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***BLIADHNA NAN CAORACH*/THE YEAR OF THE SHEEP:  
READING HIGHLAND PROTEST IN THE 1790s**

*Alexander Dick*

The Battle of Culloden was long thought to mark the end of popular resistance in the Scottish Highlands. Thanks to a good deal of archival scholarship, we now know that protests against capitalist agriculture and colonial dispossession—in short, the Highland Clearances—continued fairly regularly through the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, culminating in the “Land Wars” of the 1880s and 90s. One of the most significant of these insurrections took place in Ross-shire in the summer of 1792 when about 200 Highland farmers drove as many as 10,000 cheviot and blackface sheep toward Inverness to protest their incursion onto Highland lands. *Bliadhna nan Caorach*, the Year of the Sheep, as it is now called, is widely recognized by historians of the Highland Clearances as a dispute about property rights. But for several observers *Bliadhna nan Caorach* was not only an extension of a legal disagreement or a conflict between classes or peoples, but also a protest over the threat of the sheep to the Highland ecology. It thus provides some insight into the significance of the Clearances to the history of colonial capitalism and its environmental effects.

By the end of the 1780s, cheviot and blackface sheep, first bred in the midlands, were thriving in Scotland as far as the Great Glen. Many communities were removed to crofting villages on the coasts or encouraged to emigrate to the colonies, often with the cooperation of Highland chiefs eager to reap the benefits of decreased liability and increased rents. In 1791, one of these new owners, Sir Hector Munro depopulated the Catholic parish of Kildermorie, in Strathrusdale near Alness, to make way for new tenants, the brothers Allan and Alexander Cameron, sheep farmers from Lochaber. The Strathrusdale Highlanders did not recognize the Camerons’ exclusive rights to the Kildermorie land; when the Highland cattle wandered there, the Camerons ‘impounded’ them and made the farmers pay a fine to get them back. These tensions simmered until May when all of the Strathrusdale cattle mysteriously ended up on the Camerons’ property and the local people refused to pay.

The Strathrusdalers went to the nearby Ardross estate and returned with about 50 peat-cutters lead by a local strong-man, Alexander “Big” Wallace. Wallace confronted Allan Cameron, who, armed with a shotgun and a foot-long dirk, threatened them with transportation if they did not disperse. Wallace grabbed Cameron’s gun and twisted it into a “woodie”—which became a family heirloom. Cameron tried to press charges, but proceedings fell apart before an investigation took place.

Encouraged by this result, at a wedding on July 27, the Strathrusdale farmers hatched a plan to collect all the sheep in the area and drive them south. The plan was announced at several churches around Sutherland and Easter Ross on the following Sunday, and by Tuesday 200 or more Highland farmers were droving thousands of lowland sheep toward Inverness. Local landlords’ observing the fracas sent frantic correspondence to Edinburgh and London. Henry Dundas ordered his friend Donald McLean to send three companies of the 42<sup>nd</sup> regiment, the Black Watch, then stationed in Inverness, to disperse the protest. No shots were fired, and the protest fell apart. The ringleaders were arrested and taken to Inverness Prison. They were tried in September: most, but not all, were acquitted. Two were sentenced to transportation but escaped and, with the help of friends and sympathizers, fled Scotland never to be seen again.

How are we to interpret these events? The standard view sees the coming of the sheep as a lamentable but inevitable consequence of a capitalist agriculture that Gaelic lairds had already embraced before and certainly after the Jacobite rebellion. Accordingly, the Year of Sheep tends to be viewed in an economic perspective. Even as the protest was unfolding, Scottish proprietors, who were also reading accounts of the Birmingham riots and Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Late Revolution in France* saw the Highlanders as a violent mob stirred up by general resentments against property and social order, while journalists from the *Edinburgh Courant* and *Caledonian Mercury* saw the protests as quasi-Revolutionary responses to the poverty and oppression brought by rapacious landlords. Early accounts also interpreted the events by way of Enlightenment four-stage theory, which saw Highlanders in a “primitive” state akin to that ascribed to American Indigenous peoples. Sir George Mackenzie of Coull in Aberdeenshire, who documented the 1792 protest in his 1810 *General View of Ross and Cromarty* referred to the protestors as a “mob” but to Highlanders in general as “natives” while William Mackenzie in an 1878 paper for the Gaelic Society of Inverness recalled a “Highland friend” saying that Highlanders were “natives” who regarded the coming of the sheep as “an innovation not to be tolerated.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sir George Stuart Mackenzie, *General View of the Agriculture of the Counties of Ross and Cromarty* (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1810), 126 and *passim*;

