

Locked-down: All Donald could do was write

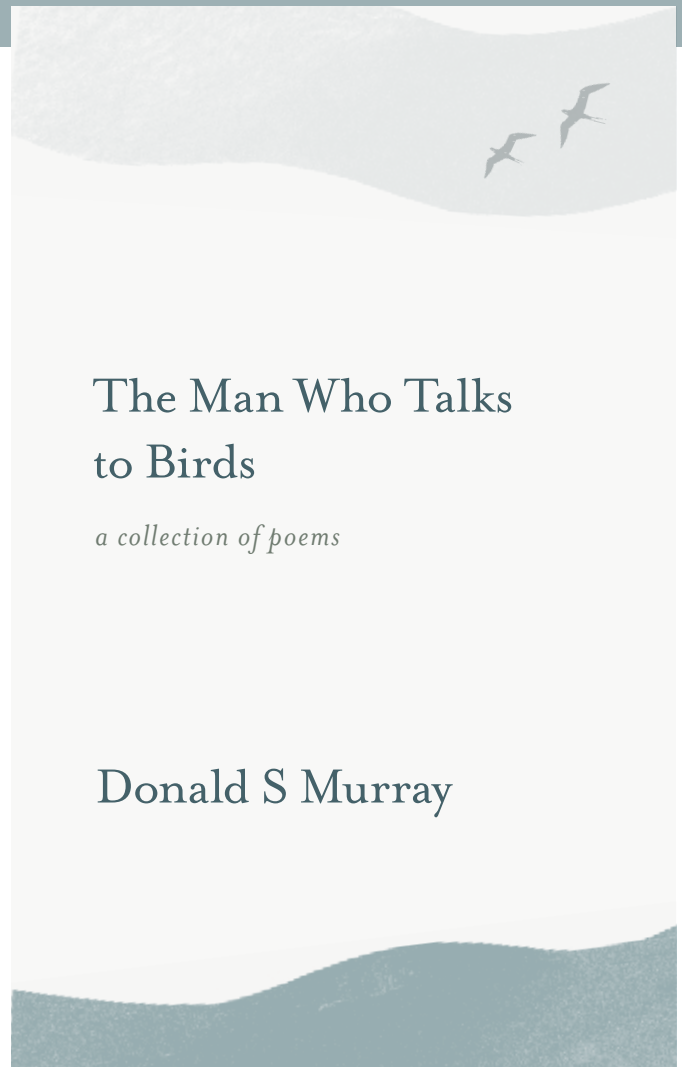
By Katie Macleod



While the rest of us baked banana bread and loaves of sourdough to pass the time during last year's lockdowns, Shetland-based author and poet Donald S. Murray wrote three books. But even without the enforced time at home, the author says he's never found it difficult to write. "I think I live in my head so much it's been okay!" he laughs.

The first of the three books Donald has been working on is *The Man Who Talks to Birds*, a collection of poems that reflect on lockdown. In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, he began sharing poems on Facebook as a way of "lifting the spirits" of his friends and family; by the end of the year, the poems had been published by Saraband, with profits being donated to charity.

"I had no intentions to publish them," he explains to me over video call from his home in Quarff in Shetland. "The intention was to put optimistic, uplifting verse on for people



because I knew we were all going through our dark days in lockdown." Unlike the usual book launch parties, this one took place virtually, broadcast on the Shetland Library Facebook page, with Donald reading snippets of verse, and his friends Donald Anderson and Iain 'Costello' Maciver providing musical interludes.

The poems in the collection are about birds, the landscape of Shetland, imaginary encounters with neighbours, and tales of people trapped in their homes, each inspired by the unique confines of lockdown, and of the scenes Donald encountered walking near his home. "If I look outside the window right now, there's a lighthouse outside the window, and there's a

bay, and the birds you encounter tend to be – especially in the summer months – things like terns, oyster catchers, golden plovers, and turnstones. And it’s almost in some ways quite like living in Ness.”

Ness, the northernmost community in Lewis, is where Donald grew up and first experienced being surrounded by wildlife, having spent his early childhood years in East Kilbride, near Glasgow. “I always remember my first experience of Lewis, seeing how different it was, in going out to the moorland and seeing the land. I think if you’re born to it you don’t notice it as much... all of that opened my eyes at a fairly young age to it.”

His next book, the novel *In A Veil of Mist*, due for release in March, takes place in Lewis, across the moorland from Ness in the village of Tolsta. Set in 1952, it examines the impact of Operation Cauldron, a series of secret biological warfare trials run by the British, American, and Canadian governments that took place off the coast of Lewis. As part of the trials, scientists from Porton Down and the Royal Navy released deadly biological agents like the bubonic plague, testing their effects on animals aboard a floating pontoon in the Minch, where the reader lands in the opening pages.

The idea for the novel had been on Donald’s mind for “20-odd years,” ever since he read a short report connected to it in *The Stornoway Gazette*. Information was initially hard to come by – many of the official records had been destroyed – and he spent extended time researching the project, speaking with politicians, and even travelling to Gibraltar, where part of the novel is set. “I’m more confident with this book, because when I was writing *As The Women Lay Dreaming*, it took me about 16 years... There was a huge burden writing the Iolaire story, because there is an emotional weight tied to that. This one, once I got down to it, was far easier – it just flowed.”

