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Angus Nicolson

An Interview with Sorley MacLean



Angus NICOLSON: What do you regard as the formative influences on your own poetry?

Sorley MACLEAN: Well that would be a long story. From the time of my first memories I was very very very keen on poetry and, of course, nearly all one's primary education was in English. Now I didn't speak any English when I went to school at the age of six, but I was of a family of, I think, unusually good tradition-bearers and singers and pipers on both sides, the MacLean side, the Matheson side, the MacLeod side, the Stewart side and, to a certain extent, the Nicolson side too because my Nicolson great-great-grandfather was a piper in the Peninsula. My grandmother, my Matheson grandmother, was a wonderful tradition-bearer--my father's mother she was--and she lived with us until she died, in 1923. She was of a Matheson family that had left Lochalsh in the eighteenth century, became for two generations millers in Staffin in Skye, and her family had taken with them from Lochalsh songs of Lochalsh and Kintail which, when I went to teach in Plockton in 1956, I found only very very few old people in Lockalsh and Kintail knew. She had a very fine voice and a tremendous memory. Now she (of course the family had been in Skye for four generations) had a tremendous store of Skye songs--she had lived in three different

parts of Skye--in Staffin, then near Portree and finally in Braes, and when she married my MacLean grandfather she came to Raasay. She was evidently a very fine singer. I don't remember my MacLean grandfather. He died when my father was only about eight. My father was the youngest of a family of five. My MacLean grandfather was evidently a bard and a very good singer though there were none of his songs carried on in the family. So my grandmother, who always sang in spite of the fact that she was officially a Free Presbyterian, was always singing and she had a very fine voice and she had a tremendous range of songs. I was not a singer. I was one of the few of the family who was not a singer, but I became passionately fond of the words of Gaelic song. In my school education in Portree School I took Gaelic as it was taken in secondary schools by native-speakers. I can always remember this interest I had in song and, even after my grandmother died, her eldest daughter, my Auntie Peggy, used to come and stay a month with us every year. She was almost as good, perhaps quite as good, as my grandmother in the number of songs she had, and she was a fine traditional singer. She stayed with us for a month a year. She fished three or four times a day and I was very fond of boats, and was willing to go out with her every time from the age of twelve onwards in my teens, and the whole time was spent either in arguing politics with her or listening to her sing. Sometimes I threatened to go on strike if she wouldn't sing--she was an obsessive fisherman for the month of holiday she had in the year. The result was, you see, that I became an unusually good rower for my physique, and my memory was stored tremendously with Gaelic song, and some of the very finest old songs, because she had it as much as my grandmother. Now there was also, you see, on my mother's people, though my mother herself wasn't a singer, she had brothers and a sister who were very good singers and they had a great number of songs too, more from the MacLeod side than the Nicolson side as far as I can make out. I became very fond of poetry in English as well as Gaelic, and in my teens I had, what was very common in those days, a tremendous enthusiasm for Shelley. Now I think that was partly, more than partly, actuated by political feelings because I think about the age of twelve I became tremendously interested, more than interested, in politics, and the result was, you see, that when I came to Edinburgh on a bursery in 1929 from Portree School, I was full of nineteenth-century English poetry and Gaelic song poetry, although by that time, of course, I had read a lot of the major eighteenth-century Gaelic poets like Alexander MacDonald and Duncan Macintyre. My father was especially keen on William Ross and he sang William Ross's songs a great deal as well as many other songs,

and I especially remember his very fine singing of William Ross's great last song. He was also a very fine piper, though he never competed. And also, you see, in Raasay there was one great tradition-bearer in the old story. Kate MacLean was not of our MacLean family, but she was an aunt of the great piper, one of the greatest pipers of this century, a man who was called William MacLean of Kilcreggan. Now those MacLeans, of course, are all pipers or tradition-bearers. They had come to Raasay from Uist, where of course MacLean is the second commonest name after MacDonald.

N: That would be North Uist?

