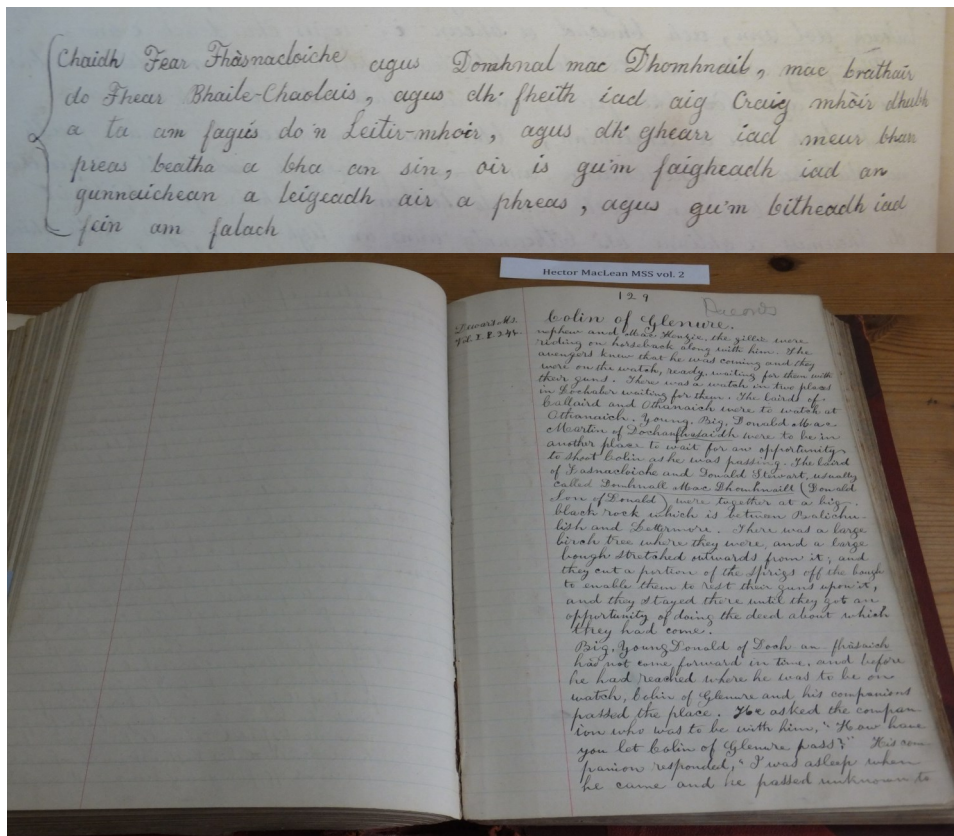


# The Dewar Manuscripts

Have you heard of the Dewar Manuscripts? These are the fruit of what has been called 'the first oral history project every conducted in Scotland.' Now it's the focus of a new project which will be of special interest to members of the Royal Celtic Society. During the 1860s, John Dewar (1802-1872), a woodsman and sawyer, was paid by the eighth Duke of Argyll to collect historical tales in Gaelic under the supervision of the celebrated folklorist, John Francis Campbell of Islay. He carried out his mission while roving through Argyllshire, Arran, Dunbartonshire, West Perthshire and Lochaber.

There are 10 volumes. Seven of these are in the Argyll Papers (the archives of the 13th Duke of Argyll at Invararay Castle, now fully open to the public), and the other three are in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. Also at Inveraray are 20 slim manuscript volumes of English translation, made for the eighth Duke by an Islay schoolmaster called Hector MacLean in 1879-81. These cover the first five volumes of Dewar. John Mackechnie's book, *The Dewar Manuscripts, Volume One* (Glasgow 1963), consists of the first three of MacLean's 20 volumes of translation, equivalent to only two thirds of Dewar's first manuscript volume. So there's a long way to go yet. Royal Celtic Society member Ronnie Black, who is behind the project, says: "Until just the other day, I knew very little about John Dewar himself. It now turns out he was born in 1802 in the back glen behind the shore of Loch Long, in the parish of Rhu, at a place called Cregganbreck. His mother was a MacFarlane and his manuscripts are full of stories of the MacFarlanes and the MacGregors, including the most detailed account on historical record of the Battle of Glen Fruin, which took place in his native parish.

"Over and again, he notes stories as having been heard from someone who had died in the 1820s, '30s, '40s and '50s. In other words, he was hearing and remembering stories all his life, certainly not just from 1859 when he was first paid to go around collecting them and writing them down. This gives his collection of historical tales the virtue of being easily the oldest ever made in Scotland, as well as the biggest. I laughed with delight at his story of Clann Bhuclaich and the MacGregors as being 'got from old people from Braidalbainn in 1812', not only be-



cause that was the year he became a highly impressionable 10 year old with a fantastic memory, but because that was the year the Brothers Grimm published their *Kinder und Hausmarchen*—globally acknowledged as the earliest landmark in the recording of popular tradition by modern methods. So Dewar was right there at the beginning, and his collection is tremendously authentic. One of his best informants, a man in Appin, gave him the whole story of the Appin murder, so we know who did it."

The Dewar MSS are full of copies or variants of the same story, and different stories about the same people. Some are scrappy field notes, whilst others are written up very formally. They are scattered haphazardly around the 10 volumes, so Ronnie's task at the moment is to make sense of it all and work out a logical programme of publication. It's generally agreed the stories should be published in Gaelic with a new English translation. The work is being undertaken by a group called the Friends of the Argyll Papers. Ronnie has provisionally divided the material into nine geographical regions with the idea that these will become nine books of historical tales, each separately introduced and indexed. In alphabetical order, these are: Appin and Lorn; Arran; Cowal; Glencoe, Lochaber and the North;

Islay and Jura; Kintyre; Mid Argyll, Colonsay and Knapdale (including Inveraray and the area between Loch Awe and Loch Fyne); Mull, Coll, Tiree and Morvern; and Perthshire and Loch Lomond.

Ronnie is liaising with experts in each region to see how they can help, especially with the 300-odd informants named by Dewar, and more generally with on-the-ground knowledge, for example on the location of places that are no longer inhabited. In addition, volunteers are required to transcribe the texts. These can be anywhere in the world, as long as they have a computer. (The manuscripts have been digitized and an image will be sent to them.) The contact for the MacLean MSS, which are all in English, is Alison Diamond, the Argyll Papers archivist (archives@inveraray-castle.com). The contact for the Dewar MSS, which are mainly in Gaelic but partly in English, is Ronnie Black (ronald.black@abair.plus.com).

Ronnie concludes: "At my age, I probably won't live to see the entire project completed, but if we can get help from enthusiastic people, well, who knows. But of one thing I'm sure—nobody in Arrochar has ever heard of John Dewar, but there should be a statue of him there. He is a totally unsung hero."

