‘This will always be a problem in Highland history’: a review of the historiography of the Highland Clearances¹

Introduction: ‘a history of controversy and deep cleavage of feeling’²

The past few years have seen major controversies in the West around the place and symbolism of historical statues, often of individuals who act as lightning rods for difficult national and colonial histories. One such statue can be found in the small town of Golspie in Sutherland, the so-called ‘Wee Mannie’ honouring the first duke of Sutherland in an inscription from his grateful tenantry. This statue has long focused the ire of those who remember the impact of the house of Sutherland in a very different way: as the most prominent perpetrators of the great tragedy of Scotland’s modern history, the Highland Clearances. This statue has become a conduit for the acrimonious debate – public, political and academic – about the Clearances; it has been attacked in print and in person and alternative statues have been raised. It has become one of the symbols of the disagreement about what the Clearances were, what they did and what that means today: as such it is a cultural cypher but also one rooted in contemporary and future economic and political realities.³ There has been

¹ E. Richards, *Patrick Sellar and the Highland Clearances: homicide, eviction and the price of progress* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. viii

² F. Fraser Darling, *West Highland Survey* (Oxford, 1955), p. 296.

³ There is much published on this statue: a useful recent survey can be found at: ‘Is this Scotland’s most controversial statue’, *The Scotsman*, 12 September 2017: last accessed 7.5.2021:

and will likely never be any consensus or resolution in this debate, because there is no simple answer to the question of what to do about the demands and costs of development which confronted all peasant societies in the industrial and imperial era in Britain, Ireland and Europe. The Clearances are part of this much larger discussion and constitute a major element in the competing perceptions, mentalities, emotions and assumptions of what we understand modernity to be. It is worth remembering that 'clearance' as a term was not used regularly by contemporaries, but became established in the later nineteenth century: the terms evictions or expulsions were more commonly used before that. 'Clearance' acts now as a portmanteau word, a spark for a whole set of political and emotional responses, demonstrating the importance of language in this debate.⁴ The word acts as a proxy for debate about the clash of cultures resulting from the Clearances: a romanticised agrarian oral culture on the fringes of industrialised Britain; or alternatively a by-word for economic and cultural regression, literally seeing a previous age dragging on in parallel existence with the modernising imperial and industrial Britain.⁵ Whatever the word used – clearance, expulsion, eviction – nuance is sometimes lacking. At the centre of the debate is the question of the necessity of the evictions and the level of responsibility of landowners in causing the decline and dispersal of people and denying them individual or collective agency in that process. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the Clearances continue to generate a significant volume of historical analysis

<https://www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/scotlands-most-controversial-statue-1441111>.

⁴ E. Richards, *Debating the Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 6-26.

⁵ C. Dewey, 'Celtic agrarian legislation and the Celtic revival,' *Past and Present*, Vol.64, No.1 (1974), pp. 30-70.

and writing, particularly so when compared to historical studies of Lowland rural Scotland in the same period. Three of these, all relatively new, will be discussed here, and links drawn between them and the deep wells of historiography that they draw upon, challenge and advance.⁶

In *Set Adrift Upon the World*, Jim Hunter set himself the difficult task of capturing the voices of those thousands of people who were caught up in the Sutherland Clearances and who found their lives irrevocably changed, for better or worse – but most often worse – by this extraordinary episode. This extends a lifelong focus for Hunter, who over the last forty years has dominated the field of Highland history, as his finely and accessibly written books have appealed to all readers across the world. Very few historians write as well as Hunter, and his ability to tease out lost and forgotten voices – mainly of the poorer classes – has been a hallmark of his work. But what makes this volume stand out in the history of the Clearances is the way in which Hunter follows the stories of those affected by the unfolding events in Sutherland out of the north of Scotland and across the world, particularly Canada, where many of those evicted moved to. The stories of the mind-boggling hardships faced by those people – from shipboard illnesses to winter treks – are researched and presented for the first time here. Hunter makes very clear which side he is on in the on-going clearances debate: that of the people against the landlords. He argues passionately that life for people in pre-clearance Sutherland was viable, that the last

⁶ In order of publication, they are: J. Hunter, *Set Adrift Upon the World: the Sutherland Clearances* (Birlinn: Edinburgh, 2015); T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Clearances: a history of the dispossessed, 1600-1900* (Penguin: London, 2018); A. Edgar, *Clans and Clearance: the Highland Clearances, volume one* (Ingram: La Vergne, 2019).

