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John William Shaw
A Biographical Note

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In 2006, John Shaw published an article entitled 'The Collectors: John Francis Campbell and Alexander Carmichael'.[1] Both men were no doubt worthy subjects; but if we wished to expand the list of 'collectors' whose contributions have been foundational to the study of oral culture in Scotland, we should add others. Where would Scottish ethnology be without the work of Frances Tolmie? Of John Lorne Campbell? Of Alan Bruford, Eric Cregeen, Hamish Henderson, Emily Lyle, Donald Archie MacDonald, John MacInnes, Morag MacLeod, Ian Paterson and the many others whose collecting here in Scotland, now housed in the School of Scottish Studies Archives, allows us not just to read transcriptions, but to hear and remember the voices of people we knew?

What about the people who travelled from Scotland – some willingly, others less so – and the cultural legacies of their emigrant communities? These have historically been less well documented. John Lorne Campbell's visits to Cape Breton in the 1930s convinced him that someone should be encouraged to explore the Gaelic settlements of the region. Fortunately for us, the 'someone' he encouraged was John Shaw.

We are delighted to present this issue of *Scottish Studies* as a Festschrift in honour of our colleague Dr John Shaw, presently an honorary fellow in Celtic & Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Each contributor has been inspired in some way by some aspect of John's fieldwork, scholarship, teaching or mentorship, and all have benefited from his conversation, advice and friendship.

Beginnings

John William Shaw began his journey a long way from Cape Breton Island and, indeed, from Gaelic culture. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1944, he grew up in Ohio, where his father, an experimental physicist, held a professorship at Ohio State University in Columbus. The Shaws were Scots-Irish, and had emigrated to Ontario in the nineteenth century to farm; John's grandfather, however, moved to California, where John's father Charles Shaw was born. John's mother, Jane Thomson, grew up in New Jersey. Her father's people, originally from Dunoon, had lived in Kingston, St Vincent, in the British Virgin Islands, where they had been ship owners. Jane's mother's people, early settlers in Massachusetts, were United Empire Loyalists and had moved to Canada in the wake of the American Revolution; they eventually returned to the U.S. and settled at Cape Cod.

John and his sister attended the University School on the OSU campus, an environment catering to faculty offspring that he characterised as 'nominally a fairly broad-minded, liberal place'.[2] At the same time, however, this was the 1950s, and he also witnessed the paranoia of McCarthyism and the 'red scare'. He recalled one uneasy moment when his father and several other faculty members, having

[1] John Shaw, 'The Collectors: John Francis Campbell and Alexander Carmichael', in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature. Volume Two: Enlightenment, Britain and Empire (1707–1918)*, edited by Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning and Murray Pittock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 347–352.

[2] Many of John Shaw's comments quoted here are taken from an interview conducted with him in Edinburgh on 12 November 2025 by Virginia Blankenhorn. The authors are grateful to John for sharing his thoughts, as well as copies of relevant unpublished work, on that occasion.

objected to the administration's abrupt cancellation of an invited speaker on the grounds that he was a communist, were hounded by the *Columbus Dispatch*, which published their names, addresses, phone numbers and salaries – something they could do because faculty were technically Ohio state employees. One evening, the telephone rang at the Shaws' home near the village of Worthington, about ten miles outside Columbus:

> So the phone rang and I answered it and the guy at the other end said, 'This is the Worthington Police, and we're just checking on you to make sure that you're alright because we're a little worried watching this stuff coming out in the paper and really afraid you might have gotten some calls or had somebody blow up your mailbox or whatever they do – we're just going to watch out for you.' And I thought that was quite unusual.[3]

John was interested in languages from a young age. When he was fourteen, his father took a sabbatical leave and moved the family to Paris for a year, and it was then that John, enrolled in an all-French school, first learned to speak a language other than English. When he was sixteen, he spent a summer in Germany, and was subsequently encouraged to enrol in German courses at OSU, where he encountered 'philologists, refugees from World War 2, who had come to the US to work – highly educated people – and I began to get more interested in linguistics and how languages were related to each other'.[4]

It was while he was still in school that John first became aware of Gaelic. Discussion of his family's origins had made him aware that he had Scottish and Irish ancestry:

> So I was kind of interested in what language do these people speak in Ireland and Scotland? It was very hard to find that out. They had the 1911 edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at home, and I found some stuff there which was helpful; but then my mother just kind of added as an aside, 'You know, I read somewhere that the languages in Scotland and Ireland are connected to the languages in India.' I thought, wow![5]

While the family were living in Paris, John visited one of the big bookstores there and was able to order a copy of James MacLaren's *Gaelic Self-Taught,* based on Latin Grammar. After working his way through that book, he said, 'I was able to begin to try to read – I'd never heard Gaelic – and I also began to look at Irish'.[6]

John's experience of Gaelic came to life in 1961 – and it was a pivotal moment. In an article in the *West Highland Free Press* John describes how, while still in school, he spent a summer in Canna as the guest of John Lorne Campbell.[7] How had he managed that?

> It was pure luck. His wife Margaret Fay Shaw,[8] who was from Pittsburgh, had a sister who was living in Worthington near us, and somebody mentioned to my father that there was a woman in Worthington whose sister was living in Canna. So I went and talked to the sister, just to find out more. I ended up writing a letter in Gaelic to John Lorne

[3] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[4] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[5] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[6] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[7] 'Tobar an Dualchais: A visit to Canna, South Uist and Barra in 1961', *West Highland Free Press*, 12 January 2022.
[8] Author of *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955). See Margaret Fay Shaw, *From the Alleghenies to the Hebrides: an autobiography* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008); also Fiona J. MacKenzie, *The Cadence of a Song: The Life of Margaret Fay Shaw* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2025).

> Campbell, which I think would be a total embarrassment if I saw it now – but he wrote back and said, 'Please come to stay with us for the summer'. This was in 1961. So without really knowing very much about anything I came through Glasgow, took the train to Mallaig, took the boat from Mallaig to Canna, and the first time I heard Gaelic spoken was on the boat. And that was it. Campbell was unfailingly generous to me.[9]

Summarising this experience years later, John remarked:

> For a high school student arriving from the American Midwest in June six decades ago this year, spending the summer on the Isle of Canna (*Eilean Chanaigh*) as a guest of the laird, John Lorne Campbell (*Fear Chanaigh*), was by any standard a memorable experience. [...] My own objective was to learn to speak Gaelic, a language I had not heard until I set foot on the island, which in those days was almost entirely Gaelic-speaking.[10]

In addition to spending time with Gaelic-speaking boys his age on Campbell's farm, John had the run of the well-stocked Celtic library at Canna House.[11] One afternoon, he came across Fear Chanaidh transcribing traditional tales he had recorded from Angus MacLellan ('*Aonghas Beag*') of South Uist (1869–1966), one of the best Gaelic informants Campbell had ever recorded.[12] Campbell mentioned that although Aonghas Beag was elderly, he was still alive, and that it would be well worth John's time to visit him. Campbell provided letters of introduction to his main Gaelic contacts in South Uist and Barra, and John headed first to Loch Eynort, South Uist, where he was 'warmly welcomed into a very patient household'. He made his way to Bornish to call on Agnes Currie, a housekeeper for the parish priest, who was well-known for her large repertoire of Uist songs, mouth music (puirt-à-beul), and prayers. In Bornish, John also visited Allan MacInnes, whom he had met in Canna where MacInnes had been shearing sheep. John recalled 'a lively household, with his wife, handsome daughters, and a son, Cailean (*Cailean Ailein Bhig* [Fr Colin MacInnes]) of my own age, who was later to receive widespread recognition from his exemplary community work in Ecuador'.[13] The next day, 11 August 1961, John visited Aonghas Beag himself in Frobost, South Uist, and kept this note in his diary:

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[9] Interview, 12 November 2025.

