Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology

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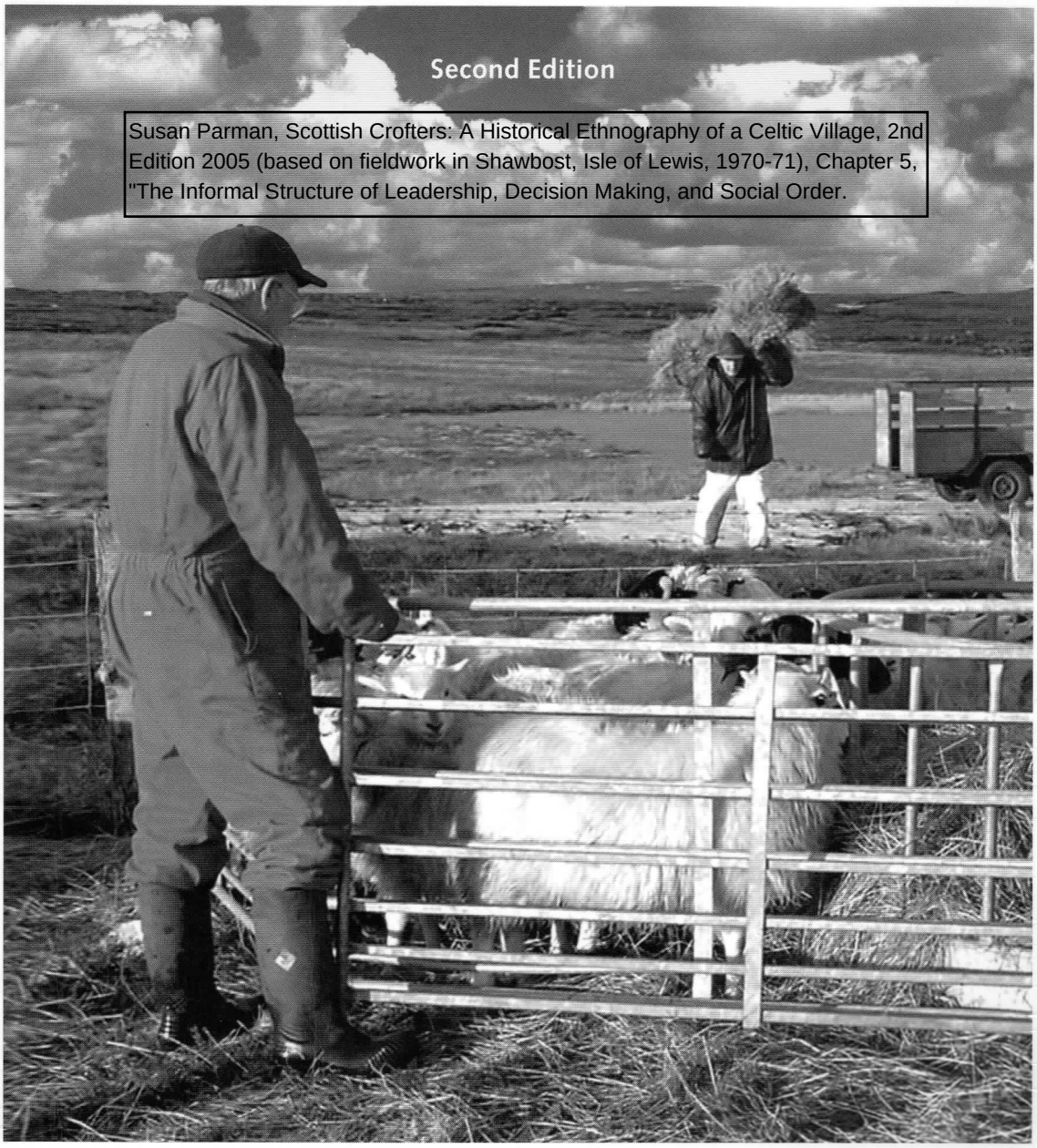
Scottish Crofters: A Historical Ethnography of a Celtic Village

Susan Parman



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5/The Informal Structure of Leadership, Decision Making, and Social Order

The whalebone arch on p. 98 was erected in the township of Bragar on the west side of Lewis by a crofter who found it on the beach, dragged it home, and erected it with a harpoon hanging from its crest. It is clearly visible from the road and many people stop, as I did in 1970 and many times over the years, most recently in 2003 when I noted that it had been given a concrete-like coating. This durable symbol of idiosyncrasy seems to belie a fundamental rule regarding the presentation of self in crofting communities: keep a low profile. A common form of praise in Gaelic memoria published on the anniversary of someone's death is "His voice was never heard in the community."

This chapter is concerned with informal patterns of leadership, decision making, and social order that lie behind the formal structures of bureaucracy in nation-states in which crofters participate as citizens of Scotland. It explores the pitfalls and strategies of constructing relationships in a tightly knit network in which everyone knows everyone; the management of front stage and back stage representations of self (Goffman 1959); the constraints on friendship and the role of gossip. The chapter attempts to illuminate the paradox that while the general rule guiding behavior is to keep a low profile, those who break this rule do so frequently with an excess of panache.

The statement, "A piece of land completely surrounded by legislation," describes not only the croft but the existence of the crofter in a political system maintained by the nation-state of Great Britain in the context of the European Union. Numerous government organizations affect the lives of Scottish crofters. The Crofters Commission, the Highlands and Islands Development Board (now Highlands and Islands Enterprise), the Department of Agriculture, the Council of Social Services, the Crofters Union, the Weavers Union, the Wool Marketing Board, and the Land Court are only a few agencies in Britain's centralized bureaucracy that specifically affect crofting. Like every other British citizen, crofters pay taxes, are included in census surveys, are affected by legislature passed in London, and submit to the same police, solicitors, and judges who determine the course of law and order in urban environments. However, the

