

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh  
RSE @ Lochaber**

***Gaelic Culture of Lochaber: Lifting the Night – A' fuadach na h-oidhche***

**Professor Hugh Cheape and Professor Donald Meek**

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Report by Kate Kennedy

*Professors Hugh Cheape and Donald Meek discussed the Gaelic culture of the Lochaber region, focusing on the poets and storytellers of the area. This event comprised a bi-lingual approach.*

Professor Hugh Cheape explained that he would discuss the Gaelic culture of the Lochaber region using images of material culture from the distant past. The culture of the past is often identified by monuments such as medieval castles and burial sites, and by industrial features such as the Caledonian Canal and the lead mines of Strontian. However, the most persistent aspect of culture in the region is the Gaelic language which, within Lochaber, dates back at least 1500 years. Much of the most useful source material about Lochaber's culture can be found not only in the 'usual' historical tomes, but also in documents detailing studies written by local historians and interested community members; many of these documents are written in the Gaelic language. These records of history from an 'insider's' viewpoint can be extremely informative and enlightening, touching on aspects of life and culture not always covered by the scholarly historical texts.

Professor Cheape's first image showed St Fillan's bell, a 6<sup>th</sup> Century relic typical of the Celtic church and a symbol of a missionary church that carried its message by hand and mouth within Scotland: a starting point for written history and language. A second image relating to early Gaelic culture depicted Cille Choirill church, located in the Braes of Lochaber near Roy Bridge. This is a typical example of a very early phase in Christianity, when the church was named after its founder; in this case 'Cairell', an Irish saint. The building standing on the site today dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, but the original 7<sup>th</sup> Century 'church' was actually founded on an earlier important pre-Christian site, suggesting the location had religious significance even before St Cairell. The grave of the Gaelic poet Iain Lom (John MacDonald of Keppoch) is situated at the door of the church. However, Professor Cheape explained that this is incorrect, as Lom was actually buried elsewhere and the gravestone mistakenly placed here in the 1890s. Curiously, however, this grave does mark the burial place of another great Gaelic poet, Domhnall mac Fionnlaigh nan Dan.

In terms of the first Millennium, one of the major upheavals in the region related to the arrival of the Norse people in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. The Norse reign lasted until the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and, in addition to changed lifestyles and new traditions, the arrival of these people left a mark on the Lochaber landscape in terms of language; most often noticeable in place names. Out of the Norse period of rule developed the extremely important historical era, the Lordship of the Isles. The Lords of the Isles were descendants of the sons of Somerled of Clan Donald and were very powerful and influential, both in Scotland and internationally. They traded within Europe and their most important trading port was Galway, Ireland. Remnants of material culture representing this era include gravestones upon which images are carved; not only depicting the wealth and power of the Lords but also detailing aspects of everyday life. One gravestone dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century shows detail of a clarsach (harp), similar to that preserved in the National Museum of Scotland which belonged to Queen Mary.

Other surviving remnants of material culture include brooches worn on Highland dress and items such as charm stones; bringing life to the traditions and superstitions of the past.

Professor Cheape showed the audience two maps which he considers encapsulate Highland history in a simple way. The first illustrates the extent of the Lordship of the Isles, the rule of Clan Donald, spreading across to the east coast of Scotland into the Earldom of Ross and down to the south end of Kintyre. The Lords of the Isles were a major force, traditionally ruling just over half of Scotland in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> Century. The Kings of Scots, particularly James I, II, III and IV, felt challenged by their presence; even more so when the Lords formed a treaty with the Kings of England. They sought to change this situation and, using the law, declared that the Lordship of the Isles no longer existed and shared its land amongst other people in the form of charters. Professor Cheape's second map depicts the 'new' boundaries of rule; the Kings of Scots empowered the MacKenzies in the north and the Campbells in the south, effectively meaning that what little remained of the Lordship was 'squeezed' in the middle, with Lochaber in the midst of this. Professor Cheape commented that much of what happened in the region in the following centuries, particularly the Jacobite uprising, was largely due to this realignment of territory. The Battle of Culloden in 1746 signified how successful and assertive Gaelic Scotland had become, on both a national and international stage. Since the 1690s, the region had been recruited by the Kings of England and Scotland to fight their wars. However, the government later turned against Gaelic Scotland and, under the guise of Jacobitism, which much of the west coast supported, they crushed the Jacobite army at Culloden.

