

Twixt the Stone and the Turf – An understanding of Gaelic Strength and Stone Lifting



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CONTENTS

Chapter One

A Gaelic Strength Culture?

This Chapter is a brief argument challenging popular and well held beliefs regarding Gaelic strength and the romanticism of it.

Chapter Two

Understanding the Language of the Stones

An analysis of the Gaelic nomenclature of stone lifting detailing the meaning of such stones known as Clach Ultach, Clach Thogalaich, Clach cuid fir and Clach Deuchainn, Dornag, Clach-neart, Pullaid and non specific named stones. The chapter challenges with evidence some preconceived beliefs on the Stones of Strength.

Chapter Three

Manhood, Are you a Pretty Man or Champion of the wood?

A discussion on Manhood and the cultural reasons for lifting stones and evidencing Gaelic culture pre 1745 to assert the Gaelic approach to stone lifting.

Chapter Four

What determines a lift of a traditional stone?

An analysis detailing the cultural requirements of strength in relation to Gaelic stone lifting examining the known lifts of – Putting the air underneath the lifting stone, Lift to the knees, waist, lap or fold, Shouldering and Overhead Lifts, Lifting onto a Plinth or Stone Dyke Wall, The Lift and Carry, Lifting the Heavy Stone and Throwing it, Assisted Lifting- Using the Plaid, Lifting Ringed Stones. The chapter then finishes with putting the known lifts into a historical time-scale.

Chapter Five

Are You Going to the Stones? Religion and its attitude to strength.

Stone lifting in the times of the Celtic Church, Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterianism as well as Paganism and how this has impacted on strength and stone lifting. The chapter also examines where the lifting stones are located.

Chapter Six

I do this for you to remember me by

An examination as to why strength and stone lifting was important to the Gael for the continuation of his memory.

Chapter Seven

The Stones of the Lowlands and Southern Uplands

The Blue Stones of Old Dailly, The Wallace Putting Stone, Closeburn Lifting Stane, The Stone of James Blaikie, The Pilgrims Stone, The Airth Smiddy Stane, The Blue Stone of Kingcase & The Loans Lifting Stone, The Glenmanna Stone, The Stone of Jamie Welsh, The Putting Stone of Robert Burns, McGlashen Stones and the Knockiebay Stone.

Chapter Eight

The Stones of the Southern Highlands

Bodach Chraig Fianna, The Chieftains Stone (Menziess Stone), The Puterach, Monachyle Stone, The Sadlin Mare, Ardvorlich Stone, The Clachaboisgean.

Chapter Nine

The Stones of the Central Highlands

The Glen Roy Stones, Bohenie Stone, Newtonmore Stone, Dalwhinnie Stone, Moy Hall Stone, The Stone of Dalness and Deirdre's Teardrop, The Lifting Stone of Invergarry, Clachnacudain, Clach-neart Mheirichard, The Lochaber Putting Stone.

Chapter Ten

The Stones of the Eastern Highlands

Putting Stone of the Clans (Barevan Stone), The Crawford Putting Stone (Mauns Stone), The Lifting Stones of Glenbuchat, Glentannar Stone, The Dinnie Steens, Dinnie Stone – Glen Esk, Hummel Craig Putting Stone, Inver Stone, Clach Thogalaich Glen Lui, The Stones of McCombie Mor, The Clachan-neart Achnak, Clach-neart Glenlivet, The Stone of Brawliemuir.

Chapter Eleven

The Stones of the Northern Highlands

Clach-neart Strathmore of Durness, The Stones of Loch More, The Strathnaver Stone, Murchison Stone, Glenelg Church Stone, Achnangart Stone, The Great Stone of the Dropping Cave, Lealty Stone.

Chapter Twelve

The Stones of the Islands

Gigha - Clach Dhomhnall Mhic Lachaln, **Colonsay** – Clach Thogalaich, **Tiree** – Stone of Walter Carmichael, **Coll** – Clach Altruman Mor and Clach Altruman Beag, **Orkney** – The Flett Stone, **Shetland** – Foula Putting Stone, **Rona** – Ultach Fear Hiort, **Taransay** - Clach Ultach, **Rasaay** – Stone of John Garbh, **Berneray** – Ultach Ghille Mhoire, **Skye** – The

Stones of An Sithean, Clach Chraboithbh I'c Thearlaich, Ultach Gillean a' Bealaich, Clach mhor na saothraich, Clach Mhor Mhic Criomainn, **North Uist** – Ultach Dhomhail Mhoir, Ultach Ailean Raghnaill, Clach Caoilte, The Weight of the Plain, Ultach Heigear, Ultach Na-h'airde Glaise, Ultach Niall I'c Uis, Ultach Dhomhnail Iain Dhonnachaidh Eabhail.

Chapter Thirteen

The Stones of Ireland

The Stone of Dreen, Coghnaught Stone, The Wayside Stones, School Stone Innis Mein, Innis Mein Stone, Innis Mor Stone, Lifting Stone of Peig's Brother, Stones of South Tipperary

Glossary

Chapter One

A Gaelic Strength Culture?

Cha'n fhiach duine gun neart gun innleachd.

(A man with neither strength or art is worth nothing)

The phrase “**Gaelic Strength Culture**” is used extensively throughout this book to highlight the unique nature that spawned many of what are deemed the “**heavy events**” at today’s modern Highland Games. Whereas the history of these events are not covered in any specific detail with an emphasis instead placed on stone lifting, this book is an analysis of the reasons why such feats of strength were carried out and are examined in an historical context.

Just about every emerging nation or groups of peoples have had at one point a strength culture, all will be different in some form but in many ways most will have cultural reasons, other than that for being strong, for exercising strength in say stone lifting.

Stone lifting to show strength is worldwide and from ancient times it was demonstrated in Palestine and Greece. In Asia heavy stones were lifted in Japan, China, India, Korea (Cheju Island) and in Pakistan where it is still regularly practiced. Moving to Europe stone lifting at sometime was practiced in Switzerland, Germany and in Spain where Basque stone lifting is almost a religion but such areas as Tenerife still manage to retain traditional lifting stones.

In Northern Europe, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland stand alongside the Faroe Islands in having stones of strength as part of their strength culture and in Britain we have to differentiate that stone lifting in Wales was unique as it was in England, Ireland and in Scotland.

Crossing the Atlantic we know that traditional lifting stones formed part of the culture of the some indigenous American Indian tribes and that further north, stone lifting was part of Inuit culture.

It is not surprising that nature’s Gym in its ability to provide heavy stones suitable for lifting should spawn men to test their mettle in lifting them throughout the world as this has occurred from the beginning of recorded history but what has never been examined is the actual strength culture giving the reasons why stones should be lifted and men should test strength. Strength culture can be then defined as the set of circumstances that cause these tests to be enacted and in this respect we also have consider the impact of other cultures as well. For example stone lifting in Sweden suddenly explodes around the time that massive numbers of Scots and Highlanders emigrated as mercenaries to Sweden and probably to some degree influenced a stone lifting culture that existed previously. Of course in the Gaelic speaking nations of Ireland and Scotland stone lifting and the approach to it is relatively the same, historically the Gael identified himself through his culture and not a national identity and therefore it would not be unsurprising to find that a Gael from the Hebrides would see the Gael from Galway as his brother yet the Scot in Edinburgh would be as Sassenach.

Culture therefore is not a national identity and should not be examined on that single premise, are indeed the Scottish Highland Games the Gaelic Games as the word Scottish implies that all of Scotland had a shared culture whereas from its earliest beginning to the present, Scotland has been awash with the influence of many external cultures.

Of course a strength culture can be influenced over a period of time and the ravages of history has played an important part in this. In England there was a stone lifting culture which can be dated back to the 11th Century but it has been long lost but in many ways shared languages helped to retain some knowledge of the practice. In Northumbria there a number of Valleys that are named "Glen", with an obvious inference that the Scottish Gaelic has had to a degree some influence in the area. Perhaps this was from the time that Gaelic was the language of all of Scotland and with little emphasis on national borders, language and this culture seeped into Northern England which, as a reminder itself once had a stone lifting culture. Religion too is part of that same self culture of strength and as will be read later, the Celtic Church had an influence on strength and although Irish/Scots based, Christianity (and culture) seeped southwards to middle England with the history detailed in place names such as Stone near Stafford whose origin is through the erection of a decidedly Gaelic memorial cairn. There are indeed thousands of these cultural crossovers and most strength enthusiasts, particularly of the Highland Games will be aware that stone putting and throwing the hammer were strength pursuits that also took place for a very long time in England.

What makes Gaelic strength decidedly different is not a matter in what differences if any existed in how a stone or hammer were thrown as they would be minimal in any case, but rather it is the reasons, the cultural reasons for throwing that differentiates feats of strength from area to area.

As mentioned, history plays a very important part in the reasons why a strength culture exists or as in many cases doesn't exist. Stone lifting as a feat of strength disappeared in England and is practically non-existent. Why this happened is probably as a consequence of many reasons however there is evidence that points to it being utterly decimated during the time of Oliver Cromwell who as a puritan believed like the Scottish Presbyterians, that strength should not be participated in on Sundays but Cromwell too had an aversion to anything seen as "**Popish**" or "**Pagan**" and it is documented that he caused hundreds of monuments to be destroyed. It is well known that Scottish Presbyterians saw stone lifting as in some-way Catholic and made every effort to destroy this culture as will be read later but stones such as the **Blue Stone of Kingcase** in Prestwick, a relic of the strength culture of those who spoke the Carrick Gaelic was destroyed by as the history states – English Dragoons. Now considering that Prestwick was only known to have been occupied by English troops only once in its history, it would be no surprise to learn that these dragoons were roundheads of Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army. There is no doubt that similar destructions were carried out in England causing the demise of a strength culture which, as it never firmly re-established itself simply became lost. It is no more.

Of course this means that the nomenclature of the stones of strength of England are well and truly lost as it would the individual sizes and weights of the stones and indeed, the manner they were actually lifted. What cultural reasons for stone lifting too is long lost and the shame is, it will never be known or indeed if researched a futility and despondency would lament its loss. Someone however will at sometime ascribe methods and reasons to why a heavy stone was lifted and what was once pure, and unknown will become corrupted.

So we have the Gaelic Stones of Strength remaining in all their purity but alas these stones have also have become corrupted.

Nowhere is this seen more than in the thousands of websites and indeed in some books that refer to the Scottish stones of strength as “Manhood Stones”. With some aplomb and with some literary abandon, various statements about the stones are now allegedly fact but most of these are ascribed without any recourse to either history, culture of language. We have today the absurd notion that all lifting stones in Scotland were lifted for and a result of the following –

- Lifting Stones were lifted to prove manhood (ie the move from puberty to manhood)
- The stone required to be of at least a predetermined weight/size and required to be lifted to a certain height.
- That lifting the heavy stone allowed the youth to wear a cap and put a feather in it.
- All such stones were known as clach cuid fir or manhood stones.

These statements do have some elements of truth however they have been understood in an incorrect context and also have not been ascribed to a particular timeframe of Scottish History.

Firstly, not all Stones of Strength are “Manhood Stones” because many are not old enough to have a particular facet of culture applied to them. Secondly, the lifting requirements of lifting a heavy stone to enter manhood have been somewhat exaggerated to the extreme as is the cultural reason for lifting in the first place with some romantic notion of “**being welcomed into manhood**” being regularly applied. The fact that two specific Gaelic cultural requirements have been merged together to form this misunderstanding will be later discussed in the chapter on Manhood but some important facets of Gaelic culture seem to have seemed to be overlooked in many of these assertions.

The nomenclature of these stones, i.e. **Clach cuid fir** is either a neglected or ignorant view of the Gaelic language in that the language itself was not and still today is not Generic. The fact that the most part of the spoken Gaelic tongue, a high degree of illiteracy prevailed caused many regional and area dialects of the spoken word to the extent that one word in Deeside may mean something some-thing completely different in South Uist. There is indeed a vast terminology of language applied to the stones of strength which is far more colourful and certainly more meaningful than the simplicity of Clach cuid fir. There were no Gaelic generics in stone lifting as will be proved but in the absence of a thorough research, simplicity and therefore inaccuracy reigns. There are indeed thousands of strength based websites which mention Scottish stone lifting and they are to the last one, wholly inaccurate and corrupted.

There are reasons for this occurring. Many writers have taken resources, particularly the written volumes of the Victorian period and word for word have inserted these into a Gaelic strength culture.

This is where time frame becomes extremely important in understanding. The history of Scotland is well known and understood but not in relation to strength although it too runs coterminous with history. In Scotland or more importantly in the Highlands and Islands strength culture can be put into two specific time frames.

- The time of the Highland Clan system which for simplicity sake, at its height was pre 1746 and before the Battle of Culloden.
- Post 1746 and in particular the 19th Century period of improved agricultural systems and the suppression of the Gaelic culture which existed pre 1746.

The Battle of Culloden Moor in 1746 in essence was the start of the death knell for traditional stone lifting. The suppression of the Gaelic language and its culture after this date was immense and went hand in hand with the forced eviction of the Gaelic people to form the Diaspora in North America and in Australia. Social structures were being reformed with in particular the position of Clan Chief now becoming wholly warped into the strict adherence towards a British Social Structure where Class and position were fundamentally important. Clan Chiefs were now based in either Edinburgh or London, most of whom in enjoying the lavishes of being in the upper tier of a British class structure simply fell into debt and sold off portions of Clan land to sustain their individual position in British society. This is after 1746 of course but before that Clan Chiefs and the essence of Gaelic strength was different.

Clans being independent social structure had their own hierarchy. The Clan Chief was not the owner of Clan Lands but was its selected protector and with individual Clan Chiefs having a duty to protect his Clansmen, on many occasions this caused incursions into a neighbouring Clan land to either acquire it or as most common take its spoils (cattle). For centuries this family obligation caused a myriad of skirmishes and battles with individual Clans and this simply meant that the survival of a Clan was based solely on its ability to win a battle.

From this a strength culture emerged that included a high emphasis on the remembrance of those who were either strong or courageous in battle, usually both at the same time. It was pretty much an accepted fact that being strong in arm meant that the individual could sustain himself longer in battle and as such, physical strength was admired and spoken of in oral tradition. As such, and because not every Clansman was strong, various cultural tests became enacted but at the same time, regardless of strength all men would be expected to fight. Gaelic stone lifting was simply part of that process and a traditional stone was lifted by pubescent males not to prove the romantic notion of manhood but to show their readiness for training in weaponry. The stone was lifted to only the extent where the air was put under the stone. As the young men trained some would obviously become stronger (and hence better fighters) than others and individual tests including stone lifting were set up to test those who could become the personal bodyguard of the Chief.

There is a far deeper cultural insight into stone lifting which will later become apparent but suffice to say, post 1746 was the time when this strength for war culture disappears for many reasons not just the fact that weaponry in the hand of the Highlander was illegal.

What we have in essence is two facets of stone lifting completely obliterated probably a short time after 1746 and hence “manhood stones” stones were redundant. Stone lifting did continue however but not for these underpinning reasons but probably more as a consequence that strength would still have been respected in Gaelic culture and as such, stones initially lifted after 1746 cannot have the “manhood” element ascribed to them.

In carrying out the research on traditional lifting stones it became extremely important to ascertain a time frame when a stone was first lifted and this is important for attaching cultural

strength practices to a lifting stone. On Colonsay, its famous lifting stone ***A Clach Thogalaich*** has on many occasions had the “manhood stone” element of culture forced upon despite the existing Gaelic speaking population saying otherwise. The stone itself was “discovered” and first lifted in 1780 certainly making it an old lifting stone but being well after 1746 it was most definitely not lifted as part of Gaelic Highland Clan culture. It is therefore not a “Manhood Stone” and neither are many others with the high probability that the most famous of the traditional stones, the Inver Stone falling into this category.

Most of the lifting stones on North Uist, of which there was an abundance, certainly date to post 1746 and it is not surprising that not one of them have the “manhood “ associations asserted with their lifting.

Some but not all traditional lifting stones can be dated through associated history as well as the location of the stone itself. Some stones exist on “coffin roads” a history that dates them after the Scottish Reformation of 1560 and some stones exist within Churchyards themselves which with certainty can date these stones as pre 1560 making them extremely old. The ramifications of the history of religion in Scotland in this case has had an impact in determining the age of a stone.

Of course there are stones where the known cultural associations with their lifting are extremely well documented and as a consequence these too can be dated but again not all stones can be easily dated and simply do not fall into a logical reasoning for their existence.

Another aspect of stone lifting which has been many years assumed is the degree to which a stone was lifted. This book will later highlight all known associated lifts of traditional stones and attempt to furnish some aspects of the reasonings for a lift as well as place it into a relevant time frame.

Now having skimmed over the strength culture pre 1746 it is quite clear that somewhere in history the requirements of Gaelic strength have been corrupted and fortunately or unfortunately as one may see it, this can be put down to external cultural influences.

Victorian romanticism ploughed the furrow of this contorted history of the Gael with the attachment of tartan and pomp, abundantly demonstrated at a Scottish Highland Games but this was merely a creation, a very much overstated creation of a perceived view of the Highlander at the time.

There are some excellent books written about the propensity of the Victorians of the 19th Century and their penchant for the romantic and as this was the time of the British Empire at its most prominent, heroes were created and books were written of them. Victorian Britain had its own distinct culture and it was during this period that many of the monuments to men of literature or of war would be erected in towns and cities as a remembrance to the individual and as a statement of the strength of Britannia. It was also a period when the differences in British Class structure was at its height with those differences between rich and poor so evident that it also incorporated a structure that disallowed those of lowly background to progress. There was never the British equivalent of the American dream and at best it would be fair to say that everyone had their place and had to know where their place was.

In particular Sir Walter Scott was the instigator of a type of romantic literature which romantised the Highlander and many other writers followed on from him in this style and it was clearly successful. Queen Victoria moved her entourage to Balmoral through her romantic love of the Highlander as portrayed by Scott and by this time everyone was in love with the tartan of the Highland Clan, a modern creation through the writings of two Welshmen who suddenly produced the *Vestorium Scoticum* as an ancient document ascribing colours and patterns to all Clans, including those of the Lowlands. Fully embraced by individual Clan Chiefs most of whom were hobnobbing in either London or Edinburgh enjoying their newfound status in British Society while perhaps naively spending money which they did not have and as a consequence, selling off substantial chunks of Clan lands to repay debts. Much of this land fell into the hands of southerners who, and as at the time as "sporting" emphasised the taking of Game, large tracks of the Highlands were taken over for the pleasure of the rich in taking the salmon or stag. The tartan took hold of Victorian Society and the Highlander was embraced as a member of that larger Clan of Britannia with Victoria as its Chief. The backdrop to this however was a completely different story.

When gallant Highland infantrymen returned home from assisting in colouring one third of the world map in British red, they found themselves on many occasions with no home to return to due to the indulgencies of Clan Chiefs who had long forgotten their feudal duties and in other instances, they were moved off the land and sent to the four corners of the Earth at the expense of sheep. This was the Highland clearances which was the final death knell for a people whose language was now forbidden to be taught in schools and Victorian Society saw well that in the social scale, the Gael was at the bottom of the pile.

Of course the Highland Games were created during this backdrop of Gaelic suppression, a recreation of rural Highland strength pursuits which fitted in well with the Victorian romantic view of the Gael. With his suppression discarded Games were initiated, not by those who threw the hammer or putted the stone, but by those of British Society who subscribed to the obvious romanticism of the period. The tartan really took grip with many of these Games by having a "Best dressed Highlander" competition as if personal appearance through a myriad of colours imported from Brazil was high on the agenda of the Clansman of pre 1745.

In essence, the Victorians created a culture and attached it to the Highlander who was in no position to disagree.

Pre 1745 individual strength was admired as a necessity for battle which in the history of the Highlands was more than frequent. Oral tradition underpinned a desire to be strong and the Sennachie or story teller was entrusted to tell the tales of strength and valour which, if listening to each night in formative years creates a strive and a reason to be strong. Strength was always there and it was always respected. Part of this respect was a strong desire in Gaelic culture to be remembered so that in death the knowledge that stories of his own deeds of valour or strength would be recited and would make death far easier to accept. The body dies but the memory lives on. Personal strength is remembered.

So steeped in a Gaelic strength tradition, the newly created Highland Games allowed the man of strength to show his mettle, prove his worth and as strength was also demonstrated with a degree of ostentatiousness known as *fraigalchd* in the Gaelic, the Highland heavy took his place in the arena. Was his strength appreciated?

***“The Highlanders themselves complained that the Games had been spoiled. They might cast the stone and throw the hammer as they pleased, for nobody except the competitors cared for the performance. The visitors had all come to see the Queen, the Prince, the Princes, and the Princess, while hammer and bar were grievously neglected; and so the more sanguine competitors felt the Royal visit in the shape of calamity -.....Competitors who had been in training for months, to throw the hammer or cast the bar, or to do any other feat of strength better than their neighbours, felt their labours lost, because nobody seemed to care for them, and all the visitors turned to the Royal lady on the terrace, the Prince and their children, so that the hammers might have been thrown to the bridge of Invercauld without being missed.”*¹**

There may well be some modern heavies at the Highland Games who have shared similar sentiments but the audience at Braemar was known to chiefly consist of Royalty and its entourage of attendants, the Gentry of near and far and a list of the rich and famous who were visiting the same Highland Estates to shoot deer and fish for salmon in peace as the irritant natives had been moved a number of years ago.

The important people at the Games were not the men of strength but those who attended –

Games was under the patronage of the Prince of Wales, the Earl of Fife and Colonel Farquharson of Invercauld. The presence of Mr Gladstone at the gathering imparted no small additional interest to the event. Some anxiety was felt the previous night in regard to the weather, which looked somewhat ominous. A thunderstorm had passed over the district in the evening, followed by a pretty heavy rainfall. On Thursday morning however, the sun shone out brilliantly from an almost cloudless sky, and the beautiful scenery of Braemar looked its loveliest. The picturesque village was a scene of the gayest animation. The number of visitors at the place is just now so large that many strangers coming the previous night found it impossible to get a bed for love or money, and every available place or shelter was fully occupied. On Thursday there was a huge influx of visitors from the surrounding districts. Tartan of course, was the favourite wear, and formed a very conspicuous element in the fete. The usual muster of the Clans took place in the morning, the Highlanders marching down to the scene of the games about mid-day. There was also a large muster of the Deeside volunteers. The Duff Clan mustered at Marr Lodge and the Farquharson’s at Invercauld House. The sports commenced about half past twelve, in the presence of a large concourse of people. At half past one the Invercauld party arrived. It included Mr, Mrs and Miss Helen Gladstone; the Home Secretary, and Lady Harcourt, Colonel Farquharson and Captain Victor Farquharson. The approach of the party was hailed with loud cheering. The Duff and Farquharson Highlanders drew up in lines between which the carriages passed. Mr Gladstone bowed repeatedly in acknowledgement of the ovation he received. Within half an hour afterwards the Royal Party from Abergeldie reached the grounds. The Prince of Wales was accompanied by the Princess of Wales and family, and the Duchess of Edinburgh. The Royal visitors were enthusiastically cheered, and on entering the reserved enclosure, were met by the Premier, with whom they engaged in conversation for some time. A little later, the Earl of Fife and Sir Henry James, Solicitor-General, entered the grounds and like the other distinguished

¹ Page11 Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine (1849). From an article called “The Dee”. Referring to the Braemar Games .

visitors, were accorded a hearty reception. The Royal Party remained on the grounds for about three hours. The weather kept fine all day.”²

This was a typical newspaper report of the Highland Games of the mid Victorian period with absolutely no mention of any results whatsoever but this was only a partial reflection on how non- Gaels looked upon the Gael. Now if there had been any true Gaelic audience, their natural inclination would be to focus on the men of strength, it was their cultural after all but it would appear lost amongst a contrivance of culture to suit a society that had no place for them. At the time of these Games, on the island of Lewis young men were still lifting heavy stones, throwing the hammer along with the traditional pursuits of Maide Leasg (lazy stick) and on occasion dorn fhuar (cold fist). What would not have been seen would be a rainbow of tartan splendour as that was for Sassenach and their kin and more strikingly the attitude to strength would have been far more traditional. There is no doubt that those hammer throwers on the field of Braemar would have sold their souls to be competing in a culture that understood and appreciated their strength.

The symbolism of tartanry underpins a history which has often been referred to as “shortbread tin history”, it is the history of Scotland the Brand, a national identity steeped in all such Victorian creations that those who wish to ignore Gaelic culture and swim in a fabrication of ignorance because Gaelic culture is not the creation of the Victorian romantic, it is a culture alien to the Briton but it is he who has moulded it and fabricated it to suit. It is this same culture that gave us the “**manhood stones**” and corrupted culture attachments.

Gaelic strength culture is on the wane. Had any serious effort been made 50 years ago far more of it would be understood but remnants of it still remain within the senior Gaelic speaking community of the Hebrides. Here you can still hear tales of the strength of fathers and grandfathers but spoken of in a unique fashion as nowhere will you hear stories told of the personal strength of the individual speaking. It is the Gaelic way and small aspects of how things are done or how they are said can make a remarkable difference.

For close on two centuries, the culture of the Gael has been contorted and twisted to fit with the colourful adjectives of the romanticist. Stone lifting is seen in the simple terms of **manhood stones** which allowed the youth to be **welcomed into manhood** or **take his place amongst the men** he was then given a cap and he was entitled to wear an **eagle feather** and so on and so on. There may well be believers of this puerile nonsense who ascribe to this notion of Gaelic culture but rest assured they will not speak with a Gaelic lilt in their voice.

Many attempts have been made to standardise Gaelic strength and to make it fit into a sporting culture. Pre 1745 any notion of sporting where rules and standards simply did not exist. There was no rules of putting the stone anywhere near the strict and exacting standards of today but those heavies of today are still acting out on the field what their ancestors did centuries before because they themselves live in a culture that respects strength. The organisers and modern athletics directors live in a Games culture no-where akin to that of which originally gave us the stone, hammer and caber whereas the heavies emulate it without thinking.

² Page 8 The Aberdeen Weekly Journal Newspaper dated Saturday September 6th 1884.

It is pleasing that many of today's Highland Games Heavies have more than an active interest in traditional stone lifting. They are simply following on the footsteps of Donald Dinnie and AA Cameron who, as will be seen later, lifted more stones than they are usually associated with. This Games association with stone lifting appeared to disappear after the war years with little or interest until recent times but interest is still growing.

It is how traditional stone lifting grows that is of serious concern. At present what is known about the stones is simply that passed down by the Victorians and there is absolutely no question that the cultural reasons for lifting heavy stones along with the actual how and where the stones were lifted have either been subjected to a complete speculation or indeed fabrication of history. In addition, the language of the stones has never been subjected to a thorough examination allowing an understanding in relation to culture.

No apologies will be given for an approach that strips the Victorian romanticism from all aspects of Gaelic strength and shreds it for consignment to the waste bin of history where it should have been placed many years ago.

What this particular narrative will attempt to do is simply honour all men of strength that have went before and encourage the modern man of strength to assess their achievements through a cultural knowledge as well as approach to the stones. The dedicated stone lifter should hopefully be in a position to assess his own approach against those long gone and lift a traditional stone in the manner it should be lifted at the same time acknowledging the strength of previous lifters.

In reality, there is no real difference between those who lift the stones today and those who have gone before and of course the same arguments and comparisons will always be to the fore. There are still stone lifting disagreements within the present day Gaelic communities so in no way assess that a purity is devoid of the occasional tarnish, stone lifting has always been the subject of much discussion over what has been done or what was not done and long may it continue but at least this particular narrative on the stones will to some degree put some historical certainty behind the premise of a Gaelic strength culture.

So what is a Gaelic strength culture as it relates to traditional stone lifting? It is a rather complicated answer but first of all the following chapter, extremely heavy on an understanding of language, should at least allow a reasonable start and a basis on which a fuller understanding will be established.

Chapter Two

Understanding the Language of the Stones

An truime a' clach sin na i so?

(Is that stone heavier than this?)

The language of Gaelic strength in the modern era has in many ways been subjected to a simplification that assumes a general standardisation that all lifting stones are ***clach cuid fir*** and all putting stones are ***clach-neart***. The reality of the language of Gaelic strength is that it is for the most part completely devoid of any generic whatsoever and that the reasons for this are simply as a consequence of the known history of the Gaelic language itself.

Without requiring to provide a complete historic account of the language there are two simple fundamentals that should be remembered regarding the historic use of the Gaelic language. Firstly, and for the better part of the entire history of the Gaelic, it has been spoken mostly by those who would be deemed as illiterate and the language, far more colourful and expressive than the English has always been known as a “spoken language”. Certainly prior to 1745, very few written Gaelic works were known of. Physical strength was far more important to the Gael rather than individual literacy. This leads to the second fundamental of the language in that being a spoken language it leads itself to a large number of variations in local and regional dialects. The differences in these dialects could on many occasions be quite profound and many spoken variations could also imply where an individual originated geographically.

These two rules of language guaranteed the fact that little by way of a specific generic in language could ever be achieved and for this reason, many Gaelic language experts emphasise the regional area where a specific word was known to be spoken as the reality is that it may have been unique solely to that area. For these reasons we have to examine the eight different forms of nomenclature as they relate to stones of strength.

- ***Clach Ultach***
- ***Clach Togalaich***
- ***Clach cuid fir & Clach Deuchainn***
 - ***Dornag***
 - ***Clach-neart***
 - ***Pullaid***
- ***Clach and non-defined stones***

As will be learned, there is not one of the known phrases above that was representative of a generic phrase describing the stones of strength that was in use throughout the Gaelic speaking Islands and Highlands. That should be no surprise as the Gaelic language for strength, like its culture was not one singular entity that can easily be described to fit a modern strive for simplification and standards in strength. They simply did not exist and

those that did, overlapped and on occasion were known to be unique solely to a specific area.

Clach Ultach

Commencing with this the first of the stone lifting nomenclature to be examined, let us allow ourselves to be an imaginary tourist visiting Scotland in search of the stones. We first visit Royal Deeside and amongst the splendour of the Mountains and Castles we find a man dressed in traditional kilt etc. He is asked about the lifting stones and he will wax lyrical about the **Clach cuid fir**, manhood stones and all sorts of associated history. He will look the part and be believable. Ask the same man to explain the Gaelic and he will be unable to do so as he is a Scot and not a Gael however he looks the part of the Highlander.

Then travel to North Uist and seek out any of the Islands more senior residents. There will be no tartan, probably well used working clothes as it is hard work living on an island but whoever that person is, he will tell you stories of strength of his father, his grandfather which are real. He is a Gael and many still living have an admiration for strength. He is a Gaelic speaker and you ask of the manhood stones – the Clach cuid fir and a blank stare will develop in front of you – he will know what the phrase means but has never heard of it being used in the present Gaelic speaking community and in no way will he associate it with a traditional lifting stone which I am sure he will kindly explain he knows solely as **Clach Ultach**.

As the majority of Gaelic speakers today reside in the Hebridean Islands, it would be fair to state that the dialects of the islands hold sway over the long lost dialects of Deeside, Perthshire and so on and as previously explained, the use and understanding of dialect is fundamental to understanding the stones of strength due to a complete lack of a generic.

The word ultach itself is one of those wonderful Gaelic expressions that can mean many different connotations but is superbly descriptive in a Gaelic fashion.

Ultach - aich, aichean, s,m. Burden carried within the fold or grasp of the arms, armful. 2. Lapful 3. Load. 4 (CR) Burden on the back – Arran. 5. Bosom. 6. Lap 7. Bundle, faggot or truss, fit to be caried on the back – Perthshire.³

Dwelly in a further dictionary specifically refers to the use of ultach as a lifting stone (note the difference in spelling which is common in the Gaelic language).

clach-ultaich - (Fionn) sf Lift-stone, i.e. what a man could lift. "Clach Uлтаich Iain Ghairbh MhicGilleChaluim Ratharsair" is at Duntuilm, Skye and is said to weigh about a ton.⁴

I would state that Dwelly, in investigating an imperfect subject matter could and was known to be prone to the occasional error and the reference above mentions a lifting stone known as **Clach Uлтаich Iain Ghairbh MhicGilleChaluim Ratharsair** which in all probability existed on the island of Rasaay rather than at Duntulm which is perhaps more famous for another ultach - **Ultach Gillean a' Bealaich**.

³ Dwelly Part 3

⁴

There are two major aspects to the use of the word *ultach* the first obviously being that it has a far different meaning in both Arran and in Perthshire and is most certainly not a lifting stone in these areas. The second aspect is its use as a descriptive in language being an ***armful or lapful*** as the Gael did not possess during the time of the Clan system any standardised weight measurement and hence a recourse to a descriptive in language. To perhaps easier explain is that a Clach *Ultach* is a bloody big stone because it is as wide as your arms. I think this descriptive in relation to stone lifting is far better than using standardised weight measurement which only puts a modern confusing and restrictive slant on a culture that had no care for such interferences.

Like many things Gaelic, arguments can develop over the use and more often than not, the abuse of language probably more so as a result of the many variances in area dialect. A more modern interpretation of *ultach* means “arms length” and this has lead to one of the most explosive arguments in stone lifting.

Whether Donald Dinnie did or whether he did not lift the stones as stated is perhaps seen as the greatest strength argument of all time but it pales in comparison to the differences in opinion over a stone in North Uist known as ***Ultach Dhomhail Mhoir***.



The small well worn brass plaque on the concrete supporting base for the stone states the following –

“This stone was lifted to arms length overhead by Donald Mor McClellan, Runa in circa 1876”

Within the close knit community of North Uist arguments still rage on whether McLellan did or did not lift this absolutely massive stone exceeding 400lbs to what would be in the modern context be considered as an overhead press. Underlying the argument is simply the understanding of “arms length” and before anyone else wishes to affirm this as a Gaelic overhead press, it is not and it is just simply one of the loose Gaelic statements that appears to have evolved from its original “armful” and this stone is a big armful.

So far it has been shown that the word *ultach* is a Gaelic descriptive which can refer to a lifting stone however its use in the Gaelic language of strength can be equally more descriptive with the use of variants.

