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Ewen A. Cameron and Andrew Newby

‘Alas, Skyemen are imitating the Irish’:
A note on Alexander Nicolson’s ‘Little Leaflet’
concerning the Crofters’ Agitation.

Introduction

The purpose of this short note is to consider the contents and context of an ‘Address to the People’ by Sheriff Nicolson, Kircudbright, which was printed on a ‘little leaflet’ and published, in both Gaelic and English, in late April 1882.¹ Nicolson professed to be shocked by the outbreak of land agitation in Skye and was keen to warn the crofters of his native island not to emulate the tactics of the Irish small tenants who had been engaged in land agitation since the late 1870s. The tone of Nicolson’s views on the crofters’ agitation and the contemporaneous protests in Ireland provides some evidence that, in the early years of the crofters’ war at least, the Irish example was viewed as much with suspicion and deprecation as it was looked to for inspiration. It also provides evidence that some of those who were regarded, or regarded themselves, as leading Highlanders and Gaels sought to control and limit the quickly developing agitation.² Nicolson’s short statement, moreover, should be seen in the context of surrounding events in Scotland and Ireland, and must be compared with other views about the Irish land question which were expressed in the early years of the crofters’ protests.

Before proceeding to a consideration of the document itself some biographical information on the author will be presented. Alexander Nicolson was one of the most prominent Gaels of the late nineteenth century.³ He was born on 27th September 1827 at Husabost, Skye, where his father, Malcolm Nicolson, was the proprietor. He attended the University of Edinburgh, with the intention, it seems, of entering

¹ The text presented here is from the *Inverness Courier* of the 25th of April 1882. The Gaelic version of the text is not an edited version and remains faithful to the original orthography, except in the case of obvious typographical errors; the authors are grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing out a number of such errors.

² E. A. Cameron, *The Life and Times of Charles Fraser Mackintosh, Crofter MP* (Aberdeen 2000) 110, 124. There is no doubt that Nicolson’s concern for his native islands was genuine, and indeed he criticised the arguments of the *Scotsman* in the late 1870s that the root of the land problem on Skye was over-population. See ‘Glasgow Highland News, Skye Gathering’, *Oban Times*, 22 Dec. 1877

³ For basic biographical information see: I. Macdonald, ‘Alexander Nicolson and his Collection’ in *A Collection of Gaelic Proverbs and Familiar Phrases*, ed. A. Nicolson (new edition, Edinburgh 1996) vii-viii.

the ministry of the Free Church, but he abandoned this calling, due to 'doctrinal difficulties', according to one obituary.⁴ He attended arts classes in the University in the late 1840s, graduating with the degree of B.A., and matriculated in law for two years from 1857 prior to becoming an Advocate in 1860.⁵ During the 1850s he supported himself by acting as an assistant to the Professor of Logic in the University of Edinburgh and in various journalistic activities. He was the editor, for a period from 1855, of the *Edinburgh Guardian* and he acted as an editor of the eighth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, contributing an article on Adam Black. He was active in the campaign, led by Professor John Stuart Blackie, to endow the Chair of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh, and it is said that he was actually offered the Chair but turned it down, something which he later regretted.⁶ He was awarded the Honorary Degree of LL.D., by the University in 1880.

In the mid-1860s he served on the Royal Commission on Scottish Education chaired by the Duke of Argyll. Nicolson compiled a separate report on educational matters in the Hebrides,⁷ which has recently been described as 'a document of considerable literary merit'.⁸ In this report he deprecated the idea of educating Gaelic-speaking children in English from the start of their educational careers, as this merely encouraged uncomprehending parrot style learning. He believed that Gaelic reading should be taught as the necessary first step to inculcating literacy in English. As Durkacz comments, 'he insisted that there was nothing intrinsically backward about the Gaelic language; it was merely the ignorance of English that delayed progress in the Highlands'.⁹

