

[27TH APRIL, 1890.]

At the Business Meeting of the Society held on this date, the various Office-Bearers read reports, satisfactory in every respect. Thereafter Mr J. G. Mackay read a paper on '*Life in the Highlands a hundred years ago.*' Mr. Makay's paper was as follows:—

SOCIAL LIFE IN THE HIGHLANDS IN THE OLDEN TIMES.

It is unfortunate that so little has been written about the Highlands by natives of the country, who being acquainted with the state of society and manners, would be able to give an intelligent and unbiassed account of the social condition of the country in the past, and not left us dependent upon what has been written by strangers, many of whom were prejudiced, and who, even though they would have been incline

to treat us fairly, could hardly have done so from their want of knowledge of the language, customs, and institutions of the people. That there were many Highlanders even at a remote period who could have done so, there is not any doubt, for, though there were no schools of learning in the country previous to the Reformation, many of the Highland youth of good families got a fair education in Edinburgh and Aberdeen, and some went abroad, even to France and Italy. Martin, who wrote an account of his tour to the Western Isles about the end of the seventeenth century, says that he was not only the first native, but the *first* who travelled in these islands, to write a description of them. He makes a complaint which might very well be repeated at the present day, "That the modern itch after knowledge of foreign places is so prevalent, that the generality of mankind bestow little thought or time upon the place of their own nativity." and adds, "It is become customary in those of quality to travel young, into foreign countries, while they are absolute strangers at home."

This has left us with very little knowledge of the social life of the Highland people during a very interesting part in their history.

During those years between the Reformation and the "45," the Highlanders occupied a very prominent part in Scottish History, and it is their misfortune to have their deeds recorded by historians who showed no disposition to do them justice. While their bravery and military prowess could not be denied,—as in disparaging *their* bravery that of their opponents

would be still further degraded,—the meanest and most mercenary of motives were attributed to them. The chiefs were represented as being actuated not by sympathy or principle, but from their inherent love for rapine and disorder, while their followers were supposed to have no choice in the matter, but to blindly follow their chiefs without questioning the object or cause.

We are not so much concerned in the meantime as to the part the Highlanders took in the events of those stirring times. Many of the facts are recorded in history, and their bitterest enemies cannot deny them the credit which is their due, and we may hope some day to see a History of Scotland that will do them the justice their conduct deserves. Our purpose at present is to give so far as we have been able to gather from the limited sources at our command, an account of the social life in the Highlands during the last century, and the early part of the present, before the great changes consequent on the introduction of the sheep-farming system took place.

Life in the Highlands in those times was very different indeed from what it is at the present day.

In a purely pastoral country like the Highlands, nearly the whole population was necessarily occupied in one way or another about the land, and everyone must consequently have more or less land, according to his station, for the maintenance of his stock, which constituted the wealth of the country. The land was divided in the first instance in large tacks among the chieftains or head men, who occupied what was termed

“so many *peighinn*,” or penny-lands, and for which they paid a certain tribute annually, partly in kind and partly in money, in support of the dignity of the chief. These men again let out portions of the land to the common men of the tribe, for which they received payment in kind and also in services, such as cutting and stacking peats, tilling the ground, and securing the crops, &c.

These services were rendered according to a regular system, so many days at peat cutting, at spring work, or harvest, &c. When the services were rendered for land held direct of the chief, they were termed *Morlanachd* or *Borlanachd*. When for lands held of the tacksmen, they were termed *Cariste*. So long as the patriarchal system prevailed, these services were neither so severe nor so degrading as they became in later years, when the chiefs lost all interest in their people. When the strong arms and loyal hearts of his clansmen formed his only wealth, the chief was very careful of the comfort of his people, and the tacksmen were bound to treat them justly, as the chief could not depend upon the loyalty of an unhappy people. When, however, with altered circumstances, after the passing of the “Hereditary Jurisdiction Act,” they lost the power they formerly held, of combining together for the purpose of warfare, their love for their people ceased; farms were let to the highest bidder, and in most instances, south-country shepherds and stock raisers, took the place of the Highland gentlemen tacksmen. Then the position of those who were left as sub-tenants, became uncomfortable in the

extreme. The former tacksmen, from their kindly nature and clannish sympathies, would naturally treat them kindly, but the new-comers, whose only interest was the making of money, considered them only as lumber in the way of their sheep and cattle, and services which formerly were rendered as an indirect way of maintaining the dignity of their chief, soon became degrading in their eyes, and very grievous to be borne.

The land held by the members of the clan under the old system, was divided into townships, usually *leth-pheighinn*, or half-penny land to the townships. Penny-lands were of different sizes, probably according to their value, or custom of the district.

