

Land, Elites and People

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The rural Lowlands have tended to become the Cinderella of modern Scottish history, ignored or marginalised in general studies and attracting few specialist works in recent years. The reasons are perhaps obvious. The region did not experience the tragedy and drama which mark the history of the Highlands while the dominance of towns, cities and industries in 19th and 20th century Scotland also means that rural society can too easily be dismissed as irrelevant to an informed understanding of the nation's present condition. This excerpt from *The Scottish Nation 1700 – 2000*, however, argues that an analysis of the rural Lowlands after 1830 is an essential part of the wider interpretation of the development of modern Scotland. It concentrates on one of the two central issues which combined to influence the nature and shape of Scottish society in the 20th century: *the structure and power of landownership*. The other was the origins of mass migration from the countryside to the towns and overseas.

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For centuries the landed classes had been the unchallenged leaders of Scottish society. However, by the 1830s this historic hegemony seemed finally to be starting to crumble. The Great Reform Act of 1832 for the first time extended the parliamentary voting franchise well beyond landed property. The new fortunes made from trade and industry undermined the virtual monopoly of the landowners over the wealth of the country and in 1846, the Repeal of the Corn Laws suggested that the interests of an urban society were now of much greater political importance than those of agriculture and the land. All these were serious potential threats to landed power, but throughout the middle decades they had little direct or decisive impact on the material position of the landed classes. Indeed, down to the 1880s most landowners in Lowland Scotland experienced several decades of prosperity and rising rent rolls. Only in the western Highlands and Islands was there a real crisis of traditional landownership as many hereditary estates disappeared in the economic collapse in that region following the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Huge losses of land were suffered by the Mackenzies of Seaforth, Campbells of Islay, McNeils of Barra and MacDonalds of Clanranald among others. By the last quarter of the 19th century, around 70 percent of the mainland and insular parishes of western Argyll, Inverness and Ross were under new ownership as a result of the greatest transfer of land recorded in modern Highland history. Ironically, however, this unprecedented sale of hereditary estates merely underscored the continuing appeal of landownership since the majority of the buyers were wealthy merchants, industrial tycoons and rich lawyers from outside the Highland region. In the Lowlands, on the other hand, the stability of landed property and its enduring economic importance were demonstrated by the continuity of ownership of great estates and the overall consolidation of the landed structure inherited from the period before 1870.

The first official survey of landownership, conducted by the government in 1872-3, confirmed that the historic Scottish structure remained intact. Some 659 individuals owned 80 percent of Scotland, while 118 held 50 percent of the land. Among the most extraordinary agglomerations were those of the Duke of Sutherland who possessed over 1 million acres, the Duke of Buccleuch with 433,000 acres, the Duke of Richmond and Gordon 280,000 acres and the Duke of Fife 249,000 acres. As in the Highlands, the wealthy of the towns were acquiring Lowland estates throughout this period. Yet this process had not reversed the 18th century pattern whereby the properties of greater landowners grew while those of the small lairds declined further. Studies of the land market in Aberdeenshire suggest that only a relatively small proportion of territory (less than 15 percent of the total acreage) was bought by new families in the 19th century and most of these sales were of property belonging to previous incomers rather than traditional owners. Throughout most of the Lowlands, therefore, the territorial ascendancy of the most powerful families, who possessed huge estates running into many thousands of acres, remained inviolate. Buccleuch, Seafield, Atholl, Roxburgh, Hamilton and Dalhousie, to name but a few of the greatest aristocratic dynasties, still controlled massive empires. The country had the most concentrated pattern of private landownership in Europe, even more so than in England, where the territorial power of the landed aristocracy was also unusually great by comparison with other nations. A full century after the Industrial Revolution no economic or social group had yet emerged to challenge this mighty elite. Great industrial dynasties such as the Coats, Tennant and Baird families did buy into the land, but their total possessions were miniscule compared to those of the hereditary landowners, while their deep interest in acquiring landed property was itself a confirmation of its continuing attraction and significance.