In 1872 he was appointed Sheriff of Kirkcudbright and then, in 1885, became Sheriff at Greenock: he retired due to ill health in 1889. The consensus is that he was a man of undoubted potential, but lacking the energy and drive to fulfil that potential. Nicolson's skill as an orator was also given an ambivalent assessment after a speech at the Edinburgh Philosophical Institute in 1883:

Sheriff Nicolson's lectures are always interesting, though they tax one's attention to the uttermost as he invariably comes out

⁴ *Times* 18 Jan 1893

⁵ Matriculation Roll of the University of Edinburgh, volume IV, 1830-1858, 1217, 1240, 1254, 1263, 1382, 1395

⁶ M. MacLean, *Literature of the Highlands* (2nd edition, London 1925) 171

⁷ P.P. 1867. XXV. *Education, (Scotland) Commission, Report on the State of Education in the Hebrides*, by Alexander Nicolson

⁸ R. D. Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People, 1750-1918* (Oxford 1995) 86

⁹ V. E. Durkacz, *The Decline of the Celtic Languages: A Study of Linguistic and Cultural Conflict in Scotland, Wales and Ireland from the Reformation to the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh 1983) 168-9

with some sparkling and humorous remark when you have given over expecting anything other than dry details.¹⁰

He was not a conspicuous success in private legal practice, MacLean describes his period as an advocate as 'years passed in a monotonous pacing of the boards of the Parliament House'¹¹ and his move to Kirkcudbright may have reflected this. Henry Whyte (who wrote under the pen-name 'Fionn'), in an article in the *Celtic Monthly* in March 1893, describes him in the following terms: 'Sheriff Nicolson was a man of intellectual power and high literary ability, but his energy was somewhat crippled by a lethargic constitution.'¹² Strangely for a man of whom this could be said, Nicolson was a distinguished mountaineer, pioneering several new routes in the Cuillins; indeed, the peak *Sgurr Alasdair* is named after him.¹³ Nicolson had made his first ascent of this peak, which was, according to the Scottish Mountaineering Club, 'one of the most graceful as well as the highest in the range', in the early 1870s.¹⁴ Nicolson's rather sentimental view of his native island, which emerges from the text published below, is also expressed in his thoughts about mountaineering: in the course of a retrospective article on his mountaineering exploits he remarked that the 'hills I like best are naturally those of Skye, where I was born...'.¹⁵

Nicolson was, however, a noted Gaelic scholar: he had been involved, alongside Donald Mackinnon, in scriptural translation with the SSPCK in 1881, and his own scholarship resulted in his volume *A Collection of Gaelic Proverbs and Familiar Phrases* which was first published in 1881, with a second and revised edition in 1882 (there have been two further reprints, in 1951 and 1996). Henry Whyte described this volume as 'a monument of patience and Celtic scholarship, and one of the most valuable collections of the kind in any language'.¹⁶ MacPhail has argued that many of the proverbs and sayings collected by Nicolson reflect a vein of assertiveness on the land question within the crofting community.¹⁷

¹⁰ *Oban Times*, 27 Jan. 1883

¹¹ MacLean, *Literature*, 171

¹² "Fionn" (Henry Whyte), 'Sheriff Nicolson', *Celtic Monthly*, 1 (1892-3) 85. As early as 1878, "Fionn" had already confirmed himself as a fan of Nicolson's work. In referring to a forthcoming collection of *Mackintosh's Gaelic Proverbs*, he wrote that 'from the pen of the gifted Sheriff we may look for an excellent work.' *Oban Times*, 13 Jul. 1878

¹³ I. M. M. MacPhail, *The Crofters War* (Stornoway, 1989) 71

¹⁴ *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* 9 (1906-7) 350-1

¹⁵ A. Nicolson, 'Skye and Sgur-nan-Gilleann in 1865', *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* 2 (1892-3) 99

¹⁶ "Fionn", 'Sheriff Nicolson' 71

¹⁷ MacPhail, *Crofters' War* 70-1

His principal involvement with the crofting community, to whom the document under discussion is addressed, came with his appointment to the *Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* chaired by Lord Napier in 1883-4. He was joined on that body by Charles Fraser Mackintosh, the Crofter M.P. for Inverness, and also a scholar of the Highlands; Donald Cameron of Lochiel; Sir Kenneth Mackenzie of Gairloch; and Professor Donald Mackinnon, the first Professor of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh.

