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The Weavers of the "Western Isles"

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United States and of northern Asia is under reverse conditions. Here the prevailing winds, still being from the west, come from land, and they give these coasts a continental or land climate, which is much colder in winter and warmer in summer. As was stated before, the cold climate of the east coast of the United States has been attributed to an Arctic current flowing close inshore. If there were such a current, it could have no effect upon the climate of this coast, since the prevailing winds are from the west, and could not bring the cold of the sea to the land.

There is a widespread notion that, in a mountainous region, all divides between streams must consist of mountain ranges, and in most maps ranges are shown in such positions, whether they exist or not. A mountain range may or may not divide drainage basins, and a divide may or may not consist of a mountain range.

Another mistake is the assumption that the highest peaks are always situated on the crest of a mountain range. This is their most common position, but in many cases the highest peaks are situated on spurs, at a distance from the crest.

We still find on many maps the main system of the Cordillera of North America represented as running in a direct line to the Arctic Ocean, just west of the mouth of the Mackenzie, in defiance of the well-known fact that the main mountain system follows the coast through Alaska, and forms the backbone of the Alaskan Peninsula.

THE WEAVERS OF THE "WESTERN ISLES."

BY AGNES VINTON LUTHER.

IT is a far cry" as the Scotch would say, from the busy woollen mill with its rattle of looms and din and whirr of machinery to the isolated cottages of the Hebrides where the island weavers make by hand, slowly and laboriously, the tweeds for which Harris has become so famous.

To locate the island of Harris one has only to look at the map of Scotland, with its west coast line, "all tattered and torn" like the garb of the man in the nursery rhyme. Pick out of the hundreds of islands there the outermost lying group. Harris and Lewis form practically one island of the outer Hebrides.

It is hard to explain the impression Harris makes on the visitor. It is well that the "amphibious nature of the country" as the Irishman put it, prevents one from going directly to this island in too short a time. Nature has her own way of keeping us from the goal until we have learned the lessons by the way, and one can not

FIG. 1. A HARRIS COTTAGE. NO BIOLOGICAL EXAMPLE OF MIMICRY COULD HAVE BEEN MORE PERFECT.

see and read Harris without the light of just such a trip as we must take, perforce. Not only must we learn to love the treeless hills, discovering other beauties which compensate, learn to accustom our ears to the constantly spoken Gaelic, but we have yet to learn the A B C of those lives, silent, forceful, spent on those islands in con-

stant endeavor to wrest from nature a bare existence. This you begin to learn as you sail in and out, touching at this port and at that.

By the chain of Royal Mail Steamers we are carried from Glasgow to our final destination. As we pass from steamer to steamer we begin to realize why this line has such a reputation even on our side of the Atlantic, for at every hand one finds a thoughtful courtesy which we soon learn to be so characteristic of the men of this line. From Glasgow to Oban, the Queen of the Highlands; Oban to Fort William at the foot of Ben Nevis; Fort William to Mallaig (the most beautiful short stretch of railway in the British Isles, and the only bit of land travel on the trip); Mallaig to Kyle of Lochalsh, well worth more than a brief visit with its views of loch and sea; Kyle over to Portree (Isle of Skye); and Portree across to Harris; such is the route.

By the time Harris is reached, one has learned many things, both of nature and human nature. We look at the shores approaching, with open eyes ready to see into the heart of things. A grey sky, a grey blue sea, grey rocks with no sign of habitation. A stretch of land with the bones of its formation showing through with patches of soil between. Where are the people? It is a surprise to see one of the masses of grey rock slowly resolve itself into a house or hut. No biological example of adaption to environment, or mimicry, could have been more perfect. As the steamer skirts the shore, we see narrow strips of lighter green; "corn" the Mate tells us. Remembering the English use of the word "corn" to indicate grain, we are not surprised to see soon that it is Scotch oats, not maize. Each row about a foot wide, four or five side by side, they wander in a desultory fashion along the slope. Each little stone cottage has its painfully small number of rows. They seem to be placed along the lines where the gracious nature of these islands has vouchsafed enough soil for them to grow. Between rocks, here and there, the lines of green wander. All the patches in sight on the island if placed together would not make one of our ordinary fields. Fishing, a patch of oats, and a few sheep; this constitutes the cottagers means of livelihood.

