

Fig. 11.1 Location: parishes of Creich and Dornoch, south-east Sutherland.

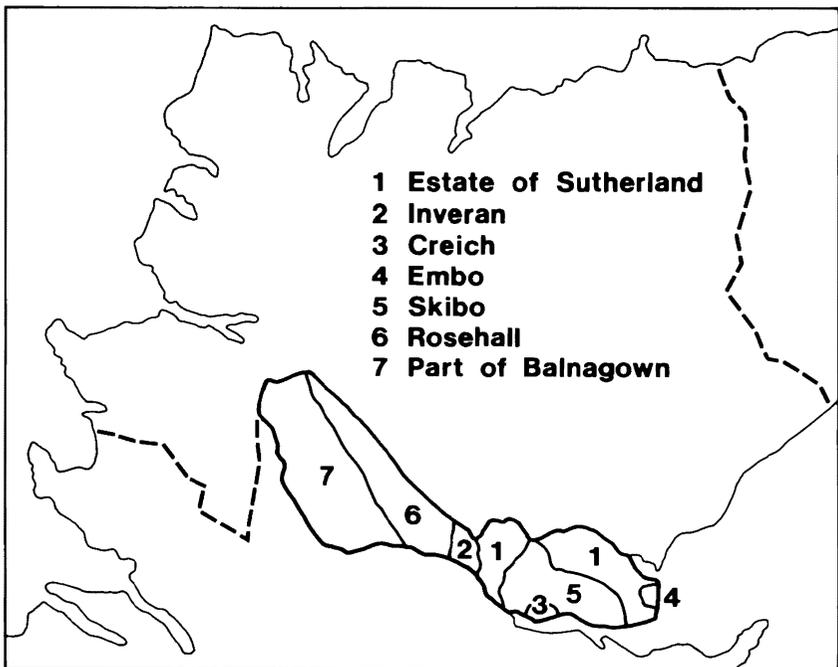


Fig. 11.2 Estates in the parishes of Creich and Dornoch.

# THE CLEARANCES IN SOUTH-EAST SUTHERLAND

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For the purposes of this paper, south-east Sutherland consists of the civil parishes of Creich and Dornoch [Fig. 11.1]; the events are those spanning roughly one hundred years from about the middle of the eighteenth century to about the middle of the nineteenth century.

What, however, of the term 'Clearances'? This is a term which tends to cover two distinct, though not necessarily unrelated processes: the removal of people from traditionally occupied townships as a result of the change of leasehold of an area, and the trend in the Scottish Highlands at that time towards migration out of the area to destinations either within Great Britain or abroad. For such a dual definition to be valid there would have to be a clear and universal causal link between removal and out-migration, a link whose provenance, however, is varied and nebulous. By way of definition, Adams (1976. 188) deems the 'Clearances' as: 'The general term given to the destruction of townships and eviction of people to make room for sheep which occurred in the Scottish Highlands in the 19th Century.' Though certainly precise, specific use of the word 'sheep' may be problematic, as also the restriction to the nineteenth century.

Within these defined parameters, there are two possible approaches to setting an overall context for events in south-east Sutherland. First, there is the thread of widespread agrarian change, commented on by Richards (1982. 18, 25) when writing that 'The Scottish Highlands was part of the net of time and circumstance which extended across Europe ... The Highland Clearances were a substantial regional variant of the enclosure movement and the associated changes in British Agriculture'. The crux of this line of argument is that agrarian reform constituted a continental movement and that the Scottish Highlands were simply due their turn in the process of time. The problem lies in the presupposition of an inevitable diffusionary process of agricultural reform, for that in turn begs the question which forms the second thread of approach, that of historical timing. A general survey of Britain during the period centred on 1800 suggests the pertinence of the chronological coincidence of events in the Highlands with the broader sweep of the Industrial Revolution, particularly given Smout's assertion (1970. 247) that the Industrial Revolution should be 'compared with the Reformation as an event that stopped and turned the current of man's ... life'. Such profound change can but entail the Highlands as part, even though they form a peripheral part of the country.

Finally by way of introduction, it can be argued that one fundamental aspect of change associated with the Industrial Revolution was the adoption of a 'new' mode of economic thinking. This might be summarized by stating that man's attitude to the 'Factors of Production', land, labour and capital, changed with the onset and development of the Industrial Revolution. How, then, does all this apply to Sutherland?

