

Cuimhneachain Nan Gaisgeach  
'Commemoration of our Land Heroes'  
Paper by Roddy Murray

Notes on Proposals for Construction of 4 Commemorative Cairns in support of the Will Maclean designs presented to The Committee

1.0. Cuimhneachain Nan Gaisgeach is fortunate that someone of Will MacLean's status, calibre and suitability has offered to become involved in this project. I cannot think of anyone more appropriate.

1.1 An internationally established artist, he is a senior member of the Royal Scottish Academy, and a lecturer at one of Scotland's top art schools.

1.2. He is a Highlander, born in Inverness with strong family connections in Skye. If you like, he is 'one of us'. Uniquely, his entire career is based on the images and inspiration he has derived from the clearances, emigration, land raids and the history of the Highlands. The land raids and site incidents are not new to him by any means.

1.3. He has visited Lewis several times in the past, and recently visited the proposed sites. Having further studied the incidents being commemorated, he is informed and knowledgeable on the issues. He is also highly sensitive to people's feelings about the sites and how these crofting heroes should be best commemorated.

1.4. Partly for that reason, his involvement will be in designing the Cairns. This will be for a nominal sum - he would prefer that the costs cited in the Gulbenkian Foundation application be reinvested in materials. If possible he would like an expenses paid trip while they are under or about to begin construction, to brief the builders. The work he has done to date is free of charge. The Cairns will be constructed by the communities, or whomsoever the communities or CNG nominate.

1.5. It seems to me that there is a tendency to be over 'territorial' about these Cairns and these sites. In a sense they do not, or should not 'belong to any specific area. They have a far wider significance throughout the Highlands as symbols of a communal struggle. They are also important to Gaels abroad. It is part of their history too; this is one reason for taking the opportunity to use someone of international status.

1.6. Another, more important reason, is that the Cairns would be a genuinely serious statement which would do justice to the memories of these crofting heroes.

1.7. These designs would also promote a far wider interest in the project. If part of the function of the Cairns is to increase awareness of the struggle for crofting rights, then the coverage, which would come from the national press and media, through the involvement of Will MacLean, must surely be counted as a factor.

1.8. In response to fears, which any CNG members may have: The proposed Cairns are not 'modern art', they are firmly in the tradition of cairn building, and are anchored in Highland history by visual references. Each one, however, is unique to its own particular site, and elements in the design relate exclusively to the events, which took place there. Each one means something; it is about the place and what happened there, plaque or no plaque.

1.9. Because they are all designed by the one hand, the four Cairns and the four land raids become intrinsically linked. Although all the sites are individually important, they are all connected because they were concerned with the same issue, land. As a unified project, these four Cairns would make a powerful and unique statement about the land issue as part of the history of the Highlands & Islands.

2.0. This is a wonderful opportunity for beginning the idea of a crofting 'trail', as mentioned in the Bryden Report. It is also a good starting point for the book.

2.1. Quite apart from all the above, it seems wholly logical to take advantage of the services of a respected artist and designer in this field.

Timetable:

From the date of this meeting, if these designs are accepted by the various parties, Will Maclean can produce finished drawings in 3 weeks. Thereafter, these will be given to an architect (Matt Bruce) who will bring them to a finished state with exact design specifications for builders. While this is taking place, materials for building could be organised or gathered at the site (stones collected from each croft etc). Building could begin in May - early/mid summer.

Alternatives:

If cairns are built 'independently' outwith these proposals and the Cuimhneachain nan Gaisgeach group, then this raises fairly basic issues not least concerning funding and the terms under which it was applied for and granted.

Under the terms of the Gulbenkian Foundation Grant, other Cairns do not have a creative input, and do not qualify for financial assistance from that source. Indeed, there has to be a strong case for diverting money from Cairns which are 'going it alone' to the Cairns which remain within CNG.

If Cairns are built outwith the CNG programme, then the separation devalues the project and dispels the united strength of The Organisation, as it was originally founded - everybody loses.

Neither should it should not be forgotten that without CNG, particularly Angus Macleod the Founding Member, nobody would be considering building Cairns.