

Old Country - New Worlds

“Tir nam Beann, 's nan Gleann, 's nan Gaisgeach.”
The land of Hills, and Glens, and Heroes

Popular tales of the west Highlands : orally collected

John Francis Campbell

1890

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ADVERTISEMENT.

“ Good wine,” as the old saying has it, “ needs no bush”; neither do the *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, collected and edited by Mr. J. F. Campbell, need any eulogy to commend them either to those from whose race they come or to the student or reader of Folk-lore. The work is well known, and, though thirty years have now well-nigh passed away since the first two volumes were published, the popularity of the collection has gone on increasing. The volumes just alluded to have long been out of print, and are rarely to be met with. In re-issuing the work, the Publisher has deferred to the strongly-expressed opinion of Mr. Campbell that the stories ought to be given as they were gathered, in the rough. No attempt, therefore, has been made to alter the style or arrangement, or to interfere with the text in any way, so that, with the exception of giving effect to the long lists of errata, the present reprint is exactly the same as the original edition.

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Do

Iain Mac Sheorais

Mac Callen Mor

MARQUESS OF LORNE.

My Dear Lorne,

I dedicate this collection of West Country Stories to you as the son of my Chief, in the hope that it may add to the interest which you already feel in a people, of whom a large number look with respect on “ Mac Callen Mor” as the head of their tribe. I know that the poorest Highlanders still feel an honest pride whenever their chiefs, or men of their name, earn distinction ; and many of “ Clan Dhiarmaid” take a warm interest in you.

Amidst curious rubbish you will find sound sense if you look for it. You will find the creed of the people, as shewn in their stories, to be, that wisdom and courage, though weak, may overcome strength, and ignorance, and pride : that the most despised is often the most worthy ; that small beginnings lead to great results.

You will find perseverance, frugality, and filial piety rewarded ; pride, greed, and laziness punished. You will find much which tells of barbarous times ; I hope you will meet nothing that can hurt, or should offend.

If you follow any study, even that of a popular tale, far enough, it will lead you to a closed door, beyond which you cannot pass till you have searched and found the key, and every study will lead the wisest to a fast locked door at last ; but knowledge lies beyond these doors, and one key may open the way to many a store which can be reached, and may be turned to evil or to good.

That you may go on acquiring knowledge, selecting the good, and rejecting the evil ; that you, like Conal in the story, may gather gold, and escape unharmed from the giant's land, is the earnest wish of your affectionate kinsman,

J. F. CAMPBELL.

September, 1860.

INTRODUCTION.

The Fairy-Egg, and what came out of it.

On the stormy coasts of the Hebrides, amongst sea-weed and shells, fishermen and kelp-burners often find certain hard, light, floating objects, somewhat like flat chesnuts, of various colours—grey, black, and brown, which they call sea-nuts, strand-nuts, and fairy-eggs. Where they are most common, they are used as snuff-boxes, but they are also worn and preserved as amulets, with a firm or sceptical belief in their mysterious virtues. Old Martin, who wrote of the Western Isles in 1703, calls them “ Molluka beans,” and tells how they were then found, and worn, and used as medicine ; how they preserved men from the evil eye, and cured sick cattle by a process as incomprehensible as mesmerism. Practical Highlandmen of the present day call the nuts trash, and brand those who wear them, like their ancestors a hundred and fifty years ago, as ignorant and superstitious ; but learned botanists, too wise to overlook trifles, set themselves to study even fairy-eggs ; and believing them to be West Indian seeds, [1] stranded in Europe, they planted them, and some (from the Azores) grew. Philosophers, having discovered what they were, use them to demonstrate the existence of the Gulf Stream, and it is even said that they formed a part of one link in that chain of reasoning which led Columbus to the New World.

So within this century, men have gathered nursery tales. They set themselves earnestly to learn all that they could concerning them ; they found similar tales common to many languages ; they traced them back for centuries ; they planted them in books, and at last the Brothers Grimm, their predecessors and their followers, have raised up a pastime for children to be “ a study fit for the energies of grown men and to all the dignity of a science.”

So at least says the learned author of the translation of “ Norse Tales,” and there are many who agree with him.

Men have now collected stories from most parts of the world. They have taken them from the dictation of American Indians, South Sea Islanders, Lapps and Samoydes, Germans and Russians. Missionaries have published the fables of African savages ; learned men have translated Arabic, Sanscrit, and Chinese manuscripts ; even Egyptian papyri have been dug up, and forced to yield their meaning, and all alike have furnished tales, very similar to stories now told by word of mouth. But as some of these are common to races whose languages have been traced to a common origin, it is now held that nursery stories and popular tales have been handed down together with the languages in which they are told ; and they are used in striving to trace out the origin of races, as philologists use words to trace language, as geologists class rocks by the shells and bones which they contain, and as natural philosophers used fairy-eggs in tracing the Gulf Stream.

