

Geordie McIntyre: A Singer Who Writes Songs

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Figure 1. Geordie McIntyre. Photo: Stuart Ogg.

The traditional singer Geordie McIntyre was born and raised in Govanhill, on the south side of Glasgow. He has had an unbroken involvement with traditional song since the folk song revival began in Scotland in the 1950s. An accomplished interpreter of traditional songs, he is also the composer of many songs written in the traditional idiom. His compositions have been sung and interpreted by singers in Scotland and further afield, and several have been recorded by other artists. Together with his wife and singing partner, Alison McMorland, Geordie has released a number of CDs, including ones containing songs discussed here.

Geordie has been connected with the School of Scottish Studies since those early days of the revival and he enjoyed a long and inspiring friendship with Hamish Henderson, for whom he wrote the poignant 'From Gulabeinn'.¹ After National Service, he worked as a radio and television technician where a chance encounter with Andrew Tannahill, a relative of the weaver poet, Robert Tannahill (1774-1810),² led to one of his early field-collecting experiences. He also recorded Arthur Lohead of Renfrewshire and International Brigadier Eddie Brown, for whom he wrote 'Another Valley'.³ He met and became friends with Dr Helen Fullerton (1928-2005) who had been recording members of the Williamson family of Travellers since the 1950s. Helen was a keen song collector who also wrote a number of

songs (including 'The Shira Dam' which Geordie can be heard singing on *White Wings*).⁴ She was also a poet, soil scientist, organic farmer, environmental activist and champion of the Scots Travelling community. Geordie went with her to record Duncan Williamson in the 1960s and afterwards made further recordings with Duncan. Of course, many collectors followed this lead and there are now almost 370 recordings of Duncan Williamson in the School of Scottish Studies Sound Archive.

According to Hamish Henderson, Geordie was the most active collector in the Glasgow area at that time.⁵ He was an early member of the Glasgow Folk Song Club and those were heady times for anyone interested in folksong. As well as singer-collectors such as Henderson, Ewan MacColl, Bert Lloyd and Arthur Argo,⁶ there were the singers: Jeannie Robertson, Davy Stewart, Jane Turriff, Jimmy MacBeath and Joe Heaney, to name only a few. By the mid-sixties, Geordie had set up the Folksong and Ballad Club along with Carl McDougall, Ron Clark and Ian Phillip. This club met in the Grand Hotel at Charing Cross, Glasgow and, as well as hosting many Scots, English, Irish and even Italian singers, it enjoyed the contribution of a number of Gaelic singers⁷ such as Flora MacNeill of Barra, Joan MacKenzie of Lewis, Willie Matheson of North Uist and singer and piper, Norman Maclean.⁸

I first interviewed Geordie in 2004-05 for my undergraduate dissertation 'Creativity Within the Folk Idiom'.⁹ He is an articulate and thoughtful man with a reflective and considered approach to his own creative practice. As he is both a singer and a song-writer it was possible to include material in the dissertation which related to both the creation, through his own compositions, and the re-creation, through traditional material, of songs within the tradition. At that time, Geordie was compiling a songbook of his own compositions and this publication, *Inveroran*, offers a clear picture of the motivations which Geordie responds to when composing.

Geordie always describes himself as a 'singer who writes songs' and he is reluctant to overstate the role of his song-writing. However, his compositions are beautifully crafted and reflect two clear themes, landscape and people, which Geordie pursues in both his song-writing and in the wider selection of material which forms his own repertoire. He and I share a love of the Scottish landscape, and especially the hills, and together we have explored how Geordie's sense of place was developed and then expressed in his song-writing.

By way of celebrating Geordie's song-writing talent and exploring how his song-writing articulates his sense of place and his sense of belonging, this short article will consider one song, 'Inveroran', in detail and will introduce a further three for consideration.

These songs are situated in the landscape around Glen Noe and Taynuilt, an area traditionally identified as the ancestral lands of the clan McIntyre. Three of the songs are Geordie's own compositions and the fourth is a Duncan Ban MacIntyre song in free translation which Geordie set to music. The Argyll highland landscape has long held a fascination for Geordie, yet he has often told me that in his childhood he was unaware of the McIntyre family history and as a young man he never felt any affiliation to the notion of *belonging* to a clan.

