

The GalGael Trust

Report of the 6th Trip to Iona, 2023

‘And I am concerned with the blossom’

1. [What we did - outwardly](#)
2. [What we did – inwardly](#)
3. [Concerned with the Blossom](#)
4. [The Road to Emmaus](#)
5. [Budget and Thanks to Funders](#)
6. [Stone Eagle and the Superquarry Squash Blossom](#)
7. [Iona my Heart – Training for Transformation](#)
8. [Future Trips – GalGael and the Iona Community](#)
9. [George MacLeod on the Iona-Govan Connection](#)

This is a fulsome report. It is not just for our funders. My hope is that the strands it draws together that came out of this year’s trip might affirm and strengthen wider GalGael links, especially with our Celtic heritage, our poetry, with artists linked to Iona and with the Iona Community. The Community has its origins both in Iona and here in Govan, and it has recently moved its offices back into the area at the Fairfield shipbuilding heritage complex. “Only a demanding common task builds community,” said George MacLeod of Govan and Iona. Both individually and in our organisations the lack of meaning, the emptiness and loneliness of our times, especially for people living on the edge, makes the demanding common task the rebuilding of community. That is, the holding of spaces that are “hospitable to the soul”, that allows for folks’ humanity more deeply to emerge. So it is that we make these GalGael trips or non-religious pilgrimages to Iona, to see what might be found there.



Stepping ashore on Iona

This was the 6th GalGael trip the Iona. For our funders especially, this report will share from our four-day experience together over 22 – 25 April. We go from Govan to Iona because it’s accessible to Glasgow. It gives people who rarely get out of the city a wonderful journey, including boats to both Mull and Iona. It lets us get to know each other without the usual pressures of the workshop, and to share food and long walks (on which, it should be said, we never get lost). The proximity to the Abbey and village make it good for those amongst us who have limited physical mobility. Iona’s Christian and pre-Christian history naturally allows us gently to explore what “spirituality” may or may not mean. The presence of the Iona Community and the Abbey that George MacLeod rebuilt in the 1930s, partly with unemployed people from Govan, makes for a welcoming connection.

Circumstances meant that John MacLean was able generously to offer us the use of the Green Shed (formerly Iona Hostel) for three nights, albeit with a lower number of people than before because it has been converted into luxury self-catering. This year we had 16 spaces – six new trainees, six seasoned volunteers three staff members and myself (Alastair) on the board. One of our people had to drop out at the last minute, so we became 15.

Last year, our sub-theme (if I might formalise it like that) looked at GalGael's path of recovery post-Covid. It was about team rebuilding. Many of our people continue to suffer as a consequence of Covid. Some, with bereavements. Others, with long Covid. What has hit some of our people especially hard has been the rash of community facilities that were closed and never re-opened. This places a greater emphasis on GalGael as a place where people can come to for a bit of human contact. Arising out of that, some come with their loneliness, woundedness, confusion, depression and other mental health problems. For this reason, we made this year's sub-theme to share around how we recognise and support one another in carrying life's difficulties. In a nutshell, how as an organisation and especially as a volunteer group might we respond to people's *suffering*.

Just before we left for Iona, our premises were hit by a what turned out to be a 3-month closure order from the Council. A neighbouring building, not ours, was found to be unsafe. We were prevented from access while its demolition took place. That has now been completed, and at the time of writing we have just moved back in. The disruption meant that there was not the usual level of planning together for Iona. As such, this report will show more of my hand as the trip's organiser than is usual. Although we had follow-up meeting after we got back in the Clyde Community Hall, this report also bears my mark more than might be usual, as we have all – myself included – been heavily caught up since we got back, as the report's lateness might indicate.

1. What we did - Outwardly

Outwardly, we travelled by minibus and van to Oban, took the ferry to Mull, drove across to Fionnphort and then ferry over to Iona. As we had 2 people with physical mobility difficulties, we were granted a permit by Argyll Council to take the minibus up to John's place at the north end. The weather was very good. We cooked meals together, had a bonfire on the beach, gazed into the stars and had conversations late into each night. We made a pilgrimage down to St Columba's bay, starting at the Abbey and Nunnery and pausing to reflect on significant places as we went, drawing especially on some of the wonder stories in Adomnan's biography of St Columba. The most able-bodied of our cohort walked right round the rugged south-east coast to the marble quarry and its grove of ancient oaks. That particular expedition made for ten miles walking. It was meant to be eight, but *we did not get lost*, we just went over the *Sithean Mor na h'Aird* immediately to the north of the quarry – the Great Faerie Hill of the Heights.



