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CROFTS UNCOVERED BY FELLING OF TREES IN THE HARRIET PLANTATION,  
DORNOCH, 1989

The people who came to live up here on this hill had had land at Cyderhall, on the fertile land of the coastal plain, but there were increasing problems from overcrowding. In 1805, the Sutherland estate decided to put all this coastal land into big farms, and to remove the people living there, some of whom had written title to their lands and had been there for many generations. The two main townships on the land which was to become Cyderhall farm were Dalvavy and Teaclioibe, so both of these were to be destroyed after clearance. We know of three typical families living there and I will refer to their stories as we go along.

The dispossessed people were to be offered seven-year leases on a few acres of land per family on the uncultivated moors inland in the parish; these new muir settlements began in 1807 with the eviction of the first families from Dalvavy.

The process was gradual – the estate was careful always to stay within the letter of the law – the first to be removed were those with no written lease to their land, or indeed no land at all, then those with one-year leases. Most of the more substantial tenants had five- or nineteen-year leases, maturing at different times, and as these longer leases ran out, these tenants were evicted. A family called MacKay had a nineteen-year lease which was due to expire in 1820; they had a good holding and farmed it efficiently, paying £8 rent, and never in arrears. The lease-holder, David MacKay, believed his lease would be renewed, but his three brothers were less hopeful: in the years between 1812 and 1820, Alexander, William and Andrew MacKay left to make their way to Nova Scotia, in Canada, where they settled with some people from Easter Ross in a township they called Scotsburn, where the MacKay descendants remain to this day. David MacKay stayed until his lease ran out in 1820, and was evicted. He was among 300 people who emigrated to Canada or America in 1820 and 21 from Dornoch Parish, and his bitterness at his treatment by the estate has been handed down to the succeeding generations.

But emigration was not what the estate wanted – the factors complained that progress in developing their new muir settlements was very slow. They had a grand scheme for the parish, with five main aims:-

- 1) the people would get a fresh start (the fact that they did not want a fresh start was ignored);
- 2) they would be encouraged into industrious ways, to the improvement of their characters;
- 3) a lot of wild barren moorland would be reclaimed for cultivation;
- 4) the estate would then get rents on this improved land, as well as the more prosperous countryside;
- 5) the estate would also have the big rents for which they let out the new large farms on the coastal plain to rich graziers from the south.

**What we call the Clearances and the Evictions, the estate called the Improvements – for the people’s own good, not to mention that of the estate.**

It is on record that most of the dispossessed people from Cyderhall went up to Dornoch Muir, which was probably this hill where the Harriet Plantation is now being felled. I make this identification with Dornoch Muir because the Dornoch Burn starts here, and the house now to the west of the wood is called Lon Dorn?ich “the bog of Dornoch”.

But there are many muirs named in the sources, and it is not easy to distinguish one from the other. We have:

Dornoch Muir

Evelix Muir – possibly the ridge of Druimastle, now under trees;

Birichen Muir – west of Dornoch Muir, on the ground north of the Evelix river;

Cyderhall Muir – presumably the land now covered by Sidera Plantation;

Proncy Muir – presumably the south side of Dornoch Muir;

Balvraid Muir – west of Skelbo;

Skelbo Muir - south and west of Skelbo;

Achvandra Muir – now know as Skelbo Street

To some extent these areas were interchangeable or overlapping; Skelbo Muir and Achvandra Muir were used to designate the same areas, and Proncy Muir was part of Dornoch Muir.

It seems that the term “muir” meant “uncultivated land, land in its untouched wild state”. Patrick Sellar, the estate factor, said in 1816 that 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”. So it seems that a muir need not necessarily be in a remote or high corner of the parish, but might be a wild spot between two areas of cultivation.

As I said, the process of moving people to these muirs began in 1807. The estate put people out of the lands and destroyed their houses to prevent their returning later. These people were then offered “improving leases”, with only a nominal rent, or even no rent at all, for the first seven years. The factors divided the muir into lots, averaging about five acres per family of untouched moorland, know as “brown heather”, with no house, steading, building or shelter whatsoever. The settlers had to build their own houses and steadings, establish a peat-moss for fuel, and reclaim the land from its wild state, and make it fit for cultivation of crops. The lease laid down that two-thirds of the entire holding must be fit for arable cultivation within the seven years, or the family would be evicted again, this time without the option of a lease elsewhere. There is a tradition in Birichen that each family was given one spade for every four adult males, and told to get on with it.

