

John Dewar: collector of the people's history

By Ronnie Black

John Dewar was born in 1802 in Cragganbreck, a house at Craggan, close to the head of Glen Douglas, near Arrochar in Dunbartonshire. For some reason he never went to school. He was the third son in a family of 10 children, of whom at least five survived to adulthood. His father Alexander Dewar became a farm manager, probably serving the wealthy Oswalds of Gortan, from whom Oswald Street in Glasgow is named.

Dewar was steeped in Gaelic oral tradition from an early age. Over and over again he tells us that he first heard a story from such and such a person in 1809, 1810, 1811 or 1812. But he lived in an era of patronage, and would never have thought of writing down his stories had he not been asked to do so by a savant of the landlord class who was taking an interest in a certain brand-new science. The *science* was one that had been invented in Germany by the brothers Grimm and had now been dubbed in English 'folklore'. The *savant* was John Francis Campbell, who should have been laird of Islay had the famine years of the 1840s not driven his father into bankruptcy. Campbell called Dewar 'a workman who has taught himself to write', and indeed Dewar himself tells us: "I did not get the benefit of a school education in my young days, and read near as much of broad-Scotch as I did of English." It is clear from his spelling that he also read the Gaelic Bible.

Dewar spent most of his life working as a woodsman, sawyer and shopkeeper. In 1859 he was learning a new trade, photography, when the gamekeeper at Rosneath tipped him off that some gentlemen were looking for stories. So he started writing down traditional tales in Gaelic for James Robertson, a Perthshire man who was the duke of Argyll's chamberlain at Inveraray, Robertson sending them on to Campbell for the work of folklore which he was about to publish, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*. Robertson describes him to Campbell at the age of 57: "Dewar is really a clever old man, but absent-minded I believe. You ask 'what is he like'. He has been a handsome powerful man in his day, but is now much bent, owing to severe rheumatism more than old age, and he suffers from a sore eye, which he got hurt at the Rosneath sawmill. He has a large forehead and good expression, and speaks with great vivacity when you commence *Gaelic talk*, more particularly if about *Sgeulachds*."

John Dewar's birthplace, or near it – this is all that is left of the house at Craggan in Glen Callanach, three miles south of Arrochar. The West Highland Line now passes through the glen. The mountain in the distance is *Cruach an t-Sithein* ('the Stack of the Otherworld')

Sgeulachds, or in Gaelic *sgeulachdan*, are stories.

Dewar first met Campbell at Inveraray in August 1860. Campbell developed an enormous respect for him, being the only man he had ever met who was both a teller of tales and a writer of them.

The tales collected by the Grimms and Campbell bore little or no relation to history. They were timeless, often mythological, often fabulous, with motifs about wicked stepmothers and the like. They crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries, and were sometimes very ancient. They are called by scholars 'international popular tales' – 'popular' in the sense that their custodians were the people.

