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Fig. 13.1 Opportunities for emigrants occurred throughout much of the 19th century. From *Historical Sketch of the Agricultural Progress of Scotland*, Highland & Agricultural Society of Scotland, Centennial Show, 1884.

POVERTY AND SURVIVAL IN NINETEENTH CENTURY COIGACH

Eric Richards

A PEASANTRY IN ADVERSITY

The survival of the heavily-populated communities of Coigach through the 19th century was achieved against formidable economic odds. Until the 1860s Coigach was one of the most remote and inaccessible districts in the mainland of the British Isles. It was also one of the poorest and most vulnerable to crop failure. Its isolation indeed had helped to preserve one of the best surviving examples of a peasant community within the industrialising nation. The people of Coigach existed in resolutely pre-industrial living conditions at a time when most of Britain moved rapidly towards complete industrialisation.

It was remarkable, therefore, that in such an age this peasant society should not only survive and persist, but also demonstrate signs of expansion. For instance, despite great poverty and periodic food crises, the population of Coigach and Lochbroom (the very large parish in which it fell) continued to grow rapidly and did not reach its maximum until the 1860s. Moreover, towards the end of the 19th century, the common people of Coigach were able to grasp a much firmer hold on their relatively small resources of land. In the teeth of the far greater economic strength of the landlord, the sheepfarmers and the great sporting tenants, the will of the people prevailed in the political campaigns of the 1880s. The peasantry, that is the crofters and the cottars, were by the terms of the Crofters' Act re-affirmed in their occupation of their lands. It was the victory of the small-holder against the forces of economic rationalisation; it was a demonstration of survival against the odds.

The tenacity and the triumph of the crofting communities in Coigach (and, of course, elsewhere in the West Highlands) was all the more extraordinary in terms of the adversity which they had faced. For, while the population rose at very high rates, continuously from about 1780 to 1860, some of the fundamental sources of income of the district lapsed into periodic or permanent decline. The great hopes raised by investments in the local herring fishery in the 1790s had been dashed by 1820: as Lord Teignmouth said, Ullapool, once the great hope of the district, had fallen 'victim of herring-caprice' (Teignmouth 1836. 68). The income derived from kelp manufacture had also collapsed by 1830. Recurrent efforts to introduce industry, in flax and wool processing, failed; and so did much of

the old domestic manufacture of goods for local consumption (*NSA*. XIV. 89). The introduction of large sheep graziers to the district by the 1810s, producing wool for distant markets, placed greater pressure on the resources of the region. In agriculture the arrival of the potato in the late 18th century was a mixed blessing. A remarkable, almost miraculous, addition to food sources, the potato was extremely susceptible to disease, however. Its ease of cultivation and high productivity encouraged monoculture. Indeed throughout the 19th century Coigach remained in a precarious balance with its food supply. For most of the time the people of Coigach were unable to feed themselves from their own crops and depended on imported meal supplies (*OSA*. X. 562). A substantial proportion of the community lived near the margin of subsistence, near the edge of life. And beyond all this was the heightened competition for the land itself, the endless pressure from sheepfarmers and graziers for the lands of the west. Survival in such circumstances was itself a triumph.

There can be no doubt that the people of Coigach lived in poverty and insecurity throughout the 19th century. The conditions in which they lived were essentially pre-industrial. The economic foundations of life were narrow and still depended largely on the weather and the seasons; there was a continuous but unpredictable alternation of good times and bad. There was little industry or differentiation of employment. But the most telling indicator of pre-industrial circumstances in Coigach was the persistence of famine.

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore the meaning, extent and incidence of famine in 19th century Coigach, and the manner in which these emergencies were faced by the people and by the public agencies of the time. A broader question lurks behind this agenda. It concerns the means by which a growing population was able to sustain itself on the basis of ostensibly declining resources, the expedients which were required for this feat of survival. In part it involves the changes in the relationship between Coigach and the outside world, but this is not the main point of attention in this paper.

Access to the inner history of the crofter community is obstructed by formidable problems of evidence. It is characteristic of most peasant societies that they generate little written record of their own workings. This is true of Coigach. Apart from the brief appearances before the Napier Commission in the summer of 1883, it is extremely difficult to find any evidence deriving directly from the people of Coigach. We are necessarily thrown back on the observations of outsiders — on the reports of estate factors, of tourists, of government officials, of newspaper reporters, of police officers and visiting agriculturalists. We see Coigach through a filter, through alien eyes. Consequently we know most about Coigach when the Barony was subjected to extreme circumstances: during times of privation, of riot (Richards 1973) or of governmental intervention (Smith 1982). The dangers of these types of evidence are palpable: they tend towards a selective and unbalanced perception of the realities of common existence.

The best and most recommended type of evidence to counterbalance

such distortions in the written record is that contained in oral testimony, by folk tradition, song or recent oral history. The only example I know in Coigach is the fascinating material collected by James M. Fraser in 1982 from Morag Shaw Mackenzie (see also Baldwin, this volume). This indeed adds several dimensions to our understanding of the inner world of Coigach. What is extraordinary is that these vivid recollections, which stretch across two centuries and more, make virtually no reference to famine or hunger in Coigach (Fraser 1982). In this, the oral testimony is in accord with other such evidence recorded in the West Highlands (Cregeen 1974). It is as though the phenomenon of famine and hunger has been systematically suppressed in the collective memory of the people. In reality famine was a central danger in the lives of the people, and it is possible to put this in a long perspective.

