

THREE MEN OF ISLAY

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Among the "Patrick Kennedy (1801-1873) Papers" in the Irish Folklore Commission are six letters written to Kennedy by Campbell of Islay, four from Niddry Lodge, Kensington, under the dates March 23 and 27 and May 21 and 24, 1867, and two of the same year sent to him from Braemore, Loch Broom, Ross-shire (September 10) and Dingwall (September 17). They refer in the main to a review of a book of Kennedy's, probably his well-known *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts* (London 1866).

In addition to these letters, the Kennedy papers include the photograph here reproduced (Pl. IX) which three years later, in 1870, Campbell of Islay sent with his compliments to his Irish admirer.

Although the photograph has appeared before in a touching obituary of Hector MacLean by Professor Donald Mackinnon (1893:105), the editor of *Scottish Studies* has urged me to republish it from the copy in the Irish Folklore Commission and to add a commentary. I wish to stress that the following notes make no pretence to be exhaustive, my concern being solely to add a stone from Ireland to the cairn of memory of John Francis Campbell of Islay (1822-1885) and of his fellow Islay men, Hector MacLean (1818-1893) and Lachlan MacNeill (1788-?) who deserve also to be remembered in this year which marks the centenary of the *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*.

The persons in the photograph (l. to r.) are Lachlan MacNeill, shoemaker, Paisley, John Francis Campbell, and Hector MacLean, Islay men all three. The photograph was taken in Paisley, 17 August 1870. The occasion is commemorated in Campbell of Islay's diary for that year (N.L.S. 50.2.2; Ms. xvi of the Campbell of Islay Mss.) as follows:

August 17, 1870. Went from Glasgow to Paisley, and to No. 5 Maxwellton Street to Lachlan MacNeill, shoemaker . . . Found (him) and Hector (MacLean) installed in a small public, both

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rather screwed, Hector the worse. They have been at the tale of O'Kane's Leg for about a week, and Hector has made about 62 sheets of Gaelic $\times 4 = 248$, say about 260 pages of foolscap. The old fellow (Lachlan MacNeill) used to play the fiddle in Islay House . . . The story of O'Kane's Leg he learned as a child from Angus the Grim, [Gruamach] an old carter, who used to tell him stories while they drove in the cart . . . Asked him if he knew many (tales) and told a beast fable as a bait. Got in return a long version of the Dragon Myth of which made short notes.

My friend, the late J. G. McKay, the editor of two volumes of the Campbell *nachlass* (McKay 1940 and 1960), to whom I owe a transcript of Campbell's diary for 1870, adds at this point in his transcript the following footnote:

On the back of the sheet containing this paragraph is an amusing pen and ink sketch by Islay, showing himself much be-whiskered and wrapped in a plaid, lying on the ground at his ease face downwards, kicking his feet in the air, smoking a cigarette, and writing with a quill. Sitting around him are various nondescript figures, also smoking, from the recitation of one of whom Islay is apparently jotting down a tale. Below this is a photo showing Islay, MacNeill and MacLean seated at a table. Hector certainly looks screwed, and he is presumably taking down from MacNeill's recitation, the story of O'Kane's Leg.

A summary follows, made by Campbell from MacNeill, of a tale which he entitles "The Dragon Myth".¹ Further notes on tales made by Campbell as he listened to MacNeill in the Paisley "public" are on pp. 56-58 of the Ms. and then comes this note on the old storyteller:

Here the old man went off upon his own history and sorrows. How a son with taper fingers growing thick and strong up to the arm (*sic*), tall and stately, became a soldier and a fiddler, and a piper, how he was given gifts and was mistaken for the pipe major by a prince who sent him a cigar at Gibraltar. How he went to the Crimea and came home, how he caught cold and was spoiled by a doctor, how he came back (?) *Séimh* [mild] and as dependable as [when] he went, and worked with his old Father and Mother at their trade till he died. How the wife was a good wife to him and kept the house and the children till she fell on a jaunt to the hill near Paisley, and hurt her leg so that she could not hobble, but had to sit propped in bed with pillows for many a long and weary day. How another son died, and he (the old man) was left cobbling shoes but content. But he would like to end his days in Islay where he began his life, that he would. After a good deal of such talk, asked

him if he had any objection to my paying his wife a visit. Went to the wife and gave her a tip, a sovereign for old acquaintance' sake. Carried off the scribe and the narrator to a photographer, and got two negatives made. Shook hands and parted.

