

# Living in the Carrying Stream

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One by one the old lights of Lochs are going out. These were the generation that raised my generation. I've been thinking a lot about them recently.

I'm meaning the likes of old Mary Kate Maclellan of Seaforth Head – "Ceiteag" - who died in 2012. Being off the mains, and not liking the racket of the diesel generator, she must have been the last person in the parish who would sit at night reading her Bible, or receiving visitors, by the soft steady light of her paraffin oil lamp. Another of that era was John M from Balallan who passed away in January 2014. The fact it isn't necessary to state his surname speaks for itself. Many of us will have warm memories from him, if not from years at Leurbost Junior Secondary School, then from the banks of many a river or loch. Then in February this year, there was the passing of Sophia Macrae (née Macleod) of Eishken. It's her life that I'd like to reflect upon here.

It was Sophie's husband, Tommy, that I knew best when I was a young man. He was my teacher when I worked for a couple of summers as a ghillie on the loch and a pony boy out on the hill in the mid-1970s. That was back in Captain Audley Archdale's day, another of fond memory who also died within the past year. Audley was the nephew of the old proprietrix, Miss Jessie Thorneycroft, who was the niece of Mrs Platt of the era of the Pairc deer raid.

If I had to sum up Tommy Macrae in one word, it would be kindness. You could hear it in the quality of his voice. I never once beheld him get impatient, hardly even with a stubborn horse. I'm told that where he considered it necessary, he could be robust with poachers. Yet I'm also told that all the local ones who out-survived him turned up to show their respects at his funeral. There's a quality of true community!

It was only after Tommy's passing that I properly got to know Sophie. The Estate, it should be said, looked after her well. She carried on at work in Eishken Lodge under Nicholas Oppenheim right into her eighties. That was not because she had to, or anybody made her, but because it was for her a way of life. Whenever I'd be on the island I'd try and pay a visit. I'd also drop in for a blether with Christopher, her son. He follows on as the Head Keeper of Eishken in the footsteps of his father Tommy (d. 2009), of his grandfather Duncan (d. 1977), and his great-grandfather Murdo (d. 1944). Owners seem to come and go, some more memorable than others. But the



*The author with his sister (Isobel), his mother (Jean), and in the centre, Miss Jessie Thorneycroft at Eishken Lodge in the early 1960s.*

Macraes – they are Eishken's keepers in so many senses of that word.

To visit Sophie was such a simple thing. You'd have a cup of tea and some scones with cheese and cake. There'd be the customary prayer, never required but certainly appreciated. These days that's almost an embarrassment to mention. It seems quaint, old-fashioned, almost fundamentalist. Not so, to folks of those days. I found it left you feeling slightly different. Closer, as if you'd been drawn together and touched a deeper base.

"What's fresh?" you'd ask, and Sophie wouldn't have a lot to talk about. When you're old and getting more housebound, there isn't very much that's "fresh". I've come to understand that the secret of visiting people of that generation is to be at peace with their silences. Silence speaks its own still words. Too much talking is for those who haven't got much inner life, who haven't yet found moorings for shared rest. The world talks and talks and talks. It has no time to let the ripples settle on the loch within, to find the gathered presence of reflection. But Sophie's generation knew - "Be still, and know...."

Not long before she died I popped a question outright. "Do you pray a lot?" I asked her. Quick as a flash came the answer. "All the time." And that was it. Just three memorable words. There was no need for





*Wedding of Tommy Macrae of Eishken and Sophie Macleod of Balallan, Kinloch Free Church, 19 February 1959*

further talk to pad them out.

Between such skeins of silence you'd sometimes rake the embers in the grate. These glowed when kindled with the breath of memory. One day she told me of that summer's evening long ago, the day that Tommy came to town! Not Tommy of rock opera fame created by The Who, but the dashing young Macrae fresh-run from Eishken in his Land Rover.

