

# **The Crofters' Party - 1885 to 1892**

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**Scottish Historical Review, Volume 35, 1956**

At the 1885 and 1886 General Elections a group of candidates who described themselves as *representatives of the crofters* contested some of the Highland constituencies of north-west Scotland with almost complete success. The group had varying degrees of links to the *Highland Land League* which had been established to independently promote the interests of crofters and their specific land rights. The League had been founded in 1882 by a number of professional men from the Scottish cities but formed its branches very largely from among the crofters themselves, and these branches spread throughout the Highlands in the next three years. It played a prominent part in the land movement and eventually brought forward and sponsored the Crofters' candidates. Although the Crofter MP group and the Land League were to be short-lived, they aroused considerable national attention at the time, and are of some significance in the development of British political life. The Crofter MP group constituted what may be regarded as the first British independent common people's political party, and in many respects may be considered a precursor of the British Labour Party.

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Although there had previously been working-class political organisations which had taken up attitudes of some hostility to the controlling element in the Liberal Party – such as the Labour Representation League of the early 1870s – it is probably true to say that in every case the members of these bodies had regarded themselves as being essentially Liberals. Certainly party organisation was still loose enough even in the 1880s – with Radicals of various kinds often contesting nominations with Whigs within the Liberal Associations and not infrequently going to the poll against the official candidates – to make it difficult to determine in many instances which candidates can be regarded as representative Liberals and which as more properly Independents; but it is probably a fair criterion of their true Liberalism that these early Labour groups set themselves out primarily to obtain Liberal nominations, and in fact claimed Liberal support as a rightful expectation. Most of the '*Crofters*', however, stood quite independently of the Liberal Party; and the group possessed its own organisation, quite unconnected with the Liberals. It is true, nevertheless, the '*Crofters*' found the problem of defining their precise relations with the Liberal Party most difficult, and one bound to cause serious dissension among their followers. But this was inevitable in the circumstances of the time; it was also to be the experience of the nascent Labour Party for many years, notably in the period when it was known as the Labour Representation Committee. In fact this experience is one of the more interesting aspects of the '*Crofters*' group's history, particularly since some of its members were closely associated at the outset of his career with Keir Hardie. Hardie's solution of this same problem was, in fact, an essential piece of political analysis which made an important contribution to the emergence of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. Moreover there were close similarities between the agitation of the Highland crofters and the questioning of the established order of society which was beginning to spread among the industrial workers at this time.

The discontent of the crofters had mounted to the point of revolt in the early 1880s. Although the days of the notorious '*Clearances*' was over, they had no security of tenure, the rents of many of them had been raised several times during the preceding

decade, not a few were living in extreme poverty, and evictions seem to have been frequent. Many had recently been moved to less fertile holdings to make way for sheep-grazings or sporting preserves; some were still in the process of losing common grazings to their landlords. While a large proportion did not hold written leases, but were entirely dependent upon the goodwill of their landlords, without even the protection of recognised custom, (Gray 1952) many of the written leases that did exist appear to have been merely annual. One of their main grievances was their inability to increase the size of their holdings, most of the plots being quite insufficient for the support of a family. Bitterly resenting being dealt with according to commercial, profit-making considerations – with the growth of luxury in England due to the increase in industrial productivity, the shooting rights of Highland estates rose in value much higher than crofters' rents – they accused the lairds of abusing a sacred trust in their management of the soil, which they claimed was really the traditional property of the clans.<sup>1</sup>

One question that arises concerning the crofters' disturbances which began to occur in the early 1880s is the extent to which they were spontaneous among the crofting community and the extent to which they may have been stimulated by agitation and propaganda on the part of educated sympathisers. Although it is impossible to return a clear answer, it seems significant that, although some contemporaries pointed to the extreme hardship resulting from the severe winter of 1882 – 3 as an important source of disaffection, the first notable demonstration – the so-called '*Battle of the Braes*' – took place earlier than this, in April 1882. Moreover a campaign of propaganda by a group of sympathisers who were in direct touch with the crofters had been proceeding for some years previously, and had recently been accelerated. It would appear therefore that the disturbances were due partly at least to external stimulus.

The most prominent figure among those who first set out to bring crofters' grievances to the attention of the public was John Murdoch, a retired Nairnshire exciseman who established his journal, *The Highlander*, for this purpose at Inverness in May 1873. Murdoch was also concerned for the preservation of the Gaelic language and lore, and gave a great deal of space to Gaelic articles, songs and poems. After barely surviving a number of financial crises in the 1870s, *The Highlander* eventually published its last issue at the end of January 1882. Some months previously, however, the agitation had entered a new, more effective phase.

