

THE ROLE OF SUB-LETTING IN THE CROFTING COMMUNITY

Alan Gailey*

North and west of the Caledonian Canal, and particularly west of the main Highland watershed, in the Hebrides and in Shetland lies the crofting region of Scotland. In this area of uninviting environment is preserved an agricultural community cast in the mould of a communally organised society dating from before 1800. There have been inevitable and necessary adjustments as ideals and standards have changed, but many elements in the crofting scene have their antecedents in the agricultural and social framework of clan society. Crofting is organised on a township basis, the township consisting of a number of crofts each of which has rights in a common grazing. The crofts are normally consolidated areas of arable with dwellings sited on the individual crofts, though in some cases a tight cluster of houses has maintained its site throughout the various changes which have taken place since the disintegration of the old open-field economy. The common grazing is operated on a system of shares, of which each croft has one or some multiple or fraction of one. The share is stated as a certain number of animals which the crofter has the right to graze on the common. This is known as the souming. In the great majority of cases the house, arable land, and grazing rights form indivisible elements of the croft.

The regulation of the common grazing is in the hands of a township committee, and all the work associated with the common, particularly work with the sheep, is the joint responsibility of the whole township. This calls for a degree of communal organisation, but only a pale shadow of that involved when the inbye land also was communally held and periodically reallocated among the tenants under the equalitarian principles of run-rig.

Prior to 1886 most crofters were tenants-at-will. The Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act, 1886, based on the work of

* Research Officer, Ulster Folk Museum. Sometime Assistant, Department of Geography, Glasgow University.

the Napier Commission of 1884, gave security of tenure to the crofter as part of the process of recognising formally, for the first time, the existence of crofting as a way of life. Crofting law is such that the individual tenant virtually owns his land, and pays only a nominal rent. There is more than a grain of truth in the oft-repeated saying that the crofter enjoys the benefits, but bears none of the responsibilities of ownership. In such circumstances it is understandable that many crofting proprietors regard their estates as millstones round their necks.

It is not intended here to discuss the historical emergence of crofting, important though this is in explaining the average very small size of the individual holding. The purpose is to demonstrate one of the as yet unrecorded aspects of a framework of small-holdings which has become ossified in a pattern suited to nineteenth century requirements, but which has been projected into the changed social, and particularly demographic, circumstances of the mid-twentieth century.

Crofting is much more than a tenurial system—it is a way of life. In modern conditions the croft is usually too small to provide an adequate living for a family, or even to keep the head of the family fully occupied. Many crofts are minute, some in north Lewis consisting only of 3 acres of inbye land, not all of which is arable. By contrast there are units only just within the legal definition of having no more than 50 acres or a rent of under £50 per annum. Unfortunately these larger and viable units are the exception and not the rule. Consequently the “typical” crofting family will have possibly only one man of working age on the croft full-time, but one or more others in ancillary employment in the vicinity, such as local small industries, Forestry Commission work, or employment as bus drivers or postmen. Many crofting households have men working away from home semi-permanently; for instance, in 1957 one third of all the men in the island of Barra were at sea, the majority with merchant shipping companies. Such non-agricultural employment is not confined to the men; seasonal domestic work in hotels is common among the younger women, but nursing and teaching both recruit women from the crofting region in considerable numbers. Thus, in many crofting townships few of the 15-44 age group are resident. And yet such people often have no other home, in a permanent sense, than the croft. The resident population consists of the elderly and the very young, with barely sufficient

men and women of working age to maintain some semblance of activity in the community.

In circumstances such as these it is inevitable that many crofts are occupied only by a portion of the crofting families, while others will lie unoccupied though legally tenanted by families seeking a livelihood beyond the township. Almost always the basic cause of this is the small size of the crofts, but factors such as physical remoteness, and consequent social isolation on a district scale must not be disregarded, especially since two wars have shown many crofters something of life beyond the Highlands. Some crofts lie derelict temporarily for the croft is often kept for use on retiral, while the land is worked by a neighbour on a basis of unofficial sub-letting. Sub-letting also occurs where the tenant works full-time in the vicinity, or away from it, while his family live on the croft but do not work the land. If the croft house is occupied by an aged or widowed tenant the land is frequently sub-let to a neighbouring active crofter. The desire of tenants to take land from those willing to sub-let is easy to understand, especially where the crofts are very small. It is the purpose of this study to examine sub-letting, and its place in the modern crofting economy and society. The evidence is taken from detailed field examination of townships studied by the author as part of a wider project being carried out by the Geography Department of Glasgow University.¹ As such it is in the nature of a sample study, but it is considered that the townships here studied are representative of most of the social conditions to be met with in the crofting region. The townships concerned are in Barra and north Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, and in west Ardnamurchan on the mainland. In addition, reference is made to a recent unpublished study of part of north Skye by MacSween, and to the published study by Caird of the district of Park in south-east Lewis.

