

Some Aspects of Family and Local Background: An Interview with Sorley MacLean

This contribution comes directly and almost totally from a series of tape-recordings made in Edinburgh in September 1982.¹ These conversations — sometimes almost monologues — so far exceeded my hopes and expectations as to take over and completely transform the original scheme which was to use the tapes as a quarry from which material could be extracted. I had known that information and tradition of this kind, interacting with much else, had been revolving and evolving in Somhairle MacLean's mind for many years. This was obvious enough from some of his poetry, from other written work of his own such as the admirable paper on Raasay traditions in the *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* (1977) and from his fascinating account of himself as a writer in *Chapman* (1976), both of which publications ought, ideally, to be read in conjunction with this piece.

A. Well, I am Somhairle mac Chaluim 'ic Caluim 'ic Iain 'ic Tharmaid 'ic Iain 'ic Tharmaid. That's as far back as we can go with certainty in Raasay.²

Q. And did your own people know that genealogy right back like that?

A. Oh yes. You know, there's a song that a woman composed to my great great grandfather who was called Tarmad Mór Iain 'ic Tharmaid to the same tune as 'Mhic Mhaoilein a shaorainn,'³ but I've only got two verses of it that I heard from my father's sister Peggie MacLean.

A Tharmaid Iain 'ic Tharmaid
'Se d'sheanchas a leòn mi
Bhith cuimhneachadh do shùgraidh
Gun dùil ri do phòsadh.

A Tharmaid a' Chaolais
Nan gorm shùilean bòidheach
Cha d'aithnich thusa raoir mi
Seach maighdeannan Osgaig.⁴

Anyway, we've been in Raasay for at least seven or eight generations.

Now the MacLeans: my father was a very fine singer, and he was a very fine piper, though he never played competitively. My brother Seonaidh used to say that he could recognise his father's playing anywhere. And my uncle Alasdair was a piper too, and my father was a very good singer. He used to sing the songs of Uilleam Ross.⁵ I have never heard anyone who was as good at the song 'Gur mis' tha fo mhulad san am'⁶ as he was, and, indeed, I hardly like to hear that song sung by anyone else. He was also marvellous at 'Crò Chinn t-Sàile',⁷ the pibroch song. I remember him singing Rob Donn's 'Marbhrann Eóghain'⁸ and

the tune he had for it was the same as the tune of ‘Mhic Dhughail ‘ic Ruairidh’,⁹ and I don’t know if there’s anyone alive who sings Rob Donn’s ‘Marbhrann Eóghain’.

He was well acquainted with the poetry of Iain Lom¹⁰ but I don’t think he was acquainted with the poetry of Alasdair mac Mhaighistir Alasdair,¹¹ though I remember him quoting that thing . . . him telling about what the Aireach Muileach¹² said of Alasdair mac Mhaighistir Alasdair:

Cha b’e ’n creideamh ach am brosgal
Chuir thu ghiùlan crois a’ Phàpa.¹³

Anyway, my father was a very fine singer and my grandmother, my father’s mother who died in 1923, was then about eighty-six and was living with us — in our home. She was Màiri Matheson. Her great grandfather came from Lochalsh . . . Màiri Iain ‘ic Sheumais ‘ic Dhòmhnail Ruaidh.¹⁴ Dòmhnall Ruadh came from Lochalsh as a miller to Steinnseal in Staffin¹⁵ . . . She was born in Staffin. Dòmhnall Ruadh, her great grandfather, had the mill there and so did Seumas her grandfather, but her father Iain did not. They were cleared out of Staffin because her father had built a good house. They were on Major Fraser’s estate and he was the worst proprietor in Skye at that time. She was about seven when they left Staffin and came to the Sgor, opposite Portree, outside Penifiler. Now I’m not sure what happened to the people in the Sgor — whether they were cleared from there or whether they left of their own accord — but they went to Braes. That’s where her father died, Iain mac Sheumais. And she married my grandfather, Calum, and went to Raasay.

