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*Fionn and Ailbhe's riddles between Ireland and Scotland*¹

Sim Innes

In October of 1860, Hector MacLean (1818–93), the Islay schoolmaster and folklore collector, took down a series of fifteen riddles in question-and-answer format from the recitation of “Donald MacPhie (smith), Breubhaig, Barra.”² MacLean sent the text to John Francis Campbell (*Iain Òg Ìle*), to be published in 1862 in the third volume of *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* [henceforth *PTWH*], where the questions are presented as a dialogue between Fionn mac Cumhaill and Gràinne. The first riddle is given in *PTWH* as follows:

*Dé 's lionaire na'm feur?
Tha 'n druichd; bidh moran bhoineachan deth air aon ghas feoir.*

What is more plenteous than the grass?

The dew; there will be many drops of it on one grass blade. (*PTWH* iii, 46)

These riddles, collected from oral recitation in the Isle of Barra in the nineteenth century, are closely related to a set of riddles in the early Irish text *Tochmarc Ailbe* (“The Wooing of Ailbhe”). It will be suggested here that a direct line of written sources ultimately links MacPhee to early modern manuscript recensions of the *Tochmarc Ailbe* riddles. The proposed transmission would involve the text moving from eighteenth-century manuscript to nineteenth-century printed book and on into nineteenth-century oral tradition. In seeking to understand how the riddles became part of MacPhee’s repertoire, this investigation in no way discredits *PTWH* as a source for Gaelic oral tradition. Rather, the transmission history of this particular text adds to our knowledge of the “synergistic relationship between the literary and oral traditions”³ in Gaelic Scotland and Ireland, and hopefully sheds greater light on the practices and networks of tradition bearers, collectors, and antiquarians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Tochmarc Ailbe

Tochmarc Ailbe (ed. Thurneysen 1920–21) is an entertaining and rather enigmatic text detailing the courtship between Cormac mac Airt’s daughter Ailbhe and Fionn mac Cumhaill.⁴ One copy survives, in what Kuno Meyer (1910a, xxiv) called tenth-century language⁵; the source is a

¹ I would like to thank Sheila Kidd, Geraldine Parsons, Martina Ní Mheachair, Carol Zall, and Peadar Ó Muircheartaigh for their suggestions and assistance. This material was researched and written at Harvard University during my Spring 2014 research leave from the University of Glasgow. I am grateful to those at both institutions who facilitated these arrangements. *Mo thaing dhuibh uile*.

² *PTWH* iii (vi–vii and 46); on MacLean see Cheape (2006, from 128).

³ J. F. Nagy (1986, 280); see also Ó Coileáin (1977–78).

⁴ Thurneysen also provided a German translation of the entire text, except for the first speech made by Ailbhe to the druid Cithruad. This first speech was re-edited, and translated into English, by Corthals (2004). Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha’s English translation of the middle part of *Tochmarc Ailbe* through to the end of the riddle section appears in Bourke et al. (2002 iv, 206–10).

⁵ For recent comment on some of the issues connected with this dating, see Kevin Murray (2012).

mostly sixteenth-century composite manuscript, TCD MS 1336 (H.3.17).⁶ By the seventeenth century this manuscript was in the possession of the well-known Sligo antiquarian Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh; it later passed into Edward Lhuyd's collection.⁷

Proinsias Mac Cana noted that the appearance of *Tochmarc Ailbe* in the medieval Irish tale-lists provides evidence that “the learned men of literature had already by c. 1000 [...] contrived to associate Finn and his fian with the reign of Cormac mac Airt” (1980, 106). The introduction to *Tochmarc Ailbe* informs us that the wooing occurs after Fionn's separation from Gráinne. The following very brief summary of the text will help contextualize the riddles: Ailbhe speaks with the druid Cithruad, seeking a prophecy on a potential future husband. Fionn has been reconciled to Cormac and comes to the Feast of Tara. Fionn uses his talent with riddles and witticisms to entice a noblewoman at the Feast. He asks a series of thirty riddles, each answered by Ailbhe. The text ends with prose and poetry in which the details of their betrothal and future life together are discussed. Therefore, we might note before any further analysis that MacPhee's riddles in *PTWH* have substituted Gráinne for Ailbhe, her less well-known sister.

