

**Poverty, Protest and Politics:
Perceptions of the Scottish Highlands in the 1880s**

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Introduction

Cultural and political organisation in the Scottish Highlands in the 1880s ensured that perceptions of the region were generated from within to a greater extent than in earlier decades of the nineteenth century. The Gaelic Society of Inverness, formed in 1871, and the Highland Land Law Reform Associations, founded in 1882 and 1883—which evolved into the Highland Land League in 1886—played a leading part in this process. Although the historian of these organisations has argued that they have ‘some claim to the title of the first mass political party in Britain’, he also goes on to make the salient point that they were ‘clearly organised from above and outwith the crofting community’.¹ The objectives of those ‘above and outwith’ have to be considered carefully: they sought to ensure that the face which the Highlands presented to the wider world was acceptable in their terms.

Newspapers, such as John Murdoch’s *Highlander* in the 1870s, Alexander Mackenzie’s *Scottish Highlander* from 1885, and Duncan Cameron’s *Oban Times* from the early 1880s, also played an important part. The *Celtic Magazine* published in Inverness by Alexander Mackenzie from late 1875 was also an important voice in the cause of the Highlander. It was, however, an ambiguous voice, with a wider range of views contained in its pages than those seen, for example, in the *Highlander*. Organs such as the *Scotsman*, the *Glasgow Herald*, and the *Times* in London presented alternative views which were more critical of the actions of the crofters in this decade. Even within the Highlands, titles such as the *Inverness Courier* (which had absorbed the more radical *Inverness Advertiser*

¹James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh 1976), 154.

in 1885) and the new Tory paper, the *Northern Chronicle*, begun in 1881, were fairly forthright in their condemnation of the assertiveness displayed by crofters throughout the 1880s.

There were a number of other themes in the 1880s which affected these perceptions. Some were familiar in Highland history, others more novel. A familiar theme was poverty: in the late 1870s, partly due to climatic conditions, but also due to the wider agricultural problems in that decade, stricken Highlanders were once more the object of philanthropic activity. A more novel theme in this decade was organised and politicised protest: while there had been significant outbursts of protests during the second phase of the clearances in the late 1840s and early 1850s, the Bernera Riot of 1874 and the controversy surrounding the Leckmelm evictions in 1879–80, were more potent precursors of the events in Skye in the early 1880s. A third theme, which follows on from the incidence of poverty and protest in the early 1880s, was political intervention. This took two forms: the direct intervention of the government in the establishment of the Napier Commission in 1883 and the passage of the *Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act* in 1886; but also the involvement of the Scottish Highlands in wider political debate than ever before. This was not only a debate within the Highlands, between landlords and crofters and their respective organisations, but also saw the Highland land issue being used both practically and symbolically in wider discourses on the nature of society in the 1880s. The land question was current throughout the British Isles and Ireland in this decade: the extension of the franchise in 1884–5 had increased the scope of political activity in rural areas throughout the United Kingdom; and the development of the labour movement and other currents of radicalism stimulated social enquiry and political rhetoric which recognised the grievances of the Highland crofters as a component of fundamental social injustice. The radical press in the 1880s, most notably the newspaper of the Social Democratic Federation, *Justice*, commented at length on conditions in the Scottish Highlands. Politicians and activists such as Joseph Chamberlain, Henry George and Michael Davitt drew the attention

of wider audiences to the land question in the Highlands. This process reached its peak in the debates on the Crofters' Bills in 1885 and 1886.

Poverty and Protest

The late 1870s was a period of severe agricultural distress across Britain, especially in the wheat-growing areas of England where foreign competition led to much reduced prices. While lowland Scottish agriculture escaped the worst of this agricultural depression, the west of Ireland experienced conditions reminiscent of the 1840s.² Conditions in the Highlands were not of this magnitude, but serious problems were encountered, both among the crofting communities of the west, and the farmers of the east and central Highlands. Interestingly, the problems of the Highlands engaged the attention of the *Scotsman* which sent a reporter to the north to investigate in December 1877. At this time there was a flurry of interest in the conditions of the Highland crofters which had been initiated by an article in the *Celtic Magazine* in October 1877. Written by Mackenzie, and entitled 'The poetry and prose of a Highland croft', it had the objective of stripping away the romantic view of life in the Highlands and presenting the realities of the situation.³ Mackenzie presented the disadvantages of the crofting system in great detail; in particular, the shortage of land available to the crofter and the difficulties of making ends meet from the agricultural produce of the croft. It was argued that the 'extension of the present croft system can only make matters infinitely worse' and concluded that the 'actual misery endured by the great majority of these poor and helpless creatures is inconceivable'.⁴ John Murdoch argued that Mackenzie had failed to enquire deeply enough into the failure of

²T. M. Devine, 'Scottish farm labour in the era of the agricultural depression, 1875–1900', in *Farm Servants and Labour in Lowland Scotland, 1770–1914*, ed. T. M. Devine (Edinburgh 1984), 243–55; Gerard P. Moran, 'Near famine: the crisis in the West of Ireland 1879–82', *Irish Studies Review* 18 (1997) 14–21.

³Alexander Mackenzie, 'The poetry and prose of a Highland croft', *Celtic Magazine* 2 (1877) 449–57.

⁴*Ibid.*, 452, 455.

the crofting system and argued that the problems had deeper structural causes and that the solution to these problems was evident:⁵

We readily admit that there are many crofts too small. But instead of doing away with the crofter system, we would go in for enlarging the small and improving the inferior. We would also keep continually before the administrators the fact that if the crofts are too small, the sheep walks and deer forests are too large. In most cases we would insist that the one class is too small because the other is too large; and it is utterly absurd, as well as injurious, and it really looks like playing into the hands of the emigration agents, and covering the offences of the evicting landlords, to argue as if there was no escape from the low estate of the crofter but emigration.

This was a classic early statement of the view which the crofters' movement was to put forward in the 1880s. The late 1870s saw a growth of interest in the fate of the crofter, but the views expressed in this debate stemmed from the interaction between internal and external perceptions of the region and its people. This becomes clear when we consider the views of the *Scotsman* 'Commissioner' in late 1877.⁶ The author travelled through the islands of Mull, Skye, Lewis and parts of the west coast of the mainland and presented his views on the crofting system. His perspective was clear from the outset: crofting was seen as a malignant agricultural system; crofters were seen as lazy and inefficient farmers and the fishing industry was insufficiently exploited as a result.⁷

The island of Lewis was singled out as the site of the worst excesses—namely rampant subdivision of holdings and importunate marriages of crofters' children who did not have the enterprise or initiative to pursue a more rewarding life outside the Highlands.⁸

⁵*Highlander*, 29 Oct. 1877.

⁶There were sixteen anonymous articles in the *Scotsman* beginning on 8 Dec. 1877 and ending on 13 Mar. 1878. It seems likely that the author of these articles was J. P. Croal, who became editor of the *Scotsman* in 1905. See *Scotsman*, 1 Aug. 1932.

⁷*Scotsman*, 8 Dec. 1877.

⁸*Scotsman*, 2, 5, 9, 12, 23 Jan. 1878.

