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**JOHN STUART BLACKIE'S *ALTAVONA*:
A LATE VICTORIAN REACTION TO
THE HIGHLAND CLEARANCES**

Brooke McLaughlin Mitchell

John Stuart Blackie was a popular and widely-recognized figure in Victorian Scotland, the Professor of Greek at Edinburgh University who was as well known for his flamboyant personality as he was for his teaching. He was also unafraid to use his notoriety in the service of causes which he found to be important.¹ By the mid-1800's, Blackie's chief cause was the protection and cultivation of Highland culture, a cause which for the rest of his life led him to speak often and at length on the situation within the Scottish Highlands. Along with the perpetuation of Gaelic, Blackie worked to bring to broader public attention the current and recent-past events of the Highland Clearances. His efforts to do this led him to write multiple poems, speeches, public letters, lengthy monographs, and a novel on the subject. The last of his creative works, the novel *Altavona: Fact and Fiction from My Life in the Highlands* (1882) bears testament to the growing concern and preoccupation that Blackie felt for the Highlanders who had been affected by the Clearances. It shows a progressively deeper engagement with the subject, not only through its length but also through its play with traditional novel form.

¹ For example, Blackie strongly supported Sophia Jex-Black when she petitioned to enroll in Edinburgh to study medicine. Additionally, Blackie undertook the fundraising for a new Celtic Chair at Edinburgh to protect a language and culture he believed to be valuable and in danger. See, e.g., Stuart Wallace, *John Stuart Blackie: Scottish Scholar and Patriot* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006); Anne M. Stoddart, *John Stuart Blackie: A Biography* (Edinburgh, London: W. Blackwood, 1895); E. Kerr Borthwick, "Blackie, John Stuart (1809-1895)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

By the time that John Stuart Blackie began publishing work about them, in 1857, the Highland Clearances had been going on for more than half a century. The Clearances form a complex and emotionally charged period in Scottish history when crofters (tenant farmers) were often forcibly removed from their lands and either relocated to other parts of the estate on which they lived or were encouraged—sometimes with force—to emigrate.² Traditionally, the narrative of the Clearances has been one of horror, regardless of whether the account appeared in poetry, fiction, or first-hand or historical accounts contemporary to the period. This is largely due to the perpetuation in several twentieth-century novels of the stories of the Clearances on the Sutherland estate in the northwest of Scotland in the 1810's. Patrick Sellar, the factor of the estate who oversaw the Clearances, was unconscionably cruel, and the stories of hardship and death brought power and humanity to the plight of the people. While the Sutherland estate was not the only scene of malice, historians now understand that the ways in which landholders conducted the Clearances fell within a large spectrum from semi-humane to that which happened in Sutherland, and that significant economic and land-use issues strongly contributed to the crisis. Although some historians now mark the beginning of the Clearances in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, most agree that “The Clearances” began in large scale with the introduction of the Cheviot sheep into the Highland land system and continued in some form until the Crofters’ Act of 1886. This period saw three waves of motivating factors: 1) clearances as the result of the introduction of the Cheviot sheep, which required pasture that was inhabited on many estates by the crofters; 2) clearances as the result of the mid-century potato famine during which many landholders either encouraged or forced immigration to alleviate strain on resources; and 3) clearances as the result of deer stalking that became popular during the zenith of Highland tourism and sport from mid- to late-nineteenth century; crofters inhabited land that was desirable as preserves and were seen as potential poachers of the game.³

² While the Highland Clearances certainly played a significant role in nineteenth-century emigration from Scotland, not all emigration was a result of the Clearances.

