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FRESHNESS, FREEDOM AND PEACE?: LAND SETTLEMENT IN SCOTLAND  
AFTER THE GREAT WAR.

EWEN A. CAMERON

Abstract

*This article will attempt to look at the wider context of 1919 and its meaning in historical chronology. The 1919 Land Settlement Act was an uncontroversial intervention in this important year but should be seen in the deeper history of the highland land question, rather than the immediate moment of 1919, which was dominated by other concerns. The article will suggest that viewing 1919 as an end point is misleading, in both the history of the land question and in a wider sense. The article will draw on extensive evidence from the newspaper press in the north of Scotland in 1919 to look at the wider issues that confronted readers and, thereby, attempt to place the Land Settlement Act in its wider context.*

**Introduction**

This article will look at the circumstances in which the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act of 1919 reached the statute book and examine the debate on the condition of the Highlands in the inter-war period. The act is, rightly, central in the historiography and there can be no doubt about its significance in changing the landscape in the crofting counties.<sup>1</sup> The act – following the Small Landholders (Scotland) Act of 1911 –

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<sup>1</sup> Especially in Leah Leneman, *Fit for Heroes? Land Settlement in Scotland after World War I* (Aberdeen, 1989), see also Leah Leneman, 'Lowland land settlement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: a forgotten segment of modern Scottish history', *Scottish Historical Review*, 67 (1988), 156–71; Leah Leneman, 'Land settlement in Scotland after World War I', *Agricultural History Review*, 37 (1989), 52–64; James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976) is much more successful in placing the act in the context of the history that helped to create it; Ewen A. Cameron, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c. 1880–1925* (East Linton, 1996) places the act in the context of legislative developments since 1886 but does not pay enough attention to the wider debate on the highlands in the 1920s.

covered the whole of Scotland, although its main effects were in the highlands and islands, where the clamour for land was at its most intense. It has been suggested that the public discussion in the 1920s was focused on land tenure before shifting, in the aftermath of the depression and cessation of emigration in 1929, to reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> This article will show that this is far too stark a distinction and that ideas pertaining to 'reconstruction' were a major part of the debate from 1919. Some attention will be paid to the experience of settlers on land settlement schemes in different parts of the highlands. The evolution of land settlement, as it moved from the highlands to the lowlands, will also be emphasized. The article will also turn to the way in which the major task of land settlement has been elided in the political memory of Scotland as land reform has re-emerged on the political agenda following devolution. The article will begin with some wider reflections on the context in which the act was passed before proceeding to examine the way in which the land question fitted into the political debate.

The 1919 Land Settlement Act was an uncontroversial intervention in this important year but can only be seen in the deeper history of the highland land question, rather than the immediate moment of 1919, which was dominated by other concerns. The Parliamentary debate on the Bill was highly technical and, aside from advocates of land nationalization in its purest form – one of whom argued that the bill was a 'maltreated ... poor skinny corpse' – the debate on its provisions was muted.<sup>3</sup> The article will draw on extensive evidence from the editorial comments of the newspaper

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<sup>2</sup> This was one of the main conclusions of Ewen A. Cameron, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c. 1880–1925* (East Linton, 1996), 202–4.

<sup>3</sup> *Forward*, 27 Dec. 1919, 1; see also 30 Nov. 1918, 5 for a representative argument in favour of land nationalisation.

press in the north of Scotland in 1919 to look at the wider issues that confronted readers and, thereby, attempt to place the Land Settlement Act in its wider context.

## 1919

The centenary of the end of the Great War has prompted much comment on the legislation of 1918 and 1919 and the occasionally dramatic events in Scotland in these years. In wider scholarship about the war and its aftermath, however, a different picture emerges. The armistice of November 1918, in a broader European context, is a less significant date than it would seem from a British point of view. The Treaty of Brest Litovsk, which ended Russian participation in the War, or the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which addressed the issues between Greece and Turkey, might be seen as more important. The 'settlement' of 1919 did not settle very much if looked at from Eastern Europe. The period from 1918 to 1923 saw continuing conflict of a variety of different kinds.<sup>4</sup> Peace was a very long time coming and to some places in Europe it came slowly and ambiguously.

Nevertheless, focusing on Scotland, the events of 1918 and 1919 effected considerable change in key areas of Scottish society and politics. The governance of the Scottish education system was reformed.<sup>5</sup> The franchise was extended to all adult males and most women over the age of thirty and there was a major redistribution of parliamentary seats away from rural areas towards urban industrial

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (London, 2016); Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916–1931* (London, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Paterson, 'The significance of the Education (Scotland) Act, 1918', *Scottish Affairs*, 27 (2018), 401–24.

