

‘*Beachdan Ura à Inbhir Nis*/New Opinions from Inverness’: Alexander MacBain (1855–1907) and the foundation of Celtic Studies in Scotland

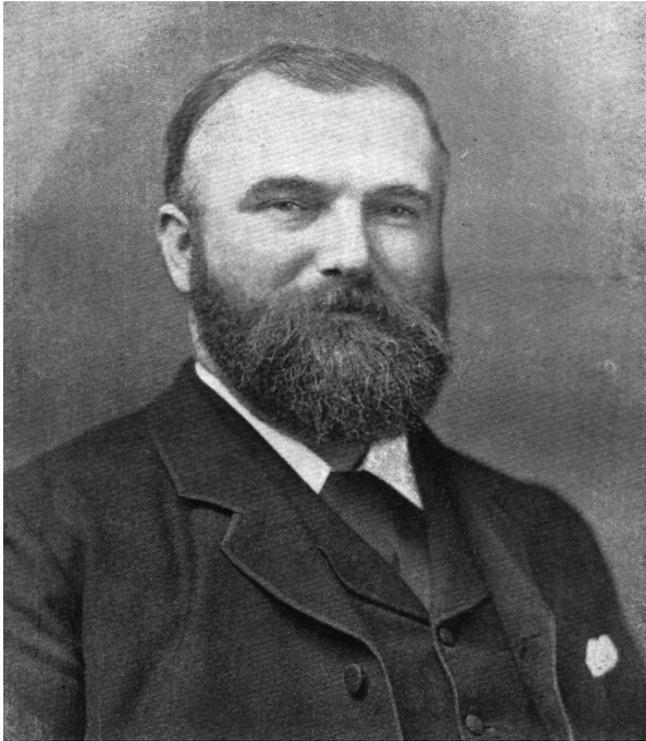
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It was a great honour to be invited to give this paper. In presenting it, I am conscious not only of the memory of Alexander Henry Rhind, who endowed the series, but also of the achievement of Dr Alexander MacBain, whom I wish to commemorate here. Dr MacBain was brought up in the Drumguish district, between Glen Feshie and Glen Tromie in Badenoch. He graduated from the University of Aberdeen in 1880, and I often think of him in that context. It is one of my deepest regrets that Aberdeen did not establish a Chair of Celtic a century earlier than it did, and that it did not have the foresight to appoint Alexander MacBain as its first Professor of Celtic. In the second half of the 19th century Aberdeen had a foundational interest in Celtic studies, but it did not grant the discipline its independence or create a department until 1916. This curious anomaly meant that Aberdeen produced several Celtic scholars who became leaders of the discipline at the turn of the 20th century, including Alexander MacBain, John Strachan (1862–1907), and William J Watson (1865–1948). Both Strachan and Watson latterly held Chairs, Strachan (in Greek and later in Comparative Philology) at Manchester and Watson (in Celtic) at Edinburgh. Strachan, a native of Keith (whose close connection with that small town in the north-east is generally overlooked or forgotten), produced foundationally important pedagogic tools which are still of great value to Celtic students in the fields of medieval Irish and Welsh (Calder 1907).

Watson distinguished himself in several more modern areas, but today he is known and remembered pre-eminently through his study of place-names, represented finally in his epoch-making *History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (1926) (Nicolaisen 1996).¹ Yet — and here was the irony of ironies — Aberdeen had no Chair of Celtic to accommodate its own outstanding scholars, and it had to endure something of a small Celtic ‘brain-drain’, even among those whom it attracted to its Celtic lectureships. It lost its first lecturer in Celtic, John Fraser, to Oxford, where he succeeded the first Professor of Celtic there, Sir John Rhys. John Fraser was replaced by John MacDonald (‘Celtic John’), a native of Kirkhill, near Inverness, and thereafter the scholarly succession at Aberdeen was stabilized through distinguished leadership at the level of Senior Lecturer or Reader until the University’s first Chair of Celtic was established in 1992.²

Given the lack of academic opportunities within the universities, young Gaelic scholars often sought careers either in the Christian ministry or in school-teaching. In both professions they frequently distinguished themselves, and some were able to move into academic positions at

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ILLUS 1 Dr Alexander MacBain

a later date. The tradition of the ‘scholarly schoolmaster’ was well developed in the Highlands and Islands by the second half of the 19th century. In that context it appears to owe its origin to a large extent to the schools of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). When the Society relaxed its oppositional view of Gaelic in the mid 18th century, Gaelic-speaking schoolmasters in its employ had the chance to become more significant literary figures. The first of its ‘scholarly schoolmasters’ to make major contributions to Gaelic literature were the poets, Alexander MacDonald (c 1695–c 1770) and particularly Dugald Buchanan (1716–68). MacDonald produced a Gaelic-English vocabulary for the SSPCK in 1741 (Black 1986). Buchanan, who taught latterly at Kinloch Rannoch, Perthshire, superintended the printing of the Scottish Gaelic New Testament (1767), and was closely associated with the Edinburgh Enlightenment (MacLean 1913). In later years, given the right circumstances, other Highland schools might become the beneficiaries of scholarly leadership with a strong Gaelic commitment. Thus William J Watson taught Classics in Inverness Royal Academy, and became its Rector, before moving to the Rectorship of the Royal High School, Edinburgh, and proceeding onwards from there to Edinburgh University’s Chair of Celtic in 1914 (Nicolaisen 1996). Alexander MacBain, who would have graced the Aberdeen Chair if it had been founded in 1892 (rather than 1992!), became and remained a headmaster, first of Raining’s School, and later the High School, in Inverness. Raining’s School was, in fact, a SSPCK foundation, and in MacBain’s time it was the ‘finishing school’ for the ‘bright boys’ from the Highlands and Islands who would proceed to university (Murchison 1982). MacBain was thus well placed to exert a lasting scholarly influence on the careers of able young men, and he did so with great distinction. He combined his teaching with deep scholarship, and earned a very high reputation among his contemporaries in Celtic

studies in Scotland and beyond. However, the opportunity to move to a Chair did not appear timeously. Consequently, MacBain is, in my view, the finest Professor of Celtic that Scotland never had. His influence on contemporary Celtic scholarship was of fundamental significance to the creation of the modern discipline in Scotland, as Professor William J Watson generously acknowledged in his obituary and subsequent memoir of MacBain (Watson 1907).

MACBAIN'S BOYHOOD

MacBain ranks among the greatest of Scotland's Celtic scholars, but he had the humblest of origins, and in terms of social class he contrasts starkly with William Forbes Skene, whose immense contribution to Scottish scholarship we also remember in this series. MacBain differed from Skene in scholarly perspectives as well as in class, and these differences, when put together, appear to have sparked some hot contention in the 1890s, to which we shall return.

