

A Ceilidh Story

By Bob Pegg

In the days before radio and television, before computers and mobile phones, before video games and streaming, people would meet in the evenings to gossip and sing, tell stories and jokes, ask riddles and play a little music; they would often take with them some domestic work such as darning, or sewing, or spinning with the drop spindle. In the parts of Scotland where Gaelic was spoken, a gathering like this would be called a *ceilidh*, and the place where it happened would be well known in the community. It could be someone's house, but it might also be another important location; a smithy for instance, a mill, or a kiln for drying corn.

On the southwest coast of Mull there was such a kiln, a place where men and boys gathered to tell stories. They sat in a row around the fire and the owner of the kiln began with his story, followed by the others in turn. The rule they had – their 'law' – was that everyone there, with no exception, should contribute a tale.

On one occasion a young man from another district was present at the session. He didn't know the house rules, and, when it came to his turn, he had no story to tell. The regulars were outraged at this flouting of protocol. Blows were close to being struck, when the owner suggested that the young man go outside to put some straw in a hole in the wall, as it was letting in the wind.

The lad stepped out into the dusk, glad to be away from the prickly atmosphere inside the kiln. There was indeed a strong wind and, when he looked out to sea, he saw that a ship was being driven dangerously close to the rocks. The boy ran down to the shore and found a small boat, pushed it out, and began to row towards the ship in distress, but the gale caught hold of his little vessel and dragged him out to sea, past Colonsay, Jura and Islay, and over to the north coast of Ireland.

The young man was cast up in the mouth of a creek, near to a cottage that was on a hill above the shore. When he enquired at the cottage, he found an old woman and a young girl living there. The old woman's husband, the father of the girl, had died a few weeks before. He had been a fisherman, and now his

boat was idle. The lad from Mull got on well with the old woman, and particularly well with the girl. He knew how to fish too, and so it seemed sensible for him to stay there, marry the daughter, and take over the management of the boat.

The young couple made a good partnership, and it wasn't so long before their first child was born. Quite quickly they had three more children, and the house became filled with the sounds of a happy family, working and playing and eating together. Then one evening the Mull man was out fishing when a great storm rose up, and his boat was blown back over the sea, past Islay, Jura, and Colonsay, to the very place in Mull that he had left all those years before. He climbed the hill to the kiln, which was still there above the beach. When he went in, he was astonished to see the same band of men and boys, sitting in just the same places, and none of them looking a year, or even a day older.

The owner of the kiln asked where he had been, and the young man told about the storm, the voyage to Ireland, his wife and four children. 'Well, at last you have a story to tell,' said the owner. The others started to laugh, but the owner hushed them, saying that the lad had been under a spell, and that his experiences had all been a vision conjured up by magic. That may have been true, but it didn't stop him mourning the wife and children who were as real to him as if they'd been flesh and blood.

People say that the owner of the kiln was a master of the black art, and was himself responsible for the young man's vision, but that surely is an old wives' tale.