

Napier Commission in Inverness-shire
West coast, Inverness & Kingussie

Arisaig, 6 August 1883 - Donald Mcvarish
DONALD M'VARISH, Crofter, Ardnish (64)—examined.

33091. Sheriff Nicolson.

—Is this your statement?

—It is. ' Ardnish has six divisions.

—(1) In Peinnmheanach there are seven families holding land and paying an average rent of £6, 3s. lid., ranging from £ 4 to £8. Four of these keep four cows each, two keep three cows, and one has only two. Some have as many as fifteen sheep and others have none at all. Besides these there is one who has no land at all

—James Macdonald, who was in a small lot with his brother, knowing that it was too small for two, left it and went in with his father-in-law to wait for an opening. He is there still with a family of five besides himself and wife, and without a morsel of ground or a head of stock, although he has made application both to the proprietrix and to the factor. He has been refused even a house, and with the exception of what his father-in-law does for him he is dependent for his living on very uncertain employment.

(2) Glasnacardaich contains three lots of equal size. The rent, in all, is £16. We keep three cows each, but the ground is not fit to carry more than six cows in all.

(3) Laggan has two tenants and a cottar, who keeps two cows on the tenants' ground. The rent is in all £45. We keep twelve cows and two hundred sheep.

(4) Mallach-bui has three crofts. Two of us pay together £8. One has four cows, the other only one, not being able to put together what will get him another. The other crofter has less ground and pays less. We feel great hardship in having to carry sea-ware on our backs up a steep and high hill.

(5) Slock has two tenants. The rent, in all, is £21, 10s. Our stock is eight cows and twenty four sheep. Our peats are almost done. Our houses are very bad.

(6) Feorlain-due has one farmer and one crofter. The crofter has very little. The farmer pays about £22. His farm is of such a size that he can live on it without seeking work elsewhere. For Ardnish as a whole (except the farmer in Feorlain-dhu) we may say among all these there is not one family which is nearly supported by the land, and some of them are in a very poor state at the best. Those who make the most of their land buy ten bolls of meal in the year, and there are some among them who have bought that much already since the new year, while fifteen bolls will hardly meet the yearly demands of others. There is an idea abroad that there is much employment given on the Arisaig estate; but whatever may be done in the immediate neighbourhood of the mansion, very little reaches the rest of the estate. Attempts at fishing have been made from time to time, but from want of means the nets and other fishing gear are getting so bad that the sea itself does not afford the help we would be willing to take out of it. It is a matter of recent history that Peinnmheanach and Laggan were in the hands of one man. This man is still only represented by one man and his family of one son and four daughters, although he is the sixth in succession on the same spot. So that the present overcrowding is not from rapid multiplication nor from wilful subdivision. The crowding and the poverty are the result of the clearing of the townships of Goadal and Ardnafuaran, which are now partly in the possession of two tacksmen and partly in the possession of a sportsman, and under deer. Besides those who were put in among us, as mentioned great numbers were obliged to emigrate, and the numbers who are crowded together on the bad and small lots, and on no lots at all, are no indication of the extent of land which lies in a state of comparative waste under the sheep and deer and cattle of the few. The truth is that the greater part of this estate is in the hands of three tacksmen, besides some held by the proprietor; and an extensive deer forest, which could support many families in comfort. The crofter population have only the smaller and most worthless scraps. Thus the great grievance of want of land may easily be met, for there is plenty of land to satisfy the utmost demands of the crofters, and leave reasonably sized farms for the tacksmen as well. There is

no desire on the part of the crofters to throw blame on the tacksmen. But it is plain to everyone that it is a great grievance to have the many reduced to poverty, and great hardship when the few have more than they need and some more than they can manage. Another grievance is the weight of rent, although we have to confess that the present family have made no addition to it in their time. But it is too heavy, all the same ; and from frequent turning over, on account of the lots being so small, the land is much less productive than it was when the present rent was laid on. We do not like to go into the details of our grievances, but seeing that we have been invited to do so by the Royal Commission, we confess here that many a time we could not live at all but from the shell-fish from the sea-shore. We wish the land to be valued by land commissioners appointed by Government. We would gladly pay for our holdings their real value. We know that at present the rent is far too high, in fact double what it should be. As our lots are too small, we wish some of the adjoining land were added to them. We wish that in case of eviction Government should interfere between tenant and landlord. We hold that though the law at present may not acknowledge that the tenant has any right to his holding, the crofter or tenant has, in reality, as much right to live on the land of his forefathers as the proprietor has to be superior over it.'

