



The Fife Adventurers

According to so called information reaching King James VI of Scotland, the Island of Lewis was a very pleasant land, a land flowing with milk and honey, yellow with corn and teeming with fish around it.

In 1597 an Act was passed by the Scottish Parliament, the preamble of which alleged that the Lords of the district neglected to develop the rich fisheries in their possession as well as failing to perform the services due by them to the Crown.

That was the first step in a policy of confiscation upon which King James VI had set his heart. In consequence of the extravagance of the King, money had to be raised somehow and somewhere and the act was plainly devised to replenish the exchequer at the expense of the Isles man.

In the records of the Privy Council there is an entry relating to the ratification of a remarkable contract between King James VI and a syndicate of adventurers known to history as the 'Fife Adventurers'. The parties to this contract were the King on the one hand, and on the other, Patrick of Lindores, James Leirmont of Balcomie, Sir James Anstruther, James Spense of Wormiston, Sir James Sandilands of Seamannamure, Captain William Murray, John Forret of Fincask, Sir William Stewart, Sir George Home and his son David Home and Lewis Duke of Lennox, cousin and favourite of the King.

The contract bound the undertakers 'to plant policy and civilisation in the hitherto most barren Isle of Lewis, and to develop the extraordinary rich resources of the same for the public good and the Kings profit'. In short the motives were to exploit Lewis for the benefit of the King and his confederates and 'Ruiting' out the barbarous inhabitants, which naturally meant force and bloodshed.

The last of many clauses in the document stipulated that 'no part of the Highlands or Isles should thereafter, at any time, be dispoit in few, tack or uterways but to Lowland men' or at least to such Highlanders as could find Lowland cautioners.

One would have thought that the logical expression of the King's passion for civilising the people of Lewis might have been to dispatch a band of missionaries and schoolteachers to the Island in order to improve their manners instead of an organisation of land grabbers, backed by a military force as a means of permanent subjugation of the inhabitants.

The Fife Adventurers were to discover that the primitive instinct of self-defence and bravery still flourished in Lewis. Towards the end of 1598 the Fife Adventurers set out for Lewis, led by the King's cousin, the Duke of Lennox, but they got a warm reception in Lewis because the Macleods put up a stubborn fight against the five or six hundred picked mercenaries and well-armed Lowlanders.

The Lowlanders settled in an encampment at what is now called Stornoway. They built houses of stone, timber and turf, about where South Beach Street is today, on the foreshore.

At the time of the invasion of Lewis, the Government of the Island was in the hands of Murdoch and Neil Macleod, sons of old Ruairidh Macleod. Murdoch was a man of superior education who could not only sign his name, but could actually draft legal documents. Neil could also write a good letter, but he was more at home with the sword than with the pen. The suggestion therefore that these men were savages who were destitute of manners, morals and education is not borne out by the facts. Murdoch as the eldest brother was in supreme command.

The Macleods resisted strongly but their resistance was eventually broken down, and in December news reached Edinburgh that old Stornoway Castle had been captured. Murdoch Macleod fled from Lewis but Neil remained in Lewis with the object of conducting guerrilla warfare against the colonists.

Having temporarily overawed the natives the Lowlanders now commenced operations for the effective settlement of the Island. They found themselves short of provisions because the natives had cleared the Island of supplies. Their shelter was also inadequate and the winter weather was setting in. The colonists decided to send one of their members, James Leirmont of Balcomie, south to inform the King of their progress and to obtain a supply of provisions.

On 7th December 1598 Murdoch Macleod who commanded a small fleet of a galley and two birlinns attacked Balcomie's ship off the coast of Ross-shire. Murdoch prevailed, killing or making prisoner of all his opponents. The Laird Balcomie himself with those of his company who were left alive were taken prisoner.

When news reached Lewis that the Laird of Balcomie had been captured, the colonists sent Colonel Stewart Spence of Wormiston and others to carry out the mission to Edinburgh on which Balcomie failed.

Taking advantage of the absence of Stewart of Spence, Neil Macleod suddenly attacked the colonists with what was said to be 200 barbarous 'bluidie and wicket Heilandmen' (bloody and wicked Highland men) armed with bows and arrows, two handed swords, pistols and other weapons. They killed 22 of the colonists, burnt property valued at 20,000 marks and carried off horses, cows, oxen, sheep and other things worth £10,000.

Neil Macleod, who lived on a small Island off the west coast of Lewis, continued to harass the Fife Adventurers for the next few years preventing the declared intention of the King to dispose of and root out the barbarous inhabitants of Lewis.

At this time Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail who was himself scheming to become Landlord of Lewis himself, saw the opportunity for which he had waited and after much scheming and the final collapse of the Fife Adventurers, the Island of Lewis was given to Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail by Crown Charter in 1610. Neil Macleod resisted the Mackenzies, but he was overcome eventually, and the Island was in the hands of the Clan Mackenzie for nearly two and a half centuries. Neil MacLeod was beheaded in Edinburgh.

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