

## “I Could Never Hope for Anything More Rewarding”: Pleasure, Selfhood, and Emotional Practices in the Forming of the Highland Folk Museum in the 1930s

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**Abstract** The actions of Dr. Isabel Grant in creating the Highland Folk Museum in Scotland in the 1930s reflect how pleasure interacted with gendered identities to form modern feminine selves in the mid-twentieth century. In examining the subjectivity of Grant and her associates through material, textual, and visual sources from the museum, I interrogate both emotional and representational aspects of her development of living history. I suggest that, along with a sense of care and duty in such museums, women such as Grant were attracted by the opportunities of imaginative play and that they formed identities that were not reducible to either traditional or modern women’s roles; instead, they were drawn to a form of historical engagement that allowed them to work outside such labels, sometimes as eccentrics. Their play was more serious and nonironic than were many other forms of interwar modern culture, and living history initiatives since then have built on this modern-but-not-modern appeal.

**H**ow can historians understand people’s choice of pleasurable activities, their obsessions, and hobbies as part of a historical narrative, and how might these relate to other, more well-historicized sources of subjectivity such as gender? Scholars have recently examined experiences of pleasure, imagination, and dream states facilitated by modern mass cultural forms as central to understanding interwar selfhood and its development.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach can be extended to less popular forms of culture such as folk museums and folk object collecting; these, too, shed light on the nature of modern selfhood, despite their apparent dissociation from technically advanced, highly commercial, and widely consumed

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Matt Houlbrook, “‘A Pin to See the Peepshow’: Culture, Fiction and Selfhood in Edith Thompson’s Letters, 1921–1922,” *Past and Present*, no. 207 (2010): 215–49; Michael Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (2006): 692–716.

modern media. Moreover, in their apparent rejection of the modern, they can help explain subjectivities that embraced modernity in a more partial fashion, particularly ones that had a difficult relationship with the idea of selves fashioned from ironic pleasures. In the case of Isabel Grant, one woman's relationship with a collection of folk objects, and the museum formed from them, was an imaginative, emotional practice that brought her pleasure and validation. This is a form of emotional "conservative modernity"<sup>2</sup> that speaks to a generational and class ambivalence about aspects of the modern feminine self for women who found little in the scripts of Victorian or modern womanhood with which to build a sense of self.

In linking pleasure, play, selfhood, and gender, I draw on work that suggests that the historical development of emotional repertoires and practices of selfhood were intertwined, and points to the modern structures of commercialization and changing gender norms as frameworks within which individuals developed emotional styles and kinds of self.<sup>3</sup> I also link these frameworks to ideas about imagination and meaning making in engagement with the past. The ways in which emotions and cognition interacted have been studied for an earlier period by Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, and their formulation of "cognitive passions," varying in their legitimacy, scope and approach, is close to what I do here, showing how emotions, gendered selfhood, and historical enquiry interacted to produce a new type of collector and curator, one specific to the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

Play is perhaps the odd one among the concepts I explore. Although much has been written on the history of adult views of children's play, little has been written on the history of adult play and playfulness or of the reasons why imaginative and sensual engagement with the past was so compelling in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Yet playful work and leisure activities were extremely important in this period, and playfulness, though fleeting and slippery, offers significant insight into subjectivities.

Recent work on the subjectivity of British people in the first half of the twentieth century has focused on the extent to which it was transformed in the interwar period, forming a decisive break with Victorian selves.<sup>6</sup> However, although elite women increasingly discarded the idea that pleasure seeking was unfeminine (selflessness being the truly feminine source of pleasure), service to others continued to be

<sup>2</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Literature, Femininity and Conservatism between the Wars* (Abingdon, 1991), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Elwin Hofman, "How to Do the History of the Self," *History of the Human Sciences* 29, no. 3 (2016): 8–24; William M. Reddy, "Historical Research on the Self and Emotions," *Emotion Review* 1, no. 4 (2009): 302–15; Linda W. Rosenzweig, "Another Self? Middle-Class American Women and Their Friends, 1900–1960," in *An Emotional History of the United States*, ed. Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis (New York, 1998), 357–77; Peter Bailey, "Entertainment! Liberalizing Modern Pleasure in the Victorian Leisure Industry," in *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain*, ed. Simon Gunn and Vernon James (Berkeley, 2011), 119–34.

<sup>4</sup> Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York, 1998), 15; see also Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment."

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of work on the history of play, see the contributions in "Histories of Play," ed. Kate Darian-Smith and Simon Sleight, special issue, *International Journal of Play* 5, no. 3 (2016). Although play is implicit in some distinctive forms of twentieth-century leisure, including sport and pageantry, this aspect is rarely addressed; the closest example might be Barbara Keys, "Senses and Emotions in the History of Sport," *Journal of Sport History* 40, no. 1 (2013): 21–38. For more on play as a historical category of analysis, see the section "Play as Emotional Practice" below.

<sup>6</sup> Houlbrook, "Pin to See the Peepshow," 223.

important to their ideas of pleasure and sense of self-worth, suggesting a less than clear-cut break with the earlier period.<sup>7</sup> To some extent, the reading of women's subjectivities has depended on the sources used to do so; letters tend to emphasize self-fashioning and close engagement with popular culture, while autobiographies and advice literature portray a more fixed self and play down the role of popular culture at the expense of more high-minded influences.<sup>8</sup> Michael Roper observes that that subjectivity is also to be found in "relationships, emotional experiences and unconscious processes";<sup>9</sup> he suggests that to engage with subjectivity as something formed between the external and the internal, it is useful to focus on "relationships and their material context" in everyday life.<sup>10</sup> Such complexity in studying inner lives has also been noted by historians of emotion, who argue that this can best be done through attention to "everyday social life" and its "emotional practices"; thus, "how people do emotion" through embodied interactions in particular spaces allows recognition of the impact of experience and discourse on subjectivities.<sup>11</sup>

In what follows, I investigate feminine subjectivity by focusing on one collection and museum, the Highland Folk Museum, between about 1930 and 1948, and the relationships forged with and through it, especially those of its owner, Dr. Isabel Grant (1887–1983), usually known at the time as Elsie. Starting about 1930, Grant collected objects relating to Highland history and folklore, and in 1935 she opened her museum, initially on the island of Iona, moving to mainland Scotland in 1938, and from 1944 based at Kingussie in the Cairngorms region of Scotland.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars have noted women's use of collecting in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to form imaginative, emotionally rich relationships with objects that supported their sense of a confident, constructed, modern feminine self.<sup>13</sup> Grant's writings show that her collection simultaneously grounded her sense of identity in

<sup>7</sup> Eve Colpus, "Women, Service and Self-Actualization in Inter-war Britain," *Past and Present*, no. 238 (2018): 197–232.

<sup>8</sup> This is a generalization. Colpus includes letters in her study, and while Houlbrook's "A Pin to See the Peepshow" is largely about letter-writing and its relationship with popular film and fiction, he makes similar points with different source material in a later article: Matt Houlbrook, "Commodifying the Self Within: Ghosts, Libels and the Crook Life Story in Interwar Britain," *Journal of Modern History* 85, no. 2 (2013): 321–63. The difference between the two views of selfhood is also related to the class positions of those studied.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Roper, "Between the Psyche and the Social: Masculinity, Subjectivity and the First World War Veteran," *Journal of Men's Studies* 15, no. 3 (2007): 251–70, at 252.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Roper, "Slipping out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 59 (2005): 57–72, at 63.

<sup>11</sup> Hester Barron and Claire Langhamer, "Feeling through Practice: Subjectivity and Emotion in Children's Writing," *Journal of Social History* 51, no. 1 (2017): 101–23, at 104, 112; see also Hera Cook, "Emotion, Bodies, Sexuality and Sex Education in Edwardian England," *Historical Journal* 55, no. 2 (2012): 475–95.

<sup>12</sup> Grant called the museum Am Fàsghadh (the shelter) in Gaelic, but in this article I refer to it as the Highland Folk Museum because this is its more common and subsequent name, and Am Fàsghadh now refers specifically to the building housing the stores and archives. See Hugh Cheape, s.v. "Grant, Isabel Frances [Elsie] (1887–1983), Promoter of Scottish Gaelic Culture and Writer," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/38583>; I. F. Grant, *The Making of Am Fàsghadh: An Account of the Origins of the Highlands Folk Museum by Its Founder* (Edinburgh, 2007), 19.

<sup>13</sup> See Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture, 1800–1940* (Berkeley, 2008); Dianne Sachko Macleod, "Art Collecting as Play: Lady Charlotte Schreiber (1812–1895)," *Visual Resources* 27, no. 1 (2011): 18–31.

sincere authenticity and incorporated care, duty, and sacrifice within a pleasurable, even self-indulgent practice of make-believe. This investigation reveals the combination of deep pleasure and sense of purpose that the creation of the Highland Folk Museum brought to her, and in so doing illuminates the reasons why historical reenactment and collecting have become modern pleasures.<sup>14</sup> As studies of live-action role-playing communities have shown, such activities allow their players to avoid the ironic approach of much contemporary culture and to be sincere.<sup>15</sup>

Grant was a prolific author who was able to produce ostensibly objective texts in different registers for different audiences. She wrote countless articles and reports on her museum to aid with publicity and fund-raising, but she also published scholarly works on Scottish history whose contribution was recognized in the award of an honorary doctorate from the University of Edinburgh in 1948.<sup>16</sup> Such writing shows her to have been a serious historian with an innovative approach to understanding and communicating the stuff of the past.<sup>17</sup> Yet what her published historical writing does not say is why she devoted her life to the history of everyday life in the Highlands, what attracted her to it and sustained her commitment, and how it fitted in with or expanded her sense of self. Such questions about emotion and subjectivity can be answered more fully through an examination of her material practices and relationships than through the historical discourses she contributed to textually. Two main aspects of these practices and relationships, play and care, are significant in clarifying female subjectivity at the time and revealing the emotional appeal of old objects.

