

SCOTTISH STUDIES

SCHOOL OF SCOTTISH STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

John MacInnes

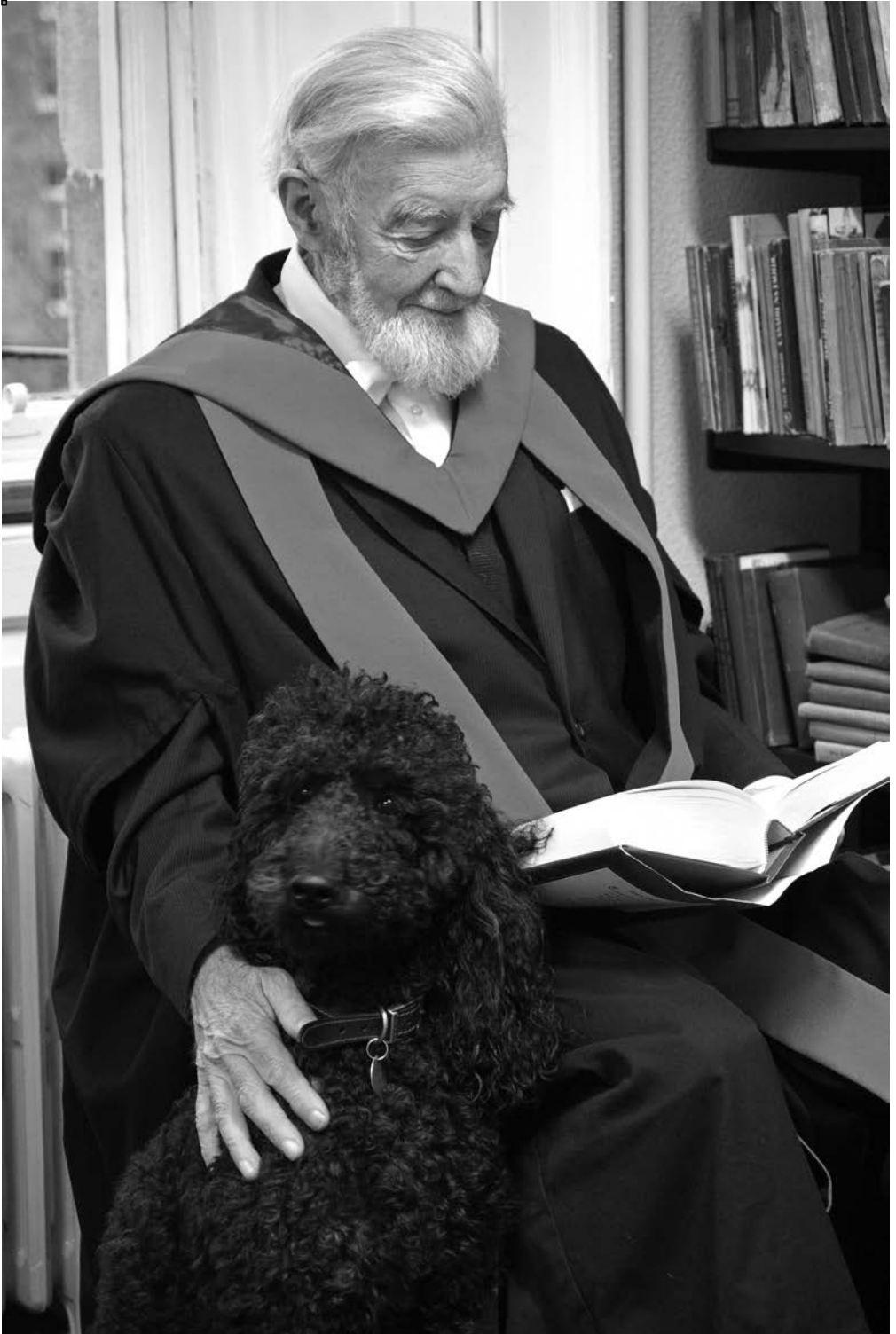
A Biographical Note

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ABSTRACT

No abstract.





John MacInnes

A Biographical Note

*Chraobh nan ubhal, gheug nan abhal,
Chraobh nan ubhal, gu robh Dia leat,
Gu robh Moire 's gu robh Crìosda,
Gu robh ghealach, gu robh ghrian leat,
Gu robh g[h]aoth an ear 's an iar leat,
Gu robh m' athair fhìn 's a thriall leat.¹*

Childhood and Education

John MacInnes – Iain Mac Aonghuis (Iain mac Ruairidh mhic Iain mhic Iain mhic Nèill mhic Mhaol Mhoire mhic Iain mhic Mhaol Chaluim) – was born on 3 April 1930 in Uig, Lewis, when his father Ruairidh was minister in the Established Church – *an Eaglais Stéidhte*, the Church of Scotland – in the parish of Uig. The MacInneses, however, came not from Lewis but from the Isle of Skye, and originally from Morvern. His father's mother's people – Andersons (Clann mhic Annraisg) – lived in Torrin, and his father's ancestors, swordsmen with the MacDonalds of Sleat, once held the tack of Leitir Fura. One of them, Maol Caluim, fought with the Jacobite forces at the Battle of Sheriffmuir in 1715.

If, as many Gaels believe, tenacity and the warrior spirit have a genetic basis, then Ruairidh MacInnes inherited them in full. An outspoken supporter of the Land League, his passion for social justice animated his life. He was also a steadfast defender and ardent proponent of the Gaelic language. As a minister, he possessed not only the rich Gaelic of his Skye forbears but also the powerful lexicon of theology and religion, the language of erudition and philosophy, and could fashion a compelling argument in trenchant and uncompromising fashion. Perhaps because he was in his forties when he first became a parent, his values – like his Gaelic – were those of an older generation, and he disapproved of a growing trend for parents to speak only English to their children. Ruairidh MacInnes's tireless advocacy of the human rights of the Gaels, and his love of the Gàidhealtachd, its language and its culture, were to exert a potent influence upon his son.

