Kevin James Grant

"And in Every Hamlet a Poet": Gaelic Oral Tradition and Postmedieval Archaeology in Scotland

ABSTRACT

The archaeological study of the postmedieval Scottish Highlands has engaged little with Gaelic oral tradition. The period from 1700 saw the gradual decline of the Gaelic language and the society and culture that supported it. Events and processes such as the Jacobite rebellions (1715 and 1745), 18th-century agricultural improvement, and the 19th-century Highland Clearances made the postmedieval era a turbulent one for both individuals and ways of life. Oral tradition played a key part in Gaelic society throughout this period and is invaluable as a form of evidence for postmedieval society and culture. Previous archaeological approaches are discussed, and the range of available evidence is outlined in order to demonstrate that archaeological engagement with oral sources can greatly enrich the understanding of Scotland's past.

Introduction

Postmedieval Scottish Gaelic society was rich in culture and tradition, and could boast of having "in every house a musician, and in every hamlet a poet" (Grant 1924:5). The language of the people had a long pedigree; it was a tongue that had been "spoken in the British Isles long, long before English had been heard there" (Grimble 1999:1). A rich oral tradition of poems, stories, and songs grew to play a central role in everyday life, and although only a small part of this treasury of culture survives today, it represents a significant resource for archaeologists.

In many ways the archaeological study of the Scottish Highlands and Islands is in its infancy. Over the previous half a century, researchers have established a small subdiscipline working with limited archaeological evidence to uncover the lives of ordinary people during a tumultuous period of Scottish history (Dalglish 2002). To date, few archaeologists studying the period have engaged with the oral history and tradition, although there are notable exceptions that will be discussed below. By outlining the place of oral tradition in Gaelic society and the nature of the available evidence, and reflecting upon previous approaches to the archaeology of the period, it will be argued here that such an engagement promises to expand the understanding of Gaelic society and evoke the everyday experience of human beings in the past.

The oral tradition makes it possible to uncover intangible landscapes of memory and culture, and to hear the voices of those who are silenced by the nature of the historical and archaeological record, emphasizing thereby the diversity of experience in the past. Through the words and thoughts that are preserved in the oral tradition, it is possible to examine the nature of the agency of ordinary people and subvert the still-dominant narrative of their passivity, as victims of a malevolent history.

Historical and Geographical Setting

The scope of this paper is governed by the geographical extent of the Gaelic language in the postmedieval period. The Gaelic language was once spoken across large areas of Scotland, from Caithness in the north to Galloway in the southwest. Over the last 500 years Gaelic has gradually retreated to a small stronghold in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, to isolated communities across the Highlands (Newton 1997), to urban areas such as Glasgow (also known as Baile Mòr Nan Gàidheal, City of the Gaels [Kidd 2007]), and to small Gaelic-speaking communities throughout former British colonial possessions, with a particularly rich tradition surviving in Canada (Bennet 1996; J. Shaw 2007). Whilst Gaelic had almost totally retreated from the Lowlands in the south and east by the postmedieval period, it remained the first language of the majority in the Highlands and Islands. The linguistic and cultural heritage in these areas makes them ideal for the study of the Gaelic oral tradition in the postmedieval period, although a Gaelic perspective may prove useful to the archaeology of any area that has played host to the rich oral culture of the Gaels.

The Highlands of Scotland are a loosely defined area of upland and coastal areas in the north and west that have a distinctive topography, geology, and ecology in comparison with much of Lowland Scotland. The Gaelic name for the Highlands is a' Gàidhealtachd (meaning the Gaelic-speaking area); this covers the area in which, traditionally, Gaelic was widely spoken (Figure 1). The historical setting of this discussion is defined primarily by the nature of the evidence for Gaelic traditional culture. Written Gaelic poetry from as early as the 7th century survives in medieval manuscripts in Classical Irish—the ancestor of modern Scottish and Irish Gaelic—but the oral tradition of Modern Scottish Gaelic is recorded from the 17th century onwards (Clancy 1998; MacLean and Dorgan 2002). The resource of oral tradition becomes particularly rich in the 18th and 19th centuries, by which time several key poets were writing in Gaelic, and collectors were compiling and publishing local tradition. This is the period under discussion below.

The historical events of the 18th and 19th centuries also make this a fecund period for study. The social structure of the Highlands (based on the clan system) underwent significant change from the 16th century, as agricultural improvement, capitalism, and the introduction of a cash economy "broke down the mutual interdependencies of kinship" and led to an unraveling of the social structure of the Highlands that "worked its way to the heart of the Gaelic community" (Newton 2000:138). Events such as the Jacobite rebellions of the 18th century were catalysts for sweeping changes in the political landscape of the Highlands and inspiration for a rich oral tradition. Archaeologists can draw on this tradition to examine how processes key to understanding the creation of the modern world played out on the ground and in the minds and words of those involved.

The Place of Oral Tradition in Gaelic Society

Oral tradition, be it in the form of story, song, or poetry, accompanied almost every aspect of Gaelic life, relieving the boredom of monotonous work, celebrating and remembering the deeds of historical and mythological characters, and passing the long winter nights. Three of the most important roles played by the oral tradition and by oral practice are discussed below.

