

## Oral Narrative and Propaganda

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I first knew John Shaw around 1970 when he and I were both young scholars at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. He had long black hair and a big black hat. He got on famously with Prof. Binchy, which made us wonder if he was destined for a career in Early Irish Law. But he seemed to talk much about the young Skye poetess Catriona Montgomery, ‘Monty’, which suggested a different trajectory. Monty must have won out, because after disappearing for a while to a kibbutz (trendy in those days) he reappeared in Cape Breton to do the priceless work with Joe Neil MacNeil, Lauchie MacLellan and others which has earned him his deservedly high reputation as a scholar of Scottish Gaelic oral narrative.

The purpose of this contribution is to examine – and if possible explain – certain inconsistencies in oral narrative thrown up by the recent publication of *John Dewar’s Islay, Jura and Colonsay*.<sup>1</sup> The inconsistencies concern the following historically attested events which took place during the dispute between Angus MacDonald of Islay and Sir Lachlan MacLean of Duart over possession of the Rhinns of Islay:

- 1578 Angus MacDonald’s forces besiege Sir Lachlan’s island castle of Loch Gorm in the Rhinns, burning and looting his property and killing his servants.
- 1586 Angus MacDonald invites Sir Lachlan and his followers to a feast at his house of Mulindry in Islay. After the feast he sets fire to the barn in which the MacLeans are sleeping, and hangs eighty-four of them. Sir Lachlan is left to the last, but Angus falls off his horse and breaks his leg, as a result of which Sir Lachlan is spared long enough for an urgent message to come from the king, James VI, ordering his release. The site of the slaughter was remembered until the twentieth century as *Geadhail na Fala* (‘the Bloody Field’).
- 1598 Sir Lachlan sails to Islay with an armed force, meaning to fulfil his aims by negotiation or conquest. Leaving part of his force on Nave Island, where it is stranded by the tide, he lands at Poll Nùstaig, not far from Loch Gruinneart. Following the failure of negotiations with Angus’s son Sir James (his own nephew), a battle is fought at Tràigh Ghruinneart. The MacDonalds are victorious; Sir Lachlan is killed, and his body is brought for burial to the church of Kilchoman.
- 1602 A battle is fought at Beinn Bhigeir in Islay between forces led by Sir Lachlan’s son Hector and Sir James MacDonald. With the aim of sacking Mulindry, the MacLeans and their allies – Camerons and others – land on the south-east coast of Islay at Proaig and/or Ardbeg. Sir James hastily gathers together a force which attempts to stand in their way, but is defeated on the high pass called the Lorg Réidh, close to the summit of Beinn Bhigeir. Mulindry is sacked and the entire length of Islay is plundered.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Black and Christopher Dracup, *John Dewar’s Islay, Jura and Colonsay* (Kinross: John Dewar Publishers, 2024).

This sequence of events is, I think, beyond dispute. It has been pieced together from works by Thomas Pennant (1790), ‘A Seneachie’ (1838), the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod (1842), William MacDonald (1850), Donald Gregory (1881), the Rev. A. Maclean Sinclair (1899), J. D. Mackie (1969), and Peggy Earl (n.d.).<sup>2</sup> These sources appear to be of three kinds: neutral, pro-MacLean or late. The Gaelic oral tradition of Islay offers a different sequence, however. The earliest example is found in the polemical work *Vindication of the Celtic Character*, where the following version of events is offered by its author, the Islay poet William Livingston.<sup>3</sup> He says of Sir Lachlan:

At last he invaded Islay with some forces and a numerous fleet of gallies. He landed at Loch Gruinart, in the north west extremity of the country; from thence he proceeded to Mullindrai. His nephew, Sir James MacDonald, mustered his retainers; the two clans met on the *Bloody Field*, so called from that circumstance. After an obstinate resistance, the MacDonalds were overpowered; they retreated towards the Bein Mor, thinking that that mountain might screen them from the vengeance of their pursuers; but it proved otherwise, the enemy followed them hard over that barrier; nor was the conflict ended till night seperated [*sic*] them, at Ardbeg, on the south coast of the Island, after both parties maintained a running fight for about eight miles. MacLean returned to his camp at the bay of Gruinairt, fully confirmed that his object was secure . . .

Livingston then describes the battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart. To sum up, he has said that Sir Lachlan lands at Loch Gruinneart (as in 1598), then marches to Mulindry and meets Sir James in a battle which Livingston calls ‘the Bloody Field’ (a version of the events of 1586). The MacDonalds retreat to the ‘Bein Mor’, by which Livingston can only mean Beinn Bhigeir, Islay’s highest mountain (there is no Beinn Mhór in the island). He then describes a running conflict over the shoulder of Beinn Bhigeir, ending at Ardbeg – exactly the events of 1602, but in the opposite direction. Finally he brings us back to Tràigh Ghruinneart, so setting the stage for the battle there. The sequence may be summarised as 1598, 1586, 1602, 1598. Livingston has not merely changed the chronological order of events – he has also blended them together and reversed the action of the battle of Beinn Bhigeir.

It can of course be argued that Livingston’s evidence is of little weight, as even in his prose works he tends to be economical with the truth. But he has backing from other sources, the first of which is John Dewar (1802–72), a native of Arrochar who visited Islay in 1869 or 1870. After describing an initial row between Angus and Sir Lachlan, in which the latter demands to be given the whole northern half of Islay, Dewar says:<sup>4</sup>

*Chuir iad batailt air Beinn Bhigeir. Chaidh an aghaidh Chlann Domhnuill. 2 Chuir iad an ath bhatailte aig àite ris an abaireir Muladradh (Muilàradh). Chaidh Clann Ghill’ Eathain gu léir ach Lachun-more e fein a mharbhadh. Uair eile, thainig Lachun le dhaoine gu eileanan Locha Guirm. Chaidh sgrios thoirt air Clann Ghill’ Eathain.*

First they fought a battle on Beinn Bhigeir, which went against the MacDonalds. They fought the next battle at a place called Mulindry, and all the MacLeans except Lachlan

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<sup>2</sup> See Bibliography for full citations of these works.

