

THE IOLAIRE IMPACT

Project Report

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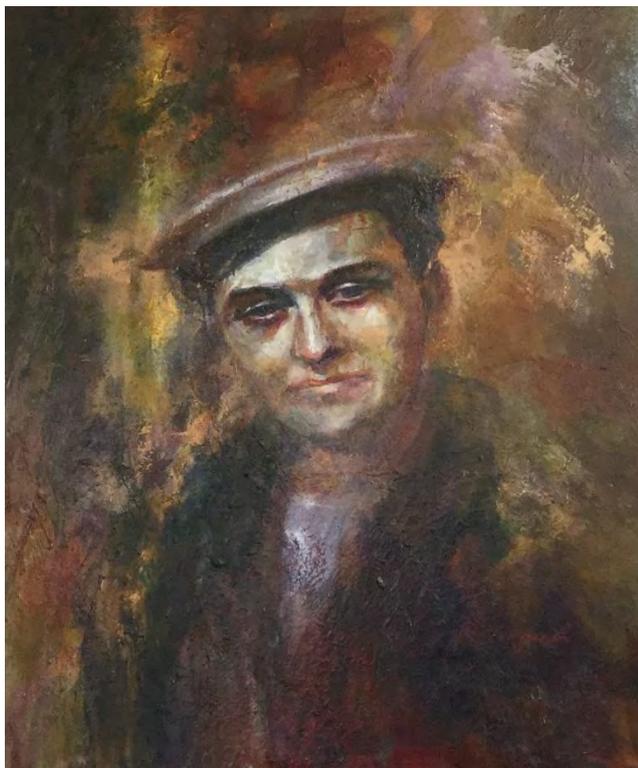
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1. Rationale and general introduction

It is well known that the tragic loss of the *lolaire* contributed very significantly to the despair that descended on the Outer Hebrides, particularly the Isle of Lewis, in the months and years after the end of the First World War. That despair manifested itself in various explicit ways, including the renewed militancy of land raids and the safety valve of emigration, but it was also implicit in the reluctance of islanders to commemorate publicly the loss of so many lives, either in the islands as a whole or within the communities most severely affected. The monument overlooking the disaster site was not erected until 1960 and the first memorial service was not held until 1999. The general consensus is that it is only the final passing of ‘first degree bereavement’¹ that has opened the way for unfettered, unselfconscious public articulation of a catastrophe that had been woven deeply but – to some extent – silently into the fabric of social, economic, cultural and religious life in the islands.



Margaret Ferguson – *Portrait painted for the lolaire 100*, c. 2019 (image courtesy of the artist).

Whatever the reasons for reticence, the danger inherent in such a delayed response is that those who attempt to analyse and understand the disaster’s impact have no recourse to first-hand recollections or perceptions of the event or its aftermath. We can evaluate contemporary documentation, speculate on the paucity of the written record after the initial flurry of reporting, and ponder the significance of family lore and community folk memory that have been filtered through successive generations. But we can no longer ask direct questions of any of those who were involved. Perhaps – as the analysis of interviews in Part II implies – we never could.

The objective of this report is to demonstrate how a blend of the oral testimony collected by the lead researcher (Dr Iain Robertson) and the documentary evidence compiled by the co-researcher (Professor Marjory Harper) can offer an innovative, ‘bottom-up’, community-rooted and shared approach to the interpretation of the *lolaire* disaster. Material from a range of under-utilised sources, including recorded conversations, provides a new perspective on the events of 1 January 1919 and their aftermath, thereby enhancing scholarly and public understanding of the immediate impact and long-term legacy of the tragedy, including persistent depopulation.

In what follows we address this objective from the two principal evidential bases before offering a brief summative overview. Further, in Section 3, we end this report by offering, in the form of an Appendix, extensive extracts from the interviews which comprise one of those bases.

2. Documentary evidence: a partial review of church, school and council records, press coverage, and communications from the diaspora

The events of 1 January 1919 and their context have been explored in meticulous and poignant detail in the recent book by Malcolm Macdonald and the late Donald John MacLeod, *The Darkest Dawn*, and in John MacLeod's monograph almost a decade earlier.² In the centenary year of 2019 the tragedy was also the subject of an exhibition entitled 'Remembering the Iolaire Disaster' which was curated by Seonaid McDonald, archivist at *Tasglann nan Eilean*.³ A further commemoration was published by the National Records of Scotland, drawing on sources of which it is custodian, such as the census, statutory civil registers, the file on Deaths at Sea, the Inland Revenue file on the Iolaire Disaster Fund, and the findings of the Fatal Accident Inquiry.⁴ The disaster has also been addressed in an online publication by the National Library of Scotland and in an exhibition at Museum nan Eilean in Benbecula.⁵ Finally, in this brief survey of a much more extensive list, Robertson, worked in partnership with Dr Iain Donald from Abertay University and a number of *Comainn eachdraidhean* on the island, to produce the online digital commemoration and app *Visualising the Iolaire*. *The original research for this project is one of the two key bodies of material analysed in this report*. Material from which is the base of the oral material drawn on in great depth in this report. These recent commemorations have reminded us, moreover, that while the greatest losses were incurred in Lewis, fatalities included four men from Harris, one from Scalpay and one from Berneray; and 20 from the rest of the United Kingdom.

There is little more to add to such a substantial corpus of research, particularly the first-hand accounts that are articulated so eloquently in *The Darkest Dawn*. The objective of this report is to build on the work already undertaken by examining initially the tragedy's impact and legacy thematically through the lens of contemporary documents, not least those generated by various institutions that lay at the heart of all Hebridean communities: churches, schools and local government bodies. Since emigration was woven into the warp and weft of life in the Long Island, the second – and lengthier – part of the report considers the response to the disaster and its aftermath in overseas locations where Scots most commonly settled.

The source in which the tragedy was most extensively covered, particularly in the early weeks of 1919, was the *Stornoway Gazette*, not only in its headline reports, editorial columns and correspondence, but in its district news, which often carried obituaries of individuals from those localities who had perished on the *Iolaire*. But since material from the *Gazette* has been extensively used in existing publications, it has been only superficially revisited for the purposes of this report, primarily to elicit information relating to the response to the disaster made by Hebrideans in the diaspora.

2.1 The reaction of the churches

For much of the twentieth century evangelical Presbyterianism remained at the heart of everyday life in the northern Outer Hebrides. Long after secularisation had taken hold in mainland Scotland, the Isle of Lewis was described in a BBC documentary in 1979 as 'The last stronghold of the pure gospel'.⁶ Seventy per cent of the *Iolaire's* passengers belonged to the Free Church of Scotland and Lewis experienced a remarkable religious revival in the 1920s, despite – or perhaps partly because of

– the tragedies experienced by the islanders, a phenomenon directly addressed in the interviews conducted by Robertson and analysed below. It is therefore imperative to scrutinise the responses of various denominations and congregations to the disaster. The significance of faith is acknowledged by the authors of *The Darkest Dawn*, who quote from the sermons delivered in Stornoway on the Sunday after the disaster, parts of which were subsequently reproduced in the *Stornoway Gazette*.⁷

Turning to the churches' own archives, time constraints have limited this initial survey largely to the response of the Free Church of Scotland, the dominant denomination. The most striking feature of that denomination's records is probably the lack of published reference to the *Iolaire*. As noted above, in January 1919 the *Stornoway Gazette* printed the responses made by five of the town's churches on the first Sunday after the disaster. But thereafter references were few. This is not surprising. Sermons were generally oral productions, which were rarely committed to paper. They were delivered and absorbed 'in the moment' before disappearing without record. We might speculate, however, that the tragedy would have been referenced only opaquely, since there was until recent decades a general reluctance among Free Church clergy to speak about current affairs in public worship, even if those events were harnessed to scriptural reassurances and injunctions. The notable absence of any *Iolaire*-related obituaries from the pages of the Church's magazine, *The Monthly Record*, may reflect another concern in Reformed church circles, to avoid any impression of praying for the dead or even eulogising them, particularly if – like many of those lost on the *Iolaire* – they were not communicant members of the Church or numbered among its office-bearers.

Another contributory factor may have been that a number of Free churches in the islands were experiencing vacancies: these included Barvas, Cross, Kinloch, Park (severely affected by the disaster) and Leverburgh in Harris. The absence of a minister, particularly if a vacancy was of long duration, could deprive communities of a natural community leader and spokesman. And a final consideration that may help to explain the reluctance to highlight the tragedy, among the population in general as well as specifically in church circles, is the self-effacing and stoical nature of island culture. As is clearly captured in the collective memory explored below, this was demonstrated in the internalising of grief, rather than in any public display that might draw unwanted attention to bereaved families or communities. Silence and "carrying on" being one of the most important, albeit nuanced, coping strategies deployed by those affected by trauma of the disaster.

The avoidance of any claim to exceptionalism was probably especially acute at the end of a long war, with its catalogue of individual and family bereavements and the regular receipt of the dreaded telegram, exacerbated by the heavy death toll from the influenza pandemic of 1918-19. In other words, it was felt that the tragedy of the *Iolaire*, though particularly poignant because of the circumstances in which it occurred, had to be absorbed into the wider context of loss and should not be highlighted, not least for fear it would diminish the sacrifices made throughout the conflict.⁸ In the longer term, neither the 25th, 50th nor 75th anniversary of the disaster featured in any of the Free Church's publications.

But the paucity of coverage does not mean the tragedy was completely ignored by either the statutory record of the Free Church, its monthly magazine or its General Assembly. When the Free Church Presbytery of Lewis met at Stornoway on 21 January 1919 the normal agenda items were preceded by a reference from the Moderator to 'the serious loss or disaster which has overtaken the island of Lewis'. Two Presbytery members were appointed to prepare a reference for consideration

at the next meeting, and it was agreed to invite the Moderator of the General Assembly and the Secretary of the Church's Highland Committee to visit the island in a gesture of solidarity.⁹ The remit given to two ministers (Donald MacLeod of Knock and Kenneth Cameron of Stornoway) to prepare a reference to the tragedy was carried over at the next meeting, but no subsequent mention was made of such a document. The February meeting did, however, include an extract from a Minute of the Free Church Presbytery of Glasgow 'sympathising with relatives and congregations concerned' and also repeated the reference to the invitation that was to be issued to the Moderator of Assembly and Secretary of the Highland Committee to visit the island.¹⁰

The January 1919 issue of the Free Church magazine, the *Monthly Record*, probably went to press before news of the disaster could be processed, but the February issue included three articles and a letter to the editor. A 339-word editorial article entitled 'An overwhelming disaster' appeared under 'Current Topics'. As well as describing what had happened, the editor noted that 'the cause of the disaster is still apparently a mystery, although disquieting rumours are in circulation, and local feeling has found expression in an insistent and successful demand for a public inquiry'.¹¹ A longer article by the Reverend K. Cameron of Stornoway first drew attention to 800 men from Lewis who had 'died for righteousness' in the war before he turned to the *Iolaire* disaster. He listed the parishes worst affected, including Knock (30); Ness and Crossbost (19 each); Barvas and Back (15 each); Carloway (10); and Shawbost (9). He described the scene as news of the disaster spread.

A mourning Island, bereaved parents, stricken wives, helpless children make plain that joy has given place to sorrow, expectation to disappointment, re-union to separation, gladness to deep anguish – all are crushed by the unlooked-for visitation. Lewis never saw such a day! After the news had spread throughout the Island, crowds came from east and west, north and south, to the scene of the disaster, to recover, if possible, the remains of their friends. Some had the mournful satisfaction of carrying what was mortal of their loved ones to their last resting-place; others had to wend their sorrowful journey to their homes with the heavy thought that the sea contained their dead. Sad were those days for the ministers: helpless did they feel as they passed from house to house seeking to turn the thoughts of the bereaved to the one source of comfort.¹²

The February issue also included a letter to the editor from the Free Church minister in Garrabost, R. Macleod, appealing for donations to be made to a disaster relief committee of which he was a member.¹³ But the strictly Sabbatarian denomination was selective in its attitude to fund-raising endeavours: while commending Macleod's appeal, an editorial expressed 'grave objection' to a proposal to hold a Sunday concert in Inverness in aid of the relief fund. 'This form of sympathy', which had been sanctioned by Inverness Town Council, was, the editorial asserted, an offensive action which constituted 'an outrage on the religious feelings of the people of Lewis and an insult to their sorrow' and it suggested they could legitimately 'refuse to touch a single penny of money which bears so unmistakeable a taint'.¹⁴

That attitude was endorsed by the Inverness Presbytery, which suggested that donations should be made to the Disaster Fund Committee through congregational collections.¹⁵ In fact, most of the *Monthly Record's* subsequent references to the *Iolaire* related to donations, which came in from individuals and congregations all over Scotland and beyond. In April £24 0s 3d was donated; in May £11 14s 8d; and in June £33 13s. In September the fund was swelled by a particularly large donation from the Free Church Presbytery of Glasgow, the sum of £238 8s 8d being the fruit of contributions

from seventeen congregations in Glasgow, Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire, Ayrshire and Arran. Further small donations continued to dribble in intermittently until August 1920.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the disaster featured in the report of the Highlands and Islands Committee to the Free Church General Assembly, meeting in Edinburgh in May 1919,¹⁷ but the only other occasion on which it was covered publicly in church records was on the first anniversary, when the *Monthly Record* printed a personal reflection by the Reverend Roderick Macleod of Knock Free Church.

At this late hour, when I have a little rest from labours often peculiar to our Church in this Island, I want to give the readers of *The Record* a faint idea of what we passed through as a congregation in connection with the above-mentioned Disaster.

No congregation in the Island felt the blow heavier than Knock, having lost twenty-nine men, among whom were thirteen heads of families. Of the sixteen single men, two were brothers, and one was the son of one of my elders.

It would take too much space to give a detailed account of my experiences in visiting the bereaved families and witnessing scenes that would overpower the strongest feelings and crush under their weight the stoutest heart. Suffice it to say that but for the sustaining grace of God to those immediately affected, and to me their pastor, we could not have stood it. When I consider the sudden shock to wives with their little ones around them, and to parents when the news, like a bolt from the blue, came to them on that fateful morning, I often wonder at the way they were sustained under it. God, or course, gave the strength.¹⁸

Macleod went on to offer short eulogies on a number of 'worthy men' in his congregation who had perished on the *lolaire*, including Murdo McLeod and two men named Alexander McKenzie from Aird; Alexander McDonald and John McIver of Lower Bayble; John Smith of Upper Bayble; and Angus McKay and Donald McAskill of Shadir.

2.2 Official responses: school and local government records

Church and school were the twin institutional pillars of Scottish society. It might therefore have been expected that school records would commemorate the disaster, but on the whole this was not the case. It was mentioned – briefly – in the minutes of only three of the five school boards on Lewis (Barvas, Lochs and Uig), all of which had presumably agreed to adopt identical wording in their recognition of the event.

On the motion of the Chairman it was unanimously resolved to express on behalf of the Board and Manager their great sorrow at the terrible and inexplicable disaster that overtook this vessel on new year's morning with a large complement of Lewis Navy men returning to their homes on leave and also to express their heartfelt sympathy with the very large number of bereaved families and friends throughout the whole Island.¹⁹

Under the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act the head teacher of every school run by a school board was required to keep a daily log of issues such as attendance, the purchase of textbooks or coal, health

inspections and disciplinary cases. One of the main deficiencies of this source, however, is the anodyne nature of the entries, it being impressed on teachers that entries should be impersonal, anonymised and stripped of any hint of their own opinions. Such an instruction obviously militated against the recording of any meaningful reflections about the impact of the *Iolaire* tragedy. To date only two school log books have been consulted for this report: Barvas (Cross) and Fidigarry. No mention was made of the tragedy in the Barvas log but there was a brief reference in the Fidigarry entry of 6 January, which stated: 'School reopened after seven weeks' closure. Very poor attendance. Spoke to the senior pupils of the dreadful disaster to the 'Iolaire' on New Year's morning which involved the deaths of two to three hundred naval ratings.'²⁰ The authors of *The Darkest Dawn* have identified references to the disaster made in three other log books: Mangersta, Bernera and Bragar. The first two entries referred to local funerals. On 6 January the teacher at Mangersta school wrote: 'Owing to the funerals in the district I thought it best to close the school for the day'. On the same date a visiting official at Bernera school wove his comment on the disaster into other more prosaic news.

Visited school this day noon. Signed registers; attendance somewhat better today altho' still poor. Weather dry but cold. The funeral of two of the *Iolaire* disaster is passing by to the Bosta burying ground. This terrible [word omitted] is aggravated by the report that it occurred through the indiscretion of the officer-in-charge. Two of the victims from this island are still missing.

Three days later the Bragar teacher reported 'Attendance improving but still poor. The naval disaster to HMS [sic] *Iolaire* accounts for most of the absences. Day wet and stormy.'²¹

Turning to local government records, it is hardly surprising that the disaster featured prominently in the minute books of Stornoway Town Council in the weeks after 1 January 1919. At a special meeting held on 3 January the Provost 'made touching reference to the calamity' and the Council unanimously agreed to 'demand of the responsible authority the strictest investigation into all the circumstances attending the catastrophe and the responsibility attaching thereto', this resolution to be sent to the Admiralty.²² Messages of sympathy were read out, including telegrams from Queen Alexandra; the Secretary for Scotland; the Secretary of the War Office and a number of military personnel; Lord Leverhulme; and various clergymen.

Three days later a joint meeting of the Town Council, Lewis District Committee and War Pensions Sub-Committee expressed its 'sincere and most profound sympathy with the dependents and relatives of our brave sailors who perished in the disaster ... which has stunned the whole community' and agreed that the island's ministers should be asked to read a resolution to that effect from their pulpits on the following Sunday. It is not recorded if the clergymen concurred, but the *Stornoway Gazette* reported that the ministers of the Established, Free and United Free Churches did read a joint telegram from the Moderators of those denominations.²³

The main purpose of the joint meeting on 6 January was to consider whether a public appeal for funds should be made 'to supplement official allowances and grants payable to widows and dependents'. In deciding to proceed with such an appeal, the meeting went against advice from the Committee of the Grand Fleet Fund that a special appeal might not be 'desirable' on the grounds that financial assistance would be given by the War Pensions Committee 'to all necessitous cases arising out of the disaster'. An all-male committee, chaired by the Provost, was duly appointed to

draw up and administer the appeal. The same meeting reiterated the Town Council's demand for an immediate public enquiry.

In view of the widespread sympathy felt for the large number of families bereaved through the shipwreck ... and the various rumours abroad as to the cause of the disaster ... this Joint Meeting ... respectfully ask H.M. Government through the Secretary for Scotland to arrange to hold, as early as possible, a Public Enquiry by an Independent Tribunal into the cause of (1) the shipwreck of the "Iolaire" and (2) the great loss of life that ensued therefrom.²⁴

The *Iolaire* Disaster Fund subscription books that were generated as part of the public appeal reflect the wide geographical spread of individuals and institutions which responded to the disaster.²⁵ It is notable that the largest number of contributors by far (about 75 per cent) came from England and included several army and naval officers and men. At many levels the loss of the *Iolaire* was therefore clearly regarded as a national disaster, which elicited a huge outpouring of national sympathy, expressed in tangible monetary form. By 31 January a total of £10,846 17s 5d had been raised, rising to £29,116 7s by 31 December. The appeal was inaugurated with a £1,000 donation from Lord Leverhulme and included £2,000 from the Navy League Overseas Relief Fund in London, £100 from British Aluminium and an early donation of £1 from Manchester from 'Marguerite Agopian, a little Armenian girl', presumably a refugee from the Armenian genocide of 1915. There were numerous contributions from church and Sunday school congregations and from Scottish societies in England and the diaspora. Lists of subscribers were periodically published in the *Stornoway Gazette*. The Fund was administered by the committee, disbursements being made half-yearly, and appeals against the refusal or cessation of payments often being lodged on the applicants' behalf by local clergymen.

2.3 Press coverage

As already noted, the main newspaper, the *Stornoway Gazette*, features only superficially in this report since it has been quoted widely in existing publications, thus making relevant material easy to access. But as well as coverage in the overseas press, which is addressed below in the section headed 'The response in the Scottish diaspora', the tragedy was covered in the wider Scottish and British press. Among Highland newspapers, the *Oban Times* was a weekly eight-page publication that had both a wide circulation and a traditionally sympathetic attitude towards crofting communities. In the first three months of 1919 the *Iolaire* tragedy was mentioned in thirteen articles, including one lengthy, multi-column illustrated feature. The paper had gone to press too early for it to feature in the issue of 4 January, but thereafter it was mentioned in every issue up to and including 29 March, with the exception of 1 February, 1, 15 and 22 March.

