

Caves in the Peoples' History of the West Highlands

While hill-walking and bothying across the Highlands, I've always wanted to know more about the history of the places I'm in – places that have not always been “wild and lonely”, but have seen plenty of incident down through the centuries. Now some of their stories are starting to come to light through the Dewar Project, and I've been very fortunate to have been able to get involved in this initiative.

John Dewar (1802-1872) was a Gaelic-speaking native of Arrochar in Dunbartonshire. Paid by the Duke of Argyll, he spent the last ten years of his life wandering around the West Highlands taking down historical tales in Gaelic from the mouths of the people. This resulted in 4,338 pages of manuscript in 10 volumes, a chaotic but priceless collection of traditional stories that may be described as “the Peoples' History of the West Highlands”. It's the job of the Dewar Project to make sense of it all, transcribing and translating the stories and publishing them in Gaelic and English. The stories are very much rooted in specific places, and the aim is to publish them in ten books, each covering a geographical area. It's hoped the first of these, *John Dewar's Islay, Jura and Colonsay*, will appear early in 2024.

As we work through Dewar's stories it has gradually become apparent that he refers to (and names) a huge number of caves all over the West Highlands, places where people took refuge, everybody from Robert Bruce in 1306 to an unsung Kerr woman in Arran in perhaps the 1600s, to Charles Stewart of Ardsheal in 1746. There are at least fifty caves, and maybe as many as a hundred.

Now we don't know where most of these caves are! Dewar sometimes gives broad descriptions. For example, "They found a suitable cave in an enclosure in Glen Loyne, about a mile up from the head of Loch Long. The cave was in MacArthur's land, but only a short distance from the boundary of MacFarlane's, and about three miles from MacFarlane's house." Another cave, in Craig Bhàn in Glen Shira, “has a recess in it, but no one would know from the top or the bottom of the rock that there's any such place in it.” Craig Bhàn is on the 1:50,000 map, but the cave might not be that easy to find – it sheltered the fugitive earl of Argyll for 5 months from the occupying force of Atholmen! This cave had “a bed, a table and a place to sit”, and “no matter how stormy the weather might be, the rain doesn't get in”, so it might be of interest to MBA members for more reasons than one Frequently, however, Dewar is pretty vague: for example, "He hid in a cave that's amongst the trees in Glen Tarken"; “MacArthur was hiding in a cave in Glen Fyne”. Finding the possible location of such caves will be a challenge, requiring a combination of local knowledge, thorough searching of the ground, navigational skills, and luck!

What we'd really like to do is locate as many caves as possible, and include a grid reference, description and photos where there is anything to be seen at all. (Where Dewar has described a particular feature of the cave, such as carvings or an approach path, it will be important to get photos of what survives.) This is where I wonder if any MBA members might be interested in helping with this challenge. The stories, and the caves, are mainly set in Argyll, Highland Perthshire and Loch Lomond, Lochaber and Morvern, and Arran. Some of the caves may no longer be accessible or even exist as

caves due to rockfalls and earth tremors (such as Uamh nam Fear, near Sanaigmore in Islay). Some may be in pretty dangerous exposed places, such as the Aoineadh Mòr above the Sound of Mull in Morvern, which a local informant describes as “a notably steep place consisting of rotten fragmented basalt ... deer and sheep regularly killed there”. In these cases we’d have to settle for a photo from a distance – we don’t want anyone getting themselves injured while in search of a lost cave!

The task of compiling a list of the caves is still at an early stage, but hopefully this article provides enough of a flavour to be going on with. (A later stage might be to match up MBA bothies with local caves.) If anyone wants to help with locating caves, please let me know. And there’s also an extremely informative website: www.dewarproject.com

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