

Eric Radcliffe Cregeen, 1921–1983

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On his appointment in 1966, Eric Cregeen brought to the School of Scottish Studies a potent combination of personal and professional qualities and experience which was to have a profound effect on the study of Scotland both within and well beyond the Department.

From his earliest years, his home environment encouraged the development of perspectives which were grounded in the local and which valued the international. His mother was a teacher and his father a Wesleyan Methodist minister, and theirs was a household where music, song and discussion — communication of all kinds — played an important role. They appreciated their three children and provided self-discipline and freedom in an atmosphere of positive inquiry and fun. Eric's mother was from Peel in the Isle of Man, and his father's father was from the south of the Island. A fixed point in the life where the family moved on the Methodist circuit in the North of England every four years was provided by regular summer visits to Mann. His sister Sheila, who was to become a writer, teacher and archaeologist, recalled the eager anticipation which she, Eric and their elder brother Allan, later a forensic scientist, always felt at the prospect of visits to grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, and expeditions over and around the Island, exploring its past and present.

The Methodist connections brought an early awareness of the wider world, fostered by their father's lantern lectures and talks by missionaries home on leave from far flung countries. There were Manx holidays shared with cousins home on furlough from China. Eric was intrigued to know that his missionary uncle who had taught him to swim had also taught the young Mao Tse Tung. Ideals of service to and interest in the lives of others were integral to the family values and an early ambition of Eric's was to be a medical missionary. He learned Russian from an émigré family and throughout his life maintained a love of the Russian people, their writers and traditions. The circle of friends in the 1930s include refugees from Nazi Germany.

Eric's maternal grandfather and great grandfather were shipsmiths, with a smiddy on the quay at Peel, a centre for schooner-building, marine trade and nautical training in earlier days and still a booming herring port. His grandfather was a hard taskmaster, expecting the boys to rise early to accompany him to feed the goats and sheep on Peel Hill and to work in the walled garden by the quay. Eric inherited from him a respect for physical skills which remained throughout his life.

The four years the family spent at Addingham in Wharfedale (1930–34) were recalled as providing a wonderful life for children, with opportunities to explore the

countryside and visit mills and farms. There is no doubt that Eric's interest in cultural traditions was developing at this time. From the age of thirteen he began to systematically study the Manx language, before school copying out a detailed grammar and in the summer gaining fluency through practice with the last Manx speakers, filling notebooks and acquiring not only linguistic skills but also a knowledge of the traditions they conveyed.

Like many ethnologists of his generation, Eric's course was not a direct one but was influenced by several related disciplines before he came to port in the School of Scottish Studies. An early influence was William Lemon, the headmaster of his elementary school in Addingham, who had a strong and active love of history. From there in 1935 Eric won a scholarship to The Leys School in Cambridge, where he was inspired by his History Master K. C. Lewis. His formal education continued as a Major History Scholar at Christ's College, Cambridge, where his tutor was J. H. Plumb, leading to B.A. History and Latin in 1947 and M.A. in 1949.

Eric was a conscientious objector during the war years, which he spent mainly in agricultural work. Part of this time he was in the Isle of Man, which gave him the opportunity to work with those who were alarmed by the steady disappearance of Manx traditional buildings and language. Professor Carl Marstrand, a linguist from Oslo, had been recording Manx speech on wax cylinder and Cregneash village had been established by the Manx Museum, inspired by William Cubbon in 1938 as the first publicly owned, open air folk-museum in Britain. Also, after 1940, important excavations were being undertaken on the Island by Dr Gerhard Bersu, a brilliant German archaeologist who was interned there. With a team of assistants and working under armed guard, those excavations nevertheless represented archaeological research at the highest level and were coordinated by the Manx Museum. In 1947 De Valera, Taoiseach of Ireland, visited Cregneash Folk Museum and was so impressed with the wealth of heritage in the Island that he offered the help of the Irish Folklore Commission to the Museum to record this heritage.

