John Stuart to Thomas Pennant, on the economy of Skye

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M^r. Stuart. Feb. 1. 1774

Skie

- —owners 1.
- —Tacksmen 1.
- —Farm Dikes 3.
- —Manure, Plough 5.
- —Grain Harvest 6.7.
- —Drying Graddan 8.11.
- —Flax 13.
- —Cattle 14.23.
- —[damage] 25.
- —[damage] 27.28
- —[damage] 29.
- —[damage] 32.
- —[damage] 34.
- —[damage] 37.
- —[damage] 39.
- —[damage] 40.

1

The present annual Rent of Sky^x 1 7000£ — belonging all to MacLeod and Sir Alexander Mac Donald, excepting a small property of Mac-Innon valued at 200 £, and of MacLeod of Raarsay's rented at 100 £ p^r. ann ———

The lands in this island partly possessed by small tenants, and partly in the hands of Gentlemen. Tacksmen; have large extensive farms — In MacDonald's country, which lies all on the North coast and is divided into three great districts called Trotternish, Strath and Slate, there will be about 40 such Tacksmen, besides small tenants ———

It is only in later times that any written tacks or leases have been given — Formerly there was but a verbal promise made before witnesses, attended with the ceremony of delivering at the same time a little straw into the Tacksman's hands — There were hardly any instances however of their being obliged to asset or remove from the possessions. — Many of them considered themselves as the descendents and friends of the great family on whom they depended, and held their farms at an easy rent from father to son by a kind of ? or imaginary right called by the Highlanders duchas,^x 2 which as long as any traces of the spirit of Chieftainship remained, was held sacred and inviolable — Several of

them likewise held their possessions by wadset, a form of tenure by which the tenant lodges so much money in the hands of the Proprietor, the interest of which, so long as the Capital remains unpaid, is considered as an equivalent in part or whole, to the rent of his farm —

The farms commonly Rounded with dikes made of earth or soda, the repairing of which takes up a great part of their labour, during summer days —

But there are hardly any head-dikes to be seen, in order to separate their hill-grass from the low-grounds, though they stand much in need of them —

Sea tangle the most common manure for bear — Little kelp made upon the coast of this island — From what is manufactured of it commonly 2 £ Sterl. of clear profit p$^{r.}$ tun — Reckoned more beneficial however to use it as a manure.

Small tenants, though their horses are idle, chuse rather to delve their ground with the crooked spade$^{x\ 3}$ to till it with the plough — Crop produced in this way observed to be better, — but the arable ground from this circumstance wearing often an irregular and disagreeable aspect; as they are not at pains to delve or sow at all the worst and most barren spots, especially at the end of the different plots ——— Computed that eight men will delve as much ground in a day with the crooked spade as a plough is able to till ———

Harrows commonly tyed to the horses tails — In wet ground, or where horses cannot harrow properly men and women are employed in breaking the ground with a block of wood having fine teeth and a long handle; which they call a raachgan ———

Small black oats and potatoes the principal crops — The little bear that is [damage] sown very thin — The common return of oats three or four-fold, of bear from eight to sixteen ———

The bear when ripe always pulled by the root and the straw preserved for thatching the houses, after cutting off the grain-end with a hook

— The corns shorn as high as possible as the only ^object is to ~~collect the~~ collect the grain — The stubble if there is not enough of bear-straw for thatching pulled likewise for his purpose by the root ———

Corn as soon as it is cut down made unto small round heaps$^{x\ 4}$ of any indetermined number of sheaves, which are thatched directly with stubble pulled for that purpose, as they cannot depend a moment upon the weather — Afterwards, if there is a fair hour these heaps are taken down now and then in order to give them air, and new ones made up, which are thatched in the same way.

— By reason of the high and penetrating winds so common here, the corn soon dries in this way and is then carried into the barnyards, where it is laid up in stacks ———

If they can, they shear their corns only when dry. If they are obliged however, to cut them down wet, they [damage] the single sheaves$^{x\ 5}$ for some time standing on [damage] till they are tolerably dry, and then make round heaps of them.

