

# The flawed legacy of Scottish popular historian John Prebble

Steve James  
21 March 2001

Journalist and writer John Prebble died January 30 this year at the age of 85. He leaves a flawed legacy. Obituaries have focussed on Prebble's script for the 1964 film *Zulu*, but he will mostly be remembered for popularising episodes of Scottish history. His most famous works are *Culloden* and *The Highland Clearances*, published in 1963 and 1965 respectively. Over the next decades he wrote on an inter-tribal massacre at Glencoe, a failed Scottish imperialist effort in the late 17th century, a history of Scotland, a travelogue, and, in 1988, *The Kings Jaunt*.

Prebble's 20 or so books have sold many millions of copies worldwide and some have been in publication for over 30 years. Any assessment must pose the question of why his works became so popular? What were the historical and political circumstances of his success and to which popular opinions and social interests do his works appeal?

Prebble was born in Middlesex, England in 1915. His father was a meat porter who emigrated to Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1921 but returned to England a few years later, having failed to find a better life. In Canada, while staying with relatives, the young Prebble heard tales about the eviction of his ancestors from Sutherland, Scotland more than a century before. In 1934 he began working as a junior reporter, having spent a period as an estate agent's clerk collecting rent for the slum landlords of South London. In 1936, Prebble visited the Scottish Highlands and read *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson—an adventure story based around the 1745 Jacobite rebellion and Walter Scott's romantic historical novels.

In *Landscape and Memories - An Intermittent Biography*, Prebble notes passages in *Rob Roy* by Scott, and comments by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, hinting at great poverty and displacement in the North of Scotland in the early years of the 19th century.

At the same time, world events were pushing Prebble towards an active involvement in politics. He notes, of the 1930s: "There was much in that dramatic and frightening decade to persuade youth that change—just, immediate, rapid—was a desperate necessity, and this was not exclusively a reaction to the rise of fascism."

As a result of these views, he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Prebble, who had also read about the 17th century English Civil War, greatly admired the Agitators of Cromwell's New Model Army, and particularly its more radical wing, the Levellers. Prebble carried an Agitator text around Europe during his years in the British Army.

Along with many of the best of his generation the youthful Prebble offered the CPGB his services in Spain in the fight against Francoist fascism. But the party refused him permission to fight in Spain. Prebble supported the CP line during the early years of World War Two, and was arrested for possible sedition after signing a petition for a "second front", the term given to the proposed US/British invasion of occupied France during World War Two to relieve pressure on the Soviet Union. However, he left the party before the war ended.

Explaining why he had joined the CP, Prebble states that in the late 30s the party had declared itself "the heir of men like John Ball, [a 14th

century peasant communist who led the Peasants' Revolt] embraced a 'patriotic peoples' nationalism' as a tactic in the Popular Front, and later, after some *cowardly hesitation*, in the war against fascism." (emphasis added)

The Popular Front policies advanced by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Kremlin were an attempt to form alliances with Britain, France and the USA against Hitler's Germany. The Stalinists promoted the democratic credentials of these imperialist powers, strangled the Spanish revolution by subordinating the working class to the bourgeoisie and carried out the mass extermination of any socialist opposition to their policies, particularly the supporters of Leon Trotsky. Prebble never opposed this popular frontist line. Indeed he centred his subsequent critique of the CP on its failure to consistently advance a "people's nationalism".

Immediately after the war, Prebble began to write novels—one was based on his wartime experiences, another on the destruction of the Native Americans in the 19th century. His first efforts on Scottish history were triggered by a visit in 1959, as a Readers Digest journalist, to the site of the last clash between opposing armies on British soil at Culloden Moor, near Inverness. Intrigued by what he saw as the relatively unknown character of the events surrounding the 1746 battle, Prebble set out to explain them. In *Culloden*, and *The Highland Clearances*, Prebble staked out the approach to historical writing that would earn him a broad readership, as well as no small amount of vilification from professional historians.

*Culloden* explained in stark and easily digestible terms, the disastrous nature of the military defeat suffered by a small tribal army that supported the reactionary 1745 Jacobite bid by Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) to acquire the monarchy of Scotland and England. He showed the battle and its aftermath through the eyes and experiences of its ordinary participants, which at the time was quite innovative.

Prebble made the reader immediately sympathise with the ordinary soldier on both sides of the conflict, but particularly with the few thousands of Highland soldiers—1,300 of who died on the battlefield. His book reads like a novel, rather than an historical investigation, and still produces a sense of the immense hardships and agonies suffered by all concerned.

This sharply contrasted with more traditional versions of the Jacobite uprising, which portrayed the rebellion as a doomed, quixotic and colourful national escapade—a suitable subject for postcards and sentimental folk songs. In pointing out the vast social differences between the leaders and the led on both sides, Prebble introduced a class element that had been lacking from previous popular descriptions. Such writing was undoubtedly formed by his recent experiences in the British army.

