



[Land-raiding in the 1920s]

In 1918/19 the war weary ex-servicemen of the First World War were trudging back home at the end of that terrible war, many of them joining their families in barns or sub-standard accommodation on the land of their relatives. At first they waited patiently while they enjoyed a well-earned rest with their families, conscious of the fact that many of their comrades would never return.

After a while they were becoming impatient when they were not hearing anything about the pre-war land re-settlement schemes, particularly when they heard that the schemes were taking place in other crofting areas. In due course they made enquiries only to find out that the new Lewis landlord, Lord Leverhulme, who bought the Island in 1918, objected to the land re-settlement schemes when the Scottish Secretary opened negotiations with him as a matter of courtesy in the summer of 1918.

Leverhulme put forward two main objections:

1. He maintained that the division of Lewis farms into crofts would do nothing to relieve the congestion in Lewis.
2. He also maintained that the farms of Lewis were essential for the supply of milk for the expanding population of Stornoway.

In the eyes of the long suffering landless families of Lewis these were lame excuses without any real substance. Furthermore, these excuses which the Scottish Secretary appeared to be condoning were quite contrary to the Governments pre-war solemn promises of land re-settlement schemes for which many of them had already applied before the war, including the prospective new crofters of Steimreway and Orinsay.

Leverhulme as a developer was welcome in Lewis by everyone, but when the hundreds and hundreds of landless/homeless families realised that the new landlord, like all the old ones, expected them to continue quietly and submissively living in barns on their relatives' land, they served notice on the Authorities and on the landlord that they were not prepared to continue any longer enduring their terrible living conditions, as did their forefathers, generation after generation.

Either the land would be restored to them quickly or orderly or they would land raid and occupy the farms from which their ancestors were forcibly evicted earlier.

When it became quite clear that Leverhulme was determined not to give up any land for re-settlement schemes, and the Scottish Office was equally reluctant to use their compulsory powers to take over the land, land raiding broke out all over Lewis in 1919/20, including Steimreway and Orinsay where up to 30 families planned to settle within the two former villages, among them 5 landless families from Calbost, as follows:

Kenneth Mackay, born 1885, 'Coinneach Dubh'

A landless family comprising of parents and a family of four girls and two boys, the oldest less than eight years shared the family croft, No.7 Calbost as the third family on that croft. Mr Mackay was a weaver/fisherman and skipper of the offshore fishing boat 'Ribhinn Donn', which was the boat used by the five Calbost land-raiders of Steimreway in order to transport building materials to erect temporary accommodation there while they were building more permanent homes. On the way to Steimreway the Ribhinn Donn had a rowing boat in tow in order to transport the men and materials ashore at their destination. Two of the young men insisted on travelling on the small boat, probably for the excitement during the ten-mile sail.

Donald Morrison, born 1867

A landless family comprising of parents and eleven children, the youngest only about four years. They shared croft No.9 Calbost as the fifth family. On the way to Steimreway in the Ribhinn Donn, along with other members of the five Calbost land-raiding families, the wind came up and the small boat they had in tow foundered and the two young men in the boat were lost at sea. One of them was Iain (Dhomhnuill), their twenty-year-old son. The other one was his cousin Iain (Neill), the son of Neil Morrison, 9 Calbost, who was a member of the party on the Ribhinn Donn.

Neil Morrison, born 1863

A landless family comprising of parents and eight children. They were one of the five families who shared croft No.9 Calbost. The head of the family was a brother of Donald Morrison and it was their son Iain (Neill) who was lost in the drowning accident.

Their oldest two boys, Murdo and Angus had emigrated to Canada before the First World War and they both volunteered to join the Canadian Expeditionary Force and they fought in the trenches in France where Murdo gained the Military Medal for conspicuous bravery on the field of battle. After the war both of them returned to Canada.

The head of the family felt that although they were no longer young they should take part in the Steimreway land-raiding for the sake of their nineteen year old son, Iain, to whom he wanted to be able to assign a croft so that he would not spend his whole life as a squatter on someone else's land, as he did himself. Sadly, young Iain was lost on the way to Steimreway.