areas, this had a profound effect on Scottish politics in the post-1918 period.<sup>6</sup> This informed a hurried general election, which *Forward*, the Glasgow newspaper of the ILP, described as ‘Scotland’s fight against serfdom’.<sup>7</sup> The rushed nature of the contest on a very fresh register meant that turnout was low. The wartime coalition, led by Lloyd George but dominated by the Conservatives, was returned with a huge majority across Britain (Ireland was a very different story), including domination of the Scottish constituencies that had once been happy hunting grounds for the Liberal Party.<sup>8</sup> The dramatic events of early 1919 ranged from riots in George Square in central Glasgow to land raids in the Hebrides.<sup>9</sup> Events in Europe and Ireland contributed to a febrile atmosphere in Scotland at the end of the Great War. In the background was the ongoing conflict in Ireland. Sinn Féin drilling in the west of Scotland was a worry to coalition politicians.<sup>10</sup> The *Northern Chronicle*, a Conservative newspaper, argued that the condition of Ireland was akin to that of the days of the Plan of Campaign in the 1880s. In reality, it was much more violent and the eventual outcome would be contrary to the views of such a Unionist newspaper. Irish problems were, from a British point of view, seen as one of the continuities in the post-war world. The *Inverness Courier* asserted this: ‘empires may rise and fall, but Ireland keeps her grievance green’.<sup>11</sup> Lurking behind this was a fear that a generation of men, brutalised by the war and with military training and familiarity with

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<sup>6</sup> Ewen A. Cameron, ‘The 1918 Reform Act, redistribution and Scottish politics’, *Parliamentary History*, 37 (2018), 101–15.

<sup>7</sup> *Forward*, 30 Nov. 1918, 1, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Ball, ‘Asquith’s decline and the general election of 1918’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 61 (1982), 44–61.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon J. Barclay, ‘“Duties in aid of the Civil Power”: the deployment of the army to Glasgow, 31 January 1919 to 17 February 1919’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 38 (2018), 261–92; Gordon J. Barclay, ‘“Churchill rolled the tanks into the crowd”: mythology and reality in the military deployment of Glasgow in 1919’, *Scottish Affairs*, 28 (2019), 1–31.

<sup>10</sup> NRS, Gilmour of Montrave MSS, GD383/14/6, Gilmour to Munro, 18 Nov. 1920; Iain D. Patterson, ‘The activities of Irish republican physical force organisations in Scotland, 1919–21’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 72 (1993), 39–59

<sup>11</sup> *Northern Chronicle*, 20 Aug. 1919, 4; see also *Inverness Courier*, 29 Jul. 1919, 4.

firearms, could threaten social stability. Revolutions in Germany, Russia, Hungary and elsewhere, and the establishment of the Communist Party of Great Britain were profoundly unsettling to the political establishment. Nevertheless, these fears were not borne out and a pervasive image of Britain as a peaceable nation, especially when shorn of twenty-six troublesome Irish counties, characterised the inter-war period.<sup>12</sup> In Scotland the politics of disorder never took hold: Communists did not embrace violence and populist bigots, such as John Cormack or Alexander Ratcliffe, remained on the margins.

### **Highland Editorials**

Before we turn to look at the 1919 Act, the context of the immediate post-war period in the Highlands needs to be considered in a little more detail. Some important reminders of other key issues can be recorded by the simple matter of reviewing the editorial content of leading newspapers published in the area in 1919. The focus on the editorial columns, as distinct from the factual reporting, in these newspapers is one, albeit imperfect, way of trying to reconstruct the texture of public discussion.

'Local' newspapers in 1919 were very different to those of today. They carried national and international news, verbatim accounts of parliament and the major speeches of leading politicians, as well as local news. The editors of such titles regarded it as their duty to write lengthy editorials on the leading questions of the day. Necessarily, each newspaper had its own character and each editor had his own favourite subjects but they drew on their awareness of their readership to craft a

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<sup>12</sup> Jon Lawrence, 'Forging a peaceable kingdom: war, violence, and fear of brutalization in post First World War Britain', *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), 557–89; and 'The transformation of British politics after the First World War', *Past and Present*, 190 (2006), 185–216. There is an extensive historiographical debate on this question, stimulated by George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford, 1990); Antoine Prost, 'The impact of war on French and German political cultures', *Historical Journal*, 37 (1994), 209–17.

distinctive world view. Nevertheless, in reviewing three different newspapers it is striking that a number of common features emerge and these will form the next section of this article.

It is very noticeable that the Act was not very prominent in their columns.<sup>13</sup> A very considerable state of anxiety throughout the region is very obvious. The fraught process of demobilisation occasioned riots in the south of England, for example.<sup>14</sup> The *Inverness Courier* covered the strikes and expressed worry that they were likely to breed discontent. The perceptive point was made that this was not a professional army but a citizen army recruited for the purpose of fighting and winning the war, a task that was now completed and that demobilisation was the first step in the repayment of the national debt of gratitude to these men.<sup>15</sup> The theme of discontent is very notable across the course of the year, one marked by serious industrial-relations problems. The widespread strike in favour of the forty-hour week in January 1919 was followed by a series of major disputes over the course of the year, culminating in a railway-workers strike in October. Newspapers in the north tried to reassure their readers that the British worker was not a Bolshevik, although complacency about the threat of extremist ideas should be avoided.<sup>16</sup> The *Northern*

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<sup>13</sup> I have reviewed the editorial columns of three highland newspapers for the year 1919. I have not used online searches for this work. I am very grateful to Dr Sophie Cooper for her research assistance. The *Inverness Courier* was published bi-weekly and had a traditional Liberal background but was very supportive of the coalition in this period. The *Northern Chronicle* was a Conservative weekly newspaper published in Inverness. The *Oban Times* was published weekly and, although it had been a strong supporter of the crofters' movement in the 1880s, it was also coalitionist by 1919.

