

REVIEW

Calum I. Maclean, *The Highlands*, Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 1959, 2006. 240 pp. ISBN 1 84596 014 9.

Ronald Black, ed., *The Gaelic Otherworld: John Gregorson Campbell's 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland' and 'Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands'*, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005. 753 pp. ISBN 10 1 84158 207 7 and ISBN 13 978 1 84158 207 8.

According to its front cover, the reprint of Calum Maclean's 1959 travelogue *The Highlands* is 'one of the most evocative and perceptive accounts of the Highlands ever written.' The claim is a lot to live up to. Undoubtedly Maclean knows his subject thoroughly. Born in 1915 on the Island of Raasay, near Skye, he was a Gaelic speaker whose profession was the collecting of old tales and songs of the *Gaidhealtachd* (Gaelic speaking areas). It was through his travels and meetings with people in the 1940s and 50s that the material for this work was obtained. His ability to speak Gaelic opened doors, allowing the reader to glimpse aspects of Highland lives that would not have been revealed to an English speaker. His tremendous sympathy with the folk of the area is in stark contrast with earlier writers such as the famed eighteenth century journaller, Samuel Johnson, who travelled in many of the same areas but with a superciliousness which allowed him only to pass judgement rather than gain understanding of local people, politics and culture.

Although Maclean's language skills and manner gave him an advantage over his predecessors, his attitude is distinctly romantic, sentimental and preoccupied with the past. His many anecdotes about the Jacobites and Clearances imply that the entire appearance of the land and mentality of the people had been defined by the worst effects of these. Their impact was doubtless profound, yet even his reflections on the contemporary state of

the Highlands, and his sometimes radical suggestions to solve problems, rest on the assumption that the society, economy and culture of the area would have been vibrant were it not for these catastrophes. His analysis therefore takes no account of long term changes in the world economy, climate or the processes of Anglicisation and migration which have been an intrinsic part of Scotland's existence for at least the last thousand years. His attitude could be a product of his times. The famed poet Sorley Maclean suggests in the foreword that his brother's 'ardent Jacobitism would [not] have remained so very strong after the researches of so many brilliant new historians.' (p. 11) This focus on the unhappy parts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries acts to obscure other aspects of Highland history which have been lent less pathos by the march of time. I found myself wondering whether his general preoccupation with the past as strongly concerned the people of the 1950s among whom he was travelling. Other Celtic researchers have found that there is a high level of disinterest among ordinary people, with many considering subjects such as the Gaelic language and folk tales irrelevant, or even holding society back from development.¹ Perhaps Maclean's professional duty of researching songs and traditions tended to put him in touch with those who had a strong interest in the past.

Where he does discuss the contemporary lives of the Highlanders his book is fascinating, rating with the best travelogues. For example, he comments perceptively on class, accent and travelling folk. He points out the irony of the landowner tendency to refuse to send their children to local schools, and to speak no Gaelic yet wear the kilt. Lochaber locals he perceives as ashamed of their Highlandness, adopting an accent similar to that of the industrialised central belt. (pp. 69-70) His friendship with the tinkers of Strathglass led to unique observations of lives in the process of profound alteration due to the implementation of the welfare state and obligatory schooling.

This reprint preserves Maclean's arrangement of chapters by place, encompassing the entirety of the mainland Highlands. However, his passion for such areas as Strathglass, Easter Ross and Inverness demonstrated in chapter six, contrasts with the superficial treatment of other areas which he had obviously just passed through. The descriptions of Ardgour, Ardnamurchan and Morvern are unfortunately of the 'we were warned that the road

to Kingairloch was in a poor state and we chose to go west to Strontian' variety, interspersed with historical anecdotes. (p.130)

Maclean's text is contextualised by a memoir placing him within the resurgent academic interest in Irish folklore, which he adapted to Scotland. His researches revealed that the oral and poetic tradition was ongoing, although greatly endangered in Gaelic speaking Scotland. He made it his life's mission to record as much as possible, ancient and modern. The book itself is part of the tradition he was trying to record by including three Gaelic elegies for Maclean, adapted to the written word. These demonstrate, even in the translation provided, the cadence and rhythm of the modern version of Gaelic oral tradition:

The world is still beautiful
 though you are not in it,
 Gaelic is eloquent in Uist
 Though you are in Hallin Hill
 And your mouth without speech. (p. 28)

It is easy to critique a writer for seeing a place and people from the perspective of his era as I have done. In Maclean's case romanticism and a profound sense of betrayal shape his interpretation. However Maclean's approach, with all its faults, gives us three things. On the surface he presents a readable insight into the Highlands of the 1950s and of legend. Secondly he provides an interpretation of the area, explaining the decline in Gaelic, the depopulation of the land and the ageing population. Thirdly, although others would have understood the Highlands differently, Maclean's romantic perspective is representative of an important strand of contemporary opinion. His writing reflects the mood, ideas and concerns of a section of educated Scots of the 1950s. It is this very personality and idiosyncrasy of the work which, on occasion, acts to place Maclean in the travellers' pantheon of Johnson, Boswell and Pennant.

Like Calum Maclean, John Gregorson Campbell (1834-1891) was fascinated by his native land. A minister on the Isle of Tiree from 1861 to his death, Campbell's particular interests were supernatural belief and the superstitious practices of the Gaels. These he recorded in several books. This 2005 reprint is the text of two of the most influential. What makes Campbell's

collection particularly important and worthy of reprinting are the assumptions that lie behind it. Unlike many of his contemporaries who felt it incumbent upon them to interpret or beautify the raw material, Campbell's collection is almost exclusively the bare oral evidence. He appreciated the unreliability of contemporary interpretations which were often written by outsiders and non Gaels. Campbell kept his interpretation to a minimum, preferring to act mainly as a recording agent, however there are included a few examples of his interpretive writing. His ideas are especially interesting as they are early examples of the academic trend of folklore collection.

The book is divided into four distinct sections. The first is the lengthy and useful introduction by Ronald Black who divided the Gaelic Otherworld into three. First is the secular otherworld of the fairies; the second is that of death which includes spirits and the second sight; and the third he equates with the Christian otherworld, populated by witches and the devil. Black gives a socially based interpretation of fairy belief. For example, he relates a tale of a mother who on returning to her baby found it to be a changeling (replaced by a fairy), and while taking it to a neighbouring township dropped it in the river where it turned into her own child again. (p. lvii) Black uses internal evidence and some imagination to demonstrate how this story could be a way of explaining away the death of an older child, possibly from starvation, and the arrival of a newborn to a widow more than nine months after her bereavement. This style of explanation is very useful in approaching the often peculiar stories, but is limited as it only deals with the first otherworld. The second and third are more difficult to explain and a rationalist historian like Black does not countenance the possibility of the supernatural.²

The bulk of the book is Campbell's collection. This is divided into chapters dealing with the various creatures of the Gaelic Otherworld such as the *each uisge* (waterhorse) and *gruagach* (a human/fairy hybrid), as well as incidences of witchcraft, premonition and incantation. Although many of the stories are confusing in their own right as they do not conform to the structure or content of storytelling to which we as Anglophones are accustomed, they are a fascinating insight into the mental and spiritual world of the Gaels. Another few chapters detail the structure of the Gaelic year, and the customs attached to particular

times, such as the New Year's Day shinty matches or precautions taken against witches on Beltane (May Day). The last section is a detailed *Life* of Campbell which, in addition to being of biographical interest, contextualises him within the growing nineteenth century historiography.

The literature of the past of the Highlands and Islands is littered with books about superstitions and traditional practices. This has served to create an image in the popular imagination of the area as a mystical wilderness filled with a doomed civilisation. Despite these unfortunate romantic side effects, the best of the work on folk beliefs and practices was highly successful in preserving some ideas and thought patterns of nineteenth century Highlanders. Campbell's collections are without doubt an example of the best of this work, and remain useful for students of the nineteenth century, intellectual history or cultural studies.

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¹ Marcus Tanner, *The Last of the Celts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

² This is in contrast to Henderson and Cowan who, in the face of the potential mockery of the academic establishment, deliberately remain ambivalent about the nature, origins and existence of the Otherworld. Lizanne Henderson and Edward Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2001).