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SALAMI CROFTING

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THE JACOBITE steam train trundles through the Morar croft twice a day in summer. The whistle shrieks to the sheep and the buffs gawp and snap at this passing pocket of western-coast Arcadia (when its not raining, anyway).

But all is not well in the world of crofting, as those “patches of land surrounded by legislation”, were once so memorably and accurately described.

That surrounding legislation has a long history. In times past – as the chieftains sold out lock, stock and loyalty to the new order – small tenants were displaced from the land in the cause of new methods of pastoral farming. In the Highlands, that mean sheep, sheep and more sheep.

The island of Eigg, which sits four-square on the horizon just opposite Morar, was advertised for let as a sheep-farm in 1824.

The new factor soon demanded the eviction of 150 natives from the dark, volcanic shadow of the Sgurr, while another 140 were to leave in 1843 to make way for sheep.

And thus, “In the first year alone, 500 lambs were

marked and houses were plundered of their stones to build a wall for the sheep farm until all but one remained intact, kept for the shepherd, one solitary house in a ghost village”.

The small tenants were, however, disinclined to accept all these changes without resistance. After years of agitation, the government of the day was forced to appoint the Napier Commission into the grievances of these onetime clansmen.

(The Commission’s 4,000 pages of printed evidence is one of the great documentary sources for the human record in the north of Scotland. It has recently been published online as a University of the Highlands and Islands project to celebrate Highland Year of Culture 2007).

Legislation followed in 1886, after which the small tenants officially became crofters, who could no longer be evicted. But the problem was there right in the beginning (as Lord Napier himself recognised) - the crofts were too small for seriously rewarding pastoral agriculture. The one I live on in Morar was granted in 1901 by the Lord Lovat of the day (his lordship later giving the West Highland Railway permission to build through it their Iron Road to the west). But how far would its four acres of boggy and marginally arable land, along with hundred or so acres of rough hill-grazing, go in the 20th century?

Surprisingly far, as it happens - and it was all thanks to sheep, and government subsidies for them. But crofting was always - and increasingly - part-time work on the near-18,000 units in the Highlands and Islands, and subsidised sheep, often kept as elderly hobby or gesture to crofting tradition, were always the last line of crofting defence.

And last week - while the Scottish Crofting Foundation (formerly known as the Scottish Crofters' Union) was meeting in annual conference at Dingwall - the sheep hit the fan with a vengeance, with the report that their numbers have crashed on crofts by a third in the last six years.

Mark Shucksmith, a former professor of land economics at Aberdeen, briefed MSPs on the first four-months of a projected year-long enquiry into crofting, under his leadership. This latter-day Lord Napier, who now has the chair of planning at Newcastle, blamed a range of reasons, among them reduced subsidy-support from the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy.

This process is likely to be progressive - and meantime, the people vote with their feet and drain slowly, but inexorably, away from Scotland's remotest rural communities. The situation is particularly marked in the Western Isles, and can be measured by comparing the

number of children in the first year and the final year of island primary schools.

Last session, there were 10 P1 pupils on Barra, compared to 21 in P7. In Harris, the respective numbers were nine and 27. And on Lewis, the seven primary schools on the west side of the island had 22 P1 pupils - less than half the number in P7.

And as the crofts become of less and less economic value, and the crofting townships become home to less and less people, the impetus to unlock the development value of crofting land becomes enormous - despite the obstacle of more than a century of legislation.

For much of the last century, after all, crofting to a greater or lesser extent (mainly, lesser) kept people on the land, or at least granted them a place to retire to. But not any longer, as more and more croft land is sold for housing. After all, there is plenty of money in the Highlands for housing development (though that money might not all be indigenous).

Thus Comhairle nan Eilean Siar last week demanded stronger regulation to stop crofts being, "advertised more or less as house sites by local estate agents who advise sellers of the price they can achieve".

And the Council has also complained in its submission to Professor Shucksmith's enquiry of the cruel Catch 22 in

planning law as it applies to house-building on croft land. The Crofters' Commission - charged with the regulation and maintenance of crofting communities - says it can't intervene with planning law when planning consent has been granted. And the planning authorities are not charged with the interests of the crofting community when making decisions on planning applications.

And yet crofting matters, for "land ownership by individuals in a free market never sat comfortably with the crofting ethos", as Alasdair McIntosh, visiting professor of human ecology at Strathclyde, said last month.

"It is therefore essential to block the leakage of community assets onto speculative private markets", he added. "Crofting matters for the future of Scotland. It matters as a pattern of tenure by which people can live with the land even if not necessarily from the land".

Meantime, however, the new age of Salami Crofting rolls on, as bit by bit and bog by bog the sacred turf is sliced-up and flogged-off by the not-so-invisible hand of the market. This is not what Lord Napier or his distinguished commissioners had in mind all those years ago.

It remains to be seen whether Professor Shucksmith - when he issues his final report sometime next year - agrees.

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