



# **'LOCALS' AND 'INCOMERS': SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY COIGACH**

**Angus MacLeod & Geoff Payne**

In addition to such well-recognised social divisions as class, race, religion and gender, less familiar forms of differentiation can be of equal or even greater utility in describing the social relations found within particular settings. A recent study of Coigach, the circumstances of which are specific, has shown the centrality of the divisions between 'locals' and 'incomers'.<sup>1</sup>

Such a local/incomer distinction is by no means unique: recent demographic and social change has underlined the wider relevance of this dichotomy in contemporary society. Since the 1960s people have been steadily moving out of Britain's big cities to sink new roots in the countryside. Between 1966 and 1981 London's population fell by more than 20%; in the 1980s another half million city dwellers headed for the countryside; and with job relocations, improvements in communications and transport, and the growing potential for computer-networking and telecommuting, this trend is likely to continue throughout the 1990s and beyond. While the arrival of large numbers of people in rural areas has coincided with widespread changes taking place in society, care must be taken in any attempt to isolate the underlying causes and consequences of in-migration. The inherent issues have become so complex as to require a different conceptual level of analysis to that found in earlier studies.

In previous work the local/incomer dichotomy has taken second place to other social divisions; particularly those associated with social class and housing in the commuter belt. The divisions between locals and incomers have been explained largely in terms of other dimensions.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will show that the division between the two groups is in fact a significant independent variable. In examining the local/incomer dimension from a more original perspective, examples will be given to show both how it is perceived and what it means to the people of Coigach, and more particularly the role of story-telling in maintaining a sense of 'local' identity. The choice of setting has facilitated the study of this dimension without it being obscured by other variables; the most pervasive social division can be explained solely in terms of 'locals' and 'incomers'.

## **COIGACH: SETTING, SERVICES AND WAY-OF-LIFE**

The Coigach townships are spread over a rocky peninsula approximately



twelve miles in length and five in breadth.<sup>3</sup> Still somewhat off the beaten track for most tourists, and with the nearest small town some 25 miles (40 kms) away, its resident population of about 260 live in relative geographical isolation.<sup>4</sup>

The settlement pattern is characteristic of such places throughout the north-west, as is the topography of the area. Less than 1% of the land surface can be classed as arable, and this has restricted the townships to the lower-lying coastal margins where the traditional landholding pattern of crofting persists. The function of crofts as agricultural producers, however, is of little economic significance today, with only a few vegetables for family consumption being grown. To own a cow is now the exception rather than the rule and the grazings (and infields) are predominantly under sheep, but less than 10 of the 105 or so permanent households run any significant number.

Typical of isolated settlements on the Atlantic margins, the area has limited services and facilities for recreation and leisure. Poor communication and transport networks leave it sufficiently cut-off from the outside world to make personal relations between its inhabitants crucial in everyday life. But although Coigach is rural and physically isolated, it is by no means depressed, declining or despondent. This is no 'Inishkillane', trapped in terminal decline and steeped in nostalgia for some lost age of Celtic innocence (Brody 1973).

The several settlements support two shops, two bars, a Post Office, a Church, a primary school and a village hall. In summer there is also a small hotel, a cafe, a camp-site and a few other 'tourist attractions'. Work is available in food-processing (there is a small plant originally financed by the Highlands and Islands Development Board), fish-farming (using capital from, among other sources, Scandinavia), the tourist trade, construction (there have been loans and grants to crofters), and basic services (eg. education, the mail, the road-gang). The Doctor, the Library and the Mobile Bank come once a week, and the older children go to secondary school in Ullapool each day by bus.

This current vitality has made it easier to avoid the romantic trap that has enmeshed some earlier writers of community studies (see Gibbon, 1973; Bell & Newby, 1971). Coigach is not an idyllic, self-contained, rural community. It is a geographically proximate grouping of relatively low-income households, set on a wet and windswept slope of hills. The way they earn their livelihoods, the way they spend their time, their connections with national institutions, the people themselves, are changing, just as in the rest of society.

Today's way of life is more varied than that of earlier times. In recent years a diversity of occupations unrelated to any local particularity and not providing any obvious social bond has come to prevail, making for differences rather than fostering common interest and cohesion. The dominant pattern is still one of manual work on a small scale, but the increased diversity of the economic base means that there is no collective work-oriented consciousness. The communal labour exchanges of the fank or the fishing

are small-scale and occasional: the small-talk of work-tasks common to all in the daily round no longer applies. Instead, we have a local society in which many small groups can flourish, and where in many cases individuals move between one group and another from day to day, and during the day. At the same time, divisions do exist: for example, between crofters and fishermen, and between fishermen and fish-farmers. But the existing situation in Coigach, just as it cannot be explained in terms of well-recognised phenomena such as class, cannot be explained in terms of other simple oppositions like crofters and fishermen. The most important division existing in Coigach today is the one between 'locals' and 'incomers'.

#### **BASES OF SOCIAL DIVISION: LIFESTYLE, BIRTHPLACE, ACCULTURATION?**

Coigach has witnessed in-migration for centuries, but it was not until the 1960s that this slow but steady stream began to take on the character of the heavy influx apparent in the 1980s [Fig. 15.1]:

---

#### **CHANGING RATES OF INCOMERS TO COIGACH:**

**1960-1989**

---

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>*NUMBER OF INCOMERS</b>
1960-1969	12
1970-1979	36
1980-1989	72
<b>Total: 1960-1989</b>	<b>120</b>

---

*Fig. 15.1* Incomers to Coigach, 1960-1989. \*These figures represent only those incomers still living in Coigach and do not include either children born to incoming parents after their arrival, or incomers who have since left. *Source:* A. MacLeod, fieldnotes.

