

Dipping into the Well: Scottish Oral Tradition Online

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Scotland has a long history of collecting material from its oral traditions as illustrated by the various manuscripts and publications of songs, tales, and verse that have appeared from the sixteenth century onwards in the languages of Gaelic, Scots, and English. For a small country, Scotland's influence has stretched widely, particularly from the 1760s onwards with the publication of MacPherson's *Ossian*, a literary creation in English drawing on oral tradition from Gaelic-speaking Badenoch. The text was seminal to the European Romantic movement and the antiquarianism of that and the following centuries, and there has been much debate as to its "authenticity," which continues even to the present day. Collectors in Scotland have come from all walks of life, from aristocrats and landed gentry such as Lady Evelyn Stewart Murray (1868-1940), sister of the Duke of Atholl, who collected Gaelic tales from people working on the family estate in Perthshire,¹ to those born into much poorer circumstances such as Robert Burns (1759-1796), son of a tenant farmer, who collected material for the *Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803), songs and airs that attracted the interest of composers such as Haydn and Beethoven. Most of the collectors, though, appear to have been from the "professional" classes, principally teachers and preachers. They were literate and therefore able to create texts of the oral material, and their roles gave them access as "insider-outsiders" to the communities in which they were located.

Verse and song were the primary interests in the early period, and in Gaelic these are virtually interchangeable. But by the nineteenth century the field had opened up, and tales, customs, and beliefs began to feature more strongly. During this century there was also a growing awareness of presentation and the uses to which the material could be put. Whose account was presented? John Francis Campbell of Islay (1822-1885), who collected Gaelic tales, was a strong advocate of verbatim transcription and publication. In his introduction to *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, in which he discusses the new science of "storyology," he indicates (1890:iii):

. . . it seemed to me as barbarous to "polish" a genuine popular tale, as it would be to adorn the bones of a Megatherium with tinsel, or gild a rare old copper coin. . . . [S]tories orally collected can only be valuable if given unaltered. . . .

¹ The manuscripts are held in the School of Scottish Studies Archives and were published in 2009 as *Tales from Highland Perthshire Collected by Lady Evelyn Stewart Murray* (Robertson and Dilworth 2009).

He worked with a team that included John Dewar, a laborer, Hector Urquhart, a gamekeeper, and Hector MacLean, a schoolmaster. Campbell would make spot checks of their transcriptions by comparing them with the original sources to see how accurate they were. The tales were published as transcribed.



Image 1. Lachlan MacNeill, John Francis Campbell, and Hector MacLean, Islay, 1870 (School of Scottish Studies Archives).

Other individuals, while taking what appear to be relatively accurate transcriptions, published quite different versions. For example, Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912), author of *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of Gaelic folklore, would sometimes make a collation from several original oral sources. Often these re-renderings would be done in the literary language of the time—moving ever further from the verbatim account.

The beginning of the twentieth century brought the use of sound recording equipment for the purpose of collecting. Gaelic songs were the main focus, with recordings made from 1907 onwards by Rudolf Trebitsch (1876-1918), an Austrian ethnologist; Lucy Broadwood (1858-1929), who was much involved in the Folk Song Society in England and worked in Arisaig; and Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857-1930) from Perth, who collected in the Hebrides.

While it appears that Trebitsch was interested in “rescue ethnology,” particularly in relation to endangered languages, Kennedy-Fraser was concerned not with the material *per se*, but with re-creating it in the form of “artsongs.” She would revamp the airs according to a western mode and use, to our ears, sometimes rather florid translations of the Gaelic originals, publishing these as *Songs of the Hebrides* and performing the songs around the world. During the 1920s and early 1930s James Maddison Carpenter (1888-1983) visited from the United States with his Dicataphone cylinder machine, recording traditional Scots songs and customs. Later in the 1930s and 1940s Margaret Fay Shaw (1903-2004) and John Lorne Campbell of Canna (1906-1996) were active in collecting songs and tales from the islands to the west of Scotland, mainly the Uists and Barra. Using the media of wax, wire, and disc, Campbell was conscious of the value of the oral tradition and published textual material and sound recordings from the original contributor more or less as they stood.

