

‘Buaile bheag do na laoiigh’ (a wee fold for the calves) Historical cattle management for milk production

Gavin Parsons

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland contain only small areas of land suitable for cultivation. Most of the land area is rough pasture, suitable, in terms of agriculture, only for grazing animals. Pastoralism has therefore been a necessary part of existence and cattle were the main grazing animals until large flocks of sheep were introduced at the time of the clearances, from the late 18th century onward. Cows were kept primarily for their milk, which was at the centre of the domestic economy. This paper looks at how this was achieved practically, at how cows and calves were managed so that a milk yield was available. Although there have been studies of songs sung at milking and of life at shielings, there has been little written about the actual management of cattle. In this paper I will investigate the oral and material culture around milking and its significance in the social, agricultural, cultural and economic systems of the Gaelic speaking areas.

BACKGROUND

Historically in Gaeldom, meaning Gaelic-speaking areas of both Scotland and Ireland, cows were of considerable importance at all levels of society. As A.T. Lucas states in his extensive study *Cattle in Ancient Ireland* (1989:4):

The cow was the measure of everything; it was the unit of value; the ultimate in poverty was the man with only one cow, the wealth of the richest consisted of vast herds of them.

Cattle were long seen as currency, in fact they were the measure of wealth in the time of the Early Irish Laws which were first written down around the 7-8th centuries AD and continued to be for centuries. The Annals of Connacht record that 126 cows were paid as éraic (penalty for homicide) for the killing of Grigóir Ó Maolchonaire (Kelly 1988: 112-114).

That such measure of wealth was still used as late as the beginning of the 17th century is shown in the “Statutes of Iona” which were agreed in 1609 and contained an order that men of substance should send their eldest sons to school in the lowlands. The measure of substance was “in goods worth three score kye” – everie gentleman or yeaman within the said Ilyndis...being in goodis worth thriescore ky (MacGregor 2006).

Cattle were the target of raids from the time of the Celtic hero tales to the late Middle Ages, and in some cases later, throughout the Gaelic speaking areas of Ireland and Scotland. One of the earliest cattle raiding tales within the Irish tradition is *Táin Bó Cúailnge* the centrepiece of

the legendary tales from the "Ulster Cycle" of early Irish literature, which survives in manuscript form from the 12th century, but probably dates back to the first century AD (Meyer 1906). In this tale a battle is fought over the Ulster bull Donn Cúailnge which Queen Medb of Connaught wishes to steal to augment the value of her herd. One of the latest in the Scottish tradition is an account of the "last cattle raid in Skye" carried out by a group of MacMillans from Loch Arkaig, and which took place "not long after the Battle of Culloden" (MacInnes 2006:149).

Particularly in the century after the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles in 1493, known as *Linn nan Creach* or the "Age of Forays", cattle raiding was rife. Martin MacGregor comments that "The fundamental form of warfare [in Gaelic Scotland] was the *creach*, or cattle raid..." (2014:216). Raids were an opportunity for young nobility to prove their worthiness to lead men in combat, and as in other tribal societies, cattle raids were not regarded as petty thievery. As Alison Cathcart has stated, raiding was such an important part of Highland culture that it was "an integral part of the clan structure itself." (Cathcart 2002:165).

Even though raiding had died out before the end of the 18th century, cattle maintained their position at the centre of the domestic economy. Milk products were valuable both as foodstuffs and as rent. Before money rents became common, rents were paid in kind, although grain might be part of the rent in more fertile districts, cheese and butter were commonly required in the less productive areas (Withers 1988 p209). Isobel Grant's book *Highland Folk Ways* (Grant 1961:

65-67) gives a description of how milk and milk products (butter, crowdie, cheese, whey) were until recent times a major part of the diet of Highland people over a large part of the year. Grain production in pre-crofting times was predominantly carried out on the "infield" close to the byre where cattle were in-wintered and that ground received annual dressings of manure.

In the traditional crofting system, cattle were still the source of much fertility. Frank Fraser Darling in his comprehensive West Highland Survey (1955: 216) describes how the dung from the byre contributed to the fertility of the machair soil in Uist.

Even the dung is something special and of a quality rare to-day, for the floor of the byre in past times was laid with divots from the peaty moor, the *scrabhan*. These soaked up the urine and the byre was not cleaned out until the spring, by which time the animals were rubbing their horns in the rafters. The dung had been kept away from the leaching rain and was well compacted, and as it contained the urine in suspension there was a high content of potassium, so necessary for the barley crop on machair which is short of this element.

