

A brief history of the Gaelic Society of Inverness

Donald John MacLeod

Context

Despite the spectacular flowering of Gaelic poetry in the 18th century, pessimism regarding the future of the language had begun to set in by the beginning of the 19th. Many believed that the demise of Gaelic was imminent and so the emphasis shifted to conservation and interpretation rather than growth, with collections of folklore overshadowing original work.

The Gaelic Society of Inverness was a by-product of this change, directly as well as indirectly. The most influential of the Gaelic folklore publications of the period was John F. Campbell's *West Highland Tales*, published in four volumes in 1860-62, and it was a letter from Campbell in the *Inverness Advertiser* on October 6th 1870, urging communities to collect Gaelic lore before it was lost, that led to the launch of the Gaelic Society in the following year.

Beginnings

When William Mackay from Glenurquhart, a young trainee solicitor in Inverness, replied to Campbell's letter, he was contacted with an offer of support by Inverness school pupil William Mackenzie (later in life to be the first Secretary of the Crofters Commission). The two made common cause on the subject and, in particular, they agreed that a Gaelic-centred society, based in Inverness, would be a suitable vehicle for putting Campbell's ideas into practice.

A letter to the press from Mackenzie in May 1871, headed 'A Celtic Debating Society', drew a positive response, encouraging the two to call a public meeting on September 4th 1871.

The meeting was chaired by Mr Thomas Mackenzie, a former Rector of Inverness High School, and took place in the YMCA Building, Inverness. The attendance was 35, with the education, business and professional sectors more-or-less evenly represented.

The proposal to establish a Gaelic Society was moved by John Murdoch and seconded by Alexander ('The Clach') Mackenzie, two well-known journalists and Land Reform activists.

Mackenzie, in his speech, referred to what he called "the disgraceful state of affairs [whereby] anyone who wants to know anything concerned with Gaelic literature or tradition must apply, not to a body of learned and patriotic men in the Capital of the Highlands, but to a Gaelic, or a Celtic, or a Highland Society in London or New York."

Murdoch's proposal was welcomed in principle but the suggested name gave rise to a debate which uncovered a divergence of views on Gaelic. Inverness Town Clerk Alexander Dallas was concerned that calling the new organisation the *Gaelic* Society "might indicate that it has no interest in anything beyond the maintenance of the language." He went on, referring to a request that children be taught Gaelic: "What would be the use of it – it would in no way promote their prosperity in the world."

Others, including Alexander Mackenzie and the Society's first Chief, Cluny MacPherson, took a more positive line, while Murdoch in presenting his motion sought the middle ground: "Assuming, as some hope, and as others fear, that the Gaelic language is destined to die out, there should be special effort made to rescue from oblivion all that is valuable in the lore that is afloat in the Highlands".

The Society

The motion was carried and preparations got underway leading to the formal constitution on 28th September 1871 of The Gaelic Society of Inverness, with 28 Members and the following stated aims:

- to enhance members' use of Gaelic
- support the language, poetry and music of the Highlands
- rescue Celtic lore, books and manuscripts from oblivion
- establish a library
- further the interests of the Scottish Gaelic people both at home and abroad.

The Society was to be managed by a Council, comprising a Chief, three Chieftains, a Secretary and Treasurer, and five ordinary members. This model has survived to the present day, though the Chief and Chieftains play little or no part in the day-to-day running of the Society now. There was, and still is, provision also for an Honorary Librarian, Piper and Bard, and up to seven Honorary Chieftains, although these posts are not part of the ruling Council.

The first Chief of the Gaelic Society was Cluny MacPherson of Cluny. He was followed by Sir Kenneth S. Mackenzie of Gairloch, setting a precedent which saw clan chiefs, or their equivalent in status, more-or-less monopolising the role for decades: a late example saw Harold Macmillan invited to be Chief for 1956, the year of the Suez Crisis (he declined!).