Alexander was the son of John MacBain, who traced his origins to Atholl stock, a lineage in which the budding scholar later took considerable pride. There are, however, some delicate matters surrounding the circumstances of the family. John MacBain emigrated to Canada when Alexander was only two years old, and father and son corresponded only occasionally thereafter, usually on matters pertaining to schooling. MacBain's mother went into service as soon as he was born, with the result that he was brought up between two homes — in the maternal home at Drumchallach, and the paternal home at Drumguish. MacBain attended Insh School for the greater part of his early boyhood (1862–70), and did not go to Kingussie School, as bright boys in those days were expected to do. He was apparently very well satisfied with the teaching offered by Alexander MacKenzie, the dominie at Insh. Following a dispute with the local landlord, the maternal home was moved from Drumchallach to Dunachton, on the north side of the Spey. At that point, MacBain gained some experience as a teacher at Drumuillie School, but he then took the opportunity to attend Baldow School for a couple of months in the summer of 1871 to learn Greek. Concluding this stage of his schooling, MacBain found employment with the Ordnance Survey, first in Dufftown and later in Wales. He returned to Badenoch late in 1873, and went back to Baldow School once again, this time to study Latin and Greek, and to prepare himself for bursary examinations. In this he was greatly assisted by one of the teachers at Baldow, John Kennedy, who was later to become a Free Church minister and a noted Gaelic scholar, co-editing two major volumes with MacBain.³ In this remarkably varied set of educational adventures, we can see the making of the future scholar. It is very evident that Kennedy's support set MacBain on his academic way to university. His period in Wales may also have had some bearing on his interest in Celtic Studies, but we are (unfortunately) prevented from assessing the impact of this period in any detail, because the fourth volume of MacBain's diaries is missing. In 1874 MacBain won a MacPhail Bursary to Old Aberdeen Grammar School, and prepared himself for entry to Aberdeen University in 1876.⁴

Overall, it is clear that MacBain had to overcome a daunting range of social and educational challenges before reaching Aberdeen. He was obviously a determined young man, and, from first to last, he worked exceedingly hard. It was his fine mind, together with his extraordinary application to study, that gained for him the high reputation which he has retained to the present day. As far as I am aware, he was not given to complaining about his unfortunate family circumstances or even to hinting that he was 'hard done by' by the vicissitudes of life. If anything, his resolve was strengthened rather than weakened by his unusual boyhood experiences. His diaries show a steely determination to succeed and to become a scholar. The missing fourth

volume of his diaries contains the following entry, written on New Year's Day 1875, while he was still at the Grammar School in Old Aberdeen:

I think that I now have as good a chance of yet appearing as an MA on equal terms in education with the other literary men of our day, a goal which has always been my ambition to arrive at, that I might have confidence to engage in discussing the topics which engross the attention of mankind. I dread to commit myself through ignorance, and ere I will appear (if ever I shall) in public, I will be backed up with a complete knowledge of the facts I speak on. This is high talking for a poor student in the second class of the Grammar School of Old Aberdeen (Watson 1907, 384–5).

Of course, in those days, uncongenial social circumstances, hardly conducive to the pursuit of higher education, would have been normal for many young men from the Highlands and Islands. Indeed, such circumstances are paralleled in the career of his contemporary, Professor Donald MacKinnon of Colonsay, who became Scotland's first Professor of Celtic when the Edinburgh Chair was founded to great acclaim in 1882. Among his many essays Professor MacKinnon has left us a moving account of the 'old school' in Colonsay — an utterly basic SSPCK establishment — where he acquired what were often called 'the rudiments' of education (MacKinnon 1956). More generally it can be said that, across the years, Scotland's native Gaelic scholars have emerged from similar social contexts to that of Alexander MacBain, though he had a particularly challenging set of obstacles to surmount within his immediate family circle.

MACBAIN'S IMPACT

By 1880 MacBain's early problems and university years were behind him. He had achieved his coveted MA with Honours and he was the headmaster of Scotland's most distinguished SSPCK school for 'bright boys' from the Highlands and Islands. A former pupil who knew MacBain particularly well has provided a pen-portrait of his teacher in action. This former pupil at Raining's School was no less than the Rev Kenneth MacLeod (1871–1955), one of Gaelic Scotland's best known folklore collectors, and author of *The Road to the Isles*. MacLeod once gave a Gaelic talk in which he reminisced about important Highlanders whom he had known in the course of his long and varied life. In his talk, he ascribed a particularly prominent place to Dr Alexander MacBain. MacLeod remembered graphically an occasion on which Dr MacBain had come to Glasgow to deliver a lecture to (possibly) the Gaelic Society on the Gaelic heroes known as 'an Fhèinn', that is to say, the warrior groups of Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn mac Cool). MacLeod said:

Bha mi anns an sgoil aig MacBheathain trì bliadhna, agus bhiodh e duilich a ràdh co air a b' fheàrr e — Laidinn no Grèigis no Beurla no Gàidhlig. Chan eil fhios a bheil a h-aon ann an seo aig a bheil cuimhne air an uair a thàinig MacBheathain do Ghlaschu a leughadh òraid — don Chomann Ghàidhlig, tha mi an dùil — air Gaisgich na Fèinne. Bha e san àm ud a' deanamh dheth nach b'e daoine a bha ann an Gaisgich na Fèinne idir, ach diathan a bha aig na Gàidheil o shean, agus thòisich e air coimeas nan gaisgeach — Fionn is Oisean is Oscar is Diarmad is iomadh fear eile. Thòisich e air an coimeas ris na diathan Greugach agus Ròmanach. Cò bh' anns a' choinneamh ach an Gàidheil làidir sin, Donnchadh Mac'Ille-bhàin, agus e 'na fhìor sheann-duine aig an àm, agus bha fios aig Gàidheil Ghlaschu gu lèir gum biodh iad ann an cunnart am beatha, nan abradh iad ri Donnchadh Mac'Ille-bhàin nach robh Fionn no Oisean ann riamh . . . Cha dhìochuimhnich mi gu bràth an drèin, mar a their sinn mu thuath, a bha

air aodann Mhic'Ille-bhain an uair a bha e ag èisdeachd ris na beachdan ùra a thàinig à Inbhir Nis. Bha iongantais orm fhèin nach do dh'èirich e 's nach do thog e am bata. Ach co-dhiù, aig deireadh na coinnimh, dh'èirich e is ghabh e am bata do na beachdan ùra, ged nach do bhean e ris an òraidiche fhèin. Is ann a bha an t-Ollamh MacBheathain anabarrach toilichte leis an t-seann-duine. Thubhairt e a rithist, 'Chunnaic mi mu dheireadh Oisean an dèidh na Fèinne. Bha mise feuchainn urram a chur air le dia a dhèanamh deth, ach tha e coltach gur fheàrr leis-san a bhith leinn fhèin air thalamh!' (Murchison 1988, 61–2)

I was in MacBain's school for three years, and it would be difficult to say which he most excelled in — Latin or Greek or English or Gaelic. I do not know if there is anyone here who remembers the time MacBain came to Glasgow to read a lecture — to the Gaelic Society, I think — on the Heroes of the Fèinn. He was at that time making out that the Heroes of the Fèinn were not humans at all, but gods that the Gaels had in the olden times, and he began to compare the heroes — Fionn and Ossian and Oscar and Diarmad and many another one. He began to compare them to the Greek and Roman gods. Who was in the meeting but that stalwart Gael, Duncan Whyte, who was a very old man at the time, and all the Gaels of Glasgow knew that they would be in danger of their lives if they said to Duncan Whyte that Fionn or Ossian never existed . . . I will never forget the scowl, as we say in the north, that was on Whyte's face when he was listening to the new opinions from Inverness. I was surprised that he did not get up and take hold of the stick. But, anyway, at the end of the meeting, he arose and took the stick to the new opinions, although he did not touch the lecturer himself. Dr MacBain was, in fact, quite delighted with the old man. He said later, 'At long last I saw Ossian having outlived the Fèinn. I was trying to give him honour by making him a god, but it seems that he himself prefers to remain with ourselves on the earth!'

