

Life in Teangue from ‘Private Donald Campbell 92nd Foot 1803-1822’

[Life In Teangue](#)

Map - [Teangue \(Teanga\), Isle of Skye](#)

Art – [Highland Whisky Still](#)

Art - [Crofters’ huts and interior](#)

Art - [Croft cottage](#)

Art - [Crofter with caschrom](#)

Life in Teangue

Donald Campbell was born in Teangue, Parish of Sleat, Isle of Skye, in 1784, to parents Finlay Campbell (born 1755) and Abigail MacPherson (born 1760).

Donald’s parents had not chosen, or were unable, to join the waves of mass emigration. Sub-tenants that relied on labouring work (as a ‘cottar’) could not afford to emigrate, as they had insufficient property that could be converted into cash to raise the cost of the journey. Speaking only Gaelic may have influenced their decision not to relocate to the lowland cities and become a labour force for the emerging industrial revolution. Instead they remained in their croft by the coast, where farming on their small allocated plot could not sustain a livelihood, but where kelp harvesting, fishing, or labouring, could provide an income.

Teangue, Skye, and the society in which Donald Campbell lived, is described in the writings of Skye’s 18th century visitors.

Thomas Pennant describes Skye during his 1772 ‘A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides’.

Thomas Pennant writes, “Skie is the largest of the Hebrides, being above sixty measured miles long; the breadth unequal, by reason of the numbers of lochs, that penetrate far on both sides.”

“The modern name is of Norwegian origin, derived from Ski, a mist; and from the clouds (that almost constantly hang on the tops of its lofty hills) was styled, Ealand Skianach, or, the cloudy island. No epithet could better suit the place; for, except in the summer season, there is scarcely a week of fair weather: the summers themselves are also generally wet, and seldom warm.”

“The Westerly wind blows here more regularly than any other, and arriving charged with vapour from the vast Atlantic, never fails to dash the clouds it wafts on the lofty summits of the hills of Cuchullin, and their contents deluge the island in a manner unknown in other places. What is properly called the rainy season commences in August: the rains begin with moderate winds; which grow stronger and stronger till the autumnal equinox, when they rage with incredible fury.”

The Parish of Sleat, Skye

The name Sleat comes from the Scottish Gaelic *Sléibhte* (or *Slèite*), which in turn comes from Old Norse *slétr* (smooth, even), which describes the landscape of Sleat when compared to the mainland across the Sound of Sleat, and to the mountains of Skye that dominate the horizon beyond Sleat. Up to the early 19th century, the anglicised spelling of *Slèite* was Slate.

Teangue

The Scottish Gaelic name for Teangue is *An Teangaidh* (the tongue or narrow strip of land). The crofts in Teangue are situated on the gradient of a hill, and beyond their collection of small plots of agricultural land are hills of heath and peat bog. A track leading to Ardvasser divided the hillside from the sea shore.



Teangue (Teanga), Isle of Skye

Samuel Johnson records his observations in Skye, during 1773, in his book 'Journey to Western Islands of Scotland'

Samuel Johnson writes, "In Sky, I first observed the use of Brogues (a rough shoe of untanned leather), a kind of artless shoes, stitched with thongs so loosely, that though they defend the foot from stones, they do not exclude water. Brogues were formerly made of raw hides, with the hair inwards, and such are perhaps still used in rude and remote parts; but they are said not to last above two days. Where life is somewhat improved, they are now made of leather tanned with oak bark, as in other places, or with the bark of birch, or roots of tormentil."

"In the islands the plaid is rarely worn. The law by which the Highlanders have been obliged to change the form of their dress, has, in all the places that we have visited, been universally obeyed. I have seen only one gentleman completely clothed in the ancient habit, and by him it was worn only occasionally and wantonly.

The fillibeg, or lower garment (small kilt - fèileadh beag), is still very common, and the bonnet almost universal."

