

THE LIFE AND SONGS
OF
IAIN 'AN SGIOB AIR' MACNEACAIL
AND THE ROLE OF A SONG-MAKER
IN A HEBRIDEAN COMMUNITY

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I declare that this thesis has been composed by me and that the work contained in it is my own.

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ABSTRACT

Iain MacNeacail of the Isle of Skye has been making songs since 1917, when he was fourteen years old; he still composes today. His style is that of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century *bàird bhaile* [township poets] who compose on a huge range of subjects. This dissertation explores the world of a Gaelic song-maker, largely in his own words through the use of tape recorded interviews and investigates his thoughts on his motives and his methods of composition. These aspects of song scholarship are under-researched in many cultures and though there are extensive collections of Gaelic songs available which allow study of the textual/musicological side, the maker's own perceptions of his work and the community's perception of their bard have been neglected. The picture that emerges is of a living village song-maker in the context of a community rich in song and cultural life, where villagers look to their local bards for articulation of their own feelings.

Functional local song in its element operates on many levels. Chapter one is the biography of Iain MacNeacail, largely in his own words, which sets the scene and provides some historical background on north Skye itself. Chapter two describes the community social life, centering on the *taigh céilidh* [céilidh or visiting house] and other pastimes during the long winter months. Chapter three consists of an edition of MacNeacail song's, with notes and detailed transcriptions of interviews relating to their background and genesis. Chapter four elucidates the actual process of making a song: how they come to him, his conscious technique and his unconscious skill. Chapter five discusses the function of song in MacNeacail's Hebridean community. This ranges from amusement to revenge and protest and looks particularly at song as a form of response, whether to adversity, requests or questions. The functional aspect of song has changed dramatically since World War II; these changes and how MacNeacail has adapted to cope with them are discussed in some detail. The final chapter examines the song-maker's aesthetic: what poets he likes and why. MacNeacail views his world through a song-maker's eyes and everything is therefore interpreted in relation to and through the words of the great bards of the past that he admires so much and quotes so often. It concludes by examining others' and his own opinions of himself and his abilities.

Iain MacNeacail's knowledge and experience provides a unique opportunity to record one of the last Gaelic bards reflecting upon his life, his art, and his role in tradition. These reflections, together with information gathered in further fieldwork, present a portrait of a type of village life once common in Gaelic society, but now rarely seen and even less frequently preserved.

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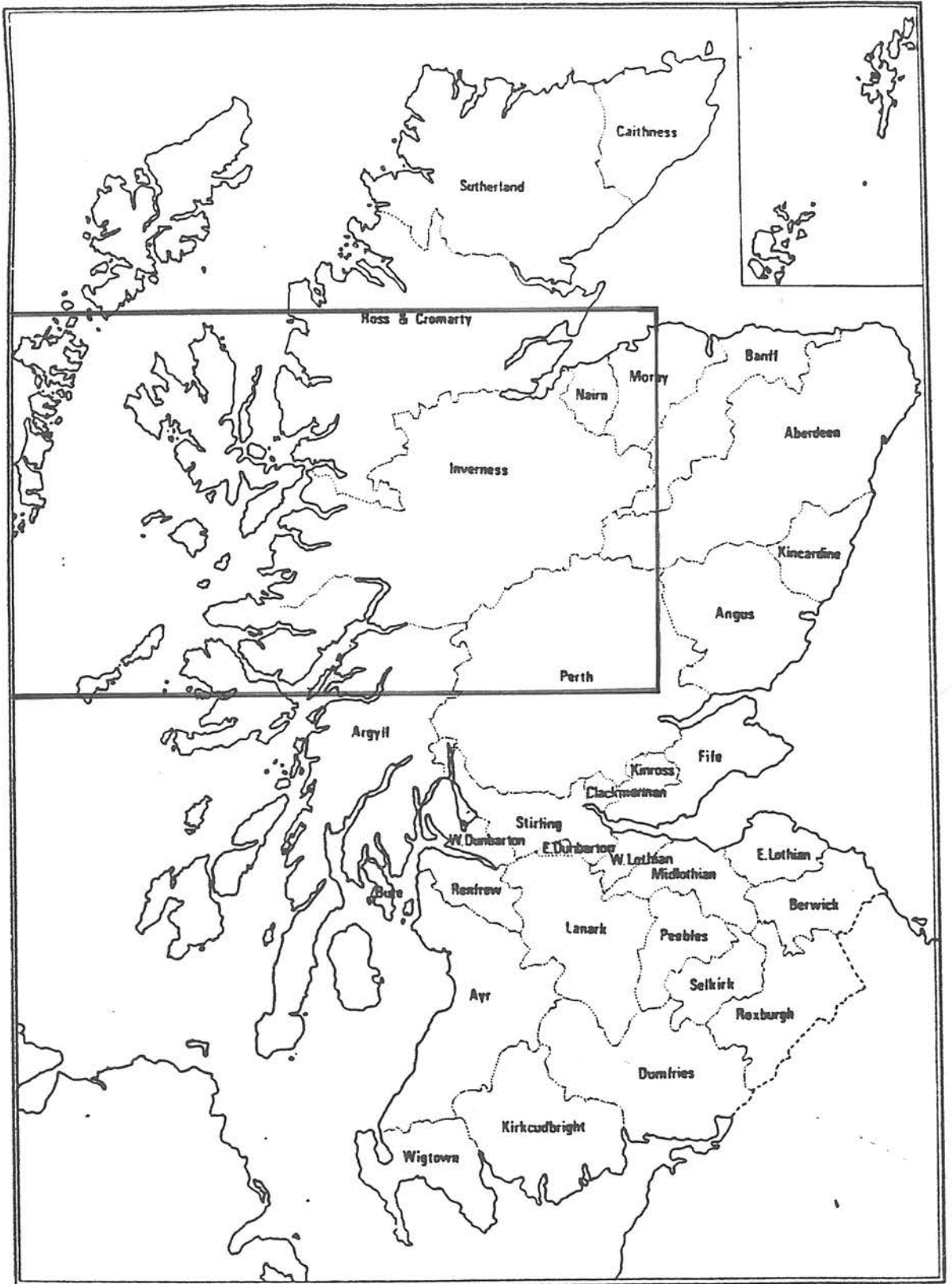
To Sandy and Bobbie Ives for inspiration, encouragement, warmth and two good senses of humour—a paragraph by themselves.

Finally, before this begins to sound like an Academy Award acceptance speech, to A.C. for love, support and belief.

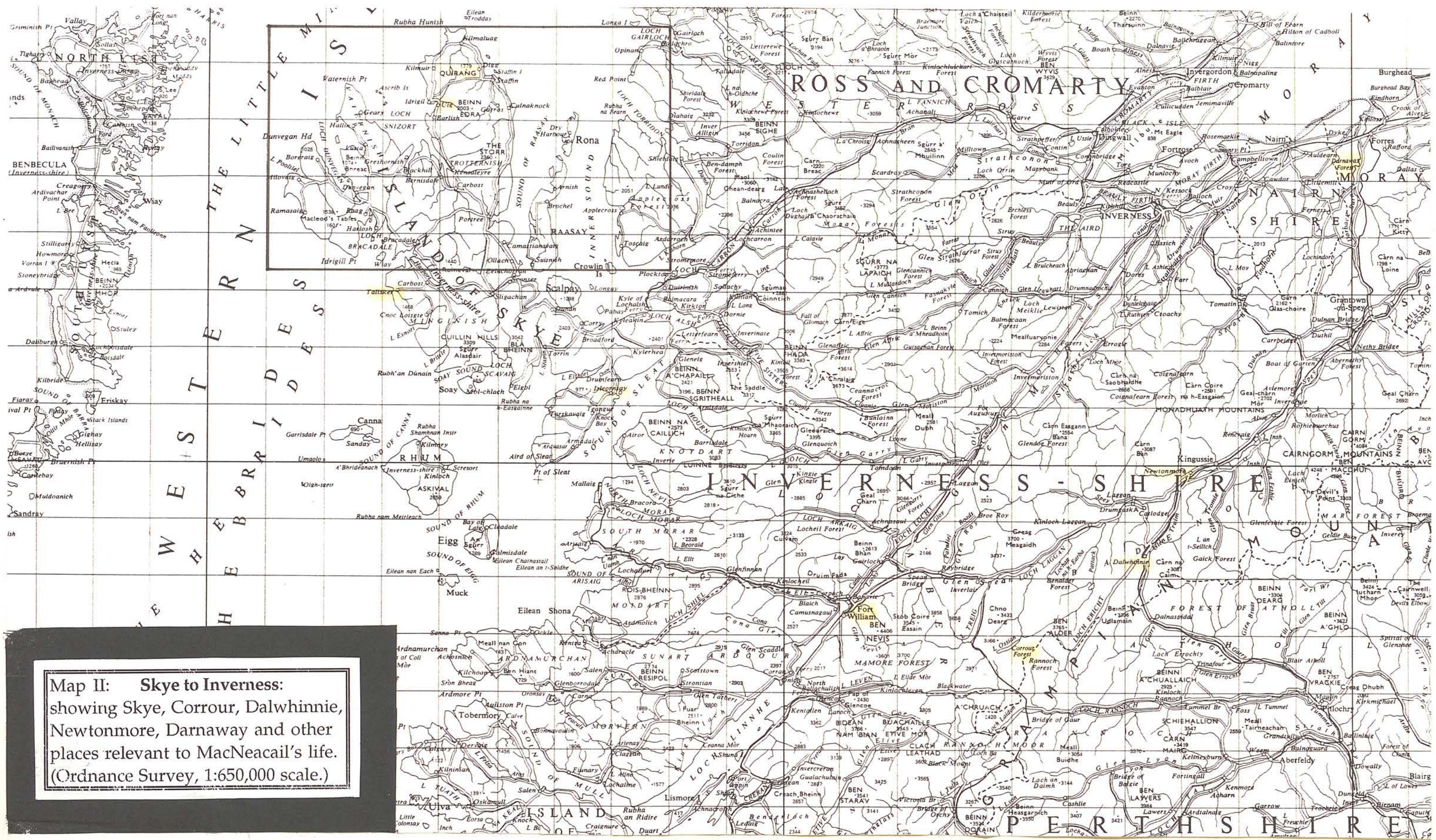
Thomas A. McKean

And to H.F.M. with love.

MAPS

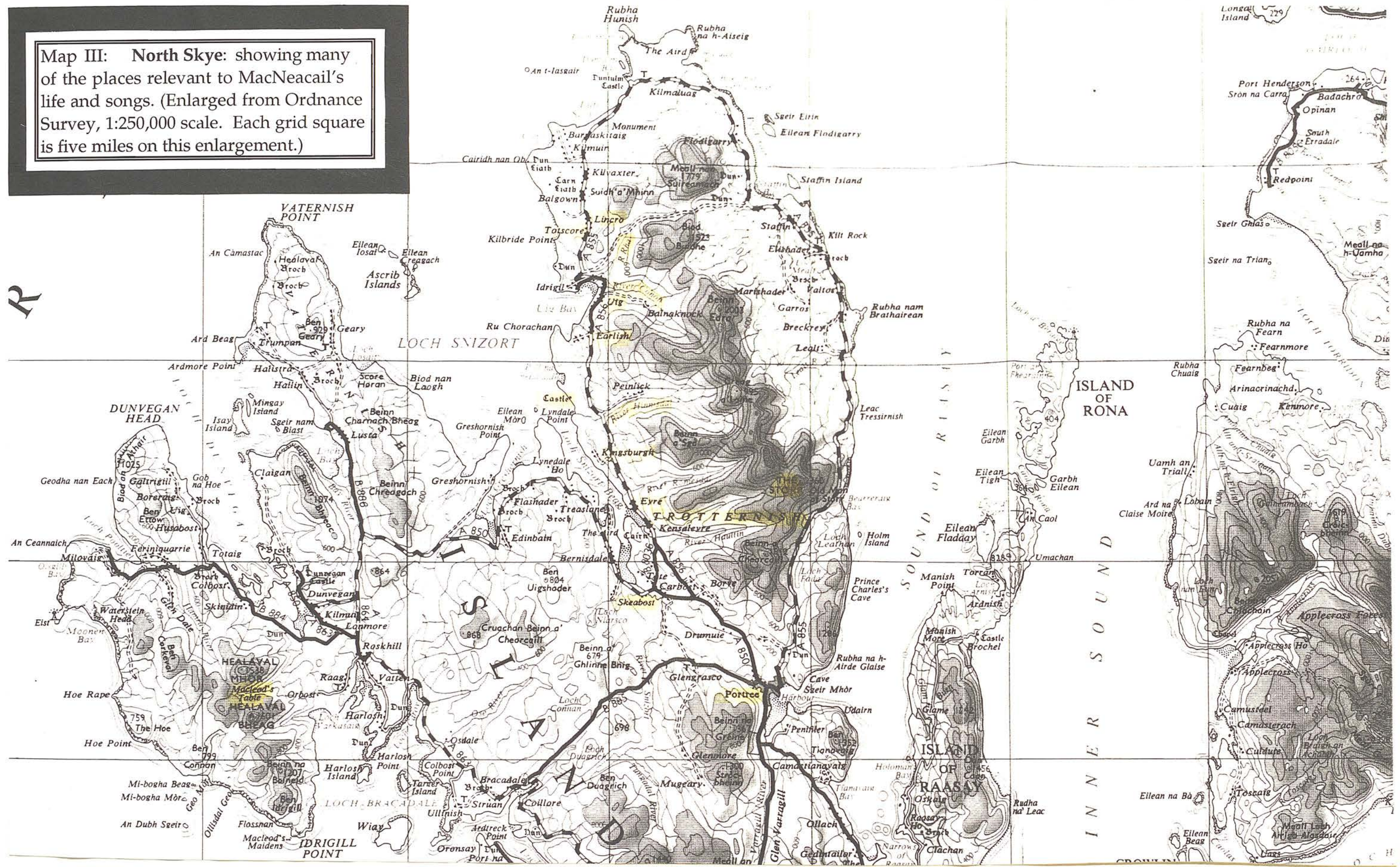


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INTRODUCTION

“Historians do not trouble themselves much about skippers.”

(Francis James Child, writing about the ballad
“Sir Patrick Spens” 1965, Vol. 2:19)

I aim to change all that, with this study of Iain ‘An Sgiobair’
MacNeacail [John ‘the Skipper’ Nicolson].

I first visited Scotland from America in 1980, on a trip inspired by an interest in its dance music and (Lowland) songs (and by the most tenuous of family connections). On that trip, I came in contact with the Gaelic language and was fascinated by the intriguing place names of the Outer Isles, names such as Rubha Ardvule, Sgurr Dearg and Beinn Mhór, the pronunciation of which defeated me. Upon my return home, I located a tutor, Catriona NicIomhair Parsons, a native of Lewis and a fine singer. She introduced me to the basics of Gaelic grammar, though my university was less than encouraging, saying that I would not be allowed to take Gaelic as part of my course (“It’s not a very pretty language, is it?” said the registrar).

Several years after graduating, during which time my interest had not diminished, I decided to return to Scotland and in 1987 enrolled in the Department of Celtic, at the University of Edinburgh for a post-graduate degree. My initial aims were to learn Gaelic and to work with a singer, though I suspect that these goals were quite unclear to both of my patient supervisors. By the end of my first year, I was torn between wanting to explore the world of a singer in detail, who (I expected at that time) would be Lowland, and a project involving Gaelic song-poetry.

These two seemingly (to me anyway) irreconcilable interests were united by Margaret Bennett's inspired suggestion that I work with Iain MacNeacail, An Sgiobair [the Skipper], a *bàrd baile* [Gaelic township poet] at that time in his mid-eighties. I was intrigued both by the possibility of uniting my enthusiasms and, as I thought further about the project, by the opportunity of making a unique contribution to Gaelic culture and to folklore studies.

In recent decades, there has been a strong movement in folkloristics towards documentation of the context, background and social function of items of lore, as opposed to the overt or symbolic meanings. As Alan Lomax has said, "the study of musical style should embrace the total human situation which produces the music."¹ Many important studies of folk and 'primitive' music have been preoccupied with African, Native American Indian, or South Pacific musical cultures, in other words, with radically 'foreign' societies. Merriam's comprehensive *The Anthropology of Music* covers the field of folk-song thoroughly and yet there is a lack of first-hand testimony from participants in European song-culture. Perhaps this is because song-making has not been considered a natural form of expression in mainstream, literate European culture for longer than in most 'primitive' societies. Community song traditions closer to home have therefore, in large measure, been overlooked.

¹ This is quoted in Nash 1961:188 and echoed by many others.

Even studies that do take in Western European song traditions are generally based on written or printed sources and observation, rather than first hand testimony (e.g. Buchan 1972, Nettl 1965, McCarthy 1990). They do not ask song-makers themselves how and why they make their songs. Studies of Gaelic song are no exception; they have almost exclusively focussed on the study of texts, with some work having been done in the musicological area. I have seen numerous collections of Gaelic songs in the libraries, and indeed in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies, and yet have been struck by the isolation of text and music from background and contextual information. The majority of printed collections were made posthumously, but even when they were not, they fall short of the standards of context so visionarily recommended by Van Gennepe and the interwar folklorists (e.g. Halpert, Herzog, the Warners, the Lomaxes).

Many Scottish collections were said to be saving the 'last leaves' of tradition for posterity,² but are perhaps of limited use since the context in which the traditions lived and breathed are missing. As far as the preservation of tradition is concerned, I align myself with Scotland's two greatest collectors of folklore, Calum MacLean and Hamish Henderson who,

unlike their predecessors...did not view the songs as museum pieces,...rather they wished songs to live, as an important part of Scots culture. (Miller 1981:180)

² The term 'last leaves' was coined by Alexander Keith for his *Last Leaves of Traditional Ballad Airs* based on the collections of Gavin Greig in the Northeast of Scotland (Greig and Keith 1925).

This study is therefore a contextual one. It is a folkloristic treatment which I hope will be of interest to academics in general as well as the folk-song scholar giving, as it does, a picture of the songs and life of Iain MacNeacail in his own native environment. This is not to deny the validity of a more 'purist' or textual approach, but simply to outline the perspective from which I will be working; further work with MacNeacail's material along less contextual lines would undoubtedly be equally rewarding.

Despite her slightly dated emphasis on the non-literate peasantry, Countess Martinengo-Cesaresco describes my point of departure well:

[The collector] should approach popular songs and traditions from some other standpoint than that of mere criticism; and divesting himself of preconceived ideas, he should try to live the life and think the thoughts of people whose only literature is that which they carry in their heads.³ (1886:xii)

Such an internal approach means that in recording someone's life, one first attempts to outline their own point of view, then moves outward to encompass outside assessments. This is perhaps the opposite of a more anthropological or sociological point of view, where theoretical conclusions are more based on external observations. As Lauri Honko says, "A modern folklore document permits the voice of the people to be heard exactly as it was uttered." (1992:5)

The approach also draws attention to the "critical distinction between folk history and history written by orthodox methods of research," (Montell 1970:xx) which usually rely heavily on documentary evidence. The folklorist's approach considers "the

³ Her description of those "in whom Imagination takes the place of acquired knowledge," (1886:xii) applies to the Sgiobair very well, for he is a creator within his tradition.

people as a living force," so that their oral history and tradition "can serve as a historical record in those areas where written accounts have not been preserved."⁴ (ibid.:xx, viii) There is no reason not to extend this use of oral sources to an informant's ruminations of the hows and whys of his own behaviour; indeed it is essential to get the participant's own perspective clear first, before building any sort of theoretical construct.

My study looks at the songs in the context of a song-maker's life and at his own reflections on their place and function therein. I am concerned, broadly speaking, with why someone makes songs, how they make them and the role the songs and the composer play in the community. Though my approach is neither literary nor textual, I have endeavoured to provide accurate, fully annotated texts, should anyone (including myself) choose to examine the language and imagery of MacNeacail's song-making at a future date. On the musical side, I include a cassette tape of nearly all of the Sgiobair's songs that I have recovered as it is not within the scope of this study to transcribe nor analyze the Sgiobair's melodies musicologically. Listening to the Sgiobair singing, even on tape, is really the only way to gain an accurate impression of his rhythms, melodies, timing, the timbre of his voice and his vocal expression. It would be futile to try to describe on paper, even with complex musical notation, what is easily experienced by listening to a half-hour tape. I have cross-referenced the numerous renditions of some of the the songs in

⁴ The veracity of oral tradition, even over centuries in many cases, has been proven by archaeological tests in the Southwestern U.S. and Greenland among other places (Montell 1970:xv-xvi).

the textual notes in Chapter III to ease future musicological work.

In recording the Sgiobair I have had the chance of which many folklorists only dream: to interview and write about a person who is not only a great tradition bearer, but who also creates from within that strong tradition. I hope that the resulting picture of a song-maker from his own perspective answers some of the questions (outlined above) that have been concerning folklorists studying other cultures.

My interviews with MacNeacail have taken place periodically since December of 1988, when I was first introduced to him by Margaret Bennett. That first occasion was greatly eased by her presence as she belongs to the same glen whence he came. She was treated almost as family, and was therefore an excellent passport for an acculturating outsider.

I have occasionally, especially at the beginning, felt out of my depth in this culture. Keeping a fieldwork notebook was invaluable in these circumstances; it allowed me to note down any point obscure to me which I would then discuss in frequent consultation with my advisors, Skye natives and other Gaels of my acquaintance. There is also something to be said *for* being an outside observer, though there may be instinctive things about a culture the outsider can never fully understand, but because of his training and perspective, the outsider "is capable of insights and evaluations which no [native], even with training abroad...could ever duplicate." (Hood 1971:374)

Naturally I would like to have interviewed MacNeacail entirely in Gaelic, as his thoughts on his life and work would

have come all the more naturally. I was not, however, sufficiently fluent at the start and in those early days, MacNeacail would either translate for me, or speak his distinctive Highland English.⁵ As my fluency has improved, so has the proportion of fieldwork done in Gaelic, until the present when my visits are conducted entirely in his native language. The tape extracts used in this dissertation, therefore, will be a mixture of Gaelic and English.

MacNeacail has always been more than willing to record and is keen to give me the songs or history about which I ask. He is quite pleased that someone has taken an interest in his songs and is delighted to think that his lore will be preserved as a memorial to his proud ancestors and to himself. Keeping up with this octogenarian when he is 'on a roll' has been a challenge, and I have collected far more information than I could possibly include in this dissertation.

I have not used a tape recorder on all of my visits to Cuidreach, as I feel that that kind of imposition on someone's home life is not justified. I have, however made frequent use of my notebook for jotting down visual impressions and for capturing observations after the tape recorder has been turned off. Inevitably, after I finish recording for the evening, thinking 'He must be getting tired,' MacNeacail continues to talk animatedly long into the night, seated in his little armchair close

⁵ It is well known that Gaelic-speakers, especially of an older generation, are extremely deferential to English speakers. Nancy Dorian supports this in her book *Language Death* (1981:79). She also points out that language switching (such as that which punctuated my early visits with the Sgiobair) is often precipitated by the learner making a linguistic slip which causes the Gaelic-dominant speaker to realize s/he is speaking to an English-dominant speaker. (1981:99)

to the fire and his bookshelf. This leads, of course, to another recording session the next day to follow up leads hastily scribbled down the night before.

There is much to be said, also, for un-recorded visits and conversation in the building up of trust and rapport. Both Iain and his wife Màiri have fairly clear (though differing) ideas about what kinds of information are worth my while recording. Indeed Màiri refuses to speak at all while the machine is on, though she sometimes maintains a quiet running commentary on the alleged worthlessness of some of the things he is relating to me (sometimes she'll say, "Cha d'fhuair thu ach *rubbish* a-raoir." ["*You only got rubbish last night.*"])⁶ Simply visiting, then, without taping can lead to information that one or both had decided I would not be interested in.

When I first met Iain MacNeacail, I was surprised by his small stature. I had perhaps been imagining a slightly dangerous looking poet of stereotypical commanding presence. He answered the door dressed in trousers, shirt and waistcoat with a pair of worn burgundy slippers, which I was to come to know as his customary wear. He had just passed his eighty-fifth birthday and looked every year of it.

I realized gradually, however, that he most definitely was a commanding presence and the years fell away as he animatedly discussed the old days, song-poetry, his favourite song-makers, local history, local characters and his ancestors; with such

⁶ She feels most of his songs are all right, but does not value his deep interest in historical traditions, debates on the antiquity of Gaelic or stories about clever or foolish local people.

vivacity he quickly becomes the focus of any gathering.⁷ And as I have come to know him, he seems to have grown in stature, fixing his listener with penetrating blue eyes and reciting poetry in direct communication. There is an immediacy, an intensity about him when he speaks of poetry and poets, which has not abated with age. Though he walks slowly and sometimes very stiffly, his mind is always far ahead.

Sometimes in recent days, his memory lapses and he cannot remember a song that he's known for fifty years. At other times, such as on my most recent visit, I quote him two lines that someone said he made at the age of twenty-four, and he recites a whole song I have not heard previously. A few minutes later, he is unable to recall the last verse of it. On another occasion, I showed him a transcription of a song he said he did not remember. He sang the first line from the paper, lifted his eyes and sang the rest of the verse and the other five verses, all the while folding the paper rhythmically. The paper is forgotten, and his eyes gaze intently at his chosen audience. Memory, at the age of eighty-nine, is a difficult and unquantifiable thing, as a person ages it performs more and more in its own time. But for someone like MacNeacail, for whom it is practically life's blood, it usually responds to his taxing demands.

Keeping in mind Bruno Nettl's caution that scholars often "come as students, but quickly pretend to become masters," (1973:260) I have tried to tell MacNeacail's story and examine his song-making techniques and even the function of his songs,

⁷ See Chapter II for descriptions of céilidhs and of MacNeacail on his mettle at one.

through his own words. To that end (and especially due to his age and the unpredictability of life), almost all my fieldwork has been done with MacNeacail himself. Though I have spoken to many other people and read a good many books along the way, I have kept the Sgiobair central to the entire project.⁸ As for the future, the list of potential informants continues to grow and further interviews will undoubtedly be done for the book that I hope will result from this thesis. Most importantly, though, this is the story of Iain MacNeacail, so I have not broadened the base too much.

To present a person's world in their own words entails a great deal of work. The tapes are full of absorbing information that arise in a conversationally logical, but not always convenient, progression. A large part of the interviewer's task then, is to guide the informant and to reorder the resulting transcriptions to form a seamless, coherent and convincing whole. This is far easier said than done; it is rather like assembling a massive jigsaw puzzle whose final dimensions and appearance are unknown. It has been a daunting task deciding what to include and what to leave out, but in the end I have included items that I consider illuminating to the image of MacNeacail the song-maker. I have, sad to say, had to leave out numerous wonderful anecdotes and traditional stories in the interests both of space and keeping the focus relatively narrow.

⁸ I would like to thank Professor John Miles Foley of the Center for the Study of Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri for his invitation to publish a paper I gave at the American Folklore Society's annual conference in 1990 (McKean 1992a). This was a source of great encouragement and helped to refine the form and direction I wanted this dissertation to take.

(And it is relatively narrow in the broad canvas of MacNeacail's fascinating life.)⁹

In trying to discuss something as complex as a person, one is inevitably forced to divide his life into categories based on various criteria: chronological (birth, youth, adulthood, etc.), functional (song-maker, father, crofter, soldier), etc. In compartmentalizing to this extent, the whole is inevitably distorted to some degree, but such artificial divisions are necessary to allow discussion and analysis. Language is very good at discussing limited and clearly defined areas, but is less than ideal in discussing the totality of a person, with all their internal dynamics of personality and how they interact.

The thesis is in two main sections: Part I looks at *The Life of Iain MacNeacail, The Community Setting of the Song-maker and The Songs*; Part II looks at *The Process of Song-making, The Function of Song in a Skye Community and MacNeacail's Place in Bardic Tradition*. These chapters run parallel to each other and each examines an aspect of the Sgiobair's life, one of the numerous different roles he plays. Rather than one chapter taking up where the previous one left off, they may be thought of as layers, the aggregate of which make up a total picture of the complex individual that is Iain MacNeacail.

⁹ I have already published a number of items that did not fit within the bounds of the present work: see McKean 1992a and b and Bennett 1992:40, 98, 155, 180-182, 221-224. I naturally hope to print more of these memorates in coming years.

METHODOLOGY

Sources

I have based the major portion of this dissertation upon interviews conducted with Iain MacNeacail at his home in Cuidreach, Skye. Most of the interviews have been recorded on a Uher open-reel machine at 7.5 i.p.s., the standard speed for all School of Scottish Studies Archive recordings.

The audio tapes are lodged in the School of Scottish Studies' S(ound) A(rchive) at the University of Edinburgh. They are cited within the text as (SAyear.tape#.item#). The following are the tapes I have used extensively.

<u>Tape Number(s)</u>	<u>Informant</u>	<u>Fieldworker(s)</u>
SA1985.85-86	Iain MacNeacail	John MacInnes and Margaret Bennett.
SA1988.63-66	"	T. A. McKean and Margaret Bennett.
SA1989.25-28	"	T. A. McKean.
SA1990.104	"	T. A. McKean and Margaret Bennett.
SA1990.105-108	"	T. A. McKean.
SA1992.61-62	"	T. A. McKean.
SA1992.63-65 ¹⁰	"	T. A. McKean and Margaret Bennett.
SA1993.2-3	Aonghas MacNeacail	T. A. McKean.
SA1993.4	Isabel Ross	T. A. McKean.
SA1993.15-16	Iain MacNeacail	T. A. McKean.

The following non-SA tapes are also used:

T1185: A recording made by David Clement in 1981 for the Place-name Archive at the School of Scottish Studies. It consists of Iain MacNeacail singing various songs of his own and others' composition.

An Sgiobair is Mór : a twenty minute video interview of MacNeacail in Gaelic, by Mór MacLeod at *Comhdhail nan Seanchaidh* [Gathering of the tradition-bearers], *Tigh Òsda Eilean Iarmain* [Isle Ornsay Hotel], ca. 1981. Abbreviated in the text as ASM.

¹⁰ These tapes were recorded on a Nagra full-track machine and consequently have only one side; citations therefore do not list side 'a' or 'b'.

An Sgiobair at Uig School : A cassette of the Sgiobair's visit to the school to talk to the children in English. Made in the mid-1980s by Mórág Henriksen, the Head teacher at the school. Abbreviated in the text as ASUS.

Transcriptions in the dissertation are taken verbatim from the tapes, with editorial modification as listed below.

I have also used a Fieldwork notebook which contains research, observations of people or places, and quotes I was not able to record on tape. In recent months, I have taken down much of this information directly onto my computer. Extracts taken from the Fieldwork notebook are preceded by an asterisk (*), and cited within the text as (FWmonth.day.year:item#). While not absolutely verbatim, they are as close as I could note to the informant's original diction and syntax.

Other sources cited in the text are:

The Uig School Register: This is cited as (USRyear:page) or (USRday.month.year).

Books and papers listed in the Bibliography: These are cited according to the Harvard convention (Author year:page). As a rule, bibliographic citations are included before punctuation.

Citations of all types generally refer to all the quotes between them and the previous citation. In other words, only the last of a series of quotes from the one source concludes with a citation.

Editorial conventions

For all of the above sources, the following editorial conventions apply:

- Dotted underlines [XXX] indicate 'stage directions' that describe Nicolson's movements or emotions not expressible in writing alone, e.g. [waves hand]

- Ellipses ... indicate an elision from a quote to make a more smoothly flowing narrative; these three dots are added either in the middle of a sentence, or at the end after its regular punctuation, e.g. !... or
The use of ellipses includes removal of hesitation words and such repetitive speech as 'you know' or 'he says', though some of these phrases have been left in to show the flavour of MacNeacail's speech.
- Square brackets [] are used in the following ways:
 - (i) [xxxx] Word(s) added for clarity, sometimes taking the place of ellipses.
 - (ii) [xxxx] or [xxxx] following Gaelic indicates a translation.
 - (iii) [i.e. xxxx] is a gloss providing a synonym, or explanation of a phrase.
 - (iv) [xxxx] with dotted underline, is a stage direction, i.e. a description of MacNeacail's gestures, emotions, affect and/or physical movements as he speaks.
 - (v) [?xxxx] or [?] indicates an uncertain transcription or that an unintelligible word has been left out.
- *Italics* indicate the marked language in most instances. In square brackets it denotes translation from Gaelic. Within English extracts it denotes emphasis in speech.
- An asterisk * indicates a quote taken from my fieldwork notebook (FW). While not verbatim, these extracts are as close as I could get to the person's speech.
- ---- indicates a missing line or phrase in a song.

Short quotes from informants or books are within double quotation marks ("""). I have used single quotation marks (") for highlighted phrases or words. Long extracts are indented just over half an inch and single-spaced in smaller type. If the extract is from a tape transcription, the initials of the speaker are along the left margin.

The informant, unless specifically stated otherwise, is Iain MacNeacail. I refer to him variously as Iain, MacNeacail and by his nickname 'the/An Sgiobair' (and sometimes with no definite article at all, following the usage of some of my informants). Where dialogue is shown, IM = the informant Iain MacNeacail, UM = his son Uilleam, IAM = his son Iain Aonghas, MN = Màiri NicNeacail, IR = Isabel Ross, AM = Aonghas MacNecail and TM = Thomas McKean of the Department of Celtic and the School of Scottish Studies and MB = Margaret Bennett of the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

A note on tape transcriptions:

Virtually all transcriptions are verbatim from my tapes, with assistance from the individuals named in my acknowledgements. In general I have used standard Gaelic orthography except when MacNeacail's dialect rendition is particularly distinctive. I have not used apostrophes before verbal nouns which appear without their particles, but I have used them to indicate elisions, particularly in the definite article. In addition, I have chosen to retain the acute accent, and have continued to spell the central lax vowel with a 'u', e.g. Pàdruig, when the pronunciation calls

for it. See the introduction to Chapter III for more methodology specific to the songs.

The translations are my own and are in bracketed italics following each extract; they include the speakers' initials where appropriate. In a few cases, where MacNeacail translates a phrase himself, or at least gives the meaning of it, I have not put in my own translation. On other occasions, when I translate a Gaelic extract in which MacNeacail spoke a sentence in English, I have left out the English and indicated this with an elipsis. English loan-words within Gaelic extracts are highlighted by putting them in italics.

On one or two occasions I have elided two renditions of a particular story. In these cases I have indicated which is which by putting one of them in *Courier* typeface.

Since this dissertation relies heavily on recorded extracts, it is necessary to convey the liveliness of MacNeacail's speech. Tape citations are therefore placed after the extract so as not to interfere with the appropriate punctuation (e.g. !). In some cases, where a speaker has tailed off or been interrupted, I have not put a full stop at the end of the phrase. I have also tried to indicate some of MacNeacail's emphases in speech through spelling, e.g. "No-o-o" or "Oh-h", when he draws out those words. Proper names and place names are spelled in English or in Gaelic, as appropriate to the pronunciation. The word 'Gaelic' is spelled 'Gàidhlig' when Nicolson uses a conspicuously long 'à' sound, otherwise the standard English spelling is used.

Song titles are shown in italics and the song's number in Chapter III given in parentheses. For editorial methodology specific to the songs see the introduction to Chapter III.

Summary of abbreviations:

AM	Aonghas MacNeacail
ASIM	An Sgiobair is Mórág (video-tape).
ASUS	<i>An Sgiobair at Uig School.</i>
FW	Fieldwork notebook.
IAM	Iain Aonghas MacNeacail
IM	Iain MacNeacail.
IR	Isabel Ross
l., ll.	line, lines
MB	Margaret Bennett.
SA	School of Scottish Studies Sound Archive.
<i>SND</i>	<i>Scottish National Dictionary</i>
TM	Tom McKean.
UM	Uilleam MacNeacail.
USR	Uig School Register.



Plate I: An Sgiobair in the doorway of his house, March 14, 1993.

(Photo by Thomas McKean)

PART I

PART I

Introduction

To look at the songs of Iain MacNeacail in isolation would be a mistake.

No song, no performance, no act of creation can be properly understood apart from the culture or sub-culture in which it is found and of which it is a part; nor should any “work of art” be looked on as a thing in itself apart from the continuum of creation-consumption. (Ives 1978:434)

The following two chapters describing MacNeacail’s life and his social setting will provide some of the necessary background.

To write a biography can never be an easy undertaking; there are innumerable choices to be made as to what to include and what to leave aside. I have been guided by two main forces in constructing this sketch of the life of Iain MacNeacail [John Nicolson]: (i) the incidents and issues that MacNeacail himself chooses to discuss and (ii) the nature of the study that follows—an investigation of a bard and his community.

With regard to the first concern, most of this section is based on MacNeacail’s own words with a minimum of editorial modification. There is inevitably a bias towards the issues about which he himself is most voluble. The elements of his life and times that he has chosen to impart to me, and their importance in his own mind go some way to defining his world view and it is this perspective I hope to illuminate. Some of the history and facts covered may not, at times, seem wholly germane, but they will add a great deal of texture to the later chapters concerning his songs and his role as a bard in a small Isle of Skye community.

Most of my interviews have taken place in the MacNeacail's home in Cuidreach by Earlish, just a few miles south of Uig in the Isle of Skye. It lies close to the shore at the end of a narrow track winding down to nearly sea level from the height of the main Uig-Portree road. The house is the converted stable of Cuidreach House ('the big house') just a few hundred yards away. It is of white-washed stone with a slated roof, four bedrooms upstairs, and a hall, sitting room, kitchen and bathroom on the ground floor. A large building attached at right angles to this houses supplies for the sheep and a number of cars in various states of repair (being worked on by MacNeacail's sons). Only two hundred yards away is the sea and across the loch, the Waternish peninsula.



Plate II: The MacNeacail house in Cuidreach. The road to the right goes to Cuidreach House approximately a hundred yards away.

(Photo by Thomas McKean)

CHAPTER ONE

THE LIFE OF THE IAIN 'AN SGIUBAIR' MACNEACAIL

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THE LIFE OF IAIN 'AN SGIUBAIR' MACNEACAIL

From Siadar to Glenconon

Iain MacNeacail was born on the 30th of October, 1903 in Siadar, Isle of Skye, the sixth of Mór and Uilleam MacNeacail's eight children.

I never got baptized and neither has [my wife Màiri], because our parents weren't religious to extremes at all. But they were quite as good in their ways and practice as those people who were, you know, but because they didn't think it's fit for them to be a communicant,...they weren't thinking they were good enough for it. (SA1990.105.A7)

Uilleam crofted, but also worked part time on the Urquhart estate, "Aye, my father was working there with the factors, [he was] a coachman. He was keeping two cows and such like...." (SA1988.63.B8) His mother was well known for her songs and stories. "Oh aye, she would know the old times [that were] going.... She was from Siadar." (SA1988.63.B14)

They would seem to be quite popular anyhow, these [MacNeacails], mo sheanair, co-dhiubh, Alasdair Chaluim [*my grandfather, anyway, Alasdair son of Calum*], he was well noted for his honesty, he was terrible honest.... Och he would be going with anybody and working,...but my father was with the factors. (SA1988.63.B8)

The house in which Iain was born, near Baile nan Cnoc at the eastern end of Siadar, was a typical Skye blackhouse.

Och I remember there were the cows coming in [to the house], but they had a door of their own, you know, on the other end.... They were under the same roof,...but you weren't sleeping with them.

TM: How big was the house?

IM: Och it would be quite big, about fifty feet long or more, you know, but half of it was for the cattle. [There] was another door for yourself and the cattle were coming in the side.

TM: Did the cattle keep you warm in the winter?

IM: Oh well, I don't know, but they were no harm to us at all; they were going out of their own door and coming in, and that's the way they were.

But still although it was like that, it wasn't the milk of the cow that our children was getting; they were from the breast, every one of them! We had eight of family and everyone of it was the mother's breast we got. But today it's the bottle, everywhere. I don't say it's anything better [than breastfeeding]. No, and [it] didn't do the mothers any harm either, eh? My mother was eighty-seven when she died and she was as strong as a bullock!

Sometimes a mother would be unable to breastfeed for one reason or another and "the next neighbour would come and breast feed for that baby till she could go home." (SA1988.63.B13-14)

Both sides of the MacNeacail family had been on the island for generations. Mór's people

were from Skye,...as far [back] as I can remember. And my father's people too, from Skye, as far as I can go back anyhow....

Oh yes, that was their origins, but quite a lot of my father's people (they were MacKinnons through my grandmother, you know) went to Canada. And New Zealand too, and Australia.... But they made quite good business down there, I think. One of them was the governor of Prince Edward Island, mhm aye....

Well, it was the people that went over there [that] had it very severe. But the generation coming after, they benefit[ted] quite a lot, better than being in Skye today. Oh yes, but it was hard times when they had to clear, aye. (SA1989.26.A5 & A6)

MacNeacails and Nicolsons are found throughout Skye:

"Tha an Clan MacNeacail... corr is mìle bliadhna a's an eilean Sgitheanach...ach chan eil càil air an chief an diugh!" [*The MacNeacail clan has been in Skye over a thousand years,...but there's no sign of the chief today!*] (SA1989.28.A9) This concentration of surnames makes *farainmean* [nicknames] and

family genealogy a necessity. Among the many not related to Iain's family was a curious character in Siadar called *an Sagart* [the Priest], an unusual name for a man in an almost wholly Presbyterian island.

IM: Yes, I knew that man! He used to come up here, aye, since I came here [to Cuidreach], aye he used to be [there].

MB: What was his name, his right name?

IM: Murchadh, Mura' Chaluim [Murdo son of Calum], [a] Nicolson he was too.

MB: Was he related to you?

IM: No, but they came from the Braes at Portree. I think his uncle was a sea captain and his [?Mòrag] belonged to Siadar, and that was an auntie of Murchadh, and they came down with Murchadh, you know, in Siadar.

MB: Was he married, the Sagart?

IM: No no, himself and Mòrag, the sister got together. Well she died of cancer, oh forty years before that.

MB: Why did he get called Sagart?

IM: He was out there questioning you everything, [like] where you were.... Aye, because if I was going to [or] from Seadair...as a child, "Ca'il thu dol?" ["Where are you going?"]
"Tha mi a' falbh a dh'Uige." ["I'm away to Uig."]
"Dé tha thu dol a dh'iarraidh?" ["What are you going to get."] I had to tell him everything, you know....

MB: Confession.

IM: Aye, and he met me one time too and my father sent me down for a bottle of whisky because my niece was cutting [the umbilical] cord.¹ And he gave me three and six for the bottle, that's what I was paying for it, at Taylor's where the hotel is today, three and six for the bottle of whisky. I went to Neil MacKinnon there, Niall a' [?] Bogaid a chanadh ad ris [Neil the [?], they called him] And "Where do you come from ghille? [laddie?] Oh, you can't get anything. Who are you, who [do] you belong to?"
"Ach," I says, "Willie Nicolson."
"William Nicol, oh all right, a' bhalaich. Eil còt' agad?" ["...boy. Do you have a coat?"]

¹ They would have needed the whisky to sterilize the wound.

"Aye."

"Have you got a coat?"

"Yes," I says, "I've got [one]"

"Deanadh cinnteach nach fhaic duine e. Na inns e do dhuine."
["*Make sure no one sees it. Don't tell anyone.*"]

"O chan inns," arsa mise. ["*Oh, I won't,*" said I.] But I got it, I gave [MacKinnon] the three and six, he gave me six of it back, so it was three shillings. That's [the cost of] a bottle of whisky then, that would be about 1914 or 13, that was the price of it. So I took the bottle, and who would I meet but the Sagart up the way, "Where were you?"

"I was down at the Hotel."

"What were you doing there?"

"Ach, bha mi ag iarraidh botul uisge beatha." ["*Ach, I was getting a bottle of whisky.*"] The fool, [I] told it, which I wasn't supposed to! [general laughter] But I thought, when I met the like of him [an] old man, that I had to...tell it. I had that impression that I had to be so...honest to people and speak right and [tell the] truth to them [laughs]. Ohh well, I knew there where it was [i.e. I realized my mistake].

UM²: So you told him that you were [down] for a bottle of whisky, eh?

IM: Aye, I thought,...well I had to tell it, because I was told at home to tell the truth and not tell lies to anybody, so I didn't want to. That was fine, but [now] I would say to him [laughs] "Get out of here, what have you to do [with it]?" Well that's what they would tell him today, the children. Aye, they would! "Dé an gnothaich a th'agadsa gu dé tha mi dèanamh?" ["*What business is it of yours what I'm up to?*"] But that was him [i.e. the way he was] with me and my kind that were brought up then. They were all alike like me: you had to tell the truth. [Even] if you thought that [it] would hang you, you had to tell it. Oh but [it's] a different system today.

TM: You learned your lesson.

IM: Yes, but it's too late. But...that's what he [did] with me and to everybody, and that's how he was called the Sagart, aye. Oh yes.
(SA1988.66.B14)

At the time of Iain's birth, most of Uig was owned by John Urquhart, who bought the estates of Linicro, Mogastad and Kilmuir from the Nairnshire landowner Captain William Fraser. He, in turn, had purchased them from Lord MacDonald in 1855,

² Sgiobair's son, Uilleam.

and quickly made them “one of the few places where crofters could claim to suffer, like their Irish counterparts, from rack-renting.... Crofting rental of the property had almost doubled, despite a substantial reduction in the amount of land available to crofters.” (Hunter 1976:133)

IM: Well it was him that built this tower.³ You’ve seen the tower...and there was *The Sea Horse* [Fraser’s boat]. She would be coming in and they would be firing two shots from the tower, [as a] welcome, you know, or saluting him when he would come. That was the reason he built it...

I remember my father and all these people, they knew...when the tower was built there. They were young then at that time.... It’s over a hundred years old anyhow, by now I’m sure.

TM: So how much [of an estate] did...Fraser own?

IM: Oh the Kilmuir estate...and up to Gleann Hionasdail. The rest belonged to Lord MacDonald see. [Fraser’s land] was going down to Kilmuir way, beyond Uig and to [the] Staffin side, aye. Oh he would have quite a big [estate].... Aye I think he was an army Captain. (SA1989.27.A4)

As the Captain’s policies impoverished his tenants, land clearance became a reality. Many families were driven from the more fertile north side of Glenconon to the meager topsoil of the Siadar side, the rocky coastline of Cùil, and overseas as well.

Well some of them went. Those that was capable of going at the time, they went.... They couldn’t very well put them away all then, but those that was capable of going had to go. You got no liberty [i.e. no choice in the matter]. Oh it was a cruel law! But that was Gladstone you know, the Irish Prime Minister, [who allowed it to happen]. (SA1989.26.A7)

In 1877, Captain Fraser received what many islanders considered a divine retribution for his methods.

IM: [His house] was in the centre, down at the bay.... Well just at the edge,...maybe fifty yards out [i.e. inshore] from the sea anyhow, but

³ A round tower high on the southern slope above Uig Bay whose main use has been as a subject for photographers.

that's where Captain Fraser had his house, down there, and the lodge when he had it.

TM: Is there anything left of it?...

IM: Well you see the foundations where it was, oh yes. 1877, that was [when] the flood came, in October.

TM: Were there heavy rains?

IM: No, definitely not. I heard my father and mother speak about it at times. [It was] coming down just, you know, gently, but it continued for twenty four hours. And what was very strange, there was no estate in Skye that suffered but Fraser's estate. Whether there was judgement coming on the laird or not, people did believe that at that time. And...Màiri Mhór was saying too that it was [a] judgement that came on him some way, [because] the bodies were coming in[to] Talisker on the shore. (SA1989.26.B8 & 27.A1)

Fraser's estate manager David Ferguson was drowned in the flood and *The Highlander* magazine featured an uncompromising editorial which ended saying that the tenants "do not hesitate to express their regret that the proprietor was not in the place of the manager when he was swept away."⁴ The Captain promptly sued the editor, Iain MacMhuirich, for libel and demanded one thousand pounds in compensation. The great Màiri Mhór nan Oran [Big Mary of the Songs] made a song about the flood and the Captain: *Duilleag bho Bhealaich nan Cabar* [A letter from Bealaich nan Cabar].

Ah, thuir i...thug e suas iad, fhios agad, agus dh'iarr e dà mhìle not [she said...he brought them up [on charges], you know, and he sought two thousand pounds] for defamation of character.... The sheriff said, in the court, when Fraser was suing:... "I'm not very certain," he says, "I haven't got the evidence strong enough to say that it wasn't, so I award you fifty pounds." Agus thuir Màiri Mhór [And Màiri Mhór said], "Fhuair thu leth cheud spìocach 'us rinn iad fiach de dh'fhanaid ort!" They made more mockery of

⁴ From *The Highlander* 3.11.1877, quoted in Meek 1977:132.

you out of your fifty than what you have obtained!⁵
(SA1989.27.A2)

“They said the captain wasn’t the worst at all,” MacNeacail maintains, “but those that was acting for him.” Even so there are plenty of local stories about Fraser’s miserliness.

I heard the man that took Cuidreach House there at the time, a Stewart he was, [rented] the land from Captain Fraser. And Captain Fraser met him,...he had the gun under his arm, and had a...brace of grouse. “What are you doing with the brace?”

“Oh,” he says, “I’m gone shooting.”

“Oh no,...you didn’t get the shooting [rights as part of the rent,” Fraser] says.

“Oh, if that’s the case, that’s your land” and he threw it up to him [i.e. threw dirt in his face] and left him that way, because he wouldn’t give away...the shooting. [Fraser] was going to have the shooting himself, although he was renting [out] the land.

(SA1989.27.A3)

In 1884, largely due to requests from Fraser, a detachment of Royal Marines was sent to Skye to control Crofters’ unrest. Land raids and rent strikes had become commonplace throughout the Highlands and resistance had been increasingly violent, culminating in the deforcement of several parties of Sheriff Officers. Landowners, in collusion with the government, rightly concluded that the crofters’ attitude to the police had become contemptuous; the only way to display a credible threat was to bring in government troops. Captain Fraser warned of continued and more violent unrest unless this course was followed.

⁵ Or, “You got a miserly, insignificant fifty pounds and they made at least that much ridicule of you.” This is part of this verse from Màiri Mhór’s poem.

‘S an àite nan deich ceud,/ A dhèanadh pàirt de’n chall a lionadh,/ Cha robh ach leth-cheud spìocach,/ ‘S gun d’rinneadh fhiach de dh’fhanaid air (Meek 1977:76:ll. 49-52).

[In place of the one thousand,/ which would partly compensate for the loss [from the flood],/ there was only an insignificant fifty pounds,/ and at least that much ridicule (or scorn) was made of him.]

Well you see,...there was a thousand marines come to Skye [in 1884] against crofters, to keep them down.⁶ If Mrs. Thatcher had done that today, where would she be? But Gladstone did that though, 'the Irish cut-throat,' that's him what he was. (SA1989.63.B22)

MacNeacail and many other islanders hold Gladstone largely responsible for sending the Marines (see *A time will come, a time will go*(XXVIII)), but it was mostly through the deprivations of the (often native) landlords that the situation reached such extremes at all. Gladstone must, however, bear some responsibility for the tardiness of the legislation which was to ease the crofters' plight.

Two hundred and fifty of the Marines were brought ashore in the first landing.

IM: Of course it's in Uig, I think, there were...more molesters...than anywhere else.

TM: So that's where the marines landed.

IM: Aye, aye, just underneath the tower...up there [in Uig]; there was a pier there....

TM: So your mother remembered?

IM: Oh yes, and my father too. Oh yes, yes....

TM: And they marched up around the north, right? Through to Staffin?

IM: Oh yes...and Kilmuir. They went out to Kilmuir, I heard my father speak about it, on a grand day.... They marched out [to] Kilmuir, and oh they seen a mass of people, you know, coming out [of a building]. They went in battle order there. But who was this but a communion service and the congregation was dispersing [laughs]. A lot of [the soldiers] at that time believed that they were coming against the army, but they weren't. Nobody lifted a finger against the army. (SA1989.27.A5)

⁶ According to Hunter the number was actually three hundred. One thousand, however, is the number quoted to me by many Skye people, indicating the impact the deployment had on the islanders' folk memory. Hunter also says that at the time the Marines' arrival was announced, innkeepers refused to put them up as they did not want to be identified as sympathizers with the government's position (1976:150).

On the whole, and contrary to their own expectations, the soldiers encountered a population quite at peace. The residents had come to resent the police as agents of the landlord and therefore received the Marines with rather more cordiality (Hunter 1976:150). It was also clear that the crofters were outgunned and they decided against resistance.

IM: Och they couldn't do much about it anyhow....

MB: Did people used to talk about that for years and years afterwards?

IM: Yes,...we would be here in the céilidhs, you know, when your grandfather and great-grandfather [Iain and Pàdruig Stiùbhart would] come there and...speak of this happening and this happening. I was only a kid then and I was hearing the talking between my father and them, you know, about what was happening then. (SA1988.63.B22)

In a newspaper report at the time, *The Times* wrote that the crofters appeared "amazed rather than intimidated by the display."⁷ There was little for the soldiers to do.

Nothing at all! The soldiers was having the time of their lives here. They were in céilidhs at night and everywhere you know. They had no command on them at all but going here and there, and there was quite a lot of them got married in Skye, aye. Och yes, they were all the ordinary boys, you know and [they just] happened to be in the army. That's the only job you would get then.

TM: So it wasn't a difficult posting?]

IM: N-o-o-o! It wasn't, that's it! (SA1989.27.A6)

Soon after the Marines arrived *The Graphic*, a London illustrated magazine, featured an article on the deployment with several engravings of the soldiers in 'action': marching off the boat and playing cards while lounging in one of the rooms of Uig School where they were billeted. Below these engravings are

⁷ *The Times*, 19.11.1884, quoted in Hunter 1976:150-151.

others of the Hudson River, and elsewhere in the magazine, Egypt and India, showing just how foreign the Highlands and Islands of Scotland seemed to nineteenth century London.⁸

MacNeacail knows of only one incident during these manoeuvres in which an officer was harmed by a native of the island. “*There was a woman who threw a peat at Sheriff Hamilton in Kilmuir. Well it hit him in the back [and injured his lung] and he never rose again!” He died shortly thereafter and “she got three months...not for murder, but for the injury.” (FW25.5.89:15)

The billeting of the troops in Staffin from November 1884 to the following June was too much for the laird:

That’s what finished Captain Fraser. He had to pay for the time the army was in Skye, so he died in the asylum in Inverness. He went off his nuts [and] he had to meet the expense.

But...about twenty years ago there was...a daughter of him, she was over eighty anyhow, coming to ask about her friends when Captain Fraser was here. Well there was nobody here but one or two that could give her information and they didn’t give it! No! He was a *tyrant* he was. So she went back. She was in Uig there. Aye I remember it well, [it was] since I came here [to Cuidreach]. (SA1989.27.A5 and SA1988.63.B22 in Courier)

In 1886, John Urquhart, the owner of the Uig Hotel, bought the estate from Fraser.⁹ His factors, and the men with whom Iain’s father worked as coachman, were

a MacIntosh and...John MacKenzie that was in Earlish, [?]my grandfather and him, he was a factor too. But MacIntosh was the last one there and it was [at] that time that they split Glenconon. It was taken from the Urquharts when John Urquhart died,...the

⁸ I am grateful to Morag Henriksen, Headmistress of Uig School, for drawing this article to my attention.

⁹ Urquhart was also, coincidentally, the grandfather of Iain’s future wife Màiri MacKenzie.

land was broken, and the same with Lionacro and Mogastad.
(SA1988.63.B9)

Upon Urquhart's death in 1910, the Glen was bought by the Congested Districts Board, as the Kilmuir estate had been in 1904. This body, the forerunner of the present Board of Agriculture, reapportioned the glen into sixteen crofts. According to Iain, "people were crying for the land and everybody that was wanting a croft, he got a croft then." In fact, many more applied for than received crofts, but William MacNeacail was one whose application was successful. Well, my parents...took a croft at Glenconon...opposite them [i.e. across from Siadar]. It was broken up, you know, at that time after 1910.... The Land League was going then, and the farmers [i.e. landowners] had to break it up. It was Mary's grandfather [John Urquhart] that had Glenconon then and a lot of Siadar too.
(SA1989.26.A7)

The croft has since passed to Iain's brother Alec and on to Alec's son William, who holds it today (SA1988.63.B11)

While the old blackhouse in Siadar had accommodated the family and their stock under the same roof, the new croft-house at Number Fifteen Glenconon was quite different. MacNeacail remembers the move well.

IM: Och, well what I remember about it [was that] I found it a bit strange, you know, the house.... The cattle wasn't in at all at that time, because in Siadar you had the cows [in] the other end of the house. But here the cows were out, in another byre of their own when I went to Glenconon, you know.

MB: You found that funny then, not living with the cows.

IM: That's it, you see it, because you were accustomed to them [in Siadar]. (SA1988.63.B13)

Though the new house was not strictly a blackhouse, it was not a new 'white-house' with a slated roof either.

Och,...well it was a thatched cottage; rushes and things like that was the thatch on it. But at that time you know, they *would* have [had] plenty of good [improved] houses in Skye, but you weren't allowed to do it, because [the landlords] could come there [at any time and say] "What are you doing? Ach you're away [evicted] next week!" You had no time at all, no fixture of tenure, nothing. (SA1988.63.B21)

MacNeacail refers to the era before the 1886 Crofters' Act when the landlords could evict their tenants virtually at will. As crofters had no inheritance rights over their homes, there was little incentive to improve the property in any permanent way. And under men like Captain Fraser, "arguably the worst landlord in the Highlands" (Hunter 1976:155), MacNeacail affirms that "the rent was terrible. That's how the revolt came, you know, that the clearances started." (SA1988.63.B21)

The reapportionment of areas like Glenconon were momentous steps in crofting history, as land fought for in the agitations of the 1880s was finally delivered. The crofters at last had legal recourse in the face of rack-renting and evictions. No longer had they to resort to land raids and rent strikes which had been the only recourse for decades.

Along with the crofts themselves, the new tenants in Glenconon regained their common grazing rights. Pasture land was once again shared, the sheep were owned communally and the village kept a full-time shepherd.

You would cut the wool, sell the lamb, sell the sheep, sell everything. Everybody got...a share of it. That has been broken away now and everybody has his own [sheep]. (SA1988.63.B10)

School and schoolmasters

In 1909 at the age of six, shortly before the move across the glen, Iain had started to attend Uig School. It was here that he acquired the nickname by which he is still known, *An Sgiobair* [the Skipper], despite the fact that he never captained a boat.

Ach well, I used to be about boats and things like that and I used to have a sailor suit on when I was going to school and everybody [who] was going to school had some name of some kind.... But people believed I was [a skipper]! They had the impression,...people that didn't know me, you know.... They thought I was, till they found out. (SA1989.28.A2)

The poet Aonghas Dubh MacNeacail,¹⁰ also from Uig, says Sgiobair got the name because he wore a skipped cap (SA1993.2.A3). The Sgiobair's own explanation may well be correct, but perhaps this *farainm* was bestowed because he showed signs, even then, of his fairly authoritarian manner. In any case, most of the children attending school would have been given a *farainm*, as the tradition is strong in Gaelic society.¹¹

Schooling had become compulsory with the passing of the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act and both of Iain's parents could therefore read and write English to some extent (SA1990.105.A3). By 1909, the Act and the mechanisms for its enforcement were well established.

Oh yes, yes.... When the Education Act came you were fined and [?]finished if you weren't regular in the school without a good excuse. No, you couldn't stay off. There was a compulsory officer

¹⁰ Aonghas is a distant cousin of the Sgiobair, born and raised in Idrigill, the township that makes up the North side of Uig proper. To avoid confusion with the surname, he will be referred to hereafter as Aonghas Dubh [Black(-haired) Angus], as he is known locally.

¹¹ The universality of nicknaming in Highland tradition may arise from the fairly rigid 'rules' for the naming of children after immediate ancestors as well as the relatively localized concentrations of surnames. See Dorian (1981) for a good discussion of Scottish Gaelic *far ainm* traditions, and Captain Edward Burt (1974:2:122) for an early eighteenth century observer's view of Highland patronymics and how they function.

going round. If you were off two days, he was at your home next day: "What's wrong with the boy that he wasn't there yesterday?" So you had to give some excuse and be back there next day. Oh they were quite tough on them then.¹² (SA1990.105.A3)

MacNeacail often refers to the Act in conversation, reflecting his interest in learning and achievement. Before the Act, however, education was a more individual endeavour: "Aye, aye,...the church had classes where people could voluntarily go...before the Education Act came in force" (SA1990.105.A1):

You could learn from a minister [or] somebody. He would be conducting classes and learning people to read and write.¹³

They were in certain places, you know, and they were making seats...to sit on, of the earth...where you were going to sit... How many hours I can't tell you, but they [i.e. the students] were there, just volunteering to go there. That's how some people had good English although they weren't going to school at that time, even before the Education Act.

Of course the English was universal some way or other [i.e. somehow] although it wasn't [then] taught by the Education Act.

TM: But did people use English at all?

IM: Oh no, at that time; they hadn't got the art of doing it, because if they were among themselves it was the Gàidhlig. But there were some people who would be working with farmers and things like that [who did], and ploughmen and all these people, and people that was going with gigs and horses, carrying gentry. So...they were learning the English from them, mouth to mouth. (SA1988.63.B20)

Though Gaelic was undoubtedly still the prevalent language in the home and the community in MacNeacail's youth, the use of English was on the rise. Iain's father, Uilleam was "very good at English because he was at the coachman and driving people that had the English." (SA1988.63.B20)

¹² In April of 1908, Iain's father William was appointed to the school board at a wage of six pounds per year (USR1908:329). He served for several years as Compulsory Officer, in charge of investigating absentee students (FW18.12.90:9). This must surely have given Iain extra incentive to keep up his attendance.

¹³ Nicolson often says "learning" in place of "teaching" as the Gaelic is the same for both: "ag ionnsachadh".

Yes. Oh he had good English, oh yes, because he would be going with all these big nobbs. He was with the factor and the factor would be hav[ing] so many [visitors] coming to him and all that, and they had two horses and a gig maybe. [There were] so many...going around Quirang and all these places with him to see the sceneries and [the locals] were learning the language like that. (SA1990.105.A1)

Many jobs in this economy, still in transition from a subsistence to a cash basis, required English. In addition, the nationalized educational system required scholars to learn through the medium of that language: "that's where I learned my English, what I have of it," says Iain. English quickly became the language of economic and social progress. Gaels themselves felt it essential to learn it, often in place of their own language.

At Uig school, assessment of the pupils' progress in English was a regular concern of the Inspector. According to regular entries in the register, the scholars' grammar was in "a most backward state." (USR1896:34)

There is a general lack of life and smartness, and the children habitually speak—when they speak at all—in an inarticulate tone of voice. More practice in connected English speech is essential. (USR1902:112)

Perhaps the children did not feel fluent enough to speak confidently. In any case, many monoglot Gaelic speakers, as most children starting school at that time were, did not take to the immersion style of language acquisition:

*John Beaton couldn't learn a *word* of English at school [though] he looked normal and was good at the ploughing, and peat cutting. (FW18.12.90:20)

Even today Beaton, a year older than the Sgiobair and still living in Glenconon, 'looks normal' and does not speak English.¹⁴

¹⁴ Recently, this has changed as his son and daughter-in-law have moved in with him. The latter has no Gaelic and consequently, Beaton in his late eighties has been forced to

Iain would have enjoyed the chance to study his native language at school, but “didn’t get the advantage of that,” indeed they were not supposed even to speak it.

We had a Lewis schoolmaster and he was a very good man.... He wouldn’t object to you, right enough, but he wasn’t teaching us [Gàidhlig]. (SA1988.64.B9)

[When the Education Act came in,] you were punished if you were speaking Gàidhlig, in school, but that has been done away with, and a good job [it was]. I don’t know why was that [i.e. why you were punished]. Of course it was all English schoolmasters they were sending up then, up here. And you had to go by [i.e. obey] him. But they [were] not allowed to be speaking Gàidhlig in the playground or anything, among the boys, or girls too.

TM: Were *you* ever punished for using Gàidhlig?

IM: Oh no. No, no, but ah, they would prefer me to speak the English, just the same, rather than Gàidhlig.¹⁵ (SA1990.105.A1)

So, although he was never punished for using his own language, Iain had to teach himself to read it. “I just learned [taught] myself. Well there’s not much words in the Gàidhlig that I can’t understand by reading it. [I would read] songbooks and stories of old you know. You get a lot of these stories in books in Gàidhlig.” He also taught himself to write Gaelic through looking at books of poetry and prose.

Ah, not perfect. Well I could [write], you know, but to have it grammatically put down I would [have to] have a book there to

acquire English. The ‘public front’ was really a cover for his reluctance to learn the language.

¹⁵ The history of Gaelic in education is largely one of missed opportunities. According to John Smith (1981), there was ample provision for Gaelic teaching in the 1872 Act, and in the addendum of 1873 which recommended that students be allowed to summarize, in Gaelic, a passage of English prose they had just read (p. 37). Later, the Napier Commission recommended a three-fold approach for the Gaelic speaking areas: (i) literacy in Gaelic should be taught first; (ii) teachers should be Gaelic speakers; and (iii) instruction in Gaelic should be encouraged (p. 46).

It is a great pity that none of these initiatives were followed up, largely because of the culturally genocidal policies of the establishment and the sense of inferiority that had been literally and figuratively beaten into the Gaels by the nineteenth century. Smith’s article contains a very comprehensive survey of Scottish education legislation relating to Gaelic.

keep the spelling of it. But I know how to write, right enough.
(SA1988.64.B9)

When MacNeacail says “grammatically” here, he means spelled correctly. Naturally his spoken Gaelic is grammatical and even elegant, but transferring that to the page can be problematic, even to the scholar. Gaelic spelling is again in flux and there are many words for which several acceptable variant spellings exist, reflecting numerous regional pronunciations. MacNeacail, therefore, is being modest in his assessment of his self-taught writing skills.

Sometimes, MacNeacail’s father would help him with English schoolwork.

Oh, my father would dictate to me how I would write, in his own language [i.e. in his own words] in [the] English language; he would tell me how to write down. Oh he could write himself too, but not to [the] extent I would.¹⁶ But if he talked to me in English, he would tell me...what to say. He would put that in order right enough. Mhm.

TM: So he helped you with your schoolwork?

IM: Aye. So that’s how it was, from one person to another.
(SA1990.105.A1)

Even today Iain does a good deal of reading from his sizeable collection of Gaelic song and poetry books. To these he gives pride of place on the shelf next to his small, comfortable armchair by the fire.

Ach at times [I read a lot],...I have some over there too.... What’s the good of reading with me now, I’m finished.... [But] it’s nice to have time to read. Well, you know, it passes the time for you right enough. It’s good to have something to concentrate on.
(SA1988.66.B21)

¹⁶ Reading and writing skills are of course two separate issues of literacy; having one does not necessarily imply having the other.

It may come as a surprise to many people outside the Highlands that a boy growing up in a croft house in Skye should be so well read, or that there would be a source of books in such a place. Even today, rural societies are often assumed to be illiterate and, indeed, are sometimes thought to hold a prejudice against 'book learning'. The very opposite applies to Gaelic society, which for centuries has placed a high premium on learning and intellectual pursuits. Education also may be measured along different scales; many Gaels, like MacNeacail, have a great store of traditional knowledge such as songs and local history. Such lore was not acquired in any formal school, nevertheless the village céilidh-house could provide a comprehensive training.¹⁷

MacNeacail is also quick to appreciate and point out intellectual achievements of his fellow Gaels who have achieved nation- and world-wide recognition for their academic, scientific or political achievements. As John Smith points out, an English centered educational system "has in fact...produced, or failed to prevent the production of a number of fine Gaelic scholars." (1981:52)

The school in Iain's day featured a wide range of subjects, including Navigation and Algebra in addition to Reading, Writing and Arithmetic.

Oh yes, we had History and Geography and Maps, you know, and things like that. And we had books to write the arithmetic [and other work] we were doing.... They [were] giving us sums and these were [handed in] and they were corrected again, if they were right or wrong.... You were getting [assessed] according to your

¹⁷ See Chapter on II for a description of the céilidh scene in the Uig area.

marks then. You were top of the class or somewhere like that, you know. (SA1990.105.A3)

The pupils would do their homework in the long winter nights by paraffin lamp.

[You] could write and read with it but I'm not sure that you could do it today because I think the electricity has ruined the whole thing [i.e. spoiled people's eyes], makes everything a blur to you.... No you wouldn't do anything with the paraffin lamp today.... You don't see at all...if you are putting it up.

You would if you had the Tilley [lamp]. It would be equal to the electric.... But oh, you know, the paraffin lamp was [a] thing of the past... Basical[ly] you would see everybody in the house and know everybody by their face and all that, but it would be quite different for you today to read with it, what [i.e. like] we used to do when we were small. Aye.

Fuel for the lamps was obtained from a merchant's shop located on Uig pier.

He would have a cask of [it] and you would be going for a gallon or a bottle or three bottles of it and you were putting it in a lamp.... A bottle of paraffin a night would do you in the lamp all right. She [the lamp] was hanging down from the, from the ceiling there. [points up to a ceiling rafter] (SA1989.27.A11-A12)

The scholars' schoolbooks themselves were supplied by the Education Authority, whose property they remained.

Oh we hadn't got to pay for the books at all, oh no. But when you were leaving the class [i.e. school], these books were [given] to the juniors again.... You were taking the other man's as they were coming and leaving school. That's how the books were working.... Oh by gosh, you had it if you put any mark on them! Of course you could have your name on it, on the outside cover or something like that, but that's all. Oh aye, they were tough on them that way. (SA1990.105.A3)

The first of MacNeacail's two schoolmasters was an ex-minister from Uist, Mr. MacDonald, who was there only a year.

His throat gave away, so he went in for the schoolmaster's job then. He couldn't preach you know, likely with his throat....

