

The Lochs Cottars March on Lewis Castle in 1888

There was great indignation in Lochs as the date of the trial, in January 1888, of the six alleged Park Deer Raiders in the High Court in Edinburgh approached. Active preparations were in progress all over the Parish to carry out a gigantic deer hunt and exterminate all the deer in the forest without delay, if the six alleged deer raiders were sentenced to a term of imprisonment.

Being aware of the crofters' plans for a new deer hunt in Park the authorities also made preparations by posting a gunboat on station off the coast of Park in order to frustrate the crofters' intentions.

When news came through that the High Court verdict was 'not guilty' the crofters decided to abandon their intention to stage a second and larger deer raid in park Deer Forest. Nevertheless the people were very dissatisfied with their landlord, Lady Matheson, because of her refusal to take steps to alleviate the gross overcrowding in the villages of Lochs by giving them land holdings in the neighbouring deer forests from where their forefathers were evicted.

Meetings of crofters continued to be held in Balallan School. At one meeting there, in April 1888, chaired by Duncan Morrison, Crofter, Balallan, discussion went on for four hours during which time about twenty lively speeches were delivered. The Chairman in his opening remarks asked the question. "How can we live independently on destitution funds? We must try the land".

The people subsisted for the last five months on destitution meal. They had no reason to suppose that their friends in the south would forever maintain them, nor had they any desire to be beggars. The land was there and lying to waste. They were willing to cultivate it, and they knew that by industry they could make a living out of it. They viewed deer forests as a sin against mankind, and blood sport as a brutal lust, and they were sworn to abolish deer forests and blood sports. If Lady Matheson would co-operate with them in restoring the land to the people and in abolishing sport, they, on their part, would fulfil all reasonable obligations to her Ladyship.

The meeting unanimously resolved that deer forests and large sheep runs must be abolished, and that the people must get the land now lying to waste from which their forefathers were evicted, but that they would lay their case by petition and deputation before Lady Matheson before taking any further steps. It was therefore agreed to go in a body to Stornoway Castle and present Lady Matheson with a humble petition, praying her Ladyship to restore Park and Aline Forests to the people at a fair rent.

It was accordingly agreed that the men of Airidhbhruach and Balallan should meet at Balallan School at 6am on Saturday 19th April 1888 and take the road to Stornoway, a distance of about 15 miles, with the cry, "land for the people". The men of Park would cross Loch Erisort and join the procession along with the men of Laxay and Keose at Keose Cross Roads, and the Achmore men were to meet the procession at Leurbost Crossroads. About 130 heads of families carried out this programme. Some of them unable to walk were driven in carts.

Their complaints were classified as follows: -

1. That Park, now occupied by Mr Platt as a deer forest, was cleared of many crofter townships.
2. That Aline, occupied by Mr Bransker as a shooting subject, was also cleared of crofter families.
3. That these clearances were all within the memory of men present, who could give a faithful account of them.
4. That the result of these clearances was a congestion of population in the present crofter townships, where the holdings are not large enough to maintain the families of the crofters as well as the large percentage of cottar or landless families.
5. That this excessive sub-division was in part caused by the evictions above referred to.
6. That the Estate was in other ways responsible for the sub-division of holdings while pretending by Estate regulations to discourage sub-division. Cases were quoted (A) in which the Estate allowed crofts to be sub-divided into two lots, and charged the old rent on each half, and (B) in which the Estate gave portions of crofts to favourites.
7. The people had subsisted for the last five months on destitution meal. They had no reason to suppose that their friends in the south would forever maintain them, nor had they any desire to be beggars. The land was lying waste. They were willing to cultivate it, and they knew that by industry they could make a living out of it. They viewed deer forests as a sin against mankind, and sport as a brutal lust and they were sworn to abolish deer forests and sport. If Lady Matheson would co-operate with them in restoring the land to the people and abolishing sport, they, on their part, would fulfil all reasonable obligations to her Ladyship.

On arriving at the Creed entrance to the castle policies the men found the road clear by her Ladyships orders and they marched in single file to the front of the castle where they took up their position under the surveillance of an

attachment of Policemen, six delegates were appointed as a deputation to state the case to her ladyship as follows; Roderick Mackenzie, Merchant, Balallan: John Macdonald, Cottar, Keose: Roderick Montgomery, Cottar, Balallan: John Mackinnon, Cottar, Airidhbhruach: John Smith, Crofter, Balallan and John Mackinnon, Crofter, Airidhbhruach. The footman came out and informed the delegates that her Ladyship was indisposed, and was sorry she could not see them, but she would be glad to read their petition. Roderick Mackenzie handed him the petition, which was subscribed by about 200 heads of families and said they would await her reply. In ten minutes the footman returned and said her Ladyship had read it with much interest and would reply by post.

Thereupon the men marched in perfect order to the town of Stornoway and Mr Macrae, School Master, Balallan, indicated that they would patiently await Lady Matheson's reply, and that they would start for home at 2pm. Those of them who could procure no food in Stornoway would get a supply of biscuits at the River Creed.

On arriving at Keose Crossroads, where the first detachment was to break off, a halt was called, and a meeting constituted with John Macdonald, Cottar, Keose, in the chair.

It was moved and unanimously agreed that the next meeting be held in front of Aline Shooting Lodge on Saturday fortnight at noon, when her Ladyship's reply would be considered. Boats were to be in readiness at Airidhbhruach to convey the people to the place of meeting.

On Monday Lady Matheson sent her reply to the Lochs crofter deputation: -

"Her Ladyship appreciates the poverty of the people and expresses her sympathy for them, and goes to say that the present crofting tenants are burdened with the cottars and squatters whom they wish her now to remove from off them by an act of hers. But by their own action in sub-dividing their crofts in direct violation of estate regulations and the remonstrance's of the officials, and it is now impossible for her either to have them removed, or provide them with land holdings elsewhere, she, therefore, can not grant their petition."

