Oral Tradition and History in a Hebridean Island

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The Gaelic-speaking Highlands of Scotland are rightly regarded as possessing unique oral traditions of great interest and immense antiquity.[1] The songs, tales, proverbs, clan traditions and music have been intensively collected and frequently published in works of folklore, literature and history. But with a few notable exceptions, almost exclusively found among scholars versed in Gaelic, professional historians have seldom in modern times looked to this body of oral tradition as a serious historical source, nor among the multiplying works on the history of the Highlands has there been any major critical assessment of oral tradition as a historical source.

It is not surprising to find historians chary of hazarding their reputations in a field in which they are untrained. Nevertheless, there is a strong *prima facie* case for approaching the history of the Highlands with a mind alert to the claims of oral tradition. It is a region where general literacy in English arrived only in the last hundred years, where written sources are relatively scarce and often quite absent and where the transmission of knowledge has depended very largely on oral methods. Families of hereditary *seanchaidhs* once existed under chiefly patronage to recall and recite the history of the clan. Since the eighteenth century there has been no professional class of clan historians, bards or musicians but oral traditions have flourished at a popular level and have been passed on both within the family and in the informal evening gatherings or *ceilidhs* where songs and stories were sung and tales recited. It is this lively popular interest and passion for the arts that has chiefly preserved the music, poetry and narrative lore of the Highlanders up to the present.

Professionalism had gone from the scene, but the transmission of stories and songs and other lore still depended in every part of the Highlands on story tellers and singers and *seanchaidhs* with natural gifts and tenacious memories. The early collectors on the staff of the School of Scottish Studies recorded, a generation ago, tales that required several evenings for the recital, and repertoires of individual singers (like the late Nan Mackinnon of Vatersay) that numbered several hundred songs. All these items, with few exceptions, had been acquired, and were recalled, without the intervention of writing. The historical knowledge and powers of recall of such natural *seanchaidhs* as the late Donald Alex MacEachan in Benbecula were equally impressive. He had traditional knowledge which frequently threw light on important aspects of social and economic life in the islands which are left obscure in written records. His genealogical

knowledge included virtually every family in Benbecula and ranged over three to four hundred years with ease and certainty. He described himself as 'Donald Alexander, son of Alexander, son of Donald, son of Alexander, son of Eoghainn, son of Iain Bàn, son of Eoghainn Mór of Drumnadaraich', and he was able to quote traditional accounts concerning events in the lives of his remote forebears. An example taken from one of the few recordings which he made in English may be quoted:

> There was Eoghainn, who was a soldier. He was at Culloden ... He survived Culloden but he passed two miserable years in England after Culloden ... in prison. And it was through Clanranald that he got out of there, that he got home. And he was slightly wounded at Culloden field and he was either taken to Leith or taken overland to London ... I've heard that he was stripped even of his undergarments on Culloden field. And Clanranald paid some money, a kind of ransom, to get him back here to Benbecula, and he got the land free of rent from Clanranald till the day of his death. That was the pension he got, the croft that I reside on today. (SA 1973/34A)

How accurate and valuable are such oral traditions to the historians? Granted the good faith and marvellous faculties of one's informants, how strong and reliable is the chain of transmission? William Matheson, an outstanding authority on Gaelic oral tradition, indicated in a paper given at Edinburgh in 1977, that the influence of folkloristic *motifs* and of other distorting factors has to be reckoned with. In general, however, little work has been done in the crucial area where storytelling and poetry interact with historical tradition. For that matter, we know little about the influence of political events and pressures on clan traditions, though it is a century since Skene showed how, with their land under the threat from central government, clan genealogies were revised to incorporate more acceptable forebears.

Historians and anthropologists, faced with a comparable situation in non-European societies, have examined oral traditions more critically. Some of the early optimism felt about the reliability of African historical tradition became modified as a result, notably in Vansina's work. The conclusions of anthropologists like Willis and historians like Roberts and Law make it clear that whilst historical traditions may be of considerable value to the historian, the influence of myth, political interest, written texts and human frailty is constantly present, and operates overwhelmingly on traditions that trace back to a period before the nineteenth century.

We do not know without careful investigation whether similar conclusions are true of oral traditions in the Highlands of Scotland, where social and cultural conditions were different. The present article discusses some aspects of an investigation recently carried out at the School of Scottish Studies which affords a firmer basis to judge the historical validity of oral tradition in the Hebridean island of Tiree. If the conclusions formed only partially agree with those reached by Africanists, it should be pointed out

that our investigation was more limited in time scale, reaching back into but hardly before the eighteenth century; it was also based on very different types of oral material, being concerned primarily with the traditions of ordinary island families and settlements in contrast with those of ruling groups and tribal entities, as is mainly the case in African studies.

The Tiree investigation developed from a series of field-trips commencing in 1968, made with the purpose of recording from the lips of the islanders such oral traditions as survived on topics already familiar to me from earlier documentary research. The interest and abundance of the traditional lore led first to limited but detailed local studies where methods and techniques were gradually improved, and finally to a fully-developed enquiry into the history and traditions of the island from circa 1770 to 1914. A small research unit was established in 1973, with funding from the Social Science Research Council. It consisted of a research fellow (Dr Margaret A. Mackay), a research assistant (Mrs Jane MacGregor) and a director (myself). Dr Mackay and I had both studied Gaelic and Mrs MacGregor was a native-speaker, whilst more extensive Gaelic interviewing was made possible with the assistance of Donald W. Mackenzie, who had been reared and had worked in the Hebrides. We had generous academic and technical help from our colleagues in the School. Four years of intensive work, followed by further, closely related research among emigrant families in Canada, yielded a large amount of data based both on traditional and written sources.

In the period up to 1977 (which includes the earlier work in Tiree from 1968 but only the earlier part of the overseas research) our oral material was collected from over a hundred and twenty informants in some five hundred interviews. Interviews varied in length but averaged about three hours. Approximately three hundred hours of material were recorded on tape. Nearly all songs and oral texts were recorded in Gaelic, and much of the historical tradition was recorded in both English and Gaelic versions. Our informants were drawn from a wide social range, though with a predominance of crofters and their wives, craftsmen and ex-seamen, and a sprinkling of shopkeepers, professional people and members of the business world. They lived in all parts of the island, in mainland Scotland and overseas. Some were young or middle-aged but the majority were in the range sixty to eighty and above. Most were interviewed at least twice and some informants, whose range and abundance of traditional lore would have earned them in former times the respected title of *seanchaidh*, were visited frequently in successive years and recorded a score or more times.

Our collection had a historical bias, but within the context of a wide-based study of the island community it was in fact impossible to distinguish what was historical from what was literary or folkloristic. All categories of traditional lore were of potential value and we recorded much that might be termed popular oral literature, embracing prose narrative, poetry and song. We might, had time allowed, have collected a fuller record of such items to supplement the earlier collections of the Rev. Hector Cameron and others.

Other Hebridean islands might have matched our traditional sources but possibly none could have rivalled the written sources available for Tiree. They were subject to the limitations common to all historical sources referring to the Highlands (and indeed frequently also to the Lowlands): parish registers of births and marriages extant only from circa 1770 (and defective in the earlier decades), deaths unregistered until 1855, official census lists non-existent until 1841; private correspondence and diaries, extremely sparse; travellers' accounts mainly dating from the nineteenth century. Some legal, ecclesiastical, parliamentary and government records were relatively detailed though mainly for the period after circa 1850, when printed material also became more available. We had the advantage, however, that Tiree had been administered for nearly three hundred years by the earls and dukes of Argyll, whose estate records, preserved at Inveraray Castle, though uncatalogued, were unusually complete and detailed. My earlier historical work on these records had made me familiar with this invaluable source and the willing help of the present duke and his father enabled this project to be realised, despite the disruption caused by a destructive fire in the castle in 1975 and its subsequent rebuilding.

Gradually we assembled two contrasting bodies of evidence — on the one hand the written record of estate and government officials, inspectors, ministers, teachers, journalists and visitors and, on the other, the popular record of oral tradition which we recorded from the islanders themselves when sitting by their fireside or on a field bank. There was now an opportunity to compare and evaluate the written and the oral records.

