

Ossianic Informants Named by the Rev. Dr Alexander Irvine (1773–1824)

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The Rev. Dr Alexander Irvine was born in 1773 in the parish of Fortingall, Perthshire.¹ His university education was undertaken during the 1790s at St Andrews, where his linguistic talents were recognised. He was ordained as missionary in Kintra in South West Mull in 1797, but early in 1799 took up work as a missionary in Rannoch in North Perthshire. He became minister of Fortingall in 1805. He married Janet (‘Jessie’) Stewart, daughter of the Edinburgh-trained lawyer Robert Stewart of Garth, *Fear Ghairt*, in April 1805 against her father’s wishes. A year later, he moved to Little Dunkeld where he was minister from 1806 until his death in 1824 and where he preached in Gaelic and English. Managing a heavy workload, he balanced his ministerial and scholarly work on Gaelic, the Highlands and ecclesiastical affairs. By his own account, he spent between eight and ten hours studying every day. He was an avid collector, collecting oral and written materials. His contribution to the collection of Ossianic poems is commended along with others such as the Rev. James McLagan (1728–1805) in the Highland Society of Scotland’s *Ossianic Report* of 1805, where they are noted amongst those ‘from whom the most important materials were obtained’.² He also collected the works of contemporary Gaelic poets. In Edinburgh on 22 December 1800, he wrote down poems by, and information about, Rob Donn from the poet’s daughter Janet McKay in the presence of the poet Duncan McIntyre.³ Unlike many of the collectors who went before him, including the Rev. James McLagan (1728–1805), Irvine was meticulous in the metadata he recorded along with his collected materials.⁴ Irvine had broad-ranging academic interests in Gaelic, including lexicography, the Gaelic Bible, dialectal variation, orthographical reform, lexical borrowing and particularly Gaelic literature. He worked for many years on a book on Gaelic poets and poetry, *Caledonian Bards*, which was never

¹ It is a great pleasure to offer this brief contribution in honour of my friend and former colleague at the University of Edinburgh, Dr John Shaw, whose life’s work has been dedicated to celebrating, respecting, preserving and elucidating the invaluable contribution of Gaelic tradition bearers to Gaelic tradition and culture. *Gum bu fada beò e!*

² Henry Mackenzie, *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1805), iii.

³ NLS MS Acc. 3184 (Section D) (recently rediscovered), inside back cover; John Mackechnie, *Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts in Selected Libraries in Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 1 (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1973), 342; Ulrike Hogg, ‘The Life and Papers of the Rev. Dr Alexander Irvine’, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 28 (2011): 161–62. On the rediscovery of some of Alexander Irvine and Donald MacNicol’s Gaelic manuscripts, see Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh, ‘Lost Gaelic Manuscripts Found’, *West Highland Notes and Queries* 5.10 (2024), 18; and Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh, ‘Lost MacNicol and Irvine Gaelic Manuscripts Discovered’, *Aiste* 7 (2024), i. It should be noted that MS 14787 referred to in these last two publications should read 14877. I am grateful to my colleague Dr Michel Bryne for spotting the typo.

⁴ Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh, ‘Tradition Bearers Named by the Rev. James McLagan’, in *Seumas MacLathagain agus a Làmh-Sgrìobhainnean / James McLagan and his Manuscripts*, ed. Geraldine Parsons and Sim Innes (Glasgow: CLOG, forthcoming).

completed or published.⁵ In order to ensure their survival, Irvine had two copies made of his Ossianic collections, one for the Highland Society of London and another for the Highland Society of Scotland.⁶ These or copies of these survive in the National Library of Scotland (NLS MS 14882) and the University of Edinburgh (EUL MS Laing III 475), upon which this article draws in addition to a range of other sources.⁷

The Rev. James McLagan was acquainted with the Rev. Dr Alexander Irvine, who visited him in Blair Atholl in 1802. On 10 September 1802, McLagan wrote to Irvine at Bunrannoch ('Bunranoch'), attaching an English translation of a Gaelic poem he had given Irvine during his visit. In the letter McLagan beseeches him to 'Come soon again' and asks him to remember 'us most kindly to the goo[d] families, by you, to whom I owe so much'.⁸ Almost a year and a half after McLagan's death, Irvine, in a letter to Sir John Sinclair,⁹ dated 22 September 1806, suggested that he had access to the collections of others, including, it would seem, to those of McLagan who 'left a collection of about 200 [*sic*] songs'.¹⁰

As previously noted, in his collection of Ossianic materials (NLS MS 14882, EUL MS Laing III 475), Irvine provides information regarding his own informants and in some cases his informants' sources, as well as the names of others from whom he received written copies of poems. Some provenance data for his Ossianic poems are summarised by Irvine in two documents that he wrote in 1802, one headed 'Dalchosnie 3 February 1802' (NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, ff. 1a–2b) and the other headed 'A list of ancient poems & fragments collected by M^r Irvine' (NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, ff. 3a–6b). The former provides the testimony of an informant named as 'Daniel McIver alias Robertson', who made an oral declaration before 'Jo[hn] Stewart of Crossmount', 'Alex^r McDonald Dalchosnie' and 'Cap^t L: S: R:[?] of pool'. The latter document was written in Edinburgh on 8 April 1802 and also refers to a declaration made before 'Capt Alex^r MacDonald of Dalchosnie and John Stewart of Crossmount'.¹¹ The 'Alexander MacDonald' referred to here can be identified as Alexander of Dalchosnie (1762–1808), son of John MacDonald (1721–1809).¹² 'John Stewart' may refer to John Stewart of Crossmount (1732–1812).¹³ Dalchosnie and Crossmount are just to the east of Kinloch Rannoch in Perthshire.

