



Eriskay, 1898. Islanders with a display of traditional implements. Photo: W.B. Blaikie, reproduced courtesy of the Literary Estate of John Lorne Campbell.

# Eriskay Business

Ronald Black

Biodh an Trianaid ga moladh  
Gura Nollaig Mhic Dhé i!

Iesum Dominum  
Venite adoremus  
Iesum Dominum.

Rugadh Ìos', ar ceann-cinnidh,  
Ann an sgiotal na spréidhe.

Bha an saoghal ro chumhag  
Ged a chruthaich e fhéin e.

'N aona chùil bha gun urram  
Àite fuirich Mhic Dé i.

Chan eil dìon air no tughadh  
Chumas drùdhadh nan speur dheth.

*May the Trinity be praised  
For it's the Son of God's birthday!*

*Iesum Dominum  
Venite adoremus  
Iesum Dominum.*

*Jesus has been born, our chieftain,  
In a lowly cattle shed.*

*The world was closed against Him  
Though He Himself created it.*

*The one corner without honour  
Was the Son of God's dwelling place.*

*It has no covering or thatch  
To keep out rain from the skies.*

IT SEEMED RIGHT to start with beginnings. *Eilein na h-Òige: The Poems of Fr Allan MacDonald* is full of birth scenes.

Curiously, the making of the book brought me back to the scene of my own birth for the first time. I was born in 1946 in a nursing-home at 23 Park Circus in Glasgow. When a young man I sometimes made a joke about being born in a circus (it palled after a while). Despite being brought up in Glasgow and attending university on the other side of Kelvingrove Park, I never saw Park Circus

again till I drove through from my home in Peebles one day in 2002 to pick up some pictures for the book from the offices of a television company at no. 24, right next door.

Park Circus is posh! Hundreds of swanky offices in a breathtaking circular sweep of Georgian grandeur. There was no Health Service in 1946, but my Dad still had some money. He was an engineer and had never been out of a job all through those difficult times between the Wars.

When home in Eriskay over Christmas, Allan MacDonald, who runs the company, had

unceremoniously stripped his mother's walls of her Father Allan pictures to lend me. Having pictures of Fr Allan on the walls is normal in Eriskay. He is more loved there than the Pope.

I got the pictures home and unwrapped them carefully. They included a watercolour, which I now call 'Eriskay Funeral with Father Allan', painted and signed in 1905 (the year of Fr Allan's death) by John Duncan RSA, who visited the island on various occasions and was known locally as *Iain na Tràghad* ('John of the Beach') or *Iain a' Chladaich* ('John of the Shore'). I checked with John Kemplay, author of *The Paintings of John Duncan*, and he told me in a call from his Gloucestershire home that I was looking at an otherwise unknown item.

One reason I had never been back to Park Circus was that I was brought up on the south side of Glasgow. I've often been asked how I have made a career out of the Gaelic language when I had no Highland connections, but it seemed a pretty natural progression to me.

My first two teachers at Holmlea Primary were both called Miss MacCallum. I assumed it was a requirement for the job. I remember one of them telling us the story of how Saint Columba on his deathbed was nuzzled affectionately by an old white pack-horse that used to carry the milk-vessels from the byre to the monastery. Later at Glasgow High, too, we got plenty of Scottish history and Scottish literature. Neil Munro's *The New Road* was required reading. Gaelic wasn't on the curriculum, oh no, but you couldn't help but be aware of the language because it was all around you. You'd hear people speaking it on the trolley-bus or the tram. Young nurses, mostly. Maybe that was because the Victoria Infirmary lay on my daily route to school in town. Policemen spoke it too, and I lapped up a regular spoof in the *Evening Citizen* which consisted of the thoughts of "Constable Chon Macaber" on the beat. Nowadays my politically-correct friends in the Gaelic language movement would probably say it was racist.

When I had worked my way through Enid Blyton and Biggles and Billy Bunter and William and *String Lug the Fox* and *Masterman Ready* and *Midshipman Easy* and *The Swiss Family Robinson* and *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* and found myself at last on the wonderful plateau of adult literature, there were three things I read for many years. Firstly, Rider Haggard, probably, I think, out of love and respect for my father, an old Africa hand. In the 1920s he brought the first motor-car up to what was then Nyasaland, having the bits carried on bearers' heads where

the Shiré River was blocked by swamps. Secondly, C.S. Forester – the diffident Hornblower was my sort of hero. And thirdly, everything about the Highlands and Islands that I could lay my hands on in the Couper Institute Library in Cathcart, from Compton Mackenzie's novels to Frank Adam's *Clans, Septs and Regiments*, taking in Maclaren's *Gaelic Self-Taught* along the way. I grew particularly fond of Seton Gordon's *Highways and Byways in the West Highlands* and *Highways and Byways in the Central Highlands* and Otta F. Swire's *Skye: The Island and its Legends*. Those two writers knew how to turn landscape, seascape and anecdote into a thrilling concoction of words.

