



Leaders of the Crofters' Movement at Lochs

The two foremost leaders of the crofter's movement in Lochs were Mr Donald Macrae, Head Teacher at Balallan, 1887-1888 and Reverend Donald MacCallum, Lochs Parish Minister at Keose, 1889-1920. Both of them were from the Scottish mainland and were well known nationally as they were active supporters of the crofters cause and the Land League before they came to Lewis.

The first Crofters Act of 1886 was already on the Statute Book before they came to Lewis and although Mr Macrae became the Land League organiser in 1888 and left Balallan, both of them continued the work on behalf of the crofters cause.

Donald Macrae, 1851-1924 was born in Plockton, Ross-shire. After teaching at Inverness High School he gained promotion to the post of Head Teacher at Bridge End School, Alness in 1879. He was there for seven years until he came to Balallan in 1887. He was a Gaelic scholar and remained a Gaelic activist all his life.

While in Alness, he strongly supported the crofter's cause of land law reform and he was an active member of the Land League as well as a prominent official of the Ross and Cromarty Association of the EJS.

At that time schools were managed by local school boards and there were always a fair number of pro-landlord members on the boards. As might be expected, the majority of the Rosskeen School Board members were not enamoured with Mr Macrae for his activities on behalf of the crofters and a dispute arose between Mr Macrae and some of the members of the school board.

Mr Macrae maintained that a proposal of the majority of the school board regarding salary conflicted with the Scottish Education Department guidelines, also a trumped up complaint was made against him regarding the use of the cause.

Notwithstanding the strong support that Mr Macrae received from the general public, the school parents and the EJS, the landlord faction on the Rosskeen School Board, who were in a majority, resolved to dismiss him despite the fact that they could not deny that he was a good teacher.

Local public opinion and even Tory and Whig newspapers were in no doubt that Mr Macrae was dismissed because of his connection with the Land League. He was made a scapegoat for his class.

Donald Macrae, the Alness Martyr, as he became known, was unanimously appointed to the post of Head Teacher at Balallan from 17th January 1887.

The Oban Times reported the arrival in Stornoway of the mail steamer 'Lochiel' with the Alness Martyr Donald Macrae. Donald was received in Lewis with open arms by hundreds of admirers, and the crofters of Lochs offered their services free to convey his furniture home to the Balallan School House.

At that time Lewis was a stronghold of Land Leaguers and the reformers defeated those opposed to them at the school board elections. They looked upon the circumstances that brought Donald Macrae to Lewis as an act of providence. They were inclined to send a note of thanks to the Rosskeen School Board for being the cause of sending to Lewis such a good teacher and a champion of the crofters cause.

Donald Macrae set to work at once to organise the Lochs crofters in their agitation for land law reform. Meetings were held in Balallan School which were attended by representatives from most, if not all, the villages in both North and South Lochs.

His philosophy was to draw the attention of the authorities and the civilised world to the deplorable conditions the crofters were forced to live in. To that end the immensely successful Park Deer Raid was conceived. It was meticulously planned, and masterfully executed as a peaceful demonstration which achieved widespread publicity, at home and abroad, as well as Parliamentary questions!

The authorities were alarmed and over reacted by mounting a large military expedition out of all proportion to solve the problem of the invasion of a deer park, by a group of ragged crofter poachers, whose only crime was trespassing on a rich man's sporting playground.

There was no question of violence of any kind when Police Sergeant Smith, a man from Keose, came to see Donald Macrae from Balallan. He told the sergeant that he and the others would come quietly. Donald felt that a trial would give him an opportunity to present a case for the Lewis people.

In all fourteen men surrendered but only six of them were shipped off to the High Court in Edinburgh in a blaze of publicity. Once again the authorities were over reacting and playing into the hands of the crofters. Mr Macrae was charged with 'instigating a riotous mob', and the five others were charged with 'forming part of a riotous mob'.