The two bodies of evidence are separate and distinctive. Quite apart from their contrasting literary forms, they select different aspects of history to emphasise or ignore. Even when dealing with the same topics the treatment is quite different as will become apparent in the following pages. One cannot maintain that the process of oral transmission has been totally sealed off from the growing influence of the written word but it played a relatively minor part until the late nineteenth century; literacy was restricted and little was available in print except religious works. We have evidence that songs composed in Tiree were occasionally written down by the composer or someone else; this practice goes back into much earlier times in the Highlands, but its part in the whole process of transmission of songs, stories and family lore appears to have been slight.[2] In order to highlight what is characteristic of the oral tradition of Tiree and to indicate its degree of validity as a historical source it is proposed in this article to cite a selection of the collected material which relates to the island during the period circa 1770 to 1850.

In 1770 the island of Tiree, lying far out from the mainland of Argyll, lacking a good harbour and surrounded by turbulent seas, was remarkably isolated from the rest of Scotland. Its population, numbering between 1700 and 1800 people and scattered in small communities over the twenty-eight square miles of the island, was largely indigenous and untravelled and spoke only Gaelic. Agriculture was the basis of

the economy and land was widely distributed among the small tenants, who in turn gave employment to the cottars, a group which provided the craftsmen, labourers and servants and was usually paid in grazing rights and the use of small plots of arable land. The island was relatively fertile and supported the population in greater comfort than was usual in the Highlands. Little was imported and the rents were paid from the barley crop and the proceeds of a flourishing trade in locally-distilled whisky. (*Instructions* xxvi ff.)

There were about thirty extensive farms in the island. Some were in the hands of tacksmen (upper tenants), three of them Macleans, the others Campbells who resided in Mull or elsewhere in Argyll. Most of the farms however were occupied by groups of co-tenants who practised a semi-communal system, in which the individually-worked and scattered strips of arable were periodically reallocated among the tenants. This runrig agriculture rested on cooperation and, at some cost in terms of efficiency and experiment, ensured rough justice.

Manufacture, apart from a feeble linen industry, scarcely existed, and there was no commercial fishery. Land and cattle were thus of vital importance to the islanders, and the object of constant striving and concern. The upper tenants had traditionally enjoyed extensive holdings of land in virtue of their kinship with the laird. Under the Campbell chiefs, the claims of blood were more grudgingly acknowledged but were not ignored and tended to perpetuate the economic privileges of the tacksmen (Cregeen 1969).

Ordinary islanders regularly divided their holdings to support close relations, a custom which was already by 1770 producing serious fragmentation of land. More widely, they belonged to kinship groups which bound together tenants and cottars and were usually concentrated in particular localities. Thus many MacUolrigs (Kennedies) were clustered in a number of contiguous townships in the extreme west, a group of MacDonald kinsfolk at the east end, and a concentration of Campbells in and about Balenoe. The members in each group traced their descent from a common ancestor. Sometimes this ancestor was of high status as in the case of the 'Diurach' (Jura) Macleans, who claimed as their founder in Tiree a certain Ailein Dubh ('black Alan') who may date to the sixteenth century.[3] Consciousness of rank and class was thus contained within a framework of family and kin.

Clanship was dying out as a political force in the Highlands in the late eighteenth century, but the sentiment of clanship was still amazingly strong in Tiree. This was partly because of historical circumstances. The Campbells had acquired Tiree and other territories from the former chiefs and lairds, the Macleans of Duart, in the late seventeenth century. Maclean tacksmen and their allies and dependents had witnessed the alienation of much of their land to Campbell settlers and others favoured by the dukes of Argyll (Cregeen 1969, 96–99). Resentment against the intruders continued to fuel the loyalty of the islanders to the representatives of the Macleans even as late as the end of the eighteenth century. 'The small tenants of Tiry,' wrote an official of the

new duke in 1771, 'are disaffected to the family of Argyll. In this disposition it's thought that long leases might render them too much independent of them and encourage the people to that sort of insolence and outrage to which they are naturally prone and much incited by their chieftains of the Maclean gentry.'[1] These words, from the pen of a member of the Campbell settlers in Mull, reflect not only Maclean hostility to the Campbells but the distrust which the Campbells entertained towards the Macleans and their supporters in the island.

The oral traditions of the island were inevitably much affected by events. The Maclean chiefs had formerly maintained bards, pipers and *seanchaidhs* (the *seanchaidh* was part story-teller, part historian) to celebrate clan deeds and provide entertainment in their halls. Such posts were hereditary in certain families, and served to transmit lore and skills from one generation to the next. Chiefly patronage ceased in the eighteenth century, except on a modest scale among the minor Campbell and Maclean gentry who resided in Tiree (Cregeen and Mackenzie 1978, 5–7). The last of the official bards, John Maclean, received patronage from the laird of the neighbouring island of Coll, as had his great-grandfather, Neil Lamont, but, for lack of sufficient material support, he emigrated to Canada in 1819.

As clan institutions for the transmission of lore and history withered, oral tradition of a more popular kind rose to prominence in Tiree as elsewhere in the Highlands. In the early 1790s the natives of the island were described as much attached to dancing, song and story-telling (*OSA* XX (1794), 1983, 276). This ceilidh tradition, with its nightly gatherings in house or barn for entertainment, persisted vigorously through the nineteenth century and into fairly recent times. The earlier, more aristocratic tradition still had an influence; after all the story-tellers and 'village poets' were sometimes descended from the ancient families of official *seanchaidhs* and bards. But the focus of interest in bardic composition moved to the everyday events and familiar personalities of the contemporary scene, and the songs, with their fresh and topical flavour, convey the experiences and emotions of the ordinary islanders (Cregeen and Mackenzie 1978). The songs of the Maclean period appear to have fallen out of use and none survived to be written down or recorded in Tiree in the twentieth century.

It is now necessary, before discussing the oral evidence that bears on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to explain briefly what emerges from a study of the written records of that period.

Tiree, in common with the Highlands in general, was profoundly affected by the industrialisation of the Scottish Lowlands. The growth of woollen manufacture brought extensive sheep-farming and depopulation to the interior of the Highlands, but Lowland industry affected maritime areas in a quite different way. There it stimulated the labour-intensive kelp-burning manufacture which used seaweed as its raw material. The rise of this industry discouraged emigration and thus tended to be associated with a rapid increase of population (Gray 1957, 124–137). The Napoleonic war period

in Tiree was one of swift economic change, unusual prosperity and soaring population. The islanders benefited from the kelp boom, in contrast with many Hebrideans, largely because the Argyll estate left the kelp shores in the possession of the tenants under leases which gave them a generous share of the profits (*Instructions*, xxvii–xxxiii, 32ff., 46, 185–194, and unpublished Instructions).

Agriculture and settlement patterns underwent a most significant change during the war period. Under the paternalistic rule of the 5th duke of Argyll, one of the great improvers of his age, the landless cottars were settled on small holdings. This was made possible by his radical policy of depriving the non-resident Campbell gentry of their farms in Tiree and dividing them into crofts of six and ten acres. A commercial fishery was also established for the employment of the crofters. Most important of all, the duke finally gained the assent and cooperation of the islanders in a scheme he had long cherished: the traditional runrig system was abandoned and in its place compact individual farms averaging about twenty-five acres (ten hectares) were created within the townships for the previous runrig tenants. Whilst retaining certain communal activities, the tenants were now free to develop their arable land as they wished. Aided by long leases, grants and technical and other assistance from the estate, the islanders began to adopt new crops and methods (*Instructions*, 73–79). This was a veritable revolution and it stands as one of the most impressive instances of beneficial improvement in Highland Scotland, where change was too often accompanied by clearance and hardship (*Instructions*, xxx–xxxv and 55ff.).

