

Some Geographical Aspects of Crofting in 'Lochaber'

DAVID TURNOCK

Although traditionally 'Lochaber' is only a small region round Fort William—the lands long held by the Camerons of Lochiel—it is convenient today to define the area in terms of Fort William's effective sphere of influence. For the present study this has been taken to include the parishes of Arisaig and Moidart, Kilmallie, Kilmonivaig and Glenelg in Inverness-shire, the parishes of Ardnamurchan and Sunart, Ardgour and Morvern in the Ardnamurchan District of Argyll and the parish of Lismore and Appin in the North Lorn District of Argyll. Lochaber so defined is a key area today in terms of Highland development. Its population increased slightly from 16,387 in 1951 to 16,572 in 1961, and by 1966 it had risen to 19,008. Yet, as has been shown (Turnock 1966), this pattern of growth does not permeate the whole region and apart from Fort William and the other main centres of Kinlochleven and Mallaig the landscape bears many of the signs of economic stagnation and of population decline from a mid-nineteenth century peak.

There is little good, flat land apart from that found in the Great Glen and in certain coastal areas, notably Appin, Morvern and the island of Lismore. Rugged, mountainous country dominates the interior and falls into two distinct sections: one, the Ben Nevis and Glencoe area whose major glens, Glen Coe and Glen Spean, carry the main roads to Fort William from Glasgow and from Kingussie respectively; and the other, the remoter country lying west of the Great Glen. Apart from Mallaig with its steamer and car-ferry connections (Turnock 1965) the routes leading west from Invergarry and Corran Ferry end in remote coastal districts such as Ardnamurchan, Glenelg, Knoydart and Moidart, whose dwindling communities have largely been bypassed by the economic developments of the present century. Morvern is perhaps a special case in that forestry and silica sand-mining have introduced an element of stability.

Crofting is a significant but not dominant element in this physically and economically diversified region, for Lochaber has been shown to be marginal to the main crofting area of Scotland (Moisley 1962). In view of Lochaber's position astride the southern part of the Great Glen the Improving Movement and other lowland influences were more keenly felt (Storrie 1965) than in districts further north and west, where recent studies (Caird 1958; Moisley 1961) have shown that the status of the small farmer was not so seriously eroded over the long term. Yet while Lochaber as a whole may be

considered as a 'residual' crofting area like Easter Ross (Tivy 1965) there are striking local variations between parishes within Lochaber. This is demonstrated in Table I where the numbers of croft holdings in each parish are listed and their valuation compared with that of farm units. The varying importance of common grazings (shown as a percentage of all rough grazings) can also be appreciated. The parish of Ardnamurchan and Sunart and the parish of Morvern represent the two extreme cases in respect of all the criteria used but otherwise the pattern is far from regular since in Glenelg, although only 8.6 per cent of the total rough grazings comprise township common pastures, the valuation of croft land is almost equal to that of farm land. It is with these varied patterns of croft land and crofting agriculture within Lochaber that this paper is concerned.

TABLE I
Some Criteria for Assessing the Dominance of Crofting, 1962

<i>Parish</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>
		%	%
Ardgour	50	5.2	18.0
Ardnamurchan and Sunart	211	20.4	139.0
Lismore and Appin	112	3.0	24.3
Morvern	9	0.3	2.1
Arisaig and Moidart	73	1.0	35.7
Glenelg	106	8.6	91.8
Kilmallic	124	7.4	36.7
Kilmonivaig	66	8.8	27.0

a Number of croft holdings (as surveyed in Tables II and III).

b Area of common grazings as a percentage of all rough grazings.

c Total value per annum of croftland expressed as a percentage of the total value per annum of all the farms in the district.

Source: Field work.

The Distribution of Croft Land

The crofting area in 1886 (Fig. 1) shows the degree to which the small tenants, formerly the dominant element in Highland agriculture, had become restricted by processes of voluntary migration and clearance. In Appin, closest to the industrial south, people drifted away relatively early, while in Moidart religious persecution on the Clanranald estate prompted a substantial emigration by tacksmen and small tenants alike. Indeed while the population of Lochaber as a whole rose from 16,939 to 19,009 between 1755 and 1798, Ardnamurchan was the only parish to show a fall in population (from 5,000 to 4,542) (O.S.A. 1798: 587). But elsewhere stronger measures had to be adopted in the

