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Patrick Sellar

> Patrick Sellar became a totemic figure in Scottish history, a figure of vilification, the strength of which has shown extraordinary stamina into the late twentieth century. His enduring infamy into the present is remarkable […]. In the literature of the Highland clearances, Sellar's name is used to evoke images of extirpation, genocide and even the Holocaust. (Richards, 1999, p. 5)

With these words Eric Richards defines the grim images that Patrick Sellar's name continues to conjure up since his involvement in the Sutherland Clearances from 1811 as factor to the Sutherland family. In 1814 he oversaw the Strathnaver Clearances which stand out in Highland – let alone Sutherland – history because of their scale, the violence with which they were allegedly undertaken and, most importantly, the controversy which surrounded them. Eventually, in 1816 Sellar was brought to trial for arson and culpable homicide and was acquitted. However, in T.C. Smout's words, «in time, the verdict in Sellar's favour has been reversed, not in law, but in popular opinion» (Smout, 1969, p. 331).

The abiding opprobrium which Sellar's name and persona still command, as well as the ink which has flowed to rehabilitate his reputation[1], all testify to the difficult process of the construction of memory, particularly when dealing with historical moments of social dislocation. Sellar's treatment in collective memory is intimately linked with one of those traumatic moments and reflects the tensions which dominate the interpretation of the causes and nature of the Highland Clearances. In history writing, the memory of the period is plural and fragmented, so is the image projected of Sellar. According to Richards's biography, he is alternatively depicted as a «great farmer in the north of Scotland» achieving prominent status in civil society as Clerk of Supply or, on the other hand, as «the harshest Highland evictor» (Richards, 1999, p. 247). In collective memory it is this infamous reputation

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1. Thomas Sellar published a defence of his father's actions in 1883; the latest attempt at revision was produced in 1999 by his great grandson's wife, Dorothy Richardson: *The Curse on Patrick Sellar. An Incident in Sutherland in 1814*.

which has been perpetuated. It seems that the work of historians, such as Richards, who have sought to place Sellar in the intellectual and cultural context of his time in order to analyse and rationalise his decisions and behaviour, has had little impact on the selection which is operated and the motifs which recur in public consciousness.

The manner in which a traumatic event is interpreted by social actors and the manner in which it is transmitted are many and professional historians are one of its many transmitters. In the production and consumption of history, novelists, political scientists, film directors, museum practitioners all have a voice which colours and shapes the perception and representation of past events and figures. Collective memory implies a representation which is socially shared; it may also be given meaning and power through the work of institutions, associations, parties, churches and so on. Recent studies have also emphasised that such «official» representations have to coincide with the living memory – the experience as it is remembered or transmitted by the social group concerned – or pockets of resistance will emerge (Lavabre, 2001, p. 8-13). In the case of the Sutherland Clearances and Sellar, an overall consensus appears in the productions of such memory entrepreneurs as popular historians, literary figures and museum practitioners which feed on and nourish the vision of Sellar as an unrelenting hater of the Gaels and evictor. The aim of this paper is to chart the phases in the making of Patrick Sellar's image and examine the reasons behind the longevity of his infamous reputation. Light will be shed on the dichotomy which surrounds interpretations of his work and personality and divides those who partake in the construction of memory.

A dissonant reputation

From the time of Sellar's trial two types of interpretation shaped by two different world views emerged; they were to have a profound incidence on the development of subsequent historiography. These two interpretations find their expression in the clash of two forms of discourse which in turn frame the representation of Sellar. The first sees the clearances as a major event in the economic transformation of the Highlands and Islands. This discourse was used by dominant groups

stressing the region's development with its widespread beneficial consequences within the private, local and national arenas. This also implied that the values of the social group to be reformed – the Gaelic-speaking population – were underrated or derided in the justification or assessment of the elite group enforcing changes. In the twentieth-century version of this form of discourse, the process of transformation is also regarded as including serious social fracture and human suffering. The second discourse sees the Clearances as a major traumatic and foundational event with respect to the Highland and Island communities – initiating dramatic and irreversible changes, in social, demographic, cultural and agricultural terms. Within the context of a study of the notion of reputation, this has undeniable consequences as, social actors are frequently made to fulfil the roles of «victim», «perpetrator» or «witness of the events». Clearly in the first case, Sellar is merely an agent of change – and a very successful one at that – whilst in the second he is the callous perpetrator of a destructive policy.

