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The Scottish Highlander

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THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDER.

PART I.

“They went forth to the war, but they always fell.”

“EVERYTHING,” wrote Macculloch, in his critical volumes on the Highlands, “whisky, courage, ghosts, virtue or Beltain, is alike peculiar to the Highlands among those who know no country but the Highlands”; and the essayist who takes the Scottish Highlands as his subject must justify his choice by avoiding the ignorant flattery and weakly acquiescence which makes so much of the occasional literature on the subject worthless. Yet Macculloch himself found in the North material sufficient to fill four stout volumes; and the century which has intervened since he wrote has been rich in new collections of Highland folklore and ancient customs. And now there is a peculiar fitness in suggesting Highland life as a subject for careful study; for a century of depopulation has culminated in the melancholy figures of the latest census. A generation ago it was the decay of Highland manners which distressed the patriot; to-day it is the actual disappearance of the Highland stock from Scotland. A few years hence the historian of the North and West may take as his most appropriate motto:

“I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.”

Without undue pessimism, it must be confessed that, in the Scottish Highlander, as the representative of a coherent people, dwelling in a fixed abode, we are dealing with a survival, the term of whose existence along the old lines cannot be prolonged far into the twentieth century. With relentless precision, modern civilisation has chosen other centres on which to mass her forces; and nothing marks the old positions now but ruined cots and the decay of ancient modes of life. I shall deal, then, in my lecture, with the psychology of a lost cause, a nation based on principles, and living under physical conditions which seem

to have contradicted the laws of modern national evolution; and my problem is to represent the virtues and picturesque qualities which have made the Highland name famous, and at the same time to trace, even in the very virtues, the elements of dissolution. It must be an essay on the decline and fall of the Highland people.

To find these virtues faithfully and sympathetically portrayed, the modern reader may safely place himself in the hands of three men of the last generation, Norman Macleod, J. F. Campbell, and Alexander Carmichael, all of them Highlanders of the Highlanders, all of them with a touch of Celtic genius, and two of them among the most notable collectors of folklore whom Britain has produced. Norman Macleod's *Reminiscences of a Highland Parish*, Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, and J. F. Campbell's four volumes of Highland tales furnish admirable material for a panegyric on the last days of the Highland community. It is a rude, but sound, Utopia to which Norman Macleod introduces us in his parish of Morven. Hill, stream, and sea furnish a fitting background for a race, if not of heroes, at least of men. Society has not completely hardened and formalised its relationships, and the chief or laird presides over something even yet recognisable as a clan. He still takes a paternal care of the education of his young men, and still receives payment in commodities not recognised in modern political economy. Religion in the parish, following the apostolic precept of poverty, attains apostolic purity and something more than apostolic peace. Schism has not yet set Presbyterianism against Presbyterianism; and the primitive soundness which in the parish minister has combined the farmer with the cleric, saves religion alike from the mawkishness of modern town evangelicism, and the effeminacy of modern ritualism. In simple farm and humble cot there is bred such a race of men and women as have no superiors in the world; and the sneer at "Scottish manners, Scottish religion, and Scottish drink," which the grossness of Burns and his world enabled Arnold to justify, falls harmlessly to the ground where men have, in Campbell's words, "the bearing of Nature's own gentlemen," and the religious imagination of the folk stands out in high contrast from

the stolid flatness of the English peasant world. Nor can any doubt as to the virility of the race be entertained in face of these astonishing facts: "It is not a little remarkable" (I quote from Norman Macleod) "that the one island of Skye should have sent forth from her wild shores, since the beginning of the last wars of the French Revolution, 21 lieutenant-generals and major-generals, 48 lieutenant-colonels, 4 governors of colonies, 1 governor-general, 1 adjutant-general, 1 chief baron of England, and 1 judge of the Supreme Court of Scotland." Crime there is, for human nature is errant, but astonishingly little; and tragedies and sorrows, when they come, have something of the simplicity and directness of the little world which they assail, and affect the reader with something of the awe, religious quiet, and purification with which a Greek tragedy cleanses the imagination.

It is given to few books so to quieten and elevate their readers as does this little half-forgotten tribute of a great Highlander to his own people. Something there may be in it over-idealised; rude facts veiled or softened by a gentle haze of West Highland romance; for even the most austere of patriots softens as he tells of the land he loves. But how little real exaggeration there is, the casual notes and prefatory references in the great collections of Highland story and custom prove beyond reasonable doubt. "I have wandered among the peasantry of many countries," says J. F. Campbell in his most admirable introduction, "there are few peasants that I think so highly of; none that I love so well. . . . The poorest is ever the readiest to share the best he has with the stranger; a kind word kindly meant is never thrown away, and whatever may be the faults of this people, *I have never found a boor or a churl in a Highland bothy.*" In similar fashion, Alexander Carmichael, in an introductory essay, which is a miracle of simple, poetic description: "The people of the Outer Isles, like the people of the Highlands and Islands generally, are simple and law-abiding, common crime being rare, and serious crime unknown amongst them. . . . During all the years that I lived and travelled among them, night and day, I never met with incivility, never with rudeness, never with vulgarity, never with aught but courtesy. I never entered a

house without the inmates offering me food or apologising for their want of it." My evidence may have proved nothing more than that Highlanders are enthusiastic in praise of themselves. But when men praise valour and courtesy as the chief virtues, one judges that valour and courtesy have made their way into the heart of the national life; and we know enough to know the right of the Highlander to claim these as his own.

Yet the Highland eulogists have failed to explain the fact that, in spite of virtue, valour, and courtesy, the Highland world is vanishing; that the Utopia, in which they have forced us to believe, is now a fallen empire. It is perhaps an invidious enquiry, but the real interest of the subject seems to me to lie in the connection between the very best in Highland culture and this decline and fall, so that, if we can only form a true conception of the Highlander, we shall have arrived at an understanding of the weakness of the social fabric of which he was the centre.

