Barra and Its History: Through the Eyes and Ears of a Modern *Seanachaidh*[1]

Calum MacNeil

THE reason I am giving this talk tonight is actually because last year, I think it was in April, were the Society for Northern Studies in Barra and there was quite a few speakers travelling with them and I had to do a talk on Barra. Because of this I intend to concentrate mostly on the people of Barra as most of the speakers had specialist subjects. I did it without notes so I have to try and keep to that same kind of talk as I had the last time because they requested it to be recorded and that there be an audience... and that is the reason for the talk tonight. ...

People

I make no apology for speaking mainly about the people of Barra because I feel that wherever you are living in any part of the world it's the people that actually are the most important part of an area. Without people a place really isn't what it ought to be. There are quite a lot of islands in the Western Isles in particular who used to have people living in them and for a variety of reasons they are now abandoned. Latterly it has to do with the fact that the young tended to prefer to live in larger communities and that is quite understandable. The difficulties of isolation that they had to face were fairly overwhelming and because of that they felt they moved on to a bigger town, a bigger place. We had a similar situation with Vatersay until the Causeway went there. We had a steady decline in the population. Eriskay had the same situation. St Kilda was irretrievably lost as was Mingulay, Sandray, Pabbay, and Berneray, Hellisay, Gighay and Flodday in the

1 The following is a transcript from a talk given on Barra in June 2004. Only minimal editing is done to the script in order to retain as much as possible the oral style of the talk. The editors would like to thank Anke Beate Stahl and Ian Macneil for assistance with the transcript.

north of Barra and to a lesser extent in Fuday. These were all populated islands at one time and even in the 1900s, the early part of the 1900s Mingulay, Pabbay and Berneray were still inhabited. The northern islands of Barra at the turn of the century were down to about one shepherd. But prior to that they sustained a reasonable population up to about 112 in case of Hellisay and Gighay. One of the reasons they were populated at that time was because of the pressure on the mainland of Barra as regards land, the scarcity of land and the fact that the population at that time was generally a good one thousand people more than we have now. So you can imagine if you lived in Barra, another one thousand people on the land would be quite difficult to sustain.

Early people

The early history of Barra is mostly – what's written about it anyway – it's quite sparse. The population we have to accept had to move at some point. Mostly they came up from the Iberian coast, from Ireland and from the western mainland of Britain. The Vikings stayed in the islands from the 800s. They left their own impact for the duration that they were here. We have to accept that they inter-married with the local population and the genetic make-up of the people of Barra obviously has that kind of blood in it but they also left an impact on the land. Mostly in names. Very little appears to be left of their buildings, that are clearly identifiable. Sheffield University has done quite a lot of research. They dug quite a lot around, they've had archaeological digs in a very organised manner and they didn't really find a lot of buildings that you would pertain to the Viking presence in Barra. The place-names certainly bear a lot of Viking names especially the coast, the coastal headlands, the bays. The Gaelic inevitably has gone back and you find place-names in Barra which contain Viking and Gaelic with the same name. The Gaelic having been put on top of the Viking name and then you have the Norse and the Gaelic mixed. One example of Vatersay you have a place called Rubha Heilinis. Heilinis is the headland in Norse, whereas Rubha is the headland in Gaelic. So you have the same word twice for the same place. Certainly there are very few places that don't bear Norse names. This is why we find it so difficult to understand why there is so little trace of their houses that they must have lived in.

The Vikings on Barra, it was reputed, had their last stand on the Isle of Fuday after a battle at Bogach na Fala at the North end. The story goes that they were actually – after the battle at Bogach which is at the North end of Barra –

they made their way to Fuday which is off the peninsula of Eoligarry. After a long battle they were tired and they went to sleep and the sentry may also have fallen asleep because it is reputed that the people of Barra had surprised them at night and actually ended up beheading them to the last person and putting their heads in the well which bears to this day the name of Tobar nan Ceann, which is the 'well of the heads'. That was supposed to have been the last Vikings that lived in Barra. Although we have to accept we all bear the same blood.

Coming of the MacNeils

The period between the Vikings and the earliest connection with the charter of the MacNeils. We are only talking about a period of 200 years in which we know the MacNeils definitely had the charter in Barra. They were of course were mainly descended from the MacNeils of Ulster and they're tenacious, they hung on to the island of Barra on and off for that period. And it is fairly certain that they also were in Barra from an earlier stage, pre-Norse, and also during the Norse period. And they may have had their own dealings with the Norse invaders, they may have formed pacts with them but certainly they held on and it wasn't long before they reasserted their dominance.

Individuals

It is from that period that we get to know people as individuals. We of course have heard of Kettil Flatnose and Magnus Barelegs, the main Norse people in Barra, but from the 1400s we know who the MacNeils were, individually they're named and with the MacNeils went their fellow islanders. They were reputed by the 1600s to be sea-farers and pirates, and they also had a quaint way of covering up some other less savoury deeds, they used to go to pilgrimage down to Connaught to Croag Phadruig. It was an annual pilgrimage but MacNeils turned it to good advantage because on the way back they would always take their leave early because the weather was unfavourable as far as they saw it. They were clever enough to know that the western provinces of Ireland would be denuded of population because of the pilgrimage. So they could come along the coast and go into different bays and they could pick up prize cattle - without paying for it. They would come back and they would have quite a lot of cattle to improve the breed that they had here. And the breed of cattle they had here obviously benefitted because they were very much sought after – even up to the present

day they are still sought after. But it was a reputed during this period that Granuiale O' Malley was a famous warrior in the south of Ireland had come after MacNeil because she didn't approve of this form of piracy. And it is reputed they had a battle southeast of Barra Head in which according to the Irish the Irish were successful and according to the Barra people they overcame the Irish. What we do know for certain is that Granviale O' Malley went and made her peace with Queen Elizabeth. But the chief of Barra never made his peace with the English queen and when he was taken to court in Edinburgh to face a charge of piracy he went in front of King James, and King James actually looked at him and he was expecting a youngish rogue of a man and he saw a grey haired man who was elderly, very elderly. And he couldn't quite get his head round as to why this was supposed to be a reputed pirate. MacNeil's reply to King James was that he didn't see it as a form of piracy, all he was doing was taking revenge on the queen's ships in view of she was actually responsible for beheading his mother. So King James actually discharged him and told one of his lesser people to take him back to Barra not to have him bothered again. So he was fairly adept at getting out of tight situations.

