How Tame were the Highlanders during the Clearances?

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There is an aspect of the history of the Highland clearances which has yielded widespread agreement among historians past and present. It is that the Highlander, in the face of the most extreme provocation from landlords, remained passive and undemonstrative. In total contrast to their fellow Celts across the North Channel, they raised no opposition to the clearances: it is a story of heroic stoicism and submission. This article offers a different perspective on this problem while also hazarding some statements which relate the Highland experience to the general study of pre-industrial societies. If the main task of modern research in Scottish social history is the demolition of cherished myths, it may be that the notion of Highland passivity should be regarded, if not derelict, then at least very suspect.

An authoritative and succinct statement of the question has been given by H. J. Hanham. After 1745 the Highlanders, he remarks, became pacified, tamed and domesticated to such an extent that, in the clearances, 'scarcely a hand was raised against the destruction of much loved homes'. By the mid-nineteenth century the Highlanders had become 'notoriously god-fearing and law-abiding, and unwilling to cause trouble' (1969:21–3). Most seem to agree. Eric Linklater has stated without qualification that 'a singular feature of the clearances is the absence of resistance' (Grimble 1962:xiii), and T. C. Smout has remarked that there was no 'major organised protest' between the Leveller's revolt of 1724 and the crofters' war of 1882 (1969:325). William Ferguson writes that 'there was little resistance, the people were leaderless and stunned, the clergy for the most part siding with the lairds' (1968:276), and John Stuart Blackie claimed that 'the Highland people were, by the double influence of tradition and religion, by far the most loyal and law-abiding of her Majesty's subjects' (1885:192). W. C. Mackenzie said the same: 'With remarkable patience—the result of their religious training, and the torpor into which they had fallen through the hopelessness of their lot—the crofters had endured for generations their hardships, without open resistance to the oppressions of some proprietors, or, far worse, those of their tyrannical factors' (1907:321). Rosalind Mitchison emphasised 'the traditional submissiveness of the Highlander to civil and religious authority' (1970:393). John Prebble notes that resistance did occur but remarks that the common people came to accept sheep 'as they accepted famine and pestilence' (1963:52). Alexander Mackenzie claimed that 'The mild nature and religious training of

the Highlanders prevented a resort to that determined resistance and revenge which has repeatedly set bounds to the rapacity of landlords in Ireland. Their ignorance of the English language, and the want of natural leaders, made it impossible for them to make their grievances known to the outside world. They were, therefore, maltreated with impunity' (A. Mackenzie 1946:21). More recently E. J. Hobsbawm has written about the clearances in terms of the 'handful of Scottish nobles who drove their dumbly loyal clansmen across the seas to Canada to make room for the profitable sheep' (1969: 100). Alluding to the relative quiescence of the north in 1832 the great sheepfarmer Patrick Sellar gave a different gloss: 'The people', he wrote, 'know right from wrong. They know their friends; they speak English, they cannot be deluded by the old tacksmen who fattened on them' (S. P. Sellar to Loch, 20 May 1832).

There is an important corollary to the received interpretation on the question of the popular response to the clearances. It is that the crofters' war of the 1880s sprang into life without precedent: without warning, the peaceful world of the Highlands exploded. The 'Battle of the Braes' is thus regarded as a unique moment in Highland history: it was not until 1882 that the Highlanders at last shook themselves into action. Only then was the value of resistance by the common people realised, and a measure of success achieved. Even then, it is said, the crucial factor in the victory was the recruitment of outside support which made the crofters' case vocal to the nation.

Thus the story is one of pathetic peasant stoicism which showed no cracks until 1882. Like so much of Highland history it emphasises the very special, perhaps uniquely Highland, response to the pressures of the new economic age. In its main thrust this view contains an important element of truth. It is obviously correct to say that the clearances continued for more than a century without a violent halt. Nevertheless the burden of the present paper is to suggest that the conventional interpretation tends to distract attention from the long tradition, indeed the continuum, of popular Highland protest which broke out in every decade after 1790.

I

Surveying the evidence of popular disturbance in the period between 1800 and 1855 the most striking impression is one of sporadic but repeated eruptions of spontaneous resistance to established authority. Not only is there a continuity, but there is also a recurrent pattern in the record of popular protest. Totting up the scores one can find a minimum of forty occasions[1] when the forces of law and order were challenged by the will of the common people.

Highland disorder was favoured by the fragility of the system existing for the maintenance of civil peace in the north. Geographical isolation, the awkwardness of the terrain, and the derisory establishment of police and militia—all this inevitably left the authorities painfully stretched at times. It helps to explain the condition of near-

hysteria that often infected law officers and landlord agents during times of disturbances. The line of communication from Whitehall to Edinburgh, then to Inverness or Fort William, and then to the location of resistance, was long and easily broken. There were times—especially during the French Wars—when the availability of troops to put down recalcitrant Highlanders was extremely unsure.

