

***Caledonian Mercury* (Edinburgh)**

Thursday, February 26, 1852:

THE WEST HIGHLANDS

Although steps are being taken to relieve some of the islands of their inhabitants by emigration, the truly melancholy picture of their present condition, as given in the following letters, induces us to call public attention to the immediate necessity of temporary relief:-

Dr Norman Macalister, M.D., Strathaird, in a letter dated 17th January current, states:-

“The bales of clothing for the poor came safely, and I find that a list is made of the parties who are to receive them. I never heard stronger or more frequent cries for food among our starving poor. There are many families in this district who have not a particle of human food to appease their cravings of hunger. What must be the issue? I have to acknowledge other L.2 from you on the 25th ult for nourishment for the sick, for which I feel most grateful, as such is daily required. There are various complaints increasing daily on us.”

Mr F H Mackenzie, Harripool, Isle of Skye, writing on the 22d January, states:-

“The state of the poor in this island is deplorable. The weather has been very bad for some time past, and to-day it is terribly so. The poor creatures cannot stand for a moment on the shores to collect shellfish. The sea is running mountain high, and the spray is carried far inland, so that fishing or shell gathering is out of the question. I find that in many cases of extremity – such as sickness – many of the poor creatures are at the greatest loss to procure anything that would in the least mitigate their sufferings; and therefore I have given in such cases a little money to enable them to get what they required – being satisfied of their real need. I sent to Kyleakin for the 10 bolls of meal you sent, and forwarded four bolls to Strathaird which were carefully distributed by Mrs Dr Macalister. From her kindness, expertness, and thorough knowledge of the Strathaird people, this charity could not be placed in better hands. Mr McQueen and myself distributed the other eight bolls here, after considerable trouble, not with the people, but to make the quantity reach them all. They were very grateful and thankful. The prospects of the coming spring look very forbidding.”

Another highly respectable gentleman, in a letter dated 24th January, writes:-

“Matters are really dismal looking in the Western Highlands. There is no employment and the people are not allowed to till the ground for a subsistence. There is one parish in Skye with a population of 1579; of these there are no less than 234 families, amounting to 1216 individuals, *who have no land*. The present condition of this large mass of unemployed people is one of *extreme suffering*. The parish is very large, and the soil very good; yet it is almost altogether under sheep. To give you an idea of the mass of human suffering in the Hebrides, I shall state that there are in

The Island of Skye, 1501 Cottar Families.

The Island of Mull, 1164 do. do.

The Island of Harris, 220 do. do.

The Islands of North Uist, South Uist and Barra, 500 do.

The Islands of Tiree and Coll, about 100 do.

In all upwards of 3400 families without land and without employment. Now this does not include a string of eight parishes on the mainland, or the western coast, with a large population, and with about 500 or 600 families of cottars in most wretched circumstances. I had recently amply opportunities of witnessing the unhappy state of the cottar population in the Hebrides, and after having visited many of them in their houses I observed much to convince me of their extreme poverty and destitution. Many of the landlords are bankrupt – the usual resources of employment are dried up; and had it not been for the charity of those at a distance, and especially the supply sent by you and your friends in Glasgow, many of the poor cottars would have perished. I confess I feel the greatest anxiety about the fate of many of the cottars, and I submit that how they are to be provided for should be a matter of consideration to those whose immediate concern it is to look after them.”

Mr F H Mackenzie, writing again on the 26th January, states:-

“The steamer that was due on Saturday has not come as yet. The weather is awfully stormy for some time past. Saturday was unusually boisterous – wind, rain, thunder, and lightning, so that but a few could leave their houses. I know many families in extreme want at this moment, and the meal you sent is all distributed. On Friday last a man and his wife came here from Strolamus, who tasted no food since they had a bowl of barley meal they had got from a poor neighbour the day before. They have three children. We gave them food, and I sent the man to the Inspector of the poor with a line; and what think you he got? – just a sixpence worth of meal. Mrs Mackenzie added two platefuls to this scanty allowance with which the poor man ran to his wife and children. He thanked God, and said they were now provided for till the Sabbath would be over. How they are to-day, you may imagine.

Next day another man came on a similar errand. I could do no more for him than send him to the Inspector of the poor, and I now inclose you all the relief he got from that official. The poor man is in rags, and is bare-footed. I gave him one of the moleskin coats you sent, and when putting it on, I observed he was clad in a sailor's tattered old frock, and no shirt. I gave him a flannel petticoat for his wife and some clothing for his children – four in number; and he desires me to offer to you his grateful thanks.

There are several other families in Strolamus equally destitute to my own knowledge; but from the tenor of the line received from the inspector, I see nothing for these families but some of your charity meal, or starvation! I can confidently say that the men are all deserving, none wrought more constantly or more diligently (although gratuitously) at the building of the schoolhouse than these very men, though there are

none in the place in greater poverty. I recommend some pairs of coarse shoes for them, as they have none; and as for buying them it is out of the question – they have not earned a sixpence for many month. Were I to multiply the cases of want which daily come to my knowledge, I do not know where I would stop.”

Mr Malcolm Morrison, schoolmaster, Harris, writing on 17th January, states:-

“I am extremely sorry to lay before you the deplorable condition of the inhabitants of this island. The most of them have nothing to depend on, and were it not for a few fishes (called ‘sprats’), they would actually have starved. The few potatoes they had were long ago exhausted. They may be said to allude to the third part of the population of Harris. How they are to subsist during the winter and spring the Almighty alone can say. I see them daily coming to me, craving a plateful of meal, candidly confessing they are without food for more than twenty-four hours. No one that did not see their mode of living will comprehend their distressful state. Unless Divine Providence, in his infinite wisdom, will open a door for relieving them from their present distress, I am quite certain there will be cases of starvation soon. As a proof that the distress is severe among the lower classes, I bought two bolls of meal last week in Stornoway, and it was served out in platefuls among those whom I really considered destitute, for supporting their families; so that you can perceive that hunger reigns to the greatest extent among them, when I had to distribute what I had for myself among them. Their cry as heartrending, and no one who had a Christian feeling could withhold from them a share of what he had. I personally visited the houses stated in the accompanying report, and I assure you they are miserable, and the people are in a deplorable condition for want of meat and clothes. I am glad that you sent us a quantity of meal and clothing. I expect the vessel here every day.”

Present Sufferings of the West Highlanders – We understand that Mr Donald Ross, of Glasgow, will be in Edinburgh to-morrow and Saturday, and will gladly meet with parties in town, who take an interest in the extreme destitution at present existing in the Islands and West Highlands. He will be found at Mr Allan’s office, 4 St Andrew Square, from eleven to three o’clock.

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[transcription by Jean Little]