At a demonstration of the Irish Land League, held in Glasgow City Hall at Easter 1881, and addressed by Parnell, a number of members of the Highland societies in Glasgow who were also members of the League drew attention to some evictions being threatened at that time upon an estate in the island of Skye. The landlord concerned had recently more than doubled the rents which the crofters were now refusing to pay. This Highland group was supported by a number of Irish speakers, and the League later voted £1,000 to be used for the prevention of Scottish evictions. The Highland group, mostly professional men, then formed a committee, which became known as the Skye Vigilance Committee, to assist and give counsel to the crofters. The threatened evictions did not take place. Later in the year the same group of men formed the Federation of Celtic Societies, the main function of this body being to aid the crofting community. (Cameron 1912, pp44-6)

One of the more prominent members of this group, who had addressed an overflow meeting at the Irish Land League demonstration, was Angus Sutherland, a schoolmaster at Glasgow Academy who was the son of a crofter in Helmsdale, Sutherlandshire, and both of whose grandparents had suffered eviction. After first becoming a pupil teacher in the Helmsdale Parish School, Sutherland had attended a Training College and had been made a tutor to Lord Pentland, a position which had enabled him to study at Glasgow University and graduate with an Arts degree. Early in 1882 he founded in Edinburgh the Highland Land League, which was to play the most prominent part in the movement and eventually bring forward the Crofters' candidates.<sup>2</sup> Although organised by a number of professional men from the Scottish cities and burghs the League formed its branches very largely from among the crofters themselves, and these branches spread throughout the Highlands in the next three years.

The League never seems to have made a clear statement of its ultimate objectives. Although, as will be seen, it made use of Henry George for propagandist purposes, it was not a '*Single Tax*' organisation. While some of its leaders spoke at times of 'the necessity of abolishing landlordism' and 'the restoration of the land to the people' – stock phrases of the Georgites – they appear to have had peasant proprietorship in mind. (This was also the position adopted and maintained by the Irish Land League, despite Michael Davitt's persistent endeavours to convert it to land nationalisation.) Occasionally, and more especially in its early years, the League made use of such titles as Highland Land Law Reform Society; and once it was rebuked by the English Land Restoration League, the Georgite body, with the argument that mere reform of the land laws would not be enough.<sup>3</sup> It maintained a completely separate existence from the Scottish Land Restoration League, formed in February 1884.<sup>4</sup> Despite its condemnation of '*landlordism*', the Highland body was a pressure group rather than a society for the propagation of a doctrine, a counterpart of the Labour Party as opposed to the Socialist societies. Its essential plea was the right of the crofters to the use of their traditional soil, whatever profits their landlords might have to forego. And as will be seen, when it came to a practical issue, the crofters rejected peasant ownership, despite their spokesmen, and preferred to remain tenants, with their tenancy completely protected.

On 17<sup>th</sup> April 1882, virtually at the same moment at which the League was formed, the most famous disturbance, the '*Battle of the Braes*', occurred at the foot of Ben Lee, in Skye. In protest against an attempt by Lord Macdonald, their landlord, to deprive them of some pasturage to which they claimed a right, some of the crofters were refusing to pay their rents – a measure that was becoming widespread at this period. When an attempt had been made on 7<sup>th</sup> April to serve summonds of ejection upon them, they had responded by burning the summonds and mildly assaulting the sheriff-officer's assistant. Then, on 17<sup>th</sup> April, a force of fifty Glasgow police, sent to the area to effect the arrests of six ring-leaders, was set upon, when making the arrest, by some hundreds of crofters with sticks and stones. It succeeded in withdrawing the prisoners, no major injuries being suffered by either side. (Cameron 1912 & Macleod 1917, p31)

In February, two months previously, a gunboat had been sent to Skye to facilitate the arrest of three crofters in another district, Glendale, for their part in a similar instance of deforcing a sheriff-officer. (Cameron 1912, p55 & Macleod 1917 p35) One of

these men, John Macpherson, known thereafter as the '*Glendale Martyr*', became a leading figure in the movement, an impassioned speaker at Land League meetings throughout the Highlands. Over the next few years there were numerous such incidents in various parts of the crofting counties. Invariably sympathisers in the towns and cities – Portree being particularly notable in this respect – found bail for imprisoned crofters or otherwise saw to their interests and comfort. In November 1884 a number of gunboats were sent to Skye and a force of marines made several marches over the island; this action, however, had been taken as the result of some fabricated reports of disturbances sent to the press by a landlord's official, and no disorder either preceded or followed this action. (Cameron 1912 p39, p56)