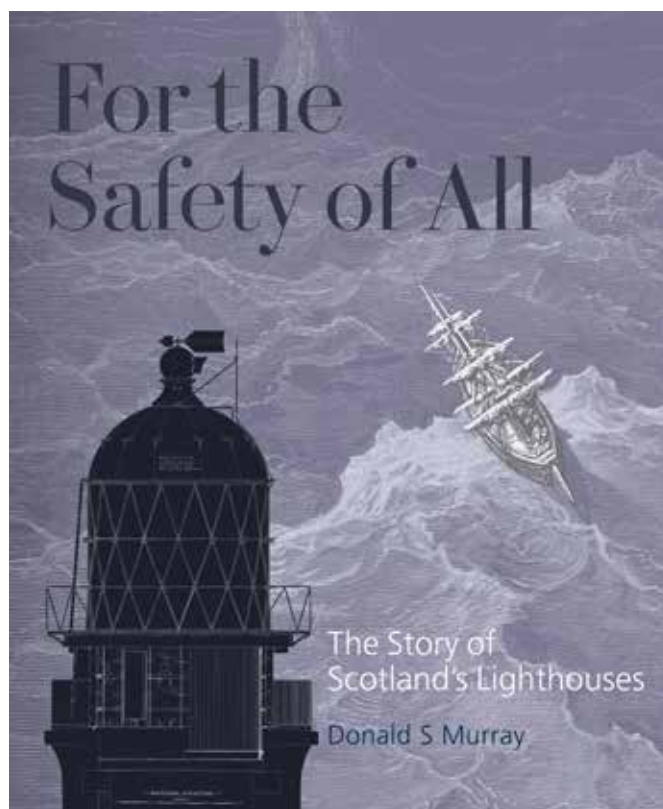
Despite the emotional weight and the years associated with its creation, *As The Women Lay Dreaming* – Donald’s debut novel – was released in 2018 to critical acclaim, longlisted for the likes of the Highland Book Prize, and chosen as Waterstone’s Scottish Book of the Month. After being included on multiple award longlists and shortlists, he won the 2020 Paul Torday Prize from The Society of Authors for the novel in June of last year. “I almost thought ‘I’m always the best man here, never the groom,’ and then suddenly I won the prize,” he says. “It’s been wonderful. That’s a huge boost to your confidence, to win something.”

Although *As The Women Lay Dreaming* was his first novel, Donald has been writing in multiple genres for decades, publishing poems, short stories, columns, plays, and books of non-fiction on subjects covering everything from the landscape of peatlands to the importance of herring in the culture of northern Europe. He’s often heard on BBC Radio nan Gàidheal, and has appeared on BBC Radio 4 as well as a variety of TV programmes related to nature and history.

He considers non-fiction demanding in its own way – everything has to be exactly right – but it is fiction he finds more challenging. “When you’re writing fiction it’s almost as if it’s a balancing act. You’re crossing a wire, a very taunted wire, that you’re always in danger of falling off, because you don’t know exactly which direction you’re going. In fiction, the direction it changes is set by your characters.”

Donald worked for 30 years as a secondary-school English teacher, turning to writing full-time in 2012. The demands of the job, he thinks, have contributed to his writing; the stamina required for teaching translates effectively to the long-haul required for writing a book.

It’s an ability that’s served him well in the last year, with yet another book set for release in May. Donald was commissioned by Historic Environment Scotland and the Northern Lighthouse Board to write *For The Safety of All: The Story of Scotland’s*



Lighthouses, which explores Scotland’s lighthouses through history, storytelling, and the voices of the lightkeepers. “I’m talking about them in their cultural impact, but also the real-life stories of all the lightkeepers, particularly in war time, and also their relationship to nature,” he explains.

“I got a lot of pleasure out of it, even though it’s a lot of hard work, particularly getting every detail right. I spoke to a lot of lighthouse-keepers, and read an awful lot of books about lighthouses. But they have been an important part of my life... I look out the window here, I can see the Bressay Lighthouse. I grew up near the Butt of Lewis lighthouse, my forebears come from places like Skye and Tiree, and even with the Monach Isles, when I was in Lionacleit, I could see the lighthouse on the horizon. So, it’s as if they’ve been haunting me for a long time.”

Much of Donald’s work revolves around Scotland’s Highlands and Islands, examining their culture, history, and landscape through fact and now fiction. The Herald described him as writing “with an inherent understanding of Highland culture, language, and way of life,” while Raasay-based author Roger Hutchinson has said Donald is “one of the most accomplished and original writers to have emerged from Lewis in modern times, and there is stiff competition.” What is it that draws him to these subjects, I ask? He muses that it’s possibly in his genes, pointing out that as well as Lewis and Shetland, he has connections to the likes of Tiree, Skye, and North Uist, too. “And all these islands are quite different, of course. But there are lots of similarities between islands, and once you know the ground rules... there’s a different politics that exists there.”

A different politics, and in the last year, a different geography, as he writes in the foreword to *The Man Who Talks To Birds*. “The geography of islands has changed over the past year... the sea surrounding the islands has imperceptibly widened. The distance between local and mainland airports has stretched a little too... There are times – over the past few years – that my location has been a major disadvantage with ferries and flights adding hours and miles to some of my journeys. This year, however, it has been a blessing. This year it has been an escape and relief.”

Find out more about D. S. Murray through his website <https://donaldsmurray.co.uk>