

SCOTTISH SOCIETY 1500–1800

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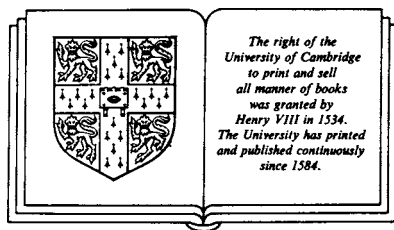
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1989

First Published 1989

Printed in Great Britain
at the University Press, Cambridge

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Scottish society, 1500–1800.

I. Scotland. Social conditions, 1500–1800.

I. Houston R. A. (Robert Allen), 1954–

II. Whyte, I. D. (Ian D.).

941.1

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Scottish society, 1500–1800 / edited by R. A. Houston and I. D. Whyte.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

Contents: Population mobility in early modern Scotland / I. D. Whyte – Scottish food and Scottish history, 1500–1700 / A. Gibson and T. C. Snout – Continuity and change in urban society, 1500–1700 / M. Lynch – Women in the economy and society of Scotland, 1500–1800 / R. A. Houston – (Social response to agrarian “improvement” / T. M. Devine – “Pretense of blude” and “place” of their dwelling” / R. A. Dogshon – North and south / R. Mitchison – Scotland and Ireland, 1600–1800 / L. M. Cullen – Kindred adjoining kingdoms / K. E. Wrightson.

1. Scotland – Social life and customs. 2. Scotland – History – 16th century.

3. Scotland – History – 17th century. 4. Scotland – History – 18th century.

5. Scotland – Social conditions.

I. Houston, E. A. (Robert Allan). 1954–

II. Whyte, Ian (Ian D.)

DA772.S32 1988

941.1–dc19 88-5004

ISBN 0 521 32522 6

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INTRODUCTION: SCOTTISH SOCIETY IN PERSPECTIVE

R.A. HOUSTON AND I.D. WHYTE

Scotland before 1750 was a small and rather poor country whose significance for European political, economic and, to a lesser extent, intellectual life was at best peripheral. Her economy and society were transformed in the century after 1750 by agrarian and industrial changes which catapulted Scotland to prominence in world affairs, a standing that the early modern period had barely presaged. Until the advent of a largely urbanised and industrialised society in the nineteenth century, historians have tended to assume that the social structure of Scotland retained archaic forms which had long disappeared from more 'developed' countries such as England. Scotland's economy and level of wealth in the pre-industrial period have often seemed closest to those of Scandinavian countries or Ireland. Not only was Scotland peripheral to mainstream European history, but her society was so distinctive as to be of little relevance to an understanding of social organisation and change in a wider context. This introductory chapter sets out to question these preconceptions by analysing Scottish society between the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution in a European context and, by presenting a brief and accessible outline of social structures and trends, to assess the typicality or distinctiveness of Scotland.

In this task, the social historian is constrained by the comparative lack of academic research on pre-nineteenth-century Scottish society. Some aspects of Scottish social history have always been attractive to the Scots themselves, but the society of Scotland in the past has received remarkably little attention from scholars. While the Scots love their history, their conception of it is generally based on vague, romantic myths about clans and tartans, poets and Pretenders.¹ Partly due to the centralisation of archives in Edinburgh and the lack, until recently, of regional record offices, Scotland has failed to develop a strong tradition of local amateur historical study of the kind which has flourished in England. One result of

¹ B.P. Lenman, 'Reinterpreting Scotland's last two centuries of independence' (1982): 217-19. We should like to thank the contributors for their comments on this introduction.

this is that the popular image of Scottish society in the past is probably further removed from the scholarly 'reality' than in any other European country. Coupled with this are the preconceptions of academic historians, both within and without Scotland. The Scottish historical 'establishment' has always been small and, until recently, intensely conservative in its approaches, and has tended to concentrate its attention on institutions like the church, or on the high and mighty, ignoring the mass of the population in the past as well as the concerns of social historians in England and Europe.³

