

## Sruth air a’ Charraig

When **Còisir Ghàidhlig Ìle** (Islay Gaelic Choir) won the Sherrif MacMaster competition at the National Mòd in Oban in 2009 the pride we felt was almost palpable. For our own choice song we had asked Kenneth Thomson (the renowned conductor of the Glasgow Gaelic Association and great friend to **Còisir Ghàidhlig Ìle**) to compose an arrangement of **Birlinn Cholla Chiotaich** (The Galley of Colla Ciotaich) by Islay bard Duncan Johnston. Winning that competition, singing an Islay song, is an experience few of us will ever forget. To somehow harness the pride we had felt in singing ‘**Birlinn**’ seemed like an obvious next step for the choir and so began the process of assembling a collection of songs based on Islay and on Islay’s heritage.

At much the same time, a project was being launched on the island. **Rogha Bardachd Ìle** (A Selection of Islay Poetry) aimed to encourage more young people on Islay to learn Gaelic by inspiring them with the stories and history of the island and by making them familiar with the work of some of the island’s bards. One facet of the **Rogha Bardachd Ìle** project involved local musician (and now choir member) Clare Jordan composing new music for words taken from poems written by Islay bards. One of the pieces Clare composed was based on the lament for Sir Lachlan Mòr Maclean taken from William Livingstone’s epic poem **Blàr Thraigh Ghrùineart**. So moved were we by Clare’s melody that in 2012 the choir commissioned her to compose two further songs based on that same poem. The resulting **Blàr Thraigh Ghrùineart** suite comprised a song for each of the ladies’ and men’s choirs and a third song for the mixed choir.

There is a loose sort of chronology to our song choices and the story starts in the 16th century when the MacDonald clan still held Islay. William Livingstone’s **Blàr Thraigh Ghrùineart** records the events and the mythology around the great battle fought at Loch Gruinart, Islay between the MacDonalds and the Macleans of Mull in 1598; the last great clan battle fought in Scotland. The MacDonalds won the day but there is a bittersweet tinge to the victory: only fourteen years after the battle, the MacDonalds relinquished their control of Islay, control that dated back to when the Lordship of the Isles was established in the wake of Somerled’s defeat of the Vikings in the 12th century. The battle is the final flourish of the MacDonalds, the last great salvo of this once mighty clan that had ruled the western seaboard of Scotland. In 1612 Islay passed into Campbell ownership and a new chapter in Islay’s story began.

In **Caomhnaibh Bràthair Mo Mhàthair** (Spare my Mother’s Brother), sung by **Còisir Ghàidhlig Ìle**’s men’s choir, Sir James MacDonald addresses his troops prior to the battle speaking passionately and movingly of the consequences of defeat. The repeated refrain of ‘Spare my Mother’s Brother’ emphasises that Sir Lachlan Mòr Maclean, the commander of the Maclean troops, was Sir James MacDonald’s uncle. That close kinship between warring clans is at the heart of the tragedy of the story of the battle.

The mixed choir’s song **Ò Albainn Caioidh** (Oh Scotland Mourn) is a powerful, evocative series of images of the horrors of war and loss of life. Threaded into these images of chaos are elements of the story of the **Dubh Sith** – the Black Dwarf from Jura said to have been responsible for the death of Sir Lachlan Mòr Maclean.

The ladies’ choir sing – **Cumha Mhic Ill’èathain** (Lament for Maclean) – the beautiful, sad and haunting lament for Sir Lachlan Mòr Maclean that Clare had first composed as part of the **Rogha Bardachd Ìle** project.

