



# The Little One of the Big Heart

## Calum Iain Maclean (1915-1960)

Andrew Wiseman explores the career of renowned folklorist Calum Iain Maclean who devoted his life to collecting the songs and stories of some of the country's finest traditional storytellers, people whose remarkable tales would otherwise have been lost forever

Tha an saoghal fhathast àlainn  
ged nach eil thu ann...

The world is still beautiful  
though you are not in it...

One of the most arresting statements made by Calum Iain Maclean in his only major publication

The Highlands (1959), which made its appearance only a year before his untimely death, was: 'There are two histories of every land and people, the written history that tells what it is considered politic to tell and the unwritten history which tells everything.' By demarcating the difference between orthodox and thus more authoritative statements from printed materials as opposed to those from oftentimes neglected oral sources, Maclean made well his point through his use of rhetoric. This philosophy pervades his study of the Highlands and remains one of the book's touchstones to this very day. Just over half a century ago, Maclean passed away at the youthful age of only 44 years in his adopted island of South Uist in the Western Isles. As a folklorist Maclean had fallen in love not only with the island itself but also its people.

On an auspicious spring day in 1947, Maclean met two of the most remarkable storytellers he was ever to meet. One of them was called Duncan MacDonald from Snishival in

South Uist and the other was Angus MacMillan from Griminish on the adjacent isle of Benbecula. Both these men were to record for Maclean on an Ediphone recording device hundreds of stories which he would then later transcribe word for word in order that a permanent record of them could be created and preserved. Such oral narratives ranged from long romantic tales to shorter historical legends, from genealogy to place-name lore, from amusing, and at times scurrilous, anecdotes to supernatural tales about ghosts, second sight, and fairy lore. A story recited by Angus MacMillan has the distinction of being the longest ever to have been recorded in Western Europe. Called Alasdair mac a' Chèird (Alasdair son of the Caird), it took nine hours to tell and over a week to transcribe. MacMillan had over forty of these types of stories in his repertoire which took around three hours each to tell whereas MacDonald's longest story, Sgeulachd Mhànuis (The History of Manus), was short in comparison and took only 1.5 hours to tell. As well as taking down both their repertoires, Maclean also recorded their life stories.

When collecting in Scotland during the early 1950s, the American ethnomusicologist, Alan Lomax (1915-2002), was assisted by his contemporary counterpart, who told him in his own inimical style, typical of Maclean, of his friendship with MacMillan:

Calum Maclean was the first story collector at the School of Scottish Studies (Courtesy of the School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh)

Old Angus MacMillan was a storyteller with whom I worked in Uist for three years. I thought I would kill him before I'd finish with him, but he went nearer to killing me before he finished with me. I sometimes recorded stories from him: I'd start at four in the afternoon: by midnight I'd be exhausted but Angus MacMillan would show no signs of exhaustion. The longest story he told took nine hours to record. We started on Monday night and did two hours. We had to break off for the night. We continued the story on Tuesday night and did two further hours. On Wednesday night we did another two hours and on Thursday we did another two hours again and we finished the story on Friday night. It took us an hour to finish the story. It took me fifteen days to write that story: it was the longest story I have ever written and I think it was really the longest story that has ever been recorded in the history of folklore recording. If I had sufficient stamina Angus MacMillan would have continued the story uninterrupted for nine hours. I remember someone telling me that an old woman disappeared one night to the well to get a pail of water. It was seven o'clock on a winter's evening. By midnight she hadn't reappeared so a search party was sent out. They finally discovered her in a house

where Angus MacMillan was telling a story.

Maclean was born in Raasay on 6 September, 1915 to a family of humble crofting background. For an island as small as Raasay to produce such a prodigious talent is quite extraordinary as he was one of a family of four other boys and two girls, all of whom went on to fulfilling careers. Their parents were Malcolm MacLean (1880-1951), tailor, and his wife, Christina Nicolson (1886-1974). Maclean's four brothers were Sorley MacLean (1911-1996), an outstanding Gaelic poet and scholar; John MacLean (1909-1970), classicist and educator; Dr Alasdair Maclean (1918-1999), a doctor and historian; and Dr Norman MacLean (1921-1998), also a doctor. Their two sisters, Ishbel (1924-2010) and Mary Maclean (1926-) were both schoolteachers. Maclean received his early education in Raasay and then in Portree, Skye. Afterwards Maclean attended the University of Edinburgh, where he would eventually take a first in Celtic in 1939 under the tutelage of two famous Gaelic scholars, Professor William J. Watson (1865-1948), and his son (and successor in the Chair of Celtic) Professor James Carmichael Watson (1910-1942). Such was his early promise as a scholar that Maclean was successful in winning the McCaig and Macpherson scholarships, which enabled him to enrol at University College Dublin where he undertook further study in Early Irish under Professor Osborn Bergin (1872-1950) and also in Medieval and Modern Welsh under Professor J. Lloyd-Jones (1885-1965).