³ For discussion on the Clearances, see Alexander MacKenzie, *History of the Highland Clearances* (Inverness: W.A. MacKenzie, 1883; Edinburgh: Mercat, 1994), John Prebble, *The Highland Clearances* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1963); Eric Richards, *A History of the Highland Clearance: Agrarian*

For many Victorians, the newly accessible Highlands represented the Romantic unknown; the novels and poems of Sir Walter Scott and the “recovered” Ossian poems of James MacPherson shaped many Victorian perceptions of the Highlands.⁴ The romanticizing of Scotland by late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novelists and poets gave way to the sentimental writing of the Kailyard School (Barrie, Crockett, MacLaren) as the predominant portrayers of Scottish life, and writing about the horrors of the Highland Clearances did not fit within their larger project. When late Victorian Scots authors did address the Clearances, it was usually in the form of brief, sentimental verse. True to the Kailyard ethos, these texts offered a sentimentalized view far short of a full representation. Other Scottish poets—James Thomson, John Davidson for the rest of his life—now seem strongest when addressing Victorian urban experience and simply ignore the experience of the Highlands. Yet, the mid- to late-nineteenth century was also a time of increased social consciousness and reform. In both Scotland and Ireland, Gladstonian liberalism took up the issue of landownership and tenants’ rights, creating a new political framework within which the Clearance narrative could be retold. There were other voices that reflected these alternate agendas, voices that attempted more searching and realistic literary treatment of these events. John Stuart Blackie, Professor of Greek at Edinburgh University, was one of these voices.

Blackie’s own relationship to the Highlands began in 1856 when he retreated to Braemar to write.⁵ He had visited the Highlands almost a decade earlier (during the potato famine), but from his accounts the trip does not seem to have been wholly pleasant, and he was not yet captivated.⁶ However, this brief time that he spent at Braemar resulted in the beginning of his public advocacy for the end of the abuse within the

Transformation and the Evictions 1746-1886 (London: Croom Helm, 1982); and Robert Dodgson, “The Clearances and the Transformation of the Scottish Countryside” in T.M. Devine and Jenny Wormald, eds., *The Oxford Handbook to Modern Scottish History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 130-158. For a succinct and balanced overview, see also Ewan Cameron, “Clearances of the Highlands and Islands” in Michael Lynch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 97-98.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of tourism during the period, see James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

⁵ Wallace, 265.

⁶ Wallace, 264-5.

Highlands and for his creative investment in the subject.⁷ He enjoyed walking as a way not only to exercise but to compose, and during these walks he “was brought face to face seriously for the first time with the sad story of Highland depopulation and desolation.”⁸ Blackie’s response to the devastation that he witnessed was to use his public persona to speak against the societal ills—and causes—of the Clearances. In 1856, he wrote a letter to the editor of *The Times* addressing deerstalking and depopulation; later that year he referenced them in an essay on Plato.⁹ Then, beginning in the early 1860’s, Gaelic language and culture became the focus of Blackie’s interest, and by extension he increased his public support of the Highlanders. He referenced the Clearances in texts, such as *Language and Literature of the Scottish Highlands* (1876), which did not directly focus on them, but he also treated them as the focus of at least two other works of non-fiction: *Gaelic Societies, Highland Depopulation and Land Law Reform: Inaugural Address to the Gaelic Society, Perth, October 7, 1880* and *The Scottish Highlanders and the Land Laws: An Historical-Economical Enquiry* (1885).¹⁰

While the scholarly and non-fiction works certainly display a strong and continuing engagement with his subject, three creative works also show Blackie’s increasing interest in the Clearances and their impact on contemporary life in Scotland, but, unlike the prose works, they allow Blackie to enter the world of the Highlander as more of an insider than just a concerned outsider. The first two collections, both poetic, by no means concentrate solely on the Clearances—in fact, poems that directly address the Clearances comprise only a very small part of their contents—but each text contains recognition of the processes of the Clearances and their effects on disenfranchised crofters who had neither the political nor economic power to defend themselves. The first book, *Lays and Legends of Ancient Greece with Other Poems* (1857), was published the year after Blackie’s previously referenced letter to the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Stuart Blackie, *Notes on a Life* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1910), 189.

⁹ Wallace, 265.