The following collection is intended to be a contribution to this new science of “Story-ology.” It is a museum of curious rubbish about to perish, given as it was gathered in the rough, for it seemed to me as barbarous to “polish” a genuine popular tale, as it would be to adorn the bones of a Megatherium with tinsel, or gild a rare old copper coin. On this, however, opinions vary, but I hold my own, that stories orally collected can only be valuable if given unaltered ; besides, where is the model story to be found ?

Practical men may despise the tales, earnest men condemn them as lies, some even consider them wicked ; one refused to write any more for a whole estate ; my best friend says they are all “blethers.” But one man’s rubbish may be another’s treasure ; and what is the standard of value in such a pursuit as this ?

“ And what are you going to do with them stories, Mr. Camal ?” said a friend of mine, as he stood amongst the brown sea-weed, at the end of a pier, on a fine summer’s evening, and watched my departure in a tiny boat.

“ Print them, man, to be sure.”

My friend is famous for his good stories, though they are of another kind, and he uses tobacco ; he eyed me steadily for a moment, and then he disposed of the whole matter monosyllabically, but forcibly,

“ Huch! !”

It seemed to come from his heart.

Said a Highland Coachman to me one day, “ The luggage is very heavy. I will not believe but there is stones in the portmanteaus ! They will be pickin’ them up off the road, and takin’ them away with them ; I have seen them myself ;” and then, having disposed of geology, he took a sapient pinch of snuff.

So a benighted Englishman, years ago in Australia, took up his quarters in a settler’s hut, as he told me.

Other travellers came in, and one had found a stone in a dry river-course which he maintained to be partly gold. The rest jeered at him till he threw away his prize in a pet ; and then they all devoured mutton chops and damper, and slept like sensible men.

So these tales may be gold or dross according to taste. Many will despise them, but some may take an interest in the pastime of their humble country-men; some may be amused ; those who would learn Gaelic will find the language of the people who told the stories ; and those who would compare popular tales of different races, may rest assured that I have altered nothing ; that these really are what they purport to be—stories orally collected in the West Highlands since the beginning of 1859. I have but carried drift rubbish from the place where I found it to a place where it may be seen and studied by those who care to take the trouble.

The resemblance which the collection bears to others already made, is a strong argument for the common origin of the stories, and of the people who tell them. But, as a foundation for argument, I am bound to give the evidence on which I have formed my belief in their antiquity, for the stories would be rubbish indeed if they were not genuine traditions.

This is the account given by Mr. Hector MacLean, parish schoolmaster at Ballygrant in Islay, whom I have known from his boyhood, and who, at my request, collected stories last summer in the Long Island : —

“ In the Islands of Barra, the recitation of tales during the long winter nights is still very

common. The people gather in crowds to the houses of those whom they consider good reciters to listen to their stories. They appear to be fondest of those tales which describe exceedingly rapid changes of place in very short portions of time, and have evidently no respect for the unities. During the recitation of these tales, the emotions of the reciters are occasionally very strongly excited, and so also are those of the listeners, almost shedding tears at one time, and giving way to loud laughter at another. A good many of them firmly believe in all the extravagance of these stories.

“ They speak of the Ossianic heroes with as much feeling, sympathy, and belief in their existence and reality as the readers of the newspapers do of the exploits of the British army in the Crimea or in India ; and whatever be the extravagance of the legends they recite respecting them, it is exceedingly remarkable that the same character is always ascribed to the same hero in almost every story and by almost every reciter. Fingal, or rather Fionn, is never called the king of any country or territory, but the king of the Finn, a body of men, who were raised, according to the traditions current in the Long Island and other parts of the Highlands, in Ireland and in the Highlands, to defend both countries against foreign invaders, more especially against the Scandinavians. The origin these illiterate people assign to them, according to the traditions handed down to them, is, that the largest and strongest bodied young men and women were selected and married together in order to produce a brave and powerful race capable of withstanding and repelling the incursions of foreign foes. Any hero that came west, east, north, or south, and ‘ Cothrom na Fínne ’ (the chance of the Finne), is the term still used for fair-play in the Highlands.

“ In no tale or tradition related to me regarding these heroes have I heard the name, ‘ Rìgh Mhòr-bheinn,’ (king of Morven) ascribed to Fionn ; nor have I heard him described as the king of any territory or country—always ‘ Rìgh na Fínne or Fēinne.’ Fēinn or Finn is the plural of Fiann, which is probably derived from Fiadh dhuine ; either a wild man from his strength and bravery, or else the man of deer, from their maintaining themselves by hunting deer, extensive tracts of laud being allotted to them for that purpose. The last etymology I believe myself to be the correct one.