Tochmarc Ailbe's riddles in Ireland and Scotland

Although the complete medieval text has only the one extant manuscript witness, Fionn and Ailbhe's riddles took on something of a life of their own in later manuscript tradition. Versions of the riddle section, without the original prose context and in more modern Irish, appear in a number of manuscripts.⁸ Brian Ó Cuív produced an edition of the riddles from Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 1304 (the O'Neill manuscript), written in 1681 by Conchubhar Mhágaadh.⁹ Ó Cuív also noted three other manuscripts known to him that also contained the riddles, all dated to the eighteenth century. Two of the eighteenth-century copies (TCD MS 1328 [formerly H.3.9] and BL MS Egerton 127) are essentially the same text in the hand of the same well-known scribe, poet and schoolteacher Muiris Ó Gormáin.¹⁰ The third is TCD MS 1289 (formerly H.1.15), written by the scribe and teacher Tadhg Ó Neachtain.¹¹ To these three eighteenth-century sources we can now add a fourth. The collection of Gaelic material made by James McLagan (†1805) (Glasgow, University of Glasgow Library, MS Gen 1042), primarily in the second half of the eighteenth century, also contains a version of Fionn and Ailbhe's riddles.¹²

⁶ For a description of the contents see Abbott and Gwynn (1921, 125–39); *Tochmarc Ailbe* begins in Column 827. For a number of the shorter narrative pieces from the MS see Dillon (1932). TÓC (1977, 107–33) used this same manuscript as one witness for his edition of *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic*.

⁷ Anne and William O'Sullivan (1962, 64); William O'Sullivan (2000, 441); Ó Muraíle (2002, 303–04 and 381).

⁸ Ó Cuív (1986): see item 2, “Agallamh Fhinn agus Ailbhe.” An investigation of the reception of *Tochmarc Ailbe* in other texts would be of great interest also. For instance, the unedited fifteenth-century bardic poem *Ni fa hindmhe is measta mor* from the Book of Fermoy (Dublin, RIA MS 23 E 29) is reported to contain ten quatrains on Fionn's wooing of Ailbhe (described on ISOS, and on the Bardic Poetry Database at <http://bardic.celt.dias.ie>).

⁹ For a description of this manuscript see Ó Cuív (1969). The manuscript is available on ISOS. For an edition of the riddles from this manuscript see Ó Cuív (1986), item 2.

¹⁰ For an edition of this text from TCD MS 1328 see J. F. Campbell (1872, 150–51). According to Ó Cuív (1986, 111), this is not a satisfactory edition.

¹¹ An edition of this, by Whitley Stokes, is also included by J. F. Campbell (1872, 151).

¹² The collection is Glasgow, University of Glasgow Library, MS Gen 1042. The riddles are one of the texts to be found in Item 229. For a description of the collection see Derick Thomson (1992–94). The

Ó Cuív (1986, 111–12) showed that Mhágaodh’s (N), Ó Neachtain’s (H), and Ó Gormáin’s (G) versions are all similar but differing versions of the riddle text. They all share a strong relationship with the tenth-century text edited by Thurneysen (T); as previously noted, all have modernized the language of the original. McLagan’s version of the text is identical to Ó Gormáin’s. Both Ó Gormáin’s and McLagan’s texts begin with a short contextualizing sentence and then the same riddle, reproduced here from McLagan:

Slisnech seághuinn Fhinn. hua Bhaoiscne fri hailbhe
gruidhbric, inghean, Corbmac sunn.
Ciodh as lionmhoire ina fér, ar Fionn. Drúchd ar an inghean.¹³

This is, of course, the riddle with which MacPhee opened in 1860 (see above). The introductory sentence, beginning *slisnech seághuinn*, is found in both of Ó Gormáin’s texts and in McLagan, but not in Mhágaodh or Ó Neachtain. In *PTWH*, an introduction in English tells us that Fionn would only marry she who could answer the questions and that “Graidhne, daughter of the King of the fifth of Ullin, answered them all.”¹⁴ Ultimately, the *slisnech seághuinn* sentence seems to come from the original *Tochmarc Ailbe*, where the following precedes the riddles:

Conid ann as-rubart Find an slisnech seadhaindeachta so. ‘A ingena’ ol Find ‘an-fil uaib
si nech rot-fessead anniso .i.

And it was there that Finn said this string of eloquence. “Girls,” said Finn, “would any of you know the following?”¹⁵

We have noted that Fionn and Ailbhe’s riddles are found in James McLagan’s MS collection from Highland Perthshire in the late eighteenth century. He has them in the same recension as the copies by Muiris Ó Gormáin. We shall consider further here McLagan’s scholarly networks, tracking his connections with Dublin antiquarians. This will lead us onto a possible line of transmission to Donald MacPhee in Barra.

Dublin to Highland Perthshire?

