

Sheep farming in Sutherland in the eighteenth century*

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Abstract

The introduction of commercial sheep farming to Sutherland has been associated with the Sutherland clearances of the early nineteenth century. This study examines the history of sheep farming on different estates in Sutherland during the eighteenth century, from the aristocratic experiments of the 1730s and 1740s to the marked expansion during the last quarter of the century. By 1800 sheep farming was firmly established in Sutherland.

The introduction of sheep farming to Sutherland has been strongly associated in most minds with the Clearances. The historiography has been dominated by events on the Sutherland estate when, broadly speaking between 1807 and 1821, a comprehensive re-organisation was carried out, comprising the establishment of sheep farming and the removal of many thousands of the small tenantry to the coastal margins. In the Highlands as a whole, the introduction of sheep farming is held to have brought about the creation of a 'new farming aristocracy'.¹ The sheep farms were tenanted by large capitalist graziers, many of whom were from the south, particularly the Scottish-English Borders. In the often emotive language surrounding the Clearances, the incoming sheep have been characterized as a 'white tide' sweeping over the hills.² This may accord with the small tenants' perspective. But, as Richards has pointed out, there has been a 'striking vagueness' about the chronology of the change of system, even amongst near contemporaries.³ In depth archival research into the history of sheep farming in the Highlands is in its infancy.⁴ Indeed, as Devine has stated more generally, 'no economic history of sheep farming exists'.⁵

This study is an investigation into the introduction of commercial sheep farming in Sutherland. At the outset, it is important to bear in mind that sheep formed part of the livestock on most Highland farms in the eighteenth century, but that in economic terms sheep were nowhere

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¹ M. Gray, *The Highland economy, 1750-1850* (1957), p. 91.

² J. Hunter, *The making of the Crofting Community* (1976), p. 15.

³ E. Richards, *A history of the Highland Clearances* (2 vols, 1982-5). For a brief examination of the background to sheep farming in Sutherland, see Richards, *Highland Clearances*, II, pp. 353-54.

⁴ I. S. Macdonald, 'Alexander Macdonald, Esq. of Glencoe: insights into early Highland sheep farming', *ROSC: Review of Scottish Culture* 10 (1996-7), pp. 55-66. Even this article sees the introduction of sheep farming in Sutherland as taking place after 1806.

⁵ T. M. Devine, *Exploring the Scottish Past* (1995), pp. 140-41.

near as significant as cattle. While numbers might vary from farm to farm, the keeping of sheep extended from the largest landowner to the smallest tenant. On the Sutherland estate, there was an extensive mains or home farm surrounding the family seat of Dunrobin which, in addition to some prime arable land, carried a varied stock of horses, cattle, sheep and goats. In general, the sheep were for the use of the family's household, principally for milk products and wool, but their meat and skins were also important. Some sheep were, like the surplus cattle, sold. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, these sheep were probably of the small native breed.⁶

Most tenants in Sutherland, whether large tacksmen or small tenants, also kept a mixed stock including sheep. Indeed, it appears that sheep equalled cattle numbers, particularly in the more highland areas. Lambs and wedders were included in the rents paid in kind or customary rents. These sheep, however, were small, tended to be badly managed, and were housed at night, possibly in summer as well as winter.⁷ They were kept for their milk, which was made into cheese, but also for their meat and wool. These were all used for household consumption and were in the main a 'subsistence accessory'.⁸ However, cheese and sheep were sold at local markets and there are suggestions of a regional trade in sheep which would bear further examination. The growing Scottish herring fishing fleet provided a new opportunity: in 1774 it was reported from Assynt on the west coast that cattle and especially sheep sold 'very high to the sailors, and others employed at the Fishery'.⁹

Broadly speaking, sheep numbers ranged from the hundred or more kept by the larger landlords to the handful of the average small tenant (although these might well have been herded within a township flock). As Gray has stated, 'There were many sheep but no sheep farms in the Highlands before 1760'.¹⁰ The issue is thus not the introduction of sheep, but the appearance of large flocks, employing novel breeds, whose size and market orientation makes them wholly commercial, rather than serving a local, essentially domestic economy.

Of the estates in the old county of Sutherland, that of the Earls of Sutherland was the most extensive. During the eighteenth century, the estate continued to grow; it comprised about 60 per cent of the county by 1800. There were, however, a number of other properties in Sutherland, particularly the Reay estate, in the north-west of the county, and the Balnagown estate in Strath Oykel. For this study, the county has been divided into three districts: the Sutherland estate in south-east Sutherland but also including the west coast parish of Assynt is dealt with first in section one; the Reay and other northern estates in section two; and the property of the Rosses of Balnagown along with other small estates in the parishes of Lairg and Creich in

⁶ In the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the Sutherland family held many flocks of sheep in varying locations throughout the estate: National Library of Scotland [hereafter NLS], Sutherland Papers, Dep. 313/561, copy inventory of moveables of William Lord Strathnaver, 1722. About 150 wedders and 110 lambs were paid to the family by the tenants as part of their annual customary rents and were placed in the various flocks: Dep. 313/642, state of the family expense ... 29 Sept. 1738; Dep. 313/698 and, in particular, Dep. 313/925 which is an account book for all

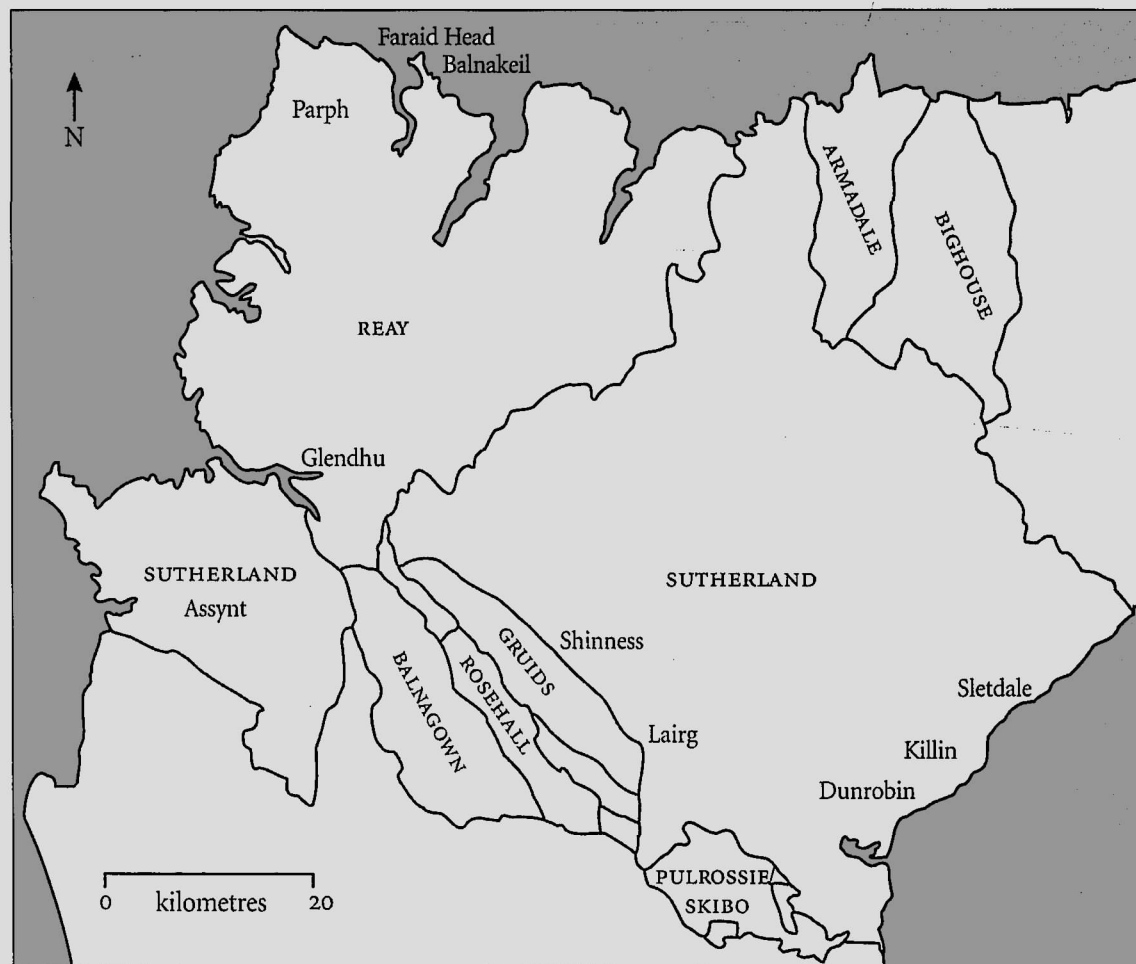
the estate shepherds covering the period 1713-20. By 1750 the flocks had been reduced to a single one on the Mains.

⁷ See, for instance, D. J. Withrington and I. R. Grant (gen. eds), *The statistical account of Scotland, 1791-1799*, XVIII, *Caithness and Sutherland* (1979), pp. 310, 323, 337, 358.

⁸ Gray, *Highland economy*, p. 39.

⁹ R. J. Adam (ed.), *John Home's survey of Assynt* (Scottish History Society, third ser., 52, 1960), p. 42.

¹⁰ Gray, *Highland economy*, p. 38.



MAP 1. Main estates in Sutherland c. 1800 and farms/grazings mentioned in the text.

the third section. These estates are located on Map 1. Each district will be considered in turn and the circumstances and chronology by which sheep farming was introduced examined.

