

Stephan Janz

# Highland Cattle

Icon of the Scottish Highlands



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# Preface to the English Edition

To quote myself: “This is the book I would have liked to have had when I first started to think about keeping and breeding Highland Cattle.” Initially it was written as an act of self-reassurance and consequently also it was an attempt to explain to my German fellow breeders and breed enthusiasts how and why Highland Cattle are an icon of the Scottish Highlands and a product of living conditions in a harsh environment. The hands-on part of the book goes through issues such as husbandry and breeding philosophy. It is based on my personal learning curve as a breeder and reflects on Scottish traditions, but deals with conditions in Germany. You will recognise that this book was written by a German dilettante\* and small-scale part-time farmer for a readership of German breeders and novices.

When it was first released in December 2020 the book and the news of its publication found its way to breeders in the UK and in other European countries and even as far away as Australia. The feedback I received was: “It looks great, it sounds interesting, but we can’t read it. Is there going to be an English edition?”

The idea had crossed my mind before, but I was very reluctant and full of doubts. Why and with what justification would I offer this book to an international readership of breeders worldwide with very widely differing background knowledge, experiences and preconceptions, working under different conditions altogether? Might it not seem like I am trying to explain Scotland to the Scots and lecture the old hands from whom I have learned? Will it not appear ridiculous to present my limited personal wisdom to native breeders with their own ideas and experiences, to professionals and specialists worldwide?

I have asked myself these questions more than once. Here is what I have come up with as answers:

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland are the land of origin of our breed and to this day Scotland is the Mecca for Highland breeders from around the world. But today the majority of Highland Cattle are not bred in Scotland anymore and the majority of breeders do not live in Scotland.

Today most breeders of Highland Cattle around the world are not Scottish hill farmers. Many of them are neither full time farmers nor large-scale cattle farmers and many are not trained in agriculture at all.

Many breeders worldwide – including the UK – have only vague ideas about the background of the breed and are not familiar with Highland history.

I believe you will find the parts on the history and traditions of the breed to be valid and equally interesting to English readers as they were for me. First hand sources about our breed

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\* *“A lover of an art or science who engages in it without scholastic training and not professionally.” (Wikipedia)*

## Act 3

# From the Crodh Dubh of the Highlands and Islands to the Highland Cattle Breed

At the end of our Act 2, as we have seen, there is a large population of cattle in the north-west of Scotland and the Hebrides that fits the modern definition of a breed. What did not exist at that time, when such differences did not matter, was a clear concept of what actually constituted a breed. The concept of different races of cattle did not exist in England or Scotland and certainly not in the Highlands. *Crodh Dubh* here, in the still Gaelic-speaking parts of Scotland, simply refers to the existing cattle and further south the English term *black cattle* generally refers to the



*This coloured lithograph after a painting by William Shiels (for further information on this artist see p. 210) was made around 1800 and shows that even at that time not all chrodh dubh were black.*

## Act 4

# The Heyday of Highland Cattle and a First Threat to the Breed



*“A Fat Highland Ox” by George Garrard (1760–1826, see p. 210). This black Highland ox was exhibited at the Smithfield Show in London in 1809 and weighed 90 stone imperial (571 kg) when slaughtered.*

The breeding efforts that turned the unimproved multipurpose domestic cattle of the Highlands and Hebrides into viable beef cattle a good 100 years before the establishment of the Herd Book were, as we have seen, down to the fact that the drovers paid more money for beefy, fleshy animals than for the poor confirmation of their dairy producing ancestors. As a result of the developments described above, the concept of a distinct native breed of cattle had become established. There were breeders from the Outer Hebrides to the central highlands of Perthshire who clearly recognised the value and performance of this breed under the extant farming conditions, breeders who did not want to lose the strengths of the Highlander by adopting other breeds and crosses. At the same time they were under no illusions about the weaknesses of the breed and made efforts to improve the cattle through breeding and better husbandry. There was now conscious adherence to breeding a true type – even without a herd book – without recourse to crossing with any other breed and with clear goals. There was also a background group of well-known breeders who presented their defined ideas of what “true” Highland Cattle should

