

Functioning and Alteration in Scottish Highland Farms during the First Phase of Clearance (c. 1775 - c. 1815)

Stefano Buckley

During the latter half of the 18th century and the early decades of the 19th, the traditional lifeways of farms in rural Highland Scotland underwent a drastic alteration. Hitherto operating in a community-focussed manner that had lasted for centuries, one bound up in notions of hereditary duty to clans and neighbours, this system became subject to a myriad of burgeoning changes both ideological and economic. Throughout the course of this paper, I will examine how these external influences reshaped the cultural and physical landscape of the Highlands, transforming a place that had once been directed towards self-sufficiency into one now dictated by the demands of an emerging capitalist marketplace.

The term “First Phase of Clearance” was coined by Allan I. MacInnes in 1988 and describes the initial period of the Highland Clearances, in which a number of changes to the traditional way of life in rural Highland Scotland were brought about.¹ Though occurring sometime between the 1730s and 1820s, this paper will focus primarily on the latter portion of this timeframe. It should be noted, however, that the radical alterations which took place throughout the Highlands did not do so in a uniform way, with identical changes at identical times.² Instead, it is best to think of this Phase as comprised of events that differ in their time and place yet still remain linked through the sharing of common themes. Such themes will be explored in further depth below. For now, it need only be understood that the First Phase of Clearance is, above all, distinguishable by a deliberate fracturing of traditional townships (which had previously been managed communally) into crofts with individual houses and plots.³ These earlier townships had acted together to ensure collective success, and their subsequent fragmentation resulted in a lack of

¹ Finlay McKichan. “Lord Seaforth and Highland Estate Management in the First Phase of Clearance (1783-1815).” *Scottish Historical Review*. Vol. 86,1 Issue 221, (April 2007), 50.

² Allan MacInnes, “Commercial Landlordism and Clearance in the Scottish Highlands: the case of Arichonan,” in Juan Pan-Montojo and Frederik Pedersen, ed., *Communities in European History: Representations, Jurisdictions, Conflicts*, (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2007), 49.

³ MacInnes, “Commercial Landlordism and Clearance in the Scottish Highlands: the case of Arichonan,” 49.

employment⁴ and the tenantry's newfound vulnerability to their landlord.⁵ Overarching this agrarian scene was the centuries-old clan system, which saw its share of change in the First Phase as well — on the one hand spurring many of the alterations to come for Highland life, but itself becoming altered in the process. While all of this will be discussed in further detail below, it should be emphasised that this First Phase of Clearance was a result of fluctuating ideologies in contact with each other as much as it was of material conditions, and that the outcome was a distinct shift from a primarily subsistence-focused method of farming to one with increased attention to market-directed agriculture.

Even in the 1770s, the Highlands and Islands of Scotland were viewed as the rugged, undomesticated periphery of Britain.⁶ The Isle of Arran, for example, in the Firth of Clyde, was largely a Gaelic-speaking land despite its proximity to commercial centres like Glasgow and Greenock.⁷ *Duthchas*, the “traditional concept of heritable trusteeship”, in which a clan and those that served it were bound together by bonds of loyalty that had reached far into the past and would, theoretically, remain in the future, had existed in the Highlands for centuries and still held sway by the time of the Clearances.⁸ The physical land itself was rather unforgiving for husbandry: composed of soil, peat, sand, *machair* (fertile grassy plain rich in calcium)⁹, clay, gravel, or some combination of the six, only a small amount of it (around 8.8%) could have been deemed fit to call arable.¹⁰ Therefore the majority of land available for agriculture was either pasture or *muir* (moorland).¹¹

This was an area that was more suited for the keeping of livestock than the tending of crops. Farmers kept sheep, horses, cattle, and goats,¹² which they used for meat, milk, wool, leather, tallow, and bone. Cattle also served a function as a means of rent payment to the landlord and in the securing of spouses between clans.¹³ Yet, in most cases, crops appear to have been of even greater importance to the tenants than livestock was.¹⁴ Though strange considering the Highland's inclement soil, this perplexity has the simple explanation that the tenants of Highland farms were focused above all on subsistence, as

⁴ J. I Little. “Agricultural Improvement and Highland Clearance: The Isle of Arran, 1766-1829.” *Scottish Economic & Social History*. Vol. 19 Issue 2, (1999), 135.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸ MacInnes, “Commercial Landlordism and Clearance in the Scottish Highlands: the case of Arichonan,” 49.

