

LANDLINE

FIVE WALKS IN SKYE

Here is a selection of quotes from the Memorandum given to John Blackadder, surveyor, in May 1799, when he was going to survey the Macdonald Estate with a view to 'improving' the farms, the landscape, and the population. I hope that they might be of interest in thinking about the crofting system, how it came into being, and how it is today.

Memorandum for Mr John Blackadder Land Surveyor – May 1799.

You are to proceed with all convenient despatch to Lord Macdonalds estates in the Isle of Sky etc and to make a Survey and Plan of the same, and as the estates are extensive it will be proper that you engage one or two expert Land Surveyors to go with you or to follow you as soon as possible, so that the plans of the whole may be finished this season if practicable. You will allot such Districts to your Assistants as you think proper, and direct them to make plans of a convenient size, laid down from such a scale as you judge the most proper, so as they may be afterwards be reduced by the reducing instrument.

This district is divided into a great number of small Farms lying in the most unhopely and inconvenient form that it is possible to imagine. Some of them are under Lease, but the greater part is under small Tenants, who have no Leases, and hold only from one year to another, a considerable number of them reside upon one Farm.

To correct those abuses the Report is of Opinion that all those people who at present are in possession of Farms, and who have no Stock sufficient even for the small share they possess (some of them pay only Twenty or Thirty shillings yearly) ought to be removed to allotments of a few Acres, less or more according to the quality of the Soil, in the most eligible situations for that purpose, where such small possessions do not interfere with, or mar the laying out of a better Farm; at the same time allowing them over and above their Acre the grazing of one Cow. And this, he is persuaded, would place a great many of these people in a situation preferable to what they have ever been in, and as there are many places in the estate where nothing at present is to be seen but barren heath and moss, and which produces nothing at all to the proprietor, these might by an industrious tenant be reclaimed and made to support a Family. To forward this improvement there is no Country whatever better adapted than Sky, as every part of the Shore affords a quantity of cast ware, which if carefully collected might enrich every little possession in the highest degree and by doing this it would both provide for the small Tennants, and allow large farms to be laid out in situations the most convenient and advantageous.

The present inhabitants are industrious, and many of them have capitals sufficient for such undertaking as the Management of any of the Farms above described if they knew the proper method of conducting it. An example is therefore necessary which shows them the best method of management, and in which to make the most of their business. It would perhaps be advisable for the present to let only one or two Farms on each District, otherwise a great number of poor people would be turned out, who being bred only to Agriculture could not support themselves in any other way. For although villages are proposed to be erected with portions of ground to each settler, they can be brought there only by their own choice, and the Islander who is turned out of his possession will emigrate, unless another way of gaining his Bread is pointed out to him. In improving an estate in such a situation as this, besides advancing the Rental, retaining a number of Inhabitants is an object of the utmost importance; and all reasonable allowances should be made to prevent emigration.

The soil has not only to be till'd, but from the surrounding ocean and its Rocky shores, immense sums may be drawn, equal at least, if not surpassing, the internal produce of the Soil.

At Present every Family in the Country is a kind of independent Colony of itself. They turn up what part of the Soil is

necessary to support them with Meal and Potatoes, take their own Fish, Manufacture and make most of their own cloaths and Husbandry utensils. Their cows supply them in Summer with Butter and Milk, after a which a few of them are sold to pay for the small spot on which they live. While at work they labour hard, but it is with a view to have soon the same proportion of ease. They are ill fed, and unable to make a continued exertion. By their methods of Management a great deal of time is lost, and much industry ill applied. Twelve people having families possess one Farm, and each one turning up his proportion of arable ground with the crooked spade, will not do more work among the whole than one Man with a pair of good Horses where the plough can be used.