



The Leverhulme Period (1918-1925)

Lord Leverhulme, the new landlord of Lewis in the period immediately after the First World War, was different to all of his predecessors. He was a business entrepreneur and the people of Lewis fully supported him, and were very grateful for the work provided by the Leverhulme development schemes. The crofting community did not see any conflict between Leverhulme's development schemes and crofting. On the contrary, the crofters were well aware that the concept of crofting involves, of necessity, some other additional work as well as crofting agriculture.

Leverhulme, on the other hand, felt that crofting was an impossible lifestyle, and he declared that he wanted to help the crofters to shake themselves free from its crippling conventions. He said that they had two good industries, fishing and weaving, and that crofting prevented a man from giving his full attention to what should be his proper job, fishing. He contended that the great wealth of Lewis was in the surrounding sea and not in the land.

It will therefore be seen that it was not the local crofters who were against Leverhulme or his development schemes. It was Leverhulme who failed to understand the concept of crofting; he failed to understand that crofting was a lifestyle, not an industry. He was therefore determined to change the people to his way of thinking. It might be quite appropriate to ask, was Leverhulme's antipathy to crofting based on a feeling that these independent crofters might not always be available to him, as a dependant pool of labour for his development schemes.

Leverhulme prepared a comprehensive development plan for Lewis, the main feature of which was the exploitation of the rich harvest of fish around the coasts of the Island. Another aspect of the plan was the rebuilding and development of the town of Stornoway. The building of new houses, roads, a railway line, a gas plant, a steam laundry, a fish offal plant, a fish canning factory, an ice plant and harbour facilities etc., as well as a nationwide chain of fish shops, under the name of Mac-Fisheries, through which he intended to sell the fish caught locally around Lewis. He also felt that the answer to the Island's problem was not emigration, but an actual increase in the population from around 30,000 to 60,000 persons.

Undoubtedly, Lord Leverhulme was a very successful businessman. However, the crofters were also practical men in their own field; some of them were sceptical about the ultimate success of Leverhulme's schemes. The crofters knew full well that however good a new house on a quarter acre allotment near Stornoway sounded, it was not enough to survive on in Stornoway without a croft. In the town of Stornoway a family needed a steady income, and as yet all Leverhulme could offer them was temporary construction work.

The schemes that were to provide permanent work had yet to be proved and fishing on which they were mainly based was notoriously fickle and uncertain. Islanders learned from experience that crofting and fishing were complementary, and each of them was a form of insurance against the periodic failure of the other. A croft was something to fall back on when all else failed.

Leverhulme expected, indeed demanded, that the Lewis crofter population place their faith in him blindly, but they were cautious, and entitled to be sceptical and rely more on their own judgement and assessment, at least until such time as they saw the development schemes bearing practical fruit. With hindsight, we now know that the crofters' cautious approach was the correct approach for them at that time.

The returning landless ex-servicemen were justifiably angry when they discovered that after fighting for 4 or 5 years in the trenches, the land holdings they were solemnly promised before the war were not now available. The Government was acting predictably, like all previous Governments, with lame excuses and prevarications, a promised capital panacea in years to come, whereas, all the ex-servicemen wanted was for the Government to implement their pre-war promises.

Apparently, the new landlord, like all previous landlords and the Government, expected the ex-service landless families to continue living in barns or temporary accommodation for the rest of their lives, but in 1919 the Establishment were confronted by a new generation who had just returned from fighting the bloodiest war the world had ever known. There was a new mood of determination abroad among the long-suffering landless families of Lewis. These men were used to facing, and using, the bayonet and the gun, and they were not prepared to be fobbed off meekly any longer with what was to them meaningless excuses. They felt strongly that they had earned the right to a few acres of land on which to build a decent home for their families. Their

determination was suitably articulated by one of their number at an open air meeting with Lord Leverhulme: 'We fought for this land in France, and if necessary, we will fight for it in Lewis as well'.

Mr Munro, the Scottish Secretary, was sure enough in a dilemma. He felt that the landless families had a perfectly good case and he wanted to help them by implementing the pre-war promises of land for the landless families. On the other hand, he was very pleased to see the Leverhulme development schemes go forward and provide work at a difficult time in the history of Lewis. If he made any moves to implement the pre-war promises, he would upset Lord Leverhulme.