The girls were gathered outside the old Balallan Post Office. Tommy stopped and asked Sophie if she'd like to go for a spin. He took her all the way to Harris, to the Clisham. She'd never been so far away before. Soon after, he proposed, she accepted, and the rest is family history. Sophie was in her eighties when I heard her tell that courtship story. To hear it was to watch years melt away. Her face flushed coy with running joy of maidenhood once more. You felt that at the deepest level of bereavement she could never be alone. That is how it is for many of that generation whose past becomes the living present.

These days I find that when I'm back on the island, it's mainly the old widows that I visit. I say to my wife - "I'm off to see my girlfriends!" - and I'll be sixty this year, and they'll be in their eighties, even nineties. The men who taught me how to work a boat or lead a pony through the bog - they've nearly all moved on. Very few of them are left. Every time I'm back to Leurbost the boys will tell me that another's gone,

and another, upon his final voyage.

I was "in the road" seeing some of the guys a wee while back. We'd all been in the class of Miss Montgomery. We were laughing at the way we used to think her name was Miss "MacGomery"! There we all were, sitting round the Raeburn, sipping at our tea, and somebody was saying: "Soon they'll all be gone. All gone."

"Aye," we found ourselves agreeing. "Soon they'll all be gone. All gone ...."

And there was a pause.

"Unless we, of our generation, take up what they've passed on and pass it on."

Two years ago, the Islands Book Trust published an appreciation of the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University. It was called, *The Carrying Stream Flows On*. The "carrying stream", Tim Neat explained, is an old folk phrase concerning, "the proper study of mankind." It's the sense of being carried in a stream that's bigger than ourselves, the underlying current of community.

They say that modern life is on the horizontal plane. Most of it is on the surface, the chitter-chatter, Twitter, tweets, and "friends" on Facebook that we "like" or "unlike". In contrast, noted John Lorne Campbell in his *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five*, Gaelic consciousness works on the vertical plane. It cuts through depths of time, "possessing historical continuity and religious sense."

Our lives and age on ages past are but the cutting edge of time, the leading wave that's breaking on eternity. Here death withdraws its sting. Those of the generation of Ceiteag of Seaforth Head, or John M of Balallan, or Tommy and Sophie of Eishken - those monarchs of the glen - they knew this from the inside out.

I'm not romanticising, not making it up or exaggerating. The evidence abounds. Norman Macleod of Bridge House, Leverburgh in Harris was a retired policeman and lobster fisherman. He wrote in his last letter to me before he passed away: "My God, Alastair, inhabiteth eternity."

Like Sophie's "All the time." Or Ceiteag's "How can I be lonely, when I'm with God?" Like the adages of so many of those who've gone before us, those five words of Norman's reverberate around my mind. Their richness. Their completeness. Their self-evident truth.

When I was a boy, Finlay Montgomery of Ranais showed me how to handle a boat with a teaching touch so light as to be nothing more than the slightest nod of his head. So it is that with their sparse but concentrated words, the old folks now departing pass to us their touch of blessing. Ask not for whom they pray when they pray "constantly". They pray, not least, for all of us. They pray that we might know the waters of that "mighty stream" - the carrying stream righteousness.

Yes, it's slightly embarrassing in this day and age to talk about these things. I know I'm not alone in saying that. An old man in Keose from my childhood days said much the same to me just the other day by email. But *Dioghluim* is a magazine of local history.

