and its sense that a key to what being human means could be found, in a relatively unproblematic fashion, by observing something as simple as water intensely and symbiotically.

In our correspondence around the time he was working on *An Tuil*, Ronald Black mentioned a clutch of Whytes living in the Oban area at the end of the 19th century which had produced several poets. Had I any connection with them? Was Henry by chance a frequent Christian name in my family? Aonghas MacNeacail raised the same question barely a month ago, in the course of a radio interview. I had known for a long time that, while both my mother's parents were born in Ireland, like my father's mother, my father's father most likely came from Protestant stock (even though the Knights of St Columba were meeting regularly in his shop on Maryhill Road long before I was born). My father's great aunt Dottie Mackay had been a Protestant, and it was more than probable that one of his forebears had fallen prey to the wiles of a Catholic girl and 'turned', as they put it then. I had both an uncle and a cousin named Henry Whyte.

The idea alarmed me, and I did not pursue it further. Might it not mean yielding to 'their' logic? (By 'them', in this context, I do not mean either Ronald or Aonghas.) That if anyone demonstrated a powerful engagement with the Gaelic language, they had to have it 'in their blood'? Was I in danger of being drawn back into a circle I had mysteriously, unknowingly escaped from? After all, there are advantages to being a Chinese beetle.

Edinburgh, September 2002

Ruaraidh MacThòmais / Christopher Whyte

Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais

What follows is an edited transcription of two 90-minute cassettes, recorded with Derick Thomson on two separate occasions during the last three months of 1988. Thomson's way of speaking reflected the quiet tones of his poetry, ranging from pianissimo to mezzo forte but never beyond. Indeed, at one point his voice became so quiet that it was necessary to encourage him to speak louder, so as not to prejudice the quality of the recording. Shortly before the interviews, I had been asked by Tessa Ransford to write a piece on An Rathad Cian *for publication in* Lines Review *and this, along with the pivotal position that book occupies in Thomson's opus, explains our concentrating on this particular cycle. As the interviewee was far from being of an expansive or forthcoming character, it helped to have the support of a text to prompt and structure the sequence of questions. The cycle is printed, with facing English translation by the poet, on pp. 125–75 of* Creachadh na Clàrsaich: Cruinneachadh de Bhàrdachd 1940–1980 / Plundering the Harp: Collected Poems 1940–1980 *(Edinburgh, Macdonald Publishers 1982). Thomson expresses himself in a tentative and provisional way, with constant use of 'for example', 'in a sense', 'of course' and similar tags, which have been severely trimmed in the text below. The actual work of transcription was done by Karen Marshalsay and Sheila Kidd, without whose patience and tenacity publication would have been impossible. There are repeated points where the ignorance of the interviewer comes through to an embarrassing extent. A self-taught learner who was, at the time the interviews were made, teaching in the English Department at Edinburgh, while working on his Ph.D. under Thomson's supervision, he continues to feel a deep gratitude for the confidence and support offered at a crucial stage to one with absolutely no formal background in the Gaelic language.*

DAY ONE

Could I ask you first of all what you were doing, where you were living, and what you were working on at the time you wrote the cycle? It was published in 1970, which would make you . . .

Forty-nine at that point. I was doing a quick check on when I actually wrote it...

That was the first thing I wanted to ask you...

It was mainly written in 1967 and 1968, but there is a little overspill into '69, 1 think it would be early '69 and, as you say, it was published in 1970, so it would have gone to the printers sometime in 1969, late '69.

It was published first of all in Gaelic and then in English afterwards. Is that right?

That's right. *Lines Review* suggested that I might let them have a translation which, of course, didn't exist at that time. So the translation was specially done for the *Lines* edition.

So you did the translation sometime after completing the cycle, it wasn't in any sense contemporaneous?

After thought, yes, as I always do, if I do a translation at all. Sometimes it can be fairly quick, but that would be exceptional, if I did a translation within a month or two of writing the poem.

Were you in Aberdeen at this time?

No, in Glasgow. I'd come back to Glasgow in 1964 and we were living in Pollokshields. I remember the circumstances around the writing of some at least of the poems. My wife was teaching in Craigbank School and I used to normally run her out there in the morning and then come back, either come over to the university here or, occasionally, work at home. I remember quite distinctly, on the run back from Craigbank, the road passed through a little bit of rural Glasgow, in between housing estates, and getting a whiff, it must have been late spring or early summer, a whiff of the vegetation which somehow got under my skin, into my nostrils as it were. It was almost as though I were using that as a trigger

mechanism to get started. Now I wasn't, of course, in any sense, writing about that particular experience. It was simply a trigger mechanism which put me in the mood for taking out my pen as soon as I got back home.

This would be spring 1968?

I think it must have been. I honestly can't remember if it were '67 or '68, because parts of it were written in both years, and I notice that quite a number of the individual poems were written in April and May of these two years.

Had you been writing quite a lot in the period immediately before starting An Rathad Cian *or had there been a kind of lull?*

I don't think there had been a long lull. Around that time I published *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* (1967), but that collection had lain dormant for a long time, partly because I had given it to William Maclellan, who was perhaps not at his most productive phase. In other words, it lay in a drawer in his office for a year or two, until I got fed up and demanded it back, you see. So I think I may not have been writing as regularly as at other times before this burst started again.

Might the satisfaction of seeing that collection in print have geared you up to write more, to write further?

I don't know. I would be a bit sceptical about that, but it might have had some influence.

Presumably the vegetation reminded you of Lewis?

Presumably yes, When I talk about a trigger what I'm talking about is some sort of emotional and memory trigger, which then gives one starting conditions, nothing more than that. But I've always found that sort of a trigger productive. Not that I go out of my way to find such a trigger, but that I respond to it.

And did it translate itself fairly quickly into words, a literary idea, a possibility of writing, of imagery?

Oh, I think so. It's very difficult to explain these particular mechanisms. I should say that the very first poem in the series, 'An Uilebheist', came as

the very first in terms of time of composition and in some sense out of the blue. What partly was happening was that over the years, as you know, I have had a long love affair with Lewis, and a long interest in trying to describe and comment on the experience of living there. It may well have been that round about this time, in the middle '60s, I was coming to the view that central though it was to my experience, it wasn't something I was ever likely to go back to in any physical sense.

So until this point there had been a lingering doubt in your mind that you might just go back?

There may have been, yes, but what this particular sequence spells out in a bleak sort of way was that I had come to that particular crossroads and knew that this was a farewell. That comes through late on, in more explicit terms, but it underlies the whole idea of the sequence.

I get the impression that it is not just a personal farewell. Something of much greater significance has been lost entirely.

Oh yes, the personal aspect is just one symbol of it, the important thing is the other one.

Did you realise early on that 'An Uilebheist' would not be an isolated poem but that much more came after? That it would lead into a structure?

I'm fairly sure that I didn't at the time of writing it, but I think I did very soon after.

Would you like to explain the title of the work, An Rathad Cian, *'the distant road'? Where is it, where does it start and where does it lead?*

You can explain it probably in different ways. It's a long way to travel back to early memories, a longer way if you explore recent history, the history of a number of centuries, an even longer way if you get right back to the times when they built the Callanish stones, and so on. There's also a different kind of distancing involved in *cian,* perhaps related to the abstract *cianalas,* nostalgia. So there's a hint of nostalgia in the title too.

Is it also the long journey from Glasgow to Lewis? It takes a long time to get back physically!

That would be the least of the notions.

The most superficial?

I think so.

I find it very much a cycle about being an exile and the psychological and emotional problems that this poses. About an exile coming to terms with and accepting the fact of non-return.

It is certainly partly to do with that. I have always been familiar with different degrees and different kinds of intensity of exile. You can't live in Glasgow without realising that there are a lot of people in this city who regard one or other of the islands as their home, and continue to refer to it as their home and, in a very real sense, have kept up that connection. They go there every year, they live imaginatively in the sort of environment that they had known at an early stage, and indeed, often was transported with them to the city.

So it's a very Glaswegian poem. Glasgow as a place of exile and a place where exiles meet and know one another?

I don't think that makes it a Glaswegian poem, because I'm quite sure I would have come round to writing it eventually, wherever I had been living. Perhaps it was something of an accident that it was when I came back to Glasgow from Aberdeen, That was probably to do with the stage of life, the age I was at the time.

So the sequence was clearly linked to your age, just on the point of reaching fifty?

It would be linked to other personal factors too, because it was in 1968 that my mother died. She died in the early summer, late spring of that year...

After you had started?

Oh yes, certainly, a year after I had started. But latish in the cycle there are some very specific references to that. There's one poem where (in the individual poems of course I'm addressing people, a lot of different people, but my mother is one of them, you see) we talk about her going away, and that refers to her death.

Can you tell me which poem you have in mind?

If I can find it. Yes, that particular reference was in no. 49, 'An galair', in particular in the second stanza: *'Nuair a chaidh thu air falbh/leis a'chabhaig sin'*, she died suddenly, *'dhùin siud mo shùilean-sa cuideachd/cha deanainn mo rathad'*. Although earlier on, in no. 34, the poem *'Na canadh duine'* (*'Na canadh duine gun do chuir mi cùl riut /ged a thionndaidh mi air falbh'*), that is after my mother's death too, because the imagery is the imagery of the burial and holding the coffin cord and that related to the umbilical cord, and so on. So that also came after.

That poem also introduces the idea of a living death: 'Glaiste ann an ùir mo bheatha'.

Yes, yes, yes. That is related to the notion of the umbilical cord connection between the child and the mother on one level, between the exile and the home country on another. Thinking of the soil of that country and so its life, its traditions, all that sort of thing, that is the *ùir mo bheatha* there.

I interrupted you when you were talking about different degrees of exile, about the generalised exile of Gaelic people in Glasgow.

That is the most literal level of exile, physical exile, and the adjustments that go with settling in a new place, making new acquaintances and all that. Then I imagine that most people have other layers of exile in their experience, which may vary in depth and intensity according to one's particular range of interests, whether intellectual, emotional, religious or whatever. There can be a wide range of exile experience, and certainly an important part of this has to be the linguistic one. For many people that linguistic break was mitigated in a situation like Glasgow's, where there was such a large colony of exiles, a significant ghetto which operated very strongly in a linguistic sense. You would hardly find this happening now, but two or three generations ago you would find third generation Glasgow families still using Gaelic.

Could you put a date on that?

Between the two wars. It wouldn't have survived the second war but it would have survived the first to some extent, perhaps not for very long. But I've known of some instances of Glasgow families where the third generation was still reasonably fluent in Gaelic. You required conditions of housing stability for that result, and in places like Partick and Maryhill the density of Gaelic settlement was such that children could be playing in Gaelic in the streets.

How important was this exile community or ghetto for your own social experience in Glasgow? Were you very involved in it, or did your friends tend to be English speakers from a different background?

It was a mixture of both really. I wasn't deeply involved in the way that a good many Hebrideans were. For example, I was never an active participant in even the Lewis and Harris Association. I was a member of it, and went to some of their meetings, but I was never a committee member, I never involved myself deeply in the running of any of these organisations, which often provided an important focal point for Glasgow exiles. I had a great many Gaelic-speaking friends and acquaintances in Glasgow but never confined myself to that. Working in the university brought me into a different circle, and both by inclination and specific choice, I kept my feet in both worlds.