Skene says, that the average township in the Mid Highlands consisted of 90 acres within the head dyke, of which 20 acres were infield, 15 acres were outfield, 10 acres meadow, 35 acres green pasture, and 10 acres woody waste, and the moorland behind the dyke 250 acres.

The arable land was usually held on the runrig system, a third of the land being divided by lot every three years, while each had a stated amount of stock on the hill pasture. Besides the regular rent charge, each member of the clan contributed according to his means on great occasions, such as the marriage of a son or daughter of the chief. These contributions, in the aggregate, frequently amounted to a good deal. It was customary, even on the occasion of the marriage of an ordinary clansman, for the neighbours to make

a contribution of useful articles so as to put the young couple in a good way of house keeping.

The rent book of a Highland chief in the olden time would be a very interesting study to day, with its payments in kind. In the old "Statistical Account" of Scotland, Dr. Smith, of Campbeltown, gives a most interesting statement of the rental of the district of Kintyre and Islay in 1542, then in the possession of the Lord of the Isles—

NORTH KINTYRE.

In money, £105 10s. 0d. Scots.
Oatmeal, $388\frac{1}{4}$ sts. a st. is $\frac{1}{8}$ of a Boll.
Malt, 4 chalders 10 Bolls.
Marts, 6, Cow, 1.
Mutton, 41.
Cheese, $307\frac{1}{4}$ sts.

SOUTH KINTYRE.

Money, £162 3s. 4d. Scots.
Meal, 480 sts. 2 pecks.
Malt, 25 chalders, 14 Bolls, 2 Firloot.
Marts, 48, Mutton, 53.
Cheese, $342\frac{1}{4}$ sts.

ISLAY AND RHINDS.

Money, £45 0s. 1d. Scots.
Meal, 2593 sts.
Marts, 301
Mutton, 301
Cheese, 2161 sts. 3 lb.
Geese, 301
Poultry, 301

TOTAL.

In money,	-	-	-	-	£323	18	6
Meal, 3061 grs. 3 qr. 3 lb. at 2s.,	-				366	2	10
Malt, 30 chalders, 8 Bolls, 2s. 4d. at 5s.					122	2	6
Marts, 356 at 2 marks,	-	-		-	553	6	8
Mutton, 559, 2s.,	-	-	-	-	45	11	10
Geese, 301 at 4,	}	-	-	-	6	0	4
Poultry, 301 at 2,							
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					£1666	2	11

At the time of which we write there were no slated houses in the Highlands, with the exception of the castle of the chief and chieftain. The common houses were built upon the same plan as many of the crofters' houses of the present day, with the fire on the middle of the floor. Many of them had the cattle in the one end of the building, with only a wattle partition plastered with clay, dividing them from the part occupied by the family. Many more had barns and stables apart from the dwelling, but were irregularly placed. From the ruins of hamlets still easily traceable on every hill side, it can be seen that the habitations of the tenants of former days were built more substantial, and with more ideas to comfort than the huts of their successors the crofters.

One cannot, on examining the ruins of the many castles in the Highlands, but be struck with the extraordinary strength of the buildings, and it is difficult to imagine that they could have been the work of the barbarians our ancestors are supposed to have been, if we believe all we are told by the historians. In order to give them strength they were

built on the ledges of rocks, or on the most inaccessible promontories, which would make it a very difficult undertaking, even with all the machinery of the present day. What it must have been in those days it is difficult to imagine. These buildings took such a time to put up, and cost so much labour, that it is not astonishing that the minor gentry contented themselves with houses of a less pretentious kind.

In foretelling the many changes that were to come over the country, *Coinneach Odhar*, mentions among other things, that there would be a "*Tigh geal air gach cnoc*," a white house on each hillock, which has been verified in some districts at least. It is a source of astonishment to strangers visiting the Western Isles, that the people are content to live in such houses, as many of them inhabit. From a careful study of the Highland question, I have become convinced that it is more the misfortune than the inclination of the people, which causes such an apparent want of desire to improve their surroundings. I am satisfied that notwithstanding the insecurity of tenure in the past, they would not content themselves in such houses were it not the great difficulty of procuring timber, there being very little growing timber in the islands. This is easily seen, as in those districts in the Highlands where wood is easily procurable, the houses are of a superior class, and even in the islands, whenever a crofter made a little money, his first care was to improve his dwelling, though frequently at the risk of an increase of rent.

