

The Dinnie Steens or the Stones of Dee

“...and took our second rest close to the Bridge of Potarch where we had tea at the little hotel on the right bank of the river”¹

It is a strange thought that the celebrated author of the cult “Dracula” novel had like so many others, visited that iconic bridge of Potarch and one can only assume that when