I

The Sutherland estate comprised a narrow coastal strip of lowland character on the east, where rents paid in grain predominated throughout the eighteenth century, and an extensive highland hinterland. Successive possessors of the estate pursued an interest in 'improvement' from at least the 1720s if not earlier. In general this appears to have centred on the policies and mains farm of Dunrobin.¹¹ The financial difficulties of William sixteenth Earl, who succeeded in 1733, do not appear to have curtailed these activities.¹² Indeed they may have encouraged the Earl to

¹¹ The improvements were not restricted to Dunrobin. For instance, enclosing and ditching took place at Morvich in the 1720s: NLS, Dep. 313/3129.

¹² NLS, Dep. 313/642, state of the family expense ... 29 Sept. 1738.

make more of the Mains. In 1738, a survey of the estate suggested that a 'great flock of sheep that may be easily kept in the Glen of Dunrobin'.¹³ This proposal was not implemented but experiments were made with the introduction of new breeds of livestock.

The earliest record of non-native sheep on the estate comes from one of the claims made for losses to Jacobite forces in east Sutherland in the spring of 1746. Lieutenant John Gordon at Aberscross and Golspietower claimed that the rebels had 'killed and carried off twenty one wedders of the English breed worth five shillings sterling each'.¹⁴ While no evidence has as yet been found to suggest that the Earl also had 'English' sheep, it is noteworthy that at the same period there were 'English swine' both on the Mains of Dunrobin and also in the hands of local tacksmen.¹⁵ It is probable that the non-native breeds of sheep which some tacksmen in east Sutherland possessed in the mid-1740s came from stock on the Mains. While it should probably be assumed that the 'English' sheep had been introduced by Earl William, it must be borne in mind that the process of 'improvement' on the Mains commenced before 1720, and the possibility of earlier introductions cannot be ruled out.

The death of the sixteenth Earl in 1750 left the estate finances in a parlous state and his successor a minor. However, the commissioners appointed by the new Earl took steps to preserve the plantations and, in a limited way, continued the process of enclosure.¹⁶ The Earl began to play a part in the management of his estates in the late 1750s and, despite financial constraints, set in train further improvements to the policies and Mains farm. In 1761, 'six ewe lambs and a ram of an English breed' were brought to Dunrobin. The lambs came from Goodtrees in Lanarkshire and the arrangements were made by the family's legal agent, John Mackenzie of Delvine, and Major Hugh Mackay of Bighouse, one of the pioneers of sheep farming in Sutherland.¹⁷

Mackenzie also advised the Earl about developments on the estate as a whole. With the Earl looking to increase his income from the estate, Mackenzie and the other advisers were apparently prepared to consider the introduction of sheep farming. The undated and unsigned fragments of a letter throw a gleam of light on their thinking. The letter appears to date from 1765 when a number of farms on the estate were about to be let for entry the following year and may have been written by Robert Gray of Creich to Mackenzie. Gray was an extensive dealer in cattle, a former factor, and a ready proposer of schemes. The author of the letter had been asked to suggest what improvements might be made to the estate, and at a meeting in London, had hinted that 'a great number of sheep might be kept on some parts of the estate by which the rents might be considerably advanced'. The recipient had observed that 'the ground

¹³ NLS, Dep. 313/642, Rental of the Earl of Sutherlands Estate ... Sept. 1738.

¹⁴ National Archives of Scotland [hereafter NAS], Gilchrist of Ospisdale Papers, GD153, box 50/2, folder with claims, 1746.

¹⁵ In November 1746, one Donald Fuchadar in Mellaig was paid £1 for 'libbing' or castrating eleven of the Earl's 'English Swine': NLS, Dep. 313/655, account of small debursments. Hugh Munro, tacksman of Clayside and Inverboll, and John Gordon, surgeon and possessor of the house of Golspietower, entered claims for losses of 'English swine' by the rebels in 1746: NAS, GD153,

box 50/2, folder with claims 1746. James MacLean of Capernoch, later claimed that the Earl of Sutherland owed him 'for maintaining English swine in ... 1745 and 1746': NLS, Dep. 313/54/292, account 19 Oct. 1750.

¹⁶ NLS, Dep. 313/698, pp. 28-29.

¹⁷ NLS, Dep. 313/1095, Mackenzie to Gilchrist, 15 July 1761; Dep. 313/2916, Hugh Mackay to [] 10 July 1761; Lauriston Castle Collection, MS 1484, fo. 25. Mackay arranged for Donald MacLeod, a soldier in the Earl's regiment, 'a very careful honest fellow, and knows the road well' to take the lambs north. MacLeod had 'a caddie to attend him to Queensferry'.

was generally wet for sheep pastures, and I own that many parts are so but there is also plenty of dry grounds on the same farms'. Sheep farmers from the south were prepared to pay one shilling and more per head. Even if land in Sutherland was only let for 6d. per head, the Earl would still receive more rent. Moreover, if a sheep farm was created, there was room enough for the existing inhabitants elsewhere on the estate.

The interior farms of Lairg and Shinness, in the parish of Lairg, extended to about 18 by 8 miles, and contained 300 inhabitants. However, the current stocking was not worth more than £1200, and the farms did not even produce £100 rent. Under sheep, the Earl might get twice or even three times as much rent, even with the sheep farmer only paying half the level of rent current in the south of Scotland. The income of the 300 inhabitants of the farms owning a cattle stock worth £1200 was contrasted with the 20 inhabitants who would be required to look after a flock of sheep valued at £2400.

The author suggested that 'a sensible Farmer from Tweeddale or Tividale should be brought to the country to view the whole estate in order to give his opinion about keeping sheep, if it turns out favourable, any expense of £15 or £20 sterling is well laid out'. Although the analysis may have been crude, the paper provided a clear contrast between the economic returns from cattle rearing and commercial sheep farming. The impact on the existing inhabitants was also obvious, even though the author considered that they could be resettled elsewhere on the estate.¹⁸ There is no evidence that the advice was followed. The set of Assynt, on the west coast of Sutherland, brought a significant increase of rent, but it was to be achieved by extracting more of the profits the existing tacksmen and small tenants would make from their cattle.

The Earl died in 1766 and was succeeded by his infant daughter, Countess Elizabeth. The management of the estate was placed under the care of her tutors, several of whom had served earlier as her father's commissioners.¹⁹ An immediate stop was put to expenditure on improvements to the Mains and the local managers were faced with the problem of what to do with the English sheep. In April 1767, Dugald Gilchrist, one of the estate factors, reported to the estate commissioner, Captain James Sutherland, that

I do not think the sheep can be disposed of in this country or Ross as the Highlanders will take none of them as they have not proper wint[er]ing and, as they are destructive to planting, such as have inclosures will avoid them on that account. It is necessary that this place be rid of them as there is no coupling them without the dikes are not built purposely for them as none of our inclosures is at present constructed in a sufficient fence for confining them.²⁰

Sutherland apparently distributed the sheep as he had proposed, in 'half dozens to the gentlemen and tacksmen in the county to improve the breed of sheep in this country'. However, some may have been retained on the Mains.²¹

While the tutors were to exercise a careful approach to expenditure, they were prepared to explore ways of developing the estate. No doubt aware of earlier discussions about sheep farming, in December 1767 they proposed that an enquiry should be made 'into the most proper

¹⁸ NAS, GD153/50.

¹⁹ The tutors who were most active were Sir Adam Fergusson of Kilkerran, James Wemyss of Wemyss, Sir David Dalrymple of Hailes, Alexander Boswell of

Auchinleck and the family lawyer, John Mackenzie of Delvine: NLS, Dep. 313/725.

²⁰ NAS, GD153, box 11, bundle 8/35.

²¹ NLS, MS 1485, fos. 73, 131-32.

method of introducing the rearing of sheep in Sutherland'. In March 1768, they agreed to the suggestion of one of their number, Alexander Boswell of Auchinleck, that John Campbell of Lagwine, then a tenant of Sir James Colquhoun of Luss who was related by marriage to the Sutherland family, should be sent to Sutherland and 'report how far it was fit' for rearing sheep.²² Campbell was one of the trailblazers of sheep farming in the Highlands.²³ Sutherland was initially sceptical and told Mackenzie that, 'When Lord Auchinlecks' man comes here I will order proper people to attend him all over the back settlements but I have no idea if this scheme tunring [*sic*] better then William's at Brora' – a reference to the attempt to exploit the small coalfield at Brora which was proving to be an expensive failure.²⁴

Campbell visited Sutherland that summer and evidently considered that sheep could thrive in the north.²⁵ He was not slow, however, to take advantage of the opportunity and expressed an interest in taking a farm himself. Sutherland found Campbell 'a schemer, but I assure you he has a great deal of address', and invited him to submit written proposals.²⁶ Campbell first applied for a lease of Shinness, but then proposed taking the Reay Forest (a traditional hunting forest on the Reay estate) in addition, and entered into preliminary discussions with one of the tutors of Lord Reay. Sutherland considered the offer for Shinness rather low, but Campbell complained of the distance from southern markets. To overcome this he proposed slaughtering the sheep in Sutherland and shipping the salted carcasses to Leith.

