

## LEAPS OF THE IMAGINATION: THE LEAP TRADITION IN SCOTLAND

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This paper looks at the widespread, though now little noticed, tradition of naming prominent chasms or declivities in Scotland and particularly in the Highlands as a 'leap, a *leum* or a *loup*'. The most publicised 'leap', *The Soldier's Leap* over the river Garry at Killiecrankie in Perthshire, is today treated as a unique historical event and it is also a site for essentialist tropes regarding the character of the Gaelic Highlander. A recent research study recorded the following explanation of this 'leap' from a minibus driver/guide:

Chris describes the Battle of Killiecrankie and *The Soldier's Leap* which he tells us is 23 feet wide. Although he expresses some doubts about it himself he can understand that it is believable because 'if I was being chased by 300 ginger-haired, hairy Highlanders brandishing claymores, I would make that jump.' (Maclean 2014, 194)

This shallow understanding of *The Soldier's Leap* is perhaps part of a broader pathology. In his paper 'A Gleaner's Vision', in which he discusses the contribution of Thoms to the discipline of folklore collection, W. F. H. Nicolaisen says

What has hardly ever been discussed, however, is the major metaphor [...] underlying Thoms's [...] basic notion of a fragmented fossilisation of the past and present, the contrast between the harvester and the gleaner. (1995, 73)

It is the

gleaner's vision that bothers [Nicolaisen] most [...] he [Thoms] links it to a limited vision and thus, [...], turned generations of folklorists into gleaners and not harvesters.

This paper is an attempt to 'reap' from the 'past and present' record a richer harvest of comprehension of a once widespread phenomenon that can now be gleaned in only a few locations.

Nicolaisen himself laid down the groundwork. In 1968 he contributed a paper on the subject of the 'Prodigious Jump' to the *Volksüberlieferung Festschrift* in honour of Kurt Ranke. In 2011, this paper was reprinted in a collection of his work, *In the Beginning was the Name*. Nicolaisen, who makes the key point that the legend is the source of the place-name, also starts his consideration with *The Soldier's Leap* at Killiecrankie. He concentrates on Irish (noting the existence

of over 60 examples from Ireland) and Scottish examples for which he lists several: Rob Roy's Leap in MacGregor country; Maggie's Loup in East Lothian; *Leum Ruaraidh* (Rorrie's Leap) in Ross-shire; *Leum na Fèinne* (The Fenian Men's Leap) in Badenoch; *Leum Odair* (Odin's Leap) in North Uist; and Barry, Scabby and Matty's Loups in the Rhinns of Galloway. He mentions Crichope Linn over which there is Burleigh's Leap where a Covenanter, Balfour of Burleigh, escaped from dragoons by leaping over the *linn* (1968, 49). He describes one leap thus:

On Loch Ness side we have *Leum Ailein Mhic Raonuill*, Allan MacRanald's leap, where Allan MacRanald of Lundie was pursued after the massacre of the MacKenzies at Kilchrist, near Beauly, escaped by two desperate leaps, one across a deep chasm in a stream and the other into the loch itself from which he was ultimately rescued ... (1968, 49)

His paper locates such leaps within Stith Thompson's *The Motif Index of Folk-literature* (1955/58) where it has the classificatory number F1071, 'The prodigious leaper'. Nicolaisen also draws connections to other motifs, such as F1071.2.1 'Man clears river of enormous width in one leap', A972.5.2 'Chasms between rocks mark leaps of giants, heroes etc.', F684 'Marvellous Jumper', F989.1.1 'Horse's Tremendous leap', H1149.10 'Task: jumping across river in one bound' and H1562.4 'Test of strength: Prodigious jump' (47).

He traces their distribution across northern Europe, particularly in the German-speaking areas, and to one instance (a story similar to *The Soldier's Leap*) in North America where a Captain Samuel Brady leapt across the Cuyahoga River, Ohio.

Of the approximately 120 'leaps' so far noted by me in Scotland, they are normally over a river gorge, such as the Garry at Killiecrankie or the Findhorn or a cliff-edge chasm or geo as at *Dùn Èistean* (Ness, Lewis), though occasionally a gap between the land and an off-shore island and in some cases across prominent landscape elements. Where the architectural characteristics permit, they can be associated with man-made structures such as the castles of Old Wick, Huntingtower or Borthwick.

The 'leaper' can take various forms and it is possible to see a number of sub-sets with the range encompassing both Christ and the Devil. For example, the MacLagan manuscripts – around 9,000 items of folklore collected over a century ago as part of a survey entitled *Folklore of the West Highlands* – records that marks on rocks on the shore at Grass Point on Mull are said to resemble the footprints of a horse bearing the Devil (MacLagan, MML 7960a.2, Record no. 8296). There are mythic animals such as the MacLagan record of a Kelpie – a water horse – on Isle of Arran (MML 5795.a.1, Record 6917). There are giants and witches, one of the latter linked with the fort at Dunadd: near the fort's summit,

on a level surface of rock, beside the image of a wild boar, the print of the human foot is carved out of the rock – it is now thought that these images are associated with the crowning ceremony of the kings of Dalriada.