McLagan’s collection gives us our earliest evidence for the riddles in Scotland. We can only speculate about why McLagan and Ó Gormáin present identical texts, but such speculation may prove fruitful. Ó Gormáin himself was certainly in Dublin by 1763, and probably much earlier than that.¹⁶ He produced catalogues for the books and manuscripts in his personal library. His 1776 inventory included two copies of the Psalms in Scottish Gaelic and a copy of the Rev. Alexander MacFarlane (†1763)’s translation into Scottish Gaelic of Richard Baxter’s *A Call to*

online catalogue can be consulted at http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/manuscripts/search/detail_c.cfm?ID=606 (last checked 20 June 2015). MacKechnie (1973 i, 450 col. 1) notes that it is written by a scribe “whose handwriting appears nowhere else in the ‘McLagan Collection’.”

¹³ Glasgow, University of Glasgow Library, MS 1042/229. I present the text and punctuation here as they appear in the MS.

¹⁴ *PTWH* iii (46).

¹⁵ Thurneysen (1920–21, 270); translation by Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha in Bourke et al. (2002 iv, 209).

¹⁶ McCabe (2009); for a recent biographical account of Ó Gormáin see Mac Cathmhaoil (2013).

the Unconverted (1658).¹⁷ Thus, even if there is no known link with Scotland, Ó Gormáin certainly had an interest in Scottish Gaelic and access in some way to Gaelic Protestant material. He taught Irish to, and produced manuscripts for, some of the best-known Irish antiquarians.¹⁸ Among Ó Gormáin's patrons and students was General Charles Vallancey (†1812). Vallancey had been in Ireland since the 1750s and had become heavily involved in the efforts of the late eighteenth-century antiquarian set in Dublin and further afield (Nevin 1993). Either Ó Gormáin or Vallancey, or indeed both, could be the link to McLagan and the channel by which Ó Gormáin's text of Fionn and Ailbhe's riddles came to Scotland.

We can be sure that Vallancey had Ó Gormáin's text of the riddles, since TCD MS 1328 (H.3.9) was in fact written for him, and his own glosses appear in the manuscript.¹⁹ There may have been plenty of opportunities for Vallancey and McLagan to become acquainted. McLagan acted as chaplain for the 42nd Regiment of Foot, the Black Watch, from 1764, and apparently held that charge until he became minister of Blair Atholl and Strowan in 1781.²⁰ The Black Watch returned from America in 1767 to serve in Ireland and remained there until 1775. In 1776 they again returned to America.²¹ Vallancey in the late 1770s had been working on his military survey of Ireland and a number of his sons had also fought in America.²² It has been suggested previously that McLagan's time in Ireland may account for a small number of items in his MS collection.²³ Material of Irish provenance does not loom large in the McLagan collection: item 229, containing the riddles, also preserves a copy of *Ceileabhradh uaimse d'Árainn*, a poem attributed to St. Columba;²⁴ item 219 also contains material in Irish, mostly religious.²⁵ The admittedly limited Irish material indicates that McLagan was interested in the Gaelic literature of Ireland insofar as it coincided with his other thematic concerns.²⁶ For instance, the riddles of Fionn and Ailbhe may have been preserved because they fit into McLagan's passion for Ossianic/Fenian ballads (D. Thomson 1958). The remaining Irish material discussed here can then fall under the umbrellas of Scottish or religious themes. McLagan's inclusion of any material in Irish does invite us to consider the nature of his scholarly networks.

It is well known that McLagan "corresponded widely on matters of Gaelic and Celtic interest" (D. Thomson 1958, 179). Peadar Ó Muirheartaigh (2014) has recently illuminated a late eighteenth-century network of Dublin antiquarians, including Vallancey and Ó Gormáin, and their Scottish connections. We can tentatively include McLagan in this same network, although much work remains to be done on the Irish aspect of his collecting career. McLagan certainly associated with the Dublin antiquarian set on a number of occasions. For instance, Charles O'Connor of Belanagare (†1791) notes that he was shown Gaelic material of Scottish provenance

¹⁷ Ní Mhunghaile (2010, 261); Sharpe (2013). On MacFarlane, see Scott (1920, 325–26).

¹⁸ Ní Mhunghaile (2009, 221–35).

¹⁹ Ní Mhunghaile (2009, 223); Abbott and Gwynn (1921, 121). It is of interest that, according to Anne and William O'Sullivan (1962, 59n12), TCD MS 1328 (H.3.9) is "a Vallancey manuscript copied from Lhuyd's manuscripts." The manuscript otherwise contains material copied from *The Book of Leinster* (TCD MS 1339/H.2.18) and the *Yellow Book of Lecan* (TCD MS 1318/H.2.16).

²⁰ Derick Thomson (1992–94, 406).

²¹ Schofield (2012, 141–48).

²² Nevin (1993, 28–29).