M: They'd been in North Uist for a long time. We're absolutely certain of that. Now when I came to the university, swerving whether to take a degree in Celtic with a Latin subsidiary, or history, in which I was very interested too, or English, I decided that (the time being such as it was, for there were so few jobs) I would take an honours degree in English in order to let me get a living. Before I was in my second year in English I had in some ways regretted it because fundamentally I was interested only in poetry and although it was the time of Grierson and the poetry of most prestige at Edinburgh University in those days was the seventeenth-century metaphysicals yet one must remember that Grierson was very very good on nineteenth-century Romantic poetry too. I must say that when I was at the university I was writing verse in English and Gaelic. At a certain juncture, I came to realize that my English verse, which was mostly imitative of Eliot and Pound, was over-sophisticated, over-self-conscious, and that what I had written in Gaelic was better in the sense that it was more myself. Whether it was--I think it was probably a culmination of my interest in Gaelic song, especially the old song, and I think clearly an interest in poets like Shelley and Blake and reading of people like Croce, I became unduly obsessed with the importance of the lyric--the lyrical cry. You know I remember reading Croce and discovering that Croce didn't believe in the long poem, that he considered it fundamentally a series of flats interspersed with lyrical peaks. That I took to because it fitted in with my own predilections. It is curious, however, that the verse I wrote in English at the time was rather dry, sophisticated Eliot-Poundish kind of stuff, the early Eliot, the Pound of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" and people like that. I realized that my Gaelic stuff was better. Among those very early things was this poem called "The Heron" from its English translation.

N: And "The Second Coming"?

M: Yes, which was surprisingly early actually. I was about twenty or at most twenty-one when I wrote that. Now I did hope, in a way, to perhaps take an honours degree in Gaelic after getting my degree in English--I had taken the ordinary class in Gaelic--but although Professor Watson would have done everything to accommodate me the Moray House [Teacher's Training College, i.e., post-graduate (MacLean's note)] authorities would not allow me to take third-year Gaelic and my Moray House work at the same time and, at any rate, I wanted to get back to the Islands very very much, and besides, for family reasons, it was necessary for me to start earning a living. I had graduated in 1933, at the depths of the Depression. Of course the 1931 business had accentuated my passionate interest in politics. Now I did not know of Hugh MacDiarmid's poetry, he was only a name to me, until in 1933, just a little before I was sitting my Finals. In the summer term of 1933, I met two remarkable men who were undergraduates then. One of them was George Davie, now Reader in Philosophy in the University here [Edinburgh]. George Davie was taking Classics. He was a year younger than my brother John, (he was taking Classics too) but everybody knew of Davie in the University. He was famous for his knowledge and ability, not only in Classics, but his knowledge of history and philosophy was remarkable. I was introduced to the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid by George Davie and James Caird, who was taking English two years younger than I. He was in the second year. Now James Caird was a man who even then combined a tremendous knowledge of literature--English, Scots, French, and Russian in translation, as well as Latin and Greek with what I considered a very unusual sensibility. Of all the people I knew at the University among undergraduates, he was the man who ought to have been a Professor of Literature, but circumstances and a lack of worldly wisdom prevented James Caird from becoming that. The influences of James Caird and George Davie were complementary; George Davie had a tremendous historical knowledge of all kinds of things in Scotland, and he was fundamentally interested in ideas and his range was immense; Caird was, I think, outstanding, as I said, in his combination of knowledge of literature and what I would call sensibility. They introduced me first to the lyrics of Hugh MacDiarmid, the early lyrics and *A Drunk Man*, and that had a tremendous influence on me. Now, I wouldn't say that these lyrics of Hugh MacDiarmid influenced my own poetry much though they had a kind of catalytic influence, because, as I think you will agree, that of all poetry, and I mean all poetry that I know, they are the most inimitable and the most difficult to follow in practice and imitate but they had this tremendous influence on me and reconfirmed my belief about the supremacy of