Highlanders were “natives” who regarded the coming of the sheep as “an innovation not to be tolerated.” Accounts of Highland obstinacy were commonplace in eighteenth-century agricultural literature, but the reference to “natives” signals wider prejudices. In contrast, the most prominent modern historian of the Year of the Sheep, Eric Richards, viewed the events in a Marxist or, more properly Thompsonite, lens as an example of burgeoning class conflict. In his digestion of the archive material, Richards states that 1792 protest “was an elaborate logistical exercise” that “required immense co-ordination.” As well as an end to land enclosures, Wallace and his men demanded reductions in rents and the cost of bread. This was not primitive obstinacy: it was an agricultural strike.<sup>2</sup>

Changing economic relations certainly played a primary role in motivating the sheep protests. But it is wrong, I think, to conclude that they reflect a mindset either completely outside or definitively inside the new capitalist regime. I see the Year of the Sheep as representing an indigenous Highland environmentalist stand, against what we now call slow violence, the Harvard environmentalist Rob Nixon’s term for the gradual, largely unseen, but hugely damaging effects that modern capitalist relations have wrought on natures and peoples throughout the world.<sup>3</sup> Nixon’s view is that slow violence has accrued steadily since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the wider European imperial project shifted from the mass emigration of its own people to the mass exploitation of natural resources, especially fossil fuels. But colonial capitalism in the eighteenth century was already responsible for the transformation of local resources into mobile commodities, including human beings, as illustrated by the Highland Clearances. Moreover, there are important cultural affinities between Scottish Highlanders and American Indigenous peoples.<sup>4</sup> These affinities include a shared, difficult history of displacement, made all the more

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William Mackenzie, “*Bliadhna nan Caorach—The Year of the Sheep*,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 7 (1877-78): 254-280 (255).

<sup>2</sup> For Richards’ full account, which covers many of the responses catalogued here, see *The Highland Clearances: People, Landlords, and Rural Turmoil* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2016), 112-133. Many of the early sources were compiled by William Mackenzie “*Bliadhna nan Caorach—The Year of the Sheep*,” *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 7 (1877-78): 254-80.

<sup>3</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Colin Calloway, *White People, Indians, and Highlanders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Tim Fulford, *Romantic Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture, 1756-1830*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Margaret Connell Szasz, *Scottish Highlanders and Native Americans: Indigenous Education in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

challenging by the fact that Indigenous communities were themselves displaced by Scottish, including Highland emigration. But they also include a sense of kinship—in Gaelic, *dùthchas*—within and between communities and, more to the point, with the natural environments and objects that surround them. It is this sense of kinship that, I think, motivated the 1792 sheep protests and marks their ecological as well as historical significance.

The fact that Big Wallace and the other Highland farmers did not destroy or steal the sheep but *drove* them south is itself an assertion of this ecological orientation. Droving became a regular feature of the Highland agricultural economy toward the end of the seventeenth century; by 1800 it was the primary mode of delivering cattle within a vibrant exchange network. Historians suggest that droving probably developed from cattle raiding and by the same people.<sup>5</sup> The Gaelic scholar John MacInnes collected several songs and stories of Highland men droving thousands of cattle for days at a time between the “Trysts” or cattle-markets from Muir of Ord, near Inverness to Falkirk on the banks of the Forth. Highland tartan, MacInnes notes, though it is usually considered to be battle dress, was also common among drovers, many of whom were exempted from the tartan bans following Culloden.<sup>6</sup> The cattle were exchanged on credit and the accounting was spontaneous and irregular. Accordingly, to lowland observers, the trysts were an affront to proper financial management. What is more, the droving roads—many of which were hundreds of years old—did not respect the newly establishing property lines around improving and enclosed Estates. To remove the lowland sheep in this way, then, means incorporating them into a web of agricultural practices that the “improved” economy replaced. Droving entailed a proximity between farmer and cattle—living with the animals for days or weeks at a time—that disgusted civilized landlords. Probably the most notable example of this attitude is Walter Scott’s story, “The Two Drovers,” published in *Chronicles of the Canongate*, and its antihero, Robin Oig, a descendant and clansman of the outlaw and cattle-stealer Rob Roy MacGregor, who murders an English farmer in a dispute over grazing space at a tryst near Carlisle and is tried and executed by a decidedly unsympathetic English judge.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as in many of his novels (including *Rob Roy*), Scott’s antipathy toward such

