SETTLEMENT IN THE HIGHLANDS, 1750-1950

THE DOCUMENTARY AND THE WRITTEN RECORD

Malcolm Gray*

The student of settlement in the Highlands of the late eighteenth century is in many ways fortunate in the records at his disposal. This was, of course, wholly an agrarian society and much depends on the completeness and nature of estate records. In all parts of the Highlands—but particularly in the west—landed property was highly concentrated. A small group of estates covered a high proportion of the land: and within each estate the property was normally unbroken by interspersed units of ownership so that the settlement as a whole, and often a solid group of settlements, came under unitary control and continuous record. By good fortune—but not entirely by accident, for high family pride, so well established in this society, is an important preservative of the written record—the records of many of these estates have survived; voluminous, increasingly well-ordered in their layout, and portentous in their appearance they seem at first glance to offer a comprehensive record of great areas of settlement. And the usefulness of the record is helped by two adventitious influences. Firstly, as the eighteenth century, with its growing competition in ostentatious urban living, wore on, many of the landlords were chronically and increasingly hard up. Being worried about money they constantly call not only for the usual accounts of rent due and received, the common coin of estates records, but also for inquiries, estimates and plans concerning the general economic circumstances of their tenantry: the factor is asked to consider the economic potential of the estate and he starts, usefully for the historian, by reporting on the day-to-day details of the local economy. Secondly, the fact that most landlords were absentees for at least part of the time carries advantages.

* Senior Lecturer in Economic History, University of Aberdeen.

They were not of the species of absentee landlord who is content to draw income in ignorance of where it comes from; from a distance they call for constant reports on matters afoot—and many trivia of daily dealings are laid out for the historian, tiresomely often enough, and in atrocious handwriting, but with the occasional bright gleam of significant information. To the material preserved in the continuity of family ownership, the accidents of history have added another great collection: the records of the estates forfeited after the rebellions. They cover estates both large and small in many different parts of the Highlands and the uniformity, the thoroughness and the order of the record is of great value, not only in showing the effects of disturbance of the normal course of administration—the results of purposive and explicit policies—but also in laying bare the underlying normal texture of agricultural life. They help, too, to correct one possible distortion emerging from the provenance of the usual run of estate records; outside this collection the record is probably overweighted by the large estates with a long history of continuous family ownership and the smaller, less competently administered estates—those that have slipped from the historian's eye—might tell a different story from the greater ones on which interest most centres.

But when he begins to build up his social and geographical picture the student finds the documents full of exasperating gaps. The working tools tend to break when they are wielded. For one thing the records are riddled with the results of the tacksmen system. Large tracts are let intact to tacksmen, subordinate members of the aristocracy, and the management of these sections, drawing together the affairs of what may be a considerable tenantry, is completely hidden from view. Moreover the clarity of the picture that remains in view is obscured from time to time by the addition or subtraction of land entering or leaving the control of the tacksmen; shifts among the tenantry do not necessarily record real human changes. Even the townships that remain steadily in view cannot be comprehensively understood from the records. They were joint farms and the names on the rental may not indicate the full roll even of people of joint-tenant status; and the rent of those who do appear on the roll does not necessarily indicate their true agricultural status. Below the joint-tenants, whether or not they appear on the record, there will normally be untold numbers of subtenants, cottars and servants. The numbers of

such people cannot even be guessed for there was no recognised proportion between numbers of direct and indirect tenants, no normal relation between the size of the holding and the numbers who worked it or were attached to it. Thus the full delineation of numbers of families or population, or even of holders of land, and certainly any attempt to disentangle the social relationships of the constituent families of the township, is impossible from the normal rent-roll. Fortunately, the impulse to plan and rearrange estates sometimes included the counting of heads and there occur occasionally more complete enumerations of population in relation to land, sometimes even complete descriptions of the tenurial conditions of all the families. Complete instantaneous pictures are revealed here and there, but once revealed they are gone; they cannot be followed through time. And partial revelation, such are the obvious capricious differences among the recorded instances, merely emphasises the impossibility of generalisation. Finally, the maps of farms are normally too generalised; if picked out in detailed rigs, it is without indication of individual holdings. Indeed the whole conception of the Highland farm as a set of generalised shares unrelated to particular portions of land and liable to periodical lotting changes is against any effective mapping of individual holdings. Altogether, the systematic plotting of settlements both as aggregates of families or as social microcosms with intricate internal relationships is fraught with difficulty. There are revealing flashes but no complete picture.