two hundred years of poverty and depopulation has been a historical blip and one that could be corrected with modern land reform. This reflects Hunter's other wide-ranging activities and influence in the Highlands: as well as his role as a historian and academic, he has campaigned for land reform, Highland development and crofting rights for his whole life, and his history reflects those interests. For Hunter, the Clearances were a historical tragedy, an enduring injustice which consolidated a pattern of power vested in land and private landownership that has endured into the twenty-first century; certainly, landowner reputations have never recovered in Scotland and the transnational history of the Clearances means they are as vividly remembered in North America, Australia, New Zealand and many other places to which Highlanders emigrated.⁷

This brings us to the question of scope: historians of the Clearances move between intensely local case studies to patterns of global land dispossession. Particularly from the 1980s on, historians are in broad agreement – and have started the research to demonstrate – that the story of the Clearances is a universal story of rural depopulation and dispossession in many parts of the world, near (Lowland Scotland, rural England) and far (North America, Australia, New Zealand).⁸ Devine's 2018 intervention in the debate addresses this issue of context, marrying in one study for the first time an analysis of the more famous Highland clearances with those that occurred all over Lowland Scotland, often well in advance of what happened in the north, to build a rounded picture of rural revolution and the advent of

⁷ Hunter, *Set Adrift*; see also E. Richards, *Debating the Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh, 2007); D. Craig, *On the Crofter's Trail* (Edinburgh, 1990: this edn. 2006).

⁸ E. Richards, *The Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh, 2008), p. xiv.

capitalism in rural society. Devine has been writing about rural Scotland for many decades: this book brings together that work to address a period when many of Scotland's people were subjected to coercive change: when traditional relationships were overturned and replaced by the 'rational' exploitation of land use, as defined by the radical ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment.⁹ The major imbalance between the volume of work on the Highland versus the Lowland clearances is something Devine highlights as a significant historiographical problem and one he seeks to rectify in this study.

As such, this is an ambitious book, large in scope and coverage: happily for the reader it is very clearly organised and written in a most engaging and fluent style. It is also not overburdened with references and takes the reader's hand to lead them through the prickly jungle of clearance and dispossession. It is divided into three parts: the first acts as an introductory context, painting a picture of Scottish rural society before the tumultuous changes brought by capitalism. Devine is at pains to point out that rural Scotland was never static, and that simplistic understandings of a primitive but content and unchanging rural society have no place in a modern analysis. There has been a tendency to assume that before the advent of the Agricultural Revolution (also term contested by Devine), rural society was slow-moving, uncommercial and largely communal in nature. Devine sets out evidence to challenge and complicate that picture, eroding the sharp edges between periods and events. He also achieves this in the second part of the book, by examining in detail

⁹ Previous work includes: T. M. Devine, *Clanship to Crofters War* (Manchester, 1994); T. M. Devine, *The Great Highland Famine: hunger, emigration and the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century* (Edinburgh, 1995 edn.).

the 'forgotten history' of the Lowland clearances, using a close reading of contemporary estate papers to understand why, how and with what consequences these were carried out. Just a glance at the many maps included gives the reader a sense of the reach and scope of these disposessions, so often neglected by historians. In bringing these clearances to the forefront of his analysis, Devine is able to broaden out the geographical as well as the chronological scope of rural change. The final part looks north and west to the more famous Highland Clearances, linking these sometimes familiar episodes and arguments to the evidence uncovered in the Lowlands to give the reader a coherent and rounded picture of this defining characteristic of all Scottish rural life. The book aims to give us a macro level reading of clearance and is richly supported with all kinds of evidence from estates papers, state records, correspondence, the records of observers and critics and poetry, fiction and drama. Maps, tables and appendices are marshalled impressively to support this, but none of the emotional power and drama are lost or ignored.

This highlights a general challenge facing all historians of the Clearances: that of evidence, not only the inevitable gaps and silences, but the equal but different challenge posed by areas of density and over-writing.¹⁰ For example, historians are fortunate in the almost embarrassingly voluminous records of landed estates or the reams of government reports, commissions and inquiries available to them as evidence. But this creates an imbalance given the relative paucity of material that captures the lived experience of the Clearances of ordinary men, women and children. This dissonance is intensified by the compartmentalisation – even

¹⁰ Richards, *Debating*, pp. 107-9.

marginalisation – of Gaelic and oral cultures and exposes the traditional hierarchies adhered to by historians in constructing their narratives in stark terms, with a clear emphasis on political, demographic, economic and elite perspectives. Devine notes that it is important but difficult to capture the lived experience of the clearances – the pain, anxiety and suffering that must have been experienced by the many thousands of people affected. The practical difficulties in achieving this are demonstrated by this lived experience never quite coming through and the overall emphasis remains on the bigger picture, with a significant slant towards economic and political drivers. It is, however, an important and balanced contribution, highlighting the importance of the rural story in the modern period, so often dominated by studies on industrialisation and urbanisation.