# The Interval and a Presentation in the Foyer

## The Old Folds and the Great Names

*By Angus R. Mackay*



*Angus Ruadh Mackay*

### **The Foundation of the Highland Cattle Society**

The year was 1884. Good whisky was £3-0-0 a bottle, a bag of tea 1s.6p per pound, a good tweed suit would cost you 40/- shillings and the Scottish press was reporting that General Gordon was to proceed to Khartoum. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of July at the Highland and Agricultural show yard at Edinburgh during the centenary show of the Highland Society of Edinburgh, that was later to become the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, a group of enthusiastic landowners and farmers, anxious to preserve the purity of the Highland Cattle breed, were meeting to launch a new organisation – The Highland Cattle Society of Scotland.

The prime mover was the Mackintosh of Macintosh, chief of the Macintosh clan, and the chairman was the Earl of Dunmore. The Chairman in opening the proceedings, thanked the gentlemen present, representing as they did some of great Highland cattle folds, such as John Campbell of Kilberry; John Malcolm of Poltalloch; Lord Middleton, Applecross; Earl of Southesk, Kinnaird Castle; David Carnegie of Stronvar; and Alexander Macdonald, Balranald. He went on to state that the following noblemen and gentlemen, although unable to be present, had given their adherence to the scheme by letter; they included: the Duke of Atholl; the Earl of Breadalbane; the Earl of Cawdor; the Earl of Kintore; Lord Lovat; Mr John Stewart, Bochastle; Mr Duncan, Benmore; and Mr Osgood H. Mackenzie of Inverewe.

He went on to state that although there were Herd Books for Shorthorn, Hereford, Polled Angus, Galloway, Ayrshire and Jersey Cattle, their own most beautiful breed the Highland Breed of Cattle, had no Herd Book. He further added that the time

# Chapter 2

## Historical Forms of Use and Husbandry Conditions

### *“The Wealth of the Highlands is Cattle”*

The above modified quote about the economy of the Highlands from the English writer Dr. Samuel Johnson, who made his famous journey to the Western Isles of Scotland in 1773 is an appropriate heading for this chapter, which deals with the different ways in which the cattle of the Highlands and Islands were valued, used, and kept by its people. At different times and in different contexts, ‘wealth’ has had different meanings. This meaning can range from the subsistence value to the community of keeping cattle for food and products such as hides and horns, to a societal definition of value which includes identification of status through owning cattle, leading eventually to a commercial trade and exchange value. This chapter is not about the historical sequence of these forms and attributions of wealth but is an explanation of the different forms and variants of wealth and esteem of cattle and how their value was realised. It deals with the various ways in which these cattle were used and finally, as a consequence of these circumstances, how they were kept and looked after as livestock.

### **Highland Cattle as a Prestige Item and Status Symbol**

Since prehistoric times, cattle have been an essential element of daily life for people in the Highlands and Islands. Long before they became a commodity with the ability to be monetised by way of a concrete market price in the transition to modern times, they also had a “*special value*”, a non-material value function. A Scottish legal text from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, for example, lists “*life values*” describing the status of the various ranks of society, from king to peasant. For this *life value* the Gaelic word *cró* was used, which, literally translated, means both “violent death” and “compensation for violent death” and which includes punitive payments for manslaughter. These penalties were to be paid, on the one hand, as compensation to the relatives of the slain, and on the other hand, as a kind of regulatory penalty, to the state authorities whose law had been broken. The amount of the payment depended on the social status of the dead person and the currency was expressed in cows. The *cró* value of the king was 1000 cows, that of a prince 140 cows and that of a simple peasant 16 cows. Slain wives were each given a third less than their husband’s *cró* value.<sup>3</sup>

# Chapter 3

## Calving and Afterbirth Problems

We have reviewed a birth without complications, a normal birth that does not require human assistance and we have seen how a healthy calf starts its life. But Highland Cattle are not “miracles of nature” and we cannot blindly rely on everything going smoothly with our breed just because they are Highlanders. Almost every breeder will sooner or later be confronted with a difficult birth, a stillbirth or a weak calf.