Hector is to finish the tale of O'Kane's Leg,² and pay the old chap for his work, and meet me at Dunoon when he has done.

This is a very interesting old fellow, a gentleman in his manners, a good, sober-looking, clean decent old man. If he has time to think over his old stories, he has enough to fill a good-sized volume; of that I am now sure from my own observation. Came back to Glasgow, dined and wrote this while smoking two cigars, the stories from the notes made at the time, and the rest from fresh memory. Stopped at 7½. J. F. Campbell.³

Sgeulachd Cois' O'Céin is one of the longest folk-tales recorded in Europe. It is a *rahmengeschichte* or frame-story, i.e. stories within a story, a well-known literary device of which outstanding examples are the *Hitōpadēśa*, the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, the *Pañchatantra*, the *Decameron*, etc. At the end of the tale Hector MacLean appended the following note (Henderson 1907:262), and how glad he must have been—*experto crede!*—when, after many days of writing, he had come to the end of an apparently endless tale!

Narrated to me by Lachlin MacNeill, shoemaker, Paisley, who in his boyhood learned it from his father. His father, he says, learned it from a person of the name of Angus Brown, who lived in the neighbourhood of Islay House, and who is quoted as authority for many other stories told in Islay. MacNeill was born at Creagan nam peighinnean, in the parish of Kilarrow, Islay, in the year 1788, on the 28th of May, and is now accordingly aged 82 years. The story was written down from his recitation in Paisley, and is now correctly transcribed (Signed): Hector MacLean, Ballygrant, January 7th, 1871.

J. G. McKay on p. 34 of his transcript of Islay's 1870 diary has the following note:

Lachlan MacNeill also recited tales Nos. 376-386 preserved in Islay's Ms. (English), Vol. xiii, and mentioned *West Highland Tales* iv, (1862) 433; 2 edit. iv, 399.

And there I must leave Lachlan MacNeill, the Islay *seanchaidhe*, who in his day must have been one of the best storytellers in Western Christendom. What he and his fellows gave to Campbell and his collectors was but a tiny fragment of an ancient legacy of Gaelic oral tradition, all of which would



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(See p. 126)

have gone without a record save for Iain Og Ile. He too still awaits a biographer to keep green his memory. He was a very gallant Highland gentleman, as was also the man who of all most revered his memory, and who spent his life in studying and in preparing for publication the hundreds of tales still unpublished which after Campbell's death in 1885 passed into the keeping of the National Library of Scotland. His name was J. G. McKay. He was my friend, and I have known few whom I respected more. His name will always be associated with that of John Francis Campbell. They were alike in many ways. He died on 28 February 1942. Requiescat! Of his many publications, mainly editions of tales from the Campbell *nachlass*, the two volumes of his *More West Highland Tales* (McKay 1940 and 1960) will serve to keep alive his memory.

Of Campbell of Islay himself these words of his friend W. R. S. Ralston of the British Museum, translator of Afanasiev's *Russian Folk Tales* (London 1873) and *The Songs of the Russian People* (London 1872), deserve to be here recorded. On hearing of Campbell's death in Cannes, 17 February 1885, Ralston wrote in his obituary notice (*Athenaeum* 1:250):

A vigorous and well-cultivated intellect, a sturdy and independent character, and a true and tender heart combined to render him a man worthy of unusual regard and esteem.

The entry on Campbell in the *Dictionary of National Biography* is inadequate and requires revision. But no fitting testimony can be furnished in the absence of a thorough and competent biography of Campbell, who, to my mind, was one of the most remarkable Scots of the nineteenth century.