John's mother Morag (Morag Alasdair 'ic Mhurchaidh) was a MacAskill, and grew up in Cladach Circebost in North Uist. Her grandfather, Murchadh Mac Asgail, had moved to Uist from Skye, and had married a Uist woman. Morag's mother's people were MacCorquodales: her grandfather Calum Mac Còrcadail had worked as a schoolteacher in Tìree, where he married Mór Nic Fhionghain, a Tìree woman. Like her husband, Morag was committed to the use of Gaelic at home. As John told Michael Newton:

By far the most important element in my background was the fact that at home we spoke Gaelic all the time. My parents, from Uist and Skye, both of them equally, had a wonderful command of rich, idiomatic Gaelic. To the present day, my sister and myself, like a great number of our relatives, would never dream of conversing in any other language than Gaelic.²

When John was eight years old, the family left Lewis and moved to Raasay, where John immediately felt at home. Raasay's proximity to Skye afforded him an opportunity to get to know members of his father's extended family: his father's paternal uncles, in particular, would

¹ J. L. Campbell and F. Collinson (eds), *Hebridean Folksongs: A Collection of Waulking Songs Made by Donald MacCormick in Kilphedir in South Uist in the year 1893*. Oxford 1969: 146.

² M. Newton (ed.), *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*. Edinburgh 2006: xxv.

eventually help to ignite his appreciation for Gaelic song and tradition. From the beginning, however, the topography of Raasay – and particularly the fact that it was forested – strongly appealed to him:

Bha mi trì bliadhna a's a' sgoil ann an Bhaltois, ann an Sgìr Ùige, ach chan 'eil ann ach...gu bheil na bliadhnaichean sin 'nan aisling, 'nam bruadar dhomhsa. Ach chaidh an teaghlach a Ratharsair an uair sin, agus gad a tha Ùige Leodhais, gad a tha an dùthaich cho àlainn 's a gheibh thu anns na h-eileanan – tha beanntan Ùige ann, 's tha iad ainmeil, tràighean móra, Tràigh Mhór Ùige fhéin – 's e àite lom a tha ann. Tha na h-àiteachan lom, mar gum b'eadh, gu nàdurra.

Thàinig sinn a Ratharsair, agus bha ceann-a-deas Ratharsair fo choille. Agus bha buaidh anabarrach aig a' choille ormsa, feumaidh mi ràdh. Bha i, cha mhór, 'na diamhaireachd. ... 'S bha buaidh aig a h-uile dad a bha sin ormsa, agus riamh bho'n uair sin 's toil leam a bhith measg nan coilltean. Chan eil dad cho cofhurtail ann ri bhith 'gabhail fasgadh aig bun craobheadh, na ann an coille, na ann an doire, ma tha stòirm, gaoth mhór, ann, gaillean is dòcha, agus tha thu cho seasgair 's a ghabhas tu.³

I was at school for three years in Valtos, in the district of Uig, but those years are little more than a dream to me. But then the family went to Raasay; and although Uig, Lewis, and the country round there is as beautiful as any you'd find in the Islands – the hills of Uig, which are famous, the wide beaches – it's basically a bare place. The places are bare, as it were, by nature.

We came to Raasay, and the south end of Raasay was forested. And the forest had a remarkable effect upon me, I have to say. It was almost magical. And it all had a great effect upon me, and ever since then I have loved to be in the midst of a forest. There's nothing as comforting as to be sheltering at the foot of a tree, or in a forest, or in a wood, if there's a big storm brewing, with gales maybe, and you're as snug as can be.

When the MacInneses moved to Raasay in 1938, the forests were those that had been planted by George Rainy some eighty years before to provide habitat for deer: oak, beech, ash, elm, spruce and pine. All of these trees were cut down during the Second World War. Today, Raasay's forests are plantation softwoods, and are nothing like the trees John remembers with such fondness, and that Somhairle MacGill-Eain celebrated in his poem 'Coilltean Ratharsair'.

After completing his primary education in Raasay, John was sent as a boarding pupil to Portree School, where he lived in the boys' hostel. His memories of this time are not sunny, as he greatly missed Raasay. Because the school regime was conducted entirely through the English language – even the playground, peopled in large majority by native Gaelic-speaking children, was English-speaking – John's main opportunity to speak Gaelic was provided by visits to a house in Portree where his sister Christina was lodging:

Ann an Port Rìgh, nuair a bha mise 'sa' *hostel*, bha boireannach ('na banntaich an uairsin), agus 's e *Mistress Beaton* a chanamaide rithe an comhnaidh. Bha i pòsda aig fear Iain Peutan, agus 's ann à Tròndairnis a bha i, agus bhiodh i gabhail loidsearan, cuid dhiubh clann sgoile. Bha mo phiuthar, a bha na bu shine na mise, cha robh i 'sa *hostel* ann, 's ann 'san taigh aice-sin a bha i. Agus nuair a thàinig mise a Sgoil Phort Rìgh, chuireadh an aithne a chéile sinn, agus thubhairt *Mistress Beaton* a bha seoriums, 'Thig thusa a-nuas a-seo an deaghaidh na sgoile latha sam bith 's a h-uile latha thogras tu.' Agus 's e Gàidhlig a bh' againn fad an t-siubhail. Boireannach laghach – cha b'urrainn dhomh gu leòr molaidh a thoirt oirre; bha an taigh aice-se dìreach 'na

³ From 'Air mo Chuairt', a series of interviews with John MacInnes conducted by Fiona MacKenzie of the BBC, first broadcast in 2009; Programme 1.

dhachaidh dhomhsa fad na bliadhnaichean a bha sin. Agus chùm e Ghàidhlig agam a' dol cuideachd, chionn 's gur h-e Beurla a bha a' dol anns a' *hostel* an comhnaidh.⁴

In Portree, when I was in the hostel, there was a woman, then a widow, whom we always called 'Mrs Beaton'. She had been married to a man, John Beaton, and was from Trotternish, and she provided lodgings for some of the students. My sister, who was older than myself, never stayed in the hostel, but lodged in her house. And when I came to Portree School, we were introduced and Mrs Beaton said to me, 'You come down here after school any day, as often as you like.' We spoke Gaelic all the time. A generous woman – I couldn't praise her highly enough; her house was like a home to me throughout those years. And it kept my Gaelic going, for it was all English that was spoken in the hostel.

