

Scottish Prose Non-fiction



Spotlight: Finlay J. MacDonald



Biographical Details

Finlay J. MacDonald (1925-1987) was a journalist, writer, filmmaker, and radio and television producer. Born and brought up in Scarista on the Isle of Harris, MacDonald took a degree in Divinity from the University of Glasgow, but rather than entering the church, joined the Gaelic department at BBC Radio Scotland as an assistant producer in 1945. For the next 30 years, MacDonald worked within the BBC, moving from the Gaelic department to become a producer in the Drama department in 1954, and then a television producer in 1962. As well as producing many original and adapted screenplays, MacDonald made several films inspired by his upbringing in Harris; his childhood also provided the basis for the series of memoirs, beginning with 1982's *Crowdie and Cream*, for which he remains best known.

Publications of Interest



- *Crowdie and Cream* (TBS The Book Service, 1982)
- *Crotal and White* (Macdonald Publishing 1983)
- *The Corncrake and the Lysander* (Macdonald Publishing 1985)

Where to Begin?



- *Crowdie and Cream*, Chapter One (pp. 5-11)
- *Crowdie and Cream*, Chapter Seven (pp. 62-71)
- *Crotal and White*, Chapters Five-Six (pp.53-74)
- *The Corncrake and the Lysander*, Chapters Eight-Nine (pp. 105-133)

Style



- Memoir
- Social history
- Comedy



Core Themes

- Hebridean life between the wars
- Gaelic culture within Scotland & UK
- Childhood and adolescence

Contextualising



Finlay J. MacDonald's work provides a valuable insight into two indigenous Scottish communities which found themselves increasingly marginalised for much of the twentieth century: the Gaelic community and the island community. While the dominant tone of his three volumes of memoir may be characterised as gently comic nostalgia, he is clear about his intention to document a way of life and a culture whose uniqueness he felt had been eroded by developments in media, transport, and agricultural technology as well as by the state's discouragement of Gaelic education. In this respect his writing finds common ground with Iain Crichton Smith's essays 'Real People in a Real Place' and 'Between Sea and Moor' (from *Towards the Human: Selected Essays*, Macdonald Publishers 1986) and, to some extent, George Mackay Brown's *For the Islands I Sing*.

Understanding



Thinking about your chosen Finlay J MacDonald text, consider the following questions, geared towards checking understanding:

- Identify **three** specific threats to the Gaelic language discussed by MacDonald.
- Summarise the key ways in which school education during MacDonald's childhood **differed** from school education today.
- In what ways did MacDonald's father provide a **positive influence** on his life as he grew up?

Analysing



Choose **one** of the features below and explain how MacDonald uses it in his writing.

Characterisation	Structure	Anecdote	Local History	Humour
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Evaluating



Thinking about your chosen Finlay J MacDonald text, consider the following evaluative questions:

1. Finlay J. MacDonald's work has been **criticised** by some for presenting the Harris community in a **reductive** or **patronising** way. To what extent is this criticism fair?
2. MacDonald's memoirs are mostly set during the **economic depression** of the 1930s. How convincingly does he capture the **hardships** experienced by islanders during that time?
3. Do you feel MacDonald has given you a greater understanding of how the culture of native Gaelic speakers **differed** from the culture of non-Gaelic-speaking Scots? Explain your answer.