Introduction

The following history of Barra is fairly standard for what I would say is most of the Western Isles. The only little difference is that the Barra people tended to do a little bit more seafaring and also possibly a little bit more fishing than certainly the islands up to about Lewis. Lewis certainly did a lot of fishing in the north end. But the islands in between didn't quite do as much fishing as they did in Barra. It was during this period that we have records of Barrachs starting to catch fish in reasonable amounts, enough to actually export to Glasgow. They continued exporting that fish right through until the herring came on in the 1870s. It was the mainstay of their income. It formed part of their income even when the kelp boom was on.

Wars and the '45

It would probably be wise now to talk about the MacNeils and Barrachs involvement in the various wars that were fought on the other mainland. They appear to have considered themselves as pirates and engaged in various battles on the mainland. They fought with as much distinction as would be expected of

a warrior race. In the '45 they missed the boat, whether by design or whether there was a genuine lack of preparation on their part is not clear. It is reputed that the army was well away on the mainland and underway towards England when the Barra contingent was ready. However, a close scrutiny of records shows there were several Barra people - mostly from Vatersay it has to be said - involved in the '45 and had to pay a heavy price for it including exile and banishment. MacNeil, who was the head of the clan, at the time also suffered because he was involved, if not in the battle, he was involved in a lot of intrigue. That's an inescapable fact and he was shopped by somebody local, he was taken away and imprisoned in Tilbury on the *Pamela*. After doing about 18 months in the *Pamela* he was actually released and taken to shore custody which was a lot more comfortable than the prison ships. It is said that he turned King's evidence. There doesn't appear to be any concrete evidence that this was the case, but whether he did or not, when he got back to Barra, he certainly hadn't changed his ways because when he got back to Barra he was drilling up to 60 men on the west side, in preparation for another uprising. He was again shopped for that, but nothing was done. He was considered a bit too old and nothing would have come of it.

After the '45

It was during this period that we have probably an insight to how he felt. It was apparent that when he was living at the west side of Tangusdale Loch, which is locally known to a lot of people as Loch St Clair, he was living in a place called Lag an Fhliodh which is the `hollow of the chickweed'. He was married to a woman from Harris, a MacLeod, and they had left the castle by this time and he was drilling his men and some say he had become quite disturbed, mentally. Some say he was just drinking too much. And whatever the story is, he would come back at night from drilling his soldiers for a future war and he would be ranting and raving when he crossed the machair in Tangusdale. The wife would take off up the side of the hill, Ben Tangaval, and she would hide behind a boulder high up on the slope. And she would watch him going round in ever-decreasing circles round the house until he flaked out, and then she would come down and he would be quite peaceful then in his sleep. It may well be that the spell on the prison ship maybe unhinged him in some way and certainly wouldn't have been a very pleasant experience for a man getting on in years.

French Canadian war

By 1759, 1758 rather, there was a contingent of Barra soldiers up to about 30 strong went out to fight in the French Canadian war and some did fall at the siege of Louisville. And Lieutenant MacNeil, who was actually the chief's son, gained a commission in the army, the British army. MacNeil wasn't overly keen on this happening, indeed he didn't approve of it at all. However, the son had probably thought he would have to move with times and took this contingent out with him. He was killed at Quebec as well as quite a few of the other Barra soldiers, and indeed when one looks at the records by 1764 only six of the 30 strong contingent were to return back to the island. And when one considers that not many people were killed at Quebec, although it was an important battle, a lot of Barra people proportionately lost their lives there. And certainly it lends credence to the fact that Wolfe always maintained that one of the virtues of the Highland soldiers was that there was no great mischief if they fell. And certainly the Barra people fell out of all proportion to the amount of people who was involved in the battle. It doesn't necessarily mean that all of them actually fell who didn't come back. May well be that some deserted and some of actually just stayed out there.

An insight into the MacNeil's thinking at the time is that they were having games on Borve Machair, and when the news of the son's death came to them by messenger, the messenger asked them if they would cancel the games. MacNeil said "No, the games will proceed, because my son did not honour me in life and I shall not honour him in death!", which meant that he certainly bore a grudge of some sort towards his only son and heir.

Grandson succeeds as chief – American War

Because of the death of Lieutenant MacNeil, the grandfather having died in 1763 at Borve, and the grandson actually took over as chief. He would only be about six or seven at this time and he was put under the care of the MacNeil of Vatersay, a relative and a direct line from the MacNeils of Barra but through the second family who had been usurped in 1610. They actually took over the care of the grandchild of MacNeil and he was brought up with the Vatersay family. He was put through college in Aberdeen and he joined the British army and he also took out a contingent of British soldiers, of Barra soldiers, to fight in the American war. He was also wounded in the arm during that fight and the page

and piper that he had was a man called Callum MacNeil, Callum son of John son of Roderick, who were the MacNeils' hereditary pipers. He had been a page with Lieutenant MacNeil when he died and he attended him before he died as well. And when Colonel MacNeil fell wounded in the American war he spent six weeks trying to suck the bullet out of his arm and eventually succeeded and he told MacNeil that he had more of MacNeil's blood, the true MacNeil bloodline, than MacNeil himself had. He advised MacNeil to make his way back for Scotland or his bones would rest in America the same as his father's had. And MacNeil took his advice and came back.

Emigration

The other Barra soldiers who were fighting with MacNeil in the American war were more fortunate. They were offered grants of lands in Nova Scotia. They were known as the Heirlichy Grants. There was a man Timothy Heirlichy, a man of Irish descent, who was fighting for the British Crown. Their grant of land was divided amongst the Barra soldiers and the grants were according to rank. The single Barra soldiers took up the grants, the married ones didn't take the grants of land but they took the pension. And they came back to Barra and after several years they had enough money to decide to emigrate. They emigrated in 1791. Up to 200 Barra people went out to Pictou with view to settling in Nova Scotia but there was also Prince Edward Island.