While there was a lot of activity, collectors operated as individuals rather than through any institution. The impetus for the establishment of an institute focusing on collecting and researching oral tradition came from various sources. With the end of the Second World War, there was great dialog and debate regarding the nation’s identity. Interest in Scotland’s oral tradition led to the setting up of the Folklore Institute in 1947 by John Lorne Campbell and others. In 1949 Angus McIntosh, Forbes Professor of English Language and General Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh, set up the Linguistic Survey of Scotland. McIntosh had worked during the war on code-breaking activities in Bletchley Park and welcomed the opportunities provided by the new technology of the time, the open reel recorder, soon to take over from wax cylinder, wire, and disc. His specialist subject area was dialectology, and he was keen to widen the context of his work through the collection of “natural speech” in context rather than focusing entirely on phonetic transcription of word lists. There was an international impetus, too. Ireland and Scandinavia had much in common both linguistically and in terms of folklore with Scotland, and were keen to foster links. James Hamilton Delargy, Head of the Irish Folklore Commission established by the Irish government in 1935, and Dag Strömbäck of the Institute for Dialect and Folklore Research in Uppsala, Sweden, founded in 1914, expressed strong support for having an institute that, so to speak, straddled the Norse and Celtic worlds.

With this support, the School of Scottish Studies was established in 1951 at the University of Edinburgh as a research institute concerned with what was then termed “folklore” and “folk life.” Stewart Sanderson, the first archivist, described the area of study as follows (1957:6):

The study of folklore is, in fact, the study of a certain kind of history; the intimate domestic history of a people. History is not just a matter of kings and queens, battles and treaties, statesmen and parliaments, these are certainly important, moving as they do in splendid and colourful succession into the highlights of time; but they play their part against a more enduring background. Behind them and around them lies the less spectacular but more lasting history of a people’s beliefs and customs, notions of right and wrong, good and evil, luck and ill-luck, happiness and sorrow, songs and stories, facts and fancies—all the common places which make up the intricately patterned fabric of our environment. It is this kind of history with which the student

of folklore is concerned. . . . The study of folklore begins with the individual and his local and personal heritage of tradition.

This seems a good description of the kind of material collected for the School, though nowadays we might use terms such as “ethnology” and “traditional arts”—there have been various debates regarding nomenclature over the years. Researchers were employed according to their special area of interest: song, music, oral narrative, place-names, customs and beliefs, social organization, and material culture. The first fieldworker, Calum Maclean, dispatched from the Irish Folklore Commission, spent time in Uppsala learning about their archiving and indexing techniques, so there was a continuum of classification between the three archives. Maclean, a native of Raasay, an island off Skye, was himself descended from a family of tradition bearers, and his brother, Sorley, became a celebrated modern Gaelic poet. He was closely followed by Francis Collinson, a composer and musicologist who had worked with the BBC, and Hamish Henderson, who had seen war service in North Africa and Italy and had published a prize-winning collection of poetry based on his experiences. He later became known as the “father” of the folk revival in Scotland. In the summer of 1951, Maclean and Henderson escorted American song hunter, Alan Lomax, around Scotland on his mission to create and publish a library of world folk music.

The early expeditions from the School might be described as “rescue ethnology” in the sense that they focused on rural areas, farming, fishing, and crofting communities where, due to the sweeping changes after the war, local traditions and dialects were dying out. It should be pointed out, though, that over the centuries many collectors of oral tradition have done such work, confident that they are collecting the last gasps of a dying culture.



Image 2. Angus MacNeil and Calum Maclean, Smearisary, 1959. Photo by Ian Whitaker (School of Scottish Studies Archives).

Fieldworkers made recordings in people’s homes, at ceilidhs, and sometimes, literally, out in the fields, building up a collection of some 12,500 tapes. In the early days, the School had decided to make the original audio rather than written transcription the main resource, a practice made possible by the innovation of open reel tape that was cheaper and more stable than earlier formats. With the unembellished voices of the contributors as the primary record, the integrity and authenticity of the original voice is unquestionable. Transcription is, by its nature, subjective. It always takes on a flavor of the transcriber, and written forms cannot convey the aesthetic or emotional expression of the voice. Preservation of the original sound recordings is an invaluable historical record; the archive becomes evidence, inviolate to literary tinkering. Of course, debates as to original sources of the actual material remain—whether, for example, a particular heroic ballad may have been transmitted solely through the oral tradition or has, at some point, re-entered it via textual intervention.