But Seton Gordon has ‘another fanciful tradition to account for this old footmark. It is said that the witch of Cruachan, landing after a great leap from the mighty hill above dark Loch Awe, landed here and left the mark of her foot’ (Gordon 1995, 335). Though ‘fanciful’, the ceremony site and Cruachan – ‘the sacred mountain of Argyll’ (Campbell 1999, 21) – appear to be now conflated in what may well represent a continuing tradition.

In the Ossianic tales of the Fianna (of which the heroes Fionn and Cú Chulainn are most prevalent), the leap is either the feat of the hero or is a mark of prowess.

For instance, *Leum Fhinn* (Fionn’s Leap) on the island of Baleshare, North Uist, is ‘where there are two hills together, one larger than the other, on the side of which Fionn sat placing his feet laterally on the hillside and pushing them with a view to making a tunnel through the hill. The earth became the little hill. The side of the larger hill, where the tunnel was said to be, is called *Simealair Fhionn* [Fionn’s Chimney] and the space between the two hills is called *Leam Fhionn* [Fionn’s Leap]’ (MacLagan MML 0729b.2, Record no. 899).

Such feats result in contrasting outcomes for the two heroes. For example, Seton Gordon – citing Professor W. J. Watson as his source – relates that the island of Loch Iubhair in Glen Dochart, near Luib, has a leap narrative associated with Fionn:

There lived a man named Taileachd whose sweetheart was one of the Sidhe [fairies]. Fionn too fell in love with her. In a stormy meeting between Taileachd and Fionn the fairy woman spoke as follows: ‘He of you who gains the victory in a leap will I follow with pleasure.’ Taileachd leaped from the isle to the mainland shore, and Fionn had no difficulty in making the same jump. Taileachd then said that they must carry out the leap backwards, and this he did successfully, but when it came to Fionn’s turn he just failed to reach the mainland shore and sank into the mud as high as his neck. Taileachd, before Fionn could move, struck off his head with his sword. (Seton Gordon 1949, 69)

Seton Gordon tells us that the Fingalians found Fionn’s head and put a finger under his ‘tooth of knowledge’ to learn that Taileachd was hiding in a cave on Ben Alder. They found him there and, after striking off his right and left hands and burning out his eyes with boiling beer, drove their spears through his heart (70).

Cú Chulainn, however, has a better leaping career and his salmon-leap

appears to be the most celebrated of Cú Chulainn's twenty-one *geasan* – tricks or devices such as the apple-feat, the edge-feat, the supine-feat and the *gae bolga*.

The Ulster Saga contains a number of these salmon-leaps. Richard Barber recounts that 'Cuchulinn [Cú Chulainn] got his scythe chariot made ready and set out to look for Emer at Forgall's dun, her father's house. And when he got there he leaped with his hero's leap over the three walls, so that he was inside the court, and there he made three attacks [...] and Forgall made a leap from the wall of the court to escape Cuchulinn and he fell in the leap and got his death from the fall' (Barber 1999, 270).

But a significant Scottish location for Cú Chulainn's salmon-leap is Dùn Sgàthaich near Ord of Sleat on Skye. T. W Rolleston describes the event:

When [...] he came to the Bridge of the Leaps, beyond which was the country of Skatha [Sgàthach]. Here he found [...] many sons of the princes of Ireland ... And among them was his friend Ferdia, whom he asked how he should pass to the dūn of Skatha. Now the Bridge of Leaps was very narrow and very high, and it crossed a gorge where far below swung the tides of a boiling sea, in which ravenous monsters could be seen swimming. 'Not one of us has crossed that bridge,' said Ferdia. 'For if a man step upon one end of that bridge, the middle straightway rises up and flings him back, and if he leap upon it he may chance to miss his footing and fall into the gulf, where the sea-monsters are waiting for him.'

Three times Cuchulain ran towards it from a distance and strove to leap upon the middle, but three times it rose against him and flung him back, ... But at the fourth leap he lit fairly on the centre of the bridge, and with one leap more he was across it, and stood before the strong fortress of Skatha (Rolleston 1912, 188).

James MacKillop (1988, 221) describes Cú Chulainn's salmon-leap as an aggressive, highly-effective combat strategy comparable to the aggressive jump of soccer players. Whatever its precise nature, that such leaps remained long in folk memory is shown by a record in the MacLagan manuscript (MML 7220.a) which notes that 'The Salmon leap – lying on ground with arms pressed tightly to sides. Gaelic Soc. records claim the leaper lay face down also with arms pressed and by use of chest was elevated 2 inches and propelled 6 inches forward.'

