

The Durness Riots — 1841

by Dr. A. B. Mearns

As part of the University of Aberdeen's extra-mural programmes a course has been set up to guide people in the study of local history. Course content varies from place to place according to the nature of local material and the perspective of the instructor. The course is running in Lochinver and in Dornoch and considerable time is being spent on what types of source material is available and what are the strengths and weaknesses. To illustrate the use of newspapers and oral tradition as sources the classes investigated the Durness riots of 1841.

If you peruse the *Inverness Courier* of 29th September you come across the headline, RIOTS IN DURNESS, and the following story:

Information has reached us, that, on the night of Saturday, the 18th instant, the sheriff-substitute and procurator-fiscal of Sutherland, with a party of sheriff officers and constables, were deposed in the execution of their duty, and attacked by a mob of about four hundred people, consisting of men and women, armed with bludgeons and other weapons, at the inn of Durine, in the parish of Durness, in Lord Reay's country; the whole party were more or less injured, and that some narrowly escaped with their lives.

The facts, in so far as we have been able to learn, are these:— Mr James Anderson, at Rispond, is the principle tacksman of Keanabin, and other farms at Durness, under a lease from Lord Reay, the former proprietor of that country. Keanabin, and place adjacent were subset (sic.) by Anderson to several people, who have small crofts of land attached to their houses, but whose principal means of subsistence is the herring and deep sea fishing, which used to be carried on there, under Mr Anderson's auspices, to a considerable extent. His fishing speculations, it would appear, proved unsuccessful, and he has latterly turned his attention to sheep farming, with which in view, it became necessary for him to remove several of the Keanabin people, who, besides, had fallen into arrear with their rents. To effect this purpose, Mr Anderson caused summonses of removing to be served, and he obtained decrees in spring last. These decrees were put into the hands of a sheriff-officer of the name of Campbell, who proceeded, in the month of August, to serve the charges of removal; but he was attacked by the Keanabin people — men and women — who turned out in great numbers, maltreated him, robbed him of his papers, and burnt them in his presence. This outrage

having been reported to the authorities at Dornoch, the superintendent of police, Mr Philip Mackay, was despatched to apprehend the parties. Mackay was treated in a similar manner. he returned home, and afterwards made a second attempt, with a stronger party, but with the same result.

On Friday, the 17th September inst., Mr Gordon, sheriff-substitute, and Mr Fraser, procurator-fiscal, with a large party of sheriff-officers, and special constables, repaired to the spot, which they reached the following evening. As soon as the party were observed approaching Keanabin, the people turned out, and met them on the road, their numbers increasing every minute, and, in less than an hour, two to three hundred assembled, with sticks, flails, and other weapons in their hands, many of the women bearing shearing hooks. They were all in a highly-excited state, using the most threatening language, and swearing vengeance against all who dared to lay hands on any of the rioters. Just as the party were at that part of the road which passes the well-known Cave of Smoo, a rush was made to seize Mackay, and throw him over the precipice. In this they were defeated. The most indecorous and insulting language was heaped on the authorities, and threats of violence to their persons were continued to be made, until the party reached the inn of Durine, where (it getting late) they intended to pass the night; but no act of personal violence was committed up to this period. About 10 o'clock at night, the people, with an accession of one hundred more to their number, made an attack on the inn; they tore down the railings in front of the house, broke the windows, and forced open the doors, by driving huge blocks of stone against them, having thus gained admittance into the room in which the constables were seated, an immediate attack was made upon them; after a hard struggle, they were knocked down, and dragged to the outside, where they met with similar treatment, and were completely dispersed. The mob having thus succeeded in driving

away the constables, a party of them returned to the inn, forced an entrance into the room in which the sheriff and procurator-fiscal were, and violently drove them out, threatening to take their lives, if they remained that night in the parish. Some proposed to destroy their horses and gigs, while others suggested that they should be stripped naked, and turned out to the rocks. At length, they were compelled to retrace their steps to the nearest inn, about twenty miles distant, which they reached at five in the morning, with the half of their party. The remainder of the party concealed themselves in the standing corn, and among the rocks, and made their escape when daylight broke.

Such is a faint account of this lawless proceeding, which, we presume, had, ere this, been submitted to the highest authorities; and we have no doubt that the prompt measures will be adopted, and a sufficient military force sent to Keanabin, to teach the misguided people that the laws of the country must, and will be vindicated, and those to whom the execution of them is entrusted protected.

The whole thing was quite exciting and the unnamed reported delighted in recounting the "lawless proceeding" and did not omit to mention the arrears of rent, which appears to justify the clearance. There was no attempt to gain any information from any of the rioters so we are left with the version the paper printed. The *Courier* of the 27 October, 1841, carried the final story on the matter.

Late Riot in Durness

We are happy to learn that the excitement which led to the recent disturbances, by Mr Anderson's tenants in Durness, has subsided, and that the people are quite peaceful, and fully sensible of the illegality and unjustifiable nature of their proceedings. Mr Lutnsden, the Sheriff of the county, accompanied by the Sheriff-Clerk and Procurator-Fiscal, have been at the place for some days investigating the

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