**Highland Depopulation**

Highland Depopulation - 'Clearances'.  
  
Points to note.  
  
1. The depopulation period can be defined as from 1700 to 1970 and possibly earlier and later.  Different historians define it in different time bands.  
  
2. In some of these periods the population who left did so voluntarily and were not expelled or evicted or encouraged to leave, e.g. in 20th C or with tacksmen in 18th C or after reports from relatives in 7 Years' War.  (There is,  however, the caveat here that if conditions in the Highlands had been really good they would not have wanted to go.)  
  
3. Emigrating has been a part of Scotland's history for centuries and settlements all over northern Europe especially bear witness to this.  
  
4. Scotland has been a very poor country with very limited resources to support its peoples for much of its history.  
  
5. A study of the census returns from 1801 on will show that in most Highland counties the increase in population ends and the drop begins in the mid-to-late 19th C, and the really big drop comes in 20th C,  though the period which is usually claimed for the 'Clearances' is usually the early 19th C.  There is a burst of high emigration in the 1850s in the aftermath of the Scottish Potato Famine.  Note that much population rise or stability in counties was at the same time as many were emigrating - to the Lowlands, abroad etc.  The ability of the Highlands to maintain their population from their own resources would have been impossible if such people had stayed.  
  
6. The blame for violent Clearances is often wrongly allocated.  There was violence but the Sutherlands (see below) were not the villains they are claimed to be and others e.g. Chisholm of Strathglass, Glengarry and Clanranald treated their tenants much worse.  Other villains were shipping concerns which misled the emigrants with their advertisements, which overloaded ships, which sold the emigrants overpriced rations for the Atlantic crossing, etc.  Yet other clan leaders, e.g. Macleod of Bernera, raided the land of other clans to kidnap the population and sell them as indentured servants in the colonies.  
  
7. It is claimed by some historians that large-scale sheep-farming caused clearance while others say that the proportion of land used for such farming which was previously in use is small.  It is said that large-scale sheep farming was only at most on 20% of the Highlands, and was not in the Western Isles.  
  
8. The deer forests are mainly in the period after the 1840s, and are often on land where sheep farming has become uneconomic.  
  
9. The emotional attachment of the Highlanders to their land was completely unrecognised and so underestimated.  
  
10. The landlords were mainly in the right in legal terms when it came to eviction.  The strong ties binding the Highlanders to what they saw as their lands had no legal basis.  
  
11. The industries and agricultural means used to try to improve prospects in the Highlands largely failed for a variety of reasons; kelp - rose and declined due to wartime conditions and their removal, and to the new chemical industry of the Lowlands, it also encouraged high populations with no other means of support, and some landlords milked the profits for their own use;  iron industry failed to take root except in Bonawe;  linen industry only was small scale and unable to compete with main linen areas;  potato - allowed many more to remain on the land than it could otherwise support, and with the Blight in 1840s the population had little other source of food;  herring - the shoals moved from the west coast.  Hopes that the transport developments would stop or reverse the emigration proved groundless;  indeed they ended up helping emigration.  
  
12. Some of the ruins found in the high hills and claimed as 'Clearances' were in fact the ruins of  shielings, i.e. used with the summer grazings only.  Admittedly these are long since abandoned but are not indicative of houses from which people were driven.  
  
13. There is a tendency among those who promote the horrors of the Clearances to imply that there was a Golden Age before this which was swept away by the evictions.  There is ample evidence to show that conditions in the Highlands, and elsewhere, for the ordinary people were far  from Utopian in the earlier period.  
  
14. Some landlords, recognising the problem of over-population, rather than forcing emigration, enforced late marriage to cut down on the population.  
  
15. The Sutherlands spent huge sums of money on their estates which comprised between two-thirds and four-fifths of the county.  In 1803 - 1816 they increased the rental value from £5000 to £20,000 but had spent more than £130,000 than had received and gap between income and expenditure remained at c.£3000 p.a. for years afterwards.  They built roads and harbours and established towns like Helmsdale with industries, the coal industry in Brora, and others.  The population figures of those removed from their homes can show that e.g.in 1818-19 of 2882, 1974 were settled on other parts of the estate, 195 are in neighbouring estates, 604 in neighbouring counties, 61 only emigrate and 48 we have no knowledge of. The Sutherlands took the best advice they could get and spent money from the Duke's English estates to improve the Sutherland ones.  
  