So even with respect to this ersatz Gaelic community in Glasgow, you were inside and outside at the same time. You didn't have a simple relationship to it.

That's true. And I would probably be looked on with a slight degree of suspicion, as not belonging properly to it.

What would be the reason for this suspicion?

Just that I hadn't thrown myself whole-heartedly into that companionship. I was more peripheral.

How closely do you identify with the man who speaks in the poems, the man who is putting together the cycle?

Oh, there's a distancing, because the structure of the sequence is such that a lot of different aspects of life in Lewis and the relationship with that life, either in terms of memory or emotion or whatever, so many different aspects of these situations are involved, that the topic has to be approached from many different angles. Sometimes the eye of the poem may be a fictional one set up for a particular purpose, a particular investigative purpose. Sometimes the 'he' will be me and sometimes somebody entirely different.

Which aspects of the persona do you feel are furthest away from your own biography?

That's a difficult question. I'd have to work through the sequence and consider that. Maybe some of the answer will emerge in a different context.

Shall we look at some of the poems? I worked through them in sequence, though it might be an idea to jump backwards and forwards at times.

Just as you like.

About the first poem. Why a monster? What is monstrous in this experience?

It's monstrous if it becomes obsessive. That is part of the definition of obsession, something that looms larger than it ought to. Probably the basic idea behind the monster is that it's something that is swollen, that has become too all pervading.

So it's threatening?

Threatening, in that sense.

And the monster could be both the place itself and the emotional obsession or attachment that you have for it?

It's a convenient image in that the island is pushing itself out of the sea, and then develops out of that.

But it makes the exile's feelings very ambivalent right from the start.

Yes, yes, yes, and that probably comes through in the perhaps not entirely respectful attitude to religion.

You move into religious imagery very quickly.

Very quickly, yes, because it is so pervasive, so important in that whole context, so I suppose it is bound to surface quickly.

As in 'leis a' chainnt/a dh'ionnsaich mi aig d'altair'. Is the altar a very important thing in a Lewis church?

Not really. The idea of the altar survives because it is part of the biblical set up. You might say that it had been repudiated in the particular type of religion that was practised. But it still survived because of its biblical importance.

Your religious imagery in the whole cycle is very catholic with a small 'c'. It moves beyond strictly Calvinist or Presbyterian implications.

Oh yes, I think it does, and this goes back very far in my own personal experience, because I remember as a teenager, probably as a fairly young teenager, becoming sceptical of religious attitudes, particularly of the narrower religious attitudes. In a place like Lewis, where you have several Presbyterian sects, some are particularly narrow, indeed almost vicious, and that aspect of things struck me as preposterous at a fairly early age. I remember arguing with some of my relatives. There was one particular aunt who was quite fond of arguing, she was religious herself up to a point...

Can you say her name?

Bella was her name in Ceòs. She was a great reader herself, open to argument, and I remember as a young teenager having quite a lot of arguments with her about how preposterous this narrowness was. So by my middle teens I was aware that religion was a wide-embracing thing, was a catholic thing if you like, with a small 'c'. That made me ready to use the more general kinds of religious imagery.

Were you more concerned with the social practice of religion or with the dogmas behind it?

More the social practices. I never really got myself deeply involved in questions of dogma and still can't.

They never touched you closely?

Not closely. I remember as a young boy having a vision of becoming a minister, but that was because a favourite uncle of mine was a minister. Within about six months I had a strong vision of becoming a bus-driver.

I remember you telling me that your father was a very good example of someone with a measured commitment to religion, a balanced attitude to his native culture and to the church.

That is perfectly true. He was deeply involved in the church in various ways, as an elder, as a Presbytery clerk, as a preacher and so on, although, and I have spoken to you about this before, that was in the Church of Scotland, which was the most liberal of the churches on the island at that time. Though even in the Church of Scotland it would be regarded as eccentric and almost 'wrong' for an elder to go to a ceilidh, or a public concert. These feelings would have been intensified as you moved towards the Free Church and still further towards the United, the Seceder church. In spite of that strong understanding, it didn't give him the slightest bother to go to ceilidhs and concerts and have a high profile in that part of the community life too. He never lost his respect on account of that. He was a quiet but strong personality.

Towards the end of poem no. 1 there's a lot of playing with language, playing around with sounds. That's something new and experimental in your poetry at this time.

I think that is so. It developed as time went on and becomes even stronger in later poems, later collections. But it was fairly new at this stage.

The phrase 'leis a' bhàs/a dh'fhuiling mi air do sgàth' makes me think of your poem about coffins, 'Cisteachan-laighe', as if a kind of death has already taken place. Why 'for your sake'?

It is often difficult to be sure that you're hitting on the motivation for a thought or a line at the time. I suppose that death there is to do with the death of exile. 'For your sake' is difficult to explain in logical terms.

Something like 'If I'd been more able to just forget about you, to consign you to oblivion, whereas it is my loyalty to you that has provoked this sensation of death. . .'

I think that is probably it.

There are a lot of landmarks in poem no. 2.

Yes, such as An Gallan, and Aird Chirc is Chicken Head, the most ken-speckled point in the Point peninsula as you are approaching it from the sea, and Aird Phabail is a cliff on Bayble shore, so this is as it were homing in on Bayble where my home was.

And the ship would take you round to Stornoway?

At that time the ship would come from Kyle, the north of Skye and come along fairly close past Gallan Head then head into the harbour, with Chicken Point to the right going in. You wouldn't see Aird Phabail, but the poem needn't be tied quite as closely to the journey by boat.

What about Biastan Thuilm?

Biastan Thuilm, the Beasts of Holm, are the rocks of Holm on which the *Iolair*, so very famous in Lewis history and mythology, grounded at the end of the First World War. '...altair na Circe' comes back to Chicken Head, Aird Chirc. I think it is referred to as Chicken Head in the English maps but *Chirc,* is a Norse name, "church", Church Head.

You translate it into English as Chicken Head first and Church Head later. Is the same doubleness evident in the Gaelic?

Yes, Aird Chirc means literally 'the head of the chicken', but presumably the adaptation had already been made in Gaelic. It was being interpreted as 'cearc', as chicken, whereas in fact it is 'kirk'.

And you go back to the idea of the 'altair' as well don't you, in using 'altair na Circe'?

That is right, yes.

What about the Bayble priests intoning in Latin? Do you have fun bringing specifically Catholic references into a Lewis poem?

I think that is the truth of the matter. But this has again an etymological significance, because Bayble, a Norse name, is thought to mean 'priest's dwelling', 'papa', so it is an easy move to *sagart* from that. It gave me great pleasure to call the Free Kirkers and what-not of Bayble *sagart*.

So you have three languages there, the Gaelic word and the Norse word, and they're speaking in Latin. You have a sense of Lewis that goes back beyond the Reformation to the arrival of the Norse, in a later poem.

That is right, yes.

And what about the 'èisdeachd chan fhan iad'?

Èisdeachd is the technical term in Gaelic for 'confession'.

Catholic confession?

Yes, 'an èisdeachd, a' dol don èisdeachd', 'going to confession'. 'Èifhreann' of course is the mass, the 'offerenda'. So these Bayble priests are intoning the mass, and yet at the same time they're not prepared to listen to confession, they are not waiting for confession.

That implies a degree of guilt, and guilt surfaces elsewhere in the cycle. When you talk of your soul going back to Lewis after death, there is a guilt that cannot be lifted or wiped out.

I'm interested you can extract that reading from the poem. I don't think it had occurred to me.

The next poem, 'An Odhrag' is about actually leaving the island.

At least in figurative terms. The 'òdhrag', the young cormorant, nests on the cliff, and when it has enough strength in its wings, it takes off. That image is compounded with the image of the fowler climbing in the cliffs to get the young birds, as they do, for example, in Ness, to catch the young birds before they fly off the nests. I suppose they are as tender eating at that stage as they are ever going to be. There is a confusion between the the young cormorant itself and the fowler who is chasing them, and the fowler is envisaged as losing his grip and falling off the cliff. For the purposes of poem, this is regarded as a release, a way of escape.

Although it is an ambivalent kind of freedom, because there is also a fear of falling, of disorientation.

That comes into it too.

But also of escaping from a very premature kind of death.

Well, yes, you could put it that way.

The way you use imagery in An Rathad Cian *struck me as new in your poetry because you abandon specific explanation of the imagery, whereas in the earlier poetry there is much more of a balance between the vehicle and the tenor. You give the image but you also explain exactly what it means, whereas often in* An Rathad Cian *the second part seems to drop out.*

Yes, that is so. I can't quite explain how that change of technique came about, but I'm very well aware of that contrast.

It comes over as a kind of liberation.

Yes, it is. It may be a part of moving towards maturity of expression. There are no doubt other explanations too, but I can't easily pinpoint them.

No. 4 introduces the idea of Lewis as the beloved young woman, or the beloved girl. Is there any suggestion of your mother at this point?

No, I think the imagery now is of a sweetheart.

Would you like to talk briefly of the places here again? Mùirneag?

Yes well, Mùirneag is the only sizeable hill, and it's not very big, in the northern part of Lewis, which is pretty flat you see.

Could you see Mùirneag from Bayble?

Yes, you could, across the Broad Bay you could.

Could you translate the name?

Mùirneag, if it is straight Gaelic as it looks, means 'the little loved one', 'the lovely one'.

So very appropriate to the feeling of the poem.

Very appropriate, yes. Mùrneag incidentally was the name of the most famous of the last sailing boats in Lewis, fishing boats, I've got a poem about that somewhere in fact.

And why was this boat so famous?

Well, because of its skipper, I think it was Alasdair Chaluim Alasdair, and he kept sailing the Mùirneag for years after other people had gone over to steam, and he was still the most successful fisherman in the place.

And what decade would this be?

That would be into the thirties.

So when you were a boy?

When I was a boy at school, yes, this was a prominent symbol.

What about Suardail Moor? That's just above Bayble, is it?

Well, there's a Suardail between Bayble and Circ, Chicken Head, and there's another one behind Ceòs. It's a common name, again one of these Norse names.

Ceòs just on Loch Erisort...

Yes, Loch Erisort. Now that was where my mother came from, where my grandparents were, so it was a place we visited a lot, holidayed a lot there. I was closer to my mother's family than to my father's, spent more time in her territory as it were.

What was your mother's name?

My mother's name was Christina Smith.

What would that be in Gaelic?

Tìneag Nic a' Ghobhainn, but she was known as Tìneag Aonghais Alasdair. She appears in the dedication: '*Mar chuimhneachan do mo mhàthair, Tìneag Aonghais Alasdair, à Ceòs*'.

Was there a different kind of Gaelic in Ceòs?

Yes, it was a recognisably different accent. It would be too strong to say dialect.

But you spoke the Gaelic of Bayble?

Yes, I spoke the Gaelic of Bayble, and used to make fun to my mother of the Gaelic of Ceòs, you see, but she would equally make fun of my Bayble Gaelic, which she regarded as outlandish, 'coorse'!

And did she correct you?

Not so much correct me, but she would make her own variety known to me.