Conditions deteriorated in the post-1815 period. It was one of the penalties of becoming enmeshed in world markets that the local economies of the islands were rendered more vulnerable. Tiree suffered severely in the post-war decline in agricultural prices and especially from the collapse of the market for kelp. The hardship was intensified by the rapid growth of the population of the island, which doubled in the fifty years after 1790, rising from 2416 in 1792 to 4687 in 1841 (*Instructions*, xxxix and *NSA* 208). Younger islanders resorted to seasonal work in the Lowlands but there was little permanent emigration until the late 1840s when blight destroyed the potato crop over a number of years and the threat of starvation brought a wholesale exodus (Tiree papers, Inveraray Castle).

We turn now to consider what oral record survives in the memory of the islanders about this period of growth and innovation. We found many traditions bearing on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, mainly among old people in their seventies and eighties. They took the form of songs, stories and anecdotes, place-name lore, sayings and genealogies. Like the written sources they varied in abundance, being sometimes amazingly full and detailed, sometimes sparse or non-existent. On the one hand they recreated the stir and bustle of vanished communities and breathed life into mere names; on the other they would sometimes ignore events of importance as if they had never occurred and took delight, it seemed, in mingling fact and fantasy. A brief acquaintance with the island and its traditions might have

given the impression that historians had little to learn from this strange amalgam. Growing knowledge of the less obvious riches of our informants' minds was to prove more rewarding.

The leading figures of the times had left their impression on oral tradition, as one would have expected. In general the earlier dukes were august figures beyond the normal range of popular knowledge and recall, though 'Duke John' ('Iain diuc') appeared several times in the tradition of one informant. But oral tradition has much to say about the duke's chamberlains, those grand officials who were entrusted with the administration of the island and whose word was law. In the traditional accounts they often appear as larger than life and are represented either as heroic personages or as sinister and awesome figures. Their persons have been magnified by the story-telling tradition of the *ceilidh*, and coloured by the imagery of the heroic tale, but they preserve an identity which we can recognise as the historical characters we know from the written records. Even in their exaggerated form they act, as it were, in character. The traditions which survive about Donald Campbell or 'Bàillidh Dòmhnull' serve as an illustration.

Donald Campbell bore sway as chamberlain from 1770 to 1800. He belonged to one of the Campbell families who had settled in Mull and were evidently descended from the Lochnell branch of the Campbells (*Instructions*, 3). Estate papers reveal him as a man of stubborn integrity, who consistently defended the interests of the islanders and irritated his superiors by pointing out the inadequacies of doctrinaire schemes of economic improvement (*Instructions*, 1–49). An old man called Donald Sinclair[5] sometimes spoke to me about the chamberlain, referring to him as 'Bàillidh Dòmhnull' and praising his noble and benevolent character. It was striking that although the oral traditions took the characteristic form of praise-song and heroic tale, their general tenor was in agreement with what one knew of him from written sources. According to the accounts which had been current in his township when he was young, the Bàillidh had two sons who fought in the Peninsular war and were killed in battle. He had heard old people sing eulogies of the sons and of their father, composed by a Tiree bard at the time, and he rendered some verses of one of the songs.[6]

The two sons, according to the praise-songs, had all the courage, strength, beauty and ferocity that are usually attributed in traditional Gaelic poetry to heroic warriors. One of them set up a battery on a hill in Spain during the Peninsular war and is represented as carrying two massive cannons, one under each arm. The existence of the songs must have helped to perpetuate traditions of Donald Campbell and his sons, for they would be sung and discussed in the *ceilidh*. Donald Sinclair's account of the young men is influenced by them, but he also had other sources of information. When he was a child his family had known an old man whose father remembered them as boys playing shinty (Donald sometimes rendered the Gaelic term 'camanachd' as 'hockey') on a grassy level land behind the shore.

> Macdonald was his name, Duncan Macdonald. He would tell you a story about Bàillidh Dòmhnull's children. When he was a boy he was brought up over somewhere at Hilipol there, and the Bàillidh's sons, you know between the pillar up at the Bàillidh's house and the church down at Balenoe, the level ground that is there, they used to be playing hockey there, and this Duncan Bàn, he used to tell my father when the factor's sons would be running you would fancy it was horses that was running, the ground was shaking under their feet. And the two of them were killed in Spain, aye, a pity, aye. (SA 1969/165B.)

There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the story of the boys playing shinty on the Balenoe *machair*, but Donald's account is that of a story-teller and it echoes the imagery of the heroic tales which he had heard recited in his childhood.

The Napoleonic war formed the background of a good deal of anecdote and local tradition which bear the hall-mark of authenticity. Some traditions crystallised around the battle of Waterloo. A fine informant, Hector Kennedy, gave the names of local men who had been press-ganged and had been at the battle.[7] He recounted that his own great-grandfather Archibald Campbell was present and survived the battle but died at the hands of a wounded French soldier afterwards. Hector showed us the croft at Barrapol which he had occupied and the two houses built by his sons when the croft was later divided between them. Another family still bears the nickname which derived from their ancestor's action in evading conscription by cutting off the end of his thumb. The historical basis for these traditions cannot be put to the proof but it is clearly necessary to know what degree of veracity such local and family traditions have. Fortunately it has been possible to put traditions of similar age to the test, in particular certain traditions about a local migration.

A surveyed plan of the island made by James Turnbull in 1769 shows the settlement of Hough as a cluster of houses on the west side of the hill of Beinn Hough. At some time its location was changed and the present inhabitants of Hough live on the east side of the hill. In our search for information we learned from Hector Kennedy that a sandstorm had deluged the old settlement, the well had filled with sand, and the inhabitants had removed inland to Kilmoluag (SA 1979/75). The story of this event was amplified by others. Local tradition at Kilmoluag, we found, confirmed the Hough origin of a number of families. One old man in his nineties directed us to the site of the abandoned house of his forebear. Another informant, Alasdair Macdonald, a descendant of one of the migrants, ascribed the migration of his great-grandfather, Alan Macdonald, and of other inhabitants of Hough, to drifting sand.

The event was assigned by Hector Kennedy to the Spring before the battle of Waterloo and he connected it with the visit of the press-gang to Tiree 'for the first time'. Usually the chronology of an event in oral tradition has vaguer boundaries though the use of such phrases as 'when my grandfather was a boy' can limit an event to within a decade. It was important for us to explore historical sources to test the

authenticity of this tradition. In favour of its credibility was the fact that he had learned it from a certain Willie MacPhail, a reputable tradition-bearer and bard at Kilmoluag, and that he himself had proved unusually reliable and well-informed on many occasions. It was also perfectly credible that a settlement had been abandoned as a consequence of inundation by blown sand. Such occurrences are well authenticated in the Hebrides, and in Tiree it is known from Turnbull's 1769 Description that sand-drift had rendered as much as an eighth of the agricultural land useless in the late eighteenth century and that sand had overwhelmed a kirkyard at Kilkenneth near Hough some years before 1792 (*OSA*, XX (1794), 1983, 263–4). There was a major problem, however, in that relevant documents between 1810 and the early 1820s were not to be found. In no written source known to us was there any explicit reference to the events at Hough.

My colleague, Dr Margaret A. Mackay, went some way towards solving the problem when she examined the Tiree and Coll parish register. She found that there had indeed been a movement of population from Hough to Kilmoluag. In the years immediately following, children were recorded as born at Kilmoluag to parents who had not long previously had children recorded as born at Hough. An estate rental of 1823 showed tenants at Kilmoluag who had been earlier resident at Hough.

But did the events occur exactly as the traditional account represents? Since the migration was evidently in progress in or shortly after 1820, either the traditional association with the Spring before Waterloo was incorrect or else there was a series of minor migrations, starting off after a catastrophic storm in 1815 and continuing, as the sand spread its havoc further over the settlement, until the whole population had moved. Such a development would accord with experience of the way in which coastal land is progressively damaged by blown sand. If this was the case, the tradition has presented a gradual movement as a single dramatic event in a manner characteristic of the story teller's art and well known to folklorists. Alternatively, we may suppose that the migration in fact took place around 1820 and was transposed in time, somewhere along the chain of oral transmission, either through a misunderstanding or for dramatic effect. There are other examples in traditional accounts of a great event, here the battle of Waterloo, exercising its gravitational attraction on minor events in its temporal field.