MacBain probably gave this talk in 1887 or 1888, the year in which Kenneth MacLeod went to Glasgow University. By attending the meeting, MacLeod, who was not yet in university, was already showing his respect for a scholar to whom he was indebted not only for his education, but also for encouraging him to take an interest in the Gaelic folklore of the Outer Hebrides (Murchison 1988, ix). Alexander MacBain was undoubtedly an inspirational figure, but he was evidently something of a polymath too. As MacLeod makes clear, MacBain had an effortless command of Latin and Greek, as well as Gaelic and English, and was ready to advance new theories about the origins of the old Gaelic heroes. Language, literature, history and folklore were all part of MacBain's wide-ranging interests, and he was not afraid to enter the lists in the difficult field of myth and mythology.

MacLeod claims that MacBain later renounced his views on the mythological origins of these warriors, but, if he did, it may have been out of a sense of deference rather than through scholarly conviction (Murchison 1988, 62). In fact MacBain's controversial views on the heroes of the Fèinn anticipated what has become the standard explanation of the origins of Fionn mac Cumhaill, and foreshadowed the opinions of the 20th-century Irish scholar, Professor Gerard Murphy, who, in his magisterial third volume (1953) of *Duanaire Finn* (a collection of Gaelic heroic ballads about the Fèinn) argued that Fionn was in origin a mythological figure. MacBain, then, was well ahead of his time in arguing that the warriors of the Fèinn belonged to the field of mythology.

Oddly, MacBain's talk to the Gaelic Society of Glasgow (if MacLeod is correct in his identification) is not recorded in the first volume of the *Transactions* of that Society, which cover the years 1887–91. However, MacBain did address the Gaelic Society of Inverness on 17 February 1885 on the theme of 'The Heroic and Ossianic Literature'. In the published text of his very important and detailed lecture, he wrote:

Until scientists agree as to the meaning of these heroic myths, we may satisfy ourselves with adding our stone to the cairn — adding, that is to say, Cuchulinn and Fionn to the other national heroes of Aryan mythology. Yet this we may say: Fionn son of Cumal (Camulus, the Celtic war-god?) is probably the incarnation of the chief deity of the Gaels — the Jupiter spoken of by Caesar and the Dagda of Irish myth. His qualities are king-like and majestic, not sun-like, as those of Cuchulinn. He is surrounded by a band of heroes that make a terrestrial Olympus, composed of counterparts to the chief deities (MacBain 1886).

This confirms MacLeod's point that MacBain did indeed regard the warriors of the Fèinn as gods in origin. Later scholars like Gerard Murphy modified the detail of that scenario, and associated Fionn with brightness and radiance, but the basic premise remained intact (1953, lxxi–lxxxii).

MACBAIN IN SCHOLARLY CONTEXT

In his description of MacBain in action in Glasgow, Kenneth MacLeod went on to compare him directly with Donald MacKinnon, who had become Scotland's first Professor of Celtic when he was appointed to the new Chair of Celtic at Edinburgh in 1882 (Gillies 1989). He writes (and here I translate without giving the Gaelic original):

There was a great difference in many ways between MacBain of Inverness and MacKinnon of Edinburgh. MacBain had more confidence, and he would throw opinions out among people though he might not be completely sure of them himself, and he thus wrote more than the other man did. MacKinnon was so full of caution that he would not put a single page in print until he was fully certain that the work was as good as he could make it. But there were few who had a knowledge as broad as his, especially about Scottish Gaelic, the oral tradition and history of the people, and the old laws of the land (Murchison 1988, 62).

MacKinnon was indeed more deferential to tradition, and sometimes to pseudo-tradition, than MacBain. This was evident in their different attitudes to Ossian and the Ossianic Controversy. This controversy had rocked the scholarly world of the second half of the 18th century, and, as is well known, it centred on the epic translations of James Macpherson, himself a Badenoch man (Stafford 1988). MacKinnon gave great honour to Ossian, the supposed blind bard of the third century AD, and did so apparently on the basis of Macpherson's work and the subsequent translation of that work into Gaelic. When he gave credit to a modern Gaelic poet, MacKinnon would often insert the words, '*a-mach o Oisean*' ('apart from Ossian').⁵ MacBain, on the other hand, had little time for Macpherson or for his Ossianic constructs, at least when he was in formal scholarly mode. In his lecture on 'The Heroic and Ossianic Literature', MacBain roundly dismissed Macpherson's work as a 'sham antique'; classified the Gaelic version as 'very modern'; and reached a firm conclusion about Macpherson's role:

The conclusion we come to . . . is simply this:— Macpherson is as truly the author of 'Ossian' as Milton is of 'Paradise Lost'. Milton is to the Bible in even nearer relation than Macpherson is to the Ossianic ballads (MacBain 1886, 211).

Few would disagree with that verdict today, at least in general terms, although modern scholarship, notably that of Professor Derick Thomson, has modified the detail, and has shown that Macpherson did make close use of some Gaelic ballads (Thomson 1952).