West Ardnamurchan is physically very isolated and although the land is potentially more valuable than in some other crofting districts (this is particularly true of some of the grazings), the physical isolation has entailed social stagnation if not regression. Since 1841 the population densities have declined from 23·1 persons per square mile to 16·1 in 1891, to 4·5 in 1959. For present purposes west Ardnamurchan may be taken to represent a crofting community which has stagnated to such an extent that there is no longer sufficient demand for land among the resident crofters to ensure that all crofts are

worked. The 28 crofts studied are in two townships, one large and one small; three of the crofts were totally derelict in 1959.

In Barra a single township of 34 crofts was studied. It lies on the west side of the island, which is more fertile than the east side, due to the presence of "machair" land based on shell sand. The arable land of the crofts is thus partly lime-rich machair along the coast, with behind it the more acid "black land", peaty and in need of constant drainage. These two are complementary and provide the area with a variety of land for both stock and crops. The township is representative of many where there is a keen demand for any land available and the land is fully, but not necessarily adequately, worked.

In north Lewis group A is a single large township of very narrow strip-crofts where there is relatively little sub-letting. The standard of husbandry is not high and little advantage is taken of facilities for improving the land. Tradition and the need to conform with majority patterns and decisions are both strongly rooted in the community. Here the township communal structure is a reality in every sense. Group B, again a single large township, ought more properly to be considered as two units, for each has a separate name and exists as a separate social entity. There is a single common grazing and grazings committee. By contrast with group A the crofts are well-worked and there is an air of progressiveness about the area. The demand for land here has been such that in one of the two groupings within the township, in the absence of sub-let crofts certain tenants have each in the past appropriated a few acres of common grazing, adjacent to their crofts, as croft extensions. Such a position is not theoretically possible without following a set procedure which has not in this case been adhered to, and consequently these extensions are not recognised in the rent roll and do not legally exist.

The areas studied are all different, varying from almost total stagnation at one extreme to a well-worked area where the tenants take advantage of all available grants for croft and grazing improvement at the other. The social position in Lewis is complicated by the presence of two groups of householders who are technically landless. Cottars are usually relatives of croft tenants who build a second dwelling on a croft, and who may work part, or all of the croft land. Squatters usually live in houses built on the edges of the common grazings. They are not legally recognised, and so live free of rents and rates. The squatters enjoy much greater freedom than cottars

and have often brought under cultivation parts of the common grazings round their dwellings. Cases are on record where individual squatters claim and work more land than legal croft tenants in the same township. None of these "non-crofting" categories have rights in the common grazings and so officially own no stock, yet some of them possess animals equivalent to the souming for a croft. Cottars exist sporadically throughout the crofting region but the squatter problem is concentrated in the northern part of the Outer Hebrides. In this study these two groups are not differentiated, and figures relating to them in the statistical tables appear in brackets.

In practice there is little social distinction between crofters, and cottars and squatters. In social units as small as the individual township there has been in the past considerable intermarriage and it has been normal for most marriages to be contracted within the parish, if not the township. It is thus understandable that there should often be close relationships between the land-holders and the landless. Some tenants have been reared in squatter households, and a tenant may have in the same township a brother or sister living as cottar or squatter. Mobility from the status of crofter to that of cottar or squatter, or in the opposite direction, is easily possible. Though cottars and squatters have no legal representation in the running of township affairs, in particular the regulation of the common grazings, it would be unusual for their opinions to be disregarded completely and they may well share in the grazing re-seeding schemes which have recently been instituted in some of the townships in north Lewis paradoxical though this may appear. Squatters will take land equally with crofters from those willing to sub-let their land, and in the same way some squatters sub-let the land they have appropriated from the grazings, either to crofters or to other squatters. The cottar and squatter problem is not a recent phenomenon in Lewis, indeed there is reason to believe that it is less pressing now than at the beginning of the century. In 1910, 24 of 36 listed cottars and squatters in groups A and B were noted as having a share in a croft in their respective townships, and 23 of these were also noted as paying up to half of the rent of the crofts they worked. (Crofters Commission 1911-12: 220-255.) It was also suggested that most of these squatters and cottars had come into existence in the townships after 1886 and that their appearance was a function of rising population, for Lewis did not attain its population maximum till 1911.

