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Review essay

A literary reinstatement of indigenous Gaelic cosmology

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Reviewed work:
Angus Peter Campbell, *Donald and His Seven Cows* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2025), pp. 207, ISBN 978-1804252086. £8.99

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Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul, born in South Uist in 1952 to indigenous Hebridean parents, stands in the lineage of the southern, largely Roman Catholic Outer Hebrides.[1] Here, mostly in the latter nineteenth century, Alexander Carmichael gathered what became the magisterial *Carmina Gadelica*, documenting island spirituality woven into daily life.[2] Campbell's new novel emerges from that same cultural soil.

Donald and His Seven Cows invokes folkloric parable to illuminate both the imaginal realm of spiritual life, and the impacts of modernity upon it. My purpose is to explore the importance of Campbell's themes, and to suggest that his bardic voice counters certain late twentieth-century 'Celtosceptic' scholarly views. In these circles, often reacting to popular 'Celtomania', a spiritual heritage and its conservators may have been too hastily deprecated.

Campbell's modest title belies the novel's depth. Donald Michael MacDonald is an 'old *bodach*' (as they would gently say of an old man in

[1] Ronald Black, *An Tuil: Anthology of 20th century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Polygon, 1999), biography 812–14; APC supplied DOB.

[2] Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, ed. C. J. Moore (Floris, 1994).

the islands), easily overlooked as a 'poor *truaghan*', or poor soul, and unexceptional in crofting communities even to the present day. His world is overshadowed by changes 'too important to stop' (p. 150) and jarred by the rattling rhythms of modernity's consumerism.

Our underspoken protagonist lives with just his dog and cat. Except for Sunday Mass, each day he circumnavigates a round mile to graze seven cows. He reminds me of an old man I met in County Mayo in the 1990s who every day would go out to sit and watch his solitary cow. Or Lewis crofters with their sheep, 'as shepherds watched …'. It remains quite common for Hebrideans mythically to anchor everyday realities in biblical motifs and texts, and Donald's seven cows echo Pharaoh's dream, a reminder, he tells us, to prepare for 'both the lean years and the fat years' (p. 150).

Down all the years, the herd is led by Maisie, no matter how many incarnations have seen her lain down on the butcher's slab. As children in the isles, many of us had a pet lamb; or in my case, a heifer called Norah. Campbell captures the realism: the paradox of affection coexisting with the slaughter, and welfare interwoven. Recall Eliot: 'Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.'[3]

Indigenous Christian piety

Today, Donald notes, so many youngsters hardly know the moor, a platform for the windfarms, pylons or the spaceport. In our own land, 'we have begun to behave like strangers' (p. 161). His neighbours have 'forgotten that the circle, not the arrow, was always our people's measure of time', and the land itself 'the big space [that] allows room for God.' They're letting slip a world where 'people became their prayers'; where 'bent-over old women' walked with rosaries and 'stiff-backed men' knelt with lowered eyes' (p. 26).

Such imagery invites warm memories of old folks in Lewis. Peggy Morrison of Melbost Borve, asking me to say a grace over a cup of tea. Her husband James, who had never needed to walk more than a mile up a rugged coastal path, and even then when searching for a missing boy.

Donald's world is not romanticised. It reveals what the Lewis poet, novelist and essayist Iain Crichton Smith called 'real people in a real

[3] T. S. Eliot, "East Coker", line 171, *Four Quartets* (Faber, 1959), 30.

place'.[4] In contrast stands Mr Haas, an American billionaire who buys the Big House hoping to find an identity, but never has the time to visit. Donald briefly becomes his tartan-clad caretaker, an impresario performing for the tourists. But it dulls his soul. When the visitors leave, 'there is only his big empty house, which is no church where we can all sing and worship together' (p. 194). In contrast, Sunday Mass punctuates the rhythm of his week. It restores what matters, where 'everything I think and do has eternal consequences' (p. 114).

As he circles his small but infinite world, Donald stops at places peopled rich with story. Each is to him a Station of the Cross. The fourth is *Lòn a' Phùinnsein*, the Poison Pool, a stagnant soak and marshy danger to the browsing herd. Into this the debris of the world accumulates. It recalls Jesus scourged, condemned and seemingly bereft of worldly hope as he meets His Mother. The capitalisation is Donald's. 'All around the mile I pray and meditate and think', because 'those fourteen stages are the whole of history, I believe' (pp. 65–67). Such simple faithful practices comprise his politics, an innate trust 'the world will change because of these women saying the rosary' (p. 25).

