**Reef Land Raids**

Spread across the brow of Eicleat Bheag, a rocky hillock that straddles the western flank of the village of Reef, lies an Suileachan, the fourth commemorative structure commissioned to honour those who resisted the absolute power of landlordism and restored land to the crofting population of the Valtos peninsula.

An Suileachan, co-designed by Will Maclean and Marian Leven, symbolises a journey through time. It draws the visitor back in history to evictions in 1850 and salutes those who later regained the land. On the southern aspect of an Suileachan, a stone portal built from slabs of magnificent Lewisian gneiss moves the visitor metaphorically from the past through to the present and invites us to gaze at the land around, now held in trust by the villagers themselves, and to ponder what the future might hold for this tranquil place.

For three years, 28 Reef families peaceably resisted all attempts by the estate of Sir James Matheson to remove them. Then,in 1850, they were forcibly evicted from their homes, some scattered elsewhere on the island, others removed to America. Neil Maclennan, Breasclete, who told the Napier Commission; *“Those of us who came here (to the Breasclete moorland) brought the roofs of our houses with us. Others left these things there and they went useless”*. A year after the Reef evictions a further fourteen Valtos and Kneep families were removed.

By the late 19th Century the remaining population of the peninsula, known traditionally as the “fourteen penny lands”, were crowded into two villages with no access to the surrounding land which had been added to large farms. Amongst those who were left were thirty-one landless families.

Over the period in excess of 40,000 acres of land in Uig had been taken out of crofting use and given over to seven sheep-farmers and three big sporting estates. The first act of popular resistance against the absolute and arbitrary power of the Lewis estate was in 1874 when the people of the Island of Bernera, also in Uig, resisted the removal of 56 families from their traditional grazing lands. The Bernera resistance was indicative of the beginning of a more forceful stand against injustice.

Reports of unrest in the district of South Uig began to filter through by the early 1880s. In December 1884, HMS Assistance, with a force of up to 100 Marines, arrived in Loch Roag to arrest eight men accused of placing stock on off-shore islands for grazing and deforcing Sheriff’s Officers. They were tried at the Court of Session and summarily imprisoned. The following year ten men and seven women were fined for similar activities. The women were charged with “mobbing and rioting and breach of the peace*;* their fines, 5/- each, were paid by the London branch of the Highland Land Law Reform Association.

On two occasions, in 1891 and in 1896 the Deer Forest Commission recommended that Reef should be re-settled as a crofting village, but the estate refused to comply. In 1909, the Matheson estate agreed to give up the farm of Reef in return for “a perpetual guarantee of rent” from government. However, the Board of Agriculture for Scotland took refuge in the view that Reef was “quite simply statute-barred” (because it fell below an overall figure of £80 in annual rents). Actually, as confirmed in official correspondence, they feared that if they bought the farm (as they were legally entitled to under the Small Landholders (Scotland) Act 1911) this would “let in the deluge”

Believing the Board to be obstructionist, the landless squatters notified their intention to raid, proclaiming; “This was our forebears’ place ... and in spring we will plant it”. In the late winter of 1913 and twice in the New Year they drove the farmer’s stock from Reef farm. Alasdair MacKay, one of the raiders, told the parish Policeman: *“*You can have plenty of prisoners now. We’ve waited too long… now we have made up our minds to take it, whatever may happen to us”.

In late January1914, the crofters began to turn the ground in Reef in preparation for cultivating in the Spring. They were interdicted to stop all work by the Matheson estate. When the interdicts were defied, eighteen men were cited to appear at the Court of Session in Edinburgh. A subscription was raised in Stornoway before they could leave for the capital where, at the Court of Session, each was sentenced to six weeks imprisonment.

At this critical point, the issue at stake was driven into abeyance by the outbreak of war. Most of the men went off to fight and those who survived came back more determined than ever to claim their own “land fit for heroes”. The contrast between their country’s call to arms in this terrible war and its continuing failure to make good promises of land was incomprehensible and impossible to accept.

By February 1920, the crofters and cottars could wait no longer. Eleven of the original raiders wrote to the Secretary of State for Scotland: *“*We are demobilised soldiers and sailors unemployed since September .... we are compelled to begin Spring work on Reef Farm. If you will send the Commissioners of Small Holdings to us for the purpose of dividing the farm into crofts and putting us in possession as we trust you will, we will delay our operation to the 1st of March. If they are not here by that time we will be under the necessity of beginning work as a means to our livelihood”.

By this time, the new landlord, Lord Leverhulme, was locked in dispute with the Scottish Office and offered up the Uig farms as pawns in his resistance to breaking up the ones closer to Stornoway. Finally, in 1921, the land of the Valtos peninsula was restored to the people. The fact there is a population here today and a future for this community is due to the struggles undertaken by those who secured a just outcome at that time. An Suileachan is a magnificent memorial to these struggles.