ELEMENTS OF THE CROFT IN RELATION TO SUB-LETTING

(a) *The Land*

From Table I some of the distinctions between the areas already noted are clear. The high percentage of sub-letting in Ardnamurchan is evident in contrast to the lower percentages recorded for Lewis, despite the fact that the Lewis crofts are much smaller. This is partly explained by the existence of the Harris tweed industry providing an ancillary occupation lacking in the other areas, operating to maintain a higher level of population than would otherwise be possible. The Lewis areas are also within easy reach of Stornoway, the largest urban centre of the crofting region which allows other employment possibilities.

TABLE I

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ardnamurchan	28*	11	39	251	100	40	9	9
Barra	34	11	32	234	62	26	7	6
Lewis A	51 (17)	9 (5)	18 (29)	202 (32)	30 (9)	15 (30)	4 (2)	3 (2)
Lewis B	58 (5)	9	16	323 (15)	41	13	6 (3)	5

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Total number of crofts. | 5. Area of inbye sub-let (acres). |
| 2. Total number of sub-let crofts. | 6. Percentage of inbye area sub-let. |
| 3. Percentage of total crofts sub-let. | 7. Average size of crofts (acres). |
| 4. Total area of inbye (acres). | 8. Average size of sub-let crofts (acres). |

* 3 crofts derelict.

By contrast, Ardnamurchan's nearest urban centre is Tobermory in Mull, the connection between the two being by motor-launch on a rather infrequent service and subject to the vagaries of the weather. The nearest mainland centre is Fort William, too far away to exert any significant influence in terms of employment. Apart from labouring jobs with the County Council the area is totally devoid of ancillary employment and consequently the population level has declined drastically within the past 60 years.

Apart from Ardnamurchan there is a tendency for the smaller crofts to be sub-let, suggesting that such are incapable of providing a sufficient base from which the crofter can work up an operative unit which involves taking land from others willing to sub-let their crofts. This is seen in the percentages of inbye area sub-let when compared with the percentages of total crofts sub-let.

(b) *The House*

From the examples studied, the house associated with a croft is of little importance in the causation of sub-letting. The exception occurs in tourist areas where crofters are allowed by law to sub-let their houses to tourists for a period in the summer. Some sub-let crofts have no house while on others it is ruinous due to age or long-continued absence of the tenant. There is no consistent regional pattern in this and the reasons for absenteeism are discussed later. The distinction between Barra and Ardnamurchan on the one hand, and Lewis on the other is clear in the remaining categories. Again the greater employment potentialities of Lewis, and the consequently more stable population position, mean that few houses

TABLE II
Houses on sub-let crofts

	1	2	3	4
Ardnamurchan .	1	6	0	3
Barra . . .	4	4	0	3
Lewis A . . .	1 (2)	1 (1)	1	5 (2)
Lewis B . . .	4	0	0	5

1. No house.
2. House unoccupied.
3. House sub-let.
4. House occupied by part or all of tenant's family.

are unoccupied, and in the majority of the cases where the crofts are sub-let the houses are occupied by the tenants' families or relatives. The position is reversed in the less successfully worked areas of Barra and Ardnamurchan where proportionally more houses lie unoccupied.

(c) *Grazing rights*

The most important element of the croft in relation to sub-letting is the grazing rights. As noted, a souming and system of shares operates in each township, and in most cases a set of equivalences is stated to complement the souming, equating the different species of animals. As an example, in one of the townships studied, the souming is stated in the grazing regulations as 1 horse, 2 cows and their followers and 33 sheep and their followers per share, each croft having one share. Here the equivalence stands at 1 horse=2 cows=10 sheep.

This enables a crofter having no horse to balance his stock by carrying more cattle and/or sheep. Using the souming and the equivalence it is possible to evaluate the allowed and the actual stock per croft, or per township, counted in cow units (or any other stock units). Table IIIa has been worked out in this way while Table IIIb, which concerns the sheep stock

TABLE IIIa

Operative units which involve sub-letting. Stock carried (total stock) related to souming. Numbers of units.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ardnamurchan	7	5	1	1	0	0
Barra . . .	7	2	1	3	0	1
Lewis A . . .	13 (5)	3	3	3	1	3
Lewis B* . . .	10 (2)	3	4	2	1	0

1. Total number of units.
2. Number of units carrying less than half soum.
3. Number of units carrying half to three quarters soum.
4. Number of units carrying three quarters to full soum.
5. Number of units carrying one to one and a quarter times full soum.
6. Number of units carrying more than one and a quarter times full soum.

* One unit without any stock.

TABLE IIIb

Operative units which involve sub-letting. Sheep carried related to sheep souming. Numbers of units.

