

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CLANSMEN

The land passed into the hands of strangers, whose sole desire was to extract wealth, and for whom nobody felt any feudal attachment. Not only was "every acre of ground . . . subtracted from the crofters . . . in order to enhance the rent of the sheep farms,"—but when the "romantic movement" attracted wealthy southerners to the Highlands, "it was found that deer forests yielded a higher revenue [and] the sheep had to give way to deer." The construction of one famous "deer forest" in Lewis required the destruction of seventeen crofting townships.

TECHNOLOGY played its part in the ruin of the crofters. The system of roads which General Wade developed in the Highlands even before the '45 not only made the area militarily accessible, but also exposed it to influences of a market economy, and gave many crofters the opportunity of migrating elsewhere. The 19th century railways in one sense helped the Highlands by facilitating access to markets; but in another sense they accelerated the drain of men. Chemistry continued what civil engineering had commenced. The soda for glass-making was originally obtained from kelp, which is produced from seaweed which was largely gathered by crofters. The

Le Blanc process for soda manufacture, developed during the turn of the 18th-19th centuries, was far cheaper. Kelp was also a source of potash; but mineral deposits in Chile and Germany were discovered, and proved more economic. Iodine was also once produced from kelp, but mineral sources were later found to be cheaper.

The vicissitudes of plant diseases also undermined the crofting way of life. The potato famine of the 1840s is notorious for its appalling effects on Ireland, and the Scottish crofters were almost as dependent on the potato; the disease ravaged Scotland as well. The appalling visitation of starvation and fevers which fell upon Ireland was not repeated in Scotland; but there was considerable privation, and thereafter much emigration. "Progressive"—if ruthless—landlords were the people most sensitive to the implications of the famine, and to the vulnerability of large populations. The 8th. Duke of Argyll was a famous "improver" who presided over his eponymous county for more than half a century. The population of Argyll dropped from 97 thousands in 1841 to 80 thousands twenty years later.

Language was also important. The traditional
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Latifundia in the British Isles

THE ESSENTIAL pattern established in the closing years of the 19th century remained with crofting until 1976. Broadly, the story was one of gradual decline. Today there are around 18,000 crofters, and perhaps 45,000 members of crofting families. The average age is high. There are examples of "success stories" in crofting areas, such as the inter-war development of the Harris tweed industry. Yet these represent the introduction of new industries—scarcely the revitalisation of crofting as such.

Land ownership in the crofting areas retained several special features. This remained the extreme example of latifundia in the British Isles. About 140 individuals and companies are said to own half the Highlands; and four to share half a million acres¹¹—not much less than 800 square miles—between them. Yet the crofter retained his statutory security of tenure from the 1886 Act, and a highland proprietor desiring to "resume" crofting land could only do so with permission from

a land court. The crofter also lacked freedom to dispose of his land at will; and many people feared that if such freedom were given to him, most crofts would soon be bought up by wealthy incomers from the south.

As matters stood three years ago, it seemed likely that crofting would eventually decline out of existence. This was partly the natural result of economic change. Some crofters deliberately established on the east coast as recently as the early part of the 20th century "were meant to provide a full-time or nearly full-time income from agriculture but with the improved standard of living and higher expectations they are now too small to do so".¹² The country was faced with a number of unpalatable possibilities.

Possibility 1—to develop industry and other occupations, so that a croft became a glorified allotment for people whose main occupation was elsewhere.

Possibility 2—subsidise crofting on a permanent basis, with the object of preserving a kind of living folk museum.

Possibility 3—remove some or all of the restrictions imposed by the 1886 Act, and allow crofting to disappear more rapidly than before.

There were other questions which cut across these. What sort of land tenure should exist in the crofting areas? The existing latifundia qualified by entrenched rights for tenants? A system of peasant proprietorship? Absolute freehold, and free right of sale for the tenant? The state to become the landlord?

Even if we gave the ringing answer "Tax land values!" our troubles would not be over. We still had to decide to what extent the planning authorities should have power to control land use.

Into the context of this wide-ranging discussion the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 1976 was introduced. It was not intended to produce a vast immediate result, but rather a long-term change. A modified crofting system should be encouraged, buttressed

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tongue of the Western Highlands and Isles (though not of the far North and the Northern Isles) was Gaelic. While this condition remained, it was inordinately difficult for individuals to move out of crofting, although whole communities were frequently transported across the Atlantic when landlords chose to dispossess them. With the spread of education and knowledge of English, individual migration became increasingly easy, especially for young, able and adaptable people. This helped to give crofting an unbalanced age-structure.

