

The Deer Forests

And How They are Bleeding Scotland White

J. M. Macdiarmid

Scottish Home Rule Association, 2nd Edition 1926

In this *Scottish Home Rule Association* pamphlet published in the mid-1920s, J M Macdiarmid vigorously addresses the problems arising from the dramatic growth in deer forests (private hunting preserves) as '*pleasure grounds of the wealthy of this and foreign nations*' during the period 1784 to 1924.

He traces the destructive impact that this type of large scale private land holding (*latifundia*) has had on the Highlands of Scotland. In particular he elaborates on its effects on: *the human population namely the peasant producers of the region; its impact on food production, cultivation and pastoral systems of agriculture; its deteriorating effects on soils and the environment; and its restrictions and loss of public access to the countryside for both tourists and the Scottish people.* The author compares the situation in Scotland with that of Switzerland where: constitutional democracy prospers; property is more equally divided; food production, cultivation and pastoral systems are encouraged; and public access and tourism are promoted.

He concludes by stating: "*When Scotland regains its own Parliament it will be possible to settle the land question on lines which will encourage workers to go back to the land, giving full security to the cultivator, will increase production and enrich the nation.*"

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“It may be true, I believe it often is, that a deer forest employs more people than the same area under sheep. It certainly brings in a larger rent. From a purely parochial point of view it may therefore be claim to be economically sound; but from no other. It provides a healthy existence for a small group of people, but it produces nothing except a small quantity of venison, for which there is no demand. It causes money to change hand. A pack of cards can do that. I doubt whether it could be said of a single deer forest, however barren and remote, that it could serve no better purpose.”

Sir John Stirling-Maxwell, Bart of Pollock
Chairman of Departmental Committee on Deer Forests (1919)

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Introduction

Not to know the past is to remain always a child. If therefore we are to solve aright the economic and social problems that confront us, insistently demanding solution, and puzzling us as they also puzzled the ancient Chaldeans, we will require to go far back into history to trace the causes and the course of events that have led us to the present deplorable conditions in the Highlands and Lowlands. Unless these problems are solved according to justice and equity the inexorable and inevitable results will be further decadence of the Scottish people, and the dissolution of the Empire.

If our ancestors could return to earth to view the results of actions taken by them they would now plead that they did not know – that they could not have foreseen so far into the dim and distant courses of the future as to predict what has actually taken place.

If we who have the wisdom which even comes to fools – that which comes after the event – do not repair the mistakes and right the wrongs that have resulted from past errors, we will be far more to blame than our ancestors.

The Problem

Why is it that so many of the fertile straths and beautiful glens of Scotland, once – and at a time not so remote – as we may learn from the solid basis of contemporary history, inhabited by a strong, brave, athletic race which has almost vanished, are now

wildernesses abandoned to the red deer, the eagle and the fox? Why has Scottish agriculture fallen into a condition of rapid and seemingly incurable decline? Every year records a falling off in the food products and a diminution in the fertility in arable land and moor land. Since 1870, 480,000 acres of Scottish arable ground have been converted into pasture, thereby decreasing productiveness to the extent of the food of a million people, while the land under cultivation is, through lack of draining and inadequate security to the cultivators, producing only about one-half of what it would produce by better direction and management.

Why is it that 65 percent of the Scottish population is huddled up in the towns, with the worst housing conditions in Europe?

Why is it that the vast majority of citizens in town and country are severed from the benefits and enjoyments of property (one of the elements of civilisation, morality and public order) and are in the precarious and dangerous condition of dependence on capital – mere recipients of wages and salaries?

Such evils cannot fail to perturb the minds of all who reflect.

Cause of Scotland's Disease

Their existence today is part of the punishment that Scotland now endures because our ancestors two hundred years ago committed the folly of surrendering the government of Scotland into the hands of an English Parliament, in which the Scottish members are but a fraction – a Parliament and Government that rarely understand Scottish affairs, overburdened with the numerous and absorbing questions incidental to the new industrial age, and to the Empire which has grown since the date of the Union in 1707.

It is no palliation to say that English questions are also neglected, and that abuses exist in England of the same type that we suffer from in Scotland. These are facts which irresistibly prove that England also, if it is to flourish, requires Home Rule.

Scotland and Switzerland Compared

What Scotland is we see and know by bitter experience: what Scotland might be we can imagine by comparing it with a similar mountain country, Switzerland, which has even a larger portion of sterile soil, a longer winter when the valleys are covered with snow and ice; which has no coal or minerals, few manufactures, the aggregate population of its four principal towns being about half that of Glasgow. It has no seaboard – its overseas merchandise having to make long overland journeys to or from the Mediterranean ports of Italy and France. Yet this country with its 16,000 square miles has a population of 4,000,000 while Scotland, with its vast coal and iron deposits, its large manufactures, with two of the large seaports of the world, a big fishing population, and an area of 30,000 square miles, has a population of only 4,883,000 with a lower birth-rate and a higher death-rate. Scotland has only four universities, while Switzerland has seven.

If the Government of Scotland had been for the last two centuries solely in the hands of Scotsmen, it cannot be doubted that today Scotland would have a population of

over 11,000,000 better housed, in easier circumstances, with property more equally divided, and with life and property as secure as they are in Switzerland.

Scottish legislation is now generations in arrears, and the arrears could not be put through the Imperial Parliament, even though it devoted several sessions exclusively to Scottish affairs, which is of course impossible. Great undue delay to legislation is also caused because the English are, as Ambassador Page wrote about them, *“politically unadaptable, tradition-ridden and class-ridden.”*

The secret of Switzerland’s prosperity is that the Swiss never surrendered the government of their country to foreigners, and that the Swiss people were never divorced from the land, which is tilled to its utmost capacity; that by their system of national railways they have created a tourist industry which brings untold wealth into their country, while the most beautiful parts of our Highlands are a forbidden country to all mankind except the deer stalker.

In no country in the world is there such waste and misuse of lands suitable for agricultural or pastoral purpose, solely to provide sport for a few rich people, as in Scotland.

The Deer Forest Cancer

This rodent cancer which we call deer forests, that is lands from which sheep and cattle have been wholly or partially removed in the interests of deer stalking, is draining the life blood of the country.

