



Episode 1: The Gaelosphere

Deirdre Graham [host]: Hallo agus fàilte chridheil oirbh gu Gaelic Song Stories, am pod-chraoladh ùr far am bi mise, Deirdre Ghreumach, a' toirt sùil air na sgeulachdan air cùlaibh nan òran.

Hello and a very warm welcome to Gaelic Song Stories with me, Deirdre Graham.

Throughout this podcast series I will be looking at the stories and themes behind Scottish Gaelic songs.

As a Gaelic singer myself, I have a lifelong affinity with the songs and stories that surrounded me growing up on the Skye. Located on the west coast of Scotland in the inner hebrides, Skye is an island with an abundance of history recorded through its oral tradition.

These stories echo across the Highlands and as I delve into them I want to take you on a journey to explore the Scottish Gàidhealtachd and its seanchas, or lore, and highlight the continuing relevance of these songs.

I'll be interviewing some wonderfully knowledgeable guests, each of whom have a keen interest and expertise in several different areas, including immigration, superstition and political and land struggles.

To start us off on our journey, I am delighted to be joined today by Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stewart, a senior lecturer at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic college on Skye.

Domhnall Uilleam was educated at the Nicolson Institute, Stornoway; in Magdalen College, Oxford, where he read classics; and in the School of Scottish Studies and the Celtic Department at the University of Edinburgh, where he completed a PhD examining the history, literature, and popular culture of the seventeenth-century Scottish Gàidhealtachd. It was the first ever PhD written in Scottish Gaelic.

Since 2006, he has lectured at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in Skye, where he teaches the MSc in Material Culture and Gàidhealtachd History, as well as undergraduate degrees in Gaelic popular culture, customs and beliefs.

He has just finished two long articles examining and suggesting new ways of thinking about Scottish Gaelic literature and oral tradition from 1640 to 1820.

Today we will be chatting about the development of Gaelic songs from the 1600s to the 1800s and the main historical events that influenced them. It is a convoluted story, which frames the Gàidhealtachd as a place of change, embracing a new outward looking global society.

And so to the podcast, I hope you enjoy!

DG: It gives me great pleasure to welcome Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stewart; fàilte ort, a Dhòmhnail Uilleim it's lovely to have you here and thank you for agreeing to talk to me today.

Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stewart [guest]: Mòran, mòran taing Deirdre it's a pleasure.

DG: Now with a host of impressive credentials to your name, would you mind sharing with us a little bit about yourself, how you became interested in Gaelic literature and how that shaped your career?



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DUS: Oh goodness me, that's a massive question. Well I spent my adolescence in the Isle of Lewis, I went to the Nicolson Institute there. I did classics, and then I did my PhD at Edinburgh in the School of Scottish Studies and in the Celtic department there as well. So you know I've always been interested in Gaelic, it's in my father's side of the family, I was taught it by my father and my father's side of the family. Well my PhD was... I decided to look at MacMhaighstear Alasdair, who is a very famous Gaelic poet, of the eighteenth century, 1700s, but I thought first of all you've got to understand where MacMhaighstear Alasdair is coming from.

DG: Absolutely.

DUS: So in order to do that I sort of had to go back in time and look at what was happening in the Highlands during the 1600s, that's a century before MacMhaighstear Alasdair, and the PhD sort of turned into this, uh, you know just examining what the Highlands was like during the sixteen hundreds and I think that actually MacMhaighstear Alasdair was mentioned once in the entire PhD.

DG: [laughter]

DUS: I didn't have much steering at all, I had lots of encouragement from my supervisors Willie Gillies and John MacInnes but I was basically left on my own, and I thought well I'd like to get my head... I tried to get me inside the head of people in the Highlands in the 1600s. I tried to get an idea of what they were thinking, what their lives were like, what their perspectives were on the world around them and the world outside, and that meant looking at historical documents... it meant looking at the literature; that is the songs and the stories that were put out, which were created at that time, and also looking at the *beul-aithris*, looking at the folklore, as well, so I was coming at it from these three points.

And what came out, to my mind now, was this tangled mess, you know? [laughter] It was just impossible, I was far too young to be doing anything like that. I had no clue. But anyway, over the years what I was doing during my PhD - all the sources I looked at, all the notes I took - that has been extremely useful to me as I get, supposedly, older and wiser and look back at what I was trying to do then. I'm able to make sense of it more nowadays.