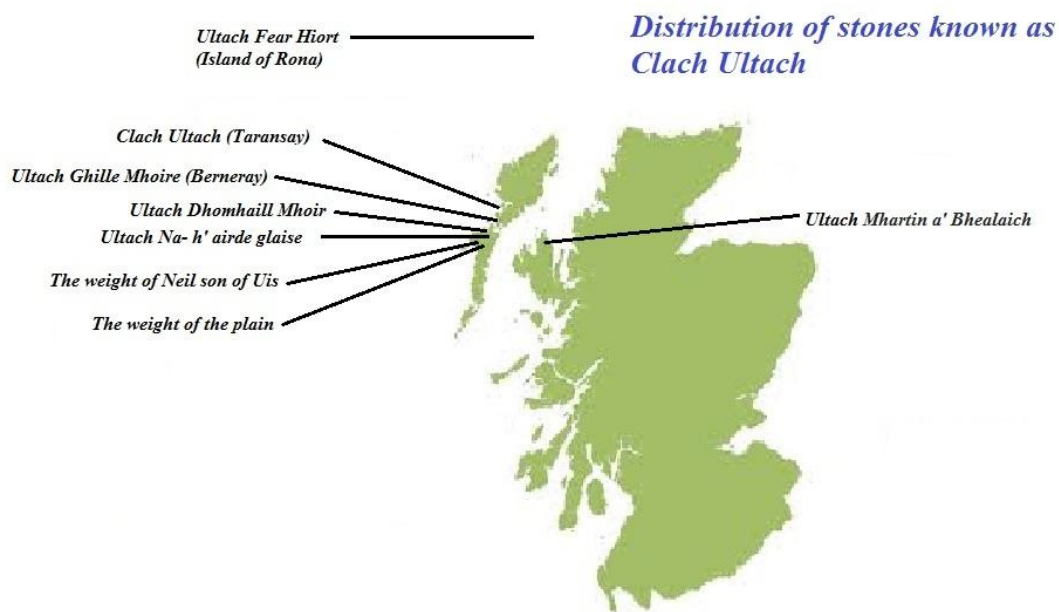
On occasion and in certain circumstances, most notably when the word *Clach* is dropped from the name of the stone, the stone is now a load or ***weight*** and this has on occasion been translated as a ***lift***.

As a consequence

Clach Ultach Uilleam MacCreamhain translates as “***the lifting stone of William Crawford***”....whereas....

Ultach Uilleam MacCreamhain can translate as “***the weight of William Crawford***” or alternatively “***William Crawford’s lift***” or more aptly “***the lift of William Crawford***”.

Now again referring to a lack of a generic for a lifting stone, the distribution map below highlights the present stones known as “*ultach*” and what is obvious is that, and recognising that *ultach* had a different meaning in Arran and Perthshire, there are no known physical examples on the Scottish mainland and hence in the traditional “Highlands”.



This is again explained by the previous mention of a complete lack of generic or standards that applied throughout the Highlands and Islands at the time of the Clans. Previous writings on lifting stones and strength always appear to have a general and simplistic overview, perhaps to make things fit or indeed make the history more colourful but the truth itself is a myriad of colours and flavours of language dialect which the Clach Ultach clearly demonstrates.

One final point to emphasise about the Clachan Ultach is that of the existing known stones, all are irregular in shape with each stone exceeding 300lbs in weight. The expected lift, as stressed by present local culture is simply a lift to the extent where the wind is put underneath the stone and perhaps it will come as no surprise that a further definition of ultach means "**strong wind**".

Clach Thogalaich

Contrary to the simple direct translation of Clach Thogalaich being simply **lifting stone** one would immediately suspect that all stones were known as such however, striving for that Gaelic generic for all stones of strength there seems to be one simple difference that discounts the **Clachan Togail** as being that illusive generic catchall in language to define the lifting stone.

Clach Thogalaich, (AH) s.f stone used in weightlifting contests⁵

The definition supplied by Dwelly is important as he quite clearly mentions that these stones are used in **contest**. This is altogether unsurprising as, apart from those stones known to have been lifted as a personal show of strength, practically all of the stones in Scotland would have been lifted in many forms of ad-hoc competition at sometime in their history. Competition however is **sporting** and is not cultural and with obviously known cultural reasons for lifting a stone this would imply something different.

Difficulty in a full understanding is demonstrated by the distribution map shown below which, and although there are not many stones known as Clach Thogalaich, its use unlike the Clach Ultach, obviously spans the entire Highlands and Islands. The fact is that there are too few remaining stones to make an understanding to the same degree as anything like that of the Clach Ultach but some simple analysis can be drawn.

Perhaps the best example of Clach Thogalaich are those two stones in Glen Roy where through local knowledge and tradition they were simply lifted with no cultural attachments. Local men would gather at the stones and have competitions lifting one atop the other and in most instances copious amount of whisky was consumed.

The Lifting Stones of Glenbuchat also appeared to have no significant cultural attachment and although the lifting style was different, in this case placing a number of heavy stones

⁵ A Gaelic Dictionary specially designed for Beginners and use in Schools by Edward Dwelly 1902

atop each other onto a plinth, the underlying history is that these stones were lifted in competition between men of neighbouring parishes.

The Clach Thogalaich in Glen Lui was known to have been lifted in competition by men who formed the forces of the Earl of Mar in the Jacobite uprising of 1715 although the oral tradition then turns the event into a feat of strength by one officer throwing the stone over the back of a horse (probably a Highland Garland pony which are relatively small). The final Clach Thogalaich is the Colonsay Stone. This stone has suffered through a Victorian assertion of the stone being lifted culturally to prove manhood, a fact hotly disputed by the Island's Gaelic speakers and perhaps the evidence in that the stone was first lifted in 1780, a time when Clan and Gaelic culture was systematically being destroyed, it is highly unlikely that the stone was lifted for a cultural application. Everything points to the stone being used in simple competition.

From the scant evidence available, there is a picture being painted that the Clach Thogalaich was simply a lifting stone used in ad hoc competition with no cultural reasons for doing so and that would appear to fit in quite well with the Dwelly definition. The time frame which each of the stones mentioned may have some bearing in the nomenclature however what is most likely that a simple heavy stone could well have been subjected to lifts for cultural reasons and lifts in ad hoc competition. This would mean that a particular heavy stone known as **clach-neart** could be known as **clach thogalaich** when used in competition but the truth we are now reaching the realms of speculation as so much has been lost on the knowledge of a Gaelic strength culture.

What we can say with some certainty is that throughout the world where in competition in Highland Games stone lifting from Australia to Canada is that the Dwelly definition should be applied – they are all Clach Thogalaich

[clach-thogalaich](#)

(AH) *sf* Stone used in weightlifting contests.

Clach cuid fir & Clach Deuchainn

Clach cuid fir does not mean “**manhood stone**” but rather its direct translation is “**stone of a man's portion or part**”. The etymology behind this is that on lifting a heavy stone as part of a cultural manhood ritual, the successful lifter was now entitled to a man sized portion at meal times.

“Clach cuid fir was a stone of two hundred pounds weight and upwards, which was to be lifted from the ground and placed on another four feet high at least, and the youth that could perform this feat was forthwith reckoned a man.”⁶

What this term implies is not a generic catchall phrase applied to all Gaelic lifting stones but rather a statement of what they are known as when a specific cultural application is applied

⁶ p209 *McLan's Highlanders at Home or Celtic gatherings 1845*

to them. The chapter on Manhood specifically examines the cultural significance of manhood in Gaelic culture and from which clear distinctions can be made in everyday language. The problem with the phrase *clach cuid fir* however is that its use in the language of modern Gaelic speaking areas of Scotland is completely unknown and nor has it ever appeared in any known Gaelic dictionary.

The written origins of the phrase can be pointed to **James Logan**, the author of the above text and for whom, any specific language or cultural fact has to be severely scrutinised as the man himself was known to demonstrate a high degree of artistic licence when writing and explaining Gaelic culture. Logan was born in Aberdeen in 1797 and he was not, despite his historic leanings and assertions, a Gael. Logan was an academic and attended Aberdeen University however dropped out of his studies no doubt as a consequence of a rather unfortunate accident. While walking with a friend on the Aberdeen links, an area well known for local worthies to practice their strength, Logan was struck on the side of his head with an errant Games Hammer propelled at full tilt and for the remainder of his life, Logan had a 4inch square metal plate covering the impact area with his skull.

What lasting damage this accident manifested upon Logan may well be appreciated by his level of dysfunctionality that he showed later in life but at some point in his early life he was known to have made two walking holidays in the Highlands and from which he collected his history of Gaelic life. He moved to London where he made a name for himself and on receiving Royal patronage for his written works, he was considered an expert on Gaelic culture despite the fact that he learned the language whilst in London and apparently reached a level of competence in speech through attending classes offered by one of the many Highland Societies based in London during this period.

What should be instantly obvious is that the walking holidays made by Logan were obviously conducted in the early 19th Century and if he witnessed stone lifting at all, it was unlikely to be for the cultural reasons he states. Lifting a heavy stone at puberty certainly allowed the youth to now wear a hat or headdress but more importantly, this trial was an indication of a readiness to now train in arms which by the time of Logan's holiday, was a non-existent practice. Additionally the actual lifting requirements of proving manhood at puberty was known as as "***chuir e ga oth eadar a ' chlach thogail 's an talamh***" or "***air between the lifting stone and the ground***" ⁷. The lifting of a heavy stone onto a static plinth is rather another cultural application but not the one as Logan states. In one particular book⁸ Logan mentions the **Puterach** lifting stone at Balquhiddy and despite specifically referring to this stone as **Clach-neart**, he mentions that the stone was lifted breast high despite local knowledge that the stone was required to be lifted upon the most splendid of reception plinth stones. This particular reference about the Puterach has been plagiarised by many writers since who I am sure like Logan, have actually failed to visit the site as simply no mention is made of its famous plinth.

Logan was one of the progenitors of the symbolism of Clan Tartan despite it being a recent invention in the Victorian era but in much of his writing, Logan insists on a historic accuracy of applying specific tartans to specific Highland Clans which for the time, was wholly acceptable in applying a sense of romanticism towards the Highland Gael. There are many

⁷ *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, Volume 45 (1968)*

⁸ *McClans Highlanders at Home OR Celtic Gatherings, James Logan (1848)*

fabrications of culture implied by Logan in his writings making him extremely untrustworthy as a valuable resource on Gaelic culture.

Logan is the originator of the phrase *clach cuid fir* so what have we to make of it in regards to its authenticity? The best that can be stated is that as a phrase, it certainly fits into the style of Gaelic text in its descriptive format – stone of a man's portion.

The best implied use of *clach cuid fir* is that it was spoken as part of a regional variation of language in line with dialect. It can be asserted that its use as a phrase was in no way generic throughout the Gaelic speaking Highlands and Islands during the time of Logan's tours but may probably be so unique that it may well only have only been in use in a specific area. Academically, the use of *clach cuid fir* did receive an historical challenge in the shape of Robert MacLaggan, a Victorian language expert from Argyll and whose knowledge of the spoken Gaelic would have exceeded that of Logan enormously.

“The trial stone seems to be the same as that called by Logan – Clach cuid fir – “a stone of two hundred pounds or more, which had to be lifted from the ground, and put on the top of another stone about four feet high”.....Logan tells us, that when a lad had developed his strength so far so as to be able to lift the clach cuid fir (stone of a man's portion), he was the reckoned a man and might wear a bonnet.”⁹

The chapter by MacLaggan is entitled “Clachneart – Clach Deuchainn” and obviously infers that, in Argyllshire at least, this cultural application of strength was known as Clach Deuchainn. The actual slant of the written work by MacLaggan certainly points to Logan being either incorrect which in itself, and considering his life history, is a distinct possibility or indeed he may well be simply inferring and highlighting the nomenclature of Clach Deuchainn being an alternative due to regional and area differences in dialect and language. The truth of this will never be known but what is known is that there is a substantial amount of dubiety in relation to the use of *clach cuid fir*.

The phrase did appear in some Victorian romantic novels after the release of Logan's works however plagiarism in Victorian literature was always evident and indeed some were known to have made a living from it. What is evident is the clear assumption made by many modern strength disciplines and historians that the phrase *Clach cuid fir* is wholly generic and this usually forms an assertion that every lifting stone in Scotland is a *Clach cuid fir* or Manhood Stone.

The phrase as explained is at the very least extremely vague with a high degree of uncertainty in relation to its use within the Highlands and Islands and what writers have mentioned it have consequently failed to embrace the obvious diversity in regional dialects of the Gaelic language itself. What can be quite specifically enforced is that *Clach cuid fir* was most definitely not a used generic for all things lifting stones. It is a quandary of language which through the loss of many regional dialects can and never will be fully explained or understood, however its romantic attachment, one that has been plagiarised on so many instances in various books or websites is unlikely to be repealed.

As stated, the phrase *clach cuid fir* does appear to have a substance in its form towards being a proper Gaelic phrase of strength. In all likelihood it is a phrase like so many others in

⁹ Games and Diversions of Argyllshire.

the Gaelic language has been lost as it appears in no dictionaries. Having put this and the associated history of clach cuid fir to the language experts, it is now a recognised phrase and appears on the “**Am Faclair Beag**” Gaelic dictionary website with the following entry

[.clach cuid fir](#)

stone of force (any stone which is lifted, lifted across or thrown)

Once again it has to be emphasised that its use in language was most likely to have been within a now lost regional or area dialect.

The phrase **Clach Deuchainn** or **Trial Stone** has appeared in use in language in both Argyllshire and on the island of Skye suggesting a wide western seaboard use however, and as the name translates, the trial stone may well be a catchall phrase for all lifting stones used in any specific cultural trial of strength.

[clach-deuchainn](#)

boir. gin. cloiche-deuchainn, iol. -an-deuchainn

trial stone (any stone which is lifted, lifted across or thrown)

Area dialect shows distinctions in the Gaelic lifting stones as shown with the uniqueness of the Ultach lifting stones but with a high likelihood of similar cultural reasons surrounding the reasons for their lifting.

The Gaelic language shows little by way of a generic, sometimes difficult to understand but one should appreciate that this lack of a specific nomenclature applies to all stones of strength, not just lifting stones but also the “putting stone”. By common consent the Putting Stone as used in today’s modern Highland Games is known as Clach-neart but this phrase was actually far reaching and as will be shown later, is as perhaps close to a generic in the Gaelic for all stones of strength. This obviously asserts that another phrase applied specifically to the putting stone and using what has been explained so far, its explanation should be far more readily understood.

Dornag

Of all writings on the Highland Games culture few if any examine the use of the descriptive in the Gaelic language and to some extent there has been a large degree of plagiarism, especially amongst American writers who seem content that what has been written before on Gaelic culture, must of course be correct. There appears by all those that the culture and language of the Gael throughout the Highlands and Islands is completely singular and generic with no notion that words and their use, as well as meaning could be interpreted as completely different elsewhere. The **Dornag** is quite simple to explain why it is in fact the putting stone so beloved by the Games heavies and again, it is the use of the descriptive in the Gaelic language that underpins and emphasises its correct nomenclature.

“Dorneag” – a round stone that a man can cast¹⁰

“Doirneag” – Round stone of a size to fill the fist, or that can be thrown without inconvenience¹¹

“Dornag - (fist sized) stone; putting stone.”¹²

“Dornag : A putting-stone”¹³

The root of the word dornag is **dorn** meaning glove, fist or in this instance fistful. The size of the putting stone in Gaelic culture is therefore defined by an abstract volume rather than (as there is more than a tendency to do so in the modern era), any specific definition by way of imperial weight measurement.

The cultural competitive implications of this are obvious – with no standardisation in Gaelic culture obviously means that the true emphasis of the stone put was as far removed from any notion of world champions or records. Such modern associations are by their essence non Gaelic and more inclined to have a history steeped in an Anglicised adaptation of a unique cultural and rural sporting activity.

To put the use of the word “dornag” into context in its application and use, the following has kindly been reproduced by kind permission of John Roxborough from New Zealand and is a story written by his mother concerning his Great Grandmother – Mary MacKenzie who was born at Achindrean Ross-shire circa 1837. The story narrates everyday life for the children and youth of the area and includes the following -

“Put-the-shot required a special stone called a dornag which had to be weigh about six or seven pounds, and be a round shape washed in the sea. What thoughts of prowess came to the minds of young lads holding them at arms length and twirling round to release it”¹⁴

The text reference refers specifically to youths putting the stone and obviously corresponding hand size would infer a far lesser imperial weight measurement. The use of the word Dornag was known on the islands of South Uist, Erskay, Lewis and on the mainland in Coigach in the far north west. It is not known whether it was in use within the Central, Eastern and Southern Highlands and its distribution of use may have followed similar lines to that of the Clach Ultach which is predominately islands based.

The Am Faclair Beag online dictionary provides the following definition -

[dòrnag](#)

boir. gin. -aige, iol. -an

1 (fist-sized) stone 2 putting-stone (lightest of the *clachan-neirt*, thrown one-handed) 3 gauntlet

¹⁰ *A Galic and English Dictionary Volume 1 by the Rev William Shaw (MDCCCLXXX)*

¹¹ *Edward Dwelly*

¹² *The most modern Gaelic dictionary by Colin Mark*

¹³ *p5 Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness - Volume 37*

¹⁴ <http://roxborough.com/afamilystory/Achindrean/marymckenzie.html>

So the hand held putting stone is the lightest of the clachan-neart and now we move onto an understanding of how broad ranging the scope of the clach-neart actually is.

Although the descriptive of Dornag, is that of a stone thrown which was a handful, a putting stone, it is still came under the broader descriptive of a stone of strength or force ¹⁵ – that is the better known Clach-neart.

Unfortunately to fully understand the Clach-neart means an examination in language, not necessarily the Gaelic of the Highlands and Islands but also an understanding of the many other languages used in the British Isles to fully appreciate why some misconceptions have been made in relation to its full understanding. The phrase has perhaps been the most corrupted word in the Gaelic language and this corruption stems in essence from a completed misunderstanding of its known English translation as “Putting Stone” with the assumption having been made that the Putting Stone is the same as the Putting Stone used at the Highland Games and it as a consequence of this misunderstanding that the clach-neart has in some way been damaged to the extent that its true cultural use as a possible generic catchall, has been lost.

Clach-neart

Of all the various Gaelic words that apply to stones and strength the Clach-neart is without doubt the most commonly quoted and more so, the least understood of all Gaelic strength phrases. There are many written texts and websites, predominately those with a Highland Games base, that make efforts to quote history and nomenclature resulting in specific definitions of what is and what is not Clach-neart however to begin with, the most obvious use by those who have used the phrase in the various books and websites where the clach-neart is mentioned, there is one particular glaring error with the vast majority in that the phrase clach-neart appears without the use of a hyphen. The hyphenating of the phrase is used by Gaelic speakers to emphasise speech and its flagrant disappearance, although understandable is wholly incorrect.

Current perceptions allow the clach-neart to be described simply as a “**putting stone**” and from this various assumptions have been made, principally regarding weight and with the addition of some doubtable social culture attached to the practice of the clach neart, the true definition has been lost. For the sake of simplicity any examination should in effect commence with what definition and translations are known –

Clach-neirt, pl – an-neirt, s, f, Putting stone (lit, stone of strength) ¹⁶

¹⁵ *Am Faclair Beag, an online Gaelic Dictionary describes the Dornag as a putting stone – the lightest of the Clach-neart.*

Clach-neart,s,f, a putting stone; literally, a stone of strength ¹⁷

Clach-neart , klach nyert, n,f – putting stone ¹⁸

Clach-neart,s,f, a putting stone; literally, a stone of strength ¹⁹

Cloch-neart – The Putting Stone ²⁰

Clach neart – Putting Stone ²¹

From the various translations given to the Clach-neart it is obvious that in its descriptive, the literal “stone of strength/force” has given way to “Putting Stone” to demonstrate what type of stone it is referring to. There is a problem with this however and one which has never been fully assessed as many writers on strength have simply taken the translation of “Putting Stone” and used it in the modern sense to apply to that type of stone thrown or putted at the Highland Games. Indeed, with the Dornag firmly established as what the Gaels themselves refer to as a hand held stone propelled for distance, why is the “Putting Stone” so clearly emphasised as the definition for Clach-neart?

Clach-neart means what its direct translation infers, a stone of strength and if there exists a generic for all stones used in a Gaelic strength culture, then this indeed is it but with some considerations however, with the Gaelic translation being a stone of strength or force it is necessary to look at the definition of the “**putting stone**”.

The earliest written dictionary definition of a Putting Stone is as follows –

Putting- Stone - A large Stone, by the throwing of which the strength is tried. ²²

This particular reference should be examined in relation to the time frame in which it was written. The reference is taken from one of the very first published English Dictionaries, by Nathan Bailey in 1721. The time scale is important as the year of publication, although some 14 years after the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707, is from a time when little or nothing was known of Gaelic culture and indeed the well known sympathies towards the Jacobite cause demonstrated by the Highlander at the time, almost insured that only the foolish would have entered the rough Highlands to the north. In essence, any idea that there would have been knowledge of a stone putting culture in the Highlands and Islands at that time should immediately be dispelled. The word Putting-Stone therefore is quite obviously not of Gaelic origin and indeed by the mention of it within Bailey’s dictionary, clearly points

¹⁶ *A Gaelic Dictionary specially designed for Beginners and use in Schools* by Edward Dwelly 1902.

¹⁷ *A Gaelic Dictionary in Two Parts* by R A Armstrong 1825

¹⁸ *A pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary* by Neil MacAlpine 1853

¹⁹ *A Dictionary of the Gaelic language in Two Parts* by Norman McLeod 1831

²⁰ *A Galic and English Dictionary* by William Shaw 1780

²¹ *Gaelic-English Dictionary* by Colin Mark 2004. Quite a curious aspect of the use of grammar in modern Gaelic is the dropping of the hyphen in the most modern of Gaelic dictionaries.

²² Taken directly from the second publication of an English Language Dictionary by Nathan Bailey – *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* published in 1721.

towards the practice of stone putting being part of English culture in or around that time frame.

This in itself raises many questions as to the practice and culture of propelling a “Putting Stone” if indeed it has a non Gaelic origin. What chance is there of a similar size stone being used or similar rules being applied, and indeed the assumption that “putting” involves solely the use of one hand also has to be questioned.

The definition given by Bailey describes the putting stone as being “**a large stone**” however the definition of large is non- specific. Whether a water rounded hand held stone could be described as large is open to individual interpretation however regardless of which, any assumption as to size of a putting stone is principally that; an assumption and therefore no specific definition can be derived in any fashion and that includes any interpretation that tries to fit the size and weight as well as style, into something similar to that as applied at the Highland Games.

Resorting to the English language, the origins of the word “putt” does have decidedly Celtic origins.

“The Welsh pwtianthe primary sense is to thrust, throw, drive or send”²³

“PUTADH, aidh s.m, a pushing, a shoving.....a push, a jostle, a shove, a put.”²⁴

The use of the word “Putt” having its origins in either or both of the **goidelic** and **brythonic** language groupings clearly demonstrates that the word is not of Anglo-Saxon origin. Being derived from the Gaelic language does not necessarily mean however that the word is of Highland origin.

The origin of the word “Putt” is most likely to have originated from the lowland Gaelic which became displaced by the English variant of Scots between the 14th and 17th Centuries as the English language migrated westwards from the Lothians.

With regards to stone lifting, this Gaelic influence in the South West would account for the presence of the Blue Stones of Old Dailly and the lifting stones at Kingcase, Prestwick and at Loans near Troon.

Further east from Ayrshire, the River Nith valley gives us some important evidence regarding stone putting culture.

At Closeburn near Dumfries there existed a 42lb “putting stone” situated close to the uniquely named Liftingstane Farm. The time frame for the use of the stone can be dated as it was amongst many other references, mentioned in a tale²⁵ regarding two local Reivers called Norman Needy and Reiving Rob. This places the use of the stone during the reign of James V of Scotland (from 1513 to 1542). The Putting Stone therefore existed completely out with any knowledge of Highlands and Islands culture however its use still relates to a lost Gaelic culture in that area of Galloway.

²³ A Dictionary of the English Language Volume 2, Noah Webster 1828

²⁴ A Gaelic Dictionary in Two Parts, RA Armstrong 1825

²⁵ Reaving Rob and Norman Needy, a border tale. p153 The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany 1824.

Further northwards along the River Nith there is knowledge of the existence of a far heavier putting stone. Known as "**The putting stone of Great Glenmana**" the stone rested in the recesses of the narrow Lowland Glen of Glenmanna, south west of the village of Sanquhar.

"Notices of these are to be found in the Dumfries Magazine and other publications of the period, and his monster putting-stone is enumerated in the appendix, in the list of articles of antiquarian interest still to be seen in the parish. This stone weighs 150 lbs."²⁶

The Glenmanna Putting Stone was known to have been in use circa 1680 when it was thrown by a John McCall a strongman of some notoriety of the period. The stone was retained at the Thornhill Museum until its closure in the 1960's however it was known to have been reduced in weight to some 75lbs following its conversion for use in the sport of curling.²⁷

The weight of this putting stone almost ensures that it was thrown with two hands instead of the single handed "putt" of the Highland Games variety. This type of stone is not unique with the "**Putting Stone of Jamie Welsh**" (also known as the Bairn of Tweedhopefoot) being a very large stone which few men could lift let alone throw.²⁸ The use of this particular putting stone can be dated to circa 1649.

At this juncture a picture is building of a putting stone which far exceeds the expected weight considerations as earlier defined by those ascribing a definition to the clach-neart however what is clear, is that regardless of weight, any stone that is thrown or propelled is being shown to be a "putting stone".

"Puttingstone - Putting and stone. That is, a stone thrown or placed by the hands."²⁹

Following on from the earlier reference to the "putting stone" made by Nathan Bailey of a "heavy stone", we now have another reference that mentions the putting stone as one in which the use of two hands is obvious. Although this single reference to the use of two hands in "putting" does stand alone amongst the many other definitions within the Victorian era, it does hint at a completely different approach to that currently perceived.

That stone putting, in whatever form existed out-with the Highlands and Islands is undisputable, and the fact that it was also practiced elsewhere in the British Isles is proof that no single approach to the putting stone could be derived. A putting stone was of any weight and would have been thrown in a variety of different methods and this is where the problem with the translation of "Clach-neart" as a putting stone exists. Many assumptions have been made that the Highlands and Islands version of the "putting stone" is that which is currently thrown single handed by a Highland Games heavy. In the English, this type of stone may well be referred to a putting stone but evidence suggests that the Gaelic "Clach Neirt" had a meaning which loosely defined the stone of strength.

²⁶ p310 *The History of Sanquhar*, James Brown 1891

²⁷ *The History of Curling, Scotland's ain game and 50 years of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club*, John Kerr 1890

²⁸ *The New Statistical Account of Scotland Volume 3* 1834

²⁹ *The London Encyclopaedia or Universal Dictionary Volume XVIII* 1829

In Victorian literature there are some examples of some doubt as to what is meant by the term "Putting Stone".

"Since Jerome, commentators have thought of a stone by throwing or lifting which men try their strength, what we call a "putting stone.""³⁰

This simple reference clearly infers that a putting stone can be a stone of strength which is either thrown or indeed lifted and interpreted alongside the previous definition of that of a stone thrown or placed with two hands, most certainly broadens the definition of a putting stone to include a heavy lifting stone, a perception perhaps totally alien to the Highland Games Community but nevertheless a certain element of doubt does exist in relation to perceived definitions.

The quote attributed to the historical knowledge of St Jerome is indeed another plagiarism, as the "putting stone" being a trial of strength was mentioned in 1701, some 14 years before the Dictionary produced by Nathan Bailey.

"St Jerome tells us, it was an old custom in Palestine, and in use in his own time, to have round stones of a great weight kept in the castles and villages, for the youth to try their strength with. And the custom is yet extant in some parts of Scotland, where stones for the same purpose, are laid at the gates of great houses, which they call putting-stones"³¹

Just how the celebrated English Poet, Alexander Pope became aware or had knowledge of a Scottish or indeed Gaelic stone lifting or throwing culture is completely unknown. In 1707, and despite the Union between Scotland and England the entire country was fearful of a Jacobite uprising and although this is often perceived to be associated with the Highlands of Scotland, Jacobite sympathisers existed throughout, and as the cause was the restoration of the Roman Catholic Stewarts to the throne of Great Britain, a large number of sympathisers were indeed Roman Catholic. Pope was known to be Catholic however I suspect that the time frame, in respect that "great houses" were few in number in the Highlands and Islands at this time, that the specific reference may refer to lowland Scotland or indeed the Borders.

The text however has proved problematical in the history of strength.

What should be noted is that the Putting Stone as defined by Pope is a "round stone of a great weight". Whatever way one looks at this, it cannot be conceived to refer to the Highland Games Putting Stone, however it has. Many strength historians (of the Highland Games) and various websites specify that the Clach-neart existed outside "great houses" and although it is clear from the previous references that the "putting stone" is a heavy lifting stone, the original quotes have in modern times been corrupted to highlight the putting stone as that thrown at the Highland Games -

³⁰ p480 *The Book of the Twelve Prophets commonly called the minor.* George Adam Smith. 1901

³¹ p143 *The Illiad of Homer translated by Alexander Pope 1715*

Referring back to the original text by Pope, it should be recalled that he clearly states that “putting stones” existed outside the “gates” to great houses in some parts of Scotland. This is the root of the plagiarism and romantic attachments that followed because many assumptions have been made with the most obvious being that –

- That the putting stone is of the Highland Games variety....and
- That all these “gates” where the stones (of whatever size) were located, are situated in the Highlands when the reference by Pope makes no mention of any specific area in Scotland.

How Pope has been corrupted is quite easy to understand.

PUTTINGSTONE - In some parts of Scotland, stones are laid at the gates of great houses, which they call putting stones, for trials of strength (Pope).³²

This reference taken from perhaps the most famous of early English dictionaries by Samuel Johnson correctly contributes Pope as the source of the definition however he does omit the reference to the size of the stone. From this point, a putting stone can then be assumed to be a putting stone of Highland Games proportions.

PUTTINGSTONE - In some parts of Scotland, stones are laid at the gates of great houses, which they call putting stones, for trials of strength³³

By 1780 a further dictionary reference remains unchanged and although again there is no reference to the size of the stone, there is no mention of Pope being the originator of the meaning of Putting Stone.

PUTTING-STONE - In Scotland, a stone laid at the gates of great houses for trials of strength. (Johnson/Pope)³⁴

The reference to “Putting Stone” has now crossed the Atlantic appearing in one of the first published English dictionaries in the USA. The reference is attributed to Pope and Johnson however the clarity of the original text by Pope has again failed to be explained in the fact that such stones were round and of a “great weight”.

What should be emphasised is that the locations of these “putting stones”, in modern times and by many authors has been explained in similar terms in such that the putting stone existed outside the gates of the “Chieftains House”. Evidence of this, as it relates to stones of the Highland Games size is non-existent however there are known examples of larger lifting stone being situated at these locations.

³² *A Dictionary of the English Language. Samuel Johnson 1792*

³³ *A General Definition of the English Language. Thomas Sheridan 1780*

³⁴ *A Dictionary of the English Language Vol 2. Noah Webster 1828 (USA)*

In the Highlands there are many examples of stones at the Gates or entrance to Great Houses.

- ***The Crawford Putting Stone was located outside Fedderate Castle***
- ***The Chieftains Stone is located outside Menzies Castle***
- ***The Ardvorlich Stone located outside Ardvorlich House***
- ***The Lochaber Putting Stone outside Achnacarry Castle***

All these stones are known lifting stones which, and with two of them being referred to as “putting stones” it is quite obvious that the romantic assertion of the Games size putting stone and stately homes is a misnomer.

Personally I think the greatest example of a stone at the gates of a great house is not in Scotland but strangely found in the USA. The historic mansion house at Graeme Park, Horsham, Pennsylvania offers a unique cultural insight as to life in colonial America and perched on a pedestal close to a gable wall of the mansion house sits a curious mushroom shaped stone known as the “Lifting Stone”. There are some historical anecdotes that make mention of this unique stone.

“Within this now deserted mansion Governor Keith entertained royally. In front of the house is Sir William’s “Lifting Stone”, a large mushroom shaped boulder which he used to test the strength of slaves before purchasing them.”³⁵

“All around are ancient trees, many of them doubtless survivors from the primeval forest. Not far away is the great “lifting stone,” a mushroom-shaped boulder with which Sir William always tested the strength of an applicant for work. If he could not lift it - and it is of substantial weight - he was not employed.”³⁶

Sir William Keith was a Highlander who after the first Jacobite rebellion of 1715 and perhaps in a unique fashion of to be rid of a troublesome Scottish noble, the British Government made him the first Governor of Philadelphia. His stone still exists but has been moved from the entrance gates of the mansion house to an area behind the main building. Despite rather dubious reasons for testing strength, it appears that Sir William Keith has kindly taken a part of his Gaelic strength heritage and planted it firmly in the USA and what chance would be for a traditional Scottish Lifting Stone to be found across the Atlantic. But this is how cultures develop and evolve and assimilate into others. The staff at Graeme Park House have a detailed history of the stone (provided by myself) but suffice to say it is another example of a “putting stone at the Gates of a Great House”.

³⁵ P661 Philadelphia, A Nation’s Birthplace. Pennsylvania Historical Commission (1937)

³⁶ P300 The Colonial Homes of Philadelphia and It’s Neighbourhood, Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Horace Mather Lippincott (1912)



The Lifting Stone of Sir William Keith (Photo courtesy of Graeme Park House)

What should be remembered is that the building of large houses by Clan Chiefs and their kin, in line with the stately Country Houses in England, falls into a time frame which mirrors the demise of the Clan System and cannot be seen as ancient in culture, but perhaps reflective of a culture that took place after 1745.

A certain degree of romantic folklore has been derived from the many dubious and perhaps incorrect sources regarding the English nomenclature and explanation of the “Putting Stone” however what is clear and obvious, is that the “putting stone” is ill defined in the English language and as a consequence, the translation from the Gaelic “Clach-neart” would appear to be incorrect. In this respect it would be prudent to examine who indeed gave the first translation of Clach-neart and what was meant by it.

