

An Obituary for Agnus MacLennan of Kirkibost and Achmore

Agnus MacLennan, late of 4a Achmore, was born at 3 Kirkibost on Great Bernera on 15th Jan 1933, and passed away on 27th July 2018.

The spelling of her name is itself a testimony to the vintage of her 85 years. In those days, many islanders were not yet fluent in the English. Births were registered at the Post Office. When her father Donald went along to do the paperwork, he didn't know that Agnes is the usual spelling. As such, Agnus went through life with a version of her name that anchored her back into the oral tradition, where spellings didn't matter.

As a teller of stories, as a carrier of the traditions, as a Gaelic broadcaster and as a pillar of the community who everybody knew, that is how we might remember her.

Across the Western Isles as a whole, it would be for her broadcasting that Agnus was best known. In the 1990s she was a regular guest on Radio Nan Gaidheal. She was a great story teller, full of tales about the Bernera boys' lobster fishing escapades out as far as the Flannans, or the forecasting of weather. She always had some old *bodach* up her sleeve who knew how long the summer sunshine might last.

She had tales about the working of the land, the days of going to the sheilings, she was very fond of cats and of course, fish, and the poaching. There were tales with a tragic twist such as when some poor fisherman's body was located by *an dà shealladh*, but often her stories would be funny.

For instance, she had one about an Achmore cailleach, Joanna MacKenzie of No. 4b, who set out across the moor to look for some missing sheep when the mist came down. She was lost the whole day long. The village was fearing the worst for her. But eventually, she turned up right at the end of Balallan. She'd seen the light of a weaver's shed as the visibility started to improve. There weren't any sheep with her, but instead she had a salmon. She'd lifted up her skirt while crossing the Laxay river and the fish, as their respective migration routes crossed, got such a fright that it leapt into her lap.

I'll tell you, had Lewis been a Catholic isle, such likes would have comprised the wonder tales of saints. As it was, you'd have to go and ask Iain MacIver if the late Soval keeper might have been quite so accommodating.

If yarning on the radio was what made Agnus widely known, in North Lochs her place of pivotal importance to the community was as the surgery manager to my father, Dr Ian Kenneth McIntosh, at what is now called the Langabhat Medical Practice.

My father had joined Dr Hector Macdonald in July 1960, taking over when he retired in 1963. Later that year, or early in 1964 – it was shortly after President Kennedy had been assassinated – we moved into the house attached to the surgery at Gleann Mòr. Four years later, helped by the renowned Stornoway builder, Willie "Bucach", he and my mother extended the surgery premises. It now had a consulting room and study for himself with a small examination room attached. There was a dispensary, and the prescriptions were left out to be picked up or delivered, often as a favour by the post man. It might not happen these days, but that was those days.

The new premises also had a waiting room with a tank of tropical fish. It was changed days from when the patients had to wait outside in the rain. Changed days, too, from when Dr Macdonald had to bury the rubbish with a spade because, until the mid 1960s, there were no council collections. As his junior partner, one of the first tasks for which Dad volunteered, was to relieve the Dr Macdonald from digging the rubbish holes.

I have a photo dated March 1969 that shows the new surgery premises just completed, and another of their facilities was an office for the practice manager. The desk was very long, built with a lid that raised up to reveal the patient records stored underneath in village and family groups. The practice's earliest secretaries who I can remember were Anne Hay, who lived with her husband George in Grimshader, and Morag Ann Macleod, who was Duncan Norman's elder sister, and whose early passing due to illness was a great sadness to the village. In those days, the practice of about 1,800 patients was often so quiet that Dad told them to be sure to come to work with their knitting.

By the late 1960s however, and with the new premises on stream, things were hotting up. Apollo rockets were flying people to the moon. Lewis was fast-changing, and more and more could be done for patients. Although Morag Anne had had to leave, her mother Peggy became, for 18 faithful years, the surgery cleaner. She'd come in three mornings a week and her wages in the early days were a shilling and sixpence an hour. On Fridays, she'd take home a pound, and she told my mother that she'd spend it on the family messages at the shop (with the petrol pump) of Alex George's father, Donald Morrison. In those days "Dolan's" shop was the hub of village life at the New Holdings end of the village. Kennag Montgomery's Post Office played the same role further down the village. It always took ages to get served, for these were the Reuters news hubs of their time.

