The Emergence of the Crofting Community: The Religious Contribution 1798—1843

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The modernisation of the Highland economy in the hundred years after 1750 has recently been the subject of a great deal of investigation and analysis.[1] The mechanism of economic change in the region has been laid bare. Old simplifications about the nature of Highland history have been demolished. In their place are scrupulously documented accounts of the development of commercial land management; the coming of sheep farming; the rise and fall of the kelp industry; and the establishment of the modern crofting system. The exploration of these essentially economic occurrences has been carried out, however, at the expense of neglecting the social changes and adaptions necessitated by them. In the present century, for instance, there has been only one serious attempt to investigate the impact of economic change on the Gaelic consciousness; and that by a Gaelic poet, Sorley MacLean, rather than by a historian (MacLean 1939). Thus while we know by what means the modern crofting system emerged from the Highland's traditional agrarian structure, the way in which the crofting community, considered as a social and cultural entity, was created out of the commons of the clans remains something of a mystery. This article is an attempt to cast some light on one aspect of the north-west Highland and Hebridean crofting community's development: the part played in it by evangelical presbyterianism, still an important element in crofting life and, in the past, one of its vital components.

'I have lived in woeful times', an old Highlander is said to have remarked to Sir Walter Scott: 'When I was young the only question concerning a man of rank was, How many men lived on his estate? Then it was, How many black cattle could it keep? But now it is, How many sheep will it carry?' (quoted, Graham 1937:210). For clan chieftains, long used to moving in the two cultural universes represented by the Gaelic Highlands on the one hand and lowland Scotland and the rest of western Europe on the other, the crisis of adaptation involved in such a transformation was not too profound; and in the eighteenth century the Gaelic aristocracy of the Highlands were accordingly assimilated into the emerging capitalist order with remarkable ease. The social groups who constituted the lower strata of the traditional society found the abandonment of the old ways more difficult to accept, however. Most tacksmen emigrated rather than adapt to the new order (Adam 1919); while the mass of tenants,

subtenants and cottars who made up the clans' lower orders were left to fend for them-
selves in a strange new environment in which the land of the kindred could be bought
and sold for cash and the people who lived upon the land treated as an element in a
calculation of profit and loss by men 'grown so niggardly'—as one Gaelic poet put it—
that they 'would geld a louse if it would rise in value a farthing':

> Dh' fhalbh na ceannardan mìleant'
> Dh' an robh sannt air an fhìrinn,
> Dh' an robh geall air an dìlsean
>   Agus cuing air an nàmhaid . . .
>
> Seallaibh mun cuairt duibh
> Is faicibh na h-uaislean
> Gun iochd annt' ri truaghain,
>   Gun suairceas ri dàimhich;
> 'S ann a tha iad am barail
> Nach buin sibh do'n talamh,
> 'S ged dh'fhàg iad sibh falamh
>   Chan fhaic iad mar chall e;
> Chaill iad an scalladh
> Air gach reachd agus gealladh
> Bha eadar na fearaibh
>   Thug am fearann-s' o 'n nàmhaid . . .[2]
>   (Matheson 1938:199–203)

The sense of betrayal which is all too evident in that poem by John MacCodrum is but
one symptom of a process of cultural disintegration testified to by late-eighteenth-
century travellers' accounts of a confused, disturbed people and by the steep decline in
Gaelic culture as the language was abandoned by the upper classes and as the old cer-
tainties gave way to growing doubt and perplexity (MacLean 1939:295–7).

Until the eighteenth century a man born in the north-west Highlands or islands lived
his life in much the same way as his father and grandfather, the essential continuity of
past and present symbolised in genealogies and traditions which spanned several cen-
turies. Then within the space of a lifetime all was changed. The crofter working his
single holding and labouring for a wage as a kelper was, in the Highland context, a
pioneer and like his landlord had little use for much of what had gone before. He had
not been born into a culture familiar with the capitalist order in which he found him-
self, for that order had come from outside—insidiously, through the operation of
economic forces of which the crofter had no comprehension and over which he could
exercise no control; violently, through military conquest and the deliberate and
systematic destruction of his traditional way of life. In attempting to cope with the
situation created by commercial landlordism crofters were therefore at an acute dis-
advantage, not least because they were complete strangers to the social antagonisms
which are an integral part of capitalism.

The traditional society of the Highlands, like all societies based on kinship, was by no means an undifferentiated, homogenous mass. It was, on the contrary, highly stratified and contained several distinct layers of rank and position. It was nevertheless a highly unified society, for although a great gulf was fixed and was known to be fixed between the chief and his tacksmen on the one hand and the lowly commons of the clan on the other, both sides—for reasons of military security if for no other—had an interest in maintaining all sorts of bridges across the chasm. Economic inequalities were consequently transcended by an egalitarianism expressed in terms of blood relationship, however remote, and encapsulated in the right of every clansman to shake the hand of his chief (see *e.g.* MacCulloch 1824: IV. 442–3). Class conflict between feudal lords and peasant masses, an important feature of the history of pre-capitalist Europe, was therefore unknown in the Highlands where, as in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa in more recent times, it was only under the impact of capitalism and the associated imposition of a commercialised agricultural structure that a peasantry in the usual sense of the word was created from the lower strata of traditional society (Saul and Woods 1971).

The crofter therefore inherited no popular tradition of resistance to feudal oppression and exploitation. Instead he inherited a folklore concerned with conflict between clan and clan, locality and locality—traditions which hindered rather than helped the creation of a sense of unity among crofters as a whole. And to the stultifying influence of such a folklore was added the confusing fact that, initially at least, most Highland landlords were the descendants of traditional chiefs. That a nineteenth-century Clanranald, Seaforth or MacLeod of Dunvegan was a landowning aristocrat rather than a tribal patriarch is obvious to the historian. For an unsophisticated people, however, the weight of traditional loyalty to the chief rendered more difficult the appreciation of the social and economic transformation than would have been the case if the Gaelic aristocracy had been expropriated and swept into oblivion, as happened in Ireland. Even in the 1880s when a radical critique of Highland landlordism had been developed there was still 'on the side of the poor much reverence for the owner of the soil' (Napier 1884: 36), an attitude enshrined in the work of Mary MacPherson whose poetry was the most forceful to emerge from the land agitation of that decade but who was unwilling or unable to criticise the traditional landowning families of her native island of Skye (MacLean 1939:319).

