

## **The Man of Park**

For generations the man of Park, like his counterparts in the rest of the Highlands and Islands, 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.

Basically, he was a crofter/fisherman, and in his neighbourhood there were a sprinkling of tradesmen to service the needs of the community, such as weavers, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, stonemasons, blacksmiths, boat builders, millers etc. They followed the seasonal herring fishing round the coast of Scotland and as far as East Anglia etc.

They were patriots who served in all branches of the armed forces, but because of their expertise in seamanship, they were in great demand in both the Merchant Navy and the Royal Navy, particularly in times of emergency. They were adaptable, and from time to time they sought work on the mainland and obviously they had a strong sense of adventure, which caused them to emigrate to every corner of the world in an effort to improve their lot. Being bilingual they soon absorbed education when the opportunity arose and consequently they held positions of responsibility both at home and away.

The society was organised into small townships and their choice of site was governed by accessibility to the sea, because it was from the sea that the substance of their livelihood came in large measure. Being crofter/fishermen, a landholding was essential because it not only provided a site for a family home, which they invariably built with their own hands, but it provided sustenance for at least part of the year. The landholding was also an insurance against distress in the event of the periodic failure of either of the two basic industries of fishing and agriculture. They were therefore a people who appreciated their freedom and independent way of life and the part time nature of their crofts suited their lifestyle.

The crofting way of life is a natural blend of private enterprise and outdoor communal activity, where many tasks are carried out on a township basis. Socially, it is a classless society, which nevertheless lends itself to entrepreneurial activity of a wide variety of kinds. A crofter may therefore be a highly educated person or a highly experienced person in more than one field.

It is a caring society where people willingly and gladly shared whatever they had, and if misfortune or illness overtook anyone, the whole community rallied round and assisted in any way they could. The elderly were lovingly cared for in the family circle, where they were made to feel useful by using their skills and experience in housework and upbringing of the young family. A feature of the Island way of life is that the doors are always open and visiting each other's homes at any time of the day or night was, and still is, quite normal.

The toil of earning their living was arduous both on sea and on land, but during the long winter evenings they socialised and spent much of their time pleasantly and light-heartedly with their fellows in the village Ceilidh House. The young people created their own entertainment and they were never bored or frustrated. Crime was virtually completely absent.

### **Education**

The Bible was the main textbook in the Gaelic schools and the teachers were chosen for their piety. In that way these schools were not only educational, they were also religious and character forming. Adults attended as well as children and there was a magnificent response as the people had the opportunity for the first time to read the Scriptures in their own tongue. In that way the truth dispelled the superstitions the people lived in, and influenced the minds and outlook of the people.

Some, at least, of these Gaelic schools were circulatory. They went from village to village, staying for at least a year, but usually more. It was a circulatory Gaelic school that was at Calbost and the walls of the old school building, which was also the village prayer house, may still be seen below the side road leading to crofts 8 and 9, on the boundary between crofts 6 and 8.

It was the Gaelic teachers that pioneered the Sunday School Movement in Lewis, but the origin of the movement is much older and can be traced to Robert Raikes in Gloucester, England. Sunday Schools are still a feature of our culture.

It was the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 that laid the foundation of a national system of education and the people of Lewis responded well to the new educational opportunities. Planasker School, Marvig served the two villages of Marvig and Calbost. When it was opened on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1880 the total roll for the first day was 30 pupils and on the second day the roll had increased to 47 pupils. It went on to exceed 100 pupils at its peak. It closed in 1973 and the pupils were transferred to the new Park School at Gravir.

### **Religion**

Martin Martin, in his book, 'A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland', published in 1703, gives us a long list of Reformation Churches in Lewis, two or three of which were in Lochs, they were St. Colm Cille, on the Island of that name, on Loch Erisort, St. Phearaer, in Kaerness and St. Mary, in the Shiant Isles. There is a degree of

uncertainty about where was St. Phearaer of Kaerness and some people maintain that it was at Swordale, near Keose. Some say that the old name for Swordale was 'Cearnish', others maintain that it was much more likely that the Church mentioned here is the old Church that is at Rearnish (Ranish) in Lochs.

The Reformation of 1560 had a profound influence on our religious outlook in Lewis. The first Presbyterian Parish Church in Lochs was at Swordale near Keose and the first Minister that settled there in 1724 was Rev. Colin Mackenzie. Until the Disruption of 1843 there was only one Church in the whole of the Parish of Lochs. Thereafter division dominates the history of Presbyterianism, and there are about a dozen congregations now in the area, which were once covered by only one Parish Church.

The Park congregation to which Calbost belonged was sanctioned in 1879 with a membership of 600 people over 14 years of age and a promise to raise a sustentation contribution of £88 a year.