

SCOTTISH STUDIES

SCHOOL OF SCOTTISH STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

# From Stornoway to ‘Mortuary View’: A Memoir

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## ABSTRACT

No abstract.



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I was born in Stornoway in 1938 – the year of Munich – in the house where I still live. The world in which I was brought up was a tiny enclave of monoglot, or apparently monoglot, English speakers surrounded by a large rural area whose population still spoke Gaelic – a language of which I was, for much of my childhood and adolescence, largely and woefully ignorant. At the time of my birth, and for the next couple of decades, Stornoway was undergoing one of its periodic lurches away from its Gaelic roots. Those of its denizens who imagined themselves sophisticated tended, often somewhat snootily, to disdain those roots – passing by Gaelic-speaking citizens as it were ‘on the other side’.

My parents, however, were of a different sort. They were both university graduates at a time when university attendance was a privilege of the few, and they were well-read and relatively comfortably off. My mother was a fluent and literate Gaelic speaker. She was always supportive of the language, and a life-member of An Comunn Gàidhealach to boot. She had certainly passed her Higher Gaelic at the Nicolson Institute, and may have attended some classes in the language at University in the 20s. Even so, she never spoke Gaelic to either of her children – any more than she did the classical Greek with which she was also familiar.

I am sure she had no positive intention of suppressing Gaelic, but she probably imagined that, if we were interested, we could pick it up as we went along, just as she had done so easily as a child in the early 1900s. Although my grandmother’s first language had been Gaelic, my mother’s father was born in Inverness to a Highland family which had long since lost its facility with the language. While his work as a chemist taught him an adequate amount of ‘Stornoway Gaelic’ (he could talk quite fluently in his shop to concerned *cailleachs* – or so it appeared to me), the language was not spoken in my grandparents’ home, though they all presumably could converse in it at a pinch. During my mother’s childhood, a hundred years ago and more, it was still possible to pick up Gaelic from other children on the streets of Stornoway – something which my mother clearly had done, and which she imagined we also would do as a matter of course. But by the 1940s this was no longer possible – at least not on the street where I lived.

While I always knew that my mother spoke something called ‘Gaelic’, I had thought of my father, who had been born and raised in Stornoway, as an English speaker, pure and simple. I have, since he passed on, learned that he could actually converse in Gaelic, when necessity arose: born in 1893, he would have needed the language to get by in Stornoway at any level. Even in 1893, however, there would already have been a small nucleus of determined North British monoglot English speakers resident there. I don’t know if his father, my paternal grandfather, who died a couple of years before I was born, could speak Gaelic. He was a lawyer and a classicist, and I strongly suspect that he must have had some inkling of the language, having been born and brought up in Stornoway in the 1860s, when the vast majority of the citizenry must have been Gaels. His mother, however, came from Inverness; and though my great-grandfather had been born (1800) and raised in Stornoway, they had spent their married life in South Carolina, before the American Civil War drove them out, and I suspect that the language of their family was English.

My paternal grandmother, who predeceased my grandfather by a month or two, was also of Stornoway parentage, but she had been born and raised in Liverpool. I believe she was very musical and apparently took a lively interest in opera and operetta, but Gaelic songs and traditions never

seemed to feature in her repertoire. I reckon she had no Gaelic, and therefore – whatever Grandpa professed – the language would not have been spoken in their home either.

All that said, my father must have gained some facility in Gaelic quite apart from what he would have picked up from other children. He survived the Gallipoli campaign in 1915 with the Left Section of the Ross Mountain Battery, an artillery unit recruited largely from Lewis and, to a lesser degree, from still-Gaelic-speaking Wester Ross, in which Gaelic was the *lingua franca*. Even 'the Londoners' (*i.e.* recruits from anywhere south of the border who were drafted in as casualty replacements) had to acquire more than a word or two of Gaelic just in order to survive. I suspect, however, that my father's grasp of the language never went much beyond basic conversation. As a professional in later life, he was probably able to put at ease the elderly near-monoglot Gaelic speakers whose wills he had been called in to draft, but maybe not much more. He never spoke any kind of Gaelic to me, nor did I ever hear my parents conversing in it, other than using the odd word here and there. Even so, I am quite sure that neither of them felt any animosity whatsoever towards Gaelic – quite the contrary in fact.

None of my immediate pals spoke Gaelic either, though much later on, in middle-age, I found out to my considerable surprise that many acquaintances in my 'townie' peer group were perfectly able to do so – or at, the very least, understood it perfectly.<sup>1</sup> They never spoke the language in my hearing, however. By the 1940s, Gaelic in Stornoway (though not yet in rural districts) had become unfashionable and restricted to home use. It was used when speaking to Grannie, but not much otherwise.

