



Out on the Moor, Tolsta, by Melissa Silver

The pull of the Hebrides...home can never really be anywhere else.

By Méadbh Bruce

It's an inevitable part of island life that people come and go like the ebb and flow of the tide. In the summer, the seasonal influx of tourists and second-homers lend the Scottish islands a temporary population boom. Permanent residents might travel to the mainland for special purchases or health care, to visit family or 'for a change of scenery' as one woman from Colonsay put it. It's hard to imagine wanting a break from the stunning coastlines of the Hebrides but I understood what she meant. However beautiful the view from your window might be, small communities can be a lot sometimes.

Many islanders commute away for work, or take temporary jobs or contracts that mean extended periods of time away from home. And of course, no-one is surprised when young islanders leave to seek their fortune in the wider world, or at least explore what it has to offer in the way of education, employment and romantic partners. They might return, perhaps to raise their families, or they might not.

But however far they go, whether it's just across The Minch or to the other side of the world, and whether it's

just a few days or for many decades, islanders still refer to the Hebrides as 'home'. I once got into conversation on the ferry with a student going back to university on the mainland after visiting home, who told me that all the time she was away from the islands, she felt like a piece of her was missing. "Like I really, really, really miss it."

That intense connection to home is a common motif in Gaelic culture, celebrated in art, literature, poetry and song since the earliest times. And there's a unique Gaelic word for what that young woman on the ferry was trying to express, for the feeling an islander has when they are far from home: cianalas. It means a profound longing - and sense of belonging - for the homeland.

Said to have originated in the Outer Hebrides, cianalas is not easily rendered into English. It is something approaching homesickness, but also so much more - 'home' in this instance includes the family and the wider community, the culture and language, history and heritage, and of course the land, the sea and the wide, wide-open skies. Cianalas is both physical and spiritual.

The history of the islands has seen war, famine and forced evictions drive its people from their land. Some families with a pioneering spirit left of their own accord to build a better life in pastures new. And wherever they settled, as far away as the Americas and Canada, Australia and New Zealand, their culture went with them.

The poetry and songs that came out of exile are full of longing and belonging. Like the 'Canadian Boat Song', written by an anonymous 18th century poet, that reads:

*From the lone shieling of the misty island
Mountains divide us, and the waste of seas—
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland,
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides!*

That sense of place, that connection to the homeland was passed down with a reverence from one exiled generation to the next. Scotland and the Isles became imbued with a kind of sacred significance. Speaking in the Scottish Parliament in 2009, Ted Brocklebank, MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife, said:

"Cianalas is still to be found in the Carolinas, where exiled Jacobites first landed at Cape Fear. It is to be found in the prairies of Manitoba ... in gleaming downtown Toronto ... in the fishing hamlets of Cape Breton ... In those and many other parts of the Americas, the blood is indeed still strong."

The longing - and belonging - for the time before the Clearances continued to be a creative theme through the 19th and 20th centuries, for Scottish poets abroad and at home. In 'Hallaig', arguably his most well-known poem, Sorley MacLean wrote of the people and the land, inextricably entwined.:

*... I will go down to Hallaig,
to the Sabbath of the dead,
where the people are frequenting,
every single generation gone.*

*They are still in Hallaig,
MacLeans and MacLeods,
all who were there in the time of Mac Gille Chalum:
the dead have been seen alive.*

And so it still is today. Cianalas is not an outdated concept and the Gaelic word hasn't fallen out of usage - in fact it is being taken up by otherwise non-Gaelic speaking Scots. Young writers, artists, photographers, filmmakers

and musicians are using the idea in their creative work.

For example, the photographer Keith Lloyd Davenport's collection entitled 'Cianalas' explores the connection between landscape and family. Zoe Paterson Macinnes says of her film 'Cianalas': "It comes down to more than just homesickness, and I really wanted that to come through ... which is why I decided to name it after cianalas, the only word to describe that pull towards the islands."

One can buy prints, maps, t-shirts and other merchandise replete with the dictionary definition of cianalas: "A deep seated sense of belonging to the place where your roots lie." In an internet chat group, someone expresses the desire to have the word tattooed on their body, a word in a language he does not speak, for a place he has never belonged to.

Last year on Islay, I met an old man in a graveyard by the sea. He was visiting the grave of his childhood friend who had been killed in the 1960s in an accident in Africa. The two boys had grown up together on the island, lived in the same hamlet, attended the same schools, walked the same paths, until they both left as young men to explore the world. His friend tragically met his end not long after and was brought 'home' to rest. The old man has lived on the mainland now for more than 20 years, but comes back every year to visit his friend's resting place and the land where they both began. "This is home," he said. "I'll always be an lleach."

From the poem 'Building Vocabulary' by Christine Laennec:

*Cianalas:
Who would have thought
I'd have to come
so far from home
to find a word that perfectly captures
the voiceless ache
of having left?*

It seems that, for the islanders, home can never really be anywhere else.



Looking towards Luskentyre, Isle of Harris by Melissa Silver