Other evils included a deplorable standard of housing, especially the cohabitation of livestock and people.⁹ While the articles purported to be the results of an objective and authoritative fact-finding mission, a political perspective emerges in those which deal with the mainland. In particular, the notion of deer forests encroaching on the land of crofters is explicitly rejected.¹⁰

Whilst these views were not new—indeed, the *Scotsman* commissioner explicitly echoed many of the prescriptions of Sir John MacNeill in his Report of 1851—the reaction to them was novel. John Murdoch described them as ‘undisguised prejudices against the Celt’ but was strongly of the opinion that these should not be allowed to ‘determine the current of public opinion or the shape of future legislation on the land question’. Murdoch echoed the theme of interaction between the external perception and insiders’ ‘reality’:¹¹

All that has been written or spoken on this question is preliminary; and most of it has been said or written by what we may call outsiders. The feelings, and views of the crofters themselves have found but little expression as yet; and before an outsider prescribes for them, as is commonly done, they should be consulted in the matter.

Thus, not only were the ideas of the *Scotsman* commissioner countered in the Highland press, but, along with other activity, the response to them was seen as an opportunity for the crofters to present their own point of view on the land question.

It has been argued that during the 1850s in the pages of, among others, the *Glasgow Argus*, *The Witness*, and the *Inverness Advertiser*, a ‘sympathetic’ response to the plight of the Highlander can be discerned.¹² The views of John Murdoch, however, transcend

⁹*Scotsman*, 5 Jan. 1878.

¹⁰*Scotsman*, 30 Jan. 1878.

¹¹*Highlander*, 15 Dec. 1877.

¹²K. Fenyő, *Contempt, Sympathy and Romance: Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands and the Clearances during the Famine Years, 1845–55* (East Linton 2000), 99–159.

these earlier perspectives in his encouragement to assertiveness and political action. The environment of the later period was also very different with the currency of the Irish land war and the election of a land reforming Liberal government in 1880.

The preferred method of elucidating Highland public opinion was through a Royal Commission, and in the late 1870s demands for the appointment of such a body began to be made in a concerted fashion. A number of the meetings of the Gaelic Society of Inverness in November and December 1877 were devoted to discussion of the crofting system, and it was agreed to petition parliament for the establishment of a Royal Commission.¹³ John Murdoch frequently gave voice to this demand, for example at a lecture delivered at the Protestant Institute in Edinburgh in December 1877.¹⁴ More than any other advocate of the cause of the crofters, Murdoch realised the obstacles which would have to be overcome before a Royal Commission could yield positive results. He was of the view that Highlanders had to be 'faithful to themselves and do the one-twentieth part of what is clearly in their power to do'.¹⁵ Further, he was in no doubt that some of the obstacles lay in the minds of the crofters themselves. He argued that one of the most important tasks of the 'Agitator' was in helping the people to develop 'their own capabilities and stirring them up to work out their own elevation'.¹⁶ Speaking of the work he and others did in advance of the Napier Commission in 1883, he remarked: 'The weightiest part of the work of these pioneers was mitigating the adverse influences of men who had for so long kept the crofters in a state of unworthy fear'.¹⁷ Murdoch was as closely associated with the crofting community as

¹³*Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 7 (1877–8) 51–2.

¹⁴*Highlander*, 29 Dec. 1877.

¹⁵*Highlander*, 5 Jan. 1878.

¹⁶Glasgow, Mitchell Library, John Murdoch MS Autobiography, vol. iv, 184. Later Murdoch recalled of his interactions with the crofters, 'my oral teaching was of great use in inspiring them with moral courage' (vol. iv, 236).

¹⁷[Parliamentary] P[apers] 1884 XXXVI, *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, 3073.

any publicist of his generation, especially in the crucial years just prior to the outbreak of the Crofters' Wars. His perceptions provide good evidence for the idea that the assertiveness which was expressed during the 1880s had complex roots. Nevertheless, the work of Murdoch and others meant that a growing interest group began to apply pressure on specific demands, such as the appointment of a Royal Commission.

The catalyst for protest in the Highlands was a severe downturn in economic and social conditions in late 1881. These events brought another dominant perception of the Highlander into the limelight: that of the poverty-stricken claimant for philanthropic relief. This had been present in the famine of the 1840s and although the conditions produced by the bad weather of late 1881 were not analogous to the total decimation of economic resources in the 1840s, it is instructive to examine briefly the response of opinion to the condition of the Highlands in the later period. The emergence of determined protests at several points, mostly on the island of Skye, strongly coloured attitudes to the Highlands in this period, especially in the light of events in Ireland.

November 1881 saw a fearsome storm visit the West Highlands and Islands. The destruction which this wrought, especially to fishing boats and gear, can scarcely be exaggerated; a report from North Skye claimed that it was the worst in living memory.¹⁸ The need to provide relief resulted in a number of meetings in the main towns of the Highlands and beyond in late 1881 and early 1882. This put the Highlands on the wider agenda of public life in Scotland, but in a rather submissive manner. These meetings did not link the social and economic condition of the stricken crofters to their tenorial grievances; statements concerned the need to relieve a suffering, but respectable population. Land agitators were notable by their absence, as ministers and other members of the middle classes enunciated appeals on behalf of those who had suffered. The Rev. Mackinnon of Strath, Skye, for example, stated that the object 'was to give

¹⁸*Inverness Courier*, 24, 29 Nov. 1881.

men—frugal, law abiding, brave and industrious—rendered destitute by an appalling and sudden calamity, the means of earning a livelihood'. The Rev. Dr Mackay of the Free North Church in Inverness rounded off his appeal with some hyperbole:¹⁹

In religion, in morals, in frugal industry, in bravery and in all those good qualities that go to make up good men and women, he believed the fishing population of the West Coast were unsurpassed by any other class in the country.

There is some evidence to suggest that this image was also part of the mindset of the crofting community, although it may have been engendered by fear and tenurial insecurity. Sir John M'Neill remarked in his 1851 report that:²⁰

the working classes in the parishes I have visited . . . contrasted their own loyalty and respect for the law with occurrences in [Ireland], and asked whether it was possible that the Queen, after doing so much for a rebellious people, who had set the laws at defiance, should refuse all assistance to a people who had constantly been loyal and orderly.

In considering this matter it is also sensible to bear in mind the possibility that M'Neill was giving greater emphasis than necessary to this point of view because it matched his own.

This perception of the peaceable and loyal Highlander was challenged by the protests of 1882. There had been protests in the 1870s, especially at Bernera in Lewis and Leckmelm in Wester Ross; 1881 had seen rent strikes on the Kilmuir estate in the north of Skye and the establishment of the Skye Vigilance Committee. Nevertheless, the scale of protest in 1882 was of a quite different order. The 'Battle of the Braes' was the event which put the grievances of the crofters on the wider political agenda. The crofters of Braes and the MacDonald estate management disputed the rights

¹⁹*Inverness Courier*, 16 Feb. 1882.