Within the Highlands it was often difficult to raise constables who were sufficiently well-motivated to be trusted when putting down local skirmishes. In 1813 Sidmouth was informed that, in the Highlands, 'most of the local Militiamen are either themselves of the number who are to be dispossessed, or entertain the same sentiments. A Military Force of a different description has become necessary. There are however few troops in the North of Scotland' (Richards 1973). In 1821 it was difficult to get constables to do the unsavoury work of clearing the common people from the straths. There is good evidence that at Coigach in 1853 the authorities were exceedingly pessimistic about the pertinacity of either local or Glasgow policemen in the task of evicting obstinate and riotous crofters. The constables were lukewarm towards the work, and were generally sympathetic to the people. Thus, when the authorities did act—by calling in troops, despatching naval vessels, mobilising police from Glasgow—it gave the impression of employing a steam hammer to crack a nut. Nevertheless the over-reaction of authority in several instances may be one powerful factor explaining the general lack of sustained opposition by the people.

Two cases of confrontation may illustrate the 'classic' form of Highland protest behaviour. The people of Kildonan acted in February 1813. Here sullen discontent had been simmering for months. The clearance plans of the landlord required that at least sixty families be moved from the inland areas to resettlement zones along the Sutherland coast. Their old land would become part of a large commercial sheep farm. Valuers who came to mark out the sheep farm were given short shrift by the people. 'The natives rose in a body and chased the valuers off the ground and now threaten the lives of every man who dares dispossess them', wrote the local factor. The people had spurned the resettlement plans made for them by the Countess of Sutherland. The factor was at his wits' end: if he did not get 'power to quell this banditti we may bid adieu to all improvement' (Richards 1970: 170). It was war as far as he was concerned. He believed that the Kildonan affair was encouraging a spirit of insubordination across the Highlands. The people were driven by the notion that not only could they halt the clearances, but also that previous clearances would be reversed. The people would establish their right to the land which had been expropriated. It was one of several occasions when Whitehall was apprehensive of rumours of a Highland Rebellion.

The dénouement of the Kildonan affair was uncomplicated. Troops were called in from Fort George and Inverness: they travelled in fishing boats. Their journey turned out to be unnecessary. As soon as the threat of intervention was known, the people and the landlord came to terms. No legal action, it was agreed, would be taken against the people. From the factor was extracted a promise that future clearances would use no

harsh methods and that adequate warning would be given. For their part, though vanquished, the people had drawn the attention of London newspapers (notably *The Military Register* and *The Star*) by their actions. They also sent a deputation and petitions to London.

The most effective weapon in the hands of the Kildonan people was the attraction of national publicity. This indeed was a general feature of Highland social protest. On his own admission the landlord regarded such publicity as acutely embarrassing. His greatest fear in the whole Kildonan episode was that the subject would be brought before the House of Commons. At least in Sutherland, this fear acted as a brake—not always very effective, to be sure—on landlord policy throughout the era of the clearances. But it was also a recurrent tactic in the long story of popular discontent in the clearances. Often it took the form of an appeal by the people to some distant authority—to the Prince Regent, to the House of Commons (by petition), to Edinburgh and London newspapers, even to public opinion in general. It was as though the common people believed that the transparent rightness of their cause would be recognised above the heads of the landlords and their factors. The more sensitive, or perhaps the less desperate, of the Highland landlords conceded the danger of this tactic. In Sutherland such an anxiety plainly persuaded the landlord to curtail some clearance plans: fire was specifically prohibited in all post-1816 evictions. It also helps to explain why many of the later clearances—particularly after 1850—were executed in the name of anonymous legal agencies rather than directly by the landlords.

Many of the Kildonan people of 1813 emigrated to Canada with Lord Selkirk. He wrote of them: 'These people had so much of the Old Highland Spirit as to think the land their own'. They were fine people, morally and physically, and were not predisposed to violence—but, said Selkirk significantly, 'there is scarcely any who can be pointed out as a leading man'. They were 'rigid Presbyterians' (Selkirk: 16 June 1813).

