

The Highlander Newspaper

Selected Editorials - 1873 to 1882

John Murdoch

Reprinted from Calgacus, Issue No 2, Summer 1975

***The Highlander** was one of the UK's most radical campaigning weekly newspapers 'advocating the cause of the people, and particularly the right of the Gaelic people to their native soil'. Based in Inverness in the Scottish Highlands it was edited by [John Murdoch](#) and published between 1873 and 1882 when it closed its doors. This selection of 5 editorials by Murdoch gives a certain insight into the mind of this remarkable man. For Murdoch, land, morality, temperance, politics and the obligations on an editor and a newspaper were inextricably linked.*

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The Land Question

Wednesday, July 28th 1880

“You go to great extremes on the Land Question – Confiscation and Communism won’t do in this country.” We might ask what it is that does do, or will do in this country; and we might press the question to another point. Do we go to greater extremes than Moses and Nehemiah did? We never proposed either confiscation or communism; but the defenders of the present system, who try to knock ***The Highlander*** on the head with the word *communism* would do well to ask what the writer of the Acts of the Apostle meant when he said that the first Christians *“had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, as every man had need.”* When you think you are killing us with what you regard as a hard word, you are only knocking your head against a fact which is a great deal harder. Better for you to let communism alone until we force it on you.

“Well, but Confiscation? How are you to establish a peasant proprietary without confiscation?” Here again, you are most unfortunate in your weapon. Or, at least, you have got hold of the wrong end of it. We never proposed confiscation, any more than Mr Forester proposes it in his Irish *“Disturbance Bill;”* than Mr Gladstone did in his Irish Land Act, or than Sir Robert Peel did when he moved the repeal of the Corn Laws. But persons make reckless use of the word, thinking to excite ignorance and fear and selfishness against what they could not meet with any better arguments. Here again they run their heads against the harder facts, and send us to enquire – Even if we did propose confiscation, for the good of the community at large, is confiscation so new and unheard of in this country, that we should stand aghast at the bare mention of it? Were not many of the estates in this country given over to those who handed them down to the present owners, without any compensation to those from whom they were taken? What did the betrayed and defrauded clans get for the lands which were taken from them and given to recreant chiefs? What did the Roman Catholic Church and the monks and nuns get for the estates which are now in the possession of so many of our Scottish and English and Irish proprietors?

“Oh! But that is a different thing.” So it is, but what is the difference? Have the present owners any Divine right to what was taken, without compensation, from the previous owners?

“But what was down by law” And who made the law? Was it not made by the class who got possession of the confiscated property? And what is law? Just what the party or the class in power manages to put in the statute book; and what another class or

party cancels when it can. Law should be the servant of justice and goodness. When it is this, it is to be respected and obeyed; when it is not, it is to be set aside as quickly as possible to make room for what is. In this case in hand, the law confirms a large number of the confiscations of the past, and it cannot be quoted against confiscation of the future. But we never proposed confiscation, and even if we did, you only run your head once more against hard facts, when you try to silence legitimate discussion by branding what we say with an obnoxious word.

“You would do away with large estates. What then would become of large proprietors?” We might ask in return, what becomes of those who are without property in consequence of the estates being so large? Indeed one would think that these were far greater objects of solicitude than those, and we have every right to press our question before answering yours. These start in life ignorant and unskilled, in addition to their being without property; while, even if those were left without property tomorrow, they should have all the advantages of the means of education having been at their disposal, and that should make a world of difference in their favour. You, should, then, be more solicitous about those without property, than about the wealthy, who in the meantime have immense advantages in the race of riches, if not in the race of life.