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<sup>5</sup> See esp. A. R. B. Haldane, *The Drove Roads of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> John MacInnes, “Highland Droving,” in *Duthchas nan Gailheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), 147-162.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Scott, “The Two Drovers” [1827], in Claire Lamont, ed., *Chronicles of the Canongate [Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels, 20]* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

apparent lawlessness is tempered by an awareness of the Highlanders' respect for the natural world. In this perspective, then, *Bliadhna nan Caorach* was an assertion of a certain kind of human-animal kinship that impelled droving against the primacy of exclusive ownership cherished by improving landlords.

It is this sense of kinship as *living with* rather than *owning* that comes through in the samples from the *Bliadhna nan Caorach* archive that I present here. The first is a poem by the Glengarry bard Ailean Dughallach (Allan MacDougall), otherwise known as “blind Allan,” entitled “Song to the Lowland Shepherds.”<sup>8</sup> Written sometime between 1784 and 1798, the poem is not a record of *Bliadhna nan Caorach per se*. Rather, it exemplifies how Gaelic ballad resists property agriculture by enacting communal modes of exchange between humans and non-humans alike. The poem opens by describing the “calamity” in the Highlands where

*Chan fhaicear ach caoraich is uain,  
Goill mun cuairt daibh air gach silos  
Tha gach fearann air dol fàs  
Na Gàilheil's an cean fo fhliodh.*

Only sheep and lambs are visible  
Lowlanders surrounding them on every slope  
All the lands have gone to waste,  
Chickweed has grown over Highlanders' heads (ll. 5-8).

As a consequence of this incursion, the sights and sounds of Highland sociability—farming, hunting, milking, children's play, markets, weddings—have been replaced by dull conversations about rent and filthy odours making sheep and farmers indistinguishable. In the face of this change, the poem rallies its listeners to drink the health of the MacKenzie, the Colonel of the Glengarry Regiment and MacDougall's own Chieftain, and Sir Alan Cameron of Erracht who “wishes us to survive without that bad lot crossing out path.” The poem concludes:

*Nan seasadh uaislean na rìoghachd  
Cho dileas ri càirdeas Ailein,  
Cha bhiodh an tuath air a sgaoileadh  
Gan cur gu aiodheachd a dh' aindeaoin.*

If all the nobles of the kingdom

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<sup>8</sup> The Gaelic title is “*Oran do na Ciobairibh Gallda*,” given in Donald Meek, ed., *Tuath Is Tighearna/ Tenants and Landlords: An Anthology of Gaelic Poetry of Social and Political Protest from the Clearances to the Land Agitation (1800-1890)* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1995), 47-53; 186-189. For a reading of the poem in its wider context, see Hugh Cheape, “A Song to the Lowland Shepherds: Popular Reaction to the Highland Clearances” *Scottish Economic and Social History* 15 (1995): 85-100.

Maintained kinship as faithfully as Allan,  
 The people would not be dispersed  
 And made to live on charity (ll. 125-128).

Scholars have noted the irony that MacKenzie was among many Glengarry chiefs to have sold his land to lowland sheep farmers and that Cameron of Erracht founded the 79<sup>th</sup> Highland Regiment, to which many local men contracted themselves on the promise of preserving their land rights. But the irony also marks the poet's recognition of the changing patterns of Highland life, even in respect to his own song. It does not celebrate kinship *as opposed to* property. Rather, the song itself registers, even embodies, as the 1792 sheep droves also do, the persistence of communal relations in the grip of that change.

