



### The Man of Lewis

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the man of Lewis, like his counterparts in the rest of the Highlands, was a man without rights or privileges. He was completely at the mercy of inconsiderate and rapacious landlords until he gained a measure of emancipation through the First Crofters Act of 1886, which granted him security of tenure for the first time.

Basically he was a crofter fisherman with a scatter of tradesmen to serve the needs of the community such as, carpenters, stonemasons, blacksmiths, boat builders, shoemakers, weavers, tailors and millers etc., They followed the seasonal herring fishing round the coast of Scotland and as far as East Anglia in England, and in Ireland.

The society was organised into small townships and the choice of site was governed by accessibility to the sea, because it was from the sea came, in large measure, the substance of their livelihood. He made a living from the sea and land and by arduous toil. He usually built his own house from local material as far as possible, and he often built his own boat. He was a Gaelic speaker, with little or no English until voluntary schools came towards the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later.

He spent his spare time pleasantly and light-heartedly with his fellows in the village ceilidh house. His culture, in which song, story folklore and religion etc. played important parts, remained unchanged until comparatively recently when travel, two world wars, the formal educational system, radio and television etc; shattered his isolation and brought him into more frequent contact with the outside world for better or for worse?

The people were very patriotic and they served in all branches of the armed forces, but particularly in the Merchant and Royal Navy because of their experience as fishermen. Islanders were in great demand in these services, particularly in times of emergency.

They were adaptable and from time to time they sought employment on the Scottish and English mainland. They also had a strong sense of adventure which led them to emigrate to every corner of the world in an effort to improve their lot. Later on, when they became bi-lingual they soon absorbed education when the opportunity arose and they often had positions of responsibility both at home and away.

Socially crofting is a classless society which nevertheless lends itself to entrepreneurial activity on a wide front. A crofter may, for instance, be a highly educated person or a highly experienced person in more than one field.

Crofting is also a caring society where people willingly share whatever they have, and if misfortune or illness overtakes anyone, the whole community rallied round to assist in any way they could. The elderly were always lovingly cared for in the family circle, where they were made to feel useful by using their skills and experience in housework and the upbringing of the young family.

A feature of the Island way of life was that doors were always open and visiting each others homes at any time of the day or night was quite normal. Crime was virtually absent.

A land holding was essential because it provided a site for a home in the first place, as well as sustenance for at least part of the year together with an insurance against real hardship and distress in the event of one of the periodic failures of the fishing. They were therefore a people who appreciated their freedom and independent way of life. In fact the part-time nature of their landholdings suited their lifestyle.

When the present crofting system of land tenure with its individually held crofts, which clearly defined boundaries, was first introduced by the new landowning class in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they kept the crofts small so as to ensure the maximum land provision for large commercial sheep farms, as well as to ensure that the crofting community did not become too independent but remain available at the beck and call of the master race.

Sir John Macneil pointed out in his report on conditions in the crofting areas in 1857 that: "The crofts of Lewis, provide produce for only six months of the year and therefore subsistence for the other half year must come from some other sources, as well as money for the rent and everything else they must purchase".

**AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE [www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk](http://www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk)**