The immediate context of the original publication of Nicolson's homily to the natives of Skye was, firstly, the eruption and publicisation of land agitation in the Scottish Highlands. The events on Lord MacDonal's Skye estates which became known as the 'Battle of the Braes' occurred on 18 April 1882, but tension had been evident in the north of the island on the estate of Captain Fraser of Kilmuir for some time prior to this. The events at Braes had a much greater impact as they were conducted in the presence of a large contingent of newspaper reporters who gave the events wide prominence in Scotland, London and Ireland.¹⁸ The second important component of the immediate context of Nicolson's views was the ongoing land and political agitation in Ireland. After near-famine conditions in Ireland in the late 1870s the Irish National Land League grew out of agitation in the western county of Mayo; a strenuous agitation was conducted among the small farmers of the West and later spread to encompass larger farmers in other parts of Ireland. These events, combined with the return of large numbers of Nationalist members (including Donald H. MacFarlane, later to represent Argyll) at the general election of 1880, placed enormous pressure on the government. The response of Gladstone's administration was to renew the policy of coercion, but also to grant substantial concessions in the form of the Irish Land Act of 1881 (this would be the model for the *Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act* of 1886), and, in 1882, to enter into political dialogue with the leaders of Irish Nationalism currently incarcerated in comfortable conditions in Kilmainham gaol. These events were covered in great detail by the press in Scotland, including the newspapers of the Highlands. Thus, any outbreak of land agitation in the Highlands could not but be seen, as Nicolson demonstrated, in the light of events unfolding in Ireland.

¹⁸ MacPhail, *Crofters' War*, 25-63 gives a full account of these events; see also Hunter, *Crofting Community*, 130-45; H. J. Hanham, 'The Problem of Highland Discontent', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series 19 (1969) 21-65 is informative on the reactions of the press to these events

The years immediately before the 'Crofter's War' witnessed the Highland press provide a weekly digest of the worst excesses of Irish agrarian terrorism; Sheriff Nicolson was not alone in his concern for the moral well-being of his countrymen. The *Oban Times*, for example, an organ which would in time come to support land reform in both the Highlands and Ireland, stated at an early stage that

This Irish view of the matter is not likely to find many supporters on this side of the channel, where shooting landlords is not looked upon as the best mode to ending agricultural distress.¹⁹

The *Oban Times* was also confident that 'only the ignorant and unthinking can be led astray by the specious and hollow sophistry of Mr. Parnell and his colleagues'.²⁰

Nicolson probably penned his 'Address to the People' before it had been reported that the Irish Land League were to intervene directly in Skye by sending an envoy, Edward McHugh, to teach the crofters about land law reform.²¹ Nevertheless, radicals among the Gaels had been given encouragement by events in Braes, an excited 'Fionn', author of a weekly 'Glasgow Letter' in the *Oban Times*, claiming that 'The heather is on fire!'²² After the circulation of the leaflet, 'Rob Roy Jr.' had a riposte for the Sheriff: 'BRAVO! The Skyemen are imitating the Irish!'²³ In a letter to the radical *Irish World* newspaper in New York, outlining the 'Land War in Scotland', John Murdoch, the veteran Highland land reformer, belittled Nicolson's address:

I met two clergymen in the town of Portree, one of them with a bundle of copies of a silly leaflet in Gaelic which a sheriff in another part of Scotland printed to act as a wet-sheet on the minds of the people... 'Oh, we sympathise with the people,' the younger of the two said, while the other seemed ashamed of the bundle of twaddle which he had been asked to circulate.²⁴

¹⁹ *Oban Times*, 27 Sep. 1879; for a consideration of the role of this newspaper in these years on see Andrew G. Newby, 'The *Oban Times* and the early land agitation in the Highlands, 1877-1881', *Scottish Local History* 54 (Spring 2002) 13-21.