Shinness was occupied by an old tacksman farmer who had been given a right to the farm for life by the late Earl. Sutherland, however, was confident that if the tacksman died, his grandson would match Campbell's offer for the farm. Moreover, there were over 20 families on the farm 'who must go to America for they cannot live in Shinness if it is turned into a sheep farm'. On the other hand, Sutherland could see advantages in bringing Campbell north. Local farmers did not 'dislike projects'. Indeed, there were 'many very judicious people' in Sutherland who thought that 'many parts of this country is better adapted for sheep than black cattle and you cannot imagine how happy the people are that the large sheep thrive so well which you gave to L[or]d Sutherland and which I distributed among the tacksman last year'. If, as Campbell suggested, sheep could flourish in the north, Sutherland predicted that there would be 'many thousands in a few years'.²⁷

In the event, the tutors decided not to pursue Campbell's proposals and laid aside the idea of sheep farming altogether. In the early 1770s they were faced with a serious subsistence crisis and a real, if exaggerated, threat of mass emigration. The tutors took steps to retain the population on the estate and large tacksman holdings were out of favour. Instead the tutors adopted a policy encouraging the tacksmen to farm on their own account without the aid of subtenants.²⁸

However, Sutherland pressed ahead with his own agricultural improvements. Although he had initially embarked upon a military career, he had become a close associate of the late Earl and had been appointed commissioner by the Countess' tutors with overall charge, not only of political matters, but also of the policies about Dunrobin, estate improvements and

²² NLS, Dep. 313/725, 2 Dec. 1767, 18 Mar. 1768.

²³ Richards, *History of the Highland Clearances*, I, pp. 187–88.

²⁴ NLS, MS 1485, fo. 126.

²⁵ NLS, Dep. 313/2922, Receipts of John Campbell. He

received 15 guineas for his 'trouble and charges in going to Sutherland'; 313/724, Mackenzie's account 27 June 1768.

²⁶ NLS, MS 1485, fo. 129.

²⁷ *ibid.*, fos. 131–32.

²⁸ Adam (ed.), *Home's Survey of Assynt*, pp. xxx–xxxvi.

plantations.²⁹ For this he received a handsome salary of £200. In 1767, while on a brief visit to his regiment in Ireland, he took time to take a close interest in agricultural methods around Dublin which he considered much suited to the northern climate. As Sutherland said, 'I begin to think I shall make a farmer ... The greatest farmer in this country is within nine miles of this place, I intend to visit him regularly once every week while I am here'.³⁰

In 1768 James Sutherland made a proposal to the tutors to take a tack of the farm of Killin, in the parish of Clyne. Although described as a 'highland' farm, Killin was situated between the coastal fringe and the more upland interior. Sutherland initially proposed to use it for his 'yeal' or barren cattle, and also for rearing and fattening his young cattle.³¹ The following year he put revised proposals to the tutors, suggesting that he would build a new house, enclose the farm, and make it 'a comfortable residence for the factors of the family'. He was given a 15-year lease and a loan to build a new farmhouse.³² This was in addition to his possession of the Mains of Dunrobin which he continued, albeit in a more limited way, to improve, buying ploughs from England, and sowing turnips, clover and rye grass.

Not long after taking possession of Killin, Sutherland established a small sheep flock there. In 1771, he invested £50 in enclosing his sheep farm, and also sent a lad to be instructed by Ross of Balnagown's shepherd. The following year he reported that he had sent some cheeses south produced from his sheep. He admitted that his

sheep farm is in its infancy, but this year I shall make a better figure, as I shall have above three score of lambs, and I propose to augment the number of my sheep to three hundred this season (I mean ewes) my flock at present amounts to eight score, that is ewes, last years lambs and wedders, and notwithstanding the long and severe winter we have had I have not lost but one sheep, this I hope will convince the people that sheep will thrive better, their not being housed.

These were, apparently, native sheep. However, Sutherland was improving his stock by crossing them with some of the 'English' sheep brought north in 1761.³³

In 1775 Sutherland told Mackenzie of his intention to buy 100 Linton or Black Faced ewes at Dunkeld. This experiment or 'trial', was undertaken 'with a view to introduce that useful animal among the Countess' tenants, more than any profit I can make'.³⁴ He continued to build up the flock and by 1781 had about 700 ewes. His operations clearly impressed the agricultural writer, Andrew Wight, who regarded Sutherland as a farmer 'who may be ranked with the very best improvers'. A fall in the price of wool apparently convinced Sutherland to 'get quit of his sheep with all convenient speed'.³⁵ In the event he did not dispense of his flock. However, the coming of age of the Countess of Sutherland and her marriage to Earl Gower in 1785, brought a change to his situation. Sutherland had already bought the small neighbouring estate of Uppat. In 1786 he gave up the management of the Sutherland estate and renounced both his farms.³⁶

²⁹ He had been with the Earl and his Countess when they were ill in Bath and referred to the Earl as his 'patron', NLS, MS 1485, fo. 142. It has been suggested that Sutherland was an illegitimate son of William 17th Earl of Sutherland: M. Sutherland, *A fighting clan: Sutherland Officers, 1250-1850* (1996), pp. 172-73.

³⁰ NLS, MS 1485, fos. 107-108.

³¹ *ibid.*, fos. 123, 126, 129.

³² NLS, Dep. 313/725, 29 July, 1 Dec 1769.

³³ NLS, MS 1485, fos. 229-30.

³⁴ *ibid.*, fo. 248.

³⁵ A. Wight, *Present state of husbandry in Scotland* (4 vols, 1784), IV (i), pp. 297, 301-302.

³⁶ NLS, Dep. 313/984/1.

The new Sutherland factor was a lawyer and small laird from Easter Ross, Hugh Rose of Aitnach. Rose has gained a certain renown for his decided opinions against sheep farming which he first expressed in 1787. Although he advocated the improvement of the native sheep and their wool by the use of introduced rams, he was scathing in his condemnation of the 'kind of rage for sheep farming' which had 'of late years prevailed in many parts of the Highlands of Scotland' and which was but 'a mode for stretching and increasing rents; for the depopulation of a country can with no degree of propriety be term'd the improvement of it'. He warned of the precariousness of sheep farming, the problem of disease and the large amounts of capital required to establish a sheep farm. According to Rose, it was nothing but 'mischief that may arise from this kind of speculation'.³⁷

It is thus not surprising that Rose presided over a conservative set which did little to alter the pattern of tenancies on the estate. The farms in some parishes were not set at all: the existing tenants were allowed to possess at will.³⁸ His factory was terminated by his death in 1791. He was replaced by John Fraser, a local lawyer but with estate management experience. With Lord Gower as British Ambassador in Paris from 1790 until the family's escape from France in August 1792, control largely lay with Fraser and the Edinburgh legal agent, Alexander Mackenzie who had taken over from Mackenzie. Many farms, particularly in the highland parts of the estate, fell out of lease in 1793 and Fraser was given a general charge to set lands 'at such rent (but not under the present) and under such conditions of improvement by the tenants as shall be stipulated between him and them'.³⁹ When he had taken over, Fraser had believed that many tenants would be prepared to give up their cattle and take to sheep farming, provided they could be shown how. But knowing little of sheep management, they were not prepared to take the risk.⁴⁰

In April 1792 Fraser had reported that Donald MacLeod of Geanies had made an offer for the small farm of Layne in Assynt which he intended to stock with sheep. MacLeod, a Ross-shire landlord and the sheriff-depute, was the tenant of a very large sheep farm on the neighbouring Balnagown estate, and Fraser felt that it was unwise to allow the same man to hold land on either side of the estate boundary, '[a]s thereby the Marches might come to be disputed and a litigation be the consequence'. Moreover MacLeod's offer of £24 only represented a 36 per cent increase over the existing rent.⁴¹

In June, after visiting the whole of the estate, Fraser wrote a short report to Mackenzie. He had paid particular attention to the lands intended to be set, and had obtained advice enabling him to judge 'what additional rents could be looked for'. There had been a rumour in the country for some months that Earl Gower had received 'a very large offer from south country graziers for the whole estate of Assynt for sheep farms'. The local tacksmen and small tenants hoped that they would be given 'preference at such rents as they could afford'. The present rent of Assynt amounted to £830 but Fraser estimated that an additional rent of £350 or £400

³⁷ NLS, Dep. 313/979, memorial respecting the Earldom of Sutherland. Another version of this paper may be found in J. Sinclair, *General View of the Agriculture of the Northern Counties and Islands of Scotland* (1795), pp. 162-64.

³⁸ NLS, Dep. 313/1114/13.

³⁹ NAS, Dornoch Sheriff Court Records, SC9/28/1,

pp. 8-9.

⁴⁰ A. Ker, *Report to Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster ... of the state of sheep farming along the eastern coast of Scotland, and the interior parts of the Highlands* (1791), pp. 22-23.

⁴¹ NLS, Dep. 313/1114/13.

⁴² NLS, Dep. 313/1114/14.

could be obtained from the present possessors, 'and few or no families turned off the estate'. Parts of Strathnaver, Kildonan, Rogart and Lairg were under unexpired leases or wadsets. However, augmentations of rent could be made on some farms and Fraser concluded that the lands now out of lease in the highland parts of the estate could be let to the present possessors for an additional yearly rent of £700. On the other hand, parts of the estate, especially Assynt, could produce a greater rise of rent if put under sheep and the present possessors removed.⁴²

This lack of enthusiasm for sheep farming can only have been reinforced by events at the end of July and beginning of August when an attempt was made by people from parts of Ross-shire and Sutherland to drive the sheep from the northern Highlands, an event which became known as *Bliadhna nan Caorach*, 'The Year of the Sheep'. Although it was also referred to as the 'Ross-shire Insurrection', the uprising was not confined to Ross-shire, but affected farms on the Balnagown and Rosehall estates in Sutherland.⁴³ The uprising came at a critical juncture for the letting arrangements on the Sutherland estate.