Now they weren't actually the first organised emigration out of Barra. The first organised emigration from Barra took place in 1771 on a ship called *Alexander* which we hear very little of. There were eight Barra families who made up the Glenalladale emigration mostly of Clanranald MacDonalds but with a few families from Uist pulling out at the last minute the Barra families took up their places.

It is interesting to note why these people are so keen to emigrate. The kelp had been established in Barra by the 1750s or just several years earlier, maybe, but certainly by 1750 the kelp was very well established and it provided a reasonable income although the wringing and drying of the kelp was slave labour. At the height of the kelp boom, a family involved for two to three months in the summer would be expected to cut about 65 ton of wet kelp, take it up onto the shore and when it was dried take the peat down from the hill, fire the kiln, dry it and reduce it down to – that 65 ton would yield about 3 tons of dry – which the landlord MacNeil could sell for up to 22 pounds a ton during the boom. The

tenants, the whole family, would be paid 2 pounds for that ton, for that three months of labour. They would be expected to make 6 pounds in ready cash from this kelp every season. It cost about £1.50 for a ton to ship it to Liverpool which wasn't very high, so the profit of the landlord was quite enormous. It wasn't just the profit of the landlord, the fact that the tenants were paid 6 pounds in ready cash means that MacNeil who actually paid them actually knew that they had this money. And this is exactly what he would charge on average for the crofts. They were expected to pay an average of 6 to 7 pounds for per croft even in those days of 1810-1811. This is an average rent. And when one considered that in 1978 they were still paying only 7 pounds on a croft on average it shows you what kind of rack renting was going on and that the landlord had probably shifted his allegiance from kinship to economics.

This was the impetus along with the soldiers' description of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton that made these people emigrate. They were harried at home, they had no security of tenure and a trip across the sea was quite attractive as far as they were concerned especially with the tales that the soldiers had coming back. They described a reasonable land with trees and where they would be free of landlords and that was the most important thing that they wanted to be free of. A detailed look at the immigration to Prince Edward Island will show you what they really though really thought. They were offered 3000 year leases on their land, a tenancy for 3000 years. The rates were very favourable, they certainly weren't extortionate. They increased slightly year on year but certainly nothing in comparison to what they had here and certainly the land was much, much better. But strangely the eight Barra families who went there decided to buy themselves out of that obligation that they had to Glenalladale and the simple tenet that they had was that they didn't leave the old country to be clear of one landlord to go and start a new life in a new country to be beholden to another landlord however benevolent. They wanted to own their own land. That's what they wanted to do. They didn't want to pay rent, they didn't want to be tenants, they wanted to own their land. They wanted independence. And they actually bought themselves out for 40 pounds per family. And they moved further along Prince Edward Island and bought their own land. And considering money wasn't very plentiful and it took them quite a while to do so but it was very important. It was an important principle.

The emigration from Barra went on. In 1802-03 there was about 700-800 people left Barra in several emigrant vessels. There was sporadic emigration between 1806-13, massive emigration again in 1817, and 1821 right through to

1828 and again of a sporadic nature to 1835. And then one last emigration of 70 people in the 1840s. That was the end of the emigration to Prince Edward Island and to Cape Breton as far as Barra was concerned. At that time the blight that had appeared in Barra and Ireland in 1746 had also appeared in Cape Breton and was of equally devastating effect so that Cape Breton was no longer an attraction. What happened to them out there was that land was getting scarce because not only were Barra people emigrating, people from the whole of the Western Isles were emigrating. From all the islands and the whole West Highlands and land was getting scarce to the degree that the front lands, which were the shore lands, averaging about 200 acres would have to go to the head of the family but any grown up member of the family would have to take up the rear lands which were more inaccessible and agriculturally less viable.

Loss of the Estate – Gordon of Cluny

By 1849 things had become quite severe in Barra as far as the people were concerned. MacNeil, the Colonel, had died. His will had tied the General, the successor to the Estate. He had made promises in the will that couldn't be met by the Estate because the money wasn't there. And every beneficiary in that will, nobody would actually accept a lowering of their share. So the successor, who became the General, was left scurrying around looking for more money. The factory which he installed at Northbay was never a success, far from it. It actually bankrupted his estate, and one of the people who was a creditor, Colonel Gordon of Cluny, called in the debt and MacNeil was put to the horn in Edinburgh and eventually Colonel Gordon was successful after several bids in buying Barra. It wasn't all bad from what I could work out. He had plans for the inland in Barra, which didn't amount to very much, and one wonders what he intended to do, but he had plans to turn the inner parts of Barra into fertile land. We would assume that he meant take a lot of sand in and reseed it. These plans fell through and he became on very bad terms with the population. They were starving; he wasn't prepared to feed them, far from it. He was actually selling off the land to sheep-farmers. The population from the west side, which is the most fertile part of the mainland, were trans-shipped to the east side, and the village of Earsary, for example, in 1810 had three tenants sharing two crofts. By the 1850s there was about 28 families living on that land, 28 families. So you can imagine what kind of pressure that land on the east side was under. The fertile land on the west side was by then under one single farmer. The same was

true of the north end although most of Kilbarra had already been cleared by the MacNeil of Barra in 1824. The situation was dire as far as Barra was concerned. The landlord Colonel Gordon wouldn't come to Barra, he wouldn't listen to any entreaties that people put to him, he wouldn't listen to any Member of Parliament. He was deaf to all pleadings and his ground officers harried and chased the population that had moved and had no land. They went to the shore where they were able to fish and at night they would pull the boats ashore and overturned them onto turf walls and used the sail as an additional shelter and they would be forced to eat shellfish and whatever fish they could catch in season.