<sup>3</sup> William Livingston, *Vindication of the Celtic Character: or, The Scotchman as He Was and as He Should Be* (Greenock: Joseph Blair, 1850), 112.

<sup>4</sup> Black and Dracup, *John Dewar’s Islay*, 82–83.

Mór himself were killed. On another occasion Lachlan came with his men to the islands of Loch Gorm, and the MacLeans were badly beaten.

Dewar then goes on to describe the battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart. It will be noticed that all the events are called battles, even Mulindry, despite the fact that elsewhere he describes what happened there quite correctly as a mass execution.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he has radically altered the sequence: it may be described as ‘1602, 1586, 1578, 1598’. And if we believe notes made by Elspeth Kerr in 1897 from William Campbell, Bridgend, Beinn Bhigeir was indeed fought before Tràigh Ghruinneart:<sup>6</sup>

The first battle was fought at Beinn-a-Mhicear, (the Vicar’s hill),<sup>7</sup> where it seems the Mac donalds lost the day, and were forced to retreat.... The next battle was the decisive one of Traigh Ghruinairt.... Some time after the Battles of Beinn-a-Mhicear, and Traigh Ghruinairt, a daughter of Macdonald’s, and a daughter of Sir Lachlan Mac leans met some where, and not being very friendly to one another, Mac lean’s daughter, to taunt the other, said – “Latha blar Beinn-a-Mhicear, cha be ’n sliomair Lachlan” (Lachlan was no clown the day of the battle of Beinn-a-Mhicear); to which the other retorted – “Latha Traigh Ghruinairt, chaidh ’n urram sin dhachaidh” (On the day of Traigh Ghruinairt, that honour went home)

– meaning of course that at Tràigh Ghruinneart it was Sir James who was no clown.

This evidence leads us to suspect that Islay storytellers placed Tràigh Ghruinneart after Beinn Bhigeir, in order to show that even if the MacDonalds had lost a battle, they won the war. In fact, the standpoint taken by some later Islay tradition-bearers was even more extreme. David Mackay writes, ‘The MacDonalds do not admit that they were defeated at Beinn Bhiogair, nor indeed that any fight took place there after the date of Traigh Ghruinnairt’.<sup>8</sup> He speaks of a belief ‘common among Islay men at the present time’ that there was a fight at Beinn Bhigeir, but that it preceded Tràigh Ghruinneart. In support of this he cites ‘an ancient Islay couplet, which is still in use’:

Latha Beinn Bhiogair cha b’e an gliocaire Lachunn,  
Latha Traigh Ghruinneart cha d’ thug e an t-urram sin dhachaidh.

He translates this very accurately as:

The day of Beinn Bhiogair no wise man was Lachlan,  
The day of Traigh Ghruinneart he took not home that honour.

So William Campbell’s *sliomair* (‘clown, slouch’) has been replaced by *gliocaire* (‘wise man’). But the logic of Mackay’s version of the couplet is very doubtful. I think for *gliocaire* we should read *glugaire* (‘stammerer, slouch’), a word similar in general meaning to *sliomair*. This would give us the translation:

The day of Beinn Bhigeir no clown was Lachlan,  
The day of Tràigh Ghruinneart he took not home that honour.

In other words, Sir Lachlan won at Beinn Bhigeir, then lost at Tràigh Ghruinneart.

<sup>5</sup> Black and Dracup, *John Dewar’s Islay*, 78–81.

<sup>6</sup> MML 3065–66, R. C. Maclagan Manuscripts, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh.

<sup>7</sup> A more plausible derivation is from the Norse personal name *Vikarr* ‘Viking’; see Black and Dracup, *John Dewar’s Islay*, 461.

<sup>8</sup> David N. Mackay, *Clan Warfare in the Scottish Highlands* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1922), 176.

On this verse, then, my conclusion is that Islay tradition-bearers were agreed that Beinn Bhigeir was fought before Tràigh Ghruinneart, and that some of them went still further, falsifying the poetic record rather clumsily in order to turn Beinn Bhigeir into a MacDonald victory. This is propaganda, or as some would say, ‘fake news’, albeit well after the event.

We must turn now to the even more curious matter of Sir Lachlan’s *giùlan* or funeral procession following his death at Tràigh Ghruinneart. Again there are two contrasting scenarios, but this time they read like an ‘official’ and an ‘unofficial’ version. Of these, the latter is the first to appear on record, thanks partly<sup>9</sup> to the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod, ‘Caraid nan Gaidheal’ (1783–1862), who was familiar with MacLean traditions through his Morvern connections, but was also no stranger to Islay:<sup>10</sup>

*Thainig boirionnach bochd a Chloinn-’Leathain, agus thug i leatha corp Lachuinn Mhóir air slaod gu eaglais Chillechomain, far na thìodhlaic i e. Le gluasad a’ charbaid air an robh an corp, thainig atharrachadh mór air ’aogus; agus thòisich mac na mnatha so ri fochaid air, agus ri gàiricich. Bu Dòmhnallach an gille, ach chuir so uiread chorruich air a mhàthair ’s gu’n d’thug i ionnsuidh air a mac féin le biodaig; agus leòn i e, airson a bhi ’magadh air a ceann-cinnidh.*

There appeared a poor MacLean woman who took Lachann Mór’s body away on a slipe to Kilchoman church, where she buried it. By the movement of the vehicle the corpse was on, a great change came over its face, so this woman’s son started making fun of it and laughing. The lad was a MacDonald, but this so enraged his mother that she attacked her own son with a dirk and wounded him for mocking her chief.