REMOTENESS AND DEMOGRAPHY

In 1793 the people of the Aird of Coigach gave themselves rare expression. In a petition to the Scottish Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge they pleaded for the services of a missionary. In doing so they drew attention to their circumstances and exposed several themes which were to recur throughout the following century. They were, they complained, 'Living at the extreme distance of Thirty Miles from our Parish church and Twenty Miles from the nearest place of worship, to which we have only access over roads almost impracticable to active and vigorous youth, and totally so to the *Old, Frail and Infirm!*' Mostly they travelled by sea which itself, they claimed, was hazardous. Their own description of Coigach was a passionate plaint against isolation. Coigach was, they said:

an extensive tract of Country about sixty miles in circumference, inhabited by about One Hundred and Ten families, supposed to number at least five hundred and fifty souls, who have not the advantage of hearing publick worship more than twice in Twelve months, and during the rest of the year the poor Ignorant and Illiterate Inhabitants, only know the Lord's Day from the other days of the week, by resting from Bodily labour, which the Brutes of the Field enjoy in common with them! How then can this poor and dark corner be said to enjoy man's greatest boast, the Comforts of Religion!

The petitioners, to emphasise their case, claimed that their isolation was affecting adversely even their demographic behaviour. 'To the poor Inhabitants of this much and long neglected, dark and unenlightened corner, it is particularly distressing, when baptism and marriage' required the prompt services of a minister. They explained thus:

This is thought to be no small check in our poor population, as weak children by cold and fatigue frequently loose their lives tho' it happens for most part that they are several months Old, before they are baptised; and Our Youth are deterred from the Honourable Bonds of Matrimony, from the apprehensions of the extreme trouble, to which the circumstances as above related expose them.

In so many words the people of Coigach were saying that their remoteness from church was seriously inhibiting both marriage and reproduction in the community (Petition to S.S.P.C.K. from the Inhabitants of the Aird of Coigach, Parish of Lochbroom, 1793, Cromartie Papers, Vol.19).¹

There was obvious exaggeration in the 1793 petition, the proof of which was to be found in the extraordinary growth of population which had already occurred in the district. Precise estimates of Coigach's population are difficult to achieve because it was located within the great parish of Lochbroom which also incorporated Ullapool. The development and subsequent decline of the fishing village at Ullapool complicates the local demography and so also did seasonal migration. Nevertheless it is clear from Dr Webster's estimate of Lochbroom's population in 1755, and those of the Old and New Statistical Accounts which were reinforced by those of the Censuses, that population growth was accelerating in the late 18th century. The population of Lochbroom more than doubled between 1755 and 1831; the population of Coigach may have trebled between 1791 and 1834 (*OSA*. X. 564-5; *NSA*. XIV. 89). Moreover, population growth continued further until 1861, though at a diminishing rate after 1841.

Isolation, therefore, had not insulated Coigach from the demographic revolution; it may indeed have exacerbated the accumulation of dense settlements on the west coast. And the problem of isolation itself was not solved until new roads began to breach the mountains in the middle decades of the 19th century. These roads were constructed partly in response to the continuing recurrence of famine in Coigach.

FAMINES IN COIGACH: 1780-1840

One of the consequences of extreme isolation was that little reportage of famine can be found before the middle of the 19th century. Recent studies in the population history of Scotland have demonstrated that famine was a recurrent fact of life in many parts of the country well into the 18th century. These food crises, however, had been diminishing in both ferocity and scale for some time. Famines were becoming increasingly localised in their incidence and were, eventually, entirely exorcised from southern Scotland (Flinn 1977. 376). In the Highlands famine continued to wreak its penalties even into the 19th century.

Famine is a word notoriously difficult to define and is here used to denote severe shortfalls in the harvest which posed a threat to life and to future seed crops: a subsistence emergency which produced the imminent danger of a leap in mortality rates. In the 19th century Highlands such a crisis was commonly called a 'destitution'. By then, of course, the population of the entire region was much larger than before, and more people were at risk. Concurrently, however, communications with the outside world (and the sources of food) were improving, and various agencies emerged which were far better placed to counteract food

emergencies. Nevertheless it would be a mistake to understate the severity of the 19th century famines in the Highlands. For, although there was no catastrophe to compare with that of Ireland in 1846-49, there were times when terrible danger hung over tens of thousands of people along the western littoral. Coigach was in the centre of the region still at risk throughout the 19th century.

Until the 1830s the subsistence emergencies in Coigach did not enter directly into the historical record. It is the contention of this paper, however, that the harvest crises of the 19th century were the last acts in the age-old saga of famine in the region, and certainly not the beginnings of communal hunger (see Donaldson 1938. *passim*). For instance, it is practically certain that Coigach suffered in the general Highland food crises of 1772, 1782, 1796, 1807, 1812-13 and 1817-18. It is hard to believe that Coigach escaped the hungry fate of so much of the Highlands in these years. The historical record, unfortunately, is virtually silent though we do know that the fishing merchant Ross gave people of Lochbroom meal on trust during the dreadful crisis of 1782. Ross's good feeling was fully reciprocated according to a recollection of the time: 'All paid him that could. When any died in debt, their directions were invariably to sell their effects to pay their meat, meaning meal. On their deaths their whole effects were sold by auction to pay this sacred debt — these might produce an average from 6s to 6s 6d' (*The Bee*, 30 May 1972). This brief glimpse of the famine indicates the significance of credit and external meal supplies in the crisis, and the high priority given to communal responsibility in facing adversity.