Like that of many revival singers of his generation, Geordie's early life was entirely urban. Growing up in Govanhill, the nearest green space was a small swing park, The Swingie, and then further on was the Queen's Park. From the high point in this park Geordie told me that it was possible to survey the landscape beyond the city for only two weeks each year: this was during the Glasgow Fair Fortnight when the factories were closed and the smog dispersed. Nevertheless, he enjoyed some early experiences of the natural world and recalls with wonder coming face to face with a cornerake early one morning while in a cornfield which edged onto an industrial wasteland at Polmadie (Molls Myre). Geordie's first trip into the highlands, aged eight or nine, came about when he was taken on a bus trip to Arrochar by his grandfather. He remembers seeing The Cobbler (Ben Arthur) and being impressed by this imposing mountain rising from the shore near the head of Loch Long. It was to be a few years yet, however, before Geordie was able to really explore the hills. When he was thirteen, he got his first bike and immediately he could ride out to the countryside and begin his life in the hills. Of course, like many working lads of the time, Geordie's weekends began not at 5pm on Friday evening, but at lunchtime on Saturday. Then there would be a hell-for-leather dash out of Glasgow to get as far into the hills as possible. One early cycle excursion took Geordie to Dalmally where he stayed at the Youth Hostel. Although only a youth at the time, he recalls this experience with clarity:

I remember one visit. It's stamped in my hostel card [which I still have]... There's no longer an SYHA hostel at Dalmally but I think the SYHA rented this [place] from the Forestry Commission. I remember staying there ... in the spring-time. I cycled up through Crianlarich, cycling through Balloch, Alexandria ... up by Loch Lomond, Glen Falloch, Tyndrum then along west and down, down to Dalmally ... Two memories of that visit may be significant. One was, in the morning, it was bright and sunny but very cold. The water in the hostel was frozen so you went to a stream and broke through the ice to freshen yourself up. I always remember that ... and I [also] remember going to the Dalmally memorial to ... 'Fair Duncan of the Songs.' And I wasn't thinking, I'm

going to be singing songs and writing songs about Duncan Ban MacIntyre [much later in life]. It was that landscape first, and the creativity later.

Highland Argyll had no special significance for me at that time. It was the joy of being outside, cycling, exercising, fresh air.¹⁰

Geordie stresses here that at this time he was only interested in the landscape: he wasn't thinking about writing songs and indeed he had no knowledge of folk song. In his home, which he shared with his mother and maternal grandparents, most of the music came from his grandfather, Dugald, a lay preacher who sang 'at the drop of a hat',¹¹ but he sang only religious songs, including many American evangelical songs such as 'The Old Rugged Cross' (a late nineteenth-century composition by Moody and Sankey). Through the cinema (his mother was an usherette with an 'encyclopaedic knowledge' of film) he was exposed to a wide range of American music and then, when he was eleven or twelve, electricity was installed in the home, and a radiogram bought and again this widened his musical experience. Soon after, he began ballroom and jazz dancing lessons and his attendance at dances then brought him into contact with skiffle and jazz.

The introduction to folk song came some time later:

It's really through hill-walking that I heard songs that I was immediately drawn to ... I remember ... being in Callander, and we met up with a lad called Archie ... we were blethering away and he said 'Do you fancy going up Ben Ledi?' ... We got to the top and he sang 'The Barnyards O Dalgety' ... And I was immediately drawn, and I thought 'What is this? This is fantastic. Where did this come from?' And so that, I think, if there was a single song ... that would be the opening song for me. Hearing that song and singing ... this was a kind of watershed moment for me.¹²

He was immediately hooked. And so the two great loves in Geordie's life came together: the songs and the landscape. Every possible moment he was out in the hills, and staying at youth hostels or camp sites. There he heard music and met people who were influential in introducing him to the budding folk scene in Glasgow and to wider landscape issues, such as the effects of pollution and environmentalism. Soon Geordie was writing songs, and an early example is 'The Weekend Song', which was written in response to ideas he had discussed with Helen Fullerton. This song gives a clear sense of Geordie's concerns at this time.

Once we used to walk, my love,
Down by a rushing stream,
Where fish did swim and trees grew high
And grass it glittered green.

We'd leave the factory far behind:
The smoke, the noise, the fume;
And drum up where a curlew cried
And where the heather bloomed.

Now these trees have disappeared,
The trout no longer glide,
The grass is grey and broken,
No wild bird-song is heard.

Where else can we run to?
The answer none can tell
If acid rain drips slowly down
And poison winds blow snell.