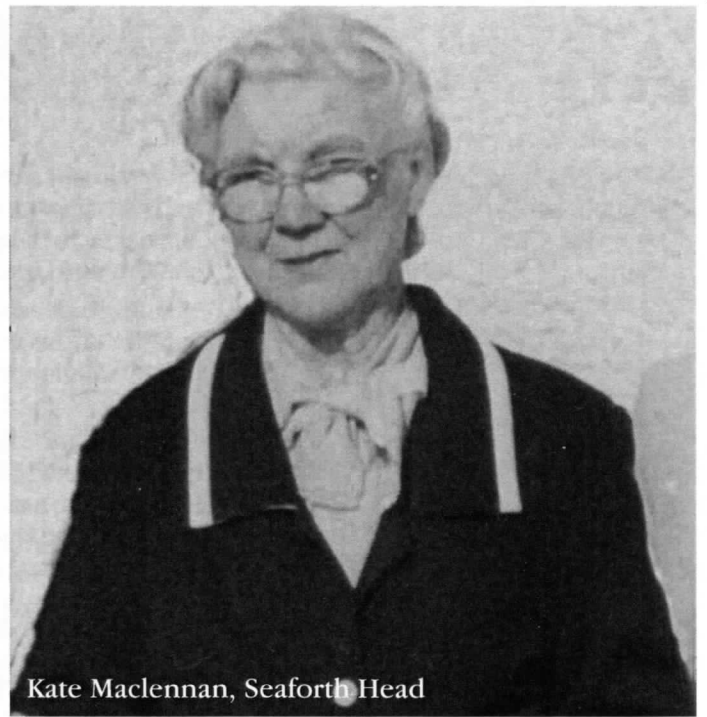


Every one of us who knew the kind of people that I've mentioned here will know these utterances to be true. This is the living history that they would want to have recorded, sustained, and lived through all eternity.

As Norman Macleod of Bridge House used to say: "This is about remembering the Fifth Commandment – remembering our 'father' and our 'mother' in the deepest sense of those words – that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee."

I don't want to give the impression of being overly pious. Not all of my faith sits comfortably with all of island religion. The slight differences between some of us may, or more likely, may not matter in the last analysis. Be that as it may, I am sure of one thing. Sophie, and those like her, would be pleased for me to close with this reflection:

O God of Bethel, by whose hand  
Thy people still are fed,  
Who through this weary pilgrimage  
Hast all our fathers led.



Kate Maclellan, Seaforth Head

## Memories of ... Keose Angling Association

Murdo Morrison's article in the last Dioghlum reminded Mrs Jean MacIntosh of an event that happened during a competition on Loch Keose.

The Association had done much work to improve the loch and introduce new fish stock. This culminated in an evening competition with the winner being the one with the best catch. Everyone spaced out their pitches with due care and attention using their experience and local knowledge in order to choose the best spot. Ian McIntosh, Jean's husband, had along with all his gear, a pac a mac, and carefully choose a spot beside Iris Walker (Jean is not sure if it was Iris or Stella Sills).

Suddenly Iris (or Stella) called out that she had caught a fish, so everyone gathered round, and to their amazement there was a salmon still hooked lying on the grass. Initially this was declared quite impossible, but with the evidence before them a long discussion followed about the geography of tributary feeds etc. With possibilities and arguments voiced and dismissed. Ken Walker, Eddie Young, John M and others got engrossed in trying to explain the situation never guessing the answer.

Eventually, after much debate, Ian and his lady accomplice explained to the unsuspecting victims of the hoax that the salmon had been smuggled to the loch by Ian in the sleeve of his mac, before passing it to his accomplice who pretended to land the salmon. Great fun was had at the expense of the local fishing aficionados.

## Village Nicknames

In our July 2014 issue we included some of the nicknames of the village of Balallan.

A few from Keose this time.

An Cat  
A' Phisheag  
A' Coileach  
Sheocan  
Dòmhnall B  
Calean Ruadh  
Coinneach Ruadh  
Stobbie  
Min  
Am Bard  
Naosan  
Angan  
Aligan  
Neers  
Culaidh  
'an t-each  
Dòll  
Dòmhnall Liath  
An Ailbhean  
Dòshie  
Dòmhnallan  
Croghardie  
Major

## Comunn Eachdraidh Cheann a' Loch



My mother's memory of the Loch Keose Angling Association appeared in the same issue but on p. 18. I have inserted the text onto this page.

Local history magazines such as Dioghlum from Kinloch on the Isle of Lewis, and Dugadh from neighbouring North Lochs, are important for showing us where we've come from and carrying those identities forward into the future. A subscription form is overleaf.

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(Comunn Eachdraidh Cheann a Loch)

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