In 1948 all of Eric's interests came together with his appointment as Assistant Director to Basil Megaw at the Manx Museum and Secretary to the Manx Museum and Ancient Monuments Trustees.

His main responsibility was the organisation of the folk life survey. With a team of thirty Manx collectors and with Kevin Danaher and a mobile recording van from the Irish Folklore Commission the survey was enthusiastically completed and housed in the Museum's archives. Good friends in Ireland, in particular Tony Lucas of the National Museum in Dublin, encouraged him and introduced him to similar studies in folk culture and to archaeological excavations taking place in Ireland.

Three happy years teaching History and Latin at Culford School, Bury St Edmunds, helped to prepare him for his next post.

In 1954 Eric joined the University of Glasgow's Extra-Mural Department as Resident Tutor to introduce extra-mural studies throughout Argyll. With the full support of the

Argyll County Council Educational Committee, for the next decade he poured his energies into developing adult education in mainland and island communities. There he is warmly remembered for the practical encouragement he gave to individuals and groups to study their own localities in a systematic way, a stimulus which continues to provide a lasting resource in the area, in publications and in archaeological and historical societies he helped to create. (Fig. 1) His idea prompted the establishing of Auchindrain Township near Inveraray as a Folk-Life Museum.



Fig 1. Eric Cregeen standing by an inscribed stone in Killewin Churchyard, Minard, Argyll in 1956. Photo: Cregeen family.

In 1958 Eric married Lily Gemmill, an artist who was teaching at Campbeltown High School and their daughters Kirsty and Nicola were born in Argyll.

Throughout these years in Argyll Eric invited speakers from many institutions, such as scientific research laboratories, hospitals, prisons and university departments including the School of Scottish Studies, to give lectures. Many stayed to visit the islands and to record the archaeology and traditional culture of the area. Eric had been collecting for some time, and in 1959 his article 'Recollections of an Argyllshire Drover' appeared in *Scottish Studies*. Although this was mainly based on oral evidence that he had recorded from Dougal MacDougall, a retired drover from Mid Argyll, it contained original detailed studies he had carried out on the estate records from Kilberry and Inveraray, the result being an unusually well rounded view of the cattle market and drovers' trade at the end of the nineteenth century. He had already begun work on the muniments of the Argyll Estate which led (with the help of a Carnegie Fellowship) to the publication in the early 1960s of *Inhabitants of the Argyll Estate 1779* for the Scottish Record Society and *Argyll Estate Instructions Mull, Morvern, Tiree, 1771-1805* for the Scottish History Society and to further seminal publications on the estate and its role.

In 1964-65 a Nuffield Foundation sociological award enabled Eric to widen the basis of his research on the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland with comparative studies in social history and anthropology, including work on Russian material. This was supervised by Professor M. Fortes at Cambridge. Before leaving Argyll for Edinburgh University he had planned to write what he would call 'The World of Domhnall Chaluum Bhain' inspired by the insight into the island's life given him mainly by Donald Sinclair, a remarkable *seanchaidh* from West Hynish in Tiree.

In 1966 he was appointed lecturer in the School of Scottish Studies in the University of Edinburgh with responsibility for research and teaching in the field of social organisation. He became a Senior Lecturer in 1969. The School was now beginning to increase its teaching capacity and he played a full part in teaching and supervising postgraduate students for the degree of M.Litt and PhD.

He helped to lay the foundations of what was to become the full degree programme in Scottish Ethnology with components in the first and second level of courses which drew not only on Scottish data but also on comparative material from the Hungarian plains to the Danish island of Læsø. This vision has informed more recent teaching at honours level and the development of the Visiting Professors of Ethnology programmes. It also ensured that the School was attuned to new perspectives in the international world of ethnology, particularly in Scandinavia. He was an active member of several committees at home and abroad which were relevant to his research and to his administrative responsibilities. In 1978 he published *Tiree Bards and their Bardachd* which was written with the Rev. D. W. Mackenzie who for many years helped him with his understanding and appreciation of Scottish Gaelic. For several months he was acting Director of the School and joint Director in 1981.

