

“Chaidh a’ Chuibhle mun Cuairt”¹

– Skye and the Land Agitation

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THE Highland Land agitation of the 1880s is a theme which has been widely researched and extensively written about, with a particular focus on the years between 1881 and 1886. Skye very much featured in the upheavals of this period and I will look again at the main events, appraise their significance and consider why Skye crofters were to the forefront of agitation at this time? For this talk on the land agitation in Skye, I will confine myself to the same period 1881-86, while recognising that the land agitation, here as elsewhere, extended well beyond this date and even continued after the First World War.

Before looking at events at Braes, Glendale and Kilmuir, it is worth considering some wider aspects of Highland and Islands land agitation. What was the nature and extent of the crofters’ resistance? What factors helped to activate and sustain the land agitation of this period? And, indeed, why was there not more of it until the 1880s?

Though the tenantry endured great hardships as a result of the Clearances there is a general viewpoint among historians that tacksmen, crofters and cottars did very little to help themselves before the 1850s, both to resist the removals and extreme provocation they endured at the hands of the landlords.

Despite these claims, there were reported incidents of conflict, even as early as 1792 in Coigach, with around fifty in all reported in the period to 1855. However, up until the 1850s, there was little unified resistance with no sustained attempt by the victims to mount anything approximating to a generalised assault on their oppressors. It can be argued that crofters had decided that resistance was futile and would only end in failure in the face of the apparent ease with which landlords gained backing from central government. Certainly, landlords and the

1 *Chaidh a’ chuibhle mun cuairt* – The wheel (of fortune) has turned.

authorities dealt with any insurrections with brute force, even when the incident did not merit it.

Though the Irish and Scottish Highlanders were part of a single Gaelic-speaking civilisation that also shared hunger, famine, clearance and emigration into the nineteenth century, the Highlanders certainly refused to engage in death dealing protest as their Irish counterparts did. Though, as Hunter points out, they were well equipped to do so through their martial traditions and military experience of serving in the British armed forces (Hunter, 1999:Chap.8). In relation to the land questions there were significant differences in circumstances that may have contributed to the Scottish Highland disinclination to rebel. Irish landowners, of British extraction, were generally English in speech and Protestant in religion and, as such, were regarded as alien intruders. In contrast, the Highlanders still clung to the concept of *dùthchas*,² regarding their landlords as the descendents of their hereditary clan chiefs and the people could not readily break with traditional loyalties.

When exploring the nature and scale of Highland resistance, it is important to note that there was probably more resistance than reported and also that, as much of the resistance was unsuccessful, it was ultimately forgotten. It is also important to recognise that there is more than one type of resistance. In addition to physical resistance there is more passive and indirect forms of protest — as successfully undertaken in the rent strikes in Skye during the 1880s and in the early American civil rights movement of the 1960s.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the people of the Scottish Highlands and Islands were demoralised in many ways, their language, culture and traditions were routinely denigrated and they were ridiculed by external observers as being in abject apathy. As Prebble has noted: “People accepted the introduction of sheep in the same manner that they accepted famine and pestilence” (Prebble, 1963). With few political solutions at this time to their problems, they tended to look back rather than forward. In many ways they were not alone as the poorer classes in Britain were equally politically disadvantaged.

What was particularly evident in the pre-1850 period was the lack of leadership, with a number of the tacksman class having already emigrated. Like others who have also been in a similar situation, the Highlanders sought collective relief from their sufferings in the sphere of religious experience. The Disruption of the Church in 1843 and the associated emergence of the Free

2 *dùthchas* – traditional clan lands, with authority recognised from within the clan itself.

Church, provided “emotional and ideological cohesion” (MacPherson Robertson, 1995:75). The role of the nineteenth century evangelism, in the form of hugely charismatic lay preachers, who were normally from a Gaelic crofting background, helped to counter the psychological dislocation produced by the collapse of clanship. They also provided leadership that compensated, to some extent, for the loss of the tacksmen, with the overall impact central to the emergence of a crofter consciousness from the 1850s onwards. In some cases, where there were disturbances, the role of the local minister was as a mediator, as in the parish of Kilmuir in 1884.

Despite this, and according to Richards, the resistance up until the mid-nineteenth century had checked the full exercise of landlord power and had attracted public support that proved effective in the 1880s. He linked events to “a century-long tradition of sporadic popular resistance” (Richards, 1973:36). Withers also saw continuity in the agitation, with crofters possessing a legitimising ideology of the expressed belief in the customary occupation of land. In the period 1850 to 1880, Grigor and others identified a new stage in the landlord-centred conflict in the Highlands and Islands, with demands now for the restoration of the land, end to evictions and to arbitrarily imposed rent increases (Grigor, 2000: Chap.4).

