

POPULATION CHANGES AND THE HIGHLAND PROBLEM, 1951-1961

H. A. Moisley*

The population of the Crofting Counties has declined more in the last ten years than in the previous twenty and this decline has taken place whilst the population of Scotland as a whole has risen to the highest figure yet recorded.¹ This is the more remarkable when we find that the excess of births over deaths in the Crofting Counties (7,116) was greater during these *ten* years than it had been during the previous *twenty* (6,433). The net loss by migration from the Crofting Counties was 15,186 or 5.3 per cent. of the 1951 population, equivalent to 1,519 persons each year which may be compared with 693 persons each year, 1931-51. Is this a measure of failure of Government policy for "Highland Development"?

Table I and the map, Fig. 1, show the breakdown of the *net* decline of 8,070 and demonstrate that the overall net loss

TABLE I
The crofting counties

County	Actual changes, 1951-61				Net percentage change
	Increases		Decreases		
	Burghs	Landward areas	Burghs	Landward areas	
Zetland . . .	368	39	Nil	1,950	-8.0
Orkney . . .	Nil	Nil	59	2,453	-11.8
Caithness . . .	5,025	181	Nil	571	+20.4
Sutherland . . .	140	265	Nil	633	-1.7
Ross and Cromarty . . .	883	42	121	3,705	-4.8
Inverness . . .	1,711	905	Nil	4,121	-1.8
Argyll . . .	633	164	1,424	3,389	-6.3
	8,760	1,596	1,604	16,822	-2.8

NOTE.—"Landward" areas, i.e. Districts of Counties, correspond more or less, to Rural Districts in England and Wales but are not necessarily wholly rural.

of 2.8 per cent. conceals much greater losses in many areas. In the table the total changes have been obtained for individual

* Lecturer in Geography, University of Glasgow.

