

Heart of the Land by Frieda Morrison

[Music and singing]

We'll try another year again

The seed is in the ground

Harvest will be here again

Seasons coming round

And if the rains don't wash away

A harvest and a year

We'll try another year and stay

Upon this time of year

From the top of the Hill called the Barmekan, in the midlands of Marr in Aberdeenshire , you can see the stone circle of Sunhoney. The abundance of stone circles in this part of Scotland may yet prove that land here was as esteemed then as it is today. From the Pictish stone fort that crowns the hill, you can get a clear view of the surrounding countryside. Between fort and circle the fields lie separated by yet another history of stone. Here, men woman and children gathered boulders from the land and built them into the stone walls that surround the fields today. The fields hold an almost intangible sense of time. These were the words with which I began a documentary I made way back in 1993. It was called Troubled Fields based on a song I'd written a year before. Programme music was by myself and musician, Dougie Maclean. The documentary focused on the changing face of land ownership taking place in this corner of Scotland.

Welcome to my Aberdeenshire and one of my favourite places the Stone Circle of Sunhoney. My documentary started here, well up there...

My cameraman director Mark Littlewood and assistant Allan Stewart and myself hauled the large camera equipment up to the top of the Barmekin to film the start of the documentary. But the story started a year or so before at a meeting in the Barons Hotel in Auchnagatt in that part of Aberdeenshire we call Buchan. It was there as a young Farming journalist with BBC Radio Scotland, I joined a meeting of around 200 farmers who had gathered in that big room to tell, the then President of the National Farmers Union of Scotland about their angst and grief about their financial situation. It soon became clear that the majority in that room were facing bankruptcy. Reasons for why – briefly – the EEC was paying big subsidies for grain and the UK economists were advising farmers to reduce or get rid of their livestock and concentrate on Grain. Three bad harvests in succession and the farmers especially

from small family farms here in the North East had nothing to fall back on. And the banks fore-closed. The economists were simply saying well there were too many small family farms and they were no longer viable. Nobody seemed to suggest that their might be too many economists.

So what started as a gentle exodus from the land grew into a mass exodus, a mass clearance. And the breaks in that age old chain was as much cultural as it was economic. To me the seasons of the countryside are like a chain with every link essential to the one on either side. And the folk who work on the land are part of that chain which in turn links into so many different aspects of life.

The North East isn't just a skelp of land. Culture is as potent a force as the soil itself. It's a wye o livin...a wye o thinkin an a wye o spikkin. Our cultural identity stems fae the land and the sea. And here I was watching the breaching of that chain. Watching the clearing o the land again of a large labour force making ways for larger industrial farms that economists called viable units. I felt as if I was standing on the edge of Survival of my own culture. Somewhere here among the stones of Midmar I realised for the first time in my life I cared about my culture and I cared about my language, North East Scots or Doric as it's called now.

Questions revolved in my head all through the making of that film. Were we just presiding over the bones of a dead language and a dead culture for sentimental reasons. Was I hearing he last verse of what Lewis Grassic Gibbon called 'The Sunset Song'? But I was proud of the people I came from and the place I came from. I didn't want to lose or cast aside the treasure of words that contained the memories of my childhood and the voices of my ancestors. And to be honest, I've tried to leave the North East a few times whether via work or by sheer necessity but I've always been pulled back like so many others. And if they couldn't come back, many have written about this area from a distance like James Leslie Mitchell otherwise known as Lewis Grassic Gibbon. He must have been aware of those precious links in the chain as he travelled around this district as a farming journalist and someone who grew up here and the Mearns.

For me his famous trilogy 'A Scots Quair' is a lot about the breaching of that chain and the consequences. 'Sunset Song' the first book in the trilogy was the first book I read at school in the rhythm of my own language, it remains my favourite. And it has made such an impact on so many. And there is another conclusion among the stones of Midmar. Stones play a big part in the trilogy as the author says 'only the stones remain'. It was to the top of the hill

called the Barmekin that James Leslie Mitchell, Lewis Grassie Gibbon born in Auchterless in Buchan at the turn of the century came to write the last paragraph of his trilogy. And here it was, where his heroine, Chris Guthrie came to live, to the farm where she was born at the back of the Barmekin. She had found the last road she wanted and taken it. As she sat there outside in the evening with her hands clasped around her knees watching Bennachie crowned with mist walking into the night she contemplated the inevitability of change.

'Change whose face she once feared to see...that ruled the earth, the sky and the waters underneath the earth might be stayed by none of the dreams of men? And that was the best deliverance of all. And as she sat watching the sunset on Bennachie she was watching the lights turning off on the wee crofts around her. She was watching the end of an era, the sunset on a way of life. In the words of my favourite North East poet Flora Gary:

'There's twa wyes o kennin
Hiz w wir heids, wir rizzon, wir printit wird:
Them wi their een, their finger-eyns, their midder wit,
Ootlins noo in a warl they widna fit.
Time canna rin back. They'll seen be oot o min".
We winna see again folk o yon kin'.

[Music and singing]

By the rock upon my feet
By a circle, stand
You can take my place
But never know the heart of the land