At the outbreak of World War II, Maclean's studies came to a temporary halt and so he had to cast around for some other means of livelihood. At first he worked in a factory in Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, after which he went to stay in Indreabhán, just west of Galway City in Connemara. While domiciled there, Maclean's already burgeoning knowledge of the Irish language and tradition was further

enhanced through the inspiration drawn from the writings of Douglas Hyde (1860-1949). As a native Scottish Gaelic speaker, Maclean acquired with relative ease an excellent command of the Irish Gaelic of the Connaught Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking area). This did not go unnoticed by Maclean's contacts in Dublin, where Professor Séamus Ó Duilearga [James Hamilton Delargy] (1899-1980) appointed Maclean as a part-time collector at Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann [the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC)], founded in 1935. During this period, Maclean turned his back on his Presbyterian upbringing and converted to the Roman Catholic faith.

While war raged throughout Europe, from August 1942 to February 1945 Maclean sent a considerable amount of southern Connemara lore to the Commission. By April 1945, Maclean was appointed a full-time collector by the IFC and, within the next few months, began learning more about the craft of folklore under the supervision of his colleague Seán Ó Súilleabháin (1903-1996), who had received archival training at Uppsala some ten years before. In a little over five years, then, Maclean had become a full-time collector in the Commission's employ. In many ways he was in the right place at the right time for not only did Maclean have good contacts but he also knew and got on well with Delargy. It was through the latter's foresight

that his latest recruit, a native speaker of Scottish Gaelic, was sent to his home island to begin folklore collecting there. Although Maclean may have been reluctant to leave his adopted homeland, he fully agreed with the sentiments behind the proposal to collect material in Scotland:

...that the time is ripe to begin the systematic collection of Scottish and Gaelic folklore under the aegis of the Irish Folklore Commission. I have no doubt that the help of so many people in Scotland will be forthcoming. Naturally a Scottish Folklore Institute would be the ideal aim, but, at the present juncture, Scottish Gaels would welcome the support of the Irish Folklore Commission.

Such a proposal only came to fruition through the drive and energy of the politically astute Delargy who eventually won financial support from the Irish Government. Importantly, Delargy, was also instrumental in the establishing the School of Scottish Studies in 1951 at the University of Edinburgh which this year celebrates its diamond jubilee since its foundation.

On 19 December, 1945, Calum Maclean returned to his homeland so that at least one serious attempt would be made at the scientific preservation of this material before the last Gaelic storytellers and folk-singers who had escaped the net of the 1872 Education Act had passed away. Maclean was fully conscious of the task that lay before him and applied himself to this work with gusto. An entry from his diary, which he wrote in Scottish Gaelic, gives an insight into his work as an ethnographer at this time:

I, Calum I. Maclean, began two days ago to collect the oral tradition of the island of Raasay. I was born and reared on this island. When I was young there were many people here who had tales and songs which had never been written down, and which never will be, since the old people are now dead,

Angus MacMillan of Griminish, Benbecula, recording on the Ediphone for Calum Maclean in 1947. The Ediphone dictation machine was based on an invention by Thomas Edison (Courtesy of the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore)





Duncan MacDonald was one of just four storytellers deemed as exceptionally talented by Maclean (Courtesy of the School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh)

wonderful type of place to work. It is small and sea-contained. It has fishermen and crofters, land and sea, birds, fish and animals, old ruins, groves, buailes, ghosts, fairies, oral tradition, local history and everything that come within our scope. It would take a good collector three years to cover it all.