It was that rate of change throughout the 1960s that had required Dad to recruit a professional practice manager. He advertised the post and carried out the interviews. Agnus was an applicant, and at the end of the day, he told my mother, "She's excellent, but I'm afraid she'll make a take-over bid." As my mother now says, "That's exactly what happened, and he loved every minute of it."

In her previous job, Agnus had been working for a company in London. She never married, and when I think about that now, I realise that she was of one of those generations of Lewis women whose romantic prospects had been diminished by the tragedies of war. She lived in the bungalow in Achmore with her sister, Joan, who was a secretary in Tawse's quarry at Marybank, and her dear old father and her reverential but bedridden old mother. I don't know the family circumstances, but it was probably to care for them that she'd come home.

She brought to the North Lochs surgery such organising skills as typing, book-keeping and record-keeping. Above all, she kept everything and everybody "proper and correct". One day, I was out fishing in the river down at Craig a' Bodaich. It was in flood, and I'd run out of those wee lead weights you'd clip onto the line. In an effort at improvisation I tried to cut my own from a sea fishing weight that I had in my bag. But the knife slipped. It ran through my left thumb and cut right down onto the bone. I wrapped the injury up in sphagnum moss and cycled home, stopping every so often to pluck a new tuft of moss from the moor and change the blood-soaked dressing. When I got back, Dad was still out on his visits. Only Agnus was at home to hold the fort. She cleaned up the wound and patched it temporarily until Dad's return. What most sticks in my mind were Dad's words: "That was very good of Agnus. She hates the sight of blood." I still have the scar from that day. It is a visceral reminder of her kindness and competency, every time I look at it.

Another time, Agnus had asked me to go up into the attic above the surgery to fetch a box of incontinence pads. Just as I was throwing them down, my mother walked in with two of her freshly baked sponge cakes. Peggy must have been watching the disaster unfold, for when the editors of Lochs News asked me to write this obituary, Duncan Norman apparently told Maggie: "Don't let him forget the story of the cakes." In those days we were full of fun and practical jokes. Alex George's sister, Chrissie Mary, helped my mother in the house, and I remember her sending me and my sister Isobel on fools' errands to her dad's shop. Such were the playful ways that lasting bonds of intimacy were formed. We worked and laughed and sometimes cried with one another. It was a living village community. I'll give another example.

By the mid-1980s the level of activity in the practice had expanded so that Agnus was joined by Chrissie "Angus John" from Ranish. Her husband, the said Angus John, was the county councillor and a powerhouse of a man – rumoured to have weighed 20 stone. He kept Dad's car reliably on the road in that era when anything from British Leyland was always breaking down. Dad attributed his skill to having been an army-trained mechanic. He was one of his best friends.



Angus with Dr Ian Macintosh

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One day, the British Medical Association sent a representative around island doctors to persuade them of the merits of computerising their patients' records. Dad received the visitor and listened to him make his case. He then rose from his roll-top desk in the consulting room, and led the man through to where Agnus and Chrissie were hard at work. "Why should I need your computers?" he asked. "I've already got two computers. Between them, Agnus and Chrissie can not only tell me every patient's medical history, but also, who they are related to, and what diseases run in which family lines." The poor man was sent away nonplussed, though doubtless with a dram to medicate the belly.

So much has changed, and the mechanisms of change are instructive. Dad died in 1986, but my mother, who turned 90 recently and now lives on Newton Street, told me just the other day of the time that that Dr Angus Mackinnon, then of the South Harris practice, was covering for Dad on a few days' locum. Angus who was married to the singer Mary Sandeman was a native Gaelic speaker, his roots in the southern isles. On attending one of Dad's patients in Achmore, he presumed to speak to the man in Gaelic, only to receive the reply: "Doctor - I have worked out how to say what's wrong

with me in the English, and it's in the English you'll be getting it."

One of the last occasions that I visited Agnus was to check on the accuracy of some of her stories that I was putting into a recent book. She still proudly curated her extensive collection of pens, and still went regularly to the weekly 'Club' in Breasclate Community Centre.