"In the islands there are no roads, nor any marks by which a stranger may find his way. The horseman has always at his side a native of the place, who, by pursuing game, or tending cattle, or being often employed in messages or conduct, has learned where the ridge of the hill has breadth sufficient to allow a horse and his rider a passage, and where the moss or bog is hard enough to bear them. The bogs are avoided as toilsome at least, if not unsafe, and therefore the journey is made generally from precipice to precipice; from which if the eye ventures to look down, it sees below a gloomy cavity, whence the run of water is sometimes heard."

"The moor-game is every where to be had. That the sea abounds with fish, needs not be told, for it supplies a great part of Europe. The isle of Sky has stags and roebucks, but no hares. They sell very numerous droves of oxen yearly to England, and therefore cannot be supposed to want beef at home. Sheep and goats are in great numbers, and they have the common domestick fowls. But as here is nothing to be bought, every family must kill its own meat, and roast part of it somewhat sooner than Apicius would prescribe."

"Their fowls are not like those plumped for sale by the poulterers of London, but they are as good as other places commonly afford, except that the geese, by feeding in the sea, have universally a fishy rankness."

“Their native bread is made of oats, or barley. Of oatmeal they spread very thin cakes, coarse and hard, to which unaccustomed palates are not easily reconciled. The barley cakes are thicker and softer; I began to eat them without unwillingness; the blackness of their colour raises some dislike, but the taste is not disagreeable. In most houses there is wheat flour, with which we were sure to be treated, if we staid long enough to have it kneaded and baked. As neither yeast nor leaven are used among them, their bread of every kind is unfermented. They make only cakes, and never mould a loaf.”

“A man of the Hebrides, for of the women’s diet I can give no account, as soon as he appears in the morning, swallows a glass of whisky; yet they are not a drunken race, at least I never was present at much intemperance; but no man is so abstemious as to refuse the morning dram, which they call a ‘skalk’ (from Scots Gaelic word ‘scailg’ meaning literally ‘a sharp blow to the head’.) The word whisky signifies water, and is applied by way of eminence to strong water, or distilled liquor. The spirit drunk in the North is drawn from barley. I never tasted it, except once for experiment at the inn in Inverary when I thought it preferable to any English malt brandy. It was strong, but not pungent, and was free from the empyreumatic taste or smell. What was the process I had no opportunity of inquiring, nor do I wish to improve the art of making poison pleasant.”



Highland Whisky Still

“Not long after the dram, may be expected the breakfast, a meal in which the Scots, whether of the lowlands or mountains, must be confessed to excel us. The tea and coffee are accompanied not only with butter, but with honey, conserves, and marmalades. If an epicure could remove by a wish, in quest of sensual gratifications, wherever he had supped he would breakfast in Scotland.”

“In the islands, however, they do what I found it not very easy to endure. They pollute the tea-table by plates piled with large slices of Cheshire cheese, which mingles its less grateful odours with the fragrance of the tea.”

“I forgot to enquire how they were supplied with so much exotic luxury. Perhaps the French may bring them wine for wool, and the Dutch give them tea and coffee at the fishing season, in exchange for fresh provision. Their trade is unconstrained; they pay no customs for there is no officer to demand them.”

“A dinner in the Western Islands differs very little from a dinner in England, except that in the place of tarts, there are always set different preparations of milk. Though they have milk, and eggs, and sugar, few of them know how to compound them in a custard. Their gardens afford them no great variety, but they have always some vegetables on the table. Potatoes at least are never wanting which, though they have not known them long, are now one of the principal parts of their food. They are not of the mealy, but the viscous kind.”