Nevertheless, in only a few months Maclean had gathered in a fairly decent amount of material and it is something of a pity that he did not collect even more than he did in Raasay. But his attention had been turned elsewhere—to the Southern Hebrides and, in particular, to South Uist. It is no coincidence that Maclean came under the influence of an older contemporary, John Lorne Campbell (1906–1996), who not only encouraged Maclean's collecting activities but would have also furnished him with good advice and contacts over in Barra, Benbecula, and South Uist. Before Maclean's initial trip to the Southern Hebrides, he spent some time at Canna House and it can be imagined that a great deal of their convivial evening conversations involved collecting and talk over tradition bearers. It was also an opportunity for the older Campbell to pass on his experience as a fieldworker to the younger Maclean.

After leaving Ireland for good, it was a great joy for Maclean to return periodically to Dublin but such visits were always tempered with the knowledge that he would miss Ireland each time that he left and thus turn his back on his adopted homeland. Such was Maclean's love of all things Irish that Maclean prevaricated over having ever to leave though the decision, somewhat to his chagrin, was out of his control. In February 1946, on his return to Dublin after his collecting trip to Raasay, Maclean wrote to his brother Sorley MacLean that 'Delargy wishes me to return to Scotland to collect in the early summer. I am not so sure, as I feel reluctant to do so on this salary. I am still going to try to wangle six months of Sweden out of him. He has made no mention of it so far.'

and all that they knew is with them in the grave. There are still some people alive who remember some of the songs and traditions of their forefathers, and as it seemed to me that there are more songs than anything else available, I decided to write down those which I could find. I realize that we are sixty years late in beginning this work of collection, but we may be able to save at least some of the traditional lore before it dies out...

After Maclean's successful sortie in collecting traditions in his native Raasay, the Commission's Director took the decision, in 1946, to send Maclean back to his native homeland so that he could continue to collect the fast-dying Gaelic traditions of the Hebrides and the mainland Highlands on a full-time basis. By February 1946, Maclean had amassed a great deal of lore from his own relations, mainly from his maternal uncle, Angus Nicolson (1890–1965) and, his paternal aunt, Peggie MacLean (1869–1950). Maclean's Raasay collection was mainly songs along with associated stories about their provenance and background. It is noteworthy that Maclean collected these rather than long romantic tales that were more or less no longer available. Maclean noted—perhaps due to the zeal of the convert—that the reason for this

was that a strong Calvinistic streak pervaded the island at that time. Indeed, it was practically only in the predominantly Catholic Southern Hebrides that Maclean encountered storytellers whose repertoires were representative of those collected by John Francis Campbell (1821–1885) and his various collectors around a century before. Maclean noted in his diary, on 24 January, 1945, writing in Irish Gaelic, after his first fieldwork foray in his native island:

I have now finished my first collection of Scottish Gaelic lore. There are many songs in this book which I have now transcribed but there are many others songs still to be recorded. All of those which I have written down have associated airs, save one, and all of the tunes are different from one another ... It is a great 'sin' that I was not born thirty years earlier, as the best of the lore has gone into the grave with those that had it... There is a terrible gale blowing here today.

In a letter to his brother Sorley, Maclean reflected upon his experience of collecting in Raasay:

But I enjoy my work very much. The folklore business became more interesting according to how you master the proper system of approach. Raasay is a

Questions of salary or foreign travel aside, Maclean had a deep affinity with Ireland and its people; and had occasion to write generously about them on his leaving Ireland. Maclean later wrote to Sorley, rather fatefully as it turned out: 'that I am not sure if I want to return to Scotland for good. I don't think I do. I am not at all keen on returning to Glasgow or Edinburgh, but would not mind spending ten to fifteen years collecting folklore in the Gaidhealtachd and Western Isles.'

Reports of Maclean's progress were regularly related back to the Commission. In his memoir of Calum Maclean, Seán Ó Súilleabháin wrote that: 'He was in constant touch by letter and telephone with the Dublin office, to which he returned occasionally to report progress and receive fresh instructions.' In October 1946, Delargy wrote a long letter to Maclean which not only gives an insight into the working relationship between the older and more experienced director with his younger and enthusiastic collector but also reveals what he expected of Maclean. What Delargy had to say was full of sound advice and his encouraging words would have left no doubt in Maclean's mind of his collecting activities and what the fruit of his efforts might bear for future generations:

You are doing more important cultural work than anyone else in Scotland, for what you are doing is immortal; and when all the polemics of the day & all the headlines in the daily papers are forgotten, your work will remain.

