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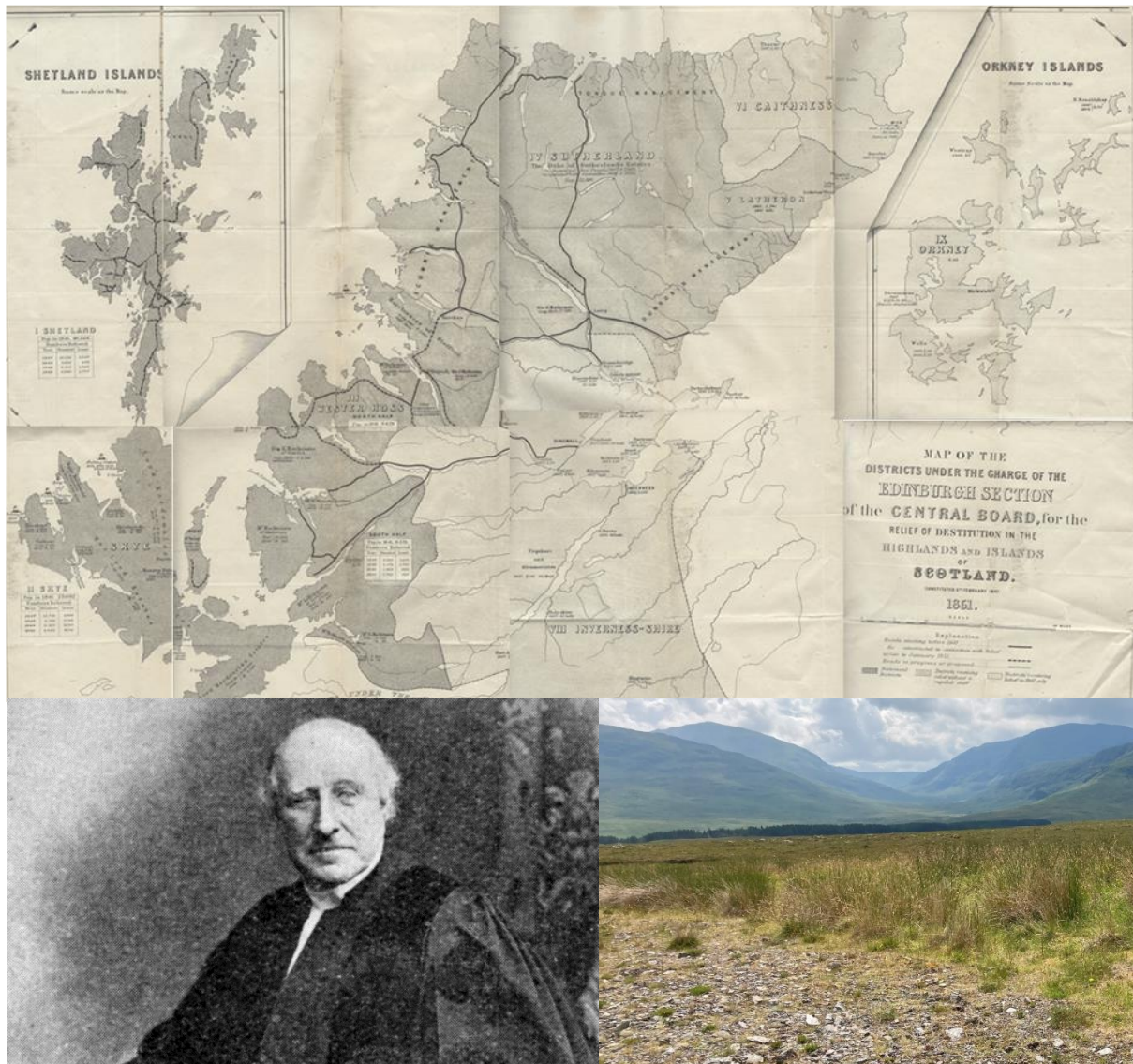
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*Top: map of the area relieved by the Edinburgh Section of the Central Board, including major road construction projects. Bottom Left: photograph, c.1880, of Gustavus Aird, Free Church minister and Local Committee member for the Edinburgh Section at Creich, Sutherland. Bottom Right: surviving portion of a relief work road near Dundonnell, Wester Ross*

## **Famine, Relief and Resistance: Reassessing Reactions to Central Board Operations in the Highlands and Northern Isles, 1847-50**

A thesis presented in September 2022 to the School of Humanities, University of Glasgow, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy

by James Romaric Arnaud

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Sgoil nan Daonnachdan

## **Table of Contents**

Cover	
List of Figures	3
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 1 – Opposition from Within</b>	<b>14</b>
Local Committee members and their motives	17
Forms of ‘opposition from within’ and their impacts	27
Groundwork for future resistance?	36
Conclusion	38
<b>Chapter 2 – Petitions to the Central Board</b>	<b>39</b>
Patterns of petitioning	41
Narrating requests	47
Assertiveness	49
Petitioning outcomes	55
Conclusion	58
<b>Chapter 3 – Everyday Resistance</b>	<b>60</b>
Towards a moral economy?	63
Strategic engagement and non-compliance	69
The reasons for non-compliance	73
Conclusion	77
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>85</b>

## **List of Figures**

- Figure 1** The four stages of challenges to landlord authority in the nineteenth century p.8
- Figure 1** Organisational structure of the Central Board from 1847 to 1850 p.15
- Figure 3** Local Committee Members at Kilmuir, Skye p.17
- Figure 4** Known occupations of Local Committee members appointed by the Edinburgh Section of the Central Board in 1847 p.18
- Figure 5** Proportions of denominational representation among clergymen selected for Local Committee duty by the Edinburgh Section of the Central Board in 1847 p.18
- Figure 6** Local Committee Members at Lerwick, Shetland p.26
- Figure 7** Identities of those who wrote petitions to the Central Board between 1847 and 1850 p.42
- Figure 8** Distribution of petitions across the four years of the Central Board's operations p.44
- Figure 9** Cases of crime against property in the Skye District of Inverness-shire between 1842 and 1850 p.66

## Introduction

[Instigators of the Crofters' War] had been brought up in the more secure and prosperous times of the 1860s and 1870s and had not known at first hand the anguish of the famine decades which had demoralised many of their parents and grandparents.

- T.M. Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War: The Social Transformation of the Scottish Highlands* <sup>1</sup>

Conventional imaginaries of the Great Highland Famine, as illustrated by Devine, picture a lack of protest from sufferers and a legacy of demoralisation and passivity. There has been no attempt, however, to explore the possibility that any significant opposition was experienced by the principal famine relief organisation, the Central Board. This thesis details the Board's nature and objectives, and examines local responses to its operations to assess the conclusion that people impacted by the Great Highland Famine were unresistant. By considering the forms that any protest might have taken, it also offers an evaluation of how resistance is conceptualised in the existing historiography on the Clearance-era and Land Wars. Additionally, this thesis reviews the implications for how the timeline of nineteenth century Highland protest is understood; it tests the historiographical consensus that the demoralisation caused by the famine era delayed the generation of meaningful protest until almost four decades later.<sup>2</sup>

From February 1847 to September 1850, the Central Board offered relief to individuals who were impoverished by the Great Highland Famine, but ineligible for parochial assistance. Potato blight ruined the harvest in 1846, inflicting 'total destitution' on between two-thirds and three-fourths of the population in the Highlands and Northern Isles.<sup>3</sup> Even in such circumstances, statutory relief was unavailable to the able-bodied under the 1845 Scots Poor Law.<sup>4</sup> When famine struck, the

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<sup>1</sup> T.M. Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) p.222

<sup>2</sup> J. Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1976) p.136, 303; Devine, 1994, p.222

<sup>3</sup> Reports of the Edinburgh Section of the Central Board, First Report of 1847 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Son, 1850) p.10-12. Wester Ross, the Hebrides and Shetland (where the potato constituted the largest proportion of populations' diets) suffered worst. For more on how earlier patterns of clearance impacted the geography of the famine, see: Devine, 1994, p.47.

<sup>4</sup> R. Mitchison, 'The Making of the Old Scottish Poor Law', *Past & Present*, 63, 1974, pp.58–93. In reality, even many eligible Highland populations received no statutory assistance because Highland Parochial Boards were 'very primitive', even after 1845 reforms. For an account of how Colonel John Gordon of Cluny resisted poor rate collection by pressurising the Barra Parochial Board to refuse assistance, see: T.M. Devine, *The Great Highland Famine* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1992) p.158. The inefficacy of the Poor Law and its geographical variations irked the Central Board; although it only existed to relieve the able-bodied, it was frequently forced

Government committed to non-intervention, expecting proprietors to claim loans under the existing Drainage Act and relieve their tenants through employment. Uptake proved to be slow, infrequent, and mostly abused as a system for settling rent arrears.<sup>5</sup> Amid worsening poverty and the relative absence of Government intervention, the Central Board emerged in February 1847 as the official channel for Highland relief. It formed from amalgamation of three disunified charities: the Free Church committee, founded in November 1846, and municipal committees at Edinburgh and Glasgow, established in December 1846 and January 1847 respectively.<sup>6</sup> The new organisation was the wealthiest charity in nineteenth century Scotland, ultimately commanding a fund of £209,376.<sup>7</sup>

Even at its outset, the Board's status was perplexing. As Sellar notes, it was Government-backed and powerful, but still independent and voluntary.<sup>8</sup> Existing historiography emphasises behind-the-scenes Government influence. The February 1847 merger, Hunter contends, proceeded under 'government pressure'.<sup>9</sup> Devine argues further that the Board was a 'quasi-governmental agency': Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, exploited it to maintain ostensible state non-intervention while secretly controlling relief policy.<sup>10</sup> Sir John McNeill reported in 1851 that many Highlanders had treated the organisation as a permanent arm of Government; its ambiguous status, he complained, encouraged misinterpretation and manipulation from those agitating for more extensive state intervention and support for the Highland population.<sup>11</sup> Historians are yet to probe McNeill's claim about the Board's reception and how this may have impacted political campaigns and governmental policy in the nineteenth century Highlands.

The Board intended to operate for a single year, with the 'express purpose' of 'meeting the present Destitution'; put differently, it appeared that its initial aims were solely relief provision and starvation prevention.<sup>12</sup> Work-for-food schemes were established throughout the Highlands and

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to divert its resources towards completing the Parochial Boards' duties of relieving the aged and infirm. See: Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Second, p.35

<sup>5</sup> Devine, 1992, p.100, 122. Government meal depots at Tobermory and Portree similarly failed to make an impact. Fearing the corruption of private trade, grain prices were set to the unaffordable rates prevailing at the nearest market in Glasgow. The scheme was terminated by August 1847.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.124

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.132; 1994, p.115

<sup>8</sup> W. Sellar, 'William Forbes Skene (1809-92): historian of Celtic Scotland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 131, 2002, pp. 3-21, p.12

<sup>9</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.120

<sup>10</sup> Devine, 1992, p.124, 126. Only 12 days after formation, Trevelyan announced in a letter to his Government colleague, John McNeill: 'we are to depend on the Edinburgh Committee [of the Central Board] and its affiliated Committees for carrying out the details of relief'. Devine, 1992, p.132; 1994, p.115

<sup>11</sup> J. McNeill, *Report to the Board of Supervision by Sir John McNeill on the Western Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh: Murray and Gibb, 1851), p.xiii

<sup>12</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, First, p.9. In February 1847, the organisation refused requests from other charitable contributors to distribute seed corn and instructions for improved agriculture on the basis that this lay beyond its remit of providing relief and averting starvation.

Northern Isles. 'Labour tests' were imposed on relief applicants. Mostly, they were instructed to construct drains, roads, bridges and piers (although there were also spinning and fishing projects) in return for scant daily allowances of 1½ pounds of meal for men, and less for women and children.<sup>13</sup> In an outdoor setting, Hunter explains, this attempted to mimic the 'petty workhouse rules' of statutory English poorhouses.<sup>14</sup> Based on Benthamite 'less eligibility' principles, these rules made relief terms unappealing to ensure that charity was only used as a last resort.<sup>15</sup> Refusing gratuitous relief, Devine argues, exemplified the Board's desire to teach Highlanders a 'moral lesson' about industriousness.<sup>16</sup> This was a policy grounded in racialised contempt for supposedly indolent and ignorant Gaels, which Fenyo identifies as characteristic among mid-nineteenth century Lowlanders.<sup>17</sup>

Operations were unexpectedly extended after a repeat of crop failures in 1847 and the subsequent two years. Hunter contends that the Board's ambitions expanded beyond preventing starvation in 1849. The organisation, he argues, 'changed direction' and aspired 'to make the Highlands and Islands more self-sufficient'.<sup>18</sup> In February 1849, 'with anxious consideration that the destitution may prove of longer endurance than the only fund likely to exist for its relief', the Board vowed to find 'means of drawing people into a position more susceptible of future improvement'.<sup>19</sup> Significant mission creep was actually evident in November 1848, when the Board abandoned previous assertions that it primarily existed to relieve destitution and recorded new plans for the 'ultimate improvement of the country, and the amelioration of its people'.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the Board's scope was always ill-defined and Hunter's suggestion that it 'changed' to focus on longer-term development is misleading. Even in 1847, 'labour tests' were calculated to 'convert the sufferings of the people into the germ of their future amelioration': the Board strove to 'develop the resources of the country' by instilling 'habits of industry'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.110

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> E.W. Sieh, 'Less Eligibility: The Upper Limits Of Penal Policy', *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 3(2), 1989, pp.159–83

<sup>16</sup> Devine, 1992, p.204

<sup>17</sup> K. Fenyo, *Contempt, Sympathy and Romance: Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands and the Clearances* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000). The influence of these views is apparent in the organisation's first official statements, which declared the 'natural, inherent and unconquerable idleness and indolence' of Gaels. It is worth noting that Calvinist doctrines of Divine Providence emboldened desires to teach Highlanders a lesson: the Board insisted that famine had been sent by the 'Divine hand'. The Edinburgh Section's Chief Inspector, Captain Robert Elliott, advocated withholding liberal relief to make Gaels 'feel the judgement Providence had sent'. See: Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, First, p.3-12

<sup>18</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.125

<sup>19</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1849, First, p.22

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, 1848, Fourth, p.14

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 1847, First, p.3-4

Although the trajectory of the Board's shifting improvement objectives proves difficult to pinpoint, substantive and material changes in its operations were enacted from late 1848 onwards. Hunter observes that the relief organisation displayed a novel focus on 'the development of ... economic infrastructure', driven by a 'co-operative system' that was first trialled in autumn 1848 and officially instituted in 1849.<sup>22</sup> Increasingly, instead of relieving populations directly, the Board paid proprietors half the cost of projects on their estate for employing their tenants and assuming total relief responsibility. The flagship construction was 90 miles of 'destitution road' in Wester Ross, designed to place Highlanders in the currents of 'more advanced society' and encourage 'greatly more extended trade'.<sup>23</sup> This project was far more ambitious than earlier work-for-food schemes, which were primarily designed for labour exaction, rather than infrastructural development. The 'co-operative system' signalled a newfound determination to induce immediate economic improvement through radical moral and material regeneration of the Highlands and Northern Isles. The full scope of the Board's shifting goals and projects requires further exploration.

The most remarkable historiographical silence concerning the Board's operations relates to the responses from the starving population. Devine notes 'anger and hostility in the distressed areas' at the start of 1848, when the 'labour test' became a stricter 'destitution test' that lowered daily meal allowances to one pound for those working without suitable enthusiasm.<sup>24</sup> He describes 'collective opposition to accepting relief under the terms of the test' in northern Skye, noting that those who co-operated in Snizort were subjected to ridicule; only ten men participated in road-building works in Kilmuir in April 1848.<sup>25</sup> There is limited discussion of the circumstances attendant upon the introduction of the new test, however, or the full nature, results and implications of resistance against it. Tantalisingly, he suggests there was 'conflict between the expectations of the inhabitants of this peasant society and the ethos of zealots steeped in the orthodoxies of political classical economy'.<sup>26</sup> Hunter is even more vague about whether or how local populations expressed demurrals at any point, only hinting that 'bitterness made crofters understandably unwilling to cooperate with the Board's officials'.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, both Hunter and Devine describe Highlanders as being too 'demoralised' to generate meaningful methods of protest at the time.<sup>28</sup> Assumptions that the mid-

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<sup>22</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.125

<sup>23</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1849, First, p.26; Third, p.302. These roads form the basis of the present-day northwest Highland road network, including the A832 and A838. For a brief account of their lasting importance, see: J. Miller, *The Finest Road in the World: The Story of Travel and Transport in the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2017), p.102-3

<sup>24</sup> Devine, 1992, p.207

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.209

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p.208

<sup>27</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.177

<sup>28</sup> Devine, 1994, p.223; Hunter, 1976, p.136, 303.



nineteenth century population was basically undemonstrative remain unchallenged in histories of the Central Board.

In his effort to situate resistance in Highland history between 1800 and 1853, Richards noted that accounts of ‘pathetic peasant stoicism’ in the period yielded ‘widespread agreement from historians past and present’, with meekness attributed to either religiosity or cultural legacies of clan society.<sup>29</sup> Although he did not explore opposition to terms of poor relief or resistance against injustices during famine, Richards challenged this consensus by highlighting 40 instances when Highland communities opposed proprietorial eviction.<sup>30</sup> These all followed the same four-stage pattern of semi-spontaneous, short-lived resistance outlined in Figure 1. He and Hunter also noted riots against Government-enforced grain exportation by the townspeople of Wick and Pulteneytown in the early months of 1847, before Central Board operations were underway.<sup>31</sup> In combination, Richards claimed, these examples of unrest demonstrate a ‘continuity’ of Highland resistance through the mid-nineteenth century, leading to land raids, the Napier Commission, and the Crofters Act.<sup>32</sup>

Stage	Characteristics
1	Summons of removal served. Envoy initially turned away by community and, on return, is subjected to humiliation, such as being stripped naked or having papers burnt.
2	Sheriff arrives to enforce eviction and is met with aggression, often by women or men dressed as women.
3	Higher authorities, often the Government, are alerted. Links to ‘Radicalism’ are made to argue for military action.
4	Resistance defused, often with facilitation from ministers, after rumours of imminent interventions.

Figure 1 - The four stages of Highland resistance to landlord authority in the nineteenth century, adapted from Richards, 1973

<sup>29</sup> E. Richards, ‘How tame were the Highlanders during the clearances?’, *Scottish Studies*, xvii, 1973, pp.35-50, p.35. See the introduction for a definitive summary of historiographical consensus on Highlanders’ passivity and its causes.

<sup>30</sup> These did include three protests during Central Board operations, at Sollas in 1849, and Strathconan and Strathaird in 1850.

<sup>31</sup> Richards, 1974; J. Hunter, *Insurrection: Scotland’s Famine Winter* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2019). It is important to note that these riots were short-lived, extremely geographically limited, confined to more urbanised eastern Highland towns, and all but over by the formation of the Central Board.

<sup>32</sup> Richards, 1973, p.50

Robertson and Cameron strenuously disagree. To Robertson, Richards' typology and catalogue merely proves that protest in that period was restricted to 'reactionary' resistance to eviction and food riots: sporadic, doomed and less sophisticated than later nineteenth century resistance.<sup>33</sup> Cameron concurs that holistic political agendas only emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, with the 1883 Napier Commission finally resulting from 'louder voices coming from within the Highlands' in the previous decade.<sup>34</sup> Even Richards concedes that the 'Battle of Braes' in Skye in 1882 marked a 'prelude to a climax of sustained agitation which exhibited an unprecedented cohesion in Highland discontent'.<sup>35</sup> The comparative insignificance of Clearance-era century protest, particularly through the famine years, remains a point of relative agreement.

In fact, historians characterise the potato blight and Central Board relief operations as an 'epochal development' that enervated defences of Highland lands and livelihoods, resulting in listless acceptance of emigration. Devine estimates that 16,553 people left the Highlands between 1846 and 1857, which Richards labels the 'post-famine clearances' (although these evictions clearly also occurred during famine).<sup>36</sup> Devine argues that the Board's ruthlessness exacerbated destitution and rent arrears, which 'weakened the grip of the people on the land'.<sup>37</sup> Richards agrees. Proprietors, he argues, witnessed worsening poverty before the Central Board's termination and, fearing the burden of maintaining unprofitable populations, offered compensation for those willing to acquiesce in their own unresistant removals. Under 'extreme duress', he concludes, Highlanders were forced to 'accede to their own clearance'.<sup>38</sup> Hunter counters that dispirited Highlanders emigrated semi-voluntarily, but concurs that there was a lack of protest. He contends that continued poverty at the conclusion of the Board's efforts 'finally dashed' Highlanders' hopes that 'something might be done to improve their position'.<sup>39</sup>

According to the existing historiography, the demoralising effects of the period left a legacy of passivity. Famine and the impact of Central Board relief have been cited as explanations for why the creation of effective opposition strategies was delayed until the later nineteenth century. According

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<sup>33</sup> I.J.M. Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest in the Scottish Highlands after 1914: The Later Highland Land Wars* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.3

<sup>34</sup> E. Cameron, 'Poverty, Protest and Politics: Perceptions of the Scottish Highlands in the 1880s', in D. Broun and M. MacGregor (eds.), *Mìorun Mór nan Gall, 'The Great Ill-Will of the Lowlander'? Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands, Medieval and Modern* (Glasgow: Centre for Scottish and Celtic Studies e-Publication, 2007), pp.218-248

<sup>35</sup> Richards, 1974, p.102

<sup>36</sup> E. Richards, 'Patterns of Highland Discontent, 1790—1860' in R. Quinault, R. and J. Stevenson (eds.) *Popular Protest and Public Order: Six Studies in British History, 1790—1920* (London: Routledge, 1974), pp.75-114, p.99; Devine, 1992, p.304

<sup>37</sup> Devine, 1994, p.189

<sup>38</sup> E. Richards, *The Highland Clearances: People, Landlords and Rural Turmoil* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008), p.238

<sup>39</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.136

to both Hunter and Devine, resistance at the end of the century only resulted once there had been maturation of a new generation who had not experienced the dispiriting events of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> Jones and King echo the substance of this opinion by writing that ‘the famine years of the 1840s and 1850s dealt a further blow to already demoralized and unstablecrofting communities ... so that there was neither widespread appetite nor cultural precedent’ for resistance at that time.<sup>41</sup>

Renewed interest in Clearance-era protest and the potential diversity of its forms has been stimulated by research from Symonds and Given.<sup>42</sup> Symonds argues that elements of resistance may have been overlooked due to particular historiographical and methodological agendas. For example, Highlanders tend to be cast as innocent victims by historians attempting to narrate clearances as cases of class conflict, or as passive respondents to externally enforced change in structurally deterministic accounts of commercialisation.<sup>43</sup> To recover Highlanders’ agency in their own story, Symonds encourages an expanded conceptualisation of protest that considers Scott’s observation of ‘everyday resistance’ in twentieth century southeast Asia.<sup>44</sup> Given responds by investigating how people ‘maintained their own pride and identity by means of routine and everyday practices’.<sup>45</sup> He outlines the ways in which illicit whisky distillation played a role in opposing the ‘humiliation and social dislocation caused by modernisation and the Clearances’.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Symonds detects that nineteenth century inhabitants of South Uist deployed simple acts of demurrals, like non-compliance and dissimulation, to subtly resist proprietorial attempts to commercialise Gaelic livelihoods. Although this analysis is thought-provoking, the accounts from Given and Symonds are geographically restricted and make little attempt to consider broader implications for our understanding of the progression of nineteenth century Highland resistance. As Robertson puts it, the history of Highland protest still ‘almost entirely ignores acts of everyday resistance.’<sup>47</sup>

Previous lack of appropriate methodological frameworks may partly explain why investigation of reactions to the Central Board has been limited. Richards’ typology of mid-nineteenth century

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<sup>40</sup> Devine, 1994, p.223; Hunter, 1976, p.136, 303

<sup>41</sup> P. Jones and S. King, ‘Voices from the Far North: Pauper Letters and the Provision of Welfare in Sutherland, 1845–1900’, *Journal of British Studies*, 55(1), 2016, pp.76–98, p.95

<sup>42</sup> J. Symonds, ‘Toiling in the Vale of Tears: Everyday Life and Resistance in South Uist, Outer Hebrides, 1760–1860’ *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 3, 1999, pp.101–122; M. Given, *The Archaeology of the Colonized* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004)

<sup>43</sup> Symonds, 1999, p.105

<sup>44</sup> J.C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985)

<sup>45</sup> Given, 2004, p.139

<sup>46</sup> M. Given, ‘Whisky and resistance: the archaeology of illicit distilling’, *Historic Argyll*, 12, 2007, pp.11–17, p.15

<sup>47</sup> Robertson, 2016, p.3

protest is ill-suited because the organisation was not a proprietor and never attempted to enforce clearance, so no such resistance to eviction erupted. Historians have dedicated minimal attention to the topic since exhortations from Symonds and Given to consider the smaller-scale, quotidian ways that the population resisted threats to aspects of their customary livelihoods. The following thesis remedies this neglect by considering the local responses to the Central Board that have either been overlooked or deemed unremarkable.

This history 'from below' uses new perspectives to scrutinise the existing 'top-down' accounts of famine relief that are based on straightforward retellings of official records and estate papers. Local responses are considered to question the status, objectives and projects of the Central Board, as well as the results of its relief programme. Were local responses tailored to variations in the Board's operations over time? Did local populations attempt to exploit the Board's ambiguities to achieve more favourable relief terms? Indeed, were some of the Board's ambiguities driven by local actions in the first instance? Particularly, therefore, this thesis tests the received wisdom that the Central Board determinedly oppressed powerless people into passivity. In this aim, it aligns with the new Highland historiography that challenges simplistic truths with case studies, Gaelic sources and interdisciplinary methods.<sup>48</sup> In this instance, however, the assessment of community reactions extends beyond the conventionally examined relationship with landlords.

Constructing a history 'from below' in the Highlands is far from easy. Gaels' ironic absence from their own story, Richards contends, is caused by 'the scantiness of historical material from the Highlanders'.<sup>49</sup> This is particularly problematic in the mid-nineteenth century: Meek posits that Highlanders intentionally left the famine period relatively unrecorded in Gaelic poetry to forget a painful period of much suffering.<sup>50</sup> The scant surviving verses about Central Board relief could be used as a means to triangulate Highlanders' reactions; due to limits in time, scope and language, however, this project has left these sources for future analysis.

