

Kindling Ancient Memory / a' beothachadh na cuimhne aosda

Cailean Maclean

Cailean Maclean was born and brought up in the Outer Hebrides and now lives on the Isle of Skye. He is a Gaelic speaker with considerable experience of working in the media through the medium of the language. Apart from a programme which he produces each week for Radio nan Gàidheal he has been involved in many other radio projects, most recently two series of six programmes based on walks he and a colleague undertook through Skye in 2010 and in small islands in the Inner Hebrides in 2011. In addition Cailean has been running radio training courses on a voluntary basis for Cuillin FM, a Skye-based community station. Cailean has also been involved in television productions for BBC Alba and in 2011 worked on a seven-part series exploring the world of bagpiping.

In the recent past he was a partner in a publishing company which produced around twenty titles, mostly related to the history and culture of the Hebrides. A record producing company he runs with another colleague has published over 50 CDs, the best part of which feature Gaelic and piping performances.

*He has edited, written or project managed several books and a number based on Cailean's photography have been published. His recent book *Suas gu Deas* (published by the Islands Book Trust), on which he collaborated with Angus Peter Campbell, was named 'Gaelic Book of the Year' at the Royal National Mod of 2010. He also collaborated with the Islands Book Trust in the publication in 2012 of a new edition of *The History of Skye*, a book written by his grandmother's brother.*

*He has taken a great interest in the work of his uncle, Calum Iain Maclean. Cailean assisted Mainstream Publishing Company with the production of the third and fourth edition of Calum Iain's classic book, *The Highlands*. Cailean also helped in the production of a 13-part series of radio programmes largely based on Calum Iain's diaries for the period when he worked with the Irish Folklore Commission and the early years of his involvement with the School of Scottish Studies.*

Patrick MacDonald in his preface to *Highland Vocal Airs*, published in 1791, made an interesting statement about folklore collection, at least that part of it relating to folk music:

In less than twenty years it would be vain to attempt a collection of Highland music. Perhaps it is rather late at present, but enough may be got to point out its genius and spirit.

It seems that every collector who ever worked in the Highlands reckoned that he or she was too late in starting and that most of the material that was of any value had already gone with the tradition bearers to the grave.

Yet the fact of the matter is that over the 200 or so years from Patrick MacDonald's pronouncement about the limited opportunities there were for collection, there have been numerous and very successful efforts to gather and save for posterity vast quantities of precious material from Gaelic culture. So, to paraphrase Mark Twain, rumours of the death of Highland music and indeed Gaelic folklore have been greatly exaggerated.

In his splendid book, *Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, Derick Thomson looked back at these efforts and was able to divine a geographical pattern in them which, excepting a couple of the earlier collections of the Book of the Dean of Lismore and the Fernaig Manuscript, reflect the retreat of Gaelic in Scotland. The 18th century collections feature researchers in the Perthshire area, in the 19th century the focus had moved northwards and westwards to include Badenoch, Argyll, Easter Ross and Skye. In the 20th century the focus of much collection was in the Western Isles but not exclusively.

In this paper I would like to talk about the work of Calum Iain Maclean, who, in the 1940s, undertook a lot of work in the Western Isles, particularly Barra, South Uist and Benbecula, before becoming the first full-time collector employed by the School of Scottish Studies. He started work in Lochaber in early 1951. Calum, my father's brother, was born in Raasay in 1915. He was one of five boys and two girls and his father, also a Calum, was a tailor.

Having survived a serious bout of the 'flu whose pandemic just after WWI caused so much death and misery, he enrolled at the local public school (where he was registered as Malcolm Maclean). Thereafter he went to secondary school in Portree. It seems that from an early age he was particularly interested in things Celtic, particularly the team from the east

