



from a study by Angus Smith Photographic

Iain Crichton Smith is one of the most celebrated and challenging writers in contemporary British literature. A poet, novelist and dramatist in both English and Gaelic, he is also a distinguished critic whose essays have a wide circle of admirers. Now published together for the first time, his essays enable us to see the range of his interests and concerns.

As a Gaelic speaker Smith is intensely aware of the recession in his native language and of the threat to that culture's well-being. Nowhere is that concern more coherently expressed than in his previously unpublished autobiographical essay 'Real People in a Real Place' which opens this collection. The poetry of his fellow Scots poet Hugh MacDiarmid is another abiding interest, one which he explores with great felicity and feeling. Other poets whose work interests him and about whom he has written with grace and intelligence are George Bruce and Robert Garioch. Above all it is poetry and the matter of poetry that commands his interest and it is that intellectual concern which dominates this fascinating collection.

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TOWARDS THE HUMAN

IAIN CRICHTON SMITH



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TOWARDS THE HUMAN SELECTED ESSAYS

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This PDF file comprises Iain Crichton Smith's two essays, "Real People in a Real World" and "Between Sea and Moor". It is long out of print and has been posted here because "Real People in a Real Place" is of such seminal importance to the New Scotland. I would urge that consideration be given to reading it together with material from philosophers from the other side of the world that I have also posted onto the third party resources index on my website at www.alastairmcintosh.com/general/resources.htm. What Bernard Narakobi (Papua New Guinea's High Commissioner to New Zealand) and Utula Samana (who was, I don't know if he still is, PNG's ambassador to the United Nations) say respectively about the claim of right of indigenous people and the elemental nature of relationship to the land expressed in the spirituality of place seems to me profoundly resonant. It was from my two terms in PNG - 1977-79 and 1984-86 that I first learned how to read and understand my own culture properly, and that then fed powerfully into my work with land reform and community. I wonder what I.C.S. would have made of that? By sheer coincidence I chanced to be seated beside him at a lunch around 1998, shortly before he died ... but at that time I was sadly too ignorant as to the importance of his work to have been able to take proper advantage of the occasion. Alastair McIntosh

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Real People in a Real Place

... The difficulty is not alone a want of native moulds; it is rather the want of a foundation upon which to establish them. Everywhere in the mentality of the Irish people are flux and uncertainty. Our national consciousness may be described, in a native phrase, as a quaking sod. It gives no footing. It is not English, nor Irish, nor Anglo-Irish; as will be understood if one thinks a while on the thwarting it undergoes in each individual child of the race as he grows into manhood. Though not quite true, let us take it that the Irish-born child is as Irish in his instincts, in his emotions, as the English child is English: the period of education comes on: all that the English child learns buttresses, while it refines, his emotional nature. Practically all the literature he reads focuses for him the mind of his own people; so also does the instruction he hears. At a later stage if he comes to read a foreign language he seizes what he reads in it with an English mind. He has something of his own by which to estimate its value for him.

How different with the Irish child! No sooner does he begin to use his intellect than what he learns begins to undermine, to weaken, and to harass his emotional nature. For practically all that he reads is English—what he reads in Irish is not yet worth taking account of. It does not therefore focus the mind of his own people, teaching him the better to look about him, to understand both himself and his surroundings. It focuses instead the life of another people. Instead of sharpening his gaze upon his own neighbourhood, his reading distracts it, for he cannot find in these surroundings what his reading has taught him is the matter worth coming upon. His surroundings begin to seem unvital. His education, instead of buttressing and refining his emotional nature, teaches him rather to despise it, inasmuch as it teaches him not to see the surroundings out of which he is sprung, as they are in themselves, but as compared with alien surroundings: his education provides him with an alien medium through which he is henceforth to look at his native land! At the least his education sets up a dispute between his intellect and his emotions. Nothing happens in the neighbourhood of an English boy's home—the fair, the hurling match, the land grabbing, the

priesting the mission, the Mass—he never comes on in literature, that is, in such literature as he is told to respect and learn. Evidently what happens in his own fields is not stuff for the Muses!

—Daniel Corkery: *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931)

To grow up on an island is to grow up in a special world. Many of the books that I have read on the Hebrides, however, make this world appear Edenic and unreal: others suggest that the islander is a child who appears lost in the “real world,” and even invent for him a language that was never spoken by anyone. It is easy to assign the islander to this misty, rather beautiful world, and leave him there if one first of all succeeds in making that world unreal, and its inhabitants unreal, off the edge of things, a noble savage with his stories and his unmaterialistic concerns. After all, is he not a Celt and are the Celts not meant to be rather vague, impractical, poetical, not at all like “us,” who succeed in both admiring and patronising the natives, simultaneously accepting that it would be nice to be poetic (and after all the islanders are nice) and also believing that such niceness is not after all suitable to the world in which we live.

These books do not take the islander seriously as a real person in a real place: he is the being but not the person that we meet on holiday when we are released from the cares of the admittedly imperfect but thoroughly twentieth-century world from which we come. Thus the islander is seen as the pawky ferryman whom one meets at the entrance to the enchanted land of summer, when the country to which he belongs is beautiful and slightly hazy, a place for a holiday. After this interlude, the real world with its constant grind and envy and ambition is waiting for us, but it is nice to think that the islanders exist behind and beyond it, as a haven beyond the edge of the sharp rocks which await us. The islander is not a menace to us, he is the tame feed for our happy comedy, he makes no demands. Why should he? Does he not have after all a beautiful place in which to stay, that blue morning of the world in which he doesn't have to work too hard, in which he actually welcomes the slightly silly but, of course, really superior tourist.

The visitor does not admit that he himself is slightly silly, that is only part of the game. If he were to think that, in that environment, then the islander would be a threat to him (which he is not), he would become a real person (which he is not). To admit that he is a real person would immediately place him in the centre of the world from which the tourist has come, with all the difficulties and treacheries that such a world contains.

To see him as an individual would surround him with the real pathos of the real person, with the envies which surround the tourist himself. No, the islander must not have materialistic concerns, or if he has they must be transformed into comedy, as in the film *Whisky Galore*. The real desire for that which he has not got, which everyone feels, must be dissipated in clouds of whisky: the islanders must become little children who have no lust for possessions as corrupt as that of the mainlanders, but are simply enacting a play for the benefit of the stranger. And this can be best done by inventing a language for him which will itself be as ludicrous as the language given to the Red Indians in Westerns. Such a language (with its “whateffers” and similar infusions) was never spoken by an islander, but that does not matter. It is a language which he would speak if he knew how. At any rate it is a method of differentiating him from those who have a real language and can speak it. It would after all be too ridiculous to have to learn Gaelic, the real language of the islander, as English is to the tourist. The very fact that the islander needs to speak English but can't is in itself a source of patronage. It does not seem to occur to the tourist that the islander can speak perfect English, as far as perfection of English can be said to exist. The tourists do not hear this grammatical English, so conditioned are they to expect a broken one.

In this way the islander is labelled, surrounded by mythology, so that the meanest tourist can feel himself superior to the brightest islander. After all, if the islander were bright, in the sense that brightness is considered important, how could he possibly stay in the islands? To be a native must surely mean that he could not have made it elsewhere. Nor does the tourist see how ridiculous it is to think that he has any superiority to the natives, many of whom have travelled the world, having been forced to do so. No, the islander must be considered as having always lived in this enchanted unreal world, with its mountains and its lochs and its sunsets. To admit that he has chosen to live here, after living in other places, would immediately smash the image, it would mean that he has chosen not to live, for instance, in the place the tourists have come from and that he refuses to admit that theirs is the real world. And how could they then patronise him? How could one consider him the unmaterialistic child who has succeeded in remaining where he is, free of ambitions and corrupt emotions by simply being who he is, the eternally innocent.

And, of course, the tourist is wrong, for the islander, just like anybody else, is concerned with ambition and all the other emotions that corrupt the inhabitants of the world. He too desires possessions, he too wishes to do well for himself, for if that were not the case he would not be human. Nor does it occur to the tourist (in the same way as it does not occur to the white Australian who despises the

aborigine) that he himself would find it more difficult to survive in the conditions in which the islander has to live than he would in his own place. For it cannot be emphasised too often that the tourist meets the islander in the summer when the land is more enchanted than it would normally appear, and it is with the islands in the summer that many travel books deal. For the summer is the period when we relax from the hard grind of the rest of the year, when returning energy makes us see the world in a new light, as if it really is not at all as bad as we had thought it was, as if it is truly a gift. Then the tourist sheds his worries as he travels into the centre of this world, he meets with what he hopes to meet, the one who is more innocent than himself, who seems to live in an eternal summer, who is forever at play.

Nor does he look behind the face of the man whom he meets, nor does he see the irony which is patent to the islander. For the islander regards the tourist as one who lives on the surface of what he sees, and the tourist, on the other hand, while seeming to admit this, at the same time knows, really knows, that his world is more gritty, more real, and therefore he can afford to make fun of himself, as if he were in a wonderland. But this is only a pretence, and a form of superiority, for if he were to admit for one moment that the islander could seriously make fun of him, what would become of this lovable wonderland? It is because he cannot conceive that the islander can really make fun of him that he can afford to appear so vulnerable. After all, laughter does not belong to the real world.

He would also refuse to admit that the world of the islander can change. It remains for him a perpetually unchanging world since he does not see beyond the mask that he has himself constructed. He would be staggered to realise how much the world of the islander has changed in its inner workings. To confess that this is so can only be predicated on the assumption that it is a real world, just like the one from which he has come. And if he does admit that it has changed, if he once sees a glimpse of the other world beyond this happily dancing one, then he becomes angry. It is as if this enchanted world has betrayed him, as if this world which in any case was never as he had thought it was, showed a face which is not all that different from the world which he left. This explains why the world of the islander is often attacked by those who once loved it, in a way that they would never attack the outside world from which they have come. Such people are like those who have left behind them the enchantments of Communism which was never in any case what they had thought it was.

The tourist, however, does not realise that he is in a similar position to the islander who has left the island, usually for economic reasons,

in his youth. The islander who is living in the city is like the tourist in that he does not want to acknowledge change either, he wants the islands to belong to the world which he too has created, one of happy boyhood, perpetual summers, nice, kind people, lack of ambition and adult emotions. He too wishes to return to a place where doors were never locked, where crime was unimaginable, where real sorrow was not to be found, from which death had been banished. He too returns in summer, and when he sees television sets in the houses, regrets their presence as if the islanders had somehow let him down. Why, the islands are just like the city. How could the islanders have betrayed him so profoundly, so cheated him of his dream?

Thus the tourist and the exiled islander belong to a similar species, each deceiving himself, though the reasons are not exactly the same. For the islander, exile leads to bad poetry; for the tourist, who has no experience of real exile, it leads to a dream without substance. But the exile has in fact lived in the islands and his self-deception is the greater. He may even be happy in the city though he may try to convince himself that this cannot be true, for if it were true what would happen to those sunny boyhood days, that stainless summer? He surely cannot be happy in the city, for that would be a denial of the logic of nostalgia. But because he is a human being there is no reason why he should be happy in the city: thus he too does a disservice to the islander by making him unreal. And his poetry also does a disservice by referring to an eternal perfection of childhood, for the poetry of exile is nearly always bad. He exists in what Sartre might call "bad faith." Yet why should he? There is no reason why as a particular person he shouldn't feel happy in the city: there is no law which states otherwise. Yet he feels guilty about it, as if he has committed some treason against his race.

It is true that when he first went to the city he might have felt it menacing and inhuman, and at such moments he might withdraw into the world of childhood which might by contrast appear innocent and precious. But as he conquered the city, as he became self-confident within it, why should he still feel guilty? Why should he feel as if he had committed the greatest of all sins, the betrayal of his own country, the country of illusion which in self-defence he created and which he can now throw away. In remaining inside his guilt and his illusion he equally does a disservice to those who stay in the islands and who wish to do so, and for whom the islands is their reality.

Another kind of disservice is to think that the islander really wants to leave his island. It is only stubbornness and tradition which make him stay, irritating governments, making subsidies essential. Such a view arises from the fact that governments see only what they want

to see, they do not understand that they are dealing with real people and that, like all real people, they wish to inhabit their own homes. For the bureaucrat, the tourist, the exile, the islander is not a real person, and therefore it is not easy to see him at all. He is invisible in the misty place he inhabits.

Why should the islander not be allowed to see his home as a home, as the place he wants to be in? There is no doubt that for most of us home is the place where there are resonances which never again are to be found elsewhere, though that is not to say that these resonances belong to a dream. Home is the place where we feel right, wherever that home may be. For the exile it may be the city, though he refuses to believe it, for the islander it is the island where he lives. There is too much guilt associated with the islands, and this guilt is the more exaggerated the more one thinks of them as an unreal place. The islands were never an Eden from which we were thrust by the sword of economics: it may have been a home but it was never an Eden. Nor is this to say that we don't blame the insensitivity of bureaucrats and others but rather to say that though it was made difficult for us to live at home, that home was never in itself a paradise, any more than the desert was for the aborigine.

To grow up on an island is a special experience, but it is not an ideal experience. It is one of many possible experiences, it is a real experience; it is chosen by those who choose, and for those who do not choose it is the same as any other home, with certain difficulties.

When one reads poems like the "Canadian Boat Song," one sees that the exile has accepted the judgment of the imperialist who has dislodged him. Who, he asks, will fight for him in the future, asking the wrong question, for it was the interior colonisation of the islander that made him proud of being a soldier. There is nothing here but dream after dream, each entwined, like a Chinese box, within the next. And all those exiles who come home from Canada in "Scottish Week" or whatever, what are they coming home to? To a theatre that has been carefully arranged and plotted to receive them, to a dream that has been carefully scripted. It is possible that those Canadians and Americans have come to the midpoint of their lives only to find that they are alone, as all of us are alone, and that what they spent their lives seeking no longer has any savour for them. And so they return to their roots only to be exploited by those who clear-sightedly exploit the world of the islander. Those who exploit them are not the islanders, for the islanders see them in their fancy kilts as comic: and yet they perhaps see too the human pathos that has made them what they are. The islander does not exploit that impossible dream which they follow.

When the islander's own brother or sister comes home from

America or Canada he welcomes them, but he does not welcome them into a dream. He knows that they left because they *had* to leave or because they wished to avoid facing up to the responsibilities of the island world. He is not easily deceived. He knows that much has had to be abandoned to earn the success such exiles have earned, and he does not gloat if they return as failures. For the failures are those who have had human aspirations also, and perhaps set off into another dream, that of Australia or Canada. When he sees them coming home he sees only the failure of another dream, and is tender with those who, while failures, refuse to admit that they are so. For home is for everyone who wishes it to be their home. But he sees also through the hypocrisy of the successful who think that they can have both worlds, the ruthless ambition of the one, and the unreal, stainless happiness of the other.

It is the dismissal of the islander as if he were not intelligent, as if he did not judge as other people judge, that is the most irritating thing of all, and the cause of the central error. The islander reacts to human situations as everyone else does. It is true that like everyone else he wishes his brother to be successful, but he does not think that success is everything, nor is he easily conned by the photographs of prosperity which are sent home so regularly, sometimes as Christmas cards. There are relative degrees of success after all, and success at the expense of those who stay behind may not be highly regarded. Success is always at the expense of someone, and it is not the case that the islander's reaction is always: "Look, he has proved in the outside world that all islanders can be successful if they choose." There are other criteria of success: it was not the richest individual that the islanders always looked up to, rather they looked up to the schoolmaster and the minister, whose success is not to be measured in money. Nevertheless change is always possible, for the islander, no more than other people, remains fixed, and it may be that money, naked money, will come to be considered important. To live is to change and the islander lives in the real world which is the real world of all of us, and the arts of that world will exert an influence on him, as perhaps he himself exerts an influence on others.