The esteem attaching to such leaping prowess is attested by a further MacLagan record of the tale explaining the loss of Tain's county-town status to Dingwall. The cause was Alasdair Sgilear (Skilled Alasdair), a renowned robber, who 'having been captured and brought to justice, and on being condemned to

death asked [...] “*Ma bheir sibh dhomh naoi leamanan agus naoi ceamanan, cha’n eil duine ann a Siorrachd Rois a bheireas orm*” (If you will give me nine leaps and nine steps, there is no one in Ross-shire who will catch me). The judges declined the offer and hanged him. On hearing the news of the death of Alasdair Sgilear, the enraged king deprived Tain of its status’ (MML 9083.a.1, Record no. 9931).

The leap was, therefore, a mark of considerable prowess and takes a central role, as in a tale from the Carmichael-Watson archive (f. 41r) that recounts Donald Herrich’s [*Hearach*] fatal leap, taken from a ‘Copy of a manuscript about the MacDonalds of Sleat and accompanying note’:

Hugh Macdonald of Sleat, Son of Alexander Lord of the Isles [...] had issue two Sons, the eldest Donald Galloch [...] the other Donald Herrach by a daughter of the Laird of MacLeod he had also an illegitimate son commonly called Gillespig duh [*sic*] or black Archibald. [...]

Their natural brother Gillespig duh [...] contrived under some specious pretence to inveigle Donald Herrich to the [...] Dun of Loch Scolpeg where he had made arrangements for his destruction. He and his associates were afraid of the personal prowess of Donald which was uncommon even at that time (as ‘his single blow left seldom work for two’) and were consequently obliged to act with more caution and duplicity [...] they therefore resolved [...] that they should pass some of their time in some gymnastick feats such as who should leap highest [...] they having previously contrived that one of their associates [...] should place a thong with a noose through the wooden partition of the apartment in which they were assembled and remain concealed on the opposite side ready when Donald Harrich would try the leap to get the noose over his neck and strangle him [...] while Gillespig dhu and the rest of the assassins could [...] finish him, this they did by running a red hot spit through his body.<sup>1</sup>

Running in parallel with these feats of prowess, and as far back as the times of the Wars of Independence, is the tradition of the ‘fugitive leaper’. The eminent historical figure, William Wallace, is alleged to have made several leaps, for example near Loch Garr, in the park of Roseneath (the former seat of the Duke of Argyll), where there is

a remarkable rock, called Wallace’s Loup or Leap, from a tradition that [...] Wallace being closely pursued by a party of the enemy, leaped this rock on horseback. And escaped unhurt: his horse was killed in the fall

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/en/fulltexttranscription/5040/0/8/10/leap/leap/ALL> (accessed 20 January 2017).

and buried at the foot of the rock, [...] the perpendicular height of the rock is thirty-four feet. (Cruttwel 1806, 355–56)

However, Robert the Bruce appears not to have leaped, although the Comyn's, his mortal enemies, feature at Randolph's Leap. Quoting a *Scots Magazine* article of November 1958, Nicolaisen describes this leap:

Midway down this stretch of the river Findhorn to Sluie is Randolph's Leap where [...] the battle of the 'Lost Standard' were fought. Cut off and surrounded on all sides, Alasdair Cumyn of Dunphail and four companions leapt over and fought their way to safety. Randolph's forces were in pursuit [...] Alasdair escaped by leaping across the river - but it is Randolph's name that is remembered. (2012, 48)

The prowess of a chief of the Robertsons, allied to Bruce, does not suffer such treatment in transmission. James Fargo tells us that Robertson's Leap on the River Ericht, which flows into Loch Rannoch near its western end, is named for Donnchadh Reamhar

who, disguised as a beggar, entered a MacDougall camp. Unfortunately, his great stature gave him away and he had to take to his heels. Having outdistanced all but one of his pursuers, Donnachadh turned back and slew him. But the remaining MacDougalls trapped Donnachadh at the River Ericht, [...] where he made a prodigious standing leap of 16 feet and was able to clear the river and escape.<sup>2</sup>

Moving forward chronologically, the protagonists in the Wars of the Three Kingdoms and later 'Killing Times' of Covenanter suppression are represented by such as John Farquharson of Inverey on Upper Deeside and the Rev. Donald Cargill. Farquharson, 'the 'Black Colonel', had many narrow escapes from his enemies, the Government troops: 'On one occasion [...] he escaped, in *puris naturalibus* and with a mighty leap he cleared the Ey, [...] and the hump-backed bridge which takes the old road across the Ey near where he jumped is known as *Drochaid an Leum*, the Bridge of the Leap' (Gordon 1949, 387).

A near contemporary of the colonel's is remembered for his own leap at Blairgowrie. According to the Caterantrail website,

The route along the riverbank passes through pleasant mixed woodland to the Falls of Ericht, a narrow stretch of the river that incorporates Donald Car-

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2 The website <http://www.genealogy.com/ftm/l/e/o/Trudy-L-Leonhard/WEBSITE-0001/UHP-0097.html> (accessed 15 May 2015) quotes the source of the tale as Fargo, James E., *The Men of Lorne in Rannoch*.

gill's Leap. This is the site of a daring feat by a 17th century Covenanter who is said to have escaped from the government troops by leaping across the river.