Red deer are indigenous to the British Isles, but never in historical times have they been so numerous in Scotland as they are today.

The first glimpse we get of them and of the Highlands is from the Romans, who as Gibbons says *“turned with contempt from gloomy hills assailed by the winter tempest, from lakes concealed in a blue mist, and from cold and lonely heaths over which the deer of the forest were chased by a troop of naked barbarians.”*

From the Ossianic poetry we learn that hunting the deer was most popular as a sport and for food. When the Christian missionaries arrived we find a Caledonian Chief asking Columba, *“Am faigh sinn feidh is coinn’nad neamh a Chaluim? (In this heaven of yours Columba, shall we chase the red deer with dogs.)”*

As civilisation and agriculture advanced the deer ceased to be of importance, indeed it became a pest, and hounds were kept for the sole purpose of extirpating such a destructive animal. Its depredations were then, as now, often ruinous to the agriculturists contiguous to its haunts, for it ravaged their crops. Its numbers decreased and reached the lowest limit about the end of the eighteenth century.

Modern farming having succeeded in procuring fresh and tender meat at all seasons of the year, venison has ceased to be a popular food. Before it can be used it requires to be kept until putrefaction has set in. When salted, as much of it used to be, and some of it still is, for use in the winter and spring, it is consumable only by those to whom Nature has given strong teeth and keen digestive powers. If today venison were

offered to the inmates, it would breed a riot in a workhouse. Many, perhaps most, of the stags shot by the gentleman stalker, and of the hinds shot by the *ghillies* to preserve the due proportion of the sexes, are left on the hillsides to be devoured by the birds and wild animals.

It will come as a shock to most people to learn that at least a fifth, probably nearly a fourth, of the whole of Scotland is reserved for the preservation of this useless and harmful if picturesque animal. Indeed the Highlands are for the most part one vast forest, since there are no fences to prevent the herds from ranging across Scotland from one side to the other.

Extent of Deer Forests

The last return (1912) made to Parliament of "*Deer Forests and lands devoted exclusively to Sport*," shows a forest area of 3,599,744 acres, of which rather more than one-third is below the 1,000 feet altitude; but the figures quoted do not give all the truth, for not all the mountains and moors where deer are shot come into the category of deer forest, and many estates where there are cattle and sheep escape the obloquy attaching to the name. The Duke of Argyll, it is stated, declined to give the particulars required in respect that the lands were not exclusively under deer.

At this period (1912) the acreage over which the deer was entitled to roam cannot be placed at less than 4,000,000 acres. A gentleman who has first-hand and intimate knowledge of the subject assures the writer that the deer forest area today far exceeds that figure.

Since 1912 a diminution of acreages has taken place; some forests have been acquired for silviculture and some have been restored to sheep farming, but the total decrease is only 152,000 acres, still leaving the official figures, as per the Departmental Committee Report, about three and a half million acres.

In 1924 deer stalking is reported to have come back again to pre-war popularity, and no doubt the process of afforestation of more lands will continue, there being no immediate prospects of Government prohibiting an increase of forests.

Destruction by Vagrant Deer

The four million acres estimated to be under deer leaves out of account the large tracts outside the forests over which the deer, a vagrant and wandering animal, habitually trespass. In Mull, for instance, there are five forests occupying about one-third of the island, but the deer wanders over the other two-thirds, and 15 – 20 miles from the forests, on the Sound of Iona, the small holders have to watch at night to protect their crops from devastation by this cunning and destructive marauder.

Had there been any fair-play in the land laws, every man leasing a forest would have been forced, at his own expense, or that of the owner to build a fence to protect the tillers of the soil from depredations by the deer. The deer is a curse, and scandals of this nature which exist all over the Highlands, rarely or ever appear in the press.

Population Supported by Deer Forests

The three and a half million acres, officially returned as deer forest, give permanent employment to only 881 men.

In these deer forests and adjacent lands, also practically derelict, it is estimated that 25,000 families could find happy homes and useful occupations. It is, maintained by some who are no mean authorities that that number could be provided for in the Sutherland forest alone, and careful perusal of the appendices to the Napier Report, 1884, conveys the impression that the higher estimate is probably nearer actuality.

To form an idea of the large and virile population which the Highlands could maintain, we need only remember that exactly 200 years ago – 1725 – the Black Watch Regiment was embodied near Aberfeldy, and that today the lands on which these men were reared are, through mismanagement and misdirection on the part of the landlords and their factors and Edinburgh lawyers, practically a wilderness. This and many other corps raised in the Highlands by voluntary enlistment were drawn from the surplus population which existed in the pre-potato era, when the land could not maintain so large a number as it now could when the potato is a favourite food with all classes.

It will surprise most people to learn the potato began to be cultivated in Scotland only about 1739. The reception of this new plant was delayed in Scotland, the clergy asserting it to be a sinful plant, because no mention of it had been made of it in the Bible.

When we find such childish credulity prevalent in the 18th century we need not be surprised at the general acceptance which today is given to the abominable untruth sedulously propagated with the passionate confidence of interested falsehood, by selfish unpatriotic owners and tenants of the forests and their dependants that the forest lands are fit only for deer.

A Banffshire adage handed down from antiquity says: *“If Scotland but kent what heather could dae she would be the richest country’o a’ the three.”* Meaning, of course that the most virile and prolific populations are reared on the heath lands.

Grouse Moors

In addition to the Deer Forests there are in Scotland, mainly in the Highlands, about 1,400 grouse moors which constitute a scandal second only to the forests in respect that in the interests of sport, the creation of small holdings is prevented, the stock of sheep and cattle on the moors is reduced to increase the bag of grouse, and also with the same object, the heather is not sufficient burnt. In some leases the burning of it is prohibited. The grouse have a preference for young heather, and the sheep for young grass.

Economic and Political Causes

It is necessary to trace and explain the economic and political causes that have led to the desolation and economic ruin of the Highlands and the preservation, on so huge a scale, of a wild animal like the deer.