Landing at Tarbert, the town of the island, we come back along the hills seen from the steamer. Treeless hills, green where the soil is thick enough for sod to grow, stretch on before us, the grey rock, a gneiss, cropping out at every turn. One comes across, here and there, stacks of peat neatly arranged. First cut, dug, then dried

in small quantities and finally stacked. Having preconceived notions of the locality possible for peat bogs it is a surprise, to say the least, to find them here crowning the rounding summits of hills. Levels or hollows seem in no way necessary for a bog. The "boggiest" place I ever stepped into was the side of a hill whose slope was at a high angle.

The road wanders over the hills in an inconsequent way. Sheep stray across the path but seem woefully shy of the camera. Around the corner comes softly a serious-faced young woman, with a roll of cloth on her back. She is dressed simply and neatly, her skirt turned carefully back and pinned up to her waist. She is barefooted, but her stockings and shoes are seen hanging at her back. On nearing the town she will stop by one of the brooks, wash her feet, put on her shoes and stockings, unpin the skirt and enter the wee metropolis of the island. We pass on, wishing devoutly that we could have understood the soft words of greeting as she passed. To be where nothing but the Gaelic is spoken, and never to have been fortunate enough to acquire it, makes one feel helpless indeed.

Once over the brow of the hill one of the crofter's holdings comes in sight. A little cottage built of stone with a thatched roof of straw, the simplest, least progressive form of crofter's hut has for its only opening, the doorway. Here and there a crevice may be left between the stones to allow some of the soot to pass out. A hole is also left in the roof, into which a barrel is neatly fitted. This hole with its barrel constitutes the chimney. Entering the house it seems perfectly dark but for the glowing mass of peat in the middle of the floor. Looking up, you see that it is located directly under the barrel opening, while suspended from the roof is a heavy iron chain with an immense hook for the kettle or other cooking utensil. Smoke and soot, some of it, finds its way up to the hole in the roof and thence out. Some escapes through the crevices, the rest attaches itself to the walls of the room. That fascinating odor of burning peat which greets you secretes itself in every thread of the tweed that the woman is weaving and comes across the Atlantic to us to give a touch of the "heimweh" for the land of our summer sojournings. So characteristic is the faint odor of peat in all the Harris cloth that some manufacturers of machine-made tweeds burn peat near their goods to deceive the public into thinking them the "hand-made."

On we go, for my kindly guide has a special cottage in mind where the various processes of weaving may be better seen. Her

English into Gaelic, Gaelic into English, has helped me out of many a difficulty and her sympathetic knowledge furnished a key to these silent lives. A sudden turn from the road and we strike across the moor. On a rock I noticed what seemed to be the remains of a wig, a radiant Titian red in hue. Picking it up, it turned out to be a bit of soft silky wool, not short and tightly curled but in strands and weaved. But whence the glorious color, the rich red brown? I soon found I had stumbled upon the first steps in the series of the tweed. Near by stood a kettle and the remains of a fire. Here the crofter's wife had been making the dye with which to color the wool. Painstakingly, slowly, she had collected from the grey rocks, the foliaceous lichen *Parmelia saxatilis*, Gaelic, "crotal," which clings so closely. By boiling it here in her open air laboratory she has made the rich red brown dye, then dipped the wool into it and spread it out on the rock or low bushes to dry. Should she have wished another color she has learned to use the root of the Iris growing there in that pool near us. The heather which crowns the moor with its hardy bloom she may make pay its tribute, a beautiful green, to the cloth to be. Nearly every dye used by the Harris weavers is a natural dye. Most wonderful of all is the origin of a brilliant yellow with a tint of brown. Soot! the black soot from the burned peat gives this brilliant coloring. That the islanders should have discovered for themselves such an extensive list of dyes utilizing the scanty gifts of nature to effect so many shades, gives us some idea of their indomitable will and energy. At least twenty of these are vegetable dyes, obtained of course, from the flora of the island. In addition to these there are the "natural sheep greys" and "browns" where the wool is not dyed but used as it is in its natural color. The tints and shades of the various colors are obtained by a longer or shorter boiling. When woven into the cloth, two or three of these colors may be combined. For example, of the material brought home, there are the following combinations:

- I. Threads of heather green, natural sheep brown and white.
- II. "Crotal" (lichen), white wool and napweed.
- III. Soot yellow and heather green.