There is no doubt that this accelerating flow has been a source of change, and one which has not gone without remark by local people. They are now aware that 'their' community could soon be 'overrun' with outsiders, and this awareness has led to a division between the two groups. Living in a 'face-to-face' community it is inevitable that locals and incomers come into regular contact — at the school, at the shop, in the pub and so on. To the extent that frequent interaction between individuals of different back-

grounds diminishes open conflict between them, this process is at work in Coigach. But at the same time, to the extent that conflict is caused or exacerbated by personal relations between locals and incomers, the difficulty of avoiding such contact renders continuing stress inevitable.

### **Elements of Social Cohesion: Lifestyle, Clothing, Speech**

Having said this, it is important to recognise that the two groups have a great deal in common and that there are no obvious characteristics that an outside observer could use to discriminate between them. Differences nowadays in normal speech, clothing and lifestyle are comparatively small for most Coigach people. The significance of family and kindred is in many ways the same for locals and incomers; households in both groups are made up of conjugal families; individuals in both groups share common expectations from kindred and obligations towards them. The division does not express itself in Coigach's formal organisations which are made up of both locals and incomers. Nor does it cut in any definite way through friendships, for it is certainly not the case that locals are only friendly with locals, and incomers with incomers. Many individuals from both groups have the same occupations and working conditions, and so on.

Over and against any differences between locals and incomers, there exists a range of 'community' and 'neighbouring' idioms whereby Coigach people can and do transform their sense of difference into one of social integrity. Through the practises of acknowledging, neighbouring and 'mucking in' (Phillips 1986), they experience and express their collective notions of being a community and belonging to it. The archetypal ideas of 'community' and 'neighbourliness' inform and pattern everyday practices that stress solidarity. Any visible evidence of the divisions between locals and incomers is therefore faint, but the reality of such a division nevertheless exists in the minds of Coigach people.

### **Concepts of Difference: Birthplace & Upbringing**

In reviewing fieldwork notes from weeks in which there were no major social events, it became apparent that there were a high number of references to locals and incomers in routine conversations. For example, in one seven day period in June 1989, 32 explicit references to the local/incomer dichotomy were recorded. The following quotes are taken from that week's fieldnotes:

... I'm a local because I live here and I've lived here all my life.

... If you live and work in Coigach, even if you are an incomer, and if you have a family here, then surely you are a local.

... I wouldn't think of them as real locals though. Maybe they are, but I don't think of them as locals.

... The only people who can call themselves local are the ones who were born here and brought up here.

These, and other quotes, bear testimony to the real social division that exists between locals and incomers. The two groups are often distinguished on the grounds that the latter were not born and bred in Coigach.<sup>5</sup> This criterion allows for locals to regard themselves as something akin to members of some sort of 'exclusive club' to which incomers cannot gain entry. It is designed to draw a definite dichotomous division in Coigach society, although in daily life other levels of division are also made.

Thus, in local conversational contexts Coigach people represent themselves to themselves, and to others, less in dualistic terms and more in qualified ways. They place themselves and their families along a 'scale of localness', ranging from 'real locals' at one end to recent incomers at the other. The term 'real local' infers the truism that there are 'degrees' of localness, as well as the division between locals and incomers. Some people, for example, regard themselves as being 'more' local than others because, as well as having been born and bred in the place, they can point to at least one parent satisfying the same criterion. If this were taken into account a simple table giving numbers of locals and incomers could be altered to look like this [Fig. 15.2]:

---

### LOCAL/INCOMER STATUS OF ALL COIGACH RESIDENTS:

August 1989

---

Born and bred locals (with at least one local parent)	70
Born and bred locals (no local parents)	35
Incomers	156
<b>Total population</b>	<b>261</b>

---

*Fig. 15.2* Status of Coigach Residents, August 1989, *not* differentiating between those with one or with two local parents. Source: A. MacLeod, fieldnotes.

By extension, a local with two born and bred parents can be regarded as

more local than someone with only one, so the table can be altered yet again [Fig. 15.3]:

---

<b>LOCAL/INCOMER STATUS OF ALL COIGACH RESIDENTS:</b>	
<b>August 1989</b>	
<hr/>	
Born and bred locals (with two local parents)	10
Born and bred locals (with one local parent)	60
Born and bred locals (no local parents)	35
Incomers	156
	<hr/>
<b>Total population</b>	<b>261</b>

---

*Fig. 15.3* Status of Coigach Residents, August 1989, *specifically* differentiating between those with one or with two local parents. *Source:* A. MacLeod, fieldnotes.

Potential complications of the table are endless. One could, for example, logically question the local status of grandparents, and so on. Yet such complications would be of little significance; so few people in Coigach today can claim 'pure' local grandparents that they are not important in differentiating locals from incomers.

Nevertheless, individuals who regard themselves as 'real locals' can, should any legitimization of their status be deemed necessary, remind others of their links to the locality through distant relatives and ancestors.<sup>6</sup> This shows that there may be more to being a local in Coigach than simply having been born and bred there. Many of the children who have been born in Coigach, but to incoming parents, are not thought of as being locals by the core of people belonging to old Coigach families. The term 'local', therefore, conjures up several related images in the minds of Coigach people — being rooted in the place; the identity that comes from belonging; bounded social horizons; and a sense of antiquity and continuity over time.