The pattern of resistance—repeated many times before the Battle of the Braes—was vividly demonstrated in the Culrain uprising of March 1820. Here a large area was marked out for clearance: six hundred people were to be evicted without alternative provision of accommodation. At Culrain popular resistance was formidable. Officers delivering the summonses for eviction were set upon, humiliated and told never to return. A second attempt was made by a party of constables. This time they were 'seized by men in women's clothes—beat—and the summons burnt in their presence'. At this point the sheriff mustered a posse of forty constables, together with armed militia. The sheriff, confident of his strength, accompanied the party to Culrain. The confrontation is worth full description:

> they were opposed by an overwhelming number of men and women organised and armed to give Battle . . . hundreds of young lads and women met them on the Boundaries of the Grounds to be removed from, who had there a Collection of Stones and of which they made in their fury such use that hardly a Gentleman present or soldier came back without being hurt and several severely—even Gearnies [the sheriff] was hit several times. These women

> paid no regard to the fire arms—but rushed through knocking about them—one woman was shot and it is supposed mortally, another was badly wounded in the mouth and eye by a bayonet and a young lad was shot in the legs which immediately took him down . . . their principal force of reserve it was said were armed and reported to be about 500 . . . but observing the number of women suffice in making the Military and Civil force retreat they do not come nearer . . . they [the women] did not regard the Soldiers daring them to shoot as they would sooner suffer in that manner than remove.

Such was an excited account of a landlord factor. (S. P. Sutherland to Loch; 5 March 1820.) The desperate resistance lasted a fortnight and then was pacified by the combined persuasion of the local minister and the looming menace of military intervention. The minister publicly denounced the landlord, and specifically denied any connection between the Culrain affair and the radical politics of the day. The people, he said, had been goaded to distraction. He calmed them to an acceptance of their fate. It was a measure of his own influence in the community, and of the futility of further resistance.

II

In the many cases of popular resistance to landlord policy the common people seem to have adopted, or conformed to, a recurrent, almost stylised, mode of action. From these cases one can create a composite picture of a Highland disturbance as a four stage challenge to landlord authority:

i The local law officer, or landlord agent, would attempt to serve the summons of removal on a village. The first time he might simply be turned away. The second time he would be subjected to some kind of petty humiliation, most usually at the hands of the womenfolk of the village. They might seize his papers and burn them under his nose. Almost as frequently the officer was stripped naked and chased off the land—or else pushed out to sea in a boat without oars.

ii A posse of constables, led by a sheriff and his assistants would arrive—often very early in the morning. Real resistance would follow: they would be assaulted by volleys of stones and sticks from a massed group of the common people. In the front line of the latter were, invariably, the women and boys, making most noise and taking the worst injuries. Sometimes men were reported at the front—but dressed as women. But most of the menfolk were to the rear, apparently as a second line of defence. The resistance was usually sufficiently vociferous and violent to push back the posse. Meanwhile the common people may have made an appeal to some distant authority: the press, local worthies or even the landlord.

iii Higher legal authorities would be alerted: the Solicitor General, or the Lord Advocate, or perhaps the Home Office. Repeatedly the local landowners, in an advanced state of panic, would attribute the disturbances to agitators with suspected connections with 'Radicalism'. Sometimes there was inflated talk of a 'Northern Rebellion' which

helped persuade the authorities that military intervention was required—from Inverness, Fort William or Aberdeen.

iv The news of impending intervention was usually enough of itself to lead to a collapse of resistance. Troops intervened on ten occasions but were never actually engaged in physical hostilities. The termination of resistance was usually facilitated by the mediation of the local minister who produced a face-saving formula for the people. It generally took the form of a delay of removal, but did nothing to prevent the eventual clearance.

In the majority of Highland disturbances women took an extraordinarily prominent, often a dominant, role. At Durness in 1841 the women assaulted and humiliated the sheriff's officers. At Sollas in 1849 the women confronted the officers; at Lochshiel in 1842 the eviction party was driven off by the womenfolk; at Glencalvie in 1843 it was the women who took the lead. At Greenyards in 1854 the local women bore the brunt of the armed attack by the constables, and the women sustained the worst injuries. It was a similar story at Knockan and Elphin in 1852, at Coigach and at Ullapool in 1853. Women were, of course, a very prominent element in the 'Battle of the Braes' in 1882. We know very little of the historical sociology of the Highlands but the role of women in these riots is probably related to their position in the family economy.[2] Direct female activism indeed may be a characteristic of a pre-industrial society in conflict. In a semi-communal peasant life the women may naturally have placed themselves in the front line when the fabric of social existence seemed under threat.

