



### Episode 3: Beinn Li

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

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

This week I am centering my focus on one song: one which has become synonymous with the 19th century Crofters' Land Struggles, and composed by revered Skye Poetess, Màiri Mhòr nan Òran. It is, of course Òran Beinn Li.

Composed in May 1887, it is a celebration of the crofters from Braes on Skye having their rents lowered and their grazing rights reinstated by the Land Courts, following years of anguish and struggle after Lord MacDonald deprived them of those rights almost twenty years before in 1865.

MacDonald's actions led to the crofters withholding their rents in protest in 1881. The following April, an officer of MacDonald's came to Braes with summonses for those who had refused their rents but they responded by making the officer burn the papers.

On the 19th April 1882, 50 policemen were then sent from Glasgow under Sheriff Ivory's command and a conflict ensued, known as *Blàr a' Chumhaing* or The Battle of the Braes.

To steer us on this journey, I am chatting today with Gilleasbuig Ferguson and, together, we navigate our way through some of the figures mentioned in each verse, as well as sharing some stories on Màiri Mhòr's own life, which was no less colourful than the events on which she commented, and we make mention of a few stories that help to paint a picture of this impressive and astute woman.

Gilleasbuig is a lecturer in Scottish Gaelic at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. He also runs a bookshop at the head of Loch Snizort, just north of Portree, and just across from the township where Màiri Mhòr herself was born.

He is a member of the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association and he has a particular interest in old and rare Scottish and Gaelic books. Incredibly and coincidentally he currently has a full collection of the Napier Commission in his bookshop. More about that later in the podcast!

Gilleasbuig it's lovely s... to... to... blargh.

Gilleasbuig Ferguson [guest]: [laughter] She's a pro! This is so professional! I am taken aback. Just by the... the familiarity with the equipment.

DG: Oh no! [laughter]

GF: The just... you know, the presence and the uh... Eloquence.

DG: I'm trying for a reputation of a one-take-wonder.



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[laughter]

GF: It's going good so far.

DG: Oh... no. [laughter] Okay. Right, take three hundred.

[laughter]

GF: It's getting dark, come on.

DG: I know!

[laughter]

DG: Gilleasbuig it's an absolute pleasure to be here with you today and thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me.

GF: It's a pleasure to have you here! So far. [laughter]

DG: [laughter] I've got to watch myself, though. [laughter] Ehm.. I'm really excited for our chat today for a couple of reasons. One you're, you come highly recommended as a font of knowledge in this area.

GF: Hm.

DG: No pressure! And... but also, a small anecdote for you. I was driving up the road this morning from Breakish and the weather was... giving Eilean a Cheò it's true... true meaning today, it was a dismal drive up the road, and just as I came in to Sconser and looking across to Braes there was a wee *bogha-frois*, a rainbow shining over Braes, and I thought that this was a good sign for us.

GF: Yes!

DG: And then...

GF: Beinn Li.

DG: Well Beinn Li, yes.

GF: Well that's what you're seeing when you drive round there.

DG: That's the one!

GF: To the north. The big mountain on your right as you drive along there.

DG: That is Beinn Li! Well somebody is looking out for me today.

GF: That's a good sign! [laughter]

DG: I hope so! They're not technically savvy but they're looking out for me.

GF: Yes.

DG: And also another thing, so lovely to come and speak with you where we are today in Skeabost because of course this is the very place that Màiri Mhòr nan Òran was born.



GF: Yes, um it's about just over a mile walk from here across the main road and up the hill, you'll see there's actually a little plaque showing where Màiri Mhòr's croft was, where they were born. And it's named after her father, it's called *Tobar Iain Bhàin*, which is Fair John's Well. And Iain Bàn or Iain MacDonald was Màiri Mhòr's father and uh... So it's quite poignant there to see. It's... there are no houses up there now but you can see, you can see the uh, the runrigs, the mounds where people...

DG: Yeah.

GF: People planted potatoes and things and uh...

DG: Lovely!

GF: You can't really see any footings of the house but it's near to that well that she was born.

DG: Do you know when...

GF: And uh...

DG: Sorry. Do you know when the plaque was put there?

GF: I... it's been... it's quite a while ago there, one was put there and it's been replaced fairly recently probably in the last ten, fifteen years, so uh, ehm.

DG: I've never seen it. Maybe I'll go on my way back.

GF: It's worth a wander up, yes, if you go up to the old cemetery and there's a... an old kind of track that you can take a Land Rover up but most people walk up there and it's about 200 or 300 yards from the car park. You'll see it on the right.

DG: Lovely.

GF: Just by the road.

DG: Great. And sometimes Màiri Mhòr nan Òran was known as Màiri Nighean Iain Bhàin nan Òran.

GF: Yes Màiri Nighean Iain Bhàin. So yes her, eh, as most people in the Highlands up until recently are named...

DG: Mhm.

GF: ...after their father usually. So ehm... she would have been named after her dad. And she would have been known that way ehm... to the locals in Skye. Yeah. So that's, apparently, 200 years ago.

DG: Yes!

GF: 1821 she was born. There are a few people who maybe dispute that. But it's the...

