



[Donald Macrae and the Paicr Deer Raid]

Donald Macrae, who was the Head Teacher at Balallan, Lochs for two years from 1887 to 1889, was the right person, in the right place, at the right time. A Gaelic scholar, Donald Macrae was born in Plockton in 1851, a son of the croft. After graduating, he took up a teaching post at Inverness High School and from there he was promoted to the post of Head Teacher at Bridgend School, Alness in 1879.

The landlord dominated Rossbean School - the School Board were not impressed with Mr Macrae's Land League and other social activities, and spurious charges were raised against him, and he was eventually unfairly dismissed from his teaching post at Bridgend School, thereafter he was known throughout the Highlands as the Martyr of Alness.

By inviting Donald Macrae to take up the post of Head Teacher at Balallan, Lewis, the Lochs School Board unwittingly provided the discontented crofters of Lochs with the leadership they required. They had already called one of their regular meetings for the month of January 1887, which was the very month in which Mr Macrae arrived in Balallan. Now they looked upon the circumstances that brought a leader of the calibre of Donald Macrae to their shores as a kindly act of providence. They welcomed him with open arms.

During the following months the whole of the scattered Parish of Lochs met regularly at Balallan School to discuss the land question and the terrible overcrowding in all the crofter villages of Lochs. Nearly half of all the crofter families in Lochs at that time were landless families living in barns and temporary accommodation on their parents' or friends' land.

The Lochs crofters were demanding the return of at least some of the land formerly held by themselves and their ancestors before they were ruthlessly evicted from their homes, especially former crofter villages within the Park Deer Forest, created in 1886, the very year of the first Crofters Act. The Park Deer Forest was converted into a sporting deer farm and playground for the affluent rich from the southern industrial society, for a few weeks holiday each year.

After much debate at many public meetings at Balallan School in the centre of the Parish, it was decided on 11th November 1887 on a notion by John Matheson of 13 Gravir, to commence a massive demonstration, known to history as the famous Park Deer Raid. The raid was to commence at dawn on Tuesday 22nd November 1887 on a signal given by blowing the village horns, and marching in an orderly fashion to an agreed rendezvous within the Deer Park, duly armed for their declared purpose of eliminating all the deer in the Deer Park.

Poachers normally sneak away furtively concealing their identity, but the Park Deer Raiders were not poachers, but a very long suffering people who were making a point by peaceful demonstration. Their whole purpose was to attract as much publicity as possible as a public relations exercise. Full details of the date of commencement of the raid, as well as the raider's intention to slaughter all the deer in the park were freely advertised. The press were informed and the management of the Lewis Estate, the Police and the Platt's of the Eishken Deer Park etc., all were informed.

The Sheriff and the Procurator Fiscal came to Lochs on the Saturday before the raid in order to dissuade the raiders from carrying out their intentions, but their advice was disregarded and when the appointed time came the horns blew and the raiders marched, many of them with pipers at their head.

Mr Platt, the leaser of the deer park was out of the Island on business and his wife Mrs Jessie Thorneycroft-Platt and some of the gamekeepers met a column of raiders from the villages at the head of Loch Erisort, just before they entered into the deer park. She tried to reason with them, but she was met on all sides with the remark, 'My Lady, we have no English', as they marched past her into the deer forest.

The senior gamekeeper addressed the raiders earnestly in Gaelic, 'An ann as bhur ciall a tha sibh?' (Have you gone mad?), no response, and the next Gaelic question was, 'Co tha air bhur ceann?' (Who is on your head?) Back came the witty retort in Gaelic, 'Tha bhur boinneadan.' (Our bonnets).

Once the raiders were inside the deer park they formed themselves into parties, each of which were assigned duties. Some were set aside to stalk the deer, some as marksmen, some to carry the spars and sails for the tents, some to carry the food and the cauldrons and some to recover the carcasses of the deer as they were shot. Two or three unarmed men accompanied each man that had a gun as they marched off in open order. The

gamekeepers who were heavily outnumbered made no attempt to stop the raiders and tried to drive the deer out of range of the raiders' guns in order to minimise the slaughter.

Meantime great excitement prevailed throughout Lewis, because the people knew full well that the landless families everywhere were driven to desperation. The people of Point claimed that Aignish Farm should be returned to the crofters and the people of Brue, Barvas, Shader, Borve and Tong etc. demanded their former lands back. Some of them marched to Lewis Castle about that time with petitions for Lady Matheson but her Ladyship told them bluntly that these lands were her property and they had nothing to do with them.

The Park Deer Raid lasted three days and it is difficult to put an accurate figure on the number of people who took part, but the figure of a thousand people was mentioned. It would also be difficult to estimate the number of deer killed, but judging from the number of skins that were about, there must have been hundreds of deer killed.

A graphic eyewitness pen picture of the raider's camp at 'Àirigh Dhomhnuill Chaim' is given in James Cameron's book 'The Old and the New Highland and Hebrides', first published in 1912.