Cattle therefore were a major part of life and economy in Gaeldom, contributing greatly to soil fertility and from their milk and milk products to daily fare and providing a means to pay for goods or services.

Most milk production was in the summer months, after cows had calved in the spring and when grass was plentiful. Transhumance was common historically and survived until after the second World War in some places (Cheape 1996).

The cattle were moved to upland, or moorland, pastures (shielings) to take advantage of fresh grass at higher altitudes and to keep them away from growing crops in ground under cultivation. Much of the dairy work was carried on in shieling huts and the products carried back to store for the winter months (Cheape 1996).

There is an interesting example relating to sheiling huts and butter production. *Loch an Ìme* (Loch of the Butter) is a small loch in Baravaig, in the Sleat peninsula of Skye. It is situated close to a site with footings of a number of small, turf-built circular or ovular buildings which was noted during a community archaeology survey as part of *Scotlands Rural Past*, the project which ran from 2006 to 2011 and which photographed, and documented many sites throughout Scotland. The relevance of the loch's name in relation to the close siting of the row of small buildings was shown by an entry in Forbes' Placenames of Skye which stated:

Loch an Ìme The loch of the butter. Near here some kegs or rather parcels of butter made up in hides were found. (Forbes 1923: 386)

The combination of these strands of information create a compelling case that the buildings were sheiling huts and the loch used to store butter made by the people using the huts. This example shows the extent to which we can gain remarkably deep insights into how people managed cattle within the landscape and the value placed on dairy products, by combining a knowledge of landscape archaeology, with an understanding of place names and oral tradition.

The day that cattle, dairy equipment and

household effects were moved up from the village to the shieling was an important one in the calendar. The significance of the *triall* or journey to the shieling is shown by these descriptions, from Alexander Carmichael's collection *Carmina Gadelica*:

Throughout Lewis the crofters of the townland go to the shieling on the same date each year and they return on the same date each year. The sheep and cattle know their day as well as do the men and women, and on that day the scene is striking and touching – all the “nì”, flocks are astir and restless to be off, requiring all the care of the people to restrain them and keep them together in the proper order. (Carmichael 1972: 190)

On arrival at the shieling, there was a check on all the livestock:

“*Laoidh an triall*” – ... (on the first day of May). This is the day of migrating from “*baile gu beinn*” [village to hill]...when the grazing ground is reached, the loads are laid down, the huts repaired, fires kindled and food made ready. The people bring forward their stock, each man his own, and count them into the fold. The herdsman of the townland and one or two more men stand within the gateway and count the flocks as they enter. (Carmichael 1972: 191)

Although men and women were together in the *triall*, for the most part, in managing cattle, their different roles were well defined. Given the importance of cattle, it is not surprising then that in a society with a strong oral culture, there exists a wealth of songs about cows and milking. Evidence for this can be seen in the collection *Ri Luinneig mun Chrà* in which Seònaid Ghriogair (2016)

has gathered almost three hundred such songs. These songs give an insight into the importance of milk cows and how they were viewed by the women who milked them. This evidence suggests that milking was traditionally done by women and though men certainly milked cows in the 20th century, I have not come across any reports of men milking in earlier times.

MILKING MANAGEMENT

To examine the practicalities of milk production, we need to remember the biological basis on which milk is produced: A cow produces milk after calving (birth of a calf). The milk yield increases for the first few weeks after calving and then gradually decreases as the calf becomes more able to digest grass and less dependent on

the milk. At around ten months after calving the milk yield is usually so low that to maximise production it makes sense to get the cow to calve again twelve months after the previous calving, so if she is “dried off” ten months after calving she gets a two month rest. Since a cow carries a calf for nine months she needs to be bulled (mated) around two to three months after calving. In natural conditions cows would calve in the spring and this means that the time of the highest milk yield corresponds with the summer flush of grass. If calves are kept along with cows, they will suckle their mothers at frequent intervals, so for cows to have milk available for humans to milk off, calves need to be kept away from the cows for several hours, preferably overnight, to allow the milk produced to accumulate in the udder. This



Fig 1 – Cròcach – somewhat barbarous examples dating from the 19th Century.
Image © National Museums Scotland

can be done either by some kind of screen on the nose of the calf (e.g. a device known as a *cròcach*, see fig 1) or by holding calves separate from the cows. Modern dairy farms remove the calves from their mothers altogether and feed them milk or a milk substitute. When both calves and humans are competing for the milk, the cow will naturally favour the calf, so a certain amount of coaxing may be required to be able to obtain milk for human consumption, if the calves have been allowed to bond with their mothers.