Now she was a very fine singer. In my early memories, she used to sing splendid old songs like ‘Cumha Iain Ghairbh’ (‘S mi nam shuidhe air an fhaolinn)¹⁶, ‘Tha na Féidh am Bràigh Uige’¹⁷, ‘Mo Shàth-ghal Goirt’, by Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh,¹⁸ ‘Milis Móra’¹⁹ and ‘Crò Chinn t-Sàile’. Oh, what didn’t she sing, and it seems that she — the family — had brought songs from Lochalsh and Kintail. They had got songs when they were in Iochdar Thròndarnais,²⁰ for when Dòmhnall Ruadh came from Lochalsh to Staffin, he married another Matheson from a family that was in Skye already. She was from Peighinn Sóbhraig near Uig and so she had the songs of Iochdar Thròndarnais, such as there were, and the songs of Lochalsh and songs that they had around the Sgor and these places, and in Braes. She had a splendid memory. My mother’s brother Alasdair²¹ used to come across specially to write down songs that she had. She was confined to bed for the last four years of her life, but that didn’t stop her singing. That didn’t stop her singing and though she was of the Free Presbyterian Church, you know, that didn’t hinder her at all. My uncle Alasdair used to take down the names of herbs and that sort of thing from her too. It seems she was tremendously knowledgeable.

And they say that she was very good looking herself. It seems that her nickname was Siùcar Iain ‘ic Sheumais.²² And her sister Caitriona Mhór Iain ‘ic Sheumais was married to Somhairle Neacail, Gille Dubh a’ Bhràighe.²³ She [Caitriona] was a big woman and they say she was as strong as two men.

- Q. And did they say that your grandmother was strong too . . . that there was strength in that family?
- A. Oh, I think so. I think there was, right enough. Now, the MacLeans we belonged to, it seems . . . In Eilean nam Fear Móra,²⁴ in Raasay, there was Tarmad Mór Iain ‘ic Tharmaid as he was called and his brother was called

Calum Mór and another of them was called Eachann Mór Sgreapadail,²⁵ the older brother, and another of them was called Niall Mór. But Tarmad Iain 'ic Tharmaid married a very small woman. She was a MacLeod. And his son Iain married another one after him. And so the MacLeans of Raasay got rather . . . rather small! Well, my father's brother Alasdair was about six feet tall. My father was just about my own size.

Q. Now, before they called someone "Mór", he had to be a pretty big man, I suppose?

A. He had to be in Raasay — for there were very big men in Raasay. You know "Eilean nam Fear Móra" was not just an [idle] word. I can remember when I was young myself and I was at funerals in Raasay, I used to wonder at the size of the men — MacLeods and Nicolsons most of them. Oh there were others — others too . . .

Well, now, she [my grandmother] was full of old songs. She learned a lot from my grandfather. He was a fisherman and he had a smack, but he died of pneumonia when he was just fifty-two and she was a widow for much of her life. It seems she was a terribly good worker, and it seems that she was great at *speuradairachd*, you know, forecasting what the weather would be. Oh, she was an able woman.

Q. And do you still remember the words of these songs you used to hear from her?

A. Oh goodness yes! I can't forget them somehow. I remember when I heard others singing 'Luinneag Mhic Leoid'²⁶ . . . and how different it was in comparison . . . she sang it so slowly . . .

Now my father's sister Peigi was the eldest of the family. She was ten years older than my father. Peigi used to come to stay with us for a month every year. She was working in Glasgow or . . . in London pretty often. And we had to go out fishing with her. I used to go out, and I was terribly keen on boats, and Peigi, she'd get up at about eleven o'clock and away out to fish. We'd come back home for dinner and out again after that, and again in the evening, out to fish for saithe. I used to go out alone with her, and it was all songs. She was full of old songs. I used to threaten to go on strike unless she sang songs! I remember one day when everyone else had gone to the Portree Games, I stayed behind to take her out fishing. What fights and arguments would be going on about politics. You know, she had become a Tory about that time because of the First World War, though she had been a Socialist and a Nationalist and a Suffragette before the war — the First War. Yes. Oh yes . . . she was a tremendous woman was Peigi!

My father's sister Floraidh was married to a Uistman so she wasn't in Raasay very often, but she was good at the songs too. She had a sort of refrain to 'Na Féidh am Bràigh Uige' that I never heard from anyone else in the world. It was curious, in a way: Peigi had things that her mother didn't have, as far as I can remember. I think it may have been from their father they got it, for he was a sort of bard, my grandfather Calum MacLean, though I don't know a single word of poetry he composed.