¹⁰ See John Stuart Blackie, *Language and Literature of the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1876); John Stuart Blackie, *Gaelic Societies, Highland Depopulation and Land Law Reform: Inaugural Address to the Gaelic Society, Perth, October 7, 1880* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1880); and John Stuart Blackie, *The Scottish Highlanders and the Land Laws: An Historical-Economical Enquiry* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885).

editor of *The Times*. Within it, a group of seven sonnets, labeled "Highland Sonnets," form a broad picture of the Highlands, including references to tourism and emigration, but several of the sonnets also directly address the Clearances. The sonnet form allows Blackie to engage briefly with a subject in which he has only recently become invested, but the form also requires adherence to tradition. Within this volume, Blackie also includes notes that further comment on these situations and conditions in the Highlands. The second book, *Lays of the Highlands and Islands* (1872), contains one long poem, "The Highlander's Lament." This later and much longer poem represents a more intensive investment in the subject of the Clearances, and the largely first-person point of view provides a more rigorous and less-structured encounter with his subject. The form of this poem also forecasts the form of the third and most sustained of Blackie's creative treatment of the Clearances, the lengthy, novel-like *Altavona: Fact and Fiction from My Life in the Highlands* (1882). All of these texts have the common theme of land use, especially concerning the Clearances, absentee landlords, and tourists. Their progression shows Blackie's increasing fascination with the Clearances that sought both a louder, more personal voice and less restrictive literary forms.

Blackie's third and longest work on the Clearances, the novel-length prose piece *Altavona: Fact and Fiction from My Life in the Highlands* coincides with the climax of the events it discusses, and successive editions reflect recent developments. In 1882, the year of the book's first edition, the Battle of the Braes marked the beginning of more widespread resistance to landlords' power. In this case, the crofters presented an organized opposition that included force and rent strikes. As a result, in 1883, the date of the third edition of Blackie's work, the Westminster Parliament established the Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, under the chairmanship of Lord Napier.¹¹ The commission led to the Crofters' Act in 1886 that established rights for crofters and guaranteed that they would have security on their land and fair rents. Politically and legally, the events of the previous century were becoming unacceptable.

This prose work defies generic classification, lying somewhere in the unknown land between philosophy, history, biography, and fiction, and it underscores Blackie's increasing need to speak about the situation in the

¹¹ This commission is commonly referred to as The Crofters' Commission or the Napier Commission.

Highlands in an unfettered manner. In the preface to the 1883 edition, Blackie tries to explain his work to the reader: “the whole of this book is fact, and only the framework is fiction; or, in other words, that what the interlocutors say is always true, or meant to be true, but the speakers themselves are wholly imaginary” (viii).¹²

The speakers to which he refers represent “types or classes” that are intended to be easily recognizable. Flora MacDonald, “an old Catholic and Highland type,” and her uncle, Roderick Gillebride MacDonald, “a Presbyterian type, Gaelic however in all points, not Lowland,” host two visitors at Altavona, a cottage by a loch in the Highlands. These visitors encompass other dominant types of Blackie’s time: the Reverend Christopher Church, A.M. of Christ Church, Oxford, Curate of Chitterby, is an “English Episcopo-Oxonian type,” while Herr Bücherblume is “European or Cosmopolitan type, for which, of course, a philosophic German seemed most proper” (viii).

These four characters—and their unique perspectives—engage in what Blackie calls his “ambulatory dialogue” in which each character has a chance to articulate and support the viewpoint he or she represents (vii). Through the discussion, characters (and by extension readers) are allowed to participate in conversation covering the complex and often difficult issues concerning the nineteenth-century Highlands: the teaching of the Gaelic language, Highland geography, religion, and music, and, of course, most important to this analysis, Highland landlords, deerstalking, and the Clearances. However, although each perspective is allowed some freedom of expression, Blackie does not intend to give each one the same credibility. Blackie explains that he hates one-sided views: “I strive always, when I most violently condemn, to appreciate my antagonist’s point of view” (vii-viii), although he half-humorously undercuts such fair mindedness by continuing, “and to state sympathetically any circumstances that may either palliate his guilt, or make a sort of reasonable apology for his blunder” (viii). Blackie’s choice of words, especially “guilt,” “apology,” and “blunder,” makes clear that while he may listen to other sides of an argument, he will continue to think views which dissent from his own are wrong. He values the reader “as a wise arbiter” who “is invited to strike a just balance between the two” (viii),¹³ but the reader is really left little choice but to accept Blackie’s points as

¹² John Stuart Blackie, *Altavona* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1883). Orig. published 1882

¹³ *Ibid.*

correct. In this case, Roderick Gillebride MacDonald becomes the voice of his author, and the connections between the character and the author are clear.

