

# The Scottish Highlands in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

## The Distinctive Features of the Gaeltacht

For several centuries before 1700 the spread of English speech across lowland Scotland led to Gaelic speaking being largely confined to an area beyond the Highland line, to the Highlands and Islands and the east coast beyond Inverness.

Lowland Scots developed a critical attitude to the kilted Gaelic-speaking Highlanders. According to the historian Professor T M Devine: *'The differences in both speech and dress were clear but even more significant, however, was the perceived savagery and lawlessness of the Highlander. He was a figure of menace who did not share the "domestic" and "civilised" virtues of the Lowland people. "Wyld wykkd Helandmen", as Wyntoun described them, were viewed as racially and culturally inferior to other Scots and were seen as a threat to the more peace-loving inhabitants of the rest of the country.'* (T M Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War*, 1994, p. 2)

By 1700 the Church of Scotland had a powerful presence in Lowland Scotland, its authority in the Highlands was far less secure whereas Episcopalianism flourished there. The growth of burghs in Lowland areas as a focus of trade, crafts, and services was not matched in the Highlands by a similar spread of such settlements.

By 1700, too, the continued existence of the Clan System marked the Highlanders as a distinctive people. Powerful clan chiefs provided protection to their people; clan success depended in part in the numbers and fighting spirit of clan members. Although 'clan' ('A' Chlann') literally meant children, members of a clan were not necessarily blood relatives. Clan territories changed frequently and as a result some clans people changed loyalties or were forcibly absorbed into a different clan. However, the myth that all clan members were descended from a common ancestor provided a strong emotional bond. Clan chiefs' authority over their clans was considerable and, through the continuation of the feudal system of land holding, chiefs were able to mobilise their clans for war. The Highland Economy depended primarily on farming. Traditionally the clan chief left the detailed management of this to his tacksman (who was often a relative) who leased land then rented it out to the folk who actually farmed it.

The Highlands very varied geographical features make it difficult to generalise too strongly about life there. Moreover, by the early eighteenth century, there were many signs of change in the area. Violent clashes between clans had become rare, the clan chiefs' powers were starting to fade and their way of life was changing as they sought to make their estates more profitable (for example removing the tacksmen and dealing directly with tenants). Some had huge debts that they struggled to pay off. Highlanders were seen in the Lowlands in increasing numbers as drovers, seasonal workers and as inhabitants of Lowland burghs like Perth and Stirling. So strong were these signs of change that the historian Ian Whyte maintains that in the Highlands before the 1745 Rising: *'Much of the change that occurred after 1745 would have happened anyway even if the rebellion had not taken place.'* (I D Whyte, *Scotland's Society and Economy in Transition 1500-1760*, 1997, p. 113)

The historian Allan MacInnes has questioned whether it is fair to regard Highland society in the early eighteenth century as economically backward and points to evidence of economic developments which had begun to take place in the seventeenth century.

## Changes in Highland Society after the '45

Highland society was affected by both immediate Government action and by longer term social and economic trends which can be detected before 1745 but which had a major impact in the later eighteenth century. Both require to be studied.

Government actions included:

- Arresting, hunting, killing and intimidating many Highlanders.

- Seizing 41 estates, selling off some and controlling 13.
- Burning crops and property, killing and driving off livestock.
- Abolishing the legal rights enabling Scottish landowners to hold private courts.
- Banning the carrying of weapons and the wearing of tartan.
- Garrisoning the Highlands and building Fort George as a huge military base. (The historian Allan MacInnes has described these policies as 'systematic state terrorism'.)
- Supporting some economic development in the Highlands, e.g. the British Fisheries Society (of 1786) which developed Ullapool and Lochbay.

Longer term trends included:

- The population of the Highlands increased.
- The movement of Highlanders out of the Highlands to urban areas and to North America and the West Indies.

The decline of the clan system and a shift to a much more commercial system of agriculture in which rents rose and the landlord dealt directly with his tenants, doing away with the tacksman.

- The increasingly comfortable and cultured lifestyle of the clan chiefs.
- The break-up of the old township (or 'baile') and its collaborative strip-farming system in favour of single tenant farms (especially eastern areas) and crofting (especially along the western coast).
- The coming of Border Black face and Cheviot sheep and the development of extensive sheep farming (since the textile revolution vastly increased demand for wool) that required few people to manage.
- Relocation of people from glens to coastal areas.
- The establishment of potatoes as a major crop providing yields three times those of oats and eight times those of barley.
- The development of supplementary earnings by crofters from fishing, quarrying, illicit distilling, and burning seaweed to make kelp, an ash used in the glass and soap industries.
- The spread of Presbyterianism, pushed by the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK).

The historian T M Devine observes: 'traditional society was destroyed in this period and a new order based on quite different values, principles and relationships emerged to take its place.' (T M Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War*, 1994, p. 32)

The relocation of Highlanders has stirred great debate between those who condemn it and those who see it as the result of underlying long-term factors.

Ian Whyte's survey of Scottish society includes these comments on change in the Highlands.