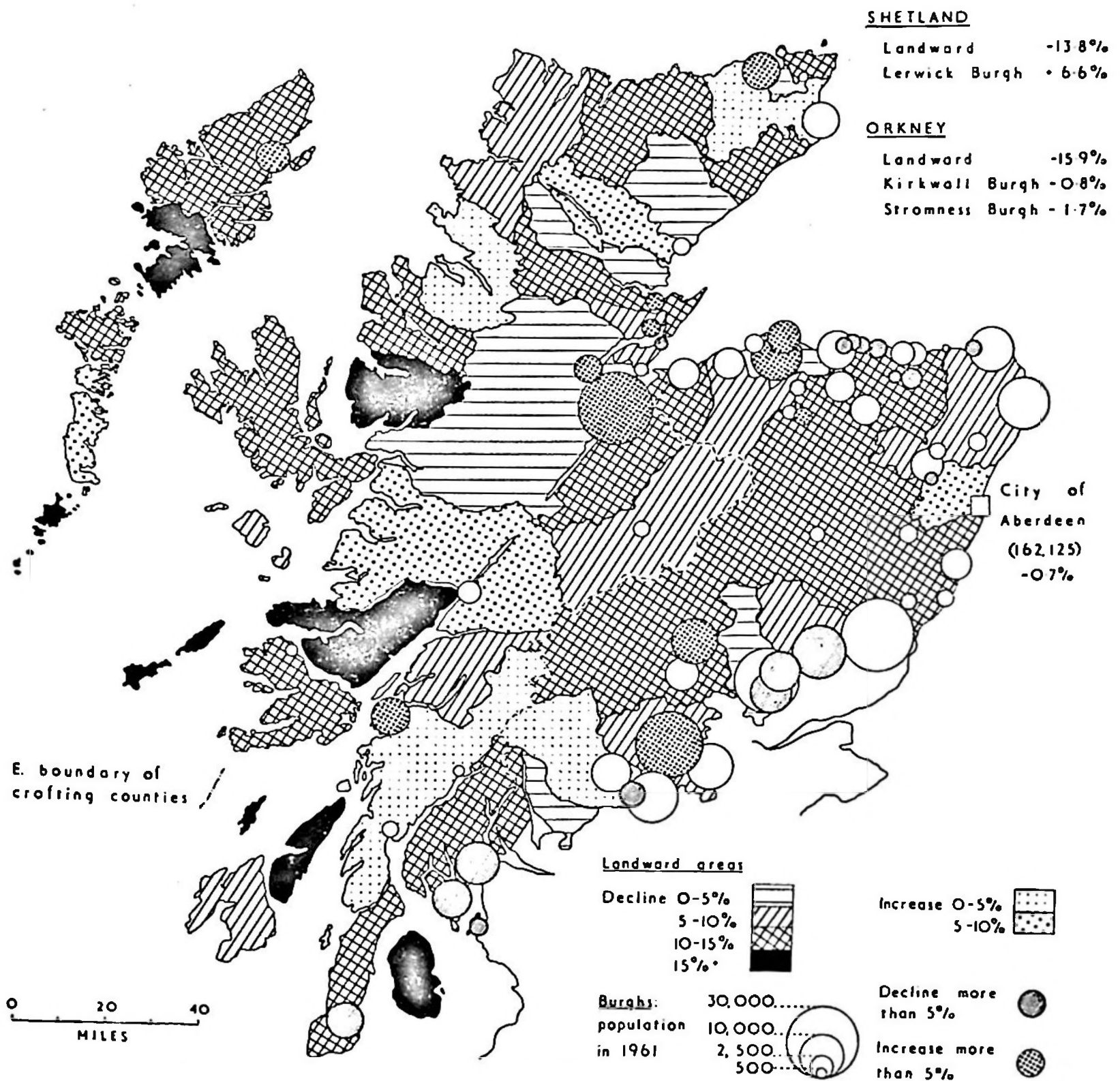


FIG. 1—Population Changes 1951-1961

burghs and landward districts of counties and the increases and decreases have been tabulated separately. Thus in Argyll, for example, certain burghs show increases (total 633 persons) others decreases (1,424 persons). The landward districts of counties may include some urban or suburban elements but these are seldom significant in the region treated; in the main, changes in landward districts may be regarded as indicative of rural changes except close to Fort William, Stornoway, Thurso and a few other burghs.

Rural (or "landward") areas lost 16,822 and gained but 1,596: burghs gained 8,760 but lost 1,604. More than half the increase in burghal population is accounted for by one burgh, Thurso, and one may hazard a guess that at least half the increase in rural areas is accounted for by Service personnel mainly in South Uist and St. Kilda. Atomic energy and military rockets are thus responsible for at least half of such increases in population as did occur in the Crofting Counties; not only have they provided some employment for local men who would otherwise have migrated southwards in search of

TABLE II
Insular districts

District	Actual changes, 1951-61				Net Percentage change
	Increases		Decreases		
	Burghs	Landward areas	Burghs	Landward areas	
Shetland	368	39	...	1,950	-8.0
Orkney . . . . .	...	...	59	2,453	-11.8
Lewis	267	...	...	2,077	-11.1
Harris . . . . .	...	...	...	706	-17.7
N. Uist . . . . .	...	...	...	300	-13.5
S. Uist . . . . .	...	219	...	...	+5.8
Barra . . . . .	...	...	...	417	-22.1
Skye, etc. . . . .	...	...	...	867	-10.0
Mull etc., . . . . .	...	...	25	287	-14.6
Tiree and Coll . . . . .	...	...	...	286	-20.0
Jura and Colonsay . . . . .	...	...	...	76	-15.3
Islay . . . . .	...	...	...	404	-9.5
	635	258	84	9,823	-9.6

work, but they have brought in a relatively large number of immigrants from the south. Without them the net emigration figure would probably have exceeded 20,000 (compare 36,000 in the period 1921-31).

