

# Land, Labour and Homerule

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## National Identity and the Land Question

Anyone who is really familiar with the working-class story between 1865 and 1914 is struck by the fact that the Scottish delegates in the British Trades Union Congress and other labour organisations were always directing attention to Scottish peculiarities including the intensity of our radicalism and the land question.

Contrary to what most of us have been taught nationalism with a small “n” was a powerful current in the Scottish Labour movement; and in those years the land question was at the heart of Scottish radicalism.

Scottish working men and women and middle-class radicals were aware of the cultural imperialism that was being imposed on them, and their nationalism sometimes expressed itself in complaints about the neglect of Scottish affairs by the British labour movement.

For example, in 1876 the printers in the Glasgow Trades Council refused to take part in a conference of British trade unions because they favoured a “*conference of the united trades of Scotland, which they thought would have a greater influence than sending delegates to London.*”

Moreover the Scottish Trades Union Congress was already foreshadowed in 1870 when the Confederation of the United Trades of Scotland met in Edinburgh to hammer out a peculiarly Scottish labour policy. And whenever Scottish labour organisations met, the land question was the dominant theme of debate and agitation.

## Land Agitation and Mass Movements

By the mid-1860s, too, the traditional gap between the common folk in the Highlands and the Lowlands was being closed, and one neglected figure of Scottish history who helped unify the radical agitations of Highland and Lowland working people was Alexander Robertson. He was better known in Scotland as *Dundonachie*, and he first

came into prominence in 1868 when he organised active resistance against the landed aristocracy in Perthshire.

In 1868 he led a militant protest against tolls in the Highlands, and in 1878 he contemplated standing in the city of Perth as a Working Man's Candidate. However, the land agitations uniting Highlanders and Lowlanders were vitiated by the Roads and Bridges Act of 1878 which abolished tolls altogether. That was not, of course, the end of his dramatic role in Scottish history, but his story will have to be told elsewhere.

The next mass movement for the reform of land laws erupted in the 1880s. The links formed by radical crofters in the Highlands and industrial workers in the Lowlands worried the authorities: and the crofters leaders who attended conferences organised by the Labour movement in Edinburgh were followed and hounded by police officers.

## **Henry George**

By then there was an increasing coalescence of Highland and Lowland land agitations, and Henry George, the American radical, was one of the key figures in cementing the solidarity of crofters, farmers and the industrial workers.

Even so, English socialist organisations were still inclined to minimise the importance of Scottish national feeling, and the Scottish socialists refused to form a subordinate branch of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF).

Far from wanting a carbon copy of the SDF, the Scots were keen to establish their own separate national identity. This was why they called their socialist organisation the Scottish Land and Labour League.

Being determined to maintain their own national identity as socialists who had an internationalist perspective, they were soon involved in the same sort of conflict when the dissent left-wing elements in the SDF broke away to form the British Socialist League.

## **Independence**

Like the SDF, the Socialist League failed to appreciate the peculiar importance of the land question in Scotland. In the ensuing conflict the dissident elements in Scotland struck out in the direction of independence and formed a Scottish Land and Labour League.

This led to a heated exchange of correspondence between London and Glasgow, and James Mavor wrote to London to justify the Scottish action: "*In these circumstances our Executive does not see any necessity for seeking authorisation from your executive.*"

The Scots had an internationalist perspective; but they felt that their English colleagues did not always appreciate Scottish peculiarities or the particular intensity of Scottish workers' feelings about the land question. On one occasion James Mavor and the Scots objected to being asked to distribute a Socialist manifesto prepared in

London because its authors had not taken account of Scottish peculiarities. Moreover this shortcoming probably contributed to the Scots comparative failure to maximise discontent over the land question.

Nevertheless the land question was debated in trade union branches, socialist groups and in the Trades Councils; and an alliance of Highland crofters and industrial workers in the Lowlands was forged by such pioneers as Keir Hardie, R.B. Cunninghame Graham and James Connolly.

This agitation for land reform forced the Liberals to the *left*, and it compelled figures like Dr Charles Cameron, a Liberal member of Parliament to play the same sleekit game as the present leadership of the *old* Labour Party. Moreover, while the so-called left-wing Liberals like Cameron supported the crofters in public agitations, they worked against them in private.

### **United Force**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the land agitation had become a vast, elemental force – a force uniting farmer and crofter, miner and smallholder, and Highlander and Lowlander. In 1910 Charles W. Thomson, a distinguished headmaster and Labour councillor, described the land question as the most important issue in Scottish politics.

An immensely interesting character in his own right and a critic of English cultural imperialism in the Scottish universities, Thomson recognised that the land question was also important in England.

To understand why the land question was of even greater importance in Scotland than in England, we must direct attention to the strength of feudal legislation in Scotland down to 1914 and beyond. In 1914 an old Act of 1621 was still in force – and this was why the game laws were more “*tyrannical in Liberal Scotland.*”

### **Penalties**

Such laws penalised farmers, miners, crofters and anyone who believed in free enterprise since no-one could kill game unless he owned a ploughgate of land (about 100acres). Moreover, even a farmer could be convicted of being “*unlawfully on his own farm at night for the purpose of killing game.*”

Scots were understandably obsessed with the land question, and the socialists were repeatedly reminded of the political importance of this question.

Thus in 1911 the national agent of the British Labour Party wrote a confidential report on the political importance of this question in words that are still appropriate: “*We were also asked to pay more attention to rural questions because the land question dominated everything else.*” With the old Labour Party’s sell out of the Crofting Bill (1976), the passion engendered by the land question will give a tremendous impetus to the Scottish Labour Party.