### **Concepts of Difference: Length of Residence, Acculturation**

It is notable how such an element as length of residence may or may not make a difference as to how an individual in Coigach is classified. Time

spent in the locality does not pre-dictate localness if it does not go hand in hand with acculturation. Some incomers actually prefer to remain outsiders, and make no effort to integrate with the host community which, consequently, has never regarded them as anything other than outsiders. They maintain their incomer status through personal choice; unlike those who try hard to be accepted as locals but are not. For some find it impossible to gain the affection or goodwill of those in the receiving community — an essential prerequisite in any attempt to negotiate the boundary separating the two groups. This is not to say that one must continually remain on good terms with everyone; but the ability to 'fit-in' and maintain acceptable norms of behaviour is necessary.

Some find the negotiation of social boundaries easier than others and do not have to be born and bred in Coigach to be thought of as local in everyday situations. One can 'become' a local by virtue of marrying into the community, or by gaining the favour of the local population and 'mucking in', or by having lived there since childhood. But fulfilling such criteria is not always enough to gain the acceptance of the *whole* population. There are those who are regarded as being local by some Coigach people but not by others; and in certain social contexts but not in others.

Although there is a real division between locals and incomers, therefore, it is impossible to draw a neat dividing line between the two groups that would be accepted by all the people in Coigach all the time. The boundary between the two is open to manipulation, with some people constantly moving from one side to the other depending on situation and context.

## **BASES OF SOCIAL DIVISION: EMPLOYMENT, CLASS, HOUSING, NATIONALITY?**

There is, then, a recognised social division between locals and incomers in Coigach, but how is it to be explained? Is it merely a phenomenon used by Coigach people to deal with other, more fundamental, underlying issues in the community; or are the two categories important independent variables? To answer these questions some other social issues must be examined.

### **Employment**

The changes taking place in Coigach today reflect a changing set of conditions in the country as a whole. The process of diversification in the labour market, for example, has considerably altered the social structure of the place. Changes in employment, income and welfare benefit have eroded much of the previous need for mutual aid between neighbours and relatives, and undermined the communal aspects of croft production (see Richards/Baldwin, this volume). Gone are the days when most of the economically active men were crofter/fishermen at about the same economic level. Work now takes its character from the general economic life of the nation and



makes for differences rather than fostering common bonds of interest and cohesion.

Yet unlike most communities, where work operates to differentiate between various categories of the population, the employment pattern in Coigach is not seen as a basis for division between locals and incomers. The increase in the number of locally available jobs has certainly attracted people to the area, but full employment means that there is very little competition with local people for these jobs. Rather than driving a wedge between the two groups, work actually serves to bring locals and incomers together. The local fish-farms, for example, employ incomers and local people. The same is true in the small food-processing factory, and both locals and incomers rely on inshore fishing as their main source of income. Local employment figures correspond with the higher numbers of incomers over locals in the total population [see Figs. 15.2; 15.3]; and the similar age and gender structure of both groups are also reflected in the labour market.

In many communities work operates as a divisive force primarily because it is class-linked — that is, people who work in different jobs associated with different prestige levels tend to choose people at their own level with whom to associate rather than to cross job-related class lines. In Coigach, however, personal esteem is more important than formal prestige, and class distinction in a formal sense is poorly developed.

## Class

It would be theoretically possible to subdivide the population of Coigach on the basis of sociological convention into upper, middle, and lower classes. In both local and incomer camps there are individuals who could, theoretically, be placed on every rung of the class ladder.

Such a basis for stratification, however, would be largely unreal, unrecognised in the speech and behaviour of Coigach people. They do not see social class as a significant feature of interpersonal relations, and rarely show deference to people in class terms. They do not attribute status to people merely because they have a better job, or more money, or live in a bigger house. Class does not play a large or direct role in defining community lines, and Coigach people do not see it as an important organising principle with regard to the usually resident population.

They do, however, regard those who own holiday homes in the area as being on a different social level, and this is reflected in their use of the derogatory 'White Settler' label to describe them. (It is an interesting linguistic point that this label is rarely used to describe people who come to live long-term in Coigach, but is reserved for those who normally spend only a few weeks of the year in the place: MacLeod & Payne 1988).<sup>7</sup>

In other parts of the Scottish Highlands and Islands the term 'White Settler' has been widely adopted as a label for a colonial type of incomer stereotyped as English, affluent and arrogant. Such incomers are thought to have made their fortunes elsewhere before retiring to pleasant havens where

they bid up house prices and adopt patronising attitudes to 'the natives'. This exploitative, elitist stereotype does scant justice to the majority of those who come to live in Coigach on a full-time basis, and their arrival needs to be evaluated on rather more than an impressionistic and anecdotal level. It is readily apparent, for example, that these incomers are not displacing local people by buying up houses and property; and they cannot generally buy the crofts upon which most are situated. In this respect the Highlands and Islands differ markedly from other rural peripheries in that access to the agricultural sector has been restricted by the institutional and legislative peculiarities of large estate management and crofting which prevent the operation of anything like an open market for croft land in which incomers could be expected to outbid locals. Crofting regulations ensure that local people retain considerable control over this crucial resource.

