

me and drove off to Lübeck with all my companions. I was left alone, half naked, soaked to the skin, in sight of the sea where our ship was burning itself out. I say "burning itself out" deliberately, for I could never have believed that such a leviathan could be destroyed so quickly. It was now no more than a large blazing patch of fire, motionless on the surface of the sea, furrowed with black outlines of funnel and masts, with seagulls flying round and round it in a circle—slowly and impassively. Soon it was just an enormous mound of ash, shot through and through with tiny sparks and then falling apart in large curves upon the no longer turbulent waves. "And is this all?" I thought. "Is our whole life nothing but a handful of ashes scattered by the wind?"

FORTUNATELY for the philosopher who had begun to chatter violently, another carter picked me up. He charged me two ducats for this, but he did wrap me in his thick cloak and sang two or three Mecklenburg songs I rather liked. I reached Lübeck at dawn. There I met my fellow castaways and we left for Hamburg, where we found twenty thousand silver rubles which the Emperor Nicholas, who happened to be passing through Berlin just then, sent us by his aide-de-camp. The men gathered and decided unanimously to offer this money to the ladies. We could do this all the more easily since in those days any Russian traveling in Germany enjoyed unlimited credit. Nowadays this is no longer so.

The sailor to whom I had promised a vast sum of money in my mother's name came to demand that I should carry out my promise. But as I was not absolutely certain whether he really was the same sailor and, moreover, since he had done absolutely nothing to save me, I offered him a thaler, which he was only too pleased to accept.

As for the poor old cook who had been so concerned about the salvation of my soul, I never saw her again, but of her it can certainly be said that whether she was roasted or drowned, she had a place reserved for her in heaven.

BOUGIVAL, June 17, 1883

A Visit To the Western Isles

NAOMI MITCHISON

A MAN looks up from his peat cutting, rests a foot on the three-cornered blade of the long turf spade, and wonders what at all has brought you to the island of North Uist in the Outer Hebrides. "He will be a tourist," says the woman behind who is piling the blackly shining cut turves into little huts so that the wind blows through and dries them. The pair are tall, dark-haired, and blue-eyed, both wearing heavy rubber boots for this job, and the fire of a joke crackles between them. But you will not understand; it is in nippy Island Gaelic, the words running together so that they'll scarcely make sense even to a mainland Gaelic speaker.

For why should anyone come to the island if he is not a tourist? People who work there don't think of it as a beauty spot. It is only now and then that a crofter suddenly sees it. He is working his infield and he looks along the plow and past his horse's ears and there is the wide shining of the sea, the brown and green patches of worked land dancing down to it, the orange fringe of the seaweed edging the rocks and beyond, islands and skerries, and far across, shadowy and half transparent in blues and purples like something in a story, the great mountains of Harris. While he is watching, a skein of duck come across, gabbling softly to themselves in the high air; the smoke from the croft house rises, a hover of peat scented blue; the machair—the low-lying ground—is alive with flowers. Bonny enough. But he will mind on the winter storms that the tourist does not see, the boom of the waves, the driven rain, the wind never for a moment easing down.

It rains often enough in summer too, but an easy, pleasant rain, not cold, followed by magnificent, sky-stretching rainbows. This is weather for the fisherman with rod and line, whether he is after the brown trout

in the dark, peaty lochs starred with white water lily and violet bog bean, that nestle everywhere between the shoulders of the low hills and that spill short, glinting outfalls down into the sea, or else waist-deep in the exciting tidal sea pools where the big fast-moving sea trout leap and hide. And there can be August gales when the Atlantic lashes along the western seaboard and the wind soars up to hurricane force so that one clings half-blinded to the rocks. But suddenly it is over. On the long, lonely strand of Vallay, ripples break on exquisitely fine, pale sand; on the wave lines are cowrie shells, pink spotted with delicate brown, tiny brittle fan shells, or sometimes a floating nut that must have rocked its way thousands of miles from some far island. The sea is peacock-colored and calmed, and the clouds rolling in from the west are still fleecy and small, more storms and rainbows still two days ahead.

Crofters and 'Black Houses'

But nobody lives by beauty alone, not even the hotelkeepers who always have a flourishing bar trade. Most people on the Uists are crofters. A croft is an agricultural small holding, rented—often from the Scottish Department of Agriculture—for only a few pounds a year and with absolute security subject to a minimum of decent farming practice. The house belongs to the tenant and a croft is usually passed on by will. There is no land tenure quite like it anywhere else, nor is there any other landscape with quite the look of a long, straggling township, each house in its own croft, five or ten acres of land and rights in a common grazing. Nothing is fenced, partly because there is no wood for fence posts, and there are no gardens.