However, it is recognised that they tried too much too quickly, and that the factors and agents on the spot were not as sensitive - to put it no higher - as they might have been.  
  
With regard to the notorious Strathnaver incident in which one or two old ladies died, there are points one should note.  Notice to quit had been given, the appropriate time had elapsed and again notice was given.  The families did not want to move though they had no legal right to their homes, so the estate authorities destroyed the houses.  The elderly victims are said to have died as a result of this eviction.  A trial was held but the factor was not found guilty, and certainly folk history suggests the trial was biased in the interest of property.  There seems also to have been a recognition of the rights to and value of roof timbers to a family in this treeless area, which was breached in this incident.  One would not condone the deaths but much harsher things were done delibrately elsewhere in the Highlands.  Some of the bitterness about the Sutherland clearances comes from evidence 80 years later by one who was a child at the time.  
  
16. One should not look at these incidents with 20th C eyes, yet there are similarities, where population was moved to other areas of estates, e.g. to the coast, or to various industrial enterprises, to see parallels with urban regeneration removals to housing schemes, or government departments such as the National Savings Dept. or the DSS being moved to Glasgow and Newcastle respectively regardless of employees' wishes.  
  
17. The bankruptcy of a clan chief - for a variety of reasons  some culpable, some not - could mean a) the sale of the estate, b) the creation of a trust to administer it.  The result of this might be the rationalisation of the estate, especially as the legal obligations of trust law under b) require the best interests of the estate and its development to be pursued.  The result of this might mean that tenants in arrears would be evicted and also land use changes could see others losing lease renewals.  One of the ironies of some bankruptcies was that they were brought on partly by retaining on the estate tenants in arrears, or excessive numbers of tenants due to previous policies, e.g. kelp production, which the successor had to remedy to avoid the same thing happening.  Even where bankruptcy was avoided an heir might have to rationalise to keep the estate intact.  
  
18. Lewis had very little in the way of clearance yet this is where some of the most dramatic land raids were carried out in the late 19th and early 20th C.  
  
19. Depopulation on a similar scale happened in the Border counties without any of the same reaction then or now to the matter compared to the Highlands.  
  
20. Up till the Acts of the 1880s the Highland tenants had no security of tenure, but the massive drain on the Highland counties is after they have achieved this security of tenure.  
  
21. Overcrowding of estates may also in the late 18th C have been due to the link between military service and leases.  Tenants could be punished if they did not provide sons to serve in the army, so increased numbers were encouraged.  
  
22. Debt burdens after the '45 may have affected some clan chiefs and their attitude to their tenants.  
  
23. It was clearly official policy at times in the 19th C and the 20th C to encourage emigration due to the overpopulation and the lack of resources of Scotland, especially the Highlands.  That does not imply any form of force.  
  
24. The descendants of many who emigrated are delighted with the result of that and are still happy about their Scottish roots, not bitter.  
  
25. It is ironic that the American Indian had a similar attitude of emotional non-legal attachment to his land and was driven out by colonists - many from Scotland with the same background!  
  
26. Eviction was also carried out by e.g. Archibald Grant and by the Commission for Forfeited Estates as part of their Improvement policies.  
  
27. There is some evidence that in islands where radical emigration/eviction policies were carried out the island then became prosperous.  
  
28. Some emigration was encouraged by the seasonal harvest migration which introduced the Highlanders to a different lifestyle.  
  
29. The parts of the Highlands hardest hit by the depopulation were the north-western ones.  
  
30. AND FINALLY - what was the alternative?  Even today there are major problems of distance and isolation to be overcome.  A number of solutions were tried without success.  The potato famine made it clear what could happen when large numbers were retained on the land.  Given the poor resources it is difficult to see what alternative there was to emigration, though the harshness which applied to some of these forced emigrations is not a happy aspect of Scotland's history.