



Episode 5: The Cèilidh House

Hallo agus fàilte air ais gu Gaelic Song Stories, am pod-chraoladh far bi mise, Deirdre Ghreumach, a toirt sùil air na sgeulachdan air cùlaibh nan òran.

Hello and welcome back to Gaelic Song Stories with me, Deirdre Graham.

I am delighted to be joined today by Gaelic singer and lecturer, Gillebride MacMillan. A native of South Uist, Gillebride was immersed from childhood in the Gaelic speaking community of Gearraidh Bhaltos, where Gaelic customs and traditions remained among the strongest in Scotland.

Gillebride is a regular performer at music festivals in Scotland and throughout the world, and he has worked as a cataloguer for *Tobar an Dulachais*, and also devised and developed song collecting and revitalisation projects, *Gaoth an Iar* and 'Aig an Iasgach'.

His self-penned album 'Freumhan Falaichte' or Hidden Roots, which was launched in 2018 received with critical acclaim and one reviewer said it was "an enormously significant album, the writing poignant, direct and the music inventive and passionate".

Gillebride has written a new album of original songs, which will be released in 2022 and I am thrilled that he shares a *criomag* or fragment of one of them during our conversation today.

In this week's podcast we take a sidestep from the songs themselves and look into the taigh cèilidh or Ceilidh House: the role it played in the community and its role in the transmission of Gaelic songs and stories.

The ceilidh house was the hub of the community in every village; a meeting place where work and socialising converged, where old and young shared in traditions and practices and where the *bard baile* or town bard broadcast the local news amongst the community.

As we move away from the cèilidh house we also look into the unbroken chain of Gaelic song composition despite the many changes in society as the Gaidhleatachd moved into an age of modernity, and how new compositions sit in the continuum of Gaelic song traditions.

Peppered throughout all of this we have a cèilidh of our own; one that you are welcomed into warmly. I hope you enjoy!

Deirdre Graham: *Mòran taing a' Ghillebride airson a' bhidh na mo chuideachd an-diugh.* Thank you so much Gillebride for talking to me today and giving me your time.

Gillebride MacMillan: *'S e do bheatha,* it's good to be here.

DG: Now with your own upbringing in South Uist, steeped in language, song and culture, and teamed with your work as a performer as well as a lecturer at the University of Glasgow, you come highly respected and revered as a voice of authority in this area today.

GM: [laughter] Oh well thank you very much and uh... Yeah I suppose I was just very lucky to grow up in a... in a place and in a family that kind of had very strong, kind of... kind of roots in Gaelic singing, Gaelic poetry and so on. So yeah it's something I love and it's a delight to be able to teach it and perform as well.

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DG: Yeah. Today I'd like us to take a look at the culture surrounding the cèilidh house, or taigh cèilidh, and I would like us delve into the purpose of it and the purpose it served in bringing people together, and I kind of think of it as the beating heart of the community. Ehm in fact I've got a quote here that I took from Margaret Callan's book, it's actually another quote from McKeane, it says: 'the cèilidh house, it was the context for social interaction, the role of the *taighean cèilidh* in transmitting rural Highland culture cannot be overemphasised.'

GM: Yeah and I think that's so true. Because so many of the villages - or even every village - would have a cèilidh house where people would gather in the long winter evenings. And I think it's important to say it wasn't necessarily something that went on all year.

DG: Mhm.

GM: Because in summer they were hard working outside making use of the long daylight hours.

DG: Yeah of course!

GM: But in winter they would have time when it was dark to come together to sing, to tell stories, to talk about *sloinneadh*, which is the patronymics, who do you belong to, which is so so important, and um, when you're doing all of that, the people would have been working as well. So you're either fixing nets, fixing creels, fixing baskets, carding, uh spinning, all those types of jobs that you could do whilst listening, whilst telling stories, whilst singing songs, were done. And so, the community coming together in those circumstances meant that it was a very warm kind of environment.

DG: Mhm.

GM: Where people shared stories, listened, and did their work at the same time.

DG: That's... That's a really interesting point because I think that my idea, or our idea of a cèilidh nowadays is so far removed from this idea of a cèilidh, and maybe we can chat a bit about what the word cèilidh actually means.

GM: Yeah so the actual word cèilidh in Gaelic means, I suppose, to go visiting-

DG: Mhm.

GM: So we'd say *a' dol air chèilidh*, so we're going visiting. And when you're visiting you do all those things which I mentioned before: singing, telling stories, playing a tune. Talking about patronymics, talking about local anecdotes and stories and so on-

DG: Mhm.

GM: And, in those circumstances, in many ways, you had a captive audience, and that meant that when people were composing songs, they were composing songs for those audiences. And there's lots of stories about how wonderful memories of people in the past were.

DG: Yes.

GM: They could hear a song, they could hear a story, and they only had to hear it once and then they could recite it the next night at another cèilidh house. So in many ways, so many of the songs and stories were passed on uh in the community just by people hearing them once and so on.

DG: That's incredible.

GM: So sometimes, too, as having variations of songs.



DG: Mhm!

GM: So you'd have uh a song which has a slightly different word in one village from another village because it was just passed on.

DG: Yep.

GM: Differently.

