**LAND AND THE “CROFTER QUESTION”
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SCOTLAND¹**

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The widows who made the complaint came to me in a state of great terror and alarm at the manner in which they had been treated for even hinting that they were to pay their rents and I submit that this is not to be wondered at when their house was surrounded by a yelling crowd who threatened them and actually tore up from its roots or broke down violently an old tree which had for years stood in front of their dwellings. No worse could have happened, I think with impunity in one of the Kingdoms of West Africa or Ireland.²

The tone of this report – a communiqué in early 1882 from a functionary on the island of Skye to his superior in Inverness – reflects the shock which was felt in many quarters at the apparent outbreak of a Land War in Highland Scotland. Phrases such as “terror” and a juxtaposition of the Highlands with the agrarian terror of Ireland, reflect contemporary preconceptions that the Highland crofters were a placid, even biddable people, who were by the 1880s as much a part of the local scenery as the lochs and heather-clad mountains. Within three months of this report, a large contingent of police was dispatched from Glasgow to Skye to restore law and order, which in turn presaged several years of unrest, a

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period which witnessed gunboats and marines being used to maintain peace in the Hebrides and western Highlands. That many contemporaries – police, newspapers, clergy, and even royalty – immediately looked to Ireland as the source of the agitation demonstrates a lack of awareness of a long-standing tradition of protest in the Highlands.

This shock at events in the Highlands and Islands reflects the shift in public perception which had occurred over the preceding centuries. To many observers of early modern Scotland, the Highlands seemed a turbulent, indeed barbarous, society.³ The most obvious difference from the Lowlands was the continued use of the Gaelic language, but the martial nature of clan society also created an impression of violence and separateness.⁴ Attempts to integrate Highland society into the rest of Britain became more urgent after the final Jacobite Rebellion of 1745–1746. The defeat of the Jacobite army on Culloden Moor in 1746 gave the Hanoverian government an opportunity to outlaw what they saw as distinctive facets of Highland life: notably the carrying of firearms and the custom of heritable jurisdiction, which gave clan chiefs legal powers over their clansmen. While this legislation may have accelerated the process of economic change in the Highlands, it is clear that estate rationalization was already taking place in the earlier part of the eighteenth century. In 1737, the Duke of Argyll – owner of the largest Highland estate – began to offer leases to the highest bidder, a prelude to traditional notions of clanship being superseded by commercial imperatives.⁵ The subsequent decades witnessed the first phase of Clearance in the Highlands, resulting in an increase in single-tenant farms, the break-up of communal townships, and the development of crofting.⁶

A by-product of the Improvement ethos, the crofting system was designed to ensure that the individual smallholders would not have enough land on which to subsist, thereby forcing them into ancillary

occupations such as kelping, fishing or other local enterprises.⁷ This, it was believed, would have the dual benefit of making the land more remunerative, and improve the morals of the Gaels by introducing them to what was perceived by Improvers as real labour.⁸ In fact, at least three consequences of a move to crofting can be seen as contributing directly to the eventual outbreak of serious, concerted land agitation in the Highlands and Islands. Firstly, a combination of the small plots of land and relative failure of ancillary occupations to increase the economic capacity of the region ensured that dearth and discontent remained an ever-present threat throughout the nineteenth century. Secondly, an increase in temporary migration would, eventually, bring urban Highlanders into direct contact with radical reform philosophies in centres such as Glasgow and Liverpool.⁹ Thirdly, and perhaps most contentiously, it has been argued that the importance of fishing to the crofting economy helped to maintain links between Highland and Irish fishing communities, allowing the Irish Land War of the late 1870s to have a direct impact on Scotland.¹⁰

The Improvers could not foresee, even less understand, the reluctance of the Highland population to move away from traditional agriculture, and the early years of the nineteenth century witnessed a huge push towards rationalization of some Highland estates. Events on the vast lands of the Countess of Sutherland, between 1807 and 1821, have come to symbolise the human consequences of Clearance. Her marriage to one of England's wealthiest landlords in 1785 ensured that there would be the resources to pay for estate reorganisation.¹¹ This was given further impetus by the arrival of Morayshire farmers William Young and Patrick Sellar in 1809.¹² Both were zealous Improvers, but the speed with which they proceeded in attempting to establish sheep farms in Kildonan led to riots in 1813. The forced evictions and burning of house roofs and frames—along with the trial of Sellar for the culpable homicide of an elderly tenant—

became an important symbol of the oppression of landlords and their managers in the Highlands. The trial ensured increased public awareness of the Clearances in Great Britain, and under the management of James Loch the estate became more sensitive to public opinion. Nevertheless, rationalization and eviction continued into the 1820s.

