

British Library Newspapers: Parts III-V in Focus

Introduction

[British Library Newspapers](#) is the most comprehensive digital collection of national and regional newspapers from across the UK, making it a key resource for studying regional history. Introduced in 2008, the series has grown to encompass five parts, each building upon the other to form a formidable resource for political, social and cultural research. The series spans 5.5 million pages with an impressive 161 newspaper titles. Academic Advisor to Parts I and II of the series, Dr Martin Conboy, described the series as an ‘enormously rich’ resource, which has already proved of great value to a range of scholars.

The *British Library Newspapers* series offers a range of research opportunities. While all parts considered together form an unrivalled platform for corroborative research, focussing upon certain parts in particular draws out the unique value of each. In this case, looking at Parts III to V emphasises the additional depth which these parts bring to the series as a whole. More specifically, they broaden coverage in lesser-known regions, such as areas in the north of England and Scotland. The topic of the Scottish Highland Clearances, which took place from the late-eighteenth century and lasted well into the nineteenth, draws out the utility of Parts III to V with its comprehensive coverage of titles from across Scotland. *Part V:1746-1950* alone doubles Gale’s coverage of the Scottish press: particularly useful in this case are the titles published within the Highlands themselves: *The Inverness Courier* and the *John O’Groat Journal*.



British Library Newspapers is a vital enhancement to regional research, complementing Gale’s broad coverage of the national UK press, with *The Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph* [and others](#).

Case Study: The Highland Clearances of Scotland

A process which saw the (often forced) removal of peoples from their farmland in favour of sheep farming, the ‘Highland Clearances’ date back to the eighteenth century. Great swathes of people living in the Highlands in the far north of Scotland left their homes, some resettling elsewhere in the UK, many others emigrating overseas. As the sheep arrived, so the people left; there was little need for so many labourers with this new system of farming. Freeing up the land which was formerly lived on by tenants and their families would mean more open space for the sheep.

The subject of the Clearances is not an easy one to deal with, given the controversy which still

surrounds the process. For many, it marked the greed of landlords, eager to realise the profits of sheep farming at the expense of their tenants, many of whom had lasting family connections to their land. Others have pointed to the pressures of a rising population and even the weather, with a succession of poor harvests and famine prompting people to move away from their homes.

By going back to some of the contemporary sources, the varying experiences of the Highland Clearances can be seen and their impact measured. These sources show the importance of considering a broad range of primary source material, with the examples selected below suggesting a largely negative response to the Clearances from across Scotland.

The Highland Clearances: from within the Highlands

The inclusion of newspapers published within the Highlands themselves in *British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950* offers a significant enhancement to research on the Clearances. The *Inverness Courier* (1817-1892) and *John O’Groat Journal* (1836-1872) are key sources; the pages of both titles were regularly filled with pieces addressing Highland ‘destitution’ in one form or another.

The summer of 1845 was a time of particular prevalence for articles addressing the Clearances. One reason for this may have been the recent attention given to the subject by *The Times*, which sent a correspondent to Scotland to investigate the process. Two articles published in May and June 1845 respectively – one each from the *Inverness Courier* and *John O’Groat Journal* – made reference to the *Times* correspondent.

The *Inverness Courier* expressed its delight that national attention was finally being diverted towards the forced removals of peoples from their homes. It was optimistic that bringing the issue into the spotlight would cause Parliament to reconsider the implementation of the Scottish Poor Law Bill, and make it more effective at caring for the poor: ‘*the circumstances which recent investigations have brought to light will speak trumpet-tongued, and compel the legislature... to do justice to the subject*’.

THE POOR AND THE “CLEARANCES” IN THE HIGHLANDS.

We endeavoured lately, in a series of articles, to show the utter inadequacy of the provision made for the poor in this part of the kingdom, and of their consequent destitution and suffering, owing to the impossibility of applying a sufficient remedy in the present defective state of the law. This subject is now under discussion by an able writer in the *Times*, who has just visited Ross-shire, on purpose to invest state of the poor, and the threatened removal from t sessions of a considerable number of small tenants. that the facts and arguments thus laid before the pu have the effect of inducing our representatives in Pa to give their serious consideration to the Scotch I bill, and to endeavour to make it effectual for accor the great ends which its promoters profess to have temptation. We suspect, and indeed have some rea lieve, that the Lord Advocate’s measure has been re by the Government not more from a desire to imp condition of the poor, than for the purpose, by doi thing, of warding off the necessity, which the pressu opinion would probably soon impose upon them, of int a measure of a larger and more beneficial character. the evil be but imperfectly treated now, the circ which recent investigations have brought to light w trumpet-tongued, and compel the Legislature, ere lo justice to the subject. The thunders of the *Times* “hushed on the moors,” but they will be recollected on the plains of the Sasenach.

