Better Than Gold: The People Behind the Folktales in the Highlands

By Michael Newton

It is a rare treat for Scotland's rich storytelling tradition to get sustained attention this year, given that 2022 has been designated Scotland's Year of Stories. There is, of course, much to discover, explore and unravel in this rich store of folk tales, and I have recently finished an anthology of Scottish Gaelic narratives transcribed from oral tradition from the late eighteenth century through the early twentieth, entitled *Into the Fairy Hill: Classic Folktales of the Scottish Highlands*, which highlights these treasures for a modern audience.

Rather than delve into these texts, their plots, characters, motifs, or symbolism, however, I'd like to look at what we know about the people who told these tales to see what we can learn about their personalities, motivations, aspirations, and inspirations. After all, both the Gaelic language and the storytelling tradition itself were targets of attack for centuries, and yet communities largely managed to resist efforts to pry them away from their cultural values and practices until the post-Culloden era. The narratives that survived long enough to be collected systematically in the Scottish Highlands, from John Francis Campbell's coordination of fieldworkers in the mid-nineteenth century through the meticulous researches of the School of Scottish Studies in the twentieth century, demonstrate that Gaels had nurtured and sustained an interest in folktales to an exceptional degree in European terms. There must be social factors that help to explain this cultural focus and I hope to identify some of them in this article by examining a selection of the documentary evidence preserved by and about these remarkable people.

There is an old Gaelic proverb that asserts *Is fheàrr na 'n t-òr sgeul innse air chòir*: 'A tale well told is better than gold'.[1] It may be hard for us in our materialistic era to appreciate fully the esteem and status associated with literature – oral and written – in Gaelic tradition and culture, but there is ample

evidence to attest to its central role in the symbolic economic system of life in the old Highlands.

One of the earliest commentaries about Gaelic literary practices in the Highlands occurs in the introductory letter to the adaptation of the Church of Scotland's *Book of Common Order* into Classical Gaelic, completed by John Carswell under the patronage of the fifth Earl of Argyll and printed in 1567.

> *Agas is mór an doille agas an dorchadas peacaidh agas aineólais agas indtleachta do lucht deachtaidh agas sgríobhtha agas chumhdaigh na Gaoidheilge gurab mó is mian léo agas gurab mó ghnáthuidheas siad eachtradha dímhaoineacha buaidheartha bréagacha saoghalta do cumadh ar Thuathaibh Dé Dhanond, agas ar Mhacaibh Míleadh, agas arna curadhaibh agas [ar] Fhind mhac Cumhaill gona Fhianaibh, agus ar mhóran eile nach áirbhim agas nach indisim andso, do chumhdach agas do choimh-leasughadh, do chiond luadhuidheachta dímhaoinigh an tsaoghail d'fhagháil dóibh féin, iná briathra dísle Dé agas slighthe foirfe na fírinde do sgriobhadh, agas do dheachtadh, agas do chumdhach. Oir is andsa leis an t-saoghal an bhréag go mór iná an fhírinde.*
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> *And great is the blindness and darkness of sin and ignorance and of the mind among composers and writers and patrons of Gaelic, in that they prefer and are accustomed to maintain and improve vain, hurtful, lying earthly stories about the Tuatha Dé Danann, and about the sons of Milesius and about the heroes and Fionn mac Cumhaill with his warriors, and about many others whom I do not recount or mention here, with a view obtaining for themselves vain worldly gain, rather than to write and compose and to preserve the very word of God and the perfect ways of truth. For the world loves the lie much more than the truth.*[2]

Carswell is here condemning the professional Gaelic literati and their patrons for maintaining a secular focus for their high-register cultural expressions. Carswell is accusing them, as the role models and 'influencers' of Gaelic society, of distracting the population from the higher goal of their spiritual salvation by continuing to centre false gods and worldly heroes in their works. He implies that the élite cultivated secular literary traditions in the pursuit of their own interests – suggesting that these texts carried power and prestige – and that this left the

work of God neglected.

Some churchmen sounded similar notes of disapproval for the next several centuries, which is hardly surprising. The Tuatha Dé Danann were literary reflexes of the old pagan gods, offering a vision of the ancient Gaelic world rooted in its own soil and language. The tales of the Fianna – the warrior-band led by Fionn mac Cumhaill – were supposed to have been recited by the last surviving member, Ossian, to Saint Patrick when the two men encountered one another. In several Gaelic ballads representing dialogues between them, Patrick attempts to convert Ossian to Christianity, only to be rebuffed by the pagan warrior who prefers the lifestyle and values of the heroic age.

The Fenian warriors function in many ways as oppositional characters in Gaelic tradition, their rejection of Christianity being just one example of their resistance against external impositions. Their associations with paganism, the uncouth, and the undomesticated may have endeared them to many Gaels, but they could also draw the censure of the orthodox and pious.

In a letter that Mr Alexander Pope, minister of Rea, Caithness, wrote to Rev. Alexander Nicholson of Thurso, on 15 November 1763, he mentions that the church had already done much damage to the transmission of these texts in oral tradition in his area: 'Many of them [the Ossianic ballads] are indeed lost, partly owing to our clergy, who were declared enemies to these poems; so that the rising generation scarcely know any thing material of them.'[3]

Pope, however, was himself an example of a counter-current as a church minister who was interested in native tradition and engaged in preserving the remains of the past. He relates that he and another gentleman had taken up transcribing Gaelic materials in about 1739, well before the controversy that erupted after James Macpherson's creative adaptations of Ossianic texts in English were published. Pope observes, with a note of wonder, that Gaels held the communal memory (especially in the form of song-poetry and narrative) of their ancestors in deep reverence.

> *There is an excellent poem, called Duan Dearmot, it is an elegy on the death of that warrior, and breathes the sublime very much. This poem is in esteem among a tribe of Campbells that live in this country, and would derive their pedigree from that hero, as other clans have chosen others of them for their*

patriarchs. There is an old fellow in this parish that very gravely takes off his bonnet as often as he sings Duan Dearmot: I was extremely fond to try if the case was so, and getting him to my house I gave him a bottle of ale, and begged the favour of him to sing Duan Dearmot; after some nicety, he told me that to oblige his parish minister he would do so, but to my surprise he took off his bonnet. I caused him stop, and would put on his bonnet; he made some excuses; however as soon as he began, he took off his bonnet, I rose and put it on; he took it off, I put it on. At last he was like to swear most horribly he would sing none, unless I allowed him to be uncovered; I gave him his freedom, and so he sung with great spirit. I asked him the reason; he told me it was out of regard to the memory of that hero. I asked him if he thought that the spirit of that hero was present; he said not; but he thought it well became them who descended from him to honour his memory.[4]

Oral tradition served to perpetuate the renown of ancestors and heroes who had earned a place of honour. We can also explain, to some degree, the prestige associated with these texts in terms of their cultivation by the learned classes and their performance in aristocratic spaces. In 1779 Rev. Donald MacNicol penned a lengthy refutation of many of the ill-informed comments by Samuel Johnson regarding Gaelic literature. He preserved interesting details about recent or contemporary practices in his rebuke, especially those related to poetry and storytelling. One of the points underscored by MacNicol is that entire communities were engaged in the composition and preservation of texts and their coordinated efforts helped to maintain textual accuracy and high literary standards.