Reaching the cottage whose dye pot and drying wool we have been inspecting, we may see the next process the wool undergoes. Quietly and easily the crofter's wife manipulates two very awkward paddles beset with teeth like a curry comb. With these she cards the wool, pulling it apart, teasing out the separate strands and finally with a deft little movement lays the strip of wool on the back

of the paddle, gives it a little rub with the back of the other one and the operation is completed. Result, a narrow strip of light fluffy wool, ready to be fed to the spinning wheel. It looks remarkably simple to do, but experimenting reveals your utter helplessness over so simple a feat. Over in the corner stands the small spinning wheel, for everything in this miniature home must accord. The illustration shows the carded wool lying across the woman's knee as she feeds it to the swiftly moving wheel.

FIG. 2. THE SPINNING WHEEL.

Refreshed by a glass of pure rich milk, for the crofters are most hospitable, we inspected the mass of wood with its numerous threads stretching from part to part. It seemed a cross between a four-post bed and an organ in appearance. On the long organ seat sat the weaver, her feet and hands constantly moving with the rhythmic fling of the shuttle. On this cottage loom, the cloth slowly comes into being. Harris tweed is single width and to those who have seen where it is made it is a surprise that it has any width at all, so tiny are the rooms in which the crofters live and work.

The cloth woven, it is taken from the loom and "wauked."

After being soaked in hot water and a strong solution of soda to take out the oil, it is placed on the "wauking board," a long piece of wood with grooves in it like a scrubbing board. A number of women sit at each side and "wauk" the cloth back and forth. Soap is rubbed on. This to shrink it and get the remaining oil out. Jolly are the times at the "wauking." The hum of voices and songs resemble more than anything the "quilting bees" of our grandmothers. In this way the cloth is cleansed, shrunk, and the fibres closely interwoven.

FIG. 3. ON A LONG ORGAN SEAT SAT THE WEAVER.

The "wauking" over, the piece of tweed has still rough times in store for it before it is finished. Down by the burn or loch the women may be seen washing and beating the cloth with a stick to get all the soap out. It seems incredible when handling the soft beautiful cloth when dry, that it has ever survived such a stormy history. Thoroughly washed and chastised, it is rinsed until the water runs clear. Dried in the open air, exposed to sun and rain, it is finally rolled into balls and carried on the back of some lass to town. It is claimed for the Island tweeds that they never

fade, never shrink and never wear out. At first this seems incredible; but a glance back over the "making" leaves one firmly convinced that to have survived the trials and tribulations thus far, argues an indefinite lease of life for the slight vicissitudes of the wearing epoch.

Turning, we catch a last glimpse of the weaver returning over the hills to the small bit of land she calls "home." How many weeks of toil does the single roll represent which she has left to be sold! Strong and peaceful is the face she turns toward the setting sun. With unwavering faith she passes resolutely back to the bare living, scanty provisions and constant struggle of her everyday life, leaving in our hearts a wonder and a strange humility.

DECISIONS OF U. S. BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES. JUNE 5, 1900 TO JANUARY 8, 1902

I

Alamoosook; lake in town of Orland, Hancock Co., Me. (Not Great pond.)

Ambrose; the channel across Sandy Hook Bar, New York Harbor, formerly known as East Harbor, was renamed Ambrose Channel by an Act of Congress approved June 6, 1900. In that Act it is "*Provided*, That the so-called East Channel across Sandy Hook Bar, New York Harbor, for the improvement of which provision was made by the River and Harbor Act, approved March third, eighteen hundred and ninety-nine, shall hereafter be known as Ambrose Channel." (Statutes at Large, 56th Congress, 1st session, pp. 588 and 627.) The name Ambrose is here included *not* as a decision of the Board, but as a decision by Congress.

Anchor; passage in Behm canal between Bell Island and the mainland, southeastern Alaska. (Not Anchorage.)

Año Nuevo; bay, creeks, island and point, San Mateo Co., Cal. (Not New Year.)

Ansley; island in Swanson Harbor, Chatham strait, southeastern Alaska. (Not Astley.)