²⁰ *Oban Times*, 29 Nov. 1879

²¹ Andrew Newby, 'Edward McHugh,, the National Land League of Great Britain and the "Crofters' War", 1879-1882' *Scottish Historical Review* 82 (2003) 74-91

²² *Oban Times*, 22 Apr. 1882

²³ *Oban Times*, 13 May 1882. 'Rob Roy Jr.' was a Liverpool-based Gael who, like the other Liverpool correspondents of the *Oban Times*, seems to have had close relations with the radical Irishmen of the city.

²⁴ *Irish World*, 10 Jun. 1882

Those to whom James Hunter referred as ‘understandably frightened members of the possessing classes’²⁵ had their worst fears confirmed barely a fortnight after the ‘Battle of the Braes’, when Lord Frederick Cavendish, the newly arrived Chief Secretary for Ireland, and his Under-Secretary, T. H. Burke, were brutally murdered whilst walking in Phoenix Park, Dublin, on 6 May. Already convinced, prior to this outrage, that any rebellious feelings should be ‘knocked out of the crofter class’, the *Oban Times* now told its readers on 15 May that ‘Cromwell and King William knew how to rule Ireland.’²⁶

The interest of Irishmen in the land issue in the Scottish Highlands was long standing. After the evictions on the estate of A. J. Pirie at Leckmelm, on Loch Broom, in 1879, John Murdoch’s radical *Highlander* newspaper felt it necessary to lambaste the Highland MPs after it was left to T. P. O’Connor, Nationalist member for Galway, to raise the issue in Parliament.²⁷ During and after the Braes disturbances, Joseph Biggar, MP for County Cavan, also made efforts to keep Highland issues in the public eye.²⁸ Highland constituencies at this time were mostly represented by men who were part of the landowning class, or had close links with it; only Charles Fraser Mackintosh, representing the Inverness District of Burghs, sought to voice the demands of the crofters and even then in a very moderate manner. However, the immediate result of the visit of McHugh – an ardent follower of Henry George – to the area, was an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the land issue among the crofters, rather than an outbreak of ‘Irish’ levels of agrarian crime.²⁹

A few months later, Michael Davitt, the instigator of the Irish Land League, toured Scotland in support of Georgite land reforming theories. The involvement of a ‘ticket-of-leave’ prisoner with a Fenian past with the crofting agitation increased unease amongst those such as Nicolson, and yet Davitt gave a statement of intent which owed little to Irish nationalism:

What was it they were aiming at, not only in Ireland, but also in Britain and Scotland? They were aiming, first, to minimise the misery and poverty of the people...³⁰

²⁵ J. Hunter *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh 1976) 137.

²⁶ *Oban Times*, 15 Apr. 1882; 20 May 1882.

²⁷ *Highlander*, 1 Sep. 1880.

²⁸ See, e.g., *Hansard*, 24 Apr. 1882 (268, col. 1245); 27 Apr. 1882 (268, col. 1565); 19 May 1882 (269, col. 1089); 27 Jul. 1882 (272, col. 1960); 6 Nov. 1882 (274, col. 1289)

²⁹ Newby, ‘Edward McHugh’, 90-1

³⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 26 Oct. 1882

Davitt had learned from bitter experience that illegal agitation could lead to strong coercive measures on the part of the British government. He believed that Scotland was going to be a more receptive testing ground for his land nationalisation theories than Ireland, and was therefore concerned that the Highland land reform movement would not be stillborn.

...it looked, if they would pardon a very bad pun, as if landlordism was soon going Skye high. While he was glad to see the intelligent spirit of determination animating the crofters, he was anxious that nothing should be done by land reformers, by farmers, or by labourers, that they would give the landlord class a legal pretext to come down on the movement.³¹

Indeed, he cancelled planned visits to Skye and Caithness in 1882 because he did not want to exacerbate the already volatile situation in those areas.

