

Chapter One

BONNÉ NORTH BRITAIN

A news item I read in 2011 concerned the attempts of an Outer Hebridean community to occupy their land. In order to do so they had to buy it back from the landowner who lived in Leamington Spa, south Britain. His family had possessed the area for around ninety years. The Scottish Government had approved the sale to the local community who hoped to take matters to the next stage, and inhabit the place. Except they were being halted. The landowner had challenged the Scottish Government and was taking his case to the European Court. Presumably this was in defence of 'his right' to do whatever he wanted with 'his property.' At some time in the future the local people were to be informed of the outcome.

So that was that.

Generally I avoid such news in an effort to retain my sanity but this attracted my attention. The actual place was the Pairc Peninsula in the Parish of Lochs. It was the first time in my life I ever saw the name in print, Parish of Lochs. I didn't know it was a real place. I thought of it as a kind of nickname used by my granny. Whatever it was it sounded great: good walks, swimming and boats, plenty of adventures. But not an actual place where people lived.

The idea that a fellow from Leamington Spa held this as a property right should have angered me. I assumed it had angered me. But I don't think it did. Did it even annoy me? Not so much vaguely as slightly. I did not know what to make of it. Maybe I was looking at it the wrong way. But what was the right way?

I established contact with the Pairc Trust, the community group involved in the campaign. I mentioned to them my family connection and offered support, if my name was of any use for petitions or something. I'm not a believer in petitions and appeals to authority generally. Lurking there is the idea that the authorities are in ignorance of the true situation, such that once the argument is presented properly they will alter events in favour of the petitioner. Naive nonsense. The authorities already know the situation, they know it intimately and precisely. This because they created it. They are responsible, they are the perpetrators. In defending against those who are abusing us we learn not to appeal to the perpetrator. We make them stop, we try to. If we ask them to stop and they do not stop then we must act to stop them. I didn't say this to the campaigning group in South Lochs, Lewis. Their campaign was up and running. They knew what they were doing. I could support or not.

Following my offer of support I was invited to take part in an event based in Baile Ailein (Balallan) around the issue of Clearance and Recovery. I was pleased to accept. I thought to give a talk around my family connection to the area. But my only connection was through my grandmother of whom I knew very little. She had no family except us, not that I knew about. She had friends, she always had friends. Old guys did her messages, changed her plugs and light bulbs, mended her fuses, fixed her taps. But she was an elderly woman who lived alone and always had lived alone that I could remember.

The 2012 Conference in Baile Ailein was entitled Recovering from the Clearances and featured different aspects of the land-struggle contemporary as well as historically, with particular reference to the event known as the Deer Park Raid which occurred in 1887. I knew nothing about this although I had heard the name of Donald Macrae,

the schoolteacher associated with it. In his day he was known as ‘the Alness Martyr’. Macrae is one of the very many significant figures in Scottish history of whom the Scottish people have little or no knowledge whatsoever. He died in Glasgow. There is a memorial to his memory at the western necropolis in the north of the city, close to where I live in Maryhill. During the 1870s-80s he taught in Easter Ross as a schoolmaster and was an activist member of the Highland Land League, alongside the legendary Highland radical, John Murdoch. I knew this through an unpublished article written by an elderly friend, Leslie Forster.¹ Needless to say the school authorities were not the only authorities who wanted rid of Macrae: these other yins aye find a way. On a pretext he was sacked from his post in Easter Ross. Eventually he was offered a job at the primary school in Baile Ailein, Lewis and he accepted the offer.

Macrae was a Plockton man originally and Gàidhlig was his first language. As late as the 1880s some 47% of the population in the Easter Ross area spoke Gàidhlig on a daily basis. I had either not known or forgotten that the language was so widely spoken in this part of the Scottish mainland and I find this peculiar. Surely it is a significant piece of information about my own country?

On Lewis in the 1880s the percentage was 99.9. A visitor from south Britain in 1833 tells us that the English language was heard in the Church when he “attended divine service in Stornoway (which was) chiefly in Gaidhlig interspersed with prayers in English (and) a short sermon too . . . preached like most such performances in Scotland, extemporaneously.”