The writing of poetry by professional, literate poets in the courts of Gaelic chieftains was still practiced in the 18th century. This "classical" tradition of writing had emerged in the medieval period, when powerful "Gaelic lords became the patrons of trained poets, who became the professional intelligentsia" (Newton 2000:81). These professional poets "served the needs of the native ruling classes" (Thomson 1994:292) by creating poems of elegy, eulogy, and praise that bolstered the status of the powerful. They could also produce poems of dispraise and chastisement; threats that the powerful sought to avoid. Dispraise could be a genuine threat in a world where status was based partly on poetic and hereditary prestige. The status associated with this kind of classical poetry also made it ideal for political purposes, and it was used by the Jacobite propagandist Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair to great effect in the 18th century (MacDonald 1924:108). The continuity of classical composition was such that a late-18th-century Scottish Gaelic poem could deviate little in language and style from an early medieval Irish one (Newton 2000:81).

The cèilidh was one of the most important social and cultural institutions of the time. Cèilidh houses existed in most townships and were the focus of community life. There tradition bearers within the local community shared knowledge in a way that fulfilled needs now served by books, newspapers, films, radio, and television (Thomson 1994:281). It was here that the bàird baile (village bards) composed in the vernacular. The performance by these bards in the cèilidh helped the local community to define itself, and the makeup of song, story, and verse in the cèilidh would constantly change to meet the needs of the community. When times went bad for the Gaels, their lore reminded them that they were "members of a society possessed of a high art of ancient and aristocratic origin in which they could directly participate, no matter how materially impoverished they may appear to outsiders" (Newton 2009:108). The importance of the cèilidh and its associated narratives made it a key social institution through which the Gaels sought to understand the world around them.

Oral tradition was not simply used as a form of entertainment or education; it was also employed to pass down important information concerning the status and rights of individuals. Writing in the 1720s, Scots military officer
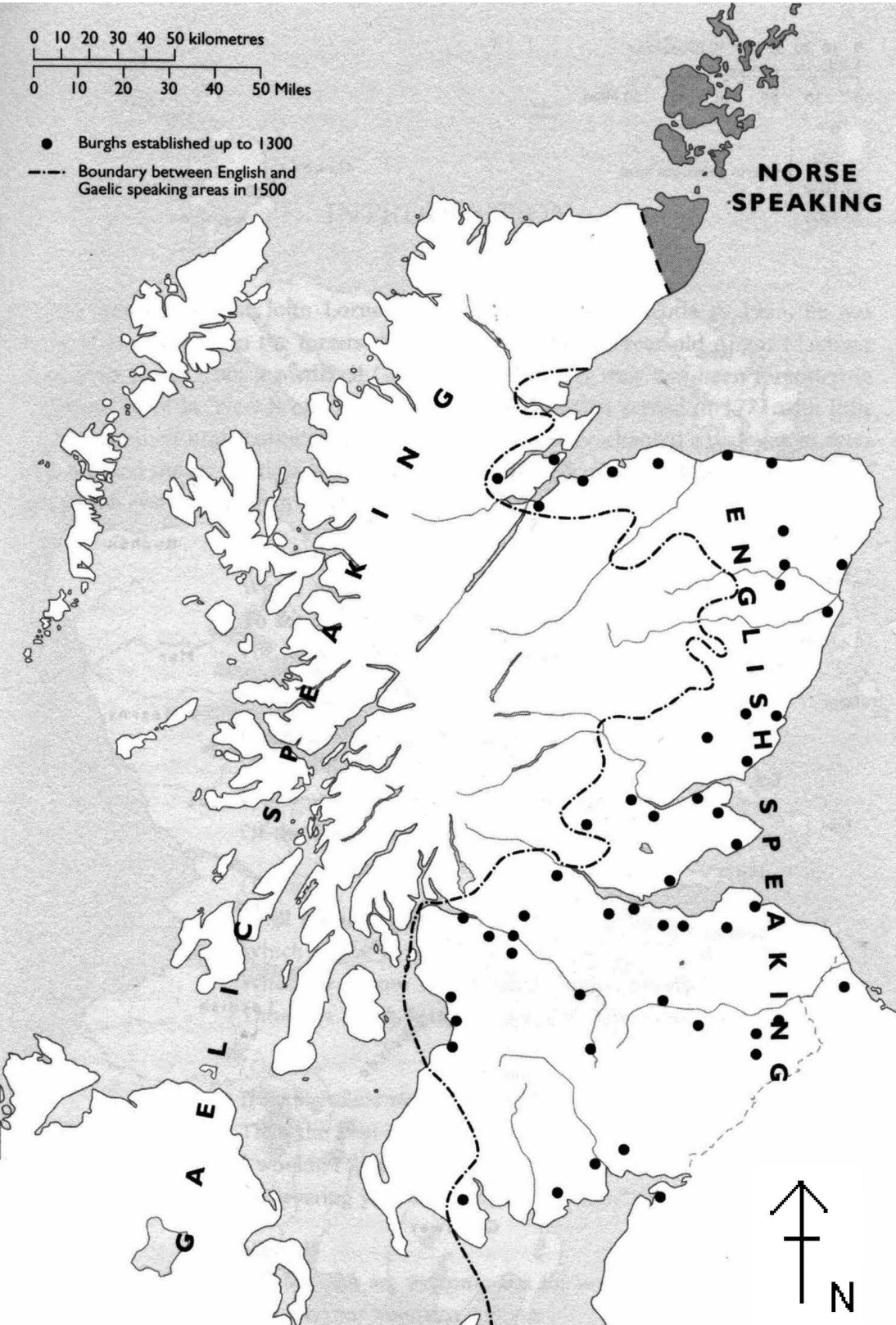
FIGURE 1. Map showing the boundary between Gaelic- and English-speaking areas of Scotland around 1500 (Newton 2009:figure 3).

