THE MAKING OF THE
CROFTING COMMUNITY

James Hunter

The publisher boldly states on the back cover of this work that this is “the book that changed the way that people think about the Scottish Highlands”. For once this is a claim which is more than mere puffery. First published in 1976, reprinted in hardcover in 1982 and 1987, made available in paperback in 1995 and reprinted in that format in 1997, The Making of the Crofting Community has become a classic. To be sure, there existed a literature on the Highlands before this book appeared, with some notable works, including A. Youngson’s After the Forty Five and Malcolm Gray’s fine study of the Highland economy from 1750 to 1850. There was nothing, however, as comprehensive as this. Hunter analyses the evolution of crofting from its first beginnings in the eighteenth century, tracing its history through the Clearances to the Crofters’ War of the 1880s and the land settlement which followed. The book ends with an assessment of crofting prospects in the “to-day” of the late 1970s. It is a work informed throughout by a passionate
sympathy for the crofters and it has aroused equally passionate feelings in its readers, who may admire or disparage but who are rarely indifferent to its conclusions. In many ways, it has set the agenda for Highland studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The introduction clearly indicates the author’s approach. He states that the book will deal primarily with “the exploitation of man by man” (p. 2) and that this is “an attempt to write the modern history of the Gaelic Highlands from the crofting community’s point of view” (p. 5). For Hunter, the first part of that history has to explain how the bulk of the Highland population became, to use the phrase of the Napier Commission (set up in 1883 to inquire into the condition of crofters and cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland), “confined within narrow limits” because of the excessive subdivision of land. The second half of that history, and of the book, is the story of the crofting community’s struggle to break free of its confinement (p. 107). In the first five chapters the Highland people are innocent, powerless victims. Then, in a crucial chapter (ch. 6) entitled “The Emergence of the Crofting Community”, Hunter attempts to explain both why the crofter made little resistance to oppression and exploitation in the grim years of Clearance and famine and also how this passivity ended. He explains the change largely in terms of the impact of popular religion: “Evangelicalism and the emergence of the modern crofting community [by which Hunter means a community capable of gaining control of its own destinies] are inseparable
phenomena...” (pp. 94, 105-6). The scene is thus set for an account of crofter self-assertion in the Highland Land War of the 1880s and 1890s; the Crofters’ Act of 1886 and subsequent enactments are seen as a victory, if an incomplete one, for the crofting community, a righting of the wrongs of the Clearances. The final chapter serves as a reminder that “the crofting problem is with us still” (p. 207) and has much to say about the author’s belief in the wrongheadedness of a great deal of government policy in the Highlands since World War Two.

While there has been a massive response to this book in the twenty-two years since its original publication, only a few of the many questions raised can be mentioned here. It has been argued that Hunter’s picture of the Highlands before the ’45 is an oversimplified one and that society was by no means as static as he suggests: see Allan Macinnes’s article on the first phase of the Clearances in T.M. Devine and Rosalind Mitchison (eds.), People and Society in Scotland, Volume I, (Edinburgh, 1998). It may also be suggested that making the crofter into a hero involves making the landlord into a villain: matters were considerably more complicated than this. (See, for example, Devine’s comments on the economic and social differentiation within the crofting community in Clanship to Crofters’ War (Manchester, 1994), 196, the most recent attempt at a general history of the Highlands in the modern period). Historians have also presented other aspects of population movement than those
provided by Hunter: see, for example, J. M. Bumsted, *The People’s Clearance* (Edinburgh, 1982), on emigration and Devine’s work on internal migration. I am uneasy at the rôle accorded to popular religion in ch. 6, where the argument seems strained, and disappointed that, although there are tantalising references to rioting crofter women and their subsequent arrest (pp. 139, 168) and to Mary MacPherson, the Skye bard “whose songs, it is said, contributed significantly to the HLLRA’s [Highland Land Law Reform Association] success”, Hunter’s crofting movement is essentially a male affair, despite the obvious opportunities for female action provided by the absence of the menfolk at the fishing, etc. Questions have also been raised about the nature of Hunter’s sources; he has been criticised for his concentration on government documents and on the lamentations of the victims of the Clearances and also for his neglect of Highland estate records. The work of Eric Richards and others in this area suggests a more complex picture of events than Hunter provides, although in fairness it must be said that he makes obvious the boundaries of his investigation at the beginning of the work. Clearly, *The Making of the Crofting Community* has stimulated, and continues to stimulate, a great deal of research.

Two final points. One must question why the publisher, John Donald, for whom this book has been a nice little earner over the years, would re-issue the work without removing the odd typographical error or in any way attempting to improve the presentation of the text.
More serious is the failure to provide an up-to-date introduction which takes account of recent work in the field. Something on the lines of Ewan A. Cameron's historiographical and source survey in the most recent book on Highland land policy, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c.1880-1925* (East Lothian, 1996), would have been immensely useful. Surely all those folk interested in Scotland who, according to the blurb on the back cover, cannot afford to be without this book, deserve such a guide?

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