As for the ministers, they have been afforded an unenviable reputation. They are regarded as the Quislings of modern Highland history. Alexander Mackenzie wrote, angrily: 'The professed ministers of religion sanctioned the iniquity [of the clearances] and prostituted their sacred office and high calling' (1946:22). W. C. Mackenzie concurred: 'The attitude of the clergy during the expatriation of the Highlanders was almost uniform in the absence of outspoken denunciation of an iniquitous injustice; in others they were passive spectators of it; with hardly an exception, they showed themselves unworthy of their calling' (1907:289). Certainly the influence of the clergy was considerable—as Eric Cregeen has said, 'In the nineteenth century the tacksman's role as a social leader and educator was largely taken over by the minister' (1968:189 fn. 16). But the connection between religion and social action is a notoriously subtle and complex question. The relationships between landlord policy, religious dissidence, and popular protest in the nineteenth-century Highlands have yet to be properly established. There were, for instance many occasions when the ministers spoke up, and wrote down, the case for the common people against the landlords. A reading of some of the Highland sections of *The New Statistical Account* (as well as government reports) demonstrates how critical and unsycophantic some of the ministers could be (this applies to Sutherland in particular—the county often represented as the most abused in this respect). But the ministers did not lead the people in physical resistance. T. C. Smout has

offered a general psychological proposition: that the Church provided a refuge into which passions were channelled away from violent opposition to landlords. In a vivid phrase he says that 'the people fled towards the compensations of an intense spiritual enthusiasm like leaves before the storm' (1969:465). In preaching a fatalistic acceptance of landlordism the ministers probably saved lives and avoided futile resistance: they dissuaded their people from violence in the face of the overwhelming power of the authorities. For the most part the role of the Highland ministers was not unlike that of Catholic priests in Irish rural disturbances of the early nineteenth century (Broeker 1970). They gave solace and mediation. They were leaders *of* the people, from *within* the crowd, but they cast their influence against the spontaneous resistance of the people.[3] Nevertheless it is not the case that the ministers invariably deserted the common folk. It is quite likely that the conventional view of the Highland clergy is close to a caricature.

Religion was of course one area of life in which the Highlanders were prepared to stand firm and united against the will of the landlord. The rioting against the induction of unacceptable ministers in the early nineteenth century was only a degree less violent than the anti-clearance agitation. Religion was a sphere in which the people were able to concert with unprecedented (though not total) unanimity. The Disruption of the Church in the Highlands was a saga of social protest which produced a measure of solidarity remarkable for its contrast with the weakness of organisation in the anti-clearance protests. Apart from the Disruption, rioting on religious issues took much the same form as the anti-clearance disturbances. So also did the Highland food riots of the 1840s.

Some of the weaknesses of Highland popular protest are reasonably obvious. Outbreaks of resistance were sporadic and spontaneous—they never cohered into a continuous threat to the landlords. Inchoate, dispersed, unarmed, apolitical and rural based, Highland discontent was unsophisticated in comparison with the methods of the new urban and industrial working class of central Scotland and England.

Highland leaders were too few in number and inadequate in organisational ability. Partly, these weaknesses may have reflected the loss of the traditional leaders in Highland society which resulted from the emigration of tacksmen. Those tacksmen who remained were frequently more closely attached to landlord policy than were the ministers. Where one is able to identify the leaders during disturbances they seem to be men of 'middling rank'—a schoolmaster, a publican, a small landowner, a failed land-agent, several half-pay captains. On the whole they lacked both funds and the ability to co-ordinate the rebellions.

Even more certainly there was a fundamental lack of a rallying ideology for the common Highlanders. The people believed that they had traditional tribal rights to their land and that the landlords were usurping those rights, and acting against real justice. This basic assumption was not given effective political expression until the 1870s. So far as one can tell, much of the thinking in the Highlands was essentially backward-looking. There was much discussion of lost rights—but little radical thought was

devoted to any consideration of the future of the Highland society and economy—or even to any notion of an alternative to landlordism. The voluminous evidence of the Napier Commission in the 1880s demonstrated the tenacity of this way of thinking. As T. C. Smout has written in a recent article—there was 'no reasoned economic argument against clearance' and 'the intellectual trumpets of the Scottish left gave forth no certain sound whatever' (1972:15). It was, of course, extraordinarily difficult for anyone to demonstrate conclusively, in short-run economic terms, that the Highlands could be rendered viable—even if the institutional structure were altered in the most radical fashion.[4] Through the nineteenth century there was an almost continuous rumbling of anti-landlord journalism in the north: it was able to frighten Highland proprietors who knew the potential power of a literary protest to act as a catalyst on the people. And there were those like Hugh Miller who were ready to assert that, in net practical terms, the clearances cost the landlords far more than any financial benefits that they derived. On the whole, however, the message was not well sustained.