[10] 'A visit to Canna', *West Highland Free Press* 12 January 2022. Sharp-eyed readers will note that the island is spelled *Canaidh* in some places, and *Canaigh* in this quoted passage. Although *Canaigh* is the generally recognised Gaelic form of the island's name, John Lorne Campbell referred to himself as *Fear Chanaidh* (the 'Laird of Canna'), and that spelling will be used hereafter when using his title.

[11] The following account of Shaw's 1961 travels relies on the article he wrote for the West Highland Free Press; see n. 7 above. In 1980, the Campbells gave the island to the National Trust of Scotland. Recently restored, Canna House houses Campbell's library, his sound recordings, his papers, and his extensive butterfly collection.

[12] Campbell recorded and translated MacLellan's reminiscences, published in English as *The Furrow Behind Me: the Autobiography of a Hebridean Crofter* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) and later in Gaelic as *Saoghal an Treobhaiche* (Inbhirnis: Club Leabhair, 1972). Forty-two of MacLellan's folktales and stories, also translated into English by Campbell, were published as *Stories from South Uist* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961); for MacLellan's version of the folktale 'Conall Gulbann', recorded and transcribed by Campbell, see J. L. Campbell, 'The Story of Conall Gulbann, Son of the King of Ireland', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inveress* 44 (1964–66): 163–178. This story was also recorded from Angus MacLellan by the late Calum MacLean; see Tobar an Dualchais https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/30532?l=en.

[13] Shaw, 'A visit to Canna'. Fr. MacInnes also played a pivotal role in relation to Gaelic cultural maintenance through the founding of Fèis Bharraigh in 1981, out of which the Fèisean movement, which provides tuition in the Gaelic traditional arts to young people, has grown; see https://www.feisean.org/en/.

> I got there about 1:45 and met Bean Nèill (his older sister), who told me she had no English but volunteered that she could understand the radio sometimes. After about 10 minutes Aonghus himeslf came in (he had been outside digging potatoes) and sat down near the fire. We started a conversation about the weather, how bad the summer was, etc... After about half an hour, Bean Nèill asked him to tell a story ... His style of reciting was remarkably varied and interesting; he never paused until the end of the story. I stayed there until 4:30, and then left to catch the bus. The bus schedule had been changed, but I managed to get a ride to Lochboisdale without much trouble.[14]

John recalled that as he left, Bean Nèill 'gave her advice and encouragement in two words: *Cum oirre*' ('Keep going with it'). It was advice which John clearly took to heart. Although he recalls that Aonghas Beag's story had stretched his Gaelic to its limits, he understood enough of it to be able to find it later in the reciter's autobiography, *Saoghal an Treobhaiche*.[15] At Lochboisdale, John visited the outstanding traditional singer Donald Joseph MacKinnon ('*An Eòsag*'); MacKinnon and his wife insisted John stay for dinner. John made visits to a number of other notable informants. He went to see Peigi and Màiri MacRae in Glendale, South Uist, with whom Margaret Fay Shaw had lived and who had provided much of the material which Margaret published in *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*.[16] He visited Dr Alasdair Maclean, the brother of Sorley, John and Calum, and his wife; Dr Maclean was himself a notable collector, and played recordings for John of some of the songs he had collected in South Uist. John also met John MacInnes (*Iain Pheadair*), from South Lochboisdale, 'who willingly sang and was tactfully helpful with pronunciation'. In Barra, John called on Annie Johnston (*Anna Aonghais Chaluim*), another very significant tradition-bearer and a close friend of the Campbells, who after some conversation led John out to weed the garden. After John was stung by nettles, Annie advised him to apply a dock leaf, and recited a rhyme which, although John did not remember it at the time, he later recovered: *Cop mhìn, mhìn [mhìn] / Loisg an fheanntag bhiorach mi* ('Dock leaf smooth, mild, gentle / The nettle has stung me'). John's abiding memory was of the generosity of those he met in Uist and Barra. While in Canna, John spent a lot of time with young men of his age who worked on the farm; mostly native Gaelic speakers, the time spent with them added considerably to his Gaelic language skills.

After a year in France learning French and German, three years' study of university-level German at OSU, and his remarkable experience in Canna, John chose to apply to Harvard because 'for better or worse I was seduced by the fact that they had a Celtic department, which is a very rare thing.'[17] Indeed, Harvard's Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures remains unique among US universities to this day. But because the department did not offer an undergraduate degree, John chose Linguistics and Germanic Languages as his major subject. He was inclined to keep his interest in Gaelic quiet, because however much he would have liked to do Celtic, he wondered about 'the chances of making a living doing that stuff'.[18]

Even so, despite this undoubtedly realistic assessment, he maintained his interest in Gaelic – again with the encouragement of John Lorne Campbell. In 1963, following his first year at Harvard, he travelled to Nova Scotia, where Campbell had given him an introduction to Fr Malcolm MacDonell (1919–2015), a native Gaelic-speaker from Hillsdale, Inverness County, Cape Breton, who taught in

[14] Shaw, 'A Visit to Canna'.
[15] See above, n. 12.
[16] See above, n. 8.
[17] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[18] Interview, 12 November 2025.

the history department at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, and served as president of that institution from 1970 to 1978. With Fr MacDonell's assistance, he made his way to Cape Breton, where he earned his bread and board working on a farm in Glendale:

> Glendale is on Trans-Canada 105, the main road from the Canso Causeway, which connects Cape Breton to the Nova Scotia peninsula and goes to Sydney and the industrial area. It was a poor parish, and still is. The people were mostly from Morar and Uist originally – there are some good genealogies on the parish. I stayed with Fr John Angus Rankin[19], his mother Sarah, and his uncle Alec Beaton; the Beatons came from a place called Sight Point, a shore community near Mabou, closer to Inverness town. Fr John Angus's father had worked in the coal mines in Inverness County – these miners came from the nearby countryside, lived in company houses in Inverness, and worked for very little wages. But they had a world of folklore – songs, stories, fiddlers in the family. People from there used to come and see Fr John Angus quite often – 'visiting' is what they called it – so I heard a lot about Inverness. And we'd go there sometimes from Glendale, where Fr John Angus had a farm – horses, a cow, chickens, a garden – I took care of the horses and the cow, made the hay. The Rankins and the Beatons were real drivers – you were on your feet all the time.[20]

It was during the summers of 1963 and 1964 that John began to develop a habit of 'fieldwork' that went beyond haymaking and animal husbandry. When there was nothing else to do after dinner, he went out with a small Phillips tape recorder to record people in Glendale. Fr Rankin's parish consisted of about one hundred families, most of whom were Gaelic-speaking, and John recalled that 'people were not only friendly, but having never before encountered someone above infancy learning the language, unfailingly patient with my efforts'.[21]

The annual Glendale parish concert made a particular impression on John during his visit. He described a 'festive atmosphere...where kinship groups were reunited, friendships renewed, news exchanged, all underlain by the serious business of celebrating the song, music and dance central to the life of the region', and observed that he was able to experience 'Highland culture from the 18th century performed with a natural competence and vigour which, even with the benefits of a PA system and floodlights, had little if any relation to the modern concert stages of North America or Europe.'[22]

> Performers were neatly – almost formally – dressed, yet in their manner they were unassuming, often appearing shy when introduced on stage. The audience, however, knew what to expect. Whenever a fiddler made particularly skilful work of the transition from strathspey to reel the listeners, many of whom knew the tunes and were following the playing intently, responded with a spontaneous swell of applause. During the Gaelic songs people in the audience joined in the chorus with gusto.[23]

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[19] Fr Rankin was priest of St Mary of the Angels parish. A native Gaelic speaker, he was a traditional musician, an important source of Gaelic tradition, and an indefatigable promoter of Nova Scotia's Gaelic culture.
[20] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[21] 'Tobar an Dualchais: Memories of Glendale, Nova Scotia, in 1963', *West Highland Free Press,* 29 January 2025. This article provides the basis for our survey of his activities that year.
[22] 'Memories of Glendale', *West Highland Free Press*, 29 January 2025.
[23] 'Memories of Glendale', *West Highland Free Press*, 29 January 2025.

