

Land Agitation in Tiree in 1886

by Donald Meek

"The big tacks are the reason for much of the poverty in this island." So said John MacFadyen (or John MacNeill as he was better known to people) when he was giving evidence to Lord Napier's Commission in Tiree at the beginning of August 1883. John MacNeill was a crofter in Caolas at the east end of the island and he was speaking on behalf of crofters in his own township and crofters in the two townships nearest to Caolas, Ruaig and Salum. When a question was put by a member of the Commission, John said that over a hundred crofters were put out of their crofts over thirty years and that the land where they were had gone to tacks in Scarinish, Baugh, Balephetrish, Heylipol, Balephuill and Mannal. John MacNeill was not the only person who testified this. Donald MacDougall (or MacLucas) told how crofters of Balephuill lost a large piece of the moor land on Ben Hynish where animals would be grazing and it was put into the Hynish tack. The crofters received no compensation whatever for the ground they lost and not only that, but they lost the foreshore that went with the pasture. They had to reduce the number of livestock and it was difficult for them to get seaweed to improve the pasture. There was another respect in which enlarging the tacks left the crofters more miserable. As Donald MacDonald from Balemartine said, it was for the crofters who were left to give some land to those who had lost their own land and were now cottars. Sometimes the factor made these crofters share with other crofters and thus the crofters lost more grazing.

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John MacNeill raised another point confirmed by the testimony of every crofter at that time and that was the rise that had come in the crofters' rent in the previous ten years. Indeed the rent had doubled. He himself was paying £14.50 for a croft of about ten acres arable and he was of the opinion half of that was enough. The rise of which he spoke is seen clearly in the rent of the island as a whole. In 1851 the Duke of Argyll who belonged to the island was getting £2,636. In 1886 he was getting £5,769. But it was not only that the crofters had to pay higher rents, they were still doing unpaid labour for the factor. While the unpaid labour was worse, the crofters had to give twelve days labour to the factor at any time he sought it and if they did not do so, they were fined. In 1883 they were doing three or four days labour in the autumn and three in the winter. That was not a trifle in addition to the rent.

It is quite clear that there was tight control of the ~~cottars~~ ^{crofters} by the factors and as John MacNeill said they were not on the crofters' side. It is obvious from Lord Napier's investigation that some who testified in Kirkapoll Church that day were afraid the factor would take revenge on them. There at that time two servants of the Duke on the island - the chamberlain, a man called Wylie, and the factor himself, a man called Hugh MacDiarmid, who was certainly Wylie's sub-factor. The people in the island called MacDiarmid the Black Factor but they were referring to his appearance and not to any abuse of power he imposed on them. He was on the island from 1876 and, compared with factors before him, he was not at all heavy on the people. Two or three of the crofters testified about the factor who was on the island thirty years earlier when some of them were put out of crofts. He was John Campbell and he thoroughly earned the name Black John Campbell. Donald MacDougall remembered him and here you have what he said: "He would be going among us," he said, "with an eviction order in one hand and a paper in the other, a paper which said we must be obedient to him and to the Duke in every way, and he said that if we did not put our names to the paper we would be put out of our crofts. We put our names to the paper otherwise we would have had to leave the ground." Another crofter gave a string of examples of the unreasonable way in which Black John Campbell handled affairs with the tenantry.

There is nothing at all in the evidence given to Lord Napier that day that was new or odd to those who were on the Commission. They had already made a tour of the greater part of the Highlands and the people had the same complaint everywhere. From the year of the potato blight (1846) the Highland landowners were trying to get rid of the crofters who were now a vast burden on them, especially weak starving people. During the forty years before that, the population of the Highlands was increasing greatly because the landowners put value on people to earn money when work at kelp was busy during the Napoleonic War period. This was seen in the way that the Duke of Argyll broke up some of the Tìree tacks, giving crofts to people around 1800. He had one eye on the betterment of the tenantry and another eye for his own pocket at the same time. But when the war ended and especially when the potatoes failed, he and other landowners changed their opinions about retaining people. He was now taking back the land that went at the division to crofts and augmenting the tacks. The crofters were put out of the crofts going either to America or the Lowlands, and the Duke gave help to some who left, or they took on a precarious life as cottars. The majority of them left the island which appeared in the number of people. In 1841 there were 4,687 in the island. Eight years later there were 3,903. In 1881 there were only 2,733. And to some who stayed on the croft, things were no whit easier because the Duke continually raised the croft rents and put levies on them to pay for ditches and developments like that to the land. According to John MacNeill, crofters were still paying levies for work done thirty-six years earlier. But the 8th Duke himself was of the opinion that everything he did was towards the advantage of the people and he had mercy on them when he put many of them away. Even when the land agitation began on the island, he was not willing to believe that the majority of the Tìree people were not well satisfied with their situation. When Lord Napier's research was revealed, he expressed the opinion that John Murdoch, who came to the island to prepare the evidence, put words into the crofters' mouths and that there was no substance in their complaints. Until the last minute he was putting it about that a small group of agitators was behind the agitation in Tìree and it was "The Epoch of the Fools" he applied to this important period in the history of the islands.