As far as the small tenantry of the Highlands were concerned, therefore, their own historical inheritance constituted the single most retarding influence on their developing a coherent critique of landlordism. Eventually, however, crofters were able to rid themselves of much of the dead weight of the past, adapt to their new situation and gain some control over their own destinies. The crofting community's decisive victories were won in the 1880s by means of political action and well organised social protest. But in the beginning, like many other people whose traditional way of life has been destroyed by western civilisation (Lanternari 1963:4), crofters sought relief from the frustrations and sufferings of their new existence in the sphere of religious experience.

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Until the eighteenth century most Highlanders had little interest in protestantism of the presbyterian variety. Its individualist ethic was not calculated to appeal to a people for whom work and war were necessarily communal activities and only in the heartland of Clan Campbell, already aligned with the Whig and Hanoverian ascendancies and consequently with the Established Church, was there a properly inducted and popularly accepted presbyterian clergy in the years immediately after 1700. Outside the Campbell pale and outside the belt of Catholic predominance which traversed the region from the southern part of the Long Island to Arisaig, Morar and Lochaber, Episcopalianism, like the Jacobitism with which it was usually associated, had survived the revolution of 1688 and its associated re-establishment of presbyterianism (Ferguson 1969:16; Smout 1969: 333). To put down episcopacy was the eighteenth-century Kirk's main mission in the Highlands; and in the Highland context, therefore, the Established Church, like the Whig state whose support it enjoyed, was uncompromisingly modernist, committed not only to rooting out religious and political dissent but to destroying the society which underpinned that dissent (MacInnes 1951:14). Opening with the foundation of the SSPCK in the century's first decade and intensified after each of the Jacobite risings, the presbyterian offensive reached its climax in 1746 when many Episcopal chapels and meeting houses were destroyed by Cumberland's troops and episcopacy was officially proscribed (Grub 1861: IV. 43; Prebble 1961:152, 163, 306). Thereafter episcopacy ceased to be an effective force in the north-west and by the 1790s the Episcopal Church retained significant numbers of Gaelic-speaking adherents only in a narrow belt of territory stretching along the eastern shore of Loch Linnhe from Appin to Ballachulish (MacKay 1914:205-7; OSA:I. 491).

Although presbyterians were in undisputed control of Highland pulpits by the eighteenth century's end there was little sign of popular enthusiasm for, or attachment to, the Establishment. The latter, admittedly, laboured under immense difficulties. As the General Assembly was informed in 1760, many parishes in the north-west were 'so Extensive as to render the charge of them resemble a Province, requiring the Labour of a Body of Clergy' (Report 1760). And everywhere there was a chronic shortage of churches—many congregations whose domiciles were remote from their parish church or whose parish church was in ruins being forced to worship 'in the open fields' (ibid.). Not until the 1820s when government funds were made available for the construction of a number of 'parliamentary churches' was a serious attempt made to come to grips with this problem; and even in the 1830s it had by no means been resolved.[3]

But while it would be uncharitable to discount these and other problems, notably of finance, it must be said that many Highland ministers regarded the difficulties of their situation not as spurs to action but as convenient excuses for doing nothing. Whatever its performance elsewhere in Scotland, the record of the Kirk in the Highlands during the period of Moderate ascendancy was not a proud one. John Buchanan who took a special interest in ecclesiastical affairs during his travels in the north-west in the 1780s drew a picture of a neglectful and apathetic clergy, out of touch and usually out of

sympathy with ordinary people (Buchanan 1793:219–51). Not a few Hebridean incumbents held large tacks and 'like some other tacksmen' were 'too prone to treat their subtenants with great severity' (op. cit.: 36–7). And in this respect at least the nineteenth century brought no improvement. In the 1820s and 1830s several Skye ministers were also sheep farmers and some of them acted as factors on the larger estates (Present State 1827:2; Fullarton and Baird 1838:26–30)—pursuits scarcely calculated to enhance their popular appeal. Although the more extreme allegations made against such ministers must be treated with caution[4] there seems no reason, therefore, to doubt the general accuracy of the contemporary opinion—as stated to the General Assembly in 1824—that the clergy of the north-west were for the most part 'inattentive to the interests of religion'—at least in so far as 'religion' was understood to incorporate a sense of evangelising mission (Present State 1827:2). Several of them did not possess even a working knowledge of Gaelic (see e.g. MacKenzie 1921:192), a state of affairs which in itself placed an insurmountable barrier between them and their congregations.

The irritating effects of such abuses were aggravated by the tendency for the Established Church to become identified in the popular mind with the interests of the landlords. In the old Highlands ministers had been drawn from among the tacksmen and like them had occupied something of an intermediate position in the social hierarchy. In the Highlands of the early nineteenth century, however, the clergy were inevitably drawn into the society of farmers, factors and proprietors and away from the small tenantry who constituted the bulk of the population. One vital consequence of this development was that ministers who objected to evictions were few and far between. One or two, notably Lachlan MacKenzie who was minister of Lochcarron from 1782 to 1819, earned a lasting popularity among the crofting population by denouncing removals (Beaton 1929:81; Campbell 1930:19–20). But ministers who adopted such a stance were invariably Evangelicals who felt landlords' control of church patronage to be a threat to their own position and their views were not shared by the Moderates who occupied most Highland pulpits. Donald MacLeod's claim that the ministers of Sutherland threatened 'the vengeance of heaven and eternal damnation on those who should presume to make the least resistance' to the evictors (quoted, Prebble 1963:75) might have been exaggerated; but there can be no doubt that most of the Established clergy gave at least tacit consent to landlords' policies and that their role during the clearances has ever since haunted the reputation of the Church of Scotland in the Highlands.