It is not that the returning exile passes judgment on the islander who has remained behind: the islander too exerts his judgment on the exile as he does on the tourist. Though he may not speak much, that does not mean that he does not think, and it is perhaps a certain kind of vulgarity that disgusts him most, like the aristocrat who talks too loudly as if the whole world were his parlour, and his interests the central ones. The Highlander has a concept of *cliu*, which roughly means "reputation," and such a concept implies that a man who has it may be considered useful to the community, not glorified, but

respected. The blatant colours of the returning exile, however preposterous, are too bright for him: he wishes to be known as one who belongs to a community and who does service to that community.

To be an islander is to inhabit real space on a real earth. He too has to make choices in the real world where he is: he too has an attitude to that place. He has his proverbs, his philosophies, the cemeteries and cradles of his hopes: his tasks and his loves: his language. Behind the judgment made on him by the bureaucrat is the idea that his world is in some way irrelevant, without challenge, an evasion: as if men at all times were always making decisions when in fact they are making similar decisions, once the local variations have been accounted for. If to live on the islands is to be different, is to die on the islands also different? Is it a different thing to count one's housekeeping money on the islands, or is that too sordid? In fact the islander has to make the hardest choice of all, since, for instance, in education he has to ask himself, "Should my daughter take French at the expense of Gaelic?" For if there is no Gaelic left, will not the islander live in a disappearing landscape, as an Englishman would if his language were slowly to die?

It is true that more than most the islander is caught in a net of contradictions, imposed on him by history, and that to live from the centre of what he is, is far harder than for those who have been luckier with their geography and their history.

The problem of language is obviously of the first importance. If the islander were to speak English and still inhabit the island which he does in fact inhabit, what would he be then but an unreal person in an unreal place? If he were to wake one morning and look around him and see "hill" and not "*cnoc*," would he not be an expatriate of his own land? What if an Englishman were to waken one morning and see that "tree" had been transformed to "*arbre*"? He would have the psychology of the exile who on landing in Nova Scotia were to see a Red Indian and hear his strange language which he would be unable to understand. For we are born inside a language and see everything from within its parameters: it is not we who make language, it is language that makes us.

Thus for me to go home to my island and talk to my Gaelic-speaking brother in English would be to establish a distance between us that would not just be linguistic but social. Gaelic is the language of the islands, and not the broken English of the island Red Indian as heard, for instance, in the books of Lilian Beckwith. And for Gaelic to die would be for the islands to die a more profound death than economics could bring. The imperialism of language is the most destructive of all and indeed we can see this when we admit that a word like *clìù* in

Gaelic is really untranslatable, implying as it does a community, and not the reputation of, say, a film star or pop star.

To feel free as far as man can, and to begin from that freedom, is what we all wish. For an Englishman, secure in his own world, to study French literature does not seem to be a form of treachery: and yet because of the guilt that his conditions impose on him, on the bright as well as the not so bright, for the islander to be influenced by T. S. Eliot or William Carlos Williams instead of by Duncan Ban MacIntyre is almost to be a traitor. To write in English becomes a form of treachery and this is so because Gaelic does not have the strength to allow explorations into language beyond itself. If Gaelic had that strength then for someone from within to write in another language would appear the most sublime form of self-confidence; to introduce new ideas, new concepts, would be a service which would be analogous to the introduction into English of foreign words, fresh philosophies. Thus the creative writer is constrained by the weakness of his own language, and his adventurousness becomes treachery. He too is forced to choose in a real place and his choices reverberate down his life story.

A broken land broken by history and the actions of men makes all choices into snakes that have multiple intricate windings. They rear up out of that supposedly naïve greenery and their beauty is their treachery. It is not true that the writer who comes from such a place belongs to any misty twilight. The best Gaelic poetry has always been the clearest and the sunniest and the most humanly penetrating. The choices for the gifted islander are more poignant and frequent than they would be in a more settled land, for each choice appears to involve allegiance or disloyalty.

The fact of the islands stronger than any other is that of exile: it is that which casts its guilt continually backwards like the rays of a setting sun. The islander has never had the chance of staying where he is: history has condemned him to departure, and afterwards to the choice of whether or not to return. Thus the home becomes for him more important than it does for others and the temptation to idealise it immense and almost forgivable. When the home is shifting continually then one feels compelled to name it, and sometimes to do so falsely. The fact of the exile leads to the lie which is intended to comfort and to fix the home. Thus there is talk of the warmth and the honesty and the love: thus we find a line like:

There is no *ceilidh* on the prairie.

For the *ceilidh* represented the community that joined together in entertainment created from within itself. Stories would be told, songs would be sung. As Derick Thomson has pointed out in an interesting

poem concerned with the destructiveness of a certain kind of doctrine, when the fire was moved from the centre of the floor then the magic ring was broken.

THE SCARECROW

That night
the scarecrow came into the ceilidh-house:
a tall, thin black-haired man
wearing black clothes.
He sat on the bench
and the cards fell from our hands.
One man
was telling a folktale about Conall Gulban
and the words froze on his lips.
A woman was sitting on a stool,
singing songs, and he took the goodness out of the music.
But he did not leave us empty-handed:
he gave us a new song,
and tales from the Middle East,
and fragments of the philosophy of Geneva,
and he swept the fire from the centre of the floor
and set a searing bonfire in our breasts.

(trans. Derick Thomson)

In this poem Thomson is making a profound statement using fire imagery to describe the destruction of a community. The fire became internalised as hell, which was once the fire, common and warm and storied, which nourished the island house. Exile, too, took the fire from the middle of the floor and put it searing in the breasts of the exiles.

To be an exile is to be a double man, living in a new world while still enchanted by the fantasies of the old. In Nova Scotia the new exiles gave the names of their old homes to a new land: thus Campbeltown, Loch Lomond, and so on: it was as if the islander wished to waken in the morning surrounded by the village from which he had sailed, as a child by well-loved dolls in a new house. But the gauntness of the day showed that the names were after all not spells but crutches. In the beginning they were the nomenclatures of men's sanities, anchors, but later they were transformed and became part of the country to which they now belonged, for new skin had grown over the old wound.

Whenever one visits Canada or Australia one feels that pathos of the exile, the failure and the success. The exile sings Gaelic songs (sometimes knows more verses than the native does) and his dream

is unbroken. But it is always anachronistic, the home has left him behind, and this because it belongs to a real land in a real place. As he moves towards it, it recedes forever as the water did from Tantalus.

Thus the songs sung at modern ceilidhs have nothing at all to do with those sung at the old ceilidhs. The new ceilidh has now become a concert, with "stars" in kilts twinkling from platforms in great halls in Glasgow or Edinburgh. The songs have become nostalgic exercises, a method of freezing time, of stopping the real traffic of Sauchiehall Street, a magic evocation of a lost island in the middle of the city. The traditional ceilidh which was held in the village ceilidh house was a celebration of the happenings of the village, it was alive, it was a diary and a repeated record. The ceilidh as it is now practised is a treacherous weakening of the present, a memorial, a tombstone on what has once been, pipes playing in a graveyard. It was not of such ceilidhs that the poet wrote, "There is no ceilidh on the prairie." He was thinking of the traditional ceilidh, the guarantee of a society. And since the word *céilidh* could also mean a visit, he meant that in that vastness there was no traditional visiting. To contrast the ceilidh with the prairie was to contrast the small with the gigantic, the human with the inhuman. It was to contrast a community with a void.

For when I was growing up on the island of Lewis people would go into houses without knocking, doors were never locked. This is not nostalgia but truth. I was in other people's houses as often as I was in my own. Houses were not locked since stealing was an inconceivable crime. Indeed crime was itself inconceivable, for to commit a crime was forever to lose one's *clìù*, one's reputation, one's status in the community, and that would last, because of the communal memory to the end of time. The judgment was indeed to the fourth generation and beyond. There was a policeman but there was no need for one. Why should there be when the community itself passed judgment? A judgment what was more rigorous than any that the law could impose. I know in fact of no crime (punishable by law) that was committed by the community all the time that I was growing up there.

It is this sense of a community that one thinks of most when one compares the island with the city. It was because of the community that the fact of exile became so desolating and frightening. For to become an exile is to become an individual on one's own in a world in which there is no community. It is not leaving the island or the village that is the terrible thing, it is leaving the community. There are, of course, two sides to the community, the positive and the negative. The positive is the sense of warmth, settledness, that it gives, the feeling that one has a place, a name, that one will not be consigned to the chilly air of pure individuality. It is the sense that what one

belongs to is a sustaining force, that one is held up in its buoyancy as a swimmer in water. When one is in harmony with the community then one's identity is reflected back from the others by a plain mirror and not by the exaggerating or attenuating mirrors that one sees in fairs. To be in the community is to be in a home of which one's real home is a microcosm: thus it is that when one goes out into the wide world one comes back to receive the admiration of the community, if one does well.

During the war when I was growing up any boys who were home on leave were expected to visit all the houses in the community: and when one goes home to the island one would be forever despised if one stayed in a town hotel rather than in one of the village houses. To return home is not simply to return home, it is to return to a community, for one's gains or losses to be assessed. The community is the ultimate critic, not easily taken in, with its own system of checks and balances. To be part of the community is in a sense to belong to everyone, to be open, vulnerable, to be willing to abide by its judgment.

In the old days, too, much of the work was communal. Thus the carrying home of the peats was a communal activity. One helped others and was in turn helped by them. The day of the carrying home of the peats was a meeting of the community in an exchange of stories, badinage, gossip. One's place in the community was precisely known and its judgment in general was a practical one. The events of the community were immortalised by the local bard, humorously and pungently. The community was as delicate as a spider's web: if you pulled one part the rest would tremble. It was a feat of almost instinctive engineering.

It is far more difficult to live in a community than to live in a city, for in a community one must have an awareness of the parameters beyond which one cannot go. For the islander to enter the city was to enter a totally new kind of world which in many cases caused "culture shock," not so much because of the demands that the city made, but because of its impersonality, because one was no longer sustained by communal force.

One of my clearest memories is at the age of seventeen arriving at Aberdeen Railway Station and finding sitting there a beggar in black glasses with a cap in front of him on the pavement and in it a few pennies. Such a sight would have been unheard of in an island community. The beggar's blatant economic demand and his overt helplessness, this individual throwing himself on the mercy of chance, would have been a contradiction of everything that the community represented. The shame of dropping out of the community to become pure individuality in a void would not be a concept that a community could sustain.

The city would have been the most terrifying place of all to a person brought up in a community and whose name was known to everybody. Its events would appear inexplicable accidents, its individual pains would demand a return to those warm characteristics of the community which would appear as almost unbearable nostalgia. For if there was ambition in the community it was thought that ambition should be in its service: thus the minister and the teacher were the archetypal figures rather than the rich, since their work was in the service of the community. Nor was it I think clear to the community, with its clarity which one later achieves, that the teacher was in fact educating the children out of the community.

A poem like the following shows quite clearly what the results of nostalgia would be when the islander confronted the city. It is called "When I was Young" and was written by the nineteenth-century Skye poetess Mary Macpherson:

I wakened early, with little sadness,
on a morning in May in Òs;
with cattle lowing as they gathered,
with the sun rising on Leac an Stòir;
Its rays were shining on the mountains,
covering over in haste night's gloom;
the lively lark sang her song above me,
reminding me of when I was young.

.....

It brought to mind many things I did then,
though some eluded me for all my days,
going in winter to waulkings, weddings,
no light from lantern but a burning peat;
there were lively youngsters, and song and dancing,
but that is gone and the glen is sad;
Andrew's ruins overgrown with nettles
reminded me of when I was young.

When I walked by each glen and hillock
where I once was carefree, herding cows,
with happy youths who have now been banished,
the native stock without pride or guile,
the fields and plains were under heath and rushes
where I often cut wisps and sheaves of corn;
could I but see folk and houses there now
my heart were light as when I was young.

(trans. Derick Thomson)

The contradictions in island life become dizzying and prolific precisely because we are dealing with a community which has been broken by history. Such historical accident does not argue against the idea of community, though it is quite possible that in the same way as trade unions arose to protect the indigent, communities are strongest when the level of economic power is not high.

What we are concerned with are the human gifts that the community endows, and the principal one is the sense of security that it gives, that no city can give, unless one joins artificial substitutes such as clubs of various kinds. The strength of the island community is that one is born into it. When I was growing up there was no work done on the day of a funeral, for death was respected. To withdraw from the community was the greatest sin that one could commit. At all costs the balance must be maintained, the miraculous and precarious balance. To be forced to live in a community and not be part of it would be a sort of refined hell. Thus it is that I have always believed there is a point even in our schools when they can be a community, and when that point is transcended there is an increase in crime among those who are not named, are not recognised.

As we are talking about a real people in a real place, we have to admit that the community also has its negative side, that is to say it is nearly always conservative and hostile to change. There is a dislike of the person who individualises himself too much, who tries to succeed for his own purposes.

When I left the village community in order to attend the secondary school in Stornoway I felt as if I was abandoning the community. There was a subtle alteration to me in the attitude of my contemporaries who were not taking the road of education but would work on the land or on the fishing boats. Even now when I meet members of the community who have stayed at home there is a slight constraint in our relationship, there is a human distance. I have made the choice, I have forsaken the community in order to individualise myself.

Even when I was quite young I felt this problem in a minor, but for me important, decision. When I used to play football I was asked both to play for the town school and the village school. I chose to play for the village because in a deep way I sensed that my allegiance was to it.

As well as this I was confronted by a language dilemma, for when I was in the town during the day I spoke English all the time, whereas when I came home to the village every evening I spoke Gaelic. All these things seem in retrospect to have been a series of consequences which flowed from an original decision, if one takes a decision at such an early age. I became schizophrenic for, as I have already said,

to have spoken English in the village would have been not a linguistic gesture but a social one. I look back with a pitying contempt at the person I was and remember that when I was asked to write an obituary for a boy who had died in the village I quoted from Paul Valéry. I had myself been taken in by the propaganda which made foreign writing more serious, more interesting, more advanced.

And one of the reasons for this was, there were no children's books in Gaelic which I might have read even if, in my arrogance, I had wanted to do so. Though I was brought up on an island where Gaelic was the dominant language, my reading was much the same as if I had been educated at Eton, rather than at Bayble Public School, that is to say, Penguin New Writing, among whose contributors were, of course, Auden, Spender and MacNeice.

I have already said that the community tends to be conservative by nature. It can also be claustrophobic, in the same way as a family can be claustrophobic, for one is known as the person one is, forever. One's parents are known, one's grandparents are known, one is in an assigned position. When I left the community to go to Aberdeen University, I felt paradoxically free since I could walk down Union Street without anyone knowing who I was. Invisibility became important to me, it was as if I had cast off chains, as the ship does when it leaves harbour. To leave the community was to emerge into one's individuality, into a future which seemed free and unjudged, though of course it was not. On the island I had felt religion as a restricting force, but the fact that I have wrestled so much with a particular kind of religion in my poetry suggests that I do not have the ease to discuss it freely. Religion had been internalised in my personality whether I like it or not and its dilemmas will always be with me.

