

## Learning and Remembering Gaelic Stories: Brian Stewart

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**ABSTRACT.** Questions about how Gaelic storytellers have learned, remembered and performed their tales are key to understanding the Gaelic narrative tradition. This article examines the experience of Brian Stewart, a Scottish Gaelic storyteller, and the techniques he reported using for learning, remembering and telling traditional Gaelic stories. Mr Stewart learned his stories – native heroic or international wonder tales – from his grandmother Susie Stewart and his uncle Alasdair Stewart (also known as ‘*Alilidh Dall*’). Strategies considered include taking an interest in stories; repeatedly listening to tales being told by a more experienced tradition bearer; practicing in front of, and being corrected by, another storyteller; consciously reviewing and rehearsing tales; visualizing stories; and retaining a faithful memory of formulaic language or runs. The difference between learning a story and learning a song is also discussed. It is suggested that studying these strategies can contribute to a better understanding of the Stewarts’ storytelling ethos.

Questions about the ways in which Gaelic storytellers have learned, remembered and performed their tales are key to our understanding of the Gaelic narrative tradition, yet this area of inquiry remains under-explored. How did Gaelic tradition bearers conceive of the tale tradition? Did they seek to memorise their material or did they view storytelling as more of an improvisational narrative form? Has there been one approach to storytelling that has dominated storytelling practices historically, or has there been much variation between the ways in which different storytellers approached their tales? These are just a few of the questions that arise in relation to the practice of Gaelic storytelling, and they form the backdrop to the research that I have pursued in regard to the Gaelic storyteller Brian Stewart.<sup>1</sup> In this article I will review the evidence that I have gathered about the way in which Mr Stewart learned and remembered his repertoire of tales, and will consider how this information can contribute to a better understanding of Mr Stewart’s storytelling technique and ethos.

### Brian Stewart

Brian Stewart was born to a family of Gaelic-speaking travellers in the north of Scotland on 20 February 1911, and he died nearly a century later, on 17 June 2008. His given name was Alasdair, but he was always known as Brian to his family and friends.<sup>2</sup> Mr Stewart and his family were based at Rhemarstaig, close to Lairg, in the winter, and travelled throughout the north of Scotland during the summer. Travelling established routes by horse and cart, they were tinsmiths and horse traders.

As a boy, Brian Stewart heard and learned stories from his father’s mother, Susie Stewart, who was born in Argyll in 1846. The other main source for his stories was his paternal uncle, Alasdair Stewart (Susie Stewart’s son), also known as ‘*Ailidh Dall*’ (‘Blind Ali’) due to the fact that he was blind in the later years of his life. While *Ailidh Dall* had a formidable reputation as a storyteller (he was described by Calum Maclean as ‘the best Gaelic storyteller ever recorded on the mainland of Scotland’),<sup>3</sup> *Ailidh* reported that he learned many of his stories from his mother Susie. Indeed, according to Brian Stewart, it was Susie who was the acknowledged master storyteller in the family. As such, it is clear that Brian Stewart learned his tales from two storytellers whose skills were considerable.<sup>4</sup>

From the evidence of extant recordings, the Stewarts were masters of the long heroic tale, and the stories that Brian Stewart remembered best were native heroic or international wonder tales. Thus Mr Stewart’s repertoire was representative of the type of long hero stories and adventures which were most popular amongst the Gael up to modern times.<sup>5</sup> Brian was

first recorded telling stories for the School of Scottish Studies in 1958. He was recorded again by fieldworkers from the School on several occasions in 1973 and 1978. Between 1993 and 1995, I recorded Mr Stewart's stories again, and also recorded songs and information about his family history. Much of the discussion that follows is based on the recorded conversations I had with Mr Stewart about how he learned and remembered stories.<sup>6</sup>

### Repeatedly Hearing Stories

To turn to the question of how Brian Stewart learned his material, he told me on many occasions that he learned stories by 'taking an interest' in them as a young boy and by repeatedly listening to his grandmother Susie tell them. It was Mr Stewart's habit as a boy to go to his grandmother's house after supper in the winters and to ask her to tell him stories, often until it was time for him to go to bed. He often described this period with comments such as:

'....I was always with my granny, you know.... I'd be always to, in the house with her and, at night and, especially at night and, when my, *Ailidh Dall* would be playing the bagpipes, then I was very interested in the bagpipes.... and then, when I came down, 'Oh, come on, Granny, 'til you give us a story now.' ....And then she was starting to tell the story and, och I would be very interested in the story and, I picked them all up, you know.'<sup>7</sup>

Here, as on other occasions, Brian Stewart says that he was "interested" in the stories and the music and describes how he "always" asked his grandmother for stories. On another occasion, he described how he would visit his grandmother until he 'got every one' of her stories:

**Brian Stewart:** '.... my granny. Because her house was not, where she lived wasn't very far away from where I lived in, as a boy. And I would be, after supper every night I was down at my granny's. And I would be there 'til bedtime....'