²³ Derick Thomson (1958, 183n1), referring to Items 24 and 107 of the McLagan Collection.

²⁴ See T. F. O'Rahilly (1927), poem 47.

²⁵ For a description of the main contents of McLagan see Derick Thomson (1992–94).

²⁶ In this context we might further note that his collection also contains a small number of items in Manx Gaelic, see R. L. Thomson (1961–62).

“in Dublin, by a very worthy and learned gentleman, the Rev. Mr. Mac Lagan, chaplain to the Highland regiment quartered in our garrison.”²⁷ We can also note that McLagan and Vallancey were both thanked by Thomas Astle in *The Origin and Progress of Writing* (1784) for their assistance with Irish and Scottish material.²⁸ Further research into McLagan’s links to Vallancey and Ó Gormáin may yet specifically explain their shared text of the riddles, but at the very least McLagan’s time in Ireland, and his continuing correspondence and involvement with late eighteenth-century networks of antiquarians and scholars, make it easy for us to imagine a context for the transmission of Fionn and Ailbhe’s riddles to Scotland.

Highland Perthshire to North Uist?

We now turn to the possible line of transmission from McLagan to MacPhee. The riddles made it into print in Scotland in 1804. They appear in Alexander and Donald Stewart’s *Cochruinneacha Taoghta de Shaothair nam Bard Gaëleach*.²⁹ The Stewarts belonged to North Uist; Alexander appears to have been a schoolmaster at Baile Loch in North Uist (“Baleloch,” near to Baile Mhàrtainn and Loch Hosta).³⁰ Their collection of Scottish Gaelic song and poetry is large and has not received sufficient scholarly attention. According to John Sinclair’s 1807 *Notices of Gaelic Books*, the Stewarts’ collection includes a song

composed by the Rev. Mr. Mac Laggan, late Minister of Blair of Athol, to the 42nd regiment, after the battle of Alexandria; in which song he pathetically laments those who fell in battle, and raises their fame like another Ossian.³¹

²⁷ O’Conor (1775, xv). See also Plowden (1812, 232). For mention of the relationship between O’Conor and McLagan see O’Brien (1995, 128).

²⁸ Thomas Astle (1784, xxv). The University of Glasgow’s online catalog for the McLagan Collection states that Item 189 is a copy of material sent by McLagan to Vallancey (as well as Thomas Astle and James Stewart of Killin); see http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/manuscripts/search/detail_c.cfm?ID=73604. However, it is unclear to me if this is correct or on what it might be based. There is no mention in MS Gen 1042/189 itself of Vallancey or the others. I suspect that the online catalog’s description may be a misunderstanding of the comments made by Astle, as above, thanking McLagan, Vallancey and James Stewart of Killin. See also MacKechnie (1973 i, 444); J. Carmichael Watson (1940, 167–69); Derick Thomson (1958, 179n2).

²⁹ Stewart and Stewart (1804, 545–47).

³⁰ John MacInnes, “Stewart, Alexander” and “Stewart, Donald,” in Derick Thomson (1983, 275). See also The Carmichael Watson Project, <http://www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/en/catalogueentry/2332> (last checked 20 June 2015). See also http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran/people/aldasair_stiubhart/?lang=gd; however, the dates given here for Alexander of birth in 1764 and death in 1821 appear to be those of the Rev. Alexander Stewart, minister of Moulin, Dingwall and the Canongate: see Scott (1915, 26). Uist is not mentioned in conjunction with the name Alexander Stewart in Cowper (1997, 97). MacDonald (1888–89, 274–75) states that Alexander Stewart was “parochial schoolmaster of North Uist” and that “it is said” that he received much of the poetry for the *Cochruinneacha* from the poet Archibald MacDonald, “Gille na Cìotaig,” c.1750–c.1815.

³¹ Highland Society of London (1807, 566). This is presumably the song in Stewart and Stewart (1804, 470–78) given the title *Oran do’n Chath-bhuidhin Rioghail, Ghaëleach, an deigh Chath na h-Eiphit ’san bhliadhna 1803*; the first line is “S an ochd-ceud-deug a’s bliadhna.” For both that song and another earlier song also attributed to McLagan, *Beir soraidh uam le deagh rùn buaidh*, on the Black Watch’s

Further study may shed light on links between the McLagan collection and the *Cochruinneacha*. At this stage we can, at the very least, note that McLagan’s song to the Black Watch on the battle of Alexandria (1801) was soon available to the Stewarts, allowing them to include it in their collection of 1804, as was the McLagan/Ó Gormáin version of the riddles.