THE CROFTERS had many grievances, but for three-quarters of the 19th century were incredibly docile. Suddenly and without warning, they irrupted in revolt. The Irish "land war" had been in full swing for a couple of years when—in 1811—some crofters from Skye made a landfall in Co. Cork.⁵ The ideas of the "land war" were conveyed to Skye. A strong infusion of Henry George's philosophy was already present; the Irish Land League was actively promoting the sales of *Progress and Poverty*. At all events, the Skyemen recalled that some local grazing land had been taken from them a number of years earlier, and resolved to refuse rent when it next fell due in the spring of 1882. Eviction notices were prepared, but a crowd of crofter women forced the sheriff officer to burn them. A large contingent of police was sent from Glasgow, and met the crofters in something like a pitched battle. The trouble was only quelled temporarily by use of marines.

Similar acts of violence spread through the Heb-

rides, and in crofting areas on the mainland. Throughout most of the 1880s, intermittent disturbances in the Highlands and Islands required frequent use of gunboats and marines, and occasionally soldiers. Political effects were also considerable; in 1885 most constituencies of the area returned M.P.s belonging to an extreme and semi-independent group of Liberals known as the "Crofters' Party".

Physical Degradation

The appearance of a Crofters' Party served to confirm what a Royal Commission had discovered a year earlier:

"The crofter of the present time has through past evictions been confined within narrow limits, some times on inferior or exhausted soil. He is subject to arbitrary augmentations of money rent, he is without security of tenure, and has only recently received the concession of compensation for improvements. His habitation is usually of a character which would almost imply physical and moral degradation. . ."⁶

In 1886, Gladstone's third Government carried the most important legislative measure of its brief career: the Crofters' Act.⁷ It sought to apply to Scotland something very similar to the reforms which the celebrated Land Act of 1881 had applied to Ireland. A crofter could only be removed for breach of covenants in his tenancy—in other words, there was an end to the mass-evictions. Complaints about rent could be brought before a Crofters' Commission.

I have contended elsewhere that the crofters' agitation of the 1880s was of crucial importance in the British land reform movement.⁸ For our present story we must note that the Crofters' Act by no means

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"If the Act does indeed bring substantial prosperity to the crofting areas, then who will benefit? Those, surely, who have an interest in land. Values will be created by the community, yet there is no provision for the community to collect back those values. The case for land value taxation remains as powerful as ever"

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ments in the crofting areas. Land could be "decrofted" by authority of the Crofters' Commission. This power has been employed "to permit the release of croft land for such purposes as industry, local authority or private housing, car parks and amenity areas, projects relative to tourism and tree planting."¹³ Compensation to Crofters when land is decrofted under the new Act has been on a much higher scale than under the old system. There was a case where land at Uig, in Lewis, was decrofted in 1966 with a compensation of £1-10s. (£1.50) per acre; when land in the same parish was decrofted under the new Act, compensation was £2,000 per acre.¹⁴ The crofter receives the right to acquire his own land. Hitherto perhaps 6%

of crofts were owner-occupied. The number acquired under the new Act by facilities for non-crofting development has not yet been dramatic, but 136 crofts or part-crofts were acquired in the first eighteen months, and signs suggest that the idea is catching on. Safeguards are introduced to ensure that croft land is not taken outwith crofting in circumstances where this would prove damaging to the township. Provision is made for an elderly crofter to retain the croft house and pass the remainder of the croft to a kinsman, who is enabled to build a house there. This is an important innovation, and seems to be encouraging new entrants to crofting.

PRIVILEGES

It is perhaps too soon to say whether

the Act will produce the effects the legislature desired. Perhaps we should look beyond short-term trends. If the Act does indeed bring substantial prosperity to the crofting areas, then who will benefit? Those, surely, who have an interest in land. Values will be created by the community; yet there is no provision for the community to collect back those values. The case for land value taxation remains as powerful as ever. This is the message which the land taxer must bring home to others before it is too late—or we shall find a formidable range of entrenched privileges growing up in the Highlands. Such privileges will be no whit less dangerous because they are vested in a large number of crofters than they were when vested in a small number of proprietors.