But this was not only a Highland failure. British radical thinking as a whole failed to generate much effective questioning of the political and legal bases of landlordism. It was not until the emergence of Irish pressure after the famine that the Highlanders found any kind of political focus. Before that virtually all the intellectual penetration had come from outside—notably from Karl Marx and the Swiss economist Sismondi—both of whom caught at the significance of the Highland problem. From within Scotland only Hugh Miller and John Stuart Blackie were really able to budge the prevailing complacency of public opinion.

At the other end of the spectrum of protest it must be said that even in the technique of rural terrorism, the Highlanders were less active than their Irish counterparts. Through eighty years of discontent I can find only three instances of 'outrage'—of desperate protest against irresistible landlord power. The petty intimidation of English shepherds was fairly commonplace. In 1813 this type of antagonism was found in a threat—never fulfilled—that an attack would eventually be made on the unborn child of Mrs Reid, the Highland wife of an English sheepfarmer in Sutherland. Again in 1816—after the acquittal of Patrick Sellar, the throats of his sheep were slit in a kind of ritualistic blood letting. On one other occasion arson was the resort of evicted people seeking revenge on a landowner (Richards 1973). On the whole however the Highlanders did not follow the strategy advocated by Hugh Miller in a letter of 1846 in which he wrote:

> They (the Irish) are buying guns, and will be by-the-bye shooting magistrates and clergymen by the score; and Parliament will in consequence do a great deal for them. But the poor Highlanders will shoot no one, not even a site-refusing laird or a brutal factor, and so they will be left to perish unregarded in their hovels. I see more and more everyday of the philosophy of Cobbet's [sic] advice to the chopsticks of Kent, 'If you wish to have your wrongs redressed, go out and burn ricks; Government will yield nothing to justice, but a great deal to fear.' (W. M. Mackenzie 1905:190–1.)

Direct and physical social protest was generally less effective than the passive resistance which, although much more difficult to define, was virtually universal during the clearances. Inevitably passive resistance is less easily identified and gauged in its impact than physical protest. Nevertheless this was the other side of the coin of 'Highland fatalism'. A land agent in 1841 put the matter plainly enough: 'I was always afraid of this passive sort of resistance, and, if resorted to it will no doubt create a vast deal of difficulty and trouble to all concerned' (Richards 1973).

Passive resistance entailed a sullen refusal to partake in landlord plans, a withholding of co-operation—and an implicit rejection of all the assumptions of the landlord-directed transformation of the Highland economy and its society. It proved more lethal a weapon than violence in many areas. Of course landlords varied—some evicted their people without compunction and for them the relative passivity of the people was totally irrelevant. But for those landlords who wished not only to clear but to reconstruct the local economy, for those who sought to promote secondary industry, the social response was crucial.

A strong case could be made that in both Argyll and Sutherland radical landlord policies, involving heavy investment, and containing a reasonable chance of generating a new basis for Highland economic life, foundered on the rocks of social resistance by the common people. Sullen apathy, mixed with 'a malicious joy' when failure occurred, was an impenetrable barrier to development. This attitude—all-pervasive even into the twentieth century—may have been half the tragedy of the Highland problem.[5] Economic plans which ignored the social response entailed in those plans, carried within them the seeds of their own destruction. Indeed the failure to recruit the active co-operation of the people compounded the problems of generating economic growth in the Highlands. It would have been a miracle of planning for even the best-intentioned landlord to have rendered the clearance of the people palatable. As it was, the social response was ignored and the investment plans, for the most part, came to nought.

The work of Eric Cregeen on Argyll points this way. There was, he notes, 'a legacy of mistrust and hostility' which 'proved an almost insurmountable obstacle to the Argylls when in the eighteenth century they launched programmes of economic reform that required trust and co-operation from their tenants' (Cregeen 1968:154). Passive resistance with its withdrawal of collaboration developed into a formidable impediment to progress. Of the project in Tiree of the fifth Duke of Argyll, Cregeen has written: though 'impeccable in theory, the scheme was a total failure in practice. It embodied many of the defects of doctrinaire planning and was highly unpopular. With the spirit of resistance spreading through the island and giving rise to plans of emigration, the Duke seized the first pretext to withdraw his plan' (1970:19). Emigration from the Highlands had many causes but it was, as much as anything, a final expression of the polarisation of Highland society.

