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A Canna Man: Angus MacDonald of Sanday

The renowned folklorist Calum Iain Maclean (1915–1960) first visited Canna House in 1946, at the behest of the then owner of the island, John Lorne Campbell (1906–1996), known in traditional fashion as *Fear Chanaigh*. The first entry for Canna that Maclean noted in his diary is dated as 1 January 1946 and a fortnight later, on 14 January, he was to meet fellow folklorist Hamish Henderson (1919–2002), also visiting Canna House for the very first time. Henderson in his tribute that he paid to Maclean sets the scene:

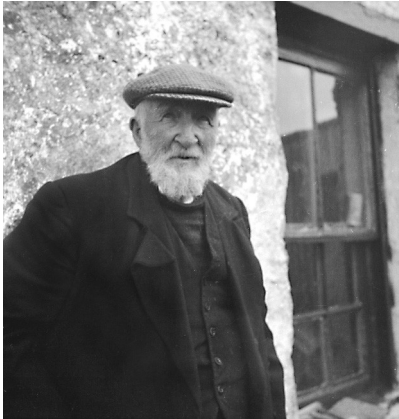
I had the privilege of meeting him [Maclean] at the very start of his period in Scotland ... Another guest was the late Séamus Ennis, the renowned Irish uilleann piper ... so Calum had every excuse for reverting to unabashed Irishism. My first impression of him, curled up in a window seat and surveying the new arrival with quizzical interrogatory eyes, was of a friendly but very watchful brownie ... Later that evening he regaled us with some of the Irish songs (in English) ...

So foregathered together in Canna House where four influential folklorists: Campbell, Maclean, Henderson and Ennis, all of whom were at the outset of their respective careers and who would go on to make a lasting impact in various ways through their research, collecting, and publishing.

Maclean would on occasion return to Canna whether on his way back home from the Southern Hebrides to Raasay or when he was collecting folklore on the neighbouring small isles of Eigg or Muck. Maclean, at this time, was employed by the Dublin-based Irish Folklore Commission, established in 1935, which had a remit that eventually included collecting in Gaelic-speaking areas outwith Ireland itself, and was sent by to his native land to do exactly this.

Each time that Maclean visited Canna he usually took both the time and effort – weather dependent – to stop off at the neighbouring island of Sanday and visit the house of one of Canna's last storytellers or seanchies. The man in question was Angus MacDonald (1865–1949), styled *Aonghas Eachainn*. His son Hector MacDonald (1901–1965), styled *Eachainn Aonghais Eachainn* or

Eachann Mòr carried on the family tradition and was also an able storyteller with a few of his stories also collected by Maclean.



Angus MacDonald 'Aonghus Eachainn', Sanday

A short and perhaps an unusual example, here given in translation from Gaelic, should suffice in order to give a taste of the whole:

A brother of Alexander MacDonald [Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair] used to always see him [as a ghost] after he had died, and he used to go away. I knew a woman with whom he [the ghost] used to converse. The spirit of a man alive is far stronger than the spirit of a dead man.

The Alexander MacDonald mentioned in this short anecdote was, of course, a great Jacobite Gaelic poet as well as being an innovative and extraordinary talent, who, at one time, held the office of bailiff of Canna. Angus himself was full of Gaelic lore and was probably familiar with some of Alexander MacDonald's songs and also stories about this black-haired poet from Moidart.

Angus MacDonald's local historical knowledge of the island of his birth was particularly strong for he remembers his own father telling him of the clearances that occurred in Canna between 1821 and 1831 when the new proprietors – MacNeills from Kintyre – arrived:

The MacNeills put a terrible number of people out of the island. I believe that sixty families left when my father was a young man. The worst of it was that they wouldn't remain in this country. Anyway they wanted them to go over [seas]. They were sent to Canada. I heard that they embarked at Tobermory. They were promised that they would be well off when they had arrived over there, but in fact they were worse off.

I heard that it was not the laird who was altogether to be blamed for sending them away at all. The father of the last MacNeill brought a farmer here; the place at that time was under crofters; that annoyed him. The crofters were then all on the Canna side, on the hill face, which was nearly all cultivated by them. The farmer who came had to shift the people off it, so that he could get the land. The land was then all cultivated.

According to his own testimony, when MacDonald was growing up on Sanday there were over a hundred people there but by the late 1940s this had been practically reduced to just the one household. Most, if not all of MacDonald's lore was gleaned from his own father who had such traditions from his own father. MacDonald says this of his grandfather:

My own grandfather hadn't a word of schooling in his head, and you never saw a better man than he for any job that ever turned up any day of the year. He knew anecdotes and songs and stories.

The inhabitants of Canna were nothing if not resilient as they eked out a living in an environment that at times could be extremely harsh and unrelenting. They had to rely upon their own resourcefulness and took advantage of nature's bounty when the opportunity arose:

When I was young, they used to make use of seal oil. They had a special day on which they went to kill them on Heisker. That island was full of them. They used to skin them and take off the blubber. Some of it took a long time to melt, too. Seal oil is terribly good for cattle.

I saw people boiling it and refining it as well as they could, and drinking it too.

When MacNeill was here, he used to bury seals at the foot of apple trees in the garden. They made excellent fertilizer. They didn't make any use of the flesh at all.

All kinds of material were collected from Angus MacDonald including aspects of weather lore:

They used to predict the weather by the way in which a cat sat by the fire. When bad weather was expected then the cat would turn around and place its back to the fire.

Perhaps it may have been that Angus was something of a naturalist for Maclean took down many anecdotes concerning the local flora and fauna, including traditions about the gather of tormentil used by fishermen to mend nets and for tanning leather for shoemaking as well as snippets of lore regarding otters and badgers even though Angus MacDonald claims to have never set his eyes on the latter animal:

There are people who call the harvest moon 'the yellow moon of the badgers'. They say that the badger itself harvest the hay and brings it home and lines their setts with it where they hibernate for the entire winter.

Such a tradition is also found in Alexander Carmichael's great compendium of Gaelic lore entitled *Carmina Gadelica* (1900):

The harvest moon is variously called 'gealach gheal an abuchaidh,' the ripening white moon; 'gealach fin na Feill Micheil,' the fair moon of the Michael Feast; and 'gealach bhuidhe nam broc,' the yellow moon of the badgers. The badger is then in best condition, before he retires to his winter retreat. When the badger emerges in spring, he is thin and emaciated. He never comes out in winter, unless upon a rare occasion when a dry sunny day may tempt him out to air his hay bedding. The intelligence with which the badger brings out his bedding, shakes it in the sun, airs it in the wind, and carries it back again to his home, is interesting and instructive.

It seems that Maclean's last visit to Canna took place in 1949, the very same year in which Angus MacDonald himself passed away, and so came to an end one of the island's last storytellers.