



[The Life of the Crofter]

For generations the crofters were a people without rights or privileges. They were completely at the mercy of inconsiderate and rapacious landowners until they gained a measure of emancipation through the first Crofters Act of 1886. Basically, they were crofter/fishermen with a scatter of tradesmen to service the needs of the community such as weavers, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, stonemasons, blacksmiths, boat builders, millers etc. They followed seasonal herring fishing round the fishing ports of Scotland and England, as well as white fishing at home in the winter. The society was organized in small townships and their choice of site was governed by accessibility to the sea because it was from the sea that the substance of their livelihood came, in large measure.

They made a living from the sea and land by arduous toil. They built their own homes from local material and they built their own boats very often. During the long winter evenings they spent the time pleasantly and lightheartedly with their fellows in the ceilidh house. They were Gaelic speaking with little or no knowledge of English until the second quarter of the 19th century, or later. Their culture, in which song, story, folklore and religion played important parts, remained unchanged down through the years. However, comparatively recently, formal education, two world wars, travel, radio and television etc, shattered their isolation and brought about many changes.

A landholding was essential because it provided a site for a family home in the first place, and sustenance for at least part of the year, as well as an insurance against real hardship and distress in the event of one of the periodic failures of the fishing.

They were patriots who served in all branches of the armed forces, but because of their expertise in seamanship, they were in great demand in both the Merchant Navy and the Royal Navy, particularly in times of emergency. They were adaptable and from time to time they sought work on the mainland. Their adventurous spirit also enabled them to emigrate to every corner of the world in an effort to improve their lot.

Being bilingual they soon absorbed education when the opportunity arose. One of the most distinctive features of the Western Isles today is the prevalence of the Gaelic language. More than anywhere else the Western Isles remain the stronghold of the ancient Gaelic language despite hundreds of years of suppression, official neglect and condemnation. Gaelic is still in everyday use as the first language of the vast majority of the indigenous people of the Western Isles. It is still vibrant and strong. It is the first language of the writer.

The crofting system of land tenure as practiced in the seven crofting counties of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland ever since the second half of the 18th century evolved from the earliest clan system of land tenure known as the runrig system which prevailed in the Highlands of Scotland for centuries. The seven crofting counties are, Sutherland; Caithness; Ross and Cromarty; Inverness-shire; Argyllshire; Orkney and Shetland. The Western Isles, from Lewis to Barra, used to be part of Ross and Cromarty and Inverness-shire, but since 1973 The Western Isles are a new local authority on their own, and they are known as 'Comhairle nan Eilean Siar', with their administrative headquarters at Stornoway. There are 18,000 crofts in the Highlands and Islands, 6,000 of which are in the Western Isles.

Crofting is based on a unique form of small scale land use which has enabled rural areas to maintain a healthy level of human settlement on the land. The system is structured as communities or villages consisting of anything from a few crofts, to a hundred or more crofts per village. A croft consists of two constituent parts. The inbye land within the village boundary walls are divided into small five to ten acre landholdings or crofts with strictly defined boundaries. These crofts are tenanted by independent individual crofters, holding their tenure direct from a landowner on a continuous basis so long as they pay their annual land rent.

In that way the landowning class was not only in direct control of the land, but they were also in direct control of the lives of the people who occupied the land on a year to year basis, and could, and often did, forcibly remove the crofters against their will, at short notice, hence the Highland clearances which came to an end when the crofter population rose up in rebellion in the early 1880s and withheld their land rent, until the 1886 first Crofters Act was passed which granted security of tenure to the crofters for the first time ever.

In addition to the inbye land of the croft proper which is located within the walls of the township, the crofter also has a right to a share in the common grazings which is usually located just outside the village boundary wall and is held collectively by all the crofting tenants in the village. In that way we see that crofts consist of two constituent

parts and therefore the crofter is cast in a dual role of a private entrepreneur on his individual croft within the village, while at the same time he is a communist in his capacity as a shareholder in the common grazing.

The common grazing is managed by a township committee known as the 'Grazing Committee'. The Grazing Committee is duly elected by the township shareholders every three years and it regulates such things as the allocation of peat banks, the dates on which the village stock is admitted or removed from the inbye land of the village to the hill pasture, the provision of sheep fanks and the maintenance of the village boundary walls, as well as organizing the gathering of the village sheep for wool clipping and dipping etc, etc.

Crofts are small part-time units, as Sir John McNeill pointed out in his 1851 Report on Conditions in the Crofting Areas, when he says: 'The crofts of Lewis provide produce for only six months of the year, and therefore subsistence for half the year must come from other sources, as well as money for rent and everything else they must purchase.'

Traditionally that subsistence, or additional employment was kelping and fishing, but nowadays crofters participate in a wide variety of jobs, including business and various other highly skilled work. That is what makes the crofting way of life so attractive. Crofters are very cosmopolitan in outlook.

Crofting is also environmentally friendly. It is the crofting system that created and sustained the present Highland environment and it would be a great pity if we were to neglect our cultural and environmental heritage in the Highlands and Islands, including our Gaelic language.

Also, a feature of crofting tenure is that it is the crofter, not the landlord as in farming, who provides the croft dwelling house, the steading and all other improvements on the croft. Because of that the first Crofters Act of 1886, which gave crofting its statutory basis, granted to the crofters the right to compensation at outgo for all the permanent improvements which he and his predecessors carried out on the land, should he choose to claim from the landlord. The rent which the crofter pays is for the unimproved bare land of the croft.

The really distinctive feature of the crofting society is not the land tenure, by which the crofters hold the land, but the close-knit communal spirit of the crofter townships, hence perhaps the best definition of crofting that was yet suggested as 'a way of life with a social conscience'.

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