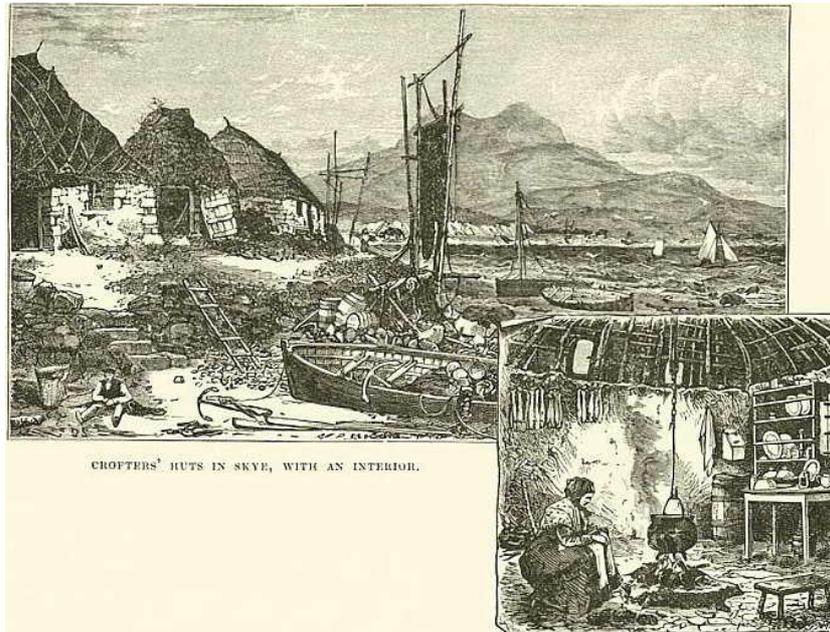
“Of what they had before the late conquest of their country, there remain only their language and their poverty. Their language is attacked on every side. Schools are erected, in which English only is taught, and there were lately some who thought it reasonable to refuse them a version of the holy scriptures, that they might have no monument of their mother-tongue.”

“In the streams or fresh lakes of the islands, I have never heard of any other fish than trouts and eels. The trouts, which I have seen, are not large, the colour of their flesh is tinged as in England. Of their eels I can give no account, having never tasted them; for I believe they are not considered as wholesome food. The inhabitants of Sky, I know not whether of the other islands, have not only eels, but pork and bacon in abhorrence, and accordingly I never saw a hog in the Hebrides, except one at Dunvegan.”

“Hares and rabbits (rather than roebucks) might be more easily obtained (for rearing). That they have few or none of either in Sky, they impute to the ravage of the foxes, and have therefore set, for some years past, a price upon their heads, which, as the number was diminished, has been gradually raised, from three shillings and sixpence to a guinea, a sum so great in this part of the world, that, in a short time, Sky may be as free from foxes, as England from wolves. The fund for these rewards is a tax of sixpence in the pound, imposed by the farmers on themselves, and said to be paid with great willingness.”

“The corn of this island is but little. I saw the harvest of a small field. The women reaped the corn, and the men bound up the sheaves. The strokes of the sickle were timed by the modulation of the harvest song, in which all their voices were united. They accompany in the Highlands every action, which can be done in equal time, with an appropriated strain, which has, they say, not much meaning; but its effects are regularity and cheerfulness.”

“The cuddy is a fish of which I know not the philosophical name. It is not much bigger than a gudgeon, but is of great use in these Islands, as it affords the people both food, and oil for their lamps. Cuddies are so abundant, at some times of the year, that they are caught like white-bait in the Thames, only by dipping a basket and drawing it back. If it were always practicable to fish, these Islands could never be in much danger from famine; but unhappily in the winter, when other provision fails, the seas are commonly too rough for nets, or boats.”



Crofters' huts and interior

“The soil, as in other countries, has its diversities. In some parts there is only a thin layer of earth spread upon a rock, which bears nothing but short brown heath, and perhaps is not generally capable of any better product. There are many bogs or mosses of greater or less extent, where the soil cannot be supposed to want depth, though it is too wet for the plough. But we did not observe in these any aquatick plants. The vallies and the mountains are alike darkened with heath. Some grass, however, grows here and there, and some happier spots of earth are capable of tillage.”

“Their agriculture is laborious. Their chief manure is sea-weed, which, when they lay it to rot upon the field, gives them a better crop than those of the Highlands. They heap sea-shells upon the dunghill, which in time moulder into a fertilising substance. When they find a vein of earth where they cannot use it, they dig it up, and add it to the mould of a more commodious place.”

