

John MacInnes by Catriona MacInnes

Rugadh Iain MacAonghais ann am mansa Bhaile na Cille ann an Ùige Leòdhais. 'S e fear do chlann Aonghais às an Eilean Sgìtheanaich a bha na athair, Ruairidh Mòr agus bha a' mhàthair, Mòrag NicAsgaill à Cladach Circeaboist ann an Uibhist a Tuath. Nuair a bha m' athair ochd bliadhna dh'aois ghluais an teaghlach a Ratharsaigh agus chuir e eòlas air dualchas cultarail sònraichte bràithrean athair air taobh Chlann Aonghais. Nuair a bha e na dhuin' òg, a' fàs suas agus a mhothaich e air mar a bha Gàidhlig a' bàsachadh agus an cultar ga chall air a' Ghàidhealtachd, dh'fhàs miann làidir ann beul-aithris a chruinneachadh.

Thug seo air sgeulachdan, òrain, creideamhan agus ainmean-àite a chruinneachadh bho air feadh Alba agus bha ùidh aige bho thùs ann an Gàidhlig Shiorrachd Pheairt agus Ghallaibh. Bha ùidh m' athair ann am beul-aithris Uibhist a Tuath riamh làidir agus chùim e air a' tadhal air cuideachd a' mhàthar air taobh an iar Uibhist a Tuath.

Aig toiseach na 1960an bha m' athair ag obair còmhla ri luchd-falbhain le Gàidhlig agus champaich an teaghlach againn còmhla riutha ann an Solas an Uibhist a Tuath. Bha meas mòr aig m' athair agus mo mhàthair air an luchd-falbhain agus chòrd an ùine a chuir iad seachad na measg le m' athair le "leithid do dh'uaisleachd, blàths is cultair." 'S ann mun àm seo a chuir piuthar màthair mo mhàthair, à Beàrnaraigh, fios mu thogalach fàsaichte agus croit gan reic, ann am Bàgh a' Chàise air taobh an ear thuath Uibhist a Tuath. Bha na daoine a bha a' fuireach anns an sgìre air an ath-àiteach bho na h-eileanan ann an Caolas na Hearadh agus chuireadh fàilte air mo mhàthair, bha màthair fhèin à Bèarnaraigh, a dh'aineoin cion Gàidhlig.

Bha an còmhnaidh beannachadh, deoch agus biadh an luib cèilidh. Dh'ionnsaich mi gu math òg cho luachmhor 's a bha an cleachdadh, a bhith roinn agus cho cudromach 's a bha am beul-aithris Gàidhlig a bha mi a' cluinntinn. Uaireannan bheireadh m' athair a-mach uidheam clàraidh agus, mar a bha an ùine a' ruith, a theip-chlàradair agus gheibheadh sgeulachd no òran àite agus urram ann an tasglann Sgoil Eòlais na h-Alba, far an robh e air a bhith ag obair bho na 1950an. Gu tric bhiodh e a' còmhradh ri seann daoine a bha e airson a chlàradh ann an Uibhist a Tuath agus Deas. Uaireannan bha e a' call an cothrom agus bhiodh e a' caoidh na bha air a chall de stòras chultar a bha air sìoladh air falbh leis an t-seann ghinealach.

Bha meas mòr aig m' athair air an dùthaich, an saoghal nàdarra eadar-fhighte le creideamh miotasach. Bha ùidh mhòr aige cuideachd ann a bhith ag obrachadh na talmhainn ann an dòighean thraidiseanta agus sheasmhach. Thionndaidh e a làmh gu bhith a' feuchainn ri craobhan fhàs as dèidh dha na h-eich Èirisgeach a chall, cha do mhair iad an droch gheamhradh. Chleachd e seann chas-chrom a' gearradh feamainn airson todhar air a' chroit, far an robh e sìor shabaid ris an t-side. Nuair a thill mi a dh'fhuireach gu Na Ceannmhor ann an 2019, dh' iarr mi air sloinneadh cuideachd a' mhàthar a dhèanamh agus thug e dhomh sreath no dhà air an dà thaobh a' dol air ais coig no sia ginealaich, sgrìobhte air duilleagan mo leabhar-latha, mun do dh'fhalbh mi.

Chaochail e gu h-aithghearr mìos às dèidh sin air an 10mh den Chèitean 2019 aig aois 89. Tha a spiorad maireannach fhathast ri fhaicinn aig ceann rathad Na Ceannmhor anns na craobhan àrda a tha a-nis a' cuartachadh an taighe a' toirt am fasgadh seachad a rinn e a dhìcheal ri thoirt gu buil.

Iain MacAonghuis / John MacInnes was born in Uig in Lewis in the manse at Baile na Cille. His father, Ruairi Mor, was a MacInnes from the Isle of Skye and his mother Morag, a MacAskill from Claddach Kirkibost in North Uist. The family moved to Raasay when my father was eight years old and he became familiar with his specific cultural heritage from his father's uncles on the MacInnes side. My father's desire to gather the oral tradition, as he grew into a young man, became increasingly important to him, as he realised and witnessed the demise of Gaelic and thus the loss of the culture in the Highlands of Scotland. This led him to gather stories, songs, beliefs and place names from all over Scotland and he cultivated an early interest in Perthshire and Caithness Gaelic. My father's interest in the oral tradition from North Uist, however, remained particularly strong and he continued to visit his mother's people on the west side of North Uist.

In the early 1960s my father worked with Gaelic speaking Travelling People and, as a family, we camped with them in Solas in North Uist. My father and mother had huge respect for the Travellers and my father described enjoying greatly their time spent with "such dignity, warmth and culture". It was then that my mother's aunt from Berneray drew attention to a derelict house for sale on a croft in Cheesebay / Bagh a Chaise in the North East of North Uist. The area had been re-settled by people largely from the islands in the Sound of Harris and my mother, whose mother was from Berneray, felt immediately welcomed despite her lack of spoken Gaelic.

The ceilidh was often a simple visit, but always involved a blessing, a drink and food. I learnt as early as I can remember the tremendous value of the ritual, the sharing and the importance of the Gaelic oral tradition I was hearing. At times my father would bring out his reel to reel and, as time passed, his tape recorder, to give a story or song its place and value in the Archive of the School of Scottish Studies, where he had worked since the 1950s. Often he would speak of older people across North and South Uist whom he wanted to tape. Sometimes he missed the opportunity and expressed his sadness at the passing away of a wealth of culture with the older generation.

My father passed on his love of place, the natural world and mythical belief interwoven. He also had a great interest in the practicalities of traditional ways of working in a sustainable way with the land. After what he described as a disastrous experiment with Eriskay ponies, who didn't survive a harsh winter, he turned to experiment with growing trees. He used an old cas-chrom to cut seaweed to fertilise the land on the croft, where he continuously battled with the weather. When I returned to live at Na Ceannmhor in 2019, I asked him to write the 'sloinneadh' of his mother's people and he gave me a few strands on both sides, going back five or six generations, which he wrote in the pages of my diary before I left. It was only one

*month later that he suddenly passed away on the 10th May 2019 at the age of 89.
His enduring spirit remains at the end of the road at Na Ceannmhor in the tall trees
that now encircle the house with the shelter he endeavoured to provide*