So what had changed by the 1880s? Certainly, forms of communication had greatly improved with the development of a steamer service and the extension of the railways into the North and West Highlands to railheads like Stromeferry (Wester Ross), served to facilitate travel and seasonal migration to the south for employment. The later introduction of the telegraph allowed news to travel more readily and the Skye crofters used this new means of communication to keep abreast of the movements of the Government authorities.

In the 1880s there was also a developing interest in Gaelic culture, both at a popular and an academic level. Second generation Highlanders in urban Scotland were among the most enthusiastic supporters of crofting agitation in the 1880s and they formed Clubs and Societies in the larger population centres. For example, the formation of the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1871, encouraged the setting up of other similar groups in Glasgow and Greenock. The same enthusiasts also successfully campaigned for the foundation of a chair of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh and it was the same Gaelic Inverness enthusiasts who first petitioned parliament for a royal commission into the Highland land question.

Poets like Mary MacPherson (Màiri Mhòr, the Skye Poetess), played an important role in encouraging the people to take action in creating a new social and political order. In the columns of *The Highlander*, John Murdoch reported on events in Ireland and demonstrated a clear vision for the Highlands and Islands, suggesting that as the Highlanders and the Irish had a common Gaelic culture, that they work together to achieve the overthrow of landlords. Along with Alexander MacKenzie's Celtic Magazine, later termed *The Scottish Highlander*, Murdoch relentlessly petitioned for more Gaelic in schools. Even after the demise of *The Highlander* in 1881, he remained as a strong figure in the land reform movement.

In the 1870s and 1880s there was a changing attitude among the people, with a new generation emerging more versed in the politics of the day. Growing crofter self-consciousness also emerged from the post-1846 evictions, which was compounded by the improved economic conditions of the 1860s and 1870s. The younger generation, though they did not directly experience the evictions, were well versed in the history of their fore-bearers and, in any case, the record of dispossession was still clearly evident on the surface of the land. Though crofters' conditions had improved by the 1880s, it must be remembered that there was still widespread distress and suffering, with threat of famine always looming.

Of course Skye was not the only area where insurrection took place at this time. However conditions and feelings of injustice were particularly high on the island, further intensified by the crop failures and severe famine conditions resulting from the violent storms of 1882-83. The wages of west coast fishermen had deteriorated and Skye fishermen and crofters, who had witness of what was happening in Ireland, were more inclined to resist their landlords than at any time before. Newspapers, expecting confrontation, thrust events in Skye into the national limelight and, as the island had also been chosen by the authorities as the place to stamp out any crofter insurrection and to make an example of any agitators, the ingredients for insurrection were right.

The Skye Land Wars

The authorities and newspaper reporters did not have to wait long for confrontation. The first example of direct action by the Skye crofters in the war against landlordism commenced at Valtos in 1881 on the Kilmuir estate. Here, the crofters gave notice that they would no longer pay extortionately high rents

on the estates of Major William Fraser, the most hated landlord in Skye at this time. The rent strike had followed an unsuccessful petition asking for a rent reduction. John Murdoch was quick to condemn Major Fraser and, as a sign of the growing interest and publicity for the cause, the Irish Nationalist and Land League Leader Charles Stewart Parnell addressed a mass meeting in Glasgow, condemning landlords like Fraser for their actions. As Alexander MacDonald, Lord MacDonald's factor later reported, "that was the beginning of it". In the same year, the crofters of Glendale followed the Kilmuir crofter's example, combining rent-strike tactics with direct land occupation.

It was in Braes, however, in 1881 and 1882 that the first serious blow was struck for the people of the Highlands and Islands and it was the aftermath of these incidents that attracted nation-wide interest in the crofters' struggle.

1882 – The Battle of the Braes

As early as 1865, the Braes crofters had been deprived of their grazing rights on Ben Lee when they were added to a large sheep farm. In addition, the crofting townships of Gedintaylor, Balmeanach and Peinchorran had become seriously overcrowded as a result of evictions from Sconser and Loch Sligachan. Passions among the crofters were beginning to run high and the issue came to a head in 1881, when the Braes men had returned from fishing in Kinsale, in the south-west of Ireland. While there, they had learnt of the land struggle and, encouraged by the success of the Irish Land League Movement, they presented a carefully worded petition to Lord MacDonald asking that their former pastures in Skye be restored to them. Later, at Martinmas, they marched to Portree and informed the factor, Alexander MacDonald, "that no rents would be paid until Ben Lee was returned to them."