**Rèid na Riobhadh**

Shuas air mullach Eicleat Bheag, cnoc bheag chreagadh teis-mheadhan baile na Riobhadh, tha an Suileachan, an ceithreamh carragh-chuimhne a bha air a choimiseanadh gus urram a thoirt dhan fheadhainn a sheas an aghaidh làn-chumhachd na h-uachdarain agus a fhuair seilbh air an fhearann dha teaghlaichean à Bhaltos agus an Chnìp bha as aonais talamh.

Tha an Suileachan a chaidh a dhealbhadh le Uilleam MacIlleathain agus a bhean Marian Leven mar shàmhla air slìghe tro thìm. Thathas gar tarraing air ais gu fuadaichdean 1850 agus a’ toirt aithne do na gaisgich a fhuair seilbh air an fhearainn. Air taobh dheas a' charragh-chuimhne tha fosglan air a cruthachadh le leacan eireachdail de seann chreaga Leòdhais, gar gluasad nar h-inntinn bho àm a dh'fhalbh gun latha an-diugh agus a' toirt oirrne sùil a thoirt air an àrainneachd timcheall. Sinn a' beachdachadh air na tha fainear don àite sàmhach seo san àm ri teachd, àite a tha a-nis ann an làmhan an coimhearsnachd fhèin.

Thug suas ri deich air fhichead teaghlach a bhuineadh do seann bhaile na Riobhadh, trì bliadhna a’ seasamh gu sìtheil an aghaidh oidhirpean oighreachd An Ridire Seumas MhicMhathain, an cur as an fhearann. Ach, ann an 1850 chaidh an ruagadh a-mach à tìr an sinnsir. Chaidh cuid an sgapadh air feadh Leòdhais agus cuid eile a chur thar a chuan a dh’Ameireaga. Nuair a thug Niall MacIlleathain à Breasclete, fianais mu choinneamh Choimisean Napier, thuirt e; “An fheadhainn againn a thàinig ann an seo (gu mòinteach Bhreasclete), thug sinn leinn mullach ar taighean, dh’fhàg an còrr a h-uile ni agus chaidh e gun fheum”.An ath bhliadhna, chaidh ceithir-deug theaghlach a ruagadh à Bhaltos agus bhon Chnìp.

Ro dheireadh na 19mh linne, bha an t-sluagh a bh’ air fhàgail anns a cheàrnaidh a bha air aithneachadh mar sgìre *“na Ceithir Peighinn Deug”* air an dinneadh ann an dà bhaile gun chead cas a chur air an talamh mun cuairt orra a bha a-nis na phairt de na tacan mòra. Nam measg, bha a h-aon deug air fhichead teaghlach de choitearan a bha as aonais fearann.

Thar an ùine seo chaidh còrr air 40,000 acraichean de dh'fhearann Uig a thoirt a-mach a croitearachd agus a thoirt dha seachdnar thuathanach agus do oighreachdan sealgaireachd mòra. 'S e tòiseach tòiseachaidh a bh’ ann an àimhreit Bheàrnaraigh ann an 1874, àimhreit a dh’èirich bho 56 teaghlaichean rabhadh fhaighinn teicheadh bhon fhearann. An àimhreit na còmharra air seasamh nas làidire an aghaidh ana-cheartas.

Thoiseach naidheachd an strì an taobh a deas Uig a' nochadh ro dheireadh an naoidheamh linn deug. Ann an 1884 thàinig HMS Assistance, le mu cheud saighdear-mara air bòrd, a-steach do Loch an Ròg gus ochd fir à Bhaltos a chur an grèim agus iad bho chasaid stoc a chuir air na h-eileanan beaga gun chead, fiachan màl agus brath a thoirt air Oifigearan an t-Siorraim. Chaidh an toirt air beulaibh Cùirt an t-Seisein an Dun Èideann agus fhuair iad am prìosan car ùine. An ath bhliadhna, chaidh càin air deich fìr agus seachd mnathan airson gnìomhan den aon seòrsa, na mnathan fo chasaid gràisgidh, aramach agus briseadh na sìth. Phàigh meur Lunnainn de Chomann Gàidhealach ath leasachaidh Làgh an Fhearainn a chàin, 5/- an tè.