“Their corn grounds often lie in such intricacies among the craggs, that there is no room for the action of a team and plough. The soil is then turned up by manual labour with an instrument called a crooked spade, of a form and weight which to me appeared very incommodious, and would perhaps be soon improved in a country where workmen could be easily found and easily paid. It has a narrow blade of iron fixed to a long and heavy piece of wood, which must have, about a foot and a half above the iron, a knee or flexure with the angle downwards. When the farmer encounters a stone which is the great impediment of his operations, he drives the blade under it, and bringing the knee or angle to the ground, has in the long handle a very forcible lever. According to the different mode of tillage, farms are distinguished into long land and short land. Long land is that which affords room for a plough, and short land is turned up by the spade.”

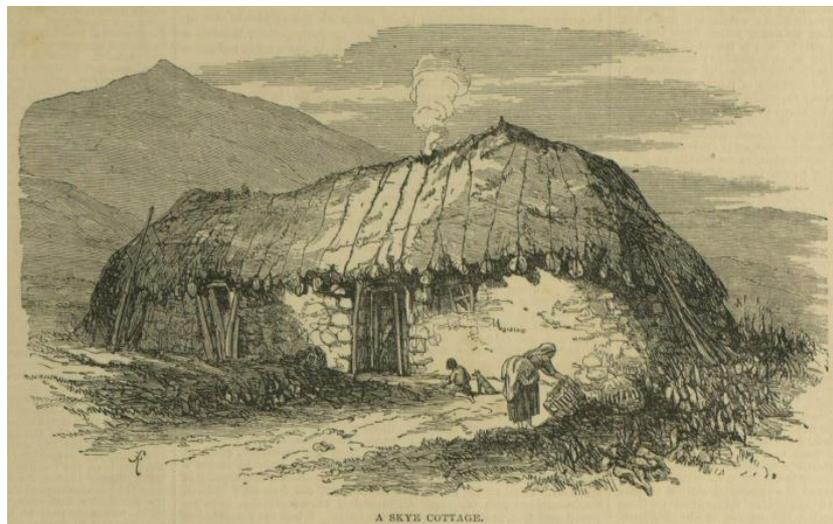
“The grain which they commit to the furrows thus tediously formed, is either oats or barley. They do not sow barley without very copious manure, and then they expect from it ten for one, an increase equal to that of better countries; but the culture is so operose (laborious) that they content themselves commonly with oats; and who can relate without compassion, that after all their diligence they are to expect only a triple increase? It is in vain to hope for plenty, when a third part of the harvest must be reserved for feed.”

“They have lately found a manufacture considerably lucrative. Their rocks abound with kelp, a sea-plant, of which the ashes are melted into glass (an alkaline product which was used to bleach linen and to assist in the manufacture of glass and soap). They burn kelp in great quantities, and then send it away in ships, which come regularly to purchase them. This new source of riches has raised the rents of many maritime farms; but the tenants pay, like all other tenants, the additional rent with

great unwillingness; because they consider the profits of the kelp as the mere product of personal labour, to which the landlord contributes nothing.”

“The cattle of Sky are not so small as is commonly believed. Since they have sent their beeves in great numbers to southern marts, they have probably taken more care of their breed. At stated times the annual growth of cattle is driven to a fair, by a general drover, and with the money, which he returns to the farmer, the rents are paid. The price regularly expected, is from two to three pounds a head: there was once one sold for five pounds. They go from the Islands very lean, and are not offered to the butcher, till they have been long fatted in English pastures.”

“Of their black cattle, some are without horns, called by the Scots humble cows, as we call a bee an humble bee, that wants a sting. Whether this difference be specifick, or accidental, though we inquired with great diligence, we could not be informed. We are not very sure that the bull is ever without horns, though we have been told, that such bulls there are. What is produced by putting a horned and unhorned male and female together, no man has ever tried, that thought the result worthy of observation. There are in Sky neither rats nor mice, but the weasel is so frequent, that he is heard in houses rattling behind chests or beds, as rats in England.”