Abundant sources of information offer themselves for an impartial account of the Highlander in modern history; whether they be in the form of folk-collections, or of description by interested if generally biassed explorers, from Martin, in the seventeenth century, down to Macculloch, Walter Scott, and Alexander Smith in the nineteenth. Using these as guides to the secret of the fate of the Highlands, the reader is first affected by an impression of defect, incapacity, even of the repulsiveness which incapacity usually involves. Apparently the old Highland world knew little of the leverage of skilled instruments, and scientific modes of action. Partly, it may be, through poverty, but also, I think, because their culture assumed that hands and feet, and the ordinary modes of nature were sufficient, Highland society possessed none of the artificial conveniences of life. Even in sea-girt St. Kilda, if Martin is to be believed, there was, at the time when he wrote, only one boat. In many parts of the Highlands implements were made entirely of wood; and the scarcity of supplies was intensified by the absence of mills and the smaller necessities of agriculture. "I saw a woman," says Burt, "cutting green barley in a little plot before her hut; this induced me to turn aside, and ask her what

use she intended it for, and she told me it was to make bread for her family." Mention of Burt suggests the most amusing volume in evidence of this failure in the instruments of civilisation. Burt, who was one of Wade's officers, and engaged on the construction of Scottish roads, wrote a series of very racy letters somewhere about 1725-6; and if he found exaggeration a very convenient literary instrument, his exaggerations do not conceal the real facts which interested him. Prejudice, frankly acknowledged, is by no means the greatest foe to truth. The Highland country, as Burt saw it, was essentially a land, the inhabitants of which had not yet appreciated the value of modern inventions. Inverness, if Burt's Inverness be not a parody, owed its filthy housing conditions, its unwashed inhabitants, to simple lack of modern skill; and what was true of city life was still truer of the country. Our author records one humorous episode when, as he travelled, he found the stable door of the inn too low to receive his horses—"so the frame was taken out, and a small part of the roof pulled down for their admittance; for which damage I had a shilling to pay the next morning." Difficulty, and remedy, and compensation, all of them proclaim a people wedded to the most primitive ways; and such attempts at style or show as were made, merely emphasised the aloofness of the Highlander from civilised methods. Everyone remembers Johnson's "elegant bed of Indian cotton" which he approached on a floor of soft mud. It was life according to nature, lived in days when the future lay with those who could improve on nature. They sang their reaping songs, using instruments unchanged from those which Ossian's Celts and Homer's Greeks had employed in the old days; they sought not doctors, but incantations; the very music which accompanied their weaving, their milling, and the routine actions of their domestic life, bears unconscious witness to their ignorance of more rapid and efficient methods of work. Happy ignorance, the dreamer may exclaim; but foolishly, for nations fall or rise according as they learn to be wise in trifles. Man is a tool-using animal and progresses only when he realises the fact.

Rooted far deeper in the Highland character than this incapacity in externals, was the failure to comprehend the rules

of civilised society. With the central fact here—the clan system—I shall deal below. But their attitude towards law and justice is illuminating. Nothing in English history is so impressive as the process whereby primitive justice hardened into law, and law grew into institutions. Out of rude revenge and compensation came the laws of Æthelberht and Alfred; and Cnut followed Alfred; and Norman and Plantagenet deepened, strengthened, made practical the earlier codes, until at last law evolved into a living power in the existence of a legislature. But in the Highlands there was never any promise of this development. Scott was well within the truth when he made Evan, in *Waverley*, contradict the ordinary usages of the courts, and offer with princely but barbaric generosity that, “if the court would let Vich Ian Vohr go free just this once, . . . ony six o’ the very best of the clan will be willing to be justified in his stead.” It was common to talk of *honest* men who died for the law, that is, who were hanged for theft. As for the Highland capacity for misusing the modern organisation of justice, I do not know that a more splendid, or a less conscious, confession of sin exists, than in Argyle’s address in the famous Appin murder case: “If you had been successful in that rebellion . . .” he said to the man whose death he was securing for reasons of state, and to placate clan feeling, “you might have been giving the law where you now have received the judgment of it, and we, who are this day your judges, might have been tried before one of your mock courts of judicature, and then you might have been satiated with the blood of any name or clan to which you had an aversion.” But in this land, where law remained custom, and courts depended on an individual’s whim, and no legislature outside that individual’s will threatened to add to the complexity of life, there is no confession of aloofness from the legal point of view so picturesque as the incantation given by Carmichael, whereby the litigant sought to interpose a buffer of magic, which he understood, between him and the law which was assailing him with its mysterious terrors. “The litigant went at morning dawn to a place where three streams met. And as the rising sun gilded the mountain crests, the man placed his two palms edgeways together, and filled them with water from

the junction of the streams. Dipping his face into this improvised basin, he fervently repeated the prayer. . . . :

I will wash my face
 In the nine rays of the sun,
 As Mary washed her Son
 In the rich fermented milk.

Love be in my countenance,
 Benevolence in my mind,
 Dew of honey in my tongue,
 My breath as the incense.

Black is yonder town,
 Black are those therein,
 I am the white swan,
 Queen above them.

I will travel in the name of God,
 In likeness of deer, in likeness of horse,
 In likeness of serpent, in likeness of King,
 Stronger will it be with me than with all persons."

I do not know that, even in stories, magic and witchcraft ever carried their privileged possessors into real prosperity.

