



The Principal Clans and Private Landlords of Lewis

It was the Clan Nicolson that was the principal Clan in the early period in Lewis and it is said that it was they that built the old Lewis Castle, which was sited on a rocky outcrop, off South Beach Street in the bay of Stornoway. There is a plaque on the wall of the Maritime Building on No1 Wharf Stornoway, indicating the site of the old Lewis Castle, now submerged under No 1 Wharf, opposite the Caledonian Hotel on South Beach Street. The ruins of the old castle remained until 1882 when it was removed in the interests of commerce. The ruins of the castle may still be seen at low tide under the wharf. We do not know when the old castle was built, but the Macleods occupied it and resisted the Fife Adventurers when they raided Lewis in 1598.

The Clan Macleod held sway in Lewis after the Clan Nicolson for 3½ centuries from the middle of the 12th century to the beginning of the 17th century, when the Clan Mackenzie controlled the island for 2½ centuries from 1610 to 1844 as follows:

1610 - 1611

Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail.

1611 - 1633

Colin Mackenzie (Cailean Ruadh) who was empowered by the Government to clean up the trouble with the Clan Macleod of Lewis and pacify the Island. For his services in that direction he was created Lord Seaforth in 1623.

1633 - 1651

George Mackenzie, second son of Seaforth and supporter of the House of Stewart.

1651 - 1678

Kenneth Mackenzie (Coinneach Mor) who was the third Earl of Seaforth. He was a supporter of the House of Stewart. Oliver Cromwell established a presence in Lewis during his time.

1678 - 1701

Kenneth Mackenzie (Coinneach Og) the fourth Earl of Seaforth. He was also a supporter of the House of Stewart.

1701 - 1740

William Mackenzie (Uilleam Dubh) the fifth Earl of Seaforth. He fought at Sheriffmuir in 1715. He was a staunch adherent of the ill-fated House of Stewart. He was wounded at Glenshiel in 1719 and subsequently forfeited. He was pardoned in 1726 and lived in Seaforth Lodge, Stornoway.

1740 - 1761

Kenneth Mackenzie, Lord Fortrose. He refused to come out in 1745 for Prince Charlie. He gave his full support to the House of Hanover. He was a Member of Parliament for 20 years and spent most of his time in London. He showed little interest in Island affairs.

1761 - 1781

Kenneth Mackenzie who was a strong supporter of the House of Hanover and a Member of Parliament. He was created Earl of Seaforth in 1771 in the Peerage of Ireland. In 1778 he raised the 78th Regiment of Foot of whom nearly half of the men were forcibly conscripted on the Seaforth Estates. On his way to India, he and 230 of his men died on the passage. As he was financially embarrassed the Estate was sold to his cousin, Lieutenant Thomas Humbertson Mackenzie for £100,000. He died without male issue and the title of Lord Seaforth became extinct.

1781 - 1783

Thomas Humberston Mackenzie. He had taken the additional name of Humberston on succeeding to his mother's property in Humberston in Lincolnshire, England. He died of wounds in India in 1783 and his Estate passed to his younger brother Francis.

1783 - 1815

Colonel Francis Humberston Mackenzie. He was created a Peer of the United Kingdom in 1797 as Lord Seaforth. He became deaf at the age of twelve after an attack of scarlet fever, and later became dumb as well. Although he suffered from the defects of deafness and imperfect speech, he was a man of high mental endowments and he

triumphed over his defects. In 1800 Lord Seaforth was appointed Governor of Barbados and therefore he was not at home when his Lewis Estate created the Park Sheep Farm in 1802, commencing the Crofter Clearance of upwards of 30 townships from Southern Park.

It was during his time that the first lotting of Lewis was carried out about 1814 to 1818. He died after all his male children as forecast by Coinneach Odhair, the Brahan Seer, and it was his daughter Mary Elizabeth Frederica that inherited his Estate in 1815. The Brahan Seer foretold that Lord Seaforth's four sons would die before him and that his Estate would pass on to 'a white coifed lass from the East.' Seaforth's daughter Mary Elizabeth Frederica was the wife of Admiral Hood, Commander in Chief in the East Indies. She was known in Lewis as Lady Hood Mackenzie.