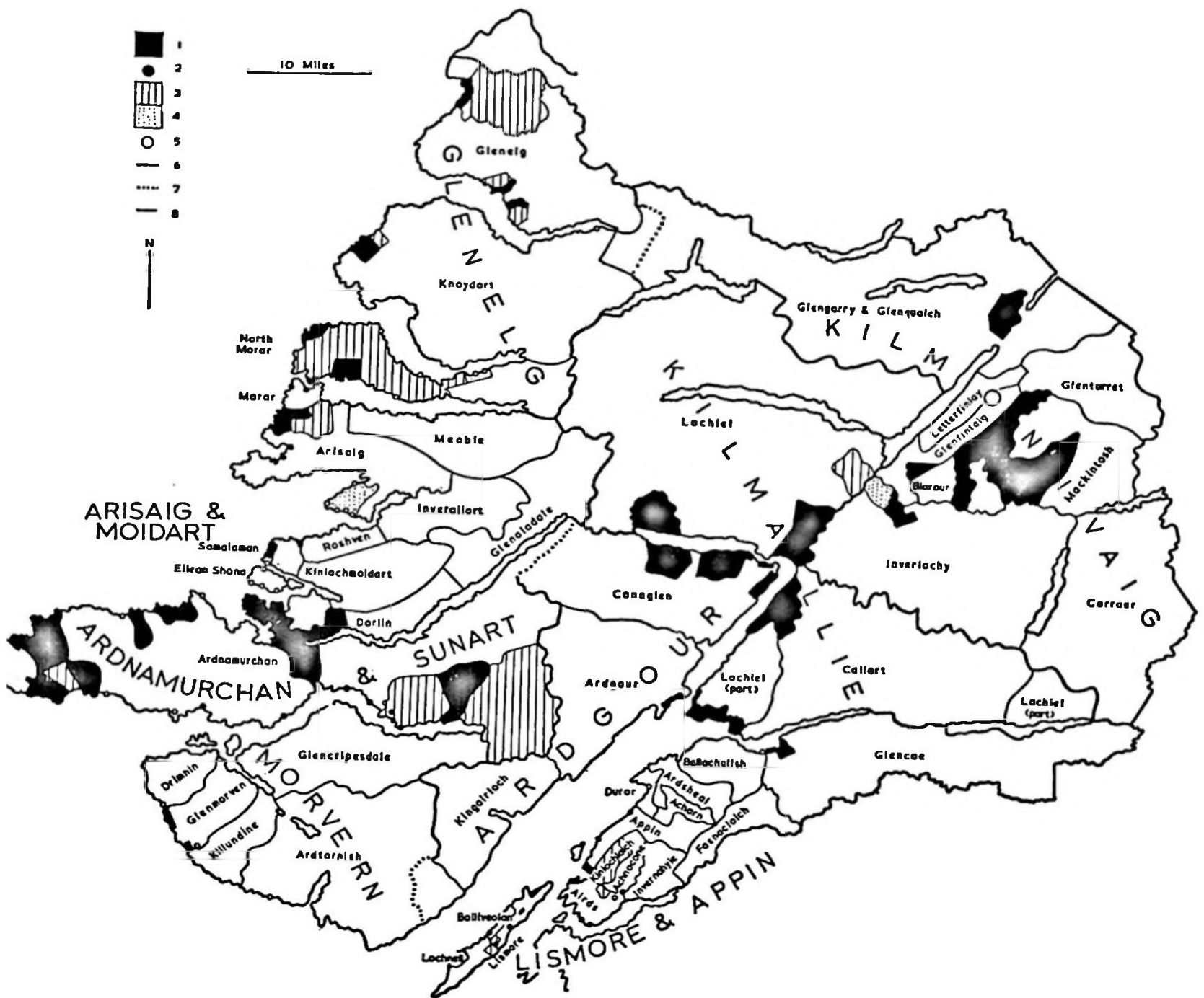


FIG. 1 Croft land in Lochaber.

1. Croft land in 1886 still in crofting today.
2. As above but an individual holding.
3. Smallholdings formed since 1886 (including common grazing extensions and some small farms which now have croft status).
4. Croft land in 1886 now lying derelict or removed from crofting.
5. Former crofting township now empty.
6. Parish boundary.
7. Parish boundary (where it does not also form an estate boundary).
8. Estate boundary.

