



#### Episode 4: Luaidh!

Deirdre Graham [host]: Hallo agus fàilte air ais gu Gaelic Song Stories, am pod-chraoladh far am bi mise, Deirdre Ghreumach, a' toirt suil air na sgeulachdan air cùlaibh nan òran.

Hello and welcome back to Gaelic Song Stories with me, Deirdre Graham.

This week's conversation focuses on the empowerment of women and their voice through a couple of waulking songs. The songs we are looking at today may have been composed hundreds of years ago but their message - and subliminal messages - still resonate with us today.

It is a conversation that is challenging at times - with references to sexual assault as well as dealing with shame and deception - but ultimately champions the strong women that overcame these experiences.

Joining me today is my lovely friend and fellow Gaelic singer, Rachel Newton. Rachel is a solo artist and founder member of The Shee, The Furrow Collective and The Lost Words: Spell Songs. She has worked across various platforms including theatre and storytelling, previously winning a Critics Award for Theatre in Scotland (CATS). Rachel's albums *To The Awe* and *Here's My Heart Come Take It* were shortlisted for a Scottish Album of the Year (Say) Award and she has been named Musician of the Year in both the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards and the Scots Trad Music Awards. A founder of The Bit Collective, Rachel has organised various campaigns and events, including the Trad. Reclaimed: Women in Folk festival at Kings Place, London in 2019.

Rachel's work with the Bit Collective has long-impressed me and she has worked tirelessly to address equalities issues in the Scottish Traditional Arts. In their mission statement, The Bit Collective aims to be a "diverse and inclusive community of practice with the shared objective of instigating positive change... by facilitating discussion and learning, providing support, and inspiring progressive action."

These actions are new yet their reasons are not and today, we choose a waulking song each that presents to us an injustice towards women. We explore the possibility of a feminist code embedded in the songs and the practice of these songs, based on our own female intuition and experiences. We go on to discuss what these songs mean to us in a modern context and finally, we try to find a positive resolution.

I hope that it's an inspiring listen - it is only a starting point to a much wider conversation and I would love to hear your thoughts on these songs and these issues. So please do join me for this journey and let's celebrate our bold and brave women for their confidence in divulging their experiences and in supporting each other unconditionally.

Deirdre Graham: Rachel thank you so much for being with me this afternoon and for agreeing to chat with me and having this conversation, it's super lovely to have you here.

Rachel Newton: Aw, thanks for having me Deirdre, it's great to be here!

DG: So this afternoon I'd like to start having a discussion about a couple of waulking songs.

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<https://www.deirdregraham.com/galeticsongstories>

RN: Sure!

DG: And, which are songs that are... hugely important in the Gaelic song repertoire, and they are very insightful into women's voice in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd and so today we've chosen a song each and we're going to get our teeth into them and having a look at the messages that are conveyed in those songs but then also it would be great for us to go on a bit of a journey where we... where we come to some sort of resolve or enlightenment in the songs. So I think this is definitely - you're a fantastic person to speak to on this subject matter with all your... all your own work with the Bit Collective and your latest album To the Awe.

RN: Ah well, thank you! Yeah I think we spoke a little bit before this before we started this podcast about waulking songs, and I think the more we talked about it the more we realised what a kind of perfect song form it is to really get our teeth stuck into that, you know those women's kind of real topics that are really come from women and are really important. So yeah, really looking forward to getting stuck into that. [laughter]

DG: Amazing! Ehm, right so for anybody who is listening and isn't sure what a waulking song is, let's just give a brief overview to this song type and then we can get stuck in with our choices. So a waulking song is particular to the Scottish Gàidhealtachd and to our song repertoire where it's... traditionally sung by women - exclusively by women. And the songs came about in conjunction with work where the women of a community would come together and after a piece of cloth had been woven, the waulking was the process of tightening that cloth and fulling that cloth so that there weren't any holes in the material and it was a very laborious task that would take many hours, and as a result the women of the village would sing songs to accompany this rhythmic work where they would bash the cloth off the table. Ehm... that in itself creates a strong beat to work to.

I actually read something where it says that it was apparently bad luck for a waulking song to be sung twice in a waulking.

RN: Yeah I think I read that too, it was bad luck for the person that would be then wearing the piece of clothing or the piece of material.

DG: Amazing.

RN: [laughter] So they kind of had to be mindful of that! Which is brilliant.

DG: That's an amazing image. [laughter]

RN: That's a lot of words isn't it to remember? Not to... To not cover any ground twice! [laughter]

DG: [laughter] Definitely!

RN: I love that.

DG: But there was a lot of ground to cover!

RN: Well, indeed. Indeed.

DG: Absolutely.

RN: Yeah!



DG: So... I think that's probably where my understanding of waulking songs would have been as a child. And my access into them: the women coming together, the thickening of the cloth, the laborious work, the rhythmic songs that accompanied them and...

But, now kind of having a little look at the songs, there's a lot more kind of... gutsiness that goes with them and the lyrics of the words; what we want to look into today, is actually kind of a secret code almost that goes with those songs.

RN: Yeah, I think what's really interesting... I think firstly, like you were saying, that kind of, from childhood we've been aware of that process, the actual process of the waulking song and the work that was done. You know. It was always, that story of that was always kind of ingrained into us from when we were singing them. And something about that is so important in itself I think, just that... there's not many songs that I know, sort of folk songs from whatever different cultures or whatever, that you can really imagine exactly the work that was being done.

