

III.

NOTES ON SOME OLD CUSTOMS IN THE ISLAND OF SKYE. BY
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Since the writer of these notes went to the Isle of Skye, fifty-six years ago, the habits of the natives have been greatly changed. The domestic and agricultural employments of the natives were quite different to what they are now. For example, there were then only three teapots to be found in the whole parish of Kilmuir, except in the few dwellings of large farmers. Tea-drinking was a thing unknown then among the common people, while now the poorest people have that beverage once, if not twice, daily. Loaf or wheaten bread was unknown. I remember, when loaves of bread were made at the Manse for a sacramental occasion, that crowds of females resorted to the minister's house to see the "*aran corneach*," that is, the "foggy or spongy bread;" and, on tasting it, they did not at all like it, because they did not consider it to be so substantial as their own oaten cakes. Now, however, loaf bread is more used by the natives than their own cakes.

Harrow.—It was then quite common to tie the harrow to the long tail of the horse when labouring the fields in spring to cover the sown seed. Such crofters or small tenants as had no horses (and these were the most numerous class), employed their women to perform the work, fastening them to the harrow by the simple harness of a rope made of twisted bents or grass, and placing the rope across their chest. The poor females were in this manner severely toiled, yet they never failed in the work thus allotted to them, as they considered it to be their duty.

Grain dressed for food.—When the fields were ripe in autumn, a family could easily supply oaten meal for their bread or porridge in little more than an hour's time. In order to do this, a female went to the field with her sickle in her hand, and cut down a few sheaves of the standing corn. The next process was to prepare the grain for being

ground into meal. For this purpose, it was taken to a convenient spot at some little distance from the dwelling, where a flat stone or flag had been secured previously for the operation. Placing the sheaves near the flat stone, the woman then set to work by taking up in her left hand a part of a sheaf, and setting fire to the ears of the grain, which were allowed to burn until the grain, thus dried and extricated from the stalks, fell on the flat stone underneath. In her other hand she held a stick, with which she kept constantly beating at the blazing straw, to shake off any part of the grain which did not fall at once when the husks were consumed. When all the sheaves had been in this manner exposed to the flames, the grain was collected and winnowed. The grain thus made ready for the mill was called "gradan," and the meal prepared by it made wholesome and palatable bread; the corn being shorn, dried, dressed, ground, baked, and eaten in little more than an hour's time.

Quern.—It is proper to observe that the mill by which the "gradan" meal was ground, was the "Muileann bradha" or "quern." This simple machine consisted of two circular stones about 26 inches diameter, the lower one of which was generally fixed in a frame of wood raised nearly breast high. The upper stone was so fitted and balanced as to revolve with ease on the lower one, when impelled by a peg fastened into its upper surface, near the outer rim, to turn it round. Grinding with the "quern" was always left to the females, two of whom would be engaged at it at the same time,—the one feeding it with the grain, the other causing the stone to revolve, and both uniting in chanting a native melody, corresponding in time with the working of the machine.

Although this primitive kind of mill was formerly in general use over all the Highlands of Scotland, it is remarkable how rarely the remnants of these "querns" are now to be met with either in Skye or among the Hebrides. When we consider that almost every family had its "quern," the stones of these primitive grinders might naturally be expected to be numerous, but, in reality, they are now rarely to be met with. No doubt the curiosity hunters have taken many of them away, but this does not altogether account for their scarcity.

Pot and Clar.—A little more than half a century ago the domestic or culinary utensils of the Hebrideans were of the rudest description. For example, the potatoes prepared for the family meal were boiled in a large pot, perhaps the only one in the house, and the fish or herrings were placed in the pot over the potatoes, and thus cooked. Plates and dishes of all kinds were very rare, but instead, they used a square board about 18 inches on the side, with a frame of 3 inches deep around it, and into this “clar,” or frame, they poured their potatoes and fish, placed it on a rude table, and the family members seated themselves around it to partake of their meal. In many of the poorer dwellings there was only one horn spoon, which was handed from one to another to help themselves in turn. There were but few bowls, cups, or dishes of earthenware, in these humble dwellings, but many of them had wooden caps of various sizes, chiefly procured from the crews of vessels from the Baltic, which they met in calm weather, and from whom they obtained battens and planks of wood, and dishes of the kind mentioned, in lieu of fresh vegetables which they took on board.

Lamps or Crusies.—Their light at night was obtained by the burning of oil in rude lamps which they called “cruisean,” and which were made by their blacksmiths. These lamps consisted, as in other parts of Scotland, of two circular iron shells, the one fitting within the other, and tapering to a point, into which the wick, made of the centre portions of rushes, was placed. The lower shell of the “cruisean” had a point that protruded beyond the upper shell to retain the oil that dropped from the burning wick. The oil was dark, like port wine, but thin and good. It was procured from the livers of the different kinds of fish which they caught for family use. On coming home from the sea-beach with creels of fish of all descriptions, the females commenced immediately to gut them, and to throw the livers into an old pot or into a “craggan,” until they melted them down into a partially liquid state; they then set the decayed livers on a slow fire to dissolve them completely. In this state they poured off the pure liquid oil, put it into a “craggan,” and threw away the refuse. In most cases the vessels con-

taining the manufactured oil, called the "craggan," were made of clay by the people themselves.

Craggans.—The "craggan" was of different sizes, some of them would contain as much as three or four imperial gallons, but generally they were of a smaller size, and made to contain eight or nine quart bottles. The clay of which they were made was not found in every district; it was indeed comparatively rare, but when it was found, the "craggans" were numerous made in the surrounding district.¹ The clay was smooth and plastic, and when required for use was wrought up by the hands for hours together, until it was brought to the consistency of the putty used by glaziers. When in this state, the most skilful and tasteful of the family group commenced to form the "craggan," which they finished in less than two hours' time. The first part of it made was the circular bottom, which, like a circular cake, they placed on a board or flat stone, always supplying themselves from the lump of prepared clay beside them. When the bottom was thus formed, they rapidly built upon it all around the outer edge to the thickness of about one inch, being careful all the time to shape it into the form required. When finished, the article was of course rough and indented with finger marks, but in order to smooth it, they scraped it round and round very gently with a knife to give it a more seemly appearance. The inside of course was left as it was, as there was no access to it. When the vessel was finished it was put into a safe place to dry by the heat of the sun, and was left in that state for perhaps some weeks, until it got perfectly hard. The next process was to place it in the midst of a powerful peat fire in order to burn it, and this step of the manufacture frequently ruined the whole concern, in consequence of the unequal heat breaking or cracking the vessel. The burning made the "craggan" harder and lighter, and quite ready as a receptacle for the family oil.

With the advent of steam communication to the Western Isles, shops commenced to be opened in every district, which were supplied from the

¹ Specimens of Craggans made at Barvas in the island of Lewis are in the Museum, some of which are figured in the Proceedings, vol. ix. p. 205.

South with everything in the modern fashion, and so crockery and earthenware jars of all sorts and sizes were provided in great abundance, and sold or bartered for eggs, rags, dried fish, &c.

After this change, the existence or even the mention of such a rude piece of furniture as a "craggan" would be considered a reflection on the respectability of the household, and consequently the present generation of the people have little or no recollection of these and other utensils used by their forefathers; perhaps the most remarkable fact of all being that hardly a specimen can now be found of the "querns" which were once so common, and are so much more imperishable than the "craggans" and other rude and fragile vessels made use of in olden times.