



The Village Ceilidh-house

The village ceilidh house was the social centre of our day. When we were growing up in Calbost the main ceilidh house was the home of Angus Morrison, 9 Calbost, 'tigh Aonghais 'an Mhurchaidh', where he and his cheerful and patient daughter Peggy entertained generation after generation of young folk, night after night, until the old way of life was rudely interrupted by the 1939/45 World War, when practically every able-bodied man in the village was called up on the very first day of the outbreak of hostilities because they were Royal Naval Reservists.

Subsequently everybody in the village was engaged in the War effort in one way or another and our way of life in the village was changed forever. We still have a very vivid recollection of our patriarchal white haired host with his flowing white beard stretched out on top of the living room bed, 'leabaidh an teine', in the evenings relating to us his life-time experiences, folklore, ghost stories, exploits at sea including disasters and narrowly missed disasters, local history, genealogy etc.

He never lost a hair out of his head and his constant boast was that a razor never touched his face. From time to time there were other visiting contributors, as if it were, informal guest speakers consisting of sailors, soldiers and various other visitors home on leave or sometimes visitors from one or other of the surrounding villages, who related their experiences and the conditions in the various places they visited or worked in at home and abroad.

Literally the young folk sat at the feet of our elders from whom a good deal of our early education came from, in the institution known as the village ceilidh-house. Gaelic songs might be heard from time to time as well as other cultural discussions. Our host was an accomplished storyteller, never boring, but bringing the events and the characters he spoke about to life. He could bring 'Sabaid Mor Wick' to life as if it was on the screen in front of us. Iasgach Gallaibh (Caithness Fishing) was a favourite subject, and the outstanding characters or strongmen like Aonghais Graim, Ness, and of course the home team like strongman 'Aonghais 'an Sheoc', and 'Balaich Ruaraidh Geobha' figured as heroes in the various exploits he described. As he would say, 'Cha robh bheag a fàgail cidhe Steornabhagh a thogadh a lamh ris an fhear sin'. (Not many left Stornoway pier that could raise a hand to him).

Only the bard in the ancient language can suitably express the nostalgia of those of us who experienced the delights of the convivial atmosphere of the village ceilidh house.

The following lines are by Kenneth Macdonald of Sandwick, Stornoway:

An Cabar-sùith

Nuair sheallas mise an diugh air ais air cleachdaidhean mo thìr
 'S a chì mi taighean mora geala ag eirigh feadh gach sgìre
 Gun ghluais mo chridhe le cianalas mar dh'atharraich mo dhùthaich.
 A charaid dh'fhalbh an cèilidh nuair dh'fhalbh an cabar-sùith.

A charaid, 's mor bha ceangailte ri druim a' chabar-sùith.
 A thuilleadh air na cailleachan-dubha bha seòladh anns an smuid;
 Bha aoibhneas air na cabair ud cho geal ri mirean flùir,
 Ach sgapadh sìos gu h-ealamh iad 'nuair dh'fhalbh an cabar-sùith.

A charaid, dh'fhalbh a h-uile rud 'nuair dh'fhalbh an cabar-sùith,
 Dh'fhalbh an aiteas is am bàidh ro bhuileach as ar dùthaich.
 Dh'fhalbh am blàths 'san cridhealas an cathranas 'sam mùirn,
 Is leapaichean a' chàirdeis, 'nuair dh'fhalbh an cabar-sùith.

A charaid, dh'fhalbh an cèilidh 'nuair dh'fhalbh an cabar-sùith,
 Is ioma rann is sgeul mu ghaol, mu ghràdh, mu shìth 's mu rùn;
 Mu shidhichean 's mu thaibhsichean, mu thoradh 's mu dhroch-shùil,
 A chluinntè 'San tigh-cheilidh mu'n dh'fhalbh an cabar-sùith.

The Thatched Rafters

When I recall the culture and habits of my country
 And I see big white houses rising all over my Parish

My heart is moved with sadness by reason of the tremendous change.
Friend, the ceilidh went once the thatched rafters went.

Friend, much was involved in the thatched rafters.
In addition to the specks of soot that floated in the air;
There was joy on these rafters as white as flour,
But it was all scoured down when the thatched rafters went.

Friend, everything went when the thatched rafters went.
Gone is the laughter and compassion from our land;
Gone are the warmth, the cheerfulness, the hospitality and affection,
And the friendship beds, once the thatched rafters went.

Friend, gone is the ceilidh, once the thatched rafters went.
Many a verse and story about love, fondness, peace and intention;
About fairies and ghosts, fertility and evil-eye,
One might have heard in the ceilidh house, before the thatched rafters went.

[ends]

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