## LAND: COMMON INHERITANCE OR ECONOMIC ASSET

Writing of rent, Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776. 247) deemed it 'the price paid for the use of land . . . the highest the tenant can afford to pay in the actual circumstances of the land'. This seems particularly appropriate to Sutherland where the basic unit of land holding was the estate [Fig. 11.2], and the prime form of estate revenue was rent. The simple fact that land was now being considered as an economic asset in terms of monetary rent was evidence itself of change.

Hobsbawm (1973. 184) viewed this change in attitude as an important aspect of post-Culloden Highland life, the discouragement of clan life giving rise to the possibility of viewing land in this way rather than as an item of assumed common inheritance held by the clan chief. Hobsbawm's analysis carried two further key points. First, for change to occur the mass of population had to become mobile wage earners, another direct effect of post-Culloden attitudes as traditional rights to land in return for goods and services declined. Second, change only occurred after the ownership of land was transferred to the hands of people who were prepared to enact such change. This was largely effected through the appointment of estate managers. In the case of the Estate of Sutherland, managers such as William Young, Patrick Sellar and James Loch were well-versed in the art of advocating radical reorganization of estates, as a result of successful enterprises elsewhere.

A combination, therefore, of the attitudes of *The Wealth of Nations* and of the desire for enclosure came to bear on Sutherland as the late eighteenth century gave way to the dawn of the nineteenth, with the net result that plans for the 'improvement' of estates proliferated. Dempster, for example, attempted to introduce change on the Estate of Skibo in the 1790s with the opening of a textile mill at Spinningdale. Its destruction by fire in 1806 meant an end to its short life and the ruinous remains are still to be seen (Sinclair 1795. 131). What the ill-fated Spinningdale venture did evidence nonetheless was the advent of change on a radical scale in Sutherland, where locally-based factory employment had previously been unheard of.

Not that factory employment became the principal manifestation of change. This was to be found, rather, on the land: a massive reorganization in the overall distribution of settlement with the onset of large-scale farm leasing; and a notable change in the more particular laying out of settlements after enclosure.

## OVERALL DISTRIBUTION OF SETTLEMENT

Figures 11.3 and 11.4 illustrate the distribution of settlement before and after the main era of reorganization in south-east Sutherland, in 1755 and 1841 respectively. Each map draws on a source which attempted to provide a comprehensive survey of the area. Major General William Roy had been commissioned to produce a military survey of the Highlands. His several years' labour ended in 1755 and his map sheets provide a source of information on the distribution of settlement. The 1841 Census, by contrast, is the first for which Enumeration Rolls survive, thus providing a later source. More detailed discussion on the nature of each as a source is available elsewhere (Houston 1980. 78–82).

In 1755 [Fig. 11.3], settlement in the western part of the area was distributed into three broad groups. The Estate of Skibo housed a distinct number of townships along the shores of the Kyle of Sutherland and up the valley of the River Shin, along with a few around Migdale and a further few in the upper parts of the valley of the River Evelix to the north. Strath Oyckell, the march between Sutherland and Ross and Cromarty, was part of Balnagown Estate and its northern bank was occupied by a string of settlements well up into the heights of the strath. The northern boundary of Balnagown Estate, the River Cassely, separated it from the Estate of Rosehall, and on either side of the river a line of settlements marks out this particular strath. The eastern part of the area is dominated by the Royal Burgh of Dornoch. Some townships existed along the links to the north of the Burgh, while settlements were also located on Skelbo Estate along the southern shore of Loch Fleet. Strath Carnach, running west from the head of Loch Fleet, also housed its group of townships. The general pattern suggested by the map is that in 1755 there was comprehensive occupation of the available low-lying ground by a substantial number of townships.

By 1841, however [Fig. 11.4], the pattern shows substantial change. The whole of the western sector of the area was devoid of settlement, whilst a substantial concentration had developed both around Bonar Bridge, by then a major village at the head of the Kyle of Sutherland, and inland around Migdale. Lower Strath Oyckell continued to house settlements, albeit more densely crowded than had been the case in 1755, and the legacy of the Spinningdale mill is apparent from the larger township to be found there in 1841. Further east, there was a marked clustering of townships in the Skibo area, centred on Clashmore and reflecting its role as a reception area for displaced tenants. This, indeed, is the case for much of the parish of Dornoch, and by 1841 there had been a substantial thickening of settlement on the moors of Achvandra, Balvraid, Rearquhar and Birichen.

