



[Crofting, Diversification and the So-called Crofting Problem]

By the second half of the 18th century the old highland social grouping known as the Clan System was coming to an end and in its place a new social grouping called Crofting was emerging. Seaforth Mackenzie, the Lewis proprietor carried out the first unofficial lotting of crofting in Lewis early in the 19th century, but crofting was not recognised officially until Parliament passed the first Crofters Act in 1886.

The Clan system was based on kinship and it was designed to ensure that it functioned as an effective and unified social and military organisation. It was structured as follows. At the top was the Clan Chief, the supreme commander as it were. Next was the so called Officer Corps, the tacksmen, or middlemen, and then the small-holders, or ordinary soldiers as it were.

The Clan lands were won and held by the Clan sword and were vested in the Clan Chief for administration purposes. While the clansmen owed allegiance to the Chief and considered it their duty to support him at all times, the Chief was himself the servant of the clan and he could be removed from office at any time, if the Clan resolved to do so collectively.

The Clan system of land tenure was called 'runrig' and was organised as follows; the Clan Chief leased large areas of land to the tacksmen on a long term basis and the tacksmen in turn gathered a lot of small holders round them as communities or villages and they sublet their land, or most of it, collectively to the small holders on a shared basis. No part of the land was held permanently by any individual small holders, but the inbye arable land was re-allocated annually among the families of the village as follows.

Towards the end of Autumn when the harvest work was over, the village Constable, who was an official elected by the small-holders from among their own number, and representing them in their dealings with the Principal and who also organised the life of the community by marking out peat-banks and appointing dates for such communal activities as sheep round ups, etc., called a meeting of all the small holders of the village and having decided on the portion of land to be put under green crop next year, they divided it into shares according to the number of tenants in the township. Thereupon they cast lots, (hence the designation 'lot' which is still applied to a croft at village level). The share of land that fell to a tenant was kept by him for three years.

The arable, or inbye land, of the village in the runrig system was enclosed by a village boundary wall. The land immediately outside the township wall was held collectively by all the tenants within the village as common grazing. The smallholders paid their annual rent to the tacksmen.

The clan system and therefore the runrig tenure land system came to an end following the upheaval after the Jacobite rising in the middle of the 18th century when the clansmen were disarmed and the clan chiefs took advantage of the military weakness of the clansmen by arbitrarily assuming personal control of the clan lands and becoming private landlords.

Once the clan system came to an end, the new landlords devised a new system of land tenure called crofting as a means of keeping the clansmen under their control. The annual rent was now paid direct to the landlord because the tacksmen were dismissed as they were expendable under the new order.

The effect of the new crofting system of land tenure was to enable the landlords to exploit the human resources on their estates by extracting the maximum profit out of them through high rents that were paid partly in money, labour and agricultural produce, as well as using them as a cheap labour force to maximise their profit from the kelp on the shores of their estates. Many of the tacksmen emigrated because they were as disillusioned as the clansmen who lost their ancestral rights of collective ownership of their lands.

The new Landlord system set in motion the infamous Highland Clearances and it was at that time that commercial herring fishing suddenly developed into a prosperous industry towards the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. A large number of the displaced persons thrown up by the clearances found work at the east coast fishing both afloat and ashore.

Under the new system of crofting tenure the traditional social groupings of the clan system were continued and the same principles of common use of most of the land continued, except that the inbye arable land was shared out into permanent crofts of a few acres each and allocated to individual tenants on a continuous basis, as part-time land holding without the security of tenure.

Commercial herring fishing developed earlier on the east coast of Scotland because of the opportunities created by the establishment of suitable harbour facilities and no doubt the prevailing social conditions in the highlands at that time, as a result of the clearances, contributed to a change of life-style on the part of the east coast fishermen who abandoned the land and became full-time fishermen once proper harbour facilities were available.

Because of the lack of proper harbour facilities on the Minches, commercial herring fishing developed later and the crofter/fishermen of the west coast retained their land, and therefore their traditional diversified way of life based on social groupings living communally on part-time landholdings. Also, the people of the west coast depended more on kelp and crofting rather than on commercial fishing, but after the failure of the kelp industry towards the end of the first quarter of the 19th century, they turned their attention to the fishing more and more. There was however a great shortage of capital to enable them to acquire larger boats. Little by little however, they were able to accumulate enough capital to acquire boats to enable them to participate in the prosperous Caithness fishing. The main fishing season in Caithness was from July to September and as the early Minch herring fishing season ended in July the west coast fishermen were in the habit of making Caithness fishing in July.

Because of the prosperous conditions that prevailed at the west coast fishing, the custom of skipper and family owned boats developed in the industry and that absorbed many of the men displaced by the clearances as hired-hands on east coast boats. The same applied to redundant kelpers on the west coast and the Islands. They began to go to the east coast as hired-hands after the failure of kelping and that practice continued for about 100 years, until the late 1930s.

Long experience of close contact with the natural elements taught these hardy west-coast crofter/fishermen that it was somewhat uncertain to rely too much on any one industry. They were used to periods of plenty and periods of famine in either the fishing or agriculture, and now the prosperous kelp industry failed as well. They understood the value of diversification as an insurance against distress and hunger when the inevitable bad year came round.

It was therefore quite natural for the Island crofter/fishermen to retain their age old diverse economy when commercial herring fishing became prosperous in the west in the 19th century and subsequently to fight for their rights on the land until they got security of tenure, and woe betide anyone who dared to interfere with the crofters security of tenure.

