

As the University of the old days 13

The seven unwritten rules of the ceilidh house

K.D. SMITH looks back at the traditions of the ceilidh, where "every grey-haired ancient grandfather regaled the company with valiant stories of the strongmen who populated the glen in the days when they were young . . ."

How often have you enjoyed a good going ceilidh of Gaelic songs and music? Have you ever wondered where the word "ceilidh" came from or what indeed it meant?

The word ceilidh is from Gaelic and means, quite simply, an informal gathering usually within a household.

Let us go back to earlier times and look at the ceilidh of the Gaelic world as it was known to our ancestors.

Every village had at least one house which was singled out and recognised as the *tigh ceilidh* — the ceilidh house — and there were certain characteristics which distinguished it as such and, in a way, set it apart from other houses in the village.

First of all one has to remember that the ceilidh house thrived in the era of the thatched houses, *na tighen dubha*.

Secondly, the occupants of the ceilidh house were usually old and cer-

tainly few in number. It was not unusual to find that the house was the home of a lonely widow.

Thirdly, winter time was undoubtedly the true season of the ceilidh house. The winter crop of hay and corn stacked safely . . . The potatoes stored in the barn . . . The winter's supply of peats in a neat stack by the door — all contributed to an atmosphere of security and cosiness, further attributes of the ceilidh house of old as I knew and remember it today.

Folks gathered of a winter's evening for a ceilidh. There were no invitations that I ever heard of, and people came and went as the mood moved them. There was always a warm glowing peat fire, and the hanging oil lamp sent a friendly glow to the four corners of the single room which housed the occupants.

Neil Macleod, the gentle and notable bard of Glendale in Skye, penned a memorable picture of the ceilidh house

as he knew it towards the end of the 19th century.

The verse is from his song "An gleann 'san robh mi og", "The glen where I was young".

*Ann an dudhlachd gharbh a gheamhraidh
Cha b e am bu ghainn ar spors;
Greis air sugradh, greis air dannsa,
Greis air canntaireachd is ceol;
Bhiodh gach seanair aosmhor, liath,
'G innseadh sgialachdan gun gho,
Air gach gaisgeach fearail,
greannmhor,
Bha 's a ghleann 'n uair bha iad og.*

"In the dark days of winter/We were not without our fun/ A while socialising, a while dancing, /A while on canntaireachd and music." Canntaireachd was a form of spoken bag-pipe music by which pipers exchanged and taught each other new tunes.

The bard continued his description: "Every grey haired ancient grandfather regaled the company with valiant stories of the strongmen who populated the glen in the days when they were young."

THE CEILIDH HOUSE was indeed a great institution in these days, and an

irresistible attraction to young people who had their minds thoroughly steeped in the folklore and traditions of their people.

I myself was imbued with the spirit of the ceilidh house and learned a great deal about the great world beyond the confines of my village from seamen home on leave. They were always welcome at the ceilidh, and youngsters extended their knowledge of geography with ease and heard great sea yarns.

It was a friend of mine — the late John MacArthur of Bayble, Lewis — who spoke of the ceilidh house as being "the university of the back waters of the Highlands" because of the strong educational influence it exerted on his peers.

Indeed it was John who surprised me once by stating quite emphatically that the idea of the ceilidh house as an informal gathering was a mistake and a fallacy. There were unwritten rules that governed the conduct of the ceilidh house, and they were seven in number.

- 1 *Is rìgh fear an tìghe* (The man of the house is king).
- 2 *Chan 'eil clao air a mhadh* (There is no deviation from the rules).

3 *Is moide nì aithris* (A tale gains in the telling).

4 (For the younger guests) (a) *Sean-fhocul bho chuil na monach* (A proverb from the peat store by youngsters delegated to keep the fire going); (b) *Toimhseachan bhon t-slige chruisgean* (A riddle from the oil lamp). Many and varied indeed were the riddles and proverbs I heard in this way.

5 (Applied to story telling) *Min-innse air uirsgeulan gu meadhon oidhche garbh innse gu gairm coilich* (Detailed narration of stories up to midnight and general narration to cock-crow).

6 *Sgeul air sgeul; oran air oran is deiseil air gach nì* (Story after story; song after song and all in a clockwise direction).

7 (Back to the host) *A cheud sgeul air fear an tìghe agus sgeul gu latha air an aoigh* (The first story to be given by the host and stories to daybreak by the guests).

EASIER ACCESS to the printed word through newspapers and periodicals; improvements in housing standards; the advent of radios; and finally the intrusion of television — all contributed

to the demise of the ceilidh house of old.