“But you do not get over the charge by merely referring to past confiscations and communism”. No, but what is worse for you – you have to face the facts as well as the charges, and how have you done? We say that the charges are words thrown in the air as children threw firebrands and they fall on your own heads with deadly effect. But we will face the charges and the facts both. We propose that ***Hypothec, Entail, Primogeniture, and the Game Laws*** – the props of the feudal system – should be done away with. Can you say why the possession of large estates should be buttressed by such laws, while the possession of houses, ships, cotton, etc, is not? Possession in the latter case depends upon good conduct, character, management, industry, economy, etc. Can you see any reason why the possession of landed estates should not be equally dependent on conduct and character? You know that if men in business do not attend to and conduct their transactions with judgement and care, they will in short time give way to others; and is it not a fact but for the props just mentioned, nine tenths of the landed estates in these Kingdoms would, long ago have passed into other hands? And why not? Those proprietors, such as Sir Kenneth MacKenzie, and Mr Alexander Matheson, who do not attend to their estates, would still continue in possession of them. But if a son or a grandson does not manage, let the estates go to satisfy the demands of creditors. Let the landless millions be ready to buy the estates as they come into the market – a thing which is quite practicable – and then you have large proprietors undoing themselves and the small one coming into existence. You will thus have large estates here and there among the small ones, for experimental purposes, as long as they hold together; and you will have the small ones as the result of the intelligence, economy, self-denial, and enterprise of the masses, wisely organised for the purpose of achieving their own emancipation – and all without confiscation and communism!

But the question is large and not to be disposed of in a few running comments like this. Another thing, in addition to having the legislative *props* abolished, we must have laws enacted to facilitate the work of restoring the land to the people. These laws must simply be public opinion coined in the legislative mint; and in to this, we must

go on discussing the question – even at the risk of being misunderstood and misrepresented.

The Landed Families

Wednesday, March 23rd 1881

The land system in these islands is based upon a fallacy as to the very object, or one of the main objects of its existence. It is not entirely for themselves that the landlords of the day hold on, they keep up a false system for the sake of their families – to keep a “house”. They have a class, and a family name to keep up; and they will do for these abstractions what they would not do for themselves. *Abstractions* they are in a very serious sense, as we shall see.

The idea of continuing a family for generations on a large estate is seldom realised. Estates may be kept up, but it does not follow that the family is preserved. How many of the families who own estates in the Highlands have been able to keep them, after they have violated justice and mercy to acquire possessions? Take the map of Scotland itself, and run your eye over it. Where is the Reay estate? Swallowed up in the Sutherland estate. And the old Sutherland family has really merged into a house representing two or three English families. Coming down the map, we find the places of clusters of MacKenzies now in possession of other families – MacKenzie of Ardross, MacKenzie of Rosehaugh, MacKenzie of Seaforth, MacKenzie of Torridon, etc. Cross to Harris and Lewis for the MacLeods who were potentates there, and their places know them no more. North Uist is no longer owned by Lord MacDonald; South Uist is no longer the property of Clanranald; and already the name Gordon has been replaced – there is no direct heir to inherit. Barra is no longer owned by a MacNeil. Skye is wonderfully preserved to the MacDonalds; and still the best part of Lord MacDonald’s estate is no longer under a MacDonald; and how often has Rasaay changed hands since Dr Johnson was there? Mull, the land of the MacLeans is in the hands of the Guthries, Langs, Allans and Forsyths. There are pendicles still in the possession of the MacLeans of Lochbuy and Carsaig. No portion of Tiree or Coll is owned by a MacLean. The Macfies are no longer lairds of Colonsay. Islay has long been out of the hands of the MacDonalds, and passed through the hands of several families of Campbells, and now it is owned by Morrison, Fulay, Ramsay, Smith, Philip, and Baker. There is a Campbell in possession of Ballinabay, but he is a descent of William Ruidhe, and not of Cailein Dubh. The MacDonalds have vanished from Kintyre, and even the Campbells who succeeded them are being wiped out. Saddal and Caradale and Skipness, have changed hands several times within the memory of living man. The name of MacDonald is kept on the Largie estate, but in this form Lochart-Morton-MacDonald, showing several vampings of the old family brogue. Arisaig is no longer the property of Clanranald; and even the Cheshire coal-master who lately owned it is gone, leaving no male heir to keep up the estate. Then you have Glengarry in the hands of the Ellices; Torlundy in the hands of an English Scarlett; and Ardverikie in the hands of an English Ramsden.

