

Outside the Safe Place

An oral history of the early years
of the Iona Community

Anne Muir



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Cover photo: Reverend Raymond Bailey labouring for the masons, Iona Abbey
1939 (Raymond Bailey archive)

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PREFACE

‘A bunch of stories’

Shortly after embarking on the series of interviews on which this book is based, I faced a challenging question-time at a meeting of Iona Community members in London. One questioner was particularly dismissive of the concept of oral history: ‘It’ll just be a bunch of stories, won’t it?’

He was partly right. This book *is* a bunch of stories. But to dismiss them as ‘*just* stories’ is, I believe, a great mistake.

In the event, far from downgrading the value of stories, the collecting of this history has powerfully reinforced for me the need to acknowledge that ‘stories’ are all we have.

In an often-quoted verse from 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul contrasts what we can know and understand in this world of time and space, with what we shall know and understand in the next world:

‘Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face’.

But the root of the Greek – *en ainigmati* – which is so often translated as ‘darkly’, translates literally as ‘stories’. ‘Now’, says Paul, ‘we see the world and the human condition reflected in metaphors – in stories.’

Some stories, of course, become more dominant over time, and they are the ones that get written up as the official histories. A book like this allows us to hear also the ‘lost’ stories and the ‘hidden’ stories which, in this context, are the stories of the islanders of Iona, the wives of early members of the Iona Community, their children, and the Community’s employees.

In the end, eighty-six women and men welcomed me into their homes, and allowed me to hear their stories. I found them to be people of keen intelligence and passionate concern. Many of them had encountered great difficulty – some had faced great danger – as they tried to live out their ‘Iona’ insights in the world. And, despite the fact that a large

number of them were, by then, in their 70s or 80s, they were still open to new ideas and fresh visions. They were, quite simply, the most life-affirming people I have ever met, and I am grateful to each and every one of them.

Anne Muir



Early days

The origins of the vision

Today, the Iona Community is known and respected worldwide as an ecumenical Christian community working for peace and social justice, the rebuilding of community, and the renewal of worship. But its beginnings were far from auspicious.

It came into being in 1938, and was virtually strangled at birth by the outbreak of the Second World War. Ironically, its founder, George MacLeod, could trace the origins of his vision for the Community back to his experiences in the First World War. Although, as his daughter Mary reveals, he rarely spoke about those times:

‘Like many people who were in the First War, he just didn’t speak about it. We do not know what went on in the trenches. But he did see inequality, and I think that’s what drove him – inequality. What makes somebody want to stamp out inequality? I don’t know. But certainly that was in his gut.’

– *Mary MacLeod*

And Mary argues that the forum in which her father would fight inequality was quite consciously chosen:

‘He was going to do law before he went to the war, but when he came back, he became a minister.’

– *Mary MacLeod*

The effects of the inequality that George MacLeod had seen at close quarters for the first time during the First World War were even more evident in the Scotland of the 1920s. As a minister in Edinburgh, he expressed what many Christians felt:

‘George MacLeod was very much aware of the terrible gulf fixed between the comfortably off and those poor souls who were living on pittance, due to the Means Test.¹ The contrast of these two situations was such that many Christians were very uncomfortable, but they needed someone to speak for them. George MacLeod spoke for the conscience of any sensitive Christian, and he was able, by his

own leadership, to influence people's thinking to a very considerable degree.'

– *John Sim*

One of the ways in which George MacLeod was able to influence people's thinking was through his radio broadcasts. John Sim, later a member of the Community, remembers hearing him, while still a schoolboy:

'We listened to George MacLeod on our battery radio, and one knew that one was listening to awarenesses that one hadn't heard before; to emphases which were vitally needing to be expressed in the modern generation.

But he was not only satisfied with having said his piece. He knew perfectly well that he had to do more than that. And so he was willing to go to Govan to take on what was still a very large congregation, but in a parish situation which was dire, due to unemployment. It was there that his Christianity became extremely active in the social sense.'

– *John Sim*

As John Sim implies, George MacLeod's experience of parish ministry in Govan was formative. Govan was an important shipbuilding area on the south bank of the River Clyde, but during the Depression half of its population was out of work. Annie Price was just 13 when MacLeod became minister of Govan Old in 1930:

'Things were very bad in Govan at that time. The men walked the street idle, and the homes were really kept going by the girls who worked in the Co-operative factory down at the dry docks at Shieldhall.'

– *Annie Price*

George MacLeod could see that, for the vast majority of ordinary people, the Church – his chosen agency of social change – was an irrelevance. Douglas Trotter, one of the Iona Community's earliest members, observed the effect on MacLeod:

'This is what hit him in Govan – how little the Church spoke to the ordinary lives of people, certainly to the working class. He was in the

middle of the shipyards where life was pretty rough. Govan parish was only about a square mile, but teeming with folk. And George was on the doorstep, known to them all, and terribly aware of how little the Church touched their lives and meant to them.'

– *Douglas Trotter*

David Jarvie, who at that time was a member of the Young Communist League, also believes that this is where MacLeod's vision for the Iona Community really began to take shape:

'He had a packed church at Govan, but when he looked at them, there was none of the people of Govan in his church. The people were coming from all over Scotland, attracted to the charisma of George. These were middle-class people. And I think, maybe, that is where the Community grew out of. Because he realised that here he had a successful church, but the people he came to serve weren't there. The people of the shipyards weren't there. They were outside.'

– *David Jarvie*

Whether there was one moment of epiphany for MacLeod, it is hard to say, but Ian Fraser, who was associated with the Iona Community from the start, tells this story:

'George told me once that he had visited a chap in hospital who had died of malnutrition. It was found that there was only something like grass in his stomach. He had the minimum amount coming from the "burro",² and he had given two-thirds of it to the family, so he didn't have enough to eat himself. That must have been very decisive for George. You're a great preacher, you've got everything before you, you've got all the adulation, you have people entranced by you, but here's a bloke who gave away two-thirds of an absolute pittance, and died of malnutrition. That's what you'd to face.'

