

‘Here I am in another world’: John Francis Campbell and Tiree

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A glimpse of the great nineteenth century collector John Francis Campbell of Islay (1821–1885) at work in Tiree is to be found in a small clutch of copied letters within a group written in the autumn of 1871 among the Campbell manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland (Adv. Ms. 50.4.6, 128 recto — 135 recto). A note on 126 recto reads ‘Letters written while in Scotland autumn 1871 kept and copied to make a journal’. This was his practice on his travels, which took him to many parts of the world. The transcription which follows shows his enthusiasm for his subject, his humour and his own narrative gifts as well as, importantly, material collected and his respect for his sources among the population of crofters and cottars. Here, as often, he made sketches and watercolours; in the foreground of the watercolour of the thatched house we see the shadow of the artist himself.

Certain obvious errors and mis-transcriptions of Gaelic place-names in the copying have been corrected in the text [indicated by italics] or notes and where necessary for easy comprehension punctuation has been inserted, though in the main this and capitalisation are as in the manuscripts. Missing words are indicated by three full stops, as is a hole in the paper towards the end of the last letter. Notes provide further information on some of the people Campbell encountered.

At the start of his stay Campbell wrote, ‘Here I am in another world. All ask me to their houses. All are indifferent to rain and wind and weather, hospitable, hearty, cheery folk and I mean to spend a week amongst them’. One hundred years later Eric Cregeen’s experience, which extended over a much longer period, was the same. He too received the warmest of welcomes wherever he went in Tiree and elsewhere, found rich veins of oral tradition of all kinds, some of it among the descendants of the nineteenth century sources for John Francis Campbell, John Gregorson Campbell and others, and never stinted in his respect and affection for those who shared it with him.

Tiree Saturday 9th Sept 1871

My Dear Mother

Yesterday I walked in the rain from the inn at Iona to Port a Churaich¹ where St Columba landed and buried his ship. The barrow which is said to *bear* his grave is seventy feet long. I have my doubts as to this for parallel to the barrow is another mound and the two make a kind of enclosure. I suspect the ruins of a building — The little bay is full of shingle and on the shingle are numerous cairns some would fill a cart others are large and would make fifty or even a hundred loads of stones. Tradition says that these were built for

penance by the devout. I suspect that they are memorial cairns made by large and small bands of pilgrims. They are very like cairns which I have seen raised and used for drying fish in Norway and Newfoundland on similar shingle. I gathered some pebbles and marched back to the Inn where I wrung out my Coat and dried it at the fire as well as I could. It was vain to change for the Steamer was coming, at four she came. There is no ladder over the side and I had to get a common shore ladder and climb up the side at the risk of slipping in between boat and ship. We ran to Banessun [sic]² where Alick Campbell Killinalen came on board and got a dram for me. The Steward offered him water but he said there was plenty of that outside. His sister Jane is to marry a Liverpool Merchant Young by name. They are to be wedded there next week I believe and I was bidden to the feast. On board was Captain Stewart of Colonsay who asked me to come to him and shoot seals. I was obliged but I am not going. He was sad about his six motherless bairns. When we got there at half-past ten it was pitch dark and we had to tumble over the side as best we could into a boat with fishermen and girls and boxes and gear. We landed on a rough pier and stumbled up somehow to the splendid Hotel where I am doing the usual thing waiting. I have fallen in with Geikie³ the Factor and MacQuarrie⁴ the Farmer and Brown a tenant at Campbell of . . . and the minister Campbell,⁵ and a man who works in the Light house boat every one has invited me to his house and I am going to visit MacQuarrie to begin with because he is a good Gaelic man and knows people who have stories and will get them he says. But if I cared much about it I would try to do otherwise for I am amongst gentry the worst class for my purpose. Now as a sample of Highland travelling I started from Inverary [sic] at half past three on Monday — slept at Oban took the fast boat in the morning and landed at Tobermoray [sic] at about 1 on Tuesday. I got my old story man and wrote two Gaelic ballads. I heard several more and did a good stroke of business — meantime the packet was in the harbour waiting for a wind — On Wednesday morning the wind had come but from the wrong quarter so despairing of the Tiree packet I took the fast boat to Iona. There I fell to work on the old stones and made a lot of rubbings — on Thursday came word from Long John⁶ that I was to go to him and Willy Turnbull to fetch me. I spent the morning amongst the tombs and a very fine morning it was and I did a good stroke of work that turn. At three I crossed the Sound and drove to Ardfearnaig three miles. There I dined with Long John & his wife and afterwards I drove back to and crossed the Sound in a crazy boat in the dark again — Next morning Friday it rained but I was determined to see Carnan Cùl Ri Eirain⁷ and the holy port and the spouting cave and I saw them all in spite of the rain. I got to Tiree near about Saturday morning having started from Inverary on Monday. The distance is not much more than to Edinburgh or Berwick at most and that would be an affair of one day. Here I am in another world. All ask me to their houses. All are indifferent to rain and wind and weather, hospitable, hearty, cheery folk and I mean to spend a week amongst them. Here comes my dinner so I wish you luck.

