The Scottish Hairst and Seasonal Labour 1600–1870

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No period in the farming year has caught the imagination as much as the harvest. Scottish literature abounds with references to it in prose, poetry and ballad, and the entries in the *Scottish National Dictionary* under 'hairst' provide clear testimony to its place in printed Scottish sources (*SND* vol. V). In historical terms, however, this single economic and social activity has been examined less in Scotland than in other European countries. Recently the balance has been redressed by scholars such as Alexander Fenton, who discusses the harvest as an indicator of indigeneous material change (Fenton 1976).

Harvest was the time of year when the farm unit experienced a peak labour-demand with which the regular farm staffs could not cope, in both medieval and modern times. In the seventeenth, and into the eighteenth century, the agricultural manpower needs of the estate were met to a large extent by the tenants in the form of ariage services, by which labour was provided on the mains farm as a condition of holding land of a landlord. At harvest-time ariage services were specified when the tenant had to provide harvesters (referred to as 'hooks', in many tacks) for a certain number of days to work at the landlord's harvest (Whyte 1979: 35). But outside that system, to ensure the successful gathering of the harvest the farmer had often to recruit additional workers on a casual and seasonal basis, many of whom were people who migrated from their homes in search of harvest work.

Seasonal work migration is characterized by short term movements of workers between one area and another. It can be broadly defined as a movement from a pastoral upland area, where there is a seasonal under-employment, to an arable lowland area, which is experiencing a temporary shortage of farm labour at that time. Such seasonal movement of workers is an old established pattern in European economic development (Bloch 1966: 114; Collins 1976: 54; Devine 1979: 355).

It is the purpose of this paper to present and chronicle evidence relating to the movement of Scottish harvesters from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. The bulk of evidence (which is frustratingly patchy) concerns the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Seventeenth-century evidence is less, but it shows a distinct pattern of seasonal harvest movement within south-east Scotland; also the first signs of a seasonal movement from the Highlands to the south are to be found in the closing decades of that century. The migrant harvesters were mainly from the region which lies north and west of the Caledonian Canal and they mostly made for the

Plate I. 'Reapers Resting', Glenfeshie (1827). Steel engraving after line and wash drawing by Sir Edwin Landseer, in *Landseer's Studies* by W. Cosmo Monkhouse [*c.* 1880?] page 105, figure 93. (Note the pair of sickles, probably toothed 'huicks', and the coggie with a (?) spoon-handle protruding.)

traditional grain-growing regions of the Lothians, south-east and east-central Scotland. These, however, were not exclusive parameters: Aberdeenshire and Caithness proved to be both source and reception areas at different times during the nineteenth century.

Even before the 1600s, indeed, there is some indication of a seasonal movement of harvest labour in the Scottish lowlands. As early as 1528, seasonal harvesters were hired to work on the mains of Mauchline in the barony of Kylesmure in Ayrshire. (Probably only some of them were seasonal workers from Ayrshire and Lanarkshire, others being members of tenants' families who could be spared from their own harvest.) Initially, 57 were employed on 5 September of that year but the number dwindled to 12 by 1 October (Sanderson 1975: 90, 92).

The Movement of Harvest Labour in the Seventeenth Century

There is evidence of movement of harvesters in the Border town of Peebles in 1612: the magistrates there were obviously facing a seasonal shortage of labour for the harvest, for in that year they issued a warning that all those who had left the town during the 1611 harvest to shear corn would be prosecuted, and if they repeated the offence during the current harvest they would be banished from the town. They also stipulated the fees to be paid in their area: two shillings and sixpence to each male shearer and two shillings to each female (*Peebles* 1872: 360). The magistrates faced a two-fold problem: their town was being deprived of labour at harvest time and employers were being forced to pay higher wages to attract labour.

The Peebles legislation represented a microcosm of a wider national problem which centred on labour seeking to increase its earning power by hiring at daily or weekly wages as against longer-term engagements. The employing classes in the seventeenth century responded to this problem in two ways: they sought both to restrict the movement of labour and to regulate wages. In an Act of 1621, farm servants, who were traditionally hired on a six monthly basis either at Whitsunday or Martinmas, were not permitted to leave their current employer at the end of their engagement unless they had an alternative six monthly engagement to take up (*APS* IV (1621): 627). The Act sought to prevent servants hiring themselves out for daily or weekly wages at 'casting or winning peats, fewell divots and building of fold dykes and shearing in harvest' (*ibid.*). It clearly pinpointed those times in the farming year when labour demand was at its highest. Harvest, which required a massive input of labour, brought the problem most sharply into focus; and the authorities struggled throughout the seventeenth century to implement the Act's provisions. The payment of unregulated day wages to labourers in the free market was regarded as an expensive extravagance: it was at the root of the state's contention forcibly expressed in the preamble to the Act which described those farm servants who cut themselves loose from a long term engagement and became day labourers as responsible for '. . . the

graat straits and necessities whereunto the poor labourers of the ground (*i.e.* tenant farmers) are driven and constrainit . . .' (*ibid.*).

The frequent repetition of the Act in the form of legislation emphasises both the recurring nature of the problem and the ineffectiveness of the Act: the harvest was singled out as the time of year when the strain of labour supply became most acute. Local legislation was repeated in Peebles, for example, in 1653, 1654, 1673, 1676, and again in 1683. In 1653, the council ordained that the magistrates were to give up 'rolles conteaning the names of severall personnes who has contravened the acts of council anent the scheareris' and those guilty were to be fined forty shillings Scots (*Peebles* 1910: 18, 92, 95, 98). By 1676 imprisonment was added to the list of punishments; also, when two shearers left the same house, the earnings of one were to be confiscated. In 1680, labourers were debarred from hiring themselves outwith the burgh until the town's own crop was harvested. In other words, the town was experiencing a temporary seasonal shortage of labour for the harvest and its own crop was jeopardised by this shortfall in labour supply.

