

Historical Ethnology in Scotland

THE IDEAS PUT FORWARD in summary fashion in these notes have been developed in the course of the last seven or eight years, when the "Country Life Section" of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland has been systematically collecting material and carrying out background research so as to lay the basis of an open-air museum for Scotland. They have been stimulated by discussion with colleagues in other countries and other parts of Britain, and the School of Scottish Studies of Edinburgh University, where a post-graduate diploma course in Scottish Studies began in October 1966, ranging over folk tales, ethnomusicology, material culture, and so on. It is an encouraging sign that in both the museum and university worlds, some progress in the systematisation of both the descriptive and theoretical aspects of the work. A great deal of time and thought must go into this in Britain in the years to come.

In 1880, Sir Arthur Mitchell published *The Past in the Present: What is Civilisation?* a book that may be described as the first study of folk life in the British Isles. In it, he examined pre-industrial equipment like peat and turf spades, single-stilted ploughs, spinning and weaving apparatus, knocking stones and querns for dehusking and grinding grain, and so on, to see what light they could throw on man's civilised status in prehistoric times¹. This approach was part of the attitude of European ethnological scholarship in the 19th century and is paralleled, for example, by the Swede Gunnar Olaf Hyltén-Cavallius, who, in his book *Wärend och Wirdarne*, investigates place-names, dialects and anthropology in remote districts, in his search for traces of pre-history². This may be described as an archaeological phase in the history of European ethnology.

After Mitchell, there was little or no follow up or development of the subject in Scotland or even Britain as a whole. Fortunately, it made progress in other countries, so that there is now a considerable body of international literature, both descriptive and theoretical, a certain amount of which is written in English. In the main formative years of the subject in the 20th century, when it became a university discipline, the stimulating influence of professor Sigurd Erixon is strong. With such a body of work available to us in Britain, it is possible partly to bridge the gap in time as far as the methodology of folk life research is concerned, but the lapse of time that should have been used in collecting objects and assembling archives of oral, documentary, and photographic information about their techniques of use and functional integration with the groups that used them has left a gap that cannot be so easily filled. Since the 1930s, however, a number of developments have taken place. The Irish Folklore Commission, the School of Scottish Studies of Edinburgh University, the Institute of Folk Life and Dialect Research of Leeds University, the Welsh Folk Museum, the Museum of English Rural Life, and the Ulster Folk Museum have all come into existence,

1. A. Fenton, *Material Culture as an Aid to Local History Studies in Scotland*. *Journal of the Folklore Institute* (Bloomington), vol. 2 (1965), pp. 326-327.

2. N.A. Bringéus, *Swedish Ethnology Before 1900*. *Folk Liv* (Stockholm) vol. 26-27 (1962-1963), p. 24.

the latter only in 1964³. The journals *Scottish Studies* and *Ulster Folk Life* are adding year by year to the bulk of printed ethnological material, and *Gwerin*, formerly published by Dr. I.C. Peate, has been replaced by *Folk Life*, the journal of the recently founded Society for Folk Life Studies. This Society is also publishing a volume of essays, *Studies in Folk Life*, in honour of Dr. Peate.

One of the greatest needs in Britain, especially now that University teaching is beginning, is for an increase in the amount of printed material available for study in English or another major language, and in this context the series of handbooks on European ethnology planned at the Julita Conference will be of great value in providing more uniform comparative material than has so far been readily accessible.

The National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland is also taking part in this general upsurge of activity, and in planning towards the development of an open-air museum, (the development of folk life as a subject in Britain also being borne in mind) two factors have been especially considered:

1. the inherent character of the country itself.
2. the desirability of laying emphasis on material of comparative value for ethnologists in other areas.