The most extensive coverage was, not surprisingly, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. On 11 January it was referenced in news reports from both Glasgow and Edinburgh. In Glasgow, where there was an extensive Lewis community, the news had been received with 'the deepest sorrow' and 'consternation'. In the capital, where the tragedy had 'evoked the keenest sympathy', the Association of Highland Societies of Edinburgh had decided to send 'a preliminary grant of £200, to be utilised in relieving immediate distress, or otherwise in connection with the burial of the victims', with the possibility that the Association might take further steps to organise the collection of funds 'at home and abroad to enable them to deal more liberally with those who are left practically

destitute'. The same issue also included a 1,506-word report of what had happened and highlighted the 'deep unrest' about the cause of the disaster that was fuelling demands for an immediate investigation. The report included a poignant description of the merriment among those waiting on the quayside in the early hours of 1 January unaware of the tragedy that was unfolding so close to shore. Within a few hours the merriment had turned to melancholy, as 'the road to the Admiralty mortuary, where the recovered bodies were laid out for identification, became a veritable highway of mourning'.

About 1.30 a.m. on New Year's Day the spacious passenger pier at Stornoway was thronged with a concourse of people – young and old – waiting the arrival of the *Iolaire*, which was specially chartered to convey about 250 Lewis naval ratings from Kyle to Stornoway on the New Year leave. The yacht was due to arrive at 2 a.m. In the crowd there were representatives from practically all the villages and hamlets of the island to greet their loved ones on their arrival after braving the dangers of the deep and evading the grey reaper in its most appalling form, which has dogged their footsteps during the last four and a half years. In the gathering old men might be seen leaning heavily on their sticks, old women also with furrowed brow, but with their countenance lit up by smiles in anticipation of meeting shortly their absent boys. Smartly dressed middle-aged and young women were also in evidence, some of them holding by the hand little children, while others were evidently waiting to welcome home their brothers and their sweethearts.,

It being New Year's morn, there was a good deal of hilarity indulged in, particularly by the young. Laughter and merry-making were constantly heard, while the compliments of the season were exchanged by old and young. An atmosphere of expectancy and joy seemed to be brooding over the whole gathering.

At 2 a.m. every eye was strained in the direction of the lighthouse which marks the entrance to the harbour, which is a quarter of a mile from the pier, but no sign of the ship could be seen. The minutes dragged into hours, yet no appearance of the long-looked-for boat. At last the crowd began to scatter. The idea that something had gone wrong was never entertained. But, alas, at that moment an awful tragedy was being enacted on the cruel reef known as the Beasts of Holm (a very appropriate name), about a mile and a half from the pier, and only that there was a strong breeze blowing from the north-west, carrying the sound away from the town, the heartrending cries of the drowning men would have been heard by their friends on the pier.²⁶

Subsequent articles documented the losses from the different parishes of Lewis, reported the appointment and proceedings of the public inquiry, and gave updates on donations to the Disaster Fund, including over £1,200 raised by a flag day in Glasgow on 22 March.²⁷ A few weeks earlier, on 16 February, financial support had been generated through a 'grand Highland concert' organised by the Highland Societies of Edinburgh in the Usher Hall, and chaired by the Secretary for Scotland.²⁸

2.4 A resurgence of emigration: impact and legacy of the disaster

Emigration had been a prominent characteristic of Scottish life well before the *Iolaire* disaster, but, as retained in the collective memory, the tragedy undoubtedly contributed to its post-war resurgence in the Western Isles. Two million emigrants had left during the century after 1815 (not least in the decade before the First World War) and they were to be followed by another two million in the century after 1918. The most significant exodus was in the 1920s. At census day in 1921 the population of Scotland was 4,882,288. By 1931 it had fallen to 4,842,554, making the 1920s the first inter-censal period since records began when the country's population registered an absolute decline. In other words, the number of people who left the country in that decade more than cancelled out the natural increase of population.

Although since the 1860s an ever-growing majority of emigrants had come from the urban-industrial central belt, and continued to do so after the war, the 1920s was also a very significant decade in the story of Hebridean emigration, with the spotlight falling particularly on 1923. Within eight days in April of that year 600 emigrants from Vatersay to the Butt of Lewis embarked for Canada on two iconic Canadian Pacific liners, the *Marloch* from Lochboisdale and the *Metagama* from Stornoway. Of the 315 passengers taken on board the *Metagama* at Stornoway on 21 April, 260 came from Lewis, and in some cases the legacy of the *Iolaire* may well have played a part in the decision to seek new lives across the Atlantic, away from haunting memories and – for a few – the lingering burden of survivor guilt.²⁹

Once again, this is a theme which emerges strongly in the oral material. Such cross-correlation of evidence, memories and emotions demonstrates and buttresses, moreover, the depth and importance of these key themes.

Of the 73 islanders who survived the *Iolaire*, thirteen emigrated: seven to Canada, five to Australia and one to New Zealand. Malcolm Macdonald's biographies indicate that two of these men left Lewis because of survivor guilt. John Maclennan had walked home to West Uig after surviving the shipwreck and later commented that 'a child could have brought her into harbour that night'. He spent fourteen years in Australia 'as he felt he could not settle in Lewis after the disaster'. After marrying in Sydney in 1929 he returned with his wife to Uig, where he lived as a crofter and weaver until his death in 1987 at the age of 91.³⁰ Meanwhile Murdo Stewart from Point, having been 'seriously traumatised' and 'finding it difficult to cope with survivor's guilt after being questioned by relatives of those lost', emigrated permanently to Canada, sailing for Montreal on 17 June 1922 on the Canadian Pacific liner *Melita*. After working as a railwayman at Fort William, Ontario, he moved to British Columbia, where in 1932 he married Bessie Thelia Carter, with whom he had twin daughters, Dorothy and Christina. He became a fisherman at Gibsons on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast, passing away on 10 June 1969, aged 74.³¹ His niece, Donna Macleod, recalled that her uncle was one of three siblings who emigrated to Canada around 1919-20. After surviving the wreck, Murdo had walked barefoot to the family home. She confirmed that his subsequent emigration was undertaken at least partly in an attempt to bury his haunting memories, for his children never knew of his experience on the *Iolaire* until after his death, when Donna visited Canada and told them about it. Their understanding was that their mother had also been unaware of the tragedy.³²

Another survivor who emigrated to Canada, Donald Macdonald from Lochs, settled at Shell Lake, Saskatchewan, where he became a teacher. An article about his experience of the disaster that he

wrote initially for an unnamed Canadian magazine was reprinted anonymously in the *Stornoway Gazette* in August 1956.³³ After describing the longing he felt for the Hebrides while 'on the lone Saskatchewan Prairies' and outlining some elements of the islands' topography and culture, he focused on the way in which 'the Fates and Furies combined dealt the island a sad and staggering blow'. It is a haunting and harrowing narrative, several parts of which have been quoted in different sections of *The Darkest Dawn*. It is reproduced below *in extenso*.

Christmas 1918 found me aboard H.M.S. Cyclops, parent boat for the Grand Fleet in Scape Flow, north of Scotland. Most of the English sailors were given Christmas leave, the Scotch laddies were to have their New Year... Early in the morning of the 31st, Jack [MacLeod] informed me that he had received his discharge and beamingly remarked, "It's me too for The Road to the Isles."

By 10 a.m. I was on my first lap homeward, crossed the treacherous Pentland Firth on a Naval boat and landed in Scrabster terminus in the north of Scotland. I took the train immediately to Kyle of Lochalsh via Inverness and arrived in Kyle about 6 p.m.

Upon arriving in Kyle I noticed the sleepy little town was swarming with sailors, soldiers, civilians and munition workers carpenters and engineers from the Clyde, kilted soldiers of Highland Regiments and sailors from various ports. I could hear broad Scots and English but mostly Gaelic, the last my Mother's tongue which I loved so much. Their sad and bitter memories were now submerged anticipating meeting their beloved ones. The Isle was The Isle of the Blessed to them, a haven of peace and rest.

Word went around that there were over two hundred passengers more than the mail boat could accommodate. Wireless was sent to Stornoway and it was decided that the mail boat would convey the soldiers and civilians and an Admiralty boat would convey the sailors.

It was not a passenger boat nor did it resemble one. It waw different from any we ever had the pleasure to sail on. It was a beautiful 900 ton steam yacht which belonged to a rich Clyde shipowner. It was now commandeered by the Government for patrol and submarine scouting. Here it was with little alteration, with the exception of a coast of slate grey on hull and tall masts, and an 18 pounder on a high stern platform surrounded by numerous depth charges It was called the Iolaire.

I felt rather honoured being conveyed on my last lap homeward on a millionaire's yacht.

Once abroad an Officer shouted "Make yourselves comfortable." Some went into the fo'c'sle, a number to the saloon, most of them remained on deck. I with twelve others found a cosy spot in the Chart house. In half an hour we shoved off.

Soon the Inner Isles were fading behind, rugged rock Rona and misty Isle of Skye were vanishing on the port quarter. Now with a pitch and roll we were in the open sea. The nigh was cold and threatening with a stiff breeze form the south east hurling us along as if conscious of the fact we wished to be on "Terra firms", to hear New Year's chimes and foot our Hogmanay.

Meanwhile I made myself comfortable, stretched out on the floor with my kit-bag for a pillow... Sleep would not come my way. I got up, walked around, and noted the wind stiffening to a gale.

I heard no loud talk, no celebrations. Everything was serene. I again returned to my temporary shake-down, told an acquaintance to wake me when nearing the light house a mile from the pier.

I fell into a restless sleep. I had a horrid dream. I saw my father talking to me. I could feel his breath, his torpedo beard touching my cheek. "Don, be careful," he said. With those words ringing in my ears I work up with terrible foreboding. Just then a scraping heaving of the boat rolled me across the floor. I got up, spruced myself, heaved my kit-bag on my shoulder shouting at Jack, "We are alongside the pier." The refrain was taken up by the remainder. I caught the door knob on the wind side, then came a louder scraping vibrating noise and a terrible impact – simultaneously the boat lurched at an awful angle catapulting us mercilessly against the lee side of the chart-house. This certainly was not the pier. The doors were closed., I could not see. Instinctively we clambered to the door on the wind side. As we opened the door the light house flashed its blessed beam – on mountainous waves relentlessly lashing against over-towering cliffs with narrow ledges and jagged crags. The waves descended in a mighty cataract into the churning, boiling and spuming depths below. We were parallel to the cliffs and a stone's throw from it.

The scene was terrible to behold. We were used to mines, torpedoes and shell fire but this struck fear in our hearts. We knew we were trapped, as no life-boat could live in that maelstrom. The most powerful swimmer would be a toy. We would be dashed to pieces, quartered and torn asunder by the piercing knife-like crags.

We struck a submerged reef, came to a stand-still twenty yards from the cliff, a mile from the pier and our destination Stornoway.

I spoke to Jack. "This is a wooden boat. No provisions made for passengers and not enough life-boats or life-belts. Minutes count. I am off for a life-belt. Good-bye Jack and God Bless you."

I threw my kit-bag down, threw my heavy over-coat away. With the aid of a flash-light I groped my way amidships, By now the lights were out. Rockets were fired from the bridge and the Captain shouted "Everybody for himself." In the rockets' flare I could see sailors everywhere, single and in groups., Pieces of the life-boats on the wind side were being hurled over our heads. Some sailors were trying to get two boats out on the lee side. Some were climbing the tall masts fearing being washed overboard. Most of them were on the gun's platform aft.

I managed to get to the lee side of the galley. While contemplating what to do I noticed a sailor with a big round cork life-belt around his shoulders. As I jumped up to him I noticed he had a cork jacket as well. "Please give me one of those life-belts." He gazed at me. I put my arm under the life-belt and pulled it over his head. He still gazed not uttering a word. Now I felt safer and descended to the bulwarks to jump into one of the boats. Thank

goodness I missed it by seconds. It was loaded. I watched it churning and whirling and in an instant down it went. I could see little black specks in the foaming froth. Something deterred me from jumping into the second boat. I gazed at it as it shoved off, then a mighty back wash wave seemed to fill the boat. It seemed to glide up to their shoulders, their heads – and then no more. I could not see any survivors from either of the boats.

I managed to climb a davit, twisted a leg around it, the other leg resting on a cross-pin and my head under a narrow platform. This platform helped to break the walloping waves. I was hardly in this position when one of the boilers exploded. Large sheets of flames with forked fingers were bellowing from the galley and tucking at my back. The aftermast snapped and bodies came plummeting around me. Looking down into the boiling cauldron below me there were scores of bodies rolling, appearing, tumbling and disappearing. I prayer, “Oh Mighty Sea, roll them Ashore. Roll them Ashore.” Now I thought I could hear far away voices from the shore.

It turned out that a sailor with a heaving line jumped from the gun’s platform, was hurled by an incoming wave to a ledge. He pulled a hawser ashore. A number managed to make shore hand over hand on this rope.

I felt that I should get at this rope, but it was impossible. The boat was awash. Fire, steam and lashing waves prevented me.

Oh! What eerie noises and sounds – the swirling water, the pounding waves, roaring fires, screams of the burned and dying and above all the chimes of the bridge-bell as if tolling our knell.

The yacht’s keel was by now well broken up. The boat was sliding backwards into deeper waters. Finally I found myself opposite where the rope was tied ashore.

There were sailors below me, trying to grasp the rope, wading to their shoulders.

My position was fearful in front and frightful behind. I must jump over the heads of those below me to grab the rope. I braced myself for a good long leap – a leap of death, I thought. Something caught me by the arm. I turned round and found another sailor had hooked his arm through my life-belt. This was serious. My last deed was to be a good one, so I took off my life-belt and handed it to him saying “Take it and good luck.”

I jumped and caught the rope. One, two heaves shoreward then my legs went round my head. I felt myself carried forward. I hit the crags. I was numb. I rolled like a football down the jagged rocks. The back wash hurled me outwards. Now I was dancing with the dead, seized one, spun around and lost him. Another [came] to me. I’d hug hm, make a few grotesque whirls and then lose my grasp.

It happened that some of the sailors who had managed ashore on the rope had enough strength left to be able to run back and fro with the waves, hauling ashore the dead and the living. One of them hauled me to a ledge.

Next morning I woke up in Sick Bay in Stornoway, my father was sitting by my bedside. He informed me that over 200 perished

below the cliff. Some sailors were washed ashore a few yards from their home cemetery as if to say “This is your final resting place.”

Only three of the yacht’s crew were saved. The Captain was found mangled amongst the rocks.

By noon all that was left of H.M.S. [sic] *lolaire* was a fathom of the foremast, pointing like a long accusing finger at the cliff.

Nobody could throw any light on this mysterious disaster, half a mile from the lighthouse at the harbour’s mouth.

Jack did not answer the roll call.

Somewhere, some place, some one blundered.

Some of those interviewed by Jim Wilkie for his book, *Metagama: a journey from Lewis to the New World*³⁴ testified to the cataclysmic impact of the sudden and dramatic exodus from Lewis in the 1920s.³⁵ Many of the sentiments were negative, framed in terms of loss rather than the anticipation of better opportunities. An interviewee in my own collection, the late Calum Murray of Shader, was one of the many who (as a young child) stood at the top of the hill near his home to watch the ship sail away. The feeling in the community was, he recalled, ‘very sad, very sad’.³⁶

2.5 The response in the Scottish diaspora

How was the tragedy reported in overseas locations where there were significant concentrations of Scots? The availability of digitised newspapers through two initiatives in New Zealand and Australia respectively makes it easy to quantify press coverage from the Antipodes. New Zealand’s *Papers Past* website records seventeen hits for items on the *lolaire*, most of which were identical reports in different newspapers across the North and South Islands. The seventeen newspapers in which it was reported – all on 6 January after the cable had been received – were the *Waihi Daily Telegraph*; the *Sun (Christchurch)*; the *Hawera and Normanby Star*; the *Taranaki Daily News*; the *Evening Post*; the *Wanganui Herald*; the *Waikato Times*; the *Taranaki Herald*; the *Feilding Star*; the *Press*; the *Southland Times*; the *Evening Star*; the *Otago Daily Times*; the *Wanganui Chronicle*; the *Rangitikei Advocate and Manawatu Argus*; the *Stratford Evening Post*; and the *Dominion*. A handful of errors crept into some of the reports, such as the mis-spelling of Stornoway; a statement in the *Southland Times* that the yacht had been carrying ‘over 340 British sailors on a holiday cruise’; a similar statement in the *Evening Star* that the yacht had been ‘cruising off the Hebrides with a number of sailors on leave’; and an inaccurate death toll.³⁷

The report that appeared in most newspapers was as follows:

Wreck of the *lolaire*. A swift tragedy. Death roll of three hundred. London, 2nd January.

Details of the wreck of the naval auxiliary yacht *lolaire*, with large loss of life, show that the night was clear with a roughish sea. A sudden storm carried her broadside on to the entrance to Stornoway (sic) Harbour, when she became unmanageable. Her bow struck on the ground a few yards from a ledge of rock jutting from the shore. Seas continually swept her, and within a few minutes she listed broadside on.

Two boats that were launched were smashed to pieces. Fifty or sixty men, tempted by the nearness of the shore, jumped for the ledge and were killed on the ragged rocks. Some reached the ledge, but were washed off.

Finally two landed and got a hawser secured, by which the survivors on board the *lolaire* were rescued. Owing to the intense cold many failed to keep hold of the hawser and were drowned. The *lolaire* broke up in half an hour and disappeared.

The total death-roll was 300. Only 40 were saved, of whom many were badly injured amongst the rocks.³⁸

Coverage in the Australian press was slightly more extensive. Seven newspapers published three articles on the disaster; 27 newspapers published two articles; and 13 newspapers published a single article. Some of the misunderstandings and errors that had appeared in the New Zealand press were repeated by the Australian newspapers, notably about the victims having been on a holiday trip, and the *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, New South Wales) said that the yacht was heading to England. Most of the coverage appeared in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, between 3 and 7 January, but on 19 and 24 March there were two overlapping retrospective articles in the *Australian Town and Country Journal* and the (*Brisbane*) *Telegraph* respectively.

The first article, headlined 'Naval tragedy: *lolaire* Sunk: over 250 men drowned' was taken from the account of a survivor, 'Lewis Alexander Maclver', probably the same individual as Alexander Donald Maciver who appears in Malcolm Macdonald's list of survivors.³⁹ Maciver's narrative had originally appeared in the London *Daily Chronicle* before being reprinted in the Australian press in an article that covered two pages. After summarising his narrative, the report went on to quote Maclver's testimony directly.

It was very dark, there being no moon. But the atmosphere was clear, and lights were distinctly visible at a great distance. As we were approaching Arnigh [sic] lighthouse we commenced getting out kit together, expecting to be safely alongside Stornoway Pier in a few minutes. It was about 1.50, and I was in the saloon, when there came a great crash, and the vessel heeled heavily to starboard. It was so dark that we could not see the land, which, as afterwards transpired, was only 30 yards distant from the point where we struck.

I don't think it was a rock we struck, but just that we ran ashore. When the ship listed the seas came breaking over, and I should say 40 or 50 men jumped overboard. I think everyone of them was drowned. There was a great panic onboard. Two lifeboats were launched, and both were swamped. From the first one man scrambled back on board.

With this exception I think all the men who went into the boats were drowned. When the *lolaire* struck she was bow on to the land, but about 10 minutes afterwards she lifted and drove a little to seawards, afterwards coming in stern first, and falling broadside on to the shore.

Rockets were fired, and by their light I could see that her stern was now not more than seven yards from a ledge of rocks jutting out from the shore, and amidships she was within 20 yards of the only available place for landing.

The seas were breaking over the stern, but many were tempted to try to reach the rocks there, which were so near. I do not think any of them succeeded, for there was a very strong

current running between the ship's stern and the ledge of rocks, and I believe there were scores of men dashed to death against the rocks.

When the second or third rocket went up I observed a line hanging into the sea from one of the davits amidships, and as the vessel, being broadside on, was breaking the force of the sea on the shore at this part, I let myself down by the line, got hold of a bit of the wreckage, and tried to make the shore. I however, got entangled in the ropes hanging from one of the boats that had been swamped. I managed to get clear, however, and finally reached the shore. So far as I know I was the first man to get to land. I went out on the ledge of rocks towards the stern of the ship to see if I could get a line passed to me from those on board, but the sea was breaking over the rocks.

