

Murder in Barra, 1609? The Killing of the 'Peursan Mór'

Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart

This article is an extended exploration of a single historical anecdote – the murder of an island clergyman in the remote past – recorded by the Scottish Highland folklorist Alexander Carmichael in 1872, while on a collecting tour in the Isle of Barra. I examine, in turn, the fascinating biographies of the narrators, the geographical background to the story, its particular linguistic idiosyncrasies, and the political and religious contexts which may have shaped and influenced the narrative and its reception in nineteenth-century Barra. The article then turns to elucidating and interpreting the historical background to what was a very real event. What light can contemporary documents shed on when, why, and by whom the 'Big Parson' was murdered? What place might there be, if any, for folkloric evidence and perspectives in the historiography of the Hebrides?

The Narrators

John MacPherson (1814-1885) and his elder sister Catriona MacFarlane (1807-1880), Ceann Tangabhal, Barra, were among the best folklore informants on the island for the collector Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912). Carmichael is best known as editor of *Carmina Gadelica*, his celebrated, if controversial, six-volume compendium of oral tradition and lore, the fruits of fifty years' of recording throughout the Scottish Gàidhealtachd, especially in the Outer Hebrides where from 1864 to 1878 he worked as an exciseman (Carmichael et al. 1900-71; Stiùbhart 2008).

The biographies of John and Catriona MacPherson invite thought-provoking perspectives on the intricate complexities of many nineteenth-century Hebridean lives. The traditional lore recorded from them gives us excellent examples of the challenges involved in disentangling and making sense of fragmentary and sometimes contradictory sources, whether official and ecclesiastical records, autobiographical reminiscences, or oral tradition.

Catherine or Catriona MacPherson, eldest daughter of John (d. 1814) and Marion née MacPhee (c.1786-1855), Ceann Tangabhal, Barra, was baptised on 20 August 1807. Catherine’s only brother John was baptised on 29 December 1814. The Catholic parish records – Barra is, of course, an overwhelmingly Catholic island – state that John was born ‘a posthumous child’: his father, whose name he bore, had died before his birth.¹ Because their mother Marion died in 1855, a year in which the newly introduced official death certificates aspired to include comprehensive information concerning families of the deceased, we can trace the other siblings: in order of birth, Ann (c.1809-1868), Mary (c.1811-c.1845), and Margaret (b. 1813), who probably died in infancy.

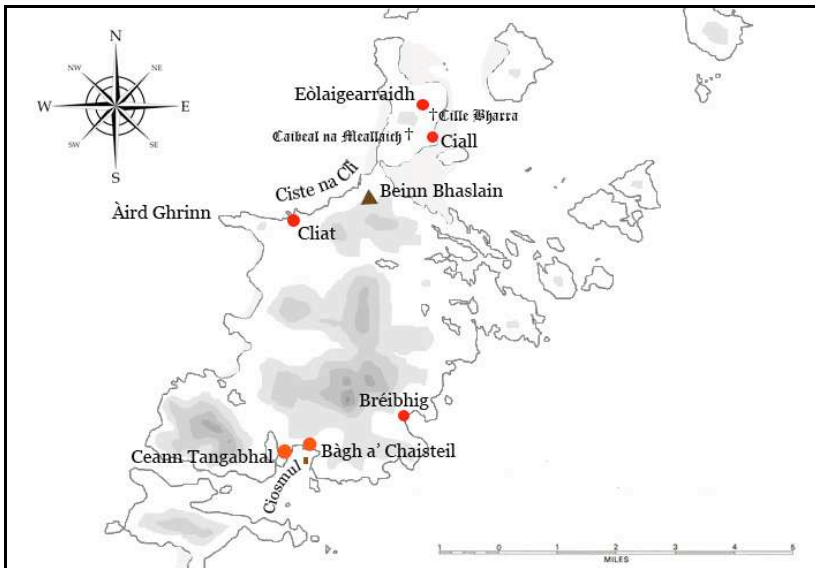


Figure 1. The Isle of Barra: the killing of the Peursan Mór

John MacPherson led an eventful life. On 26 May 1883, before the parliamentary Napier Commission taking evidence concerning the condition of crofters and cottars in the Highlands, he recounted how, at the age of twelve, he, his mother, and a sister were involved in an affray with the constables of the then Major Roderick MacNeil (c.1788-1863), who had recently succeeded as chief of the MacNeils

of Barra. Major MacNeil was then involved in an increasingly desperate and heavy-handed struggle to stave off his creditors. The entire estate economy was to be reoriented, by forceful evictions if necessary: the fertile north and west of Barra was to be cleared of its smallholdings for large farms; the tenantry were to be resettled as fishermen on the east coast, with all profits reserved for the chief. Rent arrears were to be collected, and livestock seized from those who could not pay. As John MacPherson remembered it, MacNeil intended to appropriate a cow from every tenant and cottar in Barra. The family had already lost their sheep and their croft to the estate; as a result of their resistance, they were divested of all remaining animals (*Napier Comm.*, QQ10570-81).²

In later island tradition John was best known for having enlisted in the army, possibly in Stirling, before promptly deserting with the aid of his sister Catriona. The authorities pursued him back to Barra. John evaded them and spent the next six weeks holed up in a cave. There he was surreptitiously cared for by Catriona, who was meanwhile spreading the word that he had drowned while attempting to escape. One version has it that John MacPherson subsequently converted to Protestantism, thus allowing the minister to say of him, ambiguously but with a clean conscience, *chaochail e 'bheatha*: 'he changed his life', interpretable in a metaphorical sense as 'he passed away' (SSS SA1960/89/B2-3; SA1960/105/A6).³

In 1846 John MacPherson, then living in Bàgh a' Chaisteil, married Catherine Nicolson (1824-1863) at Criachan, or Cruachan, by Bréibhig. The family had seven children: Donald (b. 1846, died young), John (b. 1848), Mary (b. 1850), Ann (b. 1854), Marion (b. 1856), Donald (b. 1859), and Catherine (b. 1862). The absence of their father's name in the Barra census returns of 1851 and 1861 indicates that he spent some time working away from the island, while his wife and her Nicolson parents in Bréibhig raised the family.⁴

Following the early death of his wife from tetanus, John MacPherson appears to have enlisted once more, this time fighting for the Confederate side in the American Civil War. In the 1871 census he claimed to have reached the rank of Corporal. Back in Barra, John MacPherson would put his linguistic ability to good use as 'a dealer in a small way' and occasional 'agent for curers in

engaging women for them here, and so on’: in other words, as a community broker for the mainland merchants who flocked to the island as a result of the remarkable expansion in the seasonal fishing industry from the early 1870s onwards (*Napier Comm.*, Q10555). As already seen, towards the end of his life he represented his native township before the Napier Commission.

Catriona is a fascinating figure in her own right: she may have been the sister who ‘ran at one of the constables and hurt him on the knee, and took the cow from him’ in John’s account of his youthful affray (*Napier Comm.*, Q10579). As seen above, her guile and quick thinking were said to have helped her brother desert from the British army and elude his pursuers. Tradition asserts that, like her brother, Catriona was bilingual, Lowland Scots, however, being her second language: this testimony is amusingly confirmed by Carmichael’s recording of her aside concerning the fate of a certain character in song: ‘The [*supra*: fancy] loon was killed by the brother’ (EUL CW90/94 [fo.39^r]).⁵ Having worked, and probably married, on the mainland, she returned to Barra, eventually sharing a house with her brother. There appears to be no further mention of her husband.⁶ Catriona MacPherson is best known in later tradition as a witch, whose most celebrated achievement was said to have brought about, over a period of some sixty years, the deaths by drowning of the five sons of Aonghas mac Dhòmhnail Mhóir, who had, as young children, hindered her from going to the village well.⁷

The Isle of Barra lay outwith Alexander Carmichael’s usual folklore stamping grounds in Uist, the islands where he lodged, lived, and raised his family. It is unsurprising, given John MacPherson’s knowledge of English, his position as the local broker, and his family’s fund of island tradition, especially supernatural ghost and witch stories, that Carmichael would soon become a regular visitor of the MacPherson siblings in Ceann Tangabhal.

What follows is an attempt to use various sources to test and explore a brief origin legend concerning their kindred, the MacPhersons of Barra. This article will deal with the geography, vocabulary, folklore, and history of the legend.