But the central fact in Highland society and ethics was the clan, and the influence of the clan system, more than any other single phenomenon, reveals how deeply intertwined with Highland virtues were the roots of destruction. It would be foolish to deny the obvious splendours and barbaric virtues of the old clan organisation. Readers of the Waverley novels are not likely to forget the Highland chapters in *Waverley*, where the splendid ostentation of Scott's scenes marks the clan at its highest. In many cases chiefs exercised the patriarchal authority with a grave sense of responsibility and with admirable effect; and where this was the case, the combined humanity and romance of the personal relationship raised Highland society to a plane far more elevated than that of Lowland commercialism. "Government," said Macleod to Boswell, "has deprived us of our ancient power, but it cannot deprive us of our domestic satisfactions. I would rather drink punch in one of their houses (meaning the houses of his people) than be enabled by their

hardships to have claret in my own." By ennobling the office of lordship, the clan organisation also idealised the office of service. Filial piety is too weak a phrase in which to describe the relation of the true clansman to his chief. Even in the time of Johnson's tour, when degeneration had set in, that critical observer found, in Col and many others, Highland chieftains not unworthy of the ancient traditions. "Wherever we roved," he wrote of Col, "we were pleased to see the reverence with which his subjects regarded him. He did not endeavour to dazzle them by any magnificence of dress; his only distinction was a feather in his bonnet; but as soon as he appeared, they forsook their work, and clustered about him: he took them by the hand, and they seemed mutually delighted." But in the heroic days, no old Germanic tribesman ever flung away his life with so enthusiastic an *abandon* as did the clansman to save his chief, or to avenge him. Culloden is no happy memory, nor did the Macdonalds on that stricken field sustain their traditional prestige, yet it was one of Keppoch's clansmen there, who bade his son "put him down, as he was gone anyway," and help to save the body of the chief. Highland courage, at its highest, was the courage of clan devotion. And in the same way Highland courtesy was also clan courtesy. Even to this day, it is impossible to hesitate between the certain, kindly, picturesque manners of the Highlands, and the dour, ill-trained, if sincere, independence of the Lowlander. It may be that the connection with France had had its due effect, but a more obvious reason is simply that where society is so planned that men of all classes are thrown into the most intimate contact, the meanest gain some slight social air, and, even if caste is stereotyped, the whole character of society is raised nearer the tone of the highest.

Whatever, then, may be said in criticism, here, in the paternal care of the chief, and the unflinching loyalty of the man, Highland society may fairly claim something rare and distinguished; and the author of the *Reminiscences* was justly proud when he could speak of his clan leaders in these terms: "They were looked up to and respected by the people. Their names were mingled with all the traditions of the country; they were as old as its history, practically as old, indeed, as the hills

themselves. They mingled freely with the peasantry, spoke their language, shared their feelings, treated them with sympathy, kindness, and, except in outward circumstances, were in all respects one of themselves."

But gracious as the old world seemed, its grace and distinction could no more save it from wreck, than the courtesies and honour of feudal France could prevent the great Revolution. In both societies, the most distinguished virtues presupposed the absence of the spirit of progress. Not every castle was so romantically perfect as the home of Flora and Fergus M'Ivor. Burt, who may act as our *advocatus diaboli*, visited some minor chieftain at his castle, and found it all "inelegant and ostentatious plenty," with the future mortgaged to meet present extravagances. "I make little doubt," he says, "that his family must starve for a month to retrieve the profusion." The criticism might be ignored as unimportant, were it not that the whole fabric of Highland show and courtliness was based on similar uneconomic uses of men and material. The chieftain's following was possible only where labour was unreasonably cheap, or altogether neglected; and there were many occasions on which the glory of the chief, and the material good of the clansman came into direct opposition. Burt, who in this matter at least knew his subject, gives an instance of clansmen called from sixteenpence a day to sixpence, to suit the needs of the chief. "They said he injured them in calling them from sixteenpence a day to sixpence; and I very well remember he then told me, that if any of those people had formerly said as much to their chief, they would have been carried to the next rock, and precipitated." *Laudatores temporis acti* may proclaim, if they like, the blessing of such primitive poverty and obedience; but poverty is a national evil, the more so when it is the natural consequences of uneconomic, that is, unnatural conditions. It was no question of preserving primitive innocence and simplicity. Change had to come, and the clan system complicated the disasters of change. It must be remembered, too, that the clan chiefs were among the first to surrender to the profitable temptations of the modern world, and, while the minds and customs of their followers very slowly readapted themselves to

meet the change, the highest Highland aristocracy signed a surrender which spelt disaster to their men. The personal bond was exchanged for territorial feudalism; feudalism made way for sheep-farming, and sheep-farming for deer-forests, and the end of the process came in the ruin of the people.

Even the romantic glamour of the Highland gift for rebellion, and the prestige of the hot courage of the Highland band tends to dissipate under cool observation. Twenty years before the '45, Burt noticed that, "were it not for their fond attachment to their chiefs, and the advantages these gentlemen take. . . I verily believe there are but few among them that would engage in an enterprise so dangerous to them as rebellion." More than half the gallant failures, on which the Highland name for desperate fighting powers is based, were schemes of the Highland leaders supported by the natural obedience of their liegemen. That the clansmen loved war is true; that their gallantry has found no superior, the history of Highland warfare from 1745, through Wellington's campaigns, down to the Crimea and the Mutiny, is the steadfast witness. Yet it has been too little noticed that when the former sanctions of the clan authority were removed, Highlanders showed little eagerness to join either the army or the navy. Macculloch was often perversely disillusionising in his comments, but on this point he is assuredly correct, and he is equally convincing in his refusal to be swept away by effusive eulogiums of clan warfare. "The military organisation appears to be very imperfect, because deficient in what is the basis of everything, obedience. . . It is well known that the ancient Highlanders could seldom be rallied in the field, and that it was impossible to detain them from home, when disgust, the acquisition of plunder, or other causes, induced them to disband."