Grant left not only her collection and a published record of her aims and endeavors in *The Making of Am Fasgadh*, published posthumously in 2007, but also a series of letters, notes, accounts, cuttings, photographs, labels and other matter that combine the highly personal and the institutional and allow a fuller reconstruction of her relationship with her collection, associates, and ultimately the past. Such data, along with encompassing a range of ways to think about and present one's self, break down the normal rationality of museum archival material, which is explicitly aligned with public, impersonal, knowledge- and evidence-based systems. Especially as museum work was professionalized in the twentieth century, museum records took on a more fixed bureaucratic tone and more clearly distinguished between the private, excluded from the archive, and the public, which was itself defined by the material

<sup>14</sup> This is not to deny that, as Raphael Samuel says, they are a “reincarnation, or new incarnation, of quite ancient forms of play,” but their forms in contemporary culture are significantly different from previous versions. See Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994), 180. That the combination of pleasure and purpose could be particularly compelling for women is also suggested by the women's pageants in Zoe Thomas, “Historical Pageants, Citizenship, and the Performance of Women's History before Second-Wave Feminism,” *Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 3 (2017): 319–43.

<sup>15</sup> Leena Vartiainen, “The Imaginary World as a Motive of Craft Making and a Way of Dressing Up,” *Textile* 13, no. 1 (2015): 66–79.

<sup>16</sup> Key publications include the following: I. F. Grant, *The Social and Economic Development of Scotland before 1603* (Edinburgh, 1930); I. F. Grant, *The Economic History of Scotland* (London, 1934); I. F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* (London, 1961).

<sup>17</sup> Laura Carter, “Rethinking Folk Culture in Twentieth-Century Britain,” *Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 4 (2017): 543–69. See also Carter's article on the Quennells and Molly Harrison at the Geffrye Museum: Laura Carter, “The Quennells and the ‘History of Everyday Life’ in England, c.1918–69,” *History Workshop Journal* 81 no. 1 (2016): 106–34.

in the archive—impersonal, affectively neutral, acting to discipline both objects and people.<sup>18</sup> The material in the Highland Folk Museum’s archive, and elsewhere, including Grant’s memoir, does not follow such a rationality and seems to deliberately blur public and private; to Grant there was no real difference between them. Once the museum was established in Kingussie, she lived in it, and her domestic servant was also a museum worker; her private life was equally enmeshed in her letters about the museum and even her museum signs and labels (see figures 1a and 1b).<sup>19</sup> Thus the material allows for other forms of analysis than with normal museum archival material as it was defined at the time; *and* the nature of the archival material itself is something that needs acknowledging.<sup>20</sup> The question of typicality in Grant’s relationship with her collection is consequently impossible to answer, as material that might shed light on other people’s use of objects to construct new subjectivities was actively suppressed by most museum archives formed in the period.<sup>21</sup> In a few instances, material similar to that found at the Highland Folk Museum has found its way into archives, suggesting a more widespread tendency, especially among women, to stage the museum as a site of mixed personal and public meaning; included in this category are letters that also blend the personal and the public, or diaries such as that of Violet Rodgers of York Castle Museum, in which she describes her museum as “darling.”<sup>22</sup> These specific examples, though, happened during wartime when normal hiring practices and professionalization was suspended.

Moreover, Grant was not alone in her endeavor during this period. Other collectors and museum founders, often but not exclusively women, also dealt in so-called bygones and folk objects—humble everyday objects, mostly from about 1700 to 1850, which were collected and displayed to illustrate a way of life.<sup>23</sup> That work has been recently rehabilitated by Laura Carter, who argues that these curators were engaging in a new type of history education for the masses, using social history to drive communicative strategies about the past in a way that could connect with ordinary people.<sup>24</sup> This aspect is important in Grant and others’

<sup>18</sup> Ana Baeza Ruiz, “Museums, Archives and Gender,” *Museum History Journal* 11, no. 2 (2018): 1–14.

<sup>19</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 171. The significance of living in the museum for blurring public professional and private domestic realms is also shown in Pearson’s study of museums during the Second World War, when at least one museum curator, at York Castle Museum, moved into the museum building after her home was destroyed by bombs. Moreover, the same museum saw the secret burial of its founder under the recreated street, and the wedding reception of the assistant curator, who wore a wedding dress borrowed from the museum’s collection; Catherine Pearson, *Museums in the Second World War: Curators, Culture and Change*, ed. Suzanne Keene (Abingdon, 2017), 169.

<sup>20</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2009), 12.

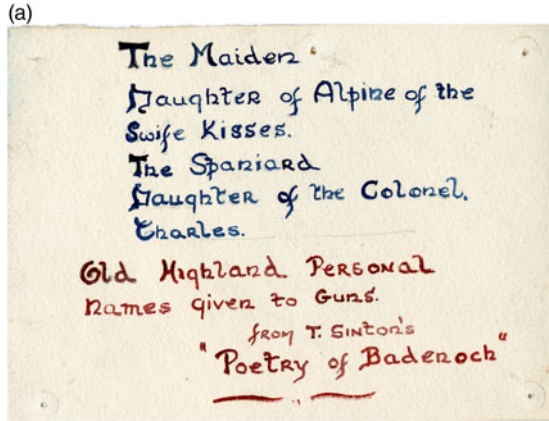
<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of a wider trend of pleasurable collecting of old things, see Heidi Egginton, “In Quest of the Antique: The Bazaar, Exchange and Mart, and the Democratization of Collecting, 1926–42,” *Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 2 (2017): 159–85. The democratized collecting she documents, however, is both more openly commercial and has a more ambiguous relationship with authenticity than does Grant’s.

<sup>22</sup> On letters, see Ruiz, “Museums, Archives and Gender,” 176; Rodgers, as quoted in Pearson, *Museums in the Second World War*, 169.

<sup>23</sup> Kate Hill, “Collecting Authenticity: Domestic, Familial and Everyday ‘Old Things’ in English Museums, 1850–1939,” *Museum History Journal* 4, no. 2 (2011): 203–22; Kate Hill, *Women and Museums, 1850–1914: Modernity and the Gendering of Knowledge* (Manchester, 2016), 91–93.

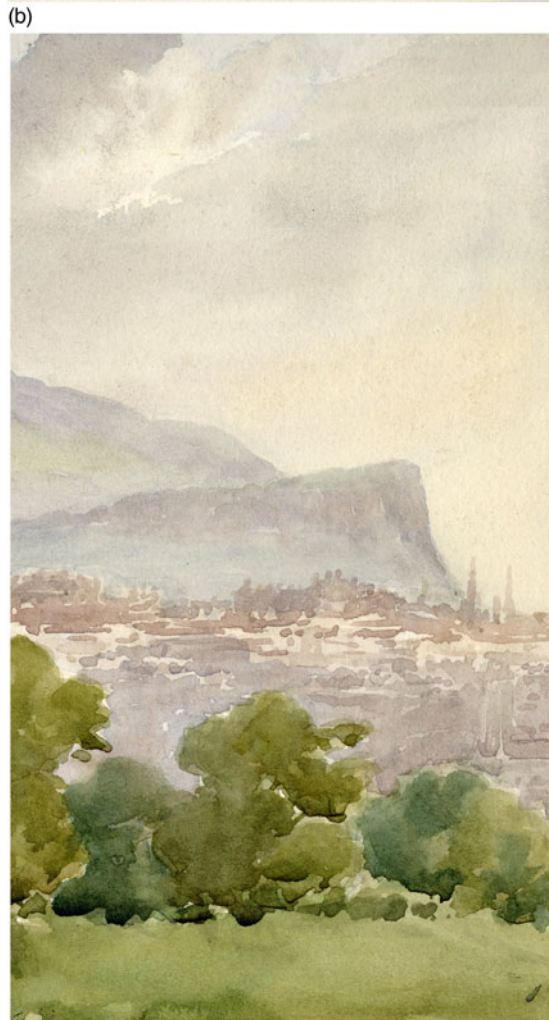
<sup>24</sup> Carter, “Rethinking Folk Culture,” 545; Carter, “The Quennells,” 108.

(a)



The Maiden  
Daughter of Alpine of the  
Swife Kisses.  
The Spariard  
Daughter of the Colonel,  
Charles.

Old Highland Personal  
Names given to Guns.  
from T. Sinton's  
"Poetry of Badenoch"



Figures 1a and 1b—Handwritten label from the Highland Folk Museum and an example of a watercolor painting found on the reverse of some labels, n.d. I. E. Grant Box 1, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.

work, but it is not the whole story. Grant's collection and documentation allow exploration of another equally important aspect of this trend—the formation of subjectivities through imaginative and playful material interactions in the first half of the twentieth century.

