Susan Craig Winsberg

Interview with Richard MacKenzie MD CM

The Thistle, July 2020

(continued)

"Yes, my mom is quite a character, and the stories that she told of her life growing up in Scotland were always strange and fascinating to me. I was fortunate as a child to regularly hear her quoting Burns...and Shakespeare...and the Bible. Or sitting at the pump organ singing Scottish songs or Protestant hymns. As children, she taught us many Scots words. We used them freely, not knowing our friends in Chicago wouldn't know what on earth we were talking about. Between that and a little Yiddish from my father, we kids had quite a unique vocabulary.

"My mother was born in Hamilton, a town near Glasgow, and lived in Hamilton, Swinhill and Glasgow proper growing up, as well as Manchester, England. She is so educated and cultured, you'd never know she had been poor during her formative years - her uncles working in the coal mines, six people living in a two-room house. There was a broken-down organ in the house, which she taught herself to play. She was a natural musician and could pick up any instrument. Now, at 86 years old, she's learning the concertina, to add to her list of at least five instruments."

Many of our members have a somewhat limited awareness of the many wonderful Celtic traditions. With the intrigue of the Scottish culture woven into your music, it must take you into many unique experiences in the diaspora here in Southern California. Would you be willing to share a few of these?

"Yes, of course! Of all my siblings, I am the most passionate about our Scottish heritage. I've always felt deeply connected to Scottish culture, I'm sure partly because I'm a musician. I was introduced to the Highland Games from an early age, and to this day I get goose bumps when I hear the pipe bands. I continue to be deeply inspired and touched by the music and dance, the tartans and regalia, the heavy athletics, the sheep dog trials, and everything Scottish. Exposure really makes a difference. After all, Scottish music, stories, songs and customs were inherently designed to unite the disparate clans and sects that were often isolated, under a common banner. The clans were the diaspora of the day. My band members, coming from a variety of backgrounds, have been inspired by playing at St. Andrew's Society events, especially the Burns Suppers. Sean Clegg, my guitarist and vocalist, discovered the beauty and lyricism of Burns songs at those events, and has since become quite the Burns aficionado."

It is exciting to hear you talk about the impact of Scottish music and traditions both on you and your band members. Of course, many of us in the St. Andrew's Society have made this our passion and mission. Very few world civilizations have survived with such a trans-cultural impact.

"Absolutely! In recent years, I have taken more and more to learning about Robert Burns, the man, his songs and his poems. I have even started performing the Address to the Haggis and

the Immortal Memory at Burns Suppers, a privilege usually reserved for men. My newest challenge is to memorize the whole of his poem "Tam O'Shanter" - quite an undertaking! Again, thank you, Mom, for having taught me how to pronounce Scots properly!"

So, you could be said to be a good Craig, inspired by a passionate mother who felt there was no greater privilege in life than to be born a Scot!

"Yes and no! Although my mother is from the Craig clan, I never wear the Craig tartan because I think it's kind of ugly, truth be told. I like the concept of it, being the colors of lichen and moss and rocks (derived from "creag", meaning rocky hill) – but the result is not something I want to drape over me when I perform. I prefer the Gordon tartan, which is a clan associated with Craig. But my new favorite is the elegant St. Andrew's Society Los Angeles commemorative tartan that came out recently. It's so stunning!

"Speaking of Gaelic words like "creag", years ago I had the pleasure of meeting a musician from Lewis named Donnie MacDonald, and my Scottish connection rose to a new level. Donnie is a native Scottish Gaelic speaker - something I had little knowledge of till then. When I first heard the language, it sounded so strange and foreign to me, I couldn't believe it had anything to do with Scotland. Since my mom was a Lowlander, I really had had no exposure to it. But, being somewhat of a linguist (I speak five languages), I became utterly fascinated, and have been studying it on and off ever since. I competed twice at the Mòd (the yearly Gàidhlig music and language competition) with Donnie MacDonald and a small group of Americans, once in Oban and once in Dunoon. We placed in the competitions both years. It was incredibly thrilling and made my love for Scotland grow even stronger."

SASLA's mission rests upon the traditions of a culture that has survived, and perhaps was even enriched, by many challenges over centuries. The 21st century, in its own uniqueness of technology and investment in the immediacy of present life, presents challenges to growing the membership, especially among the young. Do you have any suggestions as to how to enrich the Society to awaken the Celtic spirit and encourage those to join in?

"Scotland is so rich and varied, so strange and wonderful. I truly love the culture, the people, the land itself. The Highlands are wild and magnificent like no other landscape I've ever seen, and I've traveled to many parts of the world. When I'm there, I feel its ancient history in my bones, and a strong tie to my ancestors. It is truly a magical land. I'm awfully glad "Outlander" has become such a popular show, because it exposes all people to Scottish-ness – even to Scottish Gaelic. And its popularity demonstrates how attractive the Scottish culture is to everyone, not just Scots. I'm so glad there are several different Highland Games and Burns Suppers on offer here in Southern California where Scottish culture can be experienced. I try to tell everyone I can about these happenings, even if they don't have any connection to Scotland. It gives them a wee taste that leaves them longing for more! They are invariably delighted when they witness one of these quirky and distinctive events for themselves. It's easy to get hooked on Scottish culture. There's nothing quite like it!"

Thank you Susan! Your positive energy and enthusiasm are infectious through not only your music but also your words and life experience. I should mention that Susan has recorded three beautiful albums in the Scottish/Celtic genre under her own label, Craig Records. She is now in the planning stages of a new CD of Burns songs.