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GRAZING AND AGRESTIC CUSTOMS OF THE
OUTER HEBRIDES

BY ALEXANDER CARMICHAEL

THE following article was written for the Report of the Crofter Royal Commission of 1883-4 and has been published only in the Blue Book issued by the Commission, though a few copies were printed for private circulation. These copies have the following Prefatory Note:—

‘This paper was written at the request of Lord Napier and Ettrick for the Crofter Royal Commission, over which his Lordship presided. Government have courteously granted the writer permission to reprint a few copies to give to his friends.

‘Originally the paper was meant to contain some account of the geological changes and of the natural history and antiquities of the Outer Hebrides, but these not coming within the scope of the Commission Lord Napier found himself obliged to exclude them. The paper is hurried and fragmentary and contains but little of what ought to be said of the interesting people and customs of the Western Isles.

“The account of the old customs is the most interesting thing in your Report; the old hymns are charming.”—*Extract from Letter of a Nobleman in London to Lord Napier.*

Dr. Carmichael was many times asked to issue this article as a small book. He had it in his mind to do so and intended to add to it much of the matter which had to be withheld from the Report.

Geographical

The Long Island comprehends a series of islands 116 miles in length. The breadth varies from one mile to twenty-six miles.

In shape the Long Island resembles an artificial kite—Lewis being the body, and the disarticulated tail trending southward and terminating in Bearnarey of Barra.

A range of glaciated hills, rising from the centre of Lewis, and at intervals cut into by the Minch, runs along the east side of the islands. Along the west side, washed by the

Atlantic, is an irregular plain of sandy soil, locally called machair.

These islands are called the Outer Hebrides, being the most westerly islands of Scotland, except those of St. Kilda. They form a breakwater against the Atlantic, from Cape Wrath on the north to Ardnamurchan on the south.

The Outer Hebrides were of old called Innse Gall, the Isles of the Gall, the Isles of the Strangers, from the Norsemen who occupied them for over two hundred years.

The ancient name of the Long Island, and still traced among the people, was Innis Cat, the Island of the Cat, or Catti. Who the Catti were is uncertain, though probably they were the same people who gave the name of Cat Thaobh, Cat Side, to Sutherland, and Cat Nis, Cat Ness or Point, to Caithness. The modern Clan Chatan are considered to be of these people. They are called the descendants of the Cat or Catti, and have a cat for their crest.

The present inhabitants of the Long Island are essentially Celtic, with considerable infusion of Norse blood. They are a splendid race of people, probably unexcelled, mentally and physically, in the British Isles.

The populations of the different islands form an aggregate of over 40,000 souls. Of these, forty families occupy about two-thirds of the whole land of the islands, the numerous crofters occupying the other third. These crofters retain pastoral and agrestic modes of life, now obsolete elsewhere. To describe these modes of life is the object of this paper.

All the crofters throughout the Outer Hebrides occupy and work their lands on the run-rig system, more or less modified. They work under this system in three different modes, two of these being stages of decay. An example from each of these three modes will be given from each of three parishes where they are in operation. This the writer thinks is preferable to any general description which he could devise. These parishes are Barra, South Uist, and North Uist, which form the southern division of the Outer Hebrides.

It seems desirable first to explain certain words and phrases.

Run-Rig

The term run-rig seems a modification of the Gaelic, 'roinn ruith'—division run. In this case the word 'run' is used in the sense of common. In Gaelic the system of run-rig is usually spoken of as 'mor earann'—great division (or 'mor fhearann,' great land?). Occasionally, however, an old person calls the system 'roinn ruith.' This seems the correct designation and the origin of the English term run-rig.

The system of run-rig prevailed of old over the whole British Isles and the Continent of Europe. It was some generations ago common in Ireland, it has been longer extinct in England, and is now obsolete in Scotland except to a limited extent in the Western Isles.