DG: Yeah. I find that very encouraging, actually, because I think when I first approached you about doing this interview I had the same feeling of... there was a certain point I wanted to talk about and yet I felt I had to go a lot further back. And you're pinpointing the dates that actually really interest me as well, and that is something that ties in beautifully.

I'd like to begin our conversation today by reflecting on some of the songs that I'm drawn to as a performer... I recorded an album last year where the songs varied in their type, for instance waulking songs, contrasted with vernacular praise poetry and love ballads; and their themes were wide-ranging but typical for Gaelic with immigration and love, often unrequited, and political and land struggles, and also superstition, and most of them range from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, which was a time that was - if I may quote from yourself, Dòmhnall Uilleam, "far from being timelessly traditional, early modern Scottish Gaelic culture was dynamic, endlessly changing and adaptive, the culture of a surprisingly cosmopolitan, increasingly hybrid nation."

With this in mind I'd like to go some way to understand how such a variety of song types, if I may say types, or classifications, co-existed at that time and what were the main historical events that resulted in such a diverse canon of songs?

DUS: Wow, that's... [laughter] That's an awful lot of things to cover!

DG: [laughter]

DUS: But we can start by saying, uh, I try to discourage my students from using the word traditional. About the world; about that world. The world of the past in the Highlands, because traditional to our mind, it sort of throws up this picture of the world where everybody is following the ways of their ancestors and nothing ever changes.



DG: And static.

DUS: And people were sort of mired in tradition: static, like you say. Whereas if you look at what is going on really, it is a time which is accelerating. Things are changing. Every generation thinks that... well it is. It's getting more modern, if you like, it's moving out of tradition. And the other thing which I try to gently nudge my students, I hope, away from, is the idea of seeing Gaelic as being this pure tradition. Which, again, goes back to the days of whorrry[?] ancestors, again unchanging, and you're drawing upon the well of this unchanging tradition which has been ever-thus.

DG: I think both those points are something that I have been guilty of.

DUS: We all are! It's something which I think we have been especially brainwashed into by the Celtic Revival, and that takes place in the late 1800s and the early years of the twentieth century, you know this is Nationalism taking hold, the same sort of nationalism that's taking hold of people across the globe, and the way it is inflected in our society in the Highlands is, you know, okay we're not modern, we're not really suited for this sort of industrial urban life, but at the same time we've got something which is infinitely precious, ancient, unsullied by modernity. And that is nonsense! It's absolute nonsense!

Our path to modernity, talking about Scottish Gaels; it's different from you know people in the Lowlands, it's different from people in England, but it's still a path to modernity which is recognisable.

DG: Absolutely. I think perhaps before we embark on that journey, it might be nice to have an overview of the Clan Chief system and a brief understanding of how, before we came into that age, we had the Clan Chief system, we had the role of the *filidh* with classical poetry, a great connection with Ireland there, if you could explain a bit of that for us.

DUS: Yeah - now you Deirdre you'll have to keep me on the straight and narrow in this because I have a bit of a habit of wandering off.

DG: So do I!

DUS: So stop me. If anything becomes unclear, again, take me by the scruff of the neck and say look, explain this properly.

DG: Not at all! We'll go on this journey, let's go for it. Full throttle.

DUS: Let's go for it, right. Clans are notional kin-descent groups, if you like. Everybody thinks that they're related to each other, or they have some sort of alliance with each other in a clan. That's not necessarily true but it's notional, as I said. It makes people believe in... it creates a cohesive group.

DG: Because people like a feeling of belonging.

DUS: People need a feeling of belonging, yes you need a feeling of belonging. And people need land, and people held land, supposedly anyway, as a result of their ties with other people in the clan, especially with the clan gentry and the Clan Chief. Many other European societies it is common for a large proportion of people to be aristocrats. Britain is rather unusual because most people aren't aristocrats. But if you look in the Highlands, and you ask people in the Highlands, where your people come from, an awful lot of people say 'we are related to the Clan Chief, I can trace my family back, I am an aristocrat along with everybody else in my family and actually most people in the township as well', you know. [laughter]

DG: [laughter]



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DUS: So that's not usual in a European style, in the German lands, the Spanish-speaking lands, but you know compared to England that's quite unusual. So that's a clan, and as I said you held your land by virtue of your ties with other people in the clan, with the clan gentry, with the Clan Chief. That's very important.

