



The Heroines of Loch Shell

Apparently the Loch Shell community were aware of the fact that the Lewis Estate had obtained warrants to remove them from their land, and that the usual evicting party was coming to Loch Shell on 2nd June 1842. Naturally that matter was discussed locally with a view to deciding what was the best way to handle this crisis in their lives.

The crofting community drew up a prearranged plan of action. It involved the appointment of a delegation to represent the community in a dialogue with the leaders of the eviction party. It was deliberately decided that the delegation should consist mainly of women, because the crofting community was well aware of the fact that the authorities would be only too happy to arrest and detain the men-folk at the beginning of the fishing season, and in that way deprive the families of their breadwinner, as a means of intimidating the community in the event of the least resistance by the men.

Of course, there was an element of psychology in the crofters' approach to the crisis. The community knew very well that it was not likely that the women would be arrested and detained. What was to be done with their young children and breast-fed babies? They would have to come with the women to prison, causing the authorities a real problem. Also the evicting party would find it difficult to deal with scores of agitated women defending their family homes in a remote place like Loch Shell, particularly seeing that the evicting party was heavily outnumbered and unable to summon assistance quickly.

In the circumstances it was decided to be prudent and receive the visitors courteously as usual, but firmly. The men-folk were to be discreet and remain alert but passive while the appointed delegation would take the initiative and commence a dialogue with the leaders of the evicting party, protesting vigorously about the injustice of the eviction from their land and homes in order to provide more land for yet another enlargement of the sheep farm, which had already overrun more than half of the Peninsula, involving many of the Loch Shell families in one or more evictions already.

Also, they were particularly upset about the way the Lewis Estate was maligning and defaming their good character with false allegations of sheep stealing, and the crofters decided that under no circumstances were they prepared to leave their homes until these false allegations were withdrawn.

On reaching Loch Shell the evicting party found a determined and united crofting community, which showed no sign of being intimidated by the high-powered Stornoway delegation. The women-folk seemed to be taking the lead and they explained courteously that they could not leave their homes with ruined characters as a result of the false and unsubstantiated allegations of sheep stealing levelled against them by the Lewis Estate. As there was never a single act of theft proven against any of them, the community representatives demanded that these false accusations be withdrawn at once.

The community representatives also pointed out that the Lewis Estate had not made any alternative provision for land holdings and homes for the two communities and in the absence of that they could not leave their homes anyway.

There was a strange and somewhat unnatural feeling about the confrontation of the evicting party and the crofters of Loch Shell that warm June morning. The women-folk took the lead while the men remained passive and almost silent as they stood about with their hands thrust deep in their pockets as they smoked their pipes, and some of them leaning casually against a peat stack as if they were disinterested in the drama that was unfolding before their eyes. After a while, as the discussions between the leaders of the evicting party and the crofters' representatives were dragging out, the strong-arm wreckers of the evicting party were getting impatient as they were not used to discussing their business with wretched crofters. After all they had come to Loch Shell for a specific purpose, as set out clearly in the warrants of ejection duly authorised by the Sheriff of Ross-shire, which was to summarily eject the whole community and everything belonging to them forth and from their homes and gardens.

The wreckers (Na earradain) proceeded to remove the thatch from the roofs of the crofters' homes, in the usual way, as a first step in the process of demolishing the dwelling houses.

Suddenly, there was a high-pitched shout in Gaelic from the women and they rushed upon the wrecking party simultaneously, possibly as part of a pre-arranged plan. The Press Report indicates that the women concentrated

on one specific person, but unfortunately his identity is not given, but we may be sure that he was one of the more prominent personages of the evicting party, possibly the Sheriff?

Reports indicate that the women took care not to inflict any bodily injury to their victim. It is said that that they gave him what is referred to as rough handling. Naturally the heroines of Loch Shell had to be careful as the full force of the law was present and they could easily render themselves liable to prosecution. We cannot help being curious about the tactics used by the Loch Shell heroines so successfully against these hardy men of the world. It could hardly be sheer force, yet the Press Report states 'They drove the evicting party off the field'.

One can well imagine these cruel men in full flight for the shore and the protection of their boats, pursued by scores of noisy women, probably shouting menacingly in Gaelic as a war cry 'cut his trouser braces', 'cut his trouser braces', as they moved forward and closed in on the most prominent person in the eviction party, repeating his name or title as they approached him.

Naturally these respectable Stornoway dignitaries would have visions of themselves being rough handled and immobilised with their trousers falling around their ankles in an embarrassing scene with scores of rude women laughing at them in the remote fastnesses of the Park Peninsula. The local men, looking on casually, were not lifting a finger to help.

At that time the Police themselves were known to use such tactics as cutting the braces of anyone who resisted arrest in a determined way. In our young days, bantering high spirited women at a pre-wedding hen plucking party sometimes threatened the young men with the 'cut his braces' ploy, or 'let's catch him and roll him in the feathers'. We always considered it wiser to keep our distance in case they really meant to carry out their threats. In any event the evicting party at Loch Shell in June 1842 retired from the scene hastily and the event was reported in the Press as 'Deforcement of the Law'.

The deforcement of the law, which means to oppose an officer of the law in the execution of his duty, might well have been difficult to prove in the Loch Shell circumstances. However, the matter was reported to the Crown Agents at once and the advice of the Lord Advocate was sought. Feverish activities were going on behind the scenes as may be gathered from papers in the Records Office in Edinburgh. The Sheriff Principal was directed to proceed to Lewis at once to superintend the execution of the warrants to remove the Loch Shell tenants, as follows:

Accordingly, his Lordship arrived in Stornoway about the end of the said month of June 1842, but the petitioners (the Lewis Estate) were of the opinion that an attempt to remove the tenants by means of military force at that time, when the Estate was on the market, might injure the sale.

The social welfare of the crofters of Loch Shell was not a factor that was worthy of any consideration in the estimation of either the Lewis landowner or the subsidiary. No one thought of giving him or her a fair and impartial hearing before a neutral tribunal before forcing them out of their homes and from their land, where their crops were growing. No one thought of providing them with alternative accommodation or land elsewhere before forcibly wrecking their homes. No, and the reason for that was that the crofters were people without any rights, yet they were considered to be citizens of Britain and eligible to be rounded up and sent overseas to fight for, and defend, the mighty British Empire.

Landowners however, had the right to do whatever they wished with the land of the Highlands and Islands and with the indigenous people that lived on that land for generations. The highest market value of the Lewis Estate was the major consideration of the Lewis landowner in 1842.

Obviously, the obstinacy of the Loch Shell crofters was an embarrassment to the Lewis Estate management; it was not convenient for the Estate to give the crofters the full treatment of naked military force, even although the Judiciary were ready to back them.

At that time the whole establishment of Government, Judiciary, Police, Army and even the Church, whose conscience was stifled by the law of patronage, supported the so-called owners of the soil. The following year 1843 was the date of the Disruption of the Scottish Church and that brought about a change in the attitude of the Church towards land ownership and crofting.

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Author: Angus Macleod

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