## IDENTITIES AND COLLECTIVITIES: GENDER, NATION, AND THE SENSE OF SELF

The Highland Folk Museum, though not unsuccessful, was hardly a huge public attraction or a key part of British cultural life in the period, yet Grant was part of a small but significant trend, both as a woman and as a Highlander. As I place her in contexts to try to gauge the extent to which she embodied a pattern and the extent to which she was unique, it is important to recognize that she did not undertake her slightly unusual collecting and museological activity alone. Along with the women (mostly, though not exclusively) who worked closely with her on the museum, apparently sharing her obsession, others discussed collecting and forming museums with her, and still others formed similar collections or similar museums. These women were from a range of backgrounds from the middle class upward and had different educational, professional, and marital experiences, so their attraction to folk collecting cannot be said to have derived from a specific set of traditional or modern feminine identities or roles. Rather, they were women who felt fully at home in neither of these camps and as a result sought unusual identities that bordered on the eccentric.

Grant's direct collaborators include her housekeeper, Mrs. Grant (no relation), who also worked in the museum and looked after the farm animals and whose family also helped out.<sup>25</sup> Another was Louie Russ, with whom Elsie Grant corresponded for many years about the museum and who provided practical help by supplying stationery and similar items from Glasgow. Russ was the daughter of a Glasgow accountant and worked in a bookshop; she lived at home while her parents were alive, and her mother apparently discouraged socializing.<sup>26</sup> Other women were or became friends with Grant through their involvement in similar enterprises, including Colina MacDougall, wife of the chief of the Clan MacDougall, and her daughter, Hope MacDougall. Hope was a particularly keen collector of social history and very much influenced by Grant; she never married and was known for beachcombing and midden searching and living a frugal and simple life, grinding her own corn for flour and weaving her own cloth.<sup>27</sup> Lady Jean Maitland was similarly inspired by Grant, and indeed they became close friends as Maitland collected lowland Scots objects for what became her Angus Folk Museum, which opened in 1953.<sup>28</sup> She was married, and her young family formed a barrier to her pursuit of

<sup>25</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 177.

<sup>26</sup> "Louie Burton Russ," Website for the Descendants of Christian Karl Gottfried Russ, Furrier of Brandis Germany, accessed 26 October 2018, <http://www.russfamily.net/texts/lbr.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Gillies, s.v. "Macdougall of Macdougall, Margaret Hope Garnons," *New Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, ed. Elizabeth Ewan et al. (Edinburgh, 2018), 265–66, at 265.

<sup>28</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 107; Lindsay Macbeth, "A History of Collecting Vernacular Furniture in Scotland," *Regional Furniture* 6 (1992): 22–35, at 31.

her collecting activities, until the children grew up.<sup>29</sup> From Grant's perspective, the friendship "bolstered up my self-esteem" as Maitland was "a wife, the mother of a family, mistress of a 'Big Hoose'" while Grant was a "dowdy nobody."<sup>30</sup> Yet another collector, though with no known personal connections with Grant, was Margaret ("Greta") Michie, who opened a folk museum just outside the Cairngorms in Glen Esk in 1955.<sup>31</sup> Unusually among female folk collectors, Michie was university educated; like Grant, she developed connections among professional (male) Scottish historians, especially at St. Andrews, where she had studied.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Grant was part of a group of middle-class to aristocratic women, with variations occupation and marital status, all navigating important issues surrounding their sense of self, sense of duty, and desire for pleasure. Women like these had to forge new paths to a modern, feminine selfhood.<sup>33</sup>

Age may be significant here. Isabel Grant was born in 1887 but in many ways seems significantly Victorian, in large part due to her privileged background. She had no formal education at school or university level but was taught at home by governesses and tutors; she—and probably the other Highland gentry women she was friends with—thus missed out on the all-female educational communities that were so formative in the self-consciously progressive relationships, ideals, and emotional styles of many middle-class women of the period.<sup>34</sup> While Russ did attend day school in Glasgow, the school was said to be one whose pupils expected to be "at home with Mother" afterward, rather than becoming women professionals.<sup>35</sup>

For the elite women who collected Scottish folk material, a worthwhile sense of self was born from both service to others and the pursuit of their own fulfilment, development, and happiness. Eve Colpus suggests that women steering between Victorian ideals and modern identities pursued a balance between selfishness and selflessness.<sup>36</sup> Service, at best, brought happiness because it stretched those undertaking it to master new and difficult fields of endeavor, offered them some intellectual independence, and gave them a sense of purpose focused on other people beyond the family. Rather than seeing themselves as suitable for philanthropic service because of the fundamental caring nature of women, they asserted instead that such service was useful to them because it allowed the development of their personalities. Although, unlike Grant and most of her colleagues, the women that Colpus studied were all university educated, and the kinds of service they sought overwhelmingly lay in the fields of philanthropy and social work, she also notes that this idea was more widely distributed, with Women's Institutes encouraging women to learn new "skills, aptitudes and

<sup>29</sup> Macbeth, "Collecting Vernacular Furniture," 31.

<sup>30</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fàsghadh*, 108.

<sup>31</sup> Macbeth, "Collecting Vernacular Furniture," 32–33.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Rodriguez, "Greta Michie: Connections between Glenesk and St Andrews Reinvigorated," *Special Collections Blog*, 24 January 2020, University of St Andrews (website), <https://special-collections.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2020/01/24/greta-michie-connections-between-glenesk-and-st-andrews-reinvigorated/>.

<sup>33</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 138.

<sup>34</sup> Cheape, "Grant, Isabel Frances"; Vicinus, *Independent Women*; Colpus, "Women, Service and Self-actualization," 208. Grant did belong to a club in London, which she used as a pied-à-terre; see letterhead, Am Fàsghadh Archives, I. F. Grant box 3.

<sup>35</sup> "Louie Burton Russ."

<sup>36</sup> Colpus, "Women, Service and Self-Actualization," 227–28.



mental approaches, especially the openness to learning new things.”<sup>37</sup> Service of all sorts was therefore reframed as something a woman did for pleasure and to maintain a sense of self rather than out of a feminine need to focus on other people; yet that self-centeredness was acceptable, because it involved aligning one’s own needs and desires with those of a wider community.

Professional identities could also be the source of a modern identity and subjectivity for elite and upper-middle-class women.<sup>38</sup> However, by the 1930s, they were starting to look more problematic than when they had first opened up for women earlier in the century, especially for women of an age not to have any qualifications. Isabel Grant had some experience of professional roles in early adulthood, working first as a social worker and then, in wartime, in “a humble post in the Ministry of Labour” as researcher, including for John Maynard Keynes, and she had very much enjoyed it.<sup>39</sup> Given her educational background and age, though, she may eventually have shared with Violet Butler (a researcher, teacher, and charity worker), a year younger, the fear that her professional life was stagnating because of a rising tide of more fully qualified younger women.<sup>40</sup> Outside the exigencies of war, Grant was unlikely to be able to forge a successful career in the civil service system.<sup>41</sup> In curatorial work, drives toward professionalization effectively blocked women and their approaches and specializations, and except during wartime it continued to be a profession unfriendly to women.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, emotional repertoires were hard to negotiate for women in this period. Alison Light indicates that women broadly of Grant’s age (Agatha Christie was three years younger than Grant) steered well clear of what might be seen as a Victorian feminine emotional style. Light’s female subjects reject melodrama, emotional depth, and introspection, the “intensity of feeling and uncontrolled expressivity with which the feminine had formerly been associated,” in favor of self-reliance and quiet efficiency. For Christie’s generation, Light suggests, a “public voice about the self was an anxious business.”<sup>43</sup> Evident in Grant is her anxiety about emotions, public selves, and disavowal of introspection and melodrama; she asserted that she was shy and lacking in self-confidence, a “dowdy nobody,”<sup>44</sup> although her biographer for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (who was acquainted with her) describes her quite otherwise, as a “commanding figure whose temperament and determination matched the impression of a large physique.”<sup>45</sup> She was very pleased when an elderly Hebridean man suggested that she “thought a great many things that she did not say, and every one of them uncomplimentary”—she reveled in giving the impression of taciturnity and even grumpiness, not just as a rejection

<sup>37</sup> Colpus, 222.

<sup>38</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasnadb*, 61; Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914–60* (Manchester, 2007), 38–39.

<sup>39</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasnadb*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Colpus, “Women, Service and Self-Actualization,” 204–5.

<sup>41</sup> Helen Glew, *Gender, Rhetoric and Regulation: Women’s Work in the Civil Service and the London County Council, 1900–55* (Manchester, 2016); Holden, *Shadow of Marriage*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> Pearson, *Museums in the Second World War*, 185–91.

<sup>43</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 107.

<sup>44</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasnadb*, 108.

<sup>45</sup> Cheape, “Grant, Isabel Frances.”

of Victorian high emotionality but also because she saw reticence and testiness as signifying an ethnic style—that of the Highlander.<sup>46</sup>

She admired other women who were practical and competent but not ostentatiously modern—or indeed ostentatiously anything.<sup>47</sup> Like Christie, she represented herself publicly as refusing introspection, yet emotional intensity is present in her work. She expressed emotion most easily when discussing objects or their effects on people: anxiety, regret, the “sad tale of a flail,” but also delight and love, “thrills,” happiness, and pleasure.<sup>48</sup> Most notably, she described the collection itself as “looking very happy.”<sup>49</sup> Her suitably reticent self-presentation was uneasily balanced with a need for emotional richness through material engagement.

Overall, then, the circle of women involved in folk collecting and museums found that neither traditional nor modern gender roles offered an unproblematic sense of self or a script that they could follow wholeheartedly. They did not enthusiastically embrace all the markers of the modern woman, and their lives were not shaped exclusively by those markers. Most of them were not young enough in the 1930s to engage easily with modern fashion, modern films, and modern imaginaries. Grant, for example, went out of her way to disparage trouser wearing among young women (at the time *The Making of Am Fasgadh* was written, she was over seventy, remembering her fifty-something self’s reaction).<sup>50</sup> Women of that generation needed a way to be modern *and* middle-aged, with subjectivities formed partly in childhood in the Victorian era.