– *Ian Fraser*

It was a stark truth: a successful church was not necessarily a relevant church. Charismatic preaching did not actually change the lot of the poor. Clearly, MacLeod would have to discover a new way of being Church, if he was going to serve the people of Govan.

Uist Macdonald was one of his young Assistant Ministers in the 1930s:

‘There were a certain number of ministers who preached, and celebrated the sacraments, but didn’t realise that you must get to know people, see where the needs are, and help. I was lucky. I was sent to Govan. It was real tough stuff. We lived in the top flat of the Pearce Institute³ in Govan Road, and the rest of the building was taken up with all sorts of things, mainly for unemployed people, to help them to have a place where they could go and get shelter. So we were there and sharing in it.’

– *Uist Macdonald*

This is the key to understanding MacLeod’s ministry in Govan: he and his assistants ‘were there and sharing in’ the lives of the people. They were living in community with them:

‘The top flat’s occupants were available to help at any hour of the day or night where there was need. At night, once, I was called to a house where a man had committed suicide, and his wife was desperate. She had a small shop, and couldn’t face going down to it. So George went down to serve the early morning customers with milk and rolls, until help could be got. If you do things like that, what are you needing to do preaching for?’

– *Uist Macdonald*

Gradually, MacLeod and his team of young ministers built a strong community around the facilities of the Pearce Institute:

‘Groups were formed to assist men with PT [physical training], and other ways of filling in their empty days. The PT class was very successful, but, after a time, numbers began to fall away, and the assistants were sent out to find out why. Eventually, one man said he loved the class, but his family would go hungry if he ate all the food he felt he needed after the exercise.’

– *Uist Macdonald*

MacLeod’s response was simple and immediate:

‘George MacLeod had the men over working in the garden at the Pearce Institute. He fed them too. And he made a workroom where they could mend their children’s boots and shoes.’

– *Annie Price*

In the Pearce Institute, MacLeod and his assistants ministered to body, mind and soul. You can still hear the excitement in Annie Price’s voice as she recalls those days:

‘There was a big room with about a dozen big tubs where working girls – girls in service – could come on their day off and do their own washing. And we had baths as well. And there was great big dryers. And we had a canteen.

The Girls’ Club had country dancing. We had keep-fit, badminton, and we had drama. We did a pantomime in 1938. I was Cinderella, and we had all the weans from Wanlock Street – they were fairies. And as well as being a leading lady, I was the front half of the coo! And the carriage for Cinderella was a Beattie’s bread board.

And the pews were packed in these days. If you listened to George MacLeod, you sat on the edge of your seat he was so good. Oh yeah, he was some preacher! And Saturday night dance club was great! That was your life. And then George MacLeod bought an old mill out Barrhead way.’

– *Annie Price*

Fingleton was a disused mill which had fallen into disrepair. George MacLeod persuaded unemployed men from Govan to use their skills and their labour to make the mill habitable, so that groups from the parish could enjoy short breaks away from the city:

‘George had this old bus. Everybody knew this bus. It was forever breaking down in Paisley Road on its way to Fingleton Mill. The men in the Men’s Club and the boys did it up. It was big rooms, and I think it was just palliasses⁴ we used to sleep on. It wasn’t luxury. But they dug quite a nice wee pool, and we could go in and swim.’

– *Annie Price*

The restoration of Fingleton Mill was the culmination of MacLeod's experiment in community-building in Govan, and, in retrospect, a rehearsal for another, more daring project: the rebuilding of the Abbey on Iona, and the founding of the Iona Community:

'George thought something new was needed – an experiment – and it came down to this: why not rebuild the ancient buildings on Iona where he'd often been on holiday? As Columba had experimented in Christian living and sharing, why not get a team and go there? There were plenty of books about the Christian faith. What was needed was to see the faith in action: living it out; sharing it. That was the challenge.'

– *Uist Macdonald*

As Uist suggests, George MacLeod already knew the island of Iona well. Flora Brill used to spend every summer on Iona with her family. She remembers seeing George MacLeod there in the early 1930s:

'I had seen George MacLeod when I was a child. He seemed such a tall man to me. He used to wear shorts, and my sister's father-in-law was shocked at this.'

– *Flora Brill*

The Abbey church on Iona had been rebuilt at the turn of the 20th century, but the buildings around it were still in ruins:

'There was a Dr Russell who went to Iona every year. He owned a paper-mill, and he offered to finance the rebuilding of the outbuildings round the Abbey, but the Trustees turned him down. So the next thing was George MacLeod somehow won over the Trustees, and he went around collecting funds, and that's how it started.'

– *Flora Brill*

'Initially, it was a scheme to train young ministers through worship, work and sharing the whole of life, and to enable working men to realise that they had a vital part to play, and were needed by, and in, the Church.'

– *Uist Macdonald*

With hindsight, it is clear that the concept of a community of young ministers and craftsmen based around the Abbey on Iona was a natural progression from MacLeod's work in Govan. There, he had been able to train just a handful of assistants, and to draw a relatively small number of working men into community. On Iona, he would be able to train much larger numbers of ministers, demonstrate this new way of being Church, and put craftsmen at the very heart of communal life.

A vision shared

But it would be a mistake to believe that MacLeod's vision for Iona was his alone. In fact, he consulted with a number of people who were seeking, simultaneously, to find ways to make the Church more relevant to the lives of ordinary men and women.

Faith Aitken remembers George MacLeod's visits to her parents, Ralph and Jenny Morton, in Cambridge, in the late 1930s:

'They had just come back from China, from Manchuria, living under Japanese occupation there, and then went to Cambridge, which they found almost unreal. It was so detached from the world that they had been in. All very pleasant and very cultured, but they felt, I think, when George MacLeod came to visit, that he was one of the few people who were on the same wavelength as they were. Who were concerned about the state of the world. Concerned about industry, and the way the Church seemed to be so remote from ordinary, working people.'