This is another point which we have to come back to, which for me as a learner is difficult to perceive, how strong the Lewis colouring is in the language of An Rathad Cian. *Maybe you could talk about that.*

We could talk about that separately, but fairly strong I would say.

So this Suardail Moor is the one behind Ceòs then?

I think probably that's the one there, which had rather more significance for me I think. Mèalaiseal is a prominent hill in Uig.

And what about Loch nan Ruigheannan?

Loch nan Ruigheannan is a loch behind Ceòs, back to Ceòs there, and probably the meaning of that name, Loch nan Ruigheannan, is 'the loch of the arms'. *Ruighe* is a raised ridge of land, and this a very good description of that particular loch, it has several of these ridges and inlets to it. So that reference moves immediately into '*a' snìomh/a ghàirdeanan mu mo chom*', you see.

Is there a Gaelic word that links to 'ruigheannan', because I would have learnt 'gàirdean'?

Oh yes, that's the common word for arm, but *ruighe* was an older one, it was used specifically for the arm but it became obsolete, supplanted by

gàirde. But it is quite common in place names, you get *ruighe* something or other.

It makes me think of 'ruighinn', 'supple', 'flexible'... How old were you when you began to think about place names in this analytic way? Is it something which dates from after your departure?

I think it would basically, you know, it is part of my professional interest, though it never became a central part.

But it started with this particular exile and your relationship to the place.

Place-names are a convenient tab, as it were, for particular experiences or attitudes or emotions, and so on.

But the fact that you had this whole questioning attitude to them would set you apart from many other exiles.

To some extent yes, there's more play made with the names and the same would apply to the final one in that poem you see, Clach Steinn. Now *steinn* is simply Norse stone, and. it was a single stone, it was a monolith on Bayble moor, behind Lower Bayble, and I remember it was a place where one was acutely aware of these monoliths or little stone circles and marked them out, everybody knew their name, their location and so on. And I remember, probably it would be near the beginning of the war, some youngsters lit a fire at the base of that particular stone and cracked it, you know, and that would have been regarded as sacrilegious. Before people would never have interfered with a landmark of that kind. But that stone was actually cracked by a fire being lit at it, so it's s a convenient symbol. That stone had been shattered.

You take it much further in the poem, where the stone is shattered into fragments...

Yes, I take it a bit further, and then of course it leads on to the whole world being shattered and turned into shards.

There are two more things about this poem, I mean I don't want to push this too far, but the fact the shattering took place before you left means it antedates exile.

Yes.

That seems strange to me, as if that world was already breaking up before you personally took your distance from it.

As indeed it was, you know, perhaps that's a minor spelling out of the fact. You see it was I suppose about 1949 or so, '48/'49, perhaps even marginally later than that, that my connections with Lewis, my regular connections with Lewis were broken. My father retired in 1963 and my parents moved to Edinburgh, but until that point I had as it were a family base to go back to, and I didn't start working, didn't have a regular job until 1948. So by that time a lot of changes had taken place and I was acutely conscious of all the changes that were happening. I was already conscious of that, I think, in the thirties, let alone the forties.

What was the very first time you left the island?

Oh, that would have been when I was quite young, it would probably have been in the twenties, going away on holiday. We tended to go very often to this brother of my father's who was a minister. He had been a minister in Brora, then in Glasgow. I think I may have told you at one time that it was in Lilybank Gardens that I learnt to ride a bicycle, when we were staying in his manse, which was where we now have a university car park, or a geology building or something like that, and then he moved to Killin. So all through the years I was used to going away just for brief holidays, but it wasn't until 1939 that I left to go to university.

And that felt more definitive?

Oh yes, oh yes, a good deal.

Until your father retired did you go back at least once a year?

Oh oftener yes, regularly. I went back regularly.

And for how long a period?

Of course the war years intervened and I was in the RAF for three and a half years or so during the war, so it was just a case of coming home for leave during that period, but excluding that I would normally be at home for the long summer vacation, for the university vacations, and that continued to some extent even when I became a university teacher. Except that I sometimes did long recording trips for what was to become the School of Scottish Studies, that was in my early years of teaching.

But apart from that Bayble, my family home, was my base, you might say, until the very late forties.

And just one more thing: 'gach lag is bràigh nach do dh'fhidir mi, nach do dh'fhairich mi'. Why the negatives there? Surely that was the time that you knew them and felt them best?

Yes, but you see I start off the poem by saying that I have moved away from the sweetheart of my youth , that I have lost her as it were, and the implication is that I didn't have time to explore her completely, and that's true. Indeed, there are still some parts of Lewis that I have never been to and, in terms of the love imagery, I think it is really quite relevant, that exploration is part of the process.

The next one seems to me more of a political poem. You talk about the minnow of Scotland, the minnow of England, the minnow of the wide world.

Yes, yes, yes

As if to ask whether this whole process, the loss of identity, the shattering, is that important?

That's precisely what the poem is doing at that point, questioning, and again this is part of the effect of the changing persona.

So it's an attitude taken up briefly, but perhaps not a definitive one? Why the minnow?

An Doirbeardan, yes. It's not a widely used term you know.

What would be the more conventional Gaelic term?

I'm not sure, not sure of that at all.

There is an element of excavating in the language of that time too. Would you often have occasion to use that word after leaving Lewis?

Oh no, no, I wouldn't, but it would have been familiar to me, a word I would have heard in that context, but it's not a dictionary word, it's not a dictionary-dredged word at all.

You're delving back into your early childhood, into that period and words that come from that time.

There is an element of that of course, but I think this example was chosen just because of its smallness, you know, as it were to emphasise the smallness, and perhaps the smallness on the cosmic scale. Why make such a fuss about it?

So even the fact that it is a very local word fits in well.

That fits in too, yes.

I'm struck by the way you tie poems together. Were you writing these poems in sequence?

A good many of them were written in sequence, They don't always in their final arrangement stay in their original sense. I think I have dating for most of the poems, it might be fun sometime to look at the correlation, but I think it is true that many of them come in the sequence, and that's why the links are there. They are natural links.

Did you write them fairly quickly, two or three a day?

It sometimes happened that way, but certainly there was a bunching in terms of months, I think April or May...

I'd be interested to know of any poems that gave you particular difficulty or particular sense of triumph when you got them down! But perhaps that will come to you as we go through them. Do you remember, in no. 6, who it was who actually said the words 'Bùrn is moine 's coirc'?

No, but I can tell you the circumstances. It's a quotation from my Aberdeen days.

So it's not Glasgow then.

That's not Glasgow, no, I had a very close friend who was a school friend and we were at university together, a chap Donald Smith from Bragar in Lewis. We shared digs in Aberdeen.

What would his Gaelic name be?

Well he was known to everyone as Smith A.

As what?

Smith A.

Why does that make you laugh?

Well there were two Donald Smiths in my class at the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway and they both came to Aberdeen University at the same time. And as was the normal thing at that time, if you had two people of the same name in the one class, one was A and the other was B you see, so there was Donald Smith A and Donald Smith B, and that became shortened to Smith A and Smith B.

And would this be inserted in Gaelic speech, Gaelic talk?

Oh yes, yes, *Am Smith A*, that was his identification. The three of us enrolled in the humanity class in Aberdeen in 1939, and we filed past Professor Peter Noble, in alphabetical order and he took our names and addresses you see, and wrote them down at his desk, and so the two Smiths were just ahead of me and it was Smith A who was in the lead. He had lost a leg as a young, young one, but he didn't get an artificial leg until his second year at university and he had a crutch at that time. So he came first and Peter Noble said 'What's your name?' and he said 'Donald Smith A', with the habit of years you see, 'Donald Smith A', and I saw Peter Noble looking up at him. 'Smith A? And your address?' '11 North Bragar, Isle of Lewis'. He wrote that down and he moved on and the next fellow came and he said 'What's your name?' And he said 'Donald Smith B', he said 'Smith B?', taking his time to latch on, you see, 'And what's your address?', '12 North Bragar'. However, it was Smith A in fact who told me sometime when I had come back on leave to Aberdeen, and was staying in my old digs with him, that he had gone into the public toilet in Union Terrace a few days before and heard two talking to each other.. And that was how the conversation had started, '*Bùrn is mòine 's coirc*', you see, a Lewis fellow talking to a fellow Lewisman about the normal round of things. He had been back on Lewis and he said it was the same as ever, water, carrying in water, and peats and corn, you know, cutting the corn, everything the same as it always was. That's the origin of that. But '*facal am bial strainnseir*', he didn't know who it was who was speaking, except he was from Lewis, and '*ann an dùmhlachd a' bhaile,/ann am baile nan strainnsear*', and that as it were, sets up a kind of excitement, a kind of foolish excitement. 'Oh why do I get excited about this?'

It's an answer to the previous poem, isn't it, just after this intellectual distancing suddenly the emotional touch again?

That's right.

'An cridhe ri bacan': that's a very traditional kind of Gaelic image, is it not?

Well perhaps not '*an cridhe ri bacan*' but the idea of the '*bacan*' is certainly very common, yes.

I think Iain Crichton Smith uses it at times in his poems too, this idea of tethering.

Yes, yes.

And the dangers of freedom as well, 'Is daor a cheannaich mi a saorsa'.

Yes, yes.

Just to make a digression for a moment. When you talk about enrolling in university in 1939, were the political events of the time very real to you or was it something quite distant, quite strange?

The political events of the war you mean?

I mean, if you think about Sorley MacLean's poetry, this is the obsession, more than the obsession with Lewis, with the home, what's happening in Europe. Whereas reading your early poetry one feels that it is something which doesn't impinge very clearly. Perhaps it wasn't particularly important for you?

Well I think it was important, you know, you couldn't but be aware of what was going on. But I would be eighteen in 1939, my political standpoint had already been determined to an important extent at that point, and it was a Scottish Nationalist standpoint. So in one sense I took what was almost a conventional attitude among Nationalists at that time,

that this was somebody's else's quarrel, you know, this was an intrusion on the Scottish realities. Now I didn't fully believe that, but it was an attitude of mind which I was aware of and shared to some extent, so that while I had no wish, no longing to volunteer for service, I didn't feel as strongly as Douglas Young did concerning holding out against the idea of conscription.

Were you already aware of people like Douglas Young when you were seventeen, eighteen?

Not quite then, but I would have been fairly soon after, because Douglas Young was a lecturer in Greek, an assistant in Greek, at Aberdeen University when I was there, and I would have got to know him probably in 1940.

Did you do Greek among your subjects?

No, I didn't do Greek.

How did you meet then?

I think because of nationalist and literary interests. He went to various student societies and I went to nationalist gatherings and so on. So it would be in one of these contexts that I met him.

Did you find the atmosphere in Aberdeen stimulating in those years? Was it an exciting place to be?

It was quite stimulating. There were still plenty of people about in 1939. It was maybe a couple of years later that the male students began to be thin on the ground. I was there for two years and a term before being called up, you see, and there was a fair bit of stimulation among students, student societies. People like Alex Scott were there and prominent in student affairs, student literary affairs particularly, and political too. I wouldn't say it was an enormously exciting place, but it was reasonable.

The next poem is a kind of development of 'Leannan m' Òige', isn't it? 'Dh' fhairich mi thu le mo chasan'...