Meanwhile the Federation of Celtic Societies, aided by the *North British Daily Mail* – which was almost alone, even among the Radical journals, in defending the crofters' actions, though many had admitted their grievances – had organised a petition to Parliament to give consideration to the crofters' conditions. It was reported that 45,000 signatures had been obtained in Glasgow. (Cameron 1912, p41) In the House of Commons the petition was strongly supported by Charles Fraser-Mackintosh, Member for Inverness Burghs and Dr Charles Cameron, a Glasgow Member, with the result that in March 1883 a Royal Commission was set up, presided over by Lord Napier. The Federation now sent Murdoch and other agents through the crofting areas preparing the evidence and persuading the crofters to come forward to testify when the Commission reached them. (Cameron 1912, p55) The facts brought before the Commission clearly revealed that the crofters were generally in a sorry plight, and had been harshly treated in the past; but it was not easy to suggest remedies. The Commission reported that to establish freehold rights, as many of the Land League were suggesting, 'would be to perpetrate social evils of a dangerous character'; it was pointed out at this time that to set up a crofter with his own stock would cost at least £300 in each case, on which repayments over 50-years, even at a very favourable rate of interest, would amount to more than £12 annually – a burden which few crofters could carry. In effect the Commission recognised that many holdings would never be economic; its main recommendation was that security of tenure be established, but that holdings for which less than £6 was being paid be excepted, the tenants to be encouraged to leave crofting for other occupations.

Although it was understood that the Liberals would introduce legislation on the lines of the Commission's recommendations, they made no haste in the matter, the crofters being only one group to suffer from ineffectiveness of the 1880-85 Liberal Government towards the end of its term. A bill was actually introduced during the 1884 parliamentary session, but was condemned as being quite inadequate by the Scottish Radicals, and the Government did not proceed with it. Meanwhile the incidents in the crofting districts and the Land League's agitation both continued. Early in 1885 the League conducted Henry George on a speaking tour of the crofting counties. At Portree, where he was accompanied by D.C. Macdonald, an Aberdeen solicitor, and the '*Glendale Martyr*', his audience removed the horses from the shafts of his carriage and drew him for some miles across Skye.<sup>5</sup>

At the approach of the 1885 election when, for the first time, as the result of the 1884 electoral reforms, the crofters would possess the franchise, the League saw its chance. During the autumn, as the campaign was getting under way Joseph Chamberlain came north to Glasgow and Inverness and delivered outspoken speeches on the necessity for

fundamental reform of the crofting system, supporting the crofters in their contention that the land in reality belonged to the people, and that the landlords were abusing a trust.<sup>6</sup> (Cameron 1912, p82) Nevertheless the rest of the Liberal leaders appeared to have little interest in the question. At the Scottish Liberal Association Conference in August, a delegate from Dufftown in Banffshire complained that although the crofting question was the main topic of political discussion in the counties, it was not even mentioned in the Conference agenda.<sup>7</sup> The Liberal candidates in the crofting constituencies were soon, however, compelled to give some attention to the issue, as six Crofters' candidates appeared, three of them closely associated with the Highland Land League. And most of the heckling at the meeting was concerned with crofting.

Although the sitting Liberal Member, the Marquis of Stafford, was said to be popular among the crofters, and in fact appeared from his election speeches to hold views on the crofting problem little removed from those of the League, Angus Sutherland contested with him his native county of Sutherlandshire. Although defeated, he achieved a substantial poll, the voting being 1,701 to 1,058. In Ross-shire the League ran Dr R. Macdonald, a native of the Hebrides who had practised for some years in London. He defeated the sitting Member, a well-known Gladstonian Liberal, Mr Munro-Ferguson of Novar, by no fewer than 4,942 votes to 2,925; and it is notable that some two thousand votes, mostly from the Isle of Lewis, were cast by illiterates. Macdonald had contested the same seat a few months previously, at a by-election, without success; his clear victory at his second attempt was obviously a result of the extension of the franchise.