My own awareness of Gaelic came about because we had, when I was small, resident housemaids to help in the house, and occasionally I would encounter my mother talking to them in a language I did not understand. Obviously 'big-ears' was not meant to understand! But I was intrigued. It bothered me, when I found out how widespread this linguistic ability was, that I was unable to join in the fun. Eventually I asked my maternal grandmother if she would teach me Gaelic. Poor Grandma! She was a lovely lady who I knew was fluent and literate in Gaelic and a keen supporter of the language. She, too, was a life member of An Comunn. She had been a teacher in Lochs and Point in the 1880s and '90s, and later had run her own business in Stornoway before WW1. She was up-to-date in most things all her life, but she was not aware of how Gaelic even then was sliding into desuetude in the town. She just laughed at me. 'Go and ask the boys on the street to speak to you – you'll soon learn,' she said. She did not believe me when I said I did not know any other children who spoke the language. The new kids on the block no longer spoke it. So although I got all the love and affection I could have possibly hoped for from Grandma, I got no practical help from her in learning Gaelic.

I then asked my father and mother for assistance. Do not misunderstand me – it was not that I had a burning ambition in that connection bothering me day and night: far from it. I did not think about my linguistic disability very often, but every now and again it would surface. My parents took me seriously, and having obviously thought about the matter, asked me if I would go and spend a summer with a family they had identified who would give me a good grounding in the tongue. I would then have been ten or eleven years of age. I simply said I would and waited for the call. And waited. It never came, and I never knew why. Many years later, recalling this episode with my mother, I asked why nothing had transpired. I was told, much to my chagrin, that apparently I had not shown enough enthusiasm, so the idea was not pursued. I thought that was so unfair! I had been taught not to pester for things, and the misunderstanding still rankles. It would have been so easy

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<sup>1</sup> These Gaelic 'understanders', if I may call them that, had a pretty good grasp of English and they distinguished easily and accurately between English, Gaelic and even the Stornoway patois which had grown up along the quays during the town's heyday as a herring port. They spoke clearly, and when speaking English could easily be understood wherever they went. That may no longer be the case, as too many of the island monoglot English-speakers of today have a much poorer grasp of English grammar than had their bi-glot ancestors, coupled with what has become a sloppy and almost indecipherable vocal delivery.

then to learn another language while my grey-matter was still sponge-like in its ability to absorb new information.

Still, my lack of any command of Gaelic was, as I said, not a matter which occupied my daily thoughts. It remained, however, in the background as an irritant. I recall being asked, in the qualifying class of the Nicolson Primary, to fill in a form stating what language subjects I would like to take up in the Secondary Department. Out of a hundred or more pupils moving up that year (many of whom, I now realise, would have been at least Gaelic ‘understanders’), only two of us – Marco Capaldi, scion of a local restaurant family, was the other – sought to take Gaelic and French. Marco’s pragmatic and practical interest was understandable enough, but mine was obviously regarded as an aberration. In the event, neither of our requests was honoured, and Latin and French is what we got.

While Marco and I might have been alone in wanting to do something about our lack of Gaelic at the time, I should say that subsequently *every single* monoglot English-speaking Stornowegian that I have ever spoken to from that period resented the fact that they had gone through school without being taught Gaelic, and bemoaned the fact that the language had not otherwise been passed on to them – not that many of them were sufficiently concerned to do anything about it. We were in the middle of a period of language change which was transforming island society, and there was little or nothing that those most affected could do about it. Parents had increasingly subscribed to the idea that Gaelic ceased to have any value once one sailed out of Stornoway Harbour.

Gaelic-speakers in the town had lost confidence, and the language itself had lost status even within its own community. Even those who wanted to learn found few facilities to help: There were no classes, other than for fluent speakers who wanted to learn how to read and write. There were few teach-yourself books available in the 1940s and ’50s, and those that were available, such as *Gaelic Without Groans*, were of limited value. The few bakelite record courses available were very expensive and of little practical use without an easily-accessible milieu in which to practice. Unless one is immersed in it, it is almost impossible to acquire any language to any degree of fluency, and it becomes easy to lose interest. When most people are bilingual and can switch easily between languages, the earnest learner can, alas, often be regarded as an irritant.