Landed estates were not simply durable, they were also exceedingly prosperous and secure from the 1830s to the 1870s. Partly this was because of the Scots law of property and related financial arrangements which helped to give guaranteed protection to most landed families. As Sir John Sinclair famously asserted in 1814,

“In no country in Europe are the rights of proprietors so well defined and so carefully protected.” (quoted in Callander 1987)

From 1685, entailment laws safeguarded landed estates against the claims of creditors in the event of bankruptcy. A second strategy was the formation of trusts to supervise entailed estates if an owner became insolvent or was under age or for other reasons could not continue in direct possession of the lands. By the 19th century the administration of estates through trusts was common at some stage of family ownership and the associated legal arrangements became ever more secure, sophisticated and intricate. Underpinning this legal structure was the prosperity of Scottish agriculture in the middle decades of the 19th century. The basic context of this was the burgeoning demand for food, drink and other products of the land from the vast expansion of towns, cities and industrial communities which could not yet be satisfied on any significant scale from overseas suppliers. But both landlord and tenant farmers made a major contribution to this period of success by further investment and innovation which reduced costs of production and allowed more land than ever before to be used intensively for cropping and stock fattening. By 1830 the basic organisational structure of Lowland farming was in place. The consolidation of farms was complete, sub-tenancies had been removed in most areas and improved

rotations were the norm everywhere. But the Agricultural Revolution now entered a new phase. The 18th century Improvers had never solved the problem of drainage and as a result, the rigs of the old system still remained common. This changed with the invention of the cylindrical clay pipe to act as an underground drainage channel and the provision of government loans at low rates of interest from 1846. Slowly but surely the stiff, cold acres that predominated throughout many parts of the Lowlands were transformed and the frontier of turnip and potato cultivation significantly extended as a result.

The combined transportation revolution of steamship and railways was equally decisive. The great potential of Scotland as a great cattle-fattening and breeding country was finally realised. Cattle intended for the English market had in earlier times to be sold lean to the drovers who took them south on the hoof. Then, in the 1820s, came the steamships, followed in the 1850s by the railways, which opened up the huge London market to Scottish fat cattle. The most spectacular gains were achieved in the north-east which rapidly became a specialist centre of excellence for the production of quality meat. By 1870 beef from the region carried the highest premium in London markets. The Aberdeen Angus, developed by William McCombie of Tillyfour farm, evolved into a breed of worldwide reputation. The railways also enabled the perishable products of milk and buttermilk to be brought into the expanding cities from further afield while affording farmers the enhanced opportunity to import feeding-stuffs and fertilisers like guano and industrial phosphates in huge quantity. The result was even higher yields. Steam power was now used more for threshing, and by the 1870s the greater part of the grain and hay crop was being harvested mechanically in most areas of the Lowlands. The physical face of agriculture also changed as larger, more elaborate and better-designed farm steadings spread across the countryside. Many of these impressive buildings remain to this day as lasting memorials to the prosperous days of *'High Farming'* in Victorian Scotland.

Landowners in this period did not simply gain from the swelling rent rolls as grain and cattle prices rose steadily and investment in land bore profitable fruit. Industrialisation also contributed handsomely to the fortunes of several magnates by affording them the opportunity to exploit mineral royalties. Among the most fortunate Scottish grandees in this respect was the Duke of Hamilton, whose lands included some of the richest coal measures in Lanarkshire, the Duke of Fife, the Earl of Eglinton and the Duke of Portland. That great symbol of the new industrial age, the railway, was warmly welcomed by the landed classes as a whole. This was hardly surprising, since one inquiry by J. Bailey-Denton in 1868 had concluded that the letting value of farm land could increase by 5 to 20 percent according to its proximity to a railway station. Landowners were heavily involved in railway financing and, indeed, before 1860 were second only to urban merchants as investors in the new projects. Some patrician families also benefited from considerable injections of capital from the empire to which the landed classes often had privileged access through their background and the associated network of personal relationships and connections. In the north-east, for instance, one conspicuous example of the lucrative marriage between imperial profits and traditional landownership was the Forbes family of Newe. They had owned the estate since the 16th century but its economic position was mightily strengthened and its territory increased from the middle decades of the 18th century when the kindred of the family began merchanting in India. By the early 19th century the House of Forbes in Bombay was producing a flow of funds for a

