

The Hebridean Land Revolt



The Hebridean land revolt was a major uprising by the rural peasantry in 19th-century Scotland. Rents went unpaid. Fences were cut in the night. Land was illegally occupied. Telegraph poles were cut down. Roads were blocked with boulders. And government officials were attacked and beaten by mobs of women and men and children. Finally, in November 1884, the British government authorised a military invasion, dispatching gunboats and hundreds of marines.

In Scots Gaelic there's a word, *dùthchas*, that can't easily be translated. It describes a hereditary connection and entitlement to the land, a sense of belonging and obligation, a heritage of the soil. Below the Cuillin Mountains' black bealachs and coires, you can see where the foothills have over centuries been ribbed with lazy beds, the hillside carved in ridges and furrows, as though the grass covers some ancient temple. You get a sense of how hard it must have been to cultivate this land, but also how attached people must have been to this landscape, and how traumatised they must have been by their deracination.

Background: the end of feudalism

The islanders' entitlement to the land ended in the years following the Jacobite Rebellion, which was a failed attempt to reinstate the Stuart Dynasty to the British throne. In 1689 the Roman Catholic King James II of England (VII of Scotland) was replaced at the bequest of parliament by a Protestant couple: Princess Mary and her husband, William of Orange (AKA King Billy, whose picture adorns so many gable-ends in Belfast). William was King James's nephew, and Mary was King James's daughter. William and Mary signed the English Bill of Rights, which laid the foundation for a centralised nation state that over the next 200 years would come to dominate the world. By getting rid of an archaic absolutist Roman Catholic monarchy, Britain got a hundred years' start on France, and in the 18th-century its comparatively rationalised and centralised state would outpace the Bourbon monarchy in the race to despoil the world. For the merchant class this was great news, but it was obviously bad news for the Stuart Dynasty and the Kings of France. In 1745, while the French monarchy and the British state were busy fighting over territories in India and Canada (and over some weird business to do with an Austrian princess), the grandson of the king who'd been deposed in 1689 – Bonnie Prince Charlie – decided he would reclaim the thrones of England, Scotland, and Ireland. He landed with seven mates in the Outer Hebrides and tried to persuade the Highland clans to fight for him.

Now, traditionally, the Highland clans had never needed a good reason to go to war; on the Isle of Skye, for instance, the MacLeods and the McDonalds fought each other for hundreds of years, until, in 1600, the MacLeod Chief's sister was wed to the MacDonald chief's son. It seemed this might finally end the feud, but after the MacLeod girl somehow lost an eye, the MacDonalds returned her to her brother on a one-eyed horse led by a one-eyed servant and a one-eyed dog, which led to the War of the One-Eyed Woman. So, all things considered, why not fight for some dandy who wanted to sit on a fancy chair?

With the Highlanders providing the muscle, Charlie and his seven mates managed to conquer the whole of Scotland and most of England, before changing their minds and walking all the way back to the Highlands. Exhausted and hungry, many of the Highlanders began to desert back to their villages, and Charlie's diminished force was comprehensively defeated at the Battle of Culloden, near Inverness. The Prince escaped and hid in a succession of caves, before disguising himself as a woman and rowing to the Isle of Skye, from where he returned to France. Back on the continent, he had an affair with his cousin and became an alcoholic, which suggests that he'd have thrived in Scotland had he been able to stay a little longer.

From our perspective what matters is that after this episode the Highlands were occupied by the Crown's soldiers, and Highland chiefs were forbidden from commanding armed men. This meant they no longer had any use for their clan members besides accumulating wealth from their labour. As industrial cities expanded in England and lowland Scotland, there developed a great demand for wool and meat, and soon the clan chiefs realised they could make more money from running a sheep farm – or selling the land to a sheep farmer – than they could ever make from the meagre rents paid by their impoverished tenants. So those tenants were forced off the land to make way for the sheep, and many emigrated to work in Glasgow and Edinburgh's developing industries, or to New Zealand or North America, where in turn they would speed the disentanglement of the Maori and the Native Americans.

