Conceptualising Neighbourhood: Charity Labour Gatherings in Rural Perthshire, 1850–1950

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Like 'community', 'neighbourhood' is a concept which has attracted many scholarly attempts at definition. There is general consensus amongst geographers, who tend to emphasise the spatial connotations of the word, that in physical terms neighbourhood is smaller than community (Pacione 1983; Gold 1980) while sociologists and anthropologists have come to focus on neighbourhood as a form of cognitive construction or *feeling* (Bulmer 1986; Cohen 1982 and 1987; Mewett 1982). This article adheres to the latter viewpoint, for ethnographic data derived from oral history fieldwork and archival research I have carried out in my native rural Perthshire suggest that neighbourhood was a central concept in the collective mindset of the farming folk there, and was built around the tradition of *neighbouring* – non-waged, communal work practices involving members of separate agricultural units. Drawing upon categorisation models of cooperative labour constructed by Erasmus (1956: 445), Moore (1975: 272) and O'Dowd (1981: 68-70) I suggest that within Perthshire two general forms of non-waged labour arrangements can be identified: exchange labour and charity labour. This study focuses upon a specific manifestation of the charity labour category, the *lovedarg*, and suggests that an examination of the form variants, dynamics and semiotics of this tradition can illustrate the importance of mutual aid both as a means of coping with economic insecurity and in the mental construction of neighbourhood as a form of cognitive space and category of belonging (Relph 1976: 24). My focus begins at the mid-point of the 19th century when the local Perthshire weekly press began to carry reports on communal work gatherings, and ends around a century later when the tradition began to disappear with the widespread replacement of horse power by the tractor engine.

NON-WAGED LABOUR IN PERTHSHIRE

Although largely ignored by rural historians, the concept of agricultural units sharing or pooling their labour resources for certain tasks without monetary payment by no means disappeared in Scotland with the abolition of multiple and joint tenancies during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This particular aspect of a localised, organic,

informal economy survived the sweeping tide of large-scale improvement which took place during that period, before falling into a rapid decline from around 1950, due largely to increasing adoption of labour-saving technology. In Perthshire, these communal arrangements were manifested in many different ways. In the mountainous areas in the north and west of the county, where farm units were often small and heavily reliant upon the labour of the tenant's immediate family, reciprocal agreements between several neighbours were commonplace for a wide array of tasks related to pastoral and mixed farming. The topography of the south and east of the county, however, is better suited to an arable production emphasis and in Strathmore, the Carse of Gowrie and the lower reaches of the Earn and Tay valleys, large scale commercialised farms worked by a rigidly organised hierarchical labour force began to emerge early in the 19th century. There, casual mutual assistance between farms was less common, although the tradition continued to operate for a select number of labour-intensive tasks and within specific social contexts.

In his discussion of social interaction amongst neighbours, Peter Mann identifies two forms of neighbourliness – manifest and latent (Mann 1954: 164). Manifest neighbourliness is characterised by overt forms of social relationships, such as mutual visiting in the home and going out for purposes of pleasure, while the latent form involves the existence of favourable attitudes towards neighbours which result in positive action only when the need arises, particularly in times of crisis or emergency. Within a work-based context, manifest neighbourliness is most commonly embodied within the phenemenon of exchange labour – mutual help arrangements between neighbours built upon principles of direct reciprocity (Erasmus 1956; Moore 1975). In those areas of Perthshire dominated by small-scale production units, manifest neighbourliness was strong: tasks such as potato planting, haymaking, turnip sowing and grain threshing were often carried out through cooperation between immediate neighbours, thus obviating the need to find ready cash with which to pay hired hands.