At nearly 500 pages, Devine's latest volume is a substantial contribution, but in 2019 a new and even longer project – the result of decades of labour by the author – A. Edgars, was published. This volume is the first of five covering almost every conceivable aspect of the Highland Clearances, totalling 1.6 million words, greater than the number of acres the dukes of Sutherland owned at their territorial apex. According to the preface, it has been a long time in the development and writing, not surprisingly perhaps, given the scale of the project; remarkably, the author is now in his 90s and overall, this is an impressive feat. The later volumes include a study of eighteenth century clearances, followed by an entire volume on the Sutherland Clearances. The final two volumes take a chronological approach, firstly from 1800-40 and then from 1840-1900. The first volume aims to set the scene for what is to come, and tackles the material thematically, examining the region as a separate cultural, social and economic entity, with particular focus on clans, chieftdom,

everyday life, character and customs. This is organised into seven long chapters, which for a volume this long is a small number. There are very frequent sub-sections within each chapter which helps keep the reader on track; the author himself rarely stays on track within the chapters, however, an issue not assisted by a very short preface and introduction which does not go much beyond some quite general, though interesting, thoughts on the nature of history and how he became hooked on the subject, the place and the history.

Edgar notes that with this work he is trying to do something different to that attempted by previous historians, and here the problems start. Firstly, the historical evidence: the emphasis is on a selection of primary materials, mostly printed, although no sense is given as to how or why the author selected them for the basis of his research. There are some odd omissions and additions and not much in the way of critical engagement with these sources, which will immediately set off warning bells. Another warning bell comes with the author's engagement with what he calls the 'orthodox historians.' His mission seems to be to challenge the many myths and inaccuracies about the Clearances which he sees as being perpetrated by academic historians. The author argues that academic history and the universities in which it is produced generate conformity in thinking, to enable career success and progression for individuals. He also argues that to secure the funds of rich donors, universities and their academics will refrain from criticism of the rich ('he who pays the piper calls the tune' in the words of the author). Many academics will smile wryly at this, very few coming across these mythical rich donors: but these claims highlight the sometimes very acrimonious nature of the Clearances debate.

Each of these three substantial volumes makes its own particular intervention into a long-running debate, drawing on and challenging existing work, bringing a new perspective and opening up new fields of evidence. The shape of this historiography is the focus for the rest of this review.

Political and economic perspectives

By far the majority of writing on the Clearances takes an economic or political perspective, often combined into the wider intellectual hinterland of political economy that formed a critical context for the architects of the Clearances. The prominent themes in this writing include the nature of Improvement and the impact of the Enlightenment – of rational thinking, agricultural revolution and progress. Historians have taken great interest in identifying the tools of improvement, of which eviction was one, but mainly as the means to a greater end.¹¹ Take the analysis from one of the landmark – and for this writer’s money – still the best study of the Clearances, Eric Richards’s *Leviathan of Wealth* (1973).¹² The power of this book lies in the way the narrative of the most (in)famous of all clearances – those that took place on the Sutherland estates in the early nineteenth century – is embedded in the mental world of those men with their hands on the levers of power operating the new political economy in an emerging global and imperial matrix. In this study, eviction and agricultural revolution are placed next to the early railway boom and development of

¹¹ See for example, B. Bonnyman, *The Third Duke of Buccleuch and Adam Smith: estate management and improvement in Enlightenment Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2014).

¹² E. Richards, *The Leviathan of wealth: the Sutherland fortune in the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1973).

the English potteries, commercial fisheries, kelp manufacture, military recruitment and the heady intellectual context of coffee houses in the capitals and parliament.¹³

Any study with an emphasis on the political is really about power: its origins, maintenance and application. The Clearances offer one of the starkest political questions, and one which has been at the heart of Jim Hunter's lifelong work: who should own and makes decisions about the land?¹⁴ Contemporaries and later land reformers used the Clearances as a catalyst to feed the growing attack on the landed interest, not only in the Highlands but across Britain and Ireland. Landowners were accused of abandoning their traditional duties towards their tenants, once their clansmen, in exchange for generating private wealth for themselves and their dynastic ambitions. Tenants and landowners make up only part of the picture: government and the state forms the other key plank. The role of the state in the Clearances has long been contested, although there is consensus that the state's role came to be larger more quickly than in many other parts of Britain (although not Ireland). From 1746, the Highlands and Islands have been seen by successive governments as experimental ground, and as such, has attracted historians working on policy formation, the intellectual and moral underpinnings and assumptions of government and more recently, the idea of internal colonialism as a driver for both state and landed policy towards the Highlands, especially the Gaelic language and

¹³ See also Richards, *Highland Clearances*, pp. 41-66.

