

**CROFTS AND
FARMS
IN THE HEBRIDES**

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Crofts and farms in the Hebrides by George Douglas Campbell

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GEORGE DOUGLAS CAMPBELL

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IN THE

HEBRIDES

BEING AN

ACCOUNT OF THE MANAGEMENT OF AN ISLAND
ESTATE FOR 130 YEARS

19

BY

THE DUKE OF ARGYLL



EDINBURGH

DAVID DOUGLAS, CASTLE STREET

1883

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Couch's Address to the Duke of Argyll

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TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
LORD NAPIER AND ETTRICK,
CHAIRMAN OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION
(HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS).

MY LORD,—I deem it my duty to communicate to your Lordship, as chairman of the Royal Commission, some authentic information in respect to my Estates of Tyree and the Ross of Mull, which have been lately visited by your Lordship and your colleagues.

Statement relates to Tyree and Mull estates.

From documents connected with the management of the estate, we have a tolerably complete account of the population, value, and condition of Tyree, from about the middle of the last century to the present date. It may be of interest to the Commission to know the leading facts.

Leases of all the principal farms on the Island for the usual term of nineteen years, or occasionally of twenty-two years, were granted at various dates between 1753 and 1762. These Leases of course expired at various corresponding dates between 1772 and 1784. It is towards the end of these Leases, and not at the commencement of them, that we first have really detailed information. They were granted by Archibald, third Duke of Argyll, who succeeded in 1743, but whose busy political life probably prevented him from paying close attention to agricultural affairs. But towards the close of these Leases the Argyll estates were in the hands

Leases of principal farms granted between 1753-1762.

Condition of Tyree
about 1770.

of my grandfather, Field-Marshal John, fifth Duke of Argyll, who succeeded in 1770, was the first President of the Highland and Agricultural Society, and who spent the latter part of his life almost entirely in agricultural pursuits, and especially in the improvement of the breeds of cattle, which had always been, and still are, one of the principal articles of Highland produce. So early, however, as the years 1767-68-69, in three separate papers, we have very full information, evidently collected with great care, on the statistics of the Island. The total population was then only 1676, of whom only 69 were employed in handicrafts other than agricultural. It is remarkable that there is only one column for "tenants and hinds," showing that many families were on the dividing-line between regular agricultural tenants and labourers, or cottars with small plots of land. The total number of both classes is only 236, and a separate class of cottagers is numbered at only 104 on the whole island. The agricultural tenants properly so called seem to have been 170. It is still more worthy of remark that in this return, although there is a careful estimate of all kinds of agricultural produce, there is no mention of the potato;—cattle, sheep, and horses,—rye, barley, and oats are the only products noted.

Many farms afterwards subdivided were then let to single tenants.

The Leases to which I have referred as granted between 1753 and 1762, the rental of 1767, and the reports of 1768-69, make two facts quite certain. The first is that many of the farms, which at a later period became most lamentably subdivided into very small crofts, were then let to single tenants, several of whom were Highland gentlemen non-resident on the Island. The second fact proved by these documents is

that even the farms which were then let to "sundry tenants" were so let to a comparatively small number, who had of course proportionately larger shares, and these shares, if reckoned at the present value, would represent small farms quite above the definition of System of crofts did not then exist crofts, as that definition has been adopted by the Commission. That is to say, these farms, or shares in one farm, would now represent a rent above the £30 line. Thus, for example, the two farms of *Gott* and *Hianish*, now representing a rental of £163, are specially mentioned in the report of 1769 as having only four persons in possession. These two farms, if now similarly divided, would therefore represent a much more substantial class of farms than the crofts now existing, although these have been much raised and improved within the last thirty years, by the operations which I shall subsequently explain to the Commission. The same observation applies to almost all the farms which were then let under lease, or from year to year, to small tenants.

This shows the delusion which is commonly entertained, that the system of very small crofts is an old one. The truth is that in Tyree at least, and in many other places, it is not nearly one century old. The same conclusion is even more apparent when we see in this rental of 1767 that almost all the farms which at a long subsequent date became overrun and cut up into miserably small possessions, were then not occupied by small tenants at all, but by individual lessees, or "tacksmen," as they were called in the Highlands. Among the farms then held in this way I may specify Ballephuil, Balemartine, and Barrapol—all of them farms which, thirty years ago, had become excessively over-

peopled and subdivided, and which even to this day contain some of the smallest crofts upon the island.

The opinion of the reporters of 1769 on the minimum size of farm which it would be wise to assign to one tenant or family is farther indicated by the recommendations they make that certain farms should be more properly divided. Thus they recommend that the three farms of Kenovar, Barrapol, and Balle-menoch, which had then seventeen tenants, should not in future be held by more than ten. It is curious that these farms are now again held by the same number of crofters which held them in 1769. But this condition of things is the result of the gradual process of re-consolidation which has been pursued during the last thirty years, the same farms having become at one time so subdivided that there were no less than twenty-nine tenants, instead of only ten as recommended by the reporters of 1769.

Small tenants were then destroying their possessions by cropping ground suited only for pasture.

The report of 1769 is farther interesting as containing conclusive evidence on the waste and misuse of the land which the small tenants were then making. Much of the soil of Tyree is almost pure shell sand, which yields a rich and beautiful pasture, full of clovers of several species; but it is unfit for cropping, and when broken up is very apt to become blowing sand—not only sterile in itself, but liable to overrun and render barren large areas of the surrounding land. By this process two considerable farms have actually been destroyed and lost—the whole area being now as sterile as a snow-drift. The report of 1769 shows that the very poor and very ignorant tenants and sub-tenants who were then in possession were cropping this light sandy land to an injurious and dangerous

degree, and recommended the erection of strong dividing dykes, with conditions prohibiting the practice.

Another signal example of the contrast between crofts or small farms as recommended by the skilled and intelligent reporters of 1769 and the miserable possessions which subsequently arose from the improvident habits of subdivision, is furnished by the example of the two farms of Balephuill and Balemartine. These two farms are mentioned as having been "formerly" held by one tenant, who was at that time the factor or chamberlain: and the reporters recommend that if they are to be divided the total number of divisions should not exceed ten. Yet on these two farms the reckless process of subdivision went on subsequently to such an extent that there were no less than sixty-nine crofters—all of the poorest class. At this moment there are still thirty, which is exactly three times the number which the reporters of 1769 could recommend as enough to live comfortably and profitably on the land.

Two farms then held by one tenant, and fit only for ten subdivisions, afterwards occupied by 69 crofters, and still by 30.

The next document of importance is dated seven years later—in 1776; and it is very instructive. It is a draft of "Articles, Conditions, and Regulations to be observed by the Tacksmen who have obtained leases of Farms on the Island of Tyree." It appears from this paper that in Tyree, as elsewhere in the Highlands, the small tenants were still holding and cultivating in what was called "runrig," and is still called in Ireland "rundale," that is to say, under a system of management which is absolutely incompatible with the very first germs of agricultural improvement. The possession of each tenant was divided into innumerable separate little plots of land—none of which

Conditions of leases in 1776.