“ The most of the people in Barra and South Uist are Roman Catholics, can neither read nor write, and hardly know any English. From these circumstances it is extremely improbable that they have borrowed much from the literature of other nations. In North Uist and Harris these tales are nearly gone, and this, I believe, to be owing partly to reading, which in a manner supplies a substitute for them, partly to bigoted religious ideas, and partly to narrow utilitarian views.”

This clear statement is accompanied by a description of each of the men who contributed, from which it appears in detail that the greater number speak Gaelic only, that many of them can neither read nor write, and that they are clever though uneducated ; and this account I know to be correct in some cases, from my own personal knowledge of the men. Hector Urquhart, now gamekeeper at Ardkinglas, whom I have known for many years, agrees with MacLean in his account of the telling of these stories in other districts in former times.

This is his account —

“ In my native place, Pool-Ewe, Ross-shire, when I was a boy, it was the custom for the young to assemble together on the long winter nights to hear the old people recite the tales or sgeulachd, which they had learned from their fathers before them. In these days tailors and shoemakers went from house to house, making our clothes and shoes. When one of them came to the village we were greatly delighted, whilst getting new kilts at the same time. I knew an old tailor who used to tell a new tale every night during his stay in the village ; and another, an old shoemaker, who, with his large stock of stories about ghosts and fairies, used to frighten us so much that we scarcely dared pass the neighbouring

churchyard on our way home. It was also the custom when an *aoidh*, or stranger, celebrated for his store of tales, came on a visit to the village, for us, young and old, to make a rush to the house where he passed the night, and choose our seats, some on beds, some on forms, and others on three-legged stools, etc., and listen in silence to the new tales ; just as I have myself seen since, when a far-famed actor came to perform in the Glasgow theatre. The goodman of the house usually opened with the tale of *Famhair Mor* (great giant) or some other favourite tale, and then the stranger carried on after that. It was a common saying, ‘ The first tale by the good-man, and tales to day-light by the *aoidh*,’ or guest. It was also the custom to put riddles, in the solving of which all in the house had to tax their ingenuity. If one of the party put a riddle which was not solved that night, he went home with the title of King of Riddles. Besides this, there was usually in such gatherings a discussion about the *Fein*, which comes from FIANTAIDH, giant ; the Fiantaidh were a body of men who volunteered to defend their country from the invasions and inroads of the Danes and Norwegians, or *Lochlinnich*. FIUNN, who was always called King of the Fein, was the strongest man amongst them, and no person was admitted into the company who was less in height than he, however much taller. I remember the old black shoemaker telling us one night that FIUNN had a tooth which he consulted as an oracle upon all important occasions. He had but to touch this tooth, and whatever he wanted to know was at once revealed to him.

“ The above is all I can at present readily call to mind of the way in which the evenings were spent in the Highlands thirty or forty years ago. The minister came to the village in 1830, and the schoolmaster soon followed, who put a stop in our village to such gatherings ; and in their place we were supplied with heavier tasks than listening to the old shoemaker’s fairy tales. From that period till I collected the few in this collection, I have not heard a tale recited. On going to visit my friends last summer I expected that I would get some old tales among them, but I found that the most of the old men who used to relate them in my young days had died, and the few who were then alive of them were so old that they had lost their memories, so that I only got but a trifle to what I expected.

March 1860.

Hector Urquhart.

John Dewar, a labourer, whom I never saw, but who has written and sent me many stories, agrees with the others. These men have never met, and have acted independently ; and yet, in many cases, I have received versions of the same story from each and from other sources, and I have myself heard the same incidents repeated by their authorities, and by others whom they had never seen ; sometimes even the very-words.

The name of every narrator is given with his story, and I am satisfied on direct evidence that most of these were known in the Highlands at least forty years ago. Now, for the benefit of those who know as little of the subject as I did, let me give the theory of the distribution of popular tales, as I have gathered it from the able introduction to the Norse Tales and other sources, and then let me point out the bearing of this collection on that theory.

It is supposed that the races known as Indo-European came from Central Asia at some very early period, and passed over Europe, separating and settling down as nations ; retaining words of their original language, and leaving the traces of their religion and history everywhere as popular tales ; and that they found the land occupied. Each wave, it is said, “ pushed onwards those who went before,” but, as it seems to me, each in turn must have stopped as it arrived at the great sea, and there the waves of this stream of men must have mingled and stagnated.