<sup>14</sup> The background is dealt with in William Butler, "The British soldier is no Bolshevik": the British army, discipline, and the demobilization strikes of 1919', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 321–46.

<sup>15</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 7 Jan. 1919, 2. It is notable that this editorial was printed below one about the tragic sinking of the *Iolaire* outside Stornoway harbour on New Year's day 1919, an act of demobilisation that went horribly wrong.

<sup>16</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 24 Jan. 2; 4 Feb., 4; 25 Feb., 4; 18 Mar. 4; 21 Mar. 4; 25 Mar., 4; 22 Jul., 4; 25 Jul., 4; 29 Jul., 4; 1 Aug., 4; 8 Aug., 4; 15 Aug., 4; 29 Aug., 4; 9 Sep., 4; 16 Sep., 4; 26 Sep., 4; 30 Sep., 4; 3 Oct., 4; 7 Oct., 4; 4 Nov. 4; *Northern Chronicle*, 29 Jan., 4; 26 Feb., 4; 11 Jun., 4; 6 Aug., 4; 1 Oct., 4; 8 Oct., 4; 10 Dec., 4; *Oban Times*, 8 Feb., 5; 29 Mar., 5; 9 Aug., 5. All dates 1919.

*Chronicle* took a slightly wider view, noting that what was going on in the UK was only part of a wave of industrial unrest over the world.<sup>17</sup>

This sense of anxiety was deepened by the uncertainty about the state of international relations in 1919.<sup>18</sup> In the first half of the year the focus was on the peace negotiations in Paris. All the newspapers, in common with much of the British press, took an aggressive approach towards Germany and participated in the consensus that a punitive peace was appropriate. The signing of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of June was the moment for some optimism but this was quite short-lived as industrial relations worsened in the coal industry and on the railways. If the year had begun with a sense of 'victory', this was short lived. On 9 July the *Northern Chronicle* reflected that the 'times were sorely out of joint'. The extent to which the Treaty represented a settlement was in doubt.<sup>19</sup> There was a clear sense from that the world remained a dangerous place throughout 1919. Where there was some evidence of a positive interpretation of the peace treaties, it was based on arguments against the critics of the peace who felt that it would be counterproductive.<sup>20</sup> Optimism in this guise represented support for the Prime Minister and the Coalition government. Later in the year when it seemed that peace

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<sup>17</sup> *Northern Chronicle*, 11 Jun. 1919, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 3 Jan., 2; 17 Jan., 2; 21 Jan., 2; 11 Feb., 2; 14 Mar., 4; 25 Mar., 4; 1 Apr., 4; 8 Apr., 4–5; 18 Apr., 4; 22 Apr., 4; 25 Apr., 4; 9 May., 4; 13 May, 5; 27 May, 4; 3 Jun., 4; 17 Jun., 4; 20 Jun., 4; 24 Jun., 4; 27 Jun., 4; 1 Jul., 4; *Northern Chronicle*, 1 Jan., 3; 9 Apr., 4; 16 Apr., 4; 23 Apr., 4; 14 May, 4; 28 May, 4; 11 Jun., 4; 25 Jun., 4; 2 Jul. 4; 9 Jul., 4; The *Oban Times* gave this point less emphasis but carried frequent excerpts from the European press and on 17 May carried an article by Sir William Sutherland MP for Argyll, entitled 'The Treaty of Peace', describing his vantage point at Versailles; this was followed on 21 Jun. by his 'Paris and Peace'.

<sup>20</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 9 May 1919, 4; later in the month the same paper argued that there remained 'perverted sympathy for Germany in some quarters' and that this was dangerous to 'the safety of the world', 27 May 1919, 4.

was breaking down this was laid at the feet of extremists in European countries and selfish American politicians seeking to evade their responsibilities.<sup>21</sup>

These themes are not particular to the Highland press in 1919, variations could be found in most Scottish newspapers in this period. There are, however, two themes that are more distinctive. Before discussing ideas of 'reconstruction' in the Highlands consideration of the effect of the very important Education (Scotland) Act of 1918 is required. It is striking that discussion of its implications is prominent across the three titles considered here.<sup>22</sup> This reform touched the lives of a very wide section of the population, a far greater number than were directly affected by the Land Settlement Act; arguably, it was the most significant reform to Scottish life in this period. The Act was very positive for educational provision and governance in the Highlands. The School Boards that had been set up in 1872 were to be replaced by county-wide educational authorities elected by proportional representation, the first elections taking place in April 1919. The most widely discussed aspect of this reform was its effect on local taxation. To cope with new demands of the Act the new Highland authorities were faced with the prospect of setting very high rates of taxation compared to more populous areas of the country. This was only resolved by concerted action by the new Authorities and a recognition by the government that if the Act was to be effective in the Highlands large grants from central government were required. These were agreed to in December 1919. This was an important

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<sup>21</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 14 Oct. 1919, 4; see also 18 Nov. 1919, 4; 25 Nov. 1919, 4; MacMillan, *Paris, 1919*, 487–94; George W. Egerton, 'Britain and "the Great Betrayal": Anglo-American relations and the struggle for United States ratification of the Treaty of Versailles, 1919–20', *Historical Journal*, 21 (1978), 885–911.