Well, [a] Lewisman came in his place and he, he wasn't a college man at all, but my word, he was making scholars better than those with the degrees! Whatever [i.e. however] hard he had

to [work to] do it. They were passing every place, his scholars here from Uig. And those with the learning couldn't do them [i.e. make scholars] anything like him. Mhm. Angus MacDonald aye, that was his name.... He was about sixteen or seventeen years in Uig. (SA1990.105.A2)

Angus MacDonald took over from the Uistman on the third of October, 1913 (USR1913:222) and according to several of his students to whom I have spoken, he was an exceptional teacher.

Oh, he was 18 years [old] I think anyway. And they said...he never went to university or college...and there wasn't a schoolmaster in Uig ever like him, that made such scholars.... Oh he was a clever schoolmaster.... And my word he would keep you in after hours too, to get the subject done and people were complaining about that. And he had a clock and he would turn it that way [to face the wall] when it got coming near four o'clock in case the people would be seeing it. (SA1989.27.A10 & A3)

“*Every scholar had to bring a peat to the school” every day. In this way, each family provided its share of heating and there was no need to buy peats for the school.

*You had to walk [to school]. If you got drenched, you stayed drenched all day. There were about a hundred children and I don't know how they survived. And the schoolmaster was hard on them too. Some had coaches [to get to school], otherwise you got drenched. (FW18.12.90:19)

And like any good teacher, MacDonald knew how to get the best from his students in such conditions: “A cup of cocoa is served to each scholar at twelve noon. Consequently the attendance this week has been very steady.” (USR1920:340)

There were two assistants teachers for the younger students, “There was one for infants, that was Aonghas Lamont's mother...and then there was a Jetta MacLeod from Portree.” MacDonald, however, taught most of the classes.

But how was he doing it? He was giving us *all* the subjects and he had...four classes himself to do and a subject of every kind. Oh, he was good. There was nothing like him anyhow here since he left. (SA1988.65.A1)

Part of the Uig scholars' achievements can perhaps be attributed to environment.

We were very fortunate here, you know, that way. There was a fairly good education...because there was nothing to draw [the pupils] attentions such as [motion] pictures, or anything like that that would put you off it.

The isolation from urban 'improvements' even attracted the attention of a mainland schoolmaster, a MacAskill from Harris who was master of Dalwhinnie school. On a visit to Uig he remarked on MacDonald's scholars:

"I'm," he said, "so disgusted with this crowd up here [in Dalwhinnie]; I can't put nothing in their heads. And those that come from the islands here and there, they're coming out with their first degrees everywhere in the colleges and I can't do nothing with them here." Of course the attraction they had was the pictures and things like that. He was blaming that for it. (SA1989.27.A10)

The Sgiobair has great admiration for students of rural background who achieve recognition in modern urban society (especially against the odds)

There was a lot of Ministers and Doctors and even Professor...Magnus MacLean, [who located the break in the trans-Atlantic cable when it broke down.] Aye, and he used to work in these quarries and go to the university [as well] and back and forward till he gained his merit. (SA1989.27.A10)

His admiration for self education is most enthusiastic, however, when he speaks of the traditionally educated Gaelic bards who serve as his own role models. (See the chapter on Composition for MacNeacail's assessment of these bards and his view of his own place in the tradition.)

Other Uig schoolmasters whom MacNeacail remembers were of lesser ability than the outstanding Angus MacDonald.

One used corporal punishment freely, to the objections of one of his students.

Och, Dughal Ruadh, that was in Earlish, knocked him in the fireplace and went to school no more. Oh he [the schoolmaster] started battering Dughal.... Probably [Dughal] wasn't picking up [i.e. learning] the thing right and he was hammering him over it. Well he got that! [Dughal] got a hold of him and put his head in the fireplace and off he went home and never went to school any more....

Oh he would throttle them.... There was nobody to say anything about it.... Oh [Dughal] would be about fourteen at that time or something nearly it anyhow, but he never went to school again. Dughal Ruadh, aye.... [It's] some thirty years, I think, since he died now, aye. (SA1988.65.A6)

On another occasion the master had beaten Uilleam Gillies of Siadar. The boy told his stepmother Anna Màiri Mhór, so called because she was a cousin of the famous poet Màiri Mhór nan Oran.

Anna came down and gave hell, "How [i.e. what] did you do?" to the schoolmaster, and said to him, "Ged a b'e Papanach a bh'air ceann na sgoile cha bhiodh ad nas miosa na tha ad. Chan eil thu toirt leasan Biobuille fhéin dhaibh!" [*Even if there were Papists at the head of the school, they wouldn't be as bad as they are [with you]. You are not giving them a biblical example!*"]. He started it then! (SA1988.65.A5)

The next master, Barclay, had a short tenure; he suffered a heart attack one morning soon after his arrival and was found dead above the schoolhouse.

Well, it was [Glenconon crofter and fisherman] Iain Stiùbhart that took over the school then, till they got another teacher.... Aye, my sister used to belong in Siadar, she would have known him when he was there. And my other sister, of course she's dead now, she would tell me [about] "Iain Stiùbhart a bha 'na thidsear againn." [*John Stewart who was our teacher.*"] (SA1988.65.A2)

Stiùbhart had been the 'pupil-teacher', the schoolmaster's teaching assistant, in the last two years of his own schooling, so

he was well prepared to fill in until another permanent schoolmaster was found.

The pupil-teacher system allowed an older student to take on some of the master's teaching load. He was selected on the basis of his marks as recorded by the schools inspector.

You had the inspector coming three times a year maybe and that was the day, and we had to be *smart*.... And the inspector was a Lewisman too. There's only a couple of years since he died; he died in Ayrshire. I think it was...Morrison his name was, a hundred and four, I think, when he died. And he was the Director of Education...that got Angus MacDonald in Uig at the time. The Lewismen were very clannish that way you know, supporting one another very much. (SA1988.65.A3 and SA1990.105.A2 in Courier)

Uig school record books of this period tell their own story of life in Skye at the turn of the century. In them, the schoolmaster records outstanding pupils, occurrences of note (such as the inspectors' entries mentioned above) and most recurrently, before the First World War, the absence of a large percentage of the school roll at harvest time. Often the school would be closed for up to two weeks at due to insufficient attendance. Interestingly, this seems to have been accepted routine for it is recorded matter-of-factly each August and September in the School Register (e.g. "School closed for harvest 7-22 September." (USR1894:12)). Another telling entry reveals that while schoolmasters did not tolerate the use of Gaelic as a medium of communication, they at least encouraged retention of some of its cultural aspects by annually closing the school for a day to allow the choir to compete in the Portree Mòd (e.g. USR1908:218).

John Urquhart, while he owned the Uig estates, would occasionally call round the school. His sense of proprietorial

duty meant that he took an active interest in the education of his tenants' children. "All was well," reads a typical register entry in his own hand, "attendance good and registers correctly marked." (USR1908)

Religion was not taught as a separate subject, but the children studied catechism and started each day with the Lord's Prayer in English.

'Our father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name' and all. Aye we had that on our tongue and everybody saying it... We all stood, you know, and that was that. 'Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debtors, we forgive our debts [sic]. Lead us not in temptation, thine is the kingdom, the power and glory, amen.' Aye, mhm. That was the day. (SA1988.65.A4)

Though raised in the Free Church, "I never went to Sunday school.... No, I was too old before they put, erected one here.... But I was going to church, oh usually..... Och aye [it was] all Gàidhlig." (SA1988.66.B20) Sometimes the Sgiobair can appear quite dismissive of organized religion, for instance in his gleeful stories of ministers outsmarted by bards or doctors.¹⁸ To a great degree, his true faith is in Gaelic poetic tradition. The visitor who hears him say "We had to...go there anyhow," may think he only attends church on sufferance, but he willingly does so on a regular basis. In addition, a look at his song *Tha mealladh mór am measg an t-sluaigh* (XXIII) will show that he does not appreciate 'amateur' attempts at God's work. Perhaps his attitudes to religion only seem rebellious when compared with those of other islanders.

¹⁸ See Chapter VI for some of these anecdotes.

Back in the schoolroom, catechism was examined by visiting ministers. This yielded varying results, as noted by the sometimes wry examiner in the school register, "Catechism was very good, and though not much was attempted in the Senior Division, it is better to do this than profess much, and know it but indifferently." (USR1895:18)

The register also reveals some candid opinions on the native language of the scholars. "The infants were partly examined [on religious matters] in Gaelic," the Inspector wrote. "It is difficult to make other than slow progress, owing to the difficulty of the language."²⁰ (USR:148) Governmental attitude to Gaelic did relax a little early in this century and having a teacher who knew the language was seen to be of some use in disciplining and examining some children who did not take to English. The Education (Scotland) Act of 1908, therefore, called for an additional staff member at Uig School and provided funding (ten pounds per year) for a Gaelic Speaking Teacher (USR1908:208).

Stock-keeping and fishing between the wars

When World War I broke out in 1914, Iain was only eleven years of age, far too young to enlist. His father at age thirty-two, was too old. "But my brother Donald, he was just called up [just as] the war was stopped and the calling up was cancelled."

IN: [Iain Stiùbhart] went to the Army too, but [his father Pàdraig] went [and] bought him out, but...after he did that, [his son] Donald joined. "Oh...suppose a dozen of them," he says, "would go to the

²⁰ One can only hope that the examiner was referring to his own lack of fluency, or at least to the infants' difficulty with scriptural language. Smith 1948 is a report on Gaelic speakers' (in)ability to understand the cultural content of standard school texts aimed at English and English-speaking children.

army now,...I'll leave him there!..." But you could get bought out by so much [before the start of the war].

MB: So [Pàdraig] would have to pay a small fortune to get him out?

IN: Well, [it] was a lot at that time. Yes, well I think it was Ruairidh Gillies that helped him there, Norman Gillies' father that was down there in Eàrlais.

MB: Goodness knows what would have happened if he hadn't bought him out.

IN: Well I don't know. Probably he would have just carried on in the Army. He would have to,...but the war wasn't on then at all...when [Stiùbhart] was...bailed out....

It was after that that Donald...went in the Army...after [Iain] being released and Alec...—he was young at the time, maybe he would be twenty or something—...he was called up and that's what he was killed over. Oh everyone was there. Your grand-uncles was there, two of them killed.

MB: Donald and Alec, did you know them?

IM: Ooh isd! Aye, I knew them, knew them well too. Yes I did that.

MB: I only ever saw pictures, good looking men.

IM: Aye they were that. Donald was a good looking man too. He was very similar to your grandfather [Iain Stiùbhart]. He was, but he was taller and straighter. Mhm. Yes, but he volunteered for the army at the time, but Alec didn't. Of course he was conscript[ed]. He was...driving there with Alasdair Mór on a farm they had [at the] time and they took him and Angus Fletcher too, both of them they had. That was the First World War. But there was quite a lot...that was conscripted there [and] was killed there. Och yes, quite a lot in Portree. The First World War, oh aye. Yes and down at Uig too. Oh yes. Calum Gorm and Angus Graham and all these Grahams, they were...school teachers and Captains too and they were killed, aye, mhm. Oh quite a lot. And down Kilmuir too, yes, but in [the Second] World War, not so many. They didn't...put them all in bunches, but I think...they got a few branches from here and put them into the front firing line, and that's where they were got, aye. (SA1990.104.B5-6)

Rural areas such as Skye did not undergo the same material hardships as urban locales during either of the world wars. As far as food was concerned, "they didn't know there was a war on. There was no rations in the First World War.... [Here in

Skye] you had your own meat, you had your own milk, you had your own everything." (SA1988.65.A14-15)

Nevertheless, for MacNeacail it was important not to be a burden on his family. During his last two and a half years at school he worked every day for a couple in Earlish, just a mile south of Uig.

[I] went with Mary's [Iain's future wife's] grandmother up at Earlish...because when Johnny her son went to the [Navy] she was all alone, and Big Johnny [her husband] liked to be gallivanting. So [Johnny] was at me to go up, go up, go up. So he persuaded me. I went up, so I was handy [i.e. useful] there with them; I would take home water pails and buckets of water, put out the cows, clean the byre, go to school in the morning and home at night again.

He had to bicycle the two miles from Glenconon down to Earlish, before and after school to do the farmwork. Sometimes he would stay over and though the house was only a thatched cottage, there was ample room for everyone.

There was only himself [Big Johnny] and Mary's grandmother and me. Johnny was away in the [Navy and] the other daughter was married down at [?]Rionagail to a Roddy Gillies.... Oh I was there 'til after 1917.

Early on in these years Iain made his first song *Ho ro tha mi fo smalan dheth* (I) about a fruitless search for tobacco that took him from shop to shop in the villages. (See Chapter III for the song and more background on its composition.)

At the end of the war, Iain worked for a short time before finding a better situation in Gleann Hionasdail, the next glen south.

Well I was in the blacksmith's shop down at Lionacro [Linicro] a couple of years before then, aye. I was about eighteen and I used to be in the blacksmith's shop working the big hammer, you know, taking the hot iron out for the blacksmith on the anvil. Well, I left that and I went to Gleann Hionasdail and I got treble the wage

there, you know. They were eager to get somebody to keep the croft going. (SA1990.107.A4)

MacNeacail remained in school throughout his employment in Earlish and Linicro. School leaving age was fourteen and since Iain was born in October, he was only thirteen at the beginning of the 1917 school year. After completing an extra semester, he left school in the spring of 1918. The servicemen would soon be home from Europe and Iain was fortunate to find his new fee.

I was twelve years in Gleann Hionasdail.... It was the old soldier in Glen [Hìniosdail] that got me there and he says that Eilidh and Alasdair òg...was [wanting someone], and a nice gentleman he was too.... When I left school I was all out to do the crofting for them.... They could afford to give me a good wage;...I was getting equal to farm servants [on] the mainland...because she had a well-off brother there, over in Dunvegan and he was thirty years in Australia,...it was him that took the first train to Kyle. Well, I was on my own that way, you know, but I was doing just the ordinary work, about three cows, a horse and couple of sheep. (SA88.65.A13 and SA1988.63.B4 in Courier)

Both Glenconon and Glen Hinnisdal were ploughed and planted as croft lands between the wars, but this has changed dramatically in the late 'seventies and 'eighties: "That's finished now. They don't do any ploughing or any corn or anything.

*Chan eil sgrìob idir sa' ghleann an diugh." [*There's not a furrow in the glen today at all*] (SA1988.63.B7 and FW16.5.92:9)

Just at the end of the First World War, while MacNeacail was working for the Mathesons, he was still living at home and used a bicycle, the playful nickname for which was an *t-each iaruin* [*the iron horse*]. "That's what it was called here. When you'd see a man with a bicycle and regard [i.e. look at] him," you'd remark

“mu’n t-each iaruin aige.” [about his iron horse.] Well, that’s how it was known, as the iron horse.”

Aye, aye, yes, oh yes, what I had when I was in Gleann Hionasdail coming up and down, aye.... Well, I had a motor-bicycle too.... But I used to have a push bike....

TM: And that was when you were up working in Gleann Hionasdail?

IM: Aye, I’d go home.

TM: And you’d go down to school?

IM: Aye aye, aye aye and going home to Glenconon and where I was [staying].

TM: That must have been quite a bike ride up the hill.

IM: Oh well, it was about six miles from Gleann Hionasdail down to Uig when you were peddling there. Well, I had a motor bicycle after that, but it was to the bicycle really, that [the song *An t-each iaruin* (II)] was. (SA1990.107.A4)

Iain worked for the old couple in Gleann Hionasdail for twelve years.

Aye, they were Mathesons, but they’re not there now. They died you know; they were old. I was keeping their croft going and things like that.... Alasdair Matheson he was, aye. Himself and his wife were there and they were old.... And, of course, they’d rather have somebody to look after them and...keep the home just the same; they did want to have it. Oh I was twelve years up there, aye.

TM: Earlier, you mentioned driving sheep up Gleann Hionasdail. Was that their sheep?

IM: Oh yes, yes. That was their sheep, and I would go into Portree with them too and going to wintering too. You would put them up to the contractor up in Portree and he was taking them away south. And he was taking some for slaughtering too. That’s what I was doing there [in Gleann Hionasdail], and well, we had three cows and a horse, and there would be a hundred and twenty sheep or something like that. Well, we [were] sending away so many sheep every year, cast ewes and so on. And that was my life until I went to the [forestry and then the] army. (SA1990.107.A4 and B1)

In those days the glen, now nearly empty, was a lively community of many crofting families with an active céilidh scene.

Iain still sings several songs he made during this period, one of his most productive in terms of composition. Songs such as *Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd* (IX), *A Mhàiri bhàn tha thu lurach* (VII), *Thoir an t-soraidh seo bhuam* (XIII), and *Tha mi fo thùrs air bheagan sunnd* (VIII), and a scathing satire or two, reflect MacNeacail's life there and serve as a biography in themselves (see Songs section for discussions and backgrounds to all of these songs)

In these years between the wars An Sgiobair justified his nickname, serving occasionally as crew aboard neighbour Iain Stiùbhart's fishing boat. According to Murdo, Iain Stiùbhart's son who was also aboard, the Sgiobair and Murdo's brother Peter would often be at the songs: "'Hut!' my father would say. 'Get up here and do some work!' and the Sgiobair would be down below learning songs to Peter!" (FW20.3.93:1). "My father's house was only just about three [hundred yards]" away from the Stiùbhart's croft, Iain recalls. "I could walk it in ten minutes, to the house." (SA1989.28.A3)

I would go out now and again.... Oh, he was able at the sea, you know he was, he knew everything.... Oh yes, a big boat aye, he had that and he had Aonghas Phàdruig and all these people about with him, you know, and Angus Fletcher and these were his crews.²¹

I would go out with him anytime I wanted to go out and you would be amazed! I'd never seen the size of herring. "How do you know there's a herring there?"

"Well," Stiùbhart says,... "Is the night yet out?" he says. "What's these white stripes?" White stripes in the sea, you know, when you're looking down. But it came at last, sheets of it! You couldn't see...the bottom but white: it was the herring! (SA1988.63.B3)

²¹ Angus Fletcher was another Uig composer whose work will be touched upon in Part II.

According to Peter Stewart, the stripes below the surface of the water were the phosphorescent glow of plankton agitated by the motion of the herring.

Nowadays, Iain says, the herring fishing has declined and has been replaced by trawling for prawn:

Of course that's what's ruined all the other fishing, the prawns. Well you know, we used to get herring and things like that and cod, but there's nothing today but the prawns. And the trawling...on the beds what were put upside-down, mixed up. So you don't get this herring what [i.e. like] they used to have.

The herring fishery in its heyday in the islands was a major industry.

Oh away! There was seven curers down at Uig pier then.... They were getting them from Lewis, from Yarmouth, people coming to gut the herring here.... I've seen my mother go too, yes and your [i.e. Margaret Bennett's] grandmother too, she would be down...at the time of the gutting.... I would go out now and again.... That was before World War, 19 oh 30...36, I believe. Aye, that was my last year, aye. (SA1988.63.B2-3)

From forestry to the fields of France

In 1936, after twelve years feeing in Gleann Hionasdail, MacNeacail decided it was time for a change. The Matheson's croft was no longer being kept up and he decided to work for Sir John Stirling Maxwell at his Corroul Estate on Rannoch Moor. According to Peter Stewart, “*many from Skye would go to Corroul in the spring, work through the summer, and return to Skye for the winter. The estate was *already* forested, but Maxwell had them planting more” (FW5.3.90:3)

IM: Oh I was about thirty months there, or more.... Aye, two and a half years, aye.

TM: Was it all through the year, or did you come home in the winter?

IM: No, I was there in the winter too (SA1990.106.A3c)

TM: So would you come to Skye for a couple of weeks in the summer?

IM: Ohh, yes, yes. You would get a holiday every year, ten days or something like that... Yes, I would go to Glenconon. We'd go back again to Corrou after my holiday. Yes, I was two and a half years there. Mhm.

The estate was not and is not accessible by road; it can only be approached by rail (on the Glasgow-Fort William line). Even upon arrival at Corrou Station, Corrou Lodge and the bothies in which the men stayed are at the far end of Loch Ossian, five miles away by dirt track. Nights in the unheated bothies could be long and cold, but the more experienced workers soon shared their 'tricks of the trade': "I had fifteen blankets on my bed... I would put my overcoat over the bed and the woman [the cook] would think I was cold and give me another blanket, until I had fifteen! The other boys taught me that" (FW3.6.91:3)

MacNeacail approved of Maxwell himself ("Oh, a nice man he was too, real good man" (SA1989.27.A8)), and the owner of the lodge, who kept it open and staffed all year round, but came only once a year during the shooting season (FW3.6.91:4). He had more trouble, however, with his immediate bosses: "The gentlemen would pass you by, say hello and keep walking without looking back, but the foremen would pass and keep looking back to make sure you were working" (FW3.6.91:1). The lads were allowed a day off now and again when the weather was particularly bad, until one such day when the foreman caught several of them out fishing and said, "If you can fish in this [weather], you can work. And that was the days off; we had to work then every day" (FW3.6.91:5)

[We were] planting trees, aye and drainage. And you were draining the land before you would plant trees,...when there was

water running in it, you know, and you would put a [another] drain beside the drain again, because it was getting enough water from the ground the way it was.... Well you had the drains maybe three feet apart, lengths of it.... It was Douglas Fir and Spruce we were putting there. Aye (SA1990.106.A3e).

*We worked all year long ditching and planting, whatever the weather. Even if the weather was nice, you'd get just as wet. Many's the time I was soaked through, because you were pruning all the trees to make them grow up instead of out and they were all covered with dew (FW3.6.91:2)

MacNeacail's song *As a' mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh* (XV), perfectly encapsulates life on the estate.

After two and a half years of service at Corroul, he went to "Sgoil na Craoibh'...ann a' Darnaway" in Morayshire. "Fhuair mi dà chertificate a-mach as." [*Forestry School in Darnaway in Morayshire. I got two certificates out of it.*] ²² (ASM:1) "[I] passed as an Assistant Forester, mhm." (SA1990.106.A3a)

Following four weeks of lambing season in Newtonmore, it was back briefly to forestry work,

but the wages weren't there and the mists were so terrible and ach, I just made off to a contractor he was working on the tars, working on the roads, and water, dams. Well, you were getting more wage there. As long as you were out, you were getting [a] wage [whether] it was wet or dry, but you had to be out. (SA1990.107.B1 and SA1990.106.A3d in Courier)

Called up for the Six Week War

MacNeacail was still working in Dalwhinnie for Balfour-Beatty when he was called up by the army in 1939, and like many contemporaries, he did not feel that a war would last long.

I could have been exempted if I had stopped [i.e. stayed] in the forestry, but I went to Balfour and Beatty.... They got me there. But...there was a man from Kingussie saying, "I'll exempt you yet.... I'll keep you out if you want to come...." But I

²² Darnaway Forest and Castle are on the river Findhorn near Forres.

thought, you know, the war was only going to last but five or six weeks or months at the time. Well it lasted six or seven years! So that's how they got me.

But I could have been exempted [if] I wanted to, but I didn't [do it]. Ach well, I got out of it anyhow. That's how it was (SA1990.106.A3 and SA1988.66.A10 in Courier)

Back in MacNeacail's sitting room, Margaret Bennett drew Iain's attention to a portrait of himself in uniform on a corner table. "Aye, it wasn't me that put it there. I told [Màiri to] put it in the fire.... Aye, aye. Oh I didn't want to mention that was there."

IM: O [?]tràigh obaireach!²³

MB: Was it awful?

IM: Awful? I wouldn't mind if I knew who I was speaking to but, "You're not here to think" and "We're here to think for you" and they couldn't think for themselves! (SA1988.66.A8)

Iain joined the *Royal Scots Fusiliers* and was sent for training on Ayr Racecourse. Living conditions were, if anything, even worse than in the mists of Corroul.

I gave more, better food to my *dog* than I got there many a time. Oh we got pudding, potatoes, cabbages, everything mashed same as you would make a dog's breakfast. Mmhm, och I couldn't take it, there was sand and things like that in it, you know. It wasn't properly cleaned. Ah, I dumped it. "What," he says "are you doing there? You're dumping good food,...when people is starving in other countries and here too!"

"I'm dumping nothing," I says. "It wasn't fit for anybody, not for a dog!" (SA1988.66.A8)

Though the men were "not allowed to think for themselves," some were more independent than others.

Many the thing I got into hot water over...in the army. Ach, I was there one time and myself and an English fellow used to go out together and we had to sign out when we went out...and were

²³ I have spelled this according to its sound, but it could be "truaighe biorach", "acute misery".

signed to come in at twelve o'clock. [You couldn't stay later] unless you had a special pass. (SA1988.66.A9)

The lads missed the deadline and earned a reprimand from the Camp Commandant.

Sometime later, when on regular sentry duty, MacNeacail routinely questioned a man's identity not knowing it was Drill Sergeant Owen. Owen promptly reported the Sgiobair for "molesting an officer" and he was brought up on charges of insubordination. They were quickly dropped, however, upon review by the Commandant, who decided that Skyemen simply "take a lot to do with other people's affairs."

[Heatedly] Well, when I got out [from the Commandant's office] I cracked my fingers to [Owen]. "Come on now," I says to him, "you'll get plenty...out of it!" But he went to the Regimental Sergeant Major, [and] complained about me.

[The Sergeant Major] said to me, "Well Private Nicolson, I hear a lot of complaints about you with those people on sentry, that you molest them."

"I've done nothing of the kind Sir in any way."

"Well you know what [the punishment] is if you incite a mutiny?" he says.

"Oh, to be shot."

"Yes," he says [as MacNeacail laughs], "and take care!"

The Sergeant Major evidently did not take Owen's accusations very seriously, but MacNeacail does say quite gleefully, "I made myself a nuisance there. And there was a Welsh sergeant there [i.e. Owen], ach he was quite delighted." (SA1988.66.A9)

MacNeacail eventually got some respite from the discipline of camp life when he was allowed to do some gardening on his leave days for Major Struthers in Glasgow.

I went there to do the gardening for him.... And he had a wee daughter like that [holds his hand to the height of a small girl..c. 1m.] and oh, she used to come and play with me and things like that and be working in the garden, and I'd [be] showing her flowers.... And the Major's wife would come up and tell me to

come up for a meal; I got my dinner, I got my tea at night, [and that] compared to what you would get in the camp!

When I went there [on my leave days,] he'd send me three pounds. I used to do the garden and things like that. Och and who came up [one day] but the Welsh officer [Owen, who had been] was telling me to shut up.... However, I got this one [i.e. won this round]. "Look what the Major gave me now!" [holds out his hand as if showing the money]. They never went near me anymore, [or] preferred charges or anything. They wouldn't do it you know, because I would have got away with it [with the backing of Major Struthers]. (SA1988.66.A12)

After three months training in Ayr, MacNeacail's battalion was sent to Europe where they served for the next five and half years. "Oh yes, I was in Germany, Italy and Brussels, Belgium and France," he says, his voice tinged with sadness

(SA1989.26.A11). Those were "wasted, wasted years."

(FW3.6.91:6) He does not talk about them with ease, as he was in the thick of the conflict with the *Fusiliers*.. There was little time for reflection and few fellow Gaels with whom to share a song.

As a result, the war was not a productive period for MacNeacail where composition is concerned. "It's after I came back again I thought of them; there was nobody there." (SA1989.26.A12)

Fortunately though, we have one song that he did make: the moving *Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal* (XVI) which describes the magnitude of the tragedy that was engulfing Europe and the world from the point of view of a soldier far from home.

Ach I was just lying in the bunk there and on the ground there...many a time they'd plant us in the mud, you know, to keep the cows right out of it!

If the living conditions were hard, the combat was even worse. When I asked if he saw action, MacNeacail replied sharply, "Oh! I don't not talk about it." (SA1989.26.A11) For MacNeacail the song says it all, and indeed it does. Through the

song I was able to draw out a few more details of his experiences in the battlefields of Europe. (See Chapter III for the full text of the song.)

TM: And where were you when you made that?

IM: Oh in France. "Mi 'nam shìneadh air achadh an Fhraing."

TM: Yes.

IM: "Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal, fliuch fuar tha mo leabaidh...gun fhasgadh"...without a shelter on a field in France. Mhm. "'S gach cunnart is gabhadh o tha mi a' tàrsainn bi 'nam chuimhne gu bràth fad bhios tàlant 'nam cheann." As long as there will be talents in my head I will remember it! That was the meaning of it, ach aye. You had to do something...

TM: What was happening...when you made that?

IM: Och, just bombing and planes coming down and from the skies...aeroplanes bombing here and bombing there, oh!... The way the blast came, you know, it would miss you and [cause] destruction up there. The walled huts were [blown] to the ground and you were only about ten yards away, but the way the blast went it just took a sweep and you were safe enough here. Strange,...how the blast goes like that. Oh it was terrific [i.e. filled with terror]. (SA1990.104.B5)

MacNeacail recalls another frightening incident while his battalion was encamped "near Paris somewhere":

I was ten minutes after leaving the big mansion they had for the Colonels and Majors and everybody was there.... I was just come down about fifty yards from there, this bomb came and demolished the whole building, I was there. There was thirty-three in it in all and what I was regretting, a wee toddle of a girl, oh she was lovely. I was going on the back with her²⁴...she was got among them. Oh, how my heart was sore when I heard that. All was dead there.... Might have been me. Oh, it was terrible, and it was only a few yards from our other place, but it got a direct hit...

At this point in our conversation Iain's wife Màiri approached to put another shovel-full of coal on the glowing fire. The Sgiobair moved the microphone stand and his warmly slippered feet to

²⁴ i.e. taking her for piggy-back rides.

make room for her to pass and concluded, "That's how it was. You had to take it."

The soldiers never knew where they would be next, how quickly they would have to move there or what conditions would prevail. To the soldier, a sodden field in France was much the same as any other.

Ach, again in Holland I was there. Och I've been there putting up [my tent] in the mud, you know. Oh everything was mud, [I was] putting branches to put my ground sheet on [laughs], you would sink in the mud just the same! You would wrench [i.e. wring] your blankets at times. Wet? Augh! I don't know how people existed at all. But I've seen them there, going away and never came back again.... They just, well they just, perished. [quietly] Huh! (SA1990.104.B5)

Home to Skye

After his discharge from the army in 1945 Iain moved back to Glenconon for a time, where he shared work on the family croft with his brother Alec. "Alec...was needing a horse to go along with his own to put out the potatoes" so Iain went to Cuidreach House in Cuidreach to ask Mrs. Ferguson, the then owner, for the loan of a horse. "'Oh' she says, 'I have only one horse, she says, but you can have it till you get your work done, because I'll be taken over to Talisker.'" (SA1990.106.A4) Her brother, who lived in Talisker, had just died and left her his house.

Of course she belonged to Talisker. At one time she had, I think, ten shepherds and [I don't know] how many people working the land.... But then...her husband died, she was only married four years (and she was a Cameron too by name).

But you know she was rather swell-headed and she wanted to thrive and be good [i.e. successful] and she took Linicro, Kivaxter, Mogastad and Sgudiborg and all these places. Well, that was beyond him.... He hadn't got the money, but she wanted to do it. Well, I understand when he died he was nine hundred pounds in debt over the transactions he was making.... You know she was

demanding this and demanding that, but he wasn't capable to it; he hadn't got the money to cover it.... Well, I understand anyhow, nineteen-ten or nineteen-nine, when he died,...they sold out Lionacro and Mogastad and [?]Sgudiborg and he cleared [the estate].

Well,...Linicro was broken and Glenconon, in the same years [1910] and they was split up for crofting. That was the way [it worked] then and everybody was crofting down there.... Well, the crofts are now going derelict.... [People] are coming from England [and] everywhere now to to take up these places. To see a house empty is kind of a miserable sight.... That one on that side there [is empty] and up here too. [gestures to croft sites around his present home in Cuidreach] (SA1988.63.A2)

MacNeacail got the loan of the horse.

"[Now] how much do I have to give you in satisfaction [i.e. payment]," I says.

"Well," she says "you could give me twenty days [of work for] twenty days of the mare and that'll square it up...." She wasn't very generous at all you know. (SA1989.26.B2)

Mrs. Ferguson would like to have kept Cuidreach House, but according to Iain, "she couldn't get people to work for the garden and working out girls, you know, after the war. They wouldn't look at her wage of nine pounds a half year. [There] was no money at all for them, so she couldn't get anybody" and had to give up the house²⁵ (SA1989.26.B2). MacNeacail then had a chance to buy Cuidreach House and the hundred and fifty acre steadings with it for three thousand pounds. Unfortunately, that sum was beyond his resources at the time and the house was sold to two cousins Miss Mann and Miss Anderson for £3,700 (SA1989.26.B2).

At this time Iain was courting Mary MacKenzie of Earlish, seventeen years younger than himself. On November 20th, 1947,

²⁵ Mrs. Ferguson was, incidentally, a niece of Jessie of Balranald (MacKenzie 1930:77, 1934:101). For details and several versions of the famous elopement of Jessie and Donald MacDonald of Mogastad, see MacKenzie 1930:101-104 and MacDonald 1992.

they were married in Portree, with a reception following at the Royal Hotel.

Ohh, there would be a hundred [there] anyhow, oh there would be, in Portree. Of course,...I butchered two sheep myself and put them up to the hotel because you wouldn't [i.e. couldn't] get meat at that time. But I had the sheep here, you know, and on the quiet [the sheep] went up there and they cooked them there [with] whatever they had over and above that.

TM: And that was the same day as the Queen got married, right?

IM: Aye, right! Aye, aye, the twentieth of November. And the doctor and these people, aye, oh aye, [we had] plenty of a reception. But things wasn't so easy got then as it is now. The drinks were scarce at times. But I got so much [i.e. a certain amount], you know, on the quiet. Mm.

Oh yes, I had an anniversary here three or four years ago [in 1987], in Portree [laughs]. The boys [and] the girls faces! I was there, just the same. Well, it was alright [i.e. he enjoyed it].

TM: And I assume Màiri came along as well.

IM: Oh aye, aye, she was, oh she was; she would need to be....

TM: Were there a lot of Uig people at the [party]?

IM: Oh yes, quite a lot, yes. Well of Glenconon and...Earlish and Gleann Hionasdail. Oh yes...we got plenty of telegrams and things like that, heaps of them there. (SA1990.108.A13 with A12b in courier)

Shortly after their marriage, Miss Mann offered Iain and Màiri accomodation as caretakers of Cuidreach House itself.

"Oh yes," she says, "because we're away all the year round except for a few months [when] we'll be coming to the fishing of the Storr Lochs. So you can have the big house." So I had the big house and she was giving us rations sent down by the bus every weekend, our food. And she was giving [us] three pound a week, but I had to not rest, you know, on the stock [i.e. I had to work with the stock]; I bought the stock of Mrs. Ferguson. And I had the stock with...no expenses, there was no rent or anything.... So I stopped there three or four years in the big house. And I was well off there, you know, and I [had] no expenses, nothing at all, not for soup or anything you got. It was there and everything you wanted, and coals and all....

Well I went wrong, you know.... I should have taken the big house [slaps hand on table] when it went for three thousand!

Because the man who got it, you know, he got it for that! [snaps finger, i.e. for nothing]... Well, he sold it for...twenty-eight thousand...three or four years after that.

TM: It must be worth much more than that now.

IM: Och yes! That's it, but there's no land with it now. That would be a stumbling block for the man that would take it, if he wanted land. They would have land anyhow, [unless] they wanted a [large] tract of it along with it. (SA1990.106.A4)

When Miss Mann and Miss Anderson sold the big house, they offered the MacNeacails the Cuidreach House stable for conversion into a dwelling (SA1988.63.A5). It is in this house that Iain and Màiri raised their eight children and where they live today. They had "eight of children," just like Iain's own family: Duncan, Mórág, Willie, John Angus, Jessie, Stanley, Isobel, and Catriona, the oldest forty three and the youngest twenty-seven. One daughter lives in Falkirk, and another, Jessie, in Inverness. Stanley works in the oil industry in Aberdeen, while the other three sons mostly live at home and work for various local companies: John operating heavy machinery for the Nicolson Construction Co. (no immediate relation), Willie doing construction work (where he has a reputation as a tremendous worker) and Duncan, taking care of stock in Gleann Hionasdail as his father did over seventy years before.

The MacNeacail household is a typical Hebridean home in that the males rule the roost. Iain and the boys are waited on hand and foot by Màiri, whose duty it is to keep them well fed and the fire well coaled. Iain is taken care of by her throughout the day: cups of tea, sandwiches and the like, but when the boys come in from work at five-thirty or six, the pattern asserts itself—they sit comfortably reading newspapers or watching

television while Màiri bustles about stoking the fire, brewing them tea, laying the table and preparing their meals. When she calls them to the table, they do not respond immediately, but eventually get up to take their food. Iain sits in his comfortable chair by the fire and gets tea and a sandwich or a boiled egg; at eighty-eight, he has earned his relaxation. He can be quite authoritarian with his sons and with Màiri and this perhaps has given the boys a model. They certainly take Màiri and her care for granted.

In recent decades, MacNeacail's reputation as a song-maker has led to gratifying friendships with the Chief of Clan Nicolson and with the Edinburgh merchant banker and Gaelic enthusiast Sir Iain Noble.

TM: He was at your daughters' weddings.

IM: Aye. Aye, both of them.... Ach aye, it was very good that, you know, because it's very few you'd see of his kind coming to a wedding, or would be asked to come to a wedding. But he was so popular here, you know, that he was asked.... But in many other cases you wouldn't see many of Sirs, or anything like it, coming to a [wedding, nor the] ladies in the big house there.
(SA1990.108.A12b)

Clearly, Noble values the Sgiobair's friendship a great deal and when Noble married in 1991, he was, of course, invited. The feeling of respect is reciprocated.

IM: I suppose the best thing to give him [for his wedding] would be an apple tree. He has plenty of money anyhow. [laughs]

TM: ...Where is this apple tree, you have this apple tree?

IM: She's in the room [up] there, I'll get them up sometime. Well if he's up...before February, because it's fixed in a pot and you keep water in and...you can put her in the ground...the way she is. But she's there alright. Oh it will be. But I don't know when will I get up to see him unless he comes down himself. If he would, I would give it to him here, he would have to take it.
(SA1990.108.A12b)

Interestingly, he has chosen an apple tree, one of the Celtic warriors symbols of lineage and aristocracy, as “the best thing to give him.”

Only forty years ago Iain started out with no house and Mrs. Ferguson’s sheep.

There was fifty [sheep] then, but there’s over a hundred and twenty odd now, so I have built it that much. Well, I was keeping a horse and three or four cows and a plough horse.... [Eventually] I was selling them...’cause the boys are away and I’m not going to be harrassing myself doing it. I’ll be here forever, taking a long time [caring for them everyday]. I was thinking of going to Australia for a time to see the Clan Chief, but ach I thought in my head, ‘When the boys are not at home, you know, when I would come back [there] will be no house here at all, I know.’ (SA1989.27.A7)

As most of the children have grown up and left home, Iain and Màiri have found caring for the animals too taxing. Those still living at home, Willie, John Angus and Duncan, are all employed away from the croft and coping with the sheep in addition to their full time jobs is too much for them as well. Soon Iain and Màiri will sell their stock and retire from full time crofting at the ages of 89 and 62 respectively. (SA1989.27.A7)

Clach air a’ chàrn

The Sgiobair is well known in Skye for making songs, but he is also famous the world round for a little incident which happened at the Skye Gathering. According to Iain the athletes were having trouble with the caber and Colonel Jock MacDonald (of Viewfield House in Portree, presiding over the games) stepped in.

IM: “Well,” says Colonel Jock, “take the light one then.” Well, that’s what they did.... So when they got all the thing past...just for curiosity to myself,...(I didn’t think that anybody taking any heed of it), I went to see the caber, how [heavy] it was, and got it...balanced on my shoulder.... That’s when the cameras went and all that. What all was said about it [at the time] I never heard a

murmur. But they made it [up] themselves, they made up the story. And they said I had a few drams.... I did not! I never mentioned anything.

MB: They never even spoke to you?

IM: Not at all! No, but they took the cameras you know and...they were showing it in the Portree [paper, there was a picture of the] Cuillin Hills...all over Japan, China, everywhere. [Everyone was asking], 'Who was the little man?' Ah, it was nobody at all!... Well, anybody could do it. Well I don't know, would anybody.... Well, I think it was twenty-two feet long, aye and weigh[ed] about over a hundredweight anyhow, but it's the balancing on your shoulder.... But the big hefty bunch wouldn't have it, that's why I tried, [to see] what's up with it when they can't do it. I thought I would do it, so that's why I tried it. And I never thought they were going to get [i.e. photograph] me there, otherwise I wouldn't have done it. (SA1988.66.A14)

On the whole MacNeacail's life has been a healthy one.

Never a day [in] bed with illness or anything. And even in the army I seen them carried out and never came back. Many a time I wrenched the blankets over me,...you know.... I put the ground sheet in mud and branches and anything I could get, to keep it out of the mud and [I was] lying on that. I don't know how I survived at all.

Even when I took the measles, I never had to be in bed among...my brothers there. But they [would] come and scold me, "What are you doing up...?" I went back there laughing to myself, taking the scolding.

Well I went...to the army then and...I was just the same. The only thing I had [was] chilblains on my feet you know. [I was] complaining like that. Ach there's no use complaining there. No, they wouldn't listen. You'd be a nuisance if you were going [on] too much.

So then I came home.... Now when they took me in the army, they went through me.... I don't know who the man was, but I said 'He's away anyhow [i.e. he's crazy],' to myself, when I went there. "[You're] one of the strong men of the West," he said to me [and] that was forty years ago. But nine years [ago], I went to Doctor Ball, he went through me [and said], "What a remarkable ticker [i.e. heart]."

It's *now* I put weight on [i.e. gave credence to] the army surgeon, [and I] knew that he was right, but I didn't believe it at the time. Of course when you go into the army you're away anyhow.... That's how it was.

Well since then, you know, I had a [major] operation [in which a tumor was] caught in the bud.... But I was never sick, although it

happened to me that way. That's the only...handicap I had in my life.

TM: Well, it looks like you have many years ahead.

IM: Ohh. Oh away, thank you very much for the compliment. I'm eighty-five, I'll be eighty-six in October.

TM: October 30th right?

IM: 30th of October, aye. Aye, aye. What are you, twenty-four?

TM: Twenty-seven.

IM: Are you? You don't look like that at all. Starting out. I hope it will be a good life for you. (SA1989.27.A14)

In recent decades, MacNeacail has seen his culture, which has been such a central part of his life, ebbing away in a flood of Anglicization and modernization. It "doesn't count among the young...they have no interest in it," a disregard for the past which makes him rather sad.

Well yes, I would say that you're stupid if you don't take note of it. I'm thinking myself how stupid I was [that] I didn't take more interest in it because it goes a long way [towards telling you] how the world was run...I'll regret the day I can't do nothing of it. (SA1988.66.A13)



Plate III: Mór Caimbeul [Marion Campbell], MacNeacail's mother, in 1893 at the age of twenty-seven, two years before her marriage. She was working as a house-servant in Glasgow at the time.

(Collection of the MacNeacail family)



Plate IV: Uilleam MacNeacail driving the carriage belonging to the Uig Estate just north of Flodigarry on the way from Staffin to Uig. He was the coachman, but kept a croft in Siadar as well. The factors seated in the rear of the coach are John Urquhart (Màiri NicNeacail's grandfather) and Seumas Ruadh. The right-hand peak in the distance is probably Sròn Bhaornaill, mentioned in Màiri Mhór nan Òran's *Soraidh le Eilean a' Cheò*.

(Collection of Màiri and Iseabail NicNeacail)



Plate V: MacNeacail inspects the last remaining wall of the house in which he was born on our visit to Siadar, May 16, 1992. All but one of Uilleam's and Mór's children were born there. After the move across the glen in 1910, Uilleam kept several cows there and the children would cross the river twice a day to milk them.

(Photo by Thomas McKean)





Plate VI: Captain Fraser's tower overlooking Uig Bay, ca. 1950. Note the haystacks surrounding it. In 1884, the marines landed on the shore just below the tower.

(Uig Community Hall calendar, 1993)

THE SKYE CROFTERS

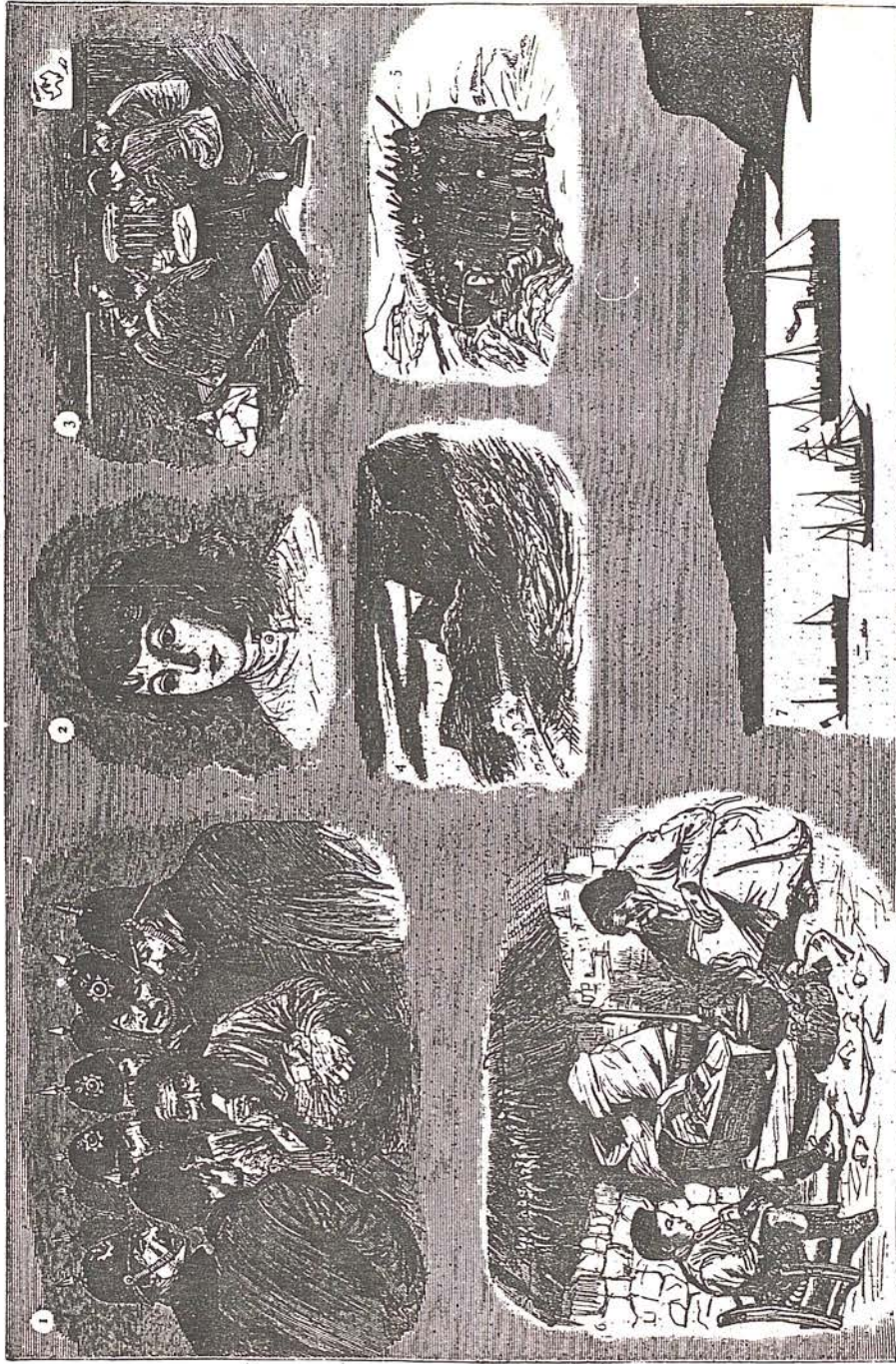
No such warlike demonstration probably has been witnessed in the bleak island of Skye since the stirring days of the "Forty-five" as that which took place on the 18th ult. A body of 250 fully armed men, forty of them constables, the remainder marines in brilliant scarlet tunics and glistening helmets, were landed at Uig from the Government vessels, and marched thence along the bleak hill-side road to Staffin, the display being witnessed by groups of natives. Rigorous military discipline was observed by the troops, and no greater caution could have been adopted if they had been marching in the Soudan or through an Afghan pass. As the expedition started from Uig, the gunboat *Forester* and the steamer *Lochiel* weighed anchor, and steamed out of the bay to Staffin, there to await the arrival of the troops overland. The crofters by the wayside paused in their work, and curiously contemplated the invaders. Fisher-girls made game of the soldiers, who were nothing loth to return their chaff; a withered crone danced a derisive break-down; a village idiot, barefooted and bare-breasted, joined the procession, and by his inane laughter provoked among the troops alternate sallies of mirth and expressions of pity. Some of the crofters' huts or shielings are very poor places, built of peat, and unprovided with chimneys, because chimneys let in the cold, so that the air within is thick with "peat-reek."—Our engravings are from sketches made on the spot by Mr. W. Lockhart Bogle.

Plate VII: The article from *The Graphic* that appeared shortly after the sending of the marines to Skye. It accompanied the etchings reproduced as Plate VIII. (Dec. 6, 1884)

Plate VIII:

The etchings that appeared in *The Graphic*, Dec. 6, 1884. They were from Sketches made "on the spot" by W. Lockhart Bogle.

The third etching shows some of the marines playing cards in Uig School where they were billeted. [The original newsprint is quite discoloured which accounts for the imperfect photocopy.]



1. The Village Idiot and the Marines.—2. A Highland Girl.—3. Marines at Play.—4. Pass Leading to Staffin Bay.—5. One of the Enemy.—6. Interior of a Crofter's Hut.—7. H.M.S. "Assistance," Gunboat, and "Lochiel" in Uig Bay.

THE AGITATION AMONG THE SKYE CROFTERS
FROM SKETCHES BY AN ARTIST WHO IS VISITING THE DISTURBED DISTRICTS



Plate IX: Uilleam and Mór MacNeacail at the end of their croft, No. 15 Glenconon, in the '30s. They were apportioned the croft in 1910 and moved across from Siadar. Their grandson, Willie, has the croft today.

(Collection of the MacNeacail family)



Plate X: The Sgiobair holding a sheep at the fank in Gleann Hionasdail, ca. 1920. He is wearing a white shirt and is standing third from the right.
(Uig Community Hall calendar, 1993)



Plate XI: MacNeacail, Nurse Ironsides and Simon Cameron, the Head For-
ester in Coire Odhar [Corrour], ca. 1938, the time of *As a' Mhadainn 's mi 'g*
éirigh (XV). The nurse had been called in due to an outbreak of measles
among the workers.

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XII: MacNeacail and another soldier, Arthur Kingsley. This was taken in Swansea just before they were posted overseas, ca. 1940.

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XIII: Iain MacNeacail, photographed in Swansea, ca. 1940. He did not care for the usual cap and so borrowed this peaked cap from Arthur Kingsley, the soldier in the previous photo (plate XII).

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XIV: Màiri MacKenzie, ca. 1945, before her marriage to the Sgiobair.
(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XV: Miss Mann, her brother Col. Mann and their mother. Miss Mann owned Cuidreach House with her cousin Miss Anderson, who was a solicitor.

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XVI: Iain MacNeacail surrounded by (from l. to r.), his younger sister Mairi, his first child, Donnchadh, wife Mairi, ca. 1950. The Mairis are known as Mairi Uilleam and Mairi Sgiobair respectively.

(Collection of Iain and Mairi MacNeacail)



Plate XVII: Iain MacNeacail in front of the stone wall just above the house in Cuidreach, ca. 1965.

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XVIII: Iain and Màiri MacNeacail, with his mother Mór between them, in front of their house in Cuidreach, ca. 1956. The three children are: Jessie, Donnchadh and Mórág.

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XIX: Iain MacNeacail with his mother Mór, ca. 1956, the same occasion as plate XVIII. With them are three of the Sgiobair's children, Mórag, Dunchadh and Jessie. As can be seen here, the Sgiobair had not yet added the dormer windows to the house.

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XX: Iain and Màiri with Donnchadh, Seasag (Jessie), Willie and [?]John Angus at the gable end of the house in Cuidreach.

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XXI: Iain MacNeacail on the moor near Caisteal Uisdean, ca. 1955. He is lifting the turf off the peat bank with a *caibe-làir* [flaughter spade] in preparation for cutting the peats themselves.

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)



Plate XXII: Iain and Màiri with seven of their family: Isabel, Mórag, Jessie, Willie, Donnchadh, John Angus and Stanley (in front), ca. 1960. (Catriona is still to come.)

(Collection of Iain and Màiri MacNeacail)

CHAPTER TWO

THE POETIC TRADITION, THE BÀIRD BHAILE AND THE
TAIGH CÉILIDH

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THE POETIC TRADITION, THE BÀIRD BHAILE AND THE TAIGH CÉILIDH

Before investigating the social milieu in which the Sgiobair practiced his art, a brief look at the origins of the twentieth century *Bàird Bhaile* [Village or Township Poet] tradition is in order.

The poetic tradition

The human experiences of the Gaels can be traced in the instinctive, inveterate and spontaneous compositions of the bards;...they react to every major event affecting the lives of their community, and their songs mirror their folk-history. (Bloomfield and Dunn 1989:67)

Iain MacNeacail was born into a culture that places a high premium on verbal dexterity, observation and quick wit. He is one of the last of the *bàird bhaile* [village or township bards], the local poets who were often requested, indeed expected, to make songs, both serious and satirical, for the local *céilidhean* [visiting sessions or informal house visits]. The *bàird baile* [village bard] was an important figure in Gaelic society for centuries and remained so until well after the Second World War. These unpaid, unofficial poets were the de facto spokesmen and spokeswomen for their communities and as such wielded considerable power over their neighbours and public opinion. For this society a song was, and to some extent still is, very much a functional and practical piece, an essential element of communication seamlessly integrated with other types of human

expression.¹ To mainstream Western society on the other hand, a song, whether old or new, is well outside accepted norms of daily social interaction; to most, it is an anomaly, while to the *bàird bhaile* and their communities, it is not. Only in the present century has Gaelic society's ancient emphasis on song and poetry as a usual form of emotional expression begun to break down.²

The roots of this functional and oral song-making tradition in Scotland date back to the coming of the Gaels of Ulster to their colony of Dal Riada in South-west Scotland in the sixth century A.D. The 'professional bard' or 'poet' in this early period was actually a song-maker, as most Gaelic poetry until the present century was meant to be sung. These highly trained and skilled song-makers composed orally, to extremely difficult metrical patterns.³ (It is said that bards used to lie in the dark with a heavy stone on their stomachs as an 'encouragement' to composition, though perhaps it was more of an incentive to finish.⁴)

As far as we know, these paid bards were always men, as composing poetry was not considered a seemly occupation for a woman. There are records of several women composing in the styles of these professional poets, most notably Màiri nighean

¹ Song was also essential to nearly every aspect of working life, from rowing to milking, from spinning to waulking, from reaping to churning. This is true for many cultures, e.g. the Sia Indians of New Mexico: "My friend, without songs you cannot do anything." (White 1962:115 quoted in Merriam 1964:225)

² See Chapter V for further details on the use of song in MacNeacail's Skye community. Ó Madagáin 1985 is a comprehensive treatment of song as emotional expression in nineteenth century Ireland.

³ Bergin points out that many of the holders of bardic office in mediæval Ireland were highly trained writers and composers, but *not* necessarily inspired composers (1970:4).

⁴ See Martin Martin (1884:116) for more details about the technique of composition and Bergin 1970:5-8 for a lengthy extract on the Irish Bardic schools. The schools were mostly destroyed in the Cromwellian period (Gillies 1989b:245).

Alasdair Ruaidh [Mary (MacLeod) daughter of Red-haired Alasdair] and the aristocratic Sileas na Ceapaich [Julia (MacDonald) of Keppoch] in the seventeenth century.⁵ Another one was Maighread Ni Lachainn who was completely unable to compose out of doors (a curious echo of the bardic technique mentioned above⁶). Unfortunately, there are no known records that payments were made for their services in anything other than kind, suggesting that professional status was not conferred upon them. And even in this century there are several traditions, found in the Western Isles of Scotland, that Màiri and Maighread were buried face down (MacInnes 1968:41), an acknowledgement (or punishment) of their bardic (i.e. unwomanly) activities.⁷ No doubt the professional educated poets also kept very close tabs on who was or was not considered one of their number; even in those days, there was no equal pay for equal work. Despite this professional prejudice however, it must be pointed out that much of extant Gaelic vernacular verse is thought to be by women (ibid.:36).

The most highly trained of the professional song-makers in the employ of a chief were composers primarily of eulogies, elegies and other praise poems for the nobles of the clan. They

⁵ Their poems are available in collected editions, see Watson 1934 and Craig 1949 and Ó Baoill 1972.

⁶ "At the proper moment she *saw* her poems running along the green turves that formed the intersection of wall and roof. The phrase used by the *seanchaidh* who supplied...this information was: *A' feitheamh na bardachd a' ruith air na glasfhadan.*" (MacInnes 1968:41)

⁷ MacInnes notes that these two poets never married and that this was unusual for their time. He also says that they were accompanied on their travels by female companions whose role was to create choral refrains for their songs. These two points hint at some doubt in tradition-bearers' minds regarding the two women's sexuality; perhaps this was the real reason for their being buried face down.

were also, following the conflation of the different ranks of court poet of the Classical period, keepers of genealogical knowledge in the clan system.⁸ Between these two duties of praise (implying present legitimacy of the ruler based on his heroic behavior), and genealogy (implying historical legitimacy) the song-maker was in a unique position of influence outwith the normal corridors of political power.

The power of the bards was partly at least a temporal power, growing out of possessions, and often boosted by closeness to the Chief.... And the Scottish evidence itself points to conditions of comfort in the material sense and strong influence in a social and political sense. (Thomson 1973:12)

There was of course a danger that the song-maker would simply act as a sort of publicity agent as he was in the Chief's pay (*ibid.*). In fact, it must often have been the bard who held the upper hand, so great was the Chief's fear of satirical condemnation in song. Public image was and is an important consideration for any leader, especially a Clan Chief. Technically his empowerment was hereditary but, practically speaking, it was largely based on a good reputation among his subjects (a situation which still applies for some today, as the recent tendency to 'trial-by-tabloid' shows). A scathing, rapidly-spread satire was therefore a thing to be feared. This is easily believable when we consider how valuable a word-of-mouth recommendation must have been in the absence of academic transcripts, diplomas and the other 'immutable' proofs of virtue we have today. Furthermore, the Chief's health was at risk as

⁸ The classes of court poet were the *filidh* [the poet], the *seanchaidh* [the historian], and the *reacaire* [reciter] (Thomson 1983:292). See Gillies 1989b and Thomson 1968 for thorough discussions of the court poets and their role.

there are several reports in Scottish oral tradition of people breaking out in boils as the result of a satirical blast.⁹

The number of paid clan poets declined rapidly following the Jacobite defeat at Culloden in 1746.¹⁰ In the following centuries, the people's confidence in their own culture and language was systematically undermined through educational propaganda until, by the late nineteenth century, they themselves considered the Gaelic language a hindrance to upward mobility; to learn English and to leave the Islands was considered "what was needed to get on in the world" (Smout 1986:219). Gaelic society was methodically crushed by the British government in a concerted effort at ethnocide the effects of which continue to be felt throughout the Highlands.

The Statutes of Iona in 1609 and the much more explicit Education Act of 1616 had required the Chiefs to educate their sons in Lowland schools and through the medium of English (Donaldson 1970:178-179) and as Derick Thomson says, the later "schooling [of] potential chiefs and lairds in the caste-schools of England, came without benefit of legislation". (Thomson 1974:116) By the early nineteenth century, therefore, the

⁹ This may sound far-fetched to modern ears, but consider the now generally accepted connection between stress and psychosomatic physical illness. It is also said that Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh's satires were so powerful that she was brought *back* from exile so she wouldn't make any more songs (MacKenzie 1907:24). Martin Martin states that the ruling classes would grant the bards anything they asked, "sometimes out of respect, and sometimes for fear of being exclaimed against by a satire, which in those days was reckoned to be a great dishonour." (1884:116)

¹⁰ One of the last of the professional song-makers was John MacCodrum, an expert satirist whose songs were collected, edited and translated by William Matheson (1938). The volume also contains interesting biographical material including some of the financial details of being a professional (pp. xxiv-xxv). The poetry of other professional poets of this era is also well represented in collections such as *Eachann Bacach and other MacLean Poets* (Ó Baoill 1979), *Bàrdachd Shilis na Ceapaich, c.1660-c.1729* (Ó Baoill 1972), *Orain Iain Luim* (MacKenzie 1964) and *Bàrdachd Gàidhlig* (Watson 1959) to name just a few.

aristocracy was heavily Anglicized; they had become no more than absentee landlords (and English-speaking at that). The Chiefs needed cash to maintain their newly acquired expensive London lifestyles; the people, no longer militarily necessary as a measure of wealth and power, were systematically cleared from the land, making way for the more profitable (and less troublesome) sheep. Having been moved to the shore-line, the inhabitants were forced, by the need for cash, to gather and burn kelp for the landlords, who sold the resultant potash for use in English and Lowland industry. With the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, however, inexpensive supplies of potash became available from Spain and the kelp market collapsed. Cattle prices too, fell at the same time due to freer access to continental markets, leaving the crofters, newly converted to a cash economy, without a cash income and starved of land on which to grow their food. Emigration then became the landlords' new solution to the overcrowding caused by their own misappropriation of land.¹¹

The Chiefs could no longer afford to keep a professional song-maker, even had they desired, and the makers themselves, no longer benefiting from a system of patronage, ceased to find praise poetry such an interesting form of composition. The emphasis of bardic vernacular verse shifted to Nature Poetry. The eighteenth century saw a great flowering of this genre through the efforts of ministers and other public figures and

¹¹ See Hunter 1976 for an exhaustive and moving study of the people's transition from clansmen to crofters. Hunter also has a valuable and extensive bibliography. For a brief introduction to the Clearances and summaries of many of the major turning points of the 150 year crisis, see Thomson 1983.

poets like Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair [Alexander son of the Minister Alexander (MacDonald)], Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir [Fair-haired Duncan MacIntyre] and others, many of whom are now anonymous.

While beautiful and often technically brilliant, many of the later eighteenth century and the nineteenth century Nature Poems talk in paradisiacal terms of the pre-Clearance Highlands and, unfortunately, blame the sheep for the devastation, rather than the tenants' own nominal rulers: the landlords. Part of this self-deception arises from the paternalism that had been inherent in the clan system,¹² but there were other influences at work, for instance the high-handed eviction of certain 'trouble-makers' which ensured that no momentum for change built up, and the teachings of the church, touched on below. In addition, the Gaels' self-esteem and sense of their culture's value was by this time almost non-existent. Little wonder, then, that they did not rebel against both their blood ties and a system which taught that authority was right and beyond the question of ordinary folk.

This unprotesting mind-set held sway through the vast emigrations during the worst of the Clearances (ca. 1820-1870), and the potato famines of the 1840s. A further shadow was cast over the free expression of Gaelic song-poetry by the evangelical revivals which swept the Highlands in the first half of the nineteenth century,¹³ reinforcing the idea of subservience to

¹² The clansmen in the past had entrusted much of the responsibility for their welfare to the chief, who was in most cases a relative. While this blood relationship was the norm, it was not universal. In some cases, a tenant willing to declare loyalty to a particular chief was free to do so. He was then able to assume the clan name if he so wished.

¹³ Even Julius Caesar remarked on the Celts tendency to strongly held beliefs: "The whole Celtic people is greatly addicted to religion" (quoted in Henderson 1992:250).

authority and teaching that this world was no more than a 'vale of tears' and song a 'mere vanity' therein. As the modern Gaelic poet Somhairle MacGill-eain [Sorley MacLean] puts it, "Gaelic song poetry degenerated to a feeble wail and to a feebler pietism".¹⁴ (1985:107-8)

The middle of this devastating nineteenth century, however, brought the dawning of a new age; a little vigour returned to Gaelic verse as poets like Dr. John MacLachlan of Rahoy and especially Uilleam MacDhùhleibhe [William Livingston] put a new spirit in the poetry. For popularity and influence, however, the composer of the nineteenth century who undoubtedly stands out is Mary MacPherson, or Màiri Mhór nan Òran [Big Mary of the Songs], as she is known throughout the Highlands. About nine thousand lines of her poetry (including some stinging anti-landlord criticism for all the accusations otherwise) were noted down from her recitation by John Whyte and published in 1891. The editor, Alasdair MacBheathain [Alexander MacBain], says in his introduction that though she

can read her own poetry in print, she cannot write it.... And she has at least half as much more of her own, and twice as much...floating [i.e. then current in oral tradition], unpublished poetry, mainly that of Skye and the Western Isles. (1891:xiii-xiv)

Clearly her memory was astonishing and MacBheathain's mention of it is an indication of the value that Gaelic society places on a good memory.¹⁵

¹⁴ MacGill-eain is known to most European and world audiences as an award-winning literary poet, but he is also a tradition bearer with a great first-hand knowledge of Gaelic song and its traditions. This rich background suffuses practically all of his own poetry.

¹⁵ William Matheson echoes this appreciation in his edition of the songs of John MacCodrum where he says that one person "might know thousands of lines of poetry, together with a large number of prose tales". (1938:xix)

Crofters conditions improved slightly with the 1886 Crofters' Holdings Act (Scotland), by which crofters were granted such minimal rights as security of tenure. The focus of the Gael's land agitation was then no longer so sharp, and the poetic outcry against the profiteering landlords abated to some extent.¹⁶ Filling this relative void of poetic activity, a new tradition appears: the aforementioned *bàird bhaile*. Local bards were not, of course, a new development, but a perceived upswing in the activity of the tradition can be traced to three factors: (i) the absence a strong formal tradition which might have overshadowed the work of these less established local poets; (ii) the establishment of the Mòd competitions in 1892 in which local poets were provided with a more public platform for their material than in the increasingly rare village céilidh house; and (iii) the appearance, following the clearance of the rural Highlands, of large numbers of Gaelic speakers in cities such as Glasgow, providing a new synthetic community in which the local poet's observation was needed.¹⁷

This urban population also had access to the large numbers of Gaelic books that were beginning to emerge in response to the spread of literacy. By the nineteenth century, many rural villages

¹⁶ The Act improved the rights of the tenantry vis à vis the landlords by granting security of tenure, and the right of inheritance and by establishing a Land Court for the fixing of fair rents. Unfortunately, however, it did not provide a solution to the crofters' main grievance: land shortage that had been brought on by the landlords' re-enclosure of the common-grazings. No attempt was made, at that point, to re-apportion them. The Land League and other crofters' resistance organizations, therefore, did not see the legislation as the great landmark that we often consider it today. See Hunter 1986 for comprehensive detail.

¹⁷ Dòmhnall Ruadh Phàislig [Red-haired Donald of Paisley], who made many songs on local issues within the new Gaelic community in Glasgow, is a perfect example of a poet in this new urban role. See Mac an t-Saoir 1968 and Byrne 1988.

in the Highlands had a voluntary schooling program run by the church, which taught reading and writing in Gaelic for the purposes of religious education. "At this time," wrote the Swiss traveller Louis Necker de Saussure in 1822, "there is scarcely a village in the Highlands where the children do not learn to read and write in Gaelic and the Holy Scriptures are in the hands of every Highlander" (p. 90). The Free Church of Scotland alone opened 596 schools between 1851 and 1869, but unfortunately, with the coming of the Education (Scotland) Act in 1872, making school attendance to age fourteen compulsory, they were either closed down or transferred to state control (Durkacz 1983). All children were then taught to read and write only English and by the late nineteenth century, "the Highlander himself was strongly and consistently against the use of Gaelic as a school language". (Durkacz 1977:19)

Late in the last century and continuing into this one, despite prohibitions against, and in some cases corporal punishment for, using Gaelic, a number of young scholars applied the same basic principles learned in the reading of English to the Gaelic of the Bible, small books of Spiritual songs and the Gaelic newspapers and periodicals that were becoming available in inexpensive popular editions. A new, literate class of Gael had been created.

The bàird bhaile and the taigh céilidh

In this century, there have been a number of good collections of bàird bhaile poetry, e.g. *Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna: òrain is dain le Dòmhnall Dòmhnallach a Uibhist* (1969), *Sporan Dhòmhnail* (Mac an t-Saoir 1968), *Sguaban Eòrna: Bàrdachd is Dàin le Iain*

MacDhòmhnuill (1973), *Na Bàird Thirisdeach* (Camshron 1932) and they continue to appear.¹⁸

Unfortunately, collections like these and those of professional bardic poetry usually only elucidate the factual background to the bards' topical and occasional songs. In the process they almost wholly neglect the social function of the songs and the thought processes of their composers. Russian scholars realized the importance on context as early as 1926 and "established early the value of performer and repertoire studies.... Only in recent decades has their importance been recognized in Anglophone scholarship". (Buchan 1992:248) Scottish Gaelic song scholarship is still many years behind in this respect. Publications such as Knudsen (1978) have gone some way in redressing the balance, with the emphasis on the bard's impressions of his own technique, but while this is a valuable contribution, the living song-maker in Gaelic tradition is still under-researched.

In order to narrow the topic of this thesis down to a single song-maker, Iain MacNeacail, let us begin to focus on the Isle of Skye. A look at Gaelic literature through the last few centuries will show that the island has produced its share of well known song-makers: the lyrical Uilleam Ros, Niall MacLeòid, Màiri Mhór nan Òran (whose village, if she were to be called a village bard, would have to be the entire Gàidhealtachd [Gaelic region] or the whole Isle of Skye, at least).¹⁹ Less well known, and more in the Bàird Bhaile mould, there have been Bàrd Ghrialain [the

¹⁸ A further selection appears in the bibliography, though it is not intended as a comprehensive list.