DG: Widely recognised.

GF: Yes, that's right. Widely recognised. So, very appropriate, 200 years ago, very close to here.

DG: And lovely that we're still speaking about her, and singing her songs, and celebrating her. Because she was some woman!



GF: She was quite the woman in uh... physically, even!

DG: Yes!

GF: If you see photos of her, you know... If you got a right hook from Màiri Mhòr, you'd know about it.

DG: [laughter]

GF: She was really well put together.

DG: [laughter]

GF: And um... I've got a good story about, and it maybe just um... shows how relatively close these things are in history. It's not really ancient history. It's uh, we're on the verges of living memory here. Because when I was born, I was born in Lewis, and we came over to Skye when I was five.

DG: Right.

GF: And I remember very clearly one of the first - my father was the parish minister in Portree - and one of the first services my father took, and it was a very, it was a huge service, in June 1980, was the funeral of Colonel Jock MacDonald.

DG: Really?

GF: Yeah. Famous landowner, possibly one of the last of the Gaelic-speaking aristocracy in Skye.

DG: Up at Viewfield House.

GF: Up at Viewfield House in Portree. Famous piper as well, great judge of piping competitions.

DG: Yeah and there's still the Colonel Jock Memorial Competition every year.

GF: Yes there's a competition every year in his name, his grandson still owns Viewfield House and it's run as a hotel there. Ehm, but the interesting thing. When he was a young boy, there's a very... The story is still in the family. He was possibly the age as I was, about five or six, he got into trouble in Viewfield and he ran away! And he ran away to Skeabost.

DG: Uh-huh!

GF: And the story goes that when... He knew Màiri Mhòr, and when he got to her place he went to Màiri Mhòr's house. And when they came looking for him he hid under her skirt.

DG: Oh! [laughter]

GF: So that they wouldn't find him! And I don't know whether Màiri Mhòr was playing along with this or not but that was the story.

DG: That's incredible!

GF: And uh.. If you see a photo of Màiri Mhòr there's room for plenty people under the skirt. The dresses are huge! There's a great photo in her collected poems of her at a traditional kind of um... what's called a *deilbh* which is what's used for winding up wool, and her... you know. She was a stout lady. And so that fellow who



had a very intimate experience with Màiri Mhòr was buried when I was a boy. So it goes to show you just how close it is, in history.

DG: Yeah. Because I think we can be guilty of just putting all of these songs and all of this history like you say, into ancient history.

GF: That's right.

DG: And it's not. And I think it's part of that, because it was so recent, makes me feel quite connected to her poetry and to her songs. The language is... simpler than the language of the poetry a hundred years ago. The imagery... It's quite accessible, certainly in the vernacular language.

GF: Yes. Yes, there is a connection, I think that people, Gaelic speakers, feel with that kind of poetry that's very close. And of course it's... a lot of her poetry and a lot of the stuff that is sung nowadays, is what's... um poetry in praise of her island. And, as we know, I mean Skye is as popular as it ever was. And probably about the time that Màiri Mhòr was composing songs, that's when the waves of visitors started to come and visit the island in huge numbers. That would have been the time it started that the Highlands became popularised in the Lowlands as a place to visit and spend time and to, you know, get away from the big urban centres down south.

DG: Would that kind of tie in with the time of... You know these posters that you see of the LNER, the Railway posters, Visit the Isle of Skye, would that have been around that time at all?

GF: I think that would have been a bit later.

DG: Right.

GF: I think they were maybe in the early twentieth century.

DG: Oh ok.

But that... but that was a development of what began in the Victorian Era, at the time Màiri Mhòr was active.

But what you said there was... another thing that I... just in terms of how close it is, to just... your Skye folk in general. I remember when I was a... I was a taxi driver for a while after I left university, and it was an awesome time, I remember; I was a taxi driver for three or four years. And it just happened to be at the time, and all these guys are gone now, but there was five other taxi drivers that I drove with, we were all Gaelic speakers from Skye, and the laugh that we would have just teasing each other and telling stories in Gaelic when we were waiting in Portree Square, it was great.

But I remember one old fella, he was from a little town nearby. He was quite a rough and ready fellow, quite gruff. And I remember one night we were sitting doing... and he asked me, in Gaelic,

'Do you know what the best Gaelic that's ever written is?'

And I said, I wasn't sure what he was getting at. He was a member in the church so I thought he was going to start talking about the Bible or something, so I said.

'Oh, leave the bible to one side. What else?'

And I said I really couldn't say. And I remember really clearly he started, he just burst into this um - and it really surprised me - he just started *"bha 'n t-sòbhrach mhìn-bhuidh' 's am beàrnan-brìghde, an cluaran rìoghail is lus an òir, 's gach bileag aoibhneach fo bhraon na h-oidhche, toirt na mo chuimhne nuair bha mi òg - sin e dhut"*



DG: Wow!

GF: He just rolled off a section of Màiri Mhòr's poem Nuair Bha Mi Òg - When I Was Young - about the flowers in the field and how beautiful they were.

DG: Beautiful!