For its part, the outside academic community has treated Scotland as a geographically peripheral nation about which little is known and whose relevance to wider European trends is limited. Described by early modern English travellers in a universally hostile manner, and only slightly more charitably by continental commentators,⁴ the Scottish people appear in English historiography as nuisances, villains or curiosities. This attitude is partly a reflection of the lack of interest of a south-east English power base for its Celtic periphery, heightened in the case of Scotland by its late incorporation into Britain. Behind the smokescreens of Scotland's distinctive social structure and institutions, which supposedly 'require special treatment',⁵ and the oft-repeated claim that the sources for proper social history do not exist, English and European historians have tended to ignore the Scottish dimension.⁶

Scotland did indeed have certain distinctive institutions. Roman law, extensively adopted in Scotland from the late fifteenth century, placed much greater emphasis on written codes than did English common law which treated custom as a powerful consideration.⁷ Scotland had a separate monarchy until 1603; her own Parliament until 1707; a vigorously Calvinist church after 1560; an education system funded and constituted in a different way from England; a different currency whose pound was worth about 8 per cent of English sterling during the seventeenth century and

² For example see G. Donaldson, *Scotland, James V to James VII* (1965).

³ Some nineteenth-century scholars and antiquarians did investigate curiosities such as witchcraft and other 'superstitions': e.g. A. Grant, *Essays on the superstitions of the Highlanders* (1811). Modern scholars have also produced work of European significance on the subject: e.g. C. Lerner, *Enemies of God* (1981).

⁴ P.H. Brown (ed.), *Early travellers in Scotland* (1891); J.K. Cameron, 'Some continental visitors to Scotland' (1986).

⁵ J.F.C. Harrison, *The common people of Great Britain* (1985): 19. See also L.A. Clarkson, 'The writing of Irish economic and social history' (1980) and on sources I.D. Whyte & K.A. Whyte, 'Sources for Scottish historical geography' (1981).

⁶ R.A. Houston, 'British society in the eighteenth century' (1986): 464-6; D. Cannadine, 'British history: past, present - and future?' (1987) treats British and English history as synonymous.

⁷ J.H. Langbein, *Prosecuting crime in the Renaissance* (1974); *An introduction to Scottish legal history* (1958).

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different weights and measures.⁸ There were also features of Scottish society which marked it out from that of England: a less prominent middling group in rural society until the later eighteenth century, composed of tacksmen (see below) in the Highlands and tenant farmers in the Lowlands rather than owner-occupiers, more extensive poverty and a lower standard of living, higher levels of emigration, a more obviously martial society, pronounced regional differences in social organisation and language between Highland and Lowland,⁹ a demographic regime in which famine featured until well into the eighteenth century.¹⁰ There are, as yet, no clear indications of distinctive farming regions with related patterns of settlement, and society in Scotland in the pre-industrial period in the same way as in Lowland England or France: in terms of its field systems, crops and livestock management Scotland appears to have been more homogeneous than many European countries during early modern times.¹¹ Despite these contrasts with neighbouring countries, in many respects social structures and social changes in Scotland did not follow unique paths between the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution when viewed in a wider European context.

POPULATION AND ECONOMY

Scotland was a small country with a small population. Although estimates of population totals before Webster's census of 1755 are based on little more than educated guesswork, it is probable that from perhaps 500,000 inhabitants in 1500, numbers rose to 7–800,000 in the later sixteenth century, a million in 1700 and 1.6 million at the time of the first official census in 1801.¹² There are signs that growth came fastest in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, numbers stagnating thereafter until a renewed and sustained period of increase began in the second half of the eighteenth century. The chronology resembles that of England, though the mechanisms probably differed and the Scottish rates of increase never matched the increase of at least 1 per cent per annum of English population at its most buoyant, possibly due in part to higher levels of emigration.

⁸ S.G.E. Lythe & J. Butt, *An economic history of Scotland* (1975):81–4; T.C. Smout, *A history of the Scottish people, 1560–1830* (1972) is easily the best introduction to the social history of Scotland though a rapidly growing body of new research is beginning to date some of the interpretations.

⁹ C.W.J. Withers, *Gaelic in Scotland* (1984):*passim*; M. Gray, *The Highland economy, 1750–1850* (1957).