It makes me think of figures like Fr Colin MacInnes of South Uist, renewing culture and community in Ecuador and back home, a liberation theology that germinated on the machairlands of Uist. Also, of one Kenny MacLeod, a retired mariner of the mainly Free Church of Scotland island of Scalpay, off Harris. In 2015 he told me:[5]

> People of that generation [early-mid twentieth century] were very strong spiritually and would have regularly prayed outdoors. […] I remember coming across a neighbour, who was an elder in the church, praying in his byre a couple of hours after we had buried their cow which had died in the field. There are similar stories of people having praying points in the moor which they would go to regularly. Sometimes I think we have lost that total dependence on God and prayer to help with everyday things like food, safety and general activities.

[4] Iain Crichton Smith, "Real People in a Real Place", in *Towards the Human* (Macdonald, 1986), 13–70.

[5] Email, 23 April 2015.

Faerie in a disembedded world

This may be familiar piety. But Campbell's Donald goes further, braiding in a cosmology characteristic of the Celtic world, our Old Testament. The rocks may be grey outside, but inside 'filled with all the colours of heaven'. Campbell's narrative glides seamlessly from material realism to the imaginal realm: to the 'little hillocks where the fairies live', for these too 'are my neighbours […] my community' (pp. 29, 35). As a child he believed in faeries; as a man he dismissed them. Now, in his bodach-hood, 'I've gone full circle and beyond […] they are more real than ever […] in the knoll as they always were' (p. 48). The Gaelic *sìth* means both peace and faerie, the *sìthean* being their hollow hill. For Donald, like other poets and musicians of tradition, here is 'the place where things are revealed to you' (p. 60).

'TV is more of a mystery to me than the fairy knoll' (p. 99). The old folks maintained that 'memory was a fairy gift' (p. 25). Once, 'we'd remember things together'. Now, 'TV remembers it for us' (p. 106). Once, the liturgical calendar paced the rhythm of the year and the timeless legends of the ceilidh-house anchored the community. Now, modernity has disrupted these connections to the collective unconscious. And yet, by some 'amazing grace', Donald can hear music from the Otherworld.[6] His neighbours cannot. They're all too busy and too noisy, rushing by in cars. But 'I'm the only one who's slow and spends every day out here, so I suppose [the faeries have] accepted me into their community' (pp. 60–61).

Far from being imaginary, this *imaginal realm*, beneath the threshold of the ego, roots the psyche into mythic consciousness. Donald pictures his grandfather, alive in the *sìthean*, relaxed from space and time (p. 60, cf. p. 142). Here, Hebridean traditions echo other indigenous cosmologies. In Papua New Guinea, where I lived for four years, many tribal communities have (or had, pre-missionary) their *Haus Tumbuna* or *Haus Tambaran*, the Spirit House. Here resides the living community of the dead. Similarly, the late Dr John MacInnes of the University of Edinburgh's School of Scottish Studies, often considered the greatest Gaelic cultural scholar of his generation, wrote of Gaels he'd known personally who believed 'implicitly',

[6] Cf. John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld: John Gregorson Campbell's Superstitions of the Highlands & Islands of Scotland and Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands & Islands*, ed. Ronald Black (Birlinn, 2005).

alongside devout Christian faith, in a faerie Otherworld 'dimension of existence'.[7]

One of the novel's most moving threads is Donald's meditation on lost love – his mother, his childhood sweetheart Mary Ann, and a legend of a lover's poetic metaphor not understood. The divine feminine weaves as a silver thread. His final Station is *Tobar nam Ban*, the Well of the Women, where a Traveller woman long ago had left a pilgrim scallop shell. She was *Brìghde nam Beann*, Bridget of the Hills – a nod to *Brìghde* as Saint Bride; and she, *Muime Chriosda* in tradition, the 'foster-mother of Christ', and even, a localised 'Mary of the Gael' (p. 177).[8] So Yeats, 'Eternal beauty wandering on her way.'[9]

Towards the novel's close, Donald tells us: 'I believe now that Mary Ann was part of the fairy knoll filled with eternal youth and happiness', and he himself as if 'made young and well and healthy again, from the fairy knoll itself' (pp. 185, 192). And there we glimpse the *sìthean's* function as indigenous apocatastasis: community as 'members one of another', togetherness realised in such 'times of restitution of all things'.[10]

What modernity has lost to its rationalism, its materialism, its pace, are God's rhythm-patterned meanings of the seasons, the liturgical year, or Stations of the Cross. 'What happened was that our routine, which is to say our world, was broken' (p. 195), because:

> Everything changed when the fairy knoll became an ordinary mound of grass you could plough or walk on. It was as if we'd thrown away our best story, where everything we'd ever dreamed or imagined had taken place. It had all come to nothing, except for fragments of songs and unbelievable stories and folk saying 'that's where they lived in the old days'. I didn't want it to be nothing, because they were part of us, and if they were nothing, so were we. (pp. 145–46)

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[7] John MacInnes, "Looking at Legends of the Supernatural", in *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton (Birlinn, 2006), 459–76.

