

Dempster's Policy

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5 May, 1989

Jim Bell
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Dear Mr Bell

Please find enclosed a sketch map of the Evelix settlements, hearth tax returns for Dornoch (1694), and two copies of an article I published in Vernacular Building last year-perhaps you could pass on a copy to your friend Mr Robertson. The journal might well be interested in your survey of Puill Fraoich. Please let me know if this might be possible.

Airdens was owned by the later Grays of Creich until 1716 when Robert Gray, Commissary of Sutherland granted the lands to his nephew Robert, the infant son of James Gray of Creich. Robert Gray of Airdens became a writer in Edinburgh and in 1751 was able to buy Ospisdale where he made substantial improvements. In 1767 he married Margaret the heiress of Robert Gray of Creich. However, it later emerged that he was by then already deeply in debt. In 1777 his estate was sequestrated with debts of £2,875 while Airdens and Ospisdale were valued at £1,606. The lands were sold to Gilchrist in 1783 .

George Dempster of Skibo sold Balblair to Sidney Hadwen of Kildonan Lodge in 1861. The lands were described as the "Ninepenny lands of Mackaill including that portion thereof commonly called Balblair with the houses and others; and a small portion of the lands and Barony of Skibo to the east". The remainder of the Skibo estate was sold to Thomas Chirnside of Warribee Park, Victoria, Australia in 1866.

I saw the letter in the Northern Times questioning my interpretation regarding Donald Macleod: if we all stopped where the writer suggests there would be no history worth reading!

Bob with
Melch Dempster

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5th September, 1988

Jim Bell
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Dear Mr Bell

Thank you for your letter and your kind comments on my article on sheep farming.

I am very pleased to hear about your work on the settlements of the River Evelix. There is a great need for such sites to be recorded. I have gathered a certain amount of information on this area and enclose some very rough notes on Dempster's muir settlers. It is clear that the earliest settlements on the hill grounds were Garvary, Sleasdairidh and Torbreck on Loch Buie. Puill Fraoich was formerly within the Sleasdairidh grazing and, like many of the other small settlements, was almost certainly created as a result of Dempster's policies. A survey of 1825 which I found among the Court of Session records states that 'Pill fraoich' consisted of 7.8 acres arable and meadow, which at 7/6 per acre, gave as estimated rent of £2 18 6. By comparison, the small settlement of Leadnamone to the east, consisted of 2.5 acres arable and meadow which was valued at 3/- per acre. A rental of the Skibo estate for 1893 or 4 only lists the hill grazing of 'Clais-na-sinneig' let to John Logan and others for £26 on a 5-year lease from Whit 1890.

I hope these notes may be of some use to you. If I find anything else I will pass it on. I look forward to meeting you next spring.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Bangor-Jones

Dr Malcolm Bangor-Jones

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

Demster'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.

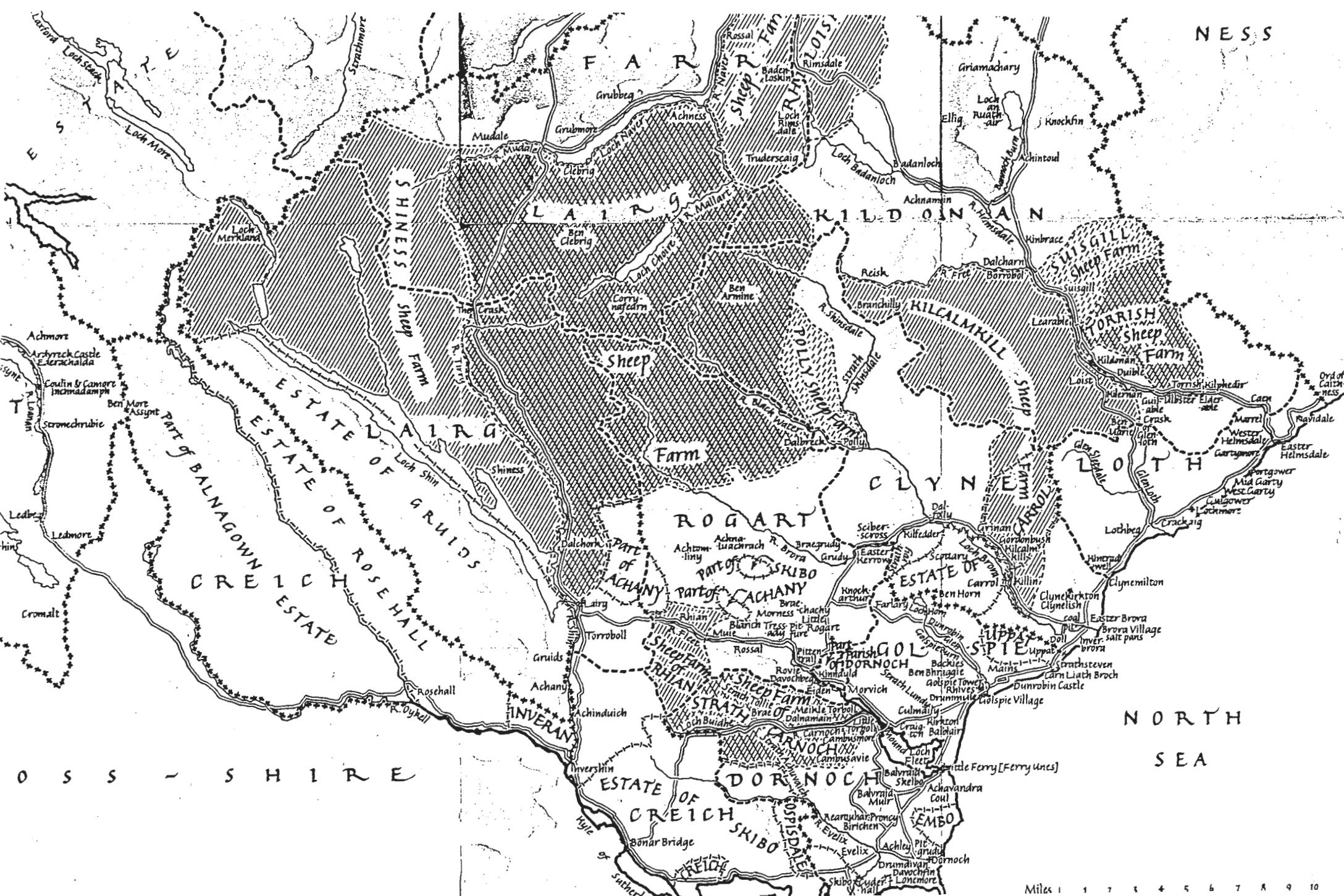
However, in 1791 Dempster began to put his plans for wasteland settlement into effect. At a meeting with Dempster held in the house of Alexander Macrae, innkeeper and ferryman at Bonar, the tenants of the five davochs agreed to relinquish their sheiling grounds in return for liferent leases of their 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 possessions 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.'



NESS

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