²⁰PP 1851 XXVI, *Report to the Board of Supervision by Sir John M'Neill G.C.B. on the Western Highlands and Islands*, iv.

to grazing on Ben Lee. The crofters continually grazed their animals on land which the estate wished to lease as a sheep farm, and legal attempts to prevent them resulted in deforcement of sheriff officers. Ultimately, a large body of police had to be drafted from outside the Highlands to force their way into the township, running the gauntlet as they did so, in order to make the necessary arrests.²¹ The events were dramatic enough, but what made the Battle of the Braes significant was the publicity which it received; it was widely reported in the press of London, of Lowland Scotland and, significantly, of Ireland. It has been suggested that in addition to these factors the Battle of the Braes received wider prominence than, say, the Leckmelm evictions, because events in Ireland and the paranoia of the Sheriff of Inverness, William Ivory, made 'a movement out of a very minor land dispute'.²² For some who professed to be leaders of opinion in the Highlands it was merely an import from Ireland. For Sheriff Alexander Nicolson of Kirkcudbright, a native of Skye, or Charles Fraser Mackintosh in his pre-Crofter-MP days, agitation was to be condemned. Nicolson deprecated the Battle of the Braes on the grounds that 'alas Skyemen are imitating the Irish, and making themselves objects of derision and dread'.²³ Fraser Mackintosh also prophesied doom for the Highlands if Irish practices were emulated; he argued that the region would suffer if its population came to be seen as 'discontented and disaffected'.²⁴ It is interesting to note that both Nicolson and Fraser Mackintosh were appointed to the long awaited Royal Commission,

²¹I. M. M. MacPhail, *The Crofters War* (Stornoway 1989), 36–45; Hunter, *Crofting Community*, 133–7; Ewen A. Cameron, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c.1880–1925* (East Linton 1996), 17.

²²H. J. Hanham, 'The problem of Highland discontent, 1880–85', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 19 (1969) 21–65, at 64–5.

²³'Address to the People' by Sheriff Alexander Nicolson, Kirkcudbright, *Inverness Courier*, 25 Apr. 1882. For a discussion of Nicolson's views see Ewen A. Cameron and Andrew Newby, ' "Alas, Skyemen are imitating the Irish": a note on Alexander Nicolson's "Little leaflet" concerning the crofters' agitation', *Innes Review* 55 (2004) 83–92.

²⁴*Inverness Courier*, 25 Nov. 1882.

chaired by Lord Napier, which began its investigation into the grievances of the crofters in 1883. Thus the reception given to crofter assertiveness was far from uniformly positive, even from individuals who have been identified as being supporters of the cause of the crofters.

A further development in 1882, which in many ways can be seen as the key year in the development of protest in the Highlands, was the institutionalisation and organisation of the crofters' movement. The core of the movement was already in existence in the form of the Federation of Celtic Societies, which had been in existence since 1878, and the Skye Vigilance Committee, which had been formed in mid-1881 in response to the difficulties of crofters on the Kilmuir estate. The reaction to the agitation on Skye replicated in an expanded form the reaction to the Leckmelm evictions a year earlier. Meetings were held in Glasgow in May 1882, and in London in February 1883. Thus the importance of linking up events in the Highlands with the politically active urban Gaels was established at an early stage. This brought people like Gavin B. Clark, Angus Sutherland and Roderick Macdonald, all to become Crofter MPs, to prominence. Three organisations established in late 1882 or early 1883 formed the core of the crofters' movement: the Highland Land Law Reform Associations of London and Edinburgh, and the Sutherland Association.²⁵ The first use of the term Highland Land Law Reform Association had come in March 1882, before the establishment of the organisations in either Edinburgh, London or Sutherland, even before the Battle of the Braes, and it was associated with a group in Inverness. The objects of the new association were as follows:²⁶

...by constitutional means, and irrespective of party politics, to effect such changes in the Land Laws as shall prevent the waste of large tracts of productive lands in the North, shall provide security of tenure, increased protection to the tillers of the soil, and promote the

²⁵MacPhail, *Crofters' War*, 88–93; Hunter, *Crofting Community*, 143.

²⁶*Inverness Courier*, 2 Mar. 1882.

general welfare of the people, particularly throughout the Highlands of Scotland.

This was an organisation of prominent Liberals confined to the town of Inverness: most of the executive were journalists, ministers of various denominations, or businessmen. There was no serious attention given to the task of reaching out to the grass-roots of the crofting community in the way that the London, Edinburgh and Sutherland Land Law Reform Associations would do the following year in response to the opportunity offered by the Napier Commission. The emphasis on 'constitutional means' and the policy prescription of security of tenure indicates the distance between this group and more radical ideas on the land question which were current in the 1880s and which will be explored below.

The sudden storms of November 1881 had destroyed a potentially prosperous year. The winter of 1882–3 was difficult for the crofters and cottars of the west coast and the islands, but in a different way. In late September it became clear that the potato blight, which had struck periodically since 1846, was 'virulent throughout the west coast'.²⁷ In addition, there was also the added blow of a dramatic failure of earnings from the fishing industry which was such a vital prop to the crofting communities of the west and the islands.²⁸ The geographical concentration of the crisis was notable: the worst conditions were in the Hebrides and particularly Skye and Lewis, the two islands which relied to the greatest extent on earnings from the east coast fishing. Evidence from other areas, where the economy was more mixed, suggest that the impact of the crisis was variable. It is notable, however, that the agitation in 1883 was at its peak in Skye and Lewis, the very areas where the potato failures and collapse of earnings from fishing were most keenly felt.²⁹ Thus, the crisis was the same kind of multifaceted event as had struck the Highlands in

²⁷ *Inverness Courier*, 28 Sept. 1882.

²⁸ Hunter, *Crofting Community*, 131; MacPhail, *Crofters' War*, 229, Appendix D.

²⁹ 'Copy of Minute of Parochial Board of Gairloch', *Alleged Destitution*; see report of 'Meeting of the Natives of Lochaber in Inverness', *Inverness Courier*, 19 Dec. 1882.

the late 1840s (indeed, local observers in Lewis reckoned conditions to be worse than in 1846): as the second bad winter in succession and coming after the events at Kilmuir, Braes, and Glendale and after the beginnings of the organisation of the crofters' movement, it augmented the protests which had already occurred.³⁰ It added great weight to the demands for a Royal Commission to examine the causes of the crofters' grievances. Further, 1883 saw more widespread, organised and politicised protest than either of the previous two years.

It would be an extensive project to chart Lowland reactions to the crofters' protests. Space permits only a brief case study to go alongside the comments on the protests of 1882 and 1883. The event chosen is protest on the island of Tiree in autumn 1886. The dispute concerning the farm of Greenhill has been explored in detail elsewhere.³¹ It should be noted that these events took place after the passage of the Crofters' Act and under the Conservative government elected in July 1886. Arthur Balfour had been appointed Secretary for Scotland with the specific brief of cracking down on protest in the Highlands (he was later sent to Ireland for the same purpose); this he assuredly did in the case of Tiree, sending a military expedition to the island and effecting arrests. Those arrested were handed down relatively long sentences of four and six months.³²

The events on Tiree produced a considerable reaction in Lowland Scotland.³³ The Scottish Office received representations on the treatment of the Tiree crofters from many organisations of Radicals and Highlanders. Most protested against the severity of the sentences imposed: the Dunfermline Radical Association reminded the Scottish Office that the jury had unanimously recommended leniency in this

³⁰ *Alleged Destitution*.

³¹ Hunter, *Crofting Community*, 163–5; MacPhail, *Crofters' War*, 186–92.

³² MacPhail, *Crofters' War*, 191.

³³ *North British Daily Mail*, 27 Jul., 2 Aug., 21 Oct. 1886. The *Mail* was a Liberal paper owned by Dr Charles Cameron, the MP for the College Division of Glasgow, who had been one of the first Parliamentarians to raise the issue of the crofters.

case.³⁴ The ‘Memorial of the Inhabitants of Dunoon’ noted that the ‘Tiree prisoners are men of good character who consider that they have hereditary rights to the soil which have been forcibly and unjustly taken from them.’ The absence of ‘personal violence’ was noted and a more general point was made:³⁵

The Highlanders have hitherto been so law-abiding that policemen, Sheriffs and such like officials have been to them almost unknown. They do not in consequence as yet, associate with them the Majesty of the Law. So that deforcement in Tiree and deforcement in quarters where appeal to legal officials is a daily occurrence cannot be regarded in the same light.