Yours affecty

J. F. Campbell

Keep this for my journal.

Sgarnish. Tiree. Sept 12. Tuesday. 1871

My dear Car [or Cas, Campbell's half-sister Castalia, as in letter of Sept 17]

You are the greatest fixture so I send you this. Pass it on to your Mother to keep for me as Journal. I got here on Friday and on Saturday morning drove with MacQuarrie the former subfactor and general factotum here down to his place at Heynish. His house is close to the Skerry-mhòr establishment and under the highest hill in this kingdom of the land under the waves. It is only 500 feet high but on the top of it at the South West end of this Outer Isle are lots of great sea boulders fourteen or fifteen feet long perched upon pillars. So far as I can make out they came from the North West. I went to the top on Sunday and had a most agreeable walk and Gaelic talk with my host. On Saturday we dawdled — The Captain of the Light house tender is an Islay man with yellow whiskers Brown by name. I went to his house on Saturday and the man went wild He beat me over the back and ejaculated for ten minutes — introduced me to his wife and daughter of Forbes the Islay light keeper and made all his family come and shake hands with me in turn and then he began again with his och och well well oh dear dear me maister Johnny of our own — Then came another MacAlister⁸ a relation of the Banker at Bridgend and then we fell to talking over old friends and old times as if we were brothers. It seems than I am not forgotten in the Highlands. Before Church on Sunday I went to look at the pumice stones. They are in a lot of shingle under sand hills — they are rolled and there do not seem to be any great number. Probably they are part of a lot drifted by the sea at a time when this Island was under water. We also went to a Churchyard to look at Iona stones and an old Cross which is very peculiar. I had no time to draw — also we picked up a lot of shells, cowries and blue shells with creatures in them which I believe to be snails washed down by the waves. I put a lot of them into my pocket and today I had to throw them away and get purified. The Minister gave us a Gaelic Sermon and then seeing me said that he saw some one who did not understand Gaelic and took to English. His accent might have suited a Frenchman I never heard an accent quite like it. Yesterday Monday was beautiful. I got a Tailor by name MacArthur⁹ and spent the whole day writing stories. I wrote 11 yesterday and the 12th this morning before breakfast. After that I drove off with McQuarrie called at the Island house where the Duke lives when he comes, and then walked four miles to this place where the Steamer now is taking in sheep on her way South. If any telegraphing is needed send to Greenock for the Steamer Dunvegan bound for the North and I may get the message in a few days. I shall take the Steamer to Barra when she comes. The weather is grand and I am in good care.

My love to you.

J. F. Campbell

Scarnish Tiree. Sept 15th 1871

My dear Mother or Car or anybody who gets this

I wrote as the Steamer Dunvegan was going South and got my letter on board. I wrote another to Dasent¹⁰ and posted it and here it is still. Next day — 13th — Wednesday —

I spent with the policeman who says Ossianic ballads very well. I got my own book from the Minister who is a learned man and found that with some variations I have all that the policeman could give and more. We walked up to the house of an old fellow here who can repeat the Lay of Osgur and found the same thing. I gave him my book to read when he had finished and he told me that I had misplaced the verses which he learned from his parents here long ago. I have almost made up my mind to cease working at poetry for the mine seems to be nearly exhausted. My own story mines not nearly worked out. I get something new every day and *if* I could catch the people here I should have enough for a new book.¹¹ I got this from the Minister just now. He got it in Coll. Three Giants lived in a Cave. On a day said one 'Chuala mi *geum* bo' I heard a Cows low. A year after the second said 'What was that you said a while ago?' But the first said 'nothing'. A year after the third said 'If you do not cease your chatter I will leave you the Cave to yourselves'. As an illustration of the nature of Giants that little story is a Jewel. Yesterday 14th I walked to the Sound of Coll. The weather was magnificent and the heat great. I visited two old churches with two churchyards at Kirkpol [sic] and found a bit of an old cross set up as a headstone. The Churches are very old and opposite to them is a rock called Am *Mollaichte*. The Cursed *Mollaichte*.¹² The story is that St Columba broke his boat on the rock and cursed it. Thence I went along a strand like Laggan in Islay and spoke to many natives in their fields and houses. I asked one old fellow for a drink of water and got milk. His name is MacLeod. He was much struck with my portly frame and asked if I was in good health. I laughed and said I was. I would not carry your weight for a hundred pounds said the man. I am carrying it said I. I am sure you were strong said MacLeod. I am not sure that I could not put you on your back still said I. Well said my host do not spare saying that you met a man who was not afraid of you. Let us go out and try a fall. Now really this was Norwegian [sic] manners to give a man hospitality and want to fight him on the spot. I laughed at the old sinner and learned afterwards that he wants to try a tussle with everybody. I could have thrown him I am sure but it was too hot and I am too old and lazy for athletics. The old fellow got hold of my legs and felt them as he would those of a horse and finally he asked me to share his dinner. I thanked him and went on to the Sound where I lay on my back and basked & smoked and listened to the prattle of a lot of kilted boys and girls with kilted coats who were puddling in the Sea. They got a partan mòr mòr — a great great Crab and they were happy as fairies. In MacLeod's house is a cripple idiot boy who is generally supposed to be a changeling. He is often quoted to the Minister as a proof of the fact in which all this Island most firmly believe. Coming back from the sound the Minister who had driven the Coll Minister to the ferry overtook me and told me of a Stone which is good for raising a storm. A woman told him that she tried the spell for her brother who was a smuggler and chased by a revenue cruiser. According to the Instructions she dug up the stone with the tongs and turned the side to the [blank] that was needed but there was not a breath of wind. I got back here and dined and jawed with MacQuarrie all the evening. He told me of a stone in Mull with a hole in it. Tradition says that St Columba was hunted by a 'beither'. He threw his mantle over the stone and the snake dashed at