## Housing

Housing is obviously a crucial issue, but in itself it causes no real social division between Coigach people. One local man neatly summed up the attitude of many of those in the receiving community when he said:

You can't blame them [incomers] for wanting their own place to live. If they get a house then it's our own fault for selling it to them or letting them build it in the first place. Once they're in there's nothing you can do about it, so there's no point complaining.

Of the 105 permanent dwellings in Coigach (August 1989), 51 are the homes of incomers or incomer families. Several of these houses are rented from local people; others 'come with the job', e.g. fish-farm cottages, the school house, the nurse's cottage; and twelve are council houses. The total number of homes actually *owned* by incomers is less than 60% of the number of dwellings they *occupy* so they cannot be accused, as a group, of buying up all the available property in the area. The number of households in the locality is about the same as the number of permanently-occupied dwellings: the fieldwork discovered no 'hidden' households — i.e. those which would separate out if housing were available. Nor were there reports of young couples or others having to leave Coigach to obtain accommodation. Incomers do not have a monopoly on council accommodation. Several of the 19 council houses in Coigach are rented by local people and, should the situation arise, a local person would be given the opportunity to receive council accommodation before a prospective incomer. The availability of chalets, caravans and winter lets helps to ensure a balance of supply and demand.

What does cause resentment in Coigach is the fact that nearly 44% of the total stock of 187 habitable houses are holiday homes. Such resentment is understandable in the light of Highland Regional Council's Community Survey Report (1981) which commented that holiday homes are a problem

where they constitute more than 20% of the local stock. Coigach people draw a distinction between 'cottages to let' owned predominantly by local people, and those houses that lie empty for the greater part of the year. The first are seen as tourist attractions that provide employment and income, especially during the busy summer months; the second are seen as expensive 'havens' for wealthy people who contribute little to the social and economic life of the place during the few weeks they spend there each year. It is these people, not the incomers, who are seen to boost house prices and severely restrict opportunities for 'ordinary folk' to contribute to Coigach life by coming to live and work in the area.

It is the relative isolation of Coigach that is one incentive for people to buy or build holiday homes in the area and may, therefore, be seen as a problem; but such isolation is also seen as an advantage in that it is a disincentive for commuters to set up 'base' there from which to travel to work. The presence of commuters in Coigach would undoubtedly lead to a far more rigid division than that presently found between locals and incomers who see the community as a central focus in their lives. Such incomers are not regarded as 'White Settlers', but as an important part of the community.

### Nationality

The 'White Settler' stereotype is further discredited in that the majority of incomers to Coigach are not English (43.3%) but Scottish (54.2%) [Fig. 15.4]:

<b>NATIONALITY AND PREVIOUS RESIDENCE OF INCOMERS (STILL RESIDENT) TO COIGACH:</b>			
<b>1960-1989</b>			
<b>NATIONALITY</b>		<b>PREVIOUS RESIDENCE</b>	
Scottish	65	Highlands	11
		Lowland Scotland	51
English	52	England	52
Outside U.K.	3	Outside U.K.	6
<b>Total</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>120</b>		<b>120</b>

Fig. 15.4 Nationality and previous residence of still-resident incomers to Coigach, 1960-1989. Source: A. MacLeod, fieldnotes.

Nor are all incomers to Coigach 'urban refugees'. Some have come to Coigach from other parts of the Scottish Highlands, and some from rural localities as far afield as Cornwall. Neither anti-English sentiment nor the rural/urban dichotomy, therefore, can adequately explain the division between locals and incomers. Nor is it the case, as protagonists of the 'White Settler' stereotype often imply, that the majority of incomers are retirees. Of the 69 adult (16+) incomers to Coigach between 1980 and 1989, only nine were aged over 60. The age structure of the incomers is similar to that of the receiving population, as is the percentage of males and females in either group.

## **THE ULTIMATE DISTINCTION: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY?**

If the division between locals and incomers cannot be fully or adequately explained in terms of the well-recognised indicators already discussed, how else may it be possible to distinguish between the two? Are there more distinctive, cultural factors?

### **Religion**

There is certainly still a division, for instance, between those who are faithful attenders of Church and those who never go, but as less than a dozen people go to Church on a regular basis this is not a major division in the community, either in terms of numbers or the importance attached to it by most people in the locality. With the obvious impotence of such potentially divisive issues as religion, how else is it possible for Coigach people to distinguish culturally between locals and incomers? By language perhaps?

### **Gaelic**

The use of Gaelic as a means of communication has declined and lost the meaning it once held for Coigach people. In the 1950s Gaelic was spoken a great deal: in the home; at work; in the pub etc. Now there are approximately 20 people in Coigach who can carry on a conversation in Gaelic, and it is heard infrequently — usually in relation to crofting matters. The youngest of these Gaelic speakers is in his early forties; and whilst there are several other fluent speakers under the age of 60, most are over 60. From the days when these people learnt Gaelic as a 'first language', the vast majority of those who regard themselves as locals today make no effort to learn it even as a 'second'. Proficiency in Gaelic is still regarded as a sure sign of localness, but its usage is no longer central to localness; there can be no overall distinction made between Gaelic-speaking locals and English-speaking incomers. There are some signs today of a slight upsurge of interest in

Gaelic — a few people, both locals and incomers, are trying to learn the language and some encourage their children to do so as well. Paradoxically, if this interest continues, Gaelic will become even less significant a tool for distinguishing between locals and incomers; but if it does not, and Gaelic dies, the loss is total.