The combination of basic historicism and an appeal to the government that Highlanders should be treated lightly due to their isolation, both physical and institutional, makes this an especially notable perception. The notions of passivity and respectability, considered to be a strong characteristic of the crofters prior to 1882, and partly compromised by subsequent events, were here being reworked to fit new circumstances.³⁶

Of course, it would be absurd to suggest that all perceptions of this event were positive. As well as the routine denunciations of establishment newspapers such as the *Times*, which declared there to be ‘war in Tiree’, the *National Review*, a Tory periodical, printed a letter on the specific subject of the ‘Tiree Crofters’ which rebutted

³⁴N[ational] A[rchives of] S[cotland], Home and Health Department, Miscellaneous Files, HH1/296, Resolution from Dunfermline Radical Association, 21 Dec. 1886.

³⁵NAS, HH1/285, Memorial of the Inhabitants of Dunoon, 5 Nov. 1886.

³⁶See, in addition to the documents quoted above, NAS HH1/287, Petition of the Inhabitants of Greenock, 19 Nov. 1886; HH1/288, Resolution of Edinburgh Advanced Radical and Liberal Association, 18 Nov. 1886; HH1/289, Resolution of the Elgin Radical Association, 17 Nov. 1886; HH1/290, Resolution of a Public Meeting in the Town Hall, Campbeltown, 22 Dec. 1886; HH1/292, Resolution of the Citizens of Edinburgh at a Public Meeting at the Literary Institute, 25 Nov. 1886; HH1/293, Resolution of the Edinburgh United Trades Council, 4 Dec 1886; HH1/295, Resolution of Paisley Highlanders’ Association, 22 Dec. 1886; HH1/299, Resolution of a Public Meeting of the Inhabitants of Paisley, 14 Jan. 1887; HH1/303, Petition from Highland Reform League of Glasgow, 27 Jan. 1887.

many of the arguments commonly put forward in support of the crofters. The author noted that crofting was a 'modern institution, as modern in its character as any other tenant farm' and pointed to the 'unselfish excellence of the Highland proprietor'.³⁷ The crofters' movement did not deny the modernity of the crofting system, but suggested that in its creation much damage had been done. The situation in Tiree was slightly at variance with the norm, as the 8th Duke of Argyll had in the 1840s modified the crofting system by attempting to eradicate those with the smallest holdings—a course of action which he viewed with pride and recommended as a model which other proprietors should follow.³⁸ The correspondent of the *National Review* argued that crofters should not be treated as special cases by the authorities: 'In the throb of sentiment it is a good deal overlooked that these men are the prisoners of the law, and that they should be treated as subjects of its justice.'³⁹

The protests of the 1880s brought the grievances of the crofters to a much wider audience than ever before. The protests themselves, however, clashed with the traditional perception of the Highlander as a peaceable and loyal citizen. This perception was not only an external construct but something which individuals who saw themselves as 'leading Highlanders', such as Alexander Mackenzie, Sheriff Nicolson or Charles Fraser Mackintosh, wished to sustain. Some evidence allows us to suggest that this view may have permeated the crofting community, although fear is a factor which should not be ruled out. Although the protesting crofters were much more interested in practical solutions to tangible problems than in abstract political ideas, the latter did emerge in connection with the Highland land question. It is to the political dimension that we should now turn to investigate further layers of perception.

³⁷ *Times*, 24 Jul. 1886; 'Scotchman', 'The Tiree Crofters', *National Review* 8 (1886–7) 141–2.

³⁸ George Douglas Campbell, 8th Duke of Argyll, *Crofts and Farms in the Hebrides* (Edinburgh 1883); T. M. Devine, *The Great Highland Famine: Hunger, Emigration, and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh 1988), 226–44.

³⁹ 'Scotchman', 'The Tiree Crofters', 141–2.

Politics

The visibility of the Highlands in this period was enhanced by the fact that the land question was a key political issue during the 1880s. Land agitation in Ireland and the Scottish Highlands were complemented by the 'Revolt of the Field' in England and disorder over tithes payable by Welsh dissenters to the Church of England in Wales.⁴⁰ The 1880s also saw the growth of a very wide variety of Radical movements: the land question was at the heart of many of them. In particular, notions of 'Land Nationalisation' were espoused by Radicals such as Alfred Russel Wallace, the famous evolutionist, who was prominent in the Land Nationalisation Society—an organisation which also contained Dr G. B. Clark, the future Crofter MP for Caithness. Clark was also, briefly, a member of H. M. Hyndman's Democratic (later Social Democratic) Federation, an organisation which regarded the nationalisation of land as a necessary, but not sufficient, measure for social reform. Its supporters were reminded in 1884:⁴¹

...we warn the Nationalisers once more that Land Nationalisation by itself will not benefit the labourers and that only by a complete

⁴⁰Interestingly, there have been few attempts to write about the land agitations of this decade in a 'British' context, but see J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain* (New York 1974) for an excellent attempt to do so. Roy Douglas, *Land People and Politics: a History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom, 1878–1952* (London 1976) is a much less successful treatment.

⁴¹'Land Nationalisation', *Justice*, 11 Nov. 1884; for a fuller discussion of the difference in views between Hyndman and George, see Henry George and H. M. Hyndman, 'Socialism and rent-appropriation: a dialogue', *Nineteenth Century* 17 (1885) 369–80. George argued 'Whatever varying social relations may exist among men, land always remains the prime necessity—the only indispensable requisite for existence' (at 376); Hyndman countered '...I consider the landlord to be a mere appendage to the capitalist, and that you cannot get at the land with any advantage to the people except through capital' (at 376). However, they agreed that peasant proprietorship was of no value as a solution to the land question. Hyndman remarked, 'we are thoroughly of one mind, that no benefit can accrue by such an extension of the rights of private property' (at 377). For information on Hyndman, see *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*, edd. Joseph Baylen and Norbert J. Gossman, vol. iii, 1870–1914, A–K (Hemel Hempstead 1988), 475–80.

overthrow of competition and the capitalist system of production for profit can any permanent good be obtained for the working class.

The Irish land reformer Michael Davitt was unusual among his colleagues in the Irish Land League in being a staunch advocate of land nationalisation, as was the maverick Welsh radical Rev. Evan Pan Jones.⁴² The second principal strand of radical thinking on the land question in this period originated in the writings of the American land reformer Henry George. George's holistic approach to the land question revolved around the notion of abolishing taxation on income and consumption and replacing it with a 'Single Tax' on the full value of private landownership which would release urban and rural tenants from the thralldom of landlordism.⁴³

In the realm of more conventional party politics two ideas dominated the debate on the land question. The Liberal Party concentrated their efforts in Scotland and Ireland on giving tenants greater protection in their relationship with their landlords, through fixity (or security) of tenure, the right to apply to a land court for a fair rent, and the right of free sale. These ideas formed the basis of the Irish Land Act of 1881 and this, with the exception of free sale, was used as the model for the Crofters' Act of 1886. The Conservative party deprecated tinkering with the rights of landlords and argued that the tenants should pay a fair price and take over ownership of their holdings.⁴⁴

These debates brought the Scottish Highlands to the forefront of political exchanges, among both Radical and Parliamentary opinion; this yields much evidence for perceptions of the Highlands in this period. If poverty and protest were the first two prisms through

⁴²P. Jones-Evans, 'Evan Pan Jones—land reformer', *Welsh History Review* 4 (1968–9) 143–59.