Q. Now when you mentioned the way Floraidh had the refrain of 'Tha na Féidh am Bràigh Uige', is this the way your own daughter Catriona has it?

A. Oh yes.

Q. And it was you yourself who taught it to her?

A. Between myself and Seonaidh. The most part of what Catriona has of the songs

of Raasay, it was Seonaidh and I who taught her.

Well now, my mother, she was Ciorstaidh Shomhairle Mhóir Iain 'ic Shomhairle Phiobaire 'ic Iain 'ic Eóghain.²⁷ That's as far as I can take it. Now . . . my grandfather was . . . Somhairle Iain 'ic Shomhairle Phiobaire. Somhairle Piobaire was a piper in Spain and he got his hands damaged . . . the frost got him and his fingers stiffened and he came out of the army. He was at Corunna [1809] and it was on the retreat to Corunna that that happened to him. It seems he was a very handsome man, Somhairle. There is a *port á beul*²⁸ about him.

He was big and he was fair-haired but he married . . . It's in the *port á beul* that he married "An té bheag dhubh a mhill an fhuil".

Q. Oh, how does the *port* go? I don't think I've ever heard the *port*.

A. Somhairle na Piobadh
An gille grinn a bha Holm
Somhairle gun chomhairle
Gun tarrainn thu ó hó
Somhairle na Piobadh
An gille grinn a bha Holm.²⁸

Now, you know, there was something coming into it . . . a variation about "An té bheag dhubh a mhill an fhuil".²⁹ She was a MacDonald . . . but, Donald, I must admit she was a Nic Cuidhein!³⁰

And that Somhairle, Somhairle na Piobadh, he was Somhairle mac Iain 'ic Eóghain, and they say that his grandfather [Eóghan] was quite closely related to Nicolson of Sgoirebreac³¹ and that he was evicted from good land that he held at the Bile near Portree for his part in helping in the escape of Prince Charles, but I don't know about that.

Now when the people were cleared from Sgoirebreac, Somhairle Piobaire came to Braes, as an old man, and he was in Camus Tianabhaig and in Gead an t-Sailleir. And I don't think there was much music in these Nicolson, though he was a piper, Somhairle Piobaire. And Iain mac Shomhairle, my great grandfather on that side was married to another Nicolson in Braes, of another line. And my mother's mother, she was called Iseabail Dhòmhnail Bhàin.³² My grandfather Somhairle Mór Iain 'ic Shomhairle Phiobaire married Iseabail MacLeod, daughter of Dòmhnall Bàn. These MacLeods were from Raasay. They were in Torra Mìcheig and they came to Braes when the people were cleared from Torra Mìcheig — where the golf course is, in Sconser. It was Dòmhnall Bàn mac Alasdair 'ic Iain 'ic Ailein Ruaidh³³ they called him, and Alasdair the father of Dòmhnall Bàn is buried in Raasay, but I don't know how many generations they were in Skye, but Ailean Ruadh was in Raasay and some say that it was from Lewis that Ailean Ruadh came . . . no, not Ailean Ruadh himself . . . but his forebears, I suppose. Others say it was from Gairloch or from Coigeach.

Now my grandmother, Iseabail Dhòmhnail Bhàin, died when she was only about fifty, in 1910 I think it was. It seems that though she was an adherent of the Free Presbyterian Church . . . she wasn't a communicant but she was, you know, pretty circumspect. She was a very fine singer too and my mother's people learned songs from her. Now my mother couldn't sing but her sister, Ceit, was very good.

It seems their mother was a very fine singer and they got songs from her. My

mother's brother Alasdair got songs from other people in Braes, especially from Màiri Iain 'ic Caluim.³⁴

Now, my mother's sister Ceit left Portree School when her mother died and from then on she kept house for her father and one or two of her brothers. Teaching in Braes at the time of the First World War was Magaidh Chrisdein, sister of Ailean Chrisdein, the famous doctor, and Ceit got songs from her.³⁵ It was from her that Ceit got the tune and the words of 'Mo Robairneach Gaolach'.³⁶ Seumas Campbell³⁷ learnt it from my Aunt Ceit.