The Clan Bard is the lynch pin, if you like, of the cohesiveness of the clan. The Clan Bard traditionally may well have been a member of a learned family or at least a hereditary family of bards, if you like, it would be passed down mainly from father to son, though we know that women were involved in bardic composition as well of course. So the official Clan Bard's main duty was praise; praise poetry and lament, particularly of the Clan Chief. These are times when the Clan Chief dies - these are times of difficulty for the clan when things threaten to break up, it's the job of the Clan (Bard) to bring everything back together, and to rally everyone around the new chief, the new figure. At the same time taking the opportunity to re-state clan virtues, in other words: great in war, but at the same time you're hospitable and you defend your clan. That's very, very important.

Now you mention the *filidhean*, who are the official clan bards, there are lots of them in Ireland, there aren't so many of them in Scotland. But the *filidh* was a figure who would have uh... he'd have been educated probably at a bardic college in Ireland, spent many years learning the very intricate meters and indeed the language, which was the classical language, it was classical Gaelic, in other words quite similar to what Irish is today. Not necessarily immediately comprehensible to everyone in Scotland. It was a Mandarin language. And their poetry was chanted rather than sung.

DG: Oh really?

DUS: In other words it was chanted, it had a harp accompaniment as well. So it's a sort of learned poetry, appreciated probably by a fairly small minority, rather than the clan as a whole.

Beneath the *filidh* if you like, in terms of status, were the *na Bàird*, the Bards. And the bards were supposedly, as far as we can make out, they are the people that would actually recite the *filidh*'s compositions.

DG: Oh really?

DUS: Yeah, but they also took the opportunity to do compositions themselves, possibly in more vernacular language. Now only a few of the major families in Scotland could afford to have the Lamborghini of the poetry world, in other words *filidh*, you know paying for them to go down to the college and stuff like that. So it's probably the case that there are a lot more bards in the Highlands than there were *filidhs* in the old days.

DG: I see, so it's not a case that the *filidhs* kind of eroded away and they were replaced by bards?

DUS: Hmm... The *filidhs*... It's a very good question. Why did the *filidhs* gradually vanish? And we can see the death blow to the *filidhs* as far as we're concerned is what happens over in Ireland when the bardic colleges are dispersed during the early 1600s, particularly in the mid 1600s by Cromwell's troops, but some of them cling on in the Highlands for a few more years afterwards, or as a result of chiefly patronage chiefs particularly wanting to keep if you like a court of poetry going in their lands. At the same time, some of the *filidhs*, at least the families of the *filidhs* I should say, would have got employment in other jobs, in other professions, particularly in the ministry. We can see that happening in the Protestant ministry. There was always a market for a sort of what they call semiclassical verse. It's a classical verse with a lot of vernacular Gaelic, that is spoken Gaelic, normal Gaelic for us today, being mixed together. So it was quite ornate poetry but it was probably more readily comprehensible than the pure poetry if you like of the *filidhs*.

DG: So that would probably be the poetry that I would be more used to, rather than the classical poetry. If the classical poetry was chanted, then the bardic praise songs, from the bards would be kind of, I suppose, Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh springs to mind at first, that would be my number one go-to for praise poetry, but I suppose she's an exception being a female...



DUS: Well is she an exception, that's the thing, we've been talking about the official poets, but we've got a load of unofficial poets as well. The world of the Gael is absolutely saturated with the spoken word, with the sung word, with poetry, um with song, with you know even down to proverbs and pithy expressions and stuff. The word had power. So it's hardly surprising that poetry, we see it operating at all levels of society down to the township. We have township bards - now when you're talking about Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh we're talking about traditions of women's poetry, which is extremely interesting. I was saying earlier on that women, especially in the gentry classes, we know that they compose poetry which is either classical or semiclassical as well, but we also have women taking part in work songs, waulking songs in particular, and we know these go back at least to the 1600s if not before.

It's a hard life in the Highlands! And one of the ways to make your life easier is to sing songs when you're working. There's a whole tradition, a very, very strong tradition, of working songs in the Highlands. Songs which are rhythmical, songs which, you know, they are fun, they pass the time, and we see a big big part of these work songs are songs which are done by women, of course, and in particular we have the waulking songs, the milling songs which were for preparing cloth. These songs were done by women, there's absolutely no doubt whatsoever that Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh is drawing on these traditions, she is also drawing on perhaps the most important tradition of women's poetry which is ritual lament. The keeners, the weepers. After death, it was older women in the township, certain women, would have the job to keen, to weep, to bewail the dead, and also if you like to help them from one world into another. There's very little, as you can imagine, of that poetry surviving today. Nevertheless we can hear echoes of it in the laments and indeed the praise poems of the great women poets during this period: Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, Sileas na Ceapaich obviously as well. Mairead Nighean Lachlainn from Mull, too, is somebody who is famous, and somebody who tradition explicitly states was a keener. A weeping woman.