Pictures by Gehan, Eddie (this one), Brian and me

For any who might think that I put too much of the Christian into this year's report, let it just be said - *we communed* - and we were lucky it was not 7 years we were detained. Those who wanted more duly sprinkled themselves at the Well of Eternal Youth the next day.

We were not able to connect as much as we have done in the last 3 years with the Iona Community.

This year, we were later in the season. The island and its staff were both busy and our folks wanted to make use of the longer days and good weather outdoors. The Community, however, was very kind and accommodating. They invited us all to lunch, but it was not going to fit with our walking plans. I was asked to give a talk in the book shop, and this led to a connection with [Jesse Mawson](#), a young Australian prison chaplain. He and his partner Cherry joined our first evening's discussion, and their introductions to themselves most wonderfully opened out our theme. Jesse shared about his ways of listening to people in prison. Their humanity. The spiritual depth and capacity to support one another that he has found in some of the prisoners who come to talk with him. A good sense of what he shared can be glimpsed from his [poem here](#).



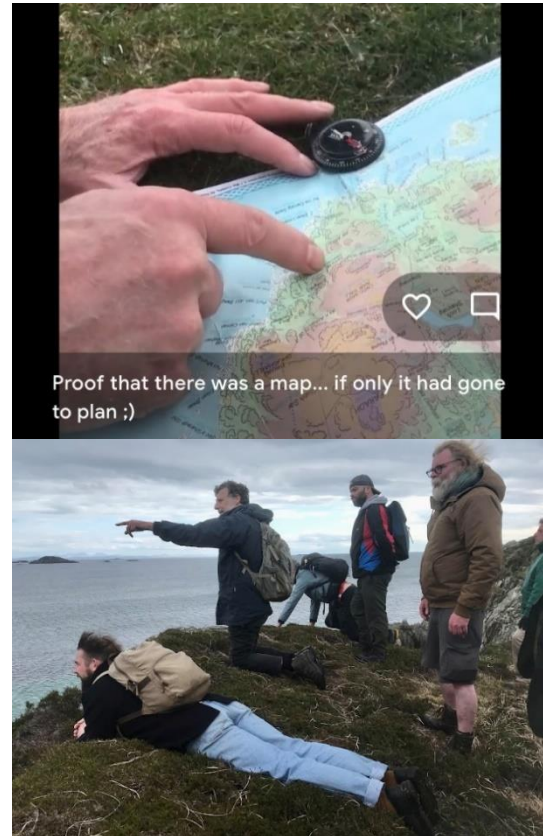
Jesse (front left) and Cherry (right) with GalGael

After we go back from Iona, I went to the Iona Community's AGM in the Pearce Institute. The McLeod Hall was full with well over 100 people. I took a fleeting opportunity to give a 1-minute verbal account of our visit and appreciation of the Community, just to help to anchor the Govan-Iona connection. David Lees, one of our staff, has been in discussions with Ruth Harvey the Community's leader (daughter of Molly & John Harvey). She welcomed us last year, with our visit being featured on the cover of their magazine, *The Coracle*.

Here are people's responses, drawn from discussion sessions on Iona and in the Clyde Hall. Some comments that were also made privately have been added, and all are given anonymously.

- I don't regard myself as a spiritual person but there's something about getting to Fionnphort and just looking across and seeing the island ... and it's amazing.
- I don't regard myself as a spiritual guy but there's something about going to that island – we each take something away from it.
- It doesn't matter if you're spiritual. I got to know people I didn't otherwise know.
- We were outside of our usual work context, so the work was simply to be together, and making community was the work.
- The extra day and being further into the season than before made an extra difference.
- To get out and get to know everybody. If you've got problems so has everybody else.
- The whole island seemed more alive at this time of year.
- Qi Gong and Tai chi on the beach.
- I had the best three nights' sleep I've had all year.
- We went to church on Sunday, and there you see proper workmanship in the Abbey.
- What got me yesterday was the amount of humour and love for each other.