<sup>22</sup> *Northern Chronicle*, 15 Jan., 4; 19 Mar., 4; 2 Apr. 4; 23 Apr., 4; 4 Jun. 4; 30 Jul., 4; 17 Sep. 4; 15 Oct., 4; 17 Dec., 4; 31 Dec., 4; *Inverness Courier*, 21 Mar., 4; 8 Apr., 5; 6 May, 4; 21 Oct., 4; 30 Dec., 5; *Oban Times*, 5 Apr., 5; 25 Oct., 5; 20 Dec., 5;

concession from government to rural areas. This is a significant event in the history of educational administration in the Highlands but it also has a wider importance for the discussion of 'reconstruction'. The great difficulty of funding services through local authorities was a real problem in maintaining the standard of living in Scotland's remote rural areas. In the absence of state subsidy, councils faced the unenviable choice between either a low standard of service or a very high rate of local taxation. The increasing intervention by government over the inter-war period to try to equalise rates and quality of service was very important indeed in the attempts at reconstructing the economy of the region and improving the quality of life for its inhabitants.

More significant than land settlement in the public discussion of the future of the Highlands in 1919 was the idea of 'reconstruction' of the area. The land question was part of this and there was general acceptance that the deficiencies of the Small Landholders (Scotland) Act of 1911 would have to be corrected. The editorials tended not to separate the land question and the creation of new holdings from a more general sense that the region required modernisation after the war sacrifices.<sup>23</sup> The *Inverness Courier* remarked that the region was 'tired of being treated as if we were of no account, except when there was fighting to be done.'<sup>24</sup> A Highland Reconstruction Association was founded in the immediate aftermath of the end of the war and its advocates saw the land question as part of a wider package of much-

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<sup>23</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 30 May, 4; 7 Nov. 4; 20 Aug. 4; 31 Dec. 4 (although this article noted that the Education Act was the most important topic of the year); *Oban Times*, 28 Jun., 5; 6 Sep., 5; 8 Nov. 5 (this article was a vehicle for drawing attention to an amendment to the land bill put forward by Sir William Sutherland).

<sup>24</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 23 Sep. 1919, 4–5.

needed reforms.<sup>25</sup> Housing was seen as a key element of the improvement of the Highlands. It was estimated that nearly 7000 new houses were required in the crofting counties. Coalition housing policy was not well adjusted to rural conditions, however. The subsidy from government was targeted towards private builders, few of whom were willing to risk building in crofting and farming areas. Landowners did not have the resources either. Ultimately, of course, land settlement proved to be a good way of improving housing conditions.<sup>26</sup>

As had been the case in the 1890s when the development of the highland economy was a concern of the Conservative government of the period, the transport network in the Highlands was central to concepts of economic modernisation. Suggestions included the development of railways to stimulate the fishing industry, a distinct echo of the 1890s. A better road network would help to stimulate the tourist industry and sporting interests and the expense of upkeep, it was argued by the *Oban Times*, should be borne by the users, mostly from furth of the Highlands. There was a recognition that this ought to be a national priority, rather than something thrown on the resources of the local community.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Land Question**

Although one very important element of the reform package presented by the coalition government was action on the land question, it is clear from this brief overview that it was only one part of a series of integrated reforms. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>25</sup> H. F. Campbell, *Highland Reconstruction* (Glasgow, 1920); the minutes and correspondence of the Association, 1918–22, are in the Highland Archive (D976) and would repay further study.

<sup>26</sup> *Northern Chronicle*, 12 Feb., 4; 25 Mar., 4; 7 May, 4; 5 Nov., 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Oban Times*, 15 Mar., 5; 31 May, 5; 30 Aug., 5; 13 Sep., 5; 20 Sep., 5; 27 Sep., 5; 18 Oct., 5; 1 Nov. 5; 15 Nov., 5; 22 Nov., 5; 27 Dec., 5.

Land Settlement (Scotland) Act of 1919 was an important acceleration of land reform. This was a particularly live issue in the highlands, where the question had been a subject of government action and political protest since the 1880s, but it was relevant in the Lowlands as well and the Act covered the whole of Scotland. It provided for the Board of Agriculture for Scotland, established in 1912, to acquire the ownership of landed estates and act as landowner to the people who lived on them. This was, effectively, a form of land nationalisation. The remainder of this article will attempt to set the Act of 1919 in its context, examine how it related to other issues in the public domain in 1919 and to assess its significance in the longer term.<sup>28</sup>

Concern about the future of private landownership was a major public issue in the immediate post-war period. In December 1921 the *Estates Gazette* – described as ‘the most influential journal of the property world at the time’ – suggested that ‘one quarter of England must have changed hands in four years’.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of the literal truth of this claim there is no doubt that the involvement of the Board of Agriculture for Scotland in the land market of the immediate post-war period was only one factor in a major change of property ownership in this period. The ‘landed interest’ felt that it had been under attack since the 1880s. During that decade Liberal governments passed acts to give rights to small tenants in Scotland and Ireland. In the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Great War there was a fundamental

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<sup>28</sup> Narratives of the history of the Scottish highlands in this period that focus on the land question perhaps give too much prominence to the Land Settlement Act: Cameron, *Land for the People?*; Hunter, *Making of the Crofting Community*; Leneman, *Fit for Heroes?*; Iain J. M. Robertson, *Landscapes of protest in the Scottish Highlands after 1914: the later Highland Land Wars* (Farnham, 2013)