The means by which these changes occurred have become the focus of much controversial debate. In terms of the management of an estate, plans for its reorganization would be drawn up. The subsequent adoption of such a plan was probably followed by a series of leasehold arrangements aimed at creating a given area over which there was simultaneous renewal

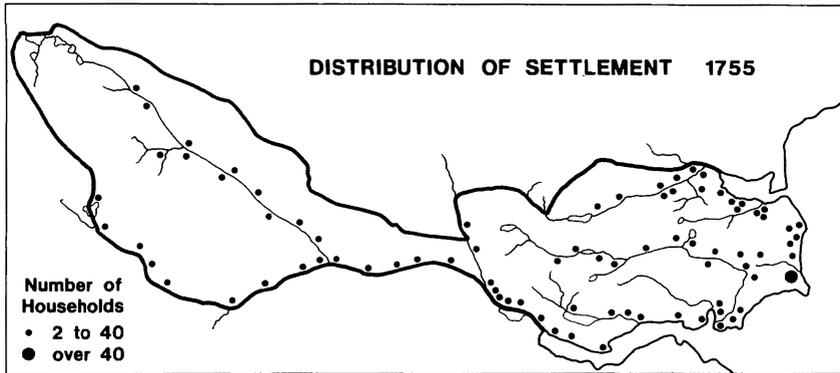


Fig. 11.3 Distribution of settlement, Creich and Dornoch parishes, 1755.

of leases. The potential leasehold of the given area was then advertised and granted to the highest bidder, and in this manner, land became the marketable commodity alluded to by Adam Smith.

In south-east Sutherland the resultant sequence of events can be plotted to some degree, although the evidence is patchy and insufficient to account fully for the marked differences in settlement pattern between 1755 and 1841. What has survived shows that the first set of removals occurred in 1790 when Balnagown Estate was converted to a series of sheep farms (Richards 1982. 287), whilst Sage's references to removals in Strath Oyckell in 1800 (1899. 185n), may relate to the same event or to subsequent activities in the area. Napier evidence (para 40077) carries reports of the removal of 194 families on Skibo Estate, and although dating that reorganization is problematic it may account for the thickening of settlement in the east of the estate, where the area around Clashmore received displaced tenants and the village of that name was established [Fig. 11.5]. In addition, several families were removed from Balchraggan, Reenare and

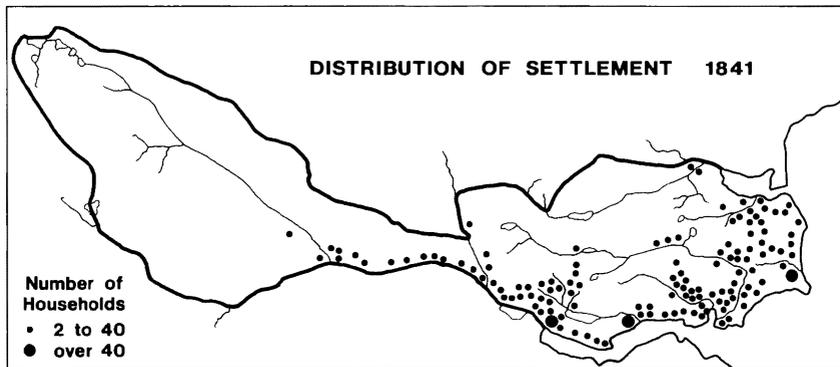


Fig. 11.4 Distribution of settlement, Creich and Dornoch parishes, 1841.

Acharrie in about 1833, while seven families were evicted from Coiloag to make way for a deer forest (Napier: para 39998). In the east, Strath Carnach was cleared in 1813 on the establishment of Torboll Sheep Farm (Adam 1972. 1. lii–liii), and some thirteen years later the lots of Torboll saw four tenants have their holdings subdivided into seven (Napier: para 39636). Adam also refers to the creation of a number of arable farms in the Parish of Dornoch in 1809–10, and this must have created displaced tenants. Explanation of the patchwork of townships to the north and west of Dornoch however, as we have seen, also lies in that area’s primary role as a reception area for tenants from other parts of the Estate of Sutherland, especially the parishes of Lairg, Rogart and Golspie.