¹⁰ M.W. Flinn, *Scottish population history* (1977):233–7.

¹¹ J. Thirsk, *The agrarian history of England and Wales, vol. 5, part 1, 1640–1750* (1985); I.D. Whyte, *Agriculture and society in seventeenth-century Scotland* (1979):19–22. The tone of this introduction is often tentative, reflecting the patchy nature of research in certain areas.

¹² J.G. Kyd, *Scottish population statistics* (1952); Lythe & Butt (1975):3; N.L. Tranter, *Population and society, 1750–1940* (1985).

Household size was similar to other north-west European countries, at about five persons, and its composition changed very little over the period 1500–1800. Scotland provides no support for an evolutionist view of shifts from large and complex family units to small and simple ones with industrialisation, though it is possible that larger, extended families may have been commoner in the Highlands.¹³

Key issues such as trends in nuptiality and fertility remain uncertain because of the patchy survival and poor quality of essential sources such as parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, but it is argued that Scotland possessed a 'high pressure' demographic regime similar to France or perhaps Ireland, where high birth rates were matched by swingeing mortality, and where crises of subsistence remained a central fact of life until the end of the seventeenth century in the Lowlands and well into the eighteenth century in the Highlands.¹⁴ Gibson and Smout imply in chapter 2 that the homeostatic regime which adjusted population and resources in England (through changes in the age of women at first marriage responding to the standard of living) was not matched in Scotland. Population trends were instead dominated by mortality caused by famine and disease to a later date than in England, and the accelerating population growth of the late eighteenth century appears, as it did in Sweden, to have been attributable mainly to improvements in life expectancy. The average life span certainly seems to have been lower in Scotland than in England: 30 years or less rather than 35 during the mid-eighteenth century. This pattern only changed in Scotland, like France, after the middle of the eighteenth century when mortality fell dramatically.¹⁵ Reasons for this included inoculation against smallpox, autonomous changes in the virulence of disease, and a decline in famine deaths thanks to more efficient agricultural techniques, the advent of the potato, improved transport, and more effective poor relief. Scotland appears to have resembled England in having a late age at first marriage for women – 23 to 26 on average, though female celibacy was more extensive. Illegitimacy was higher than in France (and in England until c.1750) and levels increased in the late eighteenth century as they did all over Europe. The level of bastardy rose steadily from about 1 per cent in the 1650s to around 5 per cent by 1800. Between 1660 and 1760 the illegitimacy ratio for Scotland as a whole was around 4 per cent. For the Central Lowlands the figure was lower, 2–3 per cent but for the Highlands 3–6 per cent and Caithness 7–9 per cent.¹⁶

There are some suggestions that the Highlands may have been more like

¹³ E.A. Wrigley & R.S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541–1871* (1981): 213–15, 246–8; Flinn (1977): 107–297.

¹⁴ Flinn (1977): 164–86.

¹⁵ Tranter (1985): 34–63; R.A. Houston, 'The demographic regime, c.1750–c.1830' (1988).

¹⁶ Tranter (1985): 53–4; Flinn (1977): 279–82; L. Leneman & R. Mitchison, 'Scottish illegitimacy ratios' (1987).

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Ireland in experiencing almost continuous population growth throughout the period, despite the fact that the region was worse hit than the Lowlands by the famines of the 1690s.¹⁷ A growing imbalance between population and resources during the eighteenth century forced many Highlanders into seasonal or permanent migration out of the area and condemned those who remained to live on increasingly marginal landholdings.¹⁸ A similar rise in the volume of temporary and permanent migration can be found in many upland areas of Europe.¹⁹ People whose lives had been disrupted by subsistence crises and, in the second half of the eighteenth century, displaced Highlanders and the victims of agricultural change in the Lowlands moved overseas in large numbers and from the sixteenth century onwards emigration was probably a more significant element in Scottish society than any other country in Europe except Ireland.²⁰

