

WESTERN ISLES: A REPLY TO MR. MacGREGOR

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A MINOR literary storm has been blowing in Scotland over a book by Alasdair Alphin MacGregor, a writer of popular travelogues about the Highlands and Islands.

For more than twenty years Mr. MacGregor has been known as the author of sentimental, romantic, innocuous books about the Highlands and Islands, beautifully illustrated, but creating a dream world far removed from the realities of life in a community where men and women must struggle hard to earn their daily bread.

Now Mr. MacGregor has recanted. He confesses that he looked at the Hebrideans in the past "through coloured spectacles", and he has written a book, in which he does not "gloss over the less pleasant things", but claims to give "a contemporary account of the Islanders and their ways, free from any 'nebulous twentieth century impressionism'".

The result is startling. Mr. MacGregor accuses the Hebrideans of being lazy, greedy, cruel, dirty, dishonest and immoral, and he does so in the most extravagant language. On the subject of immorality, for instance, he declares (in space of little over a page) that dances in the Islands afford the occasion for much promiscuity, that morals are extremely lax, that "bastardy has long been common—nay, notorious", that in Benbecula it is "often difficult to know who was born in wedlock and who was not", and that it is well nigh impossible to enter a house in some of the Islands "where there is not at least one bastard."

Mr. MacGregor's book has not only received widespread publicity from the British press, being good newspaper 'copy'; it has been quoted extensively in Canada and U. S. A., much to the annoyance of Highland and Island people who have settled there, and who, like most Scots, are still proud of their homeland and their origins.

As a writer, Mr. MacGregor is of no significance, but his present book, *The Western Isles* raises some important questions of fact, and of literary ethics.

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The newspaper publicity that the book has received gives it a borrowed importance. Moreover, it is published by Messrs. Robert Hale of London in a standard series of "County Books," and the claim is made that the author is "the greatest living authority on the Highlands and Islands of Scotland." The author himself claims that the book is factual, and he takes it into the political field by his repeated argument that public expenditure on the Isles is "sheer waste."

A community that is "libelled" in this way is at a serious disadvantage, because the law gives no redress, and once a colourful story has gone into circulation, it is difficult to overtake it; in fact any attempt to do so through the popular press may only serve to give it greater publicity. In the circumstances, it may be useful to examine Mr. MacGregor's charges, and the methods by which he attempts to establish them, so that these things will be "on the record", if the book is later quoted in Canada as an authority on the Scottish Islands.

Mr. MacGregor's book belongs to a class of popular literary journalism that is currently enjoying a vogue; the light, descriptive personal travel book, in which the author mixes together, haphazardly, objective descriptions of the places visited, comments and observations of his own, quotations from the writings of previous visitors, and excursions into byeways of history and folklore.

Books of this nature can be quite good reading. They can bring the pleasures of travel to those who cannot afford that luxury, and can broaden the reader's mind with first hand, though superficial, accounts of other people, places, customs, and climes.

Normally the critic is not greatly concerned whether such a book is true or false; he treats it as entertainment and judges it solely on its readability. But Mr. MacGregor, by the damaging nature of his attack, invites a much more severe standard of criticism. Accusations of immorality and dishonesty are serious for a community that sends hundreds of young girls to seasonal work as waitresses and chambermaids in mainland hotels, and one finds it necessary to catalogue a formidable list of errors and blemishes.

There is evidence of haste, carelessness and lack of revision. There are numerous inaccuracies of fact, contradictions and inconsistencies. The book lacks objectivity, there is no frame of reference by which the reader can assess the charges made, and there is a lack of precision about time and place that

frequently creates the impression that events that happened in the distant past belong to the present day. The best evidence has not been used, and the evidence adduced does not support the statements made. Sweeping generalities are based on isolated instances. Important facts have been omitted or suppressed, and an altogether misleading picture is given of the manners, morals and problems of the people.

