

[Page 29 - Gloomy Memories by Donald MacLeod Eyewitness to Highland Clearances](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 46](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1987/8/1

Gloomy Memories by Donald MacLeod Eyewitness to Highland Clearances The following was written by Donald MacLeod, a stonemason of Strathnaver in Sutherlandshire, Scot? land. It is taken from a much longer series of let? ters he wrote to the editor of the EDINBURGH WEEK- LY CHRONICLE in 1840-41. I am a native of Sutherlandshire, and remember when the inhabitants of that country lived comfort? ably and happily, when the mansions of proprietors and the abodes of factors, magistrates, and minis? ters, were the seats of honor, truth, and good ex- ample--when people of quality were indeed what they were styled, the friends and benefactors of all who lived upon their domains. But all this is changed. Alas, alas! I have lived to see calamity upon calamity overtake the Sutherlanders. For five successive years on or about the term day, has scarcely anything been seen but removing the inhab? itants in the most cruel and unfeeling manner, and burning the houses which they and their forefa? thers had occupied from time immemorial. The coun? try was darkened by the smoke of the burnings, and the descendants of those who drew their swords at Bannockburn, Sheriffmuir, and Killicrankie--the children and nearest relations of those who sus? tained the honor of the British name in many a bloody field--the heroes of Egypt, Corunna, Tou? louse, Salamanca, and Waterloo--were ruined, tram? pled upon, dispersed, and compelled to seek an asy? lum across the Atlantic; while those who remained from inability to emigrate, deprived of all the comforts of life, became paupers--beggars--a dis? grace to the nation whose freedom and honour many of them had maintained by their valour and ce? mented with their blood. To those causes the destitution and misery that ex? ists in Sutherlandshire are to be ascribed; misery as great, if not the greatest to be found in any part of the Highlands, and that not the fruit of indolence or improvidence, as some would allege, but the inevitable result of the avarice and tyran? ny of the landlords and factors for the last thir? ty or forty years; of treatment, I presume to say, without a parallel in the history of this nation... Down from the feudal times, the inhabitants of the hills and straths of Sutherlandshire, in a state of transition from vassalage to tenancy, looked up? on the farms they occupied from their ancestors as their own, though subject to the arrangements as to rent, duties and services imposed by the chief in possession, to whom, though his own title might be equivocal, they habitually looked up with a de? gree of clannish veneration. Every thing was done "to please the Laird." In this kind of patriarchal dominion on the one side, and obedience and confi? dence on the other, did the late tenantry and their progenitors experience much happiness, and a degree of congenial comfort and simple pastoral en? joyment. But the late war (the Napoleonic War) and its consequences interfered with this happy state of things, and hence a foundation was laid for all the suffering and depopulation which has followed. This has not been peculiar to Sutherlandshire; the general plan of almost all the Highland proprie? tors of that period being to get rid of the origin? al inhabitants, and turn the land into sheep farms, though from peculiar circumstances



this plan was there carried into effect with more revolting and wholesale severity than if any of the surrounding counties. The first attempt at this general clearing was partially made in Ross-shire, about the beginning of the present century; but from the resistance of the tenantry and other causes, has never been carried into general operation. The same was more or less the case in other counties. Effects do not occur without cause, nor do men become tyrants and monsters of cruelty all at once. Self-interest, real or imaginary, first prompts; the moral boundary is overstepped, the oppressed offer either passive or active resistance, and, in the arrogance of power, the strong resort to such means as will effect their purpose, reckless of consequences, and enforcing what they call the rights of property, utterly neglect its duties. I do not pretend to represent the late Duchess or Duke of Sutherlandshire in particular, as destitute of the common attributes of humanity, however atrocious may have been the acts perpetrated in their name, or by their authority. They were generally absentees, and while they gave in to the general clearing scheme I have no doubt they wished it to be carried into effect with as little hardship as possible. But their prompters and underlings pursued a more reckless course, and, intent only on their own selfish ends, deceived these high personages, representing the people as slothful and rebellious, while, as they pretended, every thing necessary was done for their accommodation. I have mentioned above, that the late war and its consequences laid the foundation of the evils complained of. Great Britain with her immense naval and military establishments, being in a great measure shut out from foreign supplies, and in a state of hostility or non-intercourse with all Europe and North America, almost all the necessaries of life had to be drawn from our own soil. Hence, its whole powers of production were required to supply the immense and daily increasing demand; and while the agricultural portions of the country were strained to yield an increase of grain, the more northern and mountainous districts were looked to for additional supplies of animal food. Hence, also, all the speculations to get rid of the human inhabitants of the Highlands, and replace them with cattle and sheep for the English market. At the conclusion of the war, these effects were about to cease with their cause, but the corn laws, and other food taxes, then interfered, and by excluding foreign animal food altogether, and grain till it was at a famine price, caused the increasing population to press against home produce, so as still to make it the interest of the Highland lairds to prefer cattle to human beings, and to encourage speculators with capital, from England and the south of Scotland, to take the lands over the heads of the original tenantry. Thus Highland wrongs were continued, and annually augmented, till the mass of guilt on the one hand, and of suffering on the other, became so great as almost to exceed description of belief (29)