John MacInnes's experience of the educational regime at Portree School came to colour his understanding of what it meant to be a Gael in the context of the British Empire:

Bha prógram na dhà...air an teilibhisean bho chionn ghoirid, agus daoine a' bruidhinn...air a bhith beò ann an *hostel* ann an Port Rìgh na ann an Inbhir Nis; agus 's a h-uile dad a bha iad a' ràdh dh'aontaichinn riutha ach gum bithinn, tha mi 'smaoineachadh, fada nas truime air an t-siostam uile gu léir a rinn ùdaras Alba agus Bhreatainn air na Gàidheil.

Rinn a' foghlum fada fada barrachd millidh air a' Ghàidhlig na rinn na Fuadaichean riamh. Can an-dràsda – chan eil mi a' dol a dh'àicheadh idir nach robh brùidealachd 's nach robh anaceartas eagalach fuaighte ri na Fuadaichean – ach can gu robh mìle duine ann am baile...agus gun deach còig ceud dhiubh a ruagadh a-null fairis a Chanada na dh'Astràilia na dh'àite sam bith eile. Cha robh seo a' ciallachadh ach gu robh còig ceud air a' fàgail gus an dèanamh Gallda tron an fhoghlum. Agus 's e Achd an Fhoghlum 1872 – nuair a dh'fheumadh a h-uile duine dol dhan a' sgoil aig aois chòig bliadhna, agus gu feumte am foghlum ann am Beurla fad an t-siubhail – 's e sin a' bhuille, 's e buille cho goirt 's cho cruaidh 's a thàinig air a' Ghàidhlig 's air a' Ghàidhealtachd riamh.

Nise, dh'ainmich duine na dithis a bh' air na prógramman a tha seo cho iongantach 's a bha e gur h-e Beurla a bha sinn a' bruidhinn fad an t-siubhail. Agus 's e sin a bh'ann. Nuair a chaidh mise a Phort Rìgh 's e Ghàidhlig a bha againne a-staigh an comhnaidh, agus bha lethcheud gille anns a' *hostel*,...agus 's e Ghàidhlig a bhiodh a-staigh aig cuid mhór mhór dhiubh fad an t-siubhail. Ach bha, mar gum b'eadh, a' Bheurla air a spàrradh oirnn. Agus gad a bhiodh tu ag iarraidh – agus bha mise feuchainn ri seo a dhèanamh – a' Ghàidhlig a chumail, 's gum biodh i againn comha ri chéile, bha a h-uile duine a' géilleadh air a' cheann thall.

Bha rud ann mu na tidsearan nach deach ainmeachadh [a's na prógramman] idir. Ann an Port Rìgh, a-mach air Iain Stil, Sgitheanach – 's esan a bha a' teagasg Gàidhlig – a-mach air a leitheid sin de dhuine, 's e Goill a bh' annta, à caochladh àiteachan ann an Alba. Agus bha cuid aca a bha, mar gum b'eadh, a dh'aon ghnòthach a' cur sìos air a' Ghàidhlig. Bha feadhainn eile a bha...ga dhèanamh ann an dòigh na bu shuarache. 'S bha sin a' cur air shùilean dhuinn, ann an dòigh sheòlta, nach robh feum sam bith a's a' Ghàidhlig. Chan e sin a-mhàin, ach gu robh e, mar gum b' eadh, nach robh innte ach rud a bha gad chumail ar ais. Bha iad gad chur an suarachas. Bha iad a' cur na cainnt' agad an suarachas, a' cur a' chàinain agad an suarachas, agus uime sin bha iad gad chur fhéin an suarachas. Agus tha mise a' smaoinichadh gu robh buaidh eagalach

⁴ *Ibid.*, Programme 4.

aige sin air a' Ghàidhlig agus air na daoine a bha bruidhinn na Gàidhlig air feadh na Gàidhealtachd.⁵

There were a few programmes on television recently in which people spoke of living in the hostels in Portree and in Inverness; and I would agree with everything that they said, except that I would be far harder on the whole system which the Scottish and British authorities imposed upon the Gaels.

Education brought a great deal more destruction upon the Gaelic language than the Clearances ever did. Now I am not going to deny that there was brutality connected with the Clearances, that there was not terrible injustice done; but say that there were a thousand people in a village...and that five hundred of these were driven abroad to Canada or to Australia or somewhere else. This only meant that there were five hundred remaining to be Anglicized through the educational system. And it was the Education Act of 1872 – which required everyone to attend school from the age of five, and to learn exclusively through the medium of English – that struck the real blow, a blow as sharp and severe as any ever dealt to the Gaelic language and to the Gàidhealtachd.

A few of the people interviewed on these programmes mentioned how amazing it was that we all spoke English all the time. And that is indeed what happened. When I went to Portree, it was Gaelic that we invariably spoke at home; and there were fifty boys in the hostel and the same was true for most of them. But it was as if English had been thrust upon us. And even if you tried – as I did – to keep Gaelic going, so that we'd be speaking it amongst ourselves, everybody gave way to English in the end.

One thing about the teachers was not mentioned in the television programmes. In Portree, apart from John Steele, a Skye man – he was the Gaelic teacher – apart from the likes of him, they were all Lowlanders, from various places in Scotland. Some of these intentionally disparaged the Gaelic language, while others did so in a meaner way. It was made clear to us, in a subtle fashion, that Gaelic was of no use, that it would keep you back. They were belittling you – belittling your speech, belittling your language and, by implication, belittling you. And I think that that had a dreadful effect on Gaelic and the people who spoke Gaelic throughout the Gàidhealtachd.

While most of the schoolmasters made little impression upon John, and he describes hostel life as nothing short of imprisonment, it was during his time at Portree School that he first became acquainted with the poetry of Somhairle MacGill-Eain. As a child in Raasay, John was familiar with the Maclean family, known locally as 'Clann an Tàilleir'; but because of the difference in their ages – Somhairle was born in 1911 – John did not get to know him well until much later, when he moved to Edinburgh to attend university. But his appreciation of Maclean's poems, surely intensified by his own love of Raasay, dates from this period.