Thomas Shaw, later Lord Shaw, who acted for Mr Macrae, demolished the case for the prosecution by pointing out that the chief witnesses for the crown were themselves ringleaders in the raid. They now turned against their fellow raiders in their absence. The blundering authorities were going to send a detachment of the Seaforth Highlanders to quell their starving friends in Park, until their commanding officer objected as the regiment included so many men from the Highlands and Islands. Instead the Royal Scots were sent as well as several war ships.

There would have been no case. Despite the summing up of the Judge, Lord Moncrieff, against the accused, the jury took less than half an hour to return a verdict of 'not guilty'. The verdict was greeted with cheers from the crowded court. Mr Macrae was borne shoulder high down the High Street to the Waterloo Rooms where the hero of the day made a stirring speech to a large crowd of supporters.

The Martyr of Alness was known as 'Balallan' from then on. Despite the favourable public response to the Park deer raid at home and overseas, and subsequent Royal Commission of enquiry, usually referred to as 'The Deer Forest Commission' of 1892, whose remit may be summed up as follows: 'To enquire if there was any land capable of being cultivated and occupied by crofters or others [...] tenants in the crofting counties, not occupied as a deer forest, grouse moor etc'.

The Park Deer Forest still stands intact, sterile and firmly in the iron grip of the landlord class. It is a reminder of the power and influence the British landowning class wields behind the scenes. The crofters, the Land League nor the Parliamentary radicals of last century were able to shake loose their firm grip of the Highland land. No-one even tried this in the last hundred years.

Donald Macrae's activities on behalf of the crofters of Lochs, and elsewhere, were not confined to the Park deer raid. He was an active champion of the crofters' cause all his life. A memorial was erected by his fellow Highlanders at home and abroad as a tribute of respect to the memory of the late Donald Macrae 'Balallan', the noted Highland Land League reformer. It is in the Western Necropolis, Lochburn Road, Maryhill, Glasgow, and was erected on Saturday 18th September 1926. The memorial bears the following inscription:

Erected by his fellow Highlanders at
Home and abroad as a tribute of respect

To the memory of
Donald Macrae 'Balallan'
Born Plockton, Ross-Shire, 13 February 1851
Died Glasgow, 14 February 1924

One who sacrificed the best years of his life
To the cause of Land Law Reform and
The emancipation of the oppressed and
Landless Highland crofters and cottars.

A Man who had the courage of a chieftain
The mind of a statesman,
The heart of a patriot
And the faith of a Christian.

It is a matter of great regret that the people of Lochs, and indeed Lewis as a whole, did not commemorate the crofter struggle of last century and the sacrifices of the crofter's leaders. Lochs is a scattered district and perhaps our forefathers had a hard enough struggle to keep body and soul together to think of erecting a simple cairn in memory of Donald Macrae, Rev. Donald McCallum, and the local leaders.

The crofters of Tiree erected a simple cairn in memory of Rev. Donald MacCallum for the valuable work he performed on the Island where he is still warmly remembered. 'Tur MhicChallum' was the focus of the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the Crofters Act of 1886, and the Tiree people remembered in a solemn and fitting style.

At the Braes in Skye we shed tears, on reading the touching inscription on another memorial cairn erected beside the road at Beu-lee, the site of the gallant martyrs of the Battle of the Braes. In Glendale, Skye there is another memorial beside the road.

We in Lochs should remedy our neglect and our debt to the brave and courageous leaders of the crofters' struggle by erecting a memorial cairn, perhaps taking a leaf out of the Australian book by gathering stones from each of the townships of Lochs, north and south and one from Airidh Dhomhnuill Chaim, the site of the first camp of the Park deer raiders. A suitable site might be Garraidh an Tighearna, west of Balallan, where the Park raiders left the road to enter the deer park.

It would also serve as a focal point for tourist visitation, and perhaps serve to stimulate their and our own curiosity to learn more about our local history.

Our second prominent crofters' leader in Lochs was Rev. Donald MacCallum 1849-1929, a crofter's son from Craignish in the Parish of Kilmartin in Argyllshire, who came from Tiree, to the Parish Church at Keose, Lochs, in 1889 and remained there until 1920 when he retired to Skye.

