

The Making of Modern Britain: Skills Portfolio

Module Title: The Making of Modern Britain 1707 to 2000: An Introduction (2021/2)

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Summarise the historian's main argument(s).

One of the primary arguments that T. M. Devine puts forward is that land consolidation does not occur widely across Europe, and it actually happened in few places over a longer period of time. Though it does rapidly increase in speed during the last quarter of the 17th Century.¹

Devine contrasts the situation in Denmark with that of Scotland² – Denmark's legislative approach, "was rather designed to fashion a moderate consolidation and limit the possibilities of land fragmentation in a period of rising population."³ Devine describes this as 'benevolent' legislation² – with compensation for those disposed of land,³ and landlords confined to act within laws which acted as a constraints on unfettered capitalism.

Devine defines the major differences between the Lowland and Highland clearances. The Lowland clearances - a silent revolution; while the Highland clearances 'evoked bitter, if sporadic, protest and deep hostility'.⁶

Devine then defines the Lowlands as largely urbanised by European Standards in comparison to the Highlands during the mid-to-late 1600s.⁴ He highlights the increase of markets and scarcity of grain, necessitating that both Highlands and Lowlands would trade with large markets in the North of England. Added to this was the transition of land-rent payments from in-kind to 'silver rents' – considered a more 'business-like' approach.⁵ Devine then contrasts the Highland and Lowlands. Whilst in the Lowlands

¹ T. M. Devine, "Chapter 5: The Highland and Lowland Clearances," in *Clearance and Improvement : Land, Power and People in Scotland: 1700 - 1900* (Edinburgh, Scotland: John Donald Short Run Press, 2010), 95: "Equally while the basic organisational changes extended over a much longer time-scale than previously assumed, structural adjustment seems to have accelerated in the last quarter of the eighteenth century."² Ibid.: "Scotland also differed profoundly from Denmark, the other country where consolidation produced entirely new patterns of land-holding and population distribution."³ Ibid., 96.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.: "Those who suffered loss from the reforms were to be compensated by a leasehold of 4-6 acres."

⁶ Ibid., 97.

⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁵ Ibid.: "Another powerful influence was the growth of vigorous links with English markets even before 1707... By 1700 the main foundations of the well-known cattle trade of the eighteenth century were all in

individuals below the landed gentry were able to make financial gains, the Western Highlands appears to have suffered, primarily because its main form of farming was cattle, not arable. Subsistence farming continued for many below the gentry. The gentry made the most financial gains out of cattle farming. Peasants eked out a living and paid rent through raising of single cows for the landlord, much as had *always* been the way.⁶

This led to a land '*right*' (more moral than legal⁷) of tenancy and ownership by the Highland peasantry in return for recent services – both militarily and through tending the lands of the landlord, this was something both accepted and also "*implicitly and sometimes explicitly conceded*" to by landlords.¹¹

Skye appears to have seen 23% of the island population and 13% of the county of

Sutherland⁸ appears to have been sequestered, on the landlord's behalf, into the British Army.⁹

place: the marketing centres (or trysts) at Crieff and Falkirk; the droving trails; the business connections between Highland lairds and Lowland buyers... This development can be seen as the Highland parallel to the large-scale expansion of cattle and sheep farms in the Border country. In both the rural Lowlands and the western Highlands the new commercial pressures manifested themselves in conversion of rentals in kind to money rents (or as they were known in the north west 'silver rents'), in the new consumer tastes of the landed elite and in a more business-like attitude on some properties to estate management."

⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁷ Ibid., 105. ¹¹

Ibid., 104.

⁸ The largest town today in the former County of Sutherland is Dornoch, which coincidentally is also the last place a witch was burned in Scotland in 1722 see: Author W N Neill, "The Last Execution for Witchcraft in Scotland, 1722," *The Scottish Historical Review* 20, no. 79 (1923): 218–21.

