

WHO OWNS SCOTLAND?

While the formal system of 'feudalism' may have been dismantled by the Scottish Parliament in 2000, the appalling inequality in land distribution continues to affect us today. The economic, social and political inequalities it fosters make it a key priority for an Scotland, with or without independence. This is put well by Kevin Cahill, author of *Who Owns Britain?*, who writes: "The United Nations...refuses aid to some South American countries with a less intense concentration of land ownership than Scotland, unless land reform programmes, including the redistribution of land, are undertaken"[1].

The 0.001 per cent

In total, Scotland is a country of around 19,460,000 acre. The approximate population of Scotland, going by the most recent mid-year population estimate, is 5,220,100. All told, if the land was divided equally between everyone here, this would give us about 3.72 acres each.

The numbers are rather different in reality. While information is incomplete, what we do know suggests that of the rural land, which comprises about 18,924,516 acres (i.e. 97.4 per cent of Scotland) a total of 15,722,287 acres, 83.1 per cent of this, is held privately. Of this land, 60 per cent is owned by just 969 people, with the average holding of 9,735 acres.[2] To put that in perspective, this tiny minority within the population (less than 0.001 per cent) owns an average of 2,616 times as much as an equal distribution would provide.

At the upper end of the spectrum, Buccleuch Estates, a company founded in 1923 of which the Duke of Buccleuch is the Chairman, own 241,887 acres[3]. In the Highlands, the situation resembles feudalism even more closely, with over 50 per cent of the area covered in 'sporting estates', primarily for hunting. These are divided between 340 estates, which typically range from 5,000 to 8,000 acres[4]. Scotland, as it turns out, has the

most concentrated pattern of land ownership in Europe[5]. Many of the frequently absentee landlords – which may comprise as many as 66 per cent of the owners – use the land for sport and private enjoyment, not the needs of the community as a whole.

A profitable business

Landowners can and do make considerable sums in a number of ways. Sometimes this involves leasing or selling parts of their land for farming and related activities. Some maintain holiday homes for tourists or wealthy holiday-makers or offer shooting facilities. All told, this can be a profitable business. Seafield and Strathspey Estates, owned by the Earl of Seafield, report an annual revenue turnover of £2.8 million from Cullen Farm, and £1.4 million from the Strathspey Estates, which is clearly quite a profitable business to inherit. At the upper end of the UK spectrum, ownership of the 66,000 acre Duchy of Lancaster provided the Queen with £5.9 million in revenue in 2000[6].

Large landholdings are also among the major recipients of subsidies from the Common Agricultural Policy, the EU's subsidy for farmers. After a prolonged investigation by the *Sunday Herald*, it was revealed that between 2000 and 2004, around £115 million was handed out to the one hundred largest beneficiaries in Scotland. This included, for example, Moray Estates, run by a company owned by the Earl of Moray and comprising of 33,143 acres, who received around £2.2 million. Cullen farm, a farm on the Seafield Estates mentioned above, received just under £1.9 million. The article also notes: "Southesk Farms near Brechin, owned by the Earl of Southesk, David Carnegie, got £1.5 million, while Dunecht Home Farm near Aberdeen, belonging to Viscount Cowdray, got nearly £1.4 million". The 2009 figures, which the government refused to release before the election, showed little difference, with "...the top 1,200 landowners and

companies on the continent receiving more than €5bn between them” according to the Guardian.

Subsidies are also helping to ensure that large Landowners benefit from the move to renewable energy. A particularly shocking example of this involves the Duke of Roxburgh, who owns 55,136 acres. As the Times reported in 2010, his plan to develop a 48-turbine wind farm “would generate an estimated £30m a year, shared with developers. About £17m of this would come from subsidies from consumers.”

The hidden owners

Matters are complicated by the fact that, in some cases, the real beneficiaries of land are hidden in legal black-holes. For example, in 1995 the Duke of Buccleuch had his wealth re-evaluated from £300 million to £40 million in the Sunday Times Rich List because his estate was owned by a company in which he did not own any shares. The shares, it turns out, are owned by four Edinburgh lawyers and are worth £4. The money is ultimately held in a trust, and the beneficiaries are unknown[7]. As Wightman writes: “...over 22 per cent and perhaps as much as 25 per cent of the privately owned rural land in Scotland is held in some form of offshore or beneficial ownership where, to varying degrees, the beneficiaries are unknown and tax is being avoided”[8]. In an investigation undertaken in 2003, Wightman and Torcuil Crichton analysed 500 estates and estimated that the annual loss of tax revenue was around £72 million due to offshore ownership, noting that: “The true figure would be much more if it were possible to survey all of Scotland”. Similar constraints also reduce the possibility of any kind of ‘land market’. Of course, much of the land doesn’t even end up on the market. Twenty five per cent of estates over 1,000 acres have been held in the same family for over 400 years. In the Highlands, 50 per cent haven’t been exposed for sale since World War II[9].

Land and democracy

Then, there is the Common Good Land. This is the land formally held by Town Councils (and now held by the regional authorities) intended for the benefit of town communities. While much of

this has been depleted by centuries of corruption and mismanagement, considerable assets still exist. In 2009 Scotland’s Councils published a partial account, which included around 1,610 assets in 144 separate common good funds with a reported value of £2.5 billion [10]. At present, the Local Authorities determine the use of this money, although this system could certainly be improved.

Scarce land also makes it harder to build new houses. As journalist Lesley Riddoch argues: “the single biggest obstacle to the transformation of Scottish rural communities is their lack of control over land...the Big Society in Scotland will remain forever blocked by the power of the Big Landowners – whoever wins at Holyrood”.

In short, whatever the results of the Independence referendum, one of Scotland’s oldest and most institutionalised problems remains within the remit of the Parliament. If an equal, democratic Scotland is our goal, then this is one of the issues we must confront.

References

- [1] Cahill, K Who Owns Britain? (2000) Canongate pp. 181
- [2] Wightman, A, The Poor Had No Lawyers: Who Owns Scotland and How They Got It (2010) Birlinn. pp. 106
- [3] Ibid. 115
- [4] Ibid. pp.163
- [5] Wightman, A Scotland: Land and Power – the Agenda for Land Reform (1999) Luath Press pp. 30
- [6] Cahill, K n.1 pp. 76
- [7] Wightman, n. 2 pp. 46-7
- [8] n. 5, pp. 280 and Wightman, n. 2 pp. 232
- [9] Wightman, n.2 pp. 2347
- [10] Wightman n.1. Pp. 223