Blackie is careful to offer through MacDonald a speaker who has authority. Although not a Highlander, he is an "insider," as is evidenced by his reaction to an approaching stranger in which he surmises that the man might be "some confounded Cockney tourist" or some part of a group of "smart young sophists of the Parliament House, come to annoy me with their eternal prate about all things and a few others which they don't understand" and their desire to explain to his "unkempt Celtic intellect those profound principles of Scottish political economy which tend to organise selfishness for the public good, and to improve a country by sweeping it clean, as much as may be, from the disturbing element of human population" (5).

Another element of his authority lies in his position as someone who cares deeply about the plight of the Highlands but who is also able to engage in the issues in a rational and reasonable manner. MacDonald certainly becomes emotional about his subjects, but these are forceful moments for his character because he is not governed merely by emotion. Like Blackie, MacDonald holds great respect for the Queen.¹⁴ During a conversation with Church in which they discuss a Gaelic boatsong, MacDonald points out that "it was sung before the Queen." He goes on to say "Her Majesty was delighted with it. She is an excellent lady, the Queen. She loves the Highlands. God bless her!" (117). Later, when discussing a geographical site called "the Queen's view," Church declares that it is "In every respect worthy of the Queen. Pleasantly gracious, and yet grand . . . Dignity with sweetness, that is the composition of our Victoria." MacDonald then agrees with Church (255). While Church's response and statement are expected, it is MacDonald's that are really important and somewhat surprising given is ideological relationship to the Highlands.

Another link between Blackie and his creation MacDonald is an ability to think reasonably and critically about the differences between landlords. Blackie himself establishes this tone, even before the title page, in his dedication "To Sir Kenneth MacKenzie, Bart., of Gairloch, a Good Landlord, A True Highlander, and a Politician of Enlightened Views and

¹⁴ Blackie admired Victoria, and in 1875, several years before the composition of *Altavona*, he had an audience with her about his request for a donation to establish the Celtic Chair at Edinburgh: Wallace, *John Stuart Blackie*, 274.

Popular Sympathies, These Pages are, with Sincere Esteem and Grateful Acknowledgment, Dedicated by the Author.” This prefatory material provides a counter-balance to some of the more forceful or emotional statements that are made against landlords and their class by Blackie’s characters; it encourages readers to see *Altavona* as a text written from a measured view rather than a merely biased one.

Blackie’s dedication serves its purpose well since the first, and the majority of, words that MacDonald contributes address negative representatives of the class. For MacDonald (and by extension Blackie), specific characteristics define a poor landlord. Generally, absentee landlords fall into this class. They allow factors, “that class of persons whom the devil employs as his agents in doing as much harm as possible to the Highlands,” to carry out their plans for their estates (26). The landlords’ absence from their land prevents them from seeing the result of actions they endorse in the name of progress and keeps them ignorant of other, unsanctioned actions the factors take to further ends the lord has established without specifying how they should be accomplished. MacDonald notes that this problem is tied to greed and has become multi-generational. The parents and grandparents of the current lords had moved into lowland and even English cities to increase their wealth and social power when the Highland social systems were devalued after the Jacobite Uprising. As a result, the children of these elite “refugees” were raised as young English lords rather than future Highland chiefs. Their detachment from their own hereditary lands resulted in a disconnect from the ways of life that are followed on them, including the way of life of the non-property owners who share the same land. MacDonald’s condemnation of absentee landlords is strong, and his venom towards them is clear when he explains how careful these men are to pay their “debts of honour”: “Let money be got, and gambling debts be paid, though character go to the devil!” (383).