Yes, yes, it is, making a direct contrast, between the situation in the city and in the island as it were.

I've said before that I feel a very delicate but secure sensuality permeates quite a lot of the poetry.

Yes, yes.

...very different from the violent conflictual feeling one gets from Sorley MacLean's poetry, which is much more tormented. Sensual impressions are more pervasive in your own poetry, very accessible and relaxed...

Yes, yes.

You seem to be saying in this poem that there's not really any point in trying to break free or to escape from the monster. For example, with the notion that there's really no point in washing between the toes of the boy and washing the earth of Lewis away from his feet.

Yes, yes, that's more an affirmatory poem rather than a doubting one.

An acceptance of the umbilical cord?

Yes, and as you can see from the choice of imagery, it's particularly an acceptance of the emotional validity of these ties. That is why it is expressed in sensual terms, in tactile terms and so on.

Interesting that by expressing the feminine aspects of this attachment you are able to live it in the happiest way, that when you don't see it in terms of ministers or churchmen or elders, but in terms of the women and the younger women of that society, it ceases to be a tormenting bond...

That's an interesting point, yes, I quite like the notion of that.

And then 'bhon a tha an saoghal a bh'againn/a' leantainn ruinn chon a' cheum as fhaide'. You seem quite calmly to say that there's no way you escape from this at any point.

I would still say that on the emotional level. I think it is quite different if you are talking on a political or an intellectual level.

Although the monster is an emotional image too, isn't it?

Yes, yes.

When I think about breaking free it's almost as if, having got away physically, one of the things behind this cycle is the attempt to get away mentally and emotionally too, and that's what creates the conflict.

Yes, that's so, although I think perhaps at the end of the day one can never expect to be totally free in an emotional sense. I think that I have become so in other senses, but not emotionally.

This line is taken up in no. 9 'Chaill mi mo chridhe riut', which uses the imagery of the young woman but in a much more unhappy fashion. It's full of paradoxes, isn't it? Although you say ''s cha robh thu air do thruailleadh', there is a feeling of the loss of innocence, the loss of virginity here, or of a coming together between the man and the woman. The buds of the plants open, but at the end one finds the bracken, nothing comes of this lovemaking, there is a kind of sterility in the end.

Yes, I suppose you could read that into it. I don't know that I would have developed the imagery quite as far, but certainly there is a disillusionment coming in, a disillusionment that is hard to tell, it's hard to confess to, to the girl, to the island as it were.

Is it a disillusionment that comes from the time of writing or that dates back to your youth?

I think probably what it refers to is the gradual process of disillusionment, like a love affair that has gone wrong, that runs down as it were, but not in any violent sense, so that one is left with a nice relationship that just hasn't gone on maturing, making it difficult to come out in the open and say that's that, that's the end of that, but one recognises that it's happened.

Do you sometimes think of specific girls when you read these poems, or did you when you wrote them?

I certainly wouldn't in that case, I would in one or two cases, certainly yes, but I think perhaps more often than not I wouldn't think of specific girls.

The next poem brings in the religious, Presbyterian theme fairly definitely, and there is also a use of non-Gaelic but also non-European imagery, the roads of Russia and the old Tibetan woman. You seem quite fascinated with the idea of the prayer wheel. It comes back later on in the cycle. Why did this attract you? Can you tell me what a prayer wheel is?

I suppose it's not all that different from a rosary. You turn it as you say a prayer, mark your saying prayers in that way. It's worth perhaps pausing for a minute over how that imagery comes into play. At a fairly early stage, certainly by my late teens, I had become quite interested in mountain climbing, in mountain walking but with a wee bit of rock climbing in it too. I started developing that interest in the sea cliffs in Lewis, and it was a common pastime for young boys, in particular, to test their skills against the cliff. I remember doing that whenever the opportunity arose at home. Then when we started holidaying in central Perthshire with two cousins, a boy and a girl, all three of us were very fond of the mountains and spent a lot of time clambering among them. Perhaps leading from that I became interested in the literature of mountaineering, and in particular the attempts on Everest. I read various books about the ascents of Everest, and following on from that began to take an interest in Tibet, and that's how that imagery comes. It was already firmly in my subconscious long before this time, you know, it just got dredged up from that earlier experience. The starting off point for moving into that imagery is that I sometimes used to think of the old-fashioned women of Lewis when they were dressed in their striped skirts and not a hint of make-up, and their hair in a tight bun. There were some in particular who reminded me very strongly of illustrations I had seen of Tibetan women. A connection is established, that physical resemblance in the first instance leading to the suggestion that, in Lewis society, one was dealing with a very ancient civilisation, which had probably many points in common with isolated mountain societies, such as that of Tibet. Then the imagery spills over into India and the religious usages there, the importance of the Ganges as a religious site, a place of religious pilgrimage, baptism, and all that sort of thing, immersion in the Ganges.

Would you see the kind of religious extremism you mentioned earlier when you were talking about the sects, and the sects themselves, as deriving from that society or as something intrusive?

Oh no, something intrusive, something intrusive, and what I was often attracted to was the no doubt romantic image of that whole society. I would regard particularly the more contentious among religious sects as being very intrusive. Of course you see it all around you in different parts of the world, warring between religious people. It seemed particularly obscene to me, in a small community like Lewis, that you would get

several warring sects, you know, when they could be getting on with something much more positive.

But I have the superficial impression, maybe from Alexander Carmichael's introduction to the Carmina Gadelica, *of the more Presbyterian parts of the Western Isles having buried, or even lost their tradition, whereas on South Uist and Barra the tradition was much closer to the surface. Obviously that's not entirely true, but how much did you feel this integral world continued to live behind, or alongside, the intrusive world of religious preoccupation, religious extremism?*

Well, in the twenties or thirties, the more ancient world had a very real existence still, and even the people who were on the surface committed to one or other of these religious groupings had a different level of experience, which you could loosely think of as pagan or non-religious, but I think it had religious elements in it too. That would be true on the specific level of the survival of Catholic thought and usage and expression even. There were a certain amount of people, this was true of my mother's community in Ceòs for example, who commonly used the expression, *Muire, Muire*, they would call on the Virgin Mary you see. Well, there would be chagrin if they knew this was what they were doing.

Can you think of other examples of this substratum? Of another world persisting?

Well, of another world I couldn't. It's not so easy to get many examples of specific Catholic usage, although I think probably I could gather a few. There were probably a lot of examples of more pagan thought, and this would often surface in the context of superstitions, which could happily co-exist with religious practice at that time, and probably still do. People were full of little superstitious beliefs, in what it is proper to do and under what circumstances you should do certain things, magical cures of ailments of one sort and another. There was a lot of that. I remember noticing this with people who were very specifically religious, they had quite, quite free and earthy ways of talking about emotional matters, you know, and sexual matters for example, they didn't feel inhibited talking about such things. They could carry that current alongside their sometimes quite strict religion.

The way you were talking earlier you used the three terms Presbyterian, Catholic and pagan. Would you define the pagan as non-religious? Is it not just a different kind of religion?

I would be inclined to think it was a different kind of religion. Conventionally you would think that pagan meant non-religious but I didn't feel it that way. I felt some of that pagan undercurrent would go back presumably to pagan religion, pagan gods, and so on. So it was a religion in its own way.

And these elements had an attraction for you that the more specifically Presbyterian elements didn't have?

Yes, I think so. There was a curiosity value of course. I obviously had a deep interest in the ancient features of this society, and I must confess that I will continue to have that sort of interest.

Who are you addressing in this poem?

Well that's the old, the old, wise woman who looks Chinese or Tibetan, so it's the old Lewis woman generally. It starts off with the woman I sometimes refer to as Murdag Mhòr...

She was a janitress?

That's right, she was the school cleaner, and a great family friend, a retainer as it were.

I don't quite understand 'cha do chuir thu ás do chainnt Shìna', 'you did not obliterate China's language'.

This is about this archetypal old woman, and she is contrasted with, if you like, the Anglo-Saxon woman, who would come in and obliterate the language of the Gaels. But this old Tibetan woman had no interest in obliterating the language of the neighbouring country, and so '*cha dug thu oighreachd an Tighearna do chàmhail*', 'you didn't give the Lord's inheritance to camels' - camels in an Eastern context, sheep of course in the Highland one.

That had escaped me.

... *''s na daoine bàsachadh leis a' chaitheimh'*, at that time there was a tremendous amount of death through consumption, TB, in the islands, it was a terrible scourge, people were dying off every week. It was a scourge until the later thirties.

Have you any idea when it began to hit the islands? Was it relatively late?

It arrived relatively late, that's right, it would be in this century...

And what about John Smith of Iarshadar?

Yes, he died of TB, wherever he had contracted it I don't know. It might have been in Edinburgh as a student you see. But it certainly wasn't as early as that it became an epidemic. I remember lots of young people who died in the 20s and 30s. You got the situation where whole families were decimated. One person would get TB and it was some time before people realised that they should be kept apart and they should use their own crockery, dishes, that sort of thing, with their quarters kept scrupulously clean or fumigated or whatever. So I remember whole families just dropping off one after the other, teenagers dying one after the other.

Don't speak too quietly now otherwise the machine won't hear!

Sorry, sorry.

The last time I heard you read the next poem, no.11, 'A' cluich air football le fàidh' it came over as very funny, it produced a lot of laughter. Was this your principal intention in writing the poem?

No, I don't think it was my principal intention at all. It is susceptible to that kind of treatment, but this in fact refers to the sort of conversation I was talking about earlier on with my Auntie Bella. Although there are elements of mischief in it, the reference to Skye, that there were prophets even on Skye, that's just a mischievous line, you see.

They're even more outlandish than the prophets on Barra...

That's right, yes. That's pure mischief, you see, because of this Lewis-Skye rivalry which is particularly strong.

Can you say a few words about it?

The Lewis people regarded the inhabitants of any other island as strange and different. That's one of the by products of insularity in any case, but Lewis people regarded the Harris folk as strange and backward. In that connection, I remember many years ago, I was teaching in Aberdeen, and we had a Swiss student with us for a session, and I was telling, partly with my tongue in my cheek, but you know he was asking about conditions in the island and I was exaggerating this difference between Lewis and Harris, and he asked me quite seriously after a bit of this, I retracted it all of course later you see, and he asked me quite seriously: 'And when did the wheel come to Harris?' So that was in the spirit of the kind of banter that used to go on.

But was this a specifically religious rivalry between Lewis and Harris, between Lewis and Skye?

No, no, it wasn't. I don't know how it had arisen in the first place, there must have been a history of misunderstanding and conflict and distrust. The Lewis folk tended to think of the Skye folk as unreliable, people who would try to take advantage of you and wouldn't be quite straight. That was the Lewis view of Skye. Now the Skye people would have an equally uncomplimentary view of the Lewis folk, but it wouldn't take quite that form, you see. They would feel probably that the Lewis people were overbrash, were go-getters, and that sort of thing, and other things, more uncomplimentary than that. But it was a very real rivalry. It could surface at all points of society. It is just thrown in there for fun.

The next poem maybe fits in with fourteen and fifteen, because here it's 'chunnaic mi thu 'na do chloich' and then 'chunnaic mi thu 'na do bheairt', and then 'ceòl na beairt'. Is the 'you' here a general Lewis do you think?