⁵ This brief description of Irvine draws from Ulrike Hogg's excellent article on Irvine and Irvine's papers and manuscripts; see Hogg, 'Life and Papers', 97–148. In 2022, the majority of the lost Irvine manuscripts referred to by Hogg, missing since the late 1960s, were rediscovered and repatriated to the National Library of Scotland, where they are available once again to researchers. See Ó Maolalaigh, 'Lost Gaelic Manuscripts Found' and Ó Maolalaigh, 'Lost MacNicol and Irvine Gaelic Manuscripts Discovered'. On Irvine, see also Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ*, vol. IV (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1923), 159, 179.

⁶ Alexander Irvine, 'Ossian', in *The Edinburgh Encyclopædia*, vol. 16, ed. David Brewster (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1830), 182, col. 1.

⁷ See also J. F. Campbell, *Leabhar na Feinne* (London: Spottiswoode & Co., 1872), xxv–xxvi, Text O.

⁸ NLS MS Acc. 3184 (Section A, (11)) (recently rediscovered); Mackechnie, *Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts*, 338; Hogg, 'Life and Papers', 149–50. Mackechnie notes the address of 'Reverend James Mc- [*sic*]' as 'Balnaine'. The correct readings are 'James McLagan' and 'Baluaine'.

⁹ For Sinclair of Ulbster in Caithness (1754–1835), 'the great agriculturist, writer and politician', see Ronald Black, 'The Gaelic Academy: The cultural commitment of The Highland Society of Scotland [I]', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 14.2 (1986): 5.

¹⁰ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.11, fo. 74b.

¹¹ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 5b.

¹² Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the MacDonaldis and Lords of the Isles* (Inverness: A. & W. Mackenzie, 1881), 511–12.

¹³ WikiTree s.v. John Stewart, <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Stewart-40976>.

The account below, which includes the names of twenty-three informants, only one of whom is female,¹⁴ brings all of the evidence together from the sources mentioned above. The description provided here is supplemented in some cases by further information deriving from an account of Alexander Stewart's tour of the Highlands in 1807 to procure Ossianic verse and prose tales. Stewart, the North Uist schoolmaster and co-compiler of *Co-chruinneacha Taoghta* (1804),¹⁵ was funded by the Highland Society of London to undertake this tour and collection. The account of Stewart's tour survives in Colin Macrae's summary of a report compiled by Stewart himself and sent by Macrae to Sir John Sinclair on 19 September 1808.¹⁶ See Appendix A for an alphabetical list of the informants mentioned by Irvine.¹⁷

Daniel / Donald McIver alias Robertson (b. c. 1717–22)

Daniel McIver alias Robertson is described as a foxhunter in 'Camus Chuirich in Breadalbane aged 82',¹⁸ his place of residence also being referred to as 'Lochtayside'.¹⁹ *Camus Chuirich* represents modern Camusurich on the south side of Loch Tay, five miles northeast of Killin. The Rev. Charles M. Robertson has it as *Camussurich*, *Camas a' Churraichc* and *Camas a' Churraichd*.²⁰ McIver could 'neither read nor write' and 'recites them all from memory'.²¹ This Daniel is also referred to as Donald by Irvine,²² which confirms that his Gaelic name was Dòmhnall. McIver gave Irvine a manuscript: 'MacIver before mentioned put in his hand a M.S. of modern date which he had no time to read and is now in Rev^d Mr Menzies of Dull's hands'.²³ The latter refers to the Rev. Archibald Menzies (1760–1839), minister of Dull from 1789 until his death in 1839.²⁴ McIver had evidently been learning Ossianic poems since his late teens or early twenties some time before c. 1742 ('upwards of 60 years ago').²⁵ This would suggest that McIver was born c. 1722. Alexander Stewart in his 1807 report also refers to Donald Robertson 'aged 90, on the South side of Loch Tay, a Foxhunter' who 'at one period could recite nearly all the Poems known in the Country relating to Fingal & his heroes [. . .] M^r Irvine has many of this man's Collection'.²⁶ Stewart's

¹⁴ This is in sharp contrast to the twenty informants named by McLagan, half of whom were women. See Appendix C and Ó Maolalaigh, 'Tradition Bearers' (forthcoming).

¹⁵ Alexander Stewart and Donald Stewart, *Cochruinneacha Taoghta de Shaothair nam Bard Gaëleach*, 2 vols (Duneidin: T. Stiuart, 1804).

¹⁶ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.14, ff. 102–03; Ulrike Hogg, 'Alexander Stewart's Tour of the Highlands, 1807, and his Findings' (unpublished). I am grateful to Dr Ulrike Hogg for sharing with me a copy of her unpublished paper and digital images of the manuscript. For Alexander Stewart, see John MacInnes, 'Stewart, Alexander', in *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, ed. Derick S. Thomson. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd (1987 [1983]), 275.

¹⁷ In what follows, the names of tradition bearers not interviewed directly by Irvine are given in italics.

¹⁸ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 1a (February 1802); cf. ff. 4a, 4b (April 1802).

¹⁹ NLS MS 14882, fo. 91b, 101b; EUL MS Laing III 475, ff. 91b, 101b., 111b. There is reference to the year 1802 on fo. 101b of both manuscripts.

²⁰ Jacob King, ed., *Scottish Gaelic Place-Names: The Collected Works of Charles M. Robertson, 1864–1927* (Sleat, Isle of Skye: Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, 2019), 311.

²¹ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, ff. 5a, 5b (April 1802); cf. NLS MS 73.2.15, fo. 2b (February 1802).

²² NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 4a; NLS MS 14882, ff. 91b, 101b, 113b, 166b; EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 101b. Irvine, in a letter to Sir John Sinclair, refers to 'a Donald M^rIver an old man at Lochtayside' (NLS MS Adv. 73.2.26, fo. 39v; Hogg, 'Alexander Stewart's Tour').

²³ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 6b (April 1802); cf. 'From the M.S. of M^c Iver, foresaid' (NLS MS 14882, fo. 166b; EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 162a).

²⁴ Scott, *Fasti* vol. IV, 177.

²⁵ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 4b (April 1802).