Most of the Gaelic songs were performed by groups of four or five men, a leader singing the verses and the rest joining in the refrain. Two performances stood out. The first was a song about a drowning at sea, sung by Glendale resident Roddy MacInnis (*Rodaidh Ailig Ruairidh*) 'in a powerful traditional style'; the second was a performance of a sailing song, *Air faill ill ó ro, faill ill ó*, by a group of men from Broad Cove parish led by 'a trim man in his 50s by the name of Lauchie MacLellan, [who] sang the verses with an ease and authority that commanded and held the listeners' attention, appearing to be totally absorbed in the song and unaware of the audience'.[24] MacLellan's singing on this occasion impressed John greatly, and was to have important consequences for his career:

> The first time I met him was maybe three weeks after I landed for the first time in Glendale. They had the parish concert, and Lauchie got up and sang, and I thought 'Oh, God, this guy's terrific.' So I got up my courage and I went up and I talked to him in Gaelic, and he said, 'Come over and see me some time.' But I was intimidated by the guy – he was that sharp. So years later I called him on the phone, and said 'Lauchie, you may remember me. I'm staying at Katie Florence's place.[25] Could I come over and see you sometime?' And he said, 'I'll be right with you.' And within five minutes his car pulled up outside the house. And I thought, that was a good sign!

Much of what John subsequently learned from Lauchie, and what Lauchie himself had learned from the life he had lived and the culture he had absorbed, is in the book he and John compiled together, *Brìgh an Òrain / A Story in Every Song*.[26] Lauchie was the sort of person anybody would want to call a friend, and John felt privileged to do so.

When John returned to live in Cape Breton ten years later, both Roddy MacInnes and Lauchie MacLellan (*Lachlann Dhòmhnaill Nìll*) became close friends and important informants. Other residents from whom John would later record important traditional material included Johnny Williams (*Seonaidh Aonghuis Bhig*), a well-known singer from nearby Melford, Inverness County, and Glendale storyteller Patrick MacEachern (*Pàdraig Aonghuis Sìne*). By the end of his second summer in Cape Breton, John had recorded seven reel-to-reel tapes containing some 400 items, all of which he catalogued. Copies of the tapes and the catalogue are now available for study at Harvard University and at the School of Scottish Studies Sound Archive at Edinburgh University.

The question of what to do after graduation, however, remained a concern. For male university students in the 1960s, a major consideration was the looming likelihood of military service, unless an allowable alternative – a 'deferment' – could be found. While the draft had begun in the late 1950s, conscription for the Vietnam conflict began in earnest in 1964. With graduation approaching in 1966, John had to figure out how to avoid being swept into uniform. His efforts were supported by Harvard University, which 'didn't like the idea of its products being blown up in rice paddies'.[27] With their help, John won a Fulbright Scholarship to study at L'Ecôle Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, where

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[24] 'Memories of Glendale', *West Highland Free Press*, 29 January 2025.
[25] Katie Florence Kennedy was a Gaelic teacher and one of John's informants. She and her husband Archie lived in Dunvegan, in Broad Cove Parish, not far from Lauchie MacLellan's farm. The Kennedys' home was a magnet for many of the area's musicians and tradition-bearers.
[26] Lauchie MacLellan, *Brìgh an Òrain / A Story in Every Song: The Songs and Tales of Lauchie MacLellan*, ed. John Shaw (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000). The song that Lauchie sang at the concert is transcribed on pp. 180–183.
[27] Interview, 12 November 2025.

he studied with, among others, noted Celtic scholar Edouard Bachellery (1907–1988), who later invited John to contribute to *Études Celtiques*, of which Bachellery was editor.[28] Tragically, however, John's time in France was cut short by the death of his father in a road accident, necessitating his return to the US. In the autumn of 1967 he re-enrolled at Harvard, this time for a PhD.

The following year, John was awarded a three-year NDEA fellowship in Celtic Studies.[29] In addition to pursuing the study of languages like Sanskrit and Hittite – comparative philology being a major preoccupation of Celtic linguistics at the time – John also resumed collecting in Cape Breton; the results of his 1969 fieldwork are available for consultation in the School of Scottish Studies Sound Archive. Then in 1970 he was awarded a Harvard Travelling Fellowship to study Old Irish with Daniel Binchy at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, and to write his dissertation.

Living in Ireland was a liberating experience after the hypercompetitive atmosphere of Harvard in those days. Alongside his studies, John took the opportunity to re-engage with the fiddle – he had had violin lessons as a child, and his experience of attending parish concerts and parties in Cape Breton years before had inspired him:

> The parish concerts were money-raising events in all these little parishes around Cape Breton. It was to keep the glebe house in repair, all practical stuff. Fr John Angus would take me with him to various concerts around the island – the distances are great; you could easily drive 100 miles each way – and I got to know fiddlers. One of them was a good friend of Fr John Angus called Bill Lamey. He was raised in Inverness County in the industrial area. He didn't speak Gaelic, but he was a good player and he knew a lot about fiddle music. So I'd go to parties with him and Fr John Angus, mostly Fr John Angus's relatives, and you'd have the fiddle tunes, then you'd have the singing, then you'd have the lunch, then you'd have more singing, people occasionally going outside to the trunks of cars for a drink of rum– rum was 'it' – and this was the background socialising. Bill taught me a lot about fiddle music and about other stuff as well.[30]

John might have preferred to learn to play in the Cape Breton style; but meanwhile, he was in Dublin – and Irish fiddling was everywhere:

> I thought maybe I should try to play! They had Irish music sessions right across from the Guinness brewery, in James Street. Those were dry – you couldn't drink there – the sessions were great. But I'd also go to pub sessions. I bought a fiddle for, I don't know, twenty-five quid or something. I had lots of time. And I had four tune-books – *Kerr's Merry Melodies*, they were easy to carry, and there are probably about 1,000 tunes in there. So that's what I began with. And I got to know people, and began playing here and there, and I began to recognise a lot of tunes from Cape Breton.[31]

During his time in Dublin, however, John's doubts about the wisdom of pursuing an academic career resurfaced. Raised in an academic family, John was well aware of the political pressures and the financial precarity of such a life, and he held no illusions about the ivory tower:

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[28] An article and two reviews were published in *Études Celtiques* 12/1 (1968–1969).
[29] The National Defense Education Act (1958) allocated government funding to US educational institutions to strengthen provision in science, mathematics and foreign languages in support of national security needs.
[30] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[31] Interview, 12 November 2025.

