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CHANGING CULTURES

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CHANGING CULTURES

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The aim of the series is to show how specific non-industrial societies have developed and changed in response to the conditions of the modern world. Each volume will present a comprehensive analysis, drawing on recent fieldwork, of the contemporary organisation of a particular society, but cast in a dynamic perspective that relates the present both to the past of the society and to the external forces that have impinged upon it. By concentrating on peoples that have been the subjects of earlier studies, some of these volumes will also reflect the developing interests and concerns of the social sciences.

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JUDITH ENNEW
*Department of Social Anthropology,
University of Cambridge*

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For my parents, Paul and Edna Morgan

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Prologue

In the autumn of 1977 I visited Murdo Macfarlane, the village bard of Melbost on the Isle of Lewis. Murdo had been one of my chief informants during my extended fieldwork on the island between 1975 and 1976. As is frequently the case in fieldwork, interviews had soon relaxed into conversation, and the subject/observer relationship warmed into friendship. This present visit was a purely social occasion, although the discussion included many details which would inform and enrich my work. Murdo poured me a 'dram' of whisky, while September gales shook the windows and darkened the day into an early twilight. One of the subjects we spoke of was a recent visit by an oral historian. Murdo had been particularly pleased that this observer of Lewis life had questioned him about the labour movement on the island in the 1930s. He contrasted the warm memories he retained of this interview with the visit of another academic, a 'young fool' who 'only wanted to ask about second sight'.

Murdo's obvious scorn of this second visitor confirmed my own perception of writings about the Western Isles. The tendency is to mythologise the islands, to use them to conceptualise notions of Community, peasantry and pre-industrial history. The Hebrides appear to both popular and academic vision as if in a rear-view mirror. They represent the close-knit Community which is apparently lost to industrial, urban existence. Thus they must be seen to be backward, archaic and rustic; an anachronism in the modern world. Outside observers are not usually interested in writing about the way in which the Hebrides are integrated into capitalist Europe. On the contrary, the concern of most students of the area is to construct tradition, to observe old customs and beliefs, to preserve a static picture of culture.

What should be emphasised is the dynamism of the area. This is not the dynamism of hope, for there are considerable economic reasons for describing the islands as depressed. But the Western Isles are not residual. They have moved with the times, albeit awkwardly. Far from being an area untouched by capitalist development, they exhibit in the strongest possible way the results capitalist development has on some areas in every nation state. If the islands were held up in a mirror, the image seen should not be that of a past state in contrast with the present position elsewhere in the United Kingdom. On the contrary, they should appear as the consequence of this present position. This book is an attempt to realise this appearance,

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to describe the Western Isles as an integral part of the United Kingdom, rather than as an isolated traditional Community.

The dynamic vigour of the Hebridean way of life during my visits in the mid-1970s was characterised by resentment, a feeling of dispossession which contrasted with the warmth of Hebridean hospitality and the wit of much conversation. Underlying all attempts to improve the area is a feeling of insecurity. If Hebrideans are backward-looking, it is perhaps because the future appears uncertain. In the pages which follow I shall attempt to describe the changes taking place in the Hebrides now. These changes do not represent a contrast between tradition and modernity, but are part of a long historical process. The last verse of one of Murdo's poems, *I saw from me the ben*, expresses the occasionally-voiced fear that this process can have only a bitter outcome.

I saw from me the ben
A sight that sickened my heart
Time's dog pursuing my race
Listen! hear them go down the glen!
Soon pursuit will be at an end
The sun sinks in the waves of the West
Little by little the black night draws tight.
(Translated from the Gaelic by Norman Macdonald.)