MacBain's tendency to analyse traditional Gaelic material rather coldly and clinically, and to offer what were sometimes unpalatable and controversial opinions which, in their academic presentations, gave short shrift to whimsy or romanticism, resulted in his being seen, by some at least, as somewhat un-Gaelic in his scholarly approach. Kenneth MacLeod thought that he was '*cho saothrachail agus cho mionaideach ris na Gearmailtich fhèin*' ('as industrious and as precise as the Germans themselves') (Murchison 1988, 61). He thus put him in the same category as those 19th-century German scholars such as Franz Bopp, who had pioneered Celtic philology, and who had by 1838 demonstrated the relationship between the Celtic family of languages and the ancient ancestor language, Indo-Germanisch, or Indo-European as it was later called (Maier 1997, 40). This again was fair comment; MacBain had an immense interest in Gaelic etymology and philology, and produced his *Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* in 1896. His list of 'Authors Quoted' shows that he drew extensively on the works of Continental scholars, both French and German, with the latter more prominent and represented by Zeuss, Zimmer, Windisch, Thurneysen, Osthoff, Kluge and others (MacBain 1911, xv–xvi). MacBain was indeed a thorough and exacting Celtic scholar of the German type, and, true to form, he was a pioneer of Gaelic etymological lexicography. He expressed his admiration for German scholarship in an after-dinner speech to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1882, 'It was left for science,' he said, 'for the science of language, in the hands of cool-headed Germans, to rescue the Gael and his tongue, alike from friend and foe' (MacBain 1883, 94). Donald MacKinnon, on the other hand, was perhaps closer to what might be termed 'native' Gaelic scholarship, and he was particularly well known for his literary essays, notably on Gaelic proverbs and poetry.⁶ Both MacKinnon and MacBain were graduates in Philosophy, and it is fascinating to observe the differences in their scholarly concerns; MacKinnon the Gaelic essayist, literary critic, and editor of Gaelic texts; MacBain the linguist, the etymologist and philologist, the pioneer of place-name studies, the enthusiast for mythology and mythological theorizing, and the Gaelic historian — indeed, the first *modern, Gaelic-equipped* historian — of Dark Age Scotland.

Of course it is all too easy to simplify matters. Just as MacKinnon contributed to the elucidation of the Gaelic language, so MacBain had a deep and lasting interest in Gaelic poetry and prose. For example, he was active in the commemoration of Gaelic poets of an earlier day, notably the 18th-century spiritual bard, Dugald Buchanan, who is closely associated with Kinloch Rannoch in Perthshire, and whose work was particularly well regarded by Professor MacKinnon (MacKinnon 1956, 164–75). In 1875 a monument to Buchanan was erected in the Square at Kinloch Rannoch, and it is said that this was made possible by means of funds raised chiefly by Alexander MacBain, apparently when he was still attending the Grammar School in Old Aberdeen prior to entering university (MacLean 1913, xii). Overall, the difference between MacKinnon and MacBain in terms of scholarly profile was one of emphasis rather than interest, and to a certain extent the labours of both scholars were complementary.

CLASSICISM AND CELTICISM

We may now consider how MacBain came to acquire his Celtic academic interests. MacBain's formative scholarly years would have been those which he spent at the University of Aberdeen from 1876 to 1880. There he studied Mental Philosophy, but had little real interest in the subject beyond the academic discipline, and graduated with a Class II.⁷ In those days, as we have already

noted, there was no subject called Celtic Studies, and I have little doubt that, if it had been available, MacBain would have achieved a Class I with Distinction. The subject, insofar as it could be called a subject, tended to be handled within the field of Classical scholarship, and it was in that context that philology emerged as a primary concern of early Celtic scholars. In Aberdeen it was a Professor of Greek at King's, William D Geddes, who began to explore the relationship between the Celtic languages and Latin and Greek. Geddes was a close friend of John Stuart Blackie, who served as Professor of Humanity in Marischal College between 1840 and 1852 before moving to the Chair of Greek at Edinburgh University and leading (from the 1870s) a major campaign for the establishment of the Chair of Celtic. (One wonders where the first Celtic Chair might have been located if Blackie had stayed in Aberdeen (Edwards 1986, 418–21).) Geddes, who was known as 'Old Homer', began to give lectures on Celtic philology to the University's Celtic Society. His first lecture, given in 1872 and published by the Society as a small book in the same year, was entitled *The Philologic Uses of the Celtic Tongue*. In his study Geddes paid attention to the manner in which Celtic languages could be used to facilitate the study of Greek and Latin, and the President and Secretary of the Society, who wrote an introduction to the book, opined that 'Gaelic is of far greater value than has hitherto been supposed for Philologic purposes'.⁸ The study of Gaelic and Celtic languages alongside Latin and Greek enhanced the status of the former, and Gaelic all but became 'Celtic' in the academic mind. It was as part of this philological exploration that the Celtic languages gained importance as an academic discipline, and it is of interest that two of Aberdeen's best known Celtic alumni from this period, John Strachan and William J Watson, were graduates in Classics. Although MacBain took Mental Philosophy, he was reputedly very able in Classics, and it is a fair guess that he was influenced by the work of Geddes, and that he would have known him well in his Aberdeen years. Geddes of course became Principal of the University of Aberdeen at a later stage of his career (Edwards 1986, 420).⁹ For him and for other scholars with an interest in Celtic, the Celtic Society, in which the students debated many subjects in Gaelic and English, offered a platform, and compensated for the lack of a Department of Celtic.

Interest in Celtic philology at Aberdeen, as elsewhere in the British Isles, grew not only in the context of Classics, but also in a climate of romanticism which was closely linked to concepts of race. The desire to discover the Celts as an ethnic entity, with distinctive features, feelings, and styles in art and literature, had been initiated on the Continent by some of the scholars who were burrowing into the roots of the Celtic languages. Celtic philology shared frontiers with Classics, but it also linked with the study of Oriental languages. By 1854 a remarkable Oriental scholar, Ernest Renan, who was a native of Brittany, had published a major lecture on 'The Poetry of the Celtic Races'. It was suffused with romanticism, and more or less initiated the trend to wrap up the Celtic parcel as if all its contents were one and the same (Hutchison 1896). These contents contained what might be termed a flask of political perfume, which could be used to ward off the less desirable fumes from Germanic racial constructs. Renan's views were absorbed by the English literary critic, Matthew Arnold, who argued that the English had a Celtic component in their racial character which set them apart from other Germanic peoples — a line of thought that is currently very much to the fore. Arnold's Lectures on 'The Study of Celtic Literature', delivered in Oxford in 1865–6, influenced the minds at Aberdeen, and in 1885 William Geddes again addressed the Celtic Society, this time on the *Historical Characteristics of the Celtic Race* (Bromwich 1965).¹⁰

MacBain's interests when at Aberdeen reflected both the rational and the romantic dimensions of Celtic Studies as the discipline emerged. He joined the Celtic Society, known in Gaelic as *An Comunn Gaidhealach*, when he arrived in 1876, and was immediately appointed its

President, a move that suggests that he was already well-known in Aberdeen University circles.¹¹ He had of course been studying at Aberdeen Grammar School between 1874 and 1876, after the couple of years spent working with the Ordnance Survey in Wales. His presidential address, given on 17 November 1876, was delivered in English, and concerned the relationship of Gaelic to the Aryan languages (as Indo-European languages were formerly called). In the Minutes of the meeting, the secretary records: ‘*anns an oraid nochd Mr McBheathain mor fhoghlum, agus eolas air a Ghaelig agus dheisd an Comunn le geur aire agus toil inntinn ris*’ (‘in the address Mr MacBain displayed great learning, and knowledge of Gaelic, and the Society listened to him with close attention and pleasure’).¹² MacBain, it would seem, was something of an authority on Indo-European before he reached Aberdeen University. (How he actually acquired such advanced knowledge remains unclear, though we may speculate that his time in Wales may have kindled his desire to explore the relationship between the different Celtic languages.)¹³ He was elected President for a second time in 1879, and this time addressed the Society on Highland matters, but paid particular attention to ‘the extent of the virtues which belong to the English as a result of their relationship to the Gaels’.¹⁴ If we read ‘Celts’ for ‘Gaels’, we seem to see the outline of an address which reflected the influence of Matthew Arnold’s favourite theme, namely the submerged Celtic features of the English race.