John's feeling of being culturally cast adrift undoubtedly increased in 1943, when his father was called to serve a parish in Durness, Sutherland; and his mother's untimely death in Durness the following year dealt a further severe blow. His parents' move to Durness, however, enabled John to further his exploration of the Gàidhealtachd during school holidays, and he recalls his interest in the linguistic differences between the Gaelic of Durness and what he had previously encountered:

Cha deach mise a dh'fhuireach ann – bha mi 'sa *hostel* ann an Port Rìgh, agus cha robhar aig iarraidh mo ghluasad, bhithinn a' dol ri saor-laithean – ach 's e cheud rud a ghabh mise beachd air, cho diofraichte 's a bha Gàidhlig nan Caoidheach bhon a' Ghàidhlig a chuala mi roimhe sin. Ged a bha i na bu choltaich ann an iomadach dòigh ri Gàidhlig Leodhais na ri cainnt eile a chuala mi gu ruige sin, cha robh i ach aig na

⁵ *Ibid.*, Programme 4.

seann-daoine. Na daoine có-dhiubh a bha caran ann an meadhan an aoise, cha robh Gàidhlig aig a' chloinn idir aig an àm sin fhéin.⁶

I didn't go there to live – I was in the hostel in Portree, and they didn't want to move me, I used to go [to Sutherland] for holidays – but the first thing I noticed was how different the Gaelic of the Mackay Country was from what I had heard before. Although it bore greater resemblance in a number of ways to the Gaelic of Lewis than to anything else I'd heard up to then, it was spoken only by the old people. At any rate, the people who were more-or-less middle-aged – even then, their children had no Gaelic at all.

John MacInnes returned to the Mackay Country in the late 1950s to conduct fieldwork under the auspices of the School of Scottish Studies. In addition to recording a number of the songs of Rob Donn Mackay and the stories connected with them, he also began to develop his thinking about why Sutherland Gaelic shared some of the features of Lewis Gaelic, and to get a sense of how valuable such linguistic evidence could be in helping to unravel the complicated history of Scotland's Gaelic-speaking clan society.

After leaving Portree School in 1948, MacInnes enrolled at the University of Edinburgh. His undergraduate studies began with English Literature, where he completed Junior Honours and was awarded the J. Logie Robertson Prize; shifted to English Language (Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Old High German, Old Saxon and Gothic); and included Philosophy and British History as his minor subjects. (Indeed, his studies in Philosophy earned him the Class Medal, in a class of nearly 400 students, as well as the James Seth Prize in Moral Philosophy in 1950, with the result that the faculty in that department tried to recruit him.) His language studies also included the study of phonetics with David Abercrombie, whose ideas about metre and rhythm greatly influenced his own understanding of the accentual character of Gaelic verse. Upon receiving his M.A. in 1953 he was awarded the Gatty Scholarship, which allowed him to undertake postgraduate study in any aspect of Anglo-Saxon or Germanic languages. His academic studies provided him with a rich understanding of and an abiding interest in the structure and etymology of words in both English and in Gaelic – an interest which, as any of his friends can attest, is undiminished sixty years later.

It was during the two years immediately following graduation that he began formal study of Gaelic, completing the first two years of the undergraduate degree in Celtic under the direction of Prof. Kenneth Jackson and the Rev. William Matheson, who at that time were the only two faculty members in the Department of Celtic. He eventually satisfied the terms of the Gatty Scholarship by completing work on the topic 'The Gaelic element in Lowland Scots'.

The shifting of MacInnes's academic focus towards Gaelic, along with his growing interest in his native culture and traditions, was no doubt encouraged by the founding of the School of Scottish Studies in 1951, whilst he was an undergraduate. Following graduation, he took advantage of the School's willingness to lend out recording equipment and began to record songs, stories and traditional lore in the Gàidhealtachd, initially from family members in Skye and from families he knew in Raasay, where his father was once again living.

In 1955, all of these postgraduate activities were interrupted by the necessity of fulfilling his National Service requirement. He was enlisted in the Gordon Highlanders, who assigned him to the Intelligence Corps and posted him to Cyprus, where he spent eighteen months sitting at a desk and, in free moments, cultivating friendships with the Greek Cypriot population. During this period he managed to learn Modern Greek, a language which he still enthusiastically deploys whenever he gets a chance:

Learning a people's language always opens doors, and I was offered the warmest of hospitality, being invited to weddings, baptisms and all sorts of social

⁶ *Ibid.*, Programme 7.

gatherings. I used to hear songs of the *Klephts* – the Greeks who fought in the mountains against the Ottoman Empire – and ballads of the great *Digenes Akritas*. There were some fascinating parallels between these songs and the Gaelic panegyrics, and between the balladry and *Duain na Fèinne*.⁷

Demobilised at the end of 1957, MacInnes returned to Edinburgh where he continued his study with Professor Jackson, who quite exceptionally took him on as a single student. (MacInnes's connection with the Department of Celtic continued until 1975, when he was awarded the Ph.D. for his dissertation entitled 'Gaelic Poetry'.) Early in 1958 he began work at two University jobs, the first as a tutor in Old and Middle English, a post he held until 1963; and the second as a text transcriber in the School of Scottish Studies. In 1959 he was promoted to the position of Junior Research Fellow at the School, and he remained at the School of Scottish Studies until he retired as a Senior Lecturer in 1993.

During these early years in Edinburgh, John MacInnes laid out a course for the rest of his life. It was an exciting time to live in Scotland's capital city. Beyond the University, beyond the enormous potential of the new School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh's postwar intelligentsia included some of Scotland's greatest twentieth-century writers, thinkers and poets: Hugh MacDiarmid, Derick Thomson, George Mackay Brown, George Campbell Hay, Iain Crichton Smith, Sidney Goodsir Smith, Norman MacCaig (the latter two became particularly close friends) and many others. Sorley Maclean, invalided out of the Army following the North Africa campaign, had resumed his pre-war teaching job at Boroughmuir School; in 1951 his brother Calum I. Maclean became one of the first Research Fellows hired at the School of Scottish Studies. In this intellectual ferment, John MacInnes matured as a creative and imaginative scholar, committed to championing the Gaels' right to learn about and to take pride in their cultural heritage.

Cultural Background

The world in which John MacInnes grew up was one in which traditional learning – historical anecdotes, legends and stories about the otherworld, songs, placename lore and family history – passed through many generations, formed the bedrock of a person's cultural identity in childhood. This knowledge was subsequently overlaid by the teachings of the Church and, ultimately, by the official curricula of school and university. As he himself acknowledges, the educational authorities made it their business to detach their pupils from their early cultural heritage, to set the traditional learning of the Gàidhealtachd – along with the language in which it was transmitted – at nought, and to replace it with a mindset that would ensure that these young people identified themselves ever after as 'British' rather than as Gaels.