The natural inference from all these facts is that the Highland character, moulded by clan loyalty and responsibility, fair in its antique quixotisms and ostentations, was actually contradictory to the ways of what we call the world; and that world, being always right, has a warning word for its opponents—*Vae victis*.

This stiffness in the face of change became something more than disaster to the Highlands in the hands of what men call Chance; for the Highlanders throughout their history were, like the dynasty they defended so loyally, peculiarly subject to the strokes of fortune, and peculiarly badly fortified against them. It is a curious, romantic, and unfortunate fact, that the place of Fate — that is, something independent of, and overruling, the human will — is abnormally great in Highland history. The most direct illustration may be found in the large share which nature has had in moulding the Highland character. By natural conditions the Highlander has been kept remote from the European world, has had his communities broken up into clans, has dwelt on the loose and sliding slopes of the world, beaten on and conquered by sun, wind, and rain. Nature has dictated to him his remoteness from modern civilisation, and given him but a slender hold on the operations of his life; and the very indolence and fitful energy, which are his characteristic in the world of affairs, are the fruit of the inevitable laws of a tyrannous Nature. Unlike the Stoic or the English Puritan, he has accepted religion, not from the revelations of God to his will and conscience, but from the fancies and fears imposed on his imagination from without. His poetry and songs are not merely artistic descriptions of the minor pleasures on which men's senses dwell in ease and at leisure. They arose at the dictation of "mightier movements"; and while the Englishman has written his dramas to please a crowd, and taught even love to flow gently along sonnet channels, the Highlander has sung and composed to meet the exigencies of life and death, and found charms and magic spells more suitable expressions of feeling, than less potent, if more literary, modes of poetry. As with nature, so with events. When we associate a people with lost causes, we mean that the balance between human initiative and the force of circumstances has been upset, and that its folk are no longer masters of their fate. It was instinct (which is nature), not policy, which drove the Highlands into Jacobitism, and when once that cardinal error had been made, nothing remained but to submit to all the consequences. It is pitiful to see the ancient fabric of the clans prostrate after Culloden, so

that a circumstance so trivial as the making of roads, was sufficient to threaten fundamental change. Then when political failure had reached its natural culmination, great economic changes smote the land, and again there was nothing for it but endurance. As I have hinted above, chiefs became landlords, and rents had to rise. Then landlords found sheep better tenants than men, and the men had to go. And later still the comparative humanity of sheep-farming had to vanish before men's selfish pleasures, in the form of sport. Stroke after stroke beat on this ancient people, loosened the old ties, and finally broke it. "There seems now," says Johnson, in 1773, "to be, through a great part of the Highlands, a general discontent. That adherence which was lately professed by every man to the chief of his name has now little prevalence"; and he speaks of "this epidemic desire of wandering, which spreads its contagion from valley to valley." So the Gael, fighting the new world with old weapons, found his discomfiture completed when nature and chance attacked him on flank and rear; with the end—destruction, not indeed of the individuals, but of the organised nation. It is seldom that any national type has so completely changed his moods, as the Scottish Highlander seems to have done; still seldomer that one may watch the changes come under the operation of historic and calculable causes — Reformation, and Calvinistic revival; misplaced loyalty, and war, and the sickening hardships of defeat and exile. The real Highlander, with whose nobler traits the sentimental Philistine has made such melancholy sport, the man abroad with his hopes and longings, and his unquenchable ambition to remain Highlander, is the creature of the Fates. Torn from his land, he attempts to preserve something of the old reality by creating a curious little fatherland within his imagination—a place, memorial, coloured with traditions, and preserved through a racial home-sickness. But even in this last retreat; fortune must still pursue him, and the Highlander, citizen of the land within his heart, watches the natural forces of separation and exile change his children, until the Highland name becomes the memory of a memory.

In the historic and external world then, the old Highland community stands out as the creature, rather of circumstances

than of its own will ; of virtues distinguished chiefly for their lack of contact with present utilities ; of defects, the regular and inevitable concomitants of failure. There is a struggle for existence among peoples as among individuals, and this is one of the failures.

PART II.

“Will no one tell me what she sings?
 Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
 For old, unhappy, far-off things,
 And battles long ago:
 Or is it some more humble lay,
 Familiar matter of to-day?
 Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
 That has been, and may be again.”

THE intellectual and aesthetic record of the old Highland community the external observer is perhaps less competent to criticise than its history. There are the obstacles of a strange language, and new rules of art; and the involutions and eccentricities of the Highland brain demand an expert in national psychology. It is easy, and useless, to indulge in such sweeping judgments as that of the prince of dogmatists on the “Erse” language: “The rude speech of a barbarous people, who have few thoughts to express, and were content as they conceived grossly, to be grossly understood.” But it seems not unfair to trace, in these esoteric matters, a line of argument parallel to that outlined above:—that the true Highland genius is something primitive, traditional, which it is almost impossible either to continue or to reproduce; that the onsets of the modern and alien world must, in the long run, conquer and destroy old things; and that the contribution of the Highlands to the modern world, apart from the individual genius of her sons, which is always valid and modern, must be sought in indirect influences, quaint eccentric eddies of the spirit, reversions to conservative, or even primæval, thoughts and imaginations.