Disorientated and demoralised by social and economic change and bereft of their traditional leadership, the small tenantry could not, therefore, look to the Established Church for guidance and assistance. And in fact the religion to which they adhered was not the religion of the Establishment; certainly not the religion of the Kirk's Moderate ascendancy. It was a popularly orientated and fervent evangelism which, in a series of dramatic 'revivals', swept through the north-west Highlands and Hebrides in the opening decades of the nineteenth century and eventually carried the greater part of the people of the region into the Free Church. As already suggested, the origins of this

'deep and stirring religious awakening' (MacRae 1929:81) are to be found in the social
and psychological consequences of the collapse of the old order. The 'spiritual destitu-
tion' which nineteenth-century Evangelicals discerned in the Highlands was very real.
It was the inevitable outcome of the absence—since the mid-eighteenth century—of
any real sense of social cohesion or framework of moral reference. The evangelical faith
helped make good this deficiency. It provided new beliefs and new standards. It created
a new purpose in life and in an insecure world it gave some sense of security. As in
modern Africa a people whose world had been shattered found in a particularly fervent
brand of Christianity 'a place to feel at home'[5] and a way of coping with the problems
inherent in the commercial world into which they had been propelled.

In parts of the eastern Highlands, especially Easter Ross, the evangelical faith had
gained a foothold in the seventeenth century (MacInnes 1951:13). In the north-west,
however, the spark had to come from outside, its main bearer in the first instance being
the Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home founded in Edinburgh in 1798 and
dominated by Robert and James Haldane and their particular brand of congregational-
ism. The Society's object was 'to supply the means of grace wherever we perceive a
deficiency'. And since the Highlands seemed particularly lacking in grace as in much
else its missionaries at once turned their attention northwards, their efforts being
quickly rewarded by a religious revival in southern Perthshire, the first of a northwards-
and westwards-spreading series (Haldane 1852:181 *et seq.*; Campbell 1853:3).

The Establishment's reaction, however, was decidedly hostile. In 1799 the General
Assembly adopted a resolution prohibiting 'all persons from preaching in any place
within their jurisdiction who are not licensed' and in a Pastoral Admonition con-
demned the doctrines of 'false teachers' who assumed 'the name of missionaries'
(MacKay 1914:227). Apart from resentment about the latters' attacks on what they
called 'the false doctrines of unfaithful ministers', there were fears that the revivalist
movement might be socially subversive (Meikle 1912:209 *et seq.*). The Haldanes were
no Jacobins but their congregationalism did have a mildly democratic aura (Grub 1861:
IV. 170), and there hung about the popular nature of the movement they initiated
enough of a revolutionary taint to make it suspect—especially in the neurotically
repressive political atmosphere of the late 1790s. The Society's missionaries included
numbers of 'mechanics' and artisans and in 1797 Neil Douglas, a former member of the
Friends of the People acting independently of the Haldanes preached in Argyll
(Haldane 1852:248; Douglas 1799). It is hardly surprising therefore that it should be
remarked that

> Some of these reformers of religion, as they wish to be considered, intermix their spiritual
> instructions with reflections on the incapacity and negligence of the clergymen of the
> Established Church and on the conduct of the landlords whom they compare to the task-
> masters of Egypt (Stewart 1825:I. 130-1).

Stewart of Garth, the author of that comment, deplored the spread of new-fangled
democratic ideas among his beloved Highlanders with all the considerable ire of which

his romantic Toryism was capable. And the blame for this development he laid squarely on the shoulders of the itinerant preachers—those 'ignorant and fanatical spiritual guides', he called them (*op. cit.*:125)—to whom Highlanders were increasingly turning. Even more significantly, there seemed to him to be an obvious connection between the itinerants' degree of success and the discontent engendered by economic change:

> Wherever the people are rendered contented and happy in their external circumstances by the judicious and humane treatment of their landlords . . . no itinerant preacher has ever been able to obtain a footing (*op. cit.*:131).

Much the same point was made by James MacDonald in the perceptive account of Hebridean agriculture he published in 1811. This is what he had to say of the Western Isles' crofting population:

> The bond of connection and the ties of clanship which lately subsisted between these tenants and their landlords . . . are dissolved. In many cases, indeed, they are replaced by a spirit of jealousy and hatred. Discontent and a desire for change are almost universal. The ancient attachment to church and state is grown very feeble . . . Without fixed or definite ideas concerning any failure in duty of their clergy, they gradually relax in their respect for them, and have no small hankering after the pestilent fellows who under the name of different sectaries . . . swarm over these neglected regions. Without any original tendency to bigotry or indeed any serious attachment to or predilection for any specific articles of faith, they frequently indulge in a disputatious vein of religious controversy. This, with political speculations, some of which would astonish a man not accustomed to the amazing powers of the common Hebridean in conversation, inter-larded with reflections upon the character and conduct of their superiors, and upon the hardships of their own condition, fills up their leisure hours. They have an idea that they deserve a better fate than that which has fallen to their lot . . . They always suspect that they are peculiarly ill-treated, and live under an ungrateful government and oppressive landlords. In support of these charges they mention . . . above all . . . the dearness of land, and the shortness or absolute want of leases (MacDonald 1811:109–10).

On occasion, therefore, the apparent connection between religious revivalism and social dislocation was manifested not only in the fact that small tenants—many of whom were being subjected to removal and innovation of one kind or another—were particularly susceptible to the new religion, but also in the fact that the doctrinal proclamations of the revivals' originators and adherents embodied some part of the social aspirations just beginning to be formed by crofters. Thus, in one early revival,

> . . . many of the converts became emaciated and unsociable. The duties of life were abandoned. Sullen, morose, and discontented, some of them began to talk of their high privileges and of their right, as the elect few, to possess the earth. . . . The landlord was pronounced unchristian because he insisted on his dues (*State of Religion* 1819:142–4).

Such millennial visions of social justice were bound to appeal to the dispossessed and demoralised lower strata of Highland society, just as they have always appealed to those

whose traditional way of life has broken down (Cohn 1970:52). And though the number of small tenants attracted by such notions is impossible to estimate, millennial movements could, clearly, be significant locally. Around 1800, for example, such a movement was initiated in the Great Glen

> by certain religious itinerants who addressed the people by interpreters and distributed numerous pamphlets calculated, as they said, to excite a serious soul concern. The consequence was that men who could not read began to preach, and to influence the people against their lawful pastors. . . . They next adopted a notion that all who were superior to them in wealth or rank were oppressors whom they would enjoy the consolation of seeing damned (*Remarks* 1806:39–40).

