

REVIEW

Andrew Newby

*Ireland, Radicalism and the Scottish Highlands,
c.1870-1912*

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THE Highland land agitation of the late nineteenth century has provided a number of compelling themes for historians of Scottish politics. In its most acute phase, the so-called 'Crofters' War' between 1881 and 1886, parts of the Highlands exploded into a ferment of popular unrest and provided a focus for a wider Scottish and British press. It is also an attractive episode to explore through the comparative lens of Irish-Scottish studies, which is approaching the status of a flourishing sub-discipline. Current understandings of the Highlands in this period have been shaped in work by H. J. Hanham, James Hunter, Ewen Cameron and Allan MacColl (these latter two through contributions to the same *Scottish Historical Monograph* series in which the book under review appears). No one, however, has yet explored the Highland land agitation and its links to the wider contexts of Irish, lowland Scottish and British radicalism in the kind of detail evident in this book.

The greatest achievement of this monograph is to approach the agitation with real analytical sophistication, most especially a keen appreciation of the multiple sources of political thought and action and the different contexts in which political actors operated and the different constituencies to which they appealed. This is not a simple story of an 'Irish' agitation being imported into or whipped up amongst crofters, nor is it one of the mobilisation of cosy and 'natural' Celtic political affinities. Newby's achievement is to render the Crofters' War and its aftermath in their full complexity. While he acknowledges that there was, of course, an Irish dimension to the disturbances (how could

there not have been?) in the final analysis this dimension was 'inspirational' rather than instrumental: while crofters borrowed strategies and rhetoric from Ireland, the Highland agitation was the product of a unique and diverse range of factors.

The book begins by offering a survey of the different contexts for the Crofters' War and the different groups involved in its prosecution: the crofters themselves; Irish land campaigners and nationalists and their Scottish counterparts; and an ensemble cast of urban radicals and journalists in Lowland Scotland and beyond. If the book at times forwards a political narrative that is unforgiving in its density and detail, it is because the numerous activists and propagandists and the welter of Leagues and Associations which characterised late nineteenth-century popular politics, make this unavoidable.

And it is by charting the complex interactions of these different actors and their different perspectives that Newby can arrive at some interesting and counter-intuitive conclusions in the detailed central chapters of the book. Michael Davitt, for example, comes across convincingly as someone whose motives for addressing the question of Highland land reform were far more complex than a dewy-eyed concern for other 'oppressed' peoples. Newby goes so far as to ascribe to Davitt (and to other reformers, such as John Murdoch) 'an integrated 'four nations' approach to ameliorating the conditions of all workers, and not just those of the 'Celtic periphery'" (p. 190). Similarly, far from being seen as a self-conscious expression of pan-Celtic solidarity the Irish-Scottish links during the land agitation were far more consistently used as a rhetorical ploy by opponents of land reform. Indeed, moderate land reformers went out of their way to *dissociate* the activities of Highlanders from those of the Irish.

One slight objection might be found in the chronology of Newby's title. The central focus of this monograph is on events between the early 1880s and the early 1890s, and the periods that flank this are not treated in a similar level of detail nor do they yield similarly arresting conclusions. What they do serve to do is bracket and to highlight Newby's successful central thesis: that the Crofters' War, read in its proper contexts, is best interpreted as the far from inevitable product of a quite unique and peculiar set of circumstances in Scottish, Irish and British politics.

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