THE COUNTRY'S CHARACTER. Scotland is a small country on the outer fringes of Europe. It has at present a population of about 5,000,000, as compared with 45,000,000 in England, and 75 per cent of this number is contained in the industrial central belt. The following table⁴ gives an indication of how the

Date	Highlands	Central Scotland	Southern Lowlands	Population Total
1755	652,000 (51 %)	464,000 (37 %)	149,000 (11 %)	1,265,000
1861	1,020,000 (33 %)	1,769,000 (58 %)	273,000 (9 %)	3,062,000
1951	1,000,000 (20 %)	3,840,000 (75 %)	256,000 (5 %)	5,096,000

picture has changed in the last two hundred years, when the Central Belt gained at the expense of the Highlands and Southern Lowlands. The population

3. For further details of folk museums in Britain, see D.A. Allen, *Folk Museums at Home and Abroad* [*Proceedings of the Scottish Anthropological and Folklore Society* (Edinburgh), vol. 5 (1956), pp. 102 ff.] and J. Higgs, *British Folk Collections since the War* [in : *Folkeliv og Kulturlevn. Studier tilegnet Kai Uldall*. København, 1960, pp. 318-328.

4. Adapted from J.G. Kyd, *Scottish Population Statistics*. Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, vol. 18, 1952.

movements are primarily due to the so called Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, which also occurred in other parts of Europe. It has to be emphasised that even within the Highland areas there was considerable movement of people, due to economic enterprise on the parts of the landlords linked with sheep farming and the kelp and fishing industries. Relatively few areas have an indigenous population historically linked with that area for more than a century and a half to two centuries. The changes due to agricultural and industrial developments, the details of which need not be given here, gave a new face to much of the country, whether highland or lowland, and profoundly affected land layout and land use, replaced traditional house types with architect designed house types, especially in the Lowlands but also in the Highlands, introduced new complexes of tools and equipment, along with new attitudes on the part of their users, and started the break up of the self-contained community system with which the continuance and propagation of an active folklore and what one might call a functional social anthropology is so intimately bound up. To give but one example, the replacement of the sickle by the scythe in the first decade of the 19th century in North East Scotland, as the chief means of cutting the grain crop, can be shown to be related to demographic factors brought into play by industrial developments in the south of the country. At family level, it also reflected a change in the role of women. The scythe is primarily a man's tool, the sickle a woman's, so the adoption of the scythe meant a step forward in the specialisation of farm labour as a primarily male prerogative.

The fact of these agricultural and industrial developments of the 18th-19th centuries is fundamental to Scottish historical ethnology. What is also important is the way in which the speed and intensity of change varied considerably from region to region, and this fact alone, if properly exploited, is capable of providing an excellent methodological tool. Emphasis has been laid all along on recording and archiving processes of change and the effects of change in economic, social and demographic terms, and if the principle of differential rates of change (with their varying degrees of impact in human terms) is borne firmly in mind, then it should be possible to build up a historical ethnology of Scotland by carrying out close studies of a selected number of areas⁵ of Scotland by all possible means, from archaeological evidence, documentary and manuscript evidence, and above all the evidence of on-the-spot fieldwork and oral tradition, using material culture as a concrete index of change, whenever possible. In this way, in the course of time, the accumulation of micro-regional-ethnological studies will allow a comparative view of the country's development, and the effects of inter-related changes in the two major aspects of her economy, agriculture and industry, will fit naturally into place at the regional as well as the national level. Equally, it should become possible to assess the effect of the innovation areas

5. Compare N. Lithberg: "För att erhålla kunskap om olika kulturfenomens härstamning och ålder måste först de olika etnografiska områdena avskiljas, så att varje kulturell geografisk enhet kan studeras för sig", from *Fataburen* (Stockholm), vol. 13 (1918), quoted in: S. Svensson, *Introduktion till Folklivsforskningen*. Stockholm, 1966, p. 61.

of the Lowlands on the peripheral and relict areas of the crofting counties in the North and West.

THE NEED TO LAY EMPHASIS on the kind of material that can be of international comparative value has been a strong conditioning factor in approaching Scottish historical ethnology and has helped to keep the approach reasonably fundamental. If one is looking for common ethnological denominators and differences, as between countries, it seems reasonable to start looking in those areas where community organisation is least altered by external stimuli. The regional ethnology of such an area will be more traditional in its emphasis. As a result, there will be, on the one hand, a better chance of gauging, by analogy, what conditions were like over a wider district before the 18th-19th century changes brought about by industrial and agricultural developments; and on the other hand, international parallels are more likely to appear.