A *slaod* or *carn* (‘slipe’, ‘sledge’) is a wheel-less horse-drawn cart, usually used for transporting peats or manure, an inappropriate conveyance even for the meanest of funerals. Basically, it consisted of two long timber beams joined by cross-struts.<sup>11</sup> Tradition is absolutely consistent that Sir Lachlan was buried at Kilchoman, five or six miles over moor and bog from the battlefield; the issue is how his body was brought there, and by whom. Here is Dewar’s account:<sup>12</sup>

*Bha a’ bhanaltram leis an deach Lachun Mór altram chomhnuidh anns an Roinn Illeach [= Ìleach]. Fhuair i fios gun deach Lachun Mór a mharbha aig Tràigh Ghruinnaird, ’s chuir i roimpa [= roimhpe] gun tìodhlaiceadh i e. Bha gille aice. Theirte Donacha Dubhchasach ris do bhrìgh gun robh fionna dhubh a’ fàs air a chasaibh. Thug i air Donacha Dubhchasach an carn chuir air each a bh’ aice, ’s chaidh iad gu Tràigh Ghruinnaird a thogail corp Lachuinn Mhóir, gus a thoirt gu Cille Chomain gu e bhi iar a thìodhlac ann.*

*Dh’fhalbh iad, ’s rainig iad Tràigh Ghruinnard. Cha robh cobhan air bhith aca gu corp Lachuinn Mhóir chuir ann, no neach gus iad a chuideacha gus an corp chuir air a’ charn, ach chuir iad fein suas e ’s dh’fhalbh iad leis. Bha an aghasdar aicese, is i a’*

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Maclean-Bristol writes that ‘the story of the simple young man who mocked Lachlan Mor’s corpse appears in Donald Macdonald’s unpublished manuscript of 1826’, footnoting his comment simply *BCP* – Breacachadh Castle Papers; see Nicholas Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust: The Crimes and Death of Sir Lachlan Mor Maclean of Duart, 1558–1598* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 243. The Breacachadh Castle Papers are currently unavailable to scholars.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod, ‘Lachunn Mór Dhubhairt’, *Cuairtear nan Gleann* 2 (1942), 245–246.

<sup>11</sup> I. F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* (London: Routledge, 1961), 208–209 and 281–283.

<sup>12</sup> Black and Dracup, *John Dewar’s Islay*, 94–97.

*treòireacha an eich, 's bha Donacha Dubhchasach a' freasdal do Mhac Ghill' Eathain chumail ceart air a' charn. Tra bha iad air an t-slighe, chaidh spàg a' chuirn sìos ann an easgaidh, thug clap [= clab] Lachuin cratha, rinn Donacha gàire. Phill muime Lachuin far an robh an gille, 's dh'fharraid i dheth, "Ciod fàth do ghàire?"*

*Thubhairt es', "Tha air mar a ta clab Lachuin Mhóir a' cratha tra theid spàg a' chuirn thair na torrain a's anns na h-easgaidh."*

*Chuir ise a làmh stigh fo a h-earasaid, thug i mach biodag & stog i anns an ghille i, 's mharbh si e. Chaidh an gille adhlac ann an sin, a's b'e Carn Donachaidh theirte ris an àite sin a-rithis.*

The nurse who'd reared Lachlann Mór lived in the Rhinns of Islay. She got word that Lachlann Mór had been killed at Tràigh Ghruinneart, and decided she should bury him. She had a servant who was called *Donnchadh Dubhchasach* ('Black-Legged Duncan') because he had black fur growing on his legs. She ordered him to harness the slipe to a horse she had, then they set off for Tràigh Ghruinneart to pick up Lachlann Mór's body and bring it to Kilchoman so that it could be buried there.

They set off, and got to Tràigh Ghruinneart. They had no coffin to put Lachlann Mór's body in, nor did they have anyone to help them put it on the slipe, but they put it on themselves and took it away. She held the halter and led the horse, while Donnchadh Dubhchasach concentrated on holding MacLean steady on the slipe. When they were on their way the beam of the slipe went down in a bog, Lachlan's open mouth quivered, and Duncan laughed. Lachlan's foster-mother came back around towards the servant and asked him: 'Why did you laugh?'

He said, 'Because of the way Lachann Mór's big open mouth shakes when the beam of the slipe goes over the bumps and into the pot-holes'.

She put her hand in under her cloak, took out a dirk, stuck it into the servant, and killed him. The man was buried there, and *Carn Donnchaidh* (Carnduncan, 'Duncan's Slipe or Cairn') was the name afterwards given to the place.

So the poor woman has become Sir Lachlan's foster-mother, her assistant is no longer her son but her *gille* (usually 'servant'), she not only stabs him but kills him, he has a name, and (as is frequently the case with Dewar) the story turns out to be *dindsheanchas*, place-lore, designed to explain the name Carnduncan, a township still inhabited to this day. There are problems with this aspect, however. For one thing, the *carn* which gave its name to Carnduncan dates from the Bronze Age.<sup>13</sup> And for another, Carnduncan is not on the natural route from Tràigh Ghruinneart to Kilchoman – passing that way would have involved a detour around the north side of Loch Gorm, adding a couple of miles to the journey. So the servant may or may not have been called Donnchadh Dubhchasach, but he did not give his name to Carnduncan.

Next up is a storyteller of the following generation, a Mr MacGilp who came from Lochgilphead but lived at Kilchoman. In 1894 Elspeth Kerr noted his words as follows:<sup>14</sup>

After Lachlan Mór was slain, his foster mother, and another clanswoman conveyed his dead body in a rude car from the place where he fell to Kilchoman church yard. They

<sup>13</sup> Steven Mithen, *Land of the Ilich: Journeys into Islay's Past* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2021), 102–104.