Angus Finlayson 'Diry', born 1874

Married with a family of three girls and a boy. This family was the third family sharing croft No. 13 Calbost.

Murdo Finlayson, born 1889

A brother of the above Angus, unmarried and living with his parents and sister who intended to move to Steimreway with Murdo. This family shared croft No.10 Calbost as the third family there.

These five Calbost land-raiders came from four Calbost crofts and in all there were 13 large families on these four crofts, from which the five land-raiding families comprising of 42 people, wanted to escape. Four of the five Calbost land-raiders were ex-servicemen just back from the First World War, and then there were the two young Morrisons' who volunteered in Canada and fought with conspicuous bravery. When however, it came to land, loyalty and patriotism counted for nothing.

The power and influence of the Highland landowners and their sporting tenants dictate policy in the Highlands. The shooting tenant of Eishkin reacted in 1920 by appealing to Leverhulme, the Lewis landlord, to prosecute the land-raiders of Steimreway and Orinsay. In March 1920 Leverhulme applied for, and was granted, an interim interdict against the land-raiders. Subsequently the interdict was withdrawn.

An attempt to prevent the land-raiders from occupying Steimreway was also made by erecting a steel fence without an access gate on the only track between Orinsay and Steimreway, thus closing the only landward approach to Steimreway, except through the sporting deer park to the west. The crofters made a request to the estate asking for a gate to be erected on the age old foot track, but that request was disregarded and the traditional free passage to Steimreway was effectively barred.

The land-raiders protested vigorously and stated that unless a gate was provided for free passage to and from Steimreway on the traditional right-of-way, the only alternative open to them was to flatten the fence. They also cut their names defiantly in the turf of their prospective new land-holdings. After a while the problem was solved when the offending fence, which was erected by a contractor from Skye, disappeared mysteriously into the sea one dark night. That was the end of that episode.

Living conditions were probably at their worst in all the crofting villages of Park in the 1920s, after the First World War. There was gross overcrowding in Calbost with 36 families comprising of 189 people living on the 14 crofts at Calbost. There was only one croft that was confined to one family, there were five crofts with three families on each and one croft with six families, and all the others had two families on each. The other villages of Park were similarly overcrowded at that time.

Contrary to Lord Leverhulme's contention that the division of Lewis farms into crofts would do nothing to relieve the congestion in Lewis, the land raiding in Lewis in the 1920s provided hundreds of new crofts, and in the case of Steimreway there were 16 households and 81 people living there when the crofters were evicted in 1857. In the case of Orinsay there were 35 households and 176 people living there at the time of the evictions in 1843. A combined total of 51 households and 257 people.

With regard to Leverhulme's contention that the farms of Lewis were essential for the supply of milk for the expanding population of Stornoway, there was no road to Steimreway or Orinsay in the 1920s, so how could milk be produced without transport to Stornoway?

Orinsay was subsequently recognised by the authorities as an official crofting township and it was laid out into a community of 14 crofts. Most of these crofts were by that time occupied by land-raiders from Lemreway and they received financial assistance for the village boundary wall and a footpath to the main road near Lemreway. They did not get a vehicular road until after the Second World War and by that time depopulation had set in.

Steimreway was never recognised by the authorities as an official crofting township, probably because it was bordering on the Park Deer Forest and the shooting lodge was only about two miles away.

The determined resistance of the landlord and the shooting tenant of Eishkin Park Deer Forest as well as the trauma of the drowning accident of the Calbost land-raiders caused four of them to withdraw and return to Calbost where they lived for the rest of their lives in grossly overcrowded conditions.

The fifth Calbost land-raider, Donald Morrison, 9 Calbost, persisted with his plans, although he had lost his young son. He and a number of families from Lemreway settled in Steimreway. After a few years most of the Steimreway land-raiders trickled back to Lemreway as space was becoming available there. Only two families remained in Steimreway when it became clear that the village was not going to be recognised as an official crofting township with the usual financial assistance available. These two were Donald Morrison, 9 Calbost and the family of Donald Carmichael, 26 Lemreway. Mr Carmichael himself was unfortunately killed accidentally when his gun, which he was passing into his boat, went off and hit him in the chest. That was the third victim of the Steimreway land raiding.

