



[Attempted Eviction of the Loch Shell Crofters (1842)]

By 1833 the northern boundaries of the Park Sheep Farm had reached, and included, Eishken, and all the crofters of the 27 crofter townships south of that were forcibly removed from their land and homes. Nine years later in 1842 the management of the Lewis Estate decided that the expiry of the lease of the Park Farm to the brothers, Alexander and Archibald Stewart was a convenient opportunity for yet another leap forward, by enclosing within the Park Farm the lands of the crofter communities of Steimreway, Orinsay and Lemreway in a so-called improvement scheme in anticipation of the coming of a new tenant to the extended farm at an increased rental.

That plan would bring the northern boundary of the Park Sheep Farm forward to a line across the peninsula from the shores of Loch Erisort along the common grazing boundary of Gravir to the Minch coast. Then there would only be 8 crofter townships out of the original 40 townships left in the peninsula.

The first snag the proposed 1842 crofter township clearance scheme encountered was the realisation by the Lewis Estate that the crofters of the township of Steimreway could not be forcibly removed because they collectively held a long-term unexpired legal lease of their own township lands.

The crofters of Steimreway refused to move and consequently the township of Steimreway had to be by-passed and left as an isolated intrusion, like an Island in the middle of a sea of Park Farm sheep, while the eviction of the crofters of the next two villages of Lemreway and Orinsay proceeded in 1842-43. Steimreway remained isolated like that for the next 15 years, until the next change in the Park Farm tenancy in 1857, when the crofters of Steimreway were moved into Lemreway, which was until then part of the Park Sheep Farm. Therefore, the clearance of the original crofters of Lemreway and Orinsay to Crossbost etc. in 1843 was the last but one clearance from the Park Peninsula. The clearance of the crofters of Steimreway to Lemreway in 1857 was the last forcible clearance from the Park Peninsula.

On 15th June 1842 a short article appeared in the Inverness Courier newspaper headed 'Deforcement of the Law'. The article begins with the words:

Another of these painful scenes which lately have been too prevalent, connected with the removal of Highland crofters, took place on 2nd June at Loch Shell, Parish of Lochs, in the County of Ross and Cromarty. The Sheriff, Procurator Fiscal and Factor, with a party of ground officers, constables and others proceeded to the spot, and commenced throwing down the houses. A number of women then rushed upon the party and drove them off the field, without committing any bodily injury except a little rough handling to one of the officers. The people told the Sheriff that they could not leave their homes with ruined characters, as one cause for removing them was given as that they had stolen a number of sheep from the adjoining farm, whereas, in reality, not a single act of theft had ever been proven against any of them. They were not in arrears of rent and they numbered from three to four hundred souls.

The painful scene referred to by the Inverness Courier, as above, was the attempted eviction by the Lewis Seaforth Estate of the total crofter population of Orinsay and Lemreway on the northern shores of Loch Shell in the Isle of Lewis on 2nd June 1842. The first census figures for Lewis was taken in 1841 and that confirmed that there were indeed between three and four hundred souls in the two villages as stated in the Inverness Courier, giving a total of over 60 families who can be traced to their ultimate destination.

Among the papers in the Records Office in Edinburgh is an application to the Sheriff for warrants of ejection, duly signed by the notorious factor Donald MacRae, who was at that time legal agent for the Lewis Seaforth Estate. He signed on behalf of the Lewis proprietor. In March 1842 the Sheriff of Ross-shire granted a discreet removal against the crofters of Lemreway and Orinsay, an extract of which reads as follows:

Hereby grant warrants to officers of court and their assistants, summarily to eject Kenneth Mackenzie, John Maclennan, Angus Macinnes and Duncan Macmillan, and all the tenants of the two townships and their respective wives, bairns, families, servants, sub-tenants, cottars, dependants, cattle, goods and gear, forth from their houses, gardens and grass, and from their arable land under crop etc.

Having obtained the warrants Mr Donald Munro, as Procurator Fiscal, set off to Loch Shell in a posse along with the Sheriff, the Factor and a party of ground officers, constables and other Estate employees, to carry out the eviction of the Loch Shell crofters.