Note: Because it is necessary to study the evolution of crofting against the background of the estate pattern of the time, the boundaries shown relate to the nineteenth century and do not indicate any of the fragmentation which has taken place since 1860.

nineteenth century when a deterioration in economic conditions made it necessary to introduce commercial sheep farming on much of the estate land and so confine the activities of small tenants (Turnock 1967c). They were generally grouped together on a small section of each estate, usually by the sea where fishing could be developed, but in the few cases of landlocked estates such as those of Glengarry and Mackintosh the lower part of a tributary glen was selected. The degrees to which each estate considered the interests of their crofters (as the small tenants became known) are reflected in the great variations in the amount of land earmarked for resettlement. There was relatively generous provision of grazings on the Ardnamurchan, Conaglen, Lochiel and Mackintosh estates (6,000 acres at Bohuntine and 7,723 at Galmore in Glen Roy) compared with the more ruthless clearances in Glenelg, Knoydart and Morvern where the few communities which remained were tightly enclosed around small grazings; only 300 acres were provided for 23 tenants at Camusbane on Loch Hourn. The net effect of these changes has been to remove the small farming element completely from many districts and to promote great variations in the size of holding elsewhere (Turnock 1967b).

But superimposed on this pattern were the results of the land settlement movement which was prominent at the turn of the century when the declining fortunes of commercial sheep farming in the Highlands made smallholdings a more appropriate form of land organisation. Such new holdings were included within the scope of the crofting legislation, which dates from 1886, and Figure 1 shows the extent of these later additions to the crofting landscape. In many cases these new holdings were effectively small farms and generally lacked township organisation or common grazings, and they fall into a number of categories. Some small farms were able to satisfy the requirements of the 1886 Act and consequently achieved croft status then: these lie exclusively on the North Morar estate (Glenelg). Secondly, the Congested Districts Board, whose powers in Lochaber extended only to Glenelg Parish, effected some subdivision of farms (again in North Morar) and extended certain common grazings to allow sheep stocks to be introduced. This happened at Arnisdale (Camusbane and Corran townships), Glenelg (Galder) and North Morar (Bracara and Mallaig) but was only a modest version of the sweeping programme of resettlement previously recommended in the report of the Royal Commission (*P.P.* 1895). Thirdly and most significant was the formation of smallholdings with croft status under the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act of 1919. Farms were broken up in Ardnamurchan (Ardery, Carnoch, Drimnatorran, Ormsaigmore and Ranachan), Lismore (Ballygrundle and Craignich), Appin (Kinlochlaich), Arisaig (Kinloid) and Glenelg (Beolary and Scallasaig). Although powers are still available, no further new holdings have been formed since the 1920s and under present conditions, with a premium on technical ability and capital resources, further formation of smallholdings is unlikely.

Today, therefore, there is not only an uneven distribution of croft land in Lochaber but the actual crofting area is the work of several processes of reorganisation which did

not always have similar economic objectives. Certainly the small holdings formed after 1919 aimed at the establishment of small but viable farming units, even though in the aftermath of war the desirable social policy of settling as many families as possible may have been allowed to compromise this economic objective. Yet for the older crofting townships viability was even more elusive. The Deer Forest Commission of 1892 reported that 'the kind of holding to which for the most part crofters are accustomed is one affording a home, but making it necessary for the crofter to supplement what he derives from his holding by labour or fishing or by carrying on a trade or business. In various districts those who came forward to give evidence rather showed that they had not reached the idea of a self-sustaining holding and craved our attention to the great demand for the smaller size of holdings' (*P.P.* 1895:10). Croft holdings, especially the small potato patches lotted individually or in small groups to cottars and various estate employees can only be viewed in the context of a fairly regular ancillary employment. So prominent was income from other sources that the justification of awarding security of tenure to these tiny holdings in 1886 may well be questioned. The Napier Commission's recommendation was not to award security to the tenants of the smallest holdings for, in view of the adversity of economic conditions, this 'would tend to fix them in a condition from which they ought to be resolutely though gently withdrawn' (*P.P.* 1884:39).

The health of crofting depends not only on agricultural activity but also on the strength of the local economy generally, and changes in employment structure in the present century have had important effects on the stability of crofting. Declining employment in farming, domestic fishing, deer forests and local trades has often led to the complete abandonment of some crofts or made for a largely absentee or elderly tenantry. The results have varied according to local accessibility and the existence of replacement economies. Areas hit the worst tend to be those lacking road access: most small communities in this category have disappeared since 1886. The Ardnish peninsula on the Arisaig estate, Eilean Shona and Eigneig in Moidart, the Loch Nevis townships east of Kylesmorar and Skiary on Loch Hourn, are all cases of complete abandonment by small tenants this century. These small, often rocky holdings are now used for grazing by some neighbouring farmer or crofter. But apart from these limited areas where complete depopulation has occurred there are many instances where the local response to changing economic conditions has come by way of under-use of croft land and the treatment of the croft simply as a home rather than an agricultural subject. It is necessary therefore to study these varying degrees of utilisation to see if a coherent pattern emerges which can be set alongside the simple distribution of croft land.