Lord MacDonald responded by ordering that a dozen Braes crofters be evicted. On 7 April 1882 a sheriff-officer was despatched from Portree to serve the eviction notices. The Braes people were ready and he was intercepted, papers were wrenched from his grasp and burnt. The crime of deforcement had now been committed and the authorities were thus enabled to move against them with all the force that could be mustered for that task.

William Ivory, the sheriff of Inverness-shire, decided to act quickly and to take personal charge of an expeditionary force that he now planned to send against the Braes crofters. As there were insufficient officers in Inverness, reinforcements were sought from other forces with a detachment of forty to fifty

constables from Glasgow answering the urgent call. At dawn on 19 April they marched on Braes led by Ivory himself. The Braes people were taken by surprise and the five ringleaders were arrested with a view to them being imprisoned in Portree. By now the Braes people had been mobilised and the officers faced a hostile mob as they negotiated their return journey through the small crofting township of Gedintaylor. A fierce struggle followed, with stones and rocks being hurled at the authorities. A determined baton charge allowed the police detachment to break through the mob and, in a state of some disorder, they retreated to the comparative safety of Portree.

When sheriff officers attempting to serve summonses on the Braes crofters were again deforced on 2 September and on 24 October 1882, despite being accompanied on the second occasion by eleven policemen, Sheriff Ivory of Inverness felt strongly that the law in Skye must be “vindicated”. He asked the Government for gunboats and marines. Sir William Harcourt, Home Secretary in the Liberal Government from 1880 to 1885, was reluctant to comply with the request, claiming such action could only be justified if the ordinary processes of the law had broken down and civil disorder was present or imminent.

The Braes dispute was settled at the end of 1882, with the crofters’ fines having been paid by supporters. Lord MacDonald agreed to a compromise and the people once again turned their stock on to Ben Lee. Braes had become a catalyst for much wider resistance and the skirmish was the prelude to more widespread acts of sustained subordination in Skye, Glendale, Kilmuir, and also further afield.

The Glendale Martyrs

John MacPherson, Milovaig, was the recognised leader of the Glendale crofters who organised defiance of the Court of Session interdict forbidding grazing of cattle on Waterstein farm in 1881. When the crofters drove their livestock on to the former grazings they were subsequently removed by the local shepherds, who themselves then encountered physical abuse from the crofters. As the resistance escalated, Ivory again clamoured for military action. However, the police sent to serve notices on the ring-leaders were driven from the glen and even when further police reinforcements arrived in Loch Dunvegan, on the mailboat *Dunara Castle*, they decided that it was best not to engage the huge mob of youths confronting them.

Early in 1882, as a show of force, the gunboat *Jackal* anchored in Loch Pooltiel. Malcolm MacNeill, later to be Secretary of the Royal Commission, persuaded the Glendale leaders to recognise the rule of law and go of their own will to court in Edinburgh. They duly left on the *Dunara Castle*, an action viewed as a “victory for tact and common sense”. Four Glendale men, including John MacPherson, were to serve a two-month prison sentence in Calton Jail, Edinburgh. While there they were visited by leading politicians, including Joseph Chamberlain. On 15 May 1882, the ‘Glendale Martyrs’ were released and when they disembarked from the steamer at Portree a large crowd congregated and John MacPherson was carried aloft for a joyous celebration at the Portree Hotel.

Thereafter, MacPherson was to become a major figure in the Highland Land Law Reform Association (HLLRA) or as it later became popularly known, The Highland Land League. At the first public meeting of the League in Glendale he argued that “the land should belong to the people who work it.” He was a natural leader and orator and was to become the crofters’ spokesman, not only in Glendale but also throughout Scotland. It was the continuing agitation of the Glendale crofters that influenced the Government in establishing, in March 1883, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Conditions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (The Napier Commission).

The establishing of the Napier Commission slowed the agitation. However, there was continuing disquiet among the crofters that matters were taking too long and in October 1884 the insurrection resumed. Firstly, 1000 crofters gathered at Quirang in Staffin and a resolution was unanimously passed against Major Fraser of Kilmuir and which also disowned Alexander MacDonald as factor.

