



## The Seaforth Press-gang

In 1771 the British Crown restored the Seaforth Estates as a favour, and in gratitude to the Crown for restoring the family estates, Seaforth volunteered to raise a regiment of soldiers from among the tenants on his Highland and Island Estates. The Seaforth originally raised the 78th Seaforth Highlanders in 1778. The method used by the Seaforth strong-arm agents to recruit unsuspecting young men for the army was to appear suddenly in villages unannounced, and pounce on young eligible men and uplift or press-gang them into the Seaforth Highlanders against their will.

Oral tradition in Lochs identifies quite a number of men who were uplifted by the Seaforth recruiting agents. All these young men were Gaelic only speakers and therefore, it could hardly be said that they understood the merits of the cause; they were expected to fight in far distant overseas lands, and in some cases die for. Doubtless they were told they were fighting for King and Country, whereas in truth they were often fighting to create and protect the Great British Empire, at a time when their families back home were denied a few acres of their native land for a family croft.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Britain was engaged in various wars both in Europe and worldwide, including the Napoleonic Wars.

Seaforth engaged in recruiting at various times over a lengthy period. The 1793 and 1794 recruits fought on the European Continent at first and the remnants of these battalions came together in 1796 and were known as the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 78<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders. There were 300 Lewis men in that battalion at that time, in South Africa. From South Africa the battalion went to India and to Java later on. The 1804 recruits fought in Italy and Egypt.

Another group of these soldiers were known locally as, 'Saighdearan Mhic Choinnich Bodhair', which was an allusion to Lord Seaforth who was the Lewis proprietor from 1783 to 1815. He became deaf at the age of 12 years after an attack of Scarlet Fever. Later on he became dumb as well. It was said about him however, that although he suffered from these defects of deafness and imperfect speech, he was a man of high mental endowments, and that he triumphed over his defects. He was an army Colonel and one time Governor of Barbados.

Yet another group are remembered as 'Saighdearan Cnoc a Champ' in Uig. There were also 'Saighdearan Mac a Mhinistear', so called because John Munro, a son of the Parish Minister of Uig, Lewis, the Rev. Hugh Munro, enlisted as an officer along with other recruits from Uig. They became part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 78<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders. Lieutenant John Munro was killed in Java.

Among the young men in South Lochs that are prominently identified in local oral tradition as having been forcibly recruited by the Seaforth strong-arm men, is John Macleod, 'Saighdear' of No.1 Garyvard (1766-1845). He served about 21 years in the army, and local tradition records that he was in receipt of a war pension of sixpence a week, or two and a half pence in our present day money. Tradition also records that he refused to send his son to the army, and because of that, his pension was reduced.

Another prominent Seaforth recruit was Angus Macmillan 'Saighdear' whose family lived in Eishkin before the crofters were cleared from there, and they settled in Steimreway, until they were removed again to 4 Lemreway. Angus served in the army for about 20/21 years, and due to the difficulty in communications and education his parents were not hearing from him and they didn't know whether he was alive or not. Fearing the worse they named their last son Angus in his honour. Eventually Angus 'Saighdear' returned and subsequently Angus Macmillan settled at 12 Kershader, where his descendants are well known.

Lochs tradition speaks about the time the recruiting agents of Seaforth came to the village and uplifted Angus Macmillan. Some young men managed to escape to the hills of Park, and one young man pretended he was mentally retarded, and he dressed up in his mother's clothes and sat on the floor beside the fire roasting and eating potatoes. He successfully evaded the Seaforth Draft. As 'Saighdear', Angus Macmillan's group were leaving the village for service in the army, the crying of a newly born baby was heard coming from one of the houses. On his return about 20 years later, that young 20 year old became Angus's bride. Birthdays and later occasions were remembered in earlier times by relating them to some conspicuous local event. The 'Saighdear's' wife's birthday was remembered locally as the day the Seaforth recruiting agents came to the village.

'Leac Na Gillean' is remembered in the traditions of Lochs as the geographical feature where the press-gang put 32 young local men on board small boats against their will and ferried them out to a waiting warship that was hiding behind the Island of Tabhaidh at the mouth of Loch Erisort. Subsequently 12 of them returned, but 20 of them were never seen again.

'Leac Na Gillean' is at Swordale Bay near Keose on the southern shores of Loch Leurbost. It was at Swordale, Keose that the first Presbyterian Parish Church for the whole of the Parish of Lochs was built in 1724, and about the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Church and Manse buildings were moved up to the village of Keose. The new Church stood where the seaweed factory is sited at present, and the Manse may still be seen at Glebe, Keose where it is used as a dwelling house.

According to tradition 'beul-aithris' the young men were lured into a trap under false pretences by causing them to enter the old Parish Church building at Swordale where the hated press-gang were lying in wait for them, either within the Church or nearby, ready to pounce on them and carry them away and enlist them in one of the armed services, probably the Navy, seeing a warship was used.

Local tradition gave two dates for this event, 1802 and 1808, and furthermore it was said that it was during the ministry of Rev. Alexander Simson the Parish Minister who was at Lochs from 1793 to 1830, which was during the time of the Napoleonic Wars, that the young men were taken.

One source gave the dates of the building of the new Church and Manse as 1796 for the Church and 1800 for the Manse, but we have seen slightly later dates given. 1808 seems rather late for the date of the press-gang, as the new Church was probably in use by then. On the other hand the old thatched Church might have been used on occasion as well.

It is implied that Rev. Alexander Simson was involved in the luring of the young men to the Church and that whisky played a part, but we would expect folklore to add colour to the event and no one knows what, if any, part the well-known Minister played in the episode.

A recent late Crossbost Free Church Minister seemed to be well aware of the details of the event, but unfortunately we do not know if he could identify any young men who were involved in the event. Some Keose sources are inclined to think that possibly some or all of the men were in the North Lochs area rather than the Kinloch area.

We would be grateful for any more information about the 32 young men.

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