

My relationship with the Muse

I have been asked to keep in mind three questions: what started me writing; what keeps me writing; and what I see as my relationship with poetry or the Muse.

In my early teens, that is from about 1924, I realised that I was a traditional Gaelic singer *manqué*, for I was born into a family of traditional singers and pipers on all sides, and that in a Free Presbyterian community, of all the most inimical to such 'vanities'. My Matheson grandmother, my father's mother, lived with us until she died, when I was between 11 and 12. Her Matheson great-grandfather had come to Staffin in Skye in the 18th century, after his family had been 'rascally deprived' of their land in Glas na Muclaich in Lochalsh by the Earl of Seaforth. She lived in Staffin, then near Portree and latterly in that dumping ground of the cleared, the Braes of Trotternish. Although in her seventies when I first remember her, she had still a very fine voice, and early collectors of traditional songs, especially my maternal uncle Alexander Nicolson used to come to her for old songs and for the Gaelic names of all animate and inanimate things. Her family must have brought to Skye and preserved many fine old songs of Lochalsh and Kintail, and she had in her head a great deal of the folk-lore of the large range of Trotternish. When she married my grandfather, Malcolm MacLean, she brought those with her to Raasay. Malcolm MacLean had died when my father, the youngest of three sons and two daughters, was only about nine, but he, my MacLean grandfather, was reputed to have been a very good singer and a bit of a bard. From certain things that my elder paternal aunt Peggie had and which her mother did not appear to have, I deduce that my paternal grandfather must have had songs current in Raasay that his wife had not learned. My MacLean grandfather was a fairly close relative of the great Mackay pipers, through the MacLean mother of Angus Mackay, but that does not mean that the MacLean blood added to the Mackay genius. My father, however, turned out to be one of the very fine pipers who never competed, and he was a great devotee of John MacDonald of Inverness, whom he used to hear at the Portree Games. The eldest of the three brothers, John by name, had

died in his twenties and of course I do not remember him, but my father's older brother, Alasdair, was a piper too, but as he lived in Glasgow I seldom saw him when I was young.

I think that the first great 'artistic' impact on me was my father's mother singing some of the very greatest of Gaelic songs, and all in her own traditional versions. Among those I especially remember from her are the greatest of the four extant laments for Iain Garbh, two of the great songs of Mary MacLeod, and the Crò of Kintail, but, as far as I can remember, my father was better at the Crò of Kintail than his mother was. My father's voice was good, and in some songs his timing and weight was such that I now find it difficult to listen to those songs from anyone else. He was especially striking with the Crò of Kintail, the lament for William Chisholm, and with William Ross. My father too had a great interest in language for its own sake. He was keenly and sympathetically aware of phonological and semantic variations in Gaelic dialects and remembered very well the usages of the innumerable ministers and 'men' whom he had heard expounding at the Raasay communions. The South Argyll man, Alexander MacFarlane, who had been a schoolmaster in Clachan in Raasay for all the years of my father's schooling in Raasay had spoken as much Gaelic as English to his pupils even in the eighties and nineties of the last century. His influence on my father's sense of language was immense, and he had taken his best pupils to something like the modern level of fourth year Secondary. My father's interest in all kinds of Gaelic poetry was very great. Among my earliest memories was arguments between him and Alexander Nicolson, the eldest of my mother's seven brothers, on the relative merits of Duncan MacIntyre, William Ross and Alexander MacDonald. Unfortunately, in anti-Catholic Free Presbyterian Raasay not even my father knew much about Alexander MacDonald, but he knew a lot about Rob Donn and a surprising amount about Iain Lom.

Both my father's sisters were unusually good singers. The younger, Flora, was living in Glasgow but I remember from her a cradle-rocking refrain for the 'Braes of Uig' that I have never heard from anyone else. The elder, Peggie, ten years older than my father, used to stay with us for a whole month every year. She had a mania for fishing, sea fishing of course, and I had then a mania for boats, that is from my earliest memories until I was about 20, when the Cuillins seduced me from the sea. Peggie could depend on me to take her out thrice a day. Most of the fishing was the very leisurely deep-line fishing for haddock, whiting etc. That left enough time for Peggie's singing, my listening, and many political arguments, for the First World War had

made Peggie a Tory although she had been before that a Socialist, a Scottish Nationalist and a militant suffragette. I became rather a good rower for my physique, and until fairly recently I could not forget the words of any Gaelic song I liked even if I heard it only once. My ear's defect in pitch seems to me now to have been compensated for by a painful sensitivity to what I felt faults of rhythm and time.

