The saviour of Gaelic folklore

This year’s major exhibition, ‘Sgeul | Story: Folktales from the Scottish Highlands’, is our first dual-language showcase. It delves into the archive of John Francis Campbell of Islay, without whom some of Scotland’s Gaelic folktales could have faded into oblivion. Here, Manuscripts Curator Dr Ulrike Hogg tells us more about the man and his mission...

Artist, mythologist, amateur geologist, polyglot, polymath and, by all accounts, all-round top guy John Francis Campbell (1821–1885) was a man of means who meant well, and did well. Without his work, many tales in the Gaelic folktale tradition would be lost.

To understand what compelled him to do so, we can point to his unorthodox upbringing for someone of an aristocratic background. He was born in London and would go to school at Eton and later study law at the University of Edinburgh. But before that, he spent his childhood on Islay, in the care of the family piper (whom Campbell called his ‘nurse’).

Campbell’s piper-come-nurse took him to places that someone of Campbell’s social stature would not normally access – crofts, bothies and community storytelling gatherings. Simply being around people's
day-to-day lives in the Highlands and Islands meant Campbell had a deep appreciation for Gaelic culture and a strong command of the language.

After his studies, Campbell first became private secretary to the Duke of Argyll before being appointed secretary to a number of scientific royal commissions in succession. This seems to have left him with plenty of one of the most coveted of resources – free time.

He had too many interests to list here but, beside his fascination for scientific subjects, such as rock formations and plate tectonics, he also had strong cultural interests largely focused on communities and their stories. Campbell always had an interest in fairy tales and folktales. He was given a copy of the collection of stories ‘One Thousand and One Nights’ (then known as ‘Arabian Nights’) when he was six and devoured them. He was living on Islay at the time and we can only assume he was beginning to make connections between the themes from the international fairy tales and folktales he was reading and those he was listening to by the fire.

Later in life, Campbell became aware there were people carrying out research in comparative literature or mythology on the European continent. They were exploring common themes and motifs between stories, as well as the idea that all stories originated in the East and migrated West only to wash up on the Irish coast. These theories and discussions appealed to Campbell and he set about contributing by collecting the Gaelic stories which developed in Scotland.

Gaelic stories come in two categories – one is the hero sagas and ‘newer’ tales, more akin to the Grimms’ folktales, with witches and giants...

Sketch of Campbell lying on the floor and writing a story, from a journal kept by Campbell and written while he was travelling around the West of Scotland collecting Gaelic folklore, 1870–1871

Rory Rum, storyteller, Mingulay, from a journal and scrapbook kept by Campbell mainly during his visit to Paris at the time of the siege in 1871, and while travelling around the west coast of Scotland
There were not many young people telling stories any more when Campbell and his helpers were collecting them. But Campbell reports on traditions that show it was still an intrinsic part of life for many, especially on the Outer Hebrides.

If someone from outside the community was visiting a house, this visitor had a task ahead of them. News spread and people would flock to the host’s house seeking entertainment in the form of news and stories. The host would tell the first story, followed by the main attraction for the evening – the visitor. This visitor was expected to go on all night. Some individuals were particularly renowned or well-liked as storytellers. They typically had a huge store of stories which they performed vividly and they were known for a guaranteed entertaining evening.

Storytellers during this time had a remarkable ability to retain information. A person did not need much by way of repetition to commit a story to memory. It was not uncommon for someone to hear it once and be able to retell it in full and verbatim.

These stories, well told, had a profound effect on their audience, similar perhaps to what people experience after seeing an adventure movie today. Several accounts exist where people said the stories were so vivid that they were scared to walk home lest they encounter a giant or some other malicious creature. In many of these storytelling settings, Campbell would be found listening and taking
summarised in English. He employed others to write the stories verbatim as he did not trust his proficiency in written Gaelic. His most important helpers were Hector Maclean, a schoolmaster at Ballygrant, Islay, and Hector Urquhart, gamekeeper at Ardkinglas, Loch Fyne.

Some storytellers were understandably thrown by this and it often affected the speed and rhythm of their performance. But many saw the value in the stories’ preservation – especially as storytellers were decreasing in number.

Campbell must have felt he was in a race against time because he worked extremely fast, while applying a high degree of scholarship to his pursuits. His work – making a contribution to what he called ‘storyology’ – began in 1859 and the first two volumes of stories were printed in 1860. He dissected some of the tales, enabling him to compare the versions known in one region of the Highlands to another.

