

BOOKS



ROGER HUTCHINSON

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Na h-Oganaich “adopted” the Melbost Bard’s songs

Murdo MacFarlane – ‘But still we sing’

Murdo MacFarlane embodied the 20th-century island of Lewis.

He was born in Aignish in 1901. As a young adult he worked briefly on some of Lord Leverhulme’s short-lived enterprises. When Leverhulme’s plans evaporated, MacFarlane joined so many of his fellow Leodhasaich on the emigrant ships to Canada.

He returned in the early 1930s and served during the Second World War. Later in the 1970s and 1980s, when he was living in Melbost, Murdo MacFarlane became an eminence grise to the young people (many of whom are now themselves grey, elderly and respectable) of the Keep NATO Out campaign to stop Stornoway airport becoming a NATO base.

And all the time, all around him, he watched with dismay as the island which in his childhood had been almost entirely Gaelic-speaking

turned to English. He became a Gaelic activist.

MacFarlane had written and was still writing pipe tunes and Gaelic poems and songs, which led to his familiar cognomen, Bàrd Mhealboist, the Melbost Bard.

To his great delight, groups of young people in the 1970s were not only concerned with keeping NATO out of Stornoway. They were also spearheading a Gaelic revival. Bands such as Runrig and Capercaillie acquainted themselves and their fans with MacFarlane’s work.

Most of all, a Lewis trio called Na h-Oganaich adopted the Melbost Bard’s songs and subsequently released some of them on the Decca label (the same company which recorded the Rolling Stones, Cat Stevens and the Moody Blues).

Na h-Oganaich was comprised of the future TV personality Donnie MacLeod, the guitarist Noel Eadie

and Donnie’s sister, the Mod goid medallist Margaret (Mairead) MacLeod.

In the course of their working relationship before his death in 1982, Murdo MacFarlane maintained a correspondence with Margaret MacLeod. Those letters are now the foundations of a beautiful book.

There may never be a full, commercial biography of the Melbost Bard written and published. But in its place we have ‘Le Mùirn’, a title which derives from Murdo’s affectionate sign-offs to Mairead.

‘Le Mùirn’ has been compiled in Gaelic and in English by Ishbel Murray of Ceòl ‘s Craic. It is, as you might expect from that source, an extremely stylish and multi-faceted book.

As well as written tributes from Roddy Murray and Margaret MacLeod, it includes a number of striking pieces of artwork from a

number of visual artists who were inspired by MacFarlane.

Those paintings and collages are not only excellent in their own right; they are also fitting. Murdo MacFarlane’s artistic talents were not limited to words and music. As Margaret MacLeod recalls, “Young relatives would receive beautifully decorated hand-painted eggs at Easter, and the mural he painted on the wall of his bathroom would be admired by friends and neighbours alike.”

The highlights and the centrepiece of the volume, however, lie in the illustrated life of Murdo, in the story of his relationship with Na h-Oganaich, in the reproductions of his letters and his songs — and in the photographs.

He was a remarkable figure. At the time of his greatest eminence the Melbost Bard was a rural Lewisman in his 70s. He wore bottle-glass

spectacles, of which he had two pairs which were occasionally held together with Elastoplast and which he sometimes donned simultaneously. He wore a flat cap or a battered Trilby, a worn jacket, collarless shirt and a pair of trousers which were frequently stuffed into his wellies.

He could not have been mistaken for Mick Jagger. Roddy Murray recalls how this eccentric person was greeted with embarrassment and even mockery by Roddy’s Gaelic class at the Nicolson Institute. Roddy Murray would make amends 20 years after MacFarlane’s death by mounting an exhibition at An Lanntair devoted to the life and work of the unlikely visionary.

Despite his own efforts to subvert it, there was a true dignity to Murdo MacFarlane. Looking at a photo of him with Runrig’s Calum MacDonald, you must wonder

(Calum himself must wonder) which of the two best stands the test of time — Calum in his loon jeans and skinny jumper, or the old man beside him in loose dark clothes and boots leaning on a rough-hewn stick.

The Melbost Bard was unique. He was as far from being a figure of authority as possible, but he lent the evasive authority of traditional Lewis to the radicals and young revivalists of the late 20th century. He was mischievous, funny and boundlessly creative. As Catriona Murray writes, “His message was always the same — Gaelic may be declining but *‘still we sing’*.”

It was already unlikely that Murdo MacFarlane would be forgotten. ‘Le Mùirn’ cements his reputation.

‘Le Mùirn, Murdo MacFarlane and Margaret MacLeod, A Tale of Friendship’; by Catriona Murray, Faram Publications, £10



The members of Na h-Oganaich pictured with Calum in a newspaper review of the time



Artwork by Ishbel Murray (above) and Anne Campbell (below)



Murdo with Runrig’s Calum MacDonald