1815 - 1825

Mary Elizabeth Frederica or Lady Hood Mackenzie. Admiral Sir Samuel Hood died in December 1814, 3 weeks before Lord Seaforth. Subsequently Lady Hood Mackenzie married James Stewart of Glasserton in 1817, and he assumed the name Mackenzie. In actual fact Lady Hood Mackenzie was actually the last of her Mackenzie family to be proprietor of Lewis. It is said of her that she was an outstanding person. Some felt that she was the ablest of the Seaforth family. Unfortunately her period of tenure was marred by lack of money, recurring famines, the failure of the kelp industry, economic depression and an ever-increasing population. Her husband James Alexander Stewart Mackenzie bought the Seaforth Estate outright in 1825.

1825 - 1842

James Stewart Mackenzie. He was a Member of Parliament for Ross and Cromarty, including Lewis at that time, from 1830 to 1837. Then he became Governor of Ceylon where he was until his health forced him to retire in 1841. On his way home he died in Southampton in 1842 at the age of 59 years. During James Stewart Mackenzie's absence in Ceylon Trustees administered the Seaforth Estate, but no doubt he was fully informed and ultimately responsible for the broad lines of Estate policy. He could safely leave the sordid details such as the ruthless crofter evictions to his trusted and loyal employees such as Donald Munro, the 'Shah', who became Procurator Fiscal and Legal Agent for the Seaforth Lewis Estate in 1841 on his arrival in Lewis from the Mainland. The Island of Lewis was sold to James Matheson in 1844 and Lady Hood Mackenzie retired to live in Brahan Castle in Ross-shire.

1844 - 1878

James Matheson who was born in 1796 and was the son of Captain Donald Matheson from Lairg in Sutherlandshire, Scotland. He was educated at the Royal High School in Edinburgh. He then studied at Edinburgh University. On completion of his studies in 1815 at the age of 19 years, he joined his uncle in Calcutta, India. After a while James tried his luck in the China trade, and subsequently he joined with a Dumfries born Scot called William Jardine who had been a ship's doctor. They formed the firm of 'Jardine Matheson & Co.' in 1828 and acquired ships and prosecuted the Chinese coastal trade including the smuggling of opium, which was banned by the Chinese Government. Jardine Matheson consolidated their business in Hong Kong where they are active to this day.

James Matheson retired at the age of 46 years and at first took over the British Parliamentary seat of Ashburton in England in 1842. In 1844 he bought the Island of Lewis for £190,000 and about 1847 he became Member of Parliament for Ross and Cromarty, including Lewis. In 1850/52 he carried out the second and last lotting of Lewis. He also built the present Lewis Castle about 1847/52. On Thursday November 15th 1843 the marriage of Mary Jane Perceval to James Matheson M.P. took place in St. Johns Episcopal Church in Edinburgh. James Matheson became M.P. for Ross-shire in 1847 and held the seat in 1852, 1857, 1859, and 1865. He ceased to represent Ross-shire in 1868. The crofters did not get the vote until 1884. Sir James and Lady Matheson did not have a family. He died in 1878 and his widow had the life rent of the Estate.

1878 - 1896

Lady Mary Jane Matheson who was the widow of Sir James Matheson. Lady Jane Matheson was the Lewis Proprietor at the height of the agitation for Land Law Reform in the 1880s, leading up to the passing of the first Crofters Act of 1886. She was quite unsympathetic to the plight of the crofter population. Despite many applications and petitions from landless families for permission to re-occupy some of the former crofter villages now overrun by the Park sheep farm, she refused every application for new crofts and for three years advertised the vacant Park sheep farm unsuccessfully. Then in 1886 the year of the first Crofters Act, she converted the Park sheep farm into a sporting deer park for the affluent rich from the industrial society of the south for 2 months each year. The Pairc sporting deer park is still in place as a useless and unproductive memorial to Lady Matheson.

Lady Matheson weathered the storms of the agitation for the 1886 Crofters Act, the Park deer raid of 1887, the Lochs crofters march to Lewis Castle in 1888, the widespread land raiding of 1891 and the Brand Deer Forest Commission of Enquiry in 1892 etc. In 1891 Lady Matheson refused the pleadings of the landless and therefore homeless cottar families, for living space in the empty former villages of Steimreway and Orinsay. Various national newspapers carried reports of a fresh outbreak of discontent and widespread land raiding in Lewis. An interview with one of the leaders of the Lewis crofters stated that the new outbreak of land raiding was a manifestation of the exasperation of the landless families who were forced to squat in sub-standard housing

conditions on the land of their relatives without any hope of a change so long as they endured their deprivation patiently.