For this it is necessary to examine the strength culture of Wales

“The favourite amusement, apart from cock fighting, undoubtedly was football. But in addition there was wrestling, and especially putting the stone. The latter seems to have borne some relationship to the game of hurling in Cornwall, already mentioned above. The stone was called y maen camp (the feat stone). It was round and weighed from 75 to 100 pounds”.³⁷

The Welsh “Y Maen Camp” or feat stone is also referred to as the ubiquitous “Putting Stone”. To the modern strength historian and indeed enthusiast, the mind set of such a stone would again imply that of the Highland Games variety of putting stone however the application of Welsh strength was indeed far different from that perceived in the modern.

“There is a relic of these ancient games called Y Maen Camp, or feat stone, in the churchyard of Efenechtyd. It is a ponderous boulder stone, weighing 101 lbs. The camp, or feat, was to lift this stone and throw it over the head backwards, and he was the hero who could throw this huge stone the furthest. Trials of strength and dexterity

³⁷ Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion Rhifyn 1953

with this stone at Efenechtyd took place on the north side of the churchyard, where there are to this day but few graves.³⁸.

It is perhaps fortunate that unlike the smaller Highland Games Clach Neirt, physical evidence of the Welsh “Putting Stones” still exist.



The 101 lb Efenechtyd Stone (Photo courtesy of Roger Davis)

Throwing a heavy 101 lb stone, backwards over the head using both hands is as remote from Highland Games culture as could possibly be imagined however the stone is still referred to as a “putting Stone”. Another stone of this type also exists at Llanwddyn³⁹ and although slightly lighter at 75 lbs, the same process of a two handed overhead throw was applied.⁴⁰



The 75lb Llanwddyn Stone (Photo courtesy of Roger Davis)

“Putting Stone – Carreg Orchest”⁴¹

The “Garreg Orchest” of Wales are in fact the equivalent of the traditional Scottish lifting stones and the stones which still exist of this variety all are known to weight in excess of 250lbs. In relation to Wales, as also appears in Scotland, the interpretation of the “Putting Stone” can be wide ranging with no predefined weight to define it as same.

³⁸ *Old stone crosses of the Vale of Clwyd and its neighbouring parishes* by Reverend Elias Owen 1886

³⁹ p70,88 *Collections Historical & Archaeological in relation to Montgomeryshire and its Borders*, Thomas Richard (1874)

⁴⁰ *The research of the Welsh Stones of Strength has been compiled by strength historian Roger Davis of Hemel Hempstead, England. Although not yet published, a detailed investigation resulting in the uncovering of a number of traditional Welsh Lifting and Throwing Stones has assisted in proving the existence of a unique strength culture which was completely unknown to other strength historians until 2011. There are similarities with the Scottish Gaelic strength culture however they are not the same, although quite clearly what phraseology and nomenclature that has been applied in the English language to the Welsh stones, mirror exactly that applied to Scotland.*

⁴¹ p240 *An English and Welsh Dictionary Volume 2*, Rev John Walters (1828)

A number of Scottish Victorian references make mention of a phrase which has also been plagiarised and occasionally misinterpreted.

“Casting the heavy stone”

The stone cast has been interpreted as the “stone put” with a heavy leaning to the style employed in its throwing as mirroring that of the Highlands Games tradition however, the above reference is taken from a text on Welsh sporting activities at Dolobran Hall in Powys within the Victorian period.⁴² It is more than likely that this particular casting of the stone was of the traditional Y Maen Camp where two hands were used to throw the stone overhead. Again, it is the misinterpretation of the *English Language* to make it fit into a Gaelic culture that has been the problem with understanding Gaelic strength nomenclature.

The assumption that Welsh nomenclature can be equally equivalent to the Scottish Gaelic is quite easy to understand where English language phrases such as “casting the heavy stone” and “putting stone” have been applied to both cultures, despite the fact that the application and cultures are indeed different.

How the Welsh nomenclature can be relevant to the Scottish Gaelic is not through direct translation of words but to an individual.

Thomas Pennant was born in North Wales at Downing Hall, Whitford in 1726. The location of his birth is less than 20 miles from Efenechtyd where the Y Maen Camp or Putting Stone exists. Almost every parish in North Wales was known to possess a similar stone and as Pennant was an antiquarian and writer with a detailed knowledge of his local area, and although he never wrote accordingly, there is no doubt that the common existence of these stones known as “Y maen camp” would have been known to him. Pennant was known to have more anglicised leanings and the interpretation of the Welsh to the English of the “Putting Stone” is more than a possibility.

The importance of Pennant to the Scottish Gaelic is quite simply due to the fact that he was the first individual to translate the “Clach-neart” of the Scottish Gael and conclude that it was a “Putting Stone”. Pennant is therefore the root of all subsequent translations and this cannot be understated.

In 1769 Pennant set off from home to make a tour of Scotland. Travelling southwest from Inverness, Pennant travelled the length of the Great Glen visiting Glen Morriston, Fort William and eventually concluding his Highland tour at Inverary. This tour was the first of a kind by a non Scot and his subsequent book “A tour in Scotland 1769” was well received by the English speaking public.

It is from page 173 of this particular book that the earliest definition of the clach neirt is obtained and indeed this translation predates the earliest Gaelic/English dictionary by eleven years –

“Most of the ancient sports of the Highlanders, such as archery, hunting fowling and fishing are now disused: those retained are throwing the putting stone or stone of strength (clach neart) as they call it, which occasions as emulation who can throw a

⁴² p9 *Lineage of the Lloyd and Carpenter Family, Charles Perrin Smith 1870*

weighty one the furthest..... The amusements by their firesides were the telling of tales, the wildest and most extravagant imaginable”

What has been assumed by many strength historian writers is that the reference made by Pennant to the Clach-neart is a direct account of him witnessing stone putting as known in the culture of the Highland Games. This indeed may well be correct however it is not direct proof that a small hand held stone, propelled from a mark with one hand, was indeed what was witnessed by Pennant. Throwing a heavy stone in excess of 100lbs in weight by using both hands was as common in the Highlands and Islands as it was in Wales. The “**Clach Dhomhnall Mhic Lachlan**”⁴³ on the island of Gigha is evidence that a stone of this type was propelled forward with two hands for distance.

Pennant could easily have witnessed a “putting stone” of a similar size as those known in his homeland of Wales although the Scottish variant was indeed thrown forwards, however the fact remains that the description supplied by him most certainly does not allow any reasonable conclusion to be reached. What is certain is that whatever he witnessed, it was the throwing of the Clach Neirt and it is he that directly translates this as the “Putting Stone”, a phrase which as shown has little by way of a precise definition.

What impact that Pennant made on the British public by the publication of the book on his tour can be best adjudged by the scourge of plagiarism that existed within literary works of the 18th Century.

“Most of the ancient sports of the Highlanders, such as archery, hunting fowling and fishing are now disused: those retained are throwing the putting stone or stone of strength (clach neart) as they call it, which occasions as emulation who can throw a weighty one the furthest..... The amusements by their firesides were the telling of tales, the wildest and most extravagant imaginable”.⁴⁴

“Most of the ancient sports of the Highlanders, such as archery, hunting fowling and fishing are now disused: those retained are throwing the putting stone or stone of strength as they call it, which occasions as emulation who can throw a weighty one the furthest..... The amusements by their firesides were the telling of tales, the wildest and most extravagant imaginable”.⁴⁵

“In proportion as industry has advanced among the Highlanders, their ancient sports, such as archery, hunting fowling and fishing have declined. Those which remain are chiefly throwing the putting stone or stone of strength as they call it.”⁴⁶

“Most of the ancient sports of the Highlanders, such as archery, hunting fowling and fishing are now disused. The amusements by their firesides were the telling of tales, the wildest and most extravagant imaginable”⁴⁷

⁴³ Article by Seaton Gordon entitled “Gigha, Gods Island” within Chambers Journal Volume 15, 1946.

⁴⁴ p 239 of A New and Universal Geographical Grammar by E Jones 1772. Some 2 years after the publication by Pennant a complete plagiarism in the form of a direct lift appears in this work without attributing the source of the reference.

⁴⁵ p 241 of A Tour through the Island of Great Britain by Daniel Defoe Volume 4 (Eighth Edition) 1778. Again this is another direct lift from the work of Pennant without quoting the source.

⁴⁶ p525 of The New Universal Traveller by Jonathan Carver 1779. Carver has clearly altered the original text to suit however he does at least quote Pennant as the reference.

“Most of the ancient sports of the Highlanders, such as archery, hunting fowling and fishing are now disused: those retained are throwing the putting stone or stone of strength (clach neart) as they call it, which occasions as emulation who can throw a weighty one the furthest”⁴⁸

“Most of the ancient sports of the Highlanders, such as archery, hunting fowling and fishing are now disused: those retained are throwing the putting stone or stone of strength (clach neart) as they call it, which occasions as emulation who can throw a weighty one the furthest..... The amusements by their firesides were the telling of tales, the wildest and most extravagant imaginable”⁴⁹

“Some, once more common among the lower ranks, such as archery, hunting, fowling and fishing, are now disused; but yet they retain the practice of throwing the putting stone, or stone of strength (clochneart).....Tale telling , over the winter fire, is also one of their chief amusements, particularly, as is the common case , where the narration partakes of the marvellous.”⁵⁰

“Even the ancient pastimes of archery, hunting fowling and fishing are now disused: but the putting stone, the penny stone and the shinty, or striking a ball of wood or hair, are still favourite diversions”⁵¹

“Those (sports of the Highlanders) retained are throwing the putting stone or stone of strength (clach neart) as they call it, which occasions as emulation who can throw a weighty one the furthest”⁵²

“Most of the ancient sports of the Highlanders, such as archery, hunting fowling and fishing are now disused: those retained are throwing the putting stone or stone of strength (clach neart) as they call it, which occasions as emulation who can throw a weighty one the furthest”⁵³

“ Most of the ancient sports of the Highlanders, such as archery, hunting fowling and fishing are now disused: those retained are throwing the putting stone or stone of

⁴⁷ p88 of *A View of the British Empire more especially Scotland with some proposals for the improvement of that country* by John Knox 1784. This quote making no reference to Pennant is clearly plagiarised although in itself it makes no reference to the Clach Neirt. The book itself is an excellent example of the written word of an extreme Presbyterian whose views on anything “Popish” was instantly dismissed or not mentioned. Evidence suggests that anything remotely interfering with the Sabbath was as a consequence of the Roman Catholic Church and its practice. Anything accounting to the exercise of physical strength on a Sunday was instantly regarded as having nothing in common with the values of the Church of Scotland and it is not surprising that the clach neirt fails to be mentioned.

⁴⁸ p40 of *A General Description of Scotland* by George Cook 1802. Quite simply ,another example of unreferenced plagiarism.

⁴⁹ p89 of *Voyages and Travels in all parts of the World* by John Pinkerton 1809.

⁵⁰ p324 of *A System of Modern Geography* by John Smith 1810.

⁵¹ p66 of *The British Tourist* by William Mavor 1814

⁵² p577 of the *Encyclopaedia Londinensis* by John Wilkes 1826. A straightforward encyclopaedia article found under a reference to **Putting Stone** and quotes Pennant as the source.

⁵³ p328 of *A comprehensive system of Modern Geography and History (To the use of Schools and Academies in the United States)* by Edwin Williams 1835. The Clach Neirt crosses the Atlantic for the first time in written form.

strength (clach neart) as they call it, which occasions as emulation who can throw a weighty one the furthest” – Pennant tour in Scotland 1769 page 214⁵⁴

“Those retained are throwing the putting stone or stone of strength (clach neart) as they call it, which occasions as emulation who can throw a weighty one the furthest.”

55

There are perhaps many more instances where Pennant has either been directly quoted or plagiarised however the volume of this has in some way cemented the English translation of “Putting Stone” from the Gaelic Clach-neart. The conclusion thus far is that in relation to the “putting stone” there is no single reference that clearly defines what such a stone is and indeed, the various definitions or attempts as such, leave the firm impression that the phrase is not well defined nor generic to a specific stone type and is however open to a general looseness of interpretation.

With this said it is perhaps now relevant to examine the nomenclature of the Clach-neart itself, what has been written and what physical evidence still exists that may well point to a true and far more accurate definition than the loosely defined putting stone.

Prior to 1996 what scant information that was available on traditional Scottish Stone Lifting was limited solely to the knowledge of two stones; the Inver Stone and the Dinnie Steens at Potarch. Whereas the Dinnie Steens were highlighted as a “feat” of strength associated with the celebrated Highland Games athlete, Donald Dinnie; the “steens” as they are known were recognised as a traditional test of strength for local men during the Potarch Fairs. The Inver Stone appears to have been a more traditional lifting stone whose presence is perhaps as a consequence of the location of the ancient Inn being in close proximity to the merge of two established Highland tracks nearby.

Pre 1996, these two known lifting stones, a number hardly sufficient to provide any physical evidence of nomenclature or culture, were apparently deemed sufficient in number to establish an understanding of traditional stone lifting culture and for ease of convenience were defined as “clach cuid fir” or manhood stones, a phrase in itself which as previously explained was most certainly not a generic phrase that encapsulated all traditional lifting stones.

In 1996 the single reference book on stone lifting “***Of Stones and Strength***”⁵⁶ was released and was widely acclaimed. The book managed to provide details on four further extant stones however the nomenclature still prescribed to the notion that all heavy lifting stones were manhood stones. Having to some degree being party to the research for the book, it is

⁵⁴ p246 of *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* by John Jamieson 1841. A quotation correctly referenced to Pennant but curious in the fact that a book on Scottish language written by a Scot lies heavily on the words of a Welshman.

⁵⁵ *The Lay of Havelock the Dane* by Walter Skeat 1868. Skeat ascribes the reference to Pennant and also makes further reference to the *Statistical Account of Scotland* to confirm usage of the Clach Neirt in relation to the ancient tale of the Havelock Stone, perhaps the most famous of English heavy lifting/throwing stones.

⁵⁶ Published by Ironmind Publications the booklet although heralded by the strength community it stuck to the contrived definitions of clach cuid fir and indeed helped to cement the notion that all lifting stones are known as such. One co-author was my late father which allows any criticism in relation to nomenclature and culture contained in the book to be based on first-hand knowledge. The book regrettably is error strewn.

full of contrived applications of Gaelic strength and incorrect translations of the Gaelic Language.⁵⁷

Since 1996, research carried out on the traditional lifting stones in Scotland has resulted in a list of some 103 known stones with approximately 30% still extant. The numbers allow for a reasonable overview of stone lifting culture, namely the large number located at “coffin stops” on coffin roads close to a church or graveyard and more importantly, the Gaelic nomenclature associated with these stones.

One striking aspect of the nomenclature is the number of heavy lifting stones that are known either as “putting stones” or “clach-neart”. The stones known as such are as follows -

- ***Clach-neart of Strathmore of Durness***
- ***Clach-neart Mherichard***
- ***Clach-neart Glenlivet***
- ***The Puterach (described in text as Clach-neart)***
- ***Clachan-neart Achernack (two stones hence the plural of Clach-neart)***

And from the Anglicised translation of Clach-neart to Putting Stone we have –

- ***The Wallace Putting Stone***
- ***The Putting Stone of the Clans***
- ***Lochaber Putting Stone***
- ***The Crawford Putting Stone***

With nine examples of heavy lifting stones known as Clach-neart, we now have to look at a commonality within them which makes this confusing puzzle that much easier to understand.

Extremely close to Achnacary, the seat of Clan Cameron, the celebrated Highland Games athlete, A A Cameron resided at Mucomir near Spean Bridge. It is known that Cameron in the early 20th Century, apart from competing in Highland Games had the occasional foray with lifting traditional heavy stones. It is known that he lifted both the Inver and Dalwhinnie Stones however the following story regarding him lifting a stone in Perthshire fits well into the lifting style associated with the clach-neart.

“He was another time in Perthshire. There was a big boulder besides a dyke and they said that only a powerfully built man would be able to lift it. Alexander went and lifted the boulder and threw it over the dyke where it lies to this very day. I’ve no idea who would be able to move it now”.⁵⁸

To perhaps emphasise the Clach-neart as the heavy lifting stone we can travel over the water to Ireland to discover a unique place name reference –

⁵⁷ p30 Chapter 11 – Bodach Chraig Fiannaich was translated as “the testing stone of the Fianna”. Chraig Fianna is the motehill situated 400 yards east of the lifting stone and a more apt translation is “The Old Man (referring to the Testing Stone) of the Rock of the Fianna. Ascribing the folklore associated with the stone although culturally there were many reasons for lifting this stone, has left the strength world believing that by lifting stone they become a Fianna warrior (the folklore itself states that you were allowed to fight beside them but makes no mention of joining however, such is human nature, the story and meaning has been corrupted)

⁵⁸ Taken from John MacDonald of Highbridge and transcribed by Calum Maclean on the 4th and the 25th of January 1951 - <http://calumimaclean.blogspot.co.uk>

“Cloghnart in Monaghan ; Cloch-neirt [-nert]. The stone of strength : from a stone lying in an old fort which the men were accustomed to lift as a trial of strength. A usual custom all through Ireland”⁵⁹

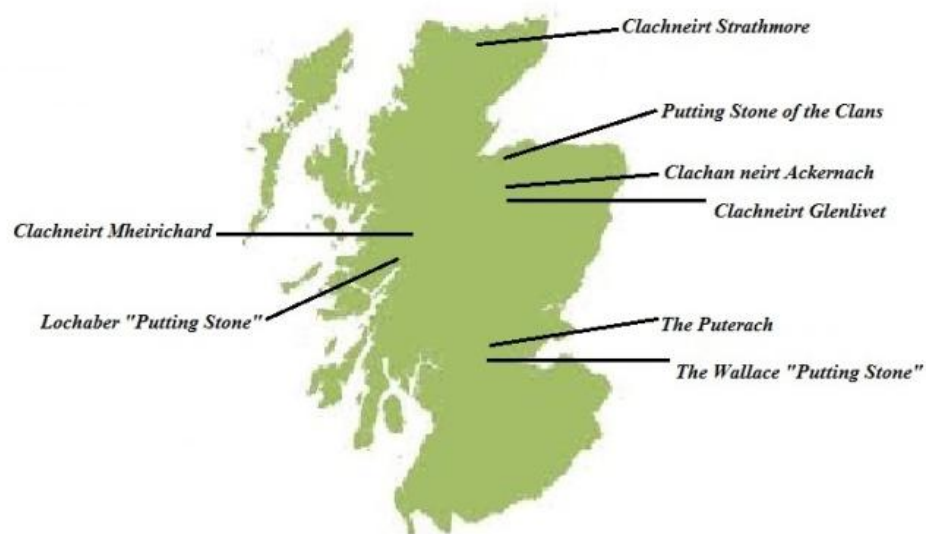
The hamlet of Cloghnart still exists north-west of the town of Monaghan however initial enquiries have proved unsuccessful in relation to both the ancient fort and the stone. Whether or not the stone is extant, it is clear that in the Irish Gaelic, the stone of strength is a lifting stone and not a Highland Games Putting Stone.

These examples are physical proof that the Clach-neart was defined as a heavy lifting stone but the previous reference to AA Cameron is where the clue lies to the shared commonality of the Clach-neart. The answer is the knowledge of the supreme show of strength which could be culturally applied to lifting stones and that is the ***“Lift and Throw”*** – that is the lifting style (where known) that took place with these stones and is fully examined in the following chapter in detail.

So in defining the Clach-neart, it is a stone of strength of any apparent size which was subjected to being forced (throwing) but as not all lifting stones are thrown, it is not a generic but is so for all stones of strength that are propelled. So from the Highland Games size putting stone to the heaviest of lifting stones, if there was a throwing element the stone is then a Clach-neart and it should be noted that this will include such stones as the two handed throwing stone or indeed the Braemar stone used at some Highland Games. The definition is sustained by what is done with the stone of its strength, not its weight.

Having proved that the Clach-neart is also a heavy lifting stone it should be possible with the numbers of this type of stone to assess the usage of both strength culture and language and location.

Distribution of stones known as "Clachneirt"



⁵⁹ *The Origin and History of Irish names of places by Patrick Joyce 1913.*

The distribution of the heavy Clach-neart clearly indicates that the practice of lifting either onto a plinth or static object, or indeed throwing the stone over it, is solely restricted to the Highlands alone with (as yet), no stone of this sort known on the Hebrides.

This examination of the Clach-neart was part of a far larger examination of the Gaelic language which when submitted to lingual experts has resulted in a readjustment of translation and understanding and correspondingly, after examination, the on-line Am Faclair Beag Dictionary now defines the Clach-neart as follows -

[clach-neirt](#)

boir. gin. cloiche-neirt, iol. -an-neirt

stone of force (any stone which is lifted, lifted across or thrown)

This definition still extends to the Highland Games Putting Stone but which also is further defined as the following -

[dòrnag](#)

boir. gin. -aige, iol. -an

1 (fist-sized) stone 2 putting-stone (lightest of the *clachan-neirt*, thrown one-handed) 3 gauntlet

Pullaid

There is no direct translation for pullaid other than it is a lifting stone, but one that may well have been solely described, not by volume or indeed cultural association but solely by shape. In common with the use of the word *ultach*, there is some indication that its use was restricted to Perthshire alone although it may well have been used in a corrupted form elsewhere.

“Pullaid -(CD) sf The lifting-stone found in many old parishes, near the parish church. Raising it off the ground was a sign that one was fit to take his place as a man. (Perthshire.) Usually called clach togail”⁶⁰

Again Dwelly emphasises the use of the word pullaid as been restricted solely to Perthshire however was this as the definition may imply, a generic word used solely for the explanation

⁶⁰ Appendix to Dwelly's Gaelic-English dictionary, [Edward Dwelly](#), [Douglas Clyne](#), [Derick S. Thomson](#) (1991)

for all lifting stones in Perthshire or alternatively, a stone lifted in that region lifted in the cultural application to prove manhood in other words is this a localised name for the Clach Deuchainn or Clach cuid Fir? I do suspect that although there are manhood associations, what Dwelly is emphasising is that the Pullaid was a generic however it was used in a cultural context to prove manhood by raising the stone off the ground which, in Gaelic culture was simply a lift to the extent where the wind was put underneath the stone. This again implies that there were many reasons for lifting the heavy stone other than to prove manhood and asserts the fact that many nomenclatures could be applied to a single lifting stone. There is however one particular problem associated with the use of pullaid and that is its actual translation in other dictionaries which implies its use, albeit corrupted, in other Highland areas.

Pulag, bullag, n.f, large round stone.⁶¹

The use of Pulag and Bullag has appeared in relation to large stones (although it cannot be ascertained whether these were actually lifted) in both Argyll and Caithness, areas quite geographically distant, but there is an emphasis that shape of stone was important. The Pullaid is simply a conundrum of Gaelic strength terminology, unique possibly in Perthshire and probably appearing in a corrupted form elsewhere but the fact remains that it is yet another nomenclature applied to a lifting stone.

One strange facet of the translation of Pulag/Bullag is that the translation meaning “round stone” appears to directly refer to large **spherical** stones suggesting to some degree that a lifting stone may have required to at least some aesthetical quality with perhaps a desire to seek out some form of perfection with oval and spherical lifting stones desired above all else. For those inclined to Strongman Atlas Stones there would appear to be some form of cultural association between the concrete Atlas stone lifted in competition and the almost orb shape of the Pulag although again it has to be emphasised that is more than likely never been in any way generic throughout the Highlands and Islands.

The use of Clach and other non-defined stones

There are some stones which are prefixed with the word “clach” meaning simply stone. These stones are usually named after an individual and give no indication through nomenclature as to how they were actually lifted. Other non defined stones to however on occasion give some hint of either how they were expected to be lifted or a cultural application towards them.

Perhaps the best example of this is the **Puterach** at Balquhidder. The word Puterach may well be derived from the Gaelic **Putaireachd** meaning “pushing” and perhaps a reference to the stone which was known as clach-neart, hence as stated above, means the requirement of a throw hence push or “putt” or it could be derived from **Pudhair** which is also Gaelic but

⁶¹ *A Pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary. Neil McAlpine*

derived from the Scot's for "Power". The name of this stone itself therefore gives some indication of the lift required with it and it is also strange to note that the residents of Balquhiddy were known to call themselves "**Puderache**".⁶²

Another non-defined named stone is the **Bodach a Chraigh Fianna** better known as the Testing stone of the Fianna. The direct translation from the Gaelic is "**the old man of the rock of the Fianna**" which, as explained in the narrative on that stone actually gives a better indication why it is located where it is but the word **Bodach** is used in a strange context.

"Although Bodach literally means Old Man, it conveys to the Highlander a great deal more. It is quite an untranslatable word. A lowland vulgar clown comes nearest to the Highlanders' meaning of the word. Bodach is a term expressive of great contempt".⁶³

What Stewart may be referring to in this context is the closeness to the word "**Bod**" which is Gaelic slang for the penis. There is indeed a known story of a Cairngorm mountain known as Bod a Demon which caught the eye of Queen Victoria due to its pointed shape. On asking her Highland guide the name of the mountain, the quick thinking guide translated it as "**Devils Point**" however this was no exception to the rule as the Gaelic language, best shown in some of its poetry, could on occasion be quite bawdy.

In the ancient history of the Celts and the Norse, there is evidence that heavy stones were lifted as part of some now forgotten fertility rite and that these stones tended to be penis shaped. The Bodach takes little imagination to ascribe its shape to anything other than a penis and strangely in modern Scots, the penis is sometimes referred to as "**old man**". So the name itself may be relevant however in another context, the use of the word Bodach was sometimes used in speech from an older man to a younger man as a term of endearment but the etymology of the Bodach as a stone would appear to be lost.

The **Clachabhoisgean** stone in Cowal was a stone which was known to have been lifted and then walked with as a unique form of marriage ritual and due to its surface being smooth and shiny the Gaelic has been translated as "**the flashing stone**". It would appear however that bhoisgean is a corruption in language from **boillsge** meaning flash however actually intended to mean "shouldering" and again the Gaelic nomenclature is actually indicating what is to be done with it emphasising the descriptive nature of the language.

[clach-bhoisgean](#)

boir. gin. cloiche-boisgean, iol. -an-boisgean

putting stone (lifted onto the shoulder)

The Gaelic nomenclature of the stones of strength is an important facet of culture which requires to be fully understood and itself is a fascinating research topic which unfortunately leaves more questions unanswered as you progress deeper into the vagaries of the language itself. The stones are not the simplistic clach cuid fir or clach-neart as has been assumed over many years and it is altogether likely that a single stone could have been

⁶² P177 *The History of Clan Gregor. Amelia McGregor (1898)*

⁶³ *Sketches of the Character and Manners and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland, Volume 2, Colonel David Stewart (1822)*

known upwards of three times. The Puterach, formerly in Perthshire could have been ***Pullaid, Clach-neart or indeed Clach cuid fir*** by being a localised descriptive due to firstly shape, or having been subjected to the lift and throw and finally lifted to the extent of putting the wind underneath it.

Although the subject is rather complicated all that the reader requires to understand is that culture plays an important part in the naming of a stone in many ways but it matters not whether this is completely understood by modern stone lifting enthusiasts. Knowing the correct nomenclature is not going to help in lifting that heavy stone.

Chapter Three

Manhood – Are you a Pretty Man or Champion of the Wood?

***“Fair scene for childhood’s opening bloom,
For sportive youth to stray in;
For manhood to enjoy his strength,
And age to wear away in.”***⁶⁴

Coming of age or manhood was a distinguishing and important point in the life of the Gaelic male of old however what has been written about it in relation to Scottish strength, has to some degree had a measure of the romantic attached to it and to such an extent that its importance in Gaelic strength culture has been over stated in the modern context. To most that have an interest in traditional stone lifting, all Scottish heavy lifting stones are simply known as ***clach cuid fir*** or ***manhood stones***.

Why this coming of age was important in the development of the Gaelic male, and having strength underpinning it is simply due to the existence and application of a strength culture which was fundamentally necessary for day to day living –

“Before the Reformation, no one thought much about education as a necessity, except for priests and clerks; to all others it was a luxury, and like most luxuries, enervating in its effects and calculated to unfit a man for his duty who had to live by strength of arm, either in fighting or in labour. We remember the famous saying of the Earl of Douglas, who thanked God that "son of mine, save Gawain, ne'er could pen a line".⁶⁵

Conceding that underpinning a Gaelic strength culture was the fact that personal strength was deemed necessary for survival, it is obvious that surrounding that culture will by its very nature, have various rituals associated with it. The point at which a youth becomes a man is simply one of those occasions when cultural strength ritual is put into practice, that is the exercise of strength for a specific cultural purpose. The first point to make regarding lifting heavy stones to prove manhood however is an affirmation that it did occur in Gaelic culture -

“ fleasg, -a, an, s.f. Rod, wand, 2. Garland, Wreath,.....(the fleasg was of old, the sign of manhood. No-one could wear any head dress until he proved himself by testing his strength that he was able to fill a man’s place, hence fleasgach. The lift stones (clachan togail) are still to be found in some place near the church”

⁶⁴ P45 History of Banff. James Imlach (1868)

⁶⁵ Cabrach Feerings, James Taylor (1920)

fleasgach,-aich, -aichean, s.m. Young man, Handsome Youth, Bachelor, Best man at a wedding.....” ⁶⁶

Of all written resources, the Dwelly dictionary is the most reliable however he does hint at the practice or culture of lifting a heavy stone to prove manhood as being “old”. Dwelly compiled his dictionary in the late Victorian period so it can be assumed that the practice did take place before the demise of the Clan system and of course the Highland clearances. As such, it would appear that the proving of worth by lifting a heavy stone was probably common place throughout the Highlands and Islands before 1745, the year of the final Jacobite uprising and a time pivotal to the emergence of an enforced anglicised culture on the Gaelic way of life. After 1746 and the battle of Culloden, just about every aspect of Gaelic culture and life changed.

What should also be noted is that Dwelly mentions that the stones lifted are ***clachan togail*** the plural of Clach Togalaich translated as lifting stone. The definition supplied by Dwelly in relation to ***fleasgach*** is important, as is the location of these stones however this will be examined later.

For most involved or with any interest in Gaelic cultural strength, the phrase “Manhood Stones” is synonymous with Scottish stone lifting to the extent that all in the non-Gaelic world perceive every lifting stone in Scotland as ***Clach cuid fir***. Unfortunately Gaelic strength is not as simple as having a generic or catch all phrase that pertains to lifting heavy stones nor indeed is the lifting of a heavy stone to prove manhood the generic method of doing so but perhaps first of all, to fully assess the specifics of manhood and stones within Gaelic culture it would be best to start with what is already known.

“Clach cuid fir is lifting a large stone two hundred pounds or more from the ground, and placing it on top of another about four feet high. The youth that can do this is forthwith reckoned a man, whence the name of the amusement, and may then wear a bonnet.” ⁶⁷

“Clach cuid fir was a stone of two hundred pounds weight and upwards, which was to be lifted from the ground and placed on another four feet high at least, and the youth that could perform this feat was forthwith reckoned a man.” ⁶⁸

These two references, taken from the Victorian literature of James Logan are without any doubt the single most popular quotes that have been replicated, quoted and indeed plagiarised in many articles regarding stone lifting and strength. Although they both appear, especially when read in conjunction with the culture surrounding the ***fleasg***, to have an air of certainty requiring no extra burden of proof to authenticate, there is however a massive degree of uncertainty in relation to the texts.

Endemic within so much Victorian literature in respect of the Gael was a massive tendency to exaggerate fact and culture and it is a strange facet of the period that whilst the Gaelic people via the Clearances were being dispersed worldwide, Victorian writers decided that the fashion should be to popularise the Gaelic culture in the format of Sir Walter Scott and in

⁶⁶ *A Gaelic Dictionary Volume 2, Edward Dwelly (1902)*

⁶⁷ *The Scottish Gael, James Logan (1831)*

⁶⁸ *Mclan's Highlanders at Home, James Logan (1848)*

relation to Highland strength, there was an over-emphasis on maculating the Highland male to conform with romantic ideologies that suited the readers of the day. Most of these writers were not Gaels but were Scots, a different culture and a far different social outlook. There have been many academic researches on this particular subject but with regards to Gaelic strength it means that in essence, every specific reference to lifting a stone or throwing it requires a thorough examination, not only in the proper cultural context but also an examination of the author that the text is taken from.

In relation to manhood this has been over emphasised to the hilt. Certainly as shown, there was a requirement to lift a heavy stone but it was likely to have been completely devoid of the ceremony that surrounds other similar cultures that emphasise a coming of age. Gaelic culture did not view manhood in perhaps the same manner in that Jewish culture adheres to with the bar mitzvah, it was likely to have been completely devoid of ceremony and was simply just carried out as a matter of course.

What Logan is emphasising is that manhood was achieved when a 200lb stone was lifted onto a plinth some 4ft in height. Without any questioning as to the culture and especially in relation to what age manhood is achieved, this has been blindly accepted by the present worldwide strength culture, whom for some reason, perhaps again to emphasise the Victorian concept of masculinity, Scottish manhood has been expressed worldwide in competition with various strength feats involving lifting the “Manhood Stones” and in most instances accompanied by a narrative explaining the requirement to lift a stone but done in the most absurd manner.

What is never questioned indeed is whether the promulgators of these statements have any specific knowledge of true Gaelic culture and with abandon, there is an implied acceptance that Gaelic culture is open to manipulation and can be added to and fabricated to suit. In this respect, competitions involving “Strongman” athletes certainly are to the fore with their emphasis on “Manhood Stones” in competition and with ever increasing popularity, there is the likelihood that a contrived view of Gaelic culture is openly accepted by millions more than existing Gaels. What this current strength discipline, along with others is achieving is simply a lengthening of a romantic historic overview of the Gael, initiated by Logan and many others which lacks substance and true authenticity.

