

CALUM I. MACLEAN'S FIELDWORK DIARIES IN ARISAIG, MORAR, AND MOIDART, 1954 *Part one*

Born into a large yet talented family of humble crofting background, Calum Iain Maclean (1915–1960) was one of five boys and two girls to Malcolm Maclean (1880–1951), from Raasay, and Christina Nicolson (1886–1974), from Braes, Isle of Skye. Sorley, his elder brother, was an outstanding poet and scholar. Raised in Raasay, he attended in turn Raasay Public School, Portree Secondary School and the University of Edinburgh, graduating with a first in Celtic in 1939. A gifted student, he won two scholarships and enrolled at University College Dublin. His studies were, however, disrupted by the outbreak of war, but through his contacts he was offered employment by Professor James Hamilton Delargy as a part-time fieldwork collector for the Irish Folklore Commission.



Calum Iain Maclean, 1956
WERNER KISSLING

By 1945, Maclean was employed on a full-time basis and, towards the end of that year, returned to Scotland to undertake further collecting, concentrating on the Southern Outer Hebrides, and collaborated with John Lorne Campbell. Delargy stated that Maclean was "the best equipped and most successful collector of all time of Scottish Gaelic tradition."

Throughout most of his career, spanning some eighteen years, Maclean kept a fieldwork diary written in turn in Irish, Gaelic and English. On the foundation of the School of Scottish Studies in 1951, Maclean was appointed its first researcher/collector working alongside Hamish Henderson, Donald Archie MacDonald and John MacInnes.

With a broadened remit, although focussing upon the Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highland and Islands, Maclean collected oral materials throughout the length and breadth of Scotland. Diagnosed with cancer in 1956, necessitating the amputation of his left arm, Maclean continued to collect on his recovery even though his health remained indifferent. Idiosyncratic perhaps but never dull, *The Highlands* (1959) remains his only published book.

By no means prolific, he nevertheless contributed academic articles about folklore to various journals as well as popular pieces to mainstream publications. Maclean's lasting legacy is his numerous fieldwork recordings and transcriptions, held in the archives of University College Dublin and the School of Scottish Studies. On his untimely death many tributes were paid to him, not least a moving elegiac poem by Sorley and also a pibroch by his colleague Francis Collinson.

By following in the footsteps of Maclean, we can look over the shoulder of a young and assiduous fieldworker going about his business. He had passed through the district before, in 1947, but it was not until the summer of 1954 that he began to collect intensively over a two-month period, at first in Arisaig, Morar and then Moidart. In many ways, as he had done before in Lochaber and Barra, Maclean was entering virgin territory. The former locality was the first place he started to collect, in the winter of 1951, for the newly established School of Scottish Studies. He hardly knew anyone but that was all set to change.

The first extract relates his arrival from Edinburgh to Arisaig and booking into the hotel, and then, the next day, he introduces us to a few folk from whom he was going to collect a rich vein of oral materials, including song, stories and later still, instrumental music. Those whom he met, at least initially, were Allan MacDonald, a retired policeman, Anne Gillies, a retired teacher, who both mentioned other folk in the district including Donald

MacEachen and William MacDonald. Maclean would later meet and record from both of them. On his second day he met Donald MacDonald, a son of George MacDonald who was a famous piper in his day, from whom he got some interesting material about piping traditions. He next visited Lachlan Gillies, a local stalwart, then Lachlan Stewart, a Skyeman and Estate Manager, in Arisaig, who stayed in Borrodale House. Later still on his second day, Maclean visited the MacDonalds in Drumgorm who recommended that he spoke with Donald MacDonald from Bunacaimbe. Maclean failed to meet Joan MacDonald when he visited but his patience would soon be rewarded. All in all, not a bad start.