My elder brother John was always a good singer. I remember him in his last year in Portree School being picked out by the notable Ethel Bassin as one of the three or four best male singers in the school. Later, in his early twenties, he took to Ceòl Mór and very soon had as colossal a memory for pibroch as he had for Greek poetry. Thus he was able to transmit accurately the tunes, as I the words, of the many great versions of old songs preserved by our family. In our later days in Portree School one of our greatest friends was John Mathieson from Kilmuir. He frequently stayed with us in Raasay, learned many of our songs well, and gave us wonderful versions of others such as Beathag Mhór's song for Martin Martin and the song about the MacDonalds at Auldearn. His singing of the Lament for Gregor of Glenstrae was beyond words and his 'feel' for most kinds of Gaelic poetry was to my mind always 'right'. His version of the song for Martin Martin (he came from the Martin country) was even better than the version sung by my uncle, Angus Nicolson.

Of my mother's seven brothers and two sisters, two brothers were pipers, two others were singers, one a bard, and one sister a very good singer. They had learned many old songs from their MacLeod mother, who had died before I was born, and who had a fine voice, and many old songs even though she was a pious 'adherent' of the Free Presbyterian Church. My brother John and I went to Braes for about a fortnight every year and heard many songs from our Aunt Katie and our Uncle Calum, who specialised in Màiri Mhór, but Katie also had added to her songs some learned from her great friend, a sister of the late Dr Allan MacDonald. Our Uncle Angus Nicolson was in those days very seldom in Skye, and more seldom in Raasay, but on the rare occasions when he was at home in Braes or visiting us in Raasay we heard some of his great store of songs learned from his mother, from the incomparable Mary Macintosh, a near neighbour of theirs in Braes, from the Buchanan sisters, and from many others on the mainland. Much later his recorded voice earned very high praise from a great friend of Gaelic songs and Ceòl Mór, the late Professor Sidney Newman. In spite of difference in religion and physique, Angus was strangely like Calum Johnstone, both rare human beings even without their remarkable sensibility. He frequently talked of his Stewart

grandmother, of her intelligence and lovable nature. She was the wife of my great-great-grandfather, John Stewart, in whose house I now live. It was said that the Stewarts had brought 'brains' into our family. Two of them were among the three joint-tenants of Peinnachorrain in the rent-roll of 1733 and were relatives of the exiled poet Norman Nicolson of Scorrybreck. It is said that the celebrated vagrant Gilleasbuig Aotrom used to come to John Stewart to make epigrams for him. If it was John Stewart who made that on the minister and factor Souter, mentioning Neil MacLeod of Gesto, John Stewart must have had a turn of witty language.

Even to this day, I sometimes think that if I had been a singer I would have written no verse, but perhaps, if I had been a singer, I would have tried to create original melodies. I know 'original' is a relative word and I think I have always been enough of a scholar to be troubled by the question of 'originality'. It is important, very important. One of the reasons, perhaps the chief reason, why I think it extremely unlikely that there is a poet equal to MacDiarmid living in Europe today is the complete originality of MacDiarmid's lyrics, their out-of-this-world quality, which rings true and hugely significant, moving in the extreme to whatever I have of sensibility. That, and because the lyrics of the 'Drunk Man' are mostly not so original is why I would still put the book 'Sangschaw' above the 'Drunk Man'. But that is a digression. What I am trying to say is that very early in life I came to be obsessed with the lyric, first of all because of my unusually rich Gaelic background; with the lyric in the Greek sense of a marriage of poetry and music, and then, because I was not a musician, with the lyric in the Shelleyan and Blakeian sense of a short or shortish poem suggesting song even if it could never be sung, a concentration running or flying away from anything that could in any way be called *sermo pedestris*. Before I came to Edinburgh University at the age of 17, I had come to be entranced by the peaks of Wordsworth's 'Prelude', the expressions of a sensitivity to certain impressions from external nature that I found original, subtle and true, emanating from the discursive *sermo pedestris* of nine tenths of the very long poem. I admire Wordsworth's poetry still although by the age of 18 I had come to acknowledge the half-truth of Arnold's dictum that he 'averted half his ken from human fate'. He did not always.

From the age of 16 or so onwards I had been writing a fair amount of verse in Gaelic and English, and reading all the poetry I could lay hands on in Gaelic and in English, but from the age of 12 onwards I was primarily an idealist democratic revolutionary and I fancied my future role in life as a politician helping to change the world, rather

