



[The Crofters' War in Pairc and Lewis]

The term 'Crofters' War' was the designation applied to the confrontation that developed in the 1880s between the Highland and Island landowners and the crofting community in their struggle for land law reform and emancipation from the cruel oppression of landlords. The crofting community of Park played an important part in that struggle.

By the 1870s, after long years of suffering, the crofter population had fallen into a stupor of utter hopelessness because the law offered them no protection against an eviction order or any other form of landlord oppression, and any form of resistance from a crofter, or a group of crofters, or even any alleged resistance, would surely and swiftly bring the inevitable response from the estate officials, 'Cuireadh mi as an fhearann thu' - 'I will evict you'.

It was not surprising therefore that the crofters were not in a position to offer any effective resistance to the tyranny and oppression of landlords during the greater part of the 19th century, while they remained divided and disorganised.

By the same token however, perhaps it was inevitable that sooner or later the crofters would rise up and shake off the oppressor, particularly in view of the fact that the living conditions of the whole crofting community was steadily getting worse and worse.

Overcrowding in the crofting townships was becoming intolerable in the 1870s, and worse was to come, due to the combined effect of the earlier clearances, rapidly increasing population, and a stubborn refusal by the landowners to respond favourably to any of the numerous crofter petitions and applications for living space in the former crofting townships, now occupied by sheep.

The only alternative left to the crofting community was to subdivide their crofts which were actually too small for one family and share it with married members of their families, and that led eventually to several families sharing most crofts.

As conditions in the crofting world deteriorated, tension was rising, and the whole crofting community throughout the seven crofting counties were beginning to stir and show signs of resistance. One of the very first big manifestations of that resistance surfaced in the so-called Bernera Riots in Lewis in 1874, when the despotic Lewis factor, Donald Munro, nicknamed 'the Shah', went too far by sending a Sheriff Officer to Bernera to serve 58 eviction notices, without good cause, on struggling law-abiding crofters on that Island.

That incident ended up in court and the Bernera crofters were represented in court by an able young lawyer from Inverness called Charles Innes. He successfully defended the Bernera crofters, and that, and the manner in which he did it, earned him a prominent place in the history of the crofters' struggle for freedom. The consequence of that court case was that the Lewis tyrant, Donald Munro, was eventually dismissed from all his numerous posts in the estate and community.

Mr Napier Campbell, an Edinburgh man, practising as a solicitor in Stornoway, referred to the factor Munro at that time, as follows:

I have met the factor Munro in seven different capacities in one case. I have also heard him boast of appearing in 16 different capacities at one time. He could, at pleasure, unite all these posts or personages into one great person under the powerful name of the sole proprietor of Lewis ... It was like fighting with some hydra-headed monster.

The welcome victory of the Bernera crofters encouraged crofters everywhere, but particularly in Lewis where the whole crofting community breathed a sigh of relief at the long overdue departure of the tyrant factor Donald Munro. Crofters everywhere stepped up their agitation for their legitimate rights.

In Skye there was the well-known 'Battle of the Braes', in April 1882, when the crofters of that area refused to pay their rent until the grazings of 'Ben-Lee' was restored to them as of right, in the way it had been in their possession for generations.

Another factor that encouraged the Highland crofters and gave impetus to their agitation was the successful Irish struggle for land law reform, and the passing into law of the Irish Land Bill by the Westminster parliament in 1881.

The early signs of crofter resistance was greatly encouraged by the sympathetic interest of expatriate Highlanders and Highland societies in various cities throughout the United Kingdom in the 1870s and 1880s, such as the Federation of Celtic Societies in Glasgow, the Gaelic Society of Inverness, and two Highland Land Law Reform Associations (H.L.L.R.A.), one in London and one in Edinburgh, and several other organisations and prominent people.

The Secretary of the London H.L.L.R.A. was Donald Murray, a Lewis man. His brother James Murray edited a pro-crofter magazine called 'The Crofter', published in London for a short time before the editor died at an early age. The Edinburgh H.L.L.R.A. was dominated by Free Church ministers.

These various organisations rallied to the cause of the Highland crofters and produced a number of champions who came out to every corner of the Highlands and Islands on speaking tours. They are too numerous to attempt to name them all, but perhaps the name of John Murdoch stands out, 'Murchadh na Feilidh', 'Murdoch of the kilt', who was editor of the pro-crofter newspaper 'The Highlander'. Perhaps he did more than anyone to stimulate and inspire the crofters to campaign for the righting of the wrongs of the Highlands.

