BAGHASDAL

A chairdean, tapadh leibh airson cuireadh a thoirt dhomh a bhith nur cuideachd an diugh. Tha iomadh bliadhna on a bha mi ann am Baghasdal an toiseach agus 's e tlachd agus sochair a th‘ann a bhith air ais.

It’s 36 years, almost to the day, since I first visited this community. At that time I was working for the BBC in Scotland and they sent me to Cape Breton to do some radio documentaries. One of the highlights of that trip was an evening spent at a ceilidh in Boisdale in Jo Lawrence Macdonald’s house. It was my baptism into Cape Breton music, conviviality and cultural continuity across the great divide of the Atlantic ocean.

One of my hosts during that visit was Linden MacIntyre, who now works for the CBC in Toronto. He recently wrote a memoir called Causeway, a Passage from Innocence, in which he eloquently describes growing up in Port Hastings at the time of the opening of the Canso Causeway. Linden is a descendant of Archie MacIntyre, who emigrated to Cape Breton in the early 1800s from the original Boisdale in the island of South Uist, where his grandfather Roderick had been gardener to the Laird of Boisdale. Gaelic was the family language in the McIntyre home in Glendale parish. Like my own grandmother, Linden’s grandmother spoke little English.

A few months after I returned to Scotland from that fateful trip to Cape Breton I got a phone call alerting me to a job opportunity at the Glace Bay Heavy Water Plant, if I was interested. I was, and that’s how I became a latter-day immigrant and Canadian citizen. So, if I stretch the elastic of logic far enough, I can say that, in more ways than one, Boisdale is the reason that I’m here. I use that term with certain reservations, because I once heard it in another context.

I started my working life as a school-teacher in my native island of North Uist. Some years later I was back in the island and had to stop the car at a place where there was a group of workmen repairing a sewer under the road. A bedraggled figure emerged from the mess and, through the mud and whatever else was on his clothes and face, I recognised him as a former student of mine. When he noticed me his greeting was: “I’m pleased to see you, sir. If it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t be here”. I presumed that he meant it as a sarcastic reprimand. But I accepted it as a compliment when I realised that roadmen were better paid than teachers.

I have another Boisdale connection to which I should confess. My wife’s forebear, Sarah Shaw, originally from the isle of Barra, was one of the pioneer settlers here. She married Roderick Johnston. Her name is on the monument up the road. Her’s a fascinating story in itself, but I dare not go into it in detail in the presence of Helen for fear of getting it wrong. Perhaps I can persuade her to add it later as a sane addendum to my own ramblings.

I guess all of us are here as a result of history and economics, sometimes involving hardship and oppression, but also the quest for a better individual and communal life. Not all of the Scottish settlers in Canada came here of their own volition. But the earlier ones did. There is another dimension to emigration that I will mention later: religion. A Scottish story would never be complete without a religious connotation.
The first group of island settlers to arrive in Cape Breton was from Barra. Donald Og MacNeil had been at the Siege of Louisbourg in 1756 and he returned home full of the praises of the Bras d’Or. In 1759 Donald Og was killed at the siege of Quebec. He was one of the Highland soldiers of whom General James Wolfe said: “‘Tis no great mischief if they fall.” Ironically, Wolfe himself was killed at Quebec. Thirteen years earlier he had been responsible for the massacre of many Highlanders in the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden. Today he is regarded in both Canada and Britain as a liberating hero rather than as the vicious and vindictive thug that he was.

Donald Og had left instructions at home in Barra as to the best area in Cape Breton for settlement. It was forty years before his advice was followed when two sets of MacNeils, fathers and sons, came from Pictou to look for a site on which to settle, and eventually recognised in Iona the place that Donald Og had so strongly recommended. Other Barra families followed them, not through any pressure from any landlord at that time, but through the determination to be pioneers in a new world. Things changed twenty years later when the landlords started putting people off the land to make way for sheep. Villages in South Uist began to be cleared to make sheep farms in the 1820s, including the village of Ormacleit which had been the seat of the MacDonalds of Clanranald. The last of the Clanranalds to live there was known as Miss Peigi. After her death in 1826 the area was made into a farm. She is still remembered in South Uist for the amount of whisky made available for consumption at her funeral! No one from Uist would allow such largesse to be forgotten.

There was another Barra settlement at Christmas Island, stretching up to Boisdale. Though Boisdale is a Uist name many of the settlers here were from Barra. The names are familiar: MacNeil, MacLean, Campbell, Gillies, MacKinnon, etc. Bill Lawson, genealogist extraordinaire, says that another name among the Barra families was MacCnaish, which I suspect is derived from MacAonghais or MacInnes. It was anglicised as MacNash, but most of the family in Cape Breton dropped the Mac to become Nash, and everyone thought they were Irish.

The first South Uist immigrants to Cape Breton settled around Judique. Later waves settled here in Boisdale, Leitches Creek, Frenchvale, both shores of east Bay, the south-east shore of Boularderie Island, Grand Mira. And the south shore of Lake Ainslie. Another South Uist name transferred to Cape Breton is Bornish, near River Denys. Much of this is ably chronicled in To the Hill of Boisdale, the wonderful book by Father Allan MacMillan who gave such a fascinating talk at this venue a year ago.

The South Uist settlers had similar surnames to the Barra people but also included MacLellans, MacIntyres, MacIsaacs, MacMillans and Morriscans. As well as the non-macs, the Steeles and O’Henleys. There’s one South Uist name that has disappeared off the genealogical map, MacMhuirich. The MacMhuirichs were the bards to the chiefs of Clanranald. Today they are either Macphersons or Curries. So if you think the Macphersons are imposters, you may be right.