How then, was milk production achieved in Gaeldom? From various sources, which I will consider, it seems that from ancient times calves were not removed entirely from their mothers as is the usual practice on modern dairy farms. The importance of keeping cows and calves separate is illustrated in the traditional Irish tale “Death of Fergus”:

When Iubhdán, king of the fairies, was held captive by Fergus, his people threatened Fergus that they would wreak havoc unless he released Iubhdán: All Ulster’s calves we will admit to their dams, so that by morning time there shall not in the whole province be found the measure of one babe’s allowance of milk (O’Grady 1892: 279).

In the early Irish Law texts, offences against domestic animals are listed. One example shows both the importance of milk to society and also indicates how cows were managed to maximise milk production:

A similar offence is to leave an opening so that a farmer’s calves can gain access to the cows. The culprit must provide restitution of the shortfall in the milk-yield (Kelly 2000).

A.T. Lucas suggests that shutting cows away from calves at night continued until recently:

It seems to have been the universal practice to drive the cattle into an enclosure at nightfall... This custom continued through medieval times down to recent centuries (1989: 25).

Songs and recordings also suggest that this was the usual practice, calves were always present somewhere nearby, so some means of keeping cows and calves separate was needed during the summer months when cattle were at pasture.

– Keeping hungry calves from the cows would have been a virtually impossible task if the two were grazed within sound or sight of each other, so we must visualise separate herds of cows and calves being driven abroad from their night enclosures at widely separated intervals of space and time (Lucas 1989: 21).

This is shown by the naming in many songs and oral sources of various types of enclosure which were used to keep cattle in.

Referring to eighteenth-century surveys, Robert Dodgshon in his comprehensive history of Farming, Landscape and Environment in the Scottish Highlands and Islands *No Stone Unturned* mentions kailyards, penfolds and other small stock pounds that were widely present by the early eighteenth century (2015: 155).

Landscape archaeologists have recorded such enclosures in many parts of the country but there seems to have been little work done to interpret how these enclosures functioned. A field survey of two townships on the west side of the island of Raasay (Macdonald and Wood 1995) recorded the remains of many small enclosures close to

sites of dwelling houses. Some of these, at least, could well have been used to hold calves away from cows, but this would be difficult to identify without excavation and was not speculated on in the report.

An extensive and detailed survey was carried out over the whole of Tìree in 2016 and again this recorded numerous remains of structures which included possible stores and animal pens. Though the editors state that only where they feel reasonably confident has an original function been attributed to a feature. In most cases these functions are suggestions only.

Scotland's Rural Past, mentioned already, (2018) was a five-year, nationwide project, which supported local communities across Scotland with training in landscape archaeology and equipment to enable them to carry out measured surveys, to investigate the landscape

archaeology in their area. Groups involved in the project which ran from 2006 to 2011 photographed, and documented many sites throughout Scotland, including the Highlands and Islands. I was involved with one group, working in Camuscross and Baravaig in the Sleat peninsula of Skye. The survey identified remains of several individual agricultural holdings which could clearly be interpreted. One of these, is shown at fig 2.

A dwelling house is easily identifiable at the right-hand side of the plan, with a probable midden outside the door, as it is a hollow, down a slope from the doorway, enclosed by a turf wall to hold the manure. This suggests that livestock, most likely the milk cows, would have been kept in one end of the house, as was the common practice (e.g. Kissling 1943: 82). In the middle is a barn, identified by the two opposing doors

