Social Life and Material Culture in Lewis

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Someone once said that in Lewis we find an early crystallisation of culture and religion and that the two were almost synonomous. Over the years there has been a strong link between the two and, although with the passing of each decade the link is weaker, it is not yet completely broken.

In 1824 a minister, Alexander Macleod, who came to Lewis was shocked to find his elders praying for a gale to wreck a ship on their shores. We must, however, remember that a shipwreck could provide sustenance perhaps for weeks and months and also timber and other commodities which were in short supply in Lewis. The minister, who was more interested in the spiritual welfare of his flock than in their material comforts, sacked his elders and insisted on a more Christian outlook from his congregation. As a result, a religious revival took place in 1827 and this was a turning-point in Lewis history: we emerged from the Dark Ages - spiritually at least.

Other dates which are very significant in Lewis history are 1886 when the famous Crofters' Act was passed and 1924 when grants and loans became available to the crofter for house-building. Before 1886 the crofter was a victim of the whim and ambition of the landlord. The interest of the sheep and deer was paramount, with the result that the crofter was evicted on the flimsiest of excuses to make room for the more lucrative sheep-farm and deer-forest. Therefore, the 1886 Act, which gave the crofter for the first time a great measure of security, was a godsend. The 1924 Act afforded an opportunity to improve housing and in the next decade the 'white house' began to replace the traditional 'black house' or 'taigh dubh'.

Up to this time the economy of the Lewis crofter was almost entirely self-sufficient. He had to provide the three basic necessities, food, clothing and shelter, without much help from outside.

(a) Food: He planted his own barley, corn and potatoes and he kept a stock of sheep and cattle which provided him with meat, milk and butter; fish he obtained from the sea, and shellfish was also used for food. From the barley a potent brew 'uisge-beatha' was made. Martin Martin in 'A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland' writes "... another called trestarig, id est aquavitae, three times distilled is strong and hot; a third sort is four times distilled and ... two spoonfuls of this last liquor is a sufficient dose; and if any man exceed this, it would presently stop his breath and endanger his life." The old home-brew must have been very potent! It was also illegal to produce it and so ways and means had to be found to get round the law. This was done by adding a secret chamber to the end of the 'taigh dubh' when constructing it, and it was here that the 'poit-dhubh' or still was concealed. Access was from the inside of the house by removing stones which could be quickly replaced if the 'gadger' came on the scene. Barley was also used for making scones.

When the corn was harvested, usually with a scythe or sickle, the seed was taken off the sheaves with a flail, which consisted of two pieces of wood tied together with a leather thong or with a rope. Then the seed was winnowed using a home-made winnow of sheep-skin. The seed was now ready for drying and this was done in the 'àth' or kiln. Very often the 'àth' caught fire which gave us the proverb, "Se deireadh gach àth a losgadh" and the tongue-twister "Bàth m'àth 's bhathain 's i na'm b'e d'àth 's ì" (Extinguish my kiln; I would do the same for you). Now the seed was taken to the Norse mill, which was usually communally owned, and the winter's supply of oatmeal was prepared.

(b) Clothing: From the wool of the sheep clothes were made. The wool was first washed at a river or loch and then dyed with vegetable dyes obtainable locally. The most commonly used was crotal, a lichen which was scraped off the rocks with a soup-spoon and it required a sackful to dye enough wool for one tweed. When the wool was dyed, it had then to be teazed to get rid of the dust and bits of crotal. In the evenings when visitors came in to 'ceilidh' all hands would set to work and soon there would be a good pile of wool ready for carding. The carded wool was spun on the spinning-wheel, and after warping, it was woven on the old hand-loom. The most outstanding event in tweed-making was the 'luadh' or waulking. The tweed was put into a tub with water, washing-soda and soft soap, and one of the ladies with skirts uplifted would stamp the oil out of it with her bare feet. Then eight of the lassies, sitting four on each side of a wooden table - usually a barn door which had been removed for the purpose - banged the tweed against the table in order to shrink it. The lady in charge measured the width of the cloth now and again, using a 'cromadh' (the length from the tip of the middle finger to the knuckle) as the unit of measure. When she deemed that the cloth had shrunk to the required width, another length of the tweed was taken to be waulked. All this labour was carried out to the accompaniment of songs, and verses were added on the spur of the moment. There was laughter and merriment and this eased the burden of what was a very laborious task. In the evening the local lads congregated at the house and a dance would follow. Harris yarn was also used for knitting socks, pull-overs and other garments.

(c) Shelter: The means of shelter was the 'taigh dubh' or black house, which was usually built near the sea in a sheltered spot. The fire was in the middle of the floor and the smoke (or some of it) escaped through a hole in the thatch. The typical black house had a bedroom, a living room and a place

for the cows and hens at the lower end. The 'taigh dubh' was a cosy abode but in the latter half of the last century when T.B. came to Lewis, it proved an ideal breeding-ground for T.B. germs, with the result that the death-rate in Lewis rose to staggering figures. This scourge was first arrested by the introduction of B.C.G. by the late Dr. Doig.

Many of the customs which were associated with the 'taigh dubh' are gradually disappearing, some because of changing cultural trends, some because of economic changes. Of the 'ceilidh', Kenneth Macdonald, the Lewis bard, wrote "Dh'fhalbh an cèilidh 'nuair dh'fhalbh an cabar-sùich" (The céilidh disappeared along with the sooty rafter). Perhaps, however, the introduction of the radio about this time may have had an influence as well. In the ceilidh-house stories were told, songs were sung and music was played. Ghost stories were common, with the result that the younger members present often had to be escorted home. The favourite songs were of local composition and the music was usually played on the chanter, melodeon, Jew's harp, comb and paper, or reeds.

'Caithris na h-oidhche' was a time-honoured institution. The suitor would spend the night with his beloved and in due course a 'rèiteach' would take place when the bridegroom-to-be and his best man would repair to the girl's house carrying an earthenware jar of whisky. The best man would disclose that his friend was looking for a wife, whereupon the man of the house would parade three or four girls, one after the other in front of them. Each one would have some fault according to the wife-seeker, and then the bride-to-be would appear and her suitor would sing her praises and ask for her hand. This granted, the whisky would be broached and a merry party would follow. In about three weeks' time the wedding would take place at the home of the bride, neighbours helping with the plucking of hens and any other necessary chores.

The ordinary crofter could not afford a holiday but the custom of going to the sheiling was a very adequate substitute. In the summer the cattle were driven to the outer grazings, sometimes a few miles from the village, and the young maids were left to herd and milk the cows. They would make an occasional journey home with milk and butter. The milk was carried in a bucket which had a covering of cured sheep-skin; the bucket was called 'imbhuideal' and the skin covering was known as 'iolaman' in Gaelic. The early sheilings were small stone edifices with a thatch of heather, but later ones were larger so that the whole family could spend the summer in them. In some parts of Lewis the custom of going to the sheiling is still in vogue, but alas without the cattle. Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis!

'Woman' as mirrored in Scandinavian Literature at the turn of the Century

Amy van Marken

The generation of Scandinavian artists born between 1860 and 1865, who at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties were about 25 years old, had, among many others, this trait in common, that they experienced women's liberation, women's emancipation in its practical consequences. The way of doing so, the way the poets, the authors and the painters met with this revolution, was decisive for the type of woman they were to create.

The discussions which were underlying the position of women concentrated - during the seventies and let's say around 1880 - on the social, economic and legal aspects of the question, which were aesthetically and intellectually approached. In the eighties a swing of opinion occurred. The changed relationship between men and women created new