A Recent Survey of Crofting Agriculture

The results of a personal survey of crofting in Lochaber in 1962 are given in summary form in Tables II and III. Amalgamation has reduced the number of holdings very

considerably since the end of the nineteenth century, but it is difficult to supply an accurate figure for the total number of crofts at that time as the Crofters Commission (established in 1886) did not visit every township in Lochaber. In 1962 there were 741 holdings and of these only 440 could be classified as agricultural units, for 180 had no crops or stock and were either completely derelict or used only for hay. The remaining 121 were sublet, legally or informally, to other crofters or, occasionally, to farmers—a practice which is now recognised officially by the Commission. Of the 440 agricultural units only 198 had sheep stocks, while 372 kept cattle: a reflection of the limited grazings in many nineteenth-century townships where provision was only made for the summering of cattle. 376 units had some arable cultivation but only in 196 cases was this sufficient to justify application to the Commission for cropping grants. On many crofts the area cultivated did not exceed one-eighth of an acre but those crofters applying for grants were cultivating, on average, only 2.5 acres.

There were interesting local variations in emphasis, however, in terms of differentiation within the region. First there was a high proportion of crofts lying derelict or used only for hay in Arisaig and Moidart (33 per cent), Ardnamurchan and Sunart (30 per cent), and Lismore and Appin (25 per cent), a feature which, along with the high rate of subletting in Lismore and Appin (33 per cent), reflects the prominence and inadequacy of tiny holdings which are suitable only for cattle. The other parishes showed more activity: thus Glenelg and Kilmonivaig had a high proportion of holdings with a sheep stock—54 per cent and 48 per cent respectively, compared with only 8 per cent in Arisaig and Moidart. This is due to the large common grazings allocated in Kilmonivaig in the nineteenth century, and in Glenelg to common grazing extensions and the establishment of smallholdings there. Ardgour, Kilmallie and Kilmonivaig showed the greatest interest in cropping: 56 per cent, 40 per cent and 39 per cent respectively of the crofts in these parishes applied for cropping grant, whereas in Glenelg and Lismore and Appin this fell off to 14 per cent.

The labour inputs were an important aspect and it was interesting that in Lochaber only 10 per cent of the crofters were working on their holdings full-time (Table III). Even this low figure may be unrealistic because some may well have obtained part of their income from interests in tourism or business which the survey did not reveal. Again the difference between the number of crofts worked full-time and the number of viable units was quite considerable: some full-time crofters may well have been underemployed. Almost 50 per cent of the crofters were working permanently or periodically in another job, with the British Aluminium Company, Forestry Commission, Post Office, County Councils or estates. Another 30 per cent were retired and the remaining 11 per cent were living away from their crofts, often permanently. But interesting again were the local contrasts: the proportion of part-time crofters was highest in Kilmallie (69 per cent), Ardgour (67 per cent), and Arisaig and Moidart (64 per cent), falling to 37 per cent in Ardnamurchan and Sunart. On the other hand the proportion of absentees was highest in Ardnamurchan and Sunart (21 per cent), Lismore and Appin (13 per

cent), and Glenelg (11 per cent), and the proportion of retired tenants was as high as 38 per cent in Kilmonivaig and 33 per cent in Ardnamurchan and Sunart, Glenelg and Lismore and Appin.

TABLE II

Crofting Survey 1: Holdings and Agricultural Units, 1962

Parish	No. of Holdings	Agricultural Units				Crofting Grant Applications*	Holdings Derelict or used for hay only	Holdings Sublet
		a	b	c	d			
Ardgour	50	41 (82)	40	34	13 (26)	28 (56)	4 (08)	5 (10)
Ardnamurchan and Sunart	211	117 (55)	110	99	53 (25)	41 (20)	64 (30)	30 (15)
Lismore and Appin	102	42 (41)	21	38	17 (17)	14 (14)	26 (25)	34 (33)
Morvern	9	4 (46)	4	4	1 (11)	2 (22)	4 (44)	1 (10)
Arisaig and Moidart	73	44 (60)	42	41	6 (08)	21 (29)	24 (33)	5 (07)
Glenelg	106	66 (62)	48	56	57 (54)	15 (14)	21 (20)	19 (18)
Kilmallie	124	81 (65)	72	71	19 (15)	50 (40)	21 (17)	22 (18)
Kilmonivaig	66	45 (68)	39	29	32 (48)	25 (39)	16 (24)	5 (08)
Total	741	440 (59)	376	372	198 (27)	196 (26)	180 (25)	121 (16)

A croft *holding* is defined as the land held by one tenant in one township. An amalgamation of two or more non-adjacent crofts are counted as one holding if they are in the same township but as two if they are in different townships. Vacant crofts are counted as separate holdings. An *agricultural unit* is a holding with crops or stock belonging to one tenant. These are the same in number as croft holdings, after allowance has been made for subletting and dereliction.

