



The Smallholders (Scotland) Act (1911)

The 20th century opened in the Highlands and Islands with widespread rumblings of discontent among the crofter population. By 1911 the crofting community and particularly the landless cottars were extremely frustrated after a period of over 30 years of agitation for a fairer distribution of the land, beginning with a petition from 32 landless cottars from Gravir, Calbost and Marvig in 1881, followed by the 1883 Napier Commission, the 1886 Crofters Act, the 1887 Park Deer Raid, the 1888 march to Lewis Castle, 1891 widespread land raiding, the 1892 Deer Forest Commission, the 1897 Congested District Board and now, the Smallholders (Scotland) Act 1911. The deprived landless cottars gained nothing from that long list of events.

The 1911 Act broke new ground in that it recognised, at long last, that Highland landowners would never make a genuine attempt to make some of the land available to the indigenous population, and therefore the Act introduced, for the first time, compulsory powers for the creation of new landholdings.

The Act brought about strong feelings of optimism among the landless families. They felt that it heralded the beginning of a new era of justice for the crofter population. They were reinforced in their optimism when they became aware that the Scottish Secretary was actively preparing schemes for land settlement under the terms of the 1911 Act. By the end of 1912 some 3370 applications for new landholdings had been filed.

In preparing re-settlement schemes under the 1911 Act the Board of Agriculture applied to the Lewis Proprietor, Major Duncan Matheson, in 1913, for his consent to divide four Lewis farms into new crofts - Galson, Gress, Carnish/Ardroil and Steimreway/Orinsay. Major Matheson employed Skene, Edwards and Garsen as his agents, and they were very effective in blocking land settlement schemes in Lewis. Major Matheson, through his legal agents, opposed the Board of Agriculture for Scotland's intention to divide the four farms, and objected on the following grounds:

1. The farms were not suitable for crofting land.
2. He would lose in rent more than he gained in compensation.
3. The proposed number of new crofts would do very little to relieve the congestion in Lewis.

Meanwhile Major Matheson was finding it difficult to sustain the financial liabilities of taxation and death duties of his Lewis Estate, in addition to his other extensive properties on the Scottish mainland, and he offered to sell the Island of Lewis to the Nation in 1913. By then however, the dark clouds of war were already in the air and no doubt the crofters' problems were pretty low in the scale of Government priorities, and Major Matheson's offer was left on the table.

During the war the crofter population was encouraged by speeches from Government Ministers such as T.B. Morrison, the Lord Advocate, speaking in Inverness in October 1917:

We are entitled to expect that the land question in the Highlands and Islands should be settled once and for all. The evils of the old system are now admitted practically on every hand, and everyone is agreed that the people of the Highlands and Islands must be placed in possession of the soil ... It has been demonstrated that 'farms', when broken up, carry a larger stock and support a large population, while the unchecked expansion of deer forests has been nothing short of a national scandal.

Expressions like these encouraged the servicemen, as well as the landless families at home, to think that at long last the land struggle was won and the end of the war would herald a new order of 'a land fit for heroes'. In the following month, November 1917, the Secretary of State for Scotland, Mr Robert Munro, let it be known, 'That he was considering a suggestion put to him by the Lewis Crofters and Cottars Association, that the Government should purchase the Island of Lewis and make the best use of it in cultivation for crofters, fishermen and cottars to settle thereon after the war'.

While the Scottish Office was still considering the 4-year-old suggestion to buy the Island of Lewis for the benefit of the people of Lewis, Lieutenant Colonel Matheson, the Proprietor decided to advertise the Island for sale in 'The Times'. It was that advertisement that first aroused Lord Leverhulme's interest in Lewis. Less than a week after the Lord Advocate's speech in Inverness, in October 1917, Lord Leverhulme had landed quietly in Lewis with very different ideas for the future of the Island.

Lord Leverhulme bought the Island of Lewis in 1918 for a total sum of £167,000. This was well below the asking price of £200,000. Sir James Matheson paid £190,000 for the Island in 1844 and it was said that he spent a further £100,495 on various improvements, such as Lewis Castle and its Policies, various shooting lodges etc.

Among the formal messages of congratulations sent to Lord Leverhulme were messages from Stornoway Town Council, the Lewis District Council, and of all people, a cordial message from 'The Lewis Crofter's and Cottar Association', who had proposed earlier that the Government should buy the Island for the people. The Crofters Association message to Lord Leverhulme read as follows: 'The smallholders and cottars of Lewis are delighted that your Lordship has purchased the Island and beg to congratulate you on this historic occasion, and assure you of our hearty goodwill and support'.

Considering the antisocial behaviour of previous Lewis Proprietors towards the crofters and cottars of the Island, the action of the leaders of the crofters on this occasion was, to say the least, surprising and smacking of abject submission, if not grovelling. Obviously the crofter's leaders at that time were out of touch with the sentiments and aspirations of the people they claimed to represent.

The ownership of the Island changed hands in the usual way, without any information to, or any consultation with, the people whose lived and worked there. Their vision of Lewis as an Island colony for the settlement of crofters, cottars and fishermen, on their return from years of military service, faded with the coming of yet another rich private Proprietor.

The crofting community had very little incentive to risk its lives for a country that treated them so shabbily, and that was particularly true concerning the cottars. Nevertheless, as soon as war broke out in 1914 the patriotic Islanders rushed to join up to fight for King and Country, including many who had previously emigrated to various countries all over the world. In fact, it is said, that the response from the Islands was greater in proportion to the population than any other community of comparable size in the British Empire. In doing so, they were encouraged to believe they were fighting for a land fit for heroes to return to. A blatant betrayal.

During that terrible fighting in the trench warfare of the western front and on the high seas, the cherished ambition of the landless servicemen was to get a smallholding, as promised, and to build a home for their deprived families or sweethearts back home, and to enjoy for the first time in their lives, the basic security that comes from the knowledge that one possesses a piece of land and a home that he can call his own.

Alas, many of these brave patriotic men did not survive to find that their dream of a smallholding and a home of their own was but yet another illusion. Those of the war weary veterans who did survive and trekked back home after demobilisation in 1919 discovered the reality that, instead of their expectation of the Government continuing with the pre-war land re-settlement schemes where they left off in 1914, the Government procrastinated and failed to take any further action to implement any of the Lewis re-settlement schemes that were in the pipeline before the war.

When the Lewis ex-servicemen discovered that re-settlement schemes were proceeding in other parts of the Highlands, they enquired and discovered that although the Scottish Secretary had the necessary compulsory powers to acquire the Lewis farms, he nevertheless opened negotiations with Lord Leverhulme, in the summer of 1918, for the break-up of some Lewis farms into crofts, because the Government preferred to take action with the co-operation of the Proprietor.

True to form, Leverhulme objected and put forward two main arguments against the creation of more crofts. Firstly, he maintained that the division of farms into crofts would do almost nothing to relieve the congestion in Lewis, and secondly, he maintained that the farms were essential for the supply of milk for the expanding town of Stornoway.

Leverhulme's reasons for declining to agree to the Governments' land re-settlement schemes were not very convincing. In fact, the farms that were eventually broken down into crofts provided decent homes for a significant number of families, and demonstrated that farms, when broken down into crofts, carry a larger stock and support a larger population, as well as relieving the congestion. Leverhulme was fiercely hostile to crofting, yet, at the end of the day, he did not establish anything that could replace the crofting way of life in Lewis.

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