# The Classic Ground of our Celtic Homer: Alexander Campbell’s Song-Collecting Tour [title, Old Ways New Roads event]

# Revisiting the Achievements of Song-Collector Alexander Campbell

Alexander Campbell was the compiler of the two-volume Albyn’s Anthology (1816, 1818). He based his collections largely on the tour of the Highlands and Islands that he made in search of Scottish traditional songs in 1815. He covered most of his journey on foot – apart, of course, from ferries and rowing-boats between the isles.

In 2008, whilst I was completing my doctoral thesis on historical Scottish song collecting, I was invited to go and talk about Campbell to the young traditional musicians at Plockton Centre of Excellence for Traditional Music.

**Slide 2** To get the whole Alexander Campbell experience, I’d have liked to have taken those teenage traditional musicians outdoors into untamed countryside, with the rain pouring down, a rough footpath under their feet, probably no map, and certainly no mobile phone! However, Plockton was sunny that day, and I only had an hour before lunch on a Sunday morning! The best I could do was to ask them to use their imaginations as I shared the story of Alexander Campbell with them. Can I likewise invite you to exercise your imagination today?!

# **Slide 3 Etching**

Campbell has been described as Scotland’s first ethnomusicologist.[[1]](#endnote-1) This may not be strictly accurate – Joseph McDonald compiled his collection a good half-century earlier – but Campbell was the first on record to expend such physical effort on his collection.

Originally from Tombea, north-west of Callander, he was proud to call himself a Highlander and a Gaelic speaker. By the time he reached adulthood he had moved to Edinburgh, and had singing lessons with Tenducci, the famous Italian singer.[[2]](#endnote-2) A music teacher and organist, Campbell also wrote about Scottish poetry and places; studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh but never seems to have been a doctor, and once made what has been described as “a financially disastrous venture into farming”.[[3]](#endnote-3) He knew of the Highland Clearances, and in 1804 published a poem called The Grampians Desolate, in which he complained about the plight of Highlanders. This book-length poem was a fund-raiser for a charity that he set up.[[4]](#endnote-4) **Slide 4 Grampians Desolate videoclip [*TALK OVER IT*]**

**Slide 5** At what he considered the old age of 51, Campbell embarked upon a song-collecting tour of the Highlands and Western Isles. It was a long-held ambition – he had told the antiquarian Joseph Ritson about his dream, as far back as 1792. Whilst we know that personal circumstances delayed his ability to make the tour until 1815, we don’t know why he chose to set out on a three-month trip in late July …when anyone who knows Scottish summers would have thought it better to set off in May!)

Campbell kept a detailed diary of his trip, calling it, “A Slight Sketch of a journey made through parts of the Highlands & ***Hebrides***”. I’ll be telling you about some of the highlights of his trip, in this brief talk.

“On the 23rd July 1815, I took my place as an out-side passenger on the mail-coach to Stirling. On my arrival there, I armed, and apparelled myself in the ancient costume of my native mountains; and set forward for Lenrick Castle.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Although he sometimes had company, just as often we find him tramping around in the mud, falling down hills, or slipping into turbulent streams, all alone. He hurt his leg quite badly more than once, but rested for a day or so and then moved on. Towards the end of his trip, he was plainly getting tired and fed up, but his spirits seem to have lifted on the homeward stretch.

A man of his age, and an artist himself, Campbell’s journal also notes when he was impressed by a particularly spectacular view, and in this respect he referenced an influential writer, Edmund Burke, who had written *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful.* [**COUNT TO EIGHT]**

# **Slide 6** Let’s pause to meet a couple of influential Scotsmen. Fifty years before Campbell’s tour, the Gaelic-speaking poet James Macpherson published The Works of Ossian, the Son of Fingal, in 1765. His poetry was in English, but he claimed to have translated it from the Gaelic, having gathered together and reconstructed ancient Gaelic poems and fragments by the bard Ossian, all about Fingal and his heroic exploits. Fingal was said to have roamed the Highlands in around the third century – and the poems were mainly handed down orally from generation to generation. Macpherson said he collected his materials from Highlanders encountered during his own poem-collecting tour.