The cautious approach of the Sutherland estate management may be gauged by its handling of offers by two Ross-shire sheep farmers, Duncan Munro of Culcairn and Walter Ross of Cromarty, acting for John Rose (son of the former factor), for the farm of Wester Lairg. In Fraser's view, 'a tenant in possession ought to have the preference on equal terms': the farm should be set on the same day as all the others on the estate and the highest offer preferred. Fraser warned that, as the farm bordered a forest, care should be taken to ensure that encroachments did not take place. Moreover, Ross was 'at this hour advertising parts of the Cromarty estate for sheep farms, and Culcairn has already set the highlands of his own estate for sheep also at an increase of rent. These gentlemen would reside only for two or three months yearly in Lairg, bad neighbourhood would ensue twixt them and the poor people, and incroachments on forests would become cause of complaint'. Fraser suggested that Rose should accommodate himself on his wadset lands in Strathbrora.⁴⁴

In the event, at the set of 1793, the estate management chose to favour the present possessors and to extract only a moderate increase of rent.⁴⁵ It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the estate ignored sheep farming completely. One spur to this was the existence of Colonel Sutherland's sheep farm of Killin, now in the landlord's possession. In 1790, a shepherd from the south of Scotland, had judged that the farm could carry 600 sheep, including 200 breeding ewes. The wool should produce an annual income of £60 and sheep sales would produce a further £105. After deducting an assumed rent of £12 10s., interest on the purchase of stock, expenses of management and any losses, he estimated that the farm could bring an annual profit of £80.⁴⁶

Nor was the Sutherland estate immune from the proselytising zeal of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster who had been experimenting with new breeds of sheep since about 1785. Three years later he had bought the estate of Langwell in Caithness where he had introduced a flock of 500 Cheviot ewes. In 1791 he had founded the Society for the Improvement of British Wool.⁴⁷ That

⁴³ This episode is noted below. For a general account of the 'insurrection' see E. Richards, *The Highland Clearances* (2000), pp. 86–104.

⁴⁴ NLS, Dep. 313/1114/18.

⁴⁵ NLS, Dep. 313/1114/24.

⁴⁶ NLS, Dep. 313/983/59; 984/1.

⁴⁷ Sinclair, *General View*, pp. 181–91; R. Mitchison, *Agricultural Sir John: the life of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster* (1962), pp. 101–19; *Caledonian Mercury*, 29 Oct. 1792.

year the Society sent 50 rams and 100 Cheviot ewes to the northern Highlands where they were distributed to 40 or 50 landlords and farmers. Most of the sheep went to Caithness but it appears that a ram and two ewes were retained at Dunrobin. According to Sir John, the trial 'answered remarkably well. The first year they were kept in the inclosures of Dunrobin, where each ewe brought two fine lambs; but this was not accounted a fair trial, at least of their hardiness'. The following year the sheep were sent to a farm 'in the upper part of the country, where they fared in common with a very hardy breed. Upon examining them in the spring following, they were found perfectly strong and healthy'.⁴⁸ The upland farm was almost certainly Killin.

In November 1793, two shepherds from Tweeddale reported on various grounds in east Sutherland.⁴⁹ The west side of Dunrobin Glen, the Forest of Ben Horn, and the adjoining hill pastures would be 'a very poor, and unprofitable sheep walk'. It lacked good grass pasture, the heathland was of poor quality, and there was no wintering ground. A number of adjoining possessions should be added and the arable land put down to grass. This would create a farm capable of supporting a flock of 400 sheep, but it would only bring a rent of £20. Killin, the associated lands of Sallachie, and the Forest of Sletdale in the parish of Loth would support 1100 sheep including 400 ewes and produce a rent of £60. John Bookless, overseer of the Mains and adviser on farming matters in general,⁵⁰ agreed that the first sheep walk was not worth creating. But he suggested that Killin could in fact carry 900 sheep which would produce an income of £225 and an annual profit of £111.

Fraser considered that neither valuation had come up to expectation, and suggested that an advert might tempt higher offers. The alternative was to bring in some proper shepherds and try Bookless' plan to build up the landlord's flock.⁵¹ In 1794, the estate advertised Killin and the Forest of Sletdale as 'very extensive, and well adapted for a sheep run'. Two Ross-shire farmers, Alexander Cameron at Dalmore by Novar and George Munro of Culrain, made an offer of 60 guineas, including public burdens, for a nineteen-year lease. Munro warned, though, that some of the tenants of the farms adjoining the forest might be 'inclined to circumscribe its boundaries from their cattle of late years being allowed to range free'.⁵² It was an accurate prediction of the difficulties which sheep farmers could experience when their lands adjoined the grazings of small tenants. The interest of Cameron, who was originally from Fort William and was farming on an extensive scale, was significant. However, the Sutherland estate may have been put off by his being a principal victim of the 1792 insurrection.⁵³

In the event Killin remained in the hands of the landlord. Between 1797 and 1800 the stock was increased from 267 to 600 sheep. In the latter year it was estimated that, valuing the stock on the ground at 12s. per head, the farm had shown an average profit of about £52 per year. The

⁴⁸ Society for the Improvement of British Wool, *Observations on the different breeds of Sheep* (1792), pp. xv-xvi; Sinclair, *General View*, pp. 145-6.

⁴⁹ Both Ben Horn and Sletdale were ancient hunting forests.

⁵⁰ NLS, Dep. 313/982/34.

⁵¹ NLS, Dep. 313/983/59.

⁵² NLS, Dep. 313/1114/8, 28; *Caledonian Mercury*, 24 Feb. 1794.

⁵³ Alexander and his brother, Captain Allan Cameron, were amongst the earliest sheep farmers to come to Ross-shire and were principal victims of the 1792 insurrection. Captain Cameron was sequestered in 1795. Not only was he an extensive sheep farmer, but he was also a drover and dealer in cattle: NAS, Court of Session papers, CS17/1/14, p. 95; *Caledonian Mercury*, 2 Apr, 27 July 1795; G. S. Mackenzie, *A General Survey of the Counties of Ross and Cromarty* (1810), p. 130.

wool had produced over £34 per year. But the major item of income had come from 124 wedders and 15 lambs sold at the raising of the Sutherland Highlanders Regiment. Moreover, the winter feed was also cheap; 150 stone of hay had come from Dunrobin each year. As Fraser pointed out, the profit calculation was based on an assumed rent of £10 per year when a rent of £40 would have been more realistic. Indeed the factor advised putting as much of the farm as possible under arable and selling off half of the sheep; two good crops of oats 'would return more than the sheep for seven years'.⁵⁴

The estate management's continuing interest in sheep farming was more than matched by some of the tacksmen farmers. In the 1790s, several of Assynt tacksmen introduced sheepflocks. John Herd is on record in 1794 and 1799 as being employed as a shepherd by Alexander Mackenzie, tacksmen of Eddrachalda. (Herd was also a subtenant of land in Strath Oykel.⁵⁵) Captain Kenneth Mackenzie, tacksmen of Ledbeg, was listed in 1798 as a member of the Sheep Farm Association which had been founded three years previously.⁵⁶ Two years later he joined with Murdoch Mackenzie in Stronchrubie in turning the farms of Dubh Clais and Druim Suardalain over to sheep.⁵⁷ The Scobie family were also involved. Elsewhere on the Sutherland estate, tacksmen such as William Munro of Achany and Captain Donald Matheson of Shinness also entered sheep farming of their own accord, without any stimulus from the estate management. Others experimented on a smaller scale. Colonel George Sutherland was a tacksmen at Rearquhar in the parish of Dornoch with a mixed stock, including a small flock of sheep on an upland possession. Although elderly, from 1795 he slowly changed his over from native breeds to the new 'large sheep'. His little flock of large sheep continued to grow even though the meat and wool were only used for household or local consumption.⁵⁸

This involvement shows that there was a willingness on the part of tacksmen to engage in commercial sheep farming, even though a lack of capital and the relatively small size of their holdings tended to limit the scale of their operations.

II

We now turn to the Reay and the northern estates of Bighouse and Strathy or Armadale. Together these made up the major part of the ancient province of Strathnaver which reached from the border of Caithness to Kylesku on the west coast of Sutherland. The Reay estate, which for most of the eighteenth century included the modern parishes of Tongue, Durness and Eddrachillis, was second only to the Sutherland estate in extent.⁵⁹ It was, though, a purely highland estate, with none of the richer arable land found in eastern Sutherland. George Mackay, Lord Reay had been educated on the continent, and when he came of age in 1699, took possession of an estate with a heavy burden of debt. It was not until the 1720s that he was able

⁵⁴ NLS, Dep. 313/984/1.

⁵⁵ NAS, SC9/7/44, summons of removing Hugh Ross and John Herd; NAS, SC9/7 (1799) summons of removing Mackenzie v Heard.

⁵⁶ NAS, Fraser Mackintosh Collection, GD128/36/8/5-8; GD128/47/4/18.

⁵⁷ NAS, SC9/7 (1802) summons of removing Mackenzie v Tenants of Stronchruby and others.

⁵⁸ E. R. Mackay, *George Sutherland of Riarchar* (nd); NAS, Sutherland of Rearquhar Papers, GD347/33/46, 78; GD347/49 pp. 175, 187.