The struggle to keep up the greater houses of Breadalbane, and Levat, and Panmure, and Dalhousie, is seen in the litigations, and in the quarterings of their arms. Estates are kept wonderfully together; nay, they are being enlarged not only by purchase, but

by the failure of issue, and the clubbing together of several estates in consequence; and the books which treat of the great families bristle with double and treble names such as Levenson-Gower, Le Poer-Trench, De Burgh-Canning, etc.

This vamping goes just because the families cannot be kept up. We have statistics ready to hand, wholesale, in Ireland, where as Judge Fitzgerald said on the recent trial, from a sixth to a fifth of the land of that country has been sold since the Incumbered Estates Court was opened. What does all this teach? Of course it teaches many things; but first of all, it teaches that the system fails to secure the end for which it is kept up. The properties pass from the families for whose aggrandisement they were consolidated, or the families pass from the properties. *“What comes over the devil’s back, goes between his legs.”* There is nothing lasting but what is true and fair and just; and if families would have long life and honour, they must seek them by just and pure and generous means. So confident are we of this, that we hesitate not to say that if the present proprietors would, from proper motives, throw up their possessions, their families would, in another hundred years, be in a far safer and more honourable position than they will be under the present forced system. The principle is illustrated in the case of the Rochabites of whom God said, *“Jonadab, the son of Rechab, shall not want a man to stand before me forever.”*

And the same lesson holds good in regard to those who are looking for possessions. As certainly as the present owners are under the ban, so will their successors be, if they are not scrupulously careful to acquire by pure and honest means.

We labour to form an opinion in this country in favour of the restoration of the land to the people; but for their own sakes, we would not have them reinstated by any means which would not stand the test of the highest honour and the purest morality. No violence, no untruth, no fraud, no confiscation. Everything must be first pure; and as we have over and over again said – every act of violence is against the cause which it is intended to promote. We know that we can be answered with the statement, that violence succeeds where reason fails – that the Irish, who strike terror, have measures passed for them which the quiet supplicating Highlanders cannot get. True, that is the way that the rulers of this country have of rewarding virtue. We still say that violence is wrong, and that every blow struck in Ireland has told against the cause of the country. Violence may seem to succeed, but it does not. The great Land Act for which Mr Gladstone has been awarded much credit, has not been the boon it was at first thought. It has encouraged the landlords to evict their tenants. But it is true, all the time, that the Irish do get things that we do not; and they earn them in that they work and make sacrifices for their cause. For example, they go to the expense of carrying on agitations, for the ventilation of the questions that they want solved, and they return men to Parliament who cannot afford to purchase seats. The Irish do not believe in sending landlords to Parliament to fight the battles of tenants. Be assured, it is the moral and intellectual force, not the physical force, which succeeds. Everywhere and in all time, it is true, *“not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,”* saith the Lord. The landlords are under the ban, because they obtained by violence and hold by fraud; and the people who resort to anything of the same kind to obtain, will also come under the ban. To them may be applied the words of James: *“Ye lust, and have not; ye kill and desire to have, and cannot obtain. Ye fight and war, yet ye have not because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”*

If the people had been pure and noble, and upright and brave, intelligent and self-sacrificing, they might have been in possession of their own long ago. There are eternal principles at the foundation of all these things, and we need not think to succeed by the use of other means.