This was still not good enough as far as Gordon was concerned. He had the ground officers and various constables on the island. He ordered them to burn all their boats and that would eventually force them off the island. And this is what happened. Quite a lot of them between 1849 and 1850 made their way to Tobermory, to Inverness, to Edinburgh, to Glasgow, to Nairn, to Dunoon, Inverary, various places. And all of them, they were on the steps of various town halls starving depending on the local population to feed them. The remaining population, 450, were shipped onto a ship called the *Admiral* and this was the last major emigration out of Barra, probably the only one that was actually forced. They joined the *Admiral* at Lochboisdale and they joined another 1500 who had already left from Uist and Benbecula and they went to Quebec. When they arrived in Quebec they were in a sorry state. It was late in the year. It was in September. You can imagine they had no English, very, very few of them could write. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the man who actually signed the petition that we have was a man who had come in from Tiree, a Hector Lamond. He could read and write because he had been taught to read the bible. And he actually signed the petition on their behalf. And they actually just appended their X to it as their mark. And they were left destitute. It has to be said that that wasn't the case while they were aboard the *Admiral* itself. The master's wife was busy all the voyage, sowing up flour bags, and whatever she could lay her hands on, to make clothes for both adults and children. We have to look at the situation when they got to Quebec, they were put in quarantine, and it was commented by one of the customs officers that an adult had passed through his inspection with nothing to wear except a woman's petticoat. And he was a man. You can imagine in what kind of poverty and how destitute these people really were to face the Canadian winter. It is probably the saddest emigration that ever took place out of Barra, and the only real one that was forced. I think for us the saddest part is

that we have never been able to trace many of these people. We can trace most of the people that left Barra. There is no difficulty because they kept records in Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, Prince Edward Island. They kept their own genealogy. They know who they are, they can trace their families back and we can trace them. But from 450 people on the *Admiral* we can only identify definitely one family that originated in Sandray and Vatersay. And they settled at Stephen Township in Huron County. And when you consider that a lot of people, a lot of families emigrated from that 450 it is amazing that we haven't been able to pin them down to where they settled. The other way of looking at it is how many of them actually survived. They survived the voyage, probably only half a dozen died on the voyage, but how many survived the Canadian winter? It is a subject where a lot more detailed study is required than has taken place up 'till now.

Recovery – the herring

Putting that period behind it was 30 years before actually Barra could rise off its knees. A full generation would pass before Barra would actually make any kind of mark again. And that came about for a variety of reasons. It takes about 30 years for people who have been brow-beaten and knocked to the ground so many times to actually reassert themselves. The saviour of Barra was the herring fishing. Although they had been involved in white fishing from time immemorial and taken the fish all the way to the Clyde in open boats, they had never really been heavily involved in herring because they didn't have the salt to properly cure it. Now the East coast fishermen had come to Barra certainly from the 1840s, 1841 they were visiting the Barra islands and by the 1870s the herring had taken off west of the Hebrides. By the 1890s it was an interesting situation. This bay would be full of up to 600 herring boats, Vatersay would have probably 300-400 herring boats, all kinds of sheds and jetties from the point of Oronsay all the way around to the Bagh Beag of Castlebay, round from the pier now right to the entrance of the small bay round the back here. Vatersay Bay, the whole of the south side of that bay, was just jetties and curing stations. During this period the Barra population would meet and mingle with people from other islands. They would also mingle with people from the mainland, from Ireland, from the East coast. They would follow the herring all the way down to Lowestoft. And they also had an important feature, they didn't really have much of it before, they were able to go to school. And being able to read and write made a great difference in how they could articulate themselves.

By the 1880s they had done enough agitation to force the authorities to look at the land question in Barra. A Barraman was always a fisherman but he never forgot the land. And by the time of the mid 1880s the demand for land was increasing and the inequities of the previous 50 to 60 years, they were determined to reverse all that. The days of the big farmers to the north end of Barra were literally numbered at that stage. Agitation took place after the crofting act continuously until they succeeded in forcing the sale of Vatersay, and turning it into 58 crofts. They raided the lands at the north end and after the First World War they actually forced the sale of the last part of Eoligarry. And this can be put down to education. They always had the desire to do it but they didn't have the means to do it. By the 1880s onwards they were able to actually argue their own case and they had very, very powerful orators within their own community.

After the First World War the herring boom was over. The markets that they had depended on so heavily in the Baltic, Russia, Germany, the markets had collapsed. There was no sale for the herring. The herring itself was getting scarce and herring boats were lying all round the bay, defunct, weathered and rotting, and people were drifting back into the merchant navy; something which they had been involved in from the 1850s, but not in a really big way. After the War that had all changed. The merchant navy was the mainstay of employment. The herring boats that that they had tended so fondly and fished so well were now being cut up for fence posts. Very few of the old boats survived to be motorised. A few stalwarts remained at the herring and that was the case until the Second World War.

Last major emigration

By 1922-23 was the last major emigration out of Barra, that went to Alberta in Canada. It was an organised emigration, a priest had organised it, Father MacDonell, one of the many priests that have visited Barra's history. The emigration itself left a bad taste in the mouth of a lot of people in Barra. It wasn't a success. The people that went out were reluctant to admit that it wasn't a success. The general trend was that the people that left promised to write to the people who were left behind and that if things went well they would follow them out to Canada in a subsequent emigration. In my own grandfather's case his elder brother left. He was 57 when he left with his family and he never wrote until 1939. It was a long time after he left. By that time my grandfather had

decided it wasn't worth going because he himself was getting old now. And the story is that some of them made it in the Prairie with a lot of difficulty and the others just headed for the sea which was Vancouver. And most of them actually settled out in Vancouver. And that was the case with quite a lot of people from Uist as well.

The story about the priest's involvement left, like I say, a sour taste. I recently read an article that I'd had sent from Canada about it. It certainly goes to a fair degree to exonerate him and it possibly isn't an apology for what he did, but it appears that the real reason for the problem was that the emigration was oversubscribed. They had only planned to have so many people going out , and I forget the numbers, but far more people actually chose to emigrate than ought to have gone. If possibly less had gone then more had gone a few year down the line, it might have been more successful. From then onwards Barra actually was dependent mostly on the merchant navy and sheep and cattle. Fishing didn't reassert itself until the 1960s and it's formed a reasonable part of the economy since then.