⁵⁹ For further detail on the Reay estate during the 18th century, see M. Bangor-Jones, 'From Clanship to Crofting: landownership, economy and the church in the province of Strathnaver', in J. R. Baldwin (ed.), *The Province of Strathnaver* (2000), pp. 49-51.

to invest in improvements. Despite living on the north coast of Sutherland, he developed an active interest in agricultural matters. He was a leading member and correspondent of the premier agricultural society in Scotland, the Society of Improvers, and was latterly its President.⁶⁰ His agricultural experiments were conducted either on the Mains of Tongue, or on the Mains of Balnakeil, in the parish of Durness. The latter included particularly fine grazings on the peninsula of Faraid Head, and were also not far from the 'sheep rooms' of the Parph on the largely uninhabited expanse between the Kyle of Durness and Cape Wrath.

Documents relating to the sale of Lord Reay's livestock after his death in 1748 suggest that this experiments had included the introduction of new breeds of sheep. The stocking included 1075 sheep which were sold for £153 to two of the sons of his second marriage, including Hugh Mackay of Bighouse. In addition, 'six large sheep and Twelve Rams young and old' were included free.⁶¹ Mackay had been effectively the manager of the Reay estate since 1743. When Lord Reay had died, his eldest son, Donald, had been subjected to a restrictive trust, controlled by his younger half-brothers. Mackay was also given possession of Tongue House, the Mains, and had received a tack of the remainder of the estate, including the Balnakeil pastures.

Mackay was heavily involved in the cattle trade, but it is evident from his correspondence with his son-in-law, Colin Campbell of Glenure, in Argyllshire, that his interests extended to sheep.⁶² In September 1749, Mackay wrote,

Do as you please, with respect to the sheep, you can for a trial, command one hundred of them, of any kind you incline most for, either wedders, sheep with or without lambs, year olds etcetra, of one or different kinds, as suits you best. I sold lately of my wedders at 6s. each, to the Inverness butchers, and a parcel at 5s. not a bad price, considering my distance from the mercats.⁶³

The following year, Mackay reported that he had sold his sheep for 7s. a head. He proposed sending a selection from Durness to Glenure, including 'some old wedders for eating, some young ones, to improve on your grounds, some yeel sheep, 3 and 4 year olds, some year old she ones, and some lambs'. In July, almost 130 sheep, great and small, were sent south. In May 1751, Mackay informed Glenure that he would have very few of the large wedders for sale. There had 'been a great death amongst the neighbouring Sheep, q[ui]ch will rise ye demand about. You may write what price, you could fetch me for both kinds, I could not sell [torn] 6s. 6d. to 7s. each, ye Tweddale brood, and five shillings ye c[oun]try? wedders, about 3 years old'.⁶⁴ These transactions suggest that George Lord Reay had introduced some Black Face or Tweeddale sheep onto the Parph and that, while the stock may have been small in number initially, it had continued to increase.

Although in 1756 Mackay was given a new 15-year tack of the estate, two years later he

⁶⁰ R. Maxwell, *Select Transactions of the Honourable The Society of Improvers in the knowledge of agriculture in Scotland* (1743), pp. 130-134, 137-138, 233.

⁶¹ NAS, Reay Papers, GD84/2/15A, Memorial and Queries for Lord Reay, 1766.

⁶² Colin Campbell married Hugh Mackay's eldest daughter in 1749. He was none other than the Colin

Campbell who was murdered in 1752 and who has become known to posterity as the Red Fox in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*.

⁶³ NAS, Campbell of Barcaldine Muniments, GD170/972, fo. 41.

⁶⁴ NAS, GD170/972, fos. 54-55, 58, 67. Yeel sheep are yeld or barren sheep.

relinquished possession, and went to live on his own estate of Bighouse. This appears to mark the point when Donald Lord Reay was able to take possession of the two Mains farms which he held until his death in 1761.⁶⁵ While initially circumscribed by the family trust, his son George was able to take possession of the estate, including the Mains farms in 1764. George Lord Reay appears to have inherited his grandfather's interest in estate improvements.⁶⁶ In 1767, the naturalist James Robertson, noted that, while there were few sheep in the north, 2500 were kept by Lord Reay and they 'had succeeded so well, that he intended to bring from the south 5000 more'. Part of Faraid Head was enclosed 'for the purpose of receiving my Lord Rae's newly weaned lambs'.⁶⁷ In April, Lord Reay's grieve at Balnakeil warned that the shepherd on the Parph had been ill and the sheep may have suffered, especially with the storms. Provender was short and many sheep had died in the second half of March, especially the hogs.⁶⁸ When taking possession of the estate, Lord Reay had entered into a 10-year contract with the estate factor for the disposal of the estate produce, including wedders, sheep, hogs, lamb and wool, and also goat and sheep cheese.⁶⁹

Lord Reay eventually managed to overturn the trust in 1767, but died the following year. The inventory of his moveable effects, taken in August 1768, is particularly revealing.⁷⁰ As well as £1000 worth of cattle, his stocking included over £600 of sheep:

1725 'ewes wedders and rams all at Durnes of different ages valued one with another 6 shillings sterling each'	£517 10s. 0d.
380 'Lambs in the Farr head valued one with another 3 shillings Sterling each'	£57 0s. 0d.
300 'Lambs reckoned unfit for keeping disposed of at the Torresdale tryst for which there was received after defraying charges'	£36 10s. 0d.
[Total]	£611 0s. 0d.

Lord Reay was succeeded by his mentally incapable younger brother Hugh and the estate was managed by various tutors and factors until his death in 1797.⁷¹ As will be recalled, Campbell of Lagwine entered into discussions with the tutors in 1768 over the possibility of including the Reay Forest in a sheep farm. These came to nothing but the tutors, particularly General Alexander Mackay, certainly saw the future of the Highlands as a 'grazing country'.⁷² But the General did not wish to destabilise Highland society and proposed similar measures to the Sutherland estate in protecting the subtenants from the tacksmen. The latter were to be given

⁶⁵ His possessions included the Mains of Tongue, with a rental value of £267, and nearby Braetongue, £54, the Mains of Balnakeil with 'Idin, Mid Park, Farret and Gra-seings thereto belonging' valued at £1000, Craggievullin worth £146 and three sheep rooms £40 (all values are in pounds Scots). NAS, GD84/2/50/5.

⁶⁶ NAS, Register House Papers, RH15/182/3, 4, 6.

⁶⁷ D. M. Henderson and J. H. Dickson (eds), *A Naturalist in the Highlands. James Robertson: his life and travels in Scotland, 1767-1771* (1994), pp. 53-4.

⁶⁸ NAS, RH15/182/14.

⁶⁹ NAS, GD84/2/52. In April 1767 10 stone of sheep

cheese was brought to Tongue House. NAS, RH15/182/14.

⁷⁰ NAS, RH15/182/8.

⁷¹ Lord Hugh's paternal uncles, Hugh of Bighouse, George of Skibo and Alexander were appointed as tutors and curators. Skibo had the day-to-day management of the estate from 1768 until his death in 1782. The sole surviving tutor and curator, General Alexander Mackay, took over the management of the estate until his own death in 1789. From 1789 until 1797, the estate was managed by George Mackay of Bighouse in the capacity of factor *loco tutoris* to his Lordship.

⁷² W. Macgill, *Old Ross-shire and Scotland* (1909), p. 158.

what lands they could farm themselves, without the aid of subtenants.⁷³ There were to be removals of subtenants, but these were, as far as can be ascertained, for cattle rather than sheep.⁷⁴

Both the Mains farms were put into the hands of tenants. Balnakeil, including its sheep flock, was let in 1770 to Colonel Hugh Mackay. He was the eldest son of an estate factor and tacksman, had prospered in Jamaica, and had returned to become a substantial farmer.⁷⁵ In 1779, with the Colonel's lease near to expiry, Balnakeil was advertised for letting. Particular attention was drawn to the quality of the black cattle reared on the grazings attached to the farm. However, mention was also made of 'a large tract of very good pasture grounds for sheep in the neighbourhood ... fit for stocking of two thousand sheep and upwards', which was available for letting, either separately or with the Mains. 'The stocking of sheep on these grounds were originally from Tweeddale; and, from the superior quality of the pasture, are now raised to a size superior to the run of Tweeddale sheep.'⁷⁶

The Mains of Balnakeil was let to Roderick MacLeod from Skye. His possessions included various grazings and also the Faraid Head, but not the Parph.⁷⁷ MacLeod's son-in-law, Donald Forbes, tacksman of Ribigill, near Tongue, succeeded after his death.⁷⁸ Their stock may have included sheep: certainly Forbes was to become a substantial sheep farmer. The Parph, now a separate possession, continued to be devoted to sheep.⁷⁹ In 1789 the Sheep Rooms at Cape Wrath were recorded as being let from year to year to James Anderson, manager for the merchant partnership at the fishing station of Rispond, and tacksman of Keoldale. It is possible that Anderson was mainly interested in providing meat for the crews of herring busses.⁸⁰ By 1797 the Parph was held by Colonel Mackay of Bighouse.⁸¹

A new sheep farm was created at Glendhu in the parish of Eddrachillis in the late 1780s. The initiator was Colin MacDiarmid from Argyllshire who had a family connection with Mackay and became his subtenant in 1787. MacDiarmid brought a substantial sheep stock to the farm, although he was also to deal in cattle and horses and his activities extended to herring fishing.⁸² In 1793 MacDiarmid took on a steelbow tack of the cattle and sheep on the lands of Laudale in Morvern.⁸³ But later that year he went bankrupt. In Mackay's view, MacDiarmid's failure was 'partly from inadvertancy, and from the times being bad, been unfortunate ... the money laid out at Glendow, has been too much'.⁸⁴ MacDiarmid had estimated that the farm was capable of keeping 3000 or 4000 sheep.⁸⁵ His stock though extended to no more than about 600 breeding ewes.⁸⁶ According to his trustee, the 'stocking of every description and grass are in the highest

⁷³ NAS, GD84/2/15a, Alexander Mackay to Donald Forbes, 7 May 1788.