In the more fertile regions in the south and east where larger units predominated, neighbour cooperation tended to be more latent, although continued to be widely used throughout this period for the specific task of threshing grain when the travelling mills arrived in a neighbourhood. These machines, steam-driven for the most part and tractor-driven by the end of this period, were a common sight in the Perthshire lanes from the mid-19th century, having developed from static steam mills which had begun to appear in the county by the end of the Napoleonic wars (Collins 1972: 17). By the 1860s, the local Perthshire press was carrying regular advertisements offering the services of mobile mills to the county's farmers. Many took advantage of this innovation, for it enabled a large volume of cereal to be threshed in one go, allowing the workers to dispense with the laborious methods associated with traditional hand-threshing techniques (Fenton 1985: 132-75). However, successful operation of the travelling mill remained extremely labour intensive, requiring a much larger force than could typically be mustered from among the ranks of even the largest Perthshire farms. The hiring of

extra labour would have been prohibitively expensive, and so the use of exchange arrangements made the whole operation viable. Flexibility was essential:

> Aye, that was an understanding. Everybody understood that. You needit anything – for a thrashin mill coming in, you needit anything from fourteen to sixteen men to keep everything going like clockwork. So it was understood, they'd just let you know two days before the mill, 'we're getting the mill in on Wednesday, I'll maybe need three men'. ... There was no money involved. (Taped interview, SA 1988.21, Dave West)

Dave West's use of the word 'understanding' is significant, a concept he mentions three times in this short passage. Both latent and manifest forms of neighbourliness were built upon an ongoing principle of mutual cooperation which was implicit in the social organisation of Perthshire rural life. Unlike those societies alluded to by both Erasmus (1956) and Moore (1975) in which mutual obligations of this kind tend to be built around principles of kinship, in Perthshire the sphere of understanding involved 'neighbours'. These individuals did not have to live and work in spatially contiguous units in order to consider themselves as neighbours. Implicit in most narratives is the idea that neighbours were quite simply 'those who neighboured'.

In hill farming areas the same principles applied to the use of exchange labour for tasks associated with sheep farming, particularly clippings and dippings. The size of the neighbouring *circle* could vary considerably, but in some cases comprised twenty or more partners, all of whom worked together on the units of each member in turn. Membership of these circles tended to be governed by tradition and was attached to units as opposed to individuals. Thus certain groups of farms neighboured for many generations, new tenants being invited into the same circles as their predecessors (Taped interviews, SA 1988.20, John Fisher; SA 1988.22, Jim Mollison). Although based on oral tradition and seldom formalised in writing (again, simply an 'understanding'), large circles required a rigid organisational framework if the system was to operate smoothly. In most, each member was allocated the same date each year, while other circles rotated the order in an attempt to ensure fairness.

With all forms of communal labour gatherings in Perthshire food and alcoholic drink were supplied by the host both during the working day and at a social meal in the evening. This aspect of the tradition was fondly recalled by John Fisher (Taped interview, SA 1988.20):

> Then you see, that was that – breakfast, excellent breakfast. When I went to Tynayare first I used to take the breakfast up before I started clippin. And then there was a tea came up again about ten o'clock and ... well, up in the fank you got a dram wi the ten o'clock tea, he went round and the man gave everybody a dram. And then when you came down for your dinner there was a dram on the table for everybody. But you were eatin a the time. Bloody great! (laughs). I thought so anyway. I loved it. I loved the thing.

Collective memory focuses closely on this aspect of these gatherings. A good deal of rivalry became attached to meal provision – 'you knew where all the best meals were by

the time you were goin roond' (Taped interview, SA 1998.23, John Menzies) – and ceilidhs lasting well into the night were common, involving singing, playing of instrumental music, dancing, storytelling and drinking. Indeed, one farmer suggested that the main reason for the eventual decline of the neighbouring tradition was the introduction of the breathalyser! (Taped interview, SA 1988.22, Jim Mollison).

CHARITY LABOUR – THE LOVEDARG

While labour exchange based on principles of direct or 'balanced' reciprocity (Sahlins 1974) was commonly utilised in Perthshire, work undertaken without expectation of reciprocation also formed part of the localised informal economy. Termed 'charity labour' by O'Dowd in relation to Ireland (O'Dowd 1981) this might involve small-scale aid carried out by two or three neighbours on behalf of a friend in need, or else could take a much grander form. In Perthshire, the word *lovedarg* was commonly used to refer to a large work party which was formed on a given day to help out a specific member of the community who required aid. *Darg* (also appearing as *dairk*, *dark*, *dawerk*) is a Scots word originally meaning 'a day's work', but which also came to refer to the *results* of a day's work, or indeed, an area of land which could be worked in a day (*Scottish National Dictionary*). In modern Scots usage it often refers to work in general, having lost its temporal implication, giving rise to the use of such tautological phrases as 'a day's darg' or 'our daily darg'. Within the specific context of the lovedarg, however, the original meaning was maintained throughout its lifetime for I have failed to find an example of such a gathering having lasted for more than a single day. A lovedarg, quite literally, was a day's labour of love given by several members of a community to a neighbour in need.