> To begin with, the Highland mind strikes the alien critic as instinctive rather than rational; poetic, not scientific. As is

the case with other primitive folk who boast an intellectual inheritance, Highland imagination has been developed at the expense of prose and reason. I do not mean that Highland powers of mind are in any sense despicable. Dr. Johnson, not once, but many times, paid sincere tributes to the culture of the Highland gentlemen and the ministers whom he met: "I never was in any house," he witnessed of the islanders, "where I did not find books in more languages than one, if I stayed long enough to want them." And if Norman Macleod's enthusiasm for Highland love of learning might suggest doubts in Lowland minds, the history of that distinguished family, to which he belonged, must quickly put them to flight. If one excepts the regions round Aberdeen (where light springs more readily than sweetness), I doubt if self-improvement proceeds anywhere so easily, and so rapidly, as in the Highlands and Islands. That the Highland mind is apt in learning the mental habits of other peoples, is a proposition easily demonstrated. Yet this is only another proof that the road to fortune for the Highlander lay, and lies, away from the Gaelic world. It is hardly too much to say that the logical thinker or scientific observer, who would be true to Celtic tradition, will find himself in an impossible dilemma, for Highland culture has produced no philosophic treatise of importance, has helped to further no great scientific discovery, indeed has composed no single volume of real weight in prose. In the Bodleian copy of Martin's *Description of the Western Islands*, there are some quaint criticisms, inscribed by Toland, the eighteenth century Deist (I wonder if anything fades so fast as self-appreciative Illuminism?). In one place he is constrained to exclaim, "The author wanted almost every quality requisite in an historian . . . except simplicity, if even this may be allowed him." Martin was a Highlander. From first to last, his fellows in literary thought have found it difficult to think coolly, and one of the latest of them—he follows the novelist's art—has lately discovered, in what is really Lowland humour, a convenient way of escape from the antique domination of his own world. One and all, they are children crying for the light, and with no language but a cry.

Without a rational philosophy, or a systematic theology, for Highland Protestant orthodoxy is a frenzy, not a system, the Highland race has made its weightiest contribution to thought in the great mass of its traditional beliefs, and primitive religious imaginations. Macculloch may brush it all aside with a contemptuous gesture: "Fashion, ignorance, idleness, credulity, superstition, falsehood, dreaming, starvation, hypochondriasm, imposture, will explain all"; and Johnson, inquiring earnestly but sceptically, concerning second sight, may depart with, at best, a will to believe, but the fact remains that this Highland supernaturalism is the richest possession of the Highlander, and his most potent means of influencing the outside world. Thanks to the fidelity of Highland records, the salient facts are known to all, and I shall simply give them in brief outline, for the purposes of my argument, grouping them under three headings—Celtic belief in a spirit-world; Celtic use of charms, magic, and witchcraft; and the Celtic pantheon of little gods and uncanny monsters.

What impressed early observers, and what still astonishes those who know the Highlander, in literature and out of it, is in the first instance his obsession by a spirit-world, where space and time seem to have lost their limits, and the dead ignore the bonds of the grave. It was a natural habit in old writers to devote a section to Second Sight, and phenomena related to Second Sight, among the Islanders; for nothing seemed to them so conspicuous and unique in the islands they were visiting. Even the sceptical Macculloch contributed a scornful chapter on the subject, and if he attributed the miraculous facts to "the condition of the Highlanders: unoccupied, subject to hypochondriacal disorders, dozing away their time in tending their cattle, nationally and habitually superstitious, and believing that which it was the fashion to believe," at any rate he thought the phantasy worth refuting. The Gaelic difficulty, apparently, was, not belief in dreams and visions, but means of escaping happily from seeing them. Martin tells us of a certain John Morison of Bernera of Harris, who "wears the plant called *fuga daemonum* sewed in the neck of his coat, to prevent his seeing of visions." The cure, we are told, was effectual. But Second Sight, no

matter how eery, was humane and comfortable compared with the uneasy energy of the Highland dead. For them the grave was no prison house, and they haunted fords and houses, and obtruded themselves on quiet sleep with their messages of doom. The Maclaines had their "Hugh of the Little Head," dreeing his weird by riding his black steed with the white spot on its forehead, to give warning when any of his race was about to die; and every great family had some similar grisly spiritual companion.¹

In an atmosphere so overcharged with spirit, it was natural to believe in witchcraft and magic, and to rely on charms, and an elaborate ritual of primitive paganism, to effect what more orthodox means seemed impotent to do. Highland witch-tales are too familiar to require restatement, but it is not often enough realised that Christianity itself finds self-expression in the Hebrides in most unorthodox practices. There are baptisms and sacraments, unknown to the strict authorities of the faith, and the charms in *Carmina Gadelica* prove how recently the western islanders still offered tribute to the unknown gods. "Three days before being sown, the seed is sprinkled with clear cold water, in the name of Father, and of Son, and of Spirit, the person sprinkling the seed *walking sunwise the while*"; and in harvest, "the father of the family took up his sickle, and, *facing the sun, cut a handful of corn. Putting the handful three*

¹Nothing could be found contrasting more amusingly the Highland way with Scott's shrewd Lowland common-sense than the novelist's account of his sleep in the haunted chamber at Dunvegan. "An autumnal blast, sometimes clear, sometimes driving mist before it, swept along the troubled billows of the lake which it occasionally concealed, and in fits disclosed. The waves rushed in wild disorder on the shore and covered with foam the steep pile of rock. . . . The voice of an angry cascade was heard from time to time mingling its notes with those of wind and wave. Such was the haunted room at Dunvegan; and, as such, it well deserved a less sleepy inhabitant. . . . In a word, it is necessary to confess that, of all I heard or saw, the most engaging spectacle was the comfortable bed in which I hoped to make amends for some rough nights on shipboard, and where I slept accordingly, without thinking of ghost or goblin, till I was called by my servant in the morning."—Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, Vol. IV, p. 206.

times round his head, the man raised the 'Iollach Buana,' or reaping salutation." It is still possible, in the Highlands, to serve two masters, and nowhere are all forgotten far-off things so intimately connected with our modern mysteries of faith. What, for example, could be at once more genuinely Christian, and at the same time Pagan, than this charm, with which they guarded their cattle from harm:

"The prosperity of Mary Mother be yours ;
Active and full may you return.
From rocks, from drifts, from streams,
From crooked passes, from destructive pits,
From the straight arrows of the slender ban-shee,
From the heart of envy, from the eye of evil."