- If you give out the humour you have to be prepared to get it given back to you.
- It was sheer laughter. So much that we cried. To see xxx laughing after all he's been through, that made me happy.
- We had a good wee walk yesterday – a helluva walk!
- Even getting lost!



On the Road to Marble Quarry
(it's one thing to point the way, quite another herding cats ... who make rude comments!)

2. What we did – Inwardly

Because we had an extra day this year, the programme did not have to be tightly structured. On the first evening we touched base. The main themes were touched on – spirituality, community, suffering, cohesion, GalGael vision, etc. – and this was helped by the sharings from our serendipitous Australian guests. Above all, people just wanted to mellow out and enjoy themselves. As our biggest funder is the John Wigham *Enjoyment* Trust, such was eminently appropriate. Themes that came up in our discussion sessions included:

- Time and space for reflection and being together.
- Away from the city, I realise the way the world could be.
- No TV for 2 days! But it's OK, we're a different group.
- I'm appreciating being present and realising the wider ways I've been un-present.

- The demanding common task [of our work back in Glasgow] is part of it. But also, just being here, just appreciating the space for togetherness.
- A chance to feel part of GalGael as a community and to be able to gather my thoughts. Magic!
- St Oran's was very special. I didn't get a feeling of the spiritual veil coming down the way people talk about, but the way we worked together, not as individuals, and created ways of being together was wonderful.
- I don't know how you define "the spiritual". But to hear Gehan singing in St Oran's! Was that spiritual?
- Something special happened. I'm not spiritual but
- I'm not very spiritual, but I like being with people who are.
- Time to spend time with good quality souls.
- I could have gazed into those stars all night.
- The old hands set the course for the new ones.



3. Concerned with the Blossom

As mentioned, the closure of our building in Govan meant that, in consultation with our 3 staff who came on the trip, I played more of a role than I might otherwise have done in structuring the trip's content. To deepen the theme – suffering, and our responses to it – I shared a Hugh MacDiarmid poem that was written around 1960, "Reflections in a Slum". I handed out copies and played a recording of the piece being read by the poet himself in 1969. Hearing it read by him in such a strong Scots accent brought it home from Paris where it is set. Listen to it at: <https://bit.ly/3PktLfe>.

Reflections in a Slum

A lot of the old folk here — all that's left
Of them after a lifetime's infernal thrall
Remind me of a Bolshie the 'Whites' buried alive
Up to his nose, just able to breathe, that's all.

Watch them. You'll see what I mean. When found
His eyes had lost their former gay twinkle.
Ants had eaten *that* away; but there was still
Some life in him . . . his forehead *would* wrinkle!

And I remember Gide telling
Of Valery and himself:
'It was a long time ago. We were young.
We had mingled with idlers
Who formed a circle
Round a troupe of wretched mountebanks.
It was on a raised strip of pavement
In the boulevard Saint-Germain,
In front of the statue of Broca.
They were admiring a poor woman,
Thin and gaunt, in pink tights despite the cold.
Her team-mate had tied her, trussed her up,
Skilfully from head to foot,
With a rope that went around her
I don't know how many times,
And from which, by a sort of wriggling,
She was to manage to free herself.

'Sorry image of the fate of the masses!
But no one thought of the symbol.
The audience merely contemplated
In stupid bliss the patient's efforts.

She twisted, writhed, slowly freed one arm,
Then the other, and when at last
The final cord fell from her
Valery took me by the arm:
"Let's go now! *She has ceased suffering.*"

Oh, if only ceasing to suffer
They were able to become men.
Alas! how many owe their dignity,
Their claim on our sympathy,
Merely to their misfortune.
Likewise, so long as a plant has not blossomed
One can hope that its flowering will be beautiful.
What a mirage surrounds what has not yet blossomed!
What a disappointment when one can no longer
Blame the abjection on the deficiency!
It is good that the voice of the indigent,
Too long stifled, should manage
To make itself heard.
But I cannot consent to listen
To nothing but that voice.
Man does not cease to interest me
When he ceases to be miserable.
Quite the contrary!
That it is important to aid him
In the beginning goes without saying,
Like a plant it is essential
To water at first;
But this is in order to get it to flower,
And I *am concerned with the blossom.*

Hugh MacDiarmid

Bolshie, Bolsheviks; *Whites*, white Russians (Czarists); *Gide* & *Valery*, 2 French writers; *mountebanks*, charlatans; *Broca*, a French anatomist & vivisectionist; *indigent*, hard-pressed.