Blackie’s “ambulatory dialogue” allows him, through his characters, to raise and refute opposing views or incredulous responses that might also arise in his readers. For as much that MacDonald (and also Herr Bücherblume, the “philosophic German” who, of course, functions as a further extension of the author and his deep connection to German philosophy), is a friend to the Highlander, the Oxonian, the Reverend Christopher Church, represents the opposing view. He is incredulous of much of what MacDonald says, allowing MacDonald to delve deeper into his subject without just appearing to ramble on, oblivious to his audience.

In an effort to convince Church, MacDonald recounts the initial clearings of the Highlanders as violent events that removed people to make room for “the great sheep-faced Baal,” asserting that the result was that the “Highland soul . . . [was] sucked out of the Highlanders” (83,82). He later comes back to the point when he asks his guests if they took “a clear account of the green solitude of Glen Dessary” (271). Of course, he is forcing his guests to acknowledge their own ignorance of the history of the place in which they walk when he reveals that it “was the scene of one of the earliest and most lamentable of the infamous HIGHLAND CLEARANCES” (271).¹⁵ Because Bücherblume is both enlightened and informed, he readily engages on the subject, having read lectures on it, but Church is less enthusiastic and wants a more even-handed approach: “Poetry is all very well; and it is very cheap to deal in tears for an expatriated peasantry, and in indignation against cruel landlords; but I should like to know the plain sober truth” (271–272).

While it is easy to find Church's continued resistance frustrating, he again serves as a catalyst for further substantiation of the harms done to this place and her people, and he has highlighted one of the chief problems of any work on the Highland Clearances: the difficulty of finding reliable sources. In response to him, MacDonald proceeds to read very different accounts of the same events from Commissioner Loch and Donald MacLeod. MacLeod's impassioned work, full of eyewitness accounts, appeals to the moral and ethical sensibilities of his audience, while Loch's text appeals instead to economic and agricultural concerns. Church clearly privileges Loch's words and points to the exculpatory verdict at Patrick Sellar's trial, which had acquitted the factor of the Sutherland estates whom many people saw as a symbol for the atrocities of the Clearances. However, Church relies on the rank of Loch and the

¹⁵ Although Blackie openly held admiration for Queen Victoria and does not publicly criticize her, it is difficult to read this scene without calling to mind Victoria's own engagement with the Highlands that in many ways echoes that of MacDonald's guests, and they collectively serve as fitting representatives of popular conceptions about the nature of the Highlands and her people. Take, for instance, her response to the depopulated landscape of the Atholl estate, the scene of early and vicious clearances: “Here we are with only this Highlander behind us holding the ponies . . . not a house, not a creature near us, but the pretty Highland sheep, with their horns and black faces” (Arthur Helps, ed., *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands from 1848 to 1861* [Philadelphia: Whilt and Yost, 1868], 43). Victoria fails to acknowledge that the people are absent from this landscape because they had been forcibly and violently removed.

wisdom of “so impartial a body as a Scottish jury” (275). In a disturbing turn, Church delivers an outright condemnation of the Highlander who “clings to his cot as a limpet to a rock; and, if the law were to yield in every case to the pertinacity of his purpose and the tenacity of his hold, the real lord of the soil would become the lessee, and not the proprietor”(275–276).

MacDonald, however, is not easily dissuaded from his point, and he calls for what we will later learn is bound collection of MacLeod’s pamphlets on the subject; it is difficult to believe that the emphasis he places on describing the book’s “blood-red binding” is only a descriptor to help his servant locate it (276). Church rejects the stone mason’s authority to speak, but Bücherblume, aligning himself with MacDonald, asserts that MacLeod’s position in fact increases his authority rather than diminishes it. After reading multiple scenes of the horrors of the Clearances, MacDonald ends his discussion with a detailed, eight-point verdict, again showing himself to be a logical and informed thinker. This conversation gives way to a similar one on the sport of deerstalking, another point about which Church is skeptical, and MacDonald also ends it with an eight point verdict that includes a suggested course of action.