By the middle of the 20th century, the majority of Portree residents, whether through choice or necessity, had become English-speakers. This fact was reflected in the off-campus cultural offerings available to pupils at Portree School. Concerts, held mainly in the Drill Hall, frequently featured performances of classical music and song – something which MacInnes likened to an alien encounter. There were, however, occasional concerts of Gaelic song, parlour-songs of the sort made popular by Marjory-Kennedy Fraser, performed by platform-singers with Mòd credentials. The boys were so glad to be released from school for a short while that they were all too glad to attend any sort of entertainment; and John naturally assumed that the Gaelic singing he heard in the Drill Hall was the best Gaelic singing there was.

It was when he was about sixteen, home in Raasay (where his father was once again living) during school holidays, that he first began to take a conscious interest in Gaelic song in its traditional habitat. Returning to the house one evening, he overheard his father singing to himself. Enquiring about the song, John learned from his father that his grand-uncles in Skye – Ruairidh's own paternal uncles – had the best store of songs in the family. MacInnes's subsequent visits to

⁷ As told to Michael Newton, *op. cit.*, xxvii.

these elderly uncles – particularly Calum and Niall, born between 1850 and 1870⁸ – were a revelation to him, and ignited a deep love of Gaelic song, traditionally sung, that remains with him today. It was at this time, as John set about absorbing the hundreds of songs held in the memory of family members and others in his community, that his mature understanding of traditional knowledge and of its transmission in the Gàidhealtachd began to take shape.

Once his interest in such matters was aroused, other Gaels – both at home and in Edinburgh – were on hand to feed it. Dr Allan MacDonald, general practitioner in the north end of Skye, was a noted piper and an excellent Gaelic singer – and as he possessed a car, was a handy source of transport round the island. Tradition-bearers in Raasay included a family of Gillieses at Baile Chùirn – ‘*bha Baile Chùirn mar gum b’eadh dìreach na theis-meadhan seanchais ann an Ratharsair*’ – and two MacLeod brothers in Baile Mèadhanach.⁹ These people, whom John had known for most of his life, told him stories about Mac Gille Chaluum Ratharsair and the Baintighearna Dhubh. They told him about old people whom they had known, people so old that they had been able to describe ‘*Ratharsair ’na theine an deaghaidh a’ Phrionnsa*’ – Raasay in flames, burnt by the redcoats in retribution for Raasay’s support of the Jacobite cause. They told him about the land raiders, whose families had been cleared to the north of Raasay and to Rona, and how their return to claim their ancestral lands following the Great War made international headlines.

In Edinburgh, John got to know Calum and Annie Johnston from Barra, who worked and lived in the city. Annie Johnston had been recorded by the redoubtable Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, and both possessed wide repertoires of stories, traditions, songs and – in Calum’s case – piping. Another Edinburgh resident and Barra native, Flora MacNeil, was gaining a wide reputation as an excellent Gaelic singer. The Morningside home of Mrs Kim Dunn, whose family came from Bernera, Harris, was a port-of-call for many Gaels in the capital, including Somhairle Maclean, once again teaching at Boroughmuir School, and his brother Calum, returned from Ireland and working at the School of Scottish Studies. John became a frequent visitor to the Dunn home, and eventually married Mrs Dunn’s daughter Wendy, who has been his wife for over fifty years.

Professional Life

The life of an academic is in many ways predictable – teaching, reading, research, conferences, publication. John MacInnes’s life certainly included all of these. Michael Newton has listed more than 170 of his publications at the beginning of *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, which was named Scottish Research Book of the Year by the Saltire Society in 2006. But unlike many scholars, MacInnes has not limited his scholarly activities to a single narrow focus. On the contrary, his writings, in both English and in Gaelic, include essays on the history of the Gàidhealtachd, drawing upon local and family traditions as well as from more conventional written sources; Gaelic literature – traditional and modern, oral and written; Gaelic song, music and dance; religion, belief-systems and the supernatural world; language and dialect studies; onomastics; politics; and the ways of life in traditional Gaelic society.

As a teacher, MacInnes got a late start, owing to the fact that the School of Scottish Studies did not become a teaching department until it was subsumed within the Faculty of Arts in the late

⁸ Trained as an advocate, Malcolm MacInnes spent most of his life working as a civil servant in South Africa, where he was Secretary of the Johannesburg School Board. He published books of songs, based musically on traditional material, as well as two operettas with Gaelic and English lyrics. After retiring to Sleat in Skye, he prepared a new edition of Sheriff Alexander Nicolson’s collection of *Gaelic Proverbs*, which appeared in 1951. Neil MacInnes had a croft at Drumfearn.

⁹ ‘Baile Chùirn was, as it were, the centre of *seanchas* in Raasay.’ The Gillieses were *clann Iain Iain Raghnaill* – Seoras, Seumas, and their sisters – and the MacLeods were Seonaidh and Dòmhnall Ruadh Dhòmhnail Iain Bhàin; BBC, *Air mo Chuairt*, Programme 2.

1960s.¹⁰ Even so, his students, both undergraduates and postgraduates, describe him as an engaging and generous teacher, someone for whom every class presented an opportunity for him to learn something new, or to learn to see something familiar from a new perspective. He encouraged students to challenge what they heard from him, not simply to write it down. Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh, now Professor of Celtic in the University of Glasgow and a contributor to this volume, recalls MacInnes's generous gift of his time and knowledge:

Thachair mise air Iain MacAonghuis an toiseach a's a bhliadhna 1988 nuair a thàinig mi a dh'Oilthigh Dhùn Èideann 'nam iar-chéimeannach. Bha esan air a bhith 'g obair fad deich air fhichead bliadhna ann an Sgoil Eòlais na h-Alba an uair sin. Agus bhitheamaid tric a' coinneachadh airson biadh a ghabhail, aig àm diathaid, agus bhiodh còmhraidhean snog againn a h-uile làtha, cha mhór. Bha e riamh, tha cuimhn a'm, gu math math taiceil do na sgoilearan òga, dìreach mar a bha mi fhìn aig an àm. Bha e gu math math fialaidh ri ùine, agus gu seachd àraid ris an fhiosrachadh a bh' aige – bha e uamhasach fhéin deònach a' fiosrachadh a bh' aige a thoirt seachad. Feumaidh mi aideachadh gun do dh'ionnsaich mi torr mór mun a' Ghàidhlig agus mu dhualchas nan Gàidheal Albannach bho Iain 'sna làithichean sin.¹¹

I first met John MacInnes in 1988, when I came to Edinburgh University as a postgraduate. He had been working in the School of Scottish Studies for thirty years by that time. We often met for a meal at lunchtime, and had great conversations together nearly every day. I remember him as always being very supportive of young scholars, as I was at the time. He was very generous with his time and especially with his knowledge – he was extremely willing to share the knowledge that he had. I have to admit that I learned a very great deal about Gaelic and about the traditions of the Gaels of Scotland from John in those days.