I was twice washed off the ledge; I then saw that another man got ashore where I had landed, and he had a lifeline with him by means of which we got a hawser ashore. All the men who were saved scrambled ashore by the aid of this rope. I cannot say how many there were ultimately. The lolaire fell off to port, and the hawser snapped. I was very exhausted and dazed, and was wandering about for an hour or two before I found the farmhouse, where all of us who got ashore were well cared for.⁴⁰

The testimony of MacIver, identified only as a 'young naval reservist', also appeared in the *Brisbane Telegraph* five days later, in an article attributed to the Stornoway correspondent of the London *Daily Telegraph*. The only slight difference from his account in the *Australian Town and Country Journal* was his description of the survivors' reception at Stoneyfield farmhouse: they were, he reported, 'hospitably entertained'. The *Brisbane Telegraph* headline also gave a more accurate indication of the death toll.⁴¹

Across the Atlantic, all the mainstream US publications have been digitised, but most are behind paywalls. The largest digital archive is www.newspapers.com. The disaster was mentioned by several newspapers across the country (170 titles, according to a superficial scrutiny of the ProQuest website) but was accorded very little coverage, most of the reports being identical single-sentence descriptive references. Perhaps that neglect was not surprising when it is set within the wider context of international news: only two months after the Armistice, there was ongoing turbulence in Europe; soldiers were being demobilised and returning home while others were being sent to fight the Bolsheviks in Russia; President Wilson was touring Europe; and the influenza epidemic was still raging. The short report of the sinking in the *New York Times* of 2 January was grossly inaccurate, both its heading – which declared '270 British Sailors Drown While on Holiday Cruise' – and in reporting that the officers and crew were 'residents of Lewis Island, off the Australian coast'.⁴² The story was widely – if scantily – covered by other American newspapers, all apparently from the same wire report. The *Bridgeport Telegram* and the *Iowa City Citizen* repeated the reference to 270 deaths but corrected the location to the Scottish coast. The *Sandusky Register* put the deaths at 274 and the *Warren Evening Times* gave a 'revised list' of 260 deaths in a three-sentence report that took up less than one column inch. The longest report (about three column inches) appeared in the *San Antonio Light* which repeated the same two errors that appeared in the *New York Times*.⁴³

The Caledonian was a New York-based monthly magazine for diasporic Scots. A number of editions, including the 1919 numbers, are accessible through Google Books. The *Iolaire* disaster was mentioned in two articles, both submitted by the journal's Glasgow correspondent. The February report emphasised the island-wide impact of the tragedy and hinted at the need to apportion blame.

An appalling [sic] naval disaster occurred on January 1st, just outside the Stornoway harbor entrance, when the steam yacht *Iolaire* ran ashore on the dangerous rocks called the Beasts of Holm, causing a death roll of more than 250 persons. The boat had come from Kyle of Lochalsh, and was conveying some 300 sailors home on New Year leave. Only thirty to fifty men were saved, and all the officers and most of the crew of the ill-fated yacht were lost. The relatives of the victims are scattered over the hundred villages of Lewis, so that practically the whole island has been plunged into grief. The most tragic aspect of the occurrence is that the accident occurred only thirty yards from land, but the sea being very rough, most of those who attempted to save themselves by jumping into the sea, were drowned.

The Stornoway disaster strikes one as all the more tragic when, as is feared, it might have been prevented. There is a feeling in the north that enquiry into the matter should be made public, as carelessness on the part of someone or other seems to have been the cause of this unfortunate occurrence. Meantime, several funds have been started for the relief of those who are left without support. In this connection Mrs Kennedy-Fraser gave a concert in Glasgow, on the 21st January, the entire proceeds of which go to the Lewis Relief Fund.⁴⁴

A shorter article the following month reported that Marjory Kennedy Fraser's concert had raised over £100 and that the enquiry in Stornoway had concluded 'no one could be blamed for the accident, the jury being satisfied that no one on board was under the influence of intoxicating liquor, and also that there was no panic on board after the vessel struck.' It also noted the recommendation made to the Carnegie Trust and the Royal Humane Society 'that Seaman J.F. McLeod receive some token of appreciation of his conduct in swimming ashore with a line, by means of which the hawser was brought ashore, and many lives saved.'⁴⁵

A search of ProQuest has not revealed any entries on the disaster in Canadian newspapers. It was covered, however, particularly in areas of significant Scottish settlement.⁴⁶ On 2 January a short article in *The Globe* reported the drowning of '270 British Seamen'. This was followed up on 4 February with a slightly longer report and an editorial, correcting the number of fatalities along with details of the public appeal, the Disaster Fund Committee having agreed to advertise the appeal in Toronto's (and Canada's) main newspaper.⁴⁷ A month later the same newspaper reported that the monthly meeting of the Caithness Society in Toronto, after listening to an appeal by a former President of the city's Lewis Society on behalf of the dependents, had 'unanimously resolved to raise a fund for this cause'.⁴⁸

Further west, following the initial wire reports, and the advertising of the public appeal,⁴⁹ the *Manitoba Free Press* announced on 5 February that the Lewis diaspora in Winnipeg was planning to organise a relief effort. The full article covered six column inches.

Details of the naval disaster of Stornoway harbor, Scotland, on January 1, have been received by Lewis people in Winnipeg and as was to be expected many here are sorely affected by the terrible accident. It now seems established that 205 naval reserve men, all natives of the Island of Lewis, went down with the ill-fated *Iolaire*. The men were on new Year's leave and another half-hour would have landed them at the Stornoway pier where in joyous anticipation their women folks and children from whom they were separated since the beginning of the war awaited their arrival. Every village in the Island is affected and the immediate dependents number no less than 50 widows and over 200 fatherless children and many aged parents whose only support came from their sailor sons. Inured as the Islanders are to hardship this is easily the heaviest blow that has ever fallen upon them and considering the appalling circumstances nothing more tragic has happened during the long bitter years of war.

A meeting of the natives and to which all sympathizers are invited will be held in the Travellers' building on Thursday evening, the 6th, at 8.30. The dependents of these gallant seamen to whom our country so largely owes its safety and victory are deserving of the sympathetic consideration of every good Britisher. In addition to local Lewismen it is expected that Mayor Gray and ex-Mayor R.D. Waugh, president of the United Scottish Association, will be present and take part in the proceedings.⁵⁰

The subscription books of the *Iolaire* Disaster Fund reveal that a significant number of Scottish organisations and individual Scots in various parts of the diaspora responded generously to the needs of dependants and survivors. Analysis of these books reveals that when the fund was finally wound up in 1938 (by which time all the orphans had reached the age of 18) the total amount subscribed had reached £31,400. When that sum was supplemented by investments and income tax recovered, and the sale of Victory Bonds, the Fund totalled £46,382 16s 4d. Nearly £44,000 had been spent, 201 families had been supported, and contributions had been towards the funeral expenses of a number of dependants.⁵¹ Of the total monies subscribed, £4,033 12s 7d had been remitted from overseas, though there may have been some duplicate entries. Most of the money had come from informal group collections and formal Scottish organisations, but £322 2s 9d was sent by individuals.

Duncan Sim has observed that the large number of emigrants from Lewis to the United States in the interwar period resulted in the establishment of 'vibrant Lewis Societies in American cities such as Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and also Montreal', as well as a Lewis Society in Duluth, which held all its meetings in Gaelic.⁵² Several pre-dated the 1920s, however, including the Lewis Society of Toronto, mentioned by one of Jim Wilkie's interviewees.⁵³ Individuals who made donations were located in at least nine Canadian locations (Toronto, Ridgetown, and Ripley in Ontario; Winnipeg, Selkirk and Portage La Prairie in Manitoba; Brûlé Mines in Alberta; and Vancouver and Trail in British Columbia, the last-named town being the site of a smelter that employed a number of Hebrideans). Individuals who donated from the United States were located in Portland, Oregon; Chicago; Nevada; New York City; and Arizona, from where the largest single donation was received - £207 16s 8d from one J.S. Douglas. Two individual donations were received from South Africa, from Utrecht and East London; one from Rhodesia; four from Shanghai; one from a couple in New Plymouth, New Zealand; and one

from Warrnambool, Victoria, Australia. Other individual donors were located in Colombo (Ceylon), Mauritius and Bethlehem.

It was more common for overseas donations to be collected and remitted by Scottish associations or informal groups of Scots. In January 1921 a sum of £66 15s 3d was received from the Lewis Society of Sydney, New South Wales, and a further Australian donation came from the Navy League in Adelaide. There was no record of donations from any Scottish association in New Zealand, but several contributions were made from southern Africa: these included £69 4s 6d sent informally from 'Lewis men and women in South Africa' and acknowledged (with the names of the donors) in the *Stornoway Gazette* on 13 June; and 'a few sympathetic South Africans in Pretoria'. More formal collections were the substantial donation of £300 from the Federated Caledonian Society of the Transvaal in Johannesburg and, in the same part of South Africa the sum of £100 15s, which was raised as the 'result of an appeal made to Scotsmen employed in the Premier (Transvaal) Diamond Mining Company'. A collection was also made by the Scottish Association at Port Elizabeth. The Caledonian Society of Madras sent £33 6s 7d. The £32 that came from 'subscriptions handed to Mr Fred Darling, Argentine Republic of South America by employees of the farm and donation by P.W. Maclean, Esq., Rancher, Rio Gallegos' reflected the number of men from the Outer Hebrides who had been attracted out to Patagonia since the late nineteenth century.

It is not surprising that most Scottish associations which contributed to the fund were located in North America, particularly Canada, with the largest amounts coming from Manitoba and Ontario: the Gaelic Society of Winnipeg (£464); the Manitoba Division of the Navy League of Canada (£400); and 'Lewismen and friends' in Fort William and Port Arthur, Ontario (£319 5s 3d). Many of the locations were also places from which individual donations were received. Several of the collective contributions were acknowledged – usually at the donors' request – in the *Stornoway Gazette*. In Ontario, donations were made by two organisations in Hamilton – the Gaelic Society and the St Andrew's Benevolent Society. Toronto was the site of the greatest number of corporate donors: the Lewis Society of Toronto; the Caithness Society of Toronto; the Gaelic Society of Canada; the Toronto Ayrshire Association; the Argyllshire Society of the City of Toronto; the Aberdeen, Banff and Kincardine Association of Toronto; the Toronto Caledonian Society; the Toronto Daughters of Scotland; the Toronto Perthshire Association; the St Andrew's Society of Toronto; and the Ontario Lewis Society of Friends. The early donation of \$189 50 from the Lewis Society of Toronto was reported in the *Stornoway Gazette* on 10 January, alongside a letter from the Society's secretary, M. Mackenzie, who requested that the names and addresses of the subscribers should also be published. Elsewhere in Ontario, a donation was made by the Huron Presbyterian Congregation in Ripley, and by 'a few Lewismen and other sympathisers in Southampton', a settlement on Lake Huron. The substantial contribution from 'Lewismen and friends in Fort William and Port Arthur' reflected the significant chain migration that had taken place from the Outer Hebrides to those locations in northern Ontario. It was forwarded to Stornoway by Kenneth Campbell of the Fort William Elevator Company and acknowledged in the *Stornoway Gazette*, along with the donors' names and individual sums contributed. In his covering letter Campbell wrote:

On hearing of the fatal disaster, the Lewismen of both cities considered it their duty to assist in some way, and called a meeting, with the Rev. N. Macleod, Port Arthur, as chairman. Collectors were appointed, and, needless to say, the results were satisfactory. Although the amount will not make up for the loss of the brave men who perished on the threshold of their homes while in defence of

our country, we all felt it our duty to assist the dependants who lost their dearest to them and we sincerely hope that the amount, although small, will help to meet some of their needs.⁵⁴

Further west, as we have seen, Scottish organisations in Manitoba made significant contributions: as well as the Gaelic Society of Winnipeg and the Manitoba Division of the Navy League of Canada, donations were also received from the St Andrew's Society of Portage La Prairie; the Lewis Disaster Committee in Winnipeg; and 'Lewis people and friends' in the town of Ninette. Two contributions from Ninette were mentioned in a letter to Provost Maclean published in the *Stornoway Gazette* on 25 April 1919. A letter written jointly by the Reverend J.A. Macconnell, Hugh Morrison and William Macdonald on behalf of 'the committee' enclosed a remittance of \$110, with the names of the contributors attached, and an explanation for the delay.

Dear Provost Maclean,

The story of the disaster by which 200 of the sons of Lewis, after braving the battle and the breeze for four years in the cause of freedom and humanity, came to us some time ago. Our minds are horror-stricken at the great loss of life and our hearts go out in sympathy for the bereaved. The Lewis people here of Ninette and district have not forgotten the Isle of our fathers, but have very fond memories that bind us to the place, and some have lost relatives in this disaster. It is known to us also that before this happened Lewis had given 800 of her sons to die in freedom's cause, and that in the giving of persons to the army she set a record for the British Empire. The cause of relief for the sufferers from the disaster was presented, at the Sanatorium here, and they made the splendid response of 200 dols. This has already gone forward. From the Lewis people of Ninette and district we ask you to accept the further contribution of 110 dollars. This has been delayed somewhat on account of a flu epidemic.⁵⁵

In Saskatchewan, the province west of Manitoba, a group of Lewismen and others also made a contribution, while in Alberta donations were received from the St Andrew's Society of Edmonton; and from 'Lewis men and friends in Calgary'. In the Pacific North-West, there were six contributions from organisations in British Columbia: the Gaelic Society of Victoria sent just over £44 as the proceeds of a Scottish concert; and other donors were the 'Widows, Wives and Mothers of Great Britain's Heroes Association Vancouver'; the members of the Admiral Jellicoe Chapter of the IODE [Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire] in Vancouver; and the United Scottish Societies of British Columbia, which sent two donations, for £242 18s and £61 10s respectively. There was also a donation of £50 10s 5d 'collected among Highlanders and friends in Victoria'. Like M. Mackenzie in Toronto, Donald Murray wrote from the mining town of Anyox, British Columbia, requesting that the *Stornoway Gazette* should publish the names and addresses of those 'friends' in the province who had subscribed \$158 in aid of the widows and orphans of Lewis and Harris'.⁵⁶ On 9 May the newspaper published the letter, written by Mrs J.M. Robertson, that had accompanied the \$50 donation from the Vancouver Widows, Wives and Mothers. She wrote:

As will be seen from the name of the Association, it consists of soldiers' dependants whose sympathy was aroused on reading in our papers here of the dreadful disaster off your shores on New Year's Eve. They, especially the war widows, thought they would like

to send some tangible token of having sympathy to their sisters in affliction, and hope it will help, with other contributions, to do some good to those sorrowing widows and children left behind. There are many from your shores in Vancouver, and no doubt you will be getting more money from this side for the Iolaire disaster, but none could be given from a more sympathetic lot than from the widows, wives and mothers. They have come through the same experience, and many of them are far from their native land. They are wonderfully bright though, and those who have children have comfort there. Assuring the widows and orphans of our sincere and heartfelt sympathy.⁵⁷

A remittance of \$243 remitted from Vancouver Island was accompanied by a letter from Norman Murray of Victoria, which expressed similar feelings of solidarity and made the usual request for the donors' details to be published in the *Stornoway Gazette*.

Dear Sir,

It was with feelings of the deepest regret and sorrow that we learned of the appalling disaster which overtook the H.M.Y. Iolaire at entrance to Stornoway harbour in the early hours of New Year's morning, resulting in the loss of over 200 of our brave countrymen. Although separated by many miles of land and sea, our hearts still yearn with a sense of deep love and devotion towards our native soil, and it has been with feelings of pride and admiration that we have followed the determination of our fellow-countrymen in the great struggle that has just been brought to a victorious end; and we realise that the efforts of these brave men (who while looking forward to a happy reunion with homes and loved ones were suddenly cut off), in no small degree helped to consummate this glorious victory, and we seek to show sincere and heartfelt sympathy to the bereaved friends and dependents.⁵⁸

Across the border in the United States donations were made by the Scottish Gaelic Society of Seattle; the Lewis Societies of Duluth (211 11s), New York and vicinity (£100) and Boston (£61 12s) and by 'Lewis people and friends in Detroit and vicinity' (£65 4s 2d). One Mary Macmillan in Providence, Rhode Island, had collected and remitted £5 15s, and Alex J. Stewart in Graniteville, Vermont had collected and sent £12. The donation from Seattle was acknowledged in a letter to Provost Maclean published (as the donors had requested) in the *Stornoway Gazette*. Written by the Scottish Gaelic Society's treasurer, Norman Macaulay, the letter described how the Society's members, having been 'much grieved' by the disaster, had voted that \$100 be donated from their treasury. This sum had been supplemented by a furth \$141 50 raised at a special concert and dance, and \$25 contributed by the Seattle Pipe Band. A bank draft for £56 was enclosed with the letter.⁵⁹ On the opposite coast the *Gazette* acknowledged a donation from the Boston Lewis Society, whose treasurer, J.W. Smith, sent the members' 'deepest sympathy to all who suffered'; and from the mid-west similar sentiments were expressed in the letter that accompanied the donation from the Lewis Society of Duluth.⁶⁰

The Lewis Society of Detroit and Vicinity actually came into being as a direct result of the disaster. The opening entry in its first Minute Book reported that on 20 March 'a meeting of natives of the Island of Lewis' had been held at the residence of one Malcolm McKay, 'for the purpose of raising

funds for the relief of dependents of those who perished on H.M.S. [sic] *Iolaire* on the *Beast* [sic] of Holm.' It was 'unanimously decided' that those present should form themselves into a permanent society and a committee of eight was appointed, including two women, with McKay being elected chairman.⁶¹ Minutes of subsequent meetings suggest that the Society very quickly morphed into a purely social organisation, with few subsequent references being made to the provision of relief. On 26 April it was noted that a decision was made 'to send the money collected for the Stornoway Naval Disaster Fund away as soon as possible' and on 24 May it was reported that the money had been remitted to Stornoway. On 24 July 1920 a further collection for the Fund was sent to Lewis, and a subsequent Minute recorded the sum remitted as £30 13s 7d, its receipt being duly acknowledged by the Stornoway Memorial Committee.⁶²

It is not known what happened to the correspondence that generally accompanied these remittances, although some letters, as we have seen, were published in the *Stornoway Gazette*. One original manuscript letter has survived, however. The town of Graniteville, Vermont, is more commonly associated with the emigration of stonemasons and quarrymen from Aberdeenshire than with settlement from the Hebrides, but in November 1919 Murdo Maclean, Chairman of the *Iolaire* Disaster Fund, received the following letter from Coll-born Alexander A. Stewart, along with the £12 (\$69) remittance noted in the Disaster Subscription Book. Stewart had collected the money from Lewis-born settlers in that vicinity, and he wrote as follows:

One year is nearing its close since nearly 200 of our brave young men lost their lives in the *Iolaire* disaster. Just at the threshold [sic] of their homes, what a sad day for Lewis. It was indeed with feelings of deepest regret that we learned of the sad news and our hearts still go I [sic] in sympathy for the many widows and orphans. We are only a few in number here from the Isle of Lewis but we still love dearly the land where we were born and brought up. Its memory shall, never, fade away, although, we love the land of our adoption Lewis we can not forget for there are sacred spots there that can never be forgotten and therefore we wish to show our sympathy to those who were so bereaved by the Terrible disaster it is only a little but every little helps and my [sic] God bless it to them and give them of his Grace to bear their burdens, trusting the Lord, who is the giver of all gifts. I left Coll 22 years ago, but visited there in 1907. Its memory is still fresh. I would be pleased if you would publish the names and send me a copy of your paper as our receipt.⁶³

Alex Stewart's letter is a powerful reminder of the impact of the *Iolaire* disaster, not just on Lewis, but among emigrants whose emotional attachment to their place of birth and practical commitment to their fellow islanders were undiminished either by distance or the passage of time.

3. The collective memory and legacy of coping with the disaster

3.1. Relationship with the project *Visualising the Iolaire*

This section presents extracts from, and analysis of the recordings Robertson undertook as part of the *Visualising the Iolaire* project. Consequently, we must acknowledge with grateful thanks the

permission of the Living Legacies Engagement Centre and AHRC for their permission to draw on this material as a key element of the current project. As revealed in what follows, it was the realisation that the final version of the *Visualising the Iolaire* app had barely skimmed the surface of the richness of the memories captured in these interviews which led to the decision to take this approach.

The current report includes neither the full transcripts of the interviews, of which there were just over 20, nor the names of our informants. All names have been anonymised. This approach accords with the principles of professional practice as set out by the Oral History society – the UK’s professional body – and its ethical guidelines. It is also acknowledged that by offering only extracts here, albeit comprehensive ones, we are open to suggestions of selectivity. In a way that is correct, but it is also part of the historical method. Full transcripts are available on request.

3.2 Detailed Analysis

...its broken hearts and broken minds⁶⁴

Such was the impact of the *Iolaire* disaster. It resonates across time and space and in the collective and individual memory of coping with the disaster. But what emerges very clearly is that even in the collective, community-based context we find in the Gàidhealtachd, coping remained a complex individual and collective process. All informants eventually found out about their connection to the disaster; all had an idea over what coping mechanisms their family and community had adopted, individually and collectively, but beyond that the picture becomes rather diverse. It is clear, however, that having to cope with the loss of a loved one or with someone wracked by survivor’s guilt was not confined to the immediate generation but was passed on. But like much memory work this inheritance was by and large intangible. The interviews confirm what is well-known, the occasional *momento mori* exists – ditty box, medal, photo, artefact and has been held within and passed down families – but overall coping and sharing were made up primarily of intangible memories and emotions. And like every emotion these change over time.

The oral evidence suggests, however, that this was not a resilient position. Academic work makes it clear that communities of mourners need to find the means to express shared sorrow. This, perhaps unconscious, search is very evident in the trajectories of remembrance, sharing and coping revealed through the interviews. The role of material and external objects and artefacts, such as books, television and radio programmes, informal and formal memorialisation appears central to both the breaking of the silence which might be described as ‘first level’ coping and the reorientation of the community to the present.