Thus, whilst it might be tempting to write off Nicolson's perspective on the Irish land agitation as an isolated statement by a member of the establishment, the briefest exploration of the context of his ideas suggests that although the Irish land agitation may have been an inspiration for some it was a more troubling event for others. Even the leaders of the Irish land movement who were present in Scotland in 1882, principally Michael Davitt and Edward McHugh, were careful to present themselves as Georgite radicals rather than as Irish nationalists; although this was not entirely opportunistic it was highly convenient that they could appeal to a different set of ideas given a less than positive view of things Irish current in the Scottish Highlands in 1882.³² As shown above, the response to Nicolson's views shows that there were politically engaged individuals in the Highlands at this time who were willing to counter his views. The text presented here ought to sound a note of caution and engender a more critical perspective on perceptions of Ireland in the Highlands in the early years of the land agitation.

³¹ *Glasgow Herald* 27 Oct. 1882

³² Newby, 'Edward McHugh', 81-8

**ADDRESS TO THE PEOPLE BY SHERIFF NICOLSON,
KIRCUDBRIGHT**

Sheriff Nicolson, Kirkcudbright – one of the most honoured sons of the Island of Skye – has issued the following address, clearly printed on a little “leaflet,” to the crofters of Skye:–

*Do Thuath an Eilean Sgiathanaich, gu h-àraid an
Gleann-dail 's 'am Braigh Phorthrigh.*

A mhuinntir mo cridhe!

'D e seo na naigheachdan eagalach a tha 'tighinn h-ugainn oirbh? 'S beag a shaoil mi riamh gun tigeadh an là a chluinninn á leithid a' tighinn á Eilean mo rùin, á Gleann-dail gu h-àraid, dùthaich m' òige, 's á Braigh Phorthrigh, dùthaich mo shinnsre, dha 'm bu dual a bhi 'n an daoine sìochail!

'S mi tha cianail an diugh. 'S beag mo shùnd 's mo chèol gàire mu'n Eilean a's tric a tha mi 'luaidh! Bha sinn muldach 'n uair a chuala sinn m'un chall mhór a thainig oirbh toiseach a' gheamhraidh, ach 's miosa leinn a' naigheachd 'tha seo. 'S ioma duine, tha mise cinn-teach ann an cearnaibh fad as, a bhios dhe'n fhaireachadh cheudna.

Bha mi bho chionn ghoirid an Duneideann, a' toirt eachdraidh bheag, le móran toilinntinn mu na Gàidhil chaomh: agus thubhairt mi ged is mór a dh'fhuiling iad, 's a tha cuid dhiubh fhathasd a' fulang, nach ionnan iad 's na h-Eireannaich thruagh. Mu 'n dubhairt am fear roimhe, “Cha b 'ionnan O Brian's na Gaidhil.” Tha 'n Gàidheal, arsa mise, fearail, tapaidh, ach tha e ciallach, cneasda, stòlda, onorach, modhail. Cha toir e droch cainnt airson droch dhiol: cha tog e lamh an aghaidh uachdarain no ughdarrais; cha diùlt e màl a phàighheadh, ge duilich gu'm bi e; cha 'n 'eil e 'g iarraidh an fhearainn dha fhéin; cha 'n 'eil e 'g iarraidh ach ceartas, agus a bheò far an d' rugadh e.

Ach a nis – mo chreach! Tha Sgiathanaich ag atharrais air na h'Eireannaich, 'g an deanamh fhéin 'n an cuis-bhùird 's n' an cuis-agail.

Mo chàirdean gràdhach, na smaoinichibh gur h-ann mar sin a gheabhar ceartas no buaidh. Cha 'n ann! Cha 'n ann! Cha tig as ach trioblaid agus nàire. Tha mo chridhe goirt a smaoineachadh air. Chuala mi le uamhas gu robh cuid anns an Eilean 'g am ainmeachadh fhein am measg na feadhnach a tha 'brosnachadh nan Sgiathanach gu aimlisg, ag ràdh gur h-ann aca fhéin a tha còir air an fhearann. Builgean air teanga nam briag! Cha dubhairt mi facal dheth – cha 'n 'eil mi cho aineolach 's cho baoth 's gu'n canainn a leithid.