The houses are set at any angle, wherever there is a piece of flat ground; each has a peat stack over

a man's height, maybe a few small conical hay or straw stacks. Ask one of the crofters what he is growing and, once he knows you aren't an inspector, he will tell you, pointing at the small, odd-shaped patches of dark, peaty land between the rocks: "There are my potatoes, enough for ourselves and a bag or two for my mother. There are my oats—no, those you are seeing will be my neighbor's. A queer shape of a field?" He laughs politely: "In America, now, you would be blasting the whole mountain and making a flat plain of it!"

These, then, are the subsistence crops, with meadow hay and grazing between the rotations. But where does the money come from? "Well," our friend says, "I've a souming of six cattle beasts and twenty sheep down there on the machair." This means that he raises store cattle for sale, and also, of course, has milk and summer butter for the house. A souming is his share of what can be grazed on the common land, and the machair is the stretch of comparatively level and easily worked land along the western edge of the Uists; blown shell sand makes the lime-loving grasses grow there. A good crofting township has land in the machair and also land in the wet, peaty hill ground behind it. In the old days the houses were on the machair and in summer the girls drove the beasts up to the green hill pastures, where they lived in summer huts, the shielings, making butter, cheese, and songs. The older people still remember that as a happy way of life.

MOST of the croft houses, built with the help of government grants, are dourly plain, poured concrete with corrugated iron or slate roofs and uncompromising dormer windows. But you see a few of the old "black houses" with immensely solid low stone walls, windows tiny, the curved roof coming at a low slope to rest on the middle of the top of the walls, so that the rain drains off through the loose-packed stones. In the old days there was a central hearth on the earth floor, with the peat smoke steeling off through doors or windows or the turf itself, and in those houses the cattle beasts at one end of the house

had only a low wall between them and the dwelling room and the sight of their mistress's fire. But now the black houses that are left have chimneys, often a modern stove, and maybe a little pretty porch, so that the wind doesn't blow straight in. They are divided into rooms with floors and ceilings, and the poor milch cows have been pushed out into a byre.

But good poetry used to be written in the black houses, songs sung and stories told. Something of that remains and people react strongly to any attempt to change the crofting life into anything nearer what we townsfolk think of as modern conditions. If they can have another job they will get by; the postman and the road menders are crofters,



and some have lobster boats with engines. They sell their lobsters well through a co-operative that markets them—often far away in the European capitals. There is still some splendid hand weaving, though few women will bother themselves with the hand spinning. Seaweed is collected and processed, cut in the small bays, and pulled around by rowboats to the drying shed in great floating mats. Yet there is never quite enough work to go around, not at least for the younger men.

MEANWHILE, most of them in North Uist are left-wing Protestants, in terms of the religious Revolution, as they called it then, led by John Knox in the sixteenth century. Communion is taken not more than twice a year, and on Communion Sunday busloads of black-clothed communicants, the older women with jet-trimmed mantles and bonnets, converge on Lochboisdale in a magnificent and horrible certainty that they alone are in the right and everyone else set for the Bad Place. Island so-

ciety is terribly dominated by such ideas, and preaching becomes painfully personal should anyone have been publicly guilty of the mildest Sabbath breaking or such crimes as "promiscuous dancing," that is, dancing with someone of the opposite sex. Dancing is grudgingly condoned if a single man by himself practices the Sword Dance or Shean Truibhis, but neither the kilt nor the bagpipes are really respectable. As to Village Halls: "Ah, they'd eat you alive sooner than that," a girl says, "but of course it's different altogether on the other island." For South Uist is a Catholic island, with a different collection of sins, but at least a kinder eye for dancing and secular singing. These islands went Protestant and Catholic with their lairds in the old days, but it takes more than an arm of the sea to stop boys and girls falling in love and sneaking across to meet one another.

Magic Chiefs and Lost Whisky

Below the roots of religion there are older things. These islands have been inhabited and fought over for a very long time. In the old days before the peat was laid down and there were still trees and perhaps a different climate, people lived in the wheel houses. One can still see the remains, half fallen in—for few of them have been excavated—along the coastal strip. They seem to have consisted of rooms dug out of rock and earth around a central space with a fire; there are remains of stone beds and cupboards. But there are also queer, winding passages, too low for an ordinary person. Were sheep driven in here during raids—or women and children on hands and knees?—or shall we just say, as older generations have done, that these are fairy dwellings? Later invaders set up the great standing stones that are landmarks still, where once a magic chief and his men were buried; later still the brochs, round fortresses with spiral staircases up the insides of the great hollow-built walls, used by raiders or raided who built and fought but left no writing and only shadowy stories.