²⁶ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.14, fo. 102v; Hogg, 'Alexander Stewart's Tour'.

evidence would date McIver's birth to *c.* 1717. McIver names four of his own sources: John Henderson, Michael McLeran, Duncan Robertson and Archibald Carmichael.

John Henderson (d. before *c.* 1772)

John Henderson was a tailor in Acharn, Breadalbane, who had died some time before *c.* 1772 ('dead upwards of thirty years ago').²⁷ Acharn is on the south side of Loch Tay, just under two miles southwest from Kenmore. McIver had learnt Ossianic poems from Henderson before *c.* 1758 ('upwards of 44 years ago').²⁸ This may be the same John Henderson, tailor, listed by James McLagan as one of the Rev. Dr Donald McNicol's informants.²⁹ Alternatively, perhaps this is the John Henderson from Glen Orchy, an uncle of Finlay McKenrick / Henderson from 'Croitandeor' in Glen Dochart, Perthshire from whom Archibald Fletcher (born *c.* 1735) from Achalader, Glen Orchy, learnt Ossianic material.³⁰ For Fletcher, see below.

John McNicol (before *c.* 1720–*c.* 1781 [?])

John Henderson, the tailor in Acharn, had in turn learnt poems from John McNicol in Arimen, Glen Orchy, who is 'reckoned the best in the country for Ossian's and other old poems'³¹ and described as 'the celebrated seanachie of Arimen Glenorchy'.³² The McNicols of Arimen / Arrivain (*Àirigh Mheadhain*) in northeast Argyllshire, about four miles west of Tyndrum, were renowned for their store of Ossianic poems and lore.³³ This is very likely to be the John McNicol (born before *c.* 1720, died *c.* 1781), grandson of Duncan McNicol and 'tenant in Arivean in Glenorchay' referred to below, with whom James Macpherson consulted and from whom Archibald Fletcher learnt a poem *c.* 1771.

Michael McLeran

'Michael Mac Leran' was tenant in Cultie [?], Breadalbane, from whom McIver had learnt poems before *c.* 1762 ('upwards of 40 years ago').³⁴

Duncan Robertson / Donnchadh mac Aonghais Bhàin (b. *c.* 1705)

Duncan Robertson was a tenant in Craigelig, Glen Lyon, from whom McIver had learnt poems before *c.* 1772 ('upwards of 30 years ago').³⁵ On 29 July 1801, Irvine got two addresses to the sun from the Rev. James McDiarmid of Weem, 'who says he got them from Duncan Robertson, Craigelig, Glenyon, upward of 40 years ago [i.e. *c.* 1761], when a student at College'.³⁶ In a document surviving in the papers of the Wedderburn family of Pearsie, now held in Dundee City Archives, the Rev. James McLagan also refers to Duncan Robertson in Glen Lyon, Perthshire, who recited 'an address to the sun' to the Rev. James McDiarmid (1744–1828),³⁷ Minister of Weem in Perthshire, in or before 1770.³⁸ In the deposition given under oath before Charles Stewart of Dalguise, a justice of the peace

²⁷ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 1a (February 1802); NLS MS 73.2.15, fo. 5a (April 1802).

²⁸ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 1a (February 1802).

²⁹ Appendix C; Ó Maolalaigh, 'Tradition Bearers'.

³⁰ In 1801, Fletcher gave his own age as 'about sixty-six'; see H. Mackenzie, *Report*, 271; Ó Maolalaigh, 'Tradition Bearers'.

³¹ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 2a (February 1802).

³² NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 5a (April 1802).

³³ Ó Maolalaigh, 'Tradition Bearers'.

³⁴ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 1b (February 1802).

³⁵ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 1b, 2a (February 1802); NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 3a (April 1802).

³⁶ NLS MS 14882, fo. 117b.

³⁷ DCA MS GD/We/6/3; Scott, *Fasti* vol. IV, 191–92.

³⁸ Appendix C; Ó Maolalaigh, 'Tradition Bearers'.

for the county of Perth, at Dunkeld on 8 April 1807, McDiarmid gives the date of ‘Summer 1765’ for this encounter with Robertson, and names him as *Donnchadh mac Aonghais Bhàin*:

some time in Summer 1765 he had written from Duncan Robertson, alias Donach mac Aonais bhan’s oral recitation the Address to the sun in galic translated by Mr Js McPherson & published in the Poem entitled Carthon, that the original thus procured corresponds almost verbatim with the translation given by McPherson [...] that the said Duncan Robertson was then about sixty years old [...] that he was a man distinguished in the country for this great collection of Ossianic Poems. that he called the address to the sun Laoigh Osseain don ghrein ’s e dall [‘Ossian’s lay to the sun when he was blind’] that he resided in Craigelig Glenlyon Parish of Fortingall & country of Perth, Deponer [*sic*] farther that he Mr McDiarmid gave a copy of said address to his son John to be given to Mr McKenzie of the Exchequer some years ago; that he received from said D. Robertson many other Poems universally ascribed to Ossian which he lost by lending them to some of his acquaintances & now does not exactly recollect their names or titles. that the said address was preserved by being transcribed on the blank leaf of a book & this is truth as he shall answer to God.³⁹

Irvine, who had arranged the deposition on the request of another, states in his undated accompanying cover letter (which can be dated to *c.* April 1807) to an unnamed correspondent that Robertson was still alive ‘some years ago’:

Besides I have no doubt that many people in Glenyon can even yet corroborate his [the Rev. McDiarmid] testimony & can dispone that D. Robertson was not only alive some years ago but had, as M^r McDiarmid dispones, a great many of Ossian’s Poems.⁴⁰

McDiarmid’s evidence allows us to date Robertson’s birth to *c.* 1705 and his place of residence – in the 1760s at least – as Craigelig, while Irvine’s evidence suggests that he may have survived into the 1780s or 1790s. W. J. Watson notes *Creag Eileig / Creag Eilig* on Kerrowmore in Glen Lyon as the most southern example of a place-name containing the element *eileag* (‘a deer trap’).⁴¹ It is situated on the south side of the River Lyon just south of Innerwick.