DG: Yeah!

RN: Of course there are different ones but I suppose there are different, or other ones. But that's our one. From our culture. And it really gives it this other... sort of like more tangible connection-

DG: Yeah.

RN: -that you have because you can really imagine these real people, singing these songs.

DG: Absolutely.

RN: And something that really I suppose struck me the older that I got, and having that in my mind helped. But the older that I got the more I think I realised that actually these songs, these people were real people.

DG: [laughter] Yes!

RN: That were singing these songs and writing these and making up these verses within the songs and things like that. They were actually real people just like us.

DG: Exactly. With real life experiences.

RN: Yeah! And somehow, even though that's such an obvious thing, it really just sort of starts to hit home the older you get yourself and the more you understand that these things that are described in the songs that people go through are universal and things that happen to people that we know now and, you know, there are so many modern parallels within what goes on in the songs.

DG: Yeah. Absolutely. I think... you say that it's really obvious, but I think it does take that moment for it to really... strike you! And you go oh! Wow! Because that's certainly something, when I was younger - I always loved these songs because they've got a great melody and a really good hook with the choruses and they are just, I find some of the songs quite engaging as a... fantasy story kind of thing.

RN: Mhm.

DG: But then when you do have that lightbulb moment to realise: this is a person's life experience and this life experience, their voice has been carried through the oral tradition for hundreds of years. There's something really



pertinent about that and there's something that really strikes you. And, I feel, connects you deeper to the song and to the culture of the Highlands.

RN: Definitely, yeah. And there's so many layers that you can connect to a song on, isn't there? Like you say the great chorus, the melody, all these things, but that kind of deeper connection where you start to really relate to what's actually going on... deeper into the song. It really gives you that sort of stronger connection to it.

And as you mentioned about the coding something that we've been, I think we've been thinking about - both of us, isn't it-

DG: Yeah!

RN: -have been thinking about, and reading about but yeah. That idea of - oh you can listen to words on one level...

DG: Mhm.

RN: And then when you start to think about what's going on, what does that mean, what are they actually saying within that, then things get really interesting!

DG: Yeah! Absolutely. So ehm, coding... is a. Is something that is a new concept to me, but again it's like 'Ah yeah, of course, this makes sense!' Coding might be described as a feminist strategy to support... I'm actually gonna look up the wee quote just now, is that okay?

RN: Yeah!

DG: So coding is something that we find in literature that Joan Radner and Susan Lancer ehm have defined as: "The expression or transmission of messages potentially accessible to a bi-cultural community under the very eyes of a dominant community for whom the same messages are inaccessible or inadmissible." So I think this is a really interesting concept that we find this in waulking songs as well where the lyrics that are being sung have an undercurrent in them - or potentially have an undercurrent, because sometimes with coding with it's implicit coding we can't say for absolute certain this is happening. They are quite - well they're coded! (see Radner and Lancer, 1993)

DG: They're disguised within the song that there's a deeper meaning to them and that idea where you have a dominant culture and people who are being dominated, where the women in this particular instance are being dominated and the dominant culture being... men? But also community pressure, perhaps.

RN: Yeah, yeah.

DG: Kind of... dictating what can be said openly. And the reason for coding is I suppose because you do or did speak openly at those times, you could encounter risk. And whether that's being shamed or whether that's you know, whatever level that risk is, to speak openly about something that's being experienced at that time was dangerous in some circumstances. So coding doesn't only exist in waulking songs, it's global! But it's something that dominated groups have created and needed to survive and to communicate messages.

RN: Yeah and I suppose an interesting thing about waulking songs is that the very nature of the song itself, ehm. We were reading, we were both reading the essay by uh Margaret Harrison and she touches on that I think. Just saying that the actual, the kind of... action of doing the waulking, and you know the rhythm and everything that goes along with it, that kind of distracts from these kind of... Really um sometimes very kind of serious messages that are



coming. And obviously there's a lot of lightheartedness as well mixed in but sometimes you have, you know you get these really serious incidents that have happened to people and they are sharing that but within this context of quite a lighthearted environment almost. (see Harrison, 2012)

DG: Yeah!

RN: Which is interesting.

DG: So that kind of touches on two strategies of coding - your distraction and your trivialisation I think? Where your distraction would be actual beating of the cloth on the table, it's loud, the actual physical sound that's created - can sound be physical? [laughter]

RN: [laughter]

DG: The actual sound that's created from this can be used as a distraction technique from the lyrics that are being openly voiced, And the other thing, you were saying the lightheartedness. That can be.. They sound sort of cheery and the women coming together and singing all together in the choruses, that kind of happiness, kind of... again I suppose it's distraction! But the happiness can almost kind of trivialise - 'Oh, it's just gossip,' you know these songs: 'Oh it's just a fun song.' And that, and to trivialise it, and the sound of the bashing and the interruption of the choruses coming in in between your lines can totally take the attention away from the subject matter. And which, in many cases of waulking songs, though not at all exclusively, but many cases, waulking songs are unhappy.

RN: Mm. They have that element to them.