When the interest shifts to the problems of change and the inquirer is carried forward in time the nature of the record does not change much; the estate records are still there at the centre of investigation, often the instruments of new owners, but still in much the same shape and still recording only imperfectly (although as tacksmen were removed and subtenants brought into full tenancy they correspond more closely to the full social reality). But the focus of interest shifts and with it the type of record that may be brought into play. Interest will now be on population trend, the re-arrangement of arable holdings, and the disappearance of settlements—and sometimes the laying of entirely new ones—associated with the spread of sheep farming. Some of these changes are in their nature difficult to follow, but in the Highlands, as in the rest of Scotland, the record between 1755 and 1850 is fortunately interspersed and defined at beginning and end by the great surveys

of population and scene, the population enumeration of 1755, and the Old and New Statistical Accounts. In this period, too, printed works become numerous and varied. It was the age when the Highland tour became fashionable and the book to record it scarcely less so. Often, after the great accounts of the pioneers, Dr. Johnson and Pennant, such works give very slight indications of social life; the writers are more interested in the display of literary style, in antiquarian learning and in the stock responses to the natural scene that pass for romantic sensitivity. But occasionally the picture comes through, and the interest in nature sometimes goes with another feature of the time—the belief in progress and in an inevitable undeveloped potential; there are manifold schemes of development and some at least take account of the real geographical and social facts. More practical, but shot with the same enthusiasms, were the accounts written for the Board of Agriculture which the Highland counties share with the rest of Britain.

The overall regional trend of population and the detailed differences between place and place are of first importance in determining the size of settlements and the social conditions within them. The rate of increase through the second half of the eighteenth century can be discerned with reasonable accuracy for each individual parish by setting Dr. Webster's enumeration against the results of the first census; and the record can be followed thereafter at ten-year intervals, though with some obscurities as parish boundaries are changed and amalgamations and splittings take place. Yet at the best this only gives happenings aggregated over what in the Highlands is often a very wide area—the parish. Many of the most important demographic changes of the nineteenth century came in the form of movements within the parish; and only by tracing such movements would it be possible to follow the intricacies of the settlement pattern. This detailed short-distance shifting—the desertion of some of the old settlements, the overcrowding of others both by natural increase and by immigration, and the occasional laying out of new—is closely connected with the sheep farming movement which was so often the occasion of desertion. The pattern remains obscure. The census material, at least as printed, is too generalised; the disappearance of evicted tenants from the estate records does not end their real social existence; among the lower, unrecorded, layers people may move from place to place while neither the estate nor the census record catches a glimpse of

them. And the literary record is characterised by the purging of guilt, the urge to justify or accuse, and the over-emphatic protestation which paralyse any attempt to tell the tale plainly and in a way that would be more eloquent of the true sufferings involved. Thus for all the ink that has been spilt little idea can yet be gleaned of the true weight of the process, of the numbers involved and the land changing hands. It is true that the movement of the sheep-farmers' frontier can be followed with fair accuracy and the ultimate balance between sheep-farming and crofting can be established. But this is a geographical rather than a social picture, a mapping of areas largely devoid of human content; the details of change are lost and the working of several different causes may be confused. Laborious and detailed work may ultimately yield more to the historian in this field. At least from 1841, the census enumerators' books can with patience be made to map in detail the decennial shifts; and every new bundle of estate records that is turned over may be the one that will show completely for at least one area the social and economic content of the abrupt nominal changes of the rent-roll.