GF: And I was really touched by that! Because he wasn't, you know, he wasn't academic in any way, he didn't really talk about his appreciation for the language or anything. But that just stuck in his head, probably from years and years and years back. And um, I'll never forget that, it was quite poignant..

DG: That's really lovely, and unexpected I suppose. But perhaps that ties in with the, ehm, the way that she's regarded as a poet of the people.

GF: Yes!

DG: And I think that she really connected with people on a personal level and she was quite a... Well she was very... what would be the word... personable.

GF: Yes! She was... And I think... I suppose she almost took on like a matriarchal kind of role, like a representative of people in the Highlands and in Skye in particular. But because she had moved about in circles in Inverness and Glasgow because she had been working, she had close ties with the kind of people who had migrated to the Lowlands, the Gaelic speakers, of which Glasgow was full of at that time.

DG: Full, yeah.

GF: And ehm, back home in her native Skye. And she moved back to Skye I think in 1882, which is when the kind of, the crofter's movement really took off.

DG: Yeah.

GF: And she instinctively got behind that and became a very important voice. In terms of... disseminating, kind of, information about the um, about the crofter's movement and encouraging people to get behind it, to vote for people who were standing for the crofters in elections and things like that. It was a huge part of her, what drove her to write, and to compose songs and... Yeah she, at that time she was... I think it would be fair to say she was kind of like a mother figure for this movement.

DG: Yeah.

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DG: So that brings us neatly on to our song for today, Òran Beinn Lì, which is a beautiful song and it documents what... Well it kind of talks us through many of the people that were instrumental in the crofting um land struggles.

GF: Yes.

DG: Which didn't actually start in Braes itself, although Òran Beinn Lì talks of the struggles in the Battle of the Braes, or Blàr a' Chumhaing I think it might be called?

GF: Blàr a' Chumhaing is the actual name for the event that happened in April 1882. Which kind of, like you say it wasn't the first event in terms of the crofter's um revolt as it were. But it was the one that sparked public interest and that really lit the fuse for various other uhm.. Events, and ultimately led to the Napier Commission the following year. Which is... well we can talk about that later. But that was an extraordinary kind of event in



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terms of... giving voice to people's grievances and concerns all over the Highlands, but starting off in Braes in Skye. The very first meeting was in May I think of 1883 in the... church I think in Braes.

DG: Wow. Amazing.

GF: So em... yeah. And she was present at that meeting as well. It's not documented in the Napier report, but she was...

DG: She was there!

GF: She was noted I think in the press as being present at that meeting and probably...

DG: Vocal!

GF: ... with a stole around her neck and a fancy big hat in one of her voluminous dresses.

DG: Absolutely! [laughter]

GF: Quite the presence.

DG: This has just made me think of a story you told me just before we started recording here, which we should be talking about the song just now, but the story you told me of the boat trip...

GF: Yes!

DG: I'd love you to tell us that. Just before we get stuck in.

GF: Yes it's a shame we don't have um Cailean MacLean, local photographer and piping expert. He was the one who told me this story about one of his relatives, I think it was a grand uncle, who um was going to. Who lived in Braes and was in Portree, presumably in the 1880s at some point. And he was going home, and who did he meet on the pier when he was heading back in his sailing boat but Màiri Mhòr nan Òran. And she prevailed on him to give him a lift in the boat to Braes; she wanted to go out and visit people in Braes, presumably. And of course she got in the boat and um... putting it delicately, the boat's balance... the boat's trim was kind of affected, adversely.

DG: That's a very delicate way of putting it, yes. [laughter]

GF: So by the time they got out of the bay, this chap realised that the wind wasn't favourable for sailing home, so he had to get out the oars. And row. And... [laughter] you can imagine with the boat tipping up the way it was kind of hard to get the oars to reach the water. And then, he said, it started to rain and Màiri Mhòr brought out this massive umbrella and erected an umbrella, and apparently this umbrella started blowing the boat in the wrong direction, and he had to row even harder, so the poor guy was absolutely done in by the time he got to Braes. And every time after, according to the story, whenever her name was mentioned he would say in Gaelic "*Ah, i fhèin 's umbrella*"

DG: [laughter]

GF: 'Herself and her umbrella.' Rather disparaging.

DG: [laughter] Yes.

GF: Never forgave her for giving him the worst boat trip of his life.



DG: There's one of her songs, though, A' Chlach agus Màiri, or Nuair Chaidh na Ceithir Ùr Oirre and it talks about a boat trip that she goes on and the 'Clach' I'm not sure who that was referring to - and it says "*ma thig thusa staigh dhan bhàta, bidh sinn uile an cunnairt bathaidh 's feumaidh mise beagan dàil mum faighinn fath air m' iompachadh*". So I think...

GF: Sin e! If that's the same one... Was that over at Strome ferry?

DG: Yes it was.

GF: Yes so she had to. They had to politely ask her to wait for the next one.

DG: For the next one! "*Bheir thu àite trìuir a-mach*", you'll take the place of three people out. [laughter] But she says "*chaidh mi staigh innnte le sùrdag 's shìn a' Chlach air monmhar ùrnaigh, 'Fhreasdail cùm sinn bhon a ghrunnd bhon chaill i na bha thùr aice*"!