¹⁹ These poets song may be found in these books: MacChoinnich 1834; MacLeòid 1893; MacBheathain 1891 and Meek 1977 respectively.

Bard of Grealan (near Staffin)], Calum Ruadh Nicolson of Braes, Iain 'An Sgiobair' MacNeacail and Aonghas Fleidsear.²⁰ There have also been modern 'art-poets' such as Somhairle MacGilleain and Aonghas MacNeacail.

Iain MacNeacail is one of the last of the *bàird bhaile*. Now in his late eighties, he is still making songs. He made his first song at the age of fourteen about the shortage of tobacco at the end of the First World War and he can still sing all six verses of it. "I thought anybody could make a song, but I didn't know," he says, not so much belittling his talent, as indicating how natural he considers a life of which song is an integral part. Song was certainly, and to some extent still is, an essential and pervasive part of Gaelic society and so MacNeacail has become well known in his native village, and beyond, as a bard.

Between the wars MacNeacail often made a new song, sang it at a céilidh or two and then it would be forgotten as it ceased to be topical or as a new issue presented itself; "they were for the time being, just." Since the topics were usually ephemeral, a song usually had a short working life. Sometimes, however, it would prove popular and be taken up by local people and learned, sung, traded and taken to other parts of Skye and further afield (e.g. *Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal* (XVI)). These songs were not made in isolation however. For MacNeacail they are not book-bound static documents, but a living means of communication. Until the breakdown of the social structure of

²⁰ Poems and songs by Bàrd Ghrialain may be found in MacKenzie (1934:97-100); Calum Ruadh Nicolson in Knudsen (1978) and MacNeacail (1975); and An Sgiobair and Fletcher in Montgomery (1980a and b). An Sgiobair and Calum Ruadh are not related; the surname MacNeacail/Nicolson is one of the most common in Skye.

this community and the drastic reduction in house-visiting, they were made for both himself *and for a local audience*.

In discussing song and story, or indeed any aspect of community life in Uig with MacNeacail, one is inevitably brought round to the subject of the céilidh. It was *the* context for social interaction, especially of the kind I usually have with MacNeacail (i.e. discussions about songs, local history and characters), so it is no wonder he is often reminded of them during our visits. To a village bard like An Sgiobair, who spent six nights a week in one of the *taighean céilidh*, they are inseparably intertwined with community identity. Indeed, I think it is hard for him to conceive of the community without them as they provide the environment for which the bard composes and performs. Conversely, the bard serves as a mouthpiece for the céilidh and, by extension, the community, expressing many people's thoughts and emotions through his songs. Compositions are made specifically in and for this milieu; outside of it they do not exist in the same sense. They are different creatures out of context, not without their intrinsic merits, but different and lesser nonetheless. Ask when he heard a tradition, or where he started learning songs and he is likely to say, "Ach, bhithinn 'gan cluinntinn as na taighean céilidh 'san àitean dhe'n t-seòrsa sin." [*Ach, I used to be hearing them in the céilidh houses and places of that kind.*] (SA1988.66.B2)

MacNeacail's songs must therefore be examined *in context* and to facilitate that we must build up a detailed picture of the céilidh and how it worked in Uig society.

The céilidh house has been described many times in literature and scholarship through the ages, ranging from scenes of

storytelling in old Irish sagas to vignettes set down by modern folktale scholars. Campbell 1890 gives several descriptions based on the notes of several of his collectors Hector Urquhart (iv-v), Hector Maclean (vi-vii) and John Dewar (li). Other accounts are in MacInnes 1890 (ix-x), Carmichael 1928 (xxii-xxiv) and Vallee 1954 (26-29), which gives a view of what went on at a slightly more formal mid-twentieth century gathering. The Irish situation is well covered in Delargy 1945 (182, 192-195 and *passim*) and Ó Súilleabháin 1973 (10-12 and *passim*). Much of this community social structure, the céilidh society, is now gone, but before the Second World War it was still largely intact in Scotland and Gaelic speaking Ireland, as well as in emigrant communities in Canada.²¹ In fact, in many ways the twentieth century céilidhs that most resemble those of MacNeacail's youth in Skye may be found in Newfoundland and Cape Breton, Nova Scotia (Bennett 1989:55-58, 81, 118-119 and MacNeill 1987:22-37).

Bennett and MacNeill aside, most published accounts of the céilidh houses concentrate on the telling of the long wonder tales and in the shuffle, the basic function of the gathering is lost—they are a basic building block of community identity, not just a rarified utopian wonderland of back-to-back international folk tales. Undoubtedly, tales (long the subject of comparative scholarship) were told at many a céilidh, but generally as part of an astounding range of news, songs old and new, jokes, history,

²¹ In the summer of 1992, I myself was part of an 'old-style' house-visit among the emigrant Scots of Quebec. Though mostly through the medium of English, it was full of stories of the old times, discussions of genealogy, jokes, news and local history.

anecdotes, gossip and the like, of which the tale, as a sort of cinema or high art of the day, is only a part.

IM: Aye but that was the custom you know.... Y' had nights in the house. You'd always be there and somebody would have something queer [i.e. funny] to say and you would get at them for doing it.

The exchanges characteristic of the *taighean céilidh* were the life-blood of the village and reflected a living community. News was passed, people gently ribbed and satires exchanged, relieving many of the pressures that build up in a small self-contained community—an essential catharsis in a society that relies on cooperation for survival. Curiously enough, in a small community there is no anonymity, no hiding from the public eye, no personal 'space' to cool off, as there is in a large city. Social pressures must therefore be released before socially devastating feuds and libelous gossip arise that could severely damage crucial inter-personal relations. In a lot of modern communities, I would suggest that this catharsis is achieved through the use of alcohol. Whatever the case, the question of how social tensions are relieved in the village and in the city would bear further investigation.²²

TM: How often would you go to the céilidh house?

IM: Well I would be here tonight and another house tomorrow, you got...round the place y'know...and the rest of the boys would be following suit.

MB: Every night?

IM: Every night.... Aye except Sunday. Oh yes, well, we had church on Sunday. We had...to go there anyhow. (SA1988.64.A9)

Well, I think it [was] Pàdruig Stiùbhart's house [it] was mostly. Yes, and Dòmhnall Oighrig's.... Well yes, Seonaidh Mór too when

²² See Schwed 1966 for a further discussion of the need for catharsis in a community.

he was there, John Anderson. Yes, [laughs] I used to go there for tales and yarns, he was very good at the yarns, you know.... Aye, old stories, aye.

MB: What kind of stories?

IM: Oh, you don' know where [i.e. whether] they were true or not!

MB: Ones like Gilleasbuig Aotrom?

IM: Aye, aye, aye, oh yes.²³ (SA1988.63.B24)

An Sgiobair draws a distinction above (and on other occasions, e.g. SA1988.66.A5, cited below) between houses where one would go for the 'crack' and ones where one would go for 'old stories'. Several neighbours were well known for stories, for example Murdo Siadar (mentioned above) and Katie MacKenzie (SA1988.66.B7), but the Sgiobair's interest was clearly in the songs and news side of house-visiting. A similar, even amplified distinction between types of céilidh house is made by Joe Neil MacNeill in Cape Breton:

They always would gather in a place where there was a lot of oral tradition, and, in the neighbourhood where I was it was Michael MacLean's house that was the best for lore and songs. And when people wanted to hear tales, it was Archie Kennedy's house; that was the house for tales, for if there was any entertainment at all there the tales would prevail. To be sure, if people came visiting who were good singers they would certainly sing songs at Kennedy's and tales would not be so well represented; and so if we were looking for a tale, we would be somewhat disappointed if many people came to the house and there was a lot of conversation and songs. (1987:30-31, translated from the Gaelic by Dr. John Shaw)

MacNeacail has never explicitly referred to the classic wonder tales in my presence and I do not know whether this is because they were mostly gone in Trotternish by the early part of this

²³ See McKean 1992b:26-32 for several stories about Gilleasbuig Aotrom [Foolish or light-headed Archie] told by An Sgiobair. Written versions of some of the same anecdotes may be found in MacLeòid 1924:229-239 and MacKenzie 1930:60-66.

century or because he simply didn't take a great interest in them (a reason he has given for not learning other people's songs (SA1990.108.A7); the same may apply here).

The summer days, long and filled with farmwork had no time for the diversions offered by the céilidh houses, but in the winter (with nights as long as sixteen hours), the entertainment would start early and go on, sometimes till dawn.

Well, [on] the winter nights, you...wouldn't mind walking a couple of miles over to a house in Earlish or something like that. Somebody else would come here the other night and maybe three or four or five or six, maybe eight at times, according to what would be going on. That was...the ways of the Highlands, of the islands all through. It was mostly in the...Islands, that was...the customs. Mhm. (SA1989.25.B8)

Many local worthies, such as Dòmhnall Saighdear [Donald the Soldier] and An Sagart [the Priest], would be there.²⁴

TM: And they'd be telling stories as well?

IM: Oh stories, and things that happened and things like that you know. (SA1989.25.B8)

Also discussed would be historical characters like Gilleasbuig Aotrom [Foolish Gillespie or Archie] and the great Lochaber drover John Cameron, known as Coire Chuinnlidh.²⁵

IM: Well I heard that [i.e. about Coire Chuinnlidh] at céilidhs long ago of the old folk....

That was the way people were at that time, you know, tales at

²⁴ See Chapter I for more information on An Sagart, who was not actually a priest at all, but a sharp and inquisitive questioner.

²⁵ Cameron was called after one of his farms in Lochaber following a custom found throughout Scotland; he died in 1856. The Sgiobair has told me many anecdotes about him, many of which he heard when he was working in Coire Odhar [Corroul] (SA1988.65.B5, SA1991.93); I hope to publish some of these stories at a later date. Màiri Mhór's dialogue poem about Coire Chuinnlidh and her father may be found in MacBheathain 1891:130 and Meek 1977:54-56, 128. Haldane 1968:66 has some biographical information on him and Cameron 1894:340-341 has a song composed by a mill-worker on the very farm after which the drover was called. Cameron was well known for his sharp eye at assessing the quality of stock (MacDonald 1977:195). Similar talents are attributed to Gilleasbaig Aotrom.

night, winter nights when they'd come from the labouring and they would be [at] a house here and a house there tomorrow night and these were the cracks [i.e. conversations] that were going on, you know, about people that existed in their own time and before then.

TM: So they were often stories about real people?

IM: Oh yes! Oh yes, well, you know, it was from mouth to mouth, you know. There was no writing or anything putting down in then, but since then you know, they've got a lot of it in writing now, you know, what happened, but I don't suppose you'd get all the things that was there [in the céilidh houses] in writing at all.

Oh he was a noted drover anyhow. One farmer went and told one of Coire Chuinnlidh's men, "Come and see the flock of sheep I have here." Oh, he went to see them. "What do you think of that now," there was a big flock of sheep.

"Och," he says, "I've seen more die with Coire Chuinnlidh with braxy"²⁶ than the farmer had [laughs]. So it tells you what kind of man he was, he had a vast area for cattle and sheep.

TM: [Did they tell stories of] other local people...at the *taigh céilidh*?

IM: Yes, that would have been the kind of talk they would have. That's how details went from one mouth to another, you know, and they came to me here from the old generations, you know. Maybe my grandfather would, he would be living at that time anyhow, [or] my father would tell so much about it and just from mouth to mouth,...everything like that. (SA1989.25.A6-9)

Though he took a great deal of interest in local tradition and history, MacNeacail was not terribly interested in 'traditional' songs.

IM: But I never took much to do with others' songs at all...

TM: Why is that?

IM: I don't know, I wasn't just interested in [them]. Well of course I heard them often enough, but I wasn't taking the notion of them. I would rather be composing myself,...but I'm finished at that now.²⁷ (SA1990.108.A7)

²⁶ A type of colic usually leading to haemorrhage and death (*SND*).

²⁷ It is worth noting that just a month before this recording, MacNeacail had made another song. I would be surprised if it proved to be the last.

This self-confessed lack of interest may appear odd in a song-maker, but as a composer he naturally emphasizes his own need to compose (and it is as involuntary as that) over learning the efforts of others. Despite this disclaimer, he has continually acquired songs, almost inadvertently by osmosis, both orally and from the printed page. Once, for example, I asked him about *Feasgar Luain*, part of which he had just sung.

TM: Cait' an do dh'ionnsaich sibh an t-òran a sheinn [sibh]...

IM: Och cha robh mise seinn riamh ach mar seo fhéin: measg dhaoine eile, mar seo ag obair, any old way. (SA1989.27.B6)

TM: [Where did you learn the song you sang?]

IM: [Och I wasn't ever singing [it] except like this: amongst other people, [it] worked like this, any old way.]

MacNeacail only occasionally sings songs by other poets, and never sings *puirt-a-beul* [mouth music] or *òran luaidh* [waulking songs], though he certainly knows about them and would have heard plenty of them in the céilidh houses. Nevertheless, he constantly surprises one with quotes from songs one didn't expect him to know, due to his avowed lack of interest in such material. Often, when I mention a song about which I am curious, he knows it and can recite or sing it (an observation I have noted down several times in my fieldwork notebook, e.g. FW18.12.90:12). On one occasion he recited four verses of the nineteenth century emigration song *Nan Ceadaicheadh an Tìde Dhomh*, which he had only heard a few times on the radio and yet knew. In some cases, no doubt, he would have heard a song in the céilidh house, remembered part of it, or at least the melody, and reinforced the words by reference to the printed page. This is undoubtedly the case with some songs by his favourite song-

makers, such as Donnchadh Bàn, Màiri Mhór, Niall MacLeòid and Uilleam Ros, but it must be emphasized that he also has many songs and epigrams attributed to them and traditions concerning them which are not to be found in the books he possesses.

To return to the examination of village life between the wars: In addition to informal house céilidhs there were occasional village dances.

There used to be two or three or four every winter there, but not now, unless they have one in summer or maybe when tourists are about. They have concerts and dance then. Aye that's all they have. (SA1989.28.A1)

Several times a year the villagers would organize a formal public 'céilidh' more along the lines of our present day expectations.

Well, you had the song or you wrote [one, and], if you were a bit of a singer, you were called out to the platform and you would go there at a concert. They would select so many here and there. There was a committee who would be taking names the week before, you know, of all to perform the concert and make a sketch²⁸ of something, you know, and...that's the way they were. (SA1989.27.A13)

Isabel Ross, brought up in Earlish tells of the local céilidhs and the humorous sketches:

TM: Innis dhomh beagan mu dheòghainn na céilidhean a bh'ann.

IR: *Well*, innsidh mi an fhìrinn dhut, cha b'e bean-céilidh a bh'annamsa ann. Cha robh móran uidh agam ann an òrain is rudan mar sin riamh ach bu thoil leam eagalach rud ris an can ad *humour*, dìreach *laugh*, fhios agad, seòrsa dìreach de spòrsa.

TM: Airson spòrsa.

IR: Airson spòrsa, 's...cha robh mi...riamh trom air dhol air chéilidh na rud [?]mar sin, ach bu toil leam, can, leithid a' Sgiobair, na Uilleam Iain Chaimbeuil, sin eile bha fear [sic] a bhiodh a' gabhail òrain *comic*, agus dìreach dèanamh òran ma rudan a thachair, na

²⁸ Usually a humorous or satirical sketch.

feadhainn a dh'aithnichinn na *comic* mar sin.

Och na céilidhean a bh'ann an uair sin, 's bhiodh ad a' dol 'san taigh sgoile, 's bhiodh. Tha cuimhne am, a nist' Aonghais, bha thusa aig fad' a bharrachd dhiubh sin, bha fear ann ris an canadh ad Duncan Corbett²⁹ aig àm a' chogaidh, 's bhiodh ad a' deanamh *sketch* air Hitler.³⁰ 'S bha fear eile ann, có bha dèanamh Goering?... Bha Hitler co-dhiubh, 's e *chauffeur* aig an dotair a bh'ann. 'S cha robh e ach a' bruidhinn 's ùmadaraich³¹ mu Churchill...a' spùtaireachd,..."Gheibh sinn Èarlais, 's gheibh sinn Calum Beag," ma b'fhior gu robh Hitler ag ràdh rudan mar s[in]. Bhiodh *sketcheaichean* ann, 's bhiodh òrain ann,...'s dòcha gu robh 'n *accordion* a' dol 's bhiodh danns dòcha as a dheòidh. Ach cha robh mis' ach dà chas cheàrr orm, 's cha robh mi math ann an dannsadh riamh. (SA1993.4.A10)

[TM: *Tell me a little about the céilidhs.*

IR: *Well, I'll tell you the truth, I wasn't much of a céilidh-goer at all. I never had much interest in songs and things like that, but I really liked what they call [i.e. you'd call] humour, just a laugh, you know, just sort of fun.*

TM: *For fun.*

IR: *For fun and I wasn't ever very big on going visiting or anything like that, but I liked, say, the like of the Sgiobair, or William John Campbell, that's another who was someone who would be singing comic songs, and just making a song about things that happened, or some[thing] I would recognize or [something] comic like that.*

Och, the céilidhs that were around then, they would be going in the school-house, [they] would. I remember, now Angus, you were at far more of them, there was a man there they called Duncan Corbett at the time of the war, and they would be making a sketch about Hitler. And there was another man there, who was doing Goering? There was Hitler anyway, it's the doctor's chauffeur who [played] him. And he was just speaking and blustering about Churchill and spouting, "We will take Earlish and we will take Little Calum [MacDonald, from Idrigill]!" as if it were true that Hitler was saying something like that. There would be sketches, and there'd be songs, maybe the accordion was going,

²⁹ Duncan Corbett was Dr. Lamont's driver. He would also sing songs such as *The Garden Where the Praties Grow* to the children at the Uig school year-end céilidh (conversation with Peigi Bennett 30.3.93).

³⁰ Katie Douglas used to write the sketches. She lived in Kilmuir and was also a great tradition-bearer. The Sgiobair has told me that he would never leave her house without getting a song or two.

³¹ This word seems to be based on "ùm(p)adalachd", which as a noun means "grossness" or "boorishness" (Dwelly).

and there would be dancing perhaps after it. I only had two wrong legs on me and I wasn't ever good at dancing.]

Between the work cycle of the year and the nights' entertainment, there was clearly no lack of activity, intellectual or physical. Another event where traditional songs could be found was the *luadh* [waulking], which still went on in Iain's youth.

IM: Luadh? O Dhia bha.

TM: Nuair a bha thu òg?

IM: Bha agus nuair a bha mi sean cuideachd; chan eil cho fad' o'n a bh'ann. *Well*, tha mi cinnteach gu bheil coig bliadhna fichead, bha feadhainn ann. Bha na h-ighnean a siod 's bhiodh iad a' luadh a' chlà, ach dh'fhalbh na breabadairean...

TM: O dh'fhalbh.

IM: Chan eil ad ann an diugh, ach bha seanmhair Màiri, 's e breabadair a bh'innte, dheanadh i plangaidean is clòimhean is eile.

TM: Bheil òran luaidh agaibh?

IM: [laughs] O chan eil! Cha robh thu a' gabhail ach dà laoine dheth siod. 'S cha robh e cho fad' ri ceithreamh idir, ri òran eile.³²

TM: Nach robh thu aig luadh idir?

IM: Och bha, bha. Bhithinn ann an còmhnuidh, bhiodh a h-uile duine ann. Bhiodh ad a' cruinneachadh air an oidhche ann, fhios agad; 's ann air an oidhche bhiodh ann. Bhiodh boireannaich ann 'sna gillean òga a' dol dachaidh leotha, fhios agad, as déidh a' luadh.... A bha, bha sin. (SA1989.27.B9)

[IM: *Waulking? O God yes.*

TM: *When you were young?*

IM: *Yes, and when I was old[er] too; it's not so long since there was [one] here. Well, I'm certain that twenty-five years ago there were*

³² This remark about such 'short' verses implies that he doesn't value them as songs. The great poets Dunnchadh Bàn and Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, however, both composed in the waulking song form, so the dismissal is a little surprising. In addition, plenty of other tradition-bearers of MacNeacail's generation (such as Calum Johnston of Barra (1981)) showed an interest in waulking songs and indeed many pupils learned them in school. MacNeacail's attitude perhaps demonstrates his intense focus on the descriptive songs of the eighteenth and nineteenth century poets

some. The girls were there and they'd be waulking the cloth, but the weavers are gone.

TM: *Oh yes.*

IM: *They're not there today, but Màiri's grandmother, she was a weaver, she would make blankets, other cloth and things.*

TM: *Do you know any waulking songs?*

IM: *Oh no! You weren't singing but two lines of it there. And they weren't as long as a quatrain at all, like other songs.*

TM: *Were you ever at a waulking?*

IM: *Oh yes, yes. I would often be, everyone would be there. They would be gathering at night there, you know; it's at night [it] would be. Women would be there and the young lads going home with them, you know, after the waulking. Oh yes, yes.]*

Most reports from the Outer Isles indicate that waulkings were strictly for women only. Interestingly, in Skye, males seem to have been included, as they were in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland (Bennett 1980). On the other hand perhaps the 'young lads' would simply come along at the end to walk the ladies home, as MacNeacail suggests.³³

In this century, Hebridean lifestyles have undergone a dramatic metamorphosis. The depopulation that began in the aftermath of the '45 and which continued for a century and a half with the Clearances, has gone on unabated. And though the reasons for this depopulation have changed, the net effect has not: a crippling of the native people's cultural (and financial) self-confidence. In the early days of the Clearances, the destruction of the clan system, followed later by the institutionalization of a hostile education system undermined the

³³ Màiri Mhór paints an idyllic picture of coming home from waulkings late at night, with nothing but a burning sod to light the way (Meek 1977:66, ll. 27-28). For a description of a Skye waulking in Màiri Mhór's day, see MacKellar 1888.

people's confidence in their own culture. In this century the World Wars compounded these blows, altering the future of the islands through war losses,³⁴ and the changed expectations of many of the returning soldiers. Many moved to urban areas and many others became acculturated to an urbanized cash economy, both of which have contributed to the people's devaluation of their own traditional folkways.

MacNeacail, one of the older generation of Islanders, still has an unshakable belief in his own culture.³⁵ As for local social tradition, when I asked if the céilidhs had stopped, MacNeacail was quick to respond:

Oh they never stopped yet! Well they're not what they were, you know, television and everything has brought things to a halt now. Because that was the only way you had for going without a wireless or anything, you know. (SA1989.25.B8)

The proliferation of radio and television has considerably altered daily patterns of social interaction and therefore the very fabric of island life, probably forever. This is a trite explanation for the demise of traditional cultures, but it is undoubtedly part of the reality, and one to which MacNeacail himself draws attention. The rich oral culture of the Gael was quickly jettisoned in favour of these modern delights, which the people were 'educated' into valuing by exposure to more 'progressive' society (during war service, for example) Nevertheless, some house-visiting does still go on.

³⁴ Between the Napoleonic wars and 1937, the Isle of Skye contributed twenty-one Lieutenants and Major-Generals, forty-eight Lieutenant-Colonels, 600 Majors, Captains and Subalterns, 120 pipers and 10,000 NCOs and men to the British Army (Henderson 1992:247).

³⁵ Some examples of this steadfast faith will be seen very definitely in discussions about his English songs and the Gaelic bardic tradition in Part II.

Oh well, that's been going just till [recently]. Well, we get occasional... céilidhs,...not many, but maybe two or three comes and [visit] here.... We see quite a lot here at night, in wintertime.

The MacNeacail household is one of the few céilidh houses left. Often when I come to visit there are several visitors in for a crack and the atmosphere of the old céilidh is recreated. The visitors may be relatives, such as Iain's two sisters down from Siadar or old friends, such as Murdo Skudiburgh, originally from Glenconon, who shared many a good night with the Sgiobair in the céilidh houses between the wars.

They just [come] to pass the time, come all the same. And I would go over the hotel and...make a night. [And] somebody else would come here just the same. That's how things were working. That was the customs, they were quite happy at that time.... They weren't rich financially in any way, but they had so much they did and were quite happy with it. Not what they are today. (SA1989.25.B8)

MacNeacail often laments this dramatic change in values that the community has undergone since his youth.

Well, that was only entertainment you had;...people would come to your house and two or three of them...and I would go away the next [night] somewhere else myself, and maybe there were some [visiting] in here when I was away. That was the custom in the Islands all throughout, Lewis and Harris and everywhere. Aye.

But it's not...similar now with television and things like that and pubs. The pubs has brought a lot of destruction...here in Uig;...they're in the pub [now] when they...used to be in my house or your house or anywhere. Och aye. It's a change of life! Change of atmosphere. That's how it is. (SA1989.28.A4)

Even Sgiobair's reminiscences of twentieth century céilidhs portray an almost idyllic picture of Highland life, recalling, as they do, the people's recreation time during winter months. The spring, summer and autumn months, however, allowed virtually no time for socializing as there was so much work to be done while the good weather and long days lasted; a crofter's life was,

for the most part, harsh and unforgiving. If, from the perspective of the urbanized late twentieth century, this pre-industrial, rural lifestyle does appear partly utopian, it was cultural traditions such as the céilidh house that made the subsistence level economy bearable.

It is in this social context of hard work and community interaction, full of lively and witty verbal exchange, that MacNeacail has spent his life, composing songs and trading news with his fellow villagers.

On November 14-17, 1991 I attended the *Comhdhail nan Seanchaidh* [Meeting of the Tradition-bearers] at Iain Noble's hotel in Isle Ornsay, Skye. One of the great benefits of the weekend conference is that it gives older tradition-bearers like MacNeacail a chance to get together to recreate a real old-fashioned céilidh. I felt privileged to be part of such an event and was delighted to see the sort of exchange of stories, jokes, songs, history and witty repartee that the Sgiobair has told me about in such detail. One of the moments that most struck me at the time was during a discussion on clan history and place-name history. When the MacNeacails or various locales around Trotternish were mentioned, the Sgiobair would come to life, move to the edge of his chair listening intently and periodically supply some information on Caisteal Uisdean or Coire Chuinnlidh. It was wonderful to see him in his element, the world of his youth with his piercing blue eyes alive with the excitement of being transported back to the environment of his youth.

CHAPTER THREE

ÒRAIN AN SGIODAIR—THE SONGS OF THE SGIODAIR

CHAPTER THREE

ÒRAIN AN SGIUBAIR — THE SONGS OF THE SGIUBAIR

This chapter is made up of the Sgiobair's songs along with information about them: why they were composed and the events and people they are about.

Methodology for the songs

The process of recording the songs has been a multi-stage one. My interviews with the Sgiobair have ranged over a wide variety of subjects and conversation has always been interspersed with songs. After building up a body of songs over a three year period, I took them to Skye for *sgrùdadh* [scrutinizing]—reading though the songs with the Sgiobair, with the tape recorder running. In this way I have recorded his corrections of mis-transcriptions or places where he had slipped in singing, his own interpretations for certain phrases, alternate versions and further reminiscences about each song's genesis. I use the Gaelic word *sgrùdadh*, as it seems appropriate to the process; the English term "proofreading" does not adequately describe the process MacNeacail really went through. He scrutinized his own mind and compared his definitive concept of a song with my version. The song texts below are modified according to his comments (noting where appropriate the lines which he himself may be misremembering). The process I have followed after the *sgrùdadh* stage and the apparatus by which I present the finished texts is described below in *Editorial conventions for the songs*.

I have tried to present the compositions in the order they were made. This has been a challenge for when I ask the Sgiobair when he made a particular song, he usually says something like "O chionn fichead bliadhna, co-dhiubh". [*Twenty years ago anyway.*] I have therefore relied primarily upon internal evidence for dating them. Often MacNeacail has said that he made a certain song on a particular occasion and I am then able to date it from biographical information I have amassed. Nevertheless, the order is somewhat conjectural and will no doubt be modified in the coming years if more songs come to light.

Critical ideals for the songs

This study is not a textual study of MacNeacail's literary art nor is it a study of his musical innovation or non-innovation. The reconstruction of the world of a living song-maker relies heavily on his own perspective on a myriad of issues, including these song texts. The process that he and I have followed (recording, transcribing, questioning, correcting, re-recording) to arrive at these texts can only be done while he is living. It is therefore a matter of urgency; I leave the making of more phonetically and dialectally exhaustive transcriptions of particular performances to other scholars. To that end I have cross-referenced the versions of each song. With MacNeacail, I have tried to create texts that are close to his original intentions and correct in his eyes. Many are composites to a degree, having been supplemented with corrected lines or recalled verses from the

sgrùdadh. A number of the songs, therefore, do not fully accord with any single taped version.

To make the cassette for this dissertation (and eventually, I hope, for publication), I wanted to get more complete, uninterrupted renditions of several of the songs than I had. (I did not even have melodies for several of them.) I therefore visited the Sgiobair in May of 1992 to re-record a number of the songs. Since he is unsure when singing a number of them, I provided him with texts from which to sing; in this way he was able to get through most of them without a problem. Usually he would recall most of each song after getting started with the paper, but in a few cases (e.g. the first song he ever made, well over seventy years ago), he practically did not recognize the song at all and had to rely heavily on my written text. Because of this artificial setting, a few renditions on the cassette are somewhat more stilted than his usual flowing style. Some may even contain a few slightly different word-forms or pronunciations than would come naturally if he were singing entirely from memory (e.g. he might be more inclined to sing "nam faighinn" or "gu" for the natural "na faighinn" or "go"). In addition, his singing voice was not in top condition that day; I know he is still capable of smoother singing as I visited him in March of 1993 and recorded him in much better form. I will be visiting again in order to obtain further recordings of some of the songs. (All the songs in this chapter (except IV, XII and XXII) are on the accompanying cassette in the order in which they appear below.)

Editorial conventions for the songs

I have shown general features of MacNeacail's dialect in these transcriptions, though not his idiolect to any great extent. The following are the prominent varying forms represented:

- *gad* and *ged* depending on register and his pronunciation.
- *ad* and *iad* as he pronounces it.
- *air* and *nuair* as he pronounces it.
- *a'* for *an* for the definite article before l, n and r, unless it is markedly pronounced as in a formal register.
- Negative irregular verbs starting with radical initial /t/ have been spelled with a 'd', reflecting the majority of the central dialects of Gaelic, including that of Skye.

Each song is laid out as follows (items marked * are not present with every song):

- Song number and title (usually first line as MacNeacail does not generally title his songs, but rather describes them with a short phrase regarding their content).
- * Introductory background information.
- Song title and text. Each song has its own line numbers; choral refrains are numbered only the first time they appear.
- * Translated song title and text. These are indented and numbered like the Gaelic originals to make line-by-line reference easier.
- * More background information.
- Textual notes. In the interests of space, the textual notes that follow each song are abbreviated in the following way:
 - (i) Tape reference of the recording used in the initial transcription.
 - (ii) Tape reference for the *sgrùdadh*.
 - (iii) References for other renditions of the song.
 - * (iv) Other general remarks.
- Line-by-line notes, using the numbers above to refer to particular renditions, e.g.: (iii) gives "XXXX". Where MacNeacail provides a translation or an alternate version of a word, phrase or line the source will be listed, e.g. "(Sgr)" or "(IM)", to avoid repetition of long SA numbers. Literary usages or formal language will be indicated by the abbreviation, "lit."

Table of contents for the songs

The songs marked below with an asterisk and brackets, [*], are not included. I have discovered their existence, but have only elicited a couplet from each one. Assigning numbers to them here will allow me to slot them in when I do recover them.

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ÒRAIN AN SGIUBAIR — SONGS OF THE SGIUBAIR

I. Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth (Òran tombaca)

MB: When did you first start...making the songs?

IM: I think when I was fourteen years [old] when the tobacco [was scarce] after the First World War; they couldn't get their tobacco. And ach I haven't got it today....

TM: Was that your *Òran an Tombaca*?...

IM: Aye, aye. What happened, you know.

MB: Were you smoking at fourteen?

IM: No I, well probably I would have to take the pipe so's I wouldn't tell on the others.... You know the others was older and...if I didn't get [i.e. smoke] it, I would tell on them.... If I took it,...I was ruined myself. So they had the way to work with that....

MB: If they made you smoke you couldn't tell on them?

IM: No I couldn't, that's it; that was the dodge.... Oh it'll be about fourteen or fifteen, I'm thinking. No more anyhow because it would leave me sick by then if I did take it. Then I got accustomed to it....

UM¹: What was the song then?

IM: Oh [I] can't [hums to try to recall the song].

UM: Come on.

IM: Oh I can't have it. [sings] (SA1988.64.A6-7)

Òran tombaca

1. Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth
's mi 'n còmhuidh air an allaban,
falbh airson tombac' a chàch
's th'e toirt mo chiall is m'aithne bhuam.
2. 'S gun d'ràinig mi bùth Rosaich thall
's ann labhair e gu crosda rium,
gun dùirt e nach robh mìr 'san tìr dheth,
's creidibh mi gun d'dh'osnaich mi.

5

¹ The Sgiobair's son Uilleam.

3. 'S gun deachaidh mi gu bùth Fhleòraidh suas
gun dh'iarr mi pìos son ceò oirre, 10
gun duirt i rium gun d'theirig e dhìse
's dh'fhalbh mi fhìn 's bu bhrònach mi.
4. 'S gun d'ràinig mi bùth Phèutanaich,
's gun d'labhair i gu beucach rium. 15
Thùirt i rium nach fhaighinn mìr;
cha b' àist mì bhith déiligidh.
5. Sin 'n uair thubhairt Iain rium
"Chuireadh bìdeag fhéin am pian-sa dhìom.
Ach mur faigh mi e go màireach,
gu bràth cha chumar ciall orm." 20
6. Shiubhail mi uile'n dùthaich seo,
feuch an tàrrainn unnsa dheth;
leis na thug e a' chois eachd 's mo shàilean,
's cunnart go fàg e crùbach mi.



Plate XXIII:
Neil Ross in his
shop on the
Kilmuir Road.
This is "Bùth
Rossaich" in *Ho-
ró tha mi fo smalan
dheth*.
(Collection of Murdo
MacLean)



Plate XXIV: The Earlish Post Office, ca. 1930, "Bùth Fhleòraidh" in *Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth*.

(Uig Community Hall calendar, 1993)



Plate XXV: Beaton's shop at the foot of Glenconon Brae, ca. 1915. This is "Bùth Pheutanaich" in *Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth*.

(Uig Community Hall calendar, 1993)

Translation:

A tobacco song

1. *Ho-ró it depresses me
as I continually wander aimlessly,
going for tobacco for others
and it is taking my reason and my recognition [i.e. senses] from
me.*
2. *I reached [Angus] Ross' shop over there 5
[and] he spoke crossly to me.
He said that there wasn't a bit of it in the country,
and you may believe me I sighed.*
3. *And then I went up to Flora [MacKenzie]'s shop,
I sought a piece [of tobacco] for smok[ing] from her; 10
she said to me that it [i.e. her supply] was exhausted
and I went away and I was sorrowful.*
4. *And then I reached Beaton's shop
and she spoke to me in a bellow. 15
She said to me that I would not get a crumb;
I was not a regular customer.*
5. *That was when Iain said to me,
"Even a little bit would relieve me of this pain.
But if I don't get it till tomorrow,
I'll never be kept sensible." 20*
6. *I searched all this country,
trying to catch an ounce of it [still in stock];
with the way it took the walking out of my heels,
there's a danger it will leave me crippled.*

TM: That's the first song you remember composing?

IM: Oh yes, I think so....

MB: Had you left school when you made it?...

IM: Oh aye, I would be going to school [still].

MB: Still going. (SA1988.64.A8)

IM: ...Airson tombac' a chàich, people were sending me for tobacco for them, you know.

TM: Mhm.

IM: 'Tombaca oir do chàch', not for myself....

TM: [Bùth Fhleòraidh] is in Earlish, is that where the post office is?

- IM: Aye the [post office], aye. Bùth Fhleòraidh, she has a shop there too, Fhleòraidh [NicCoinnich], she was keeping tobacco. And she said that she had sold the last of it and had nothing when I went... It was a shortage.
- TM: Why was there a shortage?... Nobody had any tobacco?
- IM: No, I think there was a strike with the boats at the time and all the provision was coming from Glasgow...by boat to Uig pier and everything was coming [in that way]....
- TM: See [the song] comes back....
- IM: Aye. It does....
- TM: Now where was [Angus] Ross' shop again?...
- IM: That's just, well the cooperative was there once upon a time. It's...just a quarter of a mile from the road...Kilmuir way...by those bends in the road [just north of Uig], mhm. Now the cooperative took it over from him, you know, and...the cooperative's now in Portree and [the Rosses] left Uig, aye. Mhm. (SA1990.106.B1 & B3 in Courier)

Textual notes:

- (i) SA1988.64.A7.
- (ii) SA1990.106.B1 and B3.
- (iii) a) SA1992.63.4 and c) SA1992.65.3.
- (iv) The Sgiobair mentioned this song on my first visit to Cuidreach when we were discussing when he started composing. There are several pauses for thought on this recording, but he seems to have recalled all of it. It had been many years (possibly as many as seventy) since he sang it.

Line 1: "Ho-ró" is simply a singable series of meaningless syllables, usually called 'vocables'. They are often found in Gaelic song, especially in the choral refrains of those used for waulking the tweed. See Campbell and Collinson 1969:227-238, 1981:318-323 and MacInnes 1971).

Line 3: 'Chàich' on (Sgr)

Line 4: This is from Sgr; it replaces the “‘S chaidh mi ta...” of (i) which MacNeacail was unable to complete in the original rendition. On (iii) he supplies “sense” as a translation for “ciall”.

Line 5: The name is from (iii).

Line 9: This name is from (iii).

Line 11: (Sgr) has “gun d’dh’innis...” instead, meaning “she told...”.

Lines 15-16: MacNeacail gave me an alternative for these two last lines: “‘S ann thuirt i rium, ‘chan fhaigh thu unns’;/ cha [or nach] b’àist dhut bhi déiligeadh’,” [*She said to me, ‘you won’t get an ounce; you didn’t used to be dealing’,*] i.e. you were not a regular customer. As he puts it himself, “seeing I wasn’t a regular customer, I won’t get an ounce”. (IM) He also does not make a great distinction between “chan àist mi” [*I am not*] and “cha b’àist mi” [*I was not*] both of which he offers in this line. The meanings of all these alternatives are roughly the same.

Line 17: An Sgiobair runs this line straight into a phrase: “that’s Màiri’s seanair [*grandfather*] ” to explain that the Iain referred to here is his wife’s grandfather. Because of his rapid speech it was difficult for me, in the early days of this project, to recognize the transition between languages.²

Line 18: “féin” (Sgr).

Line 19: “mur fhaigh...” (Sgr).

² Mrs. Costello draws attention to the frequent habit Irish traditional singers have of stopping to explain a textual or contextual detail such as this (1990:iv).

Line 20: This line is from (Sgr), on (i) he speaks the line, “gu bràth cha bhi mo chiall agam”, “I will never have my sense,” i.e. be sensible. The translations are essentially the same.

Line 23: The Gaelic for this line was unclear in (i). MacNeacail sorted it out on (iii).

II. An t-each iaruin

IN: Aye, aye, the bicycle that was.

TM: The bicycle?...

IN: Mhm. Well we called that ‘each iaruin’.... That’s what it was called here. When you’d see a man with a bicycle and regarding him [you’d remark], “mu’n each iaruin aige”. [about his iron horse.] Well, that’s how it was known, as the iron horse.

TM: Agus a’ robh each iaruin agad? [And did you have a bicycle?]

IN: Bha [Yes], bicycle, aye, aye, yes, oh yes. What I had when I was in Gleann Hionasdail, coming up and down [to school in Uig] here, aye.... Well, I had a motor bicycle too, but not now. But I used to have a push bike,...that was the ‘each iaruin’ same as you would call it: a modern bicycle, just the same.

TM: And that was when you were up working in Gleann Hionasdail?

IN: Aye, aye.

TM: And you’d go down to school.

IN: Aye, aye, aye and going home to Glenconon and where I was [staying], you know, at our house.

TM: That must have been quite a bike ride up the hill.

IN: Oh well, it was...about six miles from Gleann Hionasdail down to Uig there. Well, you were peddling there. Well, I had a motor bicycle after that, but it was to the bicycle, really, this [song] was, the bicycle aye. Mhm. (SA1990.107.A4)

An t-each iaruin

1. Chuala sibh mu'n each iaruin,
's mìorbhail e 'san t-saoghal seo:
cha chuir e feum air deoch na biadh;
chan iarr e strìan na taod chur ann.
Nì mi falbh leis nuair as miann leam, 5
's luaith' na fiadh an aonaich e.
Cha ghearain e air a dhroch dhìol
's cha drùidh sìon an aonaich air.
2. Seo an t-each dha bheil an t-ioghnadh,
gur iomadh aon tha eòlach air: 10
gun fheadil, gun ghaoiseid air a chnàmh,
e lom gun àite-còmhnuidh aig'.
Chan ionnan e is eich an t-sléibh',
's ann dh'fheumas tu gach dòigh thoirt dhaibh;
gur tric a bhios thu air do phianadh 15
a' cur dìon mu'n phòr aca.
3. Ach seo am fear nach iarr aon nì
de shliobadh mar a' seòrsa sin.
Chan eil mìothlachd air ri inns';
's gura grinn an òrdugh e. 20
Gu h-aotrom gluaisidh e a cheum;
cha doir e leum roimh'n bhòcan ás.
Chan fhaic thu e ri gearradh shìnteag;
cha déid e aig *speed* mar 's deòin a chur.
4. Nuair a leumas mi 'na dhìolaid, 25
's e nach iarr an t-sràc thoirt da.
Nì e siubhal leam 'na dheann;
cha chrom e cheann 'san làr orm.
Cha tig braon air a dh'fhallus,
anail cha dèan fàilneachadh. 30
Chan eagal leis roimh nì air thalamh,
dh'aindeoin 's na bheir tàire dha.

Translation:

The iron horse

1. *You have heard about the iron horse [i.e. bicycle],
it's a marvel in this world:
it needs not food nor drink;
 it does not want [i.e. require] a bridle or a halter put on it.
I can go off with it when I wish, 5
it's faster than the moorland deer.
It won't complain of bad treatment
 and no moorland storm will drench it.*

2. *Here's the horse which is wondrous, 10
many a one knows about it:
without flesh, without hair on its bone[s],
 it [is] bare without a dwelling-place.
It isn't the same as the horses of the hill,
you must give them their way in everything;
how frequently you'll be tormented 15
 protecting their crop.*

3. *But this is the one that will not seek any [sort]
of stroking [i.e. care] of that kind.
There's no unpleasantness to tell of [i.e. about] it;
 it is excellent and neat in array. 20
It lightly moves its step;
it will not give a start before a spectre.
You will not see it cutting capers;
 it won't go at any speed it wants.*

4. *When I jump in its saddle, 25
it does not need a blow given to it.
It will travel with me full speed;
 it will not bend its head down to the ground on me.
No drop of sweat will appear on it,
its breath will not fail. 30
It has no fear of anything on earth,
 despite that which gives it difficulty.*

Textual notes:

- (i) NicGumaraid 1980a:38 (where it is incorrectly printed in four line verses).
- (ii) SA1990.107.A4-B1.
- (iii) SA1992.65.4.

(iv) (iii) is the only recording of MacNeacail singing this song.

Line 16: i.e. "protecting crops for their food". "[Putting protection] about what they were eating, you know" (Sgr).

Line 10: e.g. long tail hair.

Line 22: This line a reference to the commonly held belief that horses and other animals had a special ability to perceive Otherworldly beings and spirits. They are also said to become uneasy when passing a place where a tragedy has occurred, no matter how long ago. This is an explanation often cited when a horse shies, seemingly at nothing.

Line 26: More usually "stràc", but An Sgiobair's dialect calls for this.

Line 28: In other words, it will not stop and try to graze when he is riding, a common enough occurrence with horses.

Line 29: "braonadh" in (i).

Line 32: i.e. "anything that makes trouble for it".

III. Ho ho-ró air gach cailleach (Òran a' cheàird)

After leaving his job of taking care of stock in Earlish, MacNeacail worked with the blacksmith in Idrigill. Despite a lower wage with the smith, he seems to have had a good deal of fun in his employ.

IM: I was going out in [costume as] the tinker, you know, and with a bag and going and asking for a sheaf of corn and [laughs] things like that. They were refusing me! And asking for bag of peats...in the dark of night, myself and the blacksmith, he was with me, and...that's who was there. I was at my father, you know, he was supposed to be tricked at the old trick. Oh, when they heard that [the] next morning, you know, they were so vexed that they were deceived by the tinker. [laughs] And that's how I composed the song about that, you know.... (SA1990.107.B4)

Ho ho-ró air gach cailleach (Òran a' cheàird)

1. Ho ho-ró air gach cailleach
's air gach bodach anns an àit'.
Gu bheil iad an dràs'd' fo smalain
chaidh am mealladh leis a' cheàrd.
Ho ho-ró... 5
2. Gur ann greis an déidh na Callainn
chaidh mi dh'atharrais air a' cheàrd.
Chaidh mi sìos far a' robh Calum,
'n dùil ri ceannach na làir bhàin.
Ho ho-ró...
3. 'S nuair a thòisich mi ri ceannach 10
's ann a tharruing e gun dàil;
thuirt e rium, "Na bi ri fanaid,
's math as aithne domh thu, shàir!"
Ho ho-ró...
4. Chaidh mi far robh Mórag thallad 15
's ann a labhair i gu h-àrd.
Thùirt i rium, "Bi triall gu h-ealamh,
no bidh Alasdair 'nad chràic.
Ho ho-ró...
5. 'S ann thùirt mi rith', "Dèan air do shocair,
's dòch' go faigh mi ploc na fàd?" 20
'S ann thuirt i rium, "Chan fhaigh na caoran;
cha b'ann saor a bha i dhà."
Ho ho-ró...
6. 'S chaidh mi far robh Maor a' Bhaile 25
's thùirt a' chailleach rium gun dàil,
"Chan eil è an dràs'd' aig baile,
chaidh e rathad na Creig Àird."
Ho ho-ró...
7. 'S ann dh'fhoighnich mi am biodh e fada.
Thubhairt i, "Madainn, mar as àist.
Dh'fhalbh e às a' seo le cabhaig
's thug e maide leis 'na làimh."
Ho ho-ró...
8. 'S ann chaidh mi far a robh Tarmad Mhaighlis, 30
dh'fhoighneachd e gu dé bha bhuam.
Thuirt mi ris gun robh mi farraid
tighinn a cheannach an eich ruaidh.
Ho ho-ró...

9. 'S ann thuir e rium, "Thig dha do gharadh,
nì a' chailleach cupa tea. 35
'S bheir mi dhuts' an t-each am màireach,
's fhad on bha e *guaranteed*. "
Ho ho-ró...
10. 'S ann chaidh mi far 'n robh bean Iain Sheumais,
's chuir mi i air ghleus o sguab. 40
'S ann a ghabh i staigh 's i 'g éigheach
gu robh bhéisd a' goid 'sa chruaich.
Ho ho-ró...
11. 'S ann a dh'fhalbh mi, chaidh mi dhachaidh,
chuir mi 'n saic ad air mo cheann. 45
Fhuair mi clòimh gu leòr is craicinn
's nì iad plaideachan gun taing.
Ho ho-ró...

Translation:

Ho ho-ró on every old woman (The song of the tinker)

1. *Ho ho-ró on every old woman
and on every old man in the place.
They are just now upset
that they were deceived by the tinker.* 5
Ho ho-ró...
2. *It was a little after Hogmanay,
I imitated the tinker.
I went down where Calum was,
hoping to buy the white mare.*
Ho ho-ró...
3. *And when I started to buy 10
he went off without delay;
he said to me, "Don't be mocking,
it's well I know you, my good man!"
Ho ho-ró...*
4. *I went yonder where Mórag was 15
and she spoke loudly,
she said to me, "Be on your way quickly,
or Alasdair will be in your hair."
Ho ho-ró...*

5. *Then I said to her, "Take it easy,
perhaps I 'll get [at least] a clod or a peat?"
She said to me, "No [you] won't, [not even] a particle.
it wasn't easily gotten for him."
Ho ho-ró...* 20
6. *And I went where the Ground Officer was
and the old wife immediately said to me,
"He isn't home just now,
he went [up] the Creag Ard road."
Ho ho-ró...* 25
7. *I asked if he would be long.
She said "[He would be gone for the] morning, as usual.
He went out of here in a hurry
and he took a walking-stick with him, in his hand."
Ho ho-ró...*
8. *Then I went where Norman [son of] Myles was,
[and] he asked me what I wanted.
I said to him that I was enquiring,
coming to buy the brown horse.
Ho ho-ró...* 30
9. *Then he said to me, "Come warm yourself,
the old woman will make a cup of tea.
I will give you the horse tomorrow,
it's guaranteed long since."
Ho ho-ró...* 35
10. *Then I went where the wife of Iain [son of] James was,
and I asked her for a sheaf.
She ran inside shouting
that this monster was stealing in the stack.
Ho ho-ró...* 40
11. *Then I left, I went home,
I put yon sack on my head.
I found enough wool and skins
and they will make plenty of blankets.
Ho ho-ró...* 45

TM: Who was Calum?

IN: Calum Gillies,...he had a white mare; I wanted to buy the mare of him.... "Well I know you," he says, and he went away.
[Mórag] she was a sister of the shoemaker that was there,..."bidh Alasdair 'nad chràic", because she was going to make out [that] her brother [was out].

TM: He was the shoemaker.

IN: Aye aye, but it was her that came to the door, and she told me to get off quick or Alasdair would be out, you know. Hm-hm.
[laughs under breath]

TM: Or Alasdair will be beating you.

IN: Aye aye, he would be, just [to] get me out or something. She was trying to frighten me, you know.

[Creag Àrd]—that was a girl he [the old woman's son] was at [i.e. courting].³ ... [He] went up to the High Rock where she was [and] his mother swore that he went [up] Rathad na Creig Àird to see the girl, you know.... He went away with a stick in his hand [to aid in a long walk], so he wasn't coming back in time, you see.

[Tarmad Mhaighlis]—Oh, oh aye, I was going to buy his red horse.... "'S fhad o'n bha e guaranteed," [It's guaranteed long since,] I would get the horse....

[Bean Iain Sheumais]—She was an old lady too, you know. "'S chuir mi i air ghleus o sguab", to ask for a sheaf corn. Oh Dhia! [Oh God! She] would take the head of[f] you....

Nothing of that happened though, but they were at me just the same, "get out!" aye! (SA1990.107.B4)

Textual notes:

(i) a) NicGumaraid 1980b:B6 and b) 1980a:36-37.

(ii) SA1990.107.B4.

(iii) SA1992.64.3.

Line 1: (i:a and b) both have "Hiù ri bhi...".

Line 2: "'s air gach..." (i:a and b).

Line 5: MacNeacail sings this refrain after nearly every verse in several renditions of the song, but for regularity, I have put it after all of them.

Line 9: (i:a) has "na làir bhàn".

Line 11: i.e. "he began to speak immediately".

³ This nickname illustrates the tradition of referring to a person by a placename, usually a farm or related physical land feature, e.g. the drover Sean Cameron who was called after his farm Coire Chuinnlidh.

- Line 13: "domh", lit. MacNeacail sometimes leaves out "dhomh": "'s math as aithne thu, a shàir," making the meaning closer to "You are well known, my good man".
- Line 17: Literally, "or Alasdair will be in your antlers".
- Line 19: "Ploc", translated here as "sod", refers any clod of earth.
- Line 20: A "caoran" is really a small, dry fragment of a peat, usually used for starting fires.
- Line 21: "Because it...wasn't cheap for him to get, you know."
(IM) And she was not going to give it away for nothing.
- Line 24: I put a grave accent on "e" as MacNeacail lengthens it to fit the rhythm.
- Line 37: "Well,...I could have the Gaelic in there. I could say 'Chan fhàilnig e 'n aon nì' instead of 'guaranteed', but ach you can leave the 'guarantee' there,...just the same, but it's an English word instead of Gaelic... It's the same as you would give a horse a guarantee." (IM)
- Line 39: Both the Gaelic and its translation were supplied in (ii). (i:a and b) have "chuir mi i fo ghleus o'n sguuib", the meaning of which is unclear.
- Line 43: The sack referred to here is the one he took with him to when he set out with the blacksmith to beg for goods. See the conversation before the song.
- Line 45: "[To] make plenty of blankets. Aye gun taing." (IM)
"Gun taing" is literally "in spite of", here it has a meaning closer to "anyway".

V. Chuala sibh mu'n ghàrlach ud⁴

In 1918, Iain was engaged to take care of the stock belonging to an old couple, the Mathesons in Gleann Hionasdail, the next glen south from Glenconon (see Chapter I for more detail). Up the glen was a crofter, nicknamed *Cruaisean*, who soon became the target of one of an Sgiobair's few real satires. The nickname was given to him "because he was so hard, strict, tough," according to Glenconon crofter Peter Stewart (who with his sister Peigi also supplied the spelling). While the literal meaning of the name is not clear, it may derive from *cruas* meaning 'niggardliness' or may be a form of *cruaidhsean* which could then be translated as 'difficult one'.

Whatever the derivation of the epithet, it is clear from the attitudes of several local people that *Cruaisean* was not a popular man. Even so, recalls Stewart, he was very witty and he "used to go up to Siadar to visit the *Sagart* [Priest],"⁵ and the two would pass the time trading insults.

PS: Oh, one was as good as the other at cutting each-other. One would say something smart and the other would say something smart to the other and that would be going on all day! The *Sagart* and *Cruaisean*. I suppose he said something to the Sgiobair [to cause him to make the song]. (FW5.3.90:5)

I asked the Sgiobair about *Cruaisean*.

TM: Now speaking of Gleann Hionasdail, this was a man up in Gleann Hionasdail wasn't it?

IN: Oh-h, ah-h. Oh but, ach I thought I would scrap that, oh aye. I didn't want it.

⁴ This song is not to be quoted or published outside the bounds of this thesis.

⁵ Further information on the *Sagart* may be found in Chapter I.

TM: That was Cruaisean, wasn't it?

IN: Aye, aye, aye.

TM: Peter [Stewart] was telling me about him.

IN: Oh he was, well aye...Peter likely heard that, you know, about it.... Oh that was him then, he was a Nicolson too.... But he was no relation to me or anything like that.... Everything that would happen to him, [he thought] somebody else was doing it.... And he would see you die before he would help you. That was the kind he was, you know.

TM: He was a crofter up there?

IN: Oh aye, he was a crofter there, up at the end of [Gleann Hionasdail], but nobody was bothering with him. He was like that with everybody, you know. But he came foul of me and that's how,...I thought I would compose that for him.

TM: He blamed you for something happening to his horse?

IN: Aye, aye something...like that, or something about the mare, that she got her[self] hurt...and it was me that did it.... She would be going over [to the Matheson croft where I stayed]. But he found [out] that way where she was. [He thought] it was somebody there that did it. Well, it wasn't. Well nobody would do that to an animal. But that was his suspicions, you know.

TM: And did a lot of people enjoy your song?

IN: Oh they were happy with it, aye. Ach aye, they would, they would be [enjoying it]. They would be casting it up to him, you know. Aye. (SA1990.107.B2)

MacNeacail does not need much provocation to make a song, but for him to make one of this nature is unusual. "Oh well, I don't know, maybe myself and a neighbour were cast out on something and that was enough. This was one of them." (SA1988.64.B8)

Chuala sibh mu'n ghàrlach ud

1. Chuala sibh mu'n ghàrlach ud
gu bheil e tàmh 'sa Ghleann—
gur mór th'a ghreann an t-Sàtain air
e cho dubh ri ceàrd a th'ann.
Chan fheàrr e na fiadh bheothach 5
tha triall air feadh nam beann;
gun chaill e thuigs' 's a thàlantan,
's gur e beagan bha dhiubh ann.
2. Gur h-ann de'n àlach dhùbailt' e
tha cùilteach agus seòlt'; 10
am fear a bhiodh 'na éiginn
cha bhiodh feum a dhol 'na chòir.
Cha dèanadh e mór fhàbhar riut,
cha dugadh e làmh le dèoin
ach e fhéin bhith sàsaichte 15
le càch bhith faighinn spòrs.
3. Gur mór a tha de dhroch amharas tu
nach e Sàtan thug ort buaidh,
Na millte casa'-làrach ort
rinn ud fhàgail air an t-sluagh; 20
le spréidh ma gheibh aon bàs dhiubh
's e càch tha 'gan toirt bhuat.
B'e 'n t-iongnadh liom is le càch
an Tì as Àirde bhith cuir leat suas.

Translation:

Did you hear about yon little Villain

1. *Did you hear about yon little Villain,
that he was dwelling in the Glen,
how much of the scowl of Satan is on him
[and] he as black as any tinker there.
He is no better than a wild animal 5
that is wandering throughout the mountains;
he lost his sense and abilities,
and it's few of them were there.*

2. *He's of the duplicitous crew
that is skulking and cunning; 10
the man who would be in desperation
would have no need to go [i.e. to appeal] to his civility.
He would not do any great favours for you;
he would not willingly lend a hand,
so long as he is satisfied 15
to be having sport by [the problems of] the rest.*
3. *How suspicious you are,
isn't it Satan who got the better of him?
If the feet of the mare are spoiled for you
you would blame it on the people. 20
and cattle, if one of them dies,
[you reckon that] it is others who take them from you.
It would be a wonder to me and others
[that] the Highest One puts up with you.*

O chan eil e agam, a mhór ge tà. Sin an Cruaisean anns a' Ghleann a robh siod. [Oh I don't have it, hardly anyway. That's the Cruaisean in Glen [Hinnisdal] that was there.] Well, I was writing that. [laughs] Well, he got at me over something...about his mare, that he got her hurt and it was up here [at the Matheson's croft] he did it. Well, we had nothing to do with it! But he was that suspicious of people, you know...doing harm to him, when they weren't! So I had that at him. (SA1988.64.B9)

Textual notes:

- (i) SA1988.64.B7.
- (ii) SA1990.107.B2.
- (iii) No other renditions.
- (iv) This is the only time MacNeacail sang this song to me or to my knowledge, any other fieldworker. It is not to be quoted or published outside the bounds of this thesis.

Line 1: Dwelly recommends the spelling 'gàrlaoch' and defines it in his inimitable style as a "useless fellow...Bastard.... Term of great personal contempt...weaking in body or mind," any of which would be appropriate here. I have chosen to spell it

“gàrlach” as this best reflects MacNeacail’s pronunciation.

One would expect it to be lenited, but it is not in this rendition.

Line 2: i.e. Gleann Hìonasdail.

Line 3: This is a shortened form of “gur mór a tha de ghreann...”.

Line 14: “He wouldn’t give you a hand...” (IM), but this line could read “Cha dug e làmh...”, “He did not give...”.

Line 15-16: “He was not satisfied himself, he’d always laugh at others.” (IM)

Line 17-20: In *sgrùdadh*, this quatrain runs:

Gur mór a tha de dhroch amharus ann
nach e Sàtan thug air buaidh,
Nuair bhiodh casa’-làrach ort
rinn thu fhàgail air an t-sluagh.

*[How great is [the] suspicion in him,
isn’t it Satan who got the better of him?
When the feet of the mare were [concerning] you
you would blame it on the people.]*

The fact that MacNeacail uses the third person in this version of lines 17-18 may indicate that, while *sgrùdadh*, he was trying to distance himself slightly from the spirit of the song. The second person is more personally accusatory and MacNeacail has said that he would prefer that this song be forgotten. (It is not to be used or published outside the bounds of this Ph.D.) The past tense, “rinn”, in line 20 is translated as “would” in this context.

Line 21: From (Sgr). The sung original (i) runs “is spréidh ma gheibh guin bàis gin dhiubh”, “and cattle if one of them gets a fatal wound”.

Line 22: “He’d blame the people for it.” (IM)

Line 23: The end of this line is from (iii). (i) sounds like “gun tràth”.

Line 24: This correction from (Sgr), is a calque from English; the Gaelic idiom is “a’ cur le...”. (i) has “...a bhi cuireadh suas”.

VI. Ho-ró chan eil smal orm

TM: Do you remember who that one was to?

IN: Oh you had that one, aye.

TM: D’you remember who this was?

IN: Oh yes, aye, aye. “A Mhàiri chan eil diumb orm”. [reads]

TM: Có bha i?

IN: O...té a bha shuas as a’ bhaile ann a shiod, ‘sa Ghleann, a thachair a bhith air chéilidh, fhios agads’. Siod a’ chrìoch a bh’aig a’ gnòthach. Ach bha fear eile bha staigh, fhios agad, bha e ‘g obair. Bha mise *supposed* a dhol suas ach tà, thàinig an gnòthach, bha esan a-staigh. Cha robh càil ann, fhios agad, ach rinn mis’ an t-òran; bha mise dìreach a’ dol a shealltuinn dhaibh aig an àm. Sin an aon *revenge* a bh’agad. (SA90.108.A1)

[TM: *Who was she?*

IM: *Oh, a woman who was up in the village there, in the Glen [i.e. Glen Hinnisdal], who happened to be visiting, you know. That was the end of the business. But there was another man who was in, you know, he was working. I was supposed to go up but anyway, when it came to it, he was [already] in. There wasn’t anything in it, you know, but I made the song; I was just going to see them at the time. That’s the only revenge you had.]*

Ho-ró chan eil [an] smal orm

1. Ho-ró chan eil [an] smal orm
ged thug an òigh mo char asam;
gur h-e na bh’innte dhen a’ phròis
nach fhaighinn còir dhol dhachaidh leath’.

Ho-ró chan eil smal orm.

5

2. An cuala sibh mar dh’éirich dhomh
air oidhche ‘s mi air chéilidh
far na thachair orms’ an nìghneag òg
gun d’rinn mi còmhradh réidh rithe.

Ho-ró...

3. Gad nach robh mi eòlach oirre
gun d'shuidh mi greis a' stòraidh rithe
bhon bha coltas suairce ciùin oirr'
bha mi 'n dùil gun còrdamaid.
Ho-ró... 10
4. Gun d'thòisich sinn air cainntearachd
's gun d'ruith an oidhch' go ceann oirnn,
go robh e teannadh ri tràth cadail.
Dealachadh—cha b'annsa leinn.
Ho-ró... 15
5. 'S ann dh'iarr i duanag òrain orm
gun d'ghabh mi dhi gu deònach e
bhon bha mi 'n dùil ri faicinn dachaidh
mu'm biodh geilt nam bòcan oirre.
Ho-ró... 20
6. 'S an t-òran 's gann do chriochnaich mi
na siod a-mach gu fiataidh i
gun d'ghabh i fàth, 's ann air an dorus
thàrr i às mar fhiadh orm.
Ho-ró... 25
7. 'S mar as math as aithne dhuibh
siod as a déidh gun d'ghabh mise,
ach 's beag a shaoil mi gun robh 'n eucoir
fon an sgéith a' falach aic'.
Ho-ró... 30
8. Is air a' starran thàrr mi i
is thairis chuir mo làmh oirre.
Gun d'bhoc 's gun d'leum i h-àirde fhéin,
gun fhios 'am dé 'n ceann-fàth bh'aice.
Ho-ró... 35
9. 'S ann thòisich mi ri ciallachadh—
cha dug mi bheag de riasladh dhi,
gun cluinneadh tu mac-talla chreagan
a' freagairt a cuid sgiamhaichean.
Ho-ró... 40
10. 'S a Mhàiri, chan eil diumb orm,
gad a chuir thu cùlaibh rium.
'S bhon a rinn thu ormsa tàir,
gu bràth cha chuir mi ùidh annad.
Ho-ró... 40

11. Cha dug mi gaol na gealladh dhut,
gad a rinn thu mealladh orm.
Bha'n fhoill eadar thu fhéin 's mo nàbuidh
's cha chuir càch às a' bhairil mi. 45
Ho-ró...

Translation:

Ho-ró I am not gloomy

1. *Ho-ró I am not gloomy
though the young maiden cheated me;
it is the overweening pride in her [that meant]
I could not get a right [i.e. permission] to go home with her.
Ho-ró I am not gloomy. 5*
2. *Did you hear what befell me
on a night I [was] visiting
where the young girl fell in with me
and I made pleasant conversation with her.
Ho-ró...*
3. *Although I did not know her 10
I sat a while chatting with her
since her appearance was mild and gentle
I was hopeful that we would come to an agreement.
Ho-ró...*
4. *We started to chat
and the night ran to an end on us, 15
it was coming up to bedtime.
Parting—we would prefer not to.
Ho-ró...*
5. *Then she wanted a little song-rhyme from me
and I sang it for her willingly
since I was hoping to see her home 20
in case she would be afraid of apparitions.
Ho-ró...*
6. *And the song, scarcely [had] I finished
when out she slipped.
She took her chance, it was at the door
she made off from me like a deer. 25
Ho-ró...*

7. *And as well you know
yonder I took off after her,
but little I thought that there was deceit
she had hiding under her wing.
Ho-ró...*
8. *And on the stepping stone I got her 30
and put my arm round her.
She jumped and leapt her own height,
I knew not what cause she had.
Ho-ró...*
9. *Then I started to calm her down— 35
I had not jostled her very much
[and] you could hear the echo of the rocks
answering her cries [because they were so loud].
Ho-ró...*
10. *And Mary, I am not offended,
though you turned your back to me. 40
And since you rejected me,
I will never show an interest in you.
Ho-ró...*
11. *I did not give you love or a promise,
though you deceived me. 45
The scheme was between yourself and my neighbour
and no one will put me from the opinion.
Ho-ró...*

Textual notes:

- (i) a) NicGumaraid 1980b:A9 and b) 1980a:40-41.
(ii) SA1990.107.B7 and SA1990.108.A1.
(iii) SA1992.63.4.

Line 1-2: MacNeacail sings "Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth/ o'n thug an òigh...", "Ho-ró I am downcast because of it/ since the young maiden [cheated]..." on (iii) and (i:a), but corrected the lines while recording. He did not sing the modified lines on (iii), even with my prompt sheet as my writing was not readily decipherable and he was having trouble recalling the song. I offer "*an smal*" as a way of filling out the metre, as

MacNeacail would surely want (see Chapter IV). While either couplet will fit, the Sgiobair is clearly not happy with the song as it was. He may also, over the years, have changed his mind regarding the situation described in the song.

Line 11: An Sgiobair himself supplies “a’ còmhradh rithe” here, “conversing with her”, but in (i:a) “a’ stòraidh rithe” (literally, storying her or chatting with her) is what he actually sings.

Line 13: or, “that we would reach an understanding”.

Line 21: “She was feared of the bogeymans, you know, at night, coming home on her own.” (IM) “Spectre”, “apparition” or more colloquially “bogeys” will do as well.

Line 30: “Starran” is a platform and sometimes a stone causeway. The Sgiobair explained that this referred to several stepping stones across a stream below the house where the encounter took place.

Lines 34-37: MacNeacail supplied this verse while *sgrùdadh*. It is not in (i:a) or (i:b).

Line 40: (iii) has “‘S gad a rinn...” [and though...] making this line part of the previous couplet. The full stop would then be at the end of this line.

Line 45: i.e. “no one will convince me otherwise”.

VII. A Mhàiri bhan, tha thu lurach

IM: Oh aye.

TM: There’s always another [song].

IM: Aye, oh there was.... [laughs] Och, [the songs were] something just to, pass the time.

TM: Is that the same Mhàiri [as in *Bidh mi cuimhneachadh is ag ionndrainn*]?

IM: No, no. Different, oh no.

TM: [The songs were to a] different person everytime.

IM: Everytime yes, oh yes. (SA1990.108.A2)

A Mhàiri bhàn tha thu lurach

[séisd] A Mhàiri bhàn, tha thu lurach,
flùr nan cruinneag gura tu.
'S lìonmhór fear a tha an tòir ort;
'na do bhòidhchead chuir iad ùidh.

1. Gad nach dug mi gaol thar chàch dhut, 5
innsidh mi 's gach àit' do chliù,
o'n ghabh thu a bhith coibhneil bàidheil
rium gach tràth nuair ruiginn thu.
2. Tha do dhà shùil ghorm mar dhearcag, 10
do shlios mar shneachda nam beann àrd'.
Tha do dheud gheal cothrom snaidhte
's do bheul as meacharra nì gàir'.
3. Tha gach maise ort mar dh'iarrainn, 15
nàdur ciallach mar is còir
's mi gun taghadh thu thar cheudan;
chan eil d'fhiach an Tìr a' Cheò.
4. Bhithinn sona dheth na saoilinn 20
gu faighinn le aont' ort còir
's mi nach gearaineadh mo shaothair
le dhol daonnan air do thòir.

Translation:

O fair-haired Mary, you are lovely

[chorus] *O fair-haired Mary, you are lovely,
the flower of the young women, you are.
There are many in pursuit of you;
in your beauty they have taken an interest.*

1. *Though I did not love you over another, 5
I will tell of your character everywhere,
since you were kind, and gentle
to me every time I would meet you.*
2. *You two blue eyes are like berries, 10
your form like the snow of the high mountains.
Your even white teeth are polished
and your mouth the tenderest that ever laughs.*

3. *You have every grace as I would wish,
a discreet nature, as is right
and I would choose you over hundreds [of others];
you have no equal in the Land of the Mist.* 15
4. *I would be fortunate if I could imagine
that I would, by consent, win you
and I would not complain of my labour
of continually courting you.* 20

Textual notes:

(i) NicGumaraid 1980a:30

(ii) SA1990.108.A2.

(iii) SA1993.15.B14.

(iv) There is no complete sung version of this song. (iii) has two verses and two choruses that MacNeacail sang to give me the tune, which he did not remember on previous occasions.

Lines 1-4: This verse is sung as a refrain after every verse.

Line 11: (i) has “do chas-dheud” here, but its meaning is not clear. The present version was supplied in (Sgr)

Line 13: i.e. “...that I would want in a person”.

Line 16: i.e. the Isle of Skye.