In this connection, not only material culture but also dialect terms and folklore survivals, folk tales and folk song, can produce valuable evidence. The simplest approach, in such an area, appears to be to think in terms of the seasonal round of work, to consider the complexes of tools and equipment used in the gathering of fuel, the cultivation of the soil, the sowing, cutting, stacking, threshing, drying and grinding of grain, the treatment of animals and fowls, and so on, to consider the extent to which the architecture of the buildings is functionally adapted to suit the activities, to consider what means of adding to the subsistence are practised in addition to agriculture, e.g. fishing and fowling, and the methods of catching and trapping involved, to consider how the periods of relaxation and festivity are related to the annual work cycle, and so on. It seems clear that in this broadly speaking pre-industrial type of study material of the greatest comparative value can be found, and from the point of view of historical ethnology, this is the kind of study that should prove most rewarding for the projected hand book series, providing the groundwork against which the extent and nature of later developments can be gauged.

Some subjects are undoubtedly more suitable than others when one is trying to find clues to community life and status. For instance, three or four years ago, a collection was made of instruments used in Scotland for twisting ropes. These have over a dozen variant forms, and over twenty variant dialect names. The fact that these had never been manufactured at a single centre and distributed commercially meant that local forms and names developed unmolested so that considerable regional variety is possible⁶. Their shapes and names also form themselves into geographically defined groups and rarely or never does a type appear that can be said to have been produced by an individual experimenter. They are truly community products and, therefore, of value for

6. A. Fenton, *Ropes and Rope-making in Scotland*, *Gwerin* (Oxford), vol. 3 (1960-1962), pp. 142-156, 200-214.

our purpose, for their typology and nomenclature lend themselves to comparative study, and their incidence of use can serve as an index to the cultural level of the community where they are found.

The same is true of the plough, in its non-industrial forms. With industrial forms, we are moving into the realms of what Professor Erixon has called "mobile" culture (and also to some extent "professional" culture)⁷, but even here it can be shown that new local traditions based on non-indigenous material can evolve under certain conditions in a remarkably short time, often with analogues in other countries. For instance, improved plough-types like those of Small and Wilkie were worked on by local blacksmiths and farmers and adapted to local traditions, sometimes resulting in a local product that gained extra-local importance, leading to the growth of the local smithy into a ploughmaking firm. Dr. Bringéus has shown similar developments in Sweden based, for example, on the Scottish plough of James Small⁸, and Dr. Klein in Germany for the 19th century development of the Hohenheimer plough from Brabant and Flemish originals⁹. Innovations of this nature have a profound bearing on the local economy. They add a wider perspective to the community and introduce a secondary level of development where the cultural range ceases to be entirely traditional or self propagating and is partly based on material that has come in from outside. The strength of a community may be assessed by its ability to absorb and adapt such material in the light of the traditional knowledge and expertise of its members. This is the level at which small communities in Scotland have to be studied now, but fortunately they usually contain enough in the way of survivals to allow an observer to see through to the underlying more traditional way of life. In other words, wherever one turns, and the same must be true in most parts of Europe, one is faced with stratified layers of development, and therefore the study of the rates and degrees of regional change is fundamental to the subject of historical ethnology. This coincides with the conclusion arrived at in examining the nature of the country itself.

In these exploratory studies, stress has consistently been laid on the importance of material culture as an index of change and development. This is natural enough in folk museum work which is so much concerned with the material aspects of human history, but it might also be suggested that for comparative purposes, material culture is less open to misinterpretation than many other subjects and therefore deserves a prominent place in the Handbook series. At the same time, "spiritual" culture cannot be ignored and every effort must be made to push forward the subject as a many-sided whole. In Scotland, as in the rest of Britain, its potentialities in the approach to hitherto little explored aspects of human history are slowly beginning to be recognised.

7. S. Erixon, *Ethnologie régionale ou folklore. Laos* (Stockholm), vol. 1 (1952), p. 14.

8. N.-A. Bringéus, *Järnplögen som innovation*. Lund, 1962.

9. E. Klein, *Die Entwicklung des Hohenheimer Pfluges*. *Zeitschrift für Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie* (Frankfurt a.M.), vol. 10 (1962), pp. 45-56.