Film director Peter Watkins based his 1963 film documentary *Culloden*—a ground breaking presentation of the battle and its aftermath—on Prebble's book. Watkins gave a vigorous realism to the film, using ordinary people rather than professional actors, and newsreel style clips as if from contemporary war reporting.

The problem with *Culloden* is not the portrayal of the battle, but that Prebble removes it from its correct historical context and inserts it into another, which encouraged the contemporary development of Scottish nationalism.

The United Kingdom was created in 1707 through the long proposed unification of the English and Scottish parliaments. Essentially the outcome of the bourgeois revolution in England, the establishment of the UK expanded the national market by unifying trade relations and created the conditions for a vast expansion of the productive forces on both sides of the border.

The 1745 Jacobite rebellion was an attempt to either break up the UK or to replace its Protestant monarchy with a Catholic Stuart. The Jacobites themselves never resolved which perspective they favoured. In attempting to replace the Hanoverian dynasty in London they aspired to rule the entire UK, while some of their supporters in the Scottish towns suggested that they should utilise a fading discontent with the initially slow growth of wealth post-Union to re-establish Scotland's separation from England.

The rebellion was organised in the expectation that an invasion from France would come to its aid, and those instigating it were aware that success would entail a protracted and bloody civil war. The social elements behind the uprising were, in the main, the feudal armies of the poorer Catholic clans, the more backward anti-Union landowners and a minority merchant element whose interests had been damaged by Union. In no sense was it a popular war against land expropriations (the Highland Clearances), which had increased across the whole of Scotland during the 18th century.

Any sense of this contradictory reality is lost in Prebble's work, however. He exhibits a reluctance to tackle such difficult issues, and a preference for using poignant phrases that expose the genuinely tragic, but at the expense of any more deep-going insights. From beginning to end, there is a lack of depth, a recounting of circumstances in place of analysis. The underlying sense conveyed is that history is not really comprehensible, it merely happens.

Prebble accurately and eloquently denounces the Duke of Cumberland's army for its bloody suppression of the Gaelic-speaking tribal soldiers. But he merges this with a version of Scottish nationalism in which he insists that the fate of the traditional Highland population was symbolic of Scotland's fate as a whole in the aftermath of Union.

The foreword to *Culloden* claimed, for example, that "Culloden... began a sickness from which Scotland and the Highlands in particular, never recovered... Long ago this sickness and its economic consequences, emptied the Highlands of people." The book concludes with reports of a mystical vision seen in 1748 of a Scottish army finally beating the English redcoats. The implication being that the emergence of capitalism has been a catastrophe, a disease, and that the solution rests in resurrecting Scottish independence.

He takes much the same approach in *The Highland Clearances*, which deals with the removal of much of the population from the Highland region in the late 18th and early 19th century—a subject given a particularly personal resonance by his family's own experience.

By 1746, the feudal regime was already being eroded by the penetration of capital. Clan leaders on both sides of the conflict at Culloden already maintained vastly ostentatious houses, while "their people" lived in great squalor in turf huts, sharing shrinking plots of common land and grazing black cattle. Culloden accelerated what was already an advanced process by destroying the only remaining military threat to the complete subordination of the land to capital.

Prebble describes the landowner the Duke of Sutherland, who carried out clearances on his estate in the North West Highlands, most intensively after 1813. As an isolated and barren place, the Scottish Highlands were one of the last areas in Europe where land was subordinated to large-scale capitalist ownership. As a result it often took a violent form. The

battle of Culloden and the clearances have become the most notorious of the clearances, which spanned more than a century and took many different forms.

"He was coal and wool joined by a stately hyphen and ennobled by five coronets. He was a Knight of the Garter, a Privy Councillor, Recorder of Stafford, a Trustee of the British Museum, a Vice President of the Society of Arts and an Hereditary Governor of the British Institution..."

"He was the Great Improver. Where there had been nothing in his opinion but wilderness and savagery, he built, or had built for him by the Government, thirty-four bridges and four hundred and fifty miles of road. The glens emptied by his commissioners, factors, law-agents and ground-officers (with the prompt assistance of the police and soldiers when necessary) were let or leased to Lowlanders who grazed 200,000 True Mountain Sheep upon them and sheared 415,000 pounds of wool every year."

Prebble's exposition of the clearances as forced, mass evictions, is essentially correct although the process covered about 130 years and their character altered over time. Some of those involved evinced a genuine desire to improve the existing primitive social conditions whilst expanding their own profits. A number of picturesque planned villages were built and there was even a sense of humane optimism amongst the most far sighting landlords. This was, after all, the same era in which Adam Smith, based in Edinburgh, claimed that capitalism could provide wealth for all, and that society could become a work of art.