But this mass emigration was paused during the Napoleonic wars at the start of the 19th-century. So long as the Peninsular War was ongoing, it was difficult to import Spanish barilla, which at that time was used to manufacture soap and glass. One viable alternative was kelp, and so, as the value of kelp inflated, the Highland lairds lobbied for legislation to increase the price of transatlantic freight beyond the means of the peasantry. The clearances continued but instead of being forced to emigrate, the crofters were relocated to smallholdings of infertile coastal land, where they had to supplement their incomes by collecting seaweed. For a time, Lord MacDonald made £14,000 a year selling kelp for £20 a ton, while paying only 30s a ton for its production. But when the Napoleonic Wars ended, the kelp industry collapsed and the crofters were left to support themselves from their diminished plots. As in Ireland, people became dependent on the potato, and when the European potato blight hit the Hebrides in 1846, the crofters were driven to eating roots and seaweed. Whole families were dying of scurvy, typhus, and cholera. The fourth Lord MacDonald bought a cargo of meal in Liverpool to alleviate the suffering of his starving tenants, but meal prices were rising every day that winter, and so he sold the cargo in London at a substantial profit.

Eventually the Highlanders, unlike their Gaelic brethren in Ireland, benefitted from a substantial relief effort, and the famine abated, but conditions for crofters remained abject. John MacPherson, who became the best known of the Skye agitators, was unusual among crofters in that he was literate and bilingual (most spoke only Gaelic), and in 1883 he provided a vivid account of life in a Skye crofting community. "We have very miserable dwelling houses," he explained. "They are thatched with straw; and as our crofts do not produce the required amount of straw for fodder for the cattle and thatch for our houses, and as we are prohibited from cutting rushes or pulling heather by the proprietor, the condition of our dwelling-houses in rainy weather is most deplorable." Crofters could be jailed for the crime of collecting heather from the hillside, and so "Above our beds come down pattering the rain, rendered dirty and black by the soot on the ceiling." According to Macpherson, of the twenty crofters' houses in his settlement, there were only two in which the cattle did not share the same room as the family. When those who lived in the coastal settlements of the Braes were denied their ancient right to graze their cattle on the slopes of Ben Lee, they launched a rebellion that spread across the Hebrides and provoked the last naval invasion on British land.

The Battle of the Braes

Today, Ben Lee, overlooking the Sound of Raasay, is an unremarkable and economically insignificant hillside. But in 1865, when the crofters' landlord, MacDonald of Sleat, let out Ben Lee to a sheep farm, it was a devastating blow for his already impoverished tenants. For fifteen years they stoically endured the confiscation of their grazing rights, but when the sheep farm's lease expired, they petitioned the landlord to reinstate their rights to Ben Lee in exchange for a fair rent. When the petition went ignored, the crofters declared a rent strike, and drove their animals onto the hill in violation of the law.

So on the 7th April 1882, Sheriff Office Martin and a small entourage left the island's capital, Portree, to deliver eviction notices to some of the most senior and troublesome tenants. Their party was intercepted at the north entrance to the Braes and surrounded by a jeering mob of 150 women, men, and children. They ceremonially burned the eviction notices, and then, as the *Aberdeen Daily Free Press* reported, "Certain domestic utensils, fully charged, were suddenly brought on the scene, and their contents were showered on the unlucky assistant, who immediately disappeared, followed by a howling crowd of boys." This was intolerable, and the Sheriff of Inverness-shire was determined to put on a show of force. Since he had only 44 police at his disposal, he appealed to the City of Glasgow Police, who agreed to send 40 officers north. So on April 19th a combined force of Glasgow and Highland police marched into the Braes and made it as far as the entrance to Balmeanach.

Balmeanach still has a dozen or so houses, although most of them are holiday homes. The township is huddled on a plain of flat land between the sea and a steep embankment that's now thickly covered by trees and shrubs. As the police contingent attempted to escort their prisoners back to Portree, it was between this steep slope and the hillside that the fighting commenced.