What was life like in Gaelic Scotland for individuals? Five years after Culloden, when General Roy was making his geographical survey of the Highlands, one of his surveyors drew a picture of a character from Fort William entitled *Gillie Wet Foot (Errand Runner)*. This shows a man in typical dress of the time; contrary to popular belief about Highland dress, he is not wearing a kilt! Other examples of dress from the time include the body of a man from Shetland who was discovered fully clothed and preserved in the peat. As in the illustration of Gillie Wet Foot, his everyday clothes are not that unusual; he is dressed similarly to anyone from northern Europe. Very few people from the Lochaber region, or even in Scotland in general, wore tartan or plaid clothing – in kilt form or otherwise.

Other pictures show differing means of transport throughout the ages, including sledges and wheeled carts, many of which took advantage of the drove roads, tracks and military roads. Gaelic tradition and writing reveals many details about transport, including different terms used in different places. Part of the Highlands' recovery after Culloden was the success of the cattle trade as demand grew from Britain's involvement in the Imperial Wars. Droving trade in cattle developed in the 1760s and flourished through to the Napoleonic Wars, leaving a big impression on Scotland; remnants of the routes are still in existence today, for example the resting cairns found on the roadside between Fort William and Spean Bridge.

The woodlands of the area were also very important to the culture of the region and evidence of this is found very strongly in Gaelic song; one of the names of Lochaber in Gaelic is 'Lochaber of the Trees'. Prevailing opinion from archaeologists and other experts states that the oak woods were being destroyed as soon as settlement and farming began. In Lochaber, however, woodlands were a managed and protected resource; Clan Ranald's over-lordship in the area and the importance of the oaks for building galleys meant that wood keepers were appointed to keep charge of the woodlands. The woodlands and associated grazing regimes were, however, severely impacted upon by the advent of sheep farming from the 1790s onwards. The ensuing Highland Clearances are thoroughly studied in history today and detailed accounts of and perspectives on the impact of this era are also recorded in the Gaelic language.

The period of religious disruption in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the Kirk ceased to be able to perform the social role that it once did, also colours the Gaelic voice very strongly in both literature and art. Professor Cheape showed an image depicting a minister delivering a church service from a boat to his congregation on the foreshore. Furthermore, schooling, which had largely been the responsibility of the church, began to breakdown. However, with the development of the Free Church of Scotland, the Ladies Highland Association was founded and was extremely important in creating schools in the Highlands and Islands until the 1872 Education Act took over.

Professor Donald Meek continued by discussing the Gaelic literature of Lochaber, stating that the region is very significant in the cultural history of Scotland, with a vast body of work to choose from. Many of the principal Gaelic poets, prose writers and scholars hailed from the Lochaber area and were prolific in their writing. He explained that he would simply provide an overview of the Gaelic literature associated with Lochaber and deliver this from an 'owl's eye view' of the region. The owl has many associations with the region; indeed the *Owl of Strone* is a protagonist in one of the area's famous songs.