DG: Yeah. So there's a crazy statistic that Margaret Harrison touches on and she's talking about a collection of songs by K.C. Craig on Màiri Nighean Alasdair's waulking songs, not at all the full repertoire of waulking songs in Scottish Gaelic but a really good indication of their kind of subject matter. It says the number of light or happy songs among the men's songs is almost double of what the women's songs repertoire was...

So: "The eleven lighthearted songs in the male voice make up a full forty-eight percent of men's songs as opposed to five light hearted songs in the female voice which make up five percent of women's songs." (Harrison, 2012) So that imbalance there, where you've got mens' songs that are kind of half and half, lighthearted and heavy, but then with female songs are ninety five percent heavy and five percent lighthearted is a really clear indication of the kind of stuff that women were talking about. And they were transmitting to each other through oral literature or songs.

RN: Yeah. Just touching on that, on the men's songs, it would be women singing those wouldn't it?

DG: Yeah!

RN: Because it's waulking... It's a waulking song!

DG: Yeah that's something that confused me actually.

RN: Yeah I read - I don't know whether it was in the same article or not but something that was quite funny about, it was quoting from a one of those male voice waulking songs, and it was all basically about this guy and how great he was. [laughter]

DG: [laughter]



RN: And it was sort of suggesting that there was an element of tongue in cheek to the women singing that.

DG: Yeah yeah yeah. [laughter]

RN: Which just as a little aside I thought was quite funny.

DG: I think those women you know they were sassy bold women and they knew just how to play words and really give kind of authority to their own voice but also kind of ehm just... hold no punches, take no prisoners?

RN: Yeah, yeah.

DG: They were empowered I think, within that setting.

RN: Yeah and I think that, you know and just thinking about their treatment of the songs, how that came about. There's so much... there's so much importance on context isn't there with that? And I think that's what makes it interesting for those of us who perform, who want to perform these songs now. It's like... you know, it's a very different context isn't it, that you're bringing these songs into? And of course that they've been brought into for years. You know. It's a... The whole context is different and how do we... how do we kind of... approach that as people sing now?

--interval--

DG: The leap or the advances we've made as a society from the 1950s until now is phenomenal, you know, for female empowerment. But then these songs are kind of going from hundreds of years ago, so are... What I'm trying to say, our context now is so much, as developed so much since in the last 80 years in such a short period of time, whereas the context for those songs really was quite a rooted society where this dominated group it didn't have that voice that we have now.

Does that make any sense?

RN: The voice in what sense? What is the voice in that context? What do you mean by the voice?

DG: I think the confidence to speak out.

RN: Mhm.

DG: And to, without coding, to actually say directly things that have happened and the confidence to say to somebody or to a society something that's not acceptable or to stand up to a person.

RN: Mhm. Yeah. So that sort of... environment in which it was sort of safe to talk about things, was maybe round the table and women felt like they could say these things.

DG: Yeah I think so. Although one thing that's interesting is sometimes the songs might not say this happened to me...

RN: No.

DG: ...but this happened to another person. And whether it did happen to that other person or whether they've used a distraction technique to actually still offer some form of protection to their voice, to what they were saying.



RN: Yeah, and that's maybe something that you could relate to now, and you know, things like the Me Too movement where it is - I know you say things have progressed and of course they have on one level but on another level, you know there's a lot that has some things have kind of got worse and some things have got better.

DG: Yeah!

RN: And I wonder if that idea, one woman speaking out leading to other women being able to speak out, you know, that's still, that's a very modern thing still. That's something that's still...

DG: Actually do you know now that I'm thinking on it, I'm thinking of when people speak out on social media and they might share their story. And you might share it on your stories rather than add your own voice to it, but in sharing you're... you can to some extent align yourself with that. Without putting your own actual experience on to that.

RN: Yeah.

DG: And possibly the waulking songs were doing the same thing.

RN: So that's a sort of... Amplifying, you're amplifying someone's story. Ehm, like you say that's maybe something that women were doing then. Round the table, amplifying someone else's story.

DG: Yeah.

--interval--

DG: Shall we get stuck into our songs then?

RN: Yeah, let's do it!

DG: Amazing. So! Ehm.. A song that I sing, and I love, I think I first actually really enjoyed the song because I was hooked in by the melody. It's got a really interesting melody. So again coming at it from that, from a different aspect to the actual deeper meaning of the song. Moch an-Diugh a Rinn Mi Èirigh. And it's a waulking song connected to Barra. Attributed to Barra. And it's... a song that I think it starts quite typical of many Gaelic waulking songs. The woman is going up the hill to tend to the cattle, and... when she's there she's speaking to somebody and asking the news of Dòmhnall Donn or Brown Haired Donald. And... then the song kind of takes a turn where she hears that he's betrothed to another. And then her outpouring of grief is really heavy. So she... she first of all, she goes on to say: 'If I heard that the news is true, I would draw blood and cut my veins.'

And like, I find this so surprising to have a really gritty really, um, deep lyric like that. Quite exposing isn't it? It's just so heavy.

RN: Mm. Yeah.