DUS: So we have all these, and I don't like the word sub-literary because it gives us the wrong impression. This was art, you know it was very intricate, it was very sophisticated art, but we have all these different strands weaving together.

DG: Yes, and all at the same time. Because I suppose something that I've wondered about and not got my head around is: to date all of these songs. But actually they existed all at the same time. It was, as you say, community, and the spoken word so powerful at every level of society. Of course it must have been this rich tapestry just surrounding everyone.

DUS: Yeah, yeah. Everybody would be brought up in this.

DG: Every aspect of your life whether it's at work, or at home, or at the cèilidhs. Every aspect of life was touched by poetry and by song.

DUS: That's right. Everybody would know poetry and song themselves, and everybody would have an opinion as well as to what counted as good poetry and good song. So I think it's very important to remember that we're not just talking about a society of performers, but also of highly sophisticated audiences as well. People that had been brought up listening to and absorbing song and poetry around them.

DG: That's something that you mention in your book where you're talking about the audience were as much a part of the performance as the performers, almost heckling and different versions of songs depending on the audience or who was performing or the occasion.

DUS: I think that's something that, like you, I've done a fair bit of performance in my time. But I was on the stage and I think performing to people makes you hyper aware, especially in the theatre, of just how much give and take there is, even between you and supposedly a silent audience. That silent audience hugely affects your performance.

DG: Massively, yes.



DUS: I've travelled around the Highlands and, doing Theatre-in-Education for many years, and performing to five, six, seven year olds... [laughter]

DG: [laughter] Yes, that's a whole different gig!

DUS: It's the best apprenticeship you can possibly have as an actor. I learned so much there about how to keep the most difficult audience occupied.

DG: And a very truthful audience.

DUS: A very truthful audience, exactly. Like a cèilidh house audience would have been. They wouldn't stand in ceremony if they thought they knew a better version of the song, or if they thought you had made a mistake perhaps in one or two of your lines. Or indeed if you had an opinion on who made the song and if they had a different opinion on who made the song. I think it's, you know we're talking about a web of song, of spoken word, of the sung word in the Highlands; we also have to think of a web of opinions about the songs being voiced vociferously at all levels. So whether we're talking about the cèilidh house or even the tables of the gentry, singing a song or telling a story or reciting a proverb or an anecdote, that would have been an occasion for conversion and debate and possibly disputation as well. It's a give and take, that's the exciting thing about it.

DG: It's quite refreshing because I think sometimes nowadays as a performer you do feel like you need to have the correct interpretation of the song. And yet to hear that really opens up your mind and frees you as a performer to know that it's one version and it's one representation of that poetry, so it's actually a lovely idea to think that there were different versions, and I suppose we don't have them all today. What we have and what exists now within our now-written literature or recorded literature is not nearly as diverse, potentially, as what was around at the time.

DUS: Yeah, I think that's very very true. And imagining, again that takes us back to ideas about tradition, ideas about the sort of purity of the tradition. These fossilise the performances, I mean if all you've got as your standard or worthiness of song is "oh it was like the cailleach that sang it in Tobar an Dualchais who had no teeth, and you know could barely hold a note, and was 95", that's no way to keep a culture alive and to move it into the future. And again if we're listening to Tobar an Dualchais, as I've said before it's a wonderful database.

DG: Oh, incredible.

DUS: But it's sung by people who, in many cases, whose glory days were forty or fifty years previous. And we have to remember that. The danger of seeing Gaelic culture, as it being a culture of old people, rather than a youth culture, is something that we've always got to bear in mind.

DG: Absolutely and I think at this time it's really interesting at the moment to see the way that Gaelic song is being interpreted and there are so many different, um, fusions happening at the moment. And perhaps we would think that this quite a modern thing. But really - you're shaking your head 'no, not at all' [laughter] - because this period that we're talking about, can you tell us a bit more about how international influences really moulded these songs?

DUS: Well I was laughing and thinking about Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh and for her, she's talking about... She certainly talks about stringed instruments - guitars or lutes or whatever - organs and stuff, going on. Look at the earliest recordings, the earliest music manuscripts of Gaelic song. It's all set for the fiddle and for the piano and stuff. It's always been that way, uh, and I think that we can fetishise the unaccompanied voice too much. What was I - Oh dear. What were you asking me there? [laughter]

DG: I suppose that fusion existed. I was asking about the influences, in the 1600s, 1700s, you had these international influences.