it and went through the stone and died. The Saint laid him out on the rock and there is his mark to this day — vein of white quartz meandering through the rocks. When shewn the place as a child he says that he trembled for fear of the great beither which died in the Ross of Mull. That will do for Fergusson¹³ on Tree and Serpent worship. A very similar story was told to me at Lochaweside about MacArthur of Innis Dravinieth but with more details. There was a mantle and a stone in that but also a fight and a dog and all sorts of details which I have written. I also got a charm for driving away changelings which is Fenian and therefore curious and worth preservation. Today 15th I walked 3¼ miles over to Valla on the north side to see an old Fort. It is exactly like forts in Sutherland about five feet of the outer wall is standing at one place It was round with a double wall and a passage in the thickness. There is a doorway visible. And outside was a rampart It stands on a rocky point looking north and near it is another place called Dunbeag. This one is Dun Mòr. Some boys dug in the ... centre and came to red ashes doubtless ... an antiquary might find many curious ... things there. There is a well just outside ... and within sight are other forts which is ... usual. Probably they were protections against sea rovers. The steamers will come soon and will land this in Skye. If you write P.O. Portree Skye I may get your letter in ten days. Now I am going to on towards Barra.

I am yours affecty

J. F. Campbell

NOTES

- 1 *Port na Curaich*: 'port of the coracle'.
- 2 Bunesan in the Ross of Mull.
- 3 Geikie (or Geekie) succeeded Campbell's friend from Islay, 'John Ardmore', known as *Am Factor Mòr* in Mull and *Am Bailidh Mòr* in Tiree, as the Duke of Argyll's factor in the island. Campbell continued to be factor in the Ross of Mull from his base at Ardfenaig House. He is the 'Long John' referred to later in the letter. Geikie later emigrated to Manitoba with many others from Tiree.
- 4 Lachlan MacQuarrie was ground officer and a farmer in Tiree. In a letter of 17 September 1871, Campbell writes from East Loch Tarbert in Harris that MacQuarrie would not allow him to pay for his stay and the hotel in Tiree 'which I did not like but could not help'.
- 5 The Reverend John Gregorson Campbell (1836–1891) began his ministry in Tiree in 1861.
- 6 John Campbell of Ardmore (above).
- 7 *Carn Cùl ri Èiveann*: 'hill with its back to Ireland'.
- 8 Alexander MacAlistar, Lightkeeper aged 27 from Portmahaven, Islay, is listed in the 1871 census along with his wife Mary Anne, 23, and daughter Elizabeth, 1.
- 9 John McArthur, 36, tailor, is listed as living in the township of Moss with two brothers and two sisters in the 1871 census. All were unmarried. He is listed among John Gregorson Campbell's Tiree informants in the list appended to Alfred Nutt's introduction to Volume V of the Argyllshire series of *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, p. xx.
- 10 Sir George Dasent, Campbell's friend and mentor in the collection and publication of oral narrative, whose *Popular Tales from the Norse* of 1859 had influenced him profoundly.
- 11 Campbell would publish some of the material he and others gathered in Tiree in *Leabhar na Frinne*.
- 12 *Am Mollaichte*: 'the cursed one'.
- 13 James Fergusson the archaeologist had published his *Tree and serpent worship; or illustrations of mythology and art in India in the first and fourth centuries after Christ. From the sculptures of the Buddhist Topes at Sauchi and Amravati* in 1868.

The permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland to publish these letters and illustrations is gratefully acknowledged.



Fig 1. J. F. Campbell's sketch of a thatched house by the shore in Tiree; the artist has included his shadow in the foreground. Adv. Ms. 50.4.6 116 verso. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.



Fig 2 One of J. F. Campbell's pencil drawings. The church is at Kirkapoll, Tiree. Adv. Ms. 50 4. 6 116 recto. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.