Agricultural Units: *a* Total number of units.
b Units with arable cultivation.
c Units with cattle stock.
d Units with sheep stock.

Figures in brackets are percentages of the total number of holdings in the parish concerned (as shown in the first column).

Sources: Field Work and *Crofters Commission.

These two pictures of agricultural enterprises and the status of the crofters show considerable correlation. In parts of Lochaber, notably Ardgour, Kilmallie and Kilmonivaig, the crofting scene is relatively healthy with a good average size of holding and a good measure of agricultural activity. 82 per cent, 65 per cent and 68 per cent

respectively of the crofts are agricultural units and the young tenantry is supported by the wide range of ancillary employment offered in the Fort William area. In much of Lismore and Appin employment opportunities are good, but croft land is just too limited in extent to support agriculture on any scale today. Less than half the crofts are farming units and many crofters are retired or absent. In Ardnamurchan and Sunart the small size of many holdings, especially in the old fishing townships, coupled with remoteness and limited ancillary employment (apart from forestry in Sunart), makes for

TABLE III

Crofting Survey 2: Tenants, 1962

<i>Parish</i>	<i>No. of Tenants</i>	<i>Number and Percentage of Tenants who are:</i>			
		<i>a</i> <i>Full-time Crofters</i>	<i>b</i> <i>Part-time Crofters</i>	<i>c</i> <i>Retired</i>	<i>d</i> <i>Absentees</i>
Ardgour	46	5 (11)	31 (67)	9 (20)	1 (02)
Ardnamurchan and Sunart	194	18 (09)	72 (37)	64 (33)	40 (21)
Lismore and Appin	102	11 (11)	44 (43)	34 (33)	13 (13)
Morvern	5	1 (20)	3 (60)	1 (20)	—
Arisaig and Moidart	59	5 (08)	37 (64)	15 (26)	1 (02)
Glenelg	95	13 (14)	40 (43)	30 (32)	10 (11)
Kilmallie	123	7 (06)	71 (69)	26 (25)	—
Kilmonivaig	58	4 (07)	27 (47)	22 (38)	5 (08)
Total	682	64 (10)	325 (49)	201 (30)	70 (11)

Information is lacking on 19 tenants in Kilmallie, 2 in Glenelg and 1 in Arisaig and Moidart. They are included in the total but not in the classification.

Source: Field work.

a similar picture of decay. Yet there are 18 full-time crofters in this parish, owing to the positive effects of land settlement. Glenelg is in a similar position, for the limited employment opportunities in the west have had a depressing effect, except on the newer smallholdings which support a more viable sheep farming economy. In Arisaig and Moidart however, in spite of a high proportion of dereliction, 64 per cent of the crofters have some other employment, and tourism is important. At Bunacaimb, a small township on the edge of Keppoch Moss near Arisaig, there is an admirable combination of crofting agriculture and tourism which is supporting a prosperous community.

The Future of Crofting in Lochaber

Relatively large holdings and local employment opportunities promote stability in crofting townships in Lochaber, but the general pattern is clearly one of decline. Crofting has disappeared in some localities while in others there is a distinct impression that the system has degenerated into providing homes for the elderly and for a privileged section of a predominantly industrial society. On the smaller holdings, crofting agriculture constitutes an anachronistic and uneconomic method of farming, yet one which is difficult to reorganise because of the historical legacy of the nineteenth century—first the Clearances and later the rigid land laws. The Taylor Commission reported in 1954 that crofting 'as now organised is fighting a losing battle against the social and economic forces of the day' (*P.P.* 1954: para. 10), and recommended legislation to secure the reorganisation of townships. Under the Crofters (Scotland) Act of 1955, the Crofters Commission was reconstituted with powers to reorganise, develop and regulate crofting.