It is a difficult poem. Folks asked for definition of some of the terms, words that I too had also had to look up. It opened deep discussion, focussing at first on the circumstances of the struggle of the woman who is being made to perform for others' entertainment, but then to the point of using it: the punch line, "*And I am concerned with the blossom.*" The italics are the MacDiarmid's own emphasis. What does it mean for us to water the growing plant in one another, to help others to flower, to be concerned with the blossom? Here are some of the responses.

- It's not a poem as I know a poem. It's like a story. A story out of a book.
- Poets remind us of many ways of experiencing.
- It's not right to focus on the suffering and then just walk away.
- A sensationalist way of understanding suffering doesn't acknowledge the way we've created it by rewarding greed, the media, and so on.
- People hang around to watch the struggle – it sells newspapers.
- We'll see struggle but then walk away. But love is for a lifetime.
- Even how we talk about love [is something to be thinking about].
- We had a talk yesterday about time. To continue to blossom, people need time.
- Capitalism has taught a controlled use of time. We need nice times.
- Time itself has been captured. [One agency] talks about having "enough stock in the system" – meaning unemployed people who meet with their criteria. Stock!
- Poverty = stock = good livings [for some].
- PEOPLE ARE NOT A PROJECT.
- For people on the streets and with addictions, the capitalists give support to the agency that can "do the job" in the shortest time.
- They [the system, or agencies within it] see it as "people need to be fixed", as if there is no problem with wider life in society.
- The illusion is perpetuated [of the social system fixing the problems of a capitalist society] ... but it damages people.
- Iona helps us to understand our work as being about community, which takes GalGael deeper.
- [Coming to Iona] has given me a new sense of purpose and determination to get out, instead of just sitting in the house all day except for going to the shop.
- Coming here I was talking all the time in the van. But I was reflecting last night that going home I'm going to have a lot to think about.
- I don't think I've ever smiled and laughed so much in my life before.



Tree of Life – Iona Abbey Museum

That journey home carried on. I have heard some very profound personal testimony in the month after we returned.

4. The Road to Emmaus

On the Sunday morning, one of our participants wanted to go to the service in Iona Abbey and I went with him. The sermon was delivered by Rosemary Power who was staying with the Iona Community. She was leading a week focussed on her book, *Image & Vision: Reflecting with the Book of Kells*, and she took as her text the story, “On the Road to Emmaus”. Oddly, my wife Véréne had been back in France at her parents’ place over Easter, and, although both sides of the family are of Huguenot provenance, she had spent a few days on retreat at a Catholic convent. One of the nuns had asked her to read the lectionary reading of the day, the Road to Emmaus. She had not done something like that before, but the connection that she had with the sisters had made it feel fitting.

I was therefore puzzled as to how Rosemary was using the same text but at a later date than normal. Over a cup of tea later on, she chuckled that she’d made a mistake. So it was, that Emmaus was planted twice into my mind, but there’s a third to come.

The story that’s found in Luke 24:13-35 tells that after the judicial execution of Jesus, two of the disciples were walking to the village of Emmaus. All seemed lost. They were dispirited. Then a stranger comes amongst them on the road. He asks what they are talking about. They describe the brutal events at Jerusalem. And then, their eyes are opened, and they realise that the stranger come unawares is Christ, the living presence of God amongst us.



GalGael is delighted to report to Funders that some of our participants took the “spirituality” very seriously



Accompaniment - many roads to Emmaus

We touched just briefly on the Emmaus story in our GalGael discussion. Very briefly. What does it mean to walk alongside those who have lost hope? What, to be a presence that is “concerned with the blossom”? It was just a minor point. After all, only 2 of us had been at the Abbey and while we go to Iona, the GalGael is not a “religious” organisation. However, just before midnight on our last evening I came back from the fire on the beach. Three of the others were sat around the table. I checked my phone, and saw that an email had come in from the Rev Richard Frazer of Greyfriars Highland Church in Edinburgh, a church that also runs the Grassmarket Project which was influenced by GalGael.