– *Faith Aitken*

And Faith recalls how MacLeod would closet himself away with her parents to discuss plans for this new community:

'George came frequently to preach and give talks to students, at the time when the whole idea of an Iona Community and a team of people to rebuild the Abbey was coming together in his mind. And he was talking to our parents about it. We certainly would overhear the word "Iona" anyway, and the idea of an Iona Community. That would be ... the end of 1937.'

– *Faith Aitken*

Ian Fraser also shared George Macleod's passion for a Church that could speak to ordinary people, and was in contact with him before the Iona Community came into being in 1938:

'I had had to work in my father's shop from the age of seven, and was aware of the gap between us – the "respectable" people – and the folk that worked in the shop, who were gathered at street corners on Sundays when the respectable people went to church. I felt I had to do something about the gap between the ordinary folk – who were the working folk that sustained the world – and the "respectables".'

– *Ian Fraser*

Ian would become an early member of the Community, and a significant figure in the development of its thinking – as would Lex Miller:

'Lex was a minister in a church in Stepney [in London's East End]. And, in the same way as George was involved with Govan, Lex was involved in Stepney. They were asking the same questions. They were aware of the pressures. They were aware of the gap between the Church and the working class. So there was a very strong link there. Lex came up, and, for a while, was Deputy Leader of the Iona Community.'

– *Douglas Trotter*

And there were others who were asking the same questions George MacLeod was asking. Some, like the Mortons and Ian Fraser, were in dialogue with him, even before the Community existed. Others, like Lex Miller, shortly after it was founded. But all were to play significant roles in the shaping of the new Community – despite the fact that they often disagreed with George MacLeod, personally:

'We were never called "MacLeodites"! We were not a conformist community around one man. George did really see the need for people with different emphases and different gifts to come together into a community. Okay, I'd argue with him at times, but he did see the need, and, in the end, he would bow to that need for rich and full community.'

– *Ian Fraser*

Though seldom acknowledged, it is perhaps one of George MacLeod's greatest merits that, while autocratic by nature, he was brave enough to recruit talented people who were often very different from himself, and allow them to shape the Community. He may not have always enjoyed the experience of leading a diverse community, but by building in such diversity from the start, he guaranteed the Community's health and, ultimately, its effectiveness.

The founding of the Community

Having settled on the idea of a community of ministers and craftsmen, George MacLeod set about enlisting the ministers in a methodical way. He toured the Divinity Faculties of Scotland like a Recruiting Officer, 'selling' the vision of his new community to students. Raymond Bailey's experience was typical of those encounters:

'In the summer of my last year at university [1938], George visited New College with the purpose of appealing to New College for people to take part in this plan he had, which, as I understood it, was to come to Iona to share in both manual work and academic work – what he called "ministerial training". And to give us the chance of personal contact with uneducated tradesmen – the joiners and the masons that were beginning the work of rebuilding the ruins of Iona Abbey. We were to come for the summer, and for the next two years we were to give our time to a Church Extension minister in a Church Extension charge.⁵ What he seemed to offer, particularly the manual work and the contact with tradesmen, was something that immediately attracted me.'

– *Raymond Bailey*

Bill Cooper was also a Divinity student when he signed up for summer 1939, and he too was attracted by MacLeod's description of the project:

'The Church, at one time, was at the centre of the life of the community, and we felt that it was time for the Church to mean something to people again. We were going to go into a situation that was beginning to get more and more difficult for the Church, and here was some-

thing that might put the Church back into the centre of life.'

– *Bill Cooper*

While George MacLeod was recruiting the ministers, a master mason called Bill Amos set about recruiting the craftsmen. Adam Campbell was one of the first masons to take up the challenge:

'Willie Amos had told me about the Abbey. He was a great boy for hiking, so that year [1938] he had hiked across Mull, and went to the Abbey, and was invited to a meal. And Dr MacLeod said, "Come on, I'll show you what I'm going to do." He said, "I'm going to restore this, and have students and folk up, but where will I get tradesmen? Masons? Joiners?" Willie said, "I'm a mason. I'll get masons." So he did. So that's how I came up.'

– *Adam Campbell*

Many other interviewees told this story of how Bill Amos had just happened to be hiking across Mull, had visited Iona, and had stumbled across George MacLeod, but Bill's son, Bill Amos Jnr, sees it rather differently:

'I don't think that he would have been there just by chance. You don't go to Iona, and wander off the top of a hill down towards an abbey where you can see people working. Getting to Iona was difficult. I think he knew about the project, but he was probably not convinced that he wanted to have anything to do with it. But once he saw it, and got talking, that was it. This was something that encompassed all that he wanted to do.'

– *Bill Amos*

George Wilkie, an early member of the Community, remembers Bill Amos well, and feels that his contribution to the formation of the Community has still not been fully recognised:

'Bill got together a group of workmen whom he knew on building sites in Edinburgh, and who were prepared to give up their jobs at the beginning of June [to go to Iona], knowing that they would be out of work in September. Some of them were, I suppose, nominal

Christians. One at least, if not two, were definitely Marxist, so they enlivened the conversation. But these groups were part of the Community, so that ministers were exposed to their thinking, and their way of looking at things, in a way that perhaps we haven't been since the end of the rebuilding. And I feel that I would like to underline Bill's place, almost alongside George MacLeod, because George was going round the colleges and getting young ministers, whereas Bill had to bring in the working men.'

– *George Wilkie*

And Bill's son contends that just as the young ministers were drawn to George MacLeod and his new Community for ideological reasons, so too was his father:

'I think he got involved because George MacLeod was a pacifist, and so was my father. I think he got involved because George MacLeod was a socialist. So was my father. And I think he got involved because he could see George MacLeod's religion being relevant, especially at that time. It was a meeting of minds, as much as anything else. He could empathise very much with what the objective was, and see that it was going to be something quite important.'