Thereafter, on 31 October 1884 a group of nine police officers set forth from Portree en-route to Uig but they were blocked by a jeering crowd of 200 crofters and forced back to Portree. This incident induced Ivory to make yet another plea to A.J. Balfour, the Lord Advocate, for a gunboat and marines. In the light of sensational newspaper reports of impending trouble, the Government, following a seven-hour debate, reluctantly agreed. William Harcourt, the Home Secretary had confessed more anxiety over the Skye crofters and their plight than over the Irish ‘Dynamitards’. Harcourt was sympathetic to the crofters and he once again condemned the proprietors for their greed. He was of the opinion that some of the Skye landlords had brought about the troubles now facing them and he cited the increase in the Kilmuir rents

from £3,000 to £7,000 as one of the immediate causes and appealed to them to make sacrifices to solve the questions (MacPhail, 1976:64 and at 75). The military expedition arrived first in Portree on Sunday, 16 November. The forces included HMS *Assistance*, a troopship, two gunboats the *Forester* and the *Banterer*. Macbrayne's steamer, the *Lochiel*, was commissioned as a mobile police barracks when it became apparent that none of the island's innkeepers were willing to identify themselves with the forces of law and order by providing accommodation for policemen.

On 18 November, the military force of over 400 marines and fifty extra police armed with revolvers landed at Uig. Though Sheriff Ivory claimed that the Kilmuir crofters committed a deforcement, the Lord Advocate decided not to prosecute, as he decided that the people had opposed the police only because they were regarded as agents of the landlords.³

John MacPherson counselled the people not to resist and, following pacific pleas from members of the Land League, MacPherson and Duncan Cameron, a reporter from the Oban Times, went aboard the *Lochiel* and assured the Government forces that there would be no trouble. Sheriff Ivory refused to call off the expedition. The sixteen newspaper reporters from the south that had gathered there in expectation of a confrontation were to be disappointed.

In the face of such military force, the people engaged in acts of passive resistance. The telegraph system was used to good effect to warn crofters of the movement of Ivory's forces and in areas like Glendale and Kilmuir a horn or *dùdach mòr* was sounded to warn the crofters of their imminent arrival. Six hundred people were in attendance at one meeting in Glendale and when marines arrived the leaders immediately launched into prayers. Meanwhile, in Kilmuir, the rent strikes continued.

Marches to Kilmuir and Glendale had little effect to dampen the spirits of the crofters and it was soon evident that there was little for the marines to do. Already, the *Lochiel* and the extra police had been withdrawn, causing a quarrel between Harcourt and Ivory. Harcourt saw this as saving expenses for the County, while the exchequer continued to fund the marines. The marines received farewell messages from the local people and in Staffin, they seem to have shown an even greater interest in the women, with a crofter, William Nicolson remarking "they gave more of their time to the god of love than to the god of war".

3 The Inverness County Police Committee was composed almost entirely of landlords at this time.

Major Fraser at this time urged Alexander MacDonald to serve summonses on those who were in rent-arrears, given that the marines were on the island but A.J. Balfour made it clear that troops had not been deployed for such purposes. As a concession, Fraser himself decided to offer a 25% reduction in the rent, which only served to reinforce the crofters' conviction that their rents had previously been much too high. If anything, the resolutions of the crofters seemed to have strengthened since the arrival of the military expedition.

When a sheriff-officer from Portree was deforced on his way to Kilmuir in December, 1884 three crofters were arrested and tried. One of the accused, Norman Stewart "Parnell" of Valtos and the leader of the Kilmuir crofters, successfully defended himself. Prior to the trial, Ivory had issued a libellous statement against Stewart and he now had to suffer the humiliation of losing the case and having to pay £25 damages. Other deforcements occurred in Glendale, Waternish and Kilmuir against an officer from Inverness who had been brought in as a replacement, as local sheriff officers refused to serve summonses. The deforcers in Glendale were only given mild sentences by the Sheriff-substitute, Spiers, who showed sympathy for the grievances leading to the agitation. In addition to a sheriff officer, the legal system required a concurrent also but local ground officers were reluctant to become involved. The legal system in Skye was now under great strain, much to the frustration of Alexander MacDonald. He concluded that the acquittal of Stewart and the mild sentences handed to the Glendale deforcers only encouraged further lawlessness. The marines eventually left Skye in June 1885 when the men-folk departed for the herring fishing.

