

Genealogy of West-end Calbost Common

An unofficial landholding on the common grazing

West-end Calbost common		'Seonaidh Alastair'
John Mackenzie	1903-1967	Son A. Mackenzie, 12 Calbost
Mary Smith	1903-1987	Daughter of Allan Smith, 5 Calbost
Christy	1926-1986	Mrs Macdonald, Leurbost
Aline	1928	Mrs Robert Macleod, 3 Calbost/Glasgow
Donald	1930-1969	Died suddenly, Toronto, aged 39 years
Katie Mary	1932	Mrs Muir, Schoolteacher, Glasgow
Ann	1934	Mrs Grant, Glasgow/Crossbost
Muriel	1936	Mrs J M Mackay, Schoolteacher, Glasgow
Mary Ann	1938	Mrs Donald Matheson, 30 Gravir
Iain Alex	1941	Head of Lewis Castle School
Kenny	1944	Builder, settled in Leurbost
Anna Smith	1871	Mother-in-law, widow, 5 Calbost

Congested living conditions prevailed in Calbost in the 1920s; a population of 189 souls meant 36 separate families lived on just 14 crofts. As a result, the above family of John Mackenzie, 1903 had no alternative but to ask the village shareholders for permission to reclaim an unauthorised landholding on the virgin land of the village common grazing outside the West-End gate so they could build a home of their own. The 1920s were years of depression, with unemployment, emigration and failure of the herring fishing, so the village crofters were sympathetic with the plight of the landless families. By the mid 1920s the people of Park had given up their long struggle to convince the landlord and the Government to allow them access to some of the former townships in southern Park and now families in all the villages of Lochs were setting up home outside their villages on the common grazing.

John followed the herring fishing right round the Scottish and English coasts. The return from that form of fishing in the 1930s was even smaller than in the 1920s. It was a hard struggle to raise a family, yet John raised nine of a family, he sent three of them to the secondary school in Stornoway and three of them went on to become schoolteachers.

As a long serving Royal Naval Reservist, he was called up a year before the Second World War started and served throughout the war as a Chief Petty Officer in the minesweeping service and the second front. After the war he returned to the herring fishing but the traditional gill-net herring fishing was no longer viable.

This heralded the end of Calbost and John's family moved to Cameron Terrace, Leurbost.

The ruins of the former home and landholding of John Mackenzie's family, where they lived as a squatting family on the Calbost common grazing, without security of tenure or any of the crofters rights, stand as evidence of an uncaring landowning system and indifferent Government who cared little about the deprivation of countless landless families in the 100 years from 1850 to 1950. Yet the British Government were not slow to demand military service from the deprived crofters of the Highlands and Islands.



Left to right: Mary Ann with her mother, also called Mary Ann (holding the baby), and her father John Mackenzie, West-End Calbost.



John Mackenzie, West-End, Calbost, with his wife Mary Ann and sons Kenneth; Iain- Alex; and Donald.

Donald Mackenzie Domhnuill Sheonnaidh Alastair, 1930-1969, son of John Mackenzie, West-End Calbost.

Donald emigrated to Canada and was getting on well but he died suddenly at the age of 39 years. His remains were brought back for burial at Gravir cemetery in Lochs, Isle of Lewis.



Dolina Mackenzie 'Dollag Glady', 1922, daughter of Alastair 'Glady' Mackenzie, 12 Calbost. She married William Agnew in Glasgow and they emigrated to New York. She was the aunt of the above Donald Mackenzie and this photo of them both was taken in New York.

Dolina perished in a house fire at their home in New York, her husband William was badly burnt and did not live too long after the tragedy. Their two children William Alastair and Catriona, also in this photo, were out at the time of the fire and survived without harm.



Christy Mackenzie, 1926-1986, Daughter of John and Mary Mackenzie, West-End Calbost. Christy was a sister of the above Donald Mackenzie. She married Alex Dan Macdonald and settled in Leurbost, Lochs.



Donald Mackenzie, West End, Calbost



John Mackenzie
West End, Calbost

The West-end of Calbost landholding was created in the mid 1920s by John Mackenzie, 12 Calbost, because the village was grossly overpopulated and there was 'no room at the inn' as it were. The 1921 census figures show there were 189 souls in Calbost; this shows a drop of 11 from the peak population of 200 in 1911. A closer look at the 1921 census tells us there were 36 families all living on 14 small 5acre crofts in the village, this means that over 20 landless families were there, living on their parents or friends crofts.

We know the village was also grossly overcrowded in 1881 when the landlord refused a petition by 32 landless cottars from Calbost, Marvig and Gravir requesting permission to occupy the former crofting township of Steimreway, which had been cleared in 1857. Then, in 1922 five landless families from Calbost land raided Steimreway which was again denied to them despite it being scheduled as a crofter resettlement scheme before the war, under the Smallholders Act of 1911. Throughout the 1920s 15 young people emigrated from Calbost.

In the circumstances, for a young married couple in Calbost in the 1920s, there was no alternative but to disregard the landlord and ask the village crofters for permission to build a house on the common grazing and carve out a small landholding from the then virgin grazing land. In all, three families from Calbost followed that course in the 1920s, of which John Mackenzie was one. He raised a family of nine there, six girls and three boys, three of the children went on to become schoolteachers.



The Ruins of John Mackenzie's West End House