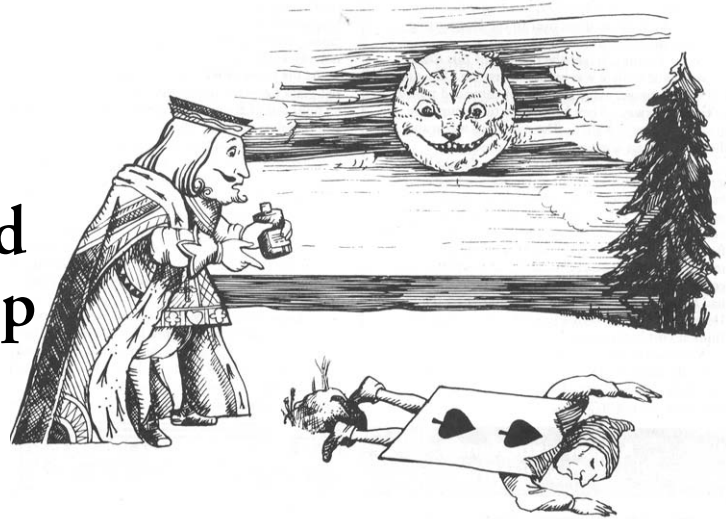


Clearing the Land for the Ownership Society: Scotland 1815



graphic: Peter Veres

by Chris Calder

In 1997, the people of Eigg purchased their home island off the west coast of Scotland from an absentee landlord...(they) live now by "geopoetic" principles.

"Lord and Lady Stafford...order a new arrangement of this Country. That the interior should be possessed by Cheviot (sheep) ... and the people brought down to the coast and placed there in lotts under the size of three arable acres, sufficient for the maintenance of an industrious family, but pinched enough to cause them to turn their attention to the fishing (waged labour). I presume to say that the proprietors humanely ordered this arrangement, because, it surely was a most benevolent action, to put these barbarous hordes into a position where they could better Associate together, apply to industry, educate their children, and advance in civilization."

Patrick Sellar, factor for the Sutherland Estates, Scotland, 1815.

When the Commons is taken, a people lose not only land, but a part of its soul. The Scottish Highland Clearances was no single event, but hundreds, stretching across most of the 18th and 19th centuries, as the ancient clan territories of the Highland Scots were converted to profit-oriented (though often unprofitable) absentee-owned estates.

Three hundred years after the Enclosures in England drove the southern Britons from the land and created an impoverished, uprooted labor force, the theft of the Commons moved north to the Highlands. These Commons consisted mostly of pasturage and hunting and fishing grounds, shared among small farms and villages of half a dozen homes. Traditionally access had been parceled out by hereditary right, according to the rules of the clan. No one, including chieftains, owned the clan's territory outright.

But their power was broken by the English after the uprising of 1745, and Highland chieftains were forced or induced to sell their hereditary lands, leaving their clans (from a Gaelic word meaning family or children) subject to the "rationalizing" projects of landlords bent mostly on selling

wool to the Industrial Revolution.

The result, as Alastair McIntosh, executive director at the Centre for Human Ecology in Edinburgh puts it, was "half a million Scots forced off the land ... to make way for commercial sheep farms and playboy sporting estates."

Along with physical depopulation came the Acts of Proscription, rendering many aspects of Highland culture illegal: music, clothing, ceremonies, anything that might rekindle the old ways. The substance of Highland life was suppressed while the landlords—then as now, mostly tycoons, titled nobility and deep-pocketed corporate entities—took up occasional residence in the castles and put on the kilt. The Acts of Proscription, in their genocidal intent, were an admission that land, culture and people, are ultimately inseparable. The Highlanders' severance from their land both caused and required the loss of vital parts of their way of life. The Gaelic language's centuries-old stronghold in the Highlands was sacrificed by the Clearances. The global ruling classes' affection for these privatized Highlands persists today, as the siting at Gleneagles of the recent G-8 summit suggests.

In 1997, the people of Eigg purchased their home island off the west coast of Scotland from an absentee landlord. Alastair McIntosh, who is involved in the effort, talks about the people of Eigg's efforts to live now by "geopoetic" principles. This term, coined by Scots poet Kenneth White, describes ways (not only literary) of forging more potent relations with the land. White's poetry makes it simple:

Walking along the shore
remembering the past
grasping it in several ways
the better to know it
and penetrate beyond appearances
into the secret nerve ...