The Narrative

John MacPherson is known in local tradition as Iain Peursan, his nickname referring to the family's alleged descent from 'Am Peursan Mór' ('The Big Parson'). On 24 September 1872 Alexander Carmichael recorded a family origin legend, probably from John, during a *céilidh* mainly taken up with historical and antiquarian conversation:

The Pearsan Mor was chapl[a]in & son to Macneil. He had [a] house at Ciolla & [was] m[arried] to a da[ugh]t[er] of Clanranald. He used to go shooting to Aird Ghrin [del: where] There was an oth[er] girl at Cliat upon his wife thought he was fond of her & she was g iadach rithe [jealous of her]. She sent for her 12 co[mh] [dh]altan [foster brothers] to Uist & they came. He was gone to Aird Ghrin as usual. His wife told them where he was gone & told them to wait him at Ciste nan Cli'eann where they would hear his dog's coinneal (chain) com[in]g thro[ugh] the ciste. They met & attacked him. He & his dog killed 10 [supra: out] of the 12 & the other 2 lived till morn[in]g. He fo[ugh]t them till he fell at Meallach where he was buried & a caibeal [chapel] was built over him (EUL CW90/111 [fos.43v-44r]).

The legend of Am Peursan Mór is situated in the north of the island of Barra, his residence being at Ciall, while his hunting grounds were on the promontory of Aird Ghrinn in the north-west near the village of Cliat. 'Ciste nan Cli'eann', where the chaplain was murdered, is known today as Ciste na Cli or Ciste na Clithe, a rocky coastal path between Cliat and Bhaslan. Although the name derives from Old Norse *kista*, 'pass', 'narrowing', and *klif*, 'cliff', 'scour', folk etymology explains the first element as deriving from *ciste[-laighe]*, 'coffin': the name of the pathway is thus understood to refer to its use as a shortcut coffin road between the villages of the north-west of the island and the traditional burial ground on the slopes of Beinn Eòlaigearraidh (Stahl 1999, 170). It is tempting to identify Caibeal na Meallaich with the mysterious 'Chapel D' structure at Eòlaigearraidh (RCAHMS 1928, 123-25; MacCulloch 1824, 3:4; NLS Adv. MS 34.2.8 fo.187; Campbell 1998, 46).⁸

Carmichael’s informant’s jingling ‘coineall’, *con-iall* or *coingheall*, was by the late nineteenth century a somewhat archaic or even misunderstood term for a slip-leash.

Cha tachradh seann daoine oirbh, mu chladaichean tuath Earraghaidheil, a chionn deich bliadhna fichead, a theireadh, ‘tha coilear mu amhaich a’ choin,’ ‘S e theireadh iad ‘tha “coingheall” mu amhaich a’ choin.’ B’ aithne dhomh duine còir aon uair de m’ shaoghal, agus cha do chuir e coilear riamh air. Thuirt a bhean ris aon latha ‘s e falbh na dh’ionnsaidh na fèille – ‘A Dhùghail, c’ar son nach cuir thusa coilear mu d’ mhuineal, coltach ri daoine eile, ‘s tu dol thun na fèille?’ ‘Coilear no coingheall,’ arsa Dughall, ‘cha deach, ‘s cha tèid mu m’ mhuineal-sa. Cha bhi coingheall ach air coin nan daoin’ uaisle’ (MacFadyen 1902, 202-03).⁹

[Thirty years ago, no old man you would meet with about the north coasts of Argyll would say, ‘There’s a collar on the dog’s neck.’ Rather, they would say, ‘There’s a “coingheall” on the dog’s neck.’ I once knew a good man, and he never wore a collar. His wife told him one day when he was going to the fair, ‘Dougal, why won’t you put on a collar on your neck like other men, and you going to the fair?’ ‘Collar or *coingheall*’, said Dougal, ‘has never and will never go on my neck. A *coingheall* only goes on the neck of a nobleman’s dog.’] (Author’s translation)

The reference to his wife implies, of course, that the Peursan Mór was a Protestant clergyman in what was to become an overwhelmingly (but not entirely) Catholic island. This crucial detail is elided in MacPherson’s account, whether out of courtesy to the Protestant interviewer, or perhaps because it was downplayed in family tradition. A fragmentary narrative, with accompanying translation, referring to what is evidently the same event, recorded at the turn of the twentieth century from a Maggie MacDonald, Eòlaigearraidh, Barra, is rather more specific:

There is a spot at Ben-Faslan in Barra which is said by people to be haunted by something, and there is a tradition which tells how it came to be haunted. This was the way: –

O cheann fad, cha robh ach aon Protastanach [*sic*] ann an Eilean Bharraidh, agus bha na Papanach ag iarraidh a mharbhadh. Ach

bha e 'na dhuine cho anabarrach laidir, agus cha robh iad a faotainn cothrom ceart air. Ach aig a' cheann mu dheireadh, 'nuair a bha e dol dhachaidh aon oidhche dhorch, thainig iad air, agus mur robh uin' aige e fein a dhion, mharbhadh e: Agus O'n [*sic*] am sin gus a so, tha iad a cumail a mach gum bheil an spot sin air a thathaich, agus tha eagal air na Protastanaich dol seachad 'san oidhche, ach tha croiseachan beaga aig na Papanach, a tha iad a saoil sinn a shabhailicheas iad, agus cha 'n eagal orrasan.

Long ago, there was only one Protestant in the island of Barra, and the Roman Catholics were seeking to kill him. But he was a man, so very strong, and they were not getting a right opportunity on him. But at the latter end, when he was going home one dark night, they came upon him, and before he had time to defend himself, he was killed. And from that time till this, they are holding out that that spot is haunted, and the Protestants are afraid to pass at night, but the Roman Catholics have little crosses, which they are thinking will save them, and they are not afraid (SSS ML MS 8223).

Although no overt hostility is expressed, the gist of MacPherson's tale, as recorded by Alexander Carmichael, is clearly antagonistic to the Protestant faith: the Peursan Mór had been reconstrued in the communal imagination as an archetypal wicked clergyman. As well as being married, the chaplain consorts with a concubine and hunts with a dog on a chain, probably for the cormorants so plentiful on the headland of Àird Ghrinn.¹⁰

Maggie MacDonald's account ends in the death of a defenceless man and a haunting understood as being especially hazardous to Protestants. Catholics, on the other hand, could resist the chaplain's ghost with their *croiseachan beaga* or little crosses. This version of events, with its reference to Protestants walking the coffin road of Ciste na Cli, may well derive from an early nineteenth-century reworking of the original legend, responding to increased socio-religious tensions on the island. As discussed above, islanders were cleared from Eòlaigearraidh during the late 1820s, both to other townships on the island and over the Atlantic to Cape Breton, while a number of Protestant tenant farmers were brought in from other islands to farm the fertile *machair* land in the north and west. The

Barra people continued, however, to use the traditional burial ground in Eòlaigearraidh: the coastal path may thus have taken on an added significance, a road on which those who had been cleared from the land could return in death to their ancestral lair. Carrying ‘little crosses’ allowed the Catholic tenantry to evade the malevolent ghost – there was probably a cairn marking the place of his murder – while their hapless new Protestant masters apparently trembled with fear.¹¹

The Historical Background

Documentary evidence testifies that there was indeed a Peursan Mór who was murdered in Barra. In 1633, Archibald Campbell (c.1607-61), Lord Lorne, was administering the Campbell of Argyll estates in the place of his exiled Catholic father. In his position as heritable Justiciar of Argyll and the Isles, he prepared a series of accusations against Ragnall mac Ailein ’ic Iain of Benbecula, Ragnall MacDonald (d. 1636). MacDonald, the uncle of Iain Mùideartach (d. 1670), Captain of Clan Ranald, was a notorious character, a ruthless, vociferous, five-times married defender of Catholicism, who two decades beforehand had effectively carved out of the clan territories a personal island fiefdom for himself in Benbecula and Uist.¹² Among the charges levelled against McDonald by Lorne was:

Item ye sd Rannald m^callane v^eeane alias M^cDonald in ye monethe of Junii 1609 yeirs Came to ye yll of Bara and y^r maist cruelly wickedlie and unmerciefullie killed & slew to ye deathe umq^{ll} Johne M^cniell persone & minister of Bara (NRS DI1/59 fo.427^r; Macphail 1934, 226-27).