When will the weary Winter pass?
What will the future bring?
Will our children see a cornflower grow
Or hear a robin sing?¹³

Later, Geordie was to write the song 'Inveroran' about a landscape which had been immortalised by Duncan Ban MacIntyre. For Geordie, this is 'an area, in Highland Argyll, of great beauty and personal association having camped and climbed there over many years, as well as participating in memorable ceilidhs in the historic Inveroran Inn.'¹⁴

Inveroran

Words & tune © Geordie McIntyre, ISA Music 1987.

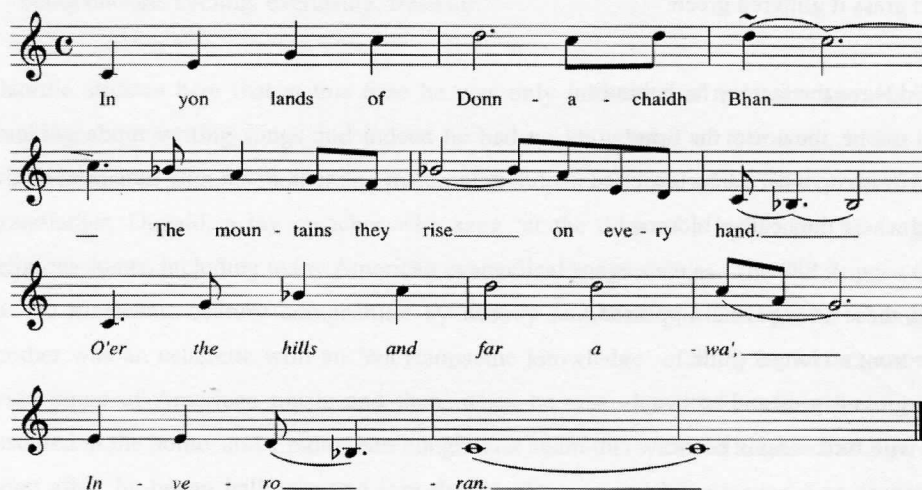


Figure 2. Inveroran

This is a deceptively simple song, only twelve lines long (plus repeating refrain) but it is packed with personal association for Geordie. The tune is Geordie's own, which he describes as having a pibroch type feel to it, and the words of the refrain have a traditional base.¹⁵ What follows is a summary of my conversations with Geordie regarding the creative construction of 'Inveroran':

In the land of Donnachaidh Bhan
Mountains rise on every hand.
O'er the hills and far awa', Inveroran

Well, of course, he [Duncan Ban] didn't own those lands, but he worked there, he was born in Glen Orchy, and he was a poet of the area, and I think of it as a poet's lands¹⁶ [and] this raises the question, who can own the land? This idea still resonates.¹⁷ Then there's the idea of the 'mountains that rise on every hand' as indeed they do, Beinn Achaladair, Stob Ghobhar ... they're all there.¹⁸

A buzzard keening as it soars

Across the silences of Glen Fuar.

O'er the hills and far awa', Inveroran

I liked this idea of the keening in Celtic culture ... of course, it's pretty well died out now ... but in Celtic history you have these keening women. And if you listen to a buzzard it has got a keening sound. So that's a suggestion there of a buzzard keening as it soars. What's it keening for? The past, as well as the present.

Even [the name], it's a wonderful name for a glen, the cold glen, and if you've camped there, with the prevailing wind from the west it is actually a cold place to camp. But 'the silences' refers to the fact that [in the past] so much of the highland landscape has been relatively populated compared to today, so that's embodied in that verse. Paradoxically, if you like, people going from the cities, whose ancestors may have been cleared from the highland areas, are going there for the silences. They're wanting to get away from the pollution and the noise, of the traffic and so on.

It's out of time, out of place. For me, this is where the imagination kicks in ... it's where the past, present and future almost fuse into one.¹⁹

Shroud of mist on Tulla shore

Crystal shining on Stob Ghobhar.

O'er the hills and far awa', Inveroran

Inveroran sits close to the shores of Loch Tulla. And Loch Tulla's ... main mountain is Stob Ghobhar, the peak of the goats. And if you look up, there are bits of quartzite, and if you're looking up and the light's changing ... of course the light's changing all the time, in a country with four seasons in one day ... [and then] the idea of that shroud of mist, and that shroud can have a double meaning as well, a metaphor for darker things ... A glint of sun coming through and illuminating, just an image.²⁰

The image of crystal is important for me, as a symbol of purity, and solidity.