DG: Yep. Uh... I think that's absolutely incredible, and I think so far removed from... I think of learning songs takes me a while- [laughter]

GM: [laughter]

DG: -you know, getting those words in my head. But I suppose that was a time where just people's lives were drenched in it, it wasn't just at the cèilidh house itself.

GM: Yeah.

DG: It was the very essence of them, their very being.

GM: Because everything that they did would have had a soundtrack attached to it, but it was their own personal soundtrack.

DG: Yeah!

[singing interval]

*Dhèanadh i cardadh, dhèanadh i cìreadh
Rachadh i bhal nam faigheadh i fìdhlear
Dhèanadh i cardadh, dhèanadh i cìreadh
Dhèanadh i sìth nam faigheadh i dram*

GM: If you were uh, carding the wool, you'd be singing a rhythmic song for that.

DG: Mhm.

GM: If you were spinning the wool you'd have a rhythm for that. Then waulking the tweed, clapping songs, all of those things connected to the wool, and wool making and cloth making would have their own songs. Uh, reaping songs if you were cutting, rowing songs if you were out rowing.

DG: Mhm.

GM: Anything like that in terms of rhythmic work-

DG: Laborious work.

GM: Anything laborious, and all these songs made that a little bit more interesting. And then when you'd have time in the evening, then you could have the ballads, the kind of story songs, where you were maybe telling the story in the first instance, and then somebody would sing a song based on that. Later on I suppose, in the early twentieth century, the kind of the *bard baile*, which would be I suppose called the village poets, they would compose songs about events that were happening in those villages.



I think of them sometimes as a bit like the newspapers of their day.

DG: Yeah!

GM: Because if something funny, something sad, something important happened in that community, they would then compose... a song. Which would then be shared in the local cèilidh house which then would be spread further and wider as well.

DG: Yeah.

GM: So it was a really important way of sharing out the culture as well.

DG: Yeah, absolutely. Just to bring back a point there you were talking about the carding and the spinning and everything. So in my mind I think growing up you know I've learned songs about all these different work practices. So would they... I've always kind of, in my mind, had a picture of them happening away from the cèilidh house. So would it almost kind of be in two parts, you would have that happening at the time of work, and then again at the cèilidh house?

GM: Yeah, so I suppose they would have the carding songs when they would be doing the work during the day...

DG: Right.

GM: And in the evening I suppose when they were sitting together carrying on that carding song, not necessarily singing, but in that instance they may be listening to somebody else sharing their song in the evening, but it's important to say: there was no time, I think there was no time for idling at all.

DG: [laughter] No.

GM: No time for sitting back and just enjoying, you were enjoying and working at the same time, so...

DG: Yeah. I think that is an important distinction to make because my childhood in going to cèilidhs would be... The village I'm from, Breakish, I've got - my childhood was steeped in going to cèilidhs. But my cèilidhing or *a' dol air chèilidh* wasn't so much, of course I went to people's houses, but we were... we came together at the village hall, and that would have been steeped with, with everyone taking a turn in singing or playing the pipes, but there would have been dancing as well, but it didn't have that work element to it. So I suppose somewhere along the line that has changed.

GM: Yeah absolutely, so we've probably gone from a kind of... actively taking part in cèilidhs and being active while at cèilidhs, to a kind of passive, you're there to enjoy the music, enjoy the show as it were, and it's that kind of moving from active to passive. So growing up I was kind of the same, we would have cèilidhs - as we call them cèilidhs in Bornish Hall-

DG: Mhm.

GM: And that would be again, um, somebody or people from the community singing, piping, you might have somebody playing the accordion, and people would get up and dance as well. So that kind of cèilidh-

DG: Mhm.

GM: -as well as people coming visiting. So when people would come visiting, they would invariably talk about *sloinneadh* which is patronymics, who you are related to, and who is related to who and so on. And stories and anecdotes from the past. So I suppose for me growing up that kind of traditional cèilidh house or the earlier form of the cèilidh house had been separated in some sense.



DG: Yeah.

GM: So people would come visiting and you'd talk about those things, but for the singing performance that would be done at the cèilidh, and of course nowadays - coming to Glasgow for me was a kind of, it was one of the things 'Oh we're going to have a cèilidh,' or 'going to do a cèilidh,' and that meant a dance.

DG: Yeah, yeah.

GM: But for me a cèilidh is not a dance.

DG: Yeah.

GM: It's that kind of shared gathering of people and... another important thing to mention, I suppose, is growing up you'd have a cèilidh in Bornish Hall and there'd be nobody named on the bill!

DG: Mhm.

GM: On the poster. Because... you knew everybody who'd come along because they would come and share their song. So that was a huge change as well I would say, in kind of 1990s to 2000s having named people on the bill.

DG: Yeah.

GM: And that meant, I think- I was doing a project on this a couple of years ago in Uist with kind of local singers in Uist who no longer had an opportunity to sing because they used to be asked to sing at cèilidhs and so on but then they just weren't being asked because there would be a named person on the bill.

DG: Yeah.

GM: And so on. So we're just trying to look at ways of trying to re-encourage people to sing again and sing within their own singing traditions and I think that's really important just in terms of meeting people, spreading the culture, speaking the language, and so on.

--interval--

DG: Yeah absolutely I wonder if there's maybe a sense of loss there even as recently as the 90's, the 1990s, you know for people who aren't necessarily going to be performers, you know, in a music industry, a kind of... There's...