> At that point, shall we say I had taken a good, hard look at things, and I didn't really see much of a future being an academic in the US. The way I saw it was, you get the job, you end up in the Rust Belt or wherever they send you, and then what happens? Age thirty-five rolls around, you've got a wife, kids, a mortgage – and tenure comes up. I wasn't really interested in being part of what I perceived as being not a very good deal, for me – American academic life. Maybe in a different field. But here I was in linguistics. Or Celtic. It hardly mattered. It was something I had been interested in, but it was never going to pay off. I had no intention of finishing my thesis. So, I took half the grant that I had, and decided to go through Asia.[32]

The world – and Cape Breton

If John's life up to that point seemed like a fairly straight and well-greased trajectory into an academic career, his decision in 1971 to abandon his studies and head east changed things. Or did it, really? His travels certainly took him quite a distance in terms of geography. After returning briefly to the States to earn some travel money, he went to Greece, where friends were living in a lighthouse; it was there that he met Londoner Jill Whittaker, his future partner. Over the next four years they travelled to Israel, where they worked briefly in a kibbutz; then onwards through Turkey, Pakistan and India to Nepal – he and Jill got married in Kathmandu – and even as far as Australia. But as they experienced different cultures, John found himself being reminded of people he had met in Cape Breton, including Lauchie MacLellan, whom he had first met in 1963:

> I'd thought a lot about Lauchie when we were in Australia and Nepal. And I'd thought a lot about North Shore singers[33], and about Hughie Dan[34], and that whole world. In Nepal, when we were married, we were living above Tibetans. They had a little school; they were instructing young men to be lamas, and we became very friendly with them. That opened up a little bit of that world. And I saw that they were trying to hang onto their culture and their language, and they'd been through a really rough experience – it's really not that much worse than what Gaels have gone through – but the parallels are right there. And I began to see some of the older Tibetan people, and how faithful they were to who they were, and the joy that they took in being who they were. And I thought, that's something that's there in the Hebrides and in Cape Breton and in other places, and nobody's doing anything about it! So that was why I was thinking about these guys, I think.[35]

Four years later, in 1975, John returned to the US. After taking Jill to meet his mother, he wanted to see Cape Breton again, so he and Jill travelled north, 'just to see what was there':

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[32] Interview, 12 November 2025.

[33] Located in Victoria County, the North Shore of Cape Breton preserved singing traditions that reflected the Lewis and Harris ancestry of many of its residents. Local bards and singers became known for their high-energy performances at local milling frolics and concerts, and The North Shore Gaelic Singers – a group of six men – performed immediately before Bob Dylan 'electrified' the crowd at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965.

[34] Hughie Dan MacDonnell (1898–1976) was a former coal-miner and Gaelic storyteller from Inverness County who, as John tells it, 'came out with stories about "The Magic Flight", which is an international tale; "Cath nan Eun" – The Battle of the Birds – he just did it like that, knew the whole thing, he had beautiful phrases. And I was transcribing that, and I thought, there's something really important going on with this guy, and with what it's part of.'

[35] Interview, 12 November 2025.

> I was perhaps a little more pessimistic than I should have been. I thought Gaelic would have been wiped out there by then, because it had been several years. But that turned out to be far from the case. We were staying with people in Inverness County, in Dunvegan, and we got a message from the College in Sydney, saying 'Will you come down, we want to talk to you.' I said, 'What about?' and they said, 'We're thinking of offering you a job.' So I began thinking about that; and there was a lot more Gaelic than I'd realised, so I thought, OK, what do we have to lose? So we drove down to Sydney, Jill and I, and we took along Katie Florence, the old lady that we were staying with.[36] The person who wanted to see me was a priest, and he said, 'we need somebody with qualifications' – I had an MA – 'to teach Gaelic Studies here; and we're willing to put you on the faculty.' He said, 'we're a community college' and I'd be working with the community. And I thought, great! This was the Nova Scotia education system, and the College of Cape Breton had become aware of the 'Roots' phenomenon in North America. And somebody there had this flash of insight: 'Hey! Cape Breton's got "roots" too!'[37]

As a consequence of this meeting, John and Jill spent the following year in Cape Breton, where John joined the faculty of the Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton (UCCB), in Sydney.[38] The Institute possessed significant holdings of Gaelic material, including donated field recordings.[39] In addition to research, John taught night school classes in the Sydney area, and was designing a Gaelic language course 'based on local traditional materials and methods and incorporating tradition-bearers in their former, time-honoured role as teachers'.[40] One of his night classes was called 'Gaelic for fluent Gaelic speakers':

> It was run entirely in Gaelic, and it was really a course in [Gaelic] literacy, which they hadn't had access to, and tradition, which I tried to show them they knew a lot more about than they realised.[41]

One person who attended was Joe Neil MacNeil (*Eòs Nìll Bhig*) of Middle Cape, who was to become John's most important source not just for folktales, but for his understanding of the communities that had kept them alive:

> That's when I met him. Actually, the first time I heard him was on tape, in the College of Cape Breton's archive. And I thought, this guy's Gaelic is unusual. I hadn't heard anything better from anyone anywhere. One friend of mine described his Gaelic as 'ringing'. And his stories were some of the best I'd heard, so I began talking to him, recording him now and again. He started coming to these classes, and afterwards – this was on Tuesday nights – we'd go a few streets down to see Dan Neil MacNeil and his

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[36] Katie Florence Kennedy, of Broad Cove; see n. 25 above.
[37] Interview, 12 November 2025. Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), inspired enormous interest in family genealogy throughout North America.
[38] Part of the University College of Cape Breton, now Cape Breton University.
[39] John Shaw and Michael Kennedy, 'Gaelic in Prince Edward Island: A Cultural Remnant (Gaelic Field Recording Project' (1987 and 2002), 47.
[40] Joe Neil MacNeil, *Sgeul gu Latha / Tales until Dawn: The World of a Cape Breton Gaelic Story-Teller,* edited and translated by John Shaw (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), xx.
[41] Interview, 12 November 2025.

> wife Mary, and we'd have our tea there. And Dan Neil would sing, and they'd both tell stories, and we'd just have a fabulous evening.[42]

John would later write that the story he had heard Joe Neil tell on the archive recording was *Nighean Rìgh na h-Èipheit*, 'delivered with a sureness of details and a command of Gaelic that I recognised as the work of a master story-teller', and he recalled that what began as an effort to introduce Joe Neil's lore into the language programme 'grew into a more detailed study of his tradition and an effort to recover as many as possible of the apparently endless stock of tales that he recalled from his youth'.[43]

It was during this period that John worked with Rosemary Hutchinson, a native of South Uist who lived in Cape Breton, to record Cape Breton tradition-bearers for the British folk music label Topic Records, which released two albums of Cape Breton traditional music and song in 1978.[44] The first of these, *The Music of Cape Breton, vol. 1: Gaelic Tradition in Cape Breton*, contained fourteen tracks including both songs and instrumental music, while the twelve tracks on the second LP, *The Music of Cape Breton, vol. 2: Cape Breton Scottish Fiddle* focused on the instrumental music for which Cape Breton has become famous.[45] The accompanying booklets, handsomely illustrated with photographs, provided an excellent introduction to Cape Breton Gaelic history, culture and traditions, as well as the names of tunes, song lyrics, and biographical information on the performers; these materials were written by John with contributions, for the second volume, from Fr. John Angus Rankin – John's host in 1963 and an accomplished piano accompanist – and fiddle player Bill Lamey.

Unfortunately, the beginning of John Shaw's professional life as an academic turned out to be something of a false start. Shortly after recruiting him to teach at UCCB, John's sponsor was killed in an accident on the Trans-Canada Highway, and the College began having second thoughts about his contract:

> They shifted me from a teaching job with a so-called faculty standing to 'adult education'. And inevitably, there was a 'test dialogue' about what my promised salary was really going to be – they wanted 15–20 percent off, and they wanted the summer school for free, and I said, 'that's not in the contract'. They wanted to see what I'd do. So I called in the union.