**Carol Zall:** 'So she, she must have had loads of stories, or did she tell you the same stories many times?'

**B.S.:** 'Aye. Not, not the same story every time, no, she would be telling me different stories'.

**C.Z.:** 'Different stories. Could she tell you different stories every night?'

**B.S.:** 'Oh, more or less.... Until I got every one that she had and then she....'

**C.Z.:** 'Then she'd tell them again?'

**B.S.:** Aye.'<sup>8</sup>

Here Brian Stewart identifies interest in the stories and repeated exposure to them as important factors in the learning process. This account of repeated requests for stories from an older family member is very similar to experiences described by other storytellers. Barbara McDermitt, for instance, states that the Scottish storyteller Stanley Robertson has identified 'hearing the same tales told many times' as one of the ways in which he learned stories as a child (1986: 356), and that the North Carolina storyteller Ray Hicks used to '... ask his Grandfather Ben to tell the same stories over and over again' (338).

Some more light may be shed on the question of transmission of stories within a family if we consider some comments which Brian Stewart made in reference to his uncle Donald, who was one of his paternal uncles (and therefore a brother of *Ailidh Dall*). Mr Stewart said

that he told stories to his uncle Donald when the latter was ‘wanting to refresh his memory on the old stories again.’ Brian’s words on the subject were as follows:

‘Oh, I told it to my own uncle. Because he was wanting to renew, to refresh his memory on them. I went over and told him some of them again, over again.... [H]e was away a long time in Aberdeen, and. When he came back to these parts again, he, he was wanting to refresh his memory on the, old stories again.....’<sup>9</sup>

The fact that Brian Stewart told the stories to Donald Stewart so that his uncle could ‘refresh’ his memory is another indication that repeatedly hearing stories from a more experienced family member was an important way in which the Stewarts learned their stories – whether as children or as adults. It is particularly interesting that Brian Stewart told his uncle the stories rather than discussing or summarising them for him; one might ask whether this means that Donald Stewart felt that he had to hear the stories *told* again in order to remember them properly. It is possible that it was important to hear the entire story as it should be told, rather than breaking it down and analysing it in terms of its constituent parts. This also may indicate that Brian Stewart and his uncle related to the stories as complete entities which could only be dealt with intact, starting from the beginning and continuing through to the end. In this regard it is interesting to consider some comments made by the South Uist storyteller Donald Alasdair Johnson, which indicate that rather than having a summary of a story in mind when he began to tell it, the story emerged bit by bit as he proceeded: ‘As you go on ... the thing comes upon you.... It's easier to tell a story right through ... from the beginning.... It comes little by little to me....’ (MacDonald 1983: 118-119). This suggests the possibility that the story was not consciously broken down into constituent parts in the mind of the storyteller, but instead was perceived as an organic whole, and that the very process of telling it triggered the act of remembering. As such, Johnson's comments resemble some that Brian Stewart made on the topic of piping. In discussing how he remembered various pipe tunes, Brian on one occasion said: ‘Do you know, when you'd be playing them, like everything else, it would come into your mind more of them.’<sup>10</sup> This comment can be taken as an indication that one pipe tune would elicit another in Mr Stewart’s mind, just as one part of a story might elicit or trigger the next section of the story during the storytelling process.<sup>11</sup>

### **Repetition and Correction**

To return to the issue of learning stories, while it is not particularly surprising that many storytellers would identify taking an ‘interest’ in stories as being important to the learning process; most of us are probably more curious to know *how* storytellers manage to learn their material. On occasion Brian Stewart went beyond saying that he was simply ‘interested’ in the stories and made comments which cast more light on the learning process. During one interview, he described how he would repeat stories back to his grandmother after he had heard them from her:

**C.Z.:** ‘Did you ever tell stories in front of your grandmother, did you ever tell your grandmother the stories?’

**B.S.:** ‘Oh, yes I told my uncles stories.’

**C.Z.:** ‘And what about your grandmother? Susie?’

**B.S.:** ‘Oh yes, I, sometimes I repeated them back ... to see if I would have them all, you know. And, if I hadn't got them all, you see, she would say, ‘Oh, you missed this bit out of that.’