Now cropping and improvement grants along with agricultural subsidies have certainly encouraged some agricultural interest but, in spite of additional legislation in 1961, reorganisation of croft land has proved very difficult and does not appeal readily to either landlord or tenant. This is partly due to the rigidity of previous legislation and township organisation which can easily stifle and suppress the initiative of the young and more enterprising tenants, but it did not prevent reorganisation of Blaich (Ardgour) in 1958 (Fig. 2). Here there was a large area of land and a dwindling but active tenantry,

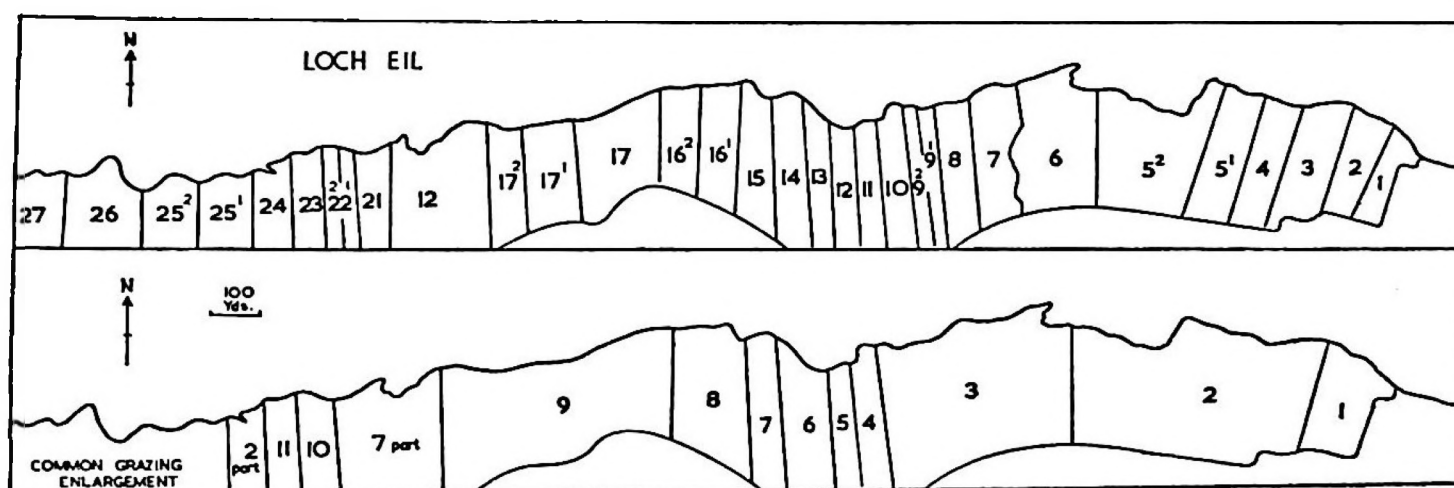


FIG. 2 Blaich, Ardgour. Showing the pattern of croft holdings before and after reorganisation.

conditions which made for a general desire to consolidate the pattern of fragmented holdings which had arisen from spasmodic amalgamation of non-adjacent crofts in the past (Turnock 1963:37). The number of holdings was reduced from 25 to 11, with a grazing of 2,936 acres. All the ten tenants are of working age and five are employed full-time on their crofts.

