

The Blind Piper: Lachlan Bàn MacCormick of Benbecula

In Benbecula, where Calum Iain Maclean (1915–1960) had spent so many years collecting folklore, a ceilidh that he attended left an emotional and lasting impression upon the young collector:

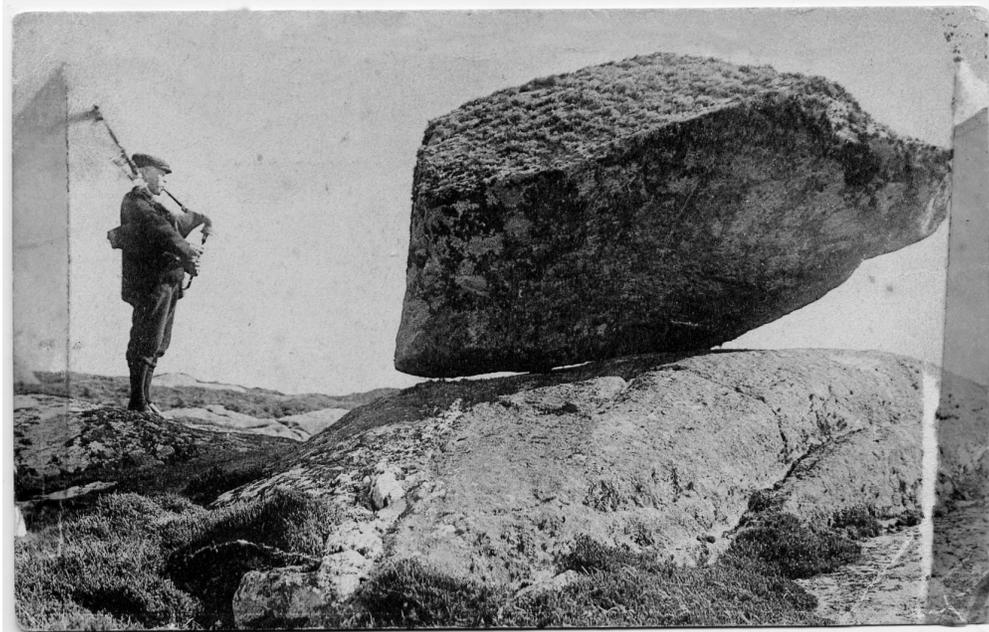
No mention of the tradition-bearers of Benbecula would be complete, if we did not include the grand old gentleman, the blind piper Lachlan Bàn MacCormick. As well as several traditional pipe-tunes, he recorded two tales, and has more to tell. My most moving experience as a folklore collector was to have recorded from him. He is 92 years of age and his eyes have been completely sightless for the past eight years.

In his diary Maclean recorded the ceilidh in some detail for not only was such work part of his duties as a professionally trained ethnologist but even more so because it was such a great social occasion and one which he would later recollect with pleasure.

Lachlan Bàn MacCormick (1859–1951) was a native of Creagorry, Benbecula, and later joined the 2nd (later 3rd) Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders in 1889 when he was thirty years of age. He was called Lachie Bàn due to his very fair hair and complexion. While in the Camerons, he reached the rank of Pipe-Sergeant and would later serve in the Lovat Scouts. It is likely that after his demobilisation he returned to Benbecula and settled down to life as a crofter. In his day he was numbered as one of the best pipers in the Hebridean scene and was a competition prize winner as well as being a highly regarded instructor. A composer of merit, some of his tunes are still to this day part of the piping repertoire such as the catchy strathspey *The South Uist Golf Club*. MacCormick on more than one occasion would also take to the bench and, when not competing himself, would judge his fellow pipers in light as well as the classical music of the pipes at the games in South Uist and probably elsewhere.

On 28 November 1949 Maclean wrote an account of his visit in his fieldwork diary. It may added in passing MacCormick composed a reel for Calum Maclean to which the recipient of this honour was deeply moved and delighted by such a generous gesture.