As the flotsam and jetsam of American rivers and of the Gulf Stream is constantly drifting north-wards and eastwards, and finds a resting-place on some western shore, so the traces of

the great human stream, which is supposed to have flowed westwards, should be found in greatest abundance stranded at the western sea. If this be correct, and if the plains of Asia sent migratory hordes eastwards as well as westwards, the tales and languages of the far East and West should most resemble each other, and should also resemble more than others the oldest forms of the myths and languages of those from whom they sprang. Brittany, Scandinavia, Ireland, and the west of Scotland, from their geographical position, should contain more of this light mental *debris* than Central Europe ; for the same reason that more of the floating rubbish of American rivers is found on the shores of Europe than anywhere on the great ocean ; and if mankind had a common origin, and started from the plains of Asia, and if popular tales really are old traditions, then the tales of Ceylon should resemble those of Barra, and those of Japan should resemble the others, because men travelling eastwards and arrived at Japan, could not easily advance farther. Mr. Oliphant tells us that both in China and in Japan groups are commonly seen listening to professional story-tellers in the streets, and it is to be hoped that some one will enable us to judge of their talents.

Be that as it may, fairy-eggs are not the only foreign products found on the shores of the Hebrides, and the people who dwell there know stories of larger growth than mere nursery tales. Great logs of drift-wood find their way to shore, and are turned to use. Such a log I once found, and used myself, long ago. It was half buried in the sand ; it had been long tossed by the sea, and battered against rocks, for it was heavy with water, splintered and ground. No tree like it grew anywhere near. There was no mark of a tool on it. The stumps of its roots and branches remained, and it seemed as if it had been torn up and wafted to its resting-place by winds and waves alone. I have now no doubt that it came from America. Had it been insignificant, and useless, like a fairy-egg, we might have left it, or preserved it as a curiosity ; but it was a useful log, and we were a party of chilled otter hunters, so, after a few speculations, we hoisted the prize on our shoulders, carried it to our dwelling, a neighbouring cave, and there we burned it. I see it often, hissing and sputtering, and lighting up the bivouac with its red glare. Its ashes may be there still, but that tree is a tree no longer ; its origin and wanderings cannot now be traced ; it has shared the fate of many a popular tale. It was found and used up.

Such a log I lately saw in South Uist. No tool mark was on it ; it had lost its own foliage, but it was covered with a brown and white marine foliage of sea-weed and dead barnacles, and it was drilled in all directions by these curious sea-shells, which are supposed by the people to be embryo geese. It was sound, though battered, and a worthy Celtic smith was about to add it to the roof of a cottage, which he was making of boulders and turf. It was about to share the fate of many popular tales, and become a part of something else. It may be recognised as an American production hereafter, and its history is deeply marked on it, though it forms part of a house by this time. So a genuine popular tale may be recognized in a play or a romance.

Another such tree I saw in Benbecula, with bark still on the roots, and close to it lay a squared log, and near that a mast with white paint and iron bindings, blocks and crosstrees, still attached to it. A few miles off was a stranded ship, with her cargo and fittings, a wreck about to be sold, and turned to any use that the new owners might think fit. All these were about to be changed, and as it is with drift-wood in the Highlands, so, as I imagine, it has been with popular tales everywhere. They are as old as the races who tell them, but the original ideas, like the trees from which logs, masts, and ships are made, have been broken up, cut, carved, and ornamented—lost and found—wrecked, destroyed, broken, and put together again ; and though the original shape is hard to find, the fragments may be recognized in books, and wherever else they may now be found.

But as there are quiet spots in the world where drift-wood accumulates undisturbed, so there are quiet spots where popular tales flourish in peace, because no man has interfered with them. In Spitzbergen, according to the accounts given me by Norwegian bear hunters,

and adventurous English nobles, trees, such as those occasionally found in Scotland, are piled in heaps. Trees, logs, broken spars, and wreck, gather and bleach and decay together, because there are no men on that wild shore to use them. So in the islands where the western "wanderers," "Albanich," settled down, and where they have remained for centuries, old men and women are still found who have hardly stirred from their native islands, who speak only Gaelic, and cannot read or write, and yet their minds are filled with a mass of popular lore, as various as the wreck piled on the shores of Spitzbergen. If such as these get hold of the contents of a story book, they seem unconsciously to extract the incidents, and reject all the rest,—to select the true wood, and throw away foreign ornament, just as they chip off the paint of a stranded mast, or scrape the sea-weed off a log when they build it into a roof. I have given one specimen of a story, which I believe to be derived from the "Arabian Nights," though it is quite impossible that the man who told it to Hector MacLean, and who told it to me also, in nearly the same words, can have got it directly from any book ; for he cannot read at all, and he does not understand English.

I have found very little notice of these West Highland prose tales in books, but they are referred to. In 1703, Martin says that his countrymen then told long tales about Fin MacCoul, but he adds that he will not trouble the reader with them.