⁴³Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (London 1880).

⁴⁴Cameron, *Land for the People?*, 62–101. Radical and Nationalist apoplexy had been evident in 1886 when Gladstone proposed to combine his proposals for Irish Home Rule with a lavishly funded land purchase scheme; see Graham D. Goodlad, 'The Liberal Party and Gladstone's Land Purchase Bill of 1886', *Historical Journal* 32 (1989) 627–41, at 641.

which the Highlands were perceived in the 1880s, politics was the third—and arguably the most important.

There is no difficulty in finding evidence of the perceptions of the Highlands held by politicians of various hues, as the involvement in debate on Highland questions was much wider in this decade than at any other point in the nineteenth century. This was a direct result of the poverty and protest which has been discussed above, but also a result of the louder voices coming from within the Highlands, through the evidence given to the Napier Commission, and the election of Crofter MPs at the General Elections of 1885 and 1886. There were two facets to this debate: the first was the use of the grievances evident in the Scottish Highlands by politicians with wider purposes. It is questionable whether the abstract ideas presented by Davitt and Henry George, or metropolitan Radical periodicals such as *Justice*, had much effect on the course of the Crofters' War. The parliamentary debates over the abortive Crofters' Bills of 1885 and 1886 are also worthy of examination.

This section of the essay will examine the impact of Michael Davitt and Henry George, both of whom brought ideas from the wider arena to the Highlands. Davitt was the only one of the front rank of Irish land reformers who took a sustained interest in the Scottish Highlands. This has been presented as part of Davitt's wider internationalist views, evidence of his commitment to social justice regardless of national boundaries. As his biographer notes:⁴⁵

From 1882 onwards he was the most striking exponent of the idea that the democratisation of the United Kingdom Parliament and the winning of Home Rule for Ireland were the common interest of working men, both British and Irish. In his self appointed task of preaching this gospel in Britain he made full use of his doctrine of land nationalisation as a link between the cause of 'the land for the people' and the interest of all workers.

⁴⁵T. W. Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution, 1846–82* (Oxford 1982), 548; see also T. W. Moody, 'Michael Davitt and the British Labour Movement, 1882–1906', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 3 (1953) 53–76.

In this cause Davitt made two appearances in the Scottish Highlands. The first took place in late 1882; he made a speech in Inverness in which he advocated land nationalisation, a doctrine which was considerably in advance of the demands being made by the emerging crofters' movement.⁴⁶ Although he was in contact with John Murdoch and the Glasgow-based Irish nationalist John Ferguson, there is little evidence that Davitt was aware of the limited agenda of the crofters' movement. His perception of the Highland agitation was as a second front in the battle against the institution of landlordism, rather than as an indigenous movement with more muted objectives. Davitt's second visit to the Scottish Highlands took place in 1887. Two factors ensured that the context of this tour was different from the 1882 visit. Firstly, Davitt went beyond the urban sophisticates of Inverness to engage more closely with the crofting community; secondly, this tour took place after the 1886 rejection of Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill, a fact which put Davitt's views at variance with the MP for Inverness-shire, Charles Fraser Mackintosh, who had voted against the Bill. The leaders of the Highland Land League who promoted Davitt's visit used it to foment dissatisfaction with their MP over his views on Irish Home Rule.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, despite the altered context of the visit, Davitt's message was largely unchanged from 1882. In Portree he argued:⁴⁸

In many respects we are not only identical in race, but in political and social aspirations as well. The land system that has impoverished Ireland and made it the home of misery and agrarian crime has also been felt in this island and other parts of Scotland. I am sure the

⁴⁶*Inverness Courier*, 7 Nov. 1882. There is a limited analysis of Davitt's Inverness speech in Paul Harding, 'John Murdoch, Michael Davitt and the Land Question: a Study in Comparative Irish and Scottish History', unpublished M.Litt. thesis (University of Aberdeen 1994), 85–8. A more substantial discussion can be found in Andrew G. Newby, *Ireland, Radicalism and the Scottish Highlands, c. 1870–1912* (Edinburgh 2007), 72–84, 146–53.

⁴⁷Ewen A. Cameron, *The Life and Times of Charles Fraser Mackintosh, Crofter MP* (Aberdeen 2000), 185–6.

⁴⁸*Scottish Highlander*, 5 May 1887.

people of Skye are convinced that if the Irish succeed in abolishing landlordism, an effective blow will be struck at the root of a similar evil system in your islands.

The views of Henry George on how the Highlands fitted into the wider debate on social reform were very different from Davitt's.⁴⁹ George was probably the most controversial figure to visit the Highlands in this period and his reception there was contested. Although one report in the *Oban Times* said of his tour to Skye in early 1884 that 'His views fell like a shower of nectar upon the auditors', a report the following week struck a more measured tone: 'his views on some points in connection with the land question are for the most part considered to be extreme, yet ... he gave utterance to a vast deal of truth on the important question with which he dealt'.⁵⁰ George had been represented as a 'wild atheistical socialist', and on his tours he found evidence of the fearful state of the crofting community, and counselled them to 'struggle to amend the law if it were unjust, and if they submitted to unjust law they were as responsible as the landlord'.⁵¹ George was particularly critical of the Highland clergy for stifling the protests of the crofters and was especially pleased to hear the views of the Rev. Donald MacCallum, Church of Scotland minister at Waternish, and a leading advocate of the cause of the crofters. Tailoring his remarks to the historical sensibilities of his Scottish audience, George remarked in Glasgow, 'Here at last was a man who came forth at a critical time, as John Knox came forth ... and he rejoiced that Mr M'Callum stood not alone'.⁵²

⁴⁹This has already been done to an extent. See Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George* (New York 1955), 378–416; Elwood P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles* (East Lansing, Michigan 1957), 42–3, 45, 58; John R. Frame, 'America and the Scottish Left: the Impact of American Ideas on the Scottish Labour Movement from the American Civil War to World War One', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Aberdeen 1998), 77–118. See also *Dictionary of American Biography*, edd. Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone (New York 1959–60) iv, 211–15.

⁵⁰*Oban Times*, 23 Feb., 1 Mar. 1884.

⁵¹*Oban Times*, 1 Mar. 1884; 10 Jan. 1885.

⁵²*Oban Times*, 31 Jan. 1885.

Perhaps because of his fundamental challenge to the system of private landownership Henry George encountered a critical reception throughout the United Kingdom, and, usefully, his views stimulated debate. Even the radical Liberal Joseph Chamberlain felt that his theories were ‘wild’ and his methods ‘unjust’.⁵³ One of the most notable debates in which George engaged was with the Duke of Argyll.⁵⁴ George had sent a copy of *Progress and Poverty* to the Duke, who was known as one of the principal defenders of private landownership in the 1880s.⁵⁵ The Duke argued that the increment gained from privately owned land was not, as George argued, ‘unearned’, pointing to his own investments in improvements.⁵⁶ He was particularly exercised by George’s proposal to resume the ownership of land without compensating the landowner, regarding this as corrupt in its breach of commercial principles and the level of probity which a property holder had the right to expect from the state.⁵⁷ Argyll referred to George as ‘a Preacher of Unrighteousness’ and labelled his teaching as ‘immoral’.⁵⁸ In his reply George denied that land was a commodity to which property rights could be attached, on the grounds that ‘the exclusive ownership of land has everywhere had its beginnings in force and fraud, in selfish greed and unscrupulous cunning’.⁵⁹ If the Duke had sought to defend the

⁵³J. Chamberlain, ‘Labourers’ and artisans’ dwellings’, *Fortnightly Review* 34 (1883) 761–76, at 761–2.