It is, that really is an address to Lewis, Lewis stones stuck in the middle of a moor.

What is the 'ìobairt do chloinne'?

'...ìobairt do chloinne crìochnaichte...' It used to be a popular idea that stone circles, and Callanish in particular, were the sites of religious sacrifices, pagan sacrifices really. Here that notion is transferred to the

people of Lewis, they have dreed their weird as it were, and suffered the sacrifice.

What kind of sacrifice were you thinking of?

The sacrifice that people suffered through lack of opportunity, lack of employment, lack of decent living conditions, having to emigrate, having to clear out and so on. The sacrifice of the children of the family.

Why does Lewis not want to be a Callanish?

I think the idea behind that is that Callanish can be taken as a symbol. The contrast here is between Callanish and Tir nam Beò, so the thought was, most people are thinking about the future, they're thinking about a viable future as it were, rather than harking back to the past, and I must say I understand that view quite well.

The two poems about the loom seem fairly clear in a sense, with this anger against the 'bodach eòlach à Glaschu' who comes along like an archaeologist.

That's right, that's what he is, an archaeologist, and that's linked very closely to that poem no. 12 you see, not wanting to be a museum exhibit, but to go on having a developing life, contemporary relevance and economic relevance, and all that sort of thing.

It's the opposite of a poem like 'Cainnt nan Oghaichean' with the electric light switches, where the desire to modernise, to keep pace, involves the destruction of many of the most valuable things.

Yes, yes, yes. If that is the result, if that is the way that modernisation is carried out, if it has that effect of, for example, destroying the indigenous language, or the traditional language, it isn't altogether a matter for congratulation. But it's not of course as naïve as to say one shouldn't have electric light.

And what about the looms that speak Gaelic, in the epigram that comes next (no. 15) ?

Just a reminder that when you do have a good going economy, as for example the one based on Harris Tweed, it's not the same sort of economy, it's not the same sort of society as you would have in Leeds.

You may produce much the same sort of cloth but it will be a different colouring.

Can we just turn back to no. 13? This looks to me like another 'old woman' poem. That's something else you have in common with Iain Crichton Smith, although not quite to the same extent. What is the mistake you are referring to at the close with 'Is thubhairt thu gur h-e toil Dhé a bh'ann'? That 'Abharsair nan iomadh riochd' was 'a sàs unnad', that she is deceiving herself in some kind of way?

Or being deceived, presumably that's what it's getting at. The situation is that of a woman who is now old, who has lost perhaps her husband or her sweetheart, specifically on the *Iolair*, that's the reference to *thog an iolaire 'na spoig*, you see, the drowning, the sinking of...

You use two different pronunciations, don't you?

Yes, yes, that's an interesting little thing. The boat was called *An Iolair*, which is just a Gaelic word, you see. But it was something to do with the lower level of Gaelic literacy in Lewis at the time, presumably the crew of that ship, it would be a mixed crew you see, some would be Gaelic the others English speaking, and probably they called it *The Iolair* [eye-oh-lare], you know, but it was in that form it got into Lewis history and Lewis folklore. Nobody would refer to it as *An Iolair* [Gaelic pronunciation], in talking Gaelic they would say *Chaidh e sìos air an Iolair* [eye-oh-lare]. It is only in relatively modern times that people have begun referring to it as an *An Iolair* [Gaelic pronunciation].

Within the cycle it links up with mentions of an eagle later on, the eagle that comes up from London, escapes up.

Oh yes, yes it is used in that, it is developed in that way. And so she is mourning, has been mourning all her life, you see, this would have happened in 1919, and perhaps thinking of this poem as being the 1960s or whatever, but she spent her life mourning that husband or sweetheart who was lost in 1919. So many people did find solace putting it in a religious context, saying it was God's will that this would happen, God's will that the boat went on the Beasts of Holm. But at the same time there are suggestions that she has forgotten other things she has heard from the pulpit, that the Devil has a way of twisting things round. To tell you the truth, I'm not quite clear what it was that I thought the Devil had been saying to her... I think perhaps what I was suggesting was the destruction

of her life, which she thinks is justified in religious terminology because it was God's will, was perhaps more the work of the Devil than the work of God, you know. I think probably that's what I was getting at.

DAY TWO

I thought perhaps today you could tell me about some of the people that you mentioned in the cycle, because there are quite a number of figures from Lewis that you return to. Would you like to say something about the lady you call Mucca, the janitor from the school? Who was she? Why was she important to you?

She was important, I suppose, particularly for me because I had a long and close association with her. She was the school cleaner actually, we weren't quite as advanced as to have a janitor in those days, and I went to Bayble where my father was headmaster at the age of one, and she coming about the house you see, naturally I suppose, took an interest in such a small fry and that association continued over many years. After some years she would come if my parents were away for a day or a night somewhere, if they were going to a communion or things like that, she would come and look after us. Both me and my brother were young at the time, you see.

There were just two children?

Just two of us. James is four years older than me. And that association and friendship continued virtually as long as she lived. After she had retired from her job as cleaner, I used regularly to go and visit her and her older sister, Catriona Mhòr. Catriona also features in some of the poems.

Can you tell me something of her background? Was she from Bayble herself?

She was from Bayble, their people maybe two or three generations back had come from Uig, the Uig district of Lewis, MacIver was their surname, and there were two sisters. They had both been away at the fishing, been herring gutters, but she in particular had worked very hard at that, both at the Stornoway fishing and at fishing round the British

Isles, various places. But they were brought up in Bayble and, apart from going away to the fishing, had spent all their lives there.

What made her so important to you, what was it she said to you, or in the way she treated you, the way she behaved that struck you so much?

Well it was probably partly the sort of thing we were talking about last time. She and her elder sister seemed to me to be vivid representatives of the older life, of the older society, and both in their use of language and in their range of interests they seemed to me almost to typify that older kind of society. It was, of course, something of an accident that they became the particular symbols for me, no doubt I could have found a dozen examples of a similar kind in the village, but as it happened these were the people I had this longstanding, close friendly relationship with.

But they do seem to be more potent symbols, more individual than the men you mention in the cycle.

Yes, well, I think this would be particularly true of the elder sister, Catriona Mhòr, who had a very vivid turn of expression, a somewhat unconventional and rebellious nature.

Can you think of stories with some incidents where this came out? Some examples?

Well, they had a family of first cousins, one of whom I mention in one of the poems, Dòmhnall Iseabail, and this Dòmhnall Iseabail had spent a good part of his life in America. I refer to him in one of the poems as having known Roosevelt and Hoover, and at other points in his career as having been a tramp, and I think that's quite literal, I think he has two sidelines in his American career! He came back to live in Lewis in his middle years, I suppose, with a mouthful of gold fillings, which if I remember rightly he gradually thinned out, perhaps something to do with the state of his liquidity as the years went on, but he came with an impressive set of gold fillings to begin with, and lots of stories. Now he and Catriona Mhòr liked each other, but each could give as good as they got, so I remember some great slanging matches, I remember Catriona Mhòr telling me a story about being out on the moor, fairly close to their home, perhaps going out for the cow, looking after the cow, and she saw a bull coming and climbed up, and she was a very, very large lady, she climbed and it must have been hard on the peats, she climbed to the top of the peatstack, to get out of the bull's way. And at that point Dòmhnall

Iseabail appeared on the scene and he just split his sides laughing at her, you see, and she shouted across the intervening space to him, *'A' bhuidheann an 'ille, thig a seo!'* He had jaundice or whatever, he did have a yellow complexion you see. However, I can't remember at the moment a succession of stories, but I think it wasn't so much her stories but the imaginative use and the free use she made of language that I found particularly entrancing, as a young fellow and right into my teens.

Was a lady, a woman like her relatively free from religious bigotry and narrowmindedness?

I think she would be fairly free-thinking but it would be uncharacteristic, certainly something unusual for a woman brought up in that society to express herself in public. But I felt that she was much freer than anybody I perhaps had ever heard out of that society, expressing her free thinking, talking about ministers and elders as if they were just human beings.

Did people like Murdag and Catriona pass on songs and stories as well?

Stories to some extent. They don't seem to have been particularly given to singing, oddly enough. I remember very little of songs, Gaelic songs, it was always stories, stories and talk.

Who was the main singer in your environment when you were a child? Or was singing not particularly important?

Oh yes, yes it was important, I didn't as it happened have to go very far to find that sort of interest, because I may have mentioned to you before that my own mother was very interested in songs, and had a good store of songs, her family as a whole had that kind of interest. But one didn't have to go far in any direction in Lewis, at that time, to find people who had quite a good knowledge, at least of the songs related to their own district. It was rarer, right enough, to find somebody whose interest clearly transcended these local boundaries.

And would these boundaries be identified with Lewis or with a specific part of Lewis?

To some extent with a specific part and then it would move to the wider Lewis, and then, in certain cases, would go beyond that. Because there was, I would say, a widespread interest in song, and I think clearly this has been a part of the Scottish Gaelic society for centuries, a long long time. So there were always people who brought back, and brought back with great interest and sometimes pride, songs from other parts of the country they had got, when they were away in service, on military service or in the militia, or away at the fishing, where there tended to be a mixture of people from different parts of the Gaelic area.

Were you thinking about Murdag and Catriona when you wrote a poem like 'An Tobar', with the image of the old lady and the well? Is it about anyone in particular or is it just a more general image?

Well that was more general, there's a phrase in that poem [*Creachadh na Clàrsaich* p. 48, start of second paragraph] which is an actual quotation from some old lady, neither of these, not Murdag or Catriona, an old lady talking about the springs of her youth. That particular phrase is a quotation, but beyond that it was a generalised old woman and a generalised attitude to the way things have changed.

Do you feel that the women of that generation had a greater attachment and faithfulness to their Gaelic culture than their menfolk?

I think probably they had, generally speaking at any rate. They seemed to be richer repositories of song for example, and I suppose it was natural enough at that time when womenfolk, once they married, wouldn't normally have any work outside the home, it was natural for womenfolk to be closer to their cultural and linguistic heritage, whereas men went away to work and, as I said, to the militia and whatnot, and they tended to have a wider and more mixed experience. It was reflected in their language too.

Does that mean their Gaelic was less pure, more mixed with foreign words, words from abroad?

There would be a slight tendency that way. That wouldn't be the only way of looking at it. The men tended to look towards some kind of bilingualism more readily than the women did.

In poem no.17 'Air Mòinteach Shuardail', you talk about a man who would speak to his dog in Spanish.

That's right, now this is a quite specific character. He was a man from Ceòs, he was known as Dòmhnall B, and he had spent many years in South America. But he came, sometime in the thirties I think, he came

back, as quite a lot of people who had emigrated to the Americas before the First World War, and shortly after it, came back. I suppose it was something to do with the Depression over there, failure of work, and he settled in Ceòs for the rest of his time. They used to say of him that when he came back at first, he was more at home in Spanish than in any other language, but as time went on, of course, one didn't hear him speak virtually anything but Gaelic. The rest of this poem is imaginary or imaginative, except that it does have an actual location, as I say: '*A' dol seachad air Loch Cheòis/ chunna tu caorann a' fàs air eilean/ 's gun chraoibh air fàire ach i.*' There's a little island on Loch Ceòs where you get rowans growing, you don't get rowans growing anywhere on that moor, but because it was isolated, you couldn't get at the seedlings on this island, so I said this reminded him of the forests of Chile. But there's something slightly ironic about that, because it is almost making fun of the emigrant who seizes on the slightest straw to bring him back, to stir nostalgia in him. This is, as it were, turning this situation upside down, you see, that it can happen in Ceòs that he is nostalgic about South America.