Signed by ALLAN M'DONALD, RONALD M'EACHEN, and fifteen others.

33092. There are three lots in the place in which you live?

—Yes.

33093. Which of them is yours?

—I have a third of it. The place is not allotted out. The rent of the three is £16.

33094. How much do you pay?

—£5, 6s. 8d. each.

33095. How many cows have you?

—The place is let to stock seven, but in order to get an equal price we have three cows each. The place cannot support these; we have to buy fodder for them.

33096. What is your share of the two hundred sheep?

—We are allowed to keep twelve sheep each, but we have only about twelve among us.

33097. It is stated in the paper 'we keep twelve cows and two hundred sheep,' what is the meaning of that?

—That is Laggan.

33098. What would you think a proper rent for your place?

—The old rent was £11, but it was raised by £ 5 in Lord Cranstoun's time. We do not complain of the rent, nor do we complain of the proprietors we have had, but we complain that we have too little land to subsist by.

33099. Where is the land you would like to get?

—Well, it is not for us to specify any particular portion of land; but, at the same time, we are of opinion that, if our township were given to two instead of three, and the third man provided for elsewhere, we would be much better off. There is plenty of land in the country where I saw people dwelling when I came first, and where no man lives now.

33100. Supposing it were left to the other two, and you got your choice of some place to which you would be removed, where would you go to ?

—I should choose many a place before Ardnish. It is an inaccessible place. There is no road, although we pay the road money; and we have to go through the moor four miles before we can get

at it, I think the third man, who would be removed from our township, would gladly choose any other place on the estate rather than remain where he is.

33101. How far is it from here?

—Nine to ten miles.

33102. And have you no road?

—Six miles of road, and the rest is very bad moor.

33103. Where do you get your goods for your family?

—Glasgow, Tobermory, Fort William, and passing vessels.

33104. How do you carry them home?

—By boats; and in winter time, when the weather is bad, we require to hire carts to carry it away from the landing place of the steamer to Borrodale, and by boat from there.

33105. How far are you from the sea?

—We are on the sea coast.

33106. Is there any part of the deer forest that you consider desirable for arable land and pasture?

—We would wish to get land, but we would not like to ask anything that those proprietors whom we have had for the last thirty-eight years would not be inclined to give, for they were very good to us.

33107. Where are the big farms of which you speak in this paper as occupying so much land which you would like to see subdivided?

—All over the country.

33108. Are any of them very large?

—Not upon this estate.

33109. Are there any of them that you would like to reduce in size?

—One would like to look to his own interests first, no doubt. I don't complain of the rent nor of the proprietor, but I should like to have a little more land upon which to support my family. I can only provide for them for three months by my croft. Our best source of income is shell-fish. We begin to gather whelks in autumn after the crops are cut, and we continue until the spring, and the whole place depends upon that source of income more than upon anything else, now that we have lost driving and shearing sheep.

33110. What do you mean by driving?

—We used to drive herds of cattle and sheep to Falkirk and other markets, and sometimes to England, and we sometimes made £14 or £15 by that in the season. That source of income is lost to us now since the railways were opened. We also used to smear sheep, and that also has gone out of fashion. There is only one man smearing now for every twelve that used to be.

33111. But is not the nearest railway station far from this, and have not sheep to be driven there yet?

—They are under a shepherd, with perhaps one or two attendants, who can drive the stock to Banavie, and then they ship them from there, and sometimes they drive them to Tyndrum and put them upon the Oban railway, or Kingussie upon the Highland line.

33112. How long is it since the whelk-gathering began?

—Twentyeight years ago some of them were employed at it ; but many of the people only took to

that mode of getting a living after every other occupation failed them.

33113. Has not the crop of whelks diminished like everything else?

—Yes, you won't gather 6d. worth now where you could gather 1s. 6d. worth five years ago.

33114. Do men gather whelks as well as women and children?

—Yes, but it is very hard work for the men.

33115. Is it not harder for the women and children?

—They don't complain of it so much.

33116. What can an industrious person make in a week at gathering whelks?

—During the five or six days of a spring tide one works well to earn about 5s.