The burgh legislation reflected that of the country. An Act of 1664 specifically directed at 'all tradesmen, cottars and other men and women . . .' prohibited any movement during harvest unless they possessed a warrant issued by the Justices of the Peace. Constables were required to 'tak notice and inquire in their severall parishes after all such personnes transgressors herein and return their names to the bench next session' (S.R.O. JP 3/2/3: 1664). The problem existed on a national scale. Legislation designed to control the movement of harvest labour was implemented, for example, in Elgin in the North-East (one of the most fertile grain producing areas of the country), in Hawick in the Borders, and in Kirkcudbright in the south-west (Cramond 1903: 270; Wilson 1850: 63; *Kirkcudbright*: 237).

While we can establish that there was a local movement of harvesters in parts of Scotland, their destination is not always clear. Evidence from Roxburgh in 1656 gives some indication of this movement. Manuscript Justice of the Peace Records show that there was a pronounced movement of harvest shearers, both men and women, out of their immediate localities, in search of higher wages. The areas which they made for were other parts of the shire, or the Lothians or the north of England (N.L.S. MS 5439: 1656). Long lists of fines make it clear that some parts of the county were facing a major exodus of harvest labour. Harvesters went in search of work, in direct contravention of the local 'Act Anent Shearing' of 1656, which forbade them to move from home; the Act also directed the constables to bring back to their place of origin those who had moved.

Early Harvest Hiring Markets

In support of this localised evidence it is clear that a hiring-market structure for the recruitment of harvest labour was emerging in the seventeenth century. Even earlier,

however, it was not uncommon for labourers to assemble at the onset of harvest, looking for work. In 1593, Perth Kirk Session records that harvesters resorted to the town on the Sabbath to be hired; and in 1594, a certain Thomas Oliphant confessed before the Kirk Session that he had hired shearers on the Sabbath. In East Lothian the 'abuse of feying shearirs on the Lordis day' was recorded in 1619 (Lawson 1847: 219; Hately Waddell 1893: 90). By 1611 Edinburgh was recognised as a focal point for the recruitment of harvesters; and such was the stir caused by throngs of harvesters that it was decreed by the council in that year that it was 'to be cawset to had thair conventioun outwith the West Port in tyme cuming' (Wood 1931: 77).

The authorities in the seventeenth century, working in the midst of religious and social upheaval, and prompted by an Act of Assembly of 1640, were becoming increasingly concerned at any interruption of normal life on the Sabbath. The gathering of harvesters in large numbers on a Sunday to be hired for work in the following week inevitably came to the attention of the government. Acts designed to put a stop to this and other abuses of the Sabbath punctuate the Statute Book of the Scots Parliament in 1639, 1640, 1641 and 1661. The Act of 1640 noted that the profanation of the Sabbath was greatly occasioned in harvest time 'by the great confluence of people to publike places as portes or streets of Tounes and Paroch churches of landwart everie sonday from morneing to preaching tyme for hyreing of sheireris the weeke falloueing' (*APS* V (1640): 297). An Act in the following year stipulated fines which were to be exacted for contravention of the 1640 Act. Harvesters and salmon fishers were lumped together as notorious Sabbath breakers. The Act declared that a fine of £10 was to be levied on each shearer 'the one halfe to be payed by the hyreres and conducers the other halfe by the persones hyred' (*APS* V (1641): 390). Local presbyteries also did their bit. The Minutes of Cupar Presbytery record in 1649: 'This day we received a letter from the Presbytery at Perth desyring our concurrence for taking away the scandalous and sinfull fying of shearers upon the Lords day at Abernethy' (*Presbytery Minutes*: 145).

Clearly some authorities, recognising the need to channel harvest labour and regulate its flow under some degree of supervision, expanded the scope of the existing hiring markets by granting permission for the creation of new markets. In 1643, the town council of Elgin, in the grain-producing area of Moray, allowed landowners outwith the burgh to establish a market specifically to recruit harvesters. The landowners were to enjoy 'the lyik libertie of feing huikis in harvest as the inhabitants of the burghe hes' (Cramond 1903: 277). Two of the most significant steps taken to establish and define a clearly recognisable harvest-hiring structure came within twelve years of each other, both in Lanarkshire. In 1695, Parliament formally established a shearers' market at Airdrie to be held every Monday during harvest (*APS* IX (1695): 499) and in 1707 the Lanarkshire Justices of the Peace also responded to the need to designate specific areas where hiring could take place. The wording of the local legislation is significant: the Justices wanted to streamline the entire system of hiring and

they may well have been attempting to clear up a haphazard routine of recruitment that had grown up through habit and usage. They wanted the speedy and effective harvesting of the crops to become the norm and to do so they would decide where and when the labour force could be recruited. Coming shortly after the state's own legislation, it may suggest that the whole system of recruiting harvesters had become muddled and patchy throughout the country. The Lanark Justices decreed:

> . . . and that the . . . method of cutting doun and saving of corne in the harvest seasone may be made the more effectuall, the saids Justices of the Peace appoints the burghs and mercat touns to be places for hyreing of shearers, . . . viz. Glasgow, Hamilton and Strathaven, in the nether waird; and Lanark, Douglas and Biggar in the over waird of the same shire. (Malcolm 1931: 18)

But the response of the authorities may also have been prompted by their awareness of an increasing number of labourers seeking work, further from home. It has been suggested that there was some mobility of labour in the seventeenth century, albeit fairly local; towards the end of the century, however, for the first time Highlanders were coming south in search of harvest work. This was very much a portent of things to come. The presence of Highland harvesters in the southern labour market may have brought confusion upon a system of recruitment which had lacked clarity before the 1695 legislation and that of 1707.