Additionally, Grant’s national identity was an important component of her collection and museum. She collected and displayed not just any historic objects but *her* historic objects, or at least those deriving from *her* people. She repeatedly referred to the Highlanders as “my own Highland people” and their history and culture as forming her sense of self and ideally that of other Highlanders who might forget their unique cultural heritage.<sup>51</sup> The development of an idea of Scottishness, and particularly of the Highlands as being the true heart of that Scottishness, through the growth of heritage over the past two centuries or so, has been extensively traced.<sup>52</sup> Useful are Hayden Lorrimer’s examination of the ideas of Scottishness and Highlandness within the National Trust of Scotland, with whom Grant had slightly tetchy relations, and in reconstructions at the Glasgow Empire Exhibition of 1938, with which she was involved.<sup>53</sup> The Glasgow exhibition featured a Highland village reconstruction called An Clachan, peopled with nine Highland families wearing traditional dress and demonstrating ancient crafts. Such an exhibit clearly

<sup>46</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 35.

<sup>47</sup> In a typical anecdote, she expressed admiration for a girl in a wool skirt handling a boat by herself, over a group of women in modern slacks who had to be helped into a motorboat. Grant, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Grant, 21, 42, 89, 93, 107, 134.

<sup>49</sup> I. F. Grant, “Am Fasgadh, the Highland Folk Museum,” annotated typescript, I. F. Grant Box 3, Am Fasgadh archives, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 161.

<sup>51</sup> Grant, 177.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, David McCrone, Angela Morris, and Richard Kiely, *Scotland the Brand: The Making of Scottish Heritage* (Edinburgh, 1995); Laurence Gourievidis, *The Dynamics of Heritage: History, Memory and the Highland Clearances* (Farnham, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Hayden Lorrimer, “Ways of Seeing the Scottish Highlands: Marginality, Authenticity and the Curious Case of the Hebridean Blackhouse,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 25, no. 4 (1999): 517–33.

drew both on ideas about the “mystic” nature of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and on the tradition of exoticized ethnic villages at international exhibitions, and received an ironic reception from audiences who recognized its artifice.<sup>54</sup> Yet, paradoxically, there are a number of reasons to suggest that national identity was a more complex thread in the Highland Folk Museum than in Lorrimer’s examples; the relationship between Grant’s own identity and her museum, though important, was not simple.

Firstly, Grant understood Highland identity as a highly cosmopolitan and even hybrid entity that had a tenuous relationship with class and was predicated on change and progress. This understanding was based on her own identity: she was fairly cosmopolitan herself, with parents who served in India for a good portion of her childhood and thereafter usually spent part of each year in London.<sup>55</sup> Yet her sense of herself as a Highlander was slightly fragile; she expressed some anxiety over her inability to speak Gaelic and a tendency to be seen as a tourist on Iona.<sup>56</sup> She therefore stressed that Highlanders were travelers and traders who had always embraced influences from other cultures. She was less wedded to the idea of Highland heritage as pure than were those heritage practitioners discussed by Lorrimer, likely because of her own insecurities about lack of purity. In elucidating Highlandness to those of Highland extraction now living far away, she felt that she was helping to “bind the peoples of the Commonwealth together.”<sup>57</sup>

Secondly, despite the adherence of collectors of folk material to a particular region or place, and the predication of folk studies on the significance of locality and community, the actual objects they collected and the displays they created were not as clearly distinguished along locality lines as might be imagined; instead, they demonstrated a certain similarity, whether illustrating the Scottish Highlands, old West Surrey, or Cambridgeshire. As discussed below, in particular, displays of cottage

<sup>54</sup> Hayden Lorrimer quotes newspaper reports citing the “mystic quality” of both the actual Highlands and the staging of it, while also including a “Broons” comic strip featuring visitors rowing a boat into an obviously fake, painted backdrop. Lorrimer, “Ways of Seeing the Scottish Highlands,” 526–27. On the other hand, a less cynical and more approving response can be found in a correspondent to Grant from North Uist, who said that many people from the island had been to see the Clachan and Grant’s “roomie.” P. McCuish to I. F. Grant, 2 September 1938, Am Fasnadh Archives, I. F. Grant box 3. Daniel Stephen’s examination of the West African displays at the British Empire Exhibition in 1924 shows that similar conflicts between the official rhetoric of progress and imperial unity and a popular leisure emphasis on difference and so-called primitiveness were widespread in exhibitionary cultures at this time and linked to gender, even if the issue of West Africa took on a much more racialized tone than that of Scotland. Daniel Stephens, “‘The White Man’s Grave’: British West Africa and the British Empire Exhibition of 1924–1925,” *Journal of British Studies* 48 no. 1 (2009): 102–28, at 127.

<sup>55</sup> Cheape, “Grant, Isabel Frances.”

<sup>56</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasnadh*, 35, 62; Lorrimer, “Ways of Seeing the Scottish Highlands,” 519. It is worth noting that because Grant was so adamant that Highland society was “classless,” she tended to see any social divisions as following ethnic or linguistic lines, whereas clearly there were significant class barriers between her and some of those who saw her as an outsider.

<sup>57</sup> I. F. Grant, “Am Fasnadh, the Highland Folk Museum,” annotated typescript, 6, Am Fasnadh Archives, I. F. Grant box 3. Her remark suggests strongly that the Highland Folk Museum was part of the formation of “imagined geographies of empire,” forming a common memory of white imperial Britishness, as argued by Bill Schwarz. As he says, this rested largely on “the seemingly innocent question of ‘Where are you from?’”; Bill Schwarz, *The White Man’s World* (Oxford, 2011), 10, 15.

hearthside and fireplace seem to draw on a common imaginary with only small regional variations.<sup>58</sup>

Thus the collectivities of which Grant was part—middle-class and elite women, and Highlanders—were significant but not entirely determining factors forming her sense of purpose and identity.

## OBJECTS AND SPACES

Grant's objects, arranged in space and put into use, are characterized by particular practices, emotional regimes of play and care.<sup>59</sup> The objects and the practices surrounding them suggest that elite women like Grant and her associates found pleasure in such engagement with the past because it enabled sincere, intense, and imaginative outlets that confirmed her sense of identity and of service to others.

Although the museum was billed as a folk collection, not all the objects were made locally and not all were "peasant" possessions.<sup>60</sup> Partly this was because Grant was at pains to stress that "Highland folk" were *not* peasants and were not isolated, but rather keen traders who followed international trends in commodities: "a race that has ventured over the wide world."<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, one thing that links all the objects in Grant's collection, except for a small section of agricultural implements and a tiny number of ecclesiastical objects, is that they belong in the home; in many ways her museum collection emerges as one determined by the need to furnish dwellings rather than as one aiming at a representative coverage of Highland culture. By contrast, other British folk collections had a much wider interpretation of their remit: by 1945, when such collections could be found in more than thirty English local and regional museums (and some university collections), they were quite broadly defined to include local industries, tradespeople, and leisure equipment.<sup>62</sup> If one considers the collection as formed in order to furnish domestic settings, it takes on a different meaning, and thus it becomes clear that the collection should be examined in the contexts of both display and collecting. This display has two important and linked aspects.

Firstly, objects must be considered as intended for a particular spatial arrangement and as taking on their full intended meaning in a particular space. This element of the collection, present from the start of the project, developed significantly over Grant's life. Some of her earliest involvement in displaying Highland culture was in

<sup>58</sup> See Gertrude Jekyll, *Old West Surrey: Some Notes and Memories* (London, 1904), 80; Enid Porter, *The Hearth and the Kitchen* (Cambridge, 1971).

<sup>59</sup> On museum practices, and the various symbolic, political, psychological, and relational aspects of them, see Inkeri Hakamies, "The Dusty Museum," *Nordic Museology*, no. 1 (2018): 74–81.

<sup>60</sup> Grant's museum contrasted notably in this regard with the slightly earlier collections of Gertrude Jekyll and of Gerald Stanley Davies in Surrey, where clear definitions and prioritizing of "the peasant" were obvious. Jekyll, moreover, maintained a strict focus on a small area of west Surrey; Davies, however, believed there was no peasant culture left in industrialized and urbanized Britain and collected instead from areas of eastern and northern Europe not yet touched, he thought, by these processes. See Emma Shepley, "The Haslemere Context," in *The Lost Arts of Europe: The Haslemere Museum Collection of European Peasant Art*, ed. David Crowley and Lou Taylor (Haslemere, 2000), 3–12, at 8; Jekyll, *Old West Surrey*, 254. On the other hand, Carter suggests that Grant was not alone in understanding folk objects in a quite different way from pre-First World War collectors; Carter, "Rethinking Folk Culture," 554.

<sup>61</sup> Grant, *Making of An Fasgadh*, 60.

<sup>62</sup> M. M. Banks, "Folk Museums and Collections in England," *Folklore* 56, no. 1 (March 1945): 218–22.

