



DUKE OF SUTHERLAND STATUE

Ben Braggie, Scotland, United Kingdom

57.9825028, -4.0124665



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Executive Summary

The Duke of Sutherland statue from 1837 has been contested already since the 1990s, when organisations and locals from the Highlands asked for its removal due to the Duke's involvement in the Highland clearances. In the last decades there have been different petitions and actions asking for its removal, for example, in 2007 there was a counter-monument erected. The contestation continues until today, especially after the social movement of 2020 and the discussion on how to deal with British statues linked to slavery and imperialism. This case illustrates the local activism attempts at removing and contextualising Sutherland's statue.

Introduction

Erected in 1837, the monument to the Duke of Sutherland, called 'the Mannie' by locals, has long stood at the top of the hill Ben Bhraggie, where it dominates the skyline over Golspie, Scotland. The Duke of Sutherland is a controversial figure in Scottish history for the role he played in the Highland clearances, which has made this monument a much-debated site over the last three decades. Since the 1990s, there have been movements from individuals and community organisations across Scotland, and especially from within the Highlands, calling for the removal of the monument. However, these calls for removal have often been at odds with the wishes of the actual residents of Golspie, who see the monument as a piece of local history.

Background

The Duke of Sutherland

George Granville Leveson-Gower, the 1st Duke of Sutherland (1758 – 1833), was a wealthy English nobleman who played an important role in English and Scottish history in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He was known as Viscount Trentham from 1758 to 1786, as Earl Gower from 1786 to 1803 and as The Marquess of Stafford from 1803 to 1833, finally, in 1833, the year of his death, he was made the 1st Duke of Sutherland. He was the eldest son of the 1st Marquess of Stafford and held positions in politics beginning when he was a young man. He was a member of Parliament for two decades, representing Newcastle-under-Lyme from 1779 to 1784 and Staffordshire from 1787 to 1799, until he was called up to the House of Lords. While serving as an MP, Sutherland was appointed Ambassador to France from 1790 to 1792, while the French Revolution was ongoing. He also held the role of Postmaster General from 1799 to 1801.¹

In 1785, Sutherland married the Scottish countess of Sutherland, Elizabeth Sutherland, taking control of the immense Sutherland estates in the Scottish Highlands, which totalled more than one million acres. In addition to inheriting his family's existing lands in Staffordshire, Shropshire, and Yorkshire on the death of his father in 1803, that same year, Sutherland also acquired extensive estates from his maternal uncle, the 3rd Duke of Bridgewater. This inheritance made him immensely wealthy, and at the time of his death, Sutherland was estimated to have been the wealthiest man in Europe. This fortune was used in part to provide patronage to the arts. With his uncle's death, Sutherland inherited a major art collection and continued to add to it over his lifetime. The collection was lodged in Bridgewater House in London, and Sutherland was one of the first collectors to open his collection to the public. He was also the president of the British Institution and a major supporter of the National Gallery of Painting.²

¹ Eric Richards, "Leveson-Gower, George Granville, first duke of Sutherland (1758-1833)." In Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Oxford University Press, 2004.

² Ibid.

The Highland Clearances

Many landowners in the Highlands participated in the Highland clearances in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, enacting mass evictions from their lands, and by 1841, at least 58% of the Highland population had been evicted from their farms. Within this wider context, the Sutherland case is particularly notable for its scale. With his new influx of wealth, Sutherland was able to begin working towards land reform of the Sutherland estate. The estate had plans to undergo early clearances in the 1770s, but a lack of money meant this program was unsuccessful. Though vast, the Sutherland lands were not particularly profitable as they were rented out to and manned by poor subsistence farmers who grew crops and raised livestock sufficient only for their own use, without any surplus to make a profit. In his management of these lands, Sutherland became convinced that the current way of subsistence farming was not sustainable – either for the estate or for the farmers themselves. He saw the impoverished conditions the farmers lived in and, informed by new progressive social and economic theories of the day, Sutherland believed that establishing crofting villages on the coast where the peasants could learn new, diverse, and more profitable skills would improve their quality of life. Simultaneously, Sutherland believed that the estate could generate more income by renting out the land to sheep farming operations. With these ideas in tandem, he undertook what became known as the Sutherland clearances, evicting and relocating his Gaelic-speaking peasant tenants.³