The subject matter of the sound archive covers all aspects of cultural life and the traditional arts, with much of the material in Gaelic and Scots. There is a good-sized collection of

tales and stories, including a notable contribution from Scottish Travellers. There are heroic narratives (some of which have been transmitted orally from medieval times), wonder tales, migratory legends, supernatural stories, and accounts of historical events and clan battles, as well as local tales and anecdotes, often humorous, from various communities, celebrating local individuals and events. Accounts of traditional life include information about work and home from the beginning of the twentieth century: farm servants' lives, the herring industry, fowling, fishing, house construction, furnishings, food, recipes, herbal cures, weather lore, Hogmanay, Halloween customs, Galoshins (a folk play), birth and marriage traditions, charms, blessings, the agricultural year, and the rhymes, proverbs, and sayings that are part of the rituals of sowing and harvesting. In recent years there has been a move away from "rescue" collecting toward the ethnology of contemporary life in Scotland. Studies include storytelling contexts, the heritage industry, Internet use, neo-paganism, the re-invention of tradition, Beltane ceremonies, clubbing, Goth culture, and divination using soda cans. Much of this work has been undertaken by students of Scottish Studies and Scottish Ethnology who are trained, as part of their studies, in fieldwork techniques.

The archive holds thousands of traditional songs in Scots and in Gaelic. These include waulking songs, *puirt-a-beul* (mouth music), laments, lullabies, work songs, political songs, bothy songs, sea songs, emigrant songs, nursery rhymes, children's games, *muckle sangs* (the great narrative ballads), and love songs. Many of these songs also appear in manuscripts compiled over the past couple of centuries, thus allowing opportunities for comparative and longitudinal work. From musicians there is a large repertoire of pipe and fiddle music and contributions from jaw harp, clarsach, and whistle, as well as ceilidh and dance bands.

The fieldwork collection includes recordings from the Gaelic and Scots Linguistic Surveys of Scotland and from the Scottish Place-Name Survey, which uses maps along with tapes for documenting the pronunciation and lore of places. Additional donated material includes oral history projects and published recordings of music and song from individual collectors. There is a small film and video archive featuring storytellers, singers, and traditional crafts such as basket-weaving, thatching, and stilt-making. The photographic archive focuses on ethnological fieldwork, with thousands of images, including significant collections from Robert Atkinson (1915-1995) and Werner Kissling (1895-1988). The manuscript archive contains many items drawn from oral tradition, and the ethnographic research library has built up a considerable collection of published resources serving to contextualize the fieldwork collections.

Over the past sixty years, technology has changed considerably from the cumbersome open reel, weighing almost as much as a sack of coal, to pocket-sized digital recorders. The recordings have been carefully stewarded and, in recent years, stored in environmentally controlled conditions. However, tapes do not last forever, and each generation of an analog recording is of poorer quality than the last. Preservation is a central aspect of archive work. So too is enabling access—a process that encompasses such tasks as the creation of mechanisms by which users can search for and listen to material. There are many visitors to the archive, including scholars, students, singers, musicians, storytellers, historians, teachers, and broadcasters. Material is especially important to the relations and communities of those recorded. However, the archive is situated in Edinburgh, well away from the areas in which most of the collections were made. The School has attempted to make the material as accessible as possible,

and publication strands include the *Scottish Tradition* series of audio recordings now published through Greentrax and *Tocher*, a journal that contains transcriptions and translations of archive material. In the 1990s a small prototype website was developed, one of the very first audio online resources, entitled PEARL (Providing Ethnological Access for Research and Learning) in which written transcriptions from *Tocher* were linked to the original audio (<http://www.pearl.arts.ed.ac.uk>). Voices were digitized and made accessible to all. This website provided proof of concept for a larger project conceived towards the end of the decade. The project, entitled *Tobar an Dualchais* (“Well of Heritage”) in Gaelic and *Kist o Riches* in Scots, incorporates three archives—the School of Scottish Studies; the National Trust for Scotland’s Campbell of Canna Collection, Gaelic songs, and tales collected by John Lorne Campbell in the Hebrides and Nova Scotia from the 1930s onwards; and complementary material from BBC Alba, the Gaelic radio archive (<http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk> and <http://www.kistoriches.co.uk>).

The project was administered through Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic medium college that is part of the University of the Highlands and Islands, and the remit of the project, which commenced in 2006, was to digitize 12,000 hours of material and create online access. The development of databases and a website was undertaken by EDINA at the University of Edinburgh. Funding came mainly from the Heritage Lottery Fund matched by a combination of other sources including local authorities, the University of Edinburgh, the Scottish Executive, and the European Regional Development Fund.

Preservation has been a very important aspect of the project. Though the School of Scottish Studies houses tapes according to the recommended environmental conditions—cold and dry—they deteriorate much more quickly than paper. Digitization enables the material to be transferred to another medium that can be managed and migrated as appropriate without further loss of quality. The variety of formats requiring digitization have included wax cylinder, wire, disc, many hours of open reel tapes, and the more recently used DAT and Minidisc.