new country seat, enormous land improvements and the purchase of neighbouring properties in Aberdeenshire. Examples of the connection between imperial profit and landownership of the kind illustrated by the Forbes family could be found in every county of Scotland.

Historians have also argued that for much of the 19th century it was the country house rather than the counting house that had most political influence. The House of Commons remained predominantly a landowner's club, the House of Lords was virtually a monopoly of the hereditary landed class, while in Scotland the owners of the great estates continued to wield great influence at the local level as Lord-Lieutenants, Justices of the Peace and through a range of more informal mechanisms. Perhaps, however, the position of the Scottish lairds was not quite as overwhelmingly dominant as that of the magnates in rural England. Even before the late 19th century, the land question attracted more passionate controversy north of the border. The Disruption of 1843 had unleashed great hostility to several major landowners who, like the Duke of Buccleuch, refused to make land available for Free Church buildings, and the campaign for disestablishment of the Church of Scotland from the mid-1870s kept these animosities alive. This crusade attracted the support of well over half of all Presbyterians in Scotland, while ranged against them were several prominent members of the peerage such as Lord Balfour of Burleigh, a robust and energetic defender of the cause of the Established Church of Scotland. There were also emerging tensions in the countryside. Conflict over the game laws intensified as lairds sought to maximise the sporting potential of their estates. By the 1870s game was being developed systematically and sporting rents were booming. But this new enterprise meant that the crops of tenant farmers increasingly suffered from the depredations of both ground game (rabbits and hares) and game birds. Farmers who killed game in retaliation could be prosecuted. The other and more serious source of tension was the law of hypothec, which gave a landlord the position of a preferred creditor for the payment of his rent by giving him a general security over a tenant's movable property. Some argued that this legal privilege allowed landlords to impose high rentals, secure in the knowledge that arrears could be recovered from a tenant's assets. Tensions on these and other issues led to the creation of the Scottish Farmers' Alliance to press for land reform and resulted in a succession of defeats at the polls for landlord candidates in the general elections of 1865 and 1868. In the event, concessions were made both on the game laws and on hypothec which helped to defuse discontent and the conflict did not develop into a full-scale revolt of the tenantry. The 1883 Agricultural Holdings Act (Scotland) also gave tenants the right to compensation for agricultural improvements. What the experience of the 1860s and 1870s did show, however, was that even at the height of their awesome power the landed classes in rural Scotland were far from omnipotent.

From the following decade, however, it seemed that the economic base of landlordism was finally starting to weaken. The immediate cause was a series of poor harvests in the later 1870s, though there had been harvest difficulties before and no crisis. What was new was that the reduced quantity of grain brought to the market was not compensated for by higher prices due to a huge increase in cheap imports from the American prairies where a vast food-growing potential had finally been unlocked by the railroads and the steamships. Then, a few years later, the livestock sector, which had escaped relatively unscathed, was hit by the arrival of chilled and frozen beef and mutton from Australasia. Free trade had finally come home to roost for British