the lyric and the lyrical nature of poetry—I can't describe now how they affected me, and how a great number of them, or most of them, do affect me still, and of course there was *A Drunk Man* and *Cenchrastus* and *Scots Unbound* by that time. I wasn't really well read by the time I graduated in what you might call modern English or Scots literature in English, but of course I remember how I was affected by the novels of Lewis Grassie Gibbon and also by things like Neil Gunn's *Morning Tide*, especially the beginning of *Morning Tide*. Of course, I had read a fair amount of D. H. Lawrence as well as Eliot and Pound and the fashionable English poets. Now Hugh MacDiarmid, of course, had before that, before '33 or '34 (it was in '34 I first met him) expressed a great interest in Gaelic poetry, in *Cenchrastus* especially he had expressed a great admiration for Alexander MacDonald. Now Hugh MacDiarmid and I have always, I think, been at odds about the importance of what can be called folk poetry, and even I think about what is called lyrical poetry. But his lyrics existed and *A Drunk Man* existed and in *Cenchrastus* he had paid a great tribute to Alexander MacDonald. He had sensed something in Alexander MacDonald, he had sensed this tremendous energy, this verve in Alexander MacDonald, and I recognized that he was right in that. When I met him in 1934 I agreed to help him (I was a student at Moray House then) in translating MacDonald's "Birlinn" and Macintyre's "Ben Dorain" and a few other Gaelic poems, but especially the "Birlinn." I always felt that Hugh MacDiarmid did better with MacDonald than he did with Macintyre. By this time, and before that, I had stopped writing anything in English, and I was writing in Gaelic, not a great deal, poetry—and, of course, there was a great deal of talk going on, with people like the two Mathesons (William and Angus) and my brother John, of course, who by this time had become a very fine pibroch player with a very very great knowledge of pibroch, which was helped by his great memory. He was a great man who could repeat books of Homer by heart without ever trying to learn them, who could place any sequence of three notes of about seventy pibrochs. And John, of course, was a good singer too; he was inclined, however, to exalt pibroch as the supreme Gaelic art, but he was very very keen on the old songs too, and we had a friend from Skye, John Matheson, who is now living in New Zealand, who was a very very good singer, who had a great number of old Skye songs, and very fine ones. By the time I started teaching at Portree in 1934, I had this kind of interest in old songs and new poetry, especially the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid, and I would say in a way that *A Drunk Man* probably influenced me more than the lyrics. In a sense, though I put the lyrics of MacDiarmid on a pedestal, and still do, beyond all modern poetry, Grieve's

lyrics, yet the great medley, full of this intellectual energy and the spiritual passion of the *Drunk Man*, affected me tremendously. But there was one thing which I realized--I could not follow the *Drunk Man* because I hadn't got this kind of *vis comica* in me, in poetry at any rate, and when later I tried to write a long medley of a poem, one of the faults of it (it was never finished because of external circumstances) was this lack of what you might call *vis comica* in me.

I would say myself, you see, that the Spanish Civil War, and especially 1937, was a very important year for me because certain circumstances, family circumstances, prevented me from going to fight in the International Brigade. It wasn't a woman fundamentally that kept me from going though there was one. By that time, as it were, things were actually coalescing in a sense: this kind of interest in politics and this passionate interest especially in Gaelic song and the fate of the Gaelic language was an obsession to me by this time. When I thought in those days of the possible demise of the Gaelic language, what I thought was: will nobody ever again be able to sing those songs as they ought to be sung? Conceivably people could play pibroch without knowing Gaelic, and could play it very well, but could they sing those songs and could those songs really be heard? Now this interest in language and the political business of the Spanish Civil War, and of course going back to our own family traditions in the Land League, because my Nicolson grandfather was one of those whose absence from Braes (he was at the Irish fishing, at the time of the Battle of the Braes, the big Battle of the Braes) allowed the police to get off with more than they would have got off with if most of the young men of Braes had been at home in 1882 and not away at fishing in various places, including Ireland as he had been. I was teaching in Portree from 1934 to the end of '37, and I think that, although some of my poems that have been published were written before then, yet '37 and then '38, the year which I spent in Mull, teaching in Tobermory in Mull, were very important years. I was in touch with Hugh MacDiarmid by letter in those days quite often, and in 1935 I had been actually up staying with him in Whalsay for a week. I had still kept in touch with people like James Caird and George Davie.