Logan is mentioned frequently in this book as one of the progenitors of the romantic portrayal of Gaelic culture and practice, an expert on ancient Clan Tartans which in reality were less than 50 years old but his works were respected as he received Royal Patronage for his books. Despite this however he was challenged in an academic fashion –

“The trial stone seems to be the same as that called by Logan – Clach cuid fir – “a stone of two hundred pounds or more, which had to be lifted from the ground, and put on the top of another stone about four feet high”.....Logan tells us, that when a lad had developed his strength so far so as to be able to lift the clach cuid fir (stone of a man’s portion), he was the reckoned a man and might wear a bonnet.” ⁶⁹

Robert MacLaggan was a Gaelic language expert from Argyll who contributed towards many Argyllshire Gaelic translations. In his 1901 book, Games and Diversions in Argyllshire, he provides a sub heading entitled “**Clach Neirt; Clach Deuchainn**” where he overtly hints that

⁶⁹ Games and Diversions of Argyllshire, Robert MacLaggan (1901)

the Clach cuid fir as explained by Logan, is known in Argyllshire as Clach Deuchainn or Trial Stone. Victorian culture and ethics would not make it gentlemanly to criticise Logan (especially with his Royal Patronage) but MacLaggan does more than hint that Logan is indeed incorrect. MacLaggan also provides the first written translation of Clach cuid fir as “**stone of a man’s portion or part**” .

The problem with this phrase clach cuid fir however is that it has never appeared in any Gaelic dictionary nor, is indeed the phrase known of or used within the present Gaelic speaking population.

The etymology of clach cuid fir or manhood stone is that a youth on lifting a stone was now deemed a man and was now worthy of a man’s portion ie a man’s portion of meat at a meal. This may appear related to “**bieyfir**” ⁷⁰ (also **beatha fir** ⁷¹) a champions portion deserved of the Gallowglaich warriors who indeed were required to lift a heavy stone (likely to be known as a **Clach Deuchainn**) as part of a strength initiation.

Neither of the texts by Logan makes any specific comment as to the location of the phrase, a fact vitally important to anyone who has even the smallest knowledge of the Gaelic language as there was a vast number of varying dialects and the usage of a word in Perthshire could well have a completely different meaning elsewhere. As a consequence, at the very least the usage of “clach cuid fir” could have been restricted to a specific area of the Highlands and Islands although, with the personal background of Logan considered⁷² there is also the possibility that it was completely fabricated by him.

In the various books written by Logan there are many factual accounts of Gaelic culture that are correct and true for the time period; there is unfortunately many aspects of culture that he mentions that are known to be completely fabricated. What is clear, is that previous writers on Scottish strength have used the doubtful Logan as a source of historical fact, and by simply taking his writings at face value and without any proper examination, we are left with the copyist’s and plagiarists to further cement a contrived aspect of Gaelic culture.

Some modern day writers on Scottish subjects have added to the uncertainty by quoting Clach cid fir and emphasising it in either an incorrect fashion or have completely misunderstood even its basic premise. ⁷³

⁷⁰ In “A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland” by Martin Martin (1703), the bold armour bearer to the Clan Chief was entitled to double portions of meat due to him being “a man of strength and courage that distinguishes him from the common fort”

⁷¹ From Dwelly – gall-oglach - ** -aich, sm Cuirassier. 2 Armour-bearer. 3 Freebooter of Gaeldom armed with Lochaber axe or sword. The ceatharnach wore a sgian-dubh or dirk. A chieftain’s armour-bearer was called gall-òglach. He was chosen on account of his boldness and bravery and his business was to prevent his employer being taken by surprise. He had a double allowance of food, called **beatha fir** or a champion’s portion

⁷² James Logan was the official historian of the gentleman’s group known as the “Club of the True Highlanders” – but one of a few “Highland Societies”, mostly Edinburgh or London based whose chief purpose was the promotion of Gaelic culture, that is a “tartanised” view of culture which exempted the common Gael and some (including Logan’s Club) were firmly behind the expulsion of the people in the Clearances.

⁷³ *Mysterious Scotland*, Michael Balfour (2012), *The Making of the Highlands*, Michael Brander (1980), *Scottish Crafts and Craftsmen*, Michael Brander (1974), *The Essential Guide to the Highland Games* (1992) – all these books quote clach cuid fir and relate them specifically to the “Dinnie Stones” as being required to be lifted to prove manhood. Other books such as *Eigg – the story of an island*, Cammille Dressler (1998) and *Rum – A landscape without figures*, John Love (2001) make reference to the “Clearance stone” on Rum, a one ton boulder raised in remembrance by a group of men as Clach cuid fir.

In essence, through a process of misinformation or rather misunderstanding in relation to Gaelic nomenclature, further additions of uncorroborated statements has resulted in three distinct nonfactual statements regarding the culture of manhood and stone lifting.

The basic premise and overview of traditional stone lifting in Scotland, seen by the world of strength, are that **all** stones are manhood stones. The second is that there was a specific requirement to lift the stone at least into the lap or fold and finally is quite simply that the weight of the stone should be determined. It is unfortunate that the current worldwide strength culture, regards everything in strength as specific; weight, distance; height etc. Everything requires to be measured whereas Gaelic strength culture was the complete opposite.

The Gaelic language itself is the measure of strength; a clach ultach is a large stone because it is an “armful (ultach)”; the dornag or highland games size putting stone is a handful (dorn). The Gaels did not measure in Kilo’s or pounds and as such this explains the huge weight variances within the extant Scottish stones. Equally, unless the stone was lifted in the form of a trial (Clach Deuchainn) there was on the whole, no specific code or rules and any that did exist, would have been local in nature with the likelihood that the “lift” in the neighbouring Glen would be somewhat different. This would be stone lifting in general but lifting the stone to prove manhood involves two specific variances which will be explained later.

There are aspects in relation to manhood stones which should first be considered.

The first aspect to be considered is – when was manhood achieved?. The second, what was expected to be done with the stone? i.e. what was the expected lift ?, and finally what stones constitute as manhood stones?

The first question is what defines manhood in terms of age?

Knowledge of the history of the times can give some indication of the realistic age a youth would be expected to attempt his entrance to manhood. In Scots Common Law, the capacity to contract for males, was and still is 14 years of age. This capacity to contract allowed the youth to sell, barter and buy goods or commodities and until the early 1920’s this age was coterminous with the legal age for marriage⁷⁴.

So in law, the 14 year old Highland male would have been allowed to sell cattle, marry and have children and do most everything his elders were allowed to do. Perhaps there may still be a hint of pubescent youth still lingering but the age of 14 years would be probably the latest age to attempt a Manhood Stone and the likelihood is that young males from perhaps 10 to 14 years were attempting the “manhood stone” on a regular basis.

⁷⁴ *It should be noted that the bride could legally be 12 years old and that the ceremony of marriage was more often than not seen not as a religious requirement but rather a simple contract between two people. In many instances the marriage did not even take place with either a Priest or Minister present and indeed there was no formal requirement for the marriage to be conducted at a place of worship. In Ireland strangely enough, the legal age for marriage in males was 18 years.*

Perhaps a touch of reality is required at this point and I must state that, no matter the notion and appeal, I do not see a ten year old Highland male lifting a stone of 250 lbs and placing it on a four feet plinth.

***“Neither of these young people were above 12 years old, but the boy was tall, lithe and manly for his age.....as well as strong – so strong that he was already entitled to wear a man’s bonnet, as proof that he could lift and fling the stone of strength – the test of manhood which lay before the door of Rob Roy’s house, as beside that of every Highland Chieftain, to test the muscle of his growing followers, for previous to being able to poise and hurl the clachneart, a boy wore his hair simply tied with a thong.”*⁷⁵**

The above text does have that Victorian romantic “air” regarding it, understandably as the author; James Grant, was a relation of the more famous romanticist Sir Walter Scott. There is good reason for the stone to be called “clach-neart” but the poignant fact is that the reference is made to a 12 year old approaching the lift. Although no specific weight of the “manhood stone” is specified, a fictitious novel published the very same year by Grant adds to the ridiculous concept of what was required to prove manhood.

***“.....lay two stones, one of which was a square block of about 4 feet high, the other was smaller and weighed about 250 pounds in weight. This was the Clach. In the Highlands, he who could lift the lesser and place it on the larger block was esteemed a man and entitled from thenceforward to wear a bonnet.....Callum Dhu alone advanced to the clach cuid fir.....”*⁷⁶**

According to Grant, it would seem not unreasonable to have a 12 year male from the Highlands lifting a 250 lb stone and placing it on a block some four feet high! This is just one of many examples where Victorian literature has over emphasised Gaelic manhood yet some would read, accept and not challenge the actual culture of the period that Grant was writing. He can easily be described as a Victorian romanticist; he is not a cultural historian so take what he mentions with the merest pinch of salt available.

Gaelic manhood is known to have been expected to have been achieved somewhere between the ages of 10 and 14 years of age so what is required is an assessment of the strength capabilities of that age group, within the time frame when the culture was existent.

What is certain is that in Gaelic strength culture, probably pre 1745, a stone of sorts was required to be lifted by youths of between 10 and 14 years of age. These manhood stones and their existence require to be further investigated however it is a poignant time to reflect on the actual culture and nomenclature.

Most lifting stones in Scotland fall into 5 categories with regards to nomenclature. There are non-specific named stones such as the “Puterach” at Balquhiddel and the “Bodach” in Glen Lyon. Neither stone by its nomenclature can give any indication as to what type of lift was imparted on the stone. This provision also exists where the generic “Clach” is used followed by a name. Where the stones become more informative by use of nomenclature, is with such stones known as Clach-neart, Clach Ultach and Clach Togalaich. Lifting onto a plinth or

⁷⁵ p4 *The Adventures of Rob Roy, James Grant (1864)*

⁷⁶ *The Highlanders of Glen Ora, James Grant (1864)*

throwing it over, lifting at arm's length or with the Togalaich a simple best lift wins in competition. These are the three basic types of lifting stone however if they are lifted out-with what is normally expected; that is when a specific aspect of culture is applied to them such as lifting to prove manhood, then the stone is known as a manhood stone.

This is another incorrect aspect of what has been written about Clach cuid fir. A stone would either be known as one of the five variant names in respect of stone nomenclature and the use for proving manhood is only a cultural application to that stone which for most of the time will retain its original specific nomenclature. Hence lifting a clach-neart to prove manhood makes the stone clach cuid fir but only for the duration of that specific trial of strength.

This does not mean that all lifting stones in Scotland are manhood stones, indeed far from it because the lifting stone itself requires to be accessed by a community where the young men come from and not all stones in Scotland exist in such circumstances.

Most lifting stones that are known have been found to exist near to a Church yard (with two known to exist inside the Churchyard) or as most common, near to the graveyard. The stones exist adjacent to what are known as "coffin roads" and about half of the known stones exist as a consequence of these tracks. In olden times these makeshift roads were the only means of communication that were simple to follow and were used extensively by the community. However not all stones exist on these tracks; some exist purely as a consequence of being located near to an ancient shebeen (Inn) used by Cattle Drivers and Whiskey Smugglers. The best examples of these are the stones in Glen Roy, The Dalwhinnie Stone and the more famous Inver Stone.

For those who wish to believe that the celebrated Inver Stone is a Clach cuid fir, lifted into the lap, read no further. Very few stones would have had its singular purpose as being used solely to prove manhood. The Inver stone, perhaps obvious in a geographical sense, has never had any substantial population to sustain its lifting to prove manhood. It simply owes its existence to its proximity to an ancient Highland track and never in its history sustained a population that would result in youths coming of age to lift it with the nearest (cleared) community being in nearby Glen Feardar, which due to the existence of a nearby church, would be more likely to have a testing stone located far closer to the community. The Inver stone is not alone in not being a manhood stone.

Returning to the variances of the required lift –

But the hillock for the cask(of whisky) is becoming indistinguishable, and the stones nearby for the trials of strength – the larger for the mature and the smaller for the younger men are no longer in vogue”⁷⁷

The above text refers to a “stop” on a well-known coffin road in Glenelg. It is unfortunate that it would appear that one of these stones or both was accidentally destroyed in the early 1970's by a bulldozer⁷⁸, however factually the statement alludes to two specific types of stone. A heavy stone for the men and a lighter stone for the youths. Knowledge of these stones also adds to the intrigue that one of them (suspected to be the lighter) was also

⁷⁷ *Benderloch, or Notes on the West Highlands, William Smith (1883)*

⁷⁸ *As explained by Lord Michael Dulverton of Eileanreach Estate in Glenelg. The coffin stop and lifting stones were located in close proximity to the well known Pictish Brochs well known in the area.*

required to be lifted by women on certain occasions. It may appear that this additional cultural aspect of stone lifting only clouds the matter under examination however it doesn't. It merely corroborates the knowledge and history of the only remaining stones of this type in Scotland – the Clach Altruman Mor and Clach Altruman Beag on the island of Coll.



Left- Clach Altruman Mor and Right - Clach Altruman Beag

The translation of “altruman” lends to certainly the lighter stone being a manhood stone. The “small nursling stone” as in breast fed would tend to suggest that in lifting it you were no longer required to be weaned, you were now a man. This however leaves the second stone in a rather curious cultural position however, as in the Gaelic language, many words have double meanings. Altruman can also mean “Chieftain”.

Although this (the beag) is perhaps the only “true” extant manhood stone, it only assists the knowledge of the application of strength to a rite of passage. No stone can individually supply the big picture of what is and what isn't.

The “Mor” is circa 260 lbs in weight and the “Beag” is circa 100lbs and both stones lie adjacent to an ancient coffin road which serviced the graveyard at Torastan less than one mile distant.

What is quite clear is that smaller stones could be lifted to prove manhood and this of course requires a specific stone or in this occasion a secondary stone. The cultural aspect of both these stones has long been forgotten by the community on Coll however what is known is that they were known by some as “his and hers” stones, a common feature with the two stones in Glenelg.

Without having a specific stone of a reduced weight which was required to be lifted to prove manhood, most communities would apply a general rule to the lifting of a far heavier stone.

The rule was not specific with the only requirement being to put the wind underneath the stone.

“The Gruagach said to them that the name of that stone was “Clach nan gaisgeach,” the stone of the heroes. Any one that could lift that stone till he could place the wind between it and earth, that he was a hero”⁷⁹

The tale of Connall Gulban is a Gaelic folklore tale based on the life of a 5th Century Irish King of the same name who is perhaps more famous for being christened by Saint Patrick. The tale was obviously exported to Scotland at the same time as the migration of the Gaelic Dalriadan Scots from Ireland but the main thrust of the story is that to prove his manhood when young, Prince Connall was required to lift the Stone of Heroes by putting the wind underneath it. The fact that Connall lifted the stone, shouldered it and took it for a walk up and down a mountain is the folklore part.

There is a more modern 18th Century tale from the county of Argyll regarding a young man of 19 years of age who had never achieved success in lifting the stone to prove manhood. Encouraged by a local shepherd who instructed and guided him, the youth achieved success by putting –

“chuir e ga oth eadar a ‘ chlach thogail ‘s an talamh”

“air between the lifting stone and the ground”⁸⁰

The text does not refer to the stone being Clach cuid fir but defers to Clach Togail but the point to be made is that the lifting requirement was simply putting the air underneath the stone, that is lifting it mere inches from the ground. Measuring strength by degrees and placing strictures on specific lifts was not the Gaelic way which was always loose and certainly not predefined; however that is not to say that the intention was anything less than what the current strength enthusiast perceives. The lift was not standard and set and if it was a lift of mere inches, it was still that, a lift. The challenge was individual with all aspects of traditional lifting being that the next attempt should be better.

The following text is taken from a story of a lifting stone that still exists on the Aran Islands in Gallway Bay, Ireland. The Aran's are still a traditional Gaelic stronghold and the language is similar to the Scottish Gaelic as they are in essence the same peoples with the same cultures applying. The story is called simply “The Stone” and details the journey of a local man of Innis Mean who lifted the stone when a young man and who, later in life, died while trying to regain his youth while lifting the stone -

“That stone had lain in that place as long as the oldest traditions in the village could remember. And from time immemorial it had been the custom of the young men of the village to test their strength by lifting it. It was a great day in each young man's life when he raised the stone from the ground and “gave it wind”, as they said. And if he raised it to his knees, he was a champion, the equal of the best. And if he raised it to his chest he was a hero, a phenomenon of strength and men talked of him.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Popular Tales of the West Highlands Volume 3, John F Campbell (1892)*

⁸⁰ *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, Volume 45 (1968)*

⁸¹ *The Stone, Liam O'Flaherty (1928)*

Giving the stone “wind” is the same as placing the air underneath it. This is no lift into the lap or even above knee height, it is probably the absolute minimum but nevertheless, it is still a lift and this contrasts against present attitudes to stone lifting. Raising it to the knees and better is the obvious progression of strength but no-where is there a statement that alludes to failure. Gaelic strength culture was far simpler and basic to even attempt to apply a set of generic strict rules to strength.

A further confirmation of giving the stone “wind” to prove manhood is provided by the Dwelly Gaelic Dictionary which also alludes to further nomenclature in relation to a manhood stone -

“Pullaid -(CD) sf The lifting-stone found in many old parishes, near the parish church. Raising it off the ground was a sign that one was fit to take his place as a man. (Perthshire.) Usually called clach togail”⁸²

“Pullaid” – a heavy weight”⁸³

The Pullaid, sometimes seen as Pullag or Bullag in writings to emphasise speech may well be “clach cuid fir” under a different name in Perthshire or indeed Clach Deuchainn in Argyll; or however it may be just a localised name given to all clachan togail that existed in this county. The definition however, although vague, does infer that to prove manhood the stone was raised from the ground without emphasising that it required a lift to the knees or indeed lifted into the lap or into the fold. In essence, no lifting stone exists as a Manhood Stone, the stone becomes that when the cultural practice is applied to it.

In common-sense terms, expecting a young man of between 10 and 14 years to lift a heavy stone such as the Inver Stone into his lap to prove manhood is a ridiculous proposition.

The following texts taken from separate sources refer to a single stone – The Bodach in Glen Lyon.

“Throughout this Glen there are strongholds of Fingallian Heroes and near the Free Church Manse, eight miles up the Glen, is a stone called the Bodach, of roundish form, which is said to have been used as a test of strength for young men before they assumed the arms of men. This feat consisted in lifting the Bodach and placing it on a flat slab close by, of about 10 inches in height and which still requires the arms of a well grown man to perform.”⁸⁴

“When a young man wished to be numbered among the athletes of the district, he was called upon to lift this stone and place it upon a pedestal of rock beside it, about three feet above the ground”.⁸⁵

“There are a number of stones in the dale herewith which no ventures to interfere, as each has its tradition, sometimes sacred. One of them was the lifting stone that every

⁸² Appendix to Dwelly's Gaelic-English dictionary, Edward Dwelly, Douglas Clyne, Derick S.Thomson (1991)

⁸³ p41 Some Rare Gaelic Words and Phrases - an article within the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness Vol 29. The text lists a number of Gaelic words that never entered dictionaries and the list was compiled by Alexander MacDonald of Inverness.

⁸⁴ Black's Picturesque Tourist of Scotland (1830)

⁸⁵ The Scots Magazine of 1st April (1893)

man had to raise in his hands before he was permitted to join the bodyguard of his chieftain.”⁸⁶

The three texts differ substantially in both the physical and cultural dimensions of lifting this stone. Quite clearly the most obvious point for consideration is the height of the plinth and as a consequence, the height of the lift. There is a substantial difference between raising the stone a mere 10 inches and lifting it some three feet from the ground however it could be argued that by lifting the stone a mere ten inches, is in fact a replication of the requirement of putting the wind underneath the stone. Note also that the first text mentions “*before they assumed the arms of men*”. The cultural meaning of this which will become clear later is that after lifting the stone (and obtaining the fleasg), the young man was now fit to train in arms, being weaponry.

The second and third texts refer to the stone being required to be lifted 3 feet and on achievement of this, he was “*permitted to join the bodyguard of his chieftain*”. This is clearly a far different cultural application than that of proving manhood but although they will be separated by a number of years in relation to physical development, they are without a doubt linked.

Again this only emphasises the cultural requirement of lifting a heavy stone to prove manhood but clearly by lifting only a mere few inches from the ground. Lifting the heavy stone into the chest or onto a high plinth is clearly a test carried out for a different cultural reason and completed by grown men and is not a test to prove a coming of age and entering manhood.

Putting the wind underneath the stone is by far more practical and far more inclusional in respect that a far larger number of pubescent males could achieve the lift which after all, if the converse was applied (as assumed by those in the modern strength), the Highland male would have been part of an almost super-human race whose physical domination, because of the territorial aspirations of individual Clan Chiefs, would have allowed the use of this physical strength to extend far further than that small area known as the Highlands and Islands.

“Another feat was to raise a stone of 200lb, at least, from the ground and deposit it on another at least four feet high. The stripling who could accomplish this was thereupon dubbed a man, and allowed to wear a bonnet, and he attained to the higher dignity of a “pretty man” when he evinced due dexterity in wielding the claymore.”⁸⁷

Fittis in the above text adds some additional flavour to the concept of manhood in that having accomplished a degree of physical strength, the addition of skills for war made the youth a “pretty man”. The expression should not be read in the modern context as “pretty” at the time had further meanings and indeed is frequently mentioned in Victorian literature. Although the “manhood” element of lifting a heavy stone of 200lbs (at least) is again another example of Victorian romanticism, Fittis does hint again at the use of “arms” as previously mentioned, in this case a “claymore”.

⁸⁶ *What I have seen while fishing and how I caught my fish. Phillip Geen (1905)*

⁸⁷ *The History and Antiquities of Perthshire, Robert Fittis (1874)*

This emphasis on weaponry explains the underpinning ethos of Gaelic strength as it was functional, not for working in fields but for war. As such a far larger picture of Gaelic strength is beginning to be established however again, language enters the cultural identity of the Gael as to the terminology “Pretty Man”.

“Pretty man, I maun say ; tak a peat and sit down. – An ironical expression to mean a boy, who would gladly be esteemed” ⁸⁸

This old Scottish proverb in use within 17th Century Scotland and probably due to language more applicable to the Lowlands rather than the Highlands emphasizes a need not too rush becoming an esteemed warrior. An actual dictionary definition exists as follows -

“A pretty man; a polite sensible man – In Scotland, it is often used in the sense of graceful, beautiful with dignity or well accomplished” ⁸⁹

Perhaps not providing a full understanding and again, perhaps written with a lowlanders viewpoint, one of the better definitions is derived from Sir Walter Scott and written in the context of Highland (Gaelic) culture. –

“He even mentioned the exact number of recruits who had joined Waverly’s troop from his uncle’s estate, and observed they were pretty men, not handsome but stout warlike fellows.” ⁹⁰

That the term “pretty man” used in the Scots language obviously refers to a “warrior” is plain to be seen, not obvious however is that the pretty man, or handsome man is derived from Gaelic culture and nomenclature and taken directly from “fleasgaich” –

“fleasgach,-aich, -aichean, s.m. Young man, Handsome Youth, Bachelor, Best man at a wedding.....”

Through the works of both Scott and Fittis, among others, there appears to be an obvious transition and application of Gaelic culture towards and after manhood. Lifting a heavy stone at the onset of puberty provides an indicator of physical strength but for some this would and could be taken a stage further. Most Clan hierarchy followed similar lines and those known to be physically strong were challenged further.

Pre 1745, when the strength of the Clan system was at its most prominent, it is known that each Clan Chief had his “bold armour bearers” as stated by Martin Martin ⁹¹.

“ CLACH NEIRT, CLACH DEUCHAINN - The trial stone seems to be the same as that called by Logan; Clach cuid fir , a stone of “two hundred pounds or more, which had to be lifted from the ground, and put on the top of another stone, about four feet high.” Perhaps there was one of these at each Chieftains door which the stranger had to handle satisfactorily as a compliment.

From Lochaweside we learn of a stone of this sort, which a certain “Donull Dubh Laider” had for frequently testing his strength, trying to lift the stone every day. So

⁸⁸ p15 A Complete Collection of Scottish Proverbs Explained and made Intelligible to the English Reader. James Kelly (1721)

⁸⁹ An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language Vol 2, John Jamieson (1802)

⁹⁰ p179 Volume 1 of the Waverly Novels by Sir Walter Scott

⁹¹ P104 A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland. Martin Martin (1703)

powerful was this gentleman that he could twist off a cows leg, if the cow was not older than four years old. The recite of this legend carefully explains that Strong Black Donald was not the Devil.⁹²

These two paragraphs about Strong Black Donald and his lifting stone are reflective of the initial evidence that points to the existence of such a stone however it is the understanding of the text that requires explanation in historical terms.

The location of this stone is Lochaweside, now a quaint Highland Village situated on the north banks of Loch Awe in Argyllshire. Complete with all the prerequisite tourist amenities and to the east of the Loch is situated the resplendent ***Kilchurn Castle*** constructed in the mid 15th century by Lord Campbell of Glen Orchy. The history of the Castle is well documented and it is known that around 1690, the castle was converted into a barracks to house some 200 men at arms. This date and adaptation of the castle is important but what should also be remembered that in those days, the castle stood on an island although in modern times, due to a nearby hydro-electric scheme, the water level is low enough to allow access.



The text highlights the fact that Donald was not the Devil with the reasoning for this being that in this area of the Highlands, the Gaelic colloquialism for the Devil was in fact ***“Black Donald”***. The text emphasises the realness of this man.

There are two main clues as to who or what was Black Donald. The first clue is the fact that he was able to practice with his stone every day and in a cultural sense this is important. The ordinary Highlander had to work hard to survive, to feed his family or simply to exist. Farming and/or fishing provided food for his family and this was expensive in time and effort. Simply speaking, no average Highlander could afford the time to practice his strength on a daily basis. The Black Donald did though.

The second clue is the reference to his ability to remove the leg of a cow and this is perhaps the best indicator of who he was. This peculiar activity was known in the Gaelic language as ***“toirt a mach dorn bhuar”*** and was carried out only by one type of Highlander when used

⁹² *Games and Diversions in Argyllshire. Robert McLaggan*

as specific strength trial⁹³ and that was by someone appointed as one of the body guards to the local Chieftain.

Depending on area these “bold armour bearers” as they were referred to in Victorian literature were called either Luchd Tighe, Buannaichean or Ceatharnach, but they are better known in the Irish Gaelic as Gallowglaich (Gallowglass). Some Scottish Highland Games have attached the phrase “Clan Champion” to these men at arms, more a romantic notion than the reality that they and everything about them was established on an ability to kill. That was their function.

These trained warriors were expensive to retain and a Chieftain would only manage to afford a few but with some quaint customs and also a good deal of fear, they were good value for money.

To become Gallowglass, the warrior had to undergo various trials of strength including a contrived form of Caber Tossing in that the Caber still had branches attached and they were also required to lift an extremely heavy stone.....the reference above was titled **Clach Deuchainn or Trial Stone** which may refer to the special stone used for these tests.

The Gallowglass were not expected by the Chieftain to work, they were expected to train with weapons and work on their strength every day. Not for them were the domestic chores so necessary for survival including farming or fishing as Clan culture had a law that allowed these men at arms to take residence within anyone of the Clan members houses and the occupants were obliged to feed them.

As Martin Martin explains in his book “ A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland”(1707) **“....and this man was called Gallowglach; he had likewise a double portion of meat assigned him at every meal. The measure of meat usually given him is called to this day “Bieyfir”, that is, a man’s portion, meaning thereby an extraordinary man, whose strength and courage distinguished him from the common fort”**

In returning to the examination of the text it is quite clear that Strong Black Donald was indeed a warrior. As an armour bearer he would have resided reasonably close to the Clan Chief (that was what he was paid for) and he was allowed to train every day. The history of Kilchurn Castle would indicate that Black Donald may have resided at the Castle around the year 1690 and as such his stone that he lifted everyday would be located not too far from it.

Black Donald therefore was a Gallowglass warrior, a mercenary and a functional killer whose strength was purely for the purpose of the disposal of life and indeed, by discarding any romantic notion, the functionality of Scottish Strength and the culture surrounding its progression from youth to manhood was purely purposeful. In all respects, Black Donald who may well have been the least handsome man to have walked the lands of Argyll was indeed a “pretty man”.

“Ceatharnach is one fit to bear arms, a soldier, a kern. Such a man as this, when outlawed, and leading the life of a freebooter in the woods (coille) is a Ceatharnach-coille, or” “cateran”. This, however, is not the same as Ceatharnachna-coille.

⁹³ An dorn fhuar or the “cold fist” was a cultural strength practice more commonly applied on or close to Martinmass (11th November) when a cow would be killed to provide winter meat. It was also a known strength test to become a member of the Buannaichean.

Ceatharnach in the latter combination, is used in a non-military sense to denote a manly person or a person distinguished from his neighbours by his superior strength and courage. Ceatharnach-na-coille is, therefore, the Strong Man or Champion of the Wood”.⁹⁴

What is being implied is that testing before, up to and during manhood was for a specific purpose. Not all men could reach the position of bold armour bearer but the underlying principle is that all would be encouraged to at least attempt this status. In this vein but without the underlying child cruelty, Gaelic strength culture mirrors in some manner the culture of ancient Sparta where all males were encouraged to be strong and more than adept warriors. The reason or functionality of Gaelic strength was purely as consequence of the need to produce a warrior.

“The chief object of the Celts in the nurture and education of their children, being to promote hardiness of constitution and corporeal strength, and to instill into the mind a sense of justice, and the highest notions of freedom and of warlike renown, their institutions were of a serious and martial cast.”⁹⁵

Oral tradition and the telling of stories played a large part in the development of aspirational levels of strength. Hearing handed down stories of historical clan members remembered for strength and daring was certainly the drive for the pubescent Gaelic male to be strong and in this respect, Gaelic manhood follows three distinct stages of development although there are a lack of preset times in the life of the young highlander when he was expected to achieve a desired goal. This merely adds an emphasis as to the lack of any pomp other than that of obtaining the fleasg. The template of manhood is loose and not rigid by being specifically related to exact age.

From birth to the age of seven years old, the young male was developed solely under the strictures of his mother. Been seen to be far too young to assist with any aspect of farming, the child would not have tended to any matter nor would indeed have been encouraged to participate in strength. This is the weaning years, the child was a nursling.

From the age of seven to fourteen years of age, the young male was actively encouraged to work and assist the family in whatever way he could. These were the formative years where the youth would have first become aware of a strength culture. Witnessing men competing in strength, the youth would also have had similar competitions with his peers. Stone Putting and Maide Leasg would have been perhaps the most familiar strength contests to have been enacted but all culminating with an attempt on lifting the manhood stone by simply putting the wind underneath it. From this age, as stated, listening to tales, stories and poetry was an important part of development as it underpinned the reasoning for the existence of a Gaelic strength culture.

⁹⁴ P292 *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition- Argyllshire Series- Volume 3. Rev J MacDougall (1893)*

⁹⁵ P XII *Sar-obair nam bard gaelach, or, The beauties of Gaelic poetry, and lives of the Highland bards. John MacKenzie (1865)*

“They were taught to believe themselves descended of persons distinguished for bravery and virtue from remote antiquity. Hence the desire of preserving the honour of a respected ancestry stimulated them to daring actions on the field.....”⁹⁶

All written texts suggest that there was no specific date for the young male to achieve the fleasg through lifting a manhood stone nor is there any evidence that this would have been carried out with any formal ceremony or celebration. It was simply expected to be done, with and again much of Gaelic culture forms this premise, that it would have been done quietly and was purely an individual conquest.

Most Gaelic youths would have achieved this distinction as “putting the wind underneath the lifting stone” would have most certainly been achievable by most. It is achieving this milestone of development that sets up the youth for his next stage, and one which only a few would have been able to fully achieve. No-one has ever stated what the consequences were for the youth who failed to have lifted the manhood stone. Was he never accepted by his peers by being excluded from wearing any headdress? Whereas modern strength attempts to exclude by strict rules and guidelines, to view Gaelic strength with a similar perspective misses completely the point that the culture of manhood and its associated lifting stones included and was not meant to exclude. Underpinning all aspects of Gaelic strength was that it was related to the ability to kill. The stronger could perhaps carry out this function better than others however no cultural purpose is served by excluding a number of youths at 14 years of age because they could not lift a stone.

From fourteen years onwards to twenty-one years of age, encouraged by older men, the reciting of tales etc., the young Gaelic male was then subject to the exposure for the reasons to be strong. A strong male culture based on the ability to succeed in battle was the underpinning reason for being strong. Depending on class position within Clan hierarchy, accounted for nothing, only the strongest would prevail.

There is an old story that emphasizes the Gaelic attitude to “softness”. One harsh winter a Clan Chief accompanied by his son and a band of men were benighted in the snow clad mountains. Wrapping themselves up in their plaids to keep warm, the Chief and his men looked for no comfort other than the cold snow covered ground. While attempting to sleep with the wild winds blowing, the Chief was startled and became seriously annoyed when he saw that his son had made the encampment slightly more comfortable by fabricating a pillow of snow. The son was seriously rebuked for his show of softness.

The development of the young Gael was based surrounding a culture, not of romanticism and celebration but one of continual harshness and testing. There are many anecdotes of fathers subjecting their sons to swordfights and particularly in wrestling where little compromise was given. Strength and its application was also tested and the young Gael was taught that dexterity in wielding a claymore was of little consequence if the individual strength limited the time that the weapon could be used in battle.

After obtaining the fleasg, testing of the young man was probably more sporadic than organized although there is no doubt that testing was part of the growing up process. Many anecdotes and tales exist surrounding situations that could perfectly fit into the culture of testing strength. One such tale is of a famous strong Highlander known as McCombie Mor.

⁹⁶ *P91 Sketches of the Character, Manners, and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland Vol2. David Stewart (1822)*

“He had seven sons, the eldest of these possessed, as he supposed, least of the courageous spirits of his ancestors, and for the purpose of testing his prowess, the old man waylaid him one dark night, at a large stone in the solitude of Glenbaynie, known to this day as McComie’s chair, and pouncing upon him unawares, a dreadful tulzie took place betwixt the father and the son. The father finding his sons strength and courage fully a match for his own, at length discovered himself, upon which his astonished son is said to have allowed the sword to drop insensibly from his hand.”⁹⁷

By the age of twenty-one, the individual strength for those who regarded as the strongest would be tested to become Buanchaiean or Gallowglaich, the supreme Gaelic warrior who was not allowed to work but was simply expected to practice his strength and dexterity for war on a daily basis and used when required at the bequest of the Clan Chief.