These two irreconcilable visions of the Highlands, their use and their inhabitants directed the reading of Sellar's actions in the nineteenth century. Beyond the press, the intervention of two groups of writers brought Sellar into the public domain; some clearly incriminated him after his trial, others, either connected to the Sutherland estate management or Sellar's own family, vindicated his policy (Loch, 1820; Stewart of Garth, 1822; Macleod, 1841; Sellar, 1883). Of these retrospective works, Macleod's is the most important because it is presented as an eye-witness account of the Strathnaver evictions detailing individual cases of brutality such as that of a pregnant woman falling from a roof and going into premature labour, and, most spectacularly, the case of William Chisholm's mother, aged 100, who was lying in bed in a cottage about to be set on fire. Sellar, on being asked to delay the removal, allegedly exclaimed: «damn her the old witch, she has lived long enough, let her burn» (Macleod, 1996 [1841], p. 24). It also contains a long section on Sellar's trial, presenting him as the member of a powerful class, inured to legal proceedings owing to his experience as lawyer and Justice of the Peace and supported by the clergy and gentry. The implication is that from the start, the confrontation was unequal and the verdict could not be but biased. If Macleod's work is an unequivocal indictment of Sellar, couched in poignant and indignant terms, Loch's

apologia is more ambiguous. His book was written more in defence of the policy of improvement adopted by the Staffords on their Highland estate than in clear defence of Sellar's behaviour during the evictions. The embarrassment of the landowners during Sellar's trial and the averse publicity it generated, underpin the distance taken by the author as regards a man who, in spite of official acquittal, still remained a prisoner in the dock in the eyes of many, not least in those of the inhabitants of the estate and their supporters. Interestingly, Sellar's own son, whilst seeking to exonerate his father in the most emphatic terms and to appeal to public opinion – hitherto misinformed in his eyes – also includes the strength of the economic argument to reinforce his position :

> On the whole, who can question the immense benefits derived from the changes effected ? And who can doubt, on the other hand, what the state of the population would have been, had they been left in the glens and on the hill-sides of the interior ? These changes were carried out compulsorily ; but they were not carried out with wanton or other cruelty. That, in particular, Mr Patrick Sellar did not commit the acts of inhumanity, only to be characterised as stupid or reckless, which are sought to be fixed on him, it is the purpose of the following pages to demonstrate. (Sellar, 1883, 19)

Subsequently, it is Macleod's work which was followed, in the nineteenth century, by other writers of renown who, in Ian Grimble's words, repeatedly put Patrick Sellar on trial. This process of telling and re-telling culminated in the work of Alexander Mackenzie who in effect produced the first book entitled « History of the Clearances », published in 1883. More propaganda than history, it is an anthology of numerous accounts – mainly but not only journalistic – covering over twenty different evictions from the east to the west coast of the region. Mackenzie's work is crucial because it brings together the voices of a great many witnesses and commentators and, interestingly, it opens with MacLeod's account. Mackenzie aims at promoting the clearances as an event of barbaric cruelty against innocent victims and indicting the perpetrators among whom Patrick Sellar is singled out. The accounts selected are largely pathos-charged, insisting on gruesome details, such as cases of violence during evictions, obfuscating more critical analysis of the socio-economic process at work. More importantly, the book was written at the time of the land

agitation in the Highlands, when demands for land reform were being voiced and the government was displaying a more conciliatory attitude towards the position of the peasantry of the Highlands and Ireland. Changes were taking place in the perception of the basis of the structure of landownership – the root cause of the policy of evictions – in particular with the appointment in 1883 of the Napier Commission. Mackenzie's political objective was crystal clear and his collation of narratives was meant to publicise the wrongs of the clearances while attempting to sway public opinion and the Commission in favour of the crofters.

> Some people may ask «why rake up all this iniquity just now?» We answer that the same laws which permitted the cruelties, the inhuman atrocities, described in this book, are still the laws of the country, and any tyrant who may be indifferent to the healthier public opinion which now prevails, may *legally* repeat the same proceedings whenever he may take it into his head to do so. (Mackenzie, 1883, viii)

Nowadays, if the context of his writing is not always remembered, his work stands as a memorial to Clearances victims and an attack on the ruthlessness of their oppressors. It acts as a clearances site of memory, in much the same way the monuments or cairns erected in the region do. This owes much to the personality, visibility and position of Mackenzie and the very form and nature of his work which, although not unusual at the time, still functions as a repository of collective misery and persecution. In it, Patrick Sellar stands as one of the earliest and most callous oppressors.