Mar thubhairt Pòl beannaichte. “O Ghalatianacha amaideach, Co chuir druidheachd oirbh?” Tha mi ’guidhe oirbh, na dichuimhnichibh an teagasg ciatach ud *Lean gu dlùth ri cliù shinnsre*. Be’n cliù-san riamh a bhi earbsach, rianail, uasal, umhal do ’n Rìgh. Ma tha fìor aobhair gearain agaibh, cha’n eagal nach fhaigh sibh ceartas; ach cha’n ann le ainneart agus ùpraid agus làmhachas-làidir a gheabh sibh e gu bràth. Esan a bhriseas an lagh, brisidh e ’cheann fhein. An ainm na h-uile ni’ tha math agus ionmholta, na toiribh masladh air ar n-ainm, agus aobhar bròin do ur fìor chàirdean, eadar Ghàidhil ’us Ghaill.

Fa dheoidh, a bhràithre, ge b’e nithe ’tha urramach, ge b’e nithe ’tha ceart, ge b’e nithe ’tha fìorghlan, ge b’e nithe ’tha ion-ghràidh, ge b’e nithe ’tha ion-mholta; ma tha deadh-bheus air bith ann, ma tha moladh air bith ann, smuainichibh air nithibh sin!

Bho ur caraid dileas agus ur fear-dùthcha,

ALASDAIR MAC NEACAIL,

a rugadh ann a Husabost, agus a’ tha nis a’ fuireach Cill-chuibèirt Deireadh an Earraich, 1882.

The following is a free translation of the address:—

People of my Heart, – What dreadful news is this that has come to us about you! Little did I think I should ever hear of the like coming from the island I love particularly from Glendale, the country of my youth, and the Braes of Portree, the country of my ancestors, whose nature it was to be peaceable people, I am very sorrowful today. Small is my delight in thinking of the island that I have so often praised. We were sorrowful to hear of your great losses at the beginning of winter; but this news is far more grievous.³³ Many a man, I am sure in places far away will feel the same. I was lately in Edinburgh giving a short account, with much satisfaction, of the Highlanders, and I said, ‘though they have suffered much, and some of them suffer still, they are very different from the miserable Irish. As the old saying has it, “O’Brien was very different from the Gael.” The Highlander is manly, spirited, but he is sensible, devout, quiet, honest, courteous. He will not give bad language in return for bad usage. He will not refuse to pay the rent, though it be difficult for him. He does not seek the land for himself; he

³³ November 1881 had seen fearsome storms sweep the west coast and the islands and caused much damage to fishing boats and gear; meetings to raise a relief fund were subsequently held in Inverness, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

seeks only justice, and to be allowed to live in the place where he was born.’ But now, alas, Skyemen are imitating the Irish, and making themselves objects of derision and dread. My dear friends, don’t think it so you will get justice. Nothing will come of it but trouble and shame. And now it has come with a vengeance! My heart is sore to think of it. I heard with disgust that I was mentioned myself in Skye as one of those who were stirring up the people to mischief, and telling them that the land belonged to themselves. I said nothing of the kind. I am not so ignorant or so mad as to use such language. As St Paul said, ‘Oh foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?’³⁴ I beseech you do not forget that excellent old saying. Follow close the fame of your fathers. Their fame ever was to be trustworthy, orderly, honourable, obedient to the law. If you have any real causes of complaint, there is no fear but you will get justice: but it is not by violence and uproar, and high-handedness that you will get it. ‘He that breaks the law breaks his own head.’ In the name of everything that is good and praiseworthy, bring no shame on our name, and sorrow to all our true friends, whether Highland or Lowland. ‘Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are of good report: if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.’³⁵ - From your faithful friend and fellow-countryman, Alexander Nicolson, who was born in Husabost, now residing in Kirkcudbright.

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³⁴ Galatians, 3:1. The notion that the protests of the Crofters’ war were inspired among the peaceable crofters by ‘agitators’, often a codeword for Irish itinerant activists like Edward McHugh, was a common one in the 1880s.

³⁵ Philippians, 4:8