– *Bill Amos*

The group that master mason Bill Amos had 'stumbled across' in the summer of 1938 was a trail-blazing group of ministers and craftsmen who had come to Iona to make preparations for the rebuilding of the Abbey. Uist Macdonald, one of George MacLeod's assistants in Govan, was one of those young ministers:

'George said, "I'm going to get a team together. Will you come?" The next day, I went over and said, "I'm in on it with you, if you'll have me." So that was it. And he went on from that, and got together a team which consisted of an architect, a doctor, a secretary, seven artisans, four trained ministers, and four in training. And there we were, trying to work out the legacy of Columban Christianity.

We met together in Glasgow, and George outlined things to us, and we all got navy blue shirts and suits for formal occasions. We were

fitted out with these, and then we spent that evening and night there, and then proceeded towards Iona. As you got further down the Clyde – Port Glasgow, Greenock, and then out – it became very rough, and we had quite a nasty night of it. But, eventually, we got clear, and sailed right on to Iona. For some of them it was quite a daring experience, because some had never been on the sea before, and certainly not in the choppy stuff you can get on the west coast of Scotland.’

– *Uist Macdonald*

On arrival on Iona that very first party had to sort out their living quarters:

‘On the east side of the Abbey grounds, just beneath the Abbey, we had put up a line of huts with little rooms where people could live, and in the early days, we had to finish that and get it into order, so that we could have more people there.’

– *Uist Macdonald*

‘It was a long wooden building which we called the “Rome Express”, and it really was very like the old railway coaches where you had little rooms off the main corridor. In each room there was a bed, there was a kind of oak-coloured chest of drawers, and a chair. Full stop. And we each got one.’

– *Douglas Trotter*

‘There were 25 wonderful little rooms there in the long corridor, and you could tell by the number of steps who was visiting who.’

– *George Wilkie*

‘You could hear what your neighbour was doing next door, of course, but it was wind- and watertight. Couldn’t have been better!’

– *Bill Cooper*

But living in such close proximity to one another could be challenging:

‘It was interesting, but difficult, because I needn’t tell you that you can’t walk off a wee island. You’re there, and you’ve got to learn to live with the folk who are there, and come to terms with them, and realise that they are entitled to a viewpoint different from yours. And you

must try to understand it, and they've to try to understand yours. I think, quite apart from the things that we discussed in terms of what we were trying to do, it gave us quite useful, and sometimes remarkable, insights into the way that people tick.'

– *Uist Macdonald*

All in all, there were many encouraging signs that first year. Although the young Douglas Trotter had been invited to Iona in 1938 simply to help keep the place clean and tidy, he was allowed to attend the meetings of the original members:

'I witnessed their enthusiasm which was generated by George MacLeod. I witnessed a view of the Church and Christianity which had never dawned on me before. I mean, to me, being a Christian was going to the church on Sunday morning, and a Bible class. This interest in the Church as a vital force was totally new to me.'

– *Douglas Trotter*

Deaconess Alice Scrimgeour, who was already working in the Gallowgate, a desperately poor area of Glasgow, also happened to be on Iona during the summer of 1938, and she too was impressed by MacLeod's vision:

'It was the first summer and, of course, George came round the two hotels and all the boarding houses, and explained what he was doing. We went to this meeting in the Argyll Hotel, and were fascinated. By that time I was nearly two years in Gallowgate, and I knew that there was something not right about the Church at that time – that we weren't getting anywhere fast – although there were twelve hundred members in the church. So I was particularly interested in George saying that Govan wasn't really being a parish church, because it was ignoring the people, the poor people in the parish, and I got excited then, and I wrote him a wee letter saying I was a Church Sister in an East End church, and I was very interested.'

– *Alice Scrimgeour*

However, despite these early encouragements, things were not going entirely according to plan.

Annie Price, one of George MacLeod's parishioners, also witnessed the birth of the Community. During the summer of 1938, she camped on Iona with a group from Govan Old, and watched as the 'Rome Express' went up. But later that year, she became aware that MacLeod was facing serious problems within the Church of Scotland:

'There was a great stooshie,⁶ because George MacLeod wanted to start the Iona Community and still remain in Govan. The powers-that-be in Govan and in the Presbytery⁷ didn't want it. And there was a great hoo-ha about it. I was the younger generation then, and we had a committee – "the Pochlers"⁸ – that's what they called us! We were refused a room to have a meeting in, in the Pearce Institute. Weren't allowed! We had to hire a room up in the Town Hall. And we went out and canvassed members who were willing to have him on that footing. We didn't get anywhere. George wanted to do it, and we were backing him – we were really behind him – but there were other elements that were very much agin' it. And let's face it – George didn't have a lot of backing in the Presbytery at times. The knives were out.'

– *Annie Price*

And Annie is equally clear about the reason for MacLeod's unpopularity within Glasgow Presbytery:

'Och, just jealousy, of course. I'm quite sure it was. I mean he was a man that was going to make his mark no matter what he did. That was obvious.'

– *Annie Price*

Annie may well be right: the Church of Scotland's opposition to the Iona project may well have been directed more at George MacLeod personally than at the Community. Douglas Trotter certainly believes so:

'My memory of these early days is that it was really anti-George, rather than anti what the Community was about. People didn't stop to think what it was about! There was more thought in the Church of Scotland about George as a person than about the principles of the Community, because he was very outspoken; because he had made a name for himself; and because he could be very acerbic, very brutal,

very critical. He didn't hesitate to call a spade a spade, and I think that that caused a lot of dislike, rather than people seriously taking what he was saying to task.'

– *Douglas Trotter*

Raymond Bailey agrees that the focus of the Church's suspicion was George MacLeod himself:

'One thing that came into it was that George MacLeod was a pacifist, and the other was that he was a member of the Labour Party. And the Church in general, in those days, certainly wasn't pacifist. And it wasn't Labour.'