One third of the population of the Crofting Counties is insular and it is in the islands (Table II) that population decline has taken place; the net overall decline of 8,070 is made up of a net increase of 944 on the mainland and a net decline of 9,014 in the islands. The only insular places showing increases are the burghs of Lerwick and Stornoway and the South Uist District; the relative prosperity of fishing and the Harris Tweed industry, respectively, account for the first two. The increase in South Uist is entirely due to the establishment of the military rocket range. Elsewhere the decline ranges from about 10 per

cent. of 1951 to more than 20 per cent. It is noteworthy that the places where population is declining most rapidly are, by and large, the smaller and less accessible islands; Orkney other than Mainland, Barra, Tiree, Coll, Jura and Colonsay. This continues a long-term trend; the Registrar General remarks on the decline in Stroma's population (from 111 to 12), and it is to be expected that when the final Reports are available many of the other smaller islands, not now separately distinguished, will show particularly heavy losses. Whilst a reduction in population of some of the larger islands is probably a healthy trend which may result eventually in communities which are more nearly economically viable, in the smaller islands it gives cause for disquiet.

In Barra, in particular, the loss of 22 per cent. of the 1951 population is quite alarming. There is a "point of no return" in such declines beyond which it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain essential services: moreover, from the social point of view, such declining communities have many problems the final result of which is to discourage younger folk from staying. De-population may become a vicious downward spiral. In 1954 the Taylor Commission stressed the need for urgent action if such crofting communities were to be resuscitated; the figures now published suggest that the Commissions' worst fears may yet be realised; this is underlined by the small response to generous official attempts to revive local fishing in the Outer Hebrides.

It is also remarkable that in Orkney, frequently pointed out as a model of prosperous small-holding, but not crofting, agriculture shows a decline greater than Shetland and similar to Lewis, both predominantly crofting. The crofting system alone, then, cannot be blamed for rural depopulation. A healthy agriculture does not stem the tide of emigration as do weaving or fishing. The effect of weaving may be estimated by comparing the loss of population from rural Lewis (11.1 per cent. of 1951) with that from districts with little or no weaving (Harris, 17.7 per cent., North Uist 13.5 per cent. and Barra 22.1 per cent.). The Harris Tweed industry is now concentrated in Lewis, where it employs about 1,300 weavers and 1,000 mill workers.² Since fishing is no longer important, and because the crofts are even smaller in Lewis than in Harris, it is reasonable to suppose that, had it not been for the tweed industry, Lewis would have experienced emigration at a far greater rate. For such a large community to depend so heavily on a narrow

market—and one dependent to some extent on fashion—is risky; these figures underline the risk. The recent introduction of fabrics other than Harris Tweed to the cottage weavers is therefore to be welcomed.

Turning to the Inner Hebrides it is clear that the depopulation has gone on apace in Tiree and Coll (probably mainly in Coll), Jura, Colonsay and Mull. This again indicates the rapid decline of the smaller communities (Coll, Jura and Colonsay) and the lack of opportunity in Mull, a largely non-crofting island which has failed to develop agriculture, industry or tourism. The economic stagnation of non-crofting Mull contrasts strongly with the steady growth of the tourist trade in Skye, almost wholly a crofting island: the Mull population has declined by 14·6 per cent., that of Skye by only 10 per cent. This suggests that the amalgamation of crofts into farms, advocated by some as a panacea to the “Highland Problem”, is not necessarily a solution. Nor is the “Highland Problem” merely a matter of accessibility, for Mull is far more accessible to the great urban centres of the mainland than either Skye or Lewis. Much the same point may be made regarding Islay, a large island, which like Lewis, has a prosperous industrial base, in this case whisky distilling, and which shows the smallest decline (9·5 per cent.) of any of the large islands.