farmers and landowners and prices for their products tumbled through the 1880s and into the 1890s. It is true that Scottish agriculture suffered less than in other areas of the United Kingdom as the greatest decline in prices was in wheat, which was a major crop only in the south-east Lowlands. The tradition of mixed farming in Scotland gave the agrarian system considerable flexibility and the capacity to adjust to changes in the market. Even in the Highlands, where hill sheep-farming was badly affected, there was often rapid diversification into deer forests. The Scottish livestock farmers operated at the quality end of the trade which gave a degree of protection against cheap overseas imports. Nevertheless, while Scottish agriculture was spared the worst effects of the Great Depression, the prosperity and confidence of the mid-Victorian era was still undermined. The average price of oats in the 1890s was a quarter less than the 1870s. Even returns from the sale of quality fat cattle from the north-eastern counties show a big slide from the mid-1880s. The net result was a parallel decline in landlord rents. Even livestock areas were not spared as the countryside adjusted to the new reality that the halcyon days of high prices and low imports were over for good. In Morayshire, a prime stock-rearing county, rents of larger farms fell by a quarter between 1878 and 1894 and the pattern was even worse in the less favoured grain-producing areas, where rents of between one-half and one-third were recorded. The misery was not spread equally, however, among estate owners. The smaller proprietors often found themselves in acute difficulty, having to meet fixed obligations such as interest charges and family annuities from a reduced income stream. The larger estates fared better as their owners tended to have outside sources of income.

The economic gloom for landlords was paralleled by adverse political developments in the 1880s. The crofting agitation had been confined to parts of the Highlands and the provisions of the Crofters Holding Act of 1886 were limited to the seven '*crofting counties*'. But Lowland landowners could not escape the political fallout as the '*evils of landlordism*', which had led to the social problems in the Highlands, were repeatedly denounced in the press. Groups such as urban Liberals, working-class socialists and Irish nationalists could and did all unite on the single issue of the excesses of landlordism. It is significant that Lloyd George's People's Budget of 1909 with its series of land reforms was warmly welcomed by a wide spectrum of opinion in Scotland.

Indeed, the later 19th century seems to stand as a watershed in the fortunes of the landed classes in Scotland as one misfortune piled on top of another. Death duties were imposed for the first time in 1894. Though not significant at first, tax rates were eventually increased to more punitive levels in the new century. New taxes on land were also passed. In 1907, for instance an unearned income surcharge payable on rents was levied. Confidence in the historic stability of land as a secure asset was further eroded by the continuing collapse of land-derived income, which fell in the UK by around 25 percent between the mid-1870s to 1910. Not surprisingly, estate sales started to increase even among the great landlords. Lord Kinnoul realised £127,000 from the sale of his lands, while magnates such as the Duke of Fife and the Marquess of Queensberry were also selling up part of their great properties. The pressures became even more acute during and after the First World War. Aristocratic families suffered huge personal loss in the bloody carnage of 1914-18. Altogether, 42 of the 225 relatives of Scottish peers who served in the war were killed in action. C.F.G. Masterman concluded that "*In the retreat from Mons and the first battle of*

Ypres, perished the flower of the British aristocracy.” During the war, he reflected, *“the Feudal system vanished”* in blood and fire and the landed classes were consumed. (quoted in Cannadine 1992) While the majority of the sons of landowners survived the conflict, the relentlessly contracting vice of higher taxes did tighten further during the Great War and its immediate aftermath. Death duties were now higher and were likely to compel sales, especially if an owner’s death was followed by that of his heir killed in action. Income tax and local rates also rose steeply. The Marquess of Aberdeen, for instance, paid £800 in annual estate taxes in 1870. By 1920 his bill had swollen to £19,000. The income from agriculture, which had increased artificially during the Great War, fell back once again in 1921. The scene was set for an unprecedented escalation in land sales and the break-up of several estates. The Duke of Marlborough pronounced, *“The old order is doomed”* as a direct result of the ‘*conspiracy*’ taxation of the 1919 budget, which had raised death duties to the punitive level of 40 percent on estates of £2million and over.