### **A Symbolic Cultural Inheritance**

Such cultural elements as language and religion, therefore, are no more relevant than place-of-birth, parentage, length of residence, nationality, employment, class or housing in differentiating adequately between locals and incomers.

Explanation is possible only in terms of the principal characters themselves, and in symbolic rather than structural terms.

The recent acceleration in the perennial phenomenon of in-migration has brought about many changes in the social organisation of Coigach, and local people perceive a threat to the traditional lifestyle and culture of the place. This has spurred an increased interest in their own identity on the part of those in the receiving community. Confronted by social change, they seek to replace the now-anachronistic *structural* bases of their community boundary with *symbolically-expressed cultural* bases before their community disintegrates as a distinctive entity:

... they do so because ... [they] find their identities as individuals through their occupancy of the community's social space; if outsiders trespass in that space then ... [their] own sense of self is felt to be debased and defaced (Cohen 1985. 109).

In order to assert and preserve their own identity, therefore, they distinguish between their own culture and that seen to be confronting it. This distinction has been described as 'cultural totemism' or 'ethnognomony' (Schwartz 1975). The terms suggest that the associational category of 'local people' or 'community', and its refraction through self, marks what it is not, as well as what it is; that it emphasises traits and characteristics 'at once emblematic of the group's solidarity and of the group's contrasting identity in relation to the groups within its ambit of comparison' (Schwartz 1975. 109).

Such contrastive marking is exactly what makes the notion of 'social boundary' so central to an understanding of community. Coigach people emphasise their own and collective identity by using this notion to differentiate between those who they see as 'belonging' to the place and those who, by virtue of being outsiders, do not. The awareness and idiomatic expression of this differentiation is how Coigach people distinguish between locals and incomers.

A potential source of differentiation between the primary associational categories is the fact that many settlers have no knowledge of local history and culture. For local people, Coigach's past is bound up with their own personal history and identity; for the incomers it has no special significance



(MacLeod & Payne 1988). Having grown up in the place, local people know a great deal about local families and local ways. Incomers cannot share this unique relationship to Coigach and their lack of knowledge of kinship connections and the past, as well as posing difficulties when participating in local conversation and gossip, emphasises the cultural divide. But with the increasing number of incomers, and the amount of time some have spent in the locality, the divide has become more hazy and some of Coigach's cultural mainstays have weakened.

Let us look, nonetheless, at the nature and content of conversations recorded locally in Coigach, and more particularly at those (roughly one third of those recorded) which focus on the 'past' (for fuller details, see MacLeod & Payne 1988).

## TALKING ABOUT THE PAST

Like most rural areas, Coigach receives hardly a reference in the major historical accounts of Scotland or in the more popular clan histories; nor is there an amateur local history. The reasons are obvious: there is no large family house to provide links to famous names, and the area has little strategic or financial significance to invite struggles for its control. One exception is the successful popular resistance to attempts to evict some of the tenant farmers during the Clearances, reference to which is to be found in several sources and to which we will return (Stevenson & Quinault 1974; Prebble 1963; Hunter 1976; Mackenzie 1914; Richards 1973; Grigor 1979; Richards & Clough 1989; Baldwin, this volume).

While there is so little *formal* local history, people do take an interest in the earlier parts of their own collective lives and there does seem to be a general awareness among 'locals' that first-hand experience and knowledge of one particular way-of-life is nearly at an end. The people now aged 60 and over, who have lived much of their lives locally, are the last generation who farmed the crofts in the traditional way: they include almost all of the fluent Gaelic speakers (MacLeod & Payne 1991). These people do sometimes speak sadly of what has been lost, but they seem no more concerned with the past than other men and women in their sixties and seventies elsewhere. The past is not the major focus of interest for them, nor do they constantly compare the present (to its detriment) with bygone days. Their interest in their own earlier lives is largely that it *is* their own lives. That the life-style was different makes it of sufficient interest to include sometimes in conversation.

### 'Historical' Themes and Local Reminiscence

Out of a total of 26 conversations containing references to the past (recorded over 27 working days and including nearly 50 speakers, 30 separate individuals), nine contained specific references to 'history', previous cen-

turies or to global events. Three of these dealt with the World Wars; one with an old document about land tenure; two with local 18th century settlements, now in ruins; two with school days and what history was taught as a subject; and the ninth being one person reflecting on 200 years of social change in Coigach. The remaining conversations dealt with past events in the locality. Most were individual reminiscences, including four fairly technical reviews of how fishing and farming work methods had changed (including poaching salmon as a work method!) and how this had affected the talkers' lives. One was a recollection of visiting a particular house years ago, as a teenager; and one was a school-days memory of how different and better it had been then without so many visitors. In all, there were seven comparisons of the past with the present, mainly arising from reflections about the current New Year's celebrations. Three others dealt with anecdotes involving mutual friends or relatives, and the last was a remark about contemporary people's attitudes to the past or history.

It is interesting to see what historical references did *not* get included. There was no general British history, of this or any century, except the World Wars. There was no general Scottish history, or use of romantic tales of battle (unless one really stretches it to include a song or two). The content of the 26 extracts is overwhelmingly local, and every one of the deep past and the global events was given explicit local reference points.