While a lovedarg could be organised for a number of reasons and to perform a variety of tasks, it most frequently involved ploughing the land of a new tenant. A Perthshire correspondent to the *Scottish National Dictionary* writing in 1928 describes the lovedarg as a 'gift day of service of horses, men, etc., by neighbour farmers to a new-come farmer' while the prolific 19th century commentator on agricultural matters, Henry Stephens, applauds the concept of the 'ploughing day' which was regarded as 'the earnest of a hearty welcome to a stranger' and which saved the newcomer labour costs of 8 shillings per acre (Stephens 1855: 516). The synonyms 'ploughing day', 'day's ploughing', 'friendly darg', and 'ploughing darg' all appear in local newspaper reports within Perthshire during the second half of the 19th century, and with a few exceptions discussed below, clearly relate to the convening of work parties to help a newly installed farmer.

THE LOVEDARG AS INSURANCE POLICY

Witnesses interviewed during the present research suggest that the primary function of this custom was to offer practical help to enable the family to establish itself upon the

new holding. The first year of a tenancy was widely acknowledged as being the most critical, and yet most difficult, as new tenants were often lacking the necessary resources to begin full scale production, particularly if they had just made the ambitious transition from labourer to tenant. Neighbours were sensitive to the potential problems newcomers could encounter, and were well aware that given the precarious nature of agricultural production, one bad season could plunge farmers into a cycle of hardship from which they might never recover. It was this empathy which lay at the root of the lovedarg tradition:

> Lovedarg. Well a lovedarg is – say you took a farm over and you had no equipment yourself – you'd just put in to this farm, all the neighbours and that would come and plough the ground for ye. And that's what ye called a lovedarg. ... When we went into Tynayare in 1914 we had no horses and the neighbours all came, two pair from some farms and one pair – I think there was seventeen pair o horses came. And they ploughed the whole bloody lot – the redland and the lea and the stubble, they did a the ploughin in one day. ... That was tae help ye start you see. Till ye got organised. It was great that altogether. It was kindness in itself. (Taped interview, SA 1988.20, John Fisher)

John Fisher's family benefited from the large turnout in that the work party completed the ploughing on their smallholding in a few hours, and so proceeded to undertake the next steps of the production process, sowing and harrowing. On larger holdings, the ploughing was not always completed by nightfall, but in such cases the volunteers would not return the following day. A lovedarg was strictly a one-day gift, providing a *full* day's labour, but *only* a day's labour. It was therefore imperative that as large a force as possible be mobilised in order to ensure that the event brought the maximum benefit to the recipient. As a result, lovedargs could attract impressively large numbers of workers: of the extant reports from Perthshire which quantify attendees, the number of plough teams involved ranges from 17 to 55, the mean being 30.25. While these figures are undoubtedly inflated due to the fact that most of the reports appeared in local newspapers and therefore represent the largest and most newsworthy gatherings, it is nonetheless clear that lovedargs were significant events within the localised context, attracting large crowds of spectators as well as a high proportion of the most skilled members of the local agricultural work force.

