# *THE LAST SHEAF*

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In the course of one seminar [1] it is impossible to deal with more than one, or at least, a few Harvest customs, and today, I think we must limit ourselves to beliefs and practices relating to the last sheaf of the harvest. The custom of cutting and bringing home the Last Sheaf survives still in Scotland. On the 14th of October last year [1958] I went into a house in Craignish in the county of Argyll and there, on the wall of the living-room, I saw a small sheaf of oats hanging. It had just been brought home a week or so before that. The following week I met two farmers at Balquhidder, Perthshire, and both of them had brought home the Harvest Maiden, and in the case of one sheaf it was cut with the scythe by the farmer's younger daughter and bound by her elder sister. Both the girls were on the eve of leaving to return to a boarding school in Edinburgh.

Still the best and most exhaustive account of the custom is given by the late Dr. Gregor in *Revue de Traditions populaires* III (October 1888:532-5), and translated back into English by Sir James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, Part V, 1:158-61).

Dr. Gregor's account describes the practice in the north-eastern corner of Aberdeen and he admits that the custom varies from parish to parish. Even within the bounds of one parish, however, the sheaf may have two or even three different names, and be treated in more than one way. The practice regarding the sheaf may even change within the limits of one township. One informant from Skye states:

"There was great strife, as you know, to complete the harvest first. When a crofter finished cutting the corn, the last handful was taken up and bound with care. Some called it *a' Ghobhar Bhacach*, others *claidheag* and others *Deir' Bhuana*, Harvest's end. Now some, and it might be in fun or through spite, threw this last handful into the plot of a neighbour and when that was done it was called *a' Ghobhar Bhacach*. In

that way they showed that they had finished first and boasted about it. Now those who called the last sheaf the *Maighdean Bhuana*, Harvest Maiden, brought it home, kept it carefully and dressed it up in all kinds of finery. And again those who made the *claidheag* put it in the top of the last stack of corn that they completed. These were the customs that they had."

Thus we see that in one area the sheaf has three different names and serves three different purposes.

Another Skye informant aged about 35 and from an area not far distant from that of the above informant, states: "The Last Sheaf was called *a' Ghobhar Bhacach* in Skye. I saw it being brought home, but people had ceased throwing it over on to their neighbour's land. When they brought it home in my memory, they kept it in the house. They put a handful—*cas mu sheach*—in the form of a cross. That was how they had it and it was very pretty. There was a *stiom*, a ribbon, of cloth binding it.

But in the old time there was more to it than that. They called it the *Gobhar Bhacach*. The way they did it was as follows: the last handful that the crofter cut on his patch, he did not put it into the sheaf or stook, but brought it home—that was the last handful cut with the sickle. He divided it in half and crossed and bound it. And it was called the *Gobhar Bhacach*. If his neighbour was behind him with the harvest, he threw the *Gobhar Bhacach* across to his land. The neighbour understood what that meant—he had beaten him. It was something that was taken in good part and treated as fun (*fealla-dhà*). The neighbour did not resent it. The person last to finish the harvest was always helped by his neighbours.

I saw it (the last sheaf) hanging on the wall all the year round. They called it the *Maighdean Bhuana*. Four handfuls were crossed and hung on a nail in the wall. The crofter himself cut and bound the last sheaf.

When the harvest was finished there was a gathering *Deir' Bhuana*—and the neighbours were invited. The woman of the house made a *stapag uachdair*—whipped cream with oatmeal added. Everyone at the *Deir' Bhuana* got this."

According to this informant the form as well as the function and name of the sheaf was changing. The two main functions of the sheaf were (*a*) to taunt or bring the neighbour who was late with harvest into disrepute—and this was either in earnest or in fun—and (*b*) to serve a decorative purpose at the Harvest

