The Sutherland Estate, c.1200-1920: a Short History

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The purpose of this short article is to provide a basic outline of the history of the earldom and estates of Sutherland, from their origins in the thirteenth century to the present day. In addition, a short bibliography has been provided for each chronological section, which will guide the interested reader in further study.

The history of the earldom and estates of Sutherland is a long one – it is one of Scotland's most ancient lineages – and this history is dogged by controversy, from medieval bloodfeuds and dynastic rivalry to the upheaval of the Sutherland clearances in the early nineteenth century. The field suffers somewhat from a dearth of recent historical investigation of the first five centuries of the earldom, although the history of the period from 1766 benefits from a plethora of writing, as the Improving ethos of the Sutherland estate captured the imagination of contemporaries and historians of the Highlands and Scotland since.

Origins of the family and Estate, c.1200-1508

The first known ancestor of the Sutherland family has been identified as one Freskin de Moray (c.1130-c.1153) who had been granted lands in Aberdeenshire by William the Conqueror. The first lord and earl of Sutherland, however, was his descendant, William (c.1214-1248), who was granted land in the Far North and the earldom for service to King Alexander II in 1235. Service to the Scottish, and later, British, monarchies, and court duties would be one of the key planks of the rise to power of the earls of Sutherland, and remained part of their family tradition well into the twentieth century.

The land holdings and position of the new earldom of Sutherland was by no means secure in this early period, and much of the history of that time is marked by conflict with their two main rivals in the region: the Sinclairs, later earls of Caithness and the Mackays of Strathnaver. Continued service to the crown marked the earls of Sutherland for success, however; William, 2nd earl, fought alongside Bruce at Bannockburn, and further ties to that royal lineage were made by the 5th earl, also William, when he married Margaret, sister to King David Bruce in c.1343. This marriage was of great importance to the earldom, as it came with large land grants; the first documentary record of Dunrobin Castle comes soon after, in 1401. The earls were kept busy defending their holdings in the north of Scotland, however; John, 7th earl, is recorded as defeating an invasion of Macdonalds at Skibo in 1451.

By 1508, the earldom of Sutherland had been established for nearly 300 years, and despite on-going rivalries, feuds and attacks, a sizeable landed interest had been built up. Two themes in the family and estate history can be identified, even in this early period; the importance of service to the crown and shrewd marriages to the fortunes of the family. We will return to these themes in the later history of the family and earldom.

Further Reading on the early medieval and medieval history of the Sutherlands:

- An older, but still key, text for the historian interested in the early history of the earldom of Sutherland is the three-volume *magnum opus* by Sir William Fraser: *The Sutherland Book* vol. I: Memoirs, vol. II: Correspondence, vol. III: Charters, privately printed in Edinburgh in 1892. Fraser was commissioned by the Sutherland family to produce a history of the title; in common with many members of the Victorian aristocracy, the Sutherlands were interested in their 'chivalric' medieval past, and in an era of rapid social and economic change, in legitimising their high social position and vast landed wealth. The resulting *Sutherland Book* remains a beautiful piece of work, with high quality illustrations and painstaking detail, although rather outdated.
- Aside from brief references to the earldom of Sutherland in general Scottish history texts covering the period, the reader may also like to examine *The Province of Strathnaver* edited by J. R. Baldwin, especially the chapters on 'Medieval Strathnaver,' by B. Crawford, and that by M. Bangor-Jones: 'From clanship to crofting: landownership, economy and the church in the province of Strathnaver.

Bloodfeud, dynastic crisis and debt: 1508-1766

The sixteenth century was one of the most turbulent periods in the history of the earldom, faced as it was with an intensification of the on-going feud with the earls of Caithness and a take over of the title by the Gordon family. In 1508, John 9th earl inherited the earldom and estates, but died in 1514; he left two sons, John and Alexander, and a daughter, Elizabeth, who was married to Adam Gordon of Aboyne, a son of the 2nd earl of Huntly. Adam Gordon took swift advantage of the sudden death of the 9th earl by claiming that John was an 'idiot', having Elizabeth proclaimed heir and successor and taking the title for himself, forcing Alexander out of the picture.