[8] Cf. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, 580–86.

[9] W. B. Yeats, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" [1893], https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43280/to-the-rose-upon-the-rood-of-time.

[10] Romans 12:5; Acts 3:21 (KJV).

He reflects on being asked how he is. 'I'll tell you how I am. Heart-broken. […] It's not the loss that grieves me […] but the beauty of it all' (pp. 173, 106).

Campbell could have left our hero there, 'away with the fairies'; like many a bard when composing, his mind 'away in the hill' (p. 106).[11] Or perhaps, less happily, like Pink Floyd's 'bleeding hearts and artists',[12] flotsam and jetsam in the Poison Pool of Giddens' 'disembedded' advanced modernity.[13] But having led us into the *sìthean*, he leads us out.

Nurse MacLeish once thought his daily mile a mental illness. Now she understands. Together, they eye a drystane wall, stones placed as if 'by God himself […] for our joy and salvation.' The narrative subtly shifts from 'I' to 'we' as she admiringly reflects: 'As long as it's true to itself it will not fall down' (p. 203).

And that's it! That's what the book's about. The way, the truth and the life of community.

Campbell shows that 'the tradition' – its ontology, metaphysics, epistemology … and love – is not dead. In 2021, with two Skye tradition-bearers of a younger generation, I introduced Maoilios Caimbeul's epic poem of a night away in the faerie hill, *Agus Mar Sin Car a' Mhuiltein*, the 'Footnote' to which honours his Free Church moorings: 'reborn wonder / intense in essence / […] wisdom well / Christ our peace (*Crìosda ar sìth*).'[14]

What does 'faerie' in such literature encode, beyond its debased representations? What does 'simple faithful' Catholicism encode, when seen appreciatively from within its own worldview and not the fashionable 'provocations' of academics who 'problematise' the worlds of others?

At one point, a folklorist dismisses Donald's lore – mere *bloighean* – 'a useless remnant, like the half-broken shaft of a spade' (pp. 160–62). But in Hamish Henderson's phrase, tradition can be a living 'carrying stream'.[15]

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[11] Cf. MacInnes, "Supernatural"; Michael Newton, "*Bha mi 's a' chnoc*: Creativity in Scottish Gaelic Tradition", Proceedings of the 1999 Harvard Celtic Colloquium, vol. 18/19 (1998/1999): 312–39.

[12] Pink Floyd, "The Trial", *The Wall* (Harvest/EMI, 1979).

[13] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Polity, 1990), 10–29.

[14] Maoilios Caimbeul/Myles Campbell (my Foreword with Catherine MacPhee and Iain MacKinnon), *Agus Mar Sin Car a' Mhuiltein/And So Somersault* (ATLAS Arts, 2021), bilingual, https://bit.ly/4klNdFT.

[15] Timothy Neat, "Hamish Henderson – the Art and Politics of a Folklorist", in *The Carrying Stream Flows On: Celebrating the Diamond Jubilee of the School*

In MacDiarmid's words, revealing 'the immense surface of the unconscious' of 'our Gaelic background', and offering 'spiritual vision […] into the true inwardness of the thing.'[16] Or as put by the Lewis-born and Raasay-rooted son of the manse, *Dr* John MacInnes (as the community consistently styles him): 'we could take the fairy knoll as a metaphor of the imagination, perhaps an equivalent of the modern concept of the Unconscious. From this shadowy realm comes the creative power of mankind.'[17]

But in this culture, 'metaphor' is not derivative. Bardic epistemology reveals a quality more primary, more archetypal, more of eternity than ordinary reality or any simulacrum. And if we, by calling or by invitation, pick up the broken spade or cowherd's hazel staff, we too might help others 'to arrange their experience', to re-embed modern lives 'more abundantly'.[18]

There is no 'pagan' tension between Donald's faeries and his God. The hollow is 'a sacred place to me,' and God 'as real to me as the wellington boots I stand in' (pp. 55, 193). In this, Campbell echoes John Carey's 'baptism of the gods' – the 'imaginative reconciliation' whereby the faeries, far from being devil-ridden, were messengers of God. As an early Irish text has it: 'for they were faithful to the truth of nature.'[19]

Curiously, Islamic culture offers parallels. In the Qur'anic surah *Kahf*, "The Cave", we find a timeless *sìthean* parallel. And in his soaring study of the Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabī, Henry Corbin of the Sorbonne explored the visionary perception of Otherworld presences 'unaided by the senses'. These may comprise 'a psycho-spiritual experience' bestowed 'by the Active Imagination, […] the organ of theophanic vision', concluding that, 'Prayer is the highest form, the supreme act of the Creative Imagination.'[20] Donald would concur.