Edward Burt complained that even among the poorest Gaels "everyone was a genealogist" (Burt 1974:126). One of the reasons genealogy was so important is the Gaelic concept of *dùthchas*. *Dùthchas*—defined as "place of origin, homeland; heredity, heritage" (Robertson and MacDonald 2004:50)—referred to the collective heritage of a clan or kin group, and stood in contrast to the concept of *oighreachd*—"estate or inheritance" (Robertson and MacDonald 2004:90)—which referred to an individual's inheritance or ownership. Thus the ownership of land could be claimed as *dùthchas* of a clan or group that felt that its ownership of the land stemmed from generations of working it, or as *oighreachd* by another group or an individual whose rights derived from legal acquisition or inheritance. These concepts were bound up with kin, heritage, ritual, and "mythical" aspects of family passed down through oral tradition, although they were also governed by routine practice (Dalglish 2003:156). In the postmedieval period such hereditary rights "came to be associated with arbitrary justice" (Nenadic 2007:9). As the central Scottish state sought to impose its system of law and order on the Highlands, oral tradition came under fire.

The Surviving Tradition

Oral tradition and culture had an important place within Gaelic society. It is unclear how much of the wider tradition survives to the present day. Despite the receding of the Gaelic language, "Gaelic communities are the heirs to a tradition which historically covered a much wider geographical spread and included a more distinctive range of expressions than today" (Newton 2009:14). How much of this wider tradition survives is unknown, indeed Gaelic scholars have urged "sensitive and thoughtful planning," regarding the tradition, to prevent "atrophy" (Newton 2000:14). There are cases that show striking tenacity in the oral tradition—such as in Canada in 1953 when oral-historian John Lorne Campbell collected a medieval Gaelic poem lost in Scotland for generations (J. Campbell 1999:182–183), and projects like Tobair an Dualchais (discussed below) continue to discover new material within the oral tradition. Only a small portion of the material that has survived has been translated into English. For the majority of archaeologists,

who have little or no Gaelic (the present author included), that must stand for all. This short discussion of the available evidence must therefore give disproportionate weight to those works that have been translated into English, and also towards poetry, which makes up a larger part of the tradition than prose or story. This is likely to do with the prestige and status of the bards in early times (Thomson 1974:11).

The last of the MacMhuirich poets—hereditary, professional storytellers, poets, lawyers, and doctors for the Lords of the Isles from as early as the 15th century (Newton 2009:92)—was still composing classical poetry until the late 18th century. Although this ancient bardic tradition had largely died out by the mid-18th century (Thomson 1993:1), the poems it created continue to live in the oral tradition to the present day, and many of the surviving examples were collected in the 19th and 20th centuries (although it should be noted that some early poems survive in written form as well) (Clancy 1998:5).

Gaelic society has always had a small literate component; many Gaelic poets of the 18th and 19th centuries enjoyed a high level of education and were published during their own lifetimes. A good example is the 18th-century poet Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair (Alasdair, son of Master Alasdair), whose father graduated from Glasgow University with an M.A. in 1674. The poet himself spent some time at the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, where he met Scots poets such as Allan Ramsay (Thomson 2005:122–124). This well-read poet composed in the classical style and the vernacular, and was published in his own lifetime. A very different example of a published poet is illiterate Glenorchy gamekeeper Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir (1724–1812) (MacLeod 1952). Despite his illiteracy and lack of any formal education, he was published several times during his lifetime and gained some fame while serving as a militiaman in Edinburgh (Thomson 2005:131).

The published work of these and other poets and tradition bearers is one form of "firsthand" evidence, but collections of oral tradition were also being compiled, often catching the work of the *báird baile* writing in the vernacular. Although Gaelic culture has produced written literature for over a thousand years, it is still best to consider the tradition as an oral one. Most written texts were intended to be performed orally (Newton

2009:83), and rather than understanding oral and literate cultures as separate and opposed, "orality and literacy [should be considered to] operate along a spectrum in which form and content, performer and audience, are deeply intertwined" (Newton 2009:83). For the non-Gaelic speaker, edited and translated collections by Gaelic scholars are the best starting point for research, as they generally contain excellent notes and references to source material (Thomson 1993; Ó Baoill 1994; Clancy 1998; Grimble 1999; Newton 1999; Black 2001; Meek 2003; Kidd 2007). The collection of story, song, and poetry continues to the present day, and there are also collections available for the early 20th century that are of use to the archaeologist (M. Shaw 1977; J. Shaw 2007).

A new and exciting resource for oral tradition in Scotland is Tobair an Dualchais, <http://www .tobarandualchais.co.uk/>, a web site that contains thousands of recordings of oral tradition in Scots and Gaelic from the 1930s onwards, as collected by the School of Scottish Studies and others. This web site allows a regional search that is particularly useful when researching specific case studies. Tobair an Dualchais has already been used by living-tradition bearers such as traditional musicians, but it has not yet been fully explored as an archaeological resource. The same may be said for the three major sources noted above (primary publications, past collections, and recent recordings).

Archaeology and the Oral Tradition: Previous Work

Few archaeologists have engaged fully with Gaelic oral tradition, although some more recent work has begun moving in this direction, for example, Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf (1999), Lelong (2000), and Symonds (1999). A greater dialogue between archaeology and oral tradition is clearly needed, as a brief critique of past work reveals.