Celtic Bonds

Wednesday, April 20th 1881

One of the first things we should say, which rises up against the proposal to restore the land to the people is the right which has been acquired by purchase. You may mention which is often the fact, that the owner does not know how to administer the trust which the possession carries with it. *"No matter, he has paid money for it, and that gives him a right to hold."* You say he actually mismanages, and turns property to bad account, still the man has paid for the property, and all its appendages, and you cannot dismiss him from the trust. You say, he stands in the way of the same being made use of by thousands who are in need. You are answered at once. *"You cannot disturb him who has purchased, the land belongs to him and he can do what he will with his own."* You press still further and say, *"Although he bought the land, the vender had no right to sell, it was taken by fraud from the people."* *"What! you are not going to disturb the rights of property so; if you do, you will upset all title to property in this country."* This was the answer of Lord Chancellor Napier, when Captain Malone laid claim to the Barnston estate in West Meath; and the case was thrown out of the court without a witness being called. This was how Lord Colonsay threw out one of the claimants to the Breadalbane estates a few years ago, and no witnesses were called as to the validity of the claim; the vast estates were disposed of in one sentence which went to make it a law that those who have either money or land in large quantities are to dominate over all others. It does not matter to our present purpose which of the two stands highest, dollars or acres. The same assertion was made, and with as good reason, by the slaveholders. They had acquired possession by purchase, and no one had a right which went to annul the purchase. Indeed the right to hold the land in this country is based upon the same principle with slavery all through. The slaves had, first to be taken by force, regardless even of purchase, before they could be sold; and then, the purchase came in as a rivet on the nail which was first driven by force, and that force put forth in opposition to the interest, and to the expressed will of others.

This idea, that money can purchase a right which overrides every other right, has to be dislodged from the public mind before much progress can be made in the direction of a true freedom in regard to land. The idea that purchase gives a right is only right as between two individuals, and then only when the two are free alike to enter into the transaction. It is purely a matter of arbitrary arrangement between them. This arrangement may be entered into by the highwaymen, and the honour which is said to exist sometime among thieves may cause the parties to respect the contract; but no third party is bound by it, and the owners of property, no matter how fraudulently acquired or consolidated originally, are not only ready to dispute the validity of the contract, but they are always eager to have it set aside.

Let us suppose a gang of highwaymen, living in a glen behind a mountain, where they had sufficient room to graze a few horses and cows, and houses enough in which to develop the institutions of private property, and hold sacred the privacy of the family. These men are in possession, say for forty years, and among themselves they barter, and buy and sell; and all the young ones grow up with commendable respect for the rights and property of the individual and family. These people are amenable to their own laws; and yet all the time they are living in this asylum on the proceeds of robbery; all the time they are really defying the laws of true mortality. All this is done by the right of sheer force and cunning.

The baron in this country holds his domain which his most honoured progenitor most likely took by violence, and every half year he sends out – on the principle of the division of labour – and collects what he calls rents from the neighbouring farmers. He does this by no moral right, but by virtue of a force first acquired by the sword, and then enforced by baton and the jailor's terror under the sanction of laws made by the class to which the baron belongs.

A change comes. There may be honour among thieves, but there is not so much generosity and the baron becomes embarrassed, and sells; the other barons do not come to the rescue; they let him sink, and such of them as can, or perhaps an upstart comes and buys; and thus the stamp of the golden seal of money has been put upon the transaction, and the robbery is sanctioned.

We cannot pass this point without noticing a thing we find too often overlooked. People say that "*the evil will cure itself*", and they refer to the fact of these properties "*which came over the devil's back going under his belly.*" What we wish to guard against here is the idea that this is a curing of the evil. Not at all. It is the evil turning on the evil-doer; it is the punishment if you like, but not the curing of the evil. The evil in this case is the holding by one incompetent man of what ought to be in the possession of many; the evil aggravated by the very injury which it does even to the holder himself. The transfer of the trust to another monopolist is no cure of the evil. In England, Ireland and Scotland the changes which have taken place in this respect have, as a rule been for the worse, because the new purchasers have in most cases been worse than the old holders; they have simply made an investment, and they insist upon their pound of flesh.

Evils do not cure themselves as these easy going philosophers try to make themselves believe. There must be a development of moral power, guided by light, and that power must be applied to the removal not only of the evil, but of the moral and intellectual cause or causes. There may be a lesson, there may be a warning, but most generally there is an aggravation of the evil in the results which follow; but you must ever have the moral power alive and at war with this downward deadly force of evil; and with this moral power, you must work directly to the purpose of breaking in destructively on the evil, and constructively towards the good which is to replace it.