He was another crusader in the cause of Land Law Reform. He came to Waternish Parish Church, Skye in 1883, the year after the Battle of the Braes, and as a young minister he left frustrated and disillusioned by the deplorable state of affairs in Skye, and decided he could no longer sit in the sidelines.

At a meeting of the Land League, Mr MacCallum was invited to speak on behalf of the crofters. That he did most eloquently, but in so doing, he did not endear himself to his brethren in the Parish Church who were the minority denomination in Skye at that time, nor to the landlords and the law. He exclaimed: 'It is now time for the Skye crofters to throw off their yoke, slaves throughout the world are now free, yet there seems to be no freedom for the blackhouse dwellers of Skye'.

In his evidence to the Brand Royal Commission of enquiry in 1892, he stated that he suffered persecution and imprisonment, and that he was often denied the common civilities of civilised society. In offering my hand to a brother clergyman I am often repulsed with the taunt, 'I shake hands with gentlemen only'. Often by an old acquaintance I have been regarded as thin invisible air.

Such was the persecution this courageous man suffered from his so-called misguided friends who denied him freedom of speech and conscience. Sheriff William Ivory duly noted the utterances of the fiery young minister from Argyllshire and he issued a warrant on Saturday for the arrest of MacCallum. He was locked up in jail to await trial on a charge of inciting the lieges to violence. News of the arrest spread like wildfire and indignation reached fever pitch. He was a man of God, languishing in gaol when he should be preaching the Gospel.

The supporters of the landlords and the establishment naturally supported Sheriff Ivory outwardly but within there were grave doubts as to the wisdom of the Sheriff's extreme action. The radicals condemned the sheriff's action as not only an attack on the Church but also an attack on the rights of the individual to free speech.

Early on Monday morning MacCallum was released on bail and the Lord Advocate decided that no further action should be taken in the matter; and the charge was dropped. But he still had to face the jury of his brethren in the Skye Presbytery of the Parish Church on a motion of censure. No-one supported him at the Presbytery and after much discussion he was allowed to go and sin no more.

At the end of 1887 he moved to Tiree where the Parish Church was in the majority and very supportive of MacCallum who was extremely popular among the crofters because of his valuable work advising them in all matters relating to their rights.

He came to Keose in 1889 and by that time the first Crofters Act was already on the Statute Book, the Park deer raid was past and Donald Macrae had left Balallan the year before. Nevertheless, he became active on behalf of the landless cottars as soon as he came because that class of croft families gained nothing from the first Crofters Act and their position was desperate.

He wrote a small volume of songs and poems, one of which was 'Bodach Isginn', which of course was Mr Platt the leaseholder of the Park Deer Forest. He is remembered in Highland history as one of the few ministers of the state Church who had the courage to stand up for the people in the crofter agitation for land law reform and justice. He was said to have had a perfect command of language in both English and Gaelic.

Giving evidence to the Royal Commission, (Highlands and Islands 1892) Rev. Donald MacCallum began by making a general statement:

The gist of the evidence I submit to you is that there is great amount of land waste in this Parish, and at the same time that the various townships are greatly congested [...] that the remedy to which the people look is premises for the cottars to re-occupy every inch of land of the forests and large farms on equitable terms.

Great evils have necessarily resulted from the fact that the land, lake, river and estuary are appropriated to the sole use, and regulated by the will of a few irresponsible individuals styled

by themselves and others as lords.

The rights of the people, freely and equitably to use the land and the water was wholly ignored by the legislature till the Crofters Act recognised it so far as present crofts are concerned. And the principal evils under which the people suffer are directly traceable to the system of absolute Lordism that previously prevailed.

Every man has a right, natural and God given, to the earth and its fullness - its fullness of light, air, water, vegetables and fruits, of beasts, birds and fishes, of metals and minerals, *said Mr MacCallum*.

Speaking about the landlords right of ownership of the land, Mr MacCallum said they grabbed the land, not for payment, nor for better lands, but as their spoil as the conquerors of the people. They should have been given the answer which Nabeth gave to Ahab when he asked him to give him his vineyard for its value in money, or for a better vineyard, 'God forbid that we should give you the inheritance of our fathers'.