The poem just before that is a short pastoral poem, about herding cattle I think, is that right?

I suppose it would be, it would be that.

Are you speaking to anyone in particular?

No, no, I think that is not personalised at all, it is addressed, as a good many of the poems are in this sequence, to some persona, who may sometimes be myself as author, or sometimes is a figure in the landscape, a representative of the society in one way or another. And this character, whoever he is, she is, is just accorded a little moment of contemplation in the midst of the moor, with the snipe making its characteristic darting movements, but surrounded by peace.

Is it the same in no.22 with the grey haired person? 'Cha b' e 'n aois a liath mo cheann'?

No, I think that's probably the author. At one time there was interminable talk about the prospect of building a quay at Brevig, and of course there was always the interminable debate about matters of piety and doctrine and so on referred to in the last line of no. 22 with '*cràbhadairean*'. It was a rather unkind comment to make about them, that they are the

pietous of Eilean Beag Donn na Gaoithe, a lot of wind being let loose, you see.

So Eilean Beag Donn isn't any particular place?

Lewis is often referred to as *Eilean Beag Donn a' Chuain*, you see, but it's *Eilean Beag Donn na Gaoithe* because people talk so much.

You talk about windbags elsewhere don't you?

That's right, yes.

They are the 'gaothairean' in no. 24. What about Dòmhnaill Cam in no. 31?

Well, Dòmhnall Cam was a famous historical character, he is Dòmhnall Cam Mac Amhlaigh, the chief of the MacAulays in the early modern period.

What date would that be?

Sixteenth century roughly, and there was a very strong feud between the MacAulays and the Morrisons for example. Now Dòmhnall Cam was regarded as the leader, the symbol of the MacAulays who lived in Uig, their base was in Uig and there was a saying about him. It was said, somebody said to Dòmhnall Cam '*Ma ghlèidheas tu beanntan Uige, gleidhidh beanntan Uige thu*', 'If you stick to the Uig hills, the Uig hills will protect you', you see, the two senses of *gleidheadh* there, and here it was a snide comment on the modern system of living on grants and subsidies, where you don't have to make any effort, you can just do what the rest do.

So another image of a style of life coming apart at the seams, breaking down, needing this help from the outside.

Yes.

In the poem about Murdag, no.41, you talk about ''Na mo thùr aolaichte'. Is that the poet in his ivory tower?

Yes, yes, that's what it is, yes.

And there's the biblical reference to Gilead as well.

That's right, yes. Gilead is a land of milk and honey, and contrasted with the bare moor over which she had to walk on her way to Stornoway, to earn her hard bread at gutting, at fish gutting.

But the oil you are giving at the end is really the oil of your poetry, is it not: 'na biodh mo làmh ro chrìon fhad 's tha ol'-ungaidh agam'.

Well, I think it's not perhaps specifically that. I suppose you could read that into it alright. I don't think at the time that that was what I had in mind, but rather that I saw her as a symbol of people who are essentially, you know, unfortunate and downtrodden, in material terms at any rate, having a hard job to scrape a living.

Can we go back for a moment to no. 28, with the image of the ribs of the boat lying in the sand? Again an old woman talks to you, about the uselessness of the boat, that there is no point in bewailing it, no point in feeling sorry for it any longer. And then you talk about twenty-five which have knocked the tears away from you, which I suppose are the years of your absence from Lewis at this stage?

Yes, yes, that's so. There's you might say some sort of failure of logical sequence in the thought of that poem, not too uncommon in poetry, but it perhaps is a little difficult to tie the two halves of the poem together in strict logical terms. It begins with the poet, let us say, or the person who is talking to the old woman at any rate, making sympathetic noises about this old boat that has been allowed to rot. So it is a symbol of the decay of part of the society and its activities and this is a realistic old lady who says 'Oh forget it, it's had its day' and then the idea I think that that boat, in other parts of the sequence, can rapidly take on the significance of, it's a symbol of, the island, so you might say the island society has broken up, it's showing through, the ribs are showing through as it were, but what is the point of going on weeping about that.

It is also a poem about not wanting to burn your boats, not wanting to let go, to abandon any possibility of going back, to sever connections.

Yes, yes, I think that comes into it too, particularly in the last line you see, '*Tha eagal orm/ lasair o m'eanchainn a chur ris an t-seann chrannlach ud.*' There is a hesitation, a doubt about taking it to its logical conclusion.

Before we go on, there are a few poems I'd like to discuss, for example no. 18, 'Am Bodach-Ròcais'. I find it interesting that you tend to have a compensatory attitude to the invasion of religious fervour. It may have taken the warmth away from the heart of the household, but it put a burning fire in the breasts of the people. How rhetorical is this recuperation of the evangelical revival or is it something you would subscribe to even now?

It is something I would find difficult to subscribe to, and I don't see it quite the way you put it. I am being critical throughout that poem, and when it comes to the end I am saying all these warm and homely and natural and traditional things are being destroyed, or there are people who wish to destroy them, looking at it from a different and, as I would see it, foreign, outside standpoint, and are quite prepared to sweep away that fire in the centre of the floor, taken as a symbol of that old society, the ceilidh-house society, are willing to sweep that away and to put a fire, but this time a destructive fire, right in people's breasts, the fire of Hell for example, Hellfire and the fear of it, *loisgeach*, a burning bonfire.

To continue with the religious imagery, quite soon afterwards you have a nun, in no. 27.

27? I don't know how she got there! Oh yes, yes.

'Cailleach dhubh'... What is her relationship to the eagle? We were talking earlier about the eagle as the ship that went down, but also as an image of, if you like, imperialism, or centralism at least, and of the degradations of centralism in Lewis.

Yes, I think probably the eagle has that same function there, but to explain for a moment how the *cailleach dhubh* comes into it, there is a place in Uig, as Brenish is a village in Uig you see, and near there is a place called Taigh nan Cailleachan Dubha, the nunnery, which would presumably have been an actual nunnery in pre-Reformation times. And this eagle, which is a representative of the destroying outside culture, is flying over the mountains of Uig. Uig was one of the first places to be depopulated by evictions and so on. Then it sees various sights as it flies over. First it sees the nun, but now she is wearing a plaid instead of a veil, and then it comes to Baile na Cille, of course another ecclesiastical name, and it sees a fellow posting his pools, in Valtos they are having a beauty competition, what do you call it...

Choosing a beauty queen?

...choosing a beauty queen. And in Miavaig someone comes from Inverness to tell them to speak Gaelic, a representative of An Comann I suppose, perhaps even Donald John MacKay who was, I think, director of An Comann when I was writing this. I think that's probably why Inverness comes in, coming over to tell them to speak Gaelic, in an upside-down world that sort of thing happens. And then in Carinish he hears psalms being sung at a wake and he comes to the conclusion that this is the wake, it's finished, this is the death, we can go away and leave now.

I can't stop dotting backwards and forwards! There are other images about the church and about modernisation in no. 21. The linking between seabirds or birds in general, with their chattering noise, and clergymen is something very constant, maybe because there is a mention of Bayble too, and that brings up the idea of priests, I think, quite consistently.

That's right, yes.

What seems to be happening here is a sequence of impossible things that have taken over, peace in Vietnam, women in the Presbytery.

Yes, the HIDB [Highlands and Islands Development Board] learning Gaelic.

Is this because you felt these things were never going to happen?

Well, they were regarded as rather improbable and outlandish things, improbable particularly, there's a series of these given, and then come the local constables, the Grazings Committee, I think that was what it was called, that looked after the peat-cutting rights and whatnot, but not policemen, local officials. And I suppose this comes to the heart of the thing, for donkey's years there have been interminable letters in the *Stornoway Gazette* about matters of creed and so on.

The way you use natural descriptions in talking about Lewis seems to me veined with ambivalence. Some of the time the birds and landscapes are simply a manifestation, a parallel for human culture, whereas at other times you seem to say Lewis itself will survive, no matter what human culture may be occupying it. So although Gaelic may die and the old ways disappear, Lewis will remain to some extent the same. Were you caught between those attitudes? Or do you think you harmonised them?

I don't think I harmonised them. That is just to look at the situation from two different angles. I don't think that it really represents a see-sawing of doubt in my own mind. It's just looking at material, the landscape and so on, which goes on for thousands of years, basically speaking, but other things will change.

How tightly do you feel the Gaelic culture of Lewis and the environment itself are meshed?

Well, these of course do become very tightly meshed, in any place where they co-existed for a long time, so there is a tight meshing in that the nomenclature is so strongly Gaelic. You could equally argue that nomenclature is absorbed earlier, in earlier linguistic strata, and has continued to serve the same purpose, so language doesn't, at the end of the day, matter all that much in a particular locality. I suppose you might say, might read that into it.

But I am struck in reading your text by the way the Norse stratum seems to have merged quite naturally into the Gaelic. You can recognise the Norse if you are prepared to dig, but in a poem like no. 19 for example, 'Fàs is taise', foreign elements like Hong Kong, the TV and the tricycle are inserted with no sense that they are going to be absorbed by the surrounding culture. As if they couldn't be.

Not any longer. I think that is the implication all right, you know, and that, I suppose, is why the old word for a doll, *liùdhag* is starkly contrasted with the borrowed 'doll', you see, and it makes the thing even more stark that the doll is manufactured. What I seem to be seeing is the break-up of Gaelic tradition on the island, not the break-up of Lewis itself or Lewis society, but certainly of a Gaelic one.

Why does the little girl have frightened eyes?

I suppose because the society is less secure, less coherent than it was before. The little girl is part of a much smaller children's society too, children are disappearing out of the language, which is part of the landscape, and this is part of the whole process of break-up, of rural depopulation and the break-up of the society. I think it is probably that sort of idea.

She is just one member of the youngest generation, set against the older people who populate the cycle so strongly.

Yes, yes, yes.

Although when you say 'am baile seo ri uchd bàis', you do talk about death rather than a transition.

I think often my strong preoccupation was of course with the Gaelic society of Lewis, and from that point of view, the move to a different type of linguistic society seemed to me a death. But as you know, looking at it from a different viewpoint, if you like a less emotional, a more rational standpoint, I see the place continue with a different kind of society, as happens in all sorts of places when linguistic change happens.

Certain cultural theorists would say that linguistic change, particularly in these circumstances, would leave very significant traumas behind, not just in the people who have been subjected to it, but in the generations who come after. Modernisation would not be a painless transition, but a very deep kind of wounding that can still be detected, even after the knowledge of the language has been lost. Would you agree with that?

I think that that's likely. I think it is something which could do with more rigorous investigation. My own hunch would be that there is a wounding, that there is an impoverishment and a wounding at the transitional stage, which no doubt a people can eventually recover from. I would think it very likely that at the transitional stage there is some kind of deformity.