<sup>29</sup> *Estates Gazette*, 31 Dec. 1921, 909; John Beckett and Michael Turner, ‘End of the old order? F M L Thompson, the land question, and the burden of ownership in England, c 1880–c 1925’, *Agricultural History Review*, 55 (2007), 269; John Beckett and Michael Turner, ‘Land reform and the English land market, 1880–1925’, in Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman (eds), *The Land Question in Britain, 1750–1914* (Basingstoke, 2010), 219–36; Beckett and Turner comment at length on whether this claim might have been literally true but don’t consider the possibility that ‘England’ might have included Scotland.

change in the attitude to land as an investment. If land could not be made to pay, and this was increasingly difficult in the harsh climate of the early 1920s, landowners responded by putting large acreages on the market. Land was no longer a political asset; indeed, it was becoming a liability and the government was becoming increasingly 'acquisitive'.<sup>30</sup> This also stimulated landlords to realise in financial terms their landed assets as they were losing their status as positional assets bringing social and political power.<sup>31</sup>

Although there were administrative problems, frustration among the applicants for land and a renewal of protest, the achievements under the 1919 Act were considerable.<sup>32</sup> In the period when the policy was implemented in the most concerted way, before 1925, there were 9600 applicants for land, a total of 1571 new holdings were created and a further 1194 were enlarged. If we narrow the focus to the Hebrides, the area where the demand for land was most intense, the results are even more striking. After considering 4370 well-founded applications the Board of Agriculture for Scotland created 932 new holdings and enlarged a further 676. The Board had access to £2.75 million to carry out its duties.<sup>33</sup> These bald figures give a rather simplified view of the outcomes of the operation. There were a series of important tensions that made the process of land redistribution very complicated. Oddly, given the history of landlord-tenant relations in the highlands, the principal problem was not the reluctance of landlords to deal with the government, but the

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<sup>30</sup> David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British aristocracy* (New Haven (CT) and London, 1990), 103.

<sup>31</sup> Avner Offer, 'Farm tenure and land values in England, 1750–1950', *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991), 1–20.

<sup>32</sup> Iain Robertson, 'Governing the highlands: the place of popular protest in the highlands of Scotland after 1918', *Rural History*, 8 (1997), 109–24.

<sup>33</sup> Cameron, *Land for the People?*, 166–90.

reverse. Some, such as the principal landlords on Skye, where over 300 new crofts were created, were in such financial difficulties that they had little option but to sell land to the government. MacLeod of Dunvegan received £56,809 for 60,000 acres of land and the Trustees of Lord MacDonald, who was both financially embarrassed and mentally incapacitated, were similarly enthusiastic about selling Scorrybreck, one of their best sheep farms, to the Board.<sup>34</sup> This was a considerable transfer of land from private owners to the state but did not represent a significant redistribution of ownership of land to those who lived and worked on it. This was a significant contrast to the position in Ireland where the landed estate almost completely disappeared as a result of legislation before and after partition, especially acts of 1903, 1909 and 1923.<sup>35</sup> It survived in Scotland and the political prominence of the land question has endured. It is significant that areas of the Hebrides where part II schemes were implemented – South Uist, North Harris, Lewis – are the places where community ownership has emerged in recent years. Land settlement, whatever its demerits, provided some foundation for population retention and created the conditions where a community purchase was possible. In Skye, by contrast, community ownership has not been seen on such a large scale because of the extent of state-owned land, most of which remains under the ownership of the Scottish Government. The Board was one of the few active purchasers in the market for highland land in the 1920s but it was not only the most poverty-stricken landlords who sold land to the government. The fifth duke of Sutherland proved to be an enthusiastic vendor. Prior to the Great War he sought to restore the finances of his

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<sup>34</sup> NRS, E824/615 documents the dealings between the BoAS, the Treasury and MacLeod of Dunvegan in March 1920; Clan Donald Centre, Armadale, Skye, Lord Macdonald Papers, Bundles 3666 and 3675, contain material about Scorrybreck.

<sup>35</sup> Phillip Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: A Study of the Irish Land Question* (Dublin, 1996); Terence Dooley, *The Land for the People: The Land Question in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004)

vast estate by extensive land sales and 600,000 acres were disposed of.<sup>36</sup> These singular events indicated the extent to which the marketability of highland land had declined. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars large numbers of rich industrialists and merchants, such as James Matheson, bought large highland estates at a time when the wider British land market was in the doldrums.<sup>37</sup>

It is striking that it is the post-war land raids that have entered the public consciousness rather than the fact that the state intervened to purchase large areas of land or use legislation to compel the creation of new holdings on privately owned land.<sup>38</sup> There were tensions between the government and land raiders and, indeed, within what has been assumed to be the 'crofting community'. There were several elements to this. The first arose from the fact that the act of 1919 gave preference to ex-service applicants for land. This fitted the rhetoric of post-war reconstruction but these men were not always the best qualified and there was resentment when they 'jumped the queue'.<sup>39</sup> There was further potential for difficulties between the landless cottars and crofters who already had land and were seeking enlargements of their crofts.<sup>40</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the Great War, the heat seemed to have gone out of the debate on the land question. Neil MacLean, the Labour MP for Govan (whose father was from the island of Mull) taunted Lloyd George in Parliament that he 'no longer gets choirs going around the country singing: "God gave the land to the people"', and that this anthem had now passed to the Labour party.<sup>41</sup> Memorials

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<sup>36</sup> *Estates Gazette*, 11 Jan 1919, front page; 22 Feb 1919, 185; 8 Mar 1919, 241; Annie Tindley, *The Sutherland Estate, 1850–1920: Aristocratic Decline, Estate Management and Land Reform* (Edinburgh, 2010), 136–7.

