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The Highland Clearances

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The Highland Clearances, known in Gaelic as 'Fuadach nan Gàidheal', which is translated as 'The eviction of the Gael' was the forced displacement during the 18th and 19th centuries of a significant number of people from traditional land tenancies in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The Clearances were a complex series of events occurring over a hundred years.

The Clearances are particularly notorious as a result of the brutality of many evictions at short notice and year-by-year tenants had almost no protection under Scots law. There was also an abruptness of change from the traditional clan system and the increasing effect of the Clearances, and the large-scale "voluntary" emigrations over the same period, devastated the cultural landscape of Scotland. **The effect of the Clearances was to destroy much of the Gaelic culture.**

The Clearances resulted in significant emigration of Highlanders and Islanders to the coast, the Scottish Lowlands, and further afield to North America and Australia.

Year of the Sheep

Another wave of mass emigration came in 1792, known to Gaelic-speaking Highlanders as the Bliadhna nan Caorach ("Year of the Sheep"). Landlords had been clearing land to establish sheep farming. **In 1792** tenant farmers from Strathrusdale led a protest by driving more than 6,000 sheep off the land surrounding Ardross. This action, commonly referred to as the "Ross-shire Sheep Riot", was dealt with at the highest levels in the government and they brought the ringleaders to trial. **They were found guilty, but later escaped custody and disappeared.**

The people were relocated to poor crofts. Others were sent to small farms in coastal areas, where farming could not sustain the population, and they were expected to take up fishing as a new trade. The weather conditions were so harsh that, while the women worked, they had to tether their livestock and their children to rocks or posts to prevent them being blown over the cliffs. **Other crofters were transported directly to emigration ships, bound for North America or Australia.**

It was only in the early 19th century that the second, more brutal phase of the Clearances began.

Most notorious are the examples of landlords trying to exploit changing economic circumstances to their financial advantage by clearing uneconomical tenants from their land, making room for more profitable uses such as sheep, deer forests or tourism. **Two of the best documented such clearances are those from the land of the Duchess of Sutherland, carried out by her factor Patrick Sellar, and the Glencalvie clearances.**

Potato famine

As in Ireland, the potato crop failed in Scotland during the mid 19th century, and a widespread outbreak of cholera further weakened the Highland population. The ongoing clearance policy resulted in starvation, deaths, and a secondary clearance, when families either migrated voluntarily or were forcibly evicted. There were many deaths of children and the aged. As there were few alternatives, people emigrated, joined the army, or moved to growing urban centres such as Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Dundee in Lowland Scotland and Newcastle upon Tyne and Liverpool in the north of England. In places some people were given economic incentives to move, but in many instances landlords used violent methods.

In 1851, following his tour of the Western Highlands and Isles, Sir John McNeill wrote:

'The inhabitants of these distressed districts have neither capital enough to cultivate the extent of the land necessary to maintain them if it could be provided, nor have they land enough were the capital supplied to them'

Richards considers this observation to be *"the central dilemma of the crofter economy"*. After the potato blight, there were more people than the land could support.

The potato famine gave rise to the Highland and Island Emigration Society which sponsored around 5,000 emigrants to Australia from the affected areas of Scotland.

Books for Children

- The Desperate Journey by Kathleen Fidler
- Fuadach nan Gàidheal by Donald Gunn agus Mari Spankie

Timeline

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