

CLEARANCE



Let's go north to the Scottish Highlands, right to the top, to Sutherland: the most isolated spot on the British mainland. And over to the Western Isles where most roads, even today, are single-tracked.

This is one of the great wildernesses of Europe, pretty and vacant. But it wasn't always so. Once many people lived in the Highlands and Islands, until they were forced out by a mix of poverty and one of history's less-known bouts of ethnic cleansing: the Highland Clearances.

Colonel Gordon of Cluny was a rich man, one of the richest in Scotland. His money came from farms in the east, in Aberdeenshire. In 1841 he heard of an opportunity: the laird of several Hebridean islands was bankrupt, which gave Gordon the chance to pick up a lot of land on the cheap. Yet the land in the west was not so fertile as the land in the east; it was no good for crops or beef. However, thought Gordon, it would be perfect for a new wonder product – the Great Cheviot sheep – ideal for squeezing profit from barren soil.

But there was a problem: the islands were full of people. These people were poor, and their long feudal servitude to clan chiefs had

left them few resources, whether in money or spirit. That clan chief had now sold them to a businessman who cared little for old loyalties. Gordon viewed these wild, Gaelic-speaking peasants as aborigines – they must be cleared so the land could be grazed.

In July 1848 Gordon removed 150 residents from the island of Barra and put them on a boat to Glasgow. There he turned them onto the street, most penniless, few speaking any English. They'd thought they were going to Nova Scotia; instead, many ended up in the Glasgow night asylum. There were protests, but Gordon cared little. Year by year he cleared more people. In one season alone he removed 2,000 people from South Uist, Benbecula and Barra.

Colonel Gordon's clearances in the Western Isles caused public outrage. And how did he respond? He got crueller. In August 1851 he sent the *Admiral* transport to the port of Lochboisdale in South Uist. His factor Fleming took bands of armed officers to seize families and chase fugitives. They burnt the crofts, so those who hid in the hills could not rebuild easily. Carts loaded with bound men came over the sea from Benbecula at low tide. As observer Donald Macleod wrote:

Were you to see the racing and chasing of policemen, pursuing the outlawed natives, you would think you had been transported to the banks of the Gambia on the slave coast of Africa.

Catherine Macphee of Iochdar in South Uist said, 'I have seen the big strong men, the champions of the country, the stalwarts of the world, being bound on Lochboisdale quay and cast into the ship as would be done to horses and cattle.'

Yet Colonel Gordon claimed every emigrant had volunteered to leave. This time he did fulfil his promise to get them over the Atlantic. But no more. The emigrants were dumped in Quebec, in late autumn, with no money, no warm clothing and the vicious winter just weeks away. The local medical officer was outraged:

I never saw a body of emigrants so destitute of clothing and bedding; many children of nine or ten had not a rag to cover them. One full-grown man passed my inspection with no other garment than a woman's petticoat.'

Why clothe animals? Nearly 50 years after slavery was banned, British communities were being cleared for grazing – and Gordon was just one of many landowners carrying out this barbarity. Worse still, it was becoming practice for landowners to clear communities not just for sheep, but simply because they could.



Knoydart is a mighty but melancholic estate on the Scottish mainland opposite the Isle of Skye. Its population, hit hard by the potato famine of the late 1840s, fell to only seventy families along the coast. Their position posed no threat to the Great Cheviot sheep, but their owner Mrs Macdonell wanted rid of a near-pauper population. In late August 1853 she arranged for the transport ship *Sillery* to anchor nearby. She sent men into the townships, armed with hammers and axes, to destroy the huts

and force the residents onto the ship. Four hundred people were cleared. They were taken directly to Nova Scotia. Some claim, even today, that this was an act of charity: a landowner paying for the impoverished to travel from a place of no prospects to a land of plenty. And yes, the potato famine had exacerbated steady economic decline in the Highlands.

But landowners in Scotland held feudal attitudes far longer than their in England. They tended to view tenants as either chattels or squatters, and felt no need to humanise their dealings with them. In Knoydart, the residents were first told the *Sillery* would deport them to Australia, and they adjusted to that horrible prospect. But at the last moment, with no warning, their destination shifted to Canada.

John Prebble's great book on the Highland Clearances includes a translation of this Gaelic song, showing the scars of clearance:

A Dhomhnaill, a ghràidh mo chridhe

*Oh Donald, love of my heart,
I am sorrowful, heavy and weary
in solitude, as I think
of all the misery that pursues me,
and of all my kinsmen lost to me.
It is not offended pride, not rage,
not a fierce and savage gloom,
not War even (that would be little),
but that Islay now has so few
of the youth that once were here.
They have been driven away
to America across the sea,
and there is no one left
with kindly feelings, or peace in him.*

Prebble also quotes from the bard Kenneth Mackenzie, aka The Brahan Seer or the 'Scottish Nostradamus', some of whose mysterious lines from centuries before are taken to foretell the Highland Clearances:

*I see the hills, the valley and the slopes,
But they do not lighten my sorrow.
I see the bands departing on the white-sailed ships.
I see the Gael rising from his door. I see the people going,
And there is no love for them in the north.*

Clearance continues. Today the aborigines being cleared are often native tribes. The charity Survival, in its work to help such endangered communities, reported the murder of a Brazilian tribal leader after his people were cleared from their lands.

Marcos Veron was leader of the Guarani-Kaiowá community of Takuára in Brazil. For many years his people tried to recover a piece of their ancestral land after it was seized by a wealthy Brazilian, cleared of forest and turned into a vast cattle ranch. In April 1997, desperate after years of lobbying the government in vain, Marcos led his community back onto the ranch. They began to rebuild their houses and plant their own crops. But the rancher who had occupied the area went to court, and a judge ordered the Indians out. In October 2001, more than one hundred heavily armed police and soldiers forced the Indians to leave their land once again. They ended up living under plastic sheets by the side of a highway. While still in Takuára, Marcos said, 'This here is my life, my soul. If you take me away from this land, you take my life.' His words came tragically true in 2003, when, during another attempt to return peacefully to his land, he was viciously beaten to death by employees of the rancher.