In 1780, Dr. Smith, in his book on Gaelic poetry, says, that prosaic tales should be preserved in the same manner may seem strange, but so it is. He condemns the "urskels" as "later tales," unworthy of notice, probably because they were different from the poetry of which he collected so much.

Gaelic dictionaries mention "legends" as sources from which words have been taken. Amongst the Gaelic MSS. now in the Advocates' Library, there are several which contain tales similar to those now told in the Highlands. One passage about the sailing of a boat, which I have got, with variations, from a great many people living in various parts of the Highlands, I find in a MS. which was lent to me by the secretary of the Celtic Society of London. It is dated 23d December 1808, signed Alexander Stewart, A.M., and marked. Poems of Ossian. It contains 7721 lines of Gaelic, mostly poetry, which by the references seem to have been copied from something else. The passage to which I refer, occurs in a "Fragment of a Tale," p. 17, which occupies thirty-seven folio pages, and treats of carrying off a lady from an inland, and her recovery by her husband.

Dr. MacLeod, the best of living Gaelic scholars, printed one old tale, somewhat altered, with a moral added, in his "Leabhar nan Cnoc," in 1834, but even his efforts to persevere and use this old lore were unsuccessful.

Those, then, who understood Gaelic, thought popular tales unworthy of notice ; those who did not understand Gaelic, could know nothing about them ; and there are many now living in the Highlands, who speak Gaelic and yet believed, till they searched at my request, that stories had become extinct in their districts. One good Highlander, who has helped me much, Mr. James Robertson, living at Inverary, so believed, till he heard his own nursemaid repeat No. 17, and a neighbouring fisherman tell No. 6. In the Highlands, as elsewhere, society is arranged in layers, like the climates of the world. The dweller on an Indian plain little dreams that there is a region of perpetual frost in the air above him ; the Esquimaux does not suspect the slumbering volcano under his feet ; and the dwellers in the upper and lower strata of society, everywhere, know as little of each other's ways of life, as the men of the plain know of the mountaineers in the snow.

Highland stories, then, have been despised by educated men, and they are as yet unchanged popular tales. It so happened that a piper was the instructor of my babyhood. He was a stalwart, kindly, gentleman, whose face is often before me, though he has long since gone to his rest. From him I first heard a few of the tales in this collection. They had almost faded

from my memory, but I remembered their existence, and I knew where to search, so I began at the beginning of 1859 by writing to my Highland friends, of all degrees, for stories of all kinds, true stories excepted ; and here let me thank them cordially for the trouble which they have taken, for they are too numerous to thank in detail.

I begged for the very words used by the people who told the stories, with nothing added, or omitted, or altered. Those who could write Gaelic, those who could not did their best in English,—translated, at first or second-hand, from Gaelic ; and when I had so gathered many versions of a story, I thought I might safely conclude that it had been known in the country for many years, and was essentially a popular tale.

My next step was to go at Easter to a Highland district, near the lowlands, where a game-keeper had marked down a lot of tale-tellers, and I was soon convinced that there was plenty of game, though hard to get.

This difficulty may be worth some explanation, for it exists elsewhere, and bears on the collection of tales everywhere. Highland peasants and fishermen, especially those dwelling near the lowlands, are shy and proud, and even more peculiarly sensitive to ridicule than peasants elsewhere. Many have a lurking belief in the truth of the stories which they tell, and a rooted conviction that any one with a better education will laugh at the belief, and the story, and the narrator and his language, if he should be weak enough to venture on English, and betray his knowledge of Sgeultachd and his creed. He cannot imagine that any one out of his own class can possibly be amused by his frivolous pastimes. No one ever has hitherto. He sees every year a summer flood of tourists of all nations pouring through his lochs and glens, but he knows as little of them as they know of him. The shoals of herrings that enter Loch Fyne know as much of the dun deer on the hill-side, as Londoners and Highland peasants know of each other. Each gets an occasional peep at the other as the deer may see the herrings capering in the loch—each affects the other slowly but surely, as the herrings do drive away the wild deer by attracting men to catch them ; but the want of a common language here as elsewhere, keeps Highlands and Lowlands, Celt and Saxon, as clearly separate as oil and water in the same glass.

The first step, then, towards the acquisition of a story is to establish confidence. It may be that the would-be-collector sees before him a strapping lad dressed in the garb of a west country fisherman—a rough blue bonnet, jacket, and trousers. He steps out and ranges up alongside. The Highlander glances from under his bushy eyebrows, and sees with his sharp grey eyes that the new comer is a stranger. He looks rather like a Saxon ; Highland curiosity is strong, and he longs to ask whence he comes ; but politeness is stronger, and it would be uncivil to begin questioning at once.