⁵⁴Duke of Argyll, ‘The Prophet of San Francisco’, *Nineteenth Century* 15 (1884) 537–58; Henry George, ‘The “Reduction to Iniquity”’, *Nineteenth Century* 16 (1884) 134–55.

⁵⁵H. C. G. Matthew, ‘Campbell, George Douglas, eighth duke of Argyll in the peerage of Scotland, and first duke of Argyll in the peerage of the United Kingdom (1823–1900)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004), edd. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4500>: accessed 21 Oct 2004]; K. M. Mulhern, ‘The intellectual duke: George Douglas Campbell, eighth duke of Argyll, 1823–1900’, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Edinburgh 2006), 190–232, esp. 221–3.

⁵⁶Argyll, ‘Prophet’, 553–5.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 546–8.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 548, 557.

⁵⁹George, ‘The “Reduction to Iniquity”’, 139.

system of private landownership with reference to the Highlands then George took up the challenge.⁶⁰

Test the institution of private property in land by its fruits in any country where it exists. Take Scotland. What, there, are its results? That wild beasts have supplanted human beings; that glens which once sent forth their thousand fighting men are now tenanted by a couple of gamekeepers; that there is destitution and degradation that would shame savages; that little children are stunted and starved for want of proper nourishment; that women are compelled to do the work of animals; that young girls who ought to be fitting themselves for wifehood and motherhood are held to monotonous toil in factories, while others, whose fate is sadder still, prowl the streets; that while a few Scotsmen have castles and palaces, more than a third of Scottish families live in one room each, and more than two thirds in not more than two rooms each; that thousands of acres are kept as playgrounds for strangers, while the masses have not enough of their native soil to grow a flower, are shut out even from moor and mountain, dare not take a trout from a loch or a salmon from a stream.

George went on to argue that the Malthusian pressures which the Duke identified in the Highlands were the result of the misappropriation of land by the landlords and, further, that the investments made by landowners in improving their estates came from rents extorted from tenants who might have been able to carry out improvements of equal value had they not been exploited in this manner.⁶¹ George also pointed to the submissive nature of the crofters and the way in which clergymen had engendered such 'tame submission of the Highland people to outrages which should have nerved the most timid ...'.⁶² Although George's diagnosis of the grievances of the Highland crofters may have shared much with the Highland Land Law Reform Associations, the solution he proposed was far in advance of their notions of secure tenancy and extended

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 146.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 150–1.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 154.

availability of land. He was firm in his advocacy of the 'Single Tax' as a universal solution of the land problem, and he viewed the Highlands not as a special case but as part of the wider problem which required such treatment. The vehicle which he hoped to use to achieve this in Scotland was the Scottish Land Restoration League, established in Glasgow in 1884.⁶³ George's Scottish lieutenant, James Shaw Maxwell, took the message of the Scottish Land Restoration League to the Portree Conference of the Highland Land Law Reform Associations in September 1885, where he argued:⁶⁴

...the men of the south were watching the progress of the land movement in Skye with the greatest interest. It was not a crofter question; it was more gigantic than many of the crofters themselves believed it to be. Not only were the crofters liberating themselves, but they were striking off the chains of slavery and thralldom which bind their poor brethren in the cities. This was noble work, and he was proud to say that he saw at the conference that the crofters recognised this, and were determined to carry out these broad and equitable principles.

The 'men of the south' did indeed have an eye on the crofter question but they were interested in it as part of a wider social challenge, as Shaw Maxwell indicated in his speech. The Social Democratic Federation passed a resolution in July 1884 which declared that 'nothing short of Land Nationalisation will solve this question'.⁶⁵ This was typical of London pressure groups who advocated land nationalisation; they made little effort to inform themselves of the details of the crofters' grievances but merely used the agitation as an example of the kind of situation where their prescriptions should apply. For example *Justice*, commenting on the Portree Conference, remarked: 'A really revolutionary movement in the North is most welcome at a time when our most advanced Radicals are still pottering with "Free Land" and Peasant Proprietary

⁶³*Ibid.*, 155; Barker, *Henry George*, 400.

⁶⁴*Oban Times*, 12 Sept. 1885.

⁶⁵*Justice*, 5 July 1884.

in the interest of the capitalist class'.⁶⁶ Although it is tempting to see the Crofters' War as part of a general assault on the forces of landlordism, it is vital, as noted above, to stress the limited nature of crofters' demands. Hyndman and his colleagues were very critical of the recommendations of the Napier Commission, for example, regarding it as having been 'written as it manifestly is in the interests of the landlords'; MPs like Charles Fraser Mackintosh and Donald MacFarlane were portrayed as being overly cautious in comparison with the crofters.⁶⁷ Two further points which emerge from *Justice* are the emphasis placed on the importance of raising the consciousness of urban workers on the land question, and the injustice of commercialised sport in the Highlands. The former is a recurring theme, especially of those who took a Georgeite view of the land question. J. L. Joynes, who had been arrested with Henry George in Ireland in 1882 (an event which ended his career as a Master at Eton), noted that the grievances of the crofters were 'cosmopolitan in nature' but that the area was 'cut off from communication with the rest of the world' resulting in the crimes of Highland landowners not being subjected to the necessary criticism at the bar of public opinion.⁶⁸

Deer Forests and the exploitation of large tracts of land for the purpose of commercialised sport had become one of the most visible aspects of landholding in the Highlands. Indeed, it could be argued that this was one of the dominant perceptions of the region, either by critics of such a system or by sportsmen.⁶⁹ The Highland Land Law Reform Associations fastened onto this as one of the most pressing

⁶⁶*Justice*, 12 Sept. 1885; see also 14 Mar. 1885.

⁶⁷*Justice*, 3 May 1884; 12 Sept. 1885.

⁶⁸*Justice*, 29 Mar. 1884; see also 18 Apr. 1885. For Joynes see *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, edd. Joyce M. Bellamy, Greg Rosen, Keith Gildart, David Howell, Neville Kirk, David Martin and John Saville, 12 vols. (London 1972–2005) viii, 129–33. He recounted the tale of his arrest in Ireland in 'A Political Tour in Ireland', *Times*, 4 Sept. 1882; a fuller account can be found in James L. Joynes, *The Adventures of a Tourist in Ireland* (London 1882).

⁶⁹This is fully discussed in Willie Orr, *Deer Forests, Landlords and Crofters: The Western Highlands in Victorian and Edwardian Times* (Edinburgh 1982).

grievances of the crofters, and the issue provided the left wing press, such as *Justice*, with good opportunity to occupy the moral high ground in its editorials:

We are evidently on the brink of hostilities in the far North. Every train to Scotland is heavily laden with its cargo of guns, ammunition, and provisions of all kinds; and every evening there is a busy scene at Euston Square and King's Cross, at the time of the night express ... The jaded statesmen, who have done so much benefit to the English people in their late Parliamentary labours, the "mashers" and "men about town" who naturally need some recreation after the exhausting duties of a London season, all these useful members of society are now off to Scotland to shoot grouse. It is right and proper that after much idling they should do a little killing.