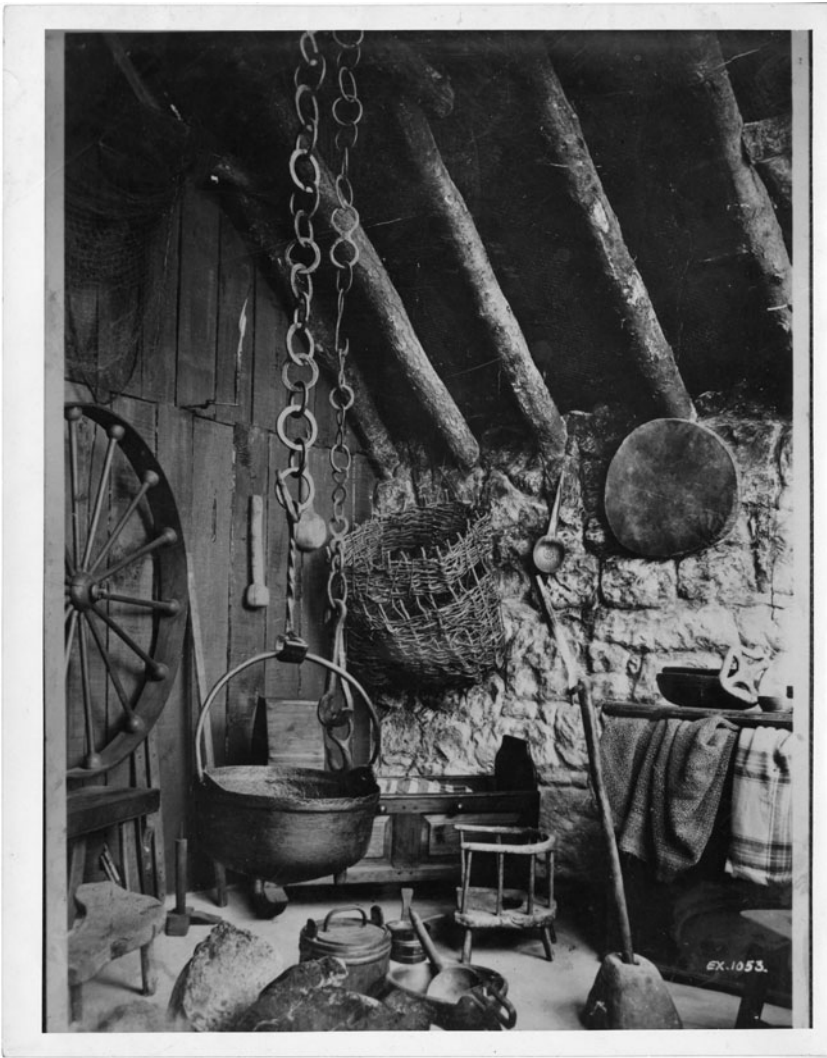


Figure 2—The “Roomie” display at the Glasgow Empire Exhibition, 1938, created by I. F. Grant. From large album of photographs, I. F. Grant Box 6, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.

exhibitions. The Highland Exhibition of 1930 provided her first experiences of collecting, and her display practices were substantially developed in 1938 at the Glasgow Empire Exhibition, where she was responsible for the display of a “roomie,” a reconstruction of a small Highland living room, complete with glowing fire effect and a small, unintended mouse (figure 2).<sup>63</sup> Images of the museum’s first incarnation on

<sup>63</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 38–39. On the exhibition and its construction of both traditional and modern Scottish identities, see Lorrimer, “Ways of Seeing the Scottish Highlands.”



Figure 3—The Highland Folk Museum’s first home, a chapel on the island of Iona. Photograph by Donald MacCulloch, c. 1936. From large album of photographs, I. F. Grant Box 6, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.

the island of Iona in the late 1930s show that it was housed in an old chapel, not a naturally home-like structure (figure 3). Yet Grant still aimed to create displays that emphasized the arrangements of a domestic setting, and she did so by using partitions to create rooms (figure 4). The acquisition of part of a fireplace was a particular coup that led to the fireside arrangement (see in in figure 5), labeled in Grant’s own photograph as the “faked fireplace.” By 1944, though, Grant had acquired a more spacious site in the Highlands proper, at Kingussie in Inverness-shire. Here she was able to develop her long-standing plan to construct and furnish Highland cottages. She (like Greta Michie at the Glenesk Folk Museum) had been influenced by a visit to Skansen in her youth; this open-air folk museum in Stockholm, opened in 1891, has been credited with starting the early twentieth-century trend for museum reconstructions.<sup>64</sup> However, whereas Skansen benefited from the Scandinavian techniques of timber-framed and easily relocatable construction, traditional Highland buildings were not so easy to dismantle and move. Grant decided instead that authentically sourced building materials and workmen steeped in traditions of building, along with a traditional plan, could produce new buildings that were simultaneously authentic expressions of Highland tradition.<sup>65</sup> Thus, at the museum, she had three cottages built to represent different types of regional tradition: the Lewis cottage, the Inverness-shire house, and the Highland cottage.

<sup>64</sup> Sten Rentzhog, *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea* (Stockholm, 2007), chap. 1. On Michie, see Rodriguez, “Greta Michie.”

<sup>65</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 180–81.



Figure 4—Interior of the Highland Folk Museum on Iona c. 1936. From large album of photographs, I. F. Grant Box 6, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.

While these structures were intended to be exhibits in their own right, they were also spaces in which to construct scenes of traditional domesticity. Objects were acquired specifically to be placed in these buildings and the interiors, once fitted out, formed the centerpieces of the museum as immortalized in picture postcards (figure 6). In the main galleries of the museum, housed in an old farmhouse, the same concern with staging domestic life prevailed, as the postcard of “the best parlour” shows (figure 7). In this sense, Grant’s work was part of a wider interest in reconstruction in museum display from the 1930s onward, yet developed in particular ways.<sup>66</sup>

The heart of the home in these domestic reconstructions was the fireside.<sup>67</sup> Such a location may be seen as a dream space in the sense that Carolyn Steedman explores the Bartons’ parlor in Mrs. Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*. Steedman discusses the “poetics of a timeless and dehistoricized working-class life” as having an oneiric richness, an invitation to dream.<sup>68</sup> Drawing on the work of Gaston Bachelard, she suggests that the oneiric richness comes from the small size of the house, the quality of its light, and its furnishing with objects like boxes and cupboards, which may be opened, or cups,

<sup>66</sup> By 1945, folk period rooms were becoming widespread. Banks notes eleven museums with period rooms and some others who were hoping to create period rooms in the future; Banks, “Folk Museums,” 219–22. Before and during the war, however, they were less common, and in 1938 the Markham report described existing displays of older material as “incredibly dull”; S. F. Markham, *A Report on the Museums and Galleries of the British Isles (Other Than the National Museums) to the Carnegie UK Trustees* (Edinburgh, 1938), 89.

<sup>67</sup> This was also true more widely as the Markham report pointed out: “The vision of many curators is attracted by the firelight . . . and can see no further”; Markham, *Report on the Museums and Galleries of the British Isles*, 88.

<sup>68</sup> Carolyn Steedman, “What a Rag Rug Means,” *Journal of Material Culture* 3, no. 3 (1998): 259–81, at 261.



Figure 5—“Faked Fireplace” in the Iona incarnation of the Highland Folk Museum. Photograph by Donald MacCulloch, c. 1936. From large album of photographs, I. E. Grant Box 6, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.

bowls, and dishes, which have a visible outside and inside.<sup>69</sup> Such qualities are all also present in Grant’s reconstructions, which (as figure 6 shows particularly well) use objects in extremely small interiors, dimly but glowingly lit. The whole house becomes an object to be opened, which the visitor must peer into, in contrast to the promotion of full visibility in glass-case museum displays. Bachelard views

<sup>69</sup> Steedman, “What a Rag Rug Means,” 266–67.





Figure 6—Cottage interiors, Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie, n.d. From medium album of photographs, I. F. Grant Box 6, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.



Figure 7—“Best Parlour,” Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie, n.d. From medium album of photographs, I. F. Grant Box 6, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.

such an interior as born out of a desire to be taken back to childhood, and Grant and various of her visitors make repeated reference to their childhoods and their grandparents.<sup>70</sup> Steedman, however, goes on to suggest that the desire to tell the self through working-class domestic life is a bourgeois one: there is “no necessary connection at all with the people who actually, in time and in social circumstance, occupied the cruel habitations.”<sup>71</sup>

So was Grant attempting to “write the self through others, who are not like you?”<sup>72</sup> I do not think this is straightforwardly the case—she strongly believed that she was representing herself, her own people; it was, as shown above, important to her sense of identity that she was a Highlander and that Highland society was or had been classless.<sup>73</sup> Despite her beliefs, she undoubtedly came from a privileged, cosmopolitan background with no cottages in her immediate family history; moreover, much of the source of her fake fireside—and those of other bourgeois and elite women who reconstructed cottage hearths—was linked to that cultural imaginary that, according to Steedman, fed Mrs. Gaskell and Richard Hoggart. In all these cases, the generic imaginary was paradoxically linked to a highly specific sense of place. Yet a key difference was that, while the domestic interiors examined by Steedman are emptied of people, characterized by their stillness and calm (and this is an important part of the means by which the bourgeois were able to appropriate these memories or dreams), Grant went to some lengths to repopulate her interiors.<sup>74</sup> This museological endeavor was much less common than collecting folk objects or constructing period rooms and firesides.<sup>75</sup>

Not only were objects intended for a particular arrangement in space but they were also put into use by Grant and others in ways that were unusual in museums at the time and that complicate the formation of subjectivities.<sup>76</sup> Grant’s first engagements with objects were around processes of textile production. She devoted considerable time to researching dyeing techniques and plants and became proficient at spinning and weaving (though less so at dyeing), activities that were often undertaken in the museum during its months of summer opening, apparently whether there were

<sup>70</sup> For example, “My mother has often told me how the old ladies used to have boxes for their caps, when she was a very small girl.” I. F. Grant to L. B. Russ, 16 June 1937, Isabel F. Grant collection, Mitchell Library. See also Jekyll, *Old West Surrey*, viii.