This practice began to change only in the 1960s, when it became more common for scholars (e.g. Derick Thomson and William Matheson) and others to be nominated as Society Chiefs, heralding a more open and professional ethos in the Society, broadly akin to the situation today.

The position of Secretary has been key to the Society's success. Among notable post-holders have been the Society's co-founders William Mackay and William Mackenzie and two long-serving incumbents, Alexander Neil Nicolson (1921-60) and Hugh Barron (1960-99). Lists of Chiefs, Secretaries and Honorary Librarians, Poets and Pipers can be found in the Appendix.

Between 1929 and 1975 the Society had access to office space in Union Street, Queensgate and finally Academy Street in Inverness. The Society Library was housed within the office.

Over the years, the Society has launched several initiatives aimed at streamlining its structures or raising its profile, for example setting up a Development Working Party in 1996/97 and, from 1998, using social media such as its own website (www.gsi.org.uk) and Facebook page.

In the early years, each member was encouraged to recruit at least one new person per year: as a result the membership mushroomed, from 28 in September 1871 to 182 by the end of that year and 320 by 1875. The total has fluctuated over the years, touching 500 in the late 1930s and 600 in the 90s. The current total is about 400 and has been around that level for some time.

From the beginning, the membership has been dispersed widely. Currently, of 412 members, 243 are based in the North of Scotland (84 of those in Inverness), 118 in the rest of Scotland, 28 in England and 23 abroad.

The membership fee was set at five shillings per year (ca. £28 in today's values) at the outset and stayed at that level for some 50 years, giving rise to recurrent financial difficulties

Meetings

The first open meeting of the Gaelic Society took place on the 19th of October 1871, when the Rev A. D. Mackenzie, Free Church minister of Kilmorack, delivered the inaugural lecture on the character of the Gaelic language (comparing it in detail to Welsh).

The meetings were initially intended to take place weekly in winter and fortnightly in summer, but that has changed over the years: currently meetings are held in the winter only and on a roughly monthly basis.

Although day-to-day business and topical issues were often discussed at these meetings in the early years, their most important function has always been to provide a platform for learned talks on aspects of Highland history and Gaelic culture which would subsequently be published in the form of volumes of Transactions.

Originally, it was proposed that alternate meetings would be in Gaelic but, in practice, a majority of the talks, from the outset, have been in English, although Gaelic presentations have also featured regularly, and continue to do so.

An Annual Dinner and an Assembly were important features of the Society's calendar in the early years: the first Dinner took place on 26th December 1871 and the first Assembly on 11th July 1872. Those were grand social occasions, held in large, lavishly-decorated venues and providing a mixed menu of lectures/speeches and a range of musical items, both vocal and instrumental.

Unlike most of the regular meetings, the Dinner and Assembly were always well attended: around 1,000 of 'the great and the good' from the Inverness area took part in the first Assembly, for example. The Assembly was usually held on the eve of the annual Inverness Wool and Sheep Fair, which helped swell the attendance.

A flavour of these events is given in this quote from Màiri A. MacDonald's *History of the Gaelic Society 1871-1971* (TGSJ XLVI): "The dinner became one of the highlights of Inverness public ceremonies. An almost unerring choice of chiefs, men of affairs, great sailors and soldiers, as befitted a Highland gathering, and a small but very choice band of scholars, gave uncommon standing and sense of occasion to the one time in the year when many more than the faithful few flocked to the standard."

The Dinner and Assembly were not just social affairs, however, with speakers often using the occasion to put their views on subjects like Gaelic education and the land question across to large, and potentially influential, audiences.

The Annual Dinner (also referred to at times as 'the supper' or simply 'the social function') has continued to the present day but is now less grand and less formal, though the Society Chief still delivers an Address.

The last Assembly was held in 1922, being in effect replaced by the annual gatherings at the Culloden Cairn from 1925.

The Transactions

The first volume of the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness (TGSI) appeared in 1872, containing a selection of papers from the 1871-72 season, including the inaugural lecture and some of the speeches and toasts from the Assembly and Dinner, as well as the scholarly papers delivered at the regular meetings of the Society.