In Lochs the land raiding began in March 1891 when 18 men sailed from Crossbost with the intention of resettling in Orinsay from which many of the original settlers at Crossbost were forcibly evicted 48 years earlier in 1843. Besides Orinsay there were 10 men from Gravir and 10 men from Calbost and others land raiding Steimreway on the shores of Loch Shell.

She refused the pleadings of the landless homeless cottar families for living space in the former crofter villages such as Steimreway and Orinsay on the shores of Loch Shell, preferring to create a buffer grazing extension of Crobeg farm some five miles away from these two former crofter townships. The idea was to avoid having crofter communities bordering on the newly established Park deer forest. These two former crofter townships were then leased to Roderick Martin of Crobeg farm at a rent of £50, which was quite within the ability of the prospective 30, or 40 crofters that could have lived there to pay. Lady Matheson then retired to the more acceptable climatic conditions in the south of France, where she died in 1896.

1896 - 1899

Donald Matheson who was a nephew of Sir James Matheson.

1899 - 1918

Lt. Col. Duncan Matheson who was a son of Donald Matheson, and the last of the Matheson dynasty. At that time the whole of Lewis was seriously congested, with almost as many landless/homeless families living in barns and temporary accommodation as there were of official crofters with land on lease. Crofter agitation for Land Law Reform continued in a determined way.

In 1906 the Smallholders (Scotland) Bill was laid before Parliament, and although it was defeated often, it was being re-introduced continually until it finally passed in 1911 as The Smallholders (Scotland) Act 1911. The 1911 Act broke new ground in that it recognised that Highland landowners would never make a genuine attempt to make the land of the Highlands available to the indigenous population, and therefore the Act introduced, for the first time ever, compulsory powers to the Scottish Secretary to acquire land for the creation of new crofter landholdings. The passing of the 1911 Act brought about a strong feeling of optimism among the landless families. They felt that at long last the Act heralded the beginning of a new era of justice for the crofter population.

They were reinforced in their optimism when they became aware that the Secretary of State for Scotland was actively preparing schemes for land settlement under the terms of the 1911 Act. By the end of 1912 some 3370 applications for new holdings were filed. Although the consent of the landowners was not necessary, the Scottish Secretary in preparing resettlement schemes under the 1911 Act, applied to the Lewis Proprietor Major Duncan Matheson in 1913 for his consent to divide four Lewis farms into new crofts. The farms were Galson, Gress, Carnish/Ardroil and Steimreway/Orinsay. Major Matheson opposed the Government resettlement scheme. He objected on the following three counts:

- A. The farms were not suitable for crofting land.
- B. He would lose more in rent than he gained in compensation.
- C. The proposed number of new crofts would only do very little to relieve the congestion.

Subsequently he opposed the Government's intention to divide any Lewis farms.

Before the authorities were ready to implement the proposed land resettlement schemes, the 1914 War broke out and all resettlement schemes were shelved for the duration. During the War the crofter population was encouraged with the cry 'A Land Fit For Heroes' and by speeches from Government Ministers such as T. B. Morrison, the Lord Advocate speaking in Inverness in 1917:

We are entitled to expect that the land question in the Highlands should be settled once and for all. The evils of the old system are now admitted practically on every hand, and every-one is agreed that the people of the Highlands must be placed in possession of the soil... It has been demonstrated that farms, when broken up, carry a larger stock and support a larger population, while the unchecked expansion of deer forests has been nothing short of a national scandal.

Meanwhile, Major Matheson was finding it difficult to sustain the financial liabilities of taxation and death duties of his Lewis Estate, in addition to his other extensive properties on the Scottish Mainland. He decided or was obliged to sell his Lewis Estate to Lord Leverhulme in 1918.

1918 - 1925

Lord Leverhulme bought Lewis in May 1918 for £167,000, which was well below the asking price of £200,000. Sir James Matheson paid £100,495 in the building of Lewis Castle and its policies and various shooting lodges etc. The ownership of the island changed in the usual way without any information or consultation with the indigenous people that live on the island.