It was as if there was just a dark veil about the whole thing, all over.

At the most general level this was the predominant sentiment which emerged when coping was discussed. Silence was unquestionably profound and, for some, an all-encompassing coping strategy.

In my generation nobody talked about it because you didn’t.

But the thing is they never, never, never spoke to us about it.

... my father used to take me out fishing when I was a young boy, out at the Beasts of Holm and there was no mention of his father having been lost there throughout the time we were fishing.

Other interviewees expressed it even more forcefully. For one the disaster was a 'taboo subject' and for another 'it was almost as if people regarded it as a curse'. It is worthwhile noting that the collective memory of silence as way of coping extended also to those survivors who remained on the island, and also, it is recalled, as mark of respect to those who had survived.

My father had a first cousin, but he survived. He was one of the youngest on the *lolaire*.

So did you know him at all?

Oh yes. Because my granny was living with us, so that was his auntie, so he used to come and visit her. But most of them never talked about it.

I think people just felt that they would be upsetting others. And I think the fact that so many of the survivors kept quiet about it and didn't want to speak about it until years later, and a large number of them emigrated or didn't get married.

At one level silence was driven by the reality of the situation people faced with 'no social security, and no help from any direction except the locals'. Into this must be woven the deep spirituality of the day and, in all probability, the long history of coping with disaster that was embedded in the *Gàidhealtachd*. The latter sentiment, however, appears in these discussions less frequently than the notion of having little choice when it came to immediate coping. This was often not easy to express for the interviewees, but the sense is present that the everyday reality of living in and dealing with a challenging world meant that, in the short term at least, there was little choice but to continue with life. It is also clear, however, that for some this was not a viable option. At this point, then, perhaps the 'widow's share' was the reality of their situation: 'If a boat went out, there was always fishes for the widows, families'.

On occasion these local support mechanisms could extend to building 'wee small houses' for *lolaire* widows 'in poor circumstances', although this was not a universal response, a position which resonates more strongly when the collective memory of silence is mined a little more deeply. What emerges is that silence was not universally experienced or enacted. It was not the case for every family, for every situation. Indeed, ways in which silence was enacted and manifest were varied and suggest individualised and particular forms of coping within overall trends. For instance, if within a family an in-law was lost rather than a blood relative, there is some evidence that one side of the family felt more at liberty to discuss the disaster than the other, directly-affected, individual. There is some evidence of gender differentiation too, with mothers feeling more able to discuss the tragedy than fathers, with, on occasion, mothers speaking with daughters and fathers with sons but rarely in mixed company or across the genders. But even then, when a mother was sitting with her daughter looking at the *Sea Sorrow* booklet, the fact that the mother's father-in-law was lost on the *lolaire* was not mentioned. Keeping the discussion on a more general level and away from family implications was a common response.

There was, then, significant variation within the coping mechanism of silence which was replicated outwith the family. For some whilst it might be discussed within the family it was rarely discussed in the township or beyond. By contrast, and perhaps a function of numbers lost from the township, for others it was common knowledge – ‘we always knew who was affected – what family was affected and who had survived, who were lost’. This however, did not automatically mean that the awareness was discussed. ‘They just didn’t talk about it. But we always knew who’d lost people.’ And even more pithily: ‘it would be known, but it wouldn’t be’. And again, ‘If it was common knowledge, it was kind of kept under wraps’.

One couple, however, were clear in their recollection over how this knowledge, awareness and collective silence was negotiated:

Everybody knew about it, but very few people talked about it.
So there’s a difference, isn’t there?
Yes, that’s right. Yes. Mmm-mm ... I think you would even whisper about it if you had to talk about it.
Would you really? In hushed voices.
In hushed voices. Yes, that’s right.
Oh it’s in hushed voices. Yes, yes. A-huh.
And that obviously didn’t matter whether you had lost somebody in the family or not, you would still talk about it in a very respectful term.
That’s right.
Yes. Oh yes. Yes.
And did that apply to all deaths or just the lolaire?
Just the lolaire, as far as I can recollect.
The lolaire was on a different level of pain in the village ... That’s right ... It was definitely...

There were, then, a diverse number of ways through which knowledge permeated. Thus, for another informant ‘everybody in the island knew. Everybody, yes’. He was sure of this because he could remember being puzzled as a youngster by every woman in his township being dressed in black. ‘I remember asking my mother why everybody was dressed in black, and she said, “Well, because of the tragedy of the *lolaire*”’. For others the communicating and acknowledging of awareness of the impact of the disaster was more readily turned to when

somebody in that family circle passed away ... Yes. Maybe the lolaire incident would crop up then ... I remember hearing a lot about it and talking a lot about it when ... the old lady who lived next door to me, passed away

In some instances, coping through silence could extend to avoidance. This was a response perhaps occasioned more by those with no body to bury. In one family this absence meant that, even in living memory, the radio would be turned off whenever something connected to the *lolaire* came on. In this there is an element of linkage to the more widely recalled inability or refusal to celebrate New Year, another means of coping which hides considerable variation. Thus, for some it is recalled that the lack of celebration at New Year was confined to the generation most directly affected (but remembered by others), whilst in other families it passed down the generations. For the family who turned the radio off this action was occasioned by the fact that one of the many songs composed in response to the disaster named a close relative. The extensive presence of and reference to song,

psalm and poetry in the collective memory is unsurprising and will be returned to later in this report. As with everything connected to the disaster and its memory the role of the literary response is a complex one, but for some respondents such commemorations were not just a way of recording, remembering and passing knowledge on, but were also an active way of coping.

Further, such responses both reflect and help materialise the intense spiritual revival of the inter-war period. In this and other more secular ways, such as the many migrations of the same period discussed in much greater depth in the previous section, the disaster and the collective repose thereto is keyed into some of the most significant social and cultural processes which shaped life across the twentieth century. Frequently interviewees would locate the disaster alongside a litany of other blows to have affected the islands at about the same time: the Stornoway Town Hall burning down, Spanish flu, the mass emigrations on the *Metagama* and *Marloch* and the perception that 'a lot of the soldiers were coming back with TB, and that spread like wildfire around the island'. The community must have felt that 'everything was against them really', with 'the whole spirit ... [going] ... out of the place'. In just one story amongst many, an informant's father had been a witness to the disaster. When asked what the effect on him had been, her response was that 'I think he lost faith rather than hope, obviously. He lost faith in, I think, ... he lost a bit of heart at the time of the disaster, and he didn't really want to stay in Lewis, hence his going away'. What this suggests is the often mentally overwhelming impact of the disaster.

Coping could not be and was not universal. Survivors' guilt, for instance, can be understood as one example of the psychological and mental health impact of the disaster. Perhaps unsurprisingly, examples or discussion of even more serious manifestations of such trauma rarely surfaced in these interviews, but for one informant at least, his aunt's life-long bouts of serious depression were occasioned by the loss of her father on the *lolaire*. He concluded by saying 'I reckon there must be a lot of people in that category who simply couldn't cope, couldn't cope with the actual loss or the aftermath, trying to build their lives again'.

Other instances point to elements of tension and contradiction as part of the coping process. For instance, one respondent felt that there was some opposition to the erection of the first formal memorial in 1960 on the grounds that 'it was opening wounds again'. By contrast, an informal memorial – in the form of a cairn – had been present on the site almost from the time when the disaster happened. In the memory of one informant, 'on your first visit, ... you put a stone on the cairn'. This everyday form of remembrance points to the outward-facing expression of grief and loss. It is the point at which individuals signify their own grief and join with a community of grievers. Moreover, the informant felt that this was a practice that has continued beyond the completion of both, more formal memorials. This ritualised practice involved the placing of just one stone on the cairn 'on your first visit' but never a second.

Here, we suggest, is a clear example of the positive and healthy side of emotion-focused coping strategies. Less healthy are those strategies which seek an external cause for the disaster and upon which to place blame. In this category is found the widely-held view of incompetence or worse; 'as if there was a need to blame somebody for doing them a wrong'. When widespread and deep-rooted, as evident amongst the respondents and beyond, such externalising should be understood as a way of coping with and rationalising the disaster. On occasion externalising can lead to the growth of conspiracy theories and whilst there is, once again, slim evidence of such in the collective memory, one interviewee did state that he was aware that one or two people were suggesting that the disaster was 'a German-inspired conspiracy. And that the ship was driven ashore purposely'.

...I'm here today to tell you the story about the *lolaire* that my dad told us. Now, I must have been in primary school when I was told ...

So where did he do it? Did he do it in the house, or did he do it at the monument?

No, he did it at the monument ...

But as we've said before, I think – as if the bung was taken out of the barrel – when the *Sea Sorrow* was printed – maybe not the original edition, but certainly the later one, the reprint.

There should be no surprise that interviewees were somewhat imprecise with regard to dates of this shift, but there is no doubt that for the majority external forms of media and memorialisation were a major contributing factor to the breaking of the all-encompassing silence from about 1960 onwards which marked a significant shift in the nature of coping. Instead of the previously dominant individual and familial responses, coping became a more communal practice.

This also reflects a turn towards the “legacy” of coping – the ways in which knowledge of loss and the effects it had was passed or not passed down the generations. Once again, the picture is a complex one. For some awareness of the impact on a previous generation came indirectly, as in the case of two brothers who agreed that they ‘would have learnt more from the neighbours or people that weren't involved with the family ... Oh, absolutely ... The only thing A... would say was he was very, very good with the sheep’. For others awareness was direct and always shared across the generations in both family and township. One interviewee, for instance, learnt of the atmosphere in the township following the disaster from her mother, who, despite being only seven could remember it well. ‘And she remembers the crying and you could hear the crying from further up the village. There was one lady in our village, she was only 6 weeks married, and they still remember the crying from that croft’.

I think that probably I started hearing and learning about these things when the survivors were beginning to die and there'd be maybe an obituary in the local paper, or it would bring it to the attention of the media. Or possibly, the other thing is that it may have been around different anniversaries – the 75th anniversary for instance, or whatever. And it was, certainly, as an adult – and I'm talking about in my 30s – that I really got some kind of awareness of it. Possibly too, I'm pretty sure that my father wrote a poem and I think probably that poem, really... it's a very moving and informative poem ... my father used to, on the rare occasion he'd say about someone being lost on the *lolaire*, he always said the proper Gaelic way.

Even though this person and her father were from a township from which losses had occurred ‘it still wasn't anything that was assimilated into me, if you like, by being around folk’. Similarly, but even more directly, it became easier for two nephews to find out more about the loss of their uncle on the *lolaire* once his sister had passed on.

...it was a generational thing as well, you know, once all the people who had been directly affected by the *lolaire*, had passed on, by and large, then it became okay to start commemorating them and recording it ... But then once that had started to go, late '80s, early '90s, people began to think, “Maybe we should do something. Maybe we should not forget. Maybe something more tangible should be there as a reminder.”

Within the collective memory, with the passing of both time and the directly affected generation, the fact of coping becomes legacy; a sense of inheritance from the past. Some, like the interviewee quoted immediately above, recall this process of memory and heritage making as a deliberate act. One interviewee agreed that whilst folk directly affected by the disaster and their descendants did not speak about it, in the township 'others were talking about it to keep the memory alive for the younger generation'.

Central to this process were the three variants of memorial at the site. We have already noted the memorialising and commemorating process and ritual associated with the original cairn. But the first, formal memorial had emotive power too. One informant spoke about a visit she had made with her local historical society to both the Lewis war memorial and *lolaire* monument on the same day. For her 'it wasn't so pleasant, sort of, to be down there ... It was really, really, really sad'. Memorials are attempts to anchor memory to physical space, but the *lolaire* memorial was also one of a number of tangible catalysts which served to accelerate this process of creating a collective legacy of responding to and coping with the disaster. Thus, for one interviewee it was the building of the formal memorial which freed his father to speak of the loss of his own father. This was the 'prod' the community needed. By way of contrast, for another interviewee the monument was not a catalyst. 'I came here in the 60s first, as a kid. Gran was utterly traumatised. Definitely, yes. And the aunts, you just wouldn't say "lolaire." You got that sense as a kid'.

Another widely recognised catalyst was the arrival of radio and television programmes and books on the disaster from the 1970s onwards. It is the *Sea Sorrow* in particular which is identified as having the biggest impact, with one interviewee stating that the 1972 reprint was 'as if the bung was taken out of the barrel'. This is certainly a common perception. Thus for one person, a sense of the inheritance of coping came not from within either family or community but from the broader, more open atmosphere occasioned by the 'books [that] started to be written about it. Well, we grabbed all the opportunities to... Some of the books were so graphically written ... It would tug at anybody's heartstrings'. But for others, this catalyst operated much closer to home. One informant's father was 'a quite open man' to whom she was 'very close' and yet he never discussed the personal impact the *lolaire* had made on him or how he responded over the years. The same could be said for the informant's mother until the near-simultaneous release of book and programme. This freed her to speak with her daughter about the profound impact of the news of the disaster and loss of his father on her husband.

That when he heard about the *lolaire*, he must have got a telegram or something, he let out a scream, and he was absolutely devastated. But they found a bag containing oranges, with my grandfather's name on it, he was taking the oranges home to the children.

Expressed here, and throughout these interviews is the emotional legacy of coping with the impact of the disaster, a legacy unconfined to books, newspaper articles and to informal and formal memorials. The making of poems and song has already been noted as playing both a positive and negative role in coping strategies, but these strategies were also instrumental in the creation of the *lolaire* legacy, of which they remained an intrinsic part. As with all other tangible commemorations, poetry and song provided a vehicle for the transmission of both familial knowledge of coping with the disaster and of disseminating that within the wider community. Although not absolutely certain, one interviewee felt that her father's 'very moving and informative poem' was both his way of

reflecting on the impact of the disaster on his township and one of the stimuli for her finding more about the losses in her home district.

In all these different ways individual and collective memory was becoming shareable. Thus a son only became aware of his grandfather's experience as a survivor when he heard the song *The Iolaire Disaster* being sung in his local pub,

and I didn't know really what it was about. But then they said "Well, your grandfather was on it, he was the one who got off it and held the rope with the rest of them." ... But the strangest thing of all is that I never knew about... I knew that I was named after him. I didn't know he was a survivor of the *Iolaire*. I had no idea about the sailor suit. Nothing at all.

Beyond question, the legacy of the disaster, as captured in these interviews, resonated across both space and time and has taken many different forms. As expressed by two friends interviewed at the same time 'It reaches me today, 100 years later. You can only but feel for these people'. They agreed that the disaster 'Spread the people all over. Three of my grandfather's brothers went to Canada'. Others saw links with processes that can be dated to the 1980s and which followed the general 'loosening up about' the disaster from a decade previously. 'And then in, I suppose, late '80s, early '90s, all these war memorials started. We started building war memorials'.

The impact, collective memory and legacy of the disaster resonate and are made manifest across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. They connect closely both to the changing ways in which the past interacts with and is drawn on by the present and to some of the most significant social and cultural processes which have shaped the contemporary islands.

3.3 Reflections on key contributions from the collective memory

The legacy and individual and collective memory of coping with the impact of the *Iolaire* disaster are both tangible and intangible. The connection was made firstly through family and township linkages but in the second half of the twentieth century legacy and memory shifted from a predominantly personal, more introspective sense of inheritance from the past to something more akin to a difficult, emotionally-challenging *heritage*: a sense expressed from within and made and maintained by those closely affected.

We must advance and entertain these conclusions with an element of caution, however. It is clear that what also emerges strongly from this material is the sense that the strategies and legacies articulated herein remain largely uncategorisable. Coping, even in the collective, community-based context we find in the *Gàidhealtachd*, remains an individual process that is both multi-layered and trans-generational. One strand of this multi-layering is revealed by the fact that whilst coping was undoubtedly individualised it was, at the same time, collective. This was an aspect of the "memory work" associated with the disaster which is more apparent once memory became legacy and heritage.

Coping, its memory and legacy, was dependent on where people were - both spatially and socially. This suggests that there was no dominant mode through which people coped. Every strategy uncovered by these interviews contains inconsistencies and variability. Even the most ubiquitous

coping strategy, that of silence and “carrying on”, is characterised as much by difference as it is by similarity. This notwithstanding, the silence occasioned by the *Iolaire* tragedy was of a particular sort. It is an *unspoken* knowledge and awareness perhaps partly occasioned by both the nature of *Gàidheal* culture and an attempt to help the survivors reintegrate into the community.

With these caveats in mind and whilst recognising it is not appropriate here to offer in-depth explanation of each type, it is clear that there remains evidence of what we might understand as *emotion-oriented, religious and ideological*, and *avoidant* types of coping, with comparatively less evidence of the more active and engaged type of *problem-focused* coping. When the idea of coping as means to describe responses to stress was first discussed in academic contexts it was generally accepted that the more engaged (*problem-focused*) response was healthier for individual and collective well-being. Today, however, when trying to reveal and explain motives for turning to a particular strategy type and then considering the positive or negative effects of deploying it, a more sophisticated approach is taken. It is now generally accepted that a pre-existing understanding of the cultural context out of which coping with collective trauma has emerged is vital to any explanation. This report has not dwelt on the contextual detail, but all partners recognise and are fully cognisant of the fundamental importance of *Gàidheal* culture to an understanding of the ways in which the community coped with the disaster.

4. The Iolaire Impact: findings

The research undertaken as part of this project has generated a number of important insights:

- It has expanded existing analyses of the impact of the *Iolaire* disaster, with particular reference to oral recollections and how they address the collective memory of the way in which people coped with the tragedy.
- It has revealed strong awareness of the disaster across national and international borders.
- Archival research reveals:
 - How the event has been absorbed into the identity and collective memory of the islands in the century since 1919.
 - The way in which the disaster was commemorated in the religious culture of a deeply devout society.
 - Further insights into ways in which the disaster affected communities across the island.
- The collective memory of island-wide coping strategies reveals:
 - This is largely a set of memories based on the intangible.
 - It is difficult to identify one pattern or model which adequately captures the way in which people responded.
 - Silence is often advanced as the one unifying response but even here a close reading of the interviews reveals divergence.
 - It took factors external to the individual and often to the community to break the silence.
- There is a legacy and sense of inheritance based on recovery from the individual and collective trauma caused by the disaster.

Above all, what emerges most strongly from this combination of archival and oral research is that the legacies of the disaster and the responses to it are connected to some of the most significant

social and cultural processes which shaped life on the islands across much of the twentieth century. Our belief is that these connections are weakly understood in both the academic literature and popular culture. Our recommendation is therefore that the next phase of the over-arching project needs to be dedicated to addressing this gap in knowledge.

What do you think, Mam, the trauma of the *lolaire*? It's not actually gone away, but is this about the first generation not to be acutely upset?

I would say so, yes, probably. Not our generation, but possibly the next generation.

5. Appendix

**N.B All names have been anonymised at present.
In what follows an ellipsis (...) indicates omitted speech.**

Interview 1

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

Yes. And so, as you know, I'm here to talk a wee bit about the lolaire, and the two lads, in particular, that were lost in the lolaire. Did you know the families?

Oh yes, I remember the families.

Both families?

One of them. I never saw the other one.

No. Is that right? Did you live next door to one of them?

Yes, more or less next door to the mother of the boy who was lost.

Ah yes. And I presume you knew the mother.

I knew the mother.

Yes. And did she ever talk about her son that was lost?

No. No

...

But going through your life, did anybody tell you much about the lolaire?

No, because it happened so far away from us, it happened up in Stornoway.

...

But I suppose there wasn't much that you could say, really.

No, it happened and... yes.

Aye. Did anybody tell stories about it, like at the ceilidh or something like that?

Oh, no, I can't remember anything in particular at all.

No. Or, say, if you were out at the sheep fank or something like that.

Oh, no you wouldn't hear much about it at gatherings like that at all.

Interview 2

I: Interviewer

Respondent A

Respondent N

A - Same name as I am. And I believe he was 45 at the time. Now, he had gone away to war and of course his wife was in the family way, she had twins and one of the twins had actually dies in childbirth. So you can imagine this man coming home, and that was only one out of hundreds. He leaved his wife, and his new born child, he never met.

N - Well, my grandfather was the same. The only difference was, he had five when he left but his wife was expecting the sixth.

A - They'd been away, some of them for 3 full years, they'd been through all this, as you can see, and between here and (unclear 0:3:00), yards offshore...

I: Absolutely. So was it talked about in the family?

N: - No. My dad died in 1988. Now, he would have been 7 or 8 at the time because he was born (over speaking). And it's something I never discussed with him and it's only since he's gone, I'm realising I should have.

A - It wasn't discussed.

N - I just wasn't, nobody spoke about it.

N -It was just not mentioned.

I: Not at all.

N - It was as if there was just a dark vale about the whole thing, all over. And the same, there have been several mass drownings in Lewis. There was one in Ness, there was one in Back. Yes, one in Bayble, that was almost in our own generation. That was in 1938. And five boys went out to sea in a little boat, and they were actually downed by a bigger ship.

I: Oh gosh, how awful.