The rearing and dealing in cattle was by far the most important industry in the country, and even the

principal gentry were engaged in it. They collected all the cattle, which they bought up usually in the month of September, and drove them to the Southern markets. The transporting of a drove of cattle in those days, was a laborious work, as well as a very risky one. In many cases they had to pay tribute for permission to pass through the land of a clan with whom the owner did not happen to be on good of terms. They often ran the risk of encountering some of the *Ceatharnachs*, or broken men who infested the mountain passes on the road, and losing some of the droves, unless the drovers were strong enough to hold their own.

In many cases the drovers did not pay for their herd till their return, and then they went round their customers, and paid them with scrupulous honesty. Most of them being gentlemen of honour and position in their respective districts, the people considered the transaction safe. When occasionally they were disappointed, the unfortunate thing was that they had no redress—there was no petitioning for *cessio* in those days. *Rob Donn*, the bard, who was frequently employed as a drover in the interest of his chief, Lord Reay, and others, composed a very scathing elegy on the death of one of these characters, who died at Perth, on his way home from the South.

“ Tha Rogairean airtnealach trom,
'N taobh bhos agus thall do na Chrasg
O 'n chual iad mu 'n cuairt an Ceann-cinnidh,
Gu 'n do dh'eug e an Siorramachd Pheairt.
Dh'aindeoin a dhreuchdan 's a chiall
Cha do chreid duine riamh a bha ceart

Aon smid thàinig mach air a bheul
'S cha mho chreid e féin Rìgh nam fear.

From the want of roads, cattle was the only commodity that could make its own way to the market, the small Highland breed of sheep which was reared in the country at that time, was not usually sent to the Southern markets—this breed of sheep which is now nearly extinct, with the exception of some few still reared by the crofters in the Island of Uist, is a hardy little animal, the wool of which is very fine, and the mutton exceedingly sweet and tender. I have seen some rams of this breed, with as many as four, or six horns.

The honourable profession of “cattle lifting” was not classed as a common theft—far from it. Many a Highlander is still proud of his “cattle lifting” ancestors. It was customary for a young chieftain before being considered capable of taking part in the affairs of his clan, to make a raid upon some other clan with whom they were at feud, or into the low country, whence they considered every man had a right to drive a prey. Some clans obtained a greater notoriety than others as cattle lifters. The MacFarlans were such adepts at the work, that the sound of their gathering tune “*Togail nam bò,*” was enough to scare the Lowland *bodachs* of Dumbartonshire. The MacGregors, again, had a world wide reputation in the profession, while the MacDonalds of Glencoe and Keppoch, and the Camerons in the Mid Highlands, were not far behind them in excellence, and my own clan in the North rejoiced in the flattering patronymic of “*Clann Aoidh nan Creach.*” It so

happened that those clans who bordered on Lowland districts, were more given to pay their neighbours those friendly visitations. In several districts there are corries pointed out where the cattle used to be hid ; as a rule they are inaccessible, but from one narrow opening, which could easily be defended against any rescuing party. It is peculiar that a very high code of honour obtained among even the most inveterate reivers. A Highland reiver would never stoop to anything less than a cow from a rich man; the property of the poor was always safe from them. Private robbery, murder, and petty thefts were hardly known. It may be said there was nothing to steal, but there was comparative wealth and poverty as elsewhere, and the poorer the people were, the stronger the temptation to steal, and the stronger the principle must have been which enabled them to resist it.

This scrupulous honesty was not confined to the property of their own kinsfolk, the effects of strangers who might happen to be among them were equally safe. They were most scrupulous in paying their debts, and such a thing as granting a receipt or a bond for money lent, would be considered an insult—*Dh'fhalbh an latha sin!*

There was an old custom of dealing with people who did not pay their debts. The neighbours were convened and formed into a circle with the debtor in the centre. He was there compelled to give a public account of his dealings, and if the judge considered that he had not done fairly, a punishment called "*Tòin chruaidh*," was administered to him. He was caught by two strong

men by the arms and legs, and his back struck three times against a stone.

The instruments of husbandry in those days were of the rudest description. With the smaller tenant the greater part of the tillage was done with the *cas-chrom*, same as now used by the crofters in many districts. The plough then in use was entirely of wood, with perhaps an iron sock, and was drawn by four, and often by six horses. The horses were yoked abreast, and were led by a man walking backwards, another man held the plough, and a third followed with a spade to turn any sods which might not happen to be turned properly. The whole arrangement was of the most primitive description, and would look very amusing at the present day.