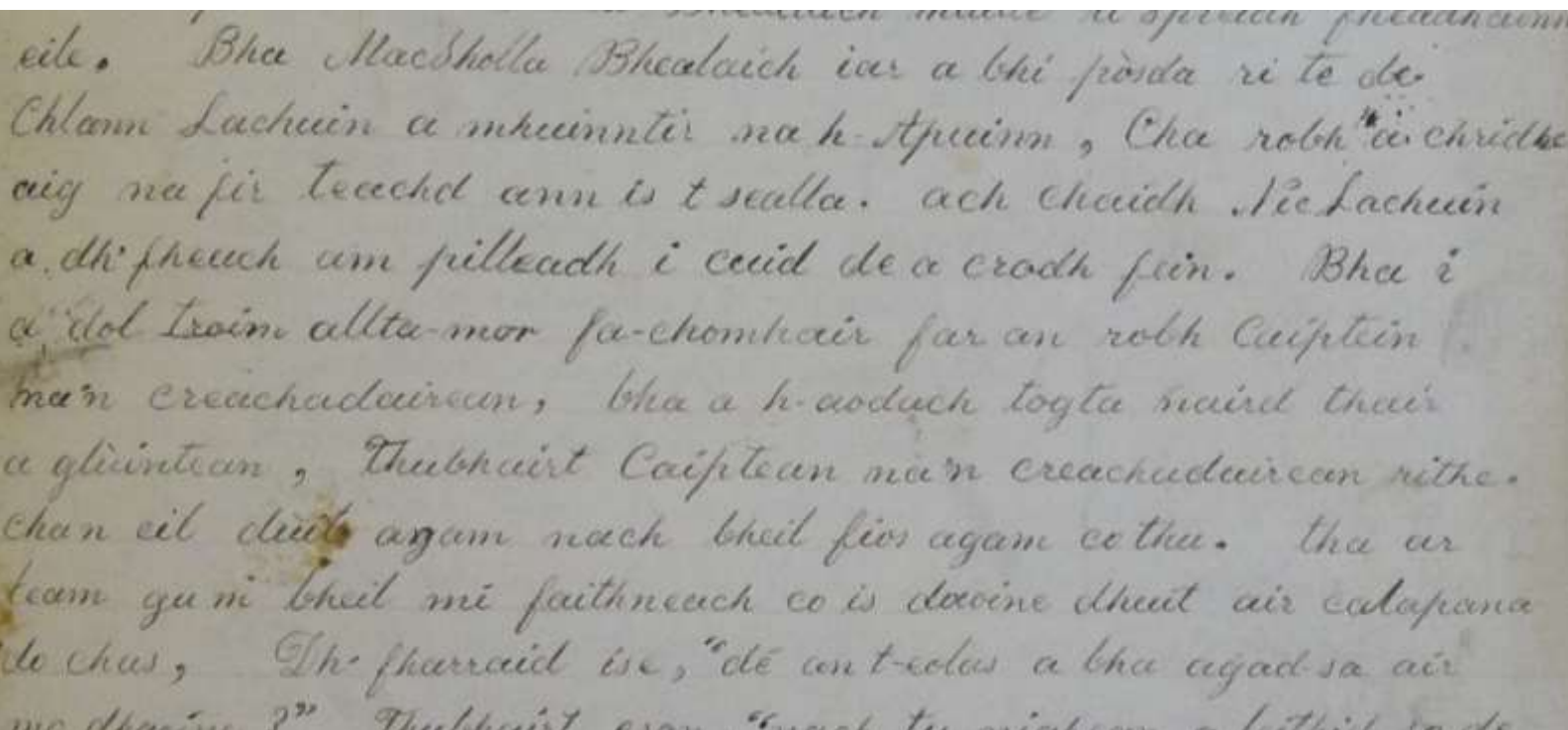
The idea that ordinary people might possess a culture of any value was revolutionary and connected to democratic ideas. But there are no fairies, ghosts, giants, monsters or witches in the Dewar MSS. What Dewar wanted to do was

revolutionary in a way that made even the relatively enlightened Campbell feel uncomfortable, because it undermined his Eton-educated sense of Britishness. In effect, what Dewar was proposing was to rescue for the world the true history of a people doubly crushed: the Scots as a whole, who had lost their independence in 1707, and the Highlanders, who had thrown the dice at Culloden and lost, and had been suffering the consequences ever since in the form of deracination, clearance, emigration – ethnic cleansing, as it is called nowadays.

years later Campbell recalled: “After publishing the fourth volume of the *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* in 1862, I suggested to the Duke of Argyll that he might gather interesting Traditional History by using the machinery which I have set going. Accordingly John Dewar was paid wages to wander about and write anything which he could gather. He was chosen because he was the most matter-of-fact man among my collectors.”

The description ‘matter-of-fact man’ is important. We can discuss what it may mean. I think it means that Dewar was no radical – that he had no agenda beyond a love for stories and truth.

So began the happiest ten years of Dewar’s life, and the result was ten huge manuscripts, of which seven are at Inveraray Castle and three are in the National Library. He wandered around all parts of Argyllshire, Arran, West Perthshire and Lochaber as well as his native Dunbartonshire, listening to stories and writing them down. And the statistics are



“She was going through a big stream with her dress raised up above her knees . . .”: Dewar tells the story of the MacLachlan heroine in Appin

History is dangerous, which is the declared reason why the BBC Scotland channel does not do history programmes. That is the importance of Dewar’s work today. But there is not the slightest evidence that he himself saw it like that.

The idea of collecting history tales first emerged in a letter from Dewar to Robertson in February 1860: “I would wish to know if tradition about the ceathairnich or freebooters which was in Scotland at the time of the feudal systime would be accepted of among the sgeulachds, as I thing [sic] a few of them might be got which never yet has been printed.” Robertson took this up eagerly, sending Dewar’s letter on to Campbell with the question: “What would you wish as to the Ceathairnich stories? Might he not be allowed to write one or two?” And many

astonishing. The total number of his informants, including those who had provided him with tales since his childhood, is 328 (of whom eight percent were women). This figure does not include informants mentioned only in connection with the *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*. The total number of texts in the Dewar MSS is 608. The late Donald Archie MacDonald calculated that volume 1 contained 160,830 words of prose and 523 lines of verse, that volume 2 contained 106,513 words of prose and 1,335 lines of verse, and that volume three contained 120,534 words of prose and 1,100 lines of verse. And so on. Dr Andrew Wiseman has calculated that the seven Inveraray manuscripts alone contain more

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than one and a quarter million words. And I have worked out that there are 4,336 pages of writing in the ten manuscripts, of which over 3,000 have been transcribed and translated under the present Dewar Project, which began in 2017.