The other main settlement change that was taking place through this period—the substitution of compact lots for the runrig farms—is well recorded. It was a step much debated by landlords and their factors and one therefore which can often be followed in intricate detail through the estate records; and since groups of farms were generally under unitary ownership it can be followed without the gaps which might occur in a system of more mixed ownership. (On the other hand, since no Parliamentary or legal process was involved, the researcher is denied any glimpse of the change in the public records.) Further, the results of the change were written boldly—and enduringly—on the countryside and there is sufficient casual comment, together with the more professional recordings of the agricultural writers (reporting at the behest of the Board of Agriculture) and the variously skilful compilations of the Statistical Accounts, to trace the spasmodic impulses erratically filling in the physical picture of the modern crofting system.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the northwest Highlands and the more northerly islands were recognised to be a problem area; a region where the population suffered constant privation beyond anything known—except among small groups—in any other part of Britain and where widespread

deaths by starvation were a possibility. It was with exasperation that the representatives of Government and even of charitable organisations turned to the rescue and record of this, to them, perverse people. But they were driven into action and investigation and the result is a series of records of a whole society that can scarcely be equalled anywhere else in Britain. These are partly in the Parliamentary records and start perhaps with the report of the Emigration Committee in 1841—the Poor Law Inquiry of 1844 was general to the whole of Scotland but contains again many detailed local accounts—continue through the M'Neill Report of 1851, on to the Napier Commission of 1884, the Report on the Cottar Population in Lewis of 1888, the Brand Commission of 1895, and on ultimately, through other examples, to the Taylor Commission of 1953. Nor does the record end there. The special administrative bodies that ultimately were to be set up to deal with Highland problems—the Crofters' Commission, the Congested Districts Board, the Land Court and the newer Crofters' Commission of the 1950's—have left their trail of annual reports. Meanwhile, less public bodies, attracted to humanitarian problems, were making their reports; the reports of the Free Church Destitution Committee, but one example of the species, contain much detailed statistical information on the whole shape of society.

Some of these reports are unusual—and revealing—in another way: in the examination of witnesses, not as experts, but as simple representatives of the social life under investigation. The Emigration Committee had contented itself with the usual committee procedure of that date (1841)—the calling of witnesses of social position or of some expert knowledge. But Sir John M'Neill, while he filters the evidence of the original witnesses, had evidently been at pains to get the first-hand accounts of the crofters and cottars themselves and with the Napier Commission we are presented with direct and verbatim evidence by members of all social groups, with the lesser and poorer abundantly represented; there are some suspicions of coaching and preparation of the witnesses, and too much depends upon fragile memories of many years past, but on the whole through all four volumes of evidence it is a rich and detailed display of the life of a people. Nor is it the last such display.

Such records are concerned only accidentally, of course, with the shape and size of settlements. But they do thoroughly

document the economic circumstances backing such development; for the question now was whether a settlement pattern which had solidified by 1850 but was still affected in its inner strength by the pulsations and trends of population, could establish the economic base for its continuance. The days of dramatic change in the outer shape were over but within a rigorously defined land system the minimum economic requirements of continued life were in constant change. Some of these changes had effects on the outer shapes of settlements and sometimes changes in the outer shape would stir a new economic effort. But on the whole it was a long, slow and largely unseen contest between the encroaching and alien forms and the native life; on the outcome of the contest would depend the ultimate physical continuance of the typical nineteenth-century settlement pattern, but for the moment the encroachment might go far without visible collapse. Local collapses there have been, the desertion of townships, the retreat of of cultivation in settlements where there is still life, but on the whole the pattern has held together. True comment must come through consideration of the totality of economic and social life within; and for this, through all the long period of physical rigidity, there are ample and untouched records.

There are records representative of most parts of the Highlands and Islands in the preserved papers of the great estates. Some of these estates were much diminished in size in the first half of the nineteenth century and the original broad picture, on them, cannot be carried beyond 1850 at the latest: such are the Seaforth and Clanranald estates. With this limitation, however, the picture is, or can be made, representative. The *Breadalbane Collection* displays a large section of Perthshire and northern Argyllshire; the *Seaforth Papers* document Lewis and some smaller parts of the eastern and western mainland of Ross-shire; the *Reay Papers* show a smallish corner of Sutherland for a short period at the beginning of the nineteenth century; *Gordon Castle Papers* deal with parts of Lochaber, as well as the largely lowland sectors of this great property; *Clanranald Papers* arise from an estate which at one time covered Arisaig and Moidart on the western mainland together with some of the smaller isles of the Inner Hebrides and the whole of South Uist in the Outer. All these collections, along with some

