

Highland Clearances

The violent end to the Jacobite rising of 1745 also sounded the death knell of Highland society. What began in less than an hour of fighting on Culloden Moor took nearly a century to complete. The first actions of the government were to destroy the basis of Highland life. The Clan system was primarily martial. Once the need for large numbers of fighting men was obviated and indeed made illegal, it was possible, for the first time, for the money economy to enter Highland society. The Anglicisation of the ruling Highland class meant that as the numbers of Gaelic speaking lairds dropped, and the numbers of monoglot lairds rose the chief became a feudal landlord for the first time in any real sense. They now began to spend more and more time in the south and needed to extract more money from their Highland estates to fund their increasingly extravagant expenses. The Tacksmen were the first strata of Highland society to feel the brunt of this change. They had become obsolescent after the '45 both as military leaders and as administrators of the system. One factor would collect the rent and administer the land at less cost to the chief than the Tacksmen could. Many were to carry on their military traditions by becoming officers in the new clan regiments which were being raised at this time, while others took up administrative positions in the Empire or became the first of the emigrants to Canada and America.

The growth in kelping and agricultural improvement encouraged the Tacksmen to make new lives for themselves in America. By the end of the 18th century they had disappeared as a class- often taking their dependents and whole townships with them. The Clearances fall into three distinct stages. The first stage began with the introduction of sheep farming to the Highlands from 1760 onwards and ended with the establishment of the large sheep runs in the interior of the country and the people on the coast. This period was to see the worst excesses generally associated with the Clearances. Soaring wool prices at the turn of the century had led to an increase in clearings from the interior to the coast. Few Highlanders had the capital or experience to take advantage of this because of the large flocks needed. Consequently the Clan chiefs, now landlords in their own right, brought in southern sheep farmers with capital and experience. The early clearances were almost always from the land to the coast simply because at the time when wool prices were rising the prices for kelp were rising too. Kelping was labour intensive and could soak up the excess population now created. Fishing was also put forward as a means by which the Highlanders could raise money.

This removal from the interior to the sea shore created for the first time a new individual, the crofter. The removed tenant was given a small piece of land- the croft. If this land was bad- it was often the land which even the sheep farmer wouldn't touch- the crofter was forced into kelping. If the land was relatively good the crofter had to pay a very high rent and was therefore forced into kelping. The most notorious examples of this type of clearance took place on the Sutherland estates of the Stafford family. Nobody pursued the clearance policy with more vigour and cruel thoroughness than Elizabeth, Countess of Sutherland, and her name is still reviled in many homes with Highland connections across the world to this day. The Stafford family's ethos was that the people of the straths of Sutherland would be moved to the coast where they could engage in more profitable occupations. The land thus cleared would be turned over to sheep. To fulfil this policy they engaged the services of several sheep farmers from Moray and the Borders amongst them Patrick Sellar.

The clearing of Strathnaver in Sutherland is a perfect example. In 14 days in May 1814, 430 people were evicted and forced to move to Brora on the coast where they were to become fishermen. Sellar himself personally directed the clearances.

To force the people to move, the roofs of their houses were often pulled down and the roof trees set alight to stop rebuilding. He was later tried and acquitted of the murder of some of the elderly evicted tenants. For the people moved to the coast, life was inevitably hard. They had to adjust to a new lifestyle and try to eke out a living from fishing- something most had had no experience of. In many cases they continued to farm on their small plots of land.

The early clearances were most harsh because no alternative was offered. Emigration and migration were discouraged by the landlords as being against the interests of the country and most notably themselves. Kelping demanded a large workforce and while it prospered the landlords and to some extent the people prospered. However, once the kelp prices began to fall during the 1820s this situation changed. Those who did choose to migrate or emigrate were seldom the poorest people in society. They had the means to support themselves in Scotland if they had wished for the emigrating Highlander of this period chose to go to America. The 1830s saw an intensification of migration and emigration. The trickle of emigrants and migrants began to become a stream as the economic situation deteriorated. After the collapse of the kelp industry, the landlords were interested only in clearing more land for sheep who were still profitable. In some cases even the newly created crofts were cleared. Landlords also financed schemes where their tenants were removed from Scotland to the Americas, so relieving the population burden on their lands, but often the tenants were given no option but to emigrate.