GF: [laughter] Everybody crossed themselves.

DG: Yes exactly. So that was her technique, she did it on more than one occasion then.

Just to translate those couple of verses before we move on. The first one is saying, the Clach was saying 'if you come into the boat, we'll all be at risk of drowning and I need a bit of time to be convinced or to be persuaded' and, eh, then the next verse says, she replies saying 'I went into it - into the boat - with a skip in my step and the Clach began to pray 'fate, keep us from the ground since she has lost all of her senses!'

---interval---

*Thugaibh taing dhan a' mhuinntir  
Tha fo riaghladh na Bànrigh,  
Rinn an lagh dhuinn cho dìongmhalt'  
'S nach caill sinn Beinn Lì.*

Okay so let's bring things back to Òran Beinn Lì then, and um, so. The song starts '*thugaibh taing dhan a' mhuinntir tha fo riaghladh na Bànrigh, rinn an lagh dhuinn cho dìongmhalt*' - dìongmhalt?

GF: *Dìongmhalt*, yeah! That's not a word you hear too often today.

DG: No!

GF: It's kind of, tight, secure, yeah so the idea was that she was praising... She didn't always do this but she was praising the government and the legal... um... apparatus that had given, that had given the day to the crofters in Braes. And basically it refers to, what it refers to is, after the um... the crofter's commission, the Napier Commission, several years after that we had the Crofters' Holding Act in 1886, which gave, was the kind of, the really important legal instrument which gave security of tenure to the crofters.

DG: Right.

GF: And um. From that we had the Scottish Land Court that passed judgement on various disputes. And in 1887 it was in the spring of that year that the land court decided in favour of the crofters of um Beinn Lì in terms of their dispute that had been going on for ages! I think it was in 1865 they lost their rights to graze there, so it's over 20 years they had to wait to get justice there.

DG: Yeah.



GF: And they were given the right to graze on that. To put their cattle out onto that hill and to use it for grazing.

DG: But they hadn't necessarily stopped it though, had they?

GF: Well it wasn't necessarily in the sense of them stopping the grazing, but the rent that was being asked, I think that was part of the problem in many places. The crofters were willing to pay for the privilege of having their cattle on people's land but the prices being asked were pretty exorbitant in many cases. And that was the real issue, so it was a...

And, yeah, basically they were refusing to pay these exorbitant rents and in, um, in 1887 they were given the right to presumably a much more reasonable rate to use that land again.

DG: Hmm.

GF: So that's basically the main driving force for the song.

DG: And that's the year that she composed the song, was 1887.

GF: That would have been 1887, yes, probably shortly after that happened.

DG: Yeah.

GF: Of course she refers back in the early part of the song, five years to the Battle of the Braes. *Blàr a' Chumhaing*, which everybody looks on as a kind of watershed moment in the whole, in the whole crofters' struggle, certainly in Skye.

DG: Yeah.

GF: Although if you were wanting to put a start on the whole thing you would have to go back to Lewis in 1874, the Bernera Riot riot as it's called where it was really the uh... the accolade goes to the Leòdhasaich for getting the ball rolling, as it were. In terms of... restoring some of the crofters' rights to use the land and uh.

DG: For the very same reasons.

GF: Yes for similar reasons, uh, I mean it was true throughout the highlands. Either lands were withheld so they could be used for other purposes, for big farms or that they were, the land that was available, often very poor, was rented at exorbitant rates.

DG: Yeah. So there's a few characters that are mentioned in the song.

GF: Yes.

DG: That are, that seem quite interesting. We've got ehm, *an t-Sàtan*.

GF: Yeah!

DG: So this is our baddie of the story, I believe.

GF: Yeah the boogeyman.

DG: [laughter]



GF: Satan. And you can tell when someone is referred to as Satan himself you know that it's um... In fact there are two characters who are named in that same stanza. "*Thugaibh beannachd gu Parnell thug a bhuaidh air an t-Sàtan air choir 's nach faicear gu bràth e tighinn air àrainn an tìr*"

So Parnell is an interesting name because it doesn't refer to the real Parnell who was part of the Irish, one of the ones who established the Irish Land League.

DG: The Land League, yeah.

GF: And then anybody who is going into detail, into depth with this, you'll realise very quickly that the... the um Scottish movement for land rights was an outgrowth of the same movement in Ireland. Um. And Parnell was one of the figureheads of that movement, one of the ones who founded it. And um, what happened we had our kind of equivalent in Skye, because the actual, the movement in Skye actually started a few years before the actual beginning of the Battle of the Braes happened, a few years earlier in Valtos.

DG: Mhm.

GF: On the East Coast of Trotternish, up near Staffin.

DG: Yes.

GF: And the... the kind of key figure there was a fellow: Norman Stewart. And ehm. Perhaps because he shared a part of the name. Parnell, his name was Charles Stewart Parnell, and because Norman Stewart, I don't know.

DG: Yeah there could be a...

GF: Anyway, he became, he got the nickname Parnell because he was the equivalent figure in people's eyes in the North of Skye.

DG: Wow.