Domhnall mac Fionnlaigh nan Dan, the poet buried in Cille Choirill churchyard, requested to be buried here so that he could see the land from a particular angle. Gaelic song and verse is closely related to and inspired by the landscape. Professor Meek commented that in current times we are obsessed by turning everything into text. However, much of Gaelic verse and text was originally song; for example, *Oran na Comhachaig (The Song of the Owl)* by Domhnall mac Fionnlaigh nan Dan. Gaelic verse also contains lots of harmonies, not just musical, but those describing the relationship between land and landscape, people and environment. *Oran na Comhachaig* is replete with this and Professor Meek suggested that it is possible to "see the landscape" as you read the song. In this song, the owl is speaking to an old huntsman and reminiscing about the grand old times; "when men were men and clan chiefs were clan chiefs". In this era, the Keppoch MacDonalds were a very important family and are represented as such within this song. The owl and the huntsman talk about all the people they have seen; the owl has seen all the great folk and is asking "where are they now"? Professor Meek describes the song as "summarising the whole cultural heartbeat of the area". The huntsman describes the landscape, the hills, Ben Nevis and paints "concise verbal photographs" for the listener. This song has been recited throughout the Gaelic world and has had parts added and removed over time, as is usual in an oral tradition. However, the song cannot belong to any other part of Scotland; it clearly depicts the Lochaber landscape. Furthermore, it tunes in to many different traditions in the Celtic world as well as the Gaelic one and as such, summarises the character of the area.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Century was a tumultuous time and a time of retrospection. Domhnall mac Fionnlaigh nan Dan was thinking about great times long past in his poetry. Other chiefs and powers were coming into the area – the Campbells, for example, pushing in from the south – and civil wars were commonplace. Professor Meek commented that there was a Gaelic way of seeing all of this; they saw it in the way that their own kindred aligned with the new powers, for example, the MacDonalds staying loyal to the Catholic tradition. One poet who was very close to these changes was Iain Lom (John MacDonald of Keppoch). His poems are full of battles and warriors. For example, the *Battle of Inverlochy 1645* describes how he saw the battle. Professor Meek considered how "looking back at these old verses makes you think about what was there before and how important it is; the history of the place and its impact upon the culture; especially when you visit Old Inverlochy Castle today, now just a ruin". There is no doubt about Iain Lom's loyalty in this poem; the Campbells were the 'baddies' and the MacDonalds virtuous in their actions. He describes the horrors of war in all their glory and paints amazing images of his MacDonald heroes, lending life to a past world. The poets of Lochaber at the time did not compartmentalise the

landscape into distinct regions as we do today, for example, distinguishing between Ardnamurchan and Nether Lochaber; they had a much more cohesive, larger community approach. Gaeldom was linked in ways other than territory, such as systems of kin and kith. These are the sentiments that influenced Iain Lom's writing.

The Owl's flight takes the audience to Keppoch and the important MacDonald family. Sileas na Ceapaich (c.1660–c.1729) was one of the female poetesses from the region; a daughter of a Keppoch chief and brought up in the chief's household. Her writing gives a female aspect to Gaelic poetry, for example, the affection for music. Her poem *Cumha Lachlainn Daill*, commemorates the death of a harper and describes the importance of the harp player who travelled throughout the area and kept the lines of communication open; like an internet of the time. The beauty of Gaelic verse is that it opens doors to worlds long forgotten; it gives a context to many of the objects found in our museums today; for example the harps and the importance of music as a communication tool.

Alastair Mac Mhaigstir Alasdair (Alexander MacDonald) was born at Dallilea House in Ardnamurchan. He was a top ranked poet of the region; indeed the plaque on Dallilea House describes him as the "greatest of all Gaelic Poets". Professor Meek described him as a "complex yet extraordinary, brilliant character; you never know quite what you are going to get from him". He composed poems in a variety of styles, somewhat schizophrenic in nature. Unlike some of the other Gaelic poets, he changed his allegiances many times and sided with the Jacobites, Protestants and Catholics on occasion. His poem *An Airc (An Ark)* describes him deciding to build an ark and giving boarding passes to the passengers. However, you would only receive a boarding pass if you supported Prince Charles (Bonnie Prince Charlie). The poem is a brilliant piece of satire in which he comments on the various folk who did or didn't support The Prince. Professor Meek described it as "almost like a summation of all of the attitudes and ideas that went on during the Jacobite era. He used the ark as a metaphor for judging the contribution of the chiefs, his friends and his foes to the cause of The Prince".

Poets have commented on and celebrated all the different phases of development of the Highlands, from rebellions to Clearance, to the arrival of industry in the form of steamships and the Caledonian Canal. Part of the role of Gaelic poets in the Highlands was to advocate what they thought was the best cause; what in their eyes would change the world for good. Whether it was Bonnie Prince Charlie or the steamship, they were there to give consultation, advice and opinion, in addition to simply noting changes and historical occasions. Allan MacDougall's, *Song on Steamship Highland Chieftain*, charted the arrival of the steamship and provided remarkable descriptions of the event for a blind poet! He saw that the industrial revolution was going to change the region and the world. Professor Meek also commented that this is an interesting example of the standard Gaelic praise poetry that was originally used for the great chiefs. In this song, the steamship and the captain are the heroes and Gaelic song tradition is being adjusted to suit the Industrial Revolution.

Professor Meek noted that there are many more examples of great Gaelic poets from the Lochaber region; however, to cover their work would take a lifetime!

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