Can I ask, you know, were people feeling that sense of change or-

GM: Yeah I would say people definitely did have a sense of... Loss in the sense that they would... Loss in two senses I suppose, people who used to sing songs at cèilidhs, at gatherings, were no longer asked to sing because for the capitalist system we're working, uh, within-

DG: Yeah yeah yeah.

GM: People were paying other people to come in and perform. And so that's a very passive form of enjoying culture. But for other people who didn't even get to that stage of being asked, or who didn't even get to that stage, unless you're going, or thinking of going to become a kind of professional or semi-professional singer, you were really never given the chance to sing at those cèilidhs, which then meant you weren't learning the songs, which then meant a loss of confidence, which meant that they just weren't singing at all. So part of the project we were working on was really just giving people the chance to sing songs in a group.



DG: Yeah.

GM: Not a choir, but just kind of: here's a song, we're going to learn it, and when there's a cèilidh, we're going to sing it.

DG: I think that's really important because I... I feel that, certainly I feel very privileged from my own upbringing to have been steeped in songs, mainly from my mum's influence, and you'll have had the same. And to not have that, and certainly schools as well don't have that... total immersion in them anymore. Unless you are going to become professional and seek it out? That must become very difficult when you don't have that foundation of that community around you. Ehm and I think going back to the cèilidh house, you know, I view it as... It was such a... A respect to old traditions and a respect to the elderly members in the community, as well as almost an immersion and setting a foundation for the youth. It was- every age would have been immersed in that!

GM: Absolutely yeah, yeah. And I think it's, it was, I think at the end of the day it comes back to lack of confidence and what was really interesting for me about seven years ago when I was recording some of these, uh, kind of people in Uist, some of the older people and some of the younger people as well, just talking to them about singing, was that... I was speaking to an 80 year old plus lady who was a great singer but what she said to me was 'Oh I've got no songs.'

DG: Oh!

GM: And I knew she had songs.

DG: Uh-huh.

GM: But then what she said later on was: 'Oh, but I've got no songs compared to those that were recorded in the 1950s. Go to Tobar an Dualchais and you'll hear their songs.' And it was like, oh because these people were recorded in the 1950s-

DG: Uh-huh.

GM: -Even people who were growing up were going 'Oh I've got nothing compared to them.'

DG: Wow.

GM: And I think there's that's really, it's a terrible shame that people feel like that, because what they have is so worthwhile-

DG: So precious.

GM: -even if they, they've never been told it's precious and worthwhile before, but really it is. And... And I think there's also that, when we think of the cèilidh house, and songs have different variations and different changes and so on.

DG: Mhm.

GM: That when a song is recorded, whether that be in Tobar an Dualchais, or a professional recording, or even written in a book, it sometimes-

DG: It stamps-

GM: -becomes the definitive version of that-



DG: -yes.

GM: -song. And somebody who is singing a different version, in terms of melody or a different words, might go and say 'Oh I've been singing it wrong all these years!'

DG: Yeah.

GM: So there's a real danger of that happening so I think it's just a way of making sure that, that doesn't... [laughter]

[washing machine noises]

My washing machine.

DG: [laughter] Ehm, I think that's a really really important point about the kind of... Puts a definitive version on something. That's something I actually touched on a few weeks ago, I spoke to Dòmhnall Uilleam Stewart, and we were talking about how... Ehm, many hundreds of years ago, there would have been audience interaction where the audience members would heckle the performer and so the performance wasn't this professional person giving the definitive version. Depending on the audience, depending on the occasion you would have a different version arise. And that kind of two-way street can.. You know be... lost a bit. And in Tobar an Dualchais there are these recordings where - and to think on that woman who you were talking about - the value of having so many people's voices heard, if not recorded but at least heard and passed on, just gives that kind of variety and assurance to people as well I would say.

GM: Yeah and I think that thing you mentioned about the *taigh cèilidh* being a thing that was going back and forward, and that meant that... The *bard baile* and the singers and those who were there responded-

DG: Hmm.

GM: -to, to events and what was going on.

DG: Yeah.

GM: And of course one of the big changes that came about was uh, the TV and the radio-

DG: Yes.

GM: -and people working, so people having to get up to work the next day meant that they were no longer following the times of the moon and the sun.

DG: Yeah.

GM: So you'd have to get up at a certain time even in winter.

DG: Yeah.

GM: Which meant that you'd probably have to go to bed.. slightly earlier than you would have in the past, which meant that it just might be easier just to stay at home, listen to the radio, watch the TV - beamed in English, of course - so that again was a big change.

DG: Yeah.



GM: And again the *bard baile* had to deal with this because the way that - or the reason you composed songs, was for the community to be singing them and to be interested in them. So if you're at the *taigh cèilidh* and nobody is there, nobody is listening to your new song, it's not being passed on, what's the point? Of doing it?

DG: Yeah!

GM: So that was the kind of existential crisis that some of the bards had, so for example *Dòmhnall Ailean Dhòmhnail na Banich* Donald Allan MacDonald, who composed probably one of the most beautiful love songs: *Gruagach Òg an Fhuilt Bhàn*.

DG: Oh!