For many years brave local people tried to emulate Cargill's feat – most were, however, unsuccessful and, failing to reach the safety of the opposite bank, fell into the icy river beneath! In 1960 the Town Council widened the river with explosives to discourage dangerous attempts to copy Cargill's exploit. So, the 'leap' you see today is much wider than in Donald's time.<sup>3</sup>

A particularly rich seam of tales is associated with the legendary warrior, the Gille Riabhach during the later phases of *Linn nan Creach* (The Age of Forays) in the later seventeenth century. The MacLagan manuscript referred to earlier has a 'Place Legend of Coll; *Leum an Gille Ribeach* [*sic*]' that is replicated in several islands. This tale relates that

On the farm of Grisapoll ... there are two places with the same name *Gille Ribeach*. The McLean and the McNeills were fighting for the island of Coll. The *Gille Ribeach* found himself standing beside a tailor of the clan McNeill. The tailor had an axe in his hand but the *Gille Ribeach* was quite unarmed. The tailor raised his arm to strike the *Gille Ribeach* with the axe. The *Gille*, who was standing on the edge of a stream, towards which his back was turned, to avoid the tailor's blow, made a spring backwards, crossing the stream and planting his feet on the elevated bank on the opposite side. The tailor, [...] enraged, threw the axe after him, whereupon, the *Gille*, picking it up, leapt [*sic*] back immediately and dispatched the tailor with his own axe. The stream [...] is about 12 feet wide with the opposite bank about six feet above the one from which he started. The other spot which bears the same name is on level ground and is marked by stones about 14 feet apart which mark the distance the *Gille Ribeach* is said to have leaped with a standing leap. (MML1411.A, Record no. 1764)

As mentioned, several locations have Gille Riabhach leaps with MacLagan MML 2301.1.2.1 being a very rich account from Mull that has the tailor named as *An tailear-lamh-an-tuath* (an tàillear làmh-na-tuaigh 'the Tailor of the Axe-hand'), and in which the Gille slaughters MacLean's step-brother at Duart castle in front of his mother, MacLean's widow.

Although the leap is generally attributed to a named hero, there are unnamed individuals caught up in events such as the Battles of Mulroy of 1688

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.caterantrail.org/trail/stage-1/cargills-leap> (accessed 26 November 2014).

and Killiecrankie less than a year later; John Prebble has a record of the escape of a MacDonald from The Massacre of Glencoe (Prebble 1966, 236).

The Jacobite campaign of 1745–46 gives us Fraser of Foyers' Cask's Leap named for James Fraser who was hiding in a cave near Foyers for a number of years after Culloden. The cask in question contained beer destined for Fraser, but the bearer was surprised by troops and the cask 'leaped' to freedom (Seton Gordon 1949, 249). The leap of Donald Maclaren of Inverenty, who was 'out' with Bonnie Prince Charlie at the Devil's Beef Tub (Errickstane Brae, near Moffat), we shall return to. Some locations with the *leum* name element, however, have no memory of the nature of the leaper. One example is Coylumbridge in Badenoch, and the same applies to many coastal loup.

The very broad range of leaping characters points, perhaps, to a pre-Christian and pagan origin of the tradition. Through time the device has assimilated Christian elements, as in the naming of *Tobar na buai* (Tobar na Buaidh, Barra) for which the Carmichael/Watson archive has the following record:

*Mac De* [Christ] & the *Donas* [Devil] were competing in leap – the Don defys [*sic*] the Lord who should leap farthest. The Lord's mark is farthest & so he won the vicy [*sic*]. *Tobar na buai* is under the *fala* [a high rock] and the footmark out from it hence the name. The D. [Devil's] footmark is splayed & ugly & the other is shapely & attractive.<sup>4</sup>

Subsequently it affixes to supposedly more mortal figures featuring in the hero tales of the *Táin* and Ulster Cycle, most particularly Fionn and Cú Chulainn. At this point it might be helpful to provide examples of the process of evolution suggested above.

That their *dramatis personae* have altered through time is demonstrated in the changing name and traditions associated with Loophead in West Clare, Ireland. In Gaelic it is *Ceann Leime* (Leap Head) and is, according to the West Clare website, now associated with the lovers Diarmaid and *Gráinne* who were escaping the army of Diarmaid's bitter suitor, Queen Maeve. Seemingly trapped, they escape when Diarmaid lifts *Gráinne* into his arms and leaps to an outcrop of rock, now known as Diarmaid and *Gráinne's* Rock.<sup>5</sup>

However, John O'Donovan, writing the 1839 Ordnance Survey Letters, recounts that the original tradition was that Loophead was *Leim Chonchulainn* (Cú Chulainn's Leap):

The history of the cause of the name was very vividly remembered [...] in

4 <http://www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/en/fulltexttranscription/4098/0/1/10/leap/leap> (accessed 20 November 2016).