<sup>14</sup> MML 542, R. C. Maclagan Manuscripts, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh.

had engaged a man of the name of Duncan, as driver, ~~and tradition has it that~~, as they were going over the rough hill, there being no roads in those days, the driver laughed when he saw the head of the lifeless body dangling over the side of the cart. The women being enraged at his levity took the sword from the dead man's sheath, and cut off the driver's head. Whether from sympathy with Duncan, or from the practice of the times, of raising a cairn on the spot on which a person met with an unnatural death, a cairn was raised where the driver lost his life, and of course was known as Duncan's Cairn: and so, as is quite common, the name came to be extended to the whole district which is now called Carn-Dhonnacha.

So one woman has become two, and the Carnduncan fiction is maintained. Perhaps the least probable embellishment of all, however, is that Sir Lachlan's corpse is still replete with sword in scabbard, and that Duncan is decapitated. The level of violence has increased with each telling.

Our first twentieth-century rendering is a little more restrained, however, and there is no mention of Carnduncan:<sup>15</sup>

The body of Sir Lachlan lay upon the field a little to the north-west of the modern farm of Aoradh. A standing stone, near an open ditch, and about twenty yards to the right of the road to Loch Gorm, still marks the spot. So far as the men of Islay were concerned, the body was allowed to remain where it lay, but at length two kindly women, who had a respect for the dead chief, decided to secure for him a decent burial in a kirkyard. The nearest was the romantic burial-place at Kilchoman, six miles across the moor, so they procured a vehicle for the removal of the body. It is the tradition in Islay that, as the cart jolted on the way, the body was stirred with a motion so reminiscent of life that the cart-driver smiled, and that this so enraged one of the ladies that she seized the dead chief's dirk, and with a single stab ended the life of the smiler.

Mackay's information about the first stone erected to Sir Lachlan on the battlefield is useful, as it was subsequently destroyed by an incoming tenant farmer.<sup>16</sup> By the time we enter the era of systematic field-recording, the story has become a caricature – not through embellishment but through compression. The following was recorded from John MacCormick, Gruinard, in 1953, and contains a final detail of great value:<sup>17</sup>

*Bha piuthar leis agus bha ogha leis, agus thug iad a chorp a chladh Chille Chomain le slipe, agus bha a phiuthar 's am balach a' folbh, agus bha cheann a' glagarsaidh a-mach, 's thòisich am balach air gàireachd a dheanamh, agus thog i chladheamh roimhe (?) is shnaip i an ceann den bhalach, agus tha carn aig Trian Donnchaidh fhathast far an d'thug i an ceann dheth.*

There was a sister of his and a grandson of his, and they brought his body to the churchyard of Kilchoman with a slipe. And his sister and the boy were going along, and his head was dangling out, and the boy started laughing, and she raised his sword in

<sup>15</sup> Mackay, *Clan Warfare*, 173–174.

<sup>16</sup> Black and Dracup, *John Dewar's Islay*, 471.

<sup>17</sup> SA1953.133.7, 'Lachlann Mòr ga mharbhadh aig Tràigh Ghruinneart'. John MacCormick, Gruinard, rec. Calum Maclean, 1953. School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh.

front of him (?) and chopped the boy's head off, and there's a cairn at Trian Donnchaidh to this day where she took his head off.

*Trian Donnchaidh* is indistinct on the tape. It sounds to my ear like *Trian Dùchair*, but as *Dùchair* is (I think) meaningless, I am satisfied that John MacCormick meant *Trian Donnchaidh*, 'Duncan's Third'. It is not an alternative name for Carnduncan. There is a large white rock in the moor approximately a third of the way from Aoradh to Kilchoman in a direct line (*Fig. 1*). There are no other rocks or stones in the vicinity. On Ordnance Survey maps it is called *Carn Bhiogairt* 'the Cairn of Jerking', which I take to refer to the sudden movement of Sir Lachlan's head. Its upper surface is flat, and slopes gently down to the ground. Although its lower half is now almost completely overgrown, it is certainly long enough for a body to have been laid on it. When I visited it in September 2024 I searched all around for any loose stones that might justify the usual meaning of *carn*. I found none. Rightly or wrongly, I concluded that in this case the term has more to do with *slipes* than cairns.



*Fig. 1. Carn Bhiogairt* 'the Cairn of Jerking'. A large single rock rather than a cairn, it slopes gently down to the right, and is long enough for a body to have been laid on it. The 'unofficial' monument to Sir Lachlan's funeral procession? (Photo: Author.)

The next version is that of the late Graham Donald, whose pen-name was Domhnall Gruamach.<sup>18</sup> 'Captain Donald', as he was called, was a propagandist historian, a twentieth-century William Livingston minus Gaelic and poetry, but still worthy of our attention, for he came to live in Islay and kept his ears open. He begins by claiming that Sir Lachlan's body lay on its bier at Aoradh until his widow arrived from Mull for the funeral:

The funeral party fell in behind the heavy bier, heading for Kilchoman Church by the track with which the present road from Aoradh to Loch Gorm must surely co-incide, and if you follow this road and continue straight on and down the *old* road which leads to the Loch-side

<sup>18</sup> Graham Donald ('Domhnall Gruamach'), *The House of Islay*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Port Charlotte, 1967), 86–87.

at Allt na Criche you will come upon a simple small Cairn, which is situated almost exactly half-way between the battlefield and Kilchoman Church and stands on the right-hand side of the old road, between the road and the shore of the Loch. This is where the funeral party, who would be taking turns at the heavy task of the carrying of Sir Lachlan, sat down for their much-needed rest and their customary food and refreshment.

