

Sheep and the Clearances in the Scottish Highlands: a Biologist's View

By M. L. RYDER

SO complete was the introduction of sheep to the Scottish Highlands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that sheep husbandry traditions there today merely reflect Lowland influence, and provide no continuity with the husbandry of the Old Scottish Shortwool kept earlier in the area. The evictions that made way for the new sheep breeds caused so much injustice and distress, that the blame became illogically transferred to the sheep itself as if it possessed some malevolent force, instead of being the innocent agent. It is naturally difficult to view the clearances dispassionately, but so much has been written that is agriculturally and historically unsound that it is necessary to cut through the sentimentality with scientific detachment.

The present author questions the much-repeated assertion that the Highland region is cattle country, and that the sheep is alien to the area. The hills of England and Wales are not regarded as being good cattle country, so it is surprising that the much wilder hills of Scotland should be regarded as such. In fact, the sheep is fundamentally a mountain animal whereas cattle have their natural home on the lowlands. Sheep can thrive on land that is too poor to support any other farm animal, but a much better hill is needed for cattle. Moreover, cattle need a bigger lowland area for wintering. The large Highland farmers who are successful with cattle today are fortunate in having a big area of such low land available, and probably also have plenty of meadow for hay.

It was of course the valley land that was

taken from the crofters in the clearances. Here they had grown small quantities of oats and bere, and taken their cattle and sheep to the shieling in summer. This can hardly have utilized the hills to the full when even today winter provides a tight feed bottleneck, and the hills could support more sheep in summer. Where pasture has deteriorated this has been due as much to under-grazing by sheep as to the lack of cattle, which is blamed by their protagonists, although it is true that where the amount of winter keep allows cattle to run with sheep on the hill in summer they help by eating the longer and coarser grass which is less suitable for sheep. James Hogg¹ was well aware of the social problems of the highland peasants, but he regarded most of the Highlands as unsuitable for cattle, and favoured sheep.

Mitchison² considered that the shieling system, although exploiting the higher ground, prevented the proper cultivation of the valleys for winter feed by taking people to the hills in summer, but the soil and climate of the Highlands make them unsuitable for arable farming. The highlanders ameliorated the winter conditions by housing their *seana chaorich cheaga* (little old sheep) but the new sheep were probably more hardy, as well as being too numerous to house easily. According to Whitaker,³ although the origin of transhumance is ancient, the first reference to the wintering of hill sheep on low ground is dated 1669, and refers to the Melrose district. It was not until the eighteenth century that the discovery was made that sheep could be kept over the winter on low ground in the High-

¹ James Hogg, *The Shepherd's Guide*, Edinburgh, 1807, p. 255.

² R. Mitchison, *Agricultural Sir John*, London, 1960, p. 104.

³ I. Whitaker, 'Some traditional Techniques in Modern Scottish farming', *Scot. Stud.*, 3, 1959, pp. 163-88.

lands without being housed, at any rate at night. The discovery has been attributed to one man—a lazy incomer—whereas it is more likely to have resulted from the introduction of new methods with new sheep and shepherds from the south.

Historical records¹ suggest that the goat, although liking more shelter, was as common as the sheep before the clearances, and that both outnumbered cattle. Dr Johnson in his *Journey in the Western Isles* (1773) gave the stock of a tacksman in the Highlands on the mainland as: "100 sheep, as many goats, 12 milk cows and 28 beeves ready for the drovers". Gray² stated that before the clearances sheep were grazed with cattle in equal numbers. According to Franklin³ cattle only became an important export after the Union (1707) and in order to develop cattle some chiefs restricted the number of sheep kept by their clansmen to only one sheep to every head of cattle.

An Act of Parliament following the 1745 rebellion destroyed the connection between the chief and his clan, and caused power to be measured by wealth rather than by the number of men. Mitchison⁴ emphasized the pressure of increasing population in forcing improvements in agriculture and stressed the backwardness of the Highlands as late as 1780. The Borders had changed from mixed to pasture farming in the seventeenth century, and in the Lowlands the population, displaced by improvements during the eighteenth century, took up other industries. Improvement in the Highlands presented peculiar problems owing to the primitive nature of the agriculture, and the high value which highlanders placed on leisure. As Mitchison pointed out, the situation has been over-coloured by the prejudice and horror of contemporary observers. The Highlands

were under-capitalized, yet already overpopulated—the earlier aim had been to keep the land stocked with men. Cattle made possible the Highland way of life, but did not justify it economically. There was already extreme poverty in the highlands (as, indeed, in other parts) in the eighteenth century before the clearances.

The first stage in improvement was to abolish the strip-cultivation of runrig agriculture and to create larger farms. This was legally much simpler than in England, but shortage of capital, archaic practices, and the large number of small tenants caused difficulties. If waste land could have been enclosed, or other industries established, re-organization would have merely meant re-settlement, but it was difficult to establish the English type of settlement with by-employments. Thus a rising population, without other industry, meant either starvation or emigration. Since many lairds lacked capital for other improvement they converted their estates into sheep-walks. Sheep farmers from the south were offering high rents, and so some of the first people to be forced from the land were the tacksmen. These had formerly been the chiefs' agents, and could not afford the increased rents.

Of the new breeds that appeared during the eighteenth century the Cheviot appears to have evolved entirely from the native Dunface or Old Scottish Shortwool.⁵ About 1800 the Cheviot still had a dun face, and the rams were horned. The Cheviot appears to have evolved on the Border, and the Border Leicester, which developed later, seems to be the result of crossing the Cheviot with the English Leicester.⁶ The Blackface, which, as the Scottish Blackface, is now the most numerous breed in the British Isles, came entirely from south of the Border. About the year 1800

¹B. R. S. Megaw, 'Goat-keeping in the Old Highland Economy', *Scot. Stud.*, 7, 1963, p. 201; 8, 1964, p. 213.

