

DEMPSTER'S MUIR SETTLERS

Skibo estate bought in 1786: the noted 'improver' George Dempster believed that sheep and people were incompatible and estate revenue could be increased by the improvement of waste land.

Dempster's estate in the parish of Creich comprised the five townships of Migdale, Little Creich, Quarters, Tulloch and Swordale, otherwise known as the five davochs. The tenants of the five davochs also possessed rights of pasturage over an extensive commonty to the north which they occupied in conjunction with the neighbouring lands of Ardens and Meikle Creich, under different ownership. Within the commonty each davoch had its own particular sheiling ground. However, in about 1750? the sheilings of Sleistaridh and Garvary were enclosed by Capt Mackay as grass parks for the cattle from the Mains farm. In 1765, after Mackay had given up Skibo, the two grazings were placed in the hands of single tenants. The tenant of Garvary had the ground to the north and looked after the 'yell cattle' of the five davochs after the milk cows had returned from the sheilings at the end of summer.

However, in 1791 Dempster began to put his plans for wasteland settlement into effect. At a meeting with Dempster held in the house of Alexander Macrae, innkeeper and ferryman at Bonar, the tenants of the five davochs agreed to relinquish their sheiling grounds in return for liferent leases of their arable lands at the present rents. Moreover, their rights of general pasturage in the commonty were to be retained. Some objected to what transpired at the meeting but were satisfied when 'writings' were 'exchanged'. Later, however, the tenants realised that without their sheilings they 'could not keep their cattle so well'.

In the meantime Dempster set about his improvements and by October 1792 some 30 settlers had taken possession in the 'Sleistary hills'. They were allowed to 'improve as much land as they find waste around them' and were entitled to the following encouragements:

- '(1) Every settler will have given him a stone of iron, for making hammers, or other instruments.
- (2) Also seed, whether potatoes or corn, for what ground shall be cultivated in the first two years.
- (3) The new settlers will be free from all services whatsoever, and from thirlage to the mill
- (4) They will only have to pay one shilling a-year of rent, during the life of the first settler.
- (5) Their heirs or children, will, have a preferable right to their possessions, of cultivated and enclosed, at such a rent as shall be fixed at the time of their succeeding to the possession, by arbitrators mutually chosen.
- (6) No addition will be made to this rent, during the life of the said heir or children.
- (7) The same rule or preference, will be observed in favour of all future heirs of the settler; so that possession may belong for ever to the family of the man who made

the first settlement; provided always, that the heirs or children of the first settler, shall build stone houses upon the possession; and that the houses in time coming, be roofed with straw, slate, or heather, and not with divots.

- (8) The new settlers will have a right to take peat from the nearest mosses upon the estate for their own use.'