A - And what made it more so here, New Year's night was - and still is, up to an extent - that was a very important day and date and time, looking back, looking forward. And they were, of course, obviously, looking forward... they maybe had hoped to be at home for the New Year.

...

N -Yes. I was talking to a lady from Sheshader recently, and her mother was telling her that her grandfather had come in to tell that her husband was lost - the lady's husband was lost - this is this lady's grandfather. And he told her, and her mother had never seen her, her own mother, ever again in anything but black. Now, my granny was the same. My grandfather died in 1916, and she lived to 52, and she was never... I wouldn't have recognised her in anything else.

A - You've always got to think, these people had no social security, very, very little. And the man was vital, he was doing all the croft work, the fishing to repairing the house, whatever, there was nothing else you could get but what you grew or what you caught in the sea.

I: Yes. So what happened to them? How did they...?

A - I think they got a widows' pension, what I think was 5 shillings a week.

N - Yeah, 5 bob. But they were also taken care of by the community.

A- Yes, there was a tremendous community spirit. But when you've got one maybe, area, losing 8 men...

...

A - And then, of course, straight after 1920s, you had mass emigration where the people... had enough of this.

I: Yes. I wonder if the two were linked. Do you think they were linked?

N - Oh, I think so.

A - I think so, yes. I think, just the whole spirit went out of the place.

...

I: So did you start researching it when you realised that your grandfather had been lost? How did you find about it?

A - Well, they always used to say to me, in fact, that I was named after this man that had been lost in the lolaire. So I did some basic research and I know he was 45 when he actually died. Now, nowadays that would be a wee bit old maybe for being away at war, but at the same time, he was only maybe about 40 when he was told to come and fight.

N: But that was over the age. My grandfather died aged 36, and there is no... well, conscription didn't start to 1916, he went in 1914, dived in, thinking he was going to be home for Christmas.

I: Yeah, and he wasn't. No. So, it's interesting, isn't it? So some folks did know that your grandfather had died, but not in your immediate family.

N: Or it would be known, but it wouldn't be...

A: In fact his body was never found. But there's unmarked graves up in the Sandwick one, and they are, in fact, military, there's a whole row of them without any names. There were these ones, bodies, that were too far gone to...

...

I: Exactly, yes. But as time goes on, no. It is important to remember.

A - It's still an open wound in that sense. I mean, we still feel it – did it have to happen?

R1 - Yeah, yeah.

N - And yet, these people had a deep Christian faith and the God they trusted, what he had cost us? Well, he could have stopped it. It was trials, spiritually as well as mentally, physically. Yes.

I: And what do you think, the impact on churchgoing was?

A - I don't know if it made much odds.

N - If anything, it made them more devout.

I: Do you think so?

N - I don't how it is, there are examples in the bible of trials and tribulations, just to test your faith.

R2 - And these people come out even more.

A - Yeah.

I: Ah, yes.

A - On the other hand, when you look at it, they had no one else to turn to but God. There was no sort of, what you call, knocking on the door of the DHSS, "Hey, I want money, I haven't eaten." Charity, well, there was quite a bit of charity but that was, of course, local.

N - It was not organised charity; it was just the way we were. If a boat went out, there was always fishes for the widows, families.

...

N - With Point Community Council, at the moment, are in the process of developing a coastal path right round... you know, Point is a peninsula, and we are in the process of starting this, getting funding for this – Alistair (over speaking) on this as well – and we are starting at the pier in Stornoway and hoping to get it as far as the Beasts by '19 for the 100th anniversary, the centenary.

I: That would be a really great thing.

A - If the weather were to be at all decent, what would be good there would be to have an actual church service of some kind, at the time, just 2 minutes of silence. I think it was 2.10 it went down, wasn't it? Ten past 2, something like that.

N - Between 1am and 2.

A - So even if you didn't know it exact, just for everyone to maybe sing a psalm, someone pray, and silence, stand still. If you had decent, just light, and people could manage, it would be just an idea, wouldn't it? I would like to see it done.

N - Yeah.

...

A - It reaches me today, 100 years later. You can only but feel for these people.

N - Spread the people all over. Three of my grandfather's brothers went to Canada, that's on my mother's side. One of the three brothers on my father's side went to Skye. There was an emigration to Skye as well.

I: There was, indeed. Yes.

...

A - Looking back on it, my own dad, they just... yeah, I'm heartbroken, but I've just got to get on with it, I'm not going to talk about it, just try and forget... honestly, that's something I wish I had spoken to him about.

Interview 3

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

So when you came back, when did you first become aware of the lolaire?

Now, I don't know that. I think, just through knowing my grandfather... my mother was born in 1912, and the lolaire was 1919, so she was 7, I think, she was just 7. And I think we always knew the story of my grandfather missing lolaire and being on the Sheila.

Yes. That was very lucky.

And they all thought he was on the lolaire.

Did they really?

Yes, they thought he was, that's why there was a huge concern and then... so I was probably a young girl.

When you heard about it and when you heard your story of your grandfather's survival.

Yes. And I know it was to do with a wedding that he was delayed, some wedding, I think his sister got married or something.

Oh yeah, okay. Are you alright? [Interruption] We're still nattering, this might take a while.

[Well, don't carry on too long because...]

Okay. Such a bully. [Laughter]. Okay, we won't carry on too long, then. So you were saying earlier on, what your mum was saying that the atmosphere was like in the village when the lolaire...

She was only 7 but she remembers it well. And she remembers the crying and you could here the crying from further up the village. There was one lady in our village, she was only 6 weeks married, and they still remember the crying from that croft. You know, when people were going over to Stornoway and trying to find out who was alive and who wasn't.

Just awful.

So we always... from a young a girl, I knew about that story and the lolaire ... and later I became interested in it.

Of course. Did you know your grandfather?

Yes, I did. Yes.

And how was he? Do you think surviving affected him in any way?

Now that I can't remember. A lot of them didn't talk about things like that and I don't remember... I was 13 when he died, so I probably don't remember exactly... a lovely man, he was a healthy man, worked hard, but he... I think they were very aware that they survived and that the circumstances, in his case, he wasn't on the boat. But I don't remember any actual thing he ever said. I was too young.

Well, of course. Did you know any of the other survivors?

Oh yes. Yes, another one was from our village, who survived.

Oh right, okay. And when the old folks got together, would they talk about it then, do you think? Did any of them talk about it to you?

Not to me, I was too young. I was only 13 when my grandfather died. So I don't remember any... but we always knew the story, we always knew that. And it was round about the time that my granny lost her 3 sons as well, just (over speaking) imagine.

It must have been awful.

Another aunt was born in the middle of that. So no, I don't ever remember them talking about the... I mean, I wasn't here all the time. I wasn't living here, I was only up in the summer, for the whole summer, but I wasn't here all the time.

...

Indeed. But you came back once a year, so...

Yes, at least once a year. I can't remember that, truly.

That's okay.

But we always knew who'd lost people and there was more of a sadness... whether it was war, but my family were fortunate, they didn't lose anybody.

Interview 4

I: *Interviewer*

R1: *Respondent*

R2: *Respondent*

R1: Well, I was born in the early 50s, not long after the Second World War. And my father had been involved in the Second World War, and yet I seldom heard him talk about it. And even less so, talk about the First World War because he wasn't even born then although he had siblings who were. But certainly, his brothers weren't involved. Having said that, quite a few people from Cuidhaseadair were lost. Quite a few households were affected, and beyond hearing from time to time that such and such was lost in the lolaire, I have no recollection of hearing anything about it really in my childhood. I know that I didn't get taught about it in primary school, and if I got taught anything about it in history in secondary school, it was so little that it didn't really register. And in Gaelic in secondary school, with the emphasis on literature and poetry and stuff, I still can't recall hearing about it there. I can recall that we dealt with a lot of much older 19th century poems. I can't even remember if we had many or any of the 20th century poetry. I don't know what it was like for you in school, A..., did you ever...?

R2: Well, I went to primary school in the 90s. And primary school would be the place that it would be taught because when you get to... I'm a primary school teacher so that's definitely something that I know is a topic that's taught now. It wasn't a topic that I learnt ... and so it would have just been the luck of the draw if your teacher chose that one or not. What I remember really vaguely, is when you are going up (unclear 0:03:55) Point and you go through Sandwick, and there's a road to your left that takes you down to the site, the Beasts of Holm. And there's a sign that says... (over speaking) lolaire. And I don't know when that went up, but I remember it also has that picture of a woman, the logo of the... And I remember thinking that I didn't... I sort of understood it must have been a ship, but I didn't know what this woman was about. So I vaguely remember that, and I probably asked, and I was probably told but then I definitely... I think there would've been Gaelic tv programmes about it. I think that's maybe where it came from. I can remember through the Gaelic tv programmes, understanding that absolutely no one talked about it. It was absolutely never mentioned, as far as these people... a generation before you, sort of, whose parents had experience of it. I don't know any experiences. I only know experiences through seeing it on telly.

R1: Well, that's quite interesting. Because obviously I went to school many moons before you and that's exactly where I got my information from. I don't know if that's because of Gaelic television and radio. I think that probably I started hearing and learning about these things when the survivors were beginning to die and there'd be maybe an obituary in the local paper, or it would bring it to the attention of the media. Or possibly, the other thing is that it may have been around different anniversaries – the 75th anniversary for instance, or whatever. And it was, certainly, as an adult - and I'm talking about in my 30s - that I really got some kind of awareness of it. Possibly too, I'm pretty sure that my father wrote a poem and I think probably that poem, really... it's a very moving and informative poem. And then, as time went on, and you hear about processions of carts with...

...

R1: Yeah. And I suppose the lolaire, my father used to, on the rare occasion he'd say about someone being lost on the lolaire, he always said the proper Gaelic way. Because it's Ula, which sounded... And I think it was the idea of the sheer number of people from the same village. You know, things about, he should have been on the lolaire, but he went on the other one, or vice versa, all these... there was a real poignancy about a lot of the stories – the mothers at home with the clothes warming by the fire. But really, I really and truly knew little or nothing of it in my childhood.

I: **But you were from a village where folks died, weren't you?**

R1: Yeah. But it still wasn't anything that was assimilated into me, if you like, by being around folk. Like I said, my childhood friend, who was my age, I'm pretty sure it was her uncle. I don't know if he would be a Montgomery from Cuidhaseadair, definitely from no. 6. No, I never heard any reference to them at all, ever.

R1: In my generation nobody talked about it because you just didn't ... you just get on with it. And maybe, in that sense... and that had come through the generations before mine and before my father and mother's and maybe it was just the way they got by? ... you have to cut the peats and you have to move the cow, and you have to do this and do that

...

I: If there'd been a death in the village or two or three deaths in the township, say, how would the township itself have reacted to that? You know, either with elderly mums left without young sons, or brothers, or fatherless children. How would...?

R1: Well, by just being supportive. People worked anyway in groups, like, everybody went to plant everybody's potatoes, and everybody went to take up everybody's peat. And I know that fishermen and people used to have, when they had a catch, part of the catch was for the widows.

I: Yes.

R1: So just because they didn't have a man to go and catch the fish. So there was that kind of cohesion, because in these days everybody was in it together and there was no differentiation between rich and poor – there was no rich – and most of them were poor and there was just more... and of course people were in and out of each other's houses all the time. So that was the social life.

Interview 5

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

I: Yes, indeed. Do you think that that was typical, the turn to the church after the war? Do you think there was a turn to the church after the war?

R: I'm sure there would be. As well, there was not many people on the island, and so many ministers and all this carry on. [clearing throat] Yes, there would be. I am not sure it would be...

I: Yes. When you were growing up, was there much talk of the lolaire?

R: Well, no. Well, there was a bit. No, no.

...

I: Yes. So, it wasn't a topic of conversation very much, the lolaire?

R: Well, I'm sure it would be, among the people who were in the services, and all that. Yes, of course. Yes, because it was... Lewis will never recover from that.

...

I: When did you first learn about the disaster?

R: I don't know. When I was young, I'm sure, people used to come and visit, ceilidh, as I call it.

I: Yes. Was your house a ceilidh house?

R: Well, people would come to ceilidh. Of course, my father wrote hymns and songs and things, that people used to sing. Well, yes, that's what people did then. They went ceilidh-ing. Yes. I used to go ceilidh in the houses, as a young boy, and listen to stories. Sure, the people who were ex-service, were ex-sailors, and they sailed the world. Oh, dear.

I: Yes. Would the lolaire be one of those stories you had heard?

R: I'm sure it would be, yes.

Interview 6

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

R: I don't think it was talked about. I didn't think... I certainly didn't know that some of these people to whom I am closely related had lost... I just... [pause] I think we just accepted that they'd been lost in the war, which was far from the truth.

I: Indeed. So, when you came back, was there anybody left really closely connected to your grandfather? Because it was your grandfather that was lost?

R: Oh, yes. All my uncles and aunts were alive then. The uncle who raised me, Donald, was a great [pause] raconteur, and a great one on genealogy, but quite honestly, it used to bore me. I let it in one ear and out the other, which is dreadful to think. It's only when you're too late that you...

...

R: If it was common knowledge, it was kind of kept under wraps. It was not [pause] topics that were talked about. In these days, we lived in days where people visited one another. There was always a ceilidh house. A ceilidh is not a song and dance thing, really. Ceilidh in Gaelic means a meeting. There was a ceilidh house in every village. Mainly a thatched house, a black house. They were really cosy, and they were given for discussions. It was almost like a mini-Parliament. A bench running down one side, and a bench running down the other. Honourable insults were being... [laughing]

...

I: Yes. How did you find out about it then?

R: Well, [sighing] slowly, it began to emerge.

I: Right. So, from within the community?

R: From within the community. Then people started to... I don't suppose it would be from anybody who had been in the lolaire.

I: Okay, that is interesting.

R: But it became... I think the ones who were in the lolaire were just too uptight about the whole thing to even speak about it. I have a feeling that those who survived [pause] had the feeling that they had cheated those who hadn't, because they had survived, and the others hadn't.

I: Yes.

R: Guilt. There was nothing to be guilty about, but a guilt complex.

I: Yes. You think that was there, do you?

R: I think it was.

I: Yes. So, it starts getting talked about slowly in the community.

R: Yes.

I: You obviously can't put a date on it, but can you say, when did you come back? What year did you come back?

R: '71.

I: '71, yes. Can you say, for instance, I am pushing you a bit hard here, I know, but it would be talked about, it would start to be common knowledge immediately, or a bit after that?

R: In the 70s, yes. I remember, strangely enough, just up the road there, we had vans, mobile shops, as well as the static. I was up there when this tourist, this American lady, came in and she

started... She was going to write a book on the lolaire ... There was a gentleman and his sister, unmarried, and they lived in the house together, and they were in my van. They gave her a great deal of information. She was absolutely... I spent half the day in that van, at that stop. I was chomping at the bit. But that gave me the beginnings of it, I think

I: Okay, yes.

R: Strange that an American coming to make enquiries, and I wouldn't have been able to help her, but these two were.

I: Yes. And who were they?

R: They lived locally. They are not here anymore.

I: No, sure. Would they be connected? Would they have lost folks in the...?

R: Well, I don't think directly, but they would have known people.

I: Yes, indeed. So, it's interesting, isn't it? It's somebody coming from outside.

R: [laughing] Yes.

I: And somebody not connected directly to it. It's all being done at one remove, isn't it?

R: Yes. It is.

I: It is not being done within the families that it is happening to, or it has happened to.

R: No. And then of course, books started to be written about it. Well, we grabbed all the opportunities to... Some of the books were so graphically written. The trauma of horse and carts coming from all over the island to haul away the ones they could find. It would tug at anybody's heartstrings.

I: Absolutely, yes. So, that is what it takes. It takes folks from outside.

R: Yes.

I: Or something from outside the immediate family, doesn't it?

R: Yes, definitely. Yes.

Interview 7

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

I: Yes. So in your family, was your family directly affected by it?

R: Well not really. My father had a first cousin, but he survived. He was one of the youngest on the lolaire.

I: So did you know him at all?

R: Oh yes. Because my granny was living with us, so that was his auntie, so he used to come and visit her. But most of them never talked about it.

I: That's interesting, isn't it?

R: Yes.

I: Really never talked?

R: I don't know but they just... they weren't people for talking about it.

...

I: So looking back to your early days and digging into your memory, when would you think was the first time you heard about the disaster?

R: Well I suppose once we maybe went to school and people talking about it, I would think.

I: It sounds as if it's something that you've grown up with?

R: Oh yes. You know, because I think it was never forgotten. Because it still sort of, crops up to tell the young ones.

I: Yes. And so folks were keen to do that, were they?

R: Yes.

I: Or felt it important, perhaps?

R: Well yes, to keep the memory alive of what happened because I mean, after going through the war years and nearly at home, and that's what happened.

I: Yes. Do you think that that idea of keeping the memory alive, would it have been done in a very formal way, I suppose is the word I'm looking for? Sitting people down and saying 'now I'm going to tell you?' or does it just come out in general conversation, would you say?

R: Well, probably you would sort of just say well, 'we're going to tell you about this tragedy that happened.' Because you want to teach the young ones what did happen.

I: Yes. Can you remember that happening to you?

R: Well I can't honestly, not exactly how it happened, I don't know ... No. You see this is the thing. They weren't actually sort of talking about it but other people were telling the next generation about it. Because it was such a tragedy.

...

I: Yes. So just to recap, as you were growing up, you became aware of it quite easily, shall we say.

R: Oh yes, yes.

I: It isn't something you remember suddenly hearing about.

R: No. No. It was there all the time, growing up with us. We knew about it.

I: **And that would be the same for all your peers in the village, would you say?**

R: Oh yes.

I: **Yes. So, you've lived through the unveiling of the monument and it appearing on television, and radio first a little bit more. Do you think that had any impact?**

R: Well I suppose it did in a way. Especially when we saw that programme on the telly that Donald Murray and the fellow from Ness, when they were all talking about it. It was sort of more real to you. Although you were hearing about it and that. It was a different thing to hear it from them. Because they were there.

I: **Indeed. Yes. Can you remember when that would have been, roughly?**

R: I can't remember actually what year it was. Not really sure. [Pause]. But it was only sort of a matter of time before he died, so I'm not sure.

I: **No. No matter. What about the memorial, have you been to see it?**

R: Yes.

I: **And have you been more than once?**

R: Just once. But I think now they're doing a road to it, because it was quite boggy to get down there.

I: **It is boggy to get down there. There is a bit of a path.**

R: Yes. Yes. But I rather think they're going to do a proper path.

I: **Yes. And so they should. It is stuck out in the middle of nowhere really, isn't it?**

R: Yes it is. But of course, well, it's where the thing happened and I suppose that's why it's there. But I believe I'm hearing that they're going to do a proper path to it.

I: **Good idea. And so you've been there once. Was it on a special occasion?**

R: Well the old historicals went there. We were first of all, we went to the war memorial. And then we went down to the lolaire.

I: **Oh, how interesting. Was there any difference in what you felt at the two memorials?**

R: Well of course, the big war memorial, well you're reading all the people that were connected to you, sort of, between the two wars. And the people that were lost and then down at the lolaire – well it was more sort of, it wasn't so pleasant, sort of, to be down there. No, it was the thought. You know, you were thinking well, so near to shore and that happened. It was really, really, really sad.

I: **Yes indeed. And of course that's something that's happened right on your doorstep, whereas the folks who lost their lives in war, lost their lives a long way away.**

R: Yes.

I: **I don't know whether that makes any difference. It probably doesn't.**

R: I don't suppose so. Oh no, for the people that lost their families far away, it was the same. But I suppose for the people that were waiting, thinking, that all those men would (ph. 0:31:08) *drown on Stornoway* that night, and then to discover what tragedy happened.

I: **Yes. Every time I think about it, it's shocking, really, to imagine so near and yet so far, isn't it?**

R: Yes. Oh it is.

I: Yes. So I can see why being there is not as – difficult to find the right word...

R: Yes, it is, it is. But I would say it was more sad, to think well, they were nearly home. After going through the years of war.

...

I: Yes. How on earth do families cope with that sort of loss?

R: Well, I don't know, it's just, they coped. Well I suppose most of them had families that they had to carry on. It was hard times after that, yes.

I: Of course. Would the local community help?

R: Well I suppose they tried to help as much as possible but people weren't well off then ... But the only way they could, well helping them, was (unclear 0:33:11) was the family, they used to help them, well do their croft work and peats. They all sort of helped with those things because they didn't have anything else with to help them with.

I: Yes. And of course that helping the widow, that was a tradition anyway, wasn't it?

R: Oh yes. Up until oh, maybe the seventies. Yes. Because, well I remember doing it myself. You know, if there was any poor person in the village. I remember the last person it was done for. Was (unclear name 0:33:50) and she had one son and he wasn't well. And they used to go on a Thursday afternoon, a whole squad to cut her peat. She was the last person it was done for. A bunch of the village went and just did it in one afternoon, for her.

Interview 8

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

I: [Laughter]. So one of the things I'm interested in is the lolaire. Now you have a direct family connection to the lolaire, don't you? Would you mind telling me about it?