Primarily, already investigated material is examined from a new viewpoint. Due to their racialised disdain for the 'inferior' *Gàidhealtachd*, the Central Board Records and McNeill Report are treated as 'colonial archives' and read 'along the grain', as Stoler suggests.<sup>51</sup> Texts are analysed for notable

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<sup>48</sup> Discussed, for example, in S. Kidd, 'The view from the inside', *Innes Review*, 51(2), 2000, pp.188-193. For further analysis of the new historiographical aim to 'tease out the historical record of lived experiences', see: A. Tindley, 'This will always be a problem in Highland history': A Review of the Historiography of the Highland Clearances, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 41(2), 2021, pp.181-194, p.194

<sup>49</sup> Richards, 2008, p. 389

<sup>50</sup> D. Meek, *Caran An-T-Saoghail (The Wives of the World): An Anthology of Nineteenth century Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh, Birlinn: 2019), p.421

<sup>51</sup> A.L. Stoler, *Along the archival grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2009), p.43

silences or compensatory over-confidence to illuminate the actual interactions with populations that generated these colonial 'epistemic anxieties'.<sup>52</sup> Proclamations of Gaelic stubbornness, for example, often suggest the Board's frustration that people were refusing to engage with its schemes.<sup>53</sup> The private letters between Government Officials and the extraordinary members of the Central Board could also reveal colonial 'epistemic anxieties'. On account of difficulties accessing the National Records of Scotland under restrictions relating to the coronavirus, these sources have been set aside for subsequent investigations. Local and national newspapers, which often detailed the developments of Central Board schemes, are used to corroborate and further investigate indicators of Highlanders' responses.

Voices of mid-nineteenth century Highlanders themselves are considered through examination of petitions to the Central Board and retrospective famine accounts in Napier Commission testimonies. These two sources are acknowledged as being far from perfectly accurate gauges of Highland events and reactions.<sup>54</sup> Evidence about the famine at the Napier Inquiry was provided more than three decades later; incidents may have been misremembered or, in the context of political campaigns for land rights, adjusted to fit narratives of downwardly spiralling poverty ever since the 1840s. As is explored further in the second chapter, petitions may also have been subject to heavy mediation, with details tailored to increase the likelihood of positive responses. Considered circumstantially and reflexively, however, this possible limitation offers rich insight into Highland reactions, since the selective presentation of information represented an important strategy in tactical interactions with authority. Analysis of kirk session records could also help to reconstruct local responses and attitudes. Again, due to restrictions in time, this line of investigation has been reserved for future study.

Chapter 1 returns to the Central Board records to reassesses the basic structure of the organisation and its membership. A review of internal disputes over relief policy and management, particularly at local levels, forms the basis for interrogation of the historiographical concurrence on relative harmony within the Board. Opposition from within the Board is analysed as a potentially important form of mid-nineteenth century resistance. The collection of petitions to the Central Board is explored in Chapter 2 to consider how 'ordinary' Highlanders perceived and approached the Board. Chapter 3 explores potential instances of more subtle acts of protest, such as foot-dragging, non-compliance and internal sanctions. The thesis concludes by evaluating how these instances of local

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<sup>52</sup> Stoler, 2009, p.47

<sup>53</sup> Examples of frustration about stubbornness appear particularly in the third chapter.

<sup>54</sup> E. Cameron, 'The Highlands since 1850', in A. Cooke (ed.) *Modern Scottish History, 1707 to the Present, volume 2, The Modernisation of Scotland, 1850 to Present* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1998), pp.47-72

reaction to the Central Board change how the organisation itself is understood, as well as the timelines and geographies of nineteenth century Highland resistance.

For the local level analysis of these sources that follows, it is important to define the frequently used term 'community'. For the period, the word is not deployed in Hunter's sense of a region-wide political identity.<sup>55</sup> MacKinnon's doubt as to whether geographically disparate Highlanders ever aligned under the banner of one crofting identity is considered in light of the evidence presented in the first chapter. Regardless, Cameron correctly observes that a sense of Highland political unity was absent until the 1870s.<sup>56</sup> In this mid-nineteenth century context, the meaning of 'community' is closer to definitions from Robertson and MacKinnon: groups of people with physical and cultural links to local land, and often with a certain level of consanguinity.<sup>57</sup>

Providing a definition for 'the Highlands and Islands' can prove complicated, Withers notes.<sup>58</sup> In this thesis, the term refers to the regions for which the Central Board assumed responsibility during the Great Highland Famine: Argyllshire, Inverness-shire, Ross-shire, Caithness, Sutherland and the Hebrides.

Although this thesis frequently considers actions and impacts relating to 'Highlanders' and 'Gaelic populations', the geographical scope of this project also includes communities in Shetland. Severe famine was experienced there, but the population was not Gaelic and was seen to be different by the Central Board. Mid-nineteenth century Lowlanders, Fenyo observes, differentiated between inhabitants of the *Gàidhealtachd* and the Northern Isles: the latter, they opined, belonged to a more economically productive 'Norwegian race' that was 'accustomed to work [and] clearly distinguishable by their complexion and houses and appearance'.<sup>59</sup> In many respects, the famine raised similar issues in Shetland, including access to land and sustainable livelihoods. The underlying cultural context, however, was different from the *Gàidhealtachd*. Rather than representing a methodological inconsistency, analysis of responses to the Central Board in Shetland allows for comparison and contrast with cases in the Highlands.

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<sup>55</sup> Hunter, 1976

<sup>56</sup> Cameron, 2007, p.218

<sup>57</sup> I. MacKinnon, 'The Invention of the Crofting Community: Scottish History's Elision of Indigenous Identity, Ideology and Agency in Accounts of Land Struggle in the Modern *Gàidhealtachd*', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 98(1), 2019, pp.71-102; Robertson, 2016. The importance of the related Gaelic concept of '*dùthchas*' in reactions to events of the famine years is contemplated particularly in the first and third chapters.

<sup>58</sup> C.W.J. Withers, *Gaelic Scotland: The Transformation of a Culture Region* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p.17

<sup>59</sup> Fenyo, 2000, p.82. The Central Board's concurrence with this prevailing attitude is evident in the proclamation that Shetlanders possessed 'moral deportment, intelligence, education and physical ability'. See Edinburgh Section Records, 1847, Fourth, p.31

## **Chapter 1: Opposition from Within**

The generosity of the public, and the labours of the Central Board, are alike paralysed by any derangement of the Local Committees.

- *Captain Robert Elliott in correspondence with William Skene, 17 May 1847*<sup>60</sup>

Due to Devine's description of a 'quasi-governmental agency', the Central Board is often assumed to have been an imperious and stable organisation, steadied by backing from established state officials.<sup>61</sup> This characterisation has only been obliquely challenged by Hunter's brief mention of changing projects, objectives and systems of management in later years, which hints at possible confusion and disharmony.<sup>62</sup> The Board's ostensible coherence must be problematised to evaluate its interactions with the people it relieved. To reveal whether and how local populations attempted to exploit any internal divisions, reactions to the Board must be understood in the context of the organisation's complex membership and bureaucratic structure.

Remarkably little is known about the Board's structure or the processes of its quotidian functions. Bureaucratic chaos is implied in Hunter's outline of how the existing relief groups were 'quickly unified' in February 1847.<sup>63</sup> The Central Board itself (comprising 117 'extraordinary members', including prominent figures close to Government, like the Lord Advocate and Solicitor General) only controlled fundraising, supply logistics and broad policy. Most relief functions, Hunter explains, were devolved to two sub-groups: the Edinburgh and Glasgow Sections. Devine notes that their 'ordinary members', numbering 43 and 35 respectively, came from the 'business and professional classes' of the cities.<sup>64</sup> The Edinburgh Section, fronted by William Skene, a lawyer in the Court of Session, controlled operations in Inverness-shire, Ross-shire, Caithness, Sutherland, Skye and the Northern Isles. The Glasgow Section, led by Charles Baird, a municipal health officer in the city, managed Argyllshire and the Hebrides. Existing accounts of the Central Board have not attempted to detail the

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<sup>60</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.35

<sup>61</sup> Devine, 1992, p.124

<sup>62</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.125

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, p.120

<sup>64</sup> Devine, 1992, p.127

Sections' decision-making processes that comprised of multiple sub-committees; Figure 2 outlines this complicated administrative structure.

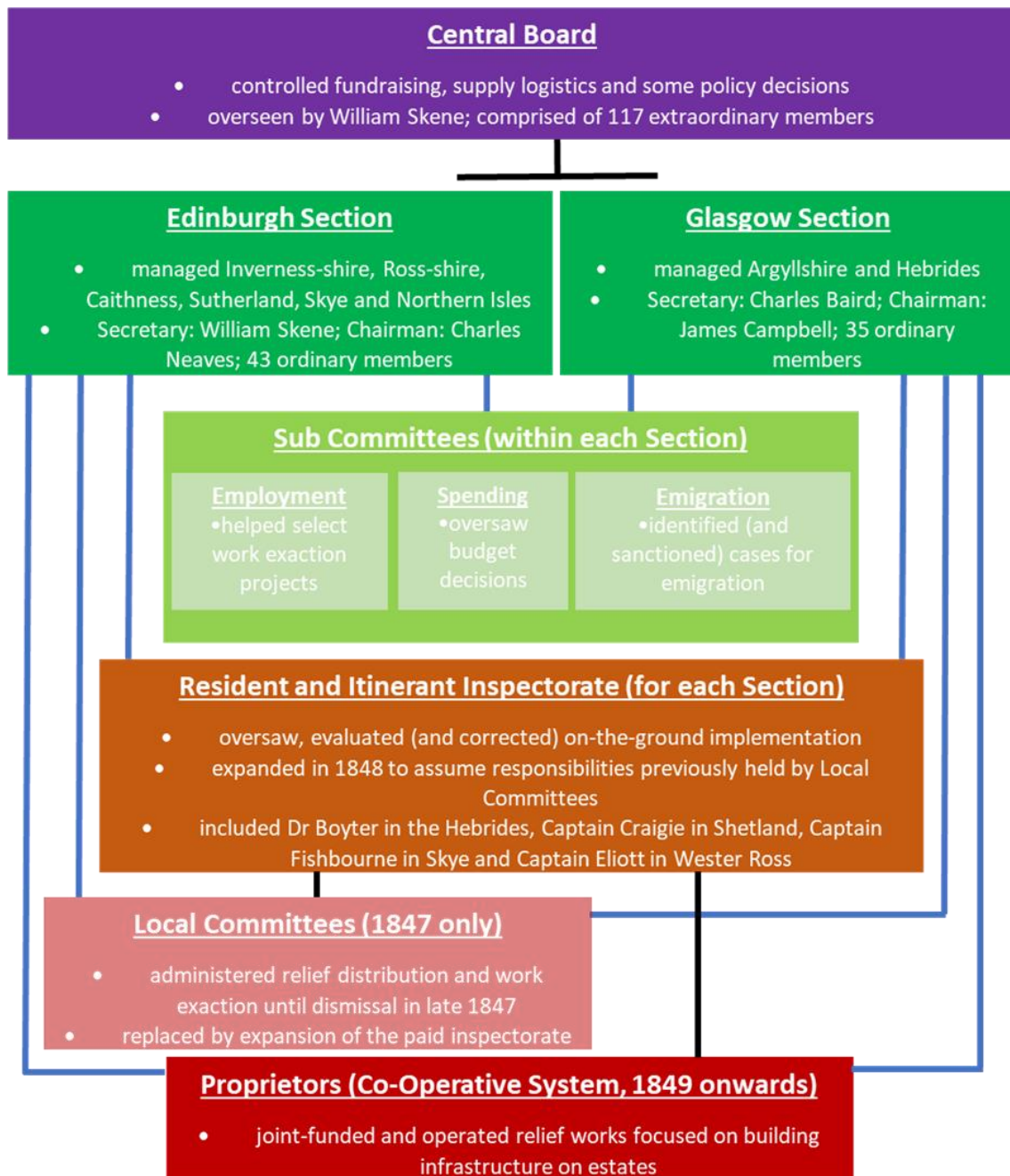


Figure 2 – The organisational structure of the Central Board from 1847 to 1850. Supervision and authority of one group over another is depicted by descending black lines. Descending blue lines denotes these functions as well as the process of appointment.

Hunter claims that the two Sections maintained a ‘considerable degree of independence’ from the parent organisation and each other.<sup>65</sup> Autonomy, however, was evidently compromised by Skene’s additional position as Chairman of the Central Board, which created confusing links and an unofficial hierarchy between the groups. The complicated (and notably unequal) power dynamic between the

<sup>65</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.120



Edinburgh and Glasgow Sections was clear in Trevelyan's proclamation, twelve days after the formation of the Central Board: 'we are to depend upon the Edinburgh Committee and its affiliated bodies for carrying out the detail of relief'.<sup>66</sup> More details on this rift emerge later in this chapter.

As seen in Figure 2, there was a similarly convoluted system for executing policies, distributing relief and exacting work in destitute regions. Confusingly, the structure changed through the Board's operations. Devine and Hunter recognise a reliance on 'Local Committees' in 1847, who were then dismissed and replaced in 1848 by an expansion of the Board's paid inspectorate of retired naval officers on half-pay.<sup>67</sup>

This chapter focuses on these Local Committees. It examines who they were, how they were selected, what they did, and why they were dismissed. Devine remains silent on these questions. Hunter only briefly mentions that Local Committees 'included crofters who themselves were in receipt of relief' and that those holding powerful positions in the Board deemed them 'unhealthily democratic'.<sup>68</sup> Even this limited information challenges Devine's depiction of the Central Board and its devolved groups as uniformly tight circles of elites loyally obeying Trevelyan and his Malthusian relief ideologies.<sup>69</sup> It suggests that some 'ordinary' people in famine-struck regions were appointed by the Central Board and defied their orders from above to help fellow community-members. Captain Elliott's words at the start of this chapter demonstrate inspectors' anxieties about Local Committee disobedience through 1847.

Evidence of 'ordinary Highlanders' using Local Committee membership to sabotage unwanted policies from inside the organisation would merit reassessment of two elements of the existing historiography. First, it would challenge notions of mid-nineteenth century passivity. Second, it would suggest the need for reconceptualization of opposition beyond Richards' narrow typology of doomed riots.<sup>70</sup> By considering the identities of Local Committee members who may have dissented, there is also opportunity to examine theories from Hunter and Meek that the Disruption and the creation of the Free Church emboldened communities, generated important leadership for social radicalism in the Highlands, and laid the groundwork for future opposition.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Devine, 1992, p.190

<sup>67</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.168 ; Devine, 1992, p.157

<sup>68</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.168

<sup>69</sup> Devine, 1992, p.202

<sup>70</sup> Richards, 1973

<sup>71</sup> J. Hunter, 'The emergence of the crofting community: the religious contribution, 1798–1843', *Scottish Studies*, 18, 1974, pp.95–116; D.E. Meek, 'The Bible and Social Change in the Nineteenth century Highlands', in D.F. Wright (ed) *The Bible in Scottish Life and Literature* (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1988), pp.179-191, p.186

This chapter begins by investigating the identities of Local Committee members and considering their possible motives, then provides more detail about the actions they took and their relative successes. It concludes by considering parallels with later nineteenth century agitation.

### **Local Committee members and their motives**

Identifying Local Committee members proves more challenging than might be imagined. The consistently comprehensive Edinburgh Section published Local Committee appointments in its records, but the less methodical Glasgow Section did not document this information.<sup>72</sup> As a result, it is possible to name Local Committee members in Inverness-shire, Ross-shire, Caithness, Sutherland, Skye and the Northern Isles, but not in Argyll-shire or the Hebrides. Analysis of the personnel mentioned by the Edinburgh Section alone, however, still yields significant insight into the general characteristic trends of appointees, as well as regional variations that correlate strongly with the geographies of dissent explored below.

Kilmuir Local Committee	
Hugh McDonald, Esq., Mugstadt, Convener and Consignee	Alex. Ross, Tenant, Kendrawn
Reverend Alexander McGregor	Malcolm Nicolson, Tenant, Kendrawn
John McKinnon, Esq., Duntulm	John McInnes, Tenant, Baronskitah
Alexander McLeod, Miller, Kilmaluag	A. McLeod, Gaelic Teacher, Linecroe
Alex. Matheson, Tenant, Feaul	Murdo Matheson, Feaul

Figure 3 - Local Committee Members at Kilmuir, Skye, based on the Reports of the Edinburgh Section, 1847, Third Appendix, p.55

Almost exclusively, Local Committee members were indigenous to the Highlands. The list of Kilmuir members is a case in point. Surnames like McDonald, McKinnon, McLeod and Nicolson suggest that these were individuals with established family ties to northern Skye and in-depth knowledge of the area. From this, it is possible to postulate that they would have been predominantly Gaelic-speaking. McLeod at Linecroe's identification as a 'Gaelic Teacher' supports this hypothesis.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> An April 1847 interaction between the Edinburgh and Glasgow Sections epitomised the more haphazard approach from the latter. The opening statement of the Fourth Report for the Central Board read: 'while the Glasgow Section are happy in having another opportunity of meeting the members of the Edinburgh Section of the Central Board, they have nothing new or of importance to present'. Records of Local Committee appointments also do not appear to have been published in any local newspapers, such as the Glasgow Herald.

<sup>73</sup> This linguistic point raises the tantalising (but ultimately unanswerable) question of whether clashes about Gaelic language and culture motivated Local Committee dissent. Eradication of the Gaelic language was one of the Board's stated aims: in the Second Report of the Edinburgh Section from 1848, Captain Elliott notes a wish that Highlanders would 'abandon the Gaelic'. It may be no coincidence that the Kilmuir Local Committee, including McLeod the 'Gaelic Teacher', were arguably the Board's most active opponents. There is, however, no evidence either to corroborate or disprove this motive for resistance.

Total Local Committee Members Known		669	
Total Occupations Known		301	
Clergymen	119	Merchants	19
		Fish Curers	8
Procurator-Fiscals	1	Ship Owners	5
Justices of the Peace	1	Millers	5
Sheriff Deputies	6	Writers	2
Bailies	5	Shoemakers	2
County Clerks	1	Joiners	2
Shoremasters	1	Saddlers	1
Custom Collectors	1	Grocers	1
		Innkeepers	1
Doctors	20	Booksellers	1
Bankers	4	Coopers	1
Schoolmasters	15		
Postmasters	2	Factors	12
Fishery Officers	2	Tacksman	15
Road Contractors	1	Tenants	20
		Farmers	10
(Ex-)Military	14	Lottery	3
Possible Landowners	33	'Esquires'	58

Figure 4 - Known occupations of Local Committee members appointed by the Edinburgh Section of the Central Board in 1847, based on the Reports of the Edinburgh Section, 1847, First to Third

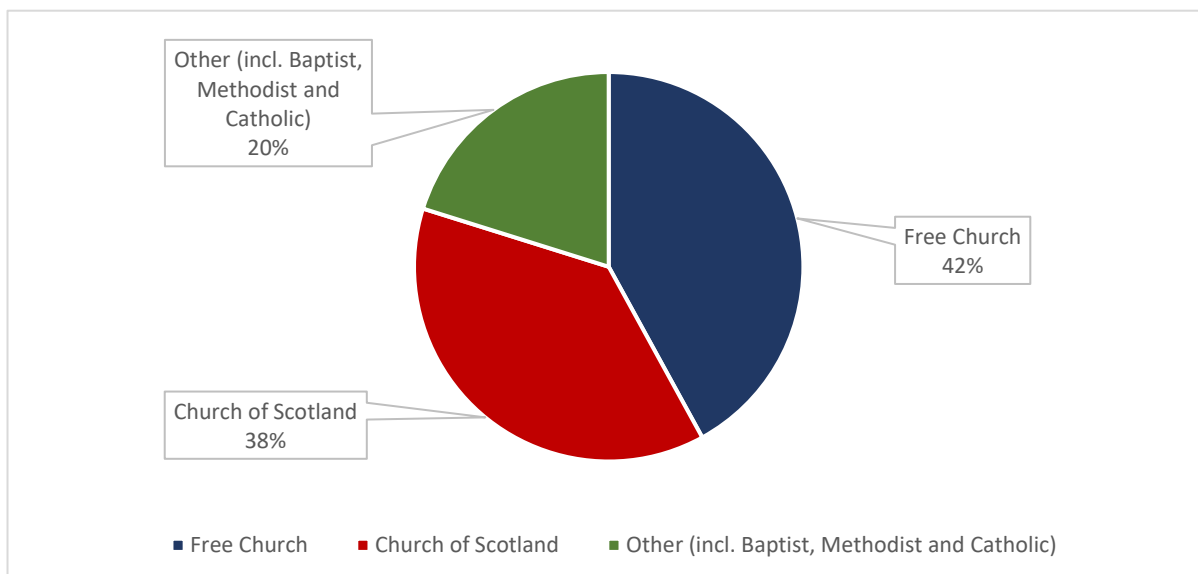


Figure 5 – Proportions of denominational representation among clergymen selected for Local Committee duty by the Edinburgh Section of the Central Board in 1847, based on the Reports of the Edinburgh Section, 1847, First to Third

By far the most prominent trend revealed by analysis of Local Committee members' occupations, outlined in Figure 4, is the prevalence of clergymen. Almost one-in-five appointees in areas overseen by the Edinburgh Section were ministers; of those whose occupations were known, it was one-in-three. The highest proportion of these clergymen, 50 out of 119, belonged to the Free Church; slightly more than the 45 ministers from the Church of Scotland, the next best represented

denomination. This attracted significant contemporary interest. There was such resentment towards Free Church domination of Local Committees that Charles Baird felt compelled to give 'a long account' of reasons for their involvement at an April 1847 meeting.<sup>74</sup>

More anecdotal evidence suggests there were many lay members of the Free Church as well as ministers. Dr Norman MacLeod, a Church of Scotland minister and ordinary committee member for the Glasgow Section, protested at an April 1847 meeting that Free Church attendees outnumbered Established churchgoers by between five-to-one and fifteen-to-one on Local Committees on Skye.<sup>75</sup> This, he claimed, was grievously disproportionate because the ratio of Established to Free Church ministers on the island was eight-to-one.<sup>76</sup> Some of these numerous Free Church lay people may have come from the ranks of *Na Daoine* (The Men): the 'spiritual aristocracy' of Highland Presbyterianism, who 'exemplified a standard for the church to imitate' and 'performed important leadership functions', according to Ansdell.<sup>77</sup> *Na Daoine* were 'drawn from the lower strata of Highland society, usually crofters themselves, but including elders, catechists and schoolmasters'.<sup>78</sup> One Local Committee member for Duirinish, Donald McQueen, for example, received religious training from the Bracadale Free Church minister, Reverend John Shaw, and later taught on the island of Soay through the Religious Education Society.<sup>79</sup>

Heavy Free Church involvement on Local Committees contests an historiographical consensus, espoused by scholars like Devine, that the denomination's relief efforts ceased in February 1847 when the Board was established to take charge of charitable responsibilities.<sup>80</sup> The supposed handover from the Free Church and municipal operations to the streamlined Central Board was, somewhat paradoxically, a transition of remarkable continuity. The denomination retained considerable influence on relief proceedings through the Local Committees.

This outcome is explained by the Board's immediate rush to assemble local relief operations before expected springtime shortages, and their reliance on the Free Church's pre-existing administrative infrastructure as a quick solution. The denomination's relief committee had been first to respond to famine, and had deployed ministers and catechists to survey destitution and determine best usage

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<sup>74</sup> 'Highland Relief Fund Board', *Scotsman*, 14 April 1847

<sup>75</sup> The involvement of Dr MacLeod, also referred to as *Caraid nan Gàidheal*, is explored further below.

<sup>76</sup> 'Highland Relief Fund Board', *Scotsman*, 14 April 1847

<sup>77</sup> D. Ansdell, *The People of the Great Faith*, (Stornoway: Acair, 1998) p.22-23

<sup>78</sup> J.R. Stephen, *The Presbyterian response to the famine years 1845 to 1855 within Ireland and in the Highlands of Scotland* (University of Glasgow: Unpublished MLitt Thesis, 2011), p.87

<sup>79</sup> *Royal Commission into the Condition of Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (The Napier Commission Report)* (Edinburgh: Neill and Co., 1884) Volume 1, p.338

<sup>80</sup> Devine, 1992, p.123

of its £15,000 relief fund in 1846.<sup>81</sup> When the Glasgow Section asked the Free Church and four other individuals for Local Committee nominations at the beginning of 1847, it received more than 600 from the former and only 150 from the latter.<sup>82</sup> The Edinburgh Section's selection process was more bureaucratic, but the result was similar: former Free Church committee members put themselves forward for Local Committee service. The Free Church, therefore, infiltrated Board operations from below. This set up the potential for conflict with the Board's extraordinary members and those senior officials, like Trevelyan, who Devine observes wished to steer the organisation from above according to their own doctrine of non-interventionism and strict relief policy.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, contemporary commentary attributed Free Churchmen's Local Committee involvement and reported insubordination to sheer denominational ambition. Concerns were raised in the press that Central Board funds were being misappropriated to solidify the denomination's nascent position of dominance in the Highlands. One pamphlet that was written in April 1847 by an anonymous 'Member of the Established Church' bore the title, *A Letter to the Lord Provost as to the Formation of Local Committees containing Proofs and Illustrations of Abuses which have taken place in the Distribution of the Fund*.<sup>84</sup> It advised the public not to donate to the Central Board, asserting that money was being embezzled by Free Church members on Local Committees and so any benefactions only 'contributed towards the support of that Church'.<sup>85</sup>

The strongest allegation was that Free Churchmen were misusing Central Board funds as 'a cheap way of building Free Churches'.<sup>86</sup> The Disruption had occurred only four years prior to the Board's formation and the denomination was seeking to bolster its position in the Highlands, where it had focussed much evangelical attention. An 1847 parliamentary committee on religious sites concluded that the Free Church was still facing material barriers to sustainable establishment.<sup>87</sup> In Mull, for example, the Torosay congregation was worshipping from a crowded canvas tent because landlords had declined to provide funds for a more permanent structure.<sup>88</sup> As construction of a stone church at Shieldaig progressed in April 1847, accusations regarding the provenance of funding were levelled at the Local Committee there, which supposedly consisted solely of four Free Churchmen. At that

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<sup>81</sup> Ansdell, 1998, p.76

<sup>82</sup> 'Highland Relief Fund Board', *Scotsman*, 14 April 1847. Detailed discussion of these four individuals and their impact is provided in the next section.