**C.Z.:** ‘Would she?’

**B.S.:** ‘Aye.’

**C.Z.:** ‘Uh huh. And then would you tell it again?’

**B.S.:** ‘Aye.’

**C.Z.:** ‘Uh huh. Until you got it right.’

**B.S.:** ‘Aye, got it right, yeah.’

**C.Z.:** ‘Mmm hmm. Right. And –’

**B.S.:** ‘That’s the way I learned.’<sup>12</sup>

Here we discover that Brian Stewart actually repeated the stories back to his grandmother and that she would correct him if he had not remembered a story in the right way. This indicates that Susie Stewart believed that there was a correct way to tell a story, or at least that she considered that there were set elements to be included in it, rather than conceiving of the story in a more improvisational way. Similar behaviour has been described by other storytellers. Donatien Laurent tells how the Breton storyteller Jean-Louis le Rolland, after hearing stories from an old weaver, would repeat them to his sisters. According to Laurent, ‘...when he was wrong, they said: “No! Here you went too far! You have omitted this episode or you put it in the wrong place. – You have to go further back”’ (113).

We may speculate that this type of correction from close family members was not uncommon in the Stewart family, and certainly such practices have been mentioned in relation to Gaelic storytelling. In his 1945 ‘The Gaelic Storyteller,’ James Delargy states that ‘... it is no uncommon experience of mine to hear the listening women interrupt and correct the speaker’ (181), and D.A. Binchy speaks of similar behaviour (cf.: 9).<sup>13</sup>

### **Reviewing or Practising Stories**

In addition to making an active effort to learn the stories from his grandmother as he heard them from her, it also seems to be the case that Brian Stewart would go over the stories in his own mind and practise them. This is not unexpected, as there are many documented instances of Gaelic storytellers reporting similar practices. Delargy cites examples of storytellers who practised their stories before going to the *taigh cèilidh* (185, 186, 188, 193) and Donald Archie MacDonald reports that the storyteller Angus MacLellan stated that he consciously went over stories in his mind (1983: 123). On one occasion, Brian told me that he used to review the stories directly after he had heard them from his grandmother, and that he still practised them at the time of our interviews, when he was in his eighties:

**C.Z.:** ‘Say when your grandmother would tell you a story, afterwards, would you go over it in your head to, to get it straight?’

**B.S.:** ‘I just would go over it in my own mind, you know.’

**C.Z.:** ‘Right. Do you ever go over stories in your own mind now?’

**B.S.:** ‘Yes, I do.’ [*Tone of voice is very emphatic.*]

**C.Z.:** ‘And remember them...?’

**B.S.:** ‘I’ll go over them in my own mind’.

**C.Z.:** ‘Right. And do you -’

**B.S.:** ‘I go over what the minister preaches on a Sunday.’<sup>14</sup>

Here Mr Stewart’s comment that not only did he go over stories in his mind but that he also went over what the minister preached, gives us some insight into the general workings of his mind; he was in the habit of replaying not just traditional material, but any material which he found to be of interest. This is not the only time that Brian Stewart said that he deliberately reviewed stories in his mind. In a 1974 interview with Donald Archie MacDonald, Brian was asked whether he ever thought about or analysed the stories he told. The exchange was as follows:

**D.A.M.:** *'S am bi sibh fhèin uaireanan, nuair a bhios sibh leibh fhèin, bi sibh a' smaoineachadh air na stòiridhean tha seo, a' toir an eanchainn asda mar sin?*

**B.S.:** *'Bidh. Bidh. Bidh. Bidh mis' 'dol mach ... 'smaoineachdainn orr', bidh mi 'dol air ais cho fad' agus tha cuimhn' agam, 's rudan dhen t-seòrs' sin... Aye. 'S air rudan a bhithinn mi fhèin 'dèanamh, agus dhen a', 'm pàirt dhen an sluagh bha cuide ruinn an uair sin, 's bha beò an uair sin. 'S bhithinn 'dol air ais, tha mi 'creidsinn gu' bheil na h-uile gin mar sin, gu' tèid iad air ais uairean, a's a' chèill aig', gu' smaoinich aid air ais.'*<sup>15</sup>

[**D.A.M.:** 'And do you yourself sometimes, when you're by yourself, do you think about these stories, analyse them like that?'

**B.S.:** 'I do. I do. I do. I'll be going out ... thinking about them, I go back as far as I can remember, and that sort of thing... Aye. And about things I myself used to do, and about the, some of the people who were with us then, and were alive at that time. And I would go back, I think that everyone is like that, that they go back at times, in their mind, that they think back.']

Not only did Brian Stewart think back on the stories, but he also would think back over past times and about people he used to know. It is significant that Brian made this comment in 1974 when he was 63 years old and was still leading an active life. Were it not for this earlier evidence, one might have wondered whether Mr Stewart's habit of retreating to the sanctuary of memory and stories in his mind was a result of being in a nursing home<sup>16</sup> where his everyday experience was not as interesting as his past. But even when Brian Stewart was much younger, he was in the habit of revisiting the past in his mind.

### **Interest in a Story or Song Identified as Key Factor**

On another occasion when I was questioning Mr Stewart about how he managed to remember stories and other information, he first attributed his good memory to God's help, but then went on to explain the process further as he related the ease with which he could learn a song from the radio:

**C.Z.:** 'Have you ever thought about how you manage to remember so many stories?'

**B.S.:** 'Oh, no, but I don't know, but I just, trust in God. It's Him that's keeping them maybe, not me. The Lord is keeping my memory. And it's Him that does everything. That's the way I see it, anyhow.'