	1	2	3	4	5
Ardnamurchan	7	4	2	1	0
Barra . . .	7	0	2	0	5
Lewis A . . .	13 (5)	2	3	3	5
Lewis B* . . .	10 (2)	1	5	1	1

1. Total number of units.
2. Number of units carrying less than half sheep soum.
3. Number of units carrying half to full sheep soum.
4. Number of units carrying one to one and a half times full sheep soum.
5. Number of units carrying more than one and a half times full sheep soum.

* Two units without any sheep.

only, does not involve the use of equivalences. These tables refer only to units in the respective areas which involve sub-letting. In this way it is possible to arrive at some assessment of the potency of overstocking as a reason for the demand for sub-let crofts.

Including units which do not involve sub-letting, the areas studied are each under-stocked as a whole; in the case of

Ardnamurchan about half of the allowable stock is carried, and even here the larger of the two townships carries only 35 per cent of the souming. The level of sheep maintained is better than that of total stock, but is still below the allowed maximum. The Barra area is better all round with 75 per cent of the allowable stock carried, but there is a considerable excess of sheep with under-stocking in cattle. The position in the Lewis areas is rather similar to that in Barra, though relatively fewer sheep are kept.

Because squatters have no legal existence in the township organisation and cottars no rights in the common grazing, it is impossible to assess statistically the level of their stocking. Their animals have been included in the observations concerning the townships as a whole (*supra*). The very fact that such people do keep stock must be a good reason for their desire to get land wherever possible, enabling them to legalise their position with regard to their stock in the townships' eyes. A sub-let croft must carry with it its souming, and it is the souming which is attractive rather than the land in such cases. While this may satisfy the township as a community, such people remain technically non-agricultural for sub-letting without the consent of the proprietor is illegal. In this way the squatter or cottar working a sub-let croft is unable to claim cattle or sheep subsidies or to benefit from improvement grants or cropping grants for the land which he in fact works.

From the tables it is clear that most of the crofters are understocked though almost half carry their full sheep stock or more. In some cases crofters carry up to three times the number of sheep stipulated in the souming, compensated for by lack of other animals, particularly horses which are fast disappearing in face of competition from tractors. As the standard of croft and township fencing is now rapidly improving with the recent introduction of fencing grants, there would seem to be an increasing desire on the part of the individual crofter to feed his own stock on his own inbye land in winter, though the township regulations often still claim that the inbye land is open to all in winter—a remnant of run-rig practices. Clearly, the more nearly fully soumed a crofter is the more inbye land he will desire for winter feeding. This is especially true where an excess of sheep is carried for they are not housed in winter as cattle may be. The progressive crofter also wishes to use his own inbye at lambing time to ensure as high a lambing percentage as possible, for the common

grazings are often dangerous to the ewes at this period due to exposure and other physical factors. This becomes more important with recent progress in the fencing of individual crofts, leading to the decline of common usage of the arable area in winter. In the past, when the level of stock maintained was higher, over-stocking may have been of great importance in determining who would seek land on a sub-letting basis from his neighbours. Now, when under-stocking appears to be the norm, it would be easy to overstress this as a factor. Many depopulated and remote areas disregard their grazing regulations as being unrealistic in modern circumstances. Bad grazing management in the past has ensured that many townships are not now over-stocked with respect to the stated soumings. This is not to say that these grazings are not over-stocked with respect to their present capacity. Only now are grazing re-seeding schemes being tackled, with government aid, in the crofting area and notably in north Lewis.

SUB-LETTING AND THE CROFTING POPULATION

While the physical characteristics of the crofts have some influence on sub-letting patterns, the most potent factors lie within the social milieu. Analysis of the ages and occupations of tenants sub-letting their crofts provides more likely answers. Sub-letting tenants are immediately divisible into those resident in and those absent from their home townships.

TABLE IV
Number of tenants who sub-let their crofts

	1	2	3
Ardnamurchan .	11	3	8
Barra . . .	11	4	7
Lewis A . . .	8 (5)	6 (2)	2 (3)
Lewis B . . .	9	4	5

1. Total number of tenants who sub-let crofts.
2. Number resident.
3. Number absent.

Table IV shows that absenteeism is the most significant cause of sub-letting. Were it not for the existence of the weaving industry in Lewis crofts, the figures there would be more comparable with those of Barra and Ardnamurchan, where

two-thirds of the sub-letting tenants are absent from the townships. In almost every case examined the reason given for absenteeism is the small size of the crofts concerned, though this reason appears equally in areas of larger and smaller crofts. Some absentee tenants are the younger folk of a previous generation who have had to migrate in the past to find employment and have remained away in spite of having inherited the crofts. Such people look on their crofts as a safeguard against possible future unemployment and as a place to which to retire on a small financial outlay. Some absentee tenants are single men and women who take employment elsewhere, having left the croft as a residence on the death of their parents. Such a tie is easily maintained within the crofting framework while the present surreptitious system of sub-letting remains, but an active proprietor could insist on the croft being relinquished if he were able to prove bad husbandry. As long as the croft is sub-let this is difficult to prove for some use, however inadequate, is being made of the land.