The inevitable upshot was that John became unemployed; and because he now lacked a job, his work visa was no longer valid, just as John was finding himself increasingly committed to Cape Breton and its Gaelic communities. John was always a meticulous folklorist and ethnographer, recording and providing detailed insights into the cultural and intellectual life of these communities. He wanted to help bring awareness of Cape Breton's Gaelic culture to the wider world, and to build an educational infrastructure that could help to preserve and perpetuate the language and its associated traditions:

> I suppose from the broadest perspective I began to get my own views about what was really happening, and what was important. And I began to see that there was something that I thought was very valuable and precious that was being lost. Nobody was even

[42] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[43] MacNeil, *Sgeul gu Latha*, xix–xx.
[44] For the history of this label, see: https://www.topicrecords.co.uk/topic-records-full-length-biography/. See also Alex Petridis, 'Topic Records – 70 years of giving a voice to the people', *The Guardian*, 23 August 2009: https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/aug/23/topic-records-70th-anniversary.
[45] *The Music of Cape Breton, Volume 1: Gaelic Tradition in Cape Breton*, Topic Records TSDL353 and *The Music of Cape Breton, Volume 2: Cape Breton Scottish Fiddle,* Topic Records TSDL354, 1978, LPs.

> commenting on it, really, and I felt that this was not right, and I felt that it was important that people know, from now on, that such a tradition existed, and that it was kept alive by such men as Joe Neil and Lauchie.[46]

But without a job that would allow him to stay in Canada, John's way forward seemed uncertain.

There was, however, one ray of hope. John's labour dispute with the College of Cape Breton had been reported in the local press, where it drew the attention of Allan J. MacEachen (1921–2017), Liberal Party of Canada MP for the Cape Breton Highlands-Canso constituency and a senior member of the government of Pierre Elliot Trudeau.[47] Born in Inverness County, MacEachen came from a family of Gaelic-speakers and had a great interest in and love for Gaelic culture. John recalls that MacEachen invited him over for breakfast:

> He said, 'What do you think we should be doing?' and I said, 'The best thing I can see, is to have a methodical recording project, from community to community, and get this culture in a form that it can be accessed when the older people are gone, and can be used for the future. And his answer – always – was 'We'll see what we can do.'

If they were to settle in Canada permanently, John and Jill had to apply – from abroad – for landed immigrant status. They left Canada while the political deals were struck, spending the winter in England. By the following year, MacEachen had managed to work things out, and John was able to return to Canada as a full-time employee of what became known as the Cape Breton Gaelic Folklore Project, which ran from 1977 to 1983. Administered through St Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, the project was designed to systematically record the Gaelic traditions of Nova Scotia.[48] As John describes it:

> We promised to do two publications, and the rest was just fieldwork. I did the fieldwork and the publications, which were Joe Neil MacNeil's book and Lauchie MacLellan's book.[49] So that's where I began. Joe Neil and Lauchie were hired as sources, so they got a small amount per month for working with me, and I had access to them pretty much whenever I needed. When I wasn't out in other places I concentrated on them, getting as much of their tradition as I could.[50]

The next several years were among the most productive of John's life, and the beginning of his career as a recognised scholar. Between 1977 and 1983 he recorded approximately 2000 items for the Cape Breton Gaelic Folklore Collection, digitised copies of which are now held in the archives at St Francis Xavier University in Antigonish.[51] The year 1981 saw publication of the first of three books focused on a single informant. This was *Luirgean Eachainn Nìll*, a collection of stories recorded from Hector Campbell who lived near Judique, a village on the west coast of Cape Breton about twenty

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[46] Interview, 12 November 2025.

[47] In 1977, MacEachen was appointed Deputy Prime Minister; he subsequently served as Minister of Finance (1980–82) and Secretary of State for External Affairs (1984) before being appointed to the Senate of Canada as member for Highlands-Canso, where he served until he retired in 1996.

[48] The project had the active support and involvement of St Francis Xavier's president, Fr Malcolm MacDonell (1919–2015), and particularly of his sister, Sr Margaret MacDonell (1920–2023) who became head of Celtic Studies there in 1977; both were native Gaelic speakers from Hillsdale, Inverness County, Cape Breton.

[49] See notes 26 and 40 above.

[50] Interview, 12 November 2025.

[51] https://dasg.ac.uk/gaelstream/.

miles north of the Canso Causeway.[52] John had first visited Campbell during the summers of 1963 and 1964, while he was still an undergraduate:

> Hector was a bachelor who lived on his own in a small house up in the hills. The postal address is Hillsdale, but they used to call it *Beinn Noah* – 'Noah's Hill' – that was the local name for it. He had stories that clearly came from the hero tales of the middle ages. Kenneth Jackson had recorded some from him in the late 1940s.[53] When I'd go to see Hector, I was maybe eighteen or nineteen years old, and I'd take a drink of rum up, and I always wondered what would happen if the Mounties stopped me, driving around at that age with a bottle of rum, and me trying to tell them that I was just taking it up to help with my story recording! Anyway, the title of the book comes from Hector's community out in Beinn Noah. There was a post office there. There would be snow there six months of the year, and people were leaving the community, and one person said, 'The only thing that will be left now will be Hector's footprints in front of the post office, in the snow'. *Luirgean* is a weird local plural of *làrachd*, the Gaelic word for 'footprint'. So the title means 'Hector's Traces'.[54]

While *Luirgean Eachainn Nìll* drew from John's early collecting – Hector Campbell had died by the time he returned to Cape Breton in 1975 – John's next project was *Sgeul gu Latha / Tales until Dawn*: *The World of a Cape Breton Gaelic Story-Teller*, a dual-language edition of Gaelic stories told by Joe Neil MacNeil of Middle Cape, one of his two principal informants from 1977 onwards. Following an introduction in which John describes how he got to know Joe Neil, the book begins with the storyteller's reminiscences of hearing and learning stories from family members and others in his community. It is this account which provided the guiding principle when it came to organising the book's contents. Asked about his editorial process, John remarked:

> Well, that comes down to the question of – how were the books organised? With Joe Neil's, I thought about this. You can divide it up into what seems to be most ancient, or you can do it by 'cycles', hero-tales, all of that. With his, I decided to do it more as the community itself would have organised it. I did it by storytelling families. So if you wanted to find out if it was an international tale or a legend or whatever, that's in the notes. This gave a more accurate, accessible portrait of a storytelling community, which in this case was Middle Cape, where Joe came from. And there have been questions about this.[55]

Indeed, most collections of oral tales, going back to the nineteenth century, have relied upon categories developed by scholars – 'Ulster Cycle' tales, for example, or 'Fenian Cycle', or 'international tales', or 'legends'. Other collections group tales according to thematic material, or the presence of characters of a certain type. There has been a preference for comparative analysis, often aimed at identifying the earliest

[52] Hector Campbell, *Luirgean Eachainn Nìll: Folktales from Cape Breton*, transcribed and translated by Margaret MacDonell and John Shaw (Stornoway, Isle of Lewis: Acair Ltd., 1981).
[53] Kenneth Jackson, 'Notes on the Gaelic of Port Hood', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 6 (1949): 179–83. Hector Campbell also recorded stories for Fr Malcolm MacDonell and for Edward MacLeach; see John Shaw's introduction to Joe Neil MacNeil, *Tales until Dawn*, xviii and notes.
[54] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[55] Interview, 12 November 2025.

possible exemplars. But John concluded that it wasn't Joe Neil's stories as such that would provide the most compelling organising principle for his book, but the storytellers themselves and their communities:

> I'd heard James Delargy talk at Harvard, and for me that was a very influential lecture.[56] I'd spent enough time in communities in Cape Breton – and in South Uist and Barra – to understand what he meant about the 'hidden people' – the people who were the custodians of the tradition that was in the kitchens. It wasn't a public role: in Cape Breton, the important forum was the kitchen, for storytelling especially. The reputation would go out, and I think it was like that for a long time.
>
> The more I talked to Joe and Lauchie and other people, and the more events that I went to, the more interested I became in the social context. And I began to see that storytelling, maybe its main importance, is as a social activity – what it does for bringing people together, but also what it does for personal, mental integration. It keeps people sane. Things would happen in the stories that would help them understand what was happening to them. There is a feeling of some kind of unity with characters in stories who had been through the same challenges. This is what I began to see. One thing that was difficult, sometimes, about fieldwork recording sessions was – you get everything set up, you have the people that you want to record, and then other people turn up, and it very rapidly turns into a social occasion. To hell with the programme, with what you were trying to record; it was the social occasion that was really important to them. So I'd just kind of relax, and turn off the machine, and come back later quietly and get it. No conflict.[57]

The organisation of Joe Neil's book reflects John's conviction that the real story lies in the holistic picture that emerges of a community held together, as it were, by their shared storytelling tradition – the shared ownership of the tales, the people's identification with the characters and their adventures, and their delight in the social occasions that storytelling afforded.[58] In the longest section of this book, headed 'The Reciters and the Tales', the fifty-two tales are presented as Joe Neil credited them to the people from whom he had learned them, including four storytelling families and an additional eight individual storytellers. Today, we can only wonder what it must have been like to live in a small community boasting such a rich tradition of oral narrative, and so many talented bearers of it.

It was in this connection that John also expressed frustration with another aspect of folklore scholarship:

> I think genre analysis in folklore is a nightmare. It's almost impossible. The efforts that have been made – Heda Jason and her assault on the international folktale classification system put up the right challenge, which is that it doesn't really work all that well.[59] Another person who showed the difficulties of genre analysis for folklore was Dan Ben-

[56] James Delargy, 'The Gaelic Storyteller' , *Proceedings of the British Academy* 31 (1945): 178–221.
[57] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[58] Discussion of how particular tales are categorised is included in the notes at the back of the book.
[59] Heda Jason, *Motif, type, and genre: A manual for compilation of indices and a bibliography of indices and indexing*. FF communications 273 (2000). Suomi, Finland: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

> Amos in Philadelphia.[60] You've got to have a rule of thumb, but it is messy, and it's imperfect, and sometimes you can probably miss the point.[61]

Similar difficulties have plagued the search for a useful classification system for Gaelic song, as anyone can attest who has ever tried to edit a song collection. When it came to organising the songs he collected from Lauchie MacLellan several years later, John realised that, absent any authoritatively emic classificatory system, he was on his own:

> I just did the best I could. I couldn't see any point in being more rigorous. Lauchie himself didn't have many names for various types of songs. I told John MacInnes that I was having a problem with this, and [asked him] what terms would he suggest – 'drinking songs' (*orain botuil)*, for example, was one that he suggested – but otherwise I hadn't found a good system for classifying Gaelic songs. [62]

The publication, in 2000, of Lauchie MacLellan's book *Brìgh an Òrain* completed John's commitment to the project he had undertaken on behalf of the Cape Breton Gaelic Folklore Collection in 1977. That project, initiated in the aftermath of his labour dispute with the College of Cape Breton, was the true beginning of John's career as a university scholar.

For the remaining years of the 1980s, John and Jill continued to live in Cape Breton, where they bought property in Glendale, built a house, and set about raising their daughters, Katie (b. 1978) and Jenny (b. 1984), as well as various livestock. John continued his collecting activities, completing a Gaelic oral history project for the Institute of Island Studies and the Celtic Studies Committee of the University of Prince Edward Island, during which he made audio and videocassette recordings of twenty Gaelic-speaking tradition-bearers, including the last fluent Gaelic speaker in P.E.I., as well as a sampling of the island's traditional violin style.[63] One of his colleagues on that project, Jim Watson (1949–2018), had been a close friend since the 1970s, and the two helped spearhead various other initiatives including Cape Gael Associates Co-op, which launched an ambitious programme of activities in support of Gaelic language and culture in Cape Breton.[64]

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[60] Dan Ben-Amos, 'Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context', *Journal of American Folklore* 84/331 (Jan–Mar 1971), 3–15.

[61] Interview, 12 November 2025.

[62] Interview, 12 November 2025. A couple of attempts have been made; see James Ross, 'A Classification of Gaelic Folk-Song', *Scottish Studies* 1 (1957):95–151; and Virginia Blankenhorn, 'A new approach to the classification of Gaelic song', *Oral Tradition* 32/1 (2018): 71–140. The first of these John Shaw described as 'uncomfortable'; the second appeared long after Lauchie's book was published.

[63] For a summary of this project, see John Shaw and Michael Kennedy, 'Gaelic in Prince Edward Island: A Cultural Remnant (Gaelic Field Recording Project)'. https://islandstudies.com/files/2014/07/GAELIC-IN-PRINCE-EDWARD-ISLAND.pdf

[64] These included organising performances of Gaelic traditional arts at the Expo '86 World's Fair in Vancouver, with a follow up concert at Vancouver's Folk Festival in 1987, and an 'International Conference for Gaelic Language and Culture' held at UCCB in 1987, which drew prominent participants from Scotland. Cape Gael also provided support for fundraising efforts for UCCB's Gaelic Cape Breton Island Play Group Fund; produced Gaelic learning materials based on local cultural resources; and engaged in ongoing advocacy and consultancy with the aim of making Gaelic language and music more accessible and more closely linked to Cape Breton's economic and social development. A concert organised in support of the Play Group Fund provides not only an excellent introduction to the Cape Breton Gaelic tradition but an insight into Cape Gael's vision: see https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=e18Zc2BiXzk. See also Veronica Gillies, 'Four people guarding a fragile legacy: Cape Gael Associates Co-op', *Worker Co-op: The Voice of Economic Democracy in Canada* 9/1 (Summer 1989), 20–21.

Also in the 1980s, John was working on Joe Neil's stories; and it was that project that rekindled his ambition to complete his doctorate. In 1982, through a process of discussion with Harvard University and the advocacy of Prof. Charles Dunn, John was awarded a PhD in Celtic Languages and Literatures for his manuscript of Joe Neil's stories and traditional lore.

In 1990, at the conclusion of a three-month teaching contract at St Mary's University in Halifax, John and Jill decided to extend their absence from Glendale and go to Scotland, expecting to stay for six months. But at the beginning of 1991, with their two daughters enrolled in the Gaelic Medium unit in Inverness, John was hired as a Gaelic Development Officer for Comunn na Gàidhlig, an organisation founded in 1984 by the Scottish Office to co-ordinate developments in Gaelic language policy.[65] It was this position that ultimately launched his full-time career as an academic, first, in 1994, as a lecturer in Celtic at King's College, University of Aberdeen, and in 1996 as Senior Lecturer in Scottish Ethnology at the University of Edinburgh, a post from which he retired in 2009.

