

Stonemason and Storyteller: Duncan MacDonald of Snishival, South Uist

Invited to an international folklore conference held, in October 1953, in the Hebridean town of Stornoway, Duncan MacDonald held an audience captive throughout the duration of his telling of an heroic Gaelic tale called *Fear na h-Eabaid* ('The Man of the Habit'). Those in attendance who were fortunate enough not only to have been present at such an event but also to have a copy of the transcribed tale to hand (published a short time previously), and who had a reading knowledge of Scottish Gaelic, must have followed the storyteller with a mixture of awe and astonishment as he recited this long tale almost word for word. By anybody's standard, this was not only an amazing performance but also a remarkable feat of memory.



Duncan MacDonald, South Uist

The then thirty-one year old renowned folklorist Calum Iain Maclean (1915–1960) first met Duncan MacDonald (1882–1954), styled *Donnchadh mac Dhòmhnail 'ic Dhonnchaidh*, on an auspicious spring day in 1947. MacDonald was born in the crofting township of Snishival, South Uist, but moved at an early age to nearby Peninerine. Like his father, MacDonald became a highly skilled stonemason and a great many of the homesteads, which he built, can still be

seen to this very day all over South Uist. But it was his storytelling that was to leave a more profound if intangible legacy, for MacDonald excelled in this fine art.

It didn't take long for Maclean to know that he had struck gold for he soon recognised that MacDonald's ability as a teller of tales was exceptional. Maclean was later to acknowledge MacDonald's talent thus:

Duncan as a storyteller was the equal of Patrick Og MacCrimmon as a piper. Everything that he recited was polished, shapely and elegant. Duncan's Gaelic was most eloquent and fluent: the best I have ever heard. Everything he recited was given both weight and due consideration.

Maclean was not only struck by MacDonald's eloquence but also by the sheer depth and richness of his perfected art of storytelling:

Duncan's interest lay more in a story's shape and form, and also in the splendour and depth of rhetorical language as deep, hard Gaelic flowed from him like grace notes played upon a silver chanter.

Perhaps more importantly was the social aspect for Maclean reckoned that MacDonald's storytelling was 'an art that delighted not only learned audiences but also his humbler fellow-islanders at the firesides in South Uist.'

Maclean, however, was not the only one to have recorded material from MacDonald for others including John Lorne Campbell (1906–1996) and Kirkland Cameron Craig (*d.* 1963) came knocking at his door. In 1944, Craig transcribed and published half-a-dozen of MacDonald's best stories, representing but only a fraction of his extensive repertoire. Without even nearly exhausting the material that MacDonald's retentive mind had to offer, Maclean himself recorded and transcribed well over a hundred items from his recitation.

MacDonald's family background – given in his life-story, also taken down by Maclean – reveals an enviable and heady genealogical mix. A patronymic stretching back several generations throws up a poetic connection: Duncan the son of Donald the son of Duncan the son of Iain the son of Donald the son of

Norman, a descendant to the MacRury family of hereditary bards at Duntulm in Trotternish to the MacDonalds of Sleat in the Isle of Skye.

His father, Donald MacDonald (1843–1919), from whom Duncan and his shyder but no less talented younger brother Neil (1884–1955) learnt most of their lore, was also a renowned storyteller in his own right, and his wife Margaret MacIntyre (1880–1952) was a celebrated singer and had a remarkable repertoire of songs. Her younger brother, and thus MacDonald's brother-in-law, was a noted Gaelic bard and piper, Donald MacIntyre (1889–1964), styled *Dòmhnall Ruadh Phaisley*. The network of tradition bearers does not stop there either, for K. C. Craig also published a collection of waulking songs entitled *Òrain Luaidh Màiri Nighean Alasdair* in 1949, recorded from Mary MacDonald (1867–1954), Duncan's first cousin, who also happened to be a sister of a certain Donald MacDonald (b. 1862).