Resident crofters who sub-let their land appear in two categories. There are in every township aged and widowed tenants who cultivate only a potato patch and possibly keep a single cow, or sub-let their land to a relative or neighbour in return for various services, most commonly for basic food requirements such as potatoes and milk. Such tenants are usually of pensionable age. Where tenants younger than this sub-let they normally follow a full-time occupation in the vicinity of the township and are between 45 and 64 years of age. Usual jobs are with the Post Office, Forestry Commission, County Councils on road-work, or with public transport operators. Some have independent businesses such as house-builders or decorators, and in Lewis full-time weavers.

It is more unusual for a resident tenant under 45 years of age to sub-let his croft, but when this does occur the reasons are identical with those above. More commonly the younger men work away from home till they are 40 to 45 years old when they return to take over the working of the croft from parents or relatives. Increasingly now, these men follow the trade they have learned while away from the crofting community and either work their land part-time or sub-let it. Many do not marry till relatively late in life when there is a prospect of settling down in the foreseeable future on the home croft as tenants, an important factor tending to bring about smaller families now than in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries in these areas. Inevitably this adds to the population problems of the crofting region. Such a pattern is partly a function of the multiplicity of small holdings, inherited from a period with very different living standards, and this in a community where the availability of land is an important social factor.

A minor cause of absenteeism is the existence of the multiple tenancy. This occurs where a single tenant falls heir to more than one croft, frequently in more than one township, either in his own right, or by marriage. In this way the total unit, regardless of any sub-letting arrangements contracted in addition, may be fragmented into pieces scattered over two or more townships, and the townships separated by as much as six or seven miles. The clerk of one of the township grazings committees in Barra held his office by virtue of being a tenant in that township. However, he resided on his wife's croft some miles to the south, one important reason being that his wife was post-mistress in her own township. Clearly the problems of operating such fragmented units are considerable and only one of the crofts can be occupied by the tenant's family, though he may have relatives on the other. Cases such as this are known as partial units with respect to any single township and appear thus in Table V. Partial units of this nature may also arise through sub-letting transactions which transcend township boundaries.

SUB-LETTING AND THE OPERATIVE UNIT

To quote Caird (Caird 1959: Table II, note 3), an operative unit is defined as "any unit, whether a legal croft or number of legal crofts owned and/or sub-let, or a cottar, . . . or squatter having stock. (Operative units may include crofts in other townships worked from the home (croft) . . .".) The application of this definition to sub-letting leads to the discussion of the causes for taking land from those willing to sub-let, and involves analysis of the families living off operative units.

In west Ardnamurchan and Barra half of all the operative units involve sub-letting arrangements and the number of operative units is only half the total number of crofts. Obviously sub-letting is very important here, the average size of the operative units which have increased their effective inbye area in this way being more than twice the average croft area. In north Lewis the operative units number three quarters of the total number of crofts, and only a third or less of these units

involve sub-letting. Here the average croft size and average operative unit size do not differ greatly for two reasons. Initially the croft is small and it is not always the case that a sub-let croft is transferred complete, and almost never so in the Lewis crofts studied. Thus a single sub-let croft may be split among as many as four different operative units. This means that the sub-let additions to operative units will not necessarily alter the croft size by very much (in Table V the areas are given only to the nearest acre). Also there is a tendency in Lewis for the smaller crofts to seek extra land through sub-letting and so bring their size up to the average. This is not the case everywhere, as suggested previously, for the smaller the croft the

TABLE V
Operative units

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ardnamurchan . . .	28	14	1	7	20	9
Barra . . .	34	16	6	7	17	7
Lewis A . . .	51 (17)	40 (15)	2	13 (5)	5 (3)	4 (2)
Lewis B . . .	58 (5)	49 (5)	1	10 (2)	6 (5)	6 (3)

1. Total number of crofts.
2. Total number of operative units.
3. Number of partial operative units.
4. Number of operative units involving sub-letting.
5. Average size of operative units involving sub-letting (acres).
6. Average size of crofts (acres).