About the time the Clans were being scattered at Culloden, metallurgists were discovering that coal possessed as high a calorific power, and could be more profitably employed than charcoal which till then had been used, as in the time of Tubal Cain, for smelting ores. The smelters turned to coal because the supply of charcoal was running out – the natural forests which at one time were spread over Britain were exhausted. The last of them to disappear for conversion into charcoal were those in the Highlands. Hence the reason why such vast tracks of our country are treeless, and how we talk of deer forests, where often no trees are visible.

In time anterior to the invention of gunpowder and fire-arms, the deer could exist only in real forest, for there it could best protect the young from eagles. When eagles appeared the mother deer called her young under the shelter afforded by the tree branches, for there it was secure.

With this discovery of the metallurgists, commences what is known as the industrial age which has, for the few, produced “*wealth beyond the dreams of avarice*,” but for the many, poverty, exhausting toil and a degrading misery which is appalling and calls to Heaven for redress.

It is these wealthy few who are responsible for the almost complete obliteration of the Highland rural population and the desolation we see in the glens.

The Potato

Another cause which contributed to increase the wealth of this few, and which was the primary cause of rural depopulation in the Lowlands as well as in the Highlands, was the introduction of the potato plant into Europe.

By using the potato greater food value can be grown on a given area than by any other vegetable or cereal.

On the great plain of Europe which extends from the Straits of Dover to the Urals, the potato – a sun plant – grows luxuriantly, for in these regions the summer days are long and the nights short. The inhabitants became potato eaters, and the population increased rapidly. While Northern Europe produced plenty of this essential food, it could not produce sufficient wool, for the ground in winter is covered in snow, and sheep in sufficient numbers could not be reared. Even in the pre-potato era, indeed from the dawn of history, the Northern Europeans drew wool supplies from England.

To supply this increased demand for wool some parts of England and the whole of the Border lands were depopulated to make room for sheep.

After the Rebellion of 1745 clearances were effected in the Eastern Counties and the more accessible parts of Perthshire, and gradually the depopulation proceeded northward and some of the remote districts were cleared, in the recollection of men still living.

Before the clearances took place the Highlands were populated by a comfortable peasantry whose interests were cultivation and pasturing. The people themselves had

built and maintained their houses, reclaimed the land, drained and fenced it, and kept down the vermin.

Their animals were the cow, horse, goat and small black-wooled sheep indigenous to the Highlands and still reared in the Northern Isles.

Tenant Right in the Old Days

The agricultural tenants in the Highlands by mere immemorial use and wont had an inalienable inherited title to security of tenure in their holdings, while rent and services were duly rendered: a custom which was inevitably embodied in the reciprocal necessities of chief and clansman as long as these relations remained a reality.

The chief was not the owner of the soil, he was *primus inter pares* the first among equals. On more than one occasion a chief has been deposed and another placed in the position.

Tenants Lose Their Rights

As a result of the criminal folly of the rebellion of 1745, this title to security our English Government by Royal Charter transferred without any compassion to the chiefs, and the independent clansman passed, and sank into the same position as the Lowland or English peasant, a mere serf of the feudal lord. This iniquitous legislation ruined the Highlands, and had almost procured the obliteration of the Highland people, when, after a century's experience of it, Parliament was compelled to restore by the Acts of 1886 and 1911, to the smaller tenantry, who had survived a century of oppression and rack-renting, some of their old rights to security of tenure in their holdings and possessions as long as rents, fixed judicially, were paid. These Acts gave no compensation to the landlords.

Revelations of the Crofter Commission

The Crofters' Commission reports which led to the passing of the 1886 Act disclosed a most disgraceful condition of affairs in the Highland counties. Noble Dukes and other proprietors, with one or two notable exceptions, rack-rented (*i.e.* sweated) their crofters as unconscionably as any *petty capitalist* in Leeds or Whitechapel sweated his workers. The Duke of Argyll of that day, for instance, was a most persistent and unrepentant sweater. The Commission under the Act reduced his rents roughly 45 percent and wiped off all the arrears. The rents paid prior to the passing of the Act were largely provided by the sons and daughters of the crofters working in the South, with whom filial piety was strong, who out of their hard-won earnings remitted moneys to the old folks at home to help pay the Ducal rack-rents. Thus we find great Dukes mean enough to accept rents which common sense might have told them were really stolen from servant girls and ploughboys.

A Remnant Saved

The Act of 1886 passed at the eleventh hour saved the remnant of the Highland people from obliteration. Its principles of security of tenure and fair rents require to be extended, as demanded by the National Farmers Union, to all farms irrespective of rent or area, if, in the National interest, we are to increase production and reclaim lands now derelict.

Sutherland Clearances

This fairly happy and contented peasantry which existed under the old unwritten law or custom was in a most iniquitous and cruel manner evicted from its homes and farms, because of the unrelenting avarice of the landlords.

The high price of wool and mutton resulting from the increased demands of the populations of Europe enticed speculative sheep farmers from the South. These knew that the land brought into such a high state of cultivation by the old tenantry would, when let down to grass, for years return a much larger profit under sheep. This knowledge induced them to offer larger rents than those paid by the indigenous population.

The largest and most infamous of these clearances was that on the Sutherland estates owned by the Leveson-Gower family who had acquired them by marriage: Leveson was a London moneylender who had inserted in the marriage contract of his only child with Mr Gower, conditions requiring the inheritors of his fortune to bear his name.

The Duke of Sutherland who made these clearances was a man of enormous possessions.

He coveted the humble clansmen's crofts and farms and accepted his time-serving factor's suggestions that his mammoth income could be materially increased by evicting the tenantry on the good lands in the straths and glens, and advised him to dump the people on the seashore, to become at a moment's notice fishermen, landless cottars, and paupers.

In two years the houses of 15,000 people were destroyed, houses which were theirs and not his, but which the Duke "*shuffled from their owners by legal chicane.*" All for ourselves and nothing for other people seems in every age to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind as it was of this Duke; and thus, to gratify the most childish, the meanest and most sordid of vanities; superfluous palaces and a frenzied luxury, he sentenced thousands to die of slow starvation, and many young women to a life of prostitution.

Principal Rainy, speaking on this question of Highland Clearances, in the Free Church Assembly (1888) said:

"I heard in my father's house a man asked, What did you see? Do tell what you heard, but what did you see? and he replied, I saw the houses burning from end to end of the strath."