Where people lived

The other thing I would like to touch on before I finish is the housing and the evidence of where people were in Barra. Sheffield University has done a lot of work over the last 12-13 years in Barra. They have done it sensitively and with permission from the local people and have certainly done a lot of work, very detailed work and they have certainly opened my eyes as to what used to go on. And the places in the hills and moors that we used to tramp as children just showed up as green patches with stones, but they have now identified them, they have dug them, they've shown what was underneath, something that we would never dream of seeing. It was a perfect example of an Atlantic Round House down at Allt Easdail on the road to Vatersay. When I look at that building, the way it's been dug out with its internal divisions and how well it has been put together, and I look at the black house that is actually overlying it and what is now part of the rear half of the black house is left and the other half was over the round house and it has been dug away and removed. There is no comparison to the Black House of the 1800s as far as architecture is concerned. The Round House was superior, so certainly as far as housing was concerned the Barra people in the Round House had probably a far better house than they had in the 1800s. And I can't see any other place in Barra with exception of the new houses, the Manse and MacNeil's Mansion down in Eoligarry and Vatersay

House. Apart from that the Black Houses were really poor in comparison. The rest of it is, where the Black Houses were mainly; but on the hills there was one thing that used to actually make me wonder. There are settlements out on a hill called Ben Tangaval. And all you would find is a row of fairly large houses by our standards but was all huge boulders, foundation boulders. And I often used to wonder, where did the rest of the stones go? Who took them? Were they so desperate to build houses somewhere else that they actually came and moved these top layers of stone completely from the site? And now getting answers as to one of the questions what was going on. It was only when they started digging out at Allt Easdail that they started finding out the truth. They never had any stones in the first place; it was turf walls, and the timbers came from the roof right through the turf walls into the base stones of the foundation. The reason for people doing that is very simple. They were quite warm and why should they build a stone house when at the end of the year if you didn't have the rent you were evicted. You couldn't take the stone with you, you could take the roof which was the thing you couldn't get anywhere else, timbers, but the turf you just kicked into the ground and that was the end of it. So it was really a matter of necessity. They didn't have the security anyhow to be able to build houses, and the reason, probably, they weren't told about it is purely to do with a sense of shame that people felt in the 1950s. They didn't want to admit that people actually lived in turf houses. But if you look at that book, it was actually turf shingle. The turf was laid as you lay stone but on the outer side of the wall the turf was laid on end, all round to shed the water and that woman wasn't ashamed to live there. But people by the 1950s probably didn't think you should be talking about it, admitting that people were so poor. People don't have any difficulty with that now of course, but during that period I would say they certainly did. Certainly, looking at Donald there and myself, when we went to school we had to walk through a village that still contained quite a number of Black Houses as well as what they would call White Houses. They were living there into the 1950s and indeed, in one particular instance, they were living in a house which was into the 1960s and 70s. But you won't find many evidence of the amount of Black Houses that was in this place as they were taken away and put into the roads, especially if they happened to be in a location that was beside the road. They would be used as infill and that's one of the reasons you don't find many ruins. You certainly find ruins out in the moor but you won't find them along the road.

I think we can end now. Is that an hour?

Questions

Q: It seems that your relationship with the landlord is really the source of all of Barra's problems. Other countries in the northern hemisphere don't seem to have had quite the same problems as we have in the northwest of Scotland. What do you think about that?

Calum a'Chal: Well, we certainly can't blame the present landlord. Either the Department of Agriculture, which owns quite a bit of Barra, or the MacNeil. We have to look at the period. It was really after the '45 rebellion when it really starts to implode. They needed the people to fight wars. They needed troops, they needed the men. The chief's importance wasn't as a landlord. He was important as a fighting man, in charge of fighting men.

Q: This is pre '45?

Calum a'Chal: Pre '45. After the '45 they become out and out landlords. They weren't equipped for it, mentally weren't equipped for it and they certainly weren't equipped mentally to be estate managers. Their carry-on down in the fleshpots of London bear ample evidence that they certainly were more concerned about their own welfare than the welfare of their tenants. Now in MacNeil's case, both the Colonel and his son, the General, they were certainly good soldiers and they weren't good estate managers, nor were they very good landlords it has to be said. People make excuses for the Colonel as opposed to his son, the General. But if you look at it fairly, the Colonel also had his own difficult situation. He was involved with the first emigrations, and he encouraged the first emigrations by taking the tacks from the tacksmen, taking the land from them and then applying it to subtentants. Now, most of these tacksmen were from MacNeil lineage – the tacksman of Vatersay, the tacksman of Scurrival, the tacksmen of Grìn, Tangusdale, Breivig, Earsary, Bhaslan – all relatives of the MacNeil one way or another. Some of them quite close relatives. They also employed sub-tenants. Shaw was the only person who wasn't directly related to MacNeil, but he certainly was in Barra for quite a while as a head schoolmaster. And what we have to look at is that when he started to talk about breaking Barra into individual crofts, the tacksman didn't like this and they chose to emigrate and they took most of the tenants with them. But that's not the full story because the tacksmen weren't that much better than the landlord was. And why should you owe any allegiance to the tacksmen? But the conditions overall in Barra meant that emigration was a favourable option as far as people

were concerned. They were very, very attached to the island but you can't live as a slave, a virtual slave all your life and that's really what it amounted to.

When the kelp started to fail, he started to move in on the white fish which they were selling to Glasgow. He wanted control of that. With no input whatsoever from him. He just wanted the money.

Q: Pre '45 there must have been a reasonable standard of life.

Calum a'Chal: Reasonable for the whole population of course. The population did not really start to increase on Barra until after the 1760s when the potato took hold, they were better fed, more carbohydrates, they had more energy. The kelp gave them ready money although it became very labour intensive and unhealthy. What you find in the old Parish Records, Baptismal Records, a lot of males died young with a child born after their death and that meant that these people died in the prime of life. Women might survive a wee bit longer and what you find with women is that they generally die if there is twins involved. They didn't normally die in childbirth with one single child. They were robust enough to withstand that kind of rigour every two years. But the men were worn out and they would obviously die with bronchial complaints with the smoke inhalation from the kiln from the kelp. The damp, continuous immersion in water. To cut the kelp, it's not what we think of nowadays, gathering it on the shore, that was no use whatsoever for processing, it was too contaminated with sand. That was only fit for manure on the land. The kelp for manufacturing it had to be cut in the sea. You would cut in one place every three years. You cut it once and you had to leave it fallow for three years, you would have to move on. You had a long sickle and you had to wade up to your shoulders in the water to cut it under water, then you had to float it in, so you were damp, no means of actually drying yourself. You then had to go and wait for the high tide, tie it up in rafts, take it up upon the shore. You had put it in the kiln, dry it first then start getting it ready for the kiln. Barra, especially round this side of Barra, the peat is right up, it's nearly a thousand feet. It's not so bad in the northeast but up at this end of the island it was absolutely terrible to win that amount of peat to fire these amount of houses and then the few clothes you had, still dry, and how could you not end up unhealthy. And obviously this was having an impact on people. They weren't stupid. They would have to realise that it was an unhealthy occupation and they would have to be out of it. And that's the way emigration was so attractive. But after 1803 they introduced the Passenger Acts which meant that they tried to make it as unattractive as possible,