Whichever is the true explanation of this mysterious event, it was rescued from oblivion by oral tradition, and the substantial accuracy of the oral account is largely supported by such historical records as could be discovered. At the same time it is evident that in matters of detail tradition has taken certain liberties perhaps in the interests of dramatic effect, and requires the restraining hand of the sober historian. Dr Mackay sums up her conclusions after a detailed study of this case: 'Neither the oral tradition nor the written sources can tell the whole story of what happened at Hough, but used in combination each can illuminate the other and add a further dimension to the account'.[8]

If we consider the history of Tiree settlements more generally, the contrasting but complementary nature of the two bodies of data becomes more evident. The written sources, especially estate papers, often contain detailed evidence on the physical character of the townships, their agricultural system and economic value, social composition and demographic features. It is given in a coherent form and frequently statistically, combined with observations that show the historian that the writer is like himself in his thought-processes and values. This obliging form of presentation is usually absent from the body of oral data. Its evidence is rarely given either in broad generalisations or with exact numerical precision. Its view is that of the insider and its language and images, familiar to the islanders, frequently have to be interpreted before they can be understood and utilised by the historian. Once understood, oral evidence was found to shed light on many aspects of social life, and complemented the evidence of officials and reporters in a fascinating way.

The topographic evidence was straightforward enough, though requiring some knowledge of Gaelic. It enabled us to fix the location of settlements which had almost vanished and identify their wells, folds, kilns, bothies and other structures. The ruins of dwellings, deserted over a century ago, occasionally preserved the names of their occupants. The remains of a church of eighteenth century date, sometimes mentioned in the records but recently described as having left 'no identifiable remains' (RCAHMS Argyll, Vol. 3, 158n.) were yet shown to us, clear and unmistakable, by an informant on the open moor of Druimbuigh. The building was known to him and others as 'an tigh-searmoin' ('the preaching house') and was connected with other lore, including the tradition that the first Independent minister in Tiree, Archibald Farquharson, had regularly preached there.

The destruction of a settlement by sand impressed itself on the folk-memory, but strangely enough there is no comparable tradition concerning the way in which the runrig settlements were transformed into townships of compact small farms and individual crofts. The impression derived from contemporary estate papers is of an island in a ferment of activity between 1803 and 1807 (*Instructions*, 93–97, and unpublished Instructions). Tenants occupied the new buildings which had been allotted to them in their townships and built houses and enclosures, dragging stones and timbers from the houses of the old settlements nearby, whilst landless cottars, eager to secure a holding, moved from their townships to the new crofting settlements at Scarinish, Heanish, Balemartin, Gott, Mannal and Balephuil. In the background of all the bustle was the enigmatic figure of the chamberlain, Malcolm MacLaurine, busy attending to the duke's orders or his own private and less respectable pursuits. The written sources point clearly to a relatively swift and radical change in a deep-rooted way of life. In the oral traditions of the island knowledge survives of ancestors who moved to newly created holdings, but one would never suspect that a new policy had been introduced and with it a dramatic social change.

The contrast in what is conveyed by the two types of source can be demonstrated if we consider the township of Balephuil in the south-west of the island. The 5th duke withdrew this large farm from the chamberlain in order to accommodate cottars and returned fencible soldiers. In the estate records we find that in 1806 a number of soldiers moved into the crofts there and were soon followed by settlers from other townships (unpublished letters and Instructions at Inveraray Castle). These settlers are rarely named in the surviving records and their place of origin usually remains unknown. Some engaged in fishing and were assisted by the estate to acquire boats and lines. The new chamberlain, Malcolm MacLaurine, showed his resentment for the loss of the farm in the acts of petty vindictiveness against the settlers here and elsewhere, but the duke protected them and sternly reminded the official of the responsibilities of his position, as he had in 1803 when he wrote: 'I sent you to Tyree to be my factor, to look after and promote my interest and the good of the people, not to be a great farmer seeking suddenly to enrich and aggrandise yourself' (*Instructions*, 95).

These events and personalities are preserved in oral tradition but in a significantly different way. It knows nothing of MacLaurine's connection with these agrarian reforms but several informants had accurate details of his personal life — that he was a doctor, that he lived with a sister at Hilipol and that he carried on amours with local women. Some verses of an unpublished bawdy song, composed by one of the Balephuil poets, narrate one of his affairs with a loose woman in the neighbourhood in vivid nautical imagery (SA 1968/263B). It was not until some years after the song was recorded that my colleague Dr Margaret Mackay discovered from the parish register that he had fathered two illegitimate children on two different women in the district.

Our informants also had tales of uncanny powers possessed by the chamberlain. He had succeeded in floating a boat marooned on the shore and had known where to find a stolen piece of timber which he had intended to use as a mast. The source of his knowledge was said to be a large black book which he kept in the house. Whilst he consulted it he wore an iron hoop on his head as protection against the powers he was invoking to his aid (SA 1969/165B and SA 1970/106A). These stories, told with perfect seriousness, evidently reflect what the islanders believed and felt about the chamberlain at that time. They convey resentment and distrust, but mingled with these is a certain respect and awe for the man's power and esoteric knowledge. Whilst they incorporate *motifs* widely known in oral literature, they express a certain moral truth about MacLaurine and dramatise the self-seeking and sinister aspects of the man.

What has tradition preserved of the actual history of the creation of the crofting townships? It has retained nothing to suggest the sequence of events that created crofts in this and other townships or the upheaval in old-established practices they brought. What the oral traditions recorded at Balephuil do provide, however, are invaluable details of families and individuals who settled here and formed its character, and many sidelights on township life during a long period after the Napoleonic war when written sources are largely silent. This concentration on the experience of

individuals, often kinsmen of our informants, to the exclusion of more general movements, is one of the distinctive characteristics of the oral record. It can be turned to advantage for historical reconstruction, as I hope to show in relation to the township of Balephuil, where I recorded a considerable body of information, mainly between 1968 and 1974.

These traditions concern a number of families among the early settlers in the township who eventually became linked by marriage. There are the Sinclairs, a family celebrated for traditions of all kinds, whose earlier associations were evidently with the north-west of the island; the Macdonalds who came from the east end of the island and were known as 'na Duibh' (a name which referred to their dark colouring); the Macleans, who also hailed from the east end and possessed a gift for poetic composition so that other families still like to claim relationship with them; the Browns whose ancestor married into this stock and whose present-day representative is a notable *seanchaidh*; the Blacks, whose forebear came as a minor estate official and was given a croft at Balephuil. These are only five of the forty-three crofter families who originally settled at Balephuil, but their family traditions, which are interwoven with one another and with others in the township, will serve to illumine the early history of the community.

They tell us of a returned soldier named Calum mac Iain 'ic Neill, or Malcolm Macdonald, settling on a croft which is still pointed out above a shore where kelp was burnt in kilns. According to family lore he had served in the Peninsular war as a valet to a surgeon and on his return put his experience to good use by practising the art of bleeding on his fellow-islanders; hence his nickname 'Lancer'. A characteristic story describes how he quarrelled about the seaweed with a woman on the shore and how, calling her a witch he drew his lancer's knife and slashed her petticoat and marked her (SA 1969/165). Tradition says that he came from Caolas at the east end of Tiree and that he was one of the so-called 'black Macdonalds' who were known for their lawless behaviour. This traditional lore and his patronymic, naming him as Calum mac Iain 'ic Neill 'ic Dhomhnuill 'ic Iain Duibh (Malcolm son of John son of Neil son of Donald son of black John), enabled us to overcome the problem of defective estate and parish records and to attach him to a family of tenants who occupied land at the east end of the island a century before Malcolm moved to Balephuil (SA 1969/165 and SA 1971/90B). This is one among many instances in which oral tradition made identification possible and so provided the key to information contained in written sources which would otherwise have been inaccessible.