The Duke’s prognosis seemed well founded in Scotland. The cream of the Scottish aristocracy, including the Dukes of Sutherland and Portland, the Earl of Airlie, the Earl of Strathmore and the Duke of Hamilton, were all selling off many thousands of acres in the early 1920s. It was claimed that one-fifth of Scotland changed hands between 1918 and 1921. A veritable social revolution was under way as former tenant farmers bought up land from the great proprietors on a remarkable scale. In 1914 only 11 percent of Scottish farmland was owner-occupied but by 1930 the figure had climbed to over 30 percent. The very basis of landlord power seemed to be crumbling. That the crisis was biting deeply is shown by the selling of town houses, artistic treasures and country seats. The London homes of Lord Balfour and Lord Rosebery were sold in 1929 and 1939 respectively. Lord Lothian divested himself of three of his four grand houses in the 1930s. The Duke of Hamilton closed Scotland’s most impressive private home, Hamilton Palace, in 1922 and sold off more than £240,000 worth of paintings, furniture and carpets. These had hitherto been one of the public symbols of aristocratic status. Their disposal suggested a class in decline.

It seemed that the process was indeed inevitable. The passage of the Parliament Act of 1911 abolished the veto powers of the House of Lords and effectively ended its real authority. The political influence of the landlords in the country had also been massively reduced by the Third Reform Act of 1884-5 which doubled the voting population in Great Britain. By the time of the Great War (1914 – 18) the age of mass democracy had truly begun. Aristocratic candidates were rejected in Scotland in the first general election held after the war, with only the two brothers of Lord Elibank achieving electoral success. Anti-landlord sentiment was stoked by such polemical works as *[Our Scots Noble Families](#)* (1909), written by the future Labour minister and Secretary of State for Scotland, Tom Johnston. He maintained that the territorial empires of the great landed families had been created through deeds of grand larceny in the past:

“Show the people that our Old Nobility is not noble, that its lands are stolen lands – stolen either by force or fraud; show people that the title deeds are rapine, murder, massacre, cheating or Court harlotry; dissolve the halo of divinity that surrounds the hereditary title; let the people clearly understand that our present House of Lords is composed largely

of descendants of successful pirates and rogues; do these things and you shatter the Romance that keeps the nation dumb and spellbound while privilege pricks its pocket.” (Johnston 1909)

The aristocracy had also to cope with more mundane direct threats to their material position. Mineral royalties declined in the 1920s due to the depression in coal mining and they were finally nationalised with compensation in 1938 and 1942. The government, through the Corn Production (Repeal) Act of 1921, had also abandoned its financial support for oat and wheat prices in the post-war era. The cycle of misery seemed complete.

However, any notion that these powerful forces would eventually destroy the traditional landed classes or the old estate structure as a whole is profoundly mistaken. Obviously it is the case that landowners in the 20th century have shed their historic role as the governing class of the nation in an age of mass democracy. But landownership itself has proved to be remarkably resilient in Scotland and England, compared to other European countries and to Ireland, where large estates have virtually disappeared altogether. In Ireland there has indeed been a complete revolution in landed structure over the last 100 years. In the 1880s, half the country was owned by the aristocracy and larger gentry with estates of 3,000 acres and above. By the 1980s, virtually none. Those who have examined the Scottish case in close detail, such as Robin Callander and Roger Millman, have painted a radically different picture. Four conclusions emerge from the research of these scholars and others.

FIRST, from the later 1930s, the selling of land on a significant scale by the great estates declined, a pattern that continued after the Second World War and lasted through to the 1970s. The tide of owner-occupation which had threatened to engulf the traditional estate structure had ebbed considerably.

SECOND, there has been a remarkable continuity in Scottish landownership which the malaise of the decades from the 1880s to the 1930s has obscured. The nation still has the most concentrated pattern of landownership in Europe with 75 percent of all privately owned land in the 1970s held in estates of 1,000 acres or more and over one-third in estates of 20,000 acres or more. By the 1990s this remarkable level of concentration had, if anything increased further. The extent of land possessed by these mammoth estates has fallen since the 1870s, but the traditional structure of concentration has survived and has done so to a greater extent than in any other European country.

THIRD, the continuities are deeply significant, as a core of fewer than 1,500 private estates have owned most of the land in Scotland during the last nine centuries. Among the owners of great estates are several families who have been in hereditary occupation for more than 30 generations. Several landed families may have lost their estates in whole or part, but the great houses of Buccleuch, Seafield, Roxburghe, Stair, Airlie, Lothian, Home, Montrose and Hamilton and others still own extensive acreages.

