

Angus Macleod  
Park House, Marybank  
Stornoway 13.11.93

Dear Helen

Thank you for your letter of 8.11.93. I am very interested in your work and you are certainly undertaking a handful. You are very welcome to any assistance or information I may be able to give you.

I think it is a very good idea for you to spend some time with me out here questioning me during your holiday. Also, I have various papers, some of which I feel sure you might find interesting. I was active in the Harris Tweed industry from the end of the war till I took ill in the 70s but our family are associated with the industry during the whole of this century.

I was invariably Chairman or Secretary of the Small Producers' Association and represented them in discussion on the industry, including the Lord Hunter case and the power-weaving double-width of the 1970s etc etc. There may be useful reports and papers lying around from these days? The thing is for you to look at what there is and prepare a long list of questions.

Strangely but I do not recall the Labour Government doubling Purchase Tax on Harris Tweed in the 1950s and I certainly do not think such a thing caused small producers to leave the industry. My recollection of that period is that the war-time seller's market prevailed until 1949/50. Up to that point one could sell any cloth but about that time a buyers' market returned and it became difficult to sell tweed. Whereas before 1950 every crofter that cared made a piece or two of tweed and it was snapped up. In fact various firms had established buying agents in Lewis. I was one of them. I was buying agent for a London firm - MARSHALL INGRAM - on commission.

Only the organised small producers survived after 1950 and they had to sell on pattern through agents in various world markets. Quality, delivery and pattern ranges had to be guaranteed. I do not remember Purchase Tax playing any part in the situation.

The problem of the small producer was the availability of sufficient yarn supplies of quality and the right delivery. We were competing with our yarn suppliers. Demand for Harris Tweed has always been cyclical and I would like you to note that. I will send you a table of the stamping figures. There was a dip in 1950 and 1951 - picked up in 1952, peaked in 1966. I could give you several reasons for the decline and the eclipse of the industry apart from styles and fashions and wool versus man-made fibres. The blame lies largely with the manufacturers of the cloth.

There is or at least was a lot of distrust and what you might call industry politics in the industry. In a word desperate jealousy and lack of genuine cooperation for the good of the whole industry and community. The H.T.A. was always a weak, short-sighted body, not prepared to administer the industry on behalf of the whole community but always deferring to the spindle power of the spinner/manufacturers.

Incidentally the small producers were priced out of the home market by the spinners, more or less from 1950, and of course N.A.T. did not apply in the export market.

It's a long long story with many sides to it but coming back to your letter you raise the question, "is double width the answer?" That is a good question and I maintain there is more to it than meets the eye. Also, it is of course a continuation of the shameful attempt to convert the communal industry to a common power-woven double-width mill-controlled industry. Brian Wilson is the only public figure that really appreciates the politics of the H.T. industry. You should interview him if you can.

May I point out that the H.T. industry is unique in the world - a survival of the old by blending it with the modern. It is as much a social concept as an industry. Crofting and Harris Tweed are social concepts and all social concepts are under attack nowadays. There is no heart in big business; it is always ruthless and grabbing. That brings me to the change in the Orb administration and particularly ownership whereas previously the Orb which was the backbone of the industry was a commercial trademark with equal right by all Hebrideans. Now it is owned by this new body with parliamentary backing. In my opinion that is a fundamental change. It is claimed to be a change for the good and let's hope so, I cannot help being sceptical.

I wonder if that change has anything to do with the fact that the H.T.A/HIDB could not force through the power-weaving Orb deal in the 1970s when the referendum of the weavers was against by something like 96%. The architect of that deal, J.S. Grant, was extremely disappointed and also very influential.

Under the new administration anything can be done with the Orb because the new body owns it. It is out of the control of the community and the weavers. I am sceptical. Let's hope it is for the better?

Incidentally, do you know anything about the Betty Davies organisation? She is a fashion designer and I am under the impression she has several shops. I think her headquarters are in Edinburgh. I am not sure if Davies is her trading name. She uses Harris Tweed and she criticised the 1970s attempt to convert it into double-width. I will give you her private address - privately and confidential - but please do not use my name. I feel that if you could contrive to have a talk with her - you might find it interesting - because she is completely away from the local politics of the industry and viewing the industry from the outside and not only that but from a users point of view. She was from Lewis and I fancy she understands the industry well. I was very impressed by a designer like that coming out on the side of single-width.

I must congratulate you on your keen perception. For instance your fourth paragraph is on the ball in my opinion 1) Double-width, was it the only option? At the end of the day I suppose that is a matter of opinion. As I am no longer active in the industry I am not keen to express public opinions - but privately I have reservations and I will be very keen to hear your conclusions after you have carried out your research. How did the relevant bodies come to this conclusion? I feel they will tell you that various consultant reports strongly recommend double-width - particularly for the ladies' trade, the furniture trade and the cutting equipment - all of which they will tell you is geared to double width. Again I am sceptical because these consultant reports are commissioned by the industry and the consultants know what the answer that will please their paymasters is. I would be more impressed by Betty Davies' independent opinions of the market.

A possible threat to the uniqueness of Harris Tweed - I always took that view - rightly or wrongly, who knows - perhaps that view is no longer relevant - I still have nagging doubts. I think it is a very good thing for young people like your good self to take an interest in these matters - a new fresh mind.

Overproduction - It was overproduction that killed the H.T. industry - or should I say - uncontrolled production saturating every market in the world at a time when people were turning away from wool. To aggravate the situation the industry went over madly to the cheap end of the woollen cloth - such as Burton's etc etc and the expensive makers-up had to drop the article. Some of them even took the cloth but not the Orb garment label. None of the main manufacturers will ever reveal these things to you because it was they who were the chief culprits. Some worse than others. As you say so rightly, "forcing Harris Tweed to compete with more inferior cloths".

I am rambling on and on but I want to say one more thing before I conclude. One of the main problems of the old H.T. industry was the difficulty of controlling a variety of manufacturers. The present-day industry is more compact and it should be that much easier to operate a sensible policy for the good of all the industry.

The first thing to do is to determine a minimum price - undercutting was always the bane of the industry. The second thing is to channel the cloth to the high-class end of the market. It is a quality high-class cloth - expensive all-wool - virgin wool at that. The third thing is to control the production and not flood the market with overproduction - thereby depressing the price. Did you notice the way the brewers control their whisky production in a much more difficult industry where whisky has to mature for years before sale? Also, whisky is not manufactured by one firm but by many firms - yet they operate in a sensible way in accordance with market demand and they curb overproduction.

Well now, that is another long lecture and do excuse me.

I will think of what documentation or references are available here or elsewhere. Books on Harris Tweeds are usually superficial.

Ms Betty Davies Suite 17  
North Bridge House  
28 North Bridge, Edinburgh EH1 1QE  
031 335 6385

I would prefer you to seek out the shop or commercial place.

With best wishes  
Angus