True to their resolution of a fortnight earlier the crofters of Lochs held their meeting on Saturday on the Aline shooting grounds. As they sailed down Loch Seaforth from Airidhbhruach they had a good view of the Promised Land of Park Forest on the left and Aline Forest on the right.

Meanwhile the Authorities pretending they feared an outbreak of lawlessness requisitioned the gunboat Seahorse. On board were Sheriff Fraser, Fiscal Ross, Police Superintendent Gordon, several Police Constables and all the Marines stationed at the Battery near Stornoway.

As the crofters sailed down Loch Seaforth in four large boats with School Master MacRae acting as captain in the foremost boat, they sighted the 'Seahorse' riding at anchor in the bay in front of Aline Shooting Lodge, and an imposing Naval, Military, Police and Legal force in position ashore at the shooting lodge waiting since early morning in the high wind and cold showers of sleet and hail.

The Land Leaguers landed in a more convenient creek and sent messengers to Aline for any of their comrades who might be waiting for them there. The gunboat at once took the expeditionary force aboard and steamed down to the crofter's camp, but the wary crofters would not discuss their revolutionary resolutions in the presence of the Sheriff and Procurator Fiscal but moved to another place and the Authorities saw by this time that they were befooled and they did not follow.

They crofters constituted an open-air meeting and John Macdonald, Cottar, Keose, took the chair. Mr Donald Macrae, Balallan, addressed the meeting at considerable length, in the course of which he said, "The Lewis Chamberlain had sent letters to all the Ministers in the Island, asking them to intimate from their pulpits on Sunday that one of the Commissioners, Mr MacNeill, would be at Stornoway next day for the purpose of floating an emigration scheme. Mr Macrae wondered if the Ministers themselves would emigrate with their people to Manitoba, or would they announce a meeting of the Land League from their pulpits."

Mr Macrae went on to say that the people had an infinitely better right to go with their spades and cultivate the waste lands at home than Lady Matheson had to keep those lands in a state of nature while the people were living on charity. He invited patriotic highlanders at home and abroad to co-operate with them in advancing loans to cottars for migrating to Park and Aline rather than with the Tory Unionist Government for emigrating them to Manitoba.

Lady Matheson's reply to the crofters' petition, dated 21st April 1888, was then read as follows: -

"Duncan Morrison and others, I received your petition this day, in which you crave that the cottars and squatters on your crofts should be moved to some other place. These cottars were not placed where they are now by me,

but by yourselves, by dividing and sub-dividing your crofts contrary to the rules and regulations of the Estate, and in defiance of everything that could be done to prevent the squatting. I cannot therefore see that I should be called upon to provide a remedy for the burdens you have brought upon yourselves. I fear, should I be able to give lands to these cottars (which I cannot), they should divide and sub-divide in a very short time their crofts, as you have already done. Further, these cottars are without capital, and how could they stock the land, build houses, cultivate the land and pay rent. As to the land applied for, it is not in my power to give it to cottars or crofters, it being held by others under a lease, and I am given to understand that it is not adaptable for crofters. Under these circumstances, I am sorry it is not in my power to relieve you of the cottars and squatters by giving them the land referred to”.

Yours truly

Mary Jane Matheson

Lady Matheson was well aware of the desperate need for land for new land holdings for the numerous landless families of Lochs in the 1880s, yet she changed the land use of the 42,000 acre Park Sheep Farm in the 1880s when the old lease expired but she did not use that opportunity to create a single new crofter holding for a landless cottar family. The only suggestion she could make was that they should go to Manitoba.

Lady Matheson was the so-called owner of the whole of the Island of Lewis and as she consistently refused, for generation after generation, to give permission to the landless families to cultivate the land, there was no other way for the compassion of their relatives who sub-divided and shared their own inadequate crofts with them, yet, in her reply to the crofters petition she tried, with her tongue in her cheek, to blame the crofters for sub-dividing their crofts, as if it was sub-division that was the root cause of the problem of landless families. Sub-division of crofts was the symptom of landlessness.

How could those of the community who were fortunate enough to have crofts of their own stand by in complete indifference to the suffering of their kith and kin without sharing their misery with them by giving them a share of their own inadequate crofts? The natural hospitality of the people demanded that they share the little they had with their suffering sons and daughters and their own grandchildren.

The population of Park in the late 1880s was about 1,780 persons and there were 182 crofts in the nine villages of Park. The in-bye land of the crofts of Park are said to be on average about five acres each which at that time came to approximately half an acre per person, even if it were evenly divided, which of course it was not because there were many crofts with many more than ten people per croft. Further more the population of Park was growing until it peaked in 1911 at 1922 persons and even in 1921 when the writer went to school the population was 1733 persons, practically the same as in the traumatic years of the 1880s.

It will therefore be seen that Lady Matheson by her refusal to grant land to the landless families of Park in the 1880s condemned subsequent generations of Park people to a mere subsistence standard of living in grossly overcrowded conditions, each person laboriously cultivating every possible inch of his own half acre of land and jealously guarding every blade of grass. Is it therefore any wonder that there were frequent boundary disputes?

The economic situation during these years was such that it was not possible to escape to a better life anywhere else on the Island or on the mainland. After fighting two world wars for a system which was not worth fighting for the people gradually left Park and the 42,000 acre Park Deer Forest is still there as a monument to the misguided Lady Matheson, and the evil system of private land ownership which is still imposed on the people of the Highlands of Scotland.