John Dewar's Islay, Jura and Colonsay: A Bird's Eye View

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Abstract
This review article attempts to assess the first fruits of a monumental undertaking by Ronald Black, Christopher Dracup and their colleagues aimed at publishing in their entirety the historical accounts and lore collected by John Dewar (1802–1872) in the West Highlands of Scotland between 1862 and 1872. It does so from the perspective of a general reader, anticipating that Scottish historians, linguists, onomasticians, ethnologists, folktale experts, musicians and others will offer more specialised critiques in due course.

John Dewar's Islay, Jura and Colonsay. **Ronald Black and Christopher Dracup, eds. Kinross: John Dewar Publishers, 2024. Pp. 557 + ix. Maps; illus. ISBN 9781068651601.**

Launched in 2017, the Dewar Project was conceived with the immodest aim of publishing the entirety of the Dewar Manuscripts, the ten-volume collection of oral historical accounts recorded by John Dewar (1802–1872) from some 328 informants in the West Highlands between 1862 and 1872.[1] The present volume is the first of ten, to be published (assuming adequate financial support and the longevity of the project team) at two-year intervals between now and 2044.

Between 1859 and 1862, John Dewar collected stories for J. F. Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, and it was with Campbell's warm encouragement and support that he subsequently undertook his collection of popular historical lore. Campbell's numerous annotations and commentary, bound within the manuscripts alongside Dewar's text, offer insight into the relationship between the two men as well as an appreciation of the accounts themselves, which Campbell describes as 'bricks, from which some future historian may make something' (12):

> These stories are anecdotes, family traditions about individuals, adventures of individuals at battles which really were fought, &c. This, which is the popular view of great events looked at from below, is microscopic and accurate for details, but hazy, vague, distorted and mythical for all that is beyond the people. … The same power of popular memory which has preserved the framework of popular tales for hundreds if not for many thousands of years…has power only to preserve one kind of true history, and even that is apt to become mythical. (12–13)

Campbell goes on to observe that 'the people do not remember great events which concern the nation', but rather the 'local fights' that involved places known to them and individuals from whom they themselves, or people they knew, were descended (14). In seeking to connect these 'great events looked at from below' with documentary evidence of what actually transpired, the Dewar team has set itself a considerable challenge.

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[1] Ronald Black, 'The Dewar Project', in Wilson McLeod, Anja Gunderloch and Rob Dunbar (eds), *Cànan is Cultar / Language and Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 10* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 2021), 73–86. The Dewar Project website (www.dewarproject.com) introduces the project team, describes and illustrates the ten Dewar manuscripts and the set of English translations made by Islay schoolmaster Hector MacLean (1818–1893), provides comprehensive story-lists for all ten projected volumes, and tracks the progress of the work.

The complexity of this task is reflected in the organisation of this first volume, which the authors describe as 'the people's history of Islay, Jura and Colonsay, in their own language, from 1585 to 1833' (2). Dewar was a remarkable person with many gifts, but the absence of any discernible organising principle in his manuscripts required the editorial team to pick one. While the idea of a thematic inventory was originally tempting, they eventually chose to group the accounts geographically by region, and then chronologically within each region.

In this volume, the stories are divided into eight sections or 'parts', each set of stories focused on particular events or individuals – a narrative focus unsurprisingly similar to that of the hero-tales familiar to Dewar and, more importantly, to his informants. Following a chronology that begins with the realignment of power relations in the century following the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles in 1493, the stories in Parts 1 through 5 recall the gore-strewn landscapes and larger-than-life characters of *Linn nan Creach* (the 'Age of Plunders'): the Battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart between the Macdonalds (Clann Iain Mhòir) and the MacLeans of Mull; the feud between MacLarty of Dun Aula and the MacKays in the Rhinns of Islay as well as other 'lesser' feuds; the exploits of Colla Ciotach and his sons; and the gradual (and very bloody) takeover of Islay and Jura by the Campbells in the seventeenth century. With Part 6, we mercifully arrive at the eighteenth century, when property in these islands was generally bought with money and political capital rather than blood, and when the Campbell hegemony included the Shawfield Campbells, from whom J. F. Campbell himself was descended.