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DUS: Yes, that's it. So you know, if you're looking at Scottish Gaelic literature from, at the very latest from the late 1600s onward, 1670s, 1680s onwards, we're looking at a language, and at a culture, and at a music that is increasingly coming under the influence of outside. And especially that means Lowlands Scots and English and to some extent Irish. I've learned a lot from my colleague Hugh Cheape here at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig who has re-envisioned the great Scottish bagpipe as a baroque instrument, you know it's a European baroque instrument. Very few bagpipes are actually made in the Highlands at all; they all come from the other side of the Highland line in Edinburgh. And the same thing is true when we look at song and culture, the song and culture of the Highlands during this period in particular. In my opinion anyway, we start seeing a lot of songs coming in which don't have a Gaelic rhythm, they have an English rhythm [rhythm noises], and to my mind that is proof that Gaels are crossing the Highland line, they are listening to songs in Edinburgh or the cattle fairs at Doune or Falkirk or whatever, and they're taking these tunes back with them and they're fitting them out with Gaelic words, and we're starting to get this hybrid Gaelic literature.

DG: The meter of the song totally changes and the structure totally changes.

DUS: Yes, that changes. And we're talking about the cèilidh house. What people want, to some extent, is something new. There is always going to be a market for new stuff, and some of that new stuff will come from outside. That's not to say that there's not a lot of new stuff being made in the Highlands as well but...

DG: But perhaps driven by... would it be a youth movement?

DUS: I think it's youth and certainly in the late 1600s we see social bandits coming, it's social bandits, cattle raiders, and they're like the gangsters of the late 1600s, and these guys want to up their image in front of the people. Because they depend on the people for support. So they start making songs about themselves, and other people make songs about them as well, propaganda, and you can see them drawing upon Lowland song, translating Lowland song, often in praise of the noble Highlander, the Bonnie Hieland Laddie and whatever. They are taking that imagery and these motifs and re-working them in Gaelic way, about themselves.

DG: In a kind of satire songs or...?

DUS: No no, they're being... I mean there are satirical songs about them, but no these are absolutely straight down the line romantic songs.

DG: And then over the course of - how long? - that starts to seep in as the...

DUS: Yeah you see it seeping in very early, and as we've said it's a dynamic culture. So you can see songs leaping from district to district and becoming the hit songs of the day. We see the idea of fashion coming in around this period as well, especially with women. Women get rid of the old *earrasaid* that they used to wear, the old Highland plaid, and they are starting to adopt European fashions at this time as well. So we can see fashions in clothes, fashions in music, fashions in songs, in culture in general. Things are getting very very dynamic, they are very fast-moving at this period. This is not at all a hermetically sealed culture, and this is long before Culloden, it's long before the '45, and though the '45 and the Battle of Culloden is a very very important lynch point in our history, literally in some cases. There were changes afoot many many generations before then.

--interval--

DG: I'd like to bring things back a little bit to the Panegyric Praise Code, a term coined by John MacInnes?

DUS: John MacInnes! My supervisor, yes. A much missed man. Yeah, his great idea was to look at Gaelic poetry as a whole and realise that what was underlying Gaelic poetry was a code, a code of praise. A panegyric code, in which the ideal chief is portrayed as somebody who is very attractive, somebody who is great at fighting, somebody who is very hospitable to his clan, somebody who presided over an open hall; food was served, food and drink were served to everybody. Somebody as I said... he wasn't miserly, someone who was



generous, generous, and... in a way the idea of the panegyric code is it's so useful that you can find it everywhere and as a result it almost stops being useful because you can see it wherever you look. [laughter]

DG: That is something that struck me because I looked a bit at the Panegyric Praise Code when I was in uni and I always thought of it as in the bardic praise songs. But the motifs that you find tend to be in ballads as well, would that be the same motifs or is it exclusive to bardic praise as well? You know you get the... they've always got the curly hair and the chalk white teeth and the salmon calves and the hospitality and the generosity, these can kind of be found in some love songs as well. Would that be a separate...

DUS: No. Not at all. You're absolutely right. It's what poetry is about. Poetry is about praise, so if you're praising somebody - whether you're praising your chief or praising your lover, or you're praising your father who has been killed in a fishing accident, elements of this panegyric code are going to seep in, it's what people recognise as poetry. It's what people expect. Of course when poets use it to praise their chief there is always an element, I think, of counsel in that too. They are not just praising them from the outside, but there is always an element of advice and almost of haranguing if you have the ear to hear it. They are making recommendations on how the chief should be behaving.