A huge rectangular pavilion facing leeward and made with cabers covered with old sails. Its blazing fires were sighted a long way before reaching the camp and the sound of music wafted over the gentle breeze. Over the fire in the centre there was a magnificent specimen of a royal stag and over another fire was the carcass of a deer broiling. Also, in an immense cauldron there was another stag reduced into chops, or what is known in the south as Irish stew.

The raiders in wild attire were either reclining on couches of heather or sitting on stones or boulders pretty much in the fashion of their forefathers when they roamed the ancient forests of Caledonia. A considerable number of them were chanting songs, such as 'Chunna mi 'n Damh Donn'.

Then there was the dramatic effect of the white haired patriarch from Marvig, Alasdair Thormoid Macfarlane, standing bareheaded with his back to the blazing peat fire, with uplifted swarthy hands, invoking a blessing in rich sonorous Gaelic upon the venison festival. The subject, says the eyewitness, was worthy of the brush of the immortal Rembrandt, the great master of light and shadow.

A military taskforce was hurriedly assembled in order to deal with the outrage. Three gunboats were alerted, HMS Ajax with 500 Officers and was ordered to sail from the Clyde to Stornoway at once. On the way a gale blew up and she was damaged and delayed. Also, HMS Jackal nicknamed locally as Jackass, and HMS Seahorse, and a force of about 20 Ross-shire Police who got a hostile reception from a large crowd at Stornoway Pier, and a military force of 89 men and 5 officers of the Royal Scots were despatched from Maryhill Barracks in Glasgow.

All in all, a mighty military task force to deal with a ragged band of trespassing deer poachers, as if they represented a mortal threat to the security of the nation. Ironically, but the deer park raiders provoked the establishment to over react by the unusual and audacious way they demonstrated openly, and their lawyers made good use of the way the establishment reacted.

On Thursday, the third day of the deer raid, Sheriff Fraser and Police Superintendent Gordon, having spent the previous night at Eishken Lodge, met a group of raiders with guns in the middle of the deer park. The Gaelic speaking Sheriff explained to the raiders that there were formidable Police and Military forces being assembled in order to deal with them. He advised them to go home.

The raiders sat down, removed their caps in deference to the Sheriff and they went on to explain to him their reasons for coming to the deer forest. Thereupon, the Sheriff read the Riot Act in English and explained it in Gaelic. By that time the raiders were tired, wet, hungry and miserable after spending two November nights under canvass, and now, listening to the Riot Act being read to them, they began to disperse and drift back home to their respective villages, reflecting on the manifest injustice of the social system under which they lived.

Quite a lot of men were arrested but only the following six men were charged with mobbing and rioting:

Donald Macrae, Head Teacher of Balallan School, aged 36
Roderick Mackenzie, Ruairaidh Sheorais, Merchant of Balallan, aged 54
John Matheson, Iain an Mhurchaidh, 13 Gravir, aged 25
Murdo Macdonald, Murchadh an Tailear, 61 Balallan, aged 41
Malcolm Mackenzie, Calum Alasdair Ruadh, 26 Crossbost, aged 43
Donald Macmillan, Domhnuill Aonghais Iain, 6 Crossbost, aged 37

The Deer Raid and the harsh treatment meted out to the crofter population of Scotland were widely reported in the press and it attracted the attention of the public, even as far away as America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, etc. Radicals in the House of Commons raised the sensational reports in the press and a Government investigator, Mr Malcolm McNeill, was sent to Lewis to carry out an investigation.

Among the results of the publicity was the setting up of a destitution and famine fund, and thousands of pounds were subscribed within a short time. Some of the largest contributions came from exiles overseas. Clothing was also distributed in Lochs, as was confirmed to us by an elderly man from Marvig, who remembered the older folk talking about the 'Deer Raid Jackets'.

The Deer Raiders were tried in the High Court in Edinburgh. The Crown massed all its heaviest guns against the raiders. The trial took place before a jury and three judges Lord Moncrieff, the Lord Justice Clerk, Lord Lee and Lord Maclaren. The Solicitor General duly assisted by an advocate deputy conducted the case for the prosecution.

For tactical reasons, three different firms of solicitors represented the six accused men. Mr Strachan, of Messrs. Strachan and Dickson, Thomas Shaw (later Lord Shaw) of Messrs. Shaw and MacPhail, and Mr Watt.

Donald Mackinnon of Balallan was the key witness for the Crown and the prosecution set out to discredit him, pointing out that he was one of the most ardent participators in the raid. Under cross examination Mr Mackinnon agreed that he had volunteered to take part in the raid and that it was he who fired the signal shot when the Balallan men joined forces with those from the Gravir area.

He also admitted that he fired three shots, with one of which he killed a stag and cut off its head in order to take it to Donald Macrae, the Balallan Head Teacher.

Mr Mackinnon elected to give his evidence in Gaelic, and Mr Shaw asked him if he had ever been a pupil teacher. He agreed that he had been. He was then asked if he could teach English. 'Because I am not well possessed in English', he said.

Asked about the purpose of his visit to Lewis Castle after he got out of Stornoway Prison, Mr Mackinnon replied that he was a member of the Primrose League, and that there were members of the League there to whom he wished to speak. It was then pointed out that it was a very unusual thing for a Gaelic speaking crofter from Balallan to be a member of the Tory Primrose League and attending tea parties at Lewis Castle.