Initially, the intention was to publish a volume of the Transactions every year but that did not prove possible. The gap between volumes averages around two years over the 148 years since the Transactions started, but there have been longer gaps on occasion, due to events such as the World Wars or funding shortages. There have been 68 volumes of TGSI to date.

Donations from wealthy supporters have sometimes been required to fund particular volumes, including, for example, from Dr J. J. Galbraith (Dingwall) in respect of Volumes 36, 38 and 39/40 and Sir Denys Lawson, former Lord Mayor of London, for Volume 41. The Carnegie and Catherine McCaig Trusts are among organisations that have provided support.

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Papers on topics related to Celtic identity appeared often in the early Transactions, reflecting a common preoccupation of the time. Traditional tales, poems and songs were a regular feature as well, in line with the original purpose of the Society: this thread has continued to the present day. Local history has been another recurring topic, as might be expected.

The range of subjects covered has continued to grow, with an increasing emphasis in recent years on social and economic development and contemporary history. The following list shows examples of the kinds of topics covered in the Transactions, from Volumes I to LXVIII, with two examples in each case of expert contributors on the subject.

- Local history and traditions (James E. Scott, Hugh Barron)
- Clan and family histories (Charles Fraser-Macintosh, William Matheson)
- Biography (J. F. M. MacLeod, Dr Martin Whittet)
- Dialects (Charles M. Robertson, Professor Donald MacKinnon)
- Literary criticism (Sorley Maclean, Professor Derick Thomson)
- Folklore (Alexander Carmichael, Dr John MacInnes)
- Legends and customs (Rev John MacRury, Calum I. Maclean)
- Placenames (Ian A. Fraser, Prof John Stuart-Murray)
- Historical events (Professors Ted Cowan and Donald E. Meek)
- Social/Economic (D. J. MacCuish, John A. MacPherson)
- Music (Malcolm MacFarlane, Ethel Bassin)
- Education (John A. Smith, Murdo MacLeod)
- Religion (Archibald B. Scott, Rev Dr Roddy MacLeod)
- Emigrants (Rev A. Maclean Sinclair, Bill Lawson).

A full classified list appears in Volume LXVIII. This, as well as a detailed subject index, can be accessed on the internet at: www.gsi.org.uk/transaction.

Campaigning

The Society often engaged in campaigning in its early years and, with activists like Alexander Mackenzie and John Murdoch in its ranks, it was inevitable that it would get involved in the politics of Land Reform. At a meeting in May 1877, Mackenzie proposed: “That the Society petition Parliament for a Royal Commission to enquire into the condition of the crofters in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland with a view to devising means for its amelioration.”

Since clan chiefs and landlords were prominent in the Society, this had the potential to be a contentious issue and, at a meeting in December, this counter motion was tabled: “Until further information is gathered as to the condition of the crofters, and until the Society is prepared to indicate what steps, if any, ought to be taken, the Society [will] not petition Parliament.”

Alexander Mackenzie’s original motion was adopted, however, and a sub-committee was set up to draft a Petition in the appropriate legal format. The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands (better known as the ‘Napier Commission’) was duly set up in 1883, issuing its report a year later. The account of the report in the Transactions does not touch on issues related to land use, hinting at underlying tensions within the Society on this subject.

Education was the other main issue with which the Society got involved at this time: the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 had made no reference to Gaelic and School Boards often took this as their cue to ignore it. The issue was often discussed at the early meetings of the Society and representations were made to Parliament through Charles Fraser Mackintosh MP.

The Society played an active part, collectively and through individuals such as W. J. Watson and the Right Hon Ian MacPherson MP, in the campaign to have a dedicated Gaelic Clause inserted in the Education (Scotland) Act of 1918.