Croft cottage

“Huts are of many gradations; from murky dens, to commodious dwellings. The wall of a common hut is always built without mortar, by a skilful adaptation of loose stones. Sometimes perhaps a double wall of stones is raised, and the intermediate space filled with earth. The air is thus completely excluded. Some walls are, I think, formed of turfs, held together by a wattle, or texture of twigs. Of the meanest huts, the first room is lighted by the entrance, and the second by the smoke-hole. The fire is usually made in the middle. Such rafters as can be procured are then raised for a roof, and covered with heath, which makes a strong and warm thatch, kept from flying off by ropes of twisted heath, of which the ends, reaching from the centre of the thatch to the top of the wall, are held firm by the weight of a large stone. No light is admitted but at the entrance, and through a hole in the thatch, which gives vent to the smoke. This hole is not directly over the fire, lest the rain should extinguish it; and the smoke therefore naturally fills the place before it escapes.”

“The only fewel of the Islands is peat. Their wood is all consumed, and coal they have not yet found. Peat is dug out of the marshes, from the depth of one foot to that of six. That is accounted the best which is nearest the surface. It appears to be a mass of black earth held together by vegetable fibres. I know not whether the earth be bituminous, or whether the fibres be not the only combustible part, which, by heating the interposed earth red hot, make a burning mass. The heat is not very strong nor lasting. The ashes are yellowish, and in a large quantity. When they dig peat, they cut it into square pieces, and pile it up to dry beside the house. In some places it has an offensive smell.”

“There are water mills in Sky and Raasay, but where they are too far distant, the house-wives grind their oats with a quern, or hand-mill, which consists of two stones, about a foot and a half in diameter; the lower is a little convex, to which the concavity of the upper must be fitted. In the middle of the upper stone is a round hole, and on one side is a long handle.”

“The Islands were long unfurnished with instruction for youth, and none but the sons of gentlemen could have any literature. There are now parochial schools, to which the lord of every manor pays a certain stipend. Here the children are taught to read; but by the rule of their institution, they teach only English, so that the natives read a language which they may never use or understand.”

“In Sky there are two grammar schools, where boarders are taken to be regularly educated. The price of board is from three pounds, to four pounds ten shillings a year, and that of instruction is half a crown a quarter. But the scholars are birds of passage, who live at school only in the summer; for in winter provisions cannot be made for any considerable number in one place.”

James Boswell describes some observations in his 1773 ‘Journal of the Tour to the Hebrides’

Saturday, October 2nd 1773 (on Raasay)

“In the evening, the company danced as usual. We performed, with much activity, a dance which, I suppose, the emigration from Sky has occasioned. They call it ‘America.’ Each of the couples, after the common involutions and evolutions, successively whirls round in a circle, till all are in motion; and the dance seems intended to shew how emigration catches, till a whole neighbourhood is set afloat. Mrs. M’Kinnon told me, that last year when a ship sailed from Portree for America, the people on shore were almost distracted when they saw their relations go off, they lay down on the ground, tumbled, and tore the grass with their teeth. This year there was not a tear shed. The people on shore seemed to think that they would soon follow.”

Samuel Johnson writes, “I inquired the subjects of the songs, and was told of one, that it was a love song, and of another, that it was a farewell composed by one of the Islanders that was going, in this epidemical fury of emigration, to seek his fortune in America.”



Crofter with caschrom

Thomas Pennant’s notes on Skye during 1772 continue, “The farmer labors to remedy this distress to the best of his power, but the wetness of the land late in spring prevents him from putting into the ground the early seed of future crops, bear and small oats: the last are fittest for the climate: they bear the fury of the winds better than other grain, and require less manure, a deficiency in this

island. Poverty prevents him from making experiments in rural economy: the ill success of a few made by the more opulent, determines him to follow the old tract, as attended with more certainty.”

“The produce of the crops very rarely are in any degree proportioned to the wants of the inhabitants: golden seasons have happened, when they have had superfluity; but the years of famine are as ten to one. Here a wet sky brings a reluctant crop. The moment the corn is cut down, a certain number of sheaves are gathered in a heap, and thatched on the top: the first dry moment that happens, the thatch is taken off, and the sheaves now dry, are carried in; and this is repeated till the whole crop is secured.”