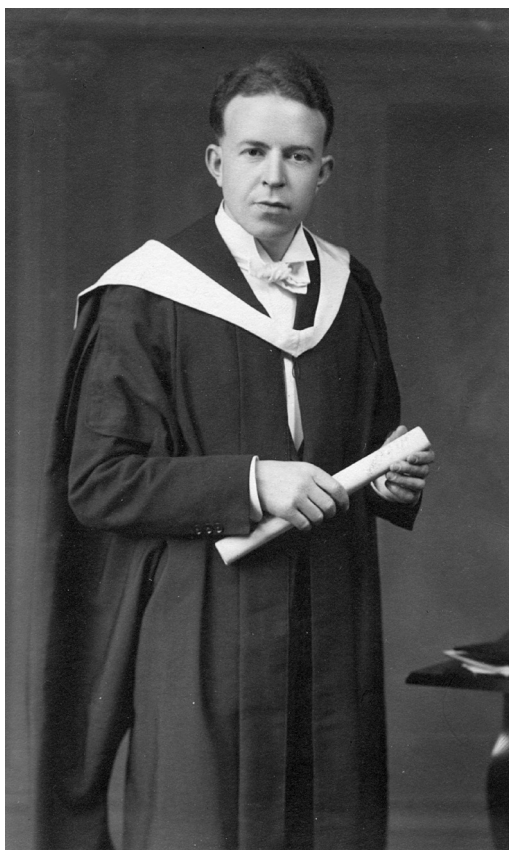
end of Glasgow who play in green and white hooped jerseys. His love of that team might have been unusual in Presbyterian Raasay.

The Portree School magazine of 1935 features an article by Calum on old Skye customs and a poem on the general topic of Scottish independence. Both things – folklore and Scottish independence – were to remain of great interest to him during his short life.

Calum's older brothers Somhairle and Johnnie were already very interested in old songs and had done a bit of collecting in an informal sense from people in Raasay and his uncle Alex (Alex Nicolson) was a serious collector of lore. He was a lecturer in Gaelic at Jordanhill College, and among other things published a Gaelic Grammar, a comprehensive history of his native island and a collection of Gaelic riddles and enigmas. And there were others in the family who had a deep interest in Gaelic folklore, but as informants rather than collectors. So, that Calum developed an interest in this field was perhaps not surprising.

In 1935 he matriculated at Edinburgh University and studied Celtic, with Latin as a secondary subject. While in Edinburgh, he stayed in digs in Polwarth Terrace. He shared a room with Allan Norman MacLean from Scarp, an island on the west side of Harris, who told me that Calum, as well as being a much more serious student than he was, took a great interest in politics. He was a nationalist and would on occasion deliver speeches extolling the virtues of independence in the Old Quadrangle; it seems that students would get on their soapboxes in the Old Quadrangle at that time. Allan recalled him being particularly abusive to Sir Thomas Holland, who had been appointed Principal of the University after many years in Empire Service. Poor Sir Thomas happened to appear in the Old Quad when Calum was in full flight and he was given dogs' abuse.

Despite this, Calum graduated on Friday 30th June 1939 with a first class degree in Celtic and Latin. The ceremony in the McEwan Hall probably was not to Calum's taste, certainly in terms of its musical content. Not only was God Save the King sung but, curiously, students were invited to sing a range of songs including Billy Boy, Ilkley Moor, Macnamara's Band and Clementine.



*Calum on graduation day,
Edinburgh University
in 1939*

Calum had considered the possibility of doing teacher training in Glasgow. He certainly sent for the prospectus for the Glasgow Training Centre but the accompanying application form was never completed. Instead, he went to Ireland. He was awarded the Macpherson and McCaig scholarships and this allowed him to go to the University College of Dublin to study Early Irish, and Mediaeval and Modern Welsh.

So Calum went to Dublin in the autumn of 1939, just about the time War was breaking out in Europe. This was hardly an auspicious time to

be starting any university course – I am not certain how much of it he completed but according to Sean O' Sullivan, the scholarships dried up and Calum was left with the choice of coming back to Scotland or trying to make ends meet in Ireland. He chose the latter and among other things he took a job in Clonmel in a pram factory but that came to an end when the factory shut due to supply shortages during wartime.

He also became a Catholic while in Clonmel and he was confirmed in Limerick. Tomas de Bhaldraithe, a scholar and a lexicographer, who knew Calum in Ireland, told me that the Bishop would use such occasions to exact a pledge against strong drink from his flock and Calum took the pledge the day he was baptized. It did not last long because that very night he and another who had taken the pledge that day went out on the randan in Limerick.

