

T. M. Devine (Research Assistant: Willie Orr), *The Great Highland Famine. Hunger, Emigration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century*, John Donald Publ. Ltd., Edinburgh 1988, pp. XVIII, 349 S., clothbound, £ 22.00.

The Irish famine of 1845–52, which was due to the failure of the potato crop, has been examined by many historians. It was a catastrophe of exceptional magnitude which led to perhaps a million deaths and to the emigration of as many more. But scholars have neglected the famine in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland which took place at the same time. This may be due to the fact that the scale of distress was much smaller in Scotland than in Ireland. The number of people in danger of starvation in the Highlands was about 150,000. The detailed study of the Highland famine by Devine and Orr is to be welcomed as an important contribution to the economic and social history of Scotland.

The failure of the potato crop did not affect the whole of the Highland region. It was to the west of a line drawn from Wick to Campbeltown that the population suffered most. In this part of the Highlands there were many large estates devoted to sheep farming. They were divided by large farms (run by tacksmen) and smallholdings (run by crofters). Some estates had recently exchanged hands, having been sold by old Highland families to newcomers from England and the Lowlands who had made their money in trade or industry. Peasants displaced by sheep had either emigrated or had been settled in new villages where they had been allocated small plots of poor land. These smallholders could not live on the produce of their allotments. They could survive only by engaging in some other activity. On the coast of the mainland and on the islands they might engage in fishing or in gathering kelp or seashells or they might operate illegal whisky stills. Unfortunately these source of income were very uncertain. The fishing industry suffered when the import of Spanish barilla revived in the 1820s. Illegal whisky distilling was greatly reduced by the rigorous enforcement of the law. Moreover opportunities for young men to enlist declined when the Napoleonic wars ended. Many crofters had great difficulty in making ends meet. They survived on a diet in which the potato became increasingly important, though – unlike the Irish peasants – some of them could supplement the potato with fish or oatmeal.

Those threatened with starvation were relieved by their landlords, by charitable organisations, and by the state. There was a strong tradition in the Highlands that landlords were responsible for the welfare of their tenants and most of them did their best to see to it that the crofters survived. They forgave arrears of rent. Many used an Act of 1846 which provided government loans for drainage purposes. Some undertook schemes of public works – including 90 miles of roads – in collaboration with the Central Relief Board. This Board was the chief charitable organisation which relieved distress in the Highlands. By 1847 it had raised over £ 200,000 to distribute in the distressed districts. This was nearly as much as the whole of Scotland had received from the poor law in the previous year. The role of the state in the relief of distress in the Highlands was a limited one. In Scotland (unlike England) an able bodied unemployed man was not eligible for poor relief. Fortunately the law was not always strictly enforced and, in an emergency, parochial authorities were prepared to give relief to able bodied persons.

The potato famine affected the movement of population from the distressed regions. It was customary for both men and women from the Highland crofts to earn enough to pay the rent by working for a few months in the herring fishery on the east coast of Scotland or on farms in the Lowlands. Migrants were also to be found in factories (such as the St Rollox chemical works in Glasgow) and in the construction industries. As might have been expected there was a considerable expansion of temporary migration from the western Highlands during the potato famine.

There was also an increase in emigration from the Highlands to Canada and Australia. Some emigrants – such as those from mainland Argyllshire – paid their own passages while

others were assisted by their landlords, by charitable organisations and by the government-funded Colonial Land and Emigration Commission. The government also encouraged emigration by offering loans to landlords who assisted their tenants to settle overseas. Their money was diverted from the funds of the Drainage Act. The opportunity to emigrate was particularly welcomed by the victims of clearings that took place during the period of the potato famine. The last four chapters of this excellent survey deal not with the potato famine but with Highland emigration mainly in the second half of the nineteenth century.

*W. O. Henderson, Hemel Hempstead*

T. M. Devine and Rosalind Mitchison (eds), *People and Society in Scotland*, Vol. I: 1760–1830 (= *A Social History of Modern Scotland in Three Volumes*), John Donald, Edinburgh, in Association with The Economic and Social History Society of Scotland, 1988, pp. xiv, 316, cloth, £ 10.00.

The Economic and Social History Society of Scotland, established in 1983, plans to issue three volumes on the social history of modern Scotland. The first volume has appeared in 1988. It includes essays by 16 scholars and covers the period 1760–1830. One of the editors observes that »modern historical studies have experienced a vigorous phase of unprecedented growth over the last quarter of a century«. The merit of this volume is that it summarises the results of much recent research which is to be found in a great many books and articles. Some of the essays, however, such as C. A. Whatley's account of »the experience of work«, are based upon original unpublished sources.

In Scotland, as in England, a predominantly agricultural society was transformed into an industrial society from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. But in Scotland the transformation took place more rapidly than in England. The essays in this book show how different from the English experience were the changes that took place in population growth, progress in farming and manufactures and the way in which society adapted to the industrial revolution. It is clear that generalisations concerning economic and social changes applicable to England may not be applicable to Scotland – or indeed to Wales and Ireland. Moreover the changes that occurred in one part of Scotland were often different from those that took place in another region. It is not surprising that developments in agriculture in the Lowlands and the Highlands should be treated in separate chapters.

One of the most interesting chapters – supported by 8 tables of statistics – is that by J. H. Treble on the standard of living of the working class in Scotland during the industrial revolution. This is a useful contribution to the controversy between those scholars who believe that the workers were better off during the industrial revolution and those who consider that their standard of living declined. In recent years attempts have been made to assess changes in the standard of living in particular regions or towns rather than in the whole of the United Kingdom. As far as Scotland is concerned Treble shows that the living standards of both farm workers and skilled industrial workers improved in the second half of the eighteenth century. There appears to have been no improvement during the French wars (1793–1814). But between 1815 and 1830, when prices fell, the living standard of skilled workers rose considerably. But unskilled workers made fewer gains.

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