These six sections form the core of the book.[2] The stories are presented as parallel texts, with Dewar's Gaelic text – edited and appropriately streamlined by Christopher Dracup – on the left, and Black's translation on the right. It is thus possible to read either text in linear fashion. This is enjoyable, because both the Gaelic texts and the translations successfully preserve the oral quality of the original recitation, with lively dialogue and racy turns of phrase. The following exchange could have been scripted for a John Wayne movie (140–141):

> *…thug iad sùil 'nan déigh agus chunnaic iad bannal de mharc-shluaigh gu dian a' tigheachd air an tòir, agus bha aon fhear fada air thoiseach air càch. Thubhairt Fear Chroiginnis, "Ach tha sinn dheth a-nis!"*
>
> […they looked behind them and saw a troop of cavalry coming headlong in pursuit of them, with one man far ahead of the others. The laird of Craignish said, "Damn. We've had it now."]

These are indeed stories that one might read aloud, presuming an audience with a thirst for heroic deeds and the stomach for blood.

For those interested in the alignment between these accounts and the documentary record, however, the process is more challenging. For starters, it is absolutely necessary to keep a bookmark at the endnotes to each section, for it is these notes that contain the commentaries – the fruits of meticulous research into parish records, census records, maps, genealogies, and a multitude of other primary and secondary sources – that elucidate the events lying behind the oral accounts. Often there are several endnotes within a single story, and the level of detail – veering sometimes into speculation – can feel overwhelming. It takes a considerable effort of will (or possibly a fierce interest in a particular historical event or character) to disrupt the flow of story in order to give the commentaries the attention they undoubtedly deserve.

For linguists, the Gaelic texts are bound to be of interest, but not for the reasons we might assume. While one peculiar dialect feature is indeed revealed in the accounts, which the authors suggest (9) maps onto a territory they identify as Clan Donald South (Islay, Colonsay, south Jura, Kintyre, west Arran, Rathlin, and the Glens of Antrim), the principal linguistic interest of Dewar's work lies elsewhere. Lacking the modern convenience of a recording device, Dewar took notes

[2] There are actually eight 'parts', the seventh containing fragments, and the eighth three texts in English.

when first visiting the storyteller, relied on those notes to guide his remarkable memory in reconstructing what he had heard, wrote the story down in his own words, and then revisited the informant to confirm the details. The stories are, therefore, written down not word-for-word in his informant's dialect, but as Dewar would have told them in his own Arrochar Gaelic – 'a dialect otherwise unknown to scholarship' (10).

Place-name scholars will find this book an onomastic gold-mine, as some of the names attested in Dewar's manuscripts are found nowhere else. Many of the stories likely owe their survival to the fact that they explain how a particular place or geographic feature is thought to have got its name, regardless of whether the explanation is ultimately justified by historical or linguistic evidence. Place-names mentioned in the text, whether in Gaelic or in English, are listed in a comprehensive gazetteer – or perhaps more accurately, four gazetteers, one for each island, plus one which lists place-names on the Scottish mainland or elsewhere. Readers interested in place-names may want additional bookmarks if they wish to avoid mistakenly searching for an Islay place-name in the Jura gazetteer.

Dewar's informants are themselves of interest, and provide additional clues to his collecting process. Based on Dewar's own notes about his informants' names, origins, and where they were interviewed, a twenty-eight page section of the book (429–457) summarizes what is known about the thirty-eight people (including one woman) whom the authors regard as Dewar's 'actual or potential' informants for this volume. In some cases quite a lot was known: the biography of Jura schoolmaster John Campbell, for example, covers five pages (433–437). The team's diligence in pursuit of the public records needed to prepare these biographies is scarcely less remarkable than the information they managed to dig up.

There is no doubt that this book will be of enormous value to scholarship. Ethnologists should go to the Dewar Project website and consult the thematic index prepared by team member Ryan Dziadowiec that, while not included in the book itself, provides valuable insight into its contents.[3] For those interested in where these stories appeared in the manuscripts themselves, a concordance (428) allows the reader to convert manuscript identifiers to the story numbers given in the text. Christopher Dracup's annotation of the Gaelic texts provides detailed insight into the idiosyncrasies of Dewar's Gaelic as well as his working method. Indeed, those interested in the working methods of nineteenth-century collectors may want to compare Dewar's with those of Hector MacLean, another collector and close confidant of J. L. Campbell's, whose subsequent translations of Dewar's manuscripts were an important resource for the present work (22).