That the Highlanders were not so liable to be imposed upon by the flattering compositions and tales of their Bards and Seannachaies, as our traveller would insinuate, is beyond all dispute. Besides those who were employed in those professions, there were multitudes in the country who spent most of their leisure hours in hearing, recording, and rehearsing the achievements of their ancestors and countrymen.

Among these, there were many who composed poems in a strain equal to the Bards themselves; and such private persons were always a check upon the Bards and Seannachies by profession, to prevent their deviating from the truth.

> *Though the Bards and Seannachies are no longer retained as formerly, this custom in the country is not yet discontinued. I myself, as well as thousands still alive, have seen and heard instances of what I have just now mentioned. […]*
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> *[…] as to Seannachies from choice, and for the amusement of themselves and friends, they have always existed; and there are several, and those not contemptible ones, both of the better and lower sort of people, still living in the country. It will be enough to shew, from well known facts, that the regular profession of Bard, who occasionally likewise officiated as Seannachie, has not been so long out of fashion. […]*
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> *[…] nor need we be more surprised, that the race of Bards is now almost extinct, than that we hear no longer of the Harpers, Scialachies (taletellers), and Jesters of former times, or that even the bagpipe itself is approaching to the eve of its last groans. Our great people, like those of other nations, have found out new modes of amusement and expence, which probably, in their turn, will soon give way to others.*
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> *[…] and as to such pieces of any length as we have in prose, they are the more easily retained, as they generally consist of a variety of episodes, depending on each other, and highly adapted to captivate the fancy. Among the latter kind are our Tales, which are, for the most part, of considerable length, and bear a great resemblance to the Arabian Nights Entertainments. One of those, in particular, is long enough to furnish subject of amusement for several nights running. It is called Scialachd Choise Ce, or Cian O Cathan's Tale; and though Scialachies, or tellers of tales by profession, are not now retained by our great families, as formerly, there are many still living, who can repeat it from end to end, very accurately.*

We can see from his account that by this time the term *seanchaidh*, which had originally referred to someone whose duty was to preserve history and traditional lore of a formal, learned nature, had acquired, to some degree, the meaning 'teller of tales' in a looser sense. The term *sgeulaiche* refers more strictly to someone who told tales primarily for the purposes of entertainment, with the stories understood to be essentially fictional, rather than historical, in nature.

Anecdotes about Gaelic oral tradition can turn up in strange places. Patrick Campbell, who occupied the position of head forester in Mamlorn for some seven

years, went to visit British colonies in North America in 1791. Amongst his notes about his travels, he recounted that even more than two centuries after Carswell the peasantry of Argyllshire was much more keen to hear Gaelic folk tales and ballads than they were the orations of their ministers:

> *It was customary in the corner of the country where I was born, when the people assembled on any public occasion, particularly at late-wakes, to place their best historian [seanchaidh] in some conspicuous and centrical place, where he could best be heard in the house, but more frequently in a barn, where the corpse was kept; and after they were tired of playing games and tricks peculiar to that country, in which all the strength, alertness, and dexterity, were exerted to their utmost, the best orator began and continued till day-light, repeating Ossian's poems, and recounting the achievements of his race, which exalted their minds and ideas to perfect enthusiasm. I myself, when a boy, was present on many of these occasions, and I well remember that I never observed a sermon by the greatest devotee, or any other discourse, picked up with half the avidity that the young people did these poems; and I have different times gone on a Saturday evening from school eight or ten miles off, to a friend's house to hear them repeated, and to learn them.*[5]

The expansion of church-sponsored schools in the Highlands, the publication of religious tracts in Gaelic, and the subsequent increase in literacy in Gaelic opened the door to a wider diversity of print culture in the nineteenth century, including periodicals. Some of these occasionally featured traditional tales often relating to clan history. A native of Ardgour sent such a story to the editor of the periodical *An Teachdaire Ùr Gàidhealach* in 1836, prefaced by the following letter:

> *Lasaidh mo chridhe fhathast le sòlas nuair a chuimhnicheas mi air cleachdaidhean agus gnàths nam beann. Có neach a thogadh anns a' Ghàidhealtachd nach d 'fhiosraich an tùs òige, an deòthas inntinn leis an éisdeadh sgeòil nan Gael agus eachdraidh na Féinne. Cha dì-chuimhnich mi ri m 'bheò an toil-inntinn leis an éisdinn ri seanchas nan aosda nuair a labhradh iad mu euchd nan laoch bho'n d'thàinig iad. 'S cinnteach mi gun do chuidich seo ri clanna nan Gael a thogail suas ann am barrachd buaidh os ceann gach sluaigh anns an domhan – mar a bha am beachd air àrdachadh le bhith cluinntinn cliù agus treuntas an sinnsear a ghnà 'ga luaidh – le bhith 'ga dheothal mar gu'm b 'ann le bainne 'me màthar agus a 'fàs 'nan cridheachan le*

neart, mar a bha ’na cuirp a ’cinntinn. ’S neònach le cuid gun cùmt ’air chuimhne bho linn gu linn nithibh a thachair bho chionn na ciadaibh bliadhna, ach iadsan a dh’fhiosraich an rùn cridhe leis an éisd an Gàidheal ri seanachas mu chinneadh, chan ioghnadh leò mar a chumadh air chuimhne iad. Tha na sgeòil ris an d’éisd mi ’smi air glùn m ’athar fhathast cho soilleir a’m inntinn ’s a bha iad an uair a chuala mi iad ’s a-chaoidh cha téid iad air dì-chuimhne gus am fuaraich mo chom. ’Sann do na sgeòil is tric a dh’éisd mi le togradh, an sgial a leanas, agus a tha phaipear mar a-nis air dh’iunnsaich mi a’m òige e o bhial nan sean’ear.[6]

My heart still blazes with joy when I remember the traditions and customs of the Highlands. What person, who was raised in a Gaelic community, did not experience in their early youth the mental exhilaration with which tales of the Gaels and the adventures of the Fianna are listened. I will never forget for as long as I live the enjoyment with which I listened to the lore of the old people when they would speak about the exploits of the warriors from whom they were descended. I’m sure that this enabled the Gaels to be endowed with qualities superior to other people of the world – since their ideas were elevated by constantly hearing references to the fame and excellence of their ancestors – by drinking it as though with their mother’s milk and growing in their hearts with strength, as their bodies were developing. Some think that it is strange that things are remembered from generation to generation that happened centuries ago, but those who have experienced the passion with which the Gael will listen to lore about his people, they will not be surprised that they are remembered. The tales to which I listened when I was on my father’s knee are still as clear in my mind as when I first heard them and I will never forget them until my body grows cold. The tale that follows is one of those to which I often listened with passion, and is now on paper as I learned it in my youth from the mouths of the elders.

This contributor tells us that he has created a faithful textual record for posterity, but his recollections are full of emotions fueled by the personal relationships and interactions that are an inherent aspect of orality. It seems to me that he is implying that those experiences were not something that could be captured on paper. Storytelling was more than an intellectual exercise: it was something lived and felt, a form of nourishment, affection and companionship, which of course

connects well with the word *céilidh* and its many uses.