The popular campaign against Patrick Sellar in Sutherland in 1814–16 was neither violent nor passive. It employed relatively unusual tactics to draw attention to the

circumstances in Sutherland, with the object of destroying Sellar and reversing the clearances to the point where the land would be returned to the people. T. C. Smout has derided the 'ritual national hatred of Sellar', and has suggested that there has never been a proper intellectual rebuttal of Sellar's way of thinking: 'he was unkind and a bit rough', but unanswered (Smout 1972:16). Smout seems to imply that only on the most radical assumption—in effect, only when the criterion of profit-maximisation is relegated to secondary importance in the Highland economy—were Sellar's views at all assailable. This, however, may be too generous to the Sutherland sheepfarmer and his kind. Sellar can be impeached without recourse to such an extreme assumption. The critical point is that Sellar's attitude to social relations *of itself* gravely impeded the economic development of the Highlanders. It was an attitude which, when executed by way of policy, necessarily entailed a disruptive social response. The re-structuring of the economy and the collapse of social cohesion were central factors in the Highland tragedy. The fatal weakness of the Sellar mentality—and though he was an extremist in his views the direction of his thinking was followed by most clearing landlords—lay precisely in its failure to take into account the feelings of the common people. Their co-operation was never properly sought and they were thoroughly alienated—not by the intellectual consistency of the landlords' rationale but by the arrogance of the planners, and by the communal agony which was the practical consequence of even the most constructive landlord's plans.

The significance of Patrick Sellar and his ideology was that he helped to build that mountain of hatred which destroyed for a century any chance of a co-operative and radical attack on the Highland problem by the landlord and the people. It was expressed in the fatalistic apathy of the people which even today is not fully dispersed. It dislocated positive investment programmes during the clearances and left a legacy of burning distrust. Any attempt to reconstruct the Highland economy must take the most serious cognisance of the social context. The long history of economic experiments in the Highlands—from the Dukes of Argyll to Lord Leverhulme—presents a sharp lesson for any planning authority in the region.

III

In his recent paper 'The Problem of Highland Discontent, 1880–1885', H. J. Hanham has examined at length the circumstances of 'The Crofters' War'. Specifically he asks the questions 'Why . . . did such disturbances occur? And why, in particular, did they start early in 1882?' (Hanham 1969:30). Hanham is one of many writers who have stressed the apparent discontinuity element in the question of the Braes disturbances. In this interpretation 1882 is the year during which the Highlanders stopped being passive and, at last, fought for their rights. Hence 'The Crofters' War' requires a special historical explanation. Hanham answers his questions in terms of the current political and social

context, the over reaction of the local authorities, and the widespread press coverage. 'Once the attention of the outside world had been attracted, the character of the land problem in the Western Highlands changed dramatically' (1969:65).

With the assistance of Hanham's detailed descriptions one is able to define the main characteristics of the Skye incident of 1882. Although Hanham states categorically that 'There was no tradition of resistance to government and no desire to use the land agitation for general political purposes' (1969:22), virtually all the features of the crofters' agitation had their counterparts in the pattern of protest that had been repeated so often in the previous eight decades. The main contrast was the ultimate success of the agitation as a movement—though even success was not unprecedented. Otherwise, to put the point somewhat paradoxically, the 1882 agitation was within a long-established continuity of sporadic protest in the Highlands.

The Skye events seem to have begun with the attempt to serve notice of ejectment on a group of people following a dispute over lost grazing rights. The people were in defence of what they regarded as traditional rights to their land. The first summons had been burned by 'some crofters and their wives'. During the main confrontation with the police force the womenfolk played a prime role. The accompanying newspaper reporter gave a description reminiscent of many such scenes earlier in the century of clearances:

> The women with infuriated looks and bedraggled dress . . . were shouting at the pitch of their voices, uttering the most fearful imprecations, hurling forth the most terrible voices of vengeance against the enemy. . . . The women, with the most violent gestures and imprecations, declared that the police should be attacked (Hanham 1969: 24, 30).

The people possessed no firearms and no apparent leader was picked out. The action had had 'a religious counterpart in a riot of Strome Ferry in 1883'. Hanham does not mention any intervention by the minister but reports that the dispute was eventually settled quite amicably in December 1882 (1969:53).

The authorities blamed the events on 'agitators'. It was found that 'the forces of law and order in Skye (a pitiful fiction) were far too weak to serve writs or notices on tenants determined not to receive them' (Hanham 1969:54). Thus outside police were requisitioned. Hanham notes a reluctance on the part not only of the police, but also the army and the navy, to become involved. He writes, 'There is no suggestion [in the reports] that an attack at dawn on the houses of god-fearing Free Churchmen by a large body of police from Glasgow is an odd way of arresting five crofters in Skye' (1969:30). It was in fact a well tried way of dealing with recalcitrant crofters. As it was, the force proved to be insufficient—any smaller action would have been implausible. Each of the characteristics of the 'Battle of the Braes' had had its echo in previous Highland riots.