In attempting to serve all of these scholarly constituencies, the authors have mostly succeeded. There are, however, some difficulties. Few of us are well informed in all of the relevant disciplines, and the undoubted riches of this book could have been made more accessible to a non-specialist reader. While the endnotes to each section allow readers to consider details of the oral accounts in light of documentary evidence, they cannot be read consecutively, and thus do not easily reveal the broader background which would contextualise those accounts as a group. Black tacitly acknowledges this problem by summarising, in a segment at the back of the book, what is known to historians regarding the Battles of Tràigh Ghruinneart and Beinn Bhigeir. A similar roundup of facts and context would have been helpful in other cases, too. (The adventures of Colla Ciotach and his sons are, we note, to feature in other Dewar volumes, and perhaps a segment of this sort will be provided then.) The endnotes to each group of stories tend to take up more pages (of smaller print) than do the stories themselves but, as structured, they require the reader to flip back and forth and maintain multiple trains of thought, as they are impossible to read *seriatim*.

The structure of the endnotes also presents a challenge to someone wishing to read the Gaelic texts while following the commentary. The endnotes are numbered sequentially, the first notes referring to the Gaelic text and mostly dealing with manuscript and textual matters, while the

[3] https://www.dewarproject.com/Commentaries/Themes.pdf. Accessed 22 September 2024.

remainder – the vast majority – refer to the English text, and deal with historical facts and everything else. This means that the person who has read the Gaelic text must then go back to the beginning and read Black's translation in order to connect with the historical commentary. While a solution to this problem is not obvious, the situation is not ideal.

A further difficulty is geographic. The book contains five attractively-drawn maps, including one of the whole of Scotland and the north coast of Ireland (x); one each of Islay (73), Jura (129), and Colonsay (41); and a detailed battle-plan of the Battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart (405). One problem, however, is that some place-names are inexplicably omitted from these maps, despite their being mentioned in the text. For example, the reader can only guess about the possible locations of Robolls, Kepolls, Scaristle, Nerebus and Ardnave, all missing from the map of Islay (73), although they are specifically mentioned on the opposite page as having been granted to MacLean of Duart in the 1540s. And why is Corsapol, whose location is essential to understanding the Battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart, missing from the battle plan (405)? While it does appear on the larger map of Islay (73), the reader should not have to hunt for it.

A larger problem is that the maps of individual islands provide only a sketchy sense of the surrounding geographical context. Of greater use to the struggling non-specialist would be a series of historical maps showing the extent of the lands held by the various clans whose activities are described in these stories. At a minimum, it would be helpful if the maps could include adjacent areas of the mainland and other islands to illustrate the points of origin of some of these incursions. The map of Colonsay (41), for example, illustrates the *dùthaich* of the MacPhees, but is silent about their adversaries the MacLeans (Mull) and the MacCallums (Poltalloch, near Lochgilphead in Argyll). Likewise, the map of Jura (129) is placed at the beginning of Part 3; but while one of the 'lesser feuds' described in that section probably occurred in Jura, the section also contains accounts of feuds involving the MacKays of the Rhinns (Islay), the MacLartys of Craignish (Argyll), and the MacLeans of Lochbuie (Mull). A map that took in these adjacent territories and showed all of the place-names mentioned in the accounts and the commentary would help the reader grasp the geographical context of these events and more easily comprehend their wider significance.

Black notes that the Highland clans' propensity for internecine warfare, particularly in the sixteenth century, ultimately cost them the opportunity to present a united front against the Crown's determination to destroy Gaelic civilisation (403). Such concerns were not, however, reflected in the traditional accounts collected by Dewar, which focus less upon national politics than upon how events were experienced by individuals. Indeed, while the Crown's actions were predicated upon the presumed nationhood of Scotland as a whole, what John MacInnes termed the 'conceptual unity' of Gaeldom, obliquely expressed in the poetry of its warrior class, did not manifest itself in overtly nationalist terms until the eighteenth century, well after many of the accounts in this volume first took shape.[4] What Dewar collected were, after all, stories which – like the hero-tales – were told to entertain as well as to inform, to pass the winter nights and reinforce community identity. While they may fail in terms of chronological accuracy, and while they tend to conflate events and create composite characters, they nonetheless preserve, as J. F. Campbell noted, a kind of history 'that is apt to become mythical'.

The truth of Campbell's observation is illustrated by an episode preserved in the two accounts, obtained from different informants, describing the Battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart. One tells of a pair of brothers, named as Donald and Neil, sons of an Islay blacksmith named MacEachern (89); the other does not name them, but identifies them as smiths 'of the tribe of the long-shanked smith in Ireland' (99). One of the brothers has gone to Mull as a young man, returning to Islay with MacLean's retinue, while the other has remained in Islay and taken up arms with MacDonald.