<sup>37</sup> T. M. Devine, 'The Emergence of a New Elite in the Western Highlands and Islands, 1800–60', in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Improvement and Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1989), 108–42.

<sup>38</sup> Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest*.

<sup>39</sup> *BoAS, Annual Report, 1922*, ix.

<sup>40</sup> Robertson, 'Historical geography of social protest', 237–9.

<sup>41</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, 5<sup>th</sup> series, vol. 112, col. 392, 13 Feb 1919.

commemorating the protests have been built, especially in Lewis, but the land settlement operation has its own memorial in the effect it continues to have on the landscape.<sup>42</sup>

Why was this extensive land-settlement operation carried out at this moment? The Prime Minister, Lloyd George, was steeped in Welsh anti-landlordism but this is not a sufficient explanation. The fact that it came just after the Great War is important but it is not enough to accept coalition rhetoric about building a 'land fit for heroes'. Land settlement was seen as a way of responding to the quite widespread fears of violence and extreme politics in the immediate aftermath of the war. Highland land raids must be one of the clearest examples of this much-debated feature of the mindset of inter-war governments. The pressure from the continuing protests and the weight of the history of the land questions and government responses to it going back to the 1880s, helps to explain its passage. The Board of Agriculture received many letters from crofters and cottars who argued that their war service was relevant to their demand for land.<sup>43</sup> There was a widespread feeling that those who had volunteered in the 1914 to 1916 period had been, implicitly, at least 'promised' land in return for their service.<sup>44</sup> In February 1919 Thomas Wilson, an official of the Board of Agriculture for Scotland, was highly critical of the proprietrix, Lady Gordon Cathcart, a notorious absentee, for refusing requests for land: 'The fact that many of

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<sup>42</sup> Iain J. M. Robertson, 'Memory, heritage and the micropolitics of memorialisation: commemorating the heroes of the land struggle', in Cameron (ed.), *Recovering from the Clearances*, 147–62; Iain J. M. Robertson and Tim Hall, 'Memory, identity and the memorialisation of conflict in the Scottish highlands', in Yvonne Whelan and Niamh Moore, *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity* (London, 2006), 19–36; C.W.J. Withers, 'Place, Memory Monument: Memorializing the past in Contemporary Highland Scotland', *Ecumene*, 3 (1996), 325–44.

<sup>43</sup> The records of BoAS are replete with such letters, see NRS, AF67/147, 148, AF83/644.

<sup>44</sup> Ewen A. Cameron and Iain J. M. Robertson, 'Fighting and bleeding for the land : the Great War and the Scottish highlands', in Catriona M. M. Macdonald and Elaine W. McFarland (eds), *Scotland and the Great War* (East Linton, 1999), pp. 81-102.

her people fought – some giving up their lives – and kept for her her estate, does not seem to have opened her mind or that of her advisers, the necessity of making available the lands she holds for these men to obtain homes upon and earn a livelihood from'.<sup>45</sup> The Secretary for Scotland, Robert Munro, was well aware of this and the 1919 Act gave the Board greater powers to deal with situations such as this. Munro advocated the 1919 bill with two broad arguments. The first related to military service:

Surely there never as a time in our long Island story when the settlement of a contented and a robust peasantry upon our soil was more desirable or more urgent than it is today, and I hope I may add that never was that urgency more generally recognised. The men from the land of Scotland have proved to be a tower of strength in the hour of national peril, and their ranks, which have been thinned by the scythe of death, must be replenished by men who, if need be, will vindicate the claim to heroism which have so fully established.<sup>46</sup>

His reference to a 'contented' peasantry was not merely banal in the context of land raids in Scotland and ongoing serious rural conflict in Ireland. His second argument referred in a broader sense to a sense of national renewal that could be achieved by land settlement:

... it is desirable that in these days men should escape from the drive and the artificiality and the fever of city life to the freshness, the freedom and the

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<sup>45</sup> NRS, AF67/146, Report by BoAS Sub-Commissioner Thomas Wilson on Glendale Farm (South Uist), Feb. 1919.

<sup>46</sup> *Parliamentary Debates* 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 119, col. 1806, 15 Aug. 1919

peace which a country life offers. The tillers of the soil are the very backbone of France today and there is no reason why that should not be so in Scotland as well.<sup>47</sup>

This was a familiar Liberal argument for land reform. It was especially prominent in the Edwardian period when there was much worry, partly prompted by the poor health of volunteers for the Boer War, that the urban poor were crippled by their environment.<sup>48</sup>

The 1919 act was the high point of Scottish land reform legislation. As the leading historian of the crofting community has concluded:

By the end of the 1920s ... the long struggle for land ... was virtually at an end. The agrarian and social injustices perpetrated by the creators of the land system that had taken shape during the clearances had been permanently removed ....<sup>49</sup>

There is much evidence for this argument, although it can be qualified in many respects, but is rather too stark. Land settlement continued to evolve in the 1930s and the highlands played less of a role in this history, which has very little place in the public consciousness in Scotland. Further land-settlement legislation of 1934 shifted the emphasis to creating intensive small holdings to relieve unemployment in

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 1806–7.