Dornoch alongside Dingwall (Ross-Shire), Kirkwall (Orkney), Tain (also Ross-Shire) and Wick (Caithness) were at the time (1708-1918) part of the parliamentary constituency called the 'Northern Boroughs', Cromarty would be added in 1832; this constituency was sometimes known as the Wick Boroughs; today it is divided between the two parliamentary boroughs – the first - Ross, Cromarty & Skye; and the second is Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.

⁹ Devine, "Chapter 5: The Highland and Lowland Clearances," 104–5.

Within estate papers there is clear evidence that those recruited for military service during this time were promised and frequently obtained land. Devine claims, “[s]uch bargains were not a figment of the peasant imagination.”¹⁰

Devine aims to highlight the emotional impact of the Highland clearances on those of the subsistence class when he states:

‘What is beyond doubt, on the other hand, is that they inevitably perpetuated an emotional attachment to the occupation of land in many areas of the western Highlands.’¹⁵

Feelings of betrayal by those they protected and whom they looked to protection from - their former clan-lords and now land-lords - must have run deep. The impact of the Highland clearances would have been devastating not only in terms of economic impact, but emotionally on a people wedded to the land.

Devine highlights one objection to the regional difference in reaction - that of time. Lowland clearances occurred quicker than the Highland clearances. Rejecting this, he states the time difference is negligible – a span of 150 years and 100 years respectively is not such a huge difference, the extra 50 years of the Lowland clearances would not have created a more compliant population.¹¹ Lowlanders actually lost the most land but at a time of buoyancy in the local labour market allowed the transition much smoother than in the Highlands where clearances took part often during local recessions.¹² Some of the worst occurred shortly after the potato famine of the 1840s.¹³ An impoverished peasant population to whom the landlords

¹⁰ Ibid., 105.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 106.

¹³ Ibid., 107.

were required to provide sustenance during famines, landlords were keen to see the back of those who had become a financial burden.¹⁴

Highland tenancies were held on a yearly basis, at Whitsun or Martinmas they were vulnerable to eviction. Often it appeared they didn't pay much rent. Larger-scale farmers from the South, who could afford to pay more were more desirable to the landlords.¹⁵

Highland farming was relatively more simple than lowland farming –rearing rather than fattening.¹⁶ Pasturing in the highlands was 'land and capital intensive' rather than labour – meaning a surplus of workers in the Highlands and often a dearth of workers in the Lowlands.¹⁷

Subsistence farming, in the Highlands, required land. It was the only means of survival for many – as the non-farming workers market was relatively non-existent; meaning with the removal of their only means of survival, the Highland clearances were devastating for the vast majority of the people economically below the landlords.¹⁸

The Complex Farming in the Lowlands required finesse - capital, expertise, and commercial skills. Lowland farmers didn't '*evolve overnight*' they had to develop over time.¹⁹ A combined arable, cattle, and dairy farming framework requiring more workers the bigger the farms grew in the Lowlands.²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid., 112.

¹⁵ Ibid., 108–9.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 108.

¹⁸ Ibid., 109–12. Devine notes the differences between the highland and lowland work market – with specialisation (ploughmen) and industrial jobs (weavers) in the lowlands, there was not a surplus of workers, in the highlands there wasn't any real work.

¹⁹ Ibid., 108–9.

²⁰ Ibid., 108.

²⁶ Ibid.

As Devine explains, the landlords of the Lowlands “...*had to work with restraint within a more disciplined environment where the parameters were set by the different scale and technical requirements of mixed farming.*”²⁶

Lowland clearances were piecemeal, over 2-3 generations, and through consolidation of tenancies. In the Highlands they occurred quicker, more drastically, with removal of whole communities. When faster clearances did occur in the Lowlands, there were occasional rebellions such as the Leveller’s Revolt.²¹

²¹ Ibid., 107.

Identify and discuss the key types of primary evidence this historian has used to make their case. Is this evidence convincing or problematic?