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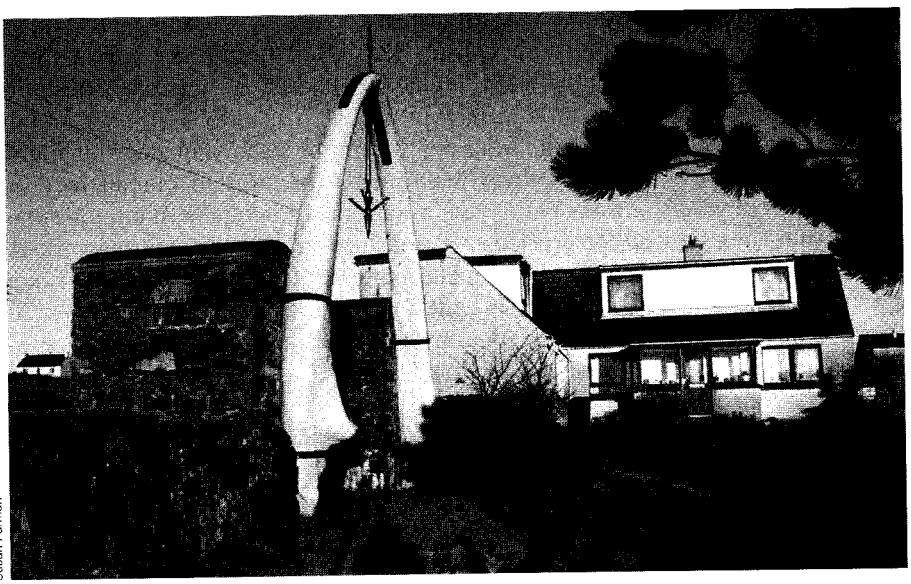

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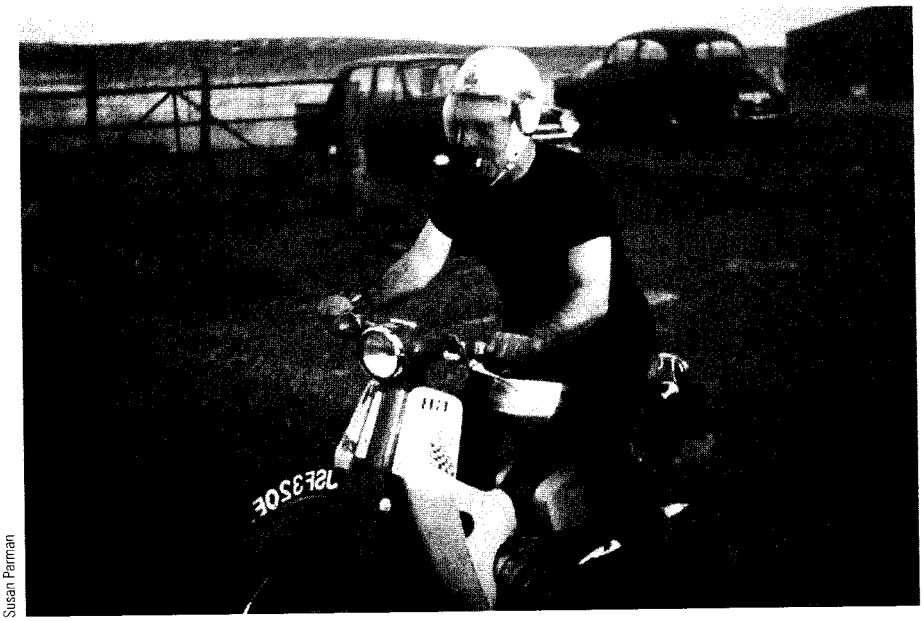
The whalebone arch in 1970 (top) and 2003 (bottom)

crofting township has its own informal structure of leadership, decision making, and social control.

In Chapter 3 I described characteristics of the crofting township that make it more of a communal entity than an aggregate of individual crofts. Despite the trends toward individualism in land use, members of crofting townships must act together in developing township reseedings, building township fences, applying



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"Mullach a bhaile" (the talk of the town)

for grants to improve peat roads, deciding whether or not to argue against a request for an individual apportionment to be taken out of the common grazing, and making other decisions regarding outside agencies, other townships, and internal affairs. (For a recent example of a community decision-making project, see the Crofters Commission 2001/2002 Report discussion of the Barvas and Brue Crofting Consulting Group composed of two shareholders from three townships and a representative from the Community Council and Community Association; also see Issie MacPhail's discussion of her thesis, "Geographies of Crofting, Crofters and Community Action: Case Studies in Assynt, Skye and Lewis," on the Highlands Listserv on July 29, 1999.)

The communal features of crofting are frequently conceptualized in historical terms. Crofters conceive of themselves as a marginal minority, the jetsam of the Clearances, that needs to maintain a united front against outside forces. Symbols of authority are both respected (crofters are interested in the latest gossip about the royal British family, respect education, and give at least token respect to persons in formal positions of leadership) and distrusted, which makes leadership a hazardous undertaking and decision making complicated. Crofters have a cynical disregard for the explicit trappings of authority, are critical of decisions made by formal leaders, and utter dire predictions of failure. A symbol of authority could be anyone, from Mrs. Perrins judging a beauty contest to a county councilman, but the most frequently distrusted symbol of authority is the laird and his or her agents. Although the crofter is guaranteed fair rent and security of tenure, the landlord is authorized to enter the croft to exercise a variety of rights, including mining, quarrying, searching for minerals, using spring water, cutting peat, cutting timber, making roads, having access to sea or loch, and most

importantly, to hunt, shoot, or fish.[1] The crofter has no rights to fish for salmon in the laird's river or hunt for deer in the laird's deer forest. As discussed in Chapter 3, the crofter now has the opportunity to become his or her own laird, a situation fraught with ambivalence.

Within the township, most decisions are made in a low-profile, democratic process that either lumbers slowly toward consensus or coughs up a "tyrant." To put oneself forward in explicit positions of leadership is to put oneself above one's neighbors and risk accusations of tyranny; it is a threat to communal solidarity, to the egalitarian code of township life. Nevertheless, the township requires local mediators, people with verbal and literate skills to deal with the elaborate bureaucracy of larger British society. Usually individuals who already occupy prominent positions of high status fill these positions of leadership. The schoolmaster and members of the mill owner family, for example, are constantly being called on to serve on various committees and boards (the minister, although perceived to be a person of high status, should not involve him or herself with such mundane matters). But even as they perform these duties, they are criticized for being "toffs," "too full of themselves." To take up a position of leadership is to offer oneself up for crucifixion, and many people go to elaborate lengths to distance themselves from the negative attributes of leadership, which can make decision making a torturous, indirect process.