as expensive as possible, for people to emigrate and the excuse they were using was that they were forcing these emigrant vessels to improve their accommodation. But really, what the ship owners did once these new regulations came in, they just passed the cost of these improvements onto the fare paying passenger. Which meant that the emigration was beyond their grasp. It was too dear. And that meant that they couldn't emigrate from 1803 until really 1817 before we see the next batch of major emigrants. There were sporadic ones in between, but not many, and the reason was a connivance between the landlords and parliament to pass this act, to make it more expensive to emigrate and to retain people on the land to be used in the kelp industry.

Q: Was there much more land under cultivation in those days?

Calum a'Chal: If there is a low sunset you could look. When the sun sets at Caolas you can see the cultivation ridges clearly marked at Goirtean. The land was heavily cultivated right up as far as physically possible to do so. In Cliad, for example, it is almost right up to the summit of the hill. It is quite a high hill. They had to use every available bit of ground. And of course they had to keep the stock up in the hill away from the crops. They had what was called a grass keeper.

Q: Can you tell us anything about the ship that grounded off Vatersay in 1859?

Calum a'Chal: 1853. The *Annie Jane*.

Q: They started off from Liverpool.

Calum a'Chal: They were from Liverpool. That was their second attempt. The first attempt ended up in disaster. They had to go round the south of Ireland and came back into Liverpool and they had to replace the topmast, restow the cargo. On the second attempt they ended up as far as St. Kilda, again they started to lose some of the topmasts and they were forced to turn back. They were running towards Barra Head. Couldn't get round it. They were forced to turn back and run up along the western shore. Some said that the intention was to find one of the channels, others said that the ship could not be handled anymore. It happened during the equinoctial gales in late September, probably with high tides and very, very difficult sea. They ran on the beach west of Vatersay where that memorial is. They broached to there. Had it happened during the day, had it happened at a different part of the tide they might have been saved. It's just that

circumstances worked against it. By next morning it was virtually flat calm and by that time most of them were drowned.

Q: People on the ship were from up here?

Calum a'Chal: There were allegedly some people from Skye on the original voyage, but they got out of it by the second voyage. They were mostly Irish, from the Lowlands of Scotland, mostly tradesmen on their way to Canada. Quite a lot of tradesmen.

Q: Were there ridges on Greian?

Calum a'Chal: If you look down to Cliad Village and if you look straight up to Beinn Chliaid, near the top you see a small dyke running across. You see the cultivation that is down there. The problem that you find in Barra, I would say, if you look at the amount of arable land alone, is that people must have been really desperate. They grew potatoes, oats, they grew barley. According to some reports in the early 1700s, possibly late 1600s the west side of Barra had a lot more land than there is now. They were talking when they were giving evidence to Dr Walker in the 1760s that the old-timers could remember grazing cattle where there is nothing but seaweed and rocks now. The only places where that would happen are at Seal Bay near Allasdale and possibly past the Isle of Barra Hotel. At low tide you can see that that was one spot. You don't have to go back thousands of years to see it. You only have to go back a few hundred years.

Q: The grass seems rather short. It must have been overgrazed. How many sheep and cattle did a family have?

Calum a'Chal: At that time there were many sheep and a lot of horses. Every household had a horse. In some cases some had three horses. The horses were useful for work. They could have shared a horse, because there wasn't work for a horse every day. And they could have lessened the pressure on the grazing by dispensing with some of the horses and just sharing the rest of them. Certainly that would have changed matters. There would have been more grass for the cattle. Horses are quite heavy grazers. You could see that they didn't work every week of the year.

Q: The grass is very short on the islands just now. Is that the grazing rather than the season?

Calum a'Chal: If you take the sheep or the cattle away it soon grows. I haven't been up to the Barra Head islands recently to see what it is like now.

After so many hundred years they've stopped having stock there. What I find, anyway, is that if you take stock off for a while, the grass just gets dry and you can't use it for anything. See the deserted village of Goirtean just opposite Caolas when you go across the causeway. If you look back, that's a deserted village that was actually cleared. Most of the population went to Beaver Cove in Cape Breton Island in 1822. There was a family of MacKinnons. There were ten children from two wives. There were eight from the first wife and two from the second wife and they were all married prior to leaving Barra with their own families. They all emigrated and most of them still lived in their own village of Goirtean before they left. And it was only the Campbells and a family of MacSweens who left after that. They were cleared by 1833 to make way for a sheep farm.

The whole of Ben Tangaval peninsula, Vatersay and Sandray were cleared for the sheep, to form one sheep farm. One of these places on its own wasn't enough, wasn't practical for the farmer. Vatersay on its own wasn't enough because they needed more grazing. People in Sandray and Vatersay were moved on to Uidh which was a neck of land on Vatersay and they were subsequently cleared in 1851. A few of them actually settled in Gleann. The ones in Bentangaval who didn't emigrate came out to Kentangaval and Nasg and then went to Uidh and then were cleared along with the rest.

But my own family and those related to the MacNeils they didn't fare any better for being closer related to MacNeil. They had a tack of land. Their father, Hector Òg, had a tack of land at Earsary and Seumas, his son, organised along with his brother Eachainn Bàn the emigration with Hugh Dunoon in 1802. Seumas MacNeil came back to organise further emigrations. He made a return voyage and he went to Arisaig to organise a further emigration. He was on very very bad terms with the Colonel, his cousin, that year and so was the priest who was also involved, James A. MacDonell. They both drowned in the Sound of Sleat while organising the emigration. They were shipwrecked. Ruairidh Bàn, my great-great-greatgrandfather, he stayed in Barra. He didn't fare any better than any non-relative. He started off in Kilbar. When two of the sons got married, they moved to Cliaid from Kilbar, ended up in Allasdale and even stayed in Uist for a while. They went to Morghan which is in Northbay, moved on to Bogach, then they went to Fuiay, which is a small island, along with another four tenants, when the factory was in business. My great-great-grandfather Alasdair was cleared from there and came to Brevig. Then they went to Gleann and finally to Kentangaval where he died. His brother, Iain Donn,

went the same way, although he had one voyage less, he moved from Brevig to Buaile nam Bodach where he died. One was 94, the other one was 95 when they died. There is a physical description of them in a book called *The Lay of Deirdre* by Alexander Carmichael.

