



The Lochs Crofters' March to Lews Castle (1888)

On Saturday evening 18th January 1888 the Park deer raiders returned home to Stornoway on the mail steamer 'Clansman' after being found 'NOT GUILTY' of any wrongdoing in the High Court in Edinburgh.

Meetings of crofters of all the villages of Lochs continued to be held in Balallan School. At one meeting there in April 1888, chaired by Duncan Morrison, Crofter, Balallan, discussions went on for four hours during which time about twenty lively speeches were delivered. The Chairman in his opening remarks asked the question 'How can we live independently of destitution funds? We must try the land.' The people had subsisted for the last five months on destitution meal. They had no reason to suppose that their friends in the south would maintain them forever, nor had they any desire to be beggars. The land was there, lying waste. They were willing to cultivate it, and they knew that by industry they could make a living out of it.

They viewed deer forests as a sin against mankind, and blood sports as a brutal lust, and they were sworn to abolish deer forests and blood sports. If Lady Matheson would cooperate with them in restoring the land to the people and in abolishing blood sports, they, on their part would fulfil all reasonable obligations to her Ladyship. Accordingly the meeting unanimously resolved that deer forests and large sheep runs must be abolished, and that the people must get the land of their forefathers, now lying waste. It was resolved to lay their case by petition and deputation before Lady Matheson, before taking any other steps.

It was therefore agreed to go in a body to Stornoway Castle and present Lady Matheson with a humble petition praying her Ladyship to restore both Park and Aline Forests to the people at a fair rent. Accordingly it was agreed that the men of Airidh-Bhruach and Balallan meet at Balallan School at 6am on Saturday 19th April 1888 and take the road to Stornoway, a distance of 15-16 miles, with the cry 'The Land for the People'. The men of South Lochs would cross Loch Erisort and join the procession along with the men from Laxay and Keose, at Keose Cross Roads. The Achmore men were to meet the procession along with the Leurbost and the other villages of North Lochs, at Leurbost Road end. This programme was carried out by about 130 heads of families. Some of them, unable to walk, were driven in carts.

A Resolution setting out seven grievances was drawn up as follows:

1. That Park, now occupied by Mr Platt as a deer forest, was cleared of many crofter townships.
2. That Aline, now occupied by Mr Branaker as a shooting subject, was also cleared of crofter families.
3. That these clearances, all within the memory of men present who could give faithful account of them.
4. That the result of these clearances was a congestion of population in the present crofting townships where the holdings are not large enough to maintain the families of the crofters, as well as the large percentage of cottars and landless families.
5. That this excessive subdivision was in part caused by the evictions above referred to.
6. That the Estate was in other ways responsible for the subdivision of holdings while pretending by regulations to discourage subdivision. Examples were:
 - A. Cases in which the Estate allowed crofts to be subdivided into two crofts and charges the old rent on each half.
 - B. Cases in which the Estate gave portions of crofts to favourites.
7. The people subsisted for the last five months on destitution meal. They had no reason to suppose that their friends in the south would forever maintain them, nor had they any desire to be beggars. The land was laying waste. They were willing to cultivate it, and they knew that by industry they could make a living out of it. They viewed deer forests as a sin against mankind, and blood sports as a brutal lust, and they were sworn to abolish deer forests and blood sports.

If Lady Matheson would co-operate with them by restoring the land to the people and abolishing blood sport, they, on their part, would fulfil all reasonable obligations to her Ladyship.

On arriving at the River Creed entrance to the castle the men found the road clear, by her Ladyship's orders, and they marched in single file to the front of the castle, where they took up their position under the surveillance of a detachment of Policemen. Six delegates were appointed to state their case to her Ladyship, as follows: Roderick Mackenzie, Balallan, John Macdonald, cottar, Keose, Roderick Montgomery, cottar, Balallan, John Mackinnon, cottar, Airidh-Bhruach, John Smith, cottar, Balallan and John Mackinnon, crofter, Airidh-Bhruach.

The Footman came out and informed the delegates that her Ladyship was indisposed, and was sorry she could not see them, but she would be glad to read their petition. Roderick Mackenzie handed him the petition, which was subscribed by about 200 heads of families, and said they would wait her reply. In ten minutes the Footman returned and said her Ladyship had read the petition with much interest and would reply by post.

Thereupon the men marched in perfect order to the town of Stornoway and Mr Donald Macrae, the Balallan School Master indicated that they would patiently await Lady Matheson's reply, and that they would start for home at 2pm. Those of them who could procure no food in Stornoway would get a supply of biscuits at the River Creed.