[singing interval]

Gruagach òg an fhuilt bhàin,

Èist ri bàrdachd mo bhilean;

Thoir dhomh gealladh thar chàich

'S air do sgàth nì mi tilleadh;

Ged 's iomadh tè san robh m' ùidh

Anns gach dùthaich is cinneadh,

O, nach aontaich thu leams',

'S mi bhiodh sunndach gad shireadh.

GM: Uh, he- after he won the Bardic Crown at the Mòd, he stopped writing poetry.

DG: [gasps] No! Really?

GM: That was the last, the last song he did. And he said in the collection of his works, edited by John Angus MacDonald, he says there, so if people are... not singing the songs, if the *taigh cèilidh* has ended, there's no point in me doing the songs.

DG: Oh that's heartbreaking.

GM: Whereas others for example *Dòmhnall Iain Dhonnchaidh*, Donald John MacDonald, he used to compose songs for the cèilidh house, what he decided to do was write poetry to be read. And there were others as well, for example *Dòmhnall Ruadh Phàislig* in Paisley-

DG: Mhm.

GM: Um and he was, of course, he was slightly separate from the community anyway, he had a community in Glasgow, but he used to compose songs and send them... To *Iain Eòsag* Captain Donald Joseph MacKinnon, and that was his way of getting his songs out in the community, by getting *Iain Eòsag* to sing them.

[singing interval]



*E horo Chalum Mhòir; thugainn comh' rium gu dram
Null do bhùth Dhòmhnail 'ic Leòid 's gheibh sinn stòpan de leann,
'S nuair a bhios sinn 'ga òl 's math a chòrdas sinn ann,
Bidh ar n-inntinn air ceòl 's cha bhi òrain oirnn gann
Ann am bùth Dhòmhnail 'ic Leòid.*

GM: So it's that kind of three ways.

DG: Yeah.

GM: One: stop completely. Two: start writing poetry to be read.

DG: Mhm.

GM: And another one: work very closely with a singer. And he would be giving him his songs and so on. So once that cèilidh house came to an end and that transmission came to an end, they had a - well - kind of those are the three ways that were taken. Stopping, changing way, or kind of feeding your songs to a singer to be sung.

DG: [sigh] Yeah. [sigh] I find that really sad because I suppose, you know, for, in your first instance there to stop composing altogether that's... Well that's really upsetting, you know? And what a loss.

GM: Oh yeah. He's a great, great...

DG: *Gruagach Òg an Fhuil Bhàn* is beautiful, and to think what else could have come after that...

GM: Yes so I think it's just one of these. But they were very much... *baird* bards within their community for their community, and when that community is no longer there. Or another thing that I would say is when the community weren't able to understand their songs, because even in the 1950s or 1960s they would be singing the Gaelic of the new generation is terrible compared to the Gaelic of the old generation! [laughter]

DG: [laughter]

GM: [laughter] So.

DG: They've been saying that for centuries!

--interval--

GM: One of the main reasons with the decline in the cèilidh house was the reason for the decline in song composition.

DG: Yeah.

GM: So when you're thinking of song composition in Gaelic from Am Bròn Binn or these Fenian ballad songs. All the way to the clan songs, to Màiri Mhòr nan Òran, to Donald Ruadh Phaislig to the *baird baile* of the 1950s, 50s, 60s, 70s, and then suddenly...

DG: Nothing.

GM: ...it almost stopped.

DG: Almost!



GM: But Murchadh MacPhàrlain carried on his links with Mairead na h-Òganaich and composing songs and then Runrig. And I think we cannot underestimate the importance of Runrig in continuing that unbroken chain of Gaelic song composition which has been going on for a thousand years, which almost came to an end. But it continued because...

DG: Save for a few folk.

GM: Save for a few folk.

DG: But I suppose then, [laughter] you know you think back to the cèilidh house where it touched every member of the community's lives. At every age, at every level. And the reach I think of - you think of social media in terms of reach and engagement - you think of the reach of that, it would have been everywhere. And on the one hand that reach is kind of declining, where you've got fewer voices composing, fewer opportunities to sing. Fewer people engaging with it.

And then, in a sense, then the reach escalates, because you've got a, I suppose in my head I can see it... it's narrowing down the number of people who are composing because it's not at every level of society anymore. But then with professional careers you start through, I suppose probably through the folk revival, would it be, Na h-Òganaich, Runrig and particularly Runrig of course, your reach then becomes global. Eh when you start... when you look at our music industry now. And... you know we talked about the confidence that had... on... Just the normal person in the community singing and sharing their own repertoire, but I suppose we're thankful that there is a very strong music industry that does promote this music.

But then that kind of brings us on to the idea where, I think, in my mind certainly when I was younger, and something maybe I've held on to too long, is that I think of Gaelic songs and I think of old songs, and I sing from a tradition, from a repertoire that was composed a couple of hundreds, three or four hundred many hundreds of years ago, and I think I'm probably guilty of using that as a repertoire and not... continuing it, whereas you're mentioning that unbroken tradition of composition.

GM: Yeah I think what you're saying is so true and I think, even... I love all these old songs and I sing them and I've been singing them for years, and I think the Gaelic speaking audience likes them as well, because I think it gives people that... Something they were used to growing up.

DG: Mhm.