Q: Was the movement of population exceptional or typical?

Calum a'Chal: Very typical. Strangely enough, there must have been a few crawlers amongst them. We find some families who stayed on. It makes you wonder what they did. All the rest appear to be completely mobile. They seemed to be very unsettled. They were chucked from one place to another. But you see the odd family that is stuck in one place.

Q: Did any ever come back to Barra from the New World?

Calum a'Chal: Yes. I only know one definite man called Ruariridh Ùr MacIntyre, the son of Allan MacIntyre. The ones that went out first across went as pioneers. Twenty years down the line they tended to kind of maybe look down on the newcomers. The newcomers weren't quite as good as the old settlers, as far as they were concerned. Ruairidh Ùr MacIntyre came back. It is a strange story, and it's a true story what happened. On the way out to Nova Scotia they had a French-Canadian crew and they experienced the same problems similar to what they had on the Annie Jane. Ruairidh Ùr was forced to join the crew and go up the mast to save the ship. The skipper thought so highly of him that when they got to Nova Scotia he asked him if he would make the return journey with him and he would take him and any of his relatives out free of charge and the return voyage again. They were coming back with timber and going out with emigrants again. This is what he did. He took his mother out with him. I find it difficult to understand, because she had children here. Her eldest daughter was married to a man called Mìcheil Mòr MacDonald who had Uist connections. They went out in 1817, so certainly could have gone out to see her own daughter. But she left two daughters here, one of them was my own ancestor, and she left another son here. So why did she go? It's quite strange what actually happened. I could understand it if she had no family left in Barra. She went with him and that was it. Maybe he was the blue-eyed one.

Q: Do you get many visitors from Canada?

Calum a'Chal: Yes we do. The descendants certainly come back. There is another strange story. I can't vouch for its veracity but there is a ring of truth in

it. There was a woman who went to Canada, a MacKenzie. There was only one family called MacKenzie on Barra with several families all from the one ancestor. The MacNeil had a brother who – the story goes – wasn't all there. He was wandering around from village to village. And he had this bag with him. One day he called on this woman who offered him whatever she had to eat and she sat him down because she knew him. And she asked him: "What have you got in that bag?" He answered: "I've got my money in it. I've got gold in it and I'm going to bury it." She first thought nothing of it because she knew he wasn't quite sensible. He went away round the headland and then came back without the bag of gold. And she found it strange, and wondered whether he actually did what he was saying he was going to do. There was a man called Carmichael who didn't belong to Barra who got wind of this story in Cape Breton one night at a ceilidh with the woman's husband. And he wanted MacKenzie to come with him Barra to find the gold. All the way from Cape Breton. But MacKenzie's wife wouldn't hear it. The only condition that she would let him go was if he took her with him. But he didn't have the money to pay for the two fares. He only had enough money to pay for himself and Carmichael to come back. So Carmichael went to Barra without him. The strange thing was that although he wasn't connected to Barra – had no connections at all to Barra – when he went back to Nova Scotia to Cape Breton he went back to the village, he upped sticks and bought a big plot of land in a desirable area. He settled there on a big farm. But nobody could explain where he got the money from. And then they started to believe it was true, that he had actually found the gold. They couldn't figure out any other way he could have got the money. They knew he'd come back. As I know the village, the two villages that woman was in – before she left she was living in Kentangaval – and then they moved to Tobhta Driseach which is just the lower part of Gleann. They emigrated from there in 1821. If MacNeil had passed this village there is only one place that he could have put the gold in. He put the gold in a crevice round a point of land. And Carmichael had asked the man: "Do you know this point of land?" And he said: "Yes, I know exactly where it is." And he said: "That's where the gold is." There is a small cleft in the point over by this cliff. And there is of course the Cave of Gold at the back of Garrygall which is another place where you've got a crevice going into the rock. These are the only places where he could possibly have put it. I've checked it out already. It is not lying on top of the ground. I don't know exactly if that actually ever happened but it is certainly a story in Cape Breton.

Q: What is the main occupation in Barra today? What do people do?

Calum a'Chal: There is the council which employs all the people to the schools, to the hospital and the health board. You've got a fish factory. You've got the hotel. You've got the fishing industry in various forms and the building trade. And you've got the merchant navy, not quite what it used to be but still of significant amount.

Q: Anybody doing crafts?

Calum a'Chal: Well, at the moment there is a craft shop down in Skallary. The owner does paintings and various crafts and you've got the Toffee Shop which is down here. That's another small business. We have Margaret Somerville at the north end who is a sculptor and does quite a bit of work.

Q: Crofting?

Calum a'Chal: There is less crofting on a communal basis. When I came back to live in Barra in 1978 crofting was more active. I think the biggest problem with crofting is paper, the same as happens in the industry I am now in – fishing. Every day there is a letter that comes through, a catalogue comes through, somebody wanting information. And that's quite disappointing for the economy. I think that successive governments for 20 odd years have gone in and out and been producing bureaucracy.

Q: I have another question. I was reading an article about the storytelling capacity, the old tradition in Barra and how some families have what they might call a *seanachaidh*. A *seanachaidh*, a storyteller with a memory. This is before the written tradition. It is way back probably hundreds of years and still in the memory of the old storytellers. Do you have any comments on that? Do we know of such a thing? Do you know of any people involved?