Now Dòmhnall MacLeod, Dòmhnall Bàn³² as they called him, was married to Caitriona Iain Stiùbhairt³⁸ and the Stewarts, so it seems, had brains — more brains than most people had. My great-grandmother's brother Aonghus was the first witness to give evidence before the first Crofters' Commission. But the Stewarts had no music in them. And Iain Stewart was a bard.

These Stewarts were in Peighinn a' Chorrain in the Rent Roll in 1733.

Well, now, that's . . . the Nicolsons and the MacLeods and the Stewarts.

- Q. And so there was music coming in from every side.
- A. Yes. Yes. I think from every side — from every side.
- Q. And now what about memory? You know, you've got an outstandingly good memory yourself, Somhairle, in many ways.
- A. Well . . . It seems that Caitriona Iain Stiùbhairt, my great grandmother, had a tremendous memory and I know that my father's mother had a tremendous memory: Màiri Iain 'ic Sheumais³⁹ — Matheson. . . . But I didn't have the memory Seonaidh had . . . Oh, he had a marvellous memory, my brother Seonaidh. You know, books of the Iliad, he had them off by heart without ever trying to learn them and they say there were seventy pibrochs — he could tell if he heard three notes from any one of them, which it was from. And he was late starting piping. It was in Cambridge he took up piping properly — though he used to play the chanter when he was a boy. But I think for Gaelic poetry, the old songs, that my own memory was every bit as good as his. It was as if I couldn't forget one word of them, well, until a few years back. I'm not quite as good now.
- Q. Was it just as easy for you to remember something you had read as something you had heard from oral tradition — or did the two things go together?
- A. Ah, it was pretty good, you know, for something I read when I was young. Even now when I wonder about my memory, whether it's deteriorated, I have a try at the 'Birlinn'⁴⁰ and I never heard the 'Birlinn' in oral tradition. Now the second last year I was in Plockton, I had to start teaching Latin. The lady who taught Latin was off ill for a whole year. And I remember the second book of the Aeneid — I almost had it off by heart. But oh, we were taught Latin so well in Portree.
- I think, the thing was, I couldn't sing as most of my people could, so I got tremendously keen about a lot of the old Gaelic songs. And so, though I couldn't get the pitch right, it used to drive spears through me almost, the rhythm, the movement and the time, when I heard something I thought was wrong.
- Q. And so you can still keep the two things apart — the way you heard it from one person and the way you heard it from another?
- A. Oh yes. Oh I think I can. I think I can . . .⁴¹ Well, that's how it was, but my memory is going now.

Well, I think I told you about Caitriona Iain Stiubhairt, that her memory was famous. And my grandmother — my father's mother, Màiri Iain 'ic Sheumais. But there was also on the MacLean side, my grandfather's brother Tarmad. He was famous in Raasay for his memory and for how precise he was about things. Dr. Galbraith made a map of place-names in the south of Raasay and it seems he got almost all the names from Tarmad. Tarmad was born in Sgreapadal and then he lived in the Fearn, then in Bailechùirn and then in Osgaig. When people used to come from Luib or from Applecross with funerals to Raasay, it was Tarmad who used to tell them if they didn't know where their people were buried. Now Tarmad died the same year as my grandmother Màiri Iain 'ic Sheumais, in 1923, in the autumn. Everyone said of him that anything he said would be so accurate and if he said something wrong, he thought it was just like telling a lie. That's the sort of man he was.

- Q. You have what some people might call an upper register, an extra register of the language that you would not have had if you did not have a Biblical and religious background?
- A. Oh, there was no doubt at all about that. And also it gave you a knowledge of variants — dialectal variants — because at communion times you might have a minister from far away with a very different Gaelic, and elders speaking on the Fridays also with a very different Gaelic. One was also rather aware of how certain words were in different registers in different parts of the country, which is very important and which often is a stumbling-block to literary critics of Gaelic at the present day because they don't know, so many of them, how registers can vary dialectally.
- Q. I know that you have registers derived from a very wide reading of all sorts, but would you say yourself that possibly most of the language you use in your own poetry you knew naturally?
- A. I would say the *great* bulk of it I knew naturally. Perhaps there is a word here and there that I actually picked up in my teens from the reading of Gaelic poetry or from hearing it. But I would say the great bulk, almost without exception, comes naturally. I've invented a neologism once or twice, but very few.