Certainly, the Highlander was not a popular figure in some of the southern towns: he was frequently banished (see *Lanark Records* 1893: 144). But farmers in Renfrewshire were in the habit of hiring Highland labour (Semple 1864: 93) and when Sir Robert Sibbald first mentioned the movement of Highlanders south to find work in the lowland hairst in 1698 (N.L.S. MS 33.5.16: 3), he may have been acknowledging a movement that had already been going on for several years. Although the Highland workers Sibbald referred to were from the periphery of the Highland zone—people who were being forced south as a result of near-starvation conditions at home—their significance cannot be over-rated. Highlanders had come to the south as part of military operations earlier in the century (Donaldson 1971: 370); consequently many of them would be aware of the routes to and from their homes and would undoubtedly have seen the possibilities of work in the southern harvest fields. What was a trickle at the end of the century had changed into an identifiable flow in the eighteenth century. (This will be discussed in the second part of the paper, page 20 *et seq.*).

Social Origins of the Seventeenth-Century Harvest Work-Force

The task of identifying the seasonal migrants is not easy, because of the vague and impressionistic nature of the sources. Much of the seventeenth-century evidence for the social make up of the harvesters comes from law-suits over the non-payment of the

harvest fee (the agreed contractual amount paid for the employment of harvest labour).

Appearing before the regality court of Melrose in 1688, was David Kyle, a blacksmith at Lessuddun, sued by Lancelot Brown, a glover, on behalf of Brown's servant, Andrew Turner, who had served Kyle (Romanes 1915: 200). In 1659, Euphame Cairncross sued Patrick Blaikie, both of Calfhill, on behalf of her servant for fifty five shillings as her balance 'of a greater sum and £4 for her servant's fee for shearing to him in harvest last, and a firlot of meal in bounty.' In 1656, William Merser, a weaver, sued William Cairncross of Allenshaws for a harvest fee of £5.10s. Scots (Romanes 1914: 202). A Newstead widow, Janet Merser, sued Robert Forsan, the miller there, for £5 Scots of fee, as an engaged servant, in addition to a firlot of meal and a pair of shoes (worth 12 shillings) of bounty for her harvest fee (Romanes 1914: 163).

It is clear that servants of rural artisans, widows, and artisans themselves, provided a supply of harvest labour to small tenants and fellow artisans. Equally, a family unit was often engaged. Local legislation in Peebles attempted to control this practice in 1676 when it was declared that if two harvesters dwelling in the same house sought harvest work outside the burgh, the earnings of one were to be confiscated by the authorities, thus thwarting any economic advantage arising from a dual hiring (*Peebles* 1910: 92). A husband and wife might both participate in the harvest: in 1674, the Stitchill baron court ordered Robert Lillie, a smith, to pay 39s.10d. to Thomas Weir and his wife, Margaret Richardson, 'for eight days shearing and one halfe wrought by them to Agnes Lillie sister germane to the said Robert . . .' (Gunn 1905: 71-2). (Lillie was evidently a bad payer: he owed an additional £7 Scots to William Service for work in the 1673 harvest [*op. cit.*: 74]). Examples of other family units of two being jointly employed are common (*op. cit.*: 108, 133.) A clear example of family involvement in the harvest comes from a case in Melrose in 1658 where a fee of £28 Scots was at stake. A unit of three, James Tullie, his brother George and their sister Margaret, all from Earlston, were jointly owed that sum by a widow, Margaret Darling, as 'thair fies for scheiring to hir in harvest last' (Romanes 1914: 250). (Some servants clearly hoped to increase their harvest earnings by contributing a horse to harvest operations: Lady Stitchill's servant, James Thomson, was to receive 38 shillings Scots from William Hoggard 'for shearing and draught of his Naig in harvest last 1673' [Gunn 1905: 76].) One member of a family might employ another at harvest time: in the Renfrewshire parish of Eastwood in 1695 Andrew Shiells received £8 Scots in harvest fee from a tenant, John Shiells—which might suggest payment to a son, or brother, or cousin. (Semple 1864: 44). In another instance, a family relationship is explicit: in the Parish of Renfrew in the same year, John Whyte, younger, a co-tenant in the holding of Meikle Inch paid £6 Scots to each of his two sisters who supplied all the harvest labour required on his holding (*op. cit.*: 89).

Cottars hired themselves out to nearby tenants: Margaret Neilson, a cottar in the

lands of Craigton in Erskine in Renfrewshire, was paid £6 harvest fee by William Paterson, a heritor in Craigton (*op. cit.*: 104); and William Jackson, cottar in the lands of Cathcart and Newlands, received £8 Scots harvest fee from a tenant, James Maxwell in the same parish (*op. cit.*: 39).

On the whole in the seventeenth century labour appears to have been drawn from the local cot town or settlement, so the distance travelled would not be considerable. Many harvesters travelled only two or three miles (although Robert Davidson of Blainslie in Roxburghshire was hired by John Gray in Selkirk, entailing a journey of some 15 miles [Romanes 1914: 296]).

Highland Labour and the Lowland Hairst

During the next century the migratory movement extended, and came more and more to have a Highland character. Contemporary sources make it clear that from tentative beginnings in the seventeenth century the travelling of Highland harvesters to the grain fields of the south in search of temporary work became more pronounced as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries progressed. This increase runs parallel with the changing economic circumstances of the Highlands: a look at that first will perhaps show why seasonal migration was becoming such a necessity.

After the collapse of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, any notion of the clan as a military organisation, relying on a potential force of fighting men, disappeared. Economically, despite the rising level of rents, peasant incomes were kept up for some time by buoyant cattle prices, the main source of income. Prices almost trebled in the second half of the eighteenth century; and the cost of meal, which was the main commodity the Highland peasant needed to buy, remained more or less steady. In the later decades the steep rise in kelp prices encouraged the exploitation of seaweed and provided seasonal employment along parts of the western seaboard. Equally, fishing was relatively sound economically: those who were involved in it could gain some financial return (Gray 1957: 36-7).

