



## [Background to the Crofters' Union Movement]

The formation of the new Scottish Crofters Union in November 1985 was an historical landmark in the affairs of the Highlands of Scotland. The new union successfully accomplished the long standing aspirations of the highland crofting community which was to form a representative crofter organisation embracing the seven crofting counties in order to encourage the development of crofting and to protect and promote the agricultural and other interests of crofting in the Highlands and Islands. The formation of the union was the culmination of several attempts by the crofting community to form an effective crofter representative organisation during the last 100 years.

While it is true to say that the new Scottish Crofters Union is more interested in looking to the future than recounting the failures and mistakes of the past, nevertheless, we believe a brief examination of the history of the Crofters Union Movement might help us to avoid some of the mistakes of the past.

The first attempt by the Highland crofting community to unite and form a representative organisation that would speak on their behalf with one voice was over 100 years ago, when the Land League was formed in the early 1880s in response to generations of ruthless application and persecution by tacksmen, landlords and their factors. Practically every crofter in the Highlands and Islands joined the league.

The land league campaigned for land reform, which was long overdue and they carried their fight to the Houses of Parliament, and at the same time they embarked on a rent strike, which was supported by crofters throughout the Highlands and Islands. Eventually their efforts and sacrifices were rewarded when Parliament pressed the first Crofters Act of 1886.

While the first Crofters Act fell far short of the comprehensive social reform called for by the leaders of the crofters and their supporters in Parliament it was a very welcome reform, the benefits of which are well known, including security of tenure.

One of the ways in which the 1886 Crofters Act fell short of expectations was to ignore the plight of the thousand and thousands of landless crofter families then in the Highlands and Islands, who were obliged to squat in cairns and other hovels, on their relatives' landholdings, while the land from which they and their forefathers were forcibly evicted remained under sheep and deer.

Once the 1886 Crofters Act was passed and the crofters with landholdings of their own got security of tenure they became complacent and support for the Land League began to fall off. The ultimate result was a lapse back into a long winter of fifty years of disunity before we find, in the 1930s, a desire among the crofting community to unite again and set up a representative organisation, this time, called the Crofters Union. Even then, the movement appears to be restricted to small organisations in Lochaber and Lewis, both of which declined at the onset of the Second World War. Thereafter there was another period of twenty years before the next effective attempt to set up a Crofters Union was made in the 1960s.

With hindsight, what do we learn from these events? For one thing, we learn the value of a united community when we reflect on the success of the Land League in convincing Parliament to pass the first Crofters Act in 1886, in the short space of time that the League existed.

The 1886 Crofters Act had far reaching effects on the subsequent history of the Highlands and Islands, by consolidating the crofters system of land use by giving it legal recognition for the first time ever. If we were to ask ourselves, what would be the situation in the Highlands and Islands today in the absence of the 1886 Crofters Act, it would be quite reasonable for us to assume that the crofting system of land use would have disappeared long ago, and with it the population of the Highlands and Islands.

When we consider the party political line-up then and later on and the determined resistance of the Highland landowners and their political friends, we cannot assume that the 1886 Crofters Act would ever have been passed without the influence of the Land League.

Another lesson we should learn from the history of the Land League is the folly of a divided crofting community. When we consider the way thousands of landless crofter's families were let down when the crofters failed to maintain full support for the League after the 1886 Crofters Act.

The landless families expected the League to continue the struggle for the restoration of the lands from which their forefathers were forcibly removed and were at that time under sheep and deer instead of being restored to their rightful owners, the landless cottier families. If the sheep farmers and deer runs had been returned to the landless cottiers at that time, perhaps the history of the Leverhulme period in Lewis and other similar events throughout the Highlands and Islands might have been different.

As it was, the problem of the deprived landless cottiers continued for another fifty years, with spasmodic land raiding, until eventually the problem resolved itself by a combination of land raiding, emigration, depopulation, wars and economic depression.

Probably the Land League was before its time and it was not possible at that time to organise a crofter's organisation properly as a professional body with paid fulltime staff, and in the absence of that it was difficult to keep the organisation together.

What was, euphemistically called, the crofters problem was debated by thoughtful people everywhere, among them was Dr Fraser Darling, who had been devoting part of his time to demonstration and educational work among the crofters. He proposed in 1944, a study of the causes underlying depopulation and economic decline in the Highlands. This proposal received the support of the Department of Agriculture for Scotland and the Development Commissioners and the first grant for the work was given in 1944. Eventually the result of years of study by Dr Fraser Darling and his team was published in 1955 as the 'West Highland Survey'.