Maclean was obviously seeking clarification for his collecting activities and had to work to a remit as directed by his employer. He was assiduous in his work and laboured as best he could on a modest salary, sometimes in trying circumstances as well as in relative isolation from Dublin. As was the case with all the other collectors employed by the Commission, Maclean habitually kept professional working diaries which detail his daily routines

and offer only so much by way of ethnographical insights. Recalling his return trip to Benbecula in the summer of 1947, Maclean wrote:

I went back to Benbecula within three weeks. It is generally the policy of our collectors to find the two best tradition-bearers in a district and collect their material completely before turning to other sources. I had found one source in Benbecula and I did not take long to find the other. In the same township, Griminish, and about a quarter of a mile from Angus MacMillan's house, I found Angus Maclellan. They were practically next-door neighbours.

Throughout his working life Maclean followed a routine of transcribing through the day and then visiting informants during the evening for recording. Collecting activity was more frequent – according to custom – during the winter nights. Invariably, Maclean in his diary entries would also make comments about the weather; and some of his more detailed entries are reserved for funerals, weddings and for gatherings of storytellers for a ceilidh.

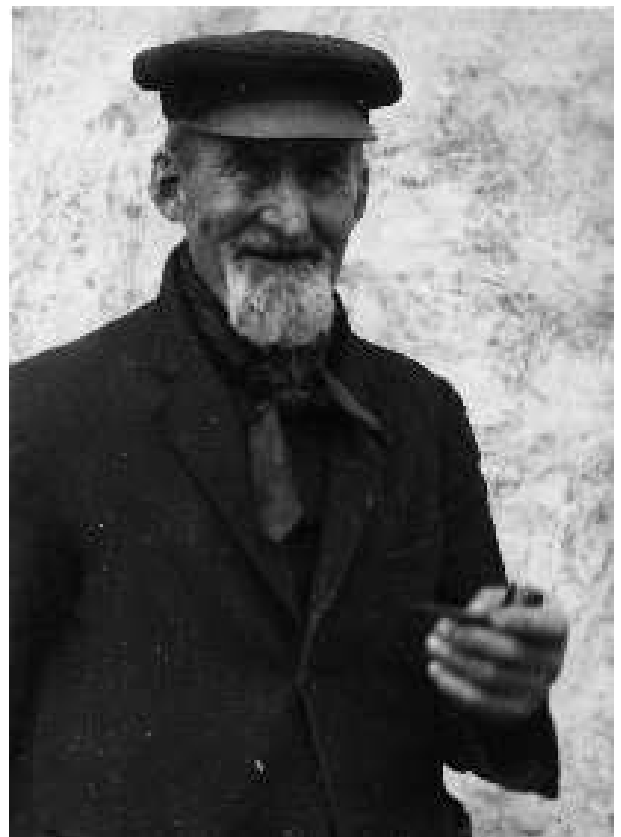
On New Year's Day 1951, Maclean formally began to work for the newly-founded School of Scottish Studies based at the University of Edinburgh. A few years later, the School received the generous gift from the IFC of microfilm copy of all the Scottish material collected for them by Maclean. Since the foundation of this long overdue institutional berth, the systematic collection of Scottish Gaelic and Scots folklore has been ongoing. Maclean, the School's first appointed collector, as well as his colleagues, spent many hours undertaking fieldwork all over Scotland as well as forth of her borders. The very first recordings that Maclean made for the School included no less than 524 Gaelic tales (mainly short items that were part of the local seanchas or lore) from a roadman encountered 'in the dead of winter, and Lochaber lay white and deep in snow.' The last

that Maclean made were literally on his deathbed.

While Maclean was an employee at the School he kept up his diaries mainly in Gaelic but also, after 1954, he would write these periodically in English. Interestingly, Maclean's diaries from 1951 contain more insights and details than many of his diaries that he kept for the IFC; and they occasionally read more like a travelogue rather than the professional working diary of a fieldworker. By the time that Maclean was in the employ of the School he had been given a freer geographical rein to collect in parts of Scotland other than in the Highlands, and in Scots too. The School had a remit to collect a wider range of material with less emphasis upon international or romantic folktales.