As well as being offered to new tenants, lovedargs were also called on behalf of established farmers who were falling behind in their work for some reason:

> And we all helped one another: all helped. The lovedarg covered the whole thing. Somebuddie behind wi their work and ye all turned up wi yer plough and yer pair o horse and started plooin their field for them. Aye, that's been done in different times that I know of. ... Aye, oh the lovedarg was a common thing. (Taped interview, SLA 1985/44, William Adam)

Often it was illness which lay at the root of the problems which led to the mobilisation of a lovedarg, and in such genuine circumstances neighbouring farmers were quick to help out in this way. In extreme cases the need was even more acute:

I was at a lovedarg once at Newtyle – a place they called Davison. The farmer hanged himsel and this what they called a lovedarg was given tae the widow, and aw the farmers roon aboot brought a pair o horse or a couple o pair o horse. An yer great-grandfather and I wis at that. The whole farm was ploughed in one day. (Taped interview, SC 1986.16, Dave MacDonald)

The lovedarg was a one-off event, designed in this case to ease immediate hardship, and would not have been convened on a regular basis to help out the widow. Offers of aid from individuals may well have been made thereafter until she was able to make alternative arrangements or indeed resign the tenancy, but large scale charitable work gatherings of this kind were treated as special events requiring significant time investment by many people, and could not be brought into action on an ongoing basis.

While the forms of lovedarg discussed above may appear to represent community altruism, viewed diachronically, the tradition actually involved a form of hidden or 'generalised' reciprocity (Sahlins 1974). Participants knew that their efforts constituted an investment, for their willingness to attend such gatherings served to guarantee them similar help should the need ever arise. Such latent neighbourliness (Mann 1954: 164) was thus a kind of 'mutual' insurance policy, underwritten by fellow members of the farming community, for which labour service rather than cash formed both the premium and the payout.

This investment was a cultural ideal which was implicitly encouraged by Scottish society at the widest level. In his examination of the Scottish Poor Law, Cage recognises the emphasis placed upon 'non-reciprocal exchange among relatives and friends in time of need' (Cage 1981: 67) although he refuses to further examine the phenomenon as its 'whimsical nature' renders it impossible to measure (Cage 1981: 68). Attempts at quantitative measurement would certainly be fruitless in retrospect, for by their very nature such arrangements did not involve cash transactions and so were seldom recorded in any farm or household accounting systems. Qualitative data in the form of oral testimonies, however, strongly suggest that the participants themselves viewed the lovedarg as an important feature of neighbourhood organisation and self-preservation, which, while instigated and implemented at localised level, was clearly sanctioned from 'above'. The lovedarg should therefore be seen as a parallel to other facets of local informal economies such as friendly societies and credit networks (Mackelworth 1999; Tonks 1999; Weinbren 1999). Like its international parallels such as the Irish *meitheal* (O'Dowd 1981) and the Norwegian *dugnad* (Klepp 1982; Norddølum 1980; Holmsen 1999), the Perthshire lovedarg complemented the use of local credit networks and friendly societies in the struggle to maintain basic standards of living within a precarious climate of economic instability.

LOVEDARG AS GESTURE

Although embedded in pragmatic economics, the lovedarg served purposes which went beyond the purely functional. The gathering held on behalf of the suicide's widow

highlighted above is a case in point. This lovedarg was much more than a practical aid, for such community action served as a spectacular and convincing display of moral support, a vehicle for the expression of mourning for the death of one of their kind and a token of respect for the bereaved family. While certainly bringing welcome practical help, this lovedarg can also be seen to represent an extension of the more common cultural markers associated with death (Bennett 1992: 175-270), serving as a secular parallel to the funeral service itself.

An analysis of newspaper reports collected from the second half of the 19th century lends further support to the suggestion that the lovedarg could be used as a form of gesture as well as a practical aid. These reports promote a very different image from the oral accounts cited above, shifting the emphasis away from the concepts of charity and need towards a sense of recognition and celebration. Rather than being viewed as clandestine offers of help executed with minimum fuss in order to complete a necessary task quickly, the press portray these events almost as local carnivals held in honour of the recipient or host who is invariably described as an eminent member of the agricultural community. As well as detailing the number of participants, these accounts estimate the size of the crowd of spectators present, comment (always positively) on the standard of the work, report on any speeches delivered and on the amount and quality of food and drink provided, and often sign off with a short testimony to the worthiness and good character of the host. The following extracts are very typical:

> Madderty – Friendly Darg:– On Wednesday last the farmers in this parish turned out to give Mr John Ritchie of Abbey Farm, a friendly darg to lift a field of old lea at Woodend. There were 21 ploughs on the ground at an early hour, and an excellent day's work was done. The ploughmen were liberally treated to refreshments, and were entertained by Mr Ritchie in his own house. Mr Ritchie is well known, not only in Madderty, but in all the Strath, as an experienced agriculturist, a kind master, and an honest man. (*Perthshire Courier*, Feb. 9th 1864)

> Dalreoch – Ploughing Darg:– On Tuesday last Mr Robert Gardiner, Chapel Bank, who entered on a lease of this farm at Martinmas last, received a lovedarg from a few of his friends. About 8 o'clock, 52 ploughs started on one field. Both men and horses went over the ground in good order and their work was good. About half-past five o'clock, the field presented the appearance of seed time. The onlookers received a hearty welcome from Mr Gardiner, and were hospitably entertained. We must also add that he did ample justice to the ploughmen. Long may such a man as Mr Gardiner be spared amongst us. We wish him every success in his new undertaking. (*Perthshire Courier*, March 31st 1863)

These cases appear to be fulfilling a quite different function from the form of lovedarg received by John Fisher in 1914. There is no suggestion that either John Ritchie or Robert Gardiner were actually *in need* of help from their neighbours. Nor indeed were the recipients of another lovedarg variation which involved ploughing the land of local professionals whose contribution to the community went beyond the purely agricultural. In 1851, 35 plough teams from the contiguous Strathearn parishes of Crieff, Muthill

and Monzievaird and Struan ploughed a field of 18 acres belonging to a local farmer 'for his invaluable services as a veterinary surgeon for a series of years past' (*Perthshire Courier*, Feb. 20 1851). The following year the Church of Scotland minister of neighbouring Redgorton parish was also given a day's ploughing by the local farmers. The Rev. William Liston had been in post since 1812, and was obviously much admired and respected by his parishioners who saw fit to honour their 'esteemed pastor' in this way. The gathering was an 'expression of kindly feeling' and was interpreted by the reporter as 'evidence of the happy and harmonious manner in which the various religious denominations in this parish and neighbourhood are in the habit of deporting themselves towards each other' (*Perthshire Courier*, Feb. 26 1852). It is unclear why that particular year was chosen for this gesture. Liston was not retiring, for he remained in post until his death in 1864 (Scott 1869: 656). Having lost his wife some two years earlier, his parishioners may have decided that a show of support of this kind would serve as a boost to his morale, or perhaps the gathering was called to celebrate his election to the post of synod clerk, an important administrative position in the regional church hierarchy, which took effect two months after the lovedarg took place (ibid.). Whatever the reason, this example, along with all the other lovedarg forms reported in the press, was certainly not based on the principle of the charitable relief of economic hardship.

What, then, are we to make of these variations? Clearly, they all involve some form of gesture, and the tone of the reporting implies that they were seen as bringing a sense of prestige to the host, thus constituting a powerful symbol of community status and high social standing. Indeed, the writers almost seem to be measuring this status by the numbers of plough teams turning up, although reputations were politely repaired in cases where the attendance was obviously deemed to be rather low:

> Alyth:– Mrs Kidd having become tenant of the farm of Auchteralyth at Martinmas, her neighbours resolved to give her a friendly lift in the form of a day's ploughing. The number which turned out was twenty-nine; and but for the frost the previous night there would have been forty-six ploughs on the ground – no small proof of the estimation in which Mrs Kidd is deservedly held in the district. (*Perthshire Courier*, Dec. 29 1863)

