

# ‘The Disembowelled Horse’

## A Place-Name Tale From Gaelic Oral Tradition

IAN A. FRASER

### ABSTRACT

The recording of traditional information by the School of Scottish Studies, at least in the Gaelic speaking area, was at its height in the 1960s and 1970s. This was the period when funds for field collection were relatively available, while there were still many native bearers of tradition who were willing to impart important amounts of precious material. Nevertheless, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Gaelic mainland was losing its native speakers rapidly and that collection there should be a priority. Their dispersed populations, from Kintyre to Sutherland, meant that the costs associated with fieldwork were rising, as these areas lacked the concentrated populations found in the Western Isles. A special effort was called for to overcome the difficulties. The recording of traditional information by the School of Scottish Studies, at least in the Gaelic speaking area, was at its height in the 1960s and 1970s. This was the period when funds for field collection were relatively available, while there were still many native bearers of tradition who were willing to impart important amounts of precious material. Nevertheless, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Gaelic mainland was losing its native speakers rapidly and that collection there should be a priority. Their dispersed populations, from Kintyre to Sutherland, meant that the costs associated with fieldwork were rising, as these areas lacked the concentrated populations found in the Western Isles. A special effort was called for to overcome the difficulties.

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## A Place-Name Tale From Gaelic Oral Tradition

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My own work, from 1965 onwards, concentrated on the collection of traditional place-name material from the whole Gaelic-speaking area, but it was to some extent targeted at mainland areas which were on the brink of losing traditional onomastic material.<sup>1</sup> The collection of these place-names used Ordnance Survey maps at 6-inch (1:10,560), or 1:10,000 scale, depending on their availability, and the informant was recorded on reel-to-reel tape, with a numbered key identifying individual place-names. This provided a pronunciation record as well as a physical location.<sup>2</sup>

There were, naturally, instances where the tape recorder was absent, and the map unavailable. Such situations generally involved casual conversations with informants, which remained un-noted. These were often family occasions, when stories were told in an informal setting. In pre-television days, there were frequent occasions when ‘ceilidhing’ produced some significant stories which evaded the formal process of recording, and were seldom repeated in circumstances when recording was possible. In families such as my own, when at work around the land, it was common for conversation to include traditional stories, old sayings, lines of verse, obsolete words and expressions. My late uncle, John Fraser, a native of Gairloch in Ross-shire, was tenant of the large hill-farm of Carnoch, at the head of Loch Sunart, in North Argyll. Although he employed local men when the demands of the farming year required it, he often recruited shepherds from the Gairloch area. His love of *seann rabhdairreachd* – ‘old gossip’ as he called it – meant that he was very much aware of traditional practices, mostly in connection with livestock and with the wild animals and birds in his immediate environment.

In the winter of 1959–60, I worked on Carnoch as general handyman, driver, wool-packer, and the many other jobs required on the farm. One very cold evening, when we were penning cattle in the byre, Uncle John produced an unusual expression: ‘*Fuar an nochd a bhith an Allt Leacachain mu thuath!*’ (‘Cold tonight it would be in Allt Leacachain in the north!’). When I asked for an explanation, he told the following story.

A young woman of a prosperous family was travelling on horseback from Strathgarve to Lochbroom in Ross-shire. She was heavy with child, and was accompanied by a young groom, on foot, who led the horse. It was winter, and as they reached the highest point of the route, the *Diridh Mór*, ‘the great ascent’, it began to snow heavily. Eventually, the horse began to founder, and to make matters worse, the woman went into labour. The groom, finding no habitable shelter, led the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ian A. Fraser, ‘The place-names of a deserted island: Eilean nan Ròn’, *Scottish Studies* 22, (1978), 83–90.

<sup>2</sup> Ian A. Fraser, ‘Recording place-names from oral tradition,’ *Scottish Literary Journal*, Supplement No. 10 (1980), 19–24.

horse onto the bank of a burn. Here, he killed the horse, removed the stomach and its contents, placed the girl inside the still-warm space, and delivered the child. By morning, the storm had cleared, and the groom was able to escort the woman and child to her destination.