I didn’t know any of that when I took part in the conference in Baile Ailein. I knew only that my paternal grandmother -

¹ Leslie Forster, author of *Rocking the Boat*, etc.

my Granny Kelman - was Catherine MacIennan Mackenzie whose first language was Gàidhlig. She was born in Gearraidh a Bhaird and raised in Ceòs, both townships in the Parish of Lochs, Lewis.

None of my family know Gàidhlig: nor did my father and uncles. I didn't find that strange. Now I do, I find it very strange, but not inconsistent. We have come to accept the fallacy that the decline of this elemental part of Scottish culture has been inevitable, that our ignorance of the language merely illustrates one more 'hard fact of life'.

In the 1950s when I was growing up Gàidhlig was never an option, neither at school nor within ordinary society. I learned nothing I would regard as positive in relation to the culture. The education system purported to be Scottish but its backbone was British. Light entered through Britishness and British means English or 'Greater English' - analagous to the area beyond London that cannot resist its tentacles, and is known as Greater London or the Home Counties. Ordinary English people have nothing to do with it. It is the place where the bulk of the British ruling class have their first homes, not the stately efforts in the far north, far west and across the sea to the north of Ireland.

My grandmother is supposed to have been born on Hogmanay, the last night of December 1880 or the 1st day of January 1881, a census year. I suspect her official birthdate was a bureaucratic convenience. Anyone involved in family research in Scotland? How many of your ancestors were born in a year ending '0' or '1'. Of her background I knew next to nothing. But I knew her; the berets she wore, the tweed coat and silk scarf; the sense of rhythm about her, how she kept time to music, the sound of her voice, how she laughed, and dug me in the ribs if she thought I should be chatting instead

of watching television; and how she cracked me one with her walking stick when I came too near her feet. Her gait was unmistakable, I would have spotted her a hundred yards away, a strange rolling sort of motion as she walked.

Delving into my grandmother's background has taken me into areas of history that were unknown to me. My elder brother remembers her refer to the Clearances but I do not and knew almost nothing of its effect on our family. I did not set out to discover this. I had no choice. In researching my family this is where it led. My knowledge of wider Clearance history was limited to the point of embarrassment, so sketchy that the question 'why' cannot be avoided.

And why should such a question be avoided? What is it about our own history that forces us to apologise for raising the subject?

In writing about this area of my family I write from within the history of Lewis, in particular South Lochs. This is unavoidable. It is a history of ordinary people which is the core of radical history; people acknowledged for what they are, people. Thus we distinguish between that and mainstream history which is essentially the story of 'the Development of Our Nation.' By the time we attain maturity some of us have learned that the concept 'Our Nation' is not necessarily inclusive, and frequently is downright exclusive, especially of us, 'the people'.

The island of Lewis was home to this branch of my family for centuries. My great-grandparents were Donald Murdo Mackenzie and Margaret MacLennan. What happened to them? I don't know. The last I heard they were squatting in Knockiandhu, a patch of waste ground on the outskirts of Ceòs. Their immediate family all left the island. Did they have a choice? I don't know. I don't think so. My granny was

their second child. We thought she had been born in Ceòs. She may have thought so herself. But she was not, she was born in Gearrai a Bhard (*Garyvard*). I had never heard of Gearrai a Bhard. It was always Ceòs she mentioned, an air of wonder at how beautiful it was. I tried to visualise a place worthy of the name. The darker side was a hint of exclusion. Ceòs was not for me. Perhaps not for ‘the likes of us’. I was from Govan in Glasgow and used to notions of class. The inferiority of ours and our lack of social standing was not something I discovered as a boy nor in my teens. I barely knew anything else.

The note of exclusion I picked up from my Lewis granny was different to that; from her I learned that if beauty was the reference it was unobtainable, at least for as long as the language and culture were beyond us. This was the Gàidhlig language and culture. I could have written ‘our’ language and culture but they was never ‘ours’. She sang to us as boys, pronounced Ceòs as though beauty inhered in the word itself. Maybe it does.

