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Editorial

Boundaries can be tricky and troublesom - as some of our politicians will no doubt have found, to their cost, by June 9th.

We have sometimes been asked to indicate the area covered by the Society; i.e. to define the boundaries of the Highlands and Islands. It is only when you sit down to think about it, in response to such a request, that you realise just how difficult, if not impossible, such a definition is.

Ask a dozen people to delineate the Highlands and Islands, and you will get at least 12 different answers.

This large area does not fit neatly into one of the new local government units, so local authority boundaries are not much help. Since they split up many of the former counties, they can, in any case, be more of a hindrance in terms of historical research.

"Everything North of the Highland Line" is a glib definition sometimes quoted, but this imaginary line stretching from somewhere near Glasgow to somewhere near Aberdeen has no historical or political basis so far as I know.

Let's try a grouping of the former counties. But which ones ? The Crofters Commission define their area this way, but they exclude Nairn which is now part of the new "Highland Region".

The area covered by the Highlands and Islands Development Board is probably the best up-to-date definition, but even this will not do exactly - inclusion of the isles of Arran and Bute, in the Firth of Clyde, is a bit ambitious for our purposes.

There are other modern definitions, of course. The Highlands and Islands constituency in the European Parliament, for example, which not only embraces Morayshire, but goes as far East as Banffshire. The only thing they all have in common is that they do not coincide with each other.

Then there are cultural boundaries. "The Islands" include Orkney & Shetland, but they are not Highland in the Gaelic sense of the "Gaidhealtachd". Neither is the mainland county of Caithness, some would argue, although it is also part of "Highland Region". Argyllshire is certainly part of the "Gaidhealtachd", but most of it now falls within "Strathclyde Region" with Glasgow as its capital. Similar problems arise on the Highland fringes in Perthshire (now part of Tayside Region) and Morayshire (part of Grampian Region), and we don't want to be accused of poaching on the territory of the Glasgow, Tay Valley & Aberdeen family history societies.

If you now feel thoroughly confused, you will at least understand one thing - why we have not tried to define "our patch".

A Pushed-Around People:

THE CLEARANCES, CROFTING AND POPULATION MOVEMENT IN THE HIGHLANDS.

This was the title of a talk given to the Society in February by Mr James Hunter, a historian and writer who has specialised in the history of Scotland's crofting community.

He said the story of what happened to the Highland population in the late 18th, throughout the 19th and into the 20th century was long and complicated, and had still not reached a definitive conclusion. Its origins lay in the early 18th century when the UK was set on becoming the great industrial and imperial power it later became.

Within the frontiers of this highly advanced and industrialised nation existed a society which was still organised on tribal lines - in the Highlands and Islands, kinship, chiefship and clanship were everything. Commerce and money did not count for a great deal.

Strains were developing, however. Highland chieftains were already spending increasing amounts of time in Edinburgh, London or Paris, where they mingled with the southern, monied aristocracy. "Keeping up with the Joneses" involved fairly large amounts of cash, and this posed them a problem. In the south, a man's status and influence depended upon his wealth, but in the Highlands a chieftain's power depended not on money but on the number of armed men he could command. This dilema was resolved very suddenly and effectively by the battle of Culloden and its aftermath.

The authorities became determined to destroy not just the Jacobites, but the society from which they came (this goes some way to explain the otherwise inexplicable brutality of the army of occupation after Culloden).

The underlying aim was to make the Highlanders like the Lowland Scots, and in this process the authorities in the south found valuable allies in the Highland chieftains themselves. Already attracted to the southern way of life, they needed no great encouragement to be transformed into landlords on the southern model.

This began to happen from the 1750s onwards, bringing massive changes in its wake. Rents were raised, and chieftains began exporting black cattle and, latterly, wool and kelp (a crude industrial alkali made from seaweed). Kelp production was labour-intensive, but a labour force was readily to hand.

At this point, the last thing a Highland landlord wanted was to get rid of his tenants to Canada or America - he wanted to keep as many on the estate as possible, but to move them from the inland areas suitable for sheep farming, and settle them on the coast where they would be employed in the kelp industry and, to a lesser extent, the herring industry. This accounted for the first major changes in population structure, between about 1790 and 1820.

To make sure people would work in the kelp industry, landlords divided the land into such small units that no family could make an adequate living from the land alone.

Up to this point, the land had been held in common. Under the chief were the tacksmen (or gentlemen) and below them the principal tenants, followed by sub-tenants, and sub-tenants of sub-tenants. But now the land was divided into tiny plots (three or four acres, or even less), and each family was given a separate plot to themselves. This plot, or lot, became the modern croft - so crofting, as such, is quite a recent invention, much more so than the factory or steam engine.

Kelp production was a profitable business, and so eager were the landlords to retain their labour force that they were instrumental in getting through Parliament the Passenger Vessels Act, which raised the cost of passages to America.

About 1820, however, the price of kelp collapsed entirely, the crofting system lost the whole reason for its existence, and west coast landlords found themselves in extreme financial difficulty. In the 1830s and 40s they began to go bankrupt, and eventually the whole of the Western Isles passed out of the hands of their traditional island owners, and into the hands of people from the south.

For the crofters, whose livlihoods also depended on this industry, the catastrophe was much worse. They not only lost income, they were forced back on the resources of crofts which had been made deliberately too small. Only one crop could come anywhere near satisfying the needs of the average family - the potato. Apart from a little meal, and fish from time to time, the people lived almost entirely on them - 90% of their total food intake consisted of mashed potato.

In 1846, potato blight arrived, and the result was famine. The Autumn and Winter of 1846/47 produced starvation and destitution throughout the Highlands and Islands. Many people died of hunger and disease, but most were kept alive through Government famine relief (along the lines of that organised in Ireland the previous year), and through the efforts of a large famine relief fund set up in the south.

In charge of the Government initiative was the inauspiciously-named Sir Edward Pine Coffin, a kindly and able man, who was infuriated by the attitude of the landlords towards the problem.

They had deduced that the whole system was now bankrupt, that the Highlands were over-populated and the only solution was to get rid of as many people as possible. This signalled a new wave of clearances along the west coast and in the Hebrides which were still fairly heavily populated, although the entire population of the island of Rum had been shipped off to Cape Breton Island as early as 1827. These clearances tended to be far more brutal than those which went before, particularly in the Uists and Barra, where reluctant emigrants were chased by dogs, tied up and bundled off to Nova Scotia or Australia.

If the land made available by these clearances had been redistributed among the people who were left, there could have been some justification for it, but every township that was cleared was added to a sheep farm. By the time these clearances had petered out in the 1850s, the pattern of settlement had acquired much the same shape as it has now, but the amount of land available to any particular family was always contracting, and the population was even more congested than before it all began.

A lot of romantic rubbish is talked about the "black house". The typical crofter's dwelling of 100 years ago had a leaking roof and walls, a mud floor, no windows or chimney, and only one door through which both animals and humans entered. Disease was rife. Typhoid and cholera continued far longer in the Highlands than elsewhere, and TB remained a scourge well into the present century. It was an appalling dwelling from a public health point of view, not because the people were too stupid to know better, but because the tenurial system ensured no improvements were made. Improvements resulted in rents going up, or even in eviction, and the lack of any security of tenure became one of the driving forces behind the great crofting rebellion of the 1880s.