Despite the fact that Alexander remained a rival to the title for many years, the Gordons retained their grip on the earldom; in 1546 John, 10th earl took the estates, now worth £666 in annual rent, and added to them substantially in 1557 when his brother-in-law, the Bishop of Caithness, granted him a large parcel of land in thanks for support against his own political enemies. Further grants followed from the bishop in 1559 and 1560 to be followed in 1567 by a new charter granted by Mary, Queen of Scots, setting up a free earldom of Sutherland, with Dunrobin named as the family's principal residence.

The late sixteenth century saw the most intense period of bloodfeud between the earls of Sutherland and Caithness. The historical record shows many 'accords of peace' signed between the two families, only to be later broken. Perhaps because of this, in 1601 John 11th earl was granted a new crown charter by James VI, confirming his land and possessions. The seventeenth century saw the earls not

only move into the reformed Protestant religion, but become one of the leading covenanting families in Scotland during the Civil Wars of the 1630s and 1640s.

John, 15th earl, was another shrewd court operator; he was an active adherent in the 1688 'Glorious Revolution' and in 1693 raised a regiment for service in Flanders under William III, earning his 'gratitude.' This was extended under Queen Anne when he was appointed one of the commissioners to negotiate Union between England and Scotland in 1706. Loyalty both to the Union and the new Hanoverian dynasty was tested and confirmed in 1715 when John raised a regiment to fight against the Jacobite rebellion of that year. He was to be disappointed by George I, however, who gave him no concrete financial reward for his loyalty, though he did augment the family's armorial bearings in 1718.

The eighteenth century saw the Sutherland family move towards the consolidation, extension and improvement of their landed estate. William 16th earl, bought the large Assynt estate in the late 1730s and in the early 1740s the family was officially reconciled with MacKay, Lord Reay. Together they fought for the government in 1745, William being present at Culloden. Of a greater threat to the Sutherlands was the level of debt being built up against the estate and there are frequent references to the 'embarrassed' financial position of the estate in this period. The 17th earl, also William, inherited these financial problems, as well as regular subsistence crises on the estate, particularly in 1751, when grain had to be imported into the county to prevent starvation. Even more catastrophically, both earl William and his countess died in Bath in 1766, leaving an infant daughter: the countess, later Duchess, Elizabeth.

Further reading on the early modern and modern history of the Sutherlands:

- William Fraser's *The Sutherland Book* gives a good overview of this period, divided by the reign of each earl.
- David Allan explores the Gordon take-over of the earldom in 1514 and later portrayals of that episode in an article in *Scottish Historical Review* 80:1 (2001), "Ane Ornament to yow and your famelie:" Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun and the genealogical history of the earldom of Sutherland.'
- 'The Marriage of the earl of Sutherland, 1567,' by Athol Murray in *Scottish Historical Review* 51 (1972) examines the scandalous events of that year and the attempt (almost successful) of the earls of Caithness to take the Sutherland earldom.
- K. Brown refers to the Sutherland-Caithness bloodfeud in his book, *Bloodfeud in Scotland, 1573-1625: violence, justice and politics in an early-modern society* (Edinburgh, 1986); especially pages 49-53, 72.

Improvement and clearance: 1766-1821

The right of the infant countess Elizabeth to inherit was challenged in 1766 by a rival Gordon in a case that lasted until 1771; the House of Lords eventually found in favour of the young countess. In 1785 she made one of the shrewdest

marriages in the history of the title when she married George Granville Leveson Gower, Lord Stafford, bringing together her vast landed estates and his enormous industrial wealth (the Bridgewater Canal fortune). With this injection of wealth, a golden age of estate building was ushered in; the Strathy estate was purchased in 1813, followed by the extensive Reay estate in 1829. Lord Reay had been struggling with heavy debts for decades, and had borrowed £100,000 from the Sutherland in 1825. When it became clear he was unable to pay this loan back, the Sutherlands purchased the estate outright in 1829 for £300,000 (it was sold again in 1898 for only £100,000). The Bighouse estate was then purchased in 1830, the resultant Sutherland estate taking up nearly all of the county (1.2 million acres approx.). These purchases were less to do with economic common sense, and more to do with family aggrandisement and social and political domination.