<sup>83</sup> Devine, 1992, p.132

<sup>84</sup> 'Highland Destitution', *Witness*, 10 April 1847

<sup>85</sup> 'Highland Destitution – Free Church', *Witness*, 20 March 1847

<sup>86</sup> 'Highland Relief Board: Insinuations against the Free Church', *Witness*, 12 May 1847

<sup>87</sup> T. Chalmers, *Evidence Given before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Sites for Churches (Scotland) by Thomas Chalmers on 12th May, 1847* (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1847)

<sup>88</sup> Ansdell, 1998, p.80

month's meeting of the Glasgow Section, the Chairman, Dr Buchanan, confirmed he had received letters complaining that relief applicants in Shialdaig were labouring on the church's construction to receive meal provided by the Central Board.<sup>89</sup>

These claims of misappropriation, however, appear to have been little more than exaggerated paranoia from a faction of Established churchgoers who were distrustful of the Free Church. The Convenor of the Edinburgh Section's Employment Committee, Mr Watson, attested that no construction work on the Shialdaig Free Church had taken place under the auspices of the Board. Contrary to popular belief, he confirmed, the Committee there consisted of as many Established Church as Free Church members and it retained the support of the Edinburgh Section's ordinary committee.<sup>90</sup> One March 1847 letter published in the Free Church newspaper, *Witness*, complained that all such attacks against the denomination's character were unfounded. Detailed accountancy was provided to show that more than double had been spent on famine relief than had been received in donations, proving the inaccuracy of the Free Church's characterisation as avaricious opportunists.<sup>91</sup>

If the evidence from *Witness* is accepted, it could be argued that the baselessness of accusations against the Free Church serves to reinforce claims from historians, like Stephen, that 'the strength of Presbyterian endeavour' during famine relief truly lay 'in the committed Christian faith'.<sup>92</sup> Certainly, some Free Church ministers on Local Committees showed attentiveness to starving parishioners' spiritual and material needs, even when this caused conflict with the Central Board. Fearing that 'there will be starvation', for example, Reverend Brown of the Glenelg Free Church pleaded with the Glasgow Section 'in the name of reason and religion' to reverse its decision to cease meal supplies after Martinmas 1849.<sup>93</sup>

Christian devotion and denominational ambition, however, were not mutually exclusive motivations for Free Church participation and dissent on Local Committees. Famine relief offered opportunities to evangelise Highland communities to the denomination through shows of pious charity.<sup>94</sup> One Free

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<sup>89</sup> 'Highland Relief Board', *Glasgow Herald*, 14 May 1847

<sup>90</sup> 'Highland Relief Board: Insinuations against the Free Church', *Witness*, 12 May 1847

<sup>91</sup> 'Highland Destitution – Free Church', *Witness*, 20 March 1847

<sup>92</sup> Stephen, 2011, p.ii

<sup>93</sup> Reports of the Glasgow Section of the Central Board, Eleventh Report of 1848 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Son, 1850) p. 20-21

<sup>94</sup> Defences of the Free Church in *Witness* notably declined to rebut assertions from reproving pamphlets that 'since the Secession, the Free Church has directed much of her attention to the Highlands ... [looking to] carve out a large portion of them, at least, as her exclusive domain'. In fact, Free Church supporters tended to proudly endorse such statements, adding that over £40,000 had been expended on the denomination's

Church correspondent in *Witness* succinctly summarised the denomination's dual motivation for continued involvement by proudly using the term, 'missionary enterprise'.<sup>95</sup> Exploitation of aid to this end was best exemplified by the privately-funded west coast tours of the philanthropist, Dr McKay, and his accompanying clergyman, aboard the Free Church schooner, *Breadalbane*.<sup>96</sup> Despite the Central Board's disapproval, Dr McKay gratuitously dispensed meal to the Highland populations who listened to evangelising sermons in April 1847.<sup>97</sup> The Glasgow Section complained that such generous, ostensibly compassionate, charity was designed to create a dependent relationship between Highlanders and the Free Church.<sup>98</sup> In May 1847, Captain Elliott raised similar misgivings about disobedient Local Committees that were dominated by Free Churchmen. He attributed overgenerosity and disregard of work exaction rules to 'sectarian animosities amongst those aspiring to the confidence of the public in the dispensation of their charity'.<sup>99</sup>

Defiance from Free Churchmen on Local Committees, therefore, clearly married the denomination's considerable ability to exert radical influence on local activities with an evangelical commitment to alms. Often, debate on the Free Church's nineteenth century political positioning evaluates whether greater zeal was devoted to co-ordinating resistance or following a dogmatic, suffering-based, Calvinist soteriology. Devine, for instance, contests Richards' assessment that the Free Church 'eventually helped the crofting community to organise itself' by countering that the denomination retarded resistance because 'the evangelical gospel was not a theology of social justice'.<sup>100</sup> The combination of social leadership and theology in Local Committee opposition to the Board's stringency supports Meek's nuanced observation that the evangelical tradition sometimes offered frameworks for condemning oppression.<sup>101</sup>

No evidence from Local Committee activities supports Hunter's claim that 'class conflict' was the true pretext for evangelicalism and Free Church activities.<sup>102</sup> As shown above, ecclesiology and theology were clear motivators, but stances based on class were never adopted by the dissenting

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evangelical activities in the Highlands. See: 'Highland Relief Board: Insinuations against the Free Church', *Witness*, 12 May 1847

<sup>95</sup> 'Highland Relief Board: Insinuations against the Free Church', *Witness*, 12 May 1847

<sup>96</sup> There are few hints as to the provenance of this private fund or Dr McKay's other interactions with the Central Board. Dr Norman MacLeod merely mentioned during the meeting that he was aware that Dr McKay received £10 from a 'liberal friend in Liverpool'.

<sup>97</sup> 'Highland Relief Fund Board', *Glasgow Herald*, 12 April 1847

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*

<sup>99</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.31

<sup>100</sup> Devine, 1994, p.106; E. Richards, *A History of the Highland Clearances: Vol. 2: Emigration, Protest, Reasons* (London: Routledge, 1985) p.357

<sup>101</sup> Meek, 1988, p.186

<sup>102</sup> Hunter, 1974, p.115-116

Local Committees populated by Free Churchmen. This strengthens Ansdell's view that 'religious preference', not socio-economics, determined post-Disruption groupings and their endeavours.<sup>103</sup> To bolster his argument, Ansdell observes that loyalty to the Free Church 'crossed class lines'; this phenomenon is also observable in the denomination's Local Committee appointments.<sup>104</sup> The convener of the Local Committee at Kingussie and Inch, for example, was Cluny McPherson, a vocal Free Church proponent and owner of the nearby Cluny Estate.<sup>105</sup>

In fact, Local Committees exhibited remarkable socio-economic diversity. As might be expected, many proprietors, such as Mr Rainy of Raasay and MacLeod of MacLeod, participated in the Local Committees operating on their estates. The exact number of landowning members is difficult to ascertain because this information was not explicitly recorded on appointee lists. It is highly likely, however, that toponymic referents, like 'Mr McCaskill of Talisker', denoted proprietorial status, as opposed to simpler recordings of locations for members who were tenants, like 'Neil MacPherson, Tenant, Gadintailie'.<sup>106</sup> Based on this methodology, approximately one in twenty Local Committee members for the Edinburgh Section, a total of 33, were landowners.

In addition to the proprietorial class, 58 members are titled, 'Esquire'. These individuals would most likely have been gentry, esteemed professionals or respected members of the commercial classes, set apart from the lower tenantry. Examples of those listed as 'Esquire' included: William Campbell, the Convener of the Creich Committee and resident of Creich House; Thomas McKenzie, the Member of Parliament for Ross and Cromarty; and Robert Bell, the Sheriff Substitute of Lerwick. Denotation as 'Esquire' cannot, however, be trusted as a consistent and reliable marker of social status. Firstly, usage is subject to variability: some factors receive the title, like William Stewart, Factor for the Earl of Seafield, while others do not, like Mr Munro, Factor on Fowlis. Secondly, the dividing line for application of the title remains unclear: it is not possible, for example, to tell whether sheep farmers or larger tenants are consistently included in this social group.

Almost three-quarters of Local Committee members were neither proprietors nor recipients of the title 'Esquire'. Perhaps linked to continued involvement from the Free Church (which Hunter and Ansdell agree was mostly attended by 'ordinary' Highlanders), they tended to be of middling socio-

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<sup>103</sup> Ansdell, 1998, p.82

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*

<sup>105</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, First Appendix, p.4

<sup>106</sup> Toponymic referents may not be an entirely accurate indicator of ownership; wadsetting and feuing may have been denoted similarly. With this caveat in mind, a majority of those referred to in this way were likely proprietors.



economic status, and occasionally even lower.<sup>107</sup> The Central Board sourly concluded that Local Committees did not represent ‘the property of the neighbourhood’.<sup>108</sup> Aside from clergymen, the next most populous group were middle class professionals of the sort that would be unlikely to own substantial property, such as doctors and schoolmasters. These were the ‘critical middle social layers of Highland society’ which are simply ‘absent’ in the historiography, according to Tindley.<sup>109</sup>

Similarly well-represented were those who rented land. Local Committee members are documented as tacksmen, tenants, farmers and lotters, with a tendency towards more lowly status within these ranks. In accordance with Mackinnon’s assertion that Gaels identified as ‘tenantry’, rather than ‘crofters’, the greatest number were recorded as tenants (whose leases would have been between £20 and £50).<sup>110</sup> Farmers and lotters (whose rentals would have been even less) were nearly as numerous as tacksmen (whose rentals were above £50).<sup>111</sup>

The next largest proportion of members were craftsmen, such as saddlers and shoemakers, possibly linked to the presence of *Na Daoine*, who often practiced such professions.<sup>112</sup> These were the individuals whom Macinnes labels the ‘elites [of ordinary Highland society] rather than the poorest orders of cottars and squatters’.<sup>113</sup>

Central Board complaints about the under-representation of property on Local Committees, however, were not simply the result of Free Church infiltration. More systematic ideological variances disturbed selection processes.<sup>114</sup> The Glasgow Section’s four nominators from beyond the Free Church boasted significant relief administration experience, but at least three had expressed charitable philosophies at odds with the Board’s ideas. Bishop John Murdoch of Glasgow had bankrupted himself by donating his wealth to sufferers of cholera and typhus in the city in 1832 and 1837 respectively.<sup>115</sup> Robert Forbes, of Scottish descent from Massachusetts, had organised meal donations from the United States and bestowed them on famine-struck Irish populations in 1846.<sup>116</sup> Dr Norman McLeod of Morvern had secured more liberal relief terms for Highlanders during the

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<sup>107</sup> Hunter, 1976; Ansdell, 1998, p.82

<sup>108</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.31

<sup>109</sup> Tindley, 2021, p.193

<sup>110</sup> MacKinnon, 2019, p.315

<sup>111</sup> McNeill Report, 1851, p.8

<sup>112</sup> Stephen, 2011, p.87

<sup>113</sup> A. Macinnes, 'Evangelical Protestantism in the Nineteenth century Highlands', in G. Walker and T. Gallagher (eds.) *Sermons and Battle Hymns: Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), pp.43-68, p.52

<sup>114</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.31

<sup>115</sup> V.A. McClelland, 'The Irish Clergy and Archbishop Manning’s Apostolic Visitation of the Western District of Scotland, 1867 Part I: The Coming of the Irish', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 53(1), 1967, pp.1–27, p.5

<sup>116</sup> R.B. Forbes, *Personal Reminiscences* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1892)

1837 famine, and in the process earned the sobriquet *Caraid nan Gàidheal* (Friend of the Gaels).<sup>117</sup> Of these nominators, only Aeneas McDonnell of Glengarry, an advocate and Trevelyan's former colleague at the Civil Service in India, had demonstrated no deviation from the Board's strictures that relief should be minimal and never gratuitous. Given the ideological differences and sympathies of nominators, it is understandable that appointment suggestions were diverse, including large numbers of people without wealth whose loyalties would lie with local suffering rather than the Board's desire to teach Highlanders a lesson about the virtues of industry.

When Local Committees ignored work exaction rules, the Board tried to rationalise dissent by contending that Local Committees' socio-economic status made them 'as incompetent alike to represent the contributors, the intelligence and the property of the neighbourhood'.<sup>118</sup> It castigated 'loose and unbusinesslike proceedings' from members.<sup>119</sup> As the following analysis of sophisticated opposition proves, however, witlessness was not an issue. Instead, the Board's claims must be considered within the context of racialised disapproval of Highland society in the nineteenth century. When reading with consideration of the archival grain, denunciations of Local Committees' stupidity merely reflect racialised dislike of Gaels, perhaps tinged with embarrassment that the Board was being out-thought by them.

Empathetic solidarity, rather than incompetence, more coherently explains Local Committee contraventions of Central Board rules. Famine impacted even the middling socio-economic strata from which Local Committees were primarily drawn: Captain Elliott noted with incredulity that schoolmasters and large farm tenants were applying for relief meal near Ullapool in May 1847.<sup>120</sup> With evidence from Applecross that month, he also confirmed scandalised newspaper reports that Local Committees were administering meal to themselves gratuitously. Tellingly, he pronounced that there was 'no doubt that they were much in need of it'.<sup>121</sup> In this light, Local Committee members' reluctance to exact labour from themselves and fellow applicants, as per the Board's strictures, is understandable. Charles Neaves explained this dynamic in a letter to William Skene in September 1847: the 'natural identification of the Local Management' was 'in feeling with the Local interests, and with the people to be fed more than with the Board'.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> S.M. Kidd, 'Caraid Nan Gaidheal and 'Friend of Emigration': Gaelic Emigration Literature of the 1840s.' *The Scottish Historical Review*, 81(211), 2002, pp.52–69

<sup>118</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.31

<sup>119</sup> *ibid*, p.5

<sup>120</sup> *ibid*, p.21

<sup>121</sup> *ibid*

<sup>122</sup> *ibid*, Seventh Appendix, p.19

Correlation between regional variations in Local Committee members' socio-economic status and the geographies of dissent provides further evidence that empathy was the primary motivator. In relatively urban locations, like Lerwick, where there were higher proportions of property-owning members, such as merchants, Local Committees were praised by the Board for their obedience.<sup>123</sup> In the Uists, Barra, Harris, northern Skye and coastal parts of Wester Ross, where there was more similarity to the unpropertied membership in Kilmuir, criticism abounded about relaxed requirements for labour.<sup>124</sup> These rural crofting communities had depended most on the potato and were hardest hit by its failure; the 'middling sort' on these Local Committees would have encountered more severe destitution and experienced deterioration of their own circumstances. This intimate, often personal, apprehension of suffering explains why Local Committees in these areas exhibited particular readiness to disobey orders and grant gratuitous relief to others in the community and themselves.

Lerwick Local Committee	
R. Bell, Esq., Sheriff Substitute, Convener	Robert Playfair, Esq.
The Reverend Mr Morgan	Dr. W. Spence
The Reverend Mr McGaffie	Dr. Isaac Cowie
The Reverend Mr Fraser	Dr. John Cowie
The Reverend Mr Hunter	The Reverend Mr Hamilton, Bressay
The Reverend Mr Watson	Mr William Merrilees
James Greig, Esq. of Sandsound	Mr Alex Nicol
Bailie Leask	Mr Gilbert Tait, Merchant
Archd. Greig, Procurator-Fiscal	Mr James Hunter, Merchant
Sir Arthur Nicholson	Mr John Robertson, Merchant
Captain Cameron Mouat	Mr Robert Gaudie, Merchant
Mr William Hay	Mr D. Gaudie, Joiner
James Mouat Jr., Esq.	The Reverend Mr Webster
Francis Heddle, Esq.	The Reverend Mr Gardner

Figure 6 - Local Committee Members at Lerwick, Shetland, based on the Reports of the Edinburgh Section, 1847, First Appendix, p.5

Empathy was driven not only by immediately self-serving instincts when members required relief themselves, but also by long-term visions for supporting sustainable Highland livelihoods and resisting worsening resource inequality. One Local Committee member lamented in April 1848 that labour tests 'encourage every man to become a pauper' and 'exhaust his credit' by making relief terms so unpleasant that people expended all resources before applying.<sup>125</sup> This entrenched poverty by depriving people of productive assets, like seed and livestock, which could have been used to

<sup>123</sup> *ibid*, Fourth, p.14

<sup>124</sup> See, for example: Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.5. The absence of Lewis and Sutherland from this list owes to the fact that they were initially relieved by private funds from James Matheson and the Duke of Sutherland, rather than that they are outliers in this trend.

<sup>125</sup> Highland Destitution and the Highland Destitution Fund', *Inverness Courier*, 25 January 1848

generate vital future resources. People in Lewis, for example, preferred to sell their cattle and become 'very much reduced' than work on the despised drainage labour schemes, according to the Chamberlain, John Munro Mackenzie.<sup>126</sup> To defend economic independence during crisis and resist the proletarianization of Highlanders into asset-less labourers, Local Committee members, like those at Shieldaig in May 1847, urged the Board to grant applicants relief in return for agricultural work on their own crofts.<sup>127</sup> The Board sneered at the 'local wisdom' of this proposed system, suggesting that unsupervised labour schemes were simply excuses for indulging Highland indolence.<sup>128</sup>

Although Local Committee opposition to the Central Board arose from shared experience of poverty and anger at inequality, this activity did not translate into a Marxist 'class struggle'. The importance of class consciousness as a motivation for resistance has been fiercely contested in Highland historiography. MacKinnon heavily criticises Hunter's use of a Marxist framework, arguing that there is no evidence of class-based self-identification around crofting status and that the real roots of community lay in consanguinity and territorial belonging.<sup>129</sup> Resistant activity from Local Committees appears to strengthen this argument. The remonstrances of members (many of whom were revealingly recorded as 'tenants', not 'crofters' as Hunter claims) were never articulated with class-based terminology like 'the means of production' or 'the proletariat'. The socio-economic status of Local Committees was too diverse to result in simple class conflict. Instead, in line with MacKinnon, their opposition to the Central Board showed the strength of ties forged in geographical proximity and notions of shared kinship. Objections were voiced against resource depletion at the community level. One Local Committee member in Skye, for example, argued that Central Board labour tests were 'more likely to degrade and ruin *our people* than to elevate their condition'.<sup>130</sup>

### **Forms of 'opposition from within' and their impacts**

Local Committees staged no overt acts of opposition against famine relief policies that would fit within Richards' typology of resistance against evictions, or even food riots. Their resistance was often more subtle; the Board's strictest orders and doctrines were overlooked, undermined and subverted, rather than confronted with aggression. Dissent from Local Committees was also

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<sup>126</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 4, p.3312. Mackenzie credited entrenched poverty from the famine years of the late 1840s for a wave of emigration at the start of the next decade.

<sup>127</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Sixth, p.24

<sup>128</sup> *ibid*, Fourth, p.12

<sup>129</sup> MacKinnon, 2019; Hunter, 1976

<sup>130</sup> 'Highland Destitution and the Highland Destitution Fund', *Inverness Courier*, 25 January 1848. My emphasis added.

significantly more long-term than the fleeting instances that Richards describes. In fact, there is evidence members continued in their attempts to sabotage the Board even after their dismissal at the end of 1847. Since evaluation of tactics' success, or lack thereof, often explains the transition from one to another, this section takes a chronological approach to explore each in turn.

In a strategy that would prove to be too successful for its own good, Local Committees ignored the strictures of the Board's uncompromising labour test while they still oversaw relief administration in 1847. Under official mandates, Local Committees were expected to demand public work from relief applicants for six days a week in return for daily meal portions not exceeding 1½ pounds for men, ¾ of a pound for women, and ½ a pound for children.<sup>131</sup> Labour was supposed to be long and back-breaking. One guideline example of a day's work from the Central Board involved breaking a cubic yard of road metal in eight hours using shovels and pick-axes.<sup>132</sup> Based on 'less eligibility' principles, the Board argued this would discourage relief-seeking behaviours, ensuring that Local Committees did not 'disturb the natural relation between people and their landlords and ordinary employers'.<sup>133</sup>

In reality, the labour test excluded the most needy who were simply too emaciated to work, so Local Committees responded by exacting less labour from applicants. Donald McRae of Lochalsh, who became an Overseer after the dismissal of Local Committees, complained that 'the people are very willing to work, but so much are they weakened by insufficient food that much work cannot be got out of them'.<sup>134</sup> The Edinburgh Section's Employment Committee reported in August 1847 that most Local Committees were responding by granting more relief for work of 'a more nominal character'.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, some ignored labour requirements entirely. Despairing at the liberality of the Gairloch Committee, Captain Elliott reported that they acted as if 'they had to admit claimants to it', regardless of their circumstances or willingness to work.<sup>136</sup> The Glasgow Section complained that 'Local Committees are failing to comply with the resolutions of the Board inasmuch as there is evidently a great deal of gratuitous distribution of the supplies sent'.<sup>137</sup>

A few Local Committees deployed more creativity in their subversion of labour test rules: immediately before the 1847 harvest in Shieldaig, for example, work on crofts was accepted so that

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<sup>131</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, First, p.5. Guidance also covered the equivalent amount of knitting and spinning work required, for example, see: Edinburgh Section Reports 1848, First, p.74

<sup>132</sup> *ibid*, 1848, Fourth, p.62

<sup>133</sup> *ibid*, 1847, First, p.4

<sup>134</sup> *ibid*, 1848, First, p.78

<sup>135</sup> *ibid*, 1847, Fifth, p.7

<sup>136</sup> *ibid*, 1847, Sixth, p. 25

<sup>137</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1847, First, p.12

applicants could perform tasks that would benefit their own agricultural output and contribute to sustainable, autonomous subsistence livelihoods.<sup>138</sup>

Additionally, Local Committees administered relief portions that exceeded regulations. Members complained that the Board's scale was 'below what could be fairly termed even bare subsistence', and 'an insufficient supply of food for persons working to the extent of those employed on the relief works'.<sup>139</sup> Captain Elliott objected to their over-generous dispensation of meal by protesting that their 'philanthropy [was] too great'.<sup>140</sup> The extent of Local Committees' liberality in 1847 was revealed the next year by William Skene, who triumphantly proclaimed that, under the expanded paid inspectorate in 1848, 'with apparently an equal amount of destitution ... the amount of food supplied does not exceed one-fourth, and the number of recipients of relief is likewise greatly less'.<sup>141</sup>

As alluded to by Skene, another Local Committee response in 1847 was to give relief to applicants who fell outside the Board's strict definition of the deserving destitute. Dr Boyter, the disciplinarian Itinerant Inspector for the Glasgow Section, removed 1,200 people from relief lists in South Uist alone through the Spring of 1847 on the basis that they were not truly destitute.<sup>142</sup> In these instances, Local Committees' actions were motivated by 'local wisdom' about avoiding unnecessary asset depletion and impoverishment as part of the relief process. Among other issues, the Local Committees in the Gairloch region clashed with Captain Elliott over the way the labour test pauperised populations during his tour of inspection in May 1847.<sup>143</sup>

These initial subversions of the labour test in 1847 might be described as too successful. On the one hand, Local Committees managed to grant more generous relief for a time, as demonstrated by Dr Boyter's removal of names from the South Uist relief lists and William Skene's celebration of reduced meal dispensation after 1847. On the other hand, the very evidence that records the short-term success of this liberality also testifies that it lacked the stealth to be sustainable.

Ultimately, disobedience from Local Committees resulted in their exclusion from positions of influence in relief administration and even harsher treatment towards poor Highlanders.<sup>144</sup> From

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<sup>138</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Sixth, p.24

<sup>139</sup> *ibid*, 1848, First, p.77

<sup>140</sup> *ibid*, 1847, Fourth, p.8

<sup>141</sup> *ibid*, 1848, Third, p.8

<sup>142</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1847, Sixth, p.14

<sup>143</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.17

<sup>144</sup> It is worth noting that some Local Committee members, such as Donald McRae of Lochalsh, seem to have been appointed as overseers from the 1848 season onwards. Little information is available to confirm how

their appointment, Local Committees received admonishment and threats of disbandment. In the late springtime of 1847, an initial attempt was made to reconstitute Local Committees to better represent propertied interests and lessen their sympathies towards relief applicants. In a move that was emblematic of this proposed transition, Captain Elliott installed MacLeod of MacLeod as the convenor of the Committee at Bracadale in May 1847 to replace an innkeeper who had formerly held the role.<sup>145</sup> Following the mixed success of these reformatations, the Board resolved to begin the 1848 relief season by expanding the paid inspectorate instead. Even more drastically, the Board replaced the labour test with a destitution test, which reduced the maximum meal allowance for men to one pound despite requiring the same amount of work.<sup>146</sup> After their dismissal for disobedience, Local Committees were no longer to resist the Board's increasingly determined stringency; arguably, dissent through 1847 only secured more unfavourable circumstances for famine-struck Highland populations.

In favour of the dissent of 1847, however, it can be said that it provided a springboard for subsequent opposition to the relief programme. Former Local Committee members became key organisers of future resistance based on their experiences of relief operations the next year. Comparisons between the common-sense workings of 1847 and increasingly ideologically dogmatic proceedings became a focal point of criticism that would successfully undermine the Board over the longer-term.

No longer in charge of relief administration, some former Local Committee members appear to have attempted, with very mixed success, to organise resistance from within relief-seeking Highland populations. Former members stressed to their communities that the destitution test should be rejected until more liberal terms of relief were forthcoming. With 'no apology' for the accusatory tone of his January 1848 letter to a former Local Committee convenor in northern Skye, Captain Elliott declared that there was 'so much, if not perversion, at least misapprehension' of the new destitution test 'on the part of those from whom it was reasonable to expect better things'.<sup>147</sup> In Kilmuir, for example, Captain Fishbourne found that local people were being 'told that they ought to be relieved without work'.<sup>148</sup> The opening statement of the Edinburgh Section's 1849 Report

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prevalent this trend was. In all likelihood, those former Local Committee members who were 'promoted' would have been those who had demonstrated unrelenting adherence to the Board's strictures during 1847.

