Where once people had lived in their hundreds and their thousands, there stretched out only the unpopulated empness of the vast estates with their sheep-covered hills or the islands which have become bird sanctuaries or shoong ranges for the well-to-do. (Alistair MacLeod, 'Clearances')

One of the darkest periods of Scotland's history, when human beings, whose families going back generations (often as far back as medieval times) had occupied the land, were replaced by sheep. The period, known as the Age of the Clearances, or simply the Highland Clearances was when market capitalism first made an appearance in Scotland. The topic strikes a chord with every Scot within the nation and across the vast global diaspora. The brutality shown by the landlords in prioritising profit over duty of care to their tenants has inspired a multitude of paintings, poetry, songs, films and novels. However, it is a complex issue that has often been oversimplified. So let's explore it a little further, shall we?

The last of the clan—by Thomas Faed

The Highland Clearances refer to the forced eviction of inhabitants (mostly poor peasant families) from large areas in the Scottish Highlands, Islands and some parts of the lowlands, from the mid to late eighteenth century through to mid nineteenth century. The land was cleared for sheep pastoralism which was considered a far more lucrative enterprise at the time than tenant farming. It has been attributed to the destruction of clan society, rural depopulation and mass emigration from Scotland.

By the mid 1700s, highland clans had been heavily involved in the Jacobite uprisings, pledging allegiance to the House of Stuart against the Hanoverians, which ultimately ended in defeat at Culloden in 1746. Thousands of highlanders were left dead on the battlefield, and many more were hunted down and killed in the weeks following the battle. Rubbing salt in the proverbial wound, the British government imposed strict sanctions on Gaelic culture, criminalising the wearing of kilts and clan tartans and the playing of bagpipes. The government also cleared the way for outsiders to acquire much of the land in the Highlands.

The Clearances are generally seen to have taken place in two phases, the first was a result of agricultural improvement and the desire for landlords to increase revenue, with many struggling with debt and the threat of bankruptcy following the failed attempt at Scottish colonisation in the Americas, known as the Darien Scheme. The traditional run rig system of farming was replaced with large scale pastoral farms and the displaced tenants were moved to newly created crofting communities where they relied on fishing, quarrying or the kelp industry for sustenance. Many of those displaced resented the demotion of status from farmer to crofter.

The second phase took place between 1815-20 up until the 1850 and was a result of overcrowding in the communities and the collapse of the industries they relied on. It was during the second phase where "assisted passages" took place where landlords paid the fares of their tenants to emigrate. George Granville Leveson-Gower, later Duke of Sutherland, is considered one of the worst culprits in the later phase, as he evicted thousands of families between 1810 to 1820, burning their cottages to the ground and making a large profit from his large scale sheep farms.

When the Highland Potato Famine hit in 1846, the crofters were financially ruined and disease and starvation spread. Migration soared to the lowlands where factory work was available and overseas to Canada, the United States and Australia, often departing as indentured servants. Sympathy for the plight of the crofters throughout Scotland brought protective legislation in the late nineteenth century but rural communities continued to struggle, with many resorting to migration to urban areas, subsequently living difficult lives working in the treacherous factory conditions and living in overcrowded, slum housing.

The last view of home for dispossessed crofters. Engraving 1886

The primary motivation for clearance was economic, but it was underpinned by an element of discrimination. Many believed that the Celtic population were less hardworking than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts in the lowlands and in England.

An example of this is seen in an excerpt from a contemporary lowland newspaper: *'Ethnologically the Celtic race is an inferior one and, attempt to disguise it as we may, there is no…getting rid of the great cosmical fact that it is destined to give way...before the time before the higher capabilities of the Anglo-Saxon.'*

This has given rise to the popular opinion that the clearances were equivalent to genocide or ethnic cleansing and that British authorities in London played a persistent role in carrying them out. However, more recent scholars have attributed the clearances as a product of economic and agricultural change that was sweeping across Europe at the time.

In the space of less than a century the Scottish Highlands became one of the most sparsely populated areas in Europe. Today, the scars are visible across the landscape with abandoned crofts that once housed generations of the same family for hundreds of years, now a common, archaeological feature for tourists to explore. For those who ventured elsewhere, the scars perhaps healed quicker and were replaced by an incredible sense of nostalgia and empathy with their former homeland.

Ruined croft houses on the island of Fuaigh Mor in the Outer Hebrides, which was cleared of its inhabitants in 1841.