The wider context for these accusations relates to Lord Lorne’s furthering Campbell interests, and those of the Protestant Church of Scotland, over the western seaboard of the Scottish Gàidhealtachd. In 1633 Lorne acquired major debts owed by Clan Ranald; the following year these were exploited in order to extend the feudal superiority of the House of Argyll over the clan’s mainland territories of Moidart, Arisaig, and Morar. The accusations levelled at Ragnall mac Ailein ’ic Iain are evidently an attempt at eliminating a disruptive, uncooperative figure in the other wing of

the clan lands, South Uist and Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides (Macinnes 2012, 72-87; Stiùbhart 1997, 134-38, 141-46).

The MacNeils of Barra in Maritime Perspective

The immediate context for the murder of the Peursan Mór is more challenging to elicit. Contemporary evidence makes clear that around the alleged time of the parson's murder the MacNeils were riven by internecine rivalry involving the offspring of the two wives of the chief Ruairidh MacNeil (d. c.1622), better known as Ruairidh an Tartair. Any attempt at recreating a coherent historical narrative is hindered not only by a chronic dearth of archival sources, but also by the fact that, as with other Hebridean kindreds of this era, the MacNeils were not operating on the western Scottish seaboard alone, but within a broader archipelagic framework. The following remarks attempt to sketch a tentative, conjectural, and provisional interpretation of island history during the period.

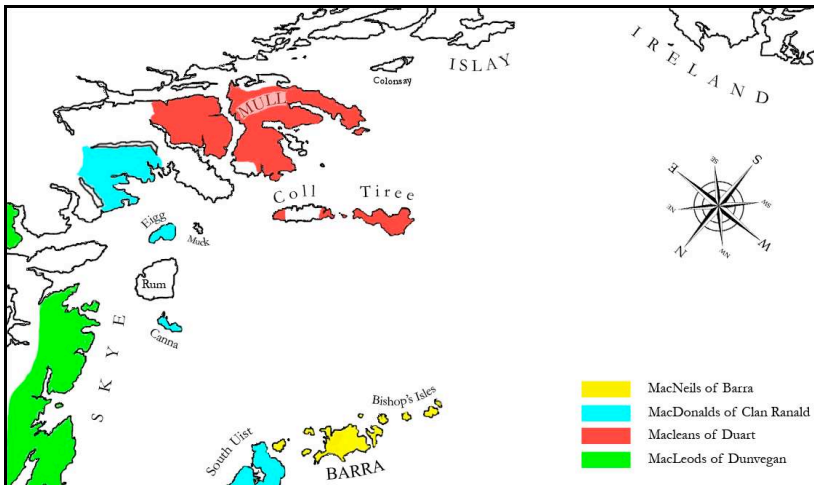


Figure 2. A vernacular vantage point: the view from Barra, c.1610

Since the collapse of the MacDonald Lordship of the Isles in the latter half of the fifteenth century, the Macleans of Duart, the MacLeods of Harris, the Mackinnons of Strath in Skye, and the

MacNeils of Barra regularly cooperated in a loose strategic coalition to counter the still formidable strength of Clan Donald. Unlike other clans in the Outer Hebrides, the MacNeils lacked a mainland ‘wing’ to their territories as a source of crucial timber supplies. It is likely that they depended upon other kindreds, in particular the powerful and ambitious Macleans of Duart, for the raw material, and perhaps the expertise, with which to build, rig, and maintain their galleys.¹³ At the southern end of the Outer Hebrides, Barra lay within the sphere of influence of the Macleans of Duart, the preeminent branch of the wider Maclean kindred, whose territories embraced much of the Isle of Mull, the Isle of Tiree, and the two ends of the Isle of Coll. Politically, Barra could be described as being as much part of what contemporaries referred to as the ‘Southern Isles’ – that is, the islands lying to the south of Ardnamurchan Point – as it was of the north. In an obligation to the Bishop of the Isles in 1585, Ruairidh MacNeil of Barra described Lachlann Mór Maclean of Duart as his ‘chief and master’ (NRS RD1/27, 21^{r-v}; Maclean-Bristol 1999, 44, 45n.30). ‘Johne and Murdo, sones to Rory M^ckneill of Barry’ were among the hostages given to Aonghas MacDonald of Dùn Naomhaig in order to release Lachlann Mór Maclean of Duart in 1587, while the chief’s brother is said to have fallen fighting with the Maclean forces in the Battle of Glenlivet, 1594 (*RPC* iv [1585-92], 160; Campbell of Airds 2002, 113-14).

Despite the small size and relative poverty of the MacNeil estate, their chiefs were not insignificant players in the politics of the western Gàidhealtachd towards the end of the sixteenth century. Contemporary sources estimate that Barra and its adjacent islands could raise the respectable figure of two or perhaps three hundred fighting men (Cameron 1936, 253; Giuseppi 1952, 37). The kindred’s real strength, however, lay in seapower, seamanship, and the boldness and charisma of its chiefs.¹⁴ The summer plundering season took the men of Barra as far afield as Shetland to the north and Munster, Ireland, to the south, involving them in politics and conflict far beyond the Hebrides:

MacNeil Barra (M^cNeale Barroh) who was reputed the best seafaring warrior in the Islands and is most remote to the north and by west, as I take it, is a follower to MacLean and has been

accustomed to invade Ulla in Connaught (Conoght) in Ireland, being O'Mallye's country and to prey in the sea coast of Connaught aforesaid, Thomond, Kyerye and Desmond in Ireland. Whereupon Grany ny Mallye and he invaded one another's possessions through far distant. I have heard some of MacNeil's sept have come with the Mallyes to prey Valensia, an island in M^cCarty More's country, with borders adjoining (Giuseppi 1952, 206).¹⁵

The MacNeils' ambition comes through in a somewhat untrustworthy contemporary anecdote, probably recounted by Ruairidh an Tartair himself in his old age, recorded by the anonymous compiler of a description of Barra, around 1620:

the Superior or Laird of Barray is called Rorie [*blank*] M^cneill he is sex or sevin score of yeares as himself did say, This ancient man in tyme of his yewth being a valiant and Stout man of warr and heareing from Skippers that oftymes wer wont to travell to ane Illand which the Inhabitants of the Illand alledged this M^cneill and his prediccors should be there Superiors which Illand is sein oftymes ffrom the tope of the Mountanes of Barray. This Rorie heareing oftymes the same Newes reported to him & to his prediccors he ffraughted a shipe but nowayes could ffind the Illand At last was driven to Ireland on the west syd theroff And took wp a Spreath [*spréidh* or plunder] And returned home yrefter (NLS Adv. MS 34.2.8 fo.187^v; Campbell 1998, 46-47; Ó hÓgáin 1999).

The reputation for archipelagic maritime reach, and their long-standing association with the powerful Macleans of Duart, allowed the MacNeils a small but noteworthy and clearly lucrative role as combatants and, not to put too fine a point on it, as pirates on the western seaboard of Scotland and Ireland during the confused and violent latter half of the sixteenth century.¹⁶ A pride in the kindred pervades contemporary waulking songs, for example in the lines in *An Spaidearachd Bharrach* ['The Barra Flyting']:

Mo cheòl-ghàire
Bheireadh am fìon
Chuireadh crùidhean

Ruairi an Tartair!
d'a chuid eachaibh,
òir fo'n casan,

’S iomadh claidheamh	gléghéal lasrach,
’S iomadh targaid	fuilteach stracach,
Chunnaig mo shùil	anns a’ chaisteal –
’S a chuid dhaoine	mar na farspaich
’S gach ian eile	thà ’s an ealtainn ...

(Campbell and Collinson 1969-81, 2: ll.1111-19; Campbell 1999, 129; Campbell 2005, 286)

[My joy of laughter	Ruairidh the Tartar!
Who’d give wine	to his horses,
Who’d put golden	horseshoes on their feet,
Many a sword	flaming white,
Many a targe	bloody and rent,
My eye saw	in the castle –
And his men	like the black-backed gulls
And every other bird	that is in the sky...]