As far as the Scottish Renaissance goes, you will understand that fundamentally in poetry the Scottish Renaissance in those days meant to me Hugh MacDiarmid though I had read William Soutar and admired him. Looking back on it, I think I depreciated Edwin Muir in those days, but I think it would be just to say that Edwin Muir didn't write his best poetry until considerably after 1937, at least the first book that greatly struck me of Edwin Muir was *The Voyage* [*The Voyage and Other*

Poems (London, 1946)], or was it *The Narrow Place* [London, 1943]? *The Voyage* was a long time after 1937 or 1938.

Now Mull, leaving Skye and going to Mull, was a kind of traumatic experience to me too, because Mull--of course the Clearances were written all over Mull--Mull I found a beautiful place, I liked it, but in many ways I considered it, and still consider it, a heart-breaking place, especially to a man with a sentimental attachment of having the name MacLean, which of course was the greatest of the Mull names. I remember going about Mull on a bicycle and asking a postman somewhere near Ulva Ferry, "Is it a Mull man lives on that farm?" meaning a man of genuine Mull stock, "or this one, or that one?" He said, "No." And then asking him, "Can you think of any farm in the north of Mull (there were no crofters then) at which there is a Mull man?" And he said, "No." Mull I found traumatic but I wrote quite a lot in Mull including that poem called "A Highland Woman"--it was written in Mull in 1938 and published very soon in the first number of MacDiarmid's periodical *The Voice of Scotland*, and of course it was a poem that he liked very much and that encouraged me very much. I can't say that up till that time I was very much influenced by any other writers of what is called the Scottish Renaissance except MacDiarmid himself and Lewis Grassie Gibbon and, to a lesser extent Neil Gunn. Of course, I had met in my last undergraduate years at Moray House "Fionn MacColla" [Tom MacDonald], and he impressed me quite a lot too, but fundamentally the Scottish Renaissance meant to me Hugh MacDiarmid, William Soutar to a much less extent in poetry, and in prose Lewis Grassie Gibbon and, to a less extent, Neil Gunn. Now I find I have been speaking for a long time and if you have anything else to say, even if it is about something that went before...

N: Well I'd like to come back to something; I noticed that you mentioned your interest in politics as developing in distinct stages--the first when you were about twelve, and then when you were at university--when you talked about politics when you were twelve would that have tended to be more the politics of the Highlands themselves?

M: Yes, a kind of left-wing radicalism, a kind of pretty left-wing radicalism.

N: Was it focused on what was happening in the Highlands?

M: Yes. And, of course, one must remember that from 1933 onwards I was obsessed with what I considered a probable victory of Fascism. I was, I think, unusually sensitive to that at the

time and although I was a Scottish Nationalist then, I thought that the immediate thing, the question of immediate importance, was the fight against Fascism, with Spain, the United Front, and all that. You see I had, I think, a kind of natural pessimism, which was probably engendered by my religious upbringing, and a hatred of élitism, social élitism, and all that made me equate, you see, what was happening then to the politics I had learned from the traditions of the Land League, and especially the traditions in Braes. You see, I was very proud of my ancestry and especially the "big men" of Braes, as Màiri Mhòr [Mary Macpherson] would say, at the time of the Land League. But you see I could never follow my Scottish Nationalist friends wholeheartedly, the kind of people, and there were many of them, who considered when the war was likely in 1939 that it wasn't Scotland's war--I couldn't agree with that. I suppose, like many others at the time, I was convinced that it was necessary to fight to the end for the bad against the worst, and I had never any time for what was considered a kind of Communist doctrine (it wasn't the official one) but it was that let the Nazis get power and the Fascists get power--after them, us. Well, I was pessimistic and sceptical about that. Now therefore, you see, I couldn't agree with MacDiarmid in that, nor could I agree with any of my Scottish Nationalist friends--of the Scottish Nationalists who considered the '39 war not Scotland's war.