When they want to convert the corn into meal, if it is not so dry as to burn readily, it is laid for a little upon a kiln with a slow fire — When taken off, it is laid together in a heap [damage] open fields, if it is a fair day [] on the floor of the kiln in bad weather. — Two women then take each of them constantly a handful from this heap, ^and when the have set fire to it, lay it aside into a separate heap with [damage] stick.$^{x\ 6}$ The grain is then ——— ——— ——— set into larger straw baskets, where two women take hold of one another's arms, and trample upon it for some time with their naked feet till the husks are in a great measure separated from it, singing merrily together Galic Chorus songs all the while. Afterwards, when it is sufficiently winnowed, the same two women carry it away to the house, and grind it together upon the quern$^{x\ 7}$ or hand miln, singing then likewise Galic songs

—The meal; which is of a dark grey colour, is baked into thick round cakes, which are set starting by the side of a stone near live coals in order to harden — As by thus burning the corn the seed itself is in reality not nearly so much deprived of it's natural juices as in the common method of kiln-drying elsewhere, the bread it is said, is found by experience to be much lighter and more easily digested than the white oat-bread used in other parts. It does not keep fresh for any time. It is baked therefore every day and sometimes twice a day. It is called graddan[x8] bread from the quickness and expedition with which it is prepared. There have been many instances of [damage] hungry stranger coming into a house without the least meal in it at the time or any grain in the barn, and yet in a few hours he has had a plentiful repast from the corn which when he came was seen growing in the fields.

As the practice of burning the Corn in Sky and some of the other W. isles is so destructive to the provender which might otherwise be p[damage]ed for the sake of the cattle, it is now much discouraged by all the Proprietors, and in the course of a few years. It is a practice however, without doubt, of very remote antiquity:— One would be almost tempted to think that the ancient Romans, or at least their famed progenitors, had precisely the same rule [damage]:

(See Virgil's description in the first [damage] of the process used for converting the corn of [damage] into meal. [damage]&c.)[2]

Hardly any lintseed sown especially by the poorer tenants, excepting a dwarf degenerate species, which does not grow above six inches high and the seed of which had been preserved by the islanders time out of mind. When pulled it is [damage] steept in water as in other parts. It is tyed together in [damage] parcels, which are hung up in the house near the fire. When these parcels are sufficiently dry they are well beaten with a wooden [damage]; and instead of being switched are then forced frequently through a wooden instrument shaped somewhat like a Barber's toupee-tongs which they [damage]-tongs —

The best and richest soil in Sky is at Mugestot. Without any manure it is [damage] to yield crops so rank that [damage] greatest ^danger lies in their being lost [damage] harvest by lodging —

Little meadow-ground in this island — Hardly any hay preserved, except at Talisker and Mugestot ———

The principal dependence of the people of Sky is upon their black cattle, and they are allowed to [damage] in the Highlands. This indeed is the staple commodity for in such nature seems principally to have intended their [damage] many parts [damage] Esteemed to be good, and from abundance of natural manures and other circumstances there are all the advantages that could be wished for in order to improve [damage] highest pitch of perfection, yet the climate is such, particularly at the harvest, as must ever render the returns of the farmer uncertain —

The rearing of good black Cattle is the principal object, which all the inhabitants of Sky propose to themselves, when in company together it is often the great topick of [damage]. They are very studious to furnish themselves, with a good kind of [damage] and to improve the breed by getting the best and most [damage] bulls. — Particular care taken in rearing the calves and more or less hardy, and proportioning the sizes of the cattle to the nature of the farm — After the first five or six days [damage] commonly allowed to suck only twice a day; but such as are [damage] observed to thrive much better by being allowed constantly to follow [damage] mother than though they had the [damage] quantity of milk given [damage] periods — Allowed to suck more plentifully [damage] than in the morning [damage] too great [damage] than is apt to make them sleepy and indolent all the day [damage] sucking some water given [damage] them to drink as the milk itself is thought to create a drought —