Townland, Township

The English word township represents the Gaelic word *baile*, as applied to a rural locality and to a country community. I, however, prefer the word townland to township, and have already used it in the paper which Mr. Skene asked me to write for his *Celtic Scotland*, and which your Lordship was pleased to commend.

I believe the word townland is recognised by law. I have certainly seen it used in law documents.

The word *baile*, townland, often appears in *Origines Parochiales*, that invaluable work, compiled by Cosmo Innes from ancient charters and other historical documents affecting the Highlands, and it occurs also in Martin's *Western Isles*, published in 1703. Dr. Johnson says that it was this book that gave him a desire to see the Highlands of Scotland, and therefore to this book the world is indebted for Johnson's famous *Tour to the Hebrides*. A copy of Martin, which Johnson and Boswell had with them in the Highlands and Islands, the writer has seen in the Signet Library, Edinburgh.

The townland has a collective existence in various ways, —by tradition, by usage, by the condition of the people, by the consensus of public opinion, and by the treatment of the proprietor. I shall endeavour to show this, and in doing so shall confine my observations to the Long Island.

Maor

The word ‘maor’ is old, and is used in several languages. Before and after the tenth century it carried a territorial title equal to Baron among the Highlanders and to the Jarl of the Norwegians.

The name was then applied to the governor of a province, whose office was hereditary, like that of the king. The term maor is now applied to a petty officer only.

‘Maor gruinn’ is a ground officer. He is appointed by the factor—Gaelic, ‘baillidh’—and acts under him. On large properties the maor is practically a sub-factor, and, being the eye, the ear, and the tongue of the factor in his district, he is often more feared than the factor himself. Where the factor is a non-Gaelic speaking man, as has frequently been the case on the Gordon properties, the people look on the maor with suspicion. ‘The tongue of the people being then in another man’s mouth,’ as one of themselves graphically said to me, they know not what the maor says or leaves unsaid concerning them. Nevertheless, there are and have been ground-officers who were far from giving cause for such suspicion, who, on the contrary, devoted their time and energies to the interests of proprietor and people to the neglect of their own. Among these have been some of the kindest men I have ever known.

The Constable

There is a constable (Gaelic, constabal) in every town, and in some two—one representing the proprietor, the other the people. Occasionally the factor and the crofters elect the constable conjointly. More often, however, the factor alone appoints the constable. When this is the case, the

crofters murmur that the man thus appointed and paid by the factor alone is, unconsciously to himself probably, too subservient to the factor and too remiss in their concerns. For this reason they elect a man to look after their own special affairs.

When a constable is to be elected for the townland, the people meet, and this and all kindred meetings are called 'nabachd,' neighbourliness. If presided over by the maor the meeting is called 'mòd,' moot.

If the people meet during the day, they probably meet at a place locally known as Cnoc na Comhairle — The Council Hill, or at Clach na Comhairle — The Council Stone. If they meet at night they meet in some central house on the townland. Almost invariably these meetings are held at night, so as to avoid losing time during the day. The meetings are orderly and interesting.

Not infrequently the man proposed for the constableness by his fellow-crofters of the townland declines the office. Then another is proposed, and perhaps with like result. Ultimately the people may have to cast lots before they get a man among themselves to accept the office, the duties of which are distasteful to them.

In some townlands the constable is elected or re-elected yearly, in some for a term of years, and in others for life.

The man who has been appointed constable takes off his shoes and stockings. Uncovering his head, he bows reverently low, and promises, in presence of heaven and earth, in presence of God and of men,—Am fianuis uir agus adhair, am fianuis De agus daoine,—that he will be faithful to his trust. In some places the elected constable takes up a handful of earth instead of uncovering his feet. The object is the same—to emphasise, by bodily contact with the earth, that he is conscious of being made of earth, to which he returns.

These and similar simple and impressive customs are disappearing, to the regret of the old people and the antiquary.

The services of the constable appointed by the factor are paid in money; those of the constable appointed by the crofters in kind—*Fiar air beinn, agus peighinn air machair*—grazing on hill and tillage on machair.