I asked her how the old folks there were seeing today's world. "Oh," she said, "they feel confused. They cannot understand why nobody's keeping cows anymore. And why they're not planting the potatoes. And not putting out to sea together in their fishing boats." The world had become a more lonely place. Even for Agnus herself, visitors were less and less dropping by unannounced.

As I was leaving, she said to me in one of those command-and-control tones of voice with which she'd run the North Lochs practice and kept the computer salesmen in their place: "Make sure you keep thinking about the stories I'm telling you." It felt like a touch of blessing. Such is how traditions in communities are given life. Such are the ways that life itself finds legs to keep on walking. Such was Agnus and her people, our community.

The last time that we spoke was on the evening of 21 March 2018, four months before her passing. I'd phoned her up at home, just for a blether about the old days. I'll never ever forget the telephone number that I called that night and every other time. It was the same old Crossbost 272. Everybody who was "on the phone" in North Lochs used to know that number. If you couldn't get through to the doctor directly on Crossbost 202, then later, Crossbost 222 as it was changed to, or if you got the infernal answering machine that only spoke the English, not the Gaelic, that was the number that you called to get Agnus at home. As a one-woman NHS 24, she'd know where to find my father, or one of his trainee assistants (such as Dr Collacott who has now retired in Outend Coll after a distinguished career in psychiatry), or a stand-in doctor, or one of the several district nurses who were a hidden backbone to the community's medical needs.

I told her that I'd not forgotten what she told me - "Make sure you keep thinking about the stories I'm telling you" - and I asked if she had any remaining tales left in her repertoire. They poured out, and poured out! We were on the phone for perhaps an hour. She talked about growing up on Bernera during the Second World War. The way the children weren't allowed to go down to the shore alone without an adult, in case they'd come across an unexploded mine, or come face to face with the body of a dead sailor. The way the women ran the crofts because most of the able-bodied men were away. The day the Bernera Bridge was opened in 1953 by a Mrs Macdonald of Thule House, Tobson. That had been one of the first "white houses" to have been built on Bernera. The said Mrs Macdonald, said Agnus, was deemed "the only one who was worthy" for the task.

And she told me a story - her very last story to my ears - that had come from her mother Mary, and harked back to the days before the movies and TV - those days when practical jokes entertained the village - and it was about ... body lice.

"Body lice!" I said, surprised.

Yes, it was from before the time of pesticides, or people ironing clothes which killed the eggs. In those days there was an old man in the village, and his fire as was the custom was in the middle of the black house floor. There was just an opening in the roof to let the smoke out. Every night, as he got ready for bed, this bodach went through the same routine. He'd take off his shirt, shake it over the fire, and as the blood-bloated lice crackled and popped on the dying embers, he'd say in Gaelic, as if to justify his action, "Oh, you've been bad, you've been very bad."

One night, three of the local lads decided to play a prank. The first went to the window, to watch out for when he took his shirt off. The second went to the door latch, to listen for what he'd say. And the third climbed up onto the roof beside the smoke hole, with a handful of rock salt that they'd use for putting down the herring.

As the bodach went to shake his shirt, the boy at the window gave the signal. The one on the roof dropped the salt down through the smoke hole. The moisture in the crystals made them crackle and pop and send out yellow spurts of flame as they landed on the embers.

The old man gave a startled look, shook his head, and the boy at the latch heard him saying: "Oh, you've been bad. Very bad. I've never known you be so bad before!"

These days, I meet people who remember the North Lochs Practice as it was, back in the days. They say they'd never before had medical care as good as it was in Agnus' day. Today, I trust, things have improved still further. Few will still recall the history of those changes. Few will know that buried out the back, to the west, is an archaeological trove of Dr Macdonald's old cork-top medicine bottles.

My father and mother felt greatly blessed to have had the opportunity to build on those foundations. Our dear late friend, Agnus MacIannan of Kirkibost and Achmore, was pivotal in helping it to happen. She wasn't just an individual. She was networked in, hard-wired into the whole community.

May she rest in peace amongst her people. May each of us take forward something of her mantle. May we keep thinking of her stories.

Alastair McIntosh