– *Raymond Bailey*

However, there were concerns within the Church about the fledgling Community too:

'There were great misgivings and a lot of doubts about these young ministers "aping" George MacLeod. I was interested in everything he had to say, because it seemed to me to ring true. I really must confess I became a minister because I wanted to join the Community, rather than the other way about. And there was a great deal of worry about this.'

– *George Wilkie*

'In the early years we got a lot of kicks. We were thought of as weird. The word "Communism" was used as well, because of the concern for politics, and for aiming at justice in the world. I don't think people realise how dismissive some folk were of politicised church people in the early days. Justice as a general idea was favoured, of course. But you hadn't to be too particular, and the Iona Community was quite particular.'

– *Ian Fraser*

'The Community was also accused of being next door to Rome! The Roman Catholic allegation was probably because of the introduction of responses and corporate participation in worship. So much of Presbyterian worship had become the minister standing in the pulpit and talking, and talking, and talking, and the idea that we would have

responses, that people would participate, was thought of as Roman.'

– *Stewart McGregor*

However, MacLeod had, to some extent, foreseen these problems, and had attempted to arm the Community with a number of sponsors who were unimpeachable in the eyes of the Church of Scotland establishment – among them the 'Father of the Church', former Moderator John White:

'George, somehow or other, had managed to get a number of people to act as "Trustees", I think he called them. One was John White, and if John White was on your side, there couldn't be much wrong with you. John White, who was an absolute Protestant with a capital "P", was yet willing to be a Trustee. Maybe John White just wanted to keep his hand in the pie, and make sure that it went the right way!'

– *George Wilkie*

And, sure enough, John White did, eventually, take a stand against George MacLeod, and the young Community found itself fighting for its life.

Ian Fraser describes their treatment at the hands of the Church of Scotland establishment:

'Well, I think the first word I'd use is "rough". This is partly because of John White's determination that there shouldn't be any kind of "loose and broken men", as they used to be called in the Highlands, pretending to belong to the Church, and not really belonging to the Church.'

– *Ian Fraser*

It was a struggle to find a form of association which would be acceptable to both the Church of Scotland and the Community:

'George with his strong constitutional sense wanted to make sure that this was not just a kind of voluntary association of people with a special bee in their bonnet. And he worked hard at this, until they got an arrangement that even John White was prepared to acknowledge, where the Community reports to the General Assembly.'

– *Ian Fraser*

But even after the constitutional arrangements of the new Community had been sorted out, more or less to everyone's satisfaction, its members were still regarded with suspicion by many in the Church:

'I got the impression that the wider Church thought of the Iona Community as a slightly dodgy, heterodox, rabble-rousing group – disturbers of the peace.'

– *Richard Holloway*

'I remember when I was applying for my parishes, I put down I was a member of the Community, and as I wrote, I thought, "This might be a black mark with certain people." There was no question of hiding it, but I think one just was known as an "Iona person".'

– *Douglas Trotter*

"Iona Men" couldn't get jobs. They couldn't get parishes, because they were Iona people.'

– *David Jarvie*

And it wasn't just the Church of Scotland establishment who had questions about the young Community. The islanders too were wary:

'When we started, some of them were a bit suspicious: Who are these folk? What are they really going to do on the island? Are some of the things that they're suggesting really necessary? But we went out in twos and visited the homes of the island, and generally were given a very friendly reception. I had a great advantage, being a Highlander and an islander, and having a bit of Gaelic at my command. So I got to know the island people, and was willingly accepted into their homes.'

– *Uist Macdonald*

Other members of the Community, however, including George MacLeod, were less successful than Uist in forming good relationships with the local people and, despite his efforts, a significant number of islanders remained wary of the incomers at the Abbey. It would be a continuing source of sadness for some members of the Iona Community for many years to come.

The organisation of the Community: 'a well-ordered day'

Once the whole team had been assembled on Iona, William Fallon and his wife, Dinah, who had looked after George MacLeod when he lived in the Pearce Institute in Govan, came to look after the men:

'Fallon had been George MacLeod's batman in the army, and he followed George to Iona, and he still looked after George. But Dinah was the boss. Dinah was a great big, sturdy mama who ruled the roost, and did the cooking, and you kept on the right side of Dinah.'

– *Douglas Trotter*

For Ian Renton who, like many of the other early members, had served in the forces, it was a regime he was more than comfortable with:

'I'd been in the army and was accustomed to men's company. This was not dissimilar because, for our meals, we all sat round one table, and there was a lot of banter went on, and teasing.'

– *Ian Renton*

Soon a pattern of work, worship and relaxation was established:

'We got up in the morning with a bell, I remember, and we had breakfast in a common room which was at the end of the "Rome Express". After breakfast, we then went across to the Abbey for morning prayers.'

– *Douglas Trotter*

'By eight o'clock we were in the Abbey, the workmen in their dungarees, and us in our blue trousers and jerseys. And we were there worshipping for not more than twenty minutes – probably more like quarter of an hour. And then the minister members had a Bible study.'

– *George Wilkie*

'Until lunchtime we discussed the Church, and we discussed what we were doing as a Community. After lunch, we joined the craftsmen for jobs. Now you didn't become a mason overnight, but you helped with this and that, gathered slates. And your time was spent learning a

little about how the workers of the world saw themselves.’

– *Douglas Trotter*

‘You helped by getting cement. We had the use of a horse and cart, and we dumped it at the east end of the Abbey. And we worked from there, mixing cement, and taking part as fairly unskilled labourers with journeymen builders and masons. We just had to pitch in. And I must say that, by the end of the day, you felt as if you had been pitching in, because a student or a minister, until he went to Iona, hadn’t been doing a great deal of hard physical work.’

– *Uist Macdonald*

‘And then there was always a meeting in the evening, a gathering on some subject or some issue of the day, where all were together, and that was where you did recognise the difference between ministers and workmen. But you did all contribute, and some of the workmen were very articulate. So it was not a one-way process by any means.’

– *George Wilkie*

‘And then we finished up by going back to prayers in the Abbey.’