GF: He was, you know, kind of... raising the standard for the Skye crofters initially. So that's why he gets, he's mentioned before anybody else in this particular poem, even though he wasn't connected with anyone in Braes specifically.

DG: Yeah. I suppose that probably gave them a lot of encouragement, though!

GF: Yes, that's right. Yes I'm sure... yeah it would have been...

The fact that somebody was standing up somewhere else would have... And the songs that were composed were part of the, spreading of the word and spreading the... the uh... the confidence to actually stand up for themselves.

DG: I heard earlier in the year, just to go off on a tangent. Earlier in the year when there was some celebration on Màiri Mhòr's 200th anniversary, and I think it might have been Donald Meek who was speaking on Radio nan Gàidheal and Donald Meek who put this book together, um the Mhàiri Mhòr book. He had said that her songs were like the modern day equivalent of - or, the olden day equivalent of our social media. Using that platform to vocalise what was going on and spread the news.

GF: Yes! Yes. And rather than being posted on Facebook, these songs were posted in the press! So like in the Oban Times..... is it the Mail in Glasgow? Is it the Scottish Mail? I forget exactly the name of it, yeah, and there were. There were specific papers for the land struggles as well. The Highland, the Scottish Highlander and the Highlander, they were important kind of... Yeah the kind of...



DG: The Glasgow Weekly Mail.

GF: The Glasgow Weekly Mail! That's the one. Yes.

DG: And the North British Daily Mail as well. Although I'm not... I'm just looking at that quickly and not sure which side...

GF: So that was the Facebook Wall of that time.

DG: [laughter] yeah!

GF: And um... it's... we're really lucky in a way that these songs were... that they were reproduced there because a lot of them we wouldn't have at all if they weren't there. And often the only sources for the original songs is maybe the Oban Times.

DG: So they were printed in the paper? The songs?

GF: They were printed in the paper quite a lot! And it was... ehm, yeah the press really really lapped that stuff up. They really wanted... because it was kind of. It really encapsulated people's feelings, in just you know a few short stanzas of how people felt and it was, yeah it happened an awful lot. And as I say, Donald Meek in his book *Tuath is Tighearna*, um Tenants and Landlords, he um, gives a really interesting introduction...

DG: Oh wow!

GF: ... about how all these newspapers, these sources are really a wealth of um... information for that period. Yeah. Mainly through the songs, the Gaelic songs that are preserved in them.

DG: That's amazing. Well there's actually, ehm, a quote in the beginning of Donald Meek's book as well that talks... I suppose as well as the songs being printed you open yourself up to reviews then, and there's... Màiri Mhòr was met with... With ehm, applause and... and criticism.

GF: Yes she would have had detractors as well. And the press that was... eh, unfavourable to the Gaels, they would publish these songs too, and say 'look at how these awful savages are behaving.'

DG: Wow.

GF: You know: 'With no regard to law and the ownership of land. You know this land belongs to these people, and these upstarts are trying to impose their own version of the law on the situation.'

DG: Nothing's changed then! [laughter]

GF: So it wasn't just the... papers that were sympathetic to the Gaels that printed them.

DG: Right okay.

GF: It's very interesting.

DG: Yeah absolutely. Right we've deviated away from *an t-Satan 's na h-Ainglean*.

GF: Yeah, so the Satan was Sheriff William Ivory who was, I suppose like a... He became a bit of a boogeyman in the Isle of Skye as he had a huge reputation, perhaps not always deserved, of being very high-handed and dismissive and ehm unnecessarily vicious towards the crofters. And of course the main reason for that is that it was under his jurisdiction that the Battle of the Braes kind of... happened.



Because he, it was him that ordered, after the fracas initially with the crofters in Braes who had committed what was called an act of deforcement, where they had stopped um... an officer, by the name of Martin from issuing summonses, *sumonaidhean* in Gaelic they were, summonses to the ringleaders of the unrest in Braes. They'd got him to burn them, and so that was... the legal term was deforcement, where he was stopped, he was prevented from carrying out his duties and the legal papers were destroyed. So that was the reason that fifty police officers were drafted. Can you imagine them all kind of...

DG: Yeah!

GF: Can you imagine when they got the news? Like, you guys are all going up to Skye.

DG: [laughter]

GF: There's this bunch of crofters who are... have uh... taken the law into their own hands, as they say.

DG: [laughter]

GF: And you're going to have to sort them out. It must have been quite, for some of them it must have been quite daunting!

DG: Quite daunting, yeah.

GF: But they had, so they went up to Skye and...

GF: ... That was the uh, that was the kind of, the force that met with the crofters in the Braes. And as they say in Gaelic, *thachar sruth ri steal* - a stream met a torrent.

DG: Oh wow.

GF: Yeah! It's interesting. From what I gather the people of Braes didn't make a great issue of it at the time, when they met with these policeman who were charged with carrying out the arrest of the five ringleaders, as they were called, of the unrest in Braes, and to take them back to the prison in Portree.

DG: Yes!

GF: And of course the crofters weren't having any of it! And everything started flying, sticks and stones and...

DG: There's quite a gory verse in the song.

GF: Yes there is!