Another option was to migrate within Scotland, usually to the Lowlands and often to a town, for population mobility was extensive, as Whyte shows in chapter 1. The royal burgh of Edinburgh, excluding satellites like the Canongate and Leith, grew from a community of 12,000 in 1560 to 20,000–25,000 in 1635, 30,000–50,000 by 1700 and to 82,000 at the time of the 1801 census. Scottish urban growth was, along with England's, the fastest in Europe during the eighteenth century, most of this growth being fuelled by immigrants from the countryside.²¹ Urban growth occurred throughout much of the early modern period, but particularly in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and again after 1750, the two periods of most rapid growth for the Scottish population as a whole. Recovery from the economic dislocations of the 1640s and 1650s was slow for towns like Dundee,²² but smaller centres and the great towns of Glasgow and Edinburgh flourished. Although Edinburgh was the largest Scottish town until the late eighteenth century, only then being overtaken by Glasgow, the capital never held such a large proportion of the urban population of Scotland, or indeed of the total population, as London did for England. Major regional centres like Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen, Perth and some lower-rank centres like Inverness and Dumfries in less highly urbanised areas were probably of greater relative significance as centres of wealth and trade than the larger provincial towns of England, a situation

¹⁷ R.E. Tyson, 'Famine in Aberdeenshire, 1695–99' (1986): 32.

¹⁸ T.M. Devine, 'Temporary migration and the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century' (1979c).

¹⁹ R.A. Dodgshon, *Land and society in early Scotland* (1981): 289–92; O. Hufton, *The poor of eighteenth-century France* (1974): 69–106; M.W. Flinn, *The European demographic system* (1981): 65–75; F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (1972): 41–5.

²⁰ Tranter (1985): 126–46.

²¹ J. de Vries, *European urbanization 1500–1800* (1984): 39, 199–231. The very approximate population figures are the result of poor documentation.

²² T.M. Devine, 'The Cromwellian Union and the Scottish burghs' (1976).

more comparable with France. Unlike England, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scotland witnessed the creation of many new burghs, though comparatively few became substantial urban centres.²³

Table 1 *Percentages of the population of England and Scotland living in towns with 10,000 or more inhabitants, 1500–1800*²⁴

	England	Scotland
1500	3	2
1600	6	3
1700	13	5
1750	16	9
1800	20	17

Although based on the amalgamation of population estimates of varying quality for individual towns the above table illustrates three important points. First, virtually all the urban growth took place in the Central Lowlands of Scotland which contained approximately half of the nation's people. The image of Scotland before the later eighteenth century has often been of a country where urbanisation had made limited progress yet the Lowlands at least were quite highly urbanised by the seventeenth century even if many of the towns were small. Urbanisation was highly regionalised since the Highlands had no towns of any size. Second, Scotland's urban population grew at the same rate as that of England between 1500 and 1600, at a much faster rate after 1700, albeit from low initial levels, and nearly doubled in the second half of the eighteenth century. This rapid increase was unique in contemporary Europe. Paisley, for instance, quadrupled in size between 1755 and 1801.²⁵ Third, these figures are a useful indicator of the rapid pace of economic change after 1750. Until the eighteenth century, demand for the services which large towns could offer and the agricultural surplus to feed them were limited. Agricultural productivity was still low in 1700 since the proportion of the population who were net consumers of food (town-dwellers and rural artisans) cannot have exceeded 25 per cent – probably less than French levels and half those obtaining in England.²⁶

Despite her position on the periphery of Europe, Scotland's overseas trade links generated contacts with most parts of north-western Europe

²³ G.S. Pryde, *The burghs of Scotland* (1965); I.H. Adams, *The making of urban Scotland* (1978): 11–47.

²⁴ de Vries (1984): 39. The urban hierarchy of England was more exceptional in a European context than that of Scotland.

²⁵ A. Dickson & W. Speirs, 'Changes in class structure in Paisley, 1750–1845' (1980): 60–1.