At the age of fourteen, I left Stornoway to complete my schooling in Edinburgh. Gaelic was far from my thoughts. However, one of my earliest friends in the city was a big, clever lad from Broadford in Skye, Iain Baird MacInnes, whose grasp of Gaelic was, I found, no better than mine. Stornoway was, obviously, not the only place suffering from language change at the time. During the 1950s, as I found out later, Gaelic was melting away like snow off the proverbial dyke not just in Stornoway but throughout much of the *Gàidhealtachd*. Iain and I would occasionally exchange the few words we had picked up just to demonstrate our difference (and perhaps our superiority); but we both had other fish to fry, and our Gaelic did not progress at all. I fitted in fairly well amongst the English and South American lads who formed a high proportion of my contemporaries at school, and did not worry overmuch about the sore gap in my education.

When I went to Edinburgh University, however, I found that, as a Lewisman, I was generally *expected* to know Gaelic. Although I felt this expectation as an ever-present reproach, I still failed to do much about it. For some reason I came across few Gaelic-speakers in my student peregrinations. At that time there were more than ten thousand students at Edinburgh University. They were spread out all over the place, and unless one went out of one’s way to find fellow islanders one did not necessarily meet them. Even when, in the hope of finding some kindred spirits, I one year attended the Highland Society’s Annual Ball, I found few actual Gaels at that particular stramash. It had, alas, acquired a reputation for disorderliness, and therefore attracted too many of the wrong sort, most of whom had probably never been north of Queensferry. So while I enjoyed the experience, it was not really my style, and I never bothered to attend the other Highland Society meetings where I might have met more congenial friends. Those in my year whom I knew

from Stornoway were usually heads down in pursuit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Class Honours degrees they largely obtained, and our paths did not cross.

Aware of my linguistic shortcomings, however, I enrolled in a Gaelic evening class being taught in Boroughmuir school by an island teacher. Perhaps an abler scholar might have made something of it, but the acquisition of a language as an adult, when the synapses have closed, is a skill not given to everyone. What I do recall noticing was that the class was full of very old people – at least 30 years of age, some 40 and even older! 'What one earth do these ancients think they are doing?' thought I to myself. 'They'll never live long enough to be able to use an additional language! Why are they bothering?'

Ah well! The arrogance of youth! But I was also beginning to think, 'What on earth am I doing?' I was getting nowhere fast, and I still knew nothing about the background of Gaelic, about its literature or traditions. It was for me merely a language like Esperanto or Interlingua or Solresol or whatever – just another means of communication, though one possessed of some fine tunes! I knew much more French, which I could converse in not too badly, if haltingly – and which I have scarcely ever used. In other words, my ignorance was still woeful, and I was about to give up the struggle. That, however, was when I had my Damascene moment.

I had by then acquired a law degree, and the world was my oyster. I regarded myself as having acquired some knowledge of the world – perhaps even some sophistication. Suddenly, however, life started to get complicated. Throughout my undergraduate years I had always shared a flat with other students, and my last flat had been a happy arrangement. The flat was very well-organised and orderly – we had rotas for cleaning (to which we adhered) and some of us even cooked – and we got on very well together. But when a couple of the lads graduated and departed, the rest of us could not afford to keep the flat on and I had, to my dismay, to look for another billet in a hurry, for I still had my apprenticeship to complete and no long summer vac for me! I had friends in various other student flats where I dossed down for a few weeks, but I could not expect to impose upon them for ever.

I was by that time about as far removed from Gaelic as I ever would be. The world beckoned. I was having a good time and enjoying life pretty well. Wine was just starting to become relatively plentiful: a bottle of *Entre Deux Mers* only cost 7/6d and was quite sufficient to bring as a present to a party-thrower. I became used to wearing a dinner jacket – even occasionally a white tie and tails – and I probably thought I was no end of a card. This homeless interlude in the uneven tenor of my ways was no fun.

I had mentioned my predicament to a fellow law apprentice, Ian S. W. Donaldson, and I was delighted when he told me that he was leaving his flat and that there might be a place in it for me in his stead, if his two flatmates agreed. So it eventually came to pass that, after I had spent the first few weeks sleeping on a Li-Lo in front of the sitting-room fireplace, Ian at last departed and I could move into his room. What an eye-opener my new lodgings turned out to be.

To start with, the flat's location was a mystery. Lauriston Terrace it was – no. 3, I think. Everyone in Edinburgh could guide you to Lauriston Place or Lauriston Gardens, but the Terrace was *terra incognita*. Even taxi-drivers were baffled. The flat itself was located at the top of a tenement block at the west end of the vast Royal Infirmary complex. A pedestrian close leading from Lauriston Place is still the only means of access to this building, a fact which probably accounts for its anonymity.

