

The Games

Och, the traffic that was flowin'
Of Bodachs* and their Dames,
And effery one wass goin'
To Tobermory Games.

Old Cailleachs § from Lochaline,
— MacGilvrays and MacVicars —
Young bloods from Sunart's Salen
Complete with winkle pickers.

The wee "Lochbuie" kept churnin',
Wis her o'ercrowded hull,
An' all those sousands burnin'
To set their feet in Mull.

Of course, you'll all be knowin'
Myself wass in the van,
Wis Erchie from Kilchoan,
— A brave an' sirsty man.

An' Sandy, down from Corran,
— A lad to take a trick —
Wis a "jeelack"* in his sporrán,
In case we got sea-sick.

We landed, us blood brothers,
Us boys who'd travelled far,
Said "ta-ta" to the others
An' headed for the bar.

Och, the folks that I wass seein'
Old friends so dear to me.
Big Lachie from Strontian,
And Murdo from Tirée.

There's choy when friends are meetin',
An' ne'er wan moment dull,
As worldly cares go fleetin'
On Games Day, there in Mull.

An' such a proud procession
Wass marchin' up and down;
When all the skirlin' pipers
Brought music to the town.

Then a bodach wis a shoogle
Came lurchin' in my track.
Said I, "How-do, MacDougall?"
And sumped him on the back.

Cried he in icy greeting,
"MacDougall I am not.
Methinks that I am meeting
A proper Hielan' clot."

Said I, "My friend, I'm sorry,
But chust amends I'll make.
I'm strange to Tobermory,
And I took you for a mistake."

from Angus Macintyre's Ceilidh Collection: poems of Highland Life
(Farnedram Publishers, 1975?)

Now, a bowly man from Dervaig
Wass cheerin' on the Band.
But clappin's no so easy
Wis a screw-top in your hand.

A man from fàr Tiroran
Chust nearly got his harp,
When he reeled an' took a header
In front of Jimmy Sharp.

But Jimmy, aye so happy,
A man to heal a rift,
Said, "Mind your step, old chappie"
Then gave the guy a lift.

A crofter from Bunessan
Wis music on his lips
Bawled out "An t-Eilean Muileach"
In between the sips.

Then up to me came ruìnin'
An almost breathless Miss
Who sighed, "Please tell me, Mister,
Chust where the Toilet iss?"

Now folks, here was a poser,
To set my mind askew,
So I asked her, "Tell me, lassie,
Are her funnels red or blue?"

She gasps and sadly mutters,
"Please say it isn't true,
That the Muileachs^o all are nutters,
Putting funnels on a Loo."

Said I, severe an' savage,
"A raspberry to you,
You asked about the Toilet,
You said nossing of the Loo."

Bad temper she wass showin'
But on such a busy day,
How could I be knowin'
Effery Vessel in the Bay?

A respite from your labours,
A time of fun and laughs;
The place to greet your neighbours,
In hearty 'Slainte-Vahs' ★

* *Gaelic for old men.*

§ *Gaelic for old women.*

• *Gill of whisky.*

◦ *Natives of Mull.*

★ *Phonetic Gaelic for good health.*

Potatoes

Big, snowy white, they
were ferried across

the choppy sound from Bonnavoulin,
ballast in the bottom of a skiff,
a native hand firm on the helm
turning into Tobermory.

Bonnavoulin. When he spoke,
it was as if the feast
were in his mouth,
served with the mackerel
trawled in their hundreds
off the light at Rudha nan Gall.

Balachan, native Gael, has gone.
Now potatoes are shipped in plastic,
frozen mackerel like fossils,
Gaelic on a compact disk.

Last Breath

I strike a match, whirl its flame
in the room in the infirmary
where my mother is dying.
This is what must be done
in the absence of the *dealan-dè*,
fire of God, the golden butterfly
that appears in the sick room
to escort the soul to the hereafter
through door or window
at the moment of death.

I hold the trembling flame
to her last breath.