Then there are the Beatons, the famous physicians. Some of them changed their name to Bethune and, to add insult to injury, began claiming a completely spurious Norman-French origin.
In my own island of North Uist MacDonald is the predominant surname. But apparently some of those who use it are not entitled to it. They are colloquially known as *Domhnallaich ton a' bhotal*, the MacDonalds of the bottom of the bottle, the story being that when they raised a bottle to their mouth they would not put it down until they could see the bottom of it. Perhaps they were advised by a public relations flack to assume a respectable branding like MacDonald.

It is one of the quirks of the history of the Western Isles of Scotland that the Uists were divided into two branches of the MacDonalds. North Uist belonged to the MacDonalds of Sleat in Skye, and South Uist and Benbecula belonged to the MacDonalds of Clanranald. Clanranald were Catholic and, therefore, so was South Uist. North Uist followed their proprietor, MacDonald of Sleat, into the Presbyterian Church. Benbecula was originally Roman Catholic, but estate policy there favoured the replacement of local tenants by Protestant families from North Uist, resulting in a mixture of denominations. And so it remains. Today South Uist is predominantly Catholic North Uist is largely Presbyterian, Benbecula is half and half.

When I worked for the BBC one of my responsibilities was the production of religious services in Gaelic for broadcast on radio. The day before the broadcast I would drop in on the priest or the minister to go over the form of the mass or service. During the conversation over a dram or a cup of tea the question that invariably turned up was: I know you're from Uist; are you from north or south? I knew that the question did not have geography in mind, but to invoke atheism or agnosticism would not have been the right answer.

The fact that I now live on the bank of the Mira River is not a nostalgic re-enactment of the fact that both shores of the Mira up to Marion Bridge were settled by people from North Uist from the 1820s onwards. They came for the usual reasons, mainly economic. Some were evicted from their homes. Some saw no future in a land where they could at best maintain a family at subsistence level, and at worst starve. The newspapers of the day were full of advertisements for fare-paying passengers to Nova Scotia and Quebec. Families who could raise the cash to pay the fare left their homeland for the New World, and this continued well into the 20th century. You know the story so I need not dwell on it.

In 1841 a book was published in Gaelic as an emigrant's guide to North America, meaning Canada. The author was a somewhat eccentric, smug and opinionated Scotsman called Robert MacDougall. He spent three years – 1836 to 1839 – in Canada, returned to Scotland, and, having praised Canada lavishly, and particularly Goderich, Ontario, emigrated to Australia two years later. He was fixated on Ontario and hardly mentions Cape Breton. He sounds to me like what they call in Scotland “a proper chancer.”

The book was translated into English and published in Canada several years ago. It includes gems of advice such as: “As for fiddlers, pipers and musicians, and the like, America (meaning Canada) will not suit them; the common people are not so foolish as to throw their wealth away on whimsy without there being any benefit.” But then, how could he have predicted Celtic Colours over 160 years ago? There was another pastime that he reviled even more than music. He proclaims: “Rich or poor, young or old, I do not welcome the man who is fond of strong drink. No; for I would not wish a short life on him. The country in which I purchased a bottle of brandy (though I do not drink it myself) for a shilling, and in which I often earned four shillings
a day, would I ask this man to go there? No; but let him spend his time for three years in the Temperance League, then let him go back again, and his wife and children will bless him.” If he was addressing Highlanders all I can say, as a former PR-man, is that he didn’t understand his audience. Were he around today he would probably be a government spin-doctor.

When I do feel nostalgic these days I walk down to the Riverview cemetery near Marion Bridge to look with fascination at the gravestones and at some names that have disappeared into the mists of antiquity. There are two head-stones there bearing the name MacCodrum. This holds a special resonance for me because John MacCodrum – Iain MacFhearchair – one of the most famous classical Gaelic poets, although he was totally illiterate, lived a mile from where I was brought up. Each day from our front door I could see the monument that marks his grave. He lived from 1693 to 1779.

His cousin Donald was one of the North Uist men who settled at Mineral Rock on the north shore of the Mira. A descendant of his, also called Donald MacCodrum, was born in Marion Bridge and became Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in 1938. He died in Brockville, Ontario, a week after he had received the top accolade of the Presbyterian Church.

John MacCodrum the bard is reputed to have composed his first poem as a teenager. He and a couple of pals went to a wedding uninvited and were recognised by a local miller as intruders. He ensured that they were not given any nourishment or refreshment. The young MacCodrum responded to the snub with vituperative verses. I’ll give you the last one as an example of the tone of the poem. It translates as “It is time to go home, since we got no invitation to feasting or music. This guy who missed us with the bottle, leave him where you found him, the red-headed big shit.” His father was apparently appalled at this breach of poetic protocol and gave him a telling-off. The story goes that he didn’t compose any more poetry until after his father’s death. But he certainly made up for it when he was no longer subject to parental criticism.

The name MacCodrum disappeared from North Uist more than a century ago. To my knowledge it no longer appears in Cape Breton. But it survives in Ontario. I remember a Bruce MacCodrum who was a prominent civil servant in Toronto and I think there are still people there bearing the name. And, according to Google, there’s a prominent baseball player in the States called MacOdrum. The name survives in a sense in Cape Breton because there’s apparently a geological structure here called the “MacCodrum formation”. Geology survives longer than genealogy.

The MacCodrums were a sept of the MacDonalds. And there is an interesting tradition about them. They were known as Clann Mhic Codruim nan Ron – the MacCodrums of the seals. Here’s how I heard the tale:

There was once a fisherman called Roderick MacCodrum, of the Clan Donald, who lived by himself on the Isle of Bernerary, in the Outer Hebrides. One day he was walking along the shore where his fishing-boat lay when he heard a sound of singing coming from rocks nearby. Cautiously he approached the rocks and there before his eyes was a group of sea-children taking
their pleasure until the sun went down for the second time. Their long hair streamed behind them as they played, and their eyes were alight with joy. He did not look long, for he knew that the seals were shy of mortal men. But as he turned to go back, he caught sight of a heap of silken skins - grey and black and golden brown - lying on a rock by his side, where the sea-children had discarded them. He picked up a golden brown one that shone with the brightest sheen of all, and he thought to himself that it would be a fine trophy to take back to his shore-side cottage. So he took it with him when he went, and hid it for safe keeping above the lintel of his cottage door.