The recognised leader of the Land League group who was to play the most prominent part in its activities in Parliament was Dr G.B. Clark, who was returned for Caithnessshire by 2,110 votes to 1,218 for the Liberal. A graduate of the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and London, Clark was active in a number of 'advanced' causes. He had been a member of Karl Marx's International Workingmen's Association in London in the 1870s – the 'International' gave a good deal of attention to land tenure<sup>8</sup> - and he was said to have been in the Boer Camp at Majuba Hill, South Africa. He was also a member of the Fabian Society and the Scottish Home Rule Association. In 1887 an attempt was made to deprive him of his seat because he was holding the office of Agent-General for the Transvaal, South Africa – a post for which he claimed to receive no salary, but in fact paid the expenses. He had travelled in Africa, India and Canada, and contributed to periodicals on the African, Indian and crofting questions. He was also the editor of the 'Good Templar', this being the interest which brought him into close touch with Keir Hardie, who was an enthusiastic member of the Order in the mid-1880s. He strongly encouraged Hardie on his first entry to politics in 1887. (Lowe 1923)

Another successful candidate who stood as a *Crofter* was D.H. Macfarlane, who was returned for Argyllshire with 3,340 votes, to 2,856 for the Liberal and 670 for another candidate who was also described in some newspapers as a *Crofter*. Macfarlane, however, who had been born in Caithness and educated privately, and who had represented County Carlow in 1880, does not appear to have been closely associated with the Highland Land League.<sup>9</sup> Another candidate described as a 'Crofter' whose position was somewhat similar was J. Macdonald Cameron, who defeated the Liberal (later Sir) John Pender for Wick Burghs by 913 votes to 868. Born in Ayrshire, Cameron was a chemist in charge of an agricultural research station near London. He

had been invited to stand by the Wick Radical Workingmen's Association and, though he had been supported by the Land League, never identified himself with it.

One feature of the election in Scotland had been the large number of constituencies – no fewer than 14 – in which Liberals had been opposed by a Radical of one kind or another. In most of these cases the Radical had given his sympathy for the crofters as the main reason for his stand against the official candidate.<sup>10</sup> One of the most interesting of these contests – a three-cornered one in this instance – had taken place in Inverness-shire, where Fraser-Mackintosh had intervened between the Liberal, Sir Kenneth Mackenzie, who had a letter of commendation from Gladstone, and a Conservative. As has been seen, Fraser-Mackintosh, who was an authority on Gaelic lore and history and a member of the Federation of Celtic Societies, had already been partly instrumental for the setting-up of the Napier Commission. A lawyer who had been very prominent in Inverness public life before entering Parliament, he had represented Inverness Burghs unopposed for the previous 11-years. Although previously a Liberal, he had always been independently minded, with strong Radical tendencies. Described now as an '*Independent Crofter*', he explained his abandonment of his secure seat in the Burghs and his candidature for the County (where the electorate had been increased five-fold by the extension of the franchise) as being due to a desire to represent crofters, whose welfare had always been one of his leading interests. Because of his intervention, a Land League candidate, Duncan Cameron, of Oban, withdrew at an early stage; and leading figures in the League supported Fraser-Mackintosh at his meeting.<sup>11</sup> Despite Sir Kenneth Mackenzie's claim that the Liberals were committed to a bill giving security of tenure, fair rents and compensation for tenants' improvements, and despite a step he now took beyond the recommendations of the Napier Commission (of which both he and Fraser-Mackintosh had been members) by personally advocating compulsory purchase of land by local authorities for the extension of holdings, it was Fraser-Mackintosh who was returned, by a clear majority. He received 3,555 votes, the Conservative polling 2,031 and Mackenzie 1,897. And the result in the Burghs appears to show – although by no means conclusively – that Fraser-Mackintosh's seat there would still have been secure, the official Liberal narrowly defeating a Radical.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the election had seen two Highland Land League candidates and three '*Independent Crofters*' returned for the north-west of Scotland against the official Liberals. During the short life of the new Parliament, the Liberal Government therefore took action at last. In fact the Crofters' Act of 1886 was the only notable piece of legislation passed before the next dissolution, in June. In its original form the bill was very restricted in scope, adopting the Napier Commission's recommendations to establish security of tenure and fair rents, but limiting them to hill grazings only. Led by Clark, and supported by English and Scottish Radicals and Irish Members, the *Crofters* obtained its extension to arable holdings, and defeated several attempts to restrict its application in other ways. For the time a group of lairds, led by the Duke of Argyll, attempted to emasculate the bill in the House of Lords; but they were eventually unsuccessful, the strong disapproval of the other peers compelling them to withdraw virtually all their proposals. A few moderate amendments were made by the upper House, but most were subsequently dropped. In its final form the Act gave security to most smallholders in the crofting counties, enabled them to bequeath their tenancies to close descendents, and established a Crofting Commission to hear appeals and determine fair rents. Crofters paying less than £6 rent were not excluded,