VIII. Tha mi fo thùrs’ air bheagan sunnd

TM: Do you remember who this was to?

IM: ...Aye she was over in Kingsburgh, as a maid or something and we’d be going over there at céilidhs just...like that, you know. Maybe joking like that. And maybe she would be wanting [me] to compose for her too, and I would have it... And she, och she wouldn’t like it at all after that [and would say], “away with you”. And that’s how I ended it up you see. (SA1990.107.A2)

Tha mi fo thùrs' air bheagan sunnd

1. Tha mi fo thùrs' air bheagan sunnd
mu'n sgeul as ùr a fhuair mi
mu'n chailinn chiùin a thug dhomh rùn
a' dùrachdadh nis' fuath dhomh.
2. An Cinnseborg tha i tàmh 5
an tràth seo tha mi luaidh air—
Gad thug mi dhi mo ghaol 's mo ghràdh,
gu bheil i 'n dràs' an gruaim rium.
3. Dèan innse dhomh a seo gun dàil, 10
gu dé 'n ceann-fàth a fhuair thu
na dé 'n nì chuala tu mi ràdh,
nuair ghabh thu gràin cho luath dhìom.
4. Bu lionmhór oidhche ruig mi thu 15
gad bhiodh an dùbhlachd fhuar ann;
gum biodh tu agam air mo ghlùin
's mi 'n dùil gun dèanainn buannachd.
5. Ach o'n chuir thu rium do chùl, 20
's nach diù leat anns an uair mi
gu faigh mi caileag laghach shunndach
a bheir rùn 'san uair dhomh.
6. Gun mhol mi thu air seòl na dhà
bho d'cheann go d'shàil—gach buaidh bh'ortsa.
Ma's nì nach taitneach e ri d'chàil,
gu bràth cha chluinnear bhuan e.

Translation:

I am under a sadness and with little joy

1. *I am under a sadness and with little joy
about the latest rumour that I got
concerning the gentle girl who loved me
now wishing me hatred.*
2. *In Kingsburgh she dwells— 5
this occasion I'm talking about—
Though I gave her my love and my affection,
she is just now ill-disposed towards me.*
3. *Tell me here without delay, 10
what reason did you find
or what thing did you hear me saying,
when you took a loathing to me so suddenly?*

4. *It was many a night I met you
though it was cold winter;
I would have you on my knee
and me hoping I could win [you].* 15
5. *But since you turned your back on me,
and [you think] I am beneath you just now,
I will get a kind, joyful girl
who will give me love at once.* 20
6. *I praised you in several ways
from your head to your heel—every virtue you had.
If it's the case that it displeases you,
it will never be heard from me.*

TM: When did you make that one?

IM: Och some time ago. Just, I was only making more fun, mockery and things like that, you know. Maybe there was nothing in it, but just for the sake of composing and things like that. If you saw her speaking something circular [i.e. saying something evasive] or anything like that, you'd think, "Ach well, she doesn't care for me" and I would compose something like that, you know. Take it, sing it for her the next day [or] anytime I would meet her...again. That's all I would have [been] meaning. Mm. Aye. (SA1990.107.A2)

Textual notes:

(i) NicGumaraid 1980a:31.

(ii) SA1990.107.A2.

(iii) No other renditions.

Line 2: (i) has "gur sgeul..." which does not fit very well.

Line 4: "Refusing me." (IM) (i) has "dùrachdainn" in this line, which is a different form of the same word.

Line 13: Prof. W. Gillies suggests "...ruiginn thu", "...I would meet you" here, but it did not come up in (Sgr)

Line 21: "'S ged...air seòl na dhà.... Aye well, it'll do like that, [or] dòigh na dhà, that'll do." (IM)

Line 24: "If you didn't like it you'll never hear it out of me, aye.

Oh [laughs] you have the translation here!" (Sgr)

IX. Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd

TM: Do you remember a song called *Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd*?

IM: Oh-ho [laughs] that's myself again, aye, oh yes. Oh that was a night we were at an old soldier's house up at Gleann Hionasdail there. [It was] about eleven o'clock [and he had] a tup. Well it was coming late in the year, you know, well you always kill them in the early summer because the flesh is getting...strong at that time on a tup. So there was a shepherd there and [a] few of us there and a céilidh, you know, and "Ohh," said the soldier "kill the [tup for me]".

"Och," they says. "Yes, why not". Well, as they were doing the thing, you know, I start[ed] singing and [as] we were discussing it, I started composing, you know, [about] what was going on,...putting [it] together.... And before they left I had the song made! [claps hands and laughs] "Oh well," he says, "it's a good recipe," he said to me [laughs]. That was the only thing, he said about it himself, but the other boys were so vexed [at me for] composing that as they were doing it. (SA1989.25.B11)

Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd

[séisd] Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd,
bha reithe bàn toirt shùrdag as,
nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd.

1. Gur ann aig aon uair deug a's t-oidhche,
bha sinn cruinn an taigh an t-Saighdeir. 5
Fhuair sinn gnìomh a bha glé oillteil:
toirt a' cheann bho rùda dha.
Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd.
2. Gun deach na gillean ann an òrdugh,
ma na casan chuir ad ròpan. 10
Nuair a chaidh a' sgian 'na sgòrnan.
thòisich e ri rùchdanaich.
Nuair a...

3. 'S ann thuirte Martainn fhéin cho ciallach,
 "[S] mór am beud gun d'rachadh sgian air.
 Chan eil a leithid a's na crìochan;
 tha adharc bhrèagha' air tionndadh air."
 Nuair a... 15
4. "'S ann shaoileas mi gur tu bha gòrach,
 nach d'fhuair loidhn' thu bhon a' Bhòrd dha
 gum biodh àl aige bhiodh bòidheach
 gum biodh clòimh is rùsg orra."
 Nuair a... 20
5. "'S truagh nach dug thu chun an t-*Show* e,
 oir tha bodhaig air tha sònraicht'.
 Chan eil móran agus òirleach
 bhon an t-sròn gu'n t-sùil aige!"
 Nuair a...
6. 'S ann thuirte a' Saighdear fhéin cho ciallach,
 "Chan eil ann dheth ach an dianag.
 Creidibh mi gu ceart mo bhriathran;
 's math is fhiach a' sùgh aige."
 Nuair a... 25
7. "Gum biodh móran geir sa' mhàileid;
 nì e maragan gun àireamh.
 Gum bi dòrlach air na h-àirnean
 's fràigidh mi an grùthan leis."
 Nuair a... 30

Translation:

When they started to butcher

[chorus] *When they started to butcher,
 the white ram was struggling,
 when they started to butcher.*

1. *'Twas at eleven o'clock at night,
 we were gathered in the Soldier's house. 5
 We got a task that was quite horrible:
 taking the head off a ram for him.
 When they started to butcher.*
2. *Then the lads got in order,
 about the legs they put cords. 10
 When the knife went in his windpipe
 he began gurgling hoarsely.
 When...*

3. *Then said Martin himself so sensibly,
 "[It's] a great pity that he should be knifed.
 There's not his like in the region;
 there is a lovely turned horn on him."
 When... 15*
4. *"I think it's you who was foolish,
 that you didn't get a licence from the Board for him;
 he would have offspring that were beautiful,
 [and] there would be good wool and fleece on them."
 When... 20*
5. *"It's a pity that you didn't take him to the Show,
 since he has a body that is exceptional.
 There's little more than an inch
 from his nose to his eye!"
 When...*
6. *Said the Soldier himself sensibly, 25
 "He is only a two year old.
 Believe me truly, my words;
 his broth is good and well worth it."
 When...*
7. *"There would be a lot of fat in his belly;
 it will make countless puddings. 30
 There will be a handful [of fat] on the kidneys
 and I will fry the liver with it."
 When...*

IM: By gosh, you have a lot of them [i.e. the songs]...
 Aye.... He got too much of [i.e. too many] boys doing it and I
 was by the fireside, listening [to] what was going on. And so when
 the tup was finished, you know, I had the song composed [laughs].
 So he was saying there himself, "Oh well,... och you gave us a
 good recipe," he says. [I]t was!

TM: You made it right there?

IM: Yes! There and then, aye. I was just watching them what was
 going on and what, where they went to perform it, you know....
 Aye it was eleven o'clock at night, aye that was right. It happened
 too!...

Màrtainn, that was one of the boys that was killing him.... [A]
 Morrison he was aye; he was the shepherd, you know, at
 Kingsburgh [at] one time. He's not living now....

TM: Do you remember who else was there?

IM: Oh well, there's none of them living today, except myself, aye.
 There was Norman MacPherson there and Màrtainn Morrison

and the soldier's boy too, John Beaton his name was, he was there along with them.... It was them that was there, but I didn't mention them [i.e. name] who they were, but just said...boys, you know? Mhm.... But you have the translation here too.... Mm. I don't know how you are able to do it. (SA1990.105.B5)

Textual notes:

- (i) SA1989.26.A1 with the addition of verse five and occasional words from (iii:b).
- (ii) SA1990.105.B5.
- (iii) a) SA1992.64.2, b) NicGumaraid 1980b:A5 and c) ASIM.1.
- (iv) This song is sung to the tune of Màiri Mhór nan Òran's *Nuair chaidh na ceithir ùr oirre*.⁶ The unnumbered first 'verse' is sung at the beginning of the song to a slightly different melody from the rest of the song and its first line is later used as a refrain.

Line 9: (iii) has " 'S ann fhuair na balaich ann an òrdugh", but the meaning is essentially the same.

Line 10: "Man a chasan", "about his legs" is an alternative.

Line 15: This line reads "a leithid feadh nan crìoch," "throughout the borders" in (i) but was changed by the Sgiobair (Sgr).

Line 16: "He had a nice horn turning, you know." [laughs] (Sgr)
MacNeacail says that the curves of a ram's horn and the tightness of those curves are measures of his value.

Line 18: The "Bòrd" referred to is the Board of Agriculture which is assesses the value of animals for sale and breeding purposes.

⁶ Thanks to Dr. Donald Meek for pointing this out.

Line 22: An Sgiobair supplies “gu bheil cumadh air tha sònraicht” in (iii:a) meaning “he has an exceptional form”.

Line 24: This is from iii. (i) has “eadar an t-sròn...” which would not make as much grammatical sense with the rest of the line.

IM: There’s no much [more than] an inch between...the eye and the nose, that was the points of him being good, you know.

TM: That’s a quality?

IM: Well, I don know, but that was supposed to be [good] if you were near the nose, you know, and...the eye[s were] near one another. It was a good thing to see him that way. That was the point [laughs], whether I was right or wrong, I don’t know. (Sgr)

Line 27: This presumably means from the brow, where the nose separates the eyes, to each eye, making the distance between the two eyes a little over two inches. This is said to be another assessment of the value of a sheep.

Line 28: “The juice of him would be good, you know.” (Sgr)

Line 29: “Màileid” usually means a bag or a wallet.

Line 31: “He would cook the liver in, with the fat...on the belly, you know.” (Sgr)

X. An cuala sibh mu’n fhiadh

IN: This was [about] a stag that was coming into Gleann Hionasdail.... Aye [he] just got up, off the mountain somewhere and he came down the glen and he was making for the corn and took it.... Aye, aye. And they was chasing him, right enough, but no one would could get him, he was too quick for them. Only you know, he was smelling them at least and he was away, but he would make quite [a lot of] damage on the stooks...at night and things like that, but if he heard you coming he would smell you in the distance and he was off again. They couldn’t get him at all, he never got eat[en].... No, that’s what I’m say[ing in the song], if they get a hold of him...he would be divided between them.... Ah hah.
(SA1990.107.B5)

An cuala sibh mu'n fhiadh

1. An cuala sibh mu'n fhiadh bha air feadh a' bhaile?
'S mór a rinn e riasladh am measg a' bharra;
bha adagan 'gan riasladh 's 'gan cur o chasan.
Bidh ad ann am fiachan man cuirear stad air.
2. Cha robh fios có'm mèirleach bha dèanamh calla 5
gos do dh'inns' dhaibh Màrtainn, nuair a thug e 'n aire
gu robh damh na cròice air lón a' chreachail
's gu robh na deich meòir air, na corr a bharrachd.
3. Thàinig e air chuairt, gur ann uair an uiridh 10
gun deachaidh a' ruaig air, cha d'fhuair e fuireach.
Ach bho'n thill e 'm bliadhna, 's e 'm brod na culaidh;
tha gach fear gu dian dhiubh a-muigh 'ga fhuireach.
4. Tha gach fear 'san àite gun tàmh 'ga chaithris, 15
'n dùil gu faigh iad fàth air, 's gun cuirear às dha.
Bidh iadsan a' liùgadh air chùlaibh adaig
le gunna làn de dh'fhùdar is luaithe ghlas ann.
5. Ach chan fhaigh iad dlùth dha, bidh e air fhaiceall.
Bheir e dhaibh an dubhlan, chan fhaigh iad faisg air.
Thig e nuair as àill leis tràth 'sa mhaduinn,
ithidh e lànshàth às is nì e tarruing. 20
6. Ach nam faighte gréim air, readh a roinn gu h-ealamh,
siod far 'm biodh an aimhreit sa' ghleann 'ga fheannadh.
Readh móran a' fiadh oirnn dhe na balaich,
siod far 'm biodh an riasladh air feadh nan caileag.

Translation:

Did you hear about the deer

1. *Did you hear about the deer that was all over the township?
He did a great deal of damage among the crops;
stooks were disordered and put [i.e. trampled] under his feet.
They [i.e. the crofters] will be in debt before a stop is put to him.*
2. *No one knew who the thief doing damage was 5
until Martin told them, when he noticed
that the antlered stag was in the hillocky water-meadow
and that there were ten points on it[s antlers], or even more.*
3. *He came around, it was once last year;
he was put to flight, he wasn't allowed to stay. 10
But since he returned this year, he is in top condition;
every one of them is outside eagerly awaiting him.*

4. *Every one in the place is sleepless watching for him,
hoping they will get a chance at him, and that he will be destroyed.
They will be creeping behind a stook* 15
with a gun full of powder and blue-grey lead in it.
5. *But they won't get near him, he will be watchful.
He will give defiance to them, they will not get close to him.
He comes when he likes, early in the morning,
he eats his fill from it and dashes away.* 20
6. *But if a hold were gotten on him, he would be quickly divided;
what a contention there would be in the glen [while] skinning
him.
Many of our lads would go rampant
yonder where there would be great carryings on among the lasses.*

Textual notes:

- (i) a) NicGumaraid 1980b:B9 and b) 1980a:39.
(ii) SA1990.107.B5.
(iii) SA1992.64.4.

Line 7: MacNeacail spelled "creachail" for me himself in Sgr, translating it as "hillocky". It may be a dialect form of "creachainn" meaning "bare, exposed mountainous or upland ground". The problem there is that it would not agree with the moistness associated with "lón". It may also be a place-name. (i:b) has "Lòin [sic] Mhic Neachdail" meaning "Nicolson's meadow", but an Sgiobair corrected it (Sgr).

Line 17: An Sgiobair offers "Ach nuair thig iad..." as an alternative to this line (Sgr).

Line 23: This line literally means that the lads would go to seed (as in a garden going wild), but taken with the next line implies that they would "go wild" in a different way.

XI. An cuala sibh mu'n ùpraid (Tarbh Eighre)

IM: Oh that was a mad bull that was in Eyre up that way. Mhm.... They were going to try and get 'im and the bull was turning on them, you know. He was just put mad some way and had too many [people] about him and he was charging them here and there. So I've only heard about that, I was just composing as I was hearing about those people that was about there. Mhm.
(SA1990.107.A3)

An cuala sibh mu'n ùpraid

1. An cuala sibh mu'n ùpraid
bha 'san dùthaich, 's chan annas,
mu'n tarbh ghòrach bha 'n Eighre
gun d'rinn iad chur cragte?
Nuair thàinig fios bho'n a Bhòrd 5
gum bu chòir a chur dhachaidh,
gun do dh'fhalbh iad, na seòid,
air thòir leis na maidean
'ga chur fo smachd.
2. Gun do chruinnich iad còmhladh 10
Clann 'Ic Leòid is an Seathach,
Clann 'Ic Rath is 'Ic Aoidh,
's na daoine làidir a bh'aca.
Gun robh Alasdair Mór Pèutan
ann e fhéin, 's e bha tapaidh 15
cur nan ròpan an òrdugh
gos an seòladh m'a amhaich
nan d'reathadh aig' air.
3. Nuair a chunnaic a' bhrùid 'ad 20
's ann 'gan ionnsaigh a ghabh e.
Nuair a dh'fhalbh e 's e bùirean
gun do dhùisg e am baile.
'S na gàrraidhean ùrach,
bha e smùideadh le chlaigeann;
gun do tharruing na diùlnaich, 25
gach fear a dh'ionnsaigh a thaighe
fo mhóran boil.

4. Thàinig Lighiche nam Brùidean
ann an ùine glé aithghearr;
gun deach e 'ghabhail 'na chùlaibh 30
is chaidh a phùnnadh an oisean.
'S nuair a ghabh e g'a ionnsaigh
leis an t-sùil ghabh e beachd air.
Gun duirt e ro-dhiùmbach,
"Tha bhrùid air dhroch cheartas 35
o chionn fad'."
5. Gun do dh'aontaich e an creutair
chuir e an *x-ray* air a mhalaidh.
Rinn e innse gun bhreug dhaibh
nach robh feum ann do'n bhaile; 40
bhon a chaill e a reusan
gu feumadh a cheannach.
Cha biodh e 'na fhàbhar
dhol 'ga fhàgail air machair—
's e às a bheachd. 45
6. Anns a' mhaduinn, 'n àm éirigh,
chaidh fios Dhùn-Éideann le cabhaig
a dh'innse nach robh fo'n ghréin seo
gu léir gheibheadh faisg air,
ach gun gabhadh iad fhéin e 50
'son feum an luchd-taighe;
bhiodh e math mu'n Fhéill' Mhàrtainn
o'n bha 'n t-àite gun sgadan—
's nach robh e pailte.
7. 'S e Calum Hearnach bha deònach 55
gun d'readh còrdadh gu h-ealamh
bhon a bha aige bùtha;
théid *sign* a' Bhùidsear ri dharus.
'S nì e reic air a' phùnn 60
's cha bhi ùnnsa gun phrofaid.
Bidh e math dha'n an òigridh
tha còmhnuidh 'sa bhaile
'go fàgail bras.

Translation:

Did you hear about the uproar

1. *Did you hear about the uproar*
[that] was in the country and it's not strange,
about the daft bull that was in Eyre,
that they made it go crazy?
When a message came from the Board 5
that it ought to be sent home [i.e. back to the Board],⁷
they went away, the heroes,
to pursue it with sticks
to put it under control.

2. *They gathered together* 10
the Clan MacLeod and Shaw,
Clan Macrae and MacKay,
and the strong men they had.
Big Alasdair Beaton was
there himself, he was clever and adept 15
putting the ropes in order
in order to direct them around his neck
if he could.

3. *When the brute saw them,*
it's toward them he made. 20
When he went away bellowing
he woke the town.
And the soil dykes,
he was pulverizing with his skull;
the brave men took off, 25
everyone towards home
in a great hurry.

4. *The Beast Physician came*
in a very short time.
He got caught behind him 30
and he was pounded in a corner
and when he charged towards him,
with his eye he judged him.
He said very indignantly,
"The brute has been handled badly 35
for some time."

⁷ These lines are a reference to the Board of Agriculture which hires bulls to crofting townships in order that they may improve their bloodlines. The bull is exchanged periodically so that the gene pool does not become to limited.

5. *The creature yielded [to] him,
 he put the x-ray on his brow.
 He told them without falsehood
 that he [i.e. the bull] was no use for the township; 40
 since he lost his reason
 he must be sold.
 He would not be in favour
 of going and leaving him in the field,
 and he out of his senses. 45*
6. *In the morning, at rising time,
 a message went quickly to Edinburgh
 saying that there wasn't here, under the sun,
 a single one who would get near him,
 but that they themselves would take [i.e. slaughter] him 50
 because of the need of the householders;
 he would be good around Martinmas
 since the place was without herring—
 since it wasn't plentiful [in the sea].*
7. *It's Calum the Harrisman who was willing 55
 [and] it was agreed quickly
 since he had a shop;
 the sign of the Butcher will go up on the door.
 He will sell it by the pound
 and there won't be an ounce without profit. 60
 It will be good for the children
 who are dwelling in the town
 to leave [them] bold [and ardent].*

IM: [Seathach was a Shaw]; Johnnie Shaw I would say [i.e. call] him.
 That was his name, Seathach.

TM: Iain Seathach?

IM: Iain Seathach, aye..., I didn't say Iain there, but I says "the
 Seathach". He was known as that, as I would be [known as] "the
 MacNeacail" or something like that.

[Alasdair Mór Peutan.] ...That was...Big Alec Beaton, you
 know.... Well, he was...bigger than any of them probably.

IM: ...That's it, aye aye.... Oh well you have them all [translated] there.

TM: This isn't a very good translation either.

IM: Oh well, you made them very good though I think.... You made it
 as good as anybody could. Mm.

TM: Well, I hope so.

IM: Ah yes, it'll pass alright; it gives me the meaning of what's there.
That's all you need. Oh aye. (SA1990.107.A3)

Textual notes:

(i) NicGumaraid 1980a:34-35.

(ii) SA1990.107.A3

(iii) SA1992.65.5.

Line 4: "cracte" is the past participle of the English "cracked".

Words like "mixed" and "cracked" are used in this way.

Line 9: "They couldn't control him you know" (Sgr).

Line 11: Literally "the Shaw". This is a form of reference found with many of the adjectival surnames, e.g. "An Dòmhnallach, Am Frisealach", "the MacDonald, the Fraser".

Line 13: "Gach fear làidir..." (i), "every strong man".

Line 16-18: "He was trying to get rope over his head if he could.

[He tried to] throw them on, throwed it on like a lasso. But that failed." (Sgr)

Line 23: "The dykes are made of the soil,...aye they were made of soil, you know, the walls, you were building about [the crofts]." (Sgr)

Line 26-27: "They went home, you know with great hurry, when they couldn't subdue him." (Sgr)

Line 28: "Well he was a doctor to the animals, you know.

'Thàinig lighiche nam brùidean.'... That's what you would call the vet...aye, just a doctor for animals, a lighiche, that's a doctor." (Sgr) "Thàinig a rithist a' bhrùid ud" (i), "the beast came there again".

Line 30: (Sgr) has "'S gun do ghabh e m'a chùl", "and he went round behind him".

Line 35: Or "ill-treated".

Line 37: "He would trap him, you know." (Sgr) The syntax here is unclear.

Line 38: "Nothing but their own eyes!" [laughs] (Sgr)

Line 42: "Gum biodh feum" or "gu bheil feum a bhith cheannach" (iii), "it would be" or "it is necessary to sell him".

Line 59: "Bhiodh e 'ga reic..." (i), "he would be selling it...".

Line 61: "Bhiodh e..." (i), "It would be...".

Line 63: In (Sgr) MacNeacail suggests "go fàgail brass", as a different possibility for the last phrase, meaning it would be good for the local boys to leave a little cash in exchange for meat.

XIII. Thoir an t-soraidh seo bhuam

This song was made in answer to a request from Isabel Gillies, because the Sgiobair made a humorous song about her boyfriend, Duncan MacKinnon. See *Case studies* in Chapter V for more details. At the time Gillies had returned to Skye and was working in Uig Hospital (where the Youth Hostel is today).

Thoir an t-soraidh seo bhuam

1. Thoir an t-soraidh seo bhuam
chun na rìghinn as suairc'
air an tric bhios mo smuaintean an còmhnuidh.
Gur òigh thu tha ciùin,
a tha finealt gun smùir;
bidh gach fear a' cur ùidh 'na do bhòidhchead.

5

2. 'Na mo dhùisg is 'nam shuain,
bidh mo smuain oir' gach uair;
gu bheil àilleachd do shnuaidh a' toirt leòn dhomh.
Bheileag òg an fhuilt dhuinn, 10
's mór a dh'fhàs ort a loinn;
tha thu gàirbheulach, aoidheil gun mhór-chùis.
3. Tha thu sìobhalta, suairc
's tu gun phròis na gun uail,
tha gun fhoill na gun ghruaim na gun ghòraich', 15
do dhà shùil mheallach chiùin
toirt dhuit àilleachd is mùirn,
beul a' mhàrain bho'n cùbhraidh na pògan.
4. Tha thu bho fhìor Chloinn 'Ill'-ios'—
bho'n robh tàlant is rian— 20
nach robh meat' ann an gnìomh ri ám còmhraig;
gheibh iad urram is cliù
bho gach aon chuir orr' iùil.
'S beag an t-ioghnadh 's ann leam ged bhiodh tòir ort.
5. Gur tu mo roghainn fhìn 25
dhe na chunnaic mi 's a chì,
ach, mo thruaighe, dé nì mi 's mi gun chòir ort.
Gu bheil eagal orm, a ghaoil,
gun doir càch thu a thaobh,
oir bidh an tòir ort luchd maoin agus stòrais. 30
6. Ach mur bi e an dàn
nach fhaigh mi thu air làimh,
's e mo dhùrachd gu bràth dhut gach sòlas,
gach beannachd 'nad dhéidh
's gach cùis bhith leat réidh, 35
ge b'e àite fo'n ghréin 'sam bi d'chòmhnuidh.

Translation:

Take this greeting from me

1. *Take this greeting from me
to the gentlest girl
on whom my thoughts ever dwell.
You are a young maiden who is gentle,
who is handsome and fine without blemish; 5
every man takes an interest in your beauty.*

2. *Awake or in deepest sleep,
my thoughts are on her every hour;
the beauty of your appearance is wounding me.
Young Bella of the brown hair,* 10
*great is the comeliness that has grown on you;
you are laughing-mouthed, cheerful and without pride.*
3. *You are peaceful, kind
and you, without pride or vanity,
are without deceit without sullenness or folly,* 15
*your two alluring gentle eyes
giving you beauty and joy,
a mouth of melodies from which the kisses are sweet.*
4. *You are of the true Gillies clan—
from whom there was talent and an even disposition—* 20
*who were not cowardly about a feat in time of strife;
they will get honour and fame
from every one who makes your acquaintance.
It's little wonder to me, indeed, that there would be suitors after
you.*
5. *You are my own choice* 25
*of those I have seen and will see,
but my woe, what will I do, and me without a right to you.
I fear, oh love,
that others will take you aside,
since you are courted by people of means and wealth.* 30
6. *But if it is not fate
[and] I do not get you by the hand,
my eternal wish is [for] every happiness for you,
every blessing with you* 35
*and that everything be smooth for you,
whatever place under the sun your dwelling be.*

Textual notes:

(i) a) NicGumaraid 1980b and b) 1980a:43.

(ii) SA1990.107.B3.

(iii) SA1992.65.6.

Line 9: i.e. "torturing me".

Line 10: This is the diminutive form of the Gaelic name Iseabail
[Isabel].

Line 15: This is from (iii). (i:b) has “tha thu gun fhoill...” here.

Line 19: i.e. “from the true Gillies lineage”.

Line 20: “From whom you got...”.

Line 24: i.e. “courting you”.

Line 27: “Not having won you.”

Line 29: i.e. “beguile you” with implications of deception.

Perhaps meaning that her family would take her aside and council her against him, or simply take her out of his reach.

Line 32: i.e. “win you”.

XIV. Bidh mi cuimhneachadh 's ag ionndrainn

This is another song to Isabel Gillies and her friend Màiri Lamont, the cook at Uig Hospital. It was made in response to repeated requests for a song, though it is not clear whether this was the deciding factor in its composition or a romantic interest in Isabel.⁸

TM: Cuin a rinn thu an t-òran *Bidh mi cuimhneachadh is ag ionndrainn*?

IM: O-o-o [chuckles], dithis caileagan, *well* ...bho'n ospadal—far a bheil *hostel* agad an diugh,...bh'e 'na ospadal an uair ud.... Agus bha dithis nighean ann, fhios agad. 'S bha mi falbh gu ruige *forestry* làrna mhàireach. O bha iad ag iarraidh orm, “Ach dèan òran dhomhsa, dèan òran dhomhsa”.

“O thalla! O a shiorruidh, chan eil tìd' agam.” 'S e *bicycle* a bh'agam an uair sin. Thòisich mi air man do dh'fhalbh mi; dh'fhàg mi ma aon uair deug. Beileag Gillies a bh'ann agus, bha an té eile, chan eil i beò 'n diugh, Màiri a bh'oirre.... Thòisich mi smaoineachdainn air òran dhaibhse. Nach d'rinn mi 'n gnothach, co-dhiubh, chaidh mi sìos an ath oidhche 's ghabh mi e. Dh'fhalbh mi rithist gu ruige *forestry* làrna mhàireach.... Cha

⁸ See Chapter V for more discussion on the role of demand in the production of songs.

d'rinn mi ach siod a dheanadh ann an cabhag aig an àm.
(SA1989.28.A18-B1)

[TM: *When did you make the song, I will be remembering and missing?*

IM: *O-o-o, two girls, well, [I was coming] from the hospital—where you have the hostel today, it was a hospital then. And there were two young women there, you know. And I was going away to the forestry the next day. Oh they were asking me, "Ach, make a song for me, make a song for me."*

"Oh away! Oh eternity, I don't have time." It's a bicycle I had then. I started before I went away; I left at eleven o'clock. Bella Gillies was there and, there was another one, she's not living today, she was Mary. I started thinking of a song for them. Didn't I do it, anyway, I went down the next night and sang it. I went again to the forestry the next day. I only made that to do in a hurry at the time.]

Bi mi cuimhneachadh 's ag ionndrainn

[séisd] Bidh mi cuimhneachadh 's ag ionndrainn,
na h-òighean ciùine tha mi fàgail,
bidh mi cuimhneachadh 's ag ionndrainn.

1. Bidh mi cuimhneachadh nan caileag,
gur h-e Beileag agus Màiri, 5
air an tric a bha mi céilidh;
's ann bhuap'éin a gheibhinn fàilte.
Bidh mi cuimhneachadh 's ag ionndrainn.
2. 'S iomadh oidhche chaith mi ùine
ann an sùgradh 's an ceòl-gàire. 10
'N ioghnadh gad a bhithinn tùrsach
deòir o'm shùilean 'ga ur fàgail?
Bidh mi...
3. Mholainn Beileag gu sonraicht'
bha mi eòlach ort 'nad phàisde.
Chan iongnadh leam thu bhith cho coibhneil 15
's nach robh foill 'san t-sliochd o'n d'fhàs thu.
Bidh mi...
4. Chan fhàginn Màiri air mo chùlaibh,
bha i biùthaisteach is bàidheil.
Chan eil aon a chuireas iùil oirr'
nach doir cliù dhi anns gach àite.
Bidh mi...

5. Soraidh leibh is beannachd dùbailt'— 20
 gun robh cùisean mar as feàrr dhuibh,
 nuair a thilleas mi do dh'Uige,
 tha mi'n dùil gu faic mi slàn sibh.
 Bidh mi...

Translation:

I will be remembering and missing

[chorus] *I will be remembering and missing,
 the gentle young women whom I am leaving,
 I will be remembering and missing.*

1. *I will be remembering the girls,
 it's Bella and Màiri 5
 whom I was frequently visiting;
 it's from themselves I would get a welcome.
 I will be remembering and missing.*
2. *Many a night I spent some time
 in sporting and light laughter. 10
 Is it any wonder though, [that] I would be melancholy
 [that there is] a tear from my eyes at leaving you?
 I will...*
3. *I would praise Bella especially,
 I was knew you well [when you were] a child. 15
 It is no wonder to me that you are so kind
 since there was no deceit in the stock from which you grew.
 I will...*
4. *I would not leave Màiri behind me,
 she was of good renown and affectionate.
 There is not one who makes her acquaintance
 who does not praise her everywhere.
 I will...*
5. *A farewell to you and a twofold blessing— 20
 may things be as is best for you [and]
 when I return to Uig,
 I hope that I will see you both well.
 I will...*

Aye there was one or two verses [more], but I forgot them all. I can't get them, no, no. Ach that was enough anyhow. That's all they'd sing at a concert anyhow,...aye. (SA1990.107.B6)

Textual notes:

(i) SA1990.104.A3.

(ii) SA1990.107.B6.

(iii) a) SA1992.63.3, b) SA1988.64.A12, c) NicGumaraid 1980a:42,
d) 1980b:A7 and e) ASIM.2.

Line 16: i.e. "I would not leave her out of my song".

Line 20-21: i.e. "...and a wish that your affairs turn out for the
best". "As feàrr", lit.

XV. As a' mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh

UM: Bu toil leam, 's dòcha gun gabh e fhéin e, ma th'aige. Bha e 'g
obair 'sa Choir' Odhair,... "Coir' Odhar na fiadh bheann"... Ai,
siuthad 's feuch air....

IM: O chan eil òran [ann]. [sings] (SA1988.64.A12)

[UM: *I would like, maybe he'll sing it himself, if he has it. He was
working in Corrou, "Corrou of the wild mountains". Aye, go
ahead, try it.*

IM: *Oh [it's] not a song.]*

As a' mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh

1. As a' mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh
's ann neo-éibhinn a tha mi;
cha b'ionnan 's mar a b'àis' domh
nuair a bhà mi 'sa Ghleann. 5
Bhon thàinig mi 'n taobh-sa
's beag m'shunnd ri ceòl-gàire;
tha eilean nan àrd-bheann
gach là tighinn 'nam shuim.
2. Gur ann gòrach a bhà mi 10
nuair a smaoinich mi fhàgail.
Gur h-ann ann gheibhinn bàigh agus dòigh,
cead laigh' agus éirigh
gun chùram fo'n ghréin dhomh;
cha robh fàillinn na éis air mo lòn.

3. B'è Coir' Odhar na' fiadh-bheann 15
 dh'fhàg m'aigne cho cianail.
 Chan eil iongnadh gad liathainn le bròn
 gun nì air gach làmh dhiom,
 ach coilltean is fàsach
 'is monaidhean àrda fo cheò. 20
4. Tha mi faotainn gach riasladh,
 le droch shìd' agus sìantan,
 mach air frithean na' fiadh,
 mi gun dìon na gun sgàil. 25
 Mi sgìth air mo chasan,
 ri cuidhleadh a' bhara,
 gu saoil mi le fadal,
 gur seachdain gach là.
5. 'N àm dhol dachaidh 'san fheasgar,
 bidh e drùidhte dom' chraiceann, 30
 mo bhiadh cha bhi deasaicht'
 gad is beag dha mo chàil.
 An fhàrdach bidh falamh
 gun cheò far an teallaich,
 cha b'ionnan 'sna gleannaibh 35
 far na chleachd mi bhi 'tàmh.
6. Ach nuair a thig deireadh bliadhna
 gur ann luath nì mi triall as
 air long-adhair na' sgiathan,
 nach till sìontan a' Mhàrt. 40
 Gu seòl mi leath' thairis,
 thar chuain is thar bheannaibh;
 gun gabh mi gach aithghearr
 gu eilean mo ghràidh.

Translation:

In the morning I rise

1. *In the morning I rise*
it's unhappy I am;
it's not thus that I used to be
when I was in the glen.
Since I came over here 5
little is my inclination to light-hearted laughter;
the island of the high mountains
comes to my mind each day.

2. *How foolish I was
when I thought of leaving it. 10*
 *For it's there I would get kindness and courteous treatment,
leave to rise and lie down,
without a care under the sun for me;
there wasn't any lack or want in my diet.*
3. *It was Corroul of the wild mountains 15*
 that left my spirit so melancholy.
 *It is no wonder though I would grow grey with sorrow
with nothing on either side of me
but woods and wilderness
and high moors under mist. 20*
4. *I am suffering every hardship,
with bad weather and elements,
out in the deer forests
and me without protection or shelter. 25*
*I [am so] tired on my legs,
with wheeling the barrow,
that I wish with longing
that a week [passed with] every day.*
5. *At the time of going home in the evening,
it [i.e. rain] will be soaking [me] to my skin, 30*
*my food will not be ready
though little is my appetite for it.*
*The living quarters will be empty
without smoke from the hearth,
not the same [as] in the glens 35*
where I used to be dwelling.
6. *But when the end of the year comes,
it's fast I will get away from there
on a winged airplane 40*
that the blasts of March will not turn back.
*I will sail over with it,
over ocean and over mountains;
[so] that I will take every shortcut
to my beloved island.*

IM: Sin agad e [laughs].

UM: An cuala tu sin riamh?

MB: Cha chuala.

UM: Bha e aige ma tha.

IM: Och. Ach tha mi air a dhìochuimhneachadh ge tà. Chan eil guth
agam an diugh.

- MB: O tha guth math [agad]....
- UM: O tha e math air seinn, nach eil?...
- IM: Tha mi fàgail móran....
- TM: Cuin a rinn sibh an t-òran sin....
- IM: O...tha mi cinnteach gu bheil...corr...is fichead bliadhna co-dhiubh, aon pairt, tha. O siod an aon chur seachad a bh'againn. (SA1988.64.A12)
- [IM: *There you have it [laughs].*
- UM: *Did you ever hear that?*
- MB: *No.*
- UM: *Well he had [i.e. knew] it anyway.*
- IM: *Och, but I have forgotten it anyway. I don't have the voice today [i.e. anymore].*
- MB: *Oh [you have] a good voice....*
- UM: *He is good at singing, isn't [he]?...*
- IM: *I am leaving [i.e. forgetting] a lot....*
- TM: *When did you make that song?...*
- IM: *Oh, I'm sure it was than twenty years [ago] anyhow, part [of it], yes. Oh that [i.e. making songs] was the only pastime we had.]*

Textual notes:

- (i) SA1988.64.A12.
- (ii) SA1990.106.A3.
- (iii) No other renditions.
- (iv) For details about life in Corroul, see "From forestry to the fields of France" in Chapter I.

This song must have been made earlier than the twenty years he refers to in the conversation above. I suspect twenty years is his generic number used for 'quite some time ago' as he uses that it fairly often when dating songs. For several reasons I believe it was made closer to the events it

describes: (i) It talks of Corroul in such rich detail; (ii) It describes a period before World War II, an event which must by contrast have ameliorated some of the unpleasantness of life in Corroul; and (iii) The late thirties was also a very productive period of composition, judging from the number of other songs I have which can be definitively dated to those years. There remains the outside possibility that it was made later as a reminiscence or an exercise in poetic reconstruction, but it is included here due to its content.

Lines 1-8: "Gleann" in line 4 refers to Gleann Hionasdail, where he worked for the twelve years immediately preceding his forestry work.

This verse bears a remarkable similarity to the first four lines of William Ross' *Òran a rinn am bàrd ann an Dùn-eideann* [A song the bard made in Edinburgh] (Calder 1937:74). MacNeacail must have used them as a model: "'Sa' mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh, 's neo-éibhinn atà mi,/ Cha b'ionann a's m' àbhaist, air àiridh nan gleann;/ O'n thàinig mi 'n taobhs', chuir mi cùl ris gach mànrann,/ 'S cha bheag a' chuis-ghràine leam cànrann nan Gall." [In the morning I rise, it's unhappy I am/ It's not thus that [it] used to be in the sheiling of the glens;/ since I came over here, I turned by back on every entertainment,/ and I do not think much of the chattering of the Lowlanders.]

Lines 9-20: I have laid out the second and third verses differently according to their metrical form. They are also sung to a slightly different melody.

Line 29: Though one would expect “dachaidh” to be lenited, lenition is more variable in songs. Such de-lenition can also be found in the Sgiobair’s everyday speech.

Line 30: “e” may also be the impersonal, as in “it’s wet to the skin I am”. “Dom” is a dialect contraction of “do mo”, but one would expect “gom” here from “go mo”.

Line 36: “anns na chleachd...” in an Sgiobair’s Sgr. “Na” is a dialect version of the past tense marker “an do”.

Line 39: There were of course no air services to the Islands in those days, but that did not stop MacNeacail from wishing.

XVI. Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal

MacNeacail was still working in the forestry when he was called up for military service.

IM: Well, then I went...to the army there, they picked me up from there.

TM: They called you up.

IM: Aye. I was five and a half years there in the army,...I was in Germany, Italy and Brussels, Belgium and France....

TM: Did you see action?

IM: Oh. [pauses] I don’t talk about it. Did I no sing you the song, at all?

TM: No.

IM: Mm. Ah hah. [tiredly] Oh ho. (SA1989.26.A11)

Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal

1. Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal,
fliuch fuar tha mo leabaidh,
's mi 'nam shùneadh gun fhasgadh
air achadh na Fraing. 5
Gach cunnart is gàbhadh
o 'm bheil mi a' tàrsainn
bidh 'nam chuimhne gu bràth
fad' bhios tàlant 'nam cheann.
2. Mìle mollachd do'n Ghearmailt 10
dhùisg an cogadh le farmad,
nach dèid leinn air dearmad
gun bhith searbh dhaibh a rèir
son na mìltean a mharbhadh
de ar n-òigrigh bu chalma
's bailtean móra bha dealbhach 15
chaidh o spealgadh 's a chéil'.
3. 'S ann a thòisicheadh còmhraig
ag iarraidh go Pòland
'n dùil gu faigheadh iad còir
na Roinn Eòrpa gu léir. 20
'S gach rìoghachd 'nan crìochan
gun dug iad gu strìochdadh,
cur dhaoin' ann an iarruinn
's 'gam pianadh gu geur.
4. Gu bheil innealan sgriosail 25
tigh'nn 's na speuran gun fhios oirnn
air an talamh toirt clisgeadh
's a bristeadh o chéil'.
Longaibh adhair mar dhruidean
feadh na h-iarmailt air uidil, 30
's gu bheil deatach bho ghunna
cur a dubhar air gréin.
5. Ach bròn de gach sealladh
faicinn òigrìdh 'ga sgathadh,
's iad leòint' air gach machair 35
a' sìleadh fo'n creuchd.
Na raointean tha daithte
le fuil chraobhach nan gaisgeach
nach tilleadh le athadh
ach chaidh gaisgeil 'san t-sreup. 40

6. Gu bheil móran rinn falbh dhiubh
a Ghàidhealtachd Alba;
b'iad taghadh ar n-armailt
 's a dhearbh e 'nan euchd.
Ar nàimhdean bu gharga 45
gun chuir iad gu farbhas;
chaidh an sgapadh mar mheanbh-spréidh
 feadh gharbhlach an t-sléibh'.
7. Ach thoir beannachd gom' mhàthair
's do luchd-eòlais 's dom' chàirdean, 50
's dèan inns' dhaibh gur slàn mi
 gad is ànrach mo cheum,
gun till mi rithist sàbhailt'
nuair théid crìoch air na blàran,
's a bhios sìth dhuinn air fhàgail 55
 's do gach àl thig 'nar déidh.



Plate XXVI: Iain MacNeacail in Swansea just before being posted overseas during World War II.

(Collection of Màiri and Iseabail NicNeacail)

Translation:

Tonight how restless my sleeping

1. *Tonight how restless my sleep,
wet, cold is my bed
and me stretched out without shelter
on a field of France.
Every danger and peril 5
from which I escape
will be in my memory forever
as long as there is sense in my head.*
2. *A thousand curses to Germany 10
which awakened the war with envy
that we will not forget
without being bitter to them according[ly]
because of the thousands who were killed
of our bravest youth
and towns that were picturesque 15
[that] were shattered asunder.*
3. *Hostilities were begun
[with their] moving toward Poland
in hope that they would get possession
of the whole of Europe. 20
Every kingdom in their territories
they caused [them] to yield,
putting men in irons
and cruelly torturing them.*
4. *O destructive machines are 25
coming at us from the skies without warning
making the earth shake
and breaking [it] apart.
Aircraft like starlings,
through the sky flitting about 30
and the pall of gunsmoke is
putting its darkness on the sun.*
5. *But the saddest of all sights
[is] seeing youth being destroyed
and they wounded on every field, 35
bleeding freely from their wounds.
The plains are coloured
with the spreading blood of the heroes
who would not return with fear
but who went heroically in the strife. 40*

6. *There are many of them who departed
from the Highlands of Scotland;
they were the pick of our army
and [the ones] who proved it in their deeds.* 45
*Our fiercest enemies
they drove [them] headlong;
they were scattered like young cattle
over the rough-ground of the moor.*
7. *But take a blessing to my mother,
and to acquaintances and to my relatives* 50
*and tell them that I am well
though wandering and weather-beaten is my step,
and that I will return again safely
when the battles are ended,
and peace will be left for us* 55
and for every generation that will come after us.

IM: Sin agad e. [There you have it.]

TM: Math dhà-rìreabh. [Very good indeed.] (SA1989.26.A12)

IM: Well what was strange, I sent that away on a record. I composed it in Belgium again;⁹ it landed in Glasgow in bits. They couldn't do nothing about it, they couldn't understand what the Gaelic was you know. (SA1990.104.B5)

Well everything was censored...so the record was broken when they [i.e. the pieces] arrived here,...I put [i.e. sent] them to Glasgow. My sister was there and she got it. Well...her son [William Grant] was a telephone engineer and he got the bits, put them together, bound them with Secotine¹⁰...and they got the result...although there was a 'trak, trak'. Aye, but they got the results, aye. I beat the censor because they couldn't understand the words!... So the best thing [they could do, since] they didn't understand the Gàidhlig, you know, [was to] break it! Well that's what they did! Well I got it through, just the same. [laughs] (SA1989.26.A12)

MacNeacail is now a little unsure of the optimism expressed in the last verse of the song: "Aah, well I don't know what will happen again, if the next World War is coming, if it will".

(SA1990.104.B6) Many island communities have been changed forever by the loss of two generations, especially at times when

⁹ This is an interesting expression which may give some clues as to how Nicolson views composition versus rendition.

¹⁰ A brand name of adhesive glue.

the Highlands were already suffering from depopulation to the industrialized South and overseas and could ill afford further depletion. See Chapter I for more information on how the wars affected places like Skye.

Textual Notes

- (i) RL 1681, copy 2466.¹¹
- (ii) SA1990.104.B5.
- (iii) a) SA1989.26.A12, b) SA1990.104.B5, c) T1182.B3¹² and d) NicGumaraid 1980a:44-45 and e) NicGumaraid 1980b:A11.
- (iv) It is interesting to compare all the other versions with version (i), made in 1951. They are almost identical although separated by thirty and forty years. Clearly the song and the events it recalls remain a very powerful experience. MacNeacail used to sing this song at local céilidhs where it became quite well known. Perhaps by virtue of frequent performance it has been more firmly fixed in MacNeacail's mind than some other songs.

Line 4: "an Fhraing" in some versions.

Line 10: i.e. "envious of others' territory".

Line 11: i.e. "lest we forget".

Line 14: "de", lit.

¹¹ The RL recordings were made in the early days of the school by fieldworkers and technicians who transported direct-to-disk machines with them all over Scotland. The four songs recorded by An Sgiobair in 1950 were made by Derick Thomson. The RL number indicates the original disk accession number and the copy number that of the back-up recording made shortly after the original.

¹² T numbers refer to tapes in the School of Scottish Studies Place-name archive.

Line 16: MacNeacail sometimes sings this as “chaidh a spealg as a chéil”. The meaning is the same.

Line 17: “‘S gun do thòisich ar còmhraig” in (iii:d); (iii:e) sounds like “‘s gun do thòisich ar còmhraig”, “and our strife began”.

Line 31: Literally “a pall from guns”, guns being heavy artillery in this case.

Line 33: “‘S e bròn...” in (iii:a), “It’s the saddest...”. “de”, lit.

Line 41: “Bha móran...” in (iii:a), “It was many...”.

Line 50: “do”, lit.

Line 56: “do”, lit.

XVII. A Mhàiri, a Mhàiri

IM: Oh aye, aye, oh well, I had that for Mary here. Mm...aye that’s it.

TM: When did you do that one?

IM: Oh well, just before, a couple of years before we got married.

TM: After the War then.

IM: Oh aye, oh I was home here anyhow. Mhm. (SA1990.108.A4)
Bheir mi dhut òran a rinn mi dhan a’ bean,...Màiri, mun do phòs mi. [*I will give you a song I made to the wife, Mary, before I married.*] (SA1989.26.A2)

A Mhàiri, a Mhàiri

1. A Mhàiri, a Mhàiri,
tha mo ghràdh ort is bìdh;
tha mo smuaintinn gach là ort
nuair a tha mi leam fhìn.
Tha mo ghaol ort, chan fhàilnig;
chan àichiaidh mi chaoidh
gu bheil t’ìomhaigh is t’àilleachd
gach là tighinn ’nam shuim.

5

Translation:

Oh Mary, oh Mary

1. O Mary, o Mary,
I love you and always will;
my thoughts dwell upon you every day
when I am by myself.
My love is for you, [it] will not abate; 5
I will never deny
that your image and your beauty
comes into my mind every day.
2. What person who sees your face 10
will not agree with my tale?
You have no fault[s] to be enumerated
in nature or in deed.
Your gentle form is like a swan
or like the mountain cotton-grass, 15
an upright figure without coldness,
graceful is your step.
3. Many a one who doesn't know you
asks who you are,
because of the distinction that surrounds you
in beauty and in reputation. 20
Your peaceful face so modest
and you in you nature so gentle—
I will not conceal from others,
that it is you I like best in Uig.
4. But if I were to get as I desire, 25
I would get a right to you for myself.
It's I who would marry you,
oh young maid without defect.
It's you who'd awaken my joy
by being always together with you, 30
the taste of honey on your kisses
from the young mouth of the good story.
5. I will be concluding now,
with the best wish
that I will get you, oh dearest, 35
with pledges of love,
and that you will not turn your back on me,
and you will not refuse me,
since you are my first love;
there will not be another one in your place. 40

6. *O Mary, o Mary,
I love you and always will;
my thoughts dwell upon you every day
when I am by myself.
My love is for you, [it] will not abate;
I will never deny
that your image and your beauty
comes into my mind every day.*

45

Textual notes:

- (i) RL 1680, copy 2465.
(ii) SA1990.108.A4.
(iii) a) SA1989.26.A2, b) T1182.B4, c) NicGumaraid 1980b:B4 and
d) NicGumaraid 1980a:33.
(iv) Peter Stewart maintains that this song was actually made by
the Sgiobair for a young man in Staffin to sing to another
Mary.

Line 5: Sgiobair usually retains the 'n' in "fàilnig" in song; the
normal Skye form in speech is "fàillig" or "fàiling".

Lines 7: "Gum bi t'ìomhaigh..." (i).

Line 17: "do", lit.

Line 24: "as feàrr", lit. Sgiobair often sings a schwa vowel sound
at the end of a verse in order to release a consonant sound
that would otherwise end the line. Many other traditional
singers, in numerous cultures, do the same thing. I have
usually left them out, but include it when a word's
pronunciation and spelling calls for it.

Line 26: i.e. "I would win your hand". "féin", lit.

Line 31: MacNeacail always sings "blas na mil", though the
everyday speech form would be "blas na meala". According to
Dr. John MacInnes, "blas na mil" often occurs, even in dialects

where it would never be found in speech. MacNeacail often draws “mil” out so much that I was tempted to lengthen the vowel in this transcription.

Line 32: “Na deagh sgéil” in (iii:a), “sgeul” is sometimes feminine in Skye. The meaning here is “the young mouth of the kind modest words,” or “the young mouth of the good reputation”.

Line 34: See the first note for line 24.

Line 40: This line is actually more elided than the spelling shows; it is more like “téile ’nad...”.

XVIII. Nach bòidheach Uige

1. Nach bòidheach Uige gur h-e tha cùbhraidh,
le choille dhlùth ghorm fo dhrùchd a’ Chéitein,
le eòin cho sùrdail a’ seinn gun tùchadh
’s gach seòrsa ciùil ac’ air bhàrr nan geugan.
2. ’S tha bheanntan àghmhor mu’n iadh an sàile 5
ri cumail sgàil air gach àird bho séid gaoth.
Tha fiamhan gràsail ri geamhradh gearrt’ ann
tha gach lus a’ fàs ann ri blàs na gréine.
3. Gu bileach snuadh-mhor gach glac is bruachag 10
le neòinein ghuanach ’san tuar cho èibhinn.
Ann an cois gach fuaran tha’m biolair uaine
’s tha bada luachrach ri bruach gach féithe.
4. Tha dealbh a thràghad mar lorg a’ chapuill;
tha’n cuan gu sàmhach cur àilleachd féin air. 15
Gach allt gu siubhlach a’ ruith an cùrsa
’n teis-meadhoin ùrlar a’ dol ’na chéile.
5. Tha chreagan uaibhreach mar bhalla suas ris
ri freagairt nuallan nan tonnan beucach;
thaobh obair nàdair chan fhaicear àicheadh
gur àit’ as àille ’sa chruinne-ché e. 20
6. Tha’n sluagh tha tàmh ann gu h-iocdmhor càirdeil,
ri nochdadh bàidh ann an gràdh da chéile.
Cha sgeul air thuairmeis atà mi luaidh air;
bidh eachdraidh buan fad bhios buar air sléibhtean.

Translation:

Isn't Uig beautiful

1. *Isn't Uig beautiful, it is fragrant,
with its dense verdant greenwood under the May dew,
with birds so spirited singing without hoarseness,
and they have every sort of music atop the branches.*
2. *And its glorious mountains, which the sea encircles, 5
keep everyplace sheltered, whatever direction the wind blows
from.
There's a delicate touch of the sun during bitter winter,
every plant is growing there with the heat of the sun.*
3. *How beautifully verdant every hollow and little bank 10
with nodding daisies so delightful in their hue.
At the foot of every spring are the green cresses
and tufts of rushes are on the bank of every channel.*
4. *The shape of its seashore is like the footstep of the mare;
the sea is quietly putting its own beauty on it.
Every stream wandering, running their course 15
going together in the very middle of the valley floor.*
5. *Its proud rocks are like a wall up against it
to answer the bellowing of the roaring waves;
regarding works of nature, [you] will not see the like 20
it is the most beautiful place in creation.*
6. *The people who are living there are compassionately tender,
revealing kindness in love for each other.
This is no unfounded tale that I am relating about it;
its fame will live as long as cattle are on the moorland.*

Textual notes:

- (i) RL 1680, copy 2465.
- (ii) SA1992.63.1.
- (iii) a) SA1992.63.1, b) Bennett 1950, c) NicGumaraid 1980a:29, d)
NicGumaraid 1980b:A1 and e) ASUS.B1.

Line 1: The Sgiobair usually does not sing the expected aspiration ("gur h-e"), but in this case he clearly does. It implies a more formal register here.

- Line 3: i.e. "sweetly". (iii:c) has "tùchaid" here, the meaning is the same.
- Line 8: "blàs" is the more historically correct spelling of "blàths" (Dr. J. MacInnis).
- Line 11: "ta'm biolair..." in (i) and (iii:a), lit.
- Line 14: i.e. "adding its own beauty to it".
- Line 16: (iii:b) has "a' tighinn 'na chéile" here, meaning "coming together".
- Line 19: More literally "denial cannot be seen".
- Line 21: "Tha sluagh..." (iii:a).
- Line 22: "da", lit.
- Line 23: "atà", lit.

XIX. 'Illean, na biodh oirbhse smalan!

- IM: O shiorruidh! [*Oh eternity!*]
- TM: Now what was this one all about, *'Illean, na biodh oirbhse smalan.*
- IM: Aye aye, going to Portree, aye, [to] take a dram...there.... Well, at that time, you know, there was no pubs in Uig then, and if you went up, you went in with some friends and all that....
- TM: If you went to a cattle sale.
- IM: Aye, then you would come and maybe you got...a bus [home] or something like that when you would come home, you know. Och, the rumours went about, "Oh they were up in Portree and they got drunk last night" and all that, you know. Well, it was a good subject to make a song on then.... And that's how I [did it]. (SA1990.105.B4)

'Illean, na biodh oirbhse smalan

- [séisd] 'Illean, na biodh oirbhse smalan,
idir na biodh oirbhse gruaim,
mas e ni gun gabh sinn drama,
's ann uair àinneamh théid sinn suas.

- | | | |
|----|--|----|
| 1. | Tha gach cailleach a's an àite
ga ar càineadh feadh na tìr
bho na ghabh sinn smùid an ànraidh,
latha a bha sinn am Port Rìgh. | 5 |
| 2. | Bidh gach ministear 'san dùthaich
bhon a' chùbaid 'g radha ruinn
nach e balaich òg' Ùige
bhrist an cliù an arm a' Rìgh. | 10 |
| 3. | Their gach bodach a's an àite
gu bheil a' Sàtan air ar cùl,
gu bheil sinn 'nar n-adhbhar nàire,
mar a [?]thachair sinn air cùrs'. | 15 |
| 4. | Sibhse 's motha nì do bhòileich,
là ur n-òig bu ghòrach sibh.
Bheil cuimhn' agaibh air bhith 'sna claisean
ga ur dalladh leis a' <i>sprea</i> . | 20 |
| 5. | 'S ann their cuid gu bheil sin cragte,
's dòch' nach eil ad fada ceàrr,
na faiceadh iad na chunnaic sinne,
am biodh iad idir dad na b'fheàrr? | |
| 6. | Bheirinn comhairl' air gach cailleach,
air gach bodach a's an àit',
gun iad bhith cruaidh air na balaich
théid cho daingeann as gach càs. | 25 |

Translation:

Lads, do not be gloomy

[chorus] *O lads, do not be gloomy,
do not be at all sullen,
if it be that we take a dram
it's a rare time we go up [for a drink].*

- | | | |
|----|---|----|
| 1. | <i>Every old woman in the place
is slandering us throughout the land
because we got riotously drunk
one day that we were in Portree.</i> | 5 |
| 2. | <i>Every minister in the country will be
saying to us from the pulpit
isn't it the young lads of Uig
who lost their character in the service of the King.</i> | 10 |

3. *Every old man in the place will say
that Satan is behind us,
that we are a cause of disgrace
as we happened on [our sinful] course.* 15
4. *Most of you will do your haranguing
[about] the day you were foolish, our young men.
Do you remember being in the ditches
blinded by the spree.* 20
5. *Some will say that we are crazy,
maybe they are not far wrong,
if they could see what we saw,
would they be any better at all?*
6. *I would give advice to every old woman
[and] to every old man in the place,
that they be hard on every boy,
who go so bravely into every predicament.* 25

Textual notes:

- (i) SA1989.28.B4.
- (ii) SA1990.105.B4.
- (iii) No other renditions.

Lines 1-4: This quatrain is used as a chorus after each verse.

Lines 3-4: i.e. "if the problem is that we drink, it's not as if we do it often".

Lines 9-12: I have pieced together this verse from several slightly different versions in Sgr. MacNeacail also gave me an alternate first line for the verse.

IM: Well, there was another verse in it, you know, "Gu bheil ceisteir feadh na dùthcha," all the preachers, you know, feadh na dùthcha, "anns a' chùbaid ag radha ruinn, nach e balaich òg Uige bhrìst an cliù an arm a' Rìgh". [laughs] I put that in it!... As the minister was saying, you know, [they] lost their character in the service of the King. ...They were saying that too.

But that was only my own imagination, but that she [i.e. the 'cailleach' in verse one] was there saying it. "Bidh gach ministear 'san dùthaich bho'n a' chùbaid, 'g radha ruinn from the pulpit, saying to us, our "balaich òg Uige, bhrìst an cliù an arm a' Rìgh". [laughs] Aye. Aye, aye, that's it.

TM: So that was another verse you sometimes sang with that?

IM: Aye, well there was that, well it could be there in between, between...the bodach and the cailleach in here anyhow, you know [i.e. between verse one and three].... Aye. Aye, aye. (Sgr)

Line 14: i.e. "our inspiration".

Line 27: What the Sgiobair actually sings here is "...air gach balaich," a slip between "gach balach" and "na balaich". In Sgr, he corrected the line to read as it stands.

Line 28: This sounds like "their" on the tape; the Sgiobair's often indistinct palatal sounds have lead to a this pronunciation of "theid".

XX. Tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt

TM: Now, *Òran a' Veto*.

IM: Oh aye!

TM: That was before there were any pubs in Uig?...

IM: Aye, aye, well just they were starting it. They were out...to get the veto, you know.

IAM:¹³ There was pubs in it, but they were trying to do away with it.

TM: Oh I see,...there already were pubs.

IM: They didn't get it sanctioned at all. It was by...the veto that was going to...sanction it [i.e. proscribe licensed pubs and close the ones already there]. But they had them just start in it. "Tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt" [~~reads the song~~] Sunday will no be with them, sin agad e. [*there you have it.*] (SA1990.108.A3)

Tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt

1. Tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt,
tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt,
'g iarraidh tighean òil an Uige
nì a spùilleadh is an creachadh.

[séisd] Tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt.

5

¹³ These initials are for one of an Sgiobair's sons, Iain Aonghas.

2. Gu bheil corr is lethcheud bliadhna
bha iad dùinte 's cha robh deur ann.
'S adhbhar smaoin cho beag 's tha chiall
aig an iarmaid tha 'ga thagradh.
3. 'S iomadh mollachd a tha lùb ris, 10
chì iad sin ann an geàrr-ùine.
Dh'inns' am ministear bho'n chùbaid
gach mi-chliù aig mac na braiche.
4. Ge bè dh'òlas dhen an druaid ad 15
gos am bi an ceann 'na thuaineal,
chan eil fàbhar bàidh na truas riuth'
nuair thig àm go gluasad dhachaidh.
5. Cuid 'na sìneadh dhiubh 's na cùiltean,
cuid 'nan cadal cha ghabh dùsgadh
'S ann a dh'fheumas tu an tionndadh 20
feuch faic thu a bheil annt' an anail.
6. Nuair a thig orr' oidhche h-Aoine,
an cuid stòrais théid a sgaoileadh;
bidh ad 'gan dalladh leis an daoraich;
th'iad 'ga slaodadh anns na claisean. 25
7. Ged a dh'innsinn pàirt de bhuadhan,
cha bhithinn buileach a' toirt fuath dha;
nam b'e 's gun gabht' e ann a' stuamachd,
cha bhithinn cho cruaidh 'ga chasaid.
8. 'S a' luchd-cuairt a thig do'n àite 30
cha bhi 'n teistneas air mar b'àist daibh,
faicinn miasdadh na deoch làidir
mar chaidh an t-Sàbaid chur á fasan.

Translation:

Young people have acted ruinously

1. *Young people have acted ruinously,
young people have acted ruinously,
seeking drinking houses in Uig
that will spoil and ruin them.*
[chorus] *Young people have acted ruinously.* 5
2. *For more than fifty years
they were closed and there wasn't a drop.
It is food for thought how little sense is
in the paltry few who are demanding it.*

3. *Many's the curse that is involved with it,* 10
they will see that in a short time.
The minister reported from the pulpit
every infamy that the son of malt [i.e. whisky] has.
4. *Whatever they drink of yon dregs*
until their head is spinning, 15
there is no favour of mercy or pity for them
when the time for moving home comes.
5. *Some of them stetched out in the corners,*
some sleeping cannot be wakened.
You'll need to turn them [over] 20
to try to see if there is a breath in them.
6. *When Friday night hits them,*
all their money will be dispersed;
they will be blind drunk;
it will trail them in the ditches. 25
7. *Though I would recount some of its 'virtues',*
I wouldn't be taking a total aversion to it;
if it were taken in moderation,
I wouldn't be accusing it so firmly.
8. *And the travellers who come to the place,* 30
their report of it will not be as it used to be,
seeing the mischief of strong drink
and how the Sabbath has been put out of fashion.

Textual notes:

(i) a) SA1990.104.A6 and b) NicGumaraid 1980a:32.

(ii) SA1990.108.A3.

(iii) a) SA1992.64.1 and b) Montgomery b:A3.

Line 5: The chorus is sung after every verse.

Line 10: One would expect "a lùib ris".

Line 19: This line may also imply "when judgement day comes,"
the time for moving to our final resting place.

Lines 22-25: This verse comes from (Sgr) and is only in (iii:a).

"Anns na...", lit.

Lines 26-29: “de” in l. 26, lit. This verse reflects the fact that “uisge beatha” is literally “the water of life”. As such it has become central to numerous rituals in the cycle of life (see Bennett 1992). The Sgiobair does not disapprove of its use in these rituals, nor as an essential part of proper hospitality.

Line 30: “do”, lit.

XXI. Lìon a-mach go bàrr na cuachan

IM: Mm. Oh aye, that’s the one I made for Mrs. Ferguson who was up here [in the big house at Cuidreach].

TM: Ah hah. Did she have any Gàidhlig?

IM: Yes, plenty, but she would never speak it. But she would say, “I hate these English songs. I prefer the Gàidhlig every time.”... She had a gramophone and she used to give a party every New Year here, but...the party stopped at last, you know, and she says, “I’ve been rather poor, getting poor now,” she says, “I can’t afford to give it”. I think they were dancing and they were breaking the...flax [in her carpets], you know dancing and all that...and she told them to put on soft boots. That was enough, you know, to tell them what they were doing, and she stopped it.

But I, myself and another, John Cameron (she was a Cameron herself to name, before she got married) and a Dugald MacLean, she would take us over at New Year, or three days after that or before that, to give us our New Year there and we’d be there till twelve o’clock and [she’d be] giving us drams and all that. That was the finish of us then [i.e. the end of the parties there].
(SA1990.106.A4)

Lìon a-mach go bàrr na cuachan

1. Lìon a-mach go bàrr na cuachan!
Òlaidh sinn deoch-slàint’ an uasail:
Bean na Cuidrich a chuir uail oirnn,
's lìonmhór uair nach gabh dhuinn cainnt.
2. 'S i 'n fhine Chamshronach gun mhòrchuis
cùl-taic na Gàidhealtachd 'sa chòmhraig
thug na naimhdean uil' go stòl
a dh'aindeoin seòl 's na bhuaile ad lann.

5

3. Thug i 'm bliadhn' dhuinn cuirm bha sònraicht',
bha do shòlas de gach seòrs' ann: 10
cluich 's a' dannsa, gabhail òran,
's cha robh sòradh ann dhe'n dram.
4. Bha stuth Thalasgair a b'fheàrr ann
'n tìr ar dùthchannan chaidh àrcadh. 15
Fhuair sinn dheth gu robh sinn sàsaicht'
cha deach ar tàlant leis a chall.
5. 'S e deoch cho sèimh 's cho blasd' 's a dh'òladh:
chuireadh sogan air an òigridh,
bheireadh seann duine go còmhradh 20
gad a bhiodh a threòir car fann.
6. Cha robh mìothlachd measg a' chòmhlainn,
'n cridhe mireadh 's iad cho stòlda,
h-uile nì cho math an òrdugh,
mar a dh'òrdaich i gun mheang.
7. Bheir sinn taing dhi anns a' Ghàidhlig, 25
h-uile beannachd bhith 'na fàrdaich,
gach bliadhna ùr a bhith mar bhà sinn,
is an àireamh dhinn bhith ann.
8. Lion a-mach gu bàrr na cuachan,
òlaidh sinn deoch-slàint' an uasail: 30
Bean na Cuidrich a chuir uail oirnn,
's lìonmhór uair nach gabh dhuinn cainnt.

Translation:

Fill up the quaichs to the top

1. *Fill up the quaichs to the top!*
We will drink the health of the noble one:
the woman of Cuidreach [House] who made us proud
more times than we can say.
2. *The unassuming Cameron clan is* 5
the support of the Highlands in the struggle
[that] brought the enemies all to order
whatever way they wielded a blade.
3. *She brought the year [in] for us [with] a special feast,*
there was good cheer of every kind there: 10
playing and dancing, singing songs
and there was no grudging of drams.

4. *The best Talisker stuff was there
in the district of our lands it was corked.
We drank of it until we were satisfied
[but] we didn't lose our senses from it.* 15
5. *It's a drink as gentle and as flavourful as has [ever] been drunk:
that would put the youths in good humour,
[and] that would make an old man [take] to conversing,
even if his strength were a bit weak.* 20
6. *There was no discord in the company
their heart[s] playful and they so well behaved,
every thing so well in order,
faultlessly as she decreed.*
7. *We will give thanks to her in Gaelic:
every blessing be in her home,
every New Year be [with us] like we were [that year]
and the [same] number of us be there.* 25
8. *Fill up the quaichs to the top!
We will drink the health of the noble one:
the woman of Cuidreach [House] who made us proud
more times than we can say.* 30

Textual notes:

- (i) SA1989.28.A15.
(ii) SA1990.106.A4.
(iii) No other renditions.

Line 4: More literally, "so many times that we cannot give tongue [to them]". This phrase sounds rather like "...gabh ruinn cainn' " on (i). I feel justified in transcribing it "dhuinn," as the Sgiobair did not question it in (Sgr) and even provided the translation. As noted elsewhere, he also has a tendency towards indistinct palatal sounds. The dental at the end of "cainnt" is very heavily elided.

Line 5-8: (i) MacNeacail remembered this verse after he had sung the rest of the song saying, "O dhìochuimhnich mi...fear

a's an toiseach". [Oh, I forgot one at the beginning.] On the basis of this and from internal evidence, I place it here after the first reference to Mrs. Ferguson. After adding this verse, he repeated the first verse to re-close the song. I have only repeated it once, at the end.

Line 8: In other words, "no matter how [hard] they fought". This probably refers to the valiant record of the Clan Cameron in general, rather than to any particular event.

Line 11: i.e. "sporting and dancing...".

Line 13: i.e. "whisky".

Line 14: i.e. "it was bottled in Skye".

XXIII. Tha mealladh mór am measg an t-sluaigh

One day, after singing several other songs, An Sgiobair mentioned the travelling evangelists of the 1950s:

It was pilgrims that were going about here and they were converting everybody.... And you know...the conversion would last about a couple of months and that's about all.... And of course I composed this—there was a fellow in Uig too who was composing a thing and he was praising them and so I got it the other way about. But I didn't refer [to] them personally unless they were that.... (SA1986.85.A5)

TM: Cò bha...na *pilgrims* ?