The idea that vernacular oral tradition is a life-sustaining force[7] is made explicit in the field notes of James Cumming in 1857, working on behalf of Rev. Dr. Thomas MacLauchlan in Edinburgh. Cumming noted of his informant Alasdair Mór in Tiree:

> *He was about 100 years old when he died; till his last illness he delighted much in reciting the songs and sgeulachd chronicles of Oissian [sic] and less ancient persons. He stated that this same old man prefaced a song or a sgeulachd with an introduction, pointing out the various persons who from age to age had handed it down for at least 3 or 4 centuries; that he delighted as much in reciting these things as that no business or condition of life would be laid aside whenever a willing ear was found to listen.*[8]

Oral tradition was of prime concern in the life of this man, and others like him. It is an important protocol of Gaelic oral tradition that the line of transmission be preserved along with the text itself, similar to a genealogical lineage. This convention aids in making explicit the social nature of orality and commemorates those responsible for feeding the carrying stream of tradition.

The floodgates of information about storytelling and storytellers open up in 1859 with John Francis Campbell's efforts to collaborate with a team of fieldworkers across the west of the Gàidhealtachd, from Islay to Lewis. Hector MacLean, the parish schoolmaster at Ballygrant in Islay, travelled widely and commented on the psychological effects of the tradition and its performance in the community:

> *During the recitation of these tales, the emotions of the reciters are occasionally very strongly excited, and so also are those of the listeners, almost shedding tears at one time, and giving way to loud laughter at another. A good many of them firmly believe in all the extravagance of these stories.*
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> *They speak of the Ossianic heroes with as much feeling, sympathy, and belief in their existence and reality as the readers of the newspapers do […]*
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> *In North Uist and Harris these tales are nearly gone, and this, I believe, to be owing partly to reading, which in a manner supplies a substitute for them,*

partly to bigoted religious ideas, and partly to narrow utilitarian views.[9]

Indeed, Campell launched his efforts not a moment too soon, for his fieldwork notes are replete with observations about the damage done, and being done, to the storytelling tradition. He summarised the contemporary state of matters in the Introduction to *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, indicating the inexorable strangulation of the secular verbal arts:

Men and women of all ages could and did tell me stories, children of all sizes listened to them; and it was self-evident that people generally knew and enjoyed them. Elsewhere I had been told, that thirty or forty years ago, men used to congregate and tell stories; here, I was told, that they now spend whole winter nights about the fire listening to these old world tales. The clergy, in some places, had condemned the practice, and there it had fallen into disuse; stories seemed to be almost exterminated in some islands, though I believe they were only buried alive; but in other places this harmless amusement is not forbidden; and there, in every cluster of houses, is some one man famed as "good at sgialachdan," whose house is a winter evening's resort. I visited these, and listened, often with wonder, at the extraordinary power of memory shown by untaught old men.[10]

Amongst the anecdotes about experiences collecting texts in the field that Campbell included in the volume is the story of a man living in a community where religious extremism had taken a jealously exclusive hold on people's minds. This man had recited folktales to Campbell but was terrified about the consequences of being condemned by his peers for perpetrating the 'lies' of folktales, rather than the 'Gospel truth'. The emotional power of storytelling has here been weaponised against its erstwhile champions:

Certain persons, in a place which I abstain from naming, were so zealous in the cause of "truth," that they assured a simple old man who had repeated a number of stories to one of my collectors, that he would have to substantiate every word he had uttered, or suffer punishment for telling falsehoods. I found him in great perturbation, evidently expecting that I had arrived for the purpose of calling him to account, and I had some trouble in setting his mind at rest. He repeatedly assured me that he only told what others had told him. In

this instance, as it seems to me, "truth" might well say, "keep me from my friends."[11]

It is perhaps remarkable that some Gaels were willing to defy these social pressures from peers and authorities and remain dedicated to their ancestral traditions. Some were dedicated to specific genres within the wider repertoire of the Gaelic verbal arts. Alexander Carmichael, one of the most passionate and steadfast fieldworkers to have come out of Campbell's enterprise, wrote a description in 1866 of one of such tradition-bearer: Eachann mac Ruaraidh (*c*. 1797–1878, 'Hector MacIsaac') from Ìochdar, South Uist. A carpenter by day, he strongly preferred the archaistic Fenian cycle of traditions, many of which were closely tied to the high status of the professional Gaelic literary classes.

Hector MacIosag despises mythological tales and says they are great rubbish in which I fear many men of greater pretention [sic] will concur. But of the Fingalians tales he declares them to be worthy [of] the attention of princes – that they are the most elegant excellent and delightful tales that man could listen to. He says that he heard tales read as repeated by persons whom he knows and that the tales were so garbled and mangled that he hung down his head and closed his ears for very shame. He declares that When [he] is done planting his potatoes he will travel over the F[ord]– a dis[tance] of about 26 m[iles]. – to give me a proper opp[ortunity] of taking down every word he has before he dies. He says he he [sic] [has] neither son nor dau[ghter] except one little girl to whom he can leave his legacy of prose and poetry. And as he likes me better than any other person in the world he is desirous I should become poss[essor] of this invaluable legacy. Ind[eed] he considers it an imper[tinence] that his young daug[hter] does not exhibit a wish to become poss[essor] of these tales of the Fein[n]e in prose and poetry. He dec[lares] that there is no man from the Butt of Lewis to Barra Head – 200 m[iles] – who has the history of the Fing[alians] so well as he. Re[citers] are the most egotistical set I have ever met. Each thinks himself much better than his neigh[bour] in reciting. Each declares that other re[citers] are only garbling the tales. Ruarai Ruadh from whom E[achann] MacIosaig learnt his tales died about 40 y[ears] ago – about 80 years of age. A gentleman came from Edin[burgh] to take down from him. He remained several weeks from writing from his dictation. For excelling so much in this L[ord] MacDon[ald] generously gave him a house and piece of land

> *free of rent and this he enjoyed while he lived. Proba[bly] he was the last Ga[elic?] reciter who enjoyed free lands for his an[cient] lore. He was a catechist and used to go about catechising but in the reality his audiences were more partial to his old lore than to better talk. And truth to say we believe the old man took more delight in reciting and expounding the Fing[alian] tales and poems than those of the Bible.*[12]

Storytelling must have enjoyed residual social prestige for such intense rivalries to continue to flare up. The croft granted by Lord MacDonald to Ruaraidh Ruadh on account of his virtuosity as a *sgeulaiche* – probably the last instance of such an arrangement in the Gaelic world – must have helped to perpetuate these cultural values in the locality. Eachann displays disappointment and frustration with his daughter, however, his sole progeny, who has declined to carry on his folklore legacy. Carmichael seems to be pleased to have been anointed as a worthy custodian of his materials which, as we have seen before, was a greater crowd-pleaser than the Scriptures – at least amongst those not yet swept up by evangelicalism.