The other two documents—both of which come from English-speaking observers—likewise reveal how the sheep protests were seen as expressive modes of ecological protest rather than mere belligerent obstruction. The first is by the poet and diarist Anne Grant, who at the time lived in Laggan, about 100 miles south of Kildermorie, but who travelled extensively in the Highlands during the 1790s. Her description of the “Ross-shire people... driven to desperation” has been cited to instantiate the sympathy that many in the region had for the protestors and against the Clearances.<sup>9</sup> Grant's account of *Bliadhna nan Caorach* reflects on important differences between protesting and rioting in a letter to her friend Mrs. Ourry, who was living in London and who appears to have thought, with many Highland landlords, that it was a violent uprising comparable to that by an urban mob. Grant replied:

Our tumults in the north appear aggravated and formidable to you in London, which is the region of political panics... Honest John Bull is very liable to the vapours; and the stocks “Turn at the touch of joy or woe / But turning, tremble too;” of which those, who live by feeling their pulse, take the advantage.<sup>10</sup>

The quotation is from “A Prayer for Indifference,” first published in the *Edinburgh Chronicle* in 1759 by Frances Greville, the wife of the Irish MP Fulke Greville, and an admired lady of fashion; a satire on the cult of sensibility, this was Greville's only significant published work. For Grant, the poem provides an apt reminder of the tendency of the capital to exaggerate threats to law and order for rhetorical and political purposes. At the same time, though, Grant is clear that she has little sympathy for rioting

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<sup>9</sup> On Grant's “ethnographic” observations of Highland culture, see Kenneth McNeil, *Scotland, Britain, Empire: Writing the Highlands, 1760-1860*. (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2007), 146-165.

<sup>10</sup> Anne MacIvor Grant, *Letters from the Mountains* (London: Longman, 1806), 235.

and, likely echoing Burke, regards “mobs in towns” as misguided expressions of power by those who do not adequately understand the responsibilities that comes with access to money and resources:

they are mere ebullitions of ignorance and wantonness in a people who were never so rich before, and to whom wealth and freedom are such novelties, that they know not the true use or bounds of either (Grant, *Letters*, 237).

In contrast, Grant explains, the Highland protesters represent a different kind of action:

The only cause of complaint in Scotland is the rage for sheep-farming. The families removed on that account, are often as numerous as our own. The poor people have neither language, money, nor education, to push their way any where [sic] else; they often possess feelings and principles, that might almost rescue human nature from the reproach which false philosophy and false refinement have brought upon it. Though the poor Ross-shire people were driven to desperation, they even then acted under a sense of rectitude, touched no property, and injured no creature (*ibid.*, 236-237).

The difference between rioting and protest comes down to difference of motivation. Rioting is motivated by the failure of false expectations. Money and democracy, Grant suggests, may provide freedoms but they do not necessarily reduce violence. Likewise, “false philosophy” and “refinement,” as Grant defines them, promise universal progress but also create states of tension when lived experience does not measure up. Real precarity, by contrast, such as that endured by the Highlanders, motivates a genuinely expressive protest against the forces that leave no option other than to repossess the space and time lost to dispossession. As Grant saw, the Highlanders’ protest is not reactionary but expressive of what she calls a moral “sense” of equilibrium between forms of life, land and animal, a sense that many scholars now see is foundational to the Gaelic concept of *dùthchas* or duty of care for the land or locality. The northern Highlanders did not destroy the sheep: they simply moved them to where they no longer disrupt the local ecology.

The next document is from *Letters on a Tour Through Various Parts of Scotland in 1792*, by John Lettice, an English clergyman and man of letters, friend of Samuel Johnson’s and tutor to William Beckford. He went to Scotland to correct the “prejudices” of earlier travel narratives like Johnson’s and Thomas Pennant’s and thus to justify Scotland’s “improvement ... rendering the *moral* as complete as the *civil union* betwixt the English and the Scots.”<sup>11</sup> For September 12, Lettice records his

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<sup>11</sup> John Lettice, *Letters on a Tour Through Various Parts of Scotland in the Year 1792* (London: T. Cadell, 1794), iv.

observations on the trial of ten of the so-called “Ross-shire rioters” (Lettice, 363). Packed into the crowded courtroom, Lettice listened for hours to testimony related to the Cameron brothers’ original charges of “riot, assault, and battery” against Big Wallace and his Strathrusdale neighbours. The prisoners were acquitted, though, because the Camerons had failed to provide adequate notice of their “entrance to these premises” and because whatever violence had been brought against them was given in “self-defence.” The next day, several other “cottage farmers” were tried for their “opposition to the sheep walks” and their having

assembled together in an armed body, and seized upon, and drove away the sheep of certain proprietors from the counties of Ross and Sutherland with an intention of forcing them out of these counties (*ibid.*, 365).