N: Did they tend to be on the radical left?

M: Yes, yes, some of them did, some of them did. And some of them were among my best friends. People like George Campbell Hay--you see I didn't know George Campbell Hay until the war had started, I met him soon after the war had started, but he was primarily a Nationalist, and I don't think he was ever very much to the left.

N: I tended to assume that George Campbell Hay was a product of the Renaissance as well, of the Scottish Renaissance but he actually developed a bit later than...

M: Well, you see, I don't know when George Campbell Hay started writing in Gaelic, or in anything. Some of my stuff was published before any of George Campbell Hay's--he was at Oxford, and it was after the war started that I got to know him, before I went into the Army.

N: From the books I've seen it's largely a poetry that centers around the war, around the North African campaign.

M: Ah yes, that's slightly later stuff, that's the sort of thing that interested him. The earlier book was *The Wind on Loch Fyne*.

N: Another thing, linking politics and literature directly, I would assume that there is a very important sense in which the Scottish Literary Renaissance formed the basis for the current revival in Scottish consciousness. Was it seen at that time as a political thing? Did it just happen?

M: Well, I suppose the political setup in the thirties and this, what appeared as the possible, even likely, triumph of Fascism accelerated a lot of things and formed a kind of dynamo as it were and brought things to a head. Now you see a lot of the Scottish literary men in the thirties--especially the young or aspiring literary men--combined a kind of leftism in politics, Scottish Nationalism, with the belief that Douglas Social Credit was a kind of panacea, you see. I remember being very impressed with Lewis Grassie Gibbon's reported statement about Douglas Social Credit at the time, even when Hugh MacDiarmid was professedly a Marxist Communist and a Douglas Social Crediter at the same time. Lewis Grassie Gibbon had referred to Douglas Social Credit sarcastically as that ingenious scheme being to the social revolution as childbirth without pain, and even more intriguing, without a child! I remember in 1935 arguing strongly with Grieve in Whalsay and with a Social Crediter friend of his about the business, and his attitude then was that, although Social Credit was an economic solution, yet it was necessary for other reasons, which he might have called cultural, but I don't think he would have, but which he could have called moral (but I don't think he would have, then at any rate)--it was necessary to liquidate the bourgeoisie. I was not of his sanguine temperament, you see, and whether it was because of that or not I could never go the whole line with them, although I must admit that the Munich business in 1938 almost made me a Communist, almost.

N: To what extent did you live in the shadow of the Russian Revolution? You might not have been a Communist, but...

M: Well, you see, during the thirties a lot of us were like this. A great amount of the anti-Soviet, anti-Stalinist propaganda was proved to emanate from Fascist or pro-Fascist sources, and therefore we became unduly sceptical of it. And when I found people, you see, who talked about the Spanish Civil War more concerned with the treatment by the Communists, or the alleged treatment of movements like the POUM by the Communists,

they seemed to be more obsessed with that than with the struggle against Franco. I was very sceptical, probably unduly sceptical, of that.

N: It would be very difficult to strike a balance.

M: It was an exceedingly difficult time; things were going in such a way that it appeared almost inevitable that the Fascists would win unless there was a maximum unity of the Left and even with that maximum unity of the Left, that the Fascists were going to win. And probably--I remember, for instance, in 1935, as early as thirty-five, at the time of Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland, when the British Government refused to give even diplomatic support to the French Government, and the Labour Party backed up the Government--I remember telling a Labour M.P. whom I knew that they were a set of damn fools for supporting the Government in their refusal to back up France even diplomatically. And his reply to me, "That's exactly what Randolph Churchill was telling a few of us privately the other day." So I think, you see, that my pessimism probably made me unduly lacking in sympathy to other left movements like the POUM in Spain. Mind you, of course, there was the business of defective knowledge and all that.