The crofters, initially taken by surprise, were soon running from every house in Balmeanach and from the neighbouring communities. They ran from their homes and fields carrying whatever weapons they could find: stones, sticks, scythes, hoes. The battle was fought in weather that, according to a contemporary report, "for sheer brutal ferocity had not been experienced in Skye for a very long time." In the gale and deluge, the crofters began to chuck stones, while others attacked with branches and agricultural tools. The police baton charged unsuccessfully and soon they too resorted to hurling stones. Writing in the *Dundee Advertiser*, a journalist who had accompanied the police expedition, described how "Stones were coming down like hail, while huge boulders were hurled down before which nothing could stand. These bounded over the road and descended the precipice with a noise like thunder. (...) Here and there a constable might be seen actually bending under the pressure of a well-directed boulder, losing his footing, and rolling down the hill, followed by scores of missiles." Sometimes, as they fought hand to hand, police and crofters would slip in the mud and roll down the hillside together, crashing at the bottom of the slope. As the police escorted their prisoners towards Portree, they were attacked again and again. The reporter from the *Dundee Advertiser* saw "Sheriffs and Fiscals forgetting their dignity, and taking to their heels." It was amazing that nobody was killed: by the end of the battle, men and women lay stretched on the hillside with blood pouring from their heads. The exhausted police force made it to Portree with five prisoners, but they were booed and jeered by the townspeople, and they were soaked and covered in mud and blood. The Dundee reporter recalled seeing that "one of the Glasgow men had his nose almost cut through with a stone, and was terribly gashed about the brow."

The whole episode was a humiliation for the forces of law, and *The North British Daily Mail* satirised their expedition to the Braes with a parody of Lord Tennyson's famous poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade":
Quote:

*Forward, Police Brigade!
Charge each auld wife and maid!"
E'en though the Bobbies knew
Someone had blundered!
Their's not to make reply;*

*Their's not to reason why;
Their's but to do or die;
Into the valley of Braes
Charged the half-hundred.*

The immediate effect of their humiliation was that there was no hope in Hell that the Glasgow police were ever again offering assistance. This was a major problem for the Sheriff, since out on Skye's most westerly peninsula, in townships closer to the Outer Hebridean island of North Uist than to Skye's capital, an even more threatening rebellion was plaguing the landlords. Again, a rent strike was provoked by the denial of grazing rights on a hill that had been let for sheep farming. Exhausted by the hostility he faced, the sheep farmer had declined to renew his lease, lamenting that the crofters "went about with pitch-forks and scythes and poles pointed with iron or steel, and it was a mercy no one would serve the processes upon them, or they would have murdered him sure enough. You cannot get a sheriff's officer to serve a process on any tenant in Skye." Recognising this, the Sheriff made an extraordinary appeal: he requested that Skye be invaded by a British military and naval force. But the Lord Advocate for Scotland, J.B. Balfour, was at this stage unwilling to authorise military force, arguing that the enforcement of law ought to be handled by the police. And so, on 11th January 1883, an unfortunate Messenger at Arms was despatched from Glasgow to serve court orders on the highest-profile Glendale rebels. And you can probably guess what happened next.

The Glendale Land Revolt

Glendale is a scatter of two-dozen, white-rendered buildings, surrounded by undulating hunter-green moorland. It's along the coast from Dunvegan Castle, the ancient seat of the chiefs of the Clan MacLeod, in the shadow of MacLeod's Tables, two large flat-topped mountains plonked in the centre of the windswept Duirinish Peninsula. Glendale is big enough to have a café and a post-office/shop. The post-office and village shop is housed in a small, traditional "but and ben" building, with a roof of corrugated metal. There was also a post office in Glendale in March 1882, and it was there that notices appeared advising of the rent strike and warning that, "Any one of the tenants at Skinidin who will pay the rent, not only that his House and Property will be destroyed, but his life will be taken away or anyone who will begin backsliding. Not to be removed."