And then the song goes on. The song is kind of in two segments, it's two.. hem versions of a song put together. And then she says '*Ciod thuige rachainn-sa Cholla, dh'fhaicinn fear*' ... I've forgotten the words. [laughter]

RN: [laughter]



DG: Okay. '*Ciod thuige rachainn-sa Cholla, shealltainn air fear donn gun onair, rinn mo leapa 'm bun an doruis, thug bhuam mo phaidirean corrach*'. Which means: 'why should I go to Coll to see the dishonourable man who made my bed by the door, who took my rosary?' And it's those lines in the song that really kind of... oof! Kind of punch me a bit and make me wonder... What's happening here? And um I think that the line 'he took my rosary' you know, I find that really upsetting.

From what I know about rosary beads they support and facilitate prayer and to rip them away, to take them from a person, is like a metaphor for... it's damaging their faith. And it's stripping them of their ability to pray. And I think what... what's happened in this song, not only has she been stripped of her rosary beads but the other line before it that says: 'The dishonourable man that made my bed at the door.' My understanding of that would be that... they've entered into some sort of sexual relationship, he's potentially taken her virginity from her, and if we look at the context of society back then... That would be probably an act where it would probably lead to marriage and it's like he had no intention of that happening. And so she's been stripped of her rosary beads but she's been stripped of her 'purity' or her 'virtue'... you know, to use that term that's...

RN: [laughter]

DG: [laughter] I'm shuddering here but. To take that from her on the understanding that a marriage contract would ensue.

RN: Mhm.

DG: But it didn't. And then all the emotion that comes with that. You can start to see the grief unpouring with the ... when she hears that he's betrothed to another. Almost that realisation for her of... None of it was ever going to happen for us.

RN: Yeah, and also that she probably won't be able to get married... like she might not be able to get married to someone else because she's... it's like she's... you know.

DG: Yeah!

RN: Slept with someone already and that's how things maybe were at that time that you were kind of... the awful phrase 'damaged goods.'

DG: Oof. Yeah.

RN: But that's like, which is... it's still a phrase that's used sometimes with people.

DG: It is, yeah!

RN: But obviously not in a lot of cultures now. It's not. That's not such a big deal to society. But it is definitely still a... still a thing that happens to people.

DG: It definitely is! There's another level in this song as well where the guy that she's betrothed to... sorry that she's not! The guy that she's... Actually, interestingly, she still calls him '*aig Dòmhnall Donn, laogh mo chèile*' which is 'Donald.. Brown Haired Donald, my dearest love!' And she is still referring to him as her love, and then she's hearing of him being betrothed to somebody else. To the daughter of the Earl of the White Sails. And that then kind of indicates that he was from high society. And if she was on the hills tending to the cattle there's a class difference





there. And if he's marrying the daughter of the Earl of the White Sails, you know, there was no chance that he was ever... ever going to be with her!

RN: Yeah, it says a lot doesn't it?

DG: It does!

RN: That class. The element of class coming into it. And that's something that comes into it a lot, as well.

DG: Yes.

RN: There's a part, ehm... a part again from Margaret Harrison's essay that we both read that um, what you were just talking about, that I thought was interesting. It just says... It's talking about a specific song but it says: 'One might also note the lack of explicit anger against the man who essentially destroyed the girl's life.'

DG: Yeah.

RN: 'This too is a common trend in waulking songs for the attitudes of female characters towards rapists...' in this case, of this song, '... can often be perceived as somewhat ambivalent.' Which is interesting. (see Harrison, 2012)

DG: Yeah. Really interesting. It kind of... I don't know it gives me just that sort of sinking feeling. You know, I think the... the... deception? Is on so many levels. You know... it's a physical level, an emotional level, a class level, and then... going back to what you were saying about society and 'damaged goods'. It's... that society at that time.

Sorry that's where I'm meaning that the dominant voice is not just the man in this song but also society where she would have actually been shamed.

RN: Yeah.

DG: And her reputation has just been ruined.

RN: And actually maybe... I don't know, I'm not at all an expert on this but maybe that is partly why, I don't know, that blame doesn't always go to the sort of perpetrator as such, the biggest thing about it was that kind of shame. And that kind of community, as you say, potentially turning its back on you for something like that having happened to you. You know um... you have this wider kind of issue of that. And maybe that kind of overshadows the actual experience of what you've gone through in some ways.

DG: Yeah.

RN: I don't know.

DG: What I find hopefully encouraging in this, though, is that... whoever that woman was - and she was someone - her voice is still here today. We still sing her song, and those lyrics. So I hope that she had that... confidence to voice those words and whether that was in that group of women in the community, in the waulking. Whether it was to them... directly or in some form. She must have confided in somebody for this song to be in existence today.

RN: Yeah.



DG: And I hope... my hope on the waulking songs when I think of those women as, that they were a support network.

RN: Yeah! Yeah yeah. Yeah. That they were hearing that at least and that was such a huge part of it, is to hear things, isn't it? I suppose that kind of leads on in a way to what's kind of been interesting me and um... what I've been thinking about recently about whether or not to sing songs-

DG: Mmm.

RN: -that include you know violence against women or you know serious wrongdoings like that.

DG: Yeah.

RN: Because I think that's a really interesting point. That idea of actually amplifying these stories and sharing these stories and letting them live on is really... that's really important actually. Because I think sometimes one can think, or I've certainly thought, is it right to be singing these songs? Ehm, certainly just some of them that are really violent or whatever. But yeah I suppose that's a counter argument to that, that kind of sharing these stories... but I suppose. I don't feel I've come to any sort of conclusion with that.