Meantime, in 1951 the Secretary of State for Scotland appointed a commission of enquiry with the following terms of reference 'to review crofting conditions in the Highlands and Islands with special reference to the secure establishment of a small holding population making full use of agricultural resources and deriving the maximum economic benefit there from'.

The commission of eleven people was chaired by Principal Thomas M Taylor and became known as the Taylor Commission. Their report was presented to Parliament in April 1954. A long list of organisations gave evidence to the Taylor Commission including the Scottish Landowners Federation, but the absence of the united voice of the crofting community through a properly organised and representative crofters union is very conspicuous at this important juncture in the history of crofting.

The Taylor Commission recommended the establishment of a Crofters Commission and the 1955 Crofters Act established such a commission. Under the 1955 Act the Crofters Commission was charged with the duties of reorganising, developing and regulating crofters in the seven crofting counties of Scotland.

The early annual reports of the new Crofters Commission provoked considerable interest and debate among the crofting community. The Commission wanted to rationalise crofting agriculture and the crofters were not very clear about what was meant by rationalisation and for that reason they were somewhat uneasy.

Then the fourth annual report of the Crofters Commission came out in 1959 and many of the crofters were alarmed following the publication of this report. Paragraph 69 of that report reads; 'But security of tenure has frozen crofting agriculture in an outdated pattern of minute units ... the problem is to unfreeze the system'.

Then paragraph 70 of the same report reads as follows; 'If we are given the necessary enabling powers... we shall be undertaking a drastic reduction in the number of crofter houses, which may entail a reduction in population numbers'.

Along with rationalisation of crofting agriculture some of the other issues hotly debated at that time were 'compulsory sub letting of crofts' and rating of crofters homes.

There was strong and widespread feeling throughout the Highlands and Islands regarding some of the proposals of the 1959 Crofters Commission Report such as 'a drastic reduction in croft houses' and 'the unfreezing of the crofting system' which they felt might be the beginning of an official second highland clearance, and they felt threatened by the very Crofters Commission that was set up to help them.

Mention of Clearances and threats to their security of tenure evoke painful memories of the minds of Highlanders and there was an immediate response everywhere throughout the Highlands and Islands. Crofters set up independent branches of their Crofters Union in the early 1960s and because there was no effective coordination between the various branches, each branch was in effect a small autonomous union. Nevertheless the Crofters Union movement did a lot of good works in the 1960s. The inaugural meetings of the 'Western Isles Crofters Union' took place in the Masonic Hall in Stornoway, in January 1961 and the level of activity of that branch can be judged from the fact that they held twenty meetings in 1961.

The concept of one single Crofters Union for the whole of the seven crofting counties was not raised at this time presumably because it was felt that the area was too scattered and it would be impossible to administer one single union effectively, seeing the movement relied on voluntary office bearers.

To overcome the problem of coordination between the various autonomic Crofter Union branches, a Federation of Crofters Unions was set up in the early 1960s and all the union branches from Shetland to the Outer Hebrides were affiliated. At first the federation was based in Lewis with Vice-Chairman from the mainland such as Walter Cameron from Ranavie, and Kenneth Mackenzie from the Strathpeffer area. The aim of the federation is given as:

- a) To unite all Crofters Unions in the crofting counties of Scotland and to promote the formation of Crofters Unions where none at present exist and
- b) To coordinate the policy of unions on common problems.

Meetings of the federation are held on the Scottish mainland as well as in Lewis and it was a very effective body for about ten years or so. Among the activities of the federation was the publication of an annual handbook, which was distributed free to all members of the union. In the early 1970s the federation was moved to the Scottish mainland and after a while it became inactive and lay dormant for some years. Many of the Crofter Union branches also became inactive in the 1970s.

The Western Isles branch of the Crofters Union was constituted at the inaugural meeting in 1961, and embraced all the Outer Isles, but it was discovered at an early date that that arrangement was not practical on account of the difficulty of attending meetings in such a scattered area. Accordingly the area was split up into five branches as follows: Lewis and Harris, North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist and Barra. Unfortunately there was no machinery for effective coordination between those five branches and by the early 1970s they all suffered serious decline.

Following the searching debates of the 1960s some of the larger and more active crofters on the Scottish mainland decided to become associated with the Scottish National Farmers Union, which was formed before the First World War, rather than form an Independent Crofters Union. Therefore they formed a Crofters Committee with their own convenor within the N.F.U. organisation.