home festival, or to serve as a present or reward to the best milk can on Christmas Day, or the first cow that calved or mare that foaled in spring, or to the horses when ploughing started. When the sheaf, and it may not always be the last sheaf or handful cut, or a figure dressed up as an old woman is sent by a crofter or farmer to his neighbour who is still engaged in the cutting of his harvest or to a neighbouring township that has been beaten in the race to finish, the term then applied is *Cailleach* or *Gobhar Bhacach*, and as far as Scotland is concerned this tradition is confined to the Western Isles and parts of the Highlands. But then the term and the tradition do not coincide. In Islay, for instance, the term *cailleach* is used, but all the practices are those relating to the *maiden* or *clyack*. In Bernera, Lewis, for example, the term *cailleach* is used, but the practices are, as it were, a sort of compromise between one tradition and another. The last sheaf is dressed up to look like an old woman, but instead of being sent to the neighbouring croft or township, it occupies a place of honour at the Harvest celebration (1895). When it had served its purpose at the celebration it was shorn of its finery. In North Uist it was the habit as late as 1896 that the *cailleach* was put among the corn of lazy crofters. In South Uist the *cailleach* was sent from person to person in a township according as they finished the harvest and the last person had to keep it and had to feed it, as it were, through the winter. The belief was common in the last century that misfortune overtook the person on whom the *cailleach* was inflicted, he would lose some of his stock or even he himself would die. In certain areas in the west the *cailleach* was much feared and during harvest time certain people remained on guard all night in case the *cailleach* was sent to them. One informant from Eochar in South Uist stated that the *cailleach* was made of *cuiseagan ruadha*, dockens, and dressed up in old woman's clothing and was given slippers to wear. Another informant from the same island stated that it was made of *raoid arbhair*, sheaf of corn, clothes wrapped round it and it was given some head-dress. The *cailleach* was sent not only from crofter to crofter, but also from township to township and from farm to farm. A farmer in Cill Donnan in Eigg sent the *cailleach* to his neighbour in Laig across the island. A servant riding on a swift, black mare, brought the sheaf and placed it on a wall near the victim's house. He was seen and fled, pursued by the angry farmer, who fired several shots at him but missed. That took place towards the end of the eighteenth century. In the

late sixteenth century Clanranald in South Uist sent a messenger on horse-back from Ormicleit to Geirinish. The *cailleach* was left in Geirinish, in a patch of standing corn. The messenger was seen, pursued and killed within one half-mile of his own township. Had he gone a half-mile further he could have been safe. In the last century, however, in Uist, the sending of the sheaf gave rise to nothing more than an occasional outburst of vituperative verses about the *cailleach*, reviling her as if she were an ugly old woman. According to the late Fr. Allan Macdonald, the townships of Daliburgh and Kilphedar fought about the *cailleach*, but the practice has now ceased in South Uist. When one crofter finishes his harvest before his neighbout he says "*Chuir mi a' chailleach ort*", "I have put the *cailleach* on you".

In Strath Fillan a *cailleach* was made of sticks, old clothes and a turnip and passed from farm to farm and finally to the innkeeper, the innkeeper being regarded as the person best able to support it.

The Lame Goat, *Gobhar Bhacach*, had the same function as the *cailleach*, and like the *cailleach* was not necessarily the last sheaf. It could be any sheaf or bundle of corn sent to a neighbour's land or built up into a stook on it by the crofter who had first finished. According to one account, it was the last sheaf pleated at both ends and placed on the dyke or boundary between the crofter who had finished and the one who had not. On the mainland, in Glen Elchaig, Kintail, the last sheaf was called the *Gobhar Bhacach* and was thrown on to the land of the farmer who had not finished. In Skye, it was a custom, although not general, to retrieve the sheaf and place it behind the *maide ceangail* in the barn or byre and give it to one of the cows when the first snow fell. One published account says that the Goat brings ill-luck, another that it is humiliating to have it.

As we have seen from one account from Islay and another from Skye, the customs connected with the *cailleach* and Lame Goat on the one hand and the Maiden on the other were confused.

The Clyack and Maiden differ in name mainly and are not thrown on to the land of the person who has not yet finished. Dr. Gregor's account deals with the Clyack-sheaf, the name common in Easter Ross, Moray, Nairn, Banff, Aberdeen and in the Eastern Highlands, but traditions and customs connected with the *Maighdean Bhuana* in Gaelic areas

and the Maiden in non-Gaelic areas are much the same with minor variations from parish to parish.

The Clyack-sheaf, according to one account from the North-East, was much smaller than an ordinary sheaf and was given to the favourite horse. It was made into a female figure and given a drink of ale, but the informant states that he had only seen this once. Another account, presumably from Buchan, states that the Clyack was either known as the *Maiden* or the *Carlin Clyack*, according as the Harvest was early or late. An account from Banff states that the Clyack was dressed up to resemble a girl of the agricultural community. It remained in the kitchen till New Year's morning, when it was undressed and shared out among the animals. When the sheaf was brought home, the harvesters were treated to "Meal and Ale", oatmeal, whisky and sugar or syrup, made thick. A ring was put in it and the finder would be married before the next harvest.