IN: Ad falbh preaching the gospel and they were converting people here and there, everywhere....

TM: Cuin?

IN: Och well...fichead bliadhna. Tha ad ann fhathast, feadhainn dhiubh; tha iad a timchioll uaireannan. Chan eil daoine a' dol gan éisdeachd mar a chleachd ad sam bith idir.... O 's dòcha *convertadh* ad aon dusan, fad na seachdainn bha iad a' searmonachadh; cha bhiodh iad mìos air falbh air a bha na daoine

cho miosa riutha fhéin,¹⁴ agus sin agad an t-òran a bh'amasa.¹⁵
(SA1989.27.B11)

[TM: *Who were the pilgrims?*

IM: *They [were] going...*

TM: *When?*

IM: *Och well...twenty years [ago]. They are there still, some of them; they are around sometimes. People aren't going to listen to them as they used to at all. Oh, perhaps they would convert a dozen, all week they were preaching; they wouldn't be away for a month when the people would be as bad as themselves, and that's the song I had.]*

TM: *Do you remember that one?*

IM: *Oh yes, I did remember it right enough...*

But the converted person only lasted a couple of years [laughs]. That's how I got at them, I [made] this, you know. Mm.

TM: *And they went back to their old ways.*

IM: *Aye, the old way. But they were coming here and oh, converting people here and there. And the people were like themselves, like you here, they were just the same!... It didn't come from the right spirit, you know. Mhmhmm [laughs],... so that's how I composed this, you know, for them, aye.*

TM: *[Would you call] Macrae was one of them...Kenneth Macrae?*

IM: *Oh-h no.*

TM: *No.*

IM: *No, no, he was a real, he was a real.*

TM: *A real Christian.*

IM: *Oh a genuine one, oh yes.¹⁶ Oh yes. But he didn't like them, just the same. Now what is the man that's American there, is he MacQueen?...*

TM: *Billy Graham, you mean?*

IM: *Billy Graham, aye! Aye, aye, he's a great preacher too, is he? He comes to Inverness at times.*

¹⁴ i.e. "as they were before" or possibly "as the pilgrims themselves".

¹⁵ A common reduction of "a bh'agamsa" with an added intrusive vowel.

¹⁶ See *An Eagalsis Shaor an Steòrnabhaigh* (XXIV) for details about Rev. Kenneth Macrae.

- TM: He's coming to Glasgow next week I think.
- IM: Is he? Oh he's a great evangelist [i.e. evangelist] him. Mm. He's well known, you know.
- TM: Was he coming to Scotland in the fifties?
- IM: Oh yes, he was here in Inverness some time, years ago, mhm. I think he had quite a crowd with him.... I never heard him, but I heard people going there just to hear him.
- TM: When was this that the pilgrims were coming around?
- IM: Oh well, they're coming every year practically. And there's these Jehovah's Witnesses too, they're just the same, oh. And they come here to your door and trying, [they] open the bible and take a verse out of here and there and trying to argue with you, you know. Oh I never have time for them at all, no. [laughs]
(SA1990.106.B9)

Tha mealladh mór am measg an t-sluaigh

1. Tha mealladh mór am measg an t-sluaigh
le luchd teagaisg thruagh gun éifeachd
tha dèanamh uaille am briathran fuar
toirt gràdh do dhuais na h-eucoir;
le'm beachdan truailt' a tha gun bhuaidh 5
toirt sluagh a-mach 's an Èipheit
bhith dèanamh bàthadh 's a' Mhuir Ruaidh
le anma truagh bheir géill dhaibh.
2. Théid iad do'n chùbaid air bheag lùths — 10
gun chùram na gun ghràs annt',
ach briathran ciùin a tha gun sùgh
tha ruith air cùrsa nàdair;
ad fhéin an dùil gu faigh ad cliù
bho'n chuid bheir rùn is àit' dhaibh,
gun aca fhéin ach cridhe cruaidh 15
le spiorad suain a' tàmh air.
3. Ged a leughas iad am Biobull,
mìnichidh mar 's àill' leo'.
Nì iad an t-slighe dhut cho dìreach
le bhith dol clì 'san àithnthe. 20
Cha doir iad géill do dh'fhocal Dhè:
's e 'm beachdan fhéin as feàrr leotha;
ma chreideas tu bhuap' brìgh na sgeul,
gun dèan iad fhéin do thèarnadh.

4. Tha iad coltach ris na h-òighean 25
 aig robh na lòchrain thràighte
 dol an coinneamh an fhir nuadh-phòsd'
 le còt' a' cur na sgàil orra.
 Ach chuirear ad taobh a-muigh na còmhla,
 mar gheibh an còrr dhe'n àireamh, 30
 mur bi aca càil de thròcair,
 na an creideamh beò bh'aig Àbram.
5. Le 'n inntinn fheòlmhor tha ad sàsaicht'
 's iad a-ghnàth gun chùram,
 gun gheilt, gun sgàth orr' roimh'n bhàs 35
 a tà gach là tighinn dlùth dhaibh.
 'S ann their ad fhéin gu bheil ad sàbhailt'
 o'n tha an coguis mùchte;
 cha d'fhuair 'ad ath-bhreith troimh ghràs
 a bheireadh càil go ùmhlachd. 40
6. Ged fhuair iad gibht' is tàlant cinn,
 gu bheil ad gun chridh' gun eòlas
 air an fhìrinn a tha sgrìobhte
 a bhios 'na dhìteadh mór dhaibh.
 Ma's e 's nach creid ad anns a' là 45
 man déid grian nan gràs fo sgòth orra,
 gum bi iad dùinte 'mach 's an Àros
 tha uile làn de shòlas.
7. Gu bheil an Fhìrinn fhéin ag inns'
 roimh'n chrìch bi iomadh àmhghair, 50
 aig ar dorsan th'e a' bualadh;
 cha tuig an sluagh gun ghràs e
 gum bi na daoine taghte fhéin
 dol iomadh ceum air Àros,
 ach tuigidh iad roimh cheann na réis 55
 gur e fuil na réit' bheir slàinte.

Translation:

A great deception is among the people

1. *The people are greatly deceived
 by ineffectual, poor preachers
 who are boasting in cold words
 giving love to the reward of what is not right.
 With their corrupted opinions that are without success, 5
 [they are] bringing people out of Egypt
 to make a drowning in the Red Sea
 with [the] pitiful soul[s] who will succumb to them.*

2. They will go to the pulpit with little strength—
 without 'concern' and without grace in them, 10
 only gentle words that are without substance
 that are running in the 'natural' course;
 they themselves hope that they will get renown
 from those who will give regard and status to them,
 without anything themselves but a hard heart 15
 with a dormant spirit dwelling in it.
3. Although they read the Bible,
 they interpret as they wish.
 They will make the way [to salvation] so direct for you
 by going wrong in the commandment. 20
 They will not obey the word of God;
 it is their own opinions they prefer,
 if you believe the substance of the tale from them,
 that they themselves will save you.
4. They are like the [foolish] virgins 25
 who had the half-empty lamps
 going to meet the the bridegroom
 with a coat shading them.
 But they will be put outside the gate [of Heaven]
 like the rest of their number, 30
 unless they have an iota of mercy,
 or the living faith that Abraham had.
5. With their carnal minds they are satisfied
 and they [are] ever without 'concern'
 without fear [or] dread of death 35
 that is coming near them every day.
 They themselves will say that they are saved
 because their conscience is smothered;
 they did not get rebirth through grace
 that could bring anything to obedience [to God]. 40
6. Although they got a gift and mental powers,
 they are without heart and without knowledge
 of the truth that is written [in the Bible]
 which will be a great condemnation for them.
 If it is the case that they do not believe it during the day 45
 before the sun of graces goes under a cloud for them,
 they will be shut out from the House [of God]
 that is totally full of solace.

7. *The Bible itself is telling*
[that] before the end there will be many afflictions, 50
at our doors it is beating;
the people without grace will not understand it,
that only the elect will be
going many steps towards [the] House,
but they will understand before the end of the race 55
that it is the blood of atonement that will bring salvation.

TM: That's a good one, I like this one.

IM: Do you? Oh well, I don't know. But...if you were right, it wasn't interfering with you, but if you weren't, that's to your condemnation [i.e. to condemn you]. Aye, that's how I took [it, i.e. understood it]; I wasn't making them going to be good when they weren't!... If you're good, it [i.e. the song] doesn't interfere with you, but if you are bad, this [tapping the song text] judges you.
...I mean where there was a real person [i.e. true Christian], he was preaching it right and, well he was alright. But if they were going to convert me and convert you and all that, within a fortnight they were back to their old ways. Well that's no conversion at all!

TM: Well their emphasis was on converting you right then.

IM: Aye that was it.

TM: As quick as they could.

IM: Aye that's [it]! Aye and they did it. You know, it wasn't left to God or grace to come to do it then. It's them that was doing it see. Well, if they were not that type [i.e. the type to succumb] this didn't affect them, you know what I mean?

TM: So a man like John Stewart wouldn't have been affected.

IM: Oh no! No, I wouldn't think so. He was a...quite a natural man, you know, in the sense of being a true worshipper. Mhm. But as long as they got praise for what they said and all that, and people believed they were so good. But still there was nothing in them. [Just] their own ways, mhm. That's it then. (SA1990.107.A1)

Textual notes:

- (i) SA1986.85.A5.
- (ii) SA1990.106.B9 and SA1990.107.A1.
- (iii) a) SA1992.65.1 and b) SA1989.28.A14.

(iv) Thanks to Dr. Donald Meek and Professor William Gillies of the Department of Celtic and Dr. John MacInnes, of the School of Scottish Studies for extra assistance with the Biblical language of this song.

Line 4: "Eucoir" has connotations of sinful behavior as well.

Line 5: "le beachdan..." in (Sgr). The translation is the same, but without the possessive. "Gun bhuidh", i.e. "without the spiritual power to convert" a person.

Lines 5-8: Without regard for Gaelic syntax or the lining of the original, this would read: "With their corrupted ineffectual opinions [they are] bringing people with pitiful souls (who will succumb to them) out of Egypt to drown in the Red Sea".

Line 9: "No strength, as you would say. They're weak...to go to the pulpit, you're weak going there in some way.... They were deficient in that, you know,...that's 'gun lùths', that's without strength or energy." (IM)

Line 10: As Dr. John MacInnes points, 'concern' is a Puritan technical term (and older: *cura pastoralis*), referring to a Christian's care for another's soul as well as one's own.

Line 12: i.e. the course untouched by divine guidance.

Line 13: "'S 'ad féin..." (Sgr).

Line 20: i.e. "by misinterpreting the commandment". "Bho'n àithnte" in (iii:a), "...from the commandment". I spell "àithnte" as MacNeacail's pronunciation requires.

Line 23-24: These false Christians preach that "they can save you if you believe what *they* say," (Sgr) whereas presbyterian salvation comes only from above.

Lines 25-28: This quatrain draws on the Tiomnadh Nuadh, Mata XXV:1-13 [*New Testament, Matthew XXV:1-13*] in which the foolish virgins were deceived by the brightness of the sun into thinking that they would not need their lamps. They shaded their eyes from the sun with their coats during the day, but were caught unprepared when their husband arrived in darkness. Here the Sgiobair likens those who take a short term view of salvation to the foolishness of the virgins who had not prepared themselves for a long wait.

Line 31: This line is from Sgr. (i) has “càil a thròcair”.

Line 34: See line 10n.

Line 36: “tà”, lit.

Line 37-38: i.e. “They will say for themselves, since their consciences are suppressed, that they are saved”.

Line 42: This line sounds like “gu bheil an cridh’ gun eòlas” in (i), meaning “their heart is without knowledge”, but the *sgrùdadh* version works rather well, providing the downbeat in singing is placed firmly on the first syllable of “iad”.

Line 45: “...ann an tràth” in (iii:a), meaning “...in time”.

Line 47: i.e. “They’ll be closed up out” (IM) of eternal bliss and happiness.

Line 48: i.e. “contentment”.

Line 51-52: “People without grace will not understand it, you know, though it’s knocking at the door, see?” (IM)

Line 53: ‘The Select’ in the biblical sense.

Line 56: “The blood will give salvation, aye. Aye, that’s it.” (IM)

XXIV. An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh

The Reverend Kenneth Macrae [1883-1964] was born in Dingwall and became a Free Church minister, serving in turn Lochgilphead, Kilmuir in north Skye and finally Stornoway, Isle of Lewis (1931-64) (Thomson 1983:191). His diary was published posthumously (Murray 1980). Macrae was always

IM: preaching the gospel, and they were converting people here and there, every-where.¹⁷... Sin agad an t-òran a rinn mise.... O 's e duine math a bha esan, ceart gu leòr. [*That's the song I made...Oh, he was a good man, right enough.*] (SA1989.27.B11)

He is still well remembered throughout the Western Isles as a forthright leader and preacher. Whole families of children, mostly born in the nineteen-twenties, were baptised by him during his tenure in Skye, so it is no surprise that many continued to follow his career after his move to Stornoway in 1931. His congregations were so large that they appeared "a sea of black," to Glenconon natives Peigi Bennett (née Stiùbhart) and her brother Peter.¹⁸ MacNeacail's biblical diction and tone in this elgàic song indicate his own regard for Macrae's presence and guidance as well as expressing the sense of loss and grief felt by many even today.

IM: Seo earrannan a rinn mi dha'n an Urramach Coinneach Macrath a bha 'na Mhinistear ann an Steòrnabhagh. Bha mi eòlach air nuair a bha mi 'nam bhalach. Nuair a chuala mi gun do chaochail e, bha mi glé iomagaineach timcheall air a' ghnothach a bh'ann agus smaoinich mi gun cuirinn na ceathramhan tha seo ri chéile, mar chlach air a'chàrn. (NicGumaraid 1980b.B2)

¹⁷ The "they" Nicolson refers to here are not the same evangelists castigated in *Tha mealladh mòr am measg an t-sluaigh*. He has a much higher opinion of Macrae and his followers than of the 'pilgrims'.

¹⁸ Interview with Peigi Bennett 3.3.90.

[These are some verses I made to the Reverend Kenneth Macrae who was the Minister in Stornoway. I knew about him when I was a boy. When I heard that he died, I was very distressed about the business and I thought I would put these quatrains together as a stone on the cairn]

An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh

1. Tha 'n Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh
an diugh fo bhròn 's i caoidh
ag ionndrainn aon bu lòchran dhi
bu thredoir dhi ri àm teinn. 5
Th'e nis air a dhol gu Pàrras
gu àros an Aird-Rìgh
far a bheil e aig a' làthaireachd
gu bràth air nach dig claidh.
2. Mhaighstir MhacRath bidh ionndrainn ort 10
mar cheannard-iùil ar slòigh
's tu shéideadh dhuinn an trùmpaid
nuair bhiodh cùisean dol far dòigh.
Do theagasg a bha cho drùidhteach
gu bhith dùsgadh sean is òg 15
bha móran air an tionndadh leat
gu slighe dh'ionnsaigh Glòir.
3. Bu shaothaireach anns an fhionlios thu 20
gach bliadhna bha thu 'san fheadil
cur aoladh ma na friamhan
bha crìonadh 's ad gun deò.
Thu tagradh gum biodh mìorbhail
bho Chrìosda 'gan toirt beò.
Bha coimhlionadh air t'iaratas,
tha iarmaid dhiubh an Glòir.
4. Tha cuid eil' air fhàgail dhiubh 25
tha cràiteach as do dhéidh.
Tha dòchas math troimh Ghràs aca
gun d'fhuair iad fàbhar Dhé,
gu faic iad anns an là sin thu 30
nuair ghabhar ris an treud,
nuair nach sgar am bàs sibh
gu bràth o aon a chéil'.

5. Thor leam gur mór de ghàirdeachas
ann an Tìr Chanaain shuas.
Tha do chomunn ris na fàidhean 35
ma'n tric a bha thu luaidh.
Chan eil roinn na pàirtean ann
gach aon toirt gràdh bith-bhuan
do'n Tì bu charraig shàbhailt' dhuit
'san fhàsach rè do chuairt. 40
6. Bidh cuimhne mar a' Fìrean ort
leis an linn a thig 'nar déidh,
gum b'e Israilach da-rìru thu
bha gluas'd an slighe Dhé.
Gur mór a bhios an dìteadh 45
do nach d'chreid bhuaigh brìgh na sgéil
bu chòir bhith dhuinn nas prìseile
na nì 'sa chruinne-ché.

Translation:

The Free Church in Stornoway

1. *The Free Church in Stornoway is
today and she mourning,
missing one who was a [guiding] light for it
and who was a strength for it in time of difficulty
He has now gone to Paradise 5
to the abode of the High King
where he is in the presence
upon which no sorrow will ever come.*
2. *Minister Macrae you will be missed
as a guiding pillar of our people 10
you used to sound the trumpet for us
when matters were getting out of order.
And your teaching was so penetrating
with a view to be waking young and old,
many were turned by you 15
[on]to the road towards Glory.*
3. *You laboured in the vineyard
every year you were alive,
putting manure about the roots
that were withering and lifeless. 20
You [were] pleading that there would be a miracle
from Christ giving them life.
It was fulfilled according to your wishes,
some of them are in Glory.*

4. *Another portion of them are left* 25
who are in wracked [with sorrow] after you.
They have high hopes through Grace
that they [have] found the favour of God,
that they will see you on that day
when acknowledgement will be given to the flock 30
[and] when death will not separate you
ever from one another.
5. *I think how great your joy*
in the Land of Canaan above.
Your fellowship is with the prophets 35
about whom you frequently spoke.
There is no division or confederacy there,
each one giving love eternal
to the One who was a rock of salvation for you
in the wilderness during your life. 40
6. *You will be remembered as a True [Christian]*
by the generation that will follow us,
that you were a true Israelite
who was moving in the path of God.
How great will be their condemnation of those 45
who did not believe from you the substance of the tale
which ought to be more precious to us
than anything in the universe.

IM: Aye Macrae, oh well yes, I suppose that was equal, as good one [as] I ever composed.... I knew him well in his day, but he was very tough on the Sabbath, strict and all that.... Oh he was dead on it.... (SA1990.105.A4)

I think Macrae's song was more truthful than any of them, you know. You were only just putting him as he was, explaining how he was....

TM: Well everybody remembers him too.

IM: Yes, they did at the time, aye. Yes and still do too. I see there's commentary on the subjects he has yet in the pulpit, aye. Well he's a good twenty-five years dead now anyhow. But [in the song] I refer to his saying what he said at one time. He was very popular that way, and what was very strange, it was Gàidhlig he learnt and he was preaching from it.

TM: Really?

IM: Aye aye, but to have in everyday conversation he wasn't very accurate at all.... To preach, he was as perfect in it, but...speaking about cattle and crofting and all that, he would be lost.

- TM: So he would have to work on his sermon to get it just right.
- IM: Oh yes, he would have, but his sermon morning and night in Gàidhlig was perfect, but if he was in the ordinary conversation on everydays he was lost! Well that is strange.... He was that because he came here and he was just learning the Gàidhlig when he came, but they took him on all right and he was a good preacher right enough and very attractive and he had a lot of communicants too.... Oh I believe he was a God fearing man, if there ever was one, he was.
- TM: Peigi and Peter [Stewart] were describing his communions in Stornoway being huge.
- IM: Oh yes. Well that was the biggest [congregation that] was in Scotland, the church he had in Stornoway. Aye. Oh yes, oh he was [there for] forty years there anyhow, or more.¹⁹ Oh yes, he would be.... I don't know, did he retire or not? I never heard of him retiring.
- TM: [I don't think he did, but] he...died in 1964.
- IM: Aye some time like that, but I don't think he retired at all, no.
- TM: And there used to be services here twice a day?...
- IM: Every sunday and fast days, oh yes there would be that, aye. And communion services. Well he always had helpers with him then at the communions, another two along with him. Mhm. Oh he was...very popular everywhere he went. But I don't think he has been in many places but Stornoway and Skye itself in his day.
- TM: I think he was in Lochgilphead for a little while.
- IM: It could be.... He was about twelve years in Kilmuir anyhow. Then...they gave him a call in Stornoway. Well they were saying then he had the biggest congregation in Scotland, in Stornoway.
- TM: How many people, do you know?
- IM: Oh I can't tell you, there must be thousands. It would have been. But that was at the Free Church itself. Aye.
- TM: Peigi was also saying that her whole family was baptized by him....
- IM: Oh they would be, but you had to be very strict before he would baptize you.... Brought up, you know, in the way of the truth and all that, otherwise you won't get it. (SA1990.105.A6)

¹⁹ Thirty-three years actually, see dates above.

Textual notes:

(i) NicGumaraid 1980a:46-47.

(ii) SA1990.106.A4 & 6.

(iii) a) SA1988.64.B2 and b) NicGumaraid 1980b:B2.

Line 10: "That's a one that would direct you on the way,... 'iùil' is a way." (Sgr)

Line 12: i.e. "...out of hand".

Line 17-20: i.e. Macrae was industrious.

Line 24: "iarmaid" is a biblical word meaning a "little remnant".
"An Glòir" is "in Heaven".

Line 26: i.e. "after your passing".

Line 30: "Gabh ris", "acknowledge": again a biblical usage with its basis in the words of Jesus.

Line 41: Literally "*the* true [Christian]", meaning 'the new man', i.e. a converted person. MacNeacail translates it as "a true Christian". (Sgr)

Line 43: Sometimes the Sgiobair uses an older syntax here:
"gum b'Israileach dà-rìreabh thu...".

Line 46: "the best of the interpretation." (IM)

XXV. The news we've heard from Waternish (A song for Johannes Hellinga)

Johannes Hellinga is a Dutch financier who came to Skye in the 1960s. He bought the Waternish Estates from Lord Godfrey MacDonald who was in debt due to the tremendous death duties that accrued on the passing of his father. See Chapter V for more details on how both this song and the next were made.

The news we've heard from Waternish

1. The news we've heard from Waternish
has echoed through the Highlands,
that the noble Dutchman
has bought part of our island.
2. His name is Johnny Hellinga 5
his fame has gone before him;
from all that I have seen and heard,
both young and old extol him.
3. He sailed across from Holland,
with dollars and with guilders, 10
he bought from the MacDonald laird
his land, his stock, his buildings.
4. The crofters now are full of joy,
the laird is on their side now—
he gives them land as they desire 15
no tax, no rent will bind them.
5. From Sgor a' Bhàigh to Geàrraidh,
from Fàsach up to Triumpan,
of land the finest anywhere,
from Hällainn down to Giùbaig. 20
6. Here the crops are heaviest,
the cattle are the finest
and when they go to sale
they're unequaled in the Highlands.
7. When Johnny comes to Triumpan, 25
there will be celebrations;
the taverns will be drained quite dry
as he receives ovations.
8. In Dutch he'll drink a toast to them
and they'll reply in Gaelic 30
and though their drams would be one foot high,
they'll drain them dry in Geàrraidh.
9. I end my song and wish him well,
may peace and joy attend him,
his stay with us be content and long 35
ceud mìle fàilt' we'll send him.

TM: Whatever happened to him anyway?

IM: Och, he's at Staffin there about, he's going about.

TM: Really?...

IM: Well, I think he was last week, a fortnight ago anyhow. But he goes back and forward. he was married and I think he left the wife. He was married to a banker's daughter in Inverness and I think he was here one or twice.... He's quite all right, good English speaker too, och aye and money was no object to him. He gave it [i.e. land] away for five pounds the acre, well the people there took it and they built houses there and sold them for thirty and thirty-five thousand, houses on...plots he gave them. "Why did you," I said, "sell them?"

"Oh I thought I was going to die at that time," he says. "I weren't keeping well." That was his [?]excuse, but I don't know what was [the] idea at all. (SA1990.105.B1)

Textual notes:

(i) SA1986.85.A2.

(ii) SA1990.105.B2.

(iii) a) SA1992.64.5 and b) Shapiro 1985.

(iv) More background information is on SA1989.26.A8-9.

Line 3: Sometimes, the Sgiobair sings "that the noble Dutchman, Hellinga" thus filling out the metre. Otherwise, he truncates the tune slightly to accomodate the shorter line.

Line 5: (iii:a) has "Johnny".

Line 9: "Amsterdam" in (iii:b), but in Sgr. the Sgiobair changed it to "Holland" which agrees with (iii:a). It would have to be elongated like the Gaelic "Òlaid" in the next song to fit with the rhythm.

Line 15: (iii:a) runs "gave them land to their desire". The line is a reference to Hellinga's sale of large portions of land for five Pounds per acre, see the dialogue above.

Line 23: (iii:a) "to market", (Sgr) "and when they go to fair...".

Line 25: (iii:a) reads "Faisach" here, which doesn't agree with any pronunciation or spelling rules.

Line 30: Pronounced "Gàidhlig", naturally, for the assonance with "Geàrraidh".

Line 31: According to (Sgr), this can either be "one foot high" or "three feet high" as in (iii:a) and (i) respectively.

Line 32: "...dry in Hàllain" in (iii:a).

Line 36: MacNeacail also supplied me with an off-the-cuff alternative line entirely in English: "'And though the drams would be three feet high,'...three or one! 'Ceud mìle fàilt' we'll send him,' 'a thousand welcomes send him,' you know". (iii:a) reads "...we send him".

XXVI. 'S e seo a' sgeul tha taitneach leinn (Òran do Johnny Hellinga)

IM: I've seen him here, he bought my lambs, and he sold them in Portree for so much and he lost two hundred pounds on them. "Oh," I says, Hellinga,...I'll need to make some of that up to you".... "Away, be quiet!" he says, I make...that in a quarter of an hour!"...

TM: You made a song on him [in Gaelic].

IM: Oh I did, aye.

TM: I never heard that.

IM: Did you no? (SA1989.26.A9)

'S e seo a' sgeul tha taitneach leinn

1. 'S e seo a' sgeul tha taitneach leinn,
nì thachair a's an dùthaich
gun deachaidh Oighreachd Bhatarnais
a cheannach leis an Dùidseach.
2. Gun dàinig e bho'n Òlaind,
le chuid stòrais agus ionntais,
's a cheannaich e bho'n Dòmhnallach
gach òirleach bha de ghrùnd aige.

5

3. 'S e an t-ainm dha Johannes Hellinga
tha e bho chinneadh chliùteach,
's their gach neach tha eòlach air
gur h-e duine còir go chùl e. 10
4. Gu bheil na mìltean acair ann
do dh'fhearann torrach sùghmhór
le spréidh tha iad ag àrachadh:
cha déid nas fheàrr gu bùidsear. 15
5. Na croitearan bidh uail orra
gu bheil uachdaran ùr ac'
is tha fearann dhaibh mar 's deòin leotha
gun bòid bhith orr' na cùmhnant. 20
6. Criochnaichidh mi 'n t-òran seo
le deagh dhòchas agus deagh dhùrachd
guma fada buan e còmhnuidh leinn
's gach sòlas bhith 'na lùchairt.

Translation:

This is the story that pleases us

1. *This is the story that pleases us,
a thing that happened in the area;
the Waternish Estate was
bought by the Dutchman.*
2. *He came from Holland,
with all his money and wealth,
and he bought from [Lord] MacDonald
every inch of ground that he had.* 5
3. *His name is Johannes Hellinga,
he is of renowned ancestry,
and everyone who knows him says
that he is a decent, honest man to his back[bone].* 10
4. *There are thousands of acres there
of fertile, moist land
with cattle that they are rearing:
better [ones] will not go to slaughter.* 15
5. *The crofters they will be boasting
that they have a new landlord
and land is [available] for them as they wish
without any need for a guarantee or account.* 20

6. *I will finish this song
with optimism and a good wish:
long and harmoniously may he dwell with us
and every happiness be in his mansion.*

IM: I think there was more Gaelic than this,...I think there was, but I don't know. Mhm.... [thinks] I can't say it is [i.e. there is] now. Och I never forgot it [then], at the time it was alright.
(SA1990.105.B3)

Textual notes:

(i) SA1989.26.B1.

(ii) SA1990.105.B3.

(iii) SA1992.65.2.

Line 7: Godfrey, the present Lord MacDonald, at the time the owner of the Waternish Estates.

Line 9: The Sgiobair pronounces the name more like "John-es" rather than with the full three syllables of "Johannes".

Line 10: An Sgiobair sings "mhùirneach", "precious" or "beloved", but corrected it to "chliùteach" (Sgr).

Line 12: "That was to his backbone, you know, he was a kind man to his backbone." (IM)

Line 14: "Sùghmhór" literally means "juicy" or in this context "rich and fertile".

Lines 19-20: Or alternatively "gun òr a bhith 'sa chùmhnant", "There's no conditions for gold being in the contract...he's giving them the land to their desire without gold being in the...contract...". (IM) See the dialogue before *The news we've heard from Waternish*.

Line 23: "Leinn" is supplied in (Sgr) in place of "ann", meaning "there", which also works well.

XXVII. 'S thoir mo bheannachd do dh'Eilein Iarmain

In the 'seventies MacNeacail came to know Sir Iain Noble, the Edinburgh merchant banker. Sir Iain has taken a great interest in the Gaelic language and culture and in addition to establishing *Sabhal Mór Ostaig*, the Gaelic business college, he founded *Comhdhail nan Seanchaidh [the Gathering of Tradition-bearers]*, run bi-annually at his hotel in Isle Ornsay, Skye. Noble values the Sgiobair's talents and traditions a great deal and in the nineteen-eighties, MacNeacail made this song to him.

'S thoir mo bheannachd do dh'Eilein Iarmain

1. 'S thoir mo bheannachd do dh'Eilein Iarmain,
do'n dhiùlnach fiachail ud Iain Noble,
thug cuireadh fialaidh dhuinn a chum dìota
gu ceòl is sgeulachd 'san t-Sabhal Mhór aige.
2. Bha sean is òg againn cruinne còmhladh 5
toirt fuaim air òrain 's toirt ceòl air teudan.
Chaidh biadh air bòrd dhuinn dhe'n h-uile seòrsa;
bha deoch gun stòradh toirt tuilleadh spéird dhuinn.
3. B'e fhéin an t-àrmunn cùl-taic na Gàidhlig'; 10
's e thog an àird i na b'fheàrr na Mòdan.
Bidh gach oisean sràide le'n ainm an Gàidhlig
is air gach ceàrnaidh 'sna raithean móra.
4. Ceann iùil ar dùthcha gu robh ad diùmbach, 15
ag ràdh nach b'fhiù leotha bhith 'ga h-òilein.
Nan d'fhuair an dùrachd gun d'readh a mùchadh,
's cha d'readh a h-ionnsachadh dha'n an òigridh.
5. Chuir e colaisde òilein an Eilein Iarmain. 20
Thig iad o chìochan na Roinn Eòrp' ann
's bidh Ghàidhlig aosda, 's i air a sgaoileadh
air feadh an t-saoghail, le aont' is òrdugh.
6. B'e sàr-dhuin' uasal, 's ann dhà bu dual sin;
gur ann o uaisle a nuas a dh'fhàs e.
Bidh cuimhn' le muirn air gu deireadh ùine
airson an cùram—bha ùidh dha'n chànan.

7. Guma buan thu an Eilean Iarmain 25
 's e sin a dh'iarradh gach neach dhan eòl thu.
 Cha chualas riamh as an Eilean Sgiath'ach
 fear sheas cho dian riut air thaobh na còrach.

Translation:

Take my blessings to Eilean Iarmain

1. *Take my blessings to Eilean Iarmain,
 to you worthy champion Iain Noble,
 who gave us a hospitable invitation to dinner
 and for music and story in his great barn.*
2. *Our young and old were gathered together, 5
 giving voice to song and making music on strings.
 Food of every sort was put on the table for us;
 limitless drink was giving more energy to us.*
3. *He himself was the chief supporter of Gaelic;
 it's he who promoted it better than the Mods. 10
 Every street-corner will have its name in Gaelic
 and [they'll be] on the main roads everywhere.*
4. *The leadership of our country was contemptuous,
 saying they didn't think it worth their while for people to learn it.
 If [they] had got their wish, it would be choked, 15
 and it wouldn't be taught to the young.*
5. *He put a institute of learning in Isle Ornsay.
 They will come there from the boundaries of Europe
 and ancient Gaelic, and she broadcasted, will be
 throughout the world, by agreement and decree.*
6. *He was the excellent noble man, for him that was a birthright;
 it's from nobility he is descended.
 He will be remembered with respect to the end of time
 because of the car—his interest was in the language. 20*
7. *Long may you live in Isle Ornsay,
 that is wanted by everyone who knows you.
 There was never heard, in the Isle of Skye,
 one as steadfast as you on the side of justice..*

Textual notes:

- (i) SA1989.26.A4.
- (ii) SA1990.106.A5b.

(iii) a) SA1989.26.A4 and b) T1185.²⁰

(iv) For more on the Sgiobair's friendship with Sir Iain Noble and Sir Iain's request for a song on the occasion of his wedding (1991), see Chapters I and V.

Line 1: Eilean Iarmain is usually known as Isle Ornsay in English.

Line 4: The Gaelic business college *Sabhal Mór Ostaig* in Sleat, Isle of Skye, which was founded by Sir Iain Noble and run by him for many years.

Line 8: Possibly from "stòr", "to hoard" making the phrase mean "without hoarding", i.e. "generous". It may also be affected by "sòradh", "sparing" or "hesitating"; this word is now usually confined to verse.

Line 9: (Sgr) has "féin" here, lit. (iii) has "B'e siod...".

Line 10: (Sgr) has "nas feàrr" here.

Line 14: "Òilein" seems to a formation with the same element as "oilthigh" and "oileanach", although it is very unusual for it to begin with a long vowel as it does here.

Line 17-20: Added from (iii:b).

Lines 25-28: Added from (Sgr).

Line 28: A reference to Noble's high regard for the islanders and his tenants. MacNeacail finds Noble a rare exception to the usual type of landlord. See *A time will come, a time will go* (XXVIII) for his perceptions of the old-style landlord.

²⁰ Tapes prefixed with a 'T' are in the place-name Archive at the School of Scottish Studies. This one was recorded by David Clement in 1981.

XXVIII. A time will come, a time will go

1. A time will come, a time will go,
but ne'er forgotten be it:
the Highland Clearance that deprived
our land of stalwart heroes.
2. They were men of great renown 5
for liberty and freedom
and all they gained as a reward
was exile without reason.
3. The land was wrenched out of their grasp,
their homes were burnt to cinders; 10
no more evil could befall our race,
by devilish type of landlords.
4. Prime Minister Gladstone was to blame
with his evil clique around him,
sent one thousand marines to Skye, 15
the people there to hound them.
5. The Skyemen gallantly did stand
as always did to foe-men
and didn't yield an inch to them,
but routed all before them. 20
6. Those that were able to survive
were driven across the ocean,
to find land by sweat and toil,
to make their new aboding.
6. The final end to the dispute 25
was by Commission Royal,
that the land be graced by gallant men
that won such fame and glory.
7. Though wounds may heal the scars remain
and so it's with the Highlands; 30
the men that made our nation great,
gain nothing but remembrance.

Textual notes:

- (i) SA1988.64.A4.
- (ii) SA1990.105.B1.

(iii) a) SA1989.25.B10, b) SA1986.85.A1, c) SA1992.65.5 and d) ASUS.B2.

(iv) See Chapter V: *Case studies* for more detail on the composition of this song.

Lines 21-24: This verse is from (iii:d). It is not in any other versions.

Lines 25-28: (iii:b) repeats this verse with an different first couplet: "The Cheviot sheep, the stag, the hind/ must quickly be disposed of/ and the land...".

XXIX. Should I have time available (A song to Mr. Ball)

IM: Oh I don' know. Mind you, I didn't know that he knew anything about me composing anyhow. Unless Dr. Macrae²¹ or somebody would have told him, you know.

MB: And he told you to go and

IM: Aye, "Compose a song there," staying down in Broadford, looking through the window.

TM: He was pointing at the sunset?...

IM: Aye. He was pointing out the window down to where I would see a lot to draw my attention for composing. "I think," I says, "I'll compose one for surgeon Ball," ...and off he went, he left me there. you know. But I had no word[s] for that, on the tip of my tongue, at the time. So that's how that happened. Oh...I'm finished composing, I'm no use now; my memory is gone complete.

MB: Oh, I don't know about that.

IM: Oh yes, yes.

TM: ...How many days after that did you finish the song?

IM: Och there's no days in it, no. No, no. (SA1990.104.A1)

²¹ The General Practitioner for the north of Skye for thirty-four years. At the end of 1992, the Sgiobair and Màiri attended Dr. Macrae's retirement party in Staffin, where the Sgiobair made the presentation of a plaque to for the doctors years of dedicated service.

Should I have time available

1. Should I have time available,
I'd give in praise a song:
to Mr. Ball the surgeon,
who did my life prolong.
He examined and x-rayed me
had an operation done, 5
to him I will be grateful
all my days to come.
2. He came to Broadford Hospital
from Swansea town in Wales, 10
where I have happy memories,
the time I there did stay;
the people were so generous
and kind in every way,
what surgeon Ball inherited 15
in his former days.
3. He is the greatest genius
that has ever been to Skye.
He has performed miracles
by saving many lives. 20
His name is familiar
throughout the Western Isles;
he will be commemorate[d]
as generation rise.

MB: And you think you might put more on it yet.

IM: I may, if I have something on my mind. (SA1990.104.A2)

Textual notes:

(i) SA1990.104.A1.

(ii) SA1990.104.A1.

(iii) No other renditions.

(iv) More background on SA1990.106.B4. See Chapter V for a detailed look at the composition of this song. It is sung, incidentally, to the Sgiobair's 'panegyric' tune, the one he used for *An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh* (XXIV).

Lines 9-16: The Sgiobair stayed in Swansea for a number of months during World War II before being sent overseas.

Line 18: (Sgr) "that ever came to..."

PART II

PART TWO

Introduction

To describe a thought process is at best a difficult undertaking. Describing a creative process as individual as song-making even more so. One must deal with matters such as context, motivation, 'audience' expectation and technique. In this part, I will look at MacNeacail's interest in song-making, the actual process of composing, the function of the songs, and the song-maker's aesthetic.

Over the years, considerable conjecture has gone on in world song scholarship about how song-makers and singers work. David Buchan summarizes the effort and skill needed for this work:

Performer and repertoire study in historical perspective makes considerable demands, requiring as it does both solid detective scholarship to build up the picture of the performer, the social context, and the cultural context, and sensitive textual analysis to triangulate the performer, the contexts, and the performed text in order to arrive at the whats and whys of function and meaning. (1992:248-249)

Even as this passage illuminates some of the problems encountered in this kind of investigation, it reveals an omission of perspective, namely that of the singers themselves. A great deal has been done without consulting these essential players in the creative act, in the process almost wholly neglecting first-hand impressions of social function and the actual thought processes of the songs' composers. No doubt this oversight is largely due to the fact that most detailed studies of particular singers and song-makers have been done posthumously (e.g. any

number of song collections to be found in the bibliography, as well as such differing and specialized studies as Ives 1964¹ and Buchan 1972).

In recent years, partly due to the general ascendancy of the concept of context in the discipline of Folklore, there has been a great deal of interest in informants and their own backgrounds, as opposed to an item of lore in isolation and for its own sake. Ives (1971), Glassie, Ives and Szwed (1970), Ó Madagáin (1985) and others have responded with detailed studies of song-making and singing *in context* (though still often after the fact). Musicologist Thorkild Knudsen's LP and booklet *Calum Ruadh, Bard of Skye* (1978), go some way to contextualizing the Gaelic song-maker, but they have a strong emphasis on the bard's basic impressions of his techniques, rather than the social settings in which the songs are made and used. While this is a valuable contribution, the social context of the functional song-maker in Gaelic society is still woefully under-investigated. This investigation of MacNeacail's lifetime of song-making examines how 'lore' is used in the context of an informant's life, throwing light on some of the areas long.

To set the scene, I begin with a conversation I had with MacNeacail in June of 1992 in which he recaps many of the points discussed in Chapter II, and touches upon many of the ideas I will discuss in more detail in the following chapters.

¹ I hasten to add that I'm certain that Ives would have liked nothing more than to ask Larry Gorman (the subject of the book) all the questions he puts forward in *The Man Who Made the Songs* (1964) so it is, in many cases, not through lack of desire, but of opportunity that this gap in song scholarship exists.

IM: Ach 's e siod an aon dòigh a bh'againn an uair ad air cur seachad na tìde; cha robh telebhisein, 's cha robh *wireless*, cha robh càil ann ach dol air chéilidh as na taighean air an oidhche, 's a h-uile fear a ghabhadh òran, na dh'innseadh stòiridh 's air rudan a bh'ann, 's rud a thachair. "Seo am fear ann bha fad air falbh," 's thigeadh iad 's dh'innseadh iad *well*, eachdraidh 's mar sin. Sin mar a bha.

TM: Agus an deanadh tu òran ùr a h-uile latha, no a h-uile seachdain?

IM: O *well* dòcha nuair a bhithinn a' coiseachd a' rathaid mhóir, thigeadh e 'gam ionnsaigh. Cha robh mi bodraigeadh an sgrìobhadh idir, cha robh càil. 'S dòcha gum bithinn a' coiseachd a' rathaid 's gu faicinn rudeigin, fhios agad. Bhiodh sin ag obair orm gos an dèanainn beagan air choreigin, agams'. Cha robh mi feuchainn mór sam bith bhith 'ga dhèanadh, ach dìreach nuair a bhuaileadh ad mar siod 'nam inntinn. Cha robh mi glé mhath air bàrdachd ann ged a bha mi ris, sin agaibh, cha robh! Ach air a chù mi na seann bhàird a bh'ann 's a' Ghàidhlig a bh'aca, chan eil càil an diugh coltach rithe. Och, 's e chuid is miosa nach eil mi cluinntinn na h-uibhir dhiubh air a ghabhail nis, na feadhainn aig Donnchadh Bàn 's Uilleam Ros 's na daoine a bha sin.... Agus gheibheadh tu breithneachadh eagalach math aig Donnchadh Bàn is a' chànan aca as a' Ghàidhlig a bh'aca. *Well* chan eil Gàidhlig dhen seòrsa sin a' dol an diugh, chan eil, chan eil. Ach bha fios aca, 's e chuir an t-ioghnadh ormsa, nach eil dath a bh'...air an t-saoghal nach robh aca,...air a chuir sios as an òran mu dheighinn breac,²

Bradán tarrgheal 'sa choire gharbhlaich
's a' tighinn bho'n fhairge bu ghailbheach tonn,
air buidhean buirb is e leum cho foirmeil
'na éideadh colgail bu ghormglas druim,
le shoillsean airgid gu h-iteach meanbhbhreac
gu ballach deargbhallach earball slìom.³

Thug e ris '*a description*' mar a chanadh sibh, air a' bhreac ann a shìod, ann a' faclan, 's cha leughadh e, 's cha sgrìobhadh e fhéin! Tà, bha fhios aig' air a chuile càil a bha siod, rud nach eil fhios amsa air càil m'a dheighinn!

² 'Breac', means 'trout'. Perhaps, MacNeacail is using it as a sort of generic word for 'fish'.

³ These are six lines of an eight line verse from Duncan Bàn's *Òran Coire a' Cheathaich* [*The Song of Misty Corrie*], MacLeod 1952:168, ll. 2342-2349. He pronounces 'slìom' more like 'sliùm'. After reciting this verse to me on another occasion, MacNeacail translated it (including the two lines left out in both recitations). See Chapter VI for that rendition, MacNeacail's translation, the complete verse from MacLeod 1952 and a fuller discussion.

TM: Bha thu 'gam innse stòraidh beag mu dheighinn Donnchadh Bàn agus...leabhar.... Cha [b']urrainn dha leughadh idir.

IN: Cha b'urrainn, cha b'urrainn, ge tà bh'e aig' air dòigh eile....

TM: Dé thachair le Donnchadh Bàn agus a' leabhar?

IM: Oh *well* [bha duine] a' bruidhinn ris, gu robh a' leabhar aige ceàrr. O ars es', sgoilear math chan eil dol ag amharc ciamar a th'aige, gun leughadh e dòigh sam bith e, ge be dé an dòigh a bhiodh aige, sìos no suas, *up or down*. Bha e math gu leòr, fhios agad, mur robh thu 'nad sgoilear math 's gu leughadh tu e. Och cha dèanadh e sin idir, cha cheid mi gun dèanadh e sin.

TM: Cha robh e go diofair do

IN: Cha robh e go diofair dha, cha robh e dèanamh uail dha fhéin air dòigh sam bith, ach bha e smaoinichadh dìreach gun dèanadh siod an gnòthach, mar a bh'e fhéin 'ga ràdh. Rinn e mòran de dh'òrain mhatha. Agus 's e obair nàduir bu mhotha bha e ag obair air.

TM: 'S e. Agus dé bha Màiri Mhór ag radh mu dheighinn òrain agus cuimhneachadh?

IM: O bha i radh, 'nuair bheirear i dhachaidh leis a' bhàs, bidh ar n-àl 'ga seinn'. Thuirt i sin ceart gu leòr.

TM: Bidh na h-òrain ann.

IM: *Well* bithidh, tha mi cinnteach, ach bha i mìnigeadh, tha mi cinnteach, na h-òrain aice fhéin....

TM: *Well* tha iadsan 'gan seinn fhathast.

IM: O tha, tha barrachd dhiubh...na latha a bha i beò. Tha, tha. Cha robh i cho ainmeal...nuair a bha i beò 's tha i an diugh idir, cha robh idir. (SA1992.63.1)

[IM: *Ach, that was the only way we had then to pass the time; there was no television, there was no wireless, there wasn't anything at all but going on visits in the houses at night, and every one would give a song, or tell a story about something that was there, and thing[s] that happened. "Here's a man who was far away" and they would come and they would tell, well, factual stuff of all sorts and [things] like that. That's how [it] was.*

TM: *And would you make a new song every day or every week?*

IM: *Oh well, maybe when I would be walking along the big road, it would come to me. I wasn't bothering to write them at all, not a bit. Perhaps I would be walking the road and I would see something, you know. That would be working on me until I*

made a little bit of something or other, to have for myself. I wasn't making any big effort to do it at all, but just when they would hit me in my mind like that. I wasn't very good at composing although I was at it, there it is, I wasn't! But when I see the old bards that were there and the Gaelic they had, there's nothing like them today. Och, the worst part is that I'm not hearing the number of them sung now, those of Duncan Bàn and William Ross and all that crowd. And you'd get fearfully good imagination from Duncan Bàn and their language in the Gaelic they had. Well, there's no Gaelic like that going today, no. But they knew, I'm amazed, there isn't a colour on earth that they didn't know [i.e. didn't have language for], as was put down in the song [by Duncan Bàn] about a trout,

A white-bellied salmon [is] in the rough corrie
And coming from the sea of the stormy waves,
On the raging [?---] and he is leaping briskly
In his martial armour of the blue-grey back,
With his silvery glitter, [and] finely speckled fins
and his spotted red-speckled sleek tail.

He gave a description to it, as you would say, on the trout there, in words, and he couldn't read and he couldn't write himself! But he knew about everything that we there, things which I know nothing about!

TM: You were telling me a little story about Duncan Bàn and a book. He wasn't able to read at all.

IM: No, no, however, he had it some other way.

TM: What happened with Duncan Bàn and the book?

IM: Oh well, a man was saying to him, that his book was wrong [way up]. Oh, he said, [that] a good scholar [is] not going to look how [i.e. which way up] it is, that he could read it any way at all, whatever way he'd have, down or up, up or down. He was good enough, you know, if you weren't a good scholar you could [still] read it. Oh he couldn't do that at all, I don't believe that he could do it.

TM: It didn't matter to

IM: It didn't matter to him, he wasn't boasting about himself in any way at all, but he was thinking just that that would do the business, as he himself was saying. He made many good songs, and it's mostly the natural world he was working on.

TM: Yes. And what was Màiri Mhór saying about songs and remembering?

IM: *Oh, she was saying, when she will be borne home by death, our generation will be singing them [i.e. her songs]. She said that right enough.*

TM: *The songs will be there.*

IM: *Well they will, I'm sure, but she was meaning, I'm sure, her own songs, that they would be sung.*

TM: *Well they're singing them still.*

IM: *Oh yes, more of them [now] than when she was alive. Yes, yes. She wasn't so famous...when she was alive as she is today at all, not at all.]*

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SONG-MAKER'S ART

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THE SONG-MAKER'S ART

I have placed MacNeacail in the cultural context of the céilidh house for which he composed, and where he sang his songs. I would like now to examine how he became interested in songs, how he acquired them, how he started making them and the actual process of song-making.

Beginnings of Interest

The place of the céilidh houses in learning song and story cannot be over-emphasized. To an interested participant they could provide endless information about the community, whether through songs, stories and legends of the past, or news and gossip of the present. In addition to this lively source of songs, however, children were also taught songs in school on a more formal basis. I asked MacNeacail when he started learning songs.

Oh learning, oh well, I don't know. When I was going to school likely and things like that. We'd usually have singing classes in school you know, before Mòds or any [Highland] games.
(SA1989.27.A9)

He draws a distinction between school learning, where the teachers were there to "keep them right", and the less formal process of osmosis in the céilidh house described in Chapter II. To MacNeacail, the word 'learning' has connotations of formal instruction, indeed when speaking English, he sometimes uses the word 'learn' in place of 'teach', following the usage of Gaelic 'ionnsachadh' which serves for both terms.

Though English was the language of education, pupils were taught to sing in their native language for local events.

TM: But you'd be singing in English in school surely?

IM: Oh yes, but we had Gaelic [speaking] teachers, you know, but it wouldn't do for us to have...an English [speaking] teacher.... You had the Gaelic here, so that's how it...worked. (SA1989.27.A9)

MacNeacail shows an inborn faith in the validity of his language and culture, as if it were no more than the children's due that they got Gaelic songs in school. Indeed it *was* no more than their due, but his assumption is uncharacteristic of a time when having Gaelic taught in school was far from being considered a right. Teachers in Highland schools at this time were often monoglot English speakers, though Uig school was fortunate in this regard. The teachers were usually Gaels and, while they did speak exclusively English in the classroom, they allowed and even encouraged the children to sing in Gaelic for Mòds and village céilidhs (USR:passim). In addition, there was an itinerant music teacher who saw to the more formal side of the scholars' musical education. In Iain's day this was the redoubtable Ethel Bassin, who was unusual in her respect of native traditions (see Bassin 1977). Nevertheless, Gaelic was struggling for a place in the educational system, as it continues to do today:

The school in Gaelic Scotland has perhaps failed so far to promote an education which enables Highland people to conserve and develop their cultural and physical heritages. (MacKinnon 1972:385)

Learning a song you liked

By far the most usual (and natural) environment for learning traditional songs was, as discussed before, the céilidh house,

where songs were passed from person to person and generation to generation.

TM: If you heard a song that you liked [at a céilidh], how would you learn it?

IM: Och,...just from you or from somebody else, he had it and you would learn it from him.

TM: Just one or two listenings?

IM: Oh well maybe, and maybe no. If you wanted to get it you would, but...[you'd say to yourself], "I'm going out to get that song off him". I would learn from you, or I would scribble [it] down in my own way. I would concentrate on [i.e. study] that again, so I had it. Oh aye. That was the only way you had.... Mhm. Aye, that's the way. (SA1989.27.A13)

It is interesting in this highly oral culture to note that, though MacNeacail generally did not write down his own songs as an *aide memoire*, he did learn some songs in this way.⁴

Learning songs was not difficult for MacNeacail. Sometimes he would note the words down (never the melody) in his own way, but mostly he picked them up through repeated hearings, sometimes from a particular singer. With the near cessation of house-visiting in recent years, MacNeacail doesn't get much chance to hear singers, but when he does, he can still pick up a song quite quickly.

TM: Last night you were saying that you like Christine Primrose's singing?... And you recited a song she sang.

IM: Aye, aye.

TM: By MacKenzie was it? Who went to Canada?

IM: Aye, aye, he was a Leòdhasach, a Lewisman, aye he was [from] Cnoc Chùsbaig in Lewis, that's where he lived, but he went to Canada and that's why he made [recites]

⁴ For a discussion of the only instance known to me when he did write one of his own songs, as a stage of composition, see *A song to Mr. Ball* (XXIX) and the discussion of its composition later in this chapter.

Nan ceadaicheadh an t-side dhomh, 1
 gun innsinn air do chàch
 mar a mheall a' saoghal mi
 le faoineasan gun stàth;
 Nuair a bha mi 'n toiseach m'òige, 5
 bha mo theaghlach òg a' fàs,
 mar a chaidh a sgapadh bhuam,
 le freasdal is le bàs.

Aaa, o chan eil càil, chan eil e agam idir, chan eil cuimhne 'am air
 ge tà. [continues to recite]

Mo chrìdhe gheall e sòlas
 nuair a bha mi òg is maoth. 10
 Gheall e iomadh seòrsa dhomh,
 do shòlasan an t-saoghail.
 Gheall e, nuair a phòs sinn,
 gum bitheamaid beò go aois
 's gum bitheadh gach nì mar dh'òrduicheadh 15
 's mo chòmhnuidh ri mo thaobh.

Ach chaidh an t-àm sin seachad,
 chaidh e mar fhaileas bhuam.
 Na sòlasan chan fhaic mi ad,
 tha iad a' falach bhuam. 20
 Mo theaghlach air a sgapadh bhuam
 is...fear dhiubh nach eil buan;
 Ri'm bhean gum b'fheudar dealachadh
 chaidh eadar mi 's an uaimh.

'S nuair a chì thu clann gun phàrantan, 25
 gun càch a' gabhail sùim,
 a dh'aindeoin dé cho àluinn
 'san t-àl nuair a bha ad cruinn.
 Nuair a chuimhnicheas mi air Màiri
 bha cho gràdhach air a' chloinn, 30
 chan ioghnadh ged a dhrùthadh
 air mo shùilean bùrn mo chinn.

Ahh, O chan eil e agam idir, chan eil cuimhne 'am air ge tà.... Sin
 agad e,...cuimhn' agam e co-dhiùbh.

*If the time were allowed me,
 I would tell to others
 how the world deceived me,
 with worthless vanities;
 when I was at the dawn of my youth, 5
 my young family was growing,
 how they were scattered from me,
 by fate and by death.*

Ahh, oh there's nothing, I don't have it at all, I don't remember it anyway.

My heart promised happiness
when I was young and tender. 10
It promised to me many kinds
of the world's comforts.
It promised, when we married,
that we would be alive to [old] age
and that everything would be as wished for [by me] 15
and my wife by my side.

But that time passed,
it passed like a shadow from me.
The comforts, I cannot see them,
they are hiding from me. 20
My family [is] scattered from me
and one of them who is not living;
that we had to separate
went between me and the grave.

And when you see children without parents, 25
without anyone taking care [i.e. showing concern],
despite how beautiful
the family [are] when they are gathered.
When I remember Mary
who was so loving to the children, 30
no wonder flows
the water of my head [i.e. tears] from my eyes.

Ahh, oh I don't have it at all, I don't remember it anyway. That's
it, what I remember [of] it anyway.]

TM: So you learned that one just from listening to Christine.

IM: Aye aye, och yes. Yes well, I heard her, I think, on the wireless
there a few times, you know, aye. Yes, but I didn't learn it all,
there was a lot more on it, oh yes. Oh she's a good singer.

TM: Yes.

IM: Oh she's good. Oh yes, she used to go up to Iain Noble['s] there, Sir
Iain. Every year we're going up there for a céilidh there.⁵
(SA1990.108.A6-7)

⁵ Christine Primrose's five verse version may also be found on her LP *Aite mo ghaoil*. The first three are essentially the same as the Sgiobair's, but his verse four is not on her recording, so where he acquired it I do not know. A five verse version of the song appears in *Eilean Fraoich* (pp. 145-146). MacNeacail's first, second and fourth verses correspond very closely to the book's first, second and fifth verses. His third does not appear, and the book's third and fourth verses are not in his version. The same book offers the following

A visit to Iain Noble's is a true house-visiting situation for MacNeacail for he is able to hear songs in the old way: "I heard it from her, just. I heard it from her a few times and learned it." (FW17.12.90:9) Hearing the song on the radio several times after the céilidhs would have reinforced it, much like repeated hearings in the local céilidh houses of his youth.

An Sgiobair obviously has a retentive memory for songs and poems. This quality of memory also extends to local history and characters. It is worth noting how much background information he usually supplies for anything he tells me about, whether it be a traditional song, an anecdote about the drover Coire Chuinnlidh or one of his own songs. This insistence on the correct context and origin for a song or piece of tradition is a well established one in Gaelic oral tradition (Thomson 1983:79).

The Process of Composition

In this section I bring together MacNeacail's reflections on how he actually makes songs. Since most of his comments regarding method have been made when I was investigating the circumstances of their composition, I will often refer to specific songs; more detailed information about them may be found under their titles in Chapter III.

It was in this fertile environment of nightly social gatherings at the *taighean céilidh* [visiting houses] that MacNeacail began to compose songs himself.

information on the composer: "William MacKenzie (Uilleam Dho'ill 'ic Choinnich), crofter-fisherman of Shader, Point [in Lewis]. Born 1857. After the death of his wife, the family emigrated to Canada. He died at Fort William, Ontario, in 1907. A collection of his songs and poems was published in "Cnoc Chùsbaig" in 1936." (146-147)

MB: When did you first start...making the songs?

IM: I think when I was fourteen years [old], I think...after the First World War, [when] they couldn't get their tobacco. And, ach I haven't got it today. (SA1988.64.A6)

Actually, he remembered that first song, *Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth* (I), and sang all of it immediately after this.

TM: That's the first song you remember composing?

IM: Oh yes, I think so....

MB: Had you left school?...

IM: Oh aye, I would be going to school. (SA1988.64.A9)

So, while still in school, MacNeacail had embarked on a life of composing. He did not deliberately try to make them at first, but they came nevertheless.

IM: Well yes, now and again if something would come, but they were forgotten. [They were] only for the time being just.

MB: Did you write them down or did you just keep them in your head?

IM: No, no, probably it would come at me as I was walking up the road.

MB: How would you do it?

IM: Och I just, I was picturing something in my mind making a picture of it and putting words to rhythm. (SA1988.64.B3)

Iain sang *Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth* (I) and the many others that followed in the céilidh houses of Uig, Glen Hinnisdal and Earlish, quickly gaining a reputation in the area as a song-maker.

TM: Did anyone ever ask you to make a song for them?

IM: Asking me? That's how they're there! I wouldn't have...never thought of them.

TM: Really?

IM: Aye, but young girls and such like [and] all these people, you know, and something curious happening in the place.

TM: And they'd ask you to make a song about it?

IM: Aye, aye. Mhm. (SA1989.28.B11)

A request for a song does not always yield one, but might start a train of thought leading to the creation of one. It depended largely on whether the muse was cooperating; the process could not be forced or hurried: "No, but it might come to me then." (SA1988.64.B4) Calum Ruadh of Braes in Skye, felt the same way:

It came to me then, as if I was...being inspired all along, but some unseen, unheard of feeling came over me, and I had a verse done. (Knudsen 1978:11b)

The image drawn by these two makers of Gaelic songs is echoed by an Eskimo song-maker, of all things: "And then it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves." (Rasmussen 1931:321 and quoted in Merriam 1964:175) Not only was a song uninvited, but there was very little MacNeacail could do to prevent its arrival (not that he would have tried). The songs came easily in those days and the Sgiobair evinces wonder and surprise that others were not as capable: "*I asked the minister down there could he compose, and he couldn't do it!" (FW17.12.90:1)

It is said that emotional periods of life can also be times of great creativity (Miller 1981:198) and there is little doubt that MacNeacail's most productive period was between the wars, when he was in his late teens, twenties and thirties. There were numerous songs, many of them addressed to young ladies in the Uig area. As Isabel Ross (née Gillies), the 'Beileag' of *Bidi mi cuimhneachadh is ag ionndrainn* (XIV), said, "Och,...rinn e òran dhan a chuile nighean òg mu'n àm sin a bha 'san àite [laughs]."

[*Och, he made a song to every young girl in the area at that time.*]

The making of songs, whether by craft or inspiration, was not difficult.⁶

IM: Cha d'rinn mi ach siod a dheanadh ann an cabhaig aig an àm.

TM: *Well, 's toil leam an t-òran sin.*

IM: An toil? Air a...tha thu ag obair orra, mar a thigeadh ad 'gad ionnsaigh cho luath. Och, tha mise a' faireachadh cho *stale*.

TM: O?

IM: Tha, tha falbh cho *stale* dhomh. Bha mi uaireigin, nuair a bha mi a' cleachdadh a bhith 'ga dheanadh,...cha robh taidhe sam bith agam, thigeadh e 'gam ionnsaigh.... O cha déid an diugh. O tha mi gu math *stiff* an diugh,...gun cuimhnich mi. (SA1989.28.B1)

[IM: *I only made that [and it] was done in a hurry at the time.*

TM: *Well, I like that song.*

IM: *Do you? When you're working on them [i.e. composing a lot], they come to you so quickly. Och, I'm feeling so stale [about composing].*

TM: *Oh?*

IM: *Yes, yes, [it's] gone so stale for me. I was at one time, when I used to be doing it, I didn't notice at all, it would come to me. Oh it doesn't go today. Oh I'm very stiff today, till I remember.]*

TM: So how,...when you wanted to sing the song again, would you remember the words [or] the pictures?

IM: Oh yes, well it was coming to me, you know. I was passing by the road and something would come on me and I would maybe have passed by and then it would come to me again and would keep on. At the time I would never think of making...a song. (SA1988.64.B3)

This is, in a sense, spontaneous composition. The song rushes in suddenly and builds up until finished or the muse departs. It is a sort of serial inspiration.

⁶ The distinction between craft and design is drawn by Bruno Netti (1956:19) and quoted in Dennison Nash 1961:187.

One spontaneous composition was made up at a late night gathering.

TM: Do you remember a song called *Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd* (IX)?

IM: Oh-h [laughs] that's myself again, aye, oh yes. Oh that was a night we were at an old soldier's house up at Gleann Hionasdail there...about eleven o'clock [and he had] a tup. Well it was coming late in the year, you know,...you always kill them in the early summer because the flesh is getting...strong at that time on a tup.

So there was a shepherd there and [a] few of us there and a céilidh, you know and "Ohh," said the soldier, "kill the [tup]"

"Och," they says, "yes, why not?" Well as they were doing the thing, you know, I start singing and [as] we were discussing it I started composing you know, what was going on, you know, putting together [a song].... And before they left I had the song made! [claps hands and laughs]

"Oh well," he says, "it's a good recipe," he said to me [laughs]. That was the *only* thing, he said about it himself. But the other boys were so vexed [at me for] composing that as they were doing it! (SA1989.25.B11)

This is also a good example of local people's wariness of his observant and mocking satirical eye of which we shall see more.

Rapid composition of this sort was not a unique occurrence, however.

TM: Did you ever make one when somebody made you mad or when you wanted to,

IM: Oh [laughs], I don't think I did, no.⁷ But ah, I've seen, coming from Uig...Hospital to here, I was going for the forestry next day and I was in the hospital with Beileag Gillies out there, and she was there as a nurse, and Johnny Alec Tobhtscòir [MacDonald]...(they were pair of them then).⁸ Oh, they were asking me to compose a song before I would go and all that. Well, I was on the bicycle, then, coming here [to Glenconon?], so when I left the hospital I started pondering it and before I reached here I had it! It was coming to me, easy, you know. (SA1990.104.A3)

⁷ Actually, he did, see *Chuala sibh mu'n gàrlach ud* (V).

⁸ John MacDonald from Totescore was actually engaged to be married to Màiri Lamont, who was working as a cook at the Uig Hospital where Isabel Gillies was a nurse.

When Sgiobair was at his most active, many songs came as easily as this. This is backed up by Isabel Ross herself, who has known him for over sixty years:

As I said before,...if he met, say, Móràg [my daughter], she was a very bonny girl, he would compose a song just [like that]. I suppose he had an interest in poetry and in *bàrdachd* and he just seemed to get the word and then another word would follow.
(SA1993.4.B21)

Though the Sgiobair's rapid compositions came without much effort, they were well crafted and worked on (as were other traditional song-makers', cf. Ives 1964:166, 128). They were not composed *as* they were being sung, but they were made spontaneously at local events, often in less than twenty minutes and we have several corroborations of this, for example, this statement from Mrs. Ross: "Och bha fhios amasa⁹ gu robh Sgiobair a' dèanadh òran ann a' preabadh na sùil." [*Och, I knew well that the Sgiobair was making a song in the wink of an eye.*]
(SA1993.4.A7)

According to Mrs. Ross, to whom the songs *Bidh mi cuimhneachadh is ag ionndrainn* (XIV) and *Thoir an t-soraidh seo bhuam* (XIII) were made,

IR: Och 's e duine tàlantach a bh'ann ann am bàrdachd airson cha robh e go diofair, co-dhiubh, 's e sgeula faoin dh'fhairich e, no rud annasach a thachair, na co-dhiubh 's e cuidiche as na ghabh e iùl—nuair a chaidh e dhachaidh 's bhiodh òran aige deiseal as madainn na màireach.

TM: Bha e furasda dha.

IR: Bha e furasda dha. Agus as a' linn a bh'ann chanainn gur e duine breithneachail a bh'ann. Dh'fhàg e sgoil, tha mi cinnteach, nuair a bha e ceithir bliadhn' deug, sin mu'n àm a bha sinn uile 'ga fàgail an uair sinach. *Well* cha chuala mi riamh gu robh e

⁹ This is a pronunciation of 'agamsa' common in Trotternish and Duirinish. It elides the 'g' and introduces the epenthetic vowel.

aimhreiteach;...cheasnaicheadh e a-mach rud gu faigheadh e brìgh a' rud. Sin a' seòrs' nàduir a bh'aige. An ann mar sin a fhuair sibh fhéin e?

[IR: *Och he was a talented man at poetry because it didn't matter at all whether it's a foolish bit of news that he observed, or something unusual that happened, or whether it's a hint from which he took a lead—when he went home he would have a song ready the next morning.*

TM: *It was easy for him.*

IR: *It was easy for him. And at that time, I would say that he was an astute man. He left school, I'm sure, when he was fourteen, that's about the time we all left it at that time. Well, I never heard of him being quarrelsome; he would ferret out a thing till he'd find the substance of it. That's the sort of nature he had. Isn't that how you found him [to be]?] (SA1993.4.A3)*

Many of these spontaneous songs were quickly forgotten, as we shall see later in this chapter with *Should I have time available* (XXIX), dealing as they did with topical issues.

Aonghas Dubh makes this observation:

As I was saying before about the weddings,...I'm quite sure there would have been an epithalamium for every couple that was getting married. There would have been a song for the occasion. There have been many 'songs for the occasion' over the years. (SA1993.03.A1)

In some sense, it is the song that transforms such an event into an occasion, formalizing the event and 'giving it its due' (Ó Madagáin 1985:215). Considering the Sgiobair's 'Occasional songs'¹⁰ that have survived, which affirm that he did make this sort of song, it is safe to say that there were many more than the twenty-six complete ones presented in Chapter III. He told me that his own estimate is well over one hundred: “*I'd make one and keep it for two weeks and then it would be forgotten.” (FW12.1.90:6)

¹⁰ A term used to describe a song made for a particular event or occasion.

Completing a song

In discussing his most recent composition, MacNeacail was asked if he would add to a finished song.

IM: I may, if I have something on my mind. It may come to me like that, you know. When I used to be composing, it was walking the road and things would come to my mind. There was no word of writing it or anything, I couldn't do it. That was the custom, but when you were at it regular, everything was coming to you so natural some way. You would get some words coming in, but that was only just for the time being and it was finished, forgotten again, maybe for a night or two in a céilidh in ordinary houses about, that was the custom.

TM: Would you be thinking about a particular subject.... Would you be thinking about something as you walked along?

IM: No I would not!

TM: About a neighbour of yours or,

IM: No, but probably there was something that [would] draw your attention, it would be nice to compose a song for that. If it would come to you, then you would start on making, you know, items how you would put it and getting words to comply with that, och aye. (SA1990.104.A2)

Again MacNeacail connects motion, such as walking (or cycling, as in *Bidh mi cuimhneachadh* (XIV)) with composition, an idea that is found in several areas of Gaelic tradition, most obviously in *òrain luaidh* [waulking songs] where extemporaneous verses are said to have been added to extant songs by members of the gathering (particularly at the end in the *òran basaidh* [clapping songs], which teasingly paired villagers off with each other).¹¹

John L. Campbell maintains that in the Scottish Gaelic tradition, the melody to the waulking songs could be

¹¹ There is no reason why such spontaneous composition should not have taken place; I myself have, with three friends, kept a single song going for well over three-quarters of an hour without repetition of any but the choral lines. The structure of the verse was ABA'B, with a refrain of CB. We provided new lines for the A and A' parts, taking turns round the four of us and usually creating a 'set-up/tag-line' effect.

extemporaneous as well (Ó Madagáin 1985:159). This is surprising given, as we shall see below (in *Melody making*), that most traditional song-makers use extant tunes. Perhaps this opposition can be resolved by a re-definition of composition along the lines suggested by Anne Dhu Shapiro, who says that the creation of variants in the process of recomposing words is composition in the world of the traditional song-maker¹² (1985:411).

To return to the connection between visual stimuli, motion and rhythmic composition, Aonghas Dubh, though he does not make songs, echoes several of the Sgiobair's thoughts. Note his use of phrases very similar to MacNeacail (my italics).

AM: I suspect there would also have been times when, you know, heading for the céilidh house, and maybe having *seen something in the course of the day or...as you're walking along the road there'd have been* [something] a bard would be liable to put his mind to.¹³

I mean I found myself recently...composing short pieces on my way down to pick the wee fellow up from nursery, 'cause I walk down, it's maybe [a] fifteen minute walk and...by the time I get there I've got maybe just eight short lines of verse [and] I may elaborate on them further.