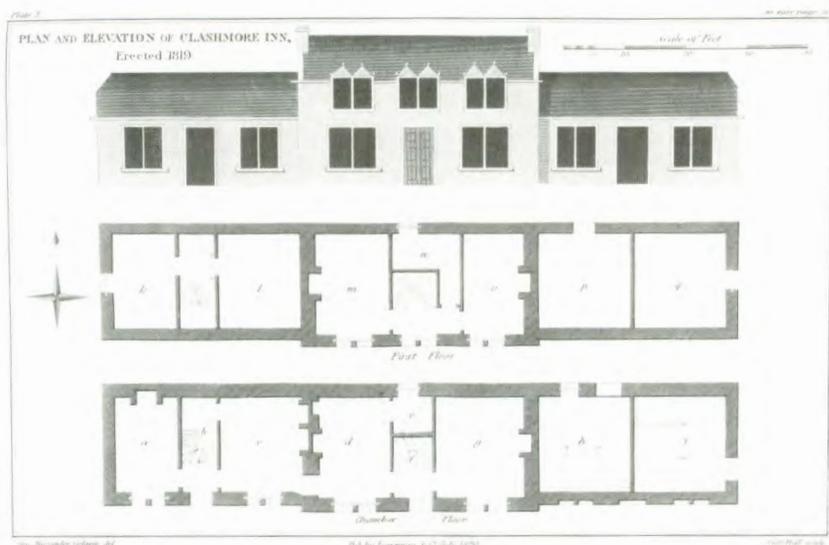


Fig. 11.5 Clashmore Inn, 1819. Clashmore was established to receive displaced tenants from nearby estates. From James Loch, *An Account of the Improvements on the Estates of the Marquess of Stafford*, 1820.

So the evidence from different sources is patchy, but the impression is one of massive change. The other point raised by the dearth of evidence is that, other than the outline plans and organization of lease-timing noted above, the whole process hardly provides a classic example of detailed planning. Displaced tenants, for example, often turned out forcibly by over-zealous estate agents, seem to have drifted to any reception area, reflecting the lack of evidence suggestive of an allocation of new holdings to them. The broad sweep of change seems to reflect the broad sweep of the plans for change.

## LAYOUT OF SETTLEMENTS ON THE ESTATES

The second key element of change was in the manner in which land was occupied. Maps survive covering the Skelbo–Achvandra area in the Parish of Dornoch before and after reorganisation. It lies on the southern shore of Loch Fleet, on the north-eastern fringe of south-east Sutherland [Figs. 11.6–11.8].

Aitken's plan of 1788 [Fig. 11.7] shows that it can be subdivided into three parts. In the north-west of the plan lies the Mains of Skelbo which, judging by its grouping of small rectangular fields, had by that time experienced a degree of enclosure. To the south of the Water of Skelbo there is an irregular series of open fields which vary in size but appear to be part of Skelbo itself. The remainder of the area is occupied by three farming townships: Achvandra, Cubecmore and Cubecbeg. All three illustrate the open field pattern of farming, accompanied by a scatter of buildings: Achvandra in particular was fairly sizeable, judging by both the size of the arable fields and the number of buildings which lie within its bounds.

Comparison of Figures 11.7 and 11.8 needs a little background. Three features help with this. Skelbo Castle and the Water of Skelbo are relatively consistent features. Thirdly, the boundary of Figure 11.7 encloses an area of about 1.1 km (0.7 ml) north–south by about 1.9 km (1.2 ml) east–west, while the boundary of Figure 11.8 is about 1.5 km