But whether at the hands of landlords influenced by the Enlightenment or clan leaders transformed into capitalist farmers, in the end thousands of Gaelic peasant farmers were marginalised and ultimately expelled from land they had, for generations, assumed to be theirs. This involved landlords putting pressure on tenants, seizure of cattle stocks, expelling the peasantry from all but the worst land, pressure to work in the new factories, encouragement to emigrate, and, of course, evictions by police and soldiers.

The clearances developed in distinct phases. Up to 1820, smaller scale population moves occurred, concentrating on coastal regions. From 1820-1850, the speed and scale of seizures increased, with the hugely powerful landlords consolidating vast sheep and shooting estates, while the population fled to the Scottish cities, to America or—in the 1840s—starved with the failure of the potato crop. While hunger in the Highlands at no time reached the catastrophic levels of Ireland, where over one million people starved to death, for extended periods up to 150,000 lives were imperilled. During the 1840s, 40 percent of all people leaving Scotland to America or Australia came from the Highlands. At the same time, landowners, who had previously not encouraged emigration, as they wanted to retain a local workforce, set about actively pushing for large-scale removals.

Some of the most brutal evictions were in 1848, with local landowners the Malcolms of Poltalloch, who already possessed a vast trading enterprise with holdings in Southern Australia and the West Indies, violently evicting people from an Argyllshire village rebuilt as recently as 1835. The same family that suppressed slave revolts in the West Indies and trampled on aboriginal peoples in Australia, cleared out its Scottish tenant population to make way for vast sheep pastures in order to take advantage of a temporary increase in the price of sheep against cattle.

By the 1850s, the plight of the Highland peasant came to be more broadly recognised, giving rise to sufficient public anger to stop evictions and allow some degree of secure tenure for those remaining.

Karl Marx wrote of the clearances in volume one of *Das Kapital*: "Sheep were introduced into glens which had been the seats of communities of small farmers; and the latter were driven to seek subsistence on coarser and more sterile tracks of soil. Now deer are supplanting sheep; and these are once more dispossessing the small tenants, who will necessarily be driven down upon still coarser land and to more grinding penury. Deer-forests and the people cannot co-exist. One or

other of the two must yield."

A great number of ex-Highlanders had joined the working class in the rapidly expanding Scottish cities. Marx earlier noted, "In the 18th century the hunted-out Gaels were forbidden to emigrate from the country, with a view to driving them by force to Glasgow and other manufacturing towns."

As early as 1790, 30 percent of the population of Greenock was from the Highlands, while in Glasgow in 1851 there were 16,500 workers who had been born in the Highlands. Over the years, a variety of means of exerting political influence emerged, which by the 1880s meant that a series of rent strikes and land seizures, backed by wide support in the cities, effectively secured a position for the remaining "crofters."

With Prebble, while there is an eloquently expressed hatred of landlordism, as represented in its most brutal form in the Highlands, but there is little exploration of any other social tendencies. Although he makes occasional references to the cities into which many Highlanders moved, in Prebble's world there is really no evidence of a working class—let alone a workers' movement. Rather, the Highlanders' eviction is presented solely as a source of unalloyed historic woe, of which, to be sure, there was no shortage.

Prebble mixes up the genuine and lasting bitterness at land seizures with a type of Highland or Gaelic nationalism. Despite the fact that land enclosures took place over the whole of Scotland during the eighteenth century and in Lowland Scotland involved the elimination of an entire class of small farmer, the "cottars", Prebble presents the Clearances as being unique to the Highlands.

He concludes *The Highland Clearances*: "In the beginning the men who imposed the change were of the same blood, tongue, and family as the people. They used the advantages given them by the old society to profit from the new, but in the end they were gone with their clans."

"The Lowlander has inherited the hills and the tartan is a shroud," he intoned.

Prebble's work appeared and became popular at a point when the CPGB in Scotland, influential in the working class and particularly in the trade unions, was seeking to divert protest against pressures on jobs and living standards in a nationalist direction. At around the same time, in 1968, the Scottish National Party (SNP) won its first seat in the working class area of Hamilton.

During the following 30 years, sections of the labour and trade union bureaucracy, the SNP and various middle class radical organisations continually attempted to channel working class opposition in Scotland to job losses and social inequality along nationalist lines. The combination of Prebble's genuinely startling exposure of Culloden and the Clearances, combined with his vague and angry nationalism, made him popular among quite broad sections of society, not least in the working class, and by no means only in Scotland. His work was used to encourage the view that England oppressed Scotland.