As they were finishing their meal, it was noticed that Sir Lachlan's lower jaw had dropped and that his mouth was now hanging open. Whereupon a certain low and base fellow stepped forward with a laugh – and stuffed a piece of bread into the corpse's open mouth. In a flash Lady MacLean leapt forward, drew a dirk from the belt of one of her kinsmen, and stabbed the base fellow to the heart. They buried him on the spot – and the small Cairn was built to mark his burial place.

So the slipe has gone, and MacLeod's *bean bhochd* of 1842 receives the ultimate promotion – to Lady MacLean herself. Storytellers have always tended to attach their stories to top people. And the bread is clearly a modern accretion, perhaps influenced by the well-known story of how bread and cheese was placed in Drummond of Drummondernoch's disincorporate head.<sup>19</sup> In other respects, this version is in line with John MacCormick's evidence, except that the cairn is placed at the halfway mark, by Loch Gorm. That has the backing of no less an authority than the Rev. Charles Robertson, who writes of '*Carn Mhic Illeathain* at Lochgorm where the boy was killed by Lachunn Mór's aunt'.<sup>20</sup> It is still there (*Fig. 2*).



*Fig. 2. Carn Mhic Illeathain* 'MacLean's Cairn' at Loch Gorm, looking east towards the barren moor where Carn Bhiogairt lies. The 'official' monument to Sir Lachlan's funeral procession? (Photo: Author.)

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Seton Gordon, *Highways and Byways in the Central Highlands* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1949), 50.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob King (ed.), *Scottish Gaelic Place-Names: The Collected Works of Charles M. Robertson 1864–1927* (Sleat, Isle of Skye: Sabhal Mór Ostaig, 2019), 399.

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There is another version, recorded from Gilbert Clark, Port Charlotte (1904–1989) by Donald Archie MacDonald and Ian Fraser in 1968:<sup>21</sup>

*Anns na làithean a bha sin, bha e 'na chleachdadh leis na Gàidheil – cinnidh Ghàidhealach – na mnathan a bu dìlse a bhith leotha aig na blàirean. Agus bha Lachainn Mór mar an ceudna, a mhuime leis 's a mac... Latha 'n deaghaidh a' bhlàr nuair a shìolaidh gnothaichean a-nìos, thug a mhuime 's a mac, Donnchaidh, leotha slype is each airson Lachann a thoirt do Chille Chomain, a thiodhlagadh an eaglais mhór Chille Chomain. Bha 'n duine cho mór, foghainteach, gus a robh a chasan a-mach air aghaidh an t-slype agus a cheann a' glagarsaigh air a' cheann eile. Thòisich Donnchaidh air fanaid a dheunadh, a' gàireachdaigh. Dh'fhoighnichd a mhàthair dheth dé bha e ciallachadh. Thuirt e: "Nach b'e 'n dà latha do Lachainn Mór e a bhith 'na laighe air a dhruim a' glagarsaigh mar siud!" Ghabh a mhàthair a leithid do cholg gus an do thug i mach a sgian is mharbh i a mac fhéin. Agus shin agaibh an t-àit' a their iad ris an-diugh Carn Dhonnchaidh – baile beag far a robh mórán chruiteirean on am sin.*

In those days it was customary for the Gael – Highland clans – to have their closest female relatives with them at the battles. And so it was with Lachainn Mór – he had his foster-mother with him and her son.... On the day after the battle, when things had settled down, his foster-mother and her son Duncan brought a slipe and horse to take Lachann to Kilchoman and bury him in the great church of Kilchoman. The man was so big and substantial that his feet were sticking out at the front of the slipe and his head was jolting from side to side at the other end. Duncan began making a joke of it, laughing. His mother asked him what he meant. He said: 'What a come-down it's been for Lachainn Mór, lying on his back nodding to and fro like that!' His mother got so furious that she took out her knife and killed her own son. And that's the place they call Carnduncan today – a little township where there have been a lot of crofters since then.

This represents a return to the standard motifs – the foster-mother, her son, the slipe and Carnduncan. But it is outstanding for its graphic description of the body on the slipe. And I have identified one more telling, this time a confused joint effort by Gilbert Clark and Neil Ferguson (1892–1980) recorded in 1970.<sup>22</sup>

*Chaidh Lachann Mór [...] a Chille Chomain. Tha e tiodhlaicte ann an Cille Chomain. Agus thug a mhàthair – an e a mhuime? – a mhuime – 's a mac, nuair a bha iad a-nall Carn Donnchaidh, bha cheann a' glagadh air a' sloidhp, 's thòisich Donnchaidh Dubh a' gàir' ann – thug a mhàthair – a mhuime – a-mach a sgian 's mharbh i e. Mharbh i am fear a bha dràibheadh a' slèids.*

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<sup>21</sup> Gilbert Clark, 'Blàr Thràigh Ghruinneart', transcribed, edited and translated by Alan Bruford and Donald Archie MacDonald in *Tocher* 44 (1992), 114–115. This passage is part of Clark's full account of the battle of Tràigh Ghruinneart, SA1968.098, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh. For other English translations see Alan Bruford and Donald A. MacDonald, eds, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994), 429–434 and Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 238–243. This portion of Clark's account can be heard online at <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/63668?l=en>.

<sup>22</sup> 'Lachlann Mór Dhuiart agus MacDhomhnaill Ìle', recorded from Gilbert Clark, Port Charlotte, and Neil Ferguson, Port Wemyss, Islay, by Mary MacDonald and Gilbert Clark. SA1970.54.B5, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh. Listen online at <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/72606?l=gd>.

Lachann Mór was [...] to Kilchoman. He's buried in Kilchoman. And his mother – was it his foster-mother? – his foster-mother – and her son, when they were coming over by Carn Duncan, his head was rattling on the slipe, and Black Duncan started laughing there – his mother – his foster-mother – took out her knife and killed him. She killed the man who was driving the sledge.