When Campbell of Islay began to gather material for his remarkable *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* he looked around for men who could write Gaelic competently and whom he could trust to record the tales accurately. Campbell was a pioneer, and as such was misunderstood and his enterprise held to scorn by those of whom there is now no memory. He was stubborn and determined, knew what he wanted, and was unperturbed by fools and scoffers. He was a man of means, and was prepared to requite accordingly not only the collectors in his employment, but the old people in the Highlands and Islands upon whose support the whole project depended. The storytellers were there in abundance—more than a small army of collectors armed, not with tape-recorders, but with quill pens and ink-horns, could cope with. There were then (1859)

some hundreds of thousands of tales and songs in Gaelic to be recorded, and the only man to undertake the work of saving a few hundred of these was Iain Og Ile. And people laughed at him and thought the poor "bodach" a foolish body. He was, on the contrary, a learned man of an original turn of mind, as his books and papers testify, interested in the world around him, and, above all, interested in people. He was gregarious, fond of company, of a dram and a chat, and was apparently

To Hector MacLean
from his friend
J. F. Campbell

POPULAR TALES

OF

THE WEST HIGHLANDS

Hector MacLean's copies of the first two volumes of the *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* were presented to the School of Scottish Studies in 1955 by Miss M. McLachlan, Ballygrant, Islay. J. F. Campbell's inscription on the fly-leaf of Volume I is here reproduced.

as much at home at a society wedding (such as that of the Marquis of Lorne, his cousin, described in his diary) as on a visit to a tinkers' encampment (also recorded in his daybook). But, apart from people, he studied such things as Geology and Meteorology, and wrote books about these subjects such as *Frost and Fire; Natural Engines, Tool-marks and Chips, etc.* (Edinburgh 1865) and *My Circular Notes. Extracts from Journals, letters sent home, geological and other notes written while travelling westwards round the world from July 6, 1874 to July 1875* (London 1876). He had, as

we say at home in the Glens of Antrim—across the sea-road from Islay—a “loose foot”; he travelled widely and kept an account of his experiences wherever he went from Iceland to Indonesia. His still unpublished diaries are of great importance to the student of the folk-tale, and Campbell’s descriptions of storytellers and of storytelling, together with those of his friend Alexander Carmichael in the introduction to Vol. 1 of *Carmina Gadelica*, are of outstanding merit, giving us a fascinating picture of a lost world and a forgotten people, the crofters and fishermen of the Highlands and the Outer Isles, witty, intelligent, open-handed and big-hearted, who have had few equals anywhere or at any time.

We turn now to the last of the Islay triumvirate in the photograph, Hector MacLean. Campbell’s main difficulty was not that of scarcity of material, but of suitable collectors. It is a difficulty not unknown to the present writer. He found close to hand in Islay his former tutor and companion, Hector MacLean.⁴ MacLean was born in Islay in January 1818, four years before Campbell, and had as his teacher the remarkable Neil McAlpine, the author of a Gaelic grammar and dictionary.⁵ “As companion and tutor” to Campbell of Islay he attended the University of Edinburgh for several sessions, but on his father’s death took up an appointment as teacher in Ballygrant School, Islay, and lived with his mother and sister at a little roadside inn between Bridgend and Portaskaig, where he remained until he retired in 1872. MacLean contributed the Essay on Gaelic Poetry to the fourth volume of the *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1862:160-215), and he is also remembered for his *Ultonian Hero Ballads*.⁶ But it is as a collector of Gaelic oral tradition that he will be remembered best, and rightly so, for he was the most outstanding of the three collectors employed by Campbell who gathered the bulk of the material in the *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* and *More West Highland Tales* 1 and 2, and the still greater body of Mss. yet unpublished in the National Library of Scotland: the others were John Dewar and Hector Urquhart.⁷

Mackinnon, who knew Hector MacLean well and held him in high regard, points out in his obituary that though: “it may be said that while to Mr. Campbell is due the credit of originality, mapping out and publishing the great work, i.e. *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, the preparation of no small portion of the material was the task of his able and willing coadjutor.”⁸

“It was in connection with the publication of *The Tales of the West Highlands* that Mr. MacLean’s name became known to Gaelic scholars. Thirty-five years ago there was no man in Scotland, I should say, so well fitted to edit such a work as he. Mr. Campbell describes him at this time as a man “who has worked at Gaelic books and traditions, and studied that language, and has taught himself to read half a dozen more, in which he reads poetry, besides acquiring the whole of Euclid and the differential calculus, and a good many ‘ologies’ to boot—a man who thinks for himself, and is free from national prejudice at all events”. And Mackinnon concludes: “Altogether a man of many gifts, and of great individuality of character; esteemed and admired by those who knew him best for the solid work he was able to do in the unfavourable circumstances in which his lot was cast; and also because of their abiding belief that with fitting environment, Mr. MacLean would have become no mean force in the literature and science of his generation”.

