Robert A. A. McGeachy’s *Argyll 1730-1850: Commerce, Community and Culture*, provides a significant new examination into the ways in which the Highland Clearances impacted a region that has generally been overlooked within Clearance historiography. While much of the work on the Highland Clearances has focused on areas such as Skye and Sutherland during the nineteenth century, McGeachy illustrates that clearances were an ongoing part of life in Argyll since the early 1700s. Argyll’s close proximity to the Lowlands and the pervasive improving ideologies of the Campbells, Argyll’s main leading family, were key factors behind the early evictions of the region’s tenantry. However, in opposition to what is often assumed, the tenants of Argyll, the ‘commonalty’, did not passively accept economic and social changes introduced by their landlords. Instead Argyll’s tenants found numerous effective means of resistance, particularly when changes were seen to threaten their traditional ways of life.

Organized both thematically and somewhat chronologically, the fifteen chapters of this book follow the major phases and means of modernization in Argyll’s transformation from a feudal agrarian economy in the years leading up to 1730 into one that was capitalist and commercial by 1850. He first outlines the traditional agrarian structure and explains how the communal *runrig* system of farming was becoming increasingly anachronistic to the landed elite (p.24). By the dawn of the eighteenth century, as their financial debt was growing, many landlords began a program of
tenurial reorganization. Looking to maximize the revenues of their estates landlords chose to implement competitive bidding, raise rents and, as the century progressed, to replace the large, multi-tenant holdings with smaller, single-tenant farms or ‘crofts’ in order to clear land for the more lucrative cattle and sheep farms. The consequence of these early ‘improvements’ was the voluntary emigration or migration of those dissatisfied tenants who could afford to leave on their own and the forced eviction of those who could not. Voluntary emigration and migration during the eighteenth century one way in which tenants refused to submit to the changes being imposed on them.

Later chapters of the book, specifically those on ‘agrarian change and resistance,’ ‘cultural change and oppression,’ ‘smuggling and illicit distilling,’ ‘changing community and defence of community,’ and ‘Argyllshire regiments, the navy and resistance to recruitment’ focus more closely on the widespread and varied ways in which tenantry resisted the landed elite and local authorities. Contemporary estate records and correspondence, as well as sheriff’s documents point to high incidences of conflict between landlords and their tenants. Besides the voluntary emigration of the more affluent, other forms of active resistance were exhibited by refusal to pay higher rents; to withdraw from land they had held for years; to take up fishing and other non-agricultural types of labour; to persist in the illegal distilling and smuggling of whisky; to enter military service; and to refrain from wearing traditional Highland clothing. Not all were effective in the long run, but many succeeded in considerably delaying changes. Regardless of effectiveness, these actions clearly demonstrate that, in Argyll at least, the tenantry in no way passively accepted change imposed on them.

Though agrarian improvements constitute a large part of McGeachy’s book, he also devotes considerable space to discussing different ways in which the landed elite tried to develop trade and industry. In two chapters on ‘enterprise and early trading companies’ and the ‘development of trade
and industry,’ McGeachy highlights some of the little known industries which were established throughout the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and which experienced varying degrees of success. These included lead and iron mining, linen and woolen manufacture, slate and lime quarrying and the more well-known kelping and fishing industries. That these industries failed to foster sustained economic growth in Argyll was due to a combination of insufficient capital, poor transport and communications, the remoteness of the Highlands from markets and the resistance of tenants who in many cases preferred traditional agrarian means of support over the new commercial forms introduced by landlords. However, in spite of their limited success, the fact that industries were established in Argyll serves to undermine the traditional assumption that the economy of the Highlands during this period was entirely dependent on husbandry.

Where *Argyll 1730-1850* is strongest is in its extensive use of estate records and contemporary accounts to provide unique insights into the behavior and motivations of both landlords and tenants in Argyll. Greater analysis of the significance of the extensive quoted passages McGeachy includes would make the book an even stronger contribution to the historiography of Highland social and economic change. Additionally, the decision to structure the book thematically as well as chronologically resulted in much overlap between chapters. Despite these minor issues in style and organization, McGeachy’s book stands as a comprehensively researched look into the process of modernization in a region of the Highlands that has received relatively little attention to date.

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