About the same period, the Napier Commission was touring the Highlands in order to hear a variety of people recounting their own clearance experience or that of their forebears transmitted by word of mouth. For the first time, «victims», «persecutors» and «witnesses» or their descendants were given an official public space where they could give vent to their feelings and wishes. In the case of the evictees, for each area visited, a representative of the crofter and cottar population was elected; many read out prepared statements before being asked personal questions. Beyond the cathartic dimension of the process, now widely recognised in international law and practice, the act of collective remembering and re-telling undoubtedly created a sense of shared experience in the crofting community. Furthermore, it established a framework

and a rich source of personal memories for subsequent narratives of the events. As regards Sutherland, statements clearly inculpate Sellar :

> Helmsdale – Angus Sutherland : The people of the parish of Kildonan, numbering 1574 souls, were ejected from their holdings, and their houses burned to the ground under circumstances of the greatest hardship and cruelty – the houses in many instances having been set on fire while the people were still in them. These burnings were carried out under the direction and supervision of Mr Patrick Sellar, who was at the time under-factor of the estate, and who was also accepted tenant of the land from which the people were evicted, and which their ancestors had held from time immemorial. (Napier, 1884, iii, p. 2431)

> Bettyhill – Angus Mackay : There was a woman came in and said – « Won't you wake up, Sellar is burning at a place called Rhistog ». We got such a fright that we started out of bed and ran down the river. (Napier, 1884, ii, 1617)

Such echoes of Macleod's account are not only interesting because of their congruence but also because some of their features such as the « burnings » were frequently integrated within the narratives of other estates ; likewise when they touch upon the thorny question of the responsibility for eviction, the focus is on Sellar's name as his son was quick to point out in his own statement :

> There runs through the Sutherland evidence which has been presented to you the impression that to Mr Sellar was due the initiative of the policy of the clearances carried out in that county, and that he alone was responsible for the execution of that policy. No other agent is ever referred to. (Napier, 1884, iv, 3179)

Here transpires the distorting and selective process of reminiscences filtered through years of telling and debating ; transfers, oversimplifications, archetypal images take precedence over the lived experience and are telling indicators of the community's underlying values and beliefs (Cregeen, 1974). These images gradually turned the Sutherland Clearances and Patrick Sellar into emblematic features of the period of the clearance as a whole.

The context of production of the narratives of the Sutherland Clearances inevitably frames the reading constructed. In the 1880s, it was propitious to anti-improvement discourse and attacks on its advocates. Doubts were cast on the validity of

orthodox Victorian economic thinking given the economic recession which was gripping Britain since the mid-1870s, particularly her agricultural sector, together with the land agitation which was polarising the Irish and Highland populations. Simultaneously, the growth of interest in Celtic studies also had a major impact, with such vocal enthusiasts of Gaelic culture as Prof. John Stuart Blackie taking up the cudgels for the crofters'cause and speaking out against Sellar, much to the anger of his descendants. Just as the political climate is an important catalyst, so can be the nature of the work produced, as is the case with history predicated upon its authors'aims, method, and approach. The dichotomy outlined earlier largely applies to modern historical works[2] in which Sellar appears.

The pattern confirmed: Sellar in twentieth-century history

In the view of some historians, the strength of commitment in nineteenth-century polemic accounts has weakened their validity as reliable sources of information (Hunter, 1976, p. 4-5). It is not the view of popular historians whose work, in the sixties, was largely based on contemporary accounts of a polemic nature and gives prominence to the tragic impact of the process on the population (Grimble, 1962; Prebble, 1963). Both Grimble and Prebble condemn the Clearances and Patrick Sellar's role; their work neither adds to the corpus of knowledge on the period nor provides new perspectives, but seeks to bring these past events to the attention of a wider audience. The tone of their indictment is one of indignation and moral outrage. Importantly, through their work runs the theme, openly stated in Prebble's conclusion, of the cultural subjugation of the Gaels; the Clearances are thus seen as one phase in the destruction of Gaelic culture and the colonisation of the region (Prebble, 1962, p. 304). This is a point more recently taken up by James Hunter, the historian of the crofting community, who in his cultural study of the Scottish Highlands refines the interpretation adopting Edward Said's orientalist model. Within this reading, Sellar stands as a paradigm of anti-Celtic prejudice:

2. Extensive analyses of the Clearances only emerged in the sixties, being previously limited to short chapters within wider studies.

