



[A Closer Look at the Pairc Sheep Farm]

By 1800 the south country sheep farmers and their big cheviot sheep 'na caoraich mhor' were all over the Highlands and were moving into the Islands.

The first commercial sheep farm to be established in Lewis was the Park Sheep Farm. It was set up about 1802 at the southern tip of the Park peninsula in Lochs, where the farmhouse may still be seen at Valamus. In setting up the farm, Lord Seaforth, the Lewis proprietor 1783-1815, followed the example of his counterparts in the Highlands. Like them, he also embarked on a comprehensive programme of so-called improvements to his Lewis estate, made up as follows: large scale commercial sheep farming, the elimination of the tacksmen class, the complete takeover of the profitable kelp industry, the replacing of the old run-rig system of land tenure by the new crofting system of tenure, as well as the encouragement of, and participation in, the fishing industry.

At that time the whole of the Park peninsula was occupied by crofters and the greater part of them resided in the southern half of the peninsula. In order therefore to establish the sheep farm, which was comparatively small at the outset, a number of established crofter communities were removed from their land and homes in the area of the proposed sheep farm. That was the first of many such crofter evictions in the history of Park.

The establishment of the Park sheep farm was followed by the setting up of many more sheep farms throughout Lewis, and in each case, the crofters were evicted in order to clear the way for the incoming southern sheep farmers and their sheep.

From the outset the Lewis estate and the tenants of the Park sheep farm adopted a policy of expanding the farm by clearing the crofters from time to time, from the area adjacent to the farm, and incorporating their land within the farm boundaries.

That policy of farm expansion continued for most of the first half of the 19th century, until nearly two-thirds of the land surface of the peninsula was taken over by the sheep farm and many hundreds of smallholders were cleared from their holdings.

Lord Seaforth who, as Colonel Francis Humbertson Mackenzie, was created a peer of the United Kingdom and Baron Mackenzie of Kintail in 1797, suffered from deafness and imperfect speech, yet it was said of him that owing to his remarkable mental endowments he triumphed over his disability. He gained for himself a national reputation as a result of raising the 1st Battalion 78th Foot Seaforth Highlanders, known to Lewis tradition as 'Saighdearan Mhic Choinnich Bodhair', the 'soldiers of deaf Mackenzie'. In 1804 the 2nd Battalion 78th Foot Seaforth Highlanders were raised. There was a large number of Lewis soldiers in both these regiments, some of them from Lochs. They fought the French at Maida in Italy and their Turkish allies at El-Hamad in Egypt, where many of them were blinded and discharged with a small army pension. Some of them also went off to the Far East and fought in Java etc.

In 1800 Lord Seaforth was appointed Governor of Barbados, where he served for a number of years, and was not therefore at home when the Park sheep farm was established in 1802, although he would be familiar with the details of the administration of his estates. He died in 1815, and was succeeded by his daughter, Mary Frederica Elizabeth, widow of Admiral Sir Samuel Hood who fought with Admiral Nelson at Trafalgar. He died in 1814. Lord Seaforth's daughter was known to the elder generation as Lady Hood Mackenzie.

She married, as her second husband, James Alexander Stewart of Glasserton, 1817, and he assumed the name of Mackenzie to please his wife, it was said, and so that there might be male heirs to carry on the Mackenzie line. In 1825 Stewart Mackenzie bought the estate outright.

Like his father-in-law, Lord Seaforth, who was a director of the British Fisheries Society which was founded in 1786, James Alexander Stewart Mackenzie also took an interest in the fishing and he built the first cod smack to take fish alive in salt water in its hold direct to London.

The new management of the Lewis estate, which was the last of the Seaforth regime in Lewis, continued the policy adopted by Lord Seaforth. It was during the Seaforth period which ended in 1844 when James Matheson (later Sir James) bought the Lewis estate, that most of the crofters were cleared from Southern Park. For that reason the people of Lochs do not remember the last two Seaforth landlords with affectionate memories. James

Alexander Stewart Mackenzie died in 1842 and Lady Hood Mackenzie retired to Brahan Castle where she died in 1863.

Mrs Stewart Mackenzie of Seaforth was said to have been a good Christian lady to whom Lewis is deeply indebted for her Christian concern to exercise her right as patron of the Lewis parishes, by appointing only evangelical preachers if at all possible. It was said she scoured the Highlands for the godliest of ministers, and that patronage in her hand became a holy weapon. The first of these evangelical ministers, Rev Alexander Macleod, came to Uig in 1824 and a few years later in 1829 the godly Rev Robert Finlayson came to Knock, Point. He moved to the Lochs parish church at Keose in 1831.