‘The Poor and the “Clearances” in the Highlands’, *The Inverness Courier*, 28 May 1845. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

sessions of a considerable number of small tenants. We trust that the facts and arguments thus laid before the public will have the effect of inducing our representatives in Parliament to give their serious consideration to the Scotch Poor-Law bill, and to endeavour to make it effectual for accomplishing the great ends which its promoters profess to have in contemplation. We suspect, and indeed have some reason to believe, that the Lord Advocate’s measure has been resorted to by the Government not more from a desire to improve the condition of the poor, than for the purpose, by doing something, of warding off the necessity, which the pressure of public opinion would probably soon impose upon them, of introducing a measure of a larger and more beneficial character. But if

Yet, in an extract which highlights the value of the regional element of newspaper research, the paper was eager to furnish the *Times* report with further details. As a 'local chronicler', the *Inverness Courier* was able to bring other examples to light which underlined the extent and scale of Highland discontent. Specifically, it drew attention to the plight of the residents in the district of Glencalvie, who were deemed unfairly treated with demands for higher rent and threat of removal.

severity or injustice. If it be true, however, as we are assured it is, that the present tenants of Glencalvie, and their forefathers, have been long there—that the rent of £55 is really 'a full rent' for their farm—and that they owe no arrears, we cannot help regretting that it should have been thought at all necessary to alarm and distress them by a process of removal, and a demand for a higher rent—more especially, seeing that

'The Poor and the "Clearances" in the Highlands', *The Inverness Courier*, 28 May 1845. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

The *John O'Groat Journal*, while similarly encouraged by the efforts of *The Times* to more fully examine the Highland Clearances, was even more forceful in its denunciation of the process. This amounted to nothing more than a 'monstrous... exercise of landlordism', characterised by the greed of Highland proprietors eager to 'improve' their estates. Yet this was at the expense of the inhabitants of the land, who had enjoyed, along with their forefathers, their properties for 'time immorial [sic]', making their forced eviction a source of 'physical and moral suffering'.

escaped public observation—Highland clearings—a process by which proprietors of the Highland districts of Scotland improve their estates and incomes at the cost of an amount of suffering, physical and moral, on the part of those who, and whose ancestors, have inhabited their properties from time immorial, unparalleled out of (perhaps in) Ireland. We have transferred to our columns

'Highland Clearances', *John O'Groat Journal*, 13 June 1845. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

Again, the scale of the removals is highlighted: it reports the removal of 15,000 people in the space of nine years from the county of Sutherlandshire. With the resultant consolidation of the land only compressing the population into 'a wretched selvage of poverty and suffering', the writer calls upon the *Times* to prevent similar depopulation in Ross-shire.

sheep.” All the effect Sismondi’s noble reclamation produced was a laudatory essay on those very improvements in the *Quarterly Review*! What is done cannot be undone; but the depopulation of Ross-shire, after the fashion of Sutherlandshire, may be prevented; and that prevention we consign to the care of the *Times*.—*Atlas*.

‘Highland Clearances’, *John O’Groat Journal*, 13 June 1845. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

Although we are only looking at a few selected examples, at this stage the sentiment towards the Clearances emanating from within the Highlands was, perhaps unsurprisingly, overwhelmingly negative. But what of the wider feelings towards the Clearances?

The Highland Clearances: from outside of the Highlands

The range of Scottish newspaper titles within the *British Library Newspapers* series means that there is fertile ground for exploring how the Clearances were regarded elsewhere in the country.