*'The 1745 rebellion shook the government so severely that in the aftermath of Culloden there were no half-measures. Government involvement in the region initially took the form of restoring and increasing garrisons, and mounting punitive expeditions against the lands of Jacobite clans. The abolition of wardholding and heritable jurisdictions in 1747 formed part of a sustained attack on the structure of clanship, which aimed to destroy the political separateness of the Highlands. A disarming act, more rigorously enforced than earlier ones, was imposed and wearing Highland dress was forbidden. Despite these measures it was economic rather than political change that undermined traditional Highland society. Once central authority was firmly in control of the region,*

*government involvement began to take on social and economic as well as military dimensions. The impact of this, however, has often been exaggerated. Social and economic conditions in the Highlands had been changing gradually for a century and a half or more. Much of the change that occurred after 1745 would have happened anyway even if the rebellion had not taken place. Government policy aimed at social and economic development in order to integrate the Highlands more closely with the rest of Britain. The philosophy of "improvement" was extended from the Lowlands. The untapped productive forces of the Highlands, it was thought, could be usefully employed in manufacturing or in military service.'*

(Ian D Whyte, 'Scotland's Society and Economy in Transition 1500-1760', 1997, pp. 112-3)

Allan MacInnes' study of Highland clans includes these comments on Government policy towards them once Culloden, and the events that immediately followed the battle, were over.

*'As the debate within Government circles switched from punitive severity to remedial leniency, the policy of civilising became identified not only with enforced pacification but with the commercial promotion of agriculture, fisheries and manufacturers. The cultural extirpation of the Gael by degrees was now deemed integral to the productive transformation of a burdensome and noxious load upon Great Britain. State-sponsored terrorism was to give way to state-sponsored improvement. In response to a plethora of civilising schemes from unctuous ideologues and unplaced opportunists, the Whig Government had decided that thirteen forfeited estates of Jacobite chiefs and gentry were to be annexed inalienably to the Crown in 1752. The Annexed Estates were thus created as corridors of improvement that were to be models of planning and management from the southern through the central Highlands with intersections in western and northern districts. At the same time, resistance of clansmen to the forfeiture of their chiefs and leading gentry had been cowed by a final show trial that led to the execution of James Stewart of the Glens for his supposed role as accessory to the murder of Colin Campbell of Glenmure – the Government factor immortalised as "the Red Fox" – near Ballachulish Ferry.'*

(Allan MacInnes, Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart 1603-1788, 1996, p. 217)

### **Primary sources**

In 1739 the London-based Gentleman's Magazine included this impression of what the author thought Highlanders were like:

*'In this great extent of country (the Highlands), ignorance and superstition greatly prevail. In some places the remains even of Paganism are still to be found, and in many others the Reformation from Popery has never yet obtained. The Parishes where Ministers are settled are commonly of very great extent, some 30, 40, 50 miles long, and generally divided by unpassable mountains and lakes; so that most of the inhabitants being destitute of all means of knowledge, and without any schools to educate their children, are entirely ignorant of the principles of religion and virtue, live in idleness and poverty, have no notion of industry, or sense of liberty, are subject to the will and command of their Popish disaffected chieftains, who have always opposed the propagating Christian knowledge, and the English tongue, that they might with less difficulty keep their miserable vassals in a slavish dependence. The poorer sort have only the Irish tongue, and little correspondence with the civilised parts of the nation, and only come among them to pillage the more industrious inhabitants; they are brought up in principles of tyranny and arbitrary Government, depend upon foreign Papists as their main support, and the native Irish as their best correspondents and allies. This has been the source of all the rebellions and insurrections, in that country, since the Revolution.'*

(In T M Devine, Clanship to Crofters' War, p. 29)

The English writer Dr Samuel Johnson toured Scotland with his Scottish friend James Boswell in 1773 and wrote about the Highlanders:

*'There was perhaps never any change of national manners so quick, so great, and so general, as that which has operated in the Highlands by the last conquest and the subsequent laws. We came hither too late to see what we expected – a people of peculiar appearance, and a system of antiquated life. The clans retain little now of their original character: their ferocity of temper is softened, their military ardour is extinguished, their dignity of independence is depressed, their contempt of government subdued, and their reverence for their chiefs abashed. Of what they had before the late conquest of their country there remains only their language and their property.'*

(In T C Smout, A History of the Scottish People, pp. 320-1)

In the 1790s the parish minister of Callander warned about how new farming methods would affect people's lives:

*'If the enlargement of farms is introduced and the country depopulated to make room for sheep, the inhabitants must emigrate, or crowd into villages. And if villages are increased without due regard to their police, their employment, and their manners, it were much better for the people, and their country, that they had never seen a village, but had remained in the simplicity of a rural life, wrapped in their plaids, on the brow of a hill, attending their cattle, and composing sonnets.'*

(The Statistical Account of Scotland)

James Hogg travelled through the Highlands at the beginning of the nineteenth century. There he met a Highland Laird, MacKenzie of Dundonnell (in Wester Ross).

*'(MacKenzie's) glens are so crammed full of stout, able-bodied men and women, that the estate under the present system must have enough to do maintaining them. The valleys are impoverished by perpetual cropping, and saving one farm on the north west quarter ... the extensive mountains are all waste; for the small parcels of diminutive sheep which the natives have, are all herded below nearest the dwellings, and are housed every night. Dundonnell asked me what I thought it would bring annually if let off in sheepwalks. I said I had only had a superficial view of it, but that, exclusive of a reasonable extent near the house, to be occupied by himself, it would bring not below £2000. He said his people would never pay him half of that. He was loathe to chase them all away to America, but at present they did not pay him above £700. He hath, however, the pleasure of absolute sway.'*

(Both the above sources in Eric Richards, A History of the Highland Clearances, pp. 136-7)