²⁶ E.A. Wrigley, 'Urban growth and agricultural change' (1985): 700, 718–20.

and occasionally with places further afield in the Mediterranean, Russia and, from the later seventeenth century, across the Atlantic. This was true even of the sixteenth century, and brought new ideas and products back to Scotland's people. Intellectual exchange took place with European universities such as Paris before the Reformation, Heidelberg and Huguenot academies like Saumur after it, and an increasingly special relationship developed with Dutch universities from the 1620s. The legal and medical schools at Leiden were particularly significant between 1675 and 1725, judging from the number of Scots who matriculated.²⁷ Scotland was part of the intellectual mainstream in early modern Europe and during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment became a leader.

Trade with Europe was the jewel in Scotland's economic crown before the eighteenth century, since the domestic economy laboured under many constraints. These included a shortage of skilled labour, poor transport and communications, lack of ready cash, limited investment in industry, circumscribed domestic markets, poor agricultural techniques and an unfavourable climate. Yet the pattern of overseas trade – exports dominated by unprocessed or partly processed primary products, imports by manufactures, luxuries and some essential raw materials such as timber and, in years of famine, emergency supplies of grain from the Baltic – underlines the poor and undeveloped nature of her economy before the eighteenth century when compared with England (but not with Ireland or Scandinavia).²⁸ Moreover, as Lynch discusses in chapter 3, the distinctive pattern of Scottish overseas trade constrained the development of craft skills and the range of occupational structures in Scottish towns until well into the seventeenth century. Edinburgh had about twenty different craft occupations in the early sixteenth century, roughly a quarter of the number in contemporary Norwich, a town of approximately the same size. In the lower reaches of urban society it was the norm to have more than one occupation.²⁹

Economic change can be summarised as follows. The sixteenth to early seventeenth century was a period of population growth when agriculture changed relatively little, but overseas trade expanded. Inflation was not a serious problem until the later sixteenth century and Scotland was less affected by wars than many continental nations in the early modern period.³⁰ However, these developments were halted in the 1630s, 1640s and 1650s by political and military dislocations from which Scotland's

²⁷ R. Feenstra, 'Scottish-Dutch legal relations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (1986): 130, 132, 136; Cameron (1986): 55–6.

²⁸ T.C. Smout (ed.), *Scotland and Europe, 1200–1800* (1986); *Scottish trade on the eve of the Union* (1963); S.G.E. Lythe, *The economy of Scotland in its European setting, 1550–1625* (1960).

²⁹ M. Lynch, 'The social and economic structure of the larger towns' (forthcoming); *Calendar of State Papers Relating to Scotland* (CSP) vol. XIII, part 2 (1969): 1119.

³⁰ J. Wormald, *Court, kirk and community* (1981): 45–6.

economy recovered only slowly in the later seventeenth century. Subsistence agriculture was overwhelmingly practised in the Highlands. The surplus of livestock which was creamed off to supply the cattle trade to the Lowlands and England, which became prominent from the later seventeenth century, was largely extracted by landowners as rent and brought little benefit to the farmers themselves. In the more advanced Lowlands the commercial element in agriculture was greater – Dodgshon has estimated that perhaps a quarter of the farmers in those areas closest to the coast and the major towns were producing wholeheartedly for the market in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.³¹ Elsewhere most farmers had some involvement with the market, however modest, and this element was to increase gradually from the seventeenth into the eighteenth century. The 1690s were disastrous for agriculture and the 1700s for some sectors of finance because of the failure of the Darien scheme, but the remainder of the eighteenth century witnessed slow recovery, then accelerating industrial and agricultural productivity coupled with rapid industrialisation, rising real wages and a healthy overseas trade based primarily on Glasgow.³²

STRUCTURE AND CHANGE IN SCOTTISH SOCIETY

It is commonly assumed that Scotland's economic backwardness went hand in hand with, or was indeed partly caused by, primitive social structures such as the Highland clans. There are few contemporary analyses of the nature of Scottish society of the sort which have proved so helpful to historians of early modern England.³³ Scottish sermons are almost invariably dry and theological, with few remarks about obedience, deference and order of the kind found so frequently in England, though the Scottish clergy were not averse to making political judgements from the pulpit.³⁴ The clergy talked about man and God but not about man and man. Formal tables of ranks of the kind which existed in seventeenth-century France or eighteenth-century Prussia were unknown in Scotland.³⁵ Descriptions tended to focus on political or legal standing and generally do

³¹ Dodgshon (1981):265.