A strong clue to the background and possible origin of these apparently 'non-essential' lovedarg gatherings is contained in another press report from 1863. Sir Thomas Munro, a Baronet and owner of the Lindertis Estate in Strathmore just over the county border in Angus, received his 'annual day's ploughing' from his tenants and neighbours on his home farm. Although termed a lovedarg by the *Perthshire Courier* (29th December 1863), this case differed somewhat from the other examples cited in that each worker attending was paid half a crown for his efforts, the equivalent of over two days' wages for a single day's work. His ability to pay the workers so generously reveals that Sir Thomas was not suffering from a lack of resources, a point underlined by the scale of the feast he also laid on for the participants. Rather, the use of the word 'annual' suggests that this particular gathering was a lingering survival of the labour exaction or corvée

tradition, whereby landlords would demand services from their tenants for a given number of days per year as a constituent element of their rental agreements, a feature which of course brought estate owners practical benefits but which also served to symbolically reinforce the power of the landed classes over their feudal inferiors. In Perthshire this was still common practice in the 1790s, although such clauses began to disappear from rental contracts early in the 19th century. Although long gone by the 1860s, Munro no doubt retained the memory of this labour 'homage' and was able to maintain its form through this re-shaped variation. The fact that the old labour exaction concept was referred to as the working of 'darg days' allowed the transition to this form of lovedarg to take place with semantic ease. While by the 1860s, the attendees were now earning good money for their efforts, Sir Thomas continued to get his home farm ploughed for him each year while the traditional power relationship remained intact, symbolically underlined through this re-contextualised lovedarg variant.

This meshing of labour exaction and grass roots mutual aid in the form of these 'elite' lovedargs is a feature of non-waged labour systems mirrored in many cultural and economic contexts throughout the world. Termed 'festive labour' by Erasmus (1956: 445) these events place great emphasis on the lavish provision and conspicuous consumption of food and drink, the host 'repaying' the workers immediately in the form of these provisions. The numbers attending tend to be significantly larger than is the case within exchange arrangements, and no reciprocation of labour is expected (Moore 1975: 272-3). Festive traditions also differ from the exchange form in terms of the status relationship between participants and host, for while exchange arrangements tend to involve social equals, festive hosts are often economically and socially more powerful than attendees. The ostentatious celebrations bear witness to their wealth, while also acting as the incentive for poorer workers to turn up (Erasmus 1956: 457). In this way, 'big' farmers are able to take advantage of their poorer neighbours by distorting existing mutual aid frameworks to meet their own needs.

The Perthshire lovedarg tradition fits neatly into this summarising model, although it is unclear to what extent those attending gatherings held for the farming elite were actually being exploited in any sense. The thoughts of the ploughmen attending remain elusive despite the power of oral testimony, for this particular form of lovedarg does not appear to have survived into the period of living memory. All of the reports relating to the elite form derive from parishes in the south and east of the county where large, commercialised units were the norm, and where the ploughmen would have had to attend such a gathering under the terms of their contractual agreements whether they wished to or not. These lovedargs were therefore essentially employers' 'clubs' – organised by employers for employers – and as such attendance says little about the attitudes of those carrying out the actual work. For them, a day's ploughing involved the same effort regardless of where it was or who it was for, and as such no exploitation was taking place, except perhaps in terms of their use as pawns in the status games of their employers.

A SENSE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD

Those who worked within Perthshire farming during the first half of the 20th century and whose life stories I have recorded, generally show very positive attitudes towards the concept of mutual aid. For them, all variants of communal labour are succinctly encapsulated in the simple term, *neighbouring*. Exchange labour and charity labour are of course structural categories imposed by scholars in our attempts to make sense of empirical data, and no such clear dichotomy is suggested within the narratives of the participants themselves. *To neighbour*, was to take part in the communal working traditions of the neighbourhood, whether as part of a sheep clipping circle, at the threshing mill or as a lovedarg participant. When pressed in interviews, they certainly demonstrate their awareness of the different social rules and etiquette which were attached to these various forms of communal activity, but it is the general principle which is most often highlighted and admired. John Fisher's views are both typical and unequivocal:

> There was more neighbourliness in these days than what there is now. ... Folk weren't living just for money entirely. It was more community spirit, you know, which you don't get nowadays. Money's done all that out. (Taped interview, SA 1988.20)

These sentiments were shared by many of those interviewed. And yet it is important not to over-romanticise this past by constructing a picture of a bucolic utopia populated by tireless altruists working solely towards the common good. My collected testimonies are peppered with enough anecdotes of conflicts – local rifts, petty jealousies and farmyard fisticuffs – to immediately rule out any such mawkish vision of Perthshire's rural past. Neighbouring did not create a climate of *communitas*, Turner's term for a bonding of people which overides normal social ordering (Turner 1974), for it is clear that the lovedarg could be used to solidify existing class hierarchies rather than dissolve them.