In English Ceòs is *Keose*.² I liked the name in English as well as Gàidhlig, as I do the very word itself, Gàidhlig, which in English is ‘*Gaelic*’. When she pronounced the name, Uig, the stress she laid, the separation of the ‘u’ and ‘i’ giving the phonetic ‘oo’ and ‘ee’: Ooeeg. Coincidentally where we lived in Govan, facing the Elderpark Library, the street had the name Uist, after another Hebridean island, and she pronounced it OOeest Street rather than the anglified Yewis Street. I pronounce it OOeest nowadays myself but I'm confident this is an affectation.

² in Norse, Kios, a township; a round hollow edging the sea (<https://www.hebrideanconnections.com/locations/533>)

I enjoyed language as a boy. I used to invent words and squeeze them into their own lines in the family dictionary. I repeated something I heard her say in reference to one of my wee brothers, sounding like 'mee-attir fogan', which I think may be translated along the lines of 'come away my wee dearie.' I cannot remember if she gave me the translation. When she spoke to me in Gàidhlig it was not something shared. Gàidhlig was hers, it was not mine. Where I went wrong was in thinking we were being excluded. She was the one excluded. It marked the difference. Gàidhlig culture was inferiorised generally and the people denigrated; apart from cops - and ferry pilots too; most of them were Gàidheals and regarded as 'real sailors.' Never denigrated, but different. In my time there were a dozen ferry crossings along the River Clyde, and I used three of them on a regular basis.

There was a strong Gàidhlig contingent in Govan. The Govan-Gàidhlig choir is still in existence today. All the big cops were said to be Gàidheals. One was a policeman who lived down the same stair from myself at 17 Uist Street. He and his wife welcomed me in and out his house, and I ran about like a relative. Other Gàidhlig enclaves remain in Glasgow; across the river in Partick, another in Finnieston. A couple of bars are well-known to that effect. Particular hotels are associated with particular communities. Tíree people go there, Isla people there. From Uist, try there, Barra over there. This is consistent in immigration. Information travels via families, friends and neighbours. This is why people from the same island communities tend to emigrate to the same parts of the world, and remain within shouting distance when they get there.

My Lewis grandmother lived in the Finnieston area following the collapse of her marriage in the early 1930s. She and my Aberdonian grandfather divorced. Although she left

him to bring up her youngest son (my father), I cannot recollect any negativity towards her. I think there were things going on we never discovered. In my family she had a cheery presence. We boys liked her; we were just wary, we kept out the way of her stick. She didn't like us coming too close. Mind my feet! Mind my feet!

She lived in a bedsit in Derby Street across from Kelvingrove Park. She sang the old song, Let us haste to Kelvingrove bonné lassie-oh. To emphasize the end of a verse she poked us in the ribs, lest we forget the song's significance - whatever that was, I never discovered. Her tenement close was at the Argyle Street end of the street and her wee room was off a long wide corridor. She shared a bathroom and kitchen with other residents but had her own gas ring, and a sink and a cold water tap too: so she boiled her own kettles of water. I think she cooked most of own meals on that gas-ring. But she ate very little; stale pancakes, boiled eggs and stewed milky tea in cracked china cups is all I remember. On her wall were pictures of her two heroes: Robert Burns and Bonné Prince Charlie. She referred to each wistfully: Rabbie and Charlie, the loveable rogues.

I was seven when my parents landed in the new council flat in Drumchapel and we flitted early in 1954. Here we were all immigrants. This post-war Glasgow housing scheme was home to more than 40,000 souls which made it greater in size than the town of Perth. My grandmother was a regular visitor. She appeared in the morning and returned home late afternoon or early evening. We met her at the bus stop and walked her back later. She never had a penny pocket money to give us but she usually had a sweetie of some kind. By the time I entered secondary school she had been allocated a pensioner's flat in Partick West, up the hill in Thornwood; a ten to fifteen minute walk from my school. Every Wednesday

I visited her during school dinner-hour. In some parts of the world they call dinner 'lunch' and tea 'dinner'. For us dinner was dinner and for my granny it was always the same: a soft-boiled egg, a slice of stale bread, a stale pancake and a cup of the strong, milky tea. I had to scrape the greeny blue bits off the pancake.

