‘EVERY TIMBER IN THE FOREST FOR MACRAE’S HOUSE’: CREEL HOUSES IN THE HIGHLANDS

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The recording of vernacular architecture and the specialist documentation of buildings have extended to the study of buildings, people and social organisation in relation to environment – what we might now call the ‘ecology of buildings’. This may be seen as part of a pluralism of approach that has come to characterise material culture studies, an approach which identifies shared interests in the exploration of our physical and social worlds and may look to different theoretical and methodological approaches to support research. ‘Material culture’ tends to draw on methodologies and evidence of different disciplines, and a multidisciplinarity or cross-disciplinarity informs and inspires the material culture genre, enlarges its zone of function and relevance and adds to scholarly rigour. Professor Sandy Fenton essentially marked out this zone and used the conceptual label of ‘ethnology’ to describe a mix of social, economic and cultural history, based on language, locality and region and an integrity supplied by the fresh evaluation of sources in museum and material culture studies.¹

As ideas about settlement have evolved, the documentation of buildings and settlement research have tended to coalesce to mutual advantage under the influence of scholarly drivers such as the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group. The extent of research into vernacular buildings throughout the country since the founding of SVBWG in 1972 has added new dimensions and detail. We recognise more nuanced versions of settlements as evolving entities, demonstrating change and diversity as opposed to a fixity, and exploring beyond the ‘big idea’ that might account for everything that had been part of the scholarly inheritance of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The interpretation of
buildings and landscape, for example, might be narrowly based on the model of a farming township or baile or on concepts of dispersed versus nucleated settlements, without reaching further to explore environmental issues or how people perceived their own circumstances or their landscape in the past.

This short essay acknowledges the enriching of the debate and moves to further scrutiny of the construction and management of living space as both physical and social phenomena. It focuses however on the architecture and material culture that is no longer there – the ‘creel houses’ of Highland history, whose absence calls for some sort of ‘materialisation’ and the proposal of a paradox that such unstable and evanescent evidence may be more significant than is inferred from past study. Written evidence describes houses of wattle, referred to in Anglo-Scots as ‘creel houses’ or ‘basket houses’, from which it is reasonably clear that an inner wall of stakes and wattle, an outer wall of turf and a thatched roof, hip-ended and supported on couples, are being described. The evidence of language – as in our title translating Gach fiodh sa’ choill’ gu Tigh Mhic Rath, from the lines of a traditional Gaelic song (see page 38) – materialises the creel house in a cultural landscape. By drawing together evidence from different discourses, the paradox is sustained by suggesting that the absence of material has ‘agency’, in that it enlists language and literature for its interpretation by giving more recognition to

Figure 1. Wattle and turf dwelling house in Strathmore, 1776. (Reproduced from: Revd Charles Cordiner, Antiquities and Scenery of the North of Scotland, London, 1780, plate 19 ‘Dun Dornadilla’ (facing p.105)
cultural landscape. A more recent exercise has produced evidence in the soil of internal timber work or partitions. The Morlaggan Rural Settlement Group was formed in December 2009 to explore and excavate the group of former structures at High Morlaggan near Arrochar. Soil discoloration has been a matter for archaeology but a ‘modern’ historical site calls for pragmatic alliance with other disciplines such as history, literature, ethnology and language. Ambiguity and uncertainty characterise such findings and caution is called for in interpretation. A slight example throws up detail from a language context. Duncan Campbell’s description of shielings and animal husbandry in Upland Perthshire in the 1860s identified the circular folds for cattle, sheep and goats – what he termed crodhan – as circular and without necessarily any associated hut structures. His cautionary tale of recognition of these features seems aimed at the archaeologist:

[The Crò] was generally surrounded by a strong wall, but in bushy districts it was often fenced in by rough wicker-work, which when it disappeared, only left the circular floor to mark the place… The folds were in pairs, or sometimes in double pairs, because milking and cheese-making purposes required that calves, lambs and kids should be kept separate from their mothers. What are called ‘hut circles’ seem to me to be in many, but not perhaps in all cases, the floors of wicker-work folds, which were too near permanent abodes to be associated with regular shieling huts.