The final draft of the Act required education authorities “to make adequate provision for teaching Gaelic in Gaelic-speaking areas”. The Clause was criticised for its vagueness but it is an important early legal recognition of Gaelic and led to more Gaelic teaching in schools.

The National Census was another matter in which the Gaelic Society got involved, again leading to a successful outcome. The Society Minute Book for 1880 sheds a light on how the Society dealt with such issues at this time: “On the motion of Mr Alexander Mackenzie, seconded by Mr Mackay, it was unanimously agreed to petition Parliament in favour of a Gaelic Census and the Secretary was instructed to ask the Chief of the Society to draw up a Petition on the subject and thereafter to have it presented to Parliament through Mr Fraser Mackintosh.”

This partnership between Alexander Mackenzie and Fraser Macintosh MP was a very productive one, making the Society an effective force for change at national level at this time.

The Society also played an important role in encouraging and supporting Professor John Stuart Blackie in his campaign to establish a Chair of Celtic in Edinburgh University: the campaign came to fruition in 1882, helping to impart an air of academic respectability to the language

The Gaelic Society has continued to express views on matters such as Gaelic and land use - responding formally to the consultations on Bòrd na Gàidhlig and crofting law reform, for example - but this has been sporadic in recent times, partly because there are now more organisations interested in such matters and, therefore, less need for the Society to get involved.

Library

Assembling a library of Gaelic-related books and manuscripts was one of the founding objectives of the Society. Thanks to bequests, donations and judicious purchases, the Gaelic Society Library now runs to some 2,500 titles, mostly on Highland history and Gaelic culture. Originally based in the Society's office - in Union Street, Queensgate and Academy Street, Inverness - the library has from 1975 been managed by the Inverness Library, Farraline Park. The books are covered in the main Inverness Library catalogue, as well as in a classified list compiled by the Gaelic Society Librarian which can be accessed at: www.gsi.org/library.

Miscellaneous

While the Talks and Transactions have been at the heart of the Society's work from the outset, it has also engaged, from time to time, in other activities related to its aims.

The Society set up a committee in 1924, for example, to tackle the disrepair into which the Culloden Battlefield had fallen. Funding was acquired – the total cost was around £300 - and the work was completed in time and to a high standard. The Society's first Culloden Memorial Service took place on April 18th 1925 and has continued to be held every April since then.

Helping to install or refurbish commemorative plaques and grave stones at various sites throughout the Highlands has been a feature of the Gaelic Society's work over the years. Those commemorated include: Alexander MacBain (Rothiemurchus), Archibald Grant/Archie Tàillear (Glenmoriston), Charles Fraser Mackintosh (Inverness), Dòmhnall Phòil (Badenoch), Duncan Bàn Macintyre (Greyfriars Churchyard; Druim Liaghart, Argyll); Dr John MacDonald of Ferintosh (Balnabeen, Caithness), Ewan Maclachlan (Craigs Burial Ground, Fort William), Gille na Ciotraig (Fort Augustus), Lachlan MacPherson (Kinlochlaggan), Mairi A. MacDonald (Culloden Battlefield), Major Neil MacLeod (Trumpan, Skye), Neil MacLeod (Glendale, Skye), Saint Mary MacKillop and Dòmhnall Mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn (Cille Choireil, Roybridge), The Seven Men of Glenmoriston (Glenmoriston, Mairi A. MacDonald bequest).

From the 1990s the Society has awarded prizes or scholarships to students as part of the following schemes: the Mackay Gaelic Prize (schools), the Charles Fraser Mackintosh Award (university history departments) and the Hugh Barron scholarship (universities/colleges).

While scholarly talks remain the mainstay of the Society, there have been attempts in recent times to introduce new ways of presenting traditional subjects, including guided visits to sites of historic interest and, for a spell in the early 2000s, a new type of stage presentation in which music, talks and visual content were combined in order to explore selected themes. At present the Society organises a Gaelic ceilidh each year, usually in Eden Court Theatre, Inverness.