Mr. MacGregor, for instance, states that "the population of the Long Island has shown little change during the present century," despite the fact that elsewhere he quotes figures that show that the population dropped from "just over 44,000" in 1922 to "about 38,000" in 1935—a fall of almost 14% in 13 years. Elsewhere he says that "Martin Martin, writing of the Western Isles as he found them in 1695, gives their population at about 40,000. If this computation be an accurate one, as it may well be, it would seem as though the total population has altered little since the close of the eighteenth century." Apart from the fact that 1695 is the close of the seventeenth, not the eighteenth century this statement is absurdly at variance within the facts. At the first census in 1801 the population of the Western Isles was considerably less than half the figure given by Martin Martin, and, if Mr. MacGregor accepts Martin Martin, he must explain how that sensational decline occurred.

The truth is that the population of the Long Island grew very rapidly during the 19th century, causing numerous social and economic problems, and contributing directly to the agrarian agitation that led to the passing of the Crofters Acts. These Acts gave the small peasant farmers, or crofters, security of tenure and well defined rights, with access to the Land Court for the settlement of their disputes, but made no provision for a growing population. The crofter was protected, the elder son who succeeded him was also protected, but there was no land for the younger members of the family, and on them the pressure to emigrate became greater than ever. As a result the population dropped very sharply between 1911 and 1931, creating an entirely new set of problems.

No account of the Western Isles can be considered well informed that overlooks the problems caused by the disappearance of a whole generation of young women condemned to an unnatural spinsterhood. The disbalance of the population in some of the more remote areas was so great that they are now being depopulated with little hope of recovery and, even in the areas least affected, acute economic stresses have been

set up. Personal stresses, arising from the same set of circumstances, have had an effect on the social and possibly even the religious life of the Islands.

One of the most obvious effects of the mass emigration of the 1920's is the very large number of ageing women in the Islands who are supported by public relief of various kinds. Their history is that they remained at home to look after their parents when the rest of the young folks emigrated. They lived for a time on the produce of the croft, augmented by the parents' old age pensions. When the parents died, the daughter was generally too young to qualify for a pension herself, but too old to learn an occupation and take up a job.

Mr. MacGregor seems to have no understanding at all of these facts although they are fundamental to any appreciation of conditions in the Western Isles today.

The lot of these faithful daughters, who stayed behind to keep the home, has been greatly eased by the extension of the Social Services, but the application of a system of National Insurance designed for industrial areas has, at the same time, created new problems for a sparsely populated crofting community. Full time workers in industry can be docketed, placed in categories and subjected to rules, but a crofter in the Western Isles may belong to two or three different categories at the same time.

As a crofter he is "self-employed". He pays the highest rate of contribution, although his money income is often negligible, and he receives the smallest range of benefits because he is never "unemployed". The same person, later in the season, may be a labourer on the roads, an employed worker of the County Council, paying a lower rate of contributions and entitled to the full scale of benefits including unemployment pay, but theoretically, he can never get that pay because when eventually he is dismissed, he becomes not an unemployed roadman, but a self-employed crofter again. Actually the Ministry decides which is his major classification, and he remains in that group irrespective of seasonal changes of occupation. But either he is getting the uncovenanted benefit of unemployment pay when he is working his croft, or he is going without unemployment pay when he is partially unemployed and earning little.

Share-fishermen are self-employed people, but the Government recognised their claim to unemployment benefit, and the boat is now regarded as the fisherman's employer. Out of the

boat's share of the earnings comes the employer's contribution to the scheme. Out of the fisherman's own share comes the worker's contribution.

But the crofter-weaver, although in much the same position as the share-fisherman, is still regarded as a self-employed person because it has defied the wit of the Ministry to devise a method of establishing whether a weaver, working on a commission basis at his own home, is genuinely unemployed, or just idling.

Naturally such a situation gives rise to anomalies. Sometimes the crofter gains, because he can slip through a loophole in the Act to qualify for some benefit that was not intended for him. More often he is penalised as a "non-conformist". Within the past year several hundred Harris Tweed weavers have had to leave their homes and go into the merchant navy because they had neither work nor unemployment pay.

Again, Mr. MacGregor has no understanding of these facts, and dismisses the situation with the comment, "many of them continue as individualists on their crofts only so long as they are a burden to the state, a burden to the ratepayer, a burden on industry as a whole, which is merely another way of saying that they are a burden on all who truly work and produce."