With three or four exceptions, the specific evaluative comments, the tone of voice, the contexts in which the past was raised and the conversational responses, all tended to suggest interest rather than high levels of consciousness or a significant symbolic point of reference. What was striking, however, was the way that both the past, and every reference to history, was connected to the locality, and most of the time to some event in the present. To some extent, this is to be expected, because there has to be a trigger for the natural occurrence of the new topic. Nonetheless, the degree of connection goes beyond the initial introduction of topic. While some of the stories did look back nostalgically to better days, the general character was not dominated by a yearning for lost ways of life, which would have had little direct relevance for today.

### **Reinforcement of a Shared Identity**

Instead, the past was commonly used as a device for sustaining shared identity among local people. For the most part, this was not done by parading their connections with the past in front of visitors and incomers. The past came up most when only the 'more local' people were present. Incomers with disparate backgrounds could neither participate, nor mobilise their own pasts in the same way when interacting with other incomers. Thus the emphasis was on what binds local people together, rather than what keeps incomers apart.

Put another way, nearly four-fifths of the conversations about the past occurred in locally-orientated groups, with no incomers or visitors. This

could simply suggest that history is not greatly used as a conversational device among relative strangers, but that does not account for its lack of usage in the company of well-known incomers, or by incomers amongst themselves. It seems plausible to suggest, rather, that the more identifiably 'local' people tend to exploit their shared memories to re-establish and maintain their interpersonal links — and therein lies a particular significance. Incomers in particular are likely to be excluded because the essence of their identity is that they are *not* local, and so they are not encouraged to participate in the resource of common knowledge about the area's past. The constant re-creation of local identity could not be achieved if non-locals were allowed to play in the same game. The emphasis is nonetheless on who *is* included, rather than on an aggressive or conscious exclusion. It may be that incomers and visitors (and ethnographers in general!) can take naturally occurring discussions of the past as one indicator of their achieving growing acceptance into a rural settlement.

It is not surprising, then, that many of the mentions of the past are explicitly about *local* events and people. However, as indicated, the more strictly *historical* references were also linked to local events and history. The salience of history for Coigach is its capacity to sustain identity and to connect with the present; its 'localness', therefore, is paramount.

## THE STORY OF THE CLEARANCES: A CULTURAL SYMBOL?

It has been suggested above that very few stories related specifically to known Scottish or local historical events, and also that very few stories reflected a significant cultural symbolism. One particular exception must be the story of mid 19th century resistance in Coigach to the Clearances.

Several recent publications (Richards 1973; Richards & Clough 1989 236-45; Baldwin, this volume) relate how the tenants of Coigach defied the authority of the landlord and the law by resisting eviction parties five times in twelve months (1852-53). Richards's account of the first attempt to serve the summons tells how the writs were burned after they had been seized from the officers of the law who had travelled from Ullapool to Coigach by boat. They were met by a large crowd of local people, mainly dressed in female fashion; they were humiliated and then sent packing. Prebble (1963), Mackenzie (1914), Stevenson & Quinault (1974) and Grigor (1979) seem to confine themselves to this event, describing the civil unrest and the writ-burning:

The Marquis of Stafford informed forty of his tenants at Coigach that he required them out, as their land was to be put under sheep. The people threatened deforcement; the Lord Advocate was asked for soldiers; and in the meantime a party of sheriff officers was deforced, and their writs of removal were burned before them (Grigor 1979).

The number of tenants facing eviction varies from account to account

(according to Eric Richards only 18 people were to be removed); so also do other details, not least of which is the part played by the Duchess of Sutherland. According to Alexander Mackenzie (1914) the Duchess interceded between her subordinates and the people and prevented the clearance: he claimed that the proceedings 'seem to have taken place without the knowledge of the noble proprietrix who, as soon as the true state of the case was laid before her, disallowed the violent proceedings of her underlings'. However, according to Richards (1988. 242-3), she urged full exertion of the law against the people.

In most of the written accounts, and in two local oral versions, the story has been radically condensed in its re-telling. First, the surviving tale is now by most standards a pretty good story, with drama and eventual triumph for the underdogs. Second, it is a story that is unique to the locality, of particular interest to people living there and in which the local people triumph. And third, as in the case when it was originally told to Payne, its text of locals versus outsiders can be turned to the modern context of locals and incomers.

We might therefore expect it to be a commonly-told tale, but while almost all local people to whom we have spoken seem to know it, at least in general terms, it does not assume a central place in the life of the people. It is not ritually told at some point of the year; there is no ceremony to mark it; MacLeod does not recall hearing it taught in the local school, or frequently recounted in his family upbringing, or told by more than three people. Payne, as an incomer, encountered the story on only two occasions in three years, apart from when he has raised the story himself.

### **Recent Versions of the Story**

To demonstrate the quality of the story, two oral versions are given below. The first was written out in 1981 by a man in his eighties, who spoke to MacLeod of the incident and offered to write down a short historical account. What follows is a short extract from that account:

... At that period the Achiltibuie rents were leased by the Cromarty estate to two MacKenzie brothers, merchants in Ullapool. The MacKenzie merchants wished to break the lease so the estate decided to evict more Coigach crofters and summons were issued for that purpose. There were no roads here then. When the Sheriff's men came to Ullapool on their way to Coigach to serve the summons, a young lad named Gordon came quickly along the coast and told the people. A large crowd gathered on the beach below the hotel at Achiltibuie where the boat landed. A number of teenage girls and some teenage boys dressed as girls then caught hold of the Sheriff's men and stripped them, looking for the summons. They failed to find them on their bodies. Then they searched the boat. They found them nailed under the sole at the stern. The summons were taken and burnt there and then in a bonfire on the beach. Then one of the lassies was put sitting in the stern — the rudder was replaced and the beam put under her arm, and the boat carried shoulder high in triumph for about a quarter mile and dumped on top of a potato pit just below the hotel and left there. No doubt a drink or two would be taken to celebrate the victory

for the local cellar was only about fifty yards from the potato pit.