**Slide 7 videoclip Ossian book** [*I read from it in the recording*] Highland society – indeed, people all over Scotland, England, and then Europe – went crazy about these poems, re-translating them into other languages, and even – much later on - back into Gaelic. It was stirring stuff about rugged mountains, misty glens, stormy weather and turbulent streams, with plenty of heroic exploits. Only seven years after The Works of Ossian was published, explorer Louis Albert Necker de Saussure “discovered” the caves on Staffa, and was told they were “the caves of Fingal”.

**Slide 8 – Fingal’s Cave** [[6]](#endnote-6) On a practical level, tourism as an industry can be said to have started about this time, and literally hundreds of tour guides were being written. The association of the caves with the great Ossianic hero fanned the flames of interest in the Hebridean islands. Travel writers were enchanted with the romance and grandeur of the caves, particularly with the echo effect in Fingal’s Cave. Travellers would take their own piper with them by boat, to hear the sound resonate round the caves. (Back in 2008, I recreated this trip with my reluctant family, only to discover a little boy playing ‘Highland Cathedral’ on the accordion in the cave.)

Literary experts were unconvinced that the poems were genuine. After Macpherson’s death, the Highland Society of Scotland began an enquiry, members travelling to the Highlands and Islands attempting to meet the people who had given Macpherson his original Gaelic poems.

Amidst the growing interest in Scottish poetry and songs in general, Alexander Campbell was anxious to preserve his heritage, writing first a book about Scottish poetry, and then a travel guide, long before he started his song collection. His *Introduction to the History of Poetry in Scotland* appeared in 1798-99.[[7]](#endnote-7) Believing the Ossian poems to be genuine, he wrote a chapter defending them, arguably less harsh a judge than some of the experts in the Highland Society of Scotland. His tour-guide, *Journey from Edinburgh through parts of North Britain*, followed in 1802.[[8]](#endnote-8) **Slide 9 Videoclip, Journey from Edinburgh START TALKING DURING VIDEO.**

His real ambition was to compile a collection of Highland songs, and he asked the Highland Society of Scotland to help finance this. The society provided the funds, but stressed that they were not commissioning the research, merely helping him fund his trip.

**Slide 10.** Campbell was fortunate that an influential member of the nobility helped him plan his itinerary. Sir John Macgregor Murray – a committed member of the Highland Society of Scotland - had already been instrumental in getting an early collection of Highland tunes published – the Patrick McDonald collection (*Highland Vocal Airs, Country Dances or Reels of the North Highlands and Western Isles*, 1784) – and, significantly, he had been amongst the individuals visiting the Highlands and Western Isles in 1800, trying to trace the sources of Macpherson’s epic verses.

**Slide 11.** Sir John had already had an illustrious career with the East India Company. He had also become Clan Chieftain of the Macgregors, and had petitioned to have the proscription of the Macgregor name lifted – so he was undoubtedly a gentleman of both determination and position. However, if there was one prevailing and notable characteristic about Sir John, it was his predeliction for recording histories and cultures. He spent much time researching his own family history, and whilst in India commissioned munshis **[Slide 12]** to write lengthy manuscripts for the East India Company about customs and procedures in the regions where he was stationed.

At that time, he also raised funds to finance a Gaelic edition of the Ossian tales. (Legal means were subsequently used to recover the funds from the deceased Macpherson’s family, since the author failed to produce a Gaelic translation).

**Slide 13.** As you see, he had his finger in quite a lot of pies, all connected with record-keeping or cultural history!

**Slide 14.** By the time Campbell met him, he was old and had retired to Lanrick Castle, north of Stirling, where he was able to indulge his passions for the Gaelic language and Highland culture, and become even more involved with the Highland Societies of Scotland and London.

**Slide 15.** In 1815, Campbell started his journey by visiting Lanrick Castle, where Sir John wrote a number of letters for him, introducing him to knowledgeable people in Mull, Staffa, Benbecula, North and South Uist and Skye. Without help, Campbell would have had much more difficulty getting to meet the right people.

**Slide 16.** Staying overnight, Campbell set off for Stirling the next day, and Sir John – unsurprisingly – set off to judge a piping competition in Edinburgh under the auspices of the Highland Society of Scotland.