Many other townships could well be better organised, such as Bohenie in Glen Roy

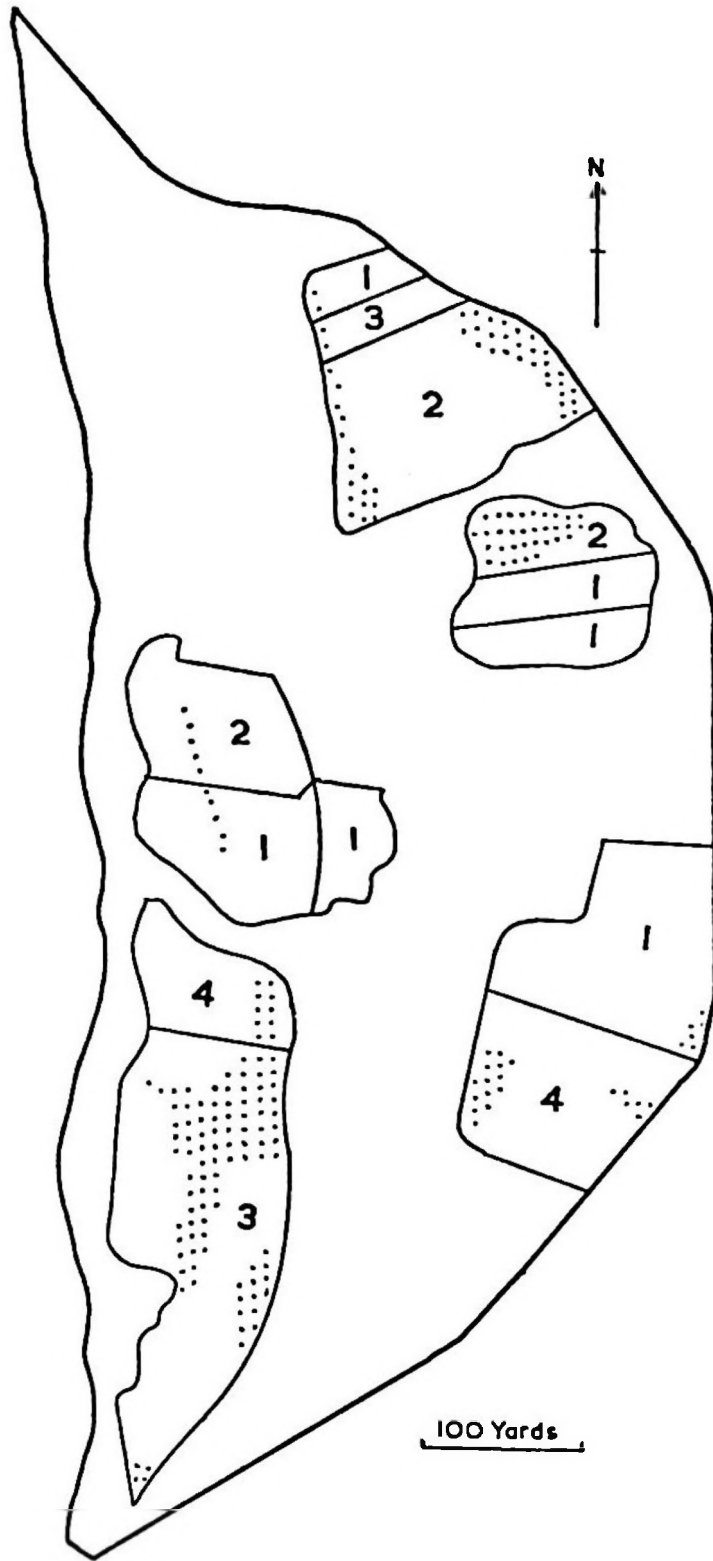


FIG. 3 Bohenie, Kilmonivaig. Showing the fragmented nature of holdings, many of which are of limited value because of the rocky patches (denoted by the shading).