5 <http://www.westclare.net/anvilfarm/attractions.html> (accessed 23 December 2014).

the year 1820. Cuchullan [Cú Chulainn] had a Leanán (mistress) whom he wished to abandon, but the more he endeavoured to avoid her, the more anxious she was to be in his society. At length, finding that Ulster was not wide enough for him and her to live apart in, he left that Province by stealth, and reached this peninsula, when suddenly looking behind him he saw to his horror his Leanán at his heels, and he set off at his utmost speed, and coming at last to the very extremity of the land, and she close behind him, he saw a detached rock or small island before him. (At the distance of fifty-two feet.) He sprang forward and landed safely on it, but scarcely had his feet touched the ground here when he perceived his Leanán by his side, upon which he leaped backwards to the mainland again which he reached in safety; the Leanán did not hesitate an instant, but leaped backwards after him, tho' not with the same good fortune, as she came with her back against a large flag stone which projects from the top of the cliff, and falling down, was dashed to pieces.<sup>6</sup>

In Scotland, the traditional leap associated with a MacGregor clan chief mirror this Irish example. According to the website 'robroyways' (<http://www.robroyway.com>), at the entrance to Glen Lyon is MacGregor's Leap over the River Lyon. This was 'an ancestor of Rob Roy Gregor MacGregor who ... in 1569 ... made a daring leap ... [to escape from] the Campbells.'

Within current Gaelic tradition, this MacGregor is perhaps its most renowned of fugitive figures, beheaded on 10th April 1570 at *Caisteal a' Bhealaich* (The Castle of the Pass<sup>7</sup>), and whose memory is enshrined in the song *Griogal Cridhe*, sung to this day. Although now over-shadowed by Killiecrankie, this leap was sufficiently well known in anglophone circles to merit Turner's attention around 1801.

However, although T. Radcliffe Barnet describes this fugitive leap in Glen Lyon in a highly detailed form, he makes no associations with *Griogal*. Barnet's version of the tale has several of Stith Thompson's motifs and the section quoted here has an uncharacteristically detailed citing of locations along an extended pursuit:

Racing down the lochside to Fearnan, he crossed by Auchtar and Croftgarrow, into Glen Lyon. But the pursuing dogs were already after him, hot-scented. Nothing could save the Macgregor now. Except a leap across the river! So, with the breath of the first bloodhound on him, he leaped across the river and just managed to scramble up the farther rock. The

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6 [http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/osl/kilballyowenz2\\_cape\\_lear.htm](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/osl/kilballyowenz2_cape_lear.htm) (accessed 22 December 2014).

7 Now known as Taymouth Castle.

first dog leaped after him, and fell short into the boiling stream of death. The second did the same. The third, taking a mightier stride, reached the rock ... One stroke of the dirk sent it after the other two, to be drowned in the flood of Lyon. (Radcliffe Barnet 1946, 75)

Nicolaisen, however, notes that the location's Gaelic name is simply *Leum a' Chleasaiche* (The Stuntman's Leap<sup>8</sup>) and considers that the name perhaps enshrines an older tale (1995, 50). This is indeed the case, as shown by a tale collected by Lady Evelyn Stewart Murray from a Hugh Cameron, Baluain, in 1891. He recounts that there was a man of clan MacGregor whose wife had made a pact with his enemies to betray him. He suspected that things were not as they ought to be and 'fled down the moor, his enemies hard in pursuit. He came to a place where there was a high rock on one side and he leapt across the river. He reached the other side but was killed on the spot. To this day they call it MacGregor's Leap or *Leum a' Chleasaiche*' (Robertson and Dilworth 2009, 75). The editors also note the tale 'of an acrobat or showman who, many years after MacGregor's famous leap, died trying to emulate the feat and of a cairn, known as *Carn an Duine Ghointe*, The Fated Man's cairn, which was raised at the roadside to commemorate the tragic event' (502).

The process of enhancement of the leaper's status that has elevated an unknown individual to a historical clan chief, as in Glen Lyon, is also evident in the MacLaren 'Devil's Beef Tub' leap mentioned earlier.

According to Wikipedia, Donald, the MacLaren chief, was wounded at Culloden, although he managed to evade capture. In August 1746, he was subsequently apprehended and

escorted [...] to Carlisle for his trial ... While passing The Devil's Beef Tub (Errickstane Brae, near Moffat) he managed to hurl himself over the edge and into the mist making his way to the bottom. This place would later be known by the locals as 'MacLaren's Leap'.<sup>9</sup>

However, Bishop Forbes notes in his journal for 7th August 1769 that

In journeying over Errickstane Brae, [...] you come to a large green circular hollow of old called the Marquis of Annandale's Beef Stand, but now MacLaurin's Leap, because one MacLaurin, a drover, in 1746, made his escape from a party of soldiers taking him to Carlisle to be tried for his life, by rolling down this hollow, there happening very luckily to be a thick mist at the time, which favoured his design greatly. None of the souldiers [*sic*] durst attempt following him, so steep is the descent ... (Paton 1895–96, 230)

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8 Gaelic *cleasaiche* 'juggler, conjurer; mountebank; actor' (Dwelly's *Dictionary*).