After the publication of his first works, professional historians ferociously attacked Prebble, particularly Gordon Donaldson, who in the 1980s was the Scottish Historiographer Royal, an Episcopalian lay preacher and investigator of peerage claims for would be aristocratic Highland landlords. Donaldson, who was also a former archivist, aggressively condemned Prebble for his apparently tendentious use of a narrow base of oral and written records as sources for his reconstructions. Later scholars have tended not to view Prebble's works as serious history, but in the words of historian TM Devine, as "a sort of *faction*"—a mixture of fact and fiction.

Prebble's biography suggests he was rather perplexed by the ferocity of the attacks on him, since he never claimed to be an historian and was happy to acknowledge that his methods were "idiosyncratic." He seems to have produced no substantial work between the early 70s, and 1988's *The King's Jaunt*.

This last work exposes Prebble's strengths and weaknesses most clearly. It deals with a peculiar visit by the then British monarch George IV to Edinburgh in 1822, organised by Prebble's one-time hero Walter Scott. The visit, the first by a British monarch to Scotland since 1650, was organised in direct response to the "Radical War" of 1819-22, a period of mass popular protests.

The end of the war with France in 1815 produced an economic slump, provoking widespread discontent in the working class in Britain, at that time by far the most advanced industrial nation in the world. Mass strikes, demonstrations and pitched battles raged for an extended period. This movement, much influenced by the French Revolution and Tom Paine's work *The Rights of Man*, was one of the first indications that industrial development was not leading towards universal wealth but to class divisions of a sharpness without historical precedent, between capitalists and the ever expanding working class. There were large public meetings in Manchester and the North of England. One such demonstration in 1819 was attacked by troops and has entered history as the Peterloo massacre, where 11 were killed and 400 wounded.

Prebble briefly mentions a huge strike of 60,000 workers in Glasgow, armed clashes with soldiers near Stirling, attempts to seize weapons from Carron Iron Works near Glasgow, an uprising by weavers and reports of miners in Northumberland preparing to march to Scotland to fight alongside the weavers. But he concentrates principally on the response from the ruling class in Britain to this early challenge to its rule.

A crucial figure in this was Walter Scott—by then knighted—who first tried to organise an army unit to fight against the working class. Once the immediate threat was over, Scott proposed an immense national pageant, insisting that the flavour of the occasion should stress its "Highland" characteristics. To this end, all the landlords and clan chiefs, including ex-Jacobite leaders and their relatives, buried all their differences and mobilised their army units. Along with the industrialists and merchants of Glasgow and Edinburgh, they assembled in Edinburgh dressed lavishly in tartan, wearing kilts, singing Robert Burns songs. King George IV appeared in tartan, with pink stockings to hide his mottled and swollen legs, before sailing away on the Royal yacht.

All concerned considered the occasion a great success for having identified a means of wielding together, in the garb of the Jacobites and a bogus "Highlandism", all sections of the Scottish ruling class within the new Britain.

Prebble deals with this important episode by relating little insights into how particular individuals felt about the occasion. He introduces news reports, notes the painters, including JMW Turner, assembled to capture the outrageous scenes. He describes individual events, sumptuous dances, meals, toasts and parades.

But Prebble's focus is not the gigantic class pressures developing in early 19th century Britain. He deals with events across Britain in a very cursory manner, ignoring the significance of the new Scottish national identity being forged in that period, specifically as an instrument to divide the working class in Scotland from workers in England. Neither does he seriously examine the relationship between Walter Scott's writings and his subsequent political and social role.

Rather, Prebble focuses on the contrast between Highland poverty and Highland wealth, as displayed in Scott's seminal jamboree. Every chapter is headed with a sad report, often from an 1880s commission referring to evicted Highlanders scratching a miserable living on an isolated beach. But while he concentrates his venom against the Highland chiefs, his "peoples nationalism" ignores the broader historical significance of the occasion.

Prebble is also popular in the Highlands of today, where there is a revival of Gaelic speaking in the middle class, and his books encourage a regional identity. In 1997 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Glasgow University, after an extended campaign by his

supporters, including Brian Wilson, now a Labour member of the new Scottish parliament established in 1999. Wilson is a representative of the social layer in the Highlands who champion regionalism in order to secure regional aid and investment. He claims that Prebble's writings "did more than any rigid work of professional scholarship to awaken public interest in the forces that shaped much of Scotland's character."

Among historians, Prebble seems most admired by Highland historian James Hunter, whose history of the region, *Land of the Free*, contains a foreword by the head of the local investment agency.

Although there is some truth in Wilson's comments, in the end, Prebble is not likely to have any lasting impact. Fundamentally, this is because his potential as a popular historical writer, his ability to empathise with the oppressed and to describe the great historical events within which they were caught up in a journalist style was crippled by a limited historical understanding. His Scottish Highland "peoples nationalism" was learnt from the Stalinist Communist Party, and never forgotten.

*See Also:*

British History

[WSWS Full Coverage]



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**