John Francis Campbell continued to visit tradition bearers and collect texts from them after his four-volume magnus opus was complete: he seemed to enjoy their company and their store of *seanchas*. His personal journal records a *céilidh* in South Uist in 1870:

> *I spent the whole of a very fine day with three old men, one would have sufficed for a week. They flooded me with knowledge. I flooded them with drink and added coin – we were mutually pleased … I cannot convey to anybody who has not experienced [it] the extraordinary mass of stuff which is stored up in these old Highland minds.*[13]

John Gregorson Campbell was another Gaelic ethnographer, working independently of John Francis Campbell, although inspired by him and in communication with him. John G was a native of Appin who became a Church of Scotland minister stationed primarily on the island of Tiree. He wrote glowingly of the mental endowments of the people with whom he worked, regardless of their social class, as demonstrated by these excerpts:

The writer has thankfully to acknowledge, and he cannot but remember with pleasure, the readiness and courtesy, and in very many cases the great intelligence with which his inquiries have been answered. Some of his informants have shown a quickness and retentiveness of memory which he could not but envy, and an appreciation of, and an acquaintance with, ancient lore that seemed to him to indicate in those who were strangers to the world of letters powers of mind of a high order. […]

This story was written as it was told by Donald Cameron, a native of Tiree, in the year 1865. Many other tales (Sgeulachdan) and songs (òrain) were taken down from him at the time, and the writer cannot but express his admiration of Cameron, as the best reciter he has ever fallen in with.

This tale was written down as it was told by Donald Cameron, Rùdhaig, Tiree, more than twenty-five years ago, and to whose happy and retentive gift of memory it is a pleasure to recur. He had a most extensive stock of old lore, and along with it much readiness and willingness to communicate what he knew. […Cameron was] in the lower rank of life: he had been at one time a crofter or small farmer, but was made a cotter, i.e., one without any land, not through any fault of his own, but from an idea that the land would be better in larger holdings.[14]

A few of the folktales collected by the aforementioned scholars during this period of intensive fieldwork comment obliquely on the significance and import of oral tradition. One of the more interesting of these is 'Bàillidh Lunnainn' ('*The Provost of London*'), transcribed in Gaelic by Donald Torrie from Donald MacIntyre of Benbecula in 1860.[15] The protagonist vindicates the natural intelligence of Highlanders against the presumed superiority of formally educated Englishmen, even those trained in such famous centres of learning as Cambridge. Two episodes from the tale are particularly relevant:

Ràinig e Sasuinn agas chaidh e a steach gu baile Lunnainn, agus air an rathad, thachair duine-uasal de mhuinntir Chambridge ris, agus air an turus, shil uisge trom, agus ghearain an Sasunnach gu'n robh e 'ga fhliuchadh.

Ars an Gàidheal: "Nam biodh do thigh féin mu d' cheann, chan éireadh sin duit!"

“Amadain!” ars an Sasunnach, “na cluinneadh duine thu ag ràdh a leithid sin de chainnt gun tùr.”

Chaidh iad air aghart, agus air dhoibh bhi dol seachad air abhuinn, ghearain an Sasunnach gu’n robh an abhuinn domhain.

“Nam biodh do dhrochaid thogalach agadsa, gheabhadh tu tioram thairis oirre!” ars an Gàidheal.

“Chan’eil annad ach am fìor amadan,” ars an Sasunnach.

Ghabh iad air an aghaidh, agus an uair a bha iad gu dealachadh, ghearain an Sasunnach gu’n robh an t-acras air.

“Nam biodh,” ars an Gàidheal, “t’ athair agus do mhàthair air do ghiùlan, cha bhiodh thu mar sin.”

“A dhuine gun tuigse,” arsa an Sasunnach, “cia mar a dhèanainn-sa sin; ach théid mi a stigh do’n tavern so, agus caisgidh mi m’ acras.” […]

An uair a chaidh e do thigh a’ Phrobhaisd, thachair gu’n robh e féin [am Probhaisd] agus an Sasunnach o Chambridge an còmhradh. Dh’innis e dha an seanachas a ghabh àite eadar e féin agus Gàidheal òg a bha ’tighinn a stigh do’n bhaile maille ris, a mhìos gus a nochd.

“Ma tha,” ars am Probhaisd, “is e a tha ’na amadan thu féin, is chan e an Gàidheal; b’ fheàrr leamsa gu’m faicinn e. Is e sin duine cho glic is a chuala mi riamh. Is e bha e ’ciallachadh leis an tigh, an carbad bu chòir a bhi agad; agus leis an drochaid thogalaich, an t-each-dialta bu chòir a bhi agad; agus le t’ athair agus do mhàthair a bhi ’nad bhroinn, am biadh agus an deoch bu chòir a bhi agad.”[16]

He arrived in England and he went to the city of London, and on the way, he met one of the noblemen of Cambridge, and on the journey, there was a heavy rain, and the Englishman complained that he was getting wet.

The Gael said, “If you had your own house around you, that would not happen to you!”

“You idiot!” said the Englishman. “May no-one hear you using that kind of

senseless talk."

They proceeded, and after they went past a river, the Englishman said that the river was deep.

"If you had your raised bridge with you, you could cross over it dry!" said the Gael.

"You are nothing but a complete idiot," said the Englishman. They proceeded, and when they were parting, the Englishman complained that he was hungry.

"If your father and your mother," said the Gael, "had carried you, you wouldn't be like that."

"O you senseless man," said the Englishman, "how would I do that? But I'm going to go into this tavern, and I'll satisfy my hunger." […]

When he went to the house of the Provost, it happened that he and the Englishman from Cambridge were talking to each other. He told him a story about what took place between himself and a young Gael who was coming into the city along with him a month ago that night.

"Well," said the Provost, "it is you who is the idiot, and not the Gael: I wish I had seen him. That's the wisest man I've ever heard of. What he was referring to as 'the house' is the buggy that you ought to have; 'the raised bridge' means the saddled horse that you ought to have; and by 'your mother and father in you' he meant the food and drink that you ought to have."

The Cambridge scholar was confounded by exactly the kinds of ambiguous imagery featured regularly in the riddles of the *céilidh* house. This tale satires the self-importance of the anglophone world and the negative stereotypes of backwards and ignorant Gaels of which they must have been very aware. Through the sharpness of his wits, the Highland protagonist of the tale marries the bride that the Englishman thought he had procured for himself. The Gael is also a much more likeable, chivalrous, and sympathetic character than the Englishman in the tale – virtues that were commended in such folktales.

This brief exploration of some of the documents produced by and about those involved in Gaelic storytelling attest to its prominent role in Highland culture and

identity. People who were adept storytellers enjoyed social distinction and cachet. Storytelling exercised minds, kept memories active, and immortalised the paragons of the past. Audiences were active participants in keeping narratives accurate in their community. Through constant engagement with the verbal arts, Gaels honed their skills as literary artists and critics. Storytelling gave expression to Gaelic verbal aesthetics and artistry. It was not just a cerebral activity but carried with it emotional associations with the people from whom the narratives were heard and those with whom the tales were shared. Above and beyond these qualities, storytelling was the vehicle for the cultural touchstones, collective memories, and worldview of Gaels for countless generations. It served as a form of currency in constant circulation that was considered, at least by some, to be 'better than gold'.It is a rare treat for Scotland's rich storytelling tradition to get sustained attention this year, given that 2022 has been designated Scotland's Year of Stories. There is, of course, much to discover, explore and unravel in this rich store of folk tales, and I have recently finished an anthology of Scottish Gaelic narratives transcribed from oral tradition from the late eighteenth century through the early twentieth, entitled *Into the Fairy Hill: Classic Folktales of the Scottish Highlands*, which highlights these treasures for a modern audience.