# Campbell on tour

Starting in Stirling in Perthshire, Campbell went westward to the Argyleshire coast, travelling from Connel (near Oban) to the isles of Lismore, Mull and Iona. He went by boat from Tobermory at the northern tip of Mull, to North Uist. He travelled to South Uist and the isles of Barra and Vatersay, before returning to North Uist.

From here, he headed for the isle of Harris, going by the tiny isle of Killegray on his way to Skye. His island-hopping took in Raasay and Scalpay before he headed back for the mainland, arriving at Glenelg some 55 miles due north of Connel.

Note that he didn’t go near Lewis, probably because James Macpherson hadn’t done so. Johnson and Boswell, who were amongst the first to try to retrace Macpherson’s footsteps in an effort to prove him a fraud, didn’t go to Lewis, and Campbell’s advisor Sir John MacGregor Murray may also not have been there.

Glengarry, Inverlochy (near Fort William), Ballachulish and Inveruran marked his return to Stirlingshire. He stopped off again at Lanrick Castle to show off his collection to Sir John, walked to Stirling then took the mail coach home to Edinburgh.

# Informants and Accomodation

Sometimes Campbell stayed with the people that he met – other times he stayed at inns. One night when he was stuck for a bed, he ended up sleeping on a bundle of hay in a weaver’s cottage. Without modern communication methods, he couldn’t be sure that the people he was visiting would be at home when he got there. On one occasion, he found his clergyman host had gone out. Campbell was grateful for a stiff drink of cognac (“conniack”) when eventually the minister came home!

Campbell lived in times when class distinction was much greater than anything we’ve ever come across, but he was clearly happy to mix with people of all ranks of society. He met a lot of people who were quite comfortably off, as well as church ministers and a few priests - the people that Sir John Macgregor Murray would have met on his own trip. At prearranged gatherings, Campbell met people who would perform for him, or individuals would be sent for in order for him to take down tunes. He went to dances, dinners, social evenings, and listened to all kinds of people singing songs and reciting poems - gentry and military men, servants and fieldworkers, boatmen, a weaver, and a cabinet-maker, besides amateur violinists and various pipers. (He too was treated to the “effect” of Staffa’s piper playing ‘The Lament for the Slain’ in Fingal’s Cave.) He even met a man who played the instrument that Campbell called a ‘Jew’s harp’. (It’s also known as a jaw harp, or a trump.)

A diligent networker, he made people to promise to forward any extra information that they were able to gather for him.

# Family genealogies and traditions

In 1815, as now, traditional musicians set great store by the history of the tunes that they performed. Campbell encountered an old man who was the 22nd male representative of the McMhuirich family, formerly the hereditary bards to the family of Clanranald. Another time, he collected songs from the grandson of McCodrum (“the celebrated bard of North Uist”).

Bagpipe music was transcribed from Captain Niel MacLeod of Gesto, who had learned it from the MacCrimmons of Skye. Campbell also heard brilliant piping by the elderly Lieut. Donald MacCrimmon, “the eleventh in succession of the MacCrummons of Skye”. He collected harp music which came indirectly from Murdoch McDonald, the last Harper to the Laird of Coll, who had died 76 years previously. These were transcribed – from whom, Campbell does not say - by Margaret Maclean Clephane, who was away in Edinburgh getting married to the Marquis of Compton, whilst Campbell was in the Hebrides. Campbell observed that harp music could still be heard in the Highlands and Western Isles – indeed, he had heard young ladies playing an “improved harp”, Campbell wished that harp music could be revived and the ancient Order of Harpers re-established in Scotland. However, part of his enjoyment of the harp was – ahem! - purely aesthetic: he thought young ladies’ figures were displayed to best advantage when playing the harp!

Growing more selective as time went by, he spent one particular evening listening to a weaver singing,

“song after song, Luineag after Luineag, interspersed with many stories of considerable length, and various merit – Most of the pieces … I had heard repeatedly in Lochaber, and other Highland districts.”