An 1891 agus a-rithist ann an 1896, mhol Comisean Frìth nam Fiadh rèiteachadh fearann a chur an cèil ann an Riobhadh. Cha do gabh an oighreachd ri seo. Ann an 1909 dh’aontaich an oighreachd tac na Riobhadh fhàgail airson barantas sìor-mhàil bhon Riaghaltas. Cha do dh'aontaich Bord an Fhearainn ri seo air sgàth 's an ìre iseal de mhàl a ghabadh a thogail, ceithir fichead not sa bhliadhna. Bha seo a' ciallachadh nach b' urrainn don Riaghaltas am màl a sparradh orra.

Bha an t-eagal air Bòrd an Fhearainn, nan reiceadh iad an fhearann ('s còir aig na croitearan a cheannach a-rèir Achd nan Gabhaltas beaga agus nan Cuibhreann Talmhainn (Alba) 1911), gun toireadh seo cothrom dha càch agus gum biodh tuilleadh 's a chòrr de dh'iarrtasan roimhpe.

Bha coitearan as aonais fearainn ann an Bhaltois agus sa Chnìp dhan bheachd gun robh an Riaghaltas an-nis a’ cur cnapan-starra nan aghaidh, dh’aontaich iad an tuathanas a reudadh, leig iad fios chun a Bhòrd ag ràdh; *“Talamh ar sinnsearach tha seo agus bith sinn dha àiteach as t-Earrach”.*

Sa Gheamhradh 1913 agus dà uair sa bhliadhna ùr ruaig còig deug de na coitearan an tuathanas. Sgùirs iad stoc an tuathanach air falbh bhon taca. Thuirt Alasdair MacAoidh, fear den ruaigearan, ris a’ phoileas; *“Bidh prìosanaich gu leòir agaibh a-nis. Chaidh an Riobhadh a ghealltainn dhuinn, tha sinn air a bhith a’ feitheamh ro fhada agus tha sinn a-nis a' dol ga ghabhail, ge bi dè thachras dhuinn”.*

Anns a’ Ghearran 1914, thoisich na croitearan a' tionndadh an talamh 's iad a' dol a treabhadh as t-Earrach. Chaidh òrdugh-bacaidh a bhuaileadh orra le oighreachd MhicMhathain. Cha do ghèill nan ruaigearan ris agus chaidh ochd deug dhuibh a chur a Dhùn Èideann far an d’fhuair iad binn sia seachdainean sa phrìosan aig Cùirt an t-Seisein. Dh’abhraich seo mòran feirg air feadh Alba agus an ceann ceala-deug, thug iomairt làidir a-mach as a’ phrìosan iad.

Thànaig bacadh air cùisean aig an àm cudthromach seo air sgath's a Chogadh Mhòr. Dh' fhalbh a chuid as mòtha de nam fir agus an fheadhainn a thug am beatha às bha iad na bu chinntiche buileach gum faigheadh iad 'fearann freagarrach do ghaisgich'. Bha an cogadh uamhasach agus am feum a bha an rìoghachd a' cur air nam fir cala dìreach an aghaidh am briseadh dùil a thaobh na chaidh a ghealltainn dhaibh. Suidheachadh nach gabhadh a thuigse no gabhail ris.

Sa Ghearran 1920, cha b' urrainn dha na croitearan 's na coitearan feitheamh nas fhàide agus chaidh litir bho h-aon deug den chiad ruaigearan gu Rùnaire na Stàite airson Alba: *“’S e saighdearan agus seòladairean air ar leigeil dheth agus gun chosnadh bhon t-Sultainn a-chaidh a th’ annainn .... is fheudar dhuinn tòiseachadh air obair an Earraich air Taca na Riobhadh. Ma chuireas sibh Comiseanairean nan Tuathanasan Beaga thugainn gus an taca a roinn a-mach na lotaichean agus sealbh a thoirt dhuinn orra mar a tha sinn ag earbsa a nì sibh, cuiridh sinn dheth an obair chun a’ chiad là den Mhàirt. Mura bi iad an-seo an uair sin, feumaidh sinn tòiseachadh air an obair gus tighinn beò”.*

Nuair a thill iad bhon chogadh bha am Morair Leverhulme air an oighreachd a cheannach agus bha e a' sabaid an aghaidh Oifis na h-Alba, bha e cuideachd a' feuchainn ri tacan Uig a leigeil seachad mar dhìoladh gus grèim a chumail air na tacan nas fhaisg air baile Steòrnabhaigh. Ged a thug e ùine, leig Leverhulme seachad tuathanais Uig mu dheireadh thall, agus, ann an 1921, fhuair muinntir Bhaltos an cuid fearann air ais.

'S ann mar thoradh air an strì an aghaidh ana-cheartas a tha baile an seo an-diugh agus seasmhachd ann. Tha an Suileachan na chuimhneachan iongantach air gach strì a ghabh àite.