Mr. MacGregor's account of the industry contains many misstatements on facts and concludes with an extraordinary calculation that is designed to show that 106 workers (50 factory hands and 56 collectors) earn, or should earn, it is not clear which, £40,000 per annum. The whole calculation is absurd because it has escaped Mr. MacGregor's notice that the seaweed collectors work in teams so that the earnings he attributes to single individuals are really earnings of groups of three or four. He also fails to allow for the intermittent seasonal nature of seaweed collection, and he makes a mistake of £100 in a summation of £850, which error he multiplies by 50 in the next line of his calculation. Omitting the error in arithmetic, which puts the result £5000 out, even on his own premises, the result may be summarised thus: if we assume that 50 factory workers receive £2 per week more than they actually do; that 56 collectors of seaweed receive the wages of more than 150; that they earn the maximum possible wages each week irrespective of the fact that their work is dependent on favourable conditions of wind, tide and weather; and that they can go on working for 50 weeks in the year, although the work is really seasonal and intermittent, the result is £40,000. That is not a "contemporary account" of the seaweed industry free from "impressions." It is a ramb-

ling pagoda of illusion and error which does no credit to the literary architect who fashioned it, and yet many people will accept this account of the seaweed industry as fact on the strength of the reputation that his publishers give Mr. MacGregor in their blurb.

The Hebrideans have proved to be satisfactory and reliable workers in the Harris Tweed industry, which has now a turn-over of more than £1,000,000 per annum, largely earned in the competitive export market. Island girls are in great demand in mainland hotels, hospitals and private homes, because of their reputation for reliability, honesty and hard work, and for the same reasons Island seamen are given preference by most of the large shipping companies. The problem in the Islands is not that the people are unfitted for modern industrial employment, but that the population is too small, and too widely scattered to provide the numbers that modern industrial methods demand. Only in Stornoway, and the immediately adjacent villages is there a large enough reserve of labour to attract industry, and it is significant that a firm that had hosiery interests in England for a number of years is now transferring part of its plant to Stornoway because labour of the right quality is more easily obtained there than on the outskirts of London.

On moral questions Mr. MacGregor is equally ill-informed. His allegations of promiscuity and illegitimacy are founded on gossip, inference and imagination, and are at variance with the known facts. He makes wild and offensive charges without a shred of real evidence to support them, although the evidence is at hand for anyone who really wants it in the annual returns of the Registrar General for Scotland. These returns show that the illegitimacy figures for Lewis, the largest of the Hebrides, are consistently below the Scottish average, and that during the war years the Lewis figures were below the national average by 25%. Although these figures provide a conclusive answer to Mr. MacGregor's charges, they do an injustice to the Isles. Immorality takes many forms, and a high illegitimacy rate in a rural area—even if it did exist—proves not a lower standard of morals but a lower standard of sophistication. The Registrar General's returns for illegitimacy provide a measure that is, in effect, weighted against the Islands, and a much more reliable index is the incidence of venereal disease. In a community that sends a high proportion of its young men into the merchant service, and of its young women into other exposed or vulner-

able occupations, one would expect a relatively high incidence, but, actually, venereal disease is almost unknown.

It is surprising that Mr. MacGregor, who claims to be a serious writer on social affairs dealing only with the incontrovertible fact, did not seek out the figures for himself, but the reason is explained in his preface, where he says that his principal sources of information have been letters to the editor appearing in the press, reports of police court proceedings, and matters discussed by public bodies. To this he adds the naive comment that "these facts are no less true because they now appear between the covers of a book."

Letters to the editor, police court reports, and statements at local councils are useful social documents, if correctly interpreted, but no one who pretends that his researches carry weight would make them a primary source of sociological data. Police court reports are valueless unless reduced to a statistical basis that gives some comparison with a known standard or with other places, and statements at public bodies, and letters to the press, by their very nature, are partisan and biased. In the thrust and counter-thrust of debate, the pattern of opinion takes shape. Read in their context, with the replies from the other side, by people who know the circumstances, speeches and letters serve a useful purpose. But, when an author comes along with preconceived notions, selects only the statements that agree with his own views, selects from these the most damaging phrases and adds his own interpretation the result is not 'fact' but error distorted and magnified, masquerading as the truth.

Moreover, Mr. MacGregor's charges are not supported even by the warped and wobbly plank that he claims as a foundation. The charges of cruelty and immorality—probably the worst in the book—are not backed by a single quotation from any of the sources that he has named. They rest on statements attributed to anonymous gossips who, by the nature of their conversation, would appear to be of an unusually morbid or prurient turn of mind.