The Scottish Press

Wednesday, October 13th 1880

The Scotsman wants statistics of the increase of deer forests and sheep walks since 1861. We should be glad to know that the leading Whig organ was coming to take a humane and Christian view of things; and that the undoubted power that it wields was about to be used for the good in the country, rather than for evil. On the other hand there is too much reason to fear that these statistics are intended for use in a desperate attempt to bolster up a vicious system just as three years ago, the "*Special Commissioner*" was sent out to prop up the large farms and pronounce sentence of death of the crofters of the Highlands. We are not alarmed; his previous attempt to misdirect public opinion against the native Highland tenantry was followed by a strong current in an appropriate direction. So now we may accept the **Scotsman's** new attempt as so much evidence that the champions of Land Law Reform are pressing hard on the giants of the feudal system; and that the **Scotsman's** efforts now, as on the previous occasion, will damage the cause which he has hitherto promoted – the cause of the rich and powerful against the poor and lowly.

Let us hope that this action will open the eyes of some more Scotchmen to the fact of how grossly un-Scottish that organ is. One of the most damaging facts in the recent history of Scotland is the extent to which it can be said to be represented by **The Scotsman**, which is upheld by the selfish, greedy, grasping monopolisers of the land of other possessions. To such, the doctrines that "*a man can do what he likes with his own,*" and that it is all right for the strong to elbow the weak out of their way, are acceptable. What although God and Gospel are against them, they have an able advocate in the press, and they support it. But the deplorable thing is that so many who have better instincts and opposite interests are so recreant to principle and to the good of the nation that they give to that profane organ the support to which they should give to truth, justice and humanity. There is no other reason why there should not be a truly Scottish journal at the head of the newspapers of Scotland. **The Scotsman** misrepresents Scotland in almost every important department of public opinion and action.

It is true, that the momentum which was given to the concern by Charles Maclaren and men of his type, has been kept up by sheer literacy and commercial ability unaccompanied by a high moral tone, or even by that generous fairness which the strong can always afford to show towards an opponent. It is notorious, that **The Scotsman** hardly ever deals with a case on its merits; a side issue is raised, and the opposite cause is covered over the ridicule which is perhaps provoked by an insignificant incident. So far does this inveracity go, that it is quite a common offence with its editorial writers to represent for instance, those who agitate the Land Question as wishing to keep Irish and Highland crofters in poverty and in dirt when they insist upon fair play to the people in their own country rather than emigration. Its whole influence is anti-Scottish on this question, and goes to keep up an alien power in the country which has been working for the ruin and denationalisation of the people; and it plays into the hands of absentee rent-drawers, English sportsmen, and Lowland sheep owners as thoroughly as if it were the right hand of the arch-enemy of the country.

But the most strange thing of all is the extent to which that paper is upheld although it is notorious for the ribald manner in which it treats the most sacred sentiments of Scotsmen. It simply, ridicules the religious belief and ecclesiastical policy of the country, and speaks and writes as if the Bible had gone out of date like an old almanac

and that God had left the country to the management of the Whig lairds, factors, sportsmen and newspapers. It affects to work for the emancipation of the people from the yoke of the clergy, but does it in such a manner as to leave the young to think that all this means is freedom from Bible control as well. Nothing that can be brought from the Bible weighs with *The Scotsman* against the philosophy of selfishness; and this carried so far that the champion of the emancipation from priest-craft is the sworn champion of tap-lord and landlord dominion over the people. Set the people free of clerical control, but keep them ever slaves of the twin powers of whisky and feudalism.

We shall only say, in conclusion, that if Scotland wishes to stand out a greedy, drunken, bastardly, godless nation before the rest of the world, it does the right thing in assigning *The Scotsman* the chief place among its organs of opinion, because these are the natural outcome of its teaching. If Scotland wishes to rise in a moral and enlightened age, to the heroism and chivalry which it showed in times of physical war for freedom, it must certainly have other gods than those of Cockburn Street.