So with a nervous kick of one foot, and a quick shy glance, the fisherman jerks out, “ It’s a fine day.” “ Tha n’ latha briagh” (The day is fine) replies the stranger ; and as he speaks, the whole face and manner of his companion change as if by magic; doubt and hesitation, suspicion and curiosity, become simple wonder ; his eyes and his heart open wide at the sound of his native tongue, and he exclaims, “ You have Gaelic ! You will take my excuse by your leave, but what part of the Gaeldom are you from ?” And then having found out all that is to be discovered, the ice being broken, and confidence established, it oozes out gradually that the fisherman knows a story, and after much persuasion he tells it, while he rows the gentleman who can talk Gaelic across a Highland loch. At parting, he adds that he has only told it to please a “ Gael,” and that he would not have said one word to a Gall (stranger). But the man who is fluent in his boat, is shy and backward when set down to repeat his story for transcribing, and it is only when set with one of his neighbours whom he knows, that his story is got on paper.

Or it may be an old dame in a tall white mutch with a broad black silk band, a red cloak, and clean white apron. She is 70, and can walk ten miles ; she has known all the neighbouring families for generations. If you can claim cousinship with any, she is your friend ; but she *will* praise the ancestors and tell of the adventures of Rob Roy the Gregorach, the last of the freebooters. “ But, Mary, can you say Murachag and Mionachag ? ” “ Huch ! my dear, that is an ursgeul that is nonsense. The Good Being bless you, I knew your grandmother,” etc., etc. So one must rest contented with the fact, that old Mary knows one tale, and probably many more, which a week’s persuasion might perhaps extract.

Or it may be a pretty lass, whose eye twinkles with intelligence at every catch-word, thrown out as a bait, but whom nothing will induce to confess that she knows the foolish tales which the minister has condemned.

Or it is an old wandering vagabond of a tinker, who has no roof but the tattered covering of his tent. He has pitched it in a quarry under a giant fir, the knarled roots, half bare, hardly support the tree on the edge of a red clay bank, and form a kind of hollow, a “ còs,” in which the tinker and his tribe have nestled at odd times for years. A thin blue smoke is curling amongst the blackened roots, and winding itself about the noble tree.

A stately mansion and a wide domain, and a blue highland loch, with a shoal of brown herring-boats, can be seen through the wood from the door of the tinker’s tent ; and there he lies, an old man past eighty, who has been a soldier, and “ has never seen a school ; ” too proud to beg, too old to work ; surrounded by boxes and horn spoons, with shaggy hair and naked feet, as perfect a nomad as the wildest Lapp or Arab in the whole world. It is easy to make friends with such men. A kind word in their native language is all that is required, but to get their stories is another affair. “ Donald, did you ever see the like of *this* ? ” Up starts the old man on his elbow,—“ Och ! och ! that’s a fairy arrow, I have seen that ; och ! och ! no fairy arrow will ever hit the man who has that—no fire will ever burn the house where that is. That’s lucky, well ! well ! ” and the old man sinks down on his bed of fern. But the elf shot has hit the mark, and started a train of thought, which leads at last to a wild weird story ; but before that story can be written, the whole tribe decamp, and are lost for a time.

The first difficulty, then, was the nature of the people who knew the stories ; and the second, the want of men able and willing to write Gaelic. It was easy to write English versions of tales heard in Gaelic, but I wanted the Gaelic as it was told, and I had neither time nor ability to write it down myself. I therefore sought out two men on whom I could rely, to collect and write for me, and the largest share of this book has been collected and written by them. One is Mr. Hector Urquhart, gamekeeper at Ardkinglas on Loch Fyne ; the other, Mr. Hector MacLean, schoolmaster at Ballygrant in Islay, who has superintended the printing of the Gaelic. They entered into the spirit of the work at once, and they have executed their share of it with the greatest fidelity. But while these are my chief aids, I am largely indebted to many others for written Gaelic; for example, to one of my earliest friends, Mrs. MacTavish ; to the Rev. Mr. MacLauchlan of Edinburgh ; to Alexander Fraser, Esq. of Mauld, near Beaully ; to many of the schoolmasters on the estate of Sir Kenneth MacKenzie ; to Mr. Donald Torrie, Benbecula ; and to many others, including John Dewar, a self-educated man of advanced age, whose contribution does him the greatest credit.