DG: Yeah.

RN: But I suppose another, the word context again feels like it's really important.

DG: Mhm!

RN: It's all about the context in which you sing it and how... how it's communicated I suppose to an audience, whatever that audience might be. Because again, what I was saying earlier, what I suppose I meant about the context of the waulking... the group of people... it wasn't so much the context of the wider kind of political and social situation. It was more just the context of those people singing that around and you know who they were communicating to.

DG: Yeah, yeah.

RN: They were were communicating to each other, a small group of women of a variety of ages in a tight knit community, whereas we're bringing these songs to a very different kind of audience.

DG: Yeah!

RN: And it's a very different context to put them in. And that responsibility that you might feel sort of putting them out there and... how to frame them and it feels like quite a responsibility.

DG: Absolutely. Yeah... How to frame them when you're in a performance setting as well you only get that snapshot of an opportunity to frame them.

RN: Yeah!

DG: So there is quite a responsibility there. And... larger than that as well I'm thinking in performance terms, on a stage or whatnot. Then... you're setting a tone for an evening. Ehm and how you impart that information and put the



song across can really um... You can draw an audience in totally but you know it's, there's quite a sway that you can have on the tone for the evening.

I'm away off on a different tangent here but this brings us to as well the... Something that I think on is... I think there can sometimes be a tendency to laugh, you know, 'Ho ho ho, this is a really cheery song,' you know and try to lighten that mood again when you're in a performance setting, And I think it's something that we all do or have done.

RN: Definitely, yeah. Yeah.

DG: But I think nowadays that responsibility we have to the women a few hundred years ago and to our audience - you know, as an informed, educated, intelligent audience as well... is to frame it in a way accordingly.

RN: Yeah! And it doesn't have to be, like... It doesn't have to mean that you can't be lighthearted on some level.

DG: Well sure they were when they were doing the waulking themselves!

RN: Yeah, but I think we're all definitely guilty of having done that, I certainly know I am. 'Oh here's another miserable song!' You know.

DG: Yeah yeah yeah!

RN: Ehm and really kind of, yeah and sometimes maybe diminishing the song by doing that and almost kind of being apologetic for singing...

DG: Yeah.

RN: ...serious like, songs that are challenging and have challenging material but it's like... That was these people's lives and this happened to somebody and... and actually yeah, I don't know, if the audience. Yeah you don't have to apologise to the audience for-

DG: Yeah.

RN: -for that and actually, I've certainly found, the more that you do apologise the more the audience are like 'Oh all your songs are miserable.'

DG: Yeah!

RN: Because you know you've kind of told them they are! And you've kind of made that...

DG: But then maybe you're using that distraction technique.

RN: Yeah...

DG: You know, sub-submli- [laughter] Subliminally. How do you say that word?

RN: Sub-lim-in-a-ly. [laughter]



DG: [laughter] But maybe you are using that distraction m, again, to kind of... When, whether it's to shroud the song, to protect the song, or to protect yourself because that's kind of your voice kind of... performing it and framing it and so on some level it could be a distraction in itself so you don't go... Here's a heavy story for you.

RN: Yeah, yeah. And actually, like we talked about earlier, the more, you know we're talking about that kind of. Oh we just like the melodies and we like this and that and as you get older and you think about it more you start to be maybe the same age as the person in the song or whatever, or you might have a similar experience or something like that.

DG: Yeah.

RN: And you think: God, wow, it really starts to hit home what you're actually singing. Actually that could be quite hard, you know, to perform.

DG: Yeah.

RN: There's a song that I sing with, ehm, the Furrow Collective, one of my bands, and it's actually an English song it's not a Gaelic song, but ehm... I've actually had to stop singing it because it's so... It's a really really, you know, heavy song.

DG: Mmm.

RN: And I couldn't even, I couldn't introduce it actually. Because I couldn't... I found it really difficult to talk about it. Just because it was so dark. I felt at the time it was really important to sing it, but I did... Somebody did ask me, you know, why do you sing that song it's so... It's so kind of dark and violent.

And actually the woman kind of... kind of wins out in the end? In that she, she kind of survives and says... look. She never kind of gives in to him, her kind of. She never gives in, her spirit, kind of thing, to this guy. And to me that's kind of the point of the song.

DG: Uh-huh.

RN: And that's why I felt like it was an important song, and important to tell that story, like we talked about. But actually at the end of every night at the end of the gig I would be... shaking, you know. [laughter]

DG: Wow.

RN: Really kind of struggling to do the next song, whatever that might be, or whatever. Ehm... and that's definitely the most I've ever felt affected by a song, and not... it wasn't because I'd experienced anything that had to do with it. It's just... you, well you know, you've got to get into...

DG: Well you've got that empathy.

RN: You've got to have that empathy with it, that's right. And I remember when we recorded it, myself and the others in the band we were all kind of in tears. You know-

DG: Wow.

RN: -recording it. And yeah, and then it was just... actually I don't think I can sing that live anymore.



And that was the life of that for me, and I, you know, moved on, and... Ehm, but yeah. I don't know where I was going with that really.

DG: [laughter]

RN: But I do think we really are feeling these things more, the older we get and the more aware we are. So it is... yeah, it... you start to question. Why and how and in what context to sing certain songs. And I think with Gaelic songs there's more of a... Often you might be singing to an audience where not everybody can actually understand the song, you know ehm...

