

In 1893, the Crofters of Birichen told the Royal Commission that their fathers and grandfathers had been evicted from their homes and land, not once but twice; these three crofts uncovered when the Harriot Plantation was recently felled are evidence of the middle phase of this eviction process.

The people who lived here in this house in the Harriot, above Proncy, had held land in the flat fertile plain below Skibo, at Cyderhall. The clearance of these people began in 1807. (One of my neighbours, Sandy Fraser of Fleuchary, has documents that show his ancestors had a croft, CROFT CANAVICH, close to Cyderhall, which they had held for at least three generations. But in 1809 this croft was taken from them and added to part of Cyderhall Farm. However, Sandy's ancestor, another Alexander Fraser, was a good farmer, and the tenant of a Captain McCulloch, who was always short of money, and he borrowed £40 from Mr. Fraser. The result was that when the Frasers' neighbours in 1809 were cleared off the land, three crofters were given leases to remain, because they were owed cash by McCulloch. They got 5-year leases, and paid £8 per year in rent, and they thought they were safe against eviction. But in 1812, McCulloch went bankrupt and they lost the money they had lent him. The Sutherland Estate honoured the 5-year lease, but in 1814 the 3 remaining crofters, including Fraser, received summons of removal. They presented to Earl Gower, husband of the Marchioness of Stafford, claiming a) they paid good rent and had never been in arrears. b) they had reclaimed the land from brown heather. c) they had spent all their capital on reclaiming and improving, and the land was in good heart. d) they appealed against eviction.

The reply was that if they were removed, the Estate would guarantee them a holding of equal value to the one they had left.

They were fine for another five years, but in 1819 they received summons of removal again, but the holding offered was not of equal value, so they did not have to go. This happened every year until 1826, when Alexander Fraser died. The Estate immediately said the agreement died with him, and evicted his widow and family in 1827. They were given a narrow strip of land in Fleuchary.

Their troubles were not quite over, for in 1854 the Commissioner of the Duke of Sutherland, James Loch, arrived at the croft to evict the Widow Fraser, in order to give it to Mr. George Clark, the Estate's Grieve at Skelbo. The factor, Mr. Gunn, and the ground-officer, Mr. Forbes, came with Mr. Loch, and without any previous notice, told Mrs. Fraser she had to get out. Sandy's grandfather, asked the party to come and look round the croft and see the improvements he had done. When he had shown them round, Mr. Gunn the factor turned to Mr. Loch and said "what would the people say if you removed her after her son making such improvements on the place? He would do more if he was made joint tenant of the place with his mother, and he will do more than Mr. Clark will" so this was arranged, and the Frasers are still in Fleuchary, but their rent went up 200% in 10 years. (They have this proud distinction of being on record as having talked James Loch out of an eviction. Not many can say that).

The clearances at Cyderhall were gradual, between the years 1807 and 1821. A family called MacKay left there in 1820, and emigrated to Nova Scotia - they now live in a place called Scotsburn. The 2nd Statistical Account speaks of this emigration of 300 people from Dornoch parish in 1820-1 - but most of the dispossessed went to the new MUIR SETTLEMENTS that the Sutherland Estates were starting. The idea was that the people got a fresh start, given a few acres of land to work, and this encouraged them in industrious ways, as well as reclaiming a lot of wild moorland, and giving the Estates their rents - as well as their old holdings of prime land being added to the Estate's big farms, let to wealthy graziers from the south. What we call clearances and evictions, they called improvements, for the people's good. It is on the record that most of the tenants removed from Cyderhall went to Dornoch Muir, which we think may well be this hillside above Proncy. The records keep changing the names of the Muir Settlements - Dornoch Muir, Evelix Muir, Cyderhall Muir, Birichen Muir, Proncy Muir, Skelbo Muir, Achavandra Muir - clearly some had more than one name, and "MUIR" meant no more than "uncultivated wild land". In 1816 Patrick Sellar said the land of Dornoch parish consisted "not of regular fields but of patches of cultivation interspersed with an improveable moor of great extent, and there is a great population gathering thither, and getting forward with the culture of the wastes".

The process began in 1807, and the Estate began to throw people out of their land around Cyderhall, and offered them "improving leases", with nominal rent only, for the first 7 years, on condition that they improved 2/3 of the land in that time, i.e. made it fit for cultivation. There is a tradition in Birichen that the Estate gave each family one spade to every 4 adult men, and told them to get on with it. They had about 5 acres of moorland to each family, with a house or shelter, and they had to build houses and steadings, and make the land viable within 7 years. Another tradition in Birichen is that each family left a small amount of the original unimproved land untouched, as a measure of the progress they were making, to show not only their successors but also the factors from the Estate.

