

IN HIS BOOK *The Highland Clearances*\*, John Prebble tells the human side of the depopulation of the counties from Sutherland to the borders of Argyll that took place from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. It included the home lands of the clans Morgan, Murray-Sutherland, Gunn, Ross, Glengarry, Mackenzie, Chisholm, Grant, Ranald-Macdonald and others.

After the rebellion of 1745 the government gradually substituted the tenant-at-will for the old clan tenure, and no more effective means could have been found to destroy the traditional bonds between the chieftains and their kinsmen as the rising value of land offered the new landlords a source of easy gain. It is the story of the virtual genocide of a fine race and illustrates both the near-absolute power of large scale land ownership and its corruptive influence on those who possess it.

For the slaughter of some hundreds of rebels-in-arms at Culloden the Duke of Cumberland has gone down to history as The Butcher. If historians had distinguished the essentials, the Duke's severity would have been forgotten in contemplation of the misery inflicted upon countless thousands of law-abiding people of all ages by the clearances. But the spectacle of an aged person silently dying of starvation and exposure beside the ruins of his humble dwelling, from which he had been dispossessed by all the force of law, is not dramatic; and it is not easy to point to a tangible scapegoat.

In the synopsis to this book it is stated "The Highlanders were defenceless against the new sheep economy." If one is satisfied—despite the conflicting voices of those who call themselves economists—that the free operation of economic forces entails human destitution, there is no more point in reading this book than there is in reading an account of the havoc caused by a great earthquake. Unfortunately the author does not examine the economic principles involved, nor does he commit himself to any verdict on the ultimate cause. An unreflecting reader might blame it all on to the deliberate wickedness of The Establishment. So, despite the author's obvious sympathy for the victims, this record of suffering sometimes becomes monotonous.

Mr. Prebble's method is rather that of the journalist than of the historian distinguishing the relation of his subject to deeper forces. He does not notice the affinity of the clearances to the effects of the Enclosure Acts; and he does not draw those parallels with modern conditions that give value to history. The period with which he is concerned, the Age of Improvement, resembles our own insofar as the adulation of productivity tended to suggest that the ordinary person's right to live his own life must give way to the requirements of material progress. The improving landlord enjoyed the same prestige as does the modern expert.

Mr. Prebble's researches enable him to re-create the atmosphere admirably, especially in his quotations from contemporary sources. We see the Highlander not as an actor dressed up for the tourist trade but as a human

\* Secker & Warburg 42s.



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being, and the chieftains not as impossible romantics but as people just as intent on wealth and status as influential persons are today.

Although no clear account of the original clan system is given, or of the stages in its transformation to landlordism, it is evident that the clan lands were regarded as common property, with each family paying a customary fee for its holding, often through an intermediary called a tacksman who enjoyed superior tenure. Since Adam Smith tells us that in 1776, when the transition was beginning, a family's rent in some parts of Scotland was as low as the payment of a lamb, the clansman's fee could not have been onerous, and it included the right of free fishing and hunting and free access to building materials and fuel. Families occupied the richer land in the glens, roughly cultivating patches of oats and barley (later, when rents pressed, giving way to potatoes), and grazing their scraggy cattle and sheep. They shared their peat-built, heather-thatched dwellings with the hogs. Yet they were renowned for their physique. From his rents in kind the chieftain dispensed hospitality and whisky at feasts where Gaelic bards sang the forays of their ancestors. The aged and infirm lived rent free and were respected. All were attached to their homes and lands with a passion that the semi-nomadic urban dwellers of today would find difficult to understand.

The military tradition was fostered by the clansmen who served in foreign regiments under their own chieftain-class officers. This discouraged aptitude for trade and led to undue confidence in the chieftains. When the situation changed the Highlanders could not readily adapt themselves, and when the chieftains betrayed them they had no leaders to organise resistance to chieftains who were becoming Anglicised and who in their efforts to live up to the Lowland lairds often ran into debt. Paralysed by ancient loyalties, men formidable in war looked on while their women protested against the demolition of their homes.

To the industrious Lowlander the Highland way of life seemed squalid, idle and thriftless; no more worthy of preservation than the customs of some simple African tribe would appear today to the European-suited, English-speaking political leaders of an emergent state.