– *Douglas Trotter*

‘It was a very well-ordered day. And there was a great feeling of doing things together. There was a tremendous spirit.’

– *George Wilkie*

Contrary to popular myth, none of the craftsmen was drawn from the ranks of the unemployed, and John Sim remembers with affection the skilled men for whom he laboured:

‘All the different trades were represented there, and they were all men who had chosen to come to Iona to do this job, almost as a calling I would say. They were men who had a great compassion for these idiots who could hardly tell their right hand from their left. We spent our lives with them. We all ate together, we all worshipped together, we all played football together, and we all had conferences together. It was a very full and meaningful fellowship.’

– *John Sim*

But not every group of ministers and craftsmen bonded successfully. Raymond Bailey reports that, in 1939, he found himself forced to ‘take sides’:

‘I became friendly with three of the tradesmen: Jim Lawson, Bill Amos and Adam Campbell, and this lasted after we’d left Iona. Once, I happened to be standing near a small group of tradesmen, and they were talking about their relationship with the ministers. I was near enough for them to include me, and they said something about the fact that the ministers never seemed to make any contact with them. At least, that was the gist of it, and I said, rather self-righteously, “Well, I don’t think that’s true of me. I’ve been friendly with some of you.” “Aye, and see what you’ve done? You’ve cut yourself off from the ministers.”’

– *Raymond Bailey*

But, over time, ministers and craftsmen clearly developed mutual respect:

‘We got on fine – after a bit. We got pally with some – well, I got pally with Graham [Raymond] Bailey. Kept in touch with him even when he was abroad, and I was abroad. And we kept in touch ever since. We got on fine with Uist [Macdonald] and big Mac – big Hamish MacIntyre. We were in the puffer⁹ once, and the skipper was quite impressed with Hamish. Wouldnae believe he was a minister. He said, “Ach well, if he cannae get a kirk, he can get a job wi’ me.”’

– *Adam Campbell*

John Young, who was an apprentice joiner when he was recruited to work on the Abbey, remembers the bonds forged by worshipping together:

‘Oh, the impressive thing, as far as I was concerned, was that you were sitting in a choir stall with other craftsmen and the ministers – the members of the Community. So it was a real community: a mixture of people, all there with different ideas, and different purposes. I cannot really remember the text, or some of the things that were being spoken about, but just the whole “feeling”. To me, it illustrated what a real community could be like.’

– *John Young*

That sense of community seems to have extended to the members' free time too:

'There was some little leisure in the evening where we would relax a bit, or discuss things, or get to know more about the craftsmen. They were always interesting. One of the lads was a bit of a communist, his name was MacNaughton. I could hear him arguing with Dr MacLeod many a time, saying, "It's all right for you!" This kind of thing. And it was interesting to hear what they were thinking about, and what life was like as workmen in these days. They weren't specially chosen, these men. They weren't hand-picked. They volunteered to come to Iona. It was perhaps a little odd that some of them would want to, because some of them had never had any experience of the Church at all. But it was interesting to hear their attitudes towards the clergy, and towards what we were doing. That was good for us: to know that religion was something that mattered, for them, as well as for us. Knowing them was good.'

– *Bill Cooper*

At the end of the summer, the Community dispersed, most of the craftsmen to look for work in their home towns, and the ministers to a parish:

'When the summer was over, the ministers were sent to various parishes that were willing to have someone from Iona, and they went there and worked as assistant ministers.'

– *Uist Macdonald*

Originally, they were expected to spend two years in the parish of an Iona Community member, or at least of someone sympathetic to the Community. Mainly, these were city parishes in areas of social deprivation or parishes which had been created under the Church Extension Scheme. There, they would put into practice the emphases which they had learned and 'lived' on Iona. But how did those early Iona Community ministers view the prospect of working in these challenging parishes?

'It was always being said that the Church didn't count for much any more. It was on the sidelines. Nobody got very much out of the Church any more. Numbers were declining. And here was a challenge

that I think we all wanted to have a share in. You know, roll up the sleeves and try to get people back into the fold, as it were. But, more than that, to get people to see that religion was something that dealt with the whole of life, not just a Sunday.’

– *Bill Cooper*

And that sense of Community Men being on the front-line of the Church’s work and witness persisted throughout the first 30 years of the Community’s life. Ian Whyte was a ‘New Man’ in the 1960s:

‘I suppose we saw ourselves as pioneers. We were going to where the real stuff was! I think we probably had a bit of a conceit about ourselves in a way. There was certainly a feeling – and I think it’s persisted until quite recently – that to be “real” in the ministry, you had to go to an Iona Community parish, and the more socially deprived the better – or the more pioneering, if it was a Church Extension parish.’

– *Iain Whyte*

What wasn’t immediately clear to the early members, however, was what membership of the Iona Community might mean at the end of their two-year ‘apprenticeship’:

‘I was asking George MacLeod, what did he see after two years? What happens? Because we were only to go to our jobs under the Community for two years, and then we’d look for a parish. Do what we liked. And he said, “Well, I don’t see this becoming the Community. It will only go on as long as God requires it.” He did give me the impression, and I don’t think I’m misrepresenting him, that he saw us going and setting up a community within the parish, similar to the one on Iona, and that there might be a bit of a connection between the two, but that was where the Community was to exist – not on Iona. I think this is quite an important point. Iona was the example. It was the place where you tried it out, and saw how it worked, and what the difficulties were, but the real community had to be in the parish. So I don’t think that George anticipated the Community becoming the sort of continuing organisation it has become.’

– *George Wilkie*

Given that the roots of George MacLeod's vision for the Community sprang from his experience as a Church of Scotland minister, he is unlikely to have predicted a continuing Community comprising both lay and ordained people, drawn from many denominations. Nor, given his preoccupation with training ministers, did he anticipate that women would ever become part of the Community:

'Well, George was very gracious to women, and didn't want them anywhere near the Community. He thought that the basis of Gospel announcement had to do with clergy: male clergy in dog collars. Not that it needed to be dog collars all the time, but it was "the dog-collared" who were the advance guard of the Church.'

