

A TRIP TO PRIEST ISLAND

by Roderick F. Macleod 1st August 2015

The month of May saw the arrival of the lambing season in Coigach. The hardy Cheviot was the preferred breed of all the villages, although the odd Blackface sheep also appeared. When time came for the lambs to be moved on, the male lambs were sold in the old days, at Am Fealing, the Badentarbat fank, where the auctioneers and drovers held a sale. This practice was discontinued sometime after WW2 and the crofters had to take their male lambs to Dingwall Auction Mart, or Lairg.

By and large, the crofters of Polbain and Altandhu were inclined to the sea, unlike the men of Achiltibuie and Polglass who seemed to favour sheep rather more; but all the villages had grazing rights on one island or another, the most common in usage being Glas Leac Mor, Glas Leac Beag, Tanera Beag, Eilean Dubh, Priest Island, The Long island, Isle Ristol and some smaller islands. Using the Summer Isles for winter grazing had the advantages of a reasonably mild winter and a sufficient amount of grass; generally the lambs came out in fairly good condition. One or two were lost through accidents, but they were not much worse than they would have been elsewhere. Landing places were scarce and rather difficult, although most islands have access. The male lambs having been sold at auction, the crofters divided the ewe lambs; one batch were sent to the low country, the Black Isle, Easter Ross etc for wintering, whilst the others were ferried in the Autumn to one or other of the islands.

Little boys make good sheep-dogs! So as a small boy having an uncle, Murdo John Maclean, with hundreds of sheep I got plenty of practice at chasing sheep, and the opportunity of a trip out to the islands for the usual spring round-up! That was an amazing event: imagine it, dogs barking, normally silent shepherds shouting at the poor dogs, boats crashing against rocks with the ocean swell, dozens of sheep crammed into the waist of the boat, trying to get back on dry land and landing in the sea (yes, sheep can swim!) scrambling up the rocks to be captured again and returned to the boat. This was indeed the Crofters Pandemonium! (A good name for a tune!!!) Ian 'Roll' Macleod, owner and skipper of the rather nice, normally clean Fifie, "Ribhinn Og", a good shepherd himself, was trying to restore some semblance of order, aghast at the growing heaps of black stuff on the floor-boards, which normally would be scrubbed clean for the tourists. Fortunately for Ian the shepherds later bought a large life-boat which was found adrift by Bell Muir behind the islands, with which they ferried the sheep to the islands.

I went out on several occasions to help off-load the young ewe lambs on the islands, and again to retrieve them in the Spring. Occasionally in the spring we were able to collect some seagulls eggs for the table; my mother would bake with them and sometimes we ate them, and they were scrumptious. Being away working in Angus, I fortunately missed this particular trip to Priest Island in the early sixties, about which I will relate here; I had been on one occasion previously to Priest but this occasion which I missed, things nearly went badly wrong.

(This account of the Priest Isle trip is second hand and partly surmise as I was not on this particular foray)

About three weeks after his wedding, Ian had been asked by the shepherds of the upper, Polglass, end of the village to ferry their ewe lambs to Priest Island on which they had the grazing rights from the estate owner. Priest is nine miles out from the mainland, and does not have an access on the north side, only a small one on the south side. It is the least protected island from the Minch storms, and has a rather exposed situation.

One day, the weather being fine, Ian set off for Priest Island, the “Ribhinn Og” loaded with lambs and their shepherds. There were four shepherds on board, Willie ‘Taylor’ Macleod, Badenscallie, Willie Uisdean Macleod, Polglass, Kenny Stewart, Polglass, Kenny ‘Han’ Mackenzie, Achnahaird Farm and Ian, the skipper, and the procedure of unloading the lambs began. At some point, three men went ashore presumably to drive the lambs clear of the rather rocky shore, and Ian and one of the men, Willie ‘Taylor’ Macleod stood off for safety. Unfortunately, a rope became entangled in the propeller of the “Ribhinn Og” and she immediately lost power. As the reader will understand a rope entangled in a boat propeller is a very serious matter as it becomes a hard solid lump, and has to be cut away with a sharp knife. To compound the problem, an easterly breeze began to freshen, and the boat started to drift away from the shore. Thus ensued a rather long heroic struggle by Ian and Willie to saw away at the hard knot of rope. They had to lie headlong over the side, over the gunnel, in the water at the stern trying to cut the rope deeply under water, which meant that they were very wet and cold.(I had experience of a rope in the propeller of the salmon fishing coble, up in the propeller tunnel, but we were not in distress. However, it took a long time to free it).

I have not been able to ascertain how long it took Ian and Willie to cut the rope free but it was certainly the rest of the day and into the night. The men sitting on land, watched helplessly and fearful of their fate too as they saw the “Ribhinn Og” slowly drift away. Even after cutting the rope free of the propeller they had to wait for daylight as at that time the “Ribhinn Og” had no navigation lights.

At home, strangely the relatives were not particularly perturbed as without any form of communication or distress signals, they rather believed that the men would return; they had faith that the men would return, which they did at dawn. Only then did the drama unfold when they eventually returned. Bert McNab, who had the Summer Isles hotel, even opened the bar to welcome them home safely again!

Those were the days before modern technology had made communication so instant, and little heed was given to safety requirements. On this occasion, great credit went to the men themselves, unaccustomed as many of them were with the ways of the sea, but particularly to the fine seamanship of Ian 'Roll' Macleod whose dogged determination at length saw them home safely. Ian had been married only a few weeks before this incident to my sister Hectoria Macleod, the late Postmistress. She had many an anxious moment when he was at sea, but he always came back.

I had the fun of going to the islands on several occasions; one trip was to the island of Glas Leac Mor to bring home some rather wild Soay sheep left there some three years previously by Duggie Baxter, the owner of Old Dornie. On this occasion the sheep were really wild, not having seen a human face for about three years and Duggie wanted them rounded up and brought home. They were like mountain goats; one or two were lost in the cliffs. We had to have rolls of sheep netting to surround the nervous flock. However, there was quite a few of us so we managed to get them on board and safely back to Old Dornie. I think that being spring time, this was one occasion when we got some gulls eggs which were delicious, particularly for baking.

Ferrying sheep, or any stock, to the islands was a great adventure for us, the young lads of the village; being sheep dogs was good fun-if you could bear the cacophony of sound!

Various vessels were used for the purpose, notably the "Ribhinn Og", launches owned by Douglas Baxter, Jimmy 'Tanera' Macleod, Donald Neil Macleod, and the Sumer Isles hotel. A ship's lifeboat salvaged by Bell Muir in the Minch was acquired by the shepherds for the task at a later date.

When the estate was sold in the sixties, the pattern of leasing of the island grazing changed and the activity was curtailed somewhat as the islands were each acquired by individual owners who were not generally disposed to sheep and particularly to the heather burning that accompanied the round-up in the spring, to enhance the growth of new grass for the next year. Some owners built properties on the islands, and were not in favour of grazing sheep around them.

It was rough work but very challenging; to us it was a great adventure; to the men it was part of the ritual of the crofting year.

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