While the Sutherland clearances have dominated the general perception of the period, they should not be considered representative of Clearances in general. The evictions that took place in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars were different in nature and geographical focus. Hitherto landowners may have wanted to reorganize their estates, leading in some cases to displacement, but they also required the labour of their tenants to work in various ancillary occupations. Peacetime in 1815, however, brought a collapse in kelp and cattle prices and the Highlands were left with an overgrown 'redundant population' without means of support.¹³ The political and economic orthodoxy was to remove the extraneous population, often through internal migration, but also to the New World. Highland landowners, though, generally lacked the wherewithal to transport their tenants overseas.¹⁴

The gradual bankruptcy of many native clan chiefs led inevitably to a different breed of proprietor in the Highlands, often absentee speculators, who were able to use their wealth to facilitate the emigration of their tenants.¹⁵ The two decades after 1840 saw a new wave of Clearance in the Highlands, the focus now changing to the western seaboard and Hebrides. The famine of the mid-1840s caused social upheaval on a huge scale, and the thinning of the land of its population was often perceived by landowners as a way of ensuring that financial responsibility for a destitute population would never again fall at their door.¹⁶

The peasantry's reaction to these dramatic social and economic changes has been the subject of considerable

debate. In recent decades, the historiography of land agitation in Scotland has taken a step back from the blanket description of the Scots as irredeemably tame in the face of extreme social change. The oft-quoted attempt by the veteran English agitator William Cobbett in 1830s to discover why “the Scots were quiet while the English burnt the ricks” made way during the century for a generalized contrast with the agrarian unrest of Ireland.¹⁷ This notion, encapsulated in Smout’s description of the perceived “uninflammable character of the Scottish populace” has been subjected to considerable revision.¹⁸ Christopher A. Whatley’s work, in particular, has stressed that Lowland Scotland did indeed witness a great deal of agitation over a range of social issues during the eighteenth century, putting the “uninflammable people” myth largely to rest.¹⁹ In spite of a great deal of time and effort being spent on seeking instances of specific, targeted, resistance to early manifestations of the agricultural revolution, it has been noted that the “old order passed away with very little dissent,” despite a “scale and speed of social and economic change ... probably unique in a European context at this time.”²⁰ Smout’s assertion that “the peasants lacked both leaders and an ideology,” also remains valid, and can be contrasted with the Highland case.²¹

The historical orthodoxy had been of a tractable Highland peasantry – pacified, even emasculated, by repressive legislation enacted after the failed Jacobite rebellions – who singularly failed to resist the social dislocation, and attendant Anglicization, caused by agricultural improvement in the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth centuries.²² The last three decades has seen the development of a revised Highland historiography, building on the pioneering work of Richards and Hunter in the 1970s, which has foregrounded the presence in Highland society of “sporadic but repeated eruptions of spontaneous resistance to established authority,” and “a recurrent pattern in the record of popular

protest."²³ Three incidents in particular can be used to demonstrate the possibility of a "much more sustained and sophisticated [strategy] of opposition."²⁴ Firstly, the large-scale mobilization of the tenantry in 1792 to drive sheep from Easter Ross may have been naïve and badly-coordinated, but it was an agitation that was maintained over several months – eventually requiring the intervention of the military – and was a physical manifestation of a more ideological battle between 'internal' autonomous socio-economic changes on the one hand, and the top-down, prescriptive Improvement ethos on the other.²⁵ Secondly, popular reaction to the Kildonan clearances, which took place in Sutherlandshire between 1812 and 1814, represented a sustained battle between tenants and incomers for the control of the land.²⁶ Thirdly, events in Culrain, Easter Ross, in 1820 would prove to be a model for those fighting eviction in the Highlands.²⁷ As Richards summarizes, Culrain witnessed:

The obstruction of officers who attempted to deliver the notices of removal; their humiliation especially by the local womenfolk; the concentrated gathering of the entire population and recurrent melees with each attempt to serve the notices; and the introduction of a sheriff's party with constables and armed militia backup.²⁸

The years after the Napoleonic Wars saw economic depression, and social agitation which culminated in the Radical War in the Lowlands and developing urban regions. As a result, the authorities may have responded more zealously in quelling any potential subordination in the Highlands after Culrain.²⁹