Of the 12,000 active crofters in the Highlands only about 700 joined the N.F.U. Crofters Committee and therefore it has become quite clear over the years that the average crofter is not prepared to join the N.F.U. because they feel that their interests may not necessarily be compatible with that of the big farmers and therefore they prefer to belong to an independent Crofters Union. Even when the old Crofters Union movement declined in the 1970s almost to the point of extinction, there was no move among the main body of crofters to join the N.F.U. Crofters Committee.

The emergence of the new Scottish Crofters Union in the 1980s has changed the situation dramatically. This time, for the first time ever, the S.C.U. is a professional organisation, well organised and covering the whole Highlands and Islands. Modern communications and modern technology such as the computer and the copying machines etc. make it possible to administer the new Crofter Union in a way that it was never possible before. The new union is working well and is taken seriously by the authorities. The S.C.U. has a good relationship with the N.F.U. and by choosing to adopt the N.F.U. Mutual Insurance the S.C.U. has demonstrated their good will.

There is still one big problem confronting the crofting community - lack of unity. They are at present divided into three groups - The new S.C.U., the N.F.U. Crofters Committee and a large body of crofters who do not seem to have any sense of duty. In the second half of the 1970s the Lewis and Harris branch of the Crofters Union received and was very active with some 1200 members holding regular meetings with very good discussions. At that time consideration was given to revitalising the federation by bringing it back to the Outer Hebrides, which might be easier to sustain because of the concentration of crofters living there. By the early 1980s we had the Federation of Crofters Unions going once again with a committee drawn from all the Islands of the Outer Hebrides because it was convenient for representatives from all the Islands to attend meetings seeing councillors, and officials of Comhairle Nan Eilean travelled regularly between the Islands.

Our next step was to organise the future A.G.M. of the federation at Inverness in order to coincide with the annual Crofters Commission Assessors conference, so that we might take advantage of the ready gathering of crofter assessors from every corner of the seven crofting counties at Inverness and try and stimulate new interest in the Crofters Union movement. The Crofters Commission gave us every possible assistance and encouragement, even to the extent of agreeing to our request to enclose our notice calling the federation A.G.M. on the evening of the assessors' conference, along with the assessors' papers in the post, at no cost to us.

We also distributed the Federation Annual Report among the 100 or so Crofters Commission assessors and in that way we did stimulate renewed interest in the Crofters Union movement, little by little and is acknowledged on page 3 of the Hunter Feasibility Study where it says; 'During the last five years, five previously inactive unions have been reconstituted and the total membership of the movement has at least doubled and possibly even trebled, and many Crofters Unions now possess energetic committees composed largely of active crofters'.

In 1982 we addressed our first written communication to the Highlands and Islands Development Board asking for financial assistance for a paid fulltime organiser because past experience had convinced us that an effective Crofters Union movement could never be properly organised or sustained in a permanent way so long as the movement relied on voluntary office bearers.

We suggested a five year period of perhaps pump-priming financial assistance on a diminishing scale to enable us to employ an organiser with secretarial assistance, in order to organise all the crofters of the seven crofting counties, into an effective professional Crofters Union, which would hopefully be able to be self-financing at the end of a five year period.

By the end of 1982 we had gathered the remnants of four union branches into membership of the Federation, three of them in the Outer Hebrides and Assynt on the mainland. By the end of 1984 the Branch Union Membership of the Federation comprised of ten union branches, some of which were barely active. However, the very name 'The Federation of Crofters Unions' was impressive and we felt that many people were impressed by the title, which enabled us to claim to represent the crofter's voice.

The H.I.D.B. however, with whom we had many meetings in 1982 and 1983 must have had doubts about our often repeated claims that the crofters of the Highlands and Islands were ready to form a single union, because in the end they suggested a feasibility study, and on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1983 we made a formal application to the H.I.D.B. for financial assistance to enable us to sponsor a feasibility study by a professional consultant.

At the Federation A.G.M. at Inverness at the beginning of November 1983, Mr Hugh Maclean of the H.I.D.B. announced the board's acceptance of our proposal to employ a consultant to ascertain if the crofters were indeed keen to set up a single Crofters Union. A grant of £2,250 was given to the Federation to carry out the feasibility study. It was not a large sum but we felt we had achieved a breakthrough and we expressed our grateful thanks.