⁷⁴ Withrington and Grant (gen. eds), *Statistical Account of Scotland*, XVIII, pp. 385–86.

⁷⁵ A. Mackay, *The Book of Mackay* (1906), p. 315; I. Grimbly, *The World of Rob Donn* (1979), pp. 191, 195.

⁷⁶ *Caledonian Mercury*, 5 Apr. 1779.

⁷⁷ NAS, GD84/section 2/84, pp. 197–98; NLS, Dep. 313/3328, summons John Dunlop v Lord Reay. MacLeod was in possession by 1785, if not earlier.

⁷⁸ NLS, Dep. 313/3326.

⁷⁹ H. Morrison (ed.), *Parish Register of Durness, 1764–1814* (Scottish Record Society, 38, 1911).

⁸⁰ NAS, GD84/section 2/84, pp. 197–8.

⁸¹ NLS, Dep. 313/3326. The rent was only £8 as compared with over £130 for Balnakeil.

⁸² It was later claimed that 'he dealt largely in sheep and cattle; and as is very common in that part of the Country, he was a drover as well as a farmer'. Advocates Library, Session Papers, Campbell Collection, Vol. 109, no. 99, p. 6. He was described as drover and cattle dealer when sequestered: NAS, CS235/Seqns/M/1/30.

⁸³ NAS, GD170/488/2/26.

⁸⁴ NAS, GD170/540, MacDiarmid to Campbell, 17 July 1795.

⁸⁵ NAS, GD170/1855/1.

⁸⁶ NAS, GD170/540, list of stocking in Glendow, 1794.

order, and I find he has this season about 500 lambs'.⁸⁷ The farm was taken over by Alexander Campbell of Barcaldine who obtained a sub-lease of Glendhu and Ardaloach from Mackay for 16 years from 1794. Barcaldine was tenant of extensive farms in Argyllshire and Perthshire and his total stock was estimated to be worth £7000.⁸⁸

The involvement of Hugh Mackay of Bighouse with sheep farming on the Reay estate in the 1740s and 1750s has already been mentioned. Mackay may have taken some sheep with him when he moved to his own estate which bordered with Caithness. However, all his stock was disposed of after his death in 1771.⁸⁹

Through inheritance and purchase, Mackay's granddaughter Louisa, one of the heiresses, and her husband, George Mackay of Island Handa, a tacksman on the Reay estate, acquired the whole of the property. The new Bighouse also took an active interest in agricultural matters. In 1791 it was reported that he kept 'some hundred head of sheep of a mixed breed, between the white faced and black faced kinds'. He sold very few, 'intending to increase his flock considerably, and proposes to try such experiments as are the most likely to improve the quality of his sheep and of his wool'.⁹⁰ A similar report made a year later confirmed that, 'some years ago' he had stocked a part of his estate with Black Faced sheep from Argyllshire (his wife had been brought up in Argyllshire). He then became associated with Sir John Sinclair's experiments with the Cheviot breed. In 1791 Mackay took two of the Cheviot rams supplied by the British Wool Society and put them amongst his flock of the 'true Argyleshire' or Black Faces. The resultant cross lambs, it was reported, were 1s. 6d. to 2s. more valuable than the Black Faced lambs.⁹¹ He continued to be associated with the spread of the Cheviot breed.⁹² As already noted, he took over the sheep stock on the Parph peninsula at Cape Wrath until his death in 1798.⁹³

The estate of Strathy on the north coast of Sutherland was held by one of the Mackay's cadet lines. In 1783, however, the estate passed by marriage to William Honeyman, the son of a prominent Orkney landowner who had entered upon a legal career in Edinburgh and eventually rose to become a Court of Session judge. Honeyman also bought lands in the central Lowlands which he developed. He does not appear to have ever resided in Sutherland.

The Mains of Strathy was advertised in 1788 as a 'sheep and grazing farm' for letting the following year. It contained a considerable extent of arable and there is no evidence that, when let, it was stocked with sheep.⁹⁴ In 1790 a more enticing advert appeared for the extended lands of Armadale. 'Every reasonable encouragement' was offered and the proprietor promised to pay the expenses of whoever took the lease in coming to Sutherland.⁹⁵ Armadale was let in 1792 on a nineteen-year lease as a sheep farm to Andrew Kerr who had undertaken a tour the

⁸⁷ NAS, GD170/2019/1.

⁸⁸ Advocates Library, Session Papers, Campbell Collection, Vol. 109, no. 100, pp. 18–19. MacDiarmid continued to have an involvement in the management of the farm until his death in 1799.

⁸⁹ *Caledonian Mercury*, 22 Apr. 1771.

⁹⁰ A. Ker, *Report to Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster ... of the state of sheep farming along the eastern coast of Scotland,*

and the interior parts of the Highlands (1791), p. 24.

⁹¹ K. Richardson, 'Remarks, made in the course of a tour, through the Highlands of Scotland', in *Observations on the different breeds of sheep* (1792), pp. 54–56.

⁹² NAS, Sinclair of Freswick Papers, GD136/478/1.

⁹³ *Caledonian Mercury*, 20 Apr. 1799.

⁹⁴ *Caledonian Mercury*, 11 Aug. 1788; 17 Aug. 1799.

⁹⁵ *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 Oct. 1790; 18 Mar. 1791.

previous year of many of the sheep farming districts in the east of Scotland and the Highlands for Sir John Sinclair and the British Wool Society. It appears that Kerr was the principal of a partnership from the Borders.⁹⁶

The Armadale flock thrived and indeed some were sold to Caithness 'improvers' such as Innes of Sandside. In 1796 Mrs Innes wrote 'of the true breed come from Cheviot in their infancy to Armadale are seasoned to our climate, thriving to excess and free of all mixtures'.⁹⁷ Kerr, however, was already in financial difficulties.⁹⁸ His trustees made over the stock to Gabriel Reid who took possession the following year. He was the son of Ellerington Reid, formerly of Prenwick, Alnham in Northumberland, who had been one of the original partners. He came to reside in Sutherland and in time became one of the foremost sheep farmers in the northern Highlands.⁹⁹

III

The final district to be considered comprised a number of properties of varying size in the parishes of Creich and Lairg in the south east of Sutherland. The Balnagown lands of Strath Oykel were part of a much larger estate which included both lowland and highland properties in the adjoining county of Ross and Cromarty. The estate had passed by marriage to Captain John Lockhart who took the additional surname of Ross (by which name he was known to contemporaries) after he succeeded in 1761. A distinguished naval commander, after the Peace of 1763 he settled in the north where, over the next 25 years or so, he was to spend enormous sums on improving his estates, particularly his lowland properties in Ross and Cromarty.¹⁰⁰

According to Sir George Mackenzie, author of the Board of Agriculture report for Ross and Cromarty, Ross had observed that, while the highland part of his estate was very extensive, it yielded little revenue and was of limited use to the occupiers. When travelling through Perthshire, he had noticed that the Black Faced sheep there could not only survive the severest winters, but were more profitable than black cattle. In 1774 or 1775, Ross had taken one of his farms into own hands and established a flock of sheep. In the light of this account, it has been generally assumed that this farm was on the southern bank of the Oykel, in the county of Ross and Cromarty.¹⁰¹

Estate records which might verify this are unfortunately sparse. However, it is clear that Ross already had an interest in sheep by 1771.¹⁰² Indeed, it is probable that he had begun experimenting with sheep in the 1760s. These experiments may well have taken place on the mains farm of Braelangwell in Strathcarron in Ross and Cromarty which Ross had improved considerably.¹⁰³ On the other hand it was not until the late 1770s that Ross established

⁹⁶ Richardson, 'Remarks', p. 56; Sinclair, *General View*, p. 151; *Caledonian Mercury*, 11 June 1796; J. Henderson, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Sutherland* (1812), p. 27.

⁹⁷ Henderson, *General View*, p. 27; NAS, GD136/478/1.

⁹⁸ *Caledonian Mercury*, 11 June 1796.

⁹⁹ NAS, GD170/540, petition for Duncan McMillan 1800; Henderson, *General View*, p. 27; J. Loch, *An account of the improvements on the estates of the Marquess of*

Stafford (1820) App. II, pp. 32-33. I am very grateful to Grace Lord of Scarborough, Ontario for providing details of the Reid family.

¹⁰⁰ NAS, Teind Commissioners Records, TE19/159; Wight, *Present state of husbandry*, IV, pp. 259-265.

¹⁰¹ Mackenzie, *General Survey*, pp. 126-30; I. R. M. Mowat, *Easter Ross, 1750-1850: The Double Frontier* (1981), p. 35.

