

JAMES SHAW GRANT
OBE, CBE, MA(Glas), Hon LLD(Abdn), FRAS.

James Shaw Grant was born on 22 May 1910 in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis. He died on 28 July 1999, aged 89. In this long life he established reputations in several different fields of activity – journalism and literature, drama, and administration. He was a major influence on the life of the Highland and Islands in the last century.

After school at the Nicolson Institute, James graduated MA at Glasgow University in 1931, with distinctions in English, Mathematics, History and Political Economy. In 1932 he followed his father as Editor of *The Stornoway Gazette*, a role which spanned 31 years and provided the base on which his reputation and influence was built. His own strong sense of community was given powerful expression in the newspaper, and was important in sustaining local morale through very difficult times for the island. In 1943 he was appointed Secretary of the Lewis Association, playing a major part in articulating the aspirations of the island community and editing a series of comprehensive reports on the social and economic problems of the island.

James was a keen supporter of the Scottish Community Drama Association, writing many one act plays for amateur groups in the Western Isles. Several were translated into Gaelic (he was not a Gaelic speaker) and “*Stranger in Skerrydhu*” was the first Gaelic play to reach the Association finals. James wrote four full length plays, performed in Glasgow, Pasadena, The Hague and at the Pitlochry Festival Theatre. His association over more than fifty years with Kenneth Ireland, joint founder of the theatre in Pitlochry, was probably the stronger of his many friendships. James was a Governor of the theatre from 1954 and Chairman from 1971 to 1983. At a later stage he served as a governor of Eden Court Theatre in Inverness. James was proud of being a direct descendant of Roderick Morison, the Blind Harper brought back from Edinburgh by the Chief of the Macleods to be Bard at Dunvegan.

By the mid fifties, James’ reputation as an advocate of highland and island causes had earned him and his newspaper a substantial reputation at the Scottish Office and his public appointments accumulated: member of the Highlands and Islands Advisory Panel (1954–1965); member of the Crofters Commission (1955–1963). His appointment as Chairman in 1963, a post he held till 1978, meant that he had to move to Inverness and vacate the editor’s chair at *The Stornoway Gazette*.

As Chairman of the Crofters Commission, he proposed and pressed for a change from crofting to tenancy (this had been offered to Lewis crofters by Lord Leverhulme in 1923, but turned down by the great majority, fearful of the shift in responsibility to pay rates and to lose other benefits of tenancy embodied in existing legislation). The proposal was that the Secretary of State would buy croft land from existing landowners and offer the crofts to the crofters, to be paid for in installments. The 1976 Crofters Act did include a “right to buy”, in a watered-down version of the earlier proposal, and the take-up of the opportunity was very limited. The problem James tried to deal with a quarter of a century ago remains to be tackled, but more sensitively than seemed (mistakenly) appropriate then. It is interesting that in the year 2000, the Crofters Commission has initiated experiments in self and community regulation in three crofting areas, exploring the possibilities for a wider shift from central to local responsibility and decision making.

His public appointments continued to multiply: member Consultative Council of H.I.D.B. 1965–1970; member Committee on Generation and Distribution of Electricity in Scotland 1961–1962; member Highland and Islands Development Board 1970–1982; member Harris Tweed Association 1969–1972, Chairman 1972–1984; member Scottish Advisory Committee of the British Council 1972–1994. Small wonder the highly critical West Highland Free Press dubbed him the Quango King. An irony was that James had been a powerful advocate for H.I.D.B. financial support for the Free Press in its early years.

As a skilled communicator, James was active throughout his life as journalist, author and broadcaster. Books included *Highland Villages*, (1977). Of greater lasting value are the many articles and broadcasts on life in Lewis, both in earlier times and in the twentieth century. It is hoped that these will be collected and reprinted in book form.

In an article following the death of the Lewis-born poet and writer Iain Crichton Smith, James wrote about “the excessive dogmatism which mars the great religious tradition of the island. His (Smith’s) rebellion against the Lewis fundamentalist dogma was unique. He did not seek to destroy the dogma or even oppose it, so much as understand it. He was puzzled to know how good and upright and well-meaning people could so imprison their minds”. Here James was underlining his own views. In the same article, James also offers a glimpse of his own approach to politics: “There are better ways to change the world than the personal pursuit of political power and the message of Iain’s life is specially important when Scotland is nominally seeking to create a new kind of consensual politics but in actual fact is still pursuing the old party feuds with a fiercely destructive relish. If politicians could show the openness and courage the author showed in his novel *In the Middle of the Wood*, we would no longer have to fear that Scotland’s future would be the random product of a parallelogram of forces created by the feuds of little but ambitious men.”

James married Catherine Mary Stewart, from Lewis, in July 1951. She died in 1989, after 38 years of a very happy marriage. James wrote two moving poems on her death.

He was awarded an OBE in 1956, CBE in 1968 and Hon LLD(Aberdeen) in 1979. In 1973 he was made a Fellow of the Royal Agricultural Society, and in 1982 a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