While acknowledging these patterns of Highland protest, however, it has been argued that "even in the north the scale of unrest needs to be kept in perspective. While we can no longer regard the Highlands as a 'pacific fringe', overt protest was still the exception rather

than the rule.”³⁰ It is notable that despite these recurrent incidences of agitation, and the obvious disquiet among estate management, the broader British reaction was persistently one of shock that “loyal” Highlanders should seek to redress grievances by physical force. Again, this suggests that the Highlanders tended to be juxtaposed in the popular imagination with their fellow Celts in Ireland. Although racial stereotyping was common – the Highland or Hebridean Gael was often depicted as just as lazy and unimprovable as the Hibernian – the Ossianic image of Highland Scotland was already firmly rooted in the British, indeed European, consciousness by the middle of the century.³¹ The popularity of the Highlands and Islands as a tourist destination ensured that regular visitors – among them several key figures from the Crofters’ War period, notably Liberal politicians William Gladstone and William Harcourt, and Queen Victoria herself – ensured that the crofters were looked upon with sentiment rarely shown towards the Irish peasantry. The celebrated role of Highland regiments in the maintenance and development of the British Empire also bolstered notions of loyalty, and heightened the sense of shock felt at any collective insubordination.³²

The Disruption of 1843, which saw the Free Church secede from the Established Church of Scotland, also had an impact on the Highland land question, with the new body holding “decidedly anti-landlord views,” and the Church of Scotland having become “identified in the popular mind with the interests of the landlords.”³³ This polarity of confessional responses has recently been greatly refined, but the perception that Free Church ministers were radical advocates of the Highland tenantry remains strong.³⁴ Large scale social engineering, often leading to migration either overseas or to urban areas such as Glasgow or Dundee, continued throughout the nineteenth century.³⁵ Thus, even prior to the Great Highland Famine of the 1840s, the Glencalvie evictions in Easter Ross had brought landlord-tenant relations in

the Highlands back to public notice, and prompted some discussion of land reform.³⁶ The Sollas clearances, from North Uist in 1849, also prompted resistance, and led the *Scotsman* to remark that the conduct of the rioters was "very much unlike what Highlanders might be expected to exhibit."³⁷ Recent research has also demonstrated that incidents of protest or agitation, which perhaps did not yet penetrate the collective consciousness of Edinburgh or London society, certainly caused concern on an estate-level.³⁸ In the context of Europe-wide revolution, James Loch, factor on the Duke of Sutherland's vast estates, wrote in 1850 that:

I have for years been convinced and have stated that conviction to those in power, that there is no feeling of attachment to the Constitution or the present order of society among the working classes of the towns and villages in the north of Scotland. It is the natural turn of their minds, they are great readers and their local press is of the worst description, tending as far as it dares to preach socialism and its accompanying doctrines. It is difficult in estimating these effects to distinguish them from such as are produced by the natural result of the growing improvement and the increasing comfort and wealth of the working classes of this estate, producing energy and increasing independence of character, the object of all your and your fathers' improvements.³⁹

This was a prescient summary, in both the short- and the long-term, for it anticipated several of the themes which would define the Crofters' War three decades later: the pernicious influence of external agitators, associated with socialism, a radical press – which would grow in influence over the course of the century – and above all a generation of former tenants, who may have made their livings in the towns and cities but did not forget the fire-side tales of oppression and eviction.⁴⁰ The disturbances

at Coigach, on the Cromartie Estate, also provided a “paradigm of pre-industrial rural disorder,” in which “the public and press took a considerable interest’ and played “a decisive part in the eventual dénouement.”⁴¹ An important element in this paradigm of agitation is the continuing role played by women, noted earlier at Culrain and which followed patterns of pre-industrial protest seen elsewhere in the world.⁴²

Soon after Coigach, a series of violent evictions and coerced emigration in Knoydart fanned the flames of newspaper sympathy.⁴³ In the aftermath of further resistance to eviction at Greenyards, Easter Ross, in 1854, during which police were said to have severely beaten and injured females, public outcry was such that the estate’s planned evictions were postponed.⁴⁴ By the middle of the nineteenth century, the early clearances had already become the subject of fierce anti-landlord propaganda.⁴⁵

Land reform in nineteenth-century Britain was not limited to the Celtic periphery, however, and was an issue which was able to unite working-class and middle-class radicals.⁴⁶ Reformers, like Thomas Paine, William Ogilvie and Thomas Spence all highlighted land in their programmes, and the Anti-Corn Law League had linked ‘free trade in land’ to their calls for free trade in corn.⁴⁷ In the face of reluctance by government to interfere with the hereditary rights of land, stalwart radicals such as John Bright and Richard Cobden continued to call for the extension of free trade principles to land, particularly via the abolition of the laws of primogeniture and entail, an issue which was taken up by the radical wing of the Liberal party.⁴⁸ As part of this wider process, but also as a result of local grievances relating to the operation of the game laws and the law of hypothec – which gave landlords security against rent arrears based on the sequestration or sale of the tenants’ stock or crops – land reform also rose up the political agenda in Scotland.⁴⁹ Although the issues which framed debates surrounding the 1870