9 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clan\\_MacLaren](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clan_MacLaren) (accessed 16 June 2013).

Here we have a fine illustration, not only of the raised status of the place-name – Marquis to Devil – but also the enhancement of the leaper.

Castles are a clear instance of a *terminus post quem* in that a ‘historical leap’ tradition can only arise once the structure takes on the form that enables the space to be leaped. This is the case with Borthwick castle, where visitors are invited to ‘look up at the twin towers and the “Prisoner’s Leap”, perhaps visualising the terrible fear of those prisoners who had chosen to risk death by jumping from one tower to the other to gain their freedom ...’<sup>10</sup> Here ‘the jailers led prisoners to the top of one of the five-storey towers, [to] leap the 12 feet across to the other tower.’ There were ‘just two conditions: the prisoner had to start from a standing position, and his hands had to be manacled behind his back.’<sup>11</sup> Recently a third has been added in that the guides now tell visitors that the leap had to be made backwards (pers. comm.). Huntingtower, the double tower house outside Perth, was already famous for the Raid of Ruthven – the apparent forcible confinement of James IV by the Earl of Gowrie and other conspirators in 1582. The construction of the closely-adjacent tower house in the early seventeenth century created the appropriate conditions for a high-status leaper:

An extraordinary exploit of a fair lady [...] has given the name of the *Maiden’s Loup* to the space between its two towers ... The young lady being in an apartment in one of the towers with her lover, hearing the footsteps of the old countess, ran to the top of the leads and took a desperate leap of 9 feet 4 inches over a chasm of 60 feet, and luckily landing on the battlements of the other tower, crept into her own bed, where her astonished mother found her and of course apologized for her unjust suspicion. (Webster 1819, 640)

In the Highland and Gaelic context, turbulent events such as the Fife Adventurers and *Linn nan Creach* produce the tales of Allan Mòr Morrison at *Dùn Èistean* and An Gille Riabhach in Coll.

The tale of Allan Mòr was recounted by Thomas to The Society of Antiquaries for Scotland in 1878. To him this was a ‘wild and impossible story’ associated with the times of ‘The Fife Adventurers’ – the attempted colonisation of Lewis in the early seventeenth century. This rich tale commences:

Niall Odhar, uncle of Torquil Dubh, Chief of Lewis, attacked the Habost Morrisons in Dun Eystein [*Dùn Èistean*]. The Macleods arrived at Dun Ey-

<sup>10</sup> <http://borthwickcastle.com/about/> (accessed 21 April 2015).

<sup>11</sup> <http://britishheritage.com/the-ins-and-outs-of-borthwick-castle-october-november-97-british-heritage-feature> (accessed 15 May 2015).

stein, at night where one of the Morrisons was shot by an arrow - *Baobh an Dòrlaich*, the Fury of the Quiver, the last arrow of the eighteen that should be used. On hearing the wounded Morrison cry for help, Allan Mor sprang across the ravine which separated Dun Eystein from the adjacent cliff, and reproached them with cowardice, and said, 'If you have come to fight you ought, according to the laws of war from the creation of the world, to have waited till there was light enough to see each other'

He asked for Neil's *lèigh* 'doctor' to attend the wounded man. Neil consented; Allan took the *lèigh* under his arm and leaped back across the ravine with him into the *dùn*. Thomas recounts that Allan's subsequent death at the hands of Nial is commemorated in an *iorram* 'boat song'.

*'S truagh nach robh mi fèin 's Nial Odhar  
An' lagan beag os ceann Dhun Othail;  
Biodag nam làimh, is e bhi fodham, —  
Dhearbhinn fèin gun teidheadh i domhain;  
'S gum biodh fuil a chleibh 'na ghabhail.*

'It is a pity that I and dun Neil were not  
In a small hollow above Dun Oo-ail [*Othail*];  
A dirk in my hand and he beneath.  
I would be sure it should go deep,  
And that the blood of his breast should flow down in rains.  
(Thomas 1878, 545)

This song is still sung today and we shall return to *Dùn Othail*. The feat of the prodigious leap is in the instance of *Dùn Èistean* is enhanced by the carrying of the *lèigh*, and we have further examples of burdens, as in the case of:

Rory Beag Mackenzie [who] lap [i.e. leaped] the water pond of the water of Grudie [...] haweing a greyhound in each hand. That leap is yett marked and spoken of, the inhabitants of these parts admired it to this day.  
(Mackenzie, Hector, 1710)<sup>12</sup>

A peculiar sub-genre is that of The Mutilated [Castrated] Leaper. Thomas (1878, already cited) continues his story at *Dùn Othail* where there is *Leum Mhic Neacail* 'MacNichol's Leap', 'the scene of a legend of which he had several and various editions. MacNicol, for some misconduct, was sentenced by the chief of Lewis to be mutilated. In revenge, he ran away with the only child of the chief. Pursued, he leapt with the child over the chasm to Dun Othail. He refused

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Dr Aonghas MacCoinnich for alerting me to this and other leap tales.