Dr. Gregor also states that the sheaf was named according as the harvest was early or late. In Corgarff, Aberdeenshire, when all the crop is cut before St. Michael's Day, 29th September, it is called a *maiden gliack*, but if the crop is cut later, the sheaf gets the name of "a fusset-ower maiden", i.e. deluded or betrayed maiden. The man who cuts the last sheaf in a late harvest, marries a widow or unchaste woman, and if a woman cuts it, she marries a widower or unchaste man. One other important point he makes is that the Clyack-sheaf was not allowed to touch the ground when being bound. Another account from Aberdeen says that the sheaf was divided among the stirks on New Year's Day. In Kincardineshire, the sheaf was kept till Christmas and given to a cow in calf, and another account says that it was kept till old Christmas Day and given to the best cow in the byre.

In the North-East of Scotland although the beginning of the ploughing was attended with important ceremonies, the Clyack-sheaf did not play any important part in them, as it did in the west and central Highlands. In the north-east, ploughing generally began in autumn after the Harvest while in the west it did not begin until well after New Year. The Clyack could not have been given to horses beginning the ploughing in autumn as in that case it would have had only a very short period in the farm-house, steading or byre. The common feature about the Maiden in Argyllshire and Western Perthshire was that it was divided between the horses the first day they went out to plough.

Sir James Frazer himself witnessed the cutting of the Maiden in Balquhidder in 1888.

From the printed sources we learn that the maiden was cut and the girl that secured it became Queen of the Harvest: That evening a supper and dance was held to entertain the reapers. The sheaf was made into a rude doll and tied with ribbons, and hung on the wall till next Spring. Another account from Fife says that in former times (written in 1924) two sheaves were cut and were called the Old Woman and the Maiden. In the same county the date of events was fixed by the day in which maiden was cut. In Lochaber men toasted the Maiden suspended in the barn at the Harvest Home Dance 1893. An account from Glen Moriston (1889) states that the informant as a boy remembered the last bit of corn being taken home, tied up with a ribbon and stuck in the wall across the kitchen fire-place, where it remained till next Spring. There was no ceremony attached to it. One account from Argyll—locality is not given—states that the Maiden was a three-cornered wall ornament decorated with ribbons. An account from Kilmartin has it that part of the Maiden was given to the horses the day they started leading home the corn and the other part as a *sainseal* (handsel) for luck on the day they started ploughing. An account from Lochaweside has it that the first shearer to complete his strip got the maiden, but the last to finish was nicknamed the *cailleach*. From the same locality it is reported that the Maiden was hung up for the purpose of preventing the death of horses in the Spring. In Glencoe, it appears, there was both a Maiden and a *cailleach*, but the Maiden was cut in an unusual manner for this area. The reapers threw their sickles at it. The person who succeeded in cutting down the Maiden got possession of her. In Aberdeenshire too the last sheaf was called the Maiden and was given to the first mare that foaled. Another account has it that the Maiden was cut by an unmarried man who chose as his bandster a maiden. The sheaf was dressed in coloured paper with coloured ribbons, and the company at the harvest home danced round it. It was hung over the mantle in the sitting-room and remained there till Auld Yule, when it was given to the pet animal in the farm. Another account from Aberdeen has it that the Maiden was given to the first mare that foaled, otherwise the consequences would be disastrous for farm operations generally. In Sutherland too they kept the Maiden hung over the mantle-piece until the next harvest. They have

always a kirn, 1889, whipped cream with often a ring in it, and sometimes meal sprinkled over it. On some farms in the Gareloch, in Dunbartonshire, about the year 1830, the last handful of standing corn was called the Maiden. It was divided in two, plaited, and then cut with the sickle by a girl, who, it was thought would be lucky and would soon be married. When it was cut the reapers gathered together and threw their sickles in the air. The Maiden was dressed with ribbons and hung in the kitchen near the roof, where it was kept for several years with the date attached. Sometimes five or six maidens might be seen at once hanging on hooks. The harvest-supper was called the Kirn. In other farms on the Gareloch the last handful of corns was called the Maidenhead or the Head; it was neatly plaited, sometimes decked with ribbons and hung in the kitchen for a year, when the grain was given to the poultry.