Archibald Carmichael

McIver got a poem from Carmichael before *c.* 1772 (‘upwards of 30 years ago’).⁴² Archibald Carmichael, ‘who had many Fingalian Songs’, was from Lic near Killin. Lic seems to refer to Lic / Lix in Glen Dochart.⁴³

³⁹ NLS MS 14877 (15b), fo. 1r (recently rediscovered). The name ‘Donal Mac Aonais bhan’ and the date ‘18th April’ given by Mackechnie, *Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts*, 338, §15 are both inaccurate.

⁴⁰ NLS MS 14877 (15a), fo. 1v. Irvine’s cover letter mentions that ‘the original of Ossian is now published’ (fo. 2v), which supports a date of 1807, the year in which Macpherson’s *The Poems of Ossian in the Original Gaelic* was posthumously published.

⁴¹ William J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1986 [1926]): 491, and ‘Place-Names of Perthshire: The Lyon Basin’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 35 (1929–30, printed 1939): 292. The Rev. Charles M. Robertson has *Creag nan Eildeag* and *Creag èilig*, where the symbol <è> represents phonetic [ɛ:], a long low-mid front vowel; see King, *Scottish Gaelic Place Names*, 298. I am grateful to Dr Jake King for discussing Robertson’s use of phonetic diacritics with me.

⁴² NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 2a (February 1802).

⁴³ The Rev. Charles Robertson has Wester-Lix / *Lic Uachdrach*, Mid-Lix / *Lic Mheadhonach* and Easter-Lix / *Lic Iochdrach*; see King, *Scottish Gaelic Place Names*, 310).

Duncan Lothian / Donnchadh Loudin (Louduinn / Loudinn / Loudaidh) (c. 1730–c. 1812)

Duncan Lothian is described as a ‘millar in Joncastle [sic]’.⁴⁴ Alexander Stewart recorded poems from the recitation of ‘Duncan Lothian, Miller to Col. Stewart of Fincastle’, thus illustrating that ‘Joncastle’ is a transcriptional error for Fincastle, which is less than three miles south of Blair Atholl.⁴⁵ This tradition bearer must be the published Gaelic author-editor-translator from Glen Lyon (b. c. 1730) who spent his latter years in Glen Fincastle and who died c. 1812. His name in Gaelic is spelt variously as *Donacha Loudin*, *Donnacha Louduinn / Loudaidh* and *Donnacha Loudinn*.⁴⁶ He was a joiner and a miller, and worked as a turner and wheelwright (of spinning wheels) with Dugald Buchanan (1716–68).⁴⁷ He translated the reformed catechism in 1779.⁴⁸ He also published a Gaelic dialogue between the Pope and Reformation in 1797,⁴⁹ and a collection of Gaelic and English songs, including macaronic songs, in 1780.⁵⁰ A possible connection with the Rev. James McLagan has yet to be explored.⁵¹

Alexander Cameron

Alexander Cameron is described as a tailor in Easter Drumcharry, Fortingall.⁵² Alexander Stewart refers to him as a ‘Taylor in Fortingall’ who had apparently ‘refused permission to commit them [his many Ossianic poems] to writing’ but adds that ‘The Rev^d M^r Irvine can command him’.⁵³

Donald Cameron

Alexander Cameron got a poem from Donald Cameron, who was also a tailor in the same place, i.e. Drumcharry, Fortingall.⁵⁴

⁴⁴ NLS MS 14882, fo. 3b (April 1802).

⁴⁵ The Gaelic name is recorded variously as *Fonn-Chastail*, *Fon-Chastail* (King, *Scottish Gaelic Place Names*, 263) and (*Gleann-*) *Fonnchaistuil* (Paul Cameron, ‘Perthshire Gaelic Songs and their Composers: Paper No. II’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 17 (1892): 341; cf. ‘Fonnachastle’ (Donnacha Loudinn, *Deasbairachd eadar am Papa agus an t-Athleasacha* (Edinburgh: Menzies, 1834): [3]).

⁴⁶ Donacha Loudin, *Orannaigh Gaedhealach agus Bearla le Donacha Loudin / A Collection of Gaelic and English Songs by Duncan Lothian, and other Hands* (Aberdeen: J. Chalmers, 1780): Gaelic title page; Cameron, ‘Perthshire Gaelic Songs’, 340, 341; Loudinn, *Deasbairachd*, title page and p. [3]. The English title page in Loudin 1780 has ‘by Duncan Lothian, and other Hands’. Mary Ferguson and Ann Matheson, *Scottish Gaelic Union Catalogue* (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1984), 88, refer to a printing of Loudin 1780 with a slightly different title: *Comh-chruinneachidh Orannaigh Gàedhealach agus Bearla*.

⁴⁷ Loudinn, *Deasbairachd*, [3]; Cameron, ‘Perthshire Gaelic Songs’, 340–41; William J. Watson, *Bardachd Ghaidhlig: Gaelic Poetry 1550–1900*, 3rd edn. (Inverness: An Comunn Gaidhealach, 1976 [1918]), 268–69; Derick S. Thomson, ‘Lothian, Duncan’, in *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, ed. Derick S. Thomson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1987 [1983]), 157.

⁴⁸ [Duncan Lothian], *Leabhar Ceasnuighe Aithleasuighe* (Duneudain: Daibhidh Mac-Phatric, 1779). For ascription of the translation to Lothian, see Iain McLachlainn’s *roimh-radh* (‘preface’) to Loudinn, *Deasbairachd*, [3]; cf. also Ferguson and Matheson, *Union Catalogue*, 88, 163. McLachlainn was an elder in ‘Fonnachastle’.