And yet this caution against romanticism should not be allowed to block an appreciation of the importance of the neighbouring tradition to the shaping of a sense of local belonging – a sense of neighbourhood. Unlike many forms of community-based gathering traditions which, as Susan Smith shows in relation to the Peebles Beltane festival, can be used to identify and marginalise 'outsiders' (Smith 1993: 292), the lovedarg served as a positive welcome to new members of the local farming community. All variants of communal labour gatherings brought people together, providing an almost unique context for both professional and social interaction involving significant numbers of local participants. This 'togetherness' gave a different slant to that experienced in other forms of social gatherings such as dances, weddings and funerals, in that mutual aid by definition involved 'work'. To all my interviewees, work was the central building block of their narratives. Levels of professional skill were discussed and used as a measure of respect. Talk was of such and such a person being 'guid haundit' (good with his hands) or 'a guid worker'; farm hands would 'walk the district to see somebody else's

stacks' (Taped interview, SA 1998.23, John Menzies) in order to judge the competencies of their neighbours. Communal labour gatherings were important in that they provided a positive vehicle for such rivalries to become manifest. With the decline in neighbouring since the 1950s, the opportunities for such regular interaction have been lost:

> Now you never – very seldom – see yer neighbours the same as ye did in those times. (Taped interview, SA 1998.23, John Menzies)

The rules which regulated the tradition have been forgotten, and so even where a latent willingness to offer help to a neighbour remains, the framework of understanding which once made this possible does not exist. The entire charity labour system was based upon an *offer* of help as opposed to a request from the host, but now neighbours tend to be more cautious for fear of causing offence:

> If the boy was needin help, you went and gave him help, it didnae matter what it was. But now, you see, it's difficult. You wouldnie go and offer: if he asked, fair enough. That has gone in the thing as well. (Taped interview, SA 1998.23, John Menzies)

Whether coloured by sentimentality or not, this is a loss which certainly appears to be mourned by those for whom it was once an accepted part of life. There is nostalgia in their narratives, certainly, but as Lowenthal reminds us, nostalgia is ubiquitous in our relationships with our past (1985: 4-13). It is a central ingredient in both individual and collective memory, and should not be used as an excuse to negate the power of oral testimony.

CONCLUSION

In this brief historical ethnography of communal labour gatherings in rural Perthshire during the century from 1850 to 1950, I have argued that the principle of neighbouring fulfilled two central functions. Firstly, in both its manifest and latent forms, it constituted an integral part of localised informal economies, obviating the need for the hiring of extra waged workers for certain highly labour-intensive tasks, while also acting as a form of mutual insurance policy to help prevent economic hardship. In this respect, these labour gatherings complemented other elements of the informal economy such as friendly societies and credit networks, although more research is certainly required before a clearer view of the inter-relationship between these phenomena at the micro level can be gained. Secondly, I have tried to show the importance of the neighbouring principle to the creation of a sense of neighbourhood at localised levels. The lovedarg tradition in particular operated within different contexts to shape local identity in a number of ways. It served to extend the hand of friendship to newcomers (although only at the social level of tenant and above); it could be used as a powerful elegiac symbol of mourning, and it often functioned as a token of respect or gratitude to an individual whose contribution to local community life was deemed exceptional. Yet

the lovedarg also served to maintain and indeed crystalise social hierarchies through its recontextualisation as a status symbol, the status being derived from and measured by the numbers of participants attending. Most significantly of all, though, the collected testimonies of those for whom neighbour cooperation was once axiomatic stress that these gatherings provided an opportunity simply to *be* together in a working environment. This was the platform upon which relationships were instigated, fostered, broken down and re-kindled, where the dynamics of social interaction could be played out for good and bad, and upon which *neighbourhood* – the sense of belonging derived from *neighbouring* – was fashioned.

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