It was, of course, desperately hard work to clear and drain the land, removing the old roots and bog timber, clearing huge boulders and masses of smaller stones, putting in stone-lined drains, and digging the whole lot by hand. A report by James Loch, the factor

in 1845, describes the soil on the hill: “(it) consists in some parts of a poor thin peat on loose gravel and hard clay, in others of a thin sandy peat on gravel, and in certain localities of a thin poor loam on soft clay”. The underlying rock, he said, is gneiss, not the fertile red sandstone found elsewhere in the parish.

To cultivate this unpromising land on that exposed hill, the settlers had spades, crowbars and ropes. The earliest settlers were the poorest, and very few of them had ploughs or horses. Some of the later arrivals would have been a little better off, and brought better implements, but the first settlers had primitive tools and the sweat of their own hands.

Another tradition in Birichen says that it was the custom to leave a small section of the holding in its original state as a reminder of what it had been, and as a measure of the progress both for those who followed and for the factors of the estate. There was a family called Ross who were among the earliest settlers, being evicted in 1809 from Cyderhall. They lived up here on Dornoch Muir, and were later removed down the hill to Proncy croy, to a small holding in the area now just west of the A9 (near Helen Bennett’s house), in 1840. They are typical of a cleared family of the less affluent kind, many of whom emigrated at this time.

The estate factors complained the people were slow to take up these “improving leases”, and that once they were settled, progress was slow – what did they expect? The settlement at Skelbo or Achvandra Muir was by far the most successful for several reasons: the soil there was more fertile, the muir less exposed, the holdings were bigger and 8 of the 10 settlers knew the area well, since they had been removed from Skelbo itself, to make room for the big farm of Skelbo – and the 10 settlers had been specially chosen for their proficiency as farmers.

But apart from Skelbo, fewer than 10 families took up the “improving leases” in the first five years of the scheme, in the entire parish. Gradually, however, times grew harder, and more and more families were evicted, so that more leases were taken up, and by 1815, 65 families were on the muirs – up here on Dornoch Muir, and on Birichen Muir, and on Evelix Muir.

These muir settlements were described as “not thriving, but surviving”. What little rent they could pay, even after seven years, was mainly in the form of hens, tough and stringy. In 1815, the 65 families living on the muirs managed between them a total of only £22, and 58 hens, in rent.

Surviving, yes, thriving, no – and ominously, none of them had been given written title of their land, in spite of the urgings of Patrick Sellar that this should be done. The settlement was described at this time as “still a provisional process”.

Some of the settlers up here on Proncy Muir were given 20 acres, some only five, depending on their age, abilities, size of family and, of course, the quality of the land. But the obligation to make the land viable was raised from two-thirds of the holding to all

of it within seven years, and any land remaining unimproved was then taken away. And as the land became viable, half-acre by half-acre, the full rent was charged on it.

Patrick Sellar, who was given to flashes of remarkable insight at times, and was sometimes quite candid about the estate's policy, remarked that settling the people on the muirs was profitable to the estate even when there was no rent for the first seven years, because the barren land was made useful – "Rearquhar, Evelix and Dornoch Muirs will certainly at present pay more under people than under big farms". (The scheme to settle Rearquhar Muir never came to anything.)

But the people did not like what was being done to them, and in 1815, James Loch wrote to the Marquis of Stafford with the comment that the people had turned against Sellar and against Young "with a view of entirely doing away with the general system of improvement which has been adopted". For this feeling of resentment he blamed some of the larger tenants and "half-gentlemen" who considered the estate their own, and were stirring up feeling against the factors. "But the system is to be preserved in" said Loch, grimly "whether the people like it or not".

Sellar made another observation in 1815, with what seems like real regret and compassion for the settlers, saying that he strongly 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 so improved will "by 1836 be put into the regular farms, and the present possessors will be drawn away into some town or village."

He was uncannily accurate as to the year, though wrong about the big farms, for in 1836 the estate took the decision to abandon the muir settlements and to cover all the big muirs in the parish with plantations of trees. And the people of the muir settlements, who had spent thirty years making their meagre holdings yield a half-decent living, were uprooted again, in 1840. There is still tremendous bitterness in Birichen about this, and people there still speak of "our land" on the hill, and "our land" at Cyderhall. It is all very well saying that people should forget the past and live in the present, but if you are still suffering from the deprivations of the past and struggling to make ends meet, and seeing others growing rich on what you feel is rightfully yours, it must be difficult not to feel bitter. Some of the folk evicted from the hill to make way for trees were given leases to muir land in Birichen and Balvraid, but many emigrated or went south, seeking work.