DG: And it says "*'s na mnathan bu shuairce 's bu modhaile gluasad, chaidh an claicinn a' spuaiceadh ann am bruachan Beinn Lì.*"

Which is, oh it's grim! The kind of the sweetest, how would you translate it? The kind of sweetest, the mildest woman...

GF: The most...

DG: Gentlest...

GF: Gentle-bearing...



DG: Gentle-bearing, their skulls were cracked!

GF: Yes! Their skulls were cracked on the banks of Beinn Li.

DG: On the banks of Beinn Li. Oh!

GF: And they were! And there were press there, who recorded it. And I can give you some sources if you want to read...

DG: Oh yeah!

GF: ... the very very ostentatious kind of descriptions of what went on. There was lots of, I think one of the policeman got his nose smashed in with a rock and um, there was a few of the ladies were laid pretty low with uh... having been smashed in the head and arms with batons by the policeman. And...

DG: It's really it was...

GF: One of the ladies, I forget her name, but she was... She was laid low for quite a while with head injuries and so forth. The fact that nobody was killed is quite possibly more luck than anything else.

DG: [laughter]

GF: And if the police hadn't managed to get away when they did, I think that could have been, there could have been a few fatalities on either side.

DG: It kind of surprises me, though... that verse stands out to me because the women were right there in the fight as well, you know, it wasn't just the men that were.

GF: Yes they were, when you read the... they were kind of caught off guard because they came very early in the morning, and it wasn't... I don't think they expected it at all. And so they had to, basically there was a... there was a shout out to everybody to come out, and people were coming out and you know the women hadn't done their hair so there was...

DG: Even more wild and savage!

GF: The hair flapping in the breeze. And the...

DG: Yeah.

GF: Not quite dressed properly and they were scrambling through the heather to...

And they were, I mean they were really. When you read it... They were mad. They were yelling all kinds of curses and uh, oaths towards these policemen. Em. Cursing them up and down.

DG: Wow.

GF: And it was, as you say they... In Gaelic it's called *Blar a' Chumhaing* which is the Battle of the Narrows or the Defile. And if you go to where the monument is in Braes, still, you can see it's kind of a narrow passage where the road goes between a kind of big slope and another massive slope going down to the sea, and it's the only place you can safely get across there. So you can imagine the police force on that road and the Braes folk gathering above and chucking stones and all sorts of anything they could get their hands on. And the policemen ultimately, they started doing the same thing, they started chucking stones back. And that's how some of the poor... and some young girls as well-



DG: Yeah.

GF: -got some really nasty cracks on the head from...

DG: I'd have run away. [laughter]

GF: From these cops. [laughter]

DG: I'm not brave enough!

GF: But it's good that the cops got away when they did.

DG: Yeah.

GF: Because otherwise it could have turned into a real nasty stramash with... serious casualties.

DG: You can see how this was a real marker in this land struggle, you know, it was such a prominent event. The news travelled across the country and...

GF: Yeah you could get the, a lot of newspapers from the London Evening News and a lot of these English newspapers from across the country you'll see it, accounts of the Battle of the Braes, the Crofter's Revolt. It was big news.

DG: Because I mean... I suppose you know that it wasn't unmotivated. The crofters were, they were pushed!

GF: Yeah. And if you go into the history of it it goes back a long way, you know, from the... when feudalism and the old way of life of the clans that came to an end in the middle of the eighteenth century.

DG: Yeah.

GF: And the... bit by bit the clan chiefs started to get more and more high-handed and...

DG: Capitalist.

GF: Yeah well, yeah. They were going to England and London and thinking 'Wow, how the other half live! I want a bit of that.'

DG: Yes.

GF: 'How can I make some cash and um live like this?'

DG: Yeah.

GF: Well, charge rent to your clansmen, you know bit by bit. And of course we had the various... I'm sure you'll get people much more knowledgeable than me talking about the economic problems of the mid-nineteenth century, you know the collapse of the kelp industry and various things...

DG: Yeah.

GF: ...that led to, well, a mixture of things. Between some of the most awful hair-raising stuff of people getting evicted and literally pushed out of their homes while they are burning above their heads, and great swathes of people to make the open-eyed decision to get out, just to go. To Canada, to Australia, anywhere!



DG: Yep.

GF: And a lot of them to the Lowlands of course. And the um... from that the gradual, just, unrest and ill-feeling towards the landlords just grew and grew and grew, and kind of came to a head at that time in the mid-seventies, early eighties.

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DG: So as a result of that we had the Napier Commission.

GF: Yes. That was Gladstone's government and um they decided to figure out what this was all about and to get first hand accounts of what exactly was going on. So they... I mean it's extraordinary! I've got it here to show you.

DG: Yeah.

GF: As a [laughter]. It's the um... four volumes of evidence that were gathered. Four big chunky...

DG: Wow, they're enormous!

GF: Big chunky volumes, yes. From all over the Highlands. Orkney, Shetland, Inner Hebrides, Outer Hebrides. Not everybody was really... in favour of it, they thought it was going to be a bit of a white wash in favour of the landlords. But it wasn't!

DG: Hm!

GF: And the first, I mean if you care to have a look at the first.

DG: I would love to.

