

Mac Iain Dubh MacThasgail – the son of Black-haired John MacAskill

*Translations and explanatory notes
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An early field recording in Gaelic by the folklorist Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912), newly arrived in Carbost, Skye, as exciseman for the Talisker Distillery. The storyteller was John MacAskill, cottar in nearby Fernilea. Carmichael wrote down MacAskill's story on *Oidhche Shamhna* or Hallowe'en, 1860.

The story is preserved in Edinburgh University Library, Carmichael Watson Collection, MS 382 fos. 50–5. This translation by Dr Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, Associate Professor at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Skye's respected Gaelic college, first appeared in the Macleod Magazine in September 2025.

The hero Mac Iain Duibh is praised in a song '*Thoughts on Sgia, or the Isle of Skye*', by Dr Donald Macraird of Greenock (1843–89), originally from Harlosh in Duirinish:

Thrèig MacSuibhne Ròthaig sinn, Bu mhòralaiche geug, 'S Mac Iain Duibh nan cruaidh- lannan Bho dhualchas nan glac treun, 'S gann gun cluinnear iomradh air Mur h-ann an iomrall sgèil, 'S Rubha an Dùnain 's Talasgeir Gun Tasgallach le chèil'.	MacSween of Roag has deserted us, He of the noblest lineage, And Mac Iain Duibh of the keen blades From the heritage of the steadfast grips, Hardly a mention of him will be heard Unless in a story drifting about, And Rubha an Dùnain and Talisker Without a single MacAskill between them.
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['Thoughts on Sgia, or the Isle of Skye', *Highland Monthly*, 5 (1893–4), 41]

Bha Mac Iain Duibh agus Macleoid far a cheile. Air a chiad Bhealltain an deigh sin thug Macleoid am fearann bho Mhac Iain Duibh agus cha'n fhaigheadh [e] ploc fearainn air an oighreachd no plod graisich gu bratha tuilleadh.

Dh fhalbh Mac Iain Duibh agus thog e air agus ruig [e] Trotarnis agus rainig e Duntuilm far an robh Magomhuill a tamh anns an am. Thug Magomhuill fearann do Mhac Iain Duibh agus thainig e agus ghabh e seilbh ann agus comhnaidh.

Bha coinneadh mhor agus cuilm gu bhith aig Siol Leoid ann am Fearann na Leatha [Leighe?]. Chuala na Domhnallaich seo agus smaoinich iad aca fhein gum bu mhath an t-am daibh tighinn air am muin agus am marbhadh. Thainig Magomhuill agus a dhaoine agus rainig iad braigh na Draoinich agus rinn iad caump a chur a suas ri taobh Allt [place-name missing here] [fo. 51] Chuir iad Mac Iain Duibh eadar iad fein agus berradh an uillt air eagal agus gun leigeadh e fios a chon a chairdean ann am Fearann an Leagha gun robh na Domhnallaich a tighin a chon am marbhaidh.

Bha gille coise aig Mac Iain Duibh ris an canadhte an Cromach mor MacThasgail. Ghearr Mac Iain Duibh a bhreacan na stiallan fada caol agus cheathail e na stiallan ra cheile agus leig e sios an Cromach Mor bruach an uillt. Dh iarr e air sinteil a mach agus gun an loda a chur a chois gus an ruigeadh Fearann an Leagha far an robh na Leodaich aig cuilm agus innseadh gun robh na Domhnallaich gu bhith air am muin an nochd a chon am marbhaidh agus iad a theicheadh le am beatha.

Goirid an deigh dha n Chromach Mhor diredh as an allt choinnich boirionneach ach cha do bhruthinn e idir rithe – aon lide math no dona cha tubhairt e [fo. 52] ach gabhail seachad gu bog balbh na theann cheum cruaidh cruthail. Rainig an Cromach Mor MacThasgail a taigh mor Fearann an Leigh agus chuir e an ceil a theachdaireachd. Sgaoil agus sgap na Leodaich thall agus a bhos

agus an geall uine bhig cha robh duine dhiu air sgial.

Is ann dha na Domhnallaich a bha a chailleach a chomhlaich ris a Chromach Mhor agus cha do ghabh i tamh no fois [] no clos gun do rainig i caump a cinn cinnidh agus finneadh a gaoil anns an Draoinich ged do bha an alltan dubh dona [*supra*: domhain] eadar i fein agus iad / air thoiseach oirre/roimpe.