In the county of Fife, situated far to the South of the Highlands, the matter of ‘Highland Destitution’ was frequently addressed in the pages of the *Fife Herald*. In the summer of 1845, for instance, it published a lengthy editorial lamenting the forced removal of tenants from their land; it was a ‘cruel spectacle’ to see them leave, ‘compelled to seek out for themselves and their children new occupations and new homes’.

kingdom. It is a cruel spectacle to see those who have spent the vigour of their days in those silent glens, quietly and peaceably pursuing their rural occupations, all at once, and without any plausible plea whatever, save the caprice of their landlord, set adrift on the world and compelled to seek out for themselves and their children other occupations and other homes. We

‘The Clearances of the Highlanders of Scotland’, *The Fife Herald*, 12 June 1845. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

It was in little doubt that it was the greed of ‘heartless’ proprietors which was to blame. Their actions were deemed an ‘inhuman despotism’ without justification than the wanton exercise of power. Not until legislation prioritised the ‘happiness of the people’ would the situation begin to change.

It is difficult to conceive anything more revolting to every good and humane feeling of our nature than this inhuman despotism on the part of our privileged and propertied gentry. That a landed proprietor who is in possession of lands extending over half a county should be permitted to exterminate, at pleasure, the rural population, with no other plea than that a man may do what he pleases with his own property, is a state of matters that urgently calls for investigation. Such proceedings are not more culpable on the part of proprietors than they are disgraceful to a professedly civilized nation.

'The Clearances of the Highlanders of Scotland', *The Fife Herald*, 12 June 1845. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

However, the existence of a public meeting on the issue of Highland Destitution in Edinburgh eighteen months later suggests that such a remedy was a long way off.

DESTITUTION IN THE HIGHLANDS.

A public meeting was held on Friday in the Music Hall, Edinburgh, to take into consideration the present destitution in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Long before the hour of meeting, a number of the leaders of the Free Church made their appearance, and sat down in the body of the hall, amidst the loud and continued plaudits of their adherents, who also appeared to be very numerous.

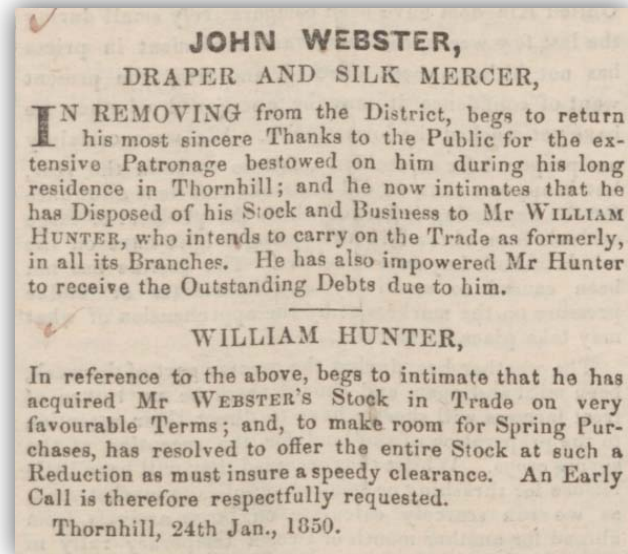
On the platform we observed, besides the Lord Provost who filled the chair, the following—amongst a great number of other gentlemen—the Provost of Leith, Lords Murray and Cuninghame, Bailies Mack and Ritchie, Convener Cushnie, Councillors Cruickshank, Calder, Robertson, and Clark, Sheriff Speirs, the Procurator of the Established Church, Rev. Dr Clark, and Norman M'Leod, Dalkeith, Bishop Terrot, James Craufurd, Esq., Advocate-Depute, J. G. Thompson, Esq., Rev. J. A. Campbell, Rev. Dr Brown, Rev. Jonathan Watson, James Moncrieff, Esq., advocate, Rev. Mr Robertson, Greyfriars, and Mr Clark of Ulva. The Rev. Dr Muir having opened the meeting with prayer,

'Destitution in the Highlands', *The Fife Herald*, 24 December 1846. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

With the *Fife Herald* addressing matters from outside of the Highlands, it provides a glimpse into the broader perceptions of the Clearances. It claimed that Highland distress was a cause of sympathy 'throughout the Kingdom', giving a sense of the widespread concern that the Clearances bred among contemporaries.