It has been stated a number of times that the version of Fionn and Ailbhe’s riddles printed by the Stewarts in the *Cochruinneacha* is based on oral tradition. In 1872 John Francis Campbell noted the appearance of the text in the Stewarts’ book as evidence that the riddles were “current in the Scotch Islands.”³² The idea that the riddles, as printed by the Stewarts, were “collected orally” was repeated by Robin Flower in 1926 and by Ó Cuív in 1986.³³ However, the text presented by the Stewarts in 1804 is almost exactly the same as the McLagan/Ó Gormáin version and even includes the short prose introduction: “Slisnech seaga Fhinn o Bhaoisene re Halbha Gruidhbric Inghean Chormaic.”³⁴ Derick Thomson in his catalogue of McLagan’s Ossianic ballads also noted that McLagan’s MS was used by the Stewarts for the riddles. He pointed out that “both McLagan and the Stewarts have ‘ar Fionn’ in the first two questions, but ‘ol Fionn’ in several questions thereafter.”³⁵ The language of the text has been very lightly “Scotticized” in places by the Stewarts. For instance, we see the introduction of a Scottish Gaelic plural *aoidhidhean* for “guests” where McLagan has *aoidhidh*. The text normalizes some orthographical features to more closely approximate Scottish Gaelic on occasion: the conjunctive particle *ina* becomes *na*; the preposition *fri* becomes *ri*; *sneachta* becomes *sneachda*.³⁶ However, the Stewarts’ text is not uniformly Scotticized and indeed does not stray very far at all from the language as found in McLagan/Ó Gormáin. This might be illustrated by the comparison of a small number of the riddles:

<i>Stewarts</i> ³⁷	<i>McLagan</i> ³⁸	<i>Ó Gormáin</i> ³⁹
C a lion crann bheil an coil? ar Fionn.	<i>Ciodh</i> lion crann fil a ccoill, ar <i>Fionn</i>	<i>Ciodh</i> líon crann fil a ccoill <i>ar fionn</i> .
A dhà, ar an Inghean, iodhon ùr agus crìon. [...]	A dho ar an <i>inghean</i> . i. úr, agus [] [...]	a <i>dho ar an inghean i. úr</i> <i>agus críon</i> [...]
Ciod is fearr do rosg? ar Fionn.	Ciodh as fearr do rosg, ar Fionn.	<i>Ciodh as fearr</i> do rosg ar <i>fionn</i>
Fuar dorcha, codladh, ar an Inghean.	Fuar, dorcha codladh, ar an inghean.	<i>fuar dorcha. codladh ar an</i> <i>inghean</i>

departure for America in 1756, see MacPharlain (1813, 92–102). The song from 1756 had also appeared previously in Eoin Gillies (1786, 113–17).

³² J. F. Campbell (1972, 150).

³³ Ó Cuív (1986, 111); O’Grady and Flower (1926–53 ii, 66).

³⁴ Stewart and Stewart (1804, 545).

³⁵ Derick Thomson (1958, 215).

³⁶ Examples here from Stewart and Stewart (1804, 545–47) and University of Glasgow Library, MS Gen 1042/229.

³⁷ Stewart and Stewart (1804, 546).

³⁸ This is my own transcription, from University of Glasgow Library, MS Gen 1042/229.

³⁹ This is my own transcription, from BL MS Egerton 127. These riddles are identical in TCD MS 1328 (H.3.9).

Thus, despite claims that the Stewarts' riddles represent something from Highland oral tradition, this is evidently not the case. The Stewarts printed a slightly modified version of McLagan's (i.e. Ó Gormáin's) text of the riddles.

North Uist to Barra?

To advance from the Stewarts to MacPhee, we must posit that a written text passed into oral tradition. That this could indeed have been what happened is clearly indicated not only by the relationship between MacPhee's version and the Stewarts', but also by how MacPhee seems to have built his repertoire as a community tradition-bearer. In letters Hector MacLean wrote to John Francis Campbell, there is a good deal of fascinating comment on the value of the oral and written sources used by his informants and the search for perceived authentic oral traditions.⁴⁰ MacLean also gives valuable insight into his own recording techniques as well as censorship of English words, "coarse oaths," and "obscene language." In a letter dated 18 May 1861, MacLean wrote that "Donald Mac Phie smith Barra has read Ossianic books and has an enthusiastic love of those poems and traditions. he has learnt much from books besides what he has acquired orally."⁴¹

MacLean writes that while MacPhee confirmed having read the printed versions, he "declares he has had the poems from oral tradition."⁴² MacLean is inclined to believe MacPhee on this point since he believes it unlikely that MacPhee could have been "capable of improving and modifying these poems"⁴³—a questionable claim to say the least, given what we know about folklore informants in general. We have no reason to doubt MacPhee's overall assertion that material taken down by MacLean had come from the oral tradition. However, it appears that explicit information on sources was not recorded for each individual item collected. MacLean's presentation makes it clear that MacPhee might well have had a written source in given instances.