The contemporary writer who seems to me to have analysed the concept of community most clearly and most perceptively is Donald MacAulay, the modern Gaelic poet. Like Derick Thomson, he has analysed the influence of Calvinism, as in the poem, "Self Righteousness":

They ask of me only
to weep repentance for a sin
that does not concern me
and I shall get in return an alien
freedom I don't understand:
to be drubbed in one thin,
wounding water after another
of their philosophy—
and confidently they would
hang
their washing in the heavens.

(trans. Donald MacAulay)

The poem is, I think, self-explanatory, comparing as it does the new repentant person to freshly washed clothes. More subtle is "Landmark," which contains most fully the windings and intricacies of what an island home means:

There goes the island out of sight
as the boat sails on,
as seen by many a bard
through sorrow and beer
and by others, tongue under tooth,
and tears blinding—
and ill-defined shadow and windows fading.

But the matter is not so simple
to the one who's a yearly pilgrim:
out of returning, sorrow rises
from a region the world has derided.

And, that is not my island:
it submerged long ago
the greater part of it
in neglect and tyranny—
and the part that submerged in me of it,
sun-bower and iceberg,
sails the ocean I travel,
a primary landmark
dangerous, essential, demanding.

(*trans.* Donald MacAulay)

As one listens to the songs in the saloon of the departing ship, one knows that they are composed of nostalgia but also emerge from alcohol. In the first few lines, the poet is concerned with the departing exile, but later he talks of the "yearly pilgrim"—as if the annual return to the island were a religious rite—and it is the one who returns who can compare the world of the island with the so-called real world. The sorrow rises out of the placing beside each other of this picture and that: the exile sees the island in the derisive light cast by the world from which he has briefly come. Nor is the island that he sees on his return the same one as he has left—for when he left he had nothing to compare the island to: now he sees it not with the earlier innocence and idealism but as a mockery of what it once was.

Nevertheless that earlier island, that first innocence untested by experience, has been internalised in his consciousness: it is the "primary landmark, dangerous, essential, demanding." Some of these dangers and demands have already been commented upon. The island

is compared to an iceberg, for an iceberg has more of its mass below the surface than above it. It changes continually in the mind, now larger now smaller, set against the world which lies outside it and yet essentially mobile, lonely, ghostly. The demands of the island are incessant for to leave it is to have convicted oneself of a crime. It is the court of law, the cold iceberg which judges one eternally.

More closely related to the community as such is the poem "A Delicate Balance," which might very well be chosen as an epigraph for the community. This poem is MacAulay's clear-eyed, humane examination of the problem of the community, its ultimate enigma.

You suffered ignominy
and shame,
a butt for slight and mockery—
if you spoke a word
they dived on it
like gannets sighting fish.

You were a sacrificial object
on which your fellows
(it seems to
me) offloaded their burden of sin;
they cared nothing
for the harm
that half a season left you dumb.

But you revealed something else to me—
my knowledge of you was different,
I experienced the tender side of you,
which was warmth
and an elegant tongue;
you were trapped in a condition
from which I learned that men repay
art and tenderness
with derision
and I did not lose from being warned
that a man's reward is not his measure.
. . . The day before yesterday you died;
they let you out by the window;
bareheaded
they raised you on high—
you had a place and respect at last.

(*trans.* Donald MacAulay)

This seems to me to be a profound and interesting poem, dealing with

the negative side of the community, that is the conservative side which will not allow for the particularities of the individual. The person in this poem is a sacrifice to the community, he represents the human cost of keeping the community in balance, he is the scapegoat which keeps the community healthy. And there is no disguising the fact that we find this in all communities, nor, transposed, is it all that different from the treatment a Solzhenitsyn would receive from a larger one. The writer of the poem understands the person who is the sacrifice because he belongs to his own world, that is the world of art and elegance. The community sometimes inflicts an inhuman justice which is revealed in the lines

And I did not lose from being warned
that a man's reward is not his measure.

The closing lines are, however, the most subtle and the most interesting (the line "they let you out by the window" refers to perhaps the narrowness of the doors in the island house). The ironic fact is that the mourners now respect the "sacrificed one" when he is dead, by taking off their hats. They are now able to fit him into a safe ritual which they were unable to do when he was alive. The poem suggests the danger of the community which tends to see people as types rather than as individuals, as conforming, or not, to an unspoken ideology. When he should perhaps have been raised on high when he was alive, it is only death that exalts him now, safe, unthreatening death. And, paradoxically enough, his ideas divorced from his personality may posthumously move the community forward, which they cannot do while he is still alive.

There is no point in romanticising the community for that would be to withdraw into the dream, to deny the existence of envy and jealousy, to refuse to live in a world inhabited by real people. In fact the principle we are concerned with here is on balance the same as we see in the life history of anyone considered a rebel, or "different," as is underlined by MacAulay in another poem about an artist, Pasternak. The poem is entitled "Pasternak for Example" and the imagery used is, as is common with MacAulay, drawn from the community which he himself knew and knows.

You winnow in a contrary wind
living seed out of beard and chaff,
since you have understood that those who hated you
did not recognise
your love:
you prepare seed for planting
since you have understood their inadequacy—
that they consign all seed for milling.

(trans. Donald MacAulay)

Again in his usual subtle manner MacAulay has realised that it is precisely the sacrifice who may have the greatest love for his community, in the sense that he sees its shortcomings and wishes to make it more perfect. The community, however, can only see that love as hate and the individual as hostile and threatening.

MacAulay's poetry seems to me to be a relevant and highly intelligent critique of the idea of the community by an exceptionally sensitive and complicated man who has himself grown up within a community. Nor should this be taken to imply that he has abandoned the community but rather that he sees its possible dangers.

Derick Thomson, unlike MacAulay, sees a possible solution for the broken community in Scottish Nationalism, while not, however, being blindly dogmatic. In a number of poems he is concerned with the forces that have almost irretrievably ruined island and Highland society, as for instance in his poems "The Herring Girls" and "Strathnaver." He will not, however, accept Scottish Nationalism as a panacea which will heal all wounds, allowing us all to remain passive.

Envy will not,
grudging won't,
slanging can't prepare the ground.
"I myself,"
"My own clan,"
"My class" are bandages, I've found.
Neither priest
nor presbyter
nor church can say for us the creed.
New boats will not,
nor will looms,
oil won't give us what we need,
till a new redeemer comes—
Sir Harpsichord MacGillybums?

(from "The Plough," trans. Derick Thomson)

It is true that we have to be very careful when reading Thomson's poetry, for it is often possessed by a wicked irony. Thomson places the responsibility on the shoulders of the Scots themselves—"our own cross on our own shoulder-blades." And in a sense beyond economics, beyond the oil, there it must rest: decisions must be taken open-eyed in a real world which will not give presents without contradictions.

A more resonant poem which arises from the pathos of inner history is "Water and Peats and Oats":

"Water and peats and oats"—
 a word in a stranger's mouth,
 in the throng of the town,
 in the town of the strangers.
 Madness. The foolish heart
 lapping along these ancient rocks
 as though there were no sea-journey in the world
 but that one.
 The heart tied to a tethering post, round upon round of the rope
 till it grows short,
 and the mind free.
 I bought its freedom dearly.

(*trans.* Derick Thomson)

It is this continual brooding on the home which separates the island poet from the English poet, but which may bring him closer to the European poet. It is precisely the incomplete and wavering nature of that home which sets the tongue under the tooth, which makes the poet probe his exile like a diseased tooth. To begin freely from home and colonise experience is a luxury that the modern islander does not have. It is this doubleness we find in much of Thomson's poetry, as in "The Second Island":

When we reached the island
 it was evening
 and we were at peace,
 the sun lying down
 under the sea's quilt
 and the dream beginning anew.

But in the morning
 we tossed the cover aside
 and in that white light
 saw a loch in the island,
 and an island in the loch,
 and we recognised
 that the dream had moved away from us again.

The stepping-stones are chancy
 to the second island,
 the stone totters
 that guards the berries,
 the rowan withers,
 we have lost now the scent of the honeysuckle.

(*trans.* Derick Thomson)

This is not to say that the idea of the community is a negative one. Take this poem called "Cotriona Mhòr":

Your picture is at the back of my mind
 undimmed,
 steady, set
 among the broken images,
 amid the movements,
 untouched by age except the age you were,
 the great round of the face like a clock stopped
 on a Spring morning,
 keeping me to the village time
 with that wisdom
 that flourished without books,
 with the fun, the cleverness-with-words
 that leapt from the heart of the race
 before it was encased,
 before it had the new valve in it
 to keep it going in the new world.
 That is the key to my museum,
 the record on which I play my folklore,
 the trowel with which I turn the ground
 of the age that is now gone,
 the image that keeps control over false images.

(*trans.* Derick Thomson)

Here we have a portrait of a character who belongs to the village. She is set in her wisdom against the mechanical movement of the "outer" world. She is the guarantee that keeps control of the "false images." As often in Thomson, wisdom is contrasted with the knowledge derived from books, for this kind of wisdom is that which is reflected back from the character of the community. Books on the other hand are the works of individuals produced for individuals. Yet the pathos of the poem lies to a great extent in the fact that the music of this world cannot return in the mechanism which threatens it. Nevertheless the picture is ultimately an affirmative one, dominated by the wisdom of the woman whom the poet so much admired.

Another characteristic of Thomson's poetry is the immediate sensuousness with which he can evoke the world from which he has come, and he sometimes does this in terms of feminine imagery, as in "I Lost my Heart to You":

I lost my heart to you at the start of May,
 your thighs were warm,
 firm and smooth, and though you were a maid

your breasts were full,
 beautiful beneath green satin;
 and in the lambs' month June
 I lay upon you,
 and you were not defiled;
 and when July came
 the buds of the plants burst open
 and bloom came on the cotton grass;
 but then came anxiety
 and tears on cheeks,
 and before I knew what to say
 a brown tint spread over the bracken,
 and I could not say—I had not the heart to do it—
 that I had lost the smooth silk of the cotton grass.

(*trans.* Derick Thomson)

Sometimes he thinks of the island as a mother:

The child's way is difficult to forget,
 he rubs himself against his mother . . .

In a long poem called "In the Vicinity of Hol" this sensuousness emerges in detailed pictures:

the cat warming himself
 where the stone was hottest: the lambs leaping
 without knowledge of the snow . . .

or

The boys playing hide-and-seek among the cornstacks
 with the merry heart of evening, and a wind from the sea
 stroking their thighs and backs with a piercing ache.

It is observable that here too Thomson refers dismissively to books:

and I think at times it was not my task
 to be reading books and scraping with a pen
 but to be alive entirely on the food of the eye . . .

His collection *Between Summer and Autumn* is full of this immediacy. Look, though, at the opening poem of the book, called "Clouds":

Waxed bandage on my eye, so that I do not see how you
 have changed, dark island, long missed.

Though I left light-heartedly, in youth's brashness and
 gaiety, my eye on a distant horizon, my steps hurrying
 towards it,

The horizon was only the cloud-base; cloud after cloud
 quenched the sparkle, of the sun on the sea I wanted, of the
 phosphorescent gleam in my heart.

Cloud piling on cloud, tricking me daily, Barvas Hills
 before me, Mèalaiséal in a blue bloom.

Little Mùirneag across the loch, as though I could touch it
 with an oar, the Silver Mount to the south—I need not feel
 depressed.

Bayble Hill beside me here, and Hòl crouching to the
 north—but I went away from them, on a tether, as far as love
 goes from hate.

(*trans.* Derick Thomson)

Part of the reason why I have quoted so much from these writers is that they are not known by many of those who write about the islands, and it seems to me that points can be made more easily by choosing from among the most truthful and sensitive spirits of the islanders, and where better to look than in poetry, where truth is imperative? It is true that in the past, and even now, there are poems drawn from within the community itself which reflect back on the community as they emerge from it, but to choose from writers who are themselves "exiles" is to show that it is not only the facile *ceilidh* that is to be found in the city. Whereas the latter is an attempt to freeze experience and time itself, the poem on the other hand, as it is articulated by these writers, is an attempt at diagnosis, at analysis, at a real living study of the effects exile can have on highly gifted individuals. It is with a sense of shock and shame that we see such energies continually breaking as at an invisible Culloden of the spirit, perpetually falling back on elegy, when they should be building from confident axioms. Part of the intention of this essay is to diagnose the disease which causes this paralysis. Behind the haze of falsity imposed on the islands, both by outsiders and naïve exiles, lies the brokenness which will not allow writers the confidence that others can have, who when they write do not feel their subject matter disappearing before their eyes.

And indeed transposed into another culture we find the heartbreaking agony of a MacAulay poem describing, with the irony only an islander can feel, the anguish of the other islander as "servant." The poem is called "Navigation":

He comes down
 every day
 to where we lie on the beach

stretched out.
He circles us first
taking his time
and then if we're in good form
he eases his bonnet
and blesses the time of day.

He points out with his finger
where the boat sits
empty
gently rolling
its prow beached on the sand:
he raises his hand to the sky
making plain
the benefits derived on such a day
from sailing
on a cool sea.

With light step for an eighty year old
his trousers rolled to the knee
he goes out
grabs an oar
and stands and waits—
an old man who in his life
has learned good manners
and patience—
and who practises cunning.

(*trans.* Donald MacAulay)

Thus when we consider community and the island experience we recognise that it is not nearly as simple as it looks. Nevertheless it can be said that if the laws of history had been different, community can be considered as having more positive than negative aspects. If we were to take an extreme case, it would be worse to be set in the void of New York, than to be set in a community, even though that community may be a hostile one. It may be the case that Solzhenitsyn, by leaving his community and entering another one, is more deeply unhappy than he would have been if he had stayed. For at least criticism from within the community gives one's life purpose and a possible future.

To work harmoniously within an accepting community must be as high a pleasure as is known to man, and the greatest periods in art, as in other activities, occur when this happens. One of the problems of modern man is that he does not have a real home, and for the modern writer that he does not have a real audience, only individuals

scattered here and there, pin-points of light answering each other from space. It is hard for a writer to surrender those resonances of home which speak of a lived past, stones which are memorials to incidents and experiences. Wordsworth, a very wise writer, saw this clearly and indeed "Michael" is a key text for exile and home and alienation, and readily understood by an islander.

The problem of language is, one supposes, the most important one that faces the person who analyses his own experience in the islands, for it is in many ways central to an island experience. As I have already said, for the islander to lose his language utterly would be to lose, to a great extent, the meaning of his life, and to become a member of a sordid colony on the edge of an imperialist world.

The history of Gaelic shows alternating patterns of attack and neglect. There was a period when the language was banned in schools, and when I was growing up there was no Gaelic spoken in the village school even by teachers who were Gaelic-speaking. It was as if an English child were to be taught in French by Englishmen, and to have first to learn French before he could become educated at all.

I cannot now remember how I learnt English after coming to school: Gaelic became a subject on the curriculum in the same way as Physics, or Chemistry, or French. When I entered the secondary school in Stornoway I had to repeat my first year (though I had already done my first year in the village school) because French was compulsory in the secondary school and I had learnt none in the village school. This seems to me, looking back on it now, a bizarre situation and even at the time it was one I resented.

There is no question that a language holds a community together in its various manifestations, and that to have to learn a new language in order to be educated at all is a dangerous and potentially fatal attack on that community and those who form part of it. For the imperialist language is imperiously and contemptuously degrading the native one. Because English is associated with so many of the important concerns of the real world, including education, and because English is the language spoken by "important" people such as doctors, many of them incomers, there rises a deep and subtle feeling that English must be superior to Gaelic, thus consigning the Gaelic speaker to the status of a peasant as the Anglo-Saxon was under the Franco-Normans.

