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THE HIGHLAND CLEARANCES: HISTORY, LITERATURE AND POLITICS¹

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THE Highland clearances is the name given to the process of eviction and emigration which took place in the north of Scotland over the period from *c.*1730 to *c.*1880, with most of the activity occurring in a concentrated period from *c.*1780 to *c.*1855. The complex history of the clearances can be divided into two phases, each with distinctive characteristics. The first phase, lasting until 1815, involved the removal and resettlement of people from traditional communal townships to newly laid out crofting communities, with individual holdings. The second phase, precipitated by economic change at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, but peaking during the potato famine of 1846 to 1855, involved the break up of failed crofting communities with direct encouragement of emigration.² The aftermath of the Clearances is almost as interesting and significant as the process itself. In the 1880s there were concentrated protests in the crofting communities of the West Highlands and Hebrides, part of the objective of the protestors was to seek the restitution of lands perceived to have been ‘stolen’ during the Clearances of the earlier part of the century. This grievance was articulated, initially hesitantly but ultimately powerfully, in the vivid evidence given by crofters to the Royal Commission chaired by Lord Napier which investigated the problem in 1883–4. From 1886 to 1919 the British government implemented a body of legislation which went some way towards resettling lands, sometimes under state ownership, and creating new communities in areas which had been depopulated. Even if this can be interpreted as a reversal of the clearances the history of the process does not end there. Political

¹ This is a version of a lecture given to the Sydney Society for Scottish History in July 2007. I am grateful to the late Malcolm Broun for hosting the lecture.

² The leading historian of the clearances is Professor Eric Richards of Flinders University, the most recent of his many books on the subject, *Debating the Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), provides a splendid introduction to the subject, contains fascinating source material and has an excellent bibliography.

debate over the land question in Scotland—from the pre-1914 period when the Liberal party dominated Scottish politics, through the inter-war years which saw the Labour party break that hegemony, and right up to the devolved politics of the post 1997 period—has been conducted with constant reference to the clearances.³

The cultural impact of the Clearances is also significant. Several novels, most notably Neil M. Gunn's *Butcher's Broom* (1934), and *Consider the Lilies* (1968) by Iain Crichton Smith, explore the topic. The stage play *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil* which dealt, in part, with the clearances played to packed houses in village halls throughout the Highlands in the early 1970s. The clearances have also had a political impact beyond the areas which were directly affected by the evictions. The development of the Labour movement in Scotland in the period from 1880 to the 1920s demonstrated that socialist politicians such as Keir Hardie and Thomas Johnston indulged in excoriation of landlords as a key element in their propagandist activities. Johnston's *Our Scots Noble Families* published in 1908 is one of the most powerful pieces of political polemic produced in twentieth century Scotland. In 1965 the Labour Secretary of State for Scotland, William Ross, presenting the Highland Development Bill to the House of Commons, argued that 'the Highlander was the man on Scotland's conscience', echoing arguments used by William Gladstone, the Prime Minister, in the preparation of the *Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act* of 1886.⁴

It could even be argued that the clearances are the central topic in modern Scottish history. There are several possibilities here. Firstly, for those who like their Scottish history to be a simple tale of victimisation, the clearances contain plenty of material. Second, it is depressing to record, although the situation is improving, that Scots are not especially well informed about their own history. One of the results of this is that the public perception of the Scottish past is dominated by a series of episodes—the Viking incursions, the Wars of Independence, the Reformation, the exploits of the Covenanters and the Jacobites—which includes the Highland clearances. Although some would argue that the clearances are a process which

³ I have dealt with some of these matters in 'The Land Question and the New Scottish Parliament', *Contemporary British History* 15 (2001), pp. 83–114.

⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, 5th series, vol. 708 (House of Commons), col. 1095 (16 March 1965).

is peripheral to the history of a country marked by industrialisation, urbanisation and highly productive agriculture in the Lowlands, it can be brought to centre stage in a more helpful way. The clearances were not remote from these central themes in Scottish history. It was industrialisation which drove the demand for wool which stimulated the creation of large scale sheep walks in the late eighteenth century. The economics of the new crofting communities—relatively small holdings, relatively high rents—impelled their members to seek employment. Sometimes this was found in kelp or fishing industries (the former to produce alkali for industrial processes such as the glass industry of the Wearside area of the north east of England) designed to profit the clearing landlord. Another survival strategy, however, was temporary migration to the industrial and agricultural economy of Lowland Scotland. This had many advantages: financial remittance, a period of consumption away from the holding, but with the retention of a link back to the place of origin. This was a strategy employed most extensively by crofters of the north-west Highlands and Hebrides. By contrast the Highlanders who moved permanently to the towns and cities of Lowland Scotland tended to originate from areas of the south and east Highlands closer to these urban settlements.⁵ These movements of people meant that the domestic economy of a crofting community in the Highlands could be quite closely tied, for better or worse, to the fortunes of the industrial economy of Lowland Scotland. In an even wider context it is perhaps trite, but nevertheless important, to note that the clearances were the Scottish manifestation of a European process whereby common land was appropriated for individual use and the relationship between lord and peasant became more formally contractual and commercialised. These points have not been brought out in the literature to any great degree, perhaps because of the tendency, especially in collective scholarship, to consider the Highlands as a separate theme rather than integrating the experience of Highland history with that of the nation as a whole.⁶ Some scholars have argued that this has led to

⁵ T. M. Devine, 'Temporary Migration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century', *Economic History Review* 32 (1979), pp. 344–59; C. W. J. Withers, *Urban Highlanders: Highland–Lowland Migration and Urban Gaelic Culture, 1700–1900* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1998).

⁶ R. J. Morris and Graeme Morton, 'Where was Nineteenth-Century Scotland?', *Scottish Historical Review* 73 (1994), pp. 93–4.

Highland history has been over-emphasised in Scottish historical writing. While this might be a prejudiced view it is certainly true that there are not a wide range of studies of lowland agrarian history.⁷ None of this is to argue, of course, that there were not distinctive elements to the clearances. The process was extremely concentrated in time and space compared to events elsewhere in Britain and Europe. A process which took 250 years in some locations was compressed into sixty to eighty years in the north of Scotland. Further, the process was not regulated in any meaningful way by the state. The Scottish legal code in the area of land tenure, the essence of which survived the Union of 1707, gave enormous power to the landlord and very few rights or protections to tenants-at-will, such as crofters, whose landholding was not governed by a lease.⁸ Indeed, despite its manifest weaknesses, this is why the Crofters Act of 1886 is so important, the security of tenure which it granted stood in such contrast to the historical experience of those who came under its jurisdiction. Before turning to develop these issues of interpretation it is important to give a broad overview of the process of clearance.

Although great changes were unleashed in the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745–6, Highland society was not static prior to that date. From 1737 to 1743 on the estates of the second duke of Argyll in Mull, Morvern and Tiree lands began to be allocated according to competitive bidding rather than political loyalty and military service. This new policy was an attempt to reorientate the economics of the estate after an investigation by Argyll's Whig colleague Duncan Forbes of Culloden. Although it looked profitable on paper it did not turn out to be so in reality, although the coincidence of its implementation with the very bad seasons of the late 1730s and early 1740s was unlucky. The succession of the third duke in 1743 saw a return to a more traditional outlook, but possibilities had been glimpsed.⁹ In the aftermath of the rebellion

⁷ R. H. Campbell, 'Too Much on the Highlands? A Plea for Change', *Scottish Economic and Social History* 14 (1994), pp. 58–75.

⁸ T. M. Devine, 'Social Responses to Agrarian "Improvement": the Highland and Lowland Clearances in Scotland', in R. A. Houston and I. D. Whyte (eds), *Scottish Society 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 148–68.

⁹ Eric Cregeen, 'The Tacksmen and their Successors: a Study of Tenurial Reorganisation in Mull, Morvern and Tiree in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Scottish Studies* 13 (1969), pp. 93–144.

government sponsored institutions such as the Annexed Estates Board, attempted to reform the structures of the estates which had been confiscated from rebels—such as Cameron of Lochiel in Lochaber, Inverness-shire—and evictions were part of the process. The growing demand for military manpower for the global conflicts of the late eighteenth century were also a powerful force which motivated the process of clearance. From 1756 to 1815 nearly 75,000 Highlanders were recruited to the British Army. Many of these men were from the landless class in Highland society and the fact that they had been promised land on enlisting stimulated the creation of new crofting communities as a direct result of the recruiting process.¹⁰