**C.Z.:** 'But do you ever, kind of practice them in your head, or try to remember the words, or anything like that, or when you were younger did you, did you make a special effort to memorise words, or things like that?'

**B.S.:** 'Oh, yes, I may have. If for instance .... I was wanting to have it. Like, eh, when ... the radio was there, on the other day, when Andy Stewart was singing on it, singing a song, ... Glencoe. I picked that up. And, another one, he said, he said ... "Come on to the ceilidh, come on to the ceilidh, by the sea of Loch Broom. Come by – travel the morning, and wait 'til noon. Come at night, and go home by the moonlight.'"

**C.Z.:** 'And if you heard a story, say, how long would it take you before you would know it?'

**B.S.:** 'Oh, not very long.'

**C.Z.:** ‘Like, if you heard a story now, someone told you, you know, a different story, *Stòiridh a’ ... Chòcaire*, but it was a different *Stòiridh a’ Chòcaire-*’  
**B.S.:** ‘Well, if I was interested in it, I would learn it right away.’<sup>17</sup>

Here Brian’s point that he could pick up words to a song, or a new version of a story, if he ‘was wanting to have it’, again emphasises the fact that it was his interest in a story or song which was important to the learning process.

### **Learning from Individuals**

In addition to stating that he learned stories and songs if he was interested in them, on several occasions Mr Stewart went on to give precise details about the people from whom he learned particular songs. This is significant, as it shows that Brian had fixed memories of when he first learned certain songs. In one instance Brian described learning a song from his wife, and then went on to describe how he had learned another song from a crofter with whom he was working in Durness:

[*B.S. has just sung a song.*]

**B.S.:** ‘It was my late wife that had it, it's from her that I got it from. One night we were way up west there, and, the two of us, sitting in a tent and, she started singing and, she started singing that song, and I made her sing it 'til I picked it up.’

**C.Z.:** ‘How long did it take you, how long does it take you?’

**B.S.:** ‘Oh, just a while of a night. I got it. She sang, she sang it two or three times, but och, she was a good singer. She's a beautiful singer. She would [put] a lovely voice to it, you know.’

[*There is a break in the recording, which resumes with B.S. singing another song, after which the conversation resumes as follows:*]

**C.Z.:** .... ‘How do you remember it? It's amazing.’

**B.S.:** ‘Well it's quite easy.... Well I learned it in Durness itself, from a man that I was working with, in Durness, he, he had a croft. And he had a pair of horses, and he said to me, ”Can you plough?”

“Yes,” I say, “I can plough.”

And, he says, “Would you take,” he says, “that pair,” he says, “and plough this [bit of] land for me.”

So I – he was Charlie White, the name of the man, in Durness. So I, I ploughed it, and then I harrowed it, and he sowed it.’

**C.Z.:** ‘How long did that take?’

**B.S.:** ‘Och, it would – half a day.’

**C.Z.:** ‘Half a day. And when, did he teach you the song while you were working?’

**B.S.:** ‘Pardon?’

**C.Z.:** ‘Was it while you were working that he gave you the song?’

**B.S.:** ‘Yes....’<sup>18</sup>

Here the fact that Brian Stewart’s precise memory of a specific person, time and place is tied to the learning of a song is worthy of our attention for it may cast light on the learning process. On another occasion when I asked him where he had learned a particular song, his response was as follows:

[*BS has just finished singing ‘Lord Ronald, My Son’.*]

- C.Z.:** .... ‘And where did you learn that song?’  
**B.S.:** ‘Aye, how did I hear that?’  
**C.Z.:** ‘Where did you hear it?’  
**B.S.:** ‘Och, I don't know, I heard it every – I heard it first, well a chappie that was working with me, in the nineteen-thirties. From Scourie.’  
**C.Z.:** ‘Scourie?’  
**B.S.:** ‘Aye, Scourie in Sutherlandshire.’  
**C.Z.:** ‘Uh huh’.  
**B.S.:** ‘His name was Tommy MacLeod.’  
**C.Z.:** ‘Mmm hmm. What was – what kind of work were you doing?’  
**B.S.:** ‘Eh, we were taking in a new bit of land.’  
**C.Z.:** ‘Uh huh.’  
**B.S.:** ‘And we -’  
**C.Z.:** ‘The Forestry Commission?’  
**B.S.:** ‘Aye – no, it was just a local job. And there was .... trees been cut down, and the root died off, they had to blow the roots up, you know, to get the – so that it could be plowed. So he came from Scourie, Tommy MacLeod...’<sup>19</sup>

Again, the identification of the particular individual from whom the song was learned, as well as the specific place and time that this occurred, is noteworthy. It is significant that Brian only recounted such specific details of time and place in relation to songs, the implication being that while the words to songs had to be memorised, stories were not learned word by word. This gives weight to the supposition that the learning and memory processes related to mastering stories are different from the straightforward memorisation used for committing songs or verse to memory. While learning a song may be a fixed act of memorisation or learning which Brian Stewart could clearly remember and identify, the acquisition of stories seems to have taken place over time and by a different process, and therefore could not be dated with the same precision.