Shortly after sundown that evening, as Roderick was mending his fishing-net beside the fire, he heard a strange sad noise outside the door. When he looked out, there stood the fairest woman he had ever seen. She was straight of limb, and her eyes were brown and soft. She wore no garment on her white-skinned body, but her gold-brown hair fell thickly down and hid her comeliness.

"Oh, help me, help me, mortal man," she pleaded. "For I am a hapless daughter of the sea. I have lost my silken seal skin, and may never return to my brothers and sisters until I find it again."

Even as he invited her and gave her his plaid for a covering, Roderick knew full well that this lovely child of the sea was none other than the owner of the skin of golden brown that he had stolen away from the shore that morning. He had only to reach up to the lintel, take down the hidden seal skin, and she would be free to swim away and rejoin her brothers and sisters of the sea. But Roderick looked at her as she sat by his hearth side; and he thought how pleasant his life would be if he could keep this fair seal woman as his wife, to cheer his loneliness and bring joy to his heart. So he said: "I cannot help you to find your silken seal skin. I doubt some man came by and stole it as it lay upon the shore - and by now he will be far away. But if you will stay here and consent to be my wife, I will honour you in my home and love you all my life."

The Sea King's daughter lifted her brown eyes full of sorrow to the fisherman's gaze. "If indeed my silken skin has been stolen and there is no hope that I may ever recover it, then I have no choice but to remain with you and become your wife," she said, "For I could hope for no greater kindness than that you have shown to me, and I should be afraid to venture into the mortal world alone."

Then she sighed for the life of the sea that she thought she would never know again. "I would like be with my brothers and sisters of the sea, who will wait for me and call my name in vain," she would say. The fisherman's grieved at her distress, but he was so enchanted by her beauty and her gentleness that he knew he could never let her go.

For many years Roderick MacCodrum and his fair seal wife lived in the cottage by the shore, and many children were born to them: children with gold-brown hair and soft voices for singing. And the people who lived about that lonely isle called Roderick "MacCodrum of the Seals", because he had taken a seal woman to be his wife; and his children they called "Clann Mhic Codruim nan Ron", "the Children of MacCodrum of the Seals". All this time the Sea King's daughter would walk alone by the shore, listening to the ceol-mara, the music of the sea, and gaire nan tonn, the laughter of the waves. And sometimes she would glimpse her brothers and sisters as they swam by the shore, and sometimes she would hear them calling, calling the name of their long-lost sister. And she wished she might join them again with all the longing in her heart.

Then one day Roderick set out as usual for his fishing, taking fond leave of his wife and children. But on the way to his boat, a hare crossed his path, which is a sure sign of bad luck.
Roderick was in two minds whether to turn back or not after this unlucky portent; but he glanced at the sky and said to himself: "It is only a bit of windy weather. I have known plenty of storms blow up over the sea before now," and he went on his way.

He had not been gone long when the wind did blow up. It whistled over the sea, and it whistled around the cottage on the shore where his wife and children were left behind. The youngest child was out on the shore, putting shells to his ear to listen to the sea-music that he loved, and his mother called to him to come inside. Just as he stepped across the threshold the wind blew an even fiercer blast, and the cottage door banged shut with a clash that shook the turf thatch. And, dislodged at last from the lintel where it had lain hidden ever since Roderick first placed it there for safe keeping, down fell the silken seal skin that belonged to his fair seal wife.

Never a word she spoke aloud against the man who had kept her there against her will for all the long, long years that had passed. But she took off her mortal’s clothes, and she clasped the seal skin to her. Then she took farewell of her children and went down to the sea. And there, while the wild sea-horses frolicked off-shore, she clad herself in her skin of golden brown and swam out across the water. Soon she turned to gaze her last upon the little cottage where she had perhaps known a little happiness in spite of her unwillingness to dwell there. And along the frothing line of surf that rolled in from the great Atlantic she saw her children standing forlorn upon the shore. But the call of the sea was stronger for her than the cry of her earth-born children; and far, far away she swam, singing for joy and happiness as she went.

When Roderick MacCodrum came back from his day's fishing, he found an open door upon a cottage deserted for ever of a woman’s care, with no sign of a peat-fire flame in the hearth to welcome his return. Fear filled his heart, and he reached up to the lintel of the door. And when he discovered that the seal skin had gone, then he knew that his lovely wife had returned to the sea. Great was his grief as his weeping children told him how their mother had taken but one farewell and left them alone upon the shore.

"Black was the day that a hare crossed my path as I went to my boat," sighed Roderick. "For the wind blew strong, and I had but an ill day’s fishing; and now this great calamity is fallen upon me."

He never forgot his fair seal wife, and grieved for her all the days of his life. His sons and their sons after them were careful never to harm a seal that they saw on the shore. And they came to be known as the MacCodrums of the seals."