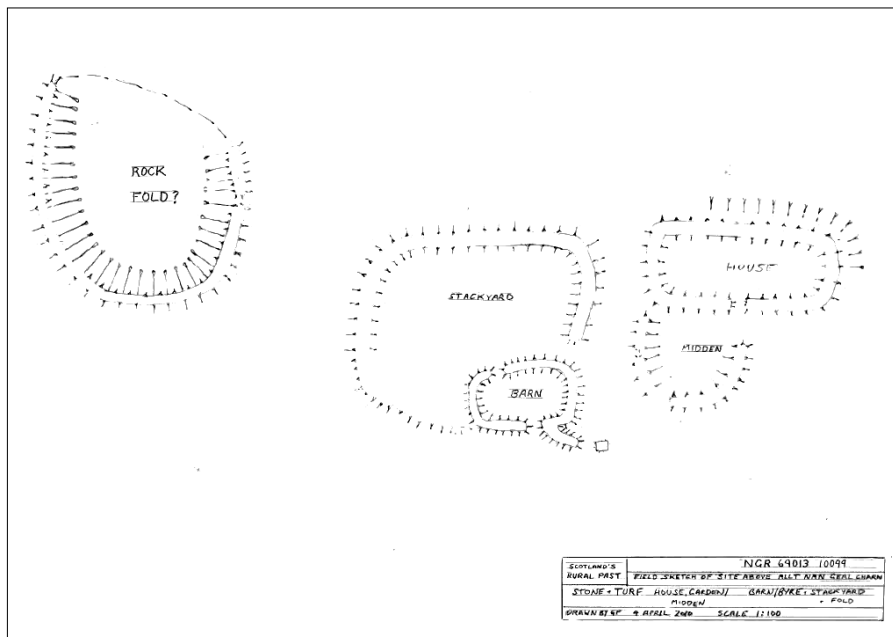


Fig 2 Plane table diagram of a settlement site near Allt nan Carn in Sleat, Skye.

which would have been used to create a draught for winnowing. The adjoining enclosure suggests a stackyard, where oats or other grains would have been stacked in the sheaf. On the left is a further enclosure and this is on rocky ground, with a rise or hillock in the middle of it, therefore not suitable for cultivation or for building stacks. The size and topography of this enclosure and proximity to the house and barn is highly suggestive that this is a fold for animals such as calves to be kept away from their mothers in the byre/dwelling house.

Several different names have been used for such folds and I'll now look at these and at how they were used. *Buaile* is one of the commonest names for a fold with many songs mentioning a *buaile*. Here is an example in a waulking song collected by K C Craig from Uist tradition bearer Màiri Nighean Alasdair (Craig 1949: 55):

Bheir mo shoraidh gu m' èolas
Take my greeting to my kent one

Gu Fear òg Bhòrnais Uarach
To the heir of Upper Bornish

Aig àm an crodh seasg
At the time of the barren cattle

Dol san fheasgar ron bhuachaill
going in the evening before the herdsman

's aig am biodh an crodh bainne
Tighinn nan deannaibh dhan bhuailidh
and whose milk cattle would race to the "buaile"
"

Buaile also occurs frequently in placenames. The word *buaile* might be used for an enclosure at a shieling as shown in this traditional account of cattle breaking out during the night. This incident

was the basis of a song by Beathag Mhòr who worked as a milkmaid for the Martins of Bealach in Trotternish, Skye at the end of the 18th Century.

Bha a' bhanarach agus an òigridh eile nan suain
chadal am bothan an àirigh nuair a bhris an crodh
a mach as a' bhuaile. Sud far an robh an ùbraid.
Sud far an robh an spòrs, ann am meadhon oidhche
shambraidh iad uile nan ruith a' cuartachadh a'
chruidh agus na laoiigh òga nan cois mus dèanadh
iad call dhaibh fhèin agus do chuid chàich. Cha
do stad an crodh gus an do ràinig iad an cladach
ann an Lag na Feamainn. Bha an latha geal òg
mbadainn shambraidh mun robh an crodh cruinn
agus sàbhailt air ais air an àirigh. Tuairisgeul –
(Buidse 1973)

The milkmaid and the other youngsters were sound asleep in the shieling bothy when the cattle broke out of the fold. That's when the turmoil began. That's where the fun was, in the middle of a summer's night, everyone running to head off the cows and the young calves with them before there would be any loss to themselves or other's property. The cattle did not stop until they reached the shore at *Lag na Feamainn* [Seaware hollow]. It was a bright summer morning before the cattle were back together and safe at the shieling.

It is not clear where the calves were, but once they were along with the cows it seems that they bolted to the shore at *Lag na Feamainn*. The song relates this incident.