as the Napier Commission had recommended. Nevertheless the ‘*Crofters*’ denounced the Bill as a landlords’ measure that did not go nearly far enough, Clark at one stage even moving its rejection.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, when the 1886 election campaign began – the Act actually passed through its final stages on the day of the dissolution – the Crofters’ renewed their efforts. It is interesting to note that on this occasion the split within the Liberal Party on the Irish question produced the result that in every case the ‘Crofter’ candidates found themselves standing against Liberal Unionists. Nevertheless, although recognised (with the exception of Fraser-Mackintosh) as Home Rulers, they again described themselves as ‘*Crofters*’ and in their campaigns they paid much more attention to the crofting problem than to Irish Home Rule. And on this occasion they were even more successful. Clark considerably increased his majority, being returned by 2,034 votes to 584, while Macdonald repeated his victory in Ross-shire by 4,263 to 1,197. In Sutherlandshire the Marquis of Stafford withdrew, giving the explanation that he was not prepared to stand without the undivided support of both the landlords and crofters, which he had not been able to obtain.<sup>14</sup> Angus Sutherland, who had indicated that he would again have opposed the Marquis,<sup>15</sup> was now successful over a Liberal-Unionist by 1,463 votes to 583. Cameron was again successful for Wick Burghs; and Macfarlane for Argyllshire. Although he had now declared himself a Liberal-Unionist, Fraser-Mackintosh was not opposed in Inverness-shire. Another successful candidate who could virtually be counted as a member of the group was R.B. Cunninghame-Graham, who largely through the support of the Scottish Land Restoration League was able to enter Parliament from North-west Lanark.

Meanwhile, at the height of the election campaign, the Crofting Commission had begun its work. It consisted of three members – a land agent from Oban and a Ross-shire farmer presided over by the Sheriff of Ayrshire – and although the League objected to the three persons chosen, they were approved by Macfarlane and Cameron.<sup>16</sup> In the course of the next few years, the Crofting Commission travelled through the Highlands and Islands, reducing rents by about an average of 30 percent and arrears by about 60 percent, the proportions being much higher in some districts, notably in Skye.

Nevertheless, largely because of the inevitable delay in covering all the crofting areas, disturbances continued. In October 1886 a further force of marines and police went to Skye to enforce the collection of rates: both landlords and crofters had been refusing to make payment, with the result that the schools were on the point of closing, and the banks were declining to meet cheques for the Poor Law Officers. On the landlords’ part this action was, of course, a demonstration in protest against the refusal of the crofters to pay their rents – and it was their default which had precipitated the crises, since their share of the arrears of rates formed by far the largest proportion of the total amount. As soon as the expedition reached the island the landlords gave way; but there were a number of ugly scenes when the authorities distrained the personal effects of crofters who professed themselves unable to pay.<sup>17</sup> (Cameron 1912, p101) At about the same period two hundred and fifty marines and fifty police were sent to Tiree (Argyllshire)<sup>18</sup> (Cameron 1912, p89) As a result of these and other incidents, the *North British Daily Mail* began a ‘*Crofters Rights Vindication Fund*’ in November 1886, on the ground that the authorities were acting with undue severity in applying



the letter of the law to these primitive people with such harshness, especially in view of the circumstances of the time.

Certainly the reductions of rents and arrears imposed by the Crofting Commission appeared to lend some force to this argument. Partly as a result of the fund (or so it was claimed), and partly because of the Commission's operations, the incidents now became fewer. Nevertheless there were still isolated cases of deforcements, notably in Sutherland; and there were still demonstrations – at the '*Deer Raid of Lews*', in November 1887 the crofters organised a deer-hunt which lasted some weeks (Cameron 1912, ch16) and in the '*Aignish Riot*', also in the Lews, in January 1888, a mob of crofters, despite the presence of a force of marines, drove stock from a large farm. (Cameron 1912, ch17) In the spring of 1887 Chamberlain and Jesse Collings visited the Hebrides and expressed the opinion that Parliament must do more for the crofters. Although they had been invited by the president of the Lews Branch of the Land League, this incursion into his constituency was resented by Dr Macdonald, who had apparently not been consulted. A bill which Chamberlain prepared for the purpose of granting the crofters their main outstanding demand – facilities to increase the size of their holdings – does not appear to have reached the floor of the House of Commons. (Cameron 1912, ch22) Further minor extensions of the protection accorded under the 1886 Act were granted, however in 1887 and 1888.