Following the departure of Ian Donaldson, who later followed a successful career as a solicitor, my flat-mates were Jimmy Porter, a music student who was later to become Professor of Music in Aberdeen, and John MacInnes, a young lecturer in the School of Scottish Studies in George Square – the last named being, as I later found out to my considerable surprise, a first cousin of my former school-friend Iain Baird MacInnes. The flat itself was not very prepossessing. Everything about it was well-worn, if not worn-out, and to my eye little housekeeping was being carried on. Any port in a storm, I thought. If it proved too uncomfortable I would have time to make alternative

arrangements – which, however, is not to say that I was not properly grateful for the harbour I was being offered. I never met the landlord, and I never saw an electricity or gas bill, but just stumped up my modest share whenever Jimmy – who I *think* was the principal tenant – asked me.

From the window above the kitchen sink we could see across a jumble of back-yards to the rear of a nurses' hostel on Lauriston Gardens, the uncurtained windows of which may have occasionally provided light entertainment as we washed our dishes. Because we tended to approach this task only when the sink was full and we had otherwise run out of crockery, I cannot myself vouch for the truth of 'eyewitness' accounts. I have, however, no trouble remembering the opposite view from our flat's sitting-room windows, overlooking certain workshops connected to the Infirmary, including its mortuary. Shortly after I arrived on the scene we took to calling our flat 'Mortuary View', and the name has stuck for those of us who were there.

While we may not initially have paid much attention to that group of anonymous sheds visible below, a change in hospital management policy brought them into sudden focus. The Royal Infirmary decided to do away with its pianos. Until then, every ward had its own piano. Whether they were originally intended for the use, on the Sabbath, of visiting bands of evangelicals, or for the more secular entertainment of inmates, the ward pianos were seemingly deemed by medical staff to harbour a huge variety of germs and bugs, and they simply had to go in the name of general sanitation. Once that decision had been made, all the hospital's pianos were, one after the other, taken for disposal to the yard outside the mortuary.

While deceased patients and dead pianos both followed the same route up to that point, the transition afforded the latter was anything but discreet and peaceful. Every weekday we awoke at what seemed like 5 a.m. to a dreadful cacophony from down below. There a manic workman performed last rites on the day's keyboard. Once he had vented his wrath, others would join him, with axes and sledgehammers, until, with many jangles and twangs, they had reduced the instrument to its constituent parts. It is no easy thing to destroy a piano in this fashion, and they tended to deal with only one piano per day, so the litany of musical abuse lofted itself skyward for a considerable number of days or weeks. How the other residents of the block stood for this auditory mayhem I do not know. Presumably the nursing staff in the Infirmary did not mind – they would have wakened their patients at first light anyway. I do recall, however, that Jimmy Porter was at the time writing the score for an orchestral piece to be played at the Edinburgh Festival. I often wondered if the dawn chorus helped or hindered him.

Although I had a number of friends in Edinburgh, my summertime move into 'Mortuary View' meant that most of the people I would ordinarily have socialised with were out of town. My seeming lonesome state did not bother me at all – it would only have been temporary anyway – but John immediately ensured that I was included in whatever ploy he and his group had planned, and I was happy to join in. I thus became involved with a crowd of intelligent, well-educated Gaels, mostly from Skye and Uist, who introduced me to a world of Gaelic culture – a world through which I had previously only sleep-walked. I was fascinated and totally hooked. Here at last I was among a body of Gaelic literati and cognoscenti who could supply what my own education had not. Being a friend of John's meant that I was tolerated, even when my lack of Gaelic became painfully obvious. They all knew who I was – they called me *Cailean Òg* ('Young Colin', as I then was) – and took pains to explain whatever it was they were saying, especially when they had said it in Gaelic.

John himself was a natural and gifted teacher – though obviously in my case an unintentional one – but his comments and expositions on our Celtic background and on matters of Gaelic history generally have stuck with me ever since. He recognised the importance of what he was doing in the School of Scottish Studies, and was able to pass on to others and certainly to me the sense of that importance. Through his influence, I began to appreciate that the Gaelic language came in different registers, and that the register employed by my new friends was a high one, as far removed from ordinary conversational Gaelic as street English is from that spoken in most drawing-rooms. John

was the first person I heard point out just how important each language is in itself – how every language can present a different and probably untranslatable slant on the world. Gaelic itself is resoundingly different in philosophic approach from English. I recall John explaining to me how in English a swain might pledge eternal troth to his inamorata 'for as long as *he* lived'. In Gaelic, the poet, as in the love-song *Duan a' Chiobair* by Donald Campbell, could say much more pragmatically 'for as long as *you* live, I'll seek no one else'! Is that not a significantly different point of view?