It was the same principle of diversification that motivated the Lewis land raiders in the 1920s when Lord Leverhulme refused to give new crofts to the First World War ex-servicemen, but preferred to offer them ¼ acre feus outside Stornoway, as well as work on his development schemes. The crofters were sceptical about the long term success of the Leverhulme schemes and Leverhulme professed to be mystified, but within the space of two or three years the crofters were proved right when Leverhulme's development schemes collapsed because of the economic situation and the failure of the fishing. The land raiders of Gress and Coll etc. are however still here and in good heart.

The crofting system was never properly understood by politicians and civil servants. They always felt that crofting was an outdated anachronism from the past and that the proper thing to do with it was to change the whole system from part-time landholdings to viable holdings, whereas the reality is that the real strength of the crofting system lies in the fact that it is based on part-time landholdings and therefore a highly diversified social system of small-holders grouped together into small communities, needing an additional source of income, which was originally fishing and kelping, but now-a-days may be any gainful employment.

In practical terms viable landholdings are not crofts but farms. Farms are individual economic units and the great practical difficulty with farming is how to remain viable in the face of constant change and steadily rising costs. Farm units have traditionally expanded and grown larger in an effort to remain viable and efficient. During that process farming has cleared the people from the countryside, whereas crofting retains the people on the land better than any other form of land-use. Crofting is also ecologically friendly. The irony is that more and more fishermen turn to the crofting system of diversification in order to survive.

Because of the misconception of crofting among the Establishment the various Government Commissions of Enquiry into crofting concentrated on what they perceived to be the crofting problem which they saw as the part-time agricultural side of crofting exclusively. The various reports of these commissions only refer to the additional employment of crofters in a casual way, whereas, crofting cannot, and never did, exist without additional employment. The basic reason for the much talked about absenteeism is lack of employment. Absenteeism is a symptom not a cause.

The remit of the Taylor Commission of 1951, which crofters everywhere looked forward to, was inadequate, 'The secure establishment of a small holding population making the full use of agricultural resources and deriving the maximum benefit there from', because it referred only to agricultural resources and neglected to mention the essential additional employment which alone would retain a healthy crofter population in the Highlands and Islands.

The remedy offered by Taylor for the so-called crofting problem missed the point because it was not relevant to the real need. The Taylor Report spoke at length about rationalisation, re-organisation and consolidation etc. They then recommended a new Crofters Commission to create the brave new re-organisation crofting society.

As usual the dead hand of the Civil Servants made sure that the new Crofters Commission's remit was also inadequate, if not meaningless;

1. Regulate crofting
2. Promote the interests of crofters.
3. Keeping under review matters relating to crofting.
4. Re-organising and developing crofting.

Only the fourth heading had any real substance and very soon the Crofters Commission itself and others were complaining that the powers of the Commission were inadequate. In their 1959 Annual Report the Crofters Commission spoke about, 'seeking new powers' but unfortunately they also misconceived the real problem and wanted powers to re-organise crofting and rehabilitate crofting agriculture, and complained that 'Security of tenure had frozen crofting agriculture in an outdated pattern of minute units' and the problem was, 'to unfreeze the system'. Fortunately they felt they did not have enough power to unfreeze the system and they gave notice on page 19 of their 1959 Annual Report that, 'If we are given the necessary enabling powers we shall be undertaking a drastic reduction in the number of croft homes which may entail a reduction in population numbers.'

As might be expected the crofting world not only lost confidence in the new Crofters Commission but they became desperately afraid of the Commission and proceeded to re-organise themselves at once into small regional Crofters Unions in order to defend themselves from this new threat to their security of tenure and a possible new Highland clearance.

The real development powers which the Government should have conferred on the new Crofters Commission, and should have been sought by the Commission itself, if they had had a clear understanding of the ethos of crofting, was only given to the H.I.D.B. ten years after the establishment of the Crofters Commission, which meant that these bodies were trying to remedy the so called crofting problem in an uncoordinated haphazard way, which in a way was not the fault of either body but that of the Politicians and the Civil Servants who controlled them.

The Napier Commission also failed to understand crofting and wanted to change the whole system into viable agricultural units by denying security of tenure to any but a few of the larger holdings. Fortunately Parliament heeded the crofters' voice in their long years of agitation for land law reform; otherwise the Highlands and Islands would be a wilderness today.

In concluding this chapter we feel we cannot do better than repeat the Taylor Report of 1954:

We have already observed that a good part of the difficulties under which the crofting districts labour has been caused not only by the decline in the production on the croft, but also, and even more, by the failure of the auxiliary occupations which used to be followed. In some parts of the western seaboard and in many of the Islands, it is the failure of the fishing industry which created the difficulty.

Having diagnosed the trouble correctly, Taylor does not go on to prescribe suitable medicine but on the next page of their 1959 report they gave yet another example of faulty thinking when they say, 'It is still possible for smaller boats to be employed in fishing for lobster and crab, but the general trend of development is against the man who combines fishing with the working of a croft'.

We know of many crofters who combine full-time fishing and full-time work on many occupations with crofting and in very many cases there is no other alternative.

The Crofters Commission and the H.I.D.B. should have been two departments of the same development organisation because they were both dealing with the same problem. Surely if that were true in the past it is still true under the present structure. The H.I.D.B. dealt with fishing etc., and the Crofters Commission dealt with agriculture. Both organisations were trying to assist, in an uncoordinated way with the development of the Highlands and Islands for the benefit of the crofting population which, in a broad sense, embraces everyone living in the highlands.

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Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: Crofter Fishermen
Location in physical archive: Series G, File 4, Section 31
NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/7/x (additional file)

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