The duties of the constable are varied and troublesome—requiring much firmness and judgment. The constable, however, can always rely upon the assistance of one or all of his fellow-crofters as occasion requires.

The peat banks (Gaelic, *stail, poil*) of the townland having become exhausted, the factor or his maor marks out a new peat moss.

The constable divides this into the necessary number of stances or hags, according to the number of tenants in the townland. For these stances the crofters cast lots, as they do for their rigs of lands. Lest a man should be placed at any advantage or disadvantage from his neighbours, these stances are again subjected to the lot, in the course of three, five, seven, or nine years, as the people consider advisable.

A peat road (Gaelic, *utraid moine*) has to be made to this new peat moss. Probably the road requires to be made over one, two, or three or more miles of rock, bog, and moorland. It is the duty of the constable to see that every crofter in the townland gives the necessary number of days of free labour, with his horses and carts, spades and pickaxes, to construct this new road.

The constable must see that all the roads of the townland are kept in repair by the mutual co-operation of the crofters; that no unnecessary traffic is carried over these roads during or immediately after wet weather; and that the side and cross drains of the roads run free.

To insure equal distribution of labour these by-roads are divided into 'peighinnean,' pennies. The good and bad, the soft and hard, the steep and level parts of the road are thus divided and allotted. Each crofter must keep his own portion in repair. Should he neglect, he is taken to account by his neighbours, and his portion of road repaired at his expense.

The constable engages the herdsman and shepherd of the townland, apportions them ground for potatoes and bere, collects and pays their wages. These wages are self-levied on the crofters according to their rent, as they have a whole croft, a half croft, or a quarter croft.

Every townland has a cattle fold on the machair, and another on the gearry—Gaelic, gearruidh. In wet weather the constable instructs the herdsman to keep the cows to the machair, where the fold, from the nature of the soil, is less wet and comfortless to the cows and the women who milk them, than the fold on the gearry.

The constable must see that the dyke enclosing the cattle-fold is repaired in early summer before being used, and that the gate, ‘cadha-chliath na cuithe’—the gate of the cattle-fold—is good and strong. The term cadha-chliath literally signifies the wattle gorge or pass.

In wooded districts throughout the Highlands, where materials can be found, doors, gates, partitions, fences, barns, and even dwelling-houses, are made of wattle-work.

In the case of dwelling-houses and their partitions, the wattling is plastered over on both sides with boulder clay, and whitewashed with lime, thereby giving an air of cleanliness and comfort to the house.

Of old this wattle-work was largely used by the Celts. It is believed that many of their early houses and churches were made of wattling, and Mr. Skene thinks that St. Columba’s first church in Iona was so constructed.

One of the Gaelic names of Dublin—Gaelic, Dubhlinne, ‘blacklinn’—is Bail ath-chliath, ‘the town of the ford of wattles,’ the first bridge over the river Liffey having been constructed of wattle-work.

Probably the interlacing—occasionally called Celtic basket-work—so much used and so much admired in ancient Celtic art and sculpturing had its origin in this wattle-work.

In carting sea-weed up from the shore, which is extremely

trying upon horses, the constable sees that no man works his horse too heavily or too long.

When he orders the people to stop work they must stop. In some places there was a latent superstition among the people that the spirits of their horses were in communication with the spirits of heaven. Probably this gave rise to their saying—

‘Am fear a bhitheas trocaireach ri anam
Cha bhith e mi-throcaireach ri bhruid.’

‘He who is merciful to his soul
Will not be unmerciful to his beast.’

The constable must see to ‘Cuartachadh a Bhaile,’ rounding or circuiting the townland.

There being no fences round the fields, there is danger that cattle or horses of their own or neighbouring farms may break loose during night and damage the corn.

