

Scottish land reform in international context



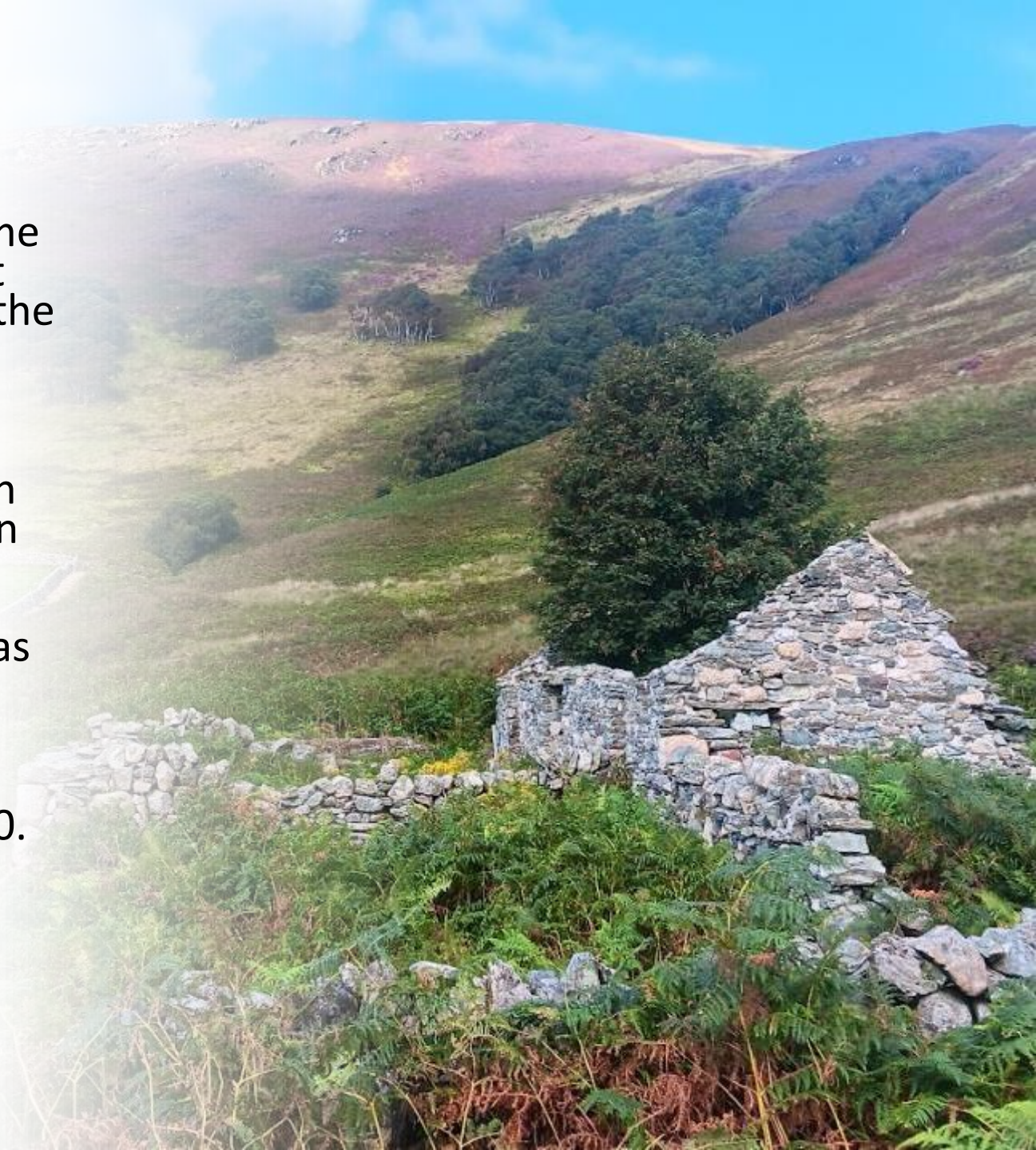
**Fraser Sugden, School of Geography,
Earth and Environmental Sciences**



**UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM**

Introduction

- How did Scotland come to be one of the most unequal countries in the world, in terms of its landownership structure?
- How does the Scottish experience of agrarian transition (and its impact on land distribution), as well as its experience of land reform, compare globally?
- Context of ICARRD+20. Where does the land question in Scotland align with low- and middle- income economies?