Rather than delve into these texts, their plots, characters, motifs, or symbolism, however, I'd like to look at what we know about the people who told these tales to see what we can learn about their personalities, motivations, aspirations, and inspirations. After all, both the Gaelic language and the storytelling tradition itself were targets of attack for centuries, and yet communities largely managed to resist efforts to pry them away from their cultural values and practices until the post-Culloden era. The narratives that survived long enough to be collected systematically in the Scottish Highlands, from John Francis Campbell's coordination of fieldworkers in the mid-nineteenth century through the meticulous researches of the School of Scottish Studies in the twentieth century, demonstrate that Gaels had nurtured and sustained an interest in folktales to an exceptional degree in European terms. There must be social factors that help to explain this cultural focus and I hope to identify some of them in this article by examining a selection of the documentary evidence preserved by and about these remarkable people.

There is an old Gaelic proverb that asserts *Is fheàrr na 'n t-òr sgeul innse air chòir*: 'A tale well told is better than gold'.[17] It may be hard for us in our

materialistic era to appreciate fully the esteem and status associated with literature – oral and written – in Gaelic tradition and culture, but there is ample evidence to attest to its central role in the symbolic economic system of life in the old Highlands.

One of the earliest commentaries about Gaelic literary practices in the Highlands occurs in the introductory letter to the adaptation of the Church of Scotland's *Book of Common Order* into Classical Gaelic, completed by John Carswell under the patronage of the fifth Earl of Argyll and printed in 1567.

> *Agas is mór an doille agas an dorchadas peacaidh agas aineólais agas indtleachta do lucht deachtaidh agas sgríobhtha agas chumhdaigh na Gaoidheilge gurab mó is mian léo agas gurab mó ghnáthuidheas siad eachtradha dímhaoineacha buaidheartha bréagacha saoghalta do cumadh ar Thuathaibh Dé Dhanond, agas ar Mhacaibh Míleadh, agas arna curadhaibh agas [ar] Fhind mhac Cumhaill gona Fhianaibh, agus ar mhóran eile nach áirbhim agas nach indisim andso, do chumhdach agas do choimh-leasughadh, do chiond luadhuidheachta dímhaoinigh an tsaoghail d'fhagháil dóibh féin, iná briathra dísle Dé agas slighthe foirfe na fírinde do sgriobhadh, agas do dheachtadh, agas do chumdhach. Oir is andsa leis an t-saoghal an bhréag go mór iná an fhírinde.*
>
> *And great is the blindness and darkness of sin and ignorance and of the mind among composers and writers and patrons of Gaelic, in that they prefer and are accustomed to maintain and improve vain, hurtful, lying earthly stories about the Tuatha Dé Danann, and about the sons of Milesius and about the heroes and Fionn mac Cumhaill with his warriors, and about many others whom I do not recount or mention here, with a view obtaining for themselves vain worldly gain, rather than to write and compose and to preserve the very word of God and the perfect ways of truth. For the world loves the lie much more than the truth.*[18]

Carswell is here condemning the professional Gaelic literati and their patrons for maintaining a secular focus for their high-register cultural expressions. Carswell is accusing them, as the role models and 'influencers' of Gaelic society, of distracting the population from the higher goal of their spiritual salvation by continuing to centre false gods and worldly heroes in their works. He implies that

the élite cultivated secular literary traditions in the pursuit of their own interests – suggesting that these texts carried power and prestige – and that this left the work of God neglected.

Some churchmen sounded similar notes of disapproval for the next several centuries, which is hardly surprising. The Tuatha Dé Danann were literary reflexes of the old pagan gods, offering a vision of the ancient Gaelic world rooted in its own soil and language. The tales of the Fianna – the warrior-band led by Fionn mac Cumhaill – were supposed to have been recited by the last surviving member, Ossian, to Saint Patrick when the two men encountered one another. In several Gaelic ballads representing dialogues between them, Patrick attempts to convert Ossian to Christianity, only to be rebuffed by the pagan warrior who prefers the lifestyle and values of the heroic age.

The Fenian warriors function in many ways as oppositional characters in Gaelic tradition, their rejection of Christianity being just one example of their resistance against external impositions. Their associations with paganism, the uncouth, and the undomesticated may have endeared them to many Gaels, but they could also draw the censure of the orthodox and pious.

In a letter that Mr Alexander Pope, minister of Rea, Caithness, wrote to Rev. Alexander Nicholson of Thurso, on 15 November 1763, he mentions that the church had already done much damage to the transmission of these texts in oral tradition in his area: 'Many of them [the Ossianic ballads] are indeed lost, partly owing to our clergy, who were declared enemies to these poems; so that the rising generation scarcely know any thing material of them.'[19]

Pope, however, was himself an example of a counter-current as a church minister who was interested in native tradition and engaged in preserving the remains of the past. He relates that he and another gentleman had taken up transcribing Gaelic materials in about 1739, well before the controversy that erupted after James Macpherson's creative adaptations of Ossianic texts in English were published. Pope observes, with a note of wonder, that Gaels held the communal memory (especially in the form of song-poetry and narrative) of their ancestors in deep reverence.

> *There is an excellent poem, called Duan Dearmot, it is an elegy on the death of that warrior, and breathes the sublime very much. This poem is in esteem*

among a tribe of Campbells that live in this country, and would derive their pedigree from that hero, as other clans have chosen others of them for their patriarchs. There is an old fellow in this parish that very gravely takes off his bonnet as often as he sings Duan Dearmot: I was extremely fond to try if the case was so, and getting him to my house I gave him a bottle of ale, and begged the favour of him to sing Duan Dearmot; after some nicety, he told me that to oblige his parish minister he would do so, but to my surprise he took off his bonnet. I caused him stop, and would put on his bonnet; he made some excuses; however as soon as he began, he took off his bonnet, I rose and put it on; he took it off, I put it on. At last he was like to swear most horribly he would sing none, unless I allowed him to be uncovered; I gave him his freedom, and so he sung with great spirit. I asked him the reason; he told me it was out of regard to the memory of that hero. I asked him if he thought that the spirit of that hero was present; he said not; but he thought it well became them who descended from him to honour his memory.[20]

Oral tradition served to perpetuate the renown of ancestors and heroes who had earned a place of honour. We can also explain, to some degree, the prestige associated with these texts in terms of their cultivation by the learned classes and their performance in aristocratic spaces. In 1779 Rev. Donald MacNicol penned a lengthy refutation of many of the ill-informed comments by Samuel Johnson regarding Gaelic literature. He preserved interesting details about recent or contemporary practices in his rebuke, especially those related to poetry and storytelling. One of the points underscored by MacNicol is that entire communities were engaged in the composition and preservation of texts and their coordinated efforts helped to maintain textual accuracy and high literary standards.