The first time that Coigach enters directly into the account was in the severe crop shortage of 1836-37. At last there was some public disclosure of conditions of life in the Barony although, of course, under the extreme circumstances of famine. Even so, partly because contemporary newspapers made relatively little reference to the famine, and partly because few estate records survive from the 1830s, our knowledge of the emergency in Coigach is derived primarily from a retrospective account given before the Parliamentary Inquiry into Scottish Emigration in 1841. It was contained within the evidence of Andrew Scott, the factor of John Hay-Mackenzie, proprietor of the Cromartie Estates of which Coigach comprised the westernmost extremity. Scott was a Roxburghshire man who had been employed in this role since 1831, a modern manager much frustrated by the immense difficulty of improving either the land or the people of Coigach. In addition, however, Scott's testimony revealed the extent and intensity of the 1836-37 crisis..

Scott provided some basic economic and demographic data about the people of Coigach. He had made his own count of the population in 1838 and provided the remarkable figure of 1,512 of whom more than one-third were less than 12 years of age; they lived in families of an average size of 6½ people and subsisted on eight great 'lot farms' to which were attached communal grazings; their arable land was a mere 450 acres, presumably almost exclusively devoted to the cultivation of potatoes. The cultivable land, indeed, was absolutely limited; there was virtually no possibility of

any expansion of cropping area. Even more significant was the parallel existence in Coigach of an unofficial population, another 500 squatters, the marginal people who had no claim on the land whatsoever except as illegal subtenants.

The Highland subsistence crisis had made its first approach as early as 1835 when the *Inverness Courier* had reported a poor crop. The harvest of 1836 was much worse and great distress was reported in general terms (Barron 1907. II. 196). Public meetings were held in Edinburgh in February 1837 to mobilise relief on behalf of the West Highlands and Islands. A communication from Skye indicated the impending danger: 'We know not that the history of the British people ever presented such pictures of severe unmitigated want and misery as are exemplified at this moment in the case of our poor Highlanders' (Barron 1907. II. 197). A Glasgow Committee was also at work raising funds from various parts of the British Isles (Macleod 1898. 125).

The famine crisis in Coigach, apart from Scott's testimony, passed virtually unrecorded except as subsumed into the general emergency in the West Highlands. The main element in the crisis was an almost total failure of the potato crop, but the corn crop (mostly oats) had also been damaged by frosts before it had been able to ripen. The herring fishing too had been very poor during the bad harvest years. Scott testified that the general health of the people of Coigach was good, yet every year some families suffered privation: 'living almost altogether on shellfish from the shore, with a little water gruel at night, and not a bit of bread or potato in their house'. Such people lived on the outer limits of subsistence and suffered want in the hard season of each year. As Scott said, 'There is positive distress every year'. But it is clear that in 1836-37 the deprivation gathered in a much larger proportion of the population.

Relief measures in Coigach were strictly limited by the financial capacity of the proprietor, Hay-Mackenzie. Certainly he recognised the responsibility to prevent death and disease on his estate, for these were regarded as the ultimate shame of the landlord (*PP*. 1841. Q.1817). But Hay-Mackenzie's finances were already strained and he was not equipped to deal with a mass emergency. In 1835 he had imported 200 bolls of meal from Aberdeen to be distributed in credit to the people and he allowed arrears of rent to accumulate (*PP*. 1841. Q.1676). Only one half of the small tenantry's rent was paid in 1835 and in the following years much rent was entirely lost. This relaxation of rent demands was the orthodox means by which a landlord could cushion the impact of famine, thereby allowing the people to use their cash reserves to buy imported meal for present consumption and as seed for future years. But in 1836 and 1837 the crisis outstripped Hay-Mackenzie's capacity to care for the Coigach community — as Scott put it candidly, 'if relief [from outside] had not come, I do not know what would have been the consequence, the distress was so severe.' The work of the Glasgow Committee was decisive in co-ordinating charitable subscriptions and its intervention was probably the most important element in the avoidance of fatalities during the famine. Hay-Mackenzie had contributed to

the fund but his Coigach estate received far more than his contribution for its famine relief. The intervention from the south was an echo of the government assistance provided to the east coast in the famine of 1782-83 (Flinn 1977. 235). In a vital sense the isolation of Coigach had been effectively breached; southern agencies were now able to counteract the dire effects of subsistence crises. Scott was able to say, 'I never heard of any one dying from starvation' (PP. Q.1815).

It is too easy to assume that the crofting community, labouring under elemental difficulties, simply awaited its fate or, better, its relief at the hands of external agencies. It is clear, from hints in Scott's own evidence, that there was a measure of reciprocal, mutual, support in times of crisis. As Scott pointed out, there was minimal regular public support for the poor and the hungry: each harvest shortfall was treated as an emergency and resources within the community used as best as they could be. At such times the people were 'all poor together' and the poor looked after the poor. As Scott put it, simply but eloquently, 'they are very remarkable for that; a poor man would divide his potatoes with his destitute neighbours'. Charitable funds from the church were derisory, and the landlord gave only a few pounds each year by way of supplementation. There was no other mode of supporting the poor who were, necessarily, thrown back on the community itself. There was no compulsory poor relief and the landlord was certainly against its introduction. So also, claimed Scott, were the people themselves because it would diminish their sense of independence: 'that independent feeling which the poor in that country generally cherish'. He said 'They have a decided objection to be on the poor roll' (PP. 1841. Q.1803).