Irish Land Act mainly by-passed Scotland, Irish organizations in Britain did start to stress the universality of the land question – and highlighting perceived injustices even within Britain.⁵⁰ The Home Government Association, soon after its establishment in 1870, spread to Britain, and became especially active in Glasgow.⁵¹ At least at an organizational level, through the leadership of John Ferguson, the Association in Glasgow was intertwined with other radical clubs and thus there existed several outlets for social and political debate.⁵² Young radicals such as Scots James Shaw Maxwell and J. Bruce Glasier and Irishmen Edward McHugh and Richard McGhee, were already within Ferguson's sphere of influence and were being given a forum for their views.⁵³

Concurrently, in Inverness, the advent in 1873 of John Murdoch's campaigning *Highlander* newspaper ensured that the land became a central plank in a wide ranging programme of reform he envisaged for the Highlands, and beyond.⁵⁴ The economic distress of the 1840s and 1850s, to some extent, had been replaced by a relative prosperity based on rising cattle prices, revived fishing, improved communications and opportunities for temporary migration within Scotland.⁵⁵ Along with educational improvements, it has been argued that this period saw the emergence of a new confidence among the crofting community, thus paving the way for a renewed self-assertiveness in the 1880s.⁵⁶ It has also been noted, however, that "the majority of inhabitants of the region continued to ensure an existence of poverty and insecurity after 1860."⁵⁷ The sense of insecurity among the crofters was strong and persistent, as noted by John Murdoch himself in his efforts to raise subscriptions for the *Highlander*.⁵⁸ Thus, from the outset, Murdoch was determined that his journal would stimulate Highlanders into affirmative action to better their position.⁵⁹ It is also clear that radical Gaels who lived outside the Highlands looked to the newspapers for guidance in their nascent social reform agitation.⁶⁰

Urban Gaelic societies had been developing since mid-century, particularly in Glasgow, and this “notion of a migrant Gaelic cultural consciousness” aided in the “politicisation of crofter unrest.”⁶¹ Men who would become central to the crofting agitation in the 1880s, such as brothers Henry and John Whyte, and Glasgow University student Angus Sutherland, joined John Murdoch and others in the newly formed *An Comunn Gaidhealach Glaschu*.⁶² This core of agitators, who would make a strong common cause in Glasgow with Irishmen like Ferguson, McHugh and McGhee, not only had the ability and opportunity to develop and maintain a Highland land reform agitation, they were all motivated by strong family memories of the Highland Clearances and an awareness of the social deprivation which was present in the overcrowded closes of urban Scotland.

It was on the west coast of Lewis, in 1874, that a relatively small-scale confrontation indicated the potential for a more widespread campaign against perceived predatory landlordism in the Highlands and Islands.⁶³ Although the Bernera Riots were an essentially local skirmish between the crofters and their estate managers, involving the attempted restoration of grazing lands to the estate, summonses for arrest and alleged deforcement, there was a critical mass of supportive voices in other parts of Scotland to publicize the case and help to create a cause.⁶⁴ Bernera allowed some urban Gaels to highlight what they presented as the latest manifestation predatory landlordism in the crofting community.⁶⁵

One of the founding principles of the Federation of Celtic Societies (FCS), in 1878, was to “ameliorate the condition of the people,” and increase political organization amongst the various Highland organizations in Britain. Initially, however, there was a marked reluctance to “go to extremes on the land issue,” and it was debated whether it should be a predominantly cultural body, rather than a political one.⁶⁶ It was thought by many that any association with Ireland would hinder, rather than

stimulate, a land agitation in the Highlands, and the Irishmen involved certainly showed an awareness of this. Other external agitators claimed a closer relationship to the crofters, using Inverness, rather than Glasgow, as a base for their agitation. Men such as the Inverness publisher and journalist, Alexander MacKenzie, civil engineer and Rogart native John Mackay, and Charles Fraser Mackintosh, a local MP (for Inverness burghs from 1874 to 1885, and Inverness-shire from 1885 to 1892), certainly advocated land tenure reform, but stressed that it must be of native Highland origin.⁶⁷ Although able on occasion to form a united front with John Murdoch and the Glasgow radicals, the relationship between these different wings of Highland reform opinion was generally strained, and often hostile.⁶⁸