On arriving at Keose crossroads a halt was called, and a meeting was constituted with John Macdonald, cottar from Keose in the Chair. It was moved and unanimously agreed that the next meeting be held in front of Aline shooting lodge on Saturday fortnight at noon. Boats were to be in readiness at Airidh-Bhruach to convey the people to the place of the meeting.

On Monday Lady Matheson sent her reply to the Lochs Crofter delegation, as follows: 'Her Ladyship deprecates the poverty of the people and expresses her sympathy for them', and goes on to say that:

The present crofting tenants are burdened with cottars and squatters whom they wish for her now to remove from off them by an act of hers. By their own action in subdividing their crofts in direct violation of Estate regulations and the remonstrance's of the officials, and that it is impossible for her either to have them removed or provide them with land holdings elsewhere. She therefore cannot grant their petition.

True to the resolution of a fortnight earlier the crofters of Lochs proceeded to hold a meeting on Saturday on the Aline shooting grounds. As they sailed down Loch Seaforth from Airidh-Bhruach they had a good view of the Promised Land of Park Forest on the left, and Aline Forest on the right.

Meanwhile the authorities pretending they feared an outbreak of lawlessness requisitioned the gunboat Seahorse, and it was stationed opposite Aline Lodge. On board were Sheriff Fraser, the Procurator Fiscal, Police Superintendent Gordon and several police constables and all the marines that were stationed at the battery near Stornoway.

As the crofters sailed down Loch Seaforth in four large boats, with School Master Donald Macrae acting as Captain in the foremost boat, they sighted the Seahorse riding at anchor in the bay in front of Aline shooting lodge. An imposing Naval, Military, Police and a legal force were also in position ashore at the shooting lodge, waiting since early morning in the high wind and cold showers of sleet and hail.

The Land League crofters landed in a more convenient creek and sent messengers to Aline for any of their comrades who might be waiting for them there. The gunboat at once took the expeditionary force aboard and steamed down to the crofters' camp. But the wary crofters would not discuss their revolutionary resolutions in the presence of the Sheriff and Procurator Fiscal, but moved to another place and the authorities saw by this time that they were befooled and they did not follow.

The crofters constituted an open-air meeting and John Macdonald, cottar from Keose took the Chair. Mr Donald Macrae, Head Teacher from Balallan addressed the meeting at considerable length, in the course of which he said:

The Lewis Chamberlain had sent letters to all the ministers on the Island, asking them to intimate from their pulpits on Sunday, that one of the Commissioners, Mr MacNeill, would be at Stornoway the next day for the purpose of floating an emigration scheme. Mr Macrae wondered if the ministers themselves would emigrate with the people to Manitoba, or would they announce a meeting of the Land League from their pulpits.

Mr Macrae went on to say that the people had an infinitely better right to go with their spades and cultivate the waste lands at home than Lady Matheson had to keep these lands in a state of nature while the people were living on charity. He invited patriotic highlanders at home and abroad to cooperate with them in advancing loans to cottars for migrating to Park and Aline, rather than with the Tory Unionist Government for emigrating them to Manitoba.

Lady Matheson's reply to the crofter's petition dated 21st April 1888 was then read as follows:

Duncan Morrison and others, I received your petition this day in which you crave that the cottars and squatters on your crofts should be moved to some other place. These cottars were not placed where they are now by me, but by yourselves, by dividing and subletting your crofts contrary to the rules and regulations of the Estate, and in defiance of everything that could be done to prevent the squatting. I cannot therefore see that I should be called upon to provide a remedy for the burdens that you have bought upon yourselves. I fear, should I be able to give

lands to these cottars (which I am not), they should divide and subdivide in a short time their crofts, as you have already done.

Furthermore, these cottars are without capital, and how could they stock the land and pay rent. As to the land applied for, it is not in my power to give it to cottars or crofters, it being held by others under a lease, and I am given to understand that it is not adaptable for crofters. Under these circumstances, I am sorry it is not in my power to relieve you of the cottars and squatters by giving them the land referred to.

Yours Truly

Mary Jane Matheson

Lady Matheson must have had her tongue firmly in her cheek when she framed the above reply to the Lochs crofters' petition of 21st April 1888.

Only 2 years earlier in 1886 Lady Matheson refused to create a single croft in Park when she converted the whole 44,000 acres farm into a sporting deer forest, after being vacant for three years while searching for a new farm tenant. Numerous applications for living space in the former crofter townships of southern Park were contemptuously refused.

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