From 1811 to 1820, the Sutherland clearances relocated 15,000 people to crofting villages on the coast of Scotland, where the land was only marginally cultivable. This meant they had to take up new trades, such as fishing and kelp foraging. However, though Sutherland thought this project would also benefit his tenants, they did not see it in the same light. These forced evictions were met with resistance from the tenant farmers, inciting violence that resulted in the burning of homes and injuries to, and, in some cases, deaths of the Highlanders who resisted.⁴ Moreover, though Sutherland believed he was setting his tenants up for economic success, in fact, the broader economic climate was adverse to their new coastal trades, and the clearances further impoverished the Highlanders.⁵ In response to the clearances and the tenants' reluctance to set up new homes where they could not farm, charities such as the Trans-Atlantic Friendly Association arose to support the victims by providing them with land and passage elsewhere in the British colonies, such as Canada, South Africa, or New Zealand. The Sutherland estate saw this increased emigration away from their lands as a radical conspiracy to disrupt their improvements and sought to oppose these charities from offering assistance, but with little success. With programs in place like this, large-scale emigration away from the Highlands, either to industrialising cities within Britain, or to colonial settlements, began to drive the population out of the Highlands, both immediately and after several generations as economic conditions in the crofts worsened.⁶

³ Eric Richards, *Debating the Highland Clearances*, Debates and Documents in Scottish History (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "The Highland Clearances," Scottish History Society, accessed March 23, 2021.

⁶ James Hunter, *Set Adrift Upon the World: The Sutherland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2016).

Legacy of Highland Clearances

The narrative around the clearances has been tense since the beginning. Most notably, in 1814, Patrick Sellar, one of the estate's property managers and sheep farmers who was responsible for overseeing the clearances, was charged with homicide, which spurred negative publicity from the onset. While Sellar supervised the burning of homes in the Strath of Kildonan to prevent the tenants from returning after their evictions, an elderly woman was trapped in her home and died from her injuries six days later. Though Sellar was ultimately acquitted, the Sutherlands distanced themselves from him in order to avoid negative press as they continued to enact large-scale evictions. Their attempts were not wholly successful, because in 1819, the London newspaper *The Observer* published an article under the headline 'the Devastation of Sutherland,' which reflected on the continued practice of burning homes.⁷

Despite this contemporary criticism, the Victorians called Sutherland the 'Great Improver,' because in his land reform project, he used his vast wealth to build new roads and bridges where previously there had been none, connecting parts of the Highlands to the rest of Scotland for the first time. He was seen as a practical reformer who implemented these changes not for personal profit, as his lands yielded no rents from 1811 to 1833, but instead for the good of the Highlands.⁸ The counter-narrative has painted Sutherland as responsible for the decimation of the Highland population and culture, cruelly forcing large-scale emigrations and worsening the poverty of the Highlanders for his own financial gain. Due to the vast scale of the Sutherland clearances, they have become representative of the entire clearances project – positioning the Duke of Sutherland as emblematic of the legacy of the clearances.⁹

The Highland clearances have taken on importance in the national mythology of Scotland. The clearances represented a stark cultural decline in the Highlands, disrupting the clan structure by breaking up communities and removing people from their ancestral lands. The threat of relocation and economic devastation that hung over the Highland population for nearly a century led to a communal feeling of dispossession and further divided the Highlanders from the British mainstream.¹⁰ These issues remain at the forefront of debates on Scottish land reform. Scotland continues to have the most inequitable land ownership in Europe, with 57% of the country owned by just 500 people, few of whom are Scots, and discussions about Scottish land often evoke the legacy of the clearances to reference the damage done to the Highlands by outside landlords.¹¹

The Monument

Due to his reputation as the 'Great Improver' among contemporaries for his modernisation of the infrastructure of Sutherland estates and the surrounding region, Sutherland was largely popular

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richards, "Leveson-Gower, George Granville, first duke of Sutherland (1758-1833)."

⁹ Hunter, *Set Adrift Upon the World: The Sutherland Clearances*.

¹⁰ Ross Noble, "The Cultural Impact of the Highland Clearances," BBC History, last updated February 17, 2011.