⁴⁹ Duncan Lothian, *Connsachadh eadar an Papa agus Reformation; Maille ri Sean Fhocail Gheur agus Comhadan* (Duneidin, 1797); cf. Donald MacLean, *Typographia Scoto-Gadelica* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972 [1915]): 168; Ferguson and Matheson *Union Catalogue*, 88; Watson *Bardachd*, 29–37, 268.

⁵⁰ Loudin, *Orannaigh Gaedhealach*.

⁵¹ Anonymous, ‘A Gaelic Norwegian Ballad’, *The Highland Monthly* 3.1 (June 1889), 148; Derick S. Thomson, ‘A Catalogue and Indexes of the Ossianic Ballads in the McLagan MSS’, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 8.2 (1958), 191.

⁵² NLS MS 14882, fo. 152b; cf. ‘Druimcharry, Fortingale’ (NLS MS 14882, fo. 167b); cf. also NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 4a (April 1802).

⁵³ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.14, fo. 102r; Hogg, ‘Alexander Stewart’s Tour’.

⁵⁴ NLS MS 14882, fo. 152b.

Archibald Fletcher (b. c. 1735)

Irvine had also heard Archibald Fletcher in Glen Orchy repeat an Ossianic poem but it was ‘so imperfect and unintelligible that he did not venture to take it down, as the man promised to get a more perfect edition’.⁵⁵ This reference must be to Archibald Fletcher (born c. 1735) from Achalader, Glen Orchy, who gave evidence to the Highland Society of Scotland on 19 January 1801 and who deposited with the Society a manuscript of 194 pages consisting of Ossianic poems taken down by others from his own recitation some time between 1798 and 1801. The manuscript survives in the National Library of Scotland (NLS MS Adv. 73.1.24) and is watermarked 1798.⁵⁶ In his evidence to the Highland Society, Fletcher named the following nine tradition bearers, from some of whom he had learnt or heard Ossianic poems:⁵⁷ John McNicol, Duncan McNicol, John Robertson, Janet McKenrick / Henderson, Finlay McKenrick / Henderson, John McKenrick, John McIntyre, Duncan McIntyre and Nicol McNicol. The information provided by Fletcher about these tradition bearers is summarised in the following subsections, and an alphabetical list is provided in Appendix B.

John McNicol (before c. 1720–c. 1781)

John McNicol is described as a ‘tenant in Arivean in Glenorchay’. John McNicol died c. 1781 (‘about twenty years ago’) and was born before c. 1720 (‘was above sixty at his death’). He was grandson of Duncan McNicol (below). James Macpherson had consulted him and may have received poems from him. Fletcher had learnt a poem from him c. 1771 (‘about thirty years ago’). This is most likely the John McNicol referred to above, ‘the celebrated seanachie of Arimen Glenorchy’, from whom John Henderson had learnt poems.

Duncan McNicol (b. c. (1671–c. 1681) – c. (1751–c. 1761/1764))

Duncan McNicol is referred to as ‘tenant in the same place’ (i.e. ‘Arivean’) and is identified as John McNicol’s grandfather. According to Fletcher, he died c. 1751–c. 1761 (‘died about forty or fifty years ago’) and was born c. 1671–c. 1681 (‘about eighty years of age at his death’). I have tentatively suggested elsewhere that this Duncan might be identified as Donnchadh Riabhach MacNeacail, alias ‘Modern Ossian’, referred to by the Rev. Donald McNicol and known to the Rev. John Smith (1747–1807) since his boyhood.⁵⁸ McLagan names a Duncan McNicol, son of Archibald McNicol from Arrivain as an informant of the Rev. Dr Donald McNicol.⁵⁹

John Robertson

Fletcher learnt a poem from John Robertson ‘in Tullochean on Loch-Tay side in Breadalbane, Perthshire’, from who he received a written copy of it.

⁵⁵ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, ff. 5b–6a (April 1802).

⁵⁶ Campbell, *Leabhar na Feinne*, [v]–vi, xvi–xvii; Donald Mackinnon, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts in the Advocates Library Edinburgh and Elsewhere in Scotland* (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1912), 277–78; Mackechnie, *Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts*, 277; Ronald Black, ‘Catalogue of Gaelic MSS in the National Library of Scotland’ (n.d.). See also Anonymous, ‘Manuscripts of Ossianic Poems by Various Anonymous Hands from Recitation of Archibald Fletcher (born circa 1734), Achallader, Argyll’, National Library of Scotland.

⁵⁷ H. Mackenzie, *Report*, 271–273.

⁵⁸ Smith implies that Donnchadh Riabhach MacNeacail was ‘an old man’ and still alive c. 1764, when he was himself aged 17. See Ó Maolalaigh, ‘Tradition Bearers’.

⁵⁹ Appendix C; Ó Maolalaigh, ‘Tradition Bearers’.

Janet McKenrick / Henderson

Fletcher learnt a poem from Janet McKenrick / Henderson who in 1801 was ‘residing in Glenfalloch’, who had in turn learnt it from the McNicols of Arrivain (*Airigh Mheadhain*).

Finlay McKenrick / Henderson

Fletcher had heard Finlay McKenrick / Henderson ‘in Croitandeor in Glendochart in Perthshire’ recite. He is described as ‘a very old man’.

John McKenrick [/ Henderson]

John McKenrick is referred to as Finlay McKenrick’s uncle ‘in Glenorchay’ from whom Finlay McKenrick may have learnt poems.

John McIntyre (b. c. 1741)

Fletcher learnt a song / poem from John McIntyre ‘in Stronmialachan in Glenorchay’, who was born c. 1741 (‘a man of abut sixty years of age’).

Duncan McIntyre

John MacIntyre had in turn learnt the song / poem just referred to from Duncan McIntyre who resided ‘near Bunaw, Argyleshire’. This is presumably not the Duncan McIntyre from ‘Meggerny in Glen Lyon’ referred to by Alexander Stewart in 1807, for whom see below.⁶⁰

Nicol McNicol

Fletcher heard c. 1751 (‘about fifty years ago’) Nicol McNicol ‘who resided some time in Achaladar’ reciting poems ‘in Arivean’ and. This is unlikely to be the Rev. Dr Donald McNicol’s father, as McLagan does not mention a Nicol McNicol amongst Donald McNicol’s informants or sources; see Appendix C.