less likely is it to be able to provide a base from which to build up a workable unit. As cited in a different context, the tweed weaving industry is the stabiliser assisting to keep tenants of minute crofts in the area who would otherwise leave. It is in Lewis also that the splitting of the sub-let croft among a number of operative units reaches its peak, in association with a relatively higher level of population. Of the Ardnamurchan sub-let crofts studied, only one was divided in the transaction, while in the Lewis examples the majority were divided among at least two operators, some among three, and in two examples among four operators. The statistical assessment of sub-letting is consequently complex and necessarily incomplete. Added to these difficulties is the fact that sub-letting may vary from the transferring of the croft complete with its grazing rights at one extreme, to the separation of the basic elements of the croft at the other. Permission may be granted to one to graze a cow or

horse on the land, to another to cut hay off part of the land, to another to grow oats or potatoes on half an acre or so, and yet another may be allowed to take up the grazing rights in the common pasture. The transference of grazing rights, dissociated from the croft land, appears to be very infrequent, though its remaining unrecorded could be due to the difficulties of establishing the existence of what are essentially illegal practices among an understandably reticent population.

Tenants sub-letting their land receive payment in many different ways. There may be a simple cash exchange, and often the legal tenant bears only a tacitly agreed proportion of the total rent to cover his house which seldom comes under sub-letting arrangements. An absentee tenant often sub-lets to a

TABLE VI
The working of operative units in relation to employment

	1	2a	2b	3a	3b	3c
Ardnamurchan . . .	7	2	3	2	0	0
Barra . . .	7	3	0	3	1	0
Lewis A . . .	11 (5)	5(3)	3 (1)	2	0	1(1)
Lewis B . . .	10 (2)	0	5 (2)	2	1	2

- 1. Number of operative units involving sub-letting.
- 2a. Units worked by a single operator with other employment.
- 2b. Units worked by a single operator without other employment.
- 3a. Units worked by two operators, one with other employment.
- 3b. Units worked by two operators, both with other employment.
- 3c. Units worked by two operators, neither with other employment.

neighbour in return for having his house and fences maintained. A resident tenant (particularly an elderly one) may be paid in kind, for instance potatoes, milk, the winning and drawing of peats. These are usually the commodities which the elderly or infirm tenant is unable to provide for himself, but which are needed to supplement a small pension.

Of the crofters operating units involving sub-letting, one third take no other employment, the unit supplying sufficient work to keep them fully occupied. Such crofters tend to be over 45 years old, and it is found that where an operator is under this age he usually has an ancillary occupation. Where there is more than one operator on a croft there is always a family relationship involved such as father and son, or brothers. Other relationships are possible for women must sometimes be classed as croft operators. Half of the operators working a

unit alone take another job, equally in all the areas under consideration. Where two operators are involved, in two thirds of the cases studied one, and occasionally both, take another job. Such occupations may be full-time such as van-driving for a local shop, or periodic such as acting as a ploughing contractor with one's own tractor. In less than a quarter of the cases neither take other employment, and this includes the partially disabled and the invalid.

Generally where regular employment is available it will be taken up but seldom are there sufficient jobs to go round. Occasional jobs, mainly labouring, for example on regional or township water schemes, or seasonal agricultural work on neighbouring farms make up the balance. Ardnamurchan has some seasonal salmon fishing which employs a few local men. Common regular jobs have been mentioned, many of them related to the provision of necessary services for the local community. Exceptional employment of each kind may be taken up as in Barra where some croft operators spend up to ten months a year at sea returning only for a period either at sowing or at harvest.

THE SIZE OF THE MINIMUM ECONOMIC UNIT

The study of the operative unit raises the problem of the size of the economic unit. There is no doubt that the majority of crofts are too small, and the practice of sub-letting, unofficial as it generally is, does give to the progressive crofter some opportunity to gain a livelihood from full-time croft work. In this context the average size of operative unit involving sub-letting is of interest, for it may be taken that the operators of such units represent the go-ahead elements in the township community, and their total holdings will approximate to economic units in the prevailing economy. In the Lewis areas studied where the percentage of crofts sub-let is small, on average the operative unit involving sub-letting is not significantly different in area from the size of the average croft. If the population decline which has been experienced since 1911 were to continue it is likely that more land would become available for sub-letting. Militating against this is the weaving industry, operating to keep people in the area who would otherwise leave. The prosperity of the weaving industry is dependent on an outside market, unfortunately subject to considerable fluctuations. In Ardnamurchan and Barra where the size of the average unit involving sub-letting is more than

twice the average croft size, sub-letting assumes a greater significance in the production of operative units. These, however, are not necessarily well-worked. Sub-letting is usually unofficial for seldom has the proprietor's permission been sought as crofting tenure requires. Thus no cropping or improvement grants are available to the operator in respect of the sub-let part of his unit. Therefore sub-let land is often taken only to provide extra inbye grazing and winter fodder in the form of natural (not sown) hay, and to allow the keeping of extra stock. Agriculturally, the sub-let crofts are not being properly utilised, drainage is neglected and fences fall into disrepair. If the process continues too long the land becomes derelict. Sub-let crofts may often be distinguished in the