That's three or four pieces I've written in two months so it's not as if it's happening every day,...but surely [for] a young man who was a bard, who had that particular skill, [it] is a perfectly natural thing for the bard to do....

TM: I suppose if somebody was used to making up verses as he was walking along he could hardly help it after a point.

¹² Certain types of 'strophic metre', e.g. some of the songs of Eachann Bacach (Ó Baoill 1979), seem to call or at least allow for melodic creation in order for the composer to reach the pre-determined long last line of the verse. (My thanks to Prof. W. Gillies for pointing this out.) The structure of Sgiobair's *An cuala sibh mu'n ùpraid* (XI) may hark back to this form of poetry, though he clearly uses a pre-existing melody.

¹³ This reminds one of the wealth of Gaelic songs which begin by telling the listener where the composer is, how s/he feels and how the song was inspired. A look through any of the collections (e.g. MacKenzie 1907, Watson 1959) will reveal a generous number. There are also an infinite number of parallels in the English-language song traditions as well, e.g. "As I walked out one midsummer/May morning...".

AM: Well exactly. (SA1993.03.A6)

The two catalysts of location and motion indicate that the senses, operating on subconscious levels as well as conscious ones, probably sense subtle triggers, which serve as compositional stimuli.

My memory is gone complete

MacNeacail says he never writes his songs down: "No, but once I got it together you know, it would be there.... No I never write anything." Nor does he consciously make changes after finishing a song as he considers them temporary creations. "No, no but they were only just for the time being and that was all forgotten you know." (SA1988.64.B3)

TM: When I was here before you sang *Òran tombaca*,...the first song you remember making.

IM: Oh yes, oh-h aye.

TM: I was...wondering if you remembered more of it now.... You got most of it.

IM: Ach I haven't got it. They're all mixed up with me now. I never practise them now, you know, and they're gone dead. At one time, when you were young and your memory is active it was going every night and everywhere somewhere, so you had it that way. Mm. (SA1989.28.B10)

One of the important features of these songs was their transience, a concept that is hard for us to grasp, used as we are to the permanence of the written word. These songs were oral both in use and in nature; they were never meant to be written and by being transcribed, they have been so divorced from their function that they are transformed into different entities. We must bear this transformation in mind when looking at the songs.

MacNeacail feels that his composing days are over.

IM: Oh I, I'm finished composing, I'm no use now; my memory is gone complete.

MB: Oh, I don't know about that.

IM: Oh yes, yes. (SA1990.104.A1)

The occasion on which he made these protestations, however, was only a few days after he made a new song (in December of 1990), so perhaps there are a few more songs to come yet:

I had arrived for a visit shortly after MacNeacail had returned home from the hospital where he had had a serious operation. He was sitting by the fire, dressed as usual in twill trousers, a white shirt buttoned to the top, maroon carpet slippers and a dark blue serge waistcoat with watch chain. His son John Angus was there and from here I will let my fieldwork notebook take up the story:

"He's made a new one," says Iain jr. We asked him [Sgiobair] about it. It was to the doctor who did an operation on him.... Màiri said she tried to get him up on Friday and he wouldn't get up. Then she and [Jessie, one of their daughters] tried to get him up and he wouldn't. Later he got up [at 2 p.m.!] and had the song made. Màiri said that was why he wouldn't answer and wouldn't get up—he was composing the song! Iain denied that that was when he had made it up. (FW12.1.90:1)

Despite this denial, the echo of Martin Martin's description of the traditional bardic method of composition, lying down and in the dark, is striking (1884:116).

The composition of this song is a rare case where MacNeacail did make notes to himself, as he said on another occasion, "scribble [it] down in my own way," (SA1989.27.A13) though as will become clear, this was no more than a rough guide.

The song was on two sheets of [crumpled] steno[graphy] paper, three verses, English. Iain jr. was very proud of it. "It's good, eh?" He took it from Iain and showed it to us. Then we asked him to

sing it, which he did—*changing some of the words to rhyme (and adding a few) as he went along!* (FW12.1.90:1)

As he sang, with the papers on his knees, I looked on from beside him and I could see that he was not singing what was on the paper. The gist was certainly the same, and the words largely the same, but the way the lines ended was radically different. The rhymes in the sung version worked rather better than the ones on the page. Sometimes he sang the written words, but reordered, indicating that the writing was a sort of code to remind him of some of the words, but not really the song text *per se*.

The tune was the same one he used for *An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh* (XXIV), another praise song. About twenty minutes later, when we had brought in recording equipment, we asked him to sing the song again. We gave him back the words, but he *did not recognize* the song, and sang it hesitantly and to a different tune; apparently it was not yet fixed in his mind.

Unfortunately, we had a problem with the microphone cable and the recording did not come out. When he sang the song for a third time, he was back to the first melody (the one that he had obviously composed the song to) and deviated from the written text in the *same way* as before. On playing the song back to him he mouthed all the words as he listened, then folded the paper and placed it on the mantelpiece at his side.

Perhaps that moment between not knowing at all and knowing by heart is just two singings and a listening away. (FW12.1.90:1)

As we were leaving, much later in the evening after more recording, *sgrùdadh* and visiting, he lifted the paper off the tiled mantelpiece, slowly folded it over and over, bent to the fire, lit it

and, between phrases of conversation, held the burning text to his pipe to light it. Usually, he reaches for some old newspapers tucked behind him in his armchair, but this time the handiest piece of paper was the song, no longer needed for its original purpose.

Compose, sing 3x and destroy original. When he used to do it often, it would come more easily (and stay better no doubt).
(FW12.1.90:1)

During his recovery in the hospital ward, Mr. Ball had practically demanded that he compose a song. Though Ball is not a 'commoner', he has social status as a surgeon and the Sgiobair shows some deference to this.

IM: He knew well that I was composing, maybe Dr. Macrae would tell him or something like that, you know. And [he said,] "Get down there and compose, [a song] for all that place down there, and look at the...sun-down [i.e. sunset] there," he says.

"Ach well, I think," I says, "I prefer to compose to Surgeon Ball," I says. Something like that, you know. And off he went. That's all I said. Mhm. Aye. He left me there, you know, but I had no word[s] for that, on the tip of my tongue, at the time. So that's how that happened.
(SA1990.106.B4 and SA1990.104.A1 in Courier)

It is obviously an unusual feeling for MacNeacail to be unable to compose something on the spot; not only has he mentioned how easily the songs came in the past, but he remarks here how that ability has deserted him (probably through lack of practice as well as aging and in this case having to compose in the medium of English for Mr. Ball). Nevertheless, the *Should I have time available* (XXIX) was finished in short order, despite the protestations to the contrary.

TM: How many days after that did you finish the song?

IM: Och there's no days in it, no! No, no. (SA1990.104.A1)

The song may not have come as quickly as in the old days, but it appears to have been less than a day.

MB: So...you're still composing.

IM: Ach no, for a long time I haven't done anything at all.... The only one I did there, was this. Mm. (SA1990.104.A5)

Despite MacNeacail's sense of finality, he admitted that he might add to the song: "I may, if I have something on my mind. It may come to me like that you know," so perhaps the situation is not as bleak as he first painted it. His memory, at age eighty-nine, is still remarkably sharp. These days, however, the mental exercise and exchange found in a lively céilidh house is increasingly hard to find.

IM: O, [laughs] tha mi 'gan diochuimhneachadh, a bhalaich. Chan eil mi 'gan cumail a dol ann, fhios agad, tha mo chuimhne a' falbh [sings]. [*Oh, I am forgetting them, laddie. I'm not keeping them going, you know, my memory is going.*] (SA1989.26.A2)

Practice and memory

In what was basically an oral culture, the next step after composing a song was to remember it. Many very topical songs were quickly forgotten as the occasion passed and the details ceased to have relevance for both the singer and the audience. (Indeed, the details of the song to Mr. Ball, discussed above, were forgotten almost immediately.) Compositions on the theme of love and war, perhaps, lasted longer than those on topical issues as these subjects do not date so readily.

Once a song was finished it was basically fixed and very few changes would be made.

MB: After it would come to you and...you put the words to the rhythm and it was in your head, would you go over and over it, or how would you keep it there?

IM: No, but once I got it together you know, it would be there. (SA1988.64.B3)

Sometimes MacNeacail would have Hugh MacKenzie, of No. 6 Glenconon, write down some of his songs for him,¹⁴ as his own writing of Gaelic was not fluent: "No. I never write anything." (SA1988.64.B3) Though he had taught himself to read the language well, his writing was not as good; MacKenzie, a schoolmaster in Portree, was an ideal candidate to serve as scribe. The two had been acquainted since youth and though Hugh is no longer living, his brother, called Murdo 'Skudiborg', frequently céilidhs in Cuidreach and is one of Sgiobair's closest friends. For the most part, though, the Sgiobair's songs which have survived are the ones preserved in his remarkable memory.

Unfortunately, the songs of most other local poets such as Calum Ciorstaigh [Malcolm son of Kirsty], "a great man for songs" and Uilleam Iain Chaimbeul [William John Campbell], have been lost. With the breakdown of the ancient oral culture, the chain of memory has been broken.

Och there was nobody there that could write then, so you had to take it in the book of memory. That's the only way you could have it then. If you could memorize them the son to the father down onward, that's how they were carried out. They hadn't got the advantage here [of writing]. (SA1988.66.B9-10)

The teaching of Gaelic did not start at Uig school until approximately a decade after MacNeacail left. He has therefore had to teach himself to read and write the language (see Chapter I). That he has done this indicates the depth of his commitment to maintaining access to his beloved song-makers and bards; their songs, with the demise of the rich oral world of the céilidh house,

¹⁴ Interview with Peigi Bennett (FW92.10.12).

are only accessible through books.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, this reliance on collected editions has some effect on his own poetry, but literacy is neither a prerequisite nor a hindrance to traditional composition, as Derick Thomson archly puts it:

Illiteracy in a literal sense can co-exist with a high degree of "oral literacy", and this phenomenon has been strikingly present in the Gaelic area. Highly literate bards can write in the song tradition, and a variant of the bardic tradition can be found in the work of poets who were probably not literate in a literal sense. (Thomson 1974:99)

Composing to the rhythm

In MacNeacail's compositional technique, rhythm and melody are inextricably interlinked. This can be seen in many of the passages quoted above, but deserves further examination. In this section, I will look more closely at how the song and the tune come together to yield the seamless whole that is a good traditional song.

Rhythm is essential to the mechanics of the Sgiobair's composition.

I had no tunes. But if the words were coming to the rhythm, you know,...I would put them...if they would sound that way. I would hum it like that [so] that they were coming in metre, you know. (SA1989.25.B10)

This concern about metre is reflected in a comment he has made on Catriona NicGumaraid's book, *Òrain Aonghais agus An Sgiobair* (1980a):

¹⁵ MacNeacail has taught himself to read very well, though his writing is less fluent. Since the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act, virtually every member of settled society has been taught to read English at school. This has made the simple classifications of literacy and non-literacy outmoded, as they do not take into account the case of the bilingual who may be literate in one language and totally oral in the other or a combination of the two.

She was breaking the rhythm.... You [would] know by the way I was saying it, there was a slip you know and it was...some other word that was put instead that was breaking the contract, the rhythm;...the word[s] wasn't coming to the syllables.¹⁶
(SA1988.64.A3)

Rhythm, then, is a key ingredient for MacNeacail and as we have seen, a catalyst for his song-making. It is essential for composition, even in a tradition as different as that of the Canadian Maritimes as described in *Larry Gorman: the man who made the songs*. (In fact, Gorman's role in his society as a maker of satires was not unlike that of the Sgiobair in his, though the Sgiobair is a far more likeable person.) Gorman is described

pacing back and forth between the living room and the parlor, his hands behind his back and his head down, too absorbed in what he was doing to notice he was being watched. Every once and a while he would stop, walk over to a high desk in the living room, write busily for a moment and then go back to his pacing. (Ives 1964:42)

This image has several parallels with the Sgiobair who often composes while walking. There is a difference in that, for MacNeacail, a song often comes upon him *while* he is walking as opposed to walking *in order* to compose (as Gorman did). The Sgiobair also does not write his material down, even after completion, which requires a good memory and a very solid grasp of the language, imagery and metres involved.

Even melody relies on rhythm.

TM: Did you make the tune to that as well?

¹⁶ In light of this comment, I was naturally particularly concerned that the transcriptions in Chapter III be accurate in his eyes, as well as in others'. In transcribing some of the songs, I have used NicGumaraid's texts as starting points and in the process of *sgrùdadh* [scrutinizing] he has pointed out problems ranging from the layout of a song, to mis-transcriptions that lead to rhythmic irregularities. In some cases these are slips of the tongue that, had he seen the proofs of the book, he would have corrected. On my last major *sgrùdadh* expedition in 1990, he went over nearly every text with me and (after making many helpful suggestions) seemed quite satisfied with them.

IM: Aye, aye. Well, just as long as they were coming in rhythm, you know. (SA1989.25.B10)

This implies that the melody itself grows from the way the words fit the rhythms. In addition, his casual, off-hand manner makes it sound as if producing complex internal rhymes were effortless.

TM: And how long would it take you to make a song like [*Tha mi fo thùrs' air bheagan sunnd* (XIII)]?

IM: Ach I don' know, it would come just mebbe quick to me at times, at other times no. It all depends of how it was I would get the words to rhyme. If they were corresponding their own words to one another.

It appears that songs could come in several different states of completion. Sometimes they would flow quite quickly, like *Bidh mi cuimhneachadh is ag ionndrainn* (XIV), and other times they would need more pondering.

As the quotes above indicate, the need for rhythmic completion and a totally controlled verse form is a very strong one for MacNeacail, as indeed for Gaelic artists through the ages (Thomson 1974:159). For the Sgiobair, this need even extends across decades; when he is proofreading with me and sees a problem with the rhyme or rhythm of a song, he has a very strong urge to correct it.

What['s] that. Something wrong there....

Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth,
's mi an còmhnuidh air an allaban,

aye [reads on trying to remember]. What could I put there?... Oh I don' know, what's that [i.e. what that is]. I would put something there, though, to make that verse, to finish it. (SA1990.106.B1)

Even though the last two lines were there in the transcription we were reading, they did not sit well with him and he saw a need for improvement.

Melody and Rhythm

Melody itself is, to a large extent, a by-product of the rhythms in Iain's mind.

TM: And would you pick a tune that you knew already? A melody?

IM: Well, as long as they were agreeing, the words with one another. I was humming it, just to make it sound [like] something [i.e. like a tune he knew].

No, I had no tunes really...of my own, but I was just quite near another tune or something like that.

TM: Whatever tune seemed to fit the rhythm that you were working with.

IM: Aye, aye, aye, aye, that's it, if the rhythm was, if they were corresponding [to] the words, they would follow. You would...hum the way. Mhm. Aye, that's how it was. Mhm.
(SA1990.107.A2)

The idea that the song should be sung, though not necessarily to a unique tune, could be compared to reading a play to oneself as opposed to seeing it *performed*: the text is the same, but the rendering is unique, individual and in line with the author's intentions. For a song to live up to its maker's intentions, then, it must be sung.¹⁷

Iain does feel that there is a 'correct' melody for each song, as is shown by his saying that he doesn't 'know' certain songs, even when he is familiar with the words. Correct in this sense, however, refers to its rhythmic and emotional appropriateness.

¹⁷ Cf. Mrs. Margaret Laidlaw's famous statement to Sir Walter Scott as he was collecting Scots ballads: "There was never ane o my sangs prentit till ye prentit them yoursel, and ye hae spoilt them awthegither. They were made for singing and no for readin: but ye hae broken the charm noo and they'll never be sung mair." (Henderson 1992:23) And cf. Christopher Maurer's statements about (and quoting) the Spanish poet García Lorca: "When his poems and plays were printed he considered them 'dead on the page', but when he read them to others he could make them live again and protect them—'against incomprehension, dilettantism, and the benevolent smile.'" (ibid.:313) García Lorca's last point holds true for village song; take it out of its natural register and habitat and it is laid open to judgements under many criteria that it was not created to fit.

- IM: Bheir mi dhut òran a rinn mi dhan a' bhean, mi fhìn, Màiri, mun do phòs mi. [sings]
- TM: An d'rinn thu...a' cheòl sin?
- IM: ...Och cha d'rinn.... Bha mis' ag iarraidh *tune* sam bith,...mu facal tighinn ann a' *rhythm*, fhios agaibh, go *sound*-adh ad mar sin. Sin a bha mi ag iarraidh. (SA1989.26.A2)
- [IM: *I'll give you a song I made myself to the wife, Màiri, before I married.*
- TM: *Did you make that music?*
- IM: *Och no. I was wanting any tune at all. [I think] about word[s] coming in rhythm, you know, till they would sound like that. That's what I wanted.]*

So the tune must go properly with the words, rhythmically speaking, in order to be 'correct'.

It is interesting to note that if he does not know the melody of a song by another song-maker, he will set a tune to it as he goes along and *sing* it, rather than simply read a song aloud from a book. He did this with the Uilleam Ros song, *Ged is socrach mo leabaidh* (*Cumhadh a' bhàird air son a leannain in MacChoinnich 1834:106-111*):

B'urrainn dhomh a ghabhail 'nam dhòigh fhìn ach chan eil mi ag amhairc leis a' *music* idir.... [*I could sing one, in my own way, but I don't keep to the music at all*]. [sings]

- IM: That's a love song for you!...
- TM: Right!... Where did you get that tune?
- IM: I had it just going to rhythm.
- TM: Mhm.
- IM: I only just have to make [sure] the words are corresponding to rhyme, to rhythm.... I put them [like] that. I have no tune for it at all, I have nothing at all. Tha fear no dhà agam mar sin.... Tha feadhainn, ach còrr dhiubh, chan eil ad an *rhythm* idir dhomh. Tha mi ad a' *rhythm*-adh, go *sound* ad. (SA1989.28.B7)
- [I have one or two like that. Some are [in rhythm], but more of them, they aren't in rhythm for me. I rhyme [i.e. recite?] them until they sound [right]].*

As can be seen from the Sgiobair's use of English loan-words here, the concepts we are discussing are not ones that he has really articulated before, even to himself. If they were, then he would presumably have worked out a vocabulary for discussing them. I think he may be using the word "rhyme" to mean recite, in other words that he recites a song until he irons out the irregularities.¹⁸

Even his beloved Donnchadh Bàn gets the same melodic/rhythmic treatment. I asked the Sgiobair if he'd like to sing one.

...I don't know what one...[maybe] *Praise of Beinn Dòbhrain*. But that was for...*pìobaireachd*, it was for dancing and things like that.... [sings] (SA1989.28.B15)

TM: When you would read Duncan Bàn...would you know a particular tune?

IM: No.

TM: Would you just pick a tune that fit?

IM: No-o. Well, I just [had] a tune that would suit myself according to the rhythm of the words,...that were, you know, corresponding in sound. (SA1989.28.B8)

A song's rhyme also depends ultimately on rhythm.

TM: When you're making a song yourself,...do you try to rhyme in certain ways?

IM: Oh aye, I would, aye.

TM: Or does it just come out?

IM: Putting it in rhythm, aye.... Well then I ponder it and I...make it similiar [sic] to a tune I heard or...some[thing] like that. No, but [if] it's not to the music...they [i.e. the céilidh-goers] would soon check you on that. (SA1989.28.B9)

¹⁸ The words, though borrowed, are nevertheless adapted to fit Gaelic morphology.

Melody making

The passages above all combine to show that MacNeacail is not so concerned with a specific melody as with its interaction with the rhythm. A song therefore has a 'correct' tune only to the extent that its rhythms match those of the song, not that its melody is necessarily unique. I have shown that Sgiobair does not deliberately compose original melodies; his tunes are usually reworkings of traditional melodies that undergo a subtle recomposition during the process of song-making.

It is the norm for traditional Gaelic song-makers to make new words to old tunes. One only has to listen to Aonghas Fleidsear's songs (NicGumaraid 1980b) to realize that he and the Sgiobair shared a body of tunes upon which they drew when making new songs. On a larger scale, a look at almost any collection of traditional-style Gaelic songs such as *Clarsach an Doire* (MacLeòid 1975), *Songs and Poems in the Gaelic Language* by Rob Donn MacKay (1829), or *The MacLean Songster: Clarsach na Coille: A Collection of Gaelic Poetry* (Sinclair 1881) will show that this was the case for most song-makers—nearly every song is preceded by the words "air fonn..." [to the tune...], followed by the name of a Highland or often a Lowland melody. In Ireland the situation is the same: "It was to a ready-made tune that the poet composed his verses." (Ó Madagáin 1985:158)

Across the Atlantic, the practice has continued among emigrant Gaels who, according to Bloomfield and Dunn, make new songs "cast in the old pattern and set to old tunes" (1989:68). This was also the case for Scots and English-language song-makers, as a glance at the songs of Robert Burns, or almost any

broadside from the British tradition will reveal "to the tune of..." or "sung to the air..." beneath the title of the 'new' song. Even English-speaking North America is no exception: "A traditional song-maker creates new words to old tunes." (Ives 1964:159 and a similar statement on p. 154)

Ives goes on to say that

the maker of traditional song...does not think in terms of metrical scansion, but in terms of a tune he wishes his words to fit: the stanza forms and metres he uses will be dictated by the stock of tunes at his disposal. (1964:154)

This is too extreme for MacNeacail's case. He does not make his song to a preselected tune. He may have other song *texts* in mind, which serve as rhythmic models for his compositions, but he does not model the song on a melody. In fact, the stanza forms and metres are dictated by the stock of poetic models at his disposal, not the body of tunes he has to work with. As may be seen in some of the Sgiobair's songs, he occasionally takes a common tune and totally reworks the rhythm for his own use (e.g. *Loch Lomond* for *Tha mealladh mór am measg an t-sluaigh* (XXIII)). This technique was noted by musicologists Melville and Frances Herskovits:

Not all melodies are rephrasings of old ones. Sometimes a tune heard...can be "swung" into a desired rhythm, with perhaps a change of a few measures, or no change at all... Many times this is done half-consciously, or unknowingly. (Herskovits 1947:277 and quoted in Merriam 1964:178)

Sometimes, of course, the melody in its renewed form has been in Gaelic tradition for years, so the Sgiobair is simply using a tune which is in effect traditional.

Brendáin Ó Madagáin says that the Irish composer's choice of tune is at least sometimes consciously made (1985:158). For

MacNeacail, the evidence points to the contrary. He does not consciously select a tune to which he will fit words, although the basic contours of his melodies are drawn from a pool of songs that were popular on the céilidh scene between the wars (many have appeared in the *Coisir a' Mhòid* series of books as well, not that MacNeacail had access to these books or could read music). It is clear that in his composition process the melody arises as a derivative of the rhythms of the words; it is a re-creation using the contours of a particular traditional tune as the point of departure. This is not re-creation in the David Buchan sense, in which the song(text) is re-created with each singing, but a one-time re-creation which takes place only in the process of original composition.¹⁹

To the Sgiobair himself, the question of whether or not he composed a particular melody from scratch is unimportant. Sometimes he says that he tried to make a tune "similar" to another one he knows (e.g. SA1989.28.B9), but on the whole he is just as likely to indicate that he made it. For instance, he first says that he made the melody to *A time will come, a time will go* (XXVIII), which is recognizably related to *The girl I left behind me*,²⁰ and then that he "had no tunes" of his own, indicating that he does not compose melodies, nor does he think of them as independent entities; they only really exist as frameworks for songs.

¹⁹ To some extent, this is all a matter of the semantic definition of composition. See Buchan 1972 for his comparison of the techniques of Scots ballad singer Mrs. Brown of Falkland to that of the Yugoslavian guslars who recreated their epic poems each time they sang them, using highly formulaic language.

²⁰ See *Case Studies iii* in Chapter V for more details.

IM: I had no tunes, but [i.e. except] if the words were coming to the rhythm, you know,...I would put them [like that], if they would sound that way.

TM: ...So they'd fit with the tune?...

IM: Aye, aye, well I was just as long as the words...—I would hum it like that—...were coming in metre, you know. (SA1989.25.B10)

MacNeacail's attitude to melodic originality is echoed in another exchange in which I asked him to sing one of Màiri Mhór's songs from a book. He did and when I asked him about the melody he used, he said he did not know the 'real' tune to the song, but that he had chosen this one because it fit.

TM: Is that the same tune you used for *Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd* (IX)?

IM: Ah,...I don't know, could be.

TM: They're quite similar....

IM: 'S dòcha gu bheil, chan eil fhios am air sin. [*Perhaps it is, I don't know about that.*] [pauses..and..thinks] Aye, aye. Aye, aye [Màiri Mhór's song] *Nuair a chaidh na ceithir ùr oirre*, aye aye, it could be, mhm. (SA1989.27.B7)

This is a revelation of sorts for MacNeacail, who does not usually think along comparative lines melodically, although he often compares the text, language and rhymes of songs. Here, he himself makes a new connection between his own song and the model he unconsciously used for it. Even though he ends up by saying "it could be", this is the only time he has ever named a source tune for one of his compositions.

An Sgiobair also sings several of his songs to the same melody, seemingly unaware, until pressed, of their similarity. A cursory listen to the songs of Aonghas Fleidsear (NicGumaraid 1980b) reveals that Aonghas used many of the same melodies as the Sgiobair, showing that there was a body of song on which the

two, and any other local composers, could draw for their melodic lines.

In her article *Scottish Regional Song Styles* (1985), which includes fieldwork done with the Sgiobair, Anne Dhu Shapiro, proposes the existence of several melodic shapes indigenous to the Isle of Skye. These she labels "Skye contours" and suggests that Skye song-makers unconsciously follow them when composing their own songs. As evidence, she compares the melodic contours of two of the Sgiobair's songs with one by Màiri Mhór nan Òran and one by Uilleam Ros. The similarities are certainly there, but it is difficult to say whether this proves the contour's existence, or simply that MacNeacail often uses Skye songs (including those of Màiri Mhór) as melodic models for his own.

The comparison mentioned above, used by Shapiro for her evidence, is unconvincing for the following reasons. (i) Ros and Màiri Mhór are both very well known in Skye and are admired by the Sgiobair. (ii) Màiri Mhór in particular holds a special place in his affections, not because he thinks of her as the best poet (he doesn't), but because he practically knew her. Her mothers' people were from Idrigill and, according to both the Sgiobair (FW13.3.93:2 and SA1993.15.A15) and Angus Fleidsear, she herself was born there; only after she was born did her parents move to Skeabost.²¹ She was well known to both of MacNeacail's parents as she had relatives in Siadar at that time

²¹ Aonghas Fleidsear, now no longer living, told this to Aonghas Dubh who passed it along to me (SA1993.02.B1). It is usually said that Màiri Mhór was born in Skeabost (MacKenzie 1934:89, Meek 1977:14).

and would frequently get lifts between Portree and Uig from the Sgiobair's father, Uilleam MacNeacail (SA1988.66.B1). The Sgiobair refers to her conversations with his parents, quotes her songs and discusses her life more frequently than he does of any other song-maker. (iii) No doubt songs by Màiri Mhór and other composers, such as Ros, would periodically gain popular currency, especially in the days of the *taighean céilidh* when the songs would be heard frequently. It is therefore comes as no surprise that these song-makers would strongly influence the Sgiobair's composition.

Of course, it may be argued that Màiri Mhór herself hewed to a "Skye contour" and that the Sgiobair, in adapting some of her melodies, does so as well. Perhaps his aesthetic has been conditioned by his tradition and therefore tunes which follow the contour are perceived as good. Even if all this is true, however, it does not go any further towards *proving* the existence of the contour. And while the idea of a regional breakdown of melodic shape is intriguing and perhaps even desirable, the data presented do not support the conclusion that it really exists in Skye, or anywhere else. In fact, the contour may well exist, but to prove it we need much more convincing evidence than that provided by a handful of Skye's many song-makers, two of whom practically knew each other.²²

²² Last year, in discussion with Dr. Shapiro, she told me that she had actually considerably modified her position on this issue. The undoubted influence of the major printed collections (e.g. MacKenzie 1907) in creating a body of basic tunes from which others were made must also be taken into account. The question needs extensive further research.

Given the creation, re-creation and re-working of original and traditional melodies in this type of song-making, the origin of a particular melody is a very subtle question indeed. From MacNeacail's perspective, he is making a series of subconscious decisions while making a song, so that the music "goes with the rhythm, with the syllables" (SA1989.28.B7). As Somhairle MacGill-eain, a modern European poet thoroughly conversant in Gaelic song tradition, has so neatly described it, "the song-poet is walking the tightrope of metre without being conscious of it, [making] ineffable melodies rise like exhalations from the rhythms and resonances of the words". (1985:112, 106)

MacGill-eain's description refers to the great anonymous songs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the idea that the melody grows out of and with the song makes sense in the context of MacNeacail's modern songs as well. I have thought this for some time and recently Aonghas Dubh made the same connection regarding the Sgiobair's songs: "*Sorley [MacLean] talks about the total marriage of song and tune. The old border ballads have that quality as well." (SA1993.02.B5) Later, when discussing *Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal*, he again talked about the unity of words and melody and how, if a song is well made, even a borrowed melody can seem unique to a particular song.

AM: It just becomes [the song], when you hear it sung. It doesn't matter where the melody came from, it just becomes so much a part of...the song that it's as fresh as if you'd never heard the melody before.

TM: Maybe because the song wasn't *set* to the music, it all came at once.

AM: It all came together, yes. Uh huh. I think *Òran Uige* has the same kind of quality. (SA1993.02.B6)

Ives feels that a traditional song-maker or singer is free to use any melody he chooses from his tradition: "A set of words can be sung to different tunes and still be the 'same song', [so] there is obviously no connection between tune and identity." (1964:159) While this may be true in the North American tradition, which is of English-speaking British origin, it certainly is not in the Gaelic tradition. The interdependence of melody and text in this tradition is of a very high order indeed, leading to a very strong identity of a song with a particular melodic line. Aonghas Dubh and MacGill-eain would undoubtedly agree.

Using a more abstract, theoretical approach, the song-maker begins the melody wherever s/he likes, and is then faced with a limited number of choices for the next note, according to the ground rules of traditional melody (the traditional modes, habitual intervals, common cadences, etc.) The next note brings fewer options, the next even fewer and, by the time the first line is complete, s/he is practically locked into the rest of the song.²³ There is almost the sense of a 'tone language' type connection between certain syllables and the pitch to which they are sung. In other words, the choice of vocalic sound and rhyme scheme virtually demands certain pitches and progressions of melody.²⁴

To put the same system in different and perhaps more acceptable terms, the composer knows a basic body of tunes (covering the various types and moods of song, e.g. lament,

²³ Expressed by Dr. John MacInnes in a discussion following a seminar I gave at the School of Scottish Studies, 15.5.90.

²⁴ Further empirical research on this idea would undoubtedly yield interesting results. (It would have the added attraction of being something in folk-song research that is actually measurable.)

praise), which s/he (consciously or unconsciously) selects as suitable. At each stage of composition, then, s/he further modifies the melody bringing it closer to one of the recensions of these basic tunes until, by the time the second line is reached the tune is 'made' or 're-made' (depending on the modifications demanded by the particular text).

"In the aesthetic world of the traditional singer, this is indeed composition; refashioning the Gaelic tune to fit the new text makes a completely new entity.... In fact, the use of old tunes with new texts may well be one of the principal means by which, over time, whole families of related tunes are spawned." (Shapiro 1985:411) This seems a very likely solution to the problem of the origins of the huge 'tune families' found in British Isles' and related song traditions.

Melodic originality, as we have seen, is not an important characteristic of traditional song. We may therefore conclude that the measure of creative tradition for MacNeacail and his audience, the aesthetic upon which the song-maker is being judged, is the creation of lyrics and the fitting of them to the chosen melody, whatever its cultural origin.²⁵ This is not to say, of course, that the traditional composer disregards the tone and atmosphere of a melody as it relates to the subject matter of the song, but to the Sgiobair the music is not a *separate* concern. It is not the primary concern, but it is an essential one; what is crucial is that the song is *sung*.

²⁵ Both Ó Madagáin (1985:178) and Eileen Costello agree (1990:iv).

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FUNCTION OF SONG IN A HEBRIDEAN
COMMUNITY

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THE FUNCTION OF SONG IN A HEBRIDEAN COMMUNITY

There is probably no other human cultural activity which is so all-pervasive and which reaches into, shapes and often controls so much of human behaviour. (Merriam 1964:218)

The previous sections explored the milieu in which MacNeacail made his songs and how he went about composing: the where and how of song-making. I shall now turn to the question of why he made songs and how the songs worked in his life and the life of the community, the function as opposed to the use (a division drawn by Merriam, *ibid.*).

AN OVERVIEW

There have been many, many Highland song-makers through the centuries and yet very little information exists on what stimulated them to compose in the first place. Even in recent decades when Gaelic scholars have had access to the latest technology and to international scholarly writings on the subject, the tendency appears to have been to record text after text without adequate context of this sort (in the published corpus of material at any rate). This section aims to provide some of that information for one traditional song-maker.

The importance of music and the bards

There is a proverbial saying in Gaelic that testifies to the importance of song in the lives of the Gaels.

IM: "Mairidh gaol is ceòl;" when the world will end,...love and music will last....

TM: O chuala mi sin ach

IM: Chuala sibh e? *Well*, chuala mi—tha Dòmhnall Nicolson ag ràdh gur e Màiri Mhór nan Òran thuirt e, chan eil fhios amasa, ach tha e coltach gu leòr, co-dhiubh; cha chreid mi nach eil. Bha siod a' dol co-dhiubh: 's bha e riamh 's bi. (SA1989.28.B6)

[IM: *"Love and music will survive"....*

TM: *Oh I heard that but*

IM: *You heard it? Well, I heard—Donald Nicolson says that it's Màiri Mhór nan Òran who said it, I don't know myself, but it's likely enough anyway; I think it is [her]. That was going round anyway: it ever was and will be.]*

Song is central to Gaelic culture and will outlast anything on this earth.

Catalysts to Composition

Township poets like MacNeacail, whose witty, intelligent repartee was so popular at céilidhs, composed songs on many subjects: songs of love and emotion, songs about local history, elegaic songs and biting satires that, without naming names, left no one in doubt as to who was being lampooned. "They were feared of me making a song to them," he says. "Maybe myself and a neighbour were cast out on [i.e. disagreeing or feuding about] something, and that was enough."¹ (SA1988.64.B6)

While satires and humorous songs were certainly a release for potentially damaging tensions in a small island community, those songs and the exchange of *aoir* [a satirical song or rhyme] were tempered by the many other types of song, e.g. songs of exile, like *As a' mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh* (XV) about his years

¹ The power of satire does not appear to have dimmed since the days Mary MacLeod raised boils with a song, see note 9 in Chapter II. Cf. also Matheson 1938:xix and MacKenzie 1907:155-156 for the story of a MacCodrum satire in reprisal for not being invited to a wedding.

working away from Skye on the mainland; songs of love, like *A Mhàiri, a Mhàiri* (XVII) or songs about local events, like *Lìon a-mach go bàrr na cuachan* (XXI). The bard was largely looked to as a chronicler of memorable local events and characters—a sort of vernacular version of the court bard,² with a range covering the controversy over licensed pubs in Uig to the beautiful countryside of Trotternish itself. Between them, MacNeacail and Aonghas Fleidsear, seven years his senior, made songs about the iron horse (in this case a bicycle), local and national political questions, affairs of the heart, amusing local occurrences, and even Myxomatosis.³

According to Somhairle MacGill-eain “all poetry reflects social phenomena” (1985:48), but to MacNeacail and the older generation of islanders, a song is as much a personal expression of emotion and of the need to communicate. It is used, as Ó Madagáin says, referring to both Irish and Scottish Gaelic song, “on occasions when feelings were such that ordinary speech was inadequate”.⁴ He goes on to state that this function has “largely been lost to characteristic Western society” (1985:143). MacNeacail, however, retains it as part of his everyday life for which it provides “a vehicle for the expression of ideas and

² See Thomson 1968:73-74 for a description of the duties of the clan bard and the clan historian. The Sgiobair, when he acts as a commentator on local events, is actually functioning more like one of the court poets than the lyrical poets he so admires such as Duncan Bàn.

³ A disease that was introduced to Scotland following World War II to control rabbit populations. It has decimated large numbers of animals. Many of the songs on this wide range of subjects were really exercises in composition, an opportunity show of one's poetic capabilities, cf. the range of Duncan Bàn's titles vs. the range of his actual subject matter and his treatment of it.

⁴ Cf. Knud Rasmussen's Eskimo informant who says exactly this: “Songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices.” (1931:321, quoted in Merriam 1964:175)

emotions not revealed in ordinary discourse” (Merriam 1964:219).

Given that MacNeacail could and did make songs at the drop of a hat, let us now look at some of the different catalysts which would lead to, or even demand, a song. Since a song “never has a single function, but several simultaneously (usually including the aesthetic)” (Ó Madagáin 1985:214), the breakdown of catalysts and functions that follows is artificial; MacNeacail makes no such categorical divisions in thinking about his song-making. For the moment, however, the unnatural separation will serve as a framework upon which to hang some observations and points of discussion. In general, the further down the list, the stronger the drive to produce the song and the more obvious function it has as a response to a personal or community need. I will comment on these functions as I progress.

Recreation—passing the time

“A chur seachad na tìde” [*to pass the time*] is the single reason most often given by the Sgiobair, when asked why he made a song:

Och cha bhithinn ach dèanamh rud, fhios agad, rud dhe’n seòrsa ud, airson feuch chur seachad na tìde, aig an àm air a bhiodh céilidhs a’ dol air an oidhche ann an tighean mar a bha seo.... ‘S bhiodh dùil aig duine, ‘s ma bha *notion* agad do dh’òrain, bhiodh tu ‘g obair orra mar sin. (SA1989.25.B7b)

[Och I would only be making something, you know, something of that kind, to try to pass the time, at the time when there’d be céilidhs going at night in houses like there were here. And one would expect, if you had a notion for songs, you’d be working on them like that.]

This is probably true to a great extent and, as he says, before television and radio, “Siod an aon chur seachad a bh’againn!” (SA1988.64.A12) [*That’s the only pastime that we had!*]

For both the composer and his fellow villagers, then, making songs (and house visits) was largely a pastime, rather like watching television or pursuing a hobby is for some today. Even when asking him about the background to a song, such as one to a young woman in Kingsburgh, he reiterates the point.

TM: *A Mhàiri bhàn tha thu lurach* (VII).

IM: Oh aye.

TM: There’s always another one [i.e. another song].

IM: Aye, oh there was! [laughs] ...Och, something just to, pass the time.

TM: Is that the same Màiri [as the previous song we were discussing]?

IM: No, no. Different, oh no.

TM: Different person everytime.

IM: Everytime yes, oh yes.... (SA1990.108.A2)

Ach bha...rudeigin de seòrsa a chur seachad na tìde [*Ach, it was something of the kind to pass the time*], when you’d come home. (SA1989.28.B4)

To stop at this would be too simplistic however, because song-making, learning and singing was such a part of daily life that it also functioned on many other levels. This is not to belittle the need for pastimes in any way—all societies need their recreations—but simply to note that MacNeacail, as *part* of the community, may not see some of the other ways the songs work; he is unable to gain an objective perspective (not to mention that it probably does not occur to him to try).

Here the study of context comes into its own. Examining a whole body of *bàrd baile* poetry such as MacNeacail’s must be a

two stage process of (i) defining the song-maker's perspective (Chapters I and II) and (ii) using this perspective to interpret his world *from his point of view* to see the interactions between his inner world and his outside world for what they are.

A means of expression

Much of the time, as MacNeacail says himself, the songs were simply made for fun:

IM: Oh well, how silly. Words, eh? But it was just amusing to have at the time and that was all that's in it. They would be forgotten. I never thought we would have this [i.e. tape recording and my transcriptions].

TM: Well you remembered [*Óran Tombaca* for me] two years ago. [I hand him a transcription of the song]

IM: When I got it here before me, it comes to me, but to tell me to [sing it and], I wouldn't have it, but I saw this now, it comes to me.... That's how I was, just putting it in my own way. [sings more] (SA1990.106.B2)

He draws attention here to the composer's own vision which leads him to express through song in his "own way". The songs have a more central role in MacNeacail's internal life than he has been letting on and, by extension, in the life of the community of which he is a part. This brings us to the idea of individual vision and expression.

Expression through poetry is one of the few ways in modern Western society that people (though only select persons, e.g. poets and other 'artists') may still display raw, deep, undisguised emotion. Furthermore, such poetic expression is generally considered 'purer' and more direct and personal than expression in prose. This kind of emotional release is usually only socially acceptable, however, at events specifically arranged for such a

purpose, e.g. 'poetry readings', where people are predisposed to accept a different level of emotional exposure and personal communication than they are used to in their daily lives. It is a specially orchestrated moment where interaction is expected according to non-usual codes.

MacNeacail's world of song-making and singing, while on one level about entertainment, is also about the regular, usual and unremarked expression of widely varying levels of emotion. The heightened speech of a song makes the emotional content more easily acceptable.⁵ It is as if poetry readings were as unremarkable and regular a pastime for average Western society as breakfast table conversation or reading a newspaper. In this context, the poet's individual vision revivifies the poetic process with each composition, reaffirming the medium as a vehicle of expression.

To the poet, this vision will have its own unique internal logic, reference and validity as "any work of art is a distortion, a reshaping of reality for an aesthetic end". This reinterpretation of reality is also largely shaped by the tradition in which the song-maker works (Ives 1978:405-406). It is this internalized model we are trying to understand through examining MacNeacail's songs and his world in such detail in previous chapters. I believe that this perspective is the ultimate core of the folkloric study of context; it is as central to the artist as one can get.

⁵ Folklorist Hamish Henderson has said, of some of the Gaelic waulking songs, that "one feels, at times, that all this emotion is only bearable because it is confined between the banks of traditional formulaic utterance." (1992:130)

Though MacNeacail would not, of course, use these words to describe it, he is certainly aware of the importance of this individual perspective, or 'core context'. This is clear from a story he tells about Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir, which shows how remarkably aware he himself is of the dichotomy between what the outsider hears and what the poet knows:

A man criticized Donnchadh Bàn's *A Mhàiri Bhàn Òg*:

IM: "Well, chan eil mi smaoinichadh," ars iadsan...ri Donnchadh Bàn, "gu robh 'Màiri Bhàn Òg' cho bòidheach 's bha thu ràdh idir."⁶

"O cha b'e mo shùilean 's bh'agad idir," arsa Donnchadh Bàn. "It wasn't my eyes you had!" No, you couldn't beat them. Sin agad e, bha esan moladh,

A Mhàiri Bhàn Òg 's tu 'n òigh air m'aire
 ri m'bheò bhith far a' bithinn fhéin,
 on fhuair mi ort còir cho mór 's bu mhath leam
 le pòsadh ceangailt' o'n chléir,
 le cùmhnanta teann 's le banntaibh daingean,
 's le shnaidhm a dh'fhanas, nach tréig:
 's e t'fhaotainn air làimh [le gràdh gach caraid]
 rinn slàinte mhaireann am chré.⁷

O bha e math air a dhèanamh. Ach bha fear eile 'ga chriticizadh. "O," arsa Donnchadh Bàn, "cha b'e mo shùilean 's a bh'agad idir."

["Well, I don't think," they said to Duncan Bàn, "that 'young fair-haired Mary' is as beautiful as you were saying at all."

"Oh it was not my eyes that you had at all," said Duncan Bàn.... That's it, he was praising,

Oh young Fair-haired Mary, you are the maiden I have noticed
 to be where I would be all my life,
 since I won a right to you, as much as I would like
 by the bonds of marriage from the clergy,
 with a firm covenant and with fortified banns,
 and with a knot that will endure, that will not yield:
 it is gaining you by the hand [with the love of every friend]
 that made health [for me] that will survive creation.

⁶ 'iadsan' and 'bòidheach' are pronounced 'àsan' and 'buaidheach' here, as is common in Skye.

⁷ This is the first verse of Duncan Bàn's *Òran d'a Cheile Nuadh-Phòsda* [Song to His Bride] (MacLeod 1952:114, ll. 1628-1635).

Oh he was good at doing it. But another man was criticizing him. "Oh," said Duncan Bàn, "it was not my eyes that you had at all."]

He had an answer for him. Dunchadh Bàn was right; he saw it in a different view than him—"It was not your eyes I had".

TM: So his song was his view of it.

IM: Aye, that's it. It was *his* eyes, so you are seeing it that way, not the other man['s]. So he gave a good answer, you know.

TM: So a different person's song on the same subject...would be different.

IM: Oh yes, it would be probably.

TM: Like Angus Fleidsear's veto song.⁸

IM: Aye, aye.

TM: Completely different.

IM: Oh different aye.... (SA1989.27.B3 and SA1990.108.A14 in Courier)

There is no question in his mind that each song-maker is possessed of an individual perspective, which makes his compositions unique. Whether those compositions measure up to MacNeacail's standards of poetry is another matter, but the validity of a particular composer's vision is unchallenged.⁹

Why song?

What makes someone express themselves in song? For the Sgiobair, coming as he does from a society in which song was an accepted daily form of communication, it is a natural response to the need for expression. Should one desire to express something, a song was considered the proper medium in which to do it:

⁸ For a discussion of Fletcher's and Sgiobair's opposing veto songs, see *Case Studies* later in this chapter.

⁹ The idea of personal vision crops up internationally, from proverbial phrases, such as "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" to modern songs, such as *If you could see her through my eyes* from the musical *Cabaret*.

IM: Oh well, that's the only thing that I think,...because [if] you were inclined to give a description on anything, you would like to have it in a song. And you were just giving, commenting on the way it was, similar to that [i.e. describing it just like it was].

TM: That would be the way you'd describe something?

IM: Aye, the way you thought of it. (SA1990.108.A14)

Song serves as an extension of a person's perceptive faculties. To use Ives' analogy of the photographer, "any image even *seen* will be judged on whether it makes a good photograph.... This may be applied to other artists, e.g. song-makers" (1978:406). I suspect that the subject is chosen, in a sense, according to how good a song could be made from it. Conversely, a good song is one that comes closest to the marrow of the subject:

I think Macrae's song [*An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhaigh* (XXIV)] was more truthful than any of them, you know. You were only just putting him as he was, explaining how he was.
(SA1990.105.A6)

Song is at its best when it bears out the truth of its subject and the truth is best served when expressed in a song, the apogee of personal expression: "You would like to have it in a song."
(SA1990.108.A14)

This idea is borne out throughout MacNeacail's life. One can see it in daily conversation, where he will frequently answer a question with a quote from a song or with an epigram from one of his favourite song-makers, especially Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir, Uilleam Ros, Màiri Mhór nan òran or Niall MacLeòid. To him the most concentrated form of information/answer is a song and he always defers to one for accuracy and validation when a point of discussion is at hand.

THE NEED TO REACT

Response

Most of MacNeacail's songs were made during or after events of which he was a part and are about his own reactions to those events. A few others tell of events which he heard about, but was not at. Such songs are reports of things that 'really happened' or at least that the song-maker thinks happened; they are a representation of truth (Ives 1978:404). This type of song in the Sgiobair's repertoire ranges from songs of large scale occurrences, the effects of which he has seen (e.g. in *A time will come, a time will go* (XXVIII)), to songs about humorous events (e.g. *An cuala sibh mu'n ùpraid* or *Òran an fhéidh* (XI and X)).

I've only heard about that; I was just composing as I was hearing about those people that was about there. (SA1990.107.A3)

These songs of reconstructed events emphasise the function of 'song as response' in his life; it is the appropriate acknowledgement of an occurrence and, for the village, a marker of local events, history and the passing of time. Such songs account for less than one third of the repertoire that we have today, but there were certainly many more over the years. Perhaps the reason more do not survive is that, being topical, they date rather more quickly than some of his songs on more eternal themes. They are an acknowledgement of, and personal comment upon, events that affected his life at the time; when the event is over the need for the response passes and the song is forgotten.¹⁰ To a great extent, *all* song is response, arising as it

¹⁰ See the Afterword for recent confirmation of this.

does in answer to a need, however we decide to categorize that need.

To view a song as the appropriate acknowledgement of an occurrence leads into the next level of 'song as response'; often a song would be made in answer to direct questions or a pressing situation. *A time will come, a time will go* (XXVIII), appears in this category as well, as it arose in answer to repeated requests from tourists for information regarding the recent history of Skye and the Gaels (See *Case Studies* for a detailed look).

Another example is the pair of songs, one Gaelic, one English that MacNeacail made for the Dutch landlord Johannes Hellinga.

IM: Well I didn't meet the man to know who he was but...I was on the phone [i.e. Hellinga phoned] and he was having a night over there—however he got my name I don't know—but I didn't go at all, because, well, I thought he would be coming and she [i.e. Màiri] told me,
"You better do something for him. If he comes, you have nothing to say to him." So that's how I was thinking.

Both Sgiobair and Màiri felt that he should have a song to give Hellinga in response to his expected query as to why MacNeacail did not attend the party.

TM: And why did you compose this one in Gaelic afterwards?

IM: Aye, likely I [would] like to have it both ways [or] something.

TM: Have you ever done that with other songs?

IM: No I didn't, but...I thought he may not understand this, but still he could interpret from the English one. (SA1990.105.B2)

Request

This brings us to the directly elicited response, the requested song.

TM: Did anyone ever ask you to make a song for them?

IM: Asking me? That's how they're there! I wouldn't have...never thought of them.

This is perhaps overly deferential as he undoubtedly would have made many songs anyway; Isabel [Bella] Ross, to whom the Sgiobair made several songs in the 1930s, has indicated to me that with very little provocation, "rinn e òran dhan a chuile nighean òg mu'n àm sin a bha 'san àite." [laughs] (SA1993.4.A3) [*he made a song to every young girl at that time who was in the area.*]

In the 'twenties and 'thirties, the requests came thick and fast.

IM: Oh it was always the case they would be at you for doing it: "Do a song for me," from them, wherever they were, you know. (SA1990.108.A4)

This is even reflected in one of his songs, *Ho-ró chan eil an smal orm*: "'S ann dh'iarr i duanag òrain orm/ gun d'ghabh mi dhi gu deònach e." (VI:ll. 18-19) [*Then she wanted a little song-rhyme from me/ and I sang it for her willingly.*]

IM: They would like to have something,...but there was no many, you know, composing there at all. But Fleidsear, he would be there.

TM: But everybody wanted one...

IM: Oh they would be! Aye. But many a time you didn't bother with them; you couldn't. (SA1990.108.A4)

There were too many requests for him to keep up with them.

Isabel Ross, born in Earlish in 1915, remembers those days.

IR: An t-òran a rinn esan san Ospadal, Màiri Lamont..."Feuch a-nis a dhèanadh òran dhuinn," agus thuir Mairi sin ris ach bha fhios amasa gu robh Sgiobair a' dèanadh òran ann a' preabadh na sùil. (SA1993.4.A7)

[*The song that he made in the hospital, Mary Lamont [said], "Try to make a song for us now," and Mary said that to him, but I knew well that the Sgiobair was making a song in the wink of an eye.*]

Many people asked for songs about anything at all, knowing that MacNeacail needed little stimulus.

TM: Really?

IM: Aye, but young girls and such like [and] all these people, you know. And something curious happening in the place.

TM: And they'd ask you to make a song about it?

IM: Aye, aye. Mhm. But I thought anybody could make a song, but I didn't know. Aye. (SA1989.28.B11)

The songs came so easily and about any event that captured people's attention

There was, as the Sgiobair indicated, no guarantee that a request would lead to a song. Even nowadays, when requests to compose are not as numerous as they once were, MacNeacail is circumspect about taking on a commission.

TM: Iain Noble asked you to make a song in English and Gaelic, didn't he?

IM: Aye aye. Och. That's impossible.

TM: Which you haven't done before.

IM: Oh no, I didn't.

TM: Except the odd word like 'guaranteed' [in *An cuala sibh mu'n ùpraid* (XI)].

IM: Oh aye, aye. Oh well, I mean, he thinks [if] I put it in English and Gaelic she [his wife] would understand it, because she only speaks English, but he would understand [the] Gaelic right enough. But I can't make a mixture like that, och I can't do that! I'll have to say...something like that... Aye well, aye, I'll say to him just that I was in hospital and I forgot all about it; so I did. (SA1990.108.A12)

Though MacNeacail says it is an impossible task, he has made Gaelic and English versions of some of his own songs and has used the odd English word in a few of his all-Gaelic compositions. In addition, he is certainly aware of the great macaronic song tradition.¹¹ No doubt he finds the request itself a little mystifying, as macaronic song is almost exclusively used for

¹¹ He once sang to me some of *When I went to Glasgow first, a-mach gu tìr nan Gall*.

humorous, satirical and bawdy compositions. As such it is, by definition, not suitable for an epithalamium.

He is quite coy about refusing Noble's commission, however, and indeed I feel that in earlier days he might well have taken on the challenge as a matter of course and of pride. A different possibility, that of class deference, emerged at another point when we discussed the request.

TM: Well, you could do like you did with John Hellinga and do one in Gaelic and one in English.

IM: Aye, I did, right,...but I had more scope there, I didn't care...who I was speaking to, but now she's a Lady! She married Sir Iain. Well she's going to inherit [the title of] a Lady now.... She'll be now Lady Noble. I [laughs] can't go about the like of that at all. If she was a common girl it was different.

TM: You wouldn't mind composing a song to her then?

IM: No, [if she] was common, but I don't know how I would go about it, the like of that kind, but he wants it.

TM: I'm sure he does...

IM: Oh yes, yes! (SA1990.107.A5)

To people of noble birth, MacNeacail does show a sort of deference, but even this does not necessarily lead to his fulfilling the commission.

IM: "Ach no," I says, "I can't."...
"Och," he says, "you'll do it all right, you're a genius."
"No, I'm no," I says, "if I was I wouldn't be here!" So I never composed anything for him yet. (SA1990.106.A5a)

Obtaining a song from MacNeacail, then, is not as easy as it used to be. He may see requests as impertinent in some way and beneath the dignity of his calling. Perhaps he always took commissions with a grain of salt, preferring that the muse of his own inspiration dictate when, how and for whom he makes a song.

IM: Iain MacInnes [sic, i.e. Dr. John MacInnes] was telling me to make a song for him, but I never did.

MB: You don't make them to order....

IM: No, I [don't], but it might come to me then. (SA1988.64.B3)

Here again, if the muse cooperates, a song may be forthcoming, but the results cannot be guaranteed and the song may not be at all along the lines imagined by the person commissioning it.

Just such a case was Surgeon Ball's virtual demand for a song (discussed in detail in Chapter IV). Without realizing it, Ball had trespassed on the bard's prerogative to choose his own subject, a theme that runs through these anecdotes about requests. The fulfillment of the requests is another matter, however. For the song to Mr. Ball, an individual vision came to the bard and two days later the song was made, not on the subject Ball requested, but as it came to the composer. Song-makers are an independent minded lot and if one asks for a song, one had better be prepared for the result. In the end, when I offered to play the tape or send the song to Mr. Ball, the Sgiobair declined, feeling, I believe, that it was not up to his usual standards. This shows that pleasing the audience is a concern, but it is not the major one—the major concern is the exercise of composing itself.

Adversity

The next form of response is in answer to adversity, such as a public slight. These are not revenge songs exactly, but are nevertheless a means of public retaliation. Song in the face of adversity is best exemplified for MacNeacail by Màiri Mhór nan Òran who was wrongly accused and convicted of stealing. He

has related this story and its poetic consequences to me several times:

IM: Well,...she was so desperate and against the big people...that was in authorities.... She was all out...to get [them] because they did so bad to herself, you know.

She was working in the house [in Inverness] and...there was a garment.... It was put into her chest and it was done by another maid that was in working in the house that had some grudge against Màiri Mhór. And when the ransacking [i.e. the search] came, you know, they found it in Màiri Mhór's chest and she was convicted and she got four months [in jail].

But I think Tearlach Friseal Mac an Tòisich—I think he was an M.P.—he paid the fine and she got only four months for the suit and...bha i ràdh [*she was saying*]: (SA1988.66.B4b)

'S e na dh'fhulaing mi de thàmailt
a thug mo bhàrdachd beò.¹²

[*It's the injustice I suffered
that brought my poetry to life.*] (SA1990.106.B6)

In telling this story, he acknowledges that such adversity can lead to a natural reaction in song.

IM: And that's what made her start, you know, she was that disgusted with her [?]fate and things that she never did and she was putting down on these people and you know, how they gave her injustice.

TM: Did she make a song about that?

IM: Oh aye, there'll be...songs about it, you know. (SA1988.66.B4b)

Revenge and protest—sources of catharsis

Ives draws a distinction between songs of protest and of satire. The former draws attention to harmful conditions and social injustice in the hope of some redress, while the latter is spiteful, vengeful and not generally desirous of creating change (1964:181). According to this delineation, the Sgiobair has made both types of song, though far fewer of the latter. Examples of

¹² The Sgiobair also recounts this story on SA1988.66.B4b and SA1989.25.A11. It is also to be found in Meek 1977:15-16, 19 and MacKenzie 1934:89-94.

his songs of protest would be *Tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt* (XX), warning of the consequences of licensed pubs in Uig and *Tha mealladh mòr am measg an t-sluaigh* (XXIII) which warns people against itinerant evangelists, in the hope that they will see through false promises of salvation. Several more of his songs which may fit into the category were made retrospectively (e.g. *As a' mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh* and *A time will come, a time will go* (XV and XXVIII)) and therefore were not expected to bring about a requital, but instead serve as a record of discontent or injustice. Probably the best recent example of protest song local to Uig that I have seen is Fleidsear's *Òran Dotair Green* (NicGumaraid 1980a:24-25) which castigates the absentee landlord of Raasay House for his neglect of the property.

Fredrick Lumley, in *Means of Social Control*, defines satire as "an unanalyzable mixture of humour and criticism." (quoted in Ives 1964:167) This definition would certainly apply to a song like *Chuala sibh mu'n ghàrlach ad* (V), but in the realm of observation and comment (as opposed to love and nature) the Sgiobair's song-making tends to the humorous rather than the critical. Numerous people acquainted with him for decades have said that he is too nice a person to really be capable of such vitriolic songs. As far as the satire/revenge song is concerned, then, we have mostly mild public rebukes, rather than the savage, scathing songs we usually associate with the genre.¹³

¹³ It is also important, when talking about satire, to remember the distinctions between the composer, the singer and the song:

Of course what the author intended may be quite beside the point, while what the singer intends may be all important. A generalized satire about Baptists can be pretty pointed if it is sung when there is only one in the room. (Ives 1964:168)

One such public scolding was *Ho-ró chan eil an smal orm* (VI)

about

té a bha shuas as a' bhaile ann a shiod, 'sa Ghleann¹⁴ a thachair a bhith air chéilidh, fhios agads'. Siod a chrìoch a bh'aig a' gnòthach. Ach bha fear eile bha staigh, fhios agad, bha e 'g obair. Bha mise *supposed* a dhol suas ach tà, thàinig an gnòthach, bha esan a-staigh. Cha robh càil ann, fhios agad, ach rinn mis' an t-òran; bha mise dìreach a' dol a shealltuinn dhaibh aig an àm. Sin an aon *revenge* a bh'agad. (SA1990.108.A1)

[*a woman who was up in the village there in the Glen [i.e. Glen Hinnisdal] who happened to be on a visit, you know. That was the end of the business. But there was another man who was in, you know, he was working. I was supposed to go up, but anyway [when] it came to it, he was [already] in. There wasn't anything in it, you know, but I made the song; I was just going to see them at the time. That's the only revenge you had.*]

'Revenge' is not meant in any very sinister way, only, as I said before, as a means of exorcising one's own humiliation. The use of song in this way, "as therapy", is a "highly important aspect" of traditional composition (Thomson 1974:82).

A poet was not condemned for these retaliatory songs; they were the natural reaction of the song-maker. Perhaps this aura of immunity owes something to the legendary "leabhar nam bard" [*the book of the bards*]. According to this tradition, a poet, if s/he was officially regarded as such,

enjoy[ed] a kind of diplomatic immunity. There are numerous anecdotes told in connection with this—always involving the composition of satires, frequently addressed to girls who had spurned the bard's advances. (MacInnes 1968:41)

And yet this sort of complaint in song is a curiously humbling way to get even, as the details of the event become known to everyone through the song. The making of the song is therefore more of a

To look at this the other way around, in other words from a listener's point of view, the context in which satire and protest song are sung can be crucial. (Dunaway 1992:375)

¹⁴ Gleann Hionasdail is usually referred to locally in Gaelic as 'an Gleann'.

catharsis and a 'laying to rest' of a grievance than a real retribution or punishment.

An Sgiobair himself has used the word revenge on occasions other than the recording above, though still not in a sinister way. I asked him if he had ever been kept out of a house for his song-making, following a lead from Peter Stewart about such an event.¹⁵

No I don't think, I don't think that ever happened.... No, I never heard of that, no. No, they never put me out of the house anyhow. I'm sure of that, because they knew...if they did, probably there would be a revenge in a song! Oh they wouldn't do that. (SA1990.108.A5)

Villagers were obviously wary of crossing the Sgiobair, or even drawing his attention, or there would be a song about them in short order.

TM: And some people...didn't want [a song] but you made one anyway.

IM: Oh well, if you're going to miscall them, as long as it was good, you know, it were alright, it would suit them fine.

TM: Did you make many like *Chuala sibh mu'n ghàrlach ud* (V)?

IM: Oh no....

TM: How many of those?

IM: No, one or two, but I wouldn't, you know, they were too filthy. Aye, aye. (SA1990.108.A4)

In his latter years MacNeacail views such songs as a product of the volatility of youth. He expresses an element of regret and would like to see this particular song suppressed. Nevertheless, they obviously fill a need in the community for the censure of particular people who transgress certain boundaries. Other villagers could also make good use of the song by singing it to its

¹⁵ I had misunderstood the situation, but have since followed up the question with the participants. See *Case Studies* for the whole story.

target. At the very least they could receive a form of catharsis by listening to it.

Oh they were happy with it, aye. Ach aye,...they would be, they would be casting it up to him, you know. Aye. (SA1990.107.B2)

It appears that if the song was well made ("as long as it was good"), the criticism was accepted as deserved, or at the very least, entertaining. This clearly harks back to the earlier bardic idea that if a satirization was unjust, or went too far, it would either lose efficacy or rebound upon the composer; "satire was a double-edged weapon which could injure him who used it as well as his enemies." (Matheson 1938:xx) For the Sgiobair, the song would castigate the guilty and exonerate (or at least by-pass) the innocent as he reveals in discussing his song *Tha mealladh mór am measg an t-sluaigh* (XXIII) about the travelling evangelists:

IM: But...if you were right, it wasn't interfering with you, but if you weren't, that's [i.e. the song is] to your condemnation. Aye, that's how I took [it]; I wasn't making them going to be good when they weren't!... If you're good, it doesn't interfere with you, but if you are bad, this [tapping the song text in front of him] judges you.

...I mean where there was a real person [i.e. true Christian], he was preaching it right and, well he was alright. But if they were going to convert me and convert you and all that, within a fortnight they were back to their old ways. Well that's no conversion at all!

TM: Well their emphasis was on converting you right then.

IM: Aye that was it.

TM: As quick as they could.

IM: Aye that's [it]! Aye and they did it. You know, it wasn't left to God or grace to come to do it then; it's them that was doing it, see. Well, if they were not that type, this [song] didn't affect them, you know what I mean? (SA1990.107.A1)

Note his insistence above that the *song* not the *song-maker* judges a person, which may be the basis for the bardic immunity

of long standing mentioned earlier. (See *Case Studies* below for more discussion of revenge and satire.)

Competition

The ultimate in artificial catalysts for song must surely be organized competition. In a sense, they are a formalized and logical extension of the flytings that sometimes took place between two bards well into this century, according to Aonghas Dubh MacNeacail.

IM: I know of a man down in Sleat, Aonghas Dhunnchaidh [Angus son of Duncan], Angus MacDonald,...who will quote you little flyting exchanges between bards, a local bard and a visiting bard, that he remembers. Whether they're from his own time or from an earlier time [I'm not sure], but they were there, that kind of extempore exchange. I think Angus was talking about seeing it happen. That sort of thing was still... happening,...people took it for granted,...well into the twentieth century. We may see 1900 as a time of great change, but it didn't bring electricity, it didn't bring radio, it didn't bring television. (SA1993.3.A3)

So in the Sgiobair's youth, such exchanges would have been still been going on.

IM: And he might be going into a situation where he would have to extoll the virtues of the North-end bard over the South-end bard, who happens to be in the village or whatever, you know,...or a Staffin bard is over céilidhing [and] there'd be odd wee flytings that would, as a lot of the waulking songs did, take on local contemporary topical detail. (SA1993.3.A8)

Competition in the form of flytings, or women trying to out-do each other composing at the waulking board, had been part of Gaelic society for centuries.¹⁶ The field was therefore ripe for the formal competitions brought in by the Mòd in 1892. Local Mòds sprung up all over the Gàidhealtachd, and even much of the

¹⁶ Marjory Kennedy-Fraser recalls hearing of a song-contest at the end of which "the vanquished singer dropped senseless from chagrin" (1926:137).

Lowlands, encouraging competitions for singing; MacNeacail himself won several prizes at the Portree Mòd.

Oh I got a...couple of prizes there, right enough, [for songs] of my own composition and...other songs. (SA1989.25.B5)

In later years, there have been other types of competition too, such as the newspaper announcement that led to the composition of *An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh* (XXIV):

IM: Bha mi eòlach air an duine, fhios agad, agus bha Hughie MacKenzie—bha e 'na mhaighstear sgoile an uair ud—an oidhche bh'ann, fhios agad, chaochail Macrath, nuair a bha mi bruidhinn ri Uisdean, agus bha Uisdean...airson rud a chuir air falbh airson *competition* a bh' aca. 'S cha b'urrainn dha càil a' smaoinichadh na b'fheàrr na dhèanadh òran do Mhacraath. Thòisich mi air an oidhche sin fhéin! (SA1988.64.B2)

[IM: *I knew the man, you know, and Hughie MacKenzie—he was a schoolmaster then—that night, you know, that Macrae died, when I was speaking to Hugh, and Hugh wanted to send something off for the competition they had [to pay tribute to Macrae]. And he couldn't think of anything better than to make a song to Macrae. I started that very night!*]

The competition was the catalyst, but interestingly, MacKenzie's natural response to this emotionally pitched issue is to get the Sgiobair to make a song.

Ephemeral creations

Motivations and subject matter aside, these songs were, more often than not, ephemeral. Frequently they would arise out of a brief encounter with someone at a céilidh, be sung a few times and then quickly forgotten, for example *Tha mi fo thùrs' air bheagan sunnd* (VIII).

If you saw her speaking something sulky or anything like that, you'd think to her [i.e. of her], "Ach well she doesn't care for me," and I would compose something like that, you know. Take it, sing it for her the next day or anytime I would meet her again. That's all I would have [been] meaning. Mm, aye. (SA1990.107.A2)

This passage gives a sense of how 'occasional' these songs were, much like the bardic compositions of the past, which were made for a particular event and then sung and discarded, their content perhaps too topical and quickly outdated for them to last long. It is this quality which makes the songs so hard to divorce from their function; no doubt in MacNeacail's mind, they never were.

I was only making more fun, mockery and things like that, you know. Maybe there was nothing in it, but just for the sake of composing and things like that. (SA1990.107.A2)

I believe that this touches upon the central function of these songs in the bard's life. "Just for the sake of composing.... Just putting it in my own way" (SA1990.106.B2) and "You would like to have it in a song" (SA1990.108.A14) show that song-making is more than an activity. The songs define him as he defined them throughout the course of his eighty-nine years (so far).

CASE STUDIES¹⁷

Any number of the categories presented above may apply to any particular song to various degrees and in any combination. I would like now to look a little more closely at some of the ways particular songs function in the community. All of MacNeacail's songs could profitably be examined in this way, but because of limited space, I present just three of these 'case studies' to show what the songs express and why MacNeacail chose to release these thoughts and emotions through song.

¹⁷ Portions of these case studies are taken from two papers that I presented at the American Folklore Society's annual meetings in Berkeley, California and St. John's, Newfoundland in 1990 and 1991.

(i) Debate and exchange through song—two local poets in opposition

Until recently, céilidh-goers in Trotternish would have been able to hear exchanges between many local song-makers. The *bàird bhaile* would be expected to make up songs of teasing, satire (both gentle and strong), one-upmanship and wit (the flytings referred to by Aonghas Dubh). This sort of exchange was undoubtedly commonplace and certainly served to “pass the time”. Nevertheless, they also served a specific function in the community—they were a means of village debate, a forum where certain issues were presented in different ways, according to the vision of each song-maker. Often a village such as Uig had several bards who would, inevitably, disagree on some issues. The villagers were then able to hear and incorporate the facts, as the bards saw them, assess and decide upon these issues in their own time and according to their own feelings and perspectives.

The bards’ compositions generally expressed their own points of view to folk gathered in the céilidh houses, but they could also express public sentiment by reflecting villagers’ feelings and opinions on a topic. In this way, the bards define the community through their songs and the topics they choose. Conversely, the community also defines the bard by providing his compositional agenda (through their actions and by their judgement of his songs). In either case, the songs provide some interesting options for the listeners: (i) they can sing or applaud the songs in support of their own views, or (ii) they can choose not to sing them and/or withhold approval when others sing them. If they did not sympathize with a song’s sentiments, they simply wouldn’t sing it

(Ó Madagáin 1985:176). The bards do the work and the people get the information. By choosing a 'side', the villagers lend several levels of approval or disapproval to the issues touched on. Through song, therefore, people are able to express opinions they may not otherwise be able to articulate (cf. *ibid.*:185). And even if they could express them, the bards do so more eloquently due to their facility with words.