¹⁴ There is a long pedigree to this writing: see two examples which bookend the debate, J. Bateman, *The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1876); A. Wightman, *Who Owns Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1997).

culture.¹⁵ Andrew Mackillop gives us a route into the development of state power through military recruitment: the activity that drew together visibly the growing power of the British state, its imperial ambition and the dynamics of Highland society, including demography, economic diversification, political and cultural upheaval, imperial engagement and questions of gender.¹⁶ For post-Clearance land-reform campaigners, the state was the obvious organisation to right the wrongs of the past, the only one with the requisite power and legitimacy to defeat the power of private property. Ewen Cameron has explored in detail the development and impact – on places, families, individuals – of the state, as well as land reform and other legislation from 1886 to the present.¹⁷ Cameron makes the point that at least part of the way the region is viewed as exceptional comes from the fact that the government framed it as such from the 1740s into a special policy area, an approach which has continued strongly into the present day.¹⁸ This was underpinned by arguments made by nineteenth-century land-reform campaigners, who sought to minimise state fears about widespread property reform by making a special case for the Highlands and Islands as a historic region with particular cultural and historical drivers. This is still very much on-going, as the work of later land-reform champions shows, as they

¹⁵ See E. A. Cameron, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c. 1880-1925* (East Linton, 1996); I. Mackinnon, 'The invention of the crofting community: Scottish historiography's elision of indigenous identity, ideology and agency in accounts of land struggle in the modern Gaidhealtachd,' *Scottish Historical Review*, 98:1 (2019), p. 71-102.

¹⁶ A. Mackillop, *More fruitful than the soil: army, empire and the Scottish Highlands, 1715-1815* (East Linton, 2000), p. 3.

¹⁷ Cameron, *Land for the People*, pp. 15-26.

¹⁸ See for example, E. A. Cameron, 'The Scottish Highlands as a Special Policy Area, 1886-1965,' *Rural History*, 8 (1997), pp. 195-216

drew on histories of clearance and enclosure to support arguments for contemporary reforms.¹⁹ One area of consensus among historians of all perspectives has been that the Highland Clearances resulted in the long term structural poverty of the region ever since. This was a key argument made by early land reformers and has been accepted by the political classes, government and even landowners since, and has rarely been questioned.²⁰ Depopulation has become a further critical issue from the 1970s onwards, with Hunter long rejecting the view that depopulation was the inevitable result of 'over population', a view beloved as orthodoxy by estate owners and managers from the mid-nineteenth century.²¹ This view has in the last twenty years become much more widely accepted and has been extended – again by Hunter – to argue for repopulation as a viable and desirable aim.²²

Gaelic perspectives: decline, protest and contested futures

In an academic establishment which is predominantly English-speaking, the Gaelic perspective on the Clearances can be considered the ghost at the feast. Significant work by Eric Cregeen, Martin MacGregor, Sheila Kidd, Hugh Cheape and Donald Meek, among others, have provided new perspectives and important correctives to

¹⁹ T. Johnston, *Our Scots Noble Families* (1909); A. Wightman, *The poor had no lawyers: who owns Scotland and how they got it* (Edinburgh, 2010). See also E. A. Cameron, 'Unfinished business: the land question and the new Scottish parliament,' *Contemporary British History*, 15:1 (2001), pp. 83-114.

²⁰ See J. Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976).

²¹ See for example, 8th duke of Argyll, *Crofts and Farms in the Hebrides: being an account of the management of an island estate for 130 years* (Edinburgh, 1883).

²² J. Hunter, *Repeopling empty places: centenary reflections on the significance and enduring legacy of the Land settlement (Scotland) Act 1919* (Edinburgh: Scottish Land Commission, 2019).

that imbalance in recent years.²³ In many ways, this imbalance continues to reflect the power dynamic exposed by the Clearances: that of a predominantly Anglicised, landed elite imposing a model of economic and moral improvement on the old Highland society and Gaelic culture. The picture is complex but much early historiography simplified it into a clash of cultures story, with on one side a doomed but noble Gaelic culture and society declining, dismal and gloomy as a result of pressure from the Hanoverian response to the last Jacobite rising, the percolation of Enlightened ideas led from other parts of Scotland and Britain that were dynamically expanding.²⁴ Work by Allan MacInnes, Finlay Mckichan and Robert Dodgshon has sought to complicate and elongate this story of the end of clanship and the shift from