There were so many Gaelic speakers among my teachers at the High School that you could have done a statistically-viable social survey on them. At one extreme was a maths teacher who went off to hit the bottle every lunchtime (we called it dinnertime then). Sometimes he failed to reappear. At the other, the head of English was president of the Glasgow Islay Association. When I put some Gaelic in an essay he perked up, summoned me to his desk and asked what dialect I spoke.

I found that strange. Here was something as fundamental to the fabric of our nation as anything as I could think of, yet which my school regarded not as a subject to be taught, but as something which you had or you hadn't, like a dimple or ears that stuck out. Even a head of English hadn't twigged that I had got it out of a book.

I had stumbled across the plight of minority languages in the modern world. I thought: why don't they treat maths like that?

But help was at hand, thanks to Sorley MacLean's campaign for learners' examinations in Gaelic, and to the enlightened policies of Glasgow Corporation Education Department. A circular came around saying that senior pupils could study Gaelic at any of three schools in the city. And so it came about that on three afternoons a week I decamped to Woodside School.

I had two teachers there. One, Kenneth Cameron, would light his pipe, put his feet up on a chair (I was the only one in the class) and tell me stories about what it was like growing up in Skye in the years before the First World War – how he and the others would come barefoot to school across the moor, lighting their way in the dark with a blazing peat which was deposited in the schoolroom fire, then picking up another one to light their way home in the evening. The other, John Campbell, was from Kilbride in South Uist. He was a strikingly handsome man



Fr Allan with waulking women, Eriskay. Photo: W.B. Blaikie, reproduced courtesy of the Literary Estate of John Lorne Campbell.

aged thirty of whom truly it could be said, “Is tu as feàrr do’n tig deise /De na sheasadh air thalamh” (*It’s you whom suit fits the best/Of all who’d stand on the ground*), for he was not only the most able teacher I ever had, but also the most immaculately dressed. He later became headmaster of Castlebay Secondary in Barra. He it was who taught me Gaelic, and that’s why *Eilein na h-Òige* is dedicated to him. In due course I stayed with his parents in Kilbride, looking out to Eriskay, and with himself and his wife and family in Geirinish and Barra.

In the shape of Kenneth Cameron and John Campbell, Woodside Secondary had given me the dual education which for two or three centuries made a Highland upbringing second to none – ceilidh-house and school.

One of the books John gave me I still have today – Professor Watson’s anthology *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*. Like me, it’s now tattered but still serviceable after retiring from twenty-two years of university teaching. It bears the name ‘John MacKay’ on a flyleaf. I wonder what happened to him? *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* has come in for its share of criticism – from Aonghas MacNeacail, for example, who like me can recall few other books being used in Gaelic lessons, and who points out that there is hardly anything in it more recent than the early nineteenth century. Bill Nicolaisen wrote in 1995–96 that *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* and its companion *Rosg Gàidhlig* “are still university textbooks today”; that was at least half true, but I think I was the last to use it.

Watson had a keen eye for what would stand

the test of time; my “Is tu as feàrr” quotation is from a wonderful old song which he called ‘Bothan Airigh am Bràigh Raithneach’. For pedagogical reasons *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* is in reverse chronological order, and the first poem in it is ‘Eilean na h-Oige’:

Ged a gheibhinn-sa mo thagha  
B’e mo rogha de’n Eòrpa  
Aite tuinidh an cois na tuinne  
An Eilean grinn na h-Oige;  
Lom e dhuilleach, lom e mhurán,  
Lom e churachd eòrna,  
Air a luimead gura lurach  
Leam-sa a h-uile fòd dheth...

*Should I even have my choice  
I’d prefer of all in Europe  
A dwelling place beside the wave  
In the lovely Isle of Youth.  
It’s bare of foliage, bare of bent-grass,  
Bare of barley sowing,  
But beautiful for all its bareness  
Is each sod of it to me...*

When I ask myself where or when I first heard (or read) the name of Fr Allan, as I do in my own first words in *Eilein na h-Òige*, the answer must be: on page one of *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, where it says: “EILEAN NA H-OIGE. AN T-ATHAIR URRAMACH AILEAN MACDHOMHNAILL 1859–1905.”

Like the good teacher he was, John Campbell put me on the path to my career – to be precise, the half-mile walk from Woodside School to University Gardens. “What are you going to do at university?” he said one day early in 1964.

“I tried hard in that book to bring satirical, bawdy and religious verse in from the literary wilderness...”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you like me to speak to Professor Thomson?”