Lettice heard later that several of these accused were transported, others fined and imprisoned, and “others less culpable than the rest were dismissed.” Lettice then opines that while the protests “were violent and indefensible,” he nevertheless hopes “in the cause of humanity” that

neither these persons, nor any other in their predicament, have been turned adrift from their turf-built cottages, without knowing where to seek for bread for themselves and their families. It is not, indeed, credible, till proved by fact, that any thing in human shape should be so sordid and so savage, that, to become worth a few pounds more, (and what else but a halter?) he would reduce a being of his own species, happy but to earn a bare subsistence by the sweat of his brow, to such a piteous state of helpless and despair (*ibid.*, 366).

For Lettice, the “savagery of improvers” in clearing their tenants reverses the terms of the Romantic binary between culture and nature. Though the court was right to judge, in Lettice’s terms, from “the spirit as well from the letter of written laws,” the sheep protests criminal, still they also appear to mark a different order of justice, what we might venture to think of environmental.

Lettice’s and Grant’s sympathy for the Highlanders’ plight may well have been a by-product of Christian sensibility. But what’s being specifically documented in both accounts is not noble savagery, but an order of kinship in which broader concepts of “right” (to care, to housing, to sustenance) express themselves physically against the slow violence sanctioned in property law. This explains why, at the end of the chapter, Lettice appends a story of another spontaneous expression of collective precarity:

An unfavourable season had occasioned such a failure of the crop, that it had only produced seed for the next year’s sowing; and that, being damaged, failed to grow. The defalcation of two years provision of corn, fell so heavy upon some families of a particular district, that they had no other subsistence for twice twelve months, than the herbs, which they collected in the summer, and the seed of

wild mustard, common in their fields, which they ground, and made bread of, for their food in winter. A third year came with no better prospect;. Their case was now desperate. No kind hand interfered, and Nature no longer found nourishment from field herbs, and wild mustard. The poor wretches in a body, consisting of individuals of four families, abandoned their habitations, where famine and death awaited them, and descending, hand in hand, into the plain; lamented their miserable fate in loud and unavailing cries, till their tears were exhausted. They then dispersed in anguish and bitterness of heart, most of them to meet no more; each going where chance or hope of charity conducted their steps; some to serve and more to beg their bread; the wife separating from her husband, and the mother from her children (*ibid.*, 367-368).

There is nothing in this event, which took place a hundred years before *Bliadhna nan Caorach* and which Lettice adapted from *The Statistical Account*, to suggest that improvement caused crop failures.<sup>12</sup> Life in the Highlands is already beset by precarious conditions, Lettice implies, but these have been exacerbated by the unjust application of property laws. His juxtaposition of this story with his account of *Bliadhna nan Caorach* highlights the resilience manifest in the latter event against the tragedy in the former. The difference is not so much economic as ecological: the early assembly is not a protest against economic conditions as it as a collective acceptance of ecological catastrophe. In the more recent case, that same spirit of collective understanding—*dùthchas*—asserted itself against the slow violence of improvement capitalism.

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<sup>12</sup> Lettice footnotes that he took this story from “Sinclair’s *Statistical Account*,” where his reader will “learn, that the hamlet where these miserable people lived, was Clunes, in the parish of Kiltarity.” The account of Kiltarity, by Rev. John Fraser (vol. 13, 1794), had not been published when Lettice wrote; he took extracts, often copied *verbatim*, from the account of the adjoining parish of Kirkhill, where it is introduced thus: “I am informed by a man in this parish, that his father told him, that during the scarcity mentioned, four families inhabiting a place called Clunes, in Kiltarity parish on the borders of this parish, subsisted for two years...”: Rev. Alexander Fraser: “Parish of Kirkhill (County of Inverness),” in Sir John Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, IV (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1792), pt. XIV, 111-123 (121-122).