The first tenant on the Park sheep farm was a group of Skye gentlemen, including Lachlan MacKinnon of Corry. Donald Stewart, a hired shepherd from Appin, who was an employee on the farm, subsequently became manager for the Skye group and eventually Mr Donald Stewart himself became tenant of the farm and prospered so well that he moved off to a more promising location on the North Harris estate.

In Harris, he succeeded Robert Brown as factor to Macleod of Harris, and soon extended his land to include the whole of the sheep farm of Luskentyre. Subsequently, it was said that Macleod of Harris fell unduly under the influence of Donald Stewart, and he extended his farmlands along the west coast of Harris where he secured farms for his sons and relatives. His son William held Ensay, Alexander held Killigary, and John held Pabbay. His youngest son refused to be associated with any land in Harris. He became a well-known and highly respected Gospel missionary in Harris, after he returned from a spell in farming in Australia. Donald Stewart eventually secured the farm of Borge where he was responsible for clearing the crofters in a ruthless manner from the whole of that area.

After Donald Stewart of Park, Archibald Stewart, 'Fear an Eilean Riabhach', and his brother Alexander (some say they were brothers of Donald Stewart, but if not they were at least close relatives). They were descendants of Alastair Mor Mac an Righ, Alexander, the Wolf of Badenoch and son of Robert II King of Scotland.

The Stewart brothers were known locally as 'Gillean Ruadh na Pairc', the red-headed men of Park or the wild Stewarts, on account of their extremely aggressive nature. His favourite excuse for getting rid of the Park smallholders was, raising allegations of sheep-stealing against them, and there was no way that they could clear their names.

Even now, the Stewarts' name is anathema among the descendants of those they evicted from Park. Their years in Park were years of sore affliction for the common people and they are still remembered in the traditions of Park with odium.

It was during the farm tenancy of the Stewarts that most of the crofter communities of Southern Park were removed. Over thirty small crofter townships were cleared, and their land swallowed up by the Park sheep farm during the tenancy of the Stewarts.

When the Stewarts were succeeded in the tenancy of the farm by Walter Scott in 1843, the northern boundaries of the sheep farm had reached the boundaries of Steimreway but the crofters of Steimreway could not be removed because they, as a community, held the lands of the township on a lease from the estate.

Steimreway was therefore bypassed and the people of Lemreway and Orinsay were removed at the change of tenancy in 1843 in order to extend the farm so as to qualify for a higher rent from Walter Scott, the incoming tenant. That brought the sheep farm to the boundaries of the crofting townships of Habost and Gravir, inclusive of all the lands south of that except the lands of Steimreway which was left behind isolated in the middle of the sheep farm, like an island in a sea of sheep.

Steimreway remained isolated like that for the next 16 years until the next change of farm tenancy in 1857-58 when Mitchell Scobie took over the farm. At that time the estate negotiated with the crofters of Steimreway and agreed to exchange the vacant township of Lemreway for the unexpired part of crofters' lease of Steimreway. Lemreway was therefore reoccupied in 1858 by the crofters of Steimreway and the boundary of the farm was rolled back a little.

No doubt the strategy of the Matheson proprietor at that time was to establish a regular defensible front line for the sheep farm by removing the pocket of potentially troublesome crofters from behind the front line before Mitchell Scobie took over the tenancy of the sheep farm. Subsequently Mitchell Scobie made over his lease of the Park sheep farm to P.P. Sellar, the son of Patrick Sellar of Sutherland farm.

In 1878 Sir James Matheson died and his widow, Mary Jane Matheson, succeeded him as proprietor of Lewis. P.P. Sellar's lease of the Park sheep farm expired in 1883 and by that time overcrowding in the crofting townships of Park was intolerable as indeed was the case everywhere in the seven crofting counties. Living conditions in the villages of Park were wretched, where the five acre crofts were subdivided between several families and the inbye land of the crofts extending only to $\frac{1}{2}$ or even $\frac{1}{4}$ an acre per person.

Only about half the families in Park were in tenuous occupation of a small plot of land of their own. The other half were landless cottar families living in barns on their in-law's crofts. There were 35 families on the 14 small crofts in Calbost in the 1880s.

It was in these circumstances of gross overcrowding that numerous landless cottars from almost every crofting township in both North and South Lochs anticipated the expiry of the lease of the Park sheep farm and petitioned Lady Matheson in 1881 two years before the actual date of the expiry of the lease, for land in Southern Park for new crofter settlements on the sites of the former crofter settlements from which the ancestors of the petitioners were forcibly removed.