For the majority however, there was a level of aptitude which was expected to have been achieved. They may well not have been as strong and warlike as those who achieved the status of Buanchaiean but nevertheless, they were also warriors. They were the “pretty men” these were the ***Ceatharnach-na-coille***, the Strong Man or Champion of the Wood.

An old oral Gaelic tale known as the “tale of the strongman of the wood” has no particular foundation in folklore being non-specific in relation to any particular individual, real or imaginary however as can be seen in the chart below, the tale about the development of a young man appears to mirror exactly the culture of Gaelic manhood.

An interesting facet of history and language is that after the Battle of Culloden in 1746 and with Clan Chiefs no longer allowed to have a retinue of strong men at his side the Ceatharnach broke off and formed small groups themselves. Having an upbringing in strength for war did not allow these men at arms to have much training by way of farming and soon they began to resort to all sorts of illegal activity, stealing cattle etc and their activities as such corrupted their name ***Ceatharnach*** to be translated as a ***freebooter*** or ***thief***.

⁹⁷ P34 Memorial of Angus and Mearns

	Cultural Development	Development in Folk-lore
From birth to 7 years	<i>From birth to aged seven years, a nursling and reared by mother alone.</i>	<i>His father falls with the oak he has felled and he himself is born as the seedling from the acorn is breaking through the ground. He is nursed for seven years and is then taken out by his mother to try if he can pull the young oak from its roots. This is also about the time that the oak wood undergoes its first thinning.</i>
7 years to 14 years old	<i>From 7 to 14 years of age begins to adapt to a male culture – listens to tales of heroes past, strength etc. He works the fields. Between the ages of 10 to 14 years he attains the fleasg by putting the wind underneath the heavy stone.</i>	<i>He is nursed another seven years and then has his second trial of strength against the oak tree. This is again the time when the oak wood undergoes its second thinning.</i>
From 14 years old onwards	<i>From 14 years onwards the cultural development in strength continues. He will be expected to work harder and strength would be encouraged. Having obtained the fleasg he would participate in strength competitions with his peers enabling a distinction between the strongest in the community. Along with this, active learning in wielding weaponry would also be encouraged.</i>	<i>At the end of a third period of seven years, the time when he arrives at maturity, and when the oak wood undergoes the last thinning, he goes to the tree and pulls it out from its roots proving that of the two, he is the stronger.</i> FROM THE STORY OF “THE STRONGMAN OF THE WOOD” (Orally told story from Lochaber and Sunart)

Before the age of 21 years and now fully developed those who were the strongest could be tested to become “Buannaichean” (warrior) selected by tests of strength. These were extremely few in number. The remainder had still training in weaponry but were distinguished through not being as strong as Buannaichean. Known as “Ceathernach” due to being fit to bear arms however “Ceathernach-na-coille” is used in a non-military sense to denote a manly person distinguished from his neighbours by his superior strength and courage - The Strongman of the Wood.

To conclude, manhood in Gaelic culture went through three specific but loosely defined stages. Stone lifting and strength played a major part in this development however the crowning glory of strength, achieving Buannachaen status was for the selected few who by a certain age, through encouragement and practice, had distinguished themselves from, as Martin Martin puts it, “the common fort”.

Now returning to the Inver Stone, research indicates that only 20% of those who visit actually achieve “accepted” lifts into the lap or fold. In Gaelic culture these were the men that could have, so many hundred years ago, have achieved warrior status within their respective Clan. Even those poor souls who managed a lift to the ankles would have proved their worth and

would have earned the fleasg but the majority would have been “pretty men” (with apologies to those women who have lifted the stone).

As for “clach cuid fir”, its use in Gaelic language and culture can, in not even the slightest manner, be confirmed in practical daily use at any time in history and having never being mentioned in any Gaelic dictionary and equally with the phrase spawning from the doubtful Logan, it is nothing more than an uncertainty. What is most definitely certain is that various modern day strength cultures have applied a twisted and contorted view of a unique culture.

Now again it has to be emphasized that much of Gaelic culture as demonstrated by the various nomenclature relating to lifting stones, clearly shows a lack of a generic, it would not be out of place to consider that the various differences in regional dialects, associated cultures and indeed geography, could allow for completely differing tests to prove manhood.

Fearachas – A test of manhood⁹⁸

Fearachd – A Feat of manhood⁹⁹

These two sources of the Gaelic language although slightly differing prove the existence of a cultural test for manhood however, they do not specify the actualities of the test. Obviously this infers that a test of manhood, although a generic part of Highland culture, may well have indeed been carried out in a manner other than trying to put the wind underneath a heavy lifting stone. It should also be noted that there is a distinction between “a test” and “a feat” of manhood.

One obvious aspect of “manhood” is that its inference as a test for those youths maturing to adulthood is the singular reason to emphasize a state of manliness, disregarding the likelihood that a feat of manhood as “***Fearachd***” above translates, refers to the measure or degree of manliness. Thus one man lifting a heavy stone to his knees is bettered by another who lifts the same stone to his shoulder. The degree of manliness is thus dictated by how successful a lift is in comparison and in this respect the lifter has demonstrated the level of his manhood with the most important aspect of this being that there is absolutely no age distinction.

Returning to the proving of ones worth to be known as a man, there are clear inferences that in some areas of the Highlands that the “putting stone” was thrown for distance to prove manhood, a test which is undefined in relation to a specific distance that the stone required to be propelled. Naturally, as there were no standardized weights, the only conceivable way that manhood could be proved would be to at least offer a degree of competition against older men.

In addition to strength pursuits, the geography of the Highlands and Islands insures that in other areas, particularly on the islands of the Hebrides which being more inclined to seafaring ability, it would not be surprising that some young island males, to prove manhood, were required to show proficiency and dexterity by being able to capture a seal¹⁰⁰ and in some Islands, where the basic diet was that of local seabirds, climbing dexterity was tested as an indication of manhood.

⁹⁸ *A Gaelic/English Dictionary in Two Parts. R A Armstrong (1825)*

⁹⁹ *Dictionarium Scoto-Celticum: A Dictionary of the Gaelic Language, Volume 1. Ewen Maclachlan (1828)*

¹⁰⁰ *P210 Gaelic Names of Beasts (Mammalia), Birds, Fishes, Insects, Reptiles etc. Alexander Robert Forbes (1905)*

There were undoubtedly many other specific methods of testing manhood within the cultures of the Highlander and Islander however some may have been designed along the lines of an accepted practice within a specific Clan. This also extends to the various tiers of the Clan system where the testing of manhood was carried out in a specific manner depending on the status of the Clan member. The following relates to a known test for prospective Chiefs of Clan McLeod on Skye -

“The Horn of Sir Rory Mor is a great ox horn tipped with silver, and holds about two English pints. The custom is that each Chief on attaining the age of manhood should drain at one draught, this horn, filled to the brim.”¹⁰¹

That there was no obvious definitive for a testing to achieving manhood is most certainly shown in that Clan culture as well as geographical location has a profound influence of the specifics of the test. Certainly in relation to lifting a heavy stone to prove manhood, there has been a substantial degree, especially within Victorian texts, of confusing specific strength tests and to a large degree, the requirement of lifting a heavy stone to become Buannaichean which has merged itself into the lesser requirement of proving manhood at a far younger age. In this respect there are two stones at Achnack near Grantown on Spey which give some indication, albeit in a later time frame, of the strength capabilities of the male population of the period.

“One man out of ten might lift the smaller over the dyke, but not one in a thousand could do this with the other”¹⁰²

With the general acceptance of the romantic notion that all lifting stones are indeed “Manhood Stones”, this early 1800’s quotation points to the probability that both stones, known to weigh 103 and 130kg respectively, most certainly would have destroyed many an aspiring youths desire to enter manhood if such odds were applied to a lift. A common-sense approach would be towards the idea that both stones could well have an achievable lift if the requirement was simply to “put the wind underneath the stone” but being able to lift them into the chest and throw them over a dyke wall was for the superior of strength and probably more unique than the norm.

So today as we look at the Atlas Stones being lifted in various Strongman Competitions, the historical background to their event is not a lift to prove manhood but a lift to prove their Champion status and self-evident from the degree of exceptional strength demonstrated. Turning the clock back to the days of turmoil in the Highlands and accompanied by the Strongman of today, in an imaginary battle, whom would you feel safer fighting with side by side? The mere mortals of everyday strength would tire however the Strongman would have the strength to continue having obtained the fleasg at a relatively young age and now had trained in weaponry underpinning the reasoning for his strength in the first place. The lifting of the heavy stone into his chest was the action of a champion, a warrior and not the action of someone assuming manhood.

To summarise using the development of an imaginary youth known as Ruaraidh from Glen Spean set in a time frame of pre 1745..

¹⁰¹ P46/47 *The MacLeods*. Rev R C MacLeod (1906) On page 210 of James Boswell’s “Tour of the Hebrides” (1807) it is stated that the horn was filled with a bottle and a half of Claret.

¹⁰² *In the shadow of Cairngorm*. Rev W Forsyth (1900)

Ruaraidh (Rory) is the son of a Clan Tacksman and well known to the upper tier of his local Clan. He is fortunate that the position and status of his father has allowed him as he developed to have an above average standard of nutrition. By the time he is 13 years of age he is bigger than his peers and none have defeated him at **Maide Leasg** in many years. He is a keen listener and takes pleasure in listening to the tales of strength and bravery of Clan ancestors as told by the **Sennachie** (story teller). He is motivated and inspired by these tales.

One Sunday morning after attending Church service, he stops off with his father and other Clan members who encourage him to attempt the **Clach-neart**. Rory puts the wind underneath the stone with a lift to his shins of the heavy stone. Some hearty back slaps from some powerful uncles and Rory is welcomed without pomp and he knows that his youth is behind him and new adventures in life commence. He obtains the **fleasg**.

Over a number of years Rory is trained in weaponry learning to wield axe and sword. As he grows he becomes stronger and he stands out from others whom will be mere **pretty men** although adept, it is Rory's size and strength that sets him apart. His father frequently tests him with sword and with wrestling and Rory tests his own strength regularly against others, putting the stone and throwing the hammer. He is well aware of the fact that he has to distinguish himself from others and he requires to attempt **Fearachas**. He approaches the Clach-neart that he put the wind underneath many years before and in the presence of others he lifts the heavy stone. There is a 4ft high plinth which some Clansmen were known to place the stone upon and as Rory approaches the plinth he ostentatiously throws the heavy stone over the plinth. He has heard the Sennachie tell of stories of the few Clansmen who have done this and as the stone hits the ground Rory turns to those present in the knowledge that he has been **fraigal** his head is high and his chest is forward. His strength has spoken for him and he knows that he will be remembered.

The Clan Chief hears of this feat of strength and enquires about Rory and his suitability to work for him. He is summoned to the Chief who explains that he will be tested. Rory is challenged to lift the trial stone – **Clach Deuchainn** which he manages comfortably by lifting it to his shoulder. He is then challenged with putting the stone, throwing the hammer and caber and the final test is his strength in **Dorn Fhuar** (cold fist). He has no challengers competing solely against himself but the Chief is impressed and Rory is offered the position of **Buanachean**

Rory is one of eight Buanachean in the employ of the Chief who it is now his duty to protect and serve. Rory is required to practice his swordsmanship each day and he works out with throwing the hammer, putting the stone and of course lifting the heavy stone. **Fearachas** is contested everyday with each warrior trying to outdo each other with feats of strength thus improving their individual strength through competition.

Rory is summoned by the Chief who asks him to ride to far flung corner of the Clan lands to ascertain who is responsible for a number of the Chiefs cattle being stolen. Rory rides off and as night falls he comes to a single cottage in a remote Clan Glen. As Buanachean the occupier of the cottage is obliged to supply him with free board and lodgings and due to his status **beatha fir**, a double portion of meat. Rory calls at the house and is met by a long lost friend called Andrew. Both men grew up together and over a meal they talk about how both lifted the heavy stone and entered manhood within days of each other and occasionally had

trained swords with each other. Andrew explains that he once managed to lift the Clach-neart to his waist and that only one of their friends had ever managed to lift the stone and place it on the plinth stone yet Rory had managed to throw it over.

The next day Rory learns that the neighbouring Clan had stolen the cattle and he reports this to the Chief. The warriors are called and an assault on the neighbouring territory is planned. Rory asks his friend Andrew to ride with him.

The fictitious story of Rory has a degree of reality in emphasising the selected instances where strength and culture merge within the life of the Highlander. Obviously the inference is that what underpinned the obvious strength culture that prevailed in that it was purposeful for the ability to fight in sustained combat. Rory would be the **“one in a thousand”** if the stone he had lifted was the 130kg Achernack Stone emphasising that this level of strength was indeed exceptional and not the norm.

A final particular “irritant” regarding the conception of Gaelic manhood is the romantic assertion that on lifting a heavy stone and now entitled to wear the fleasg that “an eagle feather” was placed in the cap as some sort of badge of honour.¹⁰³ Notwithstanding the fact that in some areas of Gaeldom, the culture was such that no headdress was worn at all and long hair was simply tied and secured with a thong, we have statements of fact that the eagle was feather was a generic part of Highland dress.

“The three pinion feathers of the native Eagle is the distinguishing badge of the Highland Chief, two of a Chieftain and one of a gentleman. This mark of nobility was known in the time of Ossian”¹⁰⁴

Here again we have the erstwhile Logan affirming his romantic assertions in the reality of the legendary Ossian where no factual evidence exists of him being anything other than a creation of folk-lore and oral story telling. What is known however is that the adornment of “Eagle Feathers” makes an appearance in Gaelic culture after 1745 and entwined with the Victorian creation of “Clan Tartan” the notion of headdress plumage seems to have fitted in well with romantic ideologies of Gaelic clothing. In an article specifically on this subject, in 1987 the Scottish Herald at Arms explains the use of Eagle feathers in headdress. –

“There are early examples of a chief with three feathers in his bonnet, although the use of three eagle feathers for chiefs seems to date from the late 18th century, after the act of 1782, which repealed the act which prohibited the wearing of Highland dress.....chieftains of clans....are entitled to wear two feathers.....all gentlemen of the clan, i.e any person who has his own coat of arms is entitled to wear one eagle feather”¹⁰⁵

The adoption of the Eagle feather into Highland dress is obviously an adaptation of culture, perhaps even an extension of its romantic portrayal and all things eagle feathers were

¹⁰³ On page 127 of “Scottish Highland Games” (1973) by David Webster states - “The young clansman had to prove his manhood by feats of strength and only then was he allowed to wear the eagles feather in his bonnet”. I would have to disagree with this celebrated author as the eagle feather became part of Highland dress well after the demise of the culture of strength it supposedly pertained to and is merely a reflection of the romantic history which shackles the truth of true Gaelic culture.

¹⁰⁴ P295 The Scottish Gael. James Logan (1831)

¹⁰⁵ Volume 25 Number 1, The Highlander Magazine Jan/Feb 1987. An American based magazine on Scottish heritage which contains an article titled “Ruffling their feathers” by Sir Crispin Agnew of Lochnaw, Herald of Arms

nothing whatsoever to do with manhood, strength or was even part of Gaelic culture pre 1745. Unfortunately lifting a heavy stone does not give the attendant stone lifter his own coat of arms although he is more likely to be far more of a gentleman than those who ascribe to the puerile romanticism that plagues the history of Scottish strength and hence no feather will be awarded for success as it never existed in the first instance.

Stripping the romantic from the prevailing attitudes toward "Manhood Stones", it has to be emphasised that the detailed lifting requirements have in fact been mixed or intertwined with the lifting requirements to prove ones worth as a champion and that in reality, only a few would indeed have had the strength ability to achieve this. Whether one in a hundred or a thousand, the physical abilities of the Highlander pre 1745 was perhaps not to the level that it is perceived today and that like the modern men of strength, there are those that are capable and others less so of lifting that heavy stone high into the chest. The fact that this culture is known of and that strength was greatly admired within Gaelic culture is perhaps as a consequence of a particular trait of the Gaelic male in that is his desire to be remembered was extremely strong and which is discussed fully in Chapter Five.

Chapter Four

What determines a “lift” of a traditional stone?

Cho laidir ri Cuchullin

(As strong as Cuchullin)

The advent of the internet has allowed far more discussion on many aspects of strength via the many dedicated Forums and Blogs that are available, however in relation to traditional stone lifting, many discussions centre around beliefs that a stone requires to be lifted at least into the lap or fold to accomplish a successful lift and although this in many instances is what is actually trained for and desired, what necessitates a successful lift in traditional Gaelic stone lifting is dependent on many factors which require to be fully explained.

Gaelic culture for all matters, certainly pre 1745 and for sometime after was most certainly not generic with factors such as geography, location and local tradition playing an important part in ensuring that, in relation to strength, what occurred in one Highland Glen may not well be mirrored in a neighbouring Glen. Aided by the fact that the language of the Gaels and its oral tradition was chiefly passed by word of mouth with a high level of illiteracy, written rules or codes just did not exist which opened the doors to many interpretations but underpinned by a complete lack of standards. What rules that existed did so within the isolation of a community itself and this is where any standards that did exist, were applied.

As we look today at the recognised Scottish Highland Games, the strength of known Gaelic activities have been standardised and codified to meet the requirements of a Victorian society that essentially gave organised sport to the world by introducing standards and rules, clearly evident in the plethora of sports such as Association Football, Golf, Curling, Tennis, Boxing etc that had their initial codes and rules initiated in Britain before the individual sports were exported throughout the world. The Highland Games is no exception to this and certainly for the heavy events to expand as they did throughout the Scottish Worldwide Diaspora this was a necessity, but in relation to stone lifting we have to examine the time before such codification.

Stone lifting as a competitive element of the Highland Games has made little inroads. The culture and differences in expected lifts as well as the varying size and shapes of lifting stones, in other words a lack of a generic standard weight almost single handedly ensured that there would have been extreme difficulty in replicating contests throughout the Highland Games circuit, but more decisively would be the fact that the application and acceptance of a lift, due to vast regional and cultural differences, just could not make stone lifting easily codified. Certainly in the modern idiom, the Atlas Stones derived and replicated from the McGlashen stones have overcome the problems regarding standardising traditional stones however the method of lifting, in this case either lifting onto a barrel or static plinth, does not completely account for the Gaelic cultural aspects of stone lifting.

In recognising that traditional lifting stones lacked standardisation it is first required to examine how the Gael looked upon a lifting stone. In essence there are two main reasons for lifting a stone with differences in those stones that were lifted singly as a test of strength, competition or for cultural reasons as opposed to those stones lifted as a feat of strength and

although these on many occasions crossover such as the Dinnie Stones being lifted traditionally as a test of strength, there are many other stones which owe their existence to having been lifted once and once only. This differentiation itself holds true to its own quirk of lifting style, that is lifting a heavy stone by using the plaid as a makeshift harness and a number of these stones certainly do appear to have been lifted in this fashion although by a further quirk of the Gaelic oral tradition, using the plaid as a harness appears to have been intentionally forgotten to make “remembrance”¹⁰⁶ of an individual’s strength that more extravagant and interesting.

In relation to the much misunderstood acceptance that manhood required the lifting of a heavy stone into the lap or fold, the preceding chapter on Manhood fully examines this concept however to once again highlight the true understanding, requires a realisation that there is a world of difference between an accepted lift as “a test of manhood” and “a feat of manhood” with the Gaelic language itself making the distinction.

Fearachas – A test of manhood¹⁰⁷

Fearachd – A feat of manhood¹⁰⁸

Culture itself thus determines how a lifting stone was drawn from the ground with many other aspects contributing to what we would in modern times refer to as a “good lift” but again it has to be emphasised that for many of the stones dual accepted practices were more than likely but it is more than often in the instances of a “test of manhood” that the modern assertions of an accepted lift have been derived, and in most instances misunderstood.

Another modern aspect applied to stone lifting is the assertion of weightlifting standards and rules being applied, especially so with the stringent requirements of the “overhead press” with the exacting analysis of a “full arm lockout” being subject to much debate and especially in those instances where the Inver Stone has been applied to those very few overhead lifts. Such stringent rules would never have been applied to traditional Gaelic strength, a culture which had no formal standardised weight measurement with stones being measured purely by a volume descriptive and hence a lifting stone known as an “Ultach” is defined solely by being an “armful” and a putting stone – “dornag” from its root “dorn” meaning handful. If weight could not be exacted rest assured a full arm lockout would be equally as foreign.

The rule of thumb therefore is not to assess a lift, within a modern standardised view but to assess the cultural requirements of the lift, albeit these by virtue of language, geography etc lacked any generic standard.

Of course many of the modern strength athletes who lift traditional Scottish lifting stones come from a variety of strength disciplines, with each its own different set of rules and codes of conduct which in underpinning standardisation within their own particular discipline, it is only natural to make comparisons in strength and this is a modern norm but it was certainly not the Gaelic way and with no overall organising body that regulates traditional stone lifting (God forbid)with the only rules that existed if any, were those that are traditional and cultural to the Gael.

¹⁰⁶ See Chapter Six “I do this for you to remember me by” – Gaelic culture and the imposition of remembrance through feats of strength.

¹⁰⁷ A Gaelic/English Dictionary in Two Parts. R A Armstrong (1825)

¹⁰⁸ Dictionarium Scoto-Celticum: A Dictionary of the Gaelic Language, Volume 1. Ewen Maclachlan (1828)

A clue to required lifts are contained within the oral tradition of the Gael and one such story relates to Connal Gulban, a 5th Century King of an area which is now County Donegal in Ireland but whose story migrated to Scotland with the spread of the Dalriadic Gaels. As with oral tradition, there are many differing versions of the story however the story of Connal along with his brothers Eobhan and Claidhean remains unaltered in all and the story, being over 1400 years old clearly has a basis on the requirements of a stone lift -

***“Eobhan and Claidhean went to the stone; Eobhan lifted it to his shoulder top, and set it down; Claidhean lifted the stone up to his lap, and the Gruagach said to them, “There is neither want of strength or learning with you; I will give you over to your father. At the end of a few days after that, the Gruagach went home to the king's house, and he gave them to their father; and he said that the king's sons were the strongest and the best taught that there were in the sixteen realms. The king gave thanks and reward to the Gruagach, and he sent Conall with him. The Gruagach began to teach Conall to do tricks and feats, and Conall pleased him well; and on a day he took Conall with him up the face of Beinn Eidinn, and they reached the place where the round brown stone was. Conall noticed it, and he asked as his brothers had done; and the Gruagach said as he said before. Conall put his hands about the stone, and he put the wind between it and earth; and they went home, and he was with the Gruagach getting more knowledge.*”**

The next year after that they went up Beinn Eidinn where the round brown stone was. Conall thought that he would try if he was (na bu mhurraiche) stronger to lift the heroes' stone. He caught the stone, and he raised it on the top of the shoulder, and on the faggot gathering place of his back, and he carried it aloft to the top of Beinn Eidinn, and down to the bottom of Beinn Eidinn, and back again; and he left it where he found it.”¹⁰⁹



The stone referred to in this story is the ***Clach nan Gaisgeach*** the “Stone of Heroes”, however what will be noted is that there are indeed four different lifts attached to it – Putting the wind underneath the stone, raising it into the lap, shouldering and finally shouldering and walking. Each of these is a well recognised application of traditional stone lifting and the story of Gulban is extremely old, so old in fact that Campbell in his *Popular Tales of the Western Highlands* Volume 3 makes mention of the story of Gulban being recorded on a stone slab (see opposite).

The slab is Pictish and was recovered as a headstone at St Braoch's Church, Montrose¹¹⁰ with the usual academic assertions of biblical stories being adduced to the story on the stone slab with, in this case, the main

¹⁰⁹ *Popular Tales of the West Highland* Volume 3, JF Campbell (1890)

¹¹⁰ The slab depicting Conall is a Class 2 Pictish stone known as the “Cross Craig Slab” and is currently retained within the Montrose Museum. The image above has been taken from “*Sculptured Stones of Scotland* (1856)” which itself makes no mention of either the carved story depicting that of Conall Gulban or having any Christian relevance.

clue being the story of Samson with the jaw bone of ass seen in the lower left but complete ignorance of the representation of the figure in the lower right. Campbell asserts that the symbolism fits into entirety with the story of Gulban with the figure on the lower right being that of Connal Gulban lifting the Stone of Heroes. Given the relative time period of the assimilation of the Picts into the language and culture of the Gaelic Dalriadan Scots, there is a high degree of probability that the stone is in fact a depiction of the story of Gulban with the engraving depicting perhaps the oldest feat of stone lifting in Gaeldom.

Although through oral tradition there are many other stories that incorporate stone lifting in the form of oral tales that of Conall Gulban is perhaps the oldest and as such may well be the origin of lifting and carrying events at today's modern Strongman competitions. Strength is not a modern invention; it has all been done before.

What has not been mentioned to this point is the relevance of time on culture and how strength has developed and adapted in Gaelic culture over many centuries although underpinning any adaptation through development of culture is always going to be the lifting to place the air/wind underneath the stone, the lift to the lap, the shoulder and the stone carry. All adaptations on these are simply those that appear at a later date.

To best examine this cultural aspect towards what is an accepted lift we will start with the most basic but least understood of lifts –

1. PUTTING THE AIR UNDERNEATH THE LIFTING STONE

This lift, as the statement itself implies is the simple lifting of a stone to the extent of a mere few inches but less than knee height and nothing more. Albeit this type of lift is more associated with a cultural application, i.e. the proving of manhood at puberty (in the Gaelic ***Fearachas***) this obviously is also determined by the size and weight of the stone. The requirements and reasons for lifting a stone to prove manhood in relation to age are thoroughly explored in Chapter Three - Manhood.

In language this lift was known as “***chuir e ga oth eadar a ‘ chlach thogail ‘s an talamh***” or “***air between the lifting stone and the ground***”¹¹¹ and although this could be applied culturally, it is also the minimum of lifting requirements, even for those beyond puberty. The modern assessment of specifics and requirements almost blindly discounts the notion that the general Gaelic male population in the time of the Clans were not to a man, men of strength, not everyone was capable of lifting such as the Inver Stone into the lap or fold. For the most part lifting to the extent of putting the air underneath the stone would be achievable by most but going that bit further was for the stronger.

Stones such as the Clach Thogalaich on Colonsay¹¹² have known to be lifted to this degree and accepted as a formal lift (against the grain of the modern) and no-where is this more accepted than on the island of North Uist where putting the air underneath the stone is highlighted by the predominant Gaelic culture still extant on the island, and who would disagree otherwise with the very culture that spawned the practice of traditional stone lifting.

¹¹¹ *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, Volume 45 (1968)*

¹¹² “It is termed the Lifting Stone, because the ability to raise it even slightly off the ground was, and indeed still is, regarded as an indication of great strength”. – *Skye and the Inner Hebrides, Alasdair Alpin MacGregor (1953)*

One must state however that the majority of the stones exceed 300lbs and therefore excessive weight rather than local culture may be more to the fore for the reason for lifting a stone to this limited degree.

In August 2014, Alex Roberts of England made a visit to North Uist in an attempt to lift the ***Ultach na-h'airde glaise***, a 380lb of pyramidal rock that had been lifted by a number of islanders many years before. Interest in the attempt was obvious by the presence of two of North Uist's respected senior citizens who knew about and could speak for hours on the history of strength on the island. Angus MacDougal and Alex MacAulay, both octogenarians had made comment that they had never seen the underside of the stone, meaning of course that in their lifetime they had never witnessed a lift (as there had been none). Alex lifted the stone a mere few inches clear from the ground to the excited cheers from both with Angus further emphasising "you will be remembered".

This is Gaelic lifting and few lifters will ever experience the opportunity of lifting a traditional stone in the presence of those whose culture stone lifting belongs to but the experience itself is merely a statement of what is an accepted lift.

Transfer this to a stone that has been lifted many times before – The Inver Stone in Royal Deeside where through modern assertions, an accepted lift is **only** a lift into the lap or fold which is more a contrivance and assertion of "rules" into a culture which fundamentally did not possess them in the first instance.

The aspect of lifting to this level, opens up the stones of strength being far more inclusional for those who have aspirations of lifting such stones into the lap or fold. Culturally this was an accepted lift in itself and as there is no ruling authority which had the right to un-qualify a lift on the basis that it did not reach a specific height. Success therefore in stone lifting should as always be defined by the lifter himself. The level of manhood displayed can be argued over whose lift is better but the definition of a lift is by its very foundations, extremely loose and only defined by culture.

In continuing the reasoning's for proving manhood we require to examine those lifts that the lifter may consider as better.

2. LIFTS TO THE KNEES, WAIST AND INTO THE LAP OR FOLD

This is where Gaelic culture becomes a little more difficult to understand as it hints towards an accepted definition of standards but which in reality are extremely loose in application. To best examine the Gaelic approach to strength, far different from today, we have to digress to the competitive aspect of the traditional stone putt. The stone putt as seen at a modern Highland Games would be no different from that of centuries before with perhaps two specific differences in attitude as it relates to competition. The Gaelic language has a word for it –

Raiteachas (Rajty- ach- as) – n,f trial of strength, a raiteachas air a cheile, competing, emulating each other from ostentatious motives, arrogance, pride.¹¹³

¹¹³ Page 206 A Pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary (fourth edition), Neil McAlpine (1853)

This is indeed linked to ***Fraigal – ostentatious of strength*** and ***Fraigalachd – show of personal strength*** which emphasises that competitions were conducted with arrogance, pride and a fair degree of showing off, not something that would be commonly displayed by the modern heavy events athletes at a Highland Games, but that was the culture of the day. This was augmented by the fact that in such competitions there was only a winner with no relevance given to a second or third place because these throws were not marked. The furthest distance of the stone cast was the only one marked (not measured...Gaelic society did not have standardised methods of measuring) and the furthest cast was marked with a Kemp Stane.

“KEMP-STANE” – A stone placed as the boundary which has been reached by the first who kempes or strives at the Putting-Stone. He who throws farthest beyond this is the winner.”¹¹⁴

Although the kemp stane is Scots in language with no corresponding Gaelic equivalent it should be emphasised that the distance of the throw in the Gaelic language was known as ***Urchair (ur-char) – n,f a stone cast, throw of a stone, hammer etc***¹¹⁵. Gaelic culture therefore in relation to strength competition had no place for second best and in essence the winner demonstrated his manliness or degree or level of manhood over the other competitors. It is quite a simple analysis in that within a strength orientated culture such as that of the Gael, the strongest was seen as more manly and as such this ties in with the Gaelic disposition of remembering the strong in oral tradition.....it is a tradition that only remembers the winners.

How this manliness as a feat of stone lifting strength (***Fearachd***) is best explained is by recourse to a mirroring Irish Gaelic stone lifting culture –

“It was a great day in each young man’s life when he raised the stone from the ground and “gave it wind”, as they said. And if he raised it to his knees, he was a champion, the equal of the best. And if he raised it to his chest he was a hero, a phenomenon of strength and men talked of him.”¹¹⁶

From this there are “manhood” distinctions of lifting the heavy stone to the extent of putting air underneath it, a knee lift and for the champion a lift into the lap or the fold. Personally I find it quite fitting that those who have managed lifts (in the modern sense) into the lap of the Inver Stone should be reminded of the reference to ***“and men talked of him”*** an obvious assertion of how important remembrance for strength was to the Gael and replicated today by the “Inver visitors book”. An extremely apt and modern view of Gaelic remembrance for those strong enough to merit it.

The determining factor however is obviously the actual weight of the stone and as such, even a lift to the knees would have been considered as a tremendous feat of strength –

“.....about the middle of the island near the High road, a large round stone, which they say John Garbh, the foresaid chief and one or two of his people used to lift on their knees. Such is its weight that scarcely could the united strength of two of the

¹¹⁴ *Scottish Dictionary and Supplement Volume 1. John Jamieson (1841)*

¹¹⁵ *Page 280, A Pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary(fourth edition), Neil McAlpine (1853)*

¹¹⁶ *The Stone, Liam O’Flaherty (1928)*

stoutest men now to be found in the country be able to raise it one inch from the ground”

The stone mentioned above was located on the island of Rassay and although it is no longer extant, it is known that this was no Inver Stone and that a lift to the knees was a lift achievable by very few. In this case the actual weight of the stone determines an accepted lift and with this of course, it dispenses with any cultural assertions for lifting it.

Any premise that a stone requires to be lifted to a certain height is factually incorrect and what is obvious is that the level or degree of “manhood” is measured by strength in that a lift into the lap of the heavier stone proves more manliness than a lift to the ankles, determined by size of stone of course.

Lifting the heavy stone therefore is not strictly defined by any assertion that it has to be lifted to a certain height or level, the culture of the Gael clearly sees a lift being simply a lift but in the knowledge that some are better than others.

3. SHOULDERING & OVERHEAD LIFTS

With the lifts of putting the air/wind under the stone, lifting to the knees and the lift to the chest for the champion as previously mentioned, it is not too surprising that there is little mention of actual lifts that go further than this in strength. Shouldering the lifting stone and putting it overhead are rarely mentioned as to the Gael this was not seen as the ultimate in stone lifting strength but that is not to say that it did not occur. It was just the fact that superior strength to the Gael was demonstrated in a completely different manner as will be explained later.

Of all the known traditional stones, only one was known to have been required to have been “shouldered” being the ***Clach a Bhoisgean*** in Argyll where the required lift was essentially part of a pre-marriage ritual with every indication that the stone may well have been far lighter than the norm. The only stone known to be put “overhead” is the rather contentious ***Ultach Dhomhail Mhoir*** on North Uist where the use of the word “ultach” meaning “arm full” or “arms length” has been interpreted as put overhead at arm’s length.

Within the Gaelic culture of strength, its famous tale of Conal Culban who as the narrative explains was asked to lift a heavy stone and put the air underneath it to prove his manhood on Ben Edin. The story explains that Conal lifted the stone and then shouldered it then took it for a walk up and down the mountain. The oral folk-lore is unlikely to not mention occurrences of strength which were in common practice to the Gael and hence there can be no doubt that shouldering a heavy stone was known but not however common practice.