Haldanite influence extended into north-west Sutherland (Adam 1973:I. 135) and in 1805 John Farquharson, an itinerant associated with the Haldanes, preached for some months in Skye (*Present State* 1827:46). But for the most part the north-west was still outside the Haldanite sphere of influence when, towards the end of the nineteenth century's first decade the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel fell victim to its own doctrinal dissensions (MacKay 1914:229). Almost at once, however, its evangelical mission was taken up by another body, the Gaelic School Society founded in Edinburgh in 1811. Although that society—as its name suggests—was primarily concerned with helping Highlanders become literate in their own language, it was also interested in the propagation of the gospel and seemed to attract men imbued with evangelising fervour (Anderson 1854:125–8). Gaelic school teachers consequently played a prominent part in the religious life of the communities in which they were stationed, not the least of their contributions to it being the use they made of the Gaelic Bible, the only book used in the society's schools (*GSS* 16th Rep. 1828:28–9).

The task of translating the scriptures into Scottish Gaelic was completed in 1801 and in the next twenty-five years 60,000 Gaelic Bibles and 80,000 New Testaments were distributed in the Highlands by the SSPCK and the British and Foreign Bible Society (*Moral Statistics* 1826:21). The Bible was thus the first and for long the only book to be widely available in Gaelic. Its appearance coincided with the highly successful literacy campaign launched by the Gaelic school movement (Nicolson 1867:84–5, 130). And its importance to the nineteenth-century crofting population can hardly be overestimated.

Until about 1800 the vast majority of the people of the north-west were dependent for their knowledge of the Bible on the clergy of the Established Church. They alone had access to the sources and their interpretation was, in consequence, almost impossible to dispute. After 1800 that situation changed. More and more crofters were able to read the Bible for themselves in their own language. In itself this development was bound to enhance the self-confidence of the small tenantry. More important, however, was their discovery that the Established clergy were not necessarily infallible; that the Bible appeared to have much to say that was relevant to their own predicament—not least to the land question; and that, in short, the fundamental principles of Christianity could be applied to their own lives in a way that was very different from that usually

suggested to them by their Moderate ministers. It is no accident, therefore, that religious revivalism in the north-west coincided with the spread of the Gaelic Bible and the growth of Gaelic literacy.[6]

Being well aware of this connection, Moderate ministers looked on the Gaelic schools with some disfavour; and many of the Society's teachers consequently found themselves hauled up in front of church courts on charges of irregular conduct of one kind or another. In 1829, for example, the Presbytery of Mull recorded its regret

> . . . that two teachers of the Gaelic School Society of Edinburgh stationed in the parish of Ardnamurchan have assumed to themselves the office of public exhorters and are in the stated practice of abstaining from public worship. . . . The presbytery find themselves called upon to put an effective stop to such practices—practices subversive of all established order and so calculated to produce the most pernicious consequences (CH 2/273/3: 23 Apr. 1829).

A year later, however, several of the Society's teachers in the area under the presbytery's jurisdiction were persisting in 'schismatic and irregular practices'. They refused to attend worship in the Established churches 'on the ground that the Gospel is not preached' and were 'in the regular habit of publicly exhorting and expounding. Thus . . . exhibiting an example in all respects pernicious and engendering dissension among the people . . . and a spirit of disaffection towards all those in authority over them' (*op. cit.*: 10 Mar. 1830).

Elsewhere there were similar developments. In Lewis the establishment of Gaelic schools was quickly followed by a revival (MacFarlane 1924: iv). In Back, for example, the Society's teacher preached every Sunday to the people of the township. His activities, the minister of Stornoway reported, 'alienated the people from me in a great measure, so that on the Sundays I preached at Back they would in droves that day pass me on the road' (CH 2/473/3: 28 Nov. 1832).[7]

The same result was produced by the Society's endeavours in Wester Ross and in this area a few of the local men employed as catechists by the SSPCK joined the more evangelically-minded newcomers. Thus John Davidson, an SSPCK catechist in Lochcarron, set himself up as a 'public expounder of Scripture', attracted a mass following, and one Sunday in March 1820,

> assembled the greater part of the population of Lochcarron to a place within sight of the Parish church, and there, while public worship was conducting regularly by the Parish Minister and such of the Parishioners as were with him . . . [he] employed himself in reading, lecturing, and praying with his congregation' (CH 2/567/3: 4 Apr. 1820).

The latter development indicates that while the revivalist faith came initially from outside the Highlands, the revivals very soon developed an impetus and produced a leadership of their own. Thus one result of John Farquharson's 1805 visit to Skye was the conversion to the evangelical faith of Donald Munro, a local man who was a catechist in the pay of the Establishment but who was more renowned for his ability as a

fiddler than for his devotion to religion. After Farquharson's departure Munro put away his fiddle and began to conduct prayer meetings at various places in the northern part of Skye (MacCowan 1902:1–30), the eventual outcome of his activities being best described in a more or less contemporary account of it:

> In the year 1812, by means of these meetings, an uncommon awakening took place among the people, which was attended with distress and trembling of the body. . . . Some persons came under convictions when attending these meetings; others when they came in contact with awakened persons who attended them. . . . These were days of power and of sweetness to as many as had spiritual taste and discernment; so that frequently when they met they were reluctant to part (*Present State* 1827:62–3).