After he was appointed Headmaster of Raining’s School in Inverness in 1880, it is very evident that MacBain continued to drink deeply of the romantic Celtic fountain. The bibulous image is not inappropriate, since his finest effusions on this theme were offered at the Annual Dinners of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, where mighty toasts were drunk on the back of resounding speeches extolling the ‘Celts’ — even ‘the Celts of the Highlands’, as MacBain himself called them.¹⁵ Highland education, rural development, the campaign for crofters’ rights (in which Professor Blackie was involved), the coming Chair — all of these, and many much more bizarre subjects with ‘Celtic’ links — came under the Celtic label at Inverness, and inspired ‘loud applause’ and ‘hear, hear’ from hearty Celtophiles often ‘attired in Highland dress’.¹⁶ The years 1882–3 represented perhaps the fullest flow of Celtic jubilation, as speakers were enthused by the establishment of the Celtic Chair at Edinburgh. In 1882, MacBain was, to say the least, bullish about the Gaels and the Celts. In his speech on ‘The Language and Literature of the Gaels’ he exulted in Celtic triumphs:

The Gaels can now claim full cousinship and kindred with the best races of Europe, and what is more — with the good help of science, their claim is allowed. The Celtic race is not the pariah of races which John Bull once imagined it to be; even he has allowed, however grudgingly, the claim of full cousinship with himself, a concession which is already fraught, as we know, with great results both social and political (MacBain 1883, 94).

MacBain, in the same speech, described Matthew Arnold as ‘the most refined of our modern critics’, and swallowed his concoctions holus-bolus, at least when he could wash them down with bonhomie. He was even mellow to James Macpherson. ‘And after all’, he asked, ‘what does it much matter whether they [the epics] are largely composed by Macpherson himself or not, if the poems are really good and have the true Celtic ring about them?’ (MacBain 1883, 95). The ‘true Celtic ring’ was certainly evident at the Annual Dinners of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, even if it was not easy to identify elsewhere. And how to identify the real thing was MacBain’s main concern.

In fact MacBain used his 1882 speech to launch his own manifesto for the good of the Gaelic language. Like several other Celtic scholars of his day (including Kuno Meyer, the

brilliant, Hamburg-born Professor of Celtic at Liverpool) he embraced both romanticism and rationalism, but he could distinguish between the two.¹⁷ He knew when the ‘Celtic playtime’ had to stop. The challenge to Celtic scholars of his period was, on the one hand, to take advantage of the favouring breezes for the establishment of the new discipline, while, on the other, to ensure that what was established was indeed worthy scholarship. MacBain was well aware that Celtic scholarship was a very different thing from the noisy, jingoistic Celticism which made good rhetoric at dinners in Inverness, Dublin and Edinburgh. His peroration was down-to-earth:

The interest in the Gaelic language must soon be mainly literary and scientific — the study of its literary remains and of the language itself. What we need at the present time is judicious collecting and good editing of the works we have. We want a good critical edition of the Gaelic poets, and more especially of Ossian; we want also a scientific Gaelic dictionary dealing with the philology of the language. Hitherto the Highlanders have been too much inclined to guess, and too little inclined to accurate scientific research (MacBain 1883, 96).

SCHOLARSHIP, IDEOLOGY AND ‘THE GRIEVOUS CUDGEL’

Thus, only two years after leaving Aberdeen, Alexander MacBain was setting out his stall as a scholar of Celtic Studies, and by 1896 he had fulfilled his ambition to provide that ‘scientific Gaelic dictionary dealing with the philology of the language’ (MacBain 1883, 96). By the standards of the time that alone was an astonishing achievement, but MacBain’s other output between 1882 and 1900 was little short of phenomenal. He presented papers regularly, indeed annually, to the Gaelic Society of Inverness from 1883. The regular meetings of the Society provided him with a platform at the tertiary level, and made up for the lack of a university environment to encourage his scholarly gifts and to publish his works. Overall, he seems to have given considerable guidance to the Society, and also to Gaelic scholarship in a more general way, by writing accounts of what would be termed nowadays the ‘Year’s Work’, as retrospective introductions to successive volumes during the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁸ Among his best known academic contributions were his paper on Ossianic literature which we have already noted (1886), his ‘Gaelic Incantations’ (1891), his study of ‘Ptolemy’s Geography of Scotland’ (1892), and his ground-breaking analysis of ‘The Norse Element in the Topography of the Highlands and the Isles’ (1894).¹⁹ These papers, devoid of romanticism, are very substantial pieces of scholarship. Some of their contents stand the test of time effectively enough. Indeed, it is impossible nowadays to deal with any of the subjects listed above without reference to MacBain, even if it is necessary to detach his ideas from their rather dated theoretical wrappings and to throw some of them away. The ‘scientific research’ which he so enthusiastically encouraged was encased in the ideological constructs of its own time.

The areas of MacBain’s scholarship which are most evidently dated are his contributions beyond the fields of Gaelic language and lexicography and Celtic philology. The scent of outmoded theories of ‘Aryan’ kinship is prominent in his essays on mythology (in which he had an early interest) represented by several papers to the Gaelic Society of Inverness which were later edited as a single volume by Professor Watson (1917). MacBain was very much in the shadow of the Oxford linguist, Indologist and philosopher, Professor Max Müller, who was at the height of his powers at the end of the 19th century (Watson 1917, 28, 37). Müller also influenced the wider philological and linguistic perspectives within which MacBain and other scholars operated. As J P Mallory notes, Müller was one of the linguists who ‘encouraged the use of Aryan to describe the ancient Indo-Europeans’. With the use of the term ‘Aryan’ went the underlying notion of a

superior white race, and Müller himself was later to attack those anthropologists who had developed a single-minded obsession with ‘Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and hair’ (Mallory 1989, 267–8). MacBain’s idea that the Gaels could now be identified with ‘the best races in Europe’ carries a whiff of this exclusive racial ‘clubbiness’, though his aim is clearly to enhance — inclusively — the status of a particular linguistic group in Scotland which was threatened by the supremacy of ‘John Bull’, and had been the victim of derogatory racial stereotyping earlier in the 19th century.²⁰ In recent years anthropologists have rejected the old, easy equation of language and race, but, in some cases, they have over-reacted by attempting to discredit the *philological* evidence on which the case for Indo-European as a theoretical ancestor-language is based.²¹ Such over-reaction reflects the anthropologists’ lack of relevant linguistic knowledge. As we enter the 21st century, the concept of race, and specifically the notion of an ‘Aryan’ race, is distinctly out of favour, largely as a result of the imperialism and two World Wars of the 20th century, and we may feel inclined to dismiss MacBain and his scholarly colleagues as part of a wider imperialist agenda, working itself out through linguistic and (sometimes) mythological, sociological and even racial theories. However, we must bear in mind that the Indo-European *linguistic* evidence which MacBain commanded is not necessarily weakened by the removal of the older theoretical packaging and the imperial constructs of an earlier day (Mallory 1989, 266–72).²²