Until 2019, Richard was the convener of what used to be the Church & Nation Committee, the political committee. His email sent a piece that he’d just drafted for *Life and Work*, the Church of Scotland’s magazine. I read it out at the table. It is no exaggeration to say that we were astonished.

The piece is now published in the June edition, as “Hope Rekindled” (pictured below). In it, Richard tells wrote about the inspiration that he had drawn from having walked a little of his life in the presence of the GalGael’s co-founder, Colin Macleod.

Every time I visited the GalGael, there were always stories about identity and belonging that Colin shared. Building boats and learning to sail them as their Gaelic ancestors had done proved to be transformative for people as they reconnected with a lost spiritual history. To reclaim that ancient culture and spiritual narrative was at the heart of ‘craic’. He knew that every person was a child of God, a person of profound worth and value, but life and circumstances could get in the way of that....

Colin was also rarely without a mug of tea in his hand, and ... as I absorbed the atmosphere he created, I could not stop thinking about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Two troubled and downhearted disciples ... then in a story about their native culture they realise they have encountered ... and their hearts ‘burn within them’. I witnessed a great coming to life in the GalGael....

So it was that for the third time in a month – Vèrène’s account, in the Abbey, and now with this email – the road to Emmaus rose up. And so, not to watch the suffering of others as a spectacle, a participation in everyday executions, but to accompany one another. To walk and be walked with on the road to Emmaus wherever we might find it. To water MacDiarmid’s plant with cups of tea. To be “concerned with the blossom”. That was how this year’s Iona trip came together.

Hope rekindled



The Rev Dr Richard Frazer

The Rev Dr Richard Frazer recalls the gifts of a friend in inspiring and transforming communities.

"It's Church Jim, but not as we know it!"

That is a twist on the famous line from Star Trek as Dr McCoy describes an alien life form to Captain Kirk.

Not long after I came to Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh in 2003, I was becoming friendly with a wild, radical man who lived in Govan. Sadly, in 2005, he died from a heart attack at the outrageously early age of 39. I miss him still, but his vision goes on inspiring me.

His name was Colin Macleod, the 'Bird Man of Govan'. He acquired that name during a protest against the extension of the M77 that involved the destruction of many ancient trees in Pollock Park. He was an environmental activist and community builder, but he was much more than that, he was one of the most profoundly spiritual people I have ever met, though he was wary of churches.

He founded an organisation called Gal Gael, helping people in Govan to reconnect with themselves and their spiritual identity. It was a community blighted by years of industrial decline. Learning boat-building skills, they worked to build a Birlinn, a replica of the galleys that carried people around the western fringes of Europe a thousand years ago. For Colin, we are all the descendants of Columba and those that had spread the good news of Christ during Europe's Dark Ages.

Every time I visited the Gal Gael, there

were always stories about identity and belonging that Colin shared. Building boats and learning to sail them as their Gaelic ancestors had done proved to be transformative for people as they reconnected with a lost spiritual history. To reclaim that ancient culture and spiritual narrative was at the heart of Colin's 'craic'. He knew that every person was a child of God, a person of profound worth and value, but life and circumstances could get in the way of that.

Colin was also rarely without a mug of tea in his hand, and as soon as anyone arrived, the kettle would be on and hospitality would go hand in hand with the stories.

As I absorbed the atmosphere he created, I could not stop thinking about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Two troubled and downhearted disciples head off to Emmaus on the first Easter Day. They are perplexed, fearful and life has taken a shocking and violent turn with Jesus's brutal execution. Broken by events, along the way a stranger comes and engages them in a story about their native culture. Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises.

Then, as they share hospitality, they realise they have encountered the risen Christ and their hearts 'burn within them'. I witnessed a great coming to life in the Gal Gael amongst people beleaguered by poverty and a feeling of alienation.

“Then, as they share hospitality, they realise they have encountered the risen Christ and their hearts ‘burn within them’.”

Personhood and hope rekindled in the mixture of storytelling and hospitality.