Islay’s Duncan Johnston was born in Lagavulin and was writing in the early years of the 20th century. His **Birlinn Cholla Chiotaich** (The Galley of Colla Ciotaich) set to Kenneth Thomson’s wonderful and rousing arrangement takes as its’ subject the great Islay hero Colla Ciotaich and picks up the story from the MacDonalds’ loss of Islay to the Campbells in 1612. Colla Ciotaich never gave up hope of Islay returning to MacDonald control and for 30 years he and his infamous galley did all they could to cause misery for the Campbell Lairds. This arrangement of **Birlinn Cholla Chiotaich** brilliantly evokes that sense of adventure and bravado that is at the heart of the Colla Ciotaich stories and a second song about Colla Ciotaich - **Colla Mo Rùn** (Colla my Love) - continues the story. **Colla Mo Rùn** is set to a haunting pibroch tune. Sileas Sinclair, conductor of the Oban Gaelic Choir, was commissioned by **Còisir Ghàidhlig Ìle** to write an arrangement which we took to the National Mòd in Paisley in 2013. Sileas’s stunning arrangement is faithful to its pibroch roots and the sound of the pipes is brilliantly evoked through both words and music. **Colla Mo Rùn** tells the story of Colla Ciotaich’s

piper who was captured by the Campbells and of how the piper used his playing as a code to warn his master of a Campbell plot to capture him. The piper’s warning worked and so Colla Ciotaich escaped capture but tradition has it that the Campbells realised what the piper had done and that he was tortured and had his fingers cut off. The solo at the start of Colla Mo Rùn is beautifully sung by Libby Morris, the choir’s Gaelic Reader.

**Fios Thun a’ Bhàird** (Message to the Bard) is a further song by William Livingstone arranged by Kenneth Thomson that found its way into the choir’s collective heart when we sang it for the National Mod in Stornoway in 2011. **Fios Thun a’ Bhàird** reflects Livingstone’s anger at the depopulation of the highlands and islands through clearance, potato blight and poverty. The descriptive images conjured by Livingstone’s words would be true of many parts of Scotland at the time the song was written in 1863 but the imagery Livingstone evokes and the place names he cites are all from Islay adding poignancy for the Islay choir. This is a powerful, dramatic song full of anger and despair at the sight of abandoned, derelict communities and empty crofts. It is now regarded as one of the greatest Gaelic songs about the clearances. Gaelic Scotland has created a wealth of beautiful love songs and two of these have made their way into our selection. **Craobh nan Ubhal** (The Apple Tree) is a traditional song about the affections of a young woman for MacKay of the Rhinns (of Islay). The MacKays are documented as being granted lands on the Oa of Islay through the Lordship of the Isles in the 13th century but not much is known about the Rhinns branch of the MacKays which might, or might not, have had a family connection to the MacKays of the Oa. We have no way of knowing who wrote the song but this arrangement is by Kenneth Thomson and it was sung by the ladies’ choir of **Còisir Ghàidhlig Ìle** at Paisley in 2013.

**A Chruinneag Ìleach** (The Islay Maiden), is another traditional song credited to Seumas Campbell and set to an arrangement by Kirsteen Grant, conductor of the Glasgow Islay Choir. Not much is known about Seumas Campbell but it seems that he originated from the Balinaby area in the west of Islay in the 18th century. His grandson is thought to be Thomas Pattison the Gaelic scholar and translator working in the late 19th century. This song comes from a classic tradition in Gaelic love songs lamenting the pains of separation, loneliness, homesickness and of being jilted for a better prospect. **Còisir Ghàidhlig Ìle**’s men’s choir sang **A Chruinneag Ìleach** at Paisley in 2013. Finally, we have included a set of puirt-a-beuls. These pieces are full of joy and celebration: music to dance to. They reflect the unstoppable spirit of the Gaels: indomitable, occasionally a wee bit anarchic but full of fun.

Not every song on this CD was written on Islay or is by an Islay Bard but in each case there is a link to the island: perhaps because the subject of the song is an Ìleach as is the case in **Craobh nan Ubhal** or, in the case of the puirt-a-beuls, because of that shared bond amongst Gaels – their love of music and dancing. Ultimately, this collection is merely a snapshot of Islay through song but we hope that it captures just a little of the pride we feel for our heritage and of what make our island the special place that it is. Whatever Islay and her people have endured, whatever twists and turns her history has taken, these have only added to our island’s rich story. We are proud of that history, of that heritage, of our language and we are proud to call Islay home. The title we have chosen for this CD – **Sruth air a’ Charraig** – is a metaphor for Islay; withstanding the flow of tide and current: enduring and steadfast. This CD, a glimpse into Islay’s story, is a heartfelt tribute sung with love and with pride.

## Fergus Muir

President Còisir Ghàidhlig Ìle