Such was the situation until the first decade of the nineteenth century: thereafter circumstances changed. Kelp and cattle prices dropped and the new agrarian order with its emphasis on sheep and clearance pushed people from the land. In addition, Highland population showed a dramatic increase after 1750 (Youngson 1973: 162), thus putting more and more pressure on a finite area of land. Landlords held rents at their high pre-1815 level and as a result the Highland peasant was faced with debt. Land shortage and a scarcity of capital forced Highlanders to look for an external source of income. Seasonal migration was their response to economic crisis at home. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the Highland croft was, generally, a base for diverse economic activities: it was not a self-sufficient operational unit. Even in times of economic expansion crofters pursued dual occupations, some of which might involve periods of absence from home. In times of crisis, when the small parcel of land

could not offer sufficient income, the need for movement from home to earn a cash wage became greater. The extent of seasonal migration from the Scottish Highlands in the century after 1750 can be judged, at least partly, in terms of the conditions prevailing in the home economy.

Naturally those at the bottom of the economic pyramid suffered worst. From the 1750s at least, destitute Highlanders were coming south for harvest work. They flocked to the West Port in Edinburgh, which had by this time become the traditional hiring point; from there they fanned out into the rich corn belts of the Lothians and the Borders. But by the 1770s pressure was growing on the city hiring point and harvest hiring markets were springing up elsewhere to supplement the existing structure. Large numbers of migrants were looking for work in the south-east: in 1794, farmers in Berwickshire were faced with such a flood of work-seeking Highlanders (*SA* XIII: 224) that the authorities thought it important to signpost clearly where harvest labour could be hired (Kames 1776: 181).

The Highland migrants seeking harvest work faced a constant difficulty in that they had always to take second place if a regular supply of labour could be secured from the farmer's immediate locality. The Highlanders' prime advantage to the host economy was that they could be removed when they were not needed (Collins 1976: 54; Devine 1979: 357). Bad weather could bring days of non-employment, but in years when the crops ripened simultaneously and there was a pressing need for as many hands as possible, migrant and locally recruited labour were both much in demand. Whatever the proportion of locally recruited harvesters to those who originated in the Highlands and who travelled some distance, contemporary sources make it clear that Highlanders furnished an impressive proportion of the labour force. Home's grudging remark in 1797 that the Berwickshire crops were harvested with 'some trifling assistance from wandering Highlanders' neither accords with other evidence nor takes into account the rapidly spreading harvest hiring structure which had grown up to channel labour (Home 1797: 99). In 1794 it was reported that the farmers in Cockburnspath in Berwickshire employed 'great numbers of Highlanders . . . who come in to the country for the purpose of harvest and no wages are spared when the season requires a stress of hands' (*SA* XIII: 224); and by the turn of the century the fairs at Doune, Gartmore and Drymen had become harvest hiring markets for multitudes of young men and women from the north (Whyte and Macfarlane 1811: 248-9).

The Character and Make-Up of the Highland Labour-Force in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Female participation in the annual harvest migration was a distinguishing feature of Highland seasonal migration at least from the 1790s: it has been argued that the majority of migrant harvesters were young women and girls, and that men worked at

fishing and kelping and went to the harvest when these other occupations failed (Collins 1976: 47; Macdonald 1937: 128). Evidence at the turn of the century shows that time was usually for the sole purpose of harvest work. In the 1780s it was the custom for young women in Mull to go south to the Lowlands to shear corn. Describing this regular migration, Knox said they relied solely on work in the south custom for young women in Mull to go south to the lowlands to shear corn. Describing this regular migration, Knox said they relied solely on work in the south for their income, and for the rest of the year when they were not participating in harvest work they were 'perfectly idle' (Knox 1787: 60). By the 1790s this migration was the established pattern in the west (*SA* IV: 565). From Creich in Sutherland unmarried girls went south 'especially before harvest', while many young men had gone south several months previously in the spring (*SA* VIII: 374). In Kilninian in Argyllshire young men engaged to go herring fishing as part of a buss crew, while the women were employed in cutting the kelp-ware in summer before going to the low country at harvest time to shear (*SA* XIV: 153). From the Hebridean parish of Small Isles a regular movement south of women harvesters was established before the end of the century (*SA* XVII: 293–4).

Children were also part of the work force—a fact that is not surprising, for if both parents were seeking work the children would naturally go with them. (Irish groups included them; and they were employed as part of the migrant work force in France.) They would not possess the physical capacity for the heavier and more skilful tasks such as reaping the corn or binding it when cut, but they may have been employed in gleaning after the crops were gathered in.[1]

Relief in Hard Times

Judging by newspaper reports, many migrant Highlanders were destitute at times. Their condition, and number, reflected the state of their home economy: in lean years more and more were forced to leave their homes in search of work (Cregeen 1964: xxi). In 1756 the presence of destitute Highland shearers in the Scottish capital prompted the Reverend George Whitefield to preach a sermon in the Orphan Hospital Park for the benefit of harvesters. He gained £60 for them (*Caledonian Mercury* 30 Sept. 1756). By the 1780s newspapers carried stories of 'many hundreds of poor Highland shearers with their children, in a starving condition on account of the inconstancy of weather, which prevents them from getting work' (*op. cit.* 30 Sept. 1782): the harvesters had come early to the harvest but bad weather held up operations that year. Again, as in 1756, efforts were made to relieve the conditions of the starving harvesters, and a voluntary contribution was recommended for their relief (*ibid.*).

Bad weather and the late harvest of 1799 caused similar distress, and, as the result of a collection, £10 was raised for their benefit, giving (in the words of the *Caledonian*

Mercury for 2 September 1799) 'one shilling to each man and woman and 6d to each child'. This was not considered enough, and the pitiful sight of hundreds of starving Highlanders caused some soul-searching on the part of Edinburgh's citizens, one of whom penned a letter to the *Edinburgh Evening Courant*.

> It may be an easy matter to perceive what I mean to aim at when these scenes of distress are exhibited in our streets daily by the Highland shearers who, by the inclemency of the weather, are obliged to straggle about the town, with scarce a farthing to support their lives, while they see others wallowing in luxury. (*Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 25 Sep. 1782)

Allowing for the exaggerated effect of bad harvests which not only forced greater numbers south but made their presence all the more noticeable, a regular movement of Highland harvesters must have been common at this time.