At least one of the initiators of the Lewis revival of the 1820s—John MacLeod, the Gaelic schoolmaster at Uig—had been involved in the events of 1812 in Skye (MacRae 1907:80). But in Lewis too local preachers quickly appeared and during 1823 the Established clergy began to complain of the 'religious frenzy which . . . has become so prevalent of late' and of the activities of 'the blind, daring fanatics who now infest this Island . . . disseminating wild unscriptural doctrines' (A. Simpson to J. Adam, 5 Feb. 1823; W. MacRae to Seaforth, 23 Dec. 1823: SP, GD 46/17/vols. 62–3). The extent of the divergence between the popular religion and the Establishment was demonstrated at a communion service in the parish church at Lochs in the south-eastern corner of Lewis in August 1823. When the parish minister, Alexander Simpson—who, according to Evangelical tradition was a drunkard as well as a Moderate (MacFarlane 1924:245)—began his sermon he was interrupted by several 'fanatics' who challenged the validity of the doctrines being propounded from the pulpit. On being asked to leave, Simpson's critics refused to budge and had to be 'dragged off'. Not a whit intimidated they then began to 'sing and expound Scripture and read it among themselves in the neighbourhood so near that their singing seemed meant to disturb the service'. Angered by this calculated defiance of his authority Simpson, with the support of the presbytery of Lewis, lodged a formal complaint with the civil authorities. Five men who had played a prominent part in the disturbances were promptly arrested and shipped to Dingwall where they were jailed for a month (J. Adam to Seaforth, 31 Oct. 1823; 8 Apr. 1824: SP, GD 40/17/vols. 63 and 65)—a proceeding which did nothing to quell the revival but which had the effect, as one of MacKenzie of Seaforth's Lewis correspondents remarked at the time, of setting the Established clergy firmly 'on the fair road to damn their popularity in the Lews' (A. Kelly to Seaforth, Dec. 1823:SP, GD 40/16/vol. 65).

Such events were not confined to Skye and Lewis. In Harris a revival began in the early 1820s under the leadership of John Morrison, a Rodel blacksmith—better known for that reason as Iain Gobha (*Present State* 1827:75–6). And by 1829 'Fanaticism and Sectarianism' were reported to be 'making rapid progress' on the island where Murdoch MacLeod, another ' . . . lay-preacher or exhorter . . . had exerted all his influence to prevent the Parishioners from attending Divine Worship in the Established Churches' (CH 2/361/2:7 Sept. 1829; 3 May 1832). Throughout the north-west there were

identical occurrences. In North Uist in the 1830s and early 1840s many people were following 'divisive courses' and organising their own Sunday services (CH 2/361/2: 27 Mar. 1839). In parts of Mull dissent had 'proceeded to an alarming extent (CH 2/273/4: 3 Dec. 1835). And in Lochcarron by 1825 the leadership of the popular movement had devolved upon John Finlayson, another blacksmith, who was accused by the presbytery of

> following divisive and schismatic courses in absenting himself from attendance on the public ordinances of religion . . . and in collecting crowds at his house during divine service upon the Lord's day and in reading and expounding Scriptures to them (CH 2/567/3: 20 Nov. 1825).

The emergence of the class of lay-preachers made up of John Finlayson, Donald Munro, John Morrison and their fellows was one of the revivalist movement's most important features, not least because these preachers—known as *na daoine*, the men, in order to distinguish them from the ordained clergy—constituted the first leadership of any sort to emerge from the crofting population's own ranks. Although they had a long history in those parts of the eastern Highlands where evangelical Christianity had been implanted in Covenanting times (MacInnes 1944:16–41), it was only in the early nineteenth century that *na daoine*, defined as a 'definitely recognised but ecclesiastically unofficial order of evangelical laymen who won public veneration by their eminence in godliness' (*op. cit.*: 16), made their appearance on the north-west coast and in the islands. In some cases, as in that of Donald Munro in Skye or John Davidson in Lochcarron, 'the men' had some previous connection with the Established Church or with the SSPCK—organisations which had long maintained a staff of lay catechists whose duty it was to assist the ministers of sprawling Highland parishes. For the most part, however, the lay-preachers seem to have been ordinary men drawn from the lower strata of Highland society.[8] Usually they were crofters. Occasionally they were crafts-men—blacksmiths seem to have been especially prominent. But their distinguishing features generally consisted solely of their own strength of character and the profound conviction of their religious beliefs, qualities which enabled them to preside over the popular religious movement from the start, conducting prayer-meetings, services, and above all the huge open air 'fellowship meetings' which became a feature of the Friday before communion throughout the evangelical Highlands (Kennedy 1927:86–8).

Well aware of their status in the community 'the men' cultivated a distinctive appearance, wearing their hair long and in some areas adopting a recognised 'uniform'—on the northern mainland this consisted of 'a camlet coat and a spotted handkerchief tied over the head', while in Skye multi-coloured nightcaps were favoured (Investigator 1850: 36; *Puritanism* 1851:309). And their fervour had its counterpart in the emotional, often hysterical nature of the movement which they led—a movement in which can be discerned at least a shade of those vast and mysterious upsurges of chiliastic and millennial fervour which occasionally gripped the imagination of the masses of mediæval Europe

and have more recently erupted in widely separated parts of the Third World (Lanternari 1963; Cohn 1970). Thus one contemporary observer, noting that 'It is known to every one conversant with the Highlands that the recent degradation and misery of the people have predisposed their minds to imbibe these pestiferous delusions to which they fly for consolation under their sufferings', went on to describe how those affected by the revivals 'see visions, dream dreams, revel in the wildest hallucinations' (Browne 1825: 142-3). In Skye, for example, many people—especially women—were said by contemporaries to have become 'fanatical' and fallen prey to fits of religious ecstasy (*Present State* 1827:63). In Lewis, too, many people were 'seized with spasms, convulsions, fits, and screaming aloud' (A. Simpson to J. Adam, 5 Feb. 1823: SP, GD 46/17/vol. 63); and *bliadhna 'n aomaidh*, the year of the swooning, was long remembered in the island (MacKay 1914:248-9).

The millennial character of the revivals had its counterpart in 'the men's' religious teaching. Their theology was of the most elemental type, combining a harsh and pristine puritanism with a transcendental mysticism that had less to do with nineteenth-century protestantism than with an older faith. Visions of heaven and hell, prophetic utterances, intensely personal conflicts with the devil and his angels: these were integral to their creed and a common part of their experience; while in their preaching homely illustration was combined with mysticism and allegory (MacInnes 1944:35, 41). And while 'the men' were often fully literate, knowing their Bibles 'as few besides have known them' (Kennedy 1927:128), they did not hesitate to introduce into their Christianity concepts which were clearly derived from the traditional cultural heritage of the Highlands. Many 'men', for example, believed themselves to have the power of second sight (MacInnes 1944:39-40; MacRae 1932*b*), and even Lachlan MacKenzie of Lochcarron, one of the earliest of the north-west Highland's Evangelical ministers was considered a prophet by his congregation (Campbell 1928:10).