Tobar an Dualchais

In the early 1990s, John's work for Comunn na Gàidhlig was actually located within the offices of Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). As he explained, 'I was officially working for Comunn na Gàidhlig, but I was within HIE, and my job was to get every penny that I could [for Gaelic] out of HIE, and they had a big budget'.[66] Even so, John's boss at the time, Roy Pedersen, came to him one day saying that they had a problem. 'The ground is shifting under our feet,' he said. 'We've got only six months left working on this Gaelic business'.[67] With his own and others' livelihoods dependent upon obtaining additional funding, John focused urgently on the problem – and an idea came to him:

> There was a visit to Brittany, about language maintenance for Breton, and one of the visits we made was to the archive in Rennes. You've probably heard of [Breton musician and singer] Alain Stivell? He put together a project there where people went out into communities and recorded, brought back these cassette tapes, and they were put on a little network called 'Minitel'.[68] And I was looking at that, and on the way home, it came home to me: Jesus, you know, we've got these huge collections, why not put big collections on a big network and make them available to everybody? So I went back to Pedersen, and Pedersen said, 'Well, what are we going to do with ourselves?' and I said, well, 'I saw something very interesting in France, we might try it.' And Pedersen said – he was my boss – he said, 'Let's do it!'[69]

As a consequence, John was commissioned by Comunn na Gàidhlig to prepare a report that would 'assess the current state, needs and potential of Gaelic oral heritage'.[70] Entitled 'DUALCHAS: Gaelic Cultural Heritage, Community and Technology', this report was submitted to Comunn na Gàidhlig and HIE in 1994, and eventually served as the initial blueprint for Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o Riches,

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[65] This was in the years before the creation of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, a government quango.
[66] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[67] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[68] Officially 'TELETEL', Minitel provided an interactive videotex online service through telephone lines in the years before the launch of the World Wide Web.
[69] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[70] John Shaw, 'From the Shoulders of Giants to the Global Arena: Scotland and its Intangible Heritage', in Chris Wright, ed., *Tobar an Dualchais: Ulaidh Nàiseanta / Kist o Riches: A National Treasure* (Tobar an Dualchais, 2014).

the online resource that today provides global access, free of charge, to some 40,000 audio recordings of traditional songs, stories, oral history and folklore in Gaelic and Scots – the vernacular heritage of Scotland's people, and those of Scottish descent around the world. The report conceived of Gaelic cultural heritage as 'the extensive store of arts, traditions and skills as practised and transmitted in Gaelic speaking communities and regarded as fundamental to Gaelic culture', and specifically referenced traditional singing and song composition, verbal arts including storytelling, instrumental music and dance – in short, the range of cultural expression which John had first encountered in the Hebrides and in Cape Breton thirty years earlier.[71] The report reviewed efforts made since the late 1700s to record what was perceived to be an endangered tradition but that had, until the mid-twentieth century, received no public support. Its summary of the situation is worth quoting at length:

> In spite of the generous intentions of informants and collectors, the effects on the tradition in the Gaelic communities have been minimal. This is because materials have been by and large confined to university archives or private collections, or published in scholarly works virtually inaccessible to Gaelic communities.
>
> Within the communities, the oral tradition has constituted one of the vital and enduring institutions on which Gaelic identity has depended. As the vehicle through which Gaelic intellectual life has remained alive among the ordinary people, it has served as an informal but powerful force in socialisation, skill development and thought formation....
>
> From the beginning of this century activities such as Gaelic singing and instrumental music have received little, if any, support from formal institutions and are still suborned to 'high' and state culture. There has been considerable encouragement from Gaelic organisations, but their support has often been accompanied by practices and standards introduced from outside Gaeldom (termed 'acculturation' by researchers), often giving rise to confusion as to 'what is real', and consequent weakening of the local aesthetic and loss of self-esteem. Compounding this has been the quantitative decline brought on by imposed priorities through modern education, mass media, social mobility and out-migration, greatly reducing the numbers of exponents of Gaelic tradition in recent generations.
>
> There has also been a qualitative decline: concerning the present generation of singers the view has been widely expressed that the song repertoire has declined noticeably in quality and breadth. The same is even more demonstrably true for Gaelic storytelling.[72]

The report listed a range of objectives for the project. These included the creation of 'an archival and organisational resource for Gaelic oral and musical cultural heritage that is easily and widely accessible throughout Scotland', a resource that would 'support and develop oral and musical heritage skills, arts and aesthetics transmitted in Gaelic through traditional methods where possible, including traditional song and singing styles; storytelling and other verbal arts; language usage; instrumental music and dance'.[73] It listed the major sound archives that had emerged in the twentieth century and on which the project would be based, including the School of Scottish Studies Archives at Edinburgh University; the BBC Gaelic archive; the recordings John had made for the Cape Breton Gaelic Folklore Project held at St Francis Xavier University; Gaelic material held at the Department of Irish

[71] John Shaw, DUALCHAS: Gaelic Heritage, Community and Technology. A Report for Comunn na Gàidhlig, (Inverness: 1994), 3.
[72] Shaw, DUALCHAS, 6.
[73] Shaw, DUALCHAS, 12.

Folklore, University College Dublin; and a number of smaller collections, as well as Dr John Lorne Campbell's private collection in Canna.[74] In addition to encouraging the use of the resource by individuals, community groups, 'and all relevant educational and Gaelic development organisations', the report envisaged that the project could provide Gaelic tradition with an economic base 'through business creation, marketing and promotion, with special reference to the media and cultural tourism'. Also important, however, were raising the awareness and image of Gaelic tradition and making it available to a wider audience, and the promotion and development of social aspects of content, transmission and performance.[75] The report provides further evidence of John's vision: the recording of Gaelic tradition was important not simply as an historical artefact, but as a resource of fundamental importance for linguistic and cultural maintenance and revitalisation of Gaelic-speaking communities.

John described his report as something of a shot-in-the-dark, something 'to keep things going, to keep people employed'; but he soon became aware that his idea might be one whose time had come:

> I thought, I'm not sure this will get off the ground. So I started calling people for information, and – it's never happened to me before in my life – everybody I called said, 'Oh, yeah! I'd love to help with that!' And the information came in – all the information I needed. People were just extremely helpful the whole way through.[76]

The plan gradually changed as these conversations took place, and progress was slow. Launched at last in 2006, the Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o' Riches project was declared complete in 2010,[77] although it maintains a staff to this day, with new material constantly added. The initial delay was perhaps just as well, given the improvements in technology that had taken place in the meantime. One of its great strengths, however, was that the project became the work of many hands. The collaboration of institutional partners – Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, which housed and managed it; the BBC, whose Gaelic recordings became part of the database; the National Trust for Scotland, owner of John Lorne Campbell's Canna collection; the sound archives of the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh – supported a successful grant proposal to the Heritage Lottery Fund. The hard work of many individuals – from advisors and steering-committee members and people with fundraising expertise to technology specialists, copyright experts, digitisers, editors, cataloguers – ensured that the work was done not just with due diligence, but with care and respect for the recordings, for the contributors and their families, for the fieldworkers, and for communities whose legacy they represented. John expressed astonishment at how collaborative the project became, and how it remained mercifully free of the usual egos and posturing:

> It's been an amazing experience. It took some time to put together. It was decided that Scots should be included as well as Gaelic, and probably Scottish English. Sabhal Mòr got involved; Hugh Cheape came on board; and Dr Martin MacIntyre got the money. It's been rough at times keeping it going, but we've had people who've really hung in there, like Donnie Munro, who understands this stuff and has enough courage to follow

[74] Shaw, DUALCHAS, 8–9.
[75] Shaw, DUALCHAS, 12.
[76] Interview, 12 November 2025.
[77] Hugh Cheape and John Shaw, 'Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o Riches Evaluation Report'. 20 December 2010. Unpublished report prepared for the Heritage Lottery Fund, whose support totalling £3.2 million made execution of the project possible.

> through.[78] But – and this is something that's never happened to me before – nobody tried to get the credit for any part of this. Nobody tried to control it. You didn't have any of that 'primate' stuff.[79]

To this day, John continues to be involved in *Tobar an Dualchais / Kist o Riches* as a member of its steering group.