A further driving force behind the clearances was the quickening of commercial activities in the region, especially in the period after 1770. The realisation that blackface and cheviot sheep could be grazed profitably in upland areas presented a great opportunity to Highland landowners wishing a greater return from their estates. For example, on the Glengarry estate in western Inverness-shire the rental increased from £732 in 1768 to £4184 in 1802. In the years from 1786 to 1788 this estate saw the first large scale removal of people as a large scale sheep run was created in Glengarry and Glenquoich, and by 1796 there were over 60,000 sheep in the area.¹¹ The most notorious clearances of the first phase occurred in the county of Sutherland where, in the years from 1807 to 1821, nearly 10,000 people were removed from Strathnaver and other locations to make way for sheep. In many ways this was the most iconic of the clearances, it has proved seductive to polemicists, historians and novelists. An eviction in Strathnaver in 1814 resulted in the death of an old woman, Mrs Chisholm, and the duke of Sutherland's agent, Patrick Sellar was accused of culpable homicide and tried at the High Court of Justiciary in Inverness. Had he been convicted he might well have faced transportation and the policy of clearance adopted by many landlords at the time may have been profoundly altered. Sellar,

¹⁰ Andrew MacKillop, *'More fruitful than the soil': Army, Empire and the Scottish Highlands, 1715–1815* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000).

¹¹ Eric Richards, *The Highland Clearances: People, Landlords and Rural Turmoil* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2000), p. 74.

however, was acquitted.¹² It should be noted that large scale and meticulously planned emigrations such as these were not representative of the process as a whole. Many clearances were small scale and piecemeal and are difficult to locate in the historical record. The victims of eviction were often removed to coastal sites where their new holdings were insufficient for subsistence. To raise money to pay their rent the tenants had to resort to industries, such as the gathering of seaweed which was then processed for its alkali products, which returned huge profits to the landowner. The labour requirements for such industries, alongside the profits available from sheep farming, motivated landowners to deprecate emigration. Nevertheless, in the interludes of peace from 1763 to 1815 nearly 30,000 Highlanders emigrated to North America. Some historians have argued that this was a spontaneous movement, a ‘peoples’ clearance’, constituting a protest against and rejection of the landlords’ intentions. Other historians have counselled that this is too sanguine a view and that the emigration of this period, although it was led by the tacksmen in many cases, was the result of coercion and fear of the consequences of the landlords’ policy.¹³ In 1803, after intensive lobbying by landowners (disguising their true motives under the cloak of humanitarian concern for shipboard conditions and facilities in the passenger trade) legislation was passed, which increased the cost of emigration, thereby reducing its extent.¹⁴

The fact that clearance in this first phase was largely concerned with relocation of people through large-scale social engineering can be illustrated by the fact that the population of the Highland counties continued to increase in this period. The Reverend Alexander Webster’s private census recorded 193,224 as the population of the counties of Argyll, Inverness, Ross and Cromarty, and Sutherland in 1755. The first civil census of 1801 gave a figure of 245,000 in 1801,

¹² Eric Richards, *Patrick Sellar and the Highland Clearances: Homicide, Eviction and the Price of Progress* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999), pp. 1–4, 114–37.

¹³ J. M. Bumsted, *The Peoples’ Clearance, 1770–1815: Highland Emigration to North America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982); Marianne McLean, *The People of Glengarry: Highlanders in Transition, 1745–1820* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ See Bumsted, *Peoples’ Clearance*, pp. 129–44; Oliver MacDonagh, *A Pattern of Government Growth, 1800–60: The Passenger Acts and their Enforcement* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1961).

rising to 310,000 by 1831. Even in Sutherland where the largest scale clearances had taken place the population had risen from 20,774 in 1755 to 25,518 in 1831.¹⁵

The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 was a key turning point in the history of the Highland clearances. The industries which Highland landowners had relied on for their own profits and for the retention of population went into decline. Military service was obviously affected as the army began to demobilise and the kelp industry, no longer sheltered from European competition by wartime embargoes, suffered severe reversals. In 1810 kelp was selling for around £10 per ton; by 1828 this had fallen to £3 13s. Thus, the crofting communities which had been created by the first phase of clearance were no longer viable. The small tenants, deprived of the wages of the kelp industry or military service, were thrown back onto the inadequate resources of their holdings. The impossibility of subsistence induced many to move temporarily to the industrial economy of the Lowlands in search of employment. A further sustaining factor was the new dependence on the potato. This crop was not only reliable, returned a high yield from a small acreage and could be cultivated in very poor ground but, in combination with milk and fish, could provide a balanced diet. These advantages outweighed the possible dangers of over dependence.¹⁶