DG: Much needed recommendations!

DUS: Yes, in some cases they certainly are. Which means we have to be really careful when we read this stuff and not necessarily think that it's just a description.

DG: Well often the clan feuds and battles were some of the most gruesome battles and often perhaps - would petty be the right word, I'm not sure - but they seem to have erupted into enormous battles over something that maybe we could resolve a bit better these days.

DUS: Yeah, yeah. I think... That takes us down an entirely new rabbit hole but there are ways of managing feuds. And these ways of managing feuds were if you like taken away when the Reformation happened and the church was really really destroyed across great swathes of the Highlands, and as a result, because of the authority of the church, indeed the authority of the Lordship of the Isles was no longer there, it meant that the feuds erupted and they were very very difficult to tamp down again. But no certainly there's... you can connect all this panegyric code with the idea of counsel, there's books being written about counsel in England and how the Chief's, or the King's advisors, they had to be so careful when they were giving advice to the king, how they had to phrase and frame that advice. And indeed to wider streams of poetry in Europe, where you've got this idea of the *Speculum Principe*, the mirror of princes, where praise is widespread across Europe in poetry, of course it is. And also people realise that this praise, quite often there's something behind the praise more than just praise itself. So I think our next step - and it's not just me saying this - our next step almost, if you like, beyond John MacInnes' idea of the panegyric code is, first of all see how the panegyric code might have been changing, from generation to generation, maybe different themes, different motifs come up. One big one is that the idea of chief being the defender of his clan: well that disappears during the 1700s, because the chief, you know, it's no longer a transaction between chief and his people, it's you know the chief is the landlord, and the landlord is all-powerful.

DG: That must have been a really difficult job to hold as the bard, at that point, to try and pacify the people, perhaps, or to keep them onside with a chief who had abandoned and left his people.

DUS: Absolutely, or try and drag the chief back to... back from the... the fleshpots and the gambling houses of Edinburgh or London and start being what they saw as 'a proper chief' again. There's this contractual element between the people and the chief which is, if you like, understood in the panegyric code. You know, we praise you, and you give us protection, and you know, salary, in return. And chiefs are no longer comfortable with that contractual element. They're moving out of the orbit of Gaelic culture, they are becoming Anglicised, they are now passing their lives in a British aristocratic framework, at least the most powerful ones are, so there's no longer a place as far as they are concerned, with sort of annoying bards telling them what to do.



DG: [laughter] A job I wouldn't want.

DUS: No no, and it becomes increasingly difficult. We can see the poor old bards becoming silenced. Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh who we talked about earlier from Skye, she was exiled, and the *Clarsair Dall*, another Skye poet was also exiled because he spoke too freely.

DG: Really? I never knew about *Clarsair Dall*.

DUS: Yeah because Òran Mòr MhicLeòid you know, the lament.

DG: Tha Mòran, Mòran Mulad?

DUS: Yes! You know, Dunvegan castle is now deserted, and the chief is now absent, yeah that earns him effectively an exile, an internal exile. The poets still have power, of course they do, the chief cannot afford to ignore the poet. But they can certainly make efforts to silence them.

DG: Wow. It's quite, I don't know, it feels quite sinister. But it's fascinating, it's intriguing...

DUS: Yeah there's an increasingly authoritarian side to Highland landlords during the eighteenth century. Of course there was, there always was! We can't pretend otherwise. But I think the oppression is more overt during the seventeen hundreds when the chiefs themselves are falling deeper and deeper into debt.

--interval--

DG: I want to step away for a moment from the role of the bard within the Clan Chief system and I wonder if we could talk a bit more about the different strands of songs that were in existence. The manuscripts that were published and also the role of the cèilidh house and *beul-aithris* and how all of that intertwined at the same time.

DUS: Part of the problem with the canon of Gaelic poetry which we have today is it's not necessarily the sort of poetry which was actually sung most frequently in the cèilidh houses. The stuff that we have printed tends to be the stuff that was preserved, supposedly because it was old, it was traditional to use that word again, and it fitted in with the chief's and the clan gentry's view of what their ancestors were like. In other words praise was the big thing about it. But if we look at what people were actually singing, I suspect that there would have been a lot of what we would call radical poetry which has only just left shadow traces on the repertoires we have today, as well as a huge bunch of bawdy poetry, throwaway poetry songs, which were just, you know they'd be a hit for a year and then everybody would move on. We know there's a lot of that as the Highlands and as Gaelic culture is increasingly absorbed into this commercial British culture, which is focused upon... I guess you could say it's a culture of broadside ballads, it's a culture of songs sung in the street...