Suddenly [there will be] this exposure of shape ... [when the shroud lifts]. I'm talking about it now, and it's still quite extraordinary to me.²¹

Winding tracks that cross the streams

Disappear like drovers' dreams.

O'er the hills and far awa', Inveroran

... then there's the line, 'Where winding tracks ...' you know when you sometimes get sheep tracks that you think are people tracks but they're actually sheep, and they just disappear ... a hill walker can connect with that.²²

Of course, Inveroran was a drover's inn in the eighteenth century, so there's a whole history ... embedded there. I've read Haldane's *Drove Roads of Scotland* [and looked] at the economics of droving, the tryst at Crieff, etc. [and the song] reflect[s] this knowledge.²³

I've often thought of these drovers travelling eight to ten miles each day ... maybe feeding on stapag ... it was pretty rough ... they were hardy characters, and so were their animals.²⁴

Ghosts of pine where rivers meet

Guard the secrets bitter sweet.

O'er the hills and far awa', Inveroran

This is based on perception, but also on [the] physical experience of walking through Glen Finglas towards Loch Etive. ... Before you get to Loch Dochard, there's a stand of pine over to the left which I've camped beside, drummed up at, get the kettle on, get the fire going. And the pines, some of them are dead and they stand like sentinels ... It's like the idea of – guard the secrets, this is a landscape that's been bloodied in the past – like so many²⁵

The guid McGregor raises glass

A slàinte tae the timeless times.

O'er the hills and far awa', Inveroran

[This last verse] is highly personal ... In the Inveroran Inn was an elderly [retired] gamekeeper ... He would be in the Inveroran Inn every weekend. He'd come in in his deerstalker tweeds and his deerstalker hat. A really friendly man and his name was [Duncan] McGregor. He'd always come in and ... we'd be singing and he'd always buy you a dram.²⁶

... He would raise his glass, very ceremonially. He was a memorable character.

Good health to timeless times. Even looking back now, they [these times] happened ... but they take on a dream-like quality. They can't be relived.²⁷

This song was one Geordie felt was connected very strongly with his late wife, Catherine, as they'd walked and camped together in this area many times. These, Geordie told me, were places he and Catherine were simply 'immensely pleased to be'.²⁸

... And of course [these songs are] very intimately connected with the landscape but it's also people and landscape. ... The landscape itself forms a kind of background and a kind of presence. It's there, you know, and ... Inveroran [is a place] where I have very strong personal associations, very strong ties with the McIntyres of Glen Noe, very strong ties with my life-long interest in walking in hills, very, very strong ties with my late wife. We walked in those hills and camped in all seasons, great ceilidhs in the Inveroran Inn, and then ... when I actually wrote the song, it's not a narrative so much as a series of images. And that came about – if my memory serves me – ... quite easily ... compared to some. I didn't have to do a tremendous amount of research on it because so much of it is drawn from personal experience.²⁹

I can sing 'Inveroran' at the drop of a hat ...³⁰ It's just a series of images ... although I have a narrative in my head. I can see this almost as a continuum, although it reads, or sings, as a series of images.³¹

... To me, the other thing about 'Inveroran' ... it's intensely personal ... and I never, I never, fail to enjoy singing it. But it's a song that should be accessible to other people ... I'm not interested in obscurantisms ... A song, it goes out, doesn't it, it just goes out there.³² I didn't want it to be a retrospective thing. I wanted it to be able to resonate with people. When you write songs, and then sing them you want them to take on a life of their own once they've been sung.³³

Many of Geordie's songs celebrate or acknowledge people *and* places which have been important in shaping his own sense of place. In particular, along with 'Inveroran', 'Where Ravens Reel'³⁴ and 'Glen Noe Gathering'³⁵ demonstrate his deep understanding and love of this particular part of the highlands.

Where Ravens Reel

Now and then I have this dream

A wall of mist before my eyes

Dissolving slowly into light

I am on a mountain high.

Across the margins of my mind

Another world – another time

Where ravens reel around the sun

And grasses dance in singing wind.

Crammassie and myrtle green

Vivid colour fills my scene

Waters bubbling from their source

Gathering for a seaward course.

Silhouettes of distant bens

Rocks that ever will remain

Deer graze peaceful safe at home

On lands where once my kindred roamed.

Pleasures pure are very few

They fade away like morning dew

I cherish in my waking hour

Those fleeting moments on Stob Ghobhar.

Now and then I have a dream

A wall of mist before my eyes

Dissolving slowly into light

I am on a mountain high.