<sup>145</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.2

<sup>146</sup> *ibid*, 1848, First, p.4

<sup>147</sup> 'Highland Relief Fund', *Inverness Courier*, 25 January 1848

<sup>148</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Second, p.79

regretted that 'a counter influence, based upon local interests and prejudices of various kinds, impeded the plans of the Section in the sphere of their labours'.<sup>149</sup>

These efforts to incite communities to resistance culminated in the coordination of strikes against the destitution test in northern Skye at harvest time in 1848. The Board refused to name the individuals behind this opposition, perhaps to starve its organisers of publicity. Complaints of the misleading 'advice of false friends' within the 'local gentry', however, hints at continued objections to the destitution test from those same former Local Committee members in northern Skye.<sup>150</sup> In Kilmuir in August 1848, Captain Elliott reported that 'the people had the idea that with a firm strike the "test" would give way'.<sup>151</sup> The destitution test was similarly met in Portree with 'folded arms'.<sup>152</sup> Alarmed by this escalation of resistance, the Board reported that 'the passive apathy of 1847 has translated into active opposition in 1848'.<sup>153</sup>

These strikes against the destitution test in northern Skye, however, were almost unqualified failures. At the simplest level, defeat was confirmed when striking was broken in the very same month it began in late August 1848. Captain Elliott celebrated that populations in Portree and Kilmuir returned to work and submitted to the destitution test after only a very brief period.<sup>154</sup>

Even the logic behind strikes against the destitution test was faulty, and the action would not have been a success in the long-term, even if they had held. Refusal to submit to the destitution test merely played into the hands of the Board, whose laissez faire ideology dictated that no assistance should be offered unless absolutely necessary. In February 1848, Captain Rose celebrated individuals' rejection of the test in Lochalsh as a 'very wholesome symptom' of the successful implementation of labour tests.<sup>155</sup> It confirmed to him that there would be no 'injurious effect...with the ordinary relations of society' arising from relief recipients being 'made too comfortable'.<sup>156</sup> Through the eyes of the Board, Kilmuir inhabitants had only 'tested themselves rather severely' in August 1848; they had revealed to the inspectorate that 'there were other resources beside calmly awaiting death by hunger'.<sup>157</sup> To participate in strikes, communities in northern Skye had been

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<sup>149</sup> *ibid*, 1849, First, p.11

<sup>150</sup> *ibid*, 1848, Third, p.101; 1850, Second, p.40

<sup>151</sup> *ibid*, 1848, Third, p.100

<sup>152</sup> *ibid*, p.101

<sup>153</sup> *ibid*, Second, p.9

<sup>154</sup> *ibid*, p.101

<sup>155</sup> *ibid*, First, p.78

<sup>156</sup> *ibid*

<sup>157</sup> *ibid*, Third, p.101



forced to expend productive assets in a way that entrenched long-term poverty, as described above. Strikes, therefore, failed in concept as well as execution.

Northern Skye strikes in August 1848 can only be considered a partial success with a long-term, speculative view that considers how actions may have influenced events later in the nineteenth century. This is considered at greater length in the next section of the chapter.

By far the most successful post-1847 resistance technique from Local Committees was the broadcasting of discontent to a wider audience beyond the Highlands. Local Committees' opinions were voiced in a letter to the editor of the *Inverness Courier* on 19 January 1848, signed anonymously by 'Neither Highland proprietor nor tenant' in Skye.<sup>158</sup> In his response, which was published in the same newspaper on 25<sup>th</sup> January, Captain Elliott revealed the author to be 'the Convener of a Late Local Committee' in Skye.<sup>159</sup> The correspondence brought public attention to three grievances for which former Local Committee members sought redress: the Board's financial inefficiency, its cruelty towards Highlanders, and the ineffectiveness of its improvement visions.

The Board's incompetence and wasteful approach to funds was most strongly argued. Denouncing the replacement of volunteer Local Committees with salaried inspectorates, the letter protested that 'the money which was intended to be devoted to the relief of the Highlanders is now being expended upon a numerous and useless staff of paid officers'. Furthermore, it continued, those paid staff had already demonstrated their incompetence in Portree and Snizort by 'allowing several hundred bolls of meal to be destroyed ... while the people were in want and suffering' because of a 'dispute between the Edinburgh and Glasgow Sections'. The article concluded sombrely that 'the charity that bestowed did not or could not watch over the distribution of its gifts'.<sup>160</sup>

The writer levelled the graver accusation of cruelty against the Board's inspectorate. Expressing that 'local wisdom' which had governed Local Committees' conduct the previous year, he argued that Highlanders' circumstances were irreparably reduced by unsympathetic less eligibility tests. Laced with incredulous irony that mimicked the Board's own use of religious language, he observed that a potential relief applicant had to, 'expend his all, to his last cow and hen, and exhaust his credit, before he can apply to the officer, who is fattening on the means collected to help him through an *extraordinary* visitation of Providence'. He pitied those who were 'destitute of everything ...

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<sup>158</sup> 'Highland Destitution and the Highland Destitution Fund', *Inverness Courier*, 25 January 1848. This cryptic signature provides insight into how Local Committee members saw themselves as part of the 'middling sort' of Highland society; neither part of the elite, nor the ordinary ranks of Highlanders.

<sup>159</sup> 'Highland Relief Fund', *Inverness Courier*, 25 January 1848

<sup>160</sup> 'Highland Destitution and the Highland Destitution Fund', *Inverness Courier*, 25 January 1848

employed on some road in a mountain several miles from his wretched home, at one pound of oatmeal per day'.<sup>161</sup>

Finally, the correspondent contested that the Board's Highland improvement visions were flawed, or even counterproductive. The organisation was, in his opinion, 'bringing about the total degradation of the people of this country by the measures they promise to put in operation'. The Board's failed seed-corn scheme exemplified these backwards steps. To induce increased effort and development of commodified agriculture, the Board had given out seed-corn on the understanding it would be sown and repaid from profits reaped at the following harvest. Famine-struck populations, however, had consumed the corn out of urgent need and merely found themselves further in debt. For such failures, the letter castigated the 'officers with *grand* schemes for the improvement of the people' which are 'more likely to ... ruin our people than to elevate their condition'.<sup>162</sup>

This public appeal undermined the Board with immediate impact. That Captain Elliott felt compelled to respond immediately to the letter in the *Inverness Courier* is proof of how the organisation was unsettled by its criticism.<sup>163</sup> Most often, the Board responded laconically, if at all, to public criticism of its actions. To counter allegations of *overgenerosity* towards Highlanders in the *Scotsman* in April 1848, for example, the Board replied they were 'feeling confident that a candid examination of proceedings could only result in satisfying any impartial enquirer of the groundlessness of imputations made'.<sup>164</sup> The detailed rebuttal in the *Inverness Courier*, therefore, was a significant deviation that revealed Board's unease at embarrassing expositions from former employees.

The primary triumph of the *Inverness Courier* letter was its generation of a slew of public complaints about the maltreatment of Highlanders. Public denunciations of the destitution test continued to grow after late January 1848. Another particularly strong letter to the *Inverness Courier* on 15 February 1848, for example, expressed regret that the Board was as unalterable as 'the laws of the Medes and Persians' in its determination to 'mock' Highlanders 'with a pittance scarcely capable of sustaining life'. 'Unless many deaths occur', it alleged critically, 'there will be many living skeletons to prove the baneful workings of the test'. The Board's improvement schemes were condemned as 'vagary schemes and pampered dogmas', with questions raised over the inspectorate's ability to determine best outcomes for Highlanders 'with any degree of propriety'.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> *ibid*

<sup>162</sup> *ibid*, emphasis in original

<sup>163</sup> 'Highland Relief Fund', *Inverness Courier*, 25 January 1848

<sup>164</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Second, p.18

<sup>165</sup> 'Highland Destitution', *Inverness Courier*, 15 February 1848

It was the unnecessary expense of the Board's salaried inspectorate that became the primary line of attack. This criticism was most successful because it united those of all stances towards Highlanders, both sympathetic and contemptuous. Compassionate *Inverness Courier* correspondents contested that 'few or none had cause of complaint' with the gratuitous services of the Local Committee, which had been 'at once dismissed by a fiat of the Central Board ... neither acknowledged nor appreciated'. The new paid officers were lambasted as 'a huge machine for distribution ... the very greasing of which will swallow no small share of the fat of the public relief funds'.<sup>166</sup> Even correspondents in the unsympathetic *Scotsman* (a paper which was requesting the return of Central Board funds to contributors on the basis that Highlanders deserved no help) complained that the Board was 'voting away the relief fund to these officials'.<sup>167</sup>

National reporters picked up this line of attack and gave even greater voice to the grievances of former Local Committees. Thomas Mulock, the Board's most prominent journalistic critic and a 'true crusader' according to Fenyo, published a series of articles through 1849 and 1850 as a pamphlet entitled *The Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland Socially Considered*.<sup>168</sup> In it, he characterised the paid inspectorate (mostly constituted of retired naval officers on half-pay) as 'heroes of the quarter deck, accustomed to rule by means of a boatswain's whistle, to effect at land what they had never tried at sea viz. to exact the maximum work for minimum food'.<sup>169</sup>

The inner sanctum of the Central Board was evidently rocked by swelling public disfavour on all sides. In January 1849, William Skene wrote to George Waddington, Under-Secretary of State, to request permission to publish a letter confirming the Board received 'approbation of the government for the course they pursued' despite 'whatever unpopularity'.<sup>170</sup>

As well as provoking anxiety, the cumulative effect of this negative publicity campaign achieved more concrete results in terms of real redress of Local Committees' grievances. To justify its position, the Board partially reversed two of its headline policies: the paid inspectorates and destitution tests. Firstly, the organisation laid off a considerable number of its salaried employees between the 1848 and 1849 relief seasons.<sup>171</sup> Announcing that 'a much smaller number of subordinate Officers will be required', the Central Board 'dispensed with the services of a Depute-

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<sup>166</sup> *ibid*

<sup>167</sup> Fenyo, 2000, p.107-16; 'Skye – The Destitution Tests', *Scotsman*, 26 January 1848

<sup>168</sup> Fenyo, 2000, p.6

<sup>169</sup> T. Mulock, *The Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland Socially Considered* (Inverness: C. Keith, 1850) p.81

<sup>170</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1849, First, p.14

<sup>171</sup> *ibid*, p.19. There appear to be no records of which specific staff were dismissed, so exact figures are unavailable.

Inspector' in Shetland, Ullapool and Gairloch. Additionally, they fixed the pay scales 'very considerably lower than formerly' to assure the public that there was a 'very great reduction in the expense of management'.<sup>172</sup>

Secondly, and with greater impact for sufferers of malnutrition, the Board relaxed the destitution test in select circumstances. Captain Rose recognised that many individuals, even those not receiving parochial relief, were too 'aged and infirm' to perform work. In April 1848, special exceptions were made to allow gratuitous relief, despite the Board's previous assertion it would never consider such applications.<sup>173</sup> Additionally, the Board yielded to 'local wisdom' and decided to permit croft work as an alternative to public construction of piers and roads under the test during the harvest period in 1848. To justify the decision, they argued that drawbacks of unsupervised labour were outweighed by potential for improved agricultural output and lessened dependence on relief funds. Notably, this had been one of the subversions of the labour test for which the Board criticised the Shieldaig Local Committee in 1847.<sup>174</sup> Its adoption as official policy demonstrated Local Committees' success in disrupting the Board's ideological crusade to proletarianize Highlanders and supporting sustainable, autonomous subsistence.

Success from Local Committees' public appeals is even more remarkable when set in the context of prevailing opinion towards charity in the Highlands in the mid-nineteenth century. Views that racially-inferior Highlanders were undeserving had grown towards the end of the eighteenth century, but as Fenyo notes, 'during the nineteenth century they became fully-fledged'.<sup>175</sup> 'The two largest and most influential papers', the *Glasgow Herald* and *Scotsman*, had fundamentally contemptuous attitudes towards Gaels, criticising the Board for being 'too liberal'.<sup>176</sup> James Bruce, *Scotsman* Commissioner, for example, claimed that Highlanders had decided to 'relieve the monotony of their idleness by resorting to cunning and low imposition on strangers'.<sup>177</sup> That the Central Board ultimately modified their policies to reflect sympathetic views speaks to the triumph of Local Committees' ability to use the press to rewrite contemporary narratives about the nature of Highland populations and the maltreatment they were suffering.

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<sup>172</sup> *ibid*

<sup>173</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Second, p.34-5

<sup>174</sup> *ibid*, 1847, Sixth, p.24

<sup>175</sup> Fenyo, 2000, p.22

<sup>176</sup> *ibid*, p.67

<sup>177</sup> 'Inquiry into the Distress in the Highlands and Islands', *Scotsman*, 30 January 1847

### Groundwork for future resistance?

There is a parallel between Local Committees' newspaper contributions and the similarly successful public appeals from within the Highlands which came later in the nineteenth century. Escalation to the Battle of Braes and Napier Commission, Cameron contends, required a watershed moment when perceptions of the Highlands began to be 'generated from within' to induce 'assertiveness and political action'; he places this development in the 1870s.<sup>178</sup> Public support mobilised by Local Committees certainly fell far short of the critical mass of interest built by later nineteenth century groups, like the Highland Land Law Reform Association. Nonetheless, Local Committees demonstrated an earlier ability to generate national narratives about mistreatment of Highlanders and malversation of the funds collected to help. This may have set an important precedent for future action.

As alluded to earlier, the rejection of the destitution test in northern Skye may also have prefigured a later tradition of striking in the region. When 'poverty gave way to protest' in the 1880s, Kilmuir became the focal point of agitation just as it had been in the late 1840s, although strikes represented refusal to make rent payments rather than taking action against famine relief programmes.<sup>179</sup> No Local Committee members specifically from Kilmuir reappear in the Napier Commission. Mackinnon observes, however, that most delegates to the Napier Commission from Kilmuir and Glendale would have endured the famine during their formative years, since their average age in 1883 was 53.<sup>180</sup> It is possible these future delegates and organisers of Kilmuir strikes gained early experience of political assertion by participating in local agitation against the Central Board. Actions in the 1840s, therefore, may represent a significant early stage in the development of a new, more proactive style of resistance that demanded redress of Highlanders' grievances.

Although not from Kilmuir, many important personnel from other Local Committees did go on to express critical consideration of economic conditions in the Highlands when advocating land reform to Napier's Commission. Neil McPherson, a tenant at Gadintailie and Local Committee member for Portree in 1847, was nominated by his community in 1883 to complain that termination of hill pasture rights had left them 'so poor' that, 'we have been obliged to spend our all for food'.<sup>181</sup> In his testimonies to the Commission 46 years later, he pinpointed the famine as the origin of a negative

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<sup>178</sup> Cameron, 2007, p.218 & 223

<sup>179</sup> Cameron, 2007, p.217

<sup>180</sup> Mackinnon, 2019, p.284

<sup>181</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 1, p.16

spiral of poverty for the communities. Local Committee activity, therefore, may have been an important moment in the development of leadership from the elite within ordinary Highland society.

More significantly, Local Committee actions lend weight to Hunter's overarching contention that the Disruption generated Highland assertiveness that 'contributed to the more important victory of 1886'.<sup>182</sup> Only four years after the Free Church's formation, opposition to the Board from within Local Committees appears to have set the tone for the denomination's role later in the nineteenth century, when 'many...in the Free Church offered strong support for land agitation'.<sup>183</sup> Laymen from Local Committees, like Donald McQueen at Duirinish, went on to use their knowledge of poverty since the famine to campaign for reform before the Napier Commission, also citing famine as the beginning of a sustained crisis.<sup>184</sup> This evidence does not stretch to corroborate Hunter's class-based reasoning that the Free Church 'welded a disparate collection of small tenants into a community capable of acting collectively', but it does reinforce Meek's assertion that the denomination provided 'powerful locality leaders in the struggle for crofters' rights'.<sup>185</sup>

Indeed, some Free Church ministers who actively supported later land reform protests seem to have drawn on their experiences on Local Committees to develop resistance strategies. The minister at Creich in Sutherland, Gustavus Aird, exemplified this. Before the famine, Aird had effectively ended opposition to the clearance of Glencalvie in 1845 by convincing tenants to accept their fate.<sup>186</sup> Contestation of the Board's policies appears to have represented a turning point for him, after which he counselled more active opposition to injustice. Aird's Local Committee at Creich rejected the Board's relief terms and offered gratuitous relief, prompting an inspector to complain that he had 'little approval to bestow'.<sup>187</sup> Forty years later, recalling of the use of charitable funds to defy authority in 1847, he collected money to offer support to the Lochs crofters who raided Park deer forest.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Hunter, 1974, p.112

<sup>183</sup> Ansdell, 1998, p.151

<sup>184</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 1, p.339

<sup>185</sup> Hunter, 1974, p.112; D.E. Meek, 'The land question answered from the Bible; the land issue and the development of a Highland theology of Liberation', *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 103(2), 1987, pp.84-89

<sup>186</sup> Macinnes, 1990, p.48

<sup>187</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.45

<sup>188</sup> A.W. MacColl, *Land, Faith and the Crofting Community: Christianity and Social Criticism in the Highlands of Scotland 1843-1893* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) p.174. That year, Aird also chaired a meeting of Free Church ministers to protest against the inadequacy of the Crofters Act.

## Conclusion

The story of Local Committee resistance reveals the need to complicate the portrayal of seemingly consistent organisations in Highland historiography to reveal potential instances of long-term opposition from within. The Central Board was significantly more disunified, and much less impervious to public disapproval, than its previous characterisation. Internal conflicts and resultant public discontent destabilised the organisation and prevented it from fully effecting its schemes in 1847 and 1848, which would have been 'more likely to degrade and ruin our people than to elevate their condition', according to Local Committees.<sup>189</sup> From the sophisticated, often subtle, actions of Local Committee members, it is clear that Highlanders were not entirely unresistant during the famine era, and the historiography's conceptualisation of opposition must be expanded beyond Richards' reactionary riots.

Evidence relating to Local Committees also challenges the consensus that passivity was a legacy of the famine era. Quite the opposite, it appears to have played an early role in the development of a more sophisticated and assertive Highland resistance that would mature in the 1870s and 1880s. Contrary to Devine's assertion that resistance came from those not demoralised by experience of famine, many of the key players in later agitation, including crofting community elites and Free Church activists, seemingly acquired valuable experience of resisting injustice from authority while working on Local Committees.<sup>190</sup> Forms of opposition, such as strikes and the rewriting of public narratives from Highland perspectives, also developed through the nineteenth century in a way that may have built on Local Committees' experiences and actions.

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<sup>189</sup> 'Highland Destitution and the Highland Destitution Fund', *Inverness Courier*, 25 January 1848

<sup>190</sup> Devine, 1994, p.222

## Chapter 2 – Petitions to the Central Board

I have already transmitted two Memorials from the North Isles, petitioning the Board to take into consideration the extreme destitution there, and praying that the Board would grant for their relief such part of the balance that may remain at their disposal ... Pinching want must be felt by a great majority of the people, the drain consequent upon the dearth of four successive seasons having swept away their whole available means, and (in the truthful words of the petition) “reduced them to absolute beggary”.

- *Captain Robert Craigie in correspondence with William Skene, 1 October 1850*<sup>191</sup>

The predominantly ‘top-down’ accounts of the famine in existing historiography have resulted from reliance on correspondence between Central Board and Government officials as source material. Historians, such as Devine, have narrated relief programmes from the perspective of those in power, describing them as experimental implementations of ‘the teachings of classical political economy’.<sup>192</sup> In such a straightforward recounting of the colonial archive, the ordinary Highlanders who received relief appear only as passive respondents and victims of laissez faire doctrinairism.

Contained within the appendices of Central Board reports there are numerous petitions from the Highlands which have yet to be analysed in detail. These petitions offer an opportunity for novel consideration of the Central Board’s relief programme ‘from below’. As Cameron remarks, focusing on petitions can ‘give voice to the crofting community’s view’ of events during the era of Clearances and counter the dominant elite-centric narratives that pervade most official record-keeping.<sup>193</sup> Petitions are particularly important sources in the Highland context, according to Houston and Schrank: rural Scottish populations were more law-abiding than rebellious English and Irish counterparts, preferring to write as an outlet for desperation, dissatisfaction and dissent.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, Second, p.127

<sup>192</sup> Devine, 1992, p.125

<sup>193</sup> E. Cameron, “Richards, The Highland Clearances The Highland Clearances: People, Landlords and Rural Turmoil”, *The Scottish Historical Review*, 81:1, 2002, pp.146-147

<sup>194</sup> R.A. Houston, *Peasant Petitions: Social Relations and Economic Life on Landed Estates, 1600–1850*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), p.294; G. Schrank, *An Orkney Estate: Improvements at Graemeshall, 1827-1888* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1995), p.18-19, 72-87



Despite these observations by Cameron, Houston and Schrank, there have been few attempts to examine the traditions of petitioning in the nineteenth century Highlands. The history of local interactions with welfare agencies in Scotland, particularly the Highlands and Islands, remains significantly less understood than in the rest of Britain.<sup>195</sup> The only systematic study of petitioning during the Great Highland Famine is an analysis of paupers' letters to parochial boards from Tongue in Sutherland between 1846 and 1899, conducted by Jones and King.<sup>196</sup>

Through the nineteenth century, Jones and King identify a changing epistolary relationship in Highland poor relief petitions. They argue that addresses to superiors from 1846 to 1852 were meek entreaties following 'strict formal rules' and that requests became more assertive in the final decades of the century, when they started to be phrased in the language of rights.<sup>197</sup> Echoing Devine's description of 'demoralised' Highlanders during famine, they assert that 'the famine years of the 1840s and 1850s dealt a further blow to already demoralized and unstable crofting communities in Sutherland, so that there was neither widespread appetite nor cultural precedent for an assertion of "rights" among Tongue's poor residents at this time'.<sup>198</sup> The subsequent politicisation of Highland communities, they contest, was attributable to a growth in confidence that was only possible following the long economic recovery after crisis.

Petitions to the Central Board offer a different perspective from which to test this theory, investigate local community interactions with poor relief systems, and explore potential instances of overlooked political assertion from Highlanders during the famine. Petitions to the Board differ from the Sutherland paupers' letters in that they were addressed to a relief organisation that was temporary and whose funds were amassed through voluntary donation rather than by compulsory poor rate assessment. Appeals to the Central Board, therefore, were unlikely to follow the set of 'strict formal rules' identified by Jones and King as characteristic in mid-nineteenth century petitioning: there was no standard way to address the organisation since it had only recently come into existence and its function was less clearly defined than parochial boards. Accordingly, the petitions document the emergence of a relationship between destitute communities and the Central Board, providing insight into Highlanders' understanding of the relief organisation and how to interact with it.

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<sup>195</sup> R.A. Houston, 'Review of On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c.1550-1750', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 85(2), 2006, pp.351-353

<sup>196</sup> P. Jones, and S. King, 'Voices from the Far North: Pauper Letters and the Provision of Welfare in Sutherland, 1845-1900', *Journal of British Studies*, 55(1), 2016, pp.76-98

<sup>197</sup> *ibid*, p.87

<sup>198</sup> *ibid*, p.95

As in any use of petitions to gauge public reaction, it is necessary to make a methodological note that these documents are not necessarily sincere, uncontrived reflections of communities' conditions and mindsets. Wary of Cameron's optimism about the utility of petitions in Highland histories 'from below', Mackinnon warns that the 'collective state of mind' is 'generally not directly available to the historian'.<sup>199</sup> By this, Mackinnon means that the authentic voices of communities underwent mediation processes in the drafting, translating and transcribing of petitions. Jones observes in a southern English context, for example, that this mediation often included the 'filtering [of] their material and practical needs through a fine rhetorical mesh so that such requests to a greater or lesser extent fulfilled, or corresponded to, the expectations' of those to whom they appealed.<sup>200</sup>

That petitions to the Central Board may be mediated sources, however, does not negate their utility. To the contrary, as Houston points out, much is revealed through the content that petitioners chose to emphasise and omit.<sup>201</sup> This allows for analysis of how Highlanders modified their own approaches according to how they perceived the Central Board.

Prior to examining the content of appeals to the Central Board, this chapter begins by identifying some key patterns, including the identities, timings and geographical provenances of petitions. Next, there follows investigation of the subjects, formats and tones of the standard requests for more generous relief. This analysis then extends to the more uncommon petitions which asked the Central Board to intervene over proprietors' conduct and issues of land use. Finally, the outcomes of petitions to the Central Board are reviewed.