Recruitment

The general impression gained is that Highlanders travelled south to recognised hiring places where they were recruited, but there is also evidence that the estate organisation was used to marshal a harvest labour force and despatch it south, in a manner which, at least in one instance, was nothing short of a deliberate direction of labour. In 1808 a letter was sent to the Marchioness of Sutherland, which had originally come from a Mr Anderson who farmed near Thornhill in Dumfriesshire. In it he offered employment to 100 Highland harvesters for six weeks at the forthcoming harvest. The Marchioness responded to this request, as she described in a letter to the Marquis dated 4 August 1808:

> Accordingly we read a proclamation at the Church Doors, about 300 volunteered, all eager to go. This morning we dispatched 108 of those least wanted at home, with letters to Mr Anderson, to be there by the 22nd of the month, selected in proportion from the different Parishes. (Adam 1972: II. 85)

There is also evidence that Highlanders could be hired directly in their native glens. The harvest of 1826, which was a month earlier than usual, prompted word to be sent to harvesters in the upland parts of Perthshire telling them that they were required at this earlier time to work at the harvest in the Carse of Gowrie (Stewart 1911: 361). This arrangement suggests that a regular pool of labour was available for work, and that a period of under-employment in the upland areas was balanced by the harvest labour-needs of the farmers in the Carse.

However recruitment took place, the number of migrants at this time seems to have been large. The following was recorded in August 1824:

> During the fourteen days immediately preceding Monday last upwards of 2,500 Highland shearers passed through the Crinan Canal for the South, in the steamboats Ben Nevis, Comet and Highlander, from the islands of Mull, Skye, etc. So crowded was the Highlander on one occasion that she was compelled to land a number of passengers at Crinan, and cause them to walk down the bank at Lochgilphead. (Barron 1903: 245)

In the 1830s one contemporary observer reckoned that the young unmarried female harvesters who went annually from Tiree and Coll could be counted in hundreds (*NSA* VII: 214).

The Changing Pattern of Highland Harvest Migration

Clearly the number of people involved in migratory work in the first half of the nineteenth century was considerable (see Appendix B). In the crofting communities of the Highlands it was the function of the younger members of the community to go south for temporary and seasonal employment and contribute to the family income by earning cash wages. A crofter whose family was in a position to go and earn cash wages in another region had greater earning power than many of the other crofters. From the '40s to '50s the pattern of seasonal migration was one of increasing volume, paralleled by the increasing economic importance of the seasonal migrant (harvester or fisherman). In Skye, for instance, in the 1840s, 300 able-bodied men from the parish of Strath went south for work annually; the same numbers went from the parish of Sleat, and about 60 from Strowan (*PP* 1851: App. A. 59-60, 58). In the years immediately before 1841, we hear that more harvesters than ever went to the Lowlands from Skye (*PP* 1841: QQ. 1937-38).

The failure of the Highland potato crop (in 1845) proved to be the biggest single cause of increased migration—linked with low cattle prices and the failure of the west coast fisheries. The potato blight caused many more of the cottar class in particular to look for seasonal rural work in other parts of the country: in an agricultural system which offered little employment, cottars, many of whom were landless, represented that portion of society which had the greatest need for extra seasonal earnings. In Kishorn, for example, we hear that 'nearly all the young men of this class and such heads of families as are young and active go to the east coast or elsewhere in quest of work' (*PP* 1851: App. A. 75, 110).

As well as the younger members of their families, many of the smaller tenants and crofters themselves whose income was insufficient and who suffered periods of unemployment on their crofts, were accustomed to going south for harvest work. But by the late 1840s economic circumstances were for the first time forcing some of the larger tenants south too, to earn a seasonal income: these were men who had never been obliged to migrate before, having had sufficient income to keep them afloat (*PP* 1851: App.A. 60; Devine 1979: 351).

The women who engaged in seasonal work were usually young, physical fitness being a key requisite for the long journey. Older women tended to seek employment in harvest fields of their immediate locality and performed less strenuous work (*NSA* XIII: 370), but at this time of economic stringency they were also found travelling some considerable distances to the hairst: for example, we hear of women, described as 'old widows', journeying from the parish of Carnoch in Ross-shire, as far as

Aberdeenshire and Morayshire to 'earn a few shillings at harvest time' (*PP* 1844: 26). Whatever their age-group, they lessened the burden of travel on foot by travelling very lightly, with only the minimum of necessities. One Angus minister noted: 'I was wont to see many of them on the road, walking barefoot and carrying their shoes and stockings in their hands, and a small burden of things on their backs' (Cruikshank 1899: 153).

Throughout the 1840s, it is evident that more Highlanders than ever were relying on income from seasonal work (Devine 1979: 351), harvest earnings still providing a sizeable proportion of it. But by mid-century a change was beginning to be seen. Opportunities for work nearer home had grown and the need to travel south to the harvest fields, for many Highlanders, lessened. In addition, Highlanders were facing a certain amount of competition from a male-dominated Irish seasonal work force which with a larger hand-cutting-tool was able to make inroads into Highland preserves on the harvest fields: the Irish presence in particular affected the role of the Highland female as a shearer of corn in the fields of the south. Also the population pattern itself was changing: after the great increase during the previous hundred years, the number in the Highlands was now declining.

New Kinds of Seasonal Employment and Other Factors of Change

Alternative employment opportunities for both men and women were growing at a time when seasonal earnings were assuming a new and central importance in the Highland economy. The expanding east coast fisheries created a demand for labour which proved to be the greatest counter-attraction to harvest work. By the 1850s the state of the east coast fisheries contrasted sharply with the depressed state of the west: Wick and Helmsdale, as fishing centres, were undergoing rapid expansion and the former drew vast numbers of seasonal workers to it (estimated at 10,000 a year in the 1830s) during the six or seven week fishing season from July to the end of August (*NSA* XV: 153–4). Equally, the success of the herring fishing caused the population in Latheron in Caithness to double between 1794 and 1840. By the latter date fishing had become a major employer of Highland labour. Young men came from Assynt, from Lochbroom, and from the Isle of Lewis, to engage as hired hands for the fishing period (*NSA* XV: 101); and large numbers of women came from the Islands to the Caithness fishing stations as packers and gutters: in Wick alone, out of a total of 7882 persons employed in the herring fishing industry in 1840, 2175 were women, employed as gutters or in related tasks (*NSA* XV: 92, 103, 153). By the 1850s the income obtained at the east coast fisheries was clearly a major prop to the economy of the west coast Highlander, and for many small tenants and cottars it represented their sole monetary income.