Some of the earliest studies of the period, in the 18th and 19th century, mirror Enlightenment theory in arguing that there were stages of societal development, and that the Highlands were still to progress to the stage that had been achieved by wider British society. This viewpoint was widely accepted and, amazingly, continued into the 1930s in the work of archaeologist

Cecil Curwen (1938). This idea of a "past in the present" was one of the basic premises of the field of folklife studies: a discipline that emerged from the 1920s onward (Grant 1924) and was concerned with recording varied "traditional" rural practices before they died out (Grant 1924, 1960; Fenton 1968, 1976). Folklife studies provided detailed comparisons of regional variations in architecture, agricultural implements, and other aspects of material culture (Grant 1960:209,213), an approach that often seems distinctly archaeological in its discussions of material culture from the past. The folklife approach was also notably holistic, covering all aspects of culture, society, and economy. Isobel Grant in particular stresses the importance of the "atmosphere of tradition and association that surrounded them [Gaels]" (Grant 1924:4). This atmosphere pervades her work, and her use of simple but evocative language often provides a colorful and human narrative of life in the 19th and 20th centuries that is steeped in the Gaelic oral tradition. Figure 2 is an excellent example of the perspective given in Grant (1960): a reconstructed view of a typical highland settlement drawn from the perspective of an onlooker, rather than a cartographical, "outsider's" view. Although there is much in this approach that is archaeological, it was concerned with recording and presenting a way of life that was disappearing, not actively researching the past.

Modern archaeological studies of Gaelic settlement in the Highlands and islands originate with the seminal work of Horace Fairhurst (1960, 1967–1968), first head of the Department of Archaeology at Glasgow University. Fairhurst sought to understand how the postmedieval settlement pattern of the Highlands and islands had developed from the medieval period. This search for the origins of the *baile* (or township) as a settlement form has continued to provide a focus for study, often at the expense of an explicit theoretical and methodological framework, and of critical reflection. Aside from Dalglish's (2002) review of the subject, there are few critical retrospective studies of the discipline that do more than describe previous work (Morrison 2000) or discuss possible methodologies for finding sites (Govan 2003).

Archaeologists have drawn on the work of historical geographers (Dogshon 1993) and economic historians (Hunter 1976; Devine 1994)
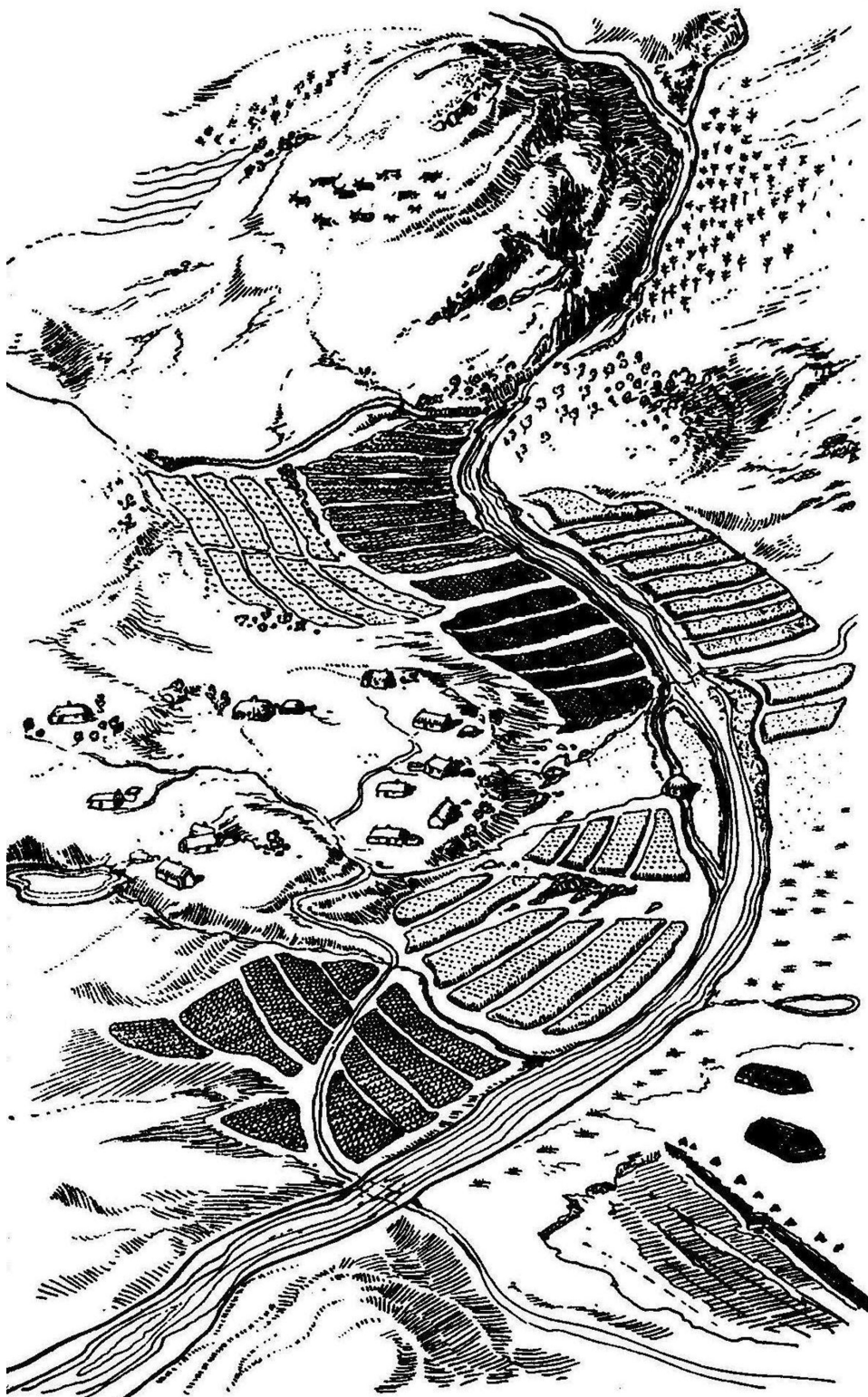
FIGURE 2. Diagrammatic drawing of a typical Highland settlement pattern in the 18th century. A river flows down the glen or strath alongside long, thin, organically shaped unenclosed fields on the fertile ground. Small nucleated clusters of dwellings and byres are shown to the left of the river. In the mountains in the distance, cattle can be seen in the shielings (Grant 1960:45, figure 1).