As well as taking me through the song, line by line, as with 'Inveroran', Geordie also told me:

Catherine and I had crossed over and come over the corrie below Stob Ghobhar and had come up another of the ridges leading up to the summit. This was a piece of ground I'd never been on before. So we were coming up this broad ridge, leading to a narrower summit. I had this incredible sense that I had definitely been here before. An overwhelming sense of *I have been here before*. And when we got up to the summit ravens were cart-wheeling and somersaulting at the summit. And then two came down right beside us at the cairn, which is absolutely unheard of ... There was just this lovely image of them displaying, cart-wheeling. And then we saw eagles that day, we saw mountain hares, we saw ptarmigan in summer plumage. It was one of those days when nature seemed to be burgeoning all around. And the point was when I started to think about it, think about why I would have these feelings. And then when I discovered how close it was to Glen Strae and Glen Noe ... and [I realized] my ancestors would have walked on ... this very ground ... undoubtedly. It's just a probability ... but then I had to write a song about it, based entirely on this dream, this recurrent dream.³⁶

Again here we have a sense of Geordie's deep connection to the landscape and to the people with whom he has shared these landscape experiences. Also evident is his sense of connection to the McIntyre clan lands. This is a theme more fully explored in 'Glen Noe Gathering', a song written in 2008 in response to an invitation Geordie and Alison received to participate in a McIntyre World Gathering in Glen Noe in July of that year.

Glen Noe Gathering

A midsummer wind blows in from the ocean
Cloud-shadows dance on Cruachan
Sun glitters bright on Loch Etive
To this place we have convened.

Twas in this glen the White Cow rested
That's the way the legend tells it
They drove their cattle spirit guided
Up and over the Lairig Noe.

For centuries here the people were settled

Till 'snow ball rent' no longer mattered
Customs were changing old ways were fading
So the clan was forced to leave.

Far and wide the folk were scattered
To distant lands across the waters
By twists of fate and wheels of fortune
They did survive – Per Ardua.

Tales of the poet, the piper, the hero
Kindle our imaginations
As here we stand in contemplation
In this our own ancestral home.

So let us join in celebration
As we gather bonded together
To mystic ties that will not sever
Glory Va to the Mac an t-saors!
(repeat last line of each verse)

This song brings the imagery of 'Inveroran' and 'Where Ravens Reel' together with a more explicit engagement with the people who have inhabited this land over the centuries, and into the present. There is a descriptive section on the McIntyre origin legend³⁷ and a reference to Duncan Ban MacIntyre. This landscape is at once full of people and empty. There is also a wonderful sense of time being stationary and fleeting at the same time, and of the landscape firing the imagination: again here we have the 'timeless times' of 'Inveroran', and the 'fleeting moments' of 'Where Ravens Reel'.

The final song we will consider is Duncan Ban MacIntyre's 'Last Farewell to the Bens',³⁸ which Geordie set to music after reading George Buchanan's free translation in Hamish Brown's *Poems of the Scottish Hills*.³⁹ The original Gaelic text was written by Duncan Ban when he was in his seventy-eighth year. The translation by George Buchanan (1841-1901) is described by Geordie as 'very free, but faithful in essence'.

Last Farewell to the Bens

Yestreen I stood on Ben Doran

And paced her dark grey path

Was there a hill I did not know

A glen or a grassy strath?

Gladly in the days of old

I trod that glorious ground

Where the white dawn melted in the sun

And the red deer cried around.

Wildly as the bright day gleamed

I climbed the mountain's breast

And when I to my home returned

The sun it was in the west.

Tw'as health and strength was life and joy

To wander freely there

To drink at the fresh mountain stream

To breathe the mountain air.

Yestreen I wandered in the glen

What thoughts were in my head

Where were the friends of yesterdays

Where have those dear ones fled.

I looked and looked where'er I looked

There was nought but flocks o' sheep

A woeful change was in the hill;

World thy deceit is deep.

Farewell ye mighty solitudes

Where once I loved to dwell

Scenes of my springtimes and its joys

Forever fare ye well ...

As Geordie told me, he was immediately drawn to the text:

First of all, it has references to Ben Doran and I've been up Ben Doran more than once and I could connect to that landscape. And from Ben Doran, that ridge, you go on to Ben an Dothaidh, and Ben Achaladair. You're looking west and straight into Loch Tulla, you're looking north to Glencoe, ... west to the black mount peaks ... [it's] fantastic, and it has this reflective thing about it, and it's a wonderful, very free translation ...