I apologise if that story was rather long. It’s the kind of tale that I was used to hearing as a child, but my fantasy was recently shattered by a new theory about the seal people. It is now suggested that the seal folk tradition is based on the real wanderings of a little-known tribe from Lapland who lived most of their lives at sea in kayaks. They splintered away from the main body of inland reindeer Lapps to live a nomadic sea-going life which took them to the coasts of Norway and as far as the rocky coasts of Scotland, including Haiskeir, a small island off the west coast of North Uist that I saw every day on the horizon as I grew up. The theory is that they were mistaken for seals or mermaids because they they would dive in the water and resurface some distance away. And it’s feasible, I suppose, that they would have interacted, so to speak, with the local population. It is also suggested that the name MacCodrum is derived from an old Norse name Godrum, meaning the Good Serpent.
You can have your pick between the traditional story and the product of modern research. Perhaps they are both figments of overactive imaginations. But they are part of what makes community history interesting.

However, I must get back to reality. Before that flight of fancy I was talking about the North Uist settlements. After the Mira settlement more North Uist families arrived in Loch Lomond, straddling the boundaries between Cape Breton and Richmond Counties. Among them were a group of MacCuish families. I met one of the descendants, Archie MacCuish, during my first visit to Cape Breton in 1971.

MacCuish was an old name in North Uist. It is said to have been derived from Mac-Dubh-Sith, the son of the black fairy. Whether that is true or not, the name Dubhsith was at one time common as a Christian name among the MacCuishes. It disappeared in Uist a long time ago, but survived in Cape Breton in the forms of Dushie, Duffus and even David (Daibhíd).

Last summer Helen and I went to a Memorial Hymn Service in the Presbyterian Church in Loch Lomond. The service had started when we arrived but we noticed that the church had two doors and took a while to decide which one we should go in by. Since then I’ve learned the reason for the two doors.

Loch Lomond was settled by people from Harris, Hearaich, and people from North Uist, Uibhistich. The two islands, unlike the Gaelic choir that was singing at the service, don’t always sing from the same hymn sheet. My father was from Uist and my mother from Harris, which explains my own schizophrenia.

The Hearaich inhabited the east side of Loch Lomond and the Uibhistich lived on the north side. They were so independent that they called their end of the loch Lake Uist. To accentuate the demarcation between the two communities they each had their own church. In the early 1900s a new minister arrived in the area and attempted to persuade them to build a new church that they would share. After some wrangling they agreed, but the Uibhistich wanted the church to be sited in their community and the Hearaich wanted it in theirs. Stalemate. The minister was in a quandary and he went for advice to Kenneth MacLeod who had spent many years as a builder in Boston and who had retired back to Loch Lomond. The following Sunday he announced that the “two wisest men” in the area had reached a decision as to where the church should be sited, without naming them. Hebrideans can be either arrogant or modest, depending on what they want to achieve.

The church has a beautiful view of both Loch Lomond and Lake Uist. But that wasn’t sufficient for the respective congregations. They insisted that the church must have two doors and two steeples. And one of the steeples must be higher than the other to represent the numerical, and perhaps intellectual and ecclesiastical, superiority of the Hearaich. Kenneth MacLeod designed the church and some of the wood in it came from his own saw-mill. But most of it came from the sawmill of the Catholic Cash family in Irish Cove. To redress the balance the Catholic church in Johnstown was designed by Big Hector Mackinnon, a Presbyterian from Loch Lomond. Ecumenism before the concept became fashionable.
But I’ve digressed and must return to Boisdale. There are four of them that I know off – the one that we’re in; the original one in South Uist; one in Victoria, Australia; and an up-market restaurant in London, England.

This restaurant is owned by Ranald MacDonald of Clanranald, a direct descendant of the Lairds of Boisdale. One restaurant guide describes it as having a clientele that includes “businessmen, City folk, corporate moguls, adventurers, actors, affable hedonists, hacks and friends of the proprietors.” Aside from an excellent menu it boasts a selection of 170 Scotch malt whiskies and what is considered to be the most comprehensive choice of hand-made Havana cigars of any restaurant in the world. It is also home to a traditional jazz band called the Boisdale Blue Rhythm Band. If you are ever in London it’s worth a visit. The first time I was there was with a Scottish Member of Parliament who is to the left of Lenin in the political spectrum. He hates landlords with a passion. But he met Fidel Castro a couple of times in Cuba, and he sheds his political sentiments to get a cigar like the ones Castro have him.

Ranald MacDonald treats his clientele a lot better than his predecessor treated his Boisdale tenants in 1770, the year in which the Cape Breton connection began. But let’s rewind first to 1740. That was when Alexander MacDonald, stepbrother of the chief of Clanranald, obtained legal title to the Boisdale estate. He was known as Alasdair Mor nam Mart, big Alasdair of the Cows, and he is still remembered in folklore for his efficient, though sometimes unscrupulous, agricultural practices. According to tradition Alasdair Mor was the first person to grow potatoes in the Hebrides in the walled garden of his fancy new mansion house in Boisdale. The house is long gone but the walled garden in which Roderick MacIntyre toiled is still there. It’s known as An Garadh Mor, the big garden. The site is now occupied by a so-called white settler who has a blog on the internet. He recently wrote a suggestion that the people living in the area of the old Boisdale estate grow potatoes, brand them as Boisdale potatoes, market and distribute them through a co-operative venture, and kick off the venture by getting the Boisdale restaurant in London to be the first customers. Alasdair Mor would have been proud of such entrepreneurial initiative.

The blog got some interesting responses, including this one:

“I am new to this forum, but interested in the difficulties and opportunities of leading a sustainable existence on remote islands. I am a descendant of the MacDonalds of South Uist via Boisdale, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.....It does seem that with your proposed connections with the Boisdale restaurant and hotel group you have a leg up on the competition.....There are some unique cultivars (natural varieties) of potatoes grown in Cape Breton that may have been brought over by early settlers, but I am not sure if they can be linked to South Uist for certain. Nevertheless, there are still lots of opportunities for focussing on gourmet-quality potatoes.