Colin was a true prophet, a wild, shamanic voice in the wilderness. He was achieving what we in the church often fail to achieve, as our communities can sometimes be too respectable and intimidating for those on the edge, blighted by life. Re-imagine the church! It is what the Spirit is summoning us to do in these lean times. We could learn a lot from places like the Gal Gael.

'It's church Jim, but not as we know it'.

Here is what the Gal Gael say about themselves:

"To work together and demonstrate that more humanity is possible in the world. This is demanding graft, but for us, it is where hope is made possible" ■

The Rev Dr Richard Frazer is minister at Edinburgh: Greyfriars.

5. Budget and Thanks to Funders

We had 5 sources of funding this year. These are what made what I have described here possible:

- £10 per participant able to contribute towards food (£140 collected).
- An Edinburgh family, long familiar with and supportive of GalGael's work, who gave £500.
- The John Wigham (Enjoyment) Trust, a small Scottish Quaker trust that gives grants specifically for what's written on the box. Their trustees provided what is a large grant for them: £1,600.
- The artist Maeve Gillies, who gave the £500 profits from selling a piece of her silverwork.
- Gift Aid on one of the donations, £125.

2	Donor old faithful Edinburgh	500.00
3	Donor Maeve Gillies Stone Eagle	500.00
4	Gift aid on a donation	125.00
5	Donor John Wigham Enjoyment Trust	1600.00
6	Participant food contributions	140.00
7		
8		2865.00
9		
10	Expenses	Direct
11	Accommodation 3 nights	750.00
12	Ferry fares incl vehicles	241.40
13	Vehicle fuel	90.30
14	Vehicle hire	1461.06
15	Notebooks/pens/books/inks	52.20
16	Food for self catering	500.00
17	Meals on ferries	383.99
18		
19		
20	Total direct costs of trip	3478.95
21	Balance	-613.95

Our available funds were £2,865 - £191 per head for the 15 people for the 4 days. However, we had major problems with getting a minibus. It was after Easter and therefore into the tourist season. I'd been so busy I'd left it late to make the booking. We ended up having to pay about £1,000 more than we should have, going to NationWide rentals instead of to one of our usual local hire outlets. Overall, we came in just slightly under budget except for this item, which left us about £600 out of pocket. This will be drawn from elsewhere in GalGael general funds.



6. Stone Eagle and the Superquarry Squash Blossom

Maeve's contribution was the profit on the sale of her piece of art jewellery, *Superquarry Squash Blossom*, this being a style of Native American necklace based on squash or *askutasquash* flower of plants of the pumpkin, melon and cucumber family. The backdrop was the 1994 Isle of Harris superquarry public inquiry when I brought the Mi'Kmaq First Nation war chief and sacred pipe

carrier of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, to testify in the Harris superquarry inquiry. With headlines like “Stone Eagle flies in to stop superquarry” it made a bit splash in the press and TV news. As well as speaking in Harris, he went to Eigg to add fuel to the land reform struggle, and to the fledgling GalGael at the Pollok Free State.

But there was a dark side. As I tell in *Soil and Soul*, he had been ripped from his family at an early age and sent to a mission boarding school run by nuns. Many first nations people were deeply scarred in childhood by this forced attempt at cultural assimilation, to “take the Indian out of the man”. The knock-on patterns of emotional, physical and sexual abuse have led to massive problems and loss of trust in the current generation of indigenous leadership. There have been government and church inquiries as the scale and impacts of the policy continue to unfold. First Nations people speak of “decolonization therapy” as they struggle to uncover and recover from what Ross describes as the residential schools’ “power to destabilize entire communities long after the last school has closed,” and how this is now being addressed through “decolonization therapy”. I like to acknowledge that my own denomination, the Quakers, were complicit. The schools were seen as progressive in their time. In Kansas, Oklahoma and Nebraska, such cultural re-education was even called “the Quaker Policy”.

Maeve’s necklace takes inspiration from Chief Stone Eagle’s story, seeing it as a wider metaphor for cultural healing in our times. It recognises both the light and the “shadow” in us all, in potential if not in actuality. On one side, the silver is inset with white stone that symbolises the light, this being the anorthosite “moon rock” from the would-have-been superquarry mountain. On the other, it is inset with black stone symbolising the dark, this being the hornblende gneiss from the foot of the mountain’s slopes.