To guard against this, two of the crofters make a circuit of the townland at night, each two and two of the crofters taking this watching in turns during summer and autumn. This precaution is called ‘cuartachadh,’ circuiting. Should the watchers be remiss and damage result, the two crofters responsible must make good the loss. The damage to the corn being appraised, the two crofters in fault pay it to the constable, who adds it to the general fund of the townland. Should cattle or horses from a neighbouring farm cause loss, the owners have to pay the loss. The people are exacting in recovering these valuations. ‘Is e an cunntas goirid, a dh-fhagas an cairdeas fada,’ they say, ‘It is the short accounting that shall leave the friendship lasting,’ and they act accordingly.

Those, however, who are thus exacting in pecuniary matters are, nevertheless, kind and considerate to one another in other things. Should a crofter or his family be laid up ill, his fellow-crofters help on his work. If a man’s horse dies, his neighbours bring on his work concurrently

with their own, and, if necessary, help him to buy another horse.

In connection with their watching, the people speak of a time when they had to kindle fires to scare away wild beasts from their flocks, as they do now in some localities to scare away deer and game from their crops. These fires look picturesque at night, and remind one of Campbell's beautiful poem of 'The Soldier's Dream'—'By the wolf-scaring faggot that guarded the slain.'

I have asked crofters who said that they were in the habit of sitting up at night to watch their corn from deer, if they mentioned this hardship to their factor. 'Yes,' said they, 'but he told us that if we complained to him again he would clear us all out of the place, so as to be out of the way of the deer. Therefore though we suffer we keep quiet.'

The constable buys fresh stock, for the infusion of new blood for his townland, and sells the old. He will not allow a crofter to cart sea-weed from the shore till his neighbours have reasonable time to be there, nor will he allow a crofter to cut sea-weed when and where he likes. He must see that the run-rig land—imire—of one man is not allowed to lie under water to the injury of the man to whose lot it may fall at next allotting. The tenant must cut a drain to allow the surface water to escape.

Should the crofters of the townland have occasion to complain of a fellow-crofter to the factor, a deputation from the crofters go to the factor to prefer the complaint. The deputation is represented by the constable alone or in company. The factor confers with the constable, giving instructions, and possibly removes the recalcitrant crofter from his holding, should he continue to offend against the customs of the community.

The constable gives information to the people from the factor as to days on which the factor is to collect rents and rates, as to new rules which the factor wishes enforced, or old ones which he wishes more strictly observed, and various other things.

These are some of the duties devolving on the farm constable for the orderly management of the townland. In the past he had to assist the maor in evicting crofters, sometimes in evicting and pulling down the houses of near and dear relatives.

There have been no large evictions in recent years in the Western Islands, nor will there probably be.

Proprietors, with a few exceptions, now visit their properties, taking a kindly interest in their people, and factors are more considerate. One of these, indeed, is a man endowed with more excellence of head and heart, without faults, than ordinarily falls to the lot of man, a man possessing the implicit confidence of proprietors and tenants alike, who daily injures himself to benefit them. Mr. John Macdonald, tacksman, Newton, North Uist, and factor for Sir John Orde, will not forgive my mentioning his name, but others will throughout the Highlands and Islands, where his name is honoured among all classes.

But things were not always so in the Western Isles. Where a factor, in many ways capable and excellent, in those days wished to acquire more land for himself, his relations, or friends, he seems to have felt no more compunction in destroying the well-being of scores of comfortable crofters than were they so many sheep. This was a common occurrence. Nor, incredible as it may seem, was it till years afterwards, that some of those absentee proprietors came to know, and that accidentally, of the wholesale removals of scores of their peaceable, loyal, industrious tenants, and of this practical destruction of hundreds of their crofter population. That these and many similar proceedings should have paralysed the whole crofter population of the Western Islands was only natural. Nor does it need a man to live and travel among the islands for a quarter of a century to see and to be convinced that the people of those Western Isles have not yet recovered from the effects of that paralysation.