The problems associated with birth relate principally to the cow, the calf and, last but not least, the breeder, and they are dealt with here in this order:

- Problems during the birth process,
- Problems with the new born calf,
- Problems with the cow after the birth ,
- Follow-up and problem analysis by the breeder.

A preliminary remark on this topic:

With all complications, the first and most important thing is that we as a breeders notice as early as possible and hopefully in time that something is wrong. Potential harbingers and alarm signs that signal a complication are described here, but each animal is an individual and what may be peculiar, but still normal behaviour in one cow may be so unusual in another that it deserves an attentive eye. The breeding imperative “Know your animals!” has its most fundamental meaning here. The expert on your herd is you, the breeder, perhaps not from day one, but hopefully more and more as time passes.

And a digression:

Once you have decided that you no longer want to be a passive observer, but need to seek veterinary help, you have to be able to catch the cow and/or the calf for examination by the vet and for treatment purposes. This can be difficult, but there is no other way.

It now proves the worth of planning ahead for such a situation when the pastures are fenced off, when the sub divided paddocks are planned and when the fences, the gates and the handling system are built.

The everyday trust you have built up with your animals now proves its worth. When you can touch, scratch and comb your animals in the pasture and when your

animals accept and appreciate you as a herd member. It proves its worth when you can lead the herd with your voice and the feed bucket and when the animals are halter trained and used to the rope.

No matter how urgent the situation may seem to you, before you do anything, think briefly about what you want to do and in what order. Cattle are stronger and faster than we are, but we are fortunately more cunning and can think ahead. What you do now has to work first time, if possible, because if the animals smell a rat and the herd gets restless and noisy, then everything becomes much more difficult.

Work alone or with someone who is familiar with the animals and familiar to the animals!

Try to lead the herd away from the cow you want to catch, to a neighbouring field, a piece of pasture that can be gated off. Nothing is more disturbing than a bellowing and interfering herd.

Be sure to understand that the behaviour of a cow in labour is usually completely different from the behaviour of a cow after birth. During birth, the cow is preoccupied with herself, she may be in pain. A first calving cow is unsettled and does not know what is going on. This cow will tolerate your approach depending on how much she trusts you as she may find your closeness, voice and touch reassuring. If you have put a handy halter on your cow two weeks before calving, you can now grab the animal and lead it into a pen. If not and the cow is still receptive to the feed bucket or to some hay, you can try to put a loop around her horns while she is eating using the “fishing method”<sup>\*</sup> or, if you can, throw a lasso.

The situation is completely different when the cow has calved. From the moment of birth onwards, the cow is a different animal and there is only one thing that matters and that is the protection of her calf. Highland cows rightly have a reputation for being protective mothers, they are fearless and they are armed with horns. As gentle an animal as she may have been before calving, a cow will now become a determined protector of her calf, robustly fending off any stranger who approaches. As a trusted member of the herd, the cow will usually let the breeder come near – with more or less suspicion – and allow the calf to be greeted and touched, but this should by no means be relied upon as a safe activity. If the cow makes short nodding or turning head movements with which she can give you painful blows, if she jabs you with her horn or if she makes short quick feint attacks, then you would do well to take these warnings seriously and retreat before things get really dangerous. So when trying to catch the cow, it is prudent to use the methods which enable much more caution and distance to be achieved such as the fishing rod or

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\* The “fishing method” is a way of trying to catch a cow that will not let you get closer than about 3 metres. You need a 3-4 metre long stick with a fork at the tip onto which you hang a loop of longer rope. With this “fishing rod” you try to loop the noose around the cow’s horns. If this is successful, it gives you a first hold and a chance of restraint. This method works best when a protective cow does not let you approach her calf, but does not move away from the calf either.