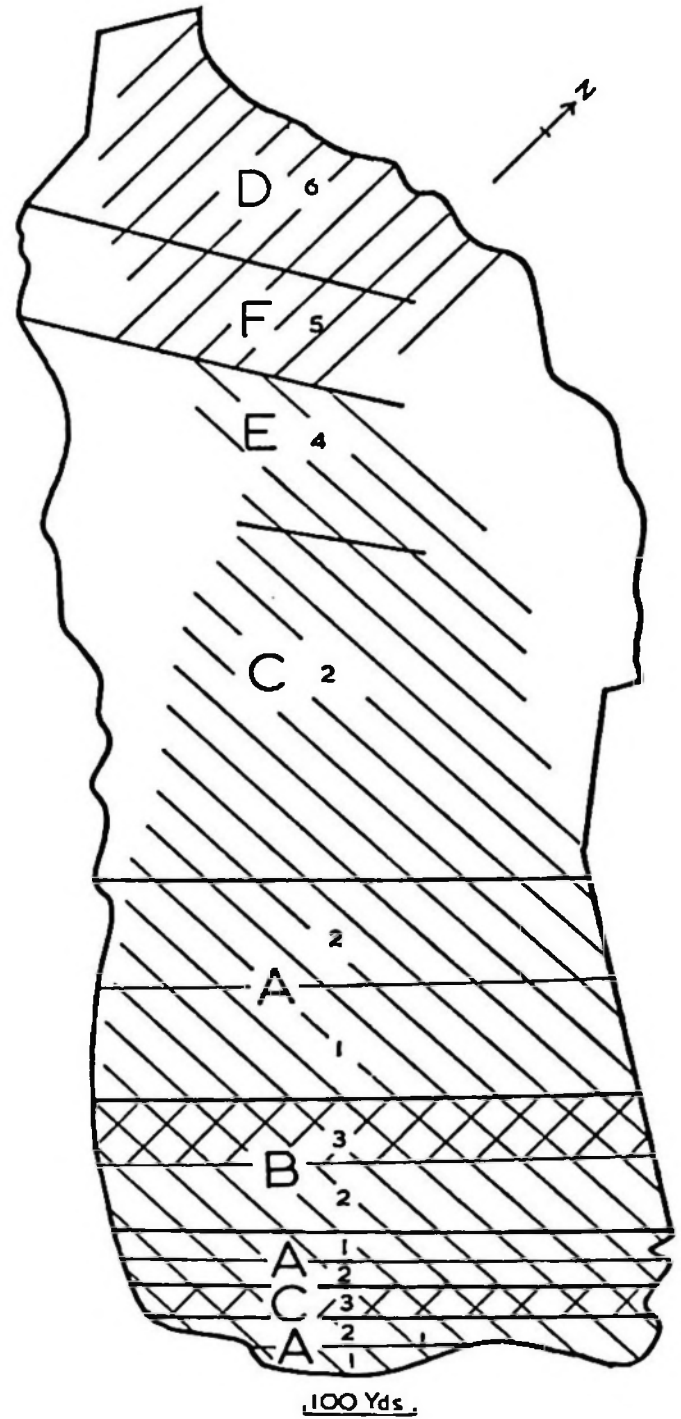


FIG. 4 Kilmory, Ardnamurchan. Showing the pattern of six croft tenancies (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), six croft holdings (A, B, C, D, E, F) and three agricultural units (shown by contrasting types of shading). A number of tenancies (1, 2, 3) are unconsolidated and some have been formed by dividing crofts A and B. The smaller number of agricultural units results from dwindling and subletting.

(Fig. 3) where the arable is very dispersed, and Kilmory in Ardnamurchan where fragmentation of holdings is excessive (Fig. 4). But in the majority of cases there is insufficient land in terms of either quantity or quality to form even one viable unit. The grazings may be steep and rocky and the arable land not only small in area but further handicapped by thin, hungry soils or rendered inaccessible by open drains. Again, there is a natural unwillingness on the part of the agriculturally inactive to give up their land without compensation. Enlargement of holdings by bringing additional land into crofting is therefore often advocated by the crofters themselves and at a meeting of the Federation of Crofters Unions in December 1962, Mr W. Cameron of Lochaber Crofters Union called for an immediate survey of land to be rehabilitated and made into economic holdings. However, although a smallholdings policy may have been a sound proposition at the turn of the century as an alternative to afforestation for deer when sheep farming fell on bad times, it is doubtful whether the state of farming today would encourage the formation of new small units which would call for a very heavy investment per acre in buildings and machinery.

Some crofts are in effect small economic farms, but the average croft is far too small for viability to be a realistic aim. The Crofters Commission (1955/56:para. 110) have it on record that 'it is the essence of our mandate to maintain the crofting population', but this cannot be achieved by agricultural development alone, even less today than it could in the nineteenth century. Maybe too much weight has been placed on agriculture as a solution to the problem, for the main demand by crofters in areas suffering heavy depopulation is for new employment.

Lochaber as a whole fares better than many parts of the Highlands, for agriculture in general is only one component of the region's highly developed industrial economy (Turnock 1966) which makes for one of the lowest rates of unemployment in the whole of the Crofting Counties. But much of the work is available only in the main centres, a situation which present developments are exaggerating (Turnock, 1967a:60). Tourism and forestry offer possibilities in rural areas, but such opportunities cannot occur everywhere. For instance, while Bunacaimb has fine *machair* sands and good communications by road and rail as a basis for tourism, Camusbane (Arnisdale) has only a stony beach at the end of a minor road. Again, trees cannot be grown economically on the rocky, steep, exposed ground of Moidart and West Ardnamurchan, irrespective of the need for additional employment by the crofters.

In townships such as Ballachulish, Fort William, Glencoe and Invergarry where the flourishing economy of Lochaber has most effect, part-time crofting would be less likely to lead to under-worked land and to the abuse of the privileges and safeguards which were awarded to crofters on the basis of nineteenth-century conditions. However, in these areas, crofting is losing much of its distinction as a social force since crofters tend to be only one of several elements in a growing industrial community; while the demands of urban development have led to considerable losses of croft land in some townships near Fort William (Turnock 1968).

Other townships, especially those on the west coast fringe of Ardnamurchan, Glenelg and Moidart, face further dwindling of their numbers and deterioration of age structures. With the way Highland development is taking place, their remoteness and limited land resources must continue to weigh against them and threaten their survival. These cases inevitably arouse strong feelings, but it should be considered whether the remains of an economy of an overpopulated landscape of the nineteenth century can necessarily provide a sound framework for growth in the present age.

NOTE

Much of the material in this article was gathered as a result of intensive field work in Lochaber in 1962 and 1963. As well as general enquiry, the Valuation Rolls of Inverness-shire and Argyll provided useful information. The minutes of evidence submitted to the Napier and Deer Forest Commissions (*P.P.* 1884; *P.P.* 1895) give a valuable insight into local conditions at that time, as do the Annual Reports of the Crofters Commission from 1886.

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