It is the more surprising that the agitation took so long to come to a head. Indeed, it was revealed by the evidence before Lord Napier that the roots of the agitation went back thirty years. It was part of the reason perhaps that there were factors who were more humane than Black John Campbell. In addition to that, the island was exceedingly fertile and the majority who were left could earn some livelihood or other. To those who lost land, and there were many, fishing was most profitable. But Lord Napier's research revealed that the Tìree people were not at all satisfied with fishing in 1883. They wanted larger boats and a better harbour with shelter. They themselves had remarked that the island was not naturally suited to fishing. But if fishing was precarious in 1883, it failed completely in 1885 and there was much poverty throughout the island. The cottars had now been thrown back on to the land and there was no land for them but what they could get from the crofters. But before the failure of the fishing, the beginning of battle was revealed. As soon as the Highland Land Law Reform Association was formed in 1883 (that is, the Land League after 1886), a branch of it was established in Tìree. The Tìree chairman member was Neil MacNeill who was cultivating a croft in Vaul and in a very short time after that there were seven hundred members. Perhaps the reason of that was that crofts rents had been raised again in 1882 and it is clear from my great-grandfather's rent accounts that he went into debt with the rent at that time. A year after the Land League was established in the island, crofters and cottars took possession of one of the big tacks that was now the object of envy. It is not clear which tack this was but it may have been that it was the Hynish tack. There was a rumour at the time that a warship would be coming – there were marines at that time in the Isle of Skye – but the Tìree people said that they were not afraid if it would come because there were was

no good harbour and it was winter. Whether it was the Hynish tack or not, it was reported that the Hynish tack was under offer at that time and that the Land League put in an offer for it. Their offer was rejected but it was also reported that the Duke said that the next tack that would be free would be divided between the crofters and the cottars. It is unlikely that they were willing to believe that because they had put in another offer that year for two crofts that were vacant in Salum and that offer was rejected in the same way.

The Grianal tack was the next that was free. Some say Lachlan MacLean, the Grianal tacksman, died in 1885. Others say he went abroad. One way or the other, the Tiree Land League put forward that they were going to take over the tack and, as far as we know, they did not put in any offer. At a meeting of the Land League at the beginning of May 1886 Neil MacNeill, the chairman, warned everyone who was considering putting in an offer that the Land League intended to take it over. At the same time the crofters and cottars were condemning the new Bill that was now before Parliament and their reason for this was that it would not give them more land. The next thing that happened was that the equipment of the tack at was sold at auction. The equipment was bought by Tom Barr, one of the biggest farmers in the island, but it was not long before the Tiree people learned that he had bought it on behalf of Neil MacNeill, the Land League chairman, and his brother, Lachlan. Shortly after this, news spread around that Neil MacNeill and his brother had put in an offer for the tack and that they had got it! Apparently the offer was in Lachlan's name for he was now the Grianal tacksman. The crofters were affronted and were enraged that Neil MacNeill of all people was involved in the background in this manner. The chairmanship of the Land League was taken from him immediately and Donald Sinclair, a cottar from Gortendonell was put in his place. Soon it was found out on what day Lachlan MacNeill was taking possession of the tack and on that day many crofters and cottars went there with pipers at their head to meet him. When MacNeill appeared they asked him what was his idea but he did not give them an answer that pleased them. At that they put him out of the tack and livestock of the crofters and especially livestock of the cottars who had no ground were put on the grazing of the tack.

It is difficult to understand why Neil MacNeill and his brother meddled with the Grianal tack. According to oral tradition, Neil was in an association with the factor at the same time as he was chairman of the Land League. However, whether he was or not, it is clear that his brother got the tack very cheaply. The son of the previous Grianal tacksman, Donald Archie MacLean, put in an offer of £96 for the tack but it was rejected and Lachlan MacNeil got it for £80. The Duke himself was of the opinion that he did a kindness to the crofters when he gave the tack to one of their number but who knows that he was not willing to take this opportunity to affront. One thing is certain, however, and it is that this episode did not weaken the fortitude of the crofters. They remained on the tack for two months and ultimately the Duke sent a letter to them telling them that he was going to put them out with the support of the law. In this letter he accused the Tiree people that they were making light of every kindness he had shown them in the past forty years and that they were not doing their best to dismiss the agitators from their midst.