Thus, as far as can be detected, the community created its own minimum standards of security even in a context of perennial poverty and rapidly rising numbers. Despite annual hardships and periodic harvest shortfalls no one starved in 1836-37 and the poor were looked after in the bosom of the community. It was a precarious balance of welfare which required the co-operation of the landlord in two ways. He was expected to step into the breach when *extremis* threatened (as in a famine). In the last resort the factor (or the minister) would intervene and no one was allowed to starve — 'it would reach the ears of the proprietor or his factor'. Second the landlord forbore to extract the economic rent for the land occupied by the numerous small tenantry. As Scott implied, the people were simply not economic: the landlord would have been better off without them. Considerations of humanity (and perhaps also the fear of physical resistance) stood between the proprietor and the maximisation of his income (PP. 1841. Q.1798)

Two central facts emerged from Scott's account of the 1836-37 famine. One was the fundamental vulnerability of the people. Coigach commonly produced less than half of the subsistence requirements and, consequently, imported substantial quantities of oatmeal every year and more, of course, during local harvest shortfalls. This explains the central role of meal dealers in these communities, not simply as organisers of food imports but also as sources of credit. The second salient matter was the role of cash income.

Each lotter kept between one and three beasts, and cattle sales effectively paid the rent. The rest of the buying power of the community, its margin between hunger and comfort, was generated externally from seasonal employment in the Caithness fishing and harvest work in the south and east, supplemented by the increasing availability of construction work on the railways. As Scott said, 'The people . . . are all poor together as they must necessarily be; they go away to Caithness, to the herring fishing, and look out for such kind of work as they can undertake' (*PP.* 1841. Q.1810). The fishing at Wick could not have continued without 'the ample supply of hired men' from districts such as Coigach (*John O'Groat Journal*, 5 August 1853). The payment of rent at Coigach fluctuated directly with the success of the northern fishing. In effect, and increasingly so, the Coigach economy was propped up by this external income: it enabled the community to survive through its great growth of population. The people were poor but were able to make ends meet by the quite un-peasant method of selling their labour outside their own district.

The peripatetic character of the Coigach labour force gave the census takers decennial headaches. Local people were highly sceptical of the official figures. In the 1831 census it was known that 'some hundreds of the parishioners of Lochbroom, away at sea, at Caithness and deep sea fishing, and at south country labouring of various kinds, must have been omitted in their own, and returned from other parishes' (*NSA.* XIV. 83-4). But local observers were agreed that the population growth in Coigach continued unabated through the 1830s and 1840s; one claimed that it had grown by 10% between 1836 and 1847 (*CP.* Scott to Hay-Mackenzie, 4 April 1847). The community was able to absorb the increase only by uncontrolled subdivision of the crofts and further growth of its 'unofficial population'. The people continued, for the most part, to reject the option of permanent migration — partly because of the support of their external earnings, partly because they were prepared to tolerate a level of poverty unacceptable in other parts of Britain. The dangers were palpable. Further famine was openly predicted. As the Rev. Norman Macleod said in March 1841: 'I am afraid a very fearful crisis is approaching' (*PP.* 1841. Q.842).

THE FAMINE OF 1847-1848

The great disaster which produced the Irish catastrophe of 1847-48 also created extreme danger in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. As in Ireland there was a large and growing population heavily dependent on potatoes. By December 1846 the destruction of the potato crop was reported widely, and the best known and best-documented of the 'destitutions' which descended upon the west coast had begun. In March 1847 the minister at Ullapool reported the imminence of disaster in his parish (Macleod 1847):

The destitution of the people here from want of meal is truly alarming, and unless some immediately arrive, death will be the consequence. Great

numbers of people have nothing to eat but herrings [and] as there is no store of meal . . . starvation is surrounding its victims.

The Ullapool minister, three months before, had already signalled the onset of hunger. There was 'a considerable number of families in absolute want of food, raiment and money, subsisting wholly on the charity of their poor neighbours — a great many of whom will become equally destitute in a few weeks, unless a kind Providence send some relief from some unseen source'. Reports early in 1847, to the General Committee of Edinburgh for the Relief of Destitution in the Highlands and Islands, confirmed the severity of the emergency. In Lochbroom there was a dense, hungry and vulnerable population; two thirds of the potato crop had been lost; the seed potatoes were now also in jeopardy. Potatoes constituted three-quarters of normal food consumption. The general view was that it was already the worst crisis in living memory. In February the minister reported that no food had yet been imported to Lochbroom. So far only one hundred and fifty families were destitute but it was certain that many more would fall to this level unless food and employment were provided. 'At present they are mutually assisting each other and bearing their hard lot without murmur or complaint'. Some of the people were already scouring the countryside for employment, being 'desperate for work', and already local spokesmen were suggesting that subsidised road construction would be the best solution to the emergency.