MacBain’s *Etymological Dictionary* has these linguistic perspectives at its heart. Here we see Gaelic being placed within its linguistic kin, so to speak. The philological friends, neighbours and of course the relatives — sometimes including the 42nd cousins — are all present at the great family gathering. They are listed wherever possible for most of the lexical sample, and the whole work is perhaps to be regarded as an exercise in comparative philology, rather than (or in some cases, in addition to) etymology.²³ Today we may feel that the dictionary attempts to do too much in too brief a compass; it is at once a record of Indo-European relationships, a source of Gaelic and non-Gaelic etymologies for words which are used in Scottish Gaelic (and some which, strictly, are not!), and a useful listing of certain distinctively Highland (rather than Hebridean) words and phrases. The work would be much the better if more rigorous principles of categorization had been applied. Yet in its own day it put Scottish Gaelic on the linguistic map, fixed it firmly within the Indo-European language family, and satisfactorily explained the derivations of a substantial sample of the Gaelic lexis. MacBain’s skilful and characteristically succinct analysis of linguistic relationships in the introduction to his *Etymological Dictionary* can be bettered today, but it holds its place in terms of linguistic detail, despite the regular use of the term ‘Aryan’.²⁴ If a comparable work were to be attempted in the present time its compiler would doubtless be less inclined to examine Indo-European relationships, and would be much more firmly focused on the wider Gaelic and Goedelic dimensions of Scottish Gaelic. It might find its starting-point in the excellent resources offered in the curiously misnamed *Dictionary of the Irish Language* of the Royal Irish Academy, which shows the flowering of the essential, indispensable kind of lexicographical scholarship which MacBain himself admired and helped to establish.²⁵

Throughout his career MacBain was something of a restless explorer, but he was very well aware of the dangers of over-zealous explorations and the pitfalls of enthusiastic adherence to any linguistic, mythological or historical theory, especially if essential philological foundations were absent. He was severely self-critical, and sometimes rejected his own work at a later stage, but he most readily extended his scepticism to the labours of other scholars who, in his view, had misinterpreted the evidence because they had no knowledge of those languages which were essential for a proper understanding of the material. As Professor Watson (1907, 385) says, ‘Charlatans found to their cost that he could on occasion wield a grievous cudgel’. Though

Watson refrains from identifying those who were at the receiving end of MacBain's 'cudgel', it is evident that the recipients were primarily 'amateur' writers on place-names. These adventurers were given their beatings in spirited reviews which contained a glorious medley of precise scholarship, wittily-phrased criticism and sharp understatement. MacBain's enthusiastic approval of Watson's early work stands in marked contrast to his comments on Matheson, Johnston and Gillies. His judgement on Gillies's book — 'A feature of the work is its perversity' — represents the laconic style which he could command to punishing effect.

MacBain sometimes extended the range of his 'cudgel' to wallop defective historians, living or dead. The most egregious example of such posthumous dismissal is his sharply critical assessment of the works of the foundationally important historian, William Forbes Skene — certainly no 'charlatan'! In 'Mr Skene *versus* Dr Skene' (published five years after the death of Skene), MacBain (1897) attacked, with great vigour, Skene's earlier views as expressed in his book, *The Highlanders of Scotland* (1837), and he trounced those who persisted in following such outmoded misconceptions. Precisely why MacBain should have chosen this moment — exactly 60 years after the publication of Skene's *Highlanders* — to attack the author is not clear. The paper contains an element of animus which may not be due solely to MacBain's poor estimate of Skene as a philologist, or his perceived failings as a pioneer in a field of immense complexity. It is possible that it may owe something to the social gulf between himself and the Edinburgh-based founding partner of Skene, Edwards, and to some prejudice against Skene because he was seen to be tainted by association with Highland landlordism. We may note that this well-known firm of solicitors had, and continues to have, close connections with the Scottish landed interest, and it is not without some relevance that MacBain's family had had an altercation with a landlord during his early days in Badenoch (Smith 1984, 289).

Yet the real motive for MacBain's outburst may lie in scholarly advance rather than in personal or political prejudice. By the end of the 1890s, thanks to the labours of MacBain and others, the concept of Celtic studies had changed, and had been more closely defined within Scotland. It had become, in MacBain's word, a 'science' with its own rigour and scholarly expectations. In truth, the discipline as we know it today had been newly established by MacBain and his contemporaries. As a result, it was possible to look back from a position of power by 1897, and to condemn the shortcomings of the early pioneers. That MacBain was a trifle ungracious in his comments on Skene is apparent to us now, though it has to be said that within the Celtic field polemical reviewing with a sharp personal edge — a form of academic flyting — is by no means unusual, even at the present time. The amount of acrimony thus expressed seems to be in direct proportion to the complexity, and often the elusiveness, of the subject concerned. Within their own context, however, MacBain's comments may reflect the triumphalism, as well as the triumph, of the new language-based Celtic discipline — as distinct from the romantic, speculative approach to 'Celtic' history of an earlier (and later) era.²⁶ They may also represent one of those entertaining moments when Celtic scholars, reaching the ends of their fraying tethers, have occasionally thrown their caution to the winds, and have felt it necessary to do battle, not always politely, with a beguiling set of 'Celtic' ideas which are well past their 'sell-by date', and, in modern make-overs, are proving difficult to eradicate from the popular mind.²⁷ If this is the case, it is ironic that MacBain should have published a new edition of Skene's *Highlanders* in 1902, thus giving fresh life and currency to the old notions.²⁸ This suggests that he may have repented of his earlier 'indiscretions', or that he may have felt it necessary to do penance, perhaps under some degree of pressure from contemporary scholars or from the Skene 'supporters' club'.

More important than his papers, however, was his edition, undertaken jointly with the Rev John Kennedy, of the *Reliquiae Celticae* of the Rev Alexander Cameron, another Badenoch man

(MacBain & Kennedy 1894). The two volumes of this work, which cover an enormous range of transcriptions of key Gaelic texts (including the Book of the Dean of Lismore and the Books of Clanranald), were published between 1892 and 1894. Although they are in some respects greatly outdated, they are still an essential *vade mecum* for Gaelic academics. It is fascinating to note, in the bygoing, that *Reliquiae Celticae* brings together the editorial skills of a trio of Badenoch men — Cameron, Kennedy and MacBain.