William Hesketh Lever (1857-1925) was a partner in his father's wholesale grocery business at Bolton, England when he first visited Stornoway as a tourist on a cruise ship in 1884. He was about 33 years of age. During that cruise it occurred to him to specialise in selling soap under his own trademark. Within a year he was manufacturing and selling his own soap, made in a small rented factory in Warrington, England. He married Elizabeth Ellen Hulme, and when he was raised to the Peerage, he adopted the name Leverhulme formed by joining their two names.

By the time Lord Leverhulme acquired Lewis in 1918 he was 66 years of age and the head of a vast business empire extending all over the world and employing a capital of 17.5 million pounds sterling. Unlike previous Lewis Landlords, Leverhulme seems to have acquired the Island of Lewis in his retirement, in order to develop it industrially, particularly the fishing industry, as he contended that the great wealth of the Island lay in the surrounding sea and not the land.

He did not see any merit in crofting and he refused to co-operate with the Scottish Office in order to implement the land resettlement schemes proposed under the 1911 Act, whereby some of the Lewis farms, which were originally created by clearing the crofters, were to be broken up compulsorily if necessary, into crofts to relieve the overcrowding in the Island. By refusing to co-operate with the Scottish Secretary Leverhulme deliberately set out to frustrate the will of Parliament.

The crofters, on the other hand, welcomed Leverhulme and his development schemes because the crofting system is a dual system of part-time agriculture as well as some other form of employment such as fishing or industrial work. Therefore they willingly participated in Leverhulme's schemes. Among the formal messages of congratulations sent to Lord Leverhulme were messages from the Stornoway Town Council, the Lewis District Council, and of all people a cordial message from the Lewis Crofters and Cottars Association, which read as follows: 'The smallholders and cottars of Lewis are delighted that your Lordship has purchased the Island and we beg to congratulate you on this historic occasion, and assure you of our hearty goodwill and support.'

In 1918/1919 the war weary ex-servicemen trickled back home to resume life where they left off after the passing of the 1911 Act and the anticipated crofter resettlement schemes for which many of them had already filed their names, such as those of Steimreway and Orinsay. After a while the ex-servicemen became impatient waiting for the Scottish Office to implement the proposed pre-war land resettlement schemes. When they became aware that land resettlement schemes were going forward in other places in the Highlands but not in Lewis, they enquired only to find out that the Scottish Secretary had opened negotiations with Leverhulme in the summer of 1918 as a matter of courtesy although he already had the necessary compulsory powers.

Leverhulme objected, putting forward the main arguments to the creation of more crofts. Firstly, he maintained that the division of the Lewis farms into crofts would do almost nothing to relieve the congestion in Lewis. Secondly, he maintained that the farms of Lewis were essential for the supply of milk for the expanding population of Stornoway. (Hardly a valid reason in the case of Steimreway and Orinsay where there was no road at that time). In the eyes of the people of Lewis these were lame meaningless excuses. Leverhulme's decision shattered the cherished dreams that sustained these ex-servicemen during five years of terrible warfare in the mud and trenches of the western front as well as the oceans of the world, as they dreamt of a smallholding of their own on which to build a home for their deprived and long-suffering families, who never had the security of a home that they could call their own. The prospect now was to continue living in their barns and sub-standard accommodation on their families' and friends' land, or protest.

The Islanders had learned by long experience that the two occupations of crofting and fishing were complementary. Each of them was a form of insurance against the periodic failure of the other. Leverhulme, on the other hand, offered to provide quarter acre allotments near Stornoway. He said, 'But not crofts, my whole object is that it should not be crofts.' The ex-servicemen told Leverhulme at a large open-air public meeting that, 'We fought for this island in France, and if necessary we will fight for it in Lewis as well.'

Land raiding broke out all over Lewis. In March 1920 Leverhulme applied for and got an interim interdict against the land raiders including those of Orinsay who had cut their names defiantly in the turf of that former crofter township which was ruthlessly cleared in 1843. On reflection Leverhulme decided in April 1920 not to proceed with the interim interdict.