In May 1981 he was appointed Reader in Scottish Studies. His research added more than 500 hours of recordings (Fig. 2), as well as films and photographs, to the School's archives. These included information on township histories, genealogies, religion, customs and beliefs, material culture, tales, legends and songs and many aspects of social and economic life.

His work in Argyll (Fig. 3) and his intimate knowledge of the Argyll Estate muniments, with their detailed evidence for the study of community life, coupled with his understanding of the rich vein of oral tradition to be found in the areas it documented,



Fig 2. Eric Cregeen interviewing Lachlan MacLeod in Grimsay, North Uist, in 1970. Photo: School of Scottish Studies.

in particular the island of Tiree, prompted the concentrated research programme which in 1973 he conceived and directed in the School of Scottish Studies with support from the Social Science Research Council. The Tiree Project, as it came to be known, was a series of linked studies on the history and traditions of the island and its emigrant offshoots, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Eric had the assistance of a small research unit with Dr Margaret Mackay as his collaborator, Dr Mackay being responsible for the emigrant aspect of the project. The research was completed but remains unpublished at present due to Eric's sudden death in 1983.



Fig 3. Eric Gregeen with Hector Kennedy. Hilipol, Tiree, in 1976. Photo: School of Scottish Studies.

Eric's view was that oral history should be as inclusive a source as possible, including inherited tradition as well as personal recollections in its scope. He recognised the value of locally composed song, the *bardachd* for which the Tìree townships were so well known, as an important source for the historian and his use of an interplay of documentary and oral sources enabled him to develop a methodology which has been taken up by a new generation of scholars. He was a founder member of the Oral History Society, an early committee member and conference organiser, and an active supporter of the wider European dimension of the oral history movement, placing Scottish material in that context in conference papers and publications. Importantly for Scotland, he was the inspiration behind the creation of the Scottish Oral History Group and its first Chairman. Innumerable individuals and group projects owe an immense debt to the generous way in which Eric was always ready to share his experience and give practical help.

The fruits of this early encouragement are now to be seen throughout Scotland in the increasing use of oral evidence to illuminate the past to be found in publications, museums, archives, libraries, school curricula, and the media.

A dedicated scholar, Eric was scrupulous in his concern for critical scrutiny and accuracy in the use and interpretation of all historical sources, whether oral, written



Fig 4. An example of Eric Cregeen's sense of humour and skill as a cartoonist; done at the time of the Cod War with Iceland and featuring his friend and colleague Donald Archie MacDonald.

or visual. But the human element was also paramount in his scholarship, to be seen in his respect for those who were his sources, his kindness, courtesy and generosity. Never was the description more richly deserved than that used of him by older Gaelic speakers, *duin' uasal*, a gentleman in the most profound sense of the word. He retained his sense of fun, delighting family and friends with witty cartoons (Fig. 4), and his enthusiasm for his subject never faltered. On the last evening of his life he was jotting down World War One reminiscences from the man in the hospital bed next to his own.

Eric knew well the importance of timely research support and the value of direct acquaintance with scholars and archival resources beyond one's immediate milieu. The Eric Cregeen Fellowship Fund, established in the School after his death, is a fitting memorial, for its aim is to offer opportunities for researchers based in Scotland to make use of resources elsewhere for comparative purposes and others to become familiar with Scottish material.

Those who were fortunate enough to work with Eric were profoundly influenced by the way he combined a wide, interdisciplinary view with attention to individual experience and detail. His delight in discovery and his capacity for friendship will long be remembered as will his support as a colleague and his kindly encouragement as a teacher. He was a man for whom family and community had real meaning as the wellspring of life, for whom scholarly work retained an essentially human face. This he communicated in ways which will continue to shape scholarship for years to come.

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