The dark and the light – Maeve Gillies – exhibited at the An Lanntair gallery, Stornoway, 2021

Her necklace was exhibited in Lewis and Harris before it was purchased by a collector. Pictures and news reports, including a BBC TV feature, are linked on [her website](#). The Isle of Harris distillery which hosted the Harris exhibition organised a public discussion between her and me. We discussed individual and cultural healing from the knock-on effects of trauma, in North America and in Scotland. The event, “[By the light of the Moonrock](#)”, can be listened to at the link given here.

In advance of the event, my friend Sulian sent these words that were read out. Walk with him on his journey, for whether with an indigenous or a Christian spirituality, or both, we walk together on our twisting roads to Emmaus.

“My heart has not healed from my huge mistake. One thing I’m happy about is how the residential school and the church are now being brought into the light of truth. I am very pleased that the Creator has allowed me to live long enough to see this happen. Thank you *nitap*. I’m am so very proud of the great work we did in saving your mountain, and saving our mountain.... I’m humbled to have rode on your victory wagon, *nitap* = my friend. My heart flys with Colin [MacLeod of the GalGael] ... and you in this very important thing we all created. Please keep me posted. Please excuse me, I suffer from what is known as chemo fog. I don’t email much or other computer things I used to know about. I’m not even sure if you’ll get this. I will ask a dear friend to see if I’ve done this correctly. Please my love and respect to you and [he names a member of the family that were hurt].”



Stone Eagle, Isle of Harris, 1994

And so, *Superquarry Squash Blossom*. And so, “concerned with the blossom.” Only as I wrote this report did the significance strike me – that perhaps Maeve’s art had brought MacDiarmid’s poem to mind. The power of unconscious symbolism? Or, as George MacLeod used to say when he was the Church of Scotland minister at Govan Old. Perhaps he said it not so much with tongue in cheek as from experience: “And if you think that’s a coincidence, may you have a very boring life.”

7. Iona my Heart – Training for Transformation

This autumn, Maeve Gillies will be launching [a new line](#) of jewellery together with the Iona-based and island family-connected artist, Mhairi Killin of [Aosdàna](#). The work of both women reopens flows of meaning from *dùthchas*, our ancient heritage, to speak to our condition in modern times. I have worked with Mhairi on [Re Soundings](#), a project that turned military shells back into bells of the Celtic era. But sadly, the 1990s saw the term “Celtic” fall subject to [mockery](#) in some circles. Partly this “deconstruction” was a backlash, mainly from archaeological and linguistic scholars to “New Age” cultural appropriation and distortion of their field. As one prominent Hebridean “Celtosceptic” told me, he has little time for those who come to take the more endearing aspects of our spirituality, but neither want to know about nor rectify the brutal social history of landed power that still alienates our people from their native lands. But deeper, [Celtoscepticism](#) was also sharply driven by interests with an aversion to spirituality, and especially, to mysticism. It served an unholy alliance of forces, on the one hand, of conservative religion; and on the other, of secular materialism.

The wells have now run too dry for too long. It is time to reclaim that spiritual *dùthchas*, heritage, as set out or recorded by such as Columba, Adomnán, Alexander Carmichael of Lismore, and written in

Iona's stones themselves. Maeve and Mhairi name their new line of design *Ì Mo Chridhe* - Iona my heart. The phrase is from Saint Columba; and according to Adomnán (3:23), his dying words were: "Love one another unfeigningly. Peace. If you keep this course ... God, who strengthens the good, will help you, and I dwelling with him shall intercede for you." In *Dark Mountain Journal* I describe a former Abbey warden's account of such: an essay called [God Carry Me](#). The *Ì Mo Chridhe* range stands explicitly in the Iona school of silversmithing that was established by Alexander and Euphemia Ritchie. Both their families were rooted in the neighbouring Isle of Mull, and the inscription above the library door in Iona Abbey requests the reader to "remember" them, for having "together revived the Celtic arts and crafts on this island." Along with such luminaries of the human spirit as the planner Patrick Geddes, the artist Phoebe Anna Traquair, the ethnographer Alexander Carmichael and the "crofters' friend" Professor John Stuart Blackie, the Ritchies were a part of the Celtic Revival.



