

# Cromarty Courthouse Learning Zone - Crumbs of Justice 4

## The Riots

### Introduction

Protest is a democratic right but rioting (when protest tips over into threats, violence or criminal damage) is a more difficult issue. This activity will look at when rioting is justified.

In this country rioting it often seems to be associated with young people, drinking and anti-social behaviour. Riots can however also highlight perceived state or religious injustice and this is the case with three notable riots which took place in Cromarty and/or Resolis in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### RIOT A

#### 1732 The Peat Moss Riot at Blackstand

William Gordon, the powerful Laird of Invergordon, who also owns considerable land near Cromarty, sends his men to enclose a peat moss at Blackstand between Rosemarkie and Cromarty. 500 people armed with dirks and cudgels assemble to pull down the boundary after it had gone up.

A peat moss is an essential and therefore valuable resource – people cut the peats, stack them to dry and burn them to cook and to keep warm. Gordon probably hopes to cut and sell the peat himself.

This peat moss would have been considered as common land (land which belonged to the community as a whole) before Gordon sought to enclose it.

This riot may have prevented the ‘moss’ from becoming part of Gordon’s property but it is likely that it was only a temporary victory. By Victorian times almost all common land in Scotland had been taken into private ownership.

The enclosure of land like the Blackstand Peat Moss plays its part in the Highland Clearances. Poor people are no longer able to cook and heat their homes without paying for a supply of peat which had previously been theirs for free.

For further information explore the useful history section here:

[http://www.andywrightman.com/docs/secur\\_comm8.pdf](http://www.andywrightman.com/docs/secur_comm8.pdf)

## Vocabulary

**democratic:** *what it means to live in a democracy (i.e. voting for those in power) and to have free speech*

**enclose:** *to surround an area of land with a barrier such as a fence, hedge or wall*

**Highland Clearances:** *period of Highland history after the Jacobite Rising of 1745 when many poorer and (sometimes) more ambitious people left Scotland for the new world, often forced, encouraged or even paid to do so by landowners looking to make more money from their lands.*

### Creative writing activity:

Ask pupils to work in pairs, one taking on the role of William Gordon and one the role of Alexander Hogg, one of the leading rioters. Begin with these phrases:

- I am William Gordon of Invergordon, and I have every right to enclose this piece of land...
- I am Alexander Hogg of Cromarty and my family has cut peat at Blackstand for as long as anyone can remember... (name fictional)

## RIOT B

### 1741 The Cromarty Harbour Grain Riot

Cromarty has fallen on hard times with changes in ownership and an absentee Laird. A ship arrives in Cromarty from Gourock, full of grain. It is attacked by 30 well-organised rioters who remove 30 sacks of grain. They distribute it fairly among the poor of the town to avoid the Laird's factor taking a 'cut' and charging inflated prices. They did pay the captain his due. The previous harvest had been poor and the winter harsh.

## Vocabulary

**cargo:** *goods carried by a ship*

**factor:** *here, the agent or legal representative of a Laird*

## Creative writing activity

Ask pupils to work in threes, one taking on the role of the captain of the ship from Gourock, one the role of Archibald Ross, the factor who should have been selling on the grain on behalf of the Laird, and one the role of Widow Skinner, one of the rioters (names fictional). Begin with these phrases:

I am Joseph MacLennan, Captain of the ship Mary-Jane out of Gourock, and these townfolk have seized part of my cargo...

I am Archibald Ross, Factor to the Laird of Cromarty: these rioters have taken the grain I should have been selling and sold it in the town themselves!

I am the Widow Skinner of the Fishertoun in Cromarty and I have nothing to lose. All our children are so hungry. We cannot afford the Factor's prices this spring.

**All names fictional.**

## RIOT C

### 1843 The Resolis Disruption Riot

The best known of the three riots, the Resolis Riot, is well documented, both in the Courthouse and in a useful detailed account here:

<https://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/13129664.highland-line-remembering-resolis-riot-1843/>

## Vocabulary

<b>Establishment:</b>	<i>here, those in power within the church and community in Scotland. The Church of Scotland is still known as The Established Church of Scotland.</i>
<b>induction:</b>	<i>a ceremony at which a new minister is appointed to a church</i>
<b>Moderate</b>	<i>here, a term of abuse shouted at those who did not leave the established church to join the Free Church, whose views were seen as too mild</i>
<b>The Riot Act:</b>	<i>A legal Act for ‘preventing tumults and riotous assemblies’, and for ‘the more speedy and effectual punishing of rioters’ which came into force in Britain on 1 August 1715. It was often read aloud so that rioters could be in no doubt of their punishment.</i>

The ‘Great Disruption’ of the Church of Scotland leads to the formation of the Free Church of Scotland, created by those who are angry about corruption within the Church of Scotland, notably the power of lairds to appoint a minister of their choosing. Free Church supporters shun existing church buildings and are denied any funding to build new ones. They often gather to worship in the open air, notably at Ferintosh on the Black Isle. Thousands of people flock there to hear powerful preachers like the great Reverend Donald Sage, minister of Resolis.

When Sage also leaves the Church of Scotland to join the Free Church, the Laird (Andrew Shaw Mackenzie of Newhall) announces he will appoint another minister of his choosing. The congregation stays almost 100% loyal to Sage, who begins to hold services in an old barn nearby instead. At 11am on the day of the induction of the new minister (John MacKenzie) a wee boy climbs a ladder to the bell, pulls out the bell and rings it. The congregation gather at this signal to riot at the Church of Scotland in protest at a new man’s appointment.

The women gather stones, the men sticks. Eppy Aird soon has an apronful and threatens the minister and the ‘establishment’ party when they arrive. Not long after their arrival, the ‘establishment’ party (which includes three Justices from Cromarty Courthouse) find themselves driven back by the hostile crowd who shout ‘Moderates!’ at them. They are soon under siege within the church. MacKenzie’s induction is abandoned and The Riot Act is read.

One of the rioters, Margaret Cameron, gets a bit too close and is arrested for throwing stones. She is imprisoned in the cells at Cromarty Courthouse and is questioned in the courtroom but denies that she threw any stones (is she mistaken for Eppy Aird?).

Between fifty and one hundred men from Resolis march on Cromarty Courthouse to try to secure bail for Margaret. The rioters then become mixed up with a Fishertoun wedding and eventually some of the wedding party and the rioters break through three Courthouse doors using a heavy bench to let her out of the cell. Margaret is recaptured but never brought to trial. Others are not so lucky: 12 are tried at the High Court in Edinburgh and several are imprisoned, others are imprisoned in Cromarty, including the bridegroom James Watson, while three fail to attend, including Eppy Aird, the one who really threatened the men with stones.

The Reverend John MacKenzie was never inducted to the Parish of Resolis!

### **Creative writing activity**

Choose any of the characters whose names are highlighted in bold and write a letter to a family member giving an account of the riot from your own viewpoint. Bear in mind:

- which side you are on - and why
- where you are when writing your letter
- how you may be feeling after such an exciting and scary event
- what you think *should* happen next
- what you think *will* happen next

Alternatively, pupils could improvise a play based on the riot and perform it in a school assembly.

### **Extension activity**

- Debate the similarities and differences between the three riots. Why is it that the Resolis Riot has been remembered and the other two forgotten?
- Do the pupils know of any issues which have caused protest in modern times (an opportunity to discuss #BlackLivesMatter)
- Why is the right to protest important in any democracy?
- Why would a government seek to limit the right of protest?