

GIDEON IRVING

*As Seen in the Pages of the Journal*

*An Carrannach*



These two essays were first published in *An Carrannach* in November 2015 and July 2016. They are reprinted here with the permission of their author, by whom they have been further annotated and also slightly modified. There is no copyright restriction on the essays themselves but the artist's permission is required for reproduction of the illustrations:  
he can be contacted via his website  
[www.michaelstuartgreen.com](http://www.michaelstuartgreen.com)



First published in this format by  
An Clò Beag Glas, Lochcarron, 2018

Text and illustrations:  
Michael Stuart Green

# GIDEON IRVING IN ARDANEASKAN<sup>1</sup>

NOV. 2015

The jongleur lives on – exemplified by Gideon Irving who, last month, graced a house at Ardaneaskan<sup>2</sup> to which were invited 65 people from Wester Ross and Skye. As the sea surged up the rocks below, the guests (age range 2 – 90) surged into the hall to be enthralled by the stories, songs and music of this itinerant New Yorker. Like his mediæval forebears, Gideon commands a wide range of, though somewhat different, instruments : bouzouki, banjo (both strummed and bowed), guitar, harmonica, jews harps, mbira and shruti box, augmented by sundry electrical gadgets and items that defy orthodox organology (*ad modum* Gerard Hoffnung<sup>3</sup>). All are used to great and differing effect to punctuate and elaborate the theme of the performance, a part-mythologised, hilarious autobiography in song, verse and monologue. Remarkably, despite his evident musical, percussive and vocal skills, Gideon constrains them so that it's the entertainment *per se* that makes the impact. The whole of the show is very much greater than its parts, even though some parts (notably the shtik with the abalone) are quite masterly.

---

<sup>1</sup> From *Àird nan Easgann* (Scots Gaelic) meaning headland of the eels or *Àird an Fheusgain* (Scots Gaelic) meaning headland of the mussels.

<sup>2</sup> A tiny, isolated clachan on the north shore of Loch Carron in the very sparsely populated north-west Highlands of Scotland, six miles from the village of Lochcarron.

<sup>3</sup> Cartoonist, tuba player, impresario, broadcaster and raconteur

Live performers entering our homes is now thought strange and invasive ; it was not always so. Gideon Irving revives the ancient practices of the travelling entertainer – the jongleur, the klezmer – with whom his hosts conspire and, in so doing, flirt closely with the danger of live performance. For there is inherent danger – this is raw and in your face. Gideon's audience is exposed in a way that guests at, say, Garsington<sup>4</sup> a hundred years ago or Ledlanet<sup>5</sup> almost fifty years ago were not. They too were private houses but the entertainment was nonetheless professional and safe. Gideon Irving's fifteenth century precursors tramped from castle to castle in France, or from shtetl to shtetl in Ukraine ; in the 1920s they pitched up at Harlem rent parties. The tone of their offerings would have been robust – too much so for the private musical soirées of eighteenth century Edinburgh or 'at homes' in the parlours of Victorian bourgeoisie.

So, Gideon Irving ricochets across the world on bicycle, roller blades or (we're warned) horse – to bring his idiosyncratic entertainment to domestic bear-pits in places like Ardaneaskan even ; where, thanks to the large number of people locally whose leap of faith and freely-given help underpinned the event, the audience was rewarded with an unforgettable experience. Never was home entertainment so direct, so muscular or so hugely enjoyable.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Garsington Manor, Oxfordshire; formerly the home of Lady Ottoline Morrell and a meeting place of the Bloomsbury Group (1914 – 1928).*

<sup>5</sup> *Ledlanet House, Kinross, Scotland former home of publisher John Calder and venue of the Ledlanet Nights Arts Festival ca 1962 – 1972.*

## GIDEON'S BURBLE<sup>6</sup>

JULY 2016

'So he brought down the people to the water (Judges 7, v.5 et seq.) ..... and did Gideon build a tabernacle there ... and he divided the[m] into three companies and he put a trumpet in every man's hand ... and he said unto them, Look on me, and do likewise.'

And we did, playing our parts and our instruments as directed by Gideon Irving, we being that ingredient essential to any live performance – the audience ; an audience assembled, as before, in a house by the sea, here in Ardaneaskan, on the shore of Loch Carron. For Gideon had returned and for a second time visited his dissenting message on those fortunates invited to camp before the dooks, dwangs and haffets for the entangled entertainment that might be characterised as Gideon's Burble. But whereas Gideon descended on Ardaneaskan alone last winter, he was accompanied this time by fellow musician (and, indeed, musicologist) Nathaniel Sloan – or 'Hubcap'. Together they wove an exquisitely tatterdemalion fabric of random and mismatched threads, of contrasting colours and colliding textures in patterns of contrived accident. If November's performance was of individual baubles, July's was an embroidery on artfully shredded cloth of gold. When Gideon performs solo he can be as idiosyncratic and whimsical as he chooses; the same, no doubt, is true for Hubcap. Performing together requires an intricacy and interplay of high order; the result is inevitably more nuanced than a solo act and has to be appreciated in that light. Thus, Gideon's multi-instrumentalism supported Hubcap's highly accomplished keyboard-playing rather than being a feature in itself.

---

<sup>6</sup> A Scots language word meaning to mystify (v.) or a tangle (n.)

But what, exactly, was it? Even those who were there would find it hard to pin-point. Gideon and Hub define what they do as 'stove-top folk' but, Scots beware, it is nothing like *The Singing Kettle*<sup>7</sup> – nothing at all! Imagine, instead, a somewhat surreal klezmer band starring Gerard Hoffnung, compered by a New York version of Ivor Cutler<sup>8</sup>, and choreographed by Marc Chagall in a seamless performance that veers from the sublime to the manic, from the erudite to the edgy and in which the audience is lovingly enfolded. The material is home-stirred and the ingredients home-grown. The result is a treat : catharsis that lasts.

Thus, this pair of trouvères leaves behind smiling faces smudged across this entire area. Their performance was only made possible by the generosity of their modestly reclusive hosts supported by a troupe of willing helpers. Other, recent, local, 'front room' performances by Gideon and Hubcap can be safely assumed to have had the same, unforgettable effect.

---

<sup>7</sup> *A Scottish folk music and entertainment group who performed traditional children's songs, along with live theatre performances, 1982 – 2015.*

<sup>8</sup> *Glaswegian poet, songwriter, humorist and harmonium-player, d. 2006*



## **IRVINGS HAVE SPOKEN**

*There is a certain relief in change, even though it be from bad to worse; as I have found in traveling ....., that it is often a comfort to shift one's position and be bruised in a new place.*

**Washington Irving** *Tales of a Traveller*

*Great minds have purposes, others have wishes.*

**Washington Irving**

*Threadworms and leeches are an interesting study, but they have no interest to me.*

**Sir Henry Irving**

*Procrastination is the kidnapper of souls and the recruiting-officer of hell.*

**Edward Irving**

*Imagining something is better than remembering something.*

**John Irving** *The World According to Garp*

*Talent is only the starting point.*

**Irving Berlin**