

Good Words

Edition No. 602

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It is said that my great grandfather Rev Norman MacLeod married Queen Victoria to her pony man John Brown.

Whatever, he was a highlander from Kintyre who started a magazine called Good Words in 1860. The purpose of the Mag was to provide healthy reading for families as they sat settling themselves before church. Fifty years later it was still going with a claimed world wide readership of 170,000. When he died his brother Donald took over.

Today my brother Neil and I have decided to restart Good Words and take up the torch. We apologise for the 115 interval.

Why bother?

I am a retired Geography teacher who has run dozens of trips around the islands with a personal fascination for their potential role as the world heads unchecked towards the ecological meltdown. I like to write about the islands.

Neil my brother is an expert on tourism and now shares stories as a tour guide. I write the mag. He produces it.

This issue, 602, does what Good Words has always done. It gives folk a chance to say their piece. There will be two major essays. Firstly the ever excellent Dr Lesley Riddoch will look at the crisis in the islands for folk of normal earnings who find it hard to afford holiday accommodation in the Highlands and secondly I will review the dilemma on the island of Iona over what to do with the MacLeod Centre, a forty year old youth centre that is now falling down and needs millions to restore it.

I make no claim to represent either the Iona Community religious organisation or the local community and will try and give a balanced view.

We hope you enjoy the revived Good Words. We will be back in two months time. Contributions welcome.

Inside -

Maxwell Macleod makes me jump

How Donald Trump shouted at me when I asked him for money for Iona

The new Book on Margaret Fay Shaw.

Charlie Maclean's (whisky) bronze head

Congratulations Prof. Michael Lean

Rev David's thoughts on how to stop the world dying



Dr. Lesley Riddoch - Journalist and Broadcaster

When Maxwell says jump, I jump. For good reasons.

He is one of my oldest friends and the reason I got involved with the Island of Eigg buyout almost 30 years ago. But also, his instincts are invariably right. Except for his inexplicable dalliances with members of the landed gentry and the Edinburgh New Club. But each to their own.

He is especially right about the fact Scots are being priced out of holidays in our own country – and especially from sought after destinations like Iona. Now holidays sound unimportant

– trivial. But leisure completely defines us. It's a rare arena of choice in a world of work-based compulsion and monotony. We find ourselves beyond the 9 to 5. Or is my Caithness mum put it 'the things you see when you're out without your gun.'

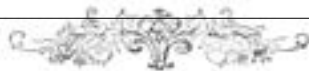
I had a bothy – once a shepherd's family home– high up on a hill in Glen Buchat near... well near nowhere which is why it was ideal. 45 minutes inland from Aberdeen, just off the beautiful Strathdon and a place you could really let your hair down, because nothing made the place any more ramshackle. There was no electricity, no indoor toilet and the water was in a trough shared with several cows. It cost £365 a year to rent and I was the only woman I knew doing something this crazy. But then I visited Norway and discovered a whole nation doing the same thing, albeit their hytte were purpose built wooden huts with nothing so primitive as a fallen telegraph pole getting slowly pushed into the fire. Indeed, no open fireplaces since woodburning stoves are so much more efficient. And of course folk make such sensible investments when they own their huts and - more importantly - the land they sit on. After a decade doing a PhD on the subject, I can say that 88% of Norwegians own their land. About the same percentage of Scots only rent it. That's mainly why there are 600 thousand family huts in Norway and just 600 in Scotland. Turning a blind eye to the world's least democratic landownership for so long has robbed us of our leisure.

With nowhere but tents, youth hostels, overpriced hotels and Air BnBs that squeeze out local buyers, we've become the most indoor folk in Europe. Daytripping munro baggers at best. Strangers in our own country at worst.

We have lost family links to the land and the Gaelic and Scots languages they could have handed on. And yet there is no outrage because we're used to it, can't see a solution and assume everyone else has the same problem. They just don't. The Nordics, Spanish, French, Baltic folk and New Zealanders all have very modest second homes to enjoy generations of family holidays. Of course they don't have to go to their hytte, sommerhus, bach, dacha, gite or mökki – but they do, taking millions of locals out of competition with tourists for commercial holiday accommodation. And that helps keep prices down. Here, millions of us with no family place to go must compete for the few expensive places to stay with visitors from countries with much stronger currencies. No wonder there is such a penchant for campervans, motorhomes and static caravans (again usually on precarious rented sites). We've nothing else.

So this is a very long way of saying that Maxwell's idea of setting up an affordable hostel on Iona is brilliant and should encourage folk in other tourist hotspots to think of doing the same. Roll on the real land reform that will finally end land scarcity, bring down land prices and open up wee wooden huts for all. Meanwhile all power to his eccentric elbow.

Diane Armstrong



When my close friend Diane heard that Neil and I were relaunching Good Words and looking for stories she was insistent that we tell her own and dictated it to us loud and clear.