Over the course of 19 pages Devine used 74 references. He makes reference to just 4 contemporaneous (and thus primary) sources:

1. D. Semple, *Renfrewshire Poll Tax Returns* (Glasgow, 1864);
2. Lord Macdonald Papers, GD221/38/1;
3. GD221/77 Minutes of the Commissioner for Lord Macdonald, 13 November – 13 December 1802;
4. Parliamentary Papers, *First and Second Reports from Select Committees on Emigration (Scotland)*, vi, 1841, Evidence of Rev. Norman Macleod, p. 68.

The rest of Devine's work appears to be based on historiography. There are several problems with some of the sources.

Sources 2 and 3 (as above) were from a landlord's perspective and contrasted the views and opinions of the peasant class, and is likely biased in some way.

Source 1 is about poll taxes which were unlikely to have been paid by everyone and are likely to be of limited use beyond knowing who paid poll tax.

Rev. Macleod's testimony to the select committee is likely to be one person's opinion and perspective, which may be helpful though not necessarily without bias. A minister at the time would be considered an educated member of the community and likely to be *biased* in favour of the landlord who was patron of his Church, and most likely the one who paid him.

The evidence is only referenced, there is little beyond historiographical citation in Devine's work – this is fine, as some certainly will contain extracts and perhaps small parts from primary sources, but Devine's references do not suggest this in any great way; he makes limited mention of primary sources – the landlord papers.

Identify the next three secondary items you would consult if you were to explore this topic further. These may be identified from library catalogue and other resource searches, or from the referencing of your chosen article/essay. They need not be on the module's recommended reading lists. List these items using the correct bibliographic conventions and explain why you have chosen them.

I would begin by looking for any historical surveys of the time period which include extracts of parish records (births, deaths and marriages); any bills of sales; and any diaries. I would prefer an approach that adheres to the old renaissance and reformation mentality, *Ad fontes* – back to the sources. However, secondary sources are a starting point. I would look at some that Devine makes reference to, I would begin with the following three books by Eric Richards, as they seem highly recommended:

Richards, Eric. *A History of the Highland Clearances*. Routledge, 2020.

Richards, Eric. *A History of the Highland Clearances: Emigration, Protest, Reasons*.
Routledge, 2020.

Richards, Eric. *A History of the Highland Clearances: Agrarian Transformation and the Evictions 1746-1886*. Routledge, 2020.

I would choose these as they appear to be academic, well recommended (online), and have been previously published – which means although the author is now dead, that his work is respected enough to have been re-published. Devine himself also references Richards on 3 occasions. I would not, however, just read three secondary sources, I would read much further to gather a wider historiographical perspective. I have chosen three by the same writer to begin with to seek to gain an understanding of one perspective before moving onto other secondary sources, before returning to the contemporaneous primary sources. The

secondary sources should guide me to the best of the primary. Devine's chapter did not do that.

Reflect on the skill you have found most challenging or rewarding from the first 4-5 sessions of the module.

I came to this reading expecting to completely reject Devine's points; having heard him present on television previously, I found him objectionable. I found reading this chapter enjoyable; and his argument well-constructed, aside from the sourcing issues (as previously mentioned, it is likely that he has relied on the secondary sources, and these are legitimate sources with well-founded arguments). Thus, I do not reject Devine's points, as they seem well argued and plausible in his presentation.

In session 4 and 5 we looked at evaluating primary sources; this was done through the shopping list receipt. Whilst I correctly surmised some of the information: family - dad (beer), children (Dairy Lea dunkers), busy (Pot Noodles), meat eaters (beef); and upper middle class (OCADO); I did not surmise Halloween, or 'sporty' – and I think this maybe because I often buy sweets to keep my own children a little quieter when we're rushing around, as well as Lucozade being a common drink for when someone is ill. What I found most challenging therefore was the inability to determine time of the year, or the purpose for some of the food items.

Regarding evaluating primary historical sources, it really shows that we can come up with many different interpretations, and I think sifting through those to find the correct one on balance of probability and other supporting evidence will be the biggest challenge I will personally face. I tend to become a little one-track minded and sometimes find it easier to unintentionally ignore evidence that doesn't fit the preconceived notions I have.

Bibliography

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