Specialists were employed to deal with the obsolete formats and two digitization centres were set up to work with tapes, one on the island of South Uist and another in the School of Scottish Studies Archives in Edinburgh.

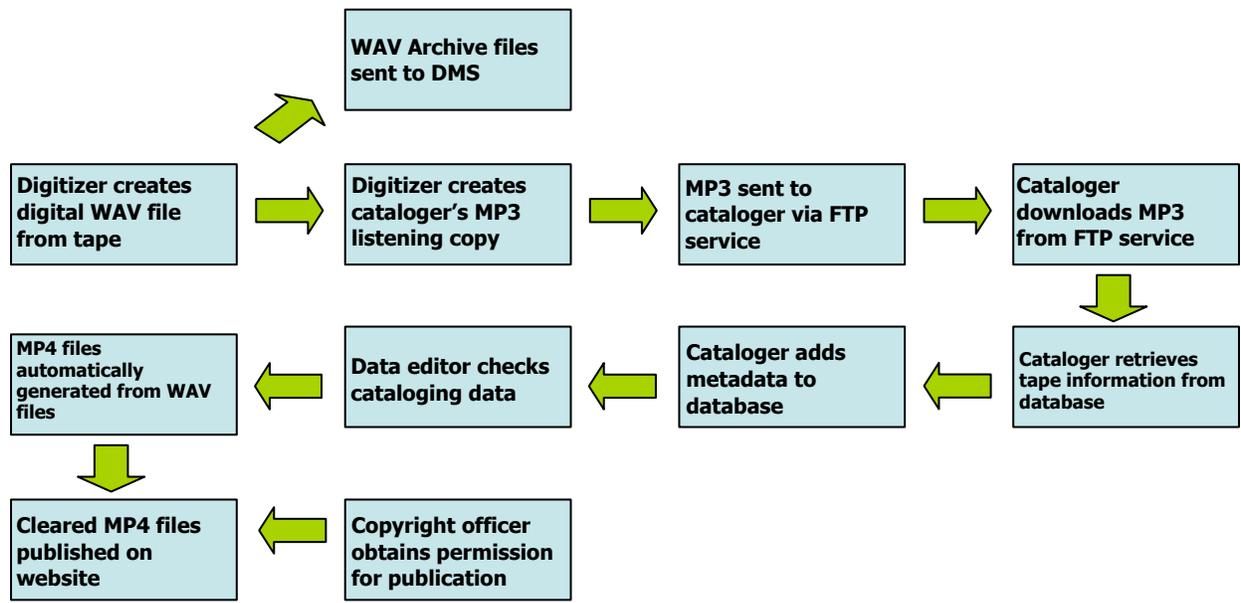


Diagram 1. Tobar an Dualchais: Process of digitization

Digitizers created high resolution WAV files (96kHz, 24-bit) to the international standard defined by IASA (International Association of Sound and Audio-Visual Archives). These archival files are now preserved in a digital mass storage system at the University of Edinburgh. MP3 copies of the files were created for access purposes—these were used in the creation of the online resource and are now used in-house in the archive search room where a streaming facility has subsequently been developed. Prior to this conversion, visitors had to use open reel tape recorders.

Digitization was a fairly straightforward process once procedures had been put in place. Cataloging the material for online access has been much more complex. One of the primary roles of the project was to create work in rural areas where economic and employment opportunities have been limited, and it is also important in archival terms that the material is cataloged by those who have some knowledge of the content or the community from which it originates. Many of the practices described no longer exist, and there are songs, tunes, and tales that may not have been heard for decades. The use of Scots and Gaelic has also diminished since the material was originally recorded. In the end, some thirty catalogers have been employed on a part-time basis during the course of the project. Selected for their expertise, they included Gaelic and Scots singers and musicians as well as those with knowledge of local history and dialect. Catalogers worked at home and were spread throughout the country. Everything was dealt with electronically—each cataloger using a laptop to receive and generate material. They accessed MP3 files through a web-based browser, tracking the audio and adding metadata about the content to a custom-built database. MP4 tracks were cut for public use on the Internet according to the timings supplied by the catalogers, and descriptive metadata was checked and proofread by a data editor before publication could be authorized.