In 2001, Glasgow University’s ‘Rannoch Archaeological Project’ chose the so-called ‘medieval village’ (as marked on the current Ordnance Survey map) of Bunrannoch, at the south-eastern end of Loch Rannoch for exploration. Typically, there was clear evidence of multi-period settlement from approximately the Neolithic or the late second millennium BC. Two sites were chosen for excavation and these were of buildings described as ‘creel houses’, apparently more-or-less typical building types and domestic structures of the region. Though assumed to have been the remains of dwelling houses burnt down in reprisals following the last Jacobite Rising of 1745, detailed analysis of the site, including radio-carbon dating, pointed to these being structures of the early historic and medieval period. Taken with later (eighteenth-century) and documentary evidence, it has been suggested that Highland ‘creel houses’ in this district demonstrate the persistence of a fairly fixed building type for about a thousand years and, as far as can be currently suggested, dating back to an early-historical period of the second half of the first millennium. The evidence of structural posts (to carry a roof), wattle panels and stone and turf footings forming a long and relatively narrow building should not surprise us in a district of woodland evidenced

Figure 2. Gable end of a ‘creel house’ with cruck couple and ‘stake and rice’ or wattle walls. (Reproduced from: Sir George Steuart Mackenzie, A Treatise on the Diseases and Management of Sheep, Edinburgh, 1809, pp 90–94 and plate V)
by the ‘Black Wood of Rannoch’ and remains of the so-called ‘Caledonian Forest’.\textsuperscript{10} If this offers some early evidence, the same district gives us a list of the timber components of a creel house at Bunnrannoch in 1717. The local saw-miller listed the resources required in a letter to the laird of Atholl, as being ‘7 couples, 35 pan trees of birk, 20 jests of fir between sole trees and side wall, 2 trees to be forks for the gavels, 100 leads of wands to work the criels, 160 standards with as many cabers besides door checks and windows’.\textsuperscript{11}

Creel houses seem well embedded in the cultural landscape in sub-recent periods although they earn few plaudits in the contemporary literature. Unsurprisingly, conventional documentary evidence is sparse measured against documentary evidence for the development of more recent building types, whose adoption or evolution forms a response to change; for example, ‘agricultural improvement’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries included radical changes in building techniques whose results are uppermost in the Highland landscape today. The disappearance of creel houses was predicated also on changes to patterns of settlement. In the Highlands and Islands, the process was intensified by the course and consequences of the Jacobite Wars, the focus of Enlightenment views on society’s ‘improvement’ and fashionable disdain in the literature for what had preceded it. Government plans followed, aimed at realising economic value by encouraging sea fishing, the kelp industry and then sheep farming, most of which was incompatible with pre-existing patterns of settlement. The law of the land offered little or no support to the occupiers of the land and a process of ‘clearance’ began in the Highlands in the 1790s and continued with varying intensity until the 1870s. The materialisation of creel houses can contribute to the understanding and interpretation of a cultural landscape that was changed in this period, perhaps out of all recognition.

How people perceived their Highland landscape in the past is abundantly clear in Scottish Gaelic. Trees were a highly recognisable element in a Gaelic cosmology, a vital part of the natural order and their loss represented disruption of the social contract between ruler and ruled. This is a constant note in surviving panegyric verse from the medieval period and extends to allegory in praising the qualities and attributes of individuals. Notable examples are Sileas na Ceapaich’s elegy of 1721 for Alexander MacDonald of Glengarry whom she characterises as ‘choice of tallest oaks’, and an elegy of about 1685 for the laird of Applecross who is recalled as ‘the highest tree in the forest’.\textsuperscript{12} The symbolism of the natural order and well-wooded landscape received more recent formulation in Alexander MacDonald’s praise of the Mainland territories of Clanranald, \textit{Fàilte na Mòrthir}, of about 1750.\textsuperscript{13} A more ‘modern’ view of a balance and harmony between nature and the occupiers of the land is preserved in Duncan Bàn Macintyre’s ‘last farewell to the mountains’ of 1802, where he characterises the loss of woods and heather as an upsetting of the old harmony. He is more specific about cause and effect:

\begin{quote}
\textit{S a’ bheinn as beag a shaoil mi
Gun dèanadh ise caochladh,
On tha i nis fo chaoraibh.}
\end{quote}

[‘And the mountain, I little thought that it would be changed since it is now under sheep’]\textsuperscript{14}

The allegory of trees extended to different values accorded to different timbers, so that oak or yew were noble woods while alder or hazel were base woods, a comparison that could be applied metaphorically and satirically to people. A poetic riposte to Alexander MacDonald’s \textit{Fàilte na Mòrthir} from the Uist poet John MacCodrum overturned the fulsome representation of the Clanranald oakwoods:

\begin{quote}
\textit{S mairog a mhòl
A’ Mhòrthir sgnogach
Air son stoban caltainn.}
\end{quote}

