Alastair McIntosh at Soval Lodge

The accompanying photo is a picture that tells the story of a very pleasant afternoon passed in the ideal comfort of the old Soval Lodge where local author Alastair McIntosh gave a talk and slide show on his early years in Lochs and explained the inspirations that led to his latest book ‘Poachers Pilgrimage’. Alastair was the guest of Bata an Salm / Psalmboat project led by Deirdre Ni Mhathuna, which held a residency at the Lodge, between 19th August and 2nd September. Later in the week most of those who attended Alastair’s presentation travelled to the ancient church ruins at Eilean Colm Cille. There, Deirdre recorded and videoed more psalm singing, which was led by Calum MacDonald (Keose), and Murdo Macmillan (Carloway). Gatherings like these may not appeal to those who are uninterested in historical trails, whether it be very ancient history or what is closer to our time. Still, surprises can arise, seemingly out of nowhere. Alastair showed us a photo taken during his student days, while working as a ghillie for Eishken Estate, near the deserted village of Bunish on Loch Shell. Little did he know then that this location, its ruins and its runrigs would reverberate through his thinking in the present time. Donald Trump’s grandmother is apparently descended from a Smith family cleared when the whole village was evicted around 1825. Alastair has strenuously opposed Mr Trump’s business and political ideas, in his writings, since Mr Trump came on his whistle-stop tour of Lewis in 2008 and he clearly expressed his surprise that some of the President’s antecedents had sprung from a desolate place he was very familiar with. Akin to the settlements of Loch Shell, there is a quiet, separate desolation to Eilean Colm Cille and its ruins have an air of benign neglect, even though, in the history of Lochs district it may have been its most important religious foundation for the better part of a Millennium. The sunny day made a pleasant task easier for the psalm singers, though a fluctuating breeze did impact on the rising and falling cadences. It is a pity, no knowledge of the island extends back beyond Dean Munro (1543) and the 1620’s when it was a power centre for the new Mackenzie overlord-ship in Lewis.
The Gaelic comedian, Norman MacLean, Tormod MacGill-Eain, died recently. It was several years since I saw him. He often used to drop in to the GalGael Trust with which I’m involved here in Govan, a project started by the late Colin Macleod, whose father, Donnie, is a crofter in Gravir.

Norman said something that last time I saw him. It came back when I heard the news of his passing. He said he’d been with many a Gael around the time when they were dying. Many who, like himself, had maybe jumped the straight and narrow rails of life.

“But they all had one thing in common. As they were leaving this life, they all wanted to hear the Psalms in Gaelic.”

And so, to the PsalmBoat Project, the Bâta nan Salm residency that took place this past August. I had been invited to speak to themes that arise in my latest book, Poacher’s Pilgrimage: an Island Journey (Birlinn), and how they tie in with a North Lochs childhood and the culture that carries the Gaelic Psalms.

It was an afternoon session, held in the Old Soval Lodge courtesy of the Kershaw family. The lodge is just a mile or so down the road from the surgery at Gleann Mor where my father had been a doctor from 1960 until 1986. Many’s the time I’ve dropped in to the lodge when working summers as a ghillie on Loch Valtos.

The sheer elemental force that opened up from our local precentors was like standing near the eye of a hurricane. The rising groundswell that followed, as everyone joined in, hinted at spiritual depths of community that go beyond words. In such moments, any doubts about faith’s living presence are just blown away. At least, that is how it was for me that day.

I asked one of the precentors, “Where is that power of song coming from within you?”

He just placed his hand over his heart.

“Straight from God?” I ventured to suggest.

“Straight from God,” he replied.

No wonder when the chips were down, people like Norman MacLean would seek such balm.

Apart from having grown up in Leurbost, I have another family interest in the Gaelic Psalms. My great great grandfather was a precentor, Murdo MacLennan, a son of one of “the Men”, na daoine.

According to his obituary in the North Star and Farmers’ Chronicle of 8 June 1899, it was he who carried the Bible out of the established church on the Sunday of the Disruption in May 1843. He went on to precent at the 1845 Free Church assembly in Inverness. Dr Beith, in his little book describing Dr Candlish’s tour of the Highlands, called him “the best Gaelic precentor in the North”.

The German ethnomusicologist, Joseph Mainzer, published some of his tunes, and Morag Macleod of Scalpay has told me that it continues to be Murdo’s version of Psalm 65 that is sung at the closing of the Mod each year.

However, she said that the ear and the limited notation of Mainzer and his collaborator were not fully capable of capturing the majesty of what, in his obituary, were referred to as “the old long tunes... with their beautiful prolonged variations”.

Sandy Matheson of Stornoway tells me that his mother maintained that we are related through this MacLennan ancestor. Murdo’s own grandparents were cleared from Strathconnon by the Balfour trustees. In The History of the Working Classes in Scotland (Chapter VIII, 1929), Tom Johnston tells how these evictions “were carried out in a most barbarous manner, and to this day the spot is shewn where the dispossessed men and women crouched together, praying rather for a merciful death than that they should be driven farther from the strath of their birth.”

I can imagine that only the depth of the Gaelic Psalms would have been capable of expressing their lament. And yet, and yet, not all is lost. The theologian Walter Brueggemann points out that exile is a recurring biblical theme. And yet, we must retain a “hopeful imagination”, because “the poet (or prophet) in exile sings his people to homecoming.”

I sense that song resurgent in our Hebridean communities today. We see it in the blessings of land reform. We see it in the resurgence of interest in the culture. And we see it in projects like Psalm-Boat. These open up new flows of life into an ancient form of worship, one that is much-needed in our superficial times. I am not calling here for a return to narrow or exclusive understanding of faith. I am calling for immersion, as Amos had it, in “a mighty stream”.

For those of us who for whatever reason do not have the Gaelic, I was helped that day in Soval Lodge by us being told that we could “just join in with the sounds”. Indeed, I have often wondered if it might be an idea to write out the Gaelic phonetically - the phonetics, Gaelic and English side-by-side with the musical notation - to help non-speakers join in and learn something of the language at the same time. Gaelic and its song must surely count amongst the world’s great spiritual languages. It is a calling of the present generation to ensure its continuation. Some of the approaches called for might be innovative, but I am sure that such likes as Murdo MacLennan would have prayed on them God’s blessing.

For me, an added dimension of the event at Soval Lodge was being in the company of those I’d grown up with. I’m meaning people like Mary Bell, who had been our school bus conductress. Both Alex George and Rusty have been amongst my closest friends since Miss Montgomery’s Primary 1 class at Leurbost J.S. School in 1960.

Mairi M Martin took a photograph of some of us around the lunch table. To me, it is a remarkable picture. We’ve all known versions of island religion that can be more dour than weather. It’s understandable, when you think of the suffering in the history - one of my key themes in Poacher’s Pilgrimage.

And yet, study that picture. Is it not a testimony to community exemplified? To happiness together, exemplified? Might that not be some intimation of Paul’s membership, “one of another”?

For me, that was the gift with which the PsalmBoat project left me with this year, and I thank especially Déirdre Ni Mhathúna and Maggie Smith for the privilege of having been involved.