He continued that lordism devastates the land; the people are weakened and impoverished by landlord exactions. On the face of the deserted villages, once the happy homes of the free and the brave, now lying in silent dislocation, we read:

The scourge of landlordism has passed over us, I never heard of any creature having a swallowing capacity equal to that of landlordism. The cattle and the ears of the corn which Pharaoh saw in his dream come nearest to it. The Highlanders call the land they love, 'Tir nam gleann s'nam beann, s'nan gaisgach'.

Rev. Donald McCallum went on to give pages of evidence and the chairman asked him at the end of his evidence if he had any comment to make on a letter which was received from Crossbost dated 28th May 1894 as follows:

Sir - the cottars of the township of Crossbost earnestly desire to bring before the notice of the Commission that they wish to be removed to Orinsay in Park, Lewis, where our fathers were cruelly treated before and sent off. We, the under named, have also suffered for the above noted place. We hope it is now in the hands of a law that will give us it. We recommend Rev. D McCallum F.C Minister at Keose, to stand on our behalf before the Royal Commission.

Mr McCallum hoped to see the prayer of the petition granted.

All those who gave evidence to the Napier and Brand Deer Forest Commission's deserve to be remembered as leaders of the people, who were risking much by standing up in public and speaking frankly.

Dr Roderick Ross, a son of Crobeg, giving evidence to the Napier Commission, stated that the grievance of the people of Park was, first, the overcrowding and second, the defective laws and management. It may be asked, he said, 'how did the Mackenzie's of Seaforth acquire their right to Lewis?' We know that the right they got to Lewis is certainly more questionable than the right the Lewis men have to their share of it.

Roderick Finlayson, Marvig, responded to a question from David Brand, chairman of the 1892 Commission: 'Could places be found in Park for all the cottars in the Parish?' 'It would make a very good clearance of all the cottars in the Parish of Lochs.' To a further question, as to how many crofter settlements were cleared from Park, Mr Finlayson said there were about 34, more or less. His own family were evicted from Bunish at Loch-Shell.

At the same meeting, Alexander MacIannan, Marvig, whose family were evicted from Ceann Chrionaig at the head of Loch Brollum when the Park Sheep Farm was first established about 1802, stated that there was an old man in this township who was born and brought up in Park, and he told me there were 34 places in Park where people dwelt at one time, but in some of them there was only one family. Mr MacIannan himself recollected seeing men coming from Park with their furniture when they were flitting.

Murdo Mackenzie, Gravir, confirmed at the same meeting that, 'the whole of Park, I think, is good for crofting purposes'.

Murdo Macmillan, Gravir, again at the same hearing, stated, 'Give the land to the people on such terms as they can live on it, under just administration and without oppression of any shape or form'.

Roderick Mackenzie, cottar at Calbost, testified at the same hearing in Stornoway on 9th July 1894 that there were 19 people in three separate dwelling houses living on their croft at 4 Calbost and that there were more but they are gone away. The chairman confirmed the acreage of the croft from the blue book as 1 acre, 3 roods, 8 poles arable, and 2 roods, 27 poles outrun approximately 2 ½ acres of land in total.

Croft 4 Calbost has been extended since then, but at that time the inbye land of the croft extended to about 1/8th of an acre for each of the 19 persons living on it, including both arable and pasture land.

In fact the following table shows that if we take the 180 crofts in Park at that time at 5 acres each and divide the inbye land of the crofts per head of the population at that time, the average is only just over ½ an acre arable and pasture land per person for all the inhabitants of Park.

	Crofts	Population
Lemreway	32	261
Gravir	43	389
Calbost	14	197
Marvig	22	205
Cromore	28	271
Caversta	5	45
Garyvard	11	101
Kershader	12	103
Habost	13	113

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Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: The Leaders of the Crofters Movement at Lochs

Location in physical archive: Series F, File 9, Section 8

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/6/13

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