At that time of the year, on 2nd June, the crofters would have already planted their crops and cut their peats, and the fishermen would probably have been away at the herring fishing. Normally, the summer herring fishing season commenced on 10th May each year, but certainly not later than 1st June. Therefore, the Estate appears to have timed their descent upon the Loch Shell crofters carefully, probably to ensure that the able-bodied men of the community were likely to be away at the summer herring fishing season, and resistance might be minimal.

Usually the Estate gave some lame excuse for the eviction of crofters from their land, and very often that was either arrears of rent or allegations of sheep stealing. In the case of the Loch Shell crofters their rents were fully paid up and therefore the usual threadbare allegation of sheep stealing was levied against them. Apparently the crofter community were very upset about these character destroying false allegations. As there were no roads in the district of Lochs at that time, the evicting party from Stornoway probably travelled to Loch Shell by boat.

Apparently, according to local tradition, the evicting party was expected by the crofting community and they consulted among themselves and prepared a plan of action for the inevitable confrontation. The arrest of the men folk was one of the methods of intimidation always practiced by the law and the estate in times past, and the crofters were well aware that they were in a vulnerable position, as the breadwinners at the beginning of the main fishing season of the year.

The agreed plan of action was to allow the womenfolk to take the initiative from the outset and engage the leaders of the evicting party in a determined dialogue, showing no signs of intimidation, but vehemently protesting the community's innocence of any sheep stealing, and demanding that the false allegations be withdrawn before they would even consider leaving their homes with their reputations tarnished.

The men folk were to remain passive and avoid giving the slightest excuse or provocation that might result in the arrest of the men at the beginning of the main fishing season.

As the drama at Loch Shell unfolded with the leaders of the evicting party challenged by scores of Gaelic speaking, loud-voiced women, in the isolation of the Park Peninsula with no possibility of calling for assistance, the strong-arm wreckers of the evicting party were becoming impatient because they were not used to discussing the details of evictions with wretched crofters, or their womenfolk. They felt they came to Loch Shell for a specific purpose, as set out clearly in the official warrants of ejection, duly authorised by the Sheriff of Ross-shire, which was to eject the whole community summarily, as well as everything belonging to them, from their houses and land.

After a while therefore, the wrecking party (earraidean) proceeded to remove the thatch from the roofs of the crofters' houses in the usual way, as a first step in the process of demolishing the crofters' houses.

Suddenly, on seeing the wreckers of the evicting party commencing to tear down the thatch from their homes, an agitated loud cry went up from the heroines of Loch Shell, as they rushed forward in a counter-attack, concentrating on one of the leaders of the evicting party and giving him a rough handling, but taking care not to inflict any bodily injury to their victim.

Whatever is meant by rough handling, it was very effective, because the tables were turned immediately, and it was the arrogant gentlemen from Stornoway that felt themselves vulnerable and they hurriedly retreated 'off the field', according to the press, presumably to their boats at the shore.

Could it be, as we have heard it being suggested, that the unanimous cry of the Loch Shell women, as they closed in on their unfortunate victim, was 'cut his braces'. Bantering high spirited, at a pre-wedding hen plucking evening sometimes threatened us young men with the 'cut his braces' ploy. We felt they did not mean it but that it was wiser to keep a safe distance just in case. It was also said that the law itself were not averse to use these tactics when confronted with a difficult arrest.

The Loch Shell incident was reported to the Crown Agents as 'Deforcement of the Law', and the advice of the Lord Advocate was sought. The Authorities acted fast and Sheriff Principle Jardine arrived in Lewis within the same month of June 1842, to investigate the affair and superintend the execution of the warrants, by removing the recalcitrant crofters, who had the temerity to defend their homes.

As in all such cases at that time, the Establishment's first thought was to call in the military in order to enforce the policy of the Estate. On reflection, however, the Trustees of the Lewis Estate concluded that an attempt to remove the recalcitrant Loch Shell crofters by means of military force at that time, when the Lewis Estate was on the market, might injure the sale.

In the circumstances, the 65 families, consisting of 178 persons in Lemreway and 145 persons in Orinsay were given one year's grace and they were expected to leave voluntarily before the end of that period.

[ends]

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

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: The 1842 Attempted Eviction of the Loch Shell Crofters

Location in physical archive: Series A, File 1, Section 3

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/1/12

© Angus Macleod Archive