That the Highlanders were not so liable to be imposed upon by the flattering compositions and tales of their Bards and Seannachaies, as our traveller would insinuate, is beyond all dispute. Besides those who were employed in those professions, there were multitudes in the country who spent most of their leisure hours in hearing, recording, and rehearsing the achievements of their ancestors and countrymen.

Among these, there were many who composed poems in a strain equal to the Bards themselves; and such private persons were always a check upon the

> *Bards and Seannachies by profession, to prevent their deviating from the truth.*
>
> *Though the Bards and Seannachies are no longer retained as formerly, this custom in the country is not yet discontinued. I myself, as well as thousands still alive, have seen and heard instances of what I have just now mentioned. […]*
>
> *[…] as to Seannachies from choice, and for the amusement of themselves and friends, they have always existed; and there are several, and those not contemptible ones, both of the better and lower sort of people, still living in the country. It will be enough to shew, from well known facts, that the regular profession of Bard, who occasionally likewise officiated as Seannachie, has not been so long out of fashion. […]*
>
> *[…] nor need we be more surprised, that the race of Bards is now almost extinct, than that we hear no longer of the Harpers, Scialachies (taletellers), and Jesters of former times, or that even the bagpipe itself is approaching to the eve of its last groans. Our great people, like those of other nations, have found out new modes of amusement and expence, which probably, in their turn, will soon give way to others.*
>
> *[…] and as to such pieces of any length as we have in prose, they are the more easily retained, as they generally consist of a variety of episodes, depending on each other, and highly adapted to captivate the fancy. Among the latter kind are our Tales, which are, for the most part, of considerable length, and bear a great resemblance to the Arabian Nights Entertainments. One of those, in particular, is long enough to furnish subject of amusement for several nights running. It is called Scialachd Choise Ce, or Cian O Cathan's Tale; and though Scialachies, or tellers of tales by profession, are not now retained by our great families, as formerly, there are many still living, who can repeat it from end to end, very accurately.*

We can see from his account that by this time the term *seanchaidh*, which had originally referred to someone whose duty was to preserve history and traditional lore of a formal, learned nature, had acquired, to some degree, the meaning 'teller of tales' in a looser sense. The term *sgeulaiche* refers more strictly to someone who told tales primarily for the purposes of entertainment, with the stories understood to be essentially fictional, rather than historical, in nature.

Anecdotes about Gaelic oral tradition can turn up in strange places. Patrick Campbell, who occupied the position of head forester in Mamlorn for some seven years, went to visit British colonies in North America in 1791. Amongst his notes about his travels, he recounted that even more than two centuries after Carswell the peasantry of Argyllshire was much more keen to hear Gaelic folk tales and ballads than they were the orations of their ministers:

> *It was customary in the corner of the country where I was born, when the people assembled on any public occasion, particularly at late-wakes, to place their best historian [seanchaidh] in some conspicuous and centrical place, where he could best be heard in the house, but more frequently in a barn, where the corpse was kept; and after they were tired of playing games and tricks peculiar to that country, in which all the strength, alertness, and dexterity, were exerted to their utmost, the best orator began and continued till day-light, repeating Ossian's poems, and recounting the achievements of his race, which exalted their minds and ideas to perfect enthusiasm. I myself, when a boy, was present on many of these occasions, and I well remember that I never observed a sermon by the greatest devotee, or any other discourse, picked up with half the avidity that the young people did these poems; and I have different times gone on a Saturday evening from school eight or ten miles off, to a friend's house to hear them repeated, and to learn them.*[21]

The expansion of church-sponsored schools in the Highlands, the publication of religious tracts in Gaelic, and the subsequent increase in literacy in Gaelic opened the door to a wider diversity of print culture in the nineteenth century, including periodicals. Some of these occasionally featured traditional tales often relating to clan history. A native of Ardgour sent such a story to the editor of the periodical *An Teachdaire Ùr Gàidhealach* in 1836, prefaced by the following letter:

> *Lasaidh mo chridhe fhathast le sòlas nuair a chuimhnicheas mi air cleachdaidhean agus gnàths nam beann. Có neach a thogadh anns a' Ghàidhealtachd nach d 'fhiosraich an tùs òige, an deòthas inntinn leis an éisdeadh sgeòil nan Gael agus eachdraidh na Féinne. Cha dì-chuimhnich mi ri m 'bheò an toil-inntinn leis an éisdinn ri seanchas nan aosda nuair a labhradh iad mu euchd nan laoch bho'n d'thàinig iad. 'S cinnteach mi gun do chuidich seo ri clanna nan Gael a thogail suas ann am barrachd buaidh os ceann gach sluaigh anns an domhan – mar a bha am beachd air àrdachadh le bhith*

cluinntinn cliù agus treuntas an sinnsear a ghnà 'ga luaidh – le bhith 'ga dheothal mar gu'm b 'ann le bainne 'me màthar agus a 'fàs 'nan cridheachan le neart, mar a bha 'na cuirp a 'cinntinn. 'S neònach le cuid gun cùmt 'air chuimhne bho linn gu linn nithibh a thachair bho chionn na ciadaibh bliadhna, ach iadsan a dh'fhiosraich an rùn cridhe leis an éisd an Gàidheal ri seanachas mu chinneadh, chan ioghnadh leò mar a chumadh air chuimhne iad. Tha na sgeòil ris an d'éisd mi 'smi air glùn m 'athar fhathast cho soilleir a'm inntinn 's a bha iad an uair a chuala mi iad 's a-chaoidh cha téid iad air dì-chuimhne gus am fuaraich mo chom. 'Sann do na sgeòil is tric a dh'éisd mi le togradh, an sgial a leanas, agus a tha phaipear mar a-nis air dh'iunnsaich mi a'm òige e o bhial nan sean'ear.[22]

My heart still blazes with joy when I remember the traditions and customs of the Highlands. What person, who was raised in a Gaelic community, did not experience in their early youth the mental exhilaration with which tales of the Gaels and the adventures of the Fianna are listened. I will never forget for as long as I live the enjoyment with which I listened to the lore of the old people when they would speak about the exploits of the warriors from whom they were descended. I'm sure that this enabled the Gaels to be endowed with qualities superior to other people of the world – since their ideas were elevated by constantly hearing references to the fame and excellence of their ancestors – by drinking it as though with their mother's milk and growing in their hearts with strength, as their bodies were developing. Some think that it is strange that things are remembered from generation to generation that happened centuries ago, but those who have experienced the passion with which the Gael will listen to lore about his people, they will not be surprised that they are remembered. The tales to which I listened when I was on my father's knee are still as clear in my mind as when I first heard them and I will never forget them until my body grows cold. The tale that follows is one of those to which I often listened with passion, and is now on paper as I learned it in my youth from the mouths of the elders.

This contributor tells us that he has created a faithful textual record for posterity, but his recollections are full of emotions fueled by the personal relationships and interactions that are an inherent aspect of orality. It seems to me that he is implying that those experiences were not something that could be captured on

paper. Storytelling was more than an intellectual exercise: it was something lived and felt, a form of nourishment, affection and companionship, which of course connects well with the word *céilidh* and its many uses.