¹¹ Ben Judah, "The Highland Clearances and land reform in Scotland: The country's semi-feudal great estates face reform," *Independent*, December 15, 2015.

among his peers at the time of his death in 1833. In fact, in 1834, just a year after his death, a subscription service was launched in order to fund a monument in his memory. Funds were raised relatively quickly via these subscription fees, and in 1837, the 100ft monument was erected on Ben Bhraggie, where it can be seen from seven counties. At the base of the monument is the inscription: 'Of Loved Revered and Cherished Memory. Erected by Tenants and Friends.'¹²

History of the Contestation

Proposed Removal and Response

Though the Duke of Sutherland monument has stood for almost 200 years, formal resistance to the monument was only recorded in the mid-1990s. In 1994, 'The Book of Ben Bhraggie' Steering Group began efforts to demolish the statue of the Duke by lodging an official application with the Divisional Planning Office of the Golspie Community Council. This group was led by retired Scottish National Party (SNP) regional councillor from Inverness, Sandy Lindsay, and Peter Findlay, an engineer from Fort Augustus. The 1994 application, which requested that the monument be demolished, was unanimously rejected after the Planning Office received 31 objections and 13 letters of support for the project.¹³ Subsequently, in October 1995, Mr Lindsay updated the group's application, instead advocating for the removal, but not the destruction of the monument. In its place, he envisaged a large Celtic cross.¹⁴ Mr Lindsay wrote that, 'the aim is to replace this symbol of the brutal clearances and dispersal of the Gaels and to replace it with a suitable memorial to the victims of the Highland Clearances.'¹⁵ After a failed attempt to secure the interest of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, California, Mr Lindsay suggested removing the statue to the gardens of Dunrobin Castle, the seat of the Sutherland family. Additionally, in the new application, the group sought to have information panels erected at the top of Ben Bhraggie to ensure the memory of what occurred at the hands of the Duke was not lost.¹⁶ In order to support their campaign, the Steering Group opened a bank account to accept donations and record the names of supporters for 'an important record of national feeling.'¹⁷ In March 1996, the Planning Office officially rejected this new application as well.¹⁸

However, this did not stop conversations about how to re-contextualise the monument. In 1999, the An Lanntair museum in Stornoway, Scotland, held an exhibition where thirty artists proposed ways to update the monument, including a proposal to put a cage around the Duke's head, or to replace the head entirely with a sheep's head.¹⁹

¹² Charles W. J. Withers, "Place, Memory, Monument: Memorializing the Past in Contemporary Highland Scotland," *Ecumene* 3, no. 3 (1996).

¹³ 'Fax: from Sandy Lindsay to Janet Mackay, June 13, 1995' in *The Book of Ben Bhraggie*.

¹⁴ Withers, "Place, Memory, Monument: Memorializing the Past in Contemporary Highland Scotland."

¹⁵ 'Fax: from Sandy Lindsay to Janet Mackay, June 13, 1995.'

¹⁶ David Ross, "New Plan to Remove, Not Demolish, Duke Statue," *Glasgow Herald*, December 15, 1995.

¹⁷ 'Fax: from Sandy Lindsay to Janet Mackay, June 13, 1995.'

¹⁸ Rob Gibson, "Toppling Statues," *Bella Caledonia*, June 13, 2020.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

A new plan was introduced by Scottish businessman and chairman of the Clearances Centre Ltd., Dennis MacLeod, in 2003. He was concerned that the removal of the monument would obscure the legacy of the clearances, and instead proposed a counter-monument to commemorate the Scots who had lost their homes. Erected in 2007 in Helmsdale, 27km from Golspie, the 30ft tall statue, *The Emigrants*, was dedicated to those who were driven from their homes by Sutherland's clearances. In building the statue, it was hoped that 'by commemorating the Clearances, will help heal the rifts of history.'²⁰ This monument received funding from the Scottish government, but was also largely funded by Mr MacLeod, whose ancestors were victims of the Sutherland clearances. In parallel to many of the clearance victims, MacLeod emigrated to Canada in his youth, before returning to Scotland after making his fortune.²¹ While the original statue stands in Helmsdale, there is a companion monument located in Canada, where many Highlanders emigrated. The Selkirk Settlers Monument, a full-scale bronze replica of *The Emigrants* statue, was erected in July 2007 in central Winnipeg. It is located near where the first Scottish settlers arrived in 1814. This companion monument was commissioned by the St. Andrews Society in Winnipeg and primarily sponsored by Mr MacLeod and John Webster, in their capacities as directors of the Clearances Centre Ltd.²²