The harrows had wooden teeth, and sometimes brush-wood in the place of the last row, which helped to smooth the ground. There being no roads in many districts, carts could not be used, so that goods had to be carried on horse back, in two creels, hung upon a wooden saddle with a thick rug made of twisted rushes neatly woven together. The burden had to be divided, so as to balance on the animal's back—if this could not be done it was put on one side, and stones put to balance it on the other. There was also a form of sledge used for carrying any heavy article; it was shod with iron, and dragged after the horses like a harrow; another form had trams like a cart. The first was called *Losgunn*, the latter *Carn-slaod*. These are still used in districts where there are no roads.

Such a thing as a gig or carriage was, of course, out

of the question in those days ; indeed, there are people living, who remember when the first spring conveyance came to Skye. The remains of this ancient luxury are still to the fore. It has had an eventful history, first in the honored services of the laird, when it carried the *elite* of the island, and was the admired of all beholders. Then it became the bearer of the laird's factor ; from that it came down the hill to the service of a tacksman, and finally settled with a small country innkeeper, where it ended its busy days.

Before the erection of meal mills, the corn was all ground with the quern, two flat stones fixed, the one upon the other, the upper having a handle to turn it round, and a hole in the centre by which the corn was put in ; this was very laborious work. I have seen the quern even yet at work when the quantity of corn was so small, as not to be worth while sending to the mill. It is astonishing the quickness with which a smart person could with this appliance prepare a quantity of meal. A friend of mine on one occasion had a good example of this. Visiting an old woman in the heights of Assynt, she was pressed to wait and get something to eat, whereupon the old matron went out to the barn, took in a sheaf of corn, and in a minute whipped the oats off with her hand, winnowed it with a fan at the end of the house, then placed it on the fire in a pot to dry ; after that it was ready to be ground, and then, being put through a sieve, was ready to bake. The whole thing was done within an hour, from the time she took in the sheaf of corn, till the cakes were on the table, and my friend says she "never tasted better."

The diet of former days was very simple, and no doubt accounts for the immunity of our ancestors from many of the forms of sickness, with which their more degenerate posterity are troubled. They were at that time, of course, necessarily restricted to the resources of our own country, which were much better suited to build up a healthy constitution, than the foreign luxuries of the present day.

Martin, whom I have already mentioned, gives the following account of the diet of the people of Skye, about 200 years ago:—

“The diet generally used by the natives consists of fresh food, for they seldom taste anything that is salted, except butter; the generality eat but little flesh, and only persons of distinction eat it every day and make three meals. All the rest eat only two, and they eat more boiled than roasted. Their ordinary diet is butter, cheese, milk, potatoes, colworts, *brochan* i.e., oatmeal boiled with water. The latter, taken with some bread, is the constant food of several thousands of both sexes in this and other islands during the winter and spring, yet they undergo many fatigues both by sea and land, and are very healthful. This verifies what the poet saith—*Populis sat est Lymphaque Ceresque*: Nature is satisfied with bread and water.”

As far back as the year 1744, in order to discourage the use of foreign luxuries, at a meeting of the Skye Chiefs, Sir Alexander MacDonald of MacDonald, Norman MacLeod of MacLeod, John MacKinnon of MacKinnon, and Malcolm MacLeod of Raasay, held in Portree, it was agreed to discontinue and discounten-

ance the use of brandy, tobacco, and tea.

Though they could not be said to be addicted to drink, the Highlanders of that period used a considerable quantity of liquor, but more as a daily beverage than in drams, as at the present day. Martin relates some curious drinking customs. When a party retired to any house to transact business and had a refreshment, it was usual to place a wand across the doorway, and it would be considered the utmost rudeness for anyone to intrude, while it remained there.

Ale formed a great part of the beverages of those days, and houses for the sale of ale were numerous, even in Tiree. It was not till the latter end of last century that whisky was sold in these houses.

Drinking at marriages and funerals was frequently carried to excess, particularly the latter. At marriages the dancing and other amusements helped to evaporate some of the exuberance, but at funerals, they drank to keep down their grief, and as they had often to carry the bier a long distance, they took frequent refreshments by the way, and more after the burial, with the result that very unseemly conduct often took place. The Highlanders are not more blameworthy in this respect than others, for the same was practised in all parts of Scotland at that period. These barbarous customs are happily gone, which we have no reason to regret.

The marriage feasts were great affairs. They lasted usually for four days—dancing, feasting, and singing songs, being kept up the whole time. The dancing usually took place in a barn, which in some districts,

was a building of considerable dimensions, and the friends coming from a distance, for whom room could not be found in the house, were put to sleep in out-houses on shake-downs, or billeted in the neighbouring houses.

It was on the occasion of a wedding of this description, that *Rob Donn* composed the well known song, "*Briogais Mhic Ruairidh*."