The Macdonalds became allied with the Macleans by the marriage of Malcolm's sister, Mary, to Donald Maclean. A brother of the famous bard, John Maclean, Donald (otherwise known as 'the Cooper') could turn his hand to making a song as easily as he could fashion a barrel out of oaken staves. Donald and Mary settled at Balephuil on a poor croft which they later exchanged for a better one and established a thriving family, all of whom were talented and given to composing songs. His own songs were

true 'village poetry', descriptions of local events and persons, and were passed on orally till recent times. From one of them we learn of his flitting from the old township, Caolas, at the east end of the island to the new croft at the west end, and the tasks which faced him in ploughing up the wet, rushy land with a plough repaired by the local blacksmith and a team of four horses made up with the help of a number of fellow-crofters (SA 1971/92).[10]

A daughter of Malcolm MacDonald, Anne, married Alasdair Sinclair[11] (*Alasdair Og*), who occupied a nearby croft, and from them descended the remarkable tradition-bearer Donald Sinclair, who was usually known as *Dòmhnall Chaluim Bàin* — Donald son of fair Malcolm. Malcolm was a great story-teller, sought out by folklorists in the last century. I knew Donald as an old man and recorded a great variety of lore from him — charms, cures, sayings, place-names, genealogies, folk-tales, anecdotes, songs and reminiscences. He drew his vast store from many sources, from *ceilidhing* with old people, and from inheriting the accumulated traditions of Macleans, MacDonalds, Sinclairs, MacArthurs and other families connected with him. Although by the time that I knew him he was over eighty and his mind was occasionally confused, his traditional knowledge was remarkable in range, accuracy and depth. Among a group of outstanding tradition-bearers connected with Balephuil, he was recognised as the doyen.[12]

The written sources are often silent on the life of the crofting township in the years 1810 to 1840; births and marriages are recorded, and there are occasional lists of tenants and their rents, but little else for the estate records for Tiree are incomplete in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In the local songs and traditions however there is mention of fishing trips and boats bringing in smuggled tobacco and liquor; of illicit stills making whisky; of the herding of cattle and milking in the folds; of occupations carried on by local men and of young men and women travelling to the Lowland harvests; of marriages and deaths in the community, and tales of 'waking' the dead; of poets and story-tellers in the township, and witchcraft and the second sight; of disasters and epidemics and emigrations. It would in fact be quite impossible to present an accurate and balanced social history of the island community without drawing upon oral traditions. Sometimes they are the only source of information about the normal events of daily life; at other times they supplement and illumine what written records provide.

Typical of such transmitted lore are the songs and stories about the herding of cattle on the commons, a subject which is little noticed in written sources. In oral sources it is often mentioned, sometimes with reference to fairly recent times, when the virtues and vices of the township herd are a recurring theme in the island's satiric songs, sometimes in the remoter past.[13] Children were much employed in herding but the crofters of each township usually jointly engaged one or more professional herds. The remains of two drystone buildings on the slope of Beinn Hoighnis were shown to us in 1973 by a Balephuil crofter, John Brown, and identified by him as the

former dwellings of herdsmen. The lower one, which was much dilapidated, was known as *tigh a'bhuachaille bhig* ('the little herd's house'), and the upper one as *tigh a'bhuachaille mhoir* ('the big herd's house').

The upper dwelling stood in a fold enclosed by a crumbling stone and turf dyke, where the grass still showed a more intense green than the surrounding hill. Above the fold was a strong dyke encircling the upper slopes and identified by our informant as *garadh nan each* ('the horses' enclosure'), a name which indicated where the tenants used to graze the sturdy ponies so often referred to in eighteenth century estate papers and eventually banished early in the nineteenth century (*Instructions*, 55, 59, 67, 89). The substantial walls of the herdsman's dwelling contained a small chamber near the entrance which fitted the description of it as a dog's kennel, whilst two slab-lined pits against the outer wall were said to have been used to store potatoes, which were part of his pay. It would be difficult to date the structure exactly. According to our informant it had fallen out of use long before his father was born in 1882 but its well-built stone walls, its state of preservation and the mention of potatoes provided by the crofters suggest an early nineteenth century context.

The history of the crofting families of Balephuil was also greatly amplified by our oral sources, which could be used to enhance the potential of written sources by providing more certain identification and other key information. Written sources mention some of the crofters and cottars of Balephuil in the early nineteenth century, in brief entries in rentals, parish registers or the records of government departments. One may discover their occupations, age, marriage-partner and children's names, their rent and how it was paid and whether they were in arrears. With luck one may find out whether they made kelp or had a fishing boat. But their personal traits and habits are seldom revealed, and their family connections and origins are usually difficult or impossible to verify. Names such as John Maclean and Donald MacDonald are so common even within one township that sure identification in historical sources is often impracticable. This is not so in the oral record of the township. Our informants knew their grandparents and great-grandparents by their patronymic and could guide us unhesitatingly to their kin and often to their place of origin.

Duncan Macdonald is recorded in the official census of 1841 as a boat-builder aged thirty-five, resident at Balephuil with his wife Janet and a daughter, Margaret. The records are otherwise unilluminating. In local tradition he is remembered as *Donnchadh ban mac Iain 'ic Sheumais* ('fair haired Duncan son of John son of James'), a skilled craftsman who travelled about widely, building sloops and smacks and whose family probably came to Balephuil from the neighbourhood of Hilipol. It was his father, Iain, who, in Donald Sinclair's account, witnessed the *baillidh's* sons playing shinty on the *machair* (SA 1971/90A).

Neil Brown is listed in the same census as a crofter, aged fifty, living at Balephuil with his wife Margaret and five children. Earlier he had had two small crofts and a Rental of 1823 shows that he was more than able to pay the rent on these (£1.8.6 and

£2.8.6) from the proceeds of kelp (£4.15.9). From family tradition we know that he was *Neill Mòr mac Iain 'ic Dhughaill* ('big Neil son of John son of Dugald') and that he had worked as a young man at foundries in the Clyde area as well as at (probably seasonal) farm-work; that the wife he married was a daughter of Donald the 'Cooper' who from her devotion to Highland ways was known as *Mairead Ghàidhealach* ('Highland Margaret'), that two of the daughters went to be servants on Lowland farms and one of their sons, Charles, left to work as a carpenter at Greenock, where he died at the age of twenty of smallpox. A nephew who died aged ninety in 1972 had been named Charles after him and with his son John, was my source for these traditions (SA 1974/83, SA 1976/120, and field-notes, 1972). From John Brown we know that his father and predecessors kept up the relationship with the Macleans at Caolas and attended their funerals at the east end — this for nearly a century and a half after Donald Maclean's removal to Balephuil. The origin of the Browns before their move to Balephuil is not retained, but the clues provided by the oral genealogy when combined with evidence in estate papers, strongly indicates the township of Balemeanach.

Here also in the census is John Black,[11] a widower and crofter of sixty years in 1841. The 1823 Rental shows him as occupying a croft for which he paid a rent of £8.17.0 — but the 1851 census describes him as 'pauper'. Family tradition is much fuller and more accurate in some respects. The census of 1851 gives his birthplace as 'Tiree', whereas Donald Sinclair (his great-grandson) narrates that he was of a Lismore family (inherently more probable) and that he came to Tiree in the service of the chamberlain, MacLaurine, bringing with him a wife from Inveraray and eventually settled in a croft by the shore at Balephuil (though now in Hynish West) which he lost at the time of the potato failure. Donald had a great deal of information about John Black's descendants. One of his daughters, Isabella, also appears in the census of 1841, married to an agricultural worker, Archibald Maclean. Her husband, known as *a ciobair* ('the shepherd') was to die in a fishing disaster. Isabella Black is of special interest and will appear again in the story of Balephuil.