The mainland, at first sight, presents a confusing pattern of increase and decline. The outstanding feature is the spectacular growth of Thurso, already mentioned (1951, 3,249; 1961, 8,038). The increase of 14·7 per cent. is not matched by any other Scottish burgh, Highland or Lowland. The “atomic” influence appears to extend to the nearby rural areas but the more distant north-east and south-west parts of Caithness show severe decline as does the adjacent area of Sutherland. The Preliminary Report gives no clue as to the extent to which these declines are due to a local migration towards Dounreay, but it is noticeable that they are roughly double the declines in the more remote parts of north-west Sutherland. In Wester Ross it is perhaps surprising to see an area of increasing population in the north. This may, to a large extent, be due to the prosperity of the tourist industry and its particular development at Ullapool. The remoter districts show declines similar to those of the smaller islands, Gairloch (10·8 per cent.), Applecross (18·4 per cent.), but the *south-west mainland* district of Ross and Cromarty shows only a slight decline; here relative stability seems to have been achieved, probably due mainly to

tourism—the district includes Kyle of Lochalsh, on the tourist road to Skye.

In Easter Ross, Cromarty and eastern Inverness, where crofting is insignificant, rural depopulation has proceeded at no less a rate than in the less accessible western and insular crofting districts but it has been partly balanced by urban expansion round the Moray Firth, an expansion which is shared by the coastal burghs of Moray and Nairn.

The landward areas of these two non-crofting Highland counties, together with those of Banff, Aberdeen and Highland Perthshire have been losing population even more rapidly than many of the crofting districts. In Banff and Aberdeen this has not been balanced by urban growth but in Perthshire, Pitlochry with its prosperous tourist trade has more than held its own.

This general decline of rural population in the eastern Highlands is in marked contrast with the south-west where, in the Lochaber region, industry and tourism joined to promote prosperity in the "fifties"; this area also includes a much-travelled tourist route, from Ballachulish Ferry northwards, where a crop of bed and breakfast signs has been yielding an increasing harvest. Not so on the far-away western side of Loch Linnhe, for tourists have scarcely discovered Ardnarmurchan, Sunart and Morvern, perhaps the most attractive cul-de-sac in Scotland, and this, after Applecross, is the most rapidly declining of the west coast districts. Further south the effect of the expanding tourist industry is reflected in population growth in Oban and the surrounding area; here some new industrial employment has also helped. This growth is not shared by the south Argyll districts of Kintyre and Cowal, including Dunoon and Campbeltown, nor by the non-crofting islands of Bute and Arran. The latter shows greater declines than any of the crofting districts except Barra. It is curious that Arran and the Cumbraes, surely the most accessible of all Scottish islands, should share with Barra and other remote places, this dubious honour. To some extent it is due to the departure of a naval base from Rothesay (decline 24.5 per cent.); in addition Rothesay, like Dunoon, is not well placed to share the expanding tourist trade brought by motor vehicles to more remote places such as Oban, Ullapool and Skye. Arran is in a somewhat similar position and suffers more because of a lack of any urban centre which might serve as a focus for services ancillary to tourism.

Depopulation is not the only aspect of the Highland problem, rather it is a significant indicator. Comparison between the crofting districts of Shetland, the Hebrides and Western Highlands and the non-crofting districts of Orkney and the Eastern Highlands shows that neither a prosperous agriculture nor accessibility to the lowlands necessarily prevents depopulation. The fundamental problem is low personal incomes and the lack of means to increase them. In particular areas industries such as Harris tweed, whisky and atomic energy development have played an important part, but the particular circumstances of their initiation and growth are unlikely to recur elsewhere. The only widespread factor which appears to have reduced the rate of depopulation since 1951 is tourism. This has developed spontaneously in certain areas, notably Skye, without direct government subsidy, yet the total of all the individual capital investments, from bathrooms in croft houses to new vessels for the Kyleakin Ferry, must be very considerable. Thus, whilst depopulation has continued, particularly in certain islands and more remote mainland districts, the census does underline that all is not lost, that stability is being achieved and that economic and population expansion can be brought about even in the most remote areas by enterprise and capital investment.

NOTES

- ¹ Unless otherwise stated all figures are taken from the *Preliminary Report on the Sixteenth Census of Scotland*, 1961.
- ² H. A. Moisley, "Harris Tweed—A Growing Highland Industry." *Economic Geography* 37 (1961): 353-70.