We now come to what I have tentatively called the 'official' story of Sir Lachlan's *giùlan*. This time our earliest authority is William Livingston, in his epic poem 'Blàr Thràigh Ghruineart'. We cannot confidently take any work by him as an accurate reflection of oral tradition. But its broad outlines find support in subsequently-recorded oral narratives, as I will show, and there is no reason to imagine that these were based on Livingston's work. I use the exact spelling of the 1882 edition. After describing the battle, Livingston writes:<sup>23</sup>

*Dh'fhalbh Mac Dhòmhuill 's na trì Raonuill,  
Fear Arois is Niall a' Chaolais,  
Bràthair Mhic Aoidh na Ranna,  
Gu lag na sgitheig far an d' fhuair iad  
Mac Ill' Leathain 'na chor duaichnidh,  
'Na shìneadh air bruachag fhàsail,  
Fuar marbh 's a chuislean tràighte,  
A dhà chomh'alta, clann fear Bhròlais,  
'Na'n luidhe leis 's an dithist leònte,  
Chuir iad e air breacan flath nan Ieach,  
Le bòid chruaidh mar a chaidh innseadh.  
Thuir Raonull na Learga, "a dhaoin'-uaisl', éisdibh.  
Ma'n tog sinn am Flath so le chéile,  
Gabhadh gach fear a ghreim air beann de'n bhreacan,  
'S ni sinn mar Dhòmhnullaich an reachd so,  
Nach stad 's nach leig sinn gu làr e,  
O'n àit' an do thuit e 'san àrfhaich,  
Gus an ruig sinn Cill-a'-Choman,  
'S ma leigeas aon a ghreim gu fàillinn,  
Gu'n cuir an triùir eile,  
Gun anail dàil da, na biodagan,  
Troimh far an d'fhàg,  
Greim Chlann Dòmhuill, Lachann Dhubhairt.  
A chàirdean cha'n àm so gu tuireadh."  
Thog, is rinn iad mar a gheall iad,  
Tha uaigh 's a Leac a' sin o'n àm ud.*

The following is my translation:

There went forth MacDonald and the three Ronalds,  
The captain of Aros, and Neil of the Kyle,  
The brother of MacKay of the Rhinns,  
To the hawthorn hollow where they encountered

<sup>23</sup> Uilleam Mac Dhunleibhe, *Duain agus Orain* (Glasgow: Archibald Sinclair, 1882), 110.

MacLean in his disfigured state,  
 Stretched out on a deserted little brae,  
 Cold, dead, with his veins run dry,  
 His two foster-brothers, Brolas's offspring,  
 Lying beside him, both of them wounded.  
 They set him on the plaid of the prince of Islay  
 With a steadfast vow, as it has been told.  
 Ronald of Largie said, 'Gentlemen, listen.  
 Before we lift this prince together,  
 Let each man grip a corner of the plaid,  
 And as MacDonalds we'll make this rule:  
 That we won't stop or put him down  
 From the spot where he fell in the battlefield  
 Until we reach Kilchoman,  
 And if anyone slackens and causes a fall,  
 Let the other three put,  
 Without a breath of delay to him, their dirks  
 Through where the MacDonald grip  
 Left Lachlan of Duart.  
 My friends, this is not the time for lamenting'.  
 They lifted, and did as they had promised.  
 His grave and gravestone are there since that time.

According to Livingston, then, Sir Lachlan's corpse was carried to Kilchoman by six men. This is the normal number for carrying a coffin, but there was no coffin, only Sir James's plaid. One of the men was Sir James himself. There were three other MacDonalds, all called Ronald, all apparently of the Largie family from Kintyre and Arran. They are also mentioned by Dewar, and their identity has been discussed by Black and Dracup.<sup>24</sup>

The captain of Aros is the only MacLean involved in the *giùlan*. Livingston has had a good deal to say about him in describing the battle, calling him *Alastair Arois*; his heroism has been extraordinary, and his life has been spared, says Livingston, at the request of one of the three Ronalds, Raghnaill Arannach.<sup>25</sup> This point was confirmed in 1953 by Hugh Currie, Ardnahoe (1878–1968), who told Calum Maclean that the MacDonald who saved Fear Àrais in the battle was *aon de dhaoine an Leirg* 'one of the Largie men'.<sup>26</sup> The captain of Aros Castle in Mull in 1592–93 was a Niall mac 'ille Chaluim;<sup>27</sup> perhaps Alastair was his brother or son.

The sixth man is Niall a' Chaolais, brother of MacKay of the Rhinns. He is difficult to identify, as many Islay MacKays of the period were called Neil, but the kyle in question is probably the one at

<sup>24</sup> Black and Dracup, *John Dewar's Islay*, 125, n. 98.

<sup>25</sup> It seems perfectly possible that this is the Raghnaill Arannach, 'Randall McSorley', who became 1st earl of Antrim in 1620 and died in 1636; see Black and Dracup, *John Dewar's Islay*, 125, n. 97.

<sup>26</sup> 'Blàr Tràigh Ghruinneart', recorded in 1953 from Hugh Currie, Ardnahoe, by Calum Maclean. SA1953.135.B13, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh. Available at <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/11423?l=gd>.

<sup>27</sup> See Ronald Black, 'The Captain of Aros in 1598', *West Highland Notes and Queries* ser. 5, no. 9 (November 2023): 26.

Portnahaven. There is some evidence that the MacKays did not take part in the battle at all.<sup>28</sup> Livingston speaks of each man gripping ‘a corner of the plaid’, and of an extraordinary agreement that if any lapse occurs, the offender is to be dirked by ‘the other three’; it sounds from this as if the MacLean and the MacKay are mere reserves.