“Who is Professor Thomson?”

So he passed me on to my next most formative influence, a very different (and complex) character, the poet Derick Thomson from Lewis, now aged eighty-two and living right opposite the Couper Institute. Small world. When I went up the road to talk to him I was in my school uniform and he was in his first year as Professor of Celtic – sharing a room with a leggy secretary in a mini-skirt. I had just turned eighteen; dazed at her fragrance, I can scarcely remember what the professor looked like or anything he said except that he would be glad to have me.

A couple of years later I was in Eriskay. Derick had me spending the summer vacation touring the islands with Gaelic books for sale. Nobody had done that since the days of the travelling pedlars. People like Peter Turner from Cowal in the eighteenth century and John Mackenzie from Gairloch in the nineteenth had gone around selling Gaelic chapbooks and pamphlets in the first half of their lives and published anthologies in the second. I suppose I’m the same. In Protestant areas my competition was from itinerant sellers of English religious tracts. In Catholic areas like Eriskay I had no competition at all. I was ferried across from Ludag by Neil MacIsaac on an October day in the genial company of Iain Pheadair (John MacInnes, the South Uist district clerk), the man they used to call the King. He borrowed a Landrover and drove me straight through to Acarsaid. Among much else I was selling Father Allan’s biography and (brand new) his poems, *Bàrdachd Mhgr Ailein*, both published by John Lorne Campbell. I noticed that the Eriskay people referred to JLC by his traditional title ‘Fear Inbhir Nèill’, even though he was now ‘Fear Chanaigh’ by dint of having purchased Canna.

My books brought out memories of Father Allan. Those in their seventies had learned their catechism from him. Livieliest of all were the recollections of a delightful old lady at Acarsaid who spoke no English. When I came back four years later with another load of books (including

JLC’s latest Fr Allan offering, *Strange Things*), she resumed our conversation exactly where we had left off.

I haven’t been back to ‘Eilein na h-Òige’ since. Like Captain Angus Edward MacInnes, author of *Eriskay Where I Was Born*, I’m afraid to. It will have changed too much. It had begun to change even between 1966 and 1970 – a café had appeared. Now, since 2000, it even has a causeway joining it to South Uist.

So what led me to *Eilein na h-Òige*, the book? Well, in 1999 I published an anthology of twentieth-century Gaelic verse, *An Tuil*, in which Fr Allan doesn’t appear for the simple reason that his dates make him look like a nineteenth-century figure. Is there evidence, I wondered afterwards, that any of his poems were made in the twentieth century?

I found that evidence in due course, buried deep in his manuscripts in Canna. ‘Eilein na h-Òige’ is a twentieth-century poem. By 1900 Fr Allan was turning into a major secular poet. Had his life not been cut off he would have reached three score years and ten in the very year that Sorley MacLean went to university and became a poet himself.

In 2000 I edited a book of poems from South Uist, *Smuaintean fo Éiseabhal* by Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin (Donald MacDonald of South Lochboisdale), a lovely man who had died that same year. In 2001 I followed it up with *An Lasair*, a selection of eighteenth-century poems based mainly on two great anthologies, John Mackenzie’s *Sàr Obair* and Watson’s *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*. I tried hard in that book to bring satirical, bawdy and religious verse in from the literary wilderness in a way of which Mackenzie (but not Watson) would have approved.

It left me feeling that I needed to get more experience with religious verse in particular. Fr Allan filled the bill perfectly, because I had found no room for Catholic hymns in *An Lasair*, and because there is a powerful element of social satire in his work, which allowed me to develop some nascent ideas about the use of satire by the Highland clergy as an instrument of social control.

I contacted Ferdia McDermott, a former student of mine now running the Saint Austin Press, a Catholic publishing company in London. I recalled Ferdia with affection as the student who had made the best ever use, in my experience, of Edinburgh University’s unique ‘vacation grants’ system for language learners – just as I had done with my vanload of books, when he arrived in South Uist he went straight to the clergy and the schoolteachers, asked who were the best people to help him, got himself into Gaelic-speaking

situations, and even found himself ad-libbing in front of classes of children. Would he now like to publish a new book of Fr Allan's verse? Not just the poems published by JLC in 1965 but the hymns published by Fr Allan himself in 1893? With parallel translations, JLC's biography, a critical introduction, and notes? "Sure."