⁹ Dodgshon. “Strategies of farming in the western highlands and islands of Scotland prior to crofting and the clearances,” 699.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 679.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 687.

¹² *Ibid.*, 692.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 679.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

explained in the introduction, rather than on market production. The cost and effort of keeping livestock around as a regular source of food outweighed that of crop-cultivation.

Knowledge of what, and how much, was grown in such communities can be gleaned from looking at precise accounts of Highland farms, which come in the form of surveys and reports, as well as more general references that present a rougher picture of the overall agricultural practises in place.¹⁵ Concerning the former, we can extrapolate from the *teind* (tithe) paid to the Church to get a sense of the quantity of crops grown in communities, with the knowledge that this *teind* would have been 10% of the harvest. Concerning the latter, we can see that oats and barley were the crops most commonly-grown, along with rye. However, cultivation of rye seemed to be on the wane after c. 1775 due to it taking “excess demands on the soil”.¹⁶ From this fact we can gather that farmers were acutely aware of the importance of good-quality soil but, more significantly, that obtaining the highest yield per foot of earth was a priority due to self-nourishment being the aim of agriculture. As seen just now in the case of rye, knowledge of a crop’s ‘demand on the soil’ could alter the prevalence of said crop in an area, and, especially when one considers the contemporary explosion in Scottish population¹⁷, it is little wonder that the maximisation of land was of the utmost importance.

As for the means by which crops were grown, the system in most common use was the run-rig method, so named because of the *rigs* (ridges) of the land when ploughed.¹⁸ Here, different tenant-families would alternate rigs throughout the years so that no family indefinitely possessed the best land. This run-rig system must be seen in the context of its broader agricultural structure, which was dubbed the infield-outfield system. A 1799 example from the Hebridean island of North Uist provides an example of this—only half of the arable land in the community would be kept tilled at a time, and this was the “infield”.¹⁹ The other half would be left fallow (or planted with clover, as was done on Arran)²⁰, and this second “outfield” is where animals would be folded so that their manure could fertilise the ground while no crops were grown there. It seems that poorer-quality soils (such as might be high in peat or sand) were those chosen most often to keep animals upon,²¹ though the example from North Uist suggests that the two halves were simply alternated every few years to allow the soil to rejuvenate.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 682.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 682.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 679.

¹⁸ Little. “Agricultural Improvement and Highland Clearance: The Isle of Arran, 1766-1829,” 135.

¹⁹ Dodgshon. “Strategies of farming in the western highlands and islands of Scotland prior to crofting and the clearances,” 686.

²⁰ Little. “Agricultural Improvement and Highland Clearance: The Isle of Arran, 1766-1829,” 134.

²¹ Dodgshon, “Strategies of farming in the western highlands and islands of Scotland prior to crofting and the clearances,” 686.

Robert Dodgshon’s much-referenced article “Strategies of farming in the western highlands and islands of Scotland prior to crofting and the clearances” explains that the cultivation of crops was of greater importance to tenants than livestock, as referenced above, yet the majority of his article still focuses on the animal component of farming. This, coupled with the very concept and extent of the infield-outfield system, suggests that fertiliser was of significant value to farmers in the Highlands and Islands, so destitute in soil. In fact, Dean Munro’s 17th-century survey of the Hebrides (though earlier than the timeframe in question) alludes to the very concept of arable land as being defined by the presence of manure in the soil:²² “sustainable cultivation was only possible if nutrient levels were maintained through heavy inputs of manure and fertiliser”.²³ Therefore we can see that the keeping of livestock, despite the resources of meat, milk, and other raw materials which they provided, was primarily for the manure produced that would aid Highland crops in growing — not as the prime source of sustenance, nor for the selling of animal products. Yet, livestock did not provide the only source of fertiliser to be found. Ferns and thatch were sometimes used,²⁴ along with peat soil, shell sand, and *seaware* (seaweed)²⁵ and, on the island of Tiree, perhaps human waste.²⁶ No matter what kind of fertiliser was used, it dictated a great deal of the farm’s labour—how and where animals were to be kept, for example (as houses existed as an alternative to the outfield)²⁷, or else resulting in the effort involved in bringing *seaware* from shore to field. In a time when farming was for the purpose of feeding oneself, enhancement of the land one cultivated was a constant concern.