Despite efforts from the landlords, many of them by now on a rate strike and forming their own association in an attempt to hang on to an untenable position, a Crofters Bill was finally presented to the House of Commons. When it became the Crofters' Act in 1886, it gave security of tenure and introduced a system of judicially-determined rents. The evictions if not the agitation had been brought to an end.

The Act, though an important landmark in crofting history, did not restore to crofters land lost as a result of earlier evictions. Unrest consequently continued in the form of land seizures. Troops were again sent to Skye in 1886 and to Sutherland and Lewis in the following two years.

Though the confrontations between the crofters and the authorities took place in the townships of Braes, Glendale and Kilmuir; Portree was to act as the nerve centre of the campaign. It was here information was gathered and sent out to the crofters. It is interesting to note that the village was split on the agitation

issue, with a small establishment party convinced that life and property was at risk from Fenian revolutionaries who had flamed the crofters. The establishment based itself at the Royal Hotel, while the crofter's friends used the Portree Hotel. A couple of incidents give a flavour to the local mood at the time.

On Monday, 4 October 1886, the whisper went round that the hated Sheriff Ivory was on his way with another military expedition. By 7pm, as the steamer *Glencoe* drew in to Portree pier, a crowd of approximately 300 people had gathered. As Ivory stepped ashore, accompanied by numerous plain clothes police, he was greeted with "a perfect tempest of booing and groaning" and according to the Scottish Highlander's reporter the crowd followed him to the Royal Hotel with "howls of derision".

By contrast, when Michael Davitt, the founder of the Irish Land League, toured the Highlands and Islands in 1887, he was greeted with wild excitement when he embarked at Portree on Saturday 7 May. It is estimated that thousands packed Somerled Square to hear him speak from the window of his room in the Portree Hotel. Skye's staunchly Protestant crofters even invited Davitt, himself a Catholic, to be their Parliamentary candidate. It was very apparent throughout his journey that the Gaels supported the Irish in their campaign for more political freedom and, similarly, he demonstrated that he was most familiar with issues and problems in the Highlands and that he greatly sympathised with them. At Stromeferry he remarked:

[...] I have felt more strongly than ever the link of sympathy which binds me to the Celtic race of the Highlands. The exterminator's hand which has depopulated Ireland has also been busy with destruction here.

He advised the Highlanders that they should not satisfy themselves with security of tenure but that they should recover, from the landowners, the land they lost at the time of the Clearances. He went as far as to suggest that landlords, sporting estates and deer should all be got rid of.

The day of the people is at hand when the rule of the classes shall give way to that of the masses, when landlordism must go the way of every other tyranny that has been struck down by the people's might, and when the system of extermination and legalised robbery, which has ruined Ireland and depopulated the Highlands, shall be banished for ever from our midst.

As a consequence of all this activity it can be argued that the Skye land agitation of this period was very significant. It was in Skye that the first meetings of the Highland Land League and the Napier Commission were held. Crofters like John MacPherson, Norman Stewart and the Rev Donald MacCallum (the Church of Scotland minister of Waternish), were to become notable champions of the crofters movement in the Highlands and Islands. Undoubtedly their example and the events of 1881-86 encouraged other crofters within the area to take the initiative to regain their grazing rights and to try and win back their lands. The historic events at Braes attracted nation-wide interest, with questions being raised in the House of Commons, and they were to have far-reaching effects in respect of the Highlands and Islands regaining some part of the autonomy it had lost during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is interesting to note that Skye featured as highly in Governmental thoughts at this time as events related to Ireland like the infamous Phoenix Park murders. Harcourt, though, had a great regard for the people of Skye, having sailed to the West Highlands and Islands for a number of years.

The crofters had to wait until 1897, with the setting up of a Congested Districts Board, for an agency with purchase powers, enabling redistribution of former sheep farms. In 1904, both the Glendale and Kilmuir estates passed into public ownership. It was only in Glendale that ownership of the land was transferred to the crofters themselves. The crofters in Kilmuir still pay rent to the Secretary of State or more correctly, the Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department (SERAD). Later Crofting Acts created new crofts and transferred the land to the people. Recent years have seen, the formation of a Crofters Union and even more radical political initiatives in relation to crofting and community ownership. The spirit and radical tradition of John MacPherson and Mairi Mòr lives on and for those communities in Skye and elsewhere who now have control over their own land and resources: *Tha a' Chuibhle air tionndadh – tha an roth air a dhol mun cuairt* (The wheel has certainly turned full-circle).

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