Some time after the Federation A.G.M. of 1983 we set up a four person Steering Committee, two persons from the H.I.D.B. and two persons from the Federation to prepare for and oversee the feasibility study. Terms of reference were drawn up and in due course Dr. Jim Hunter was appointed to carry out the feasibility study.

In the heated debates of the 1960s some of the crofters on the mainland of Scotland decided to associate themselves with the Scottish N.F.U., which was formed before the First World War, rather than from an independent Crofters Union. There, these crofters who were in the main the bigger crofters with the largest land holdings have a Crofters Committee with their own convenor within the N.F.U. organisation.

Over the years it became very clear that the average crofter was determined not to join the N.F.U. Crofters Committee because they felt that their interests were not necessarily compatible, and although the Crofters Union movement declined almost to the point of extinction in the 1970s, there was no move among the main body of crofters to join the N.F.U. However, the very fact that several hundred crofters joined the N.F.U. in the 1960s proves that there was a strong desire among the crofter population to form themselves into an effective organisation.

The situation in the 1980s has changed dramatically and the crofting community has now set up a well organised professional Scottish Crofters Union covering the whole Highlands and Islands and while we live in a free country of choice, it is however a very great pity that there was not greater unity in the crofting world. Neither the S.C.U. nor the Crofters Committee of the N.F.U. is ever going to achieve their full potential while they are divided into two organisations. The S.C.U. has demonstrated their goodwill by choosing to adopt the N.F.U. Mutual Insurance in preference to other available insurance companies. Now it is the turn of the Crofters Committee of the N.F.U. to disband their own committee and play their part in a unified single Scottish Crofters Union, for the benefit of the whole Highland community.

Even if the S.C.U. and the N.F.U. Crofters Committees were to join forces, their combined membership would still be under half the potential crofter membership of 12,000 active crofters in the Highlands and Islands. What, may we ask are the 7,000 indifferent crofters who are not members of the Crofters Union, thinking about? They were letting their fellows down, and if, at the end of the day, the S.C.U. fails because of lack of crofters support, we can be sure that, there will never be another opportunity to organise the crofters into an independent Crofters Union.

In the fullness of time the Highland Crofting Community formed themselves into one professional Crofters Union in order to encourage the development of the crofting community and protect and promote the agricultural and other interests of crofting in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The new 'Scottish Crofters Union' was formed in November 1985 but it did not become fully operative until the Director took up his post in March 1986.

The new Scottish Crofters Union replaced all the previous independent area Crofter Unions that existed before that, because they had virtually closed, and had virtually ceased to function as effective Crofters Unions. It also replaced the Federation of Crofters Unions, which had been revived in 1980 with the movement.

It would not have been possible to tackle the establishment of a single Crofters Union covering the whole Highlands and Islands except through the Federation of Crofter Unions which purported to speak for a fair number of crofters once the surviving ten branches of the old Crofters Union were encouraged to revive and become members of the federation.

While the revival of the Federation of Crofters Unions enabled us to speak for crofters in a spread of ten areas throughout the Highland and Islands, it was still not possible for us to tackle the establishment of a single Crofters Union for such a scattered area as the seven crofting counties of Scotland without financial assistance to enable us to organise this new movement.

Some would say that the crofters themselves should have provided the necessary finances by becoming members of the new union. But the dilemma was that there was no new union in existence, and it could not be brought into existence without first gathering a substantial sum of money to enable us to hold meetings throughout the Highlands and Islands and provide an opportunity for the crofters to organise themselves into a single professional Crofters Union. To solve that problem we approached the H.I.D.B. for an establishment grant.

While the H.I.D.B. was prepared to consider our proposals, naturally they had to satisfy themselves that our proposals were reliable, and to that end they questioned us closely and we endeavoured to demonstrate from the facts of Highland history that there was a need for a professional crofters union and indeed that the crofters were trying to organise themselves into a representative body for the last one hundred years as follows:

The common people of the Highlands and Islands were ruthlessly exploited and oppressed for a very long time by clan chiefs, tacksmen and landowners until at length the people themselves rose up and united under the banner of the Land League in the 1880s and fought a bitter struggle for land law reform. Were it not for that bitter struggle by our forefathers which culminated into the pressing of the first Crofters Act in 1886, there would be no crofting community in the Highlands and Islands today.

After the failure of the kelp industry in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, large numbers of Islanders began to go in season to the east coast fishing as hired deckhands on the east coast fishing boats.

[ends]

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