With the partial failure of the potato crop in 1836 and its total failure a decade later powerful forces emerged which drove the process of clearance to new levels. With the collapse of the Lowland industrial economy and cattle prices in 1848, the Highland population, especially in the former kelping areas, were experiencing famine conditions. With the reform of the poor-laws in 1845, and fears that the able bodied poor could be awarded relief by a system which was largely funded by landlords, there was an obvious imperative to clear crofting communities of surplus population. A recent survey has uncovered twenty-three major clearances in the ten year period from 1846 to 1856 and this is unlikely to be comprehensive.¹⁷ Several notorious clearances occurred in these

¹⁵ Michael Flinn (ed.), *Scottish Population History: From the 17th Century to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 301–15.

¹⁶ T. M. Devine, *The Great Highland Famine: Hunger, Emigration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: J. Donald, 1988).

¹⁷ Devine, *Great Highland Famine*, p. 177.

years. In 1849 twenty-one families were cleared from Strathconan in Ross-shire; in 1850 132 families were removed from the island of Barra by the proprietor Colonel John Gordon of Cluny; at Borreraig and Suisnish in Skye over the period from 1852 to 1854 over 100 people were evicted; over the same period in the neighbouring island of Raasay around 500 people were cleared.¹⁸

Although it is difficult to estimate the numbers of people subjected to clearance in these years it is possible to estimate the numbers who emigrated from the Highlands in the 1840s and 1850s. Whereas landlords had discouraged emigration during the first phase of clearance they positively encouraged it in the second phase. Australia emerged as an important destination for Highland emigrants, numbering around 5000, who were assisted in their voyage by the Highlands and Islands Emigration Society. Nevertheless, around 10,000 people were assisted by landowners in emigration to British North America in the decade from 1846 to 1856. These figures are not comprehensive, in that they do not include those who left on their own account, nor do they include those who went to the United States of America. Around 50,000 left Scottish ports for British North America, and nearly 16,000 for Australia in the years 1846 to 1856, so it can be seen that Highland emigration made up a substantial part of emigration from Scotland in these years. Nevertheless, we should not let the undoubted trauma of Highland emigration in the nineteenth century overwhelm our sense of the wider picture of the outward movement from Scotland, indeed from Western Europe. Perhaps 45 million people left Europe for North America, Australia, New Zealand and other destinations in this period. Of this group around two million were from Scotland. This means that Scotland was one of the major emigrant nations of the period. As such its characteristics as an urbanising industrialising nation were very different from other emigrant nations, such as Ireland.¹⁹ In contrast to the first phase of clearance the outcome of the process in the 1840s and 1850s was population decline in Highland counties. The population of the seven most northerly counties of Scotland amounted to 411,785 in 1841, by 1901 the figure was

¹⁸ Richards, *Highland Clearances*, pp. 22–31, 207–25, 237–41, 288.

¹⁹ T. M. Devine, 'The Paradox of Scottish Emigration', in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Scottish Emigration and Scottish Society* (Edinburgh: J. Donald, 1992), pp. 1–15.

371,158; and whereas in 1841 these counties accounted for 15.7 per cent of the Scottish population this had declined to 8.3 per cent in 1901 (this was affected by the dramatic rise in population in the industrial western Lowlands as well as Highland population decline, of course).²⁰

There was once a view that one of the most troubling features of the clearances was that the process was carried out with little in the way of protest from those who were its victims. That this has been shown to be wrong is one of the most important points to be established by the research which has taken place in the last generation. Although resistance to clearance had taken place during the first phase, most notably in a concerted attempt to drive sheep from Ross-shire and eastern Sutherland in 1792, protest occurred more frequently and with greater intensity during the second phase of clearance. Events such as the riots which ensued at Greenyards in Easter Ross when the landlord attempted to evict twenty-two families, the attempt by over 600 people at Sollas in North Uist to resist a policy of clearance and emigration in 1849 or the deforcements of Sheriff's Officers at Coigach in Wester Ross in 1852–3, gained great publicity in the press.²¹ Another level of protest came in the rhetorical form of Gaelic poetry. Although anti-clearance poems are not common some can be identified: two such are Allan Macdougall's 'Oran do na Ciobairibh/Song to the Lowland Shepherds' from around 1800, or the anonymous 'Gur Olc an Duine Malcolm/Malcolm is a wicked man', which excoriates Malcolm of Poltalloch for the evictions he carried out at Arichonan in Argyll in 1848.²²