TABLE VII. Park, Lewis
Occupations of males (15-64) related to unit size
Figures in brackets are percentages

	1	2	3	4	5
0-5		14 (30)	27 (59)	5 (11)	46 (100)
5-10		19 (42)	22 (49)	4 (9)	45 (100)
10-15		14 (50)	12 (43)	2 (7)	28 (100)
over 15		7 (54)	3 (23)	3 (23)	13 (100)
Total		54 (41)	64 (48)	14 (11)	132 (100)

1. Size of operative units (acres).
2. Full-time croft work.
3. Croft work with regular employment.
4. Croft work with periodic employment.
5. Total (This table omits units operated by more than one person).

field by the facts that no green or white crops are grown on them, and their drainage is even worse than that of the remainder of the township. Herein lies the evil of sub-letting.

As Caird has shown in Park, the size of the operative unit, as distinct from the croft size, is relevant to the taking of ancillary employment. Table VII is taken from his study (Caird 1959—Table V).

These figures point clearly to the conclusion that the greater the size of the operative unit the greater is the possibility of that unit providing full-time work for the operator. Using these figures together with those in Table V, it is suggested that in the circumstances of crofting as it exists now the most satisfactory size of unit is one with about 15 acres of inbye land. This must not, of course, be dissociated from adequate grazing facilities, and there always remains the need for some

ancillary employment. This conclusion finds support in MacSween's study of Trotternish, north Skye, where he has divided the townships into "old" and "new", the distinction being that many of the "new" townships are of late nineteenth and early twentieth century origin as resettlements, having larger crofts, and larger common grazings than the "old" townships in which there has been continuity of small holder settlement since the mid-eighteenth century (MacSween 1959: 223-36, 249-50). In the "old" townships where the average croft size is only fractionally above 7 acres, 31 per cent of the crofts are sub-let or vacant, but this figure drops to 12 per cent in the "new" townships with an average croft size of 12 acres. Here also, the greater the size of the unit, the greater the possibility of it providing a viable existence for the operator.

The closest parallel to sub-letting as it exists in Highland Scotland appears to be in the practice of conacre letting in Ireland, recently studied for Northern Ireland by Forbes.² The reasons for conacre letting and for sub-letting appear to be identical. It is interesting to note that a size of about 15 acres is suggested for the minimum working unit in a marginal area in Northern Ireland, comparable with much of the crofting region. The basic difference between the two systems is that conacre letting is legal while the sub-letting of crofts (as it is done in the vast majority of cases without the consent of the proprietor) is illegal.

OFFICIAL ATTITUDES TO SUB-LETTING

The attitudes of proprietors and government bodies to the practice of sub-letting are interesting. Proprietors frequently regard their crofting estates as liabilities, for the crofter enjoys a virtually absolute security of tenure for a small rent. Technically it is possible for a crofter to be removed for inadequately working his land, but this is both difficult to prove and expensive to carry out. In practice most proprietors are content to turn a blind eye to sub-letting, if not occasionally actively to support it. This is very understandable where the proprietor is not deriving a considerable financial return from his crofting townships, and would prefer to see some use, however inadequate, being made of the unoccupied crofts, than have them lie totally derelict. Were there no sub-letting, the latter would be the case within the existing framework.

In the past official attitudes to sub-letting have been incomprehensible. As long ago as 1884, before the crofter

existed in the legal sense, sub-letting and its attendant evils had been recognised. (Napier Commission Report 1884: 43-44.) The Taylor Commission of 1954, on the recommendations of which the present Crofters Commission was set up in 1955, recognised and took evidence on the nature and wide extent of sub-letting in the crofting region, but shut its eyes to the practice. The discussion of sub-letting here ends with the remarkable statement, "We have considered whether these evils should not be remedied by bringing the law into line with the facts of the situation and making sub-letting lawful. We have come to the conclusion that in this respect no change should be made in the law and we think that the remedy lies rather in a stricter enforcement of the rules of good husbandry". (Taylor Commission Report 1954: Para. 183.) Failure to recognise the social aspects of the problem was implicit in this attitude.