The next step was to spend a summer holiday in studying the actual condition of this popular lore, where I had found that it existed in the greatest profusion. I landed at Lochmaddy in North Uist, and walked with a knapsack to the sound of Barra, and back to Stornoway ; crossing the sound of Harris in a fishing boat. I found a population differing from that of the main land, perhaps the least changed from their old ways of any people in the kingdom. Gaelic is their usual, often their only language. Every English word which has crept in has a Gaelic head and tail. Many, I know not how many, “ have no English ” at all, and have never been taught to read. In many islands the people are living undisturbed, where

their ancestors have lived time out of mind. They are a small, active, intelligent race, with dark hair and eyelashes, and grey eyes ; quick, clever, and pugnacious. I had expected to find traces of Norwegian occupation in the people and their language. I watched carefully for Norwegian words and features ; and I found the people a complete contrast to Norwegian peasants, whom I know well, who are large, bony, light-haired fair men, sagacious rather than quick ; and generally slow to anger.

I could find nothing Scandinavian, except certain names of places, and certain ruins, which it is the fashion to attribute to the Lochliners. Even the houses and the old agricultural implements, where they are still used, are peculiar. For example, the old crooked spade still used in islands in the sound of Barra, and elsewhere, has no resemblance to any agricultural implement that I have ever seen anywhere out of the West Highlands. It is in fact a foot plough used without horses. It is remarkable that a steam plough should be at work at the same time, on the east coast of Cromarty at Tarbert. Every horse I met on the road stopped of his own accord. Every man asked my news, “ whence I took the walking,” where I lived, and why I came ? Saddles were often sacks, stirrups a loop of twisted bent, bridles the same, and bits occasionally wood. Dresses were coarse, but good ; but there was an air of kindly politeness over all, that is not to be found in homespun dresses in any other country that I know. When I was questioned, I answered, and told my errand, and prospered. “ I was not a drover come to buy cattle at the fair ;” “ Neither was I a merchant though I carried a pack.” “ I was the gentleman who was after Sgialachdan.” My collector had made my name known. I spoke Gaelic, and answered questions. I am one of themselves, so I got on famously.

Men and women of all ages could and did tell me stories, children of all sizes listened to them ; and it was self-evident that people generally knew and enjoyed them. Elsewhere I had been told, that thirty or forty years ago, men used to congregate and tell stories ; here, I was told, that they now spend whole winter nights about the fire listening to these old world tales. The clergy, in some places, had condemned the practice, and there it had fallen into disuse ; stories seemed to be almost exterminated in some islands, though I believe they were only buried alive ; but in other places this harmless amusement is not forbidden ; and there, in every cluster of houses, is some one man famed as “ good at sgialachdan,” whose house is a winter evening’s resort. I visited these, and listened, often with wonder, at the extraordinary power of memory shown by untaught old men.

It is perhaps beyond the province of a mere collector of old tales to be serious ; but surely Gaelic books containing sound information would be a vast boon to such a people. The young would read them, and the old would understand them. All would take a warmer interest in Canada and Australia, where strong arms and bold spirits are wanted, if they knew what these countries really are. If they heard more of European battles, and knew what a ship of war is now, there would be more soldiers and sailors from the Isles in the service of their country. At all events, the old spirit of popular romance is surely not an evil spirit to be exorcised, but rather a good genius to be controlled and directed. Surely stories in which a mother’s blessing, well earned, leads to success ; in which the poor rise to be princes, and the weak and courageous overcome giants ; in which wisdom excels brute force,—surely even such frivolities are better pastime than a solitary whisky bottle, or sleep, or grim silence ; for that seems the choice of amusements if tales are forbidden and Gaelic books are not provided for men who know no other language ; and who, as men, must be amused now and then.

I have never heard a story, whose point was obscenity, publicly told in a Highland cottage ; and I believe that such are rare. I have heard them where the rough polish of more modern ways has replaced the polished roughness of “ wild” Highlanders ; and that where even the bagpipes have been almost abolished as profane.

I have heard the music of the “ Cider Cellars” in a parlour, even in polished England, when I had failed to extract anything else from a group of comfortably-dressed villagers. A

half-polished human gem is but a spoiled crystal anywhere ; and I prefer the rough diamond or the finished jewel.

But this is foreign to my work ; my visits were to the tellers of old stories, and had nothing to do with political economy and public morals. I paid my visits, and heard the stories ; and a goodly audience often gathered to share the treat, and all seemed marvellously to enjoy it. If there was an occasional coarse word spoken, it was not coarsely meant.

Let me describe one of these old story men as a type of his kind. I trust he will not be offended, for he was very polite to me. His name is MacPhie ; he lives at the north end of South Uist, where the road ends at a sound, which has to be forded at the ebb to get to Benbecula. The house is built of a double wall of loose boulders, with a layer of peat three feet thick between the walls. The ends are round, and the roof rests on the inner wall, leaving room for a crop of yellow gowans. A man might walk round the roof on the top of the wall. There is but one room, with two low doors, one on each side of the house. The fire is on the floor ; the chimney is a hole above it ; and the rafters are hung with pendants and festoons of shining black peat reek. They are of birch from the mainland, American drift wood, or broken wreck. They support a covering of turf and straw, and stones, and heather ropes, which keep out the rain well enough.