²³ D. Meek, *The Wiles of the World* (Edinburgh, 2003); S. Maclean, 'The poetry of the clearances', *Trans. Of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, Vol.38 (1937–41); Sheila M. Kidd, 'Caraid nan Gaidheal and "Friend of Emigration" : Gaelic emigration literature of the 1840s', *Scottish Historical Review*, 81.1 (2002) 52-69; Hugh Cheape, 'A song on the Lowland shepherds : popular reaction to the Highland Clearances', *Scottish Economic & Social History*, 15. (1995) 85-100; Eric R. Cregeen, 'The tacksmen and their successors : a study of tenurial reorganisation in Mull, Morvern and Tiree in the early 18th century', *Scottish Studies*, 13.2 (1969) 93-144; Eric R. Cregeen, 'Oral tradition and agrarian history in the West Highlands', *Oral History*, 2.1 (1974) 15-33; Martin MacGregor, 'Writing the history of Gaelic Scotland : A provisional checklist of "Gaelic" genealogical histories', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 24. (2008) 357-379.

²⁴ E. Cameron, 'Poverty, Protest and Politics: Perceptions of the Scottish Highlands in the 1880s,' in D. Broun and M. Macgregor (eds), *Mìorun Mor nan Gall, The Great Ill-Will of the Lowlander: Lowland Perceptions of the Scottish Highlands* (Glasgow, 2007); R. Black, 'The Gaelic Academy: the cultural commitment of the Highland Society of Scotland,' *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, Vol.14, No.2 (1986), pp. 1-38.

a chieftainship model to a landlord one.²⁵ Chronologies are vital to changing our perspective, as these historians demonstrated: by extending the traditional chronology for the Clearances (and economic and political change in the region more broadly), the picture becomes one of long periods of gradual transition led by Highlanders, shifting the focus away from the idea of revolutionary change imposed across very short time periods.²⁶ This reduces the drama and exceptionalism of the Clearances and undermines some of the rhetoric.²⁷

The issue of the resistance (or lack of it) of Gaelic society against these processes has long been a focus for historians. The enduring influence of the work of E. P. Thompson can be traced here, as historians of the Highlands debated the extent, effectiveness and responses to resistance, during and then well after the main period of the Clearances.²⁸ The early debates focused on why there had not been more

²⁵ R. Dodgshon, 'The clearances and the transformation of the Scottish countryside,' in T Devine & J Wormald (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Scottish History* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 130-58; F. McKichan, 'Lord Seaforth and Highland estate management in the First Phase of Clearance (1783-1815)', *Scottish Historical Review*, 86:1 (2007); K. Fenyó, *Contempt, Sympathy and Romance: Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands and the clearances during the famine years, 1845-1855* (East Lothian, 2000); P. Womack, *Improvement and Romance* (Basingstoke, 1989).

²⁶ A. Macinnes, *Clanship, commerce and the house of Stuart* (East Linton, 1996); A. Macinnes, 'Scottish Gaeldom: the first phase of clearance,' in T M Devine & R Mitchison, (ed.) *People and Society in Scotland, 1760–1830*, Vol.1 (Edinburgh, 1988).

²⁷ R. Mathieson, *The Survival of the Unfittest: The Highland Clearances and the End of Isolation* (Edinburgh, 2000).

²⁸ E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1991); C. Whatley, 'Order and Disorder,' in E. Foyster and C. Whatley (eds), *A History of Everyday Life in Scotland: 1600 to 1800* (Edinburgh, 2010), Vol. 2. pp. 191-216;

(and more successful) resistance in the region, a debate echoed in studies on lowland clearance and agricultural and economic change.²⁹ It is perhaps Jim Hunter who has done the most to re-orientate and correct our picture of the extent and nature of resistance in the Highlands and Islands, through a lifetime's worth of research and publications which sought – through an innovative use of primary material – to give back a voice to ordinary men and women and their lived experiences of the Clearances.³⁰ Other historians have made significant contributions to this debate too, including Eric Richards and Charles Withers.³¹ Iain Robertson has developed this work further down both empirical and theoretical lines, linking what was happening in the Highlands to other episodes of resistance across Britain, framed by the idea of a moral ecology (and advancing Thompson's work on moral economies). Overall, the traditional picture of Gaelic society as inevitably slumping into defeat and extirpation has been carefully overturned and instead a much more complex picture emerges of a society resisting, adapting and also leading socio-economic and cultural change in the modern period.