Tha fonn gun bhith trom composed by Beathag Mhòr was published in Christine Martin's book of Skye songs *Òrain an Eilein* (Martin 2001: 130):

'Buaile bheag do na laoigh' (a wee fold for the calves) Historical cattle management for milk production

Bhris an crodh a' bhuaile

The cattle broke out of the fold

'S an t-suain air a' bhanaraich

while the milkmaid slept

Nuair a chual i 'n èigheach

When she heard their bellowing

Ri lèine chan fhanadh i

She couldn't wait to put on a shirt

Fhuair mi leisgeul àluinn

I got a great excuse

Bha dhà 'n Lag na Feamainn dhiubb

Two of them were in Lag na Feamainn

Several other words are recorded in addition to *buaile* meaning some kind of enclosure for cattle. The word *fang* (fank) though more commonly used for an enclosure for sheep was used by Donald Sinclair of Tiree in a recording from 1968:

Domhnall Mac na Ceardaich (1968)

"Mairt san fhang tron oidhche – buachaille bhon Chèitean gu Oidhche Shamhna"

[the cows in the fank through the night – a herdsman from May until Halloween]

Another word used is *cuidh* or *cuidhe*. Dwelly's dictionary gives a range of meanings for this word:

1. Enclosure. 2 Cattle-fold, pen — Barra. 3 Enclosed field — Eigg. 4 Trench, hollow artificially formed as a sheltered place to milk cows in on the grazing ground.

This is borne out by respondents in South Uist, one of whom described a *cuidhe* as a small park of

about an acre with a stone wall round it. Another respondent described a *cuidhe* as a place about 10 yards by 10 yards, closed in by stone walls. Within living memory these were used to pen cows during the night in summer, or in the case of the one acre *cuidh*, calves were penned there, both night and day. The word *cuidh* also appears in several placenames, particularly in Uist e.g.

As described by Archie MacAulay, Ileray, North Uist:

Cuidh Mhalacleit a small park at Malacleite,

Cuidh Loisgte (– burnt) another small park in Hoighearraidh "ceap a chaidh na theine" (a lump that went on fire)

Cuidh nan Laogh (– of the calves) – "this was a square shaped enclosure"

The word *cotan* is used for a small pen used to confine young animals, either lambs or calves (Dwelly). A *cotan* at a shieling was described by Donald MacDonald of North Tolsta as a "*buaile bheag*" (a small fold) to keep calves in overnight so that they would not suckle the cows (MacDonald 1978).

Crò also appears, as an enclosure, in songs such as the well-known *Crò Chinn t-Sàile*, and in *An Leannan Sìdh* (The Fairy Sweetheart) collected by Alasdair Carmichael and published in the *Carmina Gadelica*.

An Leannan Sìdh

Cha tèid mi a Luan nan Luan

I'll not go on any Monday

Cha tèid mi a chrò nan uan

I'll not go to the lamb's crò

Cha tèid, cha tèid, na chrò nan laogh
I'll not go to the calves crò

O nach bheil mo shaoghal buan
Since my life will not last

(Carmichael 1954: 153).

It seems clear then, that cows and calves were kept separate at night, so that cows could be milked the following morning, and in some cases at least, also kept separate through the day so that they could be milked in the evening. The question to ask now is: what happened at milking time? Alasdair Carmichael gives a rather flowery description without too much detail (Carmichael 1972: 259):

It is interesting and animating to see three or four comely girls among a fold of sixty-eighty or a hundred picturesque Highland cows on a meadow or mountain slope. The moaning and heaving of the sea afar...the lowing of the kine without, the response of the calves within the fold, the singing of the milkmaids in unison with the movement of their hands, and of the soft sound of the snowy milk falling into the pail...constitute a scene which the observer would not, if he could, forget.

