

The Seaforth Mackenzie Landlord Regime

The Seaforth Mackenzie Landlord regime in Lewis lasted 234 years from 1610 to 1844, during which time there were twelve Seaforth Mackenzie Proprietors in Lewis. It was during this time of the third last Seaforth Proprietor, Colonel Francis Humbertson Mackenzie, who was the Lewis Proprietor from 1783 to 1815 that the Park Sheep Farm was set up in about 1802. Colonel Francis Humbertson Mackenzie was created a Peer of the United Kingdom in 1797 as Lord Seaforth. He suffered from the defects of blindness and imperfect speech, but it was said that he was a man of high mental endowments and that he triumphed over these defects.

In 1800 Lord Seaforth was appointed Governor of Barbados and therefore he was absent from Lewis when the Park Sheep Farm was set up. In his absence Trustees and a Factor administered the Lewis Estate, but we may be sure that the Proprietor was kept fully informed and that his approval was sought for all major policy decisions, if indeed he did not initiate the proposals himself.

It was said about Lord Seaforth, that the Brahan-seer (Coinneach Odhar) foretold that all his sons would pass away before himself and that his Estate would pass on to a white coifed lass from the east. Be that fact or fiction that was indeed what did happen. Lord Seaforth died in 1815 after all his male children, and it was his daughter, Mary Elizabeth Frederica who inherited the Seaforth Estate.

Mary Elizabeth Frederica was married to Sir Admiral Hood who fought with Admiral Nelson at Trafalgar, she was therefore known in Lewis as Lady Hood Mackenzie. Admiral Hood died in 1814, the year before Lord Seaforth died, and subsequently his widow, Lady Hood married again in 1817 to James Alexander Stewart of Glasserton, and he assumed the name Mackenzie, and subsequently he bought the Lewis Seaforth Estate outright in 1825.

James Stewart Mackenzie was a Member of Parliament for Ross and Cromarty (including the Island of Lewis at that time) from 1830 to 1839. Then he became Governor of Ceylon where he was until ill health forced him to retire in 1841. At that time the Lewis Estate was financially embarrassed and in the circumstances it was decided to put the estate on the market. On his way home from Ceylon, James Stewart Mackenzie died in Southampton, England in 1842 at the age of 59 years.

For a brief summary of the history of the Park Sheep Farm we quote, as follows, from the Minute of Evidence of the Brand Deer Forest Commission of Enquiry of 1892 at question 43,973, information submitted by Mr William Mackay, Lewis Estate Chamberlain. "Early in the 19th century a company of four gentlemen from Skye took what was then known as The Park Sheep Farm. One of the company was Lachlan Mackinnon of Corry. The manager of the farm was a Mr Donald Stewart from Perthshire, who subsequently became tenant of the farm, and after him, his two brothers, Alexander and Archibald Stewart, who held the farm until 1842, when it was let to Walter Scott from Hawick, at a rent of £587. His lease terminated in 1857.

Thereafter the farm was let to Mitchell Scobie when the crofters of Steimreway, being in the centre of the farm were removed to Lemreway, which was until then part of the Park Sheep Farm. Mr Mitchell Scobie made over his lease to Patrick P Sellar, whose occupancy terminated in 1883. The farm was then advertised, but a tenant could not be found for it. It was then advertised as a sporting deer park and let as such to Mr Platt in 1886".

The last tenant of the Park Sheep Farm, Mr Patrick P Sellar, was a son of Patrick Sellar of Sutherland fame. The sheep farm lasted 80 years, by which time commercial sheep farming in the Highlands and Islands was no longer viable because of competition from imported wool and frozen mutton. By then large sporting parks for the affluent rich from the industrial south were replacing commercial sheep farming in the Highlands and Islands, including the Park Sheep Farm, because the annual rent for deer parks was more profitable for the landowners.

The crofter population of the Park Peninsula did not have its sorrows to seek even since the Park Sheep Farm came among them early in the 19th century, particularly during the first 40 years of that century when the farm expanded from time to time by forcibly clearing the crofters and absorbing their land with the Park Sheep Farm. By the early 1840s over 30 crofters townships were cleared from southern Park and the sheep farm extended to 44,000 acres of former crofter land.

During that long traumatic period of tears and suffering at the hands of a tyrannical system of landownership and an indifferent administration, there is no record of any organised resistance by the evicted crofters of whom many, many hundreds of men, women and children were dispersed from their land and homes, and replaced by the cheviot sheep of the Park Sheep Farm, as we know from the rich vein of local oral tradition about this subject. The demoralised crofters had not yet recovered their composure after the savage repressive policy they were subjected to after Culloden, hence their submissiveness.

However, by 1842 we see a significant change in the attitude of the crofter population as it begins to regain its self-confidence, as it so clearly demonstrates in its determined stand at Loch Shell when the crofters of Lemreway and Orinsay refuse to leave their land and homes, and they go on to complain bitterly about being slandered by false accusations of sheep stealing.

The 1840s was a decade of change in Lewis. In 1841 the infamous Lewis Chamberlain, Donald MacRae, who is best known for his byword 'Cuiridh mi as an fhearan thu' 'I will evict you', arrived in the Island from the Highland mainland. He ruled the Lewis Estate with a rod of iron for 33 years, until he was toppled from power in 1874 for his part in the Great Bernera Riot that year.

1842 - Brought the end of the Park Sheep Farm tenancy of the oppressive Stewart brothers 'Gilian Ruadh na Pairc', and as already noted, the death of the last Seaforth Lewis Proprietor, as well as offering the Lewis Estate for sale.

1843 - Was a significant date in the history of Lewis and the Highlands because of the Disruption of the Church, when the people cast off the shackles of patronage because they desired to be free, and a new Free Church denomination was set up. The Ministers of the old established Church were inclined to support the landowners, whereas the Ministers of the new Free Church were supportive of the crofters on the land issue. Virtually the whole of the Lewis population joined the new Free Church to begin with.

1844 - Brought a new Lewis Proprietor, James Matheson. He paid £190,000 for the Island.

1846 - Brought the severe economic conditions of the potato blight, resulting in conditions of near starvation of the people.

1847 - The new Lewis Proprietor, James Matheson became the local Member of Parliament, demonstrating, once again, that political and economic forces were at work over which the common people in the Highlands and Islands had no control, as their voice was never heard in Parliament. It was not until the passing of the Franchise Act of 1884 and the Election of 1885 that the ordinary people in the Highlands were able to vote for the first time.

The Herring Fishing

Crofting agriculture on its own is insufficient to sustain a family, and therefore it was the herring fishing that sustained the crofting way of life. Prior to the early 19th century, the Scottish herring fishing was not properly developed, and the development of Wick Harbour gave the Scottish herring fishing a tremendous impetus. The Caithness fishing (Iasgach Ghallamh) that was mainly based on Wick attracted fishing boats from far and near, including boats from Lewis, on an increasing scale, from about 1830, or earlier. Fishing boats round the north of Scotland area were open boats (undecked).

Education

Among other factors that influenced the outlook of the crofter population increasingly was education, such as the voluntary schools, mainly the Gaelic schools, which helped to restore the people's self-confidence during the 19th century.