“I have quite a bit of experience in organic food production, since I worked as an organic inspector in Canada and my wife currently works at an organic research farm here in the North of England. I will be happy to make myself available for any advice you may need in pursuing this idea.” Signed Paul Muto
So there’s your big chance, Boisdale, to get in on the act and show that PEI does not have a monopoly on potato-farming.

When Alexander MacDonald obtained a legal title to his Boisdale estate it marked the arrival in Uist of a social, political and economic revolution that was breaking out across the Scottish Highlands and Islands. It was the so-called Age of Enlightenment, and like many of his peers – men of education, means and opportunity – Boisdale was eager to apply the radical new ideas in religion, the arts, science and technology, to the improvement of his estate and the advancement of his own social, political and financial position. With legal title to his estate, instead of the old clan tradition of possession in common, he would have seen the opportunity to dispossess his tenants as a necessary step in the path of human progress. Legal title also enabled him to raise capital to pay for investment in the estate and his first priority was to build an elaborate new house on the brink of the Atlantic ocean. Things were looking good, but there were ominous clouds on the horizon.

On the 23rd of July 1745 Prince Charles Edward Stewart arrived in Scotland from France determined to regain the Crown of Britain for the Jacobites. His first landfall was in Eriskay, across the narrow sound from Boisdale’s house. The Prince sought an audience with Boisdale the next day and Boisdale’s polite but brisk advice to him was to return home to France. The Prince is alleged to have replied: “I am home.”

Boisdale was a realist and would not support a cause that he considered doomed to failure. He refused to join the Prince or to persuade others to do so. But his involvement didn’t end there. After the disastrous defeat of the Jacobite army at Culloden the fugitive Prince returned to Uist and Boisdale reluctantly found himself obliged to protect him from his pursuers. But it wasn’t the Prince who was captured by the government forces, but Boisdale. He was imprisoned in London but, on the grounds that he was not a serious threat to the state, he was released on payment of a heavy fine.

There’s a small island to the south of Eriskay called An Staca, the Stack, and on it there are a pile of rocks that are supposed to be the ruins of a castle or fort. It was called Caisteal an Reubadair, the Plunderer’s Castle. The story goes that it was built by a fellow who wrecked and robbed any ship that came close to the island. Hence his name – the Plunderer. But there’s another twist to the story. When he built the castle, he needed a wife to do the housekeeping. He was so busy plundering, and he had no access to the internet or “companions wanted” columns, so he decided to abduct the beautiful daughter of the Laird of Boisdale. He carried her on his back from her father’s home to the Sound of Eriskay, swam with her across the channel, hauled her across Eriskay, swam to the Stack with her, and then carried her up the steep path to the castle. The old storytellers would then say: “He didn’t get her cheaply.”

I recently had to do what was essentially an immersion course in the history of the Jacobite rebellion. The National Trust for Scotland is building a new information centre at the Culloden battlefield site. It’s going to have all kinds of state-of-the-art audio-visual displays, in English and Gaelic. Normally the Gaelic text would be translated from the English, but they took a different approach. They hired an English writer and a Gaelic writer, gave them hundreds of pages of source material and script guidelines, and told them to produce the scripts
independently of each other. My main role was to put Gaelic words in the mouths of characters of the time for a component of the displays called “character stations”. There are six of these stations in the centre and they represent the period before the battle, the battle itself, and the aftermath. As the visitor stands in the station they can listen to the voices of these characters – 65 in all – giving their accounts of events at the time.

One of the most fascinating characters was Neil MacEachen from South Uist who collaborated with MacDonald of Boisdale in harbouring Prince Charlie when he was on the run after Culloden. MacEachen was also from South Uist and was educated in France with the intention of entering the priesthood. However, he gave up that idea and returned to Uist where he worked as a parish schoolmaster and tutor to the Clanranald family. Clanranald sent MacEachen to be with the Prince while he was hiding in the island because he believed that his scholarship and his command of three languages – Gaelic, English and French – would be useful to the Prince. Not only was he useful to the Prince; he was useful to posterity, because he wrote about the experience in a very fetching style.

Here’s one extract from his journal in which he talks about the Prince:

"It was wonderful how he preserved his health all the time, notwithstanding all the fatigue and troubles he underwent and the bad usage he met with very often. For I have not seen him one hour sick all the time I have had the honour to accompany him, save only eight days he was troubled with a flux, which kept him very busy while it lasted. He had always a good appetite, and could eat any meat that came his way, as well as those who was accustomed to it from their infancy. He took care to warm his stomach every morning with a hearty bumper of brandy, of which he always drank a great deal; for he was seen to drink a whole bottle a day without being in the least concerned. Notwithstanding his melancholy fits, yet at other times he was so hearty and merry, that he danced for a whole hour together, having no other music but some Highland reel which he whistled as he tripped along."

It sounds like reality TV.

Also in his account he describes walking with MacDonald of Kingsburgh, a supporter of the Prince from Skye, the famous Flora MacDonald, and the Prince dressed as a woman supposedly called Betty Burke, so that he wouldn’t be recognised. They were accompanied by two men, possibly enemies looking for the big lost-and-found reward, who were apparently unaware of the disguise.

MacEachen wrote: "Betty went on always at such a rate that she often got a piece before her fellow travellers, which gave occasion to some of the fellows to cry out, ‘Curse the wretch do you observe sir (meaning Neil) what terrible steps she takes, how manly she walks, how carelessly she carries her dress.’ And a hundred such like expressions, which they repeated over and over again.

“But what they took most notice of all was, when Kingsburgh and his companion was come to a rivulet about knee deep, which crossed the road, to see Burke lift up her petticoats so high when she entered the water. The poor fellows were quite confounded at this last sight, which made
them rail out against Burke, called her all the names in the world and asked Neil if he was acquainted with her. Neil told them that he knew nothing about her further than to hear she was an Irish girl who met with Miss MacDonald in Uist, and upon report of her being a famous spinster of lint, engaged her for her mother’s use.”

