Topsy-Turvy Economics in the Highlands

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"This was a battle won by nobody. The land is virtually empty and its people are gone"

HINDSIGHT has a way of justifying history. Every age —except perhaps in the opinion of pessimistic old men—seems to have been for ever, certainly better than other ages gone before. Sheeplike, we accept the status quo, forgetting by what trials changes have come about.

In 1900, men of Morven, a rather isolated peninsula on the west coast of Scotland, felt—to quote from Philip Gaskell's recent, well-documented study of this highland parish*—"a genuine sense of gratitude" for all that the landlords had done for them. Doubtless, they were pleased with their snug little houses. Doubtless, it was a relief after what had gone before, that arbitrary eviction no longer threatened. This pleasure and relief masked conveniently, perhaps the fact that now "large land owners were in complete control of the economies of their properties and also to a great extent of the individuals who peopled them . . . " For this cosy servitude they were forced to surrender all freedom of choice as to where and how they should live.

True, their ancestors of a century before seemed to have been more than a century behind in living standards. In 1800 the population of Morven was more than two thousand, compared with only 730 in the 1901 census. Houses were mostly one-roomed affairs, shared by all members of the family as well as a cow or two (brought in from the cold) and a row of poultry in the rafters. Three meals a day consisted mostly of potatoes. Subsistence depended on their own husbandry of cattle and crops.

Yet, in fairness, when making any comparison between the conditions of 1800 and those of 1900, as is done in this book, it must be pointed out that the beginning of the end for Morven had by this date already made ugly inroads into the welfare and stability of its people. For "disloyalty" in the Jacobite rebellion of 1745-46, Morven was ordered to be "wasted." Four hundred houses were burned down as well as barns full of corn, horses, cows, meal. The countryside, then described by an eye-witness as "one red ember," still bears witness, in its scanty regrowth, to that destruction.

A less obvious disaster for Morven was to follow when land owners hit on the idea that sheep would bring in greater cash returns than did rent from the crofters and small farmers. At the turn of the century, as Mr. Gaskell points out, there was probably "not a single proprietor resident in Morven . . . " They lived elsewhere and dealt only with the figures in account books which is, of course, where so-called "improvements" were hoped for.

As numerous flocks of sheep were driven into Morven, so "famous for its grass'" so the cattle were excluded from their alternative summer pastures high in the glens and confined to poorer grazing immediately around the villages. Inevitably reductions in their numbers led to loss of livelihood for their owners, some of whom were forced to leave the district.

Those who stayed were to suffer further hardships. The sixth Duke of Argyll, a rake and a spendthrift, reduced the Argyll fortune by something like two million pounds. All his Morven property was sold in payment of his debts. Charles MacLean, another big land owner, similarly wasteful, sold his portion in bankruptcy in 1797-98.

Incoming purchasers bought the land for large-scale sheep-farming. Sheep see-sawed up while people went down. In a series of ruthless evictions, "laird's agents" cleared families off the land they had farmed for decades. Having "no legal title to their land (they) could be deprived of it all at will without compensation or redress."

The new land owners varied of course in degrees of greed and callousness, but naturally enough, all were furiously resented as "foreigners" who did not even speak the language—Gaelic—and who dared to turn out old inhabitants who worked hard, paid their rent, and knew no other land.

Among the more hated of these proprietors were Patrick Sellar, a Morayshire lawyer, already notorious for carrying out evictions in Sutherland—from where he now imported his sheep—and a Mrs. Paterson, who was attacked posthumously by the Napier Commission in 1883. Her nephew, and managing trustee of the estate, was obliged to admit to the Commission that Dr. MacLeod, the late minister, had expressed concern that his parishioners were to be moved out, and he added, "All ministers must take an interest in keeping their flocks together." This drew the caustic comment: "I am afraid the flocks you look after are not men."

As it happened, in face of competition from Australian imports, the sheep craze did not last. From about 1870 onwards, the chief motive of land buyers in Morven ceased to be profit-making and became sport—hunting, shooting and fishing in fact. Protests from early Land League agitators that this "good land (better there is not in the district) . . . is of no use to anyone else unless it affords a few months sport to Mr. Smith and his party during the shooting season . . . "had little effect. Deer were hand-fed. Pheasants were raised in estate hatcheries. Mr. Gaskell writes: "There was something both ludicrous and sinister in the expensive rearing of

**Morven Transformed*—A Highland Parish in the Nineteenth Century, by Philip Gaskell. Cambridge University Press. 65s. 0d.

exotic birds so that they might be driven carefully over the waiting guns . . . and two out of three easily shot."