There was no tune to it and I [knew] this Irish tune 'Sean O'Dwyer of the Glen' and it just seemed to suit it. I tried three to four other tunes before finally settling on this one. It's just gorgeous.

[Duncan] is asking this question: 'Was there a hill I did not know? ...' He knew it so intimately. And he talks about changes, he talks about climbing down the crest. And of course he's leaving clarty, manky, old Edinburgh. So he's breathing the mountain air. He's appreciating the purity of the mountain air, ... the clarity of the stream, that he can drink without fear of disease. And then he describes the changes that have taken place, ... where there's less deer and more sheep ... it's all in there. It's a magnificent thing that links his love of landscape, with comment on change ... it's all in there. It's just a great song, so I couldn't resist singing it, or liberating it from the pages of a book, as a song.⁴⁰

Through the text of 'Last Farewell to the Bens' Geordie has found a kindred spirit. Along with Duncan Ban MacIntyre he shares this deep love of the land even while living in an urban sprawl. There is the sense of filling up one's soul with the majesty and strength of the mountain landscape. And then there is also the concern and contemplation of the changing use of the countryside.

For me, it seems that in these songs, Geordie is able to sing about the places, people and concerns that define him as a singer, and as a man. I asked him in April 2011, if in these songs he had 'written and then sung into being, his sense of belonging?'

Oh I think so ... The degree of consciousness I'm not absolutely sure about, but what I am pretty sure comes into my sense ... when I'm singing something like 'Inveroran' or 'Glen Noe Gathering' ... it's claiming something as well. ... I get great satisfaction from singing [them].

That wasn't the motive for writing the song, to give me a sense of belonging, but when it's written it does provide further emotional ammunition ... to allow you to feel comfortable with yourself. These [songs] are of core importance, they really are.⁴¹

Glossary

clarty – muddy, disgusting

crammassie – crimson

drum up – make tea, especially by the roadside

manky – dirty, unclean

snell – bitter

stapag – a mixture of meal and cream, milk or cold water (Dwelly)

Notes

1. *Where Ravens Reel* (2010), track 1.
2. Andrew's great-great grandfather, also Andrew (1784-1811) was Robert Tannahill's youngest brother.
3. For the text for 'Another Valley' see McIntyre, 2005, 8-9.
4. *White Wings* (2007), track 9.
5. Henderson, 1987, 27.
6. It should be noted that Arthur Argo was a source singer as well as a singer-collector
7. SA2011.016 is a recording made by Geordie McIntyre at a Celtic night at the Folk Song and Ballad Club held at the Grand Hotel, Charing Cross, Glasgow in January 1967. Featured performers include Flora McNeill, Willie Matheson, Joan McKenzie, Norman McLean and Pat McNulty.
8. See further, Munro, 1996, 36. Ailie Munro thanked Geordie (p. viii) for 'his brainchild', the new title of this book (which had previously been called simply *The Folk Music Revival in Scotland*).
9. MH2005.04, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh. Quotations from Geordie marked SA2005 indicate material recorded as part of this dissertation. Those marked SA2011 indicate material recorded later.
10. School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh, SA2011.013.
11. SA2005.057.
12. SA2005.057
13. McIntyre, 2005, 33.
14. McIntyre, 2005, 7.
15. *Rowan in the Rock* (2001), track 4.

16. SA2011.05.
17. SA2011.04.
18. SA2005.058.
19. SA2011.04.
20. SA2011.04.
21. SA2005.058.
22. SA2005.058.
23. SA2005.04.
24. SA2005.058.
25. SA2005.058.
26. SA2011.013.
27. SA2011.014.
28. SA2005.058.
29. SA2011.015.
30. SA2011.015.
31. SA2005.058.
32. SA2011.015.
33. SA2011.015.
34. *Where Ravens Reel* (2010), track 14.
35. Hitherto unpublished text, provided by Geordie McIntyre for this article.
36. SA2011.015.
37. For more detail on the McIntyre legend see Gordon, 1963, 225-26.
38. For the original Gaelic text and melody of 'Cead deireannach nam beann'/'Last Farewell to the Mountains', and the literal translation, see Gillies, 2005, 241-43, along with a great deal of interesting information about the poet, and about his life in Edinburgh as a member of the Town Guard.
39. Brown, 1982, 63-64. See *White Wings* (2007), track 11.
40. SA2011.015
41. SA2011.015

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