



[Weddings and Other Social Customs]

Our generation, embracing most of the 20th century, witnessed a greater social change in the life of our village and Island than was experienced by all previous generations taken together. Compulsory education came to our area in the last 20 years of the previous century when 5 schools were built in Pairc in about 1880, but the full effect of education was not felt until well into the 20th century.

Two World Wars, fast modern communications, radio, telephone, newsprint, electricity, domestic water supply and sewerage greatly improved housing. Motors replaced the sail early in the century. The tractor replaced the horse and plough. Good tarmacadam roads replaced tracks and opened up the villages to land access as opposed to sea transport. Fast cars replaced the horse and gig. Lorries replaced the horse and cart, even the humble bicycle appeared.

As the century progresses technology marches on apace and the office is revolutionised. The typewriter is replaced by the computer, and better and more sophisticated computers keep coming on the market, copying machines, fax machines etc. etc. The kitchen and the home are also revolutionised.

The social life of the village also changed. In the early part of the 20th century the social life of the village revolved around the Ceilidh House and dancing on the road 'danns an rathad', weddings, concerts, luadhs (fulling or finishing the tweed at home by a team of girls). Whenever people congregated together there was a lot of informal fun and hilarity.

People used work songs to lighten their task, and that was true about luadhs in particular. The girls sang enthusiastically as they pummelled the cloth back and forth in unison on the surface of a purpose built 'cleith' (not unlike a big door). Usually one of the ladies led the singing, extemporising and devising compositions designed to tease the young people present by linking their names romantically with someone, not always a likely person.

In times past weddings were the highlights of the winter social round. All weddings were at home and the dance was in a barn or in the school if it was near. The ceilidh house was neglected if there was a wedding in the village. It all started when the young man and a companion approached the home of the prospective bride in order to ask her father for permission to marry the young lady. On such occasions the young man always brought a supply of whisky 'botul bodaich' in order to oil the wheels in a difficult situation. If everybody was agreed a wedding 'banais' followed, but if not, there was nothing for it but to find another young lady.

Many a young man reached the door of the home of the prospective bride before losing his nerve and failing to enter. On one occasion the prospective groom was very hesitant and his companion 'gille fuachd' was getting impatient, so he demanded that the groom enter the house at once or else he was going back home. 'Very well,' said the groom, 'let us go back home'. On one occasion they had the whisky for themselves.

Weddings lasted all night until well after dawn, in fact wedding celebrations extended over a period of weeks, beginning with the betrothal party 'reiteach' or engagement party at the home of the bride. The festivities concluded on the evening after the wedding with a party exclusively for the neighbouring senior citizens.

Until the end of the Second World War all weddings in Pairc were celebrated at home in the time honoured age-old traditional way, usually in the bride's home where a sumptuous table was laid out in the full length of the best room 'culaist'. Most, if not all, the young people in the surrounding area were invited and they made their way to the barn dance early in the evening, where they spent the whole winter's night in vigorous Highland dancing.

The table would only accommodate about a dozen to sixteen people at a time and a team of stalwart stewards was engaged to bring relay after relay of guests from the barn dance to the wedding feast. Some were too modest to appear in the dining room on their own and it was the steward's duty to escort such guests to the table, sometimes with a fairly strong degree of persuasion.

Preparations for a wedding were a village occasion and food was donated generously and all the women in the surrounding area participated in the preparations at the wedding house 'tigh na bainnse'. Lots of chickens were donated and a day was set aside for the village ladies to come and pluck these chickens. During that time there was a great deal of ragging and boisterous but harmless fun taking place, as might be expected once a number of these jolly ladies got together in festive mood. On such occasions it was prudent for the young men of the village

to keep at a safe distance or they might be feathered, or worse. Mutton, in the shape of whole carcass was also donated and the cooking was done in large three legged 50 gallon pots over an open peat fire outside.

The wedding ceremony took place in the local church, sometimes in the village prayer house, if the main church was too far away for the bride and groom and a long column of guests headed by a piper to march there. The arrival of the car changed all that. The village was decked in flags on the wedding day, usually a white pillow case displayed at every house and the appearance of the newlyweds were greeted with a gun salute by volleys of shot gun fire. We were never able to find out if there was any significance in the white flags, but in military parlance a white flag indicates surrender.

The wedding couple and their attendants sat at the top table and remained there for hours while sitting after sitting of guests came and went. There would have been two sittings, 'a cheud bòrd agus an dara bòrd.' A butler was always put in charge of the drinks and he served whisky to all the guests at the table. The waiters were known as 'gilleán frithealaidh'. The newlyweds were toasted 'air slàinte nan daoine òg', with a few witty remarks at every sitting, informality was the keynote. The ladies seldom took their drinks but instead passed them onto their partner or favourite young man at the table. Inevitably, the sweets known as conversations, on which was described a short pithy message, were distributed at the table, and that occasioned a great deal of good-humoured teasing and bantering.

When the night was far spent the newlyweds would slip quietly away from the reception to a pre-arranged secret sleeping accommodation in someone's best room. If the secret sleeping location leaked out, which invariably it did, a group of jolly friends would be waiting for the newlyweds in order to put them ceremoniously to bed in a high spirited fashion. A similar waking ceremony was also awaiting the newlyweds in the morning. A party of friends gathered at the house and the occasion was celebrated with toasts, ragging and jollification.

The last old time wedding that place at Calbost was in 1945 at the end of the Second World War. The couple concerned were Chirsty Macfarlane, nee Mackenzie of 12 Calbost and Angus Macfarlane 'Samson' of 10 Marvig. The wedding feast was as usual at the bride's home at 12 Calbost and the dance was in Peter's newly built house at 8 Calbost, a large roomy double house just roofed and floored but without partitions. It was a memorable occasion with all the boys and girls from the surrounding district home from the War, and all of them invited to Chirsty and Samson's wedding.

As usual, the newlyweds slipped away from the reception before dawn to a secret pre-arranged sleeping quarters. Before morning word got round that the newlyweds were sleeping in the Mackays best room at 7 Calbost. A waking party of worthy Calbost citizens assembled, led by 'Mor Choinneach Chalum,' also known as 'Mor an Torrain', and among her band of assistants were two young men, affectionately known as 'Sobartach and Jellicoe', later on pillars of the Church.

The bedroom was approached with that trio in the lead duly armed with a pair of shears 'deamhais' - supposedly to cut Samson's non-existent hair 'an duine treun', so as to deprive him of his strength and tame him.

It was all good clean fun where young and old made the occasion of a wedding a memorable one. The writer's wedding in 1946 at 8 Gravir with the dance conveniently at the school nearby was among the last old time weddings in Pairc. During the later part of the 20th century many Lewis weddings took place at the East coast fishing ports.

On one occasion about 1952, three Marvig men married three Caithness fisher girls and they all came home to Marvig on a local fishing boat. They were Alexander Macfarlane, 1923, 10 Marvig, and Betty Macdonald, Bettyhill: Donald MacIannan, 1932, 6 Marvig, and Barbara Macdonald, a sister of Betty: Roderick Finlayson, 1923, 8 Marvig, and Jean Munro, Melvich, Sutherland.

In recent years Lewis weddings have been celebrated in modern high class hotels, followed by an expensive honeymoon on The Costa Brava with no waking party to welcome and toast the young couple.

'Ochan, ochan,' arsa mo sheanmhair. ('Och, och', my grandmother would say).

[ends]

AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: Social Change - Weddings

Location in physical archive: Series K, File 1, Section 5

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/9/1