R: Well, we lost two uncles.

I: Oh dear. That was awful.

R: On the 1st of January 1919.

I: Yes, indeed.

R: A 27-year-old and a 21-year-old ... Looking forward after spending... looking forward to coming home and everybody at home preparing and getting ready for their homecoming. But the thing is, they never, never, never spoke to us about it.

I: Really?

R: It was when we grew up ourselves. That was in 1919 and I was born in 1933. Well, I wouldn't have any clue about... until we were at least 40s anyway. They never... my mother, she died in '39, beginning of the war, and she never... they never spoke about it to us as children.

I: No. Your father never spoke to you.

R: Oh, no. Well, it was my mother's brothers anyway.

I: It was your mother's brothers. Yes.

R: They never spoke about it. It was ourselves, when we got into our teens, and we used to say, "Why didn't you tell us?" It was so deep, they couldn't. They couldn't speak about it, not to children, anyway.

I: No. So how did you find out about it?

R: Well, from other people. You know how they used to go from house to house and in and out of houses, which is another thing gone out.

...

But in a way, I don't think they ever got over it.

I: Do you think not.

R: No, I don't think so. Because our Aunty Peggy used to say... you know it was New Year time, it happened... [Pause] Anyway, that did spoil every New Year for them.

I: Oh really.

R: Every year, they couldn't enjoy it.

...

I: Oh, you were related. And did they ever talk about losing their farther, what they did?

R: No. No, not 'til late life.

I: No, not until late life.

R: Peggy used to say about how she was three, and she could still remember her mother so excited and the fires, and them in and out of the doors waiting for the lights to come. Oh, there was no lights.

I: Oh dear. And did their mother remarry?

R: No.

...

I: Yes. But what we've been interested in is how communities cope, how the community, how the township coped with the disaster. How do you think they coped?

R: [Pause] It's a difficult question. I think with the help of the Lord, anyway.

Interview 9

I: Interviewer

R1: First Respondent

R2: Second Respondent

I: He came home as well?

R2: Yes, yes.

I: Yes, that was good, that was very good. But some folks didn't.

R1: A lot of folks didn't.

R2: Most of them.

I: Yes, yes, and what about their families? What happened to their families?

R2: Well, one family, the Mackays at the end of the village there –

R1: It didn't do any difference to the families, they just carried on as they were.

I: They just carried on?

R1: Because these were young sons really on both sides of Northton and... And it's the ones that lost their fathers, and the wives that lost their husbands; these are the ones who suffered then because there was nothing to help them, and the Government wasn't doing much for them anyway, as a matter of fact they weren't doing anything for them.

I: No, indeed. So, how did they cope? How did the wives cope?

R1: Well, I think I told you at the beginning really that people who needed something, people helped them ... There was no Social Security, and no help from any direction except the locals

I: Yes, okay. And [pause] when did you [pause] hear about the lolaire? When did you learn about the lolaire?

R1: Well, we were hearing about bits of it here and there, but it was latterly really that I'm sure you know more about it now that I do; it's what you hear on the television and the radio that really comes out. Because at that time, there was no radio and there was no television, even papers were scarce.

I: Yes indeed. So, what about yourself, M..., when did you hear about it?

R2: I think round about the time it happened; I think everybody knew about it, when it did happen.

I: Yes. And would people be talking about it in general public?

R2: No, I don't think so. [Pause]

Interview 10

Key:

I: Interviewer

R: Respondents (two)

[Transcriber's comment: There were two respondents in the interview, but both respondents have had to be labelled as 'R' as the voices were too similar to accurately identify them separately.]

I: ...So, it was an awful thing to lose a brother, wasn't it?

R: Yes, it must have been awful. The only thing we knew was, no, his mother at home, they would air the clothes ready for him when he came home, he would have a nice, warm, clean shift. And the father meeting him at Stornoway. It must have been terrible.

I: It must have been awful. Yes, so he would have come home empty handed, effectively.

R: At that time, there wasn't many vehicles. How did he get there? We don't know.

I: No, no, but he was at Stornoway to meet the son –

R: Oh yes, meeting him at the pier, yes.

...

I: So, yes, [sigh] when did you hear, when did you know about your uncle, that he had been lost in the lolaire?

R: I'm sure from a young age but you weren't taking it in properly.

I: No, no, sure.

R: I'm sure.

I: And you say it was never talked about?

R: No, it wasn't. You'd have to ask, and of course my father wouldn't know a lot.

I: No, because he was only six.

R: He was six, yes.

I: Yes, yes, but you had aunts and it was –

R: Oh, you were always curious to –

I: Yes, and what happened if you asked?

R: [Pause] I don't know, they just didn't want to talk about it.

...

R: Oh no, it was just a blank, it was a taboo subject.

I: Really?

R: Near enough, yes.

R: So, I don't know now whether or not recovering the body, did that have anything to do with it?

R: Well, who knows, who knows? I think that was a sore point right enough.

R: Because they never –

R: We did hear how it was always “Well, they should be grateful they know where his remains are, they can visit his remains.”

R: Maybe that was –

I: Maybe that was part of it, yes.

R: But other than that, I would have learnt more from the neighbours or people that weren't involved with the family. [Overspeaking] Oh, absolutely.

R: The only thing A... would say was he was very, very good with the sheep

...

I: Aye, yes, yes. So you were saying, when, say a song comes on the radio about the lolaire or –

R: That was in my auntie's case, here, as a kid.

R: Oh yes, and the other one, Peggy.

R: I'm sure as well, but I know I was living here and if anything to do with the lolaire came on, a song or whatever, it was turned off.

I: Turned off.

R: And they wouldn't tell you why. We were curious - I was just eight, nine, ten or whatever – curious, why, why, why? And in fact the lolaire didn't mean an awful lot to us but –

R: No, but in that, when you were young.

R: And it wasn't part of our school history.

I: No.

R: And it was just later on in life that –

R: The whole thing was a taboo thing with the island; it was such a disaster.

...

I: . So, you learnt it more from neighbours then?

R: Oh yes, indeed.

R: Than from family, yes.

I: And how would you do that? Would you just go in and ask them about it?

R: No, no, it would have come in conversation. Remember, perhaps next door there, perhaps there were a couple of neighbours together or somebody missing the old boy, and if it did come up of course next door here, there was a survivor – well, related to a survivor ...

...

I: And when would you imagine, D...-J..., you first heard or you first realised that your uncle – I'm sure you knew that he wasn't around and that he had been lost in the war – but when did you know that it was the lolaire that he was lost on?

R: I suppose we were at the school, before we appreciated –

I: Yes, at junior school.

R: Yes, or nearly adults, yes.

I: Or nearly adults?

R: Oh, before we realised, yes.

R: We were teenagers anyway before we appreciated well, that was our uncle, kind of thing.

...

I: Yes, yes. So, when did that start to change? When did things start to be talked about, do you think?

R: Well, I think we were more at ease with it, certainly after my auntie died you could talk about it more freely and ask questions. But the people that could answer these questions had gone.

...

I: So, how did you learn about things then?

R: They started researching programmes ... And there were a few songs composed ... And I don't think they were that chuffed about it, - Well, that's what I said; if it ever came on it was switched off right away, because in the song that somebody from Harris composed, our uncle was mentioned.

Interview 11

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

I: So, it was your grandfather who was lost... Was he lost on the lolaire?

R: No. He was one of the ones who got off the boat and held the rope. Now, he saved... See, they never talked about it.

I: It's interesting, isn't it?

R: I've never heard my parents, or my father, talking about it.

...

I: So how did you find out about it then?

R: I think it was in the pub, and the song, somebody sang the song 'The lolaire Disaster', and I didn't know really what it was about. But then they said 'Well, your grandfather was on it, he was the one who got off it and held the rope with the rest of them.'

Interview 12

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

I: Did your dad ever talk about it?

R: Not really. He never spoke about it. But of course I was quite young and I think maybe if we had asked him. But my mum told me things about it. That when he heard about the lolaire, he must have got a telegram or something, he let out a scream, and he was absolutely devastated. But they found a bag containing oranges, with my grandfather's name on it, he was taking the oranges home to the children.

...

I: I know, yes. So can you remember when you would talk to your mum or when your mum would talk to you about the lolaire? How was it done? Just in passing or did she sit you down?

R: We had a little book about it which I was looking for but I think I've given it away to someone. So I had read that, and then we saw programmes on TV and they spoke about it, they were just devastated, people. And people were poor then. And losing their fathers as well, losing their main... Families here were quite resilient, I think, in those days, because they worked the croft, they worked hard, if people were healthy and well, they weren't poor because they had cows, they had sheep, they worked the croft, so they were self-sufficient. And that was the case I think for my parents too, they worked that entire croft down there: potatoes, corn, hay, sheep, and cattle, and all that.

...

I: It's difficult for you to answer this one because you don't know but you've said that tradition is very strong. Do you think that that is one way in which they sustained themselves through the difficult times?

R: Oh, yes. Because I remember my mum speaking of, like her family, they worked, and her dad worked. He was a fisherman, so they worked the land and they had fish, and so they were fine, they weren't poor at all. But there were families in the village who had lost their fathers, where they were big families and they could not sustain themselves. They weren't able to work the croft or do the... so there was poverty.

I: So what happened to those folks?

R: I think they just really, maybe other people helped them, I think. Yes.

I: Was there a tradition of helping?

R: I think so. People were very kind to one another. And that went on. It's very much a Lewis thing, even now.

I: Really?

R: Maybe not so much but there was... we were always doing... like, when they milked the cows, we used to have go round with the milk to our neighbours.

I: Really?

R: Yes. There was too much milk, so we had little buckets with lids, milk pales, and maybe got sweeties in return. (Laughs)

I: That's a nice thing.

R: Yes, it was. And they would help, the same with the croft work, if there was something a problem, or if people had finished their peats before you, our neighbours here would come and help.

And the same with digging up the potatoes, very much like that. I don't think it's quite like that now because people don't do crofting. Not to that extent. There are a few who do.

...

I: It's very interesting. I don't honestly know how they coped with the scale of the disaster.

R: They wrote a lot of songs. I think a lot of songs were written about it. Very sad songs. I think a lot of Gallic songs are very sad. And they're always relating to all of these historic things.

I: Yes, so that's an interesting way.

R: Yes.

I: And poems. Well, songs are poems, of course.

R: That's right.

I: So perhaps rather than talking about it...

R: Maybe they... this is it.

...

I: So, going back in time, chatting, would you say that chatting to your mum was the first time you learnt about it, or reading...?

R: Well, she was the one who told me, yes, about my dad and these significant things about the bag with the oranges and things like that. And that sort of stays with you, and his name was on the bag.

I: It's fascinating your dad didn't feel able to share that, though.

R: Isn't it? And he was quite an open man, but maybe the sadness.

I: Yeah, maybe so.

R: And I was very close to my dad.

I: Well, that was going to be my next question.

R: Yes, very. He had got older and I was the only one left at home here and we were very close. And his health wasn't very good so I used to help out a lot with all that. And we were very close.

I: When did your dad die?

R: 1975. I was 20.

I: So the monument would have been built.

R: Yes.

I: Did he ever visit it, do you know?

R: I don't know. Not that I knew of.

I: And have you been?

R: Yes, I've been.

I: But after he died?

R: Oh, yes, after he died. We went for a walk there.

I: Do you like it down there?

R: Yes, it's beautiful. But it's also very horrific, isn't it, that things like that happened there.

Interview 13

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

R: And I do remember going hunting for stones. My father said, "This is your first visit there, on your first visit, the condition is that you put a stone on the cairn," on the little pile of stones. I think, nowadays, there are very few stones left on the top of the rock there because, over the years, the pile got larger and larger. Anyway, to my dad's story. My father was born and brought up at number 5, Holm. And on the night of the first of January 1919, it was the first New Year that he and his brother - his younger brother was two years younger than he - were allowed out. My grandparents were very religious people, so they didn't tend to celebrate New Year, as such. No doubt, if somebody came to the house, they would have been offered a dram, but they didn't go out celebrating. But because it was such a special New Year, the two teenagers - the 17-year-old, my father, and the 15-year-old, my Uncle Dan - were allowed to walk into Stornoway to meet their friend, an older boy from the village, from no. 9 Holm. I think his name was J... M... and he was due back, like many others, at that time. Now, they didn't know whether he was coming back or not because nobody knew who was coming and who wasn't coming. There was a little bit of disorganisation, I think, at Kyle pier. But that's not the point. The point is, they assumed he was coming and off they went to walk to Stornoway. Now, the Holm village is a tiny little village even today, although there's more houses in it. It was a small village of about 12 houses, in my father's time. And it's a snaky wee road and obviously in those days there were no street lights, in fact it's only in recent years that Holm's little snaky road got street lights. So the two young men walked up to Stornoway, having a great time thinking that they were going to celebrate New Year in a different way. They might even get a wee glass of whiskey, they thought, when they came home with the young men. Off they went to Stornoway, and they were in plenty of time to see the Sheila, the mail steamer coming in. And people disembarked, but no friend. And at that point, there was no talk about any problem because the Sheila, I think, had left first from Kyle, so obviously she was going to be in first even though she was a slower vessel than the Amalthaea lolaire. They waited around, they asked a few people that they knew coming off the Sheila if there was another boat and the answer was, yes. So they waited around and they waited around, and they obviously got fed up. So then they decided that they'd walk home. Now, Holm village is a mile and a half from Stornoway. So they are on their way back and, again, they're just laughing between themselves, having fun, thinking - oh, they were grown up, this is the first night they were out New Year. And as they were going back on the snaky wee Holm road, they saw lights in the distance. ...

On they went. They weren't far from home, less than five minutes would have taken them to their home. And they got home, there was nobody up, they went in quietly through the house, took their clothes off, went to bed. They were hardly in their bed when, less than... I think it was 15 minutes or so, maybe 15 to half an hour, 30 minutes, when there was an awful banging on the front door. And they weren't sleeping so they sat up rigid in bed and, what on earth was this? Banging on the front door. My grandfather - their father - went down and the conversation obviously was in Gaelic - but the two young boys were at least Gaelic speakers - and this was the next door neighbour, the Macdonald man, the father of the young boy that they had gone up to meet. And they knew from the conversation that something awful had happened, a ship had gone on the rocks. They didn't know at that time what ship it was, it could have been a fishing vessel. But they didn't know. So because they realised from the tenor of the voices and the tension in the conversation - oh, this is more than just a fishing boat. So they threw on their clothes and because they knew the top of the rocks, the way to the Beasts of Holm, like the back of their hands, they didn't have any difficulty although it was pretty dark. And although it was windy, it wasn't a storm. ...

So my dad and my uncle reached the top of the rocks - as we call it, the Beasts of Holm - and already there were bodies being washed up onto the top of the rocks. There was absolutely nothing they could do. The ship was so close... I think it was only about 20 yards from where he actually struck. But

because of the high sea that was running, the currents there, the men who actually... when the ship hit the rock, she hit it stern onto the rock and it... apparently, when the distress signals went up - the fireworks as my uncle and my dad thought – they could see how close they were to the shore, so lots of men jumped over and apparently everyone of them was lost because... just the conditions at the time. They saw the... there were two masts, I think, that were still up when they reached the scene of the accident but one of them broke. And he also said that people... they saw at least two people, obviously suffering from hyperthermia, fall in from the mast and then the mast broke. And they actually thought that the lad that was actually rescued – ... – the lad who was actually rescued the next morning from the mast head, they actually thought it was their friend. And they were close enough, but far enough away. Close enough but too far away. They were talking and, obviously, I don't know whether they encouraged... I mean, I'm not just saying my dad and my uncle, other people were doing this too, trying to encourage people to cling on.

So there was nothing people could do. By the time my father and my uncle were there – I don't know, maybe half an hour – lots of other people were there coming from the areas close by, [pause] and they just went back home I think, because they knew there was nothing they could do.

...

R: And a little bit about my mum.

I: **Oh yes.**

R: My mum, her slant on the lolaire, she was terrified. All the children in the villages here, the three old villages – North Street, Lower Sandwick and East Street, and they used to congregate down at the junction of the three roads just to meet and play. And for a long, long time after the tragedy of lolaire, they wouldn't go there because they were frightened of seeing lorries with the bodies. And my mother, who had lost her father in an accident onboard a ship before she was born, was brought up... she was born in Stornoway but she was 10 days old when her uncle - the one that was nearly drowned in the Loch in Holm - went for his sister and the new baby and took them down to the croft that I now live on, 25 North Street. And my mother, at the time of the lolaire, was about 13, I think. And she was still in school obviously, and she was given special permission every day for months after the lolaire, to go home to Sandwick, pick up my Uncle's meal, walk up to Stornoway, and then walk back down to school. My uncle was a joiner. I think he probably was the foreman in MacRae's, that is the undertaker, it's still in the same family. And because the men were so busy, they were working all hours, and in those days obviously you didn't snap the coffins together, you actually made them. So my uncle, before, and I dare say, the year after the lolaire, he used to go on... because there wouldn't be cafes and restaurants and whatnot, except in the hotels here in Stornoway, he used to visit a relative and have his lunch with the relative. But because of the time of the lolaire, they were just working all the time. This was why my mother was given permission to... and she hated it because she knew where she was going, the undertakers.

...

I: **Aye, indeed. What do you think the effect was on your dad? I mean, if that's very difficult for you to answer, but...**

R: I think he lost faith rather than hope, obviously. He lost faith in, I think, the... my father was always interested in politics, even when he was 74-years-old he was still working for the Labour Party, going round and taking meetings, and whatnot. So he was always interested in politics. But I think he lost... he lost a bit of heart at the time of the disaster, and he didn't really want to stay in Lewis, hence his going away.

....

R: But you see, I think, that we actually went down to the lolaire, I suspect that it would have been during the school summer holidays. Because I remember the day was bright and we, as a family, would go on picnics on Sunday and take our next-door neighbour, who was a friend of my older sister, with us. We were like four sisters, as it were. And my dad would have taken us down to the lolaire on a Sunday. I know that because he was so busy with his job and actually being a crofter as well, so he wouldn't really have time at weekends to take us. So it would have been on a Sunday. And it was a common feature in our family, every Sunday, my mother during the school holidays when Sunday school was no longer in session, we would go on picnics, in particular, down to the Holm

...

I: [Laughs]. So he sat you down as a threesome?

R: He did. And he told us. He said something along the lines of... obviously, I can't remember properly, verbatim. He said, "I'm going to tell you a story, which is a very sad story. But I'm going to tell you because it's part of your history and I think you should know about it." And he obviously waited until the three of us were at an age to understand some of it – even a 7-year-old, like my sister. But we were all told at the same time.

I: Do all three of you remember it?

R: Well, I can't speak for my sister, J..., because she's no longer with us.

I: Of course. I'm sorry.

R: But M... does. No, no, it's alright. M... does. I was wondering what time it would have been. I knew that I was in primary school, so I couldn't quite remember whether the monument was there or not. And Margaret says, "No, it was just the little pile of stones that were there." So this would be prior to... I think the monument was erected 1960 or something like that.

I: Yes, that was right.

R: And we were much younger, and if we were all in primary school – as Margaret says we were – then at most, she would have been 12. And therefore we can work back the ages of the other two.

I: So where did he do it? Did he do it in the house, or did he do it at the monument?

R: No, he did it at the monument.

I: Oh, interesting. Yes. So he'd obviously thought about it.

R: Yes, he had.

I: And was it on one of your Sunday picnics?

R: Well, it wasn't a picnic, it was a walk. We would have gone down, as we call it, the farm road. It's possible we would have gone across the crofts because it only takes less than 5 minutes to get to this farm road, whereas it's a wee bit longer if you walk on the road.

...

I: ...But you also said, back at the beginning, that he got you to put stones on the cairn, every now and then.

R: No, only the once. Only the once. When you are there the first time you just put a stone on.

I: So any idea when that might have been, before or after the...?

R: No, it was the same day.

I: Okay.

R: It was the first time we were ever down at the memorial.

I: Yes. So when you picnicked there...

R: No, we didn't picnic there. What I said was, on Sundays we went on picnics. We went down to (unclear 0:43:53) bay or we went down to Holm, going through the village. No, we didn't picnic there.

...

I actually took... I had a particular class, that just happened to be a class of all girls for English. ... So I took them down, and one of my friends who was an RE teacher, she came with me to help me because there were about 30 girls. And we went down to the lolaire site. Now that would have been... so this would have been '83 because it would have been the summertime of '83 – the session '82 -'83. And I took them down and we had a picnic there and I was, all the time we were there, even when we were walking down the road... we must of got the old school bus and it would have dropped us at the top of the road and then we walked down the farm road. All the time I was walking down there I was saying, "Should I be doing this? Should I be taking these children on a picnic at the lolaire site?" You know, there was no misbehaviour or anything like that. They were very good, that's the class that I did... well, you saw the songs earlier – that's the class. We were doing the history of the lolaire from an English point of view, not from a historical point of view. But it was part of an English project we were doing.