By 1892, when the next general election was held, the agitation had almost disappeared. A Royal Commission of that year found that the 1886 Act had brought about a marked amelioration and had given a new spirit to the crofters, this being particularly noticeable in the improvements they had made to their homes as well as to their holdings, under the encouragement of their new security of tenure. The crofting problem was still to endure – there had been no noticeable increase in production; but it would seem, as later experience appears to have shown, that what the crofters had wanted above all had been security of tenure and reduced rents, but not the freehold. This was despite all the protestations of the leaders of the Land League that the problem could be solved only by the '*abolition of landlordism*.'<sup>19</sup>

Whether or not because of this the '*Crofters*' Members, when they came forward for the 1892 election, no longer described themselves as such, but stood as '*Gladstonian*' or '*Home Rule*' Liberals. All over the north-west of Scotland the campaign was fought out between Gladstonian and Liberal-Unionists, without a single Conservative in the field, and with little or no mention of crofting. For Caithness-shire Clark was again successful with a large majority, as also Angus Sutherland for Sutherlandshire. With Macdonald now retiring from Ross-shire, his place as a Gladstonian was taken by J.A. Weir, who was also prominent in the Land League, and who was returned with a decisive majority. Cameron was narrowly defeated for Wick Burghs by his previous opponent, now a Liberal-Unionist. Macfarlane was again returned for Argyllshire. Having turned to Socialism since the previous election and thus completely alienated his former supporters, Cunninghame-Graham did not contest his seat in Lanark, but turned instead as a Labour candidate to Camlachie in Glasgow, where he polled only 906 votes. Once again Fraser-Mackintosh was concerned in what was, perhaps the most interesting contest; standing again as a Liberal-Unionist, he lost his seat in Inverness-shire to a Gladstonian, Dr Donald Macgregor, by 3,035 votes to 2,706. Macgregor, also a member of the Land League, was the son of a Rannoch crofter and general merchant who had gone to Edinburgh University by way

of his parish school and acquired a London practice, from which he had retired in 1886 through ill-health.

The Land League, however, although no longer the centre of attention at this election, was not yet defunct. On the contrary, it had recently been contesting County Council elections, with mixed results.<sup>20</sup> In September 1892, some two months after the elections – and after a postponement to enable Michael Davitt to be present, though ultimately he was unable to attend – the League held its tenth annual conference, at Portree. Five Members of Parliament attended: Clark, Macgregor, Weir and Sutherland, and also A.C. Morton, the Radical Member for Peterborough, who had attended previous conferences. At a demonstration held during the conference, the main demand was for the extension of present holdings and the creation of new holdings, together with government grants to crofters.

It was apparent, however, that the League was experiencing difficulties over the problem of its relations with other parties. Although Macgregor declared that they should not ally themselves too closely with any one party – while asserting at the same time that they could expect more favourable treatment from the Liberals – the question could not be dismissed so easily: there was discussion at some length during one of the sessions about whether Unionists could be members of the League, or could be elected to the Committee. In the Inverness-shire branches there had already been a serious rift over the Irish question – probably as a result of Fraser-Mackintosh's attitude.<sup>21</sup> And in November, two months after the Conference, there was a quarrel within the League over the action of a prominent member, John Macrae, a Dingwall solicitor, in taking a leading part in the formation of a '*Ross and Cromarty Liberal Association*'. With the concurrence of the London Branch, expressed by Dr Clark, he was censured by the Organising Secretary on the grounds that such conduct was incompatible with the League's position on independence from the Liberal Party. Yet many of the members must have had difficulty in accepting this ruling – surely it could hardly be reconciled with the conduct of the '*Crofter*' group of MPs.

Within a short time after 1892, however, the League seems to have collapsed. At subsequent elections, the former '*Crofter*' Members appear to have come forward simply as Gladstonian Liberals. In 1897, to the disappointment of many who were nourishing hopes of creating an effective Labour Party, (Johnston 1920) Angus Sutherland left politics by accepting a salaried appointment to the Scottish Fisheries Board. Dr Clark maintained his seat until the 1901 general election, when he paid the price for his unequivocal support of the Boers. Even before the election a group of his constituents had done their best to have him unseated; and at the poll received only 673 votes in a three-cornered contest.