<sup>71</sup> Steedman, “What a Rag Rug Means,” 271. See also Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal, 2009), xix–xx.

<sup>72</sup> Steedman, “What a Rag Rug Means,” 271.

<sup>73</sup> For example, she referred to an acquisition of stockings “worn and knitted by *our* great grandmothers” (my emphasis). I. F. Grant to L. B. Russ, 17 January 1938, Isabel F. Grant collection, Mitchell Library.

<sup>74</sup> Steedman, “What a Rag Rug Means,” 268.

<sup>75</sup> It was a key part of the Scandinavian open-air museum experience, as extensively discussed by Mark Sandberg in *Living Pictures, Missing Persons: Mannequins, Museums, and Modernity* (Princeton, 2003); see especially chaps. 8 and 9. The only similar British museum example before the Second World War was the Abbey Folk Park in New Barnet, where lathes and potters’ wheels were demonstrated and costume was modeled for publicity shots; Geoffrey Ginn, *Archangels and Archaeology: J. S. M. Ward’s Kingdom of the Wise* (Brighton, 2012), 178, 183.

<sup>76</sup> It had arguably become common outside museums through both pageants and exhibitions. See Bartie et al., *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain* (London, 2020); Kate Hill, “‘Olde Worlde’ Urban? Reconstructing Historic Urban Environments at Exhibitions, 1884–1908,” *Urban History* 45, no. 2 (2018): 306–30.



Figure 8—Isabel Grant spinning wool at the Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie, n.d. From medium album of photographs, I. F. Grant Box 6, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, *High Life Highland*.

visitors or not (figure 8). However, the emphasis on usability went beyond such interest in craft processes toward engagement that could be seen as more explicitly play focused. Museums routinely displayed costume on mannequins, but at Grant's museum, costume was on occasion modeled, particularly dresses; photographs in the museum's archive show at least ten items from its holdings being



Figure 9—Costume collection at Highland Folk Museum being modeled by unidentified local girl, n.d. From medium album of photographs, I. F. Grant Box 6, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.

modeled by unknown young women (see [figure 9](#)).<sup>77</sup> These images are more consciously theatrical and affective and less consciously documentary than those from an earlier period examined by Elizabeth Edwards; no authentic link between place, model, and outfit is present, as the dresses are from different regions and the models pose to invoke the items' previous owners.<sup>78</sup> Other photographs show scenes from domestic life posed in the cottages, using as models those interested in the project, including Grant's housekeeper and her family. These scenes include bath night; supertime; various domestic crafts such as carding, spinning, knitting, and butter churning; and a family around the hearth and going to bed (see [figure 10](#)). Such scenes are described as “tableaux of life in the Highlands which made charming photographs,” but there is no evidence of the photographs being circulated or used in interpretation at the museum or used to illustrate any of Grant's many publications

<sup>77</sup> Modeling of historic costume was again becoming more common outside the museum environment, and, significantly, in popular media. Newsreels in the 1930s carried footage of costume collections being modeled; see, for example, “Old Frocks: Dr Cunnington's Collection of Old Dresses,” British Pathé 1938, accessed 5 March 2021, <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/old-frocks/>. The same historic dress collection was used in *Clothes-Line*, the first British television program devoted to the history of costume, which was broadcast by the BBC in 1937: Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History* (Manchester, 2004), 54–58.

<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographs and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918* (Durham, 2012), refers notably to a shepherd “performing his smock,” 201. A pictorial approach did sometimes creep into Survey photography, though. Edwards, “The Camera as Historians,” 92.

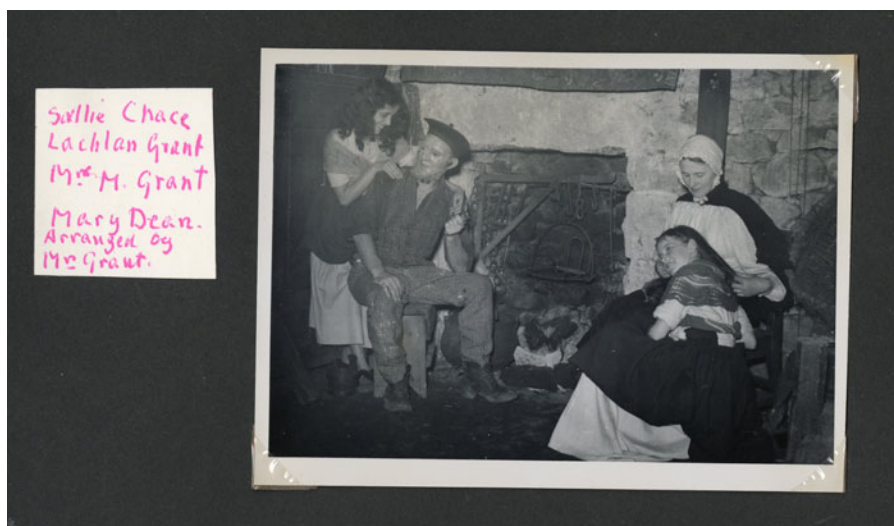


Figure 10—Domestic scene staged in Highland cottage, Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie, n.d. From medium album of photographs, I. F. Grant Box 6, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.

on Highland history.<sup>79</sup> Again, they eschew a documentary approach to photography for a more dramatic style, though the effect is quite different from the costume photographs because of the low lighting and much humbler outfits and setting. The feelings evoked by the photographs of costumes and scenes at the museum were sensational in the tradition of waxworks and exhibitions, and escapist in the way suggested by Stearns's account of twentieth-century American leisure cultures.<sup>80</sup> They add to the evidence that the museum was used for reenactment by those who lived in or with it, in ways that went beyond interpretation for visitors and constituted private, personal enjoyment.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 182. That staged photographs of historical scenes could be used as historical illustrations at the time is shown by the work of Dorothy Hartley, whose book *Mediaeval Costume and Life* (London 1931) contains photographs of people wearing reproduction medieval garments (and indeed patterns for making such garments), which often go beyond the documentary to incorporate dramatic narrative elements. See, for example, Hartley, *Mediaeval Costume and Life*, 15 (the student), 71 (the fishmonger). I am grateful to Laura Carter for this reference.

<sup>80</sup> Edwards, *Camera as Historian*, 165; Billie Melman, "Horror and Pleasure: Visual histories, Sensationalism and Modernity in Britain in the Long Nineteenth Century," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 37, no. 1 (2011): 26–46, at 31. Melman also suggests that historians have avoided the role of emotions when studying historical cultures of the nineteenth century and should seek to integrate it, particularly with visual representations. This is something I attempt here, for a later period. Peter Stearns asserts a new emotional economy of leisure, more sensational and escapist, in the twentieth century. Peter Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York, 1994), chap. 9.

<sup>81</sup> A very suggestive comparison is staged photographs as a domestic amusement in North America from the end of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, examined by Beverley Gordon. This was a specialism of women amateur and professional photographers, and historical scenes were most common, often set in actual historical settings. Gordon suggests that the reason for the photography was to preserve

## CARE AS EMOTIONAL PRACTICE

Grant's relationship with her objects and with her museum can be seen as one of looking-after in varied ways. The objects she collected were, she thought, in urgent need of rescue: it would soon be "too late to save the old things."<sup>82</sup> She saw herself as protecting them from less careful and less emotionally invested owners; she wrote of Highland objects bought by people on a whim while on holiday as being "in danger of being broken and chucked out," and discussed the danger of a local dealer acquiring objects "for tourists" and personal profit.<sup>83</sup> She also saw herself as speaking for her objects, understanding their true meaning, keeping them alive through regular use, keeping them clean and in good repair (through some rather idiosyncratic conservation methods, such as prowling among the objects at night listening for the calls of deathwatch beetles), and living with them for much of the time.<sup>84</sup> The very name of the museum, Am Fasgadh—the shelter—expressed this sense of emotional care.<sup>85</sup> The museum was in some ways like a person to Grant; its "definite personality. . . had already asserted itself," she wrote.<sup>86</sup> It had a "will to survive," and she was its "servant and guardian."<sup>87</sup>

While curators customarily look after the objects in their care, Grant's approach was distinctive in the way that care was foregrounded rather than hidden behind a façade of professional presentation; it was part of both her private and professional life in that she lived with the objects. The open demonstration of emotionally invested personal care is particularly noticeable in the handwritten labels and interpretive material she produced (see figures 1 and 11). That doing so was a deliberate aesthetic choice rather than a necessity caused by the museum's remoteness is confirmed by Louie's Russ's praise of these labels as "beautiful," "clear," and more "homely" than printed ones.<sup>88</sup> Thus as Michael Roper suggests, "the lived dimensions of relationships"—here, Grant's relationships with objects—are important; through acts of care, objects became the locus of emotional experiences.<sup>89</sup>

Moreover, Grant stressed that she was doing the work not for herself but for others, framing the enterprise as an exercise in selflessness, even self-sacrifice. The museum was a gift to Highlanders, or even something done for Highlanders past, for the dead; she "long[ed] to give the people of the Highlands such a museum" as the Scandinavian open-air ones.<sup>90</sup> She was keen to emphasize that she did not gain personally in any material sense from the collection and museum and indeed

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and prolong the pleasure of dressing up, and to highlight its "sensual pleasure." Yet by the 1930s and 1940s, such a romantic aesthetic might be thought old-fashioned. See Beverley Gordon, *The Saturated World: Aesthetic Meaning, Intimate Objects, Women's Lives, 1890–1940* (Knoxville, 2006), 130–35.