Although evictions continued to occur the scale and intensity of the process was much reduced after the mid-1850s. Much attention was drawn to the clearances during the Crofters' protests of the

²⁰ Flinn, *Scottish Population History*, p. 306.

²¹ Kenneth J. Logue, *Popular Disturbances in Scotland, 1780–1815* (Edinburgh: J. Donald, 1979), ch. 2; Eric Richards, 'How Tame were the Highlanders during the Clearances', *Scottish Studies* 17 (1973), pp. 35–48.

²² Donald E. Meek, *Tuath is Tighearna: Tenants and Landlords: An Anthology of Gaelic Poetry of Social and Political Protest from the Clearances to the Land Agitation (1800–1900)* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press for the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1995).

1880s.²³ The Crofters' Wars of the 1880s were part of protests on the land question throughout the British Isles and Ireland. Farm labourers in England continued a rich tradition of protest in the 'Revolt of the Field'; Irish small tenants, the most rebellious in Europe, reached new heights of organised agitation in the 1880s; and the more quiescent small farmers of Wales were up in arms over the injustice of having to pay tithes to the Church of England.²⁴ This concentrated outburst of protest, which could also be seen in Europe and North America, was due, partly, to global changes in the market for agricultural produce which left small farmers at a severe disadvantage. The 'Agricultural Depression', which had a particular effect in the wheat growing areas of England, was noticeable from the mid-1870s onwards. In Ireland a return to near famine conditions in the later years of that decade stimulated the formation of the Irish National Land League in County Mayo in 1879.²⁵ In the Highlands, the period since the famine of the 1840s and 1850s had been one of relative prosperity; however, coercion of vulnerable tenants by landlords, whose legal powers were practically untrammelled, continued—albeit at a lower level of intensity than during the famine clearances. These protests impinged on the consciousness of governments and Royal Commissions on the Agricultural Depression, the Irish Land Question, the Grievances of the Crofters and on the Land Question in Wales and Monmouthshire spent years taking minutes but bequeathed a rich legacy of evidence for the historian.

The years since the famine in the Highlands had seen an increase in activity and confidence, admittedly at a somewhat rarefied level, on questions relating to Gaelic culture and Highland life. Outbreaks of protest also punctuated the 1870s; with the most notable events taking place at Bernera, in the West of Lewis, and at Leckmelm in Wester Ross. The latter was particularly important as an Aberdonian paper manufacturer sought to evict crofters from his estate, but was met with protest led by a politically aware Free Church minister and

²³ The best sources for these events are I. M. M. MacPhail, *The Crofters' War* (Stornoway: Acair, 1989) and James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: J. Donald, 1976).

²⁴ J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1974).

²⁵ Paul Bew, *Land and the National Question in Ireland, 1858–1882* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982).

an evolving coalition of activists. A number of prominent figures vocalised the protests of the Crofters; notable among them was a well-to-do Inverness Tory—who had re-invented himself as an Independent Liberal and ‘member for the Highlands since being elected for the Inverness Burghs in 1874—Charles Fraser Mackintosh. A more exotic figure was John Murdoch, a former exciseman who had seen service in Ireland, and who sunk his pension into a newspaper enterprise in Inverness in 1873. The result, *The Highlander*, published weekly until 1881, was remarkable combination of campaigning journalism on the Highland land question, and Scottish and Irish Home Rule, alongside the eccentric enthusiasms of the proprietor, which included vegetarianism and the virtues of frequent bathing. Murdoch’s paper, which encountered continual financial vicissitudes, controversially alleviated by Irish-American money, was a dissonant voice in the media of the day. Murdoch’s contact with the crofters brought home to him the extent of their demoralisation and provided the materials for his incessant message of assertiveness.²⁶