As well as building up a large landed estate, the countess was concerned with the Improvement of her estates: firstly, to create make them more economically viable and valuable and secondly, to improve the economic and social position of the many small tenants, who, it has been calculated, faced subsistence crises and famine every few years. Heavy capital investment was made into the basic infrastructure of the northern estates; extensive road building under the Countess and her son the 2nd Duke, followed by c.£250,000 put into local railways by the 3rd Duke. In common with many other Highlands landowners, the Sutherlands also invested in the fishing industry, building harbours at Helmsdale, Bettyhill and Talmine, as well as numerous small piers and slipways. In an attempt to set an example to their tenants, both large and small, the estate management also established a number of model farmsteads on the estate, notably Dunrobin Mains farm; Rhives, Golspie and Clashmore, Assynt. This type of investment was topped by the 3rd Duke, who in the 1870s, spent £220,000 on land reclamation near Loch Shin, using the latest steam plough technology.

We now come to the defining episode in the history and reputation of the earldom and estates of Sutherland: the Clearances (1807-1821). The controversy surrounding this period stems from two related factors: firstly, the intellectual justification for the experiment itself and secondly, the methods and personnel involved in carrying it out. The idea was admirable in intention: to establish large scale commercial sheep farming in the county, boosting the rental roll of the family and making the estate economically self-sufficient. In order to do this, the bulk of the small tenantry would be moved to the coasts to make room for the sheep runs, giving the poor populace the opportunity to make a decent living from fishing and/or kelping. They were not consulted on this revolutionary change in the tenancy structure of the estate; to even ask this question is anachronistic. The methods used were often callous, even brutal, particularly those of the infamous agent and later tenant of the estate, Patrick Sellar, who was tried (and acquitted) of culpable homicide in 1818. The most tragic irony of the Clearances, however, was that they ultimately failed: with little provision to prosecute the fishing industry, the small tenantry became largely dependent on their small plots of poor land and poverty became engrained in the local economy and society. Additionally, although sheep farming experienced a 'golden age' in Sutherland in the 1850s and 1860s, it was ultimately of short-

lived success and by the 1880s, the conversion from sheep farms to shooting lets had begun.

Further reading on the Clearances and early nineteenth century Sutherland:
There is a huge range of work on the Highland Clearances and those in Sutherland in particular; I recommend here only a fraction of that available.

- The work of Eric Richards remains the benchmark in the field, not least because he is one of the only historians to use the Sutherland estate papers as the basis of his research; *The Leviathan of Wealth: the Sutherland Fortune in the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1976), *Patrick Sellar and the Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh, 1999), and his more general work, *The Highland Clearances* (numerous editions, incl. 2000, 2008) remain leaders in the field and are yet to be surpassed in this author's view.
- T. M. Devine, *From Clanship to Crofters War: the social transformation of the Scottish Highlands,* (Manchester, 1994) gives a good overview of the clearances and puts them into their historical context.
- The Commissioner (head factor) of the Sutherland estate during the clearances, James Loch, wrote a classic *apologia* of the episode in *An Account of the Improvements made by Lord Stafford in the counties of Salop and Sutherland* (London, 1820).

Famine and the Crofters War: 1821-1911

Post-clearance Sutherland saw many of the key planks of the 'Highland Problem' establish themselves: the difficult, if not impossible, economics of crofting leading to wide spread poverty and occasional destitution, depopulation, deterioration of land quality and later, crofter agitation. The failure of the clearance policy was amply demonstrated in Sutherland and across the Highlands between 1846 and 1851, when the potato crop was wiped out by a blight and famine conditions followed. The 2nd Duke of Sutherland spent £15,000 on food aid and absorbed the inevitable rent arrears, but even James Loch, one of the key ideological architects of the clearances, had to admit defeat over his programme of Improvement, particularly in the north and west sections of the estate.