It was clear to the landless families that they had to choose between submitting in a docile way and be content to continue indefinitely living in appalling conditions of overcrowding in sub-standard housing, or alternatively throw all restraint aside and raid and occupy the former croft land, now occupied as farm land, by cutting the farm lands up into crofts and distributing the land among the landless families.

It was agreed by the ex-service landless families that every reasonable step open to them should be tried first, and if after that, the Authorities still refused to implement the pre-war promises to break up the farms and provide new crofts, then the landless families would take the law into their own hands by land-raiding the farmlands and restoring the land to the original occupants, the crofters.

When it became clear to the landless families that Leverhulme was not prepared to give up the farmlands voluntarily, and the Scottish Secretary was not prepared to exercise his compulsory powers by taking over the farmlands, land-raiding commenced throughout the whole Island of Lewis.

Leverhulme reacted by threatening to stop his development programme and the Scottish Secretary was placed in a difficult position. Public opinion was strongly on the side of the deprived landless crofters, and so was Parliament, as was evident when both Houses of Parliament passed the Crofters Act of 1919, extending the powers of the Scottish Secretary to acquire land compulsorily for small holdings, with scarcely a murmur of disapproval in Parliament.

Leverhulme wanted the Scottish Office to condemn the Lewis land-raiders and come out in full support of him. While the Scottish Office was prepared to support him fully they felt that they could not condemn the land raiders because they understood their desperate needs and also because of the Government's pre-war promises to the crofting community.

Leverhulme was dissatisfied and stopped almost all of his development schemes. An interim interdict was granted to Leverhulme, against some of the land-raiders, including those of Steimreway and Orinsay who had cut their names defiantly in the turf. Mrs Jessie Platt of Eishkin appealed to Leverhulme to prosecute the raiders, even although she had nothing to do with the land they were raiding, except that it was adjacent, and probably too near to her own deer forest of Park. At that time the land of Steimreway and Orinsay was on a 21-year lease to Roderick Martin of Crobeg Farm. In the end Leverhulme decided not to proceed against the land raiders. It was doubtful if he could succeed against the raiders, given that the Scottish Secretary's attitude was somewhat sympathetic.

At that time the people of Lewis thought that Leverhulme's development schemes were stopped because of the land raiding, but unknown to anyone in Lewis at that time was the fact that Leverhulme's business empire was going through a severe financial crisis, even with the possibility of bankruptcy early in 1921, and probably his financial crisis had more to do with stopping his development schemes than land-raiding.

Meetings were held all over the Island and 9,000 people signed a petition supporting Leverhulme. The only districts that did not fully support him were Back and Park. The reason for the financial crisis of Lever Brothers and Lord Leverhulme was that they purchased the shares of the Niger Company in Africa for £8,000,000 without noticing that the Niger Company had a £2,000,000 overdraft and Lever Brothers became liable for that sum in 1920, when there was a worldwide slump, and Lever products were not selling well. Also, the Inland Revenue was personally pursuing Lord Leverhulme at that time.

Leverhulme's auditor managed to raise a debenture loan from Barclays Bank and the bank held nearly all the debenture stock. That meant that the bank had a degree of control over Lever Brothers and Lord Leverhulme. They were passing through a period of stress, and so were the people of Lewis and Harris. In May 1921 Leverhulme ordered a complete closure of all the Lewis development schemes.

Eventually, Leverhulme approached the Scottish Secretary, Mr Munro, indicating that he was prepared to resume his development schemes if the raiders withdrew, and Mr Munro suspended all land settlement schemes for a period of 10 years, in order to allow him to prove the success or failure of his projects.

Mr Munro granted Lord Leverhulme a 10-year period on condition that the development works would continue without further suspension. Some of the land raiders insisted that they must be given crofts and they only withdrew very reluctantly.

Meantime, Leverhulme decided to concentrate his development schemes in Harris and the village of Obe was renamed Leverburgh. By the end of 1921 Leverhulme decided not to oppose the breaking up of the Lewis farms into crofts. He also said that due to the economic situations:

No one regrets more than myself, that the canning factory, the fish products, the ice company etc. cannot be opened for work, because the conditions of supply and demand in these industries, make it impossible to do so. The business could only make heavy losses if they operated at present, and we must wait patiently for world markets to be cleared of surplus stock before prices will adjust themselves to the cost of production.