In singing or simply responding to these songs, villagers also benefit from a measure of deniability; if challenged they can truthfully disclaim responsibility, much like a Gael singing a pro-Jacobite waulking song (see Campbell 1933) or a bothy man in the Northeast of Scotland singing a scurrilous bothy ballad (see Henderson 1971). The formal rhetorical package, in which the message is transmitted, allows the singer or listener to distance his or her self: 'It's just a song,...I didn't make it up,...I was just singing it.'¹⁸

In due course, the song passes into the entertainment repertoire and acquires a permanent vitality by becoming a symbol which singer and listeners can identify with and so give indirect expression to their emotions. (Ó Madagáin 1985:185)

The song and the sentiments can, if necessary, be blamed on the bard, who becomes the scapegoat or the spokesman for the community, depending on your point of view.

Even as late as the 1960s, this form of public debate was still functioning in Uig concerning the heated controversy over whether to allow pubs to continue trading in Trotternish. Several communities held votes on 'the veto', as it became known

¹⁸ This distancing occurs in the story-telling tradition as well, as is indicated by the classic closing line: "Ma's breug bhuam e, is breug ugam e" [*If it is a lie from me, it is a lie [that was told] to me*] (Nicolson 1881:305).

and which, had it been passed, would have made the villages in question 'dry'. The early decades of this century saw a licensed bar in the Uig hotel, but the local landlord had let the license lapse in the 1920s as it was very expensive. According to MacNeacail, he wanted his tenants to have more cash in hand, thus allowing him to raise the rents. In the 1960s, when several pubs had opened, the issue arose again.

IM: Aye, aye, well just they were starting it. They were out...to get the veto, you know.

IAM¹⁹: There was pubs in it, but they were trying to do away with it.

TM: Oh I see,...there already were pubs.

IM: They didn't get [the veto] sanctioned at all...and that's how it was. (SA1990.108.A3)

There were fervid and protracted arguments with plenty of support on both sides of the issue. In general though, the village was split along generational lines with the older people feeling that pubs were not a good idea and that they would lure youth away from the church, home and their work. They worried that drink would become a focal point of life and that too much money would disappear down the throats of an already cash-impooverished population. The young, as ever, were eager for change and demanded their right to a licensed pub. Pressure from the outside world to be up to date was tremendous and younger Gaelic society, 'educated' to abandon its roots and island culture, yearned for all the accoutrements of modernity. They had begun to be discontent with their small local céilidh scene. Firmly straddling this debate were the two song-makers,

¹⁹ The Sgiobair's son, Iain Aonghas MacNeacail.

MacNeacail and Fleidsear. Each made several songs about the veto, but on opposite sides of the issue. Throughout the campaign, they sang them at céilidhs and to any interested listeners, giving us a rare view of public debate in traditional song at work.

The veto is by no means the only situation in which MacNeacail made a song opposing someone else's opinion, for he was ever independently minded. Another instance concerns the 'Pilgrims', the itinerant evangelists who came door-to-door around the island in the 1950s and '60s. Such 'travelling salesmen' of the soul have appeared periodically for centuries and continue to visit island homes, much to Sgiobair's disapproval. "There was a fellow in Uig too who was composing a thing and he was praising them and so I got it the other way about." (SA1986.85.A5) In part, the Sgiobair felt challenged, as a bard, to make a song of opposite opinion to this "fellow in Uig" and was not afraid to do so, since he did disagree philosophically with the other song-maker (*Tha mealladh mór am measg an t-sluaigh* (XXIII)).

The veto issue was more publicly debated than the 'Pilgrims', however, as there was to be a vote on the matter.

TM: Would people expect you to make a song about something like this?

IM: No they wouldn't, but there was nobody do[ing] them.... But when you saw that was...a good subject for a song, [you made one]. (SA1990.108.A3)

MacNeacail is being overly modest in asserting that the neighbours would not expect a song; my conversations with

other villagers show that such songs were expected at the drop of a hat and on just about any subject.

TM: So people would listen to the song that they liked, the song they agreed with.

IM: Oh they would use[?] them, but aye, they would have it from both of us. Aye, they didn't mind, you know, as long as it was just there, aye, if they get it, if it was there. (SA1990.108.A3)

Here we see that people took it for granted that a song would appear. "As long as it was there," he says, people did not make a fuss.

TM: But you and Angus Fleidsear would make songs about things.

IM: Aye, Angus Fleidsear had one too.... Aye, but he was praising it though, where I was against it, see.... Contrary. Mhm. [laughs] (SA1990.108.A3)

In addition to his disagreement with Fleidsear over the veto issue, An Sgiobair also relishes a healthy devil's advocacy role.

For his part, Aonghas was sure that he was right.

Bha latha ann a' Snìothasort,...bha deasbad mhór ann...ma dheòghainn,²⁰ co-dhiubh, bu chòir na taighean-seinnse a bhith fosgailte...na an dùnadh uileadh. Nise, rinn mi an t-òran seo m'a dheòghainn 's cha chreid mi nach tuig sibh e. Och bha fear eile shuas anns a' Chuidrich, fhios agad, An Sgiobair, bha esan a' smaoinachadh dòcha gu robh sinn ag òl cus. Och tha mi smaoinachadh gur e mis' a bha ceart! (NicGumaraid 1980b:A2)

[There was a time in Snizort, there was a big debate anyway about whether pubs ought to be open or if they would be closed entirely. Now, I made this song about it and I think you'll understand. Och, there was another man up in Cuidreach, you know, An Sgiobair, he was thinking, perhaps, that we were drinking too much. But I think it's me that was right!]

Here is the text and translation of Aonghas' song:

²⁰ This spelling reflects Fleidsear's radical Trotternish pronunciation of "mu dhéidhinn".

Òran a' veto

1. 'S tha 'n tìd' againn bhith smaoineachadh
ciamar théid an t-aonadh;
tha buidheann air gach taobh a tha dalma;
's e *veto* a thuir aon diubh
a fhreagradh air daoine, 5
ach feuch nach gabh sibh 'n daorach g'a dhearbhadh.
2. 'S e *veto* tha cur cùram
air Snìothasort 's air Uige,
thubhairt ad ás a' chùbaid gu falbh e;
ach tha uisge-beath' is leann ann 10
cho math 's tha 'san dùthaich,
's bidh sinn uile diùmbach e dh'fhalbh ás.
3. Nuair a bha ar sinnsir
a' fuireach as an tìr seo,
siod agaibh a' linn a bha calma, 15
le sùgha glan an eòrna—
's e chleachd ad leis a' bhròthas—
chan iarradh ad ri'm beò chur air falbh ás.
4. Och ma théid a' veto
an aghaidh luchd na *spre*-eadh, 20
théid sinn a Phort-rìgh ann an carbad;
tha cuid a ghabhas pinnt ann,
tha cuid a ghabhas *spre* ann
cuid eile dhiubh nach till mar a dh'fhalbh ad.
5. Och ma gheibh ad am Port-rìgh thu, 25
théid thu dha'n a' phrìosan;
cuiridh iad am *breather* g'a dhearbhadh;
théid e ma do shròine
's bidh t'anail a' *record*-adh
cia mheud gloine dh'òl thu mu'n d'fhalbh thu. 30
6. Ach 's ann bhios a' spòrs againn
nuair a thig latha bhòtadh,
bithidh na tighean-osd' air an dùnadh;
ach air chùl na còmhladh,
nach bochd nach robh sinn còmhl' riutha, 35
gos an d'readh na bhòtan a chùntadh.
7. Och na dèanaibh bòsdadh
mu'n rathad chaidh a' bhòtadh;
tha feadhainn air an dòigh 's cuid tha diùmbach;
och, 'illean, nuair a dh'òlas sibh 40
na bheil 'na ur pòcaid,
's e 'n dealan th'air a' chòmhlaidh ur cùrsa.

Translation

The veto song

1. Time for us to think
how the agreement will go;
there's a band on each side who are obstinate
it's a veto said one of them
that would suit some people, 5
but see that you don't get drunk testing it.
2. It's the veto that is causing anxiety
for Snizort and for Uig,
they said from the pulpit that it [i.e. whisky] will go away,
but there's whisky and ale 10
as good as any in the country,
and we will all be indignant [to see] it go.
3. When our ancestors were
living in this land,
that's the race that was robust, 15
with the pure sap of the barley—
which they used with the brose—
they would not ever want to put it away.
4. But if the veto goes [through]
against the spreeing folk, 20
we will go to Portree in a vehicle;
there are some who'll take a pint there,
there are some who'll go on a spree there
[and] others of them who will not return like they left.
5. But if they get you in Portree, 25
you'll go to prison;
they'll put a breather to test it;
it will go around your nose
and your breath will be recording
how many glasses you drank before you went. 30
6. But we'll have fun
when voting day comes,
the hotels will be closed,
but behind the outer doors,
isn't it sad that we weren't with them, 35
till the votes would go to the count.
7. But do not boast
about the way the vote went;
some are contented and a portion are discontented;
but, lads, when you drink 40

*that which is in your pockets,
it's the bar on the door [that] is your way.* ²¹

This text is taken in the main from NicGumaraid 1980a:13; I have amended the transcription in a few places, using NicGumaraid 1980b:A2, and the translation is my own. Aonghas' rendition of the song is on the accompanying cassette (item B8).

An Sgiobair, as noted before, was in favour of the veto; he felt pubs would lead to further excess. In the interests of space, I will not reproduce his song here, but refer the reader to *Tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt* (XX) in Chapter III and item A20 on the cassette. Even the Sgiobair's melody sounds disapproving, with its lugubrious timing and subdued contour as opposed to Aonghas' light-hearted melody (the dance tune '*S mór tha mi smaoineachadh*'). It will be noted that MacNeacail's song is not *totally* disapproving: he admits in verse seven that drink may have some virtue if taken in moderation.

In the end, the veto failed by two votes and the pubs were allowed. As it turns out, according to my own observations, the older generation was largely correct. Whisky had always been available in Portree even in the days before licensed pubs in Trotternish and MacNeacail approves of a dram taken in moderation: "There's no better way to show a welcome, than to offer a dram. But that's all, just as a welcome." To the older generation it was and still is a sign of hospitality and part of many rituals in the cycle of life, such as births, christenings, weddings and funerals (see Bennett 1992 for comprehensive

²¹ i.e. "the door will be bolted behind you." Alternatively, the Gaelic could read, "'S e 'n dealain...," though the 'n' does not sound palatalized. The line might then mean "it's the light of the door [that] is your way", i.e. "you'll be shown the door."

detail). To the young, however, it has become a focus of social life and an escape from modern post-industrial rural poverty and joblessness.

As far as the function of song is concerned, what is at issue here is not the outcome of the debate itself, but the fact that the villagers even as late as the 1960s looked to their local bards for perspectives on an issue and for articulation of their own feelings. The local song-maker retained this crucial role in Gaelic society as both a medium of and a catalyst for public debate. He serves as a record of opinion, like the bards of classical Gaelic society, and often expresses his own biases in song. His opinions are often given more credence than those of a 'normal' (i.e. non-song-making) citizen, as he had a reputation for thought, cleverness and eloquence. Ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam maintains that "social institutions are validated through songs which emphasize the proper and improper in society, as well as those which tell people what to do and how to do it" (1964:224-225). The exchange of songs between Aonghas and the Sgiobair, however, draws attention to both the proper *and* improper; it is up to the villagers to decide which song represents which.

In latter years, as a range of modern changes comes to rural Gaelic Scotland, the local song-maker is viewed as more and more of an oddity by the younger generation (see Chapter VI). Even so, many of the young people still appreciate that a talent for song-making is rare and that the bard may be capable of a more direct access to emotion and the expression of it than they

are. These two song-makers are part of a centuries old dialogue that has been and still is indispensable to successful village life.

(ii) Revenge through song and the exchange of song as retribution

Songs of social control play an important part in a substantial number of cultures, both through direct warning to erring members of the society and through indirect establishment of what is considered to be proper behaviour.... The enforcement of conformity to social norms is one of the major functions of music.²² (Merriam 1964:225)

As noted above in the introduction to Part II, social control through song, and specifically satire, has a long pedigree in Gaelic society. Rob Donn MacKay is particularly well known for his substantial body of satirical verse (Thomson 1983:136), a genre which has been

the stock-in-trade of most local bards since his time, and satires without truth or clarity cannot bite: they show much more of society than the eulogies of earlier bards. (Bruford 1981:351)

Revenge through song is strong in many societies, leading people to fear local song-makers, such as Larry Gorman in Atlantic Canada:

I was terrified of my life of him, I was scared he'd make up a song about me.... Many people were a bit afraid of him, and everyone joked about being careful not to incur his displeasure in any way. (Ives 64:17, 83)

In this tradition the satirist-poet is often a sort of social conscience for the community, drawing attention to misdeeds of all sorts for all to see. Villagers are wary of stepping out of line lest they draw his sharp eye, for what amounts to public ridicule

²² Ó Madagáin adds, "Satirical song was a powerful sanction against non-conformance." (1985:177) Of course, depending on what the bard expresses in the song, it may be a sanction against *conformance*.

awaits them, with the added attraction that it is singable and catchy: a sort of gossip set to music. The village bard can, even today, attain a measure of satisfaction through the use of a judiciously worded song, whether it be to simply 'let off steam' or to mobilize public opinion (Freeman 1957:219-220, and Ives 1964:182).

Traditionally, the bard, if he was known as such by the public, was immune to prosecution for libel.²³ This meant that they were rather freer than most citizens to employ a formidable store of satirical invective in seeking redress for real or imagined wrongs. One of the most famous instances of satirical back-lash was that which followed Johnson's and Boswell's famous 1773 tour to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. From the traveller's own accounts, we hear that they received a warm welcome from the Scottish nobility and there is no reason to doubt this; the Scottish aristocracy had been southward looking for over well over a hundred and fifty years before their visit and the nobles would naturally have wanted to impress the famous London dwellers.

In the years that followed, a number of writers remarked on Johnson's insensitivity to indigenous Highland culture and "his incompetency to judge of a literature whose language he does not know" (Rev. Donald MacNicol, paraphrased in Cox 1926:62). In general, however, the opinions of the Highlanders themselves were largely overlooked. There were, in fact, numerous song-poems and even a book (MacNicol 1779) reacting

²³ "This notion of immunity in regard to satire is probably the last reflection in Scottish oral tradition of the privileges of the poets." (MacInnes 1968:41) The protection did not extend to other bards, however—a bard satirizing another bard's chief laid himself open to a counter-satire.

to Johnson and his scathing opinions, which were probably largely due to the locals' understandably poor English and his own non-existent Gaelic.

Some extracts from the songs contained in MacNicol's book (as translated in Cox 1926) will illustrate the explosive response.

Although I am living at this time
in the Glen at the head of the moor,
I am devoted there to verse and prose
in the language you cannot read....

And, more savagely, from another poem:

Indeed, I do not believe that the monster's ancestral root
is of the Clan MacIan (Johnson);
rather he was begotten to his mother
by a stranger with the nature of Venus....

You are a slimy yellow-bellied frog,
you are a toad crawling along the ditches,
you are a lizard of the waste,
crawling and creeping like a reptile....

Or that sullen beast the devil fish;
you are the chicken in the midst of corruption,
the badger with its nose in his buttocks three quarters of a year,
a sheep tick that is called the leech. (pp. 73-79)

There's a great deal more where that came from, not all of it so abusive, but with the same basic message. Such songs enabled the folk to enjoy an opinion rather different to the official version with which we are usually left. (No doubt the truth of the matter was somewhere in between the two versions.) Social criticism such as this, couched in song had the advantage that it could be transmitted easily from person to person, in some sense serving as the news media of the day. In addition, in this particular case, the people were protected by virtue of these songs being in Gaelic, allowing them freedom to communicate 'behind' Johnson's back.

Satire and observational song of this nature was not by any means the exclusive province of the professionals in Gaelic society, of course, as the Reverend John Lane Buchanan noted in his travels to the Hebrides in the late eighteenth century:

They have a fine vein for poetry and music, both vocal and instrumental.... One may meet, not only with studied, but even extemporaneous effusions of the most acute and pointed satire, that pierce to the heart, and leave a poignant sting. (1793:80)

(ii:a) As long as it was good

Even today, local satirical song is a force in Gaelic society and serves as a vital means of intra-village communication. The Sgiobair's perspective on how such song-making is accepted in the community is interesting:

IM: Oh well, if you're going to miscall them, as long as it was good, you know, it were alright, it would suit them fine.
(SA1990.108.A4)

As noted above in *Revenge and protest*, he implies that as long as the treatment was honest, the 'victim' really had no recourse; they were trapped by the actuality of their own actions as accurately portrayed by the bard. As MacNeacail put it on another occasion, "I didn't refer [to] them personally unless they were that" (SA1986.85.A5). In other words, he didn't say anything that wasn't true and that made it all right. *Chuala sibh* (V) was considered "too filthy", by the Sgiobair, indicating that his rather more decorous compositions were more usual. It is interesting to note that his language in describing the song is similar to that used by a friend of John MacCodrum in 1755 to

describe a satire he made: "Tha sin ro shalach buileach, Iain." [*That's far too filthy, John.*] ²⁴

Some of MacNeacail's other songs, e.g. *Tha mealladh mór am measg an t-sluaigh*, are just as hard hitting, though he does not consider them "filthy". Perhaps again because he perceives the opinions put forward in *Tha mealladh mór* as simply just and correct as opposed to the obviously 'over the top' invective of *Chuala sibh*, creative though it may be. The Sgiobair makes a crucial distinction, as Gaelic tradition has for centuries, between two radically different types of satire. The first type (e.g. *Tha mealladh mór* (XXIII)) brings the listener's attention to certain truths, flaws and inconsistencies concerning the subject of the song, using a sort of 'anti-panegyric' language. The second type (e.g. *Chuala sibh*) trades in dis-praise in the form of personal description and vilification.²⁵

Chuala sibh is, linguistically speaking, the fiercest song MacNeacail has given me, and though I suspect that there were a few more of this type now conveniently forgotten, I do not think he is really capable of truly abusive song-making in the vein of the satires to Dr. Johnson quoted above. The Sgiobair knows that, as Capt. Edward Burt pointed out in 1754, "the true satirist is too delicate to lash with a flail" (Matheson 1938:ix).

²⁴ The satire, *Òran na Muice* was recited in an exchange of poems between MacCodrum and Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair who was visiting him at the time. Listening in was the Rev. Donald MacQueen, minister at Tigharry in North Uist (Matheson 1938:xxi-xxii).

²⁵ Cf. Many of the satires of Rob Donn MacKay vs. those on Johnson in Cox 1926 and Macnicol 1779.

When I drew MacNeacail's attention to *Chuala sibh* he was distinctly uncomfortable. (For a more complete series of transcriptions relating to this song, see Chapter III.)

IN: Ooo, ahh, oh, but ach I thought I would scrap that, oh aye. I didn't want it....

TM: That was Cruaisean, wasn't it?

IN: Aye, aye, aye.... Everything that would happen to him, [he said] somebody else was doing it.... And he would see you die before he would help you. That was the kind he was, you know.... He was like that with everybody, you know. But he came foul of me and that's how...I thought I would compose that for him....

TM: And did a lot of people enjoy your song?

IN: Oh they were happy with it, aye. Ach aye, they would, they would be, they would be casting it up to him, you know. Aye.
(SA1990.107.B2)

Despite the fact that he only made "one or two" of this type of song, he has made enough of them to make the locals wary of crossing him, "because they knew...if they did probably there would be a revenge in a song! Oh they wouldn't do that" (SA1990.108.A5). A song would be made in short order, though it would usually be of a gentler teasing variety.

(ii:b) A' feitheamh fad na h-oidhche

Such a teasing song was *Bheileag 's mór a chaidh do mhealladh* which MacNeacail made to tease a would-be suitor to Isabel Ross (née Gillies). Four years after I first got word of this incident in a letter,²⁶ I have been able to follow it up more satisfactorily, and get enough detail to show how songs were an everyday medium for friendly banter in Trotternish.

²⁶ From Margaret Bennett (12.11.89)

Recently, Peter Stewart, when looking over my collection of the Sgiobair's songs, told me the following tale, which shows the village bard in action.

*He made two songs for Bella Gillies. That's the second one you have [*Thoir an t-soraidh seo bhuam* (XIII)]. She used to make songs herself: 'aoir', what do you call them, 'aoir', miscalling, telling bad things about them. When he was in Gleann Hionasdail, Bella was up there too and she had relations up there—we were in Glenconon and we didn't really know anybody from Gleann Hionasdail. He made a song about Duncan MacKinnon; he was going with Bella. Peter MacKinnon came over and Bella was going to go out with Duncan. They had her 'tied' to the *séise* [couch], one on either side of her and wouldn't let her go out to see Duncan. He was waiting outside all night! Peter told Sgiobair to make a song on Duncan. (FW23.11.92:10)

MacNeacail soon had the song made and sang it at the shepherd's house in Kingsburgh, the only one visible from the main road (it is now no longer there). (ibid.:13)

I had asked the Sgiobair about this incident the year before, thinking that it sounded like an interesting exchange, but I was unclear on the details and he did not recognize the events. After learning more from Stewart, I decided the best way to get more information was to locate Isabel Gillies.²⁷ A little research led me at last to Fortrose in the Black Isle where Bella lives with her husband Angus (son of Neil Ross, the shopowner mentioned in *Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth* (I)). She said she would be glad to see me and so at the end of January, 1993 I stopped by for a visit.

I found her to be lively, witty and engaging; she instantly dubbed our interview-to-come "Sgiobair-gate", saying that

²⁷ In this way I hope to gather enough clues about the songs to jog the Sgiobair's memory and see if he remembers the song at all.

Camilla Parker Bowles “*had nothing on this”.²⁸ Not long into our tape recorded conversation I asked about the songs that the Sgiobair had made to her and she responded instantly:

Agus rinn e òran eile oidhche a bha *date* agam ri—tha fear ris an chanadh ad Dunnchadh—agus bha bhràthair air chéilidh cuide ris a’ Sgiobair.

TM: Dunnchadh MacFhionnaghain?

IR: Dunnchadh MacFhionnaghain. Agus bha bràthair aige air a robh Peter. O cha mhór nach toirinn *slap* do Pheter, bh’e cho mìomhodhail! E co-dhiubh, bha *date* agam ri Dunnchadh. Agus...bha mise ‘ga mo dhreasaigeadh, is ‘cà robh mi dol’ ‘s thuirte—bha piuthair Dhunnchaidh pòsd’ aig bràthair mo mhàthair—agus dh’innis ise ‘s nuair chaidh mise mach, rug ad orm agus cha d’fhuair mise mach ‘s chaidh mo ghlacadh. Bha mi ann a shin fad na h-oidhche! So rinn e òran an uair sin, òran a’ magadh.

TM: Well chuala mi beagan de siod, ach bheil cuid agadsa?

IR: Well tha cuimhne am a’ rann seo:

Bheileag ‘s mór a chaidh do mhealladh
cha d’fhuair thu raoir a-mach air daras
gu robh Dunnchadh air a lathadh
feitheamh fad na h-oidhche.

TM: Well chuala mi sin bho Pàdruig Stiùbhart.

IR: O Pàdruig!

[IR: *And he made another song one night when I had a date with—there’s a man who’s called Duncan—and his brother was visiting the Sgiobair.*

TM: *Duncan MacKinnon?*

IR: *Duncan MacKinnon. And he had a brother named Peter. Oh I almost slapped Peter, he was so impertinent! Eh anyway, I had a date with Duncan. And I was dressing, and ‘where was I going’ [Anna asked. She] said—Duncan’s sister [Anna] was married to my mothers’ brother—and she told and when I went out, they grabbed me and I didn’t get out, I was caught. I was there all night long! So he [i.e. Sgiobair] made a song then, a mocking song.*

²⁸ At the time the newspapers were full of the “Camilla-gate” story: the publication of the recording of a telephone conversation said to be between Prince Charles and the woman alleged to be his lover.

TM: Well, I heard a little of that, but do you know any?

IR: Well, I remember this verse:

*Bella, you were greatly deceived
you didn't get out the door last night
and Duncan was frozen
waiting all night long.*

TM: Well, I heard that from Peter Stewart.

IR: Oh Peter!]

Neither Bella nor Peter could remember the melody and Peter's first verse is almost identical except that he starts "Ho-ró Bheileag chaidh..." and uses the first line as a refrain. He also provided me with most of the second verse, which was from Duncan's standpoint:

PS: Chaidh mi 'nam aonar air chéilidh,
ach a faighinn comhradh réidh riut

do charadh air an séise. (FW23.11.92:11)

[PS: *I went alone on a visit,
just to have pleasant conversation with you

caught on the settle.]*

And Bella was able to recall another one.

IR: *Oh well, bha [fear] eile ann, co-dhiubh; leig Anna mise mach air
an uinneag 's tha cuimhn' am,
Sin chaidh Anna a thoirt làmh dhut,
Seo Anna, piùthar do Dhunnachadh is piùthar do Phàdruig,...'s e
a bha stigh.*

*Sin chaidh Anna a thoirt làmh dhut,
's mur bu mhisd' thu i, cha b'fheàirde.
...Thug sinn stigh thu 'n comhair do shàil
's chaidh thu gu àrd a' straidhlich.*

O chan eil cuimhn' am fhìn air chò[rr] bha sin, fhios am gu robh sin ann, ach tha mi 'ga dhìochuimhneachadh, cha robh cuimhn' am orr'. Chan eil cuimhn' agams' air gin aca. (SA1993.4.A5)

TM: Dé do bheachd an uair sin air an t-òran...a' magadh, dé smaoinich thu?

IR: Dhia, bha mi glé fhiadhaich, bha mi coma có aca, theab mi a' radha, 'Sgiobair na sad'! (SA1993.4.A7)

[IR: *Oh well, there was another one, anyway; Anna let me out of the window and I remember,*

Then Anna went to give you a hand,

This is Anna, Duncan's sister and sister or Peter, who was inside.

*Then Anna went to give you a hand,
and if you weren't the worst for it, [you] weren't the better.
We brought you in heel first,
and you struggled energetically.*

Oh I don't remember any more that there was, I know that was there, but I'm forgetting it, I don't remember them. I don't remember one of them.

TM: *What was your opinion, at that time, on the mocking song, what did you think?*

IR: *Lord, I was completely wild, I didn't care [which] of them, I almost said 'Sgiobair the pest!']*

According to Peter Stewart,

*She said she would make an 'aoir' on him, unless he made another song for her. Beileag said to Sgiobair: "Dean luaidh...òran ceart air." And Sgiobair made another song on [i.e. for] her. (FW23.11.92:15)

Bella was indeed indignant and there is a very real sense in which one can pay someone back with a song, as William Ross discovered in his own day.²⁹ The Sgiobair soon made one for Bella to put matters to right *Thoir an t-soraidh seo bhuam* (XIII).

IR: O sin agad, "...chun an ribhinn as suairc". Nach eil i brèagha a-nist'! Feuch gun innis thu sin ann a' *New Hampshire* ! [laughs] Nach do chaill mi *bit* dheth? Gu bheil mi fhathast '*first class*'.... 'S ann tha mi nist' a' fàs coltach ri Lester Piggott.... Co-dhiubh, nuair a gheibh mi *face-lift*, bi mi nas fheàrr. (SA1993.4.A6)

²⁹ Ross had to make a song in praise of a certain young woman, "she being in a great temper at the Bard because he had not praised her in a previously written song." (Calder 1937:132-135) The exchange continued when the woman commissioned another Poet to make a satire on Ross and he responded with *Òran eile do'n chailin cheudna* [Another song to the same girl] (ibid.:136-141). Cf. Ives 1964:41.

[Oh you have [it], "...to the gentlest girl". Isn't she beautiful now! Try to tell [them] that in New Hampshire! Haven't I lost a bit? But I'm still 'first class'. I'm getting to look like Lester Piggott now. Anyway, when I get a face-lift, I'll be better.]

As we saw in the previous section with the request from Mr. Ball, the song that resulted was not necessarily what the asker had in mind; the second song was complimentary, but was addressed to Bella herself instead of her suitor as was requested.

Feuch nach bi thu cluich...a' teip sin dhan a' Sgiobair a-rithist, bidh mi air mo nàrachadh. Och 's e duine glé laghach bh'ann 's duine còir. (SA1993.4.A7)

[Make sure you don't play that tape to the Sgiobair again, I'll be ashamed. Och he was a very lovely man and a good man.]

What is so interesting about this exchange is that the teasing one-upmanship and friendly rivalry of youthful banter was carried on through the medium of song. Even now after nearly sixty years there is a good natured 'nippin and scartin' between the Sgiobair and Bella which they both relish by quoting the songs of their joint past. It is a thrust and riposte of tremendous wit, creativity and vitality. As my visit with Bella was drawing to a close, I showed her some of the Sgiobair's other songs on my computer.

That's enough of them, now that I've seen my own, I won't bother with the rest.... They would only make me jealous! [laughs]
(SA1993.4.B19)

(iii) A Gaelic song-maker's response to an English speaking nation

In recent decades, as Skye has shifted from a crofting economy (largely dependent on subsistence farming and barter) to a cash economy (increasingly dependent on tourism) and the number of English-speaking incomers has increased to flood proportions,

MacNeacail has seen his village, his island, his language and his culture ebb away in a flood of Anglicization. Tour buses, Members of Parliament, Lords, and Clan Chiefs all weave their way down MacNeacail's mile long side-road (often getting stuck in his driveway) to visit him in his role of 'Bard to the Clan Nicolson'.³⁰ What are the implications of these changes in the fabric of society to a man for whom song is such an essential form of everyday expression?

Recently, in response to English-speaking incomers' queries about the content of his Gaelic songs, and about the history of the Gaels and the Isle of Skye, MacNeacail has started to respond in English, but in the medium in which he feels most comfortable—that of song. For centuries, "the painful experiences of the people who emigrated from the Highlands and Islands during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [have been] minutely recorded in song" (Bloomfield and Dunn 1989:67). Little wonder then that MacNeacail should avail himself of this medium; it is a language of daily communication in which he is fluent, rather than the set piece it is for most singers and listeners in Western society today. It has been a primary mode of social interaction in MacNeacail's culture for centuries.

A time will come, a time will go (XXVIII) fulfils an important role in MacNeacail's life. Through songs like this, *Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal*, *Lìon a-mach go bàrr na cuachan* and *As a' mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh* (XVI, XXI and XV) to name a few,

³⁰ Though it is no paid position, An Sgiobair was appointed several years ago at the suggestion of Aonghas Dubh, who felt that the Sgiobair would never otherwise receive any honours for his poetry. See Chapter VI for more information on how this came about.

significant events in his life are remembered, recreated and commemorated. The songs serve as *aides memoire* and information-dense personal memorates, set-pieces to be delivered in response to enquiry about the past (his own or his people's). This aspect of tradition pervades every level of his life. In daily conversation, queries are answered with verses or epigrams by song-makers, (whether himself, e.g. SA1990.104.B5 and '...as I said in the song...' or his favourite composers of the past). To him, these poets said it best and their verses are distilled mines of information. The Sgiobair's English songs hold a distinctive place in his song-life. He has made two types to date: praise (a type often found in Gaelic tradition) and protest.

By answering in song he is, in fact, closer to his beloved eighteenth century bards in motivation and skill than he will ever acknowledge. Not only is he performing much the same social function, but he is doing it in a foreign language and culture. Here he explains why he made *A time will come, a time will go* (XXVIII) in English:

Well, there were so many coming about here and asking questions, about things like that, you know, and 'Did I know anything about the Highland Clearances?' They come from Canada, New Zealand too, and Australia, and they were asking,...'How did this happen?' and things like that.... Well, I was putting things like that together,...what I heard of old people.... Well, I heard quite a lot from my father, you know. In age now he would be over a hundred and fifty anyhow.³¹ Well, he remembered quite a lot of the Clearances then, because his own aunties...went over to Canada, [they] had to go. Well, some of them stopped of course that couldn't; they were removed. So that's how I thought of putting that together. (SA1986.85.A1)

³¹ Actually he was born in 1857 and so would have been one hundred and twenty-nine. The Sgiobair gave me the details on my latest visit to Cuidreach (13.3.93).

“As a rule, the Gaelic poet of the Clearances is a Gael speaking to Gaels, but sometimes he addresses the rulers of the Empire.” (MacGill-eain 1985:65-66) MacNeacail does just this in this song and in English reminds them that, “the men that made our nation great,/ gain nothing but remembrance” (ll. 31-32). Unlike many of the makers of the spineless ‘Clearance Poetry’ of the nineteenth century, he lays the blame directly at the feet of the landlords and politicians responsible for the crofter’s plight:

No more evil could befall our race,
by devilish type of landlords.

Prime Minister Gladstone was to blame
with his evil clique around him,
sent one thousand marines to Skye,
the people there to hound them. (ll. 11-16)

Even his beloved Donnchadh Bàn, in the eighteenth century, laments the passing of the deer forests, rather than the clearance of the people (MacGill-eain 1985:131), but the Sgiobair tells the Skye-men’s story in heroic terms, as befits the descendants of a warrior race.

The Skyemen gallantly did stand
as always did to foe-men
and didn’t yield an inch to them
but routed all before them. (ll. 17-20)

Through oral tradition, the story of the Clearances continues to have a firm hold on the psyche of the Highlander and the Sgiobair’s sense of personal loss and wrong comes through with great poignancy:

Though wounds may heal the scars remain
and so it’s with the Highlands;
the men that made our nation great,
gain nothing but remembrance. (ll. 29-32)

Apart from its function as response, this song is also very interesting on a linguistic level, for though it is in English, we must look to Gaelic intonation, phrasing and poetics to more fully appreciate its complex character. MacNeacail has, with his distinctive dialect, unconsciously developed his own form of Highland English poetry. This incorporates linguistic features common in Gaelic verse, particularly assonance between long vowels in opposing lines. This is rare in an English song as length is not considered a feature of most speech in that language.

Melodically, lines one, two and four of *A time will come, a time will go* are closely related to the chorus of *Té Bhàn an Achaidh Luachrach* [*The Fair One of the Rushy Meadow*], a song well known in Skye in the first half of this century (there are eight renditions by different Skye singers in the School of Scottish Studies archive). *Té Bhàn* itself appears to be based on *The girl I left behind me*. Where the tune varies it is in response to the dictates of Gaelic phrasing and assonance, having been modified through Nicolson's rhythmic composition system discussed in Chapter IV.³²

By virtue of being in Highland English, which reduces some of the intimidation of listening to a foreign tongue, this song allows the mono-glot Anglophone to appreciate some of the aural subtleties of Gaelic song-poetry otherwise missed by non-speakers of the language. Most translations of Gaelic songs by

³² For a more thorough discussion of the linguistic aspects of this song, see McKean 1992a, though much of the description in that article may be side-stepped by listening to the cassette that accompanies this thesis.

less traditional poets than MacNeacail are heavily content-oriented and though they may, in spirit, be accurate reflections of the poet's original concept, they rarely convey a poem's aural feel to the listener.³³ MacNeacail has grafted aspects of his fast-disappearing song tradition onto the incoming culture. His expertise in his native idiom colours his poetry in the language of another culture, even when the language, culture and idiom are as unrelated as those of English and Gaelic.

Over the last few centuries, the concept of linguistic inferiority has been both figuratively and literally beaten into the psyche of the Gael. Its influence can be seen in much of this century's Gaelic poetry in the assumption that the culture's poetic tradition must somehow 'catch up' to developments in modern European poetry, even to the extent of changing its very nature.³⁴ In one sense, MacNeacail challenges this idea that the Gael's language must adapt to English, whether to survive or simply to die gracefully, by continuing to use song as a medium for direct communication. Conversely, he also exemplifies it by making the basic concession of language.

In either case, the Sgiobair has no inferiority complex. Perhaps a bard performing his traditional community function is less susceptible to majority propaganda, because he is expected to be (and is) a little outside the usual (see Chapter VI for more on

³³ As I noted in the introduction, this is one reason I have included the audio tape with this thesis.

³⁴ Even a self-proclaimed saviour of tradition such as Kennedy-Fraser as much as says this: She claims to be aiding the "renascence" of traditional national song but, in fact, was plundering someone else's and forging it into her own (1926:147-148). Meanwhile, this eighty-nine year old man in Cuidreach is still creating in a tradition she considered broken over seventy years ago.

this point). Through his songs, he is a source of change and comment, but also a barometre of them. He, like many other bards, also benefits from a wide knowledge of the wealth and depth of his tradition and he therefore knows that feelings of cultural inadequacy are without foundation.

While he considers himself to have only a shadow of the virtuosity of the older bards, aspects of his art are comparable, and the obstacles just as daunting. Where the eighteenth century poets' world was being physically dismantled by the Hanoverian Army, An Sgiobair's is undermined daily by an insidious cultural imperialism. On the surface, his use of English may be interpreted as a concession to English incomers, but it is, for all that, a rather subversive contribution as the aural feel of the poetry (and the use of the medium of song itself) comes from Gaelic tradition. MacNeacail, by his confidence in that tradition, shows us that it has a great deal yet to offer to European culture and is far from the "broken tradition" cited by Marjory Kennedy-Fraser to justify her lyric experiments (1926:147-148).

We have already seen that MacNeacail does not consider most modern Gaelic verse-makers poets at all, as the concepts of poem and song are still largely identical to him. He applies this same unity of song and poem to English, redefining and enriching the interface between the languages. In the process of creating this middle ground of Highland English song-poetry, he gives new life to aspects of both poetic traditions, including his own endangered one. Perhaps even more important, culturally speaking, is the idea of the 'song as response'—MacNeacail draws on a centuries-old tradition of song-making as an

essential mode of social expression. And as he sings his own song, or quotes his revered poets, the songs become a means of direct expression again, as they were at their genesis (Ó Madagáin 1985:186). With *A time will come, a time will go* he makes his oral world more accessible to us and, in the process, restores some of Gaelic Scotland's lost confidence and pride in the face of rapid cultural change.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SONG-MAKER'S AESTHETIC

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In this chapter I will be looking at Iain MacNeacail in relation to his bardic tradition, drawing together some of the qualities that he appreciates in people, especially song-makers. I will close by discussing some of the features that other people and he himself appreciate about his work. As a first step, let us consider two prominent aspects of MacNeacail's aesthetic: (i) his delight in others' wit, and (ii) his opinions of other poets and why he holds them.

The cleverness of bards

Unsurprisingly, one of the qualities the Sgiobair particularly appreciates is a readiness of wit. A bard in Gaelic society has been "known for his way with words [and] his witty, sharp retorts" for centuries (Bennett 1989:72). Anyone, but especially bards, could be measured by their ability to respond cleverly to a challenge or situation, just as MacNeacail himself would be in the céilidh house. Some of these stories are of the archetypal variety, for example, some of his anecdotes about Gilleasbaig Aotrom, a 'wise fool' who roamed the north of Skye in the early nineteenth century, living off his wits or a version of 'the Lawyer's Mad Client'.¹ Others are simply anecdotes about witty

¹ Several stories about Gilleasbaig, told by the Sgiobair, may be found in McKean 1992b:163-168. Other oral anecdotes about him are on SA1955.138.12, SA1976.170.A5, SA1977.211.A1 and SA1986.79. Written versions in Gaelic may be found in MacLeòid 1924:229-239 and *Tocher* 5:152-155 and in English in MacKenzie 1930:60-66.

The Lawyer's Mad Client' legend (AT 1585) was told to me by the Sgiobair localized to Portree (FW18.12.90:4).

or pointed retorts to foolish questions. My tapes and fieldwork notebooks are full of stories like this, a few of which will give a flavour of the spontaneous cleverness which the Sgiobair relishes. I have heard many of these anecdotes about witty or clever people from him and I have also heard him trading such stories with others, both at his own house and elsewhere showing the important place they have in his mind.²

At the end of Comhdhail nan Seanchaidh 1991, I had the pleasure of overhearing the Sgiobair trading stories about 'An Dotair Beag' ['the Wee Doctor'] from Glen Hinnisdal, with another Skyeman and longtime resident of Uig, Murdo MacLean. Both men were remembering the doctor with affection and clearly enjoying themselves a great deal; the anecdotes kept coming for quite some time.

IN: Oh yes, he was a witty fellow. A wee Doctor he was.

TM: What was his name?

IN: A MacKinnon he was aye, mhm: Doctor MacKinnon.

...He was just in [retirement], you know, and going about the way. He was a doctor...broken off by the Board of Health;...he couldn't be allowed to drink and all that, but he was a good doctor just the same, you know, when you got him right.³

...He was herding the cows in the morning [and met a man who asked], "What are you doing about here?"

"I'm herding the cows."

"And what other job do you do?"

"I do a lot of jobs about here."

"Where you ever in school?"

"Yes, I was," [said the Doctor].

"And can you count?"

"Oh yes, and write. I do a little. Mhm."

² They play an important role in the lore of many Gaels of the older generation, e.g. Joe Neil MacNeill in Cape Breton, whose book *Sgeul gu Latha* has a whole section devoted to "Freagartan Amasach agus Daoine Beàrraidh", or as Dr. John Shaw translates it in the book, "Repartee and Ready Wit" (Shaw 1987:360-379).

³ This paragraph is slightly reordered to flow more smoothly.

"And how many of us are here?"

"A hundred."

"A hundred? No-o-o, one, two."

"Yes," he says, "I'm one and you're...two nothings." [laughs]
He had them! Oh you couldn't speak to him! He was a very outspoken, you know, out right away with it. No time to consider. (SA1990.106.A2)

On another occasion, the Sgiobair was in court giving evidence on the Wee Doctor's behalf. Duncan Corbett, a local character and car hire driver, was there.

And that's when Duncan came to me and says, "Cha déid bàrd gu ruige Néamh gu bràth!"... [*"A bard will never reach Heaven!"*]

"Och a Dhiomhail," ars' an Dotair Beag, "An deachadh Daibhidh ann?" [*"Och, the Devil," said the Wee Doctor, "Did [King] David go there?"*] Did David go there? [laughs] He had them, you know. [laughs]

TM: He had the answer.

IM: Aye, the answer. "Och saoilidh mi gu robh Dàibhidh ann" ars' an Dotair Beag, mhm. [*"Och, I wonder if David was there."*] [laughs] ...Oh he was very witty.

TM: Mhm.

IN: Mhm. And the minister was passing by there and [said], "Were you in church today?"

"Yes," he answered.

"What did you learn today?"

"Oh I took the wrong book, it was *J.D. Williams* ⁴ I should take. He was only speaking about the fashions." You know [laughs], likely the minister would speak about people and fashions and short skirts and they 'couldn't sit on them' and all th[is] bobbed hair, you know, 'they could sit on the hair [in the past, but] not now'.... That's what they would be preaching at times and that's what he got here. "Oh," he says, "I took the wrong book." [laughs]

And I think the minister said to him one day, he complained of the rain.... "O," the minister says, "nach math nach eil e tighinn ann a shin." [*"Oh," the minister says, "isn't it good that it's not coming in there [i.e. through his long coat]."*]

"Well, nam b'e sin a bh'ann, a Mhinisteir," ars' an Dotair.

"Cha sheasadh an còta...agadsa fada ris!" [*"Well, [even] if that were the case, Minister," said the Doctor. "The coat wouldn't stand long*

⁴ A mail-order catalogue delivered to practically every Highland household, from which many people did most of their clothes shopping.

against it [i.e. the fires of Hell]!" Your coat wouldn't stand long with you if it was fire, through the fire, you know. He said to the minister, aye! Och he was so witty, you know, he didn't care who he spoke to. But he had his word, mhm. Och shiorruidh [*Oh eternity*], I knew him well. Aye he was a cousin of Peter Martin over at Cuidreach there, aye. But he was clever, clever...as a doctor too. Mm. Aye, aye. (SA1990.106.A2 and SA1989.27.B1 in Courier)

Another story told with relish is about John Stuart Blackie, the University professor responsible for the setting up of the Chair of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh.

IM: Agus bh'e tidseadh, ag ionnsachadh sgoilearan agus chuir e sios air a' bhlackboard, tha "*Professor Blackie intends to meet his classes at eight p.m. tonight*" a' sin. Thàinig na *students* a-staigh a sheall as a' rud agus bha iad smaoinichadh gu robh ad *clever*, thug ad as a' 'c'. Thàinig Professor Blackie, 's chunnaic e siod,...thug e as an 'l'. 'S e "*Professor Blackie intends to meet his 'asses'...tonight.*" [laughs] ...He had them! Oh you can't beat the education, eh? Och bha duil ac' gu robh e *clever* ach cha robh, robh ad ealanta ma tha. (SA1988.66.B5)

[*And he was teaching, teaching students and the put down on the blackboard, "Professor...tonight" there. The students came in to investigate and they thought they were clever, they took out the 'c'. Professor Blackie came and he saw that, he took out the 'l'. It's "Professor ...tonight." He had them..., eh? Och they were thinking it was clever, but it wasn't; [they were thinking] they were ingenious anyway.*]

Yet another favourite story, this time about another local song-maker, is about Bàrd Ghrialain, Archibald MacLeod of Grealan; MacNeacail particularly enjoys telling and hearing about clever bards. Such stories operate on several levels. Most obviously, since they are about song-makers, they are about people like himself, having a good laugh at the expense of another. In this way, he can identify with the cleverness demonstrated. On a more general level they are about the local man triumphing over the outsider and in this particular story, there's a piquancy in the triumph as the victim is a Leòdhasach

[Lewisman], which plays on the rivalry between the islands. Interestingly, the story is set on the neutral territory of the mainland.

IM: So there was a Leòdhasach, a Lewisman, and a poet from Skye, Bàrd Ghrialain, he was a MacLeod. He was a good bard too, but...his songs didn't go very far at all, but he did quite good songs, if they were got today. But nobody was taking note of them then, but just...orally by mouth.... He met a Leòdhasach and they were both working....

"Ah, where have you been?" he says. Well, there's a place at Fort William, down there, they call it Sròn na Bà, 'The Cow's Nose', but it's known as Sròn na Bà in Gàidhlig and in English....

"Ah well," he says, "tha mi aig Sròn na Bà." ["I am at 'The Cow's Nose'."]

"O ma tha, chan eil thu móran nas fheàrr na mi fhìn, tha mise air mo rathad 'Tòn an Eich'," bha esan a' ràdh. [laughs] ["Oh well, you're not much better [off] than me, I'm on my way [to] 'The Horse's Arse'," he was saying.] He was at a horse's arse working, in the stable, you know. So the one got the other.... Oh aye, he was from Staffin, well he's dead too.

But I mean, what I say, how quickly he got the answer to the Leòdhasach.

MB: They were witty.

IM: Of course. Aye, but the Leòdhasach said it genuine, you know, he was at Sròn na Bà, "Cait' a bheil thu?" ["Where are you?"]

"Aig Sròn na Bà." ["At 'The Cow's Nose'."]

"O tha mise aig Tòn an Eich!" ["Oh, I'm at 'The Horse's Arse!"] Where [it is] I don't know, but he was very witty! (SA1988.66.B12 and SA1990.106.B6 in Courier)

A quick response of this sort was typical of the *bàrd baile* and the level of mental acuity expected of him.⁵

Anecdotes such as this were the meat of the *céilidh* houses and were traded between the *Sgiobair* and people like Dòmhnall Mac Phàdruig and Murchadh Dhòmhnuille Mhàrtainn [*Donald son of Peter and Murdo [son of] Donald [son of] Martin*].

⁵ Cf. MacDhòmhnaille 1956:330 for an example of a quick exchange in verse between Iain MacCoinnich of Toscaig and the local bard, An Dròbhair.

IN: Och well we were discussing and things like that, you know, and I was just equal to him and him to me, but he would have something more, [more] news than I would have. Yes, oh he [was] very good, you know, what like of that. And that was the custom at the céilidhs at one time when we would gather in houses: cracks of old things like that and those people that was in Waterloo and Crimea and oh aye, aye, aye.

They asked Dòmhnall Saighdear [who] was up there, "What was the toughest battle you were in?"

"Blàr clach an teintean, blàr clach an teintean agus teanga nam boireanach." [laughs] ["The battle of the hearthstone, the battle of the hearthstone and [the battle of] the women's tongue[s]."] ...He had more quarrels...at the fireside and the tongue of the women. Dòmhnall Saighdear, bh'e a' fuireach 'san Gleann Hionasdail. Bha e as a' Chrimea. [Donald the Soldier, he was living in Glen Hinnisdal. He was in the Crimea.] ...Aye, and he was in...Sebastopol too. Mm [laughs] Aye, aye., but he...went that way. [taps his head with a finger] ...Oh he had a tough time of it. But they were soldiers then. (SA1988.66.A6-8)

Spontaneous composition

A more demanding manifestation of a ready wit is off-the-cuff composition, a skill which MacNeacail certainly has (see Chapter IV). He is very appreciative of others' abilities in this line, recounting several examples for me, including this one from Màiri Mhór.

IM: Aye, they told her just to give a description of the Island of Skye and she...looked about her and she said,

Nach bòidheach riamh an Cuilthionn,
's cho laghach am measg nan neòil
Glàmaig, Beinn Bhuirbh,
Eilean Thuilm is Leac a' Stòirr
gu ruige Rubha Hùinis,
gach glac is cùl is fròig,
'n taobh eile sealladh aoibhneach
de Mhaighdeanan MhicLeòid.⁶

⁶ This verse appears, nearly exactly, as lines 17-24 of Màiri Mhór's song *Eilean a' Cheò* (Meek 1977:57-61). It may have been made extemporaneously as MacNeacail says, and later used in the song. The important point is that the Sgiobair admires the verse for being off-the-cuff.

Chuir i, mar a chanadh sibh, ann an *nutshell* e... Agus rinn i glé mhath e. Agus thug i leatha an t-eilean uile. (SA1988.66.B1)

*[Isn't the Cuillin ever beautiful,
and so lovely amongst the clouds,
Glamaig, the Mountain of Boreve,
Tulm Island and the Slab of Storr
to Rubha Hunish,
every hollow and corner and nook,
on the other side, the lovely view
of MacLeod's Maidens.]*

She put it, as you would say, in a nutshell. And she did it very well. And she took in the whole island.]

Description

The story about Màiri Mhór's place-names rhyme also brings us closer to understanding one of MacNeacail's criteria for a good song:

TM: What do you think is her best song?...

IM: The best song she made?... I think it's "Soraidh leis an àite 'san d'fhuair mi m'àrach òg," I think that that's very good.

TM: Why?

IM: Well she give description of every place,

Seall fo Chaisteal Uisdein,
's caisteal --- ---
buar a' dol gu suas
go Bòrd uain' 'icLeòid.⁷

*[See below Castle Uisdean,
and a castle --- ---
cattle climbing up
to green MacLeod's Table.]*

And all that. Agus Cuith-raing. Is Sròin-Bhaornaill, *[And the Quiraing. And Sròin-Bhaornaill]* ...the winds of Norway blowing over Sròin-Bhaornaill, where the princess was buried there.⁸

⁷ Lines 65 and 70-72 in *Soraidh le Eilean a' Cheò* (Meek 1977:62-65).

⁸ MacNeacail is referring to the legend that a Danish (i.e. Scandinavian) princess lies buried beneath the peak of Sròin-Bhaornaill, which is named after her (MacKenzie 1930:36). The full quatrain runs as follows:

She gave a lot of description of those things that happened in that song. Mhm. But they were saying...—that was one of her best too, “Moch ‘s mi ‘g éirigh air bheagan éislein”—that...she was saying herself that was her best song. Well there’s no much [description] in it but...she gave more description in [the song she made] when she was going to Glasgow,...*Soraidh leis an àite*, when she made that one,

[*Soraidh leis an àite*]
 ‘san d’fhuair mi m’arach òg,
 eilean nam beann àrda
 far an tàmh an ceò;
 air am moch a dh’éireas
 cluain nan speur fo ròs
 fuadach neul na h-oidhche,
 shoillseachadh a’ Stòrr.⁹

[*A blessing to the place
 in which I was reared in youth,
 the island of the high mountains
 where the mist dwells;
 early will rise
 the field of the sky under a ros[y light]
 banishing the cloud of night,
 to illuminate the Storr.*]

She took out a good description of all these things, but they were saying *Moch ‘s mi ‘g éirigh* was quite a good song too [that] she got in Os. She was there with Bean Ois...for a time. (SA1990.106.B6)

The Gaelic language

One of the most important criteria upon which a bard must have always been judged is the quality of his Gaelic. The Gaels as a people are unusually aware of linguistic competence and are quick to assert the superiority of a particular speaker, tale-teller or even a particular dialect over another. Such people and dialects are measured against a theoretical ideal, but as Nancy

Is nuair a thig an oiteag/ bho Lochlann òirnn a-nall,/ séideadh air Sròin-
 Bhaornaill,/ ‘s cùbhraidh gaoth do bheann. (Meek 1977:62-65, l. 31)
 [And when the breeze comes/ over from Norway upon us,/ blowing on Sròin-
 Bhaornaill,/ and the fragrant wind of the hill.]

⁹ This verse may be found in Meek 1977:62, ll. 1-8, where line 6 reads “grian nan speur...”, “the sun of the heavens”.

Dorian points out, “no one perfectly embodies that ideal at present, if indeed anyone ever did” (1981:116). MacNeacail, on the other hand, measures himself against the bards of old and so, for him, an ‘ideal’ does exist. Others may not measure him against this same ideal, but many have commented appreciatively to me about his diction and the quality of his Gaelic (see *The community speaks* below).

MacNeacail is unassuming in his estimation of his own command of Gaelic, but much less so when singing the praises of the language itself. He often offers a verse from Duncan Bàn MacIntyre opining that Gaelic was the language of the Garden of Eden:

IM: Is that right?... Well it’s difficult to argue with it, you have no foundation to say it wasn’t. But it’s like this, it must be so *old* that nobody knows. But Donnchadh Bàn says,

‘S i chàinntè bh’ as a’ ghàradh,
 ’s a dh’fhàg Adhamh aig an t-sluagh,
 a bhruidhinn anns an fhàsach,
 ’n am tràghadh na Muir Ruaidh;
 a chainnt a bh’aig na fàidhean
 thug fios Phàrrais dhuinn a-nuas
 ‘s gun d’ dh’fhàg aig an àlach i
 tha làthair anns an uair.¹⁰

‘S e a ràdh a-rithist,

¹⁰ This verse is from Duncan Bàn’s *Rann do’n Ghàidhlig ‘s do’n Phìob-mhóir, ‘sa’ Bhliadhna 1781* [*Ode to Gaelic and the Great Pipe in the year 1781*] (MacLeod 1952:270, ll. 3972-3979). The verse in MacLeod and his translation run as follows:

‘S i ‘n labhairt bha ‘sa’ Ghàrradh,/ Dh’fhàg Adhamh i aig an t-sluagh;/ ‘S i chainnt a bh’aig na fàidhean/ Thug fios Phàrrais dhuinn a-nuas;/ ‘S i bhruidheann a bh’anns an fhàsach,/ ‘N am tràghadh do’n Mhuir Ruaidh;/ ‘S i nis a measg an àlach/ Tha làthair anns an uair.

[‘Tis the speech used in the Garden—/ Adam left it to mankind;/ ‘tis the language spoken/ by the prophets/ who transmitted heavenly lore to us;/ ‘tis the speech talked in the wilderness,/ at the time the Red Sea ebbed,/ and ‘tis current in the generation/ existing at this hour.]

Nach i a' chainnt a bh'aig Noah
nuair a sheòl e as an àirc.¹¹

[laughs] Chan eil a leithid ri Donnchadh Bàn ann a sheo.... But
where did they get it?... Cha b'e sgoilear a bh'ann Donnchadh Bàn
idir, cha sgrìobhadh e ainm fhìn! (SA1989.27.B3)

[IM: ...It's the language that was in the Garden
and that Adam left for the people,
that was spoken in the wilderness,
in the ebbing of the Red Sea.
The language of the prophets
who brought knowledge of Heaven down for us
and who left it with the generation
that is now here.

It's he who said again [i.e. elsewhere],

*Wasn't it the language of Noah
when he sailed in the ark.*

*There's not the like of Duncan Bàn around here [today]. But
where did they get it? Duncan Bàn wasn't a scholar at all; he
couldn't even write his own name!]*

These verses are never far from the surface of MacNeacail's
mind, and he will recite them to anyone who will listen, including
the local minister, who, the Sgiobair gleefully adds, has not been
able to offer any proof against Duncan Bàn.

Màiri Mhór, he continues, had something to add on the
matter, as well.

IM: Thubhairt Dunnchadh Bàn sin. Ach chan urrainn dhut a' radh gu
robh e ceàrr.... Thubhairt Màiri Mhór nan Òran a-rithist,

Thug Professor Blackie comhairle àraidh
air a bhith cumail suas na Gàidhlig,

¹¹ These lines are from MacIntyre's *Rann do'n Ghàidhlig 's do'n Phìob-Mhóir, 'sa' Bhliadhna 1782* [Ode to Gaelic and the Great Pipe in the Year 1782]. (MacLeod1952:276, ll. 4037-4039. This is the complete quatrain and MacLeod's translation:

Tha gach duine 'g ìnnseadh dhuinn,/ cho cinnteach ris a' bhàs,/ gur i bu chainnt
aig Noah/ 'n am seòladh anns an àirc.

[Everyone declares to us/ that, as sure as death, it was/ the language Noah
talked/ at the time of sailing in the Ark.]

oir 's ann leatha labhair Adhamh,
"Ciamar a tha thu?" ris a mhnaoi.¹²

[Duncan Bàn said that. But you can't say he was wrong. Again,
Màiri Mhór nan Òran said,
Professor Blackie gave special counsel
to keep up the Gaelic
since it's with it that Adam said,
"How do you do?" to the lady [i.e. Eve].]

So there must be something in it... Ah? I don't know, but it's so,
so old that nobody can go into it, how old it is. But it's a very
expressive language.¹³ (SA1988.63.B17)

Many cultures have made claims of this sort over the centuries. For some people, however, MacNeacail's discussion of this topic may make him seem at best an anomalous naif, at worst a cultural chauvinist. Both of these assessments, while having a certain validity, completely miss the substance of the man and the sincerity with which the observations are offered. The Sgiobair brings this subject up largely in order to express his wonder at the knowledge of the bards of old. He lives in a Gaelic cultural past where poets have the same sort of elevated status that most people, including the Sgiobair, accord University lecturers today. His entire worldview is filtered through the glass of song, so it is little wonder that his primary exemplary texts in life should be song-makers such as Donnchadh Bàn.

¹² There is an echo of this verse in English, in MacKenzie (1934:7): "When Adam first his
Eve did meet,/ shimmering bright as morning dew,/ the first words he spoke to her,/ were
"Ciamar a tha thu 'n diugh."

¹³ Even Mac Mhaighsteir Alasdair has lent his support to the argument in his poem
Moladh an Ughdair do'n t-Seann Chànain Ghàidhealaich [The Author's Praise for the
Old Gaelic Language] (A. and A. MacDonald 1924:4, ll. 57-60):

'S i labhair Adhamh/ ann am Pàrras féin,/ 's bu shiùbhach Gàilig/ bho bheul
àluinn Eubh!

[It's [Gaelic] that Adam spoke/ in Paradise itself/ and it was fluent Gaelic [that
came]/ from the lovely mouth of Eve.]

According to the Sgiobair, Gaelic is unmatched for expression of emotion and precision of thought and it is more accurate in speech than English. In terms of its use of adjectives, this may well be true; there is a dearth of exact equivalents for many Gaelic adjectives. Often a single verse of poetry will be packed with them, expressing subtle shades of the same meaning. To translate such a verse into English accurately often requires a paragraph of English prose and even resorting to the dictionary (usually Dwelly's) for each one frustratingly yields the same English word over and over again.

IM: But what is very strange, you can't get...the interpretation of the Gàidhlig in English. You can't do it!

TM: Mhm.

IN: You have the Gàidhlig there, but you can't make it rhyme the same, no. But you can give exactly near the meaning of it, what he means, but you'll not get the word for word....

TM: It doesn't sound the same.

IN: No it doesn't sound [the same];...chan eil fhios am. [*I don't know.*] Mhm. (SA1989.28.B14)

MacNeacail says that Gaelic is "one of the world's five pure languages," along with Chinese; he has not said what the other three are. Certainly Gaelic is one of the oldest European languages and possesses an ancient written tradition as well.

The Sgiobair's note of triumph and pride in his native language and culture is undoubtedly chauvinistic, and though he left school at the age of fourteen, there is a note of truth, and internal logic, in all he says about it. To me, as an outsider observing the aftermath of the Clearances and the results of a hostile education system, it is refreshing to see a Gael so openly displaying such a tremendous pride in his birthright.

The Gaelic of the poets

For MacNeacail, the language of the eighteenth century poets is the ultimate in expression.

IM: Ah, they say Donnchadh Bàn, he was giving a description of the bradan, or the breac, the salmon. He would say “am bradan tarrgheal”:

[Bradán] tarrgheal 'sa choire gharbhlaich
's a' tighinn bho'n fhairge bu ghailbheach tonn,
air buidhean buirb is e leum cho foirmeil
'na éideadh colgail bu ghormglas druim,
le soillsean airgid gu h-iteach meanbhbreac
gu ballach dearghallach earball sliom.¹⁴

He gave a description of the salmon there.

I have heard him recite this verse many times to illustrate the poet's fine command of language. On this occasion, he translated some of the verse for me (including the two lines other lines in MacLeod 1952, see previous note). I include this discussion below to show how a man fluent in nineteenth century poetic styles and vocabulary copes with the language of his most admired eighteenth century poet.

IM: Well,...tell it to anybody here and they wouldn't understand a word of it. Well, it's easy enough:... “Am bradan tarrgheal”, tarrgheal is whitish and mixed.... “As a' choire gharbhlaich,” the coire,...the stream is coming down, you know.... “Coire garbhlaich”, rough. “A' tighinn bho'n fhairge”...scurries down

¹⁴ As noted before in the introduction to Part II, these are six lines of an eight line verse from Duncan Bàn's *Òran Coire a' Cheathaich* [*The Song of Misty Corrie*], MacLeod 1952:168, ll. 2342-2349. Here is the complete verse and translation as MacLeod has it:

Tha bradan tarrgheal 'sa' choire gharbhlaich/
Tha tighinn o'n fhairge bu ghailbheach tonn,
Le luinneis mheamnach a' ceapadh mheanbhchuileag/
Gu neo-chearbach le chamghob crom,
Air bhuinte borb is e leum gu foirmeil/
'Na éideadh colgail bu ghormglas druim,
Le shoillsean airgid gu h-iteach meanbhbreac/
Gu lannach dearghallach earrgheal sliom.

[In the rugged gully is a white-bellied salmon/
that cometh from the ocean of stormy wave,
catching midges with lively vigour/
unerringly, in his arched, bent beak,
as he leapeth grandly in raging torrent,
in his martial garb of the blue-grey back,
with his silvery flashes, with fins and speckles,
scaly, red-spotted, white tailed and sleek.]

from the waves, the currents of the waves.... "Air...buidhean buirb e" is jumps, I don't know what "buidhean buirb" is, but it's something that he's keen to do.... "E leum cho foirmeil", foirmeil, e cho foirm, firm in his jumps, the way he jumps.

TM: Muscular?...

IN: Aye, aye, aye, "foirmeil, bu ghormglas dhruim, le shoillsean airgid," is glittering, a silvery glitter.... "Meanbhbreac",...mixed, you know, white and black, as you say. "A' ceapadh mheanbhchuileag", catching the wee fly, the midges with his "camghob crom", with his snout bent,...agus "earball sliom",...his tail is going down with a cast in it.

MacNeacail's text is not the same as that in the book. Either he has re-composed the verse in his own mind, or this is a version he heard in the céilidh houses. In any case, we are left with an oral version (even if it does turn out to have an intermediate source in print) which indicates his delight at the linguistic capabilities of the older poets. The verse carries meaning and performs much the same function for him as the written text, confirming his belief in the brilliance of Donnchadh Bàn's linguistic capabilities. To some extent, there is status in the mere fact that Donnchadh Bàn's language is difficult and almost opaque to many speakers of today. (Certainly poets such as Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair have been much admired over the years for using obscure vocabulary in some of their songs.) MacIntyre is also appreciated for the very fact that he is non-literate.

Well, look at the description and that man couldn't read or write his Gàidhlig!... But...where'd he get it? And he then he says, he says again [recites ll. 3972-73, 3976-77, 3974-75 from MacLeod 1952:270 again, regarding the language in the Garden of Eden and continues:]

'S i ceòl na pìob 's na clàrsach
's luchd-dàna dhèanamh dhuan.¹⁵

[It [i.e. Gaelic] is the music of the pipes and the harps
and versifiers who used to make songs.]

Well, you can't,...you can't say they were fools!

TM: No.

IM: Oh hm-hm-hm [laughs], I wish I was one of them! If I was I would be safe [for posterity]. (SA1989.28.B13)

He evinces a keen desire to be amongst the old poets and I have no doubt that he would feel at home there; he already lives with one foot in their world. He would gladly trade places if it meant the preservation of some of his poetry. I also have a sense from his last statement above, that he feels out of his element in the modern world and that he'd be 'saved' from this by being back in time with the eighteenth century masters.

MacNeacail's favourite poets

There is no question but that Duncan Bàn MacIntyre is the poet against whom Gaelic oral song-makers and tradition-bearers like the Sgiobair measure other bards. His language is very consistent and his description is of a very high order indeed. His songs are also far more singable than those of many others, perhaps because they were created by a non-literate person; it is not for nothing that he was known as Donnchadh Bàn nan Òran [Fair(-haired) Duncan of the Songs].

The paradoxical point here is that few of MacIntyre's poems

¹⁵ These two lines are from *Rann do'n Ghàidhlig 's do'n Phìob-mhóir, 'sa' Bhliadhna 1781* [Ode to Gaelic and the Great Pipe in the year 1781] as well (MacLeod 1952:272, ll. 3994-95). Here they are as they appear in MacLeod:

'S i ceòl nam pìob 's nan clàrsach/ luchd-dàn' is dhèanamh dhuan.

[Tis the music of the pipes and harps,/ of minstrels and composers of songs.]

actually survive in oral tradition. Perhaps, as John MacInnes suggests, the tradition that he was the best poet is passed on, rather than the songs themselves (MacInnes 1968:30). In his own lifetime he published several editions of his poems and toured extensively around Scotland presenting his songs. It may be that books like *Sàr-obair nam Bàrd Gaelach* (MacKenzie 1841) lent added status to his poetry by making printed versions easily accessible (though why Duncan Bàn's reputation should benefit more than others' is difficult to say). On the other hand, it may be that editors like MacKenzie made their selections from the songs that were popular at the time.

Another very likely possibility is that some of this regard is due to MacIntyre's very illiteracy; his long complex poems were composed entirely orally, as he was not able to read or write.¹⁶ That a non-literate bard should win greater respect from tradition bearers than any other, including the highly literate Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, is perhaps a testament to the premium that Gaelic song-tradition places on a good memory and the 'singability' of songs.

At one point, curious about his never having mentioned Alexander MacDonald to me, I asked MacNeacail what he thought of him and his poetry.

*Oh Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was more learned than Donnchadh Bàn, but everybody prefers Donnchadh Bàn.... Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was quite good too, [but] they were saying that Donnchadh Bàn was better on natural things. (FW17.12.90:10 and FW18.12.90:11)

¹⁶ The finished songs were written down by the Rev. Donald MacNicol from the poet's dictation, further "revised and rewritten by [his] first editor, Dr. John Stuart, minister of Luss" and printed during his lifetime (MacLeod 1952:xxvii).

Here is a very clear admission that MacDonald was better educated, and yet MacNeacail prefers Donnchadh Bàn's eye for natural beauty, which is indeed renowned throughout the Gàidhealtachd for its dramatic realism and imagery. Some of the Sgiobair's preference may also be due to the relative scarcity of printed versions of MacDonald's work (though he was available in *Sàr Obair* as well). In any case, the Sgiobair is certainly far more *au fait* with Duncan Bàn's poetry.

TM: So where did you learn the Duncan Bàn songs?

IN: Oh, well I heard that [i.e. them] before I ever got this book, you know. Among the community, they had them here. How late it was that was, I don't know. (SA1988.64.B9)

Evidently the songs could be gotten in oral tradition until quite recently, though exactly how recently he is unable to say.¹⁷

Despite the emphasis on Donnchadh Bàn, there are many other song-makers whose work the Sgiobair also appreciates, such as William Ross. MacNeacail does not fully approve of Ross' rhyme schemes, however. To him they do not measure up to most *bàrdachd bhaile*.

Oh well, he was quite good.... Ach I have his book there, but...nobody here has...the music of them, so you're lost.

Again, we see confirmation here that for poems to live in the community, they must be sung.

But even [then] they're not rhyming at all the way you get them here with me or anybody else,...the one word rhyming to the other one.... But they still...work with music all right. Mm.

TM: So they're better sung...than spoken?

¹⁷ In the Sgiobair's school days, the scholars may have been taught a few songs by Duncan Bàn for the local Mòds. In later decades the pupils received regular and more frequent year-round tuition in Gaelic songs.

IM: Oh yes. Mhm. Ach they are. Aye, aye.¹⁸ (SA1990.106.B6)

Ross is another poet whose songs MacNeacail prefers to Màiri Mhór's.

IM: I wouldn't say that she was anything like...Uilleam Ros or Neil MacLeod, aye I wouldn't class her to be as good as them.

MB: Which ones of Uilleam Ros's, or Neil MacLeod's are you

IM: *Feasgar Luain* [was] a very good one,..."*s mi air chuairt, chuala fuaim nach b'fhuathach leam.*"¹⁹ [*"A Monday evening...and me abroad, I heard a sound that did not displease me."*] Aye, he's in the book there. I have his book there, Uilleam Ros.... Oh he was good and of course he was a good scholar with English, Latin and Greek; he had the advantage over them. But still, I think Dunnchadh Bàn would be better than him,...on the average.

MB: Have you got a favourite of Dunnchadh Bàn?