There are some geographical places that have come to dominate the historiography of the Clearances due to the *strum und drang* they generated either at the time or

²⁹ H. Hanham, 'The problem of Highland Discontent,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol.19 (1969), pp. 21-65; R. Dodgshon, *No Stone Unturned: A History of Farming, Landscape and Environment in the Scottish Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2015).

³⁰ Starting with his landmark *Making of the Crofting Community* (1976).

³¹ E. Richards, 'How Tame were the Highlanders during the Clearances', *Scottish Studies*, 17 (1973), pp. 35–48; C. W. J. Withers & L. J. McEwen, 'Historical records and geomorphological events: the Solway Moss 'eruption' of 1771,' *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 105:3 (1989), pp. 149-157.

since: for instance, Skye, Lewis and Harris, but above all there is Sutherland. Some of the best historical research and writing has focused on the experience of Clearance on the Sutherland estates, including that of Malcolm Bangor-Jones, Jim Hunter and Eric Richards. As all are at pains to point out that, in many ways, the Sutherland picture was the exception in the Clearance story – their scale, timing, execution and legacy was distinctive. And yet they have become symbolic of all Clearances in the public and political mind.³² This is because they were exceptionally well documented, they were controversial from the moment they started, and they seem to distil the essential debates and frame the key legacies so perfectly. One of the more interesting developments in Clearances literature has been the broadening out of geographical perspectives, which – like that of the chronologies – has generated new perspectives that de-centre the specifically Highland experience and place it in a wider context. Take, for example, this plethora of writing on Sutherland and compare it to writing on other locations, for example David Taylor's 2016 volume on Badenoch, not an area which had benefitted from much sustained historical analysis.³³ His study draws in familiar themes – the end of clanship and the Jacobite cause, the rapidly changing role of the tacksman, the giddy power of the landowning elite, imperial military recruitment and of course radical changes in both agricultural and tenurial practice. But by examining these themes in neglected Badenoch, Taylor brings new perspectives and voices into the

³² Richards, *Leviathan of Wealth*; M. Bangor-Jones, *The Assynt Clearances* (Dundee, 1998); Hunter, *Set Adrift*.

³³ D. Taylor, *The Wild, Black Region: Badenoch, 1750-1800* (Edinburgh 2016).

old debate.³⁴ Other historians take an even broader view: the work of Marjory Harper, Jim Hunter and Eric Richards have linked Clearances debates to the story of emigration and migration within and from Scotland and the Highlands and Islands.³⁵ Some of this is highly emotive: experiences of forced emigration resulting from brutal eviction, of loss and tragedy for Highland people. Increasingly now also, historians are examining the impact of those emigrants on the indigenous societies and ecologies they came into contact with in North America, Australia and New Zealand, among many other places.³⁶ In older work there is almost no acknowledgment of this impact, the focus remaining on the wrongs done to the emigrant Highlanders and their – very real – experiences of suffering on long and dangerous passages, followed by the difficulties of adjusting to radically new environments. This is being revised so those indigenous voices can be heard. Perhaps the most innovative work is that being done on the linkages between Highlanders and slavery and the slave trade, which – as historians such as David Alston, Chris Dalglish and S. Karly Kehoe and others are uncovering – was evident at every social level and which generated long and powerful legacies.³⁷

³⁴ Taylor, *Wild Black Region*, pp. 1-15. See also F. D. Bardgett, 'Loyalty and dissent: improvement and clearance in Strathspey after 1853,' *Northern Scotland*, 12:1 (2021), pp. 1-32.

³⁵ M. Harper, *Adventurers and Exiles* (London, 2004); J. Hunter, *A Dance called America: the Scottish Highlands, the United States and Canada* (this edn. Edinburgh, 2010); E. Richards, *Britannia's Children: emigration from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland since 1600* (London, 2004).

³⁶ For example, J. C. Weaver, *The great land rush and the making of the modern world, 1650-1900* (Montreal, 2003).

³⁷ See for example the special issue of *Northern Scotland*, 'Papers from the 'Landscapes and Lifescapes' project, 2015,' C. Dalglish and S. K. Kehoe (eds), vol 9:1 (2018) and the work of David Alston, for example: D. Alston, 'A Forgotten Diaspora: The Children of Enslaved and 'Free Coloured'