Although shouldering does have a some basis at least in Gaelic culture, putting a stone overhead is practically non-existent save one single reference that mentions that when a heavy stone was put overhead, the lifter returned the stone to terra firma by dropping it behind the head to fall behind the lifter’s back. This unusual approach does appear to something that is Gaelic in nature by virtue of it in some way mirroring the approach to the

“*Y Maen Camp*”, the Welsh putting stone of 75 to 100lbs which was thrown backwards over the head.

Another aspect of shouldering the lifting stone is the imposition of Scottish geography upon it meaning that not all stones are indeed capable of being shouldered. All known rounded stones, the iconic lifting stone shape such as those at Inver, Barevan, Ackernack, etc have a are based solely within the Central or Eastern Highlands with those further west having a tendency to be far more irregular in shape and also with a tendency to be heavier. It is not surprising that the knowledge of shouldering these stones is practically unknown. There are sound geographical reasons for this with the majority of the major river courses in Scotland flowing from the west towards the east, river courses that can spawn stones of strength such as the Tay, Dee and Don however there are no such equivalent rivers in the west.

Anything other about shouldering or putting the stone overhead in Gaelic stone lifting would most certainly be that type of history which is fabricated to suit as quite clearly the culture of the Gael measured strength in a completely different manner than modern expectations and it with the next forms of stone lifting where it is most expressed at its superior level.

4. LIFTING ONTO A PLINTH OR STONE DYKE WALL

The history of Gaelic strength is punctuated with many references where a heavy stone was required to be lifted onto either a plinth stone or indeed a stone dyke wall. In many of these instances the lifting onto a plinth stone has been assumed to be a test to prove manhood where the reality is the actual test was in many instances was a trial of strength to become part of an exclusive band of Clan warriors known as Buanachean. To many, lifting the heavy stone onto a plinth was an expected norm although it was most certainly, in all probability due to Highland geography, only practiced in selected areas and was not generic throughout. Stones that were known to have been lifted onto a static plinth or dyke wall are –

- a. The Puterach at Balquhidder. - Plinth
- b. The Saddlin Mare of the Sma Glen - Plinth.
- c. The Wallace Putting Stone at Sherrifmuir. - Plinth
- d. The Lifting Stones of Glenbuchat. - Plinth
- e. The Bodach a Chraigh Fianna, Glen Lyon. - Plinth
- f. The Putting Stone of the Clans, Barevan. – Dyke Wall
- g. The Lochaber Putting Stone. – Dyke Wall
- h. The Clach-neart Mheirichard. – Dyke Wall
- i. The Clachan-neart Achnack. – Dyke Wall
- j. The Inver Stone – Dyke Wall

And although it cannot be conclusively proved,

- k. The Clach Deuchainn of Skye. - Plinth

All these locations with the exception of the Clach Deuchainn on Skye are located on the mainland rather than the islands with perhaps the location at Balquhidder being the best example of a reception plinth stone and this site in particular and one this site in particular throws up some hitherto unknown approaches and considerations to lifting a heavy stone

atop a plinth. In this case most notably, none of the 4 sides of approach to the plinth are level and as such offer up four distinct degrees of difficulty and it is not surprising to find that the traditional lift was made from the east being the lift with the greater difficulty.

One must remember that the feat of lifting the heavy stone to chest height was seen in Gaelic culture as a feat of the champion and lifting onto a plinth stone or indeed a dyke wall may either, depending on height of the plinth, be seen either as a contrived replication of this feat or a lift with added difficulty. Again, local culture and a complete lack of a generic shows that each lift at these locations cannot be compared with others and indeed, the Glen Lyon stone with its former 3ft high plinth can in no way be considered as an equal lift as that of Sadlin the Mare in the nearby Sma Glen where the difficulty is not the lift of the stone but making it stick to a far higher sloping plinth. Equally, the Lifting Stones of Glenbuchat were known to be stacked one at top the other onto a pointed plinth suggesting that dexterity in this case was also a requirement in addition to raw strength.



The Puderag Plinth Stone

5. THE LIFT AND CARRY

The origin of the “lift and carry”, previously explained as having its origin mentioned in the story of Conall Gulban has unlike the shouldering of the stone, appeared to have sustained itself as a style of lifting from a time before the introduction of the Clan system to a period well after its demise.

Obviously as an accepted lift, the lift and carry of the heavy stone was seen in Gaelic culture to be such that only the superior of strength could do so with those of a lesser strength who were capable only of lifting to the extent of putting the wind underneath the stone or the superlative lift into the lap. There is one hitherto problem with the lift and carry which I hope should be obvious in the following texts when compared to the story of Connal Gulban and his ancient lift and carry of the Stone of Heroes.

“..... a large round block of granite, weighing more than I venture to guess, which the next heir, on succeeding to the supremacy of this Clan was always expected to carry in his arms upstairs to the dining room where his health was drank.”¹¹⁷

Perhaps surprisingly, this reference to stone lifting relates to a time before 1745 and refers to the heavy lifting stone at Menzies Castle. The comparisons with the Stone of Heroes should become more apparent with the following -

“One of the men who attempted the feat alluded to, was called Jock on the Maggot, who raised and carried and carried the Clach na cuddin from its place to the top of the Old Jail stairs, but was unable to bring it back. His competitor, a man of the name of McLean, also a townsman, succeeded in performing the feat by returning with the stone to the Cross”¹¹⁸

This above is reference to a lift and carry of a special “charter stone” not always associated with strength- the ***Clach na Cuddain*** of Inverness. Not considering the individual weights of the stones mentioned, each of the above has in relation to the Stone of Heroes the shared difficulty of not walking with the stone on the flat but strenuously carrying the stone up a steep incline be it, in two instances a flight of stairs or with Conall Gulban, the steep slopes of Ben Edinn. The degree of slope is rather a misnomer as traditional lifting stones were lifted and carried on the flat although, in line with Gaelic culture, the difficulty of the terrain would only add a degree of difficulty and make a particular lift and carry more ostentatious.

One of the most celebrated examples of the lift and carry took place on 15th September 1816 at Glengarry at one of the first of the organised Highland Games, held by as well officiated by, ***Alexander Ranaldson MacDonell of Glengarry***. As a Clan Chief he was known simply as Glengarry and although he contributed a great deal of self created pomp at his Games, in many extents his events held true to a Gaelic strength culture in having competitions of ***Maide Leasg***¹¹⁹, ***Dorn Fhuar***¹²⁰, ***High Leap***¹²¹, Caber, Putting Stone, Hammer and throwing the Bar (of iron) he also has a lifting stone competition.

“The LIFTING OF THE STONE was next resorted to, and was practiced by the strong (in part) during the interval of the runners’ absence; in this; Sergeant Ranald MacDonell, “Na Craig”, from Glengarry, maintained his original superiority with great ease; next Allan MacDonell , from Glenlee , carried it 42 yards; Donald MacDonell, from Lundy,30 yards; John MacMaster, from Dockinassy, 28 yards and a half; John Chisholm, from Glenmorrison; 26 yards; Donald Cameron, from Dockinassy, 20 yards

¹¹⁷ p318 *Shetland and the Shetlanders, Catherine Sinclair (1840)*

¹¹⁸ *Reminiscences of a Clachnacuddin Nonagenarian, McLean (1886)*

¹¹⁹ *Maide Leasg translated as “Lazy Stick” is a strength pulling event similar to the now popular Mas Wrestling.*

¹²⁰ *Dorn Fhuar – “Cold Fist” – a true Gaelic spectacle of cultural strength where the leg of dead cow less than 4 years old was ripped off from below the knee but without breaking the skin.*

¹²¹ *The traditional High Leap was achieved by jumping over a Highland Garland Pony.*

– several others tried it, in vain, or declined having their names inserted, from the little hand they made of it, and the well authenticated efforts of John More MacDonell, late of Montcraggie, in Glengarry, and of James MacDonell, “Mac Fear Balemhian”, from Abertarff with this very stone, were listened to with pleasure by all and astonishment by many.”¹²²

What Glengarry purposely, no doubt through an understanding of Gaelic strength culture achieved, was to have a competition that seriously challenged the strong in attendance as highlighted by the number who obviously thought wisely to decline, however note the name **Allan MacDonell from Glenlee**, his name will reappear later.

In more modern times, who else other than AA Cameron would exhibit knowledge and put into practice a traditional lift. Knowledge that Cameron was more than adept at the “lift and throw”, Cameron once again demonstrated his Gaelic heritage by carrying out a lift and carry of the Dalwhinnie Stone circa 1912 when on lifting the stone, he carried and deposited it on the bar counter of the Loch Erich Hotel Public Bar, ostentatiously demanding a pint of beer in the process. This lift was reported in the local newspaper, no doubt raising some eyebrows but it is the feat itself, the fact that it is “fraigal” which makes the lifting of the stone cultural and not a gimmick. In *Of Stones and Strength*, this type of lift was mentioned as having been applied to the Inver Stone by Bill Kazmaier who lifted the stone and carried it to the public bar of the Inver Hotel. There is nothing better than good bit of modern folklore as it actually did not happen although, as David Webster who was present when Kazmaier visited states, there is no doubt that he could have done so with ease.

This lift and carry of the Inver Stone to the Public Bar of the Hotel does have some credence as a true story with I suspect, knowing how traditional the lift actually is, was perhaps carried out by AA Cameron a man whose Gaelic heritage would know the reasoning for it.

In the summer of 2013 James Graham from Australia conducted a tour of the stones with one highlight being a visit to lift the newly discovered **Clach-neart Glenlivet**. Of course local interest had allowed a small audience to tackle the rough terrain to reach the stone to witness the lift. The 130kg stone was lifted into the lap and duly applauded but it was when James decided to take the stone for a little walk that, even to an audience unfamiliar with stone lifting or strength, the physical strength displayed was something more spectacular with the level of appreciation considerably more. The walk is simply the icing on the cake. To the Gael it was a show of his ostentatiousness, a physical boast akin to “I’ve lifted this heavy stone but it is a mere pebble to me, so I will take it for a walk” and long may men of strength do the same in the modern era.

6. **LIFTING THE HEAVY STONE AND THROWING IT.**

Having previously shown that lifting a heavy stone and putting it over head was **not** the ultimate feat of strength that could be exhibited in Gaelic strength culture we now move onto a form of stone lifting that was the ultimate expression of strength and has its origins in ancient history yet its practice in the modern sense has been diminished at the expense of

¹²² *Sporting Anecdotes (1820) NB The stone used in this competition was most likely to have been the same “Glengarry Pebble” as used at his 1822 Games in Inverness.*

the overhead lift. There are cultural reasons behind lifting a heavy stone and simply throwing it away, rooted in the term *fraigalchd*, that ostentatious show of strength and no-where is it exhibited more than in the simple lifting and throwing of the heavy stone.

At this juncture it should be emphasised that although this could be carried out in two forms, that is throwing the stone over a static object, it could also be exhibited by simply throwing the stone away. In this case it is the manner the stone is thrown. Although being boastful in strength, ie talking up one's own strength in Gaelic culture was severely frowned upon, it was the manner that strength was exhibited which was fundamentally important. To show superior strength the strongest lifted a heavy stone and either threw it away or threw it over a static object in such as fashion to demonstrate that the feat was nothing and that the stone was a mere pebble. There is every indication that how a lifting stone was physically lifted which demonstrated the degree of ostentatiousness therefore the actual attitude of the lifter was important along of course his actual level of physical strength.

The following is an account of a trial of strength that took place at the court of King James VI in London before 1622 and which involved one of his Scottish courtiers – Sir Lachlan MacKintosh and which shows the use of this unique form of stone lifting being practised over 400 years ago .

“Upon one occasion when in London, several feats of strength were to be performed by gentlemen before the King and Court, and, amongst others, a large stone of a certain weight was to be put over a bar of so many feet high. Sir Lachlan ordered his servant before the company would assemble, in order if possible to ascertain its weight, as Sir Lachlan intended to be a competitor. The servant reported that if Sir Lachlan could raise his own brown horse (then in stable) by the forelegs, he could manage the stone. He accordingly tried that plan and succeeded. After the party had met to enjoy the amusements of the day, at last the trial of strength as to the stone came on and several attempted the task, but in vain. Sir Lachlan then came forward, and with apparently no great difficulty succeeded in turning the stone over the bar, much to the annoyance of the English.” ¹²³

Sir Lachlan was a Gael however questions could be asked that there was also the possibility of this type of stone lifting being known within English culture but these were the days of the Scottish Stuarts ascension to the British throne and then it would not be surprising to see a certain degree of Gaelic influence at the court.

From one of the oldest references of the lift and throw, we jump forward to the last known occasion when it was known to be exhibited in Gaelic culture –

“He was another time in Perthshire. There was a big boulder besides a dyke and they said that only a powerfully built man would be able to lift it. Alexander went and lifted the boulder and threw it over the dyke where it lies to this very day. I’ve no idea who would be able to move it now”.¹²⁴

The Alexander in question was at the height of his strength at the beginning of the 20th Century and was none other than the celebrated Scottish Highland Games athlete – AA

¹²³ Appendix No 1, *Dunachton, Past and Present, History of the MacKintoshes*. Charles Fraser MacKintosh (1866)

¹²⁴ Taken from John MacDonald of Highbridge and transcribed by Calum Maclean on the 4th and the 25th of January 1951 - <http://calumimaclean.blogspot.co.uk>

Cameron. Cameron was also known to have lifted both the Inver and Dalwhinnie stones and for one of these, he exhibits yet another traditional form of lifting.

The lift and throw was regarded as the most ostentatious of lifts and on occasion was carried out for the reasons of that quirk of Gaelic culture - the great desire within the male population at least, to be remembered by future generations.

“When he was setting out he took a round heavy stone and threw it from him on the roadside that it might serve as a memorial for him in case he might not return. His servant lifted the stone with ease, carried it some distance, and then threw it from him on the roadside saying, “Lie there as a memorial of both should we not return”¹²⁵

Remembrance and strength is examined thoroughly in ***Chapter Six (I do this for you to remember me by)*** but it has to be asserted that no lift to be remembered was ever known to have been carried out by putting a heavy stone overhead, it was done so in Gaelic cultural terms and not on the basis of modern perceptions.

“.....and he is accounted a strong man who can lift it in his arms to the top of the standing one, which is about four feet high,—and a very strong man who is able to toss it over without coming in contact with the upright one”¹²⁶

Once again we have yet another reference to the ultimate in Gaelic physical strength, in this instance the Wallace Putting Stone at Sherrifmuir and although this stone is extant, even for the most strong and despite knowledge that the stone has been reduced in weight, the lift and throw of this boulder over the former plinth (now recumbent) is, as oral tradition asserts, a show of strength that would in cultural terms cause the lifter to be remembered. Not everyone is capable of this level of strength but which in the modern sense, would certainly separate the wheat from the chaff. There are many modern strength athletes that could achieve this, but it is a factor that defines the stronger from the strong.

On 15th September 1822 another Highland Games organised by Glengarry was held at Inverness with the usual itinerary of Highland strength as displayed at his Games six years earlier with one crucial difference – the stone lifting competition was different.

“At lifting the stone, Allan MacDonell, first, as putting over the bar at No 9; Hugh Fraser, second, by doing it with great ease at No 8; Ewen MacDonald ,from Uist, at No7”¹²⁷

What should not be lost on the reader is that Glengarry through over the course of two separate Games, included two forms of stone lifting seen by the Gael to be the most ostentatious – the “lift and carry” and now the “lift and throw”.

On this occasion, Allan MacDonell of Glenlee was victorious however when the event was reported on by the Inverness Courier Newspaper, the lifting and throwing of this 18 stone pebble was stated to have been won by putting the stone over the bar at 5ft although the better reference shown above hints at 4ft 6inches through what appear to be 6inch

¹²⁵ p158 *The Records of Argyll, Lord Archibald Campbell (1885)*

¹²⁶ *“Dunblane Traditions”. John Monteath (1887)*

¹²⁷ *Sporting Magazine*

graduations in height. Worse still, the Courier newspaper failed to name the victor referring to him only as an “**unknown stonemason**”.

Recently this event has been reintroduced by the athletic director of the Inverness Highland Games who unwittingly has caused the event to be called “The Stonemason’s Challenge” with further assertions of the winner’s anonymity. Gaelic strength is underpinned by cultural remembrance and his name is **Allan MacDonell of Glenlee**. Few can replicate this ultimate feat of Gaelic strength so the name Allan MacDonell should be remembered.

One aspect about the lift and throw is that a number of stones associated with it, have intimated that the feat itself was never expected to be repeated, hence the particular stone in Perthshire thrown by AA Cameron allegedly remains where it landed after his lift and throw. Again this underpins the ostentatious lift, lifting a heavy stone and throwing it over a wall with the feat of strength exhibited being so great, that it is incapable of being repeated. This also applies to other stones such as the **Lochaber Putting Stone** and the **Clach-neart Mheirichard**.

7. ASSISTED LIFTING – USING THE PLAID

The expression “assisted lifting” is perhaps not the greatest of terminology to apply to a unique form of stone lifting as it implies that in some way cheating was allowed in Gaelic Strength Culture. Not so the case as Gaelic attitudes towards strength were underpinned by a rather harsh upbringing where anything that was seen as weak or soft was despised and frowned upon. With the exception of the Puterach Stone at Balquhider, which required to be lifted onto a plinth but had a known resting ledge at the halfway point on the plinth, there are certainly no known instances where some form of assist made the lift easier.

There is an old Gaelic tale of a Clan Chief and his entourage being caught out overnight in harsh winter snows. Wrapping their plaids around themselves they in the Highland way went to sleep. During the night the Chief awoke and saw that his son had made a pillow of snow to make himself more comfortable and one would not think anything of this in a modern sense but, this is a Gaelic tale and the son was seriously rebuked for his show of softness and display of qualities that could be deemed as showing weakness. This is a well known oral tale but its telling is an assertion of a despised attitude to anything that is unmanly and weak. One can draw comparisons in the feat of tossing the Caber where throwers were originally expected to up-right the caber themselves before throwing. Not so today and a fundamental principle of Gaelic culture has been lost within the specific rules now made up for this event. Centuries ago this would have been seen as a weakness.

In stone lifting there was no assistance and the modern use of “tacky” to improve grip would no doubt have earned a similar rebuke as that for making a pillow of snow. It is simply not the Gaelic way.

So what is an assisted lift? The answer is the simple use of the plaid in making a form of harness to assist in the lift of an **extremely** heavy stone. Notable for their size, the majority of these stones lack any cultural reason for their lifting and the stories attached to them appear to be more folklore than fact but they were lifted.



The Achnangart Stone

The Plaid worn by the Highlander was a multipurpose garment of value. It was more commonly used as a contrived form of sleeping bag if the Highlander had to spend the night under the stars and was also known to be used as a form of rope when twisted and on one occasion used for **abseiling**. Not surprisingly, the plaid was used for carrying and lifting and was applied to the stones.

- **Glenelg Church Stone** – carried in the plaid used as a form of haversack
- **Clach Thogalaich, Colonsay** – carried in the plaid but unknown how.
- **Putting Stone of the Clans** – lifted by a woman using an apron as a harness
- **Achnangart Stone** – lifted and carried using the plaid as a makeshift harness.

And with the following stones more likely to have been lifted in a similar fashion –

- **The Murchison Stone** – lifted and carried to form part of a wall.
- **The Lealty Stone** – a test of strength for Clan Munro
- **The McCrimmon Stone** – also a lift and carry.

With little or no cultural reason attached to this form of lifting, each stone requires an examination in its own right and each are discussed fully later in this book however underpinning each is the absurdity that the common lifting methods mentioned above could be simply applied. The strength required to lift these types of stones defy belief and, with the propensity for oral folklore to occasionally expand on actual strength, it too could in instances omit factors which in doing so emphasises further the strength of the individual.

The Achnangart stone in Glen Shiel is one example of the reason to thoroughly examine folklore and dissect the underlying truth. This stone is in fact one of the most written about stones in stone lifting tradition and which is used to emphasise the strength of Duncan MacRae. Every anecdote that mentions this particular stone states the strength of the man in lifting it and walking a distance with it after selecting the stone to form a door lintel for a house however none of the texts mentions that the stone was lifted using the plaid. Oral tradition within the MacRaes still extant within the Glen affirm his use of the plaid.

The photo above clearly shows that any lift that would be deemed the norm could simply not be applied to the Achnangart Stone as it would be beyond any known physical strength limits. Try throwing this stone over a dyke wall but as the true story asserts, it would be thoroughly possible to lift with some form of assistance.

It is this tendency for Gaelic tales to be economical with fact that requires to be accounted for and using the plaid as a harness for lifting a heavy stone does seem to, on the occasions where it was utilised, to have been conveniently discarded giving a false representation of the physical strength of the individual mentioned.

In emphasising the complete lack of cultural reasons for lifting stones by this method, only one stone, ***the Lealty Stone***, implies a cultural reason, in this case a testing stone for the Clan Munro but most certainly not a test in the normal sense.

Of the stones mentioned above, most seem to be ad hoc lifts as feats of strength with little grounding in stone lifting culture proper but so little is actually known about lifting stones using the plaid that there is the possibility that lifting stones on the boundary of human strength such as the ***Martins Lifting Stone*** and ***Crawford Putting Stone*** could for convenience be put easily into this bracket but unlikely in my opinion. It is simply not possible to expand any further on assisted lifting in Gaelic culture as so little is known but the fact remains that knowledge that it did exist helps further our understanding of stone lifting culture.

The question remains though is how was the plaid constructed into a lifting harness?

8. **LIFTING RINGED STONES**

Although the Dinnie Stones hold the accolade of perhaps being the most famous of lifting stones this position is almost entirely due to the man Donald Dinnie and his feat of strength with those two iconic stones at Potarch, Aberdeenshire. Though the notoriety of these stones an implied acceptance that in some way the lifting of ringed stones is or rather was an accepted and adapted style of stone lifting known to the Highlander. The true reality is that there is absolutely no evidence to support this. Again, there is every likelihood that where ringed stones existed and for whatever their original purpose, there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that a trial of strength would have been engaged.

Whereas the Dinnie Steens are dated to circa 1860 the oldest known example of a lifting stone with a ringed handle can be dated to the reign of King James V of Scotland (1513 to 1542) by the known existence of the ***Lifting Stane at Lifting Stane Farm, Closeburn***. Not much is known of this stone except that it was a large single stone with an attached iron

handle broad enough to admit two hands. One can only suspect that the stone was either lifted or lifted and carried a distance however the existence of this stone some 500 years ago can hint at some Gaelic origin.

The village of Closeburn is just north of the southern town of Dumfries and as far as possible from the Scottish Highlands as one could possibly imagine however the time frame for this stone and its location is important. Geographically, the hamlet of Closeburn is located within the Nith Valley which long after the introduction of the “Scots” language was still a recognised Gaelic speaking stronghold and the existence of this stone, culturally extremely similar to that of the lifting stones at Old Dailly Church, owes its existence to the remnants of a culture which would be mirrored in the Highlands and Islands. In this respect it entirely feasible that the lifters of this ringed stone would have shared similar cultural values and in some cases, even the Gaelic language of the Highlanders.

The lifting of ringed stones was most certainly not a common practice and in no way could be considered a generic style of lifting stone known throughout the country. Ringed stones only highlight the adaptability and attitude to the testing of physical strength and it should be noted that around the time of Donald Dinnie lifting and walking with the stones at Potarch, young men at Airth in the Scottish Lowlands were competing with each other in lifting the ringed stone located outside their local Blacksmith and now featured as the **Smiddy Stane** at the Airth Highland Games.

What the ringed stone provides, not through the lack of existence of these types of lifting stone, but rather a unique outlook on physical strength where what was available to lift was simply lifted in manly competition. Anecdotes of Highland physical strength lifting all sorts of ironmongery, be it cannons, heavy gates and so on, abound with a level of frequency that suggests that the attitude was simply to lift anything that was heavy. Traditional non-ringed stones have a degree of cultural significance surrounding their physical lifting however nothing like this can be attached to ringed stones implying that when they were lifted, it was more than likely that they were lifted in ad-hoc competition and nothing else.

One final point to make regarding ringed stones is that the push to attach cultural reasons for their lifting are perhaps more evident with the Dinnie Stones than any other. Consider that the stones at Potarch were known to have been lifted without use of the ring onto the wall of the Potarch bridge and this is merely a replication of a well established cultural lift of the stones themselves. It should also be noted that both Dinnie Stones were recovered by David Webster on the south bank of the River Dee well below the bridge parapets suggesting that there is also the possibility that each stone, in line with culture may have been subjected to the lift and throw, a style of lifting where the end result is making the stones irretrievable through an ostentatious feat of strength.

What can definitely be applied to the Dinnie Steens is their lift and carry aspect in Gaelic culture and the ostentatiousness of such a lift most certainly does not allow the provision of putting them down occasionally to walk a determined distance. The chapter on the **Eastern Highlands** fully examines the Gaelic heritage of Donald Dinnie and explains just why he lifted and walked with those famous stones.

In conclusion, ringed stones were lifted, they were perhaps not identified as being traditional but rest assured they would have been lifted within whatever parameters of Gaelic strength

culture could be applied and in this vein, lifting heavy ringed stones has much in common with the cultural aspects of the lift and carry as in most instances, they are a variant lift of the same.

PLACING LIFTS INTO A TIMESCALE

What is evident from the preceding is that culture and geography have played a substantial part in the story of traditional Gaelic stone lifting. There are clearly lifting styles such as “putting the wind underneath the stone” and the “lift and throw” that seem to have lost favour as a traditional style of lifting but were once the norm. Equally, with the advent of modern strength, older practices such as “shouldering” have now become an accepted norm however this is the wonderment of strength cultural history – attitudes change although it is fundamentally important to assess the cultural and historic reasons for a lift and put it into a proper context and time frame.

In this respect, assessing a Gaelic lifting culture requires an insight into the turbulent history of Scotland and simplifying major corresponding time frames with less emphasis on a micro analysis of geography and dialect but by talking a general and more practical overview of the major influences on a stone lifting culture. In this respect there are three important time scales which are relatively obvious.

- ***TIME BEFORE THE CLANS (5TH TO 11TH CENTURIES)***

Whatever way one looks at the history and early formation of Scotland, there are substantial academic arguments whether the Gaelic culture and language emigrated with the Dalriadic Scots of Ulster which colonised most of which is known today as the areas of Kintyre and Lochaber, or whether Gaelic culture was essentially in place before this. Whatever is the truth, there is no question that major elements of culture and language were shared in what later became Ireland and Scotland.

Underpinning this culture is Religion, which we do know was brought to Scotland via the establishment of monasteries instigated by St Columba, such as that at Iona. As previously discussed, the oral tradition of shared Irish and Scottish stories such as that of Connal Gulban give some insight into the strength culture of this period and to reiterate, this particular story describes four variant lifts.

1. Putting the wind underneath the stone
2. The Lift into the lap or fold
3. Shouldering the stone
4. The Lift and Carry

Also of interest in this time frame is the story of the establishment of Monkland’s Parish, now the town of Coatbridge where as tradition states, a Monk carried a large stone some 13 miles as an act penance and where he deposited the stone he was required to set up a new

Church. This particular stone is known as the **Pilgrims Stone** which is examined in Chapter Seven, "The Stones of the Lowlands".



Statue of the monk carrying the Pilgrim's Stone

What is assumed regarding the Pilgrims Stone is that, like Conall Gulban, it was carried on the shoulder as the Monk walked all those miles to establish his Church. Whether or not the basis of the story is factual, it is the fact that once again the lift and carry of a stone is highlighted as the ultimate lift of a heavy stone in this time frame, a time when the majority of the European nations as we know them today had yet to be established.

There is another story of stone lifting from this time period which is especially unique. The story is centred around the mission of St Mungo bringing Christianity to the lowland areas of Scotland centred around what is now Glasgow. Two local brothers listened to the teachings of St Mungo with one of them converting to Christianity but the other, in a statement of defiance towards the new religion, lifted a heavy stone above his head which promptly fell back down upon him killing him instantly. These two brothers were Picts not Gaels and so little is known of their basic culture and language that little can be explained other than it is stated that prior to battle, it is recorded that feats of strength by lifting heavy stones were carried out in the presence of the opposing enemy. How this was done is anyone's guess but what can be confirmed is that this time frame holds the origin of many but not all of what could be regarded as a traditional lift of a stone.

This was the time before the Scottish Clans and in the latter part of the period, the Gaelic language and its culture were in its supremacy throughout the entire country and for a time

extended for many years into the next important period of strength tradition and culture, a period when attitudes to strength and associated lifts make a substantial change.

- **THE FORMATION OF THE CLANS AND ESTABLISHMENT OF GAELIC CULTURE (12th CENTURY TO 1746)**

The Scottish Clans are, like all family associated groupings worldwide no different in that their ethnicity is not as culturally pure as perceived by most. In relation to the Scottish Clans it is the influx of other cultures that has possibly caused stone lifting, the cultural reasons for doing so and the method of lifting to be so different from that before however to what degree can only be speculated.

The origins of each Scottish Clan, established over a period of 3 centuries are linked to three individual ethnic groupings – each with its own culture that would in some way be assimilated.

Firstly we have those Clans that were formed through intermixing of the Dalraidic Scots previously mentioned with the indigenous Picts. In all likelihood both cultures would have been similar however the Gaelic of the Dalriada as they expanded over many areas of Scotland supplanted the Brythonic language, especially in the lowlands and hence Gaelic culture and obviously its strength practices such as the putting and lifting stones took root. This is the chief reason that stones such as the Blue Stones of Old Dailly and the Blue Stone of Kingcase owed their existence.

The second grouping of Clans are those whose basis is a mixture of Dalraidic/Picts with those Vikings who chose to stay and become assimilated into Gaelic culture with most of these Clans not surprisingly having a Hebridean island origin. It may come as no surprise that the known stones of the islands have a tendency to be more Icelandic in shape rather than the iconic oval such as that of the Inver Stone. There are sound geographical reasonings for this difference in shape however oval stones would still be available. There is no firm academic evidence however to suggest that a Norse influence would have played a part in the culture of Hebridean lifting stones but there are substantial differences in size, shape, lifting style as well as actual Gaelic nomenclature to assert that some influence did take place.

The final Clan grouping is again the insertion of the Norman French after 1066 with lower order knights being offered lands in Scotland after the battle of Hastings and subsequently they too became assimilated into a Pictish/Dalraidic culture. Perhaps the best associated stone with this ethnic mix is the **Menzies Stone** with the Clan origin being rooted in this Gaelic/Norman ethnic fusion.

Each of these groupings can be reasonably placed into geographical areas however from the 11th to the 18th Centuries; Gaelic culture became more similar with shared cultural practices however never to the extent that a “generic” culture could be established. This is the primary reason for the variance in strength cultures during this period, perhaps the greatest in Scottish history.

With regards to lifting styles there was still an emphasis on putting the wind underneath the stone and as explained within the Chapter on Manhood this became established as a requirement to show individual strength to practice in weaponry at the onset of puberty. It is during this period that, and as befitting a culture that was predominately warlike, attitude

counted to a massive degree and the strong were respected through oral tradition. There is no doubt that the lift and throw became established culturally during this timeframe as there is simply no mention of it beforehand. The lift and carry continued on from the previous time frame and although demonstrated with the likes of the aforesaid Menzies Stone, themselves a Clan of Pictish/Dalriadic and Norman mix, was still been a commonplace form of lifting.

The only lifting style that appears to have been dropped in this period is the “shouldering” of the stone. There are no accounts of it in oral tradition nor are there any recorded examples and one can only assume that the lift and throw has somehow for cultural reasons displaced the shoulder lift completely. This is also in this time frame that lifting a heavy stone onto a static object became established with its introduction most likely to have been established through cultural reasons for doing so. The vast majority of male Clan members would not have been sufficiently strong enough to be able to lift a heavy stone onto a 4ft or similar stone plinth. Strong men did exist within the Clans but it would be extremely naive to suggest that lifting onto a plinth was a rite of passage with associated cultural assertions, all evidence suggests that such a trial of strength was for selection of the strongest of the Clan who could become full time men at arms. Unlike putting the wind underneath the stone, a lift that was meant to include, the trial of lifting onto a plinth excluded all but those of superior strength.

Again it has to be emphasised that there are absolutely no records or stories in oral tradition that mention a stone being put overhead however there are many that mention the lift and throw which was obviously seen by the Gael as the greatest feat of strength that could be achieved.

Strangely, it also in this time frame that we first hear of stones being lifted with an iron handle which in essence established this type of lift having an older inheritance than putting the stone overhead.

In terms of strength measurement, the following is a list of lifts in order of cultural strength achievement for this time frame –

1. Putting the wind underneath the stone
2. Lifting into the lap or fold
3. Lifting onto a plinth
4. The Lift and Carry
5. The Lift and Throw (either with or without static object)

(NB The use of the Plaid in assisting a lift also appears in this period however so little of this method of lifting is actually known about and in any case would have unlikely appeared as a “trial” of strength and perhaps better suited under the banner of a “feat” of strength)

- ***THE DEMISE OF THE CLAN SYSTEM AND THE PRESENT (1746 till now)***

The five variant styles of lifting the heavy stone mentioned in the last section in all probability sustained itself for some many years into this particular important time frame but sadly, the knowledge of cultural requirements associated with a lift became to be corrupted and the influence of a new British culture co-terminus with a demise in the Gaelic language and its unique culture and its people, led to a substantial loss of knowledge of and the importance attached to stone lifting.

The Clan system was for all intents and purposes completely destroyed after the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie at the battle of Culloden in 1746. What had gone before was no more and the life of the Gaelic Highlander completely changed for many reasons. Perhaps the greatest death knell was the atrocity of the Highland Clearances, probably instigated many years before through a desire for the Stuart Monarch's of Great Britain located in London, to subject Clan Chiefs to have their sons educated at English educational establishments and thus the slow erosion of the Clan system had actually been instigated many years before the battle of Culloden.