¹⁰² NLS, MS 1485, fo. 229.

a sheep farm in Sutherland. As Sir George Mackenzie pointed out, a check was provided by the existing leases.¹⁰⁴

In 1777 Ross had returned to active service. He succeeded to a baronetcy the following year and in 1779 was promoted to Admiral. However, he continued to make arrangements for purchasing sheep through his factor.¹⁰⁵ In 1777 the lands of Sallachie in the upper reaches of Strath Oykel were taken into Ross's own hands as a sheep farm.¹⁰⁶ The following year he tried to gain possession of Gleann na Muic in upper Glen Cassley but, the lease had still many years to run, and it appears that the tenant's terms were too high.¹⁰⁷ However, in 1779 he obtained possession of Kinlochallsh which adjoined Sallachie.¹⁰⁸

Ross introduced Black Faced sheep from Crawford Moor, bought at Linton market. He had tried to 'mend' or improve the Black Faced breed with rams from Bakewell, Culley of Northumberland and Chaplin of Lincolnshire, but the experiment was not a success. The crosses were probably not sufficiently hardy. Rams from Tweeddale, on the other hand, produced better offspring and by 1781 Ross apparently had a flock of 3000 sheep, including 1500 breeding ewes.¹⁰⁹ However, the market was oversupplied and prices were depressed. Wight considered that the only remedy lay in reducing sheep numbers and returning to the 'true product of the Highlands', horned cattle, for which there was always a demand.¹¹⁰ According to Sir George Mackenzie, Ross also suffered greatly from losses by theft – no doubt following the disastrous winter of 1782–83 – and his shepherds were treated as intruders.

In 1784 Sir John handed over Kinlochallsh and Sallachie to William Geddes from Tummel Bridge in Perthshire, tenant of a sheep farm on the estate of Stuart of Garth.¹¹¹ According to Sir George, Geddes was 'a very sensible sagacious man, who understood the business thoroughly'.¹¹² He was the first of the southern graziers to come to Sutherland. Geddes took a nineteen-year lease of Kinlochallsh, Sallachie and part of the hill grass of Tuscarry, paying 6*d.* per head for 2000 sheep for the first three years and 9*d.* per head for the remaining 16 years.¹¹³ The following year he expanded by gaining possession of Inchbea, and Baddaroch, where the family was to live, and the arable lands of Tuscarry. The former tenants were heavily in arrears for rents and meal supplied by Ross and were also continuing to steal sheep.¹¹⁴ When Geddes died in 1790, his wife, Margaret MacGregor, took over the farm.

¹⁰³ NAS, TE19/159; NAS, GD129, Balnagown Papers, section 1/81/21.

¹⁰⁴ Mackenzie, *General View*, p. 127.

¹⁰⁵ NAS, GD129/section 1/81/correspondence, 1778–79.

¹⁰⁶ NAS, SC9/7 (1777), lybelled summons of removing Capt Ross v Rosses; NAS, GD129/31/118/18 and GD129, box 4, bundle 10.

¹⁰⁷ NAS, GD129/section 1/81/14.

¹⁰⁸ NAS, SC9/7 (1799) lybelled summons of removing Sir John Ross of Balnagown and Factor v Ross etc.

¹⁰⁹ Wight, *Present state of husbandry*, IV, p. 262. Wight states 'Cowley' and Chaplin; NAS, GD129/section 1/81/22; *Caledonian Mercury*, 16 Sept. 1778 records the sale of cross bred rams cross bred from Bakewell and Cowley's rams. Sir John also tried Bakewell and Cowley's bulls on west

Highland cattle.

¹¹⁰ Wight, *Present state of husbandry*, IV, p. 262. Wight states that the stock lay on Sir John's farms in Assynt. The sheep farm included the mountain of Ben Mor Assynt but not the district of Assynt.

¹¹¹ NAS, SC9/7 (1792), warrants against sheep rioters; Mackenzie, *General View*, p. 129. Sir George's statement that Geddes took over in 1781 or 1782 appears to be slightly out.

¹¹² Mackenzie, *General View*, p. 129.

¹¹³ NAS, GD129/box 31/bundle 120, rental Marts, 1784.

¹¹⁴ NAS, SC9/7 (1784), petition Admiral Sir John Ross and Factor; NAS, SC9/7 (1785), summons of removing Sir John of Balnagown and Factor v Alex. Ross and others; NAS, TE19/159, pp. 70–71.

By 1792 her flock consisted of about 4000 sheep.¹¹⁵ Four years later she got possession of Gleann na Muic.¹¹⁶

After Sir John died in 1790, his son Sir Charles Ross, set about increasing the number of sheep farms. In 1792 William and James MacGregor took the west side of Glen Cassley and Duncan MacGregor became tenant of the lands of Tutimtarvach. He was also to become tenant of the farm of Pulrossie on the Skibo estate. The MacGregors may well have come from Perthshire.¹¹⁷ James MacGregor also engaged in cattle droving but got into financial trouble and gave up his share.¹¹⁸ In 1796, Thomas Ross, tenant of Wester Turnaig, was also put in possession of Easter Turnaig. This may well have been a sheep farm, as Ross later farmed sheep on large scale in the neighbouring parish of Kincardine.¹¹⁹ By 1800 Knockan, which was used to graze the landlord's cattle, and the low ground of Invercasley appear to have been the only lands in Strath Oykel not under sheep.

The small Rosehall estate, which included the east side of Glen Cassley, was one of the properties owned by William Baillie, who also acted as factor on the Balnagown estate for many years. Baillie dealt in grain, but does not appear to have been attracted to sheep farming. Rosehall eventually passed to Major Mackay Hugh Baillie, an army careerist and absentee landowner.

In 1788 Glen Cassley was let on a thirty eight year lease as a sheep farm to none other than John Campbell of Lagwine, without, as he later claimed, ever seeing the lands. As there was some uncertainty over the exact area, the tack contained a clause varying the rent if the farm was found to be less than 25 square miles or more than 30 square miles. Campbell took up residence at Badintagairt, and in 1791 it was reported that the farm 'seems to answer very well'.¹²⁰ Campbell, however, eventually brought an action before the Court of Session to have the farm measured as he particularly wanted the lands of Achness at the lower end of the glen, presumably for wintering. The farm was found to contain just over 19 square miles, and the rent was reduced from £130 to £100 2s. 6d. Baillie and Campbell bickered over payment of the rents and various actions were brought to sequester Campbell's stocking and remove him from the farm. In 1797 it was claimed that 'every thing upon the farm seems to be going to confusion, and the corns, sheep and cattle, liable to be carried off by any person who pleases to do so'. However Campbell survived as tenant until his death when the lease was assigned to Duncan MacGregor, sheepfarmer on the neighbouring Balnagown estate.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ NAS, SC9/7 (1792), warrants against sheep rioters.

¹¹⁶ NAS, SC9/7/45, summons of removing Sir Charles Ross against John Ross; SC9/7/45, summons of removing Mrs Geddes a Tenants of Glenmuick. The previous tacksmen of Gleann na Muic, Hugh Ross, appears to have been involved in cattle dealings but had sublet the upper grazings to a shepherd employed in Assynt: SC9/29/3, 1790-1792, protested bills: Montgomery a Ross and Sutherland; SC9/7/44, summons of removing Hugh Ross a John Herd.

¹¹⁷ NAS, SC9/7 (1791), summons of removing Sir Charles Ross and Factor a Hugh McLeod and others; SC9/7 (1792), warrants against sheep rioters; GD129/section 2/52, inventory of the current leases, 1808; *Caledonian Mercury*, 5 Jan. 1798, 8 June 1807.

¹¹⁸ NAS, SC9/7/43, copy notarial copy bill of suspension, MacGrigor against Sutherland, 1794.

¹¹⁹ NAS, SC9/7 (1788), summons of removing Admiral Sir John Ross of Balnagoun and Factor v Ross and others; SC9/7/45, summons of removing Sir Charles Ross and Factor a Alex. Ross Doune; GD129/section 2/234/draft tack [to] Thomas Ross, present tenant in Turnack; *Caledonian Mercury*, 5 Jan. 1798, 8 June 1807.

¹²⁰ Ker, *Report to Sir John Sinclair*, p. 24.

¹²¹ *Caledonian Mercury*, 21 Feb. 1788; Rural History Centre, University of Reading, SUT1/1/1, pp. 4-5; NAS, SC9/7/44, summons of irritancy and removing Coll: Baillie Agt. John Campbell 1794 [and petitions for sequestration].

The modest estate of Gruids in the parish of Lairg belonged to Sir George Gunn Munro of Poyntzfield who also owned properties in Caithness and Ross-shire. His nephew and heir, George Gunn Munro, had failed as a merchant in London and to protect the estate, Sir George had executed a trust deed of entail which came into operation on his death in 1785. However, the trustees allowed Munro possession and management of the estate. This, though, was against a background of financial pressure.