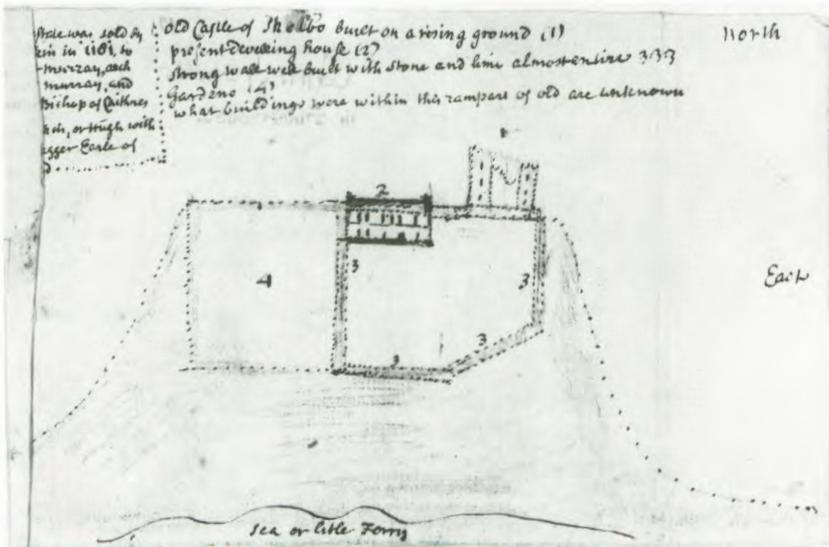


Fig. 11.6 Early eighteenth century drawing of Skelbo Castle; the old Castle (1), the present dwelling house (2), almost entire, strong, stone and lime wall (3), gardens (4).

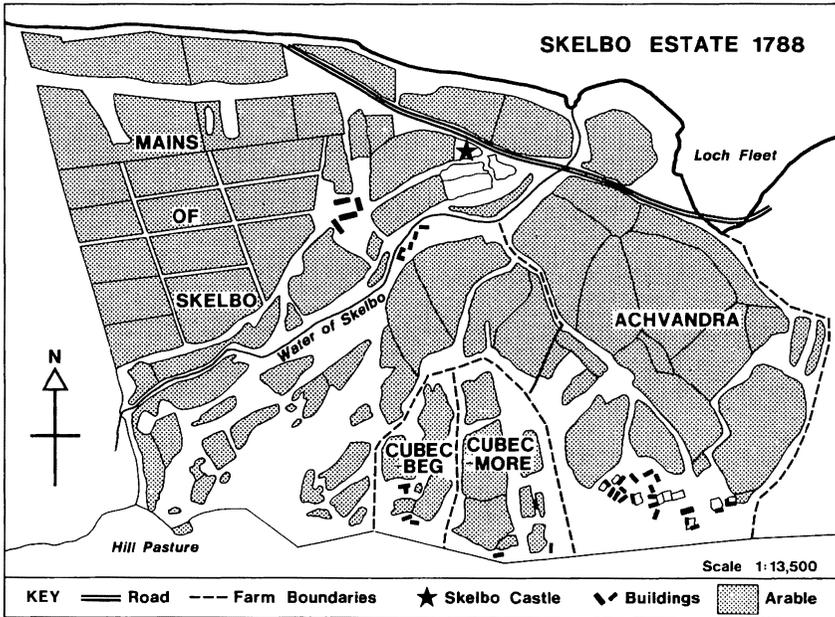


Fig. 11.7 Part of Skelbo Estate, 1788; after the plan by David Aitken.

