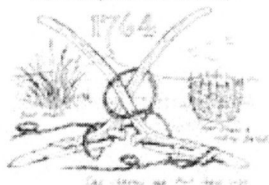


FARMING ON COLL, 1764

by Margaret M. McKay



In 1764, Coll was visited by Dr John Walker, minister of Moffat, on behalf of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. He wrote a detailed report which gives us a glimpse of life on the island before any changes had been made in the centuries-old farming practices. None of the land had been drained; seed came from the previous harvest, seaweed was the only manure; there were no walls except for main farm boundaries, and no enclosed fields.

Nevertheless, Walker saw "small Valleys of arable land, which produce corn in great plenty and Perfection" and "extensive fields of excellent Pasturage." He estimated that half of the land had at one time or another been ploughed or worked with the spade or cas-chrom.

The land was divided into small holdings "equally divided and capable of furnishing (the people) with all the necessaries of life they seem to have any demand for." They grew only bear (a form of barley) and oats, and produced these in such quantity "that after a good season, they export a considerable quantity of each, besides a great deal which they consume in their distillery." There were nine distilleries on Coll, on an average consuming between them 720 bolls of grain at 8 stones of grain to the boll. The *agua vitae* produced was said to be exported.

The people did not have adequate materials to make very strong and efficient ploughs, and in any case, as the ploughs were pulled by four horses walking abreast, they could not be used in rockier areas. In fact a lot of the land was worked by delving with the cas-chrom or "crooked spade". This method always produced a much bigger yield than when the land was ploughed. Almost all the

bear, which was sown in the spring, was planted in land worked in this way as the horses, given no extra corn or other feed during the winter, could do no work until the grazing had improved as the spring growth progressed.

A "considerable number" of black Highland cattle were exported, although Walker thought many more could be produced if hay was made and given to them during the winter. All the straw from the grain went on thatch for the houses. Lack of winter feed meant starvation, and in the spring, "great numbers die through want and by the many diseases, to which all kinds of Cattle are obnoxious when reduced to leanness." The cattle fed a great deal on seaweed and bent grass.

"The same grass also is extremely serviceable to the people for several other purposes...with no small toil and a great deal of Art, they weave it into sacks which answer for holding both their grain and meal. They form it into cordage for tether to their cattle and traces to their ploughs, and even turn it into ropes and cables sufficient for their boats. So powerful is Necessity, in the many cases to produce Industry and Ingenuity."

The island supported sheep "of a middle size". "The fine grass it affords and the mild Climate it enjoys render the wool upon them of a very fine quality. Their pasture is clear and dry all the year round. They have never any tar or grease put on them (the equivalent of dipping in the eighteenth century), and they lie abroad all Winter. By these means their wool is of a short, fine staple."

This is the form of agriculture which provided about 800 Colltachs with their livelihood in 1764.