A question of some interest concerning the role of the Highland Land League in modern British political history is its direct connections with the origins of the Labour Party. The association between Land Reform and the Socialist movements had always been marked in Scotland. Before the emergence of Keir Hardie the principal Socialist organisation in Scotland, which was affiliated with William Morris's Socialist League, had actually entitled itself the '*Land and Labour League*'. When Hardie contested the famous by-election at Mid-Lanark in April 1888 as the first independent Labour candidate, he was encouraged and supported by John Murdoch and Dr Clark, and also by some of Davitt's Glasgow following. The meeting which he called,

shortly after this contest, to consider the creation of a Scottish Labour Party was chaired by Murdoch; and when in September 1888, the new Party was ultimately formed, Cunninghame-Graham was made its President, Clark and John Ferguson, a prominent Davitt supporter, the Vice-Presidents, with J. Shaw Maxwell, who was to be closely associated with Hardie for some years and had previously stood for Parliament on behalf of the Scottish Land Restoration League, as chairman of the Executive. Hardie himself was secretary. The Land and Labour League dissolved its half-dozen branches into the new body. (Lowe 1919 and Pelling 1954) The Scottish Labour Party was, of course, the direct precursor of Hardie's Independent Labour Party, formed at Bradford in 1893, which was mainly instrumental in forming the Labour Representation Committee in 1900: the organisation which, in turn, in 1906, became the present British Labour Party.

Nevertheless the alliance between the Socialists and the group interested primarily in the land question did not endure. A major difficulty was the change which had just taken place in the direction of Irish Nationalist policy following Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule, when Irish leaders strongly opposed any candidates that would split the Home Rule vote – a factor which was a serious obstacle to the independent Labour policy at this period.<sup>22</sup> For its part the Labour section of the Party, under Hardie's prompting, insisted upon its members preserving stricter independence of the Liberals than the Highland Land League had required, with the result that Clark and another Radical MP who had accepted an official Liberal nomination were removed from the list of officials following the 1892 election. One surprising characteristic of the Party had been its comparative affluence among working-class organisations – its income for 1892 had been £1,400 and as £500 of this had been contributed by two MPs, one being the Radical now removed from office, while the other may very well have been Clark, this step could not have been lightly taken.<sup>23</sup> (Lowe 1919) Then, in 1894, the Scottish Labour Party was merged into the Independent Labour Party, an avowedly Socialist body, much more uncompromising towards the Radicals.

Although the original Highland Land League had collapsed in the 1890s, it was revived again in September 1909. And on this occasion the connection between the crofters' movement and the emerging Labour Party was more distinctly emphasised. The inaugural meeting, held in Glasgow, was addressed by Dr Clark, who stressed the need for the organisation to press for a more fundamental reform of the crofting system than had been effected by the 1886 Act, and argued that many of the crofters were in a worse state than ever before. The object of the reconstituted League was defined as the re-settlement of the Highlands by means of the nationalisation of the land, and its purpose was stated to be the returning of Members of Parliament to work for this end. On this occasion, however, it was provided that candidates supported by the League must be members of the Labour Party.

Clark was elected President of the new League, and its secretary was Thomas Johnston.<sup>24</sup> It appears to have maintained an existence only for a year or two and it never approached in influence its predecessor of the 1880s.

Perhaps the most fitting postscript to an account of the Highland Land League is a note of the fact that the person mainly responsible for the '*Pentland Act*' of 1912, which formed the next landmark in the series of measures after 1886 for the

rehabilitation of the Highlands crofters and which first provided for compulsory purchase of land by the state to extend their holdings, was as its popular title indicates, the same Lord Pentland whose tutor had been the crofter's son, Angus Sutherland. Only of Scotland, surely, could such a historical phenomenon be recorded.

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## Footnotes and References

<sup>1</sup> A careful contemporary study of the crofters' grievances and attitudes was published by the *Inverness Courier*, 29<sup>th</sup> December 1885. The writer had been sent by an English newspaper to report on the situation in the crofting counties. As shooting rights increased in value, county councils raised their rating assessments accordingly. The rapid decline in these values recently has created a serious problem for the present-day Scotland by increasing the pressure of municipal taxation on small-holders, who have shouldered only a small share of this burden in the past.

<sup>2</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1922. Although, as is mentioned in the text, the League is often referred to by other titles, the title used above is the best known and most commonly used.

<sup>3</sup> *The Christian Socialist*, October 1884. (A Crofter Appeal, published in the same journal in the September issue, translated from the Gaelic, declared that crofters were quite prepared to pay fair rent, but pleaded that the rents should be fixed by a court. There is no indication, however, that this was an official Land League manifesto.)

<sup>4</sup> The Highland Land League also antedated the English Land Restoration League, established in 1883, though not the Land Nationalisation Society – the English body led by A. R. Wallace, which was formed in 1881.

<sup>5</sup> *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1885

<sup>6</sup> Cameron (1912) gives extracts of Chamberlain's Glasgow address. In the *Inverness Courier*, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1885, the Duke of Argyll and the Macleod of Macleod contested the view that the land was a trust, arguing on legal grounds that it was in reality the personal property of the lairds.