IM: "*Mhàiri Bhàn Òg, 's tu 'n òigh air m'aire,*" [*"O young Fairhaired Mary, you are the maiden I have noticed,"*] I think that's his best.²⁰ (SA88.64.B10)

Though Donnchadh Bàn is his most admired poet, as we've seen above, MacNeacail probably quotes Màiri Mhór nan Òran more often than any other. She is not his favourite poet, but his parents knew her well and for someone growing up in the north of Skye in the early years of this century it would have been impossible to be unaware of her towering presence. Somhairle MacGill-eain notes that her poetry has "not received anything like its due except in popular esteem," (1985:72) and that

it is difficult for any Skyeman, who has a strong feeling for Skye and a certain conception of it, to speak coldly of Màiri Mhór, for her native land was in her blood. (ibid.:71)

¹⁸ As Ives notes, "irregularities in scansion disappear when sung" (1964:154).

¹⁹ This is the first couplet of Ros' *Òran gaoil* (Calder 1937:58-65). MacNeacail has been recorded singing a number of Ros' songs, including the whole of this one, on T1185 (a tape in the School of Scottish Studies' place-names archive, recorded by David Clement).

²⁰ This is the first line of Duncan Bàn's *Òran d'a Cheile Nuadh-Phòsda* [*Song to His Bride*] cited before (MacLeod 1952:114 ff). See Chapter V for MacNeacail's version of the complete first verse.

MacNeacail, though he does not ever speak coldly of her, does not shy away from criticizing her either. To him, she is, though outstanding, only one of many local poets roughly contemporary with his youth and the few decades before.

Ach cha robh ainm sam bith dhi fhad' 's a bha i beò, ach tha e an diugh dhi agus tha sin mar a dh'éireas. Thuir i fhéin sin, 'nuair a bheirear i dhachaidh leis a' bhàs, bi ar n-àl 'ga seinn'. 'S chaidh barrachd a' ràdh m'a déigh' an diugh, 's a bha ann nuair a bha i beò....

A[ch] chuala mise m'athair 's minig a thug e *lift* dhi a Phort Rìgh. Bhiodh i dol suas a Phort Rìgh 's 's e *carriage horse* 's each is *machine* a bhiodh aca, no *dog-cart* a bhiodh aca an uair sin. Bha i faotainn *lift* suas mar sin comhla ris.

Ach bhiodh i measg nan daoine móra, fios agad, uile gu léir. Cha chuala tu cur móran air duine mór riamh i, oir bha na daoine móra math dhi, oir bha eagal aca roimpe[?]; mura déanadh ad sin, bha an t-òran a chuireadh sios iad. 'S cha robh sin a' dol a fhreagairt orra. Agus bha i na b'fhearr air taobh an duine mhór, 's bha na daoine móra math air a taobh-sa cuideachd. Agus sin a dh'fhàg ise cho iomraiteach fhuair i stigh air na daoine móra. Och chan eil fhios am ciamar a tha iad ag obair an diugh, ach bha i iomraiteach latha a bh'ann as an eilean. (SA1988.66.B1)

[But she didn't have a name [as a composer] while she was alive, but she does today and that's how it happens. She said that herself, when she will be borne home by death, our offspring will be singing them. And more is said about her today, and was when she was alive.

But I heard my father [say], many's the lift he gave her from Portree. She would be going up from Portree, and they used to have a carriage horse and a machine, or dog-cart that they had then. She was getting a lift up with him like that.

But she used to be amongst the nobility, you know, completely. You never hear of her putting [i.e. composing] much on the nobility, since the nobility were good to her, because they were afraid of her, that if they didn't do that, it was the song that would put them down. And that wasn't going to suit them. And she was better on the side of the nobility, and the nobility were good on her own behalf as well. And that's what left her so well known, she got in with the nobility. Och I don't know how they are working today, but she was well known in the island in the past.

Though Màiri Mhór was undoubtedly in with such members of the upper classes as Fear Sgeabost the owner of Skeabost House,

she was also well known in her day as a campaigner for crofters' rights. MacNeacail is certainly aware of some of the renown she attained in her own lifetime, as he has recounted several stories of her ecstatically received attendance at the 'Skye Soiree' in Glasgow (SA1988.64.B12). Perhaps, since song-makers in those days were not as rare a breed as they are today, Màiri did not stand out so prominently in his mind. His opinion of her partly arises, I feel, out of his great familiarity with the details of her life and person from a very young age, which would preclude the sort of reverence that many develop for her (and the sort that he holds for Donnchadh Bàn).

MacNeacail also, perhaps, knows that her songs are not really in the same céilidh style as his own, hence his comment about Màiri Mhór and Neil MacLeod.

Ach cha dèanadh i càil do Niall MacLeòid, cha chreid mi, air na h-òrain. Rinn Niall MacLeòid orain glé mhath,

Chì mi an Cuilthionn
 's leóghainn gun tioma,
 le fhiasag de'n shneachd'
 air a phasgadh m'a cheann;
 a ghruaidhean a' srùladh
 le easanan smùideach
 a' tuiteam 'na lùban
 go ùrlar nan gleann.²¹

Och bha Gàidhlig mhath aig Niall MacLeòid agus bha Iain dubh a bhràthair fada na b'fheàrr na e.²²

...Well fhuair mi leabhar aig Niall MacLeòid, tha e agam fhathast,...*Clarsach an Doire*.... Gheibhadh sibh eachdraidh Gilleasbaig Aotram as an t-seann fhear, nam faigheadh sibh aig MacLaren an Glaschu e. (SA1988.66.B2)

²¹ This is verse two of MacLeòid's *Fàilte do'n Eilean Sgiathanach* [Welcome to the Isle of Skye] MacLeòid 1893:24-26. It is one of his enduringly popular songs.

²² One of Iain Dubh MacLeòid's songs may be found in MacKenzie 1934:87-88. See Budge 1972 and MacLeod 1922 for more information on *Dòmhnall nan Òran* (Niall's and Iain's father), and his poetry.

[But she didn't make anything like Neil MacLeod, I don't think, for songs. Neil MacLeod made very good songs.]

*I see the Cuillin,
a lion without softness
with a beard of snow
 wrapped about its head;
its cheeks rushing
with misty cascades
falling in curves
 to the floor of the glens.*

Och, Neil MacLeod had good Gaelic and his brother, Black[haired] John, was much better than him.

Well, I got Neil MacLeod's book, I still have it, The Harp of the Grove. You'll get the history of Simple Archie in the old one, if you could get it at MacLaren in Glasgow.]

According to Derick Thomson, Neil MacLeod, "more than any other of his time," became part of the popular culture for his céilidh songs in "very unexacting" metres (1974:232). He also accuses MacLeod of spurious emotion and invented detail and harbours grave doubts about his artistic integrity (ibid.:225), but admits that "he was a competent craftsman with a strong musical quality" (1983:184). Perhaps MacLeod does not measure up to Thomson's standard of a "hard" cast of mind, but his musicality lead to a great popularity with 'the folk' which surely goes some way to exonerating him from accusations of inexactitude. In their day, the songs filled a necessary niche as undemanding entertainment and were probably not regarded in the same light as the intellectual or literary effusions of the bards of earlier centuries. This, at any rate, is part of the Sgiobair's perspective on them.

IM: Ohh Neil MacLeod was good, oh yes, there was nothing like him, no. Except Dunnchadh Bàn and he's, well, who can step with him? Nobody. [laughs] (SA1990.108.A8)

The aesthetic upon which he judges MacLeod's poems is largely, how well they can be sung. This becomes clear by contrast when I ask him about more modern poets such as Murdo MacFarlane of Lewis, who has “*not one line rhyming with the other!... He was good at...a description of things.”

(FW17.12.90:7) Part of the Sgiobair's definition of the term rhyme, however, is that a song must flow smoothly and rhythmically off the tongue and MacFarlane does not measure up on these criteria. I think the Sgiobair views him as transitional and sees in his work the beginnings of a shift away from céilidh-songs and sung poetry toward verse that is primarily for reading and recitation, such as that of MacGilleain: “It's not for singing, it's bàrdachd. Songs and bàrdachd are two different things.” (FW17.12.90:5) These latter statements are the sort of criticism he applies to most of the modern Gaelic poets we have talked about.

Curiously, even Calum Ruadh Nicolson's songs (MacNeacail 1975, Knudsen 1978), though often in older styles than his own, do not meet his standards (which after all are seventeenth/eighteenth century ones).

IM: No, I didn't approve of them at all.... They're not poetic at all; they don't rhyme or anything. Mind you he was making probably a *bàrdachd* of it, but that's no songs at all.

TM: So they're better for reading than singing.

IM: Oh yes, they will be. Well you could read them, but still you didn't get much...in them. No. Of course it was this *Gairm* that was going about, that did the publishing for them and of course they will likely [be] glad to get anything, but I wouldn't say

they're...with Màiri Mhór or Niall MacLeòid. Màiri Mhór was more popular than any of them.²³ (SA1990.108.A9)

TM: Well she published six thousand lines of poetry when she was still alive.

IM: Oh yes, she did. Yes, but there's some of them that wasn't great... Aye but...at that time, there was a lot of poets going at her age [i.e. in her day], aye. Mhm.

TM: There were a lot of others when she was alive?

IM: Oh yes, plenty, oh yes, quite a lot. Mhm. Oh yes, but not since then. (SA1990.108.A9)

MacNeacail has now brought us back to the idea that there was an abundance of song-makers in his youth. In the early decades of this century, Màiri Mhór had only recently passed away and the céilidh houses were still filled with the new songs and daily anecdotes of a vibrant *living* tradition. I would argue that there was a brief period of living tradition after her death, but before the imminent breakup of her cultural tradition in which there would hardly have been an opportunity to dwell for too long on her songs which we can now, in our leisure, assess as the flower of their era.

It is interesting that MacNeacail considers a number of little-known song-makers to have been as good as Màiri Mhór. Perhaps in many ways they were, but we are left with a relatively small number of texts from North Skye song-makers of this period with which to make comparisons. We can probably put down the loss of these songs ultimately to the circles in which these local poets moved: (i) they were not among the literate nobility, meaning that their songs would not have been written

²³ Calum Ruadh, incidentally, admires the same group of song-makers as the Sgiobair (Knudsen 1978:7).

down; and (ii) they did not become notorious in their own day, as Màiri Mhór did, which might have lead to a literate outsider taking an interest and publishing editions of their works. The influence of a sizeable volume of collected poems cannot be overestimated. It lends great status to a poet in a society that has a great respect for the written word. And to book-oriented scholars, from the perspective of the late twentieth century, a volume of collected works denotes legitimacy. Through this status of having published, the author becomes revered to a degree not necessarily commensurate with a close reading of the poems.²⁴

In the absence of a larger body of the local poets' songs, then, we must defer to MacNeacail's judgement of them to some extent. He admires many of the local song-makers, e.g. Uilleam Iain Chaimbeul, Seumas Iain Sheumais, Neil Gow in Staffin, Calum Ciorstaigh and others that I have mentioned before.²⁵ Here he talks again of Bàrd Ghrialain:

Aye, he was a MacLeod from Staffin, aye. They called him Bàrd Ghrialain.... He was known as a bard, but he composed good songs.... They weren't many, but he was known as a bard at the time. There was few that would compose like him, you know, but he was known as a bard, but there's none of them now going, no.

TM: Do you think those people were comparable to Màiri Mhór?

²⁴ Such a close reading of Màiri Mhór's verse will reveal some weak language and, at times, a rather lax approach to the overall construction of her poems. Somhairle MacGill-eain goes some way to excusing her for such weaknesses, usually on the grounds of "joie-de-vivre" or "big-heartedness" (1985:250-257). She is undoubtedly immensely popular with the folk, in name anyway, and, as any artist, for particular works.

²⁵ Additional fieldwork in Trotternish (using names of local poets that MacNeacail has given me to jog people's memories) would undoubtedly yield a number of these songs, but this work must be done soon.

IM: As good as Màiri Mhór? Och yes. Och yes, but of course she was following the big bugs of the place, you know,...and she always made good songs for them. (SA1990.106.B6)

As for contemporary composers' poems, they do not accord with MacNeacail's conception of poetry. Poets as different to each other as Calum Ruadh and Somhairle MacGill-eain do not meet with his approval, though they compose in radically different styles (the former in older traditional styles and the latter in twentieth-century European styles, albeit influenced by a wealth of traditional knowledge). In fact, neither poet speaks MacNeacail's eighteenth to late nineteenth century poetic language; their songs are therefore, by definition, not poetry to him. This may be seen as a parochial opinion on his part, but there are none so able to judge what they like as the folk themselves. Tradition is the most perceptive editor of all; what passes under its rules has an innate validity that no amount of 'educated' critical judgement can deny. It would therefore be unjust to interpret MacNeacail's dismissal of some of the modern poets as real disdain, for they compose to a different aesthetic. It is therefore not possible that their songs should meet with MacNeacail's full understanding or approval. As he said so picturesquely about Donnchadh Bàn, sub-consciously echoing his own technique of composing while walking up the road, "Who can step with him?" (SA1990.108.A8)

The dramatic changes that have taken place in Gaelic society over the last half century have been very difficult for MacNeacail to bear. He laments the lack of witty and lively repartee described at the beginning of this chapter and in Chapter II. There is great sadness in his voice as he closes his reminiscences

of those days and characters with, "Ah, but all these people are gone now, you can't beat them!" (SA1988.66.B13b)

AN SGIOBAIR, THE BARD

In this section, I will consider the question of how others see the Sgiobair and in the end how does he see himself, both in relation to his village and community and to the larger world of his beloved poets of the past.

The belief that a poet is born, not made, is extremely strong, and a curious aspect of the belief is that very often a bard will stress the fact that his gift comes to him from his mother, or from his mothers' people, sometimes even when his father's family seems also to have included bards. (MacInnes 1968:40)

MacCodrum maintained that he inherited his poetic gift (Matheson 1938:xix) and even a modern poet like Somhairle MacGill-eain states that his poetic ability comes from his Nicolson mothers' side of the family. The Sgiobair too, feels that his talent is inherited: "*You can make a piper, but you can't make a poet." (FW18.12.90:3) I have also heard the same said of pipers, that they are born not made, so I suspect that whichever skill the tradition-bearer possesses is considered to be a gift and that of others, mere learning.²⁶ Curiously, the Sgiobair's saying runs contrary to the ancient tradition of the rigorously trained classical bard. Perhaps the innate ability was in-bred, but further training was needed. The Irish scholar of bardic poetry Osborn Bergin backs this up by saying that a poet had to be "both born and made" (1970:5).

²⁶ Hard work and tradition combine in another pipers' saying, which complements the Sgiobair's: 'It takes seven years and seven generations to make a piper.' The Irish version says, 'It takes twenty-one years to make an Uilleann piper: seven years learning, seven years practicing and seven years playing.'

Màiri Sgiobair [Mary, wife of the Sgiobair] has told me that their son Willie is good at composing, and though I have recorded him singing one or two songs, I have not yet elicited a verse of his own composition. The Sgiobair says he makes the odd line or verse, but that he does not follow them through to completion (SA1988.64.A11). Perhaps a real talent for composition skips a generation, but on the other hand, I have asked the Sgiobair if any of his forebears have made songs and been answered in the negative. If composition does run in the family at all, no one in the MacNeacail family seems to have picked up the torch. This may, of course, be due to the presence of the Sgiobair himself; it would take a bold and perhaps slightly disrespectful wordsmith to “step with him”. In addition, the children have grown up in a post-war culture where song was less usual than it was in the Sgiobair’s youth; there were not as many composers around and, in the way of children, they would have thought their father anomalous and not followed his model. That said, several of the children now appreciate his skill and are quite proud of some of his songs²⁷ (SA1988.64.A12 and FW12.1.90:1). MacNeacail himself considers his skill to be a gift and in his youth was not aware that he was possessed of anything special (see Chapter V).

²⁷ I have known that John Angus was interested since my early visits. My latest trip, however revealed that Willie knows the first lines and many early verses for a number of his father’s songs. In a conversation that night, he quizzed me on whether I had a particular song his father made and I would respond by reciting the first verse. This went on for quite some time; I think his opinion of me, the outsider and learner, has improved. (FW13.3.93:1) Cf. Margaret Bennett’s experience with Frank MacArthur, a son of her main informant of *The Last Stronghold* (1989), who asked her for a text of one of his father’s songs. He now sings the song himself. Bruno Nettl draws attention to the fact that the scholar’s presence may sometimes wreak havoc with a society’s view of itself and of its music (1973:261). Changes in attitude like those described above surely reveal the positive side of such a presence.

The song-maker on the outskirts of society

Many societies have come to view the song-maker as a little out of the ordinary, or at the very least eccentric. The image of the artist as a "kind of supernaturally-inspired madman" has been around for centuries, but only in recent times has "the artist began to feel himself separated from, and at odds with, his world" (Nash 1961:85). Before this separation occurred, the poet in traditional Gaelic society would have had a respected place in the hierarchy below the chief. He might be considered a little fey and perhaps, at times, encouraged the idea that he had supernatural powers, but he played an accepted role, and was probably not "at odds" with his world. Even in the post-Culloden era, and all that that entailed, the village song-maker was still part of the fabric of society, outcast only to the extent that people kept him at a distance fearing his satirical skills. In this century, however, the song-making personae of people such as the Sgiobair (and Larry Gorman, for that matter, cf. Ives 1964:29, 133) have been increasingly marginalized by the changing culture around them which no longer has a central role for the township poet. By my observation, even MacNeacail's children have seen him as a little unusual, though this attitude has been changing gradually as they have seen me and others repeatedly visiting him. They have, I think, noticed and appreciated the effort (and therefore the implied respect) that I have given the work of transcribing his songs and thoughts.

In the post-war years, when MacNeacail was physically marginalized in Cuidreach, several miles away from the céilidh haunts of his youth, many younger Uig folk, such as Aonghas

Dubh, the Gaelic poet, grew up feeling that the Sgiobair was in some way different:

AM: The impression I grew up with was of his being somewhat eccentric, or being seen as somewhat eccentric, I should say.... I think that may have arisen out of a sort of attempt to distance people from him. They would not be unfriendly with him if they met him, but...those that didn't know him so well perhaps, kept themselves at a distance by defining him in such a way, and that in a sense insulated him...

TM: [They kept their distance] for safety's sake.

AM: I think there might have been an element of that, which you would get with any bard. I mean curiously his fellow bard of the time was very much a humorist, Angus Fletcher, maybe not a satirist, but I think that was the difference. The Sgiobair was more a serious bard and therefore potentially more dangerous were he to take to...accusing anyone in verse.

TM: Do you know of any specific occurrences of that?

AM: I don't actually, no. (SA1993.2.A7)

Though the Sgiobair has made very few songs of this nature, he had a reputation as someone who could and might do so. This was enough to cause some folk to keep their distance.

In part, of course, this impression of the Sgiobair being in another world may have been justified; he would often have seemed distracted when inhabiting his world of song-making imagery. On the other hand, he was able to make the transition between distraction and involvement very smoothly, as we saw with the composition of *Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd* (IX), where he abstracted himself from direct participation in the proceedings to compose his song. This introspection, so necessary for creativity, may yield impressions of eccentricity, which could, in turn, lead to a distancing between the song-maker and his own community.

AM: He was always thinking and...because he wasn't, strictly speaking, a humorist, that also put him a wee bit at a tangent with the rest of society, because with the likes of Angus Fletcher, you knew that [as he] drew his breath to launch into a song, you were going to have a giggle, or a belly laugh even, but you didn't have that assumption with the Sgiobair because he was much more liable to touch on serious aspects of life.

TM: But I suppose if somebody was used to making up verses as he was walking along, he could hardly help it after a point.

AM: Well exactly. (SA1993.3.A6)

For MacNeacail, making songs is almost involuntary. As such, it is also crucial to his definition of self. It therefore makes little difference what others think of him, especially if the persons with whom he compares himself are the eighteenth and nineteenth century bards. Perhaps he has developed his keen sense of the past *in response* to the marginalization discussed above, but I suspect that the reverse is true; his song-making persona has become marginalized in response to his 'eccentricity'.

I hasten to point out that in discussing marginalization in this way, I do not mean to imply that the Sgiobair is in *any* way a social outcast in terms of daily life, far from it; his home is still a busy céilidh house and an evening seldom passes without a visitor.

The community speaks

In general, how good a song-maker is in local terms may be judged on how his or her songs are received "at the time and by the audience for whom they were created" (Ives 1978:413). I will now turn to "the audience for whom they were created" and present some assessments of the Sgiobair and his songs through the eyes of a number of fellow villagers and fellow Gaels.

One generalization may be made from the start and that is that folk do not judge the songs on their melodic content. I have shown this above in the discussion of the traditional song-maker's approach to the music of his songs. The measure of his creativity within tradition, the aesthetic upon which he is being judged, is the creation of lyrics and the fitting of them to the chosen melody (whatever its origin), but not the melody itself.²⁸

Peigi Bennett and her brother Peter Stewart of Glenconon (now of Balquhiddar)

Some of the Sgiobair's songs were "quite popular at one time" (SA1990.105.A5), especially *Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal* and *Nach bòidheach Uige* (XVI and XVIII). Peigi Bennett used to sing the latter at local céilidhs, and wrote it in her small black book of songs (Bennett 1950), so the songs did have a certain currency before the society veered too far away from its cultural basis of song.

"*He had very good Gaelic, the Sgiobair. He used words that were uncommon." (Peigi Bennett:FW5.3.90:2) I have heard such statements from many people, not that he used *unknown* words (as Mac Mhàigh-tìr Alasdair is famous for doing), but simply a heightened register of language slightly above the

²⁸ A.M. Freeman has this to say: "However minutely a song may be discussed, only the vaguest references to the tune will be heard." (quoted in Ó Madagáin 1985:179) Edward Miller points out that melody and voice quality are of minor importance to Bothy men in the Northeast of Scotland (1981:165). Ó Madagáin discusses the point at greater length: The singers "inability to articulate musical appreciation doesn't mean they didn't appreciate it. Language can talk about language, but language doesn't talk about music so well." He goes on to say that people's appreciation of music is instinctive so that listeners could not necessarily say why they held certain opinions about a piece of music. Even so, they would travel some way to hear a singer that they considered "good" according to their aesthetic. (1985:179-181)

everyday. “*Now that’s great poetry, Peter.” Mrs. Bennett continues (FW5.3.90:4), speaking to her brother Peter about *An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh* (XXIV) as she was assisting me with the transcription. Peter agreed, thereby confirming that the song-maker is being assessed largely on his text. Perhaps this judgement is based partly on subject matter, as well as the fine control of language. There is a sense that the Sgiobair could really rise to an occasion, such as the death of the Reverend Macrae, to make a particularly outstanding song like this one. He himself has said that his songs were better when he took a little more care, rather than making them relatively quickly for one night in the céilidh house. His more remembered and respected songs are, for the most part, the ones over which he has taken the greatest care. “Oh yes, he was a good bard,” added Peter (Interview 30.3.93).

Murdo MacLean, Portree and Uig (now North Kessock)

Murdo MacLean was born in Portree, but has known the Sgiobair since the 1930s. Shortly after the Second World War, MacLean moved to Uig where he lived with his wife Effie and their family until the late 1960s. There is an obvious rapport between the two men when talking about people they both knew and about the old days in Trotternish (see the opening of this chapter).

“*I thought there was more depth to the Sgiobair’s song’s [than Fletcher’s],” says MacLean. “*Oh he was good.” (Conversation 29.1.93) Again we see that the Sgiobair, though perfectly capable of humorous and ‘throw away’ songs, also had

a reputation for more serious compositions. Interestingly, MacLean uses the word 'depth' as a qualitative adjective.²⁹

Murdo and Teenie Stewart, Glenconon

Both Murdo and Teenie Stewart have said that they thought the Sgiobair was a clever man, but perhaps the most touching testament to the high regard in which his work is held in his own native glen is the contents of the their bookshelf in the kitchen at No. 10 Glenconon:

- Seven bibles (two English)
- One Gaelic poetry book
- Two church magazines
- Three collections of Gaelic sermons (the earliest is 1859)
- One pair of spectacles
- One Stornoway Gazette (1974)
- One photo: "At the fank, August, 1939"

And last but not least,

- One copy of the Sgiobair's booklet of songs. (FW27.12.92)

Isabel Ross, Earlish/Mogastat (now Fortrose)

Mrs. Ross has known the Sgiobair since she was eleven or twelve (ca. 1931). She told me of how the Sgiobair used to come to her father's house and sing his latest composition. On one occasion her father had tears of laughter running down his cheeks, because he knew all the people the Sgiobair was lampooning in the song (SA1993.4.B10). She also notes with pleasure that the Sgiobair is the Bard to the Clan Nicolson (SA1993.4.B9).

TM: You were saying that the Sgiobair was] better at making more serious songs.

²⁹ The Gaelic word is 'domhainn' or 'doimhneachd' and is frequently used in discussions about bardic language and poetry. Martinengo-Cesaresco uses the word depth as well, though not just regarding language, but in relation to the skills and achievements of the "Keltic Bards" (1886:47); the metaphor is a well established one.

IR: Yes, I think, the Sgiobair was ahead of even Fletcher too, but I suppose that's a matter of opinion.

But say there was a feud between you, he would try and settle it by negotiation, but...in an argument, well he wouldn't change his opinion.... He's got his opinion and you wouldn't shift him. But haven't we all. [laughs]

...He has a big heart and he's very, very kind and so is Mary. And he's really most enjoyable. Oh well I was there, remember Angus [her husband],...and he came home and Mary was teasing him.... Oh he got really annoyed with Mary over something and I forget what his wife said to him, and I was teasing him [too]. And he says, "Right," he says, "when I go,...you don't know what you're saying,...I'm going to leave my money to an old folks home. [laughs] (SA1993.4.B2)

Aonghas MacNeacail (Aonghas Dubh), Uig (now Edinburgh)

AM: To me the man he compares with who was capable of satire, but also capable of the most marvelous poignancy is Iain Dubh Dhòmhnail nan Òran, you know from Glendale,...the mariner bard who had a wonderful capacity for composing striking songs in very ordinary language. On one level, his songs were like conversation on another level there was such an economy to them and such precision to them.

TM: You were mentioning that earlier,...talking about how, in many ways, it's quite ordinary...language, and yet quite precise and controlled.

AM: Yes, it is extraordinary that language can be used in such a way. It's [a] juxtaposition of words and images;...it's very hard to explain, it's a quality

TM: It sounds like speech, but it's very deliberate and exact.

AM: Absolutely, yes. And...full of assonances and all sorts of the trickery of the bard that you don't get in normal speech, but...the rhythm of it is both flowing and fluid...as verse and yet has the ease of normal speech as well.

When you think of the translations that have been made of Gaelic poetry over the years and how sort of 'soft-edged' it can seem.... The reality of Gaelic poetry is very different;...it may deal with sentimental subjects sometimes, but always, I feel, un sentimentally.... The language transcends...the sentimentality.

TM: It's usually quite stark in a way.

AM: It is yes.

TM: Even if the images conjured up are rich or dramatic, the language is...straight ahead.

AM: ...One of the songs I was reading was [Màiri Mhór's] *Òran Beinn Lì*...wonderful, wonderful, which again carries that quality of the simplicity and the striking...and...the Sgiobair is very much in that tradition. (SA1993.2.A7)

Uilleam and Iain Aonghas MacNeacail and Màiri Sgiobair
[William and John Angus Nicolson and Màiri, wife of the
Skipper], Cuidreach

Uilleam and Iain are the Sgiobair's sons who are most often present when I have visited. They appreciate his songs, though perhaps more so in the last few years as discussed above. For the first few years of my visiting, I was not sure that they shared his interest in history and local characters, for one of them would occasionally hold up the proceedings. Now, however, they generally listen while I am recording and add further particulars or correct the Sgiobair's memory if he misremembers a detail.

Iain has assessed more than one song as "good" and takes quite an interest when I am recording his father (FW12.1.90:8). His brother Willie has said, "O tha e math air seinn, nach eil?" [*Oh he's good at singing, isn't he?*] (SA1988.64.A12), as well as frequently suggesting a song for the Sgiobair to sing to me: "**Gabh Nach bòidheach Uige (XVIII), tha sin math.*" [*Sing Isn't Uig beautiful, that's good.*] (FW13.3.93:3) Sometimes the brothers appear to tire of his old-fashioned world-view, but most children distance their themselves from their parents in this way. Their mother Màiri does not share the Sgiobair's intense interest in songs and tradition and is always worried lest I record some of

the “rubbish” I have presented in the previous five chapters (and that she has heard for the last forty-five years).³⁰

Màiri and Iseabail NicNeacail [Mary and Isabel Nicolson],

Siadar

The Sgiobair’s sisters, Màiri and Iseabail—who is five years older than the Sgiobair—still live in their native glen of Siadar and regularly come down to Cuidreach for a visit. Màiri is known as Màiri Uilleam [Mary (daughter of) William] to differentiate her from the Sgiobair’s wife, who is known as Màiri Sgiobair [Mary (wife of the) Sgiobair].

Both of the sisters are dedicated church-goers and are fairly strict on such matters as keeping the Sabbath. Like many of the older generation, but unlike their brother, they do not feel that Gaelic is important enough to save and they deplore Gaelic road signs and the like as frivolities. Despite these attitudes, they do appreciate the Sgiobair’s talent for song-making. Probably their favourite song is *An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh* (XXIV). The reason Iseabail gave for this is interesting, as it coincides with his own assessment (see below) of the strengths of the composition about Kenneth Macrae: “*The song is just like him too.” (FW19.6.91:7)

Other tradition-bearers

A number of tradition-bearers from all over the Gàidhealtachd, including the Sgiobair, gather bi-annually at *Comhdhail nan*

³⁰ Margaret Bennett tells of her main informant’s wife’s hesitation at recording the “reminiscences of an old man”, but he replied that he was “only telling the truth.” (1989:20)

Seanchaidh [the Meeting of Tradition-bearers] in Sleat. Over the years that the conference has been running, the *seanchaidhean* [tradition-bearers] have gotten to know each other quite well and I decided to elicit some of his contemporaries' and peers' impressions of his work.

I first spoke to Seasaidh Chamshron from Lewis, about *A Mhàiri, a Mhàiri* (XVII), which the Sgiobair had just sung, “*’S e òran snog a th’ann.” [*It’s a nice song.*] A woman with whom she was sitting replied, “Nach eil e brèagha!” [*Isn’t it lovely!*] (FW18.11.91:11)

Anna Dhunnchaidh [Anna daughter of Duncan (MacDonald)³¹] was another participant in the Comhdhail. She was a fund of old lore about the Fenians and I asked her what she thought about the Sgiobair from her perspective of some of the older Hebridean traditions: “*O tha e gu math fiosrachail.” [*Oh he is very intelligent and well informed.*]

“O tha, tha,” [*Oh yes, yes,*] answered Dòmhnall Dunnachadh Dòmhnallach [Donald Duncan MacDonald], seated at her side. I then asked Anna about the songs themselves: “O tha ad uamhasach math! An cuala tu òran a rinn e, *A Mhàiri, a Mhàiri?* (XVII) Tha e misneach.” [*Oh they are terribly good! Have you heard a song he made, Oh Mary, oh Mary? He is spirited.*]³² (FW18.11.91:16)

³¹ Dunnchadh ‘Clachair’, the famous storyteller from Peninerine, South Uist.

³² Sadly, Anna Dhunnchaidh died early in 1993.

Recording and media recognition

In recent decades, with the advent of inexpensive recording techniques, MacNeacail has been recorded extensively by me and several others (e.g. the BBC, Cailean MacGill-eain, Anne Dhu Shapiro, David Clement, Jonathan MacDonald). In 1980, Catriona NicGumaraid produced a cassette and booklet made up of some of the Sgiobair's and Aonghas Fleidsear's songs. It is interesting to see these modern poets, scholars and broadcasters appreciate the Sgiobair's work, perhaps as a genuine unbroken link with the past and perhaps simply because some of his best verse has a timeless quality and mastery about it. In a way, many modern Gaelic poets have been cut off from this past and so have had to start again using book-learned foundations.

A creator within the tradition

MacNeacail, for all his knowledge of his tradition, was always more interested in creating within it: "I wasn't taking the notion of them, I would rather be composing myself." (SA1990.108.A7) It is this connection with a living tradition that makes the Sgiobair, and the few remaining bards like him, so important to Gaelic culture today. Aonghas Dubh:

AM: We really are the first generation where the living tradition isn't as healthy as it could be.³³ Which makes someone like the Sgiobair even more precious, that he doesn't just represent the tradition that these people recounted, he has been a creator *in* the tradition. (SA1993.2.B5)

³³ This could have been said by each generation of tradition-bearers and collectors for at least the last several centuries, and indeed has been.

For his part, the Sgiobair sees his talent as a gift, but does not see himself as a composer of any note compared with the great bards.

IM: Well,...when I go into the language of Donnchadh Bàn and William Ross here, no there's no comparison! I knew, I know...what a fool I am, compared to them.

MacNeacail both appreciates the efficacy of an oral education, and wonders that it worked so well. There is also an element of self-deprecation here, reminiscent of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's claim in *Guidhe no Ùrnaigh an Ughdair do'n Cheòlraidh* [*Entreaty or Prayer of the Author to the Muses*], to be skill-less and unschooled.³⁴ Perhaps there is an unspoken code of self-assessment to which bards are expected to adhere.

I asked MacNeacail if he made a deliberate attempt to compose like the old bards, for example in the use of difficult words.

IM: Ah well, no but I want to go as deep in them as I can. But if I did so local[ly] here, they wouldn't understand it, because they [are] only working on the surface of Gàidhlig here, compared to what these bards were. They were going and there weren't a vegetable [i.e. plant] in the field, or a fish in the sea, or anything that, that...could compare with them! (SA1989.28.B12)

Again the word 'depth' is used in relation to a poet's language. These bards knew the names of the very building blocks of the earth.³⁵ Obviously, MacNeacail does attempt, within the limits he perceives himself to have, to emulate them in language at least. He implies that he *could* compose in a manner more like

³⁴ MacDonald 1924:10-15, especially ll. 67-80.

³⁵ The ability to name objects and creatures has been an indicator of rank and power for millennia (for example, Adam's naming of things in the Old Testament *Book of Genesis*).

the old bards than he does, but that as a contemporary poet he must modify his poetic 'ideal' to keep in step with his audience.

For a composer's music to be socially significant, it must carry some meaning to an audience.... If one's contemporaries do not understand or like one's music, there is little chance for it to become a part of the culture. (Nash 1961:93)

The audience is, after all, the final arbiter on whether his songs gain any currency and whether he himself reaps any resulting approval in the community.

Despite MacNeacail's undoubted bardic skills (which he often belittles), he does not expect his own songs to live on:

IN: Yes, yes, yes, well Màiri Mhór [said], "Nuair bheirear dhachaidh leis a' bhàs mi, bidh ar n-àl 'ga seinn," [*When I am borne home by death, our generation will be singing them,*] but not any of them.³⁷ (SA1988.64.B10)

Had he been born earlier, I believe that more of the Sgiobair's songs would have survived. Màiri Mhór left her songs to a culture with a fully functional oral tradition which allowed frequent transmission, of her reputation at least, in a céilidh setting. As we have already seen, several of the Sgiobair's songs were sung in the declining house-visiting culture of the 'fifties and early 'sixties. On the other hand, Màiri Mhór, and Donnchadh Bàn before her, were relentless publicists; their tours in combination with the publication of their songs during their lifetimes gave them very high profiles in the Gaelic world. Published collections (such as I hope to produce for the Sgiobair)

³⁶ Martinengo-Cesaresco uses the word depth as well, though not just regarding language, but in relation to the skills and achievements of the "Keltic Bards" (1886:47); the metaphor is a well established one.

³⁷ Perhaps in recent years, as more of his songs have been recorded and as I have shown him more and more transcriptions, he has begun to believe that his songs, too, will live on.

can therefore go a long way towards giving the composer currency in the eyes of society.

An Sgiobair the song-maker

In the Sgiobair's perceptions, as we have seen above, Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir is a bard, *sui generis*. By this definition, therefore, he himself is not a true bard, by his own definition even though he holds the ceremonial title.

TM: Did you consider yourself a bard?

IM: No! But I'm known as that, in Australia, New Zealand and everywhere. They got that name and everything I get [called in] Australia, the 'Bard of the Clan Nicolson'. (SA1989.27.B2)

To him, the work of a bard and the ceremonial office that he holds are two completely different things. He does not consider himself to be on the same plane as Donnchadh Bàn and therefore does not use the word "bard" in relation to himself, though he does gain some pleasure out of the recognition of his talents that the name implies. That he holds the office, in name anyway, is due to a suggestion from Aonghas Dubh to the Australian Chief of the Clan Nicolson: "'Somhairle [MacGill-eain] seemed quite content to take the honours for the Clan MacLean, so I thought it would be nice to offer [the Sgiobair] something.'" (Interview 2.3.93). 'Sgoirebreac', as the Chief is called, was enthusiastic and arranged the matter immediately.

Last May (16.5.92), I had the honour of accompanying the Sgiobair to the Clan Gathering, which took place in the Cuillin Hills Hotel in Sgoirebreac. The Chief and his wife were over from Australia (probably, they said, on their last visit to Scotland) along with their son, 'Mac', and his French wife, Marie. Also in

attendance were Nicolson clansmen from all over the world. The Sgiobair, dressed in his kilt of Nicolson tartan, took part in the procession into the hall and I was pleased to see him seated at the head table in conversation with the Chief; he values his friendship with the Chief and content enough to play the role of the Clan Bard at formal occasions every few years. In some ways, MacNeacail's situation parallels Màiri Mhór's when she was rubbing shoulders with "the big bugs", to use his phrase. On the other hand, he has not made a single song to or about the Chief or the Clan and those that he has made to the 'upper class' (e.g. *Thoir mo bheannachd do dh'Eilein Iarmain* (XXVII) and *'S e seo a' sgeul tha tàitneach leinn* (XXVI)) have not gained him any form of patronage or sponsorship. Several people present (e.g. the Chief, Dr. Alasdair Maclean and others) told me they were very pleased that someone was collecting his songs and working with him in such detail. They value his compositions and perhaps too, the ancient image of the Clan Bard. The appreciation of 'educated' people like them would no doubt be a source of satisfaction to him.³⁸

³⁸ The appointment of Ailean Dall as bard to Glengarry at the end of the eighteenth century has some parallels with the Sgiobair's, though Ailean Dall was given a cottage and croft. Both men show some pride in their positions and in taking their places in Clan Gatherings and processions (MacKenzie 1907:324-325).

William Matheson recounts the story of John MacCodrum's appointment as bard to Sir James MacDonald in 1763. The latter was intrigued by MacCodrum's *Aoir nan Tàillearan* [*Satire of the Tailors*] and offered to give him a croft, money and meal if he would take up the position of bard. The poet held out for five stones of cheese per year as well and Sir James acceded (1938:269-272). According to Matheson, the Chief was "a keen upholder of traditions" (ibid.:xxiv), as is 'Sgoirebreac' today to some extent, and used him to extend his knowledge of Gaelic (ibid.:xxv). Incidentally, MacCodrum's predecessor, Duncan MacRuaraidh, held possession of a field near Cuidreach in Skye called, *Achadh nam Bàrd* [the Field of the Bards] (MacKenzie 1930:79, Matheson 1938:xxiv).

MacNeacail's old-style fealty (as shown in his pride at being the Clan Nicolson bard and in his panegyric songs to Skye land-owners) has drawn criticism from some quarters.

After the formal part of the evening was over, I spent quite some time in conversation with the Sgiobair, 'Mac' and Marie. MacNeacail was honoured to be in conversation with the son of the Chief and commented later what a nice and ordinary person he seemed. The assumption that he might be otherwise shows that the Sgiobair is still quite deferential to people of social standing, whether they be doctors, lawyers or especially Chiefs. To him, since the Chieftainship itself went overseas, it was not to blame for the Clearances. For their part, 'Mac' and Marie were charmed by the Sgiobair and his poetic achievements and fascinated by integration of song in his culture. They were also touched, flattered (and probably made a little self-conscious) by his old-fashioned respect and loyalty.

IM: Oh I never think I'd have the office too. No I don't, not, not! No but...I could compose, you know, but being a bard, oh the like of Duncan Bàn MacIntyre...and these. Oh they were...the best bards... Donnchadh Bàn,...you know him?

TM: Yes.

IM: He's the man! (SA1989.27.B2)

MacNeacail speaks as if 'mere' composers, such as he, were common. Certainly, there is more to being a bard than simply making songs, but I believe the Sgiobair's achievements in this area are not to be under-assessed (as he would have us do). As I said at the end of *Case Studies*, I believe that aspects of his art are comparable to those of his favourite bards, and the world he

To my mind it is simply another indication of how firmly he is planted in the culture of another age. To condemn him for following the social order in which he believes would be as unwarranted as ridiculing a person born in 1800 for not knowing how to operate a motor-car. He follows the conventions appropriate to his own world-view.

lives and works in perhaps more hostile to the practice of that art.

I haven't got them myself, you know

MacNeacail's own favourite songs are those that got to the heart of the matter, such as *Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal* (XVI), which simply "told it as it was".

TM: Well something like this doesn't go out of style.

IN: ...the one I made in France?... Well that was quite popular at one time, but I'm forgetting them now, you know. Cause they're past now and there's no word of it. But it was quite popular at one time when I came home after the war. (SA1990.105.A5)

Another of his favourite songs of his own is *An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh* (XXIV), because it was "more truthful than any of them" and "put...him as he was" (SA1990.105.A4 & 6). This offers us an insight into why MacNeacail so values description as a measure of the success of a composition: to describe a subject well in song was to hit upon its pith, "brìgh a' rud" [*substance of the thing*], as Bella Ross puts it.

These days, many of the Sgiobair's songs and those of other local song-makers have been lost, their topicality, humour and functional environment passé. Still others have been forgotten due to old age.

IN: Yes well, I haven't got them myself, you know. Where are they? Although I was composing them at the time, they were gone and after years of not being put in practice...that's how they went. (SA1990.105.A5)

Nor is composing the involuntary, instinctive process it once was. He sees modern poets making a living from their work and, more importantly, becoming known and respected as poets. This highlights one of the main regrets of his later life. Aonghas Dubh

recalls an evening in The Ferry Inn in Uig with the Sgiobair and one of his sons:

AM: The Sgiobair turned to me and said "Well," he says, "Angus, if I had known when I was your age," or "when I was young" in fact, "[that] people would take my poetry as seriously as they do now, I would have taken it much more seriously myself." And I thought it was a...wonderfully vulnerable and in some ways, maybe not quite tragic, but it was a sad recognition for a man to make who was, by then, well into his seventies.

TM: Sort of after the fact.

AM: That's it.... He was acknowledging that he was the kind of bard he was with the kind of output he [had]. I happen to think he's a very, very fine poet in his own genre. I think his poem to Uig [*Nach bòidheach Uige* (XVIII)] and his...war poem [*Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal* (XVI)] are very, very fine song-poems I suppose you can call them. (SA1993.2.A6)

MacNeacail has expressed these regrets to me himself on several occasions.

IM: But how things are, you know, if I was at one time thinking that what was going on today [i.e. recording and publishing], I would have something to be of more merit than it is. I would have made them proper and more qualified than I am.

TM: Well, there are quite a few good ones.

IM: Ach I don't know, but I would have more...Gàidhlig words, better Gàidhlig in it than I have, no no, no no no. (SA1990.107.A5)

In a way the Sgiobair has been caught in a hiatus of poetic patronage; he was born at the wrong time, with an 'out of date' poetic aesthetic. Had he been born much earlier, he would have been living in a society where expression in song was still the norm and where a man of his talents might have held some official poetic office, leading to patronage, formal training and more time to devote to his craft. He would at least have received more formal and community recognition of his skill and possibly some form of remuneration, all of which would have given him a higher status in society than he now enjoys. On the other hand,

had he been born a little *later*, when poetry, albeit in a different form, has once again become a means of making a living (or at least a recognized and acceptable role/profession with a certain social status), he could perhaps have been a poet in the modern sense. He was born at the tail-end of the validity of his own aesthetic and too early to acquire the pan-European assumptions that underlie most western poetic aesthetics of today.

The rapid cultural change taking place around MacNeacail in the latter half of his life has swept away the foundations of his pre-World War I aesthetic. The twentieth century was brought forcibly and suddenly to island communities.

AM: As you say, the war was a crucial time of breakup. There was no longer the sense of going to a house to hear the old stories or to hear the poems.

TM: And I suppose radio would have come on strongly after the war, as well.

AM: I was about twelve when radio came on, so in my teens, the time when I might have developed an interest in tradition, instead I was developing an interest in wondering why my...preferred version, the Carl Perkins version wasn't given the same prominence as the Presley version of *Blue Suede Shoes*.
(SA1993.3.B6)

By the time this cultural invasion was happening, local school-children would have been coming home to an English-speaking environment, whereas in the Sgiobair's day, both home and the playground were entirely Gaelic-speaking and both were fertile nurseries of tradition.

A formal recognition

One of the most moving events for the Sgiobair in the last few years has been the erection in Sgoirebreac of a cairn to the Nicolsons evicted in the Clearances. Along with all the other

names on the cairn, appear those of John and Mary Nicolson. Their parents were not cleared, but in a sense, the Sgiobair was evicted from the inheritance of the bardic tradition and therefore the status that might have been his had the enormous social and cultural upheaval of the Clearances never taken place. In the dedication of the cairn, MacNeacail sees some redress for these wrongs and a place in posterity for himself and Màiri.

IM: The Clan Chief put that there and he put my name there and Mary's name there, but there's no other name there but ours, giving Cuidreach, you know,...from all the other colonies that was there. The[ir] name was there, but no address. But we are,...John and Mary Nicolson, Cuidreach! [slaps pipe on hands for emphasis] Well, they know who would be there at Cuidreach. While that càrn is there it'll be there! That's what I was saying, I needn't have any memorial stone on me...in the church, in the graveyard, when I had it up there; they'll know who I was, there.

TM: But see, then they'll know that you're the same one who made the songs.

IM: Well, that wasn't put on it at all, but he only put down 'the Clan Nicolson Bard'. (SA1990.106.A1)

Perhaps having his name written in stone on the cairn and in ink in this dissertation will go some way to re-enfranchising MacNeacail in his own and others' eyes.



Plate XXVII: MacNeacail and the Clan Chief, Iain Nicolson, May 16, 1992.
(Photo by Thomas McKean)



Plate XVIII:
The Sgiobair
outside the Cuillin
Hills Hotel, in
Portree. May 16,
1992.
(Photo by Thomas
McKean)



Plate XXIX:

The Bard to the Clan Nicolson outside the Cuillin Hills Hotel in Sgoirebreac on the occasion of the Clan Gathering, May 16, 1992. Portree Harbour is in the background.

(Photo by Thomas McKean)



Plate XXX:

MacNeacail in the hall at the Clan Gathering. Standing just behind him are 'Mac', the Chief's son and his wife Marie, May 16, 1992.

(Photo by Thomas McKean)



Plate XXXI: The Sgiobair with Maighrearad Nighean Pheigi Iain Phàdrraig (Margaret Bennett), whose great-grandfather's house was one of the great taighean céilidh [visiting houses] in Glenconon. This was taken outside the Cuillin Hills Hotel on the occasion of the Nicolson Clan Gathering, May 16, 1992.

(Photo by Thomas McKean)

CONCLUSIONS

Songs: the distillation of experience

This thesis set out to investigate the relationships between a song-maker and his songs, his songs and his world-view and his community's perception of him in his role as a composer.

Comparison with other folk song cultures for which in-depth studies exist, lead me to believe that a degree of interdependence could be expected. As the preceding chapters show, the integration of song in MacNeacail's daily life is so complete that it would be hard to imagine his life without it. Matters even of passing significance were recorded in song. Songs that deal with important watersheds in his life, however, are more firmly remembered and more frequently sung, for they are teeming with associations and images of the past. In singing them, he reaffirms the information and the emotions expressed. They are his memorates and, due to the nature of song, much of his emotional life is therefore on public display.

The traditional composer gains two kinds of release through song. Expression through *composition* and expression through *singing* a song are both cathartic, but the former achieves release through a creative act and the latter through performance. To compose a song is to have a free rein of expression, but to sing a song that is already made is to immediately exclude a huge range of potential expression. In the 'twenties and 'thirties, the Sgiobair participated fully in both these phases of his art. In recent decades, however, the environment in which expression in song is accepted as normal has disappeared. His internal release

of composition is still available, but the world of daily informal song and story that formed the basis of his secondary catharsis is gone. To him, song *is* communication, the purest form of it and though villagers today do not speak his language of song, the potential for renewed cathartic function remains so long as he is alive.

The Sgiobair's songs were not always expressions of deep emotion. They were often made as much for the exercise of composing and to "pass the time" as anything else. Some of the Sgiobair's early courtship songs reflect this (as opposed to being accurate reflections of intense emotional involvement). Also, the roles of expectation and demand must not be overlooked in this type of song-making. A bard must have a response to every challenge, whether it be a song refusing a request or a revenge in the form of a satire. A reaction was expected and the very fact that he did react *proved* that he was a bard.

As exercises in the seemingly effortless use of language, many of the Sgiobair's Gaelic songs are exemplary. They flow smoothly and conversationally and yet his diction is undoubtedly heightened above that of everyday language without being markedly formulaic. The Sgiobair is judged by his fellow villagers on his creation of lyrics and how well the song is put together as an entity; they particularly appreciate his command of language (e.g. the description in *Nach bòidheach Uige* (XVIII)) which while easy to understand, is beyond their own creative capabilities. On the whole, the language is rigorously controlled, polished and well put together. Emotional involvement, when presented with such apparent ease, does not intrude upon the

listener, for the message is contained in a framework within which such displays are expected; the expression is therefore seen as natural.

The village song-maker and his environment

Today, a village song-maker is viewed by the younger generation as a little old-fashioned (though they appreciate that a talent for song-making is rare). In addition, the songs' native environment of the *taigh céilidh* is no longer fully functional. Both the songs and the song-maker therefore have no natural setting and have ceased to be the carriers of direct expression in the community. Song still has a function in the village, of course, but primarily in the formalized setting of the arranged céilidhs which took over from spontaneous house visits after the Second World War. In this context, songs are not seen as personal statements. The singer may, by choice of song, *reflect* thoughts and emotions, but it is not a first-hand expression as composition is.

In many ways, the song-maker had freer access to expression of opinions and emotions than most people, because song was accepted as an appropriate medium for such expression. The song-maker's semi-official role as a social commentator also meant that he could say things that might have caused offence coming from others' mouths (e.g. the satires discussed in Chapter V). The conventions of the medium itself allowed him direct access to emotional expression, while simultaneously providing him with protection behind the persona of the song-maker and the heightened language of poetry.

In fact, villagers could expect the song-maker to deliver his reactions to and opinions on a whole range of local matters that he considered interesting enough to stimulate composition. From the villagers' point of view, when he 'makes a song on' an occurrence, he acknowledges its importance; the event and the villagers gain status from being enshrined in a song, rather like an announcement in a newspaper which formally records something as having 'happened'. The bard in this way defines the community's identity by his choice of subject, just as they define his by providing the fodder for his compositions.

Many traditional composers make their songs almost exclusively for entertainment and amusement. For a natural composer like the Sgiobair, the use of song is scarcely a choice however; it is a requirement which arises out of his need to communicate. In a society accustomed to song, the use of verse as opposed to prose alerts the listener that he is receiving a distilled message. The custom that most traditional song-makers follow, of using a familiar tune for a new composition, may actually allow easier access to this message, for the listener need not come to terms with the melody before taking in the content. In addition, the melody is selected (consciously or sub-consciously) by the song-maker because of its associations. The audience is therefore predisposed to the tenor of the poet's message. To demand a fresh melody for each song would be to apply a modern 'art' music aesthetic and to imply that a song is primarily an artistic rather than a functional, emotional and communicative creation. In order to communicate at this level, the message *must* be sung to be in the register in which such

communications are expected to be coded. It is clear from a number of references he has made to modern Gaelic poets that this is true for the Sgiobair. It confirms that in his eyes to be a true poet, you must make songs: "You can't sing a single one of his songs, how can he be a poet!"¹ (FW9.12.88:1)

In his youth, MacNeacail did not view his song-making as anything special. Undoubtedly the presence of other song-makers in the area, such as Uilleam Iain Chaimbeul, Seonaidh Aileag Chamshroin, Bàrd Ghrialain and Neil Beaton in Staffin, Aonghas Fleidsear in Siadar, Calum Ciorstaidh (and others) made him feel less unusual than he is today. Moreover, songs were a part of regular everyday life, and as such were not considered worthy of the same notice that we, for whom song is not an everyday form of expression, give them. The everyday occurrences in society are often overlooked and irrevocably lost before we realize that they were unique and worthy of interest and preservation. This is certainly the case with MacNeacail's songs; as he has said himself, if he had known that tape recorders would become available and that poets like Somhairle MacGilleain and Aonghas MacNeacail would be making a living from versifying, he would have taken a great deal more care in both making and preserving his songs.

IM: They were only just for the time being and that was all forgotten, you know, but till just recently,...then this recording and such came and I took more interest in it. If that was done, say, thirty years before now, I would have make something worth of it, but I didn't. (SA1988.64.B3-4)

¹ He has reiterated this sentiment on many other occasions referring to various other modern poets as well. Mrs. Costello says the same thing of her turn of the century west of Ireland informants: "To him the air is only the medium of conveying pleasantly to the audience the story he has to tell." (1990:iv)

A work in progress

Inevitably, while engaged in a project of this sort, the folklorist, researcher or collector gathers far more intriguing information than can be used in a single project and the Sgiobair is not finished with me by any means. A recent example, the 'discovery' of three Sgiobair songs that were unknown to me, will demonstrate the scale of productive work still to be done with him.

In the past six months, I have acquired several fragments of songs that other informants remember the Sgiobair making in the late 'thirties. I had not even heard about these songs from MacNeacail himself, but on my latest visit to Skye (13-14.3.93), I was able jog his memory by reciting the couplets. Hardly was a line out of my mouth, when he said, "Oh aye," and reeled off half a dozen verses of each of the two of the songs I was after. I had not even heard *of* these songs in the five and a half years I have been working with the Sgiobair and yet, after the smallest of hints, he remembers large tracts of them. Minutes later he had forgotten one of them, though he later recalled it (far less fluently); memory is indeed a mysterious faculty.

There has not been time to document these 'new' songs for inclusion in the present work. They add to the data base upon which my argument is founded and, more importantly, they demonstrate dramatically how active the Sgiobair's mind still is. Each visit I make to Cuidreach reveals more lore, more poetry and more of the sort of knowledge that would have been expected from an old style *file*: hill and field names, local and family histories and traditions. There is much work still to be

done with MacNeacail and I shall be following up these and other leads more fully for future publication based on this thesis.²

'Last leaves' and the creator within the tradition

I hope that this project will be seen as saving some of the 'last leaves' of the *bàird bhaile* tradition, both the songs themselves and the all-important context which allows us to reconstruct how and why a township poet goes about his business of making songs. But while it is certainly a matter of preservation, there is much more to be learned from the life and work of Iain MacNeacail than just the bare bones of his art. To claim to be 'saving' a tradition is to take on more than is realistic to achieve, for it implies (a) that the collector has the omniscience to preserve something in its unique entirety which, even with modern technology, remains impossible and (b) that the tradition really is about to cease to exist. To suggest that a culture or tradition is so static that it will either live or die in a matter of years is to sound its death knell straight away, for it is only by adapting that they can continue to be relevant to people's lives. This is the problem built in to the 'preservation' school of collecting, which practically condemns the material to obsolescence, the subject of academic study in libraries, archives and museums alone. I would argue that the complete death of a tradition or a culture is actually a very rare occurrence.³ They almost invariably adapt

² Only a week ago (March 31, 1993) I was able to locate the record that the Sgiobair made in Belgium during the War (see Chapter III). His nephews, William and Peter Grant, have had the recording since it arrived in Glasgow in 1945. They have done me the honour of giving me the disk because of my interest in their uncle's song-making. I include this recording as the last item on the accompanying cassette.

³ Cf. the "Folk Song Festivals" in Latvia and Lithuania in which traditional songs are sung after fifty years of proscription. They were banned by the Soviet government under

and undergo whatever transformation is necessary for their survival. Take for example, the British ballad tradition which had been described by collectors as moribund or non-existent for centuries. Then in the 1950s and 1960s came the discovery of the traveller traditions and thereafter the 'folk revival' which took over and adapted much of the travellers' living song tradition. It is certainly not the *same* tradition, but it is clearly a descendant which ensures the survival of a vast body of traditional song.⁴

For Gaelic tradition and culture, which is continually being pronounced dead or dying, MacNeacail is an important symbol of the role adaptation has to play in cultural preservation. Traditional Gaelic society today has broken down so far, that radical change may break apart what remains. It therefore needs change from within and confidence in order to survive. The Sgiobair has provided this himself by retaining the Gaelic tradition of song as communication, though through the medium of English (see the end of Chapter V). He does not just preserve the past, but re-casts it in a new and still living way, for he is a creator fully within the rules of a traditional aesthetic.

Song and the self

At first glance, the Sgiobair may appear an ordinary individual leading an average crofter's life. Throughout this thesis, however, we have seen him in many guises: crofter, composer,

Stalin in an attempt to suppress nationalistic sentiments. They live on today, perhaps stronger than ever. (See *Homeland* a film by Juris Podniez, Channel 4 Productions, 1991.) Cf. Professor F. J. Child's certainty that the Scots ballad *The Twa Brothers* no longer existed in British oral tradition. It surfaced very much alive when collecting began among the travelling people of Scotland after the Second World War (Henderson 1974:7).

⁴ Bennett 1992 discusses dozens of examples of 'dying' traditions that have survived for centuries.

soldier, father, humorist, poet and village song-maker to name a few. Closer inspection has revealed a combination of events, personality and culture which show him to be quite unique and aspects of his life experience to be powerful and moving. The contextual understanding of his world allows us to understand the powerful and pervasive centrality of these songs to this man's perception of self and environment and how the two interact. Such is the importance of context to the study of the individual; without it, one is left discussing 'the folk' or 'the people' collectively, thereby losing touch with the power of individual experience.

This thesis shows that the Sgiobair's songs function on several different levels: personal expression (e.g. the songs of courtship); community expression (e.g. the lament for Kenneth Macrae (XXIV) or *Tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt* (XX)); or even national or cultural expression (*Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal* (XVI) or *A time will come, a time will go* (XXVIII)). Each of these songs has intrinsic aural and literary qualities which can be appreciated by any listener or reader, who will pick up most of the content-based meanings within the songs. But to understand them as MacNeacail does and as he knew his fellow villagers would (sharing a common local culture as they do) we have had to learn of the circumstances of their composition. Once these levels of understanding are attained we can begin to see the pervasive role they play in the creation of the persona well known as 'the Sgiobair'.

Nothing else he did in his life mattered to him as much as his poetry. To think of [him] as anything but a poet, then, is to miss the whole point of his character, for that is not only the way his

contemporaries saw him, it is the way he saw himself. (Ives 1964:187)

For seventy-five years (so far), MacNeacail has chosen to express and therefore define his public self through song. His subject matter has ranged widely over the total human situation: songs of love, humour and grief; songs about personal and cultural history; songs of homeland and war (and even tobacco, for that matter), all expressed in different registers of language skillfully adapted to the matter at hand. Such was his urge to compose that he has exposed innermost thoughts and emotions to the scrutiny of others in a way that many would shy away from. Of course he is partly insulated from the repercussions of these revelations by the persona of the poet discussed earlier.⁵ The first-hand testimony in this thesis is perhaps an extension of his willingness to undergo this type of exposure. Through song, his private self has become public.⁶

How then does this definition of public self come about? To a large extent it grows from the need for response discussed in Chapter V. For the person who is born a song-maker, song is *the* vehicle for personal information, the natural form of response to his own emotions and others' requests. For MacNeacail, a song reflects truths about its subject, whether it be the elegaic song to the Rev. Macrae (XXIV) or the vituperative squib to Cruaisean (V) (SA1990.105.A6). The poet is therefore immune to any

⁵ This is rather different to the singer of 'pre-composed' songs, who is accountable directly to the approval or disapproval of their 'public'.

⁶ William Ross is one poet whose public and private self merge in his love poems. I wonder, however, whether this would appear so clearly the case if we did not know as much about Ross' private life as we do. Perhaps some of the Sgiobair's songs of unrequited love fall into this category of merged identities of the poet and the protagonist, though he was undoubtedly never as desperately in love as Ross.

accusations of invention or maliciousness. He says, in turn, that if you want to express something properly, whether it be love, or an appreciation of beauty, “you would want to have it in a song” (SA1990.108.A14); it encapsulates the essence of its subject. For the Sgiobair, song is an everyday register of speech, but one which communicates on a level that no other does. This idea is sustained throughout MacNeacail’s long life, most obviously in daily conversation in which he quotes from songs and epigrams of his favourite bards. To him, information in song is pure—almost biblical in veracity. Song is how he orders and formalizes his vision of himself and of the outside world. For MacNeacail, song is wisdom encapsulated in an easily remembered and delivered ‘meta-language’. His own songs certainly function in this way and in daily conversation he quotes those of the old bards to much the same effect.

Bard, poet, song-maker

In the Sgiobair’s younger days, composing was instinctive; he could not *help* it. Nowadays, when the making of songs does not come as easily to him as it once did, he still quotes his own and others’ songs in the uninterrupted flow of his speech. He is a poet, a song-maker, a bard. The words of Duncan Bàn, delivered by the Sgiobair with a glint in his eye, hold as true for him as they did for the great eighteenth century poet:

IM: *Well, bha ad a’ ràdh,...nach dùineadh tu beul bàird gun a theanga a thoirt as! You had to take out his tongue before he would close his mouth! Hmhmhm. [laughs] ‘S bha ad ag ràdh nach do dhùin am bàs fhéin e. (SA1989.27.B3)*

[IM: *Well, they were saying that you couldn’t close a bard’s mouth without taking out his tongue! You had to take out his tongue*

before he would close his mouth! Hmhmhm. And they were saying that death itself didn't close it.]



Plate XXXII: Sgiobair and me in Cuidreach, March 14, 1993.

(Photo by Margaret Bennett)

AFTERWORD

It is with sadness that I reach the end of this project. At the start, I thought I could not even learn the language well enough to converse with the Sgiobair, but as he said, “*If I were at you with a new word every day, you would soon learn it.” This entire thesis has been rather like that, a word or aspect of it handled and dealt with bit by bit until at last it was all there (a few days after the deadline, of course).

I cannot really begin to express what the Sgiobair has given me; as I said in the introduction, this project represents an opportunity of which most folklorists only dream—I pay tribute to Iain’s immense wealth of tradition, generosity, talent and humanity.

The most memorable trip to Skye in the whole five years of my acquaintance with the Sgiobair was on the 16th of May, 1992 when Margaret Bennett and I took him up to Siadar to see the place where he was born well over eight decades ago. On the way he kept up a running commentary about who lived where and what they were like, or were well known for: Murchadh Dhòmhnail Mhàrtuinn, An Sagart, Aonghas Fleidsear. The entire glen was peopled with personalities. As we approached Baile nan Cnoc [the township of the hillocks] he began to name each little peak and valley, “gach glac is bruachag”, as he says in *Nach bòidheach Uige* (XVIII). Then he told us to pull over to the edge of the road and almost before either of us knew it he was out of the car and walking down the slope, stick in hand. As I recorded in my fieldwork notebook that night,

We all climbed out and the old boy took off down the path off the road. It must have been about 200 yards over rough ground, tractor ruts, boggy places, through a gate and down a steep bit too [1:3]. He didn't hesitate a second, but took off like a *gille* [laddie], straight to the *tobht* [foundation]. There wasn't much left but the left-hand [North] end, in which the cows [had been] kept. About 3/4 of the *tobht* had been bull-dozed away to make a way through for tractors. He told about moving across the river to No. 15 Glenconon. The simply carried everything across (including a small dresser) as the Conon is quite [shallow] there. All the children but Màiri were born there in that house [in Siadar]. The [ruins of the] neighbour's houses were only fifty feet away and their walls are standing quite high and complete still. There was a big rowan tree growing at the end wall of the house.... Then we walked back up the slope.... It had been *years* since he was last there and there wasn't much to see. I wonder how he felt, I wonder where he played. What's it like going back to the house you were born in 89 years ago and left 82 years ago! (FW16.5.92:1-2)

He seemed both excited and sad to see it all. I could clearly imagine him as a *gille beag* [little lad] running to and fro, and walking down to Uig past the Sagart's.

My acquaintance with the Sgiobair has been awe-inspiring in some ways, for through him I have a conduit back through nearly two-hundred years of folk-memory, to his grandfather Alasdair Chaluum. It is, as Laurie Lee put it,

like a deep-running cave still linked to its antic past, a cave whose shadows were cluttered by spirits and by laws still vaguely ancestral. This cave...looked backwards through chambers that led to our ghostly beginnings; and had not, as yet, been tidied up, or scrubbed clean by electric light, or suburbanized by a Victorian church, or papered by cinema screens.

It was something we just had time to inherit, to inherit and dimly know—the blood and beliefs of generations who had been in this valley since the Stone Age. That continuous contact has at last been broken, the deeper caves sealed off for ever. But arriving, as I did, at the end of that age, I caught whiffs of something old as the glaciers. There were ghosts in the stones, in the trees, and the walls, and each field and hill had several. The elder people knew about these things and would refer to them in personal terms, and there were certain landmarks about the valley—tree-clumps, corners in woods—that bore separate, antique, half-muttered

names that were certainly older than Christian,...names which are not used now any more. (Lee 1984:95-97)

The parallel with the Sgiobair's naming of the hills of Baile nan Cnoc is exact. And so, to Iain Uilleam Alasdair Chaluim 'ic Fhionnlaigh ann an Cuidreach, mìle bheannachd, is guma fada buan e còmhnaidh ann.



Plate XXXIII: The Sgiobair and me on the way to the *làrach* [ruin] of the house in which he was born in 1903. The end of the *làrach* can just be seen at the base of the rowan tree. Across the way are the houses of Glenconon; the family moved over in 1910 when the Sgiobair was seven. May 16, 1992.

(Photo by Margaret Bennett)

APPENDIX I

Listing of songs on the cassette:

The roman numerals indicate each song's number in Chapter III. The gaps in the number sequence indicate songs that I know about, but of which there are no taped renditions.

	<u>Number in Chapter III and Title</u>	<u>Source of recording</u>
A1	I. Ho-ró tha mi fo smalan dheth (Òran tombaca)	SA1988.64.A7
A2	II. An t-each iaruinn	SA1992.65.4
A3	III. Ho ho-ró air gach cailleach (Òran a' cheàird)	SA1992.64.3
A4	V. Chuala sibh mu'n gàrlach ud	SA1988.64.B7
A5	VI. Ho-ró chan eil smal orm	SA1992.63.4
A6	VII. A Mhàiri bhan, tha thu lurach	SA1993.15.B14 ¹
A7	IX. Nuair a thòisich iad ri bùidsearachd	SA1989.26.A1
A8	X. Òran an fhéidh	SA1992.64.4 ²
A9	XI. An cuala sibh mu'n ùpraid (Tarbh Eighre)	SA1992.65 ²
A10	XIII. Thoir an t-soraidh seo bhuam	SA1992.65.6
A11	XIV. Bidh mi cuimhneachadh 's ag ionndrainn	SA1992.63.3
A12	XV. As a' mhadainn 's mi 'g éirigh	SA1988.64.A12
A13	XVI. Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal	RL 1681, copy 2466
A14	XVII. (a) A Mhàiri, a Mhàiri	RL 1680, copy 2465
	(b) A Mhàiri, a Mhàiri	SA1989.26.A2
A15	XVIII. (a) Nach bòidheach Uige	RL 1680, copy 2465
	(b) Nach bòidheach Uige	SA1992.63.1
A16	XIX. 'Illean, na biodh oirbhse smalan!	SA1989.28.B4
A17	XX. Tha sluagh òg air dhol gu aimbeirt	SA1992.64.1
A18	XXI. Lìon a-mach go bàrr na cuachan	SA1989.28.A15
B1	XXIII. Tha mealladh mór am measg an t-sluaigh	SA1992.65.1
B2	XXIV. An Eaglais Shaor an Steòrnabhagh	SA1988.64.B2
B3	XXV. The news we've heard from Waternish	SA1992.64.5
B4	XXVI. 'Se seo a' sgeul tha taitneach leinn	SA1989.26.B1
B5	XXVII. 'S thoir mo bheannachd do dh'Eilein Iarmain	SA1989.26.A4
B6	XXVIII. A time will come, a time will go	SA1986.85.A1
B7	XXIX. Should I have time available	SA1990.104.A1
B8	My most amusing field recording to date	SA1988.64.A12
B9	Aonghas Fleidsear's <i>Òran a' Veto</i>	NicGumaraid 1980b:A3
B10	XVI. <i>Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal</i> from the record the Sgiobair made in Belgium during the War. ³	

¹ This item is only the first two verses of the song; it is the only taped rendition.

² This recording has a good deal of background noise from the larch logs on the fire.

³ This is the record that arrived broken in Glasgow at the end of the War. It was repaired by the Sgiobair's nephew, William Grant. Due to the crack straight across the middle of the record, there is a regular click as it is played.

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Abbreviations used

de.	deasaichte le [edited by] for Gaelic books
diss.	dissertation
ed./eds.	edited by/editors, also edition
intro.	introduction
JAF	<i>Journal of American Folklore</i>
MS	manuscript
n.d.	no date of publication found
n.p.	no publisher found
SGS	<i>Scottish Gaelic Studies</i>
SGTS	<i>Scottish Gaelic Texts Society</i>
SND	<i>Scottish National Dictionary</i>
TGSI	<i>Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness.</i>
unpub.	unpublished manuscript or typescript

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