(Author’s translation)

The importance of the MacNeils might be pointed up by the remarkable, and apparently successful, efforts made by Lachlann Mór Maclean of Duart – up to and including lobbying Queen Elizabeth herself – in order to ensure the safety and repatriation from prison in England of a John MacNeil, now ‘Johne Neale’, ‘a special kinsman of M^cNeill of Barra’.¹⁷ Indeed, it is virtually certain that Lachlann Mór’s second son Lachlann Òg was fostered in Barra with the MacNeils: the nickname given to him in a near-contemporary source, the Wardlaw MS, written by the Rev. James Fraser of Kirkhill (1634-1709), is Lachlann Barrach, Lachlan the Barraman.¹⁸

Nevertheless, one should not exaggerate the power of the kindred. Far-flung plundering expeditions were a remarkable attestation of the seamanship of the MacNeils; it is notable, however, that these lengthy voyages prudently sidestepped the closer, more turbulent and dangerous areas of Ulster and the western Highlands. As their unstable alliance with the O’Malleys suggests, MacNeil piracy was based primarily upon expediency, opportunism, and a need to avoid provoking the authorities. Again, Lachlann Mór’s endeavours to gain pardon for John MacNeil might best be understood as part of a wider initiative to open up channels of

communication with Elizabeth's court, and to enhance his own personal standing and authority therein.

Internal Unrest

The beginning of the seventeenth century saw decisive shifts in the equilibrium of power in the western Scottish Gàidhealtachd. In brief, having succeeded to the throne of England in 1603, and with the Nine Years War in Ulster brought to a successful conclusion, James VI was now able to give teeth to the policy of pacifying the western Highlands which he had developed over the previous two decades. Through the agency of various regional magnates, the Campbells of Argyll, the Gordons of Huntly, and the Mackenzies of Seaforth, with the support of Lowland burghs and merchants eager to develop and profit from the rich west coast fisheries, and wielding the threat of a new 'British Navy', the Crown began vigorously to assert its authority over the region. Two major kindreds, Clan Donald South and the MacLeods of Lewis, already weakened by internal dissension, had been forfeited; their estates were in the process of being planted, the former by Campbell tenants, the latter by merchants from the Lowlands.¹⁹

For the MacNeils of Barra, opportunities for mercenary employment and plunder in Ireland had dried up following the end of the Nine Years War.²⁰ At the same time, the influence of their erstwhile suzerains, the Macleans of Duart, was clearly on the wane following the devastating defeat by Clan Donald South at the Battle of Gruineart in Islay in 1598 in which their chief Lachlann Mór was killed. Alongside other island kindreds, the MacNeils had given armed assistance to rebel MacLeods resisting the plantation of Lewis. This may well have radicalised those who took part; it certainly drew upon them the ire of the Crown. In 1607 James VI charged the Marquis of Huntly to 'extirpate and rute out ... M^cNeill Barra, with his clan' along with the neighbouring MacDonalds of Clan Ranald.²¹ Swiftly changing circumstances the following year – Cathair Ó Dochartaigh's rising in Ulster, and the kidnapping and imprisonment in the Lowlands of most of the island chiefs through a stratagem of Andrew Stewart, Lord Ochiltree – were to render such aggressive plantation strategies undesirable and even impracticable (Goodare 1998, 33-34; Cathcart 2010).

By 1609 at the latest the MacNeil kindred was wracked by internecine warfare. As stated above, the chief, Ruairidh an Tartair, had two families of sons with two different women. Contemporary evidence is contradictory: the most persuasive interpretation, by the Gaelic scholar John Lorne Campbell (1906-1996), suggests that the chief’s first, legitimate wife was Mòr MacDonald, sister to Dòmhnall mac Ailein, Captain of Clan Ranald, and Ragnall mac Ailein of Benbecula, while his other partner – island tradition alluded to a ‘love-match’ – was Màiri MacLeod, previously the wife of Donnchadh Campbell of Castle Sween and mother to Sir Dùghall Campbell of Auchinbreck (Campbell 1954, 35-37).²²

A rough transcription of a somewhat cryptic document dated 1585, made in 1838 by the Victorian peerage lawyer John Riddell (1785-1862), suggests how the Peursan Mór became entangled in the MacNeils’ internecine vendetta (NLS Adv. MS 26.3.7, 233-34).²³ In this document ‘rorie oig’, clearly the chief Ruairidh an Tartair, obliges himself and his heirs not to allow his son ‘jone makneill’ (evidently still a minor) to succeed to his lands until certain unspecified promises, made to Uilleam, chief of the MacLeods of Harris, and to his daughter, had been fulfilled. Riddell found her name problematic to transcribe, but it must be Màiri MacLeod, the ‘other wife’ of Ruairidh an Tartair. It may be that ‘jone makneill’ is their son Iain Òg. Nominated as cautioner is ‘Donald makneill person of [?aynocht] and Kyllevarie’. The last name is evidently Cille Bharra, the principal church on the island. The previous name, which eluded the transcriber and may have been misunderstood by the original writer, is most likely ‘Eynort’, referring to the church of St Maolrubha at Clachan Eynort in MacLeod territory on the west coast of Skye (Innes 1851-55, 2(1):357).²⁴ Also subscribing to the obligation is ‘Jone Makpherson vik neill’, Iain mac a’ Pheursain mhic Néill: our Peursan Mór, the son and heir of Dòmhnall. Unsatisfactory though Riddell’s transcription may be, it raises the possibility that by the mid-1580s Ruairidh, chief of the MacNeils, anticipated opposition from the kindred to discharging certain obligations he had made to Màiri MacLeod and her father, and charged Dòmhnall mac Néill, parson of Cille Bharra, as well as the parson’s son and heir, Iain, to ensure that these promises were fulfilled. Aligned through his father with the MacLeod faction of the

chiefs' sons, and possibly administering church lands in both MacNeil and MacLeod territories, the Peursan Mór would find himself a target for subsequent MacDonald aggression.²⁵

If the Peursan Mór was indeed murdered in June 1609, the immediate context is clear. The previous year, Ruairidh an Tartair, chief of the MacNeils, had avoided capture by Ochiltree's expedition. Eachann Òg Maclean of Duart, the chief upon whom MacNeil was 'a dependair', had been charged by the authorities to 'mak him obedient and answerable' (*RPC* viii [1607-10], 174). At the beginning of June 1609 James VI granted a commission to Andrew Knox, Bishop of the Isles, for a new expedition to the Hebrides, while in the middle of the month the island chiefs who had been seized the previous year, having agreed terms with the authorities, were at last released from captivity. On 23 August 1609 they would reconvene on the island of Iona in order to subscribe their names to a series of statutes intended to impose royal authority on the Hebrides through socio-economic, religious, educational, legal, and military reforms. For a decade the forceful policies of the Crown in the west had placed clan élites throughout the Hebrides under increasing pressure: should they cooperate and seek accommodation, or else choose to resist? As seen above, in the case of two major kindreds, Clan Donald South and Siol Torcail, the MacLeods of Lewis, such disputes exacerbated existing internal dynastic struggles between competing factions and eventually led to wholesale forfeiture and extirpation.²⁶ Their chief may have avoided capture the previous year, but it was now imperative for the MacNeils to decide what future strategy to adopt regarding the new Crown ascendancy.

Plunder and Aftermath

The critical event in the history of Barra during this period probably occurred in late 1609. A merchant ship from Bordeaux under the command of Abel Dynes, 'laden with Spanish wine', anchored off Barra. Some of the islanders had boarded the ship and despoiled it, killing or wounding at least five of her crew in the process (*RPC* ix [1609-13], 318; x [1613-16], 817; Mackenzie 1903, 287-88). As has been seen, hitherto the MacNeils of Barra had managed to stand apart from the major political upheavals on the western seaboard.

Ruairidh an Tartair had been ‘the only notable absentee’ from the signing of the Statutes of Iona in August: all other island chiefs had pledged themselves henceforth answerable to the authorities, ‘refocusing southwards their lifestyles and loyalties’ (MacGregor 2001; 2006, 116). The spoiling of Dynes’ ship in the aftermath of the Statutes offered an opportunity for each faction of sons on Barra to attempt to play the other off against the legal authorities in Edinburgh. The blatant act of piracy also provided a pretext for outside kindreds with an interest in the island to prove their loyalty by being seen to impose order and bring miscreants to justice in an island hitherto beyond the reach of the Crown. Contemporary sources suggest that the outcome was a ratcheting of pressure within the MacNeils until one group effectively broke the other.