Feeble, grey-headed men were exiled from the land of their fathers: women, who might surely claim some of the tenderness that surrounds the name of the mother, were denied the consideration that even brutes extend to their kind.

Atholl Evictions

To the Atholl family belongs the unenviable distinction of being the first to introduce evictions on a great scale about 1784.

The people of Glen Tilt were the victims. A typical Highland community of small holders, who shared a common pasture, fished the Tilt without hindrance and enjoyed the pleasures of the chase, as were their rights by immemorial custom.

Higher up is another glen, the Tarf: here the Glen Tilt people grazed their cattle in summer. The Duke of Atholl had a taste for deer, a trait not discreditable, and still characteristic of the family. He converted the summer grazings into a deer forest, and the Glen Tilt people had to acquiesce: but the deer came down to the Tilt valley and ravaged the small holders' crops. The Duke only laughed and added another slice to his forest: and then the clansmen were made to bid farewell to the sweet healthy homes of their fathers.

This rapacious rascal was the son or grand-son of the Duke of Atholl who was base enough to accept a bribe of £1,000 to acquiesce in the suppression of the Scottish Parliament.

No one can regard the baseness and venality displayed by the Scottish nobles in accepting bribes to vote for the abolition of their country's Parliament without disgust and anger. Some of them actually sold themselves for £50, some for £100, but Atholl valued himself higher. He protested against the Union on the ground that the Scots nobles were not to be admitted to the Westminster Parliament on the same terms as their English compeers, and that the Scottish members were limited to 45 seats in the House of Commons. He thus raised his price, got a £1,000 and that silenced him. When afterwards charged with having sold his country he cynically replied that he thanked God he had a country to sell.

He and his successors believed in the principles of the science which teaches that the greatest evil to be apprehended by a landed proprietor is an increase of population, and the greatest good an increase of rent. Deer stalkers are by the necessities of their position, the natural enemies of the rural population.

Other Clearances Drain Highland Life-Blood

Similar clearances, equally criminal in equity if not in law, were carried out all over, and the Highlands were drained, not of the superfluity of the population, but of the whole mass of the inhabitants, dispossessed by an unrelenting avarice now found to be as short-sighted as it was selfish and unjust.

Nowhere within the limits of these islands or, indeed, anywhere else at anytime, have blacker or more foul deeds been committed in the sacred name of property than in the

Highlands of Scotland in the hundred years commencing with the clearances of Glen Tilt, and ending with those of Leckmeln in 1883.

The traveller in Canada and New Zealand still finds that the evicted who escaped to the colonies and their descendents to the third generation are enemies of Britain because of the landlord persecution which drove their forefathers from their native home.

Why Did Highlanders Submit?

It is a matter of astonishment that any British people should have so tamely submitted. The explanation of the enigma is that the Highlands were permeated then with a deep religious sense; the people lent a willing ear to the teachings of the ministers, the clergy of the Church of Scotland, who wielded the power of the iron hand, which left its impress on the social life of the Highlands.

The minister was regarded as the stern oracle of truth and the strict interpreter of the meaning of the ways of God to man. These men, with one or two noble exceptions, were in reality the servile tools of the landowners, whose powers they feared and whose support they received.

In their own interests, and in those of their earthly lord and master, they assured the people that all their troubles were but part of the punishment inflicted on them by Providence in the course of working out their redemption.

Then, as now, the clergy of the Established Church readily mobilised themselves in support of the oppressors and depopulators.

Protests

There were at this time two men in Sutherlandshire in official positions “*who loved righteousness and hated iniquity*” whose names deserve commemoration. The Rev. Donald Sage denounced the Duke, his factors and lawyers, and called on his clerical brothers to prevent the Duke’s rascality, but in vain, and the clergyman hero, persecuted by his brethren died of a broken heart.

The Sheriff, Mr MacKid, protested against the commission of such crime, and refused to sign the necessary documents. He was taken to Edinburgh, broken and died in poverty.

If there had been a Scottish Parliament sitting in Edinburgh at this time it is impossible to believe that such crimes could have been permitted, resulting, as is now seen, in the destruction of the Highlands.

Some of the great families on whose estates these atrocities took place actually denied that they ever occurred, and spent thousands of pounds buying up and destroying all books and pamphlets descriptive of the clearances.

Others employed in their defence mercenary writers, whose methods mainly consisted in condoning the crimes by calumniating the victims.

The history of the clearances rests on the solid basis of contemporary records, and is also written in indelible characters on the surface of the soil.

The commissioners and statesmen who have studied the Highland land question are met with, what seems to them to be, the insuperable difficulty of housing the people with whom they desire to re-colonise the Highlands. We are such a class-ridden nation that it never enters the heads of our statesmen that the present day representatives of these Dukes and other depopulators should now out of their colossal incomes be compelled to rebuild the houses their predecessors destroyed. The results would be a much needed increase of the rural population and a great enhancement in the value of the estates.

Thomas Carlyle's Judgement

Thomas Carlyle, after reading Scott's *History of Scotland*, made the following entry in his diary (*Carlyle to the French Revolution*, D A Wilson, p175):

"It is noteworthy that the nobles of the country have maintained a quite, despicable behaviour from the times of Wallace downwards. A selfish, ferocious, famishing, unprincipled set of hyenas, from whom at no time and in no way has the country derived any benefit. The day is coming when these our modern hyenas – tho' toothless, still mischievous and greedy beyond limit – will quickly I hope – be paid off canaille faineante, que faites-vous la? (Ye do-nothing dogs what are ye doing there?) Down with your double barrels; take spades, if ye can do no better, and work or die!"

Those who are aware of what solid history records of the doings, in quite modern times, of the Sutherlands, Atholls, Argylls, and other 'noble' families agree there is ample justification for Carlyle's picturesque paragraph.

Deterioration – First Sheep, Then Deer

About 1860 – 70 the process of violently converting the Highlands into sheep-walks was completed, and many large fortunes were acquired by sheep farmers.

Then a great and, to most people, an unforeseen change began. When lands are grazed exclusively by a sheep stock deterioration of the pasture soon takes place; the coarse grasses increase, the surface becomes overgrown with moss, the bracken destroys the better patches. Drains become choked, diseases of sheep increase, and the number of sheep which the ground can carry diminishes. Rents fell, and the increasing importations of Australian and other overseas wool and mutton flooded the markets; rents in many cases disappeared altogether. Lands became derelict because no one would rent them, and the deer took possession of their own accord.