He was most excited when he came across parallels to tales from other countries such as ‘The Frog Prince’ or ‘The Town Musicians of Bremen’ in the Grimm’s tales. He was a keen traveller. To meet all of his interests – storytelling, art, geology – he travelled extensively around Scotland, to most corners of Europe, including to both Iceland and Italy in pursuit of volcanology. In 1875 he travelled the world, visiting China, Japan, Russia and North America.

A gifted visual artist, Campbell captured the Highlands and other breathtaking landscapes around the world in watercolours. He also experimented with peat and whisky for a series of sketches that bring some of the Gaelic folktales to life.

He sketched as many people as he could, but some of the people he wanted to capture did not have what he had – the luxury of time.

In all his travels, the Sami people – who lived in the very northern reaches of Scandinavia and Russia – as well as the Gaelic communities of the Highlands and Islands, were the most difficult to pin down. They were too busy with work to sit still for long enough.

We can assume some people did not want to be featured in his drawings. Few portraits exist of the storytellers but they are brought to life through Campbell’s notes and observations.

Without the generosity of the Gaelic people who shared their stories, we would not have the legacy we have today. Without Campbell’s dedication to story, some of the tales that enthralled generations of Highland communities might not exist on record today. These, you can experience at our library.

‘Sgeul | Story: Folktales from the Scottish Highlands’ opens on 9 June 2023 and runs until April 2024 at our George IV Bridge building in Edinburgh. Entry is free. See pages 30-33 of this magazine for more details of events surrounding the exhibition. More events will be added over the summer, details of which will be made available on our website, nls.uk.
Reviving lost and rare voices

The following article by our Scots Scriever is written in English to assist readers with understanding the two accompanying poems. Follow @ScotsScriever on Twitter, where Shane Strachan regularly posts in Scots, including some of his own work in Doric.

As this year’s Scots Scriever, I’ve relished searching through the Library’s archives, particularly those in North East Scots (Doric), of which I’m a native speaker and published author.

The main project I’m working on is the creation of new stories set in 1990s Aberdeenshire linked with the ballad repertoire of Anna Gordon Brown, many of which are collected in two manuscripts in the Library, one in her nephew’s hand in 1783 and one in her own in 1800.

Alongside this, I’ve also been working on poems and performance pieces inspired by non-fiction archives in Scots.

The creative manipulation of real-life material, or verbatim, has long been part of my practice and has resulted in a novella inspired by Muriel Spark’s time in southern Africa, based on her archive at the Library (‘Nevertheless’), a verbatim theatre project inspired by conversations overheard on Aberdeen’s Union Steet (‘The Shelter’), and ‘The Bill Gibb Line’, a podcast, film and exhibition partly inspired by real fashion reviews of the Aberdeenshire fashion designer’s work.

It may seem strange to place so much emphasis on reshaping and refashioning the pre-existing words and narratives of others, but this was common practice for medieval writers of Scots such as Robert Henryson and William Dunbar, who were not referred to as authors and poets (that was reserved for the long-dead writers of Greek and Latin such as Aristotle and Virgil), and were instead known as Makars, hence our modern-day national Makar title currently held by Kathleen Jamie. Referring to writers as Makars placed emphasis on craft and technique rather than authority (hence ‘author’) and metaphorically compared crafting with words to the construction of a building.

Overall, a Makar’s job was to make authoritative sources accessible to a wider audience, rather than our modern-day emphasis on creating anew.

This is the role I see for myself in the production of the following poems based on two real petition letters from around 1706, which are largely opaque to the modern reader due to their inconsistent spelling and their unusual mixture of older forms of English and Scots with Gaelic influences. Sent to the commissioners Queen Anne appointed to negotiate the proposed Union of Parliaments in 1707, the letters take opposing views to the union for differing reasons connected to the writers’ individual industries.

They also relate the anxieties felt by folk at this time around how a union would help or hinder their livelihoods and communities. Voices from the labouring class, especially in Scots, are rarely found in print at this time in our history, so it felt particularly important to highlight these through my role as Scriever to a wider readership.