. . . My Grandmother, Margaret MacLeod, was sixteen years of age when she took part in the burning of the summonses.

The second version, taken from a video-interview, is a re-telling to MacLeod of the story as it was originally told to Payne:

Storyteller: . . . When the Red Coats arrived out the river [along the sea loch] . . . they said to the men in Ullapool, we will give 2/6 to any man (well it was called a silver shilling but I call it 2/6) to any man who will row us fresh, so we'd be fresh when we arrive in Coigach to land the eviction papers.

And this woman who came to Ullapool from Coigach said, 'If I am married to you boy, who will row me to my own people'. She walked into the water with her child and she persuaded him, she persuaded him and eventually she threw her child into the water and said, 'If you will go to the sea, to sail and take my people away, you can have my child back'. But, you know romanticism, knowing full well that her husband would jump out of the boat and save the child.

Interviewer: Oh. Aye . . .

Storyteller: But she told her oldest son to run over the hill to Coigach, which is only seven miles, today's 25 miles by road.

Interviewer: He came by the coast?

Storyteller: Aye, he ran over the Hill and he warned people . . . When they came . . . they dressed and they put the, the big black stockings on, you know what I mean the men, some of the men dressed up, the more weaklings of the men that looked like women, you know, and they waited on the beach, and the thing was if they went over high tide mark, it would be legal landing of a document you know, so they did was, they a . . . they went and met them on the beach . . .

You see the *Cailleachs* [old women], boy, with the hand like that, scooping the pebbles out of the beach, man, you know, and wallop! you know? and that's, that's the second-hand story, you know, and they just gie'd it to them. But when they thrashed the Red Coats on the beach . . . they got the bloody boat and dragged it up the beach and . . .

Interviewer: That was the women, aye?

Storyteller: Yes; yes, yes. Then the men came down, you see, because they were broken men. They were . . . the structure was broken after the, after the ['45] . . .



But anyway when, when they pulled the boat up over the sea-tide, they suddenly thought . . . that . . . if they pulled the boat up to burn it, that the eviction papers would be in the boat, and if the eviction papers were in the boat if they pulled the boat over the shore they would be doing what the Red Coats wanted . . . once it was landed . . . we're finished, you know? So they searched the whole boat and they found, you know the triangular draining board in the back of a coble boat, they lifted it and there was the eviction papers so they built a pyre below seaweed mark and they burnt that.

Interviewer: Aye.

Storyteller: And then they took the trousers and the fun the women had! Of taking the trousers off the Red Coats, six of them, taking the trousers off them, you know and the, the pants off them, you know long pants, and sending them marching home over to Ullapool, 25 miles, that was winter.

Interviewer: Oh, they made them walk back?

Storyteller: Aye, aye, aye . . . [You've heard] . . . the tune . . . The March of the, of the cold . . . Well, you know, testicles.

Interviewer: [laughs] Is that what its called?

Storyteller: Yes, aye, aye.

Interviewer: I must remember that.

## **Social and Cultural Significance**

The story, then, is not just about the area; it has acquired numerous accretions of detail. In addition to the historical core (which broadly corresponds with other, some written, accounts), there is considerable local elaboration and embellishment of detail based on local reference, instance:

- \* the Achiltibuie woman who delays the Clearance party at Ullapool and sends her eldest son to warn his kin
- \* the 'legal landing' of the papers above the tide-mark
- \* the discovery of the papers concealed under the draining board at the back of the coble
- \* the burning of the boat between the tide-lines
- \* the local pipe-tune celebrating the trouserless march of the military back to Ullapool.

Furthermore, in addition to the many and various individual and personal

responses which punctuate the tale, it embraces a number of wider elements seemingly unconnected with the actual event — reference to the '45 and local support for it, and references (not mentioned in these extracts) to the cod fisheries, to the advice of Irish fishermen and to a Pan-Celtic identity.

This all helps give the story some of its vitality, as well as establishing the same sort of inner world of meaning that the use of slang, technical terminology or Gaelic also creates — 'over the Hill', 'out the river'; details of the coble; 'cailleach' (and elsewhere, 'bodach', 'bochan'). In this it resembles the other historical stories told locally, and it nurtures a sense of local identity.

Within, however, is a deeper and stronger sense of identity. Some of the story's capacity to stimulate such a response must lie in the dramatic form, in the creative act of narrating it and in the outcome of the event; but it also contains idealised visions of contemporary issues. The local people *acted positively* rather than passively accepting their fate at the hands of outsiders. They *acted together* rather than as individuals. They were able to do so because of a warning sent by a female relative, acting out of *kinship obligation*.

The events of the past are used to re-state cultural values and norms of behaviour. Of course, this function of myth has been recognised by social scientists for a long time: Durkheim has been a fruitful source of ideas, not least for social anthropologists. What makes this story interesting is that it would appear to be a version of an event that 'actually happened', i.e. that it is recorded in written history, which conventionally is taken to mean that it actually happened. Oral tradition, therefore, has either kept alive details which were lost in the writing, or encouraged local and personal embellishments.