There were no tape-recorders a century ago, and the amenities of life now taken for granted were unknown to MacLean who in the face of hardship carried out unflinchingly the congenial task which he had undertaken for his friend, Iain Og. Let us then, a century later, remember with respect and affection the three men of Islay, Iain Og Ile, Hector MacLean and Lachlan MacNeill, and the other men and women who gave Campbell and Carmichael and their collectors and correspondents of their best, and thus saved for Scotland and for the world one of the finest collections of folk-tales and tradition in Europe, which but for them would have been lost.

NOTES

- ¹ For this see George Henderson, *The Celtic Dragon Myth* (Edinburgh 1911) xiv; and Reidar Th. Christiansen, *Studies in Irish and Scandinavian Folktales* (Copenhagen 1959) 33-80; reference to Henderson’s book *ibid.* 77, footnote 2.
- ² The story, known in Irish as *Leighes coise Chéin*, “The Leeching of Cian’s Leg”, was published from B. Mus. Ms. Egerton 1781 by Standish Hayes O’Grady in *Silva Gadelica* 1 (1892) 296ff.; English translation *ibid.* 2 (1892) 332ff. Notes on tale by Robin Flower, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum* 2:541; and by T. F. O’Rahilly, *Gadelica* 1:281; J. G. McKay, *More West Highland Tales* 1:72. The oral version recorded from Lachlan MacNeill (N.L.S. 50.2.3) and upon the transcription of which Hector MacLean was busy in the Paisley “public” when his employer, Campbell of Islay, dropped in to see him as related

- above, was published by the Rev. Dr. George Henderson (1907: 179-265, the Gaelic text—there is no translation—occupying pp. 189-262). See English summary by Alfred Nutt, *Folklore* 1:373, based on that of Campbell.
- ³ See also Henderson (1907:188), quoting from Campbell's diary notes of 22 March 1871.
 - ⁴ The reader is referred to Mackinnon's obituary of MacLean (Mackinnon 1893) to which I am indebted for these notes on this most interesting Islayman.
 - ⁵ Neil McAlpine: *The Argyleshire Pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary, to which is prefixed a concise but most comprehensive Gaelic Grammar* (Edinburgh 1832). For further details see Donald MacLean, *Typographia Scoto-Gadelica* (Edinburgh 1915) 171-173.
 - ⁶ MacLean, Hector, *Ultonian Hero-Ballads Collected in the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland. From the year 1516, and at successive periods till 1870 . . .* Glasgow 1892.
Dedicated to John Crawford Graham, Esquire, Lagavullin, Islay . . . "a warm friend of the late John F. Campbell of Islay". . .
The preface was written at Ballygrant, Islay 1892.
 - ⁷ Hector MacLean translated many tales collected by John Dewar and others for the Marquis of Lorne. See *Adventures in Legend, being the last historic legends of the Western Highlands, by the Marquis of Lorne K.T.* Westminster n.d.
 - ⁸ J. G. McKay (1940:185 footnote) says of MacLean that "he was one of Islay's most careful collectors, though given to moralising on the tales he collected. However, he only did this in notes which he tagged on to the ends of the tales." For two examples of these strange corollaries of MacLean's see McKay 1940:208 and 276.
Campbell was suspicious of MacLean pruning his stories when writing them. For this see MacLean's reply in McKay 1940:184.

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 1960 *More West Highland Tales*. 2. Edinburgh.
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 50.2.2. National Library of Scotland. Ms. xvi of the Campbell o Islay Collection.
 50.2.3. National Library of Scotland. Ms. xvii of the Campbell of Islay Collection.