

Foreword

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When I was a little boy the Garden of the Hesperides, Hy Brasil and the Hebrides had a curious oneness in my mind. Two of these places are mythical; the Hebrides are real, but they reach into a legendary past and the limbo of my own mind and so, the western isles, the Outer Hebrides, however romantic they may have been in their beginnings in me, became a country which had to be trodden. The people were an entity to me as well, as extraordinary amalgam of hard-bitten practicality and high spiritual indifference to commercial prosperity and I knew their folklore. There was also a regard for the creatures of land and sea, completely unsentimental, and yet accepting an identity with the whole environment which reminded me of the early Columban Christian association of people with those other denizens of land and sea. The Outer Hebridean gathered a store of young gannets for winter food and killed seals for sea boots and oil but he did not kill for fun.

But that was yesterday and far beyond, into a prehistory when Pytheas circumnavigated the islands of Northern Britain, when some Mediterranean folk had already raised the Callernish Circle of great stones and set the fact of human occupation. Yesterday when we were very young, the natural resources of land and sea were, with the six-rowed bere, the bread grain, the staff of life, but history had upset any golden age of our imagination. The Vikings had been and some had stayed, adopting the Gaelic as their tongue but making over two-thirds of the place names Scandinavian. Gael and Mediterranean were so much themselves that the physical type persists today almost as a genetic segregate; the first question to a midwife was often as to whether the baby was a 'Spaneach' or not. The folk had culturally become one and the wild resources of land and sea supported them. Even North Rona, when visited by Martin Martin in the 17th century, had its 30 people, paying their proper respect to the environment in their own religious way. But the 18th century was an era of development—the sacred word which we are even now scarcely questioning—though I truly believe this Symposium is asking the question in a new humility and desire for co-operation with nature.

In the 18th century there came the new exotic, the introduced species into the biota of the Hebrides, which seemed a blessing but became a hidden curse, the potato. Its arrival allowed an increase of the human population to an inordinate size. Emigration was traumatic in its effect on folk and land. The mainland Blackface sheep had also come and are still with us, the less responsible effects of its husbandry still apparent in overburning of heather and moor grass and depleted populations of moorland birds. Here then, was a significant change which was accompanied by what are called the Clearances, but when using that emotive expression it is well to remember the Enclosures in England, which enlarged the urban populations and removed the peasantry with equal suffering and even greater social hardship, producing the 'working classes' for the Industrial Revolution. 'The sins of the fathers' are still with industrial Britain.

The Outer Hebrides are in better sort because they are farther away and they have greater natural resources near them in the sea. What is more, the shell-sandy *machair* which stretches down the west side of the islands is a resource of soil which the Highland mainland generally lacks. The *machair* is an uplifting human environment in June for all who come. Also the seabird colonies have been a natural resource of great value which must have lessened the horrors of the sudden appearance of potato blight which brought famine in places like Skye. Fishing persisted as a way of life until the 20th century and the sense of community endured. Is fishing to persist or is the plague on the planet of an ever growing human population going to act once more without restraint?

'Government' from outside the Hebrides has a poor name, which art is only now being applied with some imagination. The Risings of 1715 and 1745 brought about an alien bureaucratic administration which did not study local conditions and customs at all, a state of affairs which continued until the mid-20th century, when the Crofters Commission and the Highlands and Islands Development Board were formed for the whole area, mainland and island. These bodies have given a feeling of hope above the relief of the legal safeguards of tenure which the Land Court of the later 19th century had given, following the Napier Commission. At present, the Outer Hebrides are influenced from many official angles and not least from that of administration of natural resources, knowledge of which has grown to such an extent that this Symposium can be called with the sure feeling that conservation will be a continuing policy in government.

Conservation applied to care through wise use, is a word which originated in America in the first years of this century. It came into the open at the White House Conference in 1908. Great Britain was remarkably unheeding, although so devoted, uncritically, to the protection of wild animals. The basic necessity of maintaining an ecologically complete habitat seems scarcely to have been comprehended. Nor has it yet in so many walks of life. So, despite the Nature Conservancy and the Nature Conservancy Council, the National Parks Commission, the National Trust and numerous private bodies, the efficacious adoption of a national policy of conservation is difficult. But the Hebridean hates waste as a sin. His or her wealth of cultural background does not waste wildlife either. The wild swans are of Finoula's kindred in a Celtic past and would not be killed, nor are they now.

The Outer Hebrides by their position and environmental limitations present a fairly simple ecological system for study, which should attract the scholar. For myself I can claim no such high falutin' reasons. I just loved the place and the people, as much for the 'backwardness' of everything as for the surging beauty of land and sea and of wildlife. It took time to see that if one had any intellectual notions, they must be ordered and applied. Not being a very good scientist, nor an historian nor archaeologist, but one extremely conscious of the necessity of all of these disciplines, I became an almost 18th-century style of dilettante, interested in so many things. In such fashion was the West Highland Survey conceived in the late 1930s, to become a small working group in 1944, thanks to the Development Commission. It would do little to solve problems, but it would delve and record in the spirit of science and I realized that any ultimate value might be historical. It is called 'An Essay in Human Ecology' in the sub-title, but that sub-science has now advanced so far that this early attempt may be of little more than historical significance. The foundations of the Survey were soil, sea and natural resources on which the human population was finally dependent. The human

population was as near an indigenous fauna as any group in Britain and their social relations had evolved largely out of the environment. The sectarianism in Christian religion had not nearly the deep cleavages that had been conjectured at the outset. Lewis may be a law unto itself in many things but the fact remains that Outer Hebrideans have more in common through the dictates of their environment. Administrative exigencies push the youth of Catholic Barra and South Uist to the secondary school of the Nicholson Institute in Stornoway, an unhappy necessity, but I believe the results are less grievous than might have been feared.

The Outer Hebrides as a human habitat must of necessity impose a numerical limit of carrying capacity. The potato momentarily lifted that limit, but still greater suffering was to ensue. Crofts cannot be divided and subdivided *ad infinitum* and a population measured by the level of chromium plate on motorcar bumpers and radio sets is unreal. The satisfactions of Hebridean life have been from within. The black house of the past had many comforts the concrete white house does not have, though the introduced scourge of tuberculosis did much to make the change inevitable. We shall have change and it is our urgent duty to meet it creatively with the help of a free science that must not be monitored but recorded.

Island life, as I know, needs special gifts which the environment can develop. One is living near the edge so that, like the Eskimo, a multiplicity of physical possessions can be an embarrassment. Richness can accumulate in social achievement. Language as a means of communication, the arts of music and poetry making, are part of the cultural heritage which radio and sound recording can enrich—and they can impoverish. Which is it to be? Science is discovery and impersonal. Technology is personal and science-using. They *can* achieve a harmony. This Symposium is an offering humbly tendered, I believe.

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