In the end it was Saint Austin's Glasgow offspring, Saint Mungo, who brought out the book – their first. I'm proud to have been published at 143 High Street in my native city, on the same patch of ground where countless splendid Gaelic books appeared in the nineteenth century, trumpeting such messages as: "Gaelic Books Sold By Duncan Macvean, 175, High Street, *Opposite the College, Glasgow.*"

JLC's distinguished widow, Dr Margaret Fay Shaw Campbell of Canna, now aged ninety-nine, gave the project her enthusiastic blessing. Thanks to the kindness of her companion, Magdalena Sagarzuzu from the Basque Country (who doubles as archivist at Canna House), I was able to work on photocopies of some of Fr Allan's manuscripts at home in Peebles. In March 2002 I set off for Canna itself, where I enjoyed the unstinting hospitality of Dr Campbell and Magda in an island bathed in spring sunshine. I was granted the privilege of working in the attic room where JLC worked, surrounded by his archives and looking out to the mountains of Rum.

Returning to Fort William by train, I rejoined my wife Máire. She was to typeset the book for Saint Mungo, but she had also been doing a little sleuthing. Thanks to Jean Cameron, Ian Abernethy, and the late Donald B. MacCulloch's book *Romantic Lochaber*, we were steered to the very spot where Fr Allan is believed to have been born – another attic, this time above the Ben Nevis Bar and Restaurant.

Now I had always known Fr Allan was an innkeeper's son from the town, but for some reason JLC had written almost nothing about his childhood. After an excellent lunch Máire and I revealed our unusual mission. Fay Houghton, the manageress, responded magnificently. She yanked open a door, revealing a flight of stairs upon which sat the young waitress who had just served us, enjoying a fag. She fled with a cry of: "What? Bringing customers here!"

Fay showed me the attic, with its ancient rafters, crumbling lattice-work and wooden-headed nails. We had to stoop low. She said: "Fr Allan must have been a midget."

"He grew to be six foot three inches tall. They called him the High Priest."

"It didn't do him any harm then."

No wonder, I thought, he had so much to say about that birth in Bethlehem.

S beag tha shocair 'na chadal,  
S olc an leaba th' aig m' eudail.

E 'na shìneadh san fhraisaich,  
Damh 'na fhaisge ri geumraich.

Gura nàrach an doicheall  
Bhith ga nochdadh ri creutair,

Ach ri Dia nam Mór-Chumhachd,  
N Rìgh a chruthaich gu léir sinn!

Liuthad uair rinn mi dhoicheall  
Rinn mi dhochann le m' eugcoir.

Rinn mi fhuadach on doras –  
Gum bu dona dhomh fhéin siud.

*There's little rest in His sleep,  
It's a poor bed for my darling.*

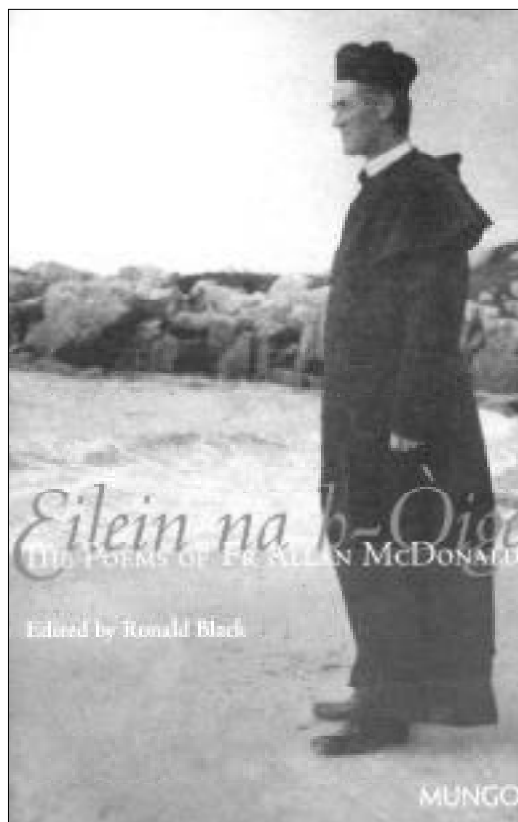
*As He lies in the manger,  
An ox is lowing beside Him.*

*Inhospitality is shameful  
When displayed to anyone,*

*But to God of Great Powers,  
The King who created us all!*

*Each time I've been inhospitable  
I have hurt Him with my crime.*

*I have sent Him from the door —  
That was bad for myself.*



*Eilein na h-Òige: The Poems of Fr Allan McDonald* (Mungo PBK £14.95 [www.stmungo.org](http://www.stmungo.org)) edited by Ronald Black includes – as well as Fr Allan's poems and translations – extensive notes, four tributes, an essay on 'Canna and John Lorne Campbell' by Hugh Cheape, illustrations and a bibliography of Fr Allan. Ronald Black is the editor of the Scotsman and the Uist newspaper *Am Pàipear*. He has published *An Tuil: An Anthology of 20th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (1999), *Smuaintean fo Èiseabhal*, the poetry of Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin of South Uist (2000) and *An Lasair: An Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (2001).