than as a scholar or a poet. 'Negative Capability' I understood but it was not for me. In the Thirties I used to be very sceptical of the Scottish writers who seemed to attribute most of Scotland's ills to Calvinism. What did they know of Calvinism? Not one of them had been brought up in a small island where nine out of ten of the people were adherents of the Free Presbyterian and the rest of the Free Church, which was in Raasay at any rate very liberal by comparison. Both sects believed doctrinally that not only were the secular arts dangerous vanities but also that the great bulk of humanity, and the great bulk of Free Presbyterians as well, were to spend an eternity of physical and mental torture. Although my father and mother were only lax Free Presbyterians, I supposed they too believed that at the level at which human beings can believe it and continue sane. One always believed that somehow in the long run one could 'make one's calling and election sure', but the odds for eternal damnation were terribly high against a very high percentage of the lovable people one knew. The obvious fewness of the Elect made me anti-elitist in most ways. My mother's Braes was almost totally Free Presbyterian, but rather anti-clerical. Gladstone's Irish Home Rule bills had made the clerical Elect Tories, and no matter how lovable as individuals a great number of those Elect were, they were politically discounted. This scepticism about the Church's politics inevitably loosened doctrinal holds or, if they did not, it led to questions about the individual minister's doctrinal orthodoxy. The *lacrimae rerum* seeped through the protective walls of the individual very early and made for pessimism and I believe toleration and a sympathy for the underdog. I do not think it made for self-righteousness at all, for was not human righteousness filthy rags, by-products but necessary by-products of Saving Grace? The 'Confessions of a Justified Sinner' are, of course, a travesty of the Calvinism of the Scottish Highlands, and I believe of the Lowlands too. At the age of 12 I took to the gospel of Socialism, and I believe that in my later teens a dichotomy took me psychologically: my 'pure' aesthetic idols of old Gaelic songs, and my humano-aesthetic idols of Blake and Shelley.

I had read no modern English poetry before I came to Edinburgh University at the age of 17. Although I was still a devotee of Blake and Shelley, my English verse then became more influenced by Donne, Eliot and Pound. I had taken English because it seemed economically disastrous to take Celtic, and I believe it was for the best. My English verse could try to follow Donne, Eliot and Pound because I could not follow Blake and Shelley. It was not that the great Grierson himself was half as pro-Donne as his undergraduate admirers or rather the

undergraduate admirers of Eliot. Among them it would have been blatant heresy to suggest that Milton was as great a poet as Donne or Yeats as great a poet as Eliot. The first undergraduate I ever heard voicing that heresy was James Caird and that when I first met him, in 1933, my last years in the University. Caird was two years younger than I. I did not listen to him on Yeats enough to get past the early Yeats, but I did listen to him on MacDiarmid, to whose poetry from *Sangschaw* to *Scots Unbound* Caird and Davie soon introduced me. The intellectual stimulus of Davie and the literary stimulus of Caird was very great, but the lyrics of Hugh MacDiarmid might very well have destroyed any chances I ever had of writing poetry had my reading of them not been immediately followed by my reading of *The Drunk Man*, *Cenchrastus* and *Scots Unbound*. To me, the best of them were, and still are, the unattainable summit of the lyric and the lyric is the summit of all poetry, but they could not be followed even 'afar off' by me or anyone else. In them I saw a timeless and 'modern' sensibility and an almost implicit 'high seriousness' and an unself-conscious perfection of rhythm that could not be an exemplar because it was so rare. *The Drunk Man*, the greatest long poem of the century that I have read, is more accessible because, along with the subtlest and most daringly imaginative, the most organic and marvellously sustained use of symbolism, it has the variety that has something for most natures. It converted me to the belief that the long medley with lyric peaks was the great form for our age. I know I did not have the *vis comica* at all, but it made me want to write a long medley with as many lyric peaks as might grow out of it. Hitler had come into power in 1933 and with the prescience of the pessimist, I saw that the political task of our generation, or of the Thirties decade, was to save what could be saved of a bad state to prevent an infinitely worse one of long duration. By 1932, before I met Caird, Davie or MacDiarmid, I had written a Gaelic poem about a heron, and I thought it worth preserving, it and some other Gaelic poems which I thought much more true to myself than anything I had done in English. Later a translation of the poem earned very great praise from Edwin Muir. So I was committed to Gaelic poetry before I had read a single poem by MacDiarmid; but the Spanish Civil War, the increasing likelihood that the Fascists would conquer Europe, my private family circumstances, the facing of questions that I long after came to be familiar with in the writings of French Existentialists, changed the directions indicated by 'The Heron', increasing urgent tensions, and from 1936 to 1939 I became, if a poet, a very different one from what my pre-1936 writings indicated. It was significant that the English poem produced by the

Spanish war that impressed me most was Cornford's 'Heart of this Heartless World'. Compared with it, Auden's 'Spain' seemed superficial, and still does. From 1939, almost till I went away to Egypt and Libya late in 1941, I was faced with a terrible personal dilemma, and from August 1941 to 1944 I could not decide whether the situation was really tragical or a farce.