'The men' were no primitivists, however. They had, on the contrary, a very low opinion of much of the traditional culture of the Highlands; and indeed their onslaughts upon that culture undoubtedly destroyed much that was valuable in it (see *e.g.* Carmichael 1928:1. xxv-xxxiii). What is not generally recognised in all that has subsequently been written about the devastating effect of Highland puritanism on Gaelic culture, however, is that the society which supported that culture was destroyed in the eighteenth century and that 'the men's' attack upon the Highland's cultural heritage can consequently be interpreted as a more or less conscious attempt to come to terms with the realities of a social and economic system dominated by landlordism rather than by clanship. Thus the revivalists' social teachings were infinitely more advanced and closer to the needs of the crofting population than those embodied in the secular poetry of the period—a considerable proportion of which, in Sorley MacLean's view, is nostalgic and pessimistic, shying away from confronting the reality of clearance and eviction (MacLean 1939: *passim*).

As early as the 1760s, for example, Dugald Buchanan of Rannoch—perhaps the

greatest evangelical poet to write in Gaelic—included in *An Claigeann, The Skull*, a telling indictment of the commercial landlordism which was just beginning to make its mark on the Highlands. Several bitter verses are devoted to the rack-renting laird who flays his people and thins the cheek of his tenants by his excessive exactions. If the rent is delayed the cattle are seized, no heed being paid to the cries of the poor. Before the landlord stands an old man, his head uncovered in the bitter wind. His petition is ignored. For striking down such a tyrant, Buchanan concludes, death is to be praised (MacBean 1920:114; MacInnes 1951:283).

Here is no anachronistic reluctance to admit the exploitative role of the former chief. And indeed Buchanan's tirade marked the beginning of a long association between Highland evangelicalism and anti-landlordism. Alexander Campbell, the leader of an early secessionist movement in Argyll, thought it worthwhile to record his 'testimony against covetous heritors that oppress the poor' (Investigator 1850:78); and not least among the faults of the Moderate clergy, according to *na daoine*, was that they 'dined with the laird' and generally associated with the upper strata of Highland society (MacKenzie 1914:86). And at another level, the social protest implicit in the vision of hell accorded to David Ross of Ferintosh, Ross-shire, requires no elucidation:

In one spot David saw a poor soul surrounded by busy devils. "There is a rich miser for you", said the angel. "They are pouring buckets of molten gold down his throat. There again", said he, pointing to another, "There is a laird who has been driving out tenants from their farms, squandering his means after strange women, rendering poor people miserable and himself so miserable that at last he had to take away his own life. He is now for ever doomed to be alternatively bitten by serpents and have his wounds licked over by hell hounds. Poor fellow! Little did he think during his moments of heartless pleasure and dissipation that he was sowing for himself the seeds of such an eternity of woe" (Sinclair 1867:61–2).

'The men' and their movement thus posed a threat to all those whose interests lay in maintaining the social and economic *status quo* in the Highlands, whether Moderate ministers, landed proprietors or sheep farmers. As far as the Church of Scotland was concerned only the comparatively small number of Evangelical ministers—whose own beliefs at least approximated to the tenets of the popular religion—had anything approaching a cordial relationship with 'the men'. Of the Evangelicals the most popular were probably *Maighstir Ruaraidh*—as Roderick MacLeod of Bracadale was popularly known—and Alexander MacLeod who became minister of Uig in Lewis shortly after the beginning of the revival in that island. These men's churches were regularly filled to capacity with the evangelically-minded people in their own congregations and in the congregations of neighbouring parishes (MacRae 1907:82–3; Beaton 1929:188). But elsewhere, as already mentioned, 'the men' and their adherents simply abandoned the parish churches. In Skye in the 1820s, for example, there were only two parishes—one of which was Roderick MacLeod's Bracadale and the other the neighbouring parish of Duirinish—in which there was no 'meeting held for social worship on the Sabbath distinct from that carried on in the parish church' (*Present State* 1827:67).

In view of 'the men's' obvious leanings towards anti-landlordism it was inevitable that the Established clergy's concern about these developments should be shared by landowners and their associates. Not only did 'the men' articulate crofters' growing dislike of landlords, but the very existence of a profoundly popular movement equipped with its own leaders clearly constituted a threat to the latter's hitherto undisputed dominance in the Highlands. The opinion of the minister of Barvas in Lewis, a man who thought it 'easy to see that no good can come to society from the raving effusions of . . . ignorant men who, with consummate effrontery, assume the character and office of public instructors' (W. MacRae to Seaforth 23 Dec. 1823: SP, GD 46/17/vol. 62), was accordingly echoed by many proprietors. 'No gentleman', it is recorded, 'associated with Donald Munro' (MacCowan 1902:18); while at his meetings and those of his fellows there might be seen, among the hundreds of crofters and their families 'an occasional sheep farmer, if a native of the district, but never a factor' (Brown 1890: 670). Lord MacDonald's factor in fact considered 'the men' to be 'an evil influence', an opinion shared by MacLeod of Dunvegan who thought that 'the influence of lay preachers . . . was injurious to the people' (*Sites* 1847: Q. 5094 *et seq.*). And a group of Skye sheep-farmers reacted to the 1812 revival in the island by making representations to Lord MacDonald 'soliciting his Lordship's power and authority to suppress these meetings and to proceed against those who held them' (*Present State* 1827:63).

Such apprehensions were not unjustified. Crofters' shared experience of the religious revivals undoubtedly helped to make possible the united and concerted action which constituted the basis of the crofting community's offensive against landlordism in the 1880s. Highland Land League meetings, it was observed, were 'always held in the open in defiance of rain or tempest', and at them 'the person selected to preside opens and closes the proceedings with prayer' (*Scotsman*: 1 Dec. 1884). The resemblance between these gatherings and the assemblages convened by 'the men' during the heyday of the religious revivals was not coincidental; nor was the fact that the local leaders of the Land League—men like John MacPherson of Glendale who opened and closed his meetings with passionately delivered Gaelic prayers and whose eloquence in his native tongue was such as to move men to tears or to fury (MacLeod 1917:74–5)—occupied positions in the townships that were in all respects analogous to those held by 'the men' of a preceding generation. As the first of the crofting community's leaders 'the men' had pioneered the route the Land Leaguers followed, and their influence is as obvious in what Land League leaders said as it is in the ways they said it.