smaller ones, are housed in the Register House, Edinburgh. In addition, some collections are still kept in the muniment rooms in the estates themselves; particularly notable are the papers relating to the Sutherland estate, kept at Dunrobin Castle: to the Macleod estate, kept at Dunvegan: to the Argyll estate, kept at Inveraray: and to the Atholl estate, at present being catalogued in King's College Library but ultimately to be returned to Blair Castle. The *Forfeited Estates Papers*, again in Register House, deal mainly with a fairly short period in the second half of the eighteenth century but they contain examples of estates, large and small, in many different parts of the Highlands (though less for the northerly Highlands); to some extent this is a record of a very special experiment in public administration, but there are also accounts of the normal agrarian composition and detailed working of typical Highland estates, and there are particularly useful surveys of population, land and stock.

The population record in the Highlands is the normal one for Scotland. *Dr. Webster's Enumeration* (1755)—of which the manuscript copy is in the National Library of Scotland—is an estimate, built on scientific principle from a known base, for all the parishes of Scotland. The estimates in the Old Statistical Account come too close to the first census to be of any great value. The decennial census figures, as given for parishes in the printed Parliamentary Papers, can be broken down to much finer detail by the use of the Enumerators' Books which show numbers of people and landholdings in every farm and settlement; they are kept in the New Register House, Edinburgh, and are not available beyond 1891. Registration of births and deaths was not made compulsory till 1855 and the record before that time is very incomplete and unreliable.

The famine of the forties brought a crop of official and semi-official reports. Correspondence about the official measures to give relief is partly printed in Parliamentary Papers (1847, LIII), but there are additional manuscript letters on the same subject in Register House (Highland Destitution Papers); again this is more than an administrative record, since there are many details about the social and economic condition of the people. The organisation called into being by the famine was not merely governmental; private charitable bodies played a part and reported on it. Such were the Highland Relief Committees of Glasgow and Edinburgh, and the Free Church

Committee on Destitution; from these came a number of annual reports, again containing some useful social investigation and comment. A similar body was the Highland Emigration Society, of which the records are preserved in Register House.

The series of Parliamentary Papers dealing with the Highlands started before the famine and lasted long after—in fact till the present day. The first notable report—with, of course, the valuable transcript of examination and answers of witnesses—was the *Report on Emigration* (1841,VI). The *Poor Law Inquiry* (1844,XXI-XXIV) contains detailed material concerning some of the Highland parishes. But Sir John M'Neill's *Report to the Board of Supervision* (1851,XXVI) was the fullest account yet given; it was to be outdone, however, by the report and evidence (running to five volumes) of the Napier *Commission on the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars* (1884, XXII-XXVI). Detailed returns concerning rent, size of holding, and stock, made to this Commission, are available in Register House to add to the printed material. The report was followed by the setting up of the Crofters' Commission, a permanent body which issued annual reports till 1911. In 1888 came the report on the *Condition of the Cottar Population of the Lews* (1888,LXXX) and some years later the Brand *Commission on the Highlands and Islands* (1895,XXXVIII-XXXIX). The Congested Districts Board, set up after the latter report, issued annual reports till 1911. The Report of the *Committee of Inquiry into Crofting Conditions* (1953,VIII) is the latest of the series of important reports and it, too, has had its sequel in the appointment of a new Crofters' Commission.

The variously named fishery authorities that have followed each other since 1809 dealt at first mainly, and then solely, with Scotland and their annual reports as well as the daily work of the fishery officers have touched at many points upon Highland conditions. The reports give a continuous, and increasingly elaborate, statistical picture, although it is a record that has to be carefully interpreted before it can be taken to indicate conditions within the coastal settlements. From about 1885, the literary account of activities in the various districts becomes full and informative, but the main help to interpretation comes through the use of manuscript records, the great mass of accounts and reports that were kept and made by the fishery officers; these are housed mainly in Register House, but there is

evidently much material still in the local offices. One experiment with an illuminating history is the attempt to found fishing settlements by the British Fishery Society. This experience, which is significant not only of the settlements themselves but also of the general conditions surrounding them, is thoroughly documented in the records of the Society, again housed in Register House.