The mid-nineteenth century was the highpoint of the Sutherland estate, title and fortune, however; annual income from land and industrial investments was £120,000, making them one of the richest patrician landowning families of the age. Much of their fortune was spent on extensive re-building programmes at Trentham House (Staffordshire), Stafford House (London) and Dunrobin Castle. They also enjoyed a close relationship with the monarchy at this time; although no great politicians or statesmen, their role as key courtiers and leading charitable organisers was well known. However, the capital basis of their wealth was slowly being eaten away by vast expenditure; the Sutherland estate in particular acting as a sponge for wealth.

In 1882, the Crofters War hit the Highland region, and the Sutherland estate was not exempt from the upheaval, although less badly affected than areas such as

Skye, Lewis and Tiree. The Highland crofters went on rent strikes, deforced legal officials and raided land in order to push for reform of the land laws, in particular, the 3 'F's': fair rents, freedom from eviction and fair sale – that is, the right to compensation for improvements from the landlord. In Sutherland, the worst agitation was seen at Clashmore, Assynt, where the local crofters and cottars agitated for Clashmore farm, from which they had been removed to make way for land reclamation in the early 1870s.

From the late 1880s, government started to take a greater interest in the Highland region and a raft of legislation was introduced; the 1886 Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act – still a benchmark piece of legislation – gave the Highland crofters the 3 'F's'; the 1896 Congested Districts (Scotland) Act followed, aimed at both facilitating government investment into the economic infrastructure of the region and government land purchase for the benefit of crofters. Aside from one, relatively unsuccessful land purchase scheme at Syre, the Sutherland estate saw little in the way of government land purchase.

Further Reading on the Sutherland estate in the nineteenth century:

- T. M .Devine's important book, *The Great Highland Famine: hunger, emigration and the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century* (Edinburgh, 1988), examines the Famine period, with particular reference to the response and consequences of estate policy.
- The work of E. A. Cameron on the role of both government and landowners in the Highlands leads the field, for example, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c.1880-1925* (East Linton, 1996).
- One of the most important books to be published in Highland history in the last 30 years, J. Hunter's *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976) gives the reader an account of this turbulent period from the perspective of the crofting and cottar community.
- Lastly, A. Tindley, *The Sutherland Estate, 1850-1920: Aristocratic Decline, estate management and land reform* (forthcoming: early 2010).

Decline and Fall: the twentieth century

The Small Landholders (Scotland) Act of 1911 extended government land purchase powers under the auspices of the Board of Agriculture for Scotland and the Scottish Land Court, but due to WWI, little was achieved until 1919, when the government passed further legislation. The great need of the Sutherland crofters and cottars was more land, but none of the legislation passed by government between 1886 and 1919 was able to address this demand. It has been argued that because the clearances in that county had been so extensive and the problems of depopulation and poverty so engrained, despite the widely acknowledged generosity and fairness of the estate management, crofter living standards especially in health and housing, remained low.

This was also a period of enormous flux for the Sutherland family and estate; during the early 1890s an ugly court case between the 4th Duke and his step-mother, the Dowager Duchess Mary, had resulted in an out of court settlement in

which the 4th Duke paid c.£750,000 to the Dowager in order to inherit his father's land and fortune. This, combined with agricultural depression from the late 1870s and decades of unremunerative spending, meant the estate and family went into a period of serious retrenchment. Land sales began before the new century; 170,000 acres of Sutherland were sold by 1913 and one of the first actions of the 5th Duke on inheriting the estate that year was to sell nearly half of it (445,000 acres). The land sales were not so much a mark of financial desperation on the part of the 5th Duke, but a radical and decisive re-structuring of the family assets – from unremunerative land to more profitable ventures. This territorial decline of what had been the largest landed estate in western Europe was matched by the declining political and social influence of the family in the region. This was not a unique process, however; the British aristocracy as a whole had faced a 'decline and fall' since the 1880s, and the Sutherland family and estate was part of that process.

Further Reading on Sutherland in the twentieth century:

- The previously listed works by Hunter, Devine, Cameron and Tindley all cover this period to some extent.
- L. Leneman's *Fit For Heroes? Land Settlement in Scotland after World War One* (Aberdeen, 1989) has a chapter on government schemes in Sutherland
- For a broader British perspective of the 'decline and fall' of aristocratic families see the seminal work of D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (London, 1990).

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