In 1971 I was asked to serve as secretary for the Village Hall Committee, a youth club whose purpose was to promote recreation for the young people of the community. When I asked who the other officers were, I was told that there were none, the fault of the area youth organizer who had been lax in getting one started. When I met the area youth organizer, a young man from the island who lived in Stornoway, he told me that it was the responsibility of the community to start youth clubs; his job was to service these groups once they got started. I found out that the Council of Social Services had foreseen the difficulty of recruiting leaders from rural communities and had established an arrangement whereby the local councillor, the grazing clerk, and the postmaster would serve as the trustees for the hall. But on Lewis these persons were usually devout members of the Free Church, which was adamantly opposed to the worldly activities of the Village Hall (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Eventually a member of the mill family agreed to start the club, and I served as secretary for awhile. I was surprised when I was given books of former minutes; no one had told me that the club had a history. But when I tried to reconstruct the events of previous meetings, I ran into a curious difficulty. The minutes were in English, as all formal documents are, which meant that all the names were in English rather than in patronymics or nicknames. In an account of a conflict that led to temporary closure of the hall, at least three different people with

[1]A poignant story told in 2003 by the son of a deceased crofter may be idiosyncratic but it also provides insight into the impact of the crofter/laird conflict on the association of crofters with environmental issues. "All that week you could hear shooting along the crofts. The landlords can shoot at anything, they have the right. My father was down at the end of the croft. He found a huge white bird. He didn't know what kind it was, he'd never seen anything like it. He thought maybe it was migrating and got lost or wounded. He used to feed it. Eventually it got so tame it would follow him into the house. And then one day it was gone."

the same "English" name played important roles in the events—but no one could remember (or, more likely, no one would tell me) who was who. Individual contributions to Ciall history had been concealed in a smokescreen of formal English record keeping.

The position of township clerk is difficult because of its visibility. Most individuals take it with the understanding that it is obligatory for all males of the village to take their turn and that everyone should recognize that they are doing it with great reluctance. They emphasize that they are working themselves to the bone for the good of their neighbors.

A few people, however, are carried away with the heady spirit of power; they begin to swagger a bit, become a manifest representation of the bureaucracy with its rules and deadlines. "Here comes Twenty Questions," muttered one man about a township clerk who took seriously all the forms to be filled out. Angry with another clerk who said he would report those who had done less than their share of work on the peat road to the Crofters Commission, one man called the clerk "His Lordship" who was "lording it over everyone in the village." Some were accused of having taken advantage of their position, for example, to get an apportionment. There appear to be two modes of operation in political gear: silent invisibility or aggressive visibility.[2] Only a few people manage to achieve a happy medium, but they need a tough skin.

Padruig a Khing (Patrick the King), nicknamed for his willingness to take on visible positions of responsibility, was the township clerk in 1970. An energetic, sociable man in his 30s, he appeared to enjoy the task of visiting the households with information about subsidies, brucellosis testing, and sheep drives, although he described it as an unpleasant chore because of the visibility of the position and the probability of becoming involved with disputes. The clerk provides agricultural statistics for the Crofters Commission, applies for and disperses subsidies, arranges transportation for fencing, sand, and fertilizer, pays contractors, and so on. His most difficult job is to enforce communal participation; all too quickly he will find himself labeled "his lordship," or nicknamed "the constable," his home referred to as the "House of Parliament." Most decisions are made not by visible leaders such as the township clerk but by a few invisible community leaders who mobilize public opinion. All decisions are made in the background rustle of discussion and rumor long before a vote is taken in a committee meeting; most explicit decisions are unanimous.

CROFTER VERSUS LAIRD

On a cold, sleet-hammered day in February 1971, the temporary postman (a cousin of the postmaster, who was sick with pneumonia) walked into my room and announced that I was "summoned to the castle." Mrs. Perrins had called his house early that morning (he had one of the few phones in the village) and asked him to tell me to be at her home by the middle of the afternoon.

[2]In 2003 I asked someone what he thought of the new Land Reform Bill and the possibility of townships acting together to buy land as a group. He replied, "It's like the Balkans here, with cliques in the different neighborhoods, everything run by committees. No one can make a decision except by tyranny and fascism. Uilleam [not his real name] is a little Hitler. All he needs is a mustache. He ignores the rules and attacks people who follow them."

Intrigued and annoyed (it was decidedly not the type of day I wanted to be out in), I battled my way through the gales to her "castle"—a small trailer on her deceased husband's estate. A blast of hot air poured through the door as I went in—there were four electric burners in the small room, but the five short-haired dogs shivered pathetically when Mrs. Perrins waved them out of the chair I was to sit in. "Anthropology is just part of history," she stated without preamble, and launched into a meandering diatribe about the family tree of Christ, the predictions contained in Isaiah on the modern state of Israel, and the prehistoric beehive huts on a neighboring estate. She was drunk, and the files of her "research" were piled perilously close to the electric heaters. "They're sending the new head of the Highlands and Islands Board[3] out here next month to hear my plans to revitalize the tweed business," she confided. "It's a secret, but I'll soon be starting loom-powered weaving. The hand loom can't do exciting designs, like diamonds, but it does give Harris Tweed weavers the finest thighs in the world! The definition of Harris Tweed implies a muddy quality, since the yarn must mix at least two colors. But I prefer sharp lines of color. I should have enough orders to keep all the weavers of Lewis busy—to hell with the Orb mark." From grandiose plans to save the Highlands she went on to explain "why Hebrideans are fat" (a Lamarckian theory that related long periods of eating salted meat and fish to water retention). I left the trailer at about 6:00; the pitch-black darkness of winter in northern latitudes had already descended, and the small light of her trailer was almost immediately extinguished.

Britain is a land still obsessed with class based on birth; and while Scotland tweaks this image with a humor born in part of a poor past and a memory of exploitation and what Michael Hechter calls "internal colonialism," it participates with an intensity that marks it as irrevocably different from Americans (who while just as obsessed with the markers of class, such as what school you went to and what car you drive, believe that the only difference between upper class and lower class is money, which they expect any day now to have).[4]

Scotland has the most concentrated pattern of private landownership in Europe. Half of Scotland is owned by 579 landowners, and more than a third of this land is held in estates of 20,000 acres or more. Much of this pattern of ownership is the result of laws that, over the past 300 years, made it easier in Scotland to transfer common land to private property (cf. Callander 1987).