The descriptive metadata for each item includes information on duration, the contributor, the fieldworker, and the date of recording. Details of place include parish, county, and township,

enabling material to be compared with other historical records, for example, parish records and the Statistical Accounts of Scotland. Details on the subject matter include genre, a summary of content, and subject classification. Gaelic material was cataloged and summarized in both English and Gaelic. Scots and English material was cataloged only in English, though index keywords may be applied bilingually, thus enabling English or Scots material to be searched through Gaelic.

Classification of subject matter has proven challenging. There has been a great cultural shift since the 1950s. Many of the ways of life described in the recordings are no longer familiar to people—words referring to particular ways of doing things have been lost or have taken on new meanings. As befits an ethnological archive, much of the material is particular to the culture, and general classification schemes such as Library of Congress subject descriptions are, in their attempt at universality, too broad. Specialist, subject-based thesauri can be too specific or technical. The main aim of the project has been to produce an educational resource. The website has to reach out to children and those who, though Internet savvy, are not used to searching for material in archives. To this end, an in-house classification that reflects the material was prepared, and a general browsing menu was developed along with an index of key terms.

The use of a bilingual interface is one of the most innovative aspects of this project, enabling the “voice” in its broadest sense to take primacy—but it has proven challenging. There are conceptual differences and nuances between Gaelic and English such that direct translation is a difficult, sometimes impossible, process. Differences in word order mean that there may be a different emphasis in compound terms, and spellings in Gaelic vary according to relation. In addition Gaelic has pronounced dialectal differences and has undergone orthographic modification twice over the last thirty years—searchers will sometimes have differing notions as regards meaning and spelling of individual terms. There was a question as to whether the website should be trilingual to encompass Scots as well. However, debate around what constitutes Scots is ongoing. It too has distinctive dialectal differences, but because there is no written standard, it would be impossible to create a list of terms that was both comprehensible and accommodating of every dialect.² Understanding and cataloging the material could be quite difficult, hence the value of using catalogers with some expertise in the subject matter, locality, and language used. Ultimately, of course, the voice is the primary source material and cataloging a means of finding it rather than interpreting it.

Another hurdle has been that of copyright. When the bulk of the material was collected, it was done for research purposes. There was no anticipation that the World Wide Web would ever exist, and copyright law at that time was not nearly as rigorous as it is now. While the archive holds copyright on recordings made by its fieldworkers, the contributor generally still holds copyright on their own words. For the purposes of the project, dedicated copyright officers were employed to track down the contributors. Finding individuals who gave material some fifty years ago or, as is often the case, their next of kin is extremely time consuming and sometimes impossible. There are interesting ethical issues, too. Much of the material given to the archive may be regarded as “community” heritage or knowledge rather than as belonging to one

² For a history of Scots see Macafee 2003 and Aitken 1985. Further information on issues to do with the language can be found in Corbett et al. 2003, on the Scots Language Centre website (<http://www.scotslanguage.com>), and through the Dictionary of the Scots Language website (<http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>).

individual, yet it is the individual contributor who is regarded as the “owner.”³ Should access to material be prohibited because the legal owner cannot be traced? On the other hand, none of the individuals who contributed could have expected their performance to be accessible so far from their own community, potentially to millions of people they did not know and would never meet. It seems fair that this re-purposing should involve informed consent, as Donald Archie MacDonald pointed out (1972:426):

These men and women who have given so freely of their time, their enthusiasm, and their unique and remarkable artistry and scholarship seem to me entitled to the same sort of consideration, courtesy, and respect as the literary artist and scholar anywhere.

Once the material had been digitized, cataloged, and copyright cleared, MP4 tracks were cut from the archived WAV files according to the timings determined by the catalogers, and the individual items were published online with linked metadata. There are thousands of items now available on the *Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches* website, though this as yet represents only a fraction of the material held in the School of Scottish Studies Archives. However, this selection allows access to material from anywhere in the world and provides a tremendous resource for scholars of oral traditions. It will encourage comparative research on oral and textual varieties of the various genres, enable international research on tales and customs, give voice and music to songs hitherto available only in print, allow linguists access to particular features of moribund dialects of Scots and Gaelic, and so forth. The uses are endless both in terms of international and comparative scholarship, and for more localized research into transmission, repertoires, and styles of music, songs, and storytelling of individual contributors or communities. Further material on all topics is available from the archive itself.

³ “Ownership” of folklore and oral tradition as well as notions of “collective” as opposed to individual origination are topics of much debate, particularly as concerns intellectual property rights. Hafstein (2004) suggests that, rather than dichotomize “communal” and “privatized” knowledge, the notion of origins/originality inherent in rights relating to intellectual property should focus on the act of creation which is always a social act involving transformation of previous knowledge, “communal origination through individual re-creation” (310).