As to material of a more recent date, one informant in Balquhidder in October of last year [1958], stated that the youngest member of the family cut the *Maighdean.* It had been cut on his farm by his younger daughter, a week or two previously. It was to be dressed up and given to the horses, divided between them, when they go out to plough next spring. It was kept and given to the horses to ensure good luck for the coming year. A mile or two away another informant said that he had taken home the Maiden a week or two previously. On the other side of Loch Voil, another informant, said that he had often cut and brought the Maiden home and had ceased doing so only four years ago. The oldest person on the field cut it and the youngest bound it. It was bound in the form of a cross. He had not noticed that precautions were taken to ensure that it did not fall on the ground. When ploughing started in spring, each horse got a portion of the sheaf. He ceased bringing the sheaf home, when he put away his horses and started ploughing by tractor. A couple of miles away another farmer's wife stated that the Maiden was given to the first mare that foaled. Another informant in Fortingall stated that he had last seen the Maiden in the spring of 1920. He was a ploughman and the sheaf was divided between two horses on the morning they were due to start ploughing. It was a *seana-chleachd*—he translated this into English as a "superstition"—and it was to prolong good luck till the next year. He maintained that anyone could cut the sheaf. The colour of the ribbon did not matter, but the one he had last seen was blue. Another informant in the same area said that the Maiden was put in a

specially made glass case. It remained there until the next Maiden came in the following autumn. Two brothers, natives of Glen Lyon, stated that the *Maighdean Bhuana*, Harvest Maiden, was divided in two halves; one was kept in the kitchen and the other half was given to the horses when ploughing started. In August 1952 an informant from Rannoch, Perthshire, who was then aged 88, said: "In Rannoch we had the Maiden. It was dressed and bound with ribbons. They kept the sheaf. They imagined that misfortune would overtake them if they did not keep it. It was called *Maighdean*. There was a dance when the harvest work was completed."

In Argyllshire the practice is just beginning to go now, as I have stated earlier I saw the sheaf this last autumn in Craignish. It was given to the horses in spring on the start of ploughing. An informant who lived on Loch Fyneside said that there the Maiden was kept all the year round. An informant on Loch Etiveside said that it was given to the horses, as at Craignish. An informant in the parish of Kilmore said that the oldest person in the field cut the Maiden. It was bound with a long, trailing red ribbon, brought home and placed above the fireplace. It was kept there until given to the horses on the start of ploughing. An informant from Benderloch, an old lady aged 84, said that there was much fun when the sheaf was about to be cut. The shearer, often hid some uncut stalks under sheaves in order to keep them to the last so that his sweetheart would get the Maiden. She herself had also hidden uncut corn under sheaves. The last sheaf cut was taken home and bound with a green ribbon. It was divided among the horses when they finished the first furrow (*sgriob*) of ploughing in spring. She herself had stopped bringing the sheaf home eight years ago, when she had to stop working on her croft. An informant from Duror said that he had often seen the *Maighdean* hanging above the fireplace. It could be bound with a ribbon of any colour, but the practice of bringing it home ceased about 20 years ago. An informant from Glencoe, aged about 75, said that he had often seen his mother bring the Maiden home. The practice ceased about 20 years ago, but other informants in Glencoe told me that it continued until much more recently. Further to the west, Acharach, Ardnamurchan, an informant said that he himself had often cut the Maiden in his croft and had ceased only four years ago. He is now 82. The sheaf was bound with a red ribbon and was in the form of a cross, like the St. Andrew's Cross, *Gobhlach*—

diagonal. He also gave it to the horses when ploughing commenced.

The form of the sheaf is interesting. Dr. John MacPherson in his *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland* stated that "In the upper districts of Banffshire, as at Glenlivet, the sheaf was made in the form of a cross. Here is the influence of the Catholic religion." He does not state, however, whether the cross was diagonal or horizontal. In Acharacle, Balquhidder, Banff, Badenoch and Skye the cross was diagonal.