[3]The Highlands and Islands Development Board, now Highlands and Islands Enterprise, is a common target of criticism among crofters because of its ambivalence about the contradictory goals of economic pragmatism and Highland ideology. During the year I was there, a new chairman was appointed, and the appointment was widely criticized for being politically motivated and totally inappropriate to the needs of the Highlands—especially because the person was not a Gaelic-speaking Highlander. A month after I was "summoned" to Mrs. Perrins's "castle," I was giving a slide show on New Mexico to the schoolchildren in Ciall when the new chairman arrived, and I attended a reception for him at the schoolmaster's. I heard later that he had visited Mrs. Perrins before coming to the school and that she had talked nonstop; every time he wanted to say something he stood up, prefaced his remarks with "Madam . . ." and sat down again, only to find that one of the dogs had leaped into his chair. My sympathy for him was sharply eroded, however, when he told a joke about lazy crofters.

[4]This difference was brought home to me when, during a visit to a rabidly pro-crofter family on the mainland, the local laird stopped by on a mission of charity. The head of the house literally doffed his cap and bowed, calling him "my lord." When I commented later on his behavior, he said, "These people are different from us—their noblesse oblige."

Despite the high concentration of land in a few private hands, significant changes in landownership have occurred over the past hundred years. In the 1870s, when the *New Domesday Book* was published, only 70 people owned half of Scotland. Also, the percentage of land taken out of private ownership and transferred to the state has increased (from about 0.2 percent to 13 percent). The squires of England, the gentry of Ireland, and the lairds of Scotland are essentially anachronisms, feudal lords hemmed in by a government committed to socialism. The symbolic representatives of pomp and tradition and world empire, they are Britain's show pieces, like the royal family that upholds the image of Great Britain while the parliament and prime minister roll up their shirtsleeves and get down to the unadorned business of running the country.

The author V. S. Pritchett wrote several stories about an eccentric rich couple, nicknamed Noisy and the Fairy Queen, who alternately terrified and intrigued the surrounding English countryside. Before living in Scotland I considered the Pritchett characters to be bizarre literary inventions; but after meeting several lairds who seemed to have stepped right out of a Pritchett story, I decided that Pritchett was an observant ethnographer of the peculiar ambience of feudalism that has survived in 20th-century Britain (until the beginning of the 21st century, when it was dissolved in Scotland by an act of Parliament). As Ronald Blythe says in *Akenfield*, "It was the duty of a squire to be meaner, odder and richer than any of his equals in the locality." Officially such persons are looked up to, and often consider themselves the agents of change and leadership; but an enormous gap of confidence, rooted in historical reference points, lies between them and their tenants.

Lewis once belonged to the MacLeods, descendants of the Norse Lord of the Isles, Somerled. In 1612 it went to MacKenzie of Kintail, or the Seaforth family who, burdened with debt in the 19th century, sold it to Sir James Matheson in 1844 for £190,000. The English soap lord, William Hesketh Lever, the first Lord Leverhulme, bought Lewis from Duncan Matheson in 1918 and Harris in 1919, tried to turn the island into the fishing capital of the North Atlantic, and sold it in 1923 after he had lost £1.5 million. Today it is carved up in numerous estates owned by individual lairds, commercial companies, and public bodies and trusts. The main interest of these landowners is not the rent that they receive from the crofters (the Crofters Act of 1886 almost guaranteed that estates based solely on crofting would not be money-making propositions) but the hunting and fishing rights, and, in some cases, the romantic role of feudal lord or paternalistic clan leader. A few "lairds" take an active interest in crofter causes and serve as self-appointed leaders on the island.

Ciall crofters do not know their "laird," who is, in fact, a group of anonymous shareholders in a commercial company, mostly Englishmen who come up to the island to fish and shoot game; but they use the category of laird, "toff," "The Big Cheese" to define what it means, and by contrast, to be a crofter. The existence of the "indolent, stupid rich," as one crofter-weaver described them after he had spent a year as a bagpiper for one such laird, legitimizes all the informal, semi-legal, and illegal economic dealings in which crofters frequently engage, of which poaching is the most popular. Salmon stolen from the laird's river is a delicacy, the most prestigious dish to serve at peat-cutting time, thumbing their noses at historic injustices.

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Dinner at the peats

Local lairds are the objects of an ambivalent respect and dislike, a favorite target of barbed humor. Lord Leverhulme is an historical reference point for Lewis residents seeking to characterize the motives and probable outcomes of plans made by modern lairds such as Mrs. Perrins. "She thinks herself another Leverhulme. But she'll fail the same as him." When I first went to visit Mrs. Perrins, a friend told me later, "I thought to myself, what a fool, talking to Perrins if she wants to find out about the islanders." But the county councillor and schoolmaster frequently went to Mrs. Perrins, urging her to use her influence to "save the islands," and she wrote numerous letters, sought signatures for petitions, and dabbled in disastrous economic ventures. As a "local personality," she was asked to participate in prestigious but sensitive village events such as choosing a May Queen (1964 Village Hall minutes). Many of her projects were culturally inappropriate. For example, she sponsored a contest to clean up the "junk" scattered over the island. Much of this "junk" is, in fact, considered a resource, a communal recycling center. Whenever my broken-down, smoke-spewing car needed a part, someone in the village would remember that a car of the same make could be found in some other part of the island, and an expedition would be organized to go over, renew the acquaintance of the tenant of land on which this other car (Perrins's "junk") was located, and retrieve the necessary part. "Junk" is an important resource for strengthening inter-island ties. No one ever says no to a request to cannibalize materials on one's property; and the acquiescence establishes a relationship, an obligation to be eventually repaid. But the crofters are accused of being apathetic when the do-gooder schemes of zealous lairds are resisted or criticized (often appropriately) for their likely failure.

