

**Sheriffs Ivory Expedition to Kilmuir on 25th October 1886 as reported by the  
Glasgow Herald's Special Correspondent**

While the events below were being recorded by the Glasgow Herald's reporter. The rest of the soldiers and police from the expedition were dealing with another incident happening a few miles away in the township of Bornaskitaig. There, soldiers had fixed bayonets and were taking control of the outbreak of 'mobbing and rioting', and were arresting the crofters who were stopping the Sheriff from serving his writs for rent arrears.

**The events that led up to the Herbusta crofters arrests and convictions.**

(extracted from the newspapers Tuesday's 26th October edition, page 8)

*'While the 'Battle of Bornaskitaig', as the encounter already described will doubtless be here after known, was taking place, MacDonald, the other sheriff officer, was being deforced at the Township of Herbusta, a mile and a half distant.*

*On parting company with the other officer, MacDonald served two decrees for arrears of rent in Kilavaxter, and then passed to Herbusta. The road to the village lies off the highway, and crossing an extensive bog, passes into a valley between two hills. The officers was accompanied by his concurrent and two constables for his protection, and James McKenzie, the subfactor who was with them for the purpose of pointing out the houses. Three representatives of the press completed the party.*

*When about a mile of the road had been travelled a crowd of men, women and children was seen gathering on one of the hills to the entrance to the glen. They were shouting and gesticulating wildly and evidently making signals to others who were not visible from the road. MacDonald instantly stopped, and declined to proceed, and an effort was made to signal to the military, who were seen fully a mile across the country taking shelter from the sun behind the gable of the parish church. A white handkerchief was tied to a walking stick and waved vigorously, and both policemen blew their whistles with the object of attracting attention, but all to no purpose. The military were not on the lookout, and the signals were all in vain. To make matters worse the soldiers were seen after the lapse of about twenty minutes to march off in the opposite direction, and it was not until later in the day that the unfortunate cause of this seemingly unaccountable movement was learned by the little group so anxiously awaiting their assistance, and saw them depart was something of the feeling of despair.*

*But the soldiers had important work near at hand and those who desired their aid a little farther off had to just to do without it. Meantime the crowd upon*

*the hill had increased considerably. Every one of the persons carried a formidable stick, as they danced backwards and forwards on the ridge of the eminence they brandished them in a threatening manner at the officer and his companions standing in a state of mingled amusement and wonder in the road below. From the other side of the hill men and women continued to scramble up to the summit, and as they joined the crowd they at once began to help the others in keeping up a continuous round of mocking laughter at the Philistines, who had, as it were, fallen into their hands. As they did not seek to come nearer it was thought by the policemen that a forward movement might be made, but MacDonald said that it was no good going on and getting deforced. It was still hoped that the protecting forces would be increased, and the intervening space in the direction in which the soldiers disappeared was eagerly scanned, but without any sign of relief.*

*The people on the hill seeing that the officers were evidently in a fix, became bolder, and shouted all sort of defiance at him. They spoke in Gaelic. What they were saying would have sounded fiercely enough in English but in the language of the locality it seemed to have a force and significance that would only suffer by translation. They danced and jumped wildly about, accompanying their antics with whoops and screams which seemed to have no meaning and to serve no object but to afford relief to their overflowing spirits. They demanded to know why the officer was frightened to go forward especially as he had 'Jumbo' with them - a reference to the sub-factor which appeared to be greatly relished. Then they dared him to move telling him that the women were ranged along the road with stones to give him a warm reception. It was only soldiers they said would do for them; Sheriff Ivory would not do at all. The rates in their Township were all paid and there was no need for the Officer to come there.*

*It was clearly impossible to make progress unless some decisive steps were taken, and after the jeers of the crowd had been withstood for nearly half an hour MacKenzie was dispatched across the moors with a view of procuring some assistance. He walked leisurely away, and in due course he too disappeared round the corner of the church in the distance, and though he was anxiously looked for he did not return.*

*A consultation was subsequently held among the people, in the course of which they several times turned round and shouted that they could turn the party back; in fact, they gave it as their opinion that they could easily kill the whole lot before the Marines came near. The truth of this remark was too obviously true for the complete comfort of the party, who, however, stood still like so many helpless sheep, not daring to go on and not caring to turn back. Cries were made to put the dogs on the party, and this was backed by the statement that it might be done without risk, as the soldiers were not coming there that day.*