There is, lastly, what I have called the pantheon of the Celtic minor gods and horrid monsters, who beset mankind—beings not only of the spirit, but apparently endowed with natural substance. Hobgoblins and fairies have played much the same part in the northern story that tyrant kings and unruly barons have done in England. So concrete is it all that one is half surprised to find no branch of Scottish law dealing with the conveyancing of fairy territory, and no constitutional practice evolved from their domination over men. But we are less concerned here with the mere details than with their meaning in the Highland character and their influence, through the Highlands, on the outside world.

It is a repetition of the wayward, incalculable power of Highland caprice and enthusiasm, relating itself to the more utilitarian civilisation of the South through curious reactions and indirect influences. Yet, as in the world of history and politics, even the influence actually exerted by the North has meant loss of vitality—virtue has gone out with it—and to trace the modifications introduced by Highland superstition is also to trace the disappearance of Highland beliefs.

In one sense, these Celtic and pre-Celtic relics have a modern value, which must continue to increase. Cool as modern science is, its anthropologists find the fossil remains they are investigating, curiously ready to come to life once more, and no

field in anthropology has so infected the explorers with sympathy and romance as the North and West of Scotland. The Highlander, indeed, has himself undertaken to investigate his own mysteries, and no names in folklore are more honourably distinguished than those of J. F. Campbell of Tiree, and half-a-dozen others of the same stock. Not only have the Scottish collectors done more in detailed collection than those of Wales or Ireland—I set the Arthurian legend aside for the present for obvious reasons—but the tales, myths, and songs have been wooed from their owners with a courtesy and gentleness in keeping with old Highland manners. The sentence with which Carmichael closes the introduction to his great collection, *Carmina Gadelica*, is both an unconscious tribute to the writer and a revelation of the secret of his success as a discoverer. "These notes and poems," he writes, "have been an education to me. And so have the men and women reciters, from whose dictation I wrote them down. They are almost all dead now, leaving no successors. With reverent hand and grateful heart I place this stone upon the cairn of those who composed and of those who transmitted the work." Such piety, indeed, is one of the virtues assured of a blessing, not only hereafter, but even here and now.

But outside the great collections Highland supernaturalism has left its traces upon the society which is securing its disappearance. It is, of course, easy to exaggerate the influence of the North on southern imagination, and there are, even within the British isles, several rivals to its predominance in literature. Border ballads and legends have had their sway; the Arthurian cycle must always claim an obvious and explicit supremacy; and the Irish mythology would find even more scope for its influence than it does were its modern proselytes more genuinely and simply Irish. Indeed, the external signs of Highland influence through myth and story are almost meagre. There are Highland renderings of the supernatural mood in Highland poetry. One English poet at least—I mean Collins—surrendered to the claims of "the popular superstitions of the Highlands," even if he went astray in his description of the "gifted wizard seer's abode" in "the depth of Uist's dark forest."

Macpherson gave it vogue in a form the corruptions of which had, curiously enough, as much influence as the pure reality. It appears, artificially but not insincerely, in Scott's poetry and novels, although I do not know that Scott really sympathised with Highland superstition as he did with Border legend. And Stevenson, with the artist's knowledge of a treasure, used it as a fascinating but subordinate part of his artist's stock in trade. But explicit literary influence is a deceptive guide. The Gaelic power has proved its strength by undercurrents and modifications, not the less genuine because they have done their work silently. The virility of the modern understanding and imagination depends on the element of primitive irrationalism in it; and Highland superstition, working not so much through books as through personal contact—through the whims of Highland gentlemen, the home-sick traditions of Highland emigrants, and the curious educative faculty of Highland nurses, has done much to hamper the enfeebling progress of the clear civilised intellect. The passivity of England may have let primitive ideas die out, and the arid efficiency of American materialism may dispense with actual myths; but through the Highlander it is still possible to draw from these deep living waters of fear and wonder, and to prolong for a little the childhood of the world. Here is a last refuge against the monotonous onsets of common sense.

I have chosen to dwell on this element in the Highland life, for it is not possible to judge Highland literature accurately without a critical equipment, drawn from these barbaric religious fancies. It is, perhaps, absurd for one who knows Gaelic poetry only in translation, to venture on criticism. Yet I do not know that stricter knowledge of local detail is necessary to substantiate the proposition that the true literature of the Highlands is to be found, not in the individual efforts of the bards and poets, but in the songs owned by the nation itself, inspired in the nation by the old vanishing world, and doomed to end, except as a record of the past, with the culture that produced it.