GM: They used to hear these songs, they were taught these songs, and it's... and they don't hear them very often. Unless you're going to search them out, because we're surrounded by lots of different music styles, by people talking, so you're kind of... It's hard to get the songs that are used to you, growing up, or as part of your repertoire, so... When you do have the chance to go to a cèilidh or something, they are few and far in between, so you want to hear the songs that you know! And there's nothing quite like having the audience singing along with you-

DG: Yes!

GM: -it's so uplifting, when you're singing, there is something wonderful about that. And also I think that it shows that these songs have gone into the tradition.

DG: Mm.

GM: Now I think the challenge I suppose for modern... people composing modern songs is, getting ways of... Getting your songs into the tradition. So that other people feel that: 'Oh, I like that song, I'm going to sing it myself.' And that's the wonderful thing that's happened with Runrig, with Cearcal a' CHuain and Chi Mi 'n Geamhradh.



DG: Oh, yes.

GM: And also with Murchadh MacPhàrlain songs... It takes a while but it's also happening with for example Maraichean nan Cuantan-

DG: Yeah, yeah.

GM: Floraidh NicPhàil and Angus MacPhail's song, so it does take a couple of years for a song, I think, to get into that kind of community - 'ooh! That song has been around for a while, I'm going to sing it myself.'

DG: Do you think that people kind of feel that, that because it's so either people nowadays - you compose songs yourself - or do you think it's very much just on the grasp of living memory in some cases. Do you think that some people think 'Oh that's their song, I can't sing that.' And that's why it takes a while?

GM: Well possibly! But it's, funnily enough, one of the best things that I've felt from... Sharing my own songs was when ehm, Evie Waddell for example asked, for example, if she could come and sing my songs!

DG: Mhm. Lovely.

GM: And I thought that was absolutely fantastic. And then there was another choir that asked if they could sing my songs, and uh... I think that's one of the things that you want in terms of... Composing songs is when other people take the songs and make them their own songs.

DG: Mhm.

GM: And so then they're no longer your songs, they're just songs that are there. And I think that's-

DG: Yeah!

GM: -a great thing.

DG: I suppose that's a real joy because essentially songs and music are... emotional responses. Or people have strong emotional responses to them. And it resonates with people in certain ways and you make different responses to them, whether it's - you know we were talking about people having slightly different versions of the songs or whether it's just your interpretation of a song on an emotional level, that's a real joy as a songwriter to kind of have people react like that to it.

GM: Yeah. And I think that one of the other things that's important to say in terms of Gaelic composition, that, up until the 1970s, really, they were... people writing songs and they weren't necessarily the ones singing them. They would... pass them on to the community and then the community singers would sing them.

DG: Ahh, yeah.

GM: What I would say nowadays is that... Those who are, those who are composing Gaelic songs also sing their own songs.

DG: Ah yeah!

GM: So it's that idea of going from... people composing songs for other people to sing or for the community to sing... to being singer songwriters, in a way. And then-

DG: Yeah!



GM: So that's quite a big change.

DG: Yeah.

GM: And part of the reason for that is, I think, that if people are writing their own songs.. but not singing them... They're just going to disappear.

DG: Yeah.

GM: So I think you, in many ways, have to give your songs that first push by singing them yourself publicly and recording them if you can and so on. And then let the community take them on, if they wish, or not. So that's really one of the challenges and I think that is a big change in... because you really have to give your songs a push nowadays. Whereas in the past... in many ways the cèilidh house would have done it for you.

DG: Do you think that, ehm, the songs that are composed these days have a more... Ehm, or rather have a less specific... correlation with a community? They are kind of more open in their... in their themes or... so that because you don't have the cèilidh house where it's community-specific and kind of a commentary on what's going on in that area, do you think that songs nowadays kind of open up to a more, um, open themes?

GM: Yeah I suppose there's, there... when we think of the *bard baile*, we might think they are very local and insular in some ways, and they definitely did songs that were very local and specific. But they also dealt with world issues-

DG: Yeah, yeah.

GM: -whether that be politics, whether that be war, whether that be the decline of the Gaelic language, the status of the Gaelic language. And when you think of some of the songs that were composed for example, An Eala Bhan...

DG: Yeah.

GM: Uh, composed in the trenches in the first World War, and you can't get anything more international than war. That kind of...

DG: More global.

GM: ...more global community than that!

DG: Yeah.

GM: So there's that argument, but also I think we just have to accept that um... the Gaelic community has changed.

DG: Yep.

GM: So we are making songs for the Gaelic community but it's also those who are interested in Gaelic songs from around the world and I think there is a huge interest in Gaelic songs from around the world. Sometimes.. the Gaelic songs.. The modern compositions give people who want to learn more about Gaelic the first step in. They may be more accessible for them in terms of language, in terms of subject matter, in terms of the kind of melodies and so on. And then that gives them the first step into them getting to know more about *bard baile* and other types of Gaelic songs so it's kind of...

DG: Yeah.



--interval--

DG: That brings us quite neatly onto some of your own compositions. Ehm, which I know that you have composed them, and what strikes me of them is that they are kind of global themes, I suppose, when we think on, you know, war, migration, politics, we're all to some level [laughter] to some level directly or indirectly affected by those themes. You know we live in a global society and I suppose Gaelic has been a global culture for hundreds of years. And so when you're composing, I believe you've got a song that you composed for ehm... The Freedom Fighters!