The existence of formal leaders in the community who are already part of the social elite is useful in several ways. They provide villagers with access to resources in the larger society, and criticism of them helps to crystallize the communal, egalitarian spirit of interaction. But when decisions are actually made

within the township, the elite seldom make them. The effective decision making occurs through casual discussion, rumor, and the quiet role of a few invisible leaders who mobilize opinion and in some cases carry out direct action.

INFORMAL LEADERS

The ability to generate social consensus is an important symbol of leadership. In fact, the best leader is one who is not perceived as a leader at all, but a reliable person who mixes well and can get a ball rolling quietly and without calling attention to him or herself.

During the early part of my stay, when I was trying to study fishing as well as weaving as alternatives to crofting, I was talking to a 70-year-old man about the local boats that used to go out regularly to fish for cod and ling. I asked: "On your boat, who was the captain?" He replied, "On a fishing boat, everyone is a skipper." "But what about decisions?" I asked. "Who decides when to go? when to cast nets? when to take down sails? when to return?" "They all do," he said.

In the 1950s, a bus company called the Western Lewis Coaches was formed. It was owned by people from four villages, including Ciall, who all took turns being manager. "It got so there were too many directors," said one person trying to explain why the company folded. "All chiefs, no Indians."

In the case of the boat, decisions were made by consensus, by a process I was to witness time and time again during my stay in Ciall. Discursive, slow-moving, and communal as a tide deciding to go in or out, consensual decision making has no visible leader, only indirect suggestions from those whose influence is almost imperceptible in the pre-decision-making discourse. The second case, involving the bus company, was an example of what happens when individuals mistake a position of authority for a license to exercise power. Squabbles erupt, individuals are pushed into a position of uncomfortable visibility, and the tension makes effective decision making almost impossible.

Most sheep roundups are organized through consensual decision making. On one occasion, a decision was made, independent of the township clerk ("He's supposed to notify us of fank dates, but no one can get hold of him, he's always away at meetings"), to bring the sheep in for lambing. I asked one of the participants how the decision was made. "We discussed it and decided" was the laconic reply. I asked what specifically happened. Memory of specific details is a great source of pride, and taking his time he sketched out a process that was like ripples spreading out from the drop of a pebble in the pool. His brother had spoken to him, asking when they should go; after elaborate discussion of past years of lambing, when ewes were brought in either too early or too late, they decided on a date that seemed safe, and both brothers talked to neighbors, who spoke to other neighbors. The date was modified to accommodate people working in the mill; several people indicated they would be away for various reasons. Although authority rests with the township clerk to organize township activities, and to take punitive action if individuals do not participate (for example, writing to the Crofters Commission, or asking them to pay for their share of labor in money), few use this explicit route to decision making. Most decisions are the communal result of the actions begun by informal ripple-starters, those who drop the pebble quietly into the pool and then assist the perpetuation of ripples.

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Consensual decision making: Fixing a drain on the peat road

The ripple-starters are those who involve themselves extensively in township affairs, always attending meetings and showing up for projects. With humor, readiness to have a "quick drink with the boys," and skillfulness in conveying significant information without being seen as gossips, such individuals serve as informal leaders. They do not put themselves forward, but they exert an irrepressible force toward decision making. "You've got to do a lot of talking first." "Everyone immediately wonders about your motives—you've got to show them that you won't personally benefit." "You've got to persuade everyone before the actual vote is taken. They have to know that everyone else agrees before they'll risk sticking their necks out to vote." "You have to talk about it first, discuss the merits of it. You must never ask someone outright what he thinks of it, because he might disagree and then he'll have to stick with what he first says."

During the pre-decision discourse, possible courses of action are broached hypothetically—"What if we should do this [for example, have a fank this Saturday]," as if the speaker were distancing him or herself from the suggestion. No one commits to a positive response; the most positive response is something along the lines of "No one has any objections." But to reach this stage of agreement by the default of negation, people float hypothetical objections—"Perhaps the wool won't be long enough"; "Perhaps it will be too wet." If there are too many hypothetical objections that are not resolved by informative comments (such as, "Carloway cut last week; the wool was not too bad"), the decision is postponed. Almost all of the decisions made when a committee or township meets are unanimous. If township members disagree with the decision they know will be made, they stay away from the meeting.

COMMITMENT AND BETRAYAL

A Lewis man living away from the island compared the people with whom he grew up (and to whom he later returned) to "computers that haven't been programmed." I remembered this comment one afternoon, when, after having made an arrangement to meet some people, I arrived to find that they were not at home.

An important part of decision making has to do with attitudes toward commitment, and with expectation of commitment or noncommitment on the part of others. I had always tried to make decisions according to certain abstract principles such as "fairness" or "honesty." If I told someone I would do something, I would do my best to be "reliable" and "trustworthy." But in Ciall I kept confronting situations that felt uncomfortably like betrayals. Were people just being nice, saying yes to avoid conflict, and then doing what they really wanted to do? Why did I often feel that people wanted to avoid making decisions, avoid committing themselves, so that many things ended up being done at the last moment?

"Spontaneous—no preprogramming allowed," I thought, and then remembered the computer comparison, and tried to figure out what all the "betrayals" had in common. I realized that they all occurred when I had made arrangements ahead of time but hadn't been around to nurse the human element along to the moment of fulfillment. It wasn't as if people didn't want to make arrangements and commitments; quite the opposite—they were overcommitted to personalism. A person must never refuse anyone anything—a weaver coming into the mill to request an extra tweed, a neighbor asking his cousin the hotel owner to sell him a bottle when the hotel is technically closed, friends asking you to throw over your own plans for the evening to take them somewhere. If you ask them to commit themselves to a plan of action far ahead of time, you are in effect cutting them out of this web of communalism, asking for a special relationship.

FRIENDSHIP

A special relationship, or "friendship" as an American usually thinks of it, is functional in a mobile urban environment. A "friend" is someone on whom you can depend in a rushing, mobile world; someone who will drop other commitments and come specifically to your aid, in a relationship that competes with all other relationships. But in Ciall, friendship in the American sense of the word would be too intense. People are already surrounded with multiple and equally significant others, in relation to whom they are trying to diminish rather than increase obligation. Every villager is continually faced with overwhelming indebtedness to people he or she will continue to see all his or her life. One result is that no single relationship must be allowed to compete with this generalized indebtedness; another is that people do their best to minimize rather than maximize relationships.