Image 3: St Kilda. Village Bay, Oiseabhal and Conachair. Photo by Robert Atkinson, 1938 (School of Scottish Studies Archives).

As an example of the kinds of material available on the website, I include a taster from St Kilda, a small archipelago located around forty miles off the Western Isles of Scotland.⁴ 2010 marked the eightieth anniversary of its evacuation, undertaken at the request of its people, numbering only 36 by 1930, a population by then so small that there were not enough young, able-bodied men to sustain it. Various factors contributed to its decline, including a series of illnesses and accidents and the government's refusal to provide either a health or transport infrastructure despite being able to do so during the First World War, when there was a naval station on the island. Contact with servicemen had also enabled young people to find out more about life elsewhere and encouraged emigration.

Life on Hirte, the archipelago's largest island, was not so very different from the other Gaelic-speaking islands of the west. However, it is an island that has captured the romantic imagination. It is notable for its isolation due to notoriously precarious sea conditions and weather fronts that have made it difficult to reach and to anchor safely. During most of the nineteenth century there were just two official sailings a year. The only landing place is Village Bay. From there the island sweeps upwards until you are standing at the top of huge cliffs, home to a massive bird population—gannets, fulmar, shearwater, puffin, guillemot—in fact, the biggest gannetry in the world. The men were notable fowlers and spectacular cliff climbers—seabirds

⁴ For further information on material relating to St Kilda, see Macaulay 2011.

formed the main part of the diet and subsistence on the island, and they also provided a means of barter and, later, cash. Fulmar were harvested in August and the feathers were sold to pay the rent to the landlords, for many centuries the MacLeods. Their oil was used as fuel for the crusie lamps and to lubricate the wool for spinning and weaving the famous St Kilda tweed. Only Hirte was populated, but fowling trips were made to nearby Boreray, Stac Li, and Stac an Armainn, the huge guano-covered rocks rising almost vertically out of the ocean.



Image 4. Finlay MacQueen snaring puffins, Carn Mor, St Kilda. Photo by Robert Atkinson, 1938 (School of Scottish Studies Archives).

Life on the island was dominated by the necessity to work for survival and, apart from fowling, the islanders fished, kept sheep, and cultivated the small patches of arable land. As in the other Hebridean islands, work was managed communally. It was an oral culture with many proverbs and sayings (pertaining to work, the weather, and so forth), wit, songs, and oral literature. Gaelic was the language of the people—there was a distinct dialect for which there are now no speakers left.

St Kilda has long proven a source of interest among collectors. Martin Martin (1665? -1718), a Skyeman and Gaelic speaker, visited in 1697, and his account of his time there was among the first of a long series of historiographies of island life. During the nineteenth century, St Kilda became something of a tourist “Mecca,” the subject of many myths and much speculation, and the volume of publications increased so much so that there are now some 700 texts, mainly by people who never spent a night on the island and did not understand the

language. There are very few Gaelic publications and only a couple written by islanders themselves.

Often the St Kildan is portrayed as a “noble savage” (or sometimes a savage savage) and the communal way of life portrayed as a kind of Utopian ideal, rather than as a pragmatic solution to geographical circumstances. Religion plays a great part in the outsiders’ accounts—the influence of a succession of Presbyterian missionaries, according to various writers, led to the death of fun, music, songs, and storytelling. We are fortunate, in the archive, to have recordings from nine of those who were born and grew up on the island. The recordings are valuable because they provide an “insider’s” perspective and provide some evidence that the art of storytelling was alive and well during this time. The following tale is something of an archetype. *Dùgan is Fearchar Mòr* (“Dugan and Big Farquhar”) was known and told by practically all of those that were interviewed, each of the versions having slight variations in style and content. Norman MacQueen tells the tale to fieldworker John MacInnes in 1961:⁵