One such petition came from 32 landless crofter fishermen from Gravir, Calbost and Marvig dated 22.11.81 as follows:

We, the undersigned fishermen, labourers and Royal Naval Reserve men Residing in the parish of Lochs, Lewis, understanding that the present lease of the Park sheep farm expires on Whitsunday 1883, would take the liberty of approaching your ladyship on the subject. At present we are either squatters or hold small patches of land from other crofters in these townships, all of which are quite inadequate for the support of ourselves and our families etc etc

After further explanation of their circumstances the petitioners bound themselves to conform to, and obey, all the rules and regulations of the estate and submit to any new rules that may be considered necessary and furthermore to protect the interests of the proprietor and her sporting tenants. Then they identified the area they wanted in the following terms:

We must respectfully solicit the portion of land known as Steimreway and Orinsay, which were at one time let to tenants, be set aside in order to be let to the undersigned in such lots or parts, and at such reasonable rents as may be arranged.

In due course the petitioners called on the Estate Chamberlain and reminded him that they were waiting on a reply to their petition. Nearly a year passed, and when the management of the Estate had not replied to the petition, they wrote again on 5th October 1882 in the following terms:

We have patiently waited for the last twelve months for your reply, having called for the same at your office repeatedly to no purpose. We must respectfully request a reply in writing so that we may consider what steps should be taken so as to secure our object. We expect that the prayer of said petition has been favourably received by Lady Matheson and all concerned, and that our very distressing conditions, which is becoming more and more serious, may induce you to give us an opportunity of earning an honest livelihood in our native island, specially when such a suitable opening occurs Waiting your reply, in name and on behalf of said petitioners.

We respectfully remain
Your obedient servants
Kenneth Nicolson
Kenneth Macleod
and many others

Two and a half months later the petitioners were still waiting for a reply, and on 23rd December 1882 they wrote again as follows:

Lady Matheson of the Lews,

Honoured lady, on behalf of a number of fishermen residing at Calbost, Marvig and Gravir, in the Parish of Lochs, I beg leave most respectfully to send you herewith, copy of a petition, addressed by us to your Ladyship, through Mr Mackay, Chamberlain of Lewis, last January and to which we had no reply.

Trusting we may not be led to resort reluctantly to such steps as many of our unfortunate countrymen are forced to adopt.

May I take the liberty of asking that you be so good as to let the petitioners know your own views regarding the matters contained in the petition.

I have the honour to be
Your Ladyship's obedient servant
Kenneth Nicolson

From a public meeting at Park a deputation delivered a resolution to the castle at Stornoway as follows:

This meeting deeply regrets that Lady Matheson did not deem it her duty to answer the petitions and statements sent to her from the townships south of Loch Erisort, or show any desire to remove the grievance under which crofters labour.

At the same meeting another resolution was passed as follows:

This meeting is of the opinion that no rent should be paid by the crofters until a satisfactory reply has been received from the landlord.

No reply was received from Lady Matheson, and no rent was forthcoming from the crofters of Park. Such was the solidarity in Park that a Free Church elder from Gravir was declared boycotted and outcast for having broken the rent strike by paying his rent.

In 1882 a crofters' demonstration took place in Stornoway where 9,000 people (which was nearly 1/3 of the total population of Lewis), with 16 pipers at their head, marched, and resolutions were passed demanding the restoration of the land to the people, as well as fair rents and security of tenure etc.

And then came Lady Matheson's reply which was dated 3rd January 1883 from Cleveland Row, her London residence:

Lady Matheson regrets that the above named respectable class of Lewis men should have been led to address her on the subject of such importance as that contained in her petition, by adding to it a letter which causes her to set aside their request, as Lady Matheson is too devoted to her Queen and the laws of which Her Gracious Majesty is the representative, to listen for one moment to a petition accompanied by a threat from them to infringe the laws by which all are governed, and by the support of which, as individuals, the wellbeing of the land and its communities at large can alone be protected.

In the meantime the Chamberlain had indicated verbally to the petitioners that their petition was refused, and apparently the reason given was that the terms of the petition was disrespectful.

Obviously Lady Matheson had no intention of granting the petitioners' request, any more than she granted the numerous other applications and petitions that came to her from the deprived landless families of Lochs at that time.

The laws to which Lady Matheson refers in her letter of 3rd January 1883 certainly afforded full protection to her and her class but they did not provide any protection whatsoever for the deprived crofters of Park and elsewhere. The law as it related to the land and the crofter communities of the Scottish Highlands was a reproach to any nation, and a reflection of the influence of the landed gentry who, along with their upper class friends, made those unjust laws. The crofters did not even have the parliamentary vote at that time. It was arrogant of Her Ladyship in her mansions and castles and her affluence to quote her devotion to her Queen and the so-called laws of the country as an excuse to deny the deprived homeless and landless people of Lochs sites for homes for their families and a little land to subsist on.