The Gaelic speaker feels himself to be inferior, and his language inferior. He begins to think, for instance, that English literature is more important than Gaelic, that as a cutting instrument for getting on in the "world" English is more valuable than Gaelic, and that since English is the language of the upper classes it has a real relationship to status and promotion. He is doing exactly what the ambitious

Anglo-Saxon did when confronted by Norman imperialism. Thus we find that the language is betrayed by those who live within it and that those who propagandise for Gaelic are considered by a strange paradox to be cranks, eccentrics on the edge of the "real" world, whereas it is they who are reacting against an unnatural situation. It is as if the Anglo-Saxon, by resenting Norman mastery, were showing himself to be unreasonable whereas in fact he was being essentially and naturally reasonable.

What is forgotten is that a language and its traditions are not by any magical transformation made into more important ones as if by absolute and necessary law. There is nothing in English, for the islander, which is superior to Gaelic except in the sense that he has been made to believe that the English world must be presumed to be more important than his own since it deals with "real" issues. Nevertheless for most people the real issues are not those of politics but rather those which are the same everywhere: how they will earn their daily bread, how they are to live. No one world has a greater "reality" than another: language can be used as an instrument of imperialism but the world that it creates is not by definition a better, more important one.

For the writer, for instance, it is not a good thing to be writing in a language which is not truly his own. Nor is it the case that he should accept that English literature is in some sense superior to Gaelic literature. For the person who lives inside that literature, Gaelic literature has its own resources, its own riches, its own way of reflecting the world; and the poems I have quoted, though often constrained by elegiac reflection, show that Gaelic literature can produce work of great consequence. This is done at a cost. Some years ago I wrote a play in Gaelic about the Trojan War and it was felt by some that this was not a suitable topic for a Gaelic writer. I disagreed, and still disagree. There is no reason why the Gaelic writer, if he wishes, should not comment on ideas and events which transcended the Gaelic world. In other words the Gaelic writer should write about the Vietnam War, if he wants to, in exactly the same way as E. M. Forster could write about India. The obstacle is not in principle a real one, it only arises from an inverted principle which has been imposed on the Gaelic world by outsiders: and the islander should not accept such propaganda which does not have the welfare of the language at heart. Why should the Gaelic writer accept the idea that only other writers have access to the treasury of the global past, and that it is not his job to comment on the "real" world?

This is wrong and can be shown to be wrong—just look at how Sorley MacLean, the Gaelic poet, can deal with the outside world, and do so in great poetry as he did in his poems about the Spanish Civil

War. There is no reason why Sorley MacLean should not have felt as deeply about the Spanish Civil War as Auden did, and indeed MacLean could see in the imperialism of Franco a reflection of the imperialism which had imposed itself on Highland history.

MacLean's poems about the Spanish Civil War or about the war in Africa in the Second World War are as good as, and in most cases better than, those by writers who wrote about them in English. The following poem, "The Choice," marries uniquely the love tradition of Gaelic poetry and its balladic intensity with the new material presented by the Spanish Civil War.

I walked with my reason
out beside the sea.
We were together but it was
keeping a little distance from me.

Then it turned saying:
is it true you heard
that your favourite white love
is getting married early on Monday?

I checked the heart that was rising
in my torn swift breast
and I said: most likely;
why should I lie about it?

How should I think that I would grab
the radiant golden star,
that I would catch it and put it
prudently in my pocket?

I did not take a cross's death
in the hard extremity of Spain
and how then should I expect
the one new prize of fate?

I followed only a way
that was small, mean, low, dry, lukewarm,
and how then should I meet
the thunderbolt of love?

But if I had the choice again
and stood on that headland,
I would leap from heaven or hell
with a whole spirit and heart.

(trans. Sorley MacLean)

Indeed, quite as clearly as Auden did, MacLean sees the close relationship between human and political choice and understands that every choice is in a deep way political. It was precisely because of his adherence to the Gaelic tradition that MacLean became a great poet and it was precisely because of his adherence to the Scottish tradition that MacDiarmid became a great poet. It was, for instance, because of this adherence to a Gaelic tradition that MacLean was able to write such a powerful poem as "Death Valley," about the war in Africa:

Sitting dead in "Death Valley"
below the Ruweisat Ridge
a boy with his forelock down about his cheek
and his face slate-grey;

I thought of the right and the joy
that he got from his Fuehrer,
of falling in the field of slaughter
to rise no more;

of the pomp and the fame
that he had, not alone,
though he was the most piteous to see
in a valley gone to seed

with flies about grey corpses
on a dun sand
dirty yellow and full of the rubbish
and fragments of battle.

Was the boy of the band
who abused the Jews
and Communists, or of the greater
band of those

led, from the beginning of generations,
unwillingly to the trial
and mad delirium of every war
for the sake of rulers?

Whatever his desire or mishap,
his innocence or malignity,
he showed no pleasure in his death
below the Ruweisat Ridge.

(*trans.* Sorley MacLean)

There is a directness in that poem, almost a simplicity, which English poetry of the time hardly achieves. The last verse seems to me to have

a justice based on the tradition of the best Gaelic poetry, since the best Gaelic poetry has always been direct and not ornamental or "misty." Indeed in another of his poems about the war in Africa, MacLean can write an elegy for a very brave but not physically imposing English soldier, comparing him to a great Gaelic hero, Alasdair of Glengarry.

It is true that Gaelic poetry does not, like English poetry, have resources of stylistically articulated irony on a large scale and that the Gaelic poet has not, on the whole, been an artist in the same way as many English poets and writers have been. This does not mean that Gaelic poetry is without its own individual power, as shown in the wrought massiveness of the love poetry of William Ross or the Old Testament vindictiveness of Iain Lom. And it seems to me that the Gaelic poetry of today is at least as great as any in the past and is able to deploy greater resources.

If we are to believe in choices then I believe it is our duty to keep clear and facing on the reality another window which is the Gaelic window, and not because that window is quaintly shaped or that behind it we see quaint people and quaint scenery but because we see through it, as elsewhere, the glories and malice and envies and subtleties of mankind. Behind the neglect of Gaelic and behind the neglect shown to Highlanders is the idea that their world is doomed by history, that it has nothing to say to us now that "progress" is leaving it behind. As if anyone who knows anything about the twentieth century could believe this for a moment, for if the Nazis were progressive where would that leave the inhabitants of the Gaelic world? And if the roots of Nazism were not in themselves in the twentieth century, what can one say of a MacLean fighting to defend a disappearing native culture in the deserts of Africa?

The ironies proliferate. And it was MacLean's great achievement that beyond this progress he saw deeper, into the life and death of an individual human being, the dead German soldier seen so clearly with his forelock down about his cheek in the tangled grave of ideology. There is no way in which the Gaelic world can be shown to be inferior to any other, any more than the Nazis could show except by pseudo-scientific theory that the Jew was inferior to the German. In essence, to dismiss the Highlander as being inferior is to make the same mistake as Hitler did: that is, not to see the Highlander as human and real but as a stereotype, a comic target and not an individual with his own feelings.

The island world has been one of exile and disorientation in the terrors of history, and it should be the aim of the government to give it help and sympathy. A confident island world secure in its own language and its own values would be of significance to the state. If money is to be poured endlessly into the British motor industry, for

example, is there no money to keep a whole culture alive? There is no question of saying that money alone will solve the problem but that it would help is evident, and that the British people should take an interest in such a culture would be of the highest significance.

History is not always allowed to happen: if that were the case what is the meaning of Salamis and the battle fought against the Spanish Armada? If one were to argue that economics must take care of businesses and cultures then exactly the same argument as might be used against the Highlands and Islands can be used against the British motor industry. Why is it that the British motor industry must be protected against the power and self-confidence of another stronger culture? One could say, if the argument were to be accepted, that in the "real" world of today the British motor industry is an anachronism and that the Darwinian theory of survival of the fittest should take care of it. But we do not say this, for history is not inevitable.

There seems to me to be no alternative to the proposition that Gaelic-speaking children should be taught in their own language when they first go to school, and that to impose English on children at that age is, and must be, damaging: to go from the colloquial world of the village and into the formal world of education, to go from one language to another where the school is the castle which by its language dominates the surrounding countryside, must be a blow to the psyche, an insult to the brain. To grow up inside a fixed language is a privilege which the islander has not had in recent centuries: he is in fact, and must be, the divided man in the very depths of his consciousness.

Nor should it be beyond the will of the government to propagandise in the opposite direction, to say that it is an addition to the health of a country that such a culture should exist, and freely exist. Deliberate wilfulness on the part of certain members of Parliament in the Gaelic debate on Donald Stewart's Bill made it appear as if the Gaelic language were embarking on an imperialist course and trying to impose itself on Scotland, a notion which is ludicrous.

To remove Gaelic and its speakers from the "real" world must be to inflict damage on that world whether it realises it or not. The urban world which so many inhabit is not in itself an attractive one, and it is quite possible that the contradictions in society itself are so deep that it may not be able to supply its own people with the necessities of life. Nor will anyone be satisfied with the impression of sordidness that he gets from travelling through British cities, the breakdown of transport, the graffiti which shows the aggression of the "homeless," the language of hatred, ferocious and misspelt, the

feeling that one has of an urban world breaking down: the rushing from late trains to vandalised telephones, as if this was a land where people no longer feel at home.

Such a world is not progress, it is the sick turning-back of progress itself, for the uprooted are taking revenge on society by turning against it and writing on walls the grotesque language which is the reality that lies deeply beneath the contradictions of schools and other institutions. Where is the home of the urban dweller now? And if he looks into his mind what does he see but images of aggression and violence, beggary and greed, hatred and envy? One stands at railway stations and stares at West Indian ticket collectors, wreathed in filthy smoke, looking furtive and hunted, without pride.

It is against such a failure that one can set the idea of community, the idea of a culture, and who would care to say that the islanders have turned their backs on a world that is viable and worth preserving?

It is possible that far from the world of the islands being archaic it is a model of a world which might return, though not exactly in the same form. The individual cannot go on forever bearing his alienation and abstraction: for if he will not find a true community then he will find a false one, like the National Front or some other organisation. For it is clear that the returning exiles who may appear comic are searching for that which they have not found, meaning a home, materialism having left them in the middle of the wood in darkness.

The attack on the island world both internally and externally was based on the values of materialism, and now that the possessions and treasures have receded, perhaps forever, such a criticism might seem at the least short-sighted. To learn French in order to enter the ranks of the unemployed is a real paradox.

To write like this is not to join the Eden dream, for Eden never existed in society and was never part of history. To write like this is merely to say that there are and were elements in the island community that are of the greatest value; that we should nourish such elements where we can find them. Though I have admitted that there are imperfections in the idea of community, as in every other human form of society, I know that I would rather have been brought up in Lewis than in the vast derelict areas of some of our cities.

If the island world were securely based then much of the guilt that the islander feels in making his choices would be removed. It would be possible for the islander to leave his island if he wished and still prosper without guilt in another place. It is, I think, interesting that Derick Thomson has translated two poems by Solzhenitsyn in his book *Freedom and the Eagle* (1977), because he sees that the island

problem is, in fact, a universal problem. Do the Russians allow their inhabitants to leave Russia without guilt? If that were so then Russia would be a confident society. There is no real comparison between two such societies in the sense of compulsion and oppression, but there is a deep connection which has to do with exile and love.

It seems to me that as I travel through Britain, as I often do, what I see is a plea for a home, for a name, for attention. It is this that island society has been seeking from the outside world, though in its own community such things are possible and do exist.

In a society which is still concerned with class to a great extent, it is important to say that the community in which I grew up was a classless one. It is possible that, seen from the outside, the islanders might be characterised as belonging to a peasant society. Seen from the inside, however, the islander does not think of himself as a peasant nor does he consider himself as being set in a particular social scale. Indeed questions of that nature have never really troubled him, and when I myself first read the works of the Angry Young Men—and especially those of Osborne—I did not feel that this had any meaning for me. It was later, when I first encountered some of the members of what may be called the English Southern Belt, that I recognised class at all, and was shocked by it, for to believe that a man or woman can be labelled according to income and school seems to me an abomination of the human spirit.

It is true that the islander looked up to the schoolmaster and the minister and indeed, certainly in the past, would cut the minister's peats without taking payment. But the reason why they looked up to these men had nothing to do with class. It was a recognition of their usefulness to the community. Education in particular was respected, not as a method of climbing out of one's class but, to a far greater extent than is common nowadays, for its own sake.

The criterion in such a society always was, not what class does such or such a man belong to, but can he do the things that are necessary? Is he a good fisherman, is he a good teacher, is he a good crofter, can he cut peats, can he tar his house? And, as I already remarked, the word *cliù* is inextricably connected with the community as such. The idea of honour or fame, as concerning above all individual achievement unrelated to community, was not a worthwhile one. Those who had *cliù* were those who conformed to the *mores* of the society and its ideals. The film star who has a high reputation but is morally tainted would not in such a society have *cliù*. The moral parameters were inextricably intertwined with the social ones.

It was I think the case that one might not be able to conform to the demands of such a society, firstly, if one's life were morally unacceptable and, secondly, if one could not carry out the practical

tasks that were the common ones. The loneliest people in such a society would be the impractical people. When one considers the attacks made on the islanders for laziness and inefficiency it would certainly be worthwhile to point to their versatility, their ability, for instance, to build their own houses without expert help.

As one who was not himself practical I admired this versatility greatly, and sometimes my admiration transcended itself and became astonishment. It is true that to be impractical was to be an internal exile and also might lead to a certain amount of ribbing. However, it is possible that such an impractical person might have some other gift to bring to the communal treasury: he might, for example, be a good singer or a good storyteller or he might have a sharp wit. And again this wit was not a "peasant-like" wit but reached a high degree of sophistication. We are not dealing here with a dull, peasant-like society but rather with a highly intelligent one which sees quite clearly what is going on around it and can draw its own conclusions.

True, the islander has an innate courtesy and a lack of aggressive sense which above all is disgusted by any show of grandiosity. He finds it difficult to put himself forward—as if by the act of doing so he was individualising himself from the community—and for this very reason he can tolerate manifest unfairness with a patience that is often long-suffering.

I am not concerned here with a scientific analysis of the islander's character such as one might find in a book of sociology, but rather with describing in an impressionistic manner a society as I found it myself. Such a society is not interested in the aesthetic in any real sense. It has been said, for instance, that the standard of singers in the Highlands is not high but this, however, is to judge the singing in a wrong way. Angus Macleod, a Gaelic singer, sang with great fervour, in a voice from which notes emerged like solid boulders. In my opinion he sang certain songs most lovingly. No purist would ever be able to convince me that Macleod's singing was not beautiful and powerful: the passion of the singing, the solidity of the notes, appealed to a profound resonance in my own nature, and was thus for me the highest pitch to which singing could attain.

The islander, as I have said, is not concerned with the aesthetic for its own sake and is not interested much in modern poetry, some of which does not appeal directly to his own experience—thus it might very well be the case that the poetry of Donald MacAulay or Derick Thomson would not be the sort that he would read. But at the same time he knows what he requires in singer and poet, and that is genuine feeling related to his own concerns. It is true that this might lead to the acceptance of songs which are essentially sentimental—and many

of these songs are about the islands themselves—but that this demand for genuineness is a real one cannot reasonably be denied.