Attempts to represent the ceilidh on stage and in hotel lounges are but pale shadows of the genuine article, although of course the modern ceilidh does help to keep alive an interest especially in Gaelic song and music.

From the west side of Lewis I gathered this illuminating verse from a longer unpublished song mourning the passing of the genuine ceilidh.

*"Faire faire Shine Neill
nan eireadh thu 'san oidhche
'sgum faiceadh thu an ceilidh mor
Bha Steornabhagh an raoir,
Gun closba, gun phrais, gun
phulaise,
gun stol, gun seis, gun smuid,
gun chagailt is gun theinntean,
gun sparr gun chabar suich . . .
A charaid dh'fhalbh an ceilidh
'Nuair a dh'fhalbh an cabar suich.*

It is interesting to note that in recent times *comuinn eachdraidh* (historical societies) developing in rural areas invite an older village historian as the central figure at their public events. Could it be a sign of a return to the ceilidh house style of old, if only in limited form?

In my last article I showed how Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were the days of the week beloved of the fairies, while the very mention of Thursday, Friday, Saturday and (above all) Sunday seems to have made them uncomfortable. This time I would like to look at some other evidence that portrays Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday as the chanciest days for humans, beginning right here in the first week after Easter.

In vol. 2 of "Carmina Gadelica" Alexander Carmichael presents an invocation which he had got from a crofter called Hector MacPhie who lived at Eilean Cuithe nam Fiadh in Iochdar, South Uist. It begins:

Mòch Là Luan Càsg

a bordertime between the natural and supernatural worlds.

Interestingly, Carmichael follows *Mòch Là Luan Càsg* with a poem (got from Malcolm MacLellan, a crofter who lived across the ford at Griminish in Benbecula) which describes in more detail how the future can be told from the movements of the swan.

*Chuala mi guth binn nan eala
Ann an dealachadh nan tràth,
Glugalaich air sgiathaibh siubhlach,
Cur nan cura dhiubh gu h-ard.*

(I heard the sweet voice of the swans
At the parting of night and day, /

WE DIE EVERY DAY . . .

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

*Agus meigead eunaraig
Sèimh am shuidhe crom
Agus cuhag liath-ghorm
'S gun am biadh am bhronn.*

(Early on Monday morning / I heard the bleating of lambs / And the kid-like cry of snipe / While I sat gently bent / And the grey-blue cuckoo / With no food in my stomach.) Hearing the cuckoo before breakfast is proverbial for bad luck.

*Feasgar finidh Mhàirt
Chunnas air lic mhìn,
Seilcheag shlim bhàn
Agus an clacharan fionn
Air barr a pharraidh toll.*

*'S dh'aithnich mi nach rachadh
A' bhliadhna leam.*

(I heard the cuckoo / Without food in my belly, / I saw the foal / With its back to me: / I saw the snail / On the bare slab — / And I foreknew that the year / Would not go well with me.)

It seems that Easter and the period of growth and fertility following it was particularly full of events of mantic significance. To have new clothing on at Easter, claimed MacDonald, was supposed to bring good luck. He explained the rhyme like this: "It was considered very desirable that one should view face foremost the first calf, the other young animal seen of a

called "Lazy Woman's Lament" (how Victorian! How sexist!) was written down by RL MacLagan about a hundred years ago and published in "Tocher" no. 14.

*Mo ghaol air Di-Haoine,
Mo ghràdh air Di-Sathairn;
Di-Domhnaich, an cadal fad.
Och! Och! Di-Luain!!!
Tha 'n t-seachdain cho fhad 's bha
i riamh.*

(Friday's my delight, Saturday I love; Sunday's the long sleep. Och! Och! Monday!!! The week's as long as ever.) That's from Argyll, but the herring-girls of Stornoway, facing yet

Mars' Day; *Di-Ciadaoin* (Wednesday) is the Day of the First Fast; Thursday in Lewis was the traditional day for marrying.

*Troimh shilleadh na Sàbaid
chuidhnich mi air do chràbhadh*

(Through the fold of the Sunday I knew your devotion);

*troimh shilleadh Luain
dh'fhairich mi tarraing a' chuain*

(through the fold of the Monday the ocean was calling);

*troimh shilleadh Mhàirt
dh'èirich do chruadal an aird*

(through the fold of the Tuesday your courage arose);

*troimh shilleadh Chiadaoin
chunnaig mi thu air chiallaidh*

(through the fold of the Wednesday I saw you at fasting);