GM: Yeah so there was a song I composed for Las Sandinistas, which is in Nicaragua. So I was over in, actually I've been over in South America, but in Nicaragua. I was in the CCA and went to see a film, by mistake, I went to the wrong one.

DG: [laughter]

GM: So I ended up watching this film and it was just an amazing story of women who had been Freedom Fighters in Nicaragua and then, once they got power, with... Once they were fighting with the men and once the Freedom Fighters won the men sidelined the women so they had to fight again to get women's rights and so on.

DG: Wow.

GM: Ehm.. because, so the women in effect had to fight twice. So I just composed that song because I was so, it was such a... A great documentary first of all but it's also a wonderful story.

DG: Mhm.

GM: People fighting standing up for their rights, and having to literally stand up for your rights so...

*Tog suas d' ainm 's do chridhe
'S thèid sinn far an iaramaid
Theid sinn le gràdh dh' ionnsaigh dùthaich nas fheàrr
Theid sinn le gràdh dh' ionnsaigh dùthaich nas fheàrr*

GM: I composed that song and, I suppose, the way I compose songs is just by... thinking of a word and a phrase and then a melody comes to that. And then a line comes, and then a next line comes, so I suppose I compose songs in the old style so the melody and the song. So you'd have the unaccompanied song and then we work with Mhairi Hall to kind of bring, or kind of bring it a musical arrangement. But... these themes - and also kind of personal songs, and political songs, and historical songs and so on. I suppose they are just things that come to me and they're part of my life and Gaelic-speaking life so just, it just seems to happen. And it comes to me like that. But I think it's just... composing songs. For me, that's important is: Composing songs within the tradition-

DG: Mm.

GM: But also not being restricted by the tradition.

DG: Yeah... I think that's a really outward looking and openly embracing the tools that you have.

GM: Yeah so I think I kind of like... I'm always reminded of a comment that, I was, after I sang. I was singing a concert of my own songs in Uist.

DG: Mhm.



GM: Uh, I got some funding and uh... I knew it would be the hardest audience.

DG: [laughter] The home crowd.

GM: I'll just sing... oh, because there's, you're over there singing, but then you're singing your own songs.

DG: Ooft.

GM: [laughter]

DG: Were there people with their arms folded at the front. [laughter]

GM: Almost it was so funny because somebody said: 'Oh I like your songs, but I just wish you'd sing *A' Pheigi a' Ghraidh!*

DG: Oh! [laughter]

GM: [laughter]

*A Pheigi a ghràidh 's tu dh'fhàg mi buileach gun sunnd,
'S mi seòladh an-dràst' thar sàil dh'Astràilia null,
Tha 'n oidhche fliuch, fuar, 's mi shuas ga cumail air chùrs,
'S tu daonnan nam smuain, a luaidh, bhon dealaich thu rium.*

GM: And I love *A' Pheigi a' Ghraidh* as well! But it's also... we have to think. That song is only 50 or 60 years old.

DG: Yeah!

GM: And it's... it's quickly become a part of the tradition. And I think one thing that happened in the 1970s onwards, when the *bard baile* stopped composing songs, is that people, and audiences in a sense, forgot that we used to compose songs.

DG: Yeah.

GM: And I think that's a challenge that we have. Oh we're still composing songs because... It's so important as a living tradition-

DG: Yeah.

GM: -and a living language to carry on singing. We can't just sing old songs, I love the old songs-

DG: Yeah.

GM: -but we have to have old songs and new songs as well.

DG: Yeah. Yeah I think that's a really strong and important message. And you're right people very quickly forget, forget that.

GM: Yeah so even um when you think of Canan nan Gàidheal or Mi Le M' Uilinn... Runrig songs, they are so embedded within the tradition now. They're not old songs, they're only forty years old, but it's then... Oh, we have to, kind of saying 'Oh!' But we're still new songs, and we can appreciate new songs and appreciate old



songs. So I think it's part of the thing, I think it's hard to get those who are Gaelic speakers interested in new songs.

DG: Yeah.

GM: So many of the people interested in, I would say, my songs are people who are coming to Gaelic, learning Gaelic, or not Gaelic speakers.

DG: Yep. A different audience.

GM: Whereas I would say those who are brought up with Gaelic want to hear the songs that they heard as children. It may be a kind of comforting thing.

DG: Yeah.

GM: Because I love to hear songs I heard as a child because it's just kind of - Oh! It's still around.

DG: Yeah! There's such warmth. It just evokes all those memories and I have this idea in my head... it's an October night and it's dark outside and it's raining and that - The fire on, being warm, and that all goes hand in hand with songs for me. And again that probably harks back to the cèilidh house where it would have been winter, winter ehm... comings-together. So all that idea of cosiness and everything and it's also a sense of nostalgia for me.

GM: Yeah and it's also another thing that's really important in that bond of all the people there knowing the chorus to Thoir Mo Shoraigh Thar Ghunaidh or whatever song it is. So people joining in... makes people enjoy those songs.

DG: Do you think to some level, or possibly quite a great level, that some people do look to the older songs as a really... trying to treasure something that's been so hard hit against? The language has been so hard hit against for many many years as well as modernity and machinery on the crofts, and as well as salaried work, and people going to work throughout the year, and not seasonal anymore, and as well as all these other things we touched on, there's a real - people are still kind of grappling and kind of, not grappling but just really holding on to the old songs because of the horrific mistreatment of the language.