<sup>7</sup> *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1885

<sup>8</sup> Details can be found in its minute book held in the Bishopsgate Institute, London.

<sup>9</sup> In 1883 Macfarlane had obtained the enactment of a provision that crofters should be given at least six months' notice before eviction. Touring the Highlands in 1884, he found that the Scottish courts had been ignoring this, enforcing the previous 40-days (*Christian Socialist*, November 1884). He was knighted in 1894. Cameron 1912, p70 describes the third candidate for Argyllshire, J. Stewart McCaig, as another Liberal.

<sup>10</sup> One example is Quintin Kerr, who stood for West Aberdeenshire against a Liberal, and was supported in his campaign by the President of the Aberdeen Trades Council (*Aberdeen Journal*, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1885)

<sup>11</sup> The *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1885, gives Fraser-Mackintosh's explanation of his decision. In an account of an election meeting, the same journal (23<sup>rd</sup> October 1885) reports an interesting rebuke delivered against the sitting Liberal Member by a heckler: "*You landed proprietors are the best men we can get, but you are all tarred with the same brush, and there is a good deal of Toryism in the best of you.*"

<sup>12</sup> Even the Highland Liberal newspapers showed a good deal of sympathy with the crofters and admitted the justice of their grievances, though they all dismiss the Land League group as irresponsible extremists. Thus the *Elgin Courant and Courier* (2<sup>nd</sup> January 1885) agreed with the contention of the crofters of a Sutherlandshire district that some land offered them by the Duke of Sutherland was worthless. Following the 1885 election, the *Inverness Courier*, although it had strongly opposed Fraser-Mackintosh – as it had always done – and had declared that Dr Macdonald's return for Ross-shire had 'virtually disfranchised' the county,

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quoted, apparently with approval, the opinion of the *Ross-shire Journal* that Novar had been the victim of the bad landlords of the constituency: 'Unfortunately, as a whole, landlords in Ross-shire in the past, and in many instances at the present, have been and are selfish and tyrannical.' (5<sup>th</sup> December 1885) The attitude of the church is also of interest. The Free Church minister in Portree refused the use of the church to Henry George's 1885 meeting; and the Rev. D. MacCallum, then Church of Scotland minister at Waternish, Skye was summoned before his Presbytery for censure for his active part in the work of the League. MacCallum was also once arrested, but released without being charged. Yet in 1892, at Inverness, in a special conference of ministers and elders of the Church of Scotland, presided over by the Moderator of the General Assembly and described as a 'Congress on Christian Life and Work', and during a remarkable session on the land question, a succession of speakers, without one dissident, declared that the Church had failed in its duty in not giving active support to the crofters. One minister referred to the evil effects of 'sporting visitors and their train of pampered minions', diverting the beaters from 'honest industry'. (Inverness Courier, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1892)

<sup>13</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Vols cccii – cccviii; also *Inverness Courier*, May-June 1886. The Marquis of Stafford also introduced a bill, which was not proceeded with after the Government brought forward its own measure. In their contest with the Government over the Bill, Clark and Macdonald do not appear to have received much support from Fraser-Mackintosh, Cameron or Macfarlane, other English and Scottish Radicals being more prominent.

<sup>14</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1886

<sup>15</sup> *Inverness Courier*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1886 – the report of a most uncompromising speech, in which Sutherland totally condemns the 1886 Act.

<sup>16</sup> *Inverness Courier* 15<sup>th</sup> June 1886

<sup>17</sup> *Inverness Courier* October – December 1886

<sup>18</sup> *Inverness Courier* July 1886

<sup>19</sup> When the choice was given, only the Glendale townships demanded and were granted peasant proprietorship – a decision they have long since regretted. This unexpected difference for Ireland, due perhaps to a different stress placed by the crofters on the obligations of their landlords towards them, considerably embarrassed the Scottish Congested Districts Board, which succeeded the Crofting Commission in 1892.

<sup>20</sup> *Inverness Courier* 30<sup>th</sup> September 1892

<sup>21</sup> *Inverness Courier* 30<sup>th</sup> September 1892

<sup>22</sup> See particularly (Sir) *J. Sexton: Sir James Sexton, Agitator* (1936) p83; also T.W. Moody *Michael Davitt and the British Labour Movement 1882 – 1906*, in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, No3 (1953) p65.

<sup>23</sup> *Labour Leader*, January 1893

<sup>24</sup> *Forward*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1909

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