With this overview of traditional Highland agriculture in mind, it is time to more officially introduce those elements in play during the late 18th century and early 19th that spurred a change to this lifestyle. Due to high populations, “farming had become a struggle of demography over topography”, as townships attempted to maximise the amount of food they grew.²⁸ George Loch, commissioner for the infamous Sutherland estate, blamed the tenants’ poverty on their overpopulation, a poverty which obliged the landlords of that estate to provide their tenants with meal (most likely oats) to prevent famine.²⁹ The traditional objective was, as previously emphasised, one of subsistence for the tenants (i.e. crops) rather than what was lucrative for landlords (livestock). But when looking at the presence of livestock on farms, the number required by tenants was much lower than that

²² Ibid., 694.

²³ Ibid., 694.

²⁴ Ibid., 697.

²⁵ Ibid., 692.

²⁶ Ibid., 698.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 700.

²⁹ Annie Tindley. “Actual pinching and suffering?: Estate Responses to Poverty in Sutherland, 1845-1886.” *Scottish Historical Review*. Vol. 90 Issue 2, (October 2011), 239.

necessitated by the landlord's wish for market farming. As this desire was indeed rising as a newfound objective among landowners, confrontation and change were inevitable.

This new push for commercially-focused production was the result of a shift taking place not just in the demographic charts of Scotland, but in the minds as well.³⁰ The traditional relationship between landlord and tenant, hitherto characterised by *duthchas*, was now changing to that dictated by *oighreachd*, the legal concept of a heritable title that likened clan chiefs more closely to English nobles, effectively severing the bonds of loyalty to their tenants.³¹ Furthermore, following a "belief in progress [...] emanating from the Scottish Enlightenment",³² the country was gripped with a desire for self-improvement. Though previously deemed a benighted land, this view had switched (possibly augmented by Samuel Johnson's popular *A Journey to The Western Isles of Scotland*)³³ to one of a region of potential. The landlordism of the Hamiltons, ducal family of the Isle of Arran since the 15th century,³⁴ was driven by a desire "to modernize Arran's agricultural economy [...] by destroying the traditional practices", practises that may have seemed primitive or ineffectual.³⁵ However the lack of progress that tenants were judged for was, at least on Arran, due to the fact that tenants who made improvements to their lands would often have to pay rent for these additions when they next renewed their lease.³⁶ So it is little wonder that impoverished farmers were reluctant to modernise. But change did come, in the eviction of tenants as well as in the division of their communal run-rig tenure. As farmers often shared labour and equipment,³⁷ decisions such as this either forced farmers to leave their communities and work in the kelping and fishing industry of the coasts,³⁸ or else forced them into poverty and destitution. And with the kelping industry fully underway it only exacerbated matters for those vestigial farms still running traditionally, by limiting their use of *seaware* as fertiliser. It seems that the poorest tenants, especially if prone to recalcitrance, were those most targeted with eviction.³⁹ And while emigration did occur,

³⁰ Little, "Agricultural Improvement and Highland Clearance: The Isle of Arran, 1766-1829," 132.

³¹ MacInnes, "Commercial Landlordism and Clearance in the Scottish Highlands: the case of Arichonan," 50.

³² *Ibid.*, 49.