This economic pressure does not, however, account for the great increase in deer forest area.

In many cases sporting tenants offered higher rents than farmers could pay, and often bought up the rights of adjoining sheep farms. Farms were bought for the express purpose of forming deer forests.

In some cases crofters, under the Act of 1886, were bought out at fancy prices, their houses demolished, and their well-cultivated lands thrown back into wilderness. Under deer the deterioration of the grasses caused by a sheep stock is still further aggravated.

The Deer Forests Committee estimated the annual diminution in production due to the existence of the deer forests at £513,000 in 1920, but who can calculate the real *loss* arising through these beautiful mountain lands – one-fifth of Scotland – being almost denuded of its human population, the deterioration of its soil, loss through neglect of tree planting, the strangling of the tourist industry, the injury inflicted on the British people by forbidding them access to their own beautiful mountains?

Crofters Commission

Hugh Miller, who knew the Highlands better than any man, writing in his paper, the *Witness*, June 24th 1854, and pointing out that while the confiscation of the common lands in England led to increased production, the contrary effect resulted in Scotland from *“the introduction of the English doctrine of property into the Highlands, where the old system of customary occupation was entirely superseded.....which threw vast territories into the absolute control of single individuals who had only been representatives of their tribe,”* and in Scotland, he continues: *“The lands, instead of being brought into cultivation, have been herried to make way for grouse and deer; and, as far as the production of food is concerned – food available for the ordinary purposes of life – hundreds of thousands of acres that once grew and supported soldiers second to none who ever stepped, might as well be sunk in the bottom of the sea. Not only are they not cultivated, but in some cases they are not even to be seen.”*

The growth of deer forests and grouse moors at the expense of cultivation and grazings has gone on since the time of Hugh Miller, and one foreign gentleman has actually created a deer forest extending right across Scotland from the North Sea to the Atlantic. The Scottish people became perturbed at the sight of the progressive desolation of the Highlands, and in 1884 a Commission appointed by the Government to inquire into the land affairs of the crofting counties reported that the enormous area of nearly two million acres had been converted into forest, and said:

“Who would admit that Scotland should be made a wilderness, even if the inhabitants were provided with better lands and more lucrative occupations elsewhere? No-one could contemplate the conversion of the whole extent of good pasture land, and of possible arable land at a moderate elevation in the Highlands, into forest without alarm and reprobation, and it is scarcely necessary to say that any serious movement towards such an issue would be arrested by the force of public opinion, attended with an amount of irritation much to be deprecated. We do not anticipate with any degree of certainty that the contingency to which we have adverted would arise, but considering the divergency of opinion expressed, the possibility of unfortunate results, and the prevailing excitement in connection with this question, we may well consider whether Your Majesty’s Government and Parliament may not contemplate such legislative restrictions as would restrain the progressive and immoderate afforestation of the land, and allay the apprehensions which are widely felt upon the subject.”

The men who composed this Commission were nearly all of the landlord class: Napier and Ettrick; Lochiel; Sir K Mackenzie; Mr Fraser-Mackintosh, MP; Sheriff Nicholson; and Donald Mackinnon, Celtic Professor in Edinburgh University, and surely one would think that any Government would at once proceed to carry out a recommendation from such men.

Nothing Done

Nothing was done to prevent the increase of deer forests. The Royal Commission of 1892 also called on the Government to put a check on the spread of deer forests, and scheduled in the crofting counties alone 1,782,785 acres of land suitable for extension of existing small holdings and the creation of new ones and moderate sized farms. Again nothing was done to mitigate the evil. Afforestation of good land continued, and now the area of deer forests cannot be placed at less than 4,000,000 acres, or a fifth of Scotland. The Departmental Committee on Deer Forests appointed in 1919 reported that *“the withdrawal of so large an area from pastoral uses was from the national point of view much to be regretted.”*

Public opinion, misled by a venal Press, has not arrested the movement which the Commissioners of 1884 regarded with alarm and reprobation.

The Great “Land Trust”

For dominating the Press, and by it forming public opinion in its own selfish interests, we have in this country the greatest Trust that has ever been seen – the Land Trust, which has existed since the Norman Conquest, has desolated the countryside, and created the hideous slums where hard-labouring citizens live under inhuman conditions.

It was this Trust that really extinguished the Scots Parliament. The men who controlled it – the great English landowning Whig and Tory magnificos – knew that the Scots were a democratic people who had made their church, with its synodical form of government, the most democratically governed church in Christendom, that they were in the process of democratising their Parliament, and that a single chamber Parliament in Edinburgh would be a menace to the land monopoly in both countries. The Trust therefore suppressed it as, 86 years later, it waged war on France to prevent popular government there. Having extinguished the Scottish Parliament, the Trust immediately shackled Scotland’s Democratic Church by placing the appointment of the Parish Ministers in the hands of the heritors that is in the hands of the aristocracy who appointed their younger sons, dependants, and those who recommended themselves to the patron by their subservience. Those who controlled the Trust knew that the best way to obtain the acquiescence of a people in any course is to enlist the adherence of its clergy, an order of men that can scarce ever be forced, as the Stuart Kings learned to their cost, but which can be managed as easily as any other by exciting the fears and expectations of the greater part of the individuals of that order – the fear of deprivation and the expectation of further preferment. This wicked interference in our Church affairs by an English Parliament, only partially remedied by the Act of 1874, led to secessions from and final disruption of the Church, and to 200 years of internecine strife and bitterness in the religious life of the people, the end of which is not yet in sight, for the Church question can be finally settled only by a

Scottish Parliament, which will doubtless follow the example of our colonies and of the USA, countries which now contain a preponderant majority of Protestants and where no religious sect enjoys any privileges or immunities more than the another.

This deflection of Church patronage from the people to the landowners made the Established Church clergy in Scotland, as in England, the stubborn allies of the reaction which has led to the deplorable conditions of our day.