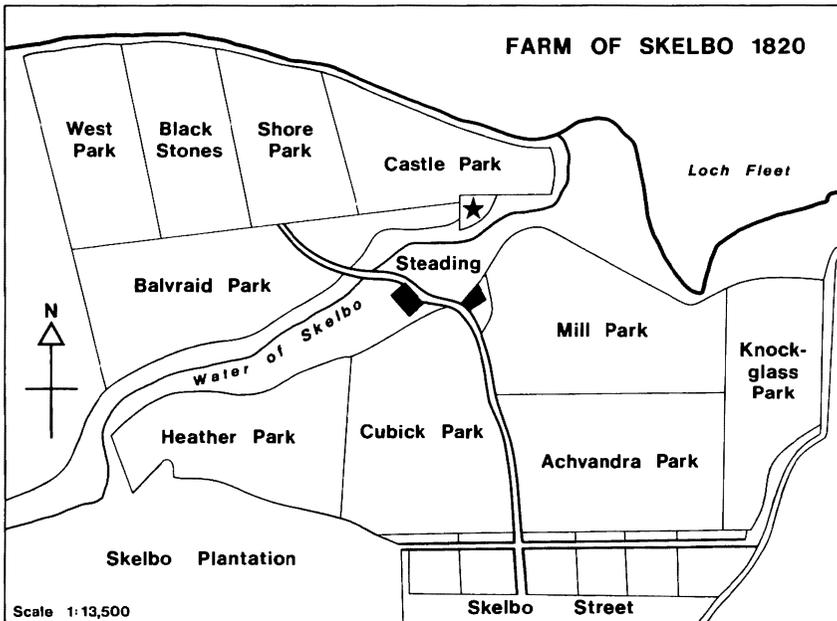


Fig. 11.8 The farm of Skelbo, 1820; after the plan by W. Forbes.

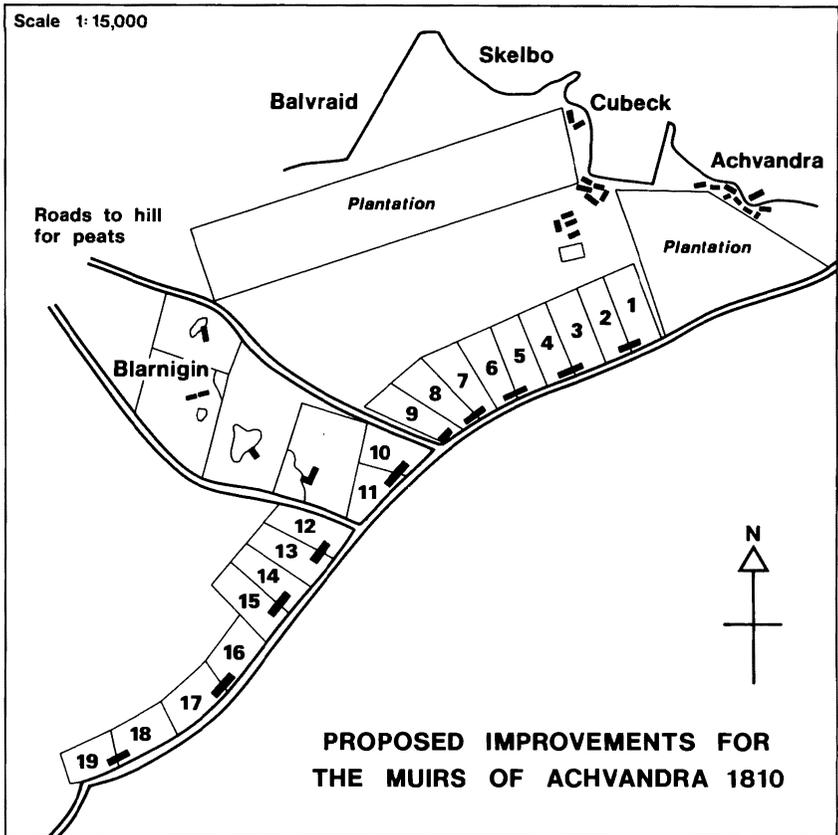


Fig. 11.9 Proposed improvements on the Muirs of Achvandra, No. 2, 1810; after the plan by Benjamin Meredith.

(0.9 ml) north–south and about 2 km (1.25 ml) east–west. The plans, therefore, cover an approximately equivalent area; clearly there has been a transformation of the landscape.

Skelbo Farm in 1820 consisted of 104 ha (257 acres) of arable ground and 17 ha (42 acres) of pasture. The arable was made up of ten large named fields plus the Stallions' Park immediately to the west of Skelbo Castle. The names of the fields themselves are indicators of change. Achvandra Park and Cubick Park cover areas which were part of the arable ground of these townships in the 1788 plan. Knockglass Park is adjacent to where the lands of Knockglass were in 1788, when Knockglass was the immediate neighbour to the east of Achvandra and just outwith the area represented by Aitken. The amalgamation of the smaller fields which formerly comprised the Mains of Skelbo is brought out by the Plan of 1820, as is the move to create as rectilineal a pattern as possible in the landscape.