MacDonald also shows respect, and sometimes even admiration, for some landholders. Interwoven with his comments on the bad landlords, MacDonald recognizes good landlords, including one who is actually a land speculator. MacDonald explains that his friend is “a wise man, and has no special favour for creating monster estates, or peopling a country with deer instead of men”(103). He goes on to explain, “On the contrary, he will often buy up an outlying pendicle of some great lord’s estate, and, before he is done with it, cut it up into half a dozen separate estates, each forming a centre of a certain amount of local life and human society”(103). Bücherblume summarizes the significance to Highland history of this type of land improvement, saying, “Such a man will be looked upon by all large-hearted economists as the greatest benefactor of the Highlands” but that “your big lords, who, to gratify their own solitary pleasure and the family vanity, lock up the land in great stretches of unpeopled solitude, must be looked upon as the enemies of all social progress” (103).

The most impressive example of a good Highland landlord comes not from MacDonald, but as a personal experience of Bücherblume. As he was sightseeing, a gentleman, who turned out to be the lord of the estate, approached him. This good landlord not only lived on his estate, but he was out on it, showing that he was connected to the affairs of his land.

As he and Bücherblume tour his estate, the sight of new cottages allowed the lord to explain his own changed views concerning the crofter. When he first bought the estate, he had believed in the large-farm system, which valued clearing the people from the land. However, he saw the situation with new eyes after he offered his tenants money equal to seven years' rent to immigrate to America, yet not a single man chose to leave his home. Their attitude made him decide to keep all of his tenants on his land. He now realizes that he benefits from this decision as thoroughly as the people: he gets happiness from seeing his aid help them prosper, and he believes that economically he is better off than had he converted to the large-farm system.

Late in the text, Church accuses MacDonald of suggesting a solution to the situation of the Highlands that amounts to the punishment of the good: "bad boys get lollipops to keep them quiet, and the good boys are flogged because they don't kick" (384–385). However, MacDonald offers his plan as a "friend of the aristocracy: what I propose is for their benefit" (385). He believes that "If my landlaw reforms, or something like them, do not pass, we may wake up some morning and find ourselves sitting on the rim of a great social volcano" (386). Clearly, Church is beyond the reach of MacDonald's reasoned words, but Blackie believes that his readers will not suffer the same short-sighted conclusions. We understand the informed and rational thought wedded with his connection to the Highlands to create a powerful statement of the conditions of the Highlanders and what should be done about them. And, while we cannot attribute this particulate text to the Crofters' Act of 1886, we can certainly see it as part of the conversation and the work of a man who was committed to the good of the Highlands.

In *Notes of a Life*, Blackie sets himself apart from the dominant sentimentality (even though his poetry was at times criticized for being overly sentimental), saying, "I was quite aware all the same of the danger of mere sentiment in practical matters of this kind [of representing the Highland Clearances], so I employed myself during my leisure hours in making some practical appendix to the reading that I had previously gone through [on Roman land issues] . . . so I was in every way prepared for writing something more than sentimental soap-bubbles on this much bespoken theme . . ." ¹⁶ This application of his academic practice to his advocacy and creative work resulted in work that differs significantly

¹⁶ Blackie, *Notes*, 189–90.

from the dominant representations of the Highlands and the Highland Clearances of his time. Unlike the tourist writers like Queen Victoria herself, Blackie confronts the historical record of the traumatic events of the early Clearances, presenting an account of the events that explains their present state while maintaining the personal element of the events through the speakers in each of these three texts. He begins this experiment in the short form with the personal voice of the “Highland Sonnets” that gives way to the more sustained, personal voice of the Highlander in “The Highlander’s Lament.” Finally, Blackie finds a way truly to become the sustained speaker through his characters, primarily Roderick Gillebride MacDonald and secondarily through Herr Bücherblume, in *Altavona*. Through the fictionalized multi-voiced discussions in this last text, Blackie has been able to convey fully the conflicts of source and evidence, the argument and experience of the Clearances that he could not fully include in his earlier poetic treatments. The result is, if anything, more moving than his work in more strictly literary forms.

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