

REVIEW: LOWLAND CLEARANCES

Graeme Morton

Peter Aitchison and Andrew Cassell, **The Lowland Clearances: Scotland's Silent Revolution, 1760-1830**, East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2003., 163+ xi pp, pb, £9.99, ISBN 1-86232-277-5.

It is no straightforward endeavour to make the cross-over from radio broadcast to published book or from historical study to popular text, yet such an accomplishment retains a valuable place in an historiography increasingly compromised by unfettered internet pronouncements. The internet mythologisers of Scotland have a tendency to focus on the headline narratives of Wallace, Bruce, Burns and the Jacobites, and so it is refreshing to be presented with a popular history of what has been found hitherto within unfashionable lodgings and cowering at the bottom of Scotland's reading lists. **The Lowland Clearances** lack the emotive charge engendered by Patrick Sellar and the forcible evictions which took place in the Highlands, but the authors of this study argue that the consequences were just as dramatic, if not more so.

Contrasting the ideological use of terms such as 'Improvement' and 'Clearance', Aitchison and Cassell guide the reader through the downside to eighteenth-century intellectual enlightenment and agricultural modernisation, focusing on the dislocation experienced by the cottars and the labouring orders of Scotland as a consequence of 'progress'. In many ways this is a story of what happens when market forces supplant an economy based heavily on payment in kind and in a society where fealty to the laird was still evident in the call to arms as well as in the usual societal hierarchies. The arrival of the cash economy in such a society informs the first of the two case studies bulking out the text – on the 'The Galloway Levellers' – a story of

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enclosure and the introduction of sheep and 'improving leases' from the 1760s. Inevitably it was accompanied by significant increases in rent and is interesting for the violent response to it. It acts as an exemplar highlighting the important point of this book: that what happened to Lowland Scotland in this period was 'clearance by stealth' (p.57). If the improvements were not made, and if the rent was not paid, then the tenants had to leave. Not as violent or as immediate as Highland croft burnings, but just as brutal.

From this point there follow two themes which Aitchison and Cassell use to structure their analysis. The first is the search for rumbustiousness in Lowland Scotland as a knee-jerk reaction to these changes. Surely the cottars did not go quietly when forced to leave the land upon which they and their families had for so long been attached? Galloway was the one place where uprisings were to be found in the Lowlands, but the authors do attempt to go beyond this isolated example, relying on the research of Christopher Whatley to suggest that a violent reaction was perhaps more widespread, although not as extreme because of Galloway, but under- and unreported if the perpetrators were not caught. It is clear here and elsewhere in this text that what the authors wish to find is the kind of reaction to economic and technological change that was more in tune with events in the Highlands. Secondly, our authors also want to focus on the numbers who left Scotland for a new life overseas, the subject of the second case study ('The rural refugees – one family's story'). This chapter tells the story of James McCowan, a Lowland Scot who embraced the entrepreneurial spirit of the time with investment in a coal mine and the land above, only to suffer during a period of economic downturn leading to bankruptcy and sequestration. After a futile attempt to pay off his debts by a return to the land, McCowan leads his family to a life in the shadow of modern-day Toronto. Relying on the work of the later family's genealogical excavations, we are presented with an emotive example fitting the conclusions of the historian Marjory Harper on the 'drip feeding' of economic migrants from Lowland Scotland to Canada and elsewhere. But why not a third case study on the half who either remained on the land elsewhere in Scotland, some locally some in other counties, or those who swelled the urban populations in Scotland, making this nation second only to England in the league tables of urban growth in the mid-nineteenth century? As Aitchison and Cassell concede, the urban populations increased and the regional populations still increased, and for many their standard of living did not go down. This is good balance, but it is a theme not developed into its own chapter.

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The authors make plain that this is not an academic book and declare up front that we are not to be given footnotes (although some of the primary evidence is cited in the text): a shame when there are often quite extensive quotes. Also, the seams to this book are at times too readily in evidence. Perhaps this is a downside of transferring research prepared for a radio broadcast into the published book, but it is seen when the transcription of interviews with key historians is used to hold the narrative together and to give the text due academic weight. Professors Tom Devine, Christopher Smout and Christopher Whatley along with Drs Marjory Harper and Jim Hunter provide the continuity play in the midfield. It is reminiscent of the 'Tales of a Grandfather' series produced by BBC Radio Scotland under the lead of Magnus Magnusson which, as a series of broadcasts, was much respected, but then caused mild surprise within the academic community when the interviews were turned into print in the publication of **Scotland: the Story of a Nation** (London: Harper Collins, 2000). It short-circuits a lot of trudging through academic monographs and refereed journal articles, let alone the mass of primary material these historians themselves have consulted, yet it does little more than proselytise the arguments of others.

The originality of this book comes instead from its promotion of an important part of Scotland's history which has not been well served by the historiography, although one should not downplay the important promotion also of the local historians of Galloway and the McCowan family who would otherwise lack this kind of exposure. As the blurb states, it is a reflection of such pioneering research that this book sets out to achieve, and it does it well. Yet by concentrating on the more emotive history of migration overseas rather than internal movements, this book does not reflect the new urban and industrial experience of those Lowlanders who left the land for a different kind of 'new life' closer to home. The hints are there in the analysis, with nods in the direction of a newly forming class-based society and of new jobs and skills attracting economic migrants from the countryside, but they are not given due weight in what is otherwise an important contribution to the popular history of Scotland. The text is highly readable, free flowing and suitably informative. Tuckwell Press, as ever, have done a high quality production job at a good price. This book has much to commend it as a contribution to what is one of the more important aspects of Scotland's history, especially because it is an area too readily neglected in the popular imagination.

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