Here Mr Stewart's memory and learning seem to have operated in a similar way to that indicated by another Gaelic storyteller, Angus MacLellan. In an article by Donald Archie MacDonald, MacLellan is quoted as saying that he differentiated between the way in which he learned set verses and the way in which he learned or remembered a story. Discussing a particular story which contained a set section of verse, MacLellan said that while he had a clear visual picture of much of the action of the story, he had no image corresponding to the verse:

‘You can learn the verse as you would learn a song or any kind of poetry... You needn't see a picture of it – or you can see one if you want to, but you don't have to see it ... but I think you have to see the rest of the story as it happens ... or you can't remember it.’ (1983: 122)

Ray Hicks of North Carolina also differentiated between the processes used for learning stories and learning songs, explaining that memorisation played a role in the learning of songs but not of stories. Discussing the telling of stories, Hicks said, ‘It ain't like a song ya see. A song ya have to memorize ta make it sing on its tune, ya see’ (MacDermitt: 337).

### **Learning and Remembering Formulaic Language**

Another point of interest in relation to Brian Stewart's memory is how he learned and remembered formulaic language – the set phrases, dialogue and descriptions that occurred in his stories in much the same way each time. Although it is clear that this language was

important to the stories, as it occurred over and over again in the same form, it is equally clear that it was difficult for Brian Stewart to consciously articulate the role which this language played in his storytelling. Often he was at a loss to explain how he had remembered the formalised set language of dialogue and runs, but it is clear from his storytelling that he remembered these set phrases and set pieces as he heard them and that he repeated them in nearly the same way each time he used them. On some level he must have recognised these phrases, descriptions and bits of dialogue as being important to the story and must have internalised the concept that he should retain them unaltered.<sup>20</sup>

I discussed the issue of formulaic language with Brian Stewart many times. On a number of occasions, we considered the somewhat enigmatic term '*fios feagal an aon sgeul*,<sup>21</sup> which is the object of the hero's quest in Brian's version of '*Stòiridh Ladhair*'.<sup>22</sup> Although Brian could not say what the term meant, he had retained it in his tellings of the story. When I asked him about the phrase in March of 1995, it was clear that the phrase did not mean much to him:

**B.S.:** 'It, the, the other word, I don't know what it means, I don't think it means anything, just a, a word.'

**C.Z.:** 'Right, but that's what your grandmother would have said.'

**B.S.:** 'Aye.'

**C.Z.:** 'So that's, that's the way you learned the story.'

**B.S.:** 'Aye, when I was a boy, you see, I would be always, eh ... in with her.'<sup>23</sup>

Brian could not really explain how he had remembered the term, which he said he did not think 'means anything', and he reiterated the explanation that he was 'always in with' his grandmother. As we continued our conversation, Brian went on to mention another enigmatic term which occurs in his stories, the phrase '*fear agus filidh*'.<sup>24</sup> As we discussed the term, Brian explained what he thought it meant:

**B.S.:** '*Fear agus filidh*.'

**C.Z.:** 'When you have words like that, that don't necessarily make that much sense, is -'

**B.S.:** 'Well the *fear*, is a person.'

**C.Z.:** 'Mmm hmm'.

**B.S.:** 'And *filidh*, *filidh* was the name.'

**C.Z.:** 'Uh huh, right. And are those -'

**B.S.:** '*Ceann fear agus filidh* – is the head.'

**C.Z.:** 'Mmm hmm.'

**B.S.:** '*Ceann fear*: the head of that fellow, *filidh*.'

**C.Z.:** 'Mmm hmm, right. And how did you remember, say, things like *fios feagal an aon sgeul*, like, those special wo— were those words special in any way?'

**B.S.:** 'No, no, they weren't special.'<sup>25</sup>

Brian's on-the-spot analysis here of the phrase *ceann fear agus filidh* is most interesting. With his comment '*Ceann fear*: the head of that fellow, *filidh*,' Brian made it clear that the phrase did not make that much sense to him; and yet what is also clear is that he remembered and retained it unaltered despite its ambiguous meaning. Interestingly, however, he stated that such words were not 'special'.

