

## A Note on Calum a'Chal, the *seanachaidh*

by Ian R. Macneil

Calum Macneil, better known as Calum a'Chal, a native Barrach, is a *seanachaidh*. He has long and thoroughly immersed himself in the history – written and oral – of the Barra and Vatersay community in which he is a fisherman and crofter and is much involved in community affairs.

*Seanachaidh* is used here in the sense of *historian* rather than *reciter of tales* or *recorder* (Dwelly: 1977, 798-99), as in one of the questions asked of Calum a'Chal. I daresay the old bards would have laughed scornfully at these distinctions. Perhaps their origins lie not in the Gaelic but in translation to a modern English influenced by centuries of objectivism. (Neil MacAlpine, whose dictionary ante-dated Dwelly's by seventy-five years, seems to have been less affected by Enlightenment objectivism than was the later Dwelly – an Englishman, not a native Gaelic speaker. MacAlpine includes only *reciter of tales* and *recorder* without reference to *historian* (MacAlpine 1973:220).)

It is curious how human concepts move in circles through time; witness many current post-modernists who insist that there is no history whatever except wholly subjective *story* or *narrative*. Even the ancient bards would never have gone that far – they lived too deeply involved in a hard real world. What is it that seems to make the human mind incapable of living with the tension of two sound yet irreconcilable concepts, and instead constantly insisting on one to the exclusion of the other? The human world is impossibly subjective and impossibly objective. Of course, each human knows, indeed creates, his or her 'objective' world only through and by his or her perceptions. Hence everything is subjective to each of us. Equally of course, for all practical human purposes there is an objective world really out there which any human ignores only at peril of rapid extinction. So let's get on with it, recognising that everything in historiography is both subjective and objective, and the Devil take the hindmost, as he undoubtedly will.

Calum a'Chal's paper is oral history transcribed. The talk transcribed was not only oral history but pure oral history in two respects. First, it was not merely an adjunct to more formal academic historical writing but stood on its own. Second, and perhaps of greater importance is that, except for questions at the end, no interview process has channeled or otherwise distorted his thoughts or words. It is thus one learned man's perception of the history of his community.

At the Northern Studies meeting Calum prefaced his remarks with a quip very much in the great oral traditions of Gaelic culture: He was speaking without notes because he was afraid that using them would atrophy his brain. As none of the talks presented at the meeting was recorded, as soon as Calum's talk was given it ceased to exist except in the memories of those present. This too fits with tradition: 'If they weren't here they shouldn't hear it.'

Nonetheless, Calum was persuaded to present his talk anew to be taped for the present translation into a different medium. It is the nature of oral history that the second talk cannot have been identical to the first. Unless a speaker pretends successfully that he or she is speaking only to himself, there is always a two-way interplay between the speaker and the audience, even when the audience does nothing but sit quietly and listen.

There thus have to have been subtle and perhaps not so subtle differences between the two talks. The first was presented to an audience the major part of which consisted of strangers to Barra most of whom did not have the Gaelic. The second audience was largely people Calum has known all his life, many of whom speak his native tongue, and some of whom had been present for the first talk. Consider, for example, the comments and questions about landlords – always a highly complex and emotional subject in the Highlands and Islands. How could the chemistry of communication between speaker and audiences possibly have been the same when a 21st century landlord was part of the first audience, but not of the second? Moreover, the sizeable second audience – at least the men in it – were paying Calum the highest possible compliment. They had come to hear him rather than to stay home to watch the long anticipated Celtic-Barcelona football game. That kind of accolade would affect even the most phlegmatic *seanachaidh*.

Thus, what is transcribed here is not the exact talk presented to the Northern Studies meeting. Moreover, a talk transcribed is not a talk, but a written report. Anyone familiar with trial or verbatim transcripts of meetings knows how much is lost and changed in translation from the oral to the written medium. Editing may help restore some of the original essence, but only at the

risk of new distortions. In this case the editing has been very light. The small headings at the beginning of paragraphs are written substitutes for the pauses, shifts in tone, emphasis, etc. that speakers use in making transitions.

### ***Further reading***

This is not a list of sources for Calum MacNeil's talk, but, except for the two dictionaries, a list of publications selected by the editor for readers wishing to explore further particular subjects Calum a'Chal has addressed. Their contents range from folk tales to formal academic work aimed by their authors at as great objectivity as the human condition permits. Which is which and how subjective or objective each is must be left to the subjective judgment of each reader.

- Branigan, Keith, 2005, *From Clan to Clearance: History and Archaeology on the Isle of Barra c. 850 - 1850 AD*. Oxford.
- Branigan, Keith, & Patrick Foster, 2002, *Barra and the Bishop's Isles: Living on the Margin*. Stroud.
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- Campbell, Dr. J.L. & Constance Eastwick, 1966, 'The Macneils of Barra in the Forty-five,' *Innes Review*, 17:82
- Chambers, Anne, 1998, *Granuaile, The Life and Times of Grace O' Malley, c. 1530-1603*, rev ed. Dublin.
- Dwelly, Edward, 1977, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary, 1901-11*. Glasgow.
- Hunter, James, 1976, *The Making of the Crofting Community*.
- MacAlpine, Neil, 1973, *Pronouncing Gaelic-English Dictionary*, 1832. Glasgow.
- Macneil of Barra, Robert Lister, 1923, *The Clan Macneil*. New York.
- MacPherson, John, 1960, *Tales from Barra Told by the Cuddy*. Edinburgh.
- Newby, Andrew, 1998-2000, 'Emigration and Clearance from the Island of Barra, c. 1770-1858,' *Transactions Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 61:116
- Richards, Eric, 2000, *The Highland Clearances: People Landlords & Rural Turmoil*.
- Walker, John, 1980, Margaret M McKay, ed, *The Rev. Dr. John Walker's Report on the Hebrides of 1764 & 1771*. Edinburgh.