The islander too is not greatly interested in the theatre for the simple reason that in the past he has not been used to one. It is significant, however, that when a play like *The Cheviot The Stag and The Black Black Oil* was shown in island halls it made a great impact. A sparse community will naturally be concerned with issues which closely affect it. In a sense too the poetry of such a society will be characterised as “naïve” in the highly specialised sense that it is not ironically or artistically articulate but will be a response to an event or a situation.

This is a real society in a real world and it will therefore be characterised by the particular reality to which it belongs. To have a strong grasp of that which is around one and to be able to deal with it is surely a virtue: but we do not get the individual brilliances which are characteristic of the urban world and for which much has to be paid. Such individual excellence as we do have is usually exported. It is to be remembered that the poetry of a Baudelaire emerges out of an alienation and loneliness which, humanly speaking, are hard coinage to expend.

The poetry that is best liked will emerge from that society itself and will incorporate its values while even making superficial fun of them: and it must be said that it is unusual to find elsewhere in Britain (except perhaps in Wales) a society in which bards are common, the historians in verse of their villages. Nevertheless a wholly radical attack on the values of such a society would be met with hostility, whether coming from inside or from outside.

The comprehensive nature of education has always meant that a class structure will be absent, and that indeed a concept like class, as has already been said, is wholly alien to such a society. I found when I visited Australia in 1980, that it is the class consciousness of, especially, the southern English which is most disliked, so that in fact the southern English do not see Australia at all as a country with its own indigenous laws, its own indigenous literature. (It is rather like the Claude mirror which gentlemen tourists used to carry about with them in the eighteenth century in order to impose on actual nature the picture of “real” nature which had been sanctioned by art.)

Similarly, Gaelic literature is not seen at all, though we get editions of other literatures, from all continents of the world. It is as if Gaelic literature does not exist. There are in Gaelic literature poems of the highest achievement characterised, however, by concerns and patterns which may not be precisely those of, for example, English literature, and at their best are passionate, lyrical and intense. The idea, however, that life imitates art would be alien to the spirit of

Gaelic literature and even inconceivable. The dandyism of an Oscar Wilde with its close associations with class would immediately be sensed as false. Genuineness is what is demanded of Gaelic literature and though this may lead at times to sentimentality, sentimentalism itself has to be more clearly defined than it has been in the past for one to accept critiques of it without examination.

As I have already said, I can well understand why the poems of a false Eden arose. They are the products of a lost home. If English poetry were to emerge from the “lost home,” it too would be sentimental: a settled society can produce great poetry, and since the nineteenth century especially Highland society has not been settled. The poetry of personal loss is, however, a different matter and who is to say that Hardy is more poignant than the anonymous writer of the following lines:

If Seathan could be but redeemed
the ransom would be got like rushes,
the silver would be got like ashes,
gold would come from the edge of the meadows,
wine would flow like the spring water,
beer would be got like a cool verdant stream;

or the later ones in the same poem:

O Seathan my brightness of the sun!
alas! despite me death has wholly seized thee,
and that has left me sad and tearful,
lamenting bitterly that thou art gone;
and if all the clerics say is true
that there is a Hell and a Heaven,
my share of Heaven—it is my welcome to death—
for a night with my darling,
with my spouse, brown haired Seathan.

(trans. Alexander Carmichael)

Sincerity is a concept which needs refining and studying. In a sense the poetry of exile is sincere. In a sense the poetry that one sees in “In Memoriam” columns in newspapers is sincere. The problem is that poetry of this nature may appear false, exaggerated, and thin. It might, however, be worthwhile to quote here a comment in a review from *Aquarius* on *The Collected Poems of Gavin Ewart*:

These poems eloquently confute again and again the title of one of the last in this collection, “How Tragedy is Impossible.” He does a companion poem entitled “How Life Is Too Sentimental”

which, describing his own and his wife's feelings on the death of their child, finishes with the lines:

And the word 'sentimental'
has come to mean exaggerated feelings.
It would have been hard to exaggerate our feelings then.

As it would have been hard to exaggerate the feelings of those who by necessity were forced to leave their homes and write:

The moon brings to my mind
the many nights we were together

followed by the later lines:

You my love are dearer to me
than my mother who reared me when I was young.

Such deep feeling, however, can lead to pathos as in the lines:

Shawbost is most beautiful to me
where I was reared when I was young,
where are the peatstacks . . .

One of my most surrealistic experiences was to stand once on the deck of a ship sailing to Lewis and hearing an English voice say, "I shall be glad to get home to Bayble" (my own village), and I remembered then that there were many people who never got home to Bayble, among them relatives of my own, no matter how much they might have wished to do so. At that moment was I being chauvinistic, sentimental, unfair? I don't know. The complex of ironies glittered too brightly for me to feel anything other than a sense of desolation combined with the free laughter of the comic which is so closely related to the tragic.

For in such a society contradictions must always abound, and there are so many others that cannot be listed here: and associated with these contradictions are innumerable guilts, the guilt for instance which I myself often feel when I recall that when I was studying at Aberdeen University my mother would have been gutting herring in Yarmouth. It is easy for me to write a poem saying that the blood which I shed in my poetry is like the blood which ran from her gloves on those cold foreign mornings and in that salty light; but that is not sufficient, for it is not an aesthetic fact, nor can it be resolved aesthetically, that one should have to leave home at such an age to do a job like the gutting of herring so far from one's own home.

For these reasons I have been always suspicious of the glitteringly aesthetic. Metaphor can sometimes be used to conceal insoluble

contradictions in life, and Yeats's poem "Easter 1916" did not solve the Irish crisis, it only clarified it. In the end society lives and works outside the metaphor, and to think that the metaphor solves anything except the problems set by the poet would be silly and unrealistic. Beyond the poems of Seamus Heaney, beautiful though they are, the masked men will stand above the draped coffins saluting an empty heaven with their guns.

It is almost as if one wishes that a debt should be paid to the islanders for their exile, and here I shall give a brief portrait of an uncle of mine who became one. At the age of sixteen he ran away to join the Army and later he sailed to Canada. (It was not perhaps with regard to this particular ship that sailed from Stornoway that my mother told me the story of the emigrants leaving after the First World War. As they stood at the railings of the crowded ship they and the people on the shore sang together in Gaelic the words of the Old Hundredth, that music of pathos drifting across the water and the many ironies that separated them.)

My uncle worked building railways, and sometimes did not work at all, and slept in dosshouses where shoes had to be nailed to the floor lest they be stolen during the night. His underwear, like that of his friends, was at last in rags. Many of them died of drink, others starved. He was lucky, eventually reaching Vancouver where he became a Fire Officer at the end of his journey. Latterly he would fly to Lewis, even at eighty years of age, and every week read the *Stornoway Gazette* which he had sent to him from home. When I saw him, and later in Nova Scotia I saw the Scottish names familiarising the exiles with their lost homes, when in Australia I heard of Highland exiles who had drifted into hopelessness and alcohol, I was angered by the waste, the dreadful waste of our island humanity. We are owed—such men are owed—not indifference but at least understanding and care. It is not right that a whole culture should have been treated in this way, that like the Red Indians and the aborigines so many of our people should have had to leave their homes to inherit the worst aspects of a so-called superior civilisation.

People should have a right to a stable home, to their own language, they have a right that work should be provided for them in exactly the same way as British Leyland had work provided. It is not as if the Highlander is lazy or inefficient but, as everyone knows from his own experience, only hope can provide the resilience that life demands. It is as if behind the criticism that is made of them is the idea that they are somehow sheltering from history, who have seen so much of it, far more than the bureaucrats in their offices.

I recall the stormy days on which the islanders went out fishing, when fishing was available. I recall those who left my village in the

last war, so many of them to be drowned in foreign seas which they had only seen previously in geography books. I recall the numbers of young boys who were lost from my own village, and perhaps I might recall those who were truly sheltered in bureaucratic offices. I recall the tragedy of the *Iolaire* when over two hundred sailors were drowned a mile from Stornoway, on a New Year's morning when their wives and children were waiting to celebrate their return. I recall reading of the forlorn carts which carried dolls from the wrecked ship into the town, presents for the drowned men's families. It is not surprising that nostalgia should be their sickness, that from their masts they should remember their disappearing village.

I think of them in Canada hacking down the dark tall trees, clearing away spruce so that they could plant. I recall both the successful and the unsuccessful, the latter who never wrote home because there was nothing to write about. I recall the broken ones who returned. And it is as if a terrible anger seizes me when I think of the many dead, the waste.

There are many who wish to stay in the islands. They wish to stay there just as everyone wishes to stay in his home. They wish to stay there because there they are surrounded by familiar resonances. But how is it possible for them to do so when unemployment is so high, when they who have so very little money have to spend more on their necessities than those who are closer to the heart of civilisation. "The qualities of the islander are those which are not suited to the modern world"—thus the given impression. They are not suited because the islander is in general honest, law-abiding, modest in asking for rights which should be human rights. If the qualities demanded of modern civilisation are slickness, greed, willingness to get away with what one can at whatever cost, aggressiveness and even violence, then the islander is not civilised. And this is not to fall into the trap of the eternal Eden, for it is historically the case that he is law-abiding—one hardly ever hears of a serious crime taking place on the islands—and even in drink the typical islander is not violent and more likely rather to relapse into melancholy and gloom than to strike out aggressively. Indeed one of the most extraordinary sights I have ever seen was a saloon bar on an island boat with islanders singing not drunken travesties of secular songs but rather psalms, and this not mockingly but with passion and dedication and purity.

I recall the fishermen sending fish round the houses in my youth. I recall the way in which the sick were looked after, how the rest of the community would help them with their peats and other domestic needs. I recall the dances at the end of the road on the autumn nights when there was a reddish moon in the sky and nothing could be heard but the music of the melodeon and the sound of the sea. And I shall

not be accused of belonging to the dream when I have already mentioned the flaws which are to be found in the community as in any human organisation. We are not concerned here with a poem but with a life which, though hard, was not bitter.

I recall with a sense of injustice my own fragmented life, the choices I had to make when I didn't realise that I was making them, the losses I endured before I well knew that I was enduring them, the contradictions I was involved in before I knew they existed. And I know that my own life has been a snake pit of contradictions, because of an accident of geography and a hostile history. I envy, for instance, those poets who have developed in a stable society, who can start from there and are not constantly analysing the very bases of their art.

It is no accident that religion—sometimes too extreme in my opinion—has gained power in some of the islands, since if there is nothing much in this life then surely there might be something in a future one. Nor is it surprising that one of the "gifts" of this religion has been a weakening of the will, a fatalism of the kind that George Campbell Hay in a conscious comparison sees both in the Highlander and the Arab. Nor has Derick Thomson been silent about it either when in "The Eagle" he writes:

"It is good to have a touch of the eagle in us
though the lamb's lot is better,
authority is good
though it is good for the soul to submit,
it is good to take wing
though comfortable to be in a fold"—
that at any rate is that the eagle-priest said
reading holy writ from the book of stone.

(trans. Derick Thomson)

Or later when in "The Journey" he writes of the drunkard:

Returning to Lewis,
my heart full with pleasure,
I thought of that first sight
of the Shiant Islands,
Park and Kebbock Head appearing,
and the mouth of Loch Ranish,
Point and the Castle Grounds,
but I missed them in the Bar,
I was so full of joy.

That week at home
there was no time to get sober,

I was plastered from dawn to dusk—
I never saw the Barvas Hills this time—
I was as happy as a dog in its own dump.

And the day I left,
what homesickness!
I took a burst in the Royal,
and if I got aboard I must have slept;
didn't know what to say
When Ullapool Pier came in sight.

Lord God,
when will I see you again, Mount Sion?

(*trans.* Derick Thomson)

And Sorley MacLean writes with much anger in "A Highland Woman":

Hast Thou seen her, great Jew,
who art called the One Son of God?
Hast Thou seen on Thy way the like of her
labouring in the distant vineyard?

The load of fruits on her back,
a bitter sweat on brow and cheek,
and the clay basin heavy on the back
of her bent poor wretched head.

Thou hast not seen her, Son of the carpenter,
who art called the King of Glory,
among the rugged western shores
in the sweat of her food's creel.

This Spring and last Spring
and every twenty Springs from the beginning,
she has carried the cold seaweed
for her children's food and the castle's reward.

And every twenty Autumns gone
she has lost the golden summer of her bloom,
and the Black Labour has ploughed the furrow
across the white smoothness of her forehead.

And Thy gentle church has spoken
about the lost state of her miserable soul,
and the unremitting toil has lowered
her body to a black peace in a grave.

And her time has gone like a black sludge
seeping through the thatch of a poor dwelling:
the hard Black Labour was her inheritance;
grey is her sleep to-night.

(*trans.* Sorley MacLean)

Now it is no wonder that the islanders have turned to the church, for the church at least offers stability in a shifting world. Nor is it any wonder that one of the archetypal figures among the islanders is the exile who has lived a drunken life abroad and who when he returns home becomes the inveterate churchgoer with the hard bowler hat and the watch chain. When he is abandoned to the waves he is saved by a grasp more rigid than normal: he becomes a statue in his own land, a harsh stony one. If humanity could not save him, God must.

For one like myself who is not committed to any ideology, whatever religion it comes from, whatever demands it makes (and these usually at the expense of the human), the church, and some churches more than others, is alien, though it perhaps creates an illusion of steadiness at the expense of the wavering present. Certainly, as Thomson has written, when the fire was shifted from the centre of the floor it became the internal fire of hell, and a real living community of folk story and poem was replaced by one held together by the bonds of a fixed creed. The secular poem became sinful and the psalm took its place, as seen for example in the poem "Gospel 1955" by Donald MacAulay:

I was at the meeting last night;
the house was full, packed to the door,
there was no place for me to sit
but a cramped nook on the stairs.

I listened to the psalm: the tune
transporting us on a tide
as mysterious as Maol Duin's;
I listened to the prayer
a liberating cascading melody—
my people's access to poetry.

(*trans.* Donald MacAulay)

If we should mock the rigidities of such a religion we must also remember that rigidity is the price one pays for insecurity: if there is no real home then an unreal one will be provided. And I have seen some of my own friends, from fear and guilt, entering that world of religion to gain the peace which may have to do with life eternal but has little to do with the chanciness and loveliness of life as it is daily lived. If they were once condemned to shaky ships now they are

condemned to a darkness which masquerades as light. If the light of the city was too dazzling for them in the individualism which rose like a sharp rock from communion, then another communion has taken its place. It is always to the human consequences that we must look, and while the church has offered something to the islands—a sort of hope which is a substitute for a greater despair—it is a condemnation of history and its agents that such a rigid shelter should have been necessary.

In all honesty, we should be asking those who have remained, “Why did you do so?” And we should not simply answer, as many do, by saying, “Of course if alternatives had been open to them, they would not have remained.” In all honesty we should not be dealing with the exceptions, with those who are crucified by the contradictions, with those who feel the guilt of desertion. We are not dealing with those who, while remaining in the city, look forward each year to the joyful, unthinking return. We are not dealing with the artists, the guilty and gifted ones. We are to ask those who remain a naked, direct question, “Why do you stay?” And they stay, I believe, firstly because this is their home no matter how many attempts have been made to diminish it. And also because they feel themselves as belonging to a community which has always been there. There are among them those who have travelled the world and returned, not because of a dream but because this is the life they wish to lead, a life where everyone is known to everyone else, where the consequences of the daily round are visible, where the landscape is their landscape and where they have not disowned their dead, where there is no rampant individualism, where their surroundings though often bleak are their own.