BARRA

The Islands of Barra form an oblong group. Of these islands, eight are inhabited. The Southern Isles of Barra were of old called the Bishop's Isles, because they belonged to the bishop of the see. The head of this wild precipitous chain of islands is still called Bearnaraidh an Easpaig, Bearnarey of the Bishop, occasionally Barra Head—Gaelic Ceann Bharraidh.

The Southern Isles of Barra are famed for birds. These are principally the puffin, razorbill, and the guillemote, Gaelic buigire, duibheineach, and langaidh. The Manx shearwater, Gaelic scrab, was extremely abundant there at one time; but since the advent of the puffin, it is now practically extinct. Both these last are burrowing birds. The puffin is vicious to a degree, his wonderfully strong, sharp, coulterneb bill cutting keenly as a lance.

Of old the crofters of Miuthlaidh paid their rents in birds to Macneill of Barra. These birds were principally the young of the shearwater, and called by the people 'fachaich,' 'fatlings.'

The land was divided into crofts called 'Clitig,' 'Feoirilig,' 'Leth-Pheighinn,' and 'Peighinn.' The 'Clitig' is half the 'Feoirilig,' the 'Feoirilig' is half the 'Leth-Pheighinn' and 'Leth-Pheighinn' is half the 'Peighinn,' Penny.

The Penny Croft paid two barrels, the Halfpenny Croft one barrel, the Farthing Croft one-half barrel, and the Clitig Croft one-fourth barrel of 'fachaich' to Macneill.

Probably not less than twenty barrels of these birds went to Macneill yearly, and all from the small island of Grianamal, behind Miuthlaidh!

The proprietor came over to Miuthlaidh a fortnight before, and remained till a fortnight after Lammas Day—Gaelic, La Lunastain. The people were not allowed to go to the rocks till he came; when he left, they had the free range of the cliffs.

The people of the Southern Isles do not now kill many birds, being too much occupied otherwise.

The people of Miuthlaidh do not seem to have used ropes as they do in St. Kilda, but to have clambered among the rocks like goats. These rocks are wonderfully grand. Mr. Campbell of Islay and the writer measured the highest of these in October 1871, when the barometer showed nearly 800 feet above the sea. The place is named Aonig, and this particular rock is called Biolacreag. The face of the cliff is as smooth and perpendicular as the wall of a house, and goes sheer down into the Atlantic.

This precipice was the crest of the ancient Macneills of Barra, and 'Biolacreag' formed the rallying cry of the clan.

There is probably no more interesting island in Britain than this island of Miuthlaidh, with its wonderful precipices, long narrow sea galleries, several hundred feet high in the perpendicular sides, and marine arcades, winding their gloomy subterraneous ways under the precipitous island. To boat through these galleries and arcades needs a calm sea, a good crew, and a steady nerve. So far as the people of Miuthlaidh knew, the writer was the first to discover, and the first, and perhaps the last, to go through, much the longest, largest, and gloomiest of these wonderful sinuous sea arcades.

The Macneills of Barra lived in a castle on a tidal rock called Ciosmal, in Baile Mhicneill, Macneilltown, now called Castlebay. There are two wells within the walls of this old castle. The people say that the water of these wells comes in pipes under the sea, the pipes being overlaid with large flags.

Some fifteen years ago, the then factor let the castle as a herring-curing station, when the principal well, in the centre of the court, was filled up, and the chapel in the west corner carried away piecemeal as ballast for boats and vessels. The native people, who still fondly cling to the memory of their once proud chiefs, were grieved at the destruction they were powerless to prevent.

The site of Ciosmal Castle had been the site of a magazine, wherein the Norsemen kept war materials during the Norse occupation of the Western Isles.

Ciosmal was abandoned by the Macneills during the first quarter of last century. They built houses in three other places, finally settling at Eoligearry, on the north end of the island. The family became extinct in the direct male line in Lieut.-General Roderick Macneill. It is said that so symmetrical in person was General Macneill that 'no eye looked at him without looking at him again.' He was adored by his people, who, with the fidelity of their race, ruined themselves in trying to save him from ruin. They gave him their all.