in describing the nature of the postmedieval Scottish landscape, but the understanding of the landscape on which many of these studies are predicated is specific to the "'big history' paradigms of the disciplines that created them" and therefore "serve poorly the needs of the archaeologist" (S. Campbell 2009:315). In such readings, society may sometimes be "categorized solely by the method of agriculture production" (S. Campbell 2009:317), an idea that S. Campbell (2009) rightly pointed out would be considered unacceptable for other archaeological periods. In addition, such approaches have often resulted in a paradigm that sees "Highland society as culturally homogenous and where social change and structure are managed by a land-owning elite and largely uncontested" (Dalglish 2000:22). This view is now being challenged by archaeological evidence that demonstrates that settlement is more likely to be characterized by regional variation and adaptability (S. Campbell 2009). The application of a more sophisticated theoretical framework has also been advocated by Dalglish (2003) in his work on the ways in which economic and societal changes interacted with the environment, creating a more complex narrative of change.

Research on the period has thus far been mostly empiricist, so the diverse theoretical approaches applied in other periods are not yet developed for postmedieval Gaelic Scotland. Much of the work has been conducted by commercial units in developer-funded projects, and although it is typically of high quality, the nature of such work inhibits experimental approaches and the inclusion of diverse pieces of fieldwork within broader academic research. At a landscape level the main source of archaeological fieldwork is the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), a public body tasked with recording Scotland's historic environment. In the 1990s the work of RCAHMS developed from simple recording of sites and monuments to more cohesive landscape studies (RCAHMS 1990; 1994), and although its approach has continued to develop (RCAHMS 2007) and come to include groundbreaking community involvement and training projects (RCAHMS 2011), it remains empiricist in nature, with recording and compiling information being the core purpose of the organization. More diverse approaches

to interpretation have developed elsewhere in recent years, however.

The viewpoints of ordinary people have been a focus of research since the late 1990s, with several scholars adopting an approach that places human experience at the center of study (Symonds 1999, 2000; Lelong 2000). The work of these scholars enriches the landscape with human experience and highlights the importance of landscapes to the people who inhabit them. Whilst this is done primarily through the use of recent theoretical approaches, such as Tim Ingold's (1993) concept of the taskscape and the phenomenological approach pioneered by Chris Tilley (1994; 2004a), some work has also incorporated oral tradition to assist in the understanding of life in the past (Symonds 1999:115–117). New work is emerging, then, that is bound up in the landscape and that has begun to recognize that oral tradition provides important information concerning how people who worked and inhabited the landscape viewed their world and their place within it.

How Can Archaeologists Engage with This Kind of Oral History?

The limited archaeological engagement with the oral tradition presents both an opportunity and a challenge; the opportunity of exploring new ways to approach the postmedieval period for the first time, and the challenge of knowing where to begin. Three possible starting points are outlined below. The first concerns intangible landscapes—landscapes of memory, tradition, and story, and asks how oral tradition may provide assistance in uncovering these hidden landscapes. The second considers how the varied viewpoints represented in Gaelic oral tradition may diversify understanding of human experience in the past. The third suggests that an understanding of Gaelic culture, uncovered through oral tradition, may help archaeologists expand on experiential or phenomenological approaches to the landscape.

Intangible Landscapes

Intangible heritage has been defined as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that

communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2003:2). In Europe, the Council of Europe's European Landscape Convention, in defining the "landscape" as "an area, as perceived by people," and in its recognition of "cultural heritage" (Council of Europe 2000:3), opens the door for the inclusion of intangible aspects of landscape under its remit. By engaging with oral tradition, aspects of the intangible landscape can be revealed.

Loch Aineort (or Loch Eynort) is a deep inlet on the eastern coast of the island of South Uist, in the Western Isles of Scotland (Figure 3). Loch Aineort also has a special and direct connection with an epic poem that is "probably the greatest sea poem written in the British Isles" (Bray 1986:36). "Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill" ("The Galley of Clanranald") by Alasdair MacMhaistir

Alasdair describes a (probably imaginary) journey by Clanranald, a local clan chief, from Loch Aineort to Carrickfergus in Ireland. The poem, composed ca. 1750, begins with Clanranald and his men "gathered reverently round their vessel on the foreshore at the head of Loch Eynort repeating together under the stars the ancient ship blessing" (Bray 1986:40).

The choice of the setting in Loch Aineort is no coincidence; this was a place that was meaningful and personal for the poet. The Clanranald of the poem was MacMhaistir Alasdair's chief patron, and two of the poet's brothers farmed on Clanranald's lands (Bray 1986:122). Figure 4 shows the character of the landscape of Loch Aineort. The loch appears now to be quiet, isolated, and uninhabited, but it was once the principal harbor for South Uist: a busy place that boasted a tax-collecting house, an inn, and several slipways (Parker-Pearson et al. 2004:173). It is through this

FIGURE 3. (*a*) Map showing location of Loch Aineort within the Isle of South Uist. (*b*) Map showing location of the Uists in Scotland. (Maps by author, 2014; courtesy of Google Maps.)