To some extent this is present in An Rathad Cian, *isn't it? In the person of the speaker, as well in the society he is observing. It's not just a pain in them, it is also a pain within him, about what is happening.*

That's right, oh yes, yes.

When you say more rigorous investigation, what do you have in mind?

Well I think it would be possible, for example, to make a detailed study at the present time. It would need to be a continuing study, spread over several decades, I should think, and ideally over several generations. It might be possible to carry out parts at least of such investigation on a wider scale here and now, in other parts of the country where the linguistic transition took place perhaps a generation, two generations ago, and build up case studies of the way society seems to have been affected at, let's say, the first generation and the end of the second generation. That's not my line of country, but something that sociologists and sociolinguists could work on.

What factors do you think would need to be evaluated?

Presumably there would be linguistic factors, there would be factors relating to belief, traditional belief and matters of that kind, superstition coming in to some extent. There would be questions of morality, I would think, too, although it would perhaps be difficult to get ideal control over an experiment this size, because there are so many outside factors distorting the situation.

Could you speak of your own experience bringing up a family of children far from your own place of birth and in a very different culture and environment? Does that produce a sense of estrangement?

Well, it makes for various problems, and some of these problems, of course, are connected with questions of personality and the integrity of personality. It's perfectly possible to achieve a certain level of linguistic, purely linguistic competence, at any rate for a time, if you have ideas that can work out in a consolidative sort of way. I knew a number of families in Glasgow, and one or two in the present time, who have brought up their children to be pretty skilled bilinguals, Gaelic-English bilinguals. We had various shots, and made some quite sustained efforts to achieve that, which sometimes seemed to be going well, but the situation is potentially fragile, particularly if you don't have a good family network to give support in a linguistic sense.

An extended family?

An extended family. I think that is probably one of the most important factors in achieving that kind of bilingual stability. Our experience was

that some of the children had Gaelic as their first language and maintained that for a number of years as a first language. But that wasn't the case with the two eldest in the family, partly because my wife learnt Gaelic herself, and she was very young when we got married, and she didn't feel at that time able to use the Gaelic as a mother language to the eldest members of the family. But she was able to do that at a later stage, and in these cases the children had Gaelic as a first language, and maintained that until they went to school, and in some cases continued using it for years after that. But we found it very difficult, the strong, strong influence of the peer group once the children went to school and had their own friends, and they sometimes indeed, though not always, found themselves in the position of being the only Gaelic speakers in the whole of their peer group, and this made things difficult. A funny story about our second youngest son, Roderick, who had Gaelic as his first language like that. When he went to school it began to weaken, and after a couple of years he was becoming positively unwilling to talk Gaelic, and when he came to that stage he realised that there was something going out of his life, something that he was missing. And I remember, we were staying in Pollokshields at that time, I remember for quite a spell, it must have been one particular year, every day at some particular point, it would be after the evening meal I think, Roderick would come to me and say 'Will we got out and talk to the plants?' Now I had, in what I hoped would be a supportive strategy, started taking him out in the garden and talking nothing but Gaelic to the growing vegetables and fruit trees and whatnot, and having a bit of fun that way. So after he had virtually stopped speaking Gaelic, he would regularly ask me to come out and talk to the plants, and was quite happy to use Gaelic in that situation. But when we came back into the house again he would revert. So there are all sorts of psychological problems I think children in that situation may have to face.

To move the focus from the children back to yourself, what do you think is the toll that this has taken on you? That's something that would link back more clearly to what you are saying in the cycle, although you don't talk about your own extra-Lewis situation.

I think it takes less of a toll of me in a personal sense, because, you know, one can to some extent relive part of one's existence in the imagination, for part of the time, at any rate. So it's not as catastrophic in that purely personal sense.

Somebody we haven't mentioned so far is Murdo Morrison, 'Murchadh Moireasdan', in no 23. That poem has an emblematic force because he was born in the year English schooling started, yet he was somebody who had this very fine 'Gàidhlig shiùbhlach na naodhamh linn deug', with good English and French too. What do you remember about this man?

Oh I remember a great deal about him. He was a relative of mine, a first cousin of my father's, and he had been Director of Education for Inverness-shire. Now he retired, as he had to, at the age of 65, and the year after that moved from Inverness to live in Troon. I had first made his acquaintance when I went to Inverness in the spring of 1939 to sit the Aberdeen University Bursary Competition, and he knew I was there, my father would have told him, and he invited me to his house one evening. And I remember him pumping me, for example, for my attitudes to the religious revival which had taken place in Lewis in the previous three years or something like that.

Which years were these?

From the middle thirties onward, perhaps '35 to '39, I forget the exact boundaries, maybe '36 to'39. It was quite a remarkable religious revival, of an evangelical nature, which showed up in various parts of the island, very strongly in my own district in Point, but all over the island. And this evangelical revival showed up in terms of, you know, people speaking with voices, speaking under a compulsion that they didn't understand.

Did you witness this yourself?

Just a little of it. One sometimes saw slight manifestations of it in normal church services, but there tended to be rather more of it in informal church meetings in private houses.

What impression did it make on you?

Oh, it made a strong impression, but I'm afraid I didn't go along with it. I didn't, I think I was very very sceptical of it, perhaps unduly sceptical of it, I was at school in the senior years in the Nicolson and I remember, this tells you what my attitude was, I remember pretending in my own class, we had one or two more perhaps gullible classmates, and with them in particular, I pretended that I had become a victim of this, for all were rather fond of watching people who had been converted in this way. And I proceeded to try and convert them you see, and of course everybody knew about it and some people felt this was a dangerous situation to get

into, they didn't want to be converted. And some of these poor fellows used to slink round corners when they saw me coming.

So Murdo Morrison cross-examined you about this?

Yes, and I could see him nodding approvingly when I was giving him that scepticism, you see. Well, we got sidetracked on that, but Murdo Morrison retired to Troon in 1940, I suppose, and when I came to live in Glasgow in the late 40s he got in touch with me, and I kept in touch with him by letter and by visiting him, and he finally died at the age of 102 and a half. He had spots of illness for the last 6 or 8 months of his life, he had virtually no illness before that, and he continued a regime, a very strict regime of studying a different subject each day of the week, five days of the week at least, during university terms. For example, he read, let's say, Latin on Monday, and English on Tuesday, French on Wednesday and Greek on Thursday and whatever the fifth one was on Friday, and he did this year in year out. He was very knowledgeable, and so I looked on him with considerable admiration. He was a very humane and understanding and sympathetic sort of character, and in spite of all these talents, he was very humble.

In no. 29 'Dùsgadh' you speak of what seems to be another group of characters, all dead now and lying in the graveyard. Are these specific people? What about the one who was so knowledgeable of the fires of Hell?

They're not terribly specific these people, they're types, and '*Dùsgadh*' was the word used of a revival you see, a religious revival, and what I am saying is, we've had lots of people coming with doctrines of revival, some taking their texts from Spurgeon or the Plymouth Brethren...

Can you tell me who Spurgeon is?

Spurgeon was a famous eighteenth-century divine whose sermons were translated into Gaelic at quite an early stage and often quoted, you see, by preachers. It became a standard Gaelic text, as it had been a standard evangelical text in England too.

And this revival in the late thirties had Gaelic as its exclusive medium?

Oh yes, perhaps not quite exclusive. I remember there was an English speaking missionary who was an Irishman I think, but he was an

evangelical missionary belonging to some sect, I really don't remember now. But basically it was a Gaelic revival.

Is 'creud coimheach / a fhuair e air bruaichean Chluaidh' a political reference?

That may be part of it, yes, though that may be as much religious too. But then the next one, the talkative chap who went deeply into the gospel according to Marx, that's clearly political. Although he was an incomer, a non-Gaelic person posing with a political philosophy from outside.

The frustration you express is that all these creeds are foreign, even inimical, to Gaelic and to the culture of the land.

Yes, yes.

What kind of texts are you looking for at the end, the text that would come from the ancient rocks, that would be in our own tongue?

Well, it's difficult to characterise that exactly, I think what I am suggesting was that we had had a bellyful of imported creeds, and you might say that the sort of thing I had in mind was what seemed to be coming, in the early days, out of the reorganisation of local government. I would be much more sceptical of that coming to fruition the way things have gone in recent years. These changes in local government, that seemed so promising in the beginning in the Western Isles, came, of course, just seven or eight years after this was written. So there was maybe something of a feeling abroad at that time that we needed more native roots, and growth from these roots, rather than getting everything imported.

So although this kind of religious revivalism was one of the most energetic elements in Gaelic culture you still see it as a foreign one?

Yes, I do. Though there is a certain degree of ambivalence.

I'm thinking of what John MacInnes, for example, says of the influence of pulpit oratory on Sorley Maclean's Gaelic writing, in a very positive way.

Yes, well, there are quite positive aspects of it, and I think that I sometimes bring out some of these, particularly in the much later

sequence '*Àirc a' Choimhcheangail*'. Even from quite a young age I was conscious of the positive and growing elements in that tradition imposed from outside, but they then took root and flourished in what you might almost describe as a native fashion. I often admired aspects of that growth, but I didn't admire the negative aspects of it, the unfortunate prejudices which seemed to come in with that evangelical revival, prejudices against native Gaelic culture, music and dance and all that sort of thing. I regretted these bitterly, and angrily sometimes, but I wouldn't, I certainly wouldn't go so far as to say that the results were negative, perhaps not even predominantly. Although the negative aspects were very trying.

Can we go on to no. 32? We've talked before about your sympathy for Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, perhaps more than any other poet in Gaelic tradition. Why do you feel this particular affinity for him?

I think there are a number of reasons for it. I'm very strongly attracted to his vivid use of language and, I must say, to his unconventional attitudes, his rather fearless expression of his own views, even at times when they can hardly be popular, you know quite well that they were not all that popular. And I also I think at various times have been attracted to his political standpoint in a very general sense, looking on him as a Gaelic nationalist, as a very strong defender of Gaelic values, of Gaelic independence. He often has a strength of Gaelic, an independent strength that allows him, for example, to use English words freely without being self-conscious. You can go to another extreme with Gaelic purity, which to my mind may exhibit an insecurity rather than a security.

Being a Gaelic nationalist at that time was something quite different from being a Scottish Nationalist. Would you agree?

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's nationalism spilled over a little bit. It may have tended a little towards a wider Scottish nationalism, but it would be much more characteristic at the time to have a Gaelic, you might say a narrow Gaelic stance and, taking the thing to a further logical conclusion, I suppose that would sometimes narrow itself down to a very provincial nationalism, an island nationalism, a clan nationalism and so on. One of the things that perhaps attracted me, has often attracted me, to Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was that he clearly transcended the narrower aspects of that kind of nationalism.

His relations with the Gaelic community of the time weren't easy, were

they? He was accused of being a turncoat in politics and religion. Certainly his relationship with the authorities was very difficult.

Oh, yes, yes.

Is this why you see him as something of a courageous outsider? Or perhaps a reckless one?

There was probably a bit of both, you know, because by all appearances he was a very fiery character, perhaps not in great control of his emotions and his actions, at certain times of his life. He was certainly accused of being a turncoat, in a religious sense particularly, and I would find difficulty in believing that he was a true convert, I think there may have been strong elements of expediency in his conversion.