During the heat of summer particular pains taken to keep [damage] constant motion in order to [damage] their indulging [damage] indolent or lazy dispositions — Only one calf [damage] by [damage] of such cows as are [damage]nded for yielding milk — Allowed in this case to suck but one of [damage] in the morning, and the other in the evening, as sucking is much severer upon the [damage] than milking — Rearing [damage] the great object — In Sky therefore and all the other Cattle country in the Highlands, seldom are butter or cheese made but what is barely sufficient for serving the several families — The cattle of this island [damage] as they are in the habit of yielding a great quantity of milk during summer and none at all in winter [damage] observed to better for [damage] and serving the purposes of the butcher, than for making any other returns ———

Particular care taken [damage] during winter, — brought [damage] to the best pasture along with the milk-cows, or to a certain warm spot by themselves — Attention likewise paid to cows [damage]

Only one spot of ground inclosed with a high dike in [damage] out as a fold for [damage] black Cattle during all summer — Kept in the [damage] higher grounds, in order to pasture as much as possible [damage] part of the low ground for winter pasture — This the only provision [damage] for their cattle against the [damage] of this season — [damage]ures commonly housed then and no provender preserved for them —

The [damage] when accessible, proves the greatest relief to black Cattle during severe storms in winter and spring.

As [damage] the food they find there is of a laxative nature it prevents that costiveness which from the [damage] quantity of their [damage] at that time [damage] be so liable to, and [damage] their appetite for digesting any other coarse food they are able to gather — Though at a distance and [damage] of the sea, it is pretty [damage] by a kind of [damage] the poor creatures of [damage] repair all regularly every day to the shore at [damage] ———

Fish-oil an established remedy for costiveness, which the cattle happen to be supplied with — This disorder, when excessive, apt to end in a dissantery called by the natives dù[damage]g[damage]r i.e. the black disease, perhaps from the greenish colour, which the fæces are then observed to have ———

The greatest and most glaring deficiency in the management of the Rearing of black Cattle in Sky lies in [damage] of no kind of provision against the precarities of spring and winter notwithstanding that from this very circumstance they often lose a third of their whole stock —

Though they had plenty of provender it would perhaps be improper to house their cattle or make them any other than a hardy breed, fit for travelling at a distance to markets, and for fattening readily when brought to richer pastures in the South — But surely, were they to give [damage] burning their corns, and properly encouraged by the Proprietors to enclose their several farms with good stone fences so as to enable them to raise turnips and sow grasses, they might [damage] safety a greater number of cattle than they do at present, raise those of a ^better breed; and prevent any danger of [damage] either actually starved or brought very low in a bad winter or spring — If either natural or sowed grasses were preserved early so as to be fit for cutting down about the middle or end of [damage], the Crop would be seldom lost through the inclemency of the weather ———

Another capital defect in the management of the Rearers of black Cattle in Sky, is the over-stocking their several farms — Summer grass in this island for a much greater number of cattle than can be kept alive in winter and spring — Even in summer however sometimes overstock as the cattle from all the [damage] islands of [damage] Harris Uist &c. are commonly brought up by the Sky Drovers, and remain after as a super-cargo on their grounds ———

The horses small, but durable and hardy — The common price of each, 3 or 4 £ [damage] Very few exported — Never fed or housed even in time of labour — At evening, when the work of the day is over, the two fore-feet of each pair of them commonly tyed together with a rope made of heather to prevent their getting off at a distance from Masters who reward their services with so much cruelty —

Not much employed in labour at any other time, and well fed in summer ———

The number of goats and ^small sheep reared on each farm only sufficient for serving the purposes of the family — All of them in this island at the entire disposal of the women—