Conclusion

The Gaelic world has changed greatly since 1871 and this has impacted on the Society in various ways. Nevertheless, the Gaelic Society of Inverness is still recognisably the same entity that began back then – an achievement in itself - and it still continues to play an important role in promoting a better understanding of the Highlands and of Gaelic culture, past and present.

APPENDIX

Chiefs

1872	Cluny MacPherson of Cluny
1873	Cluny MacPherson of Cluny
1874	Sir Kenneth MacKenzie, Bart., of Gairloch
1875	Charles Fraser Mackintosh, MP
1876	Prof John Stuart Blackie
1877	Prof John Stuart Blackie
1878	John Mackay, C.E.
1879	Lachlan MacDonald of Skeabost
1880	Rev Dr Thomas MacLauchlan
1881	Sir Patrick Grant, G.C.B.
1882	Charles Fraser Mackintosh, MP
1883	The Right Hon The Earl of Dunmore
1884	Donald Cameron of Locheil, MP
1885	Allan Mackenzie, Yr. of Kintail
1886	R. C. Munro-Ferguson of Novar
1887	Mackintosh of Mackintosh
1888	Mackintosh of Mackintosh
1889	Sir Henry C. MacAndrew
1890	Ian Murray Grant of Glenmoriston
1891	J. Douglas Fletcher, of Rosehaugh
1892	Sir Kenneth Mackenzie, Bart.
1893	Charles Fraser Mackintosh, MP
1894	Charles Fraser Mackintosh, MP
1895	Field-Marshal Sir Patrick Grant
1896	J. E. B. Baillie, MP, of Dochfour
1897	Cluny MacPherson of Cluny
1898	The Rt. Hon. Lord Lovat, C.B., D.S.O.
1899	J. E. B. Baillie of Dochfour
1900	Sir Hector Munro, Bart., of Fowlis
1901	Arthur Bignold, MP, of Lochrosque
1902	Arthur Bignold, MP, of Lochrosque
1903	The Rt. Hon. Lord Lovat, CB, DSO
1904	J. P. Grant, of Rothiemurchus
1905	John A. Dewar, MP
1906	Sir Robert Finlay, K.C.
1907	The Rt. Hon. Marquess of Tullibardine
1908	Dr William Mackay
1909	Donald W. Cameron of Locheil
1910	Captain Ellice of Invergarry
1911	The Rt. Hon. Marquess of Tullibardine
1912	Mackinnon of Mackinnon
1913	The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Seafield
1914	The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Seafield
1915	The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Seafield
1916-18	[Position vacant]
1919	Col. Donald W. Cameron of Locheil
1920	General Sir Walter Ross
1921	William Mackay
1922	Col. D. W. Cameron of Locheil
1923	Sir John Lorne MacLeod
1924	Sir John Lorne MacLeod
1925	The Right Hon. The Earl of Cassillis
1926	Lt.-Col. John MacRae-Gilstrap of Eilean Donan
1927	Prof W. J. Watson
1928	His Grace The Duke of Atholl
1929	The Right Hon. James Iain Macpherson, KC, MP