Monday, 17 May 1954

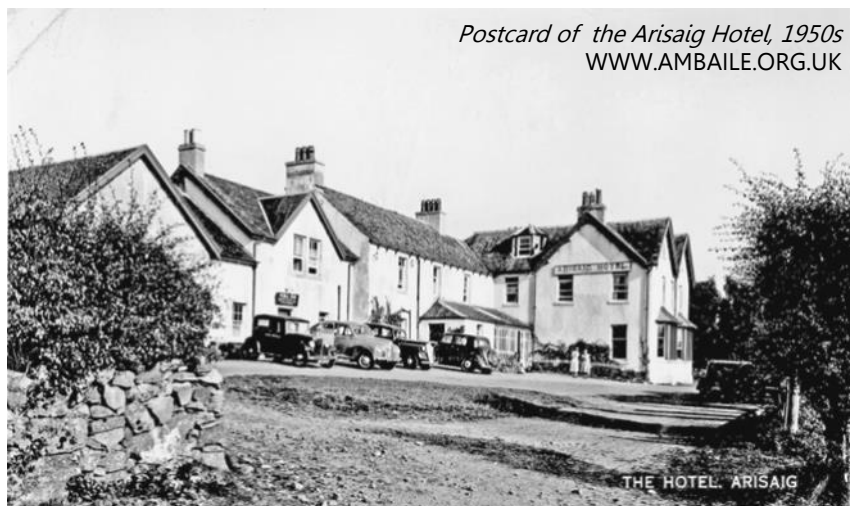
I left Oban today at 11.30 a.m. and took the train to Crianlarich. A beautiful day it has been. I arrived at Crianlarich at 1.44 pm and had to wait there until 6.30 [p.m.]. The train from Glasgow was late. On the south-going train, I saw a fleeting glimpse of Mrs Jackie Ross of Portree, a Miss Graham as I knew her in my schooldays at Portree. I boarded the north-going train. It was a lovely evening with bright sunshine. I took two photographs of Beinn Dòbhrain [Ben Dorain]. Lochaber and Ben Nevis were beautiful in the rays of the setting sun. I arrived in Arisaig close on ten o' clock. There were two old ladies from Edinburgh who were visitors to Arisaig. I got my luggage and equipment safely into the hotel. I hope to be here [Arisaig Hotel] for a week. I do not know a living soul here. I hope to know one or two people before this time tomorrow night. I did not sleep last night. So to bed!

Tuesday, 18 May 1954

A beautiful day today. After breakfast, I walked along the road by the shore from the hotel southwards. On the road a fine old Highlander spoke to me. We passed the time of day, and I told him why I had come to the district. He said that most of the old people had now gone, one woman who had a great number of old songs died two years ago. The old gentleman was none other than Allan MacDonald,¹ a retired policeman who had been many years out in Uist and Benbecula. He was well known to Aonghas Barrach [MacMillan]² and other people out in Benbecula. I had heard them talk about him very often. He was very popular out in the Isles and had evidently been a very powerful man in his day. Allan MacDonald told me to call on Miss Anne Gillies, a retired schoolteacher living in Arisaig. He also mentioned three good tradition-bearers: Donald MacEachen and an old man living in the village, Lachlan Gillies and William MacDonald who lives at [the Back of] Keppoch. These, he said, were the best people left in the place. I walked around the district for some time. There is a lovely view of Eigg, Rum and Skye from here. The day was very clear.

I took the train into Mallaig at 12 o' clock as I wanted to buy a map and some films. On the train I met Duncan MacInnes, the "Calamity Dan" of my schooldays at Portree. He is now a seaman and was on his way home to Broadford, Skye. He was not changed so very much. He speaks beautiful Gaelic and is still completely unspoilt and natural – a thorough gentleman. In Mallaig, I bought what I

Postcard of the Arisaig Hotel, 1950s
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required and took the train back to Arisaig. I arrived back in time for lunch.