For a number of his colleagues in the School of Scottish Studies, 'research' meant the usual academic thing, enquiry based on published and unpublished written works, or derived from carefully-planned studies designed to test a theoretical proposition. All of John MacInnes's work is, indeed, underpinned by constant study, careful reading and thoughtful consideration of the work of previous scholars. But there is one important difference between MacInnes and most other scholars of his generation, and it derives from the fact of his upbringing in the Gàidhealtachd and his inheritance of a Gaelic mind-set that sets great store by knowledge that has stood the test of time. As a consequence, he has been able to assess his own and others' scholarship against the background of his knowledge of the Gàidhealtachd and the Gaelic language. Whereas many of us, having been raised as English-speakers, can only make dim surmises about the life and cultural heritage of the Gaels, MacInnes has the benefit of insider knowledge, gained over a lifetime of listening to people from all parts of the Gàidhealtachd, including members of his own family, at his own hearth. His instincts are sure, and his gift for lateral thinking allows him to deploy those instincts in a variety of relevant contexts to draw multiple and often remarkable conclusions – thoughts that others might have expressed at greater length, but probably not to greater effect. His colleague and former student Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, another contributor to this volume, remarks:

Uairean, nuair a bhios mi ri rannsachadh, bidh beachd-smaoin a' tighinn chugam mu eachdraidh, na mu dhualchas – 's dòcha cuspair a dheanadh deagh *article*. Ach nuair a

¹⁰ For details of the School's founding, see John MacInnes, 'Reminiscences of the School of Scottish Studies of Edinburgh University' in K. Campbell *et al.* (eds), *A Guid Hairst: Collecting and Archiving Scottish Tradition. Essays in Honour of Dr Margaret A. Mackay*. Edinburgh 2013: 229–38.

¹¹ BBC, *Air mo Chuairt*, introduction to Programme 6.

bheir mi sùil air obair Mhic Aonghuis, chì mi gu robh an aon bheachd air a bhith aige bliadhnanachan roimhe, ach gun do dhèilig esan ris ann an aon *sentence*, na eadhon ann an aon nóta.¹²

Sometimes, in the course of my research, I'll get an idea about history, or about tradition – maybe a topic that would make a good article. But when I look at MacInnes's work, I will see that he had the same idea years before, but dealt with it in a single sentence, or even in a single footnote.

There is nothing casual about MacInnes's prodigality. Only too aware of his inclination to grasp at the big ideas, he has disciplined himself to pay close attention to detail. One of his first projects upon joining the staff of the School in 1958 was to provide English translations of stories in *More West Highland Tales*, the second volume in the collection made by J. F. Campbell of Islay. Morag MacLeod, who worked alongside John in the School of Scottish Studies for many years, recalls his approach to translation:

Tha e air leth math air e fhéin a chuir an céill ann am Beurla, agus 's ann ainneamh a thachair duine rium a b'fhearr a smuaintean eadartheangachadh bho Gàidhlig gu Beurla. Ach tha barrachd obrach air cùl na h-obrach seo na shaoileas duine: tha cuimhin agam e ràdh rium gur iomadh duilleag a bhiodh e a' caitheamh air falbh mus biodh e riarachta leis an oidhirp.¹³

He is extraordinarily good at expressing himself in English, and it's only rarely that I have met anyone better at translating his thoughts from Gaelic to English. But there is more to that sort of work than meets the eye: I recall him telling me that he would have thrown away a lot of paper before he would be satisfied with a project.

Another aspect of MacInnes's scholarly life must be mentioned, as it formed the background to a great deal of his research and publication. This was his fieldwork. As he himself has pointed out, the founders of the School were unclear to what extent fieldwork should be considered 'research'; but for MacInnes and a number of his other colleagues, the work of collecting traditional material in Gaelic and in Scots was of paramount importance.¹⁴ Whereas fieldwork nowadays tends to be more specifically designed to address a particular problem or question, in the early days MacInnes and his colleagues recognized the urgent need to collect as much as possible, across the widest possible range of categories, before the inevitable loss of the older tradition-bearers made such an undertaking impossible:

Thanks to the persistence of individual staff members in pursuing such collecting, often in their spare time and on holiday, the Sound Archive now ensures that today's scholars have a broad corpus of material upon which to base their own research – material that was collected for no immediate purpose other than its own preservation.¹⁴

MacInnes's own collecting activities reflected his keen awareness that the material he sought was ephemeral. Rather than focusing, as others did, on the Western Isles, which still supported a relatively large Gaelic-speaking population, MacInnes made the early choice to head for areas, many of them on the Scottish mainland, in which Gaelic was spoken only by older people. His recordings from Sutherland and from Perthshire preserve echoes of the speech of these districts as it must have been for centuries, as well as of the traditions that his informants considered important and interesting. His collecting among Gaelic-speaking travellers in the Northeast and in Lewis – *na*

¹² BBC, *Air mo Chuairt*, introduction to Programme 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, introduction to Programme 1.

¹⁴ MacInnes, *op. cit.*, 232.