– *Ian Fraser*

And since the Church of Scotland did not, at that time, recognise women clergy, the Community was also, by definition, an all-male community:

'In those days the idea of women ministers just hadn't arisen. Mary, my wife, wanted to be one, and tried, but they just said gently, "Well, you can come and train, but the Church won't accept you."

– *Raymond Bailey*

At first, this presented no problem to George MacLeod. Women's expectations, on the whole, were limited:

'There were women who were very happy to be working in various ancillary roles, but most of them had no imagination of the possibility of them being members of the Community. They knew perfectly well that this was the male prerogative. And they were perfectly happy to leave it at that, to be quite honest.'

– *John Sim*

But, in those very early days, few of the young members of the Community had wives:

'It was an all-male Community and, first of all, a bachelors' Community. And then, of course, people started getting married, and I do remember George MacLeod saying to me, "This raises questions

about the Community's existence.”

– *George Wilkie*

Indeed, it did. The bachelor Community had, over a number of years, developed a Rule by which they promised to live. Some aspects of that discipline were uncontentious; but others had far-reaching implications for the wives and children of members:

‘It was a discipline of personal devotions, Bible study and prayer. And there was an economic discipline, where there was an attempt being made to encourage all of us to live as near as possible to the working-class level, and to make a contribution of a certain proportion of our disposable income towards Community efforts and other charities.’

– *John Sim*

One of the main influences in the development of the Economic Discipline was Lex Miller. Tony Gibson, who was later to produce radio programmes about the Community for the BBC, met Lex Miller when he was working in the East End of London during the Blitz:

‘Lex was the minister resident for “St Paul’s on the Highway” in Shadwell. Very down-to-earth, and thinking hard about what needed to be done, who needed to do it, and where it needed to be done. They were setting up what were then called “Rest Centres” which was where people came in the daytime when the raids were not happening, and you constantly brewed up vast jugs of coffee and soup.’

– *Tony Gibson*

Tony Gibson admired Lex’s thoroughness and his eye for detail, as he organised food and accommodation for bombed-out Stepney residents – talents which he later applied within the Community to the drafting of guidelines for mutual accountability for financial expenditure:

‘Lex wrote a very good pamphlet on how you go about setting up a Minimum Wage Group. And I think it was that that probably helped the Community back on Iona to get its act together in that respect.’

– *Tony Gibson*

But when the members of the 'Bachelor Community' began to get married, it was not immediately obvious that their wives would be happy to go along with Lex's careful calculations, especially as they were prohibited from playing any part in the Community's decision-making process. David Levison joined the Community in 1943, and went, with his wife, Cecilia, to St John's, Perth where they replaced two departing Community members, Bob Craig and Bill Smith:

'Oh, I think one definitely felt excluded. One wasn't a real person somehow or other. In those days, for our economic discipline, we more or less had to give an account for what we spent during the week, and I remember being quite taken aback one time, when Lex Miller spoke up, and, with a twinkle in his eye, said, "These Levisons have been a bit extravagant. They've been out for a meal!" And this was a wedding anniversary as far as I remember! But, in those days, we carefully noted everything, and we saw that our proportion to church and other giving was always there.'

– *Cecilia Levison*

Community members working in economically deprived areas found that the economic discipline put an extra pressure on their marriage:

'If you are a bachelor, it's easy. When you have to involve your wife in it, the economic discipline is a different story. I found it very difficult, because 10% of my income wasn't 10% of George MacLeod's income, because he had a vast fortune. I felt that hard, because, in London, my salary was £620 a year. Three children, no car, and I received very few expenses. And, therefore, I did find that very difficult! I probably didn't live up to it properly.'

– *Ian Renton*

In the end, it was the stringencies of the economic discipline that set in motion the slow process by which women became part of the Community. It wasn't that the wives were unwilling to live sacrificially: they were, and they did. But the sense of alienation, of something which so profoundly affected their lives being decided by a process which they could never hope to influence, created an ever-increasing demand for personal involvement in the decision-making forums of the Community.

John Sim explains:

‘Those of us who were in the position where they had no money at all, except their stipend, which very often in those days was three months, if not six months, behind time, were living from hand to mouth in a real sense. There was no possibility of any of us ever having an overdraft. Bank managers said, “If you give a minister an overdraft, he’ll never pay it off.”

I think a number of wives really felt, “This is all very well, these men laying down the law, making the rules, but we’re the ones who’ve got to cope with the actual challenge of this. We want a say in this matter as well.” And after a comparatively short time, it became obvious that there was a demand for Family Groups to meet and discuss Community issues. And so they set up Family Groups in various parts of the country, where ministers and their wives met together, and discussed all kinds of issues, including the Economic Discipline.

Now that was the beginning. That was the impetus for change. Some of the ministers’ wives became quite concerned to have a larger share in Community thinking, and although many of them didn’t actually become members, they became quite influential in the background. And, of course, after I had ceased to be a member of the Community, this impetus grew, and I think probably, over the years, there have been more women members of the Iona Community than men, coming from all kinds of backgrounds and nationalities.’

– *John Sim*

And so the first clearly identifiable phase of Community life was over. The wild child of Scottish church life was now a mature, if not quite respectable, grown-up.