The tendency to stereotype people is one expression of minimizing relationships. Stereotyping is a form of control; it is a process by which you simplify others, reduce their complexity, freeze them into images that can be used for various purposes of interaction, such as object lessons ("Don't be like Inis, he never stops in for a drink when he's in town, he stays to himself, he's odd"). When

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Children at a birthday party

people gather information about others through gossip, they do not want information that promotes a compassionate understanding of who someone is; they want to control others, fit them into a category that strengthens their own position. Interaction is a constant battle, an exciting, humor-filled battle, in which information is both the weapon and the goal. Minimize information about yourself; maximize simplified interpretive categories about others.

I was amazed to find that although everyone I talked to knew an incredible amount of gossip about almost everyone else in the village, many villagers had never met each other. Inevitably, when they did meet, their stereotypes changed. "I had always heard he was a bit odd, always stayed to himself and didn't mix much. But when I talked to him at Jonnie's house, he was quite all right." The tendency to reduce information, to speak guardedly, to rely on quotes, stories, and jokes in the performance (rather than the exploration) of communication, creates a sense of distance.

The automatic reflex to minimize information is reflected in numerous ways, not only in discussion. People build houses so that the door through which people enter always faces away from the road. They try to minimize debt by making requests in a last-minute, matter-of-fact way at the end of rather than at the beginning of visits. *"Mo run,"* my secret, is a term of endearment. Discussion itself is curiously involuted and indirect: people want to be able to communicate, but without being accused of having communicated a definite idea. They know that whatever they do (or are thought to do) will be used to link them with the past and the future; the history of community interaction is forged in the white-hot, transforming fire of gossip.

Thus, if I wanted anything done, I could not rely on a promise of commitment or an assumption of friendship but had to generate it from interaction rather

than make plans in advance; I had to practice immediate rather than long-term influence in the competitive marketplace of personal, community interaction. If I wanted information, I could not appeal to a respect for science but had to gain it in the context of interaction, as someone who made sense in these contexts, as friend or member of the family rather than as a high-status, authority-symbolizing "anthropologist."

To be immersed in such personalism is both frustrating and satisfying. Said one young woman who had been reviled in stereotypes more cruelly than most, "Whatever else this place means, it means security." "I must leave," many say; but they don't, or else they come back, or at least look on the past with nostalgia. Every day, every contact is full of the immediacy of specific trivia, the malicious interest by which the communal self is constructed. Shortly before I left the island, I was told at a midnight ceilidh, "You have a place here as you will never have anyplace else in the world. Wherever you go or whatever you do, the people here will have an interest." People rarely said "my friend"; instead they said, "Our Jonnie" or "Your Chrissie." When I left, it would be "our Sue."

MAINTAINING SOCIAL ORDER: "THEY MAY BE MURDERERS, BUT THEY'RE OUR MURDERERS"

The police and the courts represent state-level symbols of law and order, but the immediate symbols of law and order in the community are fear of what others will think of you; the chastising, sin-oriented influence of the church; and the control of women as wives and mothers. Occasionally a few men might band together to apply a bit of "friendly persuasion" to someone who had broken township rules. If none of these work, the formal structure of the law may be called on, but this step is taken with great reluctance, for an individual does not stand alone; his or her shame reflects on his or her family and community.

When I first arrived on the island of Lewis, I reserved a bed and breakfast lodging with the tourist association, and was directed to the house with instructions to go on in if no one answered the door, that the lady of the house was at evening service. So accustomed did I become, throughout my stay, to open doors, packages being sent by "the next bus" when they were inadvertently left behind in a shop, and a wide assortment of services based on trust, that examples of "crime" stood out as unusual and interesting deviations from the norm.

The most scandalous crime to have occurred on Lewis "in the last hundred years," as I was frequently told, was the murder of an old woman in one of the westside villages several years before I came. A young man accused of the murder was tried in Inverness; the verdict, "not proven," is an ambiguous decision unique to Scottish law that is the alternative to "innocent" and "guilty." The villagers gave the gruesome, specific details of the murder itself; someone who attended the trial observed that no matter how certain the villagers were of his guilt, they drew together to protect him and refused to give evidence that would convict him. But when the trial was over, "They wouldn't leave him alone. He couldn't face anyone—even if he was innocent, he had been tried and found guilty. He tried to move to Harris, but they found out who it was and refused to sell the house to him. Finally he had to leave the island. But his family—his parents, his siblings, his cousins—they will always be made to suffer for it."

In Stornoway are a chief inspector of police, two sergeants, and four constables; and several police officers are scattered around the rural areas. Their main responsibility, according to the disgruntled villagers, is to lie in wait for people coming out of hotels to trap them with the Breathalyzer. Police officers are generally seen as the representatives of an exploitative system who stick their noses into situations where they don't belong; their behavior is interpreted in personal terms. They have power, get to know everyone in the area, and depending on their experience with these people can put people in tight spots or help them out. "They stopped Uilleam for the Breathalyzer but he didn't register. Uilleam thought it was a personal grudge because he had beat the policeman in a race they had the other day across the moor."

Occasionally crimes of theft, or more rarely, of violence occur. Halfway through the year a neighbor was arrested and charged with stealing. In the ensuing storm of discussion, previous suspicious events were recalled—missing money from a house, lumber from a mill in Stornoway, bobbins from neighboring weavers, salmon from a fellow poacher's net, a check, a fur coat, even peat from various houses around the island. My few inexpensive pieces of jewelry had disappeared shortly after I arrived (and mysteriously reappeared several months later). "He'll say he was drunk and didn't know what he was doing." "His own brother went in to persuade his wife not to marry him." "They should go away where no one knows them." "They should emigrate, but it'll catch up with them. The boys will be haunted by it; they have his blood." "He wanted to borrow the car the other day—thank goodness you had just left with it." When he was let off with a relatively light fine, the gossip channels explored personal connections to explain this, and many were outraged when he was seen enjoying himself at a wedding. A month later, holes were knocked in the bottom of a boat in which his father had a share and that he occasionally used. At the same time, he continued to interact as kinsman and neighbor, being invited in for tea, doing odd jobs, and giving driving lessons.