If you ever go to the Culloden Visitors Centre, this what you’ll hear Neil MacEachen saying at the character station:

“Two fellows travelled with us. They’d not the slightest idea Betty Burke was their prince dressed as a woman, and cried out: Curse the wretch, do you see what terrible steps she takes, how manly she walks, how carelessly she carries her dress. But when the Prince pulled that dress up to his buttocks to cross the river, they were speechless at what they saw!” A little liberty with historical fact perhaps, but interesting all the same.

The Culloden Centre was started in 1925 by the Gaelic Society of Inverness, which was itself started in 1871. I have the honour of having recently been appointed its chief for next year, the first expat to have been given this honorary position. The first ever chief of the Society was also a Macpherson, but he was more of an aristocrat than I am. He was the chief of the clan – Cluny Macpherson of Cluny. It’s perhaps an opportune time for someone to write a history of the Society. It would no doubt be called From Cluny to Looney.

Neil MacEachen also became an expat. He accompanied the Prince to France and never returned to Scotland. He changed his name from MacEachen to MacDonald. Some say it was because the French couldn’t pronounce MacEachainn. More likely it was because he was of the Clan Donald in the first place and Mac Eachainn, the son of Hector, was a patronymic rather than a surname. He died in exile in 1788. He is probably better known in history, not as a key supporter of the cause of Bonnie Prince Charlie, but as the father of Napoleon’s Marshall MacDonald, the Duke of Tarentum. The Duke came back once to visit the ancestral home in South Uist and took some rubble to be buried with him in his French grave, and some potatoes from the garden to continue the link with Uist in the soil of France. During the visit there was a communication problem. The Uist people couldn’t speak French and he couldn’t speak Gaelic. (Reference to “A MacDonald for the Prince”)

The Laird of Boisdale’s nemesis was John Ferguson, the notorious and sadistic captain of the gun-ship Furnace that scoured the islands looking for the Prince and taking his followers into captivity. He sent a threatening letter to Boisdale in which he wrote:

“Having got good intelligence that there are both arms and money landed for the use of the Pretender on the isles of Barra and South Uist, and that there are some of the rebel officers at this time upon these islands enticing the inhabitants to join them in this unnatural rebellion, I am come here on purpose to endeavour to put a stop to it, and to demand that these officers, with the arms, money, etc, may be delivered up to me by the assistance of his Majesty’s good subjects (if there be any such on the islands) which if complied with, I shall from time to time support them with my assistance to the utmost of my power, and that there shall not to the value of a chicken be hurt on either island, but if my request is not complied with I shall take them to be all rebels and disaffected, and am resolved to burn and destroy both islands.”
Nice guy. He makes the Taliban look benign and compassionate. Then he sucks up to Boisdale: “As you are a gentleman recommended to me by Lord Loudon and President to be well affected to His Majesty King George and our present constitution, I shall be glad that you would do me a favour to come aboard with the bearer (of the letter) that I may advise you with the properest method to come at the arms, etc, and to disperse the people that has joined these officers.”

Boisdale essentially told him to get lost, which confirmed Ferguson’s conviction that MacDonald was as great a rebel as any man who had been at Culloden. He noted: “At the time of his writing to me there were six rebel officers in his house, for my express saw them and spoke with them and knew two of them.”

After a close search of MacDonald’s house Ferguson found, buried under the house, three chests of fine Spanish arms, a barrel of gunpowder, two hundred-weight of shot, and a quantity of flints. Game over for Boisdale. They took him prisoner.

Ferguson of the Furnace was reviled in life and death. John MacCodrum, the poet whom I mentioned earlier, composed a vituperative mock-elegy for him in which he said:

“S iomadh tir ‘n do thog e smuid,
Talla muirneach chuir e dhith.
Gum b’aotraom leam clach-mhuilinn mhor
Mar acaire ‘ga chumail shios.

“An torc nimh’ nach tugadh baidh,
Nochd a lamh an ar ‘s am murt,
‘S ait leam claban do chinn mhaoil
‘G a chagnadh fo chraos na muic.”

“In many a country did he raise smoke, many a cheerful hall did he lay waste. Light would I deem a large mill-stone as an anchor to keep him down.

“The venomous pig that would not grant mercy, who showed his hand in slaughter and murder, ‘tis joy to me that the brain-pan of your bald head is being chewed in the whale’s mouth.”

But let’s return to Boisdale. When Alasdair Mor nam Mart died the estate was inherited by the eldest son Colin, who continued as lord of the manor in the big house. And who appears again but the Bard MacCodrum? By this time MacCodrum was bard to MacDonald of Sleat and, as a member of the “cliar”, the official travelling poets, he was welcomed by the gentry. One of his visits was to Boisdale and he celebrated the occasion by composing a poem called the Goodman of Boisdale’s House Blessing. Here’s a short excerpt:

“Gum beannaicheadh Dia an tur as aile
Gus an tainig mi ‘m beul oidhche,
Gearr on larach an robh ‘n t-armunn
Bu cheann tanach roimh na h-aoidhean.
"S e tur nan cliar an tur fialaidh
‘N tur an riaraichear gun ghainne,
An tur ceolmhor am bi morchuis,
Fionn is beoir air bord gun cheannach.

"N taigh as fhearr tha measg nan Gaidheal–
Co’n duin’ ann as fhearr na Cailean?–
Duine gasda cneasda diadhaidh,
Cliu dha iarogh’ ‘s cliu dha sheanair.”

“God bless the tower most beautiful to which I came at fall of night, a short distance from where
the chieftain was a welcoming host for his guests.