You know Gaels, especially young Gaels, were spending a lot of their time in the Lowlands. You'd go there for harvest, you would go there to work in the cities, they would go there to learn English, they would join the army perhaps and spend their time down in the Lowlands or further afield there as well. They would hear songs, they would hear stories, they would become fluent in English, and then they would try, when they returned, they would try to remake that culture in Gaelic.

The days of the clans became old fashioned and the world of work songs with women spending their days engaged in back breaking work milling corn, grinding corn, milling cloth, and so on, it looked old fashioned and it was dirty and it was unsophisticated and they turned their back on it. They moved on. Nobody wanted to sing waulking songs. People wanted love songs! They want the sort of songs that people sang, that they heard people sing in the Lowlands. Songs which talked to their own life, which was a life which was in their eyes becoming modern. In the clothes they wore, in the instruments which they played, especially the fiddle, in the sort of life which they had, in their occupations which were waged occupations - you know, they would work for money.

DG: Such a difference there.



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DUS: Yeah, rather than being subsistence peasants on working the land.

It was a huge difference. And people - as I said especially young people - and there are a lot of them in the Highlands in 1750 and 1760 onwards - there's a population explosion, the same as there is in the rest of Britain and the rest of Western Europe during this period. So Gaelic suddenly becomes this young person's culture, you know it's no longer a culture of old people... well, it is a culture of old people. But it's also especially a culture of young people. And a lot of the stuff I think, though I don't know a lot about it, but I suspect a lot of the stuff that we see as being traditional Gaelic culture is really a result of this huge big upsurge in popular youth culture from the 1750s, 1760s onwards.

DG: Wouldn't you have loved to have been there to see the reaction?

DUS: Oh it would have been so exciting!

DG: It would be amazing.

DUS: Yeah and I think people were a lot more optimistic as well, people at that time thought "right I can be Gàidhealach but I can also be modern".

DG: A sort of dual-identity.

DUS: Yes, we can re-make, and everybody at that time was thinking, everybody had these visions, these ideas, that you know, "we've seen it happen in Lancashire, we've seen it happen in Lanarkshire, why can't it happen in Sutherland? Why can't it happen in Argyll?" People... Factories being set up, people making money, towns being developed, you know, modernising.

DG: Yeah.

DUS: And of us staying here and making their life in a Gaelic speaking modern Highlands. But of course all that falls to pieces... uh, you know, partially it was broken on the land, the environment, and partially because there was more money to be made from sheep than there were from people, and also using the Highlands as a reservoir of fighting men in the British Empire.

But, while it lasted, it would have been a lot of fun! [laughter]

DG: [laughter]

DUS: It just, it didn't last too long, that's the trouble. And that's when you get the *puirt à beul*, I think anyway, I have a feeling that's when the *puirt à beul* would have been developed to its full... [laughter]

DG: Now this blew my mind! I love this idea. Can you explain it a bit more, the idea of *puirt à beul* being this youth culture and this modern day almost...

DUS: Yes! It's music done... supposedly when you don't have a fiddle to dance to, somebody will make up these rhythmic verses which you can dance to yourself without the need of any musical instrument. But look at the words! They are bawdy, they're filthy in some cases.

DG: Yeah!

DUS: Lots of double entendres. It's a culture for young people. Now these *puirt à beul* it has to be said they do go back further! But I think they were developed to the fullest extent in that second half of the seventeen hundreds. Gaelic rap music? Yes, that's what it is. It's Gaelic rap music.

DG: Brilliant. That's so exciting.



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DUS: Yeah. But you can see, you know, ... in a way it's difficult because people are thinking... The old stuff, the old clan poetry, the Ossianic ballads, heroic ballads which used to be sung, even the bagpipe music itself, people are connecting this with the old days, and they think that it's going to disappear, it's going to go over a cliff, and that is one of the reasons why there is so much collection of songs going on during this period. People are trying to desperately recover what they can of the wreckage of this old society.

DG: Well we're so thankful for that and what we have in those manuscripts and also from *beul-aithris*. To be at a point where are today, to have not just the one channel of what was in those kind of gentrified, paid-for, with-an-agenda kind of manuscripts, but to have that *beul-aithris* stream coming down as well that we now can look back and see that tapestry and see all the different elements playing into this beautiful song literature landscape.