One informant from South Uist did state that she had seen the *Maighdean Bhuana* as distinct from the *cailleach*. She was born in Snaoiseabhal in the Parish of Bornish on the west of the island. "There was always a race to get the last sheaf. It was not really a sheaf but a small handful—*làn an dùirn*. It was not allowed to fall on the ground and was bound with a red ribbon. It was brought home and kept till the next harvest."

In central Inverness-shire the older people were quite familiar with the Harvest Maiden, as many of our recordings in the School of Scottish Studies show.

In the south of Scotland and especially the south-east the last sheaf is called the Kirn, Kirn-baby, Kirn-dolly, Kirn-bobby, Kirn-cut. Popular etymology explains the terms as kirn, churn, which arose from the fact that churned cream played such an important part in the Harvest Home celebration. There seems to be no knowledge as to the earlier history of the name. The term kirn may have been extended from the Harvest Feast itself to the last sheaf. Two accounts from Berwickshire have it that the sheaf was cut by throwing sickles at it. Another account tells that the reapers were blindfolded. This went on till someone succeeded in locating the last straws and cutting them. The successful reaper was then thrown up in the air. The kirn-dolly decorated the room at the harvest supper. In Berwickshire the kirn-dolly was also called the Queen. A recent informant from Haton, near Kelso, confirmed that the farmer was thrown up in the air on the completion of the reaping, while another informant from Peebles recently stated that in his youth the last sheaf was tossed up in the air. In Galloway, again, the last sheaf, also called the Kirn there, according to two accounts, was cut by casting sickles at it. The person who succeeded in cutting it wore it, decked with ribbons, in his or her hat during the Kirn feast. One report from Stirlingshire, 1897, has it that the last sheaf cut was plaited and twisted. A twig of rowan with berries

was tied into the middle of it, and it was laid on the table at the Kirn feast. In Northern England, Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire the term *kirn* or *kern* was used. I doubt if the term was actually used in Scotland further north than Stirling.

In Wigtown, Kirkcudbright and South Ayrshire the last sheaf was termed the *hare*. All accounts agree that it was cut by casting the hooks at it. It was brought home, hung over the door, and used for purposes of divination, and when it had served its purpose, servants played pranks with it and it was torn to bits. The term *hare* is quite understandable, as young hares hiding in the corn would gradually retreat before the reapers and were supposed to go finally to the last patch that remained standing and jump away as the reapers came too near. Casting the hooks for purposes of divination was common after all the corn was cut. In Gaelic it was called *cur nan corran*. How the hook fell would indicate whether death, ill-luck, good fortune or marriage were in the offing. Casting the hooks to cut the last sheaf, however, belongs more to Lowland tradition, although there is one account of it from Glencoe, and another from Bute and Kintyre.

As to variations of the custom in Scotland, we finally go to Orkney and Shetland. One account from Stromness, Orkney, has it that there was much laughter over the last sheaf and all avoided the job of tying it as well as the job of bringing in the last load. The sheaf was made into the form of a bitch (*bikko*) and placed stealthily about the neighbour's steading. An account from Sanday has it that the *Bikko* was a figure of straw placed on the yard gate to salute the person bringing in the last load or sheaf. When the last load was being brought in everyone in the yard barked in derision. When the last sheaf was brought into the stack-yard by a young boy, he was given a piece of bread as a reward, but those in the yard were permitted to pelt him with clods. In Shetland also the child bringing in the last sheaf was given a piece of bread.

The main difficulty that we face in evaluating the material from Scotland is that there is yet too little material available. Most of the material from printed sources dates back to about 1900 and there has not been much since then. Only a very vague pattern emerges. In the Outer Hebrides, the Inner Hebrides, down to Mull and some parts of the Western Mainland the last sheaf is sent as a taunt to the farmer, crofter or township late with the Harvest. In the Southern Inner Hebrides,

the western mainland of Argyll, Perthshire, Inverness-shire, Banff and the other north-eastern counties, the Clyack and Maiden—closely related—are cut sometimes by special people, serve a decorative function at the Harvest feast, and are given to the first animals that have young (in the east) and the horses at the start of ploughing in the west. The southern limit of the Maiden seems to be from Fife across to Dumbarton. To the south the *Hare* and *Kirn* show a similar mode of cutting, hooks are cast at them, but the practice of cutting the sheaf by throwing the sickles at it extends although not by any means generally, into the Maiden area in the west, through Kintyre and Bute and Glencoe. Further north the practice of casting the hooks is divinatory and not so directly concerned with the cutting of the last sheaf. The practice in Orkney approximates somehow closely to that in the Outer Hebrides and Skye.