Gu de do sgeula fein a bhean arsa na Domhnallaich. Sgeula math ars a chailleach. Tha Siol Leoid cruinn a nochd ann am Fearann an Leighe a cumail cuirm agus cuideachd, ag itheadh agus ag ol mar bu nos dha'n daoine. Agus nam bu daoine sibhse mar bhur sinnsear bhitheadh iad uile marbh mu'n tigeadh. Ach de dha sin agus gun [*fo*. 53] agaibh ach an gad air an robh an t-iasg. Choinnich mi Crom Odhar mor Macthasgail agus gun an lodan as a chuaran a choir baireachadh daibh gu bheil Clann Domhnuill air an toir an nochd.

Sheall na Domhnallaich far an robh Mac Iain Duibh agus chunnaic iad gun robh a chailleach fìor. Chruinnich iad uile timcheall air an duine a chon mharbhaidh chionn an teachdaireachd a chur air falbh. Cha robh Magomhnaill a lathair anns a cheart am agus rinn iad fuireach [*supra*: dail] beag gan an tainig e. An uair a thainig Macdhomhnuill dh innis iad dha mar a dh eirich a mach agus gun robh airson Mac Iain Duibh a chur a dhith agus an Cromach Mor Odhar Macthasgail nam faighte greim air. Thubhairt Magomhnuill gum bu duilich an duine a chuir gu bas airson an aobhair. Nam bithinnse agus mo chairdean fein ri cuirm arsa Magomhnuill is mor a bhithinn an comain neach a thigeadh [*fo*. 54] agus a dh innseadh dhomh gun robh mo naimhdean air thi mo mhort. Agus ge do chaidh Macleoid agus Mac Iain Duibh Mhic Thasgail far [*supra*: thar] a cheile tha e colach gu bheil moran do chairdean mhic Thasgail am Fearann an Leighe an nochd. Agus mar sin bithidh a luth agus a leum aig an duine mar bha aige riamh agus nì m faod neach lamh a thogail dha na gruaman a chur air.

Phill Clann Domhnuill dachaidh do Throtarnis agus thar Clann Leoid as le dilseachd Mhic Iain Duibh ic Thasgail da luchd daimh agus da luchd ducha.

Cha do lughdaich Magomhnuill a mheas air Mac Iain Duibh ioc Thasgail ach aig an ath Bhealltain thug Macleoid Mac Iain Duibh a nall a Trotarnis agus thug e dha Eubost air ais – am bail[e] an robh e roimhe.

Iain Macthasgail coitear Fearann an leagha a nuas iomadh glun bho Mhac Iain [*fo*. 55] Duibh ioc Thasgail a bha ann an Eubost
Oidhche Shamhna 1860

Translation

Mac Iain Duibh and MacLeod had fallen out with one another. On the first Beltane [1 May] afterwards, MacLeod took away the land from Mac Iain Duibh, and [Mac Iain Duibh] would never obtain a patch of ground on the estate or a clod of grazing ever again.

Mac Iain Duibh departed, set off, and reached Trotternish. He arrived at Duntulm, where MacDonald was residing at the time. MacDonald gave land to Mac Iain Duibh, and he came and took possession of it, and settled there.

A great gathering and feast was to be held by the Siol Leòid [the MacLeods] in Fernilea. The MacDonalds heard this and thought to themselves that it would be a good opportunity to fall upon them and kill them. MacDonald and his men went and reached the brae of Drynoch, and they made a camp beside the stream of [*name omitted*]. They placed Mac Iain Duibh between themselves and the gorge of the stream, for fear he might send word to his friends in Fernilea that the MacDonalds were coming to kill them.

Mac Iain Duibh had a foot-servant named 'the great Crooked MacAskill' [*an Cromach Mòr MacThasgail*]. Mac Iain Duibh cut his plaid into long narrow strips, knotted them together, and let the Cromach Mòr down the bank of the stream. He ordered him to sprint off and not to shake the water out of his footwear [*cuaran*] until he reached Fernilea, where the MacLeods were feasting, and to tell them that the MacDonalds were that very night to fall upon them and slaughter them, that they should flee for their lives.

Shortly after the Cromach Mòr had climbed out of the stream, he met a woman, but he didn't speak to her at all—he didn't say a single syllable, good or bad—but he passed silently by, striding swiftly, firmly, and neatly. The Cromach Mòr MacAskill reached the

great house of Fernilea and delivered his message. The MacLeods broke up and scattered far and wide, and within a short time there was not a sign of any of them.

The old woman who had met the Cromach Mòr belonged to the MacDonalds, and she did not rest or pause or stop until she reached the camp of her chief and her beloved clan in Drynoch, though a black, bad, deep little stream was between her and them/was before her.

‘What’s your story, woman?’ asked the MacDonalds. ‘Good news’, said the old woman. ‘The MacLeods are gathered tonight in Fernilea, holding a feast and a gathering, eating and drinking as is their custom. And if you were men like your forefathers, they would all be dead before [morning] would come. But what’s the point, when you have nothing but the string on which the fish were hanging? I met the great Crooked Swarthy MacAskill, with the water still in his *cuaran*, going to warn them that Clan Donald were after them tonight.’