In 1896 Elspeth Kerr obtained the following information from an unnamed source. It confirms Livingston’s basic story:<sup>29</sup>

When Sir Lachlan was killed, James McDonald spread a plaid on the ground, and having put the body on it, called out three of his own men, to each of whom he assigned [sic] a corner of the plaid, he himself taking the remaining corner, and in this manner they carried the body, which had been over seven feet in height, when alive, to the burying ground of Kilchoman, on condition that any man who should let go his corner, or be the means of allowing the body to touch the ground, until they would reach the grave yard, would be put to death on the spot.

Hugh Currie’s 1953 account of the same incident omits the gratuitous threat of violence:<sup>30</sup>

*Chuir iad e anns a’ bhreacanan, agus chaidh ceithir tiulam [= timcheall?] air, agus se ’n cumhnant a bh’ ann nach leigeadh iad e sìos gus an ruigeadh iad far an robh iad ga thiodhlacadh ann an Cille Chomain. Agus rinn iad sin. Thug iad e do Chille Chomain, agus tha e tiodhlaicte ann an cladh Chille Chomain, dìreach aig a’ gheata, mar a theid thu a-staigh don chladh.*

They put him in the plaidie, and four came around him, and the agreement was that they wouldn’t set him down until they’d reached where they were to bury him in Kilchoman. And they did that. They brought him to Kilchoman, and he’s buried in Kilchoman churchyard, right at the gate, where you go into the churchyard.

It is not clear that Hugh Currie was aware of Sir James’s alleged part in the *giùlan*, and indeed in another recording he increases the number of Ronalds:<sup>31</sup>

*Thuir na ceithir Raghnaill às an Leirg gun togadh iad e agus nach leigeadh iad a-sìos e gus an ruigeadh iad far an robh iad ga thiodhlacadh. Agus rinn iad sin. ’S tha e tiodhlaicte ann a-sin, agus chaidh an sin tuireadh a dheunadh.*

The four Ronalds from Largie said that they’d lift him and not set him down until they’d reached where they were to bury him. And they did that. And he’s buried there, and then a lament was made.

There is sufficient here, I believe, to satisfy us that Livingston’s poetic account of the *giùlan* is substantially derived from tradition. If we compare the ‘official’ version with the ‘unofficial’ one, we find both similarities and contrasts. The main similarities are the lack of a coffin and the threat of

<sup>28</sup> Black and Dracup, *John Dewar’s Islay*, 403–404.

<sup>29</sup> MML 2212–2213, R. C. MacLagan Manuscripts (‘Folk Lore of the West Highlands’), School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh.

<sup>30</sup> SA1953.135.B13.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Tiodhlacadh Lachlainn Mhòir Dhubhaird’, recorded in 1953 from Hugh Currie, Ardnahoe, by Calum Maclean. SA1953.136.A2, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh. Available online at <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/5626?l=gd>.

violence. The dominance of low-born women in one version contrasts with the dominance of high-born men in the other. The actual occurrence of violence in one contrasts with the unfulfilled threat in the other. And, most obviously, in one the corpse is usually carried on a slipe, in the other on a plaid. Let us take each of these points in turn.

**Lack of a coffin.** Highland funerals frequently involved carrying corpses for long distances across moors, bogs, streams, rivers and lochs. The assumption that they were always carried in coffins is probably incorrect. It was however essential that the dead be buried in a coffin. Logically, then, most carpenters would have plied their trade in the vicinity of a churchyard – *anns a' chlachan*, to use the Gaelic phrase. A runner would have gone ahead of the *giùlan* to order the coffin and provide the necessary measurements. In a case mentioned by Dewar where corpses had to be carried across both land and sea, he does speak of *ciste-mairbh* ('coffins'), but also says: *Bheireadh iad an giùlan air snaoidh* ('They would carry their burden on poles').<sup>32</sup> I deduce from this that on the difficult parts of the *giùlan*, the corpse and coffin were carried separately.

**Threat of violence.** Violence at funerals appears to have been surprisingly common at one time, the reasons being the taking of drink and the gathering together of tribes who may have been at feud.

**Dominance of low-born women.** Women were supposed to have no role in funerals other than waking the body, serving food and drink, following the coffin only as far as the first burn,<sup>33</sup> and showing emotion, e.g. by keening, ululating, tearing their hair, and clapping or rubbing their hands, even to the effusion of blood. Each time the 'unofficial' story is told in our sources, the social status of the woman or women seems to rise a little: 'poor woman', nurse, foster-mother, 'two kindly women', Sir Lachlan's sister, Sir Lachlan's widow. The earliest, the 'poor woman', is probably the most authentic. And Livingston actually takes pains to remove women from the equation. The sun was rising on the day after the battle, he says:<sup>34</sup>

*'Nuair a chualas gul, is basraich,  
A ràinig iad fada m' am fac iad,  
Bean a'n earradh mnà uaisle,  
A' teàrnadh o Dhàil-na-buaile,  
'S a sùil air a h-ais gu lag na sgitheig,  
Cha do thuig aon na bha i sireadh,  
A' caoidh gu muladach a léir-chreach,  
'S ag iarraidh Dhubh Sith a cheusadh,  
Mu'n do ràinig i na h-uaislean,  
Dh'fhiosraich Mac Dhòmhuill, le truas di,  
Co shaoilte b'e bhean bhrònach,  
Fhreagair fear Arois 's aithne dhomhs' i,  
Tha sinn a nis aig ceann na cùise,  
Cha bheò Lachann, fàth a tùirse,  
Cha chuala thusa gus a nis e,  
Ach chuala mis' e, ged nach b' fhios domh  
Far an do thuit e, sgeula brònach,  
Seachainn a bhean so, 'Mhic Dhòmhuill,*

<sup>32</sup> Black and Dracup, *John Dewar's Islay*, 58–59.

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous, 'Highland Funerals', *The Celtic Monthly* 13 (1905): 123.

<sup>34</sup> Mac Dhunleibhe, *Duain agus Orain*, 109–110.