³² Smout (1963):244–53; T.M. Devine, *The tobacco lords* (1975); 'The Union of 1707 and Scottish development' (1985).

³³ K.E. Wrightson, *English society, 1580–1680* (1982):17–38.

³⁴ R.M. Mitchison, *Life in Scotland* (1978):41.

³⁵ Y-M. Bercé, 'La mobilité sociale, argument de révolte' (1979); J-M. Constant, 'La mobilité sociale dans une province de gentilshommes et de paysannes: la Beauce' (1979):12–14; P. Goubert, *The ancien régime* (1973):168–92; A. Wyczański, 'La stratification sociale au XVI^e siècle vue par les gens de l'époque' (1979); D. Saalfeld, 'Die ständische Gliederung der Gesellschaft Deutschlands im Zeitalter der Absolutismus' (1980):478, 481. The term 'noble' in eighteenth-century Germany could have 1 of 9 recognised definitive adjectives associated with it such as 'old', 'imperial', 'court'.

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not go beyond the simplest classification. Bishop Leslie split the society into churchmen, noblemen and commons (by which he meant burgesses): a conception of 'Estates' which had little importance for everyday life.³⁶ Adam Smith remarked on social structure, differentiation and change in his *Wealth of Nations* (1776) as did John Millar in *The origin of the distinction of ranks* (1771), both writers reflecting the Enlightenment's drive to develop general theories of the development of societies. More particular was Peter Williamson's *Edinburgh directory* of 1773–4 listing citizens in order of rank starting with Court of Session judges, advocates, writers to the signet and so on.

Social gradations were more subtle, stratification more complex in practice. At the parish level, one kirk session saw its parishioners ranked between 'masters, free holders, feuers, proprietors and servitors of the ground'.³⁷ Urban elites were anxious to maintain the distinction between those with burgess privileges and the rest, though this was in decline in the late seventeenth century.³⁸ We must therefore study the distribution of wealth, status and occupations in Scottish society, and analyse the relations of power and authority between the different groups. Using tax documents, inventories and estate records, we can establish a ranking of occupations by wealth in both urban and rural society, and can emphasise both the unequal distribution of wealth between elites and the rest of the population and also the gradations within groups such as tenant farmers which, by the later seventeenth century, had become increasingly visible in differences in housing and material possessions.³⁹ Taxation schedules reveal the extent to which wealth was polarised in the Lowlands during the 1690s. Assuming that the number of hearths in a house is an approximate indicator of the wealth and social standing of the family living in it, we can see that in West Lothian 69 per cent of all those who paid the hearth tax (the exempt poor must have lived in single hearth dwellings) did so on one hearth only, 14 per cent on two hearths and only 10 per cent on four or more. For Dumfries-shire the figures are 63 per cent, 21 per cent and 7 per cent respectively. This profile is more reminiscent of eighteenth-century Ireland than Lowland arable England.⁴⁰ Scottish society was, nevertheless, differentiated by wealth and status at an early date.

Access to land determined the wealth and well-being of the vast majority of Scotland's people, as it did throughout early modern Europe. Great

³⁶ P.H. Brown, *Scotland before 1700* (1893): 173–83; Larner (1981): 45.

³⁷ SRO CH2/471/1 f.1.

³⁸ T.M. Devine, 'The merchant class of the larger Scottish towns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (1983a): 93–104.

³⁹ Whyte (1979): 162–8; I.D. Whyte & K.A. Whyte, 'Poverty and prosperity in a seventeenth-century Scottish farming community' (1988); Dodgshon (1981): 226–9.