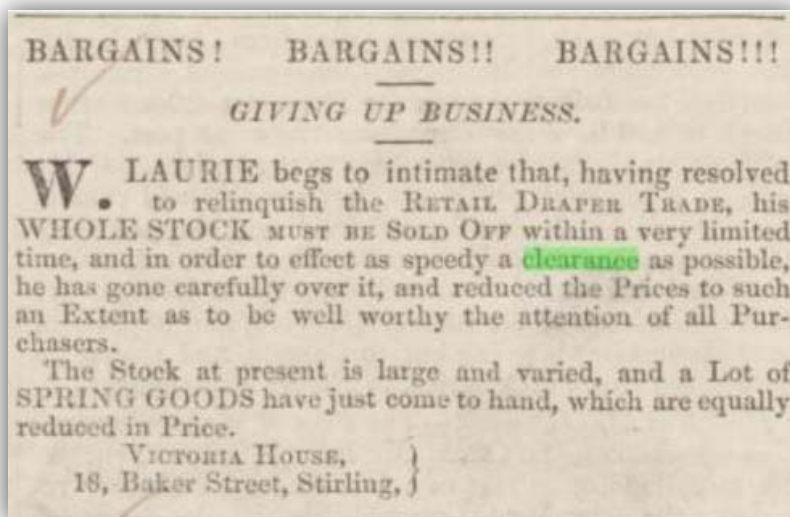
A snippet from the *Stirling Observer*, a newspaper located to the West of Fife, supports such a view, describing the clearance system as 'baneful'.

This can be further seen by the effect it had upon local businesses. As reported in the same newspaper, draper and silk merchant John Webster was forced to hand over his business to a William Hunter on his removal from the district. Webster's legacy in the region was clearly deep-seated; he thanked the residents for their 'extensive patronage bestowed upon him during his long residence in Thornhill'.



'Advertisements and Notices', *The Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 30 January 1850. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950.](#)

In similar vein, Stirling draper W. Laurie gave up his business in 1847. This did, though, mean the promise of 'bargains' for locals; a vast reduction in prices had been enacted to effect as swift a clearance as possible.



'Advertisements and Notices', *The Stirling Observer*, 15 April 1847. [British Library Newspapers, Part III, 1741-1950](#)

With such an extensive impact upon surrounding communities, it is perhaps unsurprising that hostility towards the Clearances could overspill. This was the case in Kindeace, where Major Robertson's tenants expressed opposition of a 'very formidable character' to the prospect of forced removal.

**REMOVAL OF TENANTS—RIOTOUS
PROCEEDINGS.**

We mentioned last week that considerable obstruction was anticipated in the execution of summonses of removal upon four of the tenants of Major Robertson of Kindeace, on his property of Greenyards, near Bonar-Bridge. The opposition turned out to be of a very formidable character.

'Removal of Tenants – Riotous Proceedings', *The Inverness Courier*, 6 April 1854. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

When a police force of thirty men went to enact the Clearance, they were confronted by a group consisting of some 300 people – nearly 'two thirds' of whom were women. The women armed with stones, and then men behind with sticks, they were determined to resist the eviction summonses. Yet after a short struggle, the police prevailed, enforcing the clearances upon the tenants in question.

In an attempt to purvey a balanced interpretation of events, the *Inverness Courier* then printed the contrasting views of two correspondents. The first lamented the 'impunity' with which the local residents behaved; the police force had been assembled in an orderly manner and were perfectly justified in their undertaking:

were unavoidably hurt; but if a whole countryside will rise in rebellion to prevent three or four families from being removed from their lots, or shifted from one part of an estate to another, public sympathy with the failure of such an attempt would be misplaced. The judgment and energy with which Mr Taylor, the Sheriff-Substitute at Tain, planned and conducted the present expedition, entitles him to the gratitude of every good member of society, and having been supported by a steady and resolute body of about thirty police-