N: To what extent would you describe your pessimism as emanating from the religious environment?

M: I think it did, you see. After all, if you are brought up in a church which seems to say that the bulk of humanity are going to suffer an eternity of physical as well as mental torture, it is very difficult not to be a pessimist.

N: How much was the Scottish cultural Renaissance affected by the political situation in the Scottish Lowlands?

M: Well, you see, my knowledge is obviously one-sided and defective, but I imagine that the influence of people like Hugh MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassie Gibbon, you see, was really very important. Of course, Hugh MacDiarmid became left not very early in life really. Not till he was about thirty, but then that was in the twenties, of course, you must remember, and as early as 1926 you remember what he had said about the General Strike in *A Drunk Man*, you know, about the flower that came out of the "camsteerie" plant of Scotland.

N: This is in reference to the General Strike?

M: Yes, the General Strike of 1926. Now of course there were other writers you must remember like James Barke and others who were very much affected by the political setup in the Lowlands. And of course even I was too myself. I remember as a boy in school in 1926, away up in Portree, being completely in favour of the General Strike and the miners' struggle after it collapsed--as early as 1926, when I would be only about fourteen.

Two of my Nicholson uncles knew John MacLean and had a great admiration for him as a man. One of them was at one time probably very sympathetic, the other probably was rather neutral about his politics, but you see I think it was very difficult to live in Glasgow at the time, and have any knowledge about what the working-class movement was without having this kind of mystique about John MacLean, because John MacLean became a legend pretty soon, you know. And there were other people too. I remember a man coming home to Raasay, no connection of mine, coming home to Raasay at the Glasgow Fair holiday. He was a docker or something on the Clyde, and it was obvious that that man was a follower of John MacLean. John MacLean was the great, the great, man, you see. This other follower of John MacLean was a man I liked very much. The name [John MacLean] was greater than the knowledge, you see; it was a very resonant name very early, you know, very soon after his death and before it.

N: Do you think that Gaelic poetry is less used for protest than Lowlands Scots?

M: Well, you see at one time, the Land League time, it was used a great deal. Not only people like Mary Macpherson but almost every Gaelic poet used it--Skye and Lewis--almost everywhere at that period, but of course in the period after the First World War, there was very little of that in Gaelic poetry, practically none. I would have said that a kind of Victorian pietism became dominant, with, of course, nostalgia, in the twenties and thirties.

N: Yes and even to this day there has been a kind of division, the one side was largely led by yourself, with, as certain Gaels call it, the poetry "of the new style," very contemporary poetry and on the other side you've got the folk poetry which is very separate.

M: Ah but there is even in this day--take people like Murdo MacFarlane and also people like Donald Macintyre--Donald Macintyre of Paisley was socially very conscious. But it's only since the war that they have become really known.

N: Could you wrap it up by giving your impression of where Gaelic poetry will go from here? If there is a really good future for it, what directions do you think it might take?

M: It is terribly difficult for one to say--for me, or I think for anybody else--to make any kind of prediction, but it would appear to me that Gaelic poetry if it has to keep any vitality must look to its own roots and not be just like transcriptions from, say, fashionable English poetry or fashionable poetry of any other kind. I think it must go back as well as forward, but I would be very much inclined not to make any prediction, because I think it is such an individual thing and also, you see, although my poetry might be called one-sided, and most of it has been one-sided, I would say, in some ways pointing to the future, yet I recognize that there are all kinds of people and all kinds of poems and that therefore it is very, very difficult to say. But I suppose a kind of--something like frankness and what might be called a commitment to something other than art for art's sake is always healthy and I think that the more commitment there is the more vital the poetry is likely to be although I do not rule out poems of an entirely different kind.

N: I think one thing that strikes me is that any kind of culture is essentially dependent on the vitality of the language. There is a heartening contrast, in that when I went to Portree school--about seventeen years ago--we had one teacher in Gaelic, he was also the assistant headmaster and consequently wasn't available much of the time, didn't have to be because there were so few children studying Gaelic anyway. You now have, I believe, three full time Gaelic teachers and one part-time.