[4] John MacInnes, 'The panegyric code in Gaelic poetry and its historical background', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 50 (1978): 436–437.

They meet in single combat at what both accounts describe as 'a bend in the river' – identified thereafter as *Camag nan Goibhnean* ('the Little Bend of the Smiths') – where they fail to recognise one another. After making every attempt to kill each other with battle-axes, one eventually takes a closer look at his opponent and, addressing him in verse, expresses the hope that he should survive; whereupon they both recognise each other, lay aside their weapons, sit down, reminisce, take snuff, and fight no more.

This account, Black tells us, is 'something of a motif', citing its occurrence in a traditional account of the 'Battle of the Shirts' (*Blàr nan Léine*) fought in July, 1544, between the MacDonalds of Clanranald, led by Iain Muideartach, and the Lovat Frasers in which only about a dozen people – out of hundreds – survived; in that account, preserved in Dewar's second volume, Black tells us that the episode ended differently (115, n. 55). It is very likely that those who sought to describe the Battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart would have heard the accounts of *Blàr nan Léine*, fought only fifty years before. At the same time, readers familiar with the Ulster saga *Tain Bó Cuailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley') will inescapably recognise this episode's striking similarity to the culminating encounter in the Irish tale, much of it expressed in verse, in which Cú Chulainn engages his foster-brother Ferdia at a ford in a river, killing him and leaving himself griefstricken. The close relationship between the two men, the fact that the confrontation takes the form of single combat by a river, the reference to the brothers' Irish origin, the use of poetry to express emotion, and the geographical proximity of Islay to Ulster which was, after all, part of the *dùthaich* of Clan Donald South – indeed, it would be remarkable if an event as consequential as the Battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart did not remind Islay storytellers of the *Táin*, a story which must have been well known to them. 'Mythical' indeed!

What should also interest us, however, is not so much the fact that this story is included, but why it was included, and how it has been altered. Unlike Cú Chulainn and Ferdia, the brothers ultimately refrain from killing each other, and lay down their arms – welcome narrative relief from all of the bloodletting and mayhem. Few of us today can imagine living in a society where people are regularly hanged, beheaded, burnt alive, and massacred in huge, pitched battles; where the dead are left lying in heaps and the rivers run with their blood; or where retribution requires further slaughter and the razing of people's homes, as happened when the MacLeans eventually avenged their defeat at Tràigh Gruinneart on the entire population of Islay (420–423). Even so, we have begun to understand the toll taken by post-traumatic stress on those who have witnessed or participated in such things, and we know – because the lament poetry, especially the women's poetry, is full of it – that post-traumatic stress was common in sixteenth-century Scotland. How could it have been otherwise, given the number of people from all parts of the society who were involved – people who not only knew one another, but were often close relations. Neuroscientists studying the effect of extreme stress on human memory have concluded that what they call 'explicit memory' – what people are able to verbalise after a stressful or traumatic event – is intrinsically unreliable.[5] Details become disordered, the perception of time becomes compressed, and witnesses may enter a dissociative state that depersonalises the experience; and when they do eventually reconstruct the event in their own minds, they do so in ways that they can bear to live with.

While we may be tempted to attribute the narrative unreliability of accounts such as those collected by John Dewar to confusion, forgetfulness, and the vagaries of oral tradition, we might also consider that there is more to it than that, and that some of the 'forgetting' and reconstruction

[5] Peter Maslowski and Don Winslow, *Looking for a Hero: Staff Sergeant Joe Ronnie Hooper and the Vietnam War* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 239–243. For an application of this concept to women's poetry of lamentation, see Virginia Blankenhorn, 'From ritual to rhetoric, from rhetoric to art: Women's poetry of lamentation in the Gaelic world' in Blankenhorn, *Tradition, Transmission, Transformation: Essays on Scottish Gaelic Poetry and Song* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), 285–296.

of events was deliberate. Unlike the hero tales of tradition, the accounts collected by Dewar were initially composed, heard, and reshaped by people who themselves witnessed the events described. The fact that the episode of the smiths occurs in two of Dewar's accounts suggests that it was part of the story from the beginning, with only minor differences emerging over the 260-plus years before Dewar recorded it. The meaning of the episode is unaltered. The storytellers who evoked the *Táin* in recounting the events of Tràigh Ghruinneart found a powerful way of expressing the savagery of the battle; but in changing the ending of the encounter at the bend in the river they asserted the humanity of those who fought on both sides – who were, after all, brothers. What in literary studies would merit the term 'intertextuality' is doubtless an essential part of oral tradition and the construction of myth. At the same time, we should not dismiss such echoes as unconscious reflexes of the storyteller's art, but rather recognise that they were included for specific reasons – for the associations they carried for listeners, and for the meaning assigned to them in a particular narrative context by the storyteller himself.