I think, you see, that the long preachings and prayers in Gaelic at the Free Presbyterian Church and the Free Church, combined with our family's richness in oral tradition on more than one side, had a very considerable effect on me; and the fact, for instance, that my father was so very well versed in Gaelic — in Gaelic poetry and song, and so were some of my mother's people. Because, you see, there was a considerable difference, for instance, between Raasay and the Braes district and Tròndarnais district, and Raasay was in some things more like Applecross in Gaelic. And I think that as far as vocabulary went, I was in a particularly favourable position because I was brought up in a Free Presbyterian environment with an awful lot of Gaelic preaching and, also, that my family, in such an environment, were unusual tradition bearers, especially of song, and, to a certain extent, of tales too.

- Q. So you had a combination of all these strands.
- A. I think I had. And, of course, I'm perfectly sure that my father had not only a wonderful ear for music but that he had a very unusual linguistic sense, and an interest in it. I used to hear arguments on this between my father and my mother's eldest brother Alexander, Alasdair Nicolson, the man who made the

Gaelic grammar and the *History of Skye*. For instance, on the Friday of the communion, you might be in church, or usually you were outside because there was no room in the church, from half past eleven until four o'clock. And you might hear anything up to twenty elders "speaking to the question". And the variety of Gaelic could be immense.

- Q. Perhaps we'd better explain "speaking to the question" [bruidhinn or labhairt air a' cheist.] This took place on the Friday; communion went on from Thursday till Monday.
- A. Till midday on Monday.
- Q. Yes. And that was twice a year, wasn't it?
- A. Well, sometimes it was only once a year but sometimes it was twice a year . . . The Thursday was the Fast-day: there would be a sermon in the morning: two sermons.
- Q. But you can't remember any traditions of people actually fasting on the Thursday.
- A. No. None whatsoever of fasting, of actual fasting. But it was considered in some way almost a Sunday — the Thursday. Now Friday was the day on which somebody proposed a text and as many elders as could, from all over, different places, spoke on it, and delivered a miniature sermon. I think they knew beforehand what it was going to be, and very often, of course, they couldn't all be called — there would be perhaps up to twenty of them. Of course, they would be from different parts of Skye and the mainland opposite, Gairloch, Applecross, Lochalsh.
- Q. And this, in effect, would be a debating session bringing in theological ideas?
- A. It would vary from a purely theological discussion, to a giving of their own particular experience and of course you would hear so much, even long quotations transmitted orally from people as far back as Maighistir Lachlainn, Maighistir Ruairidh, Céit Mhór Loch Carann, 'Blind Munro', the woman called Bean a' Chreideamh Mhóir,⁴² and so on. And, as I use in one of the poems, you would hear a phrase like "somebody had this", meaning that some point had come home to him and he had illustrated and so on . . . And the fact that our family were, I think, for their place, unusually rich in oral tradition, meant that our vocabulary was extensive. Then, of course, I took Gaelic in Portree School at quite a young age where I read every bit of poetry I could come across, and, of course, as I have often said, I made up for my lack in pitch in music by having an inability to forget the words of any Gaelic song I liked, even if I heard it only once. And . . . words became as it were second nature to me.
- Q. On the subject of taking communion, the ordinary person was more or less forbidden, wasn't he? It's only those who were in a 'state of grace' who took communion, wasn't it?
- A. Oh, of course. It's said very strictly in the Shorter Catechism — only a very, very small minority — I don't think five per cent of the congregation, and most of them would be old people.
- Q. Would you say that this set the seal on you having turned your back on the 'vanities of the world'?
- A. Oh, completely. Yes, it did. There's been an awful lot of exaggeration of a kind of self-righteousness, because those people were not self-righteous. I mean, in all fairness, there might have been some cases of hypocrites and all that, but

there would be in anything. So you see . . . especially in the Thirties when a lot of people were talking and finding all the faults of Scotland in Calvinism, I was saying, "What the devil do all these people, writers and all those, know about Calvinism?"