The defence pointed out that Donald Mackinnon of Balallan was the first man to be arrested, and on a much more serious charge than any of the men on trial in Edinburgh, that off pointing a gun at Police Superintendent Gordon and threatening to shoot him.

Mr Shaw pointed out that the real leaders of Deer Raid were Donald Mackinnon, Murdo Martin and Malcolm Kennedy from Balallan, and it came as a surprise to everyone who knew anything about the case that they were not at the Bar standing trial instead of appearing as witnesses for the prosecution.

On the charge of mobbing and rioting, Mr Shaw said that there had been no riot in any legal sense. The whole thing had been done openly. The sporting tenant or the landlord could have prevented it by raising an action for interdict in the Civil Court before the raid took place. The so-called mob had been a well-conducted assembly from beginning to end.

Clearly, said Mr Shaw, there could be no mob when the crowd was spread across 144 square miles of open ground. The accused, he said, were not criminals. They were God fearing and law abiding. They belonged to a class that had rendered great service to their Country.

The defence also drew attention to several instances of good behaviour by the raiders. They had treated the Sheriff with the great respect that was due to his Office. They even removed their caps while he was addressing them. There was also the incident that many felt was largely instrumental in swinging the case in favour of the raiders.

A group of raiders led by Sandy Macfarlane from Marvig met Douglas Thorneycroft (Jessie Platt's brother) and some Gillies by accident near Loch Brollum after coming ashore from a yacht for a picnic.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Sandy suggested to one of the Gillies that the food should be shared among them all, (an ainm sealbh nach roinn thu am biadh sin 'n ar measg gu leir). Mr Thorneycroft agreed with that sentiment and the food was indeed shared with the raiders, and the unexpected lunch was topped off by a welcome dram. That incident disproved the allegation that the raiders intimidated the employees and family of the sporting tenant.

Addressing the Jury, the Solicitor General asked for a conviction for all six accused of mobbing and rioting. He did so with great regret. He said, they were clearly people whom, but for bad advice, might have lived lives creditable to a civilised society.

It was absolutely imperative to obtain a conviction in the interests of the State, said the Solicitor General. He singled out Donald Macrae as the organiser of the raid, and said there could be no sympathy with a man in a responsible position who used his influence to lead others into lawlessness while keeping him safe.

Obviously there was a world of difference between the Solicitor General's assessment of what constituted 'A civilised society' and that of the raiders.

Thomas Shaw Q.C., in a leading speech for the defence said that the charge of inciting was founded on a speech made by Donald Macrae, the schoolteacher, in Gaelic, in Balallan School. Mr Shaw went on to say that when the Crown tried to found a case on what was said at a public meeting, they were entering a very delicate area. Everything that was said at a public meeting was construed, or more likely, misconstrued. It was the duty of the Jury to decline to put a criminal construction on anything which could be interpreted as exposure of a social wrong, said Mr Shaw.

The charge of mobbing and rioting was one of the most serious charges known to the law in Scotland, said Mr Shaw. The whole thing was a trifle, which had been magnified out of all proportion by the Solicitor General.

It was a poaching expedition and it should have been dealt with under the relevant statute, but the Crown was not interested in £5 fines. They wanted something heavier and he was concerned about the appearance of Partisanship in any prosecution by the Crown. He hoped the Jury would steer clear of that rock. It was a dangerous one.

The Crown failed to prove that The Park Deer Raid was organised in Balallan School or that his clients were the leaders of the raid, said Mr Shaw.

The presiding Judge summed up strongly against the raiders. He maintained that it was a mistake to suggest that the Park Deer Raid was a mere poaching expedition, which could have been dealt with under the 'Day Trespass Act'. He did, however, say that deer were not private property, neither were grouse or any other wild animals.

However, the Proprietor was entitled to prevent trespassers from coming on to his land.

The Jury then retired and in less than half-an-hour they came back and the Foreman indicated a verdict of 'not guilty'. The decision was received with loud applause from the crowded courtroom.

On leaving the courtroom Mr Macrae and his friends received an enthusiastic reception in the extreme. Mr Macrae was carried shoulder high down the High Street, Edinburgh.

On Saturday evening, 18th January 1888, the deer raiders, except Donald Macrae who went to London, arrived in Stornoway and were given a rousing welcome by a large crowd of hundreds of people who awaited them on the pier. The whole procession then marched off to Percival Square where the raiders addressed the crowd.

Deer forests developed rapidly in the Scottish Highlands in the late 19th Century. By 1891 about 22% of the total land area in the crofting counties had been set aside for deer, and the expansion continued apace. By 1911 this had increased to 34%, or over 2,800,000 acres. The Park Deer Forest is still in place at the beginning of the 21st century as a useless, unproductive reminder of the 30-odd crofter communities that were ruthlessly cleared from the area and replaced with sheep and deer.

[ends]

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

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: Leadership - Donald Macrae

Location in physical archive: Series A, File 3, Section 25

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/1/14

© Angus Macleod Archive