



[The Big Fight at Wick - Sabaid Mhòr Wick (1859)]

In the 1850s there were about 12,000 visitor workers at Wick annually in connection with the herring fishing industry, 5,000 of which were from the Highlands and Islands. Towards the end of the summer fishing season of 1859 the weather was not favourable for fishing for a whole week, and strained relations between Caithness and Island fishermen was at breaking point.

The Wick riot which took place in August 1859 between Lewis fishermen and East coast fishermen was a free for all that lasted a whole week. Although perhaps relations between East coast fishermen and Hebridean fishermen may not have been too good, it was a dispute between two lads over an apple, a lad from Wick and one from Lewis that started the 'Sabaid Mor'.

Police apprehended the 14 year old Lewis lad Malcolm Macleod 'Calum Alastair Iain', 2 Habost, Lochs, who was helping in his father's boat. Skipper Alastair had moved from Balallan to Habost to take the place of a family that was evicted and moved away to Harris by the notorious factor Donald Munro. A granddaughter still lives in the family home in Habost.

Hundreds of people were engaged on each side and some Lewis men were arrested and taken to jail and this action by the Police aggravated the situation. Domhnuill Ruaraidh Mackenzie, 10 Laxay, assisted by his crew and others, removed the mast from his boat and used it as a battering ram against the jail door and released the prisoners. Almost every village in Lewis was represented in the riot and some of the men were stabbed and many hurt. Some on both sides were given a ducking in the harbour.

On the day set aside for the trial a large crowd appeared at the court house, and the trial was abandoned. The police swore in about 150 Special Constables who were issued with batons, and they roamed through the town indiscriminately battering anyone who looked like a Highlander. Highlanders dispensed summary justice to anyone who did not know how to reply to the question 'A bheil Gaidhlig agad?'

An unusually strong man from Keose played a prominent part, Rob Macdhomhnuill, 12 Keose 'Macdhomhnuill Bhàn'. One of his roles was to provide ammunition for the rioters by breaking up barrels and supplying staves. In the end the local authorities called in the Military and Rev. George Mackay of Tongue, and peace was restored, just before the end of the fishing season. A warrant was issued for the arrest of the strong man of Keose, Robert Macdonald, and in order to evade the police he fled immediately first on foot, but he had not gone far when he was overtaken by a carriage and pair. Macdonald's signal for a lift was ignored and therefore he ran after the carriage and jumped in. He ejected the driver and his passenger and left them by the roadside. By the time the horses became exhausted he was near Poolewe, where he got the ferry 'Mary Jane' to Lewis but the Lewis Police were informed and Macdonald went into hiding with friends in Cromore until he thought the furore had died down.

Back home in Keose he joined the other youths who used to gather in the Manse kitchen with the servants. One evening the Stornoway Police turned up and arrested Rob and handcuffed him to one of the Officers. Near a loch outside the village, Rob said he was not going any further and asked the Police to release him. When they refused he threatened to drag the Officer to whom he was handcuffed into the loch. After a brief struggle the Officers felt they were no match for Rob and decided to release him, to the delight of his friends, a large number of whom had gathered to give moral support to Rob. Knowing that he was a marked man he decided to leave via Tarbert to resume his seafaring career, this time in the Merchant Navy. Alas a few years later he was lost in the Thames Estuary.

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