<sup>82</sup> I. F. Grant to L. B. Russ, 12 January 1937, Isabel F. Grant collection, Mitchell Library.

<sup>83</sup> I. F. Grant to L. B. Russ, 8 April 1937, Isabel F. Grant collection, Mitchell Library; A. R. Russ to I. F. Grant, 24 April 1937, Isabel F. Grant collection, Mitchell Library.

<sup>84</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 66, 183.

<sup>85</sup> Grant, 33.

<sup>86</sup> Grant, "Am Fasgadh," unpublished typescript dated 25 June 1947, I. F. Grant box 3, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 166.

<sup>88</sup> L. B. Russ to I. F. Grant, Isabel F. Grant Collection, Mitchell Library.

<sup>89</sup> Roper, "Slipping out of View," 63; see also Barron and Langhamer, "Feeling through Practice," 114.

<sup>90</sup> I. F. Grant, unpublished typescript dated 25 June 1947, Am Fasgadh Archives, I. F. Grant box 3.

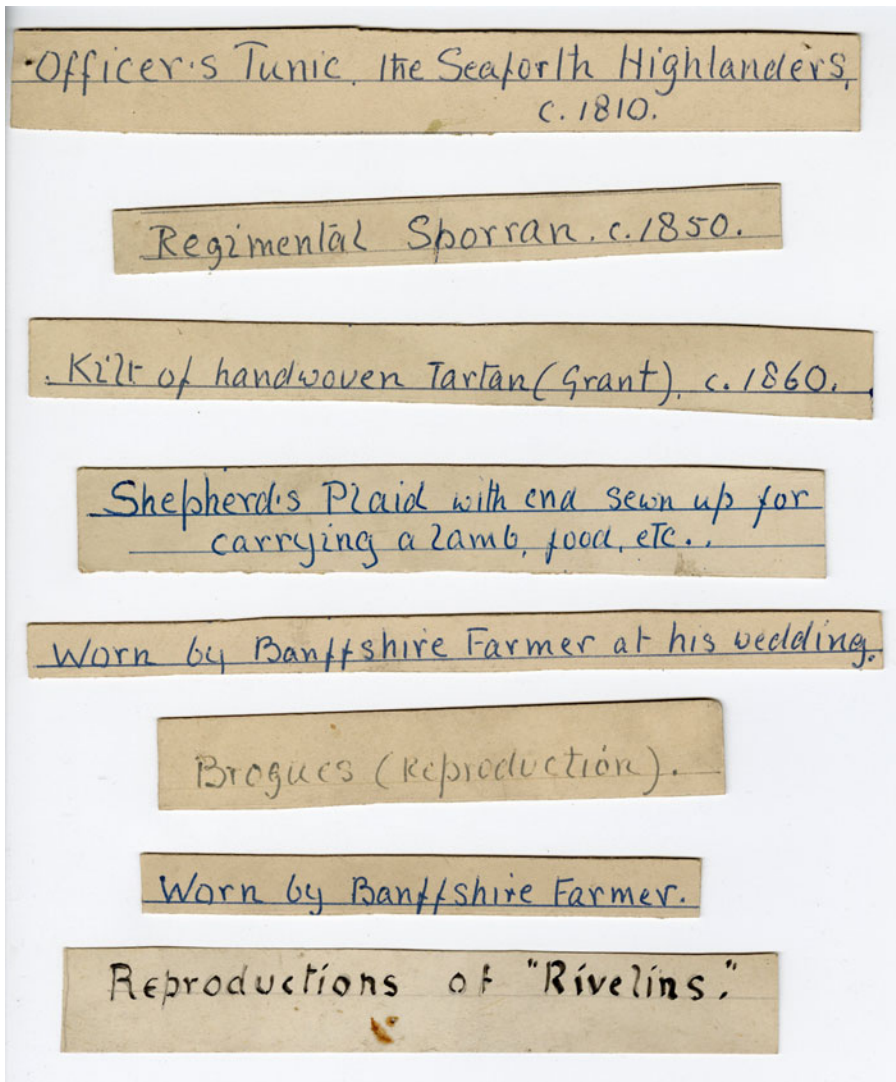


Figure 11—Handwritten interpretive material from Highland Folk Museum, n.d. I. F. Grant Box 1, Am Fasgadh archives. Highland Folk Museum, High Life Highland.

was sacrificing time, money, and comfort to look after it; she also maintained that she did “not enjoy roughing it” and did not want to “continue to spend my life indefinitely living in penury and discomfort.”<sup>91</sup> (These statements, however, seem at odds with the rest of the text, and “penury” was a very relative term.) Like the feminine philanthropists of the Arts and Crafts movement and home industries, she

<sup>91</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 65, 190. See Hakamies’s description of some people’s positive valuation of amateur museum practices: Hakamies, “Dusty Museum,” 82.

repudiated a professional role not because professional curating was exclusionary and focused on other sorts of history but because full emotional investment in care seemed more guaranteed by a noncommercial relationship.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, she repeatedly stated that she was “fated” to create the museum as a fortune teller had apparently predicted it.<sup>93</sup> Through such means, she formed a relationship with her objects that was emotionally satisfying in its own right, but it also enabled and created human relationships, particularly with other women collectors and museum makers. Her long, primarily epistolary friendship with Louie Russ, who met her when she was on holiday with her parents on Iona, was largely based on a shared sense of care for the objects and museum (indeed, Russ looked after the “roomie” exhibition at the Glasgow Exhibition). Russ’s father also contributed, but in more masculine ways through financial advice and business contacts.<sup>94</sup> Although care practices were distributed between genders in the first half of the twentieth century, there was often an expectation shown by men and women that care was really women’s work that men might undertake out of necessity, or that men and women expressed care in different ways.<sup>95</sup> The particular care that Grant expressed was feminized in its rejection of masculine, professional methods of caring for objects and assertion of the superiority of care based on tradition, authenticity, and domestic practices.

## PLAY AS EMOTIONAL PRACTICE

Grant’s relationship with her objects was based on more than care, however; it was also playful. Play was increasingly theorized during the mid-twentieth century: Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* was published in English in 1949 and Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality* in 1971.<sup>96</sup> Grant’s playfulness, however, was not so much informed by developing scholarship as derived more obviously from nineteenth-century ideas about art and craft, whereby play was a creative practice; it was motivated not by necessity but for its own value, bringing material and corporeal action together

<sup>92</sup> Such philanthropic initiatives often centered on amateur engagement with the kind of traditional textile crafts featured in the Highland Folk Museum and attracted elite women from Scotland and Ireland, among others. Those endeavors have been described as part of an “alternative modernity.” Janice Helland, “‘Good Work and Clever Design’: Early Exhibitions of the Home Arts and Industries Association,” *Journal of Modern Craft* 5, no. 3 (2012): 275–94, at 278. Being a caring amateur offered women philanthropists a sense of purpose alongside a creative outlet, and a specific female way of doing craft that had more social benefits than men’s ways. Indeed, some of these women produced very early forerunners of the Highland Folk Museum in displays at exhibitions. See Janice Helland, “Rural Women and Urban Extravagance in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Rural History* 13, no. 2 (2002): 179–97; Karen Diadick Casselman, “Women in Colour: Perceptions of Professionalism in Natural Dyeing during the Arts and Crafts Period,” *Textile History* 39, no. 1 (2008): 16–44. Moreover, women’s negotiation of professionalism in the Arts and Crafts movement was ambiguous, and again commitment could be demonstrated through rejection of overt professionalism; see Zoë Thomas, *Women Art Workers and the Arts and Crafts Movement* (Manchester, 2020), especially chap. 3.

<sup>93</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasgadh*, 29.

<sup>94</sup> Grant, 39; I. F. Grant to L. B. Russ, 22 September 1937, Isabel F. Grant Collection, Mitchell Library.

<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Roper, “Between the Psyche and the Social,” esp. 268; Barron and Langhamer, “Feeling through Practice,” 114.

<sup>96</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London, 1949); D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London, 1971).



with the imaginative or spiritual realm. Such play was seen as important for an authentic selfhood rather than in more psychological terms, at least until the Second World War.<sup>97</sup> Play could, however, as with leisure and pleasure, still be seen as negatively linked to hedonistic frivolousness and as inherently feminine in contrast to manly, serious activities; thus the Morrisian focus on authenticity through play was essential.<sup>98</sup> Currently scholars understand play as a state of mind, a cognitive state that, in bringing together imagination with intense sensory inputs and complex embodied engagement with the material world, has a transformative effect on the player's consciousness.<sup>99</sup>

Many aspects of the museum's activities under Grant can be understood as being examples of play, starting with collecting itself. Her recollections of early collecting expeditions with friends make this clear: they formed her "happiest memories," especially of objects found "just in the nick of time."<sup>100</sup> When she tracked down a particularly good find, she was full of "exultation and joy."<sup>101</sup> Even though later in her book she declares that when asked if she enjoyed collecting, "the plain answer is no!"<sup>102</sup> she evidently enjoyed the material aspects and the shared experiences with friends. If she found other social aspects of collecting more challenging, it is not difficult to see the playfulness and pleasure of collecting as allowing her to overcome shyness and lack of confidence.