to surrender the child unless the chief were reduced to the same condition as himself. The chief consented. When he had gained his purpose, he sprang with the child over the cliff into the sea, saying "I shall have no heir, and he shall have no heir." As Thomas notes, this tale is attested from a number of locations; the South Uist people claim it to have been at Huishness [Uisinish on the east coast]. To Thomas this is a good of 'where the features of a place are fit, a legend is either originated there or is transferred to it.' He states that, 'nearly the same tale is told of a place in Mull, *Bidean Ghorraidh* and probably elsewhere.' He goes on to provide a supposedly historical event:

But the original tragedy occurred a long way south of Lewis; according to Gerald Barry it was 'apud castellum Radulphi', at Chateau Roux, now the chief town in the department of the Indre, in France. The story is told in the 'Itinerary through Wales' chap, xi, in words of the same meaning as those used by the bards of Lewis at the present day. It is most singular that an event which happened so far away, and probably more than seven centuries ago, should, though falsely located, be told in the islands with such distinctness. Whether it has been passed on from mouth to mouth, or whether it has been read from Giraldus by priests, it is nearly certain that it has been kept alive by repetition for at least three or four hundred years. (549/50)

Here we would seem to have evidence that the tradition is at least 'seven centuries' old. But, equally, we have evidence of much more recent Scottish creations similar to that of Captain Samuel Brady's leap across the Cuyahoga River, Ohio. The best example is 'The Mannie on the Rock', a polychrome carved wood statue by the bridge over the Culter Burn, Peterculter. This statue depicts Rob Roy as an 18th-century Highland warrior in tartan plaid armed with broadsword, pistol and targe. According to the website:<sup>13</sup>

There have been four different 'Rob Roy' statues in this location since around 1850, [when] a ship's figurehead of the Highlander was brought out from the docks of Aberdeen with the esparto grass and rags for use in the nearby paper mill. John Anderson, a carter employed by the mill had a brother on board the eponymous whaling ship 'Rob Roy' and from him he had got the redundant figurehead. [...] The manager of the mill, Robert Arbuthnott, gave permission to place the commanding figure up on the craggy rocks of the Culter Burn. This wooden figure lasted until about 1865 when a replacement was commissioned by public subscription. [...]

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.bbaf-arts.org.uk/sites/bbaf/art-in-env/artefactdetails.asp?ArtefactNum=502>, accessed 6 November 2014.

In 1926, a third incarnation of Rob Roy was created carved from a log of Yellow Pine by a woodcarver, called Graham of the Hardgate [...] Once more in 1991, as the weather took its toll, Rob Roy saw a further change of face [...] The new statue was carved by Arnold Smith. Rob Roy, the fourth to stand on the site, was unveiled on Friday 28 June 1991 ...

Despite this detailed account, guides now recount a tale that Rob Roy leaped across the burn following a visit to his supposed academic relative James Gregory (1674–1731), Professor of Medicine, Aberdeen University.

Popular literature has also been responsible for the reascription and invention of new leaps. We noted earlier that Nicolaisen mentions Chrichope Linn, over which there is Balfour Burleigh's Leap. In *The Tale of Old Mortality* (1816), chap. XXII, Sir Walter Scott recasts the Linn as the Black Linn of Linklater:

So speaking, and ere John Balfour of Burley [Burleigh] was aware of his purpose, Henry Morton sprung past him, and leaped clear across the fearful chasm which divided the mouth of the cave from the projecting rock on the opposite side, and stood there safe and free from his enemy. (306)

This leap description is lifted lock, stock and barrel by R. L. Stevenson for his book *Kidnapped*. This time, however, the Balfour in question is the hero and the location is the River Coe. The precise location is vague, but Ian Nimmo (2005), in retracing the route of the *Kidnapped* heroes, notes that 'near the mouth of *Gleann Leac na Muidhe*, in Glencoe, the river is forced through a narrow gorge' (141).

Scott, however, was well aware of the wider application and appreciation of the leaper in Highland Scotland, as the quote from chap. XXVII of *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828) makes clear, when he has a herdsman say, 'and as for the ten miles, they are but a Highland leap when one bears a message between his friend and his chief.'

The leap following the Battle of Killiecrankie in 1689 is the one to which we return to conclude the tabulation of the leap in its many varieties. Not only is it the most cited, as a web search amply demonstrates, but it is also of interest as a vehicle for a variety of themes. Most contemporary accounts make precise reference to the battle and to a historical figure, Donald MacBean. The following records are representative.

The account at the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) visitor centre has it that '[o]n 27 July 1689 the peace and tranquillity of this beautiful gorge was shattered when the first shots in the Jacobite cause were fired. One soldier escaped by making a spectacular jump across the River Garry at the spot now known as Soldier's Leap.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nts.org.uk/Property/Killiecrankie> (accessed 20 April 2015).