Trusts are necessarily always jealous and are a public danger, as we see today when we find the Drink Trust moving heaven, earth, the nether regions and its submissive vassal the Unionist Party to extinguish the Carlisle Licensing Experiment, for obviously that is a deadly menace to the financial interests of the Beer Barons.

This Land Trust has a house of Parliament all to itself, which most members enter merely because they took the trouble to be born, others by making heavy pecuniary payments which do not go into the public exchequer, and only a few as a titular reward for eminent public services.

We hear much of alleged corruption in other countries, but Great Britain is the only country in the world where men, even though of doubtful character, can buy seats in Parliament not only for the duration of their own lives but also for their descendants to the remotest generations.

Sale of Honours

The election expenses and the other funds used to debauch constituencies in favour of Unionist and Liberal candidates are largely obtained by the sale, almost open and flagrant, of hereditary honours and knighthoods to wealthy usurers and to the great profiteers who have amassed colossal fortunes in cornering the food and drink of the people.

It is this inhuman Land Trust that has prevented the recommendations of these Commissioners being carried out.

Campbell-Bannerman and Gladstone

It also defeated Campbell-Bannerman's policy of "*making the land a treasure house for the people instead of a pleasure ground for the rich.*"

Mr. Gladstone thirty years ago, delivering his last speech and farewell testimony in the House of Commons, pointing to the House of Lords, said "*there is the enemy.*"

It is there yet, and likely to remain until some great cataclysm sweeps it away. Meanwhile, it crowds its sons, uncles and wives on to the benches of the Houses of Commons, as an effective shield, defending the arrogant pretensions of the landlords, urban and territorial, and perpetuating evils from which the people suffer.

Example of Switzerland

We should take an example from the mountaineers of Switzerland. In 1862, to purify their public life, they abolished all hereditary titles, and the control of public affairs is confided only to those who have mandates from the constituencies.

What aggravates the position in this country is that now the British aristocracy is decadent. As one of themselves has recently said, *“The fine flower of the British aristocracy has faded and has given place to the fungoid growth of Plutocracy.”* Like the Royalities of Europe its members have for generations been marrying and inter-marrying into the same families, and now many of the hereditary members of the House of Lords are suffering from inbreeding or cretinism. The women of this caste are, through their soft luxurious upbringing and enervating habits, unable to bring forth strong, healthy, brainy children.

Degenerate Aristocracy

The aristocracy from its own ranks can no longer find competent leaders, and it has to look to mercenary political adventurers to lead it in the preservation of its privileges and monopolies.

The Scottish aristocracy is particularly weak. Successive generations of Highland proprietors have made a terrible mess of things. While Scotsmen sprung from the humblest origins have become famous all over the world for their organising capacity, the Scottish aristocrats have only succeeded in ruining the Highlands and impoverishing themselves.

To leave the land in the control of the present owners, whose mismanagement has depopulated the Lowlands and made the Highlands a wilderness, is to invite irretrievable disaster.

The landlord class, with a few notable exceptions, are never leaders in technical progress. They never equip themselves by scientific training for the important work of land management. They are, in fact, mere rent receivers, who retain immense powers of obstruction, standing in the way of more progressive management, and checking the initiative of the actual producers.

In many cases they are mere nominal proprietors; their estates are often encumbered, and there is no family of any consequence in Scotland whose affairs are not really controlled by a hereditary vulture that preys on it in the shape of an Edinburgh firm of Writers to the Signet.

A Lady Champion of Landlordism

Among those prominent in opposing Scottish Home Rule, and in defence of the deer forests, the Duchess of Atholl occupies first place. In the House of Commons (Hansard, 9th May 1924) she said:

“In the Highlands and Islands we have an area of great beauty and charm which affords a delightful pleasure ground every year – and I am not in the least ashamed that it should be a pleasure ground for the people from the towns. I have spent all my life looking at deer forests, and I know something about them. I do not wish to live in

them. This land, however, has a certain value, because it brings holiday makers and sportsmen up to the Highlands. Unquestionably it brings a lot of money into the Highlands."

Her Grace's knowledge of the deer forests ought to be good; her public spirit is of course undoubted, but it is amazing to see how her class prejudices, the powerful influences of prepossession and interest, blind her to the plain facts of the situation.

The deer forests are not a pleasure ground for the people from the towns; that is the last thing the owners and tenants desire them to be.

In order that a few wealthy men may be able to shoot deer occasionally millions of acres are kept a solitary wilderness. These vast areas might provide a livelihood for tens of thousands of landholders, foresters, hotel-keepers, and others, as in Switzerland, catering for hundreds of thousands of holiday-makers. The owners of the deer forests deliberately prevent this; they do not wish to see the Highlands as popular with tourists as are the English Lake District and the Isle of Man. Nor do they wish to see an increasing rural population.

Freedom from the Plague of Crofters

The advertisements of estates for sale frequently mention "*No crofters*" or "*only a few crofters*" on the estate, and there has been no remission of the inhuman pressure on the inhabitants of the glens and no check to the depopulation of the Highlands since the period of the great clearances. The deadly work has gone steadily on, and if the rate of extermination has been slightly reduced at any time since 1850 or 1870 it has only been because there was a smaller population left to extinguish.

When the Roman armies first invaded Scotland the Caledonian leader said of them: "*They make a solitude and call it peace.*" Today he might say of the nobles of his own country, "*They make a wilderness and call it a pleasure ground.*"

In consequence of this policy of exclusion, with almost the whole of the Highlands appropriated for deer forests and other sporting purposes, there is little room for the tourist or the Scottish people themselves.

Unemployment, decay of agriculture, poverty, the worst housing conditions in Europe, emigration and rural depopulation have been the consequences of the evil work that began with the barbarous clearances of the Highland peasant a hundred years ago.

The state of things is so monstrous and the facts so indisputable that if her Grace cannot see them in their true perspective it is because she suffers from the blinding effects of acquiescence in what is familiar.

The total rental of the deer forests in the year 1912 (the highest) was only £188,788, in 1921 only £120,000 – a mere bagatelle in comparison with what the rents would be if these forests had been properly utilised for small holdings, silviculture, and a tourist industry.

Swiss Milk for Highland Children

In some districts of the Highlands the children have to be fed on Swiss milk, because the meadows in which the cows could be grazed are required for wintering the deer.