Dùgan is Fearchar Mòr: bhiodh iad a’ falbh ’na h-Eileanan Flannach a mharbhadh chaorach—a ghoid chaorach agus ’gan toir leotha Hirte. Agus co-dhiù, là bha seo, dh’fhalbh iad a mhullach na beinneadh, Dùgan is Fearchar. Agus bha teampull ann an t-Hirte fo’n talamh far am biodh daoine teicheadh ma thigeadh an nàmhaid. Agus bha an dorus cho caol air agus chan fhaigheadh sibh a staigh ann mara deidheadh sibh a staigh ann air an oir. Agus dh’fhalbh an dà bhodach a bha seo, là bha seo, mhullach na beinneadh agus thòisich iad ri eubhach à mullach na beinneadh gu robh na soitheachan-cogadh . . . cogadh a’s a’ Chaolas Bhoighreach agus a chuile duine aca dhol dh’an teampull. Well, dh’fhalbh na daoine bochd air fad dh’an teampull a bha seo agus ’se rinn mo liagh [*sic*] ach thòisich iad ri buain fraoch; bhuaibh iad boitean a [*sic*] fraoch a’ fear agus thug iad leotha am boitean a’ fear air an gualainn is thàinig iad dhachaigh.

Is bha na daoine a’s an teampull. Ach bha rùm gu leòr gu h-iseal a’s an teampull. Agus nuair a thàinig iad a nuas a [?] cha do rinn iad càil ach chuir iad am boitean ris an dorus agus chuir iad maidse leis agus thac iad a chuile duine riann bha ’san àite. Ach fhuair aon nighean—bha i còig bliadhna diag—fhuair ise mach a measg a’ cheò a bha seo agus chaidh i ann an uamha dh’fhalach gus an dàinig am bàta. . . . Agus coma co-dhiù là bha seo an dèidh dhiu na daoine mharbhadh, chaidh iad a ghabhail ceum—Dùgan is Fearchar. Agus . . . “A ghoistidh! a ghoistidh!” as an dala fear ris an fhear eile, “tha mi faotainn àileadh teine seo!” “Ho! isd amadain! Chan ’eil,” as eisein, “ach teine dh’fhàg thu as do dheaghaidh.” Agus dè bh’ann ach bha an nighean a theich bha i fo’n a’ chreag a bha seo fòtha agus cha do rinn i càil ach a h-aodach a chuir ma mhullach na poiteadh a bh’aic air an teine le biadh fiach gun cumadh i an ceò gun a dhol a suas. “Och,” as eisein, “a ghoistidh, ghoistidh, ’se an teine a dh’fhàg sinn as ar n-deaghaidh.”

Well, dh’fhalbh iad an uairsin is ghabh iad ceum agus là airne mhàireach thàinig a’ soitheach a bha seo—soitheach a’ bhàillidh. Agus bha nighean, bha i a’s an toll a bha seo, cha dàinig i mach leis an eagal agus dh’fhan i a’s an toll gos a robh am bàta beag gu bhith aig a’ chidhe agus nuair a bha am bàta gun a bhith aig a’ chidhe, thàinig i mach as an toll agus chaidh an dithis acasan a sìos a choinneachadh an eathar, ’eil thu faicinn? Agus nuair a mhothaich iad dh’an

⁵ Norman MacQueen recorded by John MacInnes, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1961.19.A1 (<http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/79150/1>). Transcription and translation by John MacInnes (1961:215-19).

nighean, as an dala fear ris an fhear eile, “ ’S fhearr dhuinn falbh agus a marbhadh.” Well, cha d’fhuair iad . . . cha d’fhuair iad an t-seansa . . . cha d’fhuair iad an t-seansa marbhadh. Chaidh iad . . . leum na daoine mach as an eathar is fhuair iad greim air an nighean a bha seo agus dh’innis an nighean dhiu a’ naidheachd.

Well, rugadh air an dala fear aca—rugadh air Fearchar agus chuireadh e Stac an Aramair a measg nan eòin agus chuireadh Dùgan a Shòraighe, an eilean eile tha an iar air Hirte, measg nan caorach agus a measg nan ian. Well, a’ fear a chuir iad a Stac an Aramair, ghearr e as deaghaidh an eathair agus chaidh a bhàthadh—cha do thog iad idir e—ghearr e mach air a’ mhuir is leig iad leis gun do bhàsaich e. Ach Dùgan, chaidh a chuir a Shòraighe agus bha e ann bliadhnachan beò; bhiodh e ’g ithe nan caorach is ag ithe nan eòin. Than a h-asnaichean aige fhathas ann a shiod: dh’fhiach mi fhèin na h-asnaichean ’na mo làimh.

English Translation

Dugan and Big Farquhar: they used to go to the Flannan Islands to kill sheep—to steal sheep and bring them back into St Kilda. Well, one day they went up to the top of the hill, Dugan and Farquhar. And there was a temple in St Kilda, underground, where people used to flee if an enemy came. The doorway was so narrow that you could not get in unless you entered sideways. And these two fellows went to the top of the hill one day and began to shout from the top of the hill that there were warships in the Kyle of Boreray and everyone to go to the temple. Well, all the poor people went to this temple and what did my bold lad(s) do but begin to cut heather; each of them cut a bundle of heather and carried his bundle on his shoulder and they came home.