- Q. And this despite the fact that you had turned your back on Calvinism?
- A. Oh yes, one has to be fair. Among those people, there are so many I know who were saintly, just saintly men.
- Q. You might reject part of the philosophy but you were still . . . ?
- A. Yes. I was sympathetic in the sense that I didn't find those people hypocrites. Because the whole business of this sinfulness, the desperate wickedness of the human heart precluded self-righteousness.
- Q. Then there was the Monday, of course, which wound the whole thing up in a way. Didn't it?
- A. Yes, the Monday service was called *Latha a' Chàinidh*⁴³ in which there was a denunciation of . . . Well, it didn't mention the Catholic Church, that was beyond mention. The Episcopalians weren't worth mentioning. The Church of Scotland was hardly worth mentioning. The concentration was on the backsliding "so-called Free Church of Scotland". And they wound up with scientists, spiritualists and socialists. But that was some ministers . . . And, of course, then, there were very different people. You see there was the wonderfully human Ewen MacQueen. A preacher with a wonderful register was Ewen MacQueen, a marvellous Gaelic . . . with the kind of ability to change the registers and to use the local colour, to use everything. He was a wonderfully human man: he was even amusing in telling of the depths of depravity to which in his unregenerate days he had sunk, such as drinking whisky out of an envelope! Time and place specified!
- Q. He had a very great charisma, hadn't he?
- A. Oh, wonderful, wonderful charisma, and, I've said this, that if his sermons could have been recorded *in toto* you would have a Gaelic prose amazing in its richness, variety and raciness. Well, there were others, but, of course, my experience is limited pretty well to when I was young, and to Free Church and Free Presbyterian.
- Q. What of the influence of landscape?
- A. Well, you see, I'm very much affected by what one calls physical beauty. I think I have always been, and Skye, of course, is an island of an amazing variety of beauty, but, above all, apart from the great sea cliffs of *Biod an Adhar* in *Diùirinnis* and the cliffs of *Bioda Ruadh* and of *Minginnis* and so on, you get the great winding sea lochs and you get a lot of the high green, like the green dome of the *Storr* suddenly plunging into pretty well perpendicular cliffs of 500-600 feet and then, but above all, the *Cuillins*. It's a very, very spectacular landscape and it is the kind of landscape that easily resolves itself into what you might call heroic symbols. Now, *Raasay* has a wonderful situation in relation to *Skye* and the mainland of *Wester Ross*, which is very beautiful too. And *Raasay* has this great geological variety, hence a great variety of scenery within it. What fascinated me especially was the kind of semi-limestone belt from the *Fearn*s to *Screapadal* including *Hallaig*: the rocks . . . most of them being what they call inferior oolite which is something to do with limestone and sandstone mixed, and the kind of narrow valleys, the great shelter, this geological variety and the tertiary and mesozoic rocks, two thirds of it in the south, then the *Torridonian*,

north about Brochel and so on, and then the Lewisian; also, the woods of Raasay which, apart from the native birches, hazels, rowans and so on, are now nearly all recently planted conifers. When I was young there were not only conifers and Scots firs, but almost every conceivable deciduous tree and other kind of trees, in the two woods planted from about 1870 or 1875 onwards, which made the landscape of Raasay a great contrast to the Cuillins and also to the Red Hills, the so-called Red Hills, of Skye. And, of course, we had the great landscape, granted from most parts of Raasay we could only see part of the Cuillins, the Sgurr nan Gillean to Bruach na Frithe group, but you have the great landscape of Blàbheinn and the Garbhheinn further to the south-east. Also the fact that Raasay was such a wonderful centre-point, from which you had such views, from most of Raasay, from the coastline of Skye, from Beinn na Caillich in Broadford to Rudha nam Bràithrean in Staffin and a very spectacular coastline. And I think there must be very few stretches of water, of seawater in the Highlands, more spectacular than the south part of the Sound of Raasay which is called the Clàrach. And this, I think, had . . . Oh, I'm sure of it, had a very big effect on me.

