



[Early History of Harris Tweed]

Before the advent of machine spinning and weaving (The Industrial Revolution) it seems many parts of Scotland obtained their domestic requirements of cloth from cottage industries, and to this day there is ample evidence of that fact to be seen in many of the Scottish museums.

The Hebrides were no exception to the rule, since several kinds of cloth were made by the crofters for their own use, and some of the older inhabitants can still remember some of these homemade fabrics being in use.

Among these fabrics was rough tweed made entirely by the crofters from their own wool, which they dyed with vegetable dyes, hand carded, hand spun, and woven by the handloom process.

To begin with, this tweed was for the crofters' own use, but in the course of time it has through various stages grown to what is now the great Harris Tweed industry of The Outer Hebrides of Scotland.

Over the years many people have contributed to the growth of this industry in the Hebrides, and although many of them have passed from the scene leaving no direct evidence of their activities on behalf of the industry, it is clear from the facts of history that the present flourishing Harris Tweed industry rests squarely on the foundations laid in those far off days.

The following are some of the people who left their mark on the Hebrides and who deserve better than to be forgotten. In fact every Hebridean should be well versed in the history of the Harris Tweed industry, as it is very clear that to a very great extent, the continued existence of these Islands depend on the prosperity of the Harris Tweed industry.

The Dunmore family who were the proprietors of Harris about the time of the 1846 famine (failure of the potato crop) were among the leading people who were largely instrumental in encouraging the establishment of a tweed industry in the Hebrides when they induced the crofters to produce a cloth suitable for a fashionable market. This cloth, of a rough home spun type, proved to be the foundation of our great Harris Tweed industry as we know it today, and we all owe a deep debt of gratitude to Lord and Lady Dunmore who took such an interest in the welfare of the crofters. It is also said that Lady Dunmore arranged for some girls from Harris to go to Alloa to learn to weave more intricate patterns, paying all their training expenses.

Mrs Thomas, wife of Captain Thomas of the Ordnance Survey Department, who appeared to be resident in Harris for a time towards the end of the last century, was another lady who took a great interest in popularising Harris Tweed in those early days.

We find the Duchess of Sutherland very active in Lewis and Harris during the last years of the 19th century, and we are given to understand this lady had connections with 'The Highland Home Industries' who had a shop in Stornoway about that time.

The Platt's of Eishken who came to Lewis about the year 1878 took a great interest in the affairs of the crofters of Park and surrounding district, and began to purchase the products of the crofters in order to help them at a time when it must have been very difficult for the crofters to earn a living. Chief among these crofter products was the local hand-made tweed, and it is said much of it found its way to bazaars and institutions in the south. A notebook still in existence in Eishken lodge shows that the price paid for such tweed in 1889 was 3s/6d per yard, which must be considered a very high reward in those days, and one for which we may be sure the crofters were grateful for.

Evidence of the esteem the people of Park held the Platts in is to be found in the illuminated address presented by the people of Park to Mr and Mrs Platt on the occasion of their silver wedding anniversary on 15th August 1901. This address can still be seen at Eishken lodge, and part of it reads: 'Nor can we allow this occasion to pass without acknowledging our deep indebtedness to you for the great interest you have shown in our local tweed industry.'

Evidence of the warm affection the people of Park held Mrs Platt in is the fact that locally the people conferred on her the title 'Lady Platt' and for very many years we always assumed the title was hers by right.

It is generally acknowledged that so far as Lewis is concerned Park was the first district to take up the industry seriously, and from there it spread to Uig and so forth. The writer can trace the industry in Park back to the 1880s, and my own mother made Harris Tweed at Calbost on her own loom about 1890 with the small loom (beart bheag),

which was the only loom then in existence. It was operated by means of throwing the shuttle (which was a sheep's shin bone) with the one hand and catching it with the other, and firing it back through the 'alt'.

James Mackenzie of 5 Gravir operated the first wooden loom in Lewis of the type in use till the present Hattersley automatic hand loom replaced it in the 1920s. It is said he brought it from Galashiels, and he was weaving on it at least until the early 1890s.

On seeing James Mackenzie's loom at 5 Gravir, Kenneth Nicolson of 11 Calbost, who was a self-taught joiner, constructed his own loom (known as the big loom) not later than 1895. Mr Mackenzie, however, fearing Kenneth Nicolson threatened his livelihood declined to assist him to secure shuttles and heddles (the only part of the loom he had not himself made by hand).

Certainly the older generation of Lochs can still recite Mr Nicolson's reply as follows, but of course in Gaelic: 'I know not that I will not manage' and he promptly inserted an advertisement in the 'Highland News' asking for shuttles and heddles. We are told that he got several replies to his advert, and armed himself with three shuttles which he used to make tartans.

By 1900 there were many 'big looms' in Lochs, and in 1903 the above Kenneth Nicolson moved to Stornoway taking his loom with him. But the industry was so low in Stornoway at that time that many in Lochs felt Mr Nicolson was making a mistake because, they reasoned, he was not at all likely to find work in Stornoway as a weaver. Being of stout heart he proceeded with his plans and it seems he got plenty of weaving. It is not known if there were any other weavers in Stornoway at that time but there could not have been many, if any at all, because Mr Nicolson was known as 'Am Breabadair' (The Weaver), and his surviving daughter is still known to the older generation as 'Kate a Bhreabadair'.

At the beginning of the present century we find Lady Seaforth very active in the welfare of the crofters and the tweed industry. Mr Coats of Paisley was in the habit of calling at Stornoway with his yacht and also purchased quantities of tweed.

I am sure there are many others whose activities are not known to us. But the 'Highland Home Industries' with whose shops we are still familiar in the various cities and towns of Scotland, helped to popularise the tweed in a very big way.

Mention also must be made of the 'Crofters Agency' of Edinburgh. It is said that by about the end of the last century there were a number of more or less philanthropic agencies engaged in marketing crofters' handwork in the South. Up to the beginning of the present century the production of tweed or 'clò mor', as it was then known, was confined almost entirely to the processing of their own wool by the crofters of the Hebrides. There were, however, some who must have been doing more tweed than their own wool could produce because, for instance, we know that in Valtos House in Balallan several spinning wheels were continually at work for years at the turn of the century.

It was the early years of the present century which saw the first changes from hand spun yarn to imported mill spun yarn, and therefore the establishment of the small producers who manufactured on a larger scale than the spinning wheel was capable of. This departure from tradition was the result of the market demand for Harris Tweed, which apparently could not be met from the previous laborious methods.

Notable among these early pioneers was Malcolm Macleod of 20 Balallan whose activities in the tweed industry as a merchant we are told goes back to about 1880. Two other well-known merchants of Harris Tweed in Stornoway were Donald Maciver of Bayhead Street and Donald Macaulay of Cromwell Street.

[ends]

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

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: Notes on the 'Clò Mor' Industry

Location in physical archive: (not located)

NRAS reference:

© Angus Macleod Archive