Nobody admitted affixing these notices, but the Landlord's representatives believed the most dangerous rebels were John MacPherson and four other men who lived further out the peninsula in the settlements of Upper and Lower Milovaig. It's a long walk to Lower Milovaig, and when you get there it feels like the edge of the world. Sea eagles nest in steep cliffs that plunge into Loch Pooltiel and seals bask on seaweed-green rocks. In January 1883, the unfortunate Messenger at Arms never made it this far.

On his journey from Dunvegan, he and two local police reached the bridge that crosses the Hamara River, and there the path was blocked by a crowd of 60 crofters. Along the glen, others were blowing horns to summon their neighbours. The river is two or three metres wide at this point, cutting its way through banks of fern and hawthorne, the water, in dry weather, shallow and calm. The Messenger at Arms approached the crowd with his ceremonial wand of peace upheld, but he later reported that "one of the men took hold of me and placed a short stick to my breast and with the assistance of another two or three gave me a push which shoved me back some four or five yards, saying 'turn back now, you won't be allowed to go further towards Milovaig.'" Then, in case this wasn't understood, the crowd, which grew to number 200, followed the lawmen through the townships of Fasach, Colbost, and Skinidin, and drove them across the Brunigil Burn. Along the way they occasionally lobbed stones and tripped and clubbed their victims, while yelling "Glacadh beo e, Am poll-mona gun cuir sinn e." (Let him be caught alive so that we can put him in a peat bog.) According to one version, by the time they'd been pushed off the estate, the Messenger and his assistant were vomiting blood.

Still determined to avoid military intervention, the government resolved to send a Hebridean Gaelic-speaking civil servant who had a reputation for assisting crofters. If anyone could reason with the Glendale rebels then it was Malcolm MacNeill. "Inhabitants of Glendale," he said, "I have come here to

speak to you one last word on behalf of the Government. It may be that you are not aware how serious is the offence which you have committed in deforcing and maltreating an officer carrying out the orders of the Supreme Court." But once again the Government was underestimating the crofters: they knew exactly how serious the situation was, and they had no intention of going toe to toe with the British Army. But they also knew that public opinion was increasingly in their favour.

So, at this point, Macpherson and the others who were to have been summoned to court took the clever step of travelling to Edinburgh and voluntarily surrendering. They appeared at the Court of Session on February 20th, and through a Gaelic interpreter they were charged with offences including contempt of court and assaulting a shepherd who worked on the disputed Waterstein Hill. The accused used their court appearance as an opportunity to debate the land question, and when each was finally sentenced to two months in prison, the public benches rose to applaud them.

None of this did anything to dampen the revolt in Skye. As a correspondent telegraphed to The Dundee Evening Telegraph from the rebellious island, "The people now freely state that they will carry on the agitation to the bitter end, and will never surrender until their grievances are redressed. The sentence of the Court of Session has tended to cause the agitation to spread and take a deeper root and hold on the minds of the people."

In Ireland, similar disturbances had quickly been repressed with violence, but the people of the Highlands, who in the 18th-century had been despised and feared, had in the 19th-century been celebrated for their contribution to the British Army and defence of the empire. Plus, their way of life and their landscape had been romanticised in Victorian art and literature. And so, instead of sending the army, the Government's next move was to establish a Committee of Inquiry "To inquire into the condition of the crofters and cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and all matters affecting the same or relating thereto, and to report thereon."

For a time, this had the desired pacifying effect. But when the Napier Commission, as the Committee became known, reported its conclusions, their recommendations fell far short of the crofters' demands. They proposed, for instance, that secure 30-year leases should be available, but only to those crofters who paid more than £6 a year in rent; in Lower Milovaig, nobody had a farm of that size. As Roger Hutchinson puts it in his excellent *Martyrs: Glendale and the Revolution in Skye*: "There would have been no place for MacPherson or any of his neighbours in Lord Napier's new Highlands."