The stories amount to the people's history of the West Highlands from 1306 to 1752, told in their own language. I give these dates because there is nothing of great importance older than 1308 or newer than 1752. In 1308 Robert Bruce began roving the Highlands after the battle of Methven, and his wanderings are described in detail. In 1752 Colin Campbell of Glenure was murdered in Appin. Again, Dewar describes the event in detail, naming the assassins.

The whole period in between is covered in depth, but dates are seldom given – that is one of the challenges. For certain battles and massacres, such as Tràigh Ghruinneart in Islay (1598), Glen Fruin in Dunbartonshire (1603), and Dunaverty in Kintyre (1646), there are descriptions which can never be excelled. We learn much about the origins and history of the clans, and about how people lived. In particular, there is women's history. Over and over in these stories, when a community is threatened, the men hang back, and the women come forward to deal with the situation.

Some time ago I made a list of the heroic women in Dewar's stories. I thought I had met them all, but it is a measure of the vastness of the collection that a new one came to my attention just last week, in a story hitherto untranscribed. It is about the MacColls in Appin, and how the Covenanting army came and took away their cattle. This is my translation of the key passage: "MacColl of Belloch was married to a woman of the Appin MacLachlans. The men didn't dare show themselves, but the MacLachlan woman went to see if she could retrieve some of her own cattle. She was going through a big stream opposite to where the raiders' captain was, with her dress raised up above her knees, whereupon the captain of the raiders said to her, 'I have a feeling I know who you are. I think I know who your people are by the calves of your legs.'"

It turns out that he is her brother, and he uses his authority to restore the MacColls' cattle.

Dewar really had three patrons, the eighth Duke of Argyll, his son Lord Lorne, and of course John Francis Campbell. The duke provided the finance, and his most memorable contribution was to declare: "Of course it would be of no use to print the Gaelic. What is printed and published must be the translation." After Dewar's death a set of partial translations was indeed made, by an Islay schoolmaster called Hector MacLean who was paid to do the job. They are very old-fashioned now. Lord Lorne's chief claims to fame are that he married a daughter of Queen Victoria and spent some years as Governor-General of Canada; he was genuinely interested in the project (which is why his father paid for it), though his big idea at first was to turn MacLean's translations into English verse. He made a start on this, and published the results in Canada, with due acknowledgment to Dewar. Subsequently he changed tack, and devoted an entire book (*Adventures in Legend*, 1898) to synopses of the translations, with no acknowledgment whatever to Dewar. By then he had allowed his younger brother Archibald to publish MacLean's translations of three of the stories. John Francis Campbell's contribution consisted of providing Dewar with gentle guidance and commenting on the results; his advice and comments are revealing, and are bound into the Dewar MSS themselves.

It will be noticed that all of the above involved filtering. Dewar had captured the real thing, so it must be watered down. Moral sensitivities, class sensitivities, British sensitivities, Campbell sensitivities . . . these must be borne in mind. Above all, 'the people's history of the West Highlands, in their own language' was not a desirable product. Only in the time of the present duke have the seven Dewar MSS at Inveraray been made available to public scrutiny. It is hoped that over the next couple of decades this magnificent collection will be published in two languages, and in full.



The Dewar family gravestone in Arrochar churchyard, facing Loch Long and Ben Arthur, known to generations of climbers as the 'Cobbler'

John Dewar, who never married, died of heart disease at his brother Donald's house in Dumbarton on 13 December 1872, and was buried in the family grave at Arrochar, on a beautiful site facing Loch Long and the 'Cobbler'. The task of writing his biography falls essentially into three periods: his early life as a woodsman, when he made fence-posts for a living, and ran a shop at Rosneath for a while with one of his sisters; his life from 1859 to 1862, which is well documented, thanks to his participation in Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* project; and the itinerary of his travels as a 'collector of traditions' from 1862 to 1872, which it may be possible to reconstruct in due course from the dates and places scattered around the Dewar MSS themselves.

John Dewar is one of the heroes of Gaelic Scotland. He deserves a statue. But for all that he dabbled in photography as early as the 1850s, there is no known photograph of him. This lack of iconography is typical of Highland heroes.