

SCF ANNUAL GATHERING

Crofting – an appreciation of transferable skills



AT THE GATHERING in Dingwall folklorist Margaret Bennet gave an inspirational talk. Here she has summarised it for us.

A career in writing books and sharing traditional music may have more to do with typewriters and tape recorders than hayforks, milk pails and butter churns.

Nevertheless, when asked about my greatest source of inspiration, without hesitation I single out a croft in Glenconon, Skye, home of my grandparents, John and Flora Stewart.

It was there I first heard the sound of milk in the pail to my mother's singing, turned the handle of a wooden butter churn under my grandmother's supervision, made brose, peeled onions for maragan, minced the suet for the clottie dumpling; turned and raked hay, thinned turnips, planted and lifted potatoes and did my little part at the slochd buntata.

I picked raspberries and brambles, helped make jam, scones, oatcakes, stapag and ceann cropaig; wound hanks of wool, darned old socks and knitted new, patched briogais, cut up strips of old garments for the 'hookie' rag-rug; sandpapered knife-blades; fed pet lambs; paid attention to the shearer who said exactly where to put the keel-mark; gathered shellfish, picked dulse; turned peats and fetched them from the stack.

In early childhood there was no question that carrying just one peat at a time was a help – and did seanair not say that God made the hands and the back fit for the task? Looking back, it seemed that no hands were too small to take part.

By the time youngsters realised that the child-sized hayforks were not custom-made but converted from ones with broken shafts, they had moved on to a bigger size.

What may be called 'basic training' or 'skill acquisition' today was simply the way of life – a myriad of crofting skills assimilated with no apparent instruction, yet taught so precisely as never to be forgotten.

At the same time, these skills were woven with rhymes, games, proverbs, riddles, songs, tunes, stories, creative crafts and even dances.

Traditions about plants, insects, animals and birds came in several guises, many etched in my memory – my grandmother's rhyme about the corra-cho-

sag (woodlouse, or slater); my grandfather lifting me up to the eaves of the barn to gaze into a nest and watch the mother bird feeding her young.

Then there were the neighbours – fellow labourers at the fank, the peats, the harvest, who also became fireside philosophers.

Unless visitors arrived, they spoke entirely in Gaelic and it was not uncommon to hear a sentence begin, "Mar a thuir Mairi Mhòr... (or Donnchadh Bàn...)" after which a long quotation of poem or song would emphasise a point in discussion.

These congenial gatherings took place in homes that never had a telephone and among folk who knew nothing of emails; nevertheless all had the assurance that, if help were needed for planting or harvest, a white sheet on a distant peat-stack could summon a team faster than any mass email.

Wherever you moved in crofting circles, from the most northern tip of Unst to the furthest point of the Western Isles there was a similar way of life and regard for the community.

By the standards of the western world there was little material wealth but the cultural richness of the crofting community could readily hold its place in any artistic, literary, scientific or intellectual arena.

Where tested and tried wisdom was taken for granted and old ways abandoned, we might take a moment to reflect on some 'discoveries' which tell us something that tradition taught us long ago.

I began my talk at the SCF gathering in September by playing an old recording of a woman singing a Gaelic song to her cow as she milked.

After long and expensive scientific research, modern farmers now benefit from the discovery that the sound of music (or MUZAK) in milking parlours produces a higher milk yield.

The importance of handing on tradition from one generation to the next is not so that we can turn back the clock and do things exactly as our grandparents did; it's so that we can progress with each generation adapting to changes without compromising our languages, traditional knowledge or culture with its wealth of music, song, literature and art.

Today when we hear new discussions on 'identifying transferable skills' let's not forget the crofters who have them in spades.

