

## Hebridean History

### **Sir James Matheson a 19th century improver by Finlay MacLeod - Sir Seamas MacMhathain: Leasaiche san 19mh Linn le Fionnlagh Macleòid**

No period of Lewis and Harris history has attracted more attention than the 19th Century and especially the period of the Matheson ownership. The whole land issue and the struggles and legislation associated with these times make it a ready field of study for anyone interested in the history of these islands. We refer to a number of texts through which the interested reader may take the topic further. Donald Macdonald (1978) provides a readable account of the period and is typical in its perception of Matheson. Sir James is perceived through bi-focal lenses; both as an old-style chief and as commercial landowner. And the discussion continued on whether or not Sir Seumas was a 'good thing' for Lewis.

Tom Devine (1988) gives the modern Scottish historian's viewpoint of the topic and this is to be compared with Macdonald's more layperson account. More radical and polemic in orientation is the account given by Joni Buchanan (1996), who takes delight in the Bernera Riot court case and the downfall of Matheson's chamberlain, Donald Monro, which left Sir James himself heavily implicated in how the people were being treated by the system he had put in place from his new Stornoway Castle.

Through all of this runs the condition of the people; of population movement and emigration, and of poverty and insecurity. Through it all runs the hand of Government and how it did its work in the Highlands & Islands throughout this period: the work of Ewan Cameron deals with this.

Providing a general and 'emotionally involved' background to the whole period is the important work of James Hunter (1976).

A study of these texts gives a good indication of how periods of history give rise to differing interpretations and emphases, making it all the more interesting and encouraging for the reader to go on and discover more about the subject.

#### References

Joni Buchanan. 1996. The Lewis Land Struggle. Acair: Stornoway  
Ewan Cameron. 1996. Land Fit for Heroes? Tuckwell Press: Edinburgh.  
Tom Devine. 1988. The Great Highland Famine.  
James Hunter. 1976. The Making of the Crofting Community. John Donald: Edinburgh.  
Donald Macdonald. 1978. Lewis; A History of the Island. Gordon Wright: Edinburgh.