Of course, the loss of over 170,000 Highlanders to the new lands in Australia and North America played its part in a culture drain that included strength and reasons for being strong. In essence, Gaelic culture pre 1746 had its basis in a readiness for war with opposing Clans and strength was structured around an ability to be successful in battle. With the Clan system being almost completely wiped out there was now no need to encourage strength and although it did still exist, its practice was no-where near as prevalent as it was during the height of the Clan system.

Concentrating on known lifts of this period, the practice of lifting to put the wind underneath the stone was still prevalent on the likes of North Uist although the Gaelic cultural requirements of proving manhood at puberty were now completely disassociated. Likewise the lifting of the heavy stone onto a dyke wall was still a common practice as well as the lift and throw and stone carry.

The suppression of Gaelic culture and language post 1746 has obviously had a major impact on strength and stone lifting. Not surprising that with a loss of culture, knowledge of how things were done also departs although many aspects of a reason to be strong were simply transferred to the Victorian advent of improved agricultural techniques that required strong farm workers. This was most evident in the tests of strength known to exist at **feeing fairs** although in many aspects these were restricted to agricultural areas such as Aberdeenshire, Perthshire etc but with much of the actual Highlands discarded. It is from this period that standards are introduced and in respect of weight, the 56lb weight was to be found in most farms. Gaelic strength feats such as throwing the weight simply become standardised whereas before there was none.

The creation of the modern Highland Games too had an influence on Gaelic strength, codifying and standardising events and perhaps this was what was required for a retention of Gaelic strength but in doing so, those events difficult to codify, perhaps through being more cultural than competitive in aspect, simply dropped off. Feats such as Maide Leasg, Dorn Fhuar and of course stone lifting, appearing as they did with Glengarry as mentioned above simply disappeared but it is the attitude of the heavies where tradition still remains.

Donald Dinnie lifted the stones at Potarch in what could be stated as a non-traditional manner however he was also known to have lifted other stones, with a particular favourite in Glen Esk which he lifted into his lap and took a walk with (lift and carry). Later we have knowledge of AA Cameron displaying many aspects of cultural strength with the stones. The question has to be asked why lift stones when they do not appear at an organised Games?

The answer to this is that it was part of both Cameron and Dinnie's culture of which there can be no doubt and there is good reason to believe that this would have also been evident

in other Highland Games heavies of the day but after two World Wars, the toll on youth simply destroyed the knowledge base.

How this knowledge dissipated is easily demonstrated in the number of known lifting stones in Scotland pre 1996. Up until this year there were only two, the Inver Stone and the Dinnie Stones and from which little or no cultural knowledge of Gaelic stone lifting could be truly derived. With the release of "**Of Stones and Strength**"¹²⁸ a few more traditional lifting stones were made known but still insufficient to determine cultural applications to stone lifting.

One would expect the Scottish Highland Games circuit to demonstrate true cultural aspects of stone lifting but they too have been effected by a loss of Gaelic culture and again some cultural assertions have been made which only cloud the true picture although what has to be said is that these Games is that the differences are relatively minor in nature.

The previously mentioned Stonemason's Challenge at the **Inverness Games** perhaps have the accolade of having a stone lifting event that holds true to culture by demonstrating the **lift and throw** with the exception that the stone is not traditional but a fabricated Atlas Stone and "Tacky"¹²⁹ is used to assist the lifter's grip on the stone. Further south, the annual Gourock Games, traditionally the first on the Scottish calendar has a stone lifting competition that incorporates the two ultimate's of stone lifting culture. The Gourock Games incorporate stone lift of a 170lb oval stone which has been referred to as the **Kempock Stone** although I am informed that the name relates solely to its unique putting stone and that the lifting stone has no name. The competitors lift the stone which is then carried a distance to a horizontal Caber suspended 3ft from the ground with the competitor being timed to throw the stone over commencing from its starting point. Obviously this incorporates both the Lift and Carry as well as the Lift and Throw which is an interesting corruption on Gaelic strength although perhaps, and even although I have seen failures in lifting the stone, at 170 lbs it could well be considered too light in comparison with the stone used at Inverness.

¹²⁸ *Of Stones and Strength*, Steve Jeck & Peter Martin. Published by Ironmind Enterprises (1996)

¹²⁹ *There is nothing to suggest that any substance was used to give a lifter any advantage whatsoever in Gaelic culture. What can definitely be stated that the culture, most certainly during the time of the Scottish Clans was adverse to any display of "softness" with an emphasis on doing things the hard way. In the modern idiom best demonstrated with the raising of the Caber prior to throwing. Early Caber tossers were expected to raise the caber themselves which is most likely to be in tune with Gaelic culture of old and transferring this to the stones, any advantage would go against the grain of Gaelic culture itself. "Tacky" was not around when stones were lifted and if was, it would not have been used.*



Gregor Edmunds of Scotland stone lifting at the Gourock Games

The previously mentioned Menzies Stone is of course well associated with the **Aberfeldy Games** where holding true to tradition, the competition is a Lift and Carry for distance. Again the use of “Tacky” is permissible and each year is returned to Menzies Castle for more traditional lifters to experience the feel of granite intermixed with sticky dried grass! An experience to be avoided at all costs. In the Lowlands again, the **Airth Highland Games** incorporates the lift and carry of the ringed **Smiddy Stane** which I do suspect has a basis in competition as part of an emulation of the more celebrated Dinnie Steens. The **Rossneath Games** has a traditional lifting stone called the **St Modans Stone** which is available for lifting but with an associated history which slightly askew (lifting into the lap to prove the move from puberty to manhood).

There are of course many other stones used at various Highland Games but on the whole there does appear to be a lack of Gaelic culture at the expense of “Games” culture with so many romantic assertions of strength. The traditional Lift & Throw Gaelic style is now known within Highland Games circles as **“Inverness Style”** probably as a consequence of the 1882 Games held by Glengarry but the nomenclature itself implies that it is so named as a result of a Highland Games rather than been seen as a traditional form of lifting and this is very much a problem when asserting a stone lifting culture in competition. If the basic history and culture is unknown, then the resultant corruption can manifest itself into a contorted and unrealistic history. Some Games express the history of the “Clan Champion” as attached to the feat of stone lifting where the truth is, in most instances it was not a singular position and

the nomenclature should be “Clan functional killer” because that’s what their purpose was. Romanticism of Scottish history can occasionally overtake itself quite spectacularly.

What is obvious is that no individual Games have a stone lifting event which is a mirror of another in the circuit underpinning an obviousness that there is a massive gap in understanding the fundamentals of Gaelic stone lifting. Although it would be fair to state that a number of Games provide a colourful and perhaps contrived associated history with the stones, it would be also fair to state that they all to a degree still demonstrate elements of the actual Gaelic requirements in relation to stone lifting.

Expanding the stones worldwide, many attempts have been made to replicate Gaelic stone lifting in many different fashions, one of which includes lifting a stone for repetitions. Without stating the obvious, there is absolutely no record either written or passed down orally of any traditional Scottish lifting stone having been required to be lifted for “reps”. Certainly have a competition in stone lifting for repetitions but it would be an affront to try and carry this off as an aspect of Gaelic culture as it is non-existent.

Lack of knowledge has thus, in regards to modern strength allowed the assertion of five types of lift, two of which did not even apply culturally to the Gael.

- a) The Lift into the lap or fold.
- b) The shouldered lift.
- c) The Lift and Carry.
- d) Putting the stone overhead.
- e) Lifting for repetitions.

Modern strength culture therefore dismisses the main stays of Gaelic stone lifting culture that is, its lowest lift, putting the wind underneath the stone as well as its most supreme, the throwing of the lifting stone but worse still, many contrived assertions of culture have been made to fit into the modern thus completely distorting or indeed corrupting the very origins of a stone lifting culture. Suffice to say that there is scope to include all aspects of lifting a traditional stone, be it culturally correct or modern as it has to be emphasised that there were no generic formal rules of stone lifting, just an application of culture. So if we turn the clock back some 300 years and witness the Inver Stone being put overhead, rest assured the person that did it would have been talked about and remembered. It is superfluous that this did not happen and remember underpinning everything about Gaelic strength is the ostentatiousness of the lifter, not the must do requirements of standardisation.

This is true Gaelic stone lifting and any future discussion about what is and what isn’t a lift should be only a discussion over whose lift was better. So when lifting that heavy stone do so with an approach that demonstrates the extremes of individual strength, do it with attitude and style whether modern or ancient. Lift it in Gaelic style and be ostentatious with it.

Chapter Five

Are you going to the stones? – Religion and it's attitude towards Gaelic Strength

***Cha dèanar sagart gun fhoghlam, 's cha dèan foghlam sagart.
(A priest should be learned, but learning won't make a priest).***

Throughout history, the impact of religious worship has moulded societies all over the world. In whatever fashion religion has altered perceptions and beliefs, very little has been written of how religious attitudes have made an effect on an existing or emerging strength culture and in this respect, Gaelic strength culture has been profoundly influenced in many areas by various changes and attitudes to religion in Scotland, particularly from the early emergence of Christian society and practice to the present day.

Just how religion has made such an influence can be seen in the various highs and lows of Gaelic strength as attitudes to strength were not always perceived in the same light; in some time frames strength was respected and indeed encouraged whereas in other periods it was frowned upon. Religion and Scottish strength go hand in hand and what is seen today as iconic examples of Scottish strength, be it stone lifting or any of the heavy events at a Highland Games, they have all been fashioned to some degree or other by religious attitudes.

As strength was very much part of Gaelic culture for centuries, it has been without question influenced by religious attitudes and practice and indeed this also includes certain aspects of paganism which also has had its part to play in Gaelic strength.

Why should knowledge of religious practice, its history and culture have such an influence and be so important is easily answered by the times when there was a demise in strength culture, but this too is important to understand as it assists in explaining where most of the strength games such as putting the stone or indeed stone lifting, actually took place and this knowledge tends to assist greatly in actually finding a long lost traditional stone of strength. It is however important to understand that religious attitude has indeed formed and created what we know today and this knowledge explains just why today's attitudes to Scottish strength exist.

Suffice to say, Gaelic strength incorporates many attitudes, some tolerant and others less so and in respect of religion, its practice has to a major degree met resistance to a complete assimilation of religious culture.

The time frame is important and stretches back to even the arrival of Christianity in Scotland however to emphasise the importance of religion to strength the following, rather hard hitting commentary explains religious attitudes and its impact -

“Shinty, putting the stone, tossing the caber, and other manly exercises, were freely engaged in, the different districts and parishes vying with each other in friendly rivalry, but the Calvinistic doctrines of the Highland clergy preached all the

manliness out of the people, and I don't think that even they will be bold enough to assert that they have preached anything better into them."¹³⁰

Considering the statement was made during a time of stringent Victorian attitudes underpinned by the staunchest of Presbyterian practice, the author is merely emphasising the truth. Presbyterian attitudes will be explained later however to find the origins of religious influence requires turning the clock back some 1500 years before to the emergence of Christianity and its arrival on Scottish shores.

THE CELTIC CHURCH -

Around the 6th Century, an Irish tribe from Ulster gradually settled in the west coast of Scotland forming a separate kingdom called Dal Riata (Dalriada). This settlement covered what is modern day Argyll and included most of the Hebridean Islands. The tribe known as the Scoti, brought with them tales of the Fionn warriors which later expanded in Scotland.

The Dalriadac Scots set up their capital at Dunadd in Argyll and began an expansion into the other areas of Scotland occupied by the Picts. It is known that with the Scots there was a strength culture that included lifting heavy stones referred to as "*nerthia*" and over many centuries their culture began to influence and take over from the existing Pictish culture. Near the end of the first millennium, the Picts were no more. Christianity arrived via the Dalriadic Scots with St Columba and St Ninian, and with them the earliest written records of a nation were recorded.

Stone lifting was known among the early Christian Missionaries. St Columba, the man who brought Christianity to the heathen Picts was noted for his individual strength and on setting up his monastery on the island of Iona, many monks were known to have lifted heavy stones as a mark of penance. On St Columba Bay, Iona, piles of stones some large, some small can still be seen. In a strength culture the Christian missionary too had to be strong or very little respect would be given to their teachings, especially with the warlike Picts whose culture was rigidly based on strength for war and a known disposition to anything seen weak, especially those peoples of the British tribes who had capitulated to Roman domination.

This early incarnation of the Celtic Church, although with no formal structure or allegiance to the Catholic Church of Rome was spread by Gaelic monks to Iceland well before the arrival of the Norse and to Germany setting up what became known as Schottenkirche – Scottish Monasteries. The Irish and Scottish Monks also spread Christianity to Belgium and Switzerland around the 8th Century and I am sure too, that some aspects of Gaelic Culture may also have been transferred.

In Scotland, Glen Lyon in Perthshire perhaps shows the best examples of a cultural, religious and ethnic mixing. Within the length of the Glen there are Roman Camps, Pictish Forts, religious standing stones and off course many artefacts relating to the Fionn warriors. The Bodach a Chraigh Fiannaidh dates from this time and forget any modern day notion of Scottishness or the concept of the Clan system, the Scottish Nation had yet to be conceived when this stone was first lifted.

¹³⁰ *p189 Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Glasgow Vol1 (1887-1891)*

Bringing Christianity to a country whose belief system was pagan and warlike would have been no easy matter and evidence suggests that many of the early Celtic Church missionaries may also have possessed a degree of strength which would have, in their physical presence, allowed them to have been respected by the pagan Picts. The message being delivered may have been strong but if delivered by a man seen to be physically weak would have had no impact and indeed the life expectancy of the priest would have been short.

Very little by way of physical evidence exists of the impact of Celtic Christianity and its attitudes towards strength save three very unique examples of history.

The cultural base of the Celtic church was the island of Iona, a place which held a great sway of power in the early days of Christendom in Europe, let alone Scotland, but there links to other monasteries such as at Lindisfarne in Northumbria, England which required monks to travel to and fro. Along the way there were various cells where there was an established presence of the church. One of these cells was known to exist in Govan which is now part of Glasgow. Perhaps more famous for being the home of ship building on the River Clyde and the home of Glasgow Rangers Football Club, the area has always had a notoriety for producing some tough men. Perhaps no tougher than an unknown monk who for penance was tasked to bring Christianity to an area some 13 miles east of Govan and establish a Church. The story of this monk is the history surrounding the town of Coatbridge in Lanarkshire.

“.....there is a tradition, that a certain pilgrim, in order to do penance for some sin was obliged to carry a particular stone in this direction from Glasgow and when he could bare it no farther and to build a church at his own expense.”¹³¹

Carrying a heavy stone from Govan some 13 miles and depositing it in a field, the Celtic Monk established his Church and as such, the local parish was known as the Monklands. The date of the establishment of the Church at Old Monkland is suspected to have been



circa 8th or 9th Century but it is this unique form of penance, one in which incorporates physical strength which is unique. There may well have been some relevance to this feat of strength but the reality is, its reasoning's are long lost in time. To cement the origins of the town of Coatbridge, a statue of the stone carrying monk was unveiled a few years ago about one mile from where he established his church.

[The Strength Origin of the town of Coatbridge - The Stone Carry](#)

The use of carrying a heavy stone for penance is not unique and is also replicated in other areas, strangely close to the town of Coatbridge and also in Lanarkshire.

Tinto Hill in South Lanarkshire forms the highest part

of that area of Scotland known as the Central Lowlands. The hill boasts the largest manmade cairn on any mountain or hill in the British Isles, and for good reason.

“On the summit there is an immense accumulation of stones, said to have been brought thither at different times from the vale (distance three Scotch miles) by the country people, upon whom the task was enjoined as a penance by the Priests of St John’s Kirk, which was situated in a little glen at the north east skirt of the mountain, though no vestige of it’s existence now remains except the burying ground”¹³²

Tinto Hill is unique, its summit is strewn with boulders of all sizes and shapes which geologically should not be there in the first place.¹³³ The ravages of the ice age should have left this hill as a bald summit, similar to the Southern Upland Hills further south and the only explanation for the existence of the stones is that they were brought to the summit by man. There is an array of boulders on the summit, of all shapes, sizes and weights. The exact remains of the Celtic Church at St John’s are no more although recent archaeological surveys can place a settlement of some form even further back in history.



[A nation of those who carry stones for penance - the summit of Tinto Hill](#)

The third story regarding stone lifting and the Celtic faith surrounds one of the many anecdotes regarding Saint Kentigren. This Saint, attributed to bringing Christianity to the lowland area of Scotland between the Forth and Clyde was known to occasionally base himself around Glasgow. He is better known as St Mungo, the patron saint of Glasgow and the depiction of his miracles form the basis of the city’s formal coat of arms. One legend

¹³²

¹³³ Per discussion with geologist David Harkin BSc

states that two local men, who in this period (early 7th Century) who would have been either Pictish but most likely, Britons, were known to the saint. One of the men called Anguen respected the Saint and lived by his teachings becoming Christian, the other named Telleyr was completely disrespectful. To show his displeasure of the religion, he lifted a large heavy stone and pressed it above his head which promptly fell back on him terminally ending his stone lifting career.¹³⁴

Perhaps there is some leverage in this respect to have Saint Kentigren as the patron saint of stone lifters; well the good ones at least.

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH -

The Celtic Church differed from the organised Roman Catholic Church which had a structural hierarchy centred from Rome. The Celtic version of Christianity, although very much based within a Roman Catholic ethos, was too many extents, monastic based with control from a number of powerful monasteries such as the aforementioned monastery on Iona. Differences between both Churches centred on differences of opinion as to when Easter should be celebrated however by the 8th Century, the Celtic church began to merge into the Roman Catholic faith and Scotland joined the rest of Europe in a the practice of a single faith.

The general loose approach of the Celtic Church suited the Gael, who from these early days managed to retain certain elements of pagan culture and work it around Christian principles. One long lasting link to the Celtic Church that remained in Gaelic culture was its reference to the stones - "***Am beil thu'dol do'n clachan***" translates as "are you going to the stones? It is not a reference to a stone lifting competition but a direct reference to the early days of the Celtic Church, when worship was carried out at a group of stones in the absence of a church, and it is from this practice that the word "clachan" meaning "stones", refers to a Highland community that has a church. There are other significant cultural aspects that continued which will be explained later however, with the Roman Catholic Church now firmly implanted in Scotland we will now examine what impact if any, this religious culture had on strength.

It would be fair to state that throughout the period when Roman Catholicism was dominant in Scotland, the Clan system emerged, Scotland declared itself as a sovereign state and everything after flourished and it was also during this time that strength flourished.

Whether strength, in any guise was encouraged by the Roman Catholic faith in Scotland cannot be ascertained. What can be firmly proved however is that strength and its practice was certainly not discouraged. Evidence of this can be found with two stones, or perhaps three, being the only traditional lifting stones in Scotland that exist within the grounds of a Church and not nearby. There are reasons for this, religious reasons that as a consequence point to these lifting stones being far older than most.

The location of some stones of strength gives an indication to religious attitudes. Within the Roman Catholic Church there was little or no strict observance of the Sabbath in respect of

¹³⁴ P365 *Kallanders of Scottish Saints. Alexander Forbes Bishop of Brechin (MDCCCLXXII)*

what one could do or rather, what one couldn't do. As such, it was quite acceptable that before and after Sunday Service, all manners of Games were played within the confines of the Churchyard. This same cultural aspect to Sunday sport also prevailed in Wales and in the Highlands, Putting the Stone and Lifting the Heavy Stone was common practice on a Sunday.

What should be respected is that distances to get to the Church were in many instances quite considerable and the Sunday Service was the only opportunity of men meeting others of the same Clan, but who did not reside in their locale. Also, as mirrored in Wales, it was the North side of the Church that was used for sporting activity as that side of the Churchyard was for those who merited unmarked graves. A strongly held Celtic belief, probably of Pagan origin was that the dead should face the sun (south) and that no man should be buried in the shadow of the Church (north).

If visiting some of the older Scottish Churches this belief system is quite obvious as few if any graves will be found on the North side of the Churchyard, this was the area where athletic and strength sports were practiced, at least before the Scottish reformation.



The ancient Church of Barevan showing a lack of graves on its North side - an apt location for a stone of strength

There are two physical examples of this practice still extant that shows this particular quirk of belief, and as such, it also adds a fair degree of antiquity to the practice of strength.

Perhaps the most famous examples of strength that existed on the North side of the Churchyard are indeed the famous Blue Stones of Old Dailly. The rhetoric that these stones existed as charter stones and/or sanctuary stones will be explained in that particular section however suffice to say, that when the stones were initially brought to the worldwide attention of the strength community, the stones existed on the north section of the Churchyard. Lifts

by Peter Martin Snr, Steve Jeck, David Horne, Nick McKinless and Lee Morrison were all carried out on the north side of the Church itself, the proper place for proper lifts of the stones and no doubt this would have been carried out by many others over the centuries.

The Blue Stones are not unique. The Putting Stone of the Clans at the ancient Church of Barevan near Cawdor also demonstrates this unique view that strength was tested to the North of the Church. What both locations also have in common is that they existed as places of worship, initially Roman Catholic and their use after the reformation for the Presbyterian faith of the Church of Scotland was extremely limited. Had both the Blue Stones and the Putting Stone of the Clans existed beside Churches solely utilised for Presbyterianism, they simply would have not existed and for those former Roman Catholic Churches that after the Reformation remained in use for Presbyterianism for some considerable time, if the Church had a lifting stone, it most surely would have been disposed of. Early Presbyterianism and strength did not go hand in hand.



[Aerial photograph of Old Dailly Church showing the obvious lack of graves to the north of the main church building](#)

The general rule of thumb is that if strength existed at the Church, as indeed shown with the stones at Old Dailly and Barevan then these are of a far older heritage than those stones found near to the Church or graveyard. This religious divide, because it actually existed can determine the age of strength practices.

THE REFORMATION AND ITS AFTERMATH –

The Scottish Reformation of 1560 was inspired by a disciple of Calvin called John Knox. From his base in Edinburgh, the Church of Scotland simply replaced the Catholic Church in the majority of the Scottish Lowlands and was achieved with such a swiftness that it was probably expected that the Catholic Highlands and Islands would follow suit. The problem with this was however Gaelic culture itself. For those in the Highlands and Islands that were Catholic, indeed almost all of it, it would be fair to say that there was little evidence to show that the Gael was completely devout as there was for many centuries, parallel beliefs in

demons, fairies and the underworld. Gaels believed in the “second sight” and prophecies but managed to adapt this belief system into a Roman Catholic religion that did little to oppress these beliefs. Calvinism on the other hand, with a strict adherence to the Biblical word, held no such notion of allowing this combination of paganism to attach itself to the Scottish Church.

Apart for the principle of believing that all men were equal under God and with this a non-acceptance of a religion with a hierarchy such as the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian faiths, Presbyterianism held a strict adherence to the observance of the Sabbath. For the majority of Gaels, this meant that strength activities which culturally were practiced on a Sunday, were definitely no longer acceptable.

“To them the stone in which good men for ages in Scotland have taken pleasure, is, not a load-stone to attract, but a stumbling-stone and a rock of offence.”¹³⁵

How did the Gael respond to this new fangled religion? Well in most quarters it did not go down too well. Before the arrival of a new Presbyterian Minister, the locals before and after Church service gleefully lifted heavy stones and putted the stone on the north side of the Church but this was no longer was acceptable.

“On the induction of Mr John Mackay to the church of Lairg in 1714, being the first Presbyterian minister who was settled in the parish, he experienced great difficulty in inducing the people to attend the church on Sundays They, like most Highlanders of their day, paid more attention to the British Solomon's " Book of Sports " than to any Gospel ministrations week day or Sunday. They paid no heed to their minister's, remonstrance's.....He was also a man of great physical strength and undaunted courage, which acquired him the cognomen of the " Ministear laidir," the strong minister. He was not making much headway with his rebellious flock. He always carried an immense cudgel in his hand. If his flock did not respect him for his new fangled, strict doctrine, they respected and feared him for his strength and big staff”

¹³⁶

There were many within the Protestant Faith that were known as “Ministear Laidir” –

In 1842, the Baptist Minister of Glen Lyon, Rev MacDonald was well known as having a laid back nature. One Christmas day he was walking near Glen Lyon House when he saw a group of young men throwing the hammer. MacDonald, who was well into middle age, remarked over the poorness of their throws and entered the field to show them how it was done. MacDonald rather unfortunately, taunted the men slightly regarding his own strength when he was younger and took hold of the hammer. A few turns, and off flew the hammer at an off angle. There was much laughter from the young men as MacDonald fell to the ground with his pride dented. Undaunted, he grabbed the hammer again and promptly threw it further than the marks of the best efforts of the young men. Walking away, he retorted that should they beat his mark that he will return, and this time he would remove his Cassock.

¹³⁵ P10 The Story of the Burning Bush – Rev JC Carrick (1890). The lodestone is also the lifting stone and as the book is a written account of the history of the Church of Scotland it is not unexpected to find a negative remark towards physical strength.

¹³⁶ P107 TRANSACTIONS of THE GAELIC SOCIETY OF INVERNESS. VOLUME XX. 1894-96

In 1727 the Rev James Leslie was the first Presbyterian Minister for the Parish of Moy, south of Inverness. Leslie was known as a powerful and zealous man who prior to one of his first Sabbath Sermons found a group of men putting the stone near to the Church. Not happy that the men were participating in sports on the Sabbath, Leslie took the stone and threw it further than any of the previous marks. Watching on as men got closer to his mark he again took the stone and threw it a massive distance into the adjacent river. Now time for Church.

Around 1720 the Parish Minister of the Island of Gigha was Angus MacDonald. MacDonald was known by all parishioners as "Ministear Laidir". He regularly participated in lifting and throwing heavy stones and was known to well beat the islands strongest men in all heavy events. He was later transferred to a parish in South Uist where he again gained the reputation as the strong minister. The Parish of South Uist included the Island of Barra which to this day still retains a populous which is 90% Roman Catholic. In 1722 he became the grandfather to the famous Flora MacDonald of Skye.

James Robertson was born in Atholl in 1701. He became a Parish Minister and in 1745 took up a post at Loch Broom. Robertson was not a Jacobite and tried hard to prevent his parishioners to join Bonnie Prince Charlie. He was later utilised as a Gaelic translator at the many trials of prominent Jacobites being held in London. Again, Robertson was also referred to as "Ministear Laidir".

While visiting the former Loch Broom Minister at Fearn in Easter Ross he went to hear the sermon given by his friend. The church was of gothic style however its roof was not slated and instead was covered with heavy flag stones. During the service the roof gave way pushing out the structural walls. The stone lintel over the main entrance began to sag under the weight and if it fell would have prevented any escape. Robertson ran to the lintel stone and shouldered the lintel and prevented it from falling thus saving the lives of many. From this day Robertson was always deserving of his title.

The Rev Adam Clarke was a distinguished religious commentator who over a period of 40 years wrote a religious study which was revered by Methodists for over 200 years. He was born in Tobermore, Ireland around 1760 AD and it is known that at the age of 5 years he amused visitors to his father's house by rolling large stones. Clarke's natural strength is attributed to his mother's lineage. She was a McLean from Islay and there were notable men of strength in her family. Her brother was a Rev John McLean who was known for his strength. He could bend iron bars and roll up large pewter dishes with his fingers. Not a man to get on the wrong side off, he was known to have discarded his religious virtues during an argument with an English army officer who was bodily lifted and thrown clean through a window only touching the earth some distance outside the building.

The above text makes mention of the "**Book of Sports**", a proclamation made by Charles I to deal with the enforcement of the North of England Catholics by the Protestant Puritans in attempting them to renege from strength sports on a Sunday. King Charles, recognising that the practice of strength on a Sunday only assisted the availability of the numbers of men at arms, proclaimed that sporting activity on a Sunday was allowable. It is highly unlikely that the Gael in the Highlands and Islands would have any formal knowledge of the "Book of Sports", their belief that strength to be exercised on a Sunday was simply a cultural practice but that big stick was wielded by many Church Ministers and for that reason, those Gaels

who remained Catholic simply referred to the Protestant faith as **Creideamh a' bhata-bhuidhe** – the Church of the Yellow Stick.

Perhaps the greatest wielder of the yellow stick was the Rev Alexander Pope, the Parish Minister at Reay, Sutherland around 1730. Once again, a man known for his immense strength, it was reported that he beat to a pulp any strong man participating in stone throwing or stone lifting. This Alexander Pope is not to be confused with his poet namesake who was only 4 feet in height.

The dominance of the Scottish Presbyterian faith in the Highlands and Islands was not overwhelming and indeed it took some-time to firmly establish its roots and doctrine to the Gaelic community. There may have been solid differences in religious ideology and for resistance to it to be so forceful, as it was in many cases, but it was this strict adherence to the laws of the Sabbath that was the most contestable and this undeniably is as a consequence of the Protestant attitude towards Sunday athletic sports. Again, the following text emphasises the lengths extended to by the Gaels in presenting an unwelcome attitude to any representative of the Church of Scotland.

“On the night of his first arrival at Lochcarron, an attempt was made to burn the house in which he lodged, and for some time after his induction his life was in constant danger. But the esteem he could not win as a minister, he soon acquired for his great physical strength. The first man in Lochcarron in these days was the champion at the athletic games. Conscious of his strength, and knowing that he would make himself respected by all if he could only lay big Rory on his back, who was acknowledged as the strongest man in the district, the minister joined the people, on the earliest opportunity, at their games. Challenging the whole field, he competed for the prize in putting the stone, tossing the cabar, and wrestling, and won an easy victory. His fame was established at once. The minister was now the champion of the district, and none was more ready to defer to him than he whom he had deprived of the laurel. Taking Rory aside in a confidential crack, he said to him – “ Now Rory, I am the minister, and you must be my elder, and we both must see to it, that all people attend church, observe the Sabbath, and conduct themselves properly”. Rory fell in with this proposal at once. On Sabbath, when the people would gather to their games in the forenoon, the minister and his elder would, and each taking a couple by the hand, they would drag them to church, lock them in, and then return to catch some more. This was repeated until none were left on the field. Then stationing his elder with his cudgel at the door, the minister would mount the pulpit and conduct the service.”¹³⁷

There is a similar story of a Church Minister from Drymen to the south of Loch Lomond also competing and beating the local men.

It is from this particular time frame that the phrase **“Ministear Laidir”** – strong minister, appears in many anecdotes about strength, and there are many that emphasise the strength of a particular Church Minister implying to some degree that the Church had at given some thought as to the physique of the minister and his respective strength, before he was unwittingly loosed upon a Gaelic community.

¹³⁷ P54 *Familiar Illustrations of Scottish Life*. Rev Charles Rogers - the account details the arrival of the Rev Eneas Sage on his arrival within the Parish of Lochcarron.

As the Presbyterian faith began to spread, so to its attitude towards strength became more imbedded in a doctrine of non-adherence to cultural pursuits. Becoming more entrenched in the daily life of the Gael, the structure of the Church allowed for suitable punishments to be administered via its Kirk of Session. Although the following example is taken from lowland Scotland, the general ethos is the same. Strength pursuits on a Sunday were not permissible by God and you will be punished.

“William M’Kay was accused before the Session 21 April for casting and putting the stone with the English Solders in the Krikyairde on the Sabbath in tyme of sermon”¹³⁸

Poor William McKay, his choice to do whatever on a Sunday was not his to choose. It is during this period that many of the Scottish lifting stones appear on the established “coffin roads” leading to the Church. Sufficiently close to the Church to be accepted as a gathering point, but sufficiently distant from it to avoid disconcerting eyes. Over some time however, the stranglehold of the Church became to be totally acceptable and prevailing attitudes, even amongst the Gaels themselves, had been completely reversed.

“There were many sad things done then, for those were the days of foolish doings and of foolish people. Perhaps, on the day of the Lord, when they came out of church, if indeed they went into church, the young men would go to throw the stone, or to toss the cabar”

These were the words recorded by Alexander Carmichael when speaking to a Gaelic woman on the island of Lewis in the mid 19th Century. Perhaps the most defamatory statement of the period is made by the Rev.....of Inverness.

“There is nothing remarkable in the features or bodily strength or exercises of the inhabitants: and although the games of football, shinty, throwing the stone, hammer and bowls were formerly common among the lower orders no amusement of this sort are now practiced, except among boys and apprentices on Christmas and New Years day, the sober realities and industrious habits of the present age having seemingly banished from the thoughts of the peasantry the pastimes of their forefathers.”¹³⁹

Religion had now transformed an important part of Gaelic strength culture into something that was considered foolish. By the Victorian period, the resurgence of interest in Gaelic strength pursuits via the Highland Games was also under severe criticisms –

“It is one of the devices of popery to unite religion and revelry – the services of the chapel in the morning with theatrical and similar amusements during the remainder of the day; and treading in the same course, Scottish Episcopacy, in her palmy days, the days of infatuated Stuarts, James the Sixth and his immediate successors – blended what they, to like Mr Chambers, of Glenmorrison, would style “religious solemnities” with foolish demoralising games, races and dancing”.¹⁴⁰

“It is also deeply to be regretted, that in the north of Scotland, a Doctor of Divinity, with his family, and also a licentiate, and others, both clergymen and elders, should have been present, since the Peebles Festival, at the celebration of low, degrading

¹³⁸ P329 Annals of Dunfermline A.D. 1069 – 1878, Ebenezer Henderson 1879

¹³⁹ New Statistical Account of Scotland 1845

¹⁴⁰ P388 The Original Sessional Magazine for 1858 – 1860 Volume 4

games, which highly to their honour, some newspapers that make no profession of religion have loudly condemned. It has been no unusual thing to hear of Popish priests, Episcopalian and Moderate clergymen, being present at these games.....Why should not the Presbyteries of Inverness, and Aberdeen, and Kincardine O'Neil, Lockerby, Dumfries, etc., issue similar warnings against Highland Games and Balls at Moffat, Dumfries, Banchory, Braemar, and Balmoral?"

So even the Highland Games were not exempt from scathing religious attacks. Perhaps the point has not been emphasised in the history of the Highland Games is that, if it was not for Royal Patronage and the backing of the ruling and upper classes of the Victorian period, there is absolutely no doubt that the Games as we know them today would have not existed. Not everyone liked the idea of the Games and it is a romantic or clouded view to think that at no time were they ever under attack because they were and it is clear that what attempts were made by the Church to make its view, were obviously suppressed due to a high association in Victorian culture.