Earlier in life she had had an aversion to eggs. This was family gossip, that she hated eggs. I assumed it was a childhood phobia; maybe she had been brought up on eggs, eggs for breakfast, dinner and tea. The very idea of an egg scunnered her completely and it took her years to recover. I could understand that, given that in Govan we were embroiled in a post-war rationing culture: we loved eggs, eggs were riches. Me and two brothers had to share one on Sunday mornings. Right hand up so help me gaahd that is the troot. Mum burst the yoke to even out the three-way split. Being 'brought up on eggs' indicated material comfort as far as we were concerned. People must be well-off for grub in Lewis is how we thought of that; country folk are always well-fed.

Later I discovered a more likely explanation. When she left the island she left for good and became a farm-girl in a wee Perthshire village. How come? I don't know. Fisher women used to follow the fish from the islands around and down the east coast. The great Hugh Miller could tell us of that. Maybe she just took the A9 road south from Ullapool and went east from there. So she took a job on a farm, worked with hens and lived on eggs. So then, when she left the farm she was so scunnered she gave them up altogether until nowadays she was back on them again; soft-boiled with very runny yolks. Sometime around then she bumped into my grandpa who had just crossed the Perthshire border hitch-hiking his way to Glasgow. I don't know. These are the stories we tell ourselves

because the auld yins don't pass on the information. What I do know is that her egg-cups were encrusted with yolk before I cracked open the shell, with the remains from yesterday, or the day before, or the day before. I ate the egg but began from a position of disgust, easily smothered by hunger. Are ye in starvation son?

Aye grannie I'm starving.

Sometimes I stayed too long and was forced not to return to school for the afternoon's intellectual drudgery.

During this period in life I was one of those lucky boys: I had two grannies. Neither minded me visiting at all hours of the day and any time I liked. And neither cared one way or the other if I returned to school, they were just glad to see me. They got on with their own stuff and I did what I liked, and left when I liked. If I dogged school, which was pretty regular, I didn't go home. My mother was there and would have disapproved. I wandered about Partick or Govan, back and forrit on the ferries, caught a train home mid afternoon and reported for work. I had a job delivering newspapers. The distribution office was located on the grounds of Drumchapel railway station. I joined the other boys who hadnay made it into school. We hung about gambling for pennies and tapping smokes from one another, looking to help the three men who ran the newspaper operation. When the bundles arrived we lugged them into the office.

The newspaper delivery service was good business back then; morning, evening and Sunday newspapers. I had two delivery runs; evening and Sunday. Drumchapel was huge and everybody bought newspapers, plus other publications: the Radio Times, TV Guide; the Reveille, Valentine, Roxy; the Weekly News and People's Friend; Woman, Women's Own, Women's Realm, My Weekly, and so on. I don't think

men had any apart from the old Boxing News; Floyd Paterson and Rocky Marciano, Willie Pastrano, Dick MacTaggart.

Individual delivery runs varied in size. The heavier the run the greater the wage. My evening run was average size and paid around 12/- for the six days (60 pence). My elder brother had a heavier run and was paid 17/6 (87.5 pence). Sometimes a boy was sick and unable to do his run. When this happened his run became 'spare' and was open to another boy to take on after finishing his own. Doing a spare run meant an extra wage. You didn't get home till 7 o'clock but it was worth it. Those of us who helped lug in the newspaper bundles as opposed to sitting in a classroom were first in line for that.

The bulk of a boy's earnings came from tips. On the evening run the tips came once a week on the Friday, the day we collected the week's money and could boost the weekly income by as much as two quid. On Sunday mornings I delivered the papers early then returned late-morning for the money. I earned more as a 'paper boy' than I did as a factory message-boy. I turned fifteen in June 1961 and left school immediately. By the end of August I was working in a printer's shop in Partick. The factory backed onto the railway station. I still visited my Lewis grannie every Wednesday. It was only a ten to fifteen minute walk from the factory gate to her flat up the hill in Thornwood. She died in 1966. It was a regret of mine that I didn't attend her funeral but no one told me. I was nineteen and labouring in a copper-mill in Salford at the time. I didn't hear of her death until too late.

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