This was not the end of the story. The young man left Lochbroom to seek his fortune in Glasgow. Many years later, he fell on hard times, and was very much down on his luck. One cold winter evening, as he trudged along a street, he heard a woman's voice call out from a big house, '*Fuar an nochd a bhi an Allt Leacachain mu thuath!*' The young woman whose life he had saved had recognised him. She welcomed him into her household, and employed him for many years. That, as they say, is how I remember my uncle's version of the story.

The location of the incident with the disembowelled horse lies a few miles east of the junction of the modern A835 and A832 roads. *Allt Leacachain* (O.S. grid ref. NH 232762)<sup>3</sup> crosses the A835 on the west side of *An Dìridh Mór*. The name means 'burn of the place of flagstones'. It is certainly in a stretch of bleak terrain, overlooked by *Meall Leacachain* (618 metres) to the north-east, and *Meall Breac* (532 metres) to the south.

The Tale Archive in the School of Scottish Studies produced two further examples of the 'disembowelled horse' story. Both of these were recorded by John MacInnes.

The first of these concerned the incident related by my uncle, but with several variations. According to John's informant, Alick Maclean of Ullapool, the character involved in this rescue was one Ruairidh Mór, a well-known cattle-thief who resided at Braemore, at the head of Strath Mór in Lochbroom.<sup>4</sup> The recording, dated 1960, contains several stories about Ruairidh Mór, including one where he is riding towards *An Dìridh Mór* in winter, when he encounters a woman who is about to give birth. He kills his own horse, empties its stomach, and the woman's baby is delivered in the still-warm cavity. Ruairidh then brings the woman back to his house in Braemore. Many years later, Ruairidh's cattle-thieving exploits result in his arrest by the authorities, and he is taken to Edinburgh for trial. While being escorted through the city (presumably with gyves upon his wrists) on a cold evening, he hears a woman's voice call from a house above, '*Fuar an nochd a bhi an Leathad Leacachain mu thuath!*' 'Cold tonight it would be in Leathad Leacachain in the north!' The woman, now revealed to be the wife of a sea captain, eventually arranges for Ruairidh's release.

The place-name *Leathad Leacachain*, 'the hill-slope of Leacachain', refers to the lower slopes of *Meall Leacachain*, beside the stream already mentioned.

The other incident, which was recorded by John MacInnes from an Argyll informant in 1963, is very different in character.<sup>5</sup> The rescuer here is a soldier whose duty it was to pursue and kill the Glencoe MacDonalds after the infamous massacre of Glencoe in 1692. In bitterly cold weather, he finds a MacDonald woman carrying a small child. To save them both, he kills his horse, and having disembowelled it, shelters them in the horse's stomach. She turns out to be a daughter of MacIain of Glencoe, and so has to flee the district.<sup>6</sup> Many years later, the soldier, now impoverished, enters an inn in the south and, asking for food, is served by a youth who enquires his background. On hearing that the soldier was one of those who persecuted his family, he runs for his weapons and is about to kill the man, when his mother intervenes, having recognised her protector of old. A bargain is then struck. The soldier instructs the lad in the use of the sword, and together they eventually return to Glencoe to claim the mother's inheritance.

While these tales are in their own way formulaic, I feel that the *Allt Leacachain* incident is very likely to have a basis in fact. In any case, the story was obviously current in oral tradition up to the

<sup>3</sup> See Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 map sheet 20 (2002 edition).

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Studies tape SA1960/189A.

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Studies tape SA1963/78B.

<sup>6</sup> The MacIains of Glencoe were a sept of the MacDonalds of Glencoe, and were among the principal victims of the massacre.

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middle of the last century. It is coincidental that my uncle John recounted it to me at about the same time that John MacInnes was recording Alick Maclean's version on tape. In both cases, the rescuer is in turn aided by the rescued woman when he is in straitened circumstances, and when he least expects help.

It must be every fieldworker's regret that the tales, expressions and snippets of traditional lore were frequently ignored in our early years, particularly by those of us who were exposed to such influences by our elders. How often have we thought, 'I wish I could remember what old So-and-so told me.' It is therefore a tribute to such ethnologists as John MacInnes that these ethnological varia were recorded with such care, reflecting, as they do, a rich oral culture which has virtually vanished in our own lifetimes.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful to Mrs Cathie Scott for searching the Scottish Tale Archive, and to Caroline Milligan for invaluable technical assistance.