The 1847 crisis soon generated an extraordinary panoply of relief, both public and private. Unprecedented efforts were made to prevent starvation. At Coigach the landlord was disadvantaged by his own financial difficulties, and eventually he accepted considerable philanthropic aid from external sources, as did many other West Highland lairds. By mid 1847 Hay-Mackenzie had already advanced to the people of Coigach, in meal and seed-oats, the equivalent of one year's rent, 'a great part of which he will not be able to recover', as his factor realistically predicted. Hay-Mackenzie also responded promptly and enthusiastically to the policy of the Board of Supervision for the creation of an employment scheme to construct roads in Coigach. It was designed as a form of relief for the able-bodied among the destitute. According to Andrew Scott, the road (later known as the 'famine road') would be a great boon to 'so remote and neglected a country'. It would educate the people into regular habits of work, and provide 'a taste of comforts that hitherto they have not discovered the want of'. The scheme combined development work with relief. It applied a work-test to the issue of food and other assistance in the name of an economic philosophy which was convinced that unrestrained charity was a moral danger to both recipient and donor.

The actual execution of relief works was a major challenge to the organisational capacities of the local estate factor and the relief officials. Anomalies and disputes were rife and the construction of roads presented great technical problems. The utilisation of untrained local labour was difficult and sometimes unpopular. Meanwhile the landlord was required to secure supplies of meal at a time when the general trade in cereals was in

considerable disarray (Richards 1982. *passim*). Hay-Mackenzie eventually made arrangements for clippers to bring meal from Banff and Aberdeen to Ullapool, and potatoes were preserved for distribution in the following season. Yet proprietorial interference in the meal trade was itself regarded as a dubious practice since it would deter the operations of the regular private suppliers. So some of the people of Coigach received relief employment and food in clear contravention of the rules for distribution set down by the organising committees. The entire district was clearly in a turmoil of poverty and activity: in late 1847 there was an astonishing report that 1,671 people on Hay-Mackenzie's property were in receipt of some form of assistance. The total population was probably about 2,000. Such numbers were, of course, a measure of the emergency along the west coast.

The relief schemes were occasionally undermined by the seasonal migratory habits of the Coigach people. For instance, in the summer of 1850, the road construction work, especially that involving rock cutting, was seriously disrupted by the departure of many of the people to the Wick fishing. It was explained that 'at this season many of the people usually go to Caithness to the Herring fishing where they can gain better wages than in road-making'. Consequently the relief managers found themselves employing extra labour in order to proceed with the road (*CP*. Andrew Scott to Lord Stafford, August 1850).

Several features of the famine need emphasis. First, there can be no doubt about the scale and intensity of the crisis, nor its persistence. Crops through the years 1847, 1848 and 1849 were severely ravaged by the blight. The emergency, therefore, was much prolonged — again, in 1850, the potatoes were reported as rotting in their pits, road construction was continued, and special food supplies were still being brought in from the east coast. As late as March 1851 the potatoes were failing but now an excellent catch of herrings in Lochbroom rescued the people. As Andrew Scott explained 'Although their potatoes have mostly failed by this time, yet there is nothing like want among the small tenantry' (*CP*. Scott to Mrs Hay Mackenzie, 5 March 1851). Later that year the new potato crop was reported as abundant and sound. The famine was over.

Second, the famine had roused an unprecedented and widely co-ordinated system of relief which effectively combined local and external assistance. Suffering and real destitution undoubtedly occurred but the clear priority was that no death should occur. In effect the relief systems brought employment and income to the district supplementing the income usually brought into the district by external seasonal labour. As one official said, 'but for the interference of relief, the gravest consequences would have been in fatal operation'. This contemporary verdict accords well with the findings of modern demographic historians. It has been suggested that the relief measures were not only effective in preventing starvation during the famine: it is now argued that the levels of mortality *declined* during the famine years in the West Highlands and Islands (Flinn 1977. 433-4). Here, therefore, the contrast with the tragedy in Ireland (and indeed with famines in pre-1750 Scotland) is astonishing. For, though population had increased dramatically

and had become dependent on a highly unreliable monoculture of potatoes, the mobilisation of relief was able to comprehensively counteract the consequences. The impact of famine had been radically curtailed: indeed it had been defeated. And so the events of 1847-50 in the Highlands leave a definitional conundrum. In what sense can they be designated as 'famine' when mortality rates are observed to decline?

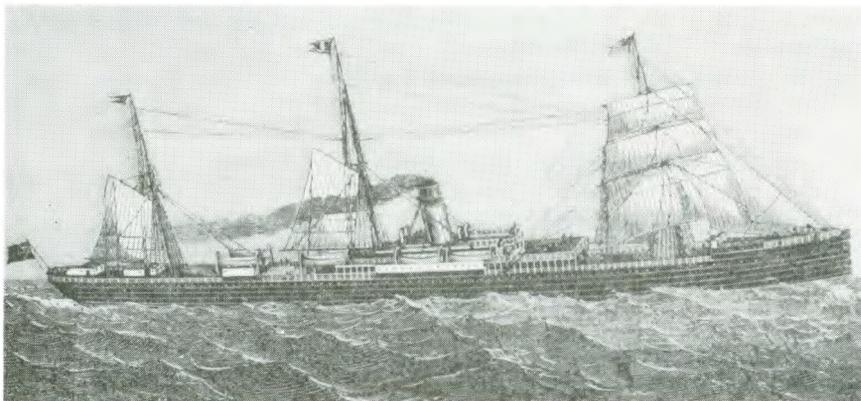
FAMINES IN COIGACH: 1850-1900

The famine of the late 1840s is generally regarded as the last such event in British history. Living standards rose, food supplies were placed on a permanently secure footing, and Britain left its pre-industrial past forever. Famine was banished from the face of the country. In the Highlands the great famine was followed by relative prosperity. In 1852 there were serious fears of labour shortage in the Highland economy (*Ross-shire Journal*, 19 June 1852). Living standards for the small tenantry in particular improved: cattle prices and wages rose for several decades while most small rents remained static or rose much more slowly. In Coigach the relative trends were especially clear. Better standards of consumption were observed in those years and, even in the 1850s, it was increasingly difficult to persuade West Highlanders to accept free passages to Australia. It is apparent that in Coigach and other districts in the West Highlands, migration was slow to siphon away the recent increments of population growth [Figs. 13.1, 13.2]. The contrast with Ireland is again worth emphasising: in many parts the population was actually higher in 1851 than in 1841 and rose marginally for another decade. In Ireland, of course, the population fell dramatically during the famine years and after.