Opinion of Commissioners

Lord Napier, Lochiel, and their fellow Commissioners in 1884 wrote as follows:

“The crofting and cottar population of the Highlands and Islands, small though it be, is a nursery of good workers and good citizens for the whole of the Empire. In this respect the stock is exceptionally valuable. By sound physical constitution, native intelligence, and good moral training, it is particularly fitted to recruit the people of our industrial centres who, without such help from wholesome sources in rural districts, would degenerate under the influences of bad lodging, unhealthy occupation, and enervating habits. It cannot be indifferent to the whole nation, constituted as the nation now is, to possess within its borders a people hardy, skilful, intelligent, and prolific as an ever-flowing fountain of renovating life.”

To allow the Highland population to be obliterated – to permit 4,000,000 acres – some of it the best land in the Highlands – to be under deer, and at least another million acres to be partially devastated by deer, when these lands could be inhabited by such a population as the Commissioners describe, is a Crime against Humanity; is High Treason against the Scottish Race.

The Commissioners of 1884, dreading an increase of the deer forests, warned the Government, and called on it to prevent such a contingency, which they denounced in the strongest language, regarding it with *“alarm and reprobation.”* The contingency has arrived. Since 1884 the forests have doubled in area, and the patriotic Duchess says that she is not the *“least ashamed.”*

Small Holdings Withheld

There are at present (Return for 1923) over 10,000 applications for small holdings before the Board of Agriculture, and there would be double or treble that number if men thought that there was any hope of getting a holding anywhere in Scotland.

Thousands of these applicants, nearly all of them doomed to disappointment, are ex-Service men, to whom promises of such holdings were held out during the war. Their services in the war, now that the danger is over, are forgotten – are, in fact, denied by the action of selfish unpatriotic landowners who wish to diminish the rural population. An indignant bard puts it thus:

Ye remnant of the brave,
Who charge when the pipes are heard,
Don't think, my lads, that you fight for your own –
'Tis for the good of the land.

And when the fight is done,
And you come back over the foam;

“Well done!” they say, “you are good and true,
But we cannot give you a home.”

For the hill we want for the deer,
And the glen the birds enjoy;
And bad for the game is the smoke of the cot
And the song of the crofter boy.

Mackenzie MacBryde

When her Grace says that she is not the least ashamed of all this, we are not, I am sure, to assume that she is a callous, hard-hearted, unfeeling person, but rather that she has never taken the trouble to inquire what the Commissioners of 1884 and of 1892 and Sir John Stirling-Maxwell and his Committee of 1919 say. What, in fact, we are to assume is that she has been content to accept the twaddle of drawing-rooms as exact truth.

Surely there is a moral obligation on all those who presume to lead public opinion, who occupy seats in Parliament, there to decide the destinies of the Empire, to carefully instruct their own minds, to ascertain the real facts, and be guided by expert advice.

The electors who sent her Grace to Parliament (the working men and women of Kinross and West Perthshire) may well complain that she has gained their confidence by false pretences, for there is nothing in Scottish politics today more obvious than that the men who created the deer forests as they now are, and the men and women who defend them, are traitors to the Empire, striking at its most vital and vulnerable part – its MANPOWER.

Scotland like Ancient Italy – On the Road to Ruin

“*Latifundia perdidere Italiam*” said Pliny. The great estates ruined Ancient Rome exactly as they are today ruining Scotland by extirpating the rural population and throwing land out of cultivation.

When we find her Grace displaying such a superficial knowledge of the deer forest question no surprise need be felt that she is also unable to see that the system which she defends, with its waste, its unpatriotic use of the nation’s heritage in the land through excessive game preservation, and the consequent depopulation of the rural areas, is the chief cause of the appalling rise in the low-income population now inhabiting Scotland.

The Church

The Glasgow Established Church Presbytery endeavours to acquire a reputation for “*patriotism*” by denouncing the existence in Scotland’s industrial regions of a large Irish population. These myopic clerics seem to think that this invasion of Irish can and ought to be abated or entirely prevented by legislation. They overlook the fact that without these Irish citizens the shipbuilding, coal mining, the shale oil, and other

important industries would be dislocated. No body of men in Scotland is more to blame for these labour conditions now prevailing on the coal belt than the Presbyteries of the Church of Scotland, for when the rural populations were evicted from their holdings the clergy, neglecting an obvious and sacred duty, remained either quiescent or actively supported the most callous and brutal evictions.

If the Scottish clergy had been, like the Irish, faithful to their flocks, their guides and protectors in temporal matters, today they would not be preaching in such empty churches situated among dense populations of men of a different faith. Scotland itself from its rural population would provide the labourers now obtained from Ireland.

*“Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
When wealth accumulates and men decay.”*

The inaction of the clergy, their acquiescence in the exclusion of the real wealth producers from the civilising effects of visits to and residence in those areas where nature is most lavish of splendour and majesty is astonishing. Can they escape being branded as mere hirelings of the wealthy few whose inhuman selfishness condemns the workers to live and die in the industrial slums, brutalised by hard work and by enervating habits? If the workers knew the innocent pleasures of which they are now deprived and the spiritual benefits they lose by their exclusion from the mountains of their own country, their young men would rise and drive all the deer on the mainland into the Pentland Firth.

As a result of deer afforestation in the Highlands, the deer, the fox, the rat, the eagle, the raven, the hooded crow, and other wild birds and beasts prevent production of, or devour, the food of tens of thousands of people.

In many places it is almost impossible to rear chickens, in the seaboard Western Counties, the grouse is disappearing, and lambs and even grown sheep are killed by the foxes. There are actually some proprietors, imbued with the silly traditions of English fox hunting, who will not allow the foxes in their deer forests to be destroyed.

Remedies

The remedies for these evils, which have long ago exceeded all reasonable limits, are, to carry out the recommendations of the various Commissions: retain and increase the people on the land, and encourage the growth of a vast Tourist Industry such as may be seen in Continental Countries, where people of moderate means are catered for, often by small landholders and cottagers whose houses are constructed to receive visitors.

It may be urged that our climate renders the creation of such an industry impossible: that is the view adopted by those who wish to make the Highlands a solitude, and accepted by the apathetic and indolent.