There were further counter attractions for the seasonal worker. In the 1820s road-making was under way in Skye (Lumsden 1828: 84), and in the 1830s considerable

employment was obtained on government roads there (*PP* 1841: Q. 2390). The able-bodied unemployed men of Urquhart parish in Inverness-shire who did not take the more traditional route south in the early 1840s found work on Highland roads (*PP* 1844: 413); and during the winter of 1849/50, except in bad weather, about 100 men were employed in road-making in Harris (*PP* 1851: App.A. 107). Land improvement both at home and in the south also created work opportunities. In Kilmuir, Skye, Lord MacDonald had given some old crofters a piece of waste ground to cultivate, free of rent; and agricultural improvement in the vicinity of Inverness offered work (*PP* 1841: QQ. 86, 427). In addition, the Scottish railway boom of the 1840s and 1850s provided work for Highlanders as well as for Irish navvies. More than half the 2124 men employed in the railway construction in the Lothians in the 1840s were from the Highlands: on the Hawick branch of the North British Railway respective numbers of employees were 1310 Scots (mainly Highlanders) and 731 Irish (Devine 1979: 353).

Another major factor to be borne in mind during this period of lessening Highland migration to the harvests undoubtedly was the changing demographic pattern in the Highland counties. In 53 of the 128 parishes in the Highland region, the population had already begun to decline by 1831, even though the population of the region as a whole continued to grow until 1841. With few exceptions, decline set in for the western islands no later than 1851 (Flinn 1977: 307). This decline in population at least in some areas contrasted sharply with the massive growth in the period after 1750 and must have led to an easing of pressure on the land.

Irish competition in the southern harvest labour market to a certain extent reduced work opportunities for Highland harvesters, but the argument that the growing annual influx of Irish harvesters brought about the end of Highland seasonal migration needs qualification. The rate of Irish migration was impressive: at the height of the season in the 1820s between 6000 and 8000 Irishmen landed on the Clyde coast each week during harvest, and by the 1840s numbers had risen considerably: on one occasion, 14,000 reapers arrived at the Broomielaw in one August week (Handley 1943: 164). Nevertheless, their geographical distribution in the harvest fields was limited. They were concentrated in the west of Scotland and the south-west, and from there they fanned into Berwick and the Lothians, and then north into Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan, but there is little evidence of Irish harvesters spreading north of the Tay. The areas to the north were still the preserve of Highland migrants. The presence of Irish harvesters in the competitive labour market of the south served to reduce wage rates: in Wigtownshire, where there was a complete dependence on Irish harvesters, harvest earnings fell by 25 per cent between 1810 and 1835 (*PP* 1836: 151, 127).

Irish competition was most acutely felt in the technology of the harvest field—with the coming of the scythe hook. It was first introduced into Galloway in the 1760s and its use spread into Dumfriesshire, then eastwards to East Lothian and north into the county of Stirling. By the first decade of the nineteenth century it was widely used in

these areas (Singer 1812: 139; Somerville 1805: 71-2; Graham 1812: 15). Its use is associated with the male Irish harvester and its spread parallels the distribution of the Irish in Scottish harvest fields. The scythe hook was larger than the traditional serrated-edge sickle. Contemporaries estimated that with it a quarter to a third more work could be done in the time it took with the smaller sickle (*Farmers Magazine* 1824: 55), therefore it represented a financial saving to the farmer (Stephens 1855: II. 342). It was almost exclusively a man's tool and was widely used by the Irish harvesters. The serrated-edge sickle was largely (though not exclusively) used by the Highland female migrants. The wider use of the scythe hook in southern Scotland from the later part of the eighteenth century suggests that Irish male harvesters were taking over the cutting of the corn crops in those areas. Ancillary operations, however, such as the gathering and stooking of the cut corn required a massive input of labour which was still supplied by Highland men and women. Some ninety years after the introduction of the scythe hook in the harvest field the female workers on the great farming units of the Lothians were almost exclusively immigrant Highlanders; at that time too, female harvesters were still being employed for harvest piece work by Forfarshire farmers (*PP*. 1870: App. Pt. II. 23).

Change in the Migration-Pattern of Highland Women

In the 1860s a feature of Highland female migration emerges which differs from the pattern of sixty years before: that is, the length of absence from home. The short-term, purely harvest, migration was changing into a longer-term migration which encompassed several different work tasks. Highland girls were coming to the southern farms for a six-month period. They still remained a key part of the harvest work force although they were no longer exclusively harvesters who returned home after the completion of harvest. Women so recruited took part in the whole round of agricultural work, including hoeing, turnip singling, work at hay harvest and of course at the corn harvest. Highland girls had always been preferred in the farmhouse (as domestic servants) to Irish girls, and they were better acquainted with dairy management than their Irish counterparts (*PP* 1841: Q. 1211). Despite the large permanent staffs resident on the Lothian farm, extra labour (see Appendix C) was still required to supplement their efforts at busy times (Gray 1973: 160). Highland female migrants were often employed to fill a vacuum caused by the absence of Lowland girls who were being increasingly attracted to domestic service. In instances where the traditional bondager system was breaking down, Highland girls were taken on to fill the gap in the farm labour force (*PP* 1870: App. Pt. II. 112, 116). An advantage of employing Highland girls on the Lothian farms was that their presence attracted still more labour, in the 1860s, in the form of male acquaintances who came south to work specifically at the harvest (*op. cit:* 110).