There are two main theories relating to the practices, beliefs and customs connected with the last sheaf, the first propagated by Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831-80) in *Wald- und Feldkulte* (1877) and later adopted by Sir James Frazer (1854-1941). Their standpoint was based on the belief that there were supernatural beings or spirits in trees, corn and in the soil. Sayings such as "There comes the corn-mother" said in Germany when the wind makes the corn wave, the expressions used by the Poles and Czechs that the corn-mother sits in the corn and will strangle children that tread on it, illustrate that belief. It is also found in the names given to the Last Sheaf or to the person cutting or binding it, and the symbolic shapes into which the sheaf is formed. The spirit of the corn which influences human fortunes for good or ill must be propitiated. Many rites and customs may be explained as the survivals of sacrifices to the spirits of corn. The corn spirits possess special powers and several rites are performed to capture this power and make sure of good crops. When the last sheaf is given the name of a man or animal or when animals are said to be captured, e.g. the hare, it is thought that the vegetation spirit has been captured so that the farmer may avail himself of its supernatural power. Many symbols belonging to other seasonal festivals are said to be survivals of a belief in vegetation spirits, such as dress-up figures at Shrove-tide, Whitsuntide, Midsummer and so forth. Decorations such as green branches, maypoles, ribbons associated with seasonal festivals are looked upon as elements in the vegetation cult. In short almost all seasonal beliefs and customs are regarded as part of a widespread fertility cult.

Sir James Frazer summarises his own theory (*The Golden Bough* V, 1:167-8): "As in the spring customs the tree-spirit is represented both by a tree and a person so, in the harvest customs the corn spirit is represented both by the last sheaf and the person who cuts, binds or threshes it. The equivalence of the person to the sheaf is shown by giving him or her the same name as the sheaf, by wrapping him or her in it and by the rule observed in some places, that when the sheaf is called the mother, it must be made up into human shape by the oldest married woman, and when it is called the Maiden, it must be cut by the youngest girl. Here the age of the personal representative of the corn-spirit corresponds with that of the supposed age of the corn-spirit, just as the human victims offered by the Mexicans to promote the growth of the maize varied with the age of the maize. For in the Mexican as in the European custom, the human beings were probably representatives of the corn-spirit rather than the victims offered to it. (2) Again the same fertilising influence which the tree-spirit is supposed to exert over vegetation, cattle and even women is ascribed to the corn-spirit. Thus, its supposed influence on vegetation is shown by the practice of taking some of the grain of the last sheaf (in which the corn-spirit is regularly supposed to be present), and scattering it among the young corn in spring or mixing it with the seed-corn. Its influence on animals is shown by giving the last sheaf to a mare in foal, to a cow in calf and to horses at the first ploughing. Lastly its influence on women is indicated by the custom of delivering the mother-sheaf, made into the likeness of a pregnant woman, to the farmer's wife: by the belief that the woman who binds the last sheaf will have a child next year; perhaps, too, by the idea that the person who gets it will soon be married."

He goes on to say, harvest customs are based on ancient modes of thought and bear the stamp of primitive ritual; (*a*) no special class of persons is set apart for performance; (*b*) no special places are set apart for performance of the rites, but performed anywhere as the occasion arises, (*c*) spirits, not gods, are recognised, spirits restricted in their operations to definite departments; (*d*) the rites are magical rather than propitiatory. The favour of divine beings is not sought by sacrifice, prayer or praise but by ceremonies which are believed to influence the course of nature though physical sympathy or resemblance between the rite and the effect which it is the intention of the rite to produce, e.g. the sheaf is made heavy

in order to get a heavy crop the following year, the last sheaf is given to cattle to make them thrive.