When we arrived we found a full house as all the neighbours were in. Lachlann Bàn is an uncle of Catriona, Peter MacAlasdair's wife, who also visited the house tonight. Lachlann Bàn is 91 years of age and was also famed as a piper. He used to pipe at weddings and funerals. He was also a piper in the Militia and rose to the rank of Pipe-Major. He learnt by ear and could compose his own tunes. Lachlann had always been short-sighted and he was grey-haired from a young age. He has now been blind for more than eight years. He sometimes recognises voices but mainly he had to ask who was speaking to him. He still has good hearing. He was very familiar with William MacLean, a famous piper who was in Creagorry and it pleased him greatly to hear that I was related to him.



Lachlan Bàn MacCormick

Pipe-Major Willie MacLean (1876–1957) mentioned here had also been a fellow Cameron Highlander and had at one time owned the Creagorry Inn. A noted piper and composer of the reel *Creagorry Blend*, MacLean could trace his piping lineage back to the MacCrimmons, hereditary pipers to the MacLeods of Dunvegan, through his instructor at Catlodge, Malcolm MacPherson, styled *Calum Piobaire*. Maclean then goes on to give further details of the ceilidh and how MacCormick played the pipes to the joy of the audience who were present in his house:

He played on the pipes and I could see how much this pleased Lachlann Bàn. Lachlann then played as he sat on a bench with his back to the window and his fingering was as good as it ever was. If it were not for his blindness he would still be an excellent piper. He looks as if he were only 60 years of age although he was 91. He played the tunes far quicker than pipers do today. He knew that I had the Ediphone recording device and that he was being recorded playing the tunes. He played an old tune that he had heard in the army, two tunes he composed himself, and another composed by his son, Allan, who died around 1930. Lachlann Bàn heard his recording replayed on the Ediphone and he very much enjoyed this.

Some two months were to pass when Maclean accompanied by Donald MacPhee revisited MacCormick, on 19 January 1950, to find him in not such a good mood but as soon as MacPhee engaged him in conversation about his old Militia days then Lachlan soon perked up. Lachlan Bàn was then handed a chanter and he managed to play two tunes, one composed for the south ford and another called 'Salute the King'. Although they were recorded they were difficult to make out. Maclean noted that MacCormick might well be past his best in order to take down his tunes and regretted not having got hold of him earlier.

Of only the five stories which Maclean managed to take down from MacCormick's recitation, two of them concerned fairy lore both of which were recorded on this particular visit. A summary may be given of one of these tales which were once common stock among storytellers. MacCormick's mother had heard the it from James MacDonald who told the tale in the presence of priest called *Maighstir Dòmhnall* (Father Donald):

He said that fairies still existed and they used to wait until Michaelmas until the corn was ripe when they would then harvest and make ready to take to the mill. They used to bake sruan, special commemorative cakes. Two neighbours on their way over to the mill heard music emanating from the fairy hillock. One of the men entered while the other stayed behind. For a year there was no sign of the man who went into the hillock and they thought he was dead by now. The year after at the very same time the other man was passing the hillock and saw a doorway open. Before entering the man placed a knife in the doorway and inside he saw his companion dancing with a sack still on his back. The man did not wish to leave so that the other man had to

drag him out. The man thought that he had only been in the hill for a minute. The other man told him he had been in for a year and his relations thought that they would never see him again. Off home he went still carrying the sack from the year before.

Maclean remarked that he thought MacCormick as a good a storyteller as he was a piper. Many old tunes as well as his own compositions were faithfully taken down on the Ediphone and perhaps remain to this day at the National Folklore Collection in Dublin and which have probably not been heard since the very night they were first recorded.

Although having only been in the company of Lachlan Bàn on two occasions, such impressions left a remarkable touchstone in Maclean's memory for he had never been so moved by any other tradition bearer. This by itself is even more remarkable given that Maclean had already met many tradition bearers before his introduction to Lachlan Bàn, including three others from Benbecula, South Uist and Barra respectively who he reckoned to be outstanding exponents of the oral tradition.