Instead of showing some social responsibility and a spark of humanity towards her less fortunate tenants and fellow creatures, Lady Matheson advertised the vacant Park sheep farm repeatedly without success, yet she continued to ignore the anguished plea of the numerous landless families of Lochs for a few acres of land to enable them to earn their living in their native island.

The only other alternative was mass emigration to an uncertain future and that was less attractive and in any case, unacceptable in the present militant mood of the Highland people as a whole.

In 1884 there was another demonstration of 8,000 people marching through Stornoway with pipes and banners, demanding a Crofters Act. At length, in 1886, Lady Matheson realised that the Park sheep farm, like many others in the Highlands, could no longer be let as a sheep farm, because the boom in Highland sheep farming was over.

Accordingly, in 1886, some three years after the last lease expired, she changed the land-use of the 42,000 acre farm to a sporting deer park and playground for the affluent rich from the southern industrial society, because they were willing and able to pay a higher rent than either the sheep farmers or the crofters, for the status and image they felt a Highland shoot conferred on them.

To add insult to injury, the conversion of the Park sheep farm to a useless sporting deer park was carried out in the same year as parliament narrowly passed the first Crofters Act, after a sustained period of years of crofter agitation for land law reform, and thousands of pages of evidence were collected by the Napier Royal Commission of Enquiry.

In converting southern Park to a sporting deer park without even granting the vacant nearby former crofting townships of Steimreway and Orinsay to the distressed landless families, Her Ladyship demonstrated beyond

doubt that she had no compassion or understanding of the plight of the people of Lochs. The local people could stew in their own juice as far as she was concerned.

The Crofters Act of 1886 also failed to make any provision for the thousands and thousands of landless families in the Highlands, despite the fact that crofters everywhere and their parliamentary representatives campaigned hard for provision to be made in the first Crofters Act for the restoration of the land from which the crofters and their forefathers were forcibly, and very often ruthlessly, removed.

While the crofters with land of their own welcomed the 1886 Crofters Act, the year 1886 brought a double blow to the landless families of Lochs. The Crofters Act did not provide for them and Lady Matheson refused to grant them any land. They were therefore condemned to continue living in squalor and overcrowded conditions, without any hope of alleviation of their distressing conditions in the foreseeable future.

All the lands comprising the Park sheep farm was converted into a deer park except a buffer zone between the deer park and the crofting townships comprising of the lands of the former crofter township of Steimreway from which the crofters were only removed about 25 years earlier together with the lands of Orinsay from which the crofters were removed about 40 years earlier.

These lands of Steimreway and Orinsay along with the Shiant Isles off the coast of Southern Park extending to about 3,000 acres, were made into a grazing farm and was given to Roderick Martin, a Balallan man that tenanted the viable farm of Crobeg near Cromore, at a rent of £50.

When the villages of Steimreway and Orinsay were cleared there were over 40 families living there, comprising of 237 persons. Obviously, if Lady Matheson had given these two townships to the landless families that applied for them about that time, they would have had no difficulty matching the £50 rent that Roderick Martin was charged.

In fact the crofters that were removed from Orinsay in 1843 were paying a much higher rent than Roderick Martin was charged, as we shall learn from Donald Mackenzie, 24 Crossbost, 'Domhnuill Ruadh, Iain ic Alastair', 1817-1895, who testified to the Napier Commission that his father's family were evicted from Orinsay when he was aged about 26 years. He said their croft in Orinsay was rented at £2.50 and that they were very well off with four milking cows, several young cattle beasts, and 50 sheep.

In fact it looks as if Her Ladyship was prepared to suffer a financial loss in order to keep the crofters out of these two former crofter townships. Neither did she consider that it would have been more reasonable to provide for 30 or 40 landless families rather than give a second farm of 3,000 acres to Mr Martin, not adjoining his own viable farm of Crobeg but some seven miles apart. Presumably, the object of converting the former crofting townships of Steimreway and Orinsay into a buffer farm between the crofters in the north and the deer park in the south, was to protect the deer from the so-called poaching crofters. In doing so she insulted the landless families and rubbed salt into their painful wounds.

To the west of the grazing farm of Steimreway/Orinsay, Lady Matheson and her advisors created another buffer strip of six crofts, three of them located at Shieldinish on the shores of Loch Erisort and two of them located at Seaforth Head and one towards Airidhbhruaich, but all six crofts to be regarded as one township, extending to 5,000 acres between inbye and common grazing land which is held collectively by all six crofters.

In that way the estate created a buffer zone stretching from Loch Shell right across the narrow neck of land to Loch Seaforth, with the Eishkin Lodge effectively guarding the approaches to the isolated Park deer forest, protecting it from the common people in the crofting enclave to the north.

That arrangement demonstrated blatant class distinction and discrimination against the ordinary local indigenous people. Unfortunately these are still features of our Highland society, one hundred years later.

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