The first poem, ‘Fain tae Hear of this Eenion’, is based on a letter most likely written collectively by a group of Aberdonian weavers who are all women (another rarity in print at this time) and who see the Union as an opportunity to expand the market for their goods – plaids, shanks (stockings) and fingreens (a variant of fingering, a kind of woollen cloth) – not just into England, but to far off continents through colonialism, regardless of the violence that entails.

The second, ‘An Onion petween Twa Kingdoms’, voices the concerns of Highland fishermen – most likely working along the Moray Firth coast and beyond – in relation to the impact that increased customs on salt will have on preserving fish and meat, and the knock-on effect this will then have on their immediate

The North East was a hotbed for language transfer after English swept up the country to compete with Scots and Gaelic
community in the Highlands right up (or rather down) to Lowland lairds.

The interesting mixture of Scotland’s three languages express how the North East was a hotbed for language transfer after English swept up the country to compete with Scots and Gaelic in the preceding century following the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and the publication of the King James Bible in 1611.

For example, the modern day ‘f’ for ‘wh’ in Doric words like fit, far and fan (what, where and when) – expressed as ‘ph’ in the weavers’ letter – is thought to be language transfer from Gaelic. Another Gaelic influence can be seen in the pronunciation of the letter ‘p’ for ‘b’ in the fishermen’s letter, such as ‘Pairns to Peg’ for ‘Bairns to Beg’, which is rare to see in printed text outside of dialogue in Walter Scott’s novels, where it is often used for comedic effect at a Highlander’s expense.

This marks these fishermen out as native Gaelic speakers who have learned Scots and English as additional languages, along with far fewer Scots words in their letter besides those they share with the Aberdonian weavers, such as pairns/bairns (children) and muckle (many/large).

The weavers include many more Scots words which they may have believed were also in use in England, or they didn’t know the English equivalent for, such as affagates (means of sale), wame (stomach), aldfarane (a variant on auld-farrant meaning old-
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fashioned). A quick search on the Dictionary of Scots Languages – dsl.ac.uk – will provide meanings for any others you don’t know.

The unusual pronunciations and spellings of words, along with the random capitalisations, makes for a somewhat surreal experience when reading these letters for the first time.

As well as making the spelling more consistent – in my bid to shape them into a more accessible form for modern readers – I transformed the verbatim material into two narrative poems comprised of five-line stanzas, which I hope makes the original letters more digestible and memorable.

I selected specific sections of the text where vivid and emotive imagery are used and reordered them into a more logical narrative flow with growing tension and drama.

I resisted the temptation to use rhyme so that the authenticity of their voices shines through, but I have fichered with the stress patterns to make the metre more iambic (tee-TUM, tee-TUM) and flowing, as you would expect in poetry from this period.

To make these poems even more accessible, you can hear recordings of me performing them on the Library’s website, nls.uk

Be warned – they won’t sound quite like anything you’ve heard before, but that’s what makes them even more special to me!

The 12-month Scots Scriever residency is hosted by the Library and funded by the National Lottery through Creative Scotland.

FAIN TEE HEAR OF THIS EENION

The Heemble Petition of Aberdeen’s peer Shank Workers and Fingreen Spinners who are right fain tee hear of this Eenion, and the Wisdom tee carry away the wool of this Kingdom tee other Quintries.

Oor breid Benison light upon ye all for this guid deed and grit encouragment to us peer things, who are fain to warble and wark late for bits of Breid tee oor Mooths and the Mooths af oor peer Babies and Bairns.

We mak meickle Work out of little Wool, but mony times cannot get the Guids sold unless oor Merchants mak their Vantage of oor needessity, phi in the mean time we sit with mony Hungry Wames and slight Meal ate.

The Cheeper Lads say if they carry Shanks and Fingreens and other Guids we mak into England they’d double their money by sick Guids as they’d bring back – far an Ell of Fingreens, twenty pounds af Tobaco.

According to the Chapmen’s Proverb, all the Winning lies in the first buying. Abjections we cannot mak Chaper Cleath than England are not worth a Fig; we Work as fare as any shee that bears Fingers.

Short sighted and peer filly things as we are, we’re as lordly selling oor Guids as any Bony Lass with half a Dozen Wooers. In oor hands, we’d yield three times the Silder in a foreign Mercat, if not meikle mare.

We’re informed by a gey aldfarane Carle, of a Quintry far aff called the Africann phar Seamon can exchange their Killimeers and Plaids for Goud Dust and iliphan teeth, inkiraging tee English trade thither.

