

**A Factor's Lot**  
Martin Petrie, Kilninver

Part 1 'while factors laid our cottages bare'

I recall listening to these words in a song by The Corries and looked into when these lyrics were written.<sup>i</sup> They bring out the passions of the Highland Clearances 200 years ago and continue the bad press that estate factors have received ever since. To those unfamiliar with the term it must be appreciated many estates engaged such a person to act as the agent, to carry out the laird's or landowner's wishes, often in their absence. It was a position of some importance, furnished with house and perquisites; the factor was often in the thick of it holding sway over who would get what in terms of land and tenancies. With some of the older titled landowners, factors duties were often carried out by the Chamberlain.

The breakdown of the clan system when people were treated as assets by their chiefs in those rebellious years was over; the subsistence agriculture was unsustainable and it was now time to maximise the laird's or new style landowner's income, sometimes to help accommodate their lifestyle. The lyrics above bear reference to the likes of the notorious Patrick Sellar, and the Clearances in Sutherland. Sellar had been a supporter of planned evictions with alternative work and accommodation, but the advantages of a quick return were tempting with the introduction of sheep. It was between 1811 and 1821 that many families were evicted in Strathnaver and 'their cottages laid bare.' It was in 1814 when the eviction, subsequent fire and the death of Margaret Mackay brought Patrick Sellar to court at Inverness to answer charges of arson and murder. Later in April 1816 Sellar was acquitted and later resigned a broken man.<sup>ii</sup>

Being a factor's son myself I am all too aware of this emotive subject. Growing up on one of Aberdeenshire's largest sporting estates in the 1960's and 1970's meant I absorbed a fair amount of the tradition within a system of management with its roots in those older times. One conclusion was the factor was "naebody's friend" and as youngster wearied of the way "Oh aye, he's the factor's loon" was uttered, but still a little naive to appreciate all that comment might have inferred in a historical sense.

As with many professions 19<sup>th</sup> century factors often served in post over long periods of 30 to 40 years, various ones being appointed J.P's and indeed well respected in the community, but evictions were not the only events put to memory in verse. One incident involving the local factor in Aberdeenshire resulted in this first of five verses and a chorus, titled "The Lay of the Lions"

Foggo sent a message to Braemar  
Touch my pailing an ye daur  
Injure but it's smallest spar  
And you'll rue it sair in the mornin'

Chorus:

Hey Factor Foggo are ye waukin' yet  
Or are your Ghillies stirrin yet  
if ye be ready we're to go  
to burn your fence in the mornin'

This incident from the late 1800's gave the long standing factor Robert G. Foggo a headache involving a fence being built blocking off the villager's right of way through the local woods and resulted in the burning of gates. The incident caused quite a stir and entered print as the Chronicles of Braemar <sup>iii</sup>. Later in 1893 after a right of way court case, which included this path, an agreement was struck. Many an evening I spent reading through old estate papers including Foggo's thoughts on local farm tenants, one I recall about a tenant in Glengairn, "a useless drunken fellow who was workman on the place and married the woman who was tenant. The woman is short witted." I never did find out whether their lease was renewed.

Part 2 'and otherwise played the devil'

Searching around the country on the subject it would have been little different here on the west coast with incidents retold in poem and song. Some of the biggest landowners of the time were the Duke of Argyll and the Earl of Breadalbane. Crofters on the Ross of Mull had to deal with the Duke's James Campbell of Ardfenaig, 'the fierce factor mor'. Reading the Tireragan story one can see how fear or hatred builds up without security

of tenure and adhering to the leases where everything had to pass the factor's eye.<sup>iv</sup>

Some will remember the article in last year's magazine on the Disruption and may recall the oppression of Established Kirk members by Breadalbane's factor Mudie in 1843.<sup>v</sup> It is interesting to note that James Mudie finally got his retribution a few years later. Thomas Carlyle, from Ecclefechan, Dumfriesshire writes a letter to his brother Alexander in 1849 regaling the news in his locality and of Springkell's former factor Mudie. He had been disgraced in Argyll (presumably sacked) for false bookkeeping 'and otherwise playing the devil'.<sup>vi</sup>

With vast land holdings stretching from Loch Tay to Easdale several factors were needed to administer the Breadalbane wishes and policies. Over at Kenmore James Ferguson Wyllie another faithful servant of 40 years had been the man in post when the Breadalbane clearances on Loch Tay happened in 1830's. Again the factor is remembered although it's the landowner more in the firing line in verse 2 of the Highland Crofter.<sup>vii</sup> The theme being, 'the land is a' the Marquis's;'

The fish that swim, the birds that skim,  
The fir, the ash, the birk is his;  
The castle ha' sae big an' braw,  
Yon diamond crusted dirk is his;  
the roofless hame, a burning shame,  
the factor's dirty work is his;  
The poor folk vexed, the lawyer's text,  
yon smirking legal shark is his;  
frae Kenmore tae Ben More  
The world is a' the Marquis's.

The pattern was repeated in many counties as improvements were set out, the coming of lowland shepherds and the instigation of new long term leases and tenancies for those suitable; although it must be remembered not all evictions ended in destitution or emigration. Despite all the good and necessary improvements carried out by landowners in agriculture, industry and welfare it seems that factors will always be remembered in song or poem for the cruel policy that was their duty to do !

**Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> Verse 2

We stood, wi heads bowed in prayer  
While factors laid our cottages bare  
The flames fired the clear mountain air  
An many lay dead in the mornin.

Chorus

Hush, hush, time tae be sleepin  
Hush, hush, dreams come a creepin  
Dreams o peace and o freedom  
Sae smile in your sleep bonnie baby.

Despite the traditional lullaby chorus the lyrics are attributed to Jim Mclean in 1968 and therefore an angry 20th century response to the Highland Clearances. The Corries and many others have recorded their own versions of it.

- <sup>ii</sup> The Sutherland book, Editor Donald Omand. It is interesting to note that Patrick Sellar was also a Farm tenant in the area he had previously evicted families from.
- <sup>iii</sup> Robert G. Foggo, factor for the Farquharson's of Invercauld from around 1872 to 1900. Aspects of the incident appeared in the press but I am unable to pinpoint all the dates.
- <sup>iv</sup> The History of Tireragan Township by Carol Riddel. This gives an insight into the restrictions that were written in leases drawn up by the factor mor and his successors.
- <sup>v</sup> Historic Argyll No 14, page 3. Disruption at Kilninver.
- <sup>vi</sup> The Carlyle Letters Online. Collected letters. Vol 24, 18 Aug 1849. Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish satirical writer, historian, essayist and teacher with a strong Calvinist background although he lost his faith in Christianity.
- <sup>vii</sup> The Highland Crofter a 19<sup>th</sup> century poem by James Kennedy may have been printed before the first verse appeared in Punch in 1903 and later published with other material in 1920. The 1st verse also appears in 'From a hollow on the hill' by Nancy Black. ( page 42) Dougie McLean sings a version and is available on YouTube.

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