*Sin Ni' Mhic Artni a mhuime,  
Tha i nis gun eagal duine,  
Feuchaidh mi'n toir mi gu céill i,  
'S co tùirseach an diugh 'san dé dhuinn.*

When weeping was heard, and clapping of hands,  
Which reached them long before they saw  
A woman in a lady's clothes  
Coming down from Dail na Buaile,  
Looking back to the hawthorn hollow.  
No one knew what she was looking for,  
Sadly lamenting her destruction  
And seeking to crucify Dubhsith.<sup>35</sup>  
Before she got to the leading men,  
MacDonald asked, out of pity for her,  
Who they thought was the wretched woman.  
The captain of Aros replied, 'I know her.  
Now we're at the end of the matter.  
Lachlan is dead – that's the cause of her grief.  
You haven't heard it until this moment,  
But I have heard it, though I didn't know  
Where he fell. It's terrible news.  
Avoid this woman, MacDonald –  
That's MacArtney's daughter, his foster-mother,  
She has now no fear of anyone.  
I'll try to bring her to her senses.  
Today is as sad for us as yesterday'.

At this point we come straight to the passage already quoted, beginning *Dh'fhalbh Mac Dhòmhnuille 's na trì Raomull*. It will be noted that the status of MacArtney's daughter is implicitly lowered by the description 'A woman in a lady's clothes'. And we hear no more of her or any other woman in the poem.

**Dominance of high-born men.** A funeral directed by women would have been considered unnatural. High-status interments were large, dominated by the deceased's peers, and involved conspicuous consumption.<sup>36</sup> The burial of Alexander Campbell of Lochnell in 1714 was said to have been witnessed by 'more than 4000 men attending the different chieftains'.<sup>37</sup> In the eyes of the time, Sir Lachlan deserved such a send-off.

**Unfulfilled threat of violence.** In this case the violence had already taken place. It was important now for the funeral to pass off peacefully.

**Slipe or plaid.** Nothing could be more undignified than being jolted along to one's grave on a slipe. Even down to the early twentieth century it was considered derogatory for the deceased to be carried to the grave in a hearse, never mind a slipe. There is a story of Alasdair Ranaldson MacDonell

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<sup>35</sup> Dubhsith was a little man who, spurned by Sir Lachlan, had offered his services to Sir James. He had hidden himself in a hawthorn tree and shot Sir Lachlan in the back; see Black and Dracup, *John Dewar's Islay*, 74, 86–87, 92–93 and 96–99.

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous, 'Highland Funerals', 122.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald Black, *The Campbells of the Ark: Men of Argyll in 1745*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2017), 461.

of Glengarry (1788–1828) that when a fellow-clansman was dangerously ill and had to be brought from Invergarry to the steamer, Glengarry disliked the idea of a carriage being used, being too like a hearse, and said, ‘No, he shall be carried in his plaid, shoulder high, like his father’s son, and the pipes before him’.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Sir Lachlan’s status required him to be carried by his peers, and Sir James’s plaid was a high-status object. It would have consisted of a web of finely-woven tartan cloth as much as two yards wide and six yards long – enough to wrap twice around the body and conceal decomposition.<sup>39</sup>

It is of course curious that we have two different monuments to the *giùlan*, one on what was until recently the road from Aoradh to Kilchoman, and one on the more direct route across the moor. As we have established, the former (*Fig. 2*) is a real cairn, the latter (*Fig. 1*) is perhaps only called a *carn* because of its association with a *slipe*. It may not be going too far, then, to suggest that even in stone memorials we have an ‘official’ and an ‘unofficial’ version, though these have become a little confused in the course of oral transmission.

Finally we may ask: where does the truth lie? How is it possible for two entirely different narratives of the same historical event to coexist?

In answer to the first question, my opinion is that the ‘unofficial’ version has the ring of truth. Livingston provides us with some clues. He is anxious to sweep ‘MacArtney’s daughter’ out of the way. He describes a situation in which the MacDonalds do not know whether Sir Lachlan is dead or alive. The reality may have been that this enterprising woman, far from being hysterical, removed his body under cover of darkness while the MacDonalds were following the rout or licking their wounds.

In answer to the second question, clearly we are not dealing with a MacDonald version and a MacLean version as in the ‘sequence of events’ case. Both accounts of the *giùlan* are MacDonald-derived, but as I have repeatedly suggested, one seems to be ‘official’ and the other ‘unofficial’. In a different case, we might speak of ‘fact’ and ‘rumour’: that is to say, first there is speculation, and then speculation takes a life of its own, and becomes a ‘story’. Then when the truth is finally established, the truth becomes another story – and people will always believe whichever story they wish to believe.

Here, however, politics were involved. As Dewar pointed out, Sir James was now in trouble for going to war without the king’s permission.<sup>40</sup> How much worse would it look if the story got out that Sir Lachlan MacLean of Duart, his own mother’s brother, had been buried like a pauper? Sir James, a worldly young man of about twenty, had been brought up as a hostage in the king’s court at Holyrood, and had learned to lie like a politician. Perhaps he underestimated the power of Gaelic orality to spread news like wildfire. So (I argue) his mother, his father, the king and all other enquirers were given a version of the truth in which the nurse became himself, the *slipe* became his plaid, Donnchadh Dubhchasach became the three Ronalds, and everything else stayed much the same.

Niall a’ Chaolais was already in Sir James’s pocket. As for the shadowy MacLean of Aros, is it possible that having been taken prisoner, his life was only spared on condition that he join the conspiracy?

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<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, ‘Highland Funerals’, 123.

<sup>39</sup> James Logan, *The Scottish Gaël*, vol. 1 (Inverness: Hugh Mackenzie, 1876), 249; see also Grant, *Highland Folk Ways*, 318–319.

<sup>40</sup> Black and Dracup, *John Dewar’s Islay*, 195.

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