> Just as racist gibes which were originally hurled against Celts could afterwards be directed against Africans and Asians, so new and improved taunts were increasingly imported from overseas colonies to be targeted on Celts. Such practices are particularly evident, as far as the Highlands are concerned, in the career of Patrick Sellar. (Hunter, 1995, p. 30)

Much of the basis of Hunter's argument relies on Sellar's correspondence quarried and widely quoted by Richards in an earlier article. In Sellar's view, the Highlanders are no better than «a parcel of beggar with no stock» or «Aborigines shut out from the general stream of knowledge and cultivation» (Richards, 1971). If Sellar was keen to clear his tarnished reputation, he certainly was not conscious of writing for posterity and his prose does away with any form of restraint when he alludes to the inhabitants of the region. Richards, in his biography, portrays Sellar as a man wholly committed to the ideology of improvement and private property, whose thinking and beliefs were deeply rooted in early nineteenth-century principles of political economy and Lowland vision of Gaelic culture. He also highlights his vindictiveness, his obsessive mind, which led him to pursue whoever stood against him as his enemy, and his paranoia. Yet in ultimately:

> he merits comparison with the great captains of industry who performed a parallel task in other sectors of British industrialisation. Sellar carried the torch of economic change into one of the most remote regions of the British economy. (Richards, 1999, p. 6)

Richards' leanings towards economic history leads him to emphasise the extent to which Sellar's ethos is illustrative of the Scottish Enlightenment. Before him, Gaskell in his study of Morvern, where Sellar had owned property, had adopted the same approach. If their work partakes in the rehabilitation of Sellar's persona, it owes much to their own economic rationale which flies in the face of the crofting community's priorities and leaves little scope for a study of its mindset. Having little consonance with the crofting community's psyche, it is doubtful that this image will ever be legitimised in collective consciousness, particularly since in the cultural domain, the opposite interpretation has been overwhelmingly embraced.

The power of literature in Sellar's reputation

Literature is a major source of historical understanding as many readers apprehend the past through fiction or drama rather than through history books. Both historians and historical novelists or playwrights seek to help readers understand, feel and know the past. Yet literature also appeals to emotions and, through its own apparatus, – characterisation and atmosphere-building – turns imaginary or real figures into heroes or antiheroes. In the case of Sellar, his literary persona is unambiguously one on whom hatred and blame crystallise[3]. In *Consider the Lilies* Ian Crichton Smith's commentary on the role of literature in the construction of Sellar's « reputation » subtly encapsulates the power of art forever fixing an image. In the novel, Sellar is confronted with Donald Macleod who warns him about the image Gaelic poets have already projected of him – an everlasting image which will be transmitted from generation to generation :

> There are some poets, we call them bards, who have written songs about you. Did you know that ? Shall I quote a bit ? « Patrick Sellar, I see you roasted in Hell like a herring and the oil running over your head. » That, of course, is only part of it. You see, Mr Sellar, you will become a legend. Are you flattered ? Is that perhaps what you wanted ? You talk about the future. Yes, true enough, you too will have a future. Children will sing about you in the streets in different countries, countries you will never visit. They may even recite poems about you in the schools. Yes, your name will be on people's lips. (Smith, 1977 [1968], p. 144)

Modern literature has in fact taken over from oral tradition and folklore with Sellar portrayed as the archetypal villain – abhorrence of the new schemes and their implementation fastening itself upon him. What matters in the realm of the manufacturing of reputation is on the one hand, the repetition of this image, and on the other the strength of its meaning and its unity through time.

In literature, a number of clearances motifs echo. Firstly, the period is depicted as a fall from the golden age of pre-clearance era which, although not idealised, is conveyed in images of close-knit communities, of a life following nature's perennial rhythms and of a stable social and cultural order. Secondly, the threat of evictions looms large in all narratives. Though the plot might not actually include any eviction scene

3. The literary works included here are : Neil M. Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 1934 ; Fionn MacColla, *And the Cock Crew*, 1945 but started a decade earlier ; Iain Crichton Smith, *Consider the Lilies*, 1968 and John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, 1973.