Is there not enough pluck, enterprise, moral principle in Scotland to have itself better represented than by such an organ. Oh for a noble, moral force organ such as John Fraser essayed when he started *The True Scotsman*.

Raising Our Voice

Saturday, July 12th 1873

We have been particularly careful so far, not to allow any cause which we have espoused, or which we may yet espouse, to be injured by rash or exaggerated statements of opinion or of facts. We are well aware that by raising our voice to a high pitch, and screaming forth our opinions on certain questions, we might have commanded greater sympathy in some certain quarters, but we should at the very outset, have closed against ourselves in all time coming, the ears of those classes from whom it is of the utmost importance to gain a hearing. We determined that we should make a reputation for sober, earnest truthfulness and for consideration of others, at the same time that there could be no mistake that we were on the side of the Highland people against all comers; and thus we should be sure of a patient and respectful hearing when we did speak.

It has been a misfortune that so many of those writers who have taken up the cause of the people, whether in town or country, have written in a manner to afford their opponents at least some pretext for saying that they (the writers in question) were guilty of exaggeration; but like many other exaggerations, it can be turned to good account by discriminating men; and we are quite justified in learning caution, if nothing else from it. In making these remarks, we have the *Land Question* before us particularly. We had it before us, as the most important which we could well touch, ere *The Highlander* saw the light, and we have had it before us ever since.

We are conscious of the importance and the dignity of taking up a leading position in regard to so vital a matter, and the more we have felt this, the more determined we

have been to watch our steps, and move only so far as we had solid ground under our feet.

One thing we have kept before our mind and that is to avoid the appearance of making *The Highlander* a mere grievance monger. We were well aware of the fact that there is a great grievance in this country arising out of the relation in which the people stand to the soil; and in so far as mere facts and principles were concerned, we could any day make out a strong argumentative case in favour of a scheme by which a revolution might be wrought in the country. But in a case like this it is not argument put into a leading article, or into a nut shell, and swallowed up all at once, that is required. This sort of thing is all very well in its own way, but we must have facts, if possible, in their proper relations, and we must have “*line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little*”, until the leader or the advocate is, so to speak, reinforced from every side, and his arguments sustained and illustrated, at the same time that the public mind is kept constantly awake on the subject.

Turning from this column to those columns in which the provinces find utterance, we think two things will strike the reader. The first of these is the sober, cautious, and matter-of-fact way in which our correspondents express themselves. There is no straining after effect, no exaggeration, no fierce denunciation of alleged evil doers. Facts are stated, suggestions are offered, claims are put forth, and principles are laid down, and left to work out their logical results in the public mind. One marked result can now be gathered within the compass of *The Highlander* itself. From one end of the country to the other, there are complaints in regard to the land. There is not a district in which the evils of a defective land system are not complained of. From within a short distance of the Pentland Firth, a voice reaches us, that the people have been swept off the land, and that the soil is not made to yield its proper increases. From the straths of Sutherland, from the mountain sides of Ross-shire, and from the glens of Inverness-shire, Argyllshire, and Perthshire, much the same sound reaches us; from Kintail, Lochalsh and Lochcarron; from Glenelg, Lochaber, and Badenoch; from Strathspey, Strathdearn, and Strathnairn; from the Islands of Uist, Barra, Skye, Rasaay, Mull, Islay, and Arran there is a wonderful concord of testimonies to the effect that wrong has been done to the people, and less inflicted on the nation as a whole, by the manner in which the land is administered.

So that without any straining after effect, and without anything to excite distrust as to the correctness of our own or our contributors' statements, we may say that there is within the limits of *The Highlander* itself a positive demonstration that our country, from one end to the other, is labouring under the malign influences of a vicious land system.

With this cloud of witnesses, bearing such testimony, we are justified now, we think, speaking out without fear of being charged with exaggeration or straining after the effect. In fact, with such backing as we now have, it must be plain that we could not, even if we were willing, evade the solemn duty of raising our voice in an unequivocal manner on the subject, and this we mean to do.