We all know of those who refuse to leave the slums of Glasgow for new council houses. They were not happy to leave because they belonged to a human community which, whatever their surroundings, at least gave them the warmth of companionship, instead of the windy bare acres of council schemes. They were deeply and profoundly and instinctively right, for only the exceptional individual like a Columbus will set out on strange seas facing the world anew each day, trembling but still moving forward. And while not condoning slums, much of the unrest and aggressiveness that one feels almost palpably in cities arose from the shifting of whole populations to grey and uncolonised wastes. Should it not be considered reasonable to keep rootedness in being wherever possible? For the unrooted person, unhappy and alienated, will turn in a frenzy against those buildings which do not belong to him, which stand up against him and outside him as the death of the spirit, the very heart of hopelessness. Deeper than any disease that society suffers from is

the sense of the lost home, the ugliness of the new one, the destruction of community. And when we see the policemen advancing in Brixton with their shields, is it not against those who have not found a home to replace the one which they have lost?

To grow up on an island is a special experience, but it is not an experience of Eden. Newspapers arrive late, the world outside is distant, its concerns are remote. Above all there is the sound of the sea, that eternal sound that haunts the islands, and has found its commemoration in a poem which is, like so many of our poems, an elegy. It is called “The Eternal Swelling of the Sea”:

The eternal swelling of the sea,
listen to its high boisterous noise.
As it was in my youth
is the great sound of the seas,
pitiless, unchanged,
mixing the sand of the shore,
the eternal swelling of the sea,
listen to its high boisterous roar.

Each wave with its crest
restless, sonorous, white,
with imperious haste
surly, plumed, unafraid.
But its speed will be checked
at the brink where the other ones died
as the people have gone
who once in this town would reside.

In the woods of the west
I'd never desire to stay.
My mind and my wish
were to set on this loveable bay.
For those who were kind
in deed and friendship and joy
are scattered like birds
whom their enemy seeks to destroy.

Willows and rushes
thistles and sea-bent and grass,
have choked all the springs
where once I would drink to my wish:
and the walls are now cold,
by groundsel and grass made infirm,
and the nettle is red
and tall round the hearth that was warm.

As I now look round
how should I not suffer grief?
For the people are gone
whose badge was friendship and love.
Poor exiles, they've been
pursued across the salt seas.
Never more will they hear
their high swelling thunderous noise.

But I must depart.
No more shall I walk in this place.
My age and my hue
reveal how short are my days,
and when I am swathed
in the chillness of death and its sleep
prepare my last bed
by the high-swelling roar of the deep.

(*trans.* Iain Crichton Smith)

It is true, of course, that this is a sentimental poem, but that it contains a profound sense of loss is also evident.

The forces of economics are driving the present population out of the islands. How much longer can high unemployment and increasing freight charges permit them to remain where they are? And when this happens will it not represent a diminution in the riches of Britain? It is easy to say that islanders are responsible for themselves, but how can this be applied to those whom history has treated so badly? How is it possible to tell a man to get up when his legs have been removed?

There is no question in my mind that a society which lives by materialistic values will be destroyed by them. If materialism has not been accepted by Western society as a philosophical concept then it has accepted it as the force by which it lives. The great powers are, to a larger extent than one is often willing to accept, mirror images of each other. I do not think that the opposite of materialism is another inflexible concept but rather those motions of the spirit which see the human being as he is, whoever he is, and really notice him. That materialism, naked and unashamed, has come to rest in Britain is a fact, however we choose to disguise it. That that belief in materialism is closely connected with the destruction of community is also, I am sure, a fact, for materialism depends on individuals being set over against each other. It is now much more difficult to see the human being as he is without the armour of money or achievement. Sometimes when I walk the streets of Glasgow I see old women passing by, bowed down with shopping bags, and I ask myself, "What

force made this woman what she is? What is her history?" It is the holiness of the person we have lost, the holiness of life itself, the inexplicable mystery and wonder of it, its strangeness, its tenderness.

If this respect for the human being, unmoneyed, without status, is lost, how can a society stand except as a mockery of what life ought to be in its most precious essence? If the justification that the islanders should continue to exist or leave be a purely material one, then nothing can be done to save the culture which they represent and which they inherited. If, however, we are to prove our superiority to those forces that stand over against us, we must make sure that we are not infected by the vices of those very forces. Our alternative must be a real alternative. It must be an alternative which shows sensitivity, which treats men with care, which really sees them. How else will we not be involved in the contradictions of history? The greatest moment in our recent history was when we stood out against the bestialities of Nazism and in defence of the human being because in our deepest natures we were outraged by the maltreatment of him. At such moments man takes on the righteous holiness which in spite of all else and beyond ideology is a radiance in his nature. If we do not remember that reliance on materialism is the death of a civilisation as surely as the barbarians have been, then we are lost. It is on sensitivity that the future of this particular culture rests, that the future of any culture rests: not indeed to mark out this particular culture as a reserve but to help where it needs help, to grant it the possibility of a future; and not to be put off by its independences and its obstinacies any more than we would by the cantankerousness of any individual.

Honesty must now admit that we are at the point of the greatest decision with regard to the islands and to the language. The forces attacking it are more and more dominant. Television is perhaps the most frightening force of all, since its heroes compel admiration from the young. More and more we see that the poems which are written now are elegiac, their endings turned in on themselves:

And my country's artists
give tongue like migratory geese,

and

I thought of the grave that I had a care for
in the cold country to the north

and

O transient flower
O world that is gone

and

Neither talk nor tea will heal this pain.

There is a possibility of saving that culture if those who have been converted by internal imperialism, and those who have only external imperialism, were to realise that its extinction would be the death of a precious thing. If instead of consigning this culture to the oblivion of history people were to say, "You are necessary," that would be sufficient encouragement for living. If people were to say, "We recognise you for what you are, we know your life history, we see you, we know your name," then something might still be salvaged.

To live is to be conscious of a history. No man can live if every action taken, no matter how enthusiastically, runs eventually into the sand. To give such a culture the possibility of a future means that the children must grow up in a world that they recognise as being as important as any other. It means that they be not divided into two by the sudden incursion of a new language. It requires that the artist should sense a future and not be forever imprisoned in the forms of the elegiac. It requires not derision but respect. It requires a government that is concerned for all its people including those who speak a language that they do not understand.

It is not the case that there are no leaders in such a community, but leadership in turn requires that men act in a real world and that the results of their actions are visible in a real world. One of the poems that I have already quoted delineates clearly enough one of the results of the lack of such a future, and that is drunkenness, exactly the response that is made among societies which are derided and diminished by stronger ones. It is easy enough, as Compton Mackenzie has shown, to transform whisky into the eternal colours of the comic, as if the islanders were children, but the matter is much more serious than that. And it is not enough for the church to attack drunkenness, as if it were a manifestation without source, for very often the drunkenness, among other things, is a subterranean attack on the church itself and its inflexible rigidity. It is also the response of a man to a reality that excludes him, it is the response of a man who sees himself as irrelevant to history. In Chekhov's plays we read of the superfluous man, one who sees history passing him by, and who catches sight now and again of the flicker of new flames on the horizon. And yet history is not an inevitable machine. The English mariners who set out against the Armada did not believe in the inevitability of history, nor did the Greeks who combed each other's hair at Salamis. To say that history is inevitable is to submit to the creed of those whom we oppose. History is not a natural force like electricity.

History is composed of decisions. It is unfortunate that the Calvinism of the islands is an ideology that weakens the will and complicates even more a situation that is still salvageable. When I

consider a Britain that is without the Welsh and Gaelic communities I consider a Britain that would be, at the very least, less interesting than it is at the moment. When I see on bookstalls at airports and railway stations throughout the world the same books and magazines, I see a world that is boring and without depth. We are told this is the direction that History will take and must take. But I do not believe in the necessity for it. I do not believe that it is rigorous and unchangeable, beyond the manipulation of man.

And in fact we do not believe this. Not even the monetarism of Margaret Thatcher permits its own total logic, for if that were so the British car industry would not be saved time and again. Even she recognises that there are other considerations which must prevail beyond that of inevitability: and she partly recognises this because she is forced to by the power such a group might exert. If people were truly honest they would say that beyond all the arguments the reason why the islands are not helped more than they are is because they exert no power on the "real" world: and this, I think, is in fact to admit the justice of the very ideas that she is opposing. We attack a society that prevents the conditions of the Jews being made better (as in Russia). When the islander sees that the laws of humanity are not applied in his own case, why should he feel patriotic towards a country that abandons him to the detritus of history? What were the friends of my youth fighting for in the last war? Were they fighting for the disappearance of their own land? It is this point which is made by John Smith (1848-81) when he writes in his poem "The Spirit of Charity":

Does anyone remember
in this age the bitter day
of that horrific battle,
Waterloo with its red plains?
The Gaels won doughty victory
when they marshalled under arms;
when faced with strong men's ardour
our fierce foes had to yield.

What solace had the fathers
of the heroes who won fame?
Their houses, warm with kindliness,
were in ruins round their ears;
their sons were on the battlefield
saving a rueless land,
their mothers' state was piteous
with their houses burnt like coal.

While Britain was rejoicing
 they spent their time in grief.
 In the country that had reared them,
 no shelter from the wind;
 the grey strands of their hair were tossed
 by the cold breeze of the glen,
 there were tears upon their cheeks
 and cold dew on their heads.

(*trans.* Derick Thomson)

And when one considers the multiple ironies of making Stornoway a NATO base one is staggered and bemused. What exactly is this NATO base defending? Is it defending the values of materialism which denuded the islands themselves? Is it defending the many exiles who have already left? Is it defending us against opposing mirror images of materialism? And this in the very centre of a religion which converts life itself into rigidity: truly the roundabouts of history are salt with irony. For from these denuded islands will fly planes which will defend us against those who are, it is said, attacking the Jews for clinging to their own culture instead of to a larger more imperialistic one. No wonder that deep in the hearts of the islanders, in their very bones, must resound the laughter of the absurd. In these dizzying multitudes of ironies the mind is lost and confused: one is bewildered by the spectacle of friends of one's youth drowning in seas which they only knew as belonging to a globe inhabiting a classroom in which they were taught in an alien language by those who could themselves speak Gaelic.

This essay is concerned with the contradictions that one person has found inside a culture. The trouble with many of the books about the islanders is that they have been written from the outside, and no matter how much these writers may investigate and speculate, they do not feel these contradictions in their bones. They do not, for example, feel the contradictions of the academic who has to go to Glasgow or Edinburgh or Aberdeen to teach his own language in a university. They do not understand what it is like to be in a city while teaching that subject and speaking English for the most part. They do not understand what it is like to have to make a choice as to whether to teach Gaelic to his children who grow up and are part of that environment and to whom Gaelic is an alien language as much as it is to their English-speaking peers.

They do not understand the contradictions between the economic direction of a life and its cultural one; the Highland academic, for instance, who marries a woman from outside the Gaelic world. They do not understand the academic's possible attitude to the "ceilidh,"

which is one of the few methods of keeping Gaelic alive in the city. They do not understand the weight of guilt such a person might bear. In other words, they do not understand the waste which accompanies the choices.

Such questions seem to me to be the real ones, but they can only be fully lived out by the islander himself, and they are so complicated that they are hard to write about and he can even feel ashamed of them. Thomson is, I think, the poet who has brought out most clearly this feeling of betrayal and helplessness, as in "Coffins":

A tall thin man
 with a short beard,
 and a plane in his hand:
 whenever I pass
 a joiner's shop in the city,
 and the scent of sawdust comes to my nostrils,
 memories return of that place,
 with the coffins,
 the hammers and nails,
 saws and chisels,
 and my grandfather, bent,
 planing shavings
 from a thin, bare plank.

Before I knew what death was;
 or had any notion, a glimmering
 of the darkness, a whisper of the stillness.
 And when I stood at his grave,
 on a cold Spring day, not a thought
 came to me of the coffins
 he had made for others:
 I merely wanted home
 where there would be talk, and tea, and warmth.

And in the other school also,
 where the joiners of the mind were planing,
 I never noticed the coffins,
 though they were sitting all round me;
 I did not recognise the English braid,
 the Lowland varnish being applied to the wood,
 I did not read the words on the brass,
 I did not understand that my race was dying.
 Until the cold wind of this Spring came
 to plane the heart;
 until I felt the nails piercing me,
 and neither tea nor talk will heal the pain.

(*trans.* Derick Thomson)

Implicit in the poem is the idea that the betrayal was taking place inside a childish ignorance, that choices were being made without the child's even knowing about them. Consciousness appears when the options are closed.

One of the most interesting things that has been happening recently, however, is the return of their natural leaders to the islands, in order to exercise the control of practical affairs that has often in the past been lost to others. These are people who have gone back to take part in the Bilingual Project (in Lewis), to run the local radio. But unless more is done for the islander, especially with regard to the most significant arm of the media, that is, television, it may be that such a sacrifice will not be enough.

One feels like a Hercules around whom prolific hydras are spawning. When one head is cut off another rises, and one runs round the arena in continual activity. And the trouble is that these monstrous heads are both internal and external. Why not give up altogether, someone might say; what is the point of this resistance? But there is something irretrievably necessary in the work that is being done, for it is recognised, however consciously or unconsciously, that a language in a deep sense is inextricably intertwined with what one really is and that the loss of it would be not only a diminution but a death. Would it not be the same for an Englishman, would he not also feel that if he ceased to speak English he would no longer be the same person; but, like a character in Chekhov, appear superfluous? And was not the antagonism between Tolstoy and Turgenev, the former even challenging the latter to a duel, a real antagonism with real issues at stake, issues which went beyond the literary? And no matter how much we may admire Nabokov's talent, can we not say that he is a writer at play, dealing only with dilettantish enigmas? Conrad is a specific case whose grandeur is more difficult to analyse except to say that he created a nautical community of his own. Time and time again we come back to the language as the ultimate justification for the culture, and we may ask what such a language has produced in literature to justify our admiration for it. And the answer is that it has produced a great deal. I have already shown that this is true of the modern poets who exist on the edge of elegy, but when one examines the poetry of the language we can see there poems as profound in their own way as those of the English culture, as, for instance, the poems of Duncan Ban MacIntyre, to choose only one poet whose nature poetry is in its innermost heart different from that of the English, not philosophical at all, but clear and hard and musical and strongly visual at the same time, as in "Ben Dorain." And this kind of visual hardness which is so evident in "Ben Dorain" is a particularly obvious quality

in Gaelic poetry down the centuries, as in these lines from a seventeenth-century poem:

I see the red lips turned black,
and the chalk white teeth turned to black bone

or the lines:

You took the east from me, you took the west from me,
you took the moon from me, you took the sun above,
you took the heart from me, from out my breast,
you almost took my God from me, my white love

Badger's blood on your shirt,
and deer's blood on your coat

It is in "Ben Dorain," however, that we find the truly sunny joy of Gaelic poetry with its fidelity of observation and its subtle variations:

Pleasant to me rising
at morning
to see them the horizon
adorning.

Seeing them so clear,
my simple-headed deer
modestly appear
in their joyousness.

They freely exercise
their sweet and level cries.
From bodies trim and terse,
hear their bellowing.

A badger of a hind
wallows in a pond.
Her capricious mind
has such vagaries!

How they fill the parish
with their chorus
sweeter than fine Irish
tunes glorious.

More tuneful than all art
the music of the hart
eloquent, alert,
on Ben Dorain.

The stag with his own call
struck from his breast wall—
you'll hear him mile on mile
at his scale-making.

