Mountain Song

Notes

Jess Potter

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MOUNTAIN SONG is born of a circular mountain: Beinn a' Chearchaill (mountain of the hoop/loop), which sits at the inland edge of the Torridon mountain range in Wester Ross. Informed by the cyclical structures of Gaelic working songs, MOUNTAIN SONG is shaped by the sounds of water running through glacial rock formations and peat beds, woven with samples from Nan Mackinnon's songs and stories held in the Tobar an Dualchais archive. They are songs from the Highlands and Islands; songs born of a struggle for land rights, they abound with beauty and hope and force. The songs call us to listen to the land, to remember and learn from Gaelic voices—to preserve and connect with them, to imagine new interconnected and restorative forms of life.

Nan MacKinnon (photograph by Ian Mackenzie) School of Scottish Studies, ref. SV11 F15.

The voice of Nan Mackinnon shines out of these songs—a voice that spoke and sung and shared over 400 songs and stories passed down through generations. As Gaelic was not taught in schools in Nan's time, these songs and stories only exist in the space of her voice and through the care and attention of the field recorders who worked to collect and record them: James Ross, Emily Lyle and Mary MacDonald and Barbara McDermitt.

Nan's voice opens the shape and space of lives, their duration, history, work, and care. Nan's family were among a small group of settlers to move to Vatersay to stake a claim on the land by planting potatoes and building small homes. This group, motivated by the need for subsistence, were taken to court in Edinburgh. They became known as the Vatersay Raiders and their case was key to the establishment of crofting rights in the Hebrides in the early twentieth century. This battle followed decades of land clearances and forced emigration which spread the stories and songs of the Hebrides and Highlands far and wide across the globe.

Through the songs of Nan MacKinnon we hear echoes of intergenerational struggle, alongside a celebration of culture and practices of work and care that, due to the nature of their oral transmission, connect us to a time where work, care, collective action and sustenance were intertwined.

'Nan's mothers' sheer enjoyment of singing was an important element in the transmission of her great repertoire. Its survival was only made possible, however, by her daughter's intelligent interest in the material she had preserved, combined with a most remarkable memory for both texts and melodies. Nan is a gifted conversationalist in her native language, with a superb knowledge of the traditions of her race. This is despite the fact that she is not literate in her own tongue, and, in common with most members of the community to which she belongs, is not able to read or write Gaelic. Her great feat of retention in preserving this unique repertoire, and her vast fund of other tradition, was accomplished without the use of a single written note.' [1]

[1] James Ross was a field recorder and member of the School of Scottish studies. He extensively recorded the songs and stories of Nan MacKinnon and intended to publish her complete songs and stories. *Tocher*, no. 38, School of Scottish Studies, 1983.

Nan MacKinnon (photograph by James Ross) School of Scottish Studies, ref. C8 33.

Nan was born in Kentangaval, Barra on 23 December 1902, as one of seven children. Nan went to school but was not taught Gaelic, which was forbidden in schools at that time. Her first language was Gaelic, but she could not read or write it. Nan comes from a rich line of singers. Her great grandfather Iain was a singer, as was her Grand Aunt Effie. Iain married a girl from Uist who brought the Uist songs to Barra and learnt all the Barra songs. This rich heritage was then passed on to Nan's Mother, who taught them to Nan. Her Father, Hector MacKinnon, had the sea songs.

Nan returned to Vatersay from working in Glasgow to care for her sister's four children, when her sister died suddenly during the second world war. She remained on Vatersay for the rest of her days. In an interview with Barbara MacDermitt, Nan states that her favourite songs of all were the waulking songs she learned from her mother:

'The waulking songs kept news alive from generation to generation. There were no newspapers, whereas today we read it in the papers and forget about it tomorrow. But the songs kept it alive. Those happenings that happened centuries ago are still to be told in song and story, It's wonderful.'

WAULKING took place around a table—A CLIATH—the front door taken off its hinges, sloping slightly towards the newly formed opening. The door became the table upon which the web of wool is waulked, by hands and by feet. The waulking is rubbing and pulling, back and forth across the planks of wood: AGITATION. All the time moved by bare hands and bare feet with singing, calling and responding keeping the time of the work and the time of the shrinking cloth. The web is woven from wool dyed by lichen and heather; spinning the colours of the hillscape into a pattern of care, to clad bodies and protect them from the wind and the rain. Singing makes the cloth and the songs come from listening to the land. There are eight songs to waulk a web of cloth.

The waulking songs survived. The act of waulking in the islands survived longer due to their remoteness and the lack of mills and industrial infrastructure. The collective act, the sharing and passing down of songs, the practices of field recording and oral history research, has kept these songs alive. Waulking became a radical act that was interrupted and disbanded by 'lairds' as hand waulking undermined the toll due to the mill in the industrial stages of tweed production. The story of waulking—the constant motion and singing, working wool that had been sheared, carded, spun, dyed and woven—is a story of complexity and interconnectedness, of labour and creativity, at the heart of resilient communities.

MOUNTAIN SONG celebrates the joy of listening to waulking songs, of thinking about their connection with landscape, community, and culture. Once the structure of a song is formed anything can fit into it. The sounds for songs come from the land. These connections across time—bound through stories and song—are fireflies, for us to preserve. These fireflies may inspire us to find a relationship between the separations that divide us. Listening to past voices and to the land shapes our search for new forms of life/new ways of living, with each other and with our earth.

Wester Ross is a crenulated and mountainous land facing the top of the Isle of Skye and the Hebrides. It is a place of druidical echoes, Norse mythology, early Christian adaptation, of clearances and the forced redistribution of land. There are stories in the names of places, descriptive and narrative resonances, expressing the senses that the land holds and keeps: a tension and productive conflict with the forces of change, through the extremity of geological form. To say and to sing is to speak through and across time, of the history and activism that paved the way for crofting rights, the interweaving of song, story, creativity, care, and labour.

MOUNTAIN SONG was formed through exploring the landscape of Wester Ross with my young children. The spirit of Nan guided our explorations which are woven with learning about Gaelic language and song that will continue. The film responds to songs and stories through sensing and saying the textures of places. This attention seeks to awaken an interconnectedness and cross generational celebration found in Gaelic songs and stories through their fight for justice and for a right to sustenance. Their expression of the interconnectedness of life, work, care and song speaks with a complexity and force across the brightness of the lights and the sounds that blind our eyes and close our ears. These *fireflies* shine out.

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WITH SPECIAL THANKS to the University of Edinburgh, School of Scottish Studies and the Tobar an Dualchais archive for permission to share the songs and stories of Nan Mackinnon.

S E FEARANN NA HEARADH A TH' ANN, Nan MacKinnon, field worker: James Ross, SA1959.65.B1, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh

CLEARANCES, SONGS, AND A SUPERNATURAL STORY, Nan MacKinnon, field worker: Mary MacDonald; Emily Lyle, SA1974.107.A4-A6 School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh

'S MITHICH DHOMH FHÈIN O BHÌ O BHÒ, Nan MacKinnon, field worker James Ross, SA1960.117.B6 School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh

RUIDHLEADH MO THOMAIGEIN, Nan MacKinnon, field worker: James Ross, SA1958.139.10 School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh

THA MÀIRI GU FOINNIDH FÌOR-GHLAN, Nan MacKinnon, field worker: James Ross, SA1959.65.A2 School of Scottish Studies Archive, University of Edinburgh

GILLE CALUM DÀ PHEIGHINN, Nan MacKinnon, field worker James Ross, SA1958.137.6 School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh

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