MacPhee was also visited by another celebrated folklorist, Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912). Carmichael collected further Fenian folklore from MacPhee in the 1860s,⁴⁴ giving us additional information on MacPhee and an insight into his community of informants.⁴⁵ Among

⁴⁰ See NLS Adv. MS 50.1.14 and NLS Adv. MS 70.2.1. I have so far not come across any trace of the riddles as originally sent by MacLean to Campbell for inclusion in *PTWH*. The discovery of MacLean's field-notes or what he actually sent on to Campbell would doubtless add to our understanding of the transmission of this text.

⁴¹ NLS Adv. MS 70.2.1, 386a.

⁴² NLS Adv. MS 70.2.1, 382–382a (dated 31 December 1860).

⁴³ NLS Adv. MS 70.2.1, 382–382a

⁴⁴ Calum Macneil (2008, 52; this section of the article appears to be a postscript written by Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart). Indeed, MacKechnie (1973 i, 486 col. 1) makes note among the Carmichael Watson Collection at Edinburgh University library (CW 130) of something with the title "Ceistean Fhinn." I have not had the opportunity to consult this. However, MacKechnie notes that 'most of the items in this collection [CW 130]' are in J. F. Campbell (1872). Therefore, I am assuming this item, in Carmichael's collection, is a transcription of a text published either in J. F. Campbell (1872) or perhaps the riddles as they appear in *PTWH*.

⁴⁵ For biographical detail on MacPhee, see the Carmichael Watson Project:

<http://www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/en/eacpersonentry/GB-237-EAC-p4695> (last checked 20 June 2015).

his informants MacPhee names Roderick MacQueen, “Ruairidh Ruadh,” a catechist from North Uist.⁴⁶ Carmichael wrote in his notebooks of MacQueen that he “lived at Scolpaig. He was a catechist and used to go about from house to house. He had eighteen books written about the Feinne which his son who turned a F.C [Free Church] burnt.”⁴⁷ This rather tragic snippet of information teaches us that one of MacPhee’s informants was in possession of written material on the *Fèinn*. Scolpaig, North Uist, is only a short distance from Baleloch where Alexander Stewart, the co-editor of *Cochruinneacha*, is said to have been a schoolmaster. That the catechist Ruairidh Ruadh, in his perambulations, had contact with a local schoolmaster who was also interested in Fenian lore, and subsequently brought the written text of the *Cochruinneacha* to Barra, makes for a feasible and compelling scenario. However, it is unnecessary and perhaps unwise to wed ourselves to these specifics. MacPhee was literate in Gaelic and might have come by the Stewarts’ publication in any number of ways. It is by comparing MacPhee’s riddles with those in the *Cochruinneacha* that we find various indications that MacPhee used this source.

We note, for instance, that all 15 of MacPhee’s riddles are based on the 21 presented by the Stewarts. There is very little in MacPhee that differs from the Stewarts other than some “modernization” or “Scotticization,” and a number of short phrases. These supplement the bare, often one-word, answers printed by the Stewarts, and can all be understood as the kind of elaboration or explanation that audiences would expect a tradition-bearer to give in an oral performance. For instance, we might compare the following, somewhat illogical, riddle given by the Stewarts (and of course also McLagan and Ó Gormáin) and MacPhee⁴⁸:

*Stewarts*⁴⁹

Ciod ar nach gabh glas, na slabhraibh? ar
Fionn.
Rosg duine mu charaid, ar an Inghean.

*MacPhee*⁵⁰

Dè air nach gabh glas na slabhraidh cur?
Rasg duine ma charaid; cha ghabh e
dunadh na cumail ach ag amhairc air.

What is it will not bide lock or chain?
The eye of a man about his friend; it will
not brook shutting or holding, but looking
on him.

This same type of elaboration also occurs in MacPhee’s version to explain why *bliochd* (“milk” or “dairy”) is the best of food,⁵¹ why a smith’s tongs can carry any load, and why dew is more numerous than grass, as given at the beginning of this essay.

⁴⁶ Macneil (2008, 56n61); biographical information at <http://www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/en/eacpersonentry/GB-237-EAC-p3972> (last checked 20 June 2015).

⁴⁷ Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Library, Carmichael Watson Collection (GB 237 Coll-97), 105/6, folio 18v. This has been digitized and transcribed by the Carmichael Watson Project: see <http://www.carmichaelwatson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/en/fulltexttranscription/2174/0> (last checked 20 June 2015).