John's circle was wide-ranging. He seemed to know everybody, including even then a large number of our Scottish savants, among whom he was always warmly received. In his company I met Norman McCaig, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Christopher Grieve (Hugh McDiarmaid), and George Mackay Brown. I met Professor Angus Matheson of Glasgow University, and his equally brilliant brother the Rev. William Matheson. All the conversations were brilliant, and albeit that my own participation was negligible, some fifty years on I still remember some of the topics discussed.

As I frequently called at the School of Scottish Studies in John's company, I was there introduced to a whole host of academics from Kenneth Jackson and Hamish Henderson downwards. In particular, John was very supportive of Sorley (Somhairle) MacLean, whose work he felt was not just of Gaelic or Scottish importance but of European stature – higher than that of any English writer or poet of the time. This judgement has been gathering in strength and acceptance ever since. I met Somhairle several times, and particularly recall one dark and stormy winter's night, driving John and some others to Plocton where Somhairle was headmaster. There we were royally entertained in the schoolhouse by the great man himself and his family – including two young daughters who played the *clarsach* delightfully for us – the first time I had ever heard the instrument which was then starting its revival.

In this fashion, I became aware of a whole world of Gaelic culture which was inaccessible to those who spoke only English. To the extent that this situation has now been reversed it is, I firmly believe, thanks in large part to the work of people like John and his colleagues who, over the years, collected a huge amount of stories, songs and oral culture as part of their researches at the School. They were active just at a time when oral tradition was vanishing fast, and the School has done tremendous work in preserving so much for future generations.

After I left Edinburgh, John and I kept in touch. Whenever he came to Lewis we would make contact, and I often acted as his chauffeur when he was carrying out his island researches. He was fascinated by *na Torgairean* – our Gaelic Travellers as they are commonly called in English these days – and he carried out detailed research into their way of life and their languages. He was particularly interested in the Travellers' secret language, the *Beurla Reagairt*, which he told me has nothing, bar a very few borrowings, to do with the language of the Gypsies. Our Travellers are not Romanys – they are seagulls of our own shore; and while there would, of course, have been tinsmiths, probably itinerant, ever since the bronze age, I recall John telling me of the Travellers' own belief that some of them were descended from members of tacksman families who had suffered after the Jacobite Risings, among them Stewarts of Appin or, before then, members of the Clan MacGregor.

Nowadays, the former Hebridean travelling families have all but vanished back to their mainland origins, or have been absorbed into the settled community. At that time, however, several clans still occupied semi-permanent camps on the outskirts of Stornoway, and elsewhere in the islands they kept up the tradition of going on the road in the summer months. I remember going with John to visit Pàdruig Sheonaidh Stiùbhart, a former Traveller who had been allowed to build a permanent home for himself and his family outside the village of Barvas in Lewis. Pàdruig Sheonaidh's house, though built of concrete blocks and stone and wood, was constructed on the 'tent principle' and, as John pointed out to me, while it looked small enough from the outside, once you were inside you could swear you were in a large and commodious tent.

John MacInnes helped me – as he has helped so many – become aware of the vast cultural riches that exist in the Gaelic language. I learned a huge amount from him, possibly through some kind of intellectual osmosis. Although nowadays many more translations of Gaelic literature and lore are available than was the case fifty years ago, I remain convinced that in order to appreciate such translations one must have a reasonable reading knowledge of the original language – and a speaking knowledge, too, if possible. While I am no linguist, my friendship with John so fired my enthusiasm for Gaelic that I kept at it, albeit in fits and starts. My best opportunity for self-improvement came when I went to live for some twelve years in the Northern Isles where, with slightly more free time to myself, I came across two Gaelic speakers, one in each archipelago, who were willing to speak face to face to me for hours at a time. It was thus that I at last managed to acquire the rudiments of conversational Gaelic. I am still anything but fluent, but I can now make myself generally understood, and I am determined to be completely fluent by my 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. In the meantime, I too have become a life member of An Comunn!

It is now more than fifty years since I heard John lay blame for the destruction of Gaelic on the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872, which required that children throughout the *Gàidhealtachd* be educated in English alone. I had been brought up to believe, along with the majority of my fellow Gaels, that success in the wider world depended upon our willingness to embrace English and that the 1872 Act was a ‘good thing’. Almost too late, it is being increasingly realised that those who learned English while retaining their Gaelic had the best of both worlds, as someone who is truly bilingual always has an intellectual advantage. Language and culture are inextricably linked, and there are, after all, many places in the world where languages exist side by side. Maybe there can be a revival – I sincerely hope so – but the fight will be long and hard. In rural Lewis, at least, there is still a glimmer of hope.