Second, the historicity of the event has been manipulated as a mechanism for sanitizing a potentially contentious statement. For whilst the second, video-taped version emphasises a sense of belonging as a Celt and a local, its first telling could be interpreted as a statement about incomers, stimulated by the unusual condition of someone moving house — signalling to them that they were outsiders, that they were part of a society which had exploited local people, and that differences could be felt between some white settlers and local people. This potentially contentious message was, however, rendered acceptable and indeed polite by the fact that it took the form of a description of a piece of 'history'. Thus there was no open antagonism, or start of a long term disagreement: rather, a boundary was laid out, which paradoxically provided the basis for future social relationships in the confined social space of a small settlement.

In other words, the story is much more than a description of events; it is not just one among several local tales but can be seen, on occasion at least, as a key symbolic tale. This confirms the more general view that the past and history are not casual conversational capital like the weather; nor yet a fixed, intrinsically interesting bank of knowledge. It is the selective use of history that makes it important for Coigach, and which contributes to the continuing sense of identity that sustains its indigenous people.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This study was the outcome of MacLeod's research in Coigach for his Ph.D thesis, Plymouth University, 1992, supervised by Professor Payne.

<sup>2</sup> See Stacey 1960; Watson 1965; Merton 1968; Newby 1979; Ennew 1980; Strathern 1984; Stephenson 1984; Phillips 1986; Bryan 1987.

<sup>3</sup> In this study the term 'Coigach' refers to those townships grouped around the peninsula of Coigach, between outer Loch Broom and Enard Bay. It does not include the rest of the former Barony of Coigach. Because these townships are usually viewed collectively by their inhabitants and by other people as a single locality, they are taken to be a distinct social unit.

<sup>4</sup> The social organisation described in this paper is as it was during the fieldwork. There were 261 people living in Coigach in August 1989, but due to births and deaths, and in- and out-migration, the population figure has varied somewhat throughout the course of research and subsequently.

<sup>5</sup> In fact it is very rare for a baby to have been born in Coigach in recent decades. The nearest maternity unit is over sixty miles away and this means that expectant mothers usually travel to the east coast to have their babies delivered. Nevertheless, 'born and bred' is the phrase used by Coigach people to designate those who were raised from infancy in Coigach, and that is how it is used here.

<sup>6</sup> Such legitimisation is only required in the event of one local vying with another in an attempt to prove him or herself 'more' local.

<sup>7</sup> Labels like 'local', 'incomer' and 'visitor' are all terms commonly used by people living in Coigach. The basic framework is as follows:

Local	: Coigach-born and/or lived most of life in Coigach
Local non-resident:	local, living away from Coigach
Locally-connected:	non-local, married into local family, or with long local work-record
Incomer	: non-local resident
Regular visitor	: incomer for part of each year (e.g. school holidays)
'White settler'	: incomer, usually well-off/middle class, with few local connections; rarely used to describe people who come to live in Coigach, but is reserved for those who normally spend only a few weeks of the year in their holiday home
'Bongley'/visitor	: casual, non-local visitor or tourist

Individuals can pass through these statuses, e.g. from 'incomer' to 'locally-connected', over time. Equally, the line between 'us' and 'them' is constantly negotiated, and is re-drawn at various points within the above list according to what is currently taking place.

## Acknowledgement

Fig. 15.5 is reproduced by courtesy of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

## References

- Bell, C. & Newby, H. *Community Studies*. 1971.  
Brody, H. *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland*. 1973.  
Bryan, G. White Settlers — A Red Herring, in *The Scots Magazine*. July 1987.  
Bryden, J. M. & Houston, G. *Agrarian Change in the Scottish Highlands*. 1976.  
Cohen, A. P. (ed.) *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and Diversity in British Cultures*. 1986.  
Ennew, J. *The Western Isles Today*. 1980.  
Gibbon, P. Arensberg and Kimball Revisited, in *Economy and Society*. vol. 2. 1973.

- MacLeod, A. *Social Identity, Social Change and the Construction of Symbolic Boundaries in a West Highland Settlement*. Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Plymouth. 1992.
- MacLeod, A. & Payne, G. *Talking About the Past: Social Identity in a Scottish Village*. B.S.A. Conference, Edinburgh. 1988. ms.
- MacLeod, A. & Payne, G. 'When All's Said and Done': *Identity Without Language in a Small Settlement*. Fasgnag Conference, Sabhal Mór Ostaig, Skye. 1991. ms.
- Merton, R. K. Locals and Cosmopolitans, in *Social Theory and Social Structure*. 2nd Edition. 1968.
- Newby, H. *Green and Pleasant Land*. 1979.
- Phillips, S. K. Natives and Incomers: the symbolism of belonging in Muker Parish, North Yorkshire, in A. P. Cohen (ed.) *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and Diversity in British Cultures*. 1986.
- Stacey, M. *Tradition and Change: A Study of Banbury*. 1960.
- Stephenson, J. B. *Ford: A Village in the West Highlands*. 1984.
- Strathern, M. The Village as an idea: constructs of village-ness in Elmdon, Essex, in A. P. Cohen (ed.) *Belonging: Identity and Social Organisation in British Rural Cultures*. 1982.

Fig. 15.5 Polglass, Coigach, 1993.