On another occasion, I questioned Brian about these same formulaic phrases, and he told me that *fios feagal an aon sgeul* was '*dìreach facal*' ('just a word').<sup>26</sup> We then discussed some more of the story, and when I asked him to translate *fios feagal an aon sgeul* he replied



by saying 'I cannot do it'. Similarly, he could not translate the somewhat archaic phrase *trì buaraichean matha sìdh* ('the three fetters of the fairy [women]'), another phrase which he used in a be-spelling formula and which is common in Gaelic stories.<sup>27</sup> He thought for a long while and then said, '*O chan eil fhios agam*' ('Oh I do not know'). While Brian was unable to say how he had remembered the words or what they meant, he did answer in the affirmative when I asked him whether the formulaic phrases were important to the story, although he could only explain his retention of them by saying, 'Och, I remember them, all right'.

Interestingly, despite the uncertainty as to the meaning of these phrases, on one occasion Brian did acknowledge that the formulaic words he used remained the same from one telling of a tale to another:

**C.Z.:** '...there are certain parts in it with special words, you know, like, like when you – '*Tha mi a' cur mo gheasan – tha mi a' cur*' – what is it?'

**B.S.:** '*Mo chrosan 's mo gheasan*' –

**C.Z.:** '*Mo chrosan 's mo gheasan,*' and it's '*trì màtha*' –

**B.S.:** '*Trì buaraichean màtha sìdh.*'

**C.Z.:** 'Aye, that's -'

**B.S.:** – '*nach stad aon oidhche agad ... gus am faigh thu fios feagal,*' whatever it was.

**C.Z.:** 'That's right, '*fios feagal an aon sgeul*'. But that's always the same. Like every time you would tell that story, those words are always the same –

**B.S.:** 'Aye, always the same.'<sup>28</sup>

[**C.Z.:** '...there are certain parts in it with special words, you know, like, like when you – 'I put my spells – I put my' – what is it?'

**B.S.:** 'My spells and my crosses' –

**C.Z.:** 'My spells and my crosses,' and it's 'the three [mothers]' –

**B.S.:** 'The three fetters of the fairy [mothers]'.  
**C.Z.:** 'Aye, that's -'

**B.S.:** – 'you won't stop one night ... until you obtain for me true knowledge, whatever it was'.

**C.Z.:** 'That's right, 'true knowledge of the one tale'. But that's always the same. Like every time you would tell that story, those words are always the same -'

**B.S.:** 'Aye, always the same.']

I then proceeded to ask Mr Stewart how he learned such words, but he was unable to offer any explanation other than that he had learned the stories from his family, adding, 'Oh I would remember the words of it, if I'm interested in anything.' Thus once again Brian explained his ability to remember the archaic phrases by saying that he took an interest in them, but was unable to further describe the process by which he had learned or retained the words.

### Visualisation and Visual Memory

Related to the way in which Brian Stewart would go over stories and speech his mind (such as the minister's sermon mentioned above), is the question of what Mr Stewart's visual memory was like and whether he pictured his stories in his mind. On one occasion when we were discussing memory, Mr Stewart himself brought up the subject of visual memory:

**C.Z.:** 'When I was talking to you yesterday, you said that when you were a little boy you would just remember the stories. How did you remember them?'

- B.S.:** ‘Oh, just it, I don't know, because I was like that, you know, anything I was interested in I could keep it.’
- C.Z.:** ‘Right. Do you have a good memory for anything you want to remember?’
- B.S.:** ‘Yes, I have a good memory. Thank goodness I have a good memory.’
- C.Z.:** ‘Mmm, that's a great thing to have.’
- B.S.:** ‘And I have a good memory of you in my, eh, I'll be seeing you in my vision. I'll always see -’
- C.Z.:** ‘Do you have a good memory for faces?’
- B.S.:** ‘Yes, I have a good memory of faces. I'll always see you in my vision....’
- C.Z.:** ‘Can you remember places, too, the way places look?’
- B.S.:** ‘Yes.’
- C.Z.:** ‘Outdoors, and scenes and things like that?’
- B.S.:** ‘I can see it in my vision, you, your face and your way you're speaking to me, I see for years in my...’ [*B.S. trails off.*]
- C.Z.:** ‘Right. So when you tell a story, do you see, do you see it happening?’
- B.S.:** ‘Aye.’
- C.Z.:** ‘Do you see the people, like when you tell the *Each Dubh*,<sup>29</sup> do you see the horse?’
- B.S.:** ‘Aye.’ [*Very emphatic tone of voice.*]<sup>30</sup>

Brian Stewart thus provided a clear indication that he had a strong visual memory and that he often pictured people in his mind. Most significant for our consideration of Brian as a storyteller, is his confirmation that there was some visualisation of stories in his mind as he told them, and that he visualised the characters in his stories. During another interview we again discussed the issue of visualisation and Brian's comments made it clear that his imagination and memory were highly visual. When I asked him whether he saw the characters of his stories in his mind's eye as he told a story, he answered me very definitely that he did. He also went on to state that he occasionally visualised friends and acquaintances, adding, ‘I go back, I'll be sitting in bed, I go to bed and I'm thinking on a lot of things. My late wife, my father and mother and, I was very fond of my mother and father, you see...’<sup>31</sup>