Only in very rare moments, and never at all during the years 1936 to 1945, did I think of the poet primarily or secondarily as a virtuoso or craftsman, nor has my practice implied that he should be a 'committed' propagandist even in the very best sense. If 'committed' the poetry must be in some way confessional if it is to be true to the perpetual dilemma of the 'Existentialist' choice. Iain Lom's famous words to Alastair MacDonald 'You do the fighting and I'll do the praising' I consider disgusting, however expedient they might have been to the exigencies of the situation, and however wise they might have been in the long run. I could not have been an Iain Lom at Inverloch or an Auden in America in 1939.

My mother's long illness in 1936, its recurrence in 1938, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the progressive decline of my father's business in the Thirties, my meeting with an Irish girl in 1937, my rash leaving of Skye for Mull late in 1937, and Munich in 1938, and always the steady unbearable decline of Gaelic, made those years for me years of difficult choice, and the tensions of those years confirmed self-expression in poetry not in action. I have to admit with shame that it was not until the early Fifties that I realised the great significance for Gaelic of what Donald Thomson and other school teachers were doing in Argyll, that is teaching it to those who did not know it already. Munich and the unparalleled heroism and self-sacrifice of Communists in the Spanish Civil War almost made me a Communist in 1938. I think Mull had much to do with my poetry: its physical beauty, so different from Skye's, with the terrible imprint of the clearances everywhere on it, made it almost intolerable for a Gael, especially for one with the proud name of MacLean. Just after Munich, indirect approaches were made to me to accept a Territorial commission in the Eighth Argylls. I was tempted, but replied: 'Not while this government (Chamberlain's) is in power.'

It was in Mull in 1938 that I conceived the idea of writing a very long poem, 10,000 words or so, on the human condition, radiating from the history of Skye and the West Highlands to Europe and what I knew of the rest of the world. Its symbolism was to be, mostly, native symbolism. I started it in Edinburgh in the summer of 1939. The idea came from *The Drunk Man*. It suffered interruption after interrup-

tion, especially the beginning of the war in September 1939. The final interruption stopped it abruptly in December 1939. Events in Poland in 1944 made me question its 'commitment' and at any rate much of its symbolism is not in proportion with its theme.

The long poem was always to me a *faute de mieux* as compared with the lyric but I have come to regard it as a necessity if poetry is to deal adequately with much of the human condition. By 'lyric' I mean something far removed from the sermo-pedestrian short poems that now pass for lyrics; rather, short poems like many Gaelic songs and the lyrics of Blake, Shelley or MacDiarmid. I think two of the reasons for my long silences and burning of unpublished poems have been my long years of grinding school-teaching and my addiction to an impossible lyric ideal. During my 16 years at Plockton the burden of school teaching was aggravated for myself by my starting of the teaching of Gaelic there, and that to pupils who did not know it already.

I think I have indicated my 'relationship with poetry or the Muse'; whether I am a first or a 42nd cousin I leave to others who are not of the Gaelic city establishments cherishing comfortable ultra-Minch ideals.

What keeps me writing nowadays is a question I cannot easily answer, nor could anyone else in my position. I have always had long silences, periods of no writing, but these have generally been accompanied by frequent burnings and long delays in publication because I could not get round to type things or write letters, or because an English translation was required by all publishers, except Caithness Books, who would publish my work. Besides, it was difficult for me to abandon my lyrical ideal, even when I came to believe that non-lyrical poetry could be the product of long and deep thought 'carried alive into the heart by passion', and could recognise some such poetry as subtle, delicate and true. I had for long been fascinated by Yeats's and Màiri Mhór's power of expressing common 'thoughts' barely and as if a common truth had come home to them for the first time. In spite of MacDiarmid, the 'full-time' professional poet is not for me and never has been. If I have time to do it, I brood over something until a rhythm comes as a more or less tight rope to cross the abyss of silence. I go on it, as far as I can see, unconsciously. Nowadays I shun 'free verse' because so very little of it in others satisfies me and because its rope is so often so slack as to be loose bits of Chopped Prose, even if courtesy gives them the name of rhythm. I could not be primarily a Gael without a very deep-seated conviction that the auditory is the primary sensuousness of poetry. The

invention of convincing new rhythms that are not primarily prose 'rhythms' is so rare that I can think of no-one who has done it convincingly in Gaelic this century except Campbell Hay and two others in a few poems. There may be more but, if there are, their rhythms have not impinged on me, or I have not read them. By saying that they have not impinged on me means that I felt their wheels were poor for their loads. Gaelic poetry that is published with English translations cannot be assessed on its translation alone even by the most honest and perceptive of critics who do not know Gaelic.

Some say that the habit of writing grows on one and that, once it is formed, it is not easy to eradicate. That may be true of most writers, but I think its truth depends on the chances of life. The chances are very much against the 20th Century Gael, who has always had to make a living in other ways, and too often he has to do it by what must be one of the most exhausting of all ways, school teaching.