I: So do you think that would have been the first time they would have known about the lolaire?

R: I suspect it might have been for some of them. But as we've said before, I think - as if the bung was taken out of the barrel - when the Sea sorrow was printed – maybe not the original edition, but certainly the later one, the reprint.

I: Yes. That's interesting. You think it might have been the reprint.

R: I do. I think it might have been the reprint. Well, for these children, anyway. Maybe for older people, they might have started speaking about... but even in my own time, I know that most of the children in Sandwickhill School didn't know the story of the lolaire like we knew it.

...

R: [Pause] When I was a young teenager, myself, A and I often went down and had a picnic but not at the lolaire site. We might have stopped, looked over the site, but we would have gone the other way and had a picnic. It's not a... I suppose in the island's psyche, it's not the place to have a picnic.

...

I: Of course. I have one final question and then we are done. The cairn, what happened to it? Is it still there?

R: Oh, it's still there.

I: It's still there. Because somebody...

R: Over there.

I: Yeah, I thought it was.

R: It's got flatter over the years.

I: Yes, it has. Somebody told me that it was built... the monument was built over it. But that's not the case.

R: Oh, no, no. If you are facing the sea, the cairn is to the right of the monument. It's a great tradition, accept when they were clearing for the croft, you cleared the stones, and you built the stone

walls. I mean, there are very few stones now that you can find there, you have to go further and further afield because...

I: Are people still putting stones on it?

R: I would suspect, yes. Certainly if they are from the island. It's just one of these traditions, like wee signs. When they carried the coffins - so the story goes - when somebody, say, for instance, who was born in Harris, and got married and came to live in a Lewis village, chances are that the person would want to be buried in their home village. And sometimes, obviously, that took... say, if it was going to Harris, it would take a long time - it would take quite a time to carry the coffin - and each time the coffin was put down when they had a break or maybe had something to eat, they would leave a wee mark, wee cairns. So like that. It's not exactly the same, but along these lines of just - I've been there, put a wee stone up and I'm thinking about you. That sort of thing.

...

I: Yes, and I like the idea that he already thought it was a tradition - that's the way you did it - when you first visited, you put a stone.

R: I wouldn't put it on now.

I: You would not?

R: No, I wouldn't. We took a friend, an African friend - I beg your pardon, she lives in Kenya - some years ago, down. And that was her first visit, and I encouraged her to put a stone on. But I wouldn't put one on. I don't know where my stone is, but it's there somewhere. [Laughs].

I: And that's good enough. That will do. Thank you very much.

Interview 14

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

My grandfather, also M M ... was one of those lost on the island and his body was not recovered. His second son, J M, was my father and he used to take me out fishing when I was a young boy, out at The Beasts of Holm, and there was no mention of his father having been lost there throughout the time we were fishing. I can't explain why, but it was only when the Iolaire memorial was placed overlooking The Beasts of Holm in 1960, but there had been plans in 1958, and it was only then that myself and my sister were made aware of the fact that our grandfather had been lost on that tragic night. Before that, I just thought he had been killed in the First World War. I don't mean "only" but we didn't know the circumstances.

I: No, and it must have felt doubly poignant for you to realise that's where you were fishing from. And your dad hadn't mentioned it to you.

R: Yes, I knew even at the age of 10 that there must have been a hidden story that he just felt he couldn't talk about it.

I: Yes, it's fascinating. And had you been fishing there often before?

R: Well, I must have been fishing there at least into double figures. I even remember being nearly sick a couple of times. I've never been seasick, but I was nearly sick a couple of times there with the boat pitching. It was a 20 foot boat.

...

I: And it's also amazing how just that one event of the memorial started to change things, don't you think?

R: Well, I think it was just a prod. And the community became aware of it, and there were people that objected to having a memorial there. And then when it was brought, others said it wasn't big enough, you know, and the names weren't there and things like that.

I: On what grounds were the objections made?

R: I think it was just the fact that it was opening wounds again.

I: People wanted it really...

R: Yeah, almost covered up, almost like the admiralty tried to do

...

R: But once the BBC started radio programmes interviewing the survivors, things gradually opened up and it became a... people could discuss it to a certain extent. And nowadays people want to talk about it openly.

I: Yes, which is great, isn't it?

R: Yeah.

I: So when things started to open up, thinking about within your family, did your parents and all your relatives talk about it a wee bit more then?

R: My father never talked about it. But my mother did because she lived very, very close to (ph 0:04:18) *Sandbrook* Shore. She lived in Battery Park Road, which was then called Lighthouse Street or part of Battery Park. And very, very close to that in our battery. She was the eldest in the family and the second eldest was another girl. The two of them were on the beach and saw some of the bodies coming in, the sailors looked like they were sleeping, and others looked like they were battered by the rocks or underneath the yacht, etc.

I: Your mum's memories must've been...

R: Oh yes, she was quite taken aback by it. And the third sister had been kept back by her mother and saw a sailor coming up the road.

...

I: I think that's very wise. So you say your mum talked about it a bit more?

R: Yes, she did. But she never revealed that my father's father had been lost on the Iolaire. She just talked about the actual bodies being washed up. She didn't talk about how the vessel had gone on the rocks or anything else.

I: So she simply talked about what she had experienced.

R: That's right, her own experiences.

I: How very interesting. And who did she talk to about this?

R: That was just to me personally, and I think she might have talked to my sister as well about that sort of thing.

...

I: Did she talk about it, do you think, in the wider community at all?

R: No, I don't think so.

I: Not even after the BBC started interviewing?

R: Not really, no. But there were programmes on television and there was a little booklet taken out by the Stornoway Gazette called Sea Sorrow. And she was saying to people, "We've got a copy if you want to read it," but they didn't speak about it, it was just more or less reading.

I: So it was okay to read about it?

R: Yeah. But perhaps when I had gone to bed as a younger boy she might have talked to visitors in the house.

...

I: How very interesting. Gosh. So, yeah, it was an amazingly private thing wasn't it?

R: It was, yes.

I: Have you got any explanation for that? I know we talked about it at the parliament the other day but I'd be interested to your hear...

R: I think people just felt that they would be upsetting others. And I think the fact that so many of the survivors kept quiet about it, and didn't want to speak about it until years later, and a large number of them emigrated or didn't get married.

...

I: ...Do you think, though, that, we were talking the other day in the parliament about how folks are very supportive in the community anyway, regardless of disaster or death or anything, you know, folks were always together, weren't they, and always talking and always working together?

R: Yes.

I: Do you think that helped in any way?

R: Well, it did help because widows that were left on their own... I've heard of instances where in certain communities, perhaps there was a widow from the Iolaire living in poor circumstances and

wee small houses were built for them, from each end of the island, at least three instances I'm aware of.

I: Gracious. Really?

R: Yes. And the community got together to help out like that.

I: Gosh, that's amazing.

R: People would always drop by with fish or potatoes or help them with their peat or whatever.

I: Yes. And that, of course, was the widows' share anyway, wasn't it?

R: That's right. Yes.

Interview 15

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

I: How interesting? Yes, how very interesting. So, the lolaire, though, was probably of a different magnitude.

R: It was huge. I think it was almost as if people regarded it as a curse, because, you know, the First World War was traumatic enough. And then, you know, there was peace and there was all the hope. And then this happened. And then, of course, the mass immigration started.

And the monument that was erected for the lolaire, it was almost as an afterthought. You know, it's stuck there, but it's only recently that a path was made to it. It's only recently that there was a ceremony, I can't remember when it was, was it at the Millennium? There was some sort of ceremony down there, on some anniversary, and although we had passed it many times on coastal walks or whatever, we never posed at the monument to reflect or to think or to stare out to sea, when you stared out to sea you were thinking of what kind of fish are in there or you were thinking of getting the ferry. You never thought of people coming home, joyous occasion, New Year's Eve getting dashed and killed on these rocks.

I: So why do you think you didn't think of it there?

R: It was probably because the connection had never been made with me that of real live people or relatives or survivors that I would think, "Oh," you know, my mum's uncle was one of these guys who crawled ashore here. I wonder what peat bog he hid in. Well, I didn't know the story anyway, but it never crossed my mind that that's what happened.

I: So would you mind repeating the story because I missed it first time round? So it was your mum's uncle that...?

R: It was my mum's (unclear 0:04:35). So the guy that I'm named after was a guy called (Ph 0:04:43) *Don John Mackay*. And he was a survivor of the lolaire. I had no idea that he was a survivor.

I: But he lived quite close to you.

R: He lived next door. He cottaged right beside us. He was dead before I was born, which is why I was named after him. But I remember his widow very clearly. She only died in the '50s, so I would have been about six or seven when she died. And his daughter I remember very well, Bella. But nobody told me his story. However he clambered onto the ropes because it's unlikely that he would swim when he came ashore on the ropes, on the rope, or whether he just managed somehow to clamber...

I: Or whether he was just washed ashore, even.

R: But having done that and having survived, he didn't make for home or make for human contact. He cowered down in a peat bog for a period of two days, I am told. That might be stretching it, but he cowered down in a peat bog and hid, clutching a sailor suit that he had brought home for my uncle, my uncle Malcolm.

I: Yes, your uncle.

R: My uncle. So, you know, I now have this image of him cowering down, sodden wet, with this parcel under his arm. And he would have had a trunk. Why he would choose to carry that under his arm while he tried to swim or clamber ashore or whatever, but it must have been the only thing that he had that he was determined to deliver home or something like that. But the strangest thing of all is that I never knew about... I knew that I was named after him. I didn't know he was a survivor of the lolaire. I had no idea about the sailor suit. Nothing at all.

I: I wonder why you weren't told, because it would have been common knowledge. Obviously, it was common knowledge. Well, it was knowledge amongst your little community.

R: I don't know. People just never, ever thought to talk about it. I suppose if it hadn't been for the advent of the Second World War and once the memories became less raw, that they would eventually have talked about it. But then the Second World War came fairly closely in human experience.

...

I: Everything I talk about to the folks who had grandfathers or something like that lost. That comes through all the time, the community in terms of the physical side of things, the actual bodily help was there, so nobody starved or at least nobody starved to death, as such. But the emotional side of things.

R: The emotional side was completely and utterly absent, as far as I can see, because they clammed up, didn't talk about it. The church made no attempt to help people cope with it. All they gave them was hellfire and condemnation for their sinful ways. And the subtext was, if you were on the lolaire and you were a born-again Christian, well, so what? You'll now be in heaven. But if you were unsaved and a heathen, un-Christian, you're down in the depths now, you're dead, you're in hell, and you guys who are still alive better watch out because that's what's going to happen to you.

...

I: Can I take you back to B and her story, because you were saying about her depressions?

R: Yeah. She lived... We came out of our front door, my grandfather's house was there and wasn't related to her, and then her wee house was there. So we were always when we were kids in and out of the house. In the '50s, I became aware that B would disappear for some time and I found out that she would be sent off to the mainland to the mental hospital for long periods, maybe a month, two months. She would disappear. Nobody said, "She's depressed." But I found out, you know, quickly, that that's what happened because she would sit and be almost immobile in the wee house down by the fire. And her mother, who was aged by that time, would be scuttling about doing the housework. And Bella would just sit there. And it didn't take long to work out there was something pretty wrong with Bella. And I remember the day her mother died. Her mother was taken to hospital, probably late '50s, Saturday, and B was taken over to our house and she was given her tea, which was two boiled eggs, slices of toast, and a banana, which we probably had to cajole her into eating.

Because everybody was really afraid of what her condition would become. Because they knew she couldn't cope by herself. But her first cousin took her over to live in Bayble, and that's a guy who came over when she died in the '70s. He came over with the fiver which she had explicitly said that I was to have off them, and she wouldn't have much because she never worked. But that fiver was for me because I was named after her father.

I: That's a lovely thing.

R: Yeah. There would have been many others who would have been depressed, clinically depressed, maybe not to that same extent, but that trauma did have an effect on people's mental health.

I: You tie it to the lolaire, don't you?

R: Oh, yeah, most definitely. There would have been no other reason for her to be depressed. I mean, she had everything she needed, but she would have been haunted by her father surviving and thinking about him not surviving. And she would also have these masses of religious overtones on it all and she couldn't cope. I reckon there must be a lot of people in that category who simply couldn't cope, couldn't cope with the actual loss or the aftermath, trying to build their lives again.

I: It's fascinating, isn't it? Thinking back over your own life, when did you first become...? Can you remember becoming aware of the lolaire, or did you always know?

R: I can't remember a specific time when we talked about it as a family at all. And I can't remember a time when... you know, I grew up in the time of (ph 0:21:18) *Kayleigh*, so we would get a lot of middle-aged men coming in and sitting round. But the talk was almost always about croft work, the harvest, jobs, illnesses, all that sort of stuff.

...

I: When do you think it started to change? Because of course, we're coming up to the centenary. But it's more than that. It is talked about more.

R: I remember there used to be an annual called (unclear 0:24:45) annual that the Stornoway Gazette used to produce, around about Christmas time, and I remember the story of the lolaire being in that magazine. Now, I can't remember, it was the late '60s, or early '70s, but that was the first time that it stared at me in the face. And then people generally started loosening up about it. And then in, I suppose, late '80s, early '90s, all these war memorials started. We started building war memorials. We've got one down in Point.

I: See, that's fascinating in its own right that it takes so long for communities to build their own war memorials.

R: Yes, it was because you could not contemplate doing it. And I suppose it was a generational thing as well, you know, once all the people who had been directly affected by the lolaire, had passed on, by and large, then it became okay to start commemorating them and recording it.

I: Yes, it's something about, that's when it's appropriate to write their names, isn't it?

R: Yes.

I: It's almost as if it's commemorated within daily life within the community.

R: Yes. But then once that had started to go, late '80s, early '90s, people began to think, "Maybe we should do something. Maybe we should not forget. Maybe something more tangible should be there as a reminder." And the other thing that sprang up along with the war memorials is the Armistice Day services, which bizarrely in some areas here were held on Saturdays, because they would not do it on Sunday.

Interview 16

In this transcription the Interviewer is in bold.

R: My grandfather drowned on the lolaire, and his body was never found.

I: Never found?

R: No.

I: Oh gosh.

R: And, just recently, the Bragar community took a book about the crofts, and my granny's brother also died on the lolaire, and a granduncle, which we didn't know about.

I: Gosh, three of the family?

R: Well, two.

I: Two? Yes, sorry. I can't do maths [laughs]. Sorry about that. Yes, that must have been a major blow to the wider family, mustn't it?

R: Yes, it must have been.

I: It really must. And did folks talk about it?

R: No. My father never spoke about it. I'm sure M... has the same story. I'm sure you're going to edit this a bit. M... has the same story. But it was me talking to my father that we discovered all the history of it. Nobody spoke about it better... there was a booklet that came out a good few years ago and I was looking for it upstairs, we have a study, but of course I can't find it. I'm not sure if it says Man of Sorrows or Men of Sorrows. It's quite a small booklet, and it had the names and addresses of all of the people that were lost on the lolaire, and my mother pointed out, she said, "That's your grandfather, Malcolm MacDonald, 57, South Bragar". He was lost on the lolaire. And nothing much was said about that. I mean, I don't think I even knew about the lolaire, and that was when I was quite young, and I never followed it up. And then, after my mother died, my father kept coming round here often because he was quite lonely, and one day we were painting the garage doors, the two of us, and he started talking about his childhood, and how he was an orphan ...

R: So anyway, he started telling me about how the loss of his father was so dreadful, that he and his brother had to start doing the croft after the father went away to the war, because he was away for 4 or 5 years previous to drowning, so they had to start planting potatoes and corn and cutting peats and other things.

I: Yes. And this was when he was less than 10?

R: Yes.

I: Was he the oldest?

R: No, his brother was two or three years older. So, I said, "You haven't spoken about this before, why not?" and he said, "I just put all that unhappy period right to the back of my mind" And he was a very gregarious, happy guy, I mean he was very well known in the town and he just compartmentalised it and put it in another area and got on with his life, and he was very successful in everything he did.

I: Good, good. Isn't that fascinating that that's how he chose to cope really?

R: Yes. It was just such an unhappy period, he didn't want to bring it up to the surface. But we spoke about it at length, and he told me all about his uncle who had six other family but took him in as well and how grateful he was to that uncle.

...

I: Yes. And do you talk about and have you talked about the lolaire to your two sons?

R: Yes, I have. They were very interested to find out about it, especially one of them who is in the army reserves, and he was very interested to hear, and another factor was my other grandfather, my maternal grandfather, was a seaman on the mill boat, the Sheila, and he was on the Shelia that night, coming into Stornoway.

I: Oh gosh. That must have been something else, mustn't it?

R: Yeah.

I: You can't imagine what it must have been like. Did he see the lolaire?

R: I don't know. Well, he died before I was born, although it didn't affect me very much, I didn't have the benefit of a grandfather.

I: No indeed, which you would have liked.

R: Yes, I would have.

I: Yes absolutely. Grandfathers are useful.

R: They are. My father was very useful and was really good with my sons.

...

I: So, casting your mind back to when you were painting the garage, how old would you have been then? You know roughly, you don't need to tell me [laughs].

R: Well, my mother died in 1982, so it would be maybe a couple of years after that, 1984. Well, I was born in 1941. My father was away for most of the war, so... I can't do that maths right away [laughs].

I: No, no it doesn't matter. That's good enough. So, you were, let's say, a mature person by then, and that was the first time he had talked to you about it.

R: Yes.

I: How very interesting. I mean, it's a very difficult thing for you to say...

R: He would be in his late 70s then.

I: Yes indeed. Do you thin, that was a factor in why he started talking about it then?

R: Maybe.

I: Very difficult to say, isn't it?

R: It is, yeah.

I: Were folks in the wider community talking about it by then?

R: I wasn't aware of it.

I: You were not?

R: No, I wasn't.

I: It really wasn't talked about much, was it? No, it's very interesting. I wonder why that was the case?

R: I think it was such a traumatic incident to the whole island, I mean nearly every house was affected by loss one way or the other, and then there was the huge emigration in the 20s, so the island must have been quite a depressed area at that time, and also the one civic building, the town hall, was gutted by fire in 1919, so all of these disasters happening, it must have affected the psyche of the people.

I: I think you're right, yes. One after the other, because there was Spanish flu as well. And so, it must have felt as if the island was doomed.

R: Yes. And after the First World War, a lot of the soldiers were coming back with TB, and that spread like wildfire around the island.

I: Yes. So, it's just this amazing set of circumstances, isn't it? All combined together. I think you're right; I really do think you are right. They must have felt...

R: Yes, everything was against them really.

I: Yes. I wonder if folks started going to church more.

R: I don't know. They were really good at attending church anyway on the island, so I'm not sure if it affected them.

I: So, it is really interesting. Once you had that initial conversation, did you have any others? Did he talk more?

R: Not that I can recall, no.

I: And he didn't talk to his grandchildren about it?

R: No.

I: So, he just chose to speak to you. I wonder if it was because you were outside doing something so ordinary.

R: Maybe. I really don't what (unclear 0:12:17.2). Did I say something, or did he decide just to talk about it? I don't know.

I: No, it's impossible to say, isn't it really? What motivates folks just to start talking about something?

R: And I never thought to ask him, "Well why are you telling me just now?"

I: Well of course not, no. Why would you? [laughs]

R: This is your father that you are talking to, you don't...

I: No, you wouldn't do that at all. You might think it in your head, but you would never ask, would you. Gosh no.

R: My mother was born in Ness but she was brought up in Stornoway, very near the beach at Battery Park, and that's where a lot of the bodies were coming ashore. She was about 9 at the time, and she remembers all of the people all surrounding them, all the villagers coming with carts and looking at all of the bodies to see if they could recognise them. So, afterwards it was very traumatic as well.

I: It must have been awful. And how was she about that? Did you ever talk to her about that?

R: Well, I remember her telling me and my aunt, who had a very good memory, and their parents told them to stay away from there and not to go there at all, so they weren't actually going down to the beach, but they were standing in the road watching the carts going back and forth, and it must have affected them.

I: It must. I wonder if they were allowed to go down to the beach afterwards, when all the bodies had gone.

R: Well I think so, yes.

I: It was okay then?

R: Yes.

I: That's interesting isn't it? Because you can almost imagine it becoming a haunted place, can't you?

R: Yes. But no I don't think it did.

I: Particularly in the island culture, because places do take on...

R: Yes, they do, but no. That was their playground later on.

I: Yes. Okay, well that's good. I think that's quite a healthy attitude, don't you?

R: Yes, it is. Yes.

I: It's better than making a place of sorrow out of it. It is a place of sorrow, of course, but you don't want to make it too much. I don't know. I don't really know what I'm talking about really [laughs]. So, did your mum talk about it? Well, obviously, because you know the story, so when did she talk about that sort of thing?

R: Well, we used to talk about, generally, the Iolaire, and just usually when they were talking about their parents, my auntie and my mother, and the fact that my grandpa was on the Sheila etc., and they just mentioned it in just general conversation really.

