

2014 Harris Mountain Festival

Roineabhal

Introduction... ..

The keynote address of John M. MacAulay, boat builder, Gaelic tradition bearer and church elder of Flodabay, Isle of Harris, at the Harris Mountain Festival, Tarbert, Isle of Harris, 13 September 2014. MacAulay was elected Chairman of the Quarry Benefit Group that was set up by Harris Voluntary Service to evaluate the benefits, or disbenefits, of the proposed superquarry.

I can say that I lived through, and survived the ‘stone age’ experience of a Public Local Inquiry, PLI, into a coastal superquarry planning application. I had always enjoyed the hills of South Harris, and indeed North Harris, but after being immersed in the rigours of a PLI

I was given an even greater respect for the wholeness of our landscape.

A new sense of values emerged, and not just for the visual aspect of our landscape, but for the diversity of life which is dependent on those hills for their existence, including our own.

The hills of Harris are enshrined in our ancient history, and our precious culture and heritage, that are celebrated in poetry, songs and folklore. There is a powerful biblical correlation here that touches all of us when we look to the hills in awe at their ever-changing beauty. The ‘high places’ since the beginning of time have been a source of spiritual strength, and, a place of refuge. Those hills will live forever in the memories of all those who leave, or have left our island.

Roineabhal, at 1500 ft in height, is not a mountain in the technical sense that to be so it must be over 2000 ft. above sea-level, but it did become a mountain in more ways than one during the course of the PLI, which also produced a veritable mountain of paperwork. There is no such defining characteristic in *Gaidhlig*, a relatively small hill can be called a ‘*beinn*’.

However, it was sufficiently large to attract the attention of various mining establishments since the outbreak of WW11, when a quarry was opened on Sletteabhal – the south-eastern flank of Roineabhal. This was for the extraction of pegmatite which was used in ceramics, and in the manufacture of very high grade optical glass used in aircraft bomb-sights and in submarine periscope lenses. This was a unique and valuable part of the war effort. Work stopped there at the end of the war, but the distinctive scar and waste material is still there for all to see.

The type of rock which attracted subsequent ventures was anorthosite, classed as one of the best concrete aggregate materials available, and the vast scale of the proposed operation was such that the open site could accommodate the whole town of Stornoway – including the Marybank quarry. Initially, to most Harris folks, a quarry, any quarry, was similar to what was then Roddy MacAskill's quarry at *Ceann an Ora*. I'm only trying to paint a picture of what we could have ended up with had it been allowed to go ahead. Scary, to say the least, but yet Redland suggested that the finished quarry would become a tourist attraction with coastal cliffs six times the height of the White Cliffs of Dover!

We would have lost forever what is possibly the single most attractive hill in South Harris, with its distinct diversity of flora and fauna, and in particular, the significant areas of dwarf juniper on the slopes of Beinn na h-Aire – classification H15, and is probably the largest extent of this species on the whole island.

During the rather boring course of the Inquiry, Colin Campbell QC acting for SNH jokingly proposed he would pay for drinks to anyone who could make a reference during procedures to Star-Trek. In the solemnity of the Inquiry one of the SNH team suggested that if you looked down from the Star-ship Enterprise you would be able to see the pearls of H15. Next week the SY Gazette had a headline "Inquiry hears of Kirk intervention", and so a celebratory drink was secured.

Another diversification, if you can call it that, was suffering the corruption of our *Gaidhlig* place-names, to the extent that the Redland team resorted to allocating numbers to the lochans surrounding the application area. One memorable name frequently corrupted was that of *Beinn na h-Aire*, which was pronounced as Ben a Hairy.

Community discussions about the superquarry brought lots of people together to contemplate the future for Harris, and one thing which stemmed from this was the creation of Harris Development Ltd. Sparked off by Ian Callaghan, the proprietor of Scarista House, and looking to the social and economic development of the island, regardless of the outcome of the quarry permission. A board of directors was established with part of its mission statement to include the 'conservation of culture, language and the natural environment, and where appropriate, to maximise on their potential for economic development'

.HDL has been a success story, stimulating small scale development and opportunities for new business on the island. HDL's involvement with the North Harris buy-out is surely one of the headline projects.

The current building of a distillery on a select location in Tarbert is also partly due to an earlier scheme by HDL to provide a site in the village for a Harris Tweed Centre which did not come to fruition at the time, but is now a reality due to the efforts of one entrepreneurial local family.

So we can see that the spirit and the heart of Roineabhal has been protected from destruction, and is right now being actively channelled into empowerment and motivation for the good of the whole island community.

The true value of any mountain lies in its wholeness, and as such can support sustainable development in many different ways. This week of exciting events hosted by the North Harris Trust is but one of them. Small scale renewable energy, whether from wind or water, is another one, and all are achievable without lasting damage to the environment.

Most of the big landowners have long since woken up to the fact that having a mountain on your estate can be a huge money-spinner, but without having sufficient care for the landscape as we can see from large scale wind-farms sprouting all over Scotland.

Locally we can easily satisfy our island's needs, whilst still enjoying the beauty of God's creation and being able to share it with the many visitors whom we welcome to the Isle of Harris.

John M MacAulay.