Maclean was one of the first persons – as well as being professionally trained – to undertake the systematic collection of the old Gaelic songs, stories, customs and traditions in the Highlands and Islands with modern recording apparatus. Therein lies the

James MacKinnon of Northbay in Barra, another of the storytellers Maclean held in the highest esteem (Courtesy of the School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh)







importance of his work. A good deal had been done previously in the way of collecting old stories in the Highlands by John Francis Campbell of Islay and his collectors, but lacking any means of making mechanical recordings, their task of writing down such tales from dictation was a very laborious one; and John Francis Campbell himself admitted that his collection in no way exhausted the stories current in the Highlands when he concluded his four-volume *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860-1862) with the admission that 'whole districts are yet untried, and whole classes of stories, such as popular history and robber stories, have yet been untouched.'

Soon after he was appointed at the School, Maclean at the behest of Delargy, spent a nine-month research sabbatical (from late summer 1951 to May 1952) at Uppsala University in Sweden which was then at the forefront of folklore, dialectology, methodology, cataloguing and archival techniques. Having studied there under Professors Dag Strömbäck (1900-1978) and Åke Campbell (1891-1957), Maclean later set up an index system for Scottish folklore at the School of Scottish Studies based on that of Uppsala. Maclean's fieldwork experience, in-depth knowledge of Gaelic oral tradition as well as a broad academic knowledge provided him with a unique combination of skills that were advantageous to collecting. Moreover, Maclean possessed a remarkable facility

to put people at ease and by his friendly and unassuming manner managed to gain their confidence. He stressed this observation in one of his articles that 'for any folklore collector the crucial time is when contact is first made with the tradition bearer' and that 'every folklore collector must be prepared to efface himself and approach even the most humble tradition bearer with the deference due to the high and exalted.' True to his own words, Calum Maclean lived out this principle to the full, and so, with his easy-going personality coupled with a sometimes-mischievous but infectious sense of humour, managed to open many a door that would have otherwise been closed. Everywhere Maclean went he found the best contacts and tradition bearers and by doing so managed to gather in a vast amount of oral material straight from people's memories.

Out of the hundreds of people recorded by Maclean, there were four storytellers that struck him as exceptionally talented: James MacKinnon (1866-1957) from Northbay in Barra, styled Seumas Iain Ghunnairigh, Duncan MacDonald (1882-1954), from Snishival in South Uist, styled Donnchadh mac Dhòmhnaill 'ic Dhonnchaidh, Angus (Barrach) MacMillan (1874-1954) from Grinish in Benbecula, and John MacDonald, or Iain MacDhòmhnaill, styled the Bard (1876-1964) from Highbridge in Brae Lochaber in the Western Highlands. Coincidentally, MacMillan and MacDonald both died within three weeks of one another. Writing their respective obituary notices, Maclean stated that: 'Eminent scholars in several European countries are proud to have numbered Angus MacMillan among their friends. To folklorists Angus was something more than a mere source of information. He was a phenomenon...' and MacDonald's '...story-telling was a perfected art, an art that delighted not only learned listeners... but more so his humbler fellow islesmen at the firesides in South Uist.' Recalling his time recording John MacDonald,

Calum Iain Maclean's headstone at Hallin cemetery in South Uist

Maclean wrote: 'I was in Lochaber for five months and met him once weekly... Most of his stories were short. Nevertheless, he recorded over five hundred different stories... Only now are we beginning to discover our own country.' A host of other names could be easily added to their number but it was in Benbecula, where Maclean had spent so many years in the field collecting, that he later recollected a ceilidh that left a lasting impression:

No mention of the tradition-bearers [...] would be complete, if we did not include the grand old gentleman, the blind piper Lachlan Bàn MacCormick. As well as several traditional pipe-tunes, he recorded two tales, and has more to tell. My most moving experience as a folklore collector was to have recorded from him. He is 92 years of age and his eyes have been completely sightless for the past eight years.

In 1956 Maclean was struck down by cancer necessitating the amputation of his left arm the following year. Even with the onset of cancer that was to eventually end his life, he continued to work and remain cheerful under extremely adverse circumstances, reflecting a strength of character that belied his small stature. Maclean's only major publication was *The Highlands*, which received many favourable critical reviews on publication. Apart from a modest but important number of academic papers, book reviews and popular publications, due to the amount of time spent in field recording, and the concomitant tasks of transcription and indexing, Maclean's foremost legacy is his vast collection of mainly Gaelic oral tradition carried out in the field over a fourteen-year period (1946-1960). The vast majority of the collection was made in the Southern and Inner Hebrides and on the mainland Highlands. Maclean was always conscious of being a successor to those great collectors who had gone before him: John Francis Campbell, Hector MacLean (1818-1892), John Dewar (1802-1872), Alexander

Carmichael (1832-1912), Fr. Allan McDonald, styled Maighstir Ailein (1859-1905), as well as others. In some ways he surpassed them all.