³³ Little, "Agricultural Improvement and Highland Clearance: The Isle of Arran, 1766-1829," 133.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

landlords were generally opposed to their tenants leaving in case the need for soldiers arose.⁴⁰

But if the Hamiltons had such ideas as this, they were also partial to a contradictory sentiment found on Arran and elsewhere in Highland aristocracy: romantic idealisation. The Hamiltons, despite their aforementioned enthusiasm for improvement, possessed an incongruous but simultaneous wish to preserve as much as possible the historic beauty of Arran.⁴¹ This can be recognized as a heightened awareness in landlords for their role in the community, which in some took the form of an intentional diminishing of *duthchas*, but in others a glorification of it.

This strain of romanticism is not to be underestimated as a potent factor that shaped the later years of the First Phase of Clearance. Earl Francis Humberston Mackenzie, chief of the Seaforth estate in Ross-shire, is perhaps the quintessential embodiment of this reluctance to dispense with Highland tradition in the face of capitalization. Though raised in England,⁴² he came into his role as *caber feidh* (hereditary chief) of the Mackenzies with much enthusiasm. Despite his near-deafness, Humberston underwent a rigorous study of Gaelic, and paid homage to his ancestry by commissioning a portrait of Colin Fitzgerald, legendary progenitor of the Mackenzie clan.⁴³ All of this translated into a pronounced concern for his tenants. Both in 1784 and 1787, Humberston rejected offers from sheep farmers who wished to purchase some of his estate⁴⁴--which would have entailed the eviction of the tenants that lived there. Humberston also raised regiments of soldiers,⁴⁵ which shows both his eagerness to play the part of Highland chief, and his reluctance to yield to the urges of clearance that were taking place throughout the country--as those who enlisted were rewarded with new leases on their land. Unfortunately, despite his desires, Seaforth was deep in debt (£147,911 by 1787) and by necessity rent-prices doubled on his lands between 1780 and 1813⁴⁶

Thus one may observe the great complexity present in the physical and cultural landscape of the Highlands at the time. While on the one hand a vigorous zeal for commercialism was burgeoning, which as we have seen became manifested in a breakdown of traditional land management and rural lifestyle, the example of Earl Seaforth demonstrates an opposite mentality that also played a role in the unfolding of the First Phase of Clearance. This period of history was, like all, rife with contradiction and

⁴⁰ McKichan. "Lord Seaforth and Highland Estate Management in the First Phase of Clearance (1783-1815)," 50.

⁴¹ Little, "Agricultural Improvement and Highland Clearance: The Isle of Arran, 1766-1829," 146.

⁴² McKichan. "Lord Seaforth and Highland Estate Management in the First Phase of Clearance (1783-1815)," 52.

⁴³ Ibid, 52.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 54

⁴⁶ Ibid, 59.

competition whose co-mingling resulted in monumental changes across Scotland, bringing material and ideological influences together to shape what we now dub the Highland Clearances. Yet, despite whatever fondness for tradition may have risen to counter the challenges of this time, both chiefs and tenants were subject to the great changes occurring around them, and were ultimately ineffective at altering the transformation of subsistence-based rural life in view of the flourishing face of modern commercialism.

Bibliography

- Dodgshon, Robert. "Strategies of farming in the western highlands and islands of Scotland prior to crofting and the clearances." *Economic History Review*. Vol. 46 Issue 4, (November 1993): 679-701.
- Little, J. I. "Agricultural Improvement and Highland Clearance: The Isle of Arran, 1766-1829." *Scottish Economic & Social History*. Vol. 19 Issue 2, (1999): 132-150.
- MacInnes, Allan I. "Commercial Landlordism and Clearance in the Scottish Highlands: the case of Arichonan." *Communities in European History: Representations, Jurisdictions, Conflicts*, edited by Juan Pan-Montojo and Frederik Pedersen, 47-64. Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2007.
- McKichan, Finlay. "Lord Seaforth and Highland Estate Management in the First Phase of Clearance (1783-1815)." *Scottish Historical Review*. Vol. 86,1 Issue 221, (April 2007): 50-68.
- Tindley, Annie. "'Actual pinching and suffering': Estate Responses to Poverty in Sutherland, 1845-1886." *Scottish Historical Review*. Vol. 90 Issue 2, (October 2011): 236-256