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Ireland, Radicalism and the Scottish Highlands, c. 1870-1912

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Ireland, Radicalism and the Scottish Highlands, c. 1870-1912, by Andrew G. Newby; pp. viii + 224. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, £45.00, \$75.00.

In September 1881, a Highland newspaper claimed that an Irish priest, Father O'Kelly, was profiting from a Hebrides land agitation to convert local crofters to Catholicism. Although a fabrication, the episode captures some of the fear and paranoia surrounding the land agitation in the Scottish Highlands during the 1880s, especially the suspicion of a nefarious Irish connection. Opponents of Scottish land reform often framed the crofter agitation, which opposed evictions and demanded rent reductions, as essentially linked with the lawlessness of Irish activists and agitators. As Andrew Newby explores in this study, Irish land and nationalist politics were vital to spur, if not necessarily to maintain, the Scottish agitation.

Irish involvement in the 1880s Highlands land agitation followed from what could be seen as either the success or the failure of the Irish Land War of 1879-82. While W. E. Gladstone's 1881 Irish Land Act essentially quelled the agitation and

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provided what most small farmers wanted—security in their lands at reduced rents—it fell far short of the demands, such as land nationalisation, that more advanced activists like Michael Davitt demanded. While mainstream Irish nationalists followed the leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell away from the land question to the national question of Irish home rule, Davitt, British radicals, and the American economist and social reformer Henry George turned to Scotland for the realisation of a more progressive land reform and social justice movement. Scotland, not yet distracted by home rule politics, appeared to present an untainted political environment for land agitation and social reform.

While the Irish connection to the Scottish agitation is undeniable, Newby contends it has been overemphasized and that the Scottish campaign relied on local leaders such as John Ferguson and Angus Sutherland to arouse and sustain the crofter agitation. These urban radicals were well aware of the danger posed by an overly Hibernian agitation and sought to downplay direct Irish intervention, instead emphasizing the native nature of the campaign. Along with re-assessing the figures involved, Newby convincingly demonstrates that studies of the agitation's geography have been skewed. Urban areas such as Glasgow, where migrant Irish and Highlanders formed bodies such as the Glasgow Land League, were as important to the agitation as Skye, where the evictions, protests, and press coverage took place.

Scottish crofters, however, proved no more radical than Irish small farmers, and, as in Ireland, the agitation was largely quieted by palliative legislation. Newby's discussion of the government's policy on the Highland land question and its response to the agitation lacks depth and perspective. The 1886 Crofters' Act was thoroughly along the lines of Gladstone's Irish land legislation of 1881, and in both the Irish and Scottish cases, the aspirations of activists were deflated by the pragmatic conservatism of small farmers and crofters who were content with lower rents and security of land occupation. Land nationalisation "did not capture the imagination of the crofters themselves in the way that it fascinated their urban advocates" (6).

As the crofter agitation subsided, Irish home rule superseded land reform as the major issue in the Highlands after 1886, and here Newby emphasizes the importance of the Irish connection and the Highland press. Though they highlighted the Irish connection, newspapers hostile to the Scottish land agitation failed to expose the divisions within Irish nationalism between the majority bloc behind Parnell and Home Rule, and the more radical groups focused on land and social reform. As such, Irish support for the crofter agitation, which helped win land reform, also helped create crofter support for home rule and spurred the formation of a coterie of "Crofter MPs" or a "Scotch-Parnellite party" at Westminster. *Ireland, Radicalism and the Scottish Highlands* therefore suggests that it was not only in Ireland that a campaign for land reform could develop into a larger national or constitutional issue. Questions of land restoration and more equitable landlord and tenant relations could be widely unifying causes adopted by Highland crofters and urban activists.

Newby relies heavily on a variety of Highland newspapers. While this presents an opportunity to consider the views of a regional press, it also raises two concerns. One is that a greater discussion of the nature of the Highland or Scottish press more generally—authorship, audience, circulation—would be of interest. Second, Newby's extensive use of newspaper quotations, although an important record of speeches and

public interpretation of the Scottish agitation, could be reduced. The book is laden with lengthy newspaper extracts that in many instances could more effectively be paraphrased, particularly where there is nothing notable about the language used.

Ireland, Radicalism and the Scottish Highlands is a welcome addition to the study of land politics, British radicalism, and Scottish-Irish relations in the later Victorian period. Newby has elucidated many of the links between Scottish and Irish social reformers during the 1880s and, very importantly, illustrated the importance of land reform as a highly charged political issue throughout the United Kingdom.

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