FIGURE 4. The typical landscape of South Uist (*top*), looking south across the loch. Seaweed-covered rocks ring the doglegs and inlets of the loch, and rich, green soil lies above the high-tide line; (*bottom*) looking east across the remains of the abandoned inn al Loch Aineort. Hafn, the "Sailing-Place" of Clan Ranald's galley, is between the two small hills on the horizon to the *left* of the picture. (Photos by author, 2014.)

busy landscape that Clanranald's men rowed from the likely anchorage at Hafn (haven) to the point of sailing, the Struthan Beag, an event described in the "Incitement for Rowing to Sailing-Place":

> To put the black well-fashioned yewship
>   To the sailing-place
> Thrust you out flexible oarbanks
>   Dressed to sheer grace;
> Oars smooth-shafted and shapely,
>   Grateful for gripping
> Made for lusty resolute rowing,
>   Palm-fast, foam-whipping;
> Knocking sparks out of the water
>   Towards Heaven (MacDiarmid 1978).

With this poem, describing a journey that did not take place, the poet evoked and projected the power of Clanranald into the mythology of place. The people of Loch Aineort could look out past the rocky inlets to the sea and imagine the straining oars and the heaving backs of the men of Clanranald passing out into the ocean and the wider world of Gaeldom. Although this non-event could never be recovered "archaeologically," the galley of Clanranald was imprinted forever rowing from Loch Aineort in the minds and voices of those who lived there, and in the imagination of today's archaeologists as they inhabit the landscape. It is only through Gaelic oral tradition that this deeply significant aspect of Loch Aineort's intangible landscape can be understood.

Where "Birlinn Chlann Raghnall" recorded a mythical event, the oral tradition of Loch Aineort also recalls a real event: the drowning of Captain Angus MacDonald of Milton in 1809. The lament for Captain MacDonald was recorded by a collector in South Uist in the 1950s (M. Shaw 1977:102), and a recording from a local source is also available on Tobair an Dualchais, <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/18759/1>. The story that accompanies the song explains that Captain MacDonald's boat was swamped as he was attempting to ferry kelp (seaweed) to a larger boat moored in the loch. The song explains that this area was used in the kelping industry in the 19th century, linking this place with the wider economy of the islands and of the Napoleonic Wars, during which the chemicals extracted from kelp were sought after because the usual source was made unavailable (Symonds 1999:110–111). This story may assist in addressing the problem

of scale, long a concern of historical archaeologists (Orser 2009). The connection between individuals on the ground and the vast global narrative of the emergence of capitalism, trade, and empire in the postmedieval period is illustrated in the story of Captain MacDonald. Whilst he was ultimately the victim of a tragic accident, this event took place due to his active participation in an event created by the Napoleonic Wars and the circumstances of global trade and industry. The song itself makes an allusion to what would be called the archaeology of the local area, linking the decayed remains of Captain MacDonald's house in nearby Àirigh Mhuilinn with the accident:

> Everyone who comes from afar sore, weary and fatigued will cast a sorrowful eye on your dwelling to which they used to ascend, to the hospitable dwelling to-day decaying under the rains. Often there was joy and pomp there, and therein the cold traveler threw off his weariness (M. Shaw 1977:105).

Àirigh Mhuilinn was extensively surveyed and partially excavated in the 1990s (Symonds 1999, 2000; Webster 1999) as part of the Flora MacDonald Project, an archaeological project based around the birthplace of Captain MacDonald and his illustrious ancestor. By working in Milton, this project recognized that Gaelic tradition is imbedded in the landscape, and that fruitful archaeological research can be influenced and directed by tradition. The Flora Macdonald Project and the story of Captain MacDonald show that Gaelic oral tradition can link intangible heritage to archaeological investigation, uncovering a personal, emotive story *and* linking everyday life in Loch Aineort to wider historical processes.

It is not simply within the poems that the events of Loch Aineort were kept alive; the oral tradition also preserved archaeology within place names. For most Scots, Gaelic place names are simply meaningless names; but for Gaelic speakers the words of the names hold meaning and memory. In the most direct sense, place names like Rubh 'Airigh an Sgaidan tell a Gaelic speaker the character of the place. The name describes a headland containing a shieling (a seasonally occupied settlement employed within the yearly transhumance cycle) where herring are plentiful. There are also place names that relate to oral tradition and history. Whilst

Hafn and the Sruthan Beag were associated with Clanranald's galley, Rudha Na Mheine (headland of the meal) recalls Clanranald landing grain to feed the local people during the failure of the crops in 1812 or 1815 (Parker-Pearson et al. 2004:173). Although these events can be recovered through the examination of historical documents, the place names that have been passed down in the oral tradition bind these events to a place and create the intangible landscapes that are part of the archaeology of everyday life in Loch Aineort.

New Perspectives

The ubiquity and, in a sense, the democracy of Gaelic oral culture and tradition mean that the views of a wide variety of people survive within it. The historical documents of the period are often written by and for the landowning classes and in English, a language that the majority population did not understand. The oral tradition allows access to the lives and concerns of ordinary people in their own words and hints at the surprising and unexpected ways in which Gaels actively engaged with turbulent social processes. As discussed below, the oral tradition may also give a view into the everyday relationships of power that took place within and structured the landscape.