In January 1610 Eachann Òg Maclean of Duart was given a commission to apprehend Ruairidh an Tartair on charges of committing ‘all kind of barbaritie’ on the inhabitants of Barra; James VI expressed his irritation that ‘such an unworthie captive [miserable wretch] sould be sufferit without controlment so long to continew rebellious or to braith the air of our cuntrey’ (*RPC* viii [1607-10], 396). But Dòmhnall MacDonald of Clan Ranald appears to have forestalled Maclean: later the same month he seized Iain MacNeil, Ruairidh’s eldest son by Màiri MacLeod, and despatched him to the Tolbooth in Edinburgh. Soon afterwards, Iain MacNeil ‘endit this lyffe’ in captivity (*RPC* x [1613-16], 817). According to tradition, his detention led his foster-mother to compose the waulking song *Iain Òg mac Mhic Néill*, recorded by Alexander Carmichael from Marion MacNeil on 2 December 1870:

Cha’n e chreach mi –	[It is not that which destroyed
Mo chui[r]tear donn	me, [but] My noble courtier
An laimh an Glaschu	In captivity in Glasgow
’S iad a ruitheadh	And them [?binding him]
Chuir a Shasunn	To send him to England
No Dhun-eideann nan	Or to Edinburgh of the
ard fasan	high fashions]
(EUL CW7/8 [fo.14 ^v]; Author’s translation).	

Iain MacNeil’s fate is described in the accompanying narrative:

Thainig an toir eir Iain og agus rugadh eir agus e tighinn eir tir a sgoth iasgaich agus thugadh eir falbh e phriosanach e mach do Ghlascho. Is e bas a thug iad da a chur ann an togsaid agus biorann iaruin troimh na clair agus an tosgaid a leigeil le beinn an dala [del: cuid] h-aite an Duneideann no an Sasunn (EUL CW7/8 [fo.14]; Carmichael et al. 1900-71, 5:22).

[Iain Òg was pursued, and he was captured disembarking from a fishing boat. He was taken away as a prisoner to Glasgow. The way they killed him was to put him in a hogshead barrel with iron spikes through the boards, and to roll the hogshead down a slope, either in Edinburgh or in England.] (Author's translation)

The anecdote serves as a reminder that Highlanders as well as Lowlanders could entertain prejudices and fears concerning the habitual barbarity and violence of the inhabitants of the other half of the country.

For his part, Eachann Òg Maclean of Duart apprehended and sent south Niall Uibhisteach, eldest son of Mòr, Clan Ranald's sister, and legitimate heir to the estate, on a similar charge of piracy. Although 'Abell Dynneis agentis and procuatoris [were] hard aganis him, thir could no thing be verifeit aganis him of that insolence committit aganis Abell Dynneis'. At the end of July 1610 Niall was allowed to return to the islands on bail, with his uncle, the Captain of Clan Ranald, going surety (*RPC* ix [1609-13], 32; x, 817). Although the case was reconvened at the end of 1611, Niall Uibhisteach was clearly and understandably reluctant to return to Edinburgh; it was not until January 1613 that he was exhibited before the Privy Council there (*RPC* ix [1609-13], 295-96, 318, 533-34). His eventual appearance was likely calculated to win favour with the authorities, given recent reported events in Barra.

In October 1612, Niall Òg and Gill-Eóghanan, the two surviving sons of Ruairidh an Tartair and Màiri MacLeod, apparently carried out a violent, well-armed attack on the MacNeil stronghold of Ciosmul. They captured their father, detained him in irons along with Gill-Eóghanan Òg, the other son of Mòr MacDonald, and garrisoned Ciosmul for themselves (*RPC* x [1613-16], 6-7). The Privy Council gave Dòmhnall MacDonald of Clan Ranald a commission to arrest them, but nothing further was done (*RPC* x

[1613-16], 28; xiv [Addenda, 1545-1625], 574). Perhaps the two brothers enjoyed popular support, and were too well secured against attack. On the other hand, the account of their attack on Ciosmul may in fact be simply an opportune fiction: this at any rate was Niall Òg’s contention in the late 1620s, with the two supposed captives, conveniently, ‘being many yeirs agoe depairtit yis Lyff’ (NRS DI1/53 [15 Jul 1629]). Again, the Clan Ranald kindred may have been incapable of taking further decisive action: the clan was riven by internal dissension which would shortly lead to the effective secession of the Uist wing of the estate under Dòmhnall’s brother Ragnall mac Ailein, while Dòmhnall, now dwelling in the mainland territories, made peace with his erstwhile rival Sir Ruairidh MacLeod of Harris (*RPC* x [1613-16], 776; Stewart 1982, 51-52; Stiùbhart 1996, 121-27, 183-85). For the authorities, Barra was just too remote and unimportant to deal with directly. The *status quo* prevailed: Niall Òg was now *de facto* chief, his position strengthened by a timely marriage in 1614 to Màiri, sister of Eachann Òg Maclean of Duart (NRS DI1/53 [5 Aug 1629]).²⁷

Resolution?

Niall Òg MacNeil, the eldest son of Màiri MacLeod, appears to have triumphed. It is clear, however, that the legitimate heir, Niall Uibhisteach, remained a force to be reckoned with. From the evidence of the anonymous description of the island composed around 1620, the aged Ruairidh an Tartair had resumed his chieftaincy before his death (NLS Adv. MS 34.2.8 fos.187, 187^v; Campbell 1999, 46-47). It is unclear, however, whether this peace involved some form of settlement and reparations with the defeated Niall Uibhisteach. A formal arrangement was certainly accomplished by 1622; the fact that this appears to coincide with the death of old Ruairidh an Tartair, and the assumption the previous year of the superiority of Barra by the exceptionally able and ambitious Ruairidh MacKenzie of Còigeach, then carving out a position for himself as a regional magnate in his own right, suggests that MacKenzie played a significant role in brokering the agreement (MacCoinnich 2004, 323n.1179; NRS GD305/1/68/6-9). It is probable that he was aided in this by Lachlann Òg Maclean, who in

1617 had assumed the titles to the clan lands – now administered as a free barony by MacKenzie – in place of his elder and less capable brother Eachann Òg. As stated above, Lachlann's other nickname Barrach, and indeed the marriage ties he contracted, suggest that he had spent his childhood fostered out to the MacNeils.²⁸

In return for a payment of one thousand merks and yearly rent of 3s. 4d. Scots thereafter, Niall Uibhisteach was effectively allowed his own fiefdom in the north of Barra, that part of the island closest to his foster-kin in South Uist: liferent on a swathe of exceptionally productive farms, with a further tack of these lands to be held by his heirs for twenty-one years after his death (NRS RD1/427 fos.484^v-485^v; Campbell 1954, 33, 34). It is clear from the unusually firm tenor of the document, explicitly binding allegiance to the chiefly house on Niall Uibhisteach and his heirs 'aganis all personis q^tsomever (his Majesteis auctoritie onlie exceptit)', from the bond's subsequent renewal thrice over the following decade; from Niall Uibhisteach's ready conversion to Catholicism in 1626 while his half-brother continued to adhere to Protestantism in order to protect his position; and from later litigation threatened by Niall Uibhisteach against Niall Òg, that the reconciliation was not entirely amicable (NRS RD2/4, 326-9; Shaw 1980, 49, 52; Giblin 1964, 77; Campbell 1954, 33-34; NRS DI1/53 [15 Jul 1629]).²⁹

If Iain mac a' Pheursain, Am Peursan Mór, was indeed murdered in June 1609, the act would fit in well with a picture of increasing internal dissension and Clan Ranald aggression in the island, culminating in the apprehension and despatch by the Clan Ranald MacDonalds of Iain Òg MacNeil, their nearest rival. Yet it appears unlikely that the Protestant clergyman of the island could have been murdered without the act being at least alluded to in contemporary official sources. The Peursan Mór was a historical figure. He was murdered. His story concentrates our attention on the political circumstances in Barra in the early seventeenth century, but the actual event and its immediate context remain elusive.

Conclusion

An historical microstudy dealing with a minor, peripheral kindred in the Outer Hebrides, relying upon scant and ambiguous documentary evidence supplemented by folkloric anecdotes recorded nearly three

centuries after the supposed event: what is its use? We might argue that the very act of taking a Barra-centric approach offers, if not a decentering counternarrative, then at least one complementary to traditional government-focused historiographical perspectives: a vernacular vantage point facing south-east, we might say, rather than north-west, one in which the usual 'Highland Problem' is balanced by an equivalent 'British Problem', or, perhaps, an 'Edinburgh Problem'. Setting conventional expectations aside, and discarding the timeworn 'cant of conquest', it might be argued that such perspectives offer an opportunity to begin to reassess, and perhaps reconceptualise, the diversity of indigenous political strategies employed by clan élites in negotiating the new dispensation imposed in the wake of Crown expansionism. The Barra example demonstrates that these strategies were framed and fashioned in the political and economic contexts of two archipelagic matrices: the larger ('British') North-East Atlantic archipelago, as recently outlined by Alison Cathcart (2010), and, within this, the 'archipelagic borderland' of the Hebrides.³⁰ Indeed, the presence in Barra of a Protestant parson, and his eventual murder, demonstrate how the island was already entangled in much wider political and religious alignments and contentions. Understanding the political dynamics of the period necessitates going beyond examining bilateral relationships forged between the island clans on the one hand and the Privy Council on the other, in order to gauge the complex and often unpredictable interactions among Hebridean kindreds, regional magnates, and various sectors of the state and ecclesiastical administrations.