“The tower of the poet-bands is the hospitable tower, the tower where one is served without
stinting, the melodious tower wherein is splendour, and on tables wine and beer that you don’t
have to buy. (The bards were apparently the free-loaders of the day)

“The best house among the Gaels – what man is there better than Colin – a generous, humane
and godly man, a credit to his great-grandson and a credit to his grandfather.”

The travelling bards were having a great time. Many of their songs of praise of the aristocracy
could have been called “Flattery gets you everywhere.”

But even the most sycophantic of bards might have found it difficult to suck up to the Laird of
Boisdale who is probably responsible for us being here today.

The pivotal year was 1770. That was when MacDonald of Boisdale, who had converted from
Catholicism to Protestantism as a consequence of inter-marriage, tried to put pressure on his
tenants en masse to adopt Presbyterianism as their faith. Being ultra-zealous, as converts often
are, he stationed himself one Sunday morning at a fork in the road and tried to drive them all to
the Presbyterian church. To add emphasis to verbal persuasion he brandished a yellow stick.
For ever after this peculiar style of evangelism was called “Creidimh a’ bhata bhuidhe”, the
religion of the yellow staff. When this effort failed, he turned his attention to the children by
establishing schools for them. At first the people welcomed the opportunity to have their
children educated but soon realised Boisdale’s real intentions. He hired a tutor whose objective
it was to indoctrinate the children, using devices like making them copy offensive sentences
under the guise of teaching them to write. When the parents realised what was happening they
withdrew the children from the school.

But the domineering landlord continued his campaign of reprisal. He summoned the tenants
together and read to them a paper in Gaelic containing a formal renunciation of their religion and
a pledge under oath nevermore to have any dealings with a Catholic priest. Sign this paper, he
said, or you will lose your homes and lands. To a man they declared that they would beg or
starve rather than submit to such conditions. They were then advised that their alternative to
starvation was to emigrate to some American colony. To most of them the expense of the long
journey seemed an unsurmountable obstacle. But at this point a saviour appeared on the scene –
Fear a’ Ghlinne, Captain John MacDonald of Glenaladale. When he heard what the Laird of Boisdale was doing he was determined to help these people and arranged to ship them to the New World. By this time Boisdale was promising to cease persecuting his tenants and was trying to persuade them that Glenaladale intended to make slaves out of them and that they would starve in the North American wilderness. In the end only nine families from his estate decided to emigrate. Glenaladale hired a ship called the Alexander and set sail with the Boisdale people and other emigrants from the islands of Eigg and Barra and Moidart on the Scottish mainland. After a seven-week voyage the Alexander arrived in Prince Edward Island in June 1772. Some stayed on in PEI and some made their way elsewhere, including Cape Breton. And that’s why we are here today in the new Boisdale.

Many stories have been told about the Laird of Boisdale. One interesting one involves a famous composer of bagpipe tunes, including the pibroch A’ Ghlas Mheur, The Finger Lock, which is still a favourite in pibroch competitions. This was Raghnall Mac Ailein Oig, Ronald, son of Young Allan MacDonald of Morar. In addition to being an accomplished piper he was a man of extraordinary strength.

When Boisdale renounced the Catholic faith and resolved to coerce his tenants to follow his example, he fixed a certain Sunday to carry out his purpose. When Ronald heard this he decided to frustrate the plan. Taking a dozen chosen clansmen and a piper, he sailed to Uist early on the Sunday morning. When they arrived he and a trusty henchman went ashore and called on the Presbyterian minister who treated them with traditional Highland hospitality. The “slige” or “shell”, the drinking vessel, was circulating freely.

When Ronald noticed the minister shedding his ecclesiastical inhibitions he suggested that he should go back with them to the boat where he said he had a keg of fine brandy. The clergyman was delighted with the invitation. After sampling the brandy Ronald suggested that they should sail a short distance from the shore and that he would play for his guest his latest composition, “An Tarbh Breac Dearg”, the Brindled Red Bull, an animal that Ronald had reportedly wrestled to the ground.

While listening to the pibroch, which is about fifteen minutes long, the minister forgot what day it was and his duties to his congregation, until he looked ashore and saw Boisdale with a large congregation standing outside the church. They immediately took him ashore, but the brandy had taken its toll. He could hardly walk, far less preach. There was nothing for Boisdale but to return home. Next day Ronald of Morar went to see him and told him that if he ever heard of him pulling the same stunt again he would double him up like an old set of bagpipes. Tradition has it that this is when Boisdale saw the light and started to let his people follow their own convictions.

So much for history and tradition. What about Boisdale of today? Like most island communities it has suffered from clearances, depopulation and landlords who were despotic at worst and indifferent at best. But in South Uist there has been a recent reversal of fortunes. The community has bought the estate from the absentee owners and is now in charge of its own destiny. I can’t help wondering if the new administration will show the same enthusiasm for education that people did at one time. I recently read that when Boisdale school was examined
by inspectors in 1821, among the students was a man of 63 who read a piece from the Book of Proverbs and was one of the pupils who won a prize. Now, as in my own younger days, people are being educated to leave rather than to stay.

The village communities are changing. The Gaelic language is in peril. Houses are becoming unaffordable for local people and are being snapped up by incomers. The communal spirit of old is gone. Instead of visiting homes for a ceilidh people stay at home to watch crap on television, except for the Gaelic programmes which are an oasis of sanity and pleasure in a digital desert. The traditional stories that I spoke of are no longer told. When you go visiting now you're expected to knock at the door. You are more likely to be greeted by a snarling pit-bull terrier than by a friendly collie dog that earns his keep by tending sheep. And, instead of wearing a tweed jacket hand-woven from the wool of a sheep that you knew, you are more likely to be wearing a polyester blazer made in China.