The climate of the Highlands is much maligned, but always remember that in the months August to September, which are not the best, the Highlands attract the richest people in the world who pay enormous sums to keep poorer people away from the mountains and glens.

If you go to Switzerland in summer the mosquito will suck your blood: if you go in winter you are liable to have your nose frost bitten, or through the violent variations of the day and night temperatures, you are liable to contract pneumonia. Last winter about a dozen tourists were killed by avalanches. In the Highlands of Scotland you are not liable to any of these *indignities*.

There the temperature varies little, and in winter, from the Mull of Kintyre to the Orkney Islands all along the coast the weather is several degrees warmer than the Isle of Wight.

Having experienced the summer and winter climates of France, Switzerland, and Italy. I am convinced that for British people the climate of the Highlands is superior to that of these countries, whatever the Tourist Agencies may say to the contrary.

Scotland Must Have Self-Government

To restore the economic life of Scotland, Home Rule is an indispensable condition, for a Scots Parliament alone is qualified to enact the necessary legislation.

If we continue, as in the past, to follow the divisive courses of sectional opinion, some of us voting Unionist, others Liberals, and some Labour, it must be obvious that the necessary reforms can never be carried.

When Scotland regains its own Parliament it will be possible to settle the land question on lines which will encourage workers to go back to the land, and giving full security to the cultivator, will increase production and enrich the nation.

It is the universal experience that when the cultivator is secure in his holding and possessions, and not liable to capricious, arbitrary or stupid interference, he makes the land fertile as in the time of Abraham. As Arthur Young has said, place a man in a garden with insecure tenure and he will turn it into a wilderness, but give him waste land with security and he will transform it into a garden.

The reader who wishes corroboration of Young's statement will find it at Wyllieland, near Kilmarnock, There a large farm has been transferred from one farmer, "*with an eye on his factor and laird,*" to eight independent smallholders, and the production of the soil is increased almost ten times in money value and the population increased fivefold.

Example of The Colonies

When the Colonies had to adopt a popular self-government they copied, as did also Switzerland and other countries, the Federal constitution of the USA, described by Mr Gladstone as an imperishable monument to the genius and wisdom of those who framed it, and which is now the oldest constitution in the world. It provides a Parliament for each of the 48 States forming the Union. Canada, with a population of 8¾ millions, has 9 Parliaments. Australia, with 5½ million has 7 Parliaments, and South Africa, with 7 millions, blacks and whites, has one Parliament and 4 Provincial

Councils, or local Parliaments, elected every three years. While Great Britain with 43 millions, has only one Parliament.

It is essential for the well-being of the inhabitants of England and Scotland that many questions of urgent importance be settled otherwise than through the cumbersome legislature that sits at Westminster.

Authorities Relied on in Drafting this Pamphlet

The general reader should peruse Dr EA Baker's books *The Forbidden Land* and *The Highlands with Rope and Rucksack* (Wetherby, London)

The more serious inquirer should read the following works:

The Crofters Commission Report, 1884. Lord Napier and Ettrick, Chairman. This is the most important as well as the best written historical document ever published about the Highlands. Its appendices are especially valuable.

The Highlands and Islands Commission Report, 1892. Sheriff Brand, Chairman.

Departmental Committee Report on Deer Forests, 1919. Sir John Stirling-Maxwell, Bart., Chairman.

The works of: Hugh Miller; Professor JS Blackie; MacLeod's *Gloomy Memories*; Mackenzie's *History of the Highland Clearances*; Macaulay's *History of England*; Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*; Mrs Grant's *Letters from the Mountains*; Esslemont's *Land Tenure* (Milne & Hutchison, Aberdeen); *Scottish Land Enquiry Report* (Liberal Party Publication Department); Thomas Johnston's *History of the Working Classes*; Professor John Wilson's *Our Farm Crops*; Professor R Wallace's *Heather and Moor Burning for Grouse and Sheep*; Mathilde Blind (poetess) *The Heather on Fire*.

Excursions to various forests are recommended, if the visitors are accompanied by a guide who can point out the deterioration in the grasses and how the best lands have gone back to a state of nature through the absence of men and cattle.

Appendix: Extract from the Land Court's Annual Report for 1916

When Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was Prime Minister he introduced into the House of Commons a Scottish Land-holders Bill calculated to carry out his policy of making the land of Scotland:

“a treasure house for the people instead of a pleasure ground for the rich.”

This Bill was twice rejected by the House of Lords and when Sir Henry died the new leader of the Liberal Party agreed to the House of Lords' amendments. The Bill was passed and is known as the Act of 1911. After five years' experience of it the Scottish Land Court under the presidency of Lord Kennedy, than whom no more patriotic and clear-headed a Scotsman ever lived wrote as follows:

“There is every reason to fear that unless the acts intended to preserve and extend small holdings are effectively reformed, at least to the extent of urgent necessary amendments, and as soon as practicable, and unless the system of law and policy which places the preservation of deer and other game above the production of food, and which permits or encourages depopulation of the country for the pleasure of the wealthy of this and foreign nations is completely reversed, this decline of population will rapidly accelerate. The younger men will, in increasing numbers, emigrate to the colonies, which offer land on just and generous conditions, rather than continue to bear the evils and abuses which the beneficent intentions of the Legislature have mitigated but as yet have failed to suppress; or they will, as happened before the Crofters Act passed, refuse to obey Land and Game Laws which they feel to be unjust and often cruel, and which are clearly inconsistent with the spirit of modern legislation and the national interest.”

Imperfect and deficient as that Act of 1911 is, there is no doubt that if applied with a will it could do much to relieve the land hunger in Scotland. When one finds the present Secretary of State for Scotland (Sir John Gilmour) making it one of his first official announcements immediately after his appointment, that expenditure on Land Settlement would be curtailed, it is not surprising that his subordinates, the Board of Agriculture, followed his lead as far as possible.

As we have no Parliament in Scotland and as our representatives at Westminster, even if unanimous, are in a hopeless minority, Scottish interests must continue to be ignored and our people must continue to suffer.

About the Author

JM Macdiarmid an advocacy for Scottish Home Rule and the Labour candidate for Kinross and West Perthshire Division. He stood against the sitting Unionist candidate her Grace the Duchess of Atholl.