

When the Hebridean island of Eigg came up for sale in the early 1990s, there was a mix of people: some native Gaelic speakers still living on the island, some living elsewhere and all from different strata of society, male and female. They came together publicly for fear of reprisals from the erstwhile, largely absent, Laird, who could easily have them evicted from their homes. The men, in particular, as breadwinners in most cases, were reluctant to risk their livelihoods as crofters and fishermen, so it was the women who began to take the lead, to quote from Alistair McIntosh's splendid book *Soil and Soul*:

More and more it became apparent that the campaign on Eigg was being driven forward in no small measure, by its women folk. Men were making the most of the outward public statements (in so far as they dared) but women were central to the inner-process of major decision-making. (p. 193)

This was not without precedent in Celtic culture and, one might add, in our own present culture or, in the words of the great Scottish folklorist, Hamish Henderson,

there is a hidden world of matriarchy...exercising power indirectly

Colonisation, he believes, destroyed traditional male role-models.

It was the 'women's world' which stood in with all its spirit, courage and resilience, when the 'men's world' faltered.

A study of similar cases, elsewhere, of indigenous people attempting to get their land back, was revealing, for time and time again it was found that

It's no longer the women who are disempowered here, it's the men. (p.193)

Now, I could have left that bit out to make it an easier reflection, stressing the importance of the women's role in the bringing to birth of Jesus, both literally and metaphorically, as we see in the long genealogy of Israel's coming to be, but what the women are doing, I would suggest, is not simply replacing one role by another but seeking to re-empower both; to give all people, that is, the chance to experience Jesus as their peace, the God who is with us all. Both Mary and Joseph then being necessary because both are subject to God's call.

Br John Mayhead
 Monastery of Christ Our Saviour