<sup>48</sup> This is the theme of Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change since 1800* (London, 2002); see also Ronan O'Donnell and David Petts, "Rural rhetoric" in 1930s unemployment relief schemes', *Rural History*, 30 (2019), 53–69.

<sup>49</sup> Hunter, *Crofting Community*, 206.

industrial areas. If 60 per cent of land settlement had been in the highlands in the 1920s, then 80 per cent of the new holdings created in the 1930s were in the lowlands.<sup>50</sup> Encouragement of emigration was not a realistic option in the world depression of the 1930s. Temporary migration in search of wage-labour to supplement the resources from the croft was also unlikely to be fruitful. New thinking was required and further land reform, even on a different basis to that advanced since the 1880s, did not seem to be a realistic prospect.<sup>51</sup>

At one level this was the end of a story but not a full denouement. Some areas of the highlands saw massive depopulation in the nineteenth century but did not receive demographic benefit from land settlement. The island of Mull is the most extreme case and helps to explain the continuing travails of that island in the twentieth century compared, for example, to Skye. There is a wider question here about the extent to which the clearances involved processes of permanent destruction, recovery from which is not possible. The novelist James Kelman has put it bluntly:

The land has gone, the culture has gone. None of it can be recovered. It was stolen and lost. No process returns a cleared people to a time when the clearance did not happen.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Alexander S. Mather, 'The rise and fall of government-assisted land settlement in Scotland', *Land Use Policy*, 2 (1985), 222–3.

<sup>51</sup> For the ways in which the land question 'survived' in this period and later see 'Still on the agenda? The strange survival of the Scottish land question, 1880–1999', in Malcolm M. Combe, Jayne Glass and Annie Tindley (eds), *Land Reform in Scotland: History, Law and Policy* (Edinburgh, 2020), 94–109.

<sup>52</sup> James Kelman, 'Clearance and eviction in South Lochs: a personal exploration', in Ewen A. Cameron (ed.), *Recovering from the Clearances: land Struggle, Resettlement and Community Ownership in the Hebrides* (Kershader, 2013), 242.

It is certainly notable that there is no corpus of poetry about the land raids of the 1920s to be compared to that of the protests of the 1880s, although there is much reflection by twentieth-century poets on earlier periods of highland history, including the clearances. There are a number of prose accounts of life in the new townships created by the process of land settlement. Most of these are retrospective, often from the distance of many years, and they tend to be idealistic. This is evident even in cases where the settlements have not themselves been successful. Flora MacDonald's memories of Nunton Hill in Benbecula, a settlement abandoned in the early 1960s, describe an 'idyllic childhood'.<sup>53</sup> John Nicolson's memories of his youth on Raasay in the aftermath of the purchase of that island by the government in 1922 is implicitly more questioning of the way in which that community developed in the inter-war period. He emphasises the way in which the Raasay land raid of 1922 was a strong part of the oral tradition of the island.<sup>54</sup> The settlement of Ardbheag in the west of Lewis, constituted in the early 1930s, has produced one of the clearest personal accounts. John MacDonald recalled the way in which his family made a 'reasonable living' through working their sheep stock, lobster fishing and poaching. He emphasised the way in which the new forms of housing associated with land settlement represented one of the biggest changes he experienced. His account is also positive in its recollection of the life of the small settlement but he is critical of the way in which the extension of crofting through land settlement did not represent a fundamental change in the society and economy of an island where state-ownership did not feature as it did in Skye.<sup>55</sup> The fact that the process of land settlement

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<sup>53</sup> Flora MacDonald, *Cocoa and Crabs: Còco is Crùbagan* (Kershader, 2009), 71; see also Bob Chambers, *Life on the Edge: Growing Up in Steimreway: The Story of Chirsty Maggie Carmichael* (Kershader, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> John Nicolson, *I Remember: Memories of Raasay* (Edinburgh, 2002), 18–19.

<sup>55</sup> John MacDonald, *An Trusadh: Memories of Crofting in the Ardveg* (Kershader, 2013).

occurred simultaneously with extensive emigration, a more prominent feature of poetry and song of the period, may explain the way that it has been elided. That the events on the ground were not linked together in a political movement, as was the case in the 1880s, perhaps militated against the composition of songs and poems as a means of political communication and the construction of memory. What seems to have been forgotten is often as interesting as what has been remembered. A historian investigating land settlement after the Great War reported that she was unable to recover oral testimony about the topic but that many were willing to talk about the clearances, which they had not witnessed. She concluded that the land settlement operation had been 'forgotten'.<sup>56</sup> This elision of memory can also be seen in the way in which the history of the period from the 1880s to the 1920s was referred to in the debates on land reform that have taken place since devolution in 1998/9 but the process of land settlement was hardly referred to. Indeed, on one occasion its existence was almost denied. Responding for the Scottish Executive to a Scottish Parliament motion expressing regret for the clearances the then MSP for the Western Isles, Alasdair Morrison, asserted that, from the point of view of the victims of the clearances,

it would have seemed inconceivable that there would one day be public funds available to help Highland communities to take on ownership and management of the land from which so many of our people had been evicted. Today, thanks to this Administration's commitment to land reform such funds are firmly in place.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Leneman, 192, 207.