In the Lothians, the preference was clearly for married farm servants housed in

cottages near the farm (*PP* 1844: 799); but a bothy was kept for unmarried farm servants and it became extensively used to house female migrant workers. In evidence put before the 1868 Royal Commission relating to the farm of Luffness Mains, Aberlady, in East Lothian, such a bothy is described:

> There is a small bothy, inhabited by eight Highland girls, consisting of one small living room and two small bedrooms, with two beds in each. These girls or women range from 17-35 years of age and are, I believe all more or less related, coming from Broadford and Portree, in the island of Skye.[2]

The female bothy quickly established itself in rural folklore, as the ballad 'Lothian Hairst' shows (see also Appendix A). It was the function of the harvest gang foreman to supervise the sleeping arrangements in the bothies and to ensure that, where there was a mixed workforce, the sexes were kept strictly apart. In the opinion of the female authoress, Logan the foreman, did his job only too well:

> My mate and I could get nae chance,
> For Logan's watchful eye,
> And wi' the lads we got nae sport,
> For Logan was so sly.
>
> He cleared oor bothy every nicht,
> Befeor he went to sleep,
> And he never left behind him one,
> But strict his rules did keep.
>
> (Ord 1930:17)

Housing the women workers in bothies was a practice not restricted to the Lothians and the south-east of the country: it also prevailed in Forfar, Aberdeen, and further north in Caithness where it became infamous.

Highland Harvesters in the North

Although in the more southern parts of Scotland the traditional form of harvest migration—*i.e.* a short term commitment governed exclusively by the length of the harvest—was being replaced in the 1860s by the longer term migration, in the north the traditional pattern still held good.

There are records which show that female harvesters from the west and north-west Highlands were moving seasonally to the eastern areas of Caithness, Ross and Cromarty and into Inverness-shire. These northern counties became, in the 1860s, the chief reception areas for migrant harvest workers, most of whom were women. In the 1860s, men and women migrants travelled to the east coast from Assynt in Sutherland, and girls and young women from Lochbroom and Gairloch in Wester Ross (some of them returning, in the words of the time-honoured complaint, 'demoralised') (*PP* 1870: App. Pt. II. 326, 329, 335). So great were their numbers in the 1860s that there is evidence of new bothies being erected to house the harvesters

(*op. cit*: 287, 294, 297). The system of packing harvesters into bothies was more general in the interior of Caithness than in the region near Wick at the coast, where part of the seasonal labour needs was filled by locally recruited labour. Sometimes between 20 and 30 women were crowded together in one bothy, and at Olrig the 26 women harvesters from the west coast who came to William Purves' 1350-acre farm were put up in an out-house which in winter was used as byre for cattle (*op. cit*: 311).

Conclusion

Except on the smallest agricultural holding, where the family and regular hired servants could cope with the workload, the grain harvest has traditionally required the recruitment of extra hands. Outwith the ariage system the seasonal increase in the demand for harvest labour in the seventeenth century resulted in the movement of harvest workers, both men and women, not bound by labour dues, but seeking to sell their labour on the market to the highest bidder. Records suggest that in the seventeenth century the harvester did not move far from his place of origin, nevertheless there was a great deal of local movement which is underlined by the attempts made by the authorities to control it. A successful harvest was of central importance to seventeenth-century rural society and the authorities were determined that the 'cutting doun and saving of corne . . . be made the more effectuall . . .'. A controlled labour supply, regulated wages and the establishment of recognised hiring markets were the tools they used to fulfil their aims. Traditionally the harvest labour force has comprised a wide spectrum of rural and urban society and it has drawn more workers to it than any other farm operation. It required not only the full scale deployment of regular farm servants, such as the tasker and the ploughman, but the recruitment of non-agricultural workers.

From the mid-eighteenth century Highland labour formed a major part of the work-force in the southern harvest fields. Throughout the period many of the harvesters were young men and women, underemployed at home, who were attracted to a limited sojourn away. But faced with a growing population and finite resources of land, food and income, Highland society was forced to make increasing use of seasonal temporary migration to relieve the pressure of people on the land: the temporary absence of the migrant worker not only saved the consumption of local resources, but resulted in a cash income at the end of the period. The seasonal migration to the lowland hairst was one aspect of migratory work and it had several distinct features. Initially, from the 1740s and 1750s, destitute and starving landless labourers flocked to the south for harvest work. Their numbers ebbed or rose as the home economy changed. As the economic crisis in the Highlands grew in the first fifty years of the nineteenth century and debt and poverty began to reach up the social scale, cottars, small crofters and latterly larger crofters were forced to look for work away from home, not only in the harvest fields but in canal, road and railway con-

struction (*PP* 1844: 367). By the 1840s more Highlanders than ever before were relying on seasonal work for a source of income.

The impressionistic nature of the sources makes it difficult to assess accurately the contribution made by harvest earnings to the Highland economy in the century after 1750. It is clear that a large part of that contribution was made by the female migrant harvester. In the 1790s she went south purely for the harvest and her stay was shorter than that of the male migrant. In the nineteenth century she continued to play a major part in lowland agriculture, the number of women harvesters then being considerable. Irish competition in the harvest field, which has usually been seen as the death knell for the migrant Highland harvester, was in fact limited in its effect (Devine 1979: 348). Large numbers of Highland harvesters were still coming south in the 1840s: the failure of the potato crop sent more harvesters south in search of work than ever. In the 1860s migrant Highland girls were so numerous that they were being housed in bothies; and in the northern counties, particularly Caithness, Ross and Cromarty, and Inverness, they formed the bulk of the migrant work force.

The 1860s, however, represented the last phase of long-distance harvest migration. It had contained a predominantly female element, and especially in the south of Scotland that seasonal movement was changing to a longer term migration: domestic service, dairy work, and the east coast fisheries were competing for labour and offering the migrant a clear choice. By the 1870s, the migrant harvest force was only a shadow of what it had been a decade before. By the early 1890s girls from Skye and the Outer Hebrides still travelled to parts of Inverness for the harvest, but only in small numbers (*PP* 1893-4: Pt. II. 167). In effect, harvest migration had come to an end.