Captain Dr Alexander Morrison (1717–1805)

Captain Dr Alexander Morrison in Greenock provided Irvine with a number of poems in 1801 and 1802, including copies of two addresses to the sun by Ossian.⁶¹ As Morrison himself corroborated in a signed declaration to the Highland Society of Scotland in January 1801: ‘I have given the Rev. Mr. Irvine a true and faithful copy of Ossian’s Address to the Sun in the original, and some other fragments of Ossian’s Poems.’⁶² Morrison, born at Skinidin, Isle of Skye, was a physician; he collaborated with James ‘Ossian’ Macpherson, who stayed with him in Skye for at least one night,⁶³ and could himself recite Ossianic poems. His mother was the daughter of Iain Breac MacLeod. He died, aged eighty-eight, on 28 January 1805.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.14, fo. 102v; Hogg, ‘Alexander Stewart’s Tour’. For Meggerny, see ‘Meggernie *Migearnaidh*’ in King, *Scottish Gaelic Place Names*, 290.

⁶¹ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, ff. 3a, 4a (April 1802); cf. NLS MS 14882, ff. 87b (date, 2 December 1802), 90b, 118b (date, 1801), 123b; EUL MS Laing III 475, ff. 87b, 90b, 115b.

⁶² H. Mackenzie, *Report*, 178.

⁶³ H. Mackenzie, *Report*, 176–177.

⁶⁴ Thomas C. Parramore, ‘Morrison, Alexander’, in *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 4 (L–O), ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 328.

The Rev. James McDiarmid (1744–1828)

Irvine got two addresses to the sun from the Rev. James McDiarmid of Weem on 29 July 1801, ‘who says he got them from Duncan Robertson, Craigelig, Glenyon, upwards of 40 years ago [i.e. before c. 1761], when a student at College’.⁶⁵ For Robertson and the poems, see above.

The Rev. Duncan MacFarlane (1743–1841)

Irvine received an Ossianic poem from ‘Mr Macfarlane min^r of the Galic chapel in perth’.⁶⁶ This was the Rev. Duncan MacFarlan, who translated all but three of the Ossianic poems published by Hugh and John McCallum in 1816.⁶⁷

John MacDonald / Iain Mòr Dhail Choisnidh (1721–1809)

John MacDonald, known as *Iain Mòr* in Gaelic, was chief of the MacDonalds of Dalchosnie,⁶⁸ *Sliochd Iain Duibh mhic Raghnaill mhòir*, at Bunrannoch in Perthshire.⁶⁹ His genealogy is *Iain Mòr mac Alastair mhic Iain mhic Ailein mhic Alastair mhic Aonghais mhic Iain Duibh mhic Raghnaill Mhòir na Ceapaich*.⁷⁰ He was an important source for the Rev. Dr Alexander Irvine. Irvine’s son, the Rev. Dr Alexander Robertson Irvine (1806–67),⁷¹ Minister of Blair Atholl (1843–67), in a partially surviving letter, dated 23 January 1867, to his own son, the Rev. Dr Alexander Irvine Robertson (1847–1925),⁷² Minister of Clackmannan, says that Irvine had taken down Ossianic poems from John MacDonald of Dalchosnie’s great store of poems and songs that he had heard and learnt from his father (Alexander MacDonald 1696–1745) and grandfather (John MacDonald), who in turn had inherited them from their ancestors, who had come from Keppoch in Lochaber. John’s eleventh son, the Rev. Robert McDonald (1770–1842), Minister of Fortingall (1806–42),⁷³ had continued the family tradition of memorising and reciting Ossianic lays. Irvine had transcribed from the oral recitation of Charles Robertson (see below) in 1808 a poem at the manse at Fortingall in the presence of the Rev. Robert MacDonald, which as Ulrike Hogg notes, suggests that they may have collaborated in this work.⁷⁴ The relevant parts of the Rev. Dr Alexander Robertson Irvine’s letter are as follows:

Say to M^r McNeill that the Poems he refers to were for by much the greater part taken down by my father from the recitation of M^r McDonald of Dalchosnie grandfather of the late Sir

⁶⁵ NLS MS 14882, fo. 117b; EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 115b. It is noted in the April 1802 document that Irvine received a copy of Ossian’s address to the sun from the Rev. ‘Mac Diarmid’, Minister of Weem, who in turn got it from Duncan Robertson, who lived in Craigelig, Glen Lyon c. 1772 (‘about 30 years ago’) (NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 3a (April 1802)).

⁶⁶ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 3b (April 1802).

⁶⁷ Scott, *Fasti* vol. IV, 240; Hugh McCallum and John McCallum, eds, *An Original Collection of the Poems of Ossian, Orrann, Ulin, and other Bards* (Montrose: James Wall, 1816), xc.

⁶⁸ The Rev. Charles M. Robertson gives the Gaelic form of Dalchosnie as *Dail Chóisnidh* (King, *Scottish Gaelic Place Names*, 268). I take the symbol <ó> here to represent phonetic [o], a short high-mid vowel. Iain MacIllechiar (‘Place-Names of Rannoch’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 66 (2014): 69) has *Dal [sic] a’ Chosnaidh*, although it is not clear what the authority for this form is.

⁶⁹ A. Mackenzie, *History of the MacDonalds*, 505.

⁷⁰ A. Mackenzie, *History of the MacDonalds*, 505–23 (esp. 510–15).

⁷¹ Scott, *Fasti* vol. IV, 146.

⁷² Scott, *Fasti* vol. IV, 303.

⁷³ Scott, *Fasti* vol. IV, 179.

⁷⁴ Hogg, ‘Life and Papers’, 106; NLS MS 14882, fo. 37v. See also Charles Robertson below.

