

Paisley-born artist finds his Morningtown on Seil



Don puts the finishing touches to the signs that Nightbird & Mike Lennie used in their photo shoot.

Translator and artist Don McCracken is taking on the role of tour manager for his return to the Highlands and Islands.

A Paisley-born artist, travelling from his home in Finland, will carry out a poignant ritual on the Isle of Seil on the completion of a musical tour he is managing.

Don McCracken has lived in Helsinki for the past 25 years but his Scottish roots run deep. In March, Don will return to his country of birth with Fenno-Swedish singer/songwriter Anna-Stina Jungerstam (Nightbird) and fellow Scot Mike Lennie for a nine-date tour of the Highlands and Islands (more on this in our leisure section).

On April 5, the trio will arrive on Seil for a performance at Tigh an Truish, but, for the 48-year-old artist, the visit will mean much more than a final tour date.

'My granny Sarah (Sal) McDougall was born at 19 Balvicar, in a slate quarrier's cottage, in 1901,' he told us.

'She was the youngest of 13 children and went to school in Ellenabeich. She moved down to Govanhill in Glasgow as a teenager, and married my grandad Gilbert Watson, but they kept a connection with the house, and by the time I came along in 1971, she owned it as the last surviving child.

'Sal and Gilbert spent most of the year there and, as a child, I spent the whole length of my summer holidays there. The house has since been demolished, but the space remains.'

Don has many fond memories of his holidays on Seil, in particular welcoming the travelling retailers. Curry the Fish on a Wednesday, Turnbull the Veg on a Thursday, and Jackie Campbell the Milk with his daily rounds from Winterton Farm.

‘There were no children in Balvicar back then, and I spent a lot of time alone, though I can’t remember ever feeling lonely,’ he continued.

‘I’d go for long walks to Ellenabeich and Cuan and explore all around the island.’



Six-year-old Don takes in his surroundings from the top of Barra Mor.

Don’s social life outwith his family was all with the old folks he called auntie and uncle. He’d do the rounds and get fed on tea and tablet and maybe they’d slip him some coins for Bilton’s shop.

‘I didn’t really notice their age, they were just my friends,’ he said.

‘My best pal was Mrs Bucheski, an old Polish woman with a corgi called Bunty, who was my second-best pal. But perhaps the most interesting character lived right next door.

‘He was called John Ross and he was seen as being rather special. He lived in his cottage without electricity and he certainly had his own way of doing things.

‘When he went out to sea, he’d row facing forwards, and after his afternoon dinner he’d walk a measured mile every day. Nothing so strange in that, except he’d do it back and forwards outside his door so that if it rained he could pop inside and wait for it to go off. When it was dry again he’d come out and pick up where he left off.

‘He also had green glass bottles stuck on poles around his yard to ward off the fairies. When I was wee I used to sit and watch his walks with an intense fascination.’

Thinking back now on that world, from a distance of some 40 years, Don admits his childhood holidays seem impossibly ancient.

His clearest memories of Balvicar are of carrying heavy buckets of water back from the well, washing in a tin bath by the fire and waiting outside the phone box half a mile away for his dad to call and say hello on a Friday night.

Don also recalls collecting wild flowers with his mum in the quarry (now a golf course), fishing for crabs at the pier, visiting Highland Arts in Ellenabeich, collecting eggs from the hens that roamed around freely, looking at Scarba to tell the weather – ‘if the top clouded over you’d get rain 20 minutes later – sitting looking out to sea at the Rubha nan Ron and following sheep tracks round the cliffs without ever imagining it might be possible to fall down into the crashing waves.

‘One other thing that I remember very clearly was going to sleep at night, and my mother singing Morningtown Ride by the Seekers,’ added Don. ‘It was one of her favourite songs.’

Rocking, rolling, riding,
Out along the bay,
All bound for Morningtown,
Many miles away.

‘It’s a night-night song, and this brings us to my connection with the tour, specifically in connection with playing on Seil,’ he added.

‘Mike and Anna-Stina are my friends, and the two musicians I love most in the world. The idea of touring Scotland has been batted around between us for a number of years before finally becoming reality.

‘I wanted to do this now because my mother died in summer 2018, and I feel that the time for grieving is over and it’s time to get back to living life.

‘Much of my art deals with ritual and I have come to realise some of those roots lie in our old neighbour, John Ross, with his ritual walks and glass bottles.

‘My mother also requested a ritual of her own – that her ashes be mixed with my dad’s when he dies, and scattered at the top of the Barra Mor, looking over the sea to Easdale and Mull.

‘The Tigh an Truish is the very last date on the tour, the end of the line. When we get there, we’ll head towards Ellenabeich, and down by the sea, at the foot of the Barra Mor, we’ll carry out a ritual of our own.

‘I’ll hold a slate from the shore while Mike and Anna-Stina sing Morningtown Ride. That slate will retain the vibration, and I’ll carry it back to Finland. And when the time comes to scatter the ashes, I’ll place the slate on the mountain, and that will be the song that’s playing through the ethers as they blow away on the wind.’

Somewhere there is sunshine
Somewhere there is day
Somewhere there is Morningtown
Many miles away.