The people were in the temple, but there was plenty of room down inside it. And when they (the two men) came . . . they immediately placed the bundle against the doorway and they lit it with a match and they choked every single person in the place. But one girl managed—she was fifteen years of age—she managed to get out in the smoke there and she went to a cave to hide until the ship arrived. . . . At any rate, one day after they had killed the people, they went out for a stroll—Dugan and Farquhar. And . . . “My friend!” said one of them to the other, “I get the smell of fire here!” “Oh quiet, you fool! It is only the fire that you have left after you.” What was it but the girl who escaped; she was underneath the rock below them and at once she placed her clothes over the top of the pot that she had on the fire with food in it, so as to keep the smoke from ascending. “Och my friend,” said he, “it is the fire that we left after us.”

Well, they went off then and they took a stroll and the following day the ship came—the factor’s ship. And the girl, she was in the hole there; she did not come out through fear and she remained in the hole until the small boat was almost at the pier, and when the boat was almost at the pier she came out of the hole and the two men went down to meet the boat, do you see? When they observed the girl, one said to the other, “We had better go and kill her.” Well, they did not get a chance to kill her. The men leapt out of the boat and they caught hold of the girl, and the girl told them the tale.

Well, one of them was seized—Farquhar was seized and put out on to Stac an Aramair among the birds, and Dugan was sent to Soay—on another island west of St Kilda—among the birds and among the sheep. The man whom they sent to Stac an Aramair, he jumped after the boat and was drowned: they did not pick him up—he jumped into the sea and they left him until he

died. But Dugan, he was sent to Soay and he was there alive for years: he used to eat the sheep and the birds. His ribs are there still; I myself have handled the ribs.



Image 5. St Kilda: Stac an Armainn. Photo by Robert Atkinson, 1947 (School of Scottish Studies Archives).

Donald MacQueen, uncle of Norman MacQueen, indicated that the *teampull*, or temple, referred to in the tale was on his own croft, though it is often now called the Fairy Cave by tourists. This historical legend is a fascinating one, partly because it was so well-known among St Kildans. As well as those recorded for the archive, two earlier versions have been published (Maclean 1838, Thomas 1874). The theme of burning or asphyxiating people taking shelter in a church or cave is present in various historical clan tales in Scotland. In one notorious event, the Eigg Massacre of 1577, part of the MacLeod-MacDonald clan feuds, the population hid in a cave when they saw MacLeod's galley coming, and they were murdered when a fire was set at the entrance.⁶ In some versions of this tale, too, there is one survivor. In fact, the theme of the solitary survivor is not uncommon in traditional tales.

The tale is of interest also in portraying the relationship between islanders and outsiders. In the version by Donald MacQueen,

the two men are described as coming from the mainland and taking control of the island (MacInnes 1961). There are various historical accounts of pirates and even slave traders working in these waters. Islanders tended to run for cover after spotting a strange ship. This behavior is mentioned in the accounts of various visitors to St Kilda (Robson 2005) and happened as late as 1918, as recounted by Donald MacQueen himself discussing the arrival of a German U-boat in these waters, while being interviewed for the Gaelic Linguistic Survey of Scotland in 1951.⁷ The tale has many interlinking threads that shed light on the place, the people, and historical events.

This example is just one of a vast repertoire of tales, songs, rhymes, riddles, and so forth in both Gaelic and Scots that are now available online. Hearing the audio gives it an aesthetic and personal context that is hard to determine just from reading the printed version. While “rescue ethnology” may have been the subject of discourse, it has nevertheless enabled the

⁶ An example of this tale can be found on the *Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches* website at <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/45450/1>.

⁷ Donald MacQueen, School of Scottish Studies Archives, GLS44. The Gaelic Linguistic Survey is held in the School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh.

preservation of historical material that would otherwise no longer exist. Through its program of collecting, the School of Scottish Studies has enabled the oral tradition, the voices of Scotland's people, to be held and valued by ensuing generations. It is somewhat ironic that while the massive changes of the twentieth century have contributed to the decline of the oral tradition, at the same time, these technological developments have enabled us to return songs, stories, and ways of being to the communities from which they came and, indeed, to make them accessible to emigrants from these communities in every part of the world.

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