GF: But yeah! Why don't you have a... If you have a look at the...

DG: Do I need white gloves? It's really a lovely old dusty book.

GF: No, no!

So um, if you want to have a look at the Napier Commission, I happen to have an original set of the Parliamentary papers that were produced!

DG: That's incredible!

GF: In 1884. Yeah! It's very hard to get a hold of, I've only had it in my shop once before.

DG: This is your second set of them?

GF: This is the second set I've handled in twenty years. There was, there is a lovely facsimile that was made by the Irish, one of the Irish Universities. But getting a hold of the original volumes...is quite difficult.

DG: But they're... beautiful looking books. Five volumes! Leather bound.

GF: Yes so you've got the... Four big volumes of all the evidence that was gathered by the Napier Commission and the volume, the report volume at the end, uh... summarising the findings and their recommendations for improving the lot of the crofters.



DG: Amazing.

GF: And of course this is what was done, it was done in 1883, printed 1884, and within two years 1886 we had the Crofter's Holding Act.

DG: That's a really impressive timeframe.

GF: It is! Extraordinary! The amount of work and we're back in the... this is before the days of desktop publishing and just all of that being written down...

DG: Yep.

GF: Taken and type set and printed and published, it's just unbelievable. With maps and everything showing where they were and, it's just a breathtaking amount of work. And yeah just an unbelievable resource for people. Anybody in the Islands, if you get a chance, you can get uh, I can send you links to digital copies that anybody can download online so you can have a look through, so that wherever you live, or wherever you're interested to see, you can go and see what the crofters there, and the landlords themselves, what they said at that time.

DG: Wow.

GF: So I've got here the first volume of evidence, the first meeting, Braes, Skye, Tuesday May 8th 1883, it gives you a list of the commissioners themselves: Lord Napier and of course Sheriff Nicholson, he was from Skye, and ehm... the first guy is Angus Stewart, a crofter, and he was involved in the Battle of the Braes, and it's really interesting, I'm going to read the first little bit.

DG: Oh yeah!

GF: So the chairman says: 'Would you have the goodness to state what is your occupation?'

'A crofter.'

'Have you been engaged in fishing?'

'Yes'

'Were you born here at the Braes?'

'Born at the Braes.'

'Have you lived here all your life?'

'Not all my life, I've been away but not very far off.'

'From time to time?'

'From time to time.'

'But you are thoroughly acquainted with the feelings and interests of the people here?'

'Yes.'

'Have you been freely elected by the people to be their delegate?'



‘Yes.’

‘Now, will you have the goodness to state to me what are your hardships-’ sorry, ‘What are the hardships or grievances of which the people complain, who have elected you?’

‘Yes, but it is in Gaelic that I prefer to speak.’

DG: [gasp] Wow!

GF: Now this is interesting because from then on, all of the examination of the witnesses, probably everybody on Skye, certainly the crofters, was conducted through their Sheriff Clark, Dougal MacLachlann as an interpreter. So think of that! As an addition to the work! Not only was all this transcribed, but it was translated.

DG: Translated!

GF: Word for word. As it happened by Dougal MacLachlann. So he goes on, what’s really interesting is that he says, before he says anything: ‘I want assurances that the landlords aren’t going to evict me because of what I say here today.’

DG: Yeah!

GF: So that is how ehm... you know how... kind of shoogly they felt their position was. That even speaking out and expressing themselves felt they could actually get them turfed out. So they managed because the factor was there, so they managed to get assurances. Basically.

DG: Wow.

GF: So that’s how it started and as you see, all of that evidence was collected in a very short time. And ehm it’s... just an amazing act of evidence gathering and publishing.

DG: But such an amazing act of, kind of, bravery, after the fighting, that speaking out, like you say it was fragile to speak out, and- But it was a turning point.

GF: Yes.

DG: And that turning point always has to come.

GF: Yes, where the government was willing to give an ear to these people who, you know, obviously were quite marginalised in geographical and social terms, at that time. You know, not really ehm... people didn’t really give a second thought to these people, but this was a chance to give them, to speak out about, all the injustices...

DG: And one of the people on the commission was Charles Fraser MacIntosh.

GF: Yes!

DG: Who went on to become the crofting MP, or something like that?

GF: Yes that’s right! There were quite a few guys who um... campaigned as uh, upholding the crofter’s struggle as it was. And he was one of them. And um praised directly by Màiri Mhòr in her songs.

DG: Yes. He in fact was on that boat trip to Strome as well!

GF: Yes!



DG: [laughter] So he was in the boat!

GF: Yes!

DG: I think they had a great relationship.

GF: Yes, ehm. There were various people in that strata that Màiri Mhòr was very supportive and vocal in praising and encouraging people to vote for as well and that was part of her, there's a great tradition in Gaelic poetry of what was called *brosnachadh*, encouragement, you know, and one of the earliest poems we have is the Battle of Harlaw at the beginning of the fifteenth century, this massive encouragement to battle, for the Gaels. And ehm... in that vein, Màiri Mhòr was inciting, a' *brosnachadh*, people to vote for folk who she felt had their best interests at heart.

DG: She was a powerful woman.