[‘Alas for the one who praised the shrivelled Mainland for some sticks of hazel’]\textsuperscript{15}
This played to the understanding also that hazel was an unlucky timber. Other forbidden timbers were ivy and bird-cherry, as in the song from which our title is taken:

Gach sgolb ’s gach sgrath
Gu Tigh Mhic Ràth,
Gach fiodh sa ’choil’
Gu Tigh mhic Ràth,
Ach eadheann mu chrann ’s fiodhagach.
[‘Every peg and divot for MacRae’s House, every timber in the forest for MacRae’s House, excepting ivy on a tree and bird-cherry’]

A significant detail to emerge from accounts of the Highlands, particularly from the pens of travellers and visitors to the region, is that, apart from the larger masonry structures such as castles, housing was undifferentiated across a social spectrum. Samuel Johnson and James Boswell made reference to creel houses in 1773, and, in 1762, Bishop Forbes described the hospitality in a public house at Boleskine on Loch Ness:

We returned to our Creel House […] where we dined sumptuously upon Venison, a piece of Roe, dressed partly in Collops, with sauce, and partly on the Gridiron, a leg of fine Mutton, two good Pulllets, Flour Bread, good Claret, White Wine and Goose-berries after dinner; and the Landlady, a Forbes by her Father and a Fraser by her Husband, was extremely fond to see a Forbes in her Creel House, and though an old body, she sang like a nightingale and danced to her own music.

It might be a matter of surprise to visitors, or certainly a matter of comment, that the house of the local chieftain or tacksmen seemed indistinguishable from the other houses in a community. This point is made by Edward Burt in the early eighteenth century. In this respect, basket or wattled wall was not generically

\[Losg iad mo shabhal ’s mo bhàthaich,
’S chuir iad mo thaigh-clàir ’na lasair.
[‘They burnt my barn and my byre, and they put my wooden house to the flames’]\n
Figure 3. Romantically inclined interior of Lochaber house by R R McIan, 1851. The original McIan painting was sold at Sotheby’s (Gleneagles), 30 August 2000, and showed a wattled wall or partition behind the seated group. (Reproduced from: James Logan, Highlanders at Home, or Gaelic Gatherings, Glasgow, 1900)
of low status, as is inferred in our title. According to tradition, the principal residence of Mackenzie of Gairloch, the Taigh Dige, was a house of wattle construction. At Tom-an-t-Sabhail, Inverwick, Grant of Glenmoriston lived in a house of wattle and turf, described as tigh caoil. The daughter of Campbell of Cawdor had eloped with Grant of Glenmoriston, being the chieftain of lower status, and this prompted her father ultimately to build An Tur or ‘The Tower’, being a stone and lime building. Mary MacKellar, writing in 1889 on the ‘Traditions of Lochaber’, described ‘Lochiel’s castle of the ’45, burnt by the Duke of Cumberland [following the Battle of Culloden], was all of wattle, excepting the bit of wall where the fire-places were, and which still stands’. This special ‘monument’ was photographically recorded for the National Monuments Record in 2005 (fig.4) but invites more detailed study, particularly to work out the proportions and internal space of a once formidable creel house. Another nearby

Figure 4. View from the south-west of the massive freestanding fireplace and chimney at Achnacarry, by tradition ‘Lochiel’s castle of the ’45’ and possibly the surviving gable of a creel house. This may be the largest monument of its type in the cultural landscape and a silent symbol of the former status of the creel house and of the high regard for timber in the Gaelic tradition. (RCAHMS image SC1157356. © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk)

Cameron house was Erracht House which was described in the late eighteenth century as ‘creel and turfed on the outside’. John Ramsay of Ochteryre recalled a conversation with a Perthshire friend of his who was buying cattle in Morvern before 1745 and was invited to the laird’s creel house. Diverging attitudes between east and west seemed to make this more remarkable. A useful description of the dwelling of Cameron of Glendessary at Acharn, written in August 1843 by the Revd John Macleod, was included in the New Statistical Account:

He resided at Ach-a-charn, and occupied a house of very peculiar construction; formed of oak beams placed at regular distances, the intervening spaces being closely interwoven with wicker-work. The outside was wholly covered with heath, and the interior was divided into several apartments, and finished in a style of taste and elegance corresponding with the enlightened refinements of the occupants. Creel houses were then becoming old-fashioned, even when not condemned by the ‘improvers’. They came to be noticed by a more romantically inclined eye or by the antiquarian. MacDonnell of Glengarry, the aptly titled Alasdair Fiadhaich (‘Alexander the Fierce’), spent a few weeks every summer at Inverie on Loch Nevis. The main part of his house was of stone and lime but one wing was built in a traditional wattle style to his express orders, with couples of ‘Scotch fir’, a clay floor and infill of basketwork of hazel. The young artist, music-collector and antiquarian John Leyden commented on this in 1800: ‘MacDonell of Glengarry has constructed, on the side of Loch Nevis a little above Scothouse, a wicker house in the ancient manner, to serve as a hunting-box. The form of the house and the position of the rafters seem to be exactly imitated, and there is no ceiling but the roof’. In 1866, Sir Arthur Mitchell described wattle partitions plastered with clay and outside walls, though generally for sheds or byres, in Kintail, Glengarry, Glenmoriston and Lochaber.
The management of fodder for animals was critical in the over-moist climate and Atlantic zone of the West Coast and creel barns evidently served a special purpose. The naturalist James Robertson made a distinction in building technique in 1768:

Their barns and houses are built in the same manner as hath been described, only the former have no turf fastened on their outer side from the ground up to the eathing, so that the wind blows through all parts of the barn with freedom, and dries their corn. 27

Sir George Stuart Mackenzie’s ‘County Agricultural Report’ for Wester Ross also mentioned creel barns:

We find creel-barns everywhere erected. These are constructed partly of stone, with large apertures in the walls, which are filled up with wicker-work. Sometimes they are made entirely of wicker-work, except the roof, which is always close. 28

The barn beside the present main road at Kirkton, Balmacara, whose recent repair was grant-aided, recalls the creel barn type. It has louvre panels on the gables, and side panels of wattlework with hazel and heather. Other successors to the creel barn can still be seen in the Kintail district. In the textbooks, this is sometimes described as ‘stake and rice’, and the same term was used historically. 29 Houses at Letterfearn on the south side of Loch Duich, photographed by the Aberdeen photographer George Washington Wilson in the late nineteenth century, illustrate this technique and suggest that this was normal in the area. This seems to be confirmed by Alexander Carmichael, writing in his paper published in 1884 on Grazing and Agrestic Customs, added to the Crofters’ Commission Report at the special request of its Chairman, Lord Napier:

In wooded districts throughout the Highlands, where materials can be found, doors, gates, partitions, fences, barns, and even dwelling houses, are made of wattle-work. In the case of dwelling houses and their partitions, the wattling is plastered over on both sides with boulder clay, and whitewashed with lime, thereby giving an air of cleanliness and comfort to the house. 30

Recognition of a material status quo is significant in such an albeit partisan account, not least because it offers an insider view – bho shealladh a’ Ghàidheil (i.e. a Gaelic viewpoint). In assembling evidence on relict material culture through an era of dramatic change, it is encouraging to hear voices which normalise the creel house trait and bracketing a period of almost two hundred years. In James Robertson’s tour of the West Coast and Inner Hebrides between May and October 1768, he described ‘creel houses’ in Moidart and Arasaig with the observing and dispassionate eye of the scientist:

The houses in which they live they call basket houses. The method of building them is this: they first mark out both breadth and length of the house, then drive stakes of wood at 9 inches or a foot [23 to 30 centimetres] distance from each other, leaving 4 or 5 feet [120 to 150 centimetres] of them above ground, then wattle them up with heath and small branches of wood, upon the outside of which they pin on very thin turf, much in the same manner that slates are laid. Alongst the top of these stakes runs a beam, which supports the couples, and what they call cabers, and this either covered with turf, heath or straw.31

Details of creel houses were recorded by Calum MacLean in Lochaber in the 1950s for the newly founded School of Scottish Studies. His informant in this instance turned out to be one of his outstanding tradition-bearers. He was ‘Little John MacDonald of Highbridge’ or ‘John the Bard’ (1876–1964) who was a seanchaidh (historian, storyteller, tradition-bearer) and poet in his own right. Calum MacLean has painted a vivid pen-picture of how a rich rapport was established in Gaelic between recorder and informant:
'We continued to meet once weekly for a whole five months. Day after day he came and poured out the unwritten history of Lochaber. Everything that ever took place there seems to have left some imprint on his memory.' The following extract from one of the recordings is an abbreviated version of the Gaelic text:

I saw wattled houses, and this was the way they built them. They set up strong casain (posts). I believe they would be about nine inches [23 centimetres] each way – strong. It was oak they used for them pretty often. They would be as high as they wanted to have the wall – no more than six feet [180 centimetres] high. They set the casain so firmly that they could place the cupaill (couples) on them to keep the roof up. And then they put on the taobhan across them – timbers along the side. Taobhan was what they called them. They wouldn’t be very thick at all, the taobhan. They did not mind at all if they were round and they did not mind what sort of timber it was – anything but the fiodhagaich (bird-cherry); it was taboo. They were full of superstitions. And then they went and got the slatan (rods), alder for the slatan. It wouldn’t matter what length the slatan were. And they would draw them back and forth through the fire – they were singed brown. And then this alder would become so soft and so supple. This would make the slatan flexible so that they could go in among the taobhan – perhaps two inches [5 centimetres] apart. And then when the slatan were plaited up among the taobhan, they got clay and cow dung and straw. And they mixed it with shovels till they got it right. And then they pressed it on with the shovels, and it went through. The slatan held it, with the straw. And they made it as smooth on the outside as it could be. Then they did the inside, in the same way. It would take a day or two for it to dry. All that had to be done now was to put the cupaill on the casain. If they could get it at all they liked pine or oak for the cupaill. Then they put on the roof.33

The early folk museum movement, exemplified in Scandinavian prototypes of the late nineteenth century, made vernacular architecture its business and building structures and interiors were collected and re-created. In spite of scholarly discrimination for regional variation and the specialisms of open-air museums, rescuing the remains of the past has been expensive and has tended to the perpetuation of stereotypes and single examples rather than a needful selection to demonstrate variation. Vernacular buildings were a popular ingredient of European national trade exhibitions before the opening of Skansen, in Stockholm, in 1891 and the Highland Village, An Clachan, in the Glasgow ‘Empire Exhibition’ of 1938 served an entertaining and didactic purpose. I F Grant was an adviser for this display and it may be that the Highland dwellings were meant to offer a stereotype. Such symbols took no cognizance of wattle or creel houses, but, in the spirit of discrimination that I F Grant introduced into the study of regional
such a building type was explored and re-created by Ross Noble and his team at the Highland Folk Museum in 1997. A creel house was constructed from the layout and floor plans of an original building excavated on the site of the former township of Mid Raits to the north of Kingussie. Archaeology was expanded with ethnological research including fieldwork, documentary evidence and the material evidence of building parts held in the museum collection. This was a substantial structure with internal dimensions of 16 metres (52 feet) in length and 5 metres (16 feet) in width, with a single entrance door into a byre-end section of the building. The roof was carried on seven pairs of crucks or couples, infilled with wattle panels of willow and hazel. Eighteenth-century tools such as axes, saws, adzes and augers were used. This experiment in reconstruction has yielded invaluable insights, not least an impression of the creel house offering commodious dwellings rather than the ‘smoking dunghills’ as described in the literature of ‘improvement’. 34

Cultural attitudes are still hard to shift and the Highlands and Islands particularly have been locked within a dominant narrative. Landscape and scenery have been romanticised for tourist and ‘heritage’ consumption and, arguably, the inhabitants patronised, perhaps not currently but certainly historically. The historical narrative is dominated by political tensions between crown, government and the Highlands and Islands, the debacle of the Jacobite Wars, and the onset of the Enlightenment, with accounts of Highland life stressing the need for change and the concept of ‘improvement’ dominating the ideological currency of the age. We can sense the ‘condescension’ that emanated from this and we can learn to delve deeper. The ubiquity of creel houses (in all their variety) remains to be better understood. 35 Exploring the materiality of absence has potential to enlarge our knowledge of an often ambiguous human geography and of the interaction between nature and culture in the historic environment.

Notes

8. Morlaggan Rural Settlement Group, www.highmorlaggan.co.uk


18 Keith Norman MacDonald, *MacDonald Bards*, Edinburgh, 1900, p.34.


22 Mrs Mary Mackellar, ‘Traditions of Lochaber’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, vol.16 (1889–90), p.26; see RCAHMS Site No. NN18NE 2 (Achnacarry Castle, Kilmallie Parish, Inverness-shire). My thanks to Abigail Grater and Veronica Fraser for assistance in obtaining the photograph of this building’s remains.


31 Henderson and Dickson *A Naturalist in the Highlands*, p.81; see also James Robertson, *General View of the Agriculture in the County of Inverness*, London, 1808, p.58.


33 Edinburgh University, School of Scottish Studies Sound Archive SA 1958.20.A11. I am most grateful to Dr Margaret Mackay for supplying me with this summary; additional material recorded from John MacDonald is now available on www.tobarandualchais.co.uk e.g. SA 1961.048.

34 I F Grant, *Highland Folk Ways*, London, 1961, pp 175–6 and 207–9;