While Mr Stewart's comments on the visual aspect of his imagination are interesting and indicate a high degree of internal visualisation accompanying his thought processes in general, they are a far cry from comments made by Donald Alasdair Johnson<sup>32</sup> which indicated that Johnson saw the story happening as he told it, and that this process was vital to his ability to tell stories. Indeed, the evidence which Alan Bruford cites in his article ‘Memory, Performance and Structure in Traditional Tales’ (1983) indicates that visualisation functions in different ways for different storytellers. For Brian Stewart, it is clear that he had a highly visual memory and imagination and that the stories and their characters had a visual dimension in his mind, yet there was no evidence to suggest that visualisation could be singled out as having played a distinct or specialised role in his storytelling, as may be the case with other individuals.

### Summary

Having reviewed the different types of evidence relating to Brian Stewart's learning and remembering of stories, we might ask what conclusions, if any, we can draw about these processes, or whether any patterns are apparent. Although it was difficult for Mr Stewart to identify a specific process which had enabled him to learn and remember stories, it is clear that he identified taking an interest in the material as a key factor contributing to his storytelling abilities. Repeated hearing of the same tales was also an important part of the learning process. Of particular interest is his description of the way in which he listened to

stories told by his grandmother and then repeated them back to her in order to learn them accurately. This is important evidence about the way in which Brian learned the stories, and about the way in which he and his grandmother – and possibly other members of the Stewart family – viewed the material and the manner in which it was to be transmitted from one generation to another. Also significant is the evidence that Brian actively rehearsed stories and other information in his mind, and that often he consciously reviewed memories and a wide range of material when he was on his own. Such conscious rehearsal is another important indication of the way in which Brian regarded stories and storytelling, implying that the stories had to be practised in order to be told in the ‘correct’ way.

Brian Stewart’s comments on visualisation indicate that, like many other storytellers, he did indeed ‘see’ stories and characters in his mind’s eye as he told them or thought about them; however, he never singled out visualisation as playing a crucial role in his ability to remember the stories, and the implication is that visualisation was just one aspect of a complex cognitive process associated with Mr Stewart’s storytelling. Further evidence about the ways in which he learned and remembered comes from Brian’s ability to pinpoint individuals from whom he had learned specific songs and the occasions on which he had learned them. Such evidence adds weight to the supposition that the process of learning a fixed song or a specific verse or group of verses differs from that of learning a story, both on a cognitive level and perhaps on a neurological one as well.

In contrast to his comments about learning songs, Mr Stewart’s comments on formulaic language, and his difficulty in explaining how he retained such language, indicate that here the storyteller was not consciously aware of the memory and learning processes involved, and that the acquisition and retention of this material must have taken place on some other level of consciousness. It indicates, too, that the conservative values surrounding such formalised language were ones that Brian had internalised without, perhaps, being fully aware of it. The fact that he seemed to be unaware of the meaning of certain archaic set words or phrases, yet was able to consistently reproduce them in his storytelling, indicates a belief (on some level) that these words were important to the story and that they must be retained, whether or not the storyteller or listener fully understood them. This, in turn, may reflect the unspoken assumptions about storytelling with which Brian Stewart was raised.

### Conclusion

My discussions with Brian Stewart about how he learned and remembered his stories revealed a number of complementary strategies by which he acquired and retained tales, and also elicited information that hinted at the storytelling ethos of the Stewart family more generally. While we can never have direct knowledge of the processes which occur in the mind of a storyteller as he or she learns or tells a story, the examination of these processes may shed light on the questions of memory and learning which are so central to Gaelic storytelling. By pursuing these questions we can only improve our understanding of the tradition, and in so doing we may raise further questions which will lead us to understand the tradition in new ways.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the scholarship regarding learning, memory and performance in relation to Gaelic storytelling, see Zall 2010b: 209-210.

<sup>2</sup> This nickname derived from the place of Mr Stewart’s birth, *Ach a’ Bhràigh* (‘field of the brae’), which is located near Altandhu on the road past Achiltibuie on the Coigeach headland in Sutherland, at latitude 58 degrees north and longitude 5 degrees 25' west.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted by Hamish Henderson in Neat: 71.

<sup>4</sup>For more complete biographical information about Brian Stewart, see Zall 1998.

<sup>5</sup>For discussions of the place of such tales in Gaelic tradition, see Bruford, 1987; Delargy: 192, 211; and MacDonald 1989: 187.