By the end of 1879, with British headlines dominated by the Land League and its impact on Ireland, the Glasgow-based radicals were presented with an opportunity to accelerate their activities in Scotland. The Highlands were starting to become the subject of national attention, especially following a controversy on the Leckmelm estate in Wester Ross.⁶⁹ In late 1879, tenants of A. C. Pirie, an Aberdonian paper mill owner, had been forced either to become employees on his newly rationalized estate or face eviction. The actions of a local Free Church minister, John MacMillan, in publicizing Pirie's plans, and the fact that John Murdoch kept the subject in the public eye through his *Highlander* newspaper, have led many to consider this episode at Leckmelm as one of the opening salvos of a Highland Land War, or Crofters' War.⁷⁰

As a result of Leckmelm, warnings began to appear in the press, suggesting that without an immediate response, a situation like that in Ireland could arise.⁷¹ Even at this early stage of the Highland land agitation, both internal and external forces were demonstrably at work in its organisation and promotion. The relative isolation of the crofting communities, from each other as

much as from the consciousness of Edinburgh and London, was one of the major factors mitigating against a sustained agitation against clearance earlier in the nineteenth century.⁷² Sporadic local episodes, it can be argued, continued a pattern of protest in the Highlands and Islands which had existed since the earliest clearances, the difference now being that there was a semblance of concerted organization ready to develop a more coordinated response to landlordism. There may have been varying degrees of sympathy among the crofters themselves for the aims of their urban advocates, but the way in which disparate and isolated incidents could be brought within the big tent of “land war” was facilitated by the external agitators.

Although Leckmelm had allowed the urban radicals to highlight what was portrayed as landlord oppression in the Highlands, the focus of the crofting agitation soon switched back from the western mainland to the island of Skye. Captain William Fraser’s Kilmuir estate, in the north-east of the island, had seen an uneasy relationship between landlord and tenant since the 1860s.⁷³ On a local level, the agitation in Kilmuir was led by Norman Stewart, a crofter-fisherman who had been refusing to pay rents since they had been increased in 1877, and who had been imprisoned after taking heather and rushes from the estate to use as thatch on his croft.⁷⁴ A determined character who would become a thorn in the side of the Fraser estate management, Stewart received the sobriquet “Parnell” for his advocacy of land reform.⁷⁵

Charles Stewart Parnell himself, meanwhile, was achieving success on the national political stage, with the concession by Gladstone of a new Land Act for Ireland in 1881. The act gave a nudge to advocates of similar reforms for Highland Scotland, but even without direct external stimuli it is likely that the Act engendered a degree of unrest among the Scottish crofters, and forced many of them to consider why Ireland, but not the

Highlands and Islands, should receive palliative legislation.⁷⁶ Although the Irish leader showed little appreciation of the possibility of a Scottish land agitation when he addressed a large Land League meeting in Glasgow in April 1881, other speakers thrust the nascent crofting agitation – especially a rent-strike at Valtos, on the island of Skye – squarely into the public domain.⁷⁷ Resolutions in support of united action between Irish and Highlanders, when taken with expressions of support from Irish Land League branch meetings in Glasgow over subsequent weeks, were enough to persuade some that the murderous hand of Captain Moonlight had crossed the North Channel and was poised to wreak havoc in Scotland.⁷⁸

Valtos, like the earlier incidents at Bernera and Leckmelm, was in itself a fairly minor conflagration between a particular landlord and his tenants, but it had two important short-term consequences: firstly, the attendant publicity tended to create unrest in other parts of Skye, leading to the development a siege mentality, and an air of confrontation, on the part of landlords and their factors on the island.⁷⁹ Secondly, politicisation among the urban advocates of the crofters was well-enough developed that a concerted effort could be made to publicise the plight of the Highlands in the wider British and Irish press.⁸⁰ Newspaper and police reports in December 1881 indicated that there were people in the Braes and Glendale districts of Skye ready to follow the example of Valtos and "join in a league against paying rents."⁸¹ Eventually, a dispute over grazing rights at Braes, and a large importation of police from Glasgow to support the small local constabulary, led to a conflagration which gained celebrity as "The Battle of the Braes."⁸² The crofters repelled the initial advances of the police but eventually had to give up several men for trial.⁸³ The events of that day attracted even more attention within the rest of Britain and Ireland from an ever-increasing press corps, and did more than anything else

to popularise the crofters' cause.⁸⁴ And yet, along with the more recent innovation of the rent strike, many of the historic elements of Highland protest were present: stoning, the burning of warrants, and the role of women.⁸⁵ Vitally, however, the rent-strike was being used here not to force a reduction in the rent, but to assert perceived ancient rights over grazing land, representative again of a clash between Highland custom and contemporary capitalism.⁸⁶

