



SLAND



CULTURE



VERYDAY



LIFE

Although feuds & wars occupied but little of the overall lives of the people those were the stories that were invariably handed down. Ordinary times made poor news, but, then as now, most people, most of the time, were concerned mainly with providing their families with food, clothing & a safe home; the same mundane chores which have always occupied the bulk of mankind.

However, it would not have been easy to satisfy these basic needs in this region. The Western Isles were not noted for their fertility nor were the men noted for being industrious in anything other than the practice & pursuit of arms. As with tribal societies today most agrarian pursuits were probably considered to be women's work. As a result, the heavy farm labor, necessary for increased productivity, would naturally suffer. Such continued to be the case centuries later when farming methods were recorded by travellers. If & when men ever did such labor it would have been at their convenience rather than when necessary. And, those men who were involved would have been older & from the lower social orders, while the more learned members of society tended to despise such activity. This, too, would inhibit productivity.



During summer in the Hebrides, the cattle were transferred from the low pastures near the farm homes to more distant & higher ground. During this period the women lived in *shielings* (huts built of turf on the hillside), tending the cattle & returning home each day with the milk. This they carried in large containers placed in their *creels* & covered with moss. (82p.89)

Another source, however, believed the whole population moved to the shielings on the moors & that the villages were empty. (139p.41) But, other work had to be done in summer which likely centred around the homesteads; fish had to be caught & dried, grain had to be sown & harvested, hay had to be stored & wool gathered. The spinning & weaving for clothes & blankets likely occurred around a winter's fire.

Southern Mull was severely handicapped due to its small amount of arable land. Some barley, oats & a little wheat were sown along Loch-na-keal, along the north shore of the Ross of Mull & in some valleys, but the amounts harvested were insufficient to meet the consumption of the local populace & their livestock. Agriculture in Mull suffered from many problems: farming methods were rudimentary & time-consuming; crop varieties were limited; yields were a low threefold and, later, fourfold on potatoes. The lack of winter feed caused the cattle & the innumerable small horses to suffer greatly & the usual over-grazing resulted in soil destruction. As well, at least 1/8th of the island's total area was ruined by sand-blow.

The island seems to have deteriorated since 1542 when a writer described Mull as "*a grate roughe iyle, yet fertil & fruitfull. In its woods were maney deire & verey fair hunting*". (246) The fresh water lakes were full of salmon & the salt water lochs teemed with herring. By 1809 the woods had almost vanished (replanting began in 1824) & the herring had disappeared.

Today it is hard to visualize Mull as an island once celebrated for its woods. Trees became such a rarity that peat & driftwood had to be gathered for cooking & for winter heat. In 1773 Dr. Johnson suffered the loss of his large, oak walking stick on this sparsely wooded island. He had used it when his little horse could not carry his considerable weight during some of their wanderings over the wild, rugged slopes. He had brought it from London & entrusted it to a fellow to be delivered to the group's baggageman; but he never saw it again. Boswell could not dissuade him that it had been stolen. "*No, no, my friend*" said he, "*it is not to be expected that any man in Mull who has got it will part with it. Consider, sir, the value of such a piece of timber here!*" (12p.211) Just prior to this (1771) the post of Factor for Mull was vacant & wood cutting had been unrestricted.

It is difficult to conceive how the people, of this period, subsisted prior to the introduction of potatoes for they only produced half the meal they consumed. Although known earlier, potatoes were not a viable crop until the late 1700's but soon became a staple. When a little boy in Morvern was asked what his three meals consisted of he replied, "*Mashed potatoes,*" & when asked to elaborate. he continued, "*...on a spoon*". (191p.187)

Despite its areas of good land, Mull was importing 2000 bolls (1 boll = 5 bushels) of meal & spuds by 1791. (218p.19) The importation

of grain was fairly general with the cost being met from the sale of livestock, particularly cattle. Until kelp production began, cattle sales were the crofter's only real source of income & was their main means of paying their rents.

Breakfast consisted usually of oatmeal porridge (a thick, hasty pudding) & milk. For other meals the fare was fish, milk, eggs, oat bread & water. When food ran short the poor ate lots of herring & oats. Wild birds' eggs were gathered from the cliffs & shellfish were collected on the beach. In the 1700's, the little butter & cheese made were sold to provide money towards the rent. Meat, such as beef, mutton or poultry, was a luxury saved for celebrations of births, weddings & feast days such as New Year's.



*The mannerless man tells what he gets (fed) at his neighbors.  
(an unpardonable offence in the Highlands) (131½)*

The general undernourishment, & in particular the lack of fruit & green vegetables, was to be seen in the short stature of the people. The average height of male prisoners taken at Culloden in 1746 was 5'5".

Although the people might live frugally in good years the problem with subsistence farming was that they suffered miserably when the season was bad. Between 1568 & 1745 there were 12 severe famines; most of them general throughout Scotland. To these must be added the many years when raiding had carried off the cattle & destroyed the crops. The only hope then was to find another enemy to raid in order to recoup the losses. Such tactics would invariably mean a net loss with no winners & everyone losers. One such raid was documented in 1545 when McDonald carried off from Glen Urquhart: (139p.63)

- 1188 cattle, 392 young cattle, 525 calves; 2 oxen; 383 horses
- 1978 sheep, 1099 lambs; 1410 goats, 794 kids
- 122 swine; 64 geese; 3000 bolls of oats; 1277 bolls of barley



Many people died of want, especially in the winter, when the poor folk often had to resort to such expedencies as bleeding their cattle. The blood was drawn, boiled, mixed with oatmeal (when it