Brief illustrations have been given of the combined use of written and oral sources in the areas of family history, personal biography and economic activities. In the historic reconstruction of social and cultural life the value of oral tradition is perhaps even more important for written sources are rarely able to illumine the mental activities, spiritual values and customary practices of Highland communities. They belonged to a world beyond the reach and interest of the English-speaking traveller, official and improver. No-one familiar only with the written records would suspect the cultural vitality of this township of crofters and fishermen. Most Highland townships had a poet or two but Balephuil was *baile nam bàrd* ('the township of the bards') and had numerous poets of both sexes. The poetic tradition existed early, for Archibald MacPhail, who composed the eulogies on Donald Campbell and his two sons, lived here (Cameron 1932, 4). The tradition was reinforced by the arrival of other settlers

given to poetic composition: Donald 'the Cooper' and his family, the Macdonalds at 'the *Sliabh*' (the upland area of Balephuil), the Blacks, the 'Manitoba' Macleans, and other talented families. From quite early in the nineteenth century there was a most remarkable burgeoning of song-composition in this township (Cregeen and Mackenzie 1978, 13ff.). Some families like the Sinclairs were more given to story-telling and *seanchas* (historical tradition), and others to dancing and piping, but there was a general delight in songs in every section of the community which we found still widespread and remarkable among the other people of Tiree. With this went a high regard and a certain fear for the poets as men and women of special power. It was they who celebrated in their compositions the significant events in the life of the community — the deaths, disasters, marriages and rejoicings — and immortalised the virtues of the living and the departed; they also mocked and ridiculed those who incurred their dislike in witty, bawdy, often savage satires. Donald Sinclair, himself a bard, was well aware of their fearful power and told me 'A wise man would keep on the poet's side so that he would not expose them'.

Oral sources proved able to suggest the operation of new cultural influences and subtle changes in the township. Among the bardic families was that of Duncan MacDougall,[15] who came from Mull circa 1820 as a Gaelic teacher and remained in Tiree as a Baptist missionary. He had a croft at Balephuil, baptised converts in the loch on the north side of the township and composed hymns of unusual merit. He came of a family of poets, his sister Mary being remembered in Mull as an accomplished bard and known more widely as the composer of the hymn *Leanabh an Aigh* (translated as 'Child in a Manger'). He himself had a family of children given to poetic composition. Nevertheless it is evident from oral sources that evangelical religion began to affect the poetic and story-telling tradition of Balephuil. It weaned some of the bards away from their concern with secular poetry, as in the case of the fisherman Alexander MacDonald.

John Black's daughter, Isabella, wife of the shepherd, referred to earlier, expressed this new spiritual concern in a song which she made on seeing a thrush singing on a rock on the shore. Like most of the village songs it was never printed but I have heard it sung. After addressing the thrush and praising its song, she compares its fate with that of herself and other mortal men and women.

> You are fortunate at the time of your death
> That you will not be dragged before the tribunal.
> You will fall down upon the ground
> But there will be no investigation of your life.
> But when I lie down
> And am pressed beneath the sward
> Unless I am alive in Jesus Christ
> I will stand condemned at the judgment-seat. (SA 1968/144A; translated)

It is evidence of this kind, drawn from oral tradition, that provides us with the clearest indications that social and cultural change, induced by contacts with the Lowlands, was taking place in Tiree in the early or middle decades of the century.

In the disastrous years between circa 1845 and 1850, the island in common with much of the Highlands was devastated by the failure of its potato crops and was drastically thinned by emigration. Balephuil lost many of its younger people including two sons of the Lancer and members of the Cooper's family and others who sailed to Canada. The sombre events can be followed in heartrending detail in documentary sources, which bring out the enormity of the crisis and the immense scale of relief measures organised by government, churches, lairds and private individuals. In oral tradition the calamities of these years have left only faint traces; there are excellent tradition-bearers who know nothing of this time of hunger, when over a third of the population had to leave the island. This strange ignorance is a reminder that sometimes the folk memory is faulty, or chooses to forget. The explanation in this particular instance is a complex one which merits detailed treatment in a future essay but would be out of place here.

In July 1856 a great storm sprang up suddenly and scattered the little fishing fleet which had set sail from Balephuil that morning. Twelve or more men and boys were drowned. The whole township was affected in one way or another. Except for notes left by one of the fishermen (Cameron 1932, 125–6), little is found in the written sources about the storm, but oral traditions still surviving at Balephuil and its neighbourhood about the 'Fuadach' preserve the details of this event and the impact which it had on the district in a way which written sources could not rival. It is illuminating to consider them for they illustrate the insights into basic patterns of thought and behaviour which oral sources afford. None of the five families mentioned earlier was directly involved except the Blacks; Isabel Black's husband, 'the shepherd', was drowned. The Sinclairs, though they were fishermen, sensed that the calm clear weather was deceptive and stayed at home. The scene was played out before the terrified onlookers.

> My mother remembered that day. She was a girl, a big girl at the time. And she saw two of the boats, they nearly made it but it was two old men and boys that was aboard and the boys was tired pulling at the oar. So they took the wind after them and made for Islay. But a good many were — There was two boys from Sliabh up there, two brothers, they were drowned. That's two, and there was Campbell, the steersman of this boat, three. And Maclean, the father of the people that was here, that's four. And two from Moss, that's six. There was about twelve or fourteen drowned. (SA 1968/243 B)

One of the survivors, a fisherman called Alasdair Macdonald, composed a lament which, sung by Donald Sinclair, seems to carry the sorrow of the whole community in its cadences:[17]

Oran an Fhuaidaich.

Refrain:

Tha mi fo chùram, fo mhòran cùraim
G'eil fear na stiùrach 'sa ghrunnd gun èirigh.

Seachad Colbhasa 'dh'fhàs i dorcha,
Bha uisge 's stoirm ann 's bha 'n fhairge beuchdaich

Tha fleasgaich's maighdeannan taobh Beinn Hoighnis,
Cha chulaidh aoibhnis a bhi 'gan èisdeachd.

My heart is laden, so heavy laden,
The helmsman's grave's in the ocean floor-bed.

Passing Colonsay, the sky grown surly,
The rain came squalling, the sea was roaring.

The youths and maidens around Ben Hynish
No cause of joy was to hear them mourning.

The echoes of the fatal day are still heard in houses in Tiree. An old woman living at Mannal told me that her grandmother described to her how she was just putting on the pot of potatoes for the family's mid-day meal when she heard the sound of the storm rising. Her husband Alasdair Macdonald was drowned and she left the croft with her young family to settle in a neighbouring village. The vacant croft and the adjacent one, where the crofter had also been lost in the storm, were given to a family called MacNeill from neighbouring Barrapol. The Browns at the Sliabh fared differently. Neill mór's sons were not to succeed to the croft and the chances of the family acquiring land were remote. The 'Fuadach' indirectly changed the situation. A family called Mackinnon held a small croft in the Sliabh of Balephuil. The crofter John Mackinnon had died earlier and his son was drowned in the storm, leaving a widow Margaret and three daughters in the croft. One of them, Ann, eventually married one of Neil Brown's sons, Archibald, who moved into the house and in due course inherited the land. Having no children, Archibald left the croft to his brother Malcolm, a fisherman, the father and grandfather of my informants.

For other families in Balephuil the 'Fuadach' had a more sinister significance, as Donald Sinclair, a descendant of the Blacks as well as the Sinclairs relates. His great-aunt Isabella Black had married Archibald Maclean, 'the shepherd', and had several children by him. The unfortunate shepherd died of exposure in the boat. But Isabella was suspected of practising witchcraft, and the story got about that she and Mary Campbell, the wife of the steersman of one of the boats, who was also drowned, had wished to get rid of their husbands and had created the storm by using their black art. Donald Sinclair, my informant, was convinced that this really was the case.

In the following account, translated from the original Gaelic, Donald Sinclair speaks of his great-aunt Isabella (the composer of the song to the thrush) and refers also to her being one of two women discovered earlier making a *corp creadha* or clay image to bewitch someone against whom they had a spite.