Nevertheless the events became part of a wider conflagration in the Highlands which was unprecedented in its level of sustained agitation, its geographical solidarity, and the positive legislative response which it eventually elicited. As Hanham points out, the

connections with the Irish Land Leaguers, the sympathy of expatriate Highland societies, and the excellent press coverage, were each important factors (1969:64–5). Yet it is also true that land agitators had given vent in previous Highland disturbances—the writing of Donald MacLeod, David Ross, Hugh Miller, Karl Marx and Sismondi in the early 1850s had provided some semblance of a strategy for the crofters' revolt. In 1855 landlords in the north were fully aware of 'a strong feeling among the people that they would all resume possession of what they conceived to be the possessions of their fathers' (S.P.: James Loch to the Duke of Sutherland 19 Feb. 1855). The Duke of Sutherland was warned that if landlords 'persevere in pursuing a mistaken policy they do more to hasten their downfall than the wildest Leveller could hope to accomplish' (S.P. Davidson to Duke of Sutherland 3 Aug. 1855). Press coverage of Highland protest was not new—most riots were reported, and newspapers such as *The Military Register*, *The Scotsman* and *The Times*, at various times took up a stridently sympathetic attitude to the crofters—in the 1810s, 1840s, and 1850s. It was not a new development: nor was expatriate assistance unprecedented. In 1822, for instance, 'The Expatriated Highlanders of Sutherland' in India, in addition to voicing criticisms of landlordism, had raised subscriptions for victims of the clearances.

There are so many elements in the crofters' war which are common to previous riots that the pressing historical questions would seem not to be 'Why did they start in 1882?' but 'Why, in the 1880s, did the disturbances yield such rapid returns?' Since the character of the disturbances had changed so little, it seems most likely that the explanation will be in terms exogenous to the Highlands. The key variable may be in the changing receptivity of both public opinion and the authorities to the demonstrations of Highland crofters. Press coverage undoubtedly helped, so also did the Irish parallels: but the most important element was probably the least defineable—public opinion in the south. The pattern of Highland discontent had changed very little.

IV

John Stuart Blackie, writing in 1885, was prepared to advocate greater direct resistance for the Highlander: 'Sometimes, however, they did resist, and recent experience has amply proved that they might have been better treated, if they had at an earlier period, and with greater observance, applied to the Government accustomed to act only on compulsion from below, the highly stimulant recalcitration of a Kenmore or Killarnye squatter.' Blackie stated clearly his opinion that 'the lawbreakers in the Highlands were less to blame for recent disturbances than the lawmakers' (1885:192–202). In a similar vein were the remarks of W. C. Mackenzie that 'so long as the Highlands remained quiet, neither of the great political parties paid heed to the miseries of the voteless and voiceless proletariat; but when the agents of the law were defied, public opinion fired the government into action' (1907:321–22). There is of course a danger in concentrating

attention on one aspect of the Highland question since there will be a tendency to inflate the importance of disturbances in the history of the clearances. Nevertheless it is one thing to say that popular Highland resistance before 1882 was relatively ineffective: it is something quite different to believe that it was non-existent.[6]

There was a contrast not only with the Irish, but also with the English experience. As E. P. Thompson has pointed out 'enclosure riots [in England] were rare, not because enclosure was not unpopular, but because the people learned early that to riot was hopeless' (1968:20). It would be a mistake to write off the record of Highland protest as futile. In functional terms the resistance performed three important tasks: it attracted public attention which had a cumulative effect; it checked the full exercise of landlord power; and it sabotaged plans of economic reconstruction. Resistance, or the threat of it, helped to define, increasingly restrictively, the tolerable limits of landlord behaviour and thereby reduced some of 'the legalised brutality' of the clearances (Smout 1972:16). It acutely embarrassed the more sensitive of the Lairds. In Sutherland it certainly produced a degree of caution in, and later a suspension of, the clearance policy. At Coigach (as well as at Elphin and Knockan) it prevented a clearance.[7] But, in the long run, it was passive resistance that was more permanent and decisive in its consequences. If the Napier Commission Report was an acceptance of 'the Highland ideology' then the deadening passivity of the Highlanders had proved its power.

It is inconsistent with the historical record to consider the crofters' war of 1882 as a unique case of Highlanders rebelling against established authority. That occasion, indeed, was in almost every respect within the classic mould of Highland protest set since 1790. The Highlanders in 1882 had not suddenly become untamed. The Skye people revolted in the manner, and employing much the same methods, that had been used throughout the clearances. It was not only a victory for 'Highland ideology' but also for the new sensibility of Victorian opinion and its growing and faintly condescending concern for lesser elements on the fringe of society. The social conscience of the British upper middle classes had changed. The Highlanders had changed hardly at all.