I: Yes. So, it was fairly normal within the family to talk about it, but not about the fact that your grandfather was killed?

R: No.

I: No. That's of a different order of things, isn't it?

R: Mmm-mm.

I: Do you think there's personalities involved there? Very difficult for you to say, of course, but because your dad was a different person, but you said he was outgoing.

R: No but his brother never spoke about it either, because my first cousin didn't know either.

I: Is that right?

R: Yeah.

I: So that's interesting. So, nobody.

R: No. No.

I: And would your mum talk about it... so say when folks came to visit, because folks would come to visit quite a lot?

R: She might have if the subject came up, but I don't think she would bring the subject up.

I: No. And certainly not about your grandfather.

R: No.

I: Very interesting. Very, very interesting. And thinking back to that booklet. So, you looked at that booklet when you were quite young.

R: Well, I would have been in my 20s, I think.

I: Oh okay. But you didn't pursue it then?

R: No, I didn't.

I: Were your folks with you, when you were looking at it?

R: No, I think it was just my mother.

I: Yes. And that didn't start anything off?

R: No.

I: **Really interesting, isn't it? Too close to home.**

R: Yes, well I regret it in (unclear 0:17:02.3), but when you're young you don't think about things as serious as that.

I: **No, you don't want to, do you?**

R: No, no you don't.

I: **No you don't. So there's no reason. So, how on earth did they cope with that loss?**

R: Well, they just seemed to get on with it, but they must have been very sad and depressed but they just had to. A lot of family life in Lewis, the croft work and cutting peats for fuel and if they wanted to keep warm in the winter and fed they had to get on with the croft work. They had no choice.

I: **It never stopped.**

R: No.

I: **No. You can't stop with something like that, because you sink then, don't you? And social security is not what it is nowadays.**

...

I: **It's interesting. So, from what you're saying, the memorial didn't really have much impact on people talking... well your father talking about it then, let's keep it to that, because the memorial was 1960 or something like that?**

R: I really can't remember.

I: **I think it was round about that time.**

R: But the thing about the memorial was it was really difficult to get to because they hadn't a path there, not for years, and people couldn't go to it, so I really don't know. He never mentioned the memorial anyway, no.

I: **No. Did you ever go to it as a family?**

R: No. Well, I did go to it, but not as a family.

I: **And when did you go to it?**

R: No idea.

I: **No, no.**

R: I think when the path went there, we went, my husband and I went.

I: **Would that have been the first time you'd seen it?**

R: Yeah.

I: **So, that would have been quite late on. Relatively recent. Yes, it's interesting.**

R: And it didn't really affect me very much. But I took a first cousin, who lives in Northern Island, and he was crying openly.

I: **Oh gosh. And he must have lost family as well then.**

R: Well, his grandfather was my grandfather.

Interview 17

Key:

I: Interviewer

Please note that there were three participants in this interview:

C:

S:

D:

I: So, do you have family connections to the Iolaire?

C: I have no doubt many. Our people came from the west side of the island from South Dell, and from Gabhsunn. I have not actually researched how many of those were lost. The nearest connection we have is M M's grandfather. Have you met M M?

I: I have indeed, yes.

C: Yes. Well, her grandfather was lost. Somebody, the men who had made it to the shore, called to him, to come on to the rope that was attached by that time to the shore. He shouted back, 'I can't swim,' and he went down.

I: Yes. Just an awful thing.

C: It was horrible.

I: Yes. Just awful. So, when you were growing up in Point, were you aware, as you were growing up, about the Iolaire?

C: I was aware of every woman in the community was dressed in black. That was something that I found, as a child, very, very strange. I had no appreciation of the spectrum of colours that they might have gone for. There they were, in black. I remember asking my mother why everybody was dressed in black, and she said, 'Well, because of the tragedy of the *Iolaire*.' Now, the *Iolaire* is the Gaelic for the Iolaire, for 'the eagle'. I asked her, 'What is that?' She explained. The nearest connection we have had with the tragedy is through M M's grandpa. I am probably repeating myself.

I: Not at all, it's fine.

C: So, that was a great loss. It took years, perhaps another five years, before young women, by now employed in the lowlands, two of my aunts were working in jute factories in Dundee, and many, many others were in service, as they called, maid servants and what have you, in grand houses. They were coming back in purples and all sorts of colours, and it was a great relief to a child to see that people had a sense of colours, and that they were now coming out of the black.

I: So, you knew about it from quite an early age then, really.

C: Yes, I did.

I: Yes. Would you say that you were...? It is difficult for you to say, but was it common knowledge, or were you just particularly inquisitive?

C: Oh, no, everybody in the island knew. Everybody, yes.

I: Was there much conversation about it then?

C: Yes, there was debate, because at number 3 Portvoller, there was a man called C M, and he was of that generation, older than my mother. He claimed that it was a conspiracy, German-inspired conspiracy.

I: [laughing] Really?

C: And that the ship was driven ashore purposely.

...

I: Yes, absolutely. I will just pause this for the moment. [pause] I don't know what you two think, but I think that the start of changing the trauma into historical interest began about 1960, perhaps, with the unveiling of the memorial? Am I bit too soon? I don't...

D: A bit too soon.

I: A bit too soon?

D: Yes. Because I came here in the 60s first, as a kid. Gran was utterly traumatised. Definitely, yes. And the aunties, you just wouldn't say 'lolaire.' You got that sense as a kid.

I: Really?

D: No, it's too raw, yes.

C: Yes, absolutely.

D: I think it's just now, actually.

I: As recent as now?

D: I would say so. What do you think, Mam, the trauma of the lolaire? It's not actually gone away, but is this about the first generation not to be acutely upset?

S: I would say so, yes, probably. Not our generation, but possibly the next generation.

D: I'm sort of the middle generation, that is straddling, remembering the trauma, and being moved enough to do that. But the youngsters are sort of, 'Oh, let's make a play about it, tell me more,' kind of thing.

...

Interview 18

Key:

I: Interviewer

C:

M:

I: So we are stood here looking at a picture of your husband's...?

C: Grandfather and grandmother. J M from North Tolsta and his wife C... Now, his wife, C..., passed away from tuberculosis or one of these illnesses that was going, in 1918, and left him with four young children.

I: Oh dear.

C: The eldest was 11 at the time, a boy, and the youngest was just months.

I: Oh dear.

C: He would leave the children with his parents at the time, they were looked after by elderly grandparents, and when he was coming home on the lolaire, he was one of the ones that was lost.

I: Dear. So they were effectively orphaned then.

C: They were orphaned that day.

I: Gosh.

C: We asked Granny if she remembered anything about it and she says she remembers being given money. She was the oldest of the three girls. And being given money to go to the butchers for meat. On the way she was stopped by a cousin and an uncle. They asked her where she was going, she showed them the money and they said, "No you won't need it today". So she was very adamant and ran off. She always remembered that her cousin came after her and took the money off her.

I: Oh gosh.

C: And as an elderly woman with Alzheimer's, she remembered that.

I: Well I'm blown.

C: She remembered her cousin, IM, taking the money off her.

I: Well it was clearly a major incident, wasn't it?

C: She never spoke about it. She never spoke to her own family about it, until one day my husband and I asked her, and Grampa said, "No, I've been married 50 years and I've never asked her about that".

I: Good gracious.

C: They never talked about it.

I: They didn't, did they?

C: But she decided to tell us about it and she remembered that. She also remembered a lot of strange people being around with black clothes.

I: Ah yes.

C: Now, we know that day, Lord Leverhulme was down with a group taking photographs.

I: Oh okay.

C: And photographs were taking of the children who were orphaned that down in Tolsa.

...

C: ... He was only married a matter of weeks, too. He had come home from Canada to go into the war, he had been in the Prairies and come home from Canada to join the war. Married and gone off to see, gone off to the war, days later, and on his first trip home he was drowned in the lolaire.

I: Oh dear.

C: His widow was in the house next door to us and we grew up with her, but she lost interest in everything and she became deranged.

I: Oh dear.

C: Again, it was like somebody with Alzheimer's.

I: But very early on.

C: Oh yes, very early on, probably 30, if she was that.

I: Dear.

C: But it was just the shock. Again, she was a lady who had lost both her father and her brother at sea, and to lose, again, her husband.

...

I: Going back to the lolaire, so your mum would have the picture from The Invincible up on the wall, so where her mum had put it and it never moved. She would talk to you about your grandfather and the fact that he was lost on The Invincible.

C: Yes.

I: But she would bring the topic back round to the lolaire as well sometimes?

C: Yes, yes. She would talk about it quite freely.

I: Yes, that was going to be my question really.

C: My mother was... she would talk about it quite freely. She didn't lose anybody of her family, any one of her direct family.

I: Yes. And you seem to be suggesting that that's the critical thing.

C: Yes. Yes. If it was something that [pause] caused a lot of grief in your own home. The way to get over it was just not to talk about it.

I: Yes.

C: You just didn't talk about it.

I: I wonder though if there's a difference because she had lost her grandfather in The Invincible and, on your father's side, he had lost... am I right, he had lost his grandfather in the lolaire? Am I right?

C: On my husband's side.

I: On your husband's side, sorry. My apologies. Yes. Yes. So your mum was happy to talk about the loss of The Invincible, but had the boot been on the other foot, what you are saying is that there wouldn't have been much talk about the lolaire within a family that had directly lost from the lolaire. So do you see where I'm going?

C: Yes. That's right. My auntie, our mother's mum, didn't talk about the loss of the lolaire.

I: No. In the same way that your mum talked about...

C: The Invincible.

I: Yes. So there's a difference.

C: Yes. There was. Was it because there was a photograph there on the wall, that we talked about, and, being children, naturally we wanted to know who was in the photograph.

...

I: I wonder also if it's the fact that lolaire happened here.

C: Quite possibly. I think that hurt more than anything. It was different. The fact that it happened here, it shouldn't have happened here. It was almost as if they were blaming somebody for doing them a wrong. It wasn't that they were out fighting, it was on their doorstep and it shouldn't have happened.

I: I wonder if there was ever any anger there.

C: I knew more about it than... Your mother never spoke much about it.

I: Your mother never spoke about the lolaire.

M: I hardly ever heard it.

I: And it was her father that was lost?

M: Her father, yes. And grandfather, yes.

I: But never talked about it.

M: No.

I: Anybody else in the family talk about it?

M: Not really, no.

I: So when did you first learn then?

M: Probably (unclear 0:33:57.9) no. We didn't hear much. Hardly anything at all.

I: So you would have learnt more about it from outside?

M: Yes, from outside.

I: A-huh. Yes. From friends at school?

M: When I was getting older and when I went away myself. I got to know more about it then than I ever did in our own house.

...

C: It was never talked about in school either.

M: Oh no. That's a strange thing as well, it was never mentioned when we were in primary.

C: It was never part of our history in school.

I: No. And yet it had happened on your doorstep.

C: On your doorstep.

I: In your village, to your own family, and yet not talked about.

C: No.

M: It's as if they wanted it (unclear 0:33:57.9).

C: That wasn't the kind of history we had in school.

I: **No indeed.**

C: I know.

I: **And what about your school mates, would they have known about it?**

C: Everybody knew about it, but very few people talked about it.

I: **So there's a difference, isn't there?**

M: Yes, that's right. Yes. Mmm-mm.

I: **Yes.**

C: I think you would even whisper about it if you had to talk about it.

I: **Would you really? In hushed voices.**

M: In hushed voices. Yes, that's right.

C: Oh it's in hushed voices. Yes, yes. A-huh.

I: **And that obviously didn't matter whether you had lost somebody in the family or not, you would still talk about it in a very respectful term.**

M: That's right.

C: Yes. Oh yes. Yes.

I: **And did that apply to all deaths or just the lolaire?**

M: Just the lolaire, as far as I can recollect.

C: The lolaire was on a different level of pain in the village.

I: **Yes.**

M: That's right.

C: It was definitely...

...

I: **And I wonder, wonder if there were appropriate times to talk about it and appropriate places. Would you be in somebody's house, would you be in cèilidh, would you be in church, would you be in... I don't know.**

C: Quite often it would be talked about most if somebody in that family circle passed away.

M: Yes. Maybe the lolaire incident would crop up then.

C: Yes.

I: **Ah. Okay.**

C: I remember hearing a lot about it and talking a lot about it when (ph: 0:38:06.4) Dolach, the old lady who lived next door to me, passed away.

M: If something like that happened, it would come out then.

C: So whenever something like that happened.

I: **Yes. And would it have to be a member of the family who had suffered loss on the lolaire or was simply a death in the family enough if you were close to the family, to trigger a conversation?**

C: Probably any death in the family.

I: Any death in the family.

C: Any death in the family.

I: Any death in any family, I suppose I mean, or would it have to be an lolaire family for want of a better way...?

C: In the lolaire circle.

I: In the lolaire circle.

C: In the lolaire circle.

I: Yes.

C: Because they would talk about what they had to go through at the time.

I: Of course, yes.

6. End Notes

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- ¹ John MacLeod, *When I Heard the Bell: the loss of the Iolaire* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009), p.3.
- ² Malcolm Macdonald and Donald John MacLeod, *The Darkest Dawn: the story of the Iolaire tragedy*, edited by Annie Delin (Stornoway: Acair, 2018); MacLeod, *When I Heard the Bell*.
- ³ <https://www.scottisharchives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CoffeeTime30.pdf> See also <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/learning/first-world-war/the-iolaire-disaster-1919>
- ⁴ <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/learning/first-world-war/the-iolaire-disaster-1919>
- ⁵ <https://digital.nls.uk/learning/iolaire/en/aftermath.html> and <https://www.scottishfield.co.uk/culture/a-new-exhibition-remembers-those-lost-on-the-iolaire/>
- ⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b011s4h8>
- ⁷ Macdonald and MacLeod, *The Darkest Dawn*, pp. 130-2.
- ⁸ My thanks to the Reverend Professor Donald MacLeod for these insights. Conversation and email exchange with Donald MacLeod, 4 March 2022. It is possible that reference to the tragedy may have been made in the *Record's* lengthy Gaelic sections but this has not been investigated.
- ⁹ Tasglann nan Eilean (Hebridean archives), GD043/1/4, Minute Book of the Free Church of Scotland Western Isles Presbvtterv. 18 December 1900 – 21 January 1919.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18 February 1919. The closure of most of this Minute Book under the 100-year rule has prevented scrutiny of the record beyond April 1922.
- ¹¹ *Monthly Record*, February 1919, p.19.
- ¹² Rev. K. Cameron, 'A tragedy of the sea', *Monthly Record*, February 1919, p.23. 613 words.
- ¹³ R. Macleod to *Monthly Record*, February 1919, p.20. See below for further details on the Disaster Relief Committee.
- ¹⁴ *Monthly Record*, February 1919.
- ¹⁵ *Monthly Record*, March 1919, p.40.
- ¹⁶ Although records of other denominations have not yet been scrutinized systematically, the *Free Presbyterian Magazine* (available online) was consulted for the first three months of 1919. Its single reference to the *Iolaire* – by the Southern Presbytery – contained a 'resolution of sympathy' and a recommendation that congregations within the Presbytery's bounds should make a collection on behalf of the bereaved. ('The Southern Presbytery and the Stornoway Disaster', *Free Presbyterian Magazine and Monthly Record*, vol. XXIII, no. 10, February 1919, p.325).
- ¹⁷ *Acts of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1919, Report of the Highlands and Islands Committee, p.299.
- ¹⁸ *Monthly Record*, January 1920, p.7.
- ¹⁹ Tasglann nan Eilean, School Board Minutes Books, Barvas (1/4/5); Lochs (1/4/9); Uig(1/4/22f). The disaster was not mentioned by Achmore or Stornoway School Boards.
- ²⁰ Stornoway Public Library, School Log Book, 1897-1927.
- ²¹ Log books of Mangersta, Bernera and Bragar, quoted in Macdonald and MacLeod, *The Darkest Dawn*, p. 134.
- ²² Tasglann nan Eilean, S/1/2/R.484, Stornoway Town Council Minute Book, 1918-1921 meeting of 3 January 1919, p.64.
- ²³ *Stornoway Gazette*, 10 January 1919. The *Gazette* was a weekly publication, most issues of which are preserved in hard copy in Stornoway Public Library. The issue for 18 January 1919 is missing, however.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, meeting of 6 January 1919, p.75.
- ²⁵ Tasglann nan Eilean, GD8/6/24, GD8/65/27, Iolaire Disaster Fund, list of subscriptions, volumes 1 and 2.
- ²⁶ *Oban Times*, 11 January 1919, page 5, columns 2-4.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 March 1919.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25 January 1919.
- ²⁹ For detailed analysis of the 1920s exodus from the Hebrides, see Marjory Harper, 'Crofter colonists in Canada: an experiment in empire settlement in the 1920s', *Northern Scotland*, first series, vol. 14 (1994), pp.69-108.
- ³⁰ Macdonald and MacLeod, *The Darkest Dawn*, pp.295-6.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p.309.
- ³² Donna Macleod in conversation with Marjory Harper at An Lanntair, Stornoway, 18 November 2009.
- ³³ *Stornoway Gazette*, 10 August 1956; Macdonald and MacLeod, *The Darkest Dawn*, pp. 305-6.

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- ³⁴ Jim Wilkie, *Metagama: a journey from Lewis to the new world* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001, first published 1987).
- ³⁵ It has not yet been established whether Wilkie's interviewees referred to a relationship between the impact of the *lolaire* disaster and the emigrations in the 1920s, particularly on 21 April 1923. Mr Wilkie has offered to make the cassette tapes of the interviews available for scrutiny.
- ³⁶ Calum Murray interviewed by Marjory Harper, Shader, Lewis, 25 February 2005.
- ³⁷ *Southland Times*, 6 January 1919, p.4; *Evening Star*, 6 January 1919, p.6.
- ³⁸ *Evening Post*, 6 January 1919, p.7.
- ³⁹ Macdonald and MacLeod, *The Darkest Dawn*, pp.311-12. Ironically, Maciver was to drown in the harbour at Stornoway in 1941, aged 47.
- ⁴⁰ *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 19 March, pp.36-7.
- ⁴¹ *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 24 March 1919, p.11.
- ⁴² *New York Times*, 2 January 1919. Thanks to John Cameron of Chicago for drawing this reference to my attention.
- ⁴³ *Bridgeport Telegram* (Bridgeport, CT); *Iowa City Times* (Iowa City, IA), *Sandusky Register* (Sandusky, OH); *Warren Evening Times* (Warren, PA); *San Antonio Light* San Antonio, TX), all 2 January 1919. Thanks again to John Cameron for assistance in identifying these newspapers.
- ⁴⁴ 'Our Glasgow Letter', *The Caledonian*, February 1919.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, March 1919. Marjory Kennedy-Fraser was a Scottish singer, composer and folklorist who collected and published a large number of Gaelic songs.
- ⁴⁶ Scans of newspaper articles kindly supplied in email communications from Marilyn Barber (Ottawa) and John Cameron (Chicago).
- ⁴⁷ Tasglann Nan Eilean, GD8/1/1, Minute Book of the lolaire Disaster Fund Committee, 10 January 1919.
- ⁴⁸ *The Globe*, 14 March 1919, p8. Accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 22 April 2022.
- ⁴⁹ Tasglann Nan Eilean, GD8/1/1, Minute Book of the lolaire Disaster Fund Committee, 10 January 1919.
- ⁵⁰ *Manitoba Free Press* (Winnipeg), 5 February 1919.
- ⁵¹ Tasglann Nan Eilean, GD008/1/2, Minute Book of lolaire Disaster Fund. The IDF committee had been dissolved much earlier, in December 1920.
- ⁵² Duncan Sim, *American Scots: The Scottish Diaspora and the USA* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2011), p.50. With the exception of New York, all the cities with Lewis associations mentioned by Sim were Great Lakes ports where there had been – and continued to be – considerable chain migration of Hebrideans.
- ⁵³ Wilkie, *Metagama*, p.127.
- ⁵⁴ *Stornoway Gazette*, 2 May 1919.
- ⁵⁵ *Stornoway Gazette*, 25 April 1919.
- ⁵⁶ 'Hands across the Sea: handsome subscription to lolaire fund', *Stornoway Gazette*, 11 April 1919.
- ⁵⁷ *Stornoway Gazette*, 9 May 1919.
- ⁵⁸ *Stornoway Gazette*, 25 July 1919.
- ⁵⁹ *Stornoway Gazette*, 25 April 1919.
- ⁶⁰ *Stornoway Gazette*, 9 May 1919.
- ⁶¹ Stornoway Historical Society, 17.1146.1, Minute Book, Lewis Society of Detroit and Vicinity, 20 March 1919. I am grateful to Ken Galloway for giving me access to this source.
- ⁶² Minute Book, Lewis Society of Detroit and Vicinity, meetings of 24 October and 28 November 1920.
- ⁶³ lolaire Disaster Fund, GD008/5/3, Alexander A. Stewart to Murdo Maclean, 26 November 1919.
- ⁶⁴ For the reasons noted above, at present all quotes remain unreferenced. Details can be provided on request.