By 1942 he was in Connemara and living with the Dillon family in Indreabhán just to the west of Galway City. It was at this point he contacted the Irish Folklore Commission, a letter to Sean O' Sullivan actually, and was taken on as a part-time collector and was paid for whatever he could collect. Between August 1942 and February 1945 he sent the Commission over 2,300 manuscript pages of south Connemara lore. As far as I am aware the collecting he undertook was done using an Ediphone and transcribing in copybooks which were then posted to Dublin. Calum's main informant in Connemara was Maithiu Mor O Tuathail who gave him a large number of tales, some of which were of the international variety, some from the heroic Gaelic world and others from local lore or *seanchas*. He also collected songs from a local bard called Padraic O Fineadhá – they formed the basis of a thesis he presented to University College Dublin and with which he got another MA. Calum had some income while in Connemara, but I am sure a large part of his keep at the Dillons was paid for in kind. According to Jude Dillon, the daughter of the household, he used to help on the land, cutting seaweed for fertiliser, lifting peat, sowing potatoes and the like. Jude told me he was a dab hand with the donkey. Jude loaned him her bicycle so he could visit informants and she said he often wrote out material into the copy books until the early hours of the morning – she said he got £2 for every copy book he filled with material.

Tomas de Bhaldraithe knew Calum in Connemara and he told me that during wartime paraffin shortages meant that many evenings there was no light by which to work.

Around 1943 Calum made a series of five or six broadcasts from Ireland in Scottish Gaelic in which he spoke of the importance of folklore, tradition and so forth. There was also evidence in the scripts of his continuing interest in independence for Scotland. The scripts are still available but Radio Eireann had no record of them being broadcast though Somhairle, another uncle, remembered hearing one of them while convalescing in hospital in Inverness after having been damaged by a land mine in the North African desert.

Sometime before around the end of 1944 beginning of 1945 Sean O'Sullivan and Seumas O Delargy the head of the Commission in Dublin invited Calum to Dublin to meet them. They seemed to get on well together because out of that meeting Calum was invited to join the Dublin staff of the Commission. He started work there in April 1945 and for the next few months Sean O' Sullivan taught him their system of cataloguing folklore.

Seumas O Delargy was very interested in the Scottish dimension of Gaelic folklore. He had been in Barra in 1919 and was impressed with what he heard there. He was also convinced that the study of Irish folklore would never be complete without recognition of what was available in Scotland. So to start with Calum was set the task of card indexing Scottish Gaelic material from printed sources such as John Lorne Campbell's *Sia Sgeulachdan* and the works of John Francis Campbell. It appears that the publication of John Lorne Campbell's *Sia Sgeulachdan* was one of the principal factors in awaking the Irish Folklore Commission to the strength of the Gaelic Oral Tradition in the Outer Hebrides. Calum also worked on 364 manuscript pages of material supplied to the Commission by Donald MacDonald of Eriskay who collected material in his native island in 1933 while a student at Glasgow University.

The next step was to send Calum on a preliminary expedition as a collector for the Commission to Scotland. That was in December 1945. Delargy was insistent that every collector should keep a diary of what they

were doing, who they were seeing, difficulties, and so forth in addition to the material they were transcribing. The diaries Calum kept are in Dublin and are an extremely interesting record of the life of a collector. They were originally written in Irish but as time went on he reverted to Scottish Gaelic. About 400 pages of material were recorded during the first expedition to Scotland and thereafter Calum returned to Dublin to carry on cataloguing.

In June 1946 he had been persuaded by Delargy to return to Scotland for a sustained period of collection. He agreed but his diary reveals he was reluctant to leave Ireland:

June 22nd

At six o'clock in the evening, I boarded a ship on my way to Scotland. Although the weather was beautiful I was very lonely to leave Ireland. I love everything in Ireland, Ireland the delightful and lovely. I remained on the upper deck until the mountains of Wicklow faded from sight.

He went back to Raasay initially where he collected more folklore. Then he went to Eigg and subsequently to Canna where he received encouragement and generous help from John Lorne Campbell.

In September he headed for Barra and South Uist. He was there effectively for the next four years and many of the 9,000 manuscript pages he collected were of material he collected in Barra and South Uist. It was here three of the four individuals who impressed him most lived – James MacKinnon or Seumas Iain Ghunnaraigh, a Barra-man, one of whose stories is featured in *Sia Sgeulachdan*; Angus MacMillan or Aonghas Barrach; and Duncan MacDonald or Donnchadh mac Dhòmhnaill ‘ac Dhonnchaidh.

Seumas Ennis, a colleague from Dublin, came to visit and work with him for a while. The reason for Ennis’ visit was primarily to get a permanent sound record of some of Calum’s informants. To do this they used a Presto Recorder which recorded audio straight onto disc. Seumas and Calum also spent time with John Lorne Campbell in Canna working on Ediphone cylinders he had made before the Second War

in Cape Breton and other places and which were now beginning to deteriorate. While there Calum recorded lore from a local man, Angus MacDonald, Aonghas Eachainn.