GM: Absolutely. So part of the things about the archival recordings and those kind of getting comfort from songs of the past is that people are trying to save what in many ways has been lost. So I think I kind of think of it sometimes, in many ways, as the... An evolving tradition. So for example if you're going to a folklore festival and people are dressed up in the... The clothes of the 1900s.

DG: Mhm.

GM: For me that's not quite such a... an example of a living culture. It's like this is how we were, so we're going to wear these clothes and we're going to see how people lived 100 years ago. What's really important for me is saying well we wore these dresses and wore these clothes 100 years ago, and we sang these songs. We're still singing these songs, and this is how they'll sound to us now.

DG: Mhm.

GM: With accompaniment. And that means the second one is a living version-

DG: Exactly.

GM: -whereas the first one is kind of a moment in time which we're getting to look back on, but then you take your clothes off and it's just dead. So it's that idea of...



DG: Yeah I think the living tradition. It is really important there. And they, of course they always did kind of... The songs always did change. And they always did go with the... They went in trends, they went in fashions all the songs as well, so.

GM: And they would have no worries about adding different words here and there of course!

DG: Yeah! So we need to have that freedom-

GM: I think it all comes back to that idea of... a definitive version.

DG: Yeah.

GM: Because we're looking for a definitive version! Because that is the correct version that was recorded by such and such a person. But we forget that the person down the road was never recorded so their version disappeared, so it's that... Looking for a definitive version which you'll never be able to get.

DG: Yeah.

GM: And if you do get that definitive version, it probably means you've probably stopped that kind of living, evolving tradition.

DG: Yeah.

GM: Living means that things are a bit fuzzy and uneven and not quite there and late and so on. Which means that it's living and ongoing.

DG: Yeah, yeah that's lovely.

--interval--

DG: I'd like to take us back again to the... the cèilidh house, *taigh cèilidh* or to that time! And I want us to think on some of the social occasions like, you know we've talked about work and carding and spinning and... rowing, and all sorts. Ehm but as well some of the frivolity that was involved and the merriment that was celebrated in communities. And of course, like you say, a living tradition, for many many years. But some things, some aspects have been forgotten along the way and I'd like to think of... kind of weddings and death as well perhaps, two kinds of areas that would be surrounded in, in not just songs, but also just... Ehm, I don't want to say tradition to put a stamp on it! But just surrounded in practices. Would you have any songs, or any insight into what would happen if there was a wedding going on and some of the practices that would be involved?

GM: Yeah so in terms of weddings... I suppose they would be. Again it's ways that communities come together. So you'd have first of all I suppose the... betrothal, so *an reiteach*

DG: Mhm.

GM: So that kind of, uh, people coming together beforehand and having all sorts of parties and kind of laughing and sharing stories and so on. And then I suppose the other event back then sounds pretty awful, but the day or two before would be the illing of the hens.

DG: [laughter] Oh!

GM: [laughter] So uh people coming, knowing that they were going to eat the hens, so the women of the village would come to kill the hens.



DG: To kill the hens!

GM: To kill the hens.

DG: [laughter] Oh.

GM: So then that would lead to lots of frivolity, lots of stories as well, and then that might mean that there would be a song composed or something like that.

DG: I've never heard of the killing of the hens! [laughter]

GM: That's the hen party.

DG: [gasp] Oh my goodness!

GM: Yeah.

DG: Wow!

GM: Yeah so they would come together to kind of kill the hens and then they would eat the hens and so on.

DG: Oh that's just blown my mind. [laughter]

GM: [laughter] Yeah so it's those types of songs, and then of course at the wedding itself there would be... just kind of different ways of music and merriment. I suppose they weren't... They would just be... in our barn, I know the person, she lives in our village, so the wedding was in our barn, in our old house barn.

DG: Yeah!

GM: So it would just be the, to the place where they could find a place where they could gather and have those sorts of events.

*Tha mi dol a dheanamh banais, tha mi dol a rèiteach
Tha mi dol a dheanamh banais, tha mi dol a rèiteach
Tha mi dol a dheanamh banais, tha mi dol a rèiteach
Hè hì hò gu nuair a thig mo cheud-ghaol*

*Hoigh ili odail iodail odail iodail oi ghrigh
Hoigh ili odail iodail odail iodail oi ghrigh
Hoigh ili odail iodail odail iodail oi ghrigh
Gheò-am 'sa ghiodail-am 'sa ghiodail iodail oighrigh*

GM: And in terms of death... [laughter]. I know a bit more about death. [laughter]

DG: [laughter]

GM: There would be loads of songs... First of all there would be songs about going clockwise or sun-wise.

DG: Oh wow! Okay.

GM: So if you're going to take the body up to the house you'd want to follow the path of good luck, so you'd go sun-wise around the house...



DG: Oh wow! Okay!

GM: ...rather than going anti-clockwise, which was kind of... ways of, the wrong way as it were. You just want to keep things fine and dandy. So I guess that comes down to that same kind of idea of *làmh-cheart* and *làmh-cheàrr*: the wrong hand doing the wrong things by going the wrong way, against the sun.

DG: Yeah, right hand, left hand! Because I'm left-handed!

GM: [laughter] Yeah!

DG: And I'm always called a *cearrag*.

