

Chapter Two

FEACHT AND SLOGED

In Lewis until “the beginning of the Christian era (the inhabitants) were Picts.” An “Ulster hero Donald Cearnach (was) levying toll in ‘the Territories of Leodus’ (Lewis) about 1 A.D.”¹ Four hundred years later, “the Colomaban missionaries” arrived. In with the information we have from this period there is an interesting aside on

the dues paid by the ancient Scots when they came from Ireland to Dalriada . . . laid down at a gathering held at Drumceatt in Ireland in 575. These . . . men of Dalriada were to pay ‘Their *fecht* and their *sloged* with the men of Erin always . . . their *cain* and their *cobach* with the men of Alban . . . their sea-gathering with the men of Alban, but all beyond that with the men of Erin.²

Remnants of “the dues paid by the ancient Scots” feature in the living conditions of Lewis people even into the 20th century by all accounts. The people continued to supply the landowners and their agents with crops, grains and other produce the which derivatives included poitín. And further the people supplied to their masters

feacht, or internal military service, and *sluggad*, or external military service . . . (plus) the old Gàidhlig services *cain* or *can*, a payment of a fixed amount of the produce of the land; and of *coigny*, *conveth*, *waytinga*, *soryn* or *cuddiche*, a specified amount of entertainment (which) had to be given to the overlord when he visited his vassals . . . *Cuddiche* survived in the Western Isles till the eighteenth century.³

¹ . . . according to an Irish manuscript of 1150 A.D.”

² my own italics here 23 A.O. Anderson, Early Sources of Scottish History, Vol 1., p84; cited by I F Grant’ in his Economic History of Scotland

³ p23 ibid A.O. Anderson, Early Sources of Scottish History, Vol 1., p84; cited by I F Grant’ in his Economic History of Scotland

Growing up on the streets of Glasgow we heard about *bonné feachters* (pronounced '*fechter*'), running the French and Gàidhlig together. I heard this in my own home. The fellow who traded punch for punch was known as a good '*sluggar*'. Everybody admired the guy who '*sluggad/sloged*' it out to the bitter end; we pronounced it in one syllable, 'slugd'. It was not from my Lewis grandmother I heard the terms used but my maternal grandfather who came from the Vale of Leven and was a daicint fechter himself. He could mix in with a bit of jujitsu that he picked up from Japanese shipyard workers at the end of the 1st World War. He boxed around the booths in his teens and showed us boys how to defend against straight jabs to the chin and where the pressure points were on the sides of the head: Don't press too long Jimmy, ye might kill him.

We grew up with the terms 'fechting' and 'slugger' in our vocabulary, not only from the streets in Govan but from American gangster movies where we read about 'good sluggers' in the old '10 centers' and 'Yankee' comics. Of course we learned not to use everyday language in official circles. Children were ridiculed or punished in the classroom. It was villified as bad, as slang, as inferior; not a proper language at all, just a dialect, a vernacular: unfit for official purposes. If we said 'feacht' instead of 'fight' we would have been looked at sternly, or given a row. We assumed ours was a weird corruption of the proper word, 'fight'. Weans who admitted their guilt by saying 'Aye' instead of 'Yes' received additional terms of detention. If I used these terms in my own home my mother would rebuke me, and if I cited her own father in my defence, she shook her head and told me her father couldn't speak properly.

The 'clan' service of '*Sluggad*' obtained by the Honourable Landowning Aristocracy into the 19th century was fulfilled by 'external military service' rendered in locations such as the Indian Subcontinent. A symbolic form of "*cuddiche*, a specified amount of entertainment" might be said to have survived at present, into the 21st century. I am not thinking here of the Duke of Athol and his private

army, the rights to which Disney-Pixar may one day seek in exchange for a substantial sum of dough. I refer to the so-called Highland regiments, honouring the Seaforths and so on.