The sparring and debating of the 1870s presaged conflict of a more tangible nature in the early years of the following decade: the focus for this protest was the Island of Skye. Protest flared initially on the rack-rented Kilmuir estate of Colonel William Fraser in the North end of the island. The justly famous Battle of the Braes in April 1882, on the estate of Lord MacDonald, was the real spark which pushed the grievances of the crofters onto the wider agenda. A dispute over grazing rights on Ben Lee resulted in land being occupied illegally, writs being served, Sheriffs Officers being ‘deforced’—prevented from carrying out their duty—and was concluded only by the augmentation of the Inverness County Police and a full scale pitched battle with crofters as arrests were effected. The reporting of these events in metropolitan newspapers added to the volume of the protests. At Glendale in the West of the island a gunboat had to be despatched to arrest a group of protesting crofters, among them John

²⁶ Ewen A. Cameron, *The Life and Times of Fraser Mackintosh, Crofter MP* (Aberdeen: Centre for Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, 2000), pp. 91–112; James Hunter (ed.), *For the People’s Cause: From the Writings of John Murdoch, Highland and Irish Land Reformer* (Edinburgh: H.M. Stationery Office, 1986).

MacPherson, the ‘Glendale Martyr’.²⁷ Meanwhile, in Parliament the issue was being pressed by Fraser Mackintosh, the Caithness born member for the Irish County of Carlow, Donald Horne MacFarlane, and a Glasgow member and proprietor of the Liberal *North British Daily Mail*, Dr Charles Cameron. The Liberal government had already granted concessions to Irish small tenants in 1881 and it was argued that a Royal Commission should be appointed to investigate the case of the Scottish crofters.

In 1883 a Royal Commission was appointed under the Chairmanship of Lord Napier. Although the Commission counted Fraser Mackintosh and the Professor of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh, Donald Mackinnon, among its members, it was thought to be unduly dominated by landowners. The Conservative MP for Inverness-shire, Donald Cameron of Lochiel and Sir Kenneth Mackenzie of Gairloch, his defeated Liberal opponent in 1880, were certainly representative of the landowning interest. They were joined by the indolent Skye-born Sheriff of Kirkcudbright, Alexander Nicolson, an avid Gaelic scholar and mountaineer. The impact of the evidence given by the hundreds of crofters who appeared before the Commission, running the very real risk of alienating their landlords, cannot be underestimated. The progress of the Commission round the Highlands, including the wreck of their ship, *The Lively*, on Chicken rock off Stornoway, was subject to full media coverage: Murdoch’s encouraging sermons to the crofting community had been highly effective.²⁸

After the cathartic effect of the hearings of the Commission the recommendations of the Commissioners on the land question were a big disappointment. In the absence of agreement among his colleagues Napier drew up a highly idealised scheme which the government recognised as impractical and the Crofters’ movement condemned as ineffectual. A new wave of protest swept the Scottish Highlands: a large military force—led by the diminutive, but megalomaniac, Sheriff of Inverness, William Ivory—wintered on Skye in 1884/85. Gladstone’s Liberal government realised the importance of a legislative solution along the lines of the Irish Land Act of 1881, especially after being disappointed by concessions

²⁷ H. J. Hanham, ‘The Problem of Highland Discontent, 1880–85’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 19 (1969), pp. 21–66.

²⁸ Cameron, *Fraser Mackintosh*, pp. 117–35.

offered by a meeting of landlords in Inverness in early 1885. The government did not have time to complete the passage of such legislation before losing office in June 1885. By the time the Liberals returned to power, and the task of Highland land legislation, in early 1886 the political world had been dramatically altered. The extension of the franchise in 1885 had given crofters the vote and they used them to sweep out the landlords who mostly represented Highland constituencies and replaced them with ‘Crofter MPs’. These new members included some familiar faces such as Fraser Mackintosh, who was elected in Inverness-shire, and MacFarlane in Argyll. Some new faces included Dr Gavin B. Clark, the most radical of the group, in Caithness; and another London medical man, Dr Roderick MacDonald in Ross-shire (MacDonald was the least active of the group, achieving greater fame as the unfortunate occupant of the coroner’s bench in the east end of London during Jack the Ripper’s reign of terror). The only one of the ‘Crofter MPs’ to have experienced life on a croft was Angus Sutherland, elected for his native county of Sutherland in 1886. These men had little impact on the government as the Crofters’ Bill was driven through a parliament dominated by the demanding issue of Irish Home Rule. The bill reached the statute book in June 1886 and granted security of tenure to the crofters, as well as the right to appeal to a Crofters’ Commission to have fair rents set and other disputes settled. The Act did not, however, include any facilities which would provide the crofters with what they needed most—more land. In this it was a great disappointment and was condemned by the Crofters’ movement. Due to this inadequacy, agitation continued after 1886, most notably on the islands of Tiree and Lewis, and in North West Sutherland, necessitating the commitment of further military expeditions to the Highlands.²⁹