A number of servants employed by each Tacksman in Sky, — commonly a principal servant or Overseer, 3 or 4 other menservants, two herds, two dairy maids, 2 or 3 maid-servants, and 2 or 3 old women for burning and grinding the corn and baking the bread — The common wages of men-servants 30 or 40 sh. p$^{r.}$ ann with shoes; of maid-servants 6 or 8 marks with shoes and liberty to spin some clothes to the [damage] — Indulged besides however sometimes in weaning a calf or two or three sheep along with the common stock—

The food of servants and the lower class of people very poor — Only two meals each day, one at eleven in the forenoon and the other at 7 or 8 in the afternoon—

One dairy-maid, and one herd reckoned necessary for taking care of every two dozen ~~of every two dozen~~ of milk-cows — They have a privilege of drinking always some of the milk at the fold; and the stranger never passes by without having some of it offered to him —

When a Tacksman has a greater farm than he can well manage himself, he often sets part of it to a bowman,[x 9] who takes care of his stock of cattle upon it, and obliges himself to give him about 4 stone of cheese & 2 stone of butter for each couple of milk-cows during every year he is pleased to employ him — If there is any arable ground, he is provided in horses and a plough for tilling it, and seed for sowing it; and his labour is rewarded by a [damage] of the produce and by grass for two or three milk-cows along with the rest ———

Publick roads much needed in Sky — For want of them no carts or sledges hitherto used there —

The houses of the common tenants all with a roof, thatched with straw which is kept firmly on by cross ropes to the lower extremity of which are suspended a number of stones in order to make constant pressure — The foundation, for the sake of shelter, often sunk much under ground — The walls commonly of stone very thick lined in the middle with earth in order to prevent the cold Northern blasts from penetrating through them—

An earthen porch built often at the door ———

The people in Sky [damage] the late ferment occasioned by augmenting their rents to all appearance extremely happy — fond of society and living in peace and friendship together — of an open and chearful countenance — beyond conception kind and hospitable to strangers — fond of musick and dancing — till of late much attached to their Chief, whom they considered as the Guardian and Head of their several families —

There is no labour they go about but they join frequently in singing Galic Songs, the musick of which is well adapted to the particular species of work; and this practice is observed to have such a visible influence in raising and supporting their spirits and thereby expeding their labour, that care is commonly taken that the song shall not fail— At shearing in particular it is pleasant in a good day to hear at a distance perhaps 30 or 40 voices joining altogether in concert. When the song and work [damage] on to the Overseer's mind, he [damage] and then expresses his approbation by a loud inarticulate roar. When there is another company shearing within reach of his voice their Overseer seldom fails to give another roar in return, to raise an emulation and let him know that he thinks his own company behave equally well —

Almost all particularly the women, have a good musical ear and good voices, much improved no doubt by being in the habit of singing from infancy — They have likewise a good lively imagination, many of the best modern Galic songs having been composed in this island ———

Sky famous for Pipers ——— None in any part of the Highlands thought to be sufficiently qualified till they pass an affirmation with the Mac Cruimer or [damage] Piper [damage] the families of M^{c}Leod and M^{c}Donald those formerly held the office hereditary. The art and the emoluments descended from father to son. — There is at present a great number of p[damage]hts or bag-pipe airs, the most of which have been composed by their Ancestors, who are said to have greatly excelled them in that art — They own however, that if tradition can be depended upon, the bag-pipe[x 10] is [damage] instrument of the old [damage] the Highlanders, and that they borrowed it originally from the Danes. Formerly the harp was probably the only musical instrument known in these parts. Till about ^sixty years ago Mac-Leod and Mac-Donald kept Harpers in their families, as well as Pipers. A room is still pointed out in the old ruinous castle of Dun-tuilm which is called seomar-nan-clèrsaireag i.e the room of the Harpers ———

This island long ago famous for second sighted people — and there are some in it who still pretend to this wonderful facility. But they are always persons of the weakest intellect, and of a vapourish imagination. Their imposition without doubt is not always designed. They are sometimes first deluded themselves into a belief of the reality of their pretended visions; and they too easily delude their superstitious brethren. But with the more sensible part their vain predictions are [damage] justly contemned—