Fact or fiction, but it was said that on one of his speaking tours in Lewis, John was making his way from Balallan to Stornoway, and he was suddenly caught in a blizzard with darkness coming on. In order to survive he dug himself into a snowdrift and spent the night there in his kilt. The spot became known as 'John Murdoch's Bed'. Who knows, perhaps John might have been the subject after which that well-known landmark 'Creag-a-Bhodaich' was named.

By the early 1880s the various associations interested in land law reform were coming together into one Highland Land Law Reform Association, with branches all over the Highlands and Islands. Eventually that movement went under the name of Highland Land League.

Before long the crofters felt confident enough to resist the oppression of the landlords, and the Land League, which was supported by almost the whole crofter population by the mid-1880s and was one of the decisive factors in the success of the crofters' long struggle for freedom from the domination of landlordism. Without the Land League and the contribution of the various champions of the crofters' cause, such as John Murdoch, it is extremely doubtful if there would be a crofting community in the Highlands, 100 years later, towards the end of the 20th century.

The landless families of Park anticipated the expiry of the lease of the Park sheep farm in 1883 by several years, and forwarded petitions and applications to the Lewis estate asking for permission to resettle some of the former crofting townships now overrun by the Park Sheep Farm. That was followed up by large public meetings and deputations that delivered resolutions to the Castle at Stornoway. Also, a 100% rent strike was embarked upon.

Nine thousand people with 16 pipers at their head marched in a demonstration in Stornoway in 1882, and again in 1884, 8,000 people marched through Stornoway with pipers and banners, demanding a Crofters' Act.

The people of Cromore and Marvig drove the Crobeg farmer's cattle from a nearby island and took steps to land raid Crobeg farm. The people of Gravir and Lemreway tore down the dyke separating them from the lands of the former township of Orinsay, in protest against the estate's refusal to allow the landless cottars back into Orinsay and Steimreway instead of giving these two former townships to Roderick Martin, the farmer at Crobeg, some six or so miles away.

In 1886 Lady Matheson converted the Park Sheep Farm into a deer forest and in 1887 the people of Lochs as a whole staged that most successful demonstration called the Park Deer Raid.

An example of the congestion in the townships of Park in the 1880s and the 40 years or so following, may be illustrated by an examination of the population of Calbost during that period. There were 35 families on the 14 crofts in Calbost at the census of 1881, and the average number of people in Calbost in the five census returns from 1881 to 1921 was 191 persons with a peak of 200 persons in 1901.

In 1921 there was one croft in Calbost with 6 families, five crofts with 3 families, seven crofts with 2 families, and only one croft with 1 family, giving a total of 36 families or an average of almost 2 ½ families per croft.

The average population during the whole of that period was 191 persons on 14 crofts of about five acres each or about 70 acres of inbye land in total or about 3/8th of an acre per person. The other townships in Park were substantially similar.

The crofters' rent strike and the crofters' rebellion were assuming frightening proportions in the eyes of the authorities by the mid-1880s. The landowning class and the Government, that was always ready to listen to them, pinned their hope on military intervention. When that was tried extensively and was proved quite ineffective in the

face of a population that was behaving peacefully, the Government and the authorities became worried about the frightening possibility that the common people everywhere, particularly in the factories, would rise up in sympathy with the Highland crofter population, whose plight was coming increasingly to the attention of the public, despite the misleading picture portrayed by the reactionary press which was controlled by people hostile to the crofters' cause.

A large military expedition was summoned to Park to deal with the ragged army of 1,000 hungry crofter deer raiders, but before they arrived the deer raiders had dispersed peacefully to their respective homes, and the military crisis was over, although some of the warships remained on patrol in case of another insurrection by the homeless, landless crofters of Lochs.

The judiciary stepped in and at the request of the police, the necessary number of deer raiders gave themselves up voluntarily and they were shipped off to the high court in Edinburgh where a jury of respectable Edinburgh citizens found them not guilty.

However, the Park Deer Forest remained intact and the deprived people of the area were left to suffer, as before, in their grossly overcrowded shacks. There was no alternative therefore for the landless cottars at Park but to continue the crofters' war, as we shall see later.

[ends]

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

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: The Crofters' War

Location in physical archive: Series F, File 9, Section 9

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/6/13

© Angus Macleod Archive