FOURTH, the historic infiltration of newcomers into Scottish landownership has persisted in the 20th century. Merchant bankers, stockbrokers, captains of industry, pop stars, oil-rich Arabs and wealthy purchasers from Holland and Denmark are

among the groups that have acquired Scottish estates in the past few decades. Nevertheless, this has not generally resulted in the break-up of the larger traditional properties, as most buying and selling has been of land that has usually had a higher turnover of ownership in the past.

It is patently clear, then, that the Scottish system of landownership and large estates in the event was not pulverised and destroyed as the alarmists and pessimists of the 1920s had predicted. Instead, the old structure has survived into the late 20th century with remarkably few alterations. Why was this? One factor was that many of the land sales of the inter-war period were not designed to liquidate landownership but to preserve it through maintaining the core estates and diversifying into other and more profitable assets. Thus, by the 1920s, the Earl of Elgin derived half his income from land and the remainder from directorates in banking and building societies. There was nothing new in this. In the 1880s such grandees as Portland and Sutherland were investing in British and overseas stocks and bonds. It is likely, nevertheless, that more landowners than ever before after c. 1920 were making the rational choice of divesting themselves of surplus territory and putting money into stocks and shares. It was crucial, too, that the land reform movement which had been at the heart of radical politics for the best part of a century virtually vanished off the British political agenda after the Great War. The vital importance of the political factor in the disintegration of private landownership was conclusively demonstrated in Ireland, where what F.M.L. Thompson describes as “*the mincing machine of land reform*” effectively destroyed the system of great estates in the space of a few years. (Thompson 1990) In Scotland, however, the depopulation of the countryside, the dominance of urban issues in a highly urbanised society and the crisis in Scottish industry marginalised the land issue for over a generation. It may well also be that the publicity given to the avalanche of land sales in the inter-war period convinced reformers that the job was already done. Certainly there is a striking contrast between the centrality of the land question in radical politics in the 1880s and 1890s and its virtual disappearance from the public discussion soon after the Great War (1914 - 18) until more recent times. Partly because of this, the larger landowners in the United Kingdom have been spared a draconian system of land value taxation which might well have hastened their demise.

Instead, in the post-1945 period and until the 1970s, the overall tax burden on landowners continued to decline, while state subsidies to agriculture and forestry increased significantly. At the same time, average land prices in the UK rose dramatically from £60 an acre in 1945 to £2,000 an acre in the early 1980s. Despite high taxation of income, there remained considerable tax advantages in owning land, particularly if it was both owned and farmed. This has been further enhanced in some areas by the application of the Common Agricultural Policy within the European Community, with its range of farming subsidies. Ironically, the Scottish landowners in the late 20th century now benefit from more public financial assistance than their ancestors ever did, even in the days of the Corn Laws. In addition, a free market in land persists in Scotland, although regulation and control have become the norm in virtually all other European countries. One expert from the Agricultural University at Wageningen in Holland recently commented of Scotland:

“It is very curious how people treat land [in Scotland]. Land is simply a commodity. This is wild-west capitalism. One of the most valuable assets

for the future, the land, can be bought and sold at will. Elsewhere in Europe this is not the case.” (quoted in Wightman 1996)

In this as in so many other ways, there was a significant continuity of the inherited system of landownership from earlier centuries to the modern age. This connection has in recent times become even more secure, as the opening of the great houses to the public, mass tourism and the popular addiction to nostalgia have enabled several aristocratic families to act as guardians of the nation’s heritage and personified symbols of an enduring link with the glories of the Scottish past. Such levels of continuity were far from the experience of the majority of the population who lived in and worked the farms and landed estates of Lowland Scotland in the 19th century. Mass migration and changing economic circumstances forced a considerable number to depart for the towns and cities of both Scotland and overseas.

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