as in *Consider the Lilies*, in all the works the process is nevertheless explicitly equated with destruction, and more graphically with fire and the burning of houses with powerful connotations of hell and hell-fire acting as clear indictments. Finally, the question of responsibility for the evictions is firmly attached to Sellar, since the landlord is shown as absentee, entrusting the latter with the practical enforcement of policies adopted. Patrick Sellar is omnipresent in such scenes, showing great zeal in urging on his men. He is thus perceived as *the* perpetrator of the evil deed, all the more so since evictions, when detailed, are memorable for their extreme violence. In all representations, the association with evil underpins the persona of the factor. Smith and McGrath chose to retain the name of Sellar, whilst the other two opted for highly symbolic substitutes. In *Butcher's Broom,* Sellar becomes Heller, the embodiment of evil wreaking havoc in his wake ; in *And the Cock Crew*, he is Byars, « a devil's servant », recurrently identified with satanic forces. As a character, he has little to endear him to the reader. He is devious and calculating in *Consider* ; he is the more complex Heller standing for improvement, materialism and the civilising of the Gaels but also for wanton destruction in a grim eviction scene in *Butcher's Broom*. In *And the Cock Crew,* he is the mono-chromatic Byars defined by his coarseness, sheer cruelty and sadistic hatred of the Gaels. In McGrath's play where caricature and burlesque dominate, Sellar is glaringly ignominious, reminiscent of a Punch and Judy character – particularly in the eviction scene. The play is the only work to include a parody of Sellar's trial, showing his arrogance and self-righteousness and its farcical ending intimates that this was but a travesty of a judgement. Overall, in spite of variations in degree, representations of Sellar are consistent and coherent.

Consistency also applies to the sources consulted by the authors, although, of course, they vary according to the time of writing. For the ideology of improvement, Loch's and Sellar's accounts were used particularly by Gunn and McGrath ; all however plundered Macleod's reminiscences which shape eviction scenes and their inhumanity. Gunn and MacColla refer to the same individual cases cited by Macleod, in Gunn's case identifying them with some of the key characters in his fictional community. What is impressed on the reader are visions of chaos and apocalypse, meant to elicit a sense of injustice and horror. Writing later on, Smith and McGrath also

resorted to the work of modern historians. In the case of the former, Grimble's and Prebble's works are mentioned as a source of inspiration whilst in the latter's case, ironically Richards, who unearthed Sellar's correspondence, is quoted verbatim. There is little doubt however that Macleod's account impressed all writers.

> We know rather exactly and vividly what happened in the glens of Sutherland because of the accounts of eye-witnesses and the explanations of contemporaries. Donald Macleod […] described the lurid scenes of burning and destruction in a series of letters […]. No army of invading barbarians ever left behind it desolation so complete as did that ruthless handful of the chief's servants. And Sutherland to this day is haunted by that «gloomy memory». (Gunn, 1987, p. 31)
>
> There did exist a person called Donald Macleod (one of the characters here) who was a stone mason and who writes attacks on the power of his time. I have made him an atheist though there is no evidence that he was. He seems to have been a wholly admirable person with a great concern for his people and a desire to speak out and tell the truth. (Smith, 1977 [1968], p. 7)

In their selection of sources, authors were obviously directed by their convictions. These were subject to their own perception of the Highland region and Scotland at large, their personal experiences, and also their political leanings. Crude a generalisation though it may be to found the reading of a novel on the political stand of their authors, the point nonetheless remains that through the underlying meaning of a narrative may filter an ideological vision.

Gunn's deep interest in the depressed economic situation of the Highlands in the 1930s and 40s, its causes and possible solutions seeps through the narrative which could be read as his commentary of the roots of the Highland problem. Furthermore, both he and MacColla were writing at a time of resurgent nationalist fervour. If inserting *Butcher's Broom* into a nationalist analysis is not viable, in the case of MacColla's novel, the nationalist dimension is one of the keys to its understanding. MacColla had been a member of the National Party of Scotland since 1928, after a spell with the ILP which he left because of Labour's gradual volte-face on Scottish self-government following their election to office in 1924. He had decided to take action and had been involved in a raid on Rum which was meant to attract the attention of the press and the

public to « the realities of Scottish History » and « to let the large world know about the clearances, that long-continued genocidal episode ». His objective was to compel labour to take a stand in the Highlands leading to

> the end of the sporting estate system….; the repopulation of the Highlands – and with a Gaelic pop: the salvation of the lge. In effect, the Clearances in reverse. (MacColla, 1977 [1945], p. 88-95)

Interestingly, in the case of *The Cheviot,* the Nationalist Party tried to hijack McGrath's play, and Billy Wolfe, when the play was first performed, invited 7: 84 to stage it at an evening's entertainment for delegates after the party's annual conference. However, this was not the political reading that MacGrath intended: « nationalism is not enough. The enemy of the Scottish people is Scottish capital, as much as the foreign exploiter » (MacGrath, p. 66). In the play, the historical material on the Clearances is organised in order to argue against capitalist doctrines and support a socialist ideology. As for Smith, his attack focuses on the « straitjacketting » effects of ideologies and is two-pronged, targeting Scottish Calvinism and the materialism of nineteenth-century improving ideology (Smith, 1986). Although an ideological stance might direct the authors'representations of the clearances period, Sellar's despicable image remains unaltered. The memory of the Clearances may be recycled to serve different political purposes, but the memory of Sellar retains its texture. Like literature, museums have done little to modify Sellar's image.