Recently, in a series of fascinating debates, historians have cast valuable light upon the roots, contexts, interpretation, and overall significance of the Statutes of Iona of 1609. More work, however, remains to be done in appraising their implementation in the Hebridean archipelago itself, and in evaluating how they were perceived and negotiated by chiefs, clan élites, regional magnates, and, perhaps, by different strands of island public opinion. Evidence from Barra, exiguous and limited as it is, suggests what one might expect: namely, that in both the short-term and the long-term, government initiatives had varying outcomes in different islands and among different kindreds, depending upon the particular

contingencies of location and circumstance, of existing affiliations of kinship, marriage, and fosterage, and of the personality, ambition, and diplomatic skills of individual chiefs. These effects were haphazard, unpredictable, paradoxical – and sometimes of less consequence than might be expected.

Barra offers an intriguing example of an island kindred not directly affected by the Statutes of Iona. Its chief Ruairidh an Tartair was not kidnapped and held captive, and did not subscribe to the measures in August 1609. Nevertheless, their ratification appears to have represented a turning point for the MacNeils. Firstly, as was the case with a number of other kindreds, the measures possibly provoked further internal dissension, judging by the evidence of contemporary song, at all levels of society. Secondly, the prospect of official favour encouraged two competing chiefs, Dòmhnall MacDonald of Clan Ranald and Eachann Maclean of Duart, to jockey for influence, both in Barra itself and with the Edinburgh authorities, employing violence and litigation in attempts to demonstrate their control over a particularly recalcitrant neighbouring clan. For the short-term at least, however, the victorious MacNeil faction, relying upon the island's remoteness and insignificance, was able to pursue a calculated policy of sitting tight and ignoring Crown authority.

Fosterage plays a significant role in the history of Barra during this period, with events testifying to its continuing resilience and adaptability, but also to the potential risks it incurred (Parkes 2006). The case of 'John Neale' above, effectively boarded out as a youth apprentice to a Devon merchant, suggests the flexibility of the institution and its potential to forge new cross-cultural affiliations in changing circumstances. Yet when 'Neale' faced the death penalty for murder in a distant Exeter jail, 'an alien, and ignorant of our [English] laws' (Green 1869, 122), he found himself unable to call upon his kindred for support and mediation. In another example, fosterage was evidently employed in an attempt to reconcile the MacNeils with the MacDonalds of Clan Ranald, following what appears to have been a lengthy feud between them over the ownership of Boisdale, the southern district of South Uist. The marriage of Ruairidh an Tartair, chief of the MacNeils, to Mòr MacDonald, sister of Dòmhnall MacDonald of Clan Ranald, and the

subsequent – and culturally unorthodox – patronal fostering within MacDonald territory of Niall, the legitimate heir to the Barra estate (known to contemporaries as Niall Uibhisteach or Niall the Uistman), were clearly intended to end the contention. The desire to support their foster-child against his usurping half-brothers may have further embroiled the MacDonalds in internal Barra politics; if the substance of John MacPherson’s narrative is to be trusted, it may also have brought about the murder of the Peursan Mór. Perhaps most significant of all is the case of Lachlann Òg Maclean, Lachlann Barrach, the second son of Lachlann Mór, whose nickname implies that he was fostered with the MacNeils in Barra. As stated above, it is highly probable that he played a crucial role in settling the conflict dividing the kindred.

Although internal dissension and discord had hardly been lacking in island kindreds beforehand, the episodes described above evoke the increased tensions experienced within clan élites in the wake of the political, economic, and cultural realignments outlined in the Statutes of Iona. To cope with the new configurations of power, controversial strategies had to be devised, endorsed, and put into practice. Circumstances certainly differed, but a common denominator affecting the three principal kindreds discussed in this article was that chiefly authority was challenged, and power either substantially redistributed between assertive younger rivals and regional magnates, or else taken away entirely. The Clan Ranald estates were effectively divided between Domhnall MacDonald on the mainland and his younger brother Raghnaidh in the islands; the Maclean lands were taken out of the hands of the chief, Eachann Òg, and placed under the administration of Ruairidh MacKenzie of Cóiageach, in alliance with his younger brother Lachlann Òg; in Barra, the apparent legitimate MacNeil heir, Niall Uibhisteach, would be permanently deprived of his birthright.³¹ But if this period encouraged fresh discord, events also seem to testify to the ability of clan élites to manage internal conflict without provoking major bloodshed, so as to avoid courting potential outside interference and the fate of the forfeited MacLeods of Lewis and the MacDonalds of Dùn Naomhaig. Despite a protracted period of internecine strife, events in Barra at this time demonstrate how kindreds working in tandem could bring about between contending factions a measure of

reconciliation, and a sometimes precarious peace, through a form of restorative justice.

Finally, the case study of the Peursan Mór testifies to the significant role played by local clergy in the western Gàidhealtachd even after the Reformation. The narrative draws attention to a network of native clerical families serving as hereditary administrators of local church sites throughout the islands. These minor kindreds may not have been as illustrious as their major learned order counterparts such as Clann Mhuirich in South Uist; nevertheless, thanks to their continuing patronage and employment by local élites and by the state church (opportunities, it should be noted, generally denied to their native counterparts in Ireland), they proved themselves remarkably resilient and adaptable in the generations after the Reformation (Ó hAnnracháin 2010, 6; Thomson 1968, 65-68).

The significance of such ‘vernacular historiography’ as historical evidence is, of course, not necessarily dependent upon its ostensible truth value. Nevertheless, matrices of folk memory repay close analysis, focusing attention on actors, events, processes, institutions, perceptions, and identities that, despite their historical import, may not be immediately apparent in the profusion of contemporary archival sources.³² Over the past 150 years many hundreds, if not thousands, of comparable historical narratives have been recorded throughout the region: it is to be hoped that this article might encourage the further exploration of these rich, voluminous, multi-layered – and intriguingly treacherous – sources of social memory, and suggest their potential value in illuminating wider historical processes and opening up new avenues of research into popular perceptions, commemorations, and reconstructions of the Gaelic past.

For their kind assistance and advice, I would like to acknowledge my grateful thanks to Bill Lawson, Aonghas MacCoinnich, Angus Macmillan, Alasdair Roberts, and Anke-Beate Stahl; to staff at the Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library; the National Library of Scotland; the National Records of Scotland; the School of Scottish Studies Archive; and to those who offered suggestions when an earlier draft of this paper was read at a

seminar at Sabhal Mór Ostaig, University of the Highlands and Islands. I am especially obliged to Calum MacNeil for being so kind in sharing his encyclopaedic knowledge of his native Barra. Finally, my deepest thanks to my colleagues at the Carmichael Watson Project, Guinevere Barlow, Kirsty Stewart, and Andrew Wiseman, for their help and support; and to the editors of Béascna for their generosity and forbearance with what at least began as a microstudy. Mo mhíle taing dhuibh uile: tha mi fada 'nur comain.

