



## OF SHIELINGS SHINTY AND SABBATHS

by Betty MacDougall

Take the east-end road and on the right hand side at the top of the brae of the lifting stones (**Uchd nan Carn**) there is a gate. It leads to the deserted township of Toraston. In the 1841 census there were seventeen households here and from all accounts it was a busy, jolly community.

Flax was one of the crops raised. The wayside lochan (hardly even a puddle in dry weather) over from **Uchd nan carn** was once called **Lochan an Lin** — the flax lochan because it was there that the flax was steeped and then dressed on the hill slope. The flax industry in Scotland declined because of dumping from abroad and the name of the lochan fell into disuse, it became **Lochan an Chnuic**.

Jean Campbell, who was still alive in Bousd towards the end of last century, said that she was in the last shieling trip in Coll, in the braes of Toraston when she was fourteen years old, which would be about 1820. The time for the old custom of going to the summer — shieling (**airigh**) was early in June or whenever the field crops showed signs of making headway. It was an occasion of bustling excitement in the township. The young boys set off first, maybe a day or two before the others — **gu luim a chur air bothan is air crò** — to rebuild and put in order the huts and cattle folds. The **airigh** was the whole pasture, the hut, the **bothan airigh**, built of stone and turf. The boys slept there the first two nights and then returned home to help the young women with the gear, pails, churns etc. The home fields were thus rested, the cattle had the benefit of the fresh pasture and the young women busied themselves with the dairy activities. The many songs about the shieling reveal that it was a happy, festive time.

There are more than twenty **airigh** names in Coll. The custom ceased when the people were deprived of the outer pastures and that land given over to game or sheep. At the time of Jean Campbell's approximate date of 1820 for the last shieling trip, Charles

MacLean of Gallanach was factor to Coll. He was something of an entrepreneur and had a hard hand on the people. It might well have been he who wanted the outland pasture for sheep. It was his son, Dr. Lachlan, who turned Rum into a sheep run after MacLean of Coll sent the bulk of the people off to Canada. Charles MacLean was succeeded as factor by Donald Campbell from Mull who finally cleared Triolan and Toraston in order to extend Gallanach farm.

The menfolk of the township were keen shinty players. One day in the early dawn they set off for the seaweed shore at Toraston. Knowing it was still full-tide, each man had a shinty stick in his creel to have a game while waiting for the ebb. They let loose the horses to graze and set to the match. The wrack was left dry by the ebb tide, but the fervour of the game had gripped the men and they played right on to the evening. It was only when they could no longer see the ball that they went home, tired and hungry. "Och, didn't the horses go home by themselves and as for the wrack — wasn't there another day coming!"

**Cnoc Airigh Losgalain** is the highest hillock in Toraston and it was there that the crofting folk used to congregate to pass the sabbath day. "The din from **Croc Airigh Losgalain** is a disgrace!" bewailed an old Gaelic dominie from the east-end, "But the day will come when it will be very quiet." The lads of the township sometimes had the Sunday ploy of going to Dun Lorachain on the south shore and tumbling the stones of the old Norwegian fort down the face of the crag. An old man who was still alive in the east end about a hundred years ago, averred that the wall was of considerable size when he was a lad in Toraston.

People said a judgement would come on the Toraston folk for the way they spent the Sabbath — probably hindsight! An old woman went out one morning and looking around could see only the one smoke — a forecast of what was to come. The prophecy that the township would be a wilderness came true, evictions did the dire work and finally there was only one smoke — the shepherd's house — and not a foot of ground under crops.