*The party were next characterised as a "lot of fine gentlemen, to come to put poor people out of their houses," and this remark was improved upon by one of the young woman, who said that "They are not like gentleman; they are more like tinkers." The consultation was afterwards resumed, and it was soon transpired that the crowd had resolved to come to close quarters. With one accord they set off down the hill, each one waving a heavy stick, and evidently bent on being the first to strike a blow that would rid for the moment of the presence of the obnoxious officer and his papers.*

*For a little there was some doubt on the part of those below as to whether discretion in the form of a hasty retreat would not be the better part of valour. Without any exchange of opinion on the subject, the feeling was clearly in favour of stand being made, and the group having come a little closer together, they turned to face the crowd that was now charging on them with reckless force. Everyone had made up his mind to be assaulted, and the only speculation was as in how much he would suffer in the contest. In the career down the hill some of the people fell headlong along the stones, but they instantly rose and resumed the chase with increased shouting and yelling. When they reached the road they redoubled their energy, and rushed at the party calmly waiting their approach, the sticks still waving in the air and their attitude being, if possible, even fiercer than before.*

*But there was an agreeable and welcome surprise in store for the half-dozen man waiting, as they thought, to be slaughtered. When the crowd had come within a yard they stopped, and one of the oldest of the men, in the blindest manner possible, ventured the remark in the mildest tone that "It was a fine day". The accuracy of the observation having been acknowledged on the other side, the people suddenly adopted a less menacing tone, and it soon appeared that they were disposed to have a little amusement at the expense of the visitors. They opened with giving three cheers for Mr Fraser Mackintosh. The relevance of the enthusiasm was not quite obvious, but as Skye people have an odd way of reasoning on most matters there was perhaps more in the cheer than appeared on the surface. This over, they asked Macdonald to come on with his papers and serve them where they were.*

*One of the constables reasoned with the men and said they should conduct themselves properly, as an officer was there in the discharge of his duty. One of the oldest men, who assumed the position of spokesman, replied that they knew that, but said it was fearfully nasty work he was engaged in, coming to rob people who were already in starvation. The whole of the rates had been paid, and they wished to know what the officer wanted there. Where are the Marines, they asked, going to protect the officer in collecting rents? All that they could give in payment of rent was some potatoes or the fleece of a sheep. The crowd then fell to talk with great vehemence amongst themselves, and in an informal sort of way they made up their minds that they would not allow the officer to proceed further. They would keep him there until the*

*soldiers came at any rate. One young woman said that they wanted to see the Marines, as no soldiers had ever been in their township, and she added rather with a sneer than otherwise that some of the girls make get a sweetheart among the redcoats. It was suggested that "Jumbo" should get turnips for dinner when he returned, as a reward for his diligence. They then burst into a fiery tirade against the sheriff-officer, men and women alike cursing and swearing, and railing against him with bitterest resentment. He was looking, they said, very ill and white-like and they thought he would be the better of something to eat. Potatoes were suggested for the purpose, but a proposal that he should be forced to take a dose of salts met with unanimous approval.*

*They had changed their tactics, and invited the policeman and reporters up to the village, where they would give them what could be had to eat, but the sheriff-officer would get nothing, and he would not be allowed to move. They complained that their rents were excessive, and could not be paid. They were rack-related to such an extent that they could not get food, and as for clothing they were clad in rags. In proof of this they called attention to the wretched conditions of the clothing which most of them were wearing, and stated that it was not only the best but all they had. The winter was coming on, and how they were going to pass it they did not know. If it were not for the sheriff-officer and others like him they would not be having their houses visited in this way.*

*At this point they turned to the officer and asked him what was the object of his visit. He made no reply, and one of the crowd wondered whether he had lost his tongue. One of the policemen again attempted to reason with them, and pointed out the serious consequences that might follow if they did not allow the officer to do his duty, but they said that they had no objection to being apprehended, as they would be better in prison than passing the winter on their crofts. They again asked him to produce his papers, as all the tenants were present except one named Macintosh, who had gone to Portree. MacDonald explained that he had a paper for MacIntosh for rates.*