GM: *Cearrag* [laughter] So it's that idea of going thins sun-wise and there's that whole tradition of-

DG: Pagan traditions.

GM: Yeah. But also there's even Nan MacKinnon on Barra, she talked about um people - that she didn't hear it herself - but the keening tradition.

DG: Keening, yeah.

GM: So people being, and in many ways they were paid to be professional mourners. So if somebody was worthy, or they would often pay them beforehand, so if they wanted to show how important they were to the community they would get keeners to wail as they were being...

DG: Now the keeners would they have been... female?

GM: Yes. Yeah. So that was a female kind of job, as it were. So they would be paid and they were professional keeners. They would keen to show how distraught they were when somebody had died.

DG: Yeah.

GM: So they were these kinds of traditions but those kinds of traditions died out, even mid eighteen hundreds. Partly I think because of the influence of the church and the churches, that they didn't think that was appropriate, so...

DG: Really.

GM: ...So that kind of tradition came to an end.

DG: Of the keening and kind of the sun elements and things like that.

GM: Well no the sun kind of carried on...

DG: Oh okay!

GM: So that would have, people on Tobar an Dualchais, Alasdair Boyd for example, he talks on Tobar an Dualchais about going sun-wise and *deiseil* - *deiseil* is going sun-wise. So that kind of doing things the correct way and taking the... the body out of the house, then to the church, then to the graveyard for burial. But doing everything sun-wise, so you might take longer, you might have to walk around the house, or you might have to walk around the different parts of the village to be able to do that. But you would always do that. Never turn left.

DG: Never turn left.



There's such beauty kind of attached to that, I think... I think what strikes me is that it's so thoughtful! And also just coming through all of this whether it's... the social occasions, or the work, or the cèilidh house, or the *bàrd baile*, just all these elements coming together, it really - at the heart of that is *coimhearsnachd* or community, and yeah.

GM: Yeah, *coimhearsnachd* and I was going to say it's... every aspect of life. So it's that idea that a song is there from the moment you're born to the moment of your death.

DG: Yeah.

GM: And everything in between has a soundtrack as well. And I think that's just really... It's good because we all know the importance of singing, how good singing is for you. And singing as a community, they really did have that as a part of their everyday lives. And it's a great way to bond - when you listen to some of the recordings of people having the most fantastic time singing together, laughing, shouting, having the most fantastic time, you think: 'ah!' We also have to remember, of course, they had very hard lives.

DG: Yeah.

GM: And when we talk about the good old days, they were pretty hard days. But there was... there were some things that were absolutely fantastic. And one of those was the singing and how singing was so integral to their everyday lives.

DG: And I think that is something I feel very fortunate and very privileged that it's something that - and I'm sure you do - we can enjoy on a really just experiencing it and enjoying it level. But also to sing and to perform it, just it's lovely to have that opportunity to revel in that feeling.

GM: Yeah because it really can take you back to the time when the song was composed, whether that be 100s of years ago. It can take you back to your childhood, remembering people singing along to the same song.

DG: Mhm.

GM: Or it can just take you to this very moment, because a song has been composed very recently, but somewhere all over the world, and it can really take you there straight away. And I think that is really... thing that is so important about folk songs in general. That people can join in, the stories mean things to people, and it moves people.

DG: That's lovely. A' Ghillebride, I think that that's just... Ah it's been a real pleasure to kind of chat over this with you. And kind of feel a bit of heart and soul for those songs and for, you know, that living tradition. And actually... you know not... not to be kind of harking back to the old days. But understanding that yes there were these practices and yes there was this, people's lives touched by song, and ehm-

GM: But they weren't static.

DG: But they weren't static. Exactly. But also we still have this carrying stream today and... and we're hopefully in a good place for it to continue.

GM: Yeah! So I think we also have to remember that um... with years of trying to kind of get rid of the Gaelic language and culture... they failed.

GM: We're still here. [laughter]

DG: We're still here! [laughter]

GM: Still singing!



DG: Yes.

GM: Still telling the stories. And I think that has to be celebrated. And uh we could in many ways, and we all love being maudlin and saying 'Oh it's terrible terrible terrible,' but actually we're saying: it's amazing we're still here.

DG: Yeah.

GM: And we have to celebrate that. And where do we go forward? How do we go forward?

DG: That's brilliant. We do have to celebrate it. And hopefully to go forward, song is a very strong vehicle for that.

GM: Absolutely.

DG: Well, *mòran mòran taing*, it's been an absolute pleasure and I thank you so much for your conversation today and your... your thoughts and all your... insight and knowledge on this. It's been a real pleasure.

GM: *'S e do bheatha*

DG: My heartfelt thanks to Gillebride again for his offering such an insight into the practices surrounding the cèilidh house, and also for his positive and encouraging thoughts on the continuation of Gaelic song compositions today.

You can read more about Gillebride's work on his website www.gillebride.com and make sure to look out for his new album for the full version of that beautiful song we got a glimpse of.

If you enjoyed this episode then please do share and review it. Also check out the other episodes in this series you haven't already. Finally if you haven't yet subscribed then please do so.

The background 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.

We've got one more episode left of Gaelic Song Stories and I hope you'll join me the next time.

Chun an uairsin, beannachd leibh!



<https://www.deirdregraham.com/gaelicsongstories>