⁴⁸ Recourse to *Tochmarc Ailbe* shows that the original early-medieval riddle makes a bit more sense as it concerns ‘roscc desi uma caraid’ (‘the eye of a pretty girl following her beloved’). See Thurneysen (1920–21, 274) and Bourke et al. (2002 iv, 209).

⁴⁹ Stewarts, *Cochruinneacha*, 546.

⁵⁰ *PTWH* iii (47).

What about the Stewarts' riddles that are missing from MacPhee? These are arguably the most opaque to a reader accustomed to Scottish Gaelic, due to obsolete or unfamiliar vocabulary. For instance, the eighteenth riddle given by the Stewarts might not have been adequately transparent, either linguistically or because of the content, to become a part of MacPhee's repertoire:

Cia lion each imtheas tuillte? ar Fionn.
A dhà, ar an Inghean iodhon fireann, agus bainion. (Stewart and Stewart 1804, 546)

This is ultimately based on a riddle from the original *Tochmarc Ailbe*, asking:

Cia lin each do-roic Tailti? ol Find.
Da each ol in ingen, 'i. boinend & firend. (Thurneysen 1920–21, 272)

'How many horses come to the fair of Tailtiu?', said Fionn.
'Two', said the girl, 'female and male.' (Bourke et al. 2002 iv, 209)

On the other hand, it is questionable to speculate based on omissions about what MacPhee did or did not understand, and other evidence must be sought. Namely, some of the riddles are opaque as MacPhee gives them, for example the following:

Dé 's brisge na cluaran?
*Briathran torc muice.*⁵²

What is more brittle than the sow thistle?
The words of a boar pig.

This seems nonsensical until we have recourse to the Stewarts. MacPhee in fact amalgamated two of their riddles:

Ciod is brisge na cutharalan? ar Fionn.
Aighe mna eadar dà fhear, ar an Inghean. (Stewart and Stewart 1804, 546)

What is more fragile than a thistle? said Fionn.

⁵¹ MacPhee's explanation as to why milk is the best of food includes *beathachaidh e leanabh beag a's sean-duine* ("it will feed a little child and an old man," *PTWH* iii, 48). McLagan/Ó Gormáin and the Stewarts only give *bliocht*, without any further explanation. Yet, *Tochmarc Ailbe* itself also contains a longer explanation of why milk is the best food and it includes the following: *toirg naidin, fo-loing dimlichta* (Thurneysen 1920–21, 272); "it nourishes the baby, it sustains the old man" (Bourke et al. 2002 iv, 209). This might be used to problematize the notion that MacPhee's text is based on the Stewarts.

However, I would argue that overall correspondence between MacPhee and the Stewarts is otherwise too great. If MacPhee's reference to milk products feeding the old and young should be taken as having a direct relationship to the same idea in the riddles as represented in the extant manuscript copy of *Tochmarc Ailbe*, it might suggest more than just the *Cochruinneacha* having informed MacPhee's text.

⁵² The first edition, *PTWH* iii (48), contains a misprint and gives *briage*; this is corrected to *brisge* in later editions.

The mind of a woman between two men, said the Girl. (my translation)

Ciod is milse na mil? ol Fionn.

Briathra tochmuirce, ar an Inghean. (Stewart and Stewart 1804, 545)

What is sweeter than honey? said Fionn.

The words of a wooing/marriage proposal, said the Girl. (my translation)

It seems that *briathra tochmuirce* caused some difficulty and was re-analyzed as *briathran torc muice*. Apparently the meaning of Old Irish *tochmarc* ('wooing') was not immediately clear to MacPhee, despite the existence of the somewhat similar Scottish Gaelic *tochradh* ('dowry'), leading to an opaque riddle on "the brittle words of a boar." The resulting *torc muice* might also suggest a written source rather an oral one since of course in speech the *m* is lenited to give *tochmharc*. It is tempting to take this example as evidence of MacPhee himself oralizing the written text published by the Stewarts, parts of which he struggled to comprehend or recognize, given that they were not completely Scotticized. However, we must proceed with caution here.

