

The Crofters

Many of us have often been on Highway 18 heading from Ninette, southwards to Killarney, Perhaps you have noticed, that just as you are approaching Road 24N, if you look off to the west you can catch a glimpse of a white church. If you take Road 24 to the next grid road, you will get a better look at a simple unadorned building on a well-kept yard. This is Knox Bellafield Presbyterian Church, situated roughly in the middle of what used to be known as the Crofter Settlement.



Once known locally as the Gaelic Church, is a direct link to the Crofters, a group of Gaelic-speaking families settlers from the Isles of Lewis and Harris in the Western Isles of Scotland. The Killarney group lived near Stornoway on Lewis Island. Another group, from Harris Island, settled at Hilton.

They sailed aboard the ships Corean and Buenos Ayrean to Montreal and came by the Canadian Pacific Railway to Killarney in 1888. They brought their Gaelic language and Presbyterian beliefs to a place they called Bellafield (Bella is Gaelic for “beautiful”) and by 1890, under the guidance of Robert Smith, they had erected a church from local fieldstone.

It was built with a mortar consisting of lime and sand with the technique used in Scotland. However, the walls were damaged by frost and the building was torn down. The stones were sold and a lumber church was rebuilt of wood in 1906 incorporating the foundation and roof of its predecessor. The Church is still used on special seasonal occasions. Morning services were conducted in Gaelic until 1939.

When they first arrived, about 90 percent of the women could not speak English. There was a certain desire for “keeping the old language alive.” However, English was a necessity because Gaelic was not practical for business dealings



***Lewis and Harris** is a Scottish island in the Outer Hebrides. It is the largest island in Scotland and the third largest in the British Isles, after Great Britain and the island of Ireland, with an area of 841 square miles (2,178 km²), which equates to slightly under 1% of the area of Great Britain. The northern two-thirds is called Lewis and the southern third Harris; both are frequently referred to as if they were separate.*

Hard times in Britain during the 1880s' prompted governments and philanthropic organizations to assist families to emigrate from depressed areas. The Imperial Colonization Board was formed to help establish families from the Island of Lewis in the Hebrides on farms in western Canada. The government put up £10,000 on condition that £2,000 be contributed by private benefactors. Lord Aberdeen alone contributed £2,000.

T. J. Lawlor visited Scotland in 1888 to encourage the organization to send some settlers to the Killarney area, and his efforts were successful, one group being located in the Bellfield district later in the year.

Lawlor and James M. Baldwin, the banker, met them at the station and took them to tents which had been set up for them. The Colonization Board had arranged that J. M. Baldwin would supply them with a small sum of money, and with this they bought from T. J. Lawlor what food and furniture they needed, also poultry, a plough, and seed grain. Hired wagons took them to their allotted quarter sections.

In all, twenty married couples (three of them recently married) with fifty-three children, seventeen single men, and six single women came to this area directly from Scotland.

Although they were called Crofters, a term which in the Highlands of Scotland designates one who rents and tills a small acreage, their descendants state that only three were crofters. The others were labourers or fishermen with no experience of farming whatever.

In some respects, however, they had advantages over the early homesteaders; they could market their grain at Killarney; schools had been established, they had neighbours from whom some of them soon learned the accepted methods of farming on the prairie, so different from their misty home land. Farming techniques were different from anything in their experience. The early nineties were not prosperous years for any farmers in the district because of poor crops or low prices for their produce. Some of the newcomers spoke only Gaelic and they were naturally clannish.



The settlement centred around the church, which was still standing in 2020.

When Lord and Lady Aberdeen visited Canada in October 1890, they drove from Brandon to see how their protégés were faring.

Lord and Lady Aberdeen had been told that some of the crofters were dissatisfied, but their efforts to discover what complaints they had were not very successful. One man replied, "Yes, it is cold in winter and hot in summer, and the dust makes me wash my face twice in the week."

They visited John MacLeod who had been reputed to be one of the grumblers. To Lord Aberdeen's inquiries MacLeod replied, "Well, my Lord, I can tell you it was a lucky day for myself and my family when we went on board the steamboat that took us out of Scotland and landed us in this fine country. We have three yokes of oxen, several cows, and young stock. We will have about 900 bushels of wheat this season and an ample supply of oats, barley, potatoes and different kinds of vegetables and will have 150 acres under cultivation next season. We are only three miles from timber at Pelican Lake. There is any amount of fish in the lake and a large quantity of ducks and geese and plenty of wild turkey on the wheat fields. We have no landlords here, no old country gamekeepers to arrest us for shooting game.

Lady Aberdeen was concerned about the loneliness of the settlers on the prairie. An organization called The Lady Aberdeen Association for Distributing Literature to Settlers in the West was formed and eighty-two parcels were sent out before Christmas. Some of the Killarney pioneers remember receiving books which were read aloud during the long winter evenings and passed on to neighbours.

Unaccustomed to paying direct taxes or to receiving credit, many of them soon found themselves deep in debt, not only to the Colonization Board which apparently was willing to wait for its money, but to the municipality for taxes and to storekeepers and implement dealers. Implement dealers pressed them to go into debt at exorbitant rates of interest for farm machinery they could ill afford, then seized the machinery but still tried to collect on the notes.

In The Killarney Guide, of January 22, 1897, a letter appeared in defense of the crofters declaring that their debts were due to unscrupulous men. The suggestion was made that some payment be made to storekeepers but none to implement dealers still trying to collect on repossessed farm machinery.

The Killarney Guide of February 26, 1937, in paying tribute to T. J. Lawlor when he died, made the following reference to the crofter settlement: "After many vicissitudes and some failures, most of the families became excellent settlers. To T. J. Lawlor must be given a large share of the credit for the final emergence of these people from the difficult position in which they found themselves in a new land; he provided necessary provisions on credit to tide them over the winters and bad crops, and acted as friend and advisor until they became established and independent farmers."

Although a few gave up and returned to Scotland and others moved on, most of them, remained in the district and many of their descendants are still there.