> A little pretty woman, but she had a really evil look about her all the same. They were saying that she was a witch, and so she was, a witch. And the disaster that befell Balephuil, when the men were drowned and the day turned bad, they were believing that it was this old woman and a sister of the one who was with her in the black narrows of Balephetrish, when they were making the clay body, that they were the two women who caused the Balephuil drowning disaster. Anyway they were blaming her. Neither of them had any great love for their husbands and they wanted to get rid of them ... And people were casting it up against these two women that it was them who caused the wind, because a witch is able to do just about anything. She'll make wind or calm just as she pleases. (SA 1968/ 245 A)

Had some of MacLaurine's black art rubbed off on the descendants of his ground officer, John Black? This may, in a sense, be near the truth. In Tiree, and elsewhere in the Highlands, witchcraft is a family characteristic, passed on to one's descendants, like bardic powers or the second sight. It was possessed by John Black's daughter, Isabella, and also by members of her sister Janet's family so that it eventually came into the immediate family of Donald Sinclair. We have come across other individuals and families in Tiree who have a reputation for witchcraft or for ill-luck, and frequently they are found, like the Blacks and MacLaurine, to be linked with the new régime as officials or settlers. They may in time have married in the island and appear to be assimilated into the population. But the stigma of witchcraft or ill-luck survives and prevents them from being wholly accepted within the community. Thus MacLaurine and the Blacks may have derived their reputation from the same source — association with the Macleans' clan enemy. This is speculation but perhaps the ill fame attaching to such individuals and families is the islanders' revenge for the Campbell conquest.

Oral traditions of widely different types have contributed to our study. Clearly not all proved to be of equal use and validity as an historical source. We recorded stories locally accepted as true accounts of historical events which on scrutiny turned out to have been derived from Fenian heroic tales. In another type of tradition based on actual notables in the island's history, the representation of persons and events betrayed the strong influence of storytelling, literacy devices and motifs or the conventions of praise-poetry, but an important factual basis remained. The quasi-legendary character acquired by our historical personages was evidently the price they had to pay to ensure survival in the popular memory. In yet another *genre*, concerned with local history and the experiences of forebears, the content of reliable historical detail was usually high and the influence of folkloristic motifs slight.

One cannot deny that myth in some form or another is always likely to be present in oral tradition. It affects even family tradition, that most valuable of oral historical sources. Stories of origin are difficult to corroborate and tend to incorporate folkloristic motifs whilst bold, skilful and strong ancestors show a tendency to become even more colourful. But the knowledge and accuracy of a good *seanchaidh* are impressive, and his genealogical lore will sometimes match time-scales in some of the oldest surviving written records. A depth of genealogical core of five to seven generations was common in the lore of our informants; the most that we encountered extended to nine generations. In this latter case it was possible to find historical corroboration in unpublished papers of much of the genealogy, but, as I have demonstrated in the Appendix, genealogical lore may incorporate and transmit errors and misapprehensions.

Such errors, however, are found equally in written sources and can be discovered by critical investigation. They do not weaken the claim of oral testimony to be utilised in historical investigation. However, its peculiar characteristics must be understood and then exploited by appropriate methods. The most valuable oral tradition in Tiree was locally and family-centred, viewing events in a native focus and selecting and stressing what was of interest and importance to the islanders. The investigator must adapt to this. He must not expect a date but a reference to a family event or a phase in an ancestor's life. He must not enquire after John Maclean but for John son of Donald — and preferably in Gaelic. It is not arranged in a form familiar to historians nor does it turn about the same topics. Its chronology is different, its frame of reference different. Our best informants could not be expected to deliver information and opinions on matters that preoccupy the academic historian: the trend of population figures, changes in living standard, relations between social classes, the emergence of new economic and social structures. But, as the earlier case-studies have shown, oral testimony greatly extended the range of our knowledge and brought to light crucial aspects of social life and cultural activity ignored or not understood by the literate creators of the written evidence: oral tradition preserved a vivid knowledge of events such as the abandonment of a settlement and the migration of families which had eluded the written record.

From traditional sources alone one would produce a strangely unstructured account of Tiree, but in our experience in dealing with oral as well as written sources, there is an unassailable case for the fullest study of oral traditions, even where written material is relatively abundant.

APPENDIX

Since much stress has been placed in this article on the value of family traditions, it is worth citing the genealogical lore of one of our main informants in some detail. Donald Sinclair recited his genealogy thus: Donald son of Malcolm son of Alasdair son of Alasdair son of *Alasdair* son of Neil son of Brian [pronounced Brehan] (SA 1971/

84A). Brian he claimed to have been a Barra man and on one occasion said that he came from Borve, eloped with the daughter of the MacNeill tacksman of Balnacreige and settled in Tiree, where he was given a holding (12/6/73). Donald was evidently uncertain about the first Alasdair (whom I have italicised) for sometimes he hesitated over the name and sometimes omitted it. The reason for this confusion may be that his great-great-grandfather's name was almost certainly not Alasdair, but Alan, a name with the same initial syllable. At any rate Donald's great-grandfather can be identified with fair assurance with an Alexander Sinclair, who is listed as aged six in the family of Alan Sinclair and Catherine Mackinnon in Kirkapol in Tiree in 1779 (Cregeen 1963, 53), whilst at the same date there is a Neil Sinclair a tenant in Ballamhulin who could be Alan's father (Cregeen 1963, 34). A 1776 List makes this even more likely since it gives Alan as aged thirty-six and Neil as seventy. There is, further, a Neill MacVrion who appears in other estate papers in the same generation and whom we can fairly safely accept as Donald's great-great-great grandfather.

Now I must draw attention to an interesting point. Neil in the genealogy is 'Son of Brian'; MacVrion (Gaelic Mac Bhriain) appears to mean 'son of Brian'. Donald assumes that Neil's father was called Brian and interpreted the genealogy in this sense. But actually Mac Vrion was used as a surname in eighteenth century Tiree and appears regularly in estate papers until it was replaced by the surname Sinclair in the 1779 List of Inhabitants. Brian was therefore the eponymous ancestor, and not the father, of Neil, and his ultimate origins were almost certainly in Ireland, like those of many Hebridean families, since the form which it took in Tiree in the seventeenth century was Mac O'Vrion.

What of the Barra origin of Donald's Sinclair forebears? There is likely to be some factual element in the tradition but enquiry in Barra from reliable informants provided no certain indication and the matter must be regarded as unproven. It has been our experience that the genealogies of our informants have often shown a high degree of reliability as far back as five, six or seven generations, but that it is seldom that ancestral lines deriving from an area outwith Tiree can be satisfactorily checked. This is mainly due to two factors. One is the deficiency of historical records (and particularly of parish records) in the West Highlands. The other is that non-native lines tend to be less well recorded in tradition; their genealogies rarely go back beyond the time of settlement. Their arrival in the island is sometimes presented in a semi-legendary form as in the story which I recorded in Mull of three brothers named Macfarlane, who settled respectively in Mull, Iona and Tiree and originated the families of that surname in these islands.

Donald Sinclair's family traditions bear out this generalisation. His mother Christine MacArthur's people were incomers. Donald knew that her father was a Gilchrist MacArthur from Mull but could trace the line no further. Her mother, Janet Black, was the daughter of an incomer, John Black, who appears to have been of a Lismore family. Donald had no pedigree of the Blacks beyond this John. He knew John Black's

wife's history one generation further back, evidently because Black brought his mother-in-law, Janet MacCallum, to Tiree and her forceful personality left an enduring impression in the family traditions, as the following story shows, given here in an English translation from the original Gaelic.

