

Public Lecture

Public Lecture on

“Climax of the Clearances: The Great Highland Famine
and Scottish History”

Speaker: Prof Sir Thomas Devine, University of
Edinburgh

5pm-7pm, 23rd May 2023

Usha Kasera Lecture Theatre, Old College, University of
Edinburgh

This public lecture sees Sir Tom Devine consider the impact of the potato blight in Scotland, and particularly in the Highlands. Devine will examine the unique history and agriculture of a landscape so dependent on the crop, and argue that it clearly contributed to the Scottish Clearances.

It is organised by the Royal Society of Edinburgh Research Network on The British Empire, Scotland, and Indian Famines.



About the lecture

This lecture considers the impact of the 1840s European potato blight on Scotland. It will focus especially on the Highlands, where over-dependency on the crop for subsistence exposed the people of the region to acute life-threatening crisis.

The first part of the lecture will seek to determine the impact of the potato failure on the people and therefore attempt to answer the question: 'Did the Highlands starve'? Throughout, comparisons and contrasts will be drawn with the Great Irish Famine (an Gorta Mór) which has attracted much more scholarly and popular attention than the famine in Scotland.

The second part will argue that the famine in the Highlands triggered an unprecedented scale and intensity of 'clearance', or forced removal of people from their traditional holdings, which rendered entire districts bereft of human habitation

through to the present day. One eye witness government official at the time feared the evictions were so extensive as to 'threaten the very structures of society in these parts'.

About the speaker

Sir Thomas Martin Devine (Kt OBE DLitt FRHistS HonMRIA FRSE FBA Member Academy of Europe) is Sir William Fraser Professor Emeritus of Scottish History and Palaeography in the University of Edinburgh, the world's oldest and most prestigious chair in the field.

Devine is the author and editor of some forty books plus numerous articles and chapters across a range of historical topics since the sixteenth century to the present including *The Great Highland Famine: Hunger, Emigration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century* and *The Scottish Clearances: A History of the Dispossessed 1600-1900*. He also has a high media profile in the press, radio and TV, both at home and abroad.

Devine's many honours and prizes include the Royal Medal of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's supreme academic accolade and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the UK Parliament in History and Archives. He was knighted in 2015 by the late HM The Queen 'for services to the study of Scottish history,' the only scholar honoured for that reason to date.

About the research strand

This event is organised by the Royal Society of Edinburgh Research Network on the British Empire, Scotland, and Indian famines.

The Network is a collaboration between the University of Edinburgh and two institutions in India, IIIT Guwahati in

Guwahati and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology in West Bengal.

The Principal Investigator of the Network is Dr Sourit Bhattacharya, Lecturer in Global Anglophone Literatures at the University of Edinburgh.

Over a number of projects on the British empire and cultural responses to famine, Dr Bhattacharya's aim is to historicise contemporary debates on neo-colonialism and global food crisis, and indigenous responses to them.

Access and recording

Please note that this is a free, in-person event held on the University of Edinburgh campus. It will not be live streamed – tickets are for access to the venue. However, the event may be photographed and/or recorded and added to the University website afterwards. If you would prefer not to appear in any recordings, please contact us in advance or speak to us on the day. It's not a problem.