<sup>57</sup> *ORSP*, 27 Sept. 2000, col. 700.

Of course, it suited Morrison to stress the novelty of the Executive's proposals but it is striking that the legislation of the period from 1897 to 1919 – which had such an important effect on the Highland landscape, creating hundreds of new holdings, enlarging hundreds of others, effectively nationalising land in some areas – does not figure in the political memory bank. This may be because the memory of the land issue in the highlands is one marked by grievances and the alleged neglect of the region by the government, rather than by detailed understanding of the effect of well-funded policies of nearly a century ago.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

The long-term effect of land settlement is ambiguous. On the ground it has been very important as these estates have provided a different model of landownership with 'The Department' [of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland and its successors] regarded as an effective landowner. During the Taylor Commission on Crofting Reform in the early 1950s, a minority report argued for an extension of the model. This was not adopted, however, and the idea of land nationalisation was marginalised in policy terms, although it remained part of the debate on the land question in Scotland.<sup>59</sup> Much of the period saw frustration for activists from different political traditions, especially socialist and nationalist, who sought to advocate it. At the time of the Knoydart 'land raid' of 1948 this was very clear, as the Labour government declined to yield to pressure to purchase an estate that had been

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<sup>58</sup> I discuss this point in Ewen A. Cameron, 'The Scottish highlands and the conscience of the nation, 1886 to 2003', in P. MacNeill (ed.) *Papers from the Sixth Australian Celtic Conference*, Sydney Series in Celtic Studies, 9 (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2010), 255–82

<sup>59</sup> 'Note of Dissent by Mrs Margaret H. Macpherson', *Commission of Enquiry into Crofting Conditions*, Cmd 9091, 91; NLS, Gunn Mss, Dep. 209/22/5, Matthew Campbell to Gunn, 2 Feb. 1954. She was still extolling the virtues of public landownership nearly forty years later: see letter to *West Highland Free Press*, 6 Jul. 1990.

brought into the public eye by the raiders and their advocates, including in song by Hamish Henderson.<sup>60</sup> By the 1980s the context had changed again. When government-owned property, especially the public housing stock, was being considered for privatisation the Scottish estates came under scrutiny. In 1979 DAFS was being urged to sell the land settlement estates. The principal grounds for this pressure that they were loss making (between £1.26 million and £1.53 million annual losses in the years 1975/6 to 1978/9), were surplus to state requirements and that there was a need to make staff cuts. The plans to dispose of them ran into complications imposed by the technicalities of crofting tenure but this official discussion was suggestive of a political atmosphere that was not propitious for land reform. This was not only the result of the election of a Conservative government in 1979 but also a result of growing financial pressures in the UK from the mid 1970s.<sup>61</sup>

The effects of the 1919 Land Settlement (Scotland) Act have been significant over a long period. This is true in a political sense and in its power to change the landscape and living conditions in the crofting areas of Scotland, where it had its greatest relevance. The Act may have been a product of the post-war moment but it was strongly affected by the deficiencies of previous legislation. The war provided moral strength for the arguments for land settlement but the continuation of protest and the continuing demand for land would have created pressure on the government to

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<sup>60</sup> NRS, CS275/1952/4, Court of Session proceedings against the raiders; NRS, SEP12/7/1, Advisory Panel on the Highlands and Islands: Report to the Panel by the Agriculture and Forestry Group: Knoydart Estate; NRS, SEP12/7/3, Memorial to the Rt Hon Arthur Woodburn, M.P. Secretary of State for Scotland regarding Family Holdings on Knoydart Estate; H. Henderson, 'Ballad of the men of Knoydart', in *Collected Poems and Songs*, ed. R. Ross (Edinburgh, 2000), 128–30; Timothy Neat, *Hamish Henderson: A Biography*, Volume 1, *The Making of the Poet (1919–1953)*, (Edinburgh, 2007), 230–2; Neat notes that Henderson's ballad was not published or broadcast for many years and was awkward politically because of its mixture of nationalistic and socialistic ideas.

<sup>61</sup> TNA, HLG29/2134, T. M. Brown (DAFS) to C.P. Thomas (Treasury), 13 Dec. 1979; Thomas to Brown, 18 Jan. 1980.

improve the 1911 Act, even without the conditions created by the Great War. Two other concluding points are worthy of emphasis. The first is that the capacity of land settlement to stabilise society in rural Scotland was an important part of the forces that led to its passage. The second is to note that the Act was relatively uncontroversial, in contrast to earlier pieces of Scottish land legislation. This was also partly due to the context of the post-war moment, a moment that was crowded with other controversial issues. The inter-war period was characterised by debates over the modernisation of the Highland economy and the early stages of this discussion can be seen in the relation of the land question to wider matters of development in the highlands – a prominent theme in the newspapers in 1919.