



[The Pairc Clearances - Crofters' Testimony]

Although the Park Peninsula might be considered by some people to be somewhat remote now-a-days because of the 30-mile distance by road between the seaport town of Stornoway and the Park district, the situation was quite different in the 18th and 19th centuries before cars and roads became a reality. At that time the people normally travelled by foot or by boat and every family owned its own boat in the same way as every family owns a car now-a-days.

Furthermore, the economy of the Island depended mainly on crofting agriculture, fishing and kelping, and Park with its numerous sheltered anchorages and sea lochs, as well as prolific off shore fishing banks and kelping shores, was considered to be one of the best places on the Island to live and work in. The area was only about one hour by sail-boat from the Port of Stornoway and the sheltered hills of Park were also eminently suitable for stock throughout the year.

Let us hear the testimony of some of the evicted crofters themselves, testifying on behalf of their communities to the Napier and Brand Commissions of Enquiry into Crofting.

George Mackenzie of 6 Laxay:

I came to Laxay at the age of 8 years (1828), along with my father and ten other crofter families who were driven from Park with all their belongings, from their thriving and agreeable holdings in which they knew nothing beyond prosperity and happiness. Park, which nature seemed to mean for men with all its arable land, hill pastures and bays of the sea, offering grand opportunities of comfort, as a reward for human industry, was quite un-precedently relieved of the inhabitants of about 28 townships.

To the perpetrators of such deeds, the discontentment and bitter feelings of the fugitive inhabitants appeared as nothing at all, compared to the peculiar pleasure they enjoyed from the fact that, now the sheep and the flat footed deer could graze on the meadows and the hearths impiously depopulated. Some of these people were evicted to America. Others scattered here and there at home, on small patches of land in the less thought of districts. A crofter having the misfortune of falling the displeasure of factor or ground of fear, however innocent the poor man may be, has not the ghost of a chance of getting along uninterrupted.

As an illustration of this, I can say I knew a person, a crofter in the village, who was compelled to abandon three different holdings and three different new houses, which he built in the sweat of his brow, in three consecutive years, without even a kind word in the way of aid or compensation for his labour, time and expense. There is another man, still living here, who underwent a similar disagreeable process. When we came to Laxay we found seven crofters there. Then it was divided into 17 crofts, at a rent of about £80. Soon however, £10 more was added to the rent of the village, and five shillings road money and one shilling for hens, which is now looked upon as a natural rent.

There are now 29 crofts, the latest of which is placed in our pasture way. The land is now almost entirely exhausted by continual ploughing. This with high rent and taxes in some cases, together with sub-dividing of crofts, make the prospects of the crofter very dark and hopeless. Mr Mackay, the present Chamberlain, has committed very gross injustice upon a sister of my own, who with peculiar industry kept her croft in good order and paid her rent regularly, cruelly turned her out of the croft six years ago, and would not accept the rent from her. She was blind and helpless; they never enquired after her. I had to take her to myself when the land she had was given to another man.

It is high time Parliament made an investigation as to the cause, or causes, of grievances amongst Her Majesty's loyal subjects in the Highlands, and especially in Lewis, where factor and ground officers pretend to be in absolute and arbitrary power, and they labour hard to keep the people in perpetual awe of their own importance (not of course denying them their proper places). We herewith suggest respectfully, some of the remedies necessary for our well-being and comfort. To obtain the arable land and hill pastures, now under sheep and deer, would of

itself, if given to our enormous number of cottars and others, meet a vast deal of what is needed.

Mr Mackenzie was asked if there were other crofter townships cleared from Park since the time when the 28 townships, to which he referred already, were cleared, he stated: 'I can speak of 4 townships that have been cleared since that time, and that are now included in the Park Farm'.

John Smith of Balallan, age 75, elected by the people of Balallan to represent them at the Napier Commission sitting at Keose on 12th June 1883 stated: 'I was born in Eishkin in Park and my family were among 16 families who were cleared from Park when I was about 15 years of age, in order to place it under sheep'.

Asked if they were removed for their own benefit, he responded: 'Quite the contrary, but because of the oppression of the people, dealt with as a flock of sheep driven by dogs into a fank'.

Asked if the other people who were removed from Park, like his father, were in comfortable circumstances:

Yes, nobody needed to leave the place from one year's end to another for anything the family required. If one family happened to be short of provisions, they had only to ask their neighbour who would supply them.

Roderick Finlayson of 8 Marvig, gave evidence to both the Napier and Brand Commissions of Enquiry into Crofting and Deer Forests. Giving evidence to the Brand Commission at their meeting in Stornoway on July 9th 1894, Mr Finlayson corroborated the evidence given by George Mackenzie of Laxay to the Napier Commission, when he stated at question 44,044 that there were about 34 crofter townships cleared from Park.

At the same meeting of the Brand Commission, Mr Alexander MacLennan of Marvig, a Church Elder, stated at question 43,921 that: 'There was an old man in the township that was born and brought up in Park, and he told me that there were 34 places in Park where people dwelt at one time.'

Mr MacLennan stated that there were 23 lots in the township of Marvig and 40 households. There were only 8 lots whole that are not sub-divided. That constitutes an additional 5 families in Marvig since Roderick Finlayson gave evidence to the Napier Commission eleven years earlier in 1883. Where there were crofts at one time there are now 40 families, and a growing population. Both Mr MacLennan's and Mr Finlayson's families were cleared from southern Park. Mr Finlayson's from Buthinish and Mr MacLennan's from Ceann Creannag at the head of Loch Brollum. Mr MacLennan confirmed that Ceann Creannag was among the first townships that were cleared when the sheep farm was set up.

To illustrate how well-off some of these crofters in southern Park were, we quote Roderick Finlayson again at question 17,554 of the Napier Commission evidence: 'There were only three tenants in Aldinish and when they left, they took away with them 23 cows each.'

Donald Mackenzie of 24 Crossbost, age 68. One of the crofters evicted from Orinsay in 1843 testified to the Napier Commission at their meeting in Keose on 12th June 1883:

Our first complaint was to be driven away from Loch Shell 40 years ago. The fires were drowned in the hearths by the officers of the Estate. We were fined £50 sterling for not leaving the village on the appointed day. The people of the two villages were put to a smaller village than the one they were driven from. When the people came to Crossbost they had a small village five miles away for herding. It was taken from them and rented to another man, and nothing taken off the rent of the village for it. Another piece of ground was taken from us at the end of the village, rented for £5 and nothing taken off the rent of the village for that. Four new crofts were set at the end of the village and paying rent to the Estate, and nothing taken off the rent of the village.

Mr Mackenzie testified that his father's croft in Orinsay 'carried four milking cows, several young cattle beasts, and about 50 sheep. The place was good and there was a good outrun or back'.

Asked if they would like to go back; 'That is what we desire.' Eight years later in 1891 a boat with 18 land raiders sailed from Crossbost and re-roofed some of the former crofter houses in Orinsay.

[ends]

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