What does ‘honouring the Seaforths’ actually mean? Is this recognition of the thousands of Lewismen who were killed in the fulfilment of ‘clan’ service, engaged on ‘*Sluggad*’? Is that kind of stuff responsible for the foolish and humiliating sentimentality that surrounds the uniform trappings of Empire, the tartan furnishings and the kilted fittings; that foolish sentimentality in regard to the Highland regiments and all their lickspittle obeisance to the upper classes of the British State, their obsequious deference to the monarchy and aristocracy. Imagine being in the middle of New York city and seeing that bunch of fucking imbecilic numbskulls marching down Broadway - I wouldn't know where to look. My Lewis ancestors were part of that too, but what choice did they have? It was either that or the kelping which was so horrendous, apparently, that many a young man opted to feacht to the death on behalf of the British ruling class.

‘*Cuddiche*’ also survives, at least in remnant form; the entertainment nowadays, known in sport as the Highland Games and in the arts as the Mòd, or “The Royal National Mòd (as) organised by An Comunn Gàidhealach [The Highland Association] which was founded in Oban in 1891 and has HM The Queen as its Patron.”⁴ This is provided by a few local people and others, presided over by the Clan Chieftains, whether hereditary or in representational form by the new owners of the land-property.

Absentee Landowners are encouraged to visit Scotshires for these splendid occasions and honour local residents with their presence. They preside over the local Highland Games. For such events symbols of the right to title are encouraged. Full Highland regalia is obligatory. Overseas celebrities and dignitaries are honoured to take part. They

⁴ <https://www.ancomunn.co.uk/nationalmod>

⁵ Lewis Grassie Gibbon used this term to annoy people. It worked.

have conferred upon them titles such as 'Honorary Highland Overlord' 'Clan Helper to the King' 'Great Chieftain of East Dalriada.' Males are requested not to shave for six months prior to the visit, offering the appearance of 'Celticness'. They take lessons in Celtic deportment that they might seat themselves in typical fashion. Lackey dignitaries walk in due deference precisely one yard to the rear. These upper forms of person enjoy a splendid evening's 'Coodicky' as they call it, provided by their vassalian workforce. Clan chieftains and vouchsafed dignitaries "sit themsel' doon," elbows resting on the knobbled shepherd's crook balanced sturdily between their knobbled knees, murmuring appreciatively, perhaps roaring in merriment. Scottish celebrity heroes of stage, screen and sound studio play their part in these wonderful occasions. When Sir Billy Connolly owned his estate in Strathdon, Aberdeenshire, "just 16 miles from Balmoral" he held

a lavish celebration in honour of his 60th year at (his) stately Highland home . . . Guests - including Star Wars actor Ewan McGregor and American comics Robin Williams and Steve Martin (enjoyed) a week of revelry in the 15-bedroomed Candacraig House . . . culminating in the Lonach Highland Games where Connolly revels in the role of laird. The Prince of Wales, who along with Wills and Harry has popped in for dinner on several occasions, is also expected to make an appearance with Camilla . . . Each year, as the culmination of a week of house parties, the comedian once famed for his outlandish satin costumes and banjo playing, dons Highland dress to hold court at Candacraig as the March of the Clansmen, led by Major Sir Hamish Forbes, upholds its ancient right to tramp - not in his big banana boots - through the glens to the games, halting at the five "big hooses" on their way for a dram. ⁶ (The Herald 17/8/2002)

⁶ <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/11954396.stars-say-cheers-to-the-laird-of-comedy-profile-billy-connolly-from-a-tormented-childhood-through-alcoholism-and-depression-the-entertainer-has-become-a-huge-star-who-will-today-celebrate-his-birthday-with-the-glitterati-in-his-native-scotland-says/>

Later the dignitaries return to the privacy of their own castle, and raise the drawbridge. The 'vassals' return to wherever vassals return, still slugging away, still looking for a good clean feacht, may it please yer majesty.

Where was I?

O yes, tradition, 'Scottishness'.