In comparing the Highlanders' response to the clearances with our knowledge of the reactions of other agrarian societies, one is struck by similarities. Indeed the forms of protest employed by the Highlanders correspond exceedingly well with the types of social action that are now well known in other pre-industrial societies. The apolitical character of the riots, the spontaneity, the sporadic incidence, the composition, the absence of arms, the role of women, the motives, the fragility of effective leadership—all this accords well with the established patterns of the typical pre-industrial forms of protest. From studying the experience of other pre-industrial societies Charles Tilly has defined an analytical category which he terms 'reactionary collective violence'. Such disturbances he says are usually 'small in scale, but they pit either communal groups or loosely organised members of the general population against representatives of those who hold power, and tend to include a critique of the way power is being wielded. . . . The somewhat risky term 'reactionary' applies to their forms of collective violence

because their participants were commonly reacting to some change that they regarded as depriving them of rights they had once enjoyed; they were backward-looking' (Tilly 1969: 16).[8] It might be fair to say that the occurrence of food riots in the Highlands into the 1850s (they had virtually disappeared in the rest of Britain by 1830) is a further symptom of survival of the essentially 'pre-industrial' mode of life in the Highlands. More generally, on these comparative criteria, the Highlanders' action during the clearances, far from being especially tame, was a good average for such a society. The Highlander was not so much naturally submissive as technically limited in his possibilities of effective protest. In the main the Highlanders behaved and reacted in a manner that we have come to expect of a pre-industrial society in such circumstances.

The widening literature of crowd studies in other societies suggest many parallels with the Highland experience. But the point may have a wider application. For instance T. C. Smout has recently introduced the stimulating idea of 'the Highland ideology' by which 'the crofter put home before wealth, the possession of land before the dubious opportunity to gain enrichment by a better income as an industrial worker, or even as a landholder overseas' (1972: 14). Such attitudes may have been less exclusively Highland and more widely characteristic of pre-industrial societies to an extent that would transcend the specifically regional focus offered by Smout.[9]

The main burden of so much discussion about the Highlands has tended to be in terms of the notion that there has been something uniquely Celtic in its character and institutions. This applies to such questions as the Highland attitude to the profit motive, to social protest, to religion and to economic development. It may be more helpful if social historians considered the Highland experience in relation to similar societies. It is not necessary to deny the special qualities of life in the nineteenth-century Highlands to see it as an essentially pre-industrial society in a growingly industrial age. Such an approach, for some, will rouse the bogey of historicism. Nevertheless a more eclectic and analytical approach in general might yield new perspectives in Scottish social history.

NOTES

1 I have documented these cases in some detail in my forthcoming paper 'Patterns of Highland Discontent 1790–1860'.

2 For an excellent description of the work of women in the West Highland economy in the 1820s, see Peter Bayne, *Life and Letters of Hugh Miller*, 2 vols., London 1871, vol. II. p. 115.

3 They were in effect reverse types or 'leaders-in-reverse'—a figure neglected in the study of crowd behaviour.

4 I am currently preparing a survey of 'Solutions to the Highland Problem since Adam Smith'.

5 This is not to say that 'non-co-operation' was the only reason for the failure of the Highland economy, as will be obvious to anyone who has read the work of Malcolm Gray.

6 There may be some parallel with the experience of contemporary England. See the intriguing footnote on page 182 of Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880*, London 1969: 'There was . . . a great deal more sporadic agrarian violence between 1830 and 1870 than is usually

supposed, *cf.* the forthcoming work of Dr. E. J. Hobsbawm on this topic.' [E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, London 1969.]

7 These points are considered in my paper mentioned in footnote 1.

8 *Cf.* George Rudé's remarks: 'the pre-industrial age has its own type of disturbance whose objects, behaviour, forms of action, and participants are, more or less, peculiar to the times' (Rudé 1964:5) and also the 'common features' described in his essay (Rudé: 1970).

9 It should be noted that Smout has himself made comparative statements of the kind which I am advocating, *e.g.* 'In many ways there are much greater similarities between the peasant culture of seventeenth-century Scotland and those of the more backward tribes of Asia and Africa than between that culture and that of the modern rural Scotsman who were their direct descendants.' (1969: 134). The dangers of the comparative approach of course should not be neglected: see E. P. Thompson's warning about the over-facile comparison of disparate phenomena under such rubrics as 'The Nuclear Family', 'The Peasantry', and 'Pre-Industrial Society', with the consequence that 'the integument of the historical discipline comes under extreme strain, and is in danger of being punctured to let in a gush of abstract typological air.' Thompson adds that the danger may be worth risking. ('Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical context', *Midland History*, vol. 1 (1972), p. 46.)

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