Yet this broadly optimistic version of West Highland conditions should be modified to take into account the continuing recurrence of famine conditions *after* 1850. Coigach provides clear evidence of these crises: its significance is to emphasise the persistent poverty and vulnerability of the communities of small tenants and cottars along Scotland's north-west coastline.

Measuring the intensity of famine is always difficult but it is unlikely that the severity of the years 1847-50 was ever again repeated. Nevertheless in each succeeding decade there were subsistence crises which demanded the mobilisation of relief measures on behalf of the Coigach crofters. These episodes are now mainly forgotten, yet at the time they caused great alarm even though they were less publicised than the previous emergencies. For example, in Coigach in the early 1860s a succession of poor crops eventually threatened the return of destitution. Petitions for help were received in May 1861. By January 1862 the people were reportedly worse off than they had been for many years. Potato supplies were exhausted and the small tenants were buying up reserves of oatmeal. Then the herring season failed and the subsequent potato harvest was also meagre. By the end of 1862 the position had demonstrably deteriorated into a full scale

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Fig. 13.2 Emigrants were welcomed by most of the old 'Commonwealth' countries — Australia, New Zealand, Canada — and by the United States. From *Historical Sketch of the Agricultural Progress of Scotland*, Highland & Agricultural Society of Scotland, Centennial Show, 1884.

emergency. The Cromartie Estate, now partly subsumed under the administration of the Duke of Sutherland's estates, mustered its resources for the needs of the moment. Famine relief in Coigach in 1863 was a replication of the events of 1847-50 with one exception. This time there was no external intervention by charitable or government agencies; instead the estate administration organised its own methods of relief. By January 1863 road construction and cottage building had been set going by the estate factors; relief was made available, under the strict rules of a work test for the able-bodied. This time however there was no landlord interference in the import of foodstuffs which was deliberately left in the hands of the customary meal-dealers. Nor was there any subsidisation of meal prices. As the Sutherland estate commissioner insisted, 'our duty is confined to averting absolute want and starvation', and this required great stringency in the provision of relief and charity. Self-help and the freedom of trade must not be subverted. Relief employment on wages and the unfettered operation of the market were the two pillars of the system created to combat the famine. But the community was promised that 'not a single person [would] suffer from absolute starvation'. Local factors were given unambiguous directives: 'You must let no one starve' (CP. George Loch to Andrew Scott, 1 February 1863, 21 February 1863, 22 February 1863, 27 February 1863). In part the relief system was designed to provide employment and income until the Caithness fishing season began, and until the new harvest was got in. Indeed by late 1863 the crisis was over and a good harvest celebrated. One consequence of the famine was that it revealed once more the mass of poverty that existed below the surface of estate life even in normal times. Once again, too, famine had further accelerated road construction in Coigach and thereby diminished again its isolation.

For as long as so many people lived in conditions of virtually pre-industrial seasonal dependence, any shortfall in the harvest was bound to bring hardship, certainly to the most marginal elements in the population. Localised famine recurred. In the middle of 1870, for instance, it was reported from Coigach that the people had been without potatoes since the early part of the winter and, though food was still relatively cheap, they had already exhausted their money and their credit. Once more the local economy had no internal means of generating employment and income. Rent arrears mounted again. As one estate factor remarked: 'There will always be a heavy list of defaulters on the West Coast among the small tenants'. The Duke of Sutherland was persuaded to finance further road construction in Coigach, partly for development purposes and the encouragement of the sporting tenantry, but more particularly to offer relief to the people by means of employment. One of the more outspoken factors remarked, 'I rejoice to hear that the Coigach road is at length to be made — it will not only afford much valuable employment for your people and afterwards tend to improve and civilise them — but it will teach many of them to work with pick and spade which is a valuable species of education for them through life'. The food crisis was little reported at the time even though the potatoes continued to fail: in October 1872 half the crop was yet

again destroyed by disease (*CP*. Gunn to Loch, 19 October 1872).

There were, naturally, good times between the crop failures. The local arable economy may also have diversified, though our knowledge of this is meagre. When the herring fishing was successful the people of Coigach lived in greater ease, for instance in 1879, and the landlord received better rents. Two years later conditions worsened dramatically and created another serious subsistence crisis. This new emergency in the western crofter communities provided the essential economic context to the great crofter agitation which was played out during the following years. The renewed food crisis had several causes. One was the accumulated effect of three exceptionally bad seasons within five years. In February 1881 all categories of tenants were in grave difficulty, suffering from very poor prices for their saleable stock at a time when their potatoes had been destroyed by frost. The Cromartie factor exclaimed, 'It has been a most trying winter for poor people out of employment, and for the sake of all concerned I do trust an improvement will come soon' (*SP*. Gunn to Kembal, 7 February 1881). Another cause was the severe weather and storms of December 1881 which damaged many of the fishing boats of the Coigach district. This was then followed by a very poor fishing season, and many of the people came back penniless from Caithness in late 1882. The markets for sheep and cattle were also much depressed. In October 1882 it was evident that the potato crop was again failing and that the oats had been ruined in the fields by gales.