The years down to the mid 1920s were punctuated by outbreaks of agitation and further attempts to legislate on the Highland land question in 1897, 1911 and 1919. The Land Settlement Act of 1919 was the only successful enactment; it provided for the effective nationalisation of land; however, it could not meet the expectations of war veterans who felt that they had been promised land in return

²⁹ Ewen A. Cameron, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c. 1880–1925* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1996), pp. 16–39.

for military service, and land raids were frequent in the 1920s. Nevertheless, this legislation had, and continues to have, a profound effect, for better or worse, on the Highlands. The Crofters' Act, despite its limitations, still engenders intense loyalty in the crofting community.³⁰

The intention of this short article has been to provide an overview of the structure of the processes which have come to be known under the single heading of the Highland clearances. Modern scholarship has clarified many matters regarding these complex events. A problem remains, however. The history of the clearances has never been free of overt political overtones. The first comprehensive history of the clearances was written by Alexander Mackenzie at the height of the Crofters' War of the 1880s, and was as much a work of political propaganda as of careful scholarship, although it was not entirely devoid of the latter.³¹ This political theme continues to the present day with proponents and critics of modern land reform returning to the historical events in the clearances for justification of their points of view.³² The historian cannot ignore these layers of complexity and they present as many intellectual opportunities as problems. The issue is to understand the ways in which these political views relate to the historical process itself. Indeed, it might be argued that they are not external to the process but integral to it. The Highland clearances remain a vital, in both senses, issue in Scottish historiography and popular culture because they remain politicised. Equally, the ongoing political debate on the land question in Scotland is deeply historicised, this was as evident in the discussions which led to the Crofters Act of 1886, the Highland Development Act of 1965 or, since devolution, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act of 2003. Indeed, the Scottish Parliament voted on an apology for the clearances on 27 September 2000 when the Liberal Democrat MSP for Caithness and Sutherland presented a motion expressing the Parliament's 'deepest regrets for the occurrence of the

³⁰ This is the theme of Cameron, *Land for the People?*; see also, James Hunter, *The Claim of Crofting: The Scottish Highlands and Islands, 1930–1990* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1991).

³¹ Alexander Mackenzie, *The History of the Highland Clearances* (Inverness: A. & W. Mackenzie, 1883).

³² See the debates in the Scottish Parliament on 24 Nov. 1999 and 20 Mar. 2002 for examples.

Highland clearances and extends its hand in friendship to the descendants of the cleared people who reside outwith our shores.’ The most recent development in the long history of the highland land question has been the development of community land ownership. From the 1990s to the present almost 500,000 acres of land in the highlands has passed out of private ownership and has been purchased by community trusts. This represents a complex and significant shift in power and opportunity in many areas of the highlands—Assynt, Eigg, North Harris, South Uist and others—that were profoundly affected by the processes of clearance dealt with in this article.³³ For some advocates of this movement its results can be described as part of a process of ‘recovery’ from clearance. For others, however, such a restorative act is not possible given the social and cultural destruction inherent in clearance.³⁴ The continuing historicisation of the politics of the highland land question leads to the pervasive politicisation of the history of clearance, relocation and emigration in the Scottish highlands.

³³ James Hunter, *From the Low Tide of the Sea to the Highest Mountain Tops: Community Ownership of Land in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Kershader: Islands Book Trust, 2012); A. Fiona D. MacKenzie, *Places of Possibility: Property, Nature and Community Land Ownership* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

³⁴ See the essays in Ewen A. Cameron (ed.), *Recovering from the Clearances: Land Struggle, Resettlement and Community Ownership in the Hebrides* (Kershader: Islands Book Trust, 2013).