Dòmhnall Eairrdsidh Dòmhnallach's comparison of orally-collected (nineteenth- and twentieth-century) versions of the tale *An Ceatharnach Caol Riabhach* with their antecedents from Irish manuscripts gives us a number of instances of Scottish Gaels reanalyzing language from Early Modern Irish into Scottish Gaelic. Dòmhnallach gives evidence of two different outcomes in such a scenario. Difficult phrases were sometimes reproduced by storytellers to adhere to the sound of the original, with unintelligible results. In other instances, the unfamiliar language was re-analyzed as something meaningful with a similar pronunciation in Scottish Gaelic, resulting however in a changed sense.⁵³ A similar phenomenon occurs when the sense of a whole episode of the orally recited tale is very difficult to understand without recourse to the manuscript version.⁵⁴ Carol Zall, in a discussion of the Gaelic storytelling of a Traveler family, makes reference to varying types of "set language" which can include "the type of fixed phrases or names which are no longer very meaningful, either to the listener or to the storyteller himself."⁵⁵ Dòmhnallach notes that

Bha mòran de na sgeulaichean measail air a bhith cleachdadh cainnt dhoirbh liomhta a chuireadh an cèill don luchd-èisteachd sgil agus ùghdarras an t-seanchaidh. Bu choma ged nach robh pàirt de na briathran sin a' dèanamh mòran seagh don t-seanchaidh fhéin air uairean. (Dòmhnallach 1989, 219n37)

Many storytellers were keen on the use of difficult heightened language that would communicate the skill and authority of the *seanchaidh* to the audience. It did not matter that some of that vocabulary didn't make much sense even to the *seanchaidh* himself at times. (my translation)

⁵³ Dòmhnallach (1989). See his discussion of the outcomes of *go mbennaighidh Dia duit, tréna shenfhuán, cá thaobh as a dtáingais, drong* and so on (200ff.).

⁵⁴ See the examples and discussion of "Cleas na Ceairsle" in Dòmhnallach (1989, 210–11).

⁵⁵ Zall (2007–10, 215).

Thus, MacPhee's opaque riddles, such as the one about the fragile words of a boar, are absolutely typical of what happens when a Gaelic storyteller draws on a manuscript tradition of Irish origin that goes back centuries, as I am arguing happened in this case.

Of course, various studies of Gaelic storytelling have also shown that dialogue is "more likely to fossilize and remain constant over repeated tellings,"⁵⁶ and the riddles we are dealing with are presented as dialogue. Hence it could be argued that MacPhee's riddles display the same fossilization of language that one would expect of dialogue that has been orally transmitted, and that the *Cochruinneacha* was not necessarily his immediate source—in other words, despite the evidence of his reading habits we cannot be certain that MacPhee himself was responsible for oralizing the text printed by the Stewarts. It was, after all, over fifty years from the publication of the riddles in Scotland until Hector MacLean's arrival in Barra, and there may have been any number of intermediaries between the *Cochruinneacha* and MacPhee.

Be that as it may, the textual relationships highlighted here do indicate that MacPhee's version of the riddles is ultimately based on the *Cochruinneacha*. This could be as a result of the suggested transmission from Ruaraidh Ruadh or it could be at some remove.

Summation

The riddles belonging to an early Irish prosimetric tale on the courtship of Fionn mac Cumhaill and Ailbhe daughter of Cormac mac Airt were a part of the Gaelic oral repertoire of a smith in the Western Isles in the middle of the nineteenth century. Donald MacPhee, and presumably his audiences, had a great passion for Fenian material in Gaelic. It was noted above that Ailbhe, as a named character, is absent from MacPhee's version, replaced by her more famous sister Gràinne. A wider investigation into appearances of Ailbhe in more modern pan-Gaelic folklore would be of interest and might provide further context for her absence in 1860. Fionn and Ailbhe's riddles are reasonably well represented in Gaelic Scotland's and Ireland's early modern manuscript tradition: three recensions survive in a number of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuscripts.

These manuscript sources include the collection of James McLagan. His time in Dublin with the Black Watch puts him into direct contact with the scholarly and antiquarian set there, an aspect of his collecting which deserves further study. His involvement in antiquarian networks would account for the transmission of the riddles from Ireland to Scotland in the eighteenth century. The text was then picked up by the Stewarts and included in their printed compendium of Scottish Gaelic poetry in 1804; their links with the McLagan collection also await further study. It is tempting, although far from conclusive, to conjecture that the riddles only appear in Scottish Gaelic oral tradition as a result of the publication of the *Cochruinneacha* in 1804. Overall, a speculative line of transmission can be constructed for Fionn and Ailbhe's riddles, taking us from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth and from Dublin to Blair Atholl in Highland Perthshire, and ultimately on to the Isle of Barra in the Western Isles, perhaps via North Uist. If this seems reasonable, then we see here the movement of a text from manuscript to printed book to oral tradition, linking the figures of Muiris Ó Gormáin, Charles Vallancey, James McLagan, Alexander and Donald Stewart, Ruaraidh Ruadh, Donald MacPhee, Hector MacLean, and John Francis Campbell.

⁵⁶ William Lamb (2012, 141) gives a list of previous comments on this.