> I am going to tell you about the time they were stealing cattle. It was going on far and near. And my mother's people were from Lorne on her father's and her grandmother's side. And at this particular time they were stealing cattle from the Duke of Argyll. And my great-great grandmother happened to be a dairy-maid to the Duke of Argyll. The boys wouldn't stay on the look-out to see what was happening, but this night she said — she was a hardy woman — 'I'll stay tonight,' she said, 'and keep watch on the cattle and see what happens.' And she put her tartan plaid on — the women were wearing tartan plaids instead of plain ones in those days — she put her tartan plaid on and made for the byre.
>
> She sat herself down at the cow's head. She wasn't long there before the thieves came, two of them, and they were feeling the cattle to see which were the fattest. And where did one of the thieves put his finger but in the mouth of the woman sitting at the cow's head. And when she got hold of his finger, with one snap she took off the end of it. The thieves fled, and in the morning when everything was in order the Duke said to her, 'And how did you get on last night, Janet?' — she was called Janet too.
>
> 'Oh, I got on well,' she said. 'Here's a piece of the thief's finger and you can find the rest of it for yourself.'
>
> It was a farmer who lived not fearfully far away who was stealing the cattle, for he was found. He couldn't hide his finger and he was given away by it. The Duke had the other bit of the finger. Well, I don't know if that man was punished but I'm sure he would be.
>
> But when my great-grandfather married this MacCallum woman, the daughter of the one who did ... the Duke was present, when he married [the daughter of] Janet MacCallum, the one who bit off the thief's finger. He came home to Tiree with one of the factors, and if my memory is right it was factor MacLaurine he came home with, and his house was over there on the machair, very near Island House, as we call it. And he is buried in Soroby, and the old woman who did this deed, she is buried in Soroby too. (SA 1968/247A)

The tale catches the forceful personality of Janet MacCallum and its details accord well with conditions in eighteenth century Argyll, where even as late as 1744 horses were driven off in a daring raid on the precincts of the ducal castle. Yet, even though the central theme is not to be found among classified folkloristic *motifs*, there is an aroma of the storytelling art in this tradition.

The two bodies of source-material are, in our experience, best treated as complementary and contrasting rather than as conflicting. The one body of material is largely that of the literate outsider (often an official, a minister or a teacher),

presenting events in a way easily apprehended by the historian; the material can be readily arranged in a chronological framework and used for the analysis of social and economic structure and development. The other is the insider's story, told to friends and neighbours in the native language, presenting a world without clear historical contours, where events may sometimes float freely in time and be subject to the bidding of the storyteller's imagination or at the mercy of the supernatural; it is rich in lively personalities and in intimate values, customs, attitudes and knowledge which have tended to survive the most drastic changes in material circumstances. Without the written sources we would have lacked the form and structure of the island's history; without the oral traditions the very essence of its life would have escaped us.

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NOTES

1 This descriptive introduction is largely based on Cregeen 1964, xxviff.

2 The influence of written versions of Gaelic songs on transmission is discussed more fully by my colleague Dr John MacInnes in 'The Oral Tradition in Scottish Gaelic Poetry' in *Scottish Studies* Vol. 12, Part I (1968) 29–43.

3 In May 1974 John MacLean, crofter in Cornaigbeg, usually known as Iain Alasadair, gave me his genealogy, which included nine generations (excluding himself), thus Iain (himself) — Alasdair — Iain — Diomhnall — Iain Og — Iain — Iain Og — Ailein Diùrach — Tearlach — Ailein Dubh. It is believed that Ailein Dubh was the first of the Diùrach MacLeans to settle in Tiree and that another member of the stock, Aonghas Diùrach, settled in Lewis. From comparison with documentary sources I have concluded that the traditional genealogy is correct. One of his forebears is found in a rental of 1663 as John McAllen Vc Carlich (evidently a great-grandson of Ailein Dubh).

4 The evidence strongly suggests that the anonymous writer of this report was Alexander Campbell, Chamberlain of Kintyre from 1767, possibly a member of the Braglen branch of the Campbells who had settled in Mull. He was the brother-in-law of Donald Campbell ('Bàillidh Dòmhnull') who was Chamberlain of Tiree from 1770.

5 In the nineteen-sixties a great deal was also recorded from Donald Sinclair by my colleague Dr John MacInnes, who first suggested I should visit him.

6 The Rev. Hector Cameron published two songs about Donald Campbell and his sons in *Na Baird Thirisdeach* in 1932 (6–8 and 13–15). They were composed by Archibald MacPhail, who lived at Balephuil in his later life and they must have formed part of the local repertoire. These were evidently the songs with which Donald Sinclair was familiar, and the verses which he sang came from the lament 'Do Dhonnchadh agus do Alasdair Caimbeul, clann Bàillidh Thireadh, a chaidh a mharbhadh anns an Spàinn' but include the following lines not found in the published version. His was a genuine orally transmitted one.

> Nuair a theann sibh ri sèiseadh a thoirt a' bhaile gu gèill d'ur comannd,
> 'N àm gluasad on bhatraidh, cha robh smuainteanan gealtach nur ceann;
> 'N àm direadh an àraidh thainig peileir o d'nàmhaid na dheann
> 'S mu an do bhuannaich thu 'n fhàrdraich, thuit thu gun chàil aig a bhonn.
>
> 'S ò an iongnadh do mhàthair a bhith euslainteach fàillinneach tinn!
> Chaneil duin' aic' an làthair de na chunnaic do dh'àraich a glùn;
> 'Se seo buille bu chràidhteach dhi, a' smaointinn mar bha thu gun chlì
> Call na fala san àraich 's tu cho fada bho d' chàirdean 's bho d'thir.
>
> When you began the siege to bring the town under your command,
> As you advanced from the battery, there was no cowardly thought in your head;
> As you scaled the height, a bullet came at speed from your enemy
> And before you could gain the ground you fell lifeless at the foot.
>
> And oh, is it any wonder that your mother is sick in heart and soul,
> She is bereft of all those whom she raised at her knee;
> This was her sorest wound, thinking of you with all your strength gone,
> Your life-blood draining away on the battlefield, far away from friends and your homeland.

7 *Tocher* 32 (1979), 69–106 contains a biographical feature on Hector Kennedy by Dr Margaret A. Mackay, together with a selection of his recorded material.

8 A detailed account of this illuminating case study was presented in September 1982 by my colleague Dr Margaret A. Mackay, and appears in the printed volume of papers given at the IVe Colloque International d'Histoire Orale held in Aix-en-Provence under the auspices of the University of Provence and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1982.

9 Marriage of Donald MacLean and Mary MacDonald, Caolas, 4 December 1798 (Parish Register). Both Mary and Malcolm MacDonald were children of John MacDonald and Mary McConnel (MacDonald).

10 Donald Sinclair sang this and other songs by 'The Cooper'. He said that he acquired them from his father and it is noticeable that they differ markedly from versions collected by Hector Cameron and published in *Na Baird Thirisdeach*. Our research revealed a great deal of detail about 'The Cooper' and his family in and beyond the island.

11 Their marriage is recorded in the Parish Register on 1 August 1830.

12 A biographical feature on Donald Sinclair with a selection of his traditions and reminiscences appears in *Tocher* 18 (1975). He recalled his father Malcolm's connection with the collector and local minister the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell, working for him in the manse garden and providing him with traditions (SA 1972/78A).

13 Oral traditions about herds and others jointly employed by the tenants of townships in Uist and Benbecula to look after their animals are illustrated and discussed by the writer in *Oral History* Vol. 2, No. 1 (1974).

14 The surname Black hardly ever occurs in Tiree before the nineteenth century, whereas it is a characteristic Lismore surname.

15 For further information, see J. McNeill, *The Baptist Church in Colonsay* (Edinburgh, 1914), which tells of MacDougall's conversion while working at kelp there; *Laoidhean Spioradail a chum cuideachadh le cràbhadh nan Gael* (Glasgow, 1841) for his hymns as well as G. Yuille, *History of the Baptists in Scotland* and the *New Statistical Account* of Tiree. *Tocher* 24 (1976) includes traditions about the MacDougalls in Mull and Cregeen and Mackenzie 1978, 16 gives details of the family's poets.

16 The Gaelic original of this verse is as follows (English translation by the Rev. Donald W. Mackenzie):

> Nach sona dhuit aig âm do bhàs, cha sàsaichear gu mòd thu.
> Tuitidh tu sìos air an làr 's gu bràth cha tig ort feòirich;
> Ach nuair a laigheas mise sìos 's a dhinnichear on fhòd mi,
> Mur bi mi beò an Iosa Criosd gun dìtear aig a' mhòd mi.

17 The verses sung by Donald Sinclair are printed together with a translation and musical transcription in *Tocher* 18 (1975), 60–61.

18 The original Gaelic is printed together with an English translation in *Tocher* 18 (1975), 56–58.

19 See *Tocher* 18 (1975), 48–49 for the Gaelic original and notes.

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