Yet this is still a mere fraction of MacBain's labours. He published frequently in the standard Celtic journals, edited journals himself, and found time to help others. In 1891 he wrote an appreciation of the life and poetry of the Skye poetess, Mary MacPherson, *Màiri Mhòr nan Oran*, which prefaced the collection of her verse which appeared in that year.²⁹ This indicates that MacBain was by no means a high-brow scholar who had forgotten his humble beginnings, nor was he merely a painstaking philologist; he was fond of Gaelic song and literature in the round, and that proved to be important in his time as Headmaster of Raining's School in Inverness. His warmth towards Màiri Mhòr, it will be noted, contrasts with his dislike of Skene, and therein we may perhaps detect something of the political polarizations of the late 19th century, as represented in contemporary scholarship and in the output of one man. It is fascinating to note that in the mid-1870s a correspondent in John Murdoch's *Highlander* newspaper, writing under the pen-name, *Alasdair Bàn*, showed a special interest in Màiri Mhòr's poetry. If *Alasdair Bàn* was indeed Alexander MacBain, we catch another fascinating glimpse of the 'radical' side of MacBain's profile (Meek 1998).

Neither time nor space will permit me to describe MacBain's school, Raining's in Inverness, in any detail. Suffice it to say that his school was every bit as productive as his pen, and that his output of gifted young scholars was remarkable in its day.³⁰ As we have already noted, Kenneth MacLeod was one of his pupils. So too were the Rev Donald Lamont (1874–1958) from Tiree, the distinguished editor of the Gaelic Supplement of *Life and Work*, whose writing in that capacity helped to lay the foundation of 20th-century creative Gaelic prose (Murchison 1960); and the Rev Dr George Henderson (1866–1912) from Kiltarlity, who became lecturer in Celtic at Glasgow University (1906–12) (Thomson 1983, 211). MacBain's scholarly influence reached as far as Crete, in the labours of Dr Duncan MacKenzie of Fairburn, Ross-shire, another of his pupils, who was Sir Arthur Evans' right-hand man when the celebrated excavation of Knossos was taking place in the early 1900s. MacKenzie was an expert in ceramics, and had much greater knowledge of excavation techniques than Evans. Although the glory for the 'dig' went to Evans, MacKenzie, I am told, was the real hero of the piece, particularly because of the manner in which he kept meticulous notebooks detailing the whole excavation. These continue to be admired by archaeologists as models of their kind.³¹ We may wonder whether he learned his methods initially from Alexander MacBain, whose well-kept diary of his schooldays in Badenoch can still be read in Edinburgh University Library (Smith 1984, 248–309).

MACBAIN'S LEGACY

Alexander MacBain's legacy lives on in numerous aspects of Celtic scholarship at the beginning of the 21st century. He provided a solid foundation for the development of Celtic Studies as the discipline reached the 20th century. His *Etymological Dictionary* was his crowning achievement, and it put Gaelic Scotland temporarily ahead of Ireland and Wales in the lexicographical race, as contemporary scholars acknowledged³² — a position which has subsequently been reversed. Indeed, one wonders what MacBain would have to say, were he alive, about the lexicographical inertia which has beset the Scottish (in contrast to the Irish) Gaelic world in the second half of the

20th century. His *Dictionary*, alongside his and Kennedy's edition of *Reliquiae Celticae*, gave great stability for the future. The stature of his contribution at the beginning of the 20th century may be measured by the references to him in Dr Magnus MacLean's important survey, *The Literature of the Celts* (1902), in which he is set among the pioneers of Celtic philology, including Windisch and Rhys (MacLean 1902, 379). His works remain important today, even if advances in Gaelic scholarship and changes in ideological perception have overtaken some of their contents. What we may note with due pride today is the extraordinary range and quantity of MacBain's output, and also (with some qualification) the command of relevant evidence which is apparent in every aspect of his work. MacBain was ready to give credit for the improvement in Celtic studies in Scotland to 'our Celtic Chair', held by Professor MacKinnon in Edinburgh (MacBain 1922, 313–57). Yet it is more than evident that the Headmaster of Raining's School, Inverness, produced some of the finest Celtic scholarship ever seen in Scotland. Alongside MacKinnon, he pulled the emerging discipline out of the myths and mists of romanticism, and placed it firmly on rational, linguistic bedrock.

All of that was achieved by a man whose life ceased at the comparatively early age of 52. MacBain died very suddenly in 1907, when he was in Stirling attending to the publication of the second edition of his *Etymological Dictionary*. It is appropriate that we should honour his memory here today, since it is almost exactly a century since he was given his honorary LLD degree, at the age of 46, by the University of Aberdeen (Watson 1907, 382).³³ Few honours have been better deserved, few intrinsically more satisfying. The 'poor student' from Badenoch had come a long way in every sense. MacBain may not have achieved the title of 'Professor', but he achieved infinitely more than many who have carried it. As I said at the outset, I am firmly of the view that Dr Alexander MacBain was the finest Professor of Celtic that Scotland never had. He was too young and perhaps too inexperienced to be a serious contender for the Edinburgh Chair in 1882, and he was dead before it became vacant in 1914. Academic opportunity did not knock for him. Death claimed him first.

It was therefore left to others to carry on where MacBain, cut down at a comparatively early age, had left off. William J Watson was his illustrious successor, and also his generous beneficiary who was ever mindful of his debt, for Watson's interests are noticeably closer to MacBain than to MacKinnon. Watson succeeded MacKinnon at Edinburgh in 1914, and his *History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* takes the pre-eminent place among the foundational works of modern Gaelic scholarship in the 70 years between 1860 and 1930. These include MacBain's *Dictionary*, many of his articles, his and Kennedy's edition of Cameron's *Reliquiae Celticae*, and MacKinnon's *Descriptive Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts* in the Advocates' Library (MacKinnon 1912). As MacBain is covered by the double shadow of MacKinnon and Watson, he is sometimes omitted from scholarly surveys of the heady days of Gaelic scholarship in the 1880s and 1890s, when he was at the height of his great powers and leading the field as Scotland's foremost Celtic philologist, and her most productive Celtic scholar. He deserves to be given his rightful place as we enter this new century. *Cuireamaid clach eile air a chàrn* — Let us put another stone on his cairn.³⁴