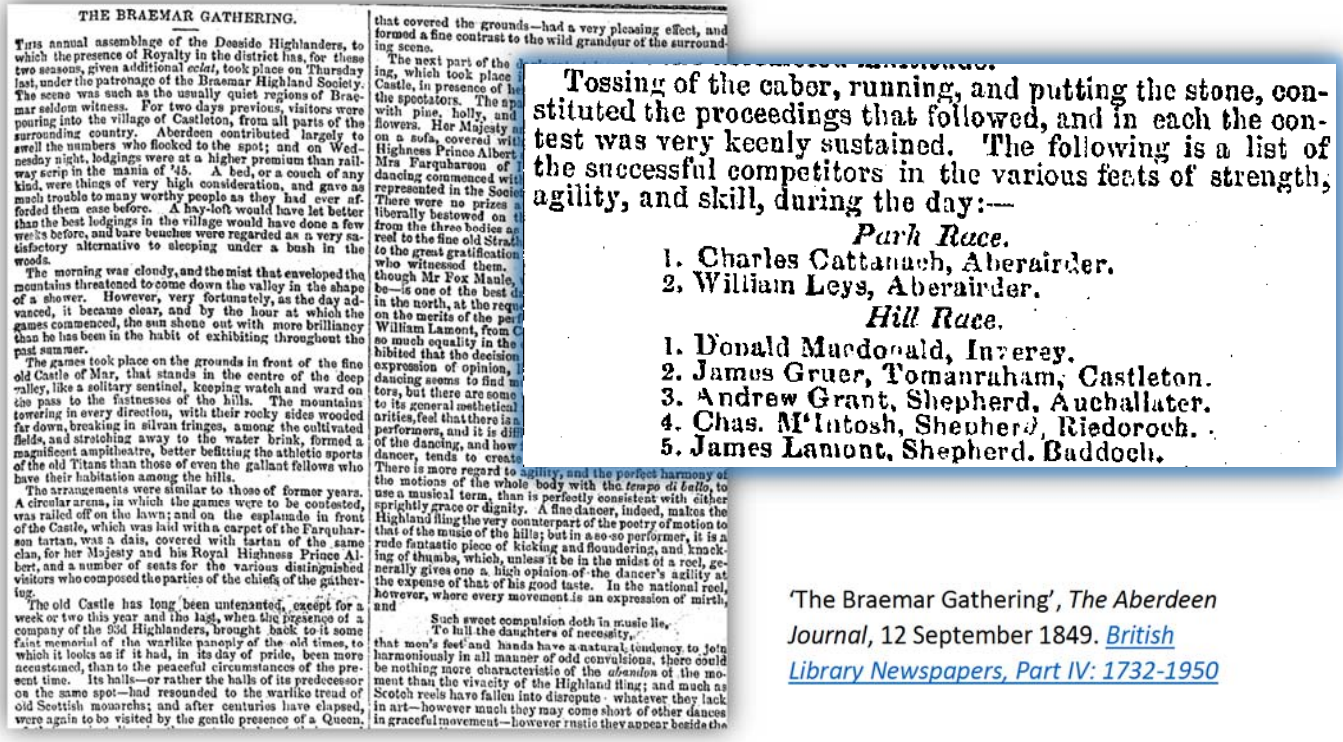
'Removal of Tenants – Riotous Proceedings', *The Inverness Courier*, 6 April 1854. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

The second correspondent took an opposing standpoint, highlighting the 'severe manner' with which many of the women in the crowd were treated. It is claimed that many of these were attacked without justification. Had more patience been exercised, the writer argued, a more peaceful outcome may have ensued, since it was deemed completely unreasonable to displace tenants within forty days. Even better would have been to simply do away with the 'harrowing Highland Clearances':

a thirty year's purchase of the crofts at once. Could not our Lord Advocate introduce some short measure that would do away with those harrowing Highland clearances."

'Removal of Tenants - Riotous Proceedings', *The Inverness Courier*, 6 April 1854. [British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746-1950](#)

It is worth remembering though that, no matter how bad the Clearances may have been, life still went on as normal for many. In the Highland area of Braemar, for instance, the annual gathering of the Deeside Highlanders took place as normal. Scores of people flocked to the region to witness the annual games, with events such as hill races, hammer throwing and caber tossing all taking place.



Summary

Collectively, the documents looked at above paint a picture of hostility and negativity towards the Highland Clearances. Whether from within the Highlands themselves, or from elsewhere within Scotland, it seemed that many interpreted the process as nothing more than a threat to the established ways of life. The impact of the Clearances upon locals – socially, politically and economically – would support this view.

The vastly differing opinions expressed in the penultimate example, however, offer a word of caution. It clearly demonstrates that there was no 'universal' response to the Clearances; that they were a complex, contested set of procedures. Of course, reactions to them were highly variant, dependent upon a range of factors, not least social class.

Ultimately, the ability to explore all of these sentiments with Parts III-V of the *British Library Newspaper* series offers a significant research tool. Having only scratched the surface, there is plenty of room for further research into the Highland Clearances; with *British Library Newspapers* at the fingertips of researchers, they have the perfect platform from which to do so.