One man, after 30 years of hard labour with a spade, was what he called "bruised out" from his viable holding on Evelix Muir, and given a 4-acre strip of untouched muir in Birichen, a piece of land which he said "would not support a snipe" – and he had 13 children.

One of the factors at this time wrote to the Duke of Sutherland saying that labourers must not be given land that was too good, because cultivation of the moors will extend their industry.....

The muir settlers were embittered by the thought that it was their efforts with their spades that had made the hill suitable for the planting of the hated trees. But they had no written title to the land, and no rights, and no power to resist – so out they had to go, with their spades, to start all over again. Good for their character, no doubt. This was in 1840, and the trees were planted in 1842, after extensive drainage of the land – drainage which the estate had not been prepared to do for the crofters' benefit. **The trees were planted right over the settlers' house, in rows through their living-rooms.**

The estate gave them new leases, and some concessions were made; some of them, those well-off enough to own a pony, were permitted to cut whins for winter fodder, while others were allowed to gather seaweed on the shore as manure for their potatoes, free of charge. They had to carry it some six miles on their backs, but they were not charged for the privilege.

But look what lay ahead: the Hungry '40's, a decade of famine and disease, total failure of the potato crop through blight, poor weather, unripened corn, terrible suffering and near starvation. The people must have been weakened both physically and mentally just when they needed to be particularly strong.

The factor wrote to the Duke at say that some were managing to make of go of it: "the exertions of these people is very praiseworthy", he said. But the Census figures tell their own story: the number of inhabited houses in Rearquhar, which did not have an influx of new muir settlers, remained the same between 1851 and 1871, but in Birichen the number of inhabited houses fell from 43 houses in 1851 to 17 in 1871 – clearly a lot of families did not succeed.

There was hostility to the estate, and especially to the factors, who had enormous power and were much feared. But the Sutherland family did not want adverse publicity, and to some extent the factors had to bow to public opinion. In 1854, the Fraser family at Fleuchary – who had been evicted from Cyderhall in 1827, and had built up a good holding from nothing – had an unexpected visit from the Duke's Commissioner, Mr Loch, and the local factor, Mr Gunn, and the Ground Officer, Mr Forbes, an ominous combination. Mr Loch said they had come to put the Frasers out of their croft, because they had promised a good croft to Mr George Clark, the griever at Skelbo Farm, and they had decided to give him the Frasers' croft. However, the Sandy Fraser of that day insisted on showing them round the place, which was leased to his widowed mother. When they had seen the new house and steading, the land in good heart, and the books in perfect order showing good yields, Mr Gunn said to Mr Loch "What are people going to say if you put this widow out of her croft when her son is making such a good thing of it" Mr Loch agreed that the croft was yielding more under the Frasers than it could be expected to do under Mr Clark, and he gave Sandy Fraser a joint tenancy with his mother, and went away. But the following year, the Frasers' rent went up 200%.

Towards the end of the century, the people's hostility and fear found a new outlet. There was a famous occasion when someone dared to stand in a parliamentary election against the Duke's son. When this candidate came to the district in his carriage, the men of

Birichen went down to the main road to meet him, took the horse out of the shafts and themselves pulled him in his carriage around the area, so pleased were they that someone was standing up to the Sutherland family. He did not get in, but the gesture had been made. Not long afterwards, the Crofters Act was passed in 1886, and the time of the Evictions was over.

The trees were cropped after 90 years, and again after another 60 years, and this is when these pathetic ruins were uncovered, sad remembrances of the bad old days. People lived in these houses for only 30 years, if as long as that, 30 years of hardship and hard work, only to be put out by a hard landlord. One of their descendants recently commented to me on an irony he had read in the paper – Skibo estate has been sold for development as a leisure complex. “Ach” he said “they took that land from our people and sent them to hard labour on the muir, and now our land is going for leisure. Changed days indeed – but one thing will never change: leisure or hard labour, it all means profit for the landlords”.

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*From a talk given to Dornoch Heritage Society members at Proncy on 7<sup>th</sup> October, 1989*