The house stands on a green bank, with grey rocks protruding through the turf ; and the whole neighbourhood is pervaded by cockle shells, which indicate the food of the people and their fishing pursuits. In a neighbouring kiln there were many cart-loads about to be burned, to make that lime which is so durable in the old castles. The owner of the house, whom I visited twice, is seventy-nine. He told me nine stories , and like all the others, declared that there was no man in the islands who knew them so well. “ He could not say how many he knew ;” he seemed to know versions of nearly everything I had got ; and he told me plainly that my versions were good for nothing. “ Huch ! Thou hast not got them right at all.” “ They came into his mind,” he said, “ sometimes at night when he could not sleep,—old tales that he had not heard for threescore years.”

He had the manner of a practised narrator, and it is quite evident that he is one ; he chuckled at the interesting parts, and laid his withered finger on my knee as he gave out the terrible bits with due solemnity. A small boy in a kilt, with large round glittering eyes, was standing mute at his knee, gazing at his wrinkled face, and devouring every word. The boy’s mother first boiled, and then mashed, potatoes ; and his father, a well grown man in tartan breeks, ate them. Ducks and duckling, a cat and a kitten, some hens and a baby, all tumbled about on the clay floor together, and expressed their delight at the savoury prospect, each in his own fashion ; and three wayfarers dropped in and listened for a spell, and passed their remarks till the ford was shallow. The light came streaming down the chimney, and through a single pane of glass, lighting up a tract in the blue mist of the peat smoke, and fell on the white hair and brown withered face of the old man, as he sat on a low stool with his feet to the fire ; and the rest of the dwelling, with all its plenishing of boxes and box-beds, dishes and dresser, and gear of all sorts, faded away through shades of deepening brown, to the black darkness of the smoked roof and the “ peat corner.” There we sat, and smoked and talked for hours, till the tide ebbed ; and then I crossed the ford by wading up to the waist, and dried my clothes in the wind in Benbecula.

Another man of the same stamp, Patrick Smith, lives near the sound of Barra ; and a third, “ Donald MacDonald MacCharles MacIntyre,” in Benbecula ; and I heard of plenty more, whom I had not time to visit. I found them to be men with clear heads and wonderful memories, generally very poor and old, living in remote corners of remote islands, and speaking only Gaelic ; in short, those who have lived most at home, furthest from the world, and who have no source of mental relaxation beyond themselves and their neighbours.

At Gearrloch on the mainland, some old namesakes of mine are of the same stamp, but in these regions the schoolmaster has made himself at home. Tales have been forbidden, but other lore has been provided. There are many well attended English schools, so old men have access to books and newspapers through their children. Tradition is out of fashion and books are in.

Farther east stories are still rarer, and seem to be told rather by women than by men. The long romances of the west give place to stories about ghosts and fairies, apparitions, and dreams,—stories which would be told in a few words, if at all, in the islands. Fairy-belief is becoming a fairy tale. In another generation it will grow into a romance, as it has in the hands of poets elsewhere, and then the whole will either be forgotten or carried from people who must work to “gentles” who can afford to be idle and read books. Railways, roads, newspapers, and tourists, are slowly but surely doing their accustomed work. They are driving out romance ; but they are not driving out the popular creed as to supernaturals. That creed will survive when the last remnant of romance has been banished, for superstition seems to belong to no one period in the history of civilization, but to all. It is as rife in towns as it is amongst the hills, and is not confined to the ignorant.

I have wandered amongst the peasantry of many countries, and this trip but confirmed my old impression. There are few peasants that I think so highly of, none that I like so well. Scotch Highlanders have faults in plenty, but they have the bearing of Nature’s own gentlemen—the delicate, natural tact which discovers, and the good taste which avoids, all that would hurt or offend a guest. The poorest is ever the readiest to share the best he has with the stranger. A kind word kindly meant is never thrown away, and whatever may be the faults of this people, I have never found a boor or a churl in a Highland bothy.

Celts have played their part in history, and they have a part to play still in Canada and Australia, where their language and character will leave a trace if they do not influence the destiny of these new worlds. There are hundreds in those distant lands, whose language is still Gaelic, and to whom these stories are familiar, and if this book should ever remind any of them of the old country, I shall not have worked in vain in the land which they call “Tir nam Beann, ’s nan Gleann, ’s nan Gaisgeach.” [2]

[1] *Mimosa scandens*, great pod-creeper. *Mucuna ureus*.

[2] The land of Hills, and Glens, and Heroes

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