And so the revolt restarted and spread across Skye and the Outer Hebrides. Rents went unpaid. Fences were cut in the night. Land was illegally occupied. Telegraph poles were cut down. Roads were blocked with boulders. Finally, in November 1884, the British government authorised a military invasion.

The naval invasion and the end of the Highland Clearances

War correspondents descended on Skye, reporting that the crofters were raising an army to fight the marines, and it was true that around Uig crofters had posted sentries to watch for the arrival of ships. But at the same time, John MacPherson and others were touring the island, urging the most militant crofters to offer no armed resistance. On the morning of 17th November, when two gunboats escorted HMS Assistance and 350 marines to the Bay of Uig, the invaders were met with a scene of total tranquillity. Confused, the boats waited in invasion formation, as the first seventy marines were dispatched to protect police in Uig. Desperate for a story, one correspondent reported that "an old crone" had "cackled" at the soldiers, but this was the extent of the disorder that he could relay.

On November 28th, two gunships docked at Colbost jetty having navigated the waters around Eilean Mor and other islets. As the landed troops began their march to Glendale, they ascended the pass at Cnoc an t-Sithein, where they saw 600 crofters gathered in a glacial trough above the road. Fearing this was, finally,

Skye's armed resistance, the soldiers readied their rifles and some took up positions on raised ground. When a cheer went up from the crowd of crofters, the soldiers imagined it was either a shout of derision or a battle cry. But as Hutchinson relates, "Luckily their senior officers, one of whom was riding a donkey and smoking a cigar, remained cool, because it was neither." In fact the crofters were cheering a speech by John MacPherson, who had told them to be unafraid and had pledged that the agitation would continue no matter how many police and soldiers the government sent. As the troops passed, the crofters completely ignored them. At the side of the B884, near where this incident took place, there stands a walled memorial "To commemorate the achievements of the Glendale land leaguers, 1882-1888."

The occupation lasted seven months and not a shot was fired. In fact, the major challenges the soldiers faced were dealing with the excited attentions of crowds of young boys, and trying to understand the flirtatious innuendos that were spoken in Gaelic by local girls. In contrast, the police continued to be heckled and jeered. When the soldiers left in 1885, the agitation restarted, but it was increasingly a parliamentary struggle: the 1884 Representation of the People Act had extended the franchise to all men paying an annual rent of £10 or more, and this included many of the more affluent crofters. The number of people eligible to vote in Inverness-shire, which included the Isle of Skye, rose from 1,664 to 10,265. At the 1885 General Election, the land leaguers stood five "Crofters' Candidates" in the Highlands, and four of them were elected. In 1886 the government agreed to pass the Crofters' Holdings Act, which secured land tenure and access to common grazing rights. It was the end of the Highland Clearances.

Scotland Today

It was certainly not the end of land injustice. Today, half of Scotland's non-public land is owned by 432 people, few of whom reside in the country. In March 2016, Conservative and Scottish National Party MPs voted down proposals that would have imposed limits on the amount of land that one individual can own. Across Scotland, tenant farmers continue to pay rent to rural lairds, even when their families have worked the land for generations. While some land is owned by descendants of clan chiefs – in 2000, MacLeod of MacLeod attempted to sell the Cuillin Mountains, asserting his ownership based on a charter from 1611 – much of Scotland has been bought more recently; for instance, the third biggest landowner is Danish billionaire Anders Povlsen, who owns 265 square miles. The biggest landowner is Richard Scott, Duke of Buccleuch, who owns an area bigger than Hong Kong. Some of this land has belonged to his family since his great, great grandfather helped King James II bump off the Earl of Douglas. Some of it has belonged to his family only since the 17th-century, after Charles II conceived an illegitimate child with his great great great great great great great great grandmother in Rotterdam. The struggle continues.

I am indebted to Roger Hutchinson's excellent *Martyrs: Glendale and the Revolution in Skye*, the major source for my abridged account. All errors are mine.

Hutchinson, R. (2015) *Martyrs: Glendale and the Revolution in Skye*, Edinburgh: Birlinn

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