And what about the way Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair would be looked on in the Gaelic environment of your youth? I can't imagine him being a favoured poet in revivalist Lewis!

No, he wasn't. I don't think his work will be widely known at all. It would be known mainly to people who had taken a particular interest in Gaelic literary matters. That is a rather more extensive category than you might think. I know, for example, that quite a lot of people from my parents' generation were proud possessors of John Mackenzie's *Sàr Obair nam Bàrd*, and I remember my mother often referred to *Sàr Obair* as an influence. Though she had been an infant teacher, so she had no occasion to teach poetry of that kind, she was strongly attracted to it and read it throughout her life. I think there would be quite a number of people like that. We should remember that books of that kind were probably more widely disseminated at an earlier stage than similar books are at the present time.

The poem we're looking at, no. 32, is a kind of skit on Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's bird poems. The use of 'cion-diutha', 'bugger you all' reflects, I reckon, Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair too, with his freedom of language and indecency.

Yes, I suppose so. Certainly the *Hileabhag, hoileabhag* has its origin there.

You were talking about Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's reception among Gaelic people. If we could jump to no. 48, where the prodigal son

addresses the land of his birth and upbringing, can this be read as the exile speaking about the kind of reception to be expected from the people he has left? That if he makes any mistakes, he will definitely be punished, and if he gets it right, he'll be ignored?

That's right.

That's not too bleak an interpretation?

No, no, I think that's exactly what it says.

And would you identify yourself with this?

Oh yes, yes, entirely. I should, perhaps shouldn't say entirely, but to an important extent.

Could we turn perhaps now and talk about something you mentioned in our first conversation, the important role of your mother in the cycle, which seems to begin with no. 34? If I'm not wrong, this is the first poem you address to her: 'Na canadh duine gun do chuir mi cùl riut'. Though for the reader it could just as easily be turning your back on Lewis as turning your back on a particular person.

And it is both of course. But a specific occasion is referred to. The imagery arises out of the circumstances of my mother's funeral.

Can you point out some other places where you were thinking more specifically about your mother, in the poems that come after?

I don't think it surfaces specifically in many of the poems, though it does once or twice. There is no doubt a hint of it in no. 44, '*Làmhan*' but in a more generalised sense, and in number 49 – I think I referred to this in the last day too, did I?

Just very briefly.

It comes in there in the second stanza. '*Nuair a chaidh thu air falbh/ leis a' chabhaig sin*' is the reference to her death, although it's integrated into this general view. It's taken up again in the next paragraph: '*Chaidh mi mach á tarraing do phlanaid.*'

But there's a paradoxical sense of liberation here. Escaping the pull of a planet makes me think of the earlier poem about 'An Òdhrag', no. 3.

Yes.

... 'tha mi seoladh ann a fànas leam fhìn': the loss of something paradoxically leaves you more space, more freedom.

That's true, that's certainly a part of it there. I think there may be a reference too in no. 52: *Ged a thàinig Calvin/ cha do ghoid e 'n gaol sin às do chridhe:/ thug thu gràdh/ don mhòintich lachdainn, agus fhuair thu cràdh/nuair thugadh bhuat am fonn sin is am flùr,/ 's nuair chuireadh cist nan òran anns an ùir.*

... 'cist nan òran' in the sense of your mother the singer?

It's partly that, yes, and partly, I think, a reference to the banning or the putting to one side of the musical tradition, you see. Although she was a religious person, she didn't go that far, you see.

When you speak about Glasgow in this cycle it has a very unattractive feel to it, a place of exile and degradation. The repeated 'Is it long since you heard from home?' in no. 35 gives a feeling of all sorts of things that are happening which can't be communicated to the people back home, or perhaps there is no point in telling them. A feeling almost of deception, certainly estrangement.

I'm not sure that you are reading that quite accurately. I think the main point of that '*Eil fada bho nach d' fhuair sibh bhon taigh?*' is that it was a common question when two people from Lewis or any of the islands met each other. Almost the first thing they'd say is 'What's the news from home?' 'Is it long since you heard from home?' and I think that is what is being underlined here. People are living in Glasgow and they're living this very different life, and yet when they meet their own fellow islanders they forget all about that, and talk about what happened in the past, and what's happening somewhere where they don't belong any more. So what I suppose it's underlining is the double, the uneasy double relations of the exiles.

Turning to no. 40, 'Na Lochlannaich a' tighinn air tìr an Nis', what led you to insert this archaeological poem, about a different, very much earlier invasion? It stands out from the poems before and after.

Yes, well, I think I've chosen the Norsemen in a symbolic sense. They left their own country to come as invaders and met with hostility, but they settled down, married and grew crops and became Lewismen. What I am suggesting in using this image is that the displaced person goes through various experiences, and if he is realistic, realises at the end of the day that he is going to settle down too, he's going to make a life where he is now, to acclimatise. I think that is how it fits into the sequence. It's a bit like the Lewis fellow speaking Spanish and wishing he was back in South America. It's looking at the problem from a different angle, but I think it is the same essentially.

It stands out because it is about coming to a place and that place becoming home, becoming a place where you feel at home. Whereas, in the context of the poem, the person who is speaking never has this sensation, and doesn't really seem to see it on the horizon.

Yes, well, this is the scent of it on the horizon, you might say. You know it's there, in spite of all the talk about the lost paradise or whatever. It's the other side of the coin.

So this is what might happen to the Lewis exile in Glasgow?

I think that is very much what I had in mind. I wouldn't care to say that is what I had in mind when I began writing the poem, but that is the way it fits into my own mental landscape.

Certain elements argue against that reading. The poem is set in Lewis, the place you have lost, and has a very virginal, beautiful feeling about it. It's not located in Glasgow.

No, no, I suppose there's a sort of disharmony there. The Norse have come a great distance and the strangeness of their experience comes through in the first part. What the second part perhaps achieves is the reconciliation, you see. In spite of that strangeness, reconciliation is possible.

Moving on to no. 43 'Anns an eaglais', why is the little boy counting here. Is this something you did yourself?

Yes, yes.

To make the time pass?

To make the time pass. These services were long, even in the Church of Scotland they might go on for an hour and three quarters, two hours sometimes. In the Free Church they could go on for longer than that, I remember as a young fellow. The sermon itself, you see, would last for forty minutes or three quarters of an hour, solid discussion of whatever the text was and the implications of that text, and sometimes of course this would be far above my head, as a young fellow of six or seven or eight, whatever. And one of my ways of making the time seem less long was, for example, to count the number of pews there were in the Church.

That can't have changed very much from one week to the next!

No, that wouldn't, but there were other aspects that did change a bit. People stood up for the prayer, you see, and the prayers were also very long, a prayer could go on for twenty minutes, the main one, and the convention was that everybody stood up. You sat for the singing and you stood up for the prayer, at least you stood up for the beginning of the prayer, but only the very resolute were standing at the end of the prayer, and one of the things you could do was count how many were standing at the beginning, how many were standing in the middle and how many were standing at the end. I usually stood to the end, probably because I got a better view that way of how many were standing.

It sounds as if your agnosticism was very instinctive right from the start.

I'm afraid so, though I can remember too, you know, children and adults are all sort of contradictions, having a strong vision of becoming a minister, and that I think would be when I was just about getting into double figures, about ten or eleven. But there must have been scepticism there.

At the end of no. 43 you say 'tha uidhe m' fhadachd an àit' eile'. Can you tell me what that means, 'the goal of my longing is in another place'?

Another place, yes. I have difficulty now to identify exactly what I had in mind. The first two paragraphs of the poem are about the actual experience, that experience, thirty-five or thirty-six years before. And then the third paragraph is a comment at the time of writing the poem, all that is now away in the distance. But I find a little difficulty in understanding exactly what I meant by the very last line.

And Mucca's 'big hairy hat'?

That incidentallly isn't the same Mucca.

It's a different one.

Murdag, but she used to sit in the seat in front of us and she had a very large hairy hat, very stylish.

And she was from Siadair?

She was from Siadair, yes. And Dòmhnall Rodaidh was the official precentor, you see, for many years.

And everything was in Gaelic at this time?

Oh, everything.

How many people would be in the church?

On a typical Sunday morning I suppose there would be 150, something like that.

And how many children?

Not very many, not many at all, not perhaps more than four or five.

Because people didn't bring their children?

Generally speaking they didn't. My parents they were going to church regularly in the morning, they didn't require us to go for the evening service, but we generally went in the morning, and the missionary's

children, and the minister's children, and that was about it, the professional folk's children.

At what age were members of the community expected to start coming?

This varied a bit, the conventions weren't quite the same, for example there was more of a tendency in the Free Church for younger people to go, not children but from middle teens say, and particularly to the evening service. It was quite common in the Free Church for teenagers, late teenagers to go to the evening service, less common in the Church of Scotland, and again the convention varied from one part of the island to another. It was commoner for young people to go in the Lochs than it was in the Point, there were all sorts of variation.

In the poem that follows, no.44, I like all the different hands very much indeed. The ending reminds me of the ending of 'Hallaig' by Sorley Maclean, 'ach fhad 's a mhaireas mise/ biodh cuimhne ga slìobadh', that it is the subjectivity of the poet that is going to keep this alive.

Yes.

There is tenderness but precariousness too. When the speaker dies, who is going to remember? Would you agree with that?

I would agree with that, that's the drift of it. Although, of course, in the nature of things every generation, every individual will have a range of recollections of that kind, and different ranges of memories will survive.

Is there any particular reason you focussed on hands?

No.

Again that very relaxed sensuality found elsewhere in your writing.

Yes.

It's all about touching, isn't it, the different things you can touch and the way these things are going to feel, hard to soft, or pleasant or repellent?

Yes. Hands are used in such a range of activities that they adjust to it. I don't honestly know how that poem began, it just, it was the sort of thing that was capable of developing.

There aren't any writing hands in the poem.

There's teacher's hands writing on the blackboard in line 2 you see, lines 1 and 2, '*is cailc orr*", that's the nearest.

When I was reading the cycle, poems like no. 47 and no. 50 suggested the possibility of a happy ending, as you say a 'slànachadh', some kind of a healing, although I don't think that's what happens. You speak about the healing itch in no. 47. Was this uplift deliberate when you were writing? 'Chaith mi bhuam plàsd nam bliadhnachan/tha mi dol a shreap a rithist', as if your limbs had healed in spite of this long numbness.

I think possibly what that poem is saying is that the sequence as a whole gives an impression of a hurt, an injury, a long lasting grief, sickness, whatever you call it, a mixture of these things, and it's as though I felt the writing of this sequence as a recognition to myself that I had come to terms with exile, that I had come to terms with notions of missing, all that sort of thing and wasn't going to spend the rest of my life going on about it. I think that is the *slànachadh* that's referred to there and this is as it were an intimation of that healing, *tachais an t-slànachaidh*, as you get an itchiness when it is just about healing...

Although two poems further on in no. 49 you get 'tha greis on thòisich an galair/ 's mura bitheadh an galair sin/ bhiodh galair eil' ann', which does kind of contradict that.

It does, it does, that's of the human condition, contradictions.