What about history? Recent historiographic writing has pointed out that the definition of 'history' is a moving target. One generation of writers may seek to contextualise events within a nationalist narrative arc, while the next may valorise 'objectivity' by ascribing events to arbitrary and impersonal forces, thereby de-emphasising the emotional resonance of those events for readers.[6] Whether or not an historical account is deemed 'accurate' may depend upon whom you ask, because how people feel about past events inevitably shapes their response to future challenges, and directly affects how those responses are in turn encoded as 'history'. The traditional accounts Dewar collected may not agree with the documentary evidence, but it was those stories that sharpened people's emotional commitment to continuing the brutal tit-for-tat that characterised *Linn nan Creach*. We must, therefore, consider the contemporaneous oral testimonies, preserved by Dewar's informants, central to our understanding of this turbulent period and of those who lived to tell its tales.

Finally, readers of this book will surely have their favourite moments. Given my own interests, two incidents with musical connections caught my eye. As Black points out (297, n. 190), a good deal has been written about 'Pìobaireachd Dhùn Naomhaig', another title of which is 'Caismeachd a' Phìobaire d'a Mhaighistir' ('The Piper's Warning to his Master').[7] Describing the circumstances of its composition, Dewar's informant quotes three stanzas of the pibroch song 'A Cholla mo rùin' which he said were 'composed to fit the melody' (234–235).[8] Both the pìobaireachd and the song were recorded by fieldworkers in the twentieth century, and readers can hear them – and judge the similarities between them – by following the hyperlinks indicated.

A second connection with the piping repertoire is less straightforward. In the story of the Battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart Dewar's informant, Neil MacTaggart, tells how MacDonald, prior to leading his men into battle against the MacLeans, says to his piper, 'Play us a new tune, piper, one you've never played before'. After casting around for anything that might bring a tune to mind, the piper spots a dairymaid and is reminded of a song beginning *Oi-a-thó dheoghaill na laoigh*

[6] For example, the historical understanding of the Irish Famine (1845–1849) has been the subject of considerable debate along these lines since publication of Cecil Woodham-Smith's polemic *The Great Hunger* in 1962; see Claudia Carroll (2016), '"The Great Hunger is great novel": Historiography and meta-fiction in Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*', The Comparative Literature Undergraduate Journal, University of California, Berkeley 7/1; (https://ucbcluj.org/the-great-hunger-is-great-novel-historiography-and-meta-fiction-in-joseph-oconnors-star-of-the-sea/), accessed 26 October 2024.

[7] Hugh Archibald Fraser, 'Pìobaireachd Dhùn Naomhaig'. Recorded in 1965 by Dr Barrie J. M. Orme, School of Scottish Studies Archives SA1965.166.B5; Tobar an Dualchais track 64009, www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/64009?l=en.

[8] www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/40434?l=en. Recorded in 1950 by John Lorne Campbell from the redoubtable Mary Morrison (1890–1973) of Ersary, Barra, who includes a snatch of *canntaireachd* at the end of her performance.

('Oi-a-hó the calves have sucked'). Quoting four lines of this song, MacTaggart tells Dewar that this tune 'was later called "Pìobaireachd Thràigh Ghruinneart"' (86–87). This song, 'A hù a hò, dheoghail na laoigh', described as a milking song, was recorded in South Uist in 1970.[9] Black notes that no pìobaireachd named for the Battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart has been identified, although he reports that a composition entitled 'Pìobaireachd of Ceann traigh Ghruinard' is listed in an account of Islay by John Murdoch published in 1859 (114–115, n. 50; see also 381–2 and notes). Perhaps a piping scholar will know if the tune MacTaggart had in mind might have been known to pipers by another name.

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Tobar an Dualchais. https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk.

[9] www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/105385?l=en. Recorded from Kate Nicolson (1901–1976), Iochdar, South Uist, by Peter Cooke.