

## The Napier Royal Commission of Inquiry

In 1877 friends of the crofter population raised for the first time a proposal for a Royal Commission of Inquiry into crofting affairs. That proposition was under constant discussion at public meetings up and down the country as well as in newspapers from then on until the Napier Commission was set up. Crofter agitation for land law reform and the return of at least some of the lost lands from which the crofting community were removed was stepped up in the 1870s and particularly in the 1880s. In 1881 some 32 landless families from Calbost, Marvig, and Gravir in Park Lochs, petitioned the Lewis proprietress, Lady Mary Jane Matheson for permission to reoccupy the nearby former crofting townships of Steimreway and Orinsay, then under sheep on the edge of the Park Sheep Farm. It was over a year before she replied to their petition and several reminders, and then only to be contemptuously brushed aside (Sir James had died in 1878).

In August 1883 some 2,000 crofter fishermen met in Fraserburgh at the end of the herring fishing season to discuss the land question. They resolved to set up branches of the recently launched 'Highland Land Law Reform Association', in their various parishes when they got home. At last, the crofters and landless cottars of the whole Highlands and Islands were uniting under one banner, that of the H.L.L.R.A. Subsequently the unwieldy name of H.L.L.R.A. was changed to 'The Highland Land League'.

Agitation continued and crofter meetings were held regularly in every corner of the Highlands and Islands and very quickly almost everybody in the Highlands joined the Land League. Widespread rent strikes were called for and that worried the landlords. During the first half of the 1880s the whole Highlands were in a state of ferment and that is the period known to history as 'The Crofters War'.

From a public meeting locally in Park Lochs, a deputation delivered a resolution to the Castle at Stornoway, as follows: "This meeting deeply regrets that Lady Matheson did not deem it her duty to answer the petition and statements sent to her from the townships south of Loch Erisort or show any desire to remove the grievance under which the crofter population labour".

Yet another resolution was passed at the same meeting and forwarded to the Castle at Stornoway: "This meeting is of the opinion that no rent should be paid by the crofters until a satisfactory reply has been received from the landlord".

No reply was received from the estate and no rent was forthcoming from the crofters at Park. Such was the solidarity of the rent strike at Park, that when a Free Church elder from Gravir broke the rent strike by paying his rent, he was declared outcast and boycotted. A similar situation obtained throughout the Highlands and Islands.

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The Napier Royal Commission of Inquiry into crofting was set up in March 1883 by the Liberal Government of Gladstone. It consisted of:

1. Chairman, Lord Napier, who was a border landowner and he had been Governor of Madras.
2. Sir Kenneth Mackenzie, Bart., of Gairloch, a landowner.
3. Donald Cameron of Lochiel, a landowner.
4. Charles Fraser Macintosh, M.P., lawyer, landowner and factor.
5. Sheriff Alexander Nicolson, who was the son of the proprietor of Husabost in Skye.
6. Donald MacKinnon, Professor of Celtic at Edinburgh. He was the only member of the commission who was not a landowner, or closely related to a landowner. He was a native of Colonsay, and it was said that he owed his academic career to a landlord, Lord Colonsay, a Court of Session Judge.
7. The Secretary of the commission was Malcolm McNeill, son of the Laird of Colonsay and a relative of Lady Gordon Cathcart, proprietress of Uist and Barra.

The remit of the Napier Commission was: 'To inquire into the conditions of the crofters and cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and all matters affecting the same or relating thereto'. They were also authorised to examine witnesses, to require production of documents and records, and make such inspections as they found necessary. The influencing power of the landlord lobby in Government circles may be clearly seen in the complete absence of any pro-crofter member on the Napier Commission, and on the other hand the complete predominance of landlords and their sympathisers in the membership of the commission.

There were moves to include a Minister of Religion, but apparently the landlord class did not have confidence in the Church either, and lame excuses were advanced, such as the controversy in Church circles at that time about the establishment principle, whatever that had to do with crofting. The members of the Napier Commission may have been good and honourable people but nevertheless they were one-sided landlord sympathisers. It could hardly be said that they were chosen for their impartiality, or their knowledge of the problems the crofter population were labouring under. Subsequently their report demonstrated where their sympathies lay.

The composition of the Napier Commission did nothing to produce crofter confidence in the Royal Commission. Crofters felt that it was the usual device to delay or avoid serious consideration of the suffering of the crofter population. However, the very existence of the Napier Commission, with all its faults, was a watershed in Highland history, as well as crofting history. It was set up to mollify and calm down the crofting community, who appeared to be ready for a revolution, and public opinion in both Britain and overseas, such as Canada, America, Australia and New Zealand, etc., was very sympathetic to the crofters' case. The very existence of the Commission was therefore a notable crofters' victory.

In all, the Napier Commission visited 61 places from the 5th of May to the 26th of December 1883 and the evidence they collected amounts to four large volumes of 3,375 pages, which is the single most important source of information about the social and economic situation in the Highlands and Islands in the late 19th century. Their itinerary was based on the use of the naval yacht, the 'Lively', on which the Commissioners and newspaper correspondents were accommodated. After sittings in eleven different places in Skye, the lively took the Commissioners over to the Western Isles, where sittings were held in Castlebay, Lochboisdale, Benbecula, Lochport and Obbe in Harris before taking a trip out to St. Kilda. From St. Kilda the lively crossed over to Lewis where the Commissioners sat at Miavaig in Uig, Breascleit, Barvas and Ness before going round the Butt of Lewis to Stornoway.

Just before entering Stornoway harbour, the lively ran aground on the submerged Chicken Rock, on the evening of 7th June. The lively was evacuated without panic by a passing steamer, the 'Mary Ann' of Glasgow, bound for Oban with a cargo of herring. The scene of the wrecking of the yacht on Chicken Rock, is marked with an iron pole with which fishermen and others entering or leaving Stornoway harbour are familiar. As it happened, Lord Napier received news of the death of his mother on the same day as the lively ran aground, and the timetable of the Commission was altered. Sir Kenneth Mackenzie took over as chairman at the Stornoway, etc., hearings. From Stornoway the Commissioners went to Lerwick, and later on the lively was replaced by the chartered vessel, the 'The North Star'.

When the Napier Report came out in 1884, the crofter population were, as expected, bitterly disappointed. It was obvious from their recommendations that they failed to understand or sympathise with the concept of crofting. In fact the Napier report was quite clearly hostile to the concept of crofting. For instance, Napier looked forward to the time when the communal tie with the clan system could be dissolved and the crofter township lands consolidated and enlarged into small independent farms. If that had been carried out, it would have spelt the end of crofting in the Highlands and Islands then. Also, the Napier report was against granting security of tenure to all the crofters.

They were only prepared to grant security of tenure to the large crofts whose annual rent was £6 or upwards. It was estimated that only about 10% of the crofting community would benefit from these terms. Napier stated: "We have no hesitation in affirming that, to grant at this moment to the whole mass of poor tenants in the Highlands and Islands fixity of tenure in their holdings, and free sale of their rights, good will and improvements, would be to perpetuate social evils of a dangerous character".