The idea that vernacular oral tradition is a life-sustaining force[23] is made explicit in the field notes of James Cumming in 1857, working on behalf of Rev. Dr. Thomas MacLauchlan in Edinburgh. Cumming noted of his informant Alasdair Mór in Tiree:

> *He was about 100 years old when he died; till his last illness he delighted much in reciting the songs and sgeulachd chronicles of Oissian [sic] and less ancient persons. He stated that this same old man prefaced a song or a sgeulachd with an introduction, pointing out the various persons who from age to age had handed it down for at least 3 or 4 centuries; that he delighted as much in reciting these things as that no business or condition of life would be laid aside whenever a willing ear was found to listen.*[24]

Oral tradition was of prime concern in the life of this man, and others like him. It is an important protocol of Gaelic oral tradition that the line of transmission be preserved along with the text itself, similar to a genealogical lineage. This convention aids in making explicit the social nature of orality and commemorates those responsible for feeding the carrying stream of tradition.

The floodgates of information about storytelling and storytellers open up in 1859 with John Francis Campbell's efforts to collaborate with a team of fieldworkers across the west of the Gàidhealtachd, from Islay to Lewis. Hector MacLean, the parish schoolmaster at Ballygrant in Islay, travelled widely and commented on the psychological effects of the tradition and its performance in the community:

> *During the recitation of these tales, the emotions of the reciters are occasionally very strongly excited, and so also are those of the listeners, almost shedding tears at one time, and giving way to loud laughter at another. A good many of them firmly believe in all the extravagance of these stories.*
>
> *They speak of the Ossianic heroes with as much feeling, sympathy, and belief in their existence and reality as the readers of the newspapers do […]*
>
> *In North Uist and Harris these tales are nearly gone, and this, I believe, to be*

> *owing partly to reading, which in a manner supplies a substitute for them, partly to bigoted religious ideas, and partly to narrow utilitarian views.*[25]

Indeed, Campell launched his efforts not a moment too soon, for his fieldwork notes are replete with observations about the damage done, and being done, to the storytelling tradition. He summarised the contemporary state of matters in the Introduction to *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, indicating the inexorable strangulation of the secular verbal arts:

> *Men and women of all ages could and did tell me stories, children of all sizes listened to them; and it was self-evident that people generally knew and enjoyed them. Elsewhere I had been told, that thirty or forty years ago, men used to congregate and tell stories; here, I was told, that they now spend whole winter nights about the fire listening to these old world tales. The clergy, in some places, had condemned the practice, and there it had fallen into disuse; stories seemed to be almost exterminated in some islands, though I believe they were only buried alive; but in other places this harmless amusement is not forbidden; and there, in every cluster of houses, is some one man famed as "good at sgialachdan," whose house is a winter evening's resort. I visited these, and listened, often with wonder, at the extraordinary power of memory shown by untaught old men.*[26]

Amongst the anecdotes about experiences collecting texts in the field that Campbell included in the volume is the story of a man living in a community where religious extremism had taken a jealously exclusive hold on people's minds. This man had recited folktales to Campbell but was terrified about the consequences of being condemned by his peers for perpetrating the 'lies' of folktales, rather than the 'Gospel truth'. The emotional power of storytelling has here been weaponised against its erstwhile champions:

> *Certain persons, in a place which I abstain from naming, were so zealous in the cause of "truth," that they assured a simple old man who had repeated a number of stories to one of my collectors, that he would have to substantiate every word he had uttered, or suffer punishment for telling falsehoods. I found him in great perturbation, evidently expecting that I had arrived for the purpose of calling him to account, and I had some trouble in setting his mind at*

rest. He repeatedly assured me that he only told what others had told him. In this instance, as it seems to me, "truth" might well say, "keep me from my friends."[27]

It is perhaps remarkable that some Gaels were willing to defy these social pressures from peers and authorities and remain dedicated to their ancestral traditions. Some were dedicated to specific genres within the wider repertoire of the Gaelic verbal arts. Alexander Carmichael, one of the most passionate and steadfast fieldworkers to have come out of Campbell's enterprise, wrote a description in 1866 of one of such tradition-bearer: Eachann mac Ruaraidh (*c*. 1797–1878, 'Hector MacIsaac') from Ìochdar, South Uist. A carpenter by day, he strongly preferred the archaistic Fenian cycle of traditions, many of which were closely tied to the high status of the professional Gaelic literary classes.

Hector MacIosag despises mythological tales and says they are great rubbish in which I fear many men of greater pretention [sic] will concur. But of the Fingalians tales he declares them to be worthy [of] the attention of princes – that they are the most elegant excellent and delightful tales that man could listen to. He says that he heard tales read as repeated by persons whom he knows and that the tales were so garbled and mangled that he hung down his head and closed his ears for very shame. He declares that When [he] is done planting his potatoes he will travel over the F[ord]– a dis[tance] of about 26 m[iles]. – to give me a proper opp[ortunity] of taking down every word he has before he dies. He says he he [sic] [has] neither son nor dau[ghter] except one little girl to whom he can leave his legacy of prose and poetry. And as he likes me better than any other person in the world he is desirous I should become poss[essor] of this invaluable legacy. Ind[eed] he considers it an imper[tinence] that his young daug[hter] does not exhibit a wish to become poss[essor] of these tales of the Fein[n]e in prose and poetry. He dec[lares] that there is no man from the Butt of Lewis to Barra Head – 200 m[iles] – who has the history of the Fing[alians] so well as he. Re[citers] are the most egotistical set I have ever met. Each thinks himself much better than his neigh[bour] in reciting. Each declares that other re[citers] are only garbling the tales. Ruarai Ruadh from whom E[achann] MacIosaig learnt his tales died about 40 y[ears] ago – about 80 years of age. A gentleman came from Edin[burgh] to take down from him. He remained several weeks from writing from his dictation. For excelling so

> *much in this L[ord] MacDon[ald] generously gave him a house and piece of land free of rent and this he enjoyed while he lived. Proba[bly] he was the last Ga[elic?] reciter who enjoyed free lands for his an[cient] lore. He was a catechist and used to go about catechising but in the reality his audiences were more partial to his old lore than to better talk. And truth to say we believe the old man took more delight in reciting and expounding the Fing[alian] tales and poems than those of the Bible.*[28]

Storytelling must have enjoyed residual social prestige for such intense rivalries to continue to flare up. The croft granted by Lord MacDonald to Ruaraidh Ruadh on account of his virtuosity as a *sgeulaiche* – probably the last instance of such an arrangement in the Gaelic world – must have helped to perpetuate these cultural values in the locality. Eachann displays disappointment and frustration with his daughter, however, his sole progeny, who has declined to carry on his folklore legacy. Carmichael seems to be pleased to have been anointed as a worthy custodian of his materials which, as we have seen before, was a greater crowd-pleaser than the Scriptures – at least amongst those not yet swept up by evangelicalism.