Osgood MacKenzie in *A Hundred Years in the Highlands* gives a more practical description of what actually happened at milking time when he quotes an account written by his uncle John Mackenzie of the twice daily milking routine. A date is not given except that it is from the time of the generation before Osgood, who was born in 1842. There is no mention in this description of any enclosure, only of a dyke, a hundred yards

long which kept the cows and calves separate. At milking time the milkmaids entered:

among the mob of bawling cows by one of the small calf gates in the wall...A young helper stood at each gate with a rowan switch to flick back the over-anxious calves till old *Domhnall* [the head cowman] sang out, looking at a cow a dairymaid was ready to milk, named, perhaps, *Busdubh* (Black muzzle), 'let in *Busdubh's* calf', who was quite ready at the wicket. Though to our eyes the sixty black calves were all alike, the helpers switched away all but young *Busdubh*, who sprang through the wicket; after a moment' dashing at the wrong cow by mistake, and being quickly horned away, there was *Busdubh* junior opposite to its mother's milker sucking away like mad for its supply, while the milkmaid milked like mad also, to get her share of it... and then calfy was dragged to the wicket and thrust out, and perhaps *Smeòrach's* (Thrush's) calf halloaed for next. This uproar lasted from six til nine, when justice having been dispensed to all concerned, Domhnall and company drove the cows away to their pastures, and the junior helpers removed the very discontented calves to their quarters til near 6 pm when the same operation was repeated. (MacKenzie 1995: 25).

When a cow and calf are not separated altogether as in these examples, then the cow will generally not let down all her milk unless the calf is present and preferably suckling. This is the reason for letting the calf in to suck at the same time as the milkmaid was milking. In my own experience over a lifetime of milking cows, if the cow keeps back some of the milk, it is always the cream that she keeps back, but if the calf is suckling on the other side of the cow, the mother

lets down all the milk.

The same system was described by John MacDonald of Kyles Paible in North Uist when he was asked about the duties of the *buachaille* [herdsman] in conversation with Eric Cregeen of the School of Scottish Studies in 1973. Kyles Paible was a township of six crofts.

They used to have more than one *buachaille*, especially in this township. They used to have a *buachaille* for the cows. They used to have a *buachaille* for the calves, and the calves were kept separate from the cows, and this was going back about 70 years ago. Now, the cows were taken into the fold, about 10 o'clock in the morning, then the *buachaille* or the herd of the calves, he was taking over the calves to the cattle fold. And each crofter had a small gate on the side of the cattle fold and this crofter's calves would go straight to their own gate, with the result that the cows were waiting on the other side of the gate for the calves and all the crofter and his wife had to do was to let in the calves one by one, to have their share of the milk... turn it out again, and bring in another one, milk the cow then, they were only getting one half, one side of the udder to milk. And that's the way they were working them in those days. The cows were then let out of the fold at 12 o'clock, and the calves were turned away to a field of their own, and left there for a period of time after having their milk and then the *buachaille* would take them on to another field where they were grazed during the rest of the day till it was about 8 o'clock or 7 o'clock in the evening and the same routine was gone over again. The cattle were in the fold all night, and the calves were in a field of their own (MacDonald 1973).

The practice of allowing the calves to suckle the cows and also milking them for human use, seems to have become less common through the twentieth century. In conversations with crofters in their 70s and 80s from Harris, Raasay and South Uist all of them stated that in their lifetimes it had been usual to remove calves altogether from milking cows and to feed them milk from a bucket. However, in my own experience, during a summer spent in Iona in the nineteen seventies, on several crofts, calves were allowed to suckle mothers which were also milked. I heard this described on farms in Mull, and in Skye, as "the crofter's way" of keeping a milk cow.

A cow whose calf has been removed altogether is normally much more accepting of being milked than one that is expecting to be suckled by a calf, and this may be the reason that a *buarach* (fetter) was often used to prevent a cow from kicking. These often feature in songs.

There is a story in Alasdair Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* of a poor widow whose heifer would not accept her calf and who appealed to Calum Cille (Saint Columba) for advice. Calum Cille composed for her a charm to sing to the heifer. It starts with:

M' aghan gaolach, na bi t' aonar
My beloved heifer, be not alone

Biodh do laoghan air do bhialaibh
May your little calf be before you

And concludes:

Tha an t-agh dubh air tighinn gu rèite
The black heifer is reconciled

Nì thu do luran geuma
You'll low to your pretty one (calf)

Thig thu dachaidh le na treuda
You'll come home with the herds

Caisgidh tu pathadh nan ceuda
You'll quench the thirst of hundreds

According to the story, the widow went home and sang the charm to her heifer and the heifer took the calf. The widow then sang her thanks to Colum Cille which included the verse:

Cha ghluais e rium cas no ceann She
moves not against me foot not head

Cha ghluais e rium eang no taobh
She moves not against me hoof nor side

Lìonaidh e an cuman dh'an chlann
She fills the pitcher for the children

An dèidh a theann a thoir dhan laogh
after giving the calf its fill.

