

Friends of the Argyll Papers seminar series 2022/23

Ronnie Black

A Mixed-Up Campbell Villain: Mac Iain Riabhaich in the Dewar Manuscripts

Fri 9 June @ 14:30 UK time on Zoom



The Dewar Project's first book, John Dewar's Islay, Jura and Colonsay, will be published this summer. One of the most fascinating characters whom it has thrown up is Mac Iain Riabhaich, which means 'the Son of Birthmarked John'. It's the hereditary by-name of the Campbell lairds of Ardkinglas, but when we examined Dewar's stories about him we realised that many of them were at odds with the historical record. The mainland and Jura stories connect him with Ardkinglas all right, but the Mac Iain Riabhaich who appears in Islay is George Campbell of Airds, who was loathed there, as was his wife. Other stories show him raiding Arran. Ardkinglas never raided Arran, though other Campbells did. In the end we realised that Dewar's Mac Iain Riabhaich is a composite figure, a sort of generic 'Bad Mid-Seventeenth-Century Campbell'. Composite figures are a product of oral tradition: the stories connected with them in the Dewar MSS seem to be largely true, but in real life they may have involved someone other than the person named.

Ronnie Black was a lecturer in Celtic at Edinburgh University from 1979 to 2001. He is author of *The Campbells of the Ark*, and editor of *To the Hebrides* (Johnson's and Boswell's tour), *The Gaelic Otherworld* (John Gregorson Campbell's folklore collection), and two poetry anthologies. He is editor of *West Highland Notes and Queries*, and director of the Dewar Project

(www.dewarproject.com), the aim of which is to transcribe, translate and publish the Dewar Manuscripts, 'the people's history of the West Highlands, in their own language'. Seven of the Dewar MSS are in the Argyll Papers, and three are in the National Library.

Image: Mac Iain Riabhaich's hanging rock in Jura. Picture: Anna Black

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