The economic situation in the Western Isles in the early 1920s, following the First World War, was depressing in the extreme and in April 1923 the first batch of 300 emigrants left Stornoway on the Canadian Pacific Liner 'Metagama'. Twenty of the emigrants were girls and the remainder were young men of the average age of 22 years. Many more were to emigrate in the later 1920s.

Meantime, the Lever Brothers business empire was recovering from the financial crisis in 1922, and by 1923 Leverhulme decided to give up the Island of Lewis, and the idea of giving the Island to its people occurred to him in June 1923. On Monday 3rd September 1923 Leverhulme made one of the momentous speeches of his career. He requested a joint meeting of the Members of the Stornoway Town Council, the Lewis District Committee and the Parish Council, in the Town Council Chambers.

To the Town of Stornoway he offered, as a free gift, Lewis Castle and its Policies. The Castle might be used as a Town Hall, Public Library and the Provost's residence. Also, various other properties in the town were offered. A Trust to be known as 'The Stornoway Trust' was to be formed to administer the properties.

To the crofters of the Parish of Stornoway he offered a freehold of all the crofts in the Parish, and any crofts not accepted by their occupiers, were to be given to the Stornoway Trustees.

To the Lewis District Council, Leverhulme offered the farms, lodges and sporting rights of the remainder of the Island, as a free gift, to be managed by a second Trust.

To the rural crofters of the rest of Lewis Leverhulme offered the freehold of all the crofts as a free gift, with the condition that any crofter who chose not to accept the offer, their crofts should be given to the Rural Trust.

Leverhulme asked for a reply in a month's time because he was about to leave on an extended trip to Australia.

The Stornoway Town Council decided unanimously to accept Leverhulme's generous offer, but the individual crofters of the Parish of Stornoway declined the offer of their crofts and therefore the croft lands went over to the newly formed Stornoway Trust, which is administered democratically by Trustees who are elected by the people of Stornoway Parish. This was a model of community land ownership.

After a cursory investigation of the accounts, the Lewis District Council declined the offer of the farms and the shooting lodges etc., because they felt that the income did not match the expenditure. The excess of expenditure over revenue at that time was felt to be about £1,365.

No doubt the members of the Lewis District Council, whose powers were limited, were taken by surprise by Leverhulme's sudden and dramatic offer, which they had to decide upon very quickly, leaving them very little time to seek good professional advice. Some people might be inclined to say that the Lewis District Council failed to appreciate the historical significance, both to themselves, and to posterity, of the decision they were called upon to make at their meeting on 5th October 1923, when they voted six against, three for, and one abstention. The composition of the District Council was as follows:

Murdo Maclean, Chairman	did not vote	Mrs JM Fraser	in favour
Alexander Maclennan	against	Ronald Macdonald	in favour
John MacLeod	against	John Mitchell	in favour
Alex Morrison	against	Donald Macleod	against
Malcolm Mackenzie	against	Alex Macfarquhar	against
Hector Smith	abstained, due to his age		

The rejection of Lord Leverhulme's offer by the Lewis District Council left Leverhulme with no alternative but to sell the Lewis Estate, less the Parish of Stornoway.

In the depressed economic conditions that prevailed at that time, there was very little demand for crofting estates, and the Island was therefore parcelled up into various small estates and sold off with difficulty, in some cases. A few of the individual crofters accepted Leverhulme's offer to take their own croft land.

After opening the War Memorial just outside Stornoway, Lord Leverhulme left the Island on 5th September 1924, never to return. On 23rd September 1924 he embarked on a six-month tour of the Congo, arriving back in Britain on 15th March 1925. Asked how he felt, he responded, 'I never felt better in my life'.

Shortly after that he caught a cold, which quickly developed into pneumonia. He died at 4.30am on Thursday 7th May 1925.

The new Board of Lever Brothers quickly closed down all the Leverhulme development schemes in Lewis and Harris. The people of Lewis and Harris were sorry to hear about the passing of Lord Leverhulme, and those of them that had crofts were glad that they at least had their crofts to fall back on, as usual in a time of crisis. Sadly many of them did not have crofts and the 1920s and 1930s were a lean time, until after 20 years of peace they were called up to fight yet another war.

[ends]

AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: The Leverhulme Period 1918-1925

Location in physical archive: Series A, File 1, Section 18

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/1/12

© Angus Macleod Archive

See also Hebridean Connections, for information about Lord Leverhulme:

<http://www.hebrideanconnections.com/Details.aspx?subjectid=38778>