### **Patterns of petitioning**

The most frequent petitioners were clergy: requests from ministers accounted for 19 of the total of 43 petitions that were received and published by the Board. Clergymen generally avoided destitution; they appealed not for personal gain, but on behalf of their suffering parishioners. For example, the Free Church minister of Uig in Lewis, Reverend John McIntyre of Kilmonivaig, began his March 1849 appeal by stating: 'We ... seeing the extreme destitution of the people around us (though ourselves, in the good providence of god, have not felt much of it as yet) are moved with a

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<sup>199</sup> Mackinnon, 2019, p.282

<sup>200</sup> P. Jones, "'I cannot keep my place without being deascent': Pauper Letters, Parish Clothing and Pragmatism in the South of England, 1750-1830', *Rural History*, 20(1), 2009, pp.31-49, p.31

<sup>201</sup> Houston, 2014, p.24-32

deep sense of duty to make this very urgent appeal to the very serious consideration of your Committee'.<sup>202</sup>

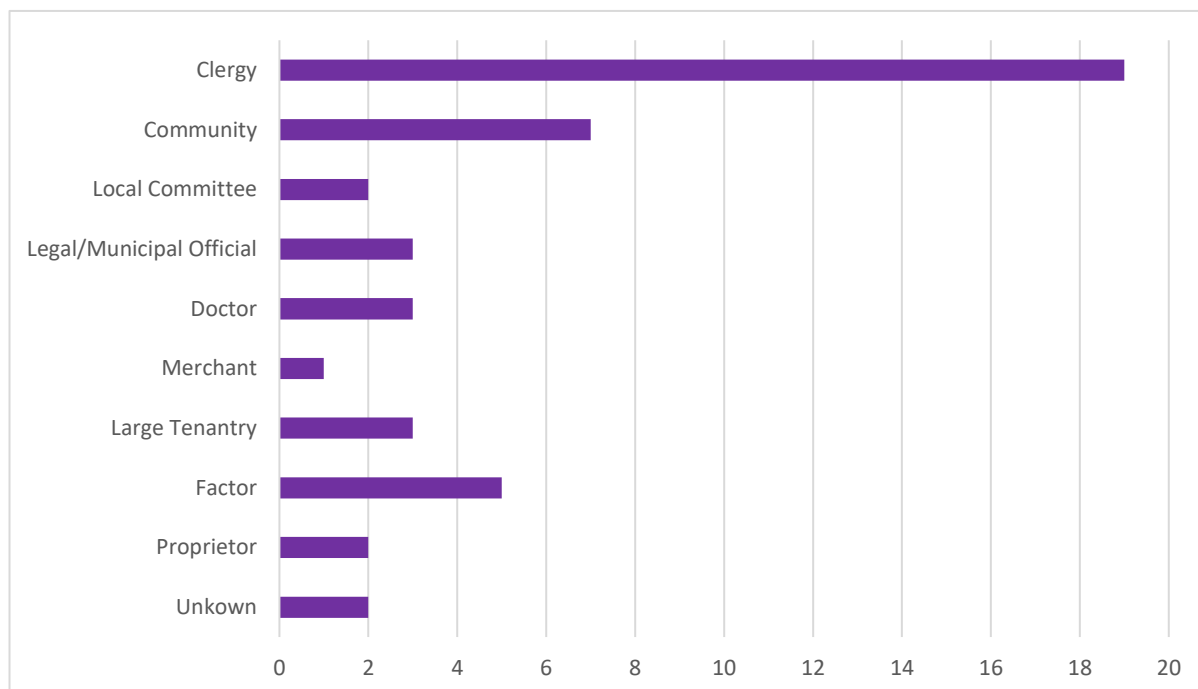


Figure 7 - Identities of those who wrote petitions to the Central Board between 1847 and 1850, based on the Reports of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Sections

As was the case in Local Committee interference in Central Board policies, petitioning was used by the Free Church to demonstrate its continued commitment to famine relief beyond the official termination of its involvement in February 1847.<sup>203</sup> Of the 19 petitions from ministers, Free Church clergy were responsible for 10. The Synod of Argyll even sent a deputation to the meeting of the Glasgow Section in autumn 1847. Free Church representatives introduced a memorial to 'pray' that the Central Board 'reconsider and rescind their Resolution to discontinue the Distribution of the Fund placed at their disposal' after Martinmas that year.<sup>204</sup>

The next most significant group of petitioners were communities themselves.<sup>205</sup> In September 1850, for instance, a letter was sent to the Board signed by the '206 Heads of Families' of the 'Crofters and Householders of the United Parishes of Mid and South Yell, Shetland'.<sup>206</sup> These petitions presumably

<sup>202</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.23. The first person plural phrasing may indicate that this was the opinion of the kirk session, not just the minister.

<sup>203</sup> Due to the fact that the Glasgow Section were the primary publishers of petitions but did not identify the individuals on its Local Committees, there is insufficient data to determine whether there were significant overlaps in personnel between Local Committees and petitioners.

<sup>204</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1847, First, p.5

<sup>205</sup> No particular geographical pattern emerges from community petitions, which came from places as varied as Skye, Mull, Lochaber and Shetland.

<sup>206</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, Second, p.126

arose from public gatherings at which appeals would have been formulated. One such meeting at Fort William on 19 December 1848 resulted in a petition signed by ‘the Inhabitants of Fort William’.<sup>207</sup> It is worth noting that clergy would have featured heavily as organisational forces in these community efforts as well. Petitions from the inhabitants of Glenelg in 1849 and Yell in 1850 were both accompanied by letters from local ministers which vouched for the veracity of the statements.<sup>208</sup>

At least five other petitions came from various individuals who held the status of middle class professionals, such as doctors and merchants. Notably, all such examples were from the Hebrides, perhaps because this was the location where poverty was worst, according to the Central Board.<sup>209</sup> Most likely, these middle-class, Hebridean petitioners would have been the individuals who observed and interacted with the most destitute on a regular basis; Dr Stewart of Barra, for example witnessed how malnutrition was causing the declining health of the islanders under his charge and he wrote to inform the Board in 1849.<sup>210</sup> Similar close contact with the destitute also spurred legal and local government officials to petition with relative frequency. Sheriff Shaw of Inverness and Sheriff Substitute Robertson of Tobermory, for example, both conducted tours of the regions under their authority and alerted the Board to deteriorating conditions in the Western Isles in 1847.<sup>211</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, given their reputation, factors also authored petitions to the Board on five occasions. Tindley and Richards exemplify negative attitudes towards mid-nineteenth century factors, like Evander Mclver, by noting their description as ‘a relic of an unlamented past’.<sup>212</sup> As Tindley points out, this is often a narrow, stereotyped view of complex characters.<sup>213</sup> Far from being cruel, many factors demonstrated great sympathy for famine sufferers. The factor at Lochshiel, Alex McDonald, petitioned the Board for more assistance by reporting with emotion in February 1849 that starving people were coming to him ‘shedding tears and begging’.<sup>214</sup> The factor at Strontian, William Kennedy, wrote similarly that month, arguing evocatively that ‘the poor people of this district will, for the first time since the failure of the potato crop, be doomed to suffer the greatest privations and in some places, death from actual want may take place’. The local community, he

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<sup>207</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.16

<sup>208</sup> *ibid*, p.20; Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, Second, p.126

<sup>209</sup> *ibid*, 1847, First, p.9. See also the descriptions from Dr Boyter that are recorded later in the chapter.

<sup>210</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.24-5

<sup>211</sup> *ibid*, p.25

<sup>212</sup> A. Tindley and E. Richards ‘Turmoil among the Crofters: Evander Mclver and the ‘Highland Question,’ 1873-1903’, *Agricultural History Review*, 60(2), 2012, pp.191-213, p.202

<sup>213</sup> A. Tindley, ‘“They sow the wind, they reap the whirlwind”: estate management in the post-clearance highlands, c. 1815 to c. 1900’, *Northern Scotland*, new series 3, 2012, pp.66–85, p.67

<sup>214</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.18

declared, were counting on the Board to send ‘a considerable quantity’ of meal.<sup>215</sup> Even the Duke of Argyll’s factor, Colonel John Campbell, petitioned the Board to give more meal to the inhabitants of Tiree in November 1848.<sup>216</sup> This is surprising, since Cregeen records ‘scurrilous songs’ composed about the ‘Black Factor’ in Tiree and describes him as ‘the most hated of all’.<sup>217</sup>

The landlord of Barra and South Uist, Colonel John Gordon of Cluny, also petitioned the Board twice. As discussed below, these two petitions demonstrated less sympathy towards famine sufferers and were more concerned with preservation of estate finances. Large tenants constituted the final substantial set of petitioners. These appeals varied most widely in their intent, with some requesting more liberal relief, but others asking for the Central Board to intervene in disputes on estates. The issues raised included management and distribution of land, fixity of leases, and the relative weight of relief responsibilities between proprietors, Parochial Boards and the Central Board.

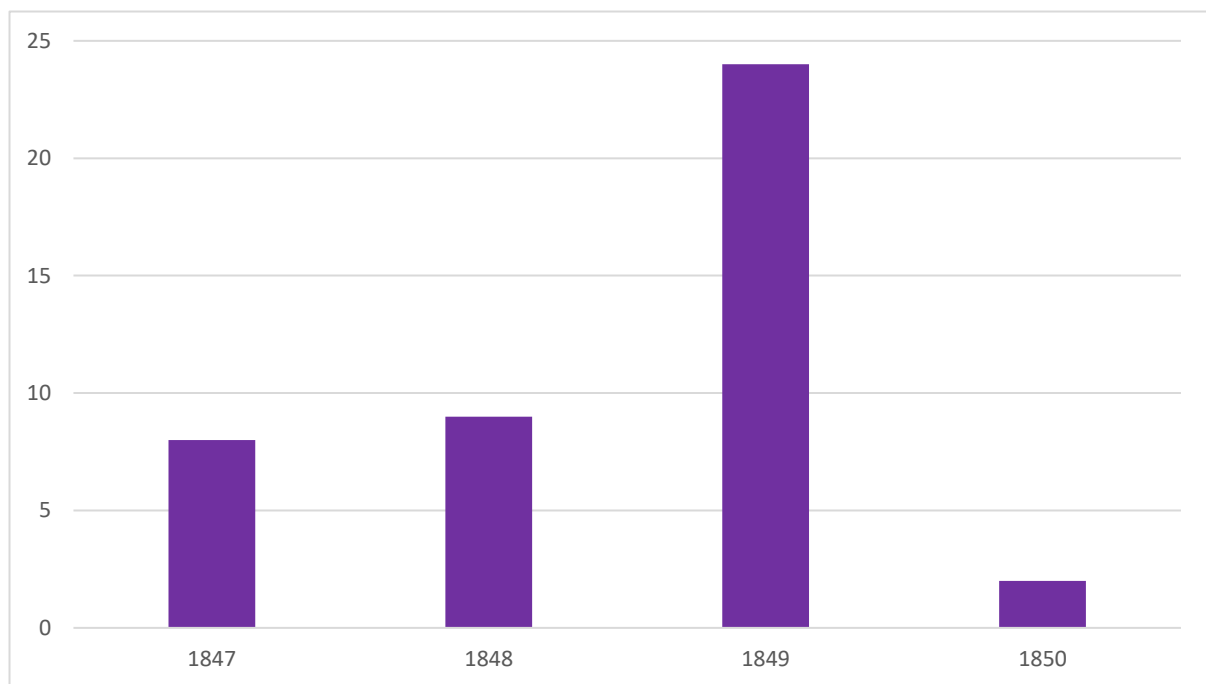


Figure 8- Distribution of petitions across the four years of the Central Board's operations, based on the Reports of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Sections

The Board received appeals in each year of its operations from 1847 to 1850, but they were inundated by an exceptionally large number in 1849. More than half of the 43 petitions were received in that year. Of the 24 petitions in 1849, 19 were simple requests for greater meal supplies. This might be considered surprising given the Central Board’s triumphant proclamations throughout

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<sup>215</sup> *ibid*

<sup>216</sup> *ibid*, p.21

<sup>217</sup> E. Cregeen, ‘Oral Sources for the Social History of the Scottish Highlands and Islands’, *Oral History*, 2(2), 1974, pp.23-36, p.28

the year that its responsibilities for relief and improvement were being 'effectually fulfilled'.<sup>218</sup> Statements of success, however, were probably distorted by the organisation's need to justify the expenditure of voluntarily contributed funds in public reports. As discussed in the previous chapter, Local Committees and concerned individuals, like the factor in Lewis, John Munro Mackenzie, were highlighting the harsh truth that destitution tests were stripping impoverished communities of productive assets and entrenching destitution.<sup>219</sup>

By 1849, the contrast between reality and the Board's self-congratulation was so great that some observers felt obliged to correct the record. At a meeting of the Glasgow Section in July 1849, the Free Church minister of Dunoon, Reverend Dr Hugh Mackay, stated that he 'was not satisfied with the language' used by the Committee to describe the state of destitution. He claimed that many families had sunk into destitution that was as grave as ever.<sup>220</sup> Progressively worsening poverty, particularly after the commencement of the destitution test at the beginning of 1848, offers one explanation for the increased number of appeals for support in 1849.

The increase in petitioning in 1849 might also be explained by disappearance of other outlets for voicing grievances, particularly due to the demise of Local Committee influence. As explored in the previous chapter, Local Committees controlled meal distribution and work exaction throughout 1847. Most likely, appeals for more lenient treatment would have been made to them while they were in operation, rather than to the Edinburgh and Glasgow Sections. In 1848, Local Committees remained the focal points for Highlanders' dissatisfaction through organisation of strikes and press appeals. There is no evidence, however, that Local Committees continued their co-ordination of activism into 1849. That year's torrent of petitions to the Edinburgh and Glasgow Sections may have been a reaction to the fact that discontent could no longer be expressed to more local representatives.

It is more challenging to account for the severe decline of petitioning in 1850. Only two petitions from 1850 were recorded, which defies the trend of increasingly entrenched destitution and the disappearance of other outlets for grievance articulation. One possible reason is that petitions may not have been published in that final season of relief operations. The Committee began the year by

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<sup>218</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1849, Third, p.261

<sup>219</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 4, p.3312; 'Highland Destitution and the Highland Destitution Fund', *Inverness Courier*, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1848

<sup>220</sup> 'Highland Relief Fund – Glasgow Section', *Scotsman*, 11 July 1849. Similar meetings were held by the Edinburgh Section in which public figures could raise their concerns in front of management figures. See, for example, the report in: 'Meeting of The Edinburgh Section of the Highland Destitution Board', *Inverness Courier*, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1847

definitively confirming that it would be 'the last year of Relief' and, possibly due to a recognition that the organisation would be dissolving imminently, both Sections published less thorough reports of their operations.<sup>221</sup> Many petitions may have been sent from Highlanders to the Central Board throughout 1850, particularly to protest the termination of support, but, if so, these have not been recorded.<sup>222</sup>

A number of geographical hotspots are identifiable from the provenance of petitions. The Hebrides feature particularly heavily. A total of 11 petitions came from the Inner Hebridean islands of Mull, Iona, Islay, Jura, Tiree, Coll and Eigg. Another 10 were sent from the Outer Hebridean isles of Barra, Lewis, and the Uists. This could have been the result of particularly severe distress in these regions, where thin strips of coastal land had produced the most marginal living before the failure of the potato. Even the usually callous Inspector for the Glasgow Section, Dr Boyter, admitted that Hebrideans were exceptionally destitute and in need of assistance during his tour of the region in the spring of 1847.<sup>223</sup>

Proprietorial neglect potentially also increased the severity of destitution and quantity of petitions from the Hebrides. As discussed further below, Colonel John Gordon of Cluny's disregard for the relief effort was widely recognised, so it is unsurprising that four petitions came from his estates in Barra and South Uist. Three of those four petitions were from doctors or merchants. This may provide further explanation for the trend for middle-class petitioners in the Isles, whose writing appears to have been in response to a lack of action from Hebridean landlords.

An alternative explanation for the preponderance of Hebridean petitions relates to the different reporting styles and geographical charges of the Glasgow and Edinburgh Sections of the Central Board. The Glasgow Section, responsible for the Hebrides and southwestern Highlands, published 37 of the 43 petitions that were recorded by the Board. The Edinburgh Section's relative disregard for community sentiment may have caused the surprising paucity of petitions from places like Ross-shire and Skye, where there had been such active opposition in connection with Local Committees.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, First, p.1. The Edinburgh Section Report of 1850, for example, had only 130 pages of text, compared to around 400 pages for each of its previous years

<sup>222</sup> These petitions may be documented in the records of local kirk sessions and synods, or even estate records.

<sup>223</sup> 'Highland Relief Fund Board', *Scotsman*, 14 April 1847

<sup>224</sup> Further investigation of the Central Board papers at the National Records of Scotland is necessary to investigate this theory.

There are still clues, however, that Skye, in particular, may have been an important area for petitioning. The small parish of Glenelg in Lochaber, situated directly across the Kyle Rhea and once owned by MacLeod of Dunvegan, sent five petitions to the Glasgow Section. Relative to the size of its population, this number was disproportionately great. As well as Local Committee resistance, a tradition of petitioning from Skye may have emboldened neighbouring parishes with estate links, like Glenelg, to adopt similar approaches to voicing their own grievances.

### **Narrating requests**

Entreaties for more generous relief supplies were by far the most common type of petition, reflecting the severity of destitution, the urgent need to find alternative sources of sustenance and reliance on the Central Board. Almost three-quarters of the petitions acknowledged by the Board requested either that the relief period be extended beyond Martinmas or that greater weekly meal allowances be given to applicants.

Petitioners demonstrated remarkable perceptiveness by narrating requests for more relief in ways that the Board would favour. To counter *laissez faire* 'dread that the Central Board ... undersell the market' or create dependence on charity, no fewer than four relief entreaties offered reassurances that supplies were being distributed with thrift.<sup>225</sup> Reverend Macrae, the Established Church minister of Glenelg, used statistics to prove the prudence with which meal was being distributed in his January 1849 petition. He informed the Board that 'all possible economy has been observed in dispensing the charity, and I assure you it has been no easy task to support 300 persons for six weeks on 32 bolls of meal'.<sup>226</sup> The factor, Alexander McDonald, remarked similarly on the economising of the Loch Shiel community, noting his astonishment at the way they managed to 'spin out their little means' before asking for more supplies.<sup>227</sup>

To convince the ideologically non-interventionist Board of the need for more external relief as a last resort, descriptions of thrift were accompanied on at least three occasions by assertions that Highland communities had already deployed all possible internal support. As discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the destitution test, the Board harboured suspicions that Highland communities owned (and profligately expended) more resources than they admitted. To counter this notion, Dr Stewart lamented to the Board from Barra in January 1849 that 'some of the people

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<sup>225</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.46

<sup>226</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.19

<sup>227</sup> *ibid*, p.18



are kept in life by handfuls and platefuls of meal from the houses of respectable people in the island'.<sup>228</sup> The Church of Scotland minister on Coll, Neill MacLean, observed in November 1848 that 'even those who ... will have not have any of their own [food] by the beginning of May, are at present aiding their more unfortunate neighbours'.<sup>229</sup> With no other resources available, both petitioners told the Central Board that communities looked to supplies from the relief programme as a last hope.

Most importantly, petitioners understood the Board's dogmatic adherence to a policy of refusing relief to those who would not work, so three requests from communities emphasised a willingness to take up employment to gain their approval. Petitioners from Fort William made it clear to the Board in 1847 that they were 'willing to be any way employed'.<sup>230</sup> In a more extreme example, the householders of Mid and South Yell illustrated their eagerness to work in September 1850 by offering to give 'a portion of their work gratis for the favour of being employed at full day's wages so many days in the week'.<sup>231</sup> An interpretation of this offer as desperation fails to appreciate how communities intelligently identified the Board's concerns about charitable distribution and proposed more acceptable relief terms to improve chances of success. Perceptiveness in famine era petitioning counters the contention from Jones and King that more sophisticated strategies of petitioning narration and 'filtering' only developed in the decades after the 1840s.<sup>232</sup>

Cause for critical consideration of the 'filtering' process is also given by the speed and skill with which petitioners identified the Board's ideologies and narrated requests accordingly. It is unlikely that petitions were simply copied and adapted with minor adjustments from widely-circulating guidance manuals, as Houston asserts was often the case in this period.<sup>233</sup> Even the earliest petitions to the Board, such as from Fort William in 1847, insightfully manipulated particular beliefs about charity in the *Gàidhealtachd*, such as Highlanders' supposed indolence and the importance of work exaction.<sup>234</sup> This reveals intelligent and original thought from educated and well-informed individuals. The numerous appeals from ministers, and the co-signing of the community petition by Reverend John Brown of Glenelg Free Church, may indicate that clergy contributed to the way

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<sup>228</sup> *ibid*, p.25

<sup>229</sup> *ibid*, p.22

<sup>230</sup> *ibid*, p.16

<sup>231</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, Second, p.126

<sup>232</sup> Jones & King, 2016, p.93

<sup>233</sup> Houston, 2014, p.74

<sup>234</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.16

petitions were crafted for maximum impact. Once more, this points to the role of the Free Church in generating social leadership in the Highlands.

### Assertiveness

Those petitioning the Board on behalf of the destitute tended to emphasise Gaelic societal expectations that elites assume caring responsibilities at times of crisis; this was implied in practically all requests for more relief. Leaders had been responsible for protecting the vulnerable in the social contract of clanship systems.<sup>235</sup> The lasting relevance of this assumption reveals itself in nineteenth century Gaelic poetry, Meek notes.<sup>236</sup> Even establishment figures recognised continued expectations for elites in the mid-nineteenth century *Gàidhealtachd*: Sir Edward Coffin, the official in charge of the government response to the Highland Famine, pronounced in October 1846 that landlords retained an 'obligation' to relieve tenants.<sup>237</sup> When the Board initiated relief efforts in February 1847 in response to proprietorial failure to remedy dearth, Highlanders asserted that the organisation had assumed a share of landlords' responsibility within the Gaelic social contract. In February 1849, the petition from the Established Church minister at Glenelg, Reverend Macrae, summarised that the Board was 'morally, if not legally, responsible' for relief provision.<sup>238</sup>

Petitioners narrated the plight of isolated individuals and starving dependents to remind the Board of its social duty to relieve the helpless. This was in the same spirit as metaphors comparing those unprotected by their leaders to motherless lambs or bees without hives, which MacInnes observes recurring over the centuries in Gaelic poetry.<sup>239</sup> The Church of Scotland minister on Eigg, Reverend Peter Grant, requested more meal supplies in January 1849 by reporting that there were 'no less

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<sup>235</sup> M.D. MacGregor, 'The statutes of Iona: text and context', *Innes Review*, 57(2), 2016, pp. 111-181, p.156

<sup>236</sup> D.E. Meek *Tuath is Tighearna: Tenants and Landlords: An Anthology of Gaelic Poetry of Social and Political Protest from the Clearances to the Land Agitation* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press for the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1995)

For more on elite responsibilities after the 'gradual renunciation ... of the obligations within the social contract that was clanship', see:

<sup>237</sup> Sir Edward Coffin, the minister co-ordinating Government famine response before the creation of the Central Board, exemplified these expectations in October 1846 by reflecting: 'as the crisis approaches, I am in hopes that no Highland proprietor will be found wanting in the discharge of an obligation, which I found all with whom I communicated ready to acknowledge'. Quoted in Devine, 1992, p.138. It is worth noting that this assumption of proprietorial responsibility was contested by some landlords. Rebuttals from Colonel John Gordon of Cluny, owner of Barra and parts of South Uist, are discussed below.

<sup>238</sup> *ibid*, p.20

<sup>239</sup> J. MacInnes, 'The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and Its Historical Background' in M. Newton (ed.) *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: selected essays of John MacInnes* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), p.279

than seventeen families, or 120 individuals, young and old, who are bordering here on starvation'.<sup>240</sup> William Young, a corn dealer on South Uist, observed in the same month that 'aged and single women, or widows with families unable to work' were among the destitute.<sup>241</sup> Importantly, he lamented that Parochial Boards had denied relief to those individuals, which made them completely reliant on the Central Board for sustenance.

Petitions from communities themselves also invoked the Gaelic social contract. Primarily, and perhaps unexpectedly given the defiance among Highland populations that Local Committees roused against relief rules, this was partly achieved through praise of the Central Board. Such expressions were probably not authentic shows of meek gratitude in response to famine relief. Instead, they epitomised the 'praise of patron' in addresses to superiors within Gaelic society.<sup>242</sup> As MacInnes explains, the 'accomplishments' of elites in 'discharge of ... duties to [their] people' were recognised to simultaneously assert their 'obligations'.<sup>243</sup> Petitions followed a seemingly standard format: appreciation for the Board's previous assistance was expressed before appealing for more aid. Seeking an extension of relief operations beyond Martinmas 1847, the petition from Fort William began by acknowledging that 'the Petitioners and their respective helpless families would have assuredly perished were it not for the humane and generous aid which your honours voluntarily contributed towards their support and maintenance'.<sup>244</sup> Similarly, a request from the community at Glenelg in 1849 recognised that 'in consequence of the entire failure of their own resources, these people have been thrown, for the last two years, on the Relief Fund for support, without which assistance many of them must have perished of hunger'.<sup>245</sup>

Petitioners highlighted the reciprocity of the social contract, which exchanged praise for support; they explained that the Board's continued status as respected elites depended on their fulfilment of relief responsibilities. The 1847 petition from Fort William spelled out this social transaction to the organisation: 'The Petitioners ... earnestly beg of the Committee to seriously look into their case and accede to their proposition, and by so doing, they will feel grateful to their honours'.<sup>246</sup> Put differently, respect would only be extended to the Board if it successfully discharged its relief duties. This differs subtly from descriptions by Houston and Andrew of entreating petitions as proposals of

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<sup>240</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.23

<sup>241</sup> *ibid*, p.23-4

<sup>242</sup> MacInnes, 2006, p.316

<sup>243</sup> *ibid*, p.279. In this instance MacInnes is referring to addresses to superiors in the form of panegyric poetry.

<sup>244</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.16

<sup>245</sup> *ibid*, p.20

<sup>246</sup> *ibid*, p.16

‘exchange of dependence for obligation, of service for care, of need for succour’.<sup>247</sup> Petitions to the Board were characterised less by submissive suggestions of a trade, more by dignified assertions of unfulfilled responsibilities and implicit threats to withhold respect from socio-economic superiors. Famine era invocation of social duties through this historic pattern of interaction suggests inaccuracy in depictions of deferential, downtrodden petitioners by Jones and King.<sup>248</sup>

Given the worsening conditions and proliferation of petitions in 1849, it might be expected that entreaties’ tones became increasingly desperate and ill-mannered, but requests continued to be expressed in ostensibly respectful tones, despite more appeals for increased urgency. In February 1849, the ‘urgent and earnest’ request from Reverend Ronald Rankin, the Catholic priest at Moidart, asked the Central Board to ‘have the kindness to forward meal to this country without loss of time’.<sup>249</sup> The Church of Scotland minister at Ardnamurchan, Reverend David Stewart, wrote more strongly in February 1849 that ‘there is no time to lose’.<sup>250</sup> Through 1849, petitioners also began to send more follow-up requests to the Board, with each appeal becoming progressively more pressing. For instance, William Kennedy, the factor at Strontian wrote to ‘beg that you will immediately forward supplies’ in January 1849. Feeling urged to appeal again only one month later, he warned the Board that they could ‘delay no longer’.<sup>251</sup>

Although no petitions went so far as to openly criticise the Board, the growing absence of praise is a recognisable trend through the petitions of 1849. In a society in which respect was the norm, MacInnes notes that the withholding, or qualification, of praise represented criticism.<sup>252</sup> The Free Church minister of Glenelg, Reverend Brown, neglected to give thanks for the relief programme in his February 1849 petition. He then informed the Board that ‘the prospects of the people are as dark as ever’ and implored them ‘in the name of reason and religion’ to yield on their dogmatic refusal to provide relief without work’.<sup>253</sup> A more threatening, but still implicit, criticism of the Board was offered by Reverend David Ross, the Church of Scotland minister at Tobermory. To spur the Board to action by implying its responsibility for a forthcoming tragedy, he signed off his January 1849 petition by declaring that record of his correspondence would exonerate him from the future

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<sup>247</sup> Houston, 2014, p.24; D.T. Andrew, ‘Noblesse Oblige: Female Charity in an Age of Sentiment’, in J. Brewer and S. Staves (eds.) *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.275-300, p.293

<sup>248</sup> Jones and King, 2016, p.95

<sup>249</sup> *ibid*, p.18

<sup>250</sup> *ibid*, p.17

<sup>251</sup> *ibid*, p.18

<sup>252</sup> MacInnes, 2006, p.289

<sup>253</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.20

consequences of withheld relief.<sup>254</sup> Eight petitions used such oblique, emotive threats to link Central Board inaction to reported imminent starvation.