Notes

- ¹ Note the belief recorded in SSS ML MS 8523, that in Barra it was thought unlucky to give a child his father's name, as this was thought to bring about the father's death. John MacPherson was himself to have a son named John (b. 1848) although in this case the son was probably named after his paternal grandfather.
- ² See Branigan 2010, 80-83, 91-92; and 2012, 110-12; Campbell 1998, 135-48; Newby 1998-2000, 125-26, 138-39. It is tempting to identify the 'contumacious Widow', about whom MacNeil writes on 30 July 1825 that he has sent 'very conclusive orders' (Campbell 1998, 144), with Marion MacPherson herself. The events described by John MacPherson may have taken place either in autumn 1827 or summer 1830, during a time of exceptional destitution on the island: see the excerpts from letters by Father Neil MacDonald of Barra to Father Angus MacDonald, Rome, 7 October 1827 and 4 March 1831, printed in Campbell 1999, 49-50, 51-52.
- ³ Reciters: Kate Gillies, Ceit Mhicheil Fhionnlaigh (1891-1979) and Flora Gillies, Flòraidh Iain Néill (1901-1999), both Caolas Bhatarsaigh; Nan MacKinnon, Nan Eachainn Fhionnlaigh (1903-1982), Bhatarsaigh. No likely John MacPherson has been located in the War Office deserter registers in the National Archives WO25 class, although it should be noted that the regimental lists, as bound, are often acephalous, and that MacPherson is said to have enlisted on behalf of another. The *bon mot* 'chaochail e 'bheatha' may first have been coined about one 'Ragnall Tàillear' from Barra, said to have deserted at the time of the Napoleonic War: see NFC 1030, 44-50.
- ⁴ In 1851, Catherine in Bréibhig was caring for their infant daughter Mary, while their young son John is staying with his grandfather Neil Nicolson (c.1789-1880), son of Alexander Nicolson, Earsaraigh, and Marion,

daughter of Murdoch MacDonald, Sgalaraiigh, two crofts away. In 1861, they are looking after the infant Donald.

- ⁵ For John MacPherson's embarrassment in the presence of Alexander Carmichael at Catriona's 'Broad Scotch', muttering '*Feuch, Dia riut, nach toir thu guth air a' rud sin a dh'ionnsaich tu ann an Kirkintilloch!*' ['Make sure, by God, you don't mention that thing you learnt in Kirkintilloch!'], see SA1960/105/A6.
- ⁶ Their marriage may have been that recorded between a Catherine MacPherson and 'Alexander McParlan' in St John's, Glasgow, on 15 April 1854.
- ⁷ The brothers were Niall (1845-1876); Ruairidh (b. 1848), Dòmhnall (1856-1873), Eòghan (1858-1873), and Iagan (1861-1929). For this, my thanks to Calum Macneil. Note the great difference in their ages, casting doubt on the background to the story as related in oral tradition.
- ⁸ Note MacCulloch's supposition, based on the small size of the chapels in the complex, that '[i]t is probable that some of them have been votive buildings.' Before the isthmus on which this complex of sites stands was inundated by a devastating hurricane on 19 February 1749, the complex may have been somewhat more impressive (McKay 1980, 87). My thanks, again, to Calum Macneil for this reference.
- ⁹ The word *coingheall*, implying a leash rather than a chain, may perhaps have been substituted in an earlier telling of the story for an original *slabhraidh*, a word which by the modern period was understood as referring principally to the pot-chain hanging from the rafters of the black house.
- ¹⁰ For hunting cormorants with dogs in Barra, see SSS SA1976/190, /191/A1-3 (Roderick MacPherson, Bruairnis).
- ¹¹ Two structures interpreted as bronze age cairns are recorded on Ciste na Cli in Branigan and Foster 2000, 320 (fig. 9.1). Later folk interpretations, of course, need not belie prehistoric origins.
- ¹² The judgement of the late seventeenth-century historian Niall MacMhuirich was that Ragnhall was 'duine maith do reir na haimsire ina ttarrla se' ['a good man according to his times'] (Cameron 1892-94, 2:172; see also Macinnes 1996, 86n.46).
- ¹³ See the poem *Leagail bheag, is togail bhog*, supposedly composed by Sir Domhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat while in Barra advising MacNeil's carpenter on how to construct a galley (MacLeod 1933, 126-29).
- ¹⁴ See the summing up of the Highland galley in Murdoch 2010, 2-4. Sources credit MacNeil of Barra with 'a fleet of galleys and smaller boats' or 'thirty galleys', not necessarily all from Barra. For the peculiarity of Barra boats in the early nineteenth century, being 'of considerable size', 'swift and safe', see MacCulloch 1824, 3:8-9.

- ¹⁵ For details of the relations between the kindreds of MacNeil and Ó Máille, see MacDonald 1994, 40-1, 68-69, 77. This piratical alliance suggests a less devout interpretation of the Barra men’s ‘pilgrimage’ to Cruach Phádraig in 1593 (*ibid.*, 208; MacDonald 2006, 38, 288n.14). The presence in the 1620s in the church of Cille Barra of an image of the patron saint Barr ‘*quae apud indigenas in magna est veneratione*’ (Giblin 1964, 74) should not necessarily be taken as an example of the continuity of orthodox Catholicism in the island. For the MacNeils in Shetland, see MacPherson 1961, 48-52, 212-15. For other examples of piracy in the Northern Isles during this period, see Murdoch 2010, 118-20, 123-24.
- ¹⁶ Hayes-McCoy 1937, 3, 10, 11, 68, 141, 142, 202, 205-06, 214, 228, 249, 297; also Murdoch 2010, 111-40, particularly 135-40.
- ¹⁷ Giuseppi 1952, 35-37, 45, 53, 58, 138, 145, 159, 171, 200, 221-24, 240-42, and probably 392; Green 1869, 122. About 1580, John MacNeil, then a young boy, had been given as a foster-child to William Nycoll, a merchant from the parish of Northam in Devon. Nycoll evidently regarded this as a prudent investment for the future safety of his ships sailing through the Minch, but the arrangement also suggests bonds of mutual interest and trust between island clans and at least certain merchants of the period, a corrective, perhaps, to the popular picture of the Minch at the time as being an arena of unbridled predatory piracy. Fifteen years later, ‘John Neale’, now a sailor, was imprisoned in Exeter, facing a death sentence having killed a John Harris while defending himself in a brawl. See also Mackie 1969, 892, 894, 945, 1024.
- ¹⁸ Fraser 1905, 233; Sinclair 1899, 144, 146, 148, 163, 164, 171, 172, 173, 457-58.
- ¹⁹ See Macinnes 1996, 56-87; Goodare 1998; MacCoinnich 2002 & 2006; MacGregor 2006; Cathcart 2010.
- ²⁰ For a song reference suggesting that MacNeil mercenaries may have taken part in the Thirty Years War, see Campbell 1950, 28, 51; Brochard 2010, 26.
- ²¹ *RPC* vii [1604-07], 524-25; also Spottiswoode 1847-51, 3:192; Cathcart 2010, 11-12.
- ²² See also Mackenzie 1889, 24-30, 33, 36-38, 40-44; Campbell of Airds 2002, 74-76. A suggestion that the different legal status of the two sets of sons was accepted by themselves is found in the decree (DI1/53 [15 Jul 1629]) on behalf of Ruairidh an Tartair’s successor Niall Óg, son of Màiri MacLeod, in which, repeating the phrasing of the complaint to the Privy Council sixteen years earlier by his half-brother (*RPC* x [1613-16], 6-7), he is referred to as ‘Neill oige Mneill sone natural to umqle rorie Mneill of barra’, while his late half-brother Gill-Eóghanan is ‘Gillievene [*sic*] Oig McNeill his son [i.e. of Ruairidh an Tartair] laull procreat betuixt him

and Morye nyen Allan his spous & sister to ye laitt Capitane of Clanronald'. The two families were of course not necessarily begotten consecutively: see EUL CW90/171 [fos.66^v-67^v] for an historical anecdote concerning a MacNeil of Barra consorting with a noblewoman in Dunstaffnage in mainland Argyll; also, possibly, SSS ML 6421. If Lachlann Òg, second son of Lachlann Mór Maclean of Duart, was indeed fostered in Barra and continued to maintain close ties with the MacNeils, his background would explain the intriguing fact that he married into maternal kin of both sets of sons of Ruairidh an Tartair: his first spouse is recorded as Mòr, daughter of Màiri MacLeod and Donnchadh Caimbeul, while his third, also named Mòr, was daughter of Dòmhnall mac Ailein, Captain of Clan Ranald (Sinclair 1899, 457-58). Iain, second son of Niall Òg, would marry Lachlann Òg's daughter Catriona (Sinclair 1899, 458; Macneil 1923, 74). Clearly these women were rather more than mere pawns and marriage counters. If nothing else, the story of Am Peursan Mór suggests a role for female agency often obscured in the contemporary documentary sources.

²³ Frustratingly, the document's provenance – the charter chest from which it was copied – is unclear: possibly Auchnabreck.