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NOTES

- 1 It is appropriate to note in this context that Watson's *History of the Celtic Place-names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926) was based on the six Rhind Lectures which he gave to the Society of Antiquaries in 1916 (Nicolaisen 1996, 18).
- 2 Fraser (1882–1945), a native of Glen Urquhart, was Lecturer in Celtic at Aberdeen from 1916 to 1921; and MacDonald (1886–1970) from 1922 to 1956.
- 3 The *Reliquiae Celticae* of Alexander Cameron: see MacBain, A & Kennedy, J (eds) 1892–4 *Reliquiae Celticae: Texts, Papers and Studies in Gaelic Literature and Philology*, 2 vols. Inverness.
- 4 A summary of the three surviving volumes of MacBain's diaries (housed in Edinburgh University Library) is contained in Smith 1984; entitled 'The Diary of a Badenoch Schoolboy (1855–1874)', the summary begins on page 273. I follow Smith in writing the diarist's surname as 'MacBain', but he himself appears to have preferred 'Macbain'.
- 5 See, for example, MacKinnon, L 1956, 170, where Donald MacKinnon expresses his view that the poetry of Dugald Buchanan surpasses 'all other Gaelic poetry that we have – apart, perhaps, from Macpherson's *Ossian* and Smith's *Seann Dàna*' (my translation).
- 6 MacKinnon 1956 provides the main writings.
- 7 *Aberdeen University Calendar*, 1880.
- 8 Colm Ó Baoill, 'Geddes, a' Ghreugais agus a' Ghàidhlig' (unpublished paper), 2–3. The interest in Celtic philology which emerged in Scotland and elsewhere in Britain in the 1870s was stimulated by the publication of the revised edition (by Ebel) of Iohann Kaspar Zeuss's *Grammatica Celtica* in 1871; see Maier 1997, 291.
- 9 Geddes's career offers a parallel to those of MacBain and (especially) Watson, as he entered school-teaching on graduating from King's, and became Rector of Aberdeen Grammar School before being appointed to the Chair of Greek at King's.
- 10 For Geddes's lecture, see Ó Baoill, 'Geddes', 5 (note 8 above). This lecture, like that of 1872 which was also influenced by Arnold, was published by the Society.
- 11 Minutes of the Celtic Society, King's College, 1860–1911, list of office-bearers for 1876–7. The Minutes for this period were kept in Gaelic, and the 'Celtic Society' was called *An Comunn Gaidhealach* in this context, and not *An Comunn Ceilteach*, as is popularly supposed.
- 12 Ibid, Minute for '17 de ceud mhios a' Gheamhraidh 1876'.
- 13 MacBain may have come into contact with John Rhys, the Welsh scholar, while he was in Wales in the mid 1870s. Rhys became Professor of Celtic at Oxford in 1877, and in later years MacBain was well aware of Rhys's scholarship, and acknowledged it frequently (as in his *Etymological Dictionary*). It is also possible that he had been attending classes at Aberdeen University during his time at Old Aberdeen Grammar School, but, as there were no Celtic classes as such in the university, this seems an unlikely source for his scholarly foundation. It is quite possible that, although he was officially studying Mental Philosophy at Aberdeen, MacBain may have used the time to pursue other interests of his own.
- 14 Minutes of the Celtic Society, King's College, 1860–1911, Minute for Presidential Address, 1879–80 (my translation).
- 15 MacBain, Speech at the Eleventh Annual Dinner of the Society, *Trans Gaelic Soc Inverness*, 10 (1881–3), 156.
- 16 Accounts of the Society's after-dinner speeches are liberally sprinkled with interjections such as '(Loud cheers.)' and '(Hearty laughter.)', and sometimes give colourful descriptions of the participants.
- 17 For Kuno Meyer, see Lúing, S Ó 1991 *Kuno Meyer*. Dublin.
- 18 MacBain appears to have been at least an editorial 'force' behind the *Transactions* during those years, and he may well have been the stimulus behind the remarkable renaissance of scholarship, political debate and cultural activity which characterized the Gaelic Society of Inverness in the 1880s and 1890s. His contribution towards compiling the introductions to *Trans Gaelic Soc Inverness* is suggested by the regular appearance of an easily accessible, but highly scholarly, commentary on the latest learned

- publications within the wider Gaelic world. One suspects that MacBain was the actual writer of several, and the ghost-writer of many, of these introductions.
- 19 For his Ossianic paper, see MacBain 1886; for his other papers, see respectively *Trans Gaelic Soc Inverness*, 17 (1890–1), 222–66; 18 (1891–2), 267–88; 19 (1893–4), 217–45. The paper on ‘The Norse Element’ was not published in *Place Names*; see MacBain 1922, 313–57.
 - 20 Thus, MacBain 1917, 44: ‘It is needless to remark that until lately the Celts suffered much from the injudicious and unscientific theories of Celtic enthusiasts, and it has been only by the patient industry of the Germans that full recognition has been given to the proper position of the Celts among the other Indo-European nations. Even yet, in Scotland, too little attention is paid to the scientific facts established in Celtic ethnology and philology.’ MacBain elsewhere (1883, 94) roundly dismissed the race-based theories of the late 18th-century writer, John Pinkerton; for an excellent and sobering discussion of 19th-century views of ‘lazy Gaels/Celts’ etc, see most recently Fenyő 2000.
 - 21 See especially Chapman 1992. This large and ambitious volume may demolish the ‘myth’ that Chapman himself has perceived, and in the terms in which he has perceived it, but it does not sufficiently distinguish the various concepts and categories of ‘Celts’ which have existed, or are/were believed to have existed, through the ages.
 - 22 The assumption that it is so weakened is one of the fatal flaws in Chapman, *The Celts*. For a reasoned, contemporary approach to Indo-European languages, see Price 1998, especially 239–42.
 - 23 The second edition (Stirling, 1911) provides the fullest text of the dictionary. It also contains a characteristically spirited and clear-headed response to reviews and criticisms of the first edition.
 - 24 MacBain speaks of ‘the Indo-European or Aryan family of speech’ (1911, i).
 - 25 This is most readily accessed in E G Quin (ed) 1983 *Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials*, compact edn. Dublin.
 - 26 MacBain kept a wry eye on the ‘Celtic Renaissance’ of the 1890s, as is evident in the references to it in the introductions to successive volumes of *Trans Gaelic Soc Inverness*; for some quiet humour at the expense of William Sharp/Fiona MacLeod, see *Trans Gaelic Soc Inverness*, 20 (1894–96), x.
 - 27 A contemporary example of this unfortunate, but sadly necessary, sort of polemic is Meek 2000. At the time of writing, the author was quite unaware that he was following so closely in Dr MacBain’s illustrious footsteps!
 - 28 W F Skene, *The Highlanders of Scotland*, edited by Alexander MacBain (Stirling, 1902).
 - 29 Màiri Nic a’ Phearsain, *Dàin agus Orain Ghàidhlig* (Inverness, 1891), xi–xiv.
 - 30 See Murchison 1982 for a useful overview.
 - 31 MacKenzie’s work has not yet been analysed in detail; for some brief references, see Farnoux 1996, 40–3.
 - 32 In 1898 MacBain was considered as a possible Vice-President by the Irish Texts Society. So too was Donald MacKinnon, and MacKinnon was later appointed; see Ó Riain 1998, 116, 119.
 - 33 The degree was awarded on 9 April 1901: see *Aberdeen University Calendar*, 1906–7, 332.
 - 34 This account should be regarded as no more than *scalae primae* towards a full assessment of Alexander MacBain in the context of Celtic Studies in Scotland. Even in its present form, which has been revised and expanded following the delivery of the original lecture, it is an inadequate appreciation of an outstandingly able scholar. To facilitate a full appreciation, the broader history of Celtic Studies in Scotland requires to be written.

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