Alan Lomax also visited and wrote to Calum on July 12th 1951:

Your introductions and contacts in the Hebrides provided me with the most enjoyable and fruitful recording trip in years. I have never met a set of people I liked as well anywhere and the astonishing number of beautiful tunes that came pouring into the microphone completely astonished me. If all the rest of the tunes of the world were to be suddenly wiped out by an evil magician, the Hebrides could fill up the gap without half trying.

When the School of Scottish Studies was set up in 1951 Calum was seconded from the Commission to the new institution, for a year in the first instance. In January 1951 he began his work in Lochaber. There he met John MacDonald who was the fourth informant who really impressed Calum.

Calum then spent the 1951–52 academic year in Uppsala University in Sweden. On his return his position with the School of Scottish Studies was confirmed. While in Sweden, Calum requested permission to buy a recording machine in readiness for his return. This request must have been granted, since in 1952 he reports that he travelled in Stratherrick with a Ferrograph machine. Unfortunately, he could not use it because there was no AC power there at the time.

He had already been recording in Badenoch in June 1952, immediately on his return from Sweden. In 1953 his diary tells us that he was in Conon Bridge, Glenelg, in South Uist, Benbecula and Barra again, Mull, Coll, Tiree, Jura, Islay, Colonsay, Luing, Moidart, Lochelside and Invergarry. In 1954 he spent a long period in Arisaig, Morar and Moidart and in August of that year he was in Shetland.

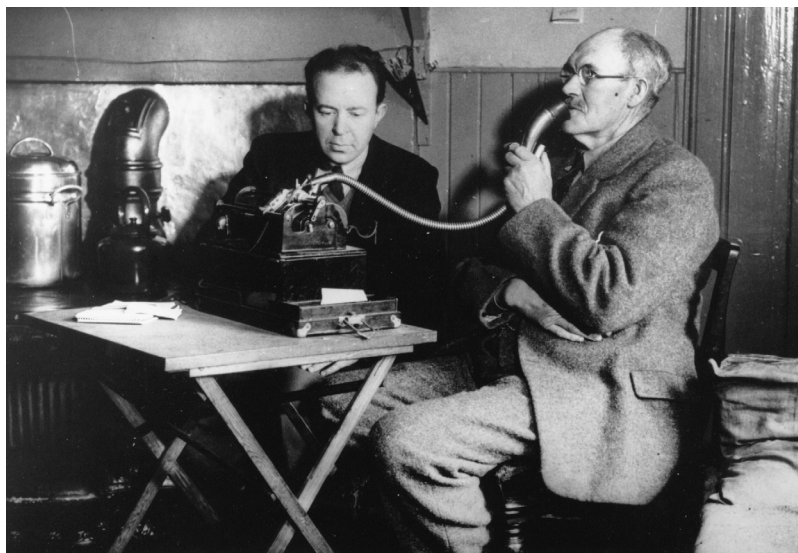
Towards the end of 1954 he was back in Dublin working on the manuscript material in the possession of the IFC, returning in May 1955. On his return to Scotland he visited Brora, Lairg, Wester Ross and Lochalsh. By this time he had been commissioned by Batsfords of London

to write a book on the Highlands. He had made a start on the book but its publication was delayed because of illness. He was suffering from cancer.

From April 1956 to September that year he was on sick leave. He went to work in the Borders, but returned due to exhaustion. A month later he returned to the Borders and it was during this field trip he met a Walter Elliot. His diary recalls:

I was quite astonished to find that several international folk tales are still told in the county of Selkirk. Mr Elliot has variants of the Aarne Thompson types 326, 1613 and 1791. Mr Elliot's telling of 1613 conforms to that of the Danish, Finnish and Finnish/Swedish versions of the tale.

His arm was amputated in 1957 in an attempt to arrest the spread of the cancer. Undaunted, he returned to work that year and worked on tales in



Calum recording Angus MacMillan (Aonghas Barrach) on Ediphone, Benbecula c 1947

the Campbell of Islay manuscripts in the National Library. In the spring of 1958 he was back working in Lochaber and Lochalsh. Then to Benbecula, South Uist, Oban, Benderloch and Balquhidder, and in December 1958 he returned to Lochalsh.

His book *The Highlands* was published in 1959 and sold very quickly. But Calum died in August 1960 and was buried in Hallan in South Uist.