# Chapter 5

## Young Animals – From Weaning to First Bulling

### **The First Winter**

Spring born calves go into their first winter as newly weaned, the late-born calves still experience this winter at their mother's side. Both these groups are still at a stage of life where they have the potential for rapid physical growth during this time of the year when there is no nutrition in the pasture from October/November to April. At the same time, however, autumn and winter are characterised by a number of adversities that hinder development. Pasture quality and maternal milk yield have already declined in autumn, and after weaning milk as a valuable source of nutrition is eliminated altogether. The digestive system of the young animals has to cope with switching from grass and milk to winter feed. The separation event of weaning, the move to winter pasture and possibly a new herd pecking order have to be managed. Finally, the winter weather takes its toll by requiring the greater proportion of energy consumed just to keep the basic metabolism ticking over with only a small part available for physical development.

Adult animals and older young stock can cope well with seasonal fluctuations in forage supply. They have physical reserves and a mature digestive system. They quickly make up for a winter loss of condition during spring. Older animals manage well with proper hay/haylage and mineral supplements in winter. Supplementary feeding with concentrated feed is – apart from individual cases – not necessary as well as impractical and uneconomical.

The situation is different with young animals of weaning age and late-born calves. If these animals are fed exclusively hay/haylage in the first winter, they will not get sick and they do not suffer. But they experience a developmental standstill with far reaching consequences not always made up for by compensatory growth the next spring. Calves and weaned animals should therefore be given special attention during their first winter.

Calves and weaned calves thank us with a steady development over the winter if they receive a small portion of concentrated feed on a daily basis in addition to good ad lib hay/haylage during this first winter. We do not want to fatten the animals,

# Chapter 8

## The Highland Bull



There is a great fascination with a fully-grown Highland bull standing in the field. For most of us, a bull is the epitome of strength and unassailability, awe-inspiring and even evoking fear, an animal we confront with admiration and respect. A Highland bull in his natural environment, with his head held high, scrutinising any incomers is the archetype of a bull par excellence. The power, the alertness and awareness, the calmness and the self-confidence that such an animal radiates makes a lasting impression on most people. As much as we may be overwhelmed by the sheer size and muscle mass of a small-headed and polled Charolais, Limousin or Chianina bull, the archetypal bull of our imagination is not only a powerhouse but exudes the epitome of harmonious proportions in its appearance through its expressive head crowned by sweeping horns. If we then find out that such an animal is a gentleman that appreciates our attention in a self-confidently friendly way, if we see that this animal can bring tranquillity into a herd just by its presence, then for most of us it is only a very small step to being addicted to Highlanders.

It may have something to do with such a pivotal experience that many Highland breeders remain loyal to their first herd bull for many years and hold on to him far beyond any breeding rationale, sometimes for his whole life, just as you are a retirement home for your old dog or horse. I do not want to mock this close

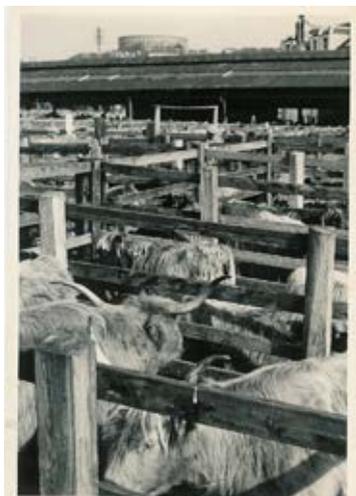
## Chapter 10

### Showing Highland Cattle



*The traditional trophies of the Oban Spring Show*

An unbiased newcomer who is interested in extensive suckler cow husbandry, environmental management through cattle and nature-friendly beef production, will soon come across Highland Cattle when searching for a suitable breed. At the same time, he/she will come across the possibly surprising fact that the public perception of Highland Cattle is more strongly influenced by the show ring and showmanship than in any other breed of cattle. Whether you look through any of the German, Scottish, American, Australian, Danish, Finnish or Austrian breeders' journals and whether you browse through the websites of the breed associations or the websites of individual breeders the fact is that reports on agricultural shows take up a lot of space. Hardly any breeder can refrain from presenting the show successes of their own animals and their ancestors. Whereas the so-called intensive breeds present performance data, in the Highland breed success in the show ring is regarded as a sign of quality. Even though the vast majority of Highland breeders and members of breeders' clubs never participate in shows, these shows determine to a large extent the public image of our breed.



*Much more modest than today, but no less ambitious, the shows in Oban were still held outdoors in the late 1960s.*