The first thing that happened after this was that a Sheriff of Edinburgh, George MacNicol by name, came to the island on the twenty-first of July. He had a batch of interdicts which he was going to give to those who put livestock on the tack and apparently he expected dissension because there were more than thirty policemen and officers from Glasgow with him. They decided they would go to Balephuill in the first place but they could not have chosen a worst time or place for a start. The Land League must have had information that they were coming because a great crowd of people gathered. It was not long before they had a good view of what the policemen were doing and they were incensed when they saw two of the islanders were with the policemen and one of these had turned his coat and worked with

the factor as a guide. The policemen took the opportunity to put four or five notices under the doors when the crowd made a dash on them. With the power of the charge, they broke through the police line and they turned the head of the horse that was in the machine back on the road it came. The policemen soon realised that there was not much more they could do and they retreated back to the Scarinish hotel where they were staying. When the policemen took to their heels, the crowd went down to Island House to speak with the Duke's Chamberlain and with MacDiarmid, the factor. They told them that the Duke had not listened to their petition and that was the reason that they took charge of the Grianal tack. "But," said the spokesman, "we are willing to pay any rent for the tack that will be negotiated with the Land Commission." They were speaking of the new Commission that had been instituted by the Crofters Act that came into effect in June. It is likely that the crofters did not receive much of a hearing from the Chamberlain or the factor and they went up to the hillock above the house where they held a meeting. They decided to put a group of watchmen on Grianal and another group on Scarinish and to hold a meeting next day. The following day before holding the meeting, it is reported that three hundred crofters went over to Scarinish. When they reached the hotel the doors and windows were boarded with wood but they got the opportunity to speak with the policemen. The main question that bothered them was whether the work of the policemen was finished? The policemen said they were not sure. With this little information, the crofters went back to hold their meeting. The next day the policemen left the island.

Even though the policemen had left, the Tíree people well knew that they had not seen the last of them. Everyone on the island was thinking what would be the next step the Duke would take until the rebels were arrested. It was the opinion of the majority that a warship would come and there was very great anxiety everywhere. That is just what happened for the next day there was a call on the warship *Assistance* for a party of marines to embark in Plymouth and to head for Tíree. A smaller ship, the *Ajax*, was with her and on Wednesday the two ships called in Oban and took on board a party of policemen from Argyll and from Inverness. The *Assistance* and the *Ajax* reached Tíree on Friday, a beautiful summer evening, the thirtieth day of July. In addition to the two warships, the steamer *Nigel* arrived, that which took away the policemen just a week earlier. The fleet anchored off Scarinish harbour and although people expected that the soldiers would come ashore that evening, only the head of police who was now thoroughly ^{acquainted} organised with the situation came ashore. It was in the morning the fuss began. Small boats from the warships arrived full of soldiers and soon 250 of them were standing in front of the hotel. They proceeded in order with the policemen in the lead and in a short time they marched up through the township on the path to the west of the island. They had in mind now to make another attempt to serve interdicts on those who had put livestock on the Grianal tack. No hindrance was made to them because the Land League was agreed no challenge was to be given to them. All together fifty notices were served that day. It was reported that the soldiers did not visit the Grianal tack itself and too hearty a welcome was not given them. According to the gossip, men were on guard at an old hen house. . . ~~so that they would have sufficient arms~~ to make an attack on the enemy if things came to that. But so far as we know not a blow was struck. Indeed, the interdicts were quite effective for before Monday no-one remained on the tack and there was peace and quiet throughout the area. But there was a much more weighty matter entrusted to the policemen and to the soldiers at this time. This was the apprehension of the people who were behind the disturbance that occurred in Balephuill. This was something not at all easy and it is clear that initially they tried to arrest the leaders of the Land League itself, Colin Henderson, Hector MacDonald and Alexander MacLean from Balemartine, Donald Sinclair, chairman of the Land League, and Donald MacKinnon and Lachlan Brown from Balevullin. They were taken to Inverary next day where they went in hard conditions in prison for a day or two. They

to blow it up to show that they had sufficient munitions

were set free when Lachlan MacQuarrie who had a shop in Balemartine paid twenty pounds bail for each of them. As John MacLean, the Balemartine Bard said in song:

In Inverary a black hole of hardship,
Without prospect of release from Monday to Sunday,
But it was through the gentility in MacQuarrie's breast
That they were soon freed by gold.