*This was received with derisive laughter accompanied with epithets of anything but a complimentary character addressed to the officers, the rates they maintained have all been paid. MacDonald asked if they all stayed in the Township, and got the genuine Highland answer "Yes, and twice as more" with the additional statement that if the others were to come out, that they would frighten him like a ghost, as they were so poor and wretched. Turning upon the officer once more and renewing the abuse they had been heaping upon him for nearly an hour, one of the woman shouted "I hope the Officer will die before he leaves Skye" while a man said to McDonald "if you were in Ireland you would not get on so well; they would soon put an end to you there" both remarks were received with loud ironical cheers.*

*At this stage the Seahorse was seen Steaming past on her way from Uig to Kimalauag and when she was observed, one of the men shouted sarcastically that there was the government boat with meal on for them. The laughter accombinated by them all, having died away, another outburst was caused by one of the men asking the Officer if he could hang a man, while another expressed doubt at his ability to tie a knot. The reporters were once more asked if they could go up to see the houses. They will get cream and meal if they want. They were glad they said to see the reporters; indeed the only person they had the slightest objection too was the sheriff officer.*

*The legal aspect of their position was then discussed, and they seemed to have considerable difficulty in defining it - possibly for the very good reason that they had very little, if any law at all on their side. They ended by once more turning to the officer and telling him that they did not wish him to go to the Township, as the road was so deep with mud as his shoes would be spoilt. The whole party were then described as dogs who were trying to drive the people to desperation and death. McDonald reminded them that he was there to serve notices for rates, but this only exasperated them and they became perfectly wild in their protestations that rates were not due to April next, one man added it was very curious that soldiers should be employed to assist in collecting rents. An old woman said that they had to sell their hens to get money for their rates, while their children were crying for meal. The vehemence of the crowd increased at this remark, and McDonald was booed for several minutes without intermissions, while imprecations that could not be put into print were uttered against them. It was hoped that he would soon return to the dust and that he would never be resurrected.*

*Macdonald again asked to be allowed to go on with his work, but he was told that he must go back, and a woman shouted, as if inciting the men to violence, that they were not worth their salt, and that she had seen the day that she would have flung him back herself.*

*Up to this point no personal violence had been offered, but the people now begun to pull up heavy clods of grass and to throw them about. They pretended to be amusing themselves by throwing them at each other; but they took care as a rule to bring the officer and the policeman within the line of fire, with the result that in the course of a very short time they were pretty effectively bespattered by mud. One big strong man made himself especially active in carrying on this part of the warfare. The officer and those along with him still held their ground, among the shower of earth and grass that was poured upon them, always hoping that they were reinforced, but in this they were doomed to disappointment. No attempt was made to apprehend any of the persons, and both the policemen and Macdonald advised them in Gaelic to detest. The advice however, was not acted upon, and after the mud throwing had continued a little longer two women came forward amidst cries of "Clear them out," and taking Macdonald by the coat turned him about, and*

*told him to leave the place. Getting between the two constables he walked slowly down the road, the crowd following close behind, jeering and making insulting remarks mingled with a good deal of obscene language. This was kept all the way across the moor until the highway was reached. Here Macdonald turned round and facing the crowd, asked to be allowed to go back and discharge his duty. This request was met with loud laughter and many expressions of defiance - a young woman, one of the two who first touched the officer, making herself particularly offensive by her manner and by course remarks. Macdonald asked her name and she replied "The same name as you are, that is devil,". Did they, he asked, mean to prevent him from going to the township to do his duty. The only reply he received was another burst of mocking laughter, and after that was over the young woman pointed in the opposite direction and told him that was his road. A number of men also declared that they would not let him to pass. MacDonald then displayed his blazon, and declared that he had been deformed by the whole crowd from doing his duty. A man asked him what his duty was, Macdonald replied that he would learn by and by. The young woman already referred to said - "It is your duty to go to the bad place." MacDonald, pointing to the woman, declared that he had been assaulted by her and also by two or three men whom he pointed out, but the only effect of his declaration was to cause another outburst of laughter. The officer then left but the crowd followed for some distance still jeering and hooting.*

*Then they stopped and after giving a parting shot, turned about and retraced their steps to the townships, so no doubt greatly elated with the success of the opposition they had made to the progress of the expedition. Macdonald afterwards joined the main body of the force and proceeded with them to the steamer at Kilmaluag.*

