



The Village Ceilidh-house

The village ceilidh-house was an ancient social institution in Lewis and elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands, where the young and not so young gather informally to pass the time pleasantly and light-heartedly in a convivial and relaxed atmosphere during the long winter evenings in the warmth of a bright peat fire, before radio and television was invented.

It was our privilege to have enjoyed the last years of that unique form of cultural education when we were growing up in the small village of Calbost during the years between the two world wars. There was, even then, at least one ceilidh house in every village in Lochs.

The main ceilidh-house in our village was the dwelling house of Angus Morrison (Tigh Aonghais an Mhurchaidh) where he and his patient daughter Peggy entertained generations after generations of young village folk night after night, until the old way of life was rudely interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, never again to be resumed. Ceilidh houses in Lochs were hospitable friendly homes where a generous and cordial welcome awaited all and sundry.

Angus, the head of the house, was the host and he took a leading, but not an exclusive, part in the entertainment of the guests. There were usually guest speakers, as it were, men and women home on holiday, or on leave from the Armed Forces or the Merchant Navy or sometimes from a spell abroad. Also visitors from one of the neighbouring villages dropped in from time to time.

The Caithness fishing (Iasgach Ghallamh) and the well-known Wick Riot of 1859 (Sabaid Mhor Wick) or Inbher Uige were favourite subjects of our host and we still remember the Gaelic names of fishing ports such as 'Liabost' 'Bunilish' 'Inbhir Theorsa' etc.

We still have a vivid recollection of our patriarchal white haired host, with his flowing white beard, stretched out on top of the living room bed (Leabaidh an Teine) relating to a full house his lifetime experiences and sea stories.

Other subjects that came up frequently were local history; genealogy; folklore; ghost stories; legends and local traditions; fairies; water-kelpies (each Uisge); place names and particularly marks of good fishing grounds. In that way the local ceilidh-house was the seat of our early education.

Gaelic songs and other cultural activities were heard from time to time and in the 1920s the gramophone was an innovation and one or other of the guests sometimes brought one in.

As almost all the young men in the Islands were under military contract as Royal Naval Reservists we all received our call-up papers in the 1938 crisis and as the war started in 1939 that ended the ceilidh-house. Our host died in 1945 at the ripe old age of 93 years. After the Second World War depopulation set in because of lack of employment and the village itself did not last long after that.

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Date:

Original document title: The Village Ceilidh-house

Location in physical archive: Series F, File 6, Section 11

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/6/x (additional file)

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