The sardonic editorial finished on a more political note: 'The Highlands are not yet a paradise, even under a beneficent English rule; indeed a very clear proof of the contrary may be seen in the annual incursion of English sportsmen and the annual exodus of dispossessed Scottish crofters'.⁷⁰

The parliamentary debates on the two Crofters' Bills also provide an opportunity to assess political perceptions of the Highlands. The debates in 1885 took place prior to the election of the Crofter MPs, those of 1886 after their election, but both were conditioned by the fact that the Government's commitment to legislate on Irish Home Rule meant that only a limited amount of Parliamentary time could be devoted to the Crofters' Bill. This meant that the Crofter MPs, dissatisfied with the limited nature of the Bill, had few opportunities to persuade the government to amend it. At first sight these debates appear to have attracted a very wide range of contributions, but many of the participants had a tangible connection with the Highlands. Some of the most prominent backbench contributors to these debates who did not represent Highland constituencies are worthy of further consideration.

Sir George Campbell, the MP for the Kirkcaldy Burghs, who

⁷⁰'The War in the North', *Justice*, 18 Aug. 1885.

specialised in matters of land tenure during his parliamentary career, had been elected to the House of Commons in 1874 after a distinguished career in India, during which he had advanced the notion of tenant right in the Central Provinces.⁷¹ He had also been an influence on Gladstone during the construction of the Irish Land Act of 1870.⁷² He toured Ireland in 1869 and produced a short book detailing his views on the Irish land question.⁷³ Campbell recognised that in Ireland—as in the Scottish Highlands—it was the tenant, rather than the landowner, who made the bulk of the improvements. Campbell and others argued that the legislative recognition of this *de facto* situation was urgently required.⁷⁴ During his time in the House of Commons Campbell took an interest in the Highland land question; he advocated the appointment of a Royal Commission and defended its conclusions.⁷⁵ During the debates on the Crofters' Bill in 1886 he argued that the provisions suggested by the government did not go nearly far enough in offering financial assistance to the crofters; financial support for the fishing industry was merely

⁷¹G. Le G Northgate, 'Campbell, Sir George (1824–1892)', rev. David Steele, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4499>; accessed 21 Oct. 2004]; Sir Richard Temple, *Men and Events of My Time in India* (London 1882), 238.

⁷²E. D. Steele, *Irish Land and British Politics: Tenant Right and Nationality, 1865–1870* (Cambridge 1974), 104–8; R. D. C. Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question, 1817–1870* (Cambridge 1960), 55.

⁷³Sir George Campbell, *The Irish Land* (London 1869), 24; Sir George Campbell, 'The Tenure of Land in India', in *Systems of Land Tenure in Various Countries: A Series of Essays Published under the Sanction of the Cobden Club*, ed. J. W. Probyn (London 1881), 213–89.

⁷⁴Campbell, *Irish Land*, 7–12; P. MacLagan, *Land Culture and Land Tenure in Ireland: The Results of Observations during a Recent Tour in Ireland* (Edinburgh 1869). MacLagan was the M.P. for Linlithgowshire; W. E. Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants in Mid Victorian Ireland* (Oxford 1994), 67–102. See also Ewen A. Cameron, 'Communication or separation? Reactions to Irish land agitation and legislation in the highlands of Scotland, c. 1870–1910', *English Historical Review* 120 (2005), 633–66, at 650–1, 656; Peter Gray, 'Famine and land in Ireland and India, 1845–1880: James Caird and the political economy of hunger', *Historical Journal* 49 (2006), 193–215, at 198–200.

⁷⁵*P[arliamentary] D[ebates]*, 3^[rd] S[eries, volume] 276, [column]169; *ibid.*, 289, 1638.

exacerbating the injustices faced by them. He noted:⁷⁶

It was the evictors cry to drive the people to the sea; and the Bill would play into the evictors hands by making loans to fishermen, and not to crofters, for the improvement of their farms. The poverty of the people proposed to be benefited by the Bill was notorious. They were not small farmers, but a congested, impoverished, squeezed out race. He did not advocate emigration; but he was convinced that the object of the Bill could never be effected without a considerable amount of migration. If they wanted to benefit these people, they must do something to migrate them to these parts of Scotland from which their ancestors were expelled; and for that purpose it was absolutely necessary that some pecuniary assistance should be given to them.

Campbell's importance stems not from his status as a marginal member of the House of Commons, but from his influential position as a leading advocate of historicist views of the land question in Britain, partly drawn from his experiences in India.⁷⁷

Joel Picton, the diminutive radical MP for Leicester, had been a heterodox Congregationalist minister in Manchester, Leicester and London. Throughout his clerical career he had displayed an interest in the welfare of the working class and in the issue of education, which, in his capacity as a member of the London School Board, he argued should be secular. As in the case of Sir George Campbell, his style of oratory reputedly did not endear him to the House of Commons.⁷⁸ Picton had spoken at the conference of the Highland Land Law Reform Associations in Portree in September 1885 where he indicated that his interest arose from his 'sympathy with suffering

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 304, 122–3.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 304, 851, where he pointed out that the notion of common grazings was familiar to him as he had 'been accustomed to them all my life in India'; Clive Dewey, 'Celtic agrarian legislation and the Celtic revival: historicist implications of Gladstone's Irish and Scottish Land Acts, 1870–1886', *Past and Present* no. 64 (August 1974) 30–70.

⁷⁸Stephen C. Orchard, 'Picton, James Allanson (1832–1910)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35527>: accessed 3 Aug. 2006]; *Times*, 7 Feb. 1910.

men all the world over' before going on to argue: 'The land was surely for the benefit of all who were sent by Divine Providence upon it, at anyrate till its resources were exhausted. Were the resources of the land exhausted? It was insulting to their common sense to tell them that the Highlands were overpeopled'.⁷⁹ Picton argued that the Game Laws lay at the heart of the grievances of rural populations throughout Britain. He made a number of interventions on behalf of the crofters in 1885 and 1886. In the debates of 1886 two of the most controversial areas of debate on the Crofters' Bill were the extent to which its provisions should be confined to the Highlands, and the weakness of the provisions for making more land available to crofters. Picton struck at both in a speech during the Committee stage of the Bill. Despite his belief, enunciated at Portree the previous year, that the grievances of the crofters were part of a wider problem, he felt that the Crofters' Bill should be confined to the Highlands (although he did not define what he meant by this) on purely historicist grounds: 'Many Highlanders can point out plots from which their grandfathers were evicted'.⁸⁰ He went on to argue that he did not think it was sufficient that five crofters had to agree to make an application for such a grievance to be righted.

Sir John Ramsden, who represented the Eastern Division of the West Riding of Yorkshire from 1880 to 1885, was also vocal in the debates on the Crofters' Bill. He had a tangible connection with the Highlands in that he owned the Ardverikie estate in Inverness-shire (Charles Fraser Mackintosh, the Crofter MP for Inverness-shire, had assisted in the administration of this estate before he entered

⁷⁹ *Oban Times*, 12 Sept. 1885. The Portree Conference was an interesting moment in the history of the crofter movement as it was not only addressed by well-known Highland figures such as Charles Fraser Mackintosh and John Murdoch, but also by a number of prominent radicals and land agitators from outwith the area. We have already noted the speech of James Shaw Maxwell, the leader of the Georgeite Scottish Land Restoration League. William Saunders, a journalist who had helped to establish the Central Press Agency as well as newspapers in Plymouth and Hull, and was later to be Radical MP for Hull, also addressed the conference. For Saunders see Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London 1990), 332.