Romance, myth and morality

One of the most durable of the Clearance arguments is the tension created by the delineation between what has sometimes disparagingly been called the myths or romance of the Clearances (and much else in Highland history) and a more dispassionate, academic response, which seeks to minimise the more emotive or rhetorical aspects of the debate. It is something of a false dichotomy perhaps, but one which has had enduring power, not just in the historiography of the Highlands but across Scottish history more generally. For the Clearances, it stemmed from the work of John Prebble – a master writer and an author with a particular and strongly held view of morality and the place and value of lived and emotional experience in history – an approach which struck a chord with generations of readers.³⁸ It was this work which generated a ‘corrective’ from the still small Scottish history academic establishment, with Rosalind Mitchison, for example, arguing in her review article on the Clearances that the historiography was ‘heavy with myth’ and took a disparaging view of oral tradition as source material.³⁹ Academic ripostes to these ‘myths’ surrounding the Clearances could be somewhat patronising and unhelpful and there is now a greater balance of perspectives and acceptance of what constitutes ‘academic’ history, although there is still some way to go.

Women and Highland Scots in Guyana Before Emancipation,’ *Northern Scotland*, 6:1 (2015), pp. 49-69.

³⁸ J. Prebble, *The Highland Clearances* (1963).

³⁹ Cited in Richards, *Debating*, p. 21.

One of the proponents of the emotional and cultural narrative of tragedy and dispossession expressed in the Clearances is David Craig.⁴⁰ The emphasis here is on a reconstruction of the emotional turmoil inflicted on people and communities by the experience of Clearance: 'Such stories, or memoirs, are to my mind the prime stuff of history because they bring home to us what it was like to experience a cruel or trying point in a social process, what it felt or smelt like, what you had to do to stay alive, how you swallowed (or nurtured) your anguish.'⁴¹ Craig takes aim at the conservatism of the academic establishment in its handling of oral tradition and folklore and emotional histories generally; of what he called, 'the habits of managerial and academic persons' who feel 'discomfiture at heartfelt speech'.⁴² Those historians might have argued that they were aiming for a greater balance, but rarely discussed how far 'balance' is a desirable trait in historical analysis for its own sake. This statement will, however, resonate with many academic historians, with their long tradition of 'myth-busting' in all periods, steadily unpicking the long shadow of Sir Walter Scott and his heirs.

This is a debate which transcends the Clearances, although one which perhaps found one of its best expressions in them. It was really about what history was – how it should be studied, analysed and evidenced.⁴³ Much of the academic reaction

⁴⁰ Craig, *Crofter's Trail*; see also A. Cameron, *Go Listen to the Crofters* (Stornoway, 1986).

⁴¹ Craig, *Crofter's Trail*, p. xiv.

⁴² Craig, *Crofter's Trail*, p. xv

⁴³ J. Shaw, 'Land, people and nation: historicist voices in the Highland land campaign,' in E. Biagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals and collective identities in the British Isles 1865-*

against perceived myths and romanticism was not generated by history writing at all, but on the long tradition of travel writing, fiction and poetry from and about the region, popular from the eighteenth century across Europe.⁴⁴ James Macpherson, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell and, above all, Walter Scott set the tone and formed the public perception of the region, its peoples and experiences. This work has cast long shadows, the edges of which can be seen in modern contributions from novelists such as Neil Gunn, Naomi Mitchison and playwrights such as John McGrath.⁴⁵ Academic historians from the 1970s countered these narratives by offering different perspectives, anti-emotional and anti-rhetorical, based on economic analysis, demographic understandings, linking to historical experience elsewhere in an attempt to reduce the exceptionalism of the Highlands and Islands. This in turn generated a pushback, with R.H. Campbell arguing that the plethora of writing on the Clearances and Highlands and Islands more generally was distorting modern Scottish historiography and the picture being painted of Scottish society in the modern period.⁴⁶ Some went further: in the wake of the publication of his *Wild Scots*,

1931 (Cambridge, 1996); C. Withers, 'The Historical Creation of the Scottish Highlands,' in I. Donnachie and C. Whatley (eds), *The Manufacture of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1992).

⁴⁴ Richards, *Highland Clearances*, p. xix.

⁴⁵ For example, N. Gunn, *Highland River* (Edinburgh, 1937) and *Butcher's Broom* (Edinburgh, 1934); N. Mitchison, *Sea Green Ribbons* (London, 1991); J. McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973).

⁴⁶ T. M. Devine and R. Campbell, 'The rural experience' in W. H. Fraser and R. J. Morris (eds) *People and Society in Scotland, 1830–1914*, Vol. II (Edinburgh, 1990); R. H. Campbell, 'Too much on the Highlands? A Plea for change,' *Scottish Economic and Social History*, 14:1 (1994), pp. 58-76.

Michael Fry was dubbed a 'clearance denier' and was formally rebuked by the Scottish Parliament.⁴⁷

Conclusions: what comes next?