All these ancestors before any known history! People are aware of them as also of the later ones. The

Prince came here, sick and hunted after Culloden, but nobody in all the Islands betrayed him to the English, and the Flora Macdonald lassie, up at her father's shieling, seeing to the butter and cheese, she brought him safe over from the Uists to Skye: near enough time, that, scarcely more than two centuries. "And there would be plenty of whisky made in the old days?"

"Indeed yes, and the English Customs sore on us. Pabbay, there, was a great island for the barley, though there's not a soul living on it now. But in those days there were a dozen stills working and the Customs came to hear of it. My great-grandfather was digging the croft, a young lad. Didn't the Customs officers come on him and make him row them out! So he was rowing away, watching them grim in the stern, and how could he save the Pabbay folk from what was coming on them—prison and ruination? There was a rock he knew; he made one stroke with his starboard oar and brought her bow across; the rock clawed and caught. They were wet landing, and late: late enough for Pabbay. There was nothing there for them to find."

"And the lad himself?"

"They were black angry, but nothing to prove on him. He never went to prison. No indeed, he had honor from all the folk and lived to a great age." And we shake our heads over the lack of such noble doings today, although to be sure there was the good ship *Politician* that went ashore on Eriskay, just as it says in the film *Tight Little Island*—oh, a truer film was never made!—and there are still crates of whisky lost somewhere in fields that were hurriedly plowed over and the spot not marked, for indeed few men in Eriskay were in any state to do so accurate a thing.

A Sorcery with Time

Below the history there was always an undertow of magic. The old Church had a place for healing and charms for man and beast, where the names of Mary and the Celtic saints were powerful. Now these beautiful sung charms are only collector's pieces, but sorcery of a kind goes on and the Sight is endemic. If someone dies suddenly, either Mrs. So-and-so had a Warning or

"It was strange, indeed, that there was no Warning." It may be the full Warning with sight of the coffin and identification of the bearers, or only a sudden definite premonition, but, whatever it is, it is painful and exhausting for those who have it, whatever kind of a trick with time it may be.

Maybe all this has to do with living on the edge of beyond with the seas ranging round us and the gray Atlantic seals singing half humanly to us out of the surf on summer evenings. Inland there are quaking bogs, often grown over with tall reeds. Be careful if you go there after duck or snipe; the ground gives and sways under your boot, it is only a skin of matted roots; there is no saying how deep the black water below. Be careful where the sea has eaten long clefts into the land, where foam and spray suddenly boil up, almost over the potatoes. Be careful of the North Ford; do not try to cross at low tide; the sands shift, the tide races up. Cross by boat at high tide, steering around and between the low grassy islands, with the geese fighting over them through the lazuline evening sky.

BUT SOON there will be a road across from the North Uist to Benbecula, the small island between the Uists where the airfield is. You ask the boatman how soon it will come. "Och well, the County has it all in hand, but I can tell you this—we would never have it at all but for the rocket range."

"That will be on South Uist?"

"So they are saying," he says and gives the engine full throttle, for now we are in a heavy, boiling current, like treacle to steer in. "But how will it be with all the strangers coming in? Good enough money to be made, but is it what we are wanting? It will be an end of the Gaelic and our own ways, that's one thing sure."

He heads the boat round the end of another low island where the cormorants stand watching us. "It is queer the way we could ask and ask for roads and water and electricity and not be getting them, whatever government they might have in London, but now it is for another war, everything is there with no trouble at all, steel and concrete and cables,

all the things they said they hadn't got!"

And you may talk to him about rockets for defense, or NATO, but he will not have the look of someone who believes in it. He was in the first war, when the men of the Islands went off eagerly to the Navy or into the Camerons and Seaforths, and only a quarter of them ever came back. In the second war there were fewer casualties, but far fewer men to go. He isn't to be sold on another war, not even a gadget one with rockets. He shakes his head.

It is certain that South Uist has a wonderful inheritance of song and dance and story, which will vanish if the language goes. People speak of all this uncomfortably, in bars and chapels, croft houses and post offices; doubtless there will have been songs made about the rocket range, going to the old tunes. Money calls one way, old loyalties another.

Giants and People from the Sea

South Uist is another long, low island; the west is all machair, pasture that perhaps has never been plowed, the common grazing of the townships, looking far out to where the storms came from. The east rises to low hills, cut into by winding sea lochs, wonderful country for rare flowers and rarer wild birds. Here are still more of the ancient burial places and dwellings of the ancestors, whom racial memory has changed into fairies and giants. Nor would it seem strange if seal men or swan women or dreadful sea horses were to come dripping out of this lonely sea.