Now in her middle age she came from a difficult background in Glasgow's Royston, the daughter of a travelling Australian footballer who had spread his seed liberally she says that in her youth she was often to be found sitting on the pavement sniffing glue out of a bucket and with a short expected life expectancy. But Diane is genuinely very extraordinary and now earns a good income working for the council in their cleaning department where she is hugely popular. She has a steady partner, three cats, a delightful home, a good car and a multitude of friends who will do anything for her. Or she them. .



She particularly agreed to let me tell her best story about how on joining a crowd of bin collectors who were looking at her a bit askance she just jumped on a table and made the following joke announcement; to the tough crowd.

"You may be wondering how I landed this plum job, which of your male bosses I have been sleeping with? Well here's the answer. Nane of them. I've been sleeping with their wives!" This brought the house down.

But its not for that joke that she asked me to write her story, it's because of Iona.

"One day a youth worker saw the awfie state I was in and bundled me me off Iona Abbey. Honestly I had no idea where I was or what I was supposed to be doing. but they gave me love and attention and part of that was they gave me wee jobs and then bigger ones and laughed at my jokes and treated me with respect and after a while I became head housekeeper and started to really like myself and stopped the drugs and learned how to laugh at myself and the awfie journey I had had.

Diane Armstrong (cont..)

Today if you are ever on Iona and are with Diane it's truly like being with a popstar. Folk are just coming up and asking for a hug or a selfie, she defines what the place is all about. She finished telling me her tale with a quiet moment, adding. "I honestly believe I would be dead without Iona." As she walked away she added. "Oh and put this in that article about me. It's about my Dad. I hear he's deid, but naebudy's telt me aught, It's an awfie thing tae live a life without anybody being there tae tell ye whether yer Dad's deid. I'm no complaining, just saying. If I just had one phone call from someone, anyone, it would help. See and put that in your article." .
So I did.



Donald Trump and Iona. The imminent death of the Church of Scotland. The man who gave his wife Staffa for her birthday.

In Good Words we always have two major essays, in this case one was by Dr Lesley Riddoch and now here's one by myself.

Lesley's was about the cultural change in the highlands with everything now being reserved, through price. for the rich. Mine is about pretty much the same though with an accent on Iona. I wrote about this crisis recently and received messages of confirmation from the inner and outer Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland and even Fair Isle.

I am not a member of either of the Iona Communities, the religious and the post-gaelic ones, but hold them both in genuine respect.

The established Kirk is almost dead. A thirty five per cent drop in congregations in the last five years with an average age of over sixty. There are now only about sixty thousands worshipping on a Sunday and with a hundred redundant buildings on the market each church buildings costing hundreds a day to maintain only enough in the coffers to keep the show on the road for at best a couple of years.

The Kirk has sent a message round the Kirks that its up to them to fund themselves or they will be for the knackers, which must be great if you are a bunch of decent old ladies who only want a place to sing a few songs, be mystified by the sermon, and have a coffee with pals and for this have to find a hundred thousand grand a year or their beloved church will become a carpet warehouse.

In the midst of this is the Iona Community based around the restored Abbey. Much has been made of their current financial stresses but there's also much to celebrate for their successes. There are now over three hundred members of the religious Iona Community following a busy discipline with around thirty new members in training, and it's not crazy happy clappy stuff but hands on social work and political action, and looking after each other and giving quality of life and moral values to thousands.

Worried about the thirty per cent increase in shop lifting? Ill bet theres community members somewhere who have been talking to school kids about right and wrong as well as the polarisation of wealth.

Everywhere you go people are complaining that the world is in am awfie state, well guys the Iona Community folk are not complaining they are doing and doing something about it iand well and with laughter and song. Across Britain wee family groups meet to discuss and act. Sometimes there's even a glass of wine and a nibble and always constructive conversation
In short whilst the Kirk is dying the Iona Community is thriving. Hurray.

Then we come to the island community. Now when I was a student (Im a Geography Teacher who specialises in the Hebrides) I did two thesis's. The first was on the socio economics of Iona and then one of the socio economics of the new established Lochalne to Fishnish ferry. Since then I've advised or written about dozens of fundraising projects in the Highlands. Buy outs, small turbines, hydroes, social housing, crofting Village halls. Associate me with just church stuff and I'll want a quiet word round the back of the bike shed which may get louder. My hear lies more in good Hebridean development than any liturgy. It's what I have given my life to.

Now this essay is not about my attitude to the future of the MacLeod Centre on the island although there will be statements elsewhere in the paper but about a two hour conversation I once had in the eighties with the world's most successful advertising man David Ogilvie, known internationally as the King of the Brand concept. (His chief of staff was Jock Elliot who gave his wife Staffa for her sixtieth birthday present. David knew Iona well) It was Jock who introduced me to Donald Trump who I tried to discuss Iona with in the hope of hard cash for the MacLeod centre (His Mother was a MacLeod) We were not a perfect match and the conversation very quickly descended into profanities from him and rapid departures from me

The point David wanted to make clear was that the island has an international branding that was envied around the world. An international branding that was a valuable thing that could bring in business and constrictive debate , particularly around concepts of reconciliation both in households and on a global scale and that if we concentrated just on vulgar market expansion for rich tourists we would kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

Be well, Maxwell Macleod

May we all congratulate Scot Prof Michael Lean who holds seats in a number of Universities around the world and has done innovative work in the field of encouraging those with Diabetes type two to undertake radical diets in harmony with their doctors.