Calum a'Chal: I wish I'd brought my great-great-grandfather, 'cause he was one of them. He died in 1881. He was 94 when he died. And his brother Iain Donn in Buaile nam Bodach, he was 95 when he died. They gave quite a few stories to Alexander Carmichael, John Francis Campbell and Hector MacLean. In Iain Donn's case he gave the story of Deirdre which is a bit of a classic. When Carmichael went to visit my great-great-grandfather in Kentangaval and he told him that he had been down to visit his brother in Buaile nam Bodach and that he got a wonderful story. My great-great-grandfather asked what story his brother had given him. He said: "It's the story of Deirdre." And he said: "Well, if you've

got the story of Deirdre from my brother, you've never got the story of Deirdre, you've got a fragment." He was very critical about his brother's ability of telling stories. That fragment that they took from Iain Donn was considered a classic folktale. So it makes you wonder whether they had time to take down the full story. He was quite caustic in his comments about his brother, strangely enough. And he says: "I was one day ceilidhing in the house of my brother Iain and he was in the middle of telling a story and I had to walk out with a vexation with the mess he was making of the grand old tale." Something that I found interesting about that comment is that Carmichael asked him if he had the Lay of Deirdre. And he said that he did not have the Lay of Deirdre and he knew only of one person, Donald MacPhee, the smith in Brevig, who was originally from Benbecula, and he was the only man that he knew of the Lay of Deirdre. And he told Carmichael that lays were like stories, they were an Art and only certain people had them. Storytellers weren't these people. The people who told the lays were a separate entity. So everybody had his own trade. He knew that because the smith, Donald MacPhee, was one of his neighbours in Brevig. In that spell my great-great-grandfather was living in Brevig. So he would have known him quite well and he knew that he had a tale.

But the storytelling I do remember in the old village, too. There were storytellers. They were old men when I was a young child, and they were certainly full of stories. Not many of them true. There was a man who died next door to me. I remember when he was on his death bed I used to call in to the woman who stayed in the same house. He was never off his death bed since the day he was born because he was so lazy according to her. He was an old man. Myself and the lad next door we called in before we went to school. He was lying on his bed what we called the closaid in the standard house. He was lying there smoking a pipe. He wouldn't stay on his legs. Somebody said he was just getting old, but the woman said: "No, he has always been like that. He is just too lazy to stay on his legs." And we used to sail wee boats up his knees and down the other side to see if he was awake. He was a wonderful storyteller. He would sit all day and tell stories to kids and anybody.

Q: Where did he get them from?

Calum a'Chal: Well, if you trace his ancestors back, they belong to the Isle of Sandray. But he didn't. And he had a granduncle, Niall Mhìcheil Ruairidh, who had actually gone to Cape Breton. He belonged to Gleann. He was one of these people who never married; probably he didn't want to marry.

He would leave the house to tend lambs at lambing time on a Sunday after mass. He never came back 'til midnight. In that period he went up the hill but he never went very far. Just to the westside of Tangusdale and down to Borve. He'd be there telling his stories, smoking the pipe and drinking tea. And then he'd come back at night. That was his night out. He had been at sea on a fishing patrol vessel and he had been in the Navy. I remember his funeral. They had to take him out of the back window. The rooms were so small, they couldn't take the coffin round. He was quite a tall man. They had to take the bottom off the window to take the coffin out. But there were so many mourners; we used to walk the coffin to church. Coffins used to be walked to church. And then they would be driven from the church to the cemetery. There were a lot of people attending funerals and they would walk to the cemetery. There was a large amount of people that was there waiting at the house, they went along the whole of the Nasg road to the crossroads. So he was well thought of. I never checked what age he was when he died. He was just an old man to me. In the other part of the village there was a man and he was the last man to see the fairy wedding on the island of Hellisay. He was born there in 1855 and he died in 1950 in Nasg. He had lots of stories and tales. It must be of the fairy variety.

Q: Fairy wedding?

Calum a'Chal: Fairy wedding. He swore by it. He said that he'd been to a fairy wedding in the Sìthean, the fairy dell, in Hellisay. The man is featured in the Coddy's book but he is not named. His name was Angus MacKinnon. He was referred to by the East coast fishermen as "Lucky Angus" because he proved to be a lucky hand on the boat.

Q: Any more about fairies?

Calum a'Chal: There was a man who came from Bruernish, a carpenter. He didn't believe in any of this stuff. This man went to visit Angus who was getting old. He didn't believe in the fairies when he went to visit him, but certainly before he left he did. So he managed to convince him. When he died there was a wake. When Angus died an old sparring partner came over as he was being coffined. He had not been told to the last minute. This generally didn't happen. When someone died they would have a wake. Next day they would put the body in a coffin and take it to church. But they didn't tell this man near the village. He got wind of it somehow because he noticed that everybody was walking over to Nasg. So he got wind of it. And he came over after them so see

what was going on. And they were just about to coffin Angus MacKinnon. And when he came through the door and saw his old sparring partner being put in the coffin he shouts to them: "Hold on a minute I'll give the man one last punch." (Sound of a clap) [Laughter]. The reason that he wasn't invited to the wake was because of an incident at a previous wake. The man's wife didn't like milking the cattle. And he had to go through the village of Nasg and milk the cattle. And this was women's work as far as the men were concerned. So he went through the village every day to milk the cow and back again. When he was still alive his cousin's husband used to be laughing and make snide comments and this was getting to him. Of course he couldn't sort him out because it was his cousin's husband. This time the cousin's husband passed away and of course they had a wake. They used to clothe the dead in a long shirt prior to being coffined. Anyway during the wake they were having a few drams. Somewhere along the line he had one or two too many and the younger fellows in the group were winding him up about his cousin's husband because he never got even with him. They were just winding him up. But, of course, you know, he took the bait. And then before the night was out and the remains were lying on the bier, he turned him over, lifted up his shirt and spanked him. After that night he was banned from all wakes.

Q: Did Barrafolk travel to St. Kilda?

Calum a'Chal: There was a woman from St Kilda who died in Barra about in the 1870s. She was working for MacGillivary as a weaveress down in Eoligarry House. She probably came to Barra with the Harris connection that MacGillivary had. In St Kilda there is a place called Geodha Chlann Nèill where a Barra boat is supposed to have been wrecked. It could just have been adrift and happened to get wrecked in that creek. The only other thing is that the fulmar here was always referred to as the Guga Hirteach, the St Kilda gannet. You see a number of fulmars now but they weren't as plentiful even in my own young days as they are now. They were only at the west side of Beinn Tangabhal where you would see them but now they are everywhere. They are in Muldoanich and various other places.