1930 Sir Reginald MacLeod of MacLeod
 1931 Sir Murdoch MacDonald, MP
 1932 The Right Hon. The Countess of Cromartie
 1933 Sir Alexander MacEwen
 1934 The Right Hon. Sir J. Iain MacPherson
 1935 Evan M. Barron
 1936 Prof W. J. Watson
 1937 Sir Francis J. Grant, Lord Lyon King of Arms
 1938 Sir T. Stewart MacPherson
 1939 Dr J. J. Galbraith
 1940 Dr J. J. Galbraith
 1941 Dr J. J. Galbraith
 1942 Dr J. J. Galbraith
 1943 Rev Archibald MacDonald
 1944 Rev Archd. B. Scott
 1945 Rev Dugald MacEchern
 1946 Vice-Admiral Sir R. R. MacGrigor
 1947 Major-General D. N. Wimberley
 1948 Sheriff John Cameron
 1949 General Sir A. F. Christison
 1950 Dr D. J. MacLeod
 1951 Vice-Admiral Mackintosh of Mackintosh
 1952 Sir Denys C. F. Lowson
 1953 The Rt. Hon. Lord Macdonald of Sleat
 1954 Sir Compton MacKenzie
 1955 The Rt. Hon. Viscount Kilmuir of Creich
 1956 Sir David Robertson, M.P.
 1957 The Rt. Hon. James Stuart
 1958 Captain John MacLeod, MP
 1959 Colonel Neil MacLean MP
 1960 Prof Angus Matheson
 1961 Rev T. M. Murchison
 1962 Mr John M. Rollo
 1963 Sir Hugh Watson
 1964 Dr D. J. MacDonald
 1965 Dr John L. Campbell of Canna
 1966 Hugh MacPhee
 1967 Alasdair R. Mackenzie, MP
 1968 Rev William Matheson
 1969 Prof Derick S. Thomson
 1970 Sam Maclean
 1971 Captain William Mackay
 1972 Dr Annie M. Murray
 1973 Rev Dr John MacPherson
 1974 Prof Kenneth H. Jackson
 1975 Rev John MacInnes
 1976 Donald J. MacCuish
 1977 Dr J. A. Maclean
 1978 John A. Smith
 1979 Alick Morrison
 1980 Dr Ian M. M. MacPhail
 1981 Rev Donald Macaulay
 1982 Dr Sam Maclean
 1983 Dr John MacInnes
 1984 Donald MacAulay
 1985 Archibald J. S. MacPherson
 1986 Dr Alasdair Maclean
 1987 Hugh Barron
 1988 John M. Mackay
 1989 Murdo Campbell

1990	Dr James Shaw Grant
1991	Rev Father John A. MacDonald
1992	Murdo MacLeod
1993	Dr Colm O Baoill
1994	Fred E. G. Macaulay
1995	Donald A. MacDonald
1996	Kenneth D. MacDonald
1997	Colonel Lachlan Robertson
1998	Prof Donald E. Meek
1999	Norman Gillies
2000	Morag MacLeod
2001	Dr Farquhar MacIntosh
2003	Prof William Gillies
2004	Rev Dr Roderick MacLeod
2005	J. F. M. MacLeod
2006	Ian A. Fraser
2007	John F. Munro
2008	John A. MacPherson
2009	Cailean Maclean
2010	Brigadier Iain MacFarlane
2011	Prof Boyd Robertson
2012	Prof Donald MacLeod
2013	Sheriff Roderick John MacLeod
2014	Dr Margaret Bennett
2015	Prof Matthew MacIver
2016	Prof Hugh Cheape
2017	Jo MacDonald
2018	Murdo Beaton

[Where the period of tenure straddles two calendar years, to save space only the first year is given here.]

Secretaries

William Mackay (1871-73)
Donald Macrae (1874)
Alexander Mackenzie (1875)
William Mackenzie (1876-86)
Duncan Mackintosh (1887-1903)
A. Morrison (1904-07)
D. F. Mackenzie (1908-15)
Davidson, Scott & Coy. (1916)
Miss M. J. Munro (1917-19)
Alexander N. Nicolson (1921-60)
Hugh Barron (1960-99)
Farquhar Mackintosh (1960-62)
Hugh D. MacLennan (1999-2001)
Anne Souter (2001-07)
Shona Campbell (2008-12)
Alice MacDonald (2013-)

Honorary Librarians

Lachlan MacBean (1872-76)
Charles Ferguson (1877-78)
A. R. Macrauld (1881)
John Whyte (1879-80, 1882-88)
William Fraser (1889-1901)
Alexander MacDonald (1902-04)
A. Morrison (1905-06)
D. J. MacDonald (1907-25)
Alexander N. Nicolson (1927-36)
Lachlan F. Dick (1966-75)
Duncan MacQuarrie (1976-92)
Murdo MacLeod (1993-2008)
Allan MacLeod (2009)
D. J. MacLeod (2010-)