As this overview has endeavoured to show, there are long standing, contentious and rich traditions of writing on the Highland Clearances. Despite that, there are still many areas of potential study to be broadened or breached, from which the field would benefit. The most obvious is a much more explicit and grounded understanding of gender and the Clearances: despite decades of ground-breaking work we can still ask: where are the women? They appear as bit-part players, sometimes as representatives of the villainous landed elite (the Countess of Sutherland; Lady Gordon Cathcart), or as usually unnamed crofters, sometimes protesting or rioting, although usually overshadowed by their male relatives.⁴⁸ There are any number of what Kathleen Jamie has labelled Lone Enraptured Males on the other hand: visionary land reformers, domineering factors, absent landlords, ineffectual ministers, pioneering crofters and cottars who formed the backbone of anti-landlord opposition.⁴⁹ None of these were working in a female-free vacuum, and yet the historiography has not begun to truly embed that reality.⁵⁰ Another absent

⁴⁷ M. Fry, *Wild Scots* (London, 2005); 'Time to Right a False Picture,' *The Herald*, 20 June 2005.

⁴⁸ With some exceptions: see for example, C. Lodge, 'The clearers and the cleared: women, economy and land in the Scottish Highlands 1800-1900,' unpublished PhD thesis (University of Glasgow, 1996).

⁴⁹ K. Jamie, 'A lone enraptured male,' *London Review of Books*, 30:5 (2008).

⁵⁰ Some pioneering work has been done on the literary and cultural side however: see D. Meek, *Mairi Mhor nan Oran* (Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1999).

group are the critical middle social layers of Highland society: the disappearing tacksmen of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, smaller lairds and gentry, clergymen, merchants, lawyers and factors. Historians have noted their disappearance as part of the Clearances themselves, but they never really went away entirely, despite the concerns expressed by contemporaries on this point. David Taylor and Jim Hunter's work demonstrates this point but more might be done on these important but often invisible figures.⁵¹

There are a number of other developing areas that could be applied fruitfully to Clearance scholarship, some of which is in motion already. This includes colonial / postcolonial work, which asks questions about race, empire and the contribution of the Highlands and Islands and its peoples as a key region in the British imperial project. This includes military recruitment, emigration, slavery, the slave trade and the abolition movement, as well as the role played by Highlanders in the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their land across the world. This feeds into a long-required discussion of why there appears to be a durable appetite for stories of Highland (and Scottish) exceptionalism, tragedy and oppression for a period when the 1707 Union was secure and the fortunes of Britain and its empire – and the proportionally high role Scots and Highlanders played in that – were at their height. Important here are perspectives which draw on a longer *durée* and broader geographical contexts to support a more nuanced understanding of landownership.⁵²

⁵¹ Taylor, *Wild Black Region*; Hunter, *Set Adrift*; L. A. Rees, C. J. Reilly & A. Tindley (eds), *The Land Agent, 1700-1920* (Edinburgh, 2019).

⁵² See for instance, M. Cragoe and P. Readman (eds) *The Land Question in Britain, 1750-1950* (Basingstoke, 2010).

Central to this, and another area which could be much more fully developed – the work of Malcolm Combe, John Macaskill and Andy Wightman notwithstanding – are the legal histories of the Clearances: histories of the legal tools and instruments, the personnel of sheriffs and sheriff officers and the legal profession's longstanding role as trustees, advisors and landowners.⁵³ Lastly, and coming full circle round to the old debate about emotive versus 'academic' histories of the Clearances, the new 'emotional turn' in historiography could bring new and constructive methodologies to an old and sterile discussion. Rosalind Mitchison wrote that, 'The steady drain of people from the land does not leave much in the way of accounts of the feelings of those involved.'⁵⁴ But new methodologies coming out of the field of emotions history could offer a corrective to that view and an opportunity to include and tease out the historical record of lived experiences. In a similar way, techniques from anthropology around understanding the nature of deference could inform historical viewpoints on paternalism, deference and social expectations, much of which underpinned contemporary responses to the Clearances. One thing is clear: the argument, debate and controversy of that constitute historiography on the Highland Clearances is far from at an end.

⁵³ J. MacAskill, *We have won the land* (Stornoway, 1999); J. MacAskill, *Scotland's Foreshore: public rights, private rights and the crown, 1840-2017* (Edinburgh, 2018); Wightman, *The Poor had no Lawyers*; M. Combe, J. Glass and A. Tindley (eds), *Land reform in Scotland: history, law and policy* (Edinburgh, 2020).

⁵⁴ Mitchison, 'Highland Clearances,' p. 8.