In some ways more serious than the errors that Mr. MacGregor falls into himself are the false impressions that he creates in the mind of the reader by confused writing, and lack of precision as to time and place. One of the features of the book that the popular press on both sides of the Atlantic have fastened on is the suggestion that brawls frequently occur at Island funerals. Levelled at people who are, if anything, excessively pious, and whose funerals are conducted with scrupulous decorum, the

charge is ludicrous, and when the passage is analysed it appears that although eight pages are devoted to funerals, they contain only two short references to the Western Isles, neither of them supporting the statement that funerals are unruly. The remainder of the passage is taken up with descriptions of funerals, all of which occurred outwith the Western Isles, and some of which occurred three hundred years ago!

In the same way when dealing with superstition, some quite valuable material about reputed cures of the Kings Evil by the laying on of hands, is rendered valueless because it is mixed up in a hotch potch with material drawn from all parts of Scotland over a period of several centuries.

The suggestion that witchcraft is still practised in the Western Isles is conveyed by a quotation from the report of a recent Land Court case in Stornoway concerning the will of a man who was said to have believed in the Evil Eye. It is clear from the report that the Land Court did not accept the allegation, that the man who made the allegation regarded a belief in witchcraft as evidence of feeble mindedness, and that even if the man had believed in witchcraft he was unique in that respect because it was stated that there was no one else like him in the district. Yet that is the basis for the suggestion, conveyed in a rhetorical question, that the Western Islanders—not some, but apparently all—still cherish a belief in witchcraft.

One could go on indefinitely multiplying instances, because Mr. MacGregor is not, as he is represented, an unbiased observer seeing the Hebrides in a clear and steady glow, but a man of unusually strong views—many of them, no doubt, admirable—who judges the Islands by a standard all his own. A penal reformer, vegetarian, anti-vivisectionist and life-long abstainer, Mr. MacGregor does not see life in the same terms as ordinary men and women. And to complicate things further, in several of his chapters—when he writes about fairies for instance—he relapses into the “impressionist” manner he so emphatically repudiates in his preface.

There is nothing wrong in having views that ordinary people think peculiar. It is to the small minority in every age who see things differently that we owe the progress of the human race. But it is one thing for a man of strong views to seek to reform his fellow men by turning propagandist or preacher; it is very different when he applies his unusual scale of values to his neighbours to give spice and flavour to a literary pot-boiler, written for purely commercial reasons and selling at 15/ a time.

If Mr. MacGregor's book is a success on the stalls we may be at the beginning of a new vogue in which the hitherto innocuous travel book sets out on a sinister career. Publishers may look, not for the accurate observer, not for the chatty writer whose pleasant personality glows through otherwise unilluminated pages, but for the man who looks on life with a jaundiced eye, and who can be relied on to say things sufficiently disagreeable to make people talk and want to buy the book. There may be a fortune still in store for the journalist or author who writes *Forever Amber* not as fiction, but as the truth about his neighbours.

Mr MacGregor's standards of accuracy do not differ greatly from those of other writers in his class. He has come under fire not because his book is misleading, but because it hurts. The reaction has come from the Hebrideans themselves, because they dislike being ridiculed and abused. There has been no outcry from the critics that a code has been violated, and the publishers have greeted the protests with delight. It is not their business to please or even placate the Hebrideans, and they know that a book can sell on notoriety more readily than on anything else.

It is a problem to know how to deal with a book like *The Western Isles*. To pass it by in silence might be read as acknowledging the truth of the charges. To reply is to give the book greater publicity than its merits could command.

In the world of commerce, which so many literary men despise, the seller of adulterated goods is punished when he is caught, but, in the world of literature, the man who boldly labels his stock "the most adulterated goods in town" is likely to top the market.

The Hebrideans are fighting their little battle with a very civilised and satirical sense of humor. At concerts and at *ceilidhs*, in poems and cartoons, they poke fun at the book for its absurdities, and the gesture gives them satisfaction, but in the outside world these things are quite unnoticed, and the sale of the book goes merrily on.

But perhaps after all, it is not the morals of the Hebrideans that are on trial in the controversy, but the literary morals of the day.