This confirms that she could not milk the heifer without the calf being there to suckle and so when at first the heifer wouldn't accept the calf, she had no milk for her children. Possibly because cows were expecting to be suckled by their calves, they wouldn't stand so well to be milked and would thus need some special treatment to keep them quiet, either some kind of restraint to physically keep them still, or some special feeding to hold their attention.

A *buarach* (fetter) is mentioned frequently in songs; *Carmina Gadelica* has several examples of milking songs where the "*buarach*" features. For instance:

Oidhche sin bha 'm Buachaill a-muigh
The night the Herdsman was out

Cha deacha buarach air bòin
No fetter went on a cow

Cha deacha geum a beul laoigh
No bleat came from the mouth of a

Caoineadh Buachaill a' chruidh
calf for the cattle Herdsman

Caoineadh Buachaill a' chruidh
(Carmichael 1972: 266).

'S i mo rùnsa an t-aghan cais-fhionn
My love is the little white-footed heifer

Chan iarr I buarach a chur mu casan
She needs no fetter about her feet

Nuair a bhiodh cach anns na siomain naisgte
When the others are bound with rope

'S e sìod a Sasunn bhiodh air mo ghual-fhionn
It's English silk on my "white-shoulder"
(Carmichael 1972: 268).

A.T. Lucas gives a description of what a *buarach* consisted of:

The buarach of recent times consisted of a short length of rope, often a two-ply one twisted from the long tail hairs of cows and horses, with a loop at one end. At the other end was a rounded piece of wood three or four inches long, with a groove in the middle in which one ply of the rope lay tightly, holding the stick in a position transverse to the extended rope. The rope was passed around one of the hind legs above the hoof, crossed on itself and then secured around the other hind leg by passing the stick through the loop. (Lucas 1989: 44).



Fig 3 – Margaret Fay Shaw's photograph of Mairi MacRae milking Dora (© National Trust for Scotland, Canna House), showing the use of a fetter.

Some milkmaids, it seems, were, through their own nature and experience, able to quieten a difficult cow. There is an account in *Carmina Gadelica* vol IV P75 of Mary MacNeill known as *Màiri Raghnail* who was head milkmaid with the MacNeills of Barra:

The crossest cow that was ever in MacNeill's fold, Mary could quiet her and make her give milk to calf and to milkmaid. She had a musical voice and a rare way with her.

The other method of keeping a cow quiet is to give her feeding which is highly desired. A somewhat unlikely feed is described in *Carmina Gadelica*:

While being milked the cattle eat the fodder which the girls and women have brought in creels. This fodder is not so much grass as

vegetables of various kinds, some of them of the most unpromising quality, such as nettles, dockens, ragworts, chickweed, common rushes and bulrushes. These the Lewis cattle eat with relish as a change from the heather and tussock grass of the moorland (Carmichael 1972: 38).

More recently, calves were often separated entirely from crofters' house cows and never allowed to suckle them, however one crofter, from Raasay, told me that they would keep the calf beside the cow in the byre "so that they would be near each other, so that she would let down the milk better, the cow would know that the calf was there."

A crofter from the Bays of Harris explained that calves were shut away from the cows in the byre and then when the cows were milked outside

in the summer, above the dyke at the back of the crofts, the calves would be tethered on the crofts. When they were milking outside the women would take a creel of grass pulled from the potato rig to keep the cow steady. They would use a fetter if they needed to, but some cows would stand “as steady as a rock”.

As we have seen, the evidence from written sources, oral tradition, songs, placenames, material culture and landscape archaeology suggests that the practice of holding calves away from cows overnight was a long established pattern of dairy-centred animal husbandry within Scottish Gaeldom, going back many centuries. The remnants of these practices remain embedded within the Gaelic language through the different terms for such enclosures (*crò, fang, buaile, cuidhe, cotan*), and in the landscape where some still exist and can be identified on the ground. My own practical experience of milking cows and crofting agriculture has been invaluable for interpreting these linguistic and archaeological signs. It is hoped this theory is further tested and applied by other researchers into oral tradition and landscape archaeology to build a fuller understanding of the central importance of a dairy-based cattle culture in shaping how individuals and communities in Gaeldom lived their daily lives and designed and built their structures and material culture.

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