If people there wrong and Cheat her Subjects, Her Majesty will send o’re meikle Ships with great Guns and destroy the Sea Coast Toons of these Quintries pha dare abeese her ain till full amends is made for the wrang deen.

In a long Summer Day, we could not tell the Eenion’s mony other Vantages – great affgates for oor Linnen Cleath and Lint, a great Fishing set up, and Mony Ships imployed in Trading free this Kingdom.

But having said mickle mair than we thought, we gee you oor Benison o’re again, and prays ye hastan the Eenion with Speed, for we lang mickle for that happy sight as we langed te be Wed phan we were Brides.
are books, medieval manuscripts, beautiful book bindings, video installations and fascinating maps are among the gems on display at our permanent exhibition, ‘Treasures of the National Library of Scotland’.

Visitors can see our copy of a complete Gutenberg Bible, which is on permanent display alongside other rare and early printed books. To really show how rich and varied the national collections are, we rotate items every six months or so.

The latest arrivals include a manuscript from the mid-15th century called ‘Mirror of the Life of Christ’. This must-see item is one of the most finely illuminated manuscripts in our collections.

On display to the public for the first time in at least 100 years is the manuscript of ‘Rob Roy’ in the hand of Sir Walter Scott. This came to us last year by way of the UK-wide fundraising initiative to save the Blavatnik Honresfield
Library, as it is now called, and ensure its contents went to publicly accessible institutions.

Also now on show is the first edition of ‘The Scotsman’ newspaper, dated 25 January 1817, material related to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and ‘The Kilmarnock Edition’ – a printed edition of Robert Burns’s poems from 1786.

If you cannot make it to Edinburgh to see these treasures, visit our website nls.uk/treasures for more information, videos exploring artists’ responses to the national collections, as well as our podcast series ‘National Treasures’.

Sgeul | Story: Folktales from the Scottish Highlands

Our first dual language exhibition celebrates the work of John Francis Campbell, a 19th-century figure who saved Gaelic folktales that were at risk of dying out.

A keen comparative mythologist, Campbell (pictured) was inspired by other significant collections such as folktales written during the Islamic Golden Age (often referred to in the English-speaking world as ‘Arabian Nights’), as well as the fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm in Germany.

Convinced Scotland had as rich a resource of folktales owing to its Celtic and Nordic influences, he made it his life’s work to ensure Gaelic tales endured.

Campbell documented his travels by making many notebooks but he was also a keen visual artist and captured the essence of people, communities, sites and landscapes through sketches and paintings.

This exhibition will highlight his own personal library (a collection held at the Library) and the manuscripts and published works of his endeavours. Visitors will also experience Campbell’s work through a range of mixed media – his artworks as well as Gaelic folktales brought to life via new sound recordings specifically made for the exhibition.

The exhibition opens in June this year and runs until April 2024, at our George IV Bridge building in Edinburgh. Entry to all of our exhibitions is free.
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**THURSDAY 21 SEPTEMBER, 5.30PM–6.30PM**
**Calman nan Loch – The Dove of Lochs**
This award-winning 30-minute documentary, followed by a Q&A, charts an artist’s 15-year friendship with a Gaelic speaking community in the Outer Hebrides.

**THURSDAY 28 SEPTEMBER, 5.30PM–6.30PM**
**Seanchaidhean agus Seanchas (Storytellers and Storyology)**
Professor Uisdean Cheape (pictured) from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig presents this talk, which will further explore the themes of our major new exhibition, ‘Sgeul | Story: Folktales from the Scottish Highlands’.

All events take place at our George IV Bridge building in Edinburgh. Entry is free but you need to book via Eventbrite. For a full and up-to-date list of events at all our buildings, please visit nls.uk/whats-on/

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**THURSDAY 21 SEPTEMBER, 5.30PM–6.30PM**
**Calman nan Loch – The Dove of Lochanna**

**The Dove of Lochs**

The haunting sound of the Gaelic psalms, the elegant traditional boats and interviews with elders in the community carry us on a journey of love, loss and faith, all underpinned by their ‘dùthchas’ which encompasses the cultural riches of the Gaelic world. The film is in Scottish Gaelic with an opening and closing voiceover in the narrator’s native Irish Gaelic. Subtitles in English throughout.
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