A police officer who was called in to investigate a missing check told the person who had called him, "I know country folk—somebody will have seen something, but no one will tell." Two months later, after the case was closed, a neighbor reported vital information over a teapot, and this bit of evidence joined the circulating gossip; but gossip rarely extends to testimony in court.

"There are more crimes here than anyone in a court will every find out about," said one person. "If it's taken into a court, innocent people get hurt; it's best to keep it in the community where everyone knows what's going on." On one occasion several young men were beating up the village youth; "They were playing Glasgow Mafia." A fight started, and the truth came out, after which the instigator stayed in his house for 5 years. "When he came out, it started up again, but everyone knew who it was and was ready for them. They may be murderers, but they're our murderers."

People who live alone and behave strangely serve as scapegoats for suspicion when crimes occur. Each neighborhood has its favorite suspect. When people fight, they dredge up things about each others' ancestors. "You're like this because of your granny."

Drink usually plays a role in crime, being used as an excuse for it, as the context in which additional information comes out, or as a contributing factor. One unusual court case involved a man who had gone to the dentist after having several drinks at the hotel in town. The dentist, who had also been drinking, forgot to give him an anaesthetic. When he yanked the infected tooth, the patient hit him and knocked him out. The nurse came in, found both on the floor—the dentist unconscious, the patient fainting from pain—and called the police. The patient won the case.

To help the police, some local people serve as "special constables," but this is interpreted as "spying on your neighbors." According to one man, special constables "are supposed to help policeman at election times, but the bad ones help at other times as well." The tires of one "special constable" were slashed because he had informed on a neighbor. Another quit when he was invited by a police officer to go in to a hotel for a drink with him; he didn't want to be visibly associated with the law.

Other men are appointed "Justice of the Peace." Appointed by the county sheriff, they are people already in a position of authority, either the schoolmaster or mill owner or someone who has served in the armed services. Their major task is to give letters of reference, to sign documents such as out-of-work forms and wills, and "to read the Riot Act to persons of 12 or more who have assembled with the intent to create a disturbance" (this act was passed in 1714; it has never been read in Ciall).

GOSSIP AND THE CREATION OF HISTORY

Lewis is often referred to as *Tir an t-soisgeul,* land of the gospels. It is also *Tir an t-sgeultachan,* land of gossips. *Sgeul* can be meteor tidings or worldly news. A *sgeultach* is a (female) gossip; *sgeultachd* is gossip rendered into history, or tradition.

When I first came to Ciall, I was struck by the sense of space: by the absence of trees, the houses that stood separate from each other in a long line against the sky between the sea and the moor like stone monuments against the weather. Then as I stayed, the sky seemed to be filled with thin filaments of social connection as I realized how much people knew about each other and watched continuously for new information, and how aware people were of the others watching (when I joked about missing a lot of potatoes, as we were digging them one day, someone replied, "Well at least the earth is black"—and I saw him looking out over the crofts, calculating who had dug their potatoes yet and who hadn't). I had dreams of large eyes filling the sky. When a friend returned to the island after many years absence, he said his first impulse was to go out in the front yard and drop his trousers for all the binoculars that he knew would be trained on his mother's house.

It is difficult for people raised in the anonymity of an urban environment to imagine living in a setting in which you are continually confronted with the living memory (sometimes accurate and sometimes inaccurate) of your mistakes and failures. Your actions are woven together and interpreted not only with

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Sharing stories

regard to interpreting your past and predicting your future, but also with regard to connecting you with a vast network of people, past and present, who share your "blood" and thus the tendency to behave predictably.

Gossip is the channel by which community interaction becomes transformed into historical reference points used to interpret and predict past, present, and future behavior. As Goffman (1959) described for Shetland in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* behavior on Lewis may be described in terms of drama, role playing, front stage and back stage, and audience. An individual plays his or her role before the community, whether he or she is actually in the community or not. Gossip renders people ever-present. If a person is gone for awhile, he meets himself when he returns to the village, often in a form he doesn't recognize.

I was vividly impressed by the speed with which people become appropriated in an incident that occurred during the winter of 1971. The day was bitter, I was fighting a cold, and I stayed inside most of the day working on notes. At about 3:00 in the afternoon I went to visit a neighbor who cried out, "Are you all right? I thought you had been taken to the hospital." Over the next few days, after being greeted by people in various states of alarm, I learned what had happened. A couple from the other side of the village who didn't know me very well were driving back from town. They saw a car stopped at the side of the road. It was gusting a cold rain so they went past, but by the time they got home, they still hadn't figured out who was in the car (cars are a great topic of conversation; even schoolchildren have learned the license plate numbers of cars all over the island). This one was new to them and I was a stranger, so it must be mine. They mentioned this possibility to a neighbor, who asked why they hadn't stopped to

help me. This neighbor criticized the couple to another neighbor, saying that for all they knew, I might have had an accident. By mid-afternoon, I was dying in a Stornoway hospital. To this day there must be people who still refer to "Sue's accident" (as in, "I remember when Iain got his tractor, it was a week after Sue's accident, when Mairi and Calum passed her by on the Barvas road, they always were an inconsiderate family").

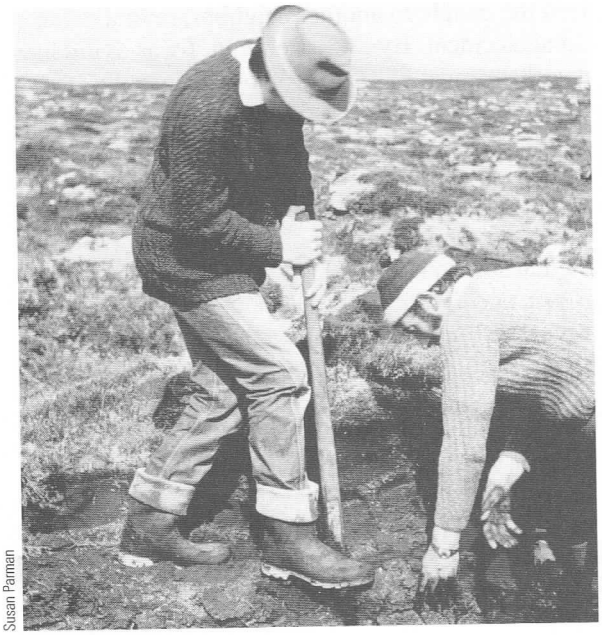
The pervasiveness of the Eye—the watchful neighbor, the gossiping tongue, the person on the next street with the binoculars—is an important element in social control. Even the thought that someone might think you were doing something keeps behavior circumspect and results in the channeling of deviance. There are stylized, ritualized changes that anxious, frightened people can go through to express their needs, as in the stages of "conversion" and "mental illness" (see Chapters 8 and 9).