The declaration of a Tiree crofter and Land League organiser who was imprisoned for his part in a land raid on the Duke of Argyll's Tiree estate in 1886 speaks for itself:

> He held that he was standing on the side of justice and he had the Bible as his authority. The earth belonged to the people and not to the Duke of Argyll or any landlord (OT: 28 Aug. 1886).

The texts on which these views were based were the common currency of Land

League politics and were to be seen on banners at any one of scores of Land League meetings:

> The earth is mine. . . . The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof. . . . Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field. . . . The earth He hath given to the children of men (OT:29 Dec. 1883; *Scotsman*:4 Sept. 1885).

'If the landlords consulted Moses or Joshua', declared Norman Stewart a crofter from Valtos in Skye and a branch secretary of the Highland Land League,

> 'they would find there substantial evidences as to who are the rightful owners of the soil. The Lord Advocate and Sheriff Ivory can quote Acts Georges and John, but we can quote the Act of God—the Bible' (OT:21 Feb. 1885).

By the 1880s, when the power and prestige of the Highland Land League was at its height, 'the men' had largely faded from the scene and the popular religion had been institutionalised within the framework of the Free Church. But while the Free Church inherited Highland evangelicalism it was John MacPherson, Norman Stewart, and a host of other Land League activists who inherited 'the men's' leadership of and influence over the crofting community.

In the context of the history of the popular religious movement in the Highlands the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843 was a largely fortuitous event. The internecine conflict between Evangelicals and Moderates which led eventually to the former's secession and to the formation of the Free Church had nothing to do with Highland affairs and was, on the face of it, of little interest to the mass of the crofting population. As the ecclesiastical crisis approached, however, the Evangelical leadership made a determined effort to win popular support in the Highlands. Gaelic pamphlets were circulated; Evangelical deputations toured the region; and most important of all, the local Evangelical ministers strenuously endeavoured to win to their side the adherents of the indigenous Evangelical movement.[9]

On their side the Evangelicals had many advantages. They were the only ministers for whom crofters felt any respect or affection and they were consequently able to draw on a fund of popularity built up over many years—*Maighstir Ruaraidh*, for example, was able to draw large and enthusiastic crowds to his pro-Evangelical meetings in the winter of 1842–3 (MacKay 1914:266). The Moderates had no such advantages. For them there was only a deeply felt animosity. It is not really surprising, therefore, that 'the men' adhered unanimously to the Free Church (MacCowan 1902:82; Sutherland 1844:9, 12–13) and that throughout the north-west Highlands the secession amounted to 'a tidal wave which . . . carried the population en masse' (Simpson 1909:1. 433). The situation in Lewis where less than 500 people out of a population of some 20,000 remained in the Established Church was not untypical (*ibid.*). There as elsewhere the parish churches were 'swept bare of worshippers', their congregations being reduced to a handful of sheep farmers and their shepherds (Barron 1913:xxxix). When on the

first Sunday after the Disruption the Durness church bell was muffled with an old sock and a dead dog hung over the pulpit in Farr (MacRae 1932a:51) the symbolism was, therefore, very apt. The Established Church had ceased to have any claim to authority over the crofting population.

The immediate cause of the Evangelicals' withdrawal from the Establishment having been their opposition to landlords' control of church patronage, the Free Church held decidedly anti-landlord views. Landlords, in their turn, were intensely suspicious of the new denomination, their antipathy towards it manifesting itself in a campaign of obstruction and harassment which usually took the form of a refusal to sell sites for Free churches. Although not confined to the Highlands the latter practice was more widespread and effective there than anywhere else simply because the sheer size of Highland estates enabled their owners to deny the Free Church access to whole parishes and in some cases to entire islands or even counties (Sites 1847:iv). In one famous episode caused by Sir James Riddell's persistent refusal to provide a site for a Free church at Strontian the problem was overcome by the provision of a floating church which was moored in Loch Sunart (Brown 1890:427-8, 655-7). Elsewhere persecution was more difficult to counter. In Mull a Free Church congregation was obliged to worship in a gravel pit below the high water-mark (Sites 1847: QQ 4088-94); while Lord MacDonald, the owner of the largest estate in the Hebrides, refused sites to no less than seven congregations (op cit.: Q 91). When in the winter of 1845 the people of Paible on the MacDonald estate in North Uist attempted to build a Free Church meeting-house on the township's common pasture the building was promptly pulled down by the estate management and nine of the crofters involved in its construction evicted. A subsequent attempt to hold services in the lee of a large rock on the common grazing was countered by the simple expedient of ploughing and sowing the ground around it (op. cit.: 3684-5, 4437-62).

Visiting the north-west Highlands five years after the Disruption, Robert Somers made the following comments about it. In the Highlands, he wrote,

> there are only two ranks of people—a higher rank and a lower rank—the former consisting of a few large tenants ... and the latter consisting of a dense body of small lotters and fishermen. ... The proverbial enmity of rich and poor in all societies has received peculiar development in this simple social structure of the Highlands. The clearances laid the foundation of a bitter animosity between the sheep farmers and the lotters; and as these violent changes were executed by the authority of the lairds, they also snapped the tie which had previously, amid all reverses, united the people and their chiefs. One link still bound the extremities of society in formal, if not in spiritual union. The parish church was a common centre where all classes met. ... But even religion ... was converted at the Disruption into a new fountain of bitterness. ... There is thus a double point of collision between the two ranks—an ecclesiastical as well as an agrarian enmity. ... It is consequently almost impossible to find an individual in the upper rank who has not a grudge against the people, either on the score of their Free Churchism, or on the score of their hostility to the sheep walk system (Somers 1848:65-6).