The trial of the Braes ringleaders took place in Inverness in May 1882, the men eventually being handed fines and allowed to return home to something approaching a heroes' welcome.⁸⁷ Thus, the profile of the agitation remained high throughout 1882. The Phoenix Park murders were used as an object lesson to the crofters of the terrible consequences of agrarian agitation, and a comprehensive tour of Skye by Edward McHugh, who was by this time the chief Scottish organiser of the National Land League of Great Britain, did little to quell fears of a "Fenian" invasion.⁸⁸

The turmoil continued elsewhere on the island, and also developed on mainland Scotland, especially in Sutherlandshire, where Angus Sutherland began to develop an effective machinery of agitation.⁸⁹ Indeed, by December 1882, the region was in such a volatile state that Michael Davitt called off plans to visit the various crofting districts for fear of inciting violence, and the appointment of a Royal Commission was becoming widely accepted as one means of dampening down the agitation.⁹⁰ In February 1883, the Government consented to send a gunboat, the *Jackal*, to Glendale, in order to ensure that three crofters charged with breach of interdict – John Macpherson, Donald MacLeod and John Morrison – could actually be apprehended. Amidst press fears of the dawn of a "period of anarchy," the men surrendered, and became known subsequently as the "Glendale Martyrs."⁹¹ They were dispatched to Glasgow and eventually imprisoned for two months in

Edinburgh.⁹² MacPherson, in particular, would become one of the figureheads of the overall crofters' agitation, often active at lowland lectures and in association with the urban radicals, as well as organizing meetings in Skye.⁹³ With coercion also came a degree of conciliation on the part of the government, and March saw the establishment of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, often referred to as the Napier Commission, after its chair, Lord Napier and Ettrick. The commission was derided on all sides – as landlord dominated by the crofter advocates (including the newly-formed Highland Land Law Reform Association [HLLRA] branches in London and Edinburgh), and "another Bessborough" by some Tory critics.⁹⁴ In retrospect, the Commission is celebrated as having given a voice to crofters, albeit often in translation from Gaelic, for the first time, and it also helped to provide an administrative definition of the Highlands and Islands.⁹⁵ Although many of its eventual recommendations were not acted upon by the authorities in London, the comprehensive report of the Napier Commission, published in 1884, gave a measured account of the diverse forces behind the Crofters' War:

The land movement in the Highlands, even if it were not spontaneously maintained by the people themselves, would be aroused to action by other forces: it is impelled by the democratic and social aspirations prevalent among various classes at home, and will probably enlist the sympathies of Highlanders in all parts of the world. There is a larger, richer, more active and more enthusiastic Celtic community beyond the limits of the Celtic region of Scotland than there is within it, and it is one of the results of increasing knowledge and expanding facilities of intercourse, that men who have forsaken the seats of their birth and early

associations continue, communicate, and transmit the affections and passions of their race with even greater warmth than those they leave behind. Endowed with native vitality and fostered by such auxiliary powers, the land agitation of the Highlands is not likely to pass away without some adjustment of the claims of occupiers acceptable to the greater number who are not yet possessed with extravagant expectations.⁹⁶

The months immediately following Napier's tour had witnessed a decrease in agitation among the crofters, perhaps anticipating a legislative solution to their campaign.⁹⁷ Legislation, in the form of the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act, however, would not appear for a further two years, and frustration at this delay prompted further violence in the region. Along with a general growth in radical ambition, prompted by the likelihood of the franchise extension in Britain and Ireland, the crofters maintained a high profile in the national press, a symbol of defiance for some, and of the pervasiveness of anarchy for others.⁹⁸ Henry George's visits to Scotland in 1884 and early 1885, if not persuading the crofters of the justice of land restoration, had at least awakened a debate on the subject in the Highlands, and had provided a boost to urban-based agitators who sought to widen the popular appeal of the land question.⁹⁹ Indeed, Vogel claimed that it is precisely this urban agitation which set the Victorian land agitation apart from earlier movements:

We find, then, as a distinct feature of land reform in its nineteenth-century setting that it no longer confines itself to agricultural land and to the problems of a rural economy. Henry George could find a mass following among the urban working classes because he was able to demonstrate a direct, causal connection between the private ownership of urban

sites and the misery of slum dwellers in the modern city.¹⁰⁰

Although a “monster meeting” at Dingwall in September 1884 attempted to stress the common purpose of all shades of reform opinion, it is clear that the program of the HLLRA, based on the Irish legislation of 1881, was sufficiently radical for the majority of the Scottish crofters.¹⁰¹ Proto-socialist groups such as the Social Democratic Federation, and the Land Restoration Leagues of England and Scotland, made a great deal of capital out of the struggle, but eventually became frustrated by what they perceived to be the innate conservatism of the crofting community, and turned to the towns and cities as areas more likely to support their radical social remedies.¹⁰²

Throughout Britain and Ireland, the Third Reform Act – finally enacted in 1884 after several delays, with a redistribution of constituencies following in 1885 – extended the vote to all male householders, and some lodgers, many for the first time.¹⁰³ The radicals recognised a tremendous opportunity, and had been organising throughout the country in anticipation. The Highlands and Islands witnessed a vast increase in the electorate and the development of a small body of candidates who, with land reform at the top of their agendas, subsequently became known as Crofter MPs.¹⁰⁴ The Duke of Argyll’s fears that the Third Reform Act would lead to a “Scotch Parnellite Party” in the Highlands, however, was not realised, as the Crofter MPs were so disparate in their own personal aspirations, and limited by demographic factors to a mere handful of constituencies.¹⁰⁵

Although the report of the Napier Commission explicitly rejected a Highland version of the Irish “3 Fs” (that is, fair rent, freedom of sale and fixity of tenure for holdings), the subsequent months saw Gladstone and his ministers encourage Highland proprietors to put forward

proposals aimed at pacifying the crofting agitation.¹⁰⁶ By May 1885, expectations were high that legislation would be forthcoming, although the landed interest once more raised the spectre of “anarchy”:

Anarchy, more or less acute, and a serious deterioration of the power and wealth of the nation, may result from tampering with the elementary principle of civilisation. No Crofters’ Bill is necessary, and in our opinion must be more or less mischievous.¹⁰⁷

The unexpected fall of the government in June, however, ensured that the bill fell down the national agenda, although it remained much discussed in Highland circles.¹⁰⁸ The Crofters’ Holdings (Scotland) Act received parliamentary assent in June 1886. As had been anticipated by the press, it followed many of the precedents set by Gladstone’s 1881 Irish Act, offering security of tenure, freedom of sale and the establishment of a Crofters’ Commission to set fair rents.¹⁰⁹

Emboldened, perhaps, by the reformist zeitgeist, but with only a limited parliamentary voice, and having apparently had their cries for ‘more land’ ignored, the crofters continued their agitation. Although language seems to have become stronger, and violence more frequent, the basic course of action remained rent strikes or deforcements.¹¹⁰ A dispute over the farm at Greenhill on the island of Tiree which the Duke of Argyll had let to a single tenant even though the island’s HLLRA had resolved to raid and redistribute the land – dominated the Highland news in the summer of 1886. Upon the accession of the Tory Government, A. J. Balfour, who took over the Scottish Office on June 30th, sent marines to crush the disturbance. Eventually, eight crofters were given custodial sentences, but Balfour’s actions caused widespread outrage.¹¹¹

Gunboats were again dispatched to Skye in the aftermath of the Tiree expeditions, with Sheriff Ivory

now conceding that local leaders had a far stronger influence than direct external agency:

I have considered it necessary to land marines to protect the Sheriff Officers while serving writs in the disturbed districts of Glendale (the head quarter of John MacPherson), Waternish (the head quarter of the Revd. Mr. McCallum), Kilmuir (the head quarter of John Macleod, shoemaker, alias 'Gladstone') and Valtos (the head quarter of Norman Stewart, alias 'Parnell').¹¹²

The very fact that Ivory was able to make this kind of statement, however, demonstrates that organization in Skye was extremely local. The press outlet of the Irish in Scotland at this time, the *Glasgow Observer*, compared the crofters' struggle unfavourably with the Plan of Campaign:

One mistake the crofters have made, and it is a very great one. They have no organization. They have no combination. They have adopted the programme of the [Irish] National League without adopting its method of organisation, and, as a hopeless floating mass of units, they are left at the mercy of Sheriff Ivory to be directed into whatever channel his armed force may be pleased to tend them...¹¹³

Again, though, a degree of conciliation followed coercion, in the form of the Crofters' Commission, which pointedly visited Skye and Tiree soon after it began operations in March 1887. It has been noted that the commission added a new, more subtle, weapon to the government's armoury in the Highlands and Islands:

Military force had been useful in the past, but in many ways it was a limited instrument of policy, tending to create resentment and alienation and

certainly lacking the Commission's problem-solving abilities.¹¹⁴

A large convention at Bonar Bridge sought to strengthen the reform movement within the Highlands, and reach out to the wider Celtic community.¹¹⁵ The legacy of the meeting was in its ratification of the plan for a Highland Land League [HLL] – supposedly unifying the HLLRAs of Edinburgh, London and Sutherlandshire – and for its serious commitment to a Celtic League.¹¹⁶ In retrospect, therefore, the Bonar Bridge conference marked not a new Celtic dawn, but the point at which divisions in the Highland reform movement could no longer be hidden by expressions of unity. With radicals calling for land nationalization, in the face of a general support for the “3 Fs,” continuing division over Irish Home Rule, and the disestablishment of the Church of Scotland, the first years of the HLL would witness a great deal of discord in the Highlands and Islands.¹¹⁷

Gradually, the majority of the crofters came to accept the tenurial system which had been established in 1886, backed up by the bureaucratic machinery of the Crofters' Commission. By the end of 1887, the *Oban Times* proclaimed that “the crofters' agitation has come to an end ... it is the cottars' turn now.”¹¹⁸ The focus of agitation switched to the Outer Hebrides, where landlessness constituted a major problem. Violent episodes on the island of Lewis, where cottars battled marines and the Royal Scots Guards in early 1888, began a series of land raids which would continue until after the Great War.¹¹⁹ MacPhail identified the 1890s as a decade of peace in the Highlands, with a general rise in living standards, a preparedness to accept the benefits of the 1886 Act, and a disengagement of the urban Highland societies from political issues.¹²⁰ The HLL crumbled in the face of internal splits and remedial Tory legislation, and the other radical threads which were entwined for a period in the 1880s unravelled. Sporadic unrest persisted in some

parts of the Highlands and Islands, but this has been attributed to the existence of "a large and dissatisfied cottar population," requiring more land, rather than the work of any external agitators.¹²¹

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Factors outside the Highlands undoubtedly gave impetus to the Crofters' War, and these include external agitators; the inevitable shadow of Ireland; the growth of a radical/labour movement which saw the crofters' struggle very much in symbolic terms; and the growth of a popular press which allowed isolated and disparate incidences of protest to be portrayed as part of a broader land movement. Moderate reformers were so perturbed by the images of Ireland that they attempted to separate crofting reform from the Irish case. Some, most notably Alexander MacKenzie and John Mackay, stressed that any land reform movement needed to be free from Irish involvement, not only to avoid the reputation of the loyal Highlander being compromised, but also because the Highlands had very different grievances to the Irish tenants. Ireland inevitably seeped into the rhetoric of these "moderate" reformers, but usually because they wanted to question why, in John Stuart Blackie's memorable phrase, the violent Irish should "get lolly-pops, while the quiet Highlanders got stripes and nothing else."¹²²

Contemporaries commented regularly upon the parallels and contrasts between the Irish Land Wars and events in the Highlands and Islands. It was common for the crofters' Highland advocates to downplay the role of the external – Irish and urban Scottish – agitators, and instead promote the 'inspirational' effect of the Irish Land War, which allowed the crofters to be seen as the instigators of their own independent land reform movement, rather than as dupes of the Irish. In this analysis, therefore, it was the timing and the tactics which were said to be influenced by Ireland, rather than strangers creating an agitation *ex nihilo*.¹²³ In assessing the Crofters'

War, it is essential that the earlier patterns of protest in the region be given full recognition. A tradition of resistance stretched back well into the eighteenth century, and meant that the Battle of the Braes in 1882 differed very little in material terms from the riots at Culrain, some sixty years previously. The Highland crofters, in other words, were perfectly capable of starting, and even maintaining, an agitation without the assistance of external agents, despite the fear of the landlords, police, government and many newspaper editors in the 1880s.

Notes

¹ The author is grateful to the constructive comments made on a draft of this paper by Dr Annie Tindley, and by an anonymous referee.

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⁴ Thomas M. Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War: The Social Transformation of the Scottish Highlands* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 1-18.

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⁸ Thomas M. Devine, "A conservative people? Scottish Gaeldom in the age of Improvement," in T. M. Devine & J. R. Young, eds., *Eighteenth Century Scotland: New Perspectives* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 225-37.

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¹⁷ Ewen A. Cameron & Andrew Newby, "Alas, Skyemen are imitating the Irish': A note on Alexander Nicolson's 'Little Leaflet' concerning the Crofters' Agitation," *Innes Review* 55 (2004), 83-92.

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²⁸ Richards, *Debating the Highland Clearances*, 75-6.

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