The difference between front stage and back stage is clearly defined. "What matters," said one person, "is not what you do, but what people think you've done." I was taught this lesson vividly when I spent all night, in the company of others, in the home of a bachelor. It was not that I had stayed the night—such all-night visiting in company was a common form of socializing—but that my presence was advertised. It didn't matter what had (or hadn't) happened; no one was interested in the truth. My family was scandalized—not because they thought anything had happened, but because they were afraid of how the gossip about me might reflect on them. To compound matters, the bachelor's sister shortly afterwards invited me to cut peats with them, thereby giving public recognition to a potential relationship.

By this time I was annoyed. I had done everything I could to explain the innocence of the visit. I suddenly understood the choice that many people made when fighting the tidal onslaught of a socially defined, erroneous image of themselves: the sear anger that drives a man to the bothan or to extremes of violence, or that molds the character of the village clown or the person who actively breaks conventions; or the choice of the antisocial being who goes out only at night or stays up in a room, always leaving when someone comes in to visit. I was already *mullach a bhaile* (roughly translated as "talk of the town"—*mullach* means top of or eminent, i.e., supremely visible); I might as well enjoy it.

I accepted the sister's invitation and went to the peats in a very unusual state—filled with a kind of blustery to-hell-with-them-all feeling for the whispering sea of gossip that rose and fell in relation to every movement on the vast screen of social visibility. My usual calm state, my detachment, my quiet acquiescence to the social flow was shredded, gone forever. In other words, I had become involved.

The day was angry and wild, a cold, wet day for cutting peat. Rain and hail moved in over the moor in iridescent sheets of pearl. In the heaviest bursts we crowded in under a tent, nine of us, full of crude jokes about the rain puddles we were sitting in. We ate salmon and ginger cakes ("I left behind the currant and apple tarts, they weren't good enough for the peats," said our hostess, making certain that we knew she had honored us; "You're stuffing us at tea time so we won't want any dinner," was the usual distancing reply), rested elbows on knees, shared cigarettes. I was paired with the bachelor, of course; we took turns cutting and throwing the brown buttery slabs of peat onto the bank and compared



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Explicit commitments: Cutting peat

notes on our disgrace, like conspirators. Over a quarter of a century older than I, avuncular and possessed of a detachment that mirrored the best of anthropological traditions, he was both embarrassed and amused. I had gone through fire, he said; now I had some idea of what it was all about. I said I had learned that truth is irrelevant; appearance is all. Of course, he said; if you maintain the proper image, you can do anything you want.

There are rules for gossiping. "I told my children when they first started going to dances, if there is a fight or anything going on, leave it there, don't bring it back to the house. Now when I ask them about a dance, they touch their noses to tell me I'm being too nosy." There is such a thing as too much gossip; certain situations should be kept separate. One of the reasons that women are criticized for gossiping is that they carry a major portion of the burden of social control and exercise this obligation by gossip, which is often resented. Fights between men that start over gossip are usually made up in a drinking setting; but the women involved are more slowly forgiven.

As in all societies, there are culturally appropriate modes of deviance, and clear-cut signals for entering into them. So clearly are situations defined that you essentially give over any decision making when you enter them; they determine your behavior. As a result, many people exert control over their own behavior by avoiding getting into certain situations. When the post office was on strike, the mills could not send payments to the weavers so delivered them by tweed van; "If we had had to pick them up in town, we would have drunk the money." "I know I'll drink if I go; best not to go." Carry-outs (buying alcohol to take with you, instead of staying to drink) are popular in part because they limit the amount a man can drink.

Gossip almost always has an edge of malice. "Murdo [the dead brother] was the best of the lot." (As one proverb says, "If you want to be praised, die.") Gossip is often better than late-night horror movies, full of grisly tales of illness and injury ("his hand was black with stitches"; "he lay there with pus streaming out of his ear"). Gossip is often indirect and full of innuendoes; people don't want to be accused themselves of having said something about someone that could itself be the topic of gossip. There is a gamesmanship in gossip: "I think I know what you're talking about. . . . You don't know what you're talking about." The giving and concealing of information is like a jousting match.

Everyone is aware of the differences between front stage and back stage, and people have strategies for bringing concealed behavior out into the open where it may be discussed and rendered into concrete history. A favorite method is asking questions. "People who ask questions already know the answer." One man described giving a ride to a man and his wife:

> The woman started asking me all sorts of questions, finally ending with, "You wouldn't be married to Mairi Macleod, would you?" She knew who I was but never asked me directly. I asked: did you know all that before you started asking the questions? Her husband laughed and said she had told him everything from the time the car had cleared the ridge to when it stopped to pick them up.

If you tell people what they already know, you legitimize their knowledge; they can use it as fact rather than rumor, which is a more powerful coin of exchange in gossip. Gossip contains new information, and it repeats and solidifies

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Mock fight (note the cigarette being rolled in the right hand)

old information, creating a bond between the old and the new in interpretation. Sometimes referred to as "the mythology of Ciall" by the villagers, gossip is a vehicle for transforming the variation of individual behavior into an orderly interpretation of the past and prediction of the future; it isn't done to get at the facts of history but to invent a workable truth that fits with everything else. New events are worked over and over until they are milked for every drop of dramatic impact, and until they can be fit into the existing framework. Probably my greatest coin of exchange, my contribution to village life while I was there, was my unpredictability; I was better than TV. Was I *curamach?* Was I a hippie? I visited with drinkers but didn't drink; I went to church and psalmody class but didn't take communion. The all-night scandalous visit was an explicit piece of evidence by which I could be interpreted. The tidal waves of gossip that spread out from the event marked my entrée into the cognitive fiber of village interpretation. "Now you're part of the mythology of Ciall."