⁸⁰ *PD*, 3S, 304, 855.

parliament in 1874).⁸¹ Ramsden was a conditional supporter of the Crofters' Bill; he regarded it as a fair attempt to deal with the complexities of the situation. He did not, however, support the notion of giving statutory rights to cottars or leaseholders. He was particularly worried about the implications of favouring the former class.⁸²

For my part, I cannot see, if you are to take land by compulsion and give it the cottars who do not possess it now, and who never have possessed it, why should you stop there? Why not take the whole land of the country and divide it up?

In the Committee stage he emphasised the importance of the Bill proceeding to the statute book in a form which made it clear that it was confined to the Highlands. In particular, he felt that if individual crofters were allowed to apply for extensions of crofting land, as opposed to the condition in the Bill that such applications required the co-operation of five or more crofters, 'the government will depart entirely from the special case of the crofters and make the bill one which is just as applicable to one part of the country as another'.⁸³ This was a concern of many of the critics of the Act itself and a criticism of many of its friends from the areas bordering the seven crofting counties which were excluded from its provisions. The MPs for Aberdeenshire East and West, Peter Esslemont and Robert Farquharson, were active in their demands for that county to receive the benefits of the Act, as was William Wedderburn on behalf of his constituency in Banffshire.⁸⁴

The MP for the Falkirk Burghs also sought to amend the area to which the Crofters' Bill applied. John Ramsay introduced an amendment to exclude the islands of Islay, Jura and Colonsay from

⁸¹For biographical details of Ramsden, see *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament*, edd. M. Stenton and J. Lees, 4 vols. (Sussex 1976–81) i, 323; *Times*, 16, 20 Apr. 1914.

⁸²*PD*, 3S, 304, 165–6, see also *ibid.*, 304, 777.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 304, 856.

⁸⁴Ewen A. Cameron, 'The Scottish Highlands as a Special Policy Area, 1886–1965', *Rural History* 8 (1997) 195–215, at 198–200.

its provisions.⁸⁵ This was not an entirely disinterested action as he was the proprietor of the Kildalton estate on Islay.⁸⁶ Ramsay had very decided views on a variety of issues relating to the Highlands and he gave voice to most of them during the debates on the Crofters' Bill in 1886. He was opposed to the provisions of the Bill as it attempted to create conditions for crofters to remain in the Highlands. That it did not provide facilities for migration and emigration was, in his view, 'a grave defect in the proposal'.⁸⁷ He argued that his proprietorship of land in Islay gave him special insight into the problems of the Highlands; indeed, the period of his ownership of the Kildalton estate had seen the emigration of around 400 Islay people in the early 1860s. Ramsay denied that this had involved coercion or evictions when this accusation was made in the House of Commons.⁸⁸ A second prominent theme in Ramsay's remarks concerned his view that the Gaelic language was an obstacle to progress in the Highlands.⁸⁹ This was a view he had held for some time. As early as 1863 he had published a pamphlet arguing for the promotion of education in the Highlands; this 'would not only benefit the people, but would solve many of the difficulties which attend the management of over-peopled Highland estates'. The extension of English was a crucial condition for such benefits: not only would it

⁸⁵ *PD*, 3S, 305, 56–8; J. P. B. Robertson, the MP for Bute, was successful in having the island of Arran excluded from the provisions of the Bill; see Cameron, 'Special Policy Area', 198.

⁸⁶ *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament* i, 323; M. Storrie, *Islay, The Biography of an Island* (Port Ellen 1981), 144–7.

⁸⁷ *PD*, 3S, 302, 1324.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 305, 62. For a laudatory account of Ramsay's changes to his estate see Freda Ramsay, *John Ramsay of Kildalton, J.P., M.P., D.L.; Being an Account of his Life in Islay and including the Diary of his trip to Canada in 1870* (Toronto 1970). I am grateful to my late colleague Mr John M. Simpson for drawing my attention to this book. See also the *Highlander*, 16 May 1873, for an overview of landownership on Islay.

⁸⁹ *PD*, 3S, 303, 127; *ibid.*, 305, 28.

be an aid to migration but a means for Highlanders to 'improve their circumstances ... on their native soil'.⁹⁰

Conclusion

This essay has sought to explore the relationship between the events of the 1880s and the perceptions of the Highlands in that decade. This is not simply a matter of outsiders looking in, but also of the greater degree of assertiveness shown by some Highlanders in this period increasing the visibility of the region. The complexity of the issue does not reside there, however. This assertiveness was not easily achieved: a deeply ingrained legacy of fear was only very slowly and cautiously discarded in its realisation. Although the poverty of Highland crofters during the difficult seasons in the early 1880s raised the profile of the region, it did so in a relatively unproblematic manner; indigence did not challenge existing stereotypes. When poverty gave way to protest, especially in the island of Skye, matters became more controversial. Existing perceptions were undermined as the police were attacked, sheriff officers deforced and military expeditions despatched to the western seaboard and islands. This occasioned condemnation by external critics, such as the editorial opinion of newspapers such as the *Scotsman* or the *Times*. The protests also caused problems for those who sought to mould Highland opinion for their own purposes: journalists like Alexander Mackenzie, or politicians like Charles Fraser Mackintosh, were fearful lest events drifted beyond their control. At the same time the protests had attracted the attention of radical opinion throughout the Britain and Ireland, and beyond, resulting in public addresses in the region by Michael Davitt from Ireland, Henry George from the United States, and Dr Evan Pan Jones from Wales. Radical journalism, such as that evident in the pages of *Justice*, also began to take notice of the crofters' protests, but

⁹⁰John Ramsay of Kildalton, M.P., *A Letter to the Right Honourable The Lord Advocate of Scotland on the State of Education in the Outer Hebrides in 1862* (Glasgow 1863), 4. The pamphlet (at 6) also contains a denial that there had been extensive enforced removals on the island of Islay.

from within particular ideological frameworks. The resultant attempts to legislate on the question brought other layers of perception to the surface and Parliamentarians of different political hues, often with diverse contacts to the region, engaged in forthright debate on the floor of the House of Commons.

Although protest recurred intermittently throughout the 1890s and early 1900s and further legislation was passed, the Highland land question was never so visible as it had been in the 1880s. Even when more sustained protest took place in the years immediately following the Great War it was not so politicised as it had been in the 1880s, and did not achieve visibility or contact with radical opinion: in short, it was more isolated. When poverty returned with a vengeance to the island of Lewis, the main site of the later agitation, it did not evince the sympathy evident in the 1880s, and, in a pattern tragically reminiscent of the 1840s and 1850s, mass emigration was the response.⁹¹ The importance of changing perceptions of the Highlands in the 1880s was that they were diverse and wide-ranging; this ensured that the Highland land problem, which seemed to parallel events in other parts of the United Kingdom, could not be ignored by the journalistic and political community.

⁹¹Marjory Harper, *Emigration from Scotland between the Wars: Opportunity or Exile?* (Manchester 1998), 71–112.