Historical precedents (12thc – 18thc):
From lineage-based to feudal
landownership

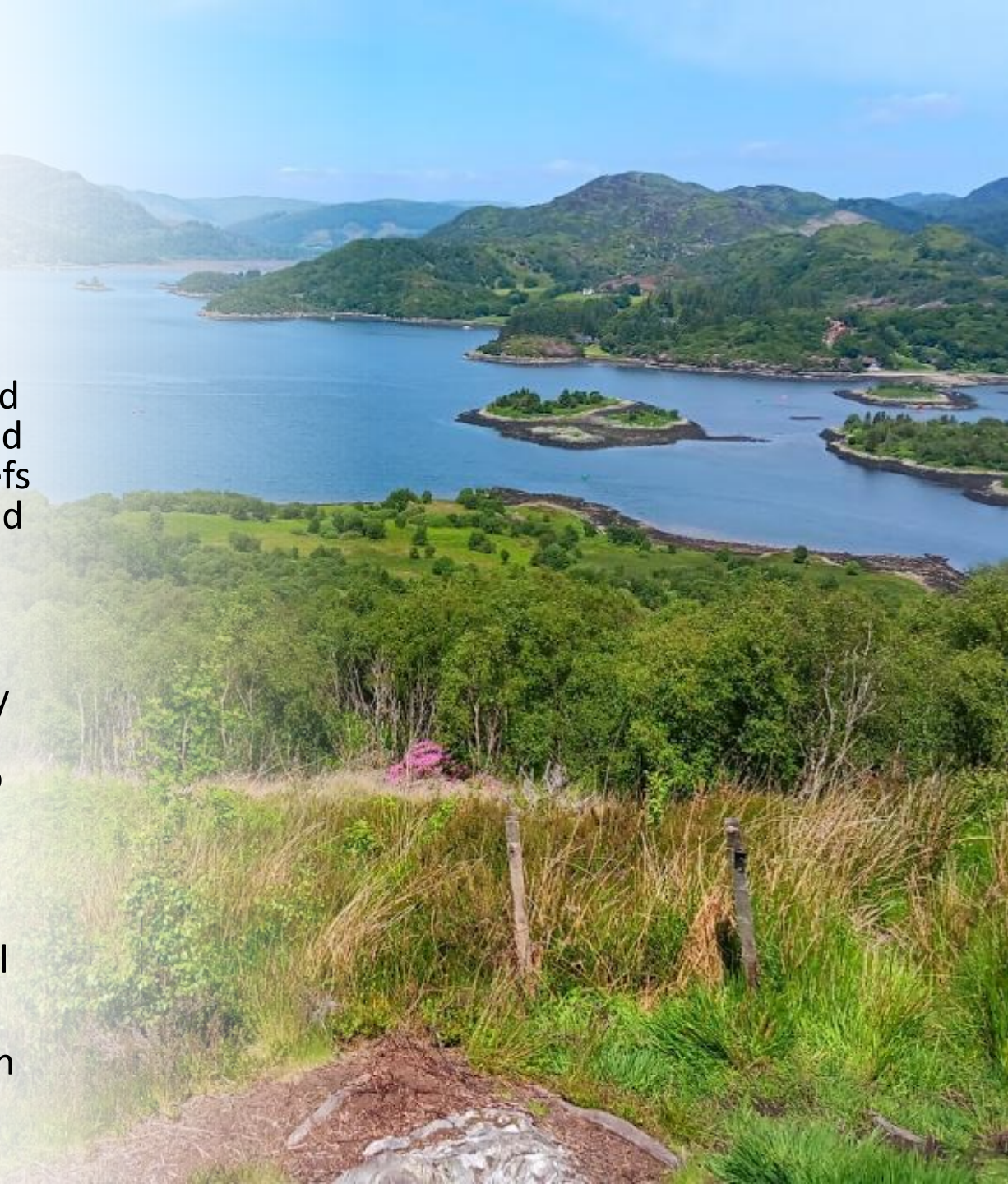
First wave of feudalisation

- Creeping feudalisation following introduction of Norman Law in 12th century – including concept that land can belong to an individual.
- Distribution of titles to Anglo-Norman and Flemish knights
- Common medieval state building strategy to reign in tribal peripheries
- Largely restricted to arable eastern lowlands and central belt – convergence with England



Second wave of feudalisation

- Until 17th century, much of the Highlands (Gàidhealtachd) and Southern Uplands, remained under de facto lineage based ownership, even if clan chiefs were the legal 'owners'. Land as joint heritage of the clan (or *dùthchas* in Gàidhealtachd);
- Yet growing feudalisation by 17th-18th century as Scottish then British, state sought to extend its influence
- Monetisation of rent, Anglicization of clan elites, and distribution/withdrawal of titles/privileges
- Land grabs post-reformation



Legacy of extensive rather than intensive land use contributed to extremes in land ownership, particularly in agro-pastoral belt



