

The Highland Clearances

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The Highland Clearances are regarded as a landmark in Scottish history. The controversy they inspired in their own day has continued into the present, particularly in the Highlands and Islands themselves, where the legacy is still immediate and bitter. Historiographically, there is a stark division between 'popular' condemnation of landlord action, and 'academic' emphases upon impersonal yet inescapable economic and demographic forces. Yet whether 'popular' or 'academic', conventionally the debate has been set within a political and economic framework which sees the Clearances as a particular local variation on the themes of the transition from subsistence to capitalism, the forging of class identity, and class confrontation.

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This course will seek to avoid conventional approaches to the Highland Clearances. Instead, the focus will be upon ideologies: the intellectual, cultural and religious systems of belief which, we shall argue, were vital in shaping the process of political and economic change in the Scottish Highlands between 1745 and 1886. The major themes will be the changing identity of the Highland elite; the inherited value-system of society as a whole, particularly kinship, conservatism and the attitude to the land; Gaels and Gaelic in the Lowlands; external cultural and racial perceptions of the Highlands; the role of religion, particularly evangelicalism, both as panacea and as providing the basis of an ideology of liberation; official attitudes to the Gaelic language and to Highland education, and ideas of popular 'passivity' and resistance.

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