



[Attempted Eviction of the Loch Shell Crofters]

In a short article that appeared in the newspaper 'Inverness Courier' on 15th June 1842, under the heading 'Deforcement of the Law', the following paragraph appeared:

Another of the painful scenes, which lately have been too prevalent, connected with the removal of Highland and Island crofters, took place on 2nd June 1842 at Loch Shell in the Parish of Lochs, in the County of Ross.

The painful scene referred to above was the attempted clearance of the whole crofter community of Lemreway and Orinsay, on the northern shores of Loch Shell. According to the census figures for the previous year 1841, there were 178 residents in Lemreway and 145 residents in Orinsay, a total of 323 residents in over 60 households.

In the first half of the 19th century the Island of Lewis was remote and roadless and travelling or any form of communication with the Island was difficult. In these circumstances events such as evictions and even clearances of whole communities were seldom, if ever, covered by newspaper correspondents and in the absence of resistance by the crofters, leading to litigation which as a rule was futile, there is very little record of the numerous cruel crofter clearances that took place on the Island.

The clearance of the crofters of Loch Shell in 1842/43 is the first time we have a comprehensive record of any of the many clearances that took place in the Park Peninsula. For one thing the first census of the area had just taken place in 1841 and gives us full accurate details of the crofter communities concerned. Furthermore the crofters concerned stoutly resisted the attempts of the Lewis Estate to remove them, and there is evidence on record as well as a fairly strong local tradition (beul-athris).

The year 1842 was a time of decisions for the management of the Lewis Estate. The lease of the Park Sheep Farm, which was held by the hated Stewart brothers, Alexander and Archibald Stewart, for upwards of 20 years, expired in 1842, and preparations were made for a new tenant for the farm.

The Lewis Proprietor, James Stewart Mackenzie, was seriously ill in Ceylon, where he was the Governor for the previous five years, and apparently it was decided to sell the Lewis Estate then. In fact, the Proprietor died on his way home from Ceylon.

The management of the Lewis Estate also decided that it would take advantage of the change in the tenancy of the Park Sheep Farm in 1842, as a convenient time to bring about yet another change.

Estate Improvement Scheme, as Highland landlords euphemistically called the change of land use from the occupation of crofters to commercial sheep farming. The Park Sheep Farm enlargement on this occasion involved the taking over of the crofters land in the two townships adjacent to the farm, Lemreway and Orinsay. The purpose of the exercise was to enable the Estate to increase the annual rental to the incoming farm tenant, Walter Scott of Hawick. It would also improve the market value of the Estate, hopefully.

The first thing that needed to be done was to remove the crofters of Lemreway and Orinsay and one of the reasons given by the Estate for the clearance of crofters, was their rent arrears and failure to pay on time. On this occasion however, that annual rent of the Loch Shell crofters were fully paid up and there were no arrears. In fact, the crofters had already suggested that for the convenience of the Estate, they were prepared to enter into an arrangement whereby their whole place might be rented to one individual crofter of their own number, on behalf of all the Loch Shell families. The Estate refused that helpful suggestion by the crofters.

The other usual excuse put forward by the Lewis Estate when they wanted to clear crofter townships was allegations of sheep stealing by the crofters and as far as the Park Peninsula was concerned, that excuse was also overplayed and threadbare. However, it was used again by the Estate, this time apparently without singling out any individual person and charging him before a court of law.

The crofters denied these allegations hotly. They were furious at that form of character assassination. In fact, they appeared to be even more concerned about their character than they were about the evictions and the loss of their homes and land.

Early in 1842 the infamous Donald Munro, known locally as the 'Shah', acting in his capacity as Legal Agent for the Lewis Estate, signed petitions for warrants of ejection in respect of all the people of Lemreway and Orinsay. In March of that year the Sheriff of Ross-shire granted discreet of removal against the crofters of these two townships, an extract of which reads as follows;

Hereby grant warrants to officers of court and their assistants, summarily to eject Kenneth Mackenzie, John Maclellan, Angus Macinnes, Duncan Macmillan and all the tenants of the two townships and their respective wives, bairns, families, servants, sub-tenants, cottars, dependants and cattle, goods and gear, forth and from their homes and gardens.

Once the tyrant Donald Munro was equipped with warrants of ejection for the Loch Shell crofters, he changed his Estate Agent's hat and as Procurator Fiscal, he set off on his first of many ruthless crofter evictions during his long career of 33 years in Lewis, culminating in his downfall and disgrace at the time of the Bernera Riot in 1874. He joined a posse of strong-arm men headed by the Sheriff and consisting of the Estate Factor, Ground officers and various other Estate personnel (Na earradan).

As there were no roads in Lochs at that time, they probably proceeded to Loch Shell, by boat, in order to execute the warrants of ejection on 2nd June 1842. That is the story that was featured in the Inverness Courier of 15th June 1842 as 'Another of these painful scenes'.

The beginning of June was a most unusual time of the year for a so-called responsible body of people to descend on a peaceful rural crofting community demanding the immediate departure of all the inhabitants of the townships, together with their belongings, including cattle etc., when their crofts were already cultivated two or three months earlier in March/April, and the crops growing. Also, their annual peat supplies were already cut, and dry enough to be lifted for the first, or second, time. The men-folk would be already engaged in the summer gill net herring fishing. The summer herring fishing season normally commenced on 10th May or at least not later than 1st June each year.

Furthermore, the Lewis Estate had not made any provision for alternative land holdings and homes for these two communities and their stock. The communities would include old and infirm people, some of them possibly in ill health or even bedridden and also children of all ages and even babies, as well as pregnant women.

Probably the Estate assumed that the people would go quietly in the same way as the numerous other earlier crofter clearances from townships in the park Peninsula in the previous 40 years. What usually happened was that the helpless evicted crofters joined their friends and relatives in the remaining villages of Park and elsewhere and shared the available land with them.

It is well known that many of the families that were being evicted from Lemreway and Orinsay in 1842 suffered previous evictions, often more than once.

It is also well known that earlier evicted families from southern Park settled in each and all the surrounding villages of northern Park as well as various other Lewis villages such as Balallan, Laxay, Keose, Leurbost, Tong etc. Sometimes, if not on all occasions, the displaced families were directed by the Estate as to which township they should settle in. Local tradition handed down numerous accounts of such persuasive intervention by the Estate.

[ends]

AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: Warrants to Eject the People of Lemreway and Orinsay

Location in physical archive: Series A, File 3, Section 4

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/1/14

© Angus Macleod Archive