Mike is in the middle of a fundraising push and is keen on furthering this treatment in the third world, particularly given the low cost of its maintenance and the pressures on so many third world countries to adopt the kinds of western diets that so often do the damage.

I hear his fundraising is going well. He's a lovely man whose hobbies include making and playing the fiddle and he deserves success and the world needs his work very badly.



Biography of Margaret Fay Shaw - to be launched next week by Birlinn.

Edinburgh's Birlinn publishers are to launch a biography of the late Margaret Fay Shaw, the famed photographer archivist and classical pianist who lived on Canna and was married to John Lorne Campbell..

I adored the woman and never more so than when I phoned her on a delicate matter. She was already in her nineties but I wanted to ask her for her help in writing the obituary of Tex Geddes who was the close friend and harpoonist of Gavin Maxwell when he was hunting for Sharks . The pair often dropped into Canna on their boat to visit Margaret and she still owned Maxwell's typewriter.

The question I had to ask her was an important one but I hesitated given her great age and it's delicacy I told her she needn't answer it if she didn't want to. " Oh I know that and I now know what the question will be. "

" Was there ever any homo sexual dynamic between the two of them" . Now Margaret was an archivist and knew the question was valid. She asked me to phone her back in ten minutes so she could get her answer right. and warned me that she intended to just answer that one question and would then slam the phone down before I could ask another.

I waited the ten minutes and phoned again. " Once Tex had sustained a big cut on his head when the boat's bow had hit him.

Tex had fallen off the boat and been hit by the stem. Gavin walked up my garden path gently carrying Tex as if he was a little baby. Then he laid him on the kitchen table so that I could stitch him up. As he did so he said to me " Try and not cut his pretty curls."

Then she slammed the phone down.

I loved that woman and look forward to the book.

Cadence of a Song Birlinn. Fiona J Mackenzie.



An extraordinary project has been unfolding in the last few weeks in Edinburgh.

Jeanie Gibbs (27) is a sculptor best known for her equine works on horses but was asked to do a bust of Charlie Maclean, whose sons have rowed the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean. Its been a huge success and its been commissioned in bronze from the Black Isle Foundry.

Jeanie is the third generation to make her living as a sculptress.

Faith and ecocide - Rev. David Coleman

Bertolt Brecht wrote of how a poem about trees was like a crime because it distracted from so many misdeeds. In our day, a sermon without trees - without engaging with the Crisis of Nature and Climate - can vere close to criminality for exactly the same reason.

People of faith are better equipped than they mostly imagine, to become beacons of resilience and hope... BUT only if eyes are wide open, reading the signs of the times and acting accordingly. Discerning, testing the spirits. Truth sets free, lies ensnare. And today, every dearth of greenery, in the expression of faith, plays into the hands of the evil appropriation, by fascist denialists, of symbols like the cross. Faith, which ignores the Crisis, risks promoting the confusion of exclusivist "patriotism" and religious integrity. That, and the continued worship of money, as if we had no other way to value anything. But Green Church is more church. Especially in crisis.

2025 compels a dual repurposing of my work as challenger/encourager to such Scottish churches as dare to follow amongst the clearest of Christ's teachings: to "take notice" of the state of Creation: the signs in the heavens and the Earth. (Unless you're victim to expert pseudoscience!)

Firstly, the complete obsolescence of any comfort based on what has become a lie that 'everything is going to be all right'. Again, the distraction factor is acute: like the casualties of which I heard from meteorologists way back at COP26: the wrong sort of preparedness makes things worse: provision for a wildfire is deadly when there's flooding. So anyone who loves their neighbour, -human or otherwise- knows, since the rise of Trump#2, that things will get worse: which makes every small effort to change course now all the more valuable.

Secondly, 'preaching to the [climate] converted' is now urgent and vital. Mitigating against an intimidating and aggressive denialist triumphalism infesting social and other media. Every public comment supporting climate concern attracts a soul-destroying rabble of contempt. Good people might despair.

That's why I'm holding on to hope, that in the elections ahead, the 'greenest' vote possible will not be wasted. Because a vote is a prayer. And that changes the world. It always has.

Above Rev David Coleman's article.

Rev David Coleman is one of my very favourite ministers and in my opinion the most important one preaching in Scotland. His job is to be the chaplain of a charity that seeks to encourage action on the climate crisis and he does it well.

He is also very good fun. and my heart lifts when I see him across a crowded room. knowing he will both make me laugh and think,

I sometimes tease him that his sermons are too intense, but only because I love him and regard his work as being the most important in the entire Christian sphere. His response to such teasing is always that it's an intense matter and cannot be treated too lightly if we are to achieve anything of substance.

We are delighted to welcome him as one of our first short essay writers.