By late winter, in March 1883, signs of hunger began to re-appear in Lochbroom where already fifty families were reported to be in danger of destitution having exhausted their own food supplies and pleading with the landlord for relief. William Gunn, factor on the Cromartie estate, described the terrible food shortages and the ensuing destitution: 'there has been nothing like it for the last forty years or more', he claimed. It was especially severe for widows in the community, women with large young families and no able-bodied workers. They faced many months of hunger before the new season. But there was also a shortage of seed and another emerging problem at the centre of the distress was the decline of local meal merchants. There had been a long term decline in country meal-mills in the region and grain was now sent to Aberdeen for processing. More critically, distant traders would not extend credit to the people, and credit had been the traditional means by which famine was mitigated and its economic effect spread across a longer period of time.

The local Parochial Boards were clearly unequal to the task of widespread relief in Coigach. It also became clear that the problem in Coigach was merely a part of a wider West Highland crisis. Rapidly and efficiently external charitable assistance was assembled by the Mansion House Committee in London, attended by much publicity on behalf of the crofters. The Cromartie Estate once again activated itself to prevent starvation. Road works were instituted together with other small relief works — notably a series of 'branch and peat moss roads [which] will be most useful to the people when completed'. Once again, however, the estate

expressly refrained from interfering with the food supply trade. Moreover the dangers of charity were stressed. As the factor put it:

I am fully alive to the necessity for the greatest care and discrimination in dealing with these people at such a time. In every possible instance the labour test should be applied and *charity* should only be given in cases of real and proved necessity.

Relief employment was confined to one man per family.

It was during this crisis that the Cromartie estate found itself in the position of relieving people who were publicly resisting the authority of the estate and withholding their rents in a concerted political campaign of protest for land rights. Nevertheless the estate policy was unambiguous: 'The utmost watchfulness will . . . be needed . . . to anticipate any risks of loss of life from starvation'. In March 1883 forty-five families were in immediate need of relief in the form of food; 135 families also needed seed for oats and potato sowings, and many of these families had no breadwinner whatsoever. By April 1883 a ton of meal was on its way by steamer from Glasgow, arranged by charitable organisations. For, though the Sutherland administration was loathe to admit the need to involve external assistance, the crisis had awakened the conscience of the British people. There was no question that relief would be forthcoming or that people would die of hunger. Death was averted (*CP*. Finlayson to Gunn, 7 May 1883; Kemball to Gunn, 12 April 1883; Gunn to Mackenzie, 8 May 1883; *Scotsman*, 21 March 1883, 23 April 1883).

The crisis of 1883 had followed the pattern set in 1837: famine conditions were effectively nullified by prompt and sufficient measures of relief. Without them death rates must have worsened. By the mid 19th century internal and, more vitally, external resources were far greater and far better co-ordinated than in previous centuries. As the experience of Coigach demonstrated, starvation was avoided, not because the basic food deficiency was less severe but because the modes of relief had become so much more successful. Nor should it ever be thought that agricultural improvement had now put the region beyond the cold reach of destitution. In 1885 the potato crop was yet again diseased and storms destroyed the crops: the season was regarded as the worst in eighteen years; rent was remitted by 50% and the people were able to subsist mainly on the strength of a good herring fishing (*CP*. Gunn to Duchess of Sutherland, 30 April 1885). Two years later the potato crop was attacked again by disease and it was reported that the seasonal migrants from Caithness 'male and female are returning home from the east with little money, partly from the low prices of herring'. Continuing road construction work helped once more to cushion the effects (*CP*. MacIver to Gunn, 12 September 1887). Finally there were fears of destitution in January 1891 again (*Ross-shire Journal*, 2 January 1891), and a further recurrence of potato disease in September 1896 — in both cases, however, the extent seems to have been relatively confined.

In a strict sense none of the subsistence crises in these years could be classed as 'famine', since short-term mortality rates appear not to have

increased. In a broader sense however it is clear that in at least four of the episodes here described the failure of the harvest would have occasioned actual starvation had it not been for the intervention of external assistance. These episodes were the clearest sign of persistent poverty and the recurrent danger under which the western crofter communities laboured. The reliance on the weather, on the seasons, and on the direct production of an ungenerous land had changed little over the past century.

A SELF-SUSTAINING COMMUNITY

The economic and social history of Coigach in the 19th century, therefore, was one of survival against adversity. To concentrate on times of famine and emergency is, of course, to produce a biased and pessimistic account of life in the Barony. There were also times of feasting and relative comfort. Nevertheless the continuing recurrence of severe food shortages exposed not only the vulnerability of the population at large but also its general poverty. The subsistence crises caused great distress among the people and embarrassment to the landlord. The Duke of Sutherland (husband of the Countess of Cromartie) was one of the richest men in the kingdom and he effectively presided over one of the country's poorest populations. Mostly the people of Coigach looked after their own needs but, during subsistence emergencies, it was necessary and expected that the landowner would intercede with direct assistance. Relief required the constant vigilance of the landlord since famine was regarded as a great humiliation to both the people and the proprietor. The record of famine relief in the 19th century sometimes appeared doctrinaire and harsh in its regulations but, in the last analysis, must be considered successful since no one starved to death.