John Francis Campbell continued to visit tradition bearers and collect texts from them after his four-volume magnus opus was complete: he seemed to enjoy their company and their store of *seanchas*. His personal journal records a *céilidh* in South Uist in 1870:

> *I spent the whole of a very fine day with three old men, one would have sufficed for a week. They flooded me with knowledge. I flooded them with drink and added coin – we were mutually pleased … I cannot convey to anybody who has not experienced [it] the extraordinary mass of stuff which is stored up in these old Highland minds.*[29]

John Gregorson Campbell was another Gaelic ethnographer, working independently of John Francis Campbell, although inspired by him and in communication with him. John G was a native of Appin who became a Church of Scotland minister stationed primarily on the island of Tiree. He wrote glowingly of the mental endowments of the people with whom he worked, regardless of their social class, as demonstrated by these excerpts:

The writer has thankfully to acknowledge, and he cannot but remember with pleasure, the readiness and courtesy, and in very many cases the great intelligence with which his inquiries have been answered. Some of his informants have shown a quickness and retentiveness of memory which he could not but envy, and an appreciation of, and an acquaintance with, ancient lore that seemed to him to indicate in those who were strangers to the world of letters powers of mind of a high order. […]

This story was written as it was told by Donald Cameron, a native of Tiree, in the year 1865. Many other tales (Sgeulachdan) and songs (òrain) were taken down from him at the time, and the writer cannot but express his admiration of Cameron, as the best reciter he has ever fallen in with.

This tale was written down as it was told by Donald Cameron, Rùdhaig, Tiree, more than twenty-five years ago, and to whose happy and retentive gift of memory it is a pleasure to recur. He had a most extensive stock of old lore, and along with it much readiness and willingness to communicate what he knew. […Cameron was] in the lower rank of life: he had been at one time a crofter or small farmer, but was made a cotter, i.e., one without any land, not through any fault of his own, but from an idea that the land would be better in larger holdings.[30]

A few of the folktales collected by the aforementioned scholars during this period of intensive fieldwork comment obliquely on the significance and import of oral tradition. One of the more interesting of these is 'Bàillidh Lunnainn' ('*The Provost of London*'), transcribed in Gaelic by Donald Torrie from Donald MacIntyre of Benbecula in 1860.[31] The protagonist vindicates the natural intelligence of Highlanders against the presumed superiority of formally educated Englishmen, even those trained in such famous centres of learning as Cambridge. Two episodes from the tale are particularly relevant:

Ràinig e Sasuinn agas chaidh e a steach gu baile Lunnainn, agus air an rathad, thachair duine-uasal de mhuinntir Chambridge ris, agus air an turus, shil uisge trom, agus ghearain an Sasunnach gu'n robh e 'ga fhliuchadh.

Ars an Gàidheal: "Nam biodh do thigh féin mu d' cheann, chan éireadh sin duit!"

“Amadain!” ars an Sasunnach, “na cluinneadh duine thu ag ràdh a leithid sin de chainnt gun tùr.”

Chaidh iad air aghart, agus air dhoibh bhi dol seachad air abhuinn, ghearain an Sasunnach gu’n robh an abhuinn domhain.

“Nam biodh do dhrochaid thogalach agadsa, gheabhadh tu tioram thairis oirre!” ars an Gàidheal.

“Chan’eil annad ach am fìor amadan,” ars an Sasunnach.

Ghabh iad air an aghaidh, agus an uair a bha iad gu dealachadh, ghearain an Sasunnach gu’n robh an t-acras air.

“Nam biodh,” ars an Gàidheal, “t’ athair agus do mhàthair air do ghiùlan, cha bhiodh thu mar sin.”

“A dhuine gun tuigse,” arsa an Sasunnach, “cia mar a dhèanainn-sa sin; ach théid mi a stigh do’n tavern so, agus caisgidh mi m’ acras.” […]

An uair a chaidh e do thigh a’ Phrobhaisd, thachair gu’n robh e féin [am Probhaisd] agus an Sasunnach o Chambridge an còmhradh. Dh’innis e dha an seanachas a ghabh àite eadar e féin agus Gàidheal òg a bha ’tighinn a stigh do’n bhaile maille ris, a mhìos gus a nochd.

“Ma tha,” ars am Probhaisd, “is e a tha ’na amadan thu féin, is chan e an Gàidheal; b’ fheàrr leamsa gu’m faicinn e. Is e sin duine cho glic is a chuala mi riamh. Is e bha e ’ciallachadh leis an tigh, an carbad bu chòir a bhi agad; agus leis an drochaid thogalaich, an t-each-dialta bu chòir a bhi agad; agus le t’ athair agus do mhàthair a bhi ’nad bhroinn, am biadh agus an deoch bu chòir a bhi agad.”[32]

He arrived in England and he went to the city of London, and on the way, he met one of the noblemen of Cambridge, and on the journey, there was a heavy rain, and the Englishman complained that he was getting wet.

The Gael said, “If you had your own house around you, that would not happen to you!”

“You idiot!” said the Englishman. “May no-one hear you using that kind of

senseless talk."

They proceeded, and after they went past a river, the Englishman said that the river was deep.

"If you had your raised bridge with you, you could cross over it dry!" said the Gael.

"You are nothing but a complete idiot," said the Englishman. They proceeded, and when they were parting, the Englishman complained that he was hungry.

"If your father and your mother," said the Gael, "had carried you, you wouldn't be like that."

"O you senseless man," said the Englishman, "how would I do that? But I'm going to go into this tavern, and I'll satisfy my hunger." […]

When he went to the house of the Provost, it happened that he and the Englishman from Cambridge were talking to each other. He told him a story about what took place between himself and a young Gael who was coming into the city along with him a month ago that night.

"Well," said the Provost, "it is you who is the idiot, and not the Gael: I wish I had seen him. That's the wisest man I've ever heard of. What he was referring to as 'the house' is the buggy that you ought to have; 'the raised bridge' means the saddled horse that you ought to have; and by 'your mother and father in you' he meant the food and drink that you ought to have."

The Cambridge scholar was confounded by exactly the kinds of ambiguous imagery featured regularly in the riddles of the *céilidh* house. This tale satires the self-importance of the anglophone world and the negative stereotypes of backwards and ignorant Gaels of which they must have been very aware. Through the sharpness of his wits, the Highland protagonist of the tale marries the bride that the Englishman thought he had procured for himself. The Gael is also a much more likeable, chivalrous, and sympathetic character than the Englishman in the tale – virtues that were commended in such folktales.

This brief exploration of some of the documents produced by and about those involved in Gaelic storytelling attest to its prominent role in Highland culture and

identity. People who were adept storytellers enjoyed social distinction and cachet. Storytelling exercised minds, kept memories active, and immortalised the paragons of the past. Audiences were active participants in keeping narratives accurate in their community. Through constant engagement with the verbal arts, Gaels honed their skills as literary artists and critics. Storytelling gave expression to Gaelic verbal aesthetics and artistry. It was not just a cerebral activity but carried with it emotional associations with the people from whom the narratives were heard and those with whom the tales were shared. Above and beyond these qualities, storytelling was the vehicle for the cultural touchstones, collective memories, and worldview of Gaels for countless generations. It served as a form of currency in constant circulation that was considered, at least by some, to be ‘better than gold’.

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