GF: Yeah there was a fair bit of power. And people talk about women not being empowered at that time and not having ehm... not having their voices heard. But Màiri Mhòr of all the... I mean there's lots of people, and if you go through Donald Meek's excellent book on the kind of, the clearances and the crofter's struggle, Tuath is Tighearna, lots of really interesting voices, some of them just...anonymous because maybe a song that appeared under a pen name in the Oban Times. But Màiri Mhòr - of all the ones who had influence, Màiri Mhòr is almost unique in that she had her work published in 1891.

DG: Yeah.

GF: There's a lovely book which I have here as well, of course!

DG: [laughter]

GF: Ehm... I think the only other equivalent I can think of is Andrew Livingston, *Mac Dhun Leighe* in Islay, who was also published at that time, and was a stalwart of the crofter struggle as well.

DG: Wonderful.

GF: You know so of all the, you know in terms of the people who really had... the privilege of being published, Màiri Mhòr really stands out in that regard.

DG: Incredible. So going forward from the Napier's Commission, we had the - two years later was the Crofters' Act?

GF: Yes, the Crofters Holding Act, which was the kind of key act. Again, people were, not everybody was that enamoured with it. Some people thought that it didn't go far enough. That it didn't em, there were a lot of old, you know, that didn't give them a chance to get, certain people lost their lands generations back and they thought we should get that back

DG: But it didn't reinstate them

GF: Yes, but it didn't really but it certainly in terms of giving them security on the land that they had, and giving them the chance to work that land at a reasonable rent, that was a huge turning point, a huge victory. Like I say, the Land Court that was established from there obviously, this is an early victory in that regard that Màiri is celebrating; when the Braes crofters, when it was judged in favour of the Braes crofters in terms of Beinn Lì.

DG: Wonderful. Well Gilleasbuig, mòran mòran taing thank you so so much for this lovely conversation this afternoon and I really appreciate your time and your generosity in sharing your knowledge, not just your thoughts and your words but also just to see these books and photographs - it's incredible to, you know I know



the song and I know... through the songs I know a bit of the history, but then to see these other pieces as well just really kind of deepens that sense of awe for it and value of it so thank you so so much it's been a real delight to speak to you today.

GF: It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

DG: Thank you

DG: My sincere thanks again to Gilleasbuig Ferguson for being so giving in his time and knowledge, not only through his words, but also in all of the books and documents he has kindly shared with me.

I hope that you enjoyed our conversation - if so, please remember to like, share, review and subscribe to this podcast.

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

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

## Òran Beinn Lì

Thugaibh taing dhan a' mhuinntir  
Tha fo riaghladh na Bànrigh,  
Rinn an lagh dhuinn cho dìongmhalt'  
'S nach caill sinn Beinn Lì.

*Give thanks to the people  
under the Queen's rule  
who gave us such a steadfast law  
that we will not lose Ben Lì.*

Cuiribh beannachd le aiteas  
Gu tuathanaich Bhaltois.  
Bha air tùs anns a' bhatail,  
'S nach do mheataich san stri.

*Send greetings with gladness  
to the farmers of Valtos  
who were at the front in the battle  
and who did not weaken in the struggle.*

Thugaibh beannachd gu "Pàrnell",  
Thug a' bhuaidh air "An t-Sàtan",  
Air chor 's nach fhaicear gu bràth e  
Tighinn air àrainn na tìr.

*Give greetings to "Pàrnell"  
who beat "The Satan",  
to the extent that he will never be seen again  
approaching this area.*

Nuair a thàinig e chiad uair  
Leth-cheud "aingel" fo riaghladh,  
Chuir e còignear an iarainn  
Ann an crìochan Beinn Lì.

*When he came the first time,  
with fifty "angels" under his command,  
he put five men in irons  
at the boundaries of Ben Lì.*

Chaidh an giùlan leis "na h-aingle",  
'S an glasadh an gainntir;  
'S a dh'aindeoin cumhachd an nàimhdean,  
'S leò am fonn is Beinn Lì.

*They were borne away by the "angels"  
and locked in a prison,  
and despite the power of their enemies  
they still have the land of Ben Lì.*

'S na mnathan bu shuairce  
'S bu mhodhaile gluasad,  
Chaidh an claiginn a spuaiceadh  
Ann am bruachan Beinn Lì.

*The kind women  
who carry themselves so courteously,  
their skulls were broken  
on the slopes of Ben Lì.*

'S ged tha 'n Cuilithionn is Glàmaig  
Measg nam beanntan as àille,  
Cha bhi 'n eachdraidh air a fàgail  
Ach aig sàiltean Beinn Lì.

*Although the Cuillins and Glàmaig  
are among the most beautiful of mountains,  
the history will only be associated  
with the slopes of Ben Lì.*

Lyrics:

Meek. D. E: 1998; Màiri Mhòr nan Òran Taghadh de a h-Òrain

Donald Eachann Meek, published Comunn Litreachas Gàidhlig na h-Alba (Scottish Gaelic Texts Society), 1998

Translation: The People's Voice <https://thepeoplesvoice.glasgow.ac.uk/song-ben-li-cathy-ann/>