One might add that there was something even more ludicrous and sinister in the fact that to make room for

this so-called sport, people who had been putting this fine land to productive use were ousted from it.

In a "Statement of Grievances by Crofters in the District of Morven" which was read to Lord Napier and his fellow Commissioners, and is included in one of the several appendixes of this book, is a bitter parody from the Bible. "Our Lord and Saviour said, 'How much more valuable is a man than a sheep?' But our landlords say, 'How much more valuable is, not even a sheep, but a game bird than a man?' "

This Statement of Grievances incorporates many complaints. Foremost is one concerning the great hardship of being excluded from the good land, formerly under cultivation, going to waste at their very doors, " . . . back to a state of nature, and overgrown with heather and rushes." The suggestion, from "a certain medical gentleman," that Highlanders who were no longer able to keep a cow for want of pasture should rear their children on cheap beer instead of milk was repudiated "with scorn."

Philip Gaskell makes it clear in his preface that he has tried to avoid the "customary over-emphasis on the misfortunes of the Highland peasantry." While one appreciates the thorough investigation that has resulted in a book of undoubted interest, students of social and economic history will find in it much that is debatable.

The author writes: "We must remind ourselves that the Highland clearances were a symptom of the inability of the old Highland economy to adapt to a changing world, and of the breakdown of the old Highland way of life. not their cause. The proprietors who cleared their farms for sheep were acting under severe economic pressure .. ."

One can cite a newspaper report of 1882—again given in an appendix—concerning a small group of evicted people who moved to a wild off-shore island of "little else than rocks and heather with stretches of unreclaimed moss." After years of labour they turned this into a productive farm, raised their families, built better houses and prospered. These improvements caught the eye of a neighbouring sheep farmer, and once more they were cleared out. Under such treatment as this, what chance could any economy have "to adapt."

Nor can one feel much sympathy with the "severe economic pressure" on landlords whose servants, surfeited with salmon, had to stipulate that they would not eat it every day—landlords who could sell their land, as the villain of the piece, Patrick Sellar, did, for much more than they paid for it—£10,000 more in his case.

The author indicates the irony of a situation in which the building of a "pompous castle . . . gross symbol of landlordism," for Valentine Smith, owner of 39,000 acres and twice a millionaire when he died, provided full employment for local workmen, thus cutting off the main cause of their discontent and helping to bring the Land League movement to an end.

Gratitude is due to Mr. Gaskell for a generous helping of excellent ammunition in the way of statistics, diaries, notes, maps and photographs which can be used to argue against his belief that in this case the end justified the means.

He suggests that the clearances were for the good of the greatest number, yet describes "a marked deterioration in the social coherence of the parish." For example, in the early part of the century, £11 was enough to support the poor and destitute of the district. Yet in 1883, with a population of less than half, more than £600 was required.

This deterioration continues today. The population density of Morven is about one-and-a-half persons per square mile on average. "Huge tracts of former farmland are now occupied by Forestry Commission plantations or are abandoned altogether." Emigration is high —there is nothing to keep the young and active. Agriculture is low. Nor is Morven noted for its sport!

In view of this present-day position, the "reforms" of the nineteenth century do seem to have fallen a little flat. This was a battle won by nobody and nothing. The land is virtually empty, and its people are gone.

The Riddle of the Sphinx

BY ROBERT MILLER

A review of a paper read by Lady Jackson (Dr. Barbara Ward) to the World Council of Churches Fourth Assembly at Uppsala, Sweden, July, 1968

LADY JACKSON draws attention to a vital fact that although we have "heard it all before," we really know little of the facts themselves. She reminds us once again that by 2000 AD world population will more than double, that most of this increase will occur in the underdeveloped lands, and that, by an apparent opposite equation, by the same time the wealth of the developed nations will have quadrupled. In trying to trace causes of this universal and apparently everlasting economic anomaly she says that it began with the advance in technological knowledge in the eighteenth century, and is coupled with the "milch-cow" economy whereby development seems to be confined to ports at the expense of inland areas whose role is limited to the extraction of natural wealth for export.

Yet in spite of this commendable discernment, Lady Jackson seems to have overlooked the fact that man has been exploiting man for many centuries, since long before the eighteenth century, in the matter of the exclusive ownership of land. And the "milch-cow" phenomenon is not a cause, but a symptom, of this exploitation. If the wages of labour remain at bare subsistence level, there can be no effective demand for imports, and there