Appeals to the unwritten social contract of elites' obligations raise the question of whether Highlanders asserted a right to famine relief. Accounts from Jones and King of feeble, starving communities without 'widespread appetite ... for an assertion of rights' contrast sharply with the verdict of the 1851 McNeill Report.<sup>255</sup> Sir John McNeill complained that Highlanders regarded the Central Board as recognition of their entitlement to relief for the able-bodied poor, writing:

[Following the 1845 Act for The Amendment and better Administration of the Laws Relating to the relief of the Poor in Scotland], they immediately conceived exaggerated notions of the nature and extent of those rights. These misapprehensions had not been removed when the issue of relief from the Destitution Fund commenced. The danger that relief provided by statute for one class of destitute persons, and that provided by voluntary charity for another, might be confounded together by the working populations in remote parishes, was foreseen, and attempts were made to guard against this misapprehension; but the distinction was not understood, and in the minds even of educated men, there was often some confusion on the subject. The use of the same terms, such as "Board", "Inspector", "Relief" &c. no doubt somewhat contributed to produce that result: and it was hardly intelligible to the inhabitants of those districts that relief administered on so great a scale by a central board, and through inspectors, some of whom were officers in Her Majesty's service, could be derived from the private charity of unknown individuals, or could be unconnected with the public authorities of the country. They regarded it as the acknowledgement of a right, the precise limits of which they did not know, but which they believed to be permanent.<sup>256</sup>

Arguably, protestation against entitlements reflects more on McNeill's personal biases than the sentiments of contemporary Highlanders. Due to his unwavering belief in the scholarship of Thomas Malthus and classical economists, McNeill's primary fear was the prospect of swelling compulsory poor-rate assessments.<sup>257</sup> Famine relief in the Highlands, he believed, set a dangerous precedent for

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<sup>254</sup> *ibid*, p.23

<sup>255</sup> Jones and King, 2016, p.95

<sup>256</sup> McNeill Report, p.xiii. It is worth noting the irony in McNeill's complaints that Highlanders erroneously viewed the Board as an arm of Government. They were, perhaps, correct to do so. As Devine puts it, officials were seeking to transform the organisation into a 'quasi-governmental agency'. Potential tactical appeals to the Board as a governmental authority are explored later in the chapter.

<sup>257</sup> Devine, 1992, p.125

extending relief to the able-bodied. Only one month after the Central Board's formation, McNeill was already certain of his preference for emigration. He wrote to Charles Trevelyan in March 1847 to express concerns that the relief programme would stimulate dependency on charity and prove 'injurious to the country'.<sup>258</sup> Given his convictions, it is unsurprising that McNeill was quick to accuse relief-seeking Highlanders of proclaiming undue entitlement. Jones and King are, in fact, correct to observe that in mid-nineteenth century petitions, including those to the Central Board, the term 'right' never appeared.

Yet mid-nineteenth century Highlanders did demonstrate assertiveness and some language associated with the concept of rights. Petitions expressed righteous anger and forthrightly denounced injustices perpetrated by the Central Board. Petitioners frequently asserted that the money collected for their benefit ought to be distributed to them and censured the Board's attempts to withhold its funds. Fort William inhabitants in 1847 requested further supplies of meal by reminding the Board that 'a large fund still remains at the disposal of the Glasgow Committee, given by the public for that purpose'.<sup>259</sup> When assistance to struggling households in Shetland waned in the autumn of 1850, the Unst and Yell clergymen stated pointedly in their petition that 'to relieve destitution wherever it exists is, or should be, the primary object of the Destitution Fund'.<sup>260</sup>

More defiantly, petitioners reinforced the Board's obligation to dispense meal by warning the Committee that it would bear responsibility for any deaths by starvation should it fail to give relief. Asking for support through the winter months after Martinmas, the 1847 Fort William petition told the Board that 'if deaths occur in the meantime, the responsibility will lie on the Committee'.<sup>261</sup> As noted above, the Established Church minister of Glenelg, Reverend Macrae, reprimanded the Board in similar tones in February 1849, by cautioning the Committee that it would be 'morally, if not legally, responsible for all of the deaths in the area'.<sup>262</sup> Declarations of the Board's responsibility to implement its fund and prevent starvation essentially expounded that Highlanders held a right to receive help from the organisation. Statements of charitable responsibility stop short of explicitly expressing individuals' rights to relief, as would be professed later in the nineteenth century, but they illustrate, contrary to the view of Jones and King, that famine era Highland communities made confident political assertions and used direct language associated with rights.

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<sup>258</sup> *ibid*

<sup>259</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.16

<sup>260</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, Second, p.122

<sup>261</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.16

<sup>262</sup> *ibid*, p.20

Addresses to the Central Board also controvert the conclusion of Jones and King that mid-nineteenth century petitions showed 'reluctance to protest openly against the hardships they suffered at the hands of landowners and estate managers'.<sup>263</sup> At least six petitions asked the Board to intervene and censure proprietors for their mistreatment of tenants. On at least two occasions, this related to the management of relief programmes that were conducted under the aegis of the Central Board. The people of Barra complained to the Glasgow Section in the summer of 1847 that Colonel Gordon was giving 'neither food nor money' to those who worked on his kelp harvesting relief scheme.<sup>264</sup> Similar accusations of 'mistreatment' were levelled against Lord MacDonald by the inhabitants of North Uist throughout 1847.<sup>265</sup> In a more complex case, the September 1850 petition from Mid and South Yell inveighed against proprietorial negligence. By this late stage in their operations, the Central Board had ceased to operate test work sites overseen by inspectors and only administered relief funds to landlords who were offering to undertake and finance half the cost of designated public works. The petitioners from Shetland wrote to outline the injustice that they were left to starve because they were 'in despair of their landlords coming forward'.<sup>266</sup>

Larger tenantry, who mostly escaped destitution, also criticised proprietorial mismanagement to the Board. Colonel Gordon's principal tenants informed the Committee of 'produce being stolen' and 'thefts committed on our sheep', contending that 'scarcity of food was in many instances the real cause'.<sup>267</sup> Their argument was that the damages to their property were direct consequences of the landlord's neglect of his smaller tenants' needs. This dynamic is explored at greater length in the next chapter.

Twice, petitions from more 'ordinary' Highlanders went so far as to pinpoint the growing inequity of land ownership and tenure as the root cause of destitution. In their February 1849 petition, the community at Glenelg identified that the infertility of their land was 'chiefly on account of the soil being exhausted by repeated cropping'. They explained to the Board that this was because 'the extent of land possessed by the crofters [is] too limited to admit of their following of a system of rotation'.<sup>268</sup> The Free Church minister at Uig, the Reverend John Campbell, recognised the same problem in Lewis in April 1849, linking famine to trends in land distribution since the start of the Clearances. Some regions by the coast, he reported to the Board, were too 'thickly peopled' and

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<sup>263</sup> Jones and King, 2016, p.95

<sup>264</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1847, Sixth, p.16

<sup>265</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.23

<sup>266</sup> *ibid*, 1850, Second, p.127

<sup>267</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.25

<sup>268</sup> *ibid*, p.20

there was 'less arable land for the production of other crops adequate to the wants of the population, especially as many of the districts of the parish are laid out as *sheep walks*'.<sup>269</sup>

Accordingly, there are records of three groups asking the Board for assistance to attain fixed leases and the opportunity to drain unworked tracts of land in appeals that resembled requests from Highlanders in the later nineteenth century. After aggressively resisting the law officers sent to enforce Lord MacDonald's notice of eviction in May 1849, the people of Sollas in North Uist petitioned the Board and explained that they had no option but emigration if the Committee could not arrange tenancies for them on the island. They called on the Glasgow Section for assistance to finance a new scheme of fixed leases, improvement and drainage on strips of peat bog on North Uist.<sup>270</sup> The desire to hold fixed leases and improve land through drainage was also evidenced in more informal appeals to Central Board officials. Captain Elliott noted the 'desire for improvement' among the people of Portmahomack in August 1848, and recorded their discontent at the 'apathy' of the factor, Mr Allen Monro.<sup>271</sup> At Kyleakin in February the next year, he remarked on a similar 'enthusiasm amongst the people relative to the hope of leases'.<sup>272</sup>

These approaches may suggest that Highland petitioners recognised and exploited the Board's quasi-governmental nature by requesting intervention into established traditions of landlordism in the name of development. These wishes to improve land under fixed leases demonstrated notable similarity to the reformatory desires expressed by witnesses to the 1883 Napier Commission.

### **Petitioning outcomes**

Such was the ideological dogmatism of the Central Board, requests for more liberal relief were often unsuccessful. Of the 43 petitions, only those from Sollas, Barra and the northern Shetland isles secured the exact material help that was requested. Reverend MacRae's petition from Glenelg alone appears to have achieved partial success. Two more prompted public statements of support from the Central Board. The most stark example of rejection came from Benbecula in the Uists, where inhabitants had petitioned the Central Board through their Local Committee in the summer of 1847, declaring that imminent increases in relief allowances were necessary to prevent loss of life. Dr Boyter, the stern Chief Inspector for the Glasgow Section, denied the request by responding in

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<sup>269</sup> *ibid*, p.29. Emphasis in original.

<sup>270</sup> *ibid*, Thirteenth, p.19

<sup>271</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Third, p.100

<sup>272</sup> *ibid*, 1849, Second, p.153



uncompromising tones that all Local Committees ought to ignore such petitions until more concrete evidence of serious threat to life was made available.<sup>273</sup> Petitioners from Fort William in 1847 and Glenelg in February 1849 experienced similar receptions.

Greater success was achieved when petitions narrated their requests to the Central Board in ways that were tailored to the organisation's expectations. Accounts of the economical use of charity from Reverend Macrae at Glenelg succeeded in securing limited further supplies in January 1849.<sup>274</sup> The petitioners of Mid and South Yell, who offered to give 'a portion of their work gratis', achieved an even more positive result. Their show of willingness to work convinced the Central Board to establish a new relief programme on the island. Indeed, the relief was granted on more generous terms than the petitioners had first proposed: four days of labour were demanded for three days' pay compared to the petition's original offer of half unpaid work.<sup>275</sup> The new scheme even extended beyond the Board's official termination in October 1850.

Perhaps unexpectedly given its image as an elitist and unbending organisation, the Central Board acted on two complaints from small tenantry about the behaviour of proprietors who managed relief programmes. The Glasgow Section rebuked Colonel Gordon in summer 1847, calling out 'so outrageous a departure from the principles' when petitions revealed that he was forcing relief applicants to work on his kelp harvest without remuneration.<sup>276</sup> The Board even offered the people of Barra a 'further supply until next distribution' in lieu of the earnings of which they had been deprived.<sup>277</sup> Evidently hurt by such scolding, Colonel Gordon wrote to the Lords of the Treasury in 1849 to complain about the Board's disapproval, arguing that 'so far from there being any reasonable claim upon him for the support of the people, he has failed to realise the greater part of the rental upon which he purchased [Barra and South Uist]'.<sup>278</sup>

The Committee also publicly denounced Lord MacDonald following petitions which complained of the way he managed his estates. In particular, following press rumours that the Glasgow Section had supported the attempted evictions at Sollas in North Uist in May 1849, the Board released a

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<sup>273</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1847, Sixth, p.17

<sup>274</sup> *ibid*, 1849, Eleventh, p.19

<sup>275</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, Second, p.126-8

<sup>276</sup> This suggests that the Board's strict adherence to the exchange of relief for work was a two-way principle: those not working should not be relieved, and those working should not go unrelieved.

<sup>277</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1847, Sixth, p.16

<sup>278</sup> *ibid*, 1849, Eleventh, p.26

statement to disassociate itself from the landlord and proclaim its commitment to preventing forcible evictions.<sup>279</sup>

The Board's reaction at Sollas formed part of a fascinating trend of increasing intervention into proprietors' right to autonomous estate management by setting conditions on relief of tenants. Following clamour for more secure land tenure recorded at Portmahomack the previous year, the Board's belief in the importance of fixed leases was first set out by Captain Elliott in January 1849.<sup>280</sup> He proposed that 'the want of [leases] is, to the tenant, the reason or excuse for no exertion, no advancement'; put differently, he thought that those without a secure entitlement to lots had minimal motivation to expend unnecessary additional effort on land from which they could be removed.<sup>281</sup> The next month, after Lord MacDonald's request for assistance in supporting his tenants on Skye, the Central Board made it a condition of relief that fixed leases be offered for periods no shorter than eight years in duration.<sup>282</sup> Additionally, the proprietor was instructed to settle those without land on 'improvable portions ... of waste land, at a nominal rent'.<sup>283</sup> Compelled to 'forego his own convictions', MacDonald agreed.<sup>284</sup> Despite his reluctance, MacLeod of Dunvegan was eventually convinced to do similarly. John Smith, a trustee on the MacLeod estate, turned down the Board's proposal in March 1849 that those participating in relief schemes should be given 'eight years' lease' on their holdings and that 'waste land ... be allowed to make up such holdings to four acres, while those without land should have a fifteen years' tenure'.<sup>285</sup> Although MacLeod never agreed to such radical terms for granting land to cottars, he yielded in July 1850 to relief conditionality that created fixed leases for up to 15 years on a total of 46 holdings in Roag and Kilmuir.<sup>286</sup>

The Board's mediation at Sollas was even more drastic. Despite MacDonald's wish for his tenants to emigrate in 1849, the Glasgow Section co-operated with the Perth Destitution Committee to finance a £700 scheme in North Uist which allotted 20 improvable acres to each of the 60 evicted families.<sup>287</sup> The organisation set a mid-nineteenth century precedent for interference into proprietorial

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<sup>279</sup> *ibid*, Thirteenth, p.19:

<sup>280</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Third, p.153. This was a major abandonment of the Board's supposed commitment to laissez faire principles.

<sup>281</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1849, First, p.43

<sup>282</sup> *ibid*, Second, p.148

<sup>283</sup> *ibid*, p.130

<sup>284</sup> *ibid*

<sup>285</sup> *ibid*, p.157

<sup>286</sup> *ibid*, 1850, First, p.21

<sup>287</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Thirteenth, p.19:

relationships with their tenants. In some ways, like leases for cottars, the Board's interventions into the laws of Highland property were even more radical than the 1886 Crofters Act.

### Conclusion

Petitions to the Board highlight the perilousness of conditions faced by populations in the Highlands and Northern Isles and their dependence on socio-economic superiors during the Great Highland Famine. The increased number and urgency of appeals in the relief programme's later years prove that destitution was not a brief shock caused solely by sudden potato crop failure. Instead, as some petitions correctly identified, crop failure was magnified by earlier clearance patterns and, furthermore, exacerbated by relief conditions.

Despite mistreatment from both proprietors and the Central Board, the petitions suggest that communities were united in a commitment to pressure the Board for better treatment without breaking into rebellious insurgence. Accounts of public meetings at Glenelg, Fort William, Benbecula and Yell, speak to an inclination for peaceful collective action, as Houston and Schrank suggest was typical for rural Scotland at the time.<sup>288</sup> The sense of unity is highlighted by the fact that middle class professionals and factors were also moved to petition on behalf of the destitute. Once again, it appears that the Free Church took a leading role in these efforts.

Mid-nineteenth century petitioners were far from defencelessly accepting of the Central Board's directives. This was as true of 'ordinary' people, such as those of Benbecula, Yell, Glenelg and Fort William, as it was of more educated clergymen, doctors and merchants. Confident denunciations of mistreatment at the hands of the Central Board and proprietors are at odds with the description of 'demoralized and unstable crofting communities' by Jones and King.<sup>289</sup> Even surface level displays of conformation to the Board's expectations were calculated petitioning strategies that demonstrated awareness of contemporary politics and how to improve the likelihood of favourable reception. In their assertiveness about obligations and rights, as well as their sophisticated narration, petitions to the Central Board exhibited more similarities with the assertiveness of the later nineteenth century.

Requests for the Central Board to intervene in tenancy arrangements, such as at Sollas and Portmahomack, provide the most remarkable parallels to the later nineteenth century. Mirroring the major conclusions of the Napier Commission, Highlanders convinced the Central Board of the

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<sup>288</sup> Houston, 2014, p.294; Schrank, 1995, p.18-19, 72-87

<sup>289</sup> Jones and King, 2006, p.25

benefits of fixed leases and the expansion of tenancy agreements onto unused land. The resultant relief conditionality based on tenurial reform gives cause to rethink the historiographical orthodoxy that the Crofters' Act of 1886 represented 'unprecedented measures of ... regulation over the operation of land rights'.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Tindley and Richards, 2012, p.196

### Chapter 3 – Everyday Resistance

‘[Refusal to participate in Central Board schemes] means a security such as [the Highlander] desires, of no necessity for change or improvement ... he revels in his good luck and his good bargain, that has kept him on the brink of famine all his life.’

- *Captain Robert Elliott in correspondence with William Skene, 3 November 1849*<sup>291</sup>

Conventional attempts to reveal resistance before 1882 in the Highlands, such as Richards’ catalogue of 40 challenges to order, have not dispelled conclusions of ‘pathetic peasant stoicism’.<sup>292</sup> Far from evidencing a ‘continuum of popular Highland protest’, recent mainstream historiography suggests that Highlanders only engaged in disorganised, underpowered and hopeless efforts to resist eviction at the last moment.<sup>293</sup> The same pattern of doomed desperation emerges in accounts of resistance against authority during the Great Highland Famine. In Wick and Pulteneytown, Hunter explains, crowds gathered in February and March 1847 to block the loading of grain onto exportation ships, but unrest dissipated as abruptly as it began when the Government deployed police.<sup>294</sup> These riots had practically ceased before the Central Board was even formed. Perhaps due to a lack of subsequent aggressive rebelliousness, the only recognition of protest in the following years is Devine’s vague reference to ‘widespread opposition’ against the destitution test.<sup>295</sup>

In recent scholarship from beyond the mainstream historical analysis, notably from Celticists and archaeologists, like Meek, Given and Symonds, ‘ordinary’ Highlanders have been examined as continuous agents, instead of passive respondents except during popular protest.<sup>296</sup> Meek, for example, gauges attitudes and behaviours revealed in Gaelic poetry, and Given interrogates landscapes and archaeology to ask if there is ‘more to resistance than “acts of defiance” and “collective protest”’.<sup>297</sup> This chimes with Bloch’s appeal to investigate the often-overlooked ‘struggles stubbornly carried on’ which, he argues, achieved more than attention-grabbing ‘flashes in the pan ... almost invariably doomed to defeat and massacre’.<sup>298</sup> Scott proposes recognition of

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<sup>291</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1849, Third, p.387

<sup>292</sup> Richards, 1973, p.35

<sup>293</sup> *ibid*, p.50

<sup>294</sup> Hunter, 2019

<sup>295</sup> Devine, 1992, p.209

<sup>296</sup> Meek, 1995, 2019; Given, 2007; Symonds, 1999

<sup>297</sup> Given, 2007, p.12

<sup>298</sup> Bloch, M. *French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics*, trans. by J. Sondheimer, (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1970) p.17

‘everyday resistance’: oppositional methods always accessible to society’s most resource-poor, like dissimulation, non-compliance and foot-dragging.<sup>299</sup> Historians have documented that these seemingly insignificant acts, when practised widely, had the power to sabotage programmes of socio-economic subjugation associated with commercialisation and proletarianization.<sup>300</sup>

Symonds explicitly deploys Scott’s concept of ‘everyday resistance’ in the context of nineteenth century South Uist.<sup>301</sup> He references MacLellan’s account of late nineteenth century farmhands working to minimum standards while secretly intimidating a fellow labourer to cease his performances of over-eager commitment. Concerned that this man’s daily prompt arrival at work would result in increased expectations for them all, they locked him in his house for a morning and ‘he never came so early again’.<sup>302</sup> Without actively confronting or even explicitly opposing those in power, therefore, ordinary Highlanders manipulated relationships with their socio-economic superiors.

Despite the evident relevance of these subtle protest performances in the Highland context, Robertson concedes that the mainstream historiography ‘almost entirely ignores acts of everyday resistance’.<sup>303</sup> He mentions the concept, but only as a sidenote on a methodology he chooses not to employ. Little attempt has been made to expand the geographical scope of investigation beyond South Uist or to consider the importance of the concept during the era of Highland famine.

Sensitivity to ‘everyday resistance’ offers another angle from which to query the notion of a Highland society demoralised into submissiveness by famine in the mid-nineteenth century. It also has the potential to reveal the issues at stake in the ways that local populations interacted with the Central Board’s relief policies.

It is challenging to pinpoint evidence of ‘everyday resistance’ during the Great Highland Famine. Symonds uses Goffman’s sociological theory of quotidian theatricality to explain that many acts of protest took place ‘behind the scenes’, intentionally hidden from view.<sup>304</sup> To extend Goffman’s metaphor, the challenge is to use archives to ‘lift the curtain’ on backstage practices. Examination of poetry and song is one method of gauging attitudes and behaviours, as Cregeen demonstrates.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Scott, 1985

<sup>300</sup> For an account of ordinary people’s everyday resistance against commercialism, for example, see: Krauss, C. *Modest Struggle: Understanding Everyday Resistance Through Citizen Activism In The 1970’s* (New York: City University of New York, 1982)

<sup>301</sup> Symonds, 1999

<sup>302</sup> A. MacLellan *The Furrow Behind Me: The Autobiography of a Hebridean Crofter*, trans. by J.L. Campbell, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1961), p.33-34

<sup>303</sup> Robertson, 2016, p.3

<sup>304</sup> E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Allen Lane, 1969)

<sup>305</sup> Cregeen, 1974

Most likely, those against whom it was aimed (in this case the Central Board) were also alert to everyday resistance; references to subtle opposition appear in records with varying obliqueness. This is evidenced in the quotation at the start of the chapter, which reveals Captain Elliott's frustration at Highlanders' refusal to participate in the Central Board's schemes. Griffin argues that there is much information to be gleaned if historians 'cast our eyes over the archive in imaginative ways' to seek hints of quotidian dissent within official documents.<sup>306</sup>

This method, however, opens dangerous hermeneutic issues. Looking too hard with creative interpretations could result in over-eager misidentification of instances of 'everyday resistance'.<sup>307</sup> It could be argued, in line with post-colonial theorists of resistance such as Ngugi, that protest should actively display a recognisable counter-narrative to justify its identification as such.<sup>308</sup> A requirement to demonstrate Highlanders' intent to impede the Board could help distinguish unexceptional acts from everyday resistance. This, however, risks succumbing to a yet more serious methodological trap of codifying customary practices as apolitical. To the contrary, continuation of certain elements of traditional livelihoods was often the political issue at stake in the Board's interactions with communities. Returning to the quote from Captain Elliott, the Central Board echoed frustration from earlier in the era of 'Improvement' about the stasis of the Highlands and its population. Explicit objectives to oppose the Board through such 'conservatism', however, are difficult to prove.

In response, this chapter adopts a pragmatic approach to outlining everyday resistance. Details of specific, actively oppositional intentions are provided where they exist. Where they are unavailable, more 'passive' and 'conservative' impedimentary actions against the Board's schemes are considered within a corpus of evidence relating to the defence of particular aspects of customary livelihoods.

The indirect references to everyday resistance in the Central Board records also obstructs easy assessment of its relative successes. Sometimes, in instances of resistance that were intended to be 'behind the scenes', documentation proves defeat in one specific case, but reveals nothing about potential positive results elsewhere if similar techniques were deployed unnoticed. This is the case in official reports of attempts to selectively disclose resources in order to qualify for relief from the Board, for example. Mentions in records mean that caches were found and particular plots were

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<sup>306</sup> C. Griffin, "Protest practice and (tree) cultures of conflict: understanding the spaces of 'tree maiming' in eighteenth- and early nineteenth century England", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33, 2008, pp.91–108, p.95

<sup>307</sup> *ibid*

<sup>308</sup> W.T. Ngugi, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle For Cultural Freedom* (London: Heinemann, 1993)

foiled, but other hidden resources may have successfully avoided detection. There is no way to know for certain if recorded failures were the tip of an iceberg of success.

Additionally, the continuous nature of everyday resistance and the impossibility of proof of causation prevent simple appraisal of the results generated by specific strategies. Accurate assessment of sustained opposition to potentially rent-increasing Central Board schemes, for example, is unattainable. Too many other factors also determined rental prices over long periods, including macro-economic trends, agricultural productivity and individual proprietorial schemes. Once more, this chapter strives to take a common-sense approach and evidence is provided, where possible, to point to the likely successes or failures of particular everyday resistance strategies.

This chapter begins by investigating how understandings of a social contract and a moral economy featured in acts of everyday resistance. Loyalty is examined as a paradoxical protest tool that asserted obligations, and more disruptive measures are analysed as methods used when populations discerned a breakdown in the established social contract. Next, the chapter contemplates two strategies referenced by Scott: tactical engagement and non-compliance (including the use of internal community sanctions). Finally, the reasons for friction between the Central Board and populations are reviewed. The conclusion to this chapter considers implications for understandings of longer-timeframes of Highland resistance. This entails an evaluation of the ways in which famine and Central Board operations caused populations to adapt well-established practices of everyday resistance and bring them to a crescendo. It also appraises whether these strategies prefigured later nineteenth century developments, such as the Napier Commission, when Highlanders asserted their own alternative visions of improvement based on continuing elements of customary livelihoods and maintaining a connection to the land.