'Training for Transformation', Pearce Institute, 1998 (Colin Macleod & Tawny far left, Sr Mary top centre, Gehan with Iona and GalGael)

The family tree shown in E. Mairi MacArthur's book, *Iona: Celtic Art*, mentions a South African branch of the family. One of that line, Anne Hope a granddaughter of George Ritchie Thomson, co-founded the influential *Training for Transformation* programme. Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire and liberation theology, this played an important role in the liberation struggles of southern Africa. Through a then staff member of the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund,

the Notre Dame sister, Mary Kilpatrick, we held a training session with the GalGael in 1998. Vèrène (my wife) has worked closely with Anne and her co-worker Sally Timmel in South Africa, and through these links Training for Transformation has today become central to community empowerment and cultural reconciliation work in the West Papua province of Indonesia, and its recently established bilingual [Papua Transformation](#) website.

It's amazing to follow that foliated knotwork and see how the blossom - set in silver, stone and prayer in Iona - connects to all the world. To see also how it played through Maeve's work into this year's GalGael trip to Iona. *Today, we need a revival of the Celtic Revival*. For as the Ritchies said:

It is very strange that even in our art schools, where all the classical arts are represented, and rightly so you will not see a single example of the best Celtic art.... It is our inheritance, given to us to enrich the present, mellow from the hand of time... If culture is the embodiment of the best aesthetic sense, then here, in the Celtic school, we have its highest expression. Therefore we claim as the very best art training for our schools, the study of those exquisite Celtic forms. They will teach the scholars the first principles of all good design – proportion, spacing, harmony... The application and practice of them will certainly be an education in itself. (MacArthur, p. 30).



Future Trips - GalGael and the Iona Community?

John MacLean of the Iona Hostel, now the Green Shed, together with our funders has made these past six trips possible. But post-Covid, our two visits have been transitional, and the Iona trip is not planned to happen again in the same format.

Might there be an affordable alternative? In one of our early trips an attempt to connect with the Iona Community by us all going to one of their evening services in the Abbey did not work out well. In short, there was a conflict of worldviews and especially, of social class. But, in the past four visits that has changed. We have at times used the Michael Chapel for our own type of sharings, with some of the Community joining in, and last year there was a wonderful sharing where the Community backed a birthday cake to celebrate GalGael's 25th anniversary. A picture of their group and ours is on the Community's magazine, *The Coracle*.



8. George MacLeod on the Iona-Govan Connection

At present, the MacLeod Centre on Iona is partly mothballed pending refurbishment. However, there has been some discussion between our staff and Ruth Harvey about GalGael possibly making use of it, perhaps with some work exchange, and hopefully these ideas will be explored in the coming months. The Community has moved its offices back into Govan, and it would be wonderful to see the connection with GalGael grow (including through Taylor Plett's review). Here is how George MacLeod prefaced his book, *We Shall Re-Build* (1944), written in the darkness of the Second World War.



“This book is dedicated in continuing affection to the people of Govan, who were the first to understand that the Iona Enterprise was no departure from our work but an attempt to extend that work to the Church at large: *especially* to the thousand Govan households – who gave the bookcases surrounding the walls where this is written and who taught the author more than all the books together, excepting always what One Book taught us both.”

In *We Shall Re-Build*, George dispelled some “lingering misunderstandings” that the Iona Community might be “a romantic throwback” and not “concerned with modern needs”. The main work of the Community should be “in the difficult places on the mainland and not on some far-off island”. However, he qualified this by adding that not for nothing are a few weeks to be spent each summer back on the island. These, to reflect back on the mainland. For, “*It is what to do there*, in the modern situation, that alone draws us together for a very short period on the Island, to set our compass.”

“I could have gazed into those stars all night,” said one of our participants. “The old hands set the course for the new ones,” said another. That is why the GalGael Trust values taking compass bearings from Iona. Such is the “spirituality” – in a very loose sense of the word – that we seek in our short time of *togetherness*. A time of profound *enjoyment*. For we *are concerned with the blossom*.