In 1883 Alexander Mackenzie described the people of Coigach as 'the most comfortable crofters in the north of Scotland' (Richards 1973. 164). Neither this, nor the clear improvements in welfare since 1850, should obscure the persistence of shocking levels of poverty even at the end of the century. The records of the Cromartie estate bear eloquent testimony to the harshness of existence, of dozens of families living in conditions of helpless poverty, submerged in debt and facing rent arrears completely beyond their means of recovery. The Cromartie rent books are catalogues of primary want, of endless biographic accounts of large families with virtually no means of employment and income, of old people living on the margins of subsistence, of infirmity, desertion, ill-health and, increasingly, of reports of children 'gone away'.

The question that looms over this study is not so much the sheer existence of poverty but the means by which the community sustained itself and coped with its adversity. It was a great feat of survival. Perhaps the most important point was that the local economy was underpinned by income from outside. The willingness of the people to sail or tramp out of Coigach in search of employment was remarkable and consistent. Working in the Caithness fishing, in the harvests of the Lothians, in the kitchens of

Edinburgh, all produced income for the landlord's rents, for food imports, for old and young relatives. In effect, ordinary life in Coigach was subsidised since the district simply could not yield sufficient income to sustain the people from its own resources. It was a remarkable balancing act maintained for more than a century. It was so successful that twice as many people lived in Coigach in 1860 as in 1760. Yet this of course was itself a great paradox: of demographic growth in an age of recurrent crisis.

Another element in the context was the behaviour of the landlord. Either out of considerations of humanity, or out of simple political expediency (or both), the Cromartie lairds were compliant in a *modus vivendi* which allowed the land to be rented at less than its next alternative use. The crofters did not pay an economic rent and their real rents fell during most of the 19th century. The small tenantry had persisted and expanded their numbers despite the fact that they could not compete against alternative uses of the land they occupied. This itself was part of their triumph against the stark forces of economic rationality. It was also an index of the tenacity of the people to resist such rationalisation — best and most sensationally demonstrated in the Coigach riots of 1852-53 (Richards 1973. *passim*; Richards & Clough 1989. 236-45; Baldwin/MacLeod & Payne, this volume). It was a status which was ultimately institutionalised under the legislative consequences which flowed from the Napier Commission of 1883.

Survival, however, was also related to one of my original themes, that is the remoteness of Coigach. Isolation, despite the mobility of the people, had tended to preserve the community from certain types of change. Coigach (and other districts in the West Highlands) had sustained the last of the peasantries on mainland Britain. Many of its agrarian arrangements were survivals from the pre-industrial age. As late as the 1860s some of the remnants of the old tacksman system remained and sub-tenancies persisted. Labour services were slow to die, and even in 1896 some of the land was still worked in the ancient runrig methods. Large families were valued for the insurance that growing children gave to ageing parents. The direct reliance on agriculture and fishing remained central to all existence, and they continued to impose their age-old disciplines of time and season on the community (Richards & Clough 1989. *passim*; Baldwin, this volume).

These, however, were the outward forms: within the society survival was assisted by methods of mutual support in times of difficulty which both surprised, and were admired by, outside observers. As far as it is possible to penetrate the detailed life of the community it appears always to have rallied to its own emergencies, though this was not always enough to preserve life. Land itself, ironically, was regarded as the greatest security against adversity, and land was clung on to with extraordinary perseverance even though, in reality, it provided very meagre security let alone comfort. It was a society which, in some important sense, exhibited a tolerance of poverty and occasional deprivation. Here, however, the evidence is ambiguous: there were indeed times when emigration was popular and people sought to leave Coigach altogether; sometimes it seemed even their own poverty

hindered their departure. Yet, when free emigration became available, especially in the 1850s, the outflow was relatively small (Hildebrandt 1980. 261) [Figs. 13.1, 13.2]. For the most part the community seems to have preferred to use seasonal migration in order to preserve their life in Coigach. Seasonal migration was an alternative to emigration, a means of putting off expatriation.

The chronology of Coigach's population changes is significant. The local population appears to have grown continuously until 1861. In the next decade net migration for the first time exceeded the natural increase of population. After that the decline was rapid, falling by one third between 1861 and 1901: it was like a sudden release of people, a swift reduction of the long-standing demographic pressure.² The interesting aspect of this exodus is that it began to occur in times of rising living standards. The people of Coigach began to migrate permanently only when their living standards began to improve. Rising expectations undoubtedly played their part. So too did the erosion of Coigach's isolation which was conquered primarily by the physical effort of the people of Coigach themselves during times when the failure of their own resources had reduced them to mendicancy and destitution. Eventually the people were confronted with the choice between the croft and the outside world. The remarkable thing was that they delayed the choice much later than most agrarian communities in the British Isles.³

Notes

¹On the fate of this petition, see *OSA*. X. 564-5.

²These remarks are based on the successive censuses, mainly extrapolated from Lochbroom figures. The 1881 census provided detailed statistics for Coigach including evidence that the number of males exceeded females. This is either a mistake or the consequence of a freakish boom in male births five to ten years before.

³All references are to the Cromartie Papers unless otherwise indicated.

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