Torgairean – introduced him to a culture-within-a-culture, and in gaining the trust of these people he was even allowed to learn some of their secret language, the *Beurla Reagairt*. He sought out the remaining natives of St Kilda, now living on the mainland following their evacuation from the island in 1930, and asked them about their traditions and their way of life. He travelled to Canada and interviewed Gaelic-speakers in Cape Breton. His fieldwork in Ross and Cromarty, Inverness-shire and Argyll took in not only the island communities, but also mainland areas where Gaelic was losing ground. In a recent interview for the BBC, he recalled a memorable encounter during a fieldtrip to the Loch Ness area:

Chaidh mise air feadh na Gàidhealtachd, cuid mhath dhe na h-eileanan, ach bha mi feuchdainn ri dhol a dh'àiteachan ann an tìr mór far nach deach móran a dhèanamh. Agus bhithinn suas mu thaobh Loch Nis, agus nuair a bha mi ann an Cille Chuimein bha mi 'bruidhinn ri Ailig Caimbeul, nach maireann. Agus 's esan, air réir coltais, an duine a thug Béist Loch Nis gu follais an t-saoghail tro na pàipearan naidheachd. Bha Ailig ag innse dhomh mu sheann-duine a bha, an oidhche a bha seo, a' tighinn à Inbhir Nis, agus bha ceum ri taobh a' Loch agus ghabh esan an ceum, anmoch a dh'oidhche, agus chunnaic e 'n creutar air réir coltais ana-ghnàthaichte a bha seo. Bha fhios aige mun a' bhéist có-dhiubh. 'S bha e 'g innse do dhaoine, a's bha maighstir-sgoile 's an àite, agus leabhar aig a' maighstir-sgoile far a robh dealbhannan de bheothaichean dhen a h-uile seòrsa. Agus sheall e dhan a' t-seann-duine na dealbhannan agus "O, cha b'e, 's cha b' e, 's cha b' e" gus an tàinig e chon an t-salamander. "Siud e!" arsa a' bodach. "Siud a' beothach a chunna mise!" "O, ged-tà," arsa a' maighstir-sgoile, "chan eil ann an salamander ach beothach beag." "À, ma-tha," ars esan, "'s e a' salamander mór a chunnaic mise." Agus cha do thug e riamh ach 'A' Salamander Mór' air Béist Loch Nis.¹⁵

I travelled throughout the Gàidhealtachd, to a good many of the islands, but I was trying to go to places on the mainland where not much had been done. I used to go up to Loch Ness-side, and when I was in Fort Augustus I was speaking to the late Alec Campbell. It would appear that he was the one who brought the Loch Ness Monster to the world's notice through the newspapers. Alec told me about an old man who, this particular night, was coming from Inverness, and he took a path by the side of the Loch, late at night, and he saw this unnatural-looking creature. He knew about the Beast, anyway. And he was telling people about it. And there was a schoolmaster in the place who had a book containing pictures of all sorts of animals. He showed the pictures to the old man, who said "No; no; it's not that one" until he came to the salamander. "That's it!" he cried. "That's the animal that I saw!" "Oh," said the schoolmaster, "but the salamander is only a small creature." "Even so," said the old man, "it's the big salamander that I saw." And all he ever called the Loch Ness Monster after that was 'The Big Salamander.'

One of MacInnes's favourite informants was Donald Sinclair (Dòmhnall Chalum Bàin) of Baile Phuill, Tìree. The *Tobar an Dualchais* website contains 618 items recorded by MacInnes from Donald Sinclair between 1960 and 1970 – songs, stories, verse, Fenian lore, historical accounts and anecdotes involving Tìree people. The man had an extraordinary grasp of all sorts of traditional material, and a wonderfully vivid way of expressing himself:

Bha e anabarrach math air e fhéin a chur an céill, Dòmhnall Chalum Bàin. Nuair a bha e 'na bhalachan bha e 'g obair aig dìthis bhràithrean – Maighstir Niall agus Maighstir Calum. Agus tha e coltach gur h-e duine anabarrach mór a bha ann am

¹⁵ BBC, *Air mo Chuairt*, Programme 8.

Maighstir Calum. Agus bhiodh e aig bòrd a' chidsin a' sgrìobhadh cùntaisean 's rudan. Agus "bha na crògain aige cho mór" bha Dòmhnall a' ràdh, "shaoilidh tu gur h-e snathaid mhór a bha 's a' pheann." Turus eile, chunnaic e seann-duine. Bha a duine a bha seo, bha e 'fàs gu math aosda, 's cha robh e tighinn a-mach idir. "Ach chunnaic mise e," arsa Dòmhnall, "a's b' e sin an coltas," ars esan, "duine mór loma-chnàmhach lachdunn granna, coltach ri leannan a bhiodh aig taidhbhs'!" Agus bha e an còmhnaidh cho beòthail 'na chainnt.¹⁶

He was remarkably good at expressing himself, Dòmhnall Chaluim Bàin. When he was a boy he worked for two brothers – Mr Neil and Mr Calum. It would appear that Mr Calum was an extraordinarily large man. He used to sit at the kitchen table writing accounts and so forth; and "his hands were so big", Donald said, "that you'd think that the pen was nothing but a bodkin." Another time, he saw an old fellow. This old man was getting old, and he didn't come out at all. "But I saw him," said Donald, "and I'll tell you what he looked like," he said: "a big, raw-boned, dun-coloured, ugly man, like a sweetheart that a ghost might have!" His conversation was always so lively.

One could fill pages with anecdotes like this. Indeed, anyone who knows John MacInnes will be aware of his considerable gifts as a raconteur, a skill that was long ago recognized by the BBC and other broadcasters. His distinctive speaking voice has been a presence on the airwaves for many years, as the former Managing Editor of BBC Gàidhlig, Jo MacDonald, recalled in her introduction to the final programme in the series *Air mo Chuairt*, from which we have been quoting throughout this introductory sketch:

Thairis air na seachdainean a dh'fhalbh tha sinn air cluintinn mu Iain Mac Aonghuis mar shàr-sgoilear Gàidhlig, mar sheanchaidh, mar eòlaiche litreachais is eachtraidh, mar dhuine aig a bheil eòlas farsaing air iomadach cuspair, mar dhuine a bha – agus a tha – fialaidh leis an eòlas sin, agus a tha taiceil do sgoilearan do chraoladairean. Cha b'ann an-dé a thoisich Iain Mac Aonghuis a' sgaoileadh fiosrachadh mu litreachas, mu bheul-aithris, mu dhùthchas 's mu dhualchas nan Gàidheal, gu h-àraid air rèidio. Cò-dhiubh bha e 'g innse dhuinn mu òrain a bu toil leis – nam measg sin, tha cuimhn' a'm bha òrain leithid *Smedrach Chlann Raghnaill*, *Cumha Mhàrtainn a' Bhealaich*, agus *Nan ceadaicheadh an tìde dhomh* ann an aon phrògram. Neo, is dòcha gura h-ann air bàrdachd a bha e 'bruidhinn – bàrdachd na seachdamh 's na h-ochdamh linn deug, mar eisimpleir, bàrdachd leitheid *Òran Gaoil do Bhràigh Mhàr* no *Dàn do Sheumas Mór*, *Mormhair Shléite*, no *Latha Inbhir Lóchaidh*. 'S iomadh neach mun cuala sinn bhuaidhe, 's saoil leam fhìn gun cluinn mi e an-dràsda fhìn ag innse mun Tirisdeach bha 'na sgiobair air an *ti-clipper an Teiping*, a's mun a' duine mu dheireadh aig a robh Gàidhlig air Eilean Arainn, a's mu *John the Bard* ann an Loch Abar. 'S iomadh leabhar is taisbeanadh thairis air na bliadhnaichean air an do rinn e léirmheas do luchd éisdeachd Radio nan Gàidheal. 'S iomadh bàrd air an tug e iomradh – bho Dhunnchadh Bàn 's Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair gu Somhairle Mac Gill-Eàin 's Iain Crichton Mac a' Ghobhainn. Tha mi an dòchas gum bi a ghuth ri chluinntinn air Radio nan Gàidheal airson iomadh bliadhna fhathast.¹⁷

Over the past weeks we have heard about John MacInnes as a pre-eminent Gaelic scholar, as a seanchaidh, as an expert in literature and history, as a man of wide

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Programme 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Introduction to Programme 8.

knowledge on many topics, as a person who was – and is – generous with that knowledge, and who is supportive of young scholars, and of singers and musicians. He has also been supportive of broadcasters. It wasn't yesterday that John MacInnes began broadcasting on the literature, oral tradition, and heritage of the Gael, especially on the radio, whether he was telling us about his favourite songs – I recall him once discussing Smeòrach Chlann Raghnaill, Cumha Mhàrtainn a' Bhealaich, and Nan ceadaicheadh an tìde dhomh in the same programme – or talking about poetry – the poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, poetry like Òran Gaoil do Bhràigh Mhàr or Dàn do Sheumas Mór, Mormhair Shléite, or Latha Inbhir Lòchaidh. And it's many a person we first heard of from him. I can still hear him telling about the Tìree man who was master of the tea-clipper Taeping, about the man who was the last Gaelic-speaker in the Isle of Aran, and about 'John the Bard' in Lochaber. He has reviewed countless books and exhibitions for Radio nan Gàidheal listeners, and discussed many a poet – from Duncan Bàn MacIntyre and Alasdair Mac Mhaisghstir Alasdair to Sorley Maclean and Iain Crichton Smith. May his voice be heard on Radio nan Gàidheal for many years yet.

The late Rev. William Matheson famously remarked of John MacInnes that he was 'the last of our native scholars'. This assessment contains a world of meaning, and one that may not be apparent at first glance. MacInnes is not the last Gael to have achieved distinction in academic life – there have been plenty of others in his own and subsequent generations. What distinguishes him from these is that the knowledge upon which his scholarship is based – of the Gaelic language, of the Gàidhealtachd, of its history and its culture – was gained not through formal study in an academic setting, but primarily from his own home and from the communities in which he grew up. The academic regimen that he endured in school was designed to discourage pupils from even speaking their native language, let alone taking a scholarly interest in it or in the cultural heritage that depended upon it. As an undergraduate at Edinburgh University, MacInnes studied English literature, English language, linguistics, philosophy and history – study that undoubtedly sharpened his mind and imparted the mental rigour necessary to a successful academic career. But his formal study of Gaelic or 'Celtic' subject matter did not begin until he was a postgraduate, when he was supposedly engaged in research in English and Germanic languages. It was therefore his own upbringing that supplied the knowledge upon which his academic career ultimately rested, knowledge to which he then applied the mental tools that his formal education had given him.

In following this path MacInnes was not unique. Many Gaels followed professions that encouraged thoughtful and rigorous habits of mind. His own father, like most ministers, was a learned man, deeply engaged with questions and causes requiring thoughtful scrutiny and articulate response. His grand-uncle Malcolm, an advocate who, in retirement, took up the scholarly re-edition of Alexander Nicolson's *Gaelic Proverbs*, was also a highly-regarded piper and competition adjudicator who was not afraid to take on the piping establishment at long distance – from Durban, South Africa – in the columns of the *Oban Times* and the *Inverness Courier*. Men like these published volumes of sermons or poetry, engaged in philosophical debate, and shaped the Gaels' response to the political and social forces that impinged ever more urgently upon the Gàidhealtachd. At the most basic level, they were the *seanchaidhean*, those whose prodigious memories and intellectual gifts gave them authority in matters relating to their communities' historical and cultural heritage.

Generations of such men were undoubtedly the 'native scholars' whom William Matheson had in mind, and the models for John MacInnes's own life. In contrast to most of the academic Gaels of his own and preceding generations – men like W. J. Watson, Derick Thomson, Angus Matheson, and William Matheson himself – MacInnes derived his scholarly authority not from years of formal study of the Celtic languages and of Gaelic literature, but from what he had learned before he

entered university at all. He was fortunate in possessing a scholarly inclination; he excelled at academic study; he became a prodigiously persuasive writer, lecturer, and broadcaster; and he recognised – at just the right moment, when the founding of the School of Scottish Studies made such a career trajectory possible – that he could live an academic life while putting these skills to the service of his own people. By helping his fellow Gaels gain a deeper understanding of and love for the linguistic and cultural heritage which their education had deemed irrelevant; by helping his academic colleagues appreciate the broad sweep and rich subtlety of Gaelic literature, history, song and *seanchas* and their important contribution to the identity of the Scottish people; and by raising awareness of these riches among non-Gaels, John MacInnes has performed a unique service to his country, to his people, and to his friends.

In grateful recognition that he did so, and in thanksgiving for his work, his scholarship and his excellent company, this volume is offered to John MacInnes – Iain Mac Aonghuis – Iain mac Ruairidh mhic Iain mhic Iain mhic Nèill mhic Mhaol Mhoire mhic Iain mhic Mhaol Chaluim – with love and affection.

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Tapadh leibh.

Virginia Blankenhorn
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