I mean actually. When you sing English ballads... I know when I do, ehm, a lot of people aren't listening to the words anyways.

DG: [laughter]

RN: [laughter] So you still have to contextualise it a lot of the time. But obviously with Gaelic songs there's going to be people in the audience that don't... that don't have Gaelic, and therefore you really have to think about how to contextualise the song and how to explain it beforehand. And yeah I think with some of these songs it really kind of... you really feel like 'Oh I want to understand how to put this across.'

DG: That was actually the reason why, with my album I released last year, I was quite aware that most people listening wouldn't be aware of the songs. So I decided to go big. So that you could - if you're not going to understand the lyrics, you could understand the emotion.

RN: Mm, mhm.

DG: Because you can feel it through that music. I think that's quite a... quite a privilege as musicians that we can present these songs in that way. And you know...

RN: In that new context, I suppose.

DG: Yeah! And then using that kind of, instruments and arrangements and everything to kind of get emotion across because music is... so emotional! You know it can be this massively emotional response.

RN: Yeah. And it can tell a story of its own I suppose, through that music.

DG: So this is just a few wee verses from *Moch an-Diugh*

*Nan saoilinn gum b'fhìor an sgeula, hi ri linn is ògaibh ò*

*Dhòrtainn fuel 's gun gearrainn fèithe, hìu na hi rì rì ahu, hi ri a hoilibho hi a hògaibh ò*

*Cìod thuige rachainn-sa Cholla, hi ri linn is ògaibh ò*

*Shealltainn air fear donn gun onair, hìu na hi rì rì ahu, hi ri a hoilibho hi a hògaibh ò*

*Rinn mo leapa 'm bun an doruis, hi ri linn is ògaibh ò*

*Thug bhuam mo phaidirean corrach, hìu na hi rì rì ahu, hi ri a hoilibho hi a hògaibh ò*



DG: Thank you!

--interval--

DG: Shall we move on to your song, Rachel?

RN: Yes! [laughter]

DG: [laughter]

RN: Yes I suppose it kind of relates to what we were just talking about in a way. So this is a song that's ehm, that's called *Chaidil Mi an-Raoir air an Àirigh*, which is 'I slept last night on the shieling.'

Ehm, yeah. I found this version of it on *Tobar an Dualchais*, Kist o Riches website, which is where I find most of [laughter]

DG: [laughter] Loads of stuff!

RN: [laughter] Most of my songs. Ehm it's such a brilliant resource and um yeah this is eh... Captain Donald Joseph MacKinnon, originally from Barra, another Barra...

DG: Well Barra is well known for its waulking songs as well!

RN: [laughter] Yeah of course, yeah.

DG: The collection of them, it's amazing.

RN: Yeah! I think he later lived in South Uist but um, but yeah. And it's... I was kind of searching for songs with that in mind. I was just talking about that idea of... When I did my last solo album um I was looking for songs where the woman eh... wins. [Laughter] In the end. You know it's... It's quite hard actually when you start looking for songs. Like that. It's actually quite hard to find them.

DG: Yeah.

RN: Of course there are songs like that but it did strike me that... often, and like we talked about, often people are singing because they want to share something that's happened, you know a grievance-

DG: Yeah.

RN: -that's happened to them. So it's only natural that they might not be winning at that moment in time or whatever, but yeah. That was kind of why I suppose this song kind of really spoke to me. And in this song, it does, it is a heavy song. It's not a lighthearted song by any means.

Ehm. But it's, I suppose and - I don't know but - bearing in mind this idea of coding or this idea of setting up a story and then actually having another story going on as well.

DG: Mhm.

RN: Maybe that was going on in this song, I don't know.



DG: I guess it's worth point out about the coding though I don't know that it's to say that it's necessarily there-

RN: Yeah of course! Yeah it might be that... What she does is she talks - the woman, the protagonist, the woman in the song - she talks about her love, you know, she's talking about missing this man that she loves. And um that's kind of where the song is going at first.

DG: Mhm.

RN: And then it develops into, you know, she's there, she's you know, she's there on her. She's in a place on her own, ehm, and she becomes aware of somebody there. And I suppose... She's... I suppose that kind of idea of her love that she's talking about kind of sets up - because the next thing she's saying is. She realises it's; that's not who it is.

DG: Mm.

RN: It's somebody else. And... In the song it's another man and he... It's basically describing a sexual assault, really, ehm.

DG: Yeah.

RN: Or at least an attempt at... because she ends up... basically beating him up! [laughter]

DG: [laughter]

RN: And uh, that sort of... He hits his head on a stone I think? And that's... yeah that's kind of where we leave her, in this version anyway.

DG: There's quite a sinister line in that song, is there not, where she kind of senses that someone's there. She gets, like a shudder, but it's not from the cold.

RN: Yeah! Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, it really sets it up, doesn't it? It's quite a good storytelling song actually.

DG: Yeah! It's got the plot twist, hasn't it?

RN: Yeah!

DG: It's like a movie.

RN: Totally yeah! And you can really... yeah I felt like... Quite often with songs I feel like ones I want to sing are ones, you know especially with traditional songs that are telling a story-

DG: Mhm.

RN: -it's like you really want to imagine it in your head like a good book. Ehm and... I think that's what's so brilliant about traditional songs.