These two families reclaimed large land-holdings and their lazybeds may still be seen there as evidence of all their hard work. Also, they both built substantial new homes in Steimreway and they maintained that they were very happy there. They remained there in Steimreway for over twenty years until after the Second World War started, but eventually they were forced out because of loneliness and a complete lack of any facilities, no road, no telephone and school. The children of both families had to be boarded out, some in Lemreway, some in Balallan and some in Stornoway. When, however, the Second World War started the Country remembered the members of these two families and demanded that they should fight for their Country.

The 1920s land raiding was the last land raiding to take place in the Parish of Lochs. In the 1920s and 1930s families from every village in Lewis began to move out onto the common grazing outside the village boundary wall, with the blessing of the crofter tenants of the village, but without the authority of the landlord. That was the only relief available to the deprived landless families except emigration from Lewis, and twelve young people from Calbost emigrated in the 1920s.

In neighbouring Gravir no less than fourteen families moved out to the common grazing at Glen Gravir in the 1920s. They asked for Smallholders status but the authorities were reluctant to recognise them in any way. Eventually in 1934 the Government recognised the Glen Gravir settlement as Smallholders. That was the last resettlement scheme in the Park peninsula, but it came too late. The people had lost heart and serious depopulation had set in. Also, the herring fishing was in failure in the 1920s and 1930s, ever since the market for salt herring in Germany, the Baltic States and Russia was lost at the time of the First World War.

The resettlement scheme at Glen Gravir was set out for fifteen smallholdings, but a landless family never took up the fifteenth, which is proof that it was too late. Also, the clouds of war were gathering and large numbers of young fishermen/naval reservists were finding work in the Merchant Navy.

Three landless families from Calbost moved out to the common grazing land outside the village boundary wall, where they reclaimed unofficial landholdings and built new homes at their own expense in the 1920s. Then came the Second World War, which had a profound effect on the district of Park.

Although there are seventy former residents of Calbost still alive and living in various parts of the World, the village itself is completely depopulated in the 1990s. The last indigenous resident, Donald Macleod, 6 Calbost, passed away in 1995, aged 93 years.

The five schools in Park, which were built about 1880 following the passing of the 1872 Education Act when all the villages of Park were grossly overcrowded, were all closed, although each of them exceeded 100 pupils at one time or another, and one central school, the new Park School, covering the whole of Park, opened in 1973 at Gravir with a total roll of about 25 pupils in the early 1990s.

The 42,000-acre unproductive Park Deer Forest is still in place as a reminder of the folly of the land-use policy pursued by private landowners in the 19th century.

The Scottish Highlander is resilient, humorous and patriotic. The only Marvig land-raider in the Steimreway party was Allan Finlayson, a blacksmith by trade. He emigrated to South America as a very young man. On hearing about the outbreak of war in 1914 he immediately volunteered and fought in the trenches of Flanders and survived without a scratch. He joined the land-raiders of Steimreway and carried his possessions on his back over two miles of road-less moor to Steimreway, where he set up home. In all these hardships Allan Sheonnaidh's humour was proverbial. Among those he poked fun at was his fellow land-raider, Angus Finlayson 'Diry' from Calbost, whose temporary house at Steimreway was very leaky. Despite Allan Finlayson's patriotism he had to raise his family and spend his entire life in the small house that he built in the 1920s outside the Marvig village boundary wall, on the common grazing, where he reclaimed an unofficial landholding from the virgin soil. Allan is remembered in his neighbourhood for his outstanding humour. He was never heard to complain and neither were his fellow land-raiders', despite the shabby treatment they received from their so-called Country.

Allan and his compatriots were enterprising people. In addition to practising his trade as a blacksmith, he was also a self-taught stone mason, carpenter, boat-builder and fisherman. He died in 1970 at the age of 89 years.

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