### **Towards a moral economy?**

In regular encounters with the Board, as in petitions, communities legitimised requests for better treatment by referencing the social contract of the *Gàidhealtachd* which had cultural roots in clanship. The clanship ethos had held elites responsible for the welfare of suffering dependents and extended relations in the regions they controlled. Appeals to the Board's agents, therefore, invoked those local ties and evidenced the 'web of communalism' that Symonds describes as a 'powerful coercive force'.<sup>309</sup> John Munro Mackenzie, the Chamberlain in Lewis and a native of the island, recalled an approach from one relief scheme applicant: 'I have seen six factors on the estate, and

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<sup>309</sup> Symonds, 1999, p.119



you are the first countryman ... may I ask you a favour'. Complaining that workers were 'wasting our constitutions with the pick', the man asked for more merciful labour arrangements, as one Lewisman to another.<sup>310</sup>

As evidence that their duties within this social contract were upheld, destitute communities cited their respectfulness to the Board and its representatives; rightfully, under this system, they were entitled to support in return. Traditions of demonstrating 'loyalty' to 'secure connections [and] ... patronage' are traced back to the Jacobite uprisings and before by Sunter.<sup>311</sup> Mid-nineteenth century communities emphasised that they had obeyed the Board's monition to abstain from further 'popular excitement' after 'criminal proceedings' at the Wick and Pulteneytown grain exportation riots in spring 1847.<sup>312</sup> The Skye Emigration Committee reflected in 1851 that the people had merited reward during the famine, because although the Board had done much 'to excite bitterness, irritation, and discontent ... no single case of violence, tumult, or outrage of any kind has occurred'.<sup>313</sup> Of course, this testimonial conveniently omitted details of the organised strikes covered in the first chapter and the increases in civil disorder detailed below.

Details of loyalty, and the relief it merited from the Board, were outlined in particular contrast to contemporary Irish disturbances. As Kinealy notes, 'sustained food shortages between 1845 and 1849 resulted in a period of extraordinary disorder and protest' in Ireland.<sup>314</sup> Highlanders were quick to observe that they were asking for less than their Irish counterparts and would receive it more graciously; put differently, they maintained that they deserved reward for adhering to the social contract and populations in Ireland did not. In his 1851 Report, McNeill recorded that:

'[Highlanders] believed that [authorities like the Central Board] could not refuse to provide the comparatively small amount of assistance when so vast an amount had been given to Ireland. They contrasted their own loyalty and respect for the laws with occurrences in that country and asked whether it was possible that the Queen, after doing so much for a rebellious people, who had set the laws at defiance, should refuse assistance to a people who had been constantly loyal and orderly.'<sup>315</sup>

An emphasis on obedience and loyalty in the Highlands, therefore, proved a paradoxical protest tool.

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<sup>310</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 4, p.2684

<sup>311</sup> R.M. Sunter, *Patronage and Politics in Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1986) p.43

<sup>312</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, First, p.11

<sup>313</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 1, p.636. The statement is quoted by the Bank Agent at Portree, Dugald MacLachlan.

<sup>314</sup> C. Kinealy, 'Riot, Protest and Popular Agitation', in C. Kinealy (ed.) *The Great Irish Famine: British History in Perspective*, no.38 (London: Palgrave, 2002), pp.117-148, p.117

<sup>315</sup> McNeill Report, p.4

It was, however, an unsuccessful protest tool. In a statement that typified the Board's dogma, Captain Elliott stressed that the organisation's Highland programmes were 'in exact conformity with the present Government practice in Ireland'.<sup>316</sup> The significance of loyalty and kinship in the social contract of the *Gàidhealtachd* proved irrelevant in the context of the Board's determination to exact work and distribute relief minimally.

There is some suggestion that the Central Board inspectorate treated relief applicants in Shetland with more sympathy and respect in subtler ways due to their open and honest comportment. Captain Craigie contrasted the 'frank and independent' conduct of some Shetlanders with the behaviours of the common 'Irish beggar' in March 1848.<sup>317</sup> Although they did not receive additional meal or more merciful labour requirements, they may have been spared some of the contemptuous treatment that Nally observed in contemporary relief programmes in Ireland.<sup>318</sup> There is no evidence, however, that populations in the *Gàidhealtachd* even achieved those subtle improvements through their loyalty and appeals to the social contract. The Board was determined, in the words of Captain Elliott, to punish Gaels for the improvidence of their livelihoods and make them 'feel the judgment Providence had sent'.<sup>319</sup>

Appeals to the social contract were evidently in vain. There were, however, other ways to push for a moral economy. When elites, like the Central Board, neglected their responsibility of care, 'ordinary' people deemed it legitimate to abandon their side of the social accord. This entailed disrespectful threats, disobedience and actual disorder, all calculated to achieve a fairer redistribution of resources.

Threats of insubordination, for example, were used to test the Board's commitment to 'destitution tests' at Tobermory in spring 1848. The Glasgow Section's Inspector in Mull reported that the unemployed 'outcasts' of the town, bemoaning the Board's unforgiving strictures, had 'assumed a character that requires caution'. Indeed, 'a single word of encouragement to riot would at once be responded to by the idle and worthless part of the community'. Proving that murmurs of dissent forced serious consideration of the Board's plans, the Inspector added anxiously that 'no steps have yet been taken to repress any sort of violence, should such an occurrence take place'.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, First, p.89

<sup>317</sup> *ibid*, Second, p.49

<sup>318</sup> D.P. Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2011)

<sup>319</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Second, p.66

<sup>320</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1848, Ninth, p.18-26

Feared mass disturbance at Tobermory failed to materialise, but there were minor protests in Mull by women from the village of Dervaig. Numerous historians, including Richards, Hunter, Withers and Logue have observed women's centrality in Highland demonstrations of resistance, particularly later nineteenth century agitation, such as at Braes in 1882.<sup>321</sup> The women of Dervaig opposed the Board's termination of relief supplies in 1848 after the men went to cut peat and abandoned their destitution test employment on public works. They demanded meal from the Inspector, who described them as 'loud and unnatural in their language and violent in their gestures'.<sup>322</sup> Although ultimately unsuccessful, they clearly daunted the Board's inspectorate.

It could be argued, in line with Logue, that female-led protests at Dervaig were 'a reaction stemming perhaps from the central place of women in the peasant domestic economy'.<sup>323</sup> The Central Board tended to be distribute relief weekly or fortnightly to challenge households to foster thrift, and reported that women took responsibility for community food distribution.<sup>324</sup> Withheld relief, therefore, may have affected them most directly.<sup>325</sup> Yet women also spoke up to ask for rights to reasonable fixed leases and employment, as the Central Board reported from Portmahomack in August 1848.<sup>326</sup> These less gender-specific demands support theses from Robertson and Lodge that female protestors, like those at Dervaig, were more likely demanding better treatment based on a 'shared ideology' of 'common justice'.<sup>327</sup>

These disturbances (and threatened disturbances) might broadly fit within Richards' catalogue of food riots and eviction refusals, but discontent towards the Board's parsimoniousness was also expressed in other ways. Theft from proprietors protested the withholding of relief and signalled that the Board's neglect of their side of the social contract would result in a breakdown of respect for property and order. Sheriff Shaw reported drastic increases in theft on Barra in the spring of 1848, which tellingly coincided with institution of the despised destitution test.<sup>328</sup> The Parochial Board of Barra confirmed in 1851 that those refused statutory assistance and absent from the Central Board roll, like Roderick McNeill of Baharva, had stolen sheep as an alternative to relief and

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<sup>321</sup> Richards, 1985, p.292; Hunter, 1976, pp.131–45; Withers, 1988, pp.27–32; K. Logue, *Popular Disturbances in Scotland, 1780-1815* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979), p.10, 113-8, 163-167, 260-272

<sup>322</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1848, Ninth, p.24

<sup>323</sup> K. Logue, 'Eighteenth century popular protest', in Cowan, E. J. (ed.) *The People's Past* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1980) pp.119–21

<sup>324</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third Appendix, p.34

<sup>325</sup> *ibid*, 1848, Second, p.50

<sup>326</sup> *ibid*, Third, p.100

<sup>327</sup> Robertson, I.J.M. 'The role of women in social protest in the Highlands of Scotland, c.1880–1939', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 23(2), 1997, pp.187-200, p.197; C. Lodge, *The Clearers and the Cleared: Women, Economy and Land in the Scottish Highlands 1800-1900* (Unpublished PhD thesis from the University of Glasgow, 1996), p.293

<sup>328</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1848, Eighth, p.7

to display contempt for authority.<sup>329</sup> Colonel Gordon’s larger tenants claimed to have lost as many as 3,000 head of livestock by 1849, although a Glasgow Section investigation concluded the actual figure was a lower, but still substantial, total of 1,200.<sup>330</sup> The Procurator Fiscal for Skye, Mr Donald Mackenzie, echoed observations of widespread theft to the McNeill Report. He noted a two-fold increase during Central Board operations compared to the previous five years, including a similarly drastic uptick following the commencement of the destitution test.<sup>331</sup>

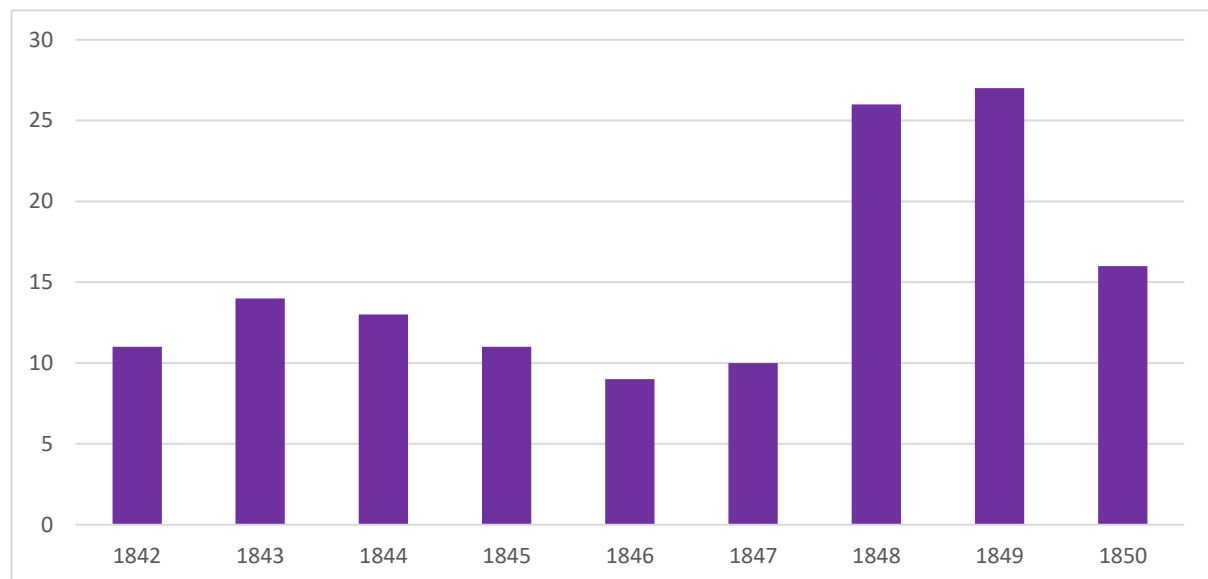


Figure 9 - Chart showing cases of crime against property in the Skye District of Invernessshire between 1842 and 1850 based on data provided by Procurator Fiscal Donald Mackenzie in the McNeill Report, p.97

The frequency of livestock raids is explained by their double success. First, they provided immediate and vital resources for those suffering starvation. Second, as was the case in Barra in April 1849, they prompted greater tenants to argue that ‘hunger was the real problem’ and to pressurise the Board to restore order by relaxing the destitution test and liberalising relief for smaller tenants.<sup>332</sup>

In particularly desperate circumstances, threats of theft from the local grain stores of the Board itself were made. In line with Thompson’s observations of a ‘moral economy’ in England, these were calculated to intimidate propertied authority into concessions to avoid more radical redistributive measures.<sup>333</sup> The Catholic priest and former Local Committee member on Barra, Reverend Beatson, recalled in 1851 that people had ‘threatened to break open the store if the distributor insisted on

<sup>329</sup> McNeill Report, p.179

<sup>330</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Special Report on the Hebrides, p.28

<sup>331</sup> McNeill Report, p.96.

<sup>332</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Eleventh, p.25

<sup>333</sup> E.P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past & Present*, 50, 1971, pp.76-136

enforcing the [destitution test] regulations'. Hinting that this intimidation proved relatively successful in securing more palatable relief conditions, he conceded that 'nothing occurred' because 'supplies were distributed'.<sup>334</sup>

In one recorded instance, a threat of theft from the Board was realised when concessions were not forthcoming. The distributor on South Uist, Mr Chisholm, reported in 1848 that the door to the Central Board meal store was 'forced', and 'stores carried off'.<sup>335</sup> This audacious attempt did not yield such favourable results: the culprit was charged and stricter measures of security at the store were implemented to prevent further defiance.

Protest and theft should not be dismissed as acts of desperation and petty criminality; these were sophisticated political performances of redistribution. It is even possible that there were links to broader national and international political movements. In the wake of the 1847 riots, James Loch, the Whig Member of Parliament for Wick, blamed the 'local press' for 'preach[ing] socialism and its accompanying doctrines' to Highlanders.<sup>336</sup> According to Dr Mackenzie, who managed the Gairloch estate during Sir Kenneth's minority, these values were taken on board throughout the Highlands during the famine. In an 1851 letter to the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, he explained his fears of the 'Socialist views now so prevalent', complaining that some in Wester Ross had conceived a notion 'as to the rights of tenantry superseding those of a landlord'.<sup>337</sup> It is possible that these ideas had been encouraged by people like the prominent Chartist and proponent of rebellion, Julian Harney, whose touring lectures in Inverness-shire had attracted large crowds in the early 1840s.<sup>338</sup>

There is no conclusive proof, however, that Highlanders demonstrated overtly socialist stances during the famine. As Fraser notes, socialism and Chartism struggled to establish themselves in the region in the mid-nineteenth century because of a failure to communicate their ideologies in ways that spoke directly to uniquely Highland issues, particularly relating to the Clearances.<sup>339</sup> The language of socialism was adopted by neither the Local Committee press appeals, nor the petitions explored in previous chapters. There are no mentions of 'the proletariat' or 'the means of production', for example. Reports of Highland political radicalism might have been little more than elite paranoia following rent strikes in New York and the 'springtime of the peoples' riots throughout

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<sup>334</sup> McNeill Report, p.181

<sup>335</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1848, Ninth, p.26

<sup>336</sup> Hunter, 2019, p.60

<sup>337</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 4, p.144

<sup>338</sup> *ibid*, p.180

<sup>339</sup> H.W. Fraser, *Chartism in Scotland* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2010), p.146

Europe and Ireland. Fenyo notes that these events were hyperbolised in scaremongering reports by established Scottish papers, like the *Scotsman*.<sup>340</sup>

Even if not aligned under the banner of a particular political movement, however, Highlanders showed awareness of unjust inequality and the need for redistributive measures. Charles Baird, the Board's Chairman, reported in 1849 that Highland communities believed stealing to be legitimised by their poverty.<sup>341</sup> Similar to Thompson's analysis in England, therefore, this agitation exemplified that Highlanders would find their own methods of maintaining a 'moral economy' following breakdowns of the established Gaelic social contract.<sup>342</sup> Protest and livestock theft point to an underlying belief that accessible sustenance for all should be provided by systems of agriculture and food distribution. Laws of private property and free markets, or the Central Board's regulations, were deemed fit to be broken when unjustly impeding universal survival.

### **Strategic engagement and non-compliance**

Pursuit of subsistence and fairer treatment did not always entail defiance and dissent; occasionally, it required tactical engagement (and disengagement) with the Board's philosophies and policies. As covered in the first chapter, former Local Committees cornered the Board over 'croft culture' schemes: although unwilling to relieve populations for their own unsupervised agricultural work, laissez faire ideologues admitted that abandonment of 'croft work' impeded their objective to make the *Gàidhealtachd* less reliant on charity. When the Board reluctantly permitted relief in return for a few weeks' croft work each harvest-time from 1848 onwards, Highlanders used this concession to its full potential.<sup>343</sup> In April 1849, Captain Elliott described how the inhabitants of Kishorn abstained from relief application under the destitution test 'till within a week or a fortnight of the period of ordinary croft labour, when they clustered around the work, in the hope that it would substantiate their claim to some weeks' gratuitous assistance'.<sup>344</sup> This was a remarkably successful strategy. Throughout the Highlands and Islands, William Skene recorded that numbers on the relief list almost doubled during the period of croft culture in 1848.<sup>345</sup> This allowed a significant number of

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<sup>340</sup> Fenyo, 1996, p.130

<sup>341</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1849, Twelfth, p.24. As shown above, their loyalty and adherence to the social contract also figures in the justification of redistributive measures.

<sup>342</sup> Thompson, 1971

<sup>343</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Second, p.92

<sup>344</sup> *ibid*, 1849, Second, p.136

<sup>345</sup> *ibid*, p.79:

Highlanders to receive additional relief while performing work that contributed to their own livelihoods.

Selective disclosure of assets to the Board was another strategic engagement that was deployed to get the most from the Central Board's relief system. Those who were essentially destitute, but still possessed some limited assets, were frequently struck from the Board's lists, as was the case in Shetland in May 1848.<sup>346</sup> To ensure their names remained on relief rolls in Barra, Reverend Beatson observed that people 'represented themselves to have exhausted their whole crop' even though they 'were found, after several weeks, taking grain to the mill'.<sup>347</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Board reported the sharpest increase in this tactic during periods when relief was offered in return for croft work rather than the destitution test.<sup>348</sup>

A riskier variant of this tactic involved intentionally expending assets to qualify for the extra resources that the Board offered. The people of Yell, for example, would 'dispose of some of their cattle, in order [that] they might come under the class who received relief', according to one Itinerant Relief Officer in Shetland, David Taylor.<sup>349</sup> Presumably, the logic underpinning this action was that relief would be granted by the Board and additional benefits would be reaped in the form of money or meat from the sale or slaughter of cattle. It is worth remembering, however, that this action was exactly what the Board intended from policies like the destitution test: it depleted the safety net of productive assets and forced the population closer to a state of proletarianization.

Likely for the same purpose of expending visible assets to qualify for immediate relief supplies, illicit whisky distillation seemingly increased during the famine period. Captain Rose observed that unusually large quantities of whisky were found for New Year festivities at Lochalsh in 1848.<sup>350</sup> In his 1851 report, McNeill observed a similarly extraordinary growth in whisky purchase and consumption on Mull during the famine, rising from 8,701 gallons in 1845 to 10,212 gallons in 1850. He fulminated that the quantity of 'ardent spirits' drunk by the islanders in 1848 equated to £6,099, 4s, which was more than double the value of the meal distributed by the Central Board that year.<sup>351</sup> Illicit whisky distillation would have conserved perishable grain supplies beyond the Board's view, and smuggling markets may have provided vital additional income to impoverished communities.

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<sup>346</sup> *ibid*, 1848, Second, p.195

<sup>347</sup> McNeill Report, p.181

<sup>348</sup> *ibid*, 1849, Second, p.228

<sup>349</sup> *ibid*

<sup>350</sup> *ibid*, 1848, First, p.78

<sup>351</sup> McNeill Report, p.16

This formed part of a wider strategy of investing in long-lasting, easily-hidden, consumable goods during the famine. Sheriffs Nicholson and Shaw both reported large increases in purchases of tea, tobacco, snuff and sugar during and after the failure of the potato.<sup>352</sup> This was a rational choice and a good investment. These items were less perishable, so provided long-term safeguards against absolute destitution and also offered some material comfort. They could be stored and consumed discreetly while applying to the Central Board for relief meal on the grounds of expended grain and livestock assets. The one specific example of a family discovered deploying this tactic was, necessarily, a failed instance. Captain Elliott was outraged to find a supposedly destitute, relief-seeking family at Eddrachillis enjoying their tea during his inspection of Sutherland in March 1848.<sup>353</sup> Others, however, may have followed this strategy with more success.

Highlanders also strategically engaged with the Board's relief programme as a leverage tool in wage disputes with other employers. Workers collectively threatened proprietors that they would labour for the Central Board instead if they were not offered immediate improvements in pay and working conditions. In March 1848, Captain Fishbourne recorded inhabitants of Portree confronting their employers, by saying: 'Sir, – if you do not give me such wages as will support my family, I must go and work under the Central Board'.<sup>354</sup> Commitment to this tactic in Skye was demonstrated in January 1848, when Captain Fishbourne reported that 35 men had proceeded to 'leave McLeod's employment at 10s simply on the assumption that they will receive committee meal'.<sup>355</sup> Additionally, the Board recorded that those who did not want to migrate abandoned work on Lowland railways and returned to the Hebrides to labour on Central Board schemes instead.<sup>356</sup> As early as 22 March 1847, the Board reported that 30 men had been struck from their relief lists for refusing work and trying to claim relief.<sup>357</sup> It is worth noting that this evidence suggests that the strategy may have had quite limited success. Nonetheless, collective refusal of unfavourable conditions and mobilisation of the relief scheme as a leverage tool demonstrated an ability to embrace the Board's own commitment to free market principles at moments of tactical advantage.

Reading along the archival grain suggests that non-compliance was an even more common resistance tool, particularly against labour tests. Reports with colonial assumptions and racialised stereotypes of the inferior *Gàidhealtachd* abound with criticisms of Highlanders' idleness and apathy towards improvement. Faced with widespread refusal of the destitution test, the Central Board

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<sup>352</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 1, p.105; McNeill Report, p.166

<sup>353</sup> Edinburgh Section Report, 1848, Second, p.61

<sup>354</sup> *ibid*, First, p.86

<sup>355</sup> *ibid*, First, p.43

<sup>356</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1847, Fourth, p.7

<sup>357</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, First, p.28



reported that populations exhibited a 'repugnance to labour' and a 'reluctance ... to submit to what they do not understand'.<sup>358</sup> As the strikes organised by Local Committees demonstrated, however, refusals to work were often rejections of demeaning and exploitative relief philosophies. More spontaneous refusals to work, which proved as short-lived and unsuccessful as the co-ordinated strikes in northern Skye, also took place at Plockton in July 1847 and at Walls, in Shetland, in April 1848.<sup>359</sup> Captain Fishbourne even reported that one young man from Portree named McKinnon had died of starvation in March 1848 after he and all his relatives had 'refused service'.<sup>360</sup> To account for the tragedy, the Inspector explained that Highlanders found the destitution test undignified and went to extreme lengths, seemingly including death, to avoid it.

Despite Captain Fishbourne's characteristically unempathetic account, he successfully identified a willingness to suffer long-term negative consequences as the price for refusing degrading labour tests. As Captain Elliott reported from Kilmuir after strikes organised by Local Committees in August 1848, the people expended valuable resources to avoid labour schemes and 'tested themselves rather severely'.<sup>361</sup> To avoid work on trenching and drainage schemes on Lewis, John Munro Mackenzie observed that individuals were willing to sell stock and 'became very much reduced' before they considered participating.<sup>362</sup> Indeed, at Kilfinichen in Mull, the Church of Scotland minister, Reverend Campbell, recorded his astonishment to the McNeill Report that people had sold the entirety of their stock before working under the destitution test.<sup>363</sup>

Highlanders were even willing to adopt practices they otherwise considered dishonourable to avoid the destitution test. In the Highlands, literal readings of Biblical kashrut laws interpreted oceanic organisms without fins to be the waste of the sea.<sup>364</sup> As such, according to Carlson et al, they were codified as unclean and unfit for ingestion.<sup>365</sup> Not only did phycophagy and consumption of shellfish advertise poverty (and the absence of, or forsaking by, supportive relations), it also contravened the teaching of Highland churches.<sup>366</sup> The attendant shame is recorded by Nicolson in the Gaelic proverb, '*Is mairg a theid do 'n tràigh an uair a tha h-eòin fhèin 'g a tràigsinn*' (pity him who goes to

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<sup>358</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Second, p.35; *ibid*, Third, p.16

<sup>359</sup> *ibid*, 1847, Sixth, p.20; *ibid*, 1848, Third, p.49

<sup>360</sup> *ibid*, 1848, First, p.86

<sup>361</sup> *ibid*, Third, p.101

<sup>362</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 4, p.3312

<sup>363</sup> McNeill Report, p.53

<sup>364</sup> 'Kashrut laws' are the dietary rules from the Old Testament. The word 'kashrut' is etymologically related to the term 'kosher'. Most relevant biblical passages about diet are contained in Leviticus 11 (including the relevant passage about shellfish), although there is also information about items fit for consumption in Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 14.

<sup>365</sup> E. Carlson, M. Kipps and J. Thomson., 'Ethnic Food Habits', *Nutrition & Food Science*, 83(4), pp.7-9, p.7

<sup>366</sup> Phycophagy means the consumption of seaweed.

the shore, when its own birds are forsaking it).<sup>367</sup> Yet, as Angus McKinnon explained to the Napier Commission, communities in Benbecula in the Uists resorted to living off shellfish and seaweed during the famine, presumably as an alternative to the Central Board labour scheme on the island.<sup>368</sup> This may have been such a common response during the famine that most deemed it unremarkable. Internal policing represented a specific type of community-wide and community-monitored non-compliance with the Central Board. Harsh sanctions against those betraying community interests were the negative side of the 'web of compliance' that Symonds describes.<sup>369</sup> This clashes with the rosy picture of the harmonious 'crofting community' that Hunter paints.<sup>370</sup> The Edinburgh Section's Inspector in Skye, Captain Fishbourne, reported from Sleat in May 1848 that destitution test workers were subjected to scorn by those who lived around them.<sup>371</sup> In Lewis (where James Matheson, the proprietor, ran relief projects that were Central Board backed until 1849, and funded from then onwards), John Munro Mackenzie observed that neighbours 'taunted' men for 'working for the proprietor'.<sup>372</sup>

### **Reasons for non-compliance**

The harshness and shame of labour tests doubtless encouraged objections, but such lengths were taken to avoid participation because relief schemes intensified well-established, politicised disputes over patterns of Highland employment, land-ownership and food provisioning. As Davidson observes, visions of Highland improvement through industrial-style labour and commercialised production can be traced at least as far back as the seventeenth century, and they proliferated more widely after 1745.<sup>373</sup> Through the destitution test, the Central Board sought to advance the realisation of this social reordering, and institute what Nash describes as a radical 'visionary geography' of improvement, similar to Government plans in Ireland.<sup>374</sup> First, the test would compel Highlanders to expend productive assets. Second, the Board imagined that remuneration on its employment schemes would instigate a new system in which 'purchased food' would form the

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<sup>367</sup> A. Nicolson, *A collection of Gaelic proverbs and familiar phrases: based on Macintosh's collection* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1996), p.268

<sup>368</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 1, p.778

<sup>369</sup> Symonds, 1999, p.119

<sup>370</sup> Hunter, 1976

<sup>371</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Second, p.83

<sup>372</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 4, p.3305

<sup>373</sup> N. Davidson, 'The Scottish Path to Capitalist Agriculture 2: The Capitalist Offensive (1747–1815)', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4, 2004, pp.411–460

<sup>374</sup> C. Nash, 'Visionary geographies: designs for developing Ireland', *History Workshop Journal*, 45(1), 1998, pp.49–78, p.49

‘principal part of the diet of the population’.<sup>375</sup> Consequently, Highlanders would relinquish their claims to land and autonomous subsistence livelihoods. Finally, in the words of Captain Elliott, they would ‘assume more legitimate roles as day labourers’, and behave more like the proletarianized, landless populations of England and Lowland Scotland.<sup>376</sup>

This vision infringed on Highlanders’ more-than-economic understandings of interactions with land. As Macinnes notes in his definition of the Gaelic term ‘*dùthchas*’, these relationships in the *Gàidhealtachd* were conceived in terms of ‘heritable trusteeship’.<sup>377</sup> Mackinnon observes that ‘identity and belonging’ were bound together in ‘interrelated familial, territorial and historical concerns’, coalescing in communitarian, intergenerational rights and responsibilities to ‘manage natural resources’.<sup>378</sup> The core culture of Gaelic livelihoods, therefore, was incompatible with the Board’s vision of a commercialised economy driven by a landless Highland proletariat.