John McDonald⁷⁵ [1788–1866] in the period between 1800 & 1804. It may have been a year or two earlier, but certainly not later. The old gentleman had an extraordinary store of similar poetry, which my father had not time to take down. He had acquitted it from his father and grandfather, who had gotten & preserved it in the same way, in their memory. They were of Keppoch in Lochaber & it was then the poems were learnt by the M^cDonalds of three generations above mentioned. I cannot say of course thro what channel the poetry first came into the family, but that it was in existence early in the last century is manifest, for the M^cDonalds of that time were a long lived race, & if you only go back for two generations from the old gentleman when my father heard repeat the poems, you will reach the 45, or an earlier date, but it is quite safe to go back much farther, tho' I cannot legally prove it to be so. [...] There are a fragment or two among the poems taken down by my father from other old people in Rannoch at the same time as the others, but I can't say which they are. [...] You may tell him as a proof of the singular gift of memory of many of these old reciters, that old Dalchosnie had a vast store of songs taken down, by his son, Robert who was at home when my father was in Rannoch, & these or at least many of them, are still in the possession of his son Dr McDonald in Strathardle. I have heard old Rob sing some of the songs for a whole night. And with sets of poems, the heroic taken down from my father & the lyrics jotted by Robert, were but a small part of what the old man could repeat.⁷⁶

It would appear that MacDonald's house in Dalchosnie was the location at which Irvine took down some, if not many, of his poems, especially during the years 1801–04. The declaration made by Donald McIver in February 1802 was made at Dalchosnie.⁷⁷ One poem taken down by Irvine from MacDonald is dated 26 February 1801.⁷⁸ Irvine received a 'more correct' version of *Cath Mhàlais* from John MacDonald.⁷⁹ Irvine wrote another poem from the recitation of John MacDonald at Dalchosnie, Bunrannoch, on 6 March 1804. MacDonald had learnt it before *c.* 1744 ('60 years ago and more') from Donald Stewart.⁸⁰

Donald Stewart / Dòmhnall Ruadh mac Aonghais Ruaidh

Donald Stewart was known as 'Donald ruadh mac Aonais ruaidh' and was 'resident at Iempar [*sic*]'.⁸¹ Iempar, or possibly Jempar, which is J. F. Campbell's reading,⁸² may be a mistranscription (by both of the clerks who transcribed Irvine's Ossianic poems) for Tempar, which was in the parish of Logierait and lies on the south side of Loch Rannoch, two miles southeast of Kinloch Rannoch and just to the east of Dalchosnie.⁸³ The letters 'I', 'J' and 'T' in NLS MS 14882 and EUL MS Laing III 475 are very similar.

⁷⁵ This John MacDonald, son of Alexander (b. 1762), son of John (1721–1809), succeeded his grandfather in 1809 (A. Mackenzie, *History of the MacDonalds*, 515).

⁷⁶ NLS MS 14882, ff. ia–iib.

⁷⁷ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, ff. 1a, 2b (February 1802).

⁷⁸ NLS MS 14882, fo. 124b.

⁷⁹ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15, fo. 4b (April 1802).

⁸⁰ NLS MS 14882, fo. 51b; EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 52b. The same information occurs in two leaves (four pages) of blue paper inserted into EUL MS Laing III 475 between pp. [iib] and [iia] (at p. [2b]), where Stewart's name is spelt 'Stuart'.

⁸¹ NLS MS 14882, fo. 51b.

⁸² Campbell, *Leabhar na Feinne*, 15, col. 2.

⁸³ Robertson has *Tempar* (King, *Scottish Gaelic Place Names*, 268); cf. MacIllechiarr, 'Place-Names', 69, 97. The blue paper insert referred to in n. 81 above has 'Tempar' although the letter 'T' resembles the letters 'J' and 'I'.

Archibald Stewart

Archibald Stewart, described as a ‘man servant, Dalchosnie, Rannoch’, recited for Irvine on 19 February 1801.⁸⁴

Murdoch McLennan (b. c. 1742)

Roderick McLennan, ‘Tacksman in Kintail’, took down a poem from the recitation of Murdoch McLennan, Kintail, who was then aged about sixty, in the presence of Mr Alexander Stewart and ‘many others’ on 25 August 1802 in Milltown, Rannoch. He had in turn learnt it from his father ‘many years before’.⁸⁵ Roderick MacLennan (1765–1855) was tacksman of Killilan (*Cill Fhaolain*) in Glenshiel and later innkeeper at Shiel House near Shiel Bridge. He died, aged ninety, at the Sligachan Inn on Skye which was run by his second son to be named Alexander (b. 1822).⁸⁶

Charles Robertson

Charles Robertson from Loch Tay Side repeated a poem in the presence of the Rev. Robert McDonald (1770–1842), son of John McDonald of Dalchosnie (*Iain Mòr*) and Minister of Fortingall (1806–42), at his manse on 24 November 1808.⁸⁷ For his grandmother, see Helen MacLennan, below.

Helen MacLennan

Charles Robertson had learnt the poem referred to above c. 1790 (‘18 years ago’) from Helen MacLennan, his grandmother.⁸⁸

MacIntyre [Duncan] (b. c. 1732)

A poem was taken down from ‘___ Macintyre, Glenlyon, who can neither read nor write’. No forename is given.⁸⁹ Another was taken down from ‘M^r Macintyre, foresaid, Glenlyon’.⁹⁰ This is very likely to be the Duncan MacIntyre ‘aged 75’ from ‘Meggerny in Glen Lyon’ referred to by Alexander Stewart in 1807.⁹¹

John Stewart (b. c. 1722 / 23)

John Stewart, who is described as a tenant at ‘Bohaly, aged 86’, recited a poem in Irvine’s presence on 1 November 1808.⁹² Bohally is in Perthshire to the northwest of Loch Tummel, just east of Tummel Bridge. Alexander Stewart in 1807 refers to this John Stewart as being ‘aged 84, Tenant in Bohally, Parish of Dull’ who ‘has been a general Reciter at Late wakes, &c. for many years’.⁹³

⁸⁴ NLS MS 14882, fo. 20b; cf. fo. 64b; EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 21b; cf. fo. 64b. Mackechnie’s date ‘19th Dec. 1811’ is incorrect (Mackechnie, *Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts*, 563, col. 1, (5)); cf. Campbell, *Leabhar na Feinne*, 57, col. 1.