The MacDonalds looked where Mac Iain Duibh was, and they saw that the old woman was telling the truth. They all gathered about the man to kill him for having sent off the message. MacDonald himself was not present at that moment, and they delayed a while until he arrived. When MacDonald came, they told him what had happened and that [they] wanted to kill Mac Iain Duibh, and the Great Crooked Swarthy MacAskill if they could get a hold of him. MacDonald said that it would be sad to put a man to death for such a reason. ‘If I myself and my own relatives had been feasting’, said MacDonald, ‘I would be greatly indebted to anyone who’d come and tell me that my enemies were about to murder me. And though MacLeod and Mac Iain Duibh MacAskill fell out with each other, it is likely that many of MacAskill’s relatives are in Fernilea tonight. And so may that man keep his strength and his swiftness as he always has had them, and may no one raise a hand against him or make him melancholy.’

Clan Donald returned home to Trotternish and the MacLeods were saved, because of the faithfulness of Mac Iain Duibh MacAskill to his kinsmen and countrymen.

MacDonald’s esteem for Mac Iain Duibh MacThasgail was not diminished, but at the following Beltane MacLeod brought Mac Iain Duibh over from Trotternish and restored to him Eubost—the township where he had been before.

John MacAskill, cottar, Fernilea, descended through many generations from Mac Iain Duibh MacAskill, who lived in Ebst.
Hallowe’en 1860

As summed up by ‘Magomhnuill’—the epithet of the old Lords of the Isles, here assumed by their putative heir, MacDonald of Sleat—the story turns on *dilseachd*: loyalty or allegiance. Members of the smaller kindreds in Skye, such as the MacAskills, may not have strong blood ties to their chiefs: as Mac Iain Duibh demonstrates, they may even have the option of transferring allegiance to the other side if offended by their erstwhile master. Yet, as MacDonald recognises, blood will out. Mac Iain Duibh may have severed his ties to MacLeod, but his primary loyalty remains with his MacAskill kinsmen feasting with that chief in the great house at Fernilea. The theme of kindred solidarity and faithfulness had, of course, particular resonance in the time of the cottar John MacAskill, in the aftermath of the clearances, the Great Famine, and the impoverishment and emigration of many MacAskills in the preceding decades. Their sole tacksman remaining, at present-day Glenbrittle House, was Hugh MacAskill (1799–1863), a man with no heirs, and nearing the end of his life.

There is hidden humour in the story in the figure of the Cromach Mòr, the Great Crooked MacAskill. Although described as a *gille-coise* or footman, listeners would have understood him, powerful and bent-backed, as a *gille cas fhliuch* (a ‘wet foot man’):

according to Edward Dwelly's Gaelic dictionary, 'a member of a Highland chief's retinue who carried his master over streams...' The joke is that, after being lowered into the stream by the rope made of knotted strips of his plaid, the Cromach Mòr is able to keep his footing in the water and run to Fernilea to give warning, not even pausing to empty his *cuaran* (Dwelly: 'brogue of untanned skin, commonly worn with the hairy side outwards') of *lodan* ('water in one's shoe': it looks as if Carmichael doesn't fully understand what he's recording here).

The reference to the *cuaran* here may be set beside another MacAskill tale, recorded in 1890 by Father Allan McDonald of Eriskay and discussed by Ronald Black in number 551 of his Quern-Dust Calendar series, originally printed in the *West Highland Free Press* and now available online. There, a MacAskill fisherman of the Rubha an Dùnain family, quarreling with MacNeill of Barra, 'in the struggle had his foot thrust thro' his cuaran but yet proved a match for McNeil'. The implication may be that the MacAskills, in their role as *maoir-chladaich* or 'watchers of the shore' for MacLeod, habitually wore *cuarain*.

Ronald Black describes them as 'not a shoe in the true sense of the term at all, that is, several pieces of tanned leather shaped, stitched together and stretched on a last to match a particular foot. It was really just a foot-bag. You took an animal's hide, put your foot on it, and cut out a piece big enough to cover the entire foot, leaving the flesh on the inside and the hair on the outside. Then – the tricky bit – you had to take your needle and thong, gather in all the flaps around the ankle, and sew them up as tightly as possible.' Did its hairy exterior make the *cuaran* particularly suited for seafaring kindreds such as the MacAskills, offering grip on a wet boat deck better than smooth leather shoes or even bare feet? In the case of the Cromach Mòr, his desperate race gave him no time to unpick the stitching of his *cuarain*, empty out the water, then sew them back up again.