Taken together, the two diagrams (re-drawn from the originals) show that the pattern of 1788 was completely supplanted by one large arable farm and a group of six smallholdings, Skelbo Street. The removal of the tenants who held leases in the former townships was an integral component of this change. Mackay stated that this transformation happened between 1810 and 1814, along with the establishment of twenty-four other large farms on the Estate of Sutherland (1889. 190–91).

The portrayal of Skelbo Street indicates the type of smallholding to which displaced tenants could move; Meredith's plan of 1810 for a series of such holdings on the Muirs of Achvandra [Fig. 11.9], extends the point. The hill ground lay immediately to the south of the Skelbo area; it is dominated by the line of nineteen numbered holdings strung out along the roadside. The work on Achvandra was one of the earlier of the resettlement schemes organized by the Estate of Sutherland, and was very much tied up with the early visit to Sutherland by William Young and Patrick Sellar in 1809–10. The sequence of events around that time has already been well documented by Adam; however, an interesting point arises from a letter dated 12 April 1811, written by William Young to the Marchioness of Stafford. In that letter, Young writes:

The Achvandra people are taking Lotts, indeed battling about the Moor, and I will in every parish lay off places of the same sort with which the people will I think be perfectly satisfied and ten times more comfortable, for such a mass of confusion as these Lands are in at present I never witnessed. (Adam 1972. II. 140)

The use of the word 'confusion' seems pertinent. It suggests that the patterns of land holding and land use which had existed prior to change were made orderly by the introduction of a system dominated by geometrical lines. That attitude, along with the wholesale effect of change on the mass of people in the area, was to be the focus for vitriolic criticism from a wide variety of sources, attracting the attention even of Karl Marx. The nub of the debate, almost irrespective of the origin of a particular point of view, was whether or not the mass of tenantry was, in the words of Young, 'more comfortable'.

## EFFECTS OF LAND REORGANIZATION ON THE PEOPLE

Various sources highlight the manner in which the mass of people in south-east Sutherland were affected by reorganization, notably the *Old Statistical Account* for the 1790s and the *New Statistical Account* for the 1830s.

According to Webster, the total population of Creich was 1,705 in 1755, and Dornoch had 2,780 inhabitants. By 1841, the totals were 2,582 for Creich and 2,714 for Dornoch. In the case of Creich there was an increase in the parish total at each Census; for Dornoch the pattern of totals was more variable, though within that variation perhaps the most important figure for our purposes was that of 1831: 3,380. In general terms, therefore, this was a period of steady overall growth in population

in the area; there was also a change in the density of population as a result of organization. If we estimate the area of settlement on the maps [Figs. 11.1; 11.2], we find that in Dornoch at both periods the total was some 67 sq. km (26 sq. ml). In Creich, however, the total of 120 sq. km (46 sq. ml) in 1755 was reduced to 96 sq. km (37 sq. ml) in 1841. In the context of population growth, this represents a marked increase in the density of population in the area as a whole.

The pattern of life depicted by the *Old Statistical Account* might broadly be summarised as one in which most people were subsistence smallholders, cultivating crops for domestic supply and rearing black cattle towards payment of rent. Crop supply was, according to the report for Dornoch, 'Not much more than is sufficient' in ordinary season. In Creich, it was noted that 'in tolerably good years' the crop supply was able to provide 'rather more victual than would be sufficient for supplying itself'. Both reports illustrate the variable nature of this food supply from smallholdings by inclusion of reference to famine. In the case of Dornoch, 1782 was cited as one in which 'a severe dearth was experienced here', whereas the summers of 1783 and 1784 were times of 'great distress' in Creich. Indeed, this pattern of occasional catastrophe seemed to strike about once a decade, with 1766, 1782 and 1793 being other disastrous seasons.

The question of food supply became paramount for most people at that time, other essentials such as shelter and clothing receiving scant attention in the Accounts, and fuel apparently being available. In Creich people were 'well supplied' with peat, and this seems to have been the case in Dornoch, although the Account asserts that the means of collection was 'peculiarly injurious to health'. If the 'improvements' were to assist people beyond the level of subsistence, however, as argued by the more fervent protagonists of change such as James Loch, then perhaps the question of food supply offers a measure for drawing judgement.