Academic and activist

During his time at Edinburgh University, in addition to teaching and post-graduate supervision, John returned regularly to Cape Breton to make recordings for the School of Scottish Studies Archives. In 2005, he obtained a major grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council to launch the Calum Maclean Project (2005–2009) which aimed to create a searchable catalogue of material collected in Gaelic Scotland by Calum I. Maclean (1915–1960), the first fieldworker hired by the School of Scottish Studies after its founding in 1951.[80] Between 1945 and 1950, Maclean had worked in Ireland for the Irish Folklore Commission collecting Gaelic material in Scotland. Maclean's written transcriptions of these field recordings amount to 10,511 hand-written pages – approximately 2.1 million words – bound in twenty-three volumes held in the National Folklore Archive, University College Dublin. A further ten volumes of transcriptions from audiotape, amounting to 2,224 hand-written pages of approximately 440,000 words, are held in the School of Scottish Studies Archives. Primarily containing long folk-tales, these two collections constitute the entire known corpus of Calum Maclean's Scottish Gaelic field transcriptions. The catalogue developed by the Calum Maclean Project is thus of immense value to researchers of Gaelic oral narrative and tradition.[81]

Since retiring from the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies in 2009, John has remained active. His editorship of *Scottish Studies*, which began when he was hired in 2006, continued until 2022, when he had been retired for over a decade. He continues publishing, lecturing, and following the work of other scholars. He plays the fiddle on Monday nights at Sandy Bell's bar in Forrest Road. Above all, he regularly returns to Cape Breton to visit friends and to support efforts aimed at revitalising Gaelic language and culture. The welcome creation in 2006 of Nova Scotia's Office of Gaelic Affairs (*Oifis Iomairtean na Gàidhlig*) has, in an effort to slow the ongoing decline of Gaelic in Cape Breton, supported a number of language acquisition and other language promotional initiatives there.[82] John was centrally involved in developing one of these, *Stòras a' Bhaile*. Designed

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[78] Dr Hugh Cheape is a Vice-President of the National Trust for Scotland and executor for the estate of John Lorne Campbell, whose collection of recordings, dating from the 1930s, became part of the project database. Dr Martin MacIntyre served as Project Co-ordinator and was a powerful advocate for it with the Heritage Lottery and other funders. Donnie Munro, a member of the Gaelic band Run Rig, has been involved in the project for years, and is a constant advocate when further support is needed.

[79] Interview, 12 November 2025.

[80] https://www.calum-maclean-project.celtscot.ed.ac.uk/home/.

[81] Outputs of the project included 'Fear Beag a' Chridhe Mhòir', a series of twelve programmes on the life and work of Calum Maclean broadcast on Radio nan Gàidheal, the BBC's Gaelic radio service; a conference, 'The Life and Legacy of Calum Maclean', held at Edinburgh University on 23 November 2013; an exhibition (https://www.calum-maclean-project.celtscot.ed.ac.uk/resources/exhibition/); and a double CD, *Cruinneachadh Chaluim*, featuring a rich selection of Maclean's field recordings of Gaelic song curated by John and project researcher Dr Andrew Wiseman (https://greentrax.com/product/cruinneachadh-chaluim-field-recordings-of-gaelic-music-and-song/).

[82] *Gàidhlig aig Baile* ('Gaelic at Home'), promotes basic fluency through interactive, immersion-based approaches, conducted in homes rather than formal classroom settings; another initiative, *Bun is Bàrr* ('Root and

by John and Jim Watson, *Stòras a' Bhaile* is a week-long folk-life school, established by the Nova Scotia Highland Village Museum, which brings Gaelic learners and local native speakers together to explore songs, tales and other forms of Nova Scotia Gaelic oral tradition by utilising material both from the native-speaking participants and from sound recordings, particularly those made for the Cape Breton Gaelic Folklore Project.[83] Founded 'on the principle that Gaelic language development in Nova Scotia entails restoring a group identity based in shared cultural expressions', the programme seeks 'to build group identity while fostering language acquisition through experiences and representations of communal Nova Scotia Gaelic Culture'.[84]

In the years since John left Canada, all of the recordings he made for the Cape Breton Gaelic Folklore Project have been digitised and made available online.[85] A project developed by Dr Heather Sparling of Cape Breton University, 'Cainnt is Ceathramhan/Language in Lyrics', is working to catalogue, digitize, transcribe and facilitate access to the Gaelic songs and folklore of Nova Scotia.[86]A searchable index of over 6,000 records of Gaelic songs made or known in Nova Scotia, with over 1,000 digitised texts, has been created.

In many ways, then, John's life and work has come full circle. His fieldwork has provided present and future generations of scholars with an extremely valuable record of remarkable New World Gaelic communities. John's vision, however, was that this cultural and linguistic resource be used not only by scholars but, most importantly, by the communities in which the fieldwork was first conducted, as a means of linguistic and cultural regeneration. While Gaelic remains fragile, John's work has played a central role in current revival efforts, and for that, all those concerned with Gaelic language and culture, both in Nova Scotia and elsewhere, should be extremely grateful.

As for the study of folklore, there can be no doubt regarding the value of John Shaw's contribution. By enabling us to hear the voices of Gaels from Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island, not just by giving us what we may call the 'artefacts' – the stories, songs, music and lore – but by sensitively exploring the social context of those activities, John has expanded our understanding of what 'collecting' is all about, and encouraged us to think holistically about the work of earlier collectors and the communities they studied. Most crucially for the future, the realisation of his vision for Tobar and Dualchais has proved that the academy is capable not just of collecting and archiving the oral remnants of cultures assumed to be 'dying' or 'lost'– the sort of 'museumifying' activities sometimes critiqued as 'salvage ethnography' – but also of meaningfully sharing those collections with the descendants of those whose cultural legacy they were, and with the world at large. What we do with this national treasury is up to us.

Branch'), provides more intensive learning opportunities and seeks to strengthen links between Gaelic learners and Nova Scotia's Gaelic elders, allowing elders to share their knowledge, cultural tradition and wisdom with younger generations. See Frances MacEachen, *Am Blas Againn fhìn. Community Gaelic immersion classes in Nova Scotia: An evaluation of activities in 2006–2007* (Halifax: Office of Gaelic Affairs, 2008), 7–8. https://gaelic.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/inline/documents/am_blas_againn_fhin.pdf; also Seumas Watson and Marlene Ivey, 'Nàisean cultarach nan Gàidheal: Ath-chruthachadh tìr-dhùthchasaich ann an Albainn Nuaidh', in *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 8*, ed. Wilson McLeod, Anja Gunderloch and Rob Dunbar (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2016): 183–94.

[83] Watson and Ivey, 'Nàisean cultarach nan Gàidheal', 189.

[84] Nova Scotia Highland Village, *Stòras a' Bhaile 2013: Highland Village Gaelic Folklife School and Celebration, July 22nd–25th, 2013, report to the Office of Gaelic Affairs.* (Halifax: Office of Gaelic Affairs, 2013), 1, 2.

[85] https://dasg.ac.uk/gaelstream/.

[86] https://languageinlyrics.com/.

We are delighted to present this issue of *Scottish Studies* as a Festschrift to our colleague Dr Shaw, presently an honorary fellow in Celtic & Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Each of us has been inspired in some way by some aspect of John's fieldwork, scholarship, teaching or mentorship, and we have all have benefited from his conversation, advice and friendship. In honour of John's work, his life, and his enormous contribution to our field we, his colleagues, former students and friends offer him this volume of essays, with love and affection.

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