Honorary Bards

Angus MacDonald (1871-74)
Mary Mackellar (1876-1890)
Neil MacLeod (1891-1902)
Alexander MacDonald (1903)
Rev Dugald MacEchern (1904-44)
Sam Maclean (1945-97)
Derick Thomson (1998-2011)
Maoilios Caimbeul (2012-)

Honorary Pipers

Alexander MacLennan (1874-1889)
Pipe Major Ronald Mackenzie (1890-1915)
Pipe Major John MacDonald (1919-44)
Malcolm MacInnes (1945-51)
Norman Macrae (1952-55)
Pipe Major William Young (1956-60)
Neil A. MacDonald (1961-78)
Ruairidh MacDonald (1979-93)
Angus MacPhee (1994-98)
Angus MacDonald (1999-2013)
Ronald MacLean (2008-2013)
Euan J. J. MacCrimmon (2014-)



URQUHART AND GLENMORISTON

OLDEN TIMES

IN A

HIGHLAND PARISH

BY

WILLIAM MACKAY

“Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations.”—
Deut. xxii. 7

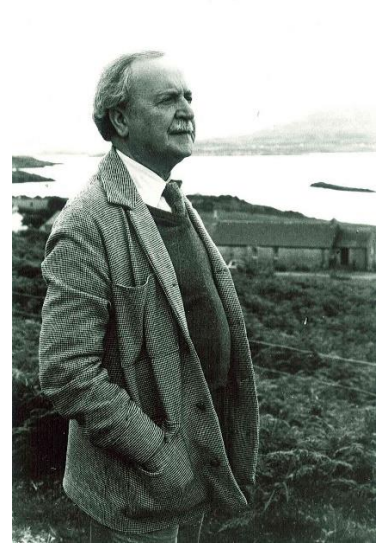
Inverness

THE NORTHERN COUNTIES NEWSPAPER AND PRINTING AND

PUBLISHING COMPANY, LIMITED

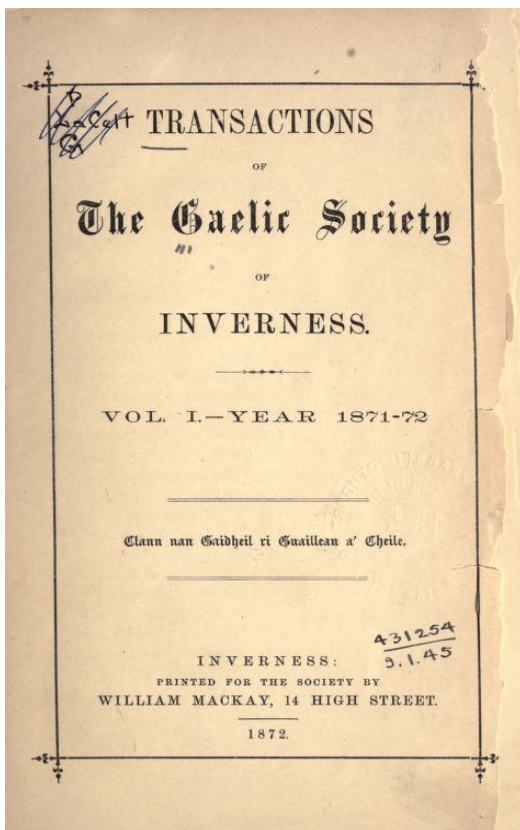
1893

William Mackay, co-founder of the Society, was a distinguished historian in his own right.



Three personalities from the Society's history

- Left:* John Murdoch, radical newspaper owner/editor and land reform campaigner
- Centre:* Charles Fraser Mackintosh, MP and local historian
- Right:* Sorley Maclean, GSI Bard (1945-77), Chief (1970) and a frequent contributor to TGSI



Volume I of the Transactions



The Culloden Anniversary Service 2016