

**Plantation slavery and landownership in the west
Highlands and Islands: legacies and lessons**

Summary of Discussion Paper

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Land and the Common Good
A discussion paper series on land reform in Scotland

The killing in the United States in May 2020 of Mr George Floyd has reignited a world-wide set of debates over the racial and social inequalities that are a part of the contemporary legacies of colonial-era slavery.

These debates might seem of little immediate relevance to communities in the twenty-first century west Highlands and Islands of Scotland, struggling as they are with issues of depopulation, language and cultural decline, and ongoing economic vulnerability. However, this report shows that colonial-era slavery, with its legacies of embedded economic inequality and the subordination of people to profit, are as much a part of the history of the region as the land question and the Clearances and, indeed, are inter-related with them.

Based on research sponsored by the Economy History Society, the report uncovers for the first time the scale and complexity of links between wealth derived from slavery and trends in landowning during the eighteenth- to early twentieth centuries. It details research which has found **63 estate purchases made in the west Highlands and Islands of Scotland by significant beneficiaries of slavery derived wealth in the years between 1726 and 1939.**

The majority of those purchases (37) took place between 1790 and 1855, the main period of the Highland Clearances, with a peak of slavery related sales occurring in the late 1830s – in the years following the British Government establishment of a £20 million fund (£16 billion in today's terms) to compensate slave-owners for the loss of their 'property' when slavery was abolished in the British empire in 1833.

Cumulatively, it is estimated that **the estates purchased amount to 1,144,395 acres.** This calculation is likely to be significantly less than the true total as it has not been possible to find acreages for several large slavery related purchases. Several estates were purchased on multiple occasions – the acreage of such estates have only been included once in the total figure.

The report defines 'slavery beneficiaries' as slave-owners, or the children and grand-children of slave-owners, or others who derived significant benefits from the wider slavery based economy, such as sugar, tobacco or cotton merchants. The definition also includes men who married into families with slavery derived wealth. In this report the term 'direct beneficiaries of slavery' is only used to describe slave-owners or slave-traders. The descendants of slave-owners or traders are described as 'indirect beneficiaries', a category which also includes those who married into slavery derived wealth, as well as individuals and their descendants involved in related commercial activities reliant upon slave labour.

The west Highlands and Islands have been defined as the islands off the west coast of Scotland from Islay in the south to Lewis in the north, and those mainland parishes of what were the counties of Inverness and Ross which have a boundary with the Atlantic ocean on the west coast – four parishes in Inverness, and seven parishes in Ross. Defining the area in this specific way allows a reliable estimate of the total area of the west highlands and islands, amounting to 3,417,074 acres.

Establishing an acreage in this way enables a calculation to be made of the percentage of the area's land bought by slavery derived wealth: **33.5 per cent of the west Highlands and Islands – more than one-third of its total area – has passed through the hands of people enriched by slavery; the true figure is almost certainly greater than one-third.** Moreover, **the estates purchased by slavery beneficiaries in the west Highlands and Islands alone amount to more than five per cent of the entire land mass of Scotland.**

Some of these land purchasers bought their estates after receiving money from the compensation fund for slave-owners. Using the same calculation for measuring relative monetary values over time as is used by the Legacies of British Slavery project, **the total amount received by these land purchasers from the compensation fund is £110,080,000 in today's terms.** This figure only includes direct recipients of the compensation fund, and not those whose parents or grandparents received compensation. Including these recipients would, of course, substantially increase the amount previously mentioned.

Although putting contemporary values onto historical prices is an imprecise science, it does give an indication of the scale of the financial transfers involving slavery beneficiaries. Using a calculator from the ['measuring worth'](#) project it can be estimated that, allowing only for price inflation, slavery beneficiaries spent a total of £120,260,770 on land in the west Highlands and Islands. However, on the basis that wages change at a different rate of inflation from prices, another measure calculates relative values in terms of labour value – that is, how much would someone on an average wage today need to pay to afford the total slavery related estate. This appears to be the measure used by the *LBS* project. On the basis of this measure direct and indirect slavery beneficiaries spent £1,069,749,000 on west Highlands and Islands estates. Both these calculations are significant underestimates as prices for around one-third of all slavery related purchases have not been obtained.

However, the scale of slavery related landholding previously described is not the full story. In addition to the 'new elite' of landowners who originated for the most part from outside of the west Highlands and Islands, there is a further category of slavery enriched landowners who did not buy land in the area but rather inherited traditional clan lands. Some of these families, such as Mackenzies of Gairloch, Macleod of Macleod and the House of Sutherland, had married into slavery derived wealth. However, at least two, Cameron of Locheil and Mackintosh of Mackintosh, appear to have been directly involved in the plantation economy in Jamaica. In the 1880s these families combined held at least 690,313 acres in the counties of Ross and Inverness.

When the land owned by these traditional families is added to the acquisitions of the new elite, it transpires that at least 1,834,708 acres of the west Highlands and Islands – more than half of the area's total landmass and approaching ten percent of the total landmass of Scotland – has been owned by families that have benefitted significantly from slavery.

This figure does not include around 400,000 acres owned on Lewis by the Mackenzie of Seaforth family whose financial decline during the nineteenth century saw them sell almost their entire Scottish estate. This happened despite the last Lord

Seaforth being both governor of the slave colony of Barbados and also a slave-owner in Berbice.

The research also has implications for our understanding of the period known as the Highland Clearances. Some of the worst examples of clearance can be found on the estates of members of the new slavery elite. More than 2,900 people left Uist and Barra – ‘forced in some cases with circumstances of shocking inhumanity’ (Devine 1988: 328) – in the years following their purchase by the slave-owner John Gordon of Cluny.

Smaller, but no more humane, clearances were enacted by the slave-owner George Rainy on Raasay, and by slavery beneficiaries James Forsyth on Mull, Lord Cranstoun at Arisaig and Lord Dunmore on Harris. There also appears to have been substantial ‘assisted emigration’ from other slavery linked estates on which estate policy appears first to have placed the land’s inhabitants into circumstances of abject destitution from which they then ‘voluntarily’ removed. **The total number of those cleared by the new slavery elite using these different methods is highly unlikely to be less than 5,000.** After the actions of traditional clan families implicated in slavery are taken into account this figure will be very much higher, almost certainly into the tens of thousands.

The report has implications for thinking about the relationship in the Highlands and Islands between past and present. The boundaries of the region’s experience in the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries need to be understood as global in character. This explains why the racism and inequalities of wealth and power created by Britain’s transatlantic system of enslavement intersects with the history of the Highlands and Islands. It is vitally important to acknowledge that many Gaels, of all different social classes and backgrounds, benefited from involvement in transatlantic slavery. Equally, however, many communities in the region also experienced negative consequences arising from the capital and propertied power created by the British system of slavery.

The report’s findings also have important contemporary resonances. One effect of slavery derived wealth was that it helped to perpetuate and reinforce the pre-existing, structure of highly unequal, monopoly land ownership. Another consisted of the use of such land in increasingly one-dimensional and ecologically harmful ways. Its findings reveal how external wealth and capital, in this case created by unstable and brutally exploitative forms of capitalism, shaped the structure of property and power in the region and impacted on the lived experience of local people. This lesson from history should be borne in mind as people and communities across the Highland and Islands look for better, more sustainable and equitable ways of owning, using and managing the land they live on.

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