In the afternoon I called to see Miss [Anne] Gillies.³ She had been the local schoolmistress and is now retired. I told her my mission to the district. She said she had always been more interested in the practical and did not have much interest in traditions. She had done her best to teach Gaelic but had found that real interest and enthusiasm was lacking; the young people were not interested in Gaelic. She thought the efforts of An Comunn Gàidhealach were quite futile. There was far too much cheap sentiment about it all. She mentioned other people whom she thought might be helpful. She mentioned the local minister, Mr [Donald Macintosh] Logan,⁴ who was a good Gaelic scholar and interested in traditions. She also mentioned a Miss Joan MacDonald whose grandfather was a poet and who did know some old songs herself. Others in the district were Mrs Marion MacDonald from Barra, Mr and Mrs John MacKinnon. She also asked me to call on the sons of the late George MacDonald, the famous piper of the last generation. George and his brother Angus [MacDonald] were great pipers, Angus being a great master of *ceòl mòr* [pibroch], and George a splendid player of strathspeys and reels. The late Pipe-Major John MacDonald of Inverness,⁵ Pipe-Major William MacLean, Kilcreggan,⁶ Sheriff [J. P.] Grant of Rothiemurchas⁷ and many others came to the MacDonalds of Arisaig for tuition. Angus [MacDonald] died during the closing years of the 1914–18 war. George [MacDonald]⁸ died in the early years of the century. I hoped that some of their musical MSS. might still be available. I was to be disappointed.



Angus MacDonald, c. 1910
M.E.M. DONALDSON

I walked along the southern shore of Loch nan Ceall to Hazel [Grove] Cottage, where the MacDonald brothers live. I knocked at the door and a woman with an English voice came and answered. She said she was a visitor, but the MacDonald brothers were somewhere about the house. One of them soon appeared at the door of an outhouse and I went to speak to him. This was Donald MacDonald,⁹ the son of George. I explained who I was, and we had an interesting talk. He had much to say about his father [George MacDonald] and his uncle Angus [MacDonald].¹⁰ He is not a piper. He spoke of visits paid by Pipe-Major John MacDonald, Inverness, Pipe-Major [William] MacLean and Lt. Col. [J. P.] Grant to his father and uncle. They had tuition from a piper Duncan Campbell¹¹ and also from Angus MacKay.¹² They had left a lot of MSS. behind them, their own settings of tunes, tunes which they had written down, and collections of pibroch – printed collections, with their own corrections written in red ink. All those had been burnt, he said, along with a diary kept by his father. Donald [MacDonald] himself had seen them. That, I must say, was a very great loss. How very much valuable material had been consigned to the flames. All this is very shocking. Donald had also very interesting accounts of *Raghnall mac Ailein Òig* [Ronald son of Young Allan, Ronald MacDonald]. These he promised to record for me on Friday evening. Donald MacDonald is a very pleasant and interesting man. I have still to meet the other brother Charles [MacDonald].

I then returned in the direction of Arisaig and called at the house of Lachlan Gillies. I was there re-introduced to [Lt.-] Col. [James] Gray Simpson,¹³ whom I had met four years ago going out to Lochboisdale with Seton [Paul] Gordon¹⁴ and [Francis] Cameron-Head of Lochailort. Lachlan Gillies and his wife [Isabella MacNeil],¹⁵ a lady from Moidart, are a charming couple. Lachlan had met John [Maclean] and Alasdair [Maclean], my brothers, coming from Portree Games some years ago. He was a noted dancer in his younger days and also an athlete. He served with the 4th Camerons in the 1914–18 War and was badly wounded. He comes of a family of singers and musicians. He himself sings and plays the fiddle. He sang some old songs for me. I had not heard them

before. He also had stories about *Raghnall mac Ailein Òig* and also *Ailean nan Corc* [Allan MacDonald of the Dirks], who lived at [the Back of] Keppoch. There is a huge tacksman's house there today. It is about a quarter of a mile north of Arisaig Hotel. I said I would go over on Thursday evening and would bring the recording machine. Lachlan walked a bit of the way with me, and we sat down on a bridge and talked. As we sat there a man came by riding on a bicycle. He was introduced to me as John MacKinnon.¹⁶ He lives here in Arisaig and is a piper. He was taught by Pipe-Major John MacDonald [*Seonaidh Roidein*] of the Glasgow Police. Lachlan Gillies also spoke of the Estate Manager, Lachlan Stewart from Skye. He said that Lachlan Stewart had many songs which he learned from old people in Skye. While we sat on the bridge Lachlan Stewart's car passed in the direction of the hotel.