According to those who knew Calum Maclean personally, he was a friendly, easy-going character with no pretensions of pride or scholarly haughtiness. Maclean was humble, engaging, and sociable with a personality full of fun, charm and diversion that could disarm even the most shy and reticent. At least one anecdote can be noted here to illustrate this:

...the late Donald Archie MacDonald and Calum were listening to a song sung by Mrs Archie MacDonald of South Uist when the tape jammed while being fast-forwarded and a section of the tape disintegrated. In a flash, both men scrambled to the floor and picked up the pieces in the hope that they might still be usable. Suddenly Calum swooped on a miniscule piece of tape and looked up at Donald Archie with just the right balance of horror together with a sparkle in his eye and exclaimed: 'A Thighearna, 's dòcha gur h-e grace-note a tha seo!' (Oh Lord, this might be a grace-note!).

In 1960, the year of his death, Maclean was to have received the honorary degree of LL.D., in recognition of his work for the preservation of Gaelic oral tradition, from St Francis Xavier University at Antigonish in Nova Scotia. It was a fitting honour for a scholar—though this the one word that he pleaded to his friends and colleagues not to have marked on his gravestone but where 'Celtic Scholar and Folklorist' appears—who had spent so many long hours collecting in the field. Maclean was buried in Hallin Cemetery, South Uist, an island that not only claimed him but one that he claimed to be his own. Sorley MacLean wrote a moving lament for his younger brother typifying for many the great loss felt at his untimely death and which was considered by Hugh MacDiarmid

to be 'one of the noblest elegies I have ever been privileged to read.'

There is many a poor man in  
Scotland  
Whose spirit and name you  
raised;  
You lifted the humble  
Whom our age put aside.  
They gave you more  
Than they would give the others  
Since you gave them the zeal  
That was a fire beneath your  
kindness  
They sensed the vehemence  
That was gentle in your ways,  
They understood the heavy  
depths of your humanity  
When your fun was at its lightest.

Since its foundation in 1951, the School of Scottish Studies has collected and catalogued many examples of the storyteller's art in its archive. In that year, Calum Iain Maclean was transferred from the Commission in order to become the first collector at this newly-founded institution. Along with many others, Maclean had been instrumental in the development of the School and assisted in formulating its remit, especially with regard to fieldwork and research. His contribution in recording the fast-dying oral traditions of Scotland cannot be underestimated. There are now more than 10,000 hours worth of material of oral narratives, song, customs, beliefs, place-names, information on material culture and ways of life all recorded in Gaelic and Scots. It is a remarkable collection for a variety of reasons and Maclean many of these items. Looking back on his life one may ask what was his greatest contribution: the recordings he made of Highlanders and Islanders telling stories and singing; the scholarly articles that he wrote; or, indeed, his book about the Highlands showing the world what it was like to be a Gael and giving an insider's view of the world of the Gael in the middle of the 20th century. Opinions may diverge over this but one thing that can be certain is those precious things he preserved were in danger of disappearing if it had

not been for Maclean's unstinting and selfless work. He gathered together a treasure-trove for future generations, the lasting legacy of Calum Iain Maclean's life, a man that his brother Sorley so aptly described as Fear Beag a' Chridhe Mhòir (The Little One of the Big Heart).

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#### Further Reading

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Nicolaisen, W. F. H., Calum Maclean (1915–1960), *Fabula: Journal of Folklore Studies*, vol. 5 (1962), pp. 162–64.

*Tocher*, vol. 39 (1985) [a volume dedicated to Calum Maclean's fieldwork].

Wiseman, Andrew, 'Fear Beag a' Chridhe Mhòir: The Life and Legacy of Calum Iain Maclean (1915–1960)', in Kenneth E. Nilsen (ed.), *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 5: Scottish Gaelic Research Conference* (Sydney, N.S.: Cape Breton University Press, 2010), pp. 284–302.

Many of Calum Maclean's recordings and transcripts from his fieldwork notebooks are to be found on the following online resources:

Tobar an Dualchais: [www.tobarandualchais.co.uk](http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk)  
Calum Maclean Project:  
[www.celtscot.ed.ac.uk/calum-maclean](http://www.celtscot.ed.ac.uk/calum-maclean)