To Dr. Macgillivray, the people of Barra are much indebted, and this they gratefully acknowledge. Since he became tacksman of Eoligearry, some forty-four years ago, probably he has given in one form or another some £7000 in work to the people of Barra, while his skill and his medicine are ever at the disposal of all. The eminent naturalist of that name was brother to Dr. Macgillivray.

A curious custom prevails among the people of Barra of apportioning their boats to their fishing-banks at sea, much as they apportion their cows to their grazing grounds on land. The names, positions, extent, characteristics, and capabilities of these banks are as well known to them as those of their crofts.

The people meet at church on the 1st day of February — Gaelic, *La-Fheill Bride* — the Festival of St Bridget; and having ascertained among themselves the number of boats engaging in the long line fishing, they assign these boats in proportionate numbers among the banks according to the fishing capabilities of each bank. The men then draw lots, each head-man drawing the lot for his crew, and thus the boats are assigned to their respective banks for the season.

Should a bank prove unproductive, the boats of that bank are invariably allowed to distribute themselves

among the other banks, the boats of which are then at liberty to try the deserted bank. The fishermen say that the ways and migrations of the fishes of the sea are as unaccountable as those of the fowls of the air—here to-day and there to-morrow. They say also that fishes resemble birds in their habits: some fishes, as the cod and the conger, in being solitary, like the raven and the skua; while some other fishes, as the saithe and the herring, are gregarious in their habits, and live in communities, like the razorbill and the guillemote. I am indebted to the intelligent and observant fishermen throughout those islands for much interesting and curious information regarding fishes and sea-birds.

Having completed their balloting, the fishermen go in to church, accompanied by fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, wives and children, and sweethearts. The good priest says a short service, wherein he commends those 'who go down to the sea in ships' to the protection of the holy Saint Barr, after whom Barra is named, of the beautiful Saint Bridget, 'virgin of a thousand charms'—'Bride bhoidheach oigh nam mile beus'—on whose festival they are met, of their loved Mother, the golden-haired Virgin, and to the protection, individually and collectively, of the Holy Trinity. The people disperse, chanting—

'Athair, A Mhic, A Spioraid Naoimh,
 Biodh an Tri-aon leinn, a la 's a dh' oidhehe;
 'S air chul nan tonn, no air thaobh nam beann,
 Bith'dh ar Mathair leinn 's bith'dh a lamh mu'r ceann.
 Bith'dh ar Mathair leinn 's bith'dh a lamh mu'r ceann.'

Father! Son! and Spirit Holy!
 Be the Three-in-One with us day and night;
 And at the back of the waves or on the mountain-side,
 Be our Mother with us and be her hand about our head,
 Be our Mother with us and be her hand about our head.

Having dispersed, the people repair to their homes, on the way thither eagerly and simultaneously discussing the

merits and the demerits of their respective banks. To hear their loud and simultaneous talk, one would think that the people were quarrelling. But no, this is only their way—the Barra people being peaceable and gentle, and eminently well-mannered and polite.

This habit of the Barra fishermen of apportioning their fishing-banks may seem antiquated to modern views. The fishermen themselves advance good reasons for its retention, among them being that it prevents overcrowding of boats on the banks, with the consequent entanglement of lines, resulting sometimes in the loss of temper and friendship.

In the *Inverness Courier* seventeen years ago, or so, the writer suggested converting the strait between Barra Head and Miuthlaidh into a harbour of refuge, by throwing a breakwater across the west end. A harbour there would be of inestimable benefit to shipping and fishing.

Third Stage of Run-Rig

The arable land of the crofters of Barra is all divided into crofts, no part being in common. The grazing-grounds only are held in common, each townland being confined to its own grazing limits. The crofters of each townland have their own herdsman, and regulate their own townland affairs with no interference from without.

(To be continued.)