²⁴ There is a remote chance that the word does not in fact refer to a place-name at all, but represents a rare and misunderstood Scottish Gaelic occurrence of *érenagh* or *airchinneach*, a term referring by this time to a member of a clerical family functioning as hereditary chief tenants and administrators of church lands. The fact that in the dialect of Barra slender r is realised as the voiced dental fricative ð may make the transliteration 'aynocht' slightly less tentative, but nevertheless still unlikely.

²⁵ The early association of the MacPherson parsons of Barra with the MacLeods may explain the curious incorporation of the island into the distant parish of Harris in the seventeenth century (Adv. MS 33.2.27 fo.351; Martin 1703, 95). Among the list of MacNeil warriors incorporated into the seventeenth-century waulking song *Latha dhomh 's mi 'm Beinn a' Cheathaich* are 'dà mhac Iain mhic a' Phearsain' ['the two sons of John the son of the Parson'] (Campbell and Collinson 1969-81, 1: 1.1319).

²⁶ See MacDonald 1994, 101-31; MacCoinnich 2004, 298-351; also 2006 & 2007.

²⁷ For the Privy Council's continuing attempts to secure taxes from Barra, note Bishop Andrew Knox being granted feu-ferme of Barra in 1612, an offer he did not take up (*RPC* ix [1609-13], 753), while in 1617 Sir Dugald Campbell of Auchinbreck was charged with paying four years'

tack duty for the ‘sevin illis of Barra and small islandis belonging thairto’ (probably the Bishop’s Isles) (*RPC* xi [1616-19], 244; NLS MS 2134, 7).

²⁸ In 1617 Ruairidh MacKenzie had taken over the administration of the lands of Duart, heavily indebted and now deprived by the Crown of the church lands acquired during the Reformation, from the chief Eachann Maclean, who had himself been fostered with MacKenzie’s elder brother Coinnich Lord Seaforth. The Duart estate itself was placed in the hands of the chief’s ambitious and more capable younger brother Lachlann Òg, who, as suggested above, was probably fostered in Barra (and would go on to forge marriage ties with the maternal kin of both sets of MacNeil half-brothers). These developments may have facilitated MacKenzie’s subsequent appropriation of the superiority of Barra and his probable resolution of the succession dispute (MacCoinnich 2004, 64n.204, 231-32, 323n.1179; Sinclair 1899, 173-76; Stiùbhart 1997, 102-07).

²⁹ The catalogue of the Clan Ranald muniments refers to an undated obligation (NRS GD1/201/99), now unfortunately missing, outlining how ‘McNeill of Oligon[ie]’ – clearly Niall Uibhisteach, now of Eòlaigearraidh – will no longer pursue a legal process against his chief ‘for the murder of John McNeill, lawful son of the deceased Rorie McNeill of Barray’. The identity of ‘John McNeill’ is unclear – the Iain Òg who was supposedly captured by Domhnall MacDonald of Clan Ranald, and despatched to his death in the Edinburgh Tolbooth perhaps, or an unknown elder brother of Niall Uibhisteach himself. It may indeed be the former, given that the decision was reached in conjunction with Iain Mùideartach, son of Domhnall MacDonald, who ‘has disbursed the entire charges’. It seems most unlikely, however, that Niall Uibhisteach could describe Iain Òg as the legal heir, and it may be a confused reference to the slaughter of a ‘John McMurche VcNeill’ and others around 1598, with which Donnchadh Campbell of Glenlyon was charged in 1630 (Macneil 1923, 62, 77-8). If Niall Uibhisteach was the progenitor of the later MacNeils of Vatersay, tensions between the families may have lingered into the early eighteenth century (Campbell and Eastwick 1966, 82-3).

³⁰ In constructing and testing new paradigms, perspectives, and conceptual frameworks for this period, productive comparisons may be drawn with recent approaches to the history of North American indigenous peoples: for example, Hämäläinen 2008; Witgen 2012; and Gratton et al. 2013.

³¹ For a similar response to analogous circumstances earlier in the previous century, see MacCoinnich 2004, 119-21.

³² See, for example, Beiner 2007; Stiùbhart 2007.

Appendix

	The Killing of the Peursan Mór: A Timeline
?1585	‘Donald makneill’, parson of Cille Bharra, becomes cautioner for the fulfilment by Ruairidh MacNeil of Barra of certain unspecified promises to Uilleam MacLeod of Harris and his daughter Màiri. The document is also signed by Donald’s son John, who would succeed his father as the Peursan Mór.
1607	Marquis of Huntly charged by James VI to ‘extirpate and rute out ... M ^c Neill Barra, with his clan.’
Aug 1608	Most island chiefs captured by Lord Ochiltree and imprisoned in the Lowlands. Ruairidh MacNeil of Barra remains free.
Jun 1609	James VI grants commission to Andrew Knox, Bishop of the Isles, for new expedition to the Hebrides.
Jun 1609	Island chiefs released from captivity after reaching agreement with Crown
? Jun 1609	Murder of the Peursan Mór.
Aug 1609	Island chiefs subscribe to Statutes of Iona, with the exception of Ruairidh MacNeil of Barra.
?late 1609	Abel Dynes’ merchant ship boarded and plundered in Barra.
Jan 1610	Eachann Óg Maclean of Duart given commission to apprehend Ruairidh MacNeil of Barra on charges of committing ‘all kind of barbaritie’ on islanders.
Jan 1610	Dòmhnall MacDonald of Clan Ranald seizes Iain Óg, eldest son of Ruairidh MacNeil of Barra by Màiri MacLeod, and sends him to the Lowlands on charge of piracy. Iain MacNeil dies shortly afterwards in Edinburgh Tolbooth.
Jan 1610	Eachann Óg Maclean of Duart seizes Niall Uibhisteach, eldest son of Ruairidh MacNeil of Barra and Mòr, sister of Dòmhnall MacDonald of Clan Ranald, and sends him to the Lowlands on a charge of piracy.
Jul 1610	Niall Uibhisteach released on bail, with his uncle Dòmhnall MacDonald of Clan Ranald going surety.
Oct 1612	Niall Óg and Gill-Eòghanan, surviving sons of Ruairidh an Tartair and Màiri MacLeod, supposedly attack Ciosmul Castle and capture their father along with Gill-Eòghanan Óg, their half-brother.
Jan 1613	Niall Uibhisteach appears before Privy Council in Edinburgh.
Apr 1613	Niall Óg declared outlaw by the Privy Council.
Jun 1614	Niall Óg marries Mary, sister of Eachann Óg Maclean of Duart.
Jul 1621	Sir Ruairidh MacKenzie of Cóiageach awarded newly erected Barony of Barra by Crown Charter.
c.1622	Death of Ruairidh an Tartair, Ruairidh MacNeil of Barra.
Apr 1622	Sir Ruairidh MacKenzie takes legal possession of Barra.
May 1622	Formal arrangement, under the auspices of Sir Ruairidh MacKenzie of Cóiageach, between half-brothers Niall Óg and Niall Uibhisteach, with the former assuming the chieftaincy of the Macneils of Barra, and the latter given liferent of tacks in the north of the island.
Nov 1625, Feb 1626	Father Cornelius Ward visits Barra, celebrating Mass and reconciling 218 islanders to the Catholic church, including Niall Uibhisteach and two sons of Niall Óg. Niall Óg himself ‘refuses the faith’, supposedly lest he have to restore the estate to his half-brother.
May 1626	Renewal of agreement between Niall Óg and Niall Uibhisteach, under auspices of Sir Ruairidh MacKenzie of Cóiageach.
1633	Archibald Campbell, Lord Lorne, prepares accusation against Raghnaidh MacDonald of Benbecula for the murder of ‘Johne M ^c niell persone & minister of Barra’.

Abbreviations

CW: Carmichael Watson collection

EUL: Edinburgh University Library

NFC: National Folklore Commission, University College Dublin

ML: Maclagan MSS

Napier Comm.: Parliamentary Papers, 1884, XXXII-XXXVI, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland [Napier Commission]*

NLS: National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh

NRS: National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh

RCAHMS: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. 1928. *The Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles*. Edinburgh: HMSO.

RPC: Register of the Privy Council of Scotland

SSS: School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh

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Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart leads the MSc degree, *Cultar Dùthchasach agus Eachdraidh na Gàidhealtachd* (Material Culture and Gàidhealtachd History), at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, University of the Highlands and Islands, and is also Senior Researcher at the Carmichael Watson Project, Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library, where his work on the manuscript and material collections of the folklorist and ethnographer, Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912), is ongoing.