



## [The Crofters' Union Movement and the 1886 Crofters' Act]

On several occasions in the last 100 years the Highland crofting community attempted to form a representative organisation for the purpose of encouraging the development of crofting and to protect and promote the agricultural and other interests of crofting in the Highlands and Islands, but while these efforts were very useful at the time, unfortunately they fell short of a permanent professional crofters' organisation, covering all the seven crofting counties.

The formation of the Scottish Crofters Union in November 1985 did however accomplish the longstanding aspirations of the Highland crofting community and marked a watershed in the history of the Highlands of Scotland.

While it is true to say that the new Scottish Crofters Union is more interested in looking to the future than recounting the failures and mistakes of the past, nevertheless, a brief examination of the history of the Crofters Union movement might help us to avoid similar mistakes in the future.

It is hardly necessary to recall the way the Highland community were ruthlessly exploited and persecuted for generations, and the people were quite unable to ask for justice, because the inevitable response from the landowner and his men were, 'Cuiridh mi às an fhearann thu' - 'I will remove you from your land'.

However, there came a time when the people were unable to take any more and in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the people throughout the whole Highlands and Islands reacted against their persecutors by uniting under the banner of the Land League and then they fought a bitter struggle for land-law reform.

They carried their fight to the House of Commons and at the same time they refused to pay their land rent until they were granted a measure of land-law reform.

The efforts of our forefathers at that time eventually resulted in the passing of the first Crofters Act in 1886 and the benefits of that Act are well known, including security of tenure.

However, perhaps it is not always realised that it was the 1886 Act that consolidated the crofting system of land use by giving it legal recognition for the first time, and in the absence of that legal protection, it is quite reasonable to assume that there would be no crofts and no crofting community in the Highlands and Islands today.

We are quite entitled to draw that conclusion from the way the Highland landowners and their friends acted, before, during and after the passage of the Crofters Bill through Parliament.

In the absence of the 1886 Crofters Act, it is reasonable to assume that the Highland landowners would have continued their ambition to convert as much as possible of the Highland landscape into shooting and fishing estates as a profitable playground for the rich gentry from the southern industrial society who frequented the many shooting lodges and castles springing up all over the Highlands ever since sheep-farming failed earlier in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Some of the local people were employed as serfs attending to the needs of the gentry in their castles and sporting lodges. The rest of the Highland population were surplus to the needs of the landowner and they wanted rid of them through emigration, under the pretence that the place was overpopulated.

The passing of the first Crofters Act in 1886 curtailed the previous absolute power of the Highland landlords but only in part, because there were thousands of landless families known as cottars, squatting on their relatives' and in-laws' land, in conditions of terrible deprivation, in barns and other hovels, that did not benefit from the 1886 Act, and the landlords continued to refuse to provide landholdings for these cottars.

[ends]

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Author: Angus Macleod

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