The earliest poetic promise of the race, when Erse was the literary dialect of both Ireland and the Scottish Highlands, was singularly splendid. This is no place in which to describe the

heroic legends of the Irish Celt; or the schools of the Irish bards; or the rich literature of early Celtic Christianity. It will be sufficient to indicate from such early lyrics as Dr. Kuno Meyer has translated, the distinctive qualities of early Celtic poetry. Dr. Meyer has very rightly indicated the secret of their charm—an “avoidance of the obvious and the commonplace. The half-said thing to them is dearest.” It would be hard to find in the literature, late or early, of any European people a more perfect treatment of nature. The early Celtic poet finds subtle enjoyment of her through all his senses. Sight is the obvious hand-maiden of descriptive verse, and the old poet’s eyes are aided in their work by a loving care for detail—he sees not merely the autumn hillside, but the bracken reddening on its slopes, the pleasant ruin of the summer’s growth, and the wild-geese winging their way to sunnier skies. He hears with acuter ear the small sounds, and subtle quiet music of nature, and like the greatest of later lyric poets, Keats, he knows the poetry of taste. He associates the nature he loves with all the occupations of his life, and earns his bread more willingly in the sweat of his brow, because he does it in a fair setting. Even the scribe finds new attractions in his scroll and pen and ink, because he writes under trees and with the sky above him:—

“A hedge of trees surrounds me,
A blackbird’s lay singe to me;
Above my lined booklet
The trilling birds chant to me.

Well do I write under the greensward.”

The religious penitent rejoices because the operations of the Holy Spirit have as their fitting symbol the clear pool in which he washes away his sins. The life ascetic has still the subtle luxury of natural beauty to satisfy earthly cravings, and a warrior saint like Columba tempers the rigours of his religious exile with memories of the oak-groves of Derry. Matthew Arnold, misleading the world with a phrase, as was his wont, has spoken of melancholy, and a kind of brooding art-magic, as the notes of the Celtic imagination. He speaks of “the sheer inimitable note” (Celtic, of course) in passages like these:

“Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,
By paved fountain or by rushy brook,
Or in the beached margent of the sea.”

And

“ In such a night as this
Stood Dido, with a willow in her hand,
Upon the wild sea-banks, and waved her love
To come again to Carthage.”

But half the charm of this early Celtic poetry lies in its frankness and health. It has lightness and spirit; and real melancholy, reflective gloom, in fact all derivative emotions are less evident than in Anglo-Saxon verse. Laments there are, but objective and direct laments.

Passing from this fair early phase of Celtic imagination, we have an acute sense of disappointment at the later achievements of Gaelic genius, when that genius has learned to express itself in a Highland dialect. It is, perhaps, well to remind ourselves at how late a date this happened. According to Skene, it was only when the fall of the almost independent kingdom of the Isles, and the Reformation again separated the country from Ireland that a reaction towards the vernacular and spoken Scotch Gaelic took place. Among the earliest examples of Gaelic literature are the poems in the Book of the Dean of Lismore. Even there “some are in pure Irish, . . . others in a mixed dialect, in some of which the Irish idiom, in others the Scotch predominates.” The old lyrical graces have not entirely disappeared. The affectionate details of natural beauty in Deirdre’s lament show the old quality still present.

“Glendaruadh! O Glendaruadh!
My love each man of its inheritance.
Sweet the voice of the cuckoo on bending bough,
On the hill above Glendaruadh.
Beloved is Naighen and its sounding shore;
Beloved the water o’er pure sand.
O that I might not depart from the east,
But that I might go with my beloved.”

There is an extraordinarily frank and simple pleasure in human graces—ruddy faces, pearl-white teeth, raven-black hair, as in this verse in praise of Diarmaid:

“Whiter his body than the sun’s bright light,
Redder his lips than blossoms tinged with red,
Long yellow locks did rest upon his head.”

The heroic note, too—battle, and legendary splendour, and the virtues of champions—still sounds clearly. But despite one little despairful love song by a Countess of Argyll, the collection creates the impression that writing and the self-conscious literary life are obstacles intervening to pervert the true character of Gaelic poetry. There are wonderfully few memorable things in the Ossianic fragments in the Dean’s book; only vain repetitions, and hints of things which the Irish had done more skilfully centuries earlier. Much of the rest of the volume is composed of aphorisms and trite sayings—the refuge, in all ages, of third-rate minds. There are the usual satires of the half-educated imagination, many of them wearisome tirades against women in general, suggesting that woman in particular has been a little disdainful of the bardic advances. Eulogies and laments commemorate great heroes, not without a professional unction, as though sorrow and praise rose and fell in strict accordance with a recognised tariff. It may be the effect of imperfect translation, but the novice in Gaelic finds himself conscious of a literary dilemma—the one alternative, that there is little in the substance of the poetry to justify aesthetic enthusiasm, the other, that somewhere, concealed behind imperfect art, lies a world of true poetry and natural magic. Nor does the critic’s difficulty grow less as he passes on to the age of more celebrated Gaelic poets, when the graces and complicated art of the Gael had reached perfection. It is obvious that the affection of Duncan Ban Macintyre for his hills and deer has produced some charming open-air poetry, and that Alastair Macdonald’s “Birlinn Chlann-Raonuill” has Celtic fire and movement, even in a late translation; yet, when enthusiastic advocates of Highland Celticism boast of poetic triumphs in Gaelic, the Saxon critic remains sceptical. Alexander Carmichael may claim for Gaelic oral literature that it has passages “unsurpassed by anything similar in the ancient classics of Greece or Rome,” but there is surely little in the artificial literature of his people which counts in European courts of

literary criticism, and it is no kindness to Highland folk-poetry to compare it with anything in the classics more modern than Homer. Apart from the eighteenth-century Wardour Street Celtic of Macpherson, which has its own virtues, and which certainly had its influence, no work of any Gaelic poet has yet contrived to convince the world of western criticism that the obstacle of the Gaelic language is worth surmounting, as men learn Italian to know Dante, for the treasures beyond.