For Grant, finding the objects was a game resembling a hunt in its peaks of excitement, those "most thrilling moments when one strikes oil."<sup>103</sup> Once she had obtained the objects, play continued through close and persistent use in learning to use them, dressing up, and staging scenes. Through this play she gained embodied, sensual experience and haptic skills, alongside an imaginative and even spiritual element.<sup>104</sup> Key

<sup>97</sup> David Latham, "'To Frame a Desire': Morris's Ideology of Work and Play," in *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris*, ed. David Latham (Toronto, 2007), 155–72; Simona Livescu, "From Plato to Derrida and Theories of Play," *CLCWeb* 5, no. 4 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1201>.

<sup>98</sup> In this period, leisure and pleasure both share with play a sense that they might be too sensational and sensorially attractive to be morally safe, and women might be particularly susceptible to such demoralization through pleasure. The increasing identification of feminine pleasure with particular forms of consumption might enhance this; see, for example, Anne Anderson, "'Chinamania': Collecting Old Blue for the House Beautiful, c. 1860–1900," in *Material Cultures, 1740–1920: The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, ed. John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (Farnham, 2009), 109–28, at 118. She shows that the pleasures and the ludic quality were both associated with the feminine and seen as particularly dangerous. See also Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, 2001).

<sup>99</sup> I am drawing particularly on Gordon, *Saturated World*. Her concept of the "saturated world," though anchored in early twentieth-century American women's experiences, is posited as a universally sought-after ideal, suggesting that further historicization is needed. However, the similarity of her concept of saturation with contemporary reenactors' and gamers' articulation of the attraction of their play, and with Macleod's women collectors who explicitly played with their collections for creative release, suggests that it is a modern experience, made up of imagination, intense sensory inputs, embodied skills, and knowledge, and that it involves a forgetting of the self that paradoxically leaves participants with a renewed or enhanced sense of self. Maja Mikula, "Historical Re-enactment: Narrativity, Affect and the Sublime," *Rethinking History* 19, no. 4 (2015): 583–601; Macleod, *Enchanted Lives*, 14–16.

<sup>100</sup> Grant, *Making of Am Fasqadh*, 22, 21.

<sup>101</sup> Grant, 22.

<sup>102</sup> Grant, 62.

<sup>103</sup> I. F. Grant to L. B. Russ, 30 December 1936, Isabel F. Grant collection, Mitchell Library.

<sup>104</sup> Mikula, "Historical Re-enactment." Discussing Finnish role players, Vartiainen notes the necessity of a serious approach to get the most benefits from play. Vartiainen, "Imaginary World." See also Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London, 2009).

among the pleasures of modern reenactment is its promotion of immersive states through strong sensory inputs, the need to master various bodily habits and motor skills, and the involvement of strong imaginative elements.<sup>105</sup> Thus it is imperative that the make-believe is taken seriously and not regarded in an ironic way.<sup>106</sup>

Grant's playful practices extended to the gendering of the past. She used a masculine chivalry motif to characterize her collecting, stressing her competition and sacrifice for her objects, while in staging them she emphasized traditional female skills and environments through dressing up and make-believe. Such combinations of gendered play chime with her apparent self-understanding as a modern woman, but one whose understanding of modern femininity was shaped by the early as much as the middle twentieth century, and who manifested some ambiguity about public, professional cultural leadership.

Moreover, as Grant's collection drew on other ways in which the past was experienced at the time, including pageants and exhibitions, it also shared elements of play with them. Pageants have been seen as serving political, civic, and educational ends, but the play and enjoyment they offered to the thousands of people who took part in them has been less fully explored.<sup>107</sup> Ryan suggests they need to be seen as part of a new economy of pleasure in modern leisure practices and highlights particularly the pleasure of dressing up that pageanteers felt: "Many of them [wore] their costume in their everyday jobs and for weeks after the pageant ended."<sup>108</sup> Moreover, those in charge of costumes were usually elite women in the community, who might additionally bring to this role their expert knowledge of costume history—women not dissimilar to Grant, who in the serious leisure of pageants found a sense of purpose.<sup>109</sup>

Thus play offered not only the opportunity to engage with gender in an embodied and performative way but also particular benefits to elite women. Dianne Sachko Macleod, in her work on women collectors of art in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, argues that playful engagement with objects was a key part of gendered subjectivities. Lady Charlotte Schreiber used playing with objects to escape from a feeling of feminine inferiority, to inject excitement into her marriage, and to try to recapture the emotional satisfaction of her marriage in her widowhood; to her, seeking out and acquiring objects was "pure pleasure."<sup>110</sup> American elite women collectors, on the other hand, gained confidence and a sphere of action through their "collecting-as-play."<sup>111</sup> More broadly, Macleod views playful embodied

<sup>105</sup> Petra Tjitske Kalshoven, "The World Unwraps from Tiny Bags: Measuring Landscapes in Miniature," *Ethnos* 78, no. 3 (2013): 352–79.

<sup>106</sup> *Make-believe* is a strong but justified term here. Although the museum's reconstructions were based in research and intended to educate, and some craft activity was intended as research and demonstration, the use of the museum's spaces to stage scenes that were not apparently shown to visitors is much more clearly ludic and imaginative and intended to allow Grant and her collaborators to inhabit a different time. The extent to which visitors were invited to undertake—or even sometimes witness—experiential learning seems minimal.

<sup>107</sup> Mark Freeman offers a good overview of the literature. Mark Freeman, "Splendid Display, Pompous Spectacle: Historical Pageants in Twentieth-Century Britain," *Social History* 28, no. 4 (2013): 423–55.

<sup>108</sup> Deborah Sugg Ryan, "Pageantitis: Frank Lascelles' 1907 Oxford Historical Pageant, Visual Spectacle, and Popular Memory," *Visual Culture in Britain* 8, no. 2 (2007): 63–82, at 75.

<sup>109</sup> Thomas, "Historical Pageants"; Freeman, "Splendid Display," 429.

<sup>110</sup> Macleod, "Art Collecting as Play," 23.

<sup>111</sup> Macleod, *Enchanted Lives*, 14.

relationships with objects as a key feature of elite women's subjectivity in modernity, from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century at least, allowing them to reconcile conflicting emotions and cultural scripts and forming a key source of pleasure.<sup>112</sup> Macleod draws on both Freud and Winnicott in a psychological reading of collecting as play, focusing on the specific benefits that it can bring—comfort, sexual stimulation, assertiveness. Yet it is also important to recognize that play is not by definition directly instrumental.<sup>113</sup> While Grant may have found psychological benefits in her play with her collection, they were not the reason for it.

## CONCLUSION

The story of Isabel Grant and the Highland Folk Museum offers insights about the ways in which some women in the period—particularly those free of the immediate need to earn a living—sought and achieved pleasure and a sense of purpose through engagement with the past. Although Grant found aspects of her museum creation wearisome or stressful, overall it was a compelling—even joyful—activity that sustained her emotionally. Her story, then, is valuable for what it reveals about modern pleasure, revealing rich emotional, relational, and imaginative practices built around old things. Raphael Samuel has highlighted such pleasures, suggesting they were modern reincarnations of ancient forms of play that invited a surrender to particular forms of artifice, a poetic and aesthetic undertaking where “the poetry is in the grime.”<sup>114</sup> Women like Grant rejected forms of modern emotion and pleasure associated with youth and with being working class, but they nevertheless considered themselves modern. They were unusual, verging on eccentric, but eccentricity as a historically determined category helps to show both the normal and the abnormal at the time, sitting somewhere between the two.<sup>115</sup> Their gender and their age meant these women faced a particularly difficult negotiation of the Victorian and the interwar, the feminine and the ungendered, and the objective and subjective, in their engagement with objects from the past. Scottishness or Highlandness did not offer an easy sense of self to them any more than any other category of their identity.

Grant's collection and museum undoubtedly formed an enormous part of her sense of self and emotional inner life, acting as a way of collapsing some of the contradictions she faced, and so can be productively studied in this regard. Although it was a scholarly collection with a public purpose, it simultaneously functioned as a personal material assemblage for Grant and her friends. The dual nature of the collection, both official and personal, public and private, also reveals the ways in which it could facilitate contradictory impulses within the selfhood of women of a certain age and class in the interwar period. Collecting and displaying objects

<sup>112</sup> Gordon, however, sees women's collecting (again, North American) as less instrumental and more purely focused on an aesthetic, intimate approach to “deep play.” Gordon, *Saturated World*; 29–34, 197–201.

<sup>113</sup> Hector Rodriguez, “The Playful and the Serious: An Approximation to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*,” *Game Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006), <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/rodrigues>.

<sup>114</sup> Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 283.

<sup>115</sup> See the contributions in Sophie Aymes-Stokes and Laurent Mellet, eds., *In and Out: Eccentricity in Britain* (Newcastle, 2012).

allowed Grant, as it did others like her, to develop both playful and caring aspects of her personality, in a way that showed an ambiguous relationship with modern femininity. Moreover, this personal development went even further than Light's "conservative modernity"<sup>116</sup> in allowing women to adhere to a reticent emotional style while also living a richly emotional life through their objects. Despite the idea that the twentieth century saw a more ironic approach to dreams and fantasy, rejecting the earnestness of Victorian subjectivity, Grant shows that earnestness and sincerity remained important, especially among those who were middle-aged by the 1930s.<sup>117</sup> While Grant's make-believe might be self-aware, it was also important for her to suspend disbelief and take it seriously, following the rules of historical authenticity; that was what made it fun. This interplay between play and care, and between irony and sincerity, continues to be a key part of the attraction of living history and reenactment, which also rely on these activities to forge strong communities of emotional practice.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 10.

<sup>117</sup> Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment," Stearns, *American Cool*.

<sup>118</sup> Vartiainen, "Imaginary World."