

## Land Ownership

The ownership of the land in the Highlands and Islands has always been a contentious issue. Long ago there were the competing claims of the Scottish and Norse Kings. Then there were the claims of private landowners to the land which is a natural resource which God created for the benefit of the whole community, and not just for the benefit of a privileged few, whose purpose is to manage the land and its mineral resources as a private asset for personal profit.

The ancient clan society in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland functioned as a unified social and military system for many centuries, perhaps upwards of a thousand years, but by the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were political and economic forces at work in the Highlands over which the ordinary people had no control because their voice was never heard in Parliament, as they did not have the vote.

Therefore, the ancient clan system of 'Dualchas' which conferred on the clansman hereditary rights in the clan lands which they and their ancestors occupied for generations, was gradually eroded by the imposition of feudalism on the clan society by the King and an un-representative Parliament composed mainly of landed and other vested interests.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the industrial revolution in the south created an ever-increasing demand for wool and mutton and in an effort to meet the demand for these products, south country sheep farmers offered to lease large areas of land from the emerging new class of private landowners in the Highlands for commercial sheep farms, for which they were willing and able to pay unusually high rents. By 1800 the south country sheep farmers with their big cheviot sheep 'Na Caurach Mhora' were all over the Highland mainland and were poised ready to move into the Islands.

In 1802 the Lewis proprietor, Colonel Francis Humbertson Mackenzie, (later Lord Seaforth) who was proprietor of Lewis from 1783 to 1815, set up the first commercial sheep farm in Lewis at Valamus on the southern shores of the Park peninsula in the Parish of Lochs. The peninsula of Park extends to 68,000 acres and as it is almost surrounded by the sea; probably the long term plan of the Lewis estate was to extend the sheep farm ultimately to cover the whole of the peninsula. The land access to the peninsula is confined to a narrow neck of land less than two miles wide between the crofting villages of 'Balallan' at the head of Loch Erisort and 'Airidhbhruch' at the head of Loch Seaforth.

At that time the whole of the Park peninsula from end to end was inhabited by smallholder crofter communities and in order to establish the Park Sheep Farm, the Lewis estate forcibly removed quite a number of crofter communities from the area round about Valamus where a new purpose built modern farmhouse was built. The ruins of that house may still be seen.

The people of Park and the rest of Lewis did not have their sorrows to seek after that, as commercial sheep farming and therefore clearances spread, both in Park and throughout the Island. Some 40 years later in 1843 the Park Sheep Farm had overrun 44,000 acres of crofter land or about two thirds of the whole land surface of the peninsula, and displaced 30 crofter communities from the Park peninsula. The hundreds and hundreds of men, women and children who were thus rendered homeless and landless had no alternative but to squeeze into the remaining eight crofter townships still left in the northern part of the peninsula or seek shelter elsewhere in the overcrowded Island or overseas.

Subsequently in 1886, (ironically the year of the first crofters act) when the Lewis estate failed to find a tenant to continue the Park sheep farm because commercial sheep farming was no longer profitable in the Highlands and Islands due to competition from deep frozen imports of mutton, the Lewis estate refused numerous applications and petitions from local landless cottar families for new crofts in the Park peninsula, and instead, converted the whole 44,000 acre park sheep farm into a sporting deer park for the affluent rich from the industrial south, in that way illustrating the priorities of Highland landlordism.

These facts are borne out by the evidence of numerous witnesses who testified to the Napier and Brand Royal Commissions of enquiry into crofting in the 1880s and 1890s. Suffice it to quote briefly from the evidence of John Smith, Balallan at question 17325/6/7 at the Napier Commission meeting at Keose on 12.6.1883, as follows:

'Q:- "Was your father well off when he lived in Park?"

'A'- "Yes, as well as a crofter tenant might need to ask".

'Q:- "Was it for his benefit to be removed?"

'A'- "Quite the contrary, but because of the oppression of the people - dealt with like a flock of sheep driven by dogs into a fank".

'Q:- "Were the other people who were removed like your father, in comfortable circumstances?"

'A'- "Yes, nobody needed to leave the place from one year's end to another for anything the family required. If one family happened to be short of provisions, they only had to ask their neighbour who could supply them".

Again,

Donald Mackenzie, Crosbost at question 17675

'A'- "We were driven away from loch shell in 1843. Our fires were drowned on the hearths by the officers of the estate and we were fined £50 for not leaving on the appointed day"

Also, at the same Napier Commission meeting at Keose on 12.6.1883

George Mackenzie, Crofter / Fisherman Laxay, lochs at question 17386

"I came to Laxay at the age of eight, along with my father and ten other crofters, who were driven away with all their belongings from their thriving and agreeable holdings at Aline and Park, in which they knew nothing beyond prosperity and happiness. Park, which nature seemed to mean for man, with all its arable lands, hill pastures, and bays of the sea, offered grand opportunities of comfort, as a reward to human industry, was quite unprecedented relieved of the inhabitant population of twenty-eight townships. To the perpetrators of such deeds the discontentment and bitter feelings of the fugitive inhabitants appeared as nothing at all compared to the peculiar pleasure they enjoyed from the fact that now the sheep and fleet-footed deer could graze on the meadows and on heaths impiously depopulated. Some of these men who were evicted went to America, others scattered here and there at home, on small patches of land in the less thought of districts. A crofter having the misfortune of falling under the displeasure of factor or ground officer, however innocent the poor man may be, hadn't the ghost of a chance of getting on uninterrupted. As an illustration of this, I can say I knew of a person, a crofter in the village, who was compelled to abandon three different holdings and three different new houses which he built in the sweat of his brow, in three consecutive years, without even a kind word in the way of aid or compensation for his labour, time, and expenses."

The Park peninsula was a very good place in which to live in the 18<sup>th</sup> century before private landlordism came to power, because of its numerous sheltered bays and sea lochs as well as the offshore fishing banks which were teeming with fish of all kinds at that time. Also, the sheltered hills of Park were eminently suitable for crofter's stock, both in summer and winter; hence the reason the place was inhabited from end to end with smallholder communities.

Furthermore, the Park peninsula is only about nine miles by sea from Stornoway, the only market town on the Island. As there were no roads on the Island at that time, the people travelled by foot or by the sea in their sailing boats. In lochs at that time every family had a boat, and very often two boats, a small inshore boat and a larger offshore fishing boat, much the same as every family has a car and sometimes two cars nowadays. A little over an hour would bring a sail fishing boat from Park to Stornoway in a favourable wind, and it takes almost as long to travel to Stornoway from parts of Park in a car nowadays.

In the 18th century the people of Park and the Western Isles were living quite comfortably, but once the private landowners came the people were not left alone to earn their living from the land and the sea for long. First, the landowners dismissed the middlemen tacksmen and took over the lucrative kelp industry and established legal rights to the seaweed which grew on the shores and on which the kelp industry was based, as well as the tangle that the action of the winds and the tides cast up on the beaches. Then they turned their attention to the land and commenced to replace the indigenous crofters by large commercial sheep farms, hence the well known Highland and Island clearances.