The Report of the Crofters Commission for 1959 gives much more cause for hope for the future. The Commission adopts a sane attitude in noting that on some 2,000 registered crofts, "only about one third of the crofters concerned are fully and seriously cultivating their holdings". The Report continues "This does not justify any harsh judgement. Many crofters do not work their crofts because they are too small or the land too poor to reward labour as it is priced to-day. The crofter's decision in such cases to cut his losses and apply his labour elsewhere for a living wage is sensible and businesslike. In many cases the crofters are old or infirm . . ." (Crofters Commission 1960: Para 61a). The Commission has also recognised the problem from the landlord's viewpoint. The Report suggests that the Commission are at present under-powered to enable them to attempt any rationalisation of crofting agriculture. ". . . about two thirds of the 20,000 crofts are not being cultivated, or are under-cultivated, or have been informally turned over to neighbours for grazing. Given normal economic fluidity, much of the unwanted or unworked land would long since have passed legally into the hands of those who need and can work it; but security of tenure has frozen crofting agriculture in an out-dated pattern of minute units. The pressure of economic trends has indeed wrought much change, but it is all undercover. The problem is to unfreeze the system . . . to give . . . legal form to the changes . . . already accepted . . ." (Crofters Commission 1960: Para. 69).

An unfreezing process is envisaged without causing any

major social upheaval, allowing particularly the older people to live out their lives relatively undisturbed under conditions similar to those current. The major change sought by the Commission is "powers to sub-let crofts which are not worked in . . . a satisfactory manner". (Crofters Commission 1960: Para. 84.) The obvious advantage of legalising sub-letting lies in the fact that all crofts would thus qualify for the various agricultural grants and the quality of the inbye land could be maintained or improved. However, the problem of what constitutes adequate working of the croft remains.

This attitude, involving a complete reversal of previously held opinions, is to be commended. There will be inevitable opposition from those in the crofting community who are well content with existing conditions, and who would view compulsory sub-letting of unworked crofts as an infringement of what they have come to regard as their inalienable right to do what they will with land they rent under crofting tenure. This attitude is exemplified in the failure of an attempt to re-organise a crofting township in Wester Ross under the existing framework. After a considerable expenditure of resources by the Commission, the crofters concerned turned down a rationalisation of the present chaotic conditions in their area. (Crofters Commission 1960: Appendix IX.) Further schemes are in preparation, and already crofters in part of Sutherland are taking measures to protect their existing "rights". It remains to be seen if the Crofters Commission will, in fact, be granted the powers it seeks.

CONCLUSION

In present circumstances the practice of sub-letting is both inevitable and desirable. It is a function of minute holdings, inadequate employment opportunities, and an unbalanced population structure. Sub-letting fulfils an important social function, for were it removed completely there would undoubtedly be even heavier migration from the West Highlands and Islands than already exists. Not only for the sake of the people, but also for the good of the land involved, the practice needs legalising, but this must be part and parcel of the creation of much more stable social and economic conditions in the Highlands. Regional planning, and not County planning, is called for. It is encouraging to know that the problem is at least being faced up to by the Crofters Commission as this

body is one whose sphere of influence transcends county boundaries.

NOTES

- ¹ Glasgow University Geography Department Crofting Survey. Initiated 1956. Five seasons field study covering the Outer Hebrides on an individual croft basis, recording data on stock, crops, population and employment.
- ² The author is indebted to Miss Jean Forbes for access to, and permission to quote from a MS copy of the section on conacre, of the forthcoming "Land of Ulster: Land Utilisation Memoir".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author acknowledges permission from Professor Miller to use material based on field studies carried out as part of the Glasgow University Geography Department Crofting Survey, and is indebted to Dr James Caird for his valuable comments during the preparation of this paper.

Barra was visited in September, 1957, and Lewis and Ardnamurchan during July/September 1959. The study could not have been made without the willing assistance of many crofters in these areas.

REFERENCES

- CAIRD, J. B.
1959 *Park. A Geographical Study of a Lewis Crofting District 1959.* Glasgow University and Geographical Field Group.
- CROFTERS COMMISSION
1911-12 *Report of the Crofters Commission, 1911-1912.* Appendix CC. Return of Cottars and Squatters in . . . Lewis . . . in 1910. H.M.S.O. 1912.
1960 *Annual Report of the Crofters Commission for 1959.* H.M.S.O.
- MACSWEEN, M. D.
1959 *Settlement in Trotternish, Isle of Skye, 1700-1958.* Unpublished B.Litt. Thesis, Glasgow University.
- NAPIER COMMISSION
1884 *Report of H.M. Commissioners of Enquiry into the Conditions of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.* H.M.S.O. 1884.
- TAYLOR COMMISSION
1954 *Report of Commission of Enquiry into Crofting Conditions, 1954.* H.M.S.O. Cmd. 9091.