Nevertheless, somehow or other, the Gaelic temperament has always received recognition as poetic; indeed if there were nothing more, the power which Macpherson's translations so indubitably exercised, in spite of Dr. Johnson's triumphant and ignorant contempt, demands some further explanation than that of Macpherson's very questionable genius. It was on a voyage of adventure, to discover some solution to this dilemma, that I found Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, and so came upon the greatest author produced by Highland culture, and its finest expression,—the Highland folk themselves, and their natural songs and poetry. In the remoter regions of the Western Highlands, and more especially in "The Long Island," that ardent Gael and true gentleman, Alexander Carmichael, discovered a literature in folk-song, unquestionably superior, not merely to formal and artificial Gaelic poetry, but to any similar folk-song in the British Isles. It is a literature dependent on a life simple and primitive, where natural wants are satisfied by the simplest natural processes, and literature, if that may be called literature which is never written, is nothing but the rhythms or melodies which serve as a kindly accompaniment to domestic routine and the labours of the field. Sowing and reaping, churning and weaving, pasturing cattle and catching fish, these things with shining intervals of Sundays and saints'-days, dominate life, and leave no intervals for modern artifice. There, even Christianity has done little to repress the worship of former days, and Protestantism could secure her dogmatic victory only by creating waste places in the old traditionary life. "There were many sad things done then," said a housewife to Carmichael, "for those were the days of foolish doings, and of foolish people. . . . The good ministers and the good elders

preached against them, and went among the people, and besought them to forsake their follies and to return to wisdom. They made the people break and burn their pipes and fiddles. If there was a foolish man here and there who demurred, the ministers and elders themselves broke and burnt their instruments, saying:

“Is fearr an teine beag a gharas la beag na sithe
 Na'n teine mor a loisgeas la mor na feirge.
 [Better is the small fire that warms on the little day of peace,
 Than the big fire that burns on the great day of wrath.]”

Even in the Protestant islands something remained after this drastic Puritan invasion; but, in the Catholic islands, a wiser toleration compromised with earlier paganism, and so, thanks to the editor of *Carmina Gadelica*, we have to-day record of a spontaneous literature of charms, invocations, blessings, as real as the life they commemorate, as beautiful as the old Celtic poetry, the very soul of the Highland people. It has at least one proud distinction, of which the lewder and more sensual lowland genius cannot boast—an amazing purity, which Campbell of Islay found paralleled in the Highland Tales to which he listened: “I have never heard a story whose point was obscenity, publicly told in a Highland cottage; and I believe such are rare.” It tells the story of the simple crises of a simple life. There are routine chants which the women sang as they milked, or worked the quern, or rocked the cradle; verses appropriate to joy and sorrow, the natural poetry of birth, love, and death. They are pieces of an extraordinary religious mosaic, in which the Celtic imagination has set together old mythology, and mediaeval hagiology, and evangelic truth. For the islanders have written quaint magical verses in honour of a pagan Christ, and his mother, and his angels. Christ is the ‘white Lamb’; Mary, some fair heathen goddess; and the angels are demi-gods.

“Come, Brendan, from the ocean,”

sang the herdsman,

“Come, Ternan, most potent of men,
 Come, Michael, valiant, down
 And propitiate the cow of my joy.

Ho, my heifer, the heifer of my love,
 My beloved heifer, choice cow of every sheiling,
 For the sake of the High King, take to thy calf."

They sang their appropriate invocations, when February brought round the day of Bride, the "aid-woman" of Mary in travail. They created out of St. Michael a new god of the sea, and held his day, the 29th of September, as "the most popular demonstration of the Celtic year." I cannot find elsewhere in Gaelic verse anything to match in delicate fancy the invocation that the people made on the maiden before her marriage, wishing her the skill and virtue, faith and beauty, of the saints, the ancient heroines, and the fairies; and the simplicity of the true lyric surely reaches its perfection, in these verses sung by lovers, of the lovers' gifts bestowed on the day of St. Michael:

"My lover gave to me a knife
 That would cut the sapling withe,
 That would cut the soft and hard,
 Long live the hand that gave.

My lover promised me a snood,
 Ay, and a brooch and comb,
 And I promised, by the wood,
 To meet him at rise of sun.

My lover promised me a mirror,
 That my beauty I might see,
 Yes, and a coif and ring,
 And a dulcet harp of chords.

He vowed me those and a fold of kine,
 And a palfrey of the steeds,
 And a barge, pinnaced white,
 That would safely cross the perilous seas.

A thousand blessings, a thousand victories
 To my lover who left me yestreen,
 He gave to me the promise lasting,
 Be his Shepherd God's own Son."

Or, once again, here is surely the true and perfect lyric of Highland hospitality; true and perfect because it reflects, not an individual fancy, but the ideas of the folk:

"I saw a stranger yestreen,
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place;
In the sacred name of the Triune
He blessed myself, and my house,
My cattle and my dear ones;
And the lark said in her song,
Often, often, often,
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.
Often, often, often,
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise."

It is with heart-felt sorrow that one realises how quickly this natural literature has already faded. What Carmichael says of the feast of St. Michael is true of the whole world of which he is the affectionate historian: "The Michael lamb is sometimes slain, the Michael struan is sometimes baked, and the carrots are occasionally gathered, but the people can give no account of their significance." Here and nowhere else is the true inspired literature of the Gael, and yet the days of its life are numbered. Old things are passing, and must pass, and these songs can live, only in the modifications they may have made in minds imperfectly in sympathy with the Highlander, or in the affection and faithful memory of Gaels, still determined to fight time and fate to the last.

Alike in history and literature, the modern student of the Highland community finds the elegiac note predominant. Like another elect people, the clansmen have been and must continue to be pilgrims and strangers. Their gallantry has been the central strength of the British army through a century; their love of culture has done much to give to the Scottish Universities their prestige; their virility and resourcefulness are building *Novae Scotiae* for Britain beyond the seas. But the days of the proud old Highland realm in Scotland are almost over, and Britain is the poorer for it.