Patrick Sellar's reputation in local museums

Sellar features in the displays of two community museums in the Sutherland region, at Bettyhill (Strathnaver museum, 1976) and Helsmdale (Timespan Heritage Center, 1987). Different though they are in methods and overall purpose with Timespan's exhibition clearly inclined towards « edutainment » – laying emphasis on the sensational aspects of historical events– their assessment of the Sutherland clearances tends towards consensus. They both rely heavily on written information. Ian Grimble was instrumental in establishing Strathnaver museum in the 1970s and is largely referenced as a source for the display, complemented by the archaeological research

undertaken by Horace Fairhurst in the 1960s. Also scripted, Timespan's presentation ultimately revolves around the vivid tableau of an eviction scene with sound effects – strictly derived from Macleod's account – featuring Sellar coercing a family into abandoning their home. It is a spine-chilling scene meant to illustrate evictions on the estate. The images of fire and unjustifiable mercilessness prolong the atmosphere created by the preceding sets presenting the last burning of a witch and murder in Helsmdale castle. Timespan's narrative technique plainly hinges upon a re-arrangement of the past around selected climaxes. The highly emotive scene involving Sellar is in keeping with the general aim of the Centre to relate «the dramatic story of the Highlands» (Timespan advert, non dated) with a clear presentation of the winners and losers in history. The underlying assumption is that loss and misery have a powerful commercial appeal; this private heritage venture needs to be self-sustaining and attract visitors – offering families entertainment and information when they wish to escape from the vagaries of the Scottish weather or the midges… Ultimately, history is hijacked in a designer-led and consumer-centred display.

Beyond Timespan's sensationalism, the appraisal of the period and conclusions reached in the two museums are identical. The tenantry's circumstances declined during the period and the main motive behind the changes initiated on their estate by the Staffords was the maximisation of profits. Most importantly as regards Sellar, the methods used during evictions were violent and verging on barbarity; they displayed a lack of the most basic human feelings towards the inhabitants of the straths, perceived as slothful, primitive and needing «civilising». In both cases, there is no doubt as to Sellar's involvement and ruthless acts. Strathnaver for instance, contrasts the outcome and dubious proceedings at his trial with an extract from Donald Macleod's damning account. Incidentally, amongst the factsheets available at Strathnaver, one focuses on Donald Macleod who is quoted as saying:

> I have devoted all my spare time and means, for the past thirty four years, expostulating, remonstrating with, and exposing the desolators of my country, and extirpators of my race, from the land of their birth… considering that I could not serve God in a more acceptable way than to help those who could not help themselves. (Strathnaver, factsheet 9, non dated)

In both venues, the selection and interpretation of evidence invite visitors to empathise with the evicted tenantry and denounce Sellar as a remorseless oppressor whose trial was a fraud.

In collective memory, Patrick Sellar's sinister reputation stems from two irreconcilable world visions which led to clashing interpretations of the Clearances and divided the tenantry and the landowning class of the Highlands and Islands. For the latter, the Clearances meant progress and made economic sense whilst, for the former, they meant trauma. The improvement ideology, which Sellar advocated relentlessly, was even more odious to the tenantry because it purported to act for the common good and spurned their own social and cultural values. Beside Gaelic lore, the vision incriminating Sellar was most forcefully developed by Donald MacLeod whose work has been endlessly appropriated in subsequent narratives of the Sutherland clearances. He stands as the champion of the Strathnaver evictees and redresser of a wrong left unacknowledged and unpunished by the Law. His vision was given added power at the time of the Napier Commission because the voices of Strathnaver victims were heard in an official public space. Their testimonies articulate the notion of a wronged people demanding recognition of and compensation for the crimes of the past. In their memories of evictions, the figure of Sellar looms large and stands accused. Undoubtedly this collective experience became empowering and was given legitimacy in the changing ideological context of the 1880s. Political but also economic priorities thus go a long way towards explaining Patrick Sellar's execrable reputation in collective memory – the new heritage ventures often pander, in the name of realism, to the public's taste for blood and gore. Most importantly, to paraphrase Raphael Samuel: « it is disaster rather than the record of progress which leaves the deepest impression on the public mind » (Samuel, 1994, p. 16).

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