Although the strict observance of the Sabbath is far more watered down than it once was it is important to emphasise that particularly in the Outer Hebrides, many still ascribe to this observance and the visitor to the likes of North Uist should be well aware that lifting stones of strength on a Sunday may well be seen as disrespectful.

PAGAN BELIEFS-

Religion has had a profound impact on the application of Gaelic strength through interpretation of religious doctrine. Underpinning Gaelic culture however has always been a belief in the underworld, a land of goblins, fairies and kelpies and to which a healthy respect was always given. In this respect, there are two known stone lifting sites which emphasise this belief and indeed have an impact on where stone lifting actually took place.

About 3 miles along the road between Braodford and Elgol on the island of Skye, there is a prominent hillock to the side of the road with a resplendent monolithic stone perched on top which at first glance, and if informed that stone lifting took place here, one would suspect that a heavy stone would have been lifted on top of the mound with perhaps the obvious plinth being used. This was definitely not the case as the hillock is known as "**An Sithean**" – the fairy hill or mound and is itself the subject of many tales of folklore regarding fairies singing songs, alluring unsuspecting travellers to a quick demise etc. The hillock was not a place which would have been visited, even through curiosity and the strongest of Clan men would have simply have given the area a wide berth when travelling along the road.

Stone lifting did take part at an sithean however it took place on the roadside, not on the mound. Without an understanding of Gaelic culture and belief, it would be easy to believe the converse and lift stones on the summit of the hillock but what stone lifting did take place here, was during the late 19th Century, a time when religion had almost ground Gaelic belief systems to dust yet there still lingered an almost blind acceptance that the underworld still existed. (See Clachan An Sithean)



An Sithean in the foreground with what would appear to be a plinth on its green summit - the lifting stones are not in the photograph being below the hillock.

To the south-west of the village of Paible in North Uist, the vast flat machair is broken by a prominent hillock known as **Creag Hasten**. The site again has so much Gaelic folklore attached to it, some showing Norse influences with the location being known also as “**Thor’s Kettle**” but it also has an underworld influence. The location on a fine day would probably be the finest stone lifting site in the entire world, the expansive machair broken at the coast with white sand beaches being lashed by a turquoise sea. The summit of Creag Hasten is a flat bowling green interspersed with gigantic monolithic stone blocks and at first glance, one would be forgiven to suggest that sporting activities such as stone lifting and putting the stone took place here. It did not however and the location does have a lifting stone - **Clach Ic Caoilte**, but the stone was definitely not situated on the obvious summit. It was situated on the slopes as no self-respecting Gael would venture near the summit due to its underworld associations. The present landowner, a local farmer explained that when he was younger it was simply a place where you would not visit and even today, only visited as a necessity if feeding cattle have inadvertently strayed.

So underpinning whatever religious doctrines which prevailed, was an attitude and belief system that was almost pagan in origin. Even paganism has had an effect on Gaelic strength whatever strength discipline was being pursued.



The foreboding summit of Creag Hasten, North Uist

RELIGIOUS CEREMONY – MARRIAGE & DEATH

After the Presbyterian reformation, Gaelic culture adapted to its strict observance of the Sabbath by adopting strength into religious ceremony. It is well established that Highland Marriage ceremonies incorporated revelry and a great deal of consumption of alcohol and the competitive element would always rise with stone putting common place in such ceremonies.

“Last weekend a wedding was solemnised in the wild but beautiful Glen of Urquhartas merry makings of this sort do not occur every day, even in the Highlands, the guests wisely resolved to make the most of the occasion, and they accordingly kept up the festivities from Tuesday till Saturday night. Among many diversions resorted to for amusement, the athletic national sport of “putting the stone”, was the favourite which a man named, “Ian- mor- na- Cuinn”, about six feet six inches high, the Goliath of the Glen, outdistanced al his competitors.....”¹⁴¹

Gaelic wedding ceremonies were lengthy affairs and strength competitions would have taken place at every single one of them in the past. What should be highlighted is that in those days, strength mixed with copious amounts of whisky were the norm and competitions between men were not exercised through sobriety. That alcohol is also associated with religious ceremony can equally be seen in Gaelic funeral culture.

Death and the Gael was a quaint mix between religious practice and paganism with such beliefs that the deceased when laying in his house would have had mirrors covered and windows open to allow his spirit to depart. Additionally, when the funeral party arrived at the cemetery, it was believed that the spirit of the deceased would guard the cemetery gates until the next person who had died was buried and took their place. This pagan belief caused many fights when two people were being buried at the same time as opposing funeral parties did not wish their beloved to be standing at the gates for too long. Apart from the fact that women were not allowed into the cemetery during interment is only one of many peculiar beliefs that was held by the Gael, whether his religion was Roman Catholic or Protestant.

Getting to the cemetery is where strength culture applies itself. The road or track to the cemetery from a township could span many miles over rough terrain and these tracks known as “coffin roads” were well used every Sunday to get to worship. The length of these tracks could span many miles and every now and again, when used for funeral purposes the deceased’s coffin would be placed on either a flat plinth of rock or a flattened cairn. These were known as coffin stops and they are so important in Gaelic strength.

The following stones are located or were known to have been located at a “stop” on a coffin road –

¹⁴¹ A depiction of a Highland Wedding written in 1829 and reprinted in the Inverness Courier of 6th September 1929

- ***The Puterach***
- ***Monachyle Stone***
- ***Clach-neart Glenlivet***
- ***Newtomore Stone***
- ***Bohennie Stone***
- ***Clach Altruman Mor***
 - ***Glenelg Stone***
 - ***Achness Stone***

Prominent in the history of Gaelic strength are anecdotes that strength such as putting the stone took place near to the Church or Graveyard. Strength would certainly not be allowed at the Church through Presbyterianism and hence, the thoughtful Gael, simply met his kin and enjoyed competition a short distance away, naturally beside a track – a coffin road and at an identifiable place – a coffin stop. This ensured that the prying eyes of the Minister would not view what was taking place. It is the knowledge of these “coffin roads and stops” that have thrown up a greater knowledge of stone lifting.

The Puterach at Balquhiddel is situated at a known coffin stop, as is the Bohennie Stone, Clach-neirt Glenlivet, Monachyle, among many others. These lifting stones exist at the last known coffin stop before a Church or Graveyard but other activities also took place at these locations.

To the west of the Highland Village of Newtonmore, an ancient coffin road stretches from the hamlet of Nuide to the graveyard at St Brides. The coffin road has through time been affected by encroaching agriculture and even a railway line was built over it, but the last coffin stop still exists. Through the ravages of time, the coffin cairn has been destroyed by a tree growing through the centre and scattering the cairn stones. One extremely large stone was definitely not part of the cairn, it is far too heavy and is obviously the lifting stone associated with this track. Curiously though, close to the lifting stone, there is a grey round stone, so obviously not part of the cairn.

Neil Ramsay, an expert on these ancient tracks and construction of coffin cairns confirms that the large stone was most definitely not part of the cairn whose construction was purely made of far smaller stones. The location of the large stone, being a lifting stone is entirely obvious although this is beyond even local knowledge. The site has also been visited by Rob Ritchie of Newtonmore, a stalwart of the local Highland Games in the 1970's and indeed one of the first lifters of the lost Stone of Heroes which was used at the Newtonmore Highland Games. Although Rob himself has no knowledge of this stone, it is only recently that the knowledge of lifting stones and coffin roads has been made known.

Returning to the obvious small grey stone, would this almost perfect sphere of granite be discarded onto a cairn or was it used for other purposes? Even restraining a desire for the obvious, the stone is a Putting Stone and indeed its obviousness was such that when in 2013, the local farmer constructed a new wooden fence bordering the coffin road at this location, the small grey stone disappeared.



Lifting stone and Putting Stone side by side

That a substantial number of lifting stones exist on these ancient tracks cannot be under emphasised. These tracks, amounting to many hundreds in the Highlands and Islands, many of which have yet to be properly explored are indeed the future of any further research on Gaelic strength. Put quite simply, where such a track exists, along its length there will be a place where a “lifting stone” exists. It may not be mentioned in writing, such as the above stone at Newtonmore, but they will exist and they will co-exist with putting stones.

Alcohol was again a large part of Gaelic social culture as it applied to strength. The coffin of the deceased was carried by local men taking turns to show respect and along the way, whisky was drank in large quantities –

“But the hillock for the cask(of whisky) is becoming indistinguishable, and the stones nearby for the trials of strength – the larger for the mature and the smaller for the younger men are no longer in vogue. Some may yet look back with wistful eyes to the days when drink, dancing and fighting were inseparable from a “good” funeral” ¹⁴²

The above refers to an ancient coffin stop near to Glen Elg in the North West Highlands and again only emphasises the use of such tracks and off course, the use of alcohol in strength.

Another element of funeral culture of note is the carrying of the coffin. Again Gaelic belief systems emphasised that no man should be at the ass of an animal and hence a true Highland funeral does not involve a horse and hearse. Later, Victorian literature and its love of the Highlander overlooked this aspect of culture with an emphasis on the piper playing his bagpipes at the head of a horse drawn hearse and many funerals were later conducted in this manner. Suffice to say a funeral is a funeral, but there is only one Gaelic funeral rite and it isn't the Victorian perception.

To my own personal knowledge, the last traditional Gaelic funeral took place on the island of Coll where a former resident of the island was returned to their home soil by ferry and on

¹⁴² *Benderloch, or Notes from the West Highlands by William Smith*

landing, the coffin was carried to its resting place. Curiously the island of Coll exhibits one of the best examples of a lifting stone at a coffin stop, at Torastan.



Clach Altruman Mor, Coll and "Putting Stones"

The lifting stone, the Clach Altruman Mor is obvious and it is known that to rest the coffin of a deceased, the stone was lifted off the plinth and replaced as the funeral party continued towards the graveyard. What is curious however is the array of slightly lighter stones that are obvious behind the plinth. I was informed that these stones were "putted" or "thrown" as part of an act of remembrance to the deceased and although I would have a tendency to dispute this act as generic of a Gaelic strength culture, the facet of remembrance entwined with exhibits of strength is purely Gaelic in origin. There are stones that were lifted for remembrance, to remember the individual or to remember a community however the most common form of remembrance in this respect was to place a stone on a cairn to remember the deceased. The fact that these stones were purportedly putted or thrown cannot be confirmed however the basis of this curious facet does ring true to the ethos of Gaelic culture and is further discussed in a preceding chapter. (See Chapter Six I do this for you to remember me by.)

One aspect of these coffin road tracks is the obviousness of the many intermittent piles of cairns that to many, even those who currently live in areas where such a track exists, are put down simply as cairns placed to mark out the route. The Gael navigated his way throughout the Highlands through local knowledge and language, with in most cases, the shapes of mountain tops being an obvious indicator of where you were. If passing between the Monadhliath (the grey hills) and Am Monagh Ruadh (the red hills now anglicised as the Cairngorms), the Gael would know that he is somewhere between Kingussie and Aviemore. He did not require marker or route cairns so these intermittent cairns exist for another and singular practice. They are for remembrance of the deceased.

“Cuiridh mi clach air do chàrn”.

I will put a stone on your cairn. (i.e. I will remember you / you won't be forgotten.)

These coffin cairns by their existence do mark the route of the ancient track but each stone was placed by an individual as an act of remembrance and as previously stated, it is beside one of the last of these cairns before the church or graveyard on an established track that a lifting stone will be found.

These tracks were not solely for the purpose of carrying the deceased and were used primarily as the local road which would take one from A to B using the contours of the land and local knowledge to accommodate the easiest way forward. These were the roads used by whisky smugglers and by those attending church on a Sunday and the majority of those that remain are indeed extremely remote.

One of the remotest of “coffin” tracks that exist with an incumbent lifting stone is the track that extends from Bohenie in Glen Roy to the Church of Gille Chaorral in Glen Spean. To emphasise the remoteness of this track, in recent years a BBC radio commentary team exploring the track required assistance from the local Mountain Rescue to affect their safe removal from the hillside, this despite the obviousness of the “remembrance cairns” that exist along the route.



Coffin Cairn on the Bohenie track

Far different in construction than the remembrance cairn at Newtonmore, the stones laid down at the many stops on the Bohenie track are substantially large with many that exceed 200lbs in weight. Of course the geography of both Newtonmore and Bohenie are far different with, on the Bohenie track very few small stones available to actually construct a memorial cairn but the fact remains that the heavier stones were indeed lifted.

There are many hundreds of known coffin roads in the Highlands and Islands and more recently it has become somewhat of a hobby by some who enjoy walking the length of them and soaking in the history at the same time. Every single one of these routes would have,

and most still do, coffin or remembrance cairns dotted along their entire length. They are worthy of exploring and perhaps a little stone lifting archaeology will uncover a few hidden trials of strength as this is where they will be found.

Chapter Six

I do this for you to remember me by – Strength & Remembrance

Guilainibh mi gu'm chruaich, a threininbh, togaibh clach sa bheinn do'm chliu.

(Carry me to my mountains, heroes; raise a stone to my fame) ¹⁴³

Following on from the previous chapter which introduced the concept of strength for remembrance we begin this chapter with a story.

In the early 18th Century there lived a MacKinnon from Strath on Skye known as **Glagaan Gluin 'an Triubhais Bhric** translated as "Shaky Knees of the grey trousers". MacKinnon was a local man celebrated for his strength and although his supposed nickname appears at first to be demeaning in a fashion, it is far from it. MacKinnon was a resident of Suishnish, a short distance from the township of Boreraig and a small un-bridged stream set in a steep gully separated both communities. MacKinnon was reputed to have carried an 18cwt flat slab of rock to bridge the gully but what is known is that when it was being secured, MacKinnon took the full weight of one side of the slab on his knees. Most certainly his knees shook while he took the weight and consequently, the bridge which still exists, is known as Drochaid Glagaan Gluine – the bridge of shaky knees. For as long as the bridge remains, so too will be the memory of Shaky Knees MacKinnon.

Although MacKinnon would be in all respects be completely unknown to the worldwide strength community, many years after his feat of strength his name lives on within the Gaelic community on the island of Skye.

For many hundreds of years, and perhaps even to a lesser extent in modern times, there has always been a compulsion by the Gaelic male to be remembered; to be mentioned by future generations and celebrated. There were perhaps many ways this could be achieved, being known as a story teller or famed for the ability to recite poetry are just two of a number of ways to be remembered, but it is with strength that remembrance becomes more poignant. Wanting to be remembered was equal only to a deep rooted fear of having to leave a local community and never return and in Gaelic culture this has resulted in strength being applied for the remembrance of individuals as well as communities.

The following is an account of the strength of Iain Ciar or John MacDougall 22nd of Dunollie which took place around the end of the 17th Century.

“John Ciar accepted the Earl’s offer and was ready to start for Ireland the following morning. His lady advised him to take his servant, Maclain Leigh (Livingstone), with him; but John was so confident in his own prowess that he saw no necessity to do so. When he was setting out he took a round heavy stone and threw it from him on the roadside that it might serve as a memorial for him in case he might not return. His

¹⁴³ *The Language, Poetry and Music of the Highland Clans; Temora by Ossian, Donald Campbell (1862)*

servant lifted the stone with ease, carried it some distance, and then threw it from him on the roadside saying, "Lie there as a memorial of both should we not return" ¹⁴⁴

The narrative does not mention as such but the stones would not have been lifted in isolation and would have been lifted and thrown in the presence of members of the local community (a rather futile exercise otherwise) and in this particular example, Ciar had been requested to assist an Irish Lord with ridding a community of a rather troublesome robber who had been known to have killed many people. There was the chance that Ciar would not have returned to his home, likewise his servant, and both made sure that they would have been remembered through the exercise of a feat of strength.

The story of Ciar is not folklore but a story of the real man who existed and which has been passed down through generations; his exploits in Ireland, where he defeated and beheaded the troublesome warrior were later rewarded when after supporting the Jacobite Rebellion of 1715, and losing lands after the battle of Sheriffmuir the following year, Ciar fled to Ireland and was subsequently given land by the same Irish Lord whom he had assisted. Although not a generic part of culture, being remembered for strength still existed up until recent times.

On the island of North Uist, the A867 road between Lochmaddy and Clachan is perhaps the only recognised modern state road on the entire island. The road was only recently upgraded to one lane in each direction which required the obvious widening of the older existing road. While constructing the new road, builders working at Loch Tomasad Beag bulldozed a large round stone into the lochan. This stone was not seen by the local people as a traditional lifting stone but one which was associated with the remembrance of an individual.

In 1918 Ailean Raohnailt (Allan MacDonald) was required to leave the island to find work in Glasgow. As with the culture he feared that he would never again return and to leave his mark he lifted the large round stone at Loch Tomasad proclaiming "I do this for you to remember me by". One month later, Allan died in an industrial accident on a shipyard on the River Clyde at Glasgow. The stone stood for many years as a poignant reminder of him as a person as well as his strength until the stone was bulldozed into the lochan on the creation of the new road.

The depth of the lochan meant that the stone could not be retrieved but to appease the locals for this unfortunate occurrence, the builders placed another stone (un-liftable) at the site of the former "***Ultach Ailean Raohnailt***". In addition to this the builders also constructed an unplanned car lay by (parking area) adjacent to the stone for those visiting, but the truth of the matter is that the memory of Ailean Raohnailt is now lost in the deep murky waters of Loch Tomasad and it is more than likely than within a few generations, this memory and aspect of Gaelic culture will be long lost. I would like to think that to the reader who has the opportunity to visit Scotland and indeed North Uist, that he would take a few minutes of his time to pay respects and continue this memory of strength. The stone is

¹⁴⁴ p158 *The Records of Argyll, Lord Archibald Campbell (1885)*

situated on the south side of the road only a mile or so from the hamlet of Clachan.



The replacement memory stone of Allan Lamb

Underpinning this culture of remembrance is the fear of not returning home. The above are two examples when related to an individual however what happens when a whole community fears that it will never return?



Stone raised to the memory of the people of Kinloch Glen

The ravages of the Highland Clearances on the communities within the Highlands and Islands were not pleasant. People were replaced by sheep and shipped, on most occasions against their will, to the new lands in North America. Often this took place within a matter of days with little warning but the culture of remembrance to the Gael was still strong.

Between 1826 and 1828 the removal of the communities on the island of Rhum took place. The community of Kinloch Glen on the island were given exactly one week's notice of their

requirement to leave their family home and be removed to North America. Again, to prove the importance of community and the remembrance of it, a group of local men wanted to construct a monument for those who were left on the island to remember them by.

It is stated that no more than four local men, days prior to departure, moved a massive glacial boulder onto a flat rock plinth and this was done for those in future generations to remember them by. There is no longer a community in Kinloch Glen and it is perhaps even sadder, that the culture surrounding this particular act should be misrepresented as two recent books actually describe the boulder as a “clach cuid fir”. Clearly plagiarised and ill researched but the heartening aspect of the presence of the stone within the Glen is shown on the above photograph. At least one person has remembered. Another aspect of Gaelic culture is to respect the dead by placing a stone atop the cairn or stone laid down to honour the deceased. There is only one single stone atop this boulder in Kinloch Glen.

One of the most remote of all the Scottish Islands is North Rona, situated closer to the Faroe Islands than Edinburgh, it can be best described a rock that sits lonely in the vastness of the North Atlantic Ocean. A terrible plague hit the island in the late 17th century and all the 30 or so inhabitants perished. Alexander McLeod of Harris discovered the great tragedy and disposed of the dead however before leaving the island he lifted a large heavy stone which he placed on a rock ledge as an act of remembrance. The stone still exists and is known as the ***Ultach Fear Hiort*** – the lift of the St Kildans.

There are many oral tales in Gaelic tradition about stone lifting which will never be found in written literature. One such story is of a strongman from Tiree who lifted a very large stone from its socket in a graveyard. The stone was reputed to be liftable by three men such was the strength of Walter Carmichael and as the stone had been brought to Tiree from the sacred island of Iona, there is no doubt that the stone had religious significance. The emphasis of the story is one, the fact that it was lifted and two, it has only be lifted by Walter Carmichael and this format indeed follows for a number of lifting stones in the Highlands and Islands. They have been lifted once and once only, for remembrance.

In this respect, perhaps the most challenging of lifting stones is the ***Ultach Dhomhail Mhoir*** in North Uist, a massive boulder pressed overhead by Donald McLellan circa 1876. The stone has only been lifted by McLellan in this fashion and his family still resist any notion that it was lifted in any manner, by anyone since. Clearly lifted to be remembered, and perhaps the inclusion of a plaque beside the stone is a family assertion of the fact, but not all of the community believe that this feat of strength took place in the manner described.

This emphasises a fundamental of Gaelic strength in relation to remembrance, it is for the community to assert the strength of the individual and not the lifter himself. This principle is perhaps the complete opposite of modern strength culture where proclaiming strength via social networking sites is culturally acceptable. Rest assured this would not have been acceptable to the Gael whose community was rather restricted in size in comparison to the world wide web.

Stone lifting is a personal strength challenge but when observed by others, it matters how the stone is lifted.

Fraigalachd – show of personal strength

Fraigal – ostentatious of strength

Raiteachas (Rajty- ach- as) – n,f trial of strength a raiteachas air a cheile, competing, emulating each other from ostentatious motives, arrogance, pride.

These three Gaelic phrases, probably now rarely used in context, again emphasise the existence of a Gaelic strength culture which has cultural rules. All of Gaelic stone lifting and strength culture emphasises that you should not be known as ***fraigal*** however when lifting to be remembered, being ostentatious would appear to be acceptable although the line would most certainly be drawn at bragging.

To understand Gaelic culture in this respect, there is a well-known story about a young Gael from the islands leaving after finding work in Glasgow. After a year or so he returned home to visit friends and family. Before leaving Glasgow, and knowing that he would be expecting some really cold weather on his return home, he purchased a rather expensive but warm greatcoat. On his return to his native island, he found the weather cold but even colder was the response to the young man by his fellow islanders. He was acknowledged in a polite way but his welcome home was not as expected. After some time it suddenly occurred to him that life away from the island had meant that he had forgotten some customary rules. What had altered his welcome was the fact that he was not wearing clothing associated with his community but underpinning this was the fact that he had forgot the custom of social acceptance and that in itself was sufficient for the cold response. There were in existence many rules that are indeed difficult to comprehend in a modern sense and these also were exhibited in behavioural attitudes towards strength.

It is known that the famous Gaelic travel writer, Martin Martin, being Skye born and bred but educated in the Lowlands, was treated with great suspicion on his tours of the Hebrides purely as a result of his clothing. Gaelic culture is unique and it would be completely foolish to attach a modern lifting culture to it and assume that this was how it was done.

It would have mattered not to the Gael if you had placed the Inver Stone on your head and balanced it whilst carrying the Dinnie Stones – if you had beaten your chest after it and professed your greatness, you most definitely would have been remembered for all the wrong reasons and would have been spoken of in rather impolite terms.

" Thomh'se tu traigh 'us dorn-gulban

Mach o urracagun na dairich

Mor Chalum, Mor dhugh Chalum,

Dian laidhe le Moir a Chalum." ¹⁴⁵

I am of lazy strength not the hand of Gulban

Pulling out the pin to release the boat

¹⁴⁵ P35 Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness Volume I. (1872)

Big Callum, Big outsider Callum

The strength of a worm has Big Callum

The above is a verse from an ancient song about a factor from the island of Barra who repeatedly professed of his strength in a boastful fashion which resulted in him being the subject of a “***mocking song***”. The reference to Gulban is that of Connal Gulban who had lifted the ***Clach nan gaisgeach*** or the stone of heroes to prove his manhood. The obvious inference being that Big Callum may not have achieved the feat.

It is obvious that boastfulness and Gaelic strength, be it lifting a stone, putting a stone or any other facet of strength was not expected, welcomed or indeed respected. The man of strength had to receive the plaudits of the community who were the sole arbiters of whether someone deserved to be remembered for his strength.

Another aspect of Gaelic strength and remembrance is the manner it is spoken in. There is nothing written regarding this particular manner or whether it is custom, but it was abundantly obvious when carrying out the research for this book and has been confirmed. What was obvious is that the more senior members of the Gaelic community, when talking about strength, do so with a particular emphasis and exclusion. A man will speak of the strength of his father, his grand-father and his ancestors but will not speak of his own strength. Even when this unwritten rule is dispensed with, any words about personal strength are always played down with a lack of emphasis.

I recall speaking to a particular farmer in Glen Shiel, the gentleman was about 60 years of age and stood 6ft 6inches. Speaking English with a Gaelic lilt, he mentioned many stories of the strength of his father, remarkable stories but no less remarkable than the striking physique of this man himself who, at no point spoke or indeed wanted to speak of his own strength.

This is not a unique story as it was replicated in many different areas and on many occasions.

Having noticed this repeated many times in many conversations, I specifically asked on two occasions why strength was talked about in this fashion, both responses were remarkably similar in that no serious ruling of culture could be explained other than it was respectful to talk in such a way.

That culture and its application in strength are somehow engrained into Gaelic behaviours, the knowledge of this opens up a greater understanding of statements regarding strength and in this respect, perhaps the most contentious statement of strength (and the least understood) in the entire history and knowledge of human strength. –

"On the granite stone bridge that crosses the River Dee at Potarch there were, and still are, two large stones weighing about 8cwt the pair, placed in a recess. In the early 1830's massive iron rings were placed in them, to which ropes were fixed so that scaffolds could be attached for pointing the bridge. Now, one of these stones was somewhat heavier than the other. Very few strong men of that day could lift the heavy one with both hands, but my father could raise one in each hand with apparent ease,

and could throw the heavier stone of the two on to the top of a parapet wall of the bridge.

Those stones are still on the bridge and I myself lifted one in each hand on many occasions and one market day, I carried them across the bridge and back, some four to five yards."

The chapter on the Dinnie Steens fully examines the Gaelic influence on the celebrated Donald Dinnie however in all the written material on him, perhaps the most famous of all men of strength, has anyone ever considered his cultural background. To most, he was simply a Scot but this excludes the fact that Scottish culture and Gaelic culture had few similarities and attitudes were far different. Donald Dinnie had more than smidgen of Gaelic influence and in some degree, he was nothing less than a Gael.

Although the text was contained in a letter and was not a verbal statement made by Dinnie, his Gaelic influence is to the fore in even the manner and structure it is written. Dinnie in Gaelic fashion explains the strength in comparison with his father and does so with emphasis. It is only the last line of the entire text where he mentions his own strength and very little about it. He makes a simple statement that in no way appears to contradict Gaelic acceptance of what is ***fraigal***. There is absolutely nothing contentious or ostentatious about his remark. Quite simply, the statement, although written in English follows the patterns of Gaelic strength talk.

Now if as previously mentioned, the feat of strength to be remembered, was carried out in the presence of others, it should be emphasised (as it is indeed remarkably on most occasions) that his feat of strength was carried out in the presence of an audience, indeed it was done in front of the attendees of the Potarch Fair, which locally would have in relation to attendance, been second only to the Aboyne Highland Games for numbers present. More importantly, those that were there present, would have been known to Dinnie and indeed were his friends, they were his community.

What is known is that in 1860, Dinnie was beginning to understand that his strength could make him a living and there is no doubt that he aspired to travel far further requiring him to leave home. Was his lifting of the stones an act of strength for remembrance? All the circumstances would suggest that this may well have been the case but there is no oral tradition to confirm.

There are some in the world of strength who chose to read the statement in a modern context and draw a completely different view on the Dinnie feat of strength, such is the remarkable attraction that these stones possess that they frequently draw opinion from men of strength who I may add, do not have the slightest knowledge of Gaelic or even Scottish culture other than that of an association with the Highland Games.

In so asserting a different opinion, that of not believing the achievement of Dinnie, it is prudent to state that Dinnie himself would have been well aware of the consequences of being conservative with the truth with his feat of strength. If he had not done as stated and the contents of his letter were made known, he would have been mocked by the Gaels of Royal Deeside and called a liar by the Scots.

In the Victorian era with its public romantic interest in Gaelic culture, various Clan autobiographies were written pertaining to individual Clans. The format of these narratives followed a genealogical progression from the individual who had created the Clan up until, in most instances, the present Clan Chief at the time of writing. These books as such were written by a prominent Clan member and in essence each details the ancestry of the upper level of the Clan.

There are a large number of these books which however are punctuated throughout with remarks about strength. Often going back centuries, the common phrase “known for his great strength” or “feats of strength” frequently appears in relation to many individuals emphasising the importance of strength in being remembered.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of strength and being remembered in Gaelic culture was the number of occasions that a heavy head stone was lifted.

“The pious Highlander feels no scruples in lifting the grave-stone of some reputed King or insular Prince, to ornament the remains of his grandmother. A considerable number of these stolen stones may now be seen very far from the sacred island (Iona) in which they were originally placed.”¹⁴⁶

Perhaps the most famous of such stones is found in the Troternish peninsula of Skye. Close to the celebrated homeland of the Martin’s of Bealach is an ancient graveyard at Kilmuir. A gravestone regularly visited by tourists depicts an ancient Gaelic warrior dressed in chainmail and sword. The gravestone marks the resting place of the celebrated Gallowglass warrior known as Angus Martin or Angus of the wind.



The gravestone probably weighs in excess of 600lbs and was actually acquired (Martins don’t steal) by Angus from the island of Iona. On returning to Skye he lifted the stone upon

¹⁴⁶ P26 *The Select Circulating Library containing the Best Popular Literature Part2 (1836)*. An American periodical which contains a narrative called “Clan Albin” by Mrs Johnstone !

his back and walked the half mile distance to the graveyard at Kilmuir where it lay until his death many years later.

Angus Martin was not the only Highlander who “acquired” a heavy stone and lifted it to mark his future burial place. In Lochaber in the 16th Century lived perhaps the oldest known of the famous “MacDonald Bards” – Domhnull MacFhionnlaid Nan Dan (Donald MacDonald). Perhaps better known for his poetry and his prowess as a hunter in ridding a large number of wolves from the Lochaber area, in later years MacDonald was known to have selected a heavy stone to mark his grave which he carried for some distance -

“He commanded that he was to be buried in the skin of this deer, and his grave to be made at the door of the Church with face turned towards “Cròdhearg”, a mountain rising above Fearsaid. It is needless to state that his wish was complied with. The grave may be seen to this day – air bile na bruaieh- by the edge of the hillock, at the Church of Gille Chaorral, and a grave stone upon it which he himself carried on his back from the moorland” ¹⁴⁷

The Church of Gille Chaorral is a prominent landmark in Glen Spean and the Church, which perhaps being better known as the termination of the Bohennie Coffin road from Glen Roy and the marker stone to Donald MacDonald can still be viewed. As for distance carried this can only be assumed but it is reckoned that the stone was carried from further away than Fersit which is a number of miles from the church.



To emphasise the Gaelic emphasis on being remembered we have yet another example of a “lifted grave stone” from Caithness. At Dirlot near Loch More a small walled graveyard contains the graves of chiefly members of Clan Gunn. Within it lies a large gravestone erected in memory of Alexander Gunn the farmer of Dalganachan. The Clan history of the Gunn’s mentions that this massive stone was carried and then erected by Alexander and

¹⁴⁷ P7 MacDonald Bards. Keith Norman MacDonald (1900)

Ingram Gunn who acquired the stone in Morrayshire over 100 miles distant ¹⁴⁸. I do suspect that a tinge of romanticism may have been added via a tendency to exaggerate however clarification of this feat of strength can be ascertained –

“Towards the south-west corner is a huge threutch stane,,,,,,,,,underneath are buried several generations and connected with this threutch stane is an incident which furnishes a striking example of bone and muscle once in Caithness. The stone was brought to Wick sometime last century (18th) and it was carried from the vessel to the cart in which it was taken to Dirlet by two men , namely Marcus Gunn of Dalmore, the grandson of Marcus Mohr and Alexander Gunn who now sleeps beneath it. Both men used only one hand in carrying it. A man with irdinary strength may well try to move the Castle rock as lift one end with both hands” ¹⁴⁹.

The story now becomes far more believable however it is the fact that underlying remembrance we again have an associated feat of strength which is repeated once more with lifting gravestones. There are many other anecdotes of feats of strength regarding remembrance and in particular if visiting Caithness or Sutherland, any visit to an old graveyard will reveal a number of headstones where the original name of the deceased is simply removed and a new name inserted. In most cases this was done by the deceased acquiring the stone well before death and amending it without of course inserting the date of death.

This curious aspect of remembrance in Gaelic culture that gravestones, if not stolen in the first instance were retained by individual many years before their actual death and more often and not they were stored outside the entrance door to the family home. It is a quirk of culture that can prove evidential. Many arguments have raged over Donald Dinnie and the carrying of the stones at Potarch but there has never been any examination into the culture or background of Dinnie himself. The previous chapters only highlight the nature of Gaelic strength, its culture and understanding and which proves overwhelmingly that in relation to stone lifting, there is a necessity in understanding its true culture as it in many cases has an influence over an understanding of how things were actually done. Quite clearly if Donald Dinnie was a Gael rather than a Scot, his feat of strength has to be assessed as a feat of Gaelic strength culture and not as a general discussion. Was Dinnie a Gael? Well the following perhaps emphasises that he at the very least had a substantial Gaelic influence –

“His gravestone, partly hewed by himself and ready to be inscribed, stood at the door of his cottage on a wooded height in the valley of the Dee less than a couple of miles from Kincardine O’ Neil.” ¹⁵⁰

The above reference is taken from an obituary of Robert Dinne but rest assured the practice of selecting a gravestone before death is Gaelic and not Scots and as the preceeding chapters emphasise – Gaelic Strength Culture was somewhat different from that previously known and it makes a difference in our understanding of the stones of strength.

¹⁴⁸ Page 107 *The Gunn’s. Thomas Sinclair (1890)*

¹⁴⁹ *Northern Ensign Newspaper 24th April 1884*

¹⁵⁰ *The Evening Telegraph, Friday 30th October 1891*