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of Scottish Studies, ed. Bob Chambers (Islands Book Trust, 2013), 44–72, https://doi.org/10.2218/ED.9781907443404.3.

[16] Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (Penguin, 1985): "Our Gaelic Background", 664; "Good-bye Twilight", 1124–26; cf. "A Golden Wine in the Gaidhealtachd", 721–22.

[17] MacInnes, "Supernatural", 467.

[18] MacInnes, 476; John 10:10 KJV.

[19] John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Celtic Studies Publications, 1999), 12, 37–38.

[20] Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn 'Arabī* (Princeton, 1998), 43, 145, 248.

Beyond Celtoscepticism

Campbell's book matters, because it comes from within a Celtic tradition. It quietly counterpoints certain 'Celtosceptic' scholarship that has derided such torchbearers as Alexander Carmichael of Lismore, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser of Perth, Alistair Maclean of Daviot, Kenneth Macleod of Eigg and George MacLeod of Iona.[21] Relegating them as romantics of a Yeatsian Celtic Twilight has introduced a mostly-unearned Celtic cringe. As I have witnessed over four decades of close involvement with Iona Abbey, this has weakened what the region's tradition offers to the world. 'Spirituality' and 'mysticism' can stir an unholy alliance in evangelicals and secularists alike. That said, their ire can be justified by a 'New Age' or 'Celtomaniac' effervescence that appropriates the bells and smells, but lacks social context and political solidarity. As a recent letter in the *West Highland Free Press* observes: '[amidst] the ever-growing number of fairy pools, fairy glens and other mass tourist sites […] this area once housed people and communities, and should again.'[22]

Celtosceptic critics fault early collectors for imperfect ethnography and arguable embellishment. But two points are overlooked.

Firstly, these collectors have been esteemed in their communities. Both Professor Mackinnon and Professor Carmichael Watson held the chair in Celtic at Edinburgh. Both considered Kenneth Macleod the foremost authority of his era.[23] Canon MacQueen of South Uist said the *Carmina Gadelica* let him 'eavesdrop on the private life of those old folk who included God in every passing moment of the day.'[24] Calum Macneil ('Calum a' Chal') of Barra, heir to Carmichael's informants, has lamented easy pot shots taken 'without giving due cognisance to either the times, or

[21] See especially, Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Handsel, 2000), 53–78.

[22] Michael Foxley, "Captain William Fraser cleared seven villages" (9 Jan 2026), 11.

[23] Sources etc. in my *Island Spirituality: Spiritual Values of Lewis and Harris* (Islands Book Trust, 2013), https://bit.ly/Island-Spirituality, especially endnote 117; Also, *Poacher's Pilgrimage: A Journey into Land and Soul* (Birlinn, 2016).

[24] Angus MacQueen, "Under the Mantle of Holy Bride", in *The Life and Legacy of Alexander Carmichael*, ed. Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart (Islands Book Trust, 2008), 183.

the conditions under which the materials […] were gathered.'[25] When I spent an evening with him and his wife in 2013, he was less diplomatic.

Secondly, as well as being collectors, most were rooted in the bardic function of their communities. Academics archive. But the bardic function (Continuing) includes maintaining the tradition in good repair. Kenneth Macleod was explicit. His endnotes to *The Road to the Isles* state that some pieces were 'partly old and partly new', or 'a fragment completed'.[26]

In its beguiling simplicity, *Donald and His Seven Cows* fulfils the bardic function of repair. Campbell has produced the most significant literary ethnography from out of the South Uist faerie hill in modern times. May younger generations pick up the hazel staff, and whether with seven cows or otherwise, walk on, the round mile.

[25] Calum Macneil, "Carmichael in Barra", in Stiùbhart, *Life and Legacy*, 44–56.

[26] Kenneth Macleod, *The Road to the Isles: Poetry, Lore and Tradition of the Hebrides* (Adam & Charles Black, 1927), 24–48.