No wood in Sky, except a little at Kyl-arrain and in Slate — Timber imported every year from the main land with considerable trouble and expence — In places that are tolerably sheltered plantations would certainly thrive. But any

tryals that have already been made in places much exposed to the Northern blast have not answered expectations ———

A narrow seam of Coals seen in the middle of immense whin rocks at Portree,[x 11] and in one or two other places in this island — but not worth the labour [damage] of working ———

More petrifactions found upon the coast than in any other of the W. isles, as Belemnites Cornu Ammonis; immense rocks of limestone full of petrifyed shells &c. —

White marble in Strath, black in Torrin ———

Beautiful rock-marl in great abundance in Strath — evidently formed from lime-stone — The rock appearing firm and solid in some parts above, in the mixture retaining it's light blue colour and a little of it's hardness but really formed into a marl, and below the marl quite soft and a fine white colour ———

Elf-shot arrows frequently found here ———

Many druidical Circles to be seen in different parts of Sky — the stones of which they consist low and small — Circles commonly but 13 or 14 feet in diam[r] — Called by the natives tighe-nan-driuneach i.e. the houses of the Druids.

Some very large Cairns[x12] are to be seen in different parts. In the middle of such as have been taken down for the sake of the stone in building dikes, small earthen cairns with some ashes in them have been found ———

In Raarsay and in Sky there are some flat stones of about ^4 or five feet in diameter, which were probably once the altars of one of the druidical divinities — The superstitious, attached to the customs of their ancestors, still pour at certain times a libation of milk upon them. They are called clachan-a'-Ghruagaich i.e. the stones of the Gruagach. A particular account of the common belief of the islanders with regard to this superior Being is given by ***Martin***. ———

Killin Feb[y·] 1. 1774 —

Dear Sir

I was favoured with yours of Jan[y·] 15[th] yesterday morning, inclosing *a specimen of your Tour* with which I am much pleased — It gave me no small pain however to find that the remarks relative to Iona were too late — All I can say is that though a Highlander [damage] not surely lay the smallest claim to the "Second sight," otherwise my desire of being of [damage]le service to you in my power [damage] prevented any of my letters from being as far distanced, though part of my most necessary business in other respects should be allowed to stand — I now suspect however that my first letter must have loitered some days betwixt this and Crieff, as I was obliged to send it by an uncertain hand — I send you inclosed part of the remarks on Sky, which I would fain hope may come to your h[damage] in due time — The remaining part is sent you [damage] Cover by the same Post — After leaving this island excepting some names of places, there will I think be but few new observations of any consequence that I can communicate unto you — Achalader and my father are in health and much at your service.

I remain
Dear Sir
[damage] great sincerity
Your most humble Serv[t.]

John Stuart

Thomas Pennant Esq[r.]

Downing

Flintshire

S. Britain—

Editorial Notes

[1] This appears to be a contents page to Stuart's manuscript on Skye, written in Pennant's hand.

[2] Possibly a reference to *'Moretum'*, a Latin poem attributed to Virgil which depicts the use of a quern.

Authorial Notes

[1] x It's Galic name Eilean Sgitheanach

[2] From dùthaich a [damage] country

[3] This kind of spade, which is almost the only one used in Sk ~~[damage]~~ ie called in Galic cas-chrom i.e. the spade with the crooked shank or handle ———

[4] x These round heaps are called by the natives mulains—

[5] Single sheaves sat up in this way, called gabhair i.e. goats, from some resemblance they are thought to bear to these animals ———

[6] x This stick they call maig-araiguin from the nature of it's office ———

[7] x The quern is in Galic called bra'—

[8] x From grad quick or expeditious.

[9] x Called in the Gal. lang. Aireach.

[10] In Galic Piob.—

[11] Port-righ i.e. The Kings harbour —

[12] heaps