I was also keen on the sea and boats, but became less keen when, in my early twenties, I went to teach in Portree School and started going to the Cuillins. In those days I could get very few people to go with me, practically nobody in those days, and I used to wander about alone on them, ridge-wandering and doing some rock-climbing to avoid detours and being there in all kinds of conditions. To me the whole thing was bound up with the history of Skye and Raasay, as I knew it. Because, you see, I was of that, in every way, except that I knew that my paternal grandmother's people had come from Lochalsh perhaps 250 years before that. And also, you see, even at my youngest and most . . . what you might call politically radical time of my life, I had this sense of continuity. And when I was up on the top of the Cuillins or on Dùn Cana I mean, it wasn't just a case of scenery, but it was always very much intermingled with the people.

I came to maturity at the time of the great symbolist movement in European poetry, which you've got in Yeats, Eliot, MacDiarmid, Blok in Russia and Paul Valéry in France, and my symbols came mostly from my immediate environment, because in many ways my immediate physical environment was very varied. The Cuillins naturally became a symbol of difficulty, hardship and heroic qualities as against, as it were, the softness and relative luxury of the woods of Raasay with all their own contradictions.

So you see, all this was so much associated with what I knew from oral tradition, song and even stories. The fact, for instance, that you remembered in an old story that the boulders of Mol Stamhain were thrown up on dry land the day that Iain Garbh Mac Gille Chalum was drowned. Oh, there were other stories too which involved not storm but witches, about the death of Iain Garbh Mac Gille Chalum.

When I was younger, I wasn't affected so much by colour as I was by outline in landscape, and, of course the outlines of Skye are spectacular and even heroic, and, well, perhaps you've got even greater variety of colour . . . in Raasay, but there is the atmospheric colour to remember, too. I remember an evening being on Sgurr Alasdair, a summer evening, and seeing glitter — the glitter of the sun, west of Barra. And another day, for instance, being on the

Cuillins, with swirling mist on the narrow top of Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh, and the mist suddenly clearing and there was a glint of sun on the wings of a golden eagle standing on a ledge about twenty feet below me. I grew up at that time, when symbolism was such a thing in European poetry and I was affected a lot by . . . people, more by MacDiarmid and Yeats, and my symbols almost automatically became the landscape of my physical environment. But, of course, that was always affected, blended with what I knew of the history of my people.

DONALD ARCHIE MACDONALD

NOTES

1. These tapes, now SA1982/150-57 in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies, may be consulted by prior arrangement with Somhairle MacLean and D. A. MacDonald. The archives also contain a video recording of an interview with Dr. MacLean.
2. "Somhairle son of Calum, son of Calum son of Iain son of Tarmad son of Iain son of Tarmad." Somhairle is often 'anglicised' as Samuel, Calum as Malcolm (from the older Maolcoluim), Iain as John, Tarmad/Tormod as Norman. The MacLean family are almost certain that they were originally from North Uist, of the family of the MacLean tacksmen of Boreray. The late James MacLean, Yr. of Glensanda, lecturer in History at Edinburgh University, apparently said that Tarmad, the most distant name in the above genealogy, was the son of Iain who was the son of Neil, the first of these MacLeans to come to the MacLeod lands in Skye. He also stated that this Iain was the first of the family to go to Raasay. Somhairle MacLean does not know the source of James MacLean's information. Catherine MacLean (Caitriona Uilleim), a fine local tradition-bearer in Raasay, held that her own family and Somhairle MacLean's were the same people. This family, of whom the famous Pipe Major William MacLean of Kilcreggan was also a member, had a tradition that the first of them to come to Raasay was called Iain Mór Buidhe ("Big Yellow John") and that he was a son of a MacLean of Boreray. See also Somhairle MacLean's article in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 1977, pp 377-8.
3. "MacMillan I would excuse you": mock love-song by a Kintail bard called MacCulloch *alias* An Tàillear Crùbach, "The Lame Tailor".
4. Tarmad son of Iain son of Tarmad
 It was your words that wounded me
 Remembering your love-talk
 With no hope of marrying you.
 Tarmad from Caolas
 Of the bonny blue eyes
 You did not acknowledge me last night
 Ahead of the maidens of Osgaig.
5. William Ross (1762-90), the famous Skye and Gairloch bard.
6. "I am full of sorrow at this time".
7. Traditional: 'The Crò of Kintail'.

