

# DOES NEO-FEUDAL SWAY HOLD PERTSHIRE BACK ?

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Records show that a century ago two-thirds of Perthshire - or a million acres - was in the hands of two Dukes, four Earls, a Baroness, half-a-dozen lesser nobles and twenty untitled but heavily landed gentry.

**I**N MANY parts of Scotland the rural population is falling fast. One particular Fabian Society is so concerned about this state of affairs that it recently set up a long-term research project to look into the whole question of depopulation and what steps might yet be taken to stem the tide. The Society's pamphlet\* examines today's land use and the effects that our present system of land tenure - "outdated, iniquitous and inefficient" - is having on the social and cultural life of the people. This would appear to be an extremely useful exercise and every county would do well to study its findings.

The writer of the pamphlet who is clearly far from happy about the way things have been going suggests that "the greater part of Perthshire's land surface is subject to Neo-feudal sway" - and this may well be so. It has prompted the Perthshire Fabians to investigate past and present ownership of the great estates.

Since Scotland was never conquered by the Normans it escaped the Domesday Survey of 1085 so it was not until the 15th Earl of Derby decided to bring out a Return of Owners of Lands and Heritages that some facts and figures were actually recorded. The Scottish return was published first in 1874, largely as a result of the Radical agitation of the period and the claim that the land belonged to all. If God gave the land to the people, they argued, why hadn't they got it?

As an early example of statistics, the return gave some very distorted impressions, no doubt on account of its absurd terms of reference. But it aroused tremendous interest and excitement and through the maze of figures it clearly showed that 106 people owned nearly half of Scotland. In Perthshire alone some thirty-three landowners held 10,000 acres or more - some of them much more.

The family names of the great Perthshire families - the Campbells, the Murrays, the Drummonds, the Robertsons and the Stewarts - are still with us. Their ancestors were chieftains originally having rights only to part of the produce of the soil. Through time these

privileges hardened into full land ownership - which was certainly not the original concept of the Clan.

More recently a great deal of land has passed into public ownership. The Forestry Commission, for example, now the largest landowner in Perthshire, controls about 160,000 acres of state forest. The second largest public landowner is the Glasgow Corporation Water Works, now under Lower Clyde Water Board, who acquired 19,000 acres to the watershed. This land is mainly under sheep and trees but much of it is let off for deer-stalking.

Among the great commercial interests are three companies - Wills (tobacco), Forteviot (whiskey) and Rootes (cars) - reckoned to be among Perthshire's top landlords.

Like so many other counties it suffers from unbalanced development, over-development in the city centres, under-development in the bracken-choked glens. As the second largest county of Scotland, more than half of its 1,600,000 acres are rough or hill land under Blackface sheep and contribute little to the country's economy. One-fifth is good lowland used for agriculture while another eighth is forest or urban development. But there is plenty of wasteland. Bracken smothers nearly every glen, particularly the rich soils on the hill slopes, and a few pioneer farmers have found it rewarding to reclaim bracken country.

Hill farms are badly overgrazed and keep going only with the aid of big Government subsidies. Since hill cattle are also subsidised, forestry is the only real growth point in primary land use. Government grants for planting and maintenance have also helped private landlords to make forestry very profitable, though since the establishment of the Forestry Commission in 1919, most forest land is now state-owned. At one time the Commission acquired vast stretches of land including much that was not really suitable for forestry. Of their 160,000 acres, half has been planted, about ten per cent is programmed, the rest is too steep, too exposed or infertile. The policy now is to sell these lands back into private ownership.

During the Victorian and Edwardian eras countless small sheep farms were cleared to give deer free range. This was the heyday of sporting activities on the great estates. With the rapid increase in deer-stalking between 1883 and 1908, nearly 50,000 farm servants -

\**The Acreocracy of Perthshire—Who Owns Our Land?* published by The Perth and Kinross Fabian Society and available from Mrs. M. McEwen, Rowantree, Rosemount, By Blairgowrie, Perthshire. Price 10p.

over a third of the total labour force - vanished from Perthshire, many no doubt to find a new life overseas. Since those days, according to one proprietor of a deer forest, thousands of acres under deer have produced "only a small quantity of venison for which



there was no demand." Today income from sporting activities is once again on the up-surge with sportsmen flying in from as far afield as Tokyo and New York.

In some areas things are really moving. One is obliged to recognise such enterprises as the Cairngorms Sports Centre at Aviemore, centred upon skiing. Although critics have complained that roads, ski-lifts and tows have already denuded some 800 acres of vegetation and created erosion dangers, there is obviously great scope for more resort development. Timber production might well have to fall into second place.

In a Danish forest near Copenhagen, for example, one unique enterprise provides deer park, hotels, restaurants, race-course, old peoples' home and amusement park, the whole complex yielding some £180,000 a year, as against £40,000 from local timber. Perthshire planners will be thinking hard about this kind of development, and it is the sort of enterprise that brings people back into an area and re-establishes community spirit.

The death of a community is closely connected with the local education system which throughout Perthshire prepares young people to earn their living in cities; it is no wonder that country children grow up believing that the way to get on is to get out. Few stay behind to live and work in the place where they were born and those who do can only hope to become ill-paid shepherds, forestry workers or estate men. There is precious little chance of advancement, further education is rare and it is almost impossible to buy a plot of land.

What then can be done to put new life into the glens, re-invigorate the highlands and use the countryside of Perthshire to its fullest potential?, asks the writer of this pamphlet. For, he says, the big landowners have had control for too long and they have failed to keep the land and the people who live by it from decay.

Our Fabian friend who would seem to have it in for the landowning classes and their alien outlook - "the Guards, the Inner Temple, the Stock Exchange . . . and their clubs as listed in *Who's Who*" - and he

points out that as a class these people have moved in and seriously tampered with the natural environment of country people. "For the majority," he says, "their real interests lie elsewhere. Meanwhile the land wastes, rural communities continue to contract, land workers are little else but pawns in a power game."

Those making the moves govern vast areas and reduce them to a framework for exclusive sporting activities, a convenient source of tax relief and/or prestige symbols. Dimly, he perceives the answer lies in "some form of nationalisation of the land."

So far, so good. But let Perth and Kinross Fabians study the effects of land nationalisation as it has been tried out and see it for what it is - an interesting failure. Many countries have tried to stop the abuse of private ownership in land. The Communist countries did it by executing the landowners. (It has been said that today, on a mechanised co-operative, morale is so low that it would take twenty peasants to do the work of one good Scot.) Certainly the lag in farm production is one of Russia's biggest headaches. Other countries such as Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Mexico, Italy and Free China are expropriating the big landowners peacefully (with or without compensation) and redistributing the land to small owners who are expected to farm it themselves.

A few countries are freezing land prices to control the price of land. France has been doing this for fifty years though this method discourages maintenance and inhibits improvement.

The most sensible countries use tax pressure to revitalise both the land and the people. Until recently Denmark imposed a three per cent tax on increased land values. It taxed land at steeper rates than it taxed improvements. Pakistan imposes a three per cent tax on all unused land in order to force it into productive use. Jamaica recently shifted some local taxes off improvements on to land, in the belief that this will bring more land into production and stimulate development.

The best examples of how tax pressure works can be found in Australia and New Zealand. Here, where a tax on land values is in operation, one can observe that a constant pressure is exerted on owners of land to develop its productive capacity to the full while development does not attract taxation on improvements. Thus, if a landowner is reluctant to develop, he is encouraged to sell out to others who will. The



Campbells and other Perthshire clans will surely see this arrangement not only as canny and profitable to themselves, but beneficial to the whole community.