The flow of emigrants was constant and relentless. Much of this was to blame on the increasing population pressures in the Highlands and Islands. The growth of the kelp industry had encouraged landowners to subdivide the crofts and insist on large families. Consequently when the kelp industry collapsed and the price of cattle fell there were now large numbers of surplus and destitute people unable to pay either their rent or for their subsistence. The failure of the potato crop, upon which the crofters were solely dependent, in the late 1830s and again in the 1840s and '50s was the last straw for many of these people.

The 'clearances' of the 1840s and early 1850s were intended to clear the land of those people who were so destitute that the landlords could not support them. It was thought that they would have a far better chance of surviving outside Scotland than by staying at home. This last wave of clearances was paid for by the landowners who found it cheaper to pay for the transport of their tenants across the Atlantic or even to the new favourite for émigrés, Australia. In many cases the tenants had no choice but to emigrate, their homes having been torn down to make way for sheep-walks. With nowhere left to go, the offer of passage to the colonies where they would be able to acquire land denied to them in Scotland was the only choice.

The majority of Highlanders did not emigrate however, many being too poor in the first place. Once the break had been made with their land, many Gaels moved south to find work in the factories of Lowland Scotland. By 1851 85,400 native born Highlanders were living in the rest of Scotland. However, all of this demographic movement from the Highlands was not sufficiently fast enough to relieve the pressure on the resources of the Highlands until well into the 1850s.

By the 1850s the Clearances were effectively at an end, for several reasons, firstly there were no more people to evict, secondly the population had finally begun to decrease, thirdly the economy was now beginning to pick up and finally the fishing industry was finally entering an upturn. Moreover the crofters were finally beginning to stir themselves on their own behalf. The final end to clearances came in 1886 with the passing of the Crofters Act after four years of struggle. There are

several reasons to explain why it took a long time for the Highlanders to defend themselves. Firstly, they were slow to organise effectively. Secondly, protests against the clearances tended to be spontaneous and unorganised. Then the loss of their traditional leaders, the Tacksmen, meant that they took time to recover from the shock of the clearances, the destruction of the Clan society and also to produce new leaders from amongst themselves. Finally the church had an important influence on the course of events. The Church had tended to portray the clearances as God's retribution for their sins on earth and they consequently advised against protesting. This is a graphic example of the effect the reintroduction of patronage had in Scotland.

The question of patterns to the clearances is difficult to explain. While the individual acts of clearances showed differing characteristics there were several aspects which remained the same in each case. The first of these is that of the economy. The landowners were faced with a situation where they were trying to increase the yields from their lands while at the same time having to finance the population of their land. It is unsurprising that they followed the actions which they did, for this was the era when the uncompromising, improving, ideas of Robert Malthus and John MacCulloch were followed closely by landlord and sheep farmer alike. These doctrines advocated the clearing of the land and the eviction of the native population for:

The blessing of classical political economy was the reward of the improving landlord who had been prepared to break the grip of custom. Secondly, all Highland landlords strove to make the most money out of the boom period Britain was going through at the turn of the century. With wool and kelp prices rising, the chance was there for the taking. The Highlanders themselves could not take this opportunity because of their individual lack of capital and expertise and so they were at the mercy of the landlords. Finally the famines of the 1830s and '40s caused the landlords to look hard at the principle of emigration- something that they had been intrinsically opposed to for most of the preceding decades. Indeed during the Clearances one of the most valuable weapons available to the people had been the threat of emigration in order to gain tenure concessions.

The large cost involved to keep the people on the land, forced many landlords to see that by paying the cost of passage to the colonies they could rid themselves of the worst affected families and so ease the financial burden. In some cases the policy of previous years was revoked. In particular, the bans on marriage were lifted on many estates, to enable the people to comply with the emigration laws, so allowing them to leave the land. For the Highlanders themselves, the experience of the Clearances left an indelible hatred in their memory for the factors and the sheep farmers, not for the landlords. Even the individual incidences of Clearance showed that there were different patterns involved. The manner in which the evictions were carried out depended on the factor and the circumstances in the area at the time. The result however was always depressingly the same. Even resistance to the Clearances showed different patterns depending on the area and the influences of church and leadership.

It is clear therefore, that there was no one pattern to the Clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries. The sad fact is that the financial circumstances of the landlord dictated the fortunes of the people on the land. In trying to keep themselves in the manner of London society the landlords destroyed what was in reality important to the Highlands, its people.