“The ground, inclosed only with turf mounds, is accessible to every animal. A continual watch employs numbers of his people: some again are occupied in repairing the damages sustained by their houses from storms the preceding year; others are laboring at the turberies (paid for area of bog, where peat was allowed to be cut), to provide fuel to keep out the rigor of the severe season: or in fencing the natural grasses of the country to preserve their cattle from starving which are the true and proper staple of these islands.”

“.....all the corn land is dug with the cas-chrom, or crooked spade, instead of being ploughed: eight men are necessary to dig as much in a day as a single plough would turn up: the harrows are commonly tied to the horses tails; but in very wet land, the men and women break the sods by dragging over them a block of wood, with five teeth and a long handle, called Raachgan.”

“The corn is graddan'd, or burnt out of the ear, instead of being thrashed: this is performed two ways; first, by cutting off the ears, and drying them in a kiln, then setting fire to them on a floor, and picking out the grains, by this operation rendered as black as coal.”

“The ‘quern’ or ‘bra’ is made in some of the neighboring counties, in the mainland, and costs about fourteen shillings. This method of grinding is very tedious: for it employs two pair of hands four hours to grind only a single bushel of corn. Instead of a hair sieve to sift the meal the inhabitants here have an ingenious substitute, a sheep's skin stretched round a hoop, and perforated with small holes made with a hot iron. They knead their bannock with water only, and bake or rather toast it, by laying it upright against a stone placed near the fire.”

“Their common food is Brochan, a thick meal-pudding, with milk, butter or treacle; or a thinner sort, called Easoch, taken with their bannocks.”

“The poorer tenants, who have no winter parks, are under the necessity of keeping the cattle under the same roof with themselves during night; and often are obliged to keep them alive with the meal designed for their families. In April the farmer turns them to the moor-grass (cotton-grass) which springs first. The cows are often forced, through want of other food, to have recourse to the shores and feed on the sea-plants at low water: by instinct they will, at ebb tide, hasten from the moors notwithstanding they are not within sight of the sea.”

“Here are no sheep but what are kept for home consumption, or for the wool for the cloathing of the inhabitants. Hogs are not introduced here yet, for want of proper food for those animals.”

“There are not above two or three slated houses in the island; the general thatch is fern, root and stalk, which will last above twenty years.”

“The roots of the orobus tuberosus (accepted name Lathyrus linifolius, bitter vetch or heath pea.), the cor-meille (wild liquorice), or carmel, of the Highlanders, are in high esteem in this and the other (Hebridean) islands: they sometimes chew them, at others make a fermented liquor with them. They imagine that they promote expectoration, and that they are very efficacious in curing any disorders of the breast or lungs: they also use it as a remedy against hunger, chewing it as some of our poorest people do tobacco, to put off that uneasy sensation.”

“Ligusticum scoticum, Scotch parsley, or the shunis of this island, is also much valued; in medicine, the root is reckoned a good carminative, and an infusion of the leaves is thought a good purge for calves. It is besides used as a food, either as a sallad, raw, or boiled as greens.”

The heathlands supplied an inexhaustible supply of peat to the crofting population in a country so destitute of wood, and to which it was so expensive to bring coal. With their abundance of fuel, and by using the skill of "smooring" the fire before retiring to rest, the fire on the hearth never went out, so that it might be found still burning next morning.

The seaweed was collected in large quantities and spread out to dry, and was then reduced to ashes in shallow stone-lined pits (kelp kilns), twenty tons of seaweed yielding only a ton of kelp ash. In the best seasons, the cottars might be paid £2 per ton of kelp ash, producing up to than five tons of kelp ash during a single season. (ref. John MacCulloch ‘The Misty Isle of Skye’)

For the laird, the seaweed was a valuable resource, and he relied on the crofters to supply the labour. To this extent, the laird encouraged tenants to move to the coast, then sub-divided a farm, allocating only small plots of land to the crofters.

Apart from the commercial value of the kelp ash, the seaweed was used by the crofters in cookery, being a good source of vitamins and minerals.

These were the times of the young Donald Campbell, who became 19 years old in 1803, and whose life was about to change dramatically during the next 19 years.