Unknown to the Lewis crofters and land raiders, Leverhulme had other and much greater worries than the troubles of his Lewis Estate. His worldwide business empire was going through a very difficult period with the distinct possibility of failure and bankruptcy. Lever Brothers bought the Niger Company in Africa for £8,000,000 without noticing that the Niger Company had a £2,000,000 overdraft for which Lever Brothers became liable in 1920, at a time when Lever products were not selling well because of the depressed economic conditions of the 1920s.

Leverhulme bought Harris in 1919. In 1923 he decided to give up Lewis and offer it free of charge to the people of the Island. The Stornoway Town Council decided unanimously to accept Leverhulme's offer of Stornoway Castle and all his other properties in Stornoway. The Stornoway Trust was formed to administer the property including

the crofters' land within the Parish of Stornoway. Leverhulme generously offered the remaining crofters' land throughout the Island as a free gift to the Lewis District Council.

The landward area was to be managed by another Trust. Leverhulme stipulated that he wanted a very early decision, and after a cursory examination of the accounts, the District Councillors decided to decline the offer because they felt that the income did not match the expenditure. The annual excess of expenditure over revenue was calculated to be about £1,365. The District Councillors voted six against, three for and one abstained. The Chairman did not vote. The members of the Lewis District Council at the time of taking the vote on the Leverhulme offers were:

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| Murdo Maclean, Chairman | Against |
| Alexander Maclennan | Against |
| John Macleod | Against |
| Alex Morrison | Against |
| Malcolm Mackenzie | Against |
| Alex Farquhar | Against |
| Donald Macleod | Against |
| Mrs J. M. Fraser | In Favour |
| Ronald Macdonald | In Favour |
| John Mitchell | In Favour |
| Hector Smith | Abstained |

In that way the Lewis people lost the magnificent opportunity to be their own landlords, except of course the Stornoway Parish, whose inhabitants are their own landlords. In the circumstances Leverhulme had no alternative but to sell the Lewis Estate, less the Parish of Stornoway. In the economic depression that existed in the early 1920s there was little or no demand for land Estates, and eventually the Island was parcelled up into various small Estates and sold off with difficulty in some cases.

After opening the Lewis War Memorial near Stornoway, Lord Leverhulme left the Island on 5th September 1924 never to return. On 23rd September 1924 he embarked on a six-month tour of the Congo, arriving back in Britain on 15th March 1925. Asked how he felt, he replied, 'I never felt better in my life.' Shortly after that he caught a cold, which quickly developed into pneumonia. He died on Thursday 7th May 1925.

The new Board of Lever Brothers closed shortly after all Lord Leverhulme's development schemes in Lewis and Harris. The people of Lewis and Harris were sorry to hear about the passing of Lord Leverhulme. Those of them that had crofts were glad that they could fall back on their crofts, but sadly there were many landless families, and the 1920s and 1930s was a lean time for everybody.

In a speech before he left Lewis Leverhulme said that:

No one regrets more than me that the canning factory, the fish products, the ice company, etc cannot be opened for work because the conditions of supply and demand in these industries make it impossible to do so. The business could only make losses if they operated at present, and we must wait patiently for world markets to be cleared of surplus stock before prices will adjust themselves to the cost of production.

It was the failure of the fishing in Lewis and the worldwide difficulties of Lever Brothers that caused Lord Leverhulme to abandon his development schemes in Lewis. At the end of the day the crofting community of Lewis were right to be sceptical of the Leverhulme development schemes at the expense of their crofting way of life, at least not until Leverhulme proved his schemes to be successful.

Early in 1919 Leverhulme incorporated 'Mac Fisheries' which was to become a chain of fish shops throughout the whole of Britain. They bought fish shops in every town and city as they became available. The company, which was based in London, grew so rapidly that within a short time the capital was increased to £3,000,000. The original purpose of Mac Fisheries was to sell the fish caught by the fishing fleets operating from Lewis, including fish canned on the Island. In 1922 Mac Fisheries was incorporated in Lever Brothers Company.

Towards the end of the 20th century Lever Brothers sold Mac Fisheries. It was said that it could be argued that Mac Fisheries was a very sound investment, and on the whole, the financial outlay of Leverhulme in the Hebrides was probably re-implemented many times over by Mac Fisheries.

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Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: The Principal Clans and the Private Landlords of Lewis

Location in physical archive: Series F, File 6, Section 14

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/6/x (additional file)

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