DUS: Yeah. It's incredibly complex and intricate and variegated, the culture as well. We have to remember, you know chiefs still meant something to the people of the Highlands and there was plenty of loyalty to the chiefs. The chiefs would recruit regiments, of course, you would fight for the British Empire, so that in a sense kept the panegyric code that we were talking about earlier, alive and it also kept not just the panegyric code, but it kept alive the meters of the songs, it kept alive the praise language longer than might have been the case otherwise. It didn't just die. It was kept alive into the nineteenth century and even into our own times as well. So we can see... you know, again it takes us back. It's not a fossilised tradition. It's a tradition that people are using, perhaps older songs as a template to make something new with as well.

DG: Great. Well, long may it continue. [laughter]

DUS: [laughter] Long may it continue! But you know, I think that we've... It's difficult and I still haven't been able to work out how we can properly work out the mixture, the admixture, of English and Gaelic culture in the Highlands. Not just today but a hundred or two hundred years ago. Because people - they sang in Gaelic, but they also sang in English as well, increasingly. So there's this English repertoire but it's like dark matter, we don't see it. Nobody's bothered recording it. But we know it's there. It's just there, we can sort of feel it and we can hear the echoes of it in Gaelic poetry and Gaelic song.

DG: Do you think people were perhaps aware of the decline of the language at that point?

DUS: No.

DG: No?

DUS: No, no. Why should they? They think it's a... it's a bilingual culture. Great, we know English, but we also know Gaelic. You know the two are, there's no reason to suppose, I don't think at the level of the people themselves. Of course learned ministers may have had a very different opinion.

DG: Yeah.

DUS: And the ideologues who were trying to force English on the people... also are quite convinced that the days of Gaelic are numbered. But I think you know at the level of the individual townships, individual communities in the Highlands, I think people, you know, they are Gàidhealach, and they are an example to us today of how it's possible to steer and keep balance between these two cultures, and other cultures as well.

DG: That's beautiful.

DUS: We have to remember that these people are travelling everywhere!

DG: Wow, that's incredible. You've taken us on this incredible journey and it's so multifaceted and it's... not a linear journey at all and it's all over the place and there's so much food for thought there, and I am so appreciative of your time and your generosity in sharing your knowledge and... ehm, wisdom.



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DUS: Oh, there's no wisdom there. There's no wisdom. [laughter]

DG: [laughter]

DUS: It's just... oh dear, when people start to talk like that. You know?

DG: Well I enormously appreciate your time, and I just think that is so interesting, and really refreshing to think of that time period as a time of excitement and change and freshness.

DUS: Yeah it's an awful thing to say, but one of the things which we have to do I think is to take a step back and think that Gaelic literature isn't special, before we can then take a step forward and see the special things about it.

DG: Yeah, and I think that brings us right back to the beginning where you said that you know it's not, you don't like the word 'tradition', and to think that we are unique from other influences and that it's a standalone thing, because I think that's quite a good lesson for us to learn, and not to be... if I'm understanding you correctly, but not to set us apart and to recognise how it all melds together in a much wider sense. And then we can make so many more links across the way.

DUS: I think that's very true. I think we have to see Gaelic as being a globalised culture and it has been so for many years, and it has been a culture with communities across the globe as well. I talk about a global Gaelosphere, it's like an Anglosphere except it's a Gaelosphere, and you know this is, there's been feedback from the globe, and particularly from the British Empire for good and for bad, on the Highlands for many many generations, and you know when you look upon our culture, we have to be aware of these different echoes that we can hear of different cultures and different voices.

DG: Well a Dhòmhnaill Uilleim, mòran mòran taing airson a' bhìdh na mo chuideachd an-diugh agus a' bruidhinn còmhla riom, thank you so much for chatting with me today, that's been just really phenomenal. Thank you so so much.

DUS: 'S e do bheatha Deirdre, mòran mòran taing dhut fhèin cuideachd.

DG: Cheers.

DG: My thanks again to Dòmhnall Uilleam Stewart for being so generous in navigating us through this exciting period of history. I hope that you enjoyed our conversation - if so, please remember to like, share, review and subscribe to this podcast.

The music you hear is taken from my album, *Urranta*, which is available through my website www.deirdregraham.com as well as on the usual streaming platforms.

Before I go I'd like to extend my grateful thanks to Creative Scotland for supporting this project.

I look forward to sharing more Gaelic Song Stories with you and I hope that you'll join me the next time.

Chun an uairsin, beannachd leibh!



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