⁸⁵ NLS MS 14882, ff. 23b, 24b; EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 25b.

⁸⁶ David Alston, ‘Enslaved Africans and Scottish Enslavers in Guyana’, s.v. MacLennan (Killilan, Glenshiel), accessed 24/06/2025.

⁸⁷ NLS MS 14882, ff. 37b, 101b; EUL MS Laing III 475, ff. 38b, 56b, 101b. There is reference to the year 1808 on fo. 101b of both manuscripts.

⁸⁸ NLS MS 14882, fo. 37b; cf. also ff. 46b, 56b, 101b; EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 38b; cf. also fo. 47b.

⁸⁹ NLS MS 14882, fo. 71b; EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 71b.

⁹⁰ NLS MS 14882, fo. 77b; EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 77b.

⁹¹ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.14, fo. 102v; Hogg, ‘Alexander Stewart’s Tour’.

⁹² NLS MS 14882, fo. 96b; NLS MS 14882, fo. 96b.

⁹³ NLS MS Adv. 73.2.14, fo. 102r; Hogg, ‘Alexander Stewart’s Tour’.

Angus Stewart

Angus Stewart recited *An Tailfhear do na Fiannaibh* ('Chaidh mi turus dheanamh eudaich' 'I once went to make clothes') for Irvine at Dalchosnie on 25 February 1801. He is described in NLS MS 14882 as a tailor at Runrannoch [*sic*], a mistranscription for Bunrannoch.⁹⁴ Stewart learned it from another tailor, Donald Dewar; see below. I have tentatively suggested elsewhere that this parodic poem about a Scottish tailor from Glen Lochy who served the *Fèinn*, said to have been composed in 1715 by a McNicol from Arrivain, may be ascribed to Duncan Riabhach McNicol, the 'Modern Ossian' referred to above.⁹⁵

Donald Dewar (d. before 25 February 1801)

Donald Dewar, from whom Angus Stewart learned *An Tailfhear do na Fiannaibh*, is described as a tailor 'now dead', i.e. by 25 February 1801.⁹⁶

APPENDIX A – Informants mentioned by the Rev. Alexander Irvine

Cameron, Alexander

Cameron, Donald

Carmichael, Archibald

Dewar, Donald (d. before 25 February 1801)

Fletcher, Archibald (b. c. 1735)

Henderson, John (d. before c. 1772)

Lothian, Duncan; Donnchadh Loudin (Louduinn / Loudinn / Loudaidh) (c. 1730–c. 1812)

MacDonald, John; Iain Mòr Dhail Choisnidh (1721–1809)

MacFarlane, Rev. Duncan (1743–1841)

MacIntyre [Duncan]

MacLennan, Helen

McDiarmid, Rev. James (1744–1828)

McIver, Daniel / Donald; alias Robertson (b. c. 1717–22)

McLeran, Michael

McLennan, Murdoch (b. c. 1742)

McNicol, John (before c. 1720–c. 1781 [?])

Morrison, Captain Dr Alexander (1717–1805)

Robertson, Charles

Robertson, Duncan; Donnchadh mac Aonghais Bhàin

Stewart, Angus

Stewart, Archibald

Stewart, Donald; *Dòmhnall Ruadh mac Aonghais Ruaidh*

Stewart, John (b. c. 1722 / 23)

APPENDIX B – Informants / sources mentioned by Archibald Fletcher

McIntyre, Duncan

⁹⁴ NLS MS 14882, fo. 156b; Bunrannoch appears in EUL MS Laing III 475, fo. 153a.

⁹⁵ Ó Maolalaigh, 'Tradition Bearers'.

⁹⁶ NLS MS 14882, fo. 156b. Laing III 475 fo. 153a.

McIntyre, John (b. c. 1741)
McKenrick / Henderson, Finlay
McKenrick / Henderson, Janet
McKenrick [/ Henderson], John
McNicol, Duncan (b. c. (1671–c. 1681) – c. (1751–c. 1761/1764))
McNicol, John (before c. 1720–c. 1781)
McNicol, Nicol
Robertson, John

APPENDIX C – Informants / sources mentioned by the Rev. James MacLagan⁹⁷

Chaimbeul, Anna
Henderson, John
McArthur, Catharine
McArthur, Robert ('Rob')
McGregor, Katharine ('Kate')
McIsaac, Alexander; Alastair MacÌosaic
McIsaac, Malcolm; MacÌosaic alias Calum an Ràdhair
McLagan, Janet
McLean, Margaret
McNaughtan
McNaughtan, John
McNicol, Archibald
McNicol, Duncan
McNicol, Janet
McNicol, John
NicAoidh
Robertson, Duncan; Donnchadh mac Aonghais Bhàin (c. 1705–[?]1790s)
Stewart, Isabel
Stewart, Janet
Stewart, William; Uilleam Stuart alias McFhinlay

SOURCES

MANUSCRIPTS

Dundee City Archives: DCA MS GD/We/6/3
Edinburgh University Library: EUL MS Laing III 475
National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh:
NLS MS Acc. 3184
NLS MS 14877 (15a)
NLS MS 14877 (15b)
NLS MS 14882

⁹⁷ From Ó Maolalaigh, 'Tradition Bearers'.

NLS MS Adv. 73.1.24
 NLS MS Adv. 73.2.11
 NLS MS Adv. 73.2.14
 NLS MS Adv. 73.2.15
 NLS MS Adv. 73.2.26

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