After the prisoners were free they went to Glasgow on board the steamer *Lord of the Isles*. A hero's welcome awaited them when they reached the Broomielaw because everyone had heard of them. Next night a great meeting was held in the Waterloo Rooms with George Clark, MP for Caithness, in the chair. Donald Sinclair delivered a lecture and said Gaels had a right to stand shoulder to shoulder until the cottars had the benefit of the new Act because although the Act satisfied the crofters it made no reference whatever to the cottars.

While the prisoners were out of the island, two meetings of the Land League were held. At the first meeting the crofters condemned the government for sending soldiers to Tiree. At the second meeting, the crofters rejected putting further livestock on the Grianal tack and the greater part of the agitation was over. On the 23rd of August, a short time after the prisoners returned home, Lachlan MacNeill took possession of the Grianal tack and then not a living soul hindered him.

Among those who visited Tiree at this time was Donald MacFarlane who was the MP for Argyllshire between 1885 and 1886. When he spoke to the islanders, MacFarlane said that the soldiers would take the side of the islanders because he had noticed that that had happened in other places. It is very likely that that did happen because the soldiers mixed with the islanders and there was humour and jokes going between them. On the 17th of August, sports were held in Scarinish and a team from the warship *Humber* which had replaced the *Assistance* strove against boys from the island itself. It has been reported that the Tiree men won everything. But who knows that there was not a cunning reason for this rapprochement for the work of the soldiers was not yet at an end. At the beginning of September ~~seven~~ others were arrested for their participation in the disturbance at Balephuil: Iain Sinclair, Iain MacFadyen and Gilbert Gilchrist from Balemartine and George Campbell and Alasdair MacArthur from Balinoe. No others were arrested after that but the soldiers remained in the island until the end of the month. It is very likely that they were quite thankful to leave the island. Their quarters in Scarinish were destroyed by storm and water and they had to get others throughout the island in the schoolhouse in Moss, in the Glassary and the old store in Balephetrish.

A short time after the soldiers were gone the (allegedly) guilty men were called to court. But all the men who were arrested by the soldiers were not taken to court. Four were set free: Donald Sinclair, Lachlan Brown, Donald MacKinnon and Alasdair MacArthur. The court ~~itself~~ ** Balephuil* assembled on the 18th of October in the High Court in Edinburgh. Many witnesses were called (about thirty) and among them was John MacLean, the Balemartine Bard. On the Saturday before the court there was a cèilidh in Glasgow and the Balemartine Bard was among the company. A request was made for a song but the bard said he would not make a song until the court was over. He was not much happier after the court because the day went very badly against the Tireemen. Although the defence went well with the lawyer on their side, the judge Lord Mure said that it was clear that they were guilty of hindering Sheriff MacNicol when he tried to serve the interdicts in Balephuil. Five (MacLean, Henderson, Hector MacDonald, Iain Sinclair and Campbell) got six months imprisonment; the other three got four months. These were the most severe sentences put on any crofters in the Highlands until then and there was much sympathy with Tiree people throughout the country. And the Balemartine Bard's own opinion on the subject:

" - - - - - only lies

In the Edinburgh court, that was obvious to me."

The tumult finished with eight Tireemen in prison in Edinburgh and it is appropriate to enquire what profit did they gain. In respect of getting more land, they gained very little immediately. The Grianal MacNeill family enjoyed the tack for many years after that and some of the large tacks such as Hynish and Heylipol were not divided until 1912 and 1914. The Balephetrish tack, Tom Barr's famous tack, was not divided until 1921 and there was more disturbance before that happened. But that was not the crofters' fault but the fault of the Crofters' Act for the Act did not propose in any decisive way how the crofters would enlarge their crofts. This was to an extent what was behind the disturbance in Tiree in the first place. In general, however, it was the means of drawing the attention of the community to the deplorable plight of the crofters and cottars on Tiree. When the Land Court made the investigation in the following year, the rents of the crofters were much reduced and a substantial sum of debt was cancelled. Perhaps this happened because of what happened in other areas of the Highlands, but who knows if the Tiree crofters would have gained much but for what happened in Grianal?

This is the first detailed account of the Tiree disturbance and it drew wide interest. The information came from various places especially the Oban Times and the Scottish Highlander and oral tradition and songs of the island. Information about the Duke of Argyll's opinions will be got in the biography of Lady Victoria Campbell by Frances Balfour and *Crofts and Farms in the Hebrides* by the Duke himself. No faith whatsoever should be placed in 'Tiree under Military Law' in the book *The Old and the New Highlands and Hebrides* by James Cameron.

*Reinheits an Thearann an Tiroth 1886. Donald F. Meek,
University of Aberdeen 1980. (Gaelic).*