DG: Yeah, definitely.

RN: That's what they do. Not all of them really well, but I feel like this one does that really well.



DG: Yeah for sure.

RN: And that's what I really liked about it.

DG: I feel like, you know, I think if you think about that in a wider sense, just think... eh Scottish Oral literature, meaning songs and stories and poems, being in a wider sense then... You know they were literature. Stories and songs, they were... It was drenched in people's - sorry - People's lives were drenched in it. It was every level of society. So they were kind of really top class storytellers. Because that was... that was so innate for them.

RN: Yeah, it was everyday life all day.

DG: Whether it was the clan chiefs and the bards for the clan chiefs, or whether it was the women with the waulking, or whether it was the sort of the people in the village kind of...

RN: Totally yeah. When you think about the waulking songs, you know, sitting round... Sitting round with all your kind of, female friends, or family, or peers, or people in your community. And having to make up some sort of... it fills me with fear, I'd be terrible at that! [laughter]

DG: [laughter] Oh I know, so would I!

RN: [laughter] It's amazing, like you say, just that level of storytelling. And... Such quick-wittedness.

DG: Quick-wittedness and complex structures-

RN: Yeah!

DG: -to fit them into!

RN: Yeah, yeah for sure. And just the sheer volume of songs in general.

DG: Yeah.

RN: It's just amazing. I mean I know there are obviously lots of new songs cropping up, but... But people are now like 'I'm a songwriter and that's my thing.'

DG: Mmm.

RN: But back then it was like... Yeah it seems like it was such a grassroots... Base level-

DG: Yes absolutely.

RN: -like everyday thing that was just, you know, in people's... what people were doing.

DG: Sorry I jumped in on you there you were saying about your song.

RN: Yeah I mean, I suppose... That's it really! It's... it was that kind of idea of overcoming these advances and kind of telling that story again, that idea of sharing that experience that I found... I just felt like it was really... ehm... kind of chimed with me especially at the time with the work I was doing with the Bit Collective, as you mentioned,





kind of ehm looking at. Well it's looking at issues of equality in Folk history and music. But looking at that point... Ehm, we were really looking at ehm sexual assault and... and ehm abuse of power in the music scene.

DG: Mm.

RN: That was something - I mean it still is - but at that point where I was making that album it was you know something that we were really dealing with because it was something that was coming to the fore.

DG: Absolutely.

RN: For the first time - for what really felt like the first time in our sort of community and folk and traditional music, and really being addressed in a more open way than certainly I'd ever experienced before. So it felt, yeah, just having a song that was...

DG: Yeah.

RN: From all that time ago that was actually sharing an experience like that. It just felt really important to include that in what I was doing at the time. And ehm... and again it's just that feeling of, you know. And that's why I do it, and I think that's probably why a lot of singers do it as well, is what I'd guess...

DG: Yeah!

RN: Is that sort of relationship, it's so relatable that material. And that kind of reminder that these people were just like us!

DG: Yeah.

RN: And had similar experiences and... All of that it's... So special to be able to sing these songs.

DG: Yeah it really is! It's... And even bringing it back to just that feeling of emotion, you know? It is an emotional thing and a privilege to be able to sing these songs, it certainly aligns my thoughts and kind of gives power to my voice.

RN: I think, it feels like.. for me as well it kind of keeps my interest in traditional song in Gaelic song-

DG: Mhm.

RN: -it keeps that spark, that fire, um, going for me. To sort of be able to recognise things that I'm hearing about from today, you know from the modern time to hear those experiences happening in these older songs, these traditional songs.

DG: Yeah, that's lovely.

RN: It just feels like it keeps.. you know that relevance, I suppose, going for me.

DG: That makes me think a little bit of how - I spoke to Dòmhnall Uilleam Stewart a few weeks ago, we had an amazing chat about, just an overview of the history of Gaelic song through 17th/18th century. And one of the things that he said is that he doesn't like to use, he doesn't like his scholars to use the word 'tradition' because it makes it static, it puts it on a...



RN: Mmm.

DG: It sets it almost in stone, really.

RN: Yeah, yeah.

DG: And really, you know, even back in the 18th century people were thinking back to older songs and being inspired by them.

RN: Totally.

DG: And tweaking them for their time, and it's exactly what we are doing now. So when you're saying it keeps that spark of interest in you, these songs, it's a continuation of this culture, isn't it?

RN: Yeah. Yeah! Definitely. And I love that idea of, kind of... Of... that's a sort of continuum, isn't it?

DG: Yeah exactly. And I suppose when you think back to the 'olden days' you know, and you think to those people they were drawing on other people's experiences. Their lived, real experiences as well, and the... The things that we're singing about today kind of dominant and dominated, um, community pressures, societal pressures, shame, kind of a secret voice, sexual violence, assault, all of these things have carried and people within the Gàidhealtachd and across the world, but we're looking today at Gaelic, people have continually had those experiences, shared them with each other, been influenced by them, and it just goes on and on and on. And I love the idea that here we are today, you know... I don't love the idea that we're still having this conversation and that these injustices still happen. And there's a need still to code, if everything was equal there wouldn't be a need to code, you know. Ehm... But we're continually ehm... Adding our voices - hopefully - in a positive way that will then continue and help people going forwards.