Although the link between social conflict and religious dissent went back farther than Somers realised, his remarks contain an essential truth. In the Highlands the Disruption was not just an ecclesiastical dispute. It was a class conflict. Its battle line was the line of class demarcation, the line between the small tenantry on the one hand and sheep farmers, factors and proprietors on the other. In that fact is to be found the explanation of what is otherwise inexplicable: the intensity of proprietorial opposition to the Free Church.

Highland landlords' experience of the popular religious movement had done little to convince them that its institutionalisation in a Church founded on an essentially anti-landlord principle would be to their advantage. The Free Church, declared Sir James Riddell, would lead the people 'astray from the ministrations of the regularly ordained clergy who were placed over them for their spiritual good and edification' and make them more than ever dependent upon 'the teaching of illiterate laymen'. Besides, he added—and the argument must have seemed a powerful one in the politically troubled world of the 1840s—once one part of the established order had been challenged there was no knowing where the process might end. Already, he thought, the Free Church had 'bid defiance to the powers that be' and 'broken up society from its very foundation' (*Sites* 1847: 1st Rep. 96; 2nd Rep. 92).

Such expectations were exaggerated. Ultimately dependent on the urban middle class of lowland Scotland the Free Church was unlikely to sanction a serious challenge to private property in land or in anything else. The real threat posed to landlords' interests by the Free Church was more subtle—though nonetheless serious in the long term—than the red revolution suspected by Sir James Riddell in his more fevered moments. It was, as pointed out by Hugh Miller—who in his capacity as editor of the evangelical newspaper *The Witness* was one of the most effective of Highland land-lordism's early critics—that the Free Church threatened to end crofters' political isolation; 'to translate their wrongs into English and to give them currency in the general mart of opinion' (Miller 1843: 35).

Broadly speaking this was in fact what occurred. Among the Free Church's southern membership there immediately appeared a feeling that 'the enthusiastic adhesion' of the crofting population to their cause imposed upon them a special charge and responsibility (Fleming 1927: 70), a feeling which made possible the financing of the Free Church in the Highlands and greatly contributed to the success of charitable relief efforts during the famine of the later 1840s. At the same time, through the medium of the Free Church—which a recent historian has described as 'the bulwark of the Scottish Liberal Party' (Kellas 1964: 31)—the first concrete links were established between the incipient agrarian radicalism of the crofting population and the mainstream of Scottish Liberalism and radicalism. It is not without significance, therefore, that the crofting population, acting in concert with an important and vociferous section of southern public opinion and the Liberal and Evangelical press, was able, through the medium of a parliamentary enquiry which unreservedly condemned the landlords' conduct (*Sites*

1847), to force the site-refusing proprietors to give away. The passing in 1886 of the first Crofters Act—a measure which ended the crofting community's long insecurity and recognised crofters' rights in the land—was the outcome of a very similar sequence of events.

Of more immediate importance, however, was the fact that in the north-west Highlands the Free Church came into existence as a profoundly popular institution, the heir to a long tradition of religious dissent. It was, and still is, the church of the mass of the small tenantry and in a very real sense it was their creation, a victory for their interests over those of their landlords. It was in this way above all that the victory of 1843 contributed to the more important victory of 1886, for the Disruption and the revivals which preceded it were largely instrumental in welding a disparate collection of small tenants into a community capable of acting collectively and possessing a distinctive character and outlook. That the future of the Gaelic language is still bound up with the fate of the Free Church is not accidental (Thomson 1971:136); nor is the fact that even the socialism and anti-clericalism of a modern Gaelic poet like Sorley MacLean is expressed in a language reminiscent of the early evangelical revivals (MacInnes 1973). Evangelicalism and the emergence of the modern crofting community are inseparable phenomena if only for the reason that it was through the medium of a profoundly evangelical faith that crofters first developed a forward-looking critique of the situation created in the Highlands by the actions of the region's landowning and therefore ruling class. The principles at stake in 1843 were ostensibly religious. But they reflected the deep-seated social antagonisms which underlay the more explicitly political conflict of the 1880s and which are by no means absent from the Highland scene today. In 1843 a majority of the crofting population stood up to their landlords for the first time. And they won. Not even the catastrophe of the famine and the renewed clearances which followed it could obliterate the significance of their victory.

NOTES

1 See Gray 1957; Cregeen 1964; Gaskell 1968; Richards 1973; Adam 1973.

2 The warrior chiefs are gone who had a yearning for the truth, who had regard for their faithful followers and had a yoke on their foe. . . . Look around you and see the gentry without pity for poor folk, without kindness to friends; they are of the opinion that you do not belong to the soil and though they have left you destitute they cannot see it as a loss; they have lost sight of every law and promise that was observed by the men who took this land from the foe. . . .

3 For details see *Reports of Commissioners for Building Churches in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, 1825–1835; *Specimens of the Ecclesiastical Destitution of Scotland* pp. 35–50 (Edinburgh 1835); *Commissioners of Religious Instruction, Scotland*, 4th Report, Parliamentary Papers 1837–8, XXXIII.

4 Roderick MacLeod of Bracadale is said to have 'declared that the first presbyterial act he performed after ordination was to assist his co-presbyters to bed. They were so helplessly intoxicated' (MacRae 1907:68). Such allegations of loose living—and especially the identification of Moderatism and alcoholism—are common in Free Church sources.

5 The phase is borrowed from the title of a recent study of independent church movements in Kenya (Welbourn and Ogot 1966).

6 Again the African experience is relevant. A comparative study of independent church movements in Africa has demonstrated a close connection between the availability of the Bible in the vernacular and the appearance of religious independency in one form or another (Barrett 1968:127 *et seq.*).

7 It is noteworthy that the Lewis Presbytery Minutes and the Seaforth Papers generally corroborate the traditions of the Lewis revival included in MacFarlane 1924.

8 Several of 'the men' are referred to in this article. For short biographies of some of the best known see MacCowan 1902; MacFarlane 1924.

9 For details of these activities see *The Witness*, 21 Dec. 1842; 25 Feb., 28 Apr. 1843; Brown 1890: 58–74; Kennedy 1927: 242 *et seq.*

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