Preparedness to work during times when relief was provided for ‘croft culture’ made it clear that Highlanders’ non-compliance contested the Central Board’s ideologies of improvement, rather than the concept of labour itself. While receiving relief for ‘croft culture’, the Board reported that the abnormally large number of relief applicants were enthusiastic participants in important work, like peat-cutting.<sup>379</sup> This negates Captain Elliott’s complaints against the people of Kishorn, that Highlanders participated in ‘croft culture’ work because it was easier to evade supervision and receive relief for minimal effort.<sup>380</sup> Tactically timed relief claims showed willingness to engage when relief schemes could be used to strengthen the customary Gaelic connection to the land. As the Edinburgh Section actually recognised in August 1848, unwillingness to participate in the Board’s other labour tests stemmed from a dislike of improvement schemes in which they were ‘no longer our own masters’.<sup>381</sup>

Accordingly, there was clear reluctance to participate in proletarianizing schemes. Bemoaning that crofting livelihoods made populations economically inefficient ‘Jacks-of-all-trades’, Captain Elliott proposed an industrial-style system of Highland labour division in which there would be ‘one man farmer, one labourer at wages...a carpenter, blacksmith, four fishermen’.<sup>382</sup> To initiate this plan, the

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<sup>375</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, Second, p.11; *ibid*, 1849, Second, p.134

<sup>376</sup> *ibid*, 1847, Third Appendix, p.16

<sup>377</sup> A. Macinnes, *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart* (East Lothian: Tuckwell, 1996), p.279

<sup>378</sup> I. MacKinnon, ‘Decommonising the mind’: historical impacts of British imperialism on indigenous tenure systems and self-understanding in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland’, *International Journal of the Commons*, 12(1), 2018, pp.278–300, p.284

<sup>379</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1849, Second, p.136

<sup>380</sup> *ibid*

<sup>381</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Third, p.53

<sup>382</sup> *ibid*, 1847, Third Appendix, p.16

Board provided boats and nets to support full-time fishery schemes under test rules at Outer Hebridean coastal communities in 1849. They were met with 'asinine resistance'.<sup>383</sup> In both Uist and Barra, Dr Boyter explained that small tenants ignored potential profits and clung to their accustomed practice of fishing only part-time to supplement agricultural produce from their ground.<sup>384</sup> Considerations beyond finances were involved; Gaels could not be convinced to abandon their territorial belonging and the vital link to the means by which their subsistence was produced. Despite the Board's complaints about the economic irrationality of this stance, it actually proved sensible even in those terms: at Delting in Shetland in 1847, among other places, labourers for the Board could not access food 'even for money'.<sup>385</sup>

The Board's plans to commercialise Highland agriculture were also rejected. Ironically, given the potato's centrality in the visions of improvement that created the crofting system roughly a century earlier, the Board believed Smee's 1847 conclusion that 'the potatoe [sic] plant is a plant of indolence' causing people to 'care for nothing but their dish of potatoes'.<sup>386</sup> The organisation attempted to encourage cultivation and trade of edible commodities instead, providing seeds for garden vegetables, like parsnips, which could be traded at markets throughout Scotland. In Islay, however, the Glasgow Section's Inspector, William Simpson, documented a refusal to sow new seeds because 'the demand was for potatoes'.<sup>387</sup> Loyalty to the potato, despite successive harvest failures due to blight, was probably rooted in the crop's high yields and low maintenance.

Attempted rent increases on some estates due to new seed systems also bore out the rationality of resistance against commercialised agriculture. The factor at Gairloch, Murdo Maclean, demanded an extra sixpence more than the usual rental from Alexander Mackenzie's mother following an 'imperiously enforced' market vegetable scheme. Mackenzie's family, he recounted to the Napier Commission, did not plant the seeds provided to them and reaped no benefit. They only narrowly avoided the confiscation of a hen as compensation, however, after they pleaded for mercy and offered alternative payment.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> *ibid*, 1849, Second, p.144

<sup>384</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Thirteenth, p.37; *ibid*, p.11

<sup>385</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Second, p.4

<sup>386</sup> A. Smee, *The Potato Plant, Its Uses and Properties Together with the Cause of the Present Malady* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1847), p.143

<sup>387</sup> Glasgow Section Reports 1849, Twelfth, p.29

<sup>388</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 4, p.2685. Mackenzie records that small tenants were given no instructions on how to cultivate the seeds they were given. The factor demanded repayment while Mackenzie's father was away at the herring fishing. Only twelve years old, Mackenzie himself defended the hen by accusing the factor of cruelly depriving the family of a vital egg a week. He then offering alternative payment of a coin he had received as a gift.

Wariness of rent rises also motivated the internal sanctions that opposed the Board's projects to build new infrastructure through relief schemes. In Lewis, for example, Matheson used relief conditionality to attempt to force small tenants to construct new crofts, which he wanted to be cleaner and more aesthetically-pleasing. 'Order and tidiness were paramount', according to Given, 'improved structures and lifestyles'.<sup>389</sup> One participant was met with such ill-will, including from his own father, that he undid all the work he had undertaken to build windows, chimneys and separate byres. Neighbours, John Munro Mackenzie reported, were 'fearing they would have to build such houses as he did, [so] they got him prevailed upon to go back and live in his byre'<sup>390</sup>. Community members saw no functional advantage in the scheme. As Given observes, Highlanders preferred 'local materials and straight-forward building techniques [which] meant that houses could be easily constructed, dismantled and modified'.<sup>391</sup> According to Mackenzie, tenants recognised that the Matheson must have 'some selfish reason for [improvement plans]', like rent increases.<sup>392</sup>

Fraught tenurial relations in the 1850s confirmed these suspicions. Although landlords, like McLeod in Skye, assured tenants that rents would not be influenced by the committee's improvements, these promises were reneged with predictable rapidity.<sup>393</sup> At Breanish in Lewis, for example, Norman Matheson complained to the Napier Commission that 'five shillings of additional rent was placed upon every one that was on the rent roll' almost immediately after construction of a dyke by test work during the famine.<sup>394</sup> A particularly severe case unfolded in Fair Isle in 1848. Through drainage schemes, individuals had expended much effort on their land, but tenants were not permitted to reap the benefits of their labours.<sup>395</sup> The proprietor instituted a 'change in their allotments', which were 'put up at auction and knocked down to the highest bidder', resulting in a 'great increase in rent'.<sup>396</sup> Even the Secretary of the Edinburgh Section, William Skene, condemned the ruthlessness of Shetland proprietors and estate trustees, labelling them 'extortioners, ever bent on the alchemical process of turning all to gold'.<sup>397</sup> In the case of Fair Isle, there followed a 'post-famine clearance' of

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<sup>389</sup> Given, 2004, p.146

<sup>390</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 4, p.3307

<sup>391</sup> Given, 2004, p.148

<sup>392</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 4, p.3305

<sup>393</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, First, p.20

<sup>394</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 2, p.888

<sup>395</sup> The Central Board celebrated one tenant, named Jerome Stout, who supposedly 'raised the richest and most abundant crop on the island by draining a piece of land on which a horse drowned only a few years ago'.

<sup>396</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Third, p.54

<sup>397</sup> *ibid*, 1847, Fourth, p.30

the sort described by Richards; Butler notes that indebtedness and arrears forced a mass emigration to Canada in 1862.<sup>398</sup>

In their totality, even if the intention was never stated explicitly, acts of non-compliance represented a desire to maintain continuity with historically productive elements of livelihoods in the Highlands and Northern Isles. Political ecologists such as Robbins observe that proponents of agricultural modernisation throughout history have been frustrated with what they perceive as the 'irrationally conservative' nature of those who live on the margins of subsistence.<sup>399</sup> Discussion of the drive for fixed tenancy in the previous chapter proves that mid-nineteenth century Highlanders were not actually conceptually opposed to change. For those experiencing precarity, however, the rational choice is always to minimise risk by following low-reward but dependable strategies, and only to adapt when new plans prove rational and compatible. This was no different during the Great Highland Famine. Starving people recognised that the Board's plans for economic development through proletarianization and commercialisation threatened some reliable means of survival that they wished to maintain. These included low rents, the potato, diversified endeavours for sourcing sustenance and customary connections to land. Misalignment of improvement ideologies, therefore, rather than Highland hebetude or pride, explained the extent of everyday resistance to the Central Board's labour test schemes.

### **Conclusion**

Everyday resistance against the Central Board developed well-established Highland protest practices. Struggles to defend historically successful elements of Gaelic livelihoods against commercialism had a long tradition. Famine era resistance against potential rent-raising schemes, for example, exhibits parallels with communities' refusal to use expensive, newly-constructed, landlord-owned mills in late eighteenth century Skye and Tiree, as outlined by Dodgshon.<sup>400</sup> Other protest strategies, like illicit whisky distillation also already had an extensive history in the Highlands, as Devine and Given observe.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Richards, 1974; Butler, R.W. 'Fair Isle: half a century of change', *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 135(1-2), 2019, pp.123-138, p.124

<sup>399</sup> P. Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2011) p.58

<sup>400</sup> R.A. Dodgshon 'Farming practice in the western highlands and islands before crofting: A study in cultural inertia or opportunity costs?', *Rural History*, 3(2), 1992, pp.173-189

<sup>401</sup> T.M. Devine, 'The Rise and Fall of Illicit Whisky-Making in Northern Scotland, c. 1780-1840', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 54(158), 1975, pp.155-77; Given, 2007

Although the famine era did not create the central contestations around which resistance centred, it did mark a crescendo in what Davidson describes as a long-running saga of clashes between different value systems and understandings of 'improvement'.<sup>402</sup> Destitution increased Highlanders' awareness of threats to their livelihoods and made self-termed 'improvers', like the Central Board, even more determined to manage the population according to their own ideologies to lessen reliance on charity. Old methods of opposition needed to be repurposed to new ends to combat novel political developments during the nineteenth century. Illicit whisky distillation, for example, became a technique for navigating the Board's laissez faire ideology and resolve not to provide relief to anyone with remaining, visible supplies of grain.

Although similarities to past protest are clear, resistance against the Central Board also appears to mark a significant moment at which Highlanders began to communicate alternative improvement visions to those in power. In rejections of full-time fishing and commercialised agriculture schemes, Highlanders demonstrated continuity in their ability to frustrate the plans of external, would-be 'improvers'. There are also hints, however, particularly in John Munro Mackenzie's reported interactions with communities who vocalised suspicions about proprietorial policy, that some positive assertions and demands were made to the Board's representatives. Most remarkably, the inhabitants of Valtos and Kneep in Lewis objected to the Board's plans to remove them to drained and enclosed land by noting their preference to stay 'because they were attached to their present locations'.<sup>403</sup> Such an explicit defence of the heritability of Gaelic land and rejection of unwanted rent-increasing improvements prefigured the more widely-documented demands made to the Napier Commission, later in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>402</sup> Davidson, 2004

<sup>403</sup> Glasgow Section Reports, 1849, Special Report on the Hebrides, p.15

## Conclusion

Perhaps the best statement will be a record of what the several said to the purpose of laying their grievances before Her Majesty's representatives. By way of commencement it was asked first, "How many of those present had enough of land?" and on a show of hands being called for, there was not a hand raised. Then it was asked, "How many are there who have not enough of land?" and the response was all hands up ... After the failure of the potato the present proprietor (Mr Clark) cleared off the crofters from about the half of the island first, and put sheep in their place; and as his stock was increasing he gradually cleared off the rest of the crofters till he had all the island cleared, with the exception of one small place, Ardglass, where he allowed three or four to put up huts for themselves to remain there for a little, but it was not very long till he sent them after the rest.

- *Extract from the 1883 Napier Commission testimony of Lachlan McQuarie of Salen, Mull, assisted by Alexander Fletcher*<sup>404</sup>

Investigated 'from below', the history of relief during the Great Highland Famine illuminates contemporary Highlanders' activities, but also reveals the Central Board's considerable complexity. Existing descriptions of the organisation require radical reassessment before conclusions are drawn about how the population interacted with its relief projects.

Arguably, the existing historiography fails to bestow sufficient emphasis on the ways in which some of the Central Board's policies exacerbated destitution. Refusal of gratuitous relief and work exaction are well-documented by Hunter and Devine, but accounts are yet to acknowledge the extent to which the organisation perceived itself as an exactor of punishment and correction for improvident Gaelic livelihoods. Captain Elliott and Captain Rose demonstrated the determination to make communities 'feel the judgment Providence had sent' in their celebration that relief had not been 'made too comfortable' when Kilmuir inhabitants 'tested themselves rather severely' by attempting to enact a strike.<sup>405</sup>

In instances when communities were forced to deplete vital assets and destroy their chances of maintaining subsistence livelihoods, the Board often congratulated itself for managing to 'stir them

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<sup>404</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 3, p.1748

<sup>405</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1848, Second, p.66; 1848, Third, p.101



from their native peat-reek' and force them towards proletarianized labour.<sup>406</sup> Understandably, given the racialised attitudes towards Gaelic society, Highlanders clearly bore the brunt of this contemptuous treatment. Contrary to claims by Fenyo, however, Shetlanders did not escape it entirely.<sup>407</sup> Although deemed racially superior, they were also 'not a provident people', which merited their suffering through relief schemes that sought to dismantle small tenants' unproductive and commercially moribund lifestyles.<sup>408</sup>

The Board's plans to stimulate a new 'visionary geography' and an industrial-style division of labour were far more ambitious than has been recognised in the existing historiography, even by Hunter. It echoed the credos of its supposed backstage ruler, Charles Trevelyan. Seemingly unaware that the system had been implemented by earlier 'improvers', or perhaps simply scapegoating the population for the systemic failure of those policies, he complained that 'the Scotch runrigg [sic] prevails...and by making the industrious and thriving responsible for the short-comings of the idle and improvident, effectually destroys the spring of all improvement'.<sup>409</sup>

Despite the Board's powerful ambitions and frequent alignment with Government ideologues, however, Devine's description of a 'quasi-governmental agency' fail to capture its disunity and fragility.<sup>410</sup> It was not simply Trevelyan's puppet. Selection processes for Local Committee members, and their mutinous behaviour both during and after their time in office, exemplify the internal conflicts that plagued the organisation and complicated its plans. Rifts between the Edinburgh and Glasgow Sections, which have received only brief mention in the preceding chapters, need further review to unveil the full extent of friction.

Largely due to its unstable bureaucratic structure, the Board's intentions exhibited every bit as much mutability and inconsistency. Hunter is certainly correct to observe that, through new attention to economic infrastructure, like the northwest Highland road network, the Board 'changed' objectives in 1849 to focus more on longer-term self-sustainability.<sup>411</sup> This, however, was only a single alteration amid a sea of policy expansions, recalibrations and volte-faces. Other instances included relaxation of the refusal to accept croft labour as test work in 1848 after appeals by Local Committee members, and the decision to extend relief beyond the agreed Martinmas cessation in Unst and Yell in 1850 at the behest of the seemingly more lenient Shetland inspectorate.

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<sup>406</sup> *ibid*, 1849, Third, p.380

<sup>407</sup> Fenyo, 2000, p.82

<sup>408</sup> *ibid*, 1848, First, p.41

<sup>409</sup> C. Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1848), p.25

<sup>410</sup> Devine, 1992, p.132

<sup>411</sup> Hunter, 1976, p.125

A tangled mix of seemingly contradictory aims and projects resulted from this constant inconstancy. In some schemes, like encouragement of full-time fishing and commercial agriculture through all four years, the Board urged Highlanders to abandon their land and engage in proletarianized work. In other projects, it seemed to support autonomous subsistence livelihoods. The reversal of the decision to refuse relief for 'croft culture' in 1848 is a case in point. Observation of inconsistency provides important qualification to characterisations of the Board as a determined destroyer of small tenants and their livelihoods.

Indeed, the Board displayed moments of apparently genuine compassion. Contrary to Devine's implication that the Board was in league with John McNeill in his pursuit of clearance for financially unproductive populations, the organisation vehemently resisted the idea of emigration.<sup>412</sup> It maintained that its fund had been raised to help Highlanders *in situ*, and intervened at crucial moments to prevent displacement, as at Sollas in 1849.<sup>413</sup> Although the Board's members almost certainly believed the organisation always took a logical approach towards the region's long-term interests, these instances appear difficult to square with the Board's primary improvement objective, which was to ensure that each Highlander was 'uprooted from his potato patch'.<sup>414</sup> Future analysis of the private letters relating to Central Board operations, which are held in the National Records of Scotland, may help to reveal whether and how such seemingly tangled policy and ideology was internally justified by the organisation's decision-makers. Moving forward, historians must acknowledge the Central Board as a complicated organisation, not simply a dogmatic, unofficial arm of Government that was solely motivated by racialised hatred for Gaels.

Intervention into tenurial arrangements on Highlanders' behalf marked the most unexpected development in the expansion of the Board's scope, particularly in the context of rampant contemporary laissez faire policy.<sup>415</sup> The Board broke its promise not to 'disturb the natural relation between people and their landlords' by censoring proprietors for mistreating tenants and forcing

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<sup>412</sup> See Devine, 1992, p.125 for an account of McNeill's involvement with the Central Board and the way in which his proposed schemes 'echoed the policies of James Loch, William Young and Patrick Sellar'.

<sup>413</sup> This anti-displacement stance was made clear by the Emigration Committee of the Edinburgh Section. Central Board funds were only to be given for the purposes of emigration in very 'limited' cases, 'on being satisfied ... that the Emigration was conducted with the approbation of Government, which was implied, and in all respects satisfactorily, especially in being calculated to promote the permanent benefit of those who emigrate, and of those who remain (on which points it will be observed the Board required minute and definite information before they could give *any* aid to emigrants, and accordingly have not yet granted such aid in any single instance)'. See Edinburgh Section Reports, 1847, Third, p.4

<sup>414</sup> Edinburgh Section Reports, 1850, Second, p.78

<sup>415</sup> The repeal of the Corn Laws had taken place in 1846, only three years prior to the Board's interventions into tenantry arrangements. For more information on laissez faire policy in nineteenth century Britain, particularly during the famine era, see: C. Read, 'The Irish Famine and British Financial Crisis', *The Economic History Review*, 69, 2016, pp. 411-434

offers of favourable fixed leases from 1849 onwards<sup>416</sup>. This represented a previously unmatched threat to landlordism and proprietorial power that has not been recognised in the existing historiography. In granting itself the right to interfere with the autonomy of estate management in the name of Highland development, the Central Board foreshadowed the role of the Napier Commission more than three decades later.

As well as reconsideration of the Central Board, there is clear need for reassessment of community responses during the famine era. There was certainly no mid-nineteenth century caesura in Highland resistance, as Hunter and Devine claim. Against the Central Board's harsher schemes, Highland populations mobilised and adapted many of the well-established practices for protesting against commercialisation that Symonds observes. Petitions, non-compliance, petty theft, illicit whisky distillation and the invocation of elites' obligations already had long traditions in the Highlands.

Strategies of resistance against the Central Board, however, cannot be characterised as old-fashioned and outdated. Many instances of dissent, such as co-ordinated strikes and press appeals, were relatively innovative and resembled tactics used in later nineteenth century land agitation. The famine years must be acknowledged not as a period when protest was abandoned by 'demoralised' populations, but as a continuation of everyday resistance, and perhaps even a development towards more sophisticated political opposition. It is possible that extensive poverty and the region-wide interaction with a single relief organisations catalysed a new, more politicised approach from Highlanders.

The geography of resistance to the Central Board certainly supports links to events later in the century. Although opposition was widespread, there were particular hotspots. Northern Skye and Lewis, for example, feature more heavily in the story of protest against the Board than anywhere else. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, they were once again the primary sites of dissent. Rent strikes in northern Skye mirrored the destitution test strikes just over three decades previously, and land raids in Lewis echoed refusals to leave their land by the inhabitants of Kneep and Valtos in 1849. This, perhaps, is no coincidence. MacKinnon makes an important observation about the relatively elderly average age of those who were interviewed by the Napier Commission.<sup>417</sup> For these people, the famine era would most likely have coincided with their formative years. Far from leaving a legacy of demoralised passivity, as Devine and Hunter suggest, the events of the mid-nineteenth century may have been the inspiration for the patterns of agitation in these locations in the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>416</sup> *ibid*, 1847, First, p.4

<sup>417</sup> MacKinnon, 2019, p.284

From the different acts of opposition in each location, it is clear that the ‘community’ was a crucial, developing component in mid-nineteenth century resistance, but not in the way that Hunter, Devine and Cameron suggest. The evidence points not to a class-based stimulus for resistance to the Board, but a solidarity founded on relationships to local land, culture and people, often based on Gaelic understandings of the heritability of land, as MacKinnon suggests.<sup>418</sup> Uniquely place-based responses demonstrated how reactions were localised; they were tailored to the ways in which each community encountered the variability in the execution of the Central Board’s schemes. Future investigation of a broader range of sources, including kirk session records, will help to reveal the full texture of local responses. Even from the records of the Central Board itself, however, the importance of locality and community, and their significance in Gaelic culture, is clear. It featured in protest practices like the foot-dragging and assertions of territorial belonging in Kneep and Valtos.

Events at Kneep and Valtos form part of an array of evidence that shows striking similarities to the Napier Commission, in Highlanders’ activities as well as the Board’s. In expressions of ‘natural rights’ that historians, like Jones and King, normally associate with later decades, Highland petitioners urged an end to proprietors’ unjust land policies that they perceived to have been the proximate cause of famine. Requests for access to old plots at Sollas and calls for fixed leases at Kyleakin and Portmahomack exhibited the same core attitudes and demands as witnesses to the Napier Commission at the end of the century.

It is noteworthy that many Napier Commission witnesses traced the clamour for land reform back to the famine years. The continuous struggle for land dating back to the famine era was referenced by Lachlan McQuarie of Salen, Mull, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Links to the mid-nineteenth century were also made to the Commission by Duncan Sinclair of Balmacara, who observed that the people were ‘deprived of their township in 1849’ and that there had been an enduring ‘desire that the land of their forefathers should become their own again’.<sup>419</sup> When asked if ‘the wish of the people to get back to their old places’ was ‘a modern one’, Hugh Mackay of Lochinver replied ‘No; although this movement is modern, as you know’.<sup>420</sup> He cited examples of agitation for land dating as far back as 1846, which tellingly coincided with the failure of the potato.

Resistance against the Board, therefore, marked a possibly significant development for some of the key protagonists of later nineteenth century Highland resistance. It is notable that the ‘elite’ of rural communities stepped forward in acts of protest against the Central Board, such as Local Committee

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<sup>418</sup> Hunter, 1976; MacKinnon, 2019

<sup>419</sup> Napier Commission, Volume 3, p.1881

<sup>420</sup> *ibid*, p.1748

action and petitions, providing another parallel with later events. This seems to have set a precedent for many who would go on to advocate on behalf of their communities to the Napier Commission, like Donald McQueen of Duirinish and Neil McPherson of Gadintaille.

This is particularly true for the involvement of the Free Church. The denomination infiltrated the Board through Local Committees and displayed prominence in petitioning, similar to the way that Meek notes it would go on to do during the Napier Commission.<sup>421</sup> Opposition to the Board's policies seemingly represented an important maturation of the political stances of Free Church figures, like the Reverend Gustavus Aird, who would go on to encourage later Highland resistance. Evidence of the Free Church's radical stance only four years after its creation supports Hunter's argument that conditions for land agitation in the final decades of the nineteenth century were set in motion by the Disruption in 1843.<sup>422</sup>

The numerous precedents for the development of protest in the late nineteenth century give cause to question the historiographical consensus, espoused by scholars like Cameron and Newby, that agitation finally developed in the Highlands by imitation of contemporary events in Ireland.<sup>423</sup> Oddly, Richards' claim that there was a 'continuum of Highland protest' throughout the nineteenth century actually seems to be correct, but not for the reasons that he asserted.<sup>424</sup> Attempts to manage the Highlands and its population were persistently opposed through acts of sabotage, assertions of elites' obligations in the *Gàidhealtachd* and quotidian protest, rather than the instances of aggressive confrontation which tended to be more sporadic. The famine era, and forms of resistance against the Central Board, foreshadowed the later maturation of sustained resistance, suggesting that the impetus for later nineteenth century land agitation originated within the Highlands itself at an earlier point than has been recognised previously.

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<sup>421</sup> Meek, 1987, p.87

<sup>422</sup> Hunter, 1974

<sup>423</sup> E. Cameron and A. Newby, 'Alas, Skyemen are imitating the Irish': A note on Alexander Nicolson's 'Little Leaflet' concerning the Crofters' Agitation', *The Innes Review*, 55, 2004, pp. 83-92

<sup>424</sup> Richards, 1973, p.50

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