<sup>6</sup> For a more extensive study of Mr Stewart as a storyteller see Zall 1998; and for additional details related to Mr Stewart and the Stewart storytelling tradition, see Zall 2006, 2010a and 2010b.

<sup>7</sup>30 October 1993, Tape 1 of 1. N.B. All recordings were made by the author unless otherwise noted. Copies of these recordings have been deposited in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies of the University of Edinburgh. It is my understanding that at present, not all of these recordings have been assigned SA numbers. However some of the recordings I made with Brian Stewart are to be found on SA1993.48-53.

<sup>8</sup>14 April 1993, Tape 2 of 2.

<sup>9</sup>14 April 1993, Tape 2 of 2.

<sup>10</sup>1 April 1995, Tape 1 of 2.

<sup>11</sup>The concept of ‘organic unity’ has been discussed and studied by neurologists and musicologists in relation to music, recitation and other metrical structures. Referring to these as ‘flowing dynamic-semantic structures’, the neurologist Oliver Sacks says that with such structures it is typical that ‘each part leads on to the next, that every part has reference to the rest. Such structures cannot usually be perceived, or remembered in part – they are perceived and remembered, if at all, as wholes’ (61). The way in which some Gaelic storytellers remember their stories appears to be highly similar to the way in which such ‘flowing dynamic-semantic structures’ have been described. See Rubin for more on the ways in which the research of cognitive psychologists and others who study memory is relevant to the study of traditional narrative.

<sup>12</sup>31 March 1995, Tape 2 of 2.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, it appears that little research has been done in relation to such correction: Ruth Finnegan notes that ‘... there has until recently been relatively little culture-specific work on social strategies relating to memory....’ (1992: 116).

<sup>14</sup>15 April 1993, Tape 2 of 2.

<sup>15</sup>School of Scottish Studies recording SA1974/27/A-B1.

<sup>16</sup>Brian Stewart was in nursing homes from 1993 until his death in 2008.

<sup>17</sup>30 March 1995, Tape 1 of 1.

<sup>18</sup>16 April 1993, Tape 1 of 2.

<sup>19</sup>2 July 1994, Tape 1 of 2.

<sup>20</sup>For a fuller discussion of Brian Stewart's use of formalised language, set dialogue and runs see Zall 2010b and Chapter Four in Zall 1998.

<sup>21</sup>'*Fios feagal an aon sgeul*': a phrase usually associated with spells of obligation that require a character to obtain knowledge of the fate of a certain king. Brian Stewart's phrase '*fios feagal an aon sgeul*' is related to similar terms found in versions of '*An Tuairisgeul Mòr*' and the Irish story '*Fios Fátha an aon scéil*', also sometimes known as '*Fios Fátha an doimhin-scéil*'. See *Béaloideas* I: 105, where '*fios fátha an doimhin-scéil*' is glossed as 'the significance of the profound tale'. Cf. also Gillies 1981: 54 for discussion of Gaelic tales which deal with quests for '*fios fátha an aoinsgéil ar na mnáibh*' or similar. For a discussion of 'Be-Spelling Incantations' see McKay: 504. Cf. Zall 2010b: 235 fn 20.

<sup>22</sup>'*Stòiridh Ladhair*': a native hero tale which has some similarity to the '*Tuairisgeul Mòr*' story and which contains the '*Rìdire gan Ghàire*' ('Knight without Laughter') motif.

<sup>23</sup>31 March 1995, Tape 2 of 2.

<sup>24</sup>This is another term which Brian used in his versions of '*Stòiridh Ladhair*'. Literally it means 'a man and a poet'. It was suggested to me by the late Donald Archie MacDonald that the term may have evolved from the proper name '*Fearghus Filidh*' ('Fergus the Poet'), which could have been re-interpreted as '*fear agus filidh*' over time.

<sup>25</sup>31 March 1995, Tape 2 of 2.

<sup>26</sup>13 May 1994, Tape 2 of 2.

<sup>27</sup>The spell is typically used to place characters under obligation; many examples of it may be found in collections of Gaelic stories, such as J.G. McKay: 228 and following, and in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies. See MacDonell and Shaw: 88 note 6 for some discussion of the origins of the phrase. Also see Bruford 1969: 196. Brian's phrase '*matha sìdh*' probably evolved from an earlier phrase such as '*màthraichean sìdh*' ('fairy mothers'), an example of which can be found in MacNeil: 52. For more on this formula see Zall 2010b: 217-218 and note 22.

<sup>28</sup>30 March 1995, Tape 1 of 1.

<sup>29</sup>'*Stòiridh an Eich Dhuibh*' ('The Story of the Black Horse'), a native hero tale related to A.T. 531, is one of the stories in Brian's repertoire.

<sup>30</sup>15 April 1993, Tape 2 of 2.

<sup>31</sup>1 April 1995, Tape 1 of 2.

<sup>32</sup>See MacDonald 1983.

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