²M. Gray, *The Highland Economy, 1750-1850*, Edinburgh, 1957, p. 38.

³T. Bedford Franklin, *A History of Scottish Farming*, London, 1952, p. 165.

⁴R. Mitchison, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁵M. L. Ryder, 'The History of Sheep Breeds in Britain', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, XII, 1, 1964, pp. 1-12; II, pp. 65-82.

⁶M. L. Ryder, 'Sheep Type in the History of Scotland', *Scot. Stud.*, in the press.

Blackfaces were termed "short sheep" suggesting that Cheviots, which were named "long sheep", were already bigger. Another name for the Blackface was the Linton, from the market, West Linton in Peeblesshire, from which the sheep were bought for the Highlands. It did not begin to enter the Highlands until about 1750, however, and before the clearances its introduction would have been gradual, by a crossing with the indigenous sheep.

According to MacLagan¹ the movement started in 1752 when John Campbell took Blackface sheep from Ayrshire to Dunbartonshire. The spread of the Blackface into Argyllshire and Perthshire, reaching Ross-shire about 1775, is well chronicled. By 1800 they had reached the Great Glen, and by 1840 runrig was almost extinct. The Cheviot was taken from the Borders to Caithness about 1790. Although such movements are frequently attributed to one man, in this instance, Sir John Sinclair, Kerr of Armadale, too, introduced the Cheviot into northern Scotland in 1791.² Here it developed into a larger type known today as the North Country Cheviot. In Caithness and Sutherland the Cheviot predominates to this day. Sutherland was the last county to receive sheep, and this was associated with particular bitterness. The highlander hated the sheep and the shepherds that caused him to leave his glen to provide winter grazing. Wheeler³ used maps to give graphic illustration of the way in which settlements distributed throughout the county were swept to the coasts so that the interior could be used as a relatively small number of sheep estates.

It has been said that the sheep happened to pay best owing to the high price of wool during the Napoleonic wars, and that any eco-

nomie form of farming would have caused evictions. True as this may be, it ignores the fact that much of the land in question can support only sheep.

According to Mitchison,⁴ the conflict of the tenants' and landlords' interests came to a head on the issue of sheep about 1780. By turning over the land to sheep the owner could receive a great increase in rent with regularity and security. Where there was adequate arable land (as in south-west Scotland) or where there were other industries, the change did not mean distress. But the large sheep farm involved new men from the south because the highlander disliked the lonely life of the shepherd. Also, the expense of the change meant that the landlord could not wait for the 2,000 sheep, regarded as being an economic flock, to build up, or for the local men to gain experience as shepherds. The sheep farm thus did little to help the economy, and many landowners were unwilling to adopt it. On the other hand, had the reorganization of small farms been quicker, sheep would probably have been less important.

The effect of sheep on depopulation has created controversy. Adams⁵ claimed that sheep had no long-term effect on emigration. He showed that people moved from areas without sheep, as well as from those with, and said that landowners were unsuccessful in keeping them back. Symon⁶ claimed that emigration from the Highlands, owing to shortage of food, began even before 1745. Mitchison⁷ considered that these views ignored the contemporary opinions of some writers such as Sinclair, but the contemporary opinions are likely to have been biased. Sinclair in fact advocated sheep in the Highlands, but in flocks of only 300 in order to avoid depopu-

¹ D. S. MacLagan, 'Stock Rearing in the Highlands, 1720-1820', *Trans. Roy. High. Agric. Soc.*, 6th Ser., II, 1958, pp. 63-71.

² R. Trow-Smith, *A History of British Livestock Husbandry, 1700-1900*, London, 1959, p. 137.

³ P. T. Wheeler, 'Landownership and the Crofting System in Sutherland since 1800', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, XIV, 1, 1966, p. 45.

⁴ Mitchison, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁵ M. I. Adams, 'The Causes of Highland Emigration, 1783-1803', *Scot. Hist. Rev.*, XIX, 1922, p. 73.

⁶ J. A. Symon, *Scottish Farming Past and Present*, Edinburgh, 1959, p. 271.

⁷ Mitchison, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

lation. Even so he gave his own tenants crofts in Caithness.

An account published by the Highland Society about 1790 stated that the sheep was only one reason for depopulation. Increase of population and attractive accounts of America came before sheep as reasons for emigration. In fact, despite the emigration of nearly 40,000 highlanders between 1760 and 1808 the Highland population continued to rise until 1840.¹

Indeed, the departure of the last crofters was accompanied by the departure of many of the sheep, because after 1850 the lairds found that deer forests provided still more income.

It was not until the Crofters Holdings Act of 1886 that security of tenure was provided. Symon² showed how by 1874 falling sheep and wool prices and declining pastures paved the way for the sportsman. Wheeler³ showed that livestock numbers were at a maximum in 1876. In Argyllshire, Inverness-shire, and Ross-shire sheep numbers dropped from 2,187,000 in 1879 to 1,609,000 in 1914. The sheep at first co-existed with the game, but heather burning had to be limited in order to keep grouse, and as sheep interfered with deer-stalking, the sportsmen became willing to pay for the grazing, as well as the sporting rent, and so sheep numbers declined.

¹ MacLagan, *op. cit.*

² Symon, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

³ Wheeler, *op. cit.*, p. 49.