Gruids had been set for seven years in 1789 and, while most of the possessors were small tenants, some farms with extensive grazings were held by absentee tacksmen, mainly for cattle.¹²² As early as 1791, Munro was writing to his uncle and factor about having a 'serious meeting with my Gruids folks myself'.¹²³ Preparations were thus made well in advance of when the leases expired and, from 1794 onwards, the estate was advertised for letting as suitable for either cattle or sheep.¹²⁴ By August 1795 Munro had had many offers from sheep farmers. This left him in a quandary:

I know not what to do – there is such a prodigious number of people upon the property – I lean towards the people but my interest pulls me forcibly the other way, – I ... am now master of every circumstance respecting the property – which I think will yield another *sort* of rent at any rate rather different from that it now pays – and I do not wish to see a tenant in it but who I shall be convinced can well pay and afford to pay what he engages for.¹²⁵

In the event, Munro resisted the temptation to convert the whole of Gruids to sheep farming. But although the former pattern of tenancies was largely retained, the set achieved 'a considerable augmentation' of rent. This was especially true of the farms held by tacksmen. Braemore and Little Brae were set to John Ross with the rent rising from £28 to £65. Sallachy and Carnich were set to one Angus Kennedy, 'for sheep', with the rent rising from less than £15 to £57. In 1797 the 'lands and grassings of Crinich' were in the possession of Evan and Donald Rankin, evidently also sheep farmers.¹²⁶

The more substantial estates of Pulrossie and Skibo, in the parishes of Creich and Dornoch, were for the most part fringed by low-lying hills to the north. At the eastern end, there were several large, mainly arable farms. The grazings were either common, shared by more than one estate, or common to several townships.

In the 1790s a good deal of publicity was given to the efforts of George Dempster of Dunnichen to develop these estates. (Although Pulrossie had been made over to his brother, a sea captain in the East India Company, Dempster retained the management of both estates).¹²⁷ Dempster himself had acquired wealth through the East India Company, and had a great interest in the development of the Highlands.¹²⁸ His plans for the estates, prepared in the early 1790s, centred

¹²² NAS, GD347/49, pp. 157–58; GD347/81, George Gunn Munro to William Taylor, 21 Mar. 1796.

¹²³ NAS, GD347/73, George Gunn Munro to [GS] 2 Sept. 1791.

¹²⁴ *Caledonian Mercury*, 15 May 1794 to 7 Sept. 1795.

¹²⁵ NAS, GD347/81, George Gunn Munro to William Taylor, 20 Aug. 1795.

¹²⁶ NAS, GD347/12, fo. 64; SC9/7/45, summons of

removing Evan and Dond. Rankin a Angus Ross Subtenant; SC9/7 (1808), summons of removing Munro of Poyntzfield v Tenants of Crinich Arskaig Aulds Kerry and Sallachy etc.

¹²⁷ NAS, SC9/28/1, pp. 48–49; *Statistical Account*, XVIII, p. 344.

¹²⁸ A. M. Lang, *A Life of George Dempster, Scottish MP of Dunnichen (1732–1818)* (1998).

on the establishment of manufacturing – most notably the establishment of a cotton mill at Spinningdale – villages, muir settlers, and plantations. At this stage, Dempster was not an enthusiast of sheep farming, and indeed wrote of the superior value of ‘an estate inhabited by mankind, to one occupied by sheep’.¹²⁹

However, extensive agricultural improvements were also put in train, particularly to the Mains of Pulrossie. These included the establishment in 1796 of a small sheep farm at Prontenach, a detached grazing or shieling which had belonged to the Mains. The farm was laid out by Andrew Thomson from Berwickshire who had been appointed grieve or farm manager of Skibo and Pulrossie the previous year.¹³⁰ It was stocked with 100 Cheviot ewes and lambs bought from Donald MacLeod of Geanies.¹³¹ Geanies had apparently bought these in the summer of 1793, some from the Quickingcoat Farm on the English side of Cheviot Hills and others at the Fair of Yetholm.¹³² According to Geanies it was ‘extremely difficult to get them to purchase in the Cheviot country, as they are jealous of allowing the breed being transferred from there to our hills’. Geanies had a large farm stocked with Black Faced and realised it would take many years to change over to Cheviots.¹³³ In 1802 Prontenach was said to be stocked with 300 Cheviots in a ‘thriving condition’.¹³⁴

IV

The earliest phase of the history of sheep farming in Sutherland, apparently beginning in the 1730s and 1740s, was characterized by aristocratic experiments with non-native breeds. These experiments were not entirely ephemeral and may have improved the native sheep in some localities. It was in the last quarter of the century, however, that commercial sheep farming became firmly established in Sutherland. Sheep farming took off in the 1790s and by the end of the century there were about ten major sheep flocks in Sutherland, a handful of smaller flocks, and a number of small scale experiments. The interest shown by local tacksmen, albeit sometimes on a limited scale, is of particular significance. The spread of sheep farming in the northern Highlands may have lagged behind the Southern Uplands of Scotland, but it would be wrong to associate the introduction of sheep farming in Sutherland solely with the Clearances of the early nineteenth century.¹³⁵

The transformation of clan chiefs into landlords was a drawn out process which began long before 1745 and had not been completed by 1800.¹³⁶ Chiefs and landlords, however, had always been interested in ways to increase their income. But if sheep farming was to get beyond the experimental stage, the economics of the enterprise had to be addressed. To be successful,

¹²⁹ Withrington and Grant (gen. eds), *Statistical Account of Scotland*, XVIII, p. 350.

¹³⁰ Thomson claimed to have ‘acquired a thorough knowledge of modern husbandry, under some of the most skilful improvers in the counties of Northumberland and Berwick’. *Caledonian Mercury*, 26 Jan. 1807; NAS, CS235/g/30/1.

¹³¹ NAS, GD136/468/181.

¹³² *Caledonian Mercury*, 18 Feb. 1796.

¹³³ NAS, GD136/468/432.

¹³⁴ *Caledonian Mercury*, 11 Dec. 1802.

¹³⁵ R. A. Dodgshon, ‘Agricultural change and its social consequences in the southern uplands of Scotland, 1600–1780’ in T. M. Devine and D. Dickson (eds), *Ireland and Scotland, 1600–1850* (1983), pp. 46–59.

¹³⁶ A. I. Macinnes, *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart, 1603–1788* (1996); R. A. Dodgshon, *From Chiefs to Landlords. Social and economic change in the Western Highlands and Islands, c. 1493–1820* (1998).

sheep farms needed to be large and capable of being divided into separate hirsels, as different ages and kinds of sheep required different kinds of pasture.¹³⁷ Tenants with the necessary capital, commercial sense and technical knowledge were in short supply. With sheep farming moving slowly northwards from the southern fringes of the Highlands from about the 1760s, Sutherland landowners had the hard task of attracting tenants to come further north to where the distances from markets were that much greater. Many landlords and their advisers perceived sheep farming as a speculative enterprise. The level of risk did decline as the new breeds of sheep were improved and as prices rose. But it is noticeable that even some of the incoming sheep farmers maintained an interest in cattle farming and/or the cattle trade.

Market opportunities were of considerable importance. The native sheep were not only kept for domestic use: there was a limited regional trade. This trade survived the introduction of non-native breeds. However, the development of more distant markets provided better prospects. There is, as yet, no long-run series of price data for sheep and wool in the Highlands during the eighteenth century. Although it appears that the depression around 1780 was not without its impact, even in Sutherland, there was a steady rise in prices from the mid-1780s.¹³⁸

If landlords were tempted by the prospects of increased rents from sheep, they had to face the fact that the native inhabitants would have to be removed. Sheep and people were incompatible. The sheep could make more efficient use of the hill pastures than cattle, but they required good wintering ground which was most conveniently provided by laying the arable and lower pastures of farms down to grass. In an age which regarded population as a source of national greatness and security, many landlords were reluctant to engage in the wholesale removal of the native tenantry. The move to put landlord-tenant relations on a completely commercial footing was gradual: as Gray states, the 'regard for a numerous tenantry lingered on'.¹³⁹ This is the context for the concern at the emigration from Sutherland in the early 1770s, and for the measures taken to protect the subtenants from overbearing tacksmen. There was also the desire by some landlords to gain prestige and to reap the economic benefits by raising regiments from their estates.¹⁴⁰ The development of a philosophy for estate reorganization which encompassed the provision of alternative employment, particularly through the fishing and kelp industries, in tandem with the clearance of the interior for sheep, came only slowly. The growth of population did not as yet feature in landlords' consideration of sheep farming, as it undoubtedly was to after 1815. For the moment, excess population was largely absorbed by the expanding small tenant economy, the growth of seasonal migration, and military recruitment.

It was easier for displaced people from the south-west Highlands to move to the developing centres of industry in the Lowlands, than it was for the people of Sutherland. As Richards has

¹³⁷ Gray, *Highland economy*, p. 89; T. M. Devine, *The transformation of rural Scotland: social change and the agrarian economy, 1660-1815* (1994), pp. 85-86.

¹³⁸ Richards, *Highland Clearances*, I, pp. 173-4; R. A. Dodgshon, 'The economics of sheep farming in the southern uplands during the age of improvement, 1750-1833', *EcHR* 29 (1976), pp. 551-69.

¹³⁹ Gray, *Highland economy*, p. 12. See also Dodgshon, *From Chiefs to Landlords*, pp. 241-42.

¹⁴⁰ A. Mackillop 'More fruitful than the soil'. *Army, empire and the Scottish Highlands, 1715-1815* (2000). Mackillop's assertion that recruiting delayed the introduction of sheep farming on the Sutherland estate from 1775 to 1800 is not entirely persuasive.

pointed out, the further a district was from central Scotland, the 'greater was the problem of adjustment'.¹⁴¹ In the short term, landlords were satisfied with a gradual rise in rental income from their existing tenants. As the vision of an alternative economic base for the small tenantry became more compelling and as prices of sheep continued to rise, landlords were more easily convinced of the case for sheep farming having established its practicality and potential profitability in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

¹⁴¹ Richards, *Highland Clearances* (2000), p. 70.