
The transformation of Highland estates receives a thorough treatment in Annie Tindley’s volume *The Sutherland Estate, 1850-1920: Aristocratic Decline, Estate Management, and Land Reform*. Tindley’s volume, part of the *Scottish Historical Review*’s Monograph Series, follows the changing fortunes of the Sutherland estate—one of the largest estates in Britain. At its peak, the Sutherland estate covered c.1.1 million acres (nearly the whole county) and contained a population of 25,000.

Tindley examines a number of political, ideological, and practical transformations over roughly seventy tumultuous years of the estate’s history. Beginning with the years following the Clearances, Tindley explores the estate’s attempts at reclamation starting in the 1860s; the 1882 Crofter’s War; the Napier Commission of 1883; the 1886 Crofter’s Act, and the 1897 Congested Districts Act, among others. Following David Carradine’s thesis, Tindley examines how these various events contributed to the decline and fall of the estate. She is keen to note, however, that although it underwent a significant transformation, the estate persisted. It is therefore how the estate negotiated these major events that Tindley emphasizes throughout.

In the wake of clearance, agricultural prices improved the standard of living of some crofters on the Sutherland estate. However, improvement was both uneven and very fragile. In essence, the clearances on this estate on the whole had failed, leaving increasing numbers of tenants on the poor roll and dependent on unproductive land. This led to uneasy
and conflicting relationships between the estate’s upper management, the factors on the ground, and the estate’s crofters. These conflicts would eventually culminate in the Crofter’s War of 1882.

A solution to agitation and to boost the value of the estate was reclamation. Between 1869 and 1893, the Sutherland estate exercised the largest reclamation project ever on a Highland estate, both in terms of acreage and monetary investment. Reclamation, in theory, was advantageous as of the approximate 1.2 million acres of land within the Sutherland estate, only about 29,000 of it was actively cultivated. Overall, reclamation was unsuccessful, and by 1890, reclaimed areas on the estate were one-third their original size. This failure, in addition to causing agitation with crofters who received little reclaimed land, also made the estate far more cautious about investing large sums of money to improve it in the future.

Tindley examines the Crofters’ War that broke out in 1882, leading to government intervention in the form of the 1883 Napier Commission and passage of the Crofters’ Act in 1886. The estate generally welcomed the Act and Commission as it took some of the burden of dealing with crofters out of its hands, and by the crofters who now had a body to act in their interests. Conflict, however, continued, leading to the fourth Duke of Sutherland taking over management of the estate in 1889.

The question of increased access to land, Tindley argues, was the most prevalent for crofters on the Sutherland estate. Seizing the opportunity, the fourth Duke of Sutherland created the Crofters Purchase Scheme in 1894, which offered to sell land to crofters, making them independent landowners. This ultimately failed as crofters preferred the protection and interests offered by the 1886 Crofters Act and lacked capital to buy land.

Ultimately the government increasingly became more influential on the Sutherland estate. In 1897, the Congested
Districts Act was passed, allowing the government, in the form of the Congested Districts Board (CDB) to purchase tracts of land as well as invest in other ventures. The CDB ultimately had little influence in making the estate comply with crofters’ demands and was replaced in 1911 with the passing of the Small Landholders (Scotland) Act.

By the end of Tindley’s study, the Sutherland estate looked dramatically different than it did at the beginning. What was once an estate of over one million acres, was now less that 400,000. The strength of Tindley’s work lies in her examination of how the various levels of authority on the estate negotiated and managed it in this period of intense instability and political turmoil. A further strength of the book is her focus on the people closely involved. While larger political and economic issues drove many of the reforms on the Sutherland estate throughout the period, the fate and fortunes were driven just as much by the individuals involved. This includes estate Commissioner James Loch, and the ducal family. For example, Tindley examines the ramifications of the death of the third Duke in 1892. Remarried to his second wife at the time of his death, his successor was forced to part with a substantial amount of the estates’ capital in a bitter court case with the Dowager. This severely hindered future investment (p. 89).

Tindley’s work is an excellent addition to Highland historiography, the Clearances, and Highland estates generally. As she notes, the sheer size, value, and therefore uniqueness of the Sutherland estate has largely excluded it from academic consideration in the past. Despite its wealth, which somewhat softened its decline, the Sutherland estate is not unique, but rather Tindley places it firmly within a broad arena of scholarship and worthy of consideration.

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