*The Seahorse with the prisoners on board arrived in Portree in the evening. The men were taken ashore and conveyed to the Sheriff Court-House.'*

### **Notes:**

The Glasgow Herald newspaper at that time was anti-crofter, along with the Scotsman. The only newspaper that was sympathetic to the crofters' cause was the North British Daily Mail (they also paid the court costs for John Beaton, in Beaton vs Ivory)

The events in Herbusta were debated in the House of Commons, and the different accounts in the transactions described by the correspondents were examined. They found that even though "there were some minute points of difference; but as regarded the main facts there was no difference whatever. They practically agreed in describing what they saw" (Hansard: Crofters debate Wed 16th Feb 1887, Liberal MP James Henderson)

The stand-off between the crofters and Police at Herbusta, looks like it happened around the site of the old cattle crush (which is still line of sight of the old church in Bornaskitaig), with the Herbusta folk lined up along the top of the hill at the end of 8 Herbusta and on top of the hill where the water tank is now.

As one of the oldest persons there, Donald Beaton or William MacArthur could very well have been the chief spokesman, as mentioned by the reporter

It looks like the young woman who was accused of assault, when she touched the Sheriff, was Mrs Ann MacMillian (22 years old), and the other three men who were accused of assault by touching him, were possibility Donald Beaton, Alex MacMillian and John MacDonald, as they later got the harsher sentence of 2 months imprisonment.

They six Crofters arrested in Bornaskitaig that day were:

William MacNab (27) Bornaskitaig

Samual MacLeod (30) Bornaskitaig

Duncan Macpherson (40) Bornaskitaig

Duncan Gilles (22) Bornaskitaig

Donald Ross (24) Hungladder

Myles Martin (24) Camusmore

(They were tried and sentenced at Edinburgh High Court 13th Dec 1886)

Sheriff Ivory returned to Herbusta, two days later with a force, composed of 70 Soldiers and Police, to arrest the crofters accused of assaulting Sheriff MacDonald.

### **Timeline**

1852 - Donald Beaton & Flora MacQueen left Lachasay and took on the rental of 1 Herbusta (Landlord was the Trustees of Lord MacDonald's Estate)

1855 - Kilmuir Estate purchased by Captain William Brown Fraser for £85,000

1865 - Herbusta Common Grazing removed from the crofters and divided between the factors of Monksdat and Duntulum and rents are doubled (Donald Beaton lost the grazing for his 20 sheep and his rents increased from £4,13s to £8,10s)

1867 - John & Ann Beaton along with their Mother, evicted and cleared from Greaulin. Moved in with their brother Donald at 1 Herbusta.

1881 - The Irish land law reform Act passed (The Crofting Act 1886 was based on this Act)

1882 - The battle of the Braes and start of what was called the 'Crofters War'

1883 - Napier Commission set up to look into the issues with crofters & cotters in the Highlands. (Donald Beaton interviewed, 10th May 1883)

1886 - (May) Crofters Holding Act (1886) passed, which gives crofters secure tenure. Crofters Commission formed and started work reducing rents and cancelling rent arrears.

1886 - (June) Gladstones Liberal Party loses the election. The Earl of Salisbury's Conservative Party takes power, with Balfour the new Secretary of State of Scotland taking a very Hard line against the rent arrears by the crofters. He approves Sheriff Ivory's request for the use of Military Force to evict tenants for non-payment. (The Gladstone Liberal Government had always refused his request.)

1886 - (October) 250 Marines on the Gunboats Seahorse and Jackal along with 50 police arrive in Portree and start serving writs for rent arrears, evicting tenants and arresting and imprisoning crofters who are objecting. (Crofters Commission are working through the Estates of Sutherland at this time, reducing rents and cancelling rent arrears. Not due on Skye for another 6 months yet.)

1887 - (Jan) The seven Herbusta crofters convicted and sentenced at Edinburgh High Court (the eighth crofter Mrs MacMillian was not tried due to her being pregnant)

1887 - (Apr) The crofters Commission arrived in Skye, met Herbusta crofters on the 16th and started reducing the rents and cancelling the arrears.

1888 - Captain William Fraser (or Lieut Colonel as he had now become) sells Kilmuir Estate to George Abinger Baird

1904 - Congested District Board purchase Kilmuir Estate (later becomes Board of Agricultural)