When I was growing up there was a social convention called “nabachd”. The closest English word I can find for it is neighbourliness. You helped your neighbour plant his potatoes and cut his peats. If you caught fish you kept what you needed and gave the rest away. Every adult in the village acted as a parent to every child. We may have more sophistication and creature comforts today but the old virtues of caring and sharing are disappearing.

So are the people. Depopulation is still going on. The island of Scalpay in Harris, where my mother was from, has a population of 400. And not a single baby amongst them. I find it hard to believe that they've given up sex, but, as an only child myself, perhaps I should refrain from comment. They recently announced the closure of the croileagan, the Gaelic nursery school, because there are no children under school age to go to it. In Northton, also in Harris, and the home of the genealogist Bill Lawson whom I mentioned earlier and who has helped many Cape Bretoners trace their roots, there are 19 houses that are empty in the winter because they are just used as holiday homes in the summer. There are more houses vacant than are occupied. So it's not surprising that the Gaelic language is on the wane. What is surprising is that it has survived at all. But the picture is not totally grim. Education through the medium of Gaelic, unheard of thirty years ago, has been very successful. It's interesting to note that incomers to the islands send their children to the Gaelic medium schools while many local people still believe that Gaelic is an educational hindrance rather than a help. And this despite the fact that it has been proven that the children being taught through the medium of Gaelic have a better grasp of English than those attending English medium schools.

One of the real success stories has been Gaelic broadcasting. Gaelic radio carries a wide range of programming. If you are interested in these programmes you can hear them on the internet. And by the end of this year a digital television channel devoted exclusively to Gaelic will be launched. More recently there was another extraordinary breakthrough. One of the screenings at the Cannes Film Festival ten days ago was a feature-length film called Seachd. When it's released later this year it will be the first Gaelic film to be shown in commercial cinemas in the UK and later in other countries. Seachd draws on the Gaelic story-telling tradition. It's about a young man who cannot stop his boyhood quest for the truth – the truth behind the death of his parents and the truth behind his grandfather's incredible, terrifying stories. The part of the
grandfather is played by Angus Peter Campbell, who has written three excellent Gaelic novels. He now lives in Skye, but guess where he comes from – from the Boisdale district of South Uist!

The two Uists and Benbecula are now one island, linked by causeways. When I was growing up you had to cross to Benbecula on a small ferry-boat. To get to the mainland you had to take a boat from Lochmaddy to the mainland, stopping at Lochboisdale on the way. That’s how the bar of the Lochboisdale Hotel became the watering-hole for travellers from both Uists. I remember being there one night on my way to Edinburgh University to re-sit an exam that I had failed earlier. A neighbour happened to be travelling that night and we paid the obligatory homage to the Lochboisdale bar, partly to buy some refreshment that would ease the tedium of the eight-hour journey to the mainland. There had been a labour dispute which prevented deliveries of the more important consumer goods, and the bar had run out of whisky. All we could buy to take with us was a bottle of gin. At that time I had never tasted gin and, as we sat on the deck on a moon-lit night as we left Lochboisdale, I took my first swig from the bottle and nearly choked. Shortly afterwards the captain of the boat, who was also an acclaimed Gaelic singer, came by with a box of tomatoes. “We forgot to drop these off in Lochboisdale and they’ll be rotten by the time we get back. So if you’re hungry, help yourselves,” he told us. My neighbour suggested that if we had a swig of gin followed by a bite of tomato it would make the liquor more palatable. By the time we had finished the bottle the ship was rolling in the heavy swell and I went down to the toilet to be sick. When I noticed in the dim light that what I was throwing up was of a reddish colour I thought I was haemorrhaging. Realising then that it was the tomatoes was no great comfort.

A few years ago I was at a conference in Cardiff in Wales and I was relating this story to some friends in a restaurant where we were having dinner. A couple of nights later I went back there on my own and was studying the menu when a waitress came over and planted in front of me a glass of gin and a tomato. The manageress had apparently heard the crazy conversation two nights before and recognised me. I took her gesture as a challenge and drank the gin and ate the tomato. This time there was no heaving or haemorrhaging.

One more story about Lochboisdale Hotel and I’ll finish. At one time the proprietor there was a wonderful character called Finlay MacKenzie. He was the host with the most and used to entertain visitors with formidable drams of Scotch. A couple of BBC producers were there at one time and they were the grateful recipients of Finlay’s hospitality. When they left Uist they headed for London and by the time they got from London airport to the city they were feeling a bit thirsty. So they went into a pub beside the bus terminal and ordered two whiskies. What they got hardly covered the bottom of the glass and they asked the barman to add another one, and then another, and another, until eventually they thought it matched the dram they had had in Lochboisdale. You can still go into this London pub and order a special drink called a Finlay. If you survive it you can then stagger along to the Boisdale Restaurant and pretend you’re in Boisdale, South Uist, or Boisdale, Cape Breton. Mountains and seas may divide the two, but the blood is strong and the heart is Highland, and we can all drink a toast to that.

I think there’s another reason why the Gaels should celebrate. Even though their destiny was shaped by the kind of history and memories that today drive the guerilla and the sniper and the suicide bomber, they do not dwell on past injustices. We were marginalised more than most, but
we haven’t joined the millions who remain emotional captives of the repression and cruelty suffered by their forebears and who resort to extreme measures in retaliation. That’s why the Boisdales of this world are havens of sanity and serenity in an otherwise troubled world. There are historians in Scotland today who deny that the Highland Clearances ever took place, and the worst that happens to them is a critical book review. We are not perfect but we are a tolerant and forgiving society. You have certainly been tolerant in listening to this long and disjointed talk, and I am grateful for your patience.

Tapadh leibh airson eisteachd le foighidinn is fois.

Submitted by
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BHS A6M
June 2007.