The sweet harmonious hind—
with her calf behind—
elaborates the wind
with her music.

Palpitant bright eye
without squint in it.
Lash below the brow,
guide and regulant.

Walker quick and grave,
so elegant to move
ahead of that great drove
when accelerant.

There's no flaw in your step,
there's all law in your leap,
there's no rust or sleep
in your motion there.

Lengthening your stride,
intent on what's ahead,
who of live or dead
could outrace you?

The hind is on the heath
where she ought to be.
Her delicate sweet mouth
feeding tenderly.

Stool-bent and sweet grass
the finest food there is
that puts fat and grease
on her flanks and sides.

Transparent springs that nurse
the modest water cress—
no foreign wines surpass
these as drink for her.

Sorrel grass and sedge
that grow on heath and ridge,
these are what you judge
as hors d'oeuvres for you.

Luxuries for does
between grasses,
St John's wort, the primrose,
and daisies.

The spotted water-cress
with forked and spiky gloss;
water where it grows
so abundantly.

This is the good food
that animates their blood
and circulates as bread
in hard famine-time.

That would fatten their
bodies to a clear
shimmer, rich and rare,
without clumsiness.

That was the neat herd
in the twilight,
suave and trim, unblurred
in that violet!

However long the night
you would be safe and right
snug at the hill's foot
till the morning came.

The herds of the neat deer
are where they always were
on the wide kind moor
and the heathland.

When colour changed their skins
my love was most intense,
they came not by mischance
to Ben Dorain.

(*trans.* Iain Crichton Smith)

In its combination of tenderness, sunniness, music and observation and knowledge of subject matter we hardly find this kind of poem in English at all. Yet other languages are translated into English and the poetry of this part of the world is ignored, as if nothing worthwhile could emerge from the Celtic races. Truly the Gaelic speakers are invisible in Britain, all knowledge of them confined to films which

show them as pawky, loveable and ultimately distant (like the black servants in Hollywood films). In an age where women are seen as a race different from men, where children too are enfranchised, the inhabitants of parts of this island are not seen at all, as if they did not exist, as if their language were rather like the grunts Red Indians make before setting off against the cavalry of Hollywood. Even Samuel Johnson took a far more intelligent interest in them than anyone does now.

So that one can sometimes feel like that beggar I saw in Aberdeen with the pennies beside him in his cap, black glasses over his eyes, vulnerable and open to the day. It is as if we were saying in the end—"All we can look for is justice. All we can look for is the sensitivity that will not pass by, that will pause and study, that will sense in the inmost heart the unfairness of the desolation of a culture. These ships broken by history should be seen as bearing a precious and valuable cargo. The destruction is not complete, the last chance is not lost. Much help is sent to foreign lands, yet so little is given to those inhabitants of our own."

I should like to end with a poem of my own which I have translated from the Gaelic. It is called "Shall Gaelic Die?"

(1)

A picture has no grammar. It has neither evil nor good. It has only colour, say orange or mauve.

Can Picasso change a minister? Did he make a sermon into a bull? Did heaven rise from his brush? Who saw a church that is orange? In a world like a picture, a world without language, would your mind go astray, lost among objects?

(2)

Advertisements in neon, lighting and going out, "Shall it . . . shall it . . . Shall Gaelic . . . shall it . . . shall Gaelic . . . die?

(3)

Words rise out of the country. They are around us. In every month in the year we are surrounded by words.

Spring has its own dictionary, its leaves are turning in the sharp wind of March, which opens the shops.

Autumn has its own dictionary, the brown words lying on the bottom of the loch, asleep for a season.

Winter has its own dictionary, the words are a blizzard building a tower of Babel. Its grammar is like snow.

Between the words the wild-cat looks sharply across a No-Man's-Land, artillery of the Imagination.

(4)

They built a house with stones. They put windows in the house, and doors. They filled the room with furniture and the beards of thistles. They looked out of the house on a Highland world, the flowers, the glens, distant Glasgow on fire.

They built a barometer of history.

Inch after inch, they suffered the stings of suffering.

Strangers entered the house, and they left.

But now, who is looking out with an altered gaze? What does he see? What has he got in his hand? A string of words.

(5)

He who loses his language loses his world. The Highlander who loses his language loses his world.

The space ship that goes astray among planets loses the world.

In an orange world how would you know orange? In a world without evil how would you know good?

Wittgenstein is in the middle of his world. He is like a spider.

The flies come to him. 'Cuan' and 'coill' rising.*

When Wittgenstein dies, his world dies.

The thistle bends to the earth. The earth is tired of it.

(6)

I came with a 'sobhrach' in my mouth. He came with a 'primrose.'

A 'primrose by the river's brim.' Between the two languages, the word 'sobhrach' turned to 'primrose.'

Behind the two words, a Roman said 'prima rosa.'

The 'sobhrach' or the 'primrose' was in our hands. Its reasons belonged to us.

(7)

'That thing about which you cannot speak, be silent about it.'

Was there a pianist before a piano? Did Plato have a melodeon?

Melodeon in the heavens? Feet dancing in the heavens? Red lips and black hair? Was there a melodeon in the heavens? A skeleton of notes.

(8)

'Shall Gaelic die?' A hundred years from now who will say these words? Who will say, 'Co their?'"** Who? The voice of the owl.

* 'Cuan' means 'sea' and 'coill' means 'wood.'

** 'Co their?'—'Who will say?'

(9)

If I say 'an orange church' will I build an orange church?
If I say 'a mauve minister' will I create him?
The tartan is in its own country.
The tartan is a language.
A Campbell is different from a Macdonald (this is what a tartan teaches).
The tartans fight each other. Is that why they had to put a colourless church between them?

(10)

Said Alexander Macdonald, 'It was Gaelic that Adam and Eve spoke in that garden.' Did God speak Gaelic as well, when he told them about the apple? And when they left that garden, were they like exiles sailing to . . . Canada?

(11)

Shall Gaelic die! What that means is: shall we die?

(12)

An orange church with green walls. A picture on a wall showing ships like triangles. On another wall, a picture of a cafe with men made of paint. 'Gloria Deo' in the language of paintings, an orange bell, a yellow halo around the pulpit where there are red dancers.

(13)

Were you ever in a maze? Its language fits your language. Its roads fit the roads of your head. If you cannot get out of the language you cannot get out of the maze. Its roads reflect your language. O for a higher language, like a hawk in the sky, that can see the roads, that can see their end, like God who built the roads, our General Wade. The roads of the Highlands fit the roads of our language.

(14)

When the ape descended from the trees he changed his language. He put away the green leaves. He made small sharp words, words made of stones.

(15)

The dove returned to Noah with a word in his mouth.

(16)

The scholar is sitting with a candle in front of him. He is construing words. He is building a dictionary. Little by little, inch by inch, he

is building a dictionary. Outside the window the children are shouting, a ball is rising to the sky, a girl and a boy are walking without language to bed. What will he do when the ball enters the quiet room, breaking the window, stopping him at B, and Z so distant.

(17)

Whom have you got in the net? Who is rising with green eyes, with a helmet, who is in the net?
Cuchulain is in the net, he is rising from the sea, ropes of moonlight at his heels, ropes of language.

(18)

'When you turn your back on the door, does the door exist?' said Berkeley, the Irishman who was alive in the soul.
When the Highlands loses its language, will there be a Highlands, said I, with my two coats, losing, perhaps, the two.

(19)

A million colours are better than one colour, if they are different. A million men are better than one man if they are different. Keep out of the factory, O man, you are not a robot. It wasn't a factory that made your language—it made you.

(20)

Like a rainbow, like crayons, spectrum of beautiful languages. The one-language descended like a church—like a blanket, like mist.

(21)

God is outside language, standing on a perch. He crows now and again. Who hears him? If there is a God let him emanate from the language, a perfume emanating from the dew of the morning, from the various-coloured flowers.

(22)

Death is outside the language. The end of language is beyond language. Wittgenstein didn't speak after his death. What language would he speak? In what language would you say, 'Fhuair a' Ghaidhlig bas?'

* 'Fhuair a' Ghaidhlig bas'—'Gaelic is dead.'

(23)

When the name 'Adam' was called, he turned his back on the hills.
He saw his shadow at his feet—he drew his breath.

(24)

You cannot say, 'Not-Adam.' You cannot say, 'Not-Eve.' The apple
has a name as well. It is in the story.

(25)

The gold is new. It will not rust. 'Immutable universal,' as the
Frenchman said. But the pennies, the pounds, the half-crowns, these
coins that are old and dirty, the notes that are wrinkled like old faces,
they are coping with time; to these I give my allegiance, to these I owe
honour, the sweetness. 'Immutable, perfect,' Midas with his coat of
gold and of death.

It is not a witticism to say "Shall Gaelic die?" What that means is
"Shall we die?" For on the day that I go home to the island and speak
to my neighbour in English it is not only the language that has died
but in a sense the two who no longer speak it. We would be elegies
on the face of the earth, empty and without substance. We would not
represent anything, and the world would be an orphan about us.

I imagine those who lose their language dying in the same way as
the language dies, spiritless, without pride. One imagines the tourist
then entering a world which would truly be inferior to his own. One
imagines the beggars of the spirit, no longer real people in a real place.
They will be shadows cast by an imperialistic language that is not
their own. For if they speak a language that is not their own they are
slaves in the very centre of themselves. They will have been colonised
completely at the centre of the spirit, they will be dead, exiles, not
abroad but in their own land, which will not reflect back the names
they have given it. Such a people will be a race of shadows and in that
final silence there will be no creativity. They will be superfluous,
talking without alternative in a language that is not their own.

—Written in 1982: previously unpublished.

Part Two

The Poet's World

Between Sea and Moor

Brought up on the island of Lewis, I never left it till I was seventeen years old and went to Aberdeen University. When I think of Lewis now, when I try to feel it again in my bones and flesh, what returns to me?

The moor and the sea. ✓

I could never live away from the sea. Days when it drowns in the sun, when among rank flowers we sat on a headland and watched the ships sailing by. Days when the rain streamed down the window panes and the sea was grey and dull about the bare island out in the bay.

Days when the waves were playful about the rocks. Days when I used to draw drifters with crayons on a page of writing pad. Days when we used to search for crabs among the pools or sit on the pier swinging our legs, watching the faint blue hills across the water.

Days in Stornoway when, a pupil at the Nicolson Institute, I would walk along the quay watching the drifters with their orange buoys and men seated, apparently sewing, among green netting. Salt in the nostrils. Herring in barrels. The grey shops crouched facing the sea and the masts.

Nights of astonishing silence when the moonlight laid yellow roads across the water.

Many years afterwards I would think of my mother working as a fishergirl among those barrels, wearing her flesh-coloured gloves, an inconceivable girl in a world so different from mine, and I would feel guilty as if I had condemned her to that life.

The sea, monster and creator, has remained with me as a well of fertile symbolism. I think of the many dead—some I have known—drifting about in it, being refined there forever. One of the best footballers in the island was drowned there one terrible night. Another boy was blinded by an oar. The *Iolaire* sank there on New Year's morning, in 1919, bringing home from the war two hundred men to be drowned on their own doorsteps, a tragedy that breaks the mind. And yet on summer days how innocent it looks, how playful, how almost Mediterranean. How easily like a human being it is transformed from serenity to anger, from calm to sudden outbursts of rage. On an island the sea is always present. Always one hears the

sound of it behind the painted day, a background, a resonance, the loved and feared one.

My house lay between the sea and the moor: the moor which was often red with heather, on which one would find larks' nests, where one would gather blaeberrys: the moor scarred with peatbanks, spongy underfoot: blown across by the wind (for there is no land barer than Lewis). I am a child again, barefoot, jerseyed, bare-kneed, the daisies are growing, the daffodils are a blaze of yellow. The smoke of the village chimneys is rising into the sky. There is a vague desultory hammering, dogs are barking, there are cows munching clothes on the line.

Days when we played football all day, nights when we played football by the light of the moon, returning home across the moor like sweaty ghosts, the moon a gold football in the sky.

How can one be that boy again? How can one walk home from the well with the two pails brimming with water, on paths that are probably now gone, between the cornfields, and through the long wet grass?

The moor and the grass and the sea. Throwing stones at telegraph poles, jumping rivers, watching roofs being tarred, hearing the lazy hammering of stones from the quarry.

The sky of Lewis above the stones, the sea, the bleak landscape almost without distraction of colour.

And beyond it all on moonlit nights hearing the music of the accordion and the feet of the dancers from the end of the road, having thoughts of a warm eternity brooded over as by a hen with red feathers.

Later, but in Dumbarton, I would try to write about some of this in a complex of images which I called "Some Days Were Running Legs":

Some days were running legs and joy
and old men telling tomorrow would be
a fine day surely: for sky was red
at setting of sun between the hills.

Some nights were parting at the gates
with day's companions: and dew falling
on heads clear of ambition except light
returning and throwing stones at sticks.

Some days were rain flooding forever the green
pasture: and horses turning to the wind
bare smooth backs. The toothed rocks rising
sharp and grey out of the ancient sea.

Some nights were shawling mirrors lest the lightning
strike with the eel's speed out of the storm.

Black the roman rooks came from the left squawking
and the evening flowed back around their wings.

The phrase "and old men telling tomorrow would be / a fine day surely" refers to the one indisputably marvellous day in the year. This was the one day when we—that is, my two brothers and I—were allowed to visit Stornoway, seven miles and a whole world away. On the night before, I would go and ask the old men of the village, one by one, what sort of day the following one was going to be, terrified in case it was going to rain. And the following morning, how early I got up, how I waited trembling at the side of the road, for the first sight of the bus, and then, when Stornoway appeared, could Babylon have been a more lustrous city?

Poor as we were, my mother long-widowed as she had been, she at least tried to afford us that visit.

She herself had never been to a cinema in her life but she allowed us to go. We ate ice-cream, we smelt the smell of apples, we wandered among bookshops which appeared vast to us, we ate chocolate, and if we were lucky we might arrive home with small wooden carts drawn by rampant wooden horses. And after coming out of the cinema we stalked the streets in a dazzle of heroism, guns strapped to our sides, rolling our tall boots along the grey pavements of Stornoway.

And much later I would write about the cinema and about Westerns, and about the Black Mask, Phantom and Spider, detective stories that I borrowed and the smell of whose yellow pages return to me now. For just as dearly as I loved Keats and Shelley—more dearly really—I loved that other world of cowboys and detectives in their lonely yet romantic settings.

I learned about John Dickson Carr, though not yet about Ellery Queen, who seemed to me to be the two towering geniuses of the classical detective story. And about the same time I read P. C. Wren and, of course, stories about the sea.

I read and read and read. I think I was really a very isolated child, isolated in school and perhaps in the village too: and isolated the more because I was often ill with bronchitis and sometimes with asthma. I was off school almost as often as I was there. In the long summer days I would lie in bed listening to the sounds that went on outside the house, in a dream of longing for some other world that wasn't this one, a world inhabited as much by English public schoolboys as by my own friends. My father had died of tuberculosis and my mother was terrified that I would also get the disease, so whenever I coughed

I was immediately bundled into bed with hot water bottles. Sometimes I felt so suffocated by this treatment that whenever I felt a cough coming I would go into the next room lest she should hear me. I would spend days in the attic reading *Chambers' Journal* or sitting at the window looking out across the village.