⁴⁰ D. Adamson (ed.), *West Lothian hearth tax, 1691* (1981); R.B. McDowell, 'Ireland in 1800' (1986): 670–1.

proprietors dominated land ownership,⁴¹ their economic power protected and reinforced by their hold on political life, the judicial system and social values. In this respect Scotland resembled Denmark, where farmers and labourers were exploited by the great lords and where in 1789 1 per cent of the population owned 56 per cent of the national wealth, or Norway where a substantial independent peasantry did not exist.⁴² There was no active land market among the peasantry despite the existence of feuing and wadsetting (see below), and an acceleration of buying and selling of heritable property in the later eighteenth century, principally by the merchants and professionals of the larger towns.⁴³ The dominance of the great nobles remained. Crown, burghs and owner-occupiers held a small proportion of the land in Scotland, the only regions with any substantial numbers of peasant proprietors being the west-central Lowlands and the south west.⁴⁴ The Western Isles represent one of the most extreme examples of the general pattern, land being held in large blocks and changes of ownership by sale (as opposed to inheritance) rare.⁴⁵ In between were areas like East Lothian and Fife where average estate size was smaller and the land market comparatively more developed.

Scotland had no real equivalent of the celebrated English yeoman freeholder, except perhaps a handful of small lairds and portioners (heirs to part of a heritable estate) numbering perhaps 8,000 in the later seventeenth century.⁴⁶ English copyholders were paralleled in sixteenth-century Scotland by a few 'kindly tenants' and by the only slightly more numerous 'rentallers', but most of these tenures were converted to ordinary leasehold in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁴⁷ Small owner-occupiers holding land by heritable 'feu ferme' tenure became more numerous from the middle of the sixteenth century with the break up of ecclesiastical estates in the years before and immediately following the Reformation of 1560 (see below) but their importance in rural society was purely local and many of them were bought out by larger lairds during the seventeenth century. An observer summarised this distinctive feature of Scottish society compared with England when he wrote, probably in the 1580s, of the 'defect in proportion among the commonality, viz. that there

⁴¹ L. Timperley, 'The pattern of landholding in eighteenth-century Scotland' (1980): 142-7.

⁴² S. Dyrvik, 'The social structure of Norway and Denmark' (1979b): 66-9; J. Oldervoll, 'The rural society of Norway' (1979): 72-8; L. Soltow, 'Wealth distribution in Denmark in 1789' (1979): 138.

⁴³ Timperley (1980): 148-52; Devine (1983a): 104-7; R. Callander, 'The pattern of landholding in Aberdeenshire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (1986): 7.

⁴⁴ Timperley (1980): 144.

⁴⁵ F.J. Shaw, *The northern and western islands of Scotland* (1981): 16.

⁴⁶ R.M. Mitchison, *From lordship to patronage* (1983): 80. In his contribution to this volume Wrightson notes that certain areas of England also lacked this substantial, independent middling group.

⁴⁷ M.H.B. Sanderson, *Scottish rural society in the sixteenth century* (1982): 58-63.

Introduction

are so few of the middle rank of subjects among them that are able to live competently and honestly of their own and by that means are as a band to tie together the two extremes' of society, 'viz. the higher sort and the rascality'.⁴⁸

In addition to the medieval feudal tenures an individual could hold land by one or all of the following: tack (lease), feu (heritable) or wadset (redeemable mortgage). For most Scottish peasants, access to the land was by leasehold: in seventeenth-century Shetland only 1 will in 20 mentions feu duty payment (indicating proprietorship), but 76 per cent had land rent owing.⁴⁹ The short leases which prevailed in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, smallholdings, inefficient agricultural methods and high rent levels weakened any incentive which tenants might have had to invest labour or capital in improvements, although paternalistic attitudes by proprietors usually ensured security of tenure in practice from one generation to another provided that the tenants were suitably productive and deferential.⁵⁰ The Hally family held the same farms at Tullibardine on the Atholl estates throughout the years 1688–1783 and average lease duration rose from 9 or 11 years in 1725 to 15 or 19 in 1760.⁵¹ Longer, written leases became generally more frequent in the second half of the seventeenth century and indicated the development of more commercial attitudes in landlord–tenant relations but these were not a complete novelty.⁵² Long leases and substantial security of tenure had also been more common in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries when tenants were in short supply.⁵³