In the olden times the pipe and the song were frequently heard in every Highland clachan, and the youths of the country could enjoy themselves in a rational manner. Shinty, putting the stone, tossing the caber, and other manly exercises, were freely engaged in, the different districts and parishes vying with each other in friendly rivalry, but the Calvinistic doctrines of the Highland clergy preached all the manliness out of the people, and I don't think that even they will be bold enough to assert that they have preached anything better into them.

As Rob Donn so very graphically says of them—

Falbh 'n an cuideachd 's 'nan còmhraidh,
Is gheibh thu mòran do 'n *phac* ud,
'Dheanadh ceannaiche no seòladair,
'Dheanadh dròbhair no factoir,
'Dheanadh tuathanach sunndach,
'Dheanadh stiubhard neo-chaithteach'
'S mach o 'n cheaird air 'n do mhionnaich iad
Tha na h-uile ni gasd ac'.

Join their clubs and society
You'll find most of the pack of them
Fit for pedlars and sailors,
Fit for drovers or factors,

Fit for active shrewd farmers,
Fit for stewards, not wasteful,
Their sworn calling excepted,
Fit for everything excellent.

It is wonderful after all how tenacious our old mother tongue has been of its life. It seems the insane policy of denaturalizing the Highlanders, in order to civilize them, has not been an idea of modern years. As far back as 1795, an Act of Parliament was passed beginning thus—"Our Sovereign Lord, considering that several of the inhabitants of the Highlands are very refractory in paying to the chamberlains and factors, the rents of the Bishopric of Argyle and the Isles, which now His Majesty has been graciously pleased to bestow upon erecting of English Schools for the rooting out of the Irish Language (Gaelic) and other uses."

Strange that after two hundred years of this denaturalizing process, the Gaelic language is spoken by more people now than it was then, and looks quite robust enough to stand two hundred years yet.

As might be expected from the rude implements of husbandry in use, the ignorance of the best modes of agriculture, as well as the want of roads and communication with the southern markets, there were occasionally seasons of severity owing to bad harvests, and in such times, the poor people were reduced to sore straits, and were it not for the kindly feeling which existed among the different classes of society, serious consequences might have happened, but in those times those that had, shared with those who had not.

In seasons of severity, many had recourse to a very barbarous means of increasing their store of provisions, by bleeding the cattle and mixing the blood with meal, which was said to make a very nourishing diet.

Besides the usual butter and cheese, they made many preparations of milk, such as "crowdy"—that is, the curdled milk well pressed, and cured with a little salt and butter. "*Onaich*," or frothed whey. This was done with a stick having a cross on the end, over which was placed a cord made of the hair of a cow's tail. This instrument was worked round in the whey swiftly between the two hands, which quickly worked it into a thick froth.

Another more simple preparation was the "*Stapag*," made of cream, with a little oatmeal stirred into it. After the introduction of the potato, there was no famine in the Highlands till the unfortunate failure of that crop in the year 1846-7, and owing to the changes which had taken place by divorcing the people from the soil; that famine is counted the severest that is known to have visited the country. Of course, it must be understood that the Highlands was not the only part of the country that had these periodic visitations of famine; such were quite common in these times in the most fertile districts of England, before the principles of agriculture were so well understood. It is, however, melancholy to reflect that while other districts of the country have been making great strides forward in social progress, and that while in every other place "two blades of grass grow where only one grew before," in the Highlands, the reverse

is the case. Where corn and barley waved a hundred years ago, heather and rushes grow luxuriantly to-day—a sad comment on our civilization and progress!

For a picture of the Social State of the Country about the end of last century, the following extract from the old “Statistical Account of Scotland,” 1792, referring to the parish of Assynt, by the Rev. William Mackenzie, minister of the parish, is perhaps the best estimate we could have of the condition of the Highlands at that period—“Properly speaking, though many here are poor, they cannot be represented as a burden on the parish. The natives are all connected by alliance. When any one becomes old and feeble, the nearest relations build a little comfortable house close to their own residence; and even there the distaff and spindle are well managed. These old matrons nurse the children of their relations; the songs and airs of Fingal and ancient heroes are sung in the Gaelic tongue, to which the little children dance. Old men are prudently engaged in domestic affairs, such as repairing the houses of the neighbours, &c. In short, they share with their relatives all the viands of the family. At this period the poorest stranger, even though he be unacquainted, finds charity and safe shelter; but there is a very great distance (and now no places as of old) in this wilderness betwixt this parish and the inn at Brae of Strath o’ Kill. Such being the condition of the poor in Assynt Parish, there are no public funds. The little trifle of money that is collected every Sabbath day after divine worship is served, is yearly distributed amongst the most friendless and deserving poor.”