emigrated or moved to island's planned towns. In Edinburgh it would have been easy to accept these statements. However, each time we travelled the Bowmore road across the flat, desolate moorland and saw the many hares hopping "pa letten fod over lyngen", I thought of Jutland before the 19th Century cultivation of the heath. And when you stand on a deserted croft, it is easier to see with the eyes of John Livingstone:

Though the rays of the sun may ration Heaven's warmth to
meadows' bloom,
Though the sheilings have their cattle, with folds full of
lowing calves,
Islay has lost her people; the sheep have emptied homes.

In his report on last year's conference, Ian Keiller drew attention to a division between the academics and the general members of conference, which he noted particularly at the final ceilidh. No such division was evident this year. Our numbers swollen by the presence of some Islay friends, we sang and danced (to the piano of Dr. Margaret Storrie) late into the night. And academic elbows and vocal shords were exercised as much as others. Perhaps we benefited from a practice run on an earlier evening when we enjoyed the hospitality of Dr. Storrie at her home in Port Ellen.

The conference however, had already been declared successful at the informal general discussion, though members, asked for suggestions for next year, perhaps with memories of Port Ellen Bay, tended to favour a mainland site. Katanes? Jorvik? Gardarik? Here we come!

A PROBLEMATIC 17th CENTURY DUELLING PRACTICE IN SCOTLAND

Ian A. Morrison

At the Islay conference of the Society, the Reverend Peter Youngson of Jura introduced the work that he is doing on the Presbyterian Records of Kintyre, and drew attention to a

puzzling entry dating from 1656. In this, a wayward parishioner, being required to appear in public and acknowledge a certain scandal before the congregation, suddenly turned obdurate and offered to "feght (his accuser) in the breadth of his plaid".

Whatever was intended was clearly no lovesome "bundling". The phrase has the ring of some form of duel to known rules, or perhaps even a trial by combat of rough and ready formality.

Plaids were certainly used in pistol duels between Scots at a slightly later period. "The Expert Sword-Man's Companion", a handy manual sold to Glaswegians in 1728, tells how "Sword and Pistol, is what is too often practised on Desperat Occasions on Foot. When Gentlemen are so Desparate as to Engage in this Manner, they in Honour oought to have Regard to do one another Justice, and each to take a fast hold of a Cloak or Plaid, holding it so high in their Left hand, that they cannot see their Adversary, and Cock on the other if he be ready; so by Cocking their Pistols, they may be so Advertised, as by sliping to the Right or Left, they may very probably avoid each others Shot, then may they apply to their Swords, for the Decision of their Quarrel."

There is perhaps another possibility, however; that the plaid was not held as a curtain between the combatants, but laid out on the ground in a way reminiscent of the "Holmganga" of Viking times.

This "going on an island" was a form of duel used as a legal method of settling disputes, and when a suitably small islet was not available to set bounds for the combat, a cloak was traditionally used to define the finghting area. One version of the custom is described thus in Kormac's Saga:

> "This was the Holmganga law: that the cloak should be ten feet from one end to the other, with loops in the corners, and through these loops should be put pegs with a head at the top. Then three squares, their sides each a foot beyond the other, must be marked round the cloak. Outside the squares must be placed four poles called Hoslur (hazel-poles). It was called a Hazelled Field when it was prepared thus.

> Each man must have three shields, and when these were made useless he must stand upon the cloak, even if he had moved out of it before, and defend himslef with his weapons. He who had been challenged must strike first. If either was wounded so that blood came upon the cloak he was not obliged to fight any longer. If either stepped with one of his feet outside the hazel poles he was held to have retreated; if he stepped outside with both feet he was held to have fled. One man was to hold the shield before each of the combatants. The one who received most wounds was to pay Holmslausn (indemnity for being released from the fight) three marks of silver." (Ch. 10; quoted in Ewart Oakshott's "Archaeology of Weapons" 1963, pp. 155–6).

John Telfer Dunbar's "History of Highland Dress" (1962) gives sources that set the 17th century Scottish plaid at "about seven or eight yards long" (Morer, in op. cit. p. 44) or "commonly seven double Ells" (Martin, in op. cit. p. 45). It might thus be regarded as a commodious battleground, by Highlandmen of a Viking turn of mind – whether for swordplay, dirks or fisticuffs.

How far threads from the skein of Scandinavian heritage are still traceable into the 17th century in the western, as opposed to northern, isles and coastlands of Scotland is an intriguing question. Topics ranging from the late typology of birlins to the antecedents of various of the practices described by Martin Martin invite discussion. It would be interesting in this wider context if others could throw further light on whether this casual mention in the Kintyre records of recourse to a fight in the breadth of a plaid might or might not represent a late survival of a custom rooted in the Viking past of our western seaboard.