Rural society was headed by the landowners. Next came the tenant farmers who worked the land through their own labour, that of their families and by employing cottars and servants. Tenant farmers were far from being a homogeneous group although the gradations within tenant society are far from clear.⁵⁴ The sizes of the holdings which they worked, their wealth, and their influence in local affairs probably varied considerably within and between communities. In upland Aberdeenshire tenants accounted for 50 per cent or more of the male pollable population of some parishes in the poll tax returns of the 1690s while in the Lothians they might account for less than 20 per cent.⁵⁵ In the upper reaches of the Aberdeenshire Dee and Don, where many farms were divided between 8 or more small tenants, tenant society was comparatively undifferentiated and

⁴⁸ CSP Scotland vol. XIII, pt 2 (1969): 1119.

⁴⁹ Shaw (1981): 77.

⁵⁰ Whyte (1979): 137–62; I.D. Whyte & K.A. Whyte, 'Continuity and change in a seventeenth-century Scottish farming community' (1984a).

⁵¹ L. Leneman, *Living in Atholl: a social history of the estates, 1685–1785* (1986): 16, 40.

⁵² Whyte (1979): 152–61.

⁵³ Wormald (1981): 51–4.

⁵⁴ I.D. Whyte & K.A. Whyte, 'Some aspects of the social structure of rural society in seventeenth-century Lowland Scotland' (1983).

⁵⁵ Whyte (1979): 141–5.

there was probably little distinction between tenant and cottar. In the Lothians, by contrast, there was a marked difference between the larger tenants and the cottars. In such areas the distinction between the wealthy capitalist farmer and his labourers that was so characteristic of the nineteenth century was already beginning to emerge in the seventeenth.⁵⁶

An important difference between the rural societies of Scotland and England lay in the comparative lack of landless people in the former. As in Ireland, many people in Scotland had access to at least some land, though the size of their plots was often tiny. Cottar families formed the bulk of the rural population in many Lowland parishes and a high proportion of farm servants were probably also drawn from this group. However, cottars, and indeed many tenants, were very definitely land-poor.⁵⁷ In essence, cottars rented small plots of land from tenant farmers in exchange for their labour and that of their families if they were married. They were effectively farm labourers, removable at will.⁵⁸ Again, there were regional variations in the extent of this social group. In Renfrewshire, cottars and sub-tenants were less numerous than in Midlothian or Lowland Aberdeenshire because small, tenanted holdings were more available and more people could achieve the status of tenant.⁵⁹ Subletting was more frequent in Scotland and Ireland than in England, and its distribution around Scotland was determined by population pressure and by the need of landlords for certain types of labour: during the fifteenth century some monastic estates created whole cottar communities to fulfil these requirements.⁶⁰

Cottars lived close to the margins of subsistence on very small plots of land. In the Highlands in the later eighteenth century there was a great increase in the number of people with very small holdings, tied to the development of kelp burning, fishing and illicit whisky distilling. This development is particularly noticeable in the Western Isles after c.1770: Hebridean cottars were called 'scallags'.⁶¹ In the Lowlands many cottars took up industrial by-employments to supplement their incomes. This was so common in the Lothians that the poll tax schedules of the 1690s pick out for special mention those cottars without a craft employment. In south-east Scotland weavers, smiths and wrights usually worked to meet local demand but in rural Angus the putting-out system of yarn and cloth production for regional and national markets was more extensive.⁶² The economically marginal position of the cottars as a group is highlighted by

⁵⁶ Dodgshon (1981):206-17.

⁵⁷ Dodgshon (1981):214-17; W. Doyle, *The old European order, 1660-1800* (1978):115; Leneman (1986):58-62.

⁵⁸ See S. Sogner, 'Freeholder and cottar. Property relationships in the peasant community' (1976):185-6 for a Norwegian comparison.

⁵⁹ Dodgshon (1981):206-14; Whyte (1979):141-5.

⁶⁰ Sanderson (1982):43.

⁶¹ J.M. Bumsted, *The people's clearance* (1982):36.

⁶² I.D. Whyte, 'Proto-industrialisation in early-modern Scotland' (1988); Tyson (1986):35.