One area of Highland economy and society that is little understood is the lowest level of organization within the *baile*, or township, the dominant settlement form. Stuart Campbell's (2009) examination of the evidence for settlement forms on the Isle of Lewis suggests that individual townships may have been "in reality a series of separate cooperative endeavors based around the family groups who lived [in them]" (S. Campbell 2009:326). An understanding of the day-to-day level of agricultural organization within a *baile* would be beneficial in the study of Gaelic society because it would link the decisions of the chiefs and large-scale economic processes with the decisions of individuals, giving a deeper understanding of how such processes played out on the ground. The oral tradition describes just such relationships. Oral tradition has already been employed in examining the interplay between landlords and tenants (Meek 1995), and a well-established strand of Gaelic studies focuses on the evidence that the

oral tradition provides concerning political and economic relationships (Thomson 1993; Black 2001; Meek 2003; Newton 2009). The work of Caithness herd boy and poet Robb Donn described relationships between people of all social scales in vivid detail (Grimble 1999). By studying works such as these, the role that ordinary people far down the political scale played in shaping their own lives and the landscapes they inhabited can begin to be revealed.

Women are particularly underrepresented in the study of postmedieval Gaeldom. In Gaelic society women were generally excluded from the formal political institutions of the elite, and they are often underrepresented in the historical documents, meaning, in turn, that the study of women is underdeveloped (Newton 2009:156). Despite this, the oral tradition shows that "female poets were clearly consequential to wider society ... [persuading] popular opinion" (Newton 2009:158). Nineteenth-century poetess Màiri Nic a' Phearsain, also known as Màiri Mhòr nan Òran (Big Mary of the Songs), is an example of a woman who gained power and prestige through her mastery of oral culture. Many of her poems were deeply political, and they played a role in agitating for land rights in the Highlands in the late 19th century (Meek 2003:367). Many poems by women also show a nuanced understanding of politics and demonstrate how Gaels engaged in the tumultuous events of the 18th century. Mairearad Chaimbeul, another woman who immortalized her political beliefs through the creation of oral tradition, expressed a detailed list of grievances against laws that prohibited the wearing of traditional Highland dress that were enforced by the British government in the aftermath of the 1715 Jacobite Rebellion. One verse is particularly remarkable:

> The king will be the loser here
> In my opinion:
> If there's no demand for dyestuffs
> He forfeits customs,
> The merchants of the land complaining
> For lack of bread—
> And if the court were to consider it
> Change will come yet (Black 2001:178).

Here the poet presents a considered argument that shows an awareness of politics and economics, and a willingness to engage with

the government on its own terms, presenting the argument against the laws as reasonable and considerate of the government's interests. She also shows a self-awareness of the importance of oral tradition in Gaelic society—by creating poetry she acted to establish her political view within the established oral culture in a way that made it deeply active and influential, and ultimately preserved her beliefs for posterity. Although gender can be difficult to presence in archaeology, engaging with oral tradition may serve to encourage an appreciation of the important part that women played within Gaelic society.

Some recent scholarship has focused on addressing how the Gaels experienced and reacted to the historical events and processes of the postmedieval period (Symonds 1999, 2000; Lelong 2000). The concept of resistance has been especially important here (Symonds 1999; Webster 1999; Given 2004) and aims to show how, through day-to-day practice, people who have been seen as "victims" resisted dominant political or economic powers. James Symonds (1999) utilized oral tradition in his discussion of everyday resistance on South Uist. His example is Milton Farm, just a mile or so south of Àirigh Mhuilinn, but part of a very different landscape. Milton, a newly built model farm, represented the attempt of the estate to move away from traditional crofting methods to more formal agriculture on a Lowland model. The oral tradition preserved this modification of the landscape in story and in place names. The nearby loch was named Loch Eilean an Staoir (Loch of the Island of the Dust), because the large threshing machine used at Milton Farm covered the loch in grain dust when used (Symonds 1999:115). Oral history revealed further details of resistance to new agricultural methods. New mills were built in which the miller would keep as a fee 1/17 of the grain milled. This resulted in local crofters using their own querns to grind grain. A story told by Angus MacLellan recalled what happened next: "Then the regulation was made by the proprietor that everyone who owned a quern must have it broken ... the querns were thrown into a loch ... that loch has never been called anything since but 'Loch nam Braithntean,' 'the loch of the querns'" (MacLellan 1997:7).

The use of oral history to illustrate the everyday resistance to change is a perfect example

of how oral tradition cements events to the landscape through naming—the memory of this place remained alive on the tongues of the local people, ensuring that the story associated with it would continue to be told and kept alive within oral culture. It also opens a window into individual experience of the processes of agricultural change and demonstrates how engagement by archaeologists with oral tradition can offer new perspectives on wider historical processes.

The Skin of the Land

Since the late 1990s experiential or phenomenological approaches to the archaeology of Scotland's recent past have sought to place a focus on human experience of life and landscape. Many of these approaches have been inspired by the work of Christopher Tilley (1994, 2004a, 2004b), who proposed the use of phenomenology in archaeology to encourage the consideration of the "manner in which people experience and understand the world" (Tilley 1994:11). Whilst Tilley and others have come under criticism for their understanding and use of phenomenology (Fleming 2006; Barret and Ko 2009), they have stimulated a variety of new and exciting approaches to understanding life in the past. Gaelic oral tradition and culture have a part to play in evoking the experience of place and landscape in a phenomenological or experiential way.