8. 'Elegy for Ewen', by the famous Sutherland bard Rob Donn Mackay, "Brown-Haired Rob" (1714-78).
9. Traditional lament (17th Century?): "Son of Dughall Son of Ruairidh".
10. Iain Lom MacDonald, "Bare John", the famous Lochaber bard (c. 1620-1710).
11. "Alasdair son of the Rev. Alasdair", probably the most famous of the eighteenth-century bards (c. 1700-c. 1770).
12. "The Mull Herdsman".
13. It was not faith but flattery
 that drove you to carry the Pope's Cross.
This refers to the fact that Alasdair Mac Mhaighistir Alasdair became a Catholic convert, the implication being that this was a flattering gesture to the Jacobite cause. Elsewhere in these recordings (SA 1982/151A) Somhairle MacLean has pointed out that the fact that his father did not seem to be well acquainted with MacDonald's poetry may have been due to prejudice against him in Presbyterian areas for his change of religion, perhaps also for his scurrilous satire 'Di-moladh Móraig', 'In Dispraise of Morag'.
14. "Mary daughter of John son of James son of Red Haired Donald".
15. Here and *passim* I have translated An Taobh Sear as "Staffin", which is the usual practice in Skye. An Taobh Sear is on the east side of Tròndarnais.
16. 'The Lament for John Garbh' ('As I sit on the raised beach'). Traditional lament for "Stalwart John" MacLeod, Chief of Raasay, drowned in 1671. The composition is usually attributed to his sister.
17. 'The Deer are in the Braes of Uig'. Traditional lament.
18. 'My bitter fill of weeping' by the famous bardess Mary MacLeod (c. 1615-1707), 'Mary daughter of Red-Haired Alasdair'.
19. 'Sweet is Morag'. Traditional love song.
20. "Lower Tròndarnais", i.e. the north-east wing of Skye.
21. Alexander Nicolson, Lecturer in Gaelic at Jordanhill College of Education, Glasgow.
22. "Iain mac Sheumais' sugar".
23. Cairiona Matheson: "Big Cairiona daughter of Iain mac Sheumais" was married to "Somhairle son of Neacal (Nicol), the Black Lad of Braes", a famous strong man. He was a Nicolson.
24. "Island of the Big Men".
25. "Big Eachann (Hector) of Sgreapadal".
26. 'MacLeod's Ditty' by Mary MacLeod (Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh).
27. "Christina daughter of Big Somhairle son of John son of Somhairle the Piper son of John son of Ewen".
28. Somhairle of the Pipes
 The handsome lad who was in Holm
 Somhairle ill advised
 I would grab you o ho!
 Somhairle of the Pipes
 The handsome lad who was in Holm.
A *port á beul* ("mouth-tune"/"mouth-music") is a diddling type of song, usually a dance tune. Holm is north of Portree.
29. "The little black one who spoilt the blood".
30. The surname MacCuidhein is often anglicised as MacQueen or MacQuien,

but in Skye always MacDonald. It was relatively common for lesser-known surnames to be replaced by one of the better-known Clan names.

31. These Nicolsons, Clann 'ic Neacail Sgoirebreac were an important tacksman family located for centuries at Sgoirebreac (Scorrybreck) near Portree.
32. "Iseabail Daughter of Fair-Haired Donald".
33. "Fair-Haired Donald son of Alasdair son of John son of Red-Haired Allan".
34. "Mary, daughter of John son of Calum".
35. "Allan son of Christopher" and "Maggie daughter of Christopher"; the well-known singer and doctor in Skye, Dr. Allan MacDonald, and his sister Maggie MacDonald.
36. Roughly "My beloved bonny lad".
37. The late J. C. M. Campbell of Kintail and London, a well-known Gaelic singer and friend of Somhairle MacLean.
38. "Caitriona daughter of John Stewart".
39. "Mary daughter of John son of James".
40. 'Birlinn Chlann Ràghnaill' ('Clan Ranald's Galley') by Alasdair Mac Mhaighistir Alasdair.
41. Quotes a verse heard from his grandmother and a variant from another source.
42. "The Woman of Great Faith".
43. "The Day of Scolding".