Such was the situation when, about 1790, it was discovered that the profitable Cheviot sheep could thrive well in the Highlands. Sir John Sinclair, of Caithness, first President of the Board of Agriculture, estimated that the

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value of the Highland stock output could be trebled. Lowland breeders offered landlords tempting sums for the use of land, provided the present occupiers were removed. Alternatively, the landlord could himself become a stock-breeder—with the same proviso—if he bought Cheviot ewes and engaged Lowland factors or agents. The clansmen, already pressed by rising rents, had no money with which to buy the capital and were allowed no time to learn the know-how.

The effects of this discovery first attracted public attention in Sutherland and illustrates the general pattern, although some later examples, in which the landlords were not so affluent, were more brutal in operation. The clan Murray-Sutherland occupied over a million acres and its chieftains had been Scottish earls since early times. In 1766 the line ended in a woman, with the young Countess Elizabeth Gordon as *Moruir Chat* or clan leader. She married Granville Leveson Gower, Marquis of Stafford, a wealthy Shropshire land owner. These noble paternalists were ardent improvers, anxious to promote economic growth by the compulsory means they enjoyed as owners of the soil. There is no evidence to suggest that they had less concern for those in their power than a modern Minister signing a slum clearance order and arranging to decant the overspill to a place which, in his superior judgment, would be better for them. And, in her vast empire, the Countess-Duchess could have little more opportunity to know the people concerned than has the politician. She had no Gaelic, and her interpreters were usually parish ministers, as dependent upon her as other tenants.

These noble landlords undertook great improvement schemes on their Sutherland estate, even including the building of roads defrayed partly by public and partly by their "own" money (obtained by poll taxes on tenants) not so different from the present system of imposing levies on rate payers and tax payers for public works that enhance the value of private land.

When their factors informed them that if the valleys were cleared for Cheviot sheep the inhabitants could easily be accommodated on the coast, where fish abounded and where sea-weed could be collected for fertiliser, these ardent improvers were not likely to make exhaustive personal investigation, or to allow for the bias of factors and tacksmen who hoped to get profitable land for themselves. So the clansmen were served with eviction orders while their ministers lectured them on the sacred

duty of obeying the man-made law. These ministers also gave certificates to "suitable" applicants requiring parish assistance. Then the factors and their brutal underlings moved in to dismantle and burn the dwellings; but the inhabitants were graciously allowed to carry the timber, with their other possessions, some twenty miles to re-build their houses on the treeless coast. The aged and sick had also to be carried, but many preferred to stay and die rather than face a life of hardship compared with which hard labour in prison would be luxury.

The noble land owners did not witness these operations, but later showed a charitable spirit by supporting emigration schemes to solve the "population problem" of the Highlands. The Sutherland family also pitied the negro slaves and entertained the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at romantic Dunrobin Castle. She was impressed by the model cottages on the estate and found no evidence to support rumours of hardship.

When any great disaster occurs the public always demands an enquiry to find out how it might have been avoided, but Mr. Prebble makes no such enquiry with regard to the clearances. He avoids discussion of the principles of land tenure even where his narrative suggests it. In connection with the Cato Street conspiracy he mentions the "Spencean Philanthropists," and in a footnote refers to Thomas Spence as "an odd, bitter and unsociable bookseller" who had published "ideas of corporate land tenure," his followers being "politically simple." But this is all.

One illustration in the book is of Raeburn's fine portrait of Sir John Sinclair, but little is said of him beyond the fact that "he got close to imagining peasant co-operatives." As Sir John was one of the most eminent and widely-respected men of his time, a practical administrator consulted by Prime Minister Pitt; and as he introduced the Cheviot sheep into Caithness without, so far as we are told, any clearances as a direct consequence, one would have thought his ideas and measures especially worthy of study in any useful account of this tragedy.

If Thomas Spence was odd in declaring that all men "have an equal and just property in land as they have in the light of the sun," he shared his oddity with the Hebrew prophets; and he shared his proposal to collect land rent for public purposes with many later philosophers not usually dismissed as unsociable and embittered oddities. If this principle had been applied to the Highlands after the Forty Five, the clansmen would have had the same



opportunity to become improvers as did their landlords, for the latter, having to pass on the rent to the public treasury, could have acquired breeding-ewes only by honest, productive labour. Under such conditions how could the clearances have taken place?