Tilley's phenomenological method (Tilley 1994, 2004a, 2004b) lacks sustained focus on what Tilley himself calls "the skin of the land" (Tilley 1994:73), the flora and fauna that cover the geological landscape, as well as the human landscape of fields, homes, places of work and habitation, and secret, personal places. Tilley argues that this landscape is "gone for good" (Tilley 1994:73) and can only be partially recovered by extremely detailed environmental analysis. It may be argued that Tilley's most tantalizing vision of the past is of "where the flowers bloomed and the rushes sighed in the wind" (Tilley 1994:73), an aspect of the landscape that is little discussed. I would argue that this surface aspect of the land greatly affects human experience of a place: the flora and fauna of the land take primacy as people recreate in their minds the world that they experience around them. These aspects of the landscape were

lovingly described by Gaels in the oral tradition. The work of Gaelic nature poet Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir (1724–1812) offers a particularly fine example. His most famous poem "Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain" ("The Praise of Ben Dorian") contains detailed descriptions of the plants and animals on the "skin of the land":

> The hind's in the deer-forest
>   Where she ought to be,
> Where she'll find sweet grass
>   Pure in the blade,
> Heath-rush and deer-grass,
>   Herbs full of substance. ...
>
> Were primrose, St John's Wort
>   And tormentil flowers
> The delicate orchids
>   Forked, Spiky and Smooth,
> And meadows where it grows
>   In great clusters (Black 2001:227).

Detailed descriptions in the oral tradition evoke the flora and fauna of the landscape in a way that would enrich any experiential approach and allow direct understanding of how people in the past viewed their landscape. The sight of bog cotton and heather rippling wavelike in the wind across moorland is a common and striking sight to anyone who has spent time in the Highlands, a sight that would be seen by people in the past as they gazed from the shieling grounds to the peat banks and wilderness, the smell of their cattle in their nostrils. These experiences of the skin of the land did not end at the threshold of the house—the heather and moss of the moorland would also have been present in the peat ash and smoke scent in the hearths during the long nights of winter. The flora and fauna of the arable areas and the summer shielings would have been distinctly different, and such associations are deeply encoded in oral tradition. Such descriptions allow the archaeologist to place the experience of a culturally and historically contextualized agent into the landscape, providing a reading of the experience of place and landscape that may be more sensitive to the culture and viewpoint of individuals in the past.

It is not easy for an archaeologist from a modern industrialized nation to understand how people in the past experienced the world. The relationship between humans and nature was complex within Gaelic culture, and it has been argued that the nature/culture dichotomy was not as strong here as it was in many other agricultural societies (Newton 2009:288). An intermingling of images of man and nature begins in early Irish poems and continues in Scotland through the 18th and 19th centuries (Meek 2003), and into the present day (Bhàin 2000). In the vernacular tradition, kennings for individuals often contain tree- and plant-related terms, even the perceived *personality* of different species of trees was often used affectionately or offensively when discussing individuals of all ranks (Newton 2009:290–291). Totemism of plants and animals was also practiced: it was a commonly held belief that the McCodrums were descended from seals, which they would refuse to eat or kill out of respect for their kin (Newton 2009:322).

The most common dwelling of the period, the byre dwelling or longhouse (*tigh-dubh* or blackhouse in the Hebrides), provides an example of how human culture and nature were deeply intertwined. Although this building form has ingenious regional adaptations (Grant 1960), studies of the few excavated sites (Dalglish 2003:97–103) allow a description of the general character: long, low, rectangular structures of a single story with a central hearth set into a floor built of turf and stone. Before the middle of the 18th century, many byre dwellings were constructed almost entirely of organic materials (Dalglish 2003:98). As a result, complete excavation of a turf byre dwelling at Tombrek, Loch Tayside, revealed little more than a subrectangular bank of silt, a handful of postholes, a possible hearth, and no items of material culture (Atkinson et al. 2005). The lack of "structure" and material culture in such dwellings has led to them being thought of as little more than hovels—Samuel Johnson's deeply loaded and disparaging descriptions of such dwellings as "huts" of the "meanest" construction (Johnson 1775:66) demonstrated an ignorance for which he was satirized in many surviving Gaelic poems (Black 2001:293). In reality byre dwellings represented a perfect understanding of the landscape and provided ideal homes for people who "spent their days largely out of doors, had few worldly possessions and were used to living in close association" (Grant 1960:141). The buildings were made of and clothed in the skin of the land—turf stripped from the earth nearby

comprised the walls, peat provided the warmth, and a heather or thatch roof offered shelter. The people usually shared their dwelling with the cattle—a mutually beneficial arrangement that allowed often-underfed humans and cattle to share heat, and for the animals to be easily cared for during sickness or calving (Grant 1960:142). The thatching on the roof absorbed the peat smoke, providing excellent fertilizer and creating inky black drops of water that dripped on the inhabitants as they sheltered from the rains, an experience remembered in the Gaelic language as *snighe* (Grant 1960:151). With such a scarce archaeological record, an understanding of the relationship between people and their environment is one of the best ways of understanding the blackhouse: an ingenious design in which Gaelic culture and society, and the flora and fauna of the landscape come together. An understanding of the relationship between people and nature gained through study of the oral tradition not only allows for an experiential and evocative glimpse into life in the byre dwelling, it also serves to undermine the biased, external views of the Gaelic way of life.

Conclusions

Gaelic oral tradition may hold the key to a deeper understanding of the postmedieval period in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Information contained within the oral historical record can assist in seeing ordinary people and recognizing the diverse roles they played in society. A wealth of intangible heritage is locked within Gaelic oral tradition, much of which is bounded within the archaeological landscape, providing a link between modern fieldwork and the stories of the past.

Acknowledgments

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KEVIN JAMES GRANT
ARCHAEOLOGY
SGOIL NAN DAONNACHDAN
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW
GLASGOW G12 8QQ
UNITED KINGDOM