I parted with Lachlan Gillies and went back to the hotel. I went into the bar and there was a person who I took to be Lachlan Stewart.¹⁷ I introduced myself to him and he turned out to be the man I wanted. He had been in Portree School a decade before my time. He had lived for some time at Tote [near Skeabost], Skye. He has very many songs, mostly songs of the nineteenth century. We arranged to meet and do some recording on Saturday night.

I returned to the hotel and had dinner. After dinner, I went up to visit the MacDonalds at Drumgorm. Mrs MacDonald is a sister of Norman MacLure¹⁸ in Oban. John MacDonald,¹⁹ the husband, was very helpful and spoke about old Donald MacEachen and asked me to go to see him. He also mentioned a potential source of information, Donald MacDonald of Bun na Caime [Bunacaimbe], a surface-man on the railway. He imagined that he had some stories. I spent some time with the MacDonalds and then went to visit a Miss Joan MacDonald. There was no answer at her door, and I assumed that she was not at home. I went back to the hotel and did some writing. So far, I have been quite successful and have made good contacts. The district seems promising. The people I have met so far are certainly very nice.

In the next extract, we shall meet Donald MacDonald (*Dòmhnall Màiri Ruairidh*), from Bunacaimbe, Donald MacEachen (*Dòmhnall Iain Bhàin*) from the Back of Keppoch, Calum MacKellaig, whom Maclean had met in 1947, and also hear about the sad passing of Angus Barrach MacMillan (from Benbecula) who had recorded hundreds of stories. Also, a ceilidh takes place in Lachlan Gillies's house (in Morroch, Arisaig) where mention is made of Simon Peter MacDonald, a local schoolmaster, Angus MacDonald (the Drover), Charles MacDonald (brother of Donald), Joan MacDonald and her brother John, Marion MacDonald (originally from Barra), John MacKinnon and his wife, Cecilia Teresa MacDonald. With such talent abounding, it must have been quite a ceilidh!

Andrew Wiseman

Diary extracts by courtesy of the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin

Footnotes

1. Allan MacDonald (1885–1962).
2. Angus MacMillan (Aonghas Barrach, 1874–1954), an outstanding storyteller from Griminish, Benbecula, and from whom Calum Maclean collected hundreds of stories.
3. Anne Gillies (1887–1966).
4. Donald Macintosh Logan (1887–1976).
5. Pipe-Major John MacDonald (1865–1953).
6. Pipe-Major William MacLean of Kilcreggan (1876–1957). He was related to Calum Maclean.
7. Lt. Col. John Peter Grant of Rothiemurchas C.B., M.C., T.D. (1885–1963).
8. George MacDonald (1850–1905).
9. Donald MacDonald (b. 1896).
10. Angus MacDonald (c. 1837–1922).
11. Duncan Campbell (1814–1860).
12. Angus MacKay (1813–1859).
13. Lt.-Col. James Gray Simpson, D.S.O., M.C. (d. 1955).
14. Seton Paul Gordon (1886–1977).
15. Ishbel MacNeil was born to Ewen or Hugh MacNeil, known as 'An Diùc' (The Duke) and Margaret MacDonald, daughter of John and Isabella MacDonald from Blain, Mingarry, Moidart.
16. John 'Johnny' MacKinnon (1911–1989).
17. Lachlan 'Lachie' Stewart (b. c. 1905), from Tote, Skeabost, Isle of Skye.
18. Skye-born Norman Campbell MacLure (d. 1961).
19. John MacDonald (1884–1974).