Figure 1: Emigrant Statue. Image by Dave Conner via Flickr CC BY 2.0

Proposed Removal and Response

Negative feelings towards the Duke of Sutherland monument have persisted across the 21st century, and though there have been no new government applications filed to remove or replace it, independent protests have continued. In May 2010, the monument was spray-painted with the word 'monster,' while in 2011, two separate attempts were made to damage the statue by removing the large stones in its plinth.²³ These anonymous acts illustrate the continued resistance to the monument. The monument, and the reminder of the clearances it provides, has also been tied to the rise of pro-independence movements in Scotland. The group *The Hills Have Eyes* hung a 'yes' banner across the Duke in the lead up to the 2014 independence referendum.²⁴ Local feeling has been largely divided on the issue, however. In 2015, two warring Change.org petitions were launched. The first, started by John Morrison, a resident of the Isle of Lewis, located 200 km from Golspie, advocated for the Scottish Parliament to open a discussion about the removal of the statue and the possibility of replacing it with a statue of a 'more worthy person.'²⁵ Golspie resident Steven Doogan launched a counter-petition titled, 'Leave the 'mannie' alone,' indicating that the monument

²⁰ Clearances Centre Ltd., *The Emigrants Statue: Unveiling by the First Minister of Scotland, 23rd July 2007, 2007.*

²¹ Gibson, "Toppling Statues."

²² Clearances Centre Ltd., *The Emigrants Statue.*

²³ Caroline McMorran, "Fears for Duke's status as vandals strike again," *Northern Times*, updated November 8, 2011.

²⁴ Maddy Searle, "Scotland's most controversial statue – and the attempts to destroy it," *iNews*, updated July 16, 2020.

²⁵ John Angus Morrison, "Remove the Duke of Sutherland Statue on Ben Bhraggie, Golspie, Scotland" petition, 2015.

symbolises a period of Scottish history that ‘should be remembered,’ and that ‘the people of Golspie identify with.’²⁶ Mr Morrison’s petition received 4,872 signatures, and Mr Doogan’s received 1,030. Despite the relative success of Mr Morrison’s petition, this issue was not raised by the Scottish Parliament.

National conversation was sparked again in 2020, when increased attention was drawn to British statues with ties to slavery and imperialism following a renewal of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Drawing parallels between the memorialization of individuals who had profited from the slave trade and colonisation and Sutherland, who had profited from Scottish lands, Scottish activist Katie Laird planned a rally in June 2020 in order to garner support for the removal of the statue. Deirdre Mackay, Highland Councillor for east Sutherland and Edderton, supported the right to protest, but believed that the monument, ‘should be left and the balanced story told...to ensure such injustices can never happen again.’²⁷ Despite more than 1,000 people indicating interest in the event, the protest did not occur because of the rain.

Decision-Making Processes

In this case, the decision-making process has been largely spurred on by grassroots movements from local groups, politicians, and private citizens who oppose the monument and seek to have it removed. Though these movements have involved local government in the decision-making process, it is community groups and local individuals that have been responsible for applications to have it removed, the counter-monument *The Emigrants*, and further efforts to have it taken down – officially, through petitions, or unofficially, through vandalism. However, this has also been met with pushback from other locals who see it as an important historical reminder and landmark. Given the seeming conflict of local interests surrounding the Duke of Sutherland monument, there are no official plans to have the monument’s removal discussed at a governmental level.²⁸

Significantly, popular understandings of the Highland clearances play a large role in the conflict over the monument and whose voices should be prioritised in debates about its removal. While the Duke stands in Golspie, the Sutherland estate was vast and affected a much larger area than just the immediate town. Moreover, because the Sutherland clearances have become notorious for being the largest individual clearances of the time, the Duke of Sutherland has come to represent the devastation of the clearances at large, not just those he oversaw. Due to this, individuals from other parts of northern Scotland, such as Inverness, Fort Augustus, and the Isle of Lewis, feel entitled to advocate for the removal of the monument. Though many Scots are not confronted with the monument of the Duke daily, they see his continued presence as reinforcing the troubling legacy of the clearances, which affected the entire Highlands, not just Golspie.

²⁶ Steve Doogan, “Leave the ‘mannie’ alone” petition, 2015.

²⁷ “Protesters rally to attack Sutherland statue,” *Press and Journal*, June 23, 2020.

²⁸ Caroline McMorran, “Thunder, lightning and rain as ‘Mannie’ protest fails to materialize,” *Northern Times*, June 30 2020.

Summary and Conclusions

The Duke of Sutherland monument has stood on Ben Bhraggie for over 180 years. It was erected in the immediate aftermath of the Duke's death, and just a few decades after the onset of Sutherland's controversial land clearances that displaced 15,000 of his Scottish tenants. In recent decades, beginning in the 1990s, there have been local movements seeking the removal of the monument. Despite these community efforts, there has been continual local pushback against the removal, which has led to stagnation. This case raises questions about how to deal with a controversial monument when the local community is divided about its place in their community, and the interests of the national community conflict with those of the local community.

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Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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