The factor complained that progress was very slow, and the people were not keen to take up these "improving leases" - the Skelbo scheme was by far the most successful, as the land was

both more fertile and more sheltered. Up here progress was almost at a standstill for the first 5 years, with fewer than 10 families re-settled. But as times got harder, more settlers took these leases, and by 1815, 65 families were on the Muirs - not only up here but at Achavandra Skelbo, Birichen, Evelix - on the edges all the uncultivated ground. They were not thriving communities, but they were surviving, and what little rent they could pay was mainly in the form of tough and stringy hens (- in 1815, the 65 settlers paid a total of £22.10s 2d and 58 hens). But unanimously, none of these settlers had got written title to their lands - the settlement was still a provisional process. Some of the settlers up here above Proncy had 20 acres, others only 5, depending on their age, abilities and the size of their family. But the obligation to improve the land within 7 years was raised from 2/3 to all the holding, and any land not improved by the end of the 7 years was taken away from them. Rent was charged then on the land being worked, and Patrick Sellar in 1816 remarked that settling the people in the muir settlements was profitable. ^{to the estate} Rearquhar, Evelix and Dornoch Muirs "will certainly at present pay more under people than under farms". Sellar also said (interestingly) that he shrewdly suspected that "that will happen which has frequently happened elsewhere, that after these men have improved the ground and rendered it fit for the regular operation of husbandry," the land they have improved will "by 1836 be put into the regular farms, and the present possessors will be drawn into some Town or Village". Sellar was almost right - he was out by about 4 years, and it was not big farms which took the land, but trees.

Around 1840, it was decided to turn the hill here above and below the Poles (towards Embo) into plantations, and the people were uprooted again. There is still tremendous bitterness about this in Birichen, where some of them were re-settled. What one man referred to as being "bruised out" after 30 years' work with a spade was a lot to bear, when they had just got the land into working order - and it would not have been fit for trees if they had not cleared the land first. But they had no written title to the land.

And think what lay ahead: the hungry '40's, 10 years of famine and bad weather, when the potato crop failed, and disease and starvation faced the people. *(The audience were in tears by now)*

Many emigrated at this time, or moved south seeking work, but some were given holdings in Birichen and Balvraid, again on uncultivated land, and it was back to the spade work. One man in Birichen was given 4 acres of land which he said was so poor it would not support a Snipe - but the ones who stayed on the estate had no choice but to get down to it (the factor wrote to the Duke that "the exertions of these people are very praise worthy") (He also asked the Duke not to give the people rich land, as hard labour was good for their characters).

The trees were planted over their former crofts in 1842, and before they were cut, 90 years later in the late 1920's, the Crofters' Act had been passed in 1886, and the evictions were over. The trees were cropped again at 60 years, and this is when these sad remembrances of the bad old days came to light. People lived in this house above Proncy for 30 years of hardship and hard work, yet were sorry to leave when they were put out by a hard Landlord.

One of their descendants, scanning the "Raggie" not long ago, saw announcement that Skibo was being sold for development as a leisure complex. "AH" he said "they took that land from the people and sent them to hard labour on the muir, and now our land is going for leisure". Changed days indeed, except for one thing: it is going for the profit of the Landlords'.

Three areas where the displaced crofters were re-settled - the so called "Muir settlements" - 1) The Muir of Achavandra - behind Skelbo, now known as Skelbo Street; 2) The Muir of Evelix and 3) The Muir of Dornoch. I think the Muir of Evelix was the cultivated areas of Birichen, ie Fleuchary, Lednabirichen and Rearquhar - but the high ground there was also called Birichen Muir. I think that Dornoch Muir was here and the land to the west of the road, since that is called Lon Dornach (The bog of Dornoch) to this day.

We know from the estate records the new Statistical Account that the quite large population of Cyderhall was cleared around 1810, and the people removed to Dornoch Muir 80 years later, Crofters in Birichen complained to the Royal Commission that they had been evicted twice, once from Cyderhall or Rosebank, anyway the Clashmore area, to make way not for sheep but for arable and rich grazing; and once from their new crofts on Dornoch Muir, to make way for trees. They said they had about 30 years in their new crofts before the second eviction, which was in the early 1840's. Ahead lay a decade of terrible famine and hardship; in a new croft on uncultivated ground this must have been grim. They went to Balvraid and Birichen or emigrated.

That's the outline of what happened. I'll try and fill in some detail.

First, take note of what Patrick Sellar said in an essay dated 1816 about Dornoch Parish "The grounds of this Parish are in general low and free from mill dew, and consisting of regular fields but of patches interspersed with an improveable moor of great extent, there is great population gathering thither and getting forward with the culture of the wastes". He foresaw that "after these men have improved the ground and rendered it fit for the regular operation of husbandry, these allotments will by 1836 be in all probability (be) put into regular farms, and the present possessors drawn into some Town!"