RN: Totally. And I think, like, that responsibility to do that feels to me, like, you know often... Ehm... I want to find another word for traditional music now! [laughter]

DG: [laughter] I know, it's like, I can't say that now!

RN: But you know, often I think that something we are told a lot growing up, ehm, with this music and sort of... Is this responsibility of "preserving the tradition." I say that with quotation marks.

DG: Yeah yeah!

RN: But actually, I think what we maybe touched on earlier; what feels much more relevant to me - which isn't actually that different!

DG: Mhm.

RN: But is actually that responsibility of carrying these stories and these experiences - especially you know these women's experiences - ehm, I think like that responsibility, or not so much responsibility but responsibility for the context in which you tell those stories feels like a much more - relevant to me anyways - way of thinking about my responsibility to the "tradition." In quotes you know. [laughter]

DG: No, no and you're right, it's not that much of a shift to kind of think on it in those terms.



RN: No but it just feels a bit more human. It kind of... humanises it a bit more.

DG: Definitely. I kind of feel as well... my mind's just gone wandering. But you know, when you're a child you're told to stay away from the woods and from cliffs and the lochs and there's monsters. All these things and you know those stories to some level are warning children of danger. And whether it's the actual danger of, you know, falling off a cliff, or ehm getting lost in the woods, or whether it's just kind of embedding that sense of awareness in being safe in your environment from a young age and maybe... these waulking songs, when we were accessing them as children, the community, the women, the gossiping. Maybe that was our almost initiation into those songs.

RN: Yeah.

DG: And as we get older the responsibility, or the... not the responsibility. But that kind of... that's been so embedded in us that we had those foundations for us to now go... I understand this a lot deeper now and... we can take it forwards and so framing it and... to your audience, and bringing it forwards and sharing it, or teaching it or whatever... Is passing on that just, awareness and that kind of... you know, in that same sense.

RN: Yeah definitely.

So this is just the last three verses of the song, of ehm, *Chaidil Mi an-Raoir air an Àirigh*

*Dh' aithnich mi nach b' e mo luaidh e, hug hoireann o, hug hoireann o, hi hò eile ho hoil il o*

*'S chuir mi breab chas, 's fhuair mi bhuaim e, hug hoireann o, hug hoireann o, hi hò eile ho hoil il o*

*'S thug cùl a chinn lag san luachair, hug hoireann o, hug hoireann o, hi hò eile ho hoil il o*

DG: Gorgeous! I love it, it's got such sass in it.

RN: Such a great tune isn't it?!

DG: Yeah! [laughter]

Rachel -

RN: [laughter]

DG: [laughter] This has been really really lovely, do you know? It's so nice to have this conversation and, on the one hand, to feel empowered by it, but also to acknowledge... I'm not an expert on it-

RN: Yeah, me neither

DG: Yeah! [laughter] For sure. But I think these conversations are things that have been mulling in both of our heads.

RN: Yeah, and it's really good to talk it through with somebody.

DG: Yeah!

RN: And of course there's no real conclusion to be drawn in a way, is there?



DG: Exactly, yeah.

RN: But it's really nice to explore it with somebody who kind of... Yeah who totally gets it. [laughter]

DG: [laughter]

RN: Or, well neither of us get it. But that's the point. [laughter]

DG: [laughter] Yes neither of us get it all! We're trying to-

RN: We're exploring it.

DG: And I think that's really lovely, yeah, so thank you. Because I think sometimes these conversations can, yeah, mull over your head and just to get that kind of ehm... That solidarity with somebody.

RN: Yeah, definitely!

DG: And we'll forge a path together!

RN: Yeah! Keep learning. [laughter] And keep chatting.

DG: Exactly. Thank you so so much for sharing your time with me and sharing your thoughts and sharing your songs. And ehm that's really been such, I hope that we've... what we've done is taken these songs that are... That are deep and heavy, but they are because they happened. And they have to be spoken about quite frankly or, or coded, but they're said. And I hope what we've done is take them into a place of a bit of hope.

RN: Yeah, yeah, for sure.

DG: So thank you very very very much for your time.

RN: Thank you for having me! It's been a pleasure.

DG: It's been lovely!

I'd like to extend my grateful thanks again to Rachel for so openly sharing her thoughts on this conversation. You can check out her music via her website (<http://www.rachelnewtonmusic.com/>) as well as her work with the Bit Collective (<https://www.thebitcollective.co.uk>).

Another thanks is due to Sim Innes, a lecturer at the University of Glasgow who, after a chance encounter, kindly and helpfully pointed me in the direction of the articles from which we quoted today.

I'd love to hear your feedback on what these songs mean to you and how you feel we can present these voices going forward.

If you enjoyed this episode then please do share and review it - also check out the other episodes in this series if you haven't done so already. Finally, if you haven't yet subscribed then please do so.

The background music you hear is taken from my album, Urranta, which is available through my website <http://www.deirdregraham.com> as well as on the usual streaming platforms.

Gaelic  
Song  
Stories



<https://www.deirdregraham.com/gaelijksongstories>

Before I go I'd like to extend my ever grateful thanks to Creative Scotland for supporting this project.

I look forward to sharing more Gaelic Song Stories with you and I hope that you'll join me the next time.

Chun an uairsin, beannachd leibh!

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