The modern theory as propounded by Von Sydow and other Scandinavian scholars, such as Eskeröd, challenge the hypothesis behind Mannhardt and Frazer's theories that the traditions of the folk developed from some primitive philosophy, i.e. that speculation and attempts to build up a system engender folk belief. They maintain that a close study of folk tradition shows that it is not a matter of philosophical speculation, but more or less chance formations, arising from associations of various kinds, short isolated lines of thought that, even if they are bound up with one and the same object, often lack all internal connection. A primitive philosophy with everything organically coherent is something that never did exist. The last sheaf, for example, meant that hard and important work was at an end and this fact gave rise to serious considerations about the future as well as a lot of fun and games. In tradition the last sheaf is important because it is unusual and stands apart from other sheaves. In some cases it is not cut at all, just as sometimes no one wants the last apple on a tree or to spend the last copper in his purse. There is also a belief that the last bite of food is more important than all other bites. Similar beliefs also that certain weather conditions in the last hour of a certain day portent a long spell of weather, a person should not be the last to cross a swamp or last to leave a room, the devil takes the last person to leave a room, an abducted woman can be rescued from the last horse in a procession of fairies, the last person buried in a graveyard has to keep watch and so on. Thus the last sheaf can be studied only in the light of such analogies. The last sheaf, because it is last, is surrounded with special power. That is the primary reason why it is given to the horses on the first ploughing, with the cows that calf and the mare that foals. The first ploughing is a very important event in the year's work and something special must be given to the horses and what could be better than a very special sheaf. The female animals are important for the increase of farm stock, and therefore must be given special recognition when they contribute to that end. The best cow in the byre similarly must get some special food on New Year or Christmas Day. When the folk identify the last sheaf with a goat, a wolf, bull, cow, cat, witch, fox and so on, they do so because they want to prevent children trampling on the corn and scare them by inventing fictitious beings that gradually retreat to the last

sheaf when the corn is cut. The beings are large when the corn is standing, but when it is cut down they are no higher than the stubble. The hare in the corn can be easily explained, as hares do hide in the corn and are chased away when the cutting is nearing completion. The sending of the *Cailleach*, Lame Goat or *Bikko* to a neighbour who is late with the harvest will thus be explained as arising from a natural competitive spirit among farmers and also as a result of the release from anxiety as to the fate of the year's crop. It, according to the Swedish theory, is nothing more than a prank or joke. Eskeröd points out that in Sweden when the last sheaf is cut the reapers gather round the person who cuts it and call out "little goat" to him. The last corner of the field is sometimes called "goat" in Sweden, Germany and Russia, but the word also means "bunch of straw" or "beard", and the custom is related to the primary meaning of the word.

I do not think, however, that the *Gobhar Bhacach*, or the *Bikko* can have anything to do with a corn-spirit or a fertility cult. It is doubtful too, if the *Cailleach* is more than a nickname, or if the nature of the last sheaf may be taken as an omen of next year's harvest. When the sheaf is small it is weighed down with stones, and it is also made as large as possible to ensure a good crop the following year. The ominal significance in the last sheaf is extended to the person who cuts it, as he will be last in everything. The importance of marriage in an agricultural community also gives rise to looking for omens about marriage from the last sheaf. The one who gets the maiden will be married before next harvest and so on. The fact that many young people are engaged in harvest work results in the fact that coarse jokes, sometimes referring to the sexual act and organs are made about the last sheaf, and that gives rise to such terms as *horunge*—bastard—in Sweden, *Bikko* in Orkney, Maidenhead in Dunbartonshire and so forth.

I think, but I am not yet entirely convinced, that the theory of Von Sydow and the other Scandinavian scholars is the right one. Most customs at the *kirn*, *clyack* and so forth were not any manifestation of a cult, but merely festive frolics. One important point that Eskeröd does make is that, if the customs connected with the last sheaf were part of a fertility cult, the grain from the ears of the last sheaf would almost inevitably be used as part of the seed-corn of the next year. He admits that the practice does occur but only very sporadically throughout Europe. Only this morning I came across the only instance

in Scottish tradition where the grain from the last sheaf is used as corn-seed, the instance is from Shetland where the corn from the ears of the last sheaf are the first to be sown in spring.

NOTE

[1] This paper was read by the late author under the title "Harvest Customs" at an informal seminar at the School of Scottish Studies on Friday, 6th March 1959. It has been transcribed from a pencilled draft found in one of his notebooks. It is here printed with only slight emendations. References to unprinted sources are normally to material in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies. The main printed sources consulted appear to have been: (1) Mrs. M. Macleod Banks, *British Calendar Customs, Scotland*, Vol. I. Publications of the Folk-lore Society, London 1937, pp. 62-84. (2) Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Part V, "Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild", Vol. I, London 1912, etc., pp. 131-70.