



## Waulking the Tweed - Luadh

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the social life of the village revolved around the ceilidh house, dancing in the road 'danns an rathaid', weddings, concerts, 'luadhs' (fulling or finishing the tweed at home by a team of village girls). People practised work songs to lighten their work and that was true about 'luadhs' in particular. The girls sang enthusiastically as they pummelled the cloth back and fore in unison on the surface of a purpose-built 'cleith' (not unlike a large door). Usually one of the ladies led the singing, extemporising and devising compositions often designed to tease those young people present by linking their names romantically to a member of the opposite sex, not always a likely person because the object was to raise a laugh.

Clo-mor was manufactured in the Outer Islands for generations before it was commercialised in the 1840s by Lord and Lady Dunmore, the Proprietors of Harris, and re-named Harris Tweed. All the processes were carried out at the Islanders' homes. They sheared their sheep, washed the wool and dyed it with vegetable dye. After drying it on the stone dykes, they teased and carded it by hand then spun it on the distaff 'cougal', and later on the spinning wheel. Then they hand warped the yarn ready for the loom where it was woven into tweed or blanketing.

The final process was the waulking or finishing of the cloth 'luadh'. That was a social occasion in the village that was attended by the writer and his compatriots on many occasions in one month. The first mechanical finishing plant set up in Lewis was in 1934 after the amending of the hand-spun 'Orb' trademark to enable mill-spun yarn to qualify for the 'Orb' trademark. It was James Macdonald Ltd, a man from Habost, Lochs who set up the first finishing plant in Stornoway.

Towards the evening the young ladies, with their sleeves rolled up and wearing multi-coloured head squares and light clothing - a flowing cross-over - would gather at the house of the 'luadh'. The housewife, perhaps with assistance from the neighbours, would be ready for the girls, having taken in a large volume of water and heated it up in large iron pots, both within and outwith the house, on peat fires.

Two large tubs, usually made by cutting a large 50 gallon oak cask into two, were placed in front of the bench 'seis', and the board 'cleith' which was probably about 10 feet by 4½ feet wide. Sometimes a door was used, but the purpose built 'cleith' had small ridges on the surface in order to facilitate a degree of resistance to the pummelling of the tweed back and fore across the board. The 'cleith' was made of new planed flooring with small half-round strips of beading, half-an-inch high, attached to the surface every six inches, in order to create the above ridges. The writer possesses a 'cleith' and two traditional tubs.

Once the waulking 'luadh' started, it was imperative that the water and the cloth be kept warm (at a certain temperature). The cloth was therefore soaked in fairly hot water in the tub at one end of the board and when the eight or ten girls were seated opposite each other on each side of the board, the end of the web of cloth was taken up from the tub and a suitable length was distributed among the girls for the whole length of the board.

It was soft soap that was usually used and a little washing soda crystals 'soda nighe agus sioban bog'.

Once action commenced, the neighbourhood echoed to the thump, thump, thump of the pummelling of the cloth by the girls as well as the lusty singing in unison of the working team (one could say choir) - 'Cha b' e gann an ùpraid' ('No scarcity of noise'). Care had to be taken that each part of the cloth received equal treatment and for that reason the girls moved the cloth about continually under the supervision of the supervisory lady of the house.

The purpose of waulking, or finishing, the cloth is twofold; to remove the oil and dirt from the cloth as well as to soften and shrink the cloth, both in width as well as in length. The finished product should then be soft, clean and ready to wear. The width of Harris Tweed is normally shrunk from 32 inches in the waulking to 28 ½ inches width after finishing, and also it is shrunk several yards lengthways.

The supervisory lady had to exercise great care to ensure that the cloth was not underdone because it would then feel rough, look dirty, and would not sell. It was also a very easy matter to overdo the waulking and shrink the cloth too much. If it was less than 28 ½ inches wide, it would not sell either. The supervisory lady therefore measured the width of the tweed regularly, particularly in the latter stages of the work.

The measuring was not done with a tape measure, but with her hand 'cromadh'. A 'cromadh', which was almost 5 inches, was achieved by the length round the knuckle of the longest finger of the hand in a near-closed position, right round to the palm of the hand. Therefore 5  $\frac{3}{4}$  'cromadh' was about 28  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide.

These things should be checked and video filmed while there are still practising ladies available. The writer would also appreciate corrections to any points he raised. Why not initiate 'a letters page' in your valuable newsheet to enable your readers to have their say? And put us so-called experts in our place. We feel certain that many of your readers have valuable heritage information hidden away in their ancient heads.

The children of the village looked forward to a 'luadh' in the village. Everybody was happy and laughing, and it was also an occasion when there were always handouts of a piece and jam, which was highly appreciated because jam was only available on special occasions such as weddings, luadhs and communions.

The actual 'luadh' itself is now a thing of the past. It is carried out coldly and clinically in the commercial finishing mills, without a fuss or a song.

However, the singing tradition is still carried on at the Gaelic ceilidhs and therefore the institution of the 'luadh' will continue as long as Gaelic is spoken.

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