There is a big weaving shed here, where beautiful tweeds are made, and a few shops in Lochboisdale where the steamers come in, and sometimes the bigger boats that have been out after herring or whitefish. But it is not enough to keep the young men at home, not even with the good prices the young beasts are fetching just now in the mainland markets. The young men look uneasily for jobs somewhere else, far from home. Yet if they leave their islands they will miss for the rest of their lives the soft air and the sound of the Gaelic, the feel of turf or light shells underfoot, the crying of the birds and the ever-present sound of the sea.

Tenth Row Center

At the Bolshoi Ballet

DOROTHEA BOURNE

BALLET, post-Diaghilev, is basically Russian, and trying to appreciate it without knowing what the Russians are doing in the dance is like trying to design women's clothes without any knowledge of French *haute couture*. Our hard-core balletomanes, a group that proudly counts its numbers in modest, or pre-Sadler's Wells, thousands, have some knowledge of ballet under the Soviets. In the big cities, by careful watching of programs at small art movie theaters, they have been able to see a fair number of Soviet ballet films, including some with Moscow's pride, the Bolshoi company and its great ballerina Galina Ulanova. Only a few years ago, for instance, there was the feature-length *Romeo and Juliet*, starring Ulanova.

But the small Soviet films were often only snippets of dances, fuzzily photographed, and *Romeo and Juliet* was done in a specially constructed cinematic setting that made it more a movie than a true ballet performance. What was lacking, then, short of an appearance of the Bolshoi Ballet itself in the United States, was a well-photographed and extensive look at the company's repertory in performance, i.e., onstage.

With the release in December of the J. Arthur Rank film *The Bolshoi Ballet*, produced and directed by Dr. Paul Czinner in Eastman Color, Americans have their chance to see the Bolshoi Ballet in full flight and full color. This film, made in England during the Bolshoi's 1956 appearances at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, is an adequate substitute until the company itself tours this country.

WHILE *The Bolshoi Ballet* is a far different affair from another notable British ballet film, *The Red Shoes*, it may very well please the same motion-picture fans whose curiosity about ballet was stirred by the popular 1948 movie. Though the

current picture has no single sentimental story, it does have stories, or at least dramatic situations, and they are told simply. But there is no doubt that this film will appeal more to those who like what they have seen of straight classical ballet.

Dr. Czinner, who has long been interested in trying to capture on film great theatrical performances, has obviously given much thought to capturing the stage performance on film. Having decided where to place his eleven color cameras in relation to the stage, he has wisely let the



dancers do the rest. Czinner wanted a record, a documentary, of the company that would give the viewer a sense of being in the theater during a regular performance. This meant photographing a straight run-through, without stopping for corrections or improvements. It also meant using various angle shots to show the patterns and details behind the soloists.

From a central control spot, Czinner communicated by telephone to his camera crews in what is now familiar television technique, depending upon his own knowledge of the ballets for matters of angle, scope, and sequence. His main advantage over live television's method was that he could later determine at leisure which shots were truest to the

performance from the viewpoint of the audience.

The Bolshoi Ballet, filmed in two early-morning sessions immediately after the regular performances, has many flaws, more cinematic than balletic. Though there are some blurred shots, and sometimes dancers' legs are cut off, on the whole *The Bolshoi Ballet* is a good technical job of filmmaking in what is as yet an exploratory field. Technical matters aside, it fulfills Dr. Czinner's hope: the viewer has an excellent seat and misses very little of what drove the British critics to un-British hosannas.

The first half of the film is given over to six divertissements, which range from the barbaric *Dance of the Tartars*, from Zakharov's 1934 *Fountain of Bakhchisarai*, to Galina Ulanova in Fokine's small tragedy, *The Dying Swan*. In most of these the emphasis is upon ballets in which dancing is strong and swift rather than light and lyric, but the six pieces give us a good look, both detailed and extensive, at what the Bolshoi company is doing and how it is doing it.

Some of the detail proves unfortunate. For example, Soviet dancers are more muscular than subtle in their acting; but since all stage dancing is necessarily broad in gesture and mime, this can be dismissed as a minor, though sometimes risible, detail. Much more important is that with six different dances to judge from, one is struck by how old-fashioned the Soviet dancers are in their use of technique. Much of it seems only that of talented students in the best western ballet schools, students who have mastered their muscles but have not yet had to meet the demands of a modern choreographer. And where are the new ballets?

Prima Ballerina Galina Ulanova

While our eyes will be critical, our spirits are sure to soar with the vitality and superb skill of the dancing, the sincerity of the miming, the intense love of dancing obvious in every movement of leading artist or member of the corps.

The high point of the film, what drew one into the theater in the first place, is Galina Ulanova's appearance in the title role of *Giselle*. Ulanova was forty-six when she danced at Covent Garden for Czinner's cam-