APPENDIX A

Migrant North-Eastern Harvesters in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Although the evidence about the movement of north-eastern harvesters to the south is sparse, a pattern does seem to have been established by 1751. The people of Glenbuchat in Aberdeenshire, for instance, travelled south to harvest southern crops before their own harvest was ready (Henderson 1942: 123): they were making use of the time-lag between the Scottish harvesting regions which produced early and later harvests, depending on the crop grown, the locality and the climate (see, for example, *SA* V: 224, 329, 358, 381, 415). By the middle of the next century, a considerable number of harvesters were sailing down the east coast from Aberdeen to Leith. An outstanding example of mobility was Banffshire farm servant and later farm manager, John Gordon. The notice of his death tells the story:

> The death has taken place at Tiniver, Dufftown, Banffshire of Mr John Gordon, who on February 2nd, celebrated his 99th birthday. A Native of the parish of Grange, Banffshire, he entered farm service at an early age, and when a young man he would walk to Aberdeen and proceed by Boat to Leith to engage in the Lothian harvests. (*Glasgow Evening Times* 1923: March 29)

A lively source of information on the movement and character of the harvesters can be found in some of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Bothy Ballads. (It has been noted that of

all the Ballads dealing with life on the land, the harvest songs form the largest category [Buchan 1972: 265]). 'The Lothian Hairst' (mentioned above, p. 28) describes Aberdeen harvesters travelling to the Lothian fields. According to tradition, it was written about 1860 by a female harvester from Deeside who travelled to the Lothians as part of the band of harvesters. They were contracted by a Lothian farmer to cut, gather and stook the crops at an agreed price per acre. The contractor then engaged a foreman who was responsible for carrying out the various tasks (Ord 1930: 16, 264). Some of the ballads testify to the strenuous nature of harvest work on the one hand; and on the other they convey the vitality of the harvest workers and, what the author has taken to be, their convivial spirit of camaraderie. The ballad 'Johnnie Sangster' for example, gives some idea of this contrast:

Oh some complain on hacks and thraws
And some on brods and bruises,
And some complain on grippet hips
And stiffness in their troosers;
But as soon as they lay doon the scythe
And the pipers yoke their blawvin,
They ane an' a forget their dools
Wi' daffin an wi' tyawvin.
(Greig 1963: article 3)

In 'The Harvest Song' we learn of the individuals who cut the corn with hand tools, gathering at the farm and being arranged by the farmer into a working unit:

Frae baith toon and country to him they convene
And a' to the fields they gaither O;
The maister he orders them a' as he thinks fit,
And pits whom he pleases thegither O.
(Greig 1963: article 98)

The cutting of the crops brings much physical fatigue: one by one the harvesters air their feelings. First is the bandster, next the tailor:

Then oot speaks the tailor, 'To my needle I'll go,
And shape and sew claith to keep oot frost and snow;
I'll mend up the old for to hain up the new,
And forget a' the toil at the shearin' o't.'

The barnman follows, then the ploughman. All look forward to returning to their normal tasks.

It can be seen here that men of other trades, as well as regular farm servants, left their usual work to join the harvest force.[3] This recruitment of harvest labour from a wide spectrum of society can be corroborated from other sources (Carter 1979: 65).

APPENDIX B

Migration and the 1841 Census Survey

One of the most sensitive indicators of nineteenth century population movements comes from the various census surveys, and although only one occupational census, that of 1841, was taken in the summer when seasonal migration was at its peak, it underlines the extent of that migration. At Kilchoman in Argyllshire, for example, a decrease of 317 head had occurred since the 1831 census. This was attributed 'partly to a number of young persons, particularly

females, having left to seek work in the summer months in the low country, and in Torosay in the same county, about 50 persons left during the summer 'for seasonal work in the south'. Latheron parish in Caithness showed 500 persons temporarily absent in 1841; and, from six parishes in Ross and Cromarty, a total of 544 were absent on a temporary basis (*PP* 1843). It may reasonably be deduced that a proportion of those migrants were part of the harvest work force.

APPENDIX C

Comparison of Numbers of Workers at Different Seasons

The following list shows the number of workers employed in the 1860s on selected farms in the Lothians, an area of large grain-growing farms and one of the main reception areas for migrant harvesters. The numbers are calculated from the labour returns of 27 occupiers of farms in 21 different parishes, as given by the assistant commissioners who in 1867 compiled the *Fourth Report on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture* (*PP* 1870, vol. XIII).

	Male	*Female*
Spring	431	369
Summer	468	447
Autumn	612	589
Winter	421	308

The high figures for Autumn shows the extent to which the farmers depended on temporary work at harvest-time. Case studies of individual farms endorse this: for example, on a 750-acre arable farm in Corstorphine parish (Midlothian), 70 men were needed in Autumn compared with 25 in each of the other seasons; 64 women were employed at harvest-time, 34 in Spring and Summer and 10 in Winter (*PP* 1870: App. Pt. II. 180). At Fentonbarns in Dirleton parish, East Lothian, 15 harvesters were recruited by George Hope to supplement his 58 regular hands. Further north, in Errol parish in Perthshire, extra harvest labour was supplied entirely by recruited female labour—100 women were employed in the harvest quarter, compared with only 20 in Spring. On another Perthshire farm, in Methven parish, we hear that between 40 and 45 extra hands were taken on at harvest-time (*op. cit*: 189).

NOTES

1 For a graphic description of children as part of the migrant force in the nineteenth century see *The Scotsman* 23 Aug. 1845 (and in a wider context, Handley 1970: 19 and Hufton 1974: 83). The children of poor Irish cottars were often hired out as seasonal workers in Northern Ireland with their parents from the age of nine, as a prelude to migratory work in Scotland (Cullen 1968: 161).

2 *PP* 1870: App. Pt II. 110. See also evidence from Coldstream, Athelstaneford and Dirleton.

3 Although this version was collected in the North-East, another version, 'The Faughhill Shearing' may refer to the Roxburgh farm of Faughhill (Crawfurd 1975: xlii, 132).

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