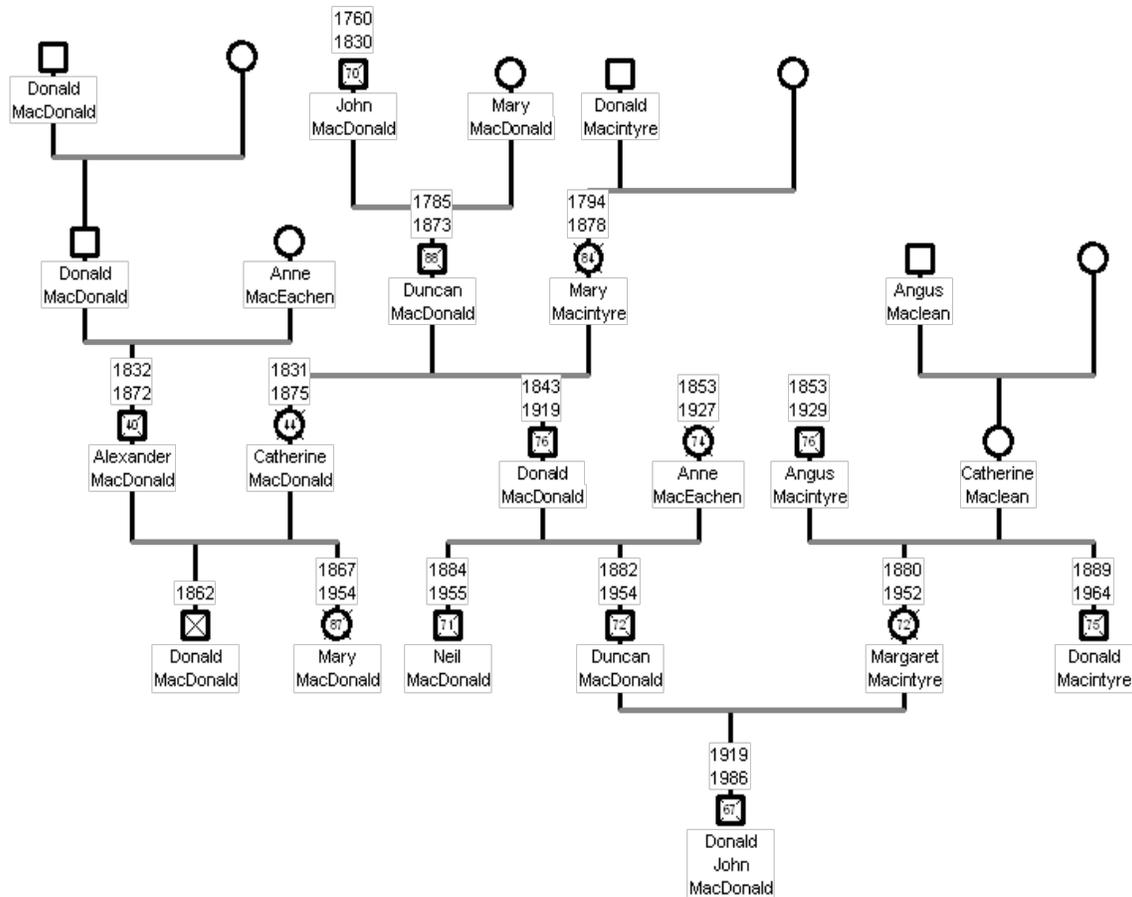
Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912), a native of Lismore, found a rich seam of oral traditions from which to draw when in his spare time he swapped collecting taxes for the more congenial task of collecting stories. One touchstone of memory must have been the two days (6–7 April 1869) he spent with Duncan MacDonald of Snishival and his six-year old grandson Donald. Carmichael clearly got on well with the old man, whom he portrays as 'a smart little man sorely afflicted with rheumatism. Has a clear blue eye & an intelligent face.' But it was the boy whom Carmichael remembered vividly many years after the events of those days:

I took down several versions of the beautiful poem of Fraoch in Argyle and the Outer Isles. They all agree in the main but differ in detail. That, however, which I like best is a version written on the 7th April 1869 from the recitation of a remarkable boy six years of age, Donald Macdonald, son of Alexander Macdonald, crofter, Snaoisval, South Uist. Probably I took down in all from 400 to 500 lines of excellent old poetry from this wonderful child of song modesty and memory.

The only difficulty experienced with this boy was his childlike disposition to gambol about with his companions. There were a kitten, a pup, and a lamb in the house and every now and then these three and the boy rose and had a frolic on

the floor together. The boy's grandfather Duncan MacDonald (1785–1873) was described by Carmichael as 'a nice old man sat in a corner enveloped in friendly peat smoke and now and again scolded the boy in a friendly way for not attending to the gentleman.'

Young Donald told Carmichael that the tales and poetry he recited had been learned from his grandfather, who in turn had learned them from his father. Amongst those which young Donald recited were *Laoidh Dhiarmaid* ('The Lay of Diarmad'), *Laoidh Fhraoich* ('The Lay of Fraoch') and *Tàladh Iain Mhùideartaich* ('The Lullaby of John of Moidart'), two rather intricate ballads together with a long Gaelic song and usually not thought to be the preserve of a six-year old boy. Whether or not Donald and Duncan ever met or knew one another remains uncertain but their fount of knowledge clearly stemmed from their grandfather, also called Duncan and who received his lore, in turn, from his father John MacDonald (1760–1830), styled *Iain mac Dhòmhnail 'ic Thormaid* who hailed from North Uist.



Duncan MacDonald Family Tree

Little wonder then that with talent such as this burgeoning in the family background that Duncan MacDonald would not only go on to carry the tradition into the twentieth century but would also come to be known as a highly-regarded exponent of storytelling. After an hiatus of forty years, MacDonald returned to Glasgow in 1949 at the behest of Calum Iain Maclean and David Thompson to record one of his stories to be broadcast on the BBC's Third Programme. Indeed, MacDonald had the distinction of being the very first storyteller to have been broadcast on this particular programme. MacDonald later told Maclean of what he thought of this experience:

I spent a fortnight away on that trip and I enjoyed it terribly well. I was going to see the people I knew while I was there as well...When I returned home, a week after that, I heard myself on the wireless but could scarcely recognise that it was me at all...I didn't recognise my own voice at all and since then I've been once or twice on the wireless and...I've got to know it very well since then of how these things actually work.