The welcometoscotland website has

It was here, after the Battle of Killiecrankie in 1689, that Donald MacBean a soldier in the defeated government army escaped his Jacobite pursuers by leaping across this 5.5m (18.5ft) rocky chasm.<sup>15</sup>

Wikipedia tells us that '[i]n 1689, during the Jacobite Rebellion, the Battle of Killiecrankie was fought on the northern edge of the village. The Highland charge of the Jacobites took the government forces [...] by surprise and they were completely overwhelmed in only 10 minutes. Donald MacBean, one of William II of Scotland's [*sic*] supporters, [...] is said to have cleared the pass, from one bank to the other, at "The Soldier's Leap".'<sup>16</sup>

Finally the mysteriousbritain website has an account which echoes the explanation of Chris, the driver/guide quoted at the start of the paper in which '[t]raditionally "The Soldier's Leap" across the gorge is said to be where one of the government soldiers leapt to his escape during the height of the battle. This is dubious, as the stretch is daunting to say the least, however, who knows what you can do with a horde of bloodthirsty Highlanders on your tail.'<sup>17</sup>

Citing the sources for the NTS website, Nicolaisen states that there 'is not the slightest doubt about the authenticity of the account ...'<sup>18</sup> (2011, 28)

However, in the following paragraph he is forced to state that the 'historicity of the events as told becomes somewhat doubtful' as he goes on to list both Randolph's and Donnacha Reamhar's leaps. Indeed, the earlier accounts of such battle-flight traditions have an anonymous leaper, thus enabling the tale to carry motifs beyond that of the simple fugitive. So while Seton Gordon, writing of the slightly earlier Battle of Mulroy, states the MacIntosh's 'standard-bearer is said to have leaped [...] across the River Roy at a spot where the most courageous of his enemies did not dare attempt to follow' (1949, 172), the almost contemporary oral tradition had an account in which the identity of the three fugitives is of less consequence than the ownership of the pursuing dogs. The notes on this tale, recorded in January 1951 by Calum I. MacLean from an Allan Macdonald in nearby Roy Bridge, say that the

Battle was fought at *Maol Ruadh*, Mulroy, and MacDonalDs won. Three or four men ran away – MacIntosh asked whose men they were. Keppoch re-

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15 <http://www.welcometoscotland.com/things-to-do/attractions/natural-features/perthshire-angus-dundee/soldier-s-leap-killiecrankie> (accessed 20 April 2015).

16 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killiecrankie> (accessed 20 April 2015).

17 <http://www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/scotland/perthshire/hauntings/killiecrankie.html> (accessed 20 April 2015).

18 His footnote 6a states that George Scottt-Moncrieff, quoting a memoire of 1728, names Donald MacBean as the leaper.

plied that the dogs were his, whoever the men belonged to. The men were killed. There is a leap, *Leum an Tòisich*, where two MacIntoshes jumped. (SSS Archive no. CIM Notebook I.I.1; 25)

Such variation in emphasis surfaces in a tale in the MacLagan manuscript, MML 9160.a.1 Record no. 10035, where ‘At the Battle of Killiecrankie, a Highland soldier who was running for his life, leaped across the pass and when he had got to the other side he shouted to his pursuers, “*Is gort a lean thu mi*”, You have followed me closely, to which the other, who turned out to be a Highlander, replied, “*Nan robh fios agam gu robh a’ Ghàidhlig agad, cha do lean mi thu cho teann.*” If I had known that you spoke Gaelic, I would have not have pursued you so hotly.’

In an evident effort to claim royal sympathy, the informant added that ‘when Queen Victoria ... was one-day riding ... and W. D. was leading her pony. This was a man the Duke of Atholl kept as a kind of fool, but he was no fool, but awfully witty. Well, W. was telling her Majesty every old story of interest about the place, and when he told her about the two Highland soldiers, she asked him what had made the man take such a dangerous leap as that one, to which he replied, “because your Majesty, they were going to shoot him”. “A very good reason,” responded the Queen.’

Finally, MacLagan 9160.a.1 offers a further variant tale on Killiecrankie, in which the fugitive having leaped to safety offers snuff to his pursuers. The sangfroid of the successful leaper calmly taking snuff on the far side of the leap, is at some far remove from the modern era essentialisms about Highlanders noted above.

We have seen, therefore, the persistence of a leap tradition that has adapted subtly to reflect the concerns and events of each passing generation. Song has always helped to maintain the specific associative elements, as with *Niall Odhar at Dùn Othail* and to a fugitive such as *Griogal Cridhe*. Their continued transmission, and the creation of the song that recounts the Huntingtower leap (‘Twa miles without St. Johnstone’s walls’, composed by Andrew Douglas in 1977, SSS Archive No. SA1977.125A3), attest to the continuing tradition. The increasing access to the rich archive of recorded folk-tale and place-name studies has re-invigorated this place knowledge and its celebration.

Is it perhaps optimistic to believe that future visitors to the gorge of the Garry at Killiecrankie – a key site for musings on the nature of the leap – will recognise that the countless film sequences of leaping heroes, from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* to *The X-Men*, must in some fashion owe their existence to the traditions of Stith Thompson’s ‘The Prodigious Jump’?

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