M: Of course that is entirely due, or largely due, to this business of the alternative Learners' paper in Highers. That was a tremendously important thing. You see up till 1968, until this paper came, the only full secondary schools who were teaching any pupils except full native-speakers were the schools like Oban, the two in Glasgow, and Plockton, where I started it in 1956. And of course that has resulted--the successful agitation to get that one, and it was a hard and bitter agitation to get that Learners' paper--has doubled, trebled, quadrupled, and more, the number of people taking Gaelic in secondary schools, and of course the man to whom the chief credit is due, or the two to whom the chief credit is due, are Donald Thomson and Donald Morrison, two Lewis men teaching in Oban. They had started doing that--giving it to anybody who would

take it in secondary schools--about 1935. After the War they were followed by two Glasgow schools (the two at that time are now three) and then by Plockton. And, of course, until I went to Plockton I didn't realize how terribly important that was because you can't keep Gaelic alive as an enclave in the Western Isles or in Skye, you cannot, and I've said it, and I've made many enemies by what I said to back up Donald Thomson and Donald Morrison before this new Higher paper came in, and it didn't come in till 1968.

N: I know one or two people in Glasgow who have absolutely no connection with the Highlands who are now learning Gaelic, adults--this sort of thing is happening.

M: Yes, and of course it is true that till very recently most of the pupils taking Gaelic in the secondary schools in Glasgow had little Highland connection, and great number of them didn't have at all. And Glasgow Gaels were not very distinguished by sending their own children to those schools, and are not yet I'm afraid, even though the alternative paper has come, but certain other people have sacrificed a lot for the sake of that, and sacrificed the material prospects of their own family at the time, before 1968, when it was putting a big incubus on a child in the secondary school to learn Gaelic if he or she wasn't a native-speaker and had to sit the same higher paper as native-speakers. I know to my cost because I was for nearly sixteen years involved in that. And therefore, you see, no matter what happens, the people I honour for their work for Gaelic are the teachers, especially the teachers who are teaching it to people who are not already native-speakers, because, as Donald Thomson has said, it is easier to teach Gaelic to a person who already knows it than to teach it to somebody who does not! This business of concentrating only on the Western Isles and making it an enclave is comfortable for ex-patriate Platform Gaels and Place Gaels, but it won't save Gaelic.

N: Would you say at the moment actually that the political situation in Scotland, the political feeling in Scotland, is contributing to a great extent...

M: Oh yes, oh I think so. I think that Scotland, and I've said in public before, you see that the existence and the successes of the Scottish Nationalist Party are the great hope of Gaelic. Now, you see, I am myself, of course, torn in that I am inclined to be sceptical of the success of the Scottish Nationalist Party in the industrial Lowlands, where most voters

are, and therefore I think myself that the success of the Scottish Nationalist Party, and I've said it again and again, may save Gaelic, may save Gaelic, but what I am disturbed about is their chances of success if they are just a Scottish Nationalist Party and nothing else.

N: There is now, in Scotland, a strong feeling of a backlash against the Westminster parties.

M: Oh yes, of course. But, on the other hand, I have been very, very unhappy since 1945 when the Labour Party ceased to make Scottish Home Rule one of the planks of their programme. I've been very, very unhappy about that. And perhaps I'm unduly pessimistic but I see one of the hopes of Gaelic is what happens--one of the hopes of Gaelic is the number of people in the Lowlands even without Highland background who are learning Gaelic, who are keen on Gaelic, who are prepared to see their children learn it in schools and so on. And I must say there are certain people in the Scottish Nationalist Party, including candidates for election, like Shirley [Shirley has been twice the Scottish Nationalist candidate for South Edinburgh. There is also Thompson, Member for Galloway. (MacLean's note)] in Edinburgh, who not only learned Gaelic but learned it well.

N: There are also some who have learned Gaelic so they could read the poems of Sorley MacLean.

M: Well, that won't take people very far....