Enlightenment era land reforms

- Scotland was like many other parts of Eurasia a landlord economy by the 18th century
- Yet, so called 'enlightenment' supported a challenge to landlord authority in mainland Europe



France

French Revolution saw the abolition of the feudal system with serfs becoming owners, and a redistribution of ecclesiastical lands

Denmark

800 estates made up 75 percent of the land, yet in late 18th/early 18th century, reforms to land tenure supported many tenants in becoming independent landowners

Russia

Emancipation Act of 1861
freed serfs (up 1/3 of the
population) who were
bonded to landlords and
provided allotments of
land

Ireland

19th century Land Law
(Ireland) Acts, introduced in
the wake of the famine, set
the foundations for decline in
landlord authority.

Scotland's 'enlightenment' and land

- In Scotland, 18th-19th century enlightenment was driven not by redistributive justice but by ideas of economic progress.
- Violent imposition of capitalism for commercial production in both lowlands and highlands
- Appropriation by both Anglicized chiefs turned landlords, and a neo-elite of English and lowland Scottish capitalists.
- Crofting as a temporary political settlement (not genuine land reform).

20th century land reforms

- Communist revolutions, saw large scale abolition of feudalism or extreme capitalist land inequality across Eastern Europe, Russia, China, Central Asia, Cuba and Vietnam.
- Wave of redistributive reforms however, took place outside of the Communist Bloc, driven by decolonisation, post-war reconstruction, cold war geopolitics.
- A wave which entirely bypassed Scotland and England

Ireland

Irish Land Act 1923 confiscated estates from landlords, or subjected them to compulsory purchase orders, enabling tenants to buy their own farms.

Mexico

11,000 landed estates made up 57% of the national territory. Plan de Ayala in aftermath of Mexican revolution: 1/3 of lands owned by large landholders redistributed to landless peasants and grouped into ejidos or collective holdings

Nepal

1964 Lands Act brought down the century old *jimidari* system where, clan-chiefs turned landlords had tax collection rights. Ceilings imposed on holdings, although success limited due to landlord power.



Japan and Korea

Post-war reforms set ceilings on what could be owned, forcing landlords to sell at a fixed price. Abolition of feudalism and paved the way for post-war economic take off.

Latin America

Wave of reforms (e.g. in Peru, and Chile) the 1960s, which imposed ceilings on holdings and successfully contributed to the breakup of Latifundia estates

India

Highly successful reforms in West Bengal and Kerela. Less so in other states due to landlord dominance in bureaucracy. Ceilings on holdings, rent control, and legal rights for tenants.



Land reforms in Scotland today?

- True **redistributive** reform is off the agenda
- Reasons are complex – may be linked to the violent break from the land – and lost sense of collective heritage and links to ancestral lands by urban majority.
- Despite post-1990s move towards community ownership – it remains a tiny fraction (2.6%) of the total land area



- Community ownership paves the way for a potentially radical future vision for land reform
- Opens opportunities for communal management of natural resources, and consolidation of land.
- Builds upon the centuries old history of communal land management; Has the potential to support innovation and enterprise in communities; and the design of appropriate plans which will encourage repopulation.

The Scottish land reform paradox

- Radical vision of collective ownership, is at odds with the commitment to the market principle
- Land reform in Scotland grounded in the principle of 'willing buyer, willing seller'
- However, similar collective regimes e.g. *ejido* system of Mexico emerged out of the redistribution of 20m ha.
- Scottish legislation treats the rights of landlords as sacrosanct
- Willing-buyer, willing-seller approach has **poor track record** in Global South. Seen as an approach to appease landed interests

Why market-based reforms fail?

- Creating willing sellers without compulsion
 - Genuine land reform does not depend on the goodwill or business imperatives of landlords to sell
 - Most 20th century land reforms outlined above, are based upon a ceiling whereby it is considered politically, economically and morally unacceptable for a single individual to own a considerable area of land
- The costs – often out of reach for most marginal users
 - Shown in Colombia and South Africa to result in failure of market based reforms.
 - Scottish Land Fund budget of £10m/year. In 2022 alone, Savills put up 246,496 acres for sale in 2022, with a total estimated value of £347m

Final thoughts...

- Break free from the 'market principle' so community ownership becomes the standard model for rural areas.
- Reconnection with the land – approx. 3/4 of Scotland's population is urban – and all bear the legacy of dispossession.
- Ideological shift where land is considered not just site of elite leisure or sport, but source of food, collective heritage and knowledge –
- How do we re-engage with the land for a post-land reform future (e.g. community market gardens), and community ownership itself.

Thank you!



Email, f.sugden@bham.ac.uk