Campbell gathered fiddle music, pipe tunes, harp airs, and tunes that he described as “pretty national melodies” – sometimes played on the piano. His collection included short songs, “ancient love songs”, rowing songs, and “mouth-music”, sung in place of instrumental music for dancing. There was also Gaelic poetry, some of which Campbell declared to be “Ossianic fragments”, later writing of tracing the steps of “our Celtic Homer” – in other words, Ossian the bard.

For each piece that he took down, then repeated them back to the performer – or the people he was staying with – to “authenticate” them. There’s no mention of his carrying an instrument. After the first month, Campbell noted that in Mull he had gleaned “forty-seven original melodies, mostly vocal, with a stanza or two of the original words to each – the plan I uniformly followed – in order to identify the songs … to which they are chanted … “

Twelve months after his return to Edinburgh, he was to make another music-collecting tour to the Scottish Borders in October 1816, again logging the trip. However, this tour was curtailed by illness, after three weeks. He had covered a circle roughly defined by the Borders towns of Peebles, Ettrick, Hawick, Jedburgh and Melrose, and spent time with James Hogg and Sir Walter Scott, besides taking detailed notes about famous Borders pipers, from Sir Walter Scott’s uncle, Mr Thomas Scott.

The second volume of *Albyn’s Anthology* was not meant to be the final one. He never published his intended third volume. His collections met with a mixed reception, and did not achieve a great popularity - probably due to the fact that his arrangements left much to be desired!

Campbell tried to write simple “classical” song settings, but it’s fair to say that traditional modal melodies can be harder to harmonise than you might think; he sometimes broke some of the most basic harmony rules that were commonly learnt in those days - rules that you might expect Campbell to have encountered, if he was working as a professional musician. This raises questions about his level of musicianship, and also about how many lessons he actually had with the eminent singer, Tenducci! (Tenducci himself had had a chorister’s training in Italy, and was undoubtedly musically educated.) Nonetheless, Campbell knew what he was looking for, believed he could spot an authentic Highland melody, and thought he could tell the difference between a Highland and a Lowland melody.

Indeed, he did preserve a lot of songs that might otherwise have been forgotten. From a musical point of view, the tunes make good source-material, and musicians nowadays make their own settings of them.

**Slide 17 – videoclip of vol.1 [COMMENT OVER THIS]**

Meanwhile, the publications and the travel logs’ significance lie in telling us where he went, and his methodology. Campbell left an intriguing piece of social history, demonstrating the depth of this particular Highlander’s love for his homeland, its traditions and its heritage.

**Slide 18 – soundclip, The auburn-hair’d bonny dey.**

**Slide 19 – front cover of vol.1.** Thank you.

1. Mary Ann Alburger, *Making the Fiddle Sing: Captain Simon Fraser of Knockie and his ‘Airs and Melodies Peculiar to the Highlands of Scotland and the Isles’* [1816] Dissertation for the degree of PhD, University of Aberdeen, 2001. 2 vols. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci, ca. 1735-1790. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Francis Watt, rev. John Purser, “Alexander Campbell”, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography http://www.oxforddnb.com/ accessed 23 Jan 2006 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Campbell, Alexander, The Grampians Desolate: a poem, Edinburgh: Manners & Miller, 1804 raising funds for The Fund of Aid for Waste Land Cultivators. (Reprinted Montana : Kessinger Publishing, [n.d.] [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “A Slight Sketch of a journey made through parts of the Highlands & Hebrides; undertaken to collect materials for Albyn’s Anthology by the Editor: in Autumn 1815.”Edinburgh University Library, MS La III 577 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/55/Fingal%27s_Cave%2C_Staffa_%2818thC%29.JPG> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Campbell, Alexander, *An introduction to the history of poetry in Scotland ... together with a conversation on Scotish song. To which are subjoined, Sangs of the Lowlands of Scotland ... with characteristic designs ... engraved by the late David Allan*. Edinburgh : A. Foulis, 1798-1799 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Campbell, Alexander, *A Journey from Edinburgh through parts of North Britain.* London: printed by A. Strahan for T. N. Longman & O Rees, and Vernor and Hood, 1802, 2 vols. Campbell informed his readers that he to visit the spots that he had chosen to describe and sketch, and furthermore, he had had “frequent occasion to visit the extensive range through which the traveller is herein directed”, over a period of twenty years. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)