The *New Statistical Account* of Dornoch contains no direct reference to the adequacy of food supply, the reporter addressing himself to other matters from a standpoint which clearly supports the changes which occurred. This is also the case for Creich. There is a possible explanation for the omission, however, other than approval of change. Famines did occur in Sutherland as a whole in 1807-08 and 1816-17, but not in the 1820s. Both these Accounts were written in 1834, almost a generation after the last notable famine, and this may have led the reporters to feel that the spectre of famine had passed, no doubt as a result of reorganization. This was not to last, however, as famine returned to parts of the County in 1836-37, and Sutherland suffered in common with many areas during the cataclysm of potato blight in the second half of the 1840s. It seems fair, therefore, to suggest that the 'improvements' led only to a short term alleviation of the incidence of famine.

Another means of judging the effect of change is by looking at the migration of people out of Sutherland, particularly overseas emigration. In 1773, for example, before the main phase of reorganization, the brig 'Nancy' left Dornoch for New York. Estimates of the number of emigrants

on board vary from Meyer's 200 to Graham's 280, but it can be assumed that both totals included people from south-east Sutherland. After reorganization, the *New Statistical Account* for Dornoch noted that some 300 people had recently emigrated to 'British America'; the sharp drop in population in Dornoch between 1831 and 1841 is also suggestive of out-migration; and Duncan Ross, the General Assembly's teacher in Creich, gave evidence to the Poor Law Inquiry in 1843 that there was 'a great willingness in the people to emigrate...'. In addition to emigration overseas, there was also movement to destinations within Great Britain. Unfortunately data in terms of permanent movement is lacking, although the *Old Statistical Account* for Dornoch refers to seasonal movement to the south in search of work, and both the *New Statistical Account* and the *Minutes of Evidence to the Poor Law Inquiry* indicate a similar seasonal migration.

### PLUS ÇA CHANGE?

While such instances are by no means fully comprehensive, they serve as important indicators: the 'improvements' seem not to have led to a change in the pattern of people leaving the area; and there is nothing to suggest that 'improvement' stemmed the flow. On the contrary, many critics argue that the effect of change was to increase the rate of out-migration. There is simply insufficient reliable data for that assertion to be fully tested, however, with recent work by Bumstead (1982) illustrating the problems. What is relevant to the present review is that, as with famine, there was no lasting alteration to the patterns of migration which seemed to have held sway prior to reorganization.

The link which can be drawn between the two is apparent. The continued risk of famine might be viewed as a force pushing people from the area, while the perceived advantages of such possible destinations as the factories of central Scotland or the available lands of North America serve as forces of attraction. But explanation of the link extends beyond Hobsbawm's mobile labour force. If a wage economy had adequately accompanied reorganization, then food could have been bought in by people. However, other than short-term employment on road building projects (see Haldane 1973), there was a singular lack of lasting non-agricultural employment in south-east Sutherland throughout the period. Those who did not migrate as a result of being displaced from their old holdings, therefore, were thrown back to dependence on their new holdings for survival. In the context of a rising population, pressure on these holdings increased, and their relative ability to provide diminished as population densities thickened. This culminated in the potato famine of 1846 and its aftermath.

So for the mass of the population, the chief impact of reorganization was not primarily on a near-subsistence lifestyle which motivated some to migrate in search of a better future; it was more in the dislocation of settlement, resulting from evictions and re-allocation.

## CONCLUSION

What conclusions can be drawn from this review of the Clearances in south-east Sutherland? First, and importantly, much research hitherto for this period has focused on events in other parts of Sutherland. Strathnaver and the Strath of Kildonan have attracted much attention, probably reflecting Loch's publication and the notorious trial of Patrick Sellar, but the price of this emphasis has been a tendency to overlook the all-pervasive nature of these changes. The case of south-east Sutherland, an area in which there were a number of estates other than the Estate of Sutherland, serves as illustration. Second, the connection between the Clearances and sheep, while popular, is not entirely accurate. The case of the Skelbo area indicates that the impact of the creation of large arable farms was no less important. Perhaps a definition in terms of the replacement of open field farming by large scale commercial farming is appropriate. Third, the changes of which the Clearances were an integral part did not solve the basic human problem of periodic famine which bedevilled the area in the second half of the eighteenth century. The case of south-east Sutherland is but another example of the inability of economic change to take account of human circumstances.

### *Acknowledgement*

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Dunrobin Castle, Golspie

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