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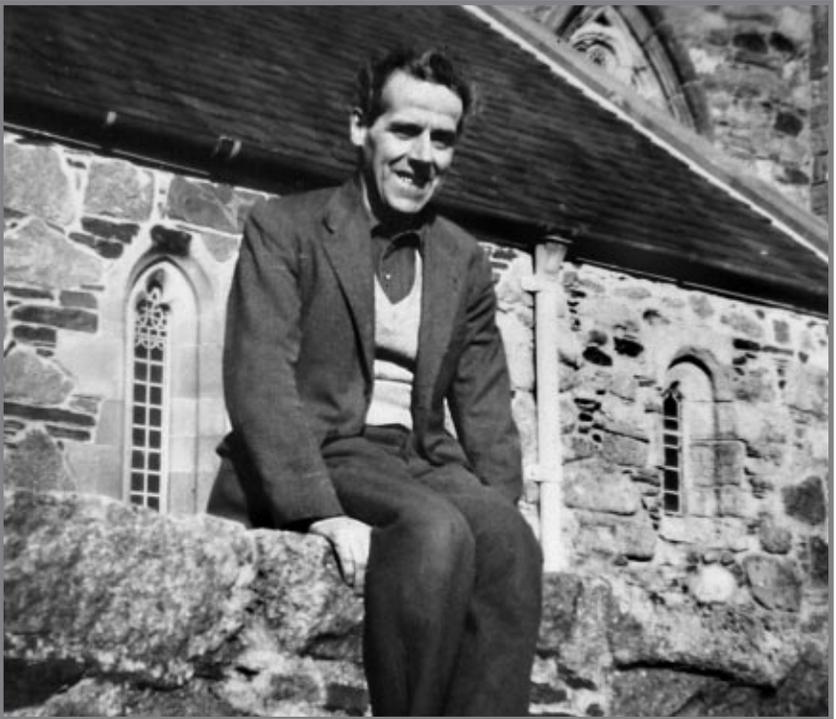


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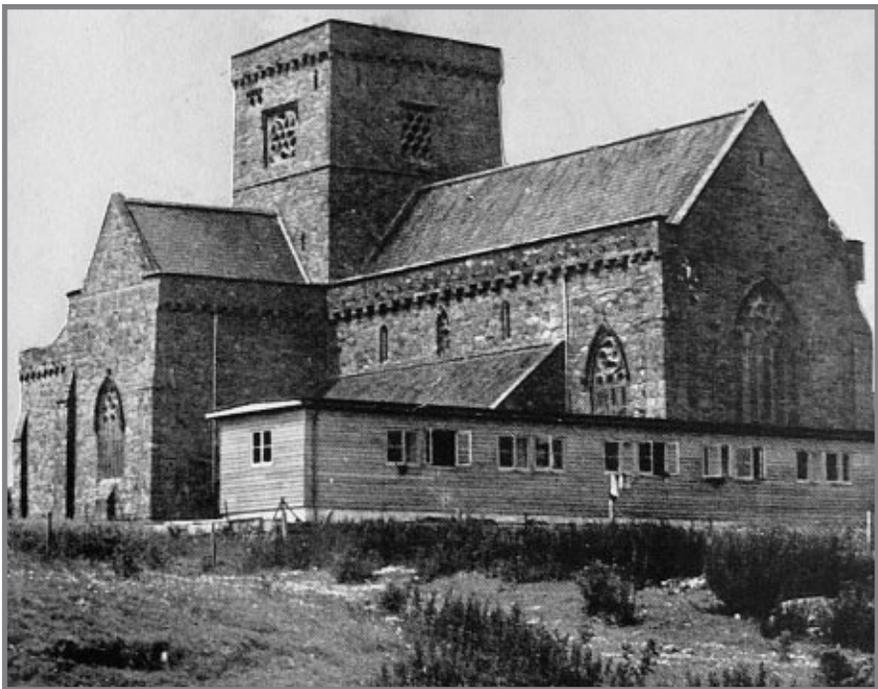


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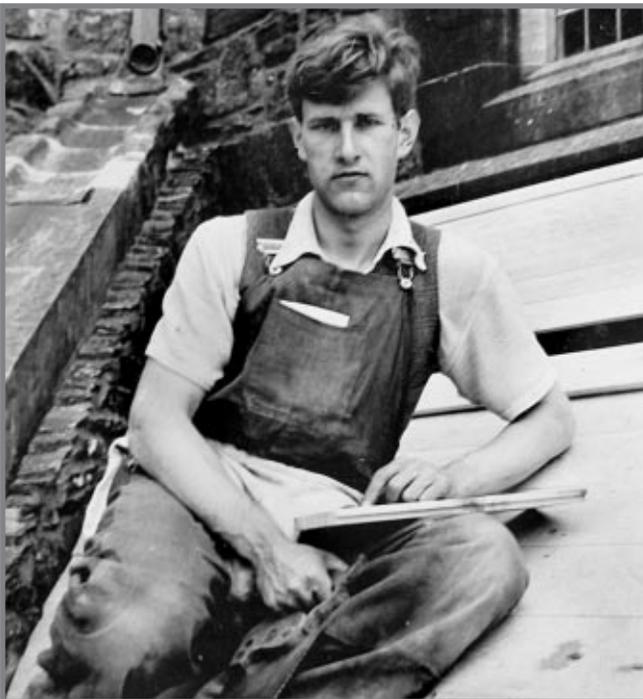


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Photos

1. George MacLeod's mode of dress (left) shocked the islanders (Faith Aitken archive)
2. Members of the 1939 Community: Back row, left to right: Bill Cooper, Uist Macdonald, Hamish MacIntyre, Ralph Morton, Jimmy Currie. Front row, left to right: Bobby Ross, Johnny MacMillan, George MacLeod, Cameron Wallace, Ian Fraser (Bill Cooper archive)
3. Lex Miller with George MacLeod, 1944 (Ian Fraser archive)
4. Master mason, Bill Amos (Raymond Bailey archive)
5. Mason Adam Campbell dressing stone for the Abbey (Raymond Bailey archive)
6. Huts were erected on the east side of the Abbey (Raymond Bailey archive)
7. The huts became known as the 'Rome Express' (Duncan Finlayson archive)
8. Douglas Trotter kept the 'Rome Express' clean and tidy (Duncan Finlayson archive)
9. Dinah and William Fallon (Raymond Bailey archive)
10. Raymond Bailey working on the roof, 1939 (Raymond Bailey archive)