In the village school I was slow at arithmetic but good at writing essays on the slates that we used then. I lived in a state of perpetual humiliation, shy and secretive, often ill, and when I look at the class photograph that was taken then, wearing my brown jersey which my mother had knitted for me, and a tie-pin at the throat, I see a child whose eyes are heavy and almost dim with fright staring into a world which he finds threatening. Often I would wake at night thinking that I was haemorrhaging, for all around me the village was palpitant with the symptoms of tuberculosis which the young and the middle-aged were suffering from, and also dying from.

When later I attended the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway a strange almost visionary thing happened to me. I was, as I have said, very poor at arithmetic and mathematics. Then one day I went into Woolworth's and bought a puzzle book which I took home with me. I began to do the puzzles which were mostly, if I remember correctly, about differently coloured Easter eggs, and then one morning I woke up and found that I could do mathematics, and that above all I had fallen in love with geometry. From then on I would do geometry problems for pleasure and when the solution clicked so elegantly it was as good as being able to write a poem. Geometry appealed to some part of my nature which has to do with a love of order and elegance, and also to a part which has to do with a love of puzzle-solving. For this reason I only like challenging crossword puzzles. Even when I was in school I was trying to do *The Listener* crossword puzzles even though they were pretty well beyond me. The idea of elegance would later appear as the idea of grace, for instance in the following sonnet:

And lastly I speak of the grace that musicks us
into our accurate element till we
go gownned at length in exact propriety.
I speak of the glowing light along the axis
of the turning earth that bears the thunderous sea
and all the chaos that might learn to wreck us
if the chained stars were snapped and the huge free
leonine planets would some night attack us.
I speak of the central grace, that line which is
the genesis of geometry and of all
that tightly bars the pacing animal.

Around it build this house, this poem, this
eternal guesthouse where late strangers call,
this waiting room, this fresh hypothesis.

For many years the poem to me was to be an elegant construction, not sweaty but pure, a musical artefact composed of exact language.

One day when I was eleven years old and the weather was blue and perfect the most publicly important and significant event of my childhood happened. The Second World War broke out. I remember that even at that age politics cannot have impinged on me suddenly and without warning, for before the war began I had written in Gaelic a poem about Neville Chamberlain setting out with his umbrella to shield us from the storm about to come. Even then I must have thought of him as a comic figure. But certainly at eleven years old I did not realise what war would bring. It brought us gas masks which we had to try on, and which with my usual clumsiness I found difficulty in handling. Certainly it would bring us saccharine and whalemeat. And we would wander about the village in search of scrap metal to help the war effort.

But it did not occur to me then that it would send out long searching tentacles from vast unimaginable distances to pick off one by one a number of the older boys of the village who drowned in oceans which they had never seen except on a dusty globe in the village schoolroom. Thus died Rob on a cruiser in the Atlantic. And many others. They would appear with their kitbags home on leave for a few days, then later the telegram would come and they would never be seen again. My own brother was a lieutenant on a corvette and was later to be on a tank landing craft on D-Day. We worried about him a great deal but were also proud of him when he came home in his officer's uniform.

Nevertheless the war was in a way unreal. Nothing happened to us. No bombs fell on us. There were the RAF huts outside the village but hardly any other physical evidence apart from the blackout which protected us from the planes that never came. True, there was the Home Guard (or LDV) which my brother joined, once bringing home his rifle and taking it apart and assembling it in the kitchen in the light of the Tilley lamp, for we had no electricity. It was in fact difficult to get methylated spirits for the lamp, and that was one of the inconveniences of the war for us. Sweets practically disappeared and everything was meagrely portioned out according to coupons. But nothing happened to us except that one after one the boys of the village disappeared to distant seas and some went down with their ships (for of course they almost without exception joined the navy).

There was one radio in the village (it was called a "wireless" in

those days, though it had wires) and curiously enough it was in a thatched house. Every night I would go and listen to it. It was perched up on a shelf with a white curtain around it, and before the news began the curtain was pulled aside, almost as if to reveal to us an idol speaking with a godlike voice. And certainly the voices that emerged from it sounded godlike, those of Bruce Belfrage, Joseph Macleod and John Snagge. They told us of Russian tanks chasing Germans through the snow and of convoys being attacked by U-boats. Names like Timoshenko, Voroshilov, and Rommel became as familiar as the names of the villagers. The wireless, of course, had an accumulator, and one day an old woman from the village came into the house and was told that the accumulator had gone down. "Obh, obh, obh," she said, "imagine that and all the poor boys on her." She thought it was HMS *Accumulator*!

It was odd and disquieting to sit in that thatched house and listen to the news, for one might hear of a ship on which one of the village boys was serving. One of the most ominous phrases that remain with me to this day is the one that the announcer would use, "The next of kin have been informed." The war looked as if it would go on forever. And yet, strangely enough, it never occurred to me that we would lose it. It was like being in a theatre watching a play which had little to do with oneself, but which one knew in advance would have a happy ending.

The village became a world of old men and women and girls. All the older boys had suddenly left. In the school itself we were mostly taught by women. In my fifth year I found myself on the magazine committee and was soundly lectured by an English teacher for having written a parody of *In Memoriam* such as one might read in the local newspaper. Girls suddenly flowered into one's consciousness in their white blouses and gym shorts. Dido and Aeneas and their blazing love affair was projected as if onto a Lewis screen. The Latin master, a ball of fire and energy, would stride into the room and without pausing would say, "Begin translating at line 567" or whatever. The Gaelic poet William Ross died of his love affair in a dusty room on a summer afternoon. And there was a perpetual hunt for French irregular verbs. That was what happened in the daytime. At night there was the thunder of guns in the deserts of Libya while Tobruk was captured, lost, recaptured.

Lewis was of course a bare island without a theatre, ballet, museums. There was a good library, however, and there I would sit during the dinner hour reading magazines like *The Tatler* bound in leather covers and seeing pictures of the aristocracy joined together by a "common joke." One afternoon I got so engrossed in the magazine that I forgot to return to school until three o'clock and was

saved from punishment by a very understanding lady teacher. I think that I liked the Nicolson very much. I became reasonably good at passing examinations. I even tried the Aberdeen University Bursary Competition in fifth year and won a minor bursary, although I had great difficulty with the Latin paper since all the "u"s had been printed as "v"s and at first I wondered whether I had been given a Hindustani paper.

I moved between two worlds—the world of school and the world of the village—travelling home every night by bus. I spoke Gaelic at home and English in the school. But in those days I did not find this an extraordinary situation: I simply accepted it. I would never have dreamed of speaking English to anyone in the village, and of course most of the Stornoway people spoke only English. I was not writing much Gaelic then, only English, and what I most wrote was poems. There were no interesting Gaelic books for me to read, no adventure stories, no poetry that spoke directly to me in my own world. I used to read Penguin New Writing—though cannot now remember where I got copies of the magazine—and learned about Auden and other writers who excited me very much.

I became, I think, slightly blasé in an objectionable and rather juvenile way. I began to think of the island as constricting. I could not but see that religion was dominant and joyless, that ministers were considered as of the greatest importance, that certain people whom I despised were respected simply because they were church-goers and attended the Communion. It was as if I was searching for a wider world of ideas which I could get only through books, a freedom which I imagined as existing elsewhere. I felt myself as alienated from my own friends for I had the feeling that I was predestined to be a writer—a poet certainly—though I had not written anything that was of the slightest value. I even felt that Stornoway, which had once seemed a pulsing city, was becoming smaller and duller. I thought of the black-clad women gossiping at corners, in the biting wind, while at the same time clutching their Bibles with black elastic around them.

I would return at night from the school and do my homework—I remember mainly geometry problems and Latin—by the light of the Tilley lamp on the oil-clothed table, and I felt more and more a gap opening between me on the one side and my mother and brother on the other. So I withdrew into myself and never discussed anything that had happened in the school as if it were a secret world which I treasured and which I did not want tampered with at any cost. I did not want to have anything to do with the cutting of peats, mainly because I was clumsy, and also because I felt that such tasks were unimportant: what was important was the world of the mind. I was

continually falling in love with girls who I thought were at least as beautiful as Helen, but I never told them my passion. I only dreamed about them.

The only contact I had with the boys of the village was through football, for I played outside right for the village team. I was not particularly good but I valued the games partly for their own sake but also because by means of them I felt myself part of a team, of the village itself. Sometimes if I played well I thought there was nothing in the whole world like racing down the wing with the ball at my feet, the green dewy grass below me, and the possibility of a goal ahead of me. I would listen to the radio and almost cry with frustration when in every game Scotland was hammered by a forward line composed of people like Matthews, Carter, Lawton and Finney. I could not understand why the English could keep their forward line intact throughout the whole war and thought that there must be a secret plot to keep these great and hated players available for the simple purpose of humiliating Scotland.

I had no feeling for Scotland at all as a country except through football. I did not feel myself as belonging to Scotland. I felt myself as belonging to Lewis. I had never even seen a train. I had never been out of the island in my whole life. Glasgow was as distant to me as the moon. I had hardly read any Scottish writers, not even MacDiarmid. Most of the writers I had read were English. The island was in a way self-sufficient and, strange though it seems, there were many parts of the island itself that I had never visited. For instance it was not until recently that I visited the district of Ness which is one of the most beautiful areas in Lewis. I travelled the beaten track between my village and Stornoway and it never occurred to me to go anywhere else, for hardly anyone had a car then, and we certainly did not have one. We were too poor. My mother and the three of us existed on a widow's pension of about a pound a week and most of this was spent on food. My books I got from the library or from friends, one in particular who lent me detective stories which he could afford to buy.

In a strange sort of way, too, the island seemed to have no history. There were standing stones on the moor behind our house but I never found out why they were there or who had put them there. My curiosity about the past was minimal and it never occurred to anyone to tell us anything about the history of the island. It seemed to have sprung out of the sea fully formed, scoured by the wind, brilliant in spring, with daffodils, without much animal life, and with few birds. It was a hard bleak island which did not reverberate when one touched it with one's mind.

Looking back on it now I think of its society as a very demanding

one, classless, practical, and in some ways claustrophobic. One was judged by what one could do, not by one's money (for in those days very few people had much of that). The most important thing was to be practical, and I wasn't that. I have seen men from the village building their own house, which seems to me an astonishing achievement. They fished competently and did all sorts of jobs that I wished to do but could not: repairing fences, tarring roofs, cutting peats and so on.

I felt myself a dreamer in this practical world, naked and visible to it: and yet it was also a world that valued education, not just because education led to a valuable job but for its own sake too. Nevertheless, I sometimes have a nightmare in which I think that there are more teachers in Scotland than there are pupils, and I yearn for the love of ideas for their own sake: for the free play of the mind.

As I look back on what I have written I wonder: what has Lewis given me? It gave me images of the sea, and the bare mind. It gave me a respect for hard work and self-reliance and independence. It freed me from a trivial obsession with class and politics. It taught me because of my poverty not to be interested greatly in riches, and sometimes to feel that they are immoral. But I suppose that it also left me with defects, though perhaps those defects should be blamed more on myself than on my environment. It has made me, I think, unhealthily concerned with religion, so that I find I do not wholly believe in poems of the moment but rather in poems morally shaped. I find it difficult to be spontaneous and joyful in my work. There is a certain pessimism which may perhaps have to do with growing up among an ageing population, so that I seem to know more about the old than I do about the young. It gave me a respect for education from which it took me a long time to free myself, for Scottish education is simply one way of dipping into an endless sea, and that perhaps not the best one. It has given me I think a feeling for honesty and an unwholesome distrust of the Bohemian and the disorganised. The other kind of honesty that it has given me is more conventional, for there was no crime on the island. Doors could be left open and when one returned to an empty house one found that nothing had been touched. However, I do not hear coming from the island the novel cry of the transient but rather the proved monotony of the permanent. And in spite of all that, I love the island.

I love it for its very bleakness, for its very absences. I think of it as a place beaten upon by winds, an orchestra of gales, which bend the fences like the strings of a musical instrument. If it has its noises they are not supernatural ones, they are in fact the noises of our own obdurate world. And sometimes, as I have said, the island will flower into the purest dazzle of colour, the more brilliant because the more

transient. One of my more recent memories is standing on a road on the moor and watching a man and woman cutting peats, bent down into the rain and wind: and then suddenly a ray of light, fugitive and serene, falling across them so that for a moment they looked as if they had been framed in a picture without glamour or glory, but rather attesting to the sudden moments of illumination or happiness that come to us out of the grind of existence.

When I was much younger I tried to put some of these ideas and feelings into a poem which I called "Poem of Lewis." I must say that this poem is a much more disillusioned one than I would perhaps write now though it has a hard, bleak truth, I hope, of its own:

Here they have no time for the fine graces
of poetry, unless it freely grows
in deep compulsion, like water in the well,
woven into the texture of the soil
in a strong pattern. They have no rhymes
to tailor the material of thought
and snap the thread quickly on the tooth.
One would have thought that this black north
was used to lightning, crossing the sky like fish
swift in their element. One would have thought
the barren rock would give a value to
the bursting flower. The two extremes,
mourning and gaiety, meet like north and south
in the one breast, milked by knuckled time,
till dryness spreads across each ageing bone.
They have no place for the fine graces
of poetry. The great forgiving spirit of the word
fanning its rainbow wing like a shot bird
falls from the windy sky. The sea heaves
in visionless anger over the cramped graves
and the early daffodil, purer than a soul,
is gathered into the terrible mouth of the gale.

At the age of seventeen, sometime in October 1945, I left Lewis for the first time in my life to go to Aberdeen University. I waved to my mother and brother across the space of water that separated the ship from the quay. I watched them driven away in their hired taxi and as I did so I felt as if I were saying some sort of permanent farewell. My mother suddenly looked very small and distant in her black coat and my brother withdrawn into a deep pathos of his own. I went down to my berth and slept till morning and when I went up on deck in the dawn I saw a tremendous sea spreading all around me and the sun as red as a banner in the sky. It was cold and yet I felt exhilarated.

A piper was playing on the deck. The ship sailed on through that waste of waters till we reached Kyle of Lochalsh, which seemed to consist of a flurry of seagulls above fishing boats, I went to the train which was the first that I had ever seen. All day we travelled, first through stony land and then through fertile, over which the evening sun slanted—land very different from and much richer than that of Lewis with its poor huddled crops and its stone walls.

When I arrived at Aberdeen Railway Station the first thing I saw was a beggar sitting on the pavement wearing black glasses and with a cap beside him. In the cap were some pennies. I walked into the hurrying city with my case and took a taxi to my lodgings which were opposite a statue of Byron. That night when I was lying in my bed I thought I heard someone whistling a Gaelic tune past my window, but it was not a Gaelic tune at all. When I woke in the morning I felt no homesickness, only excitement. I felt free on the anonymous streets and because I was young I found my solitude exhilarating. The granite glittered from the large stone buildings, the trams and buses passed by. I went to the University—King's College—which was anciently mellow and covered with ivy.

Lewis seemed a world away both in space and time. There were cinemas everywhere and a theatre. There were hundreds of shops, not the one shop which we had in the village. There was colour and noise everywhere. I didn't realise then that one could not leave one's childhood and youth behind so easily, as if it were forgotten luggage. And it came to me as a great surprise to hear some of the students who belonged to Aberdeen telling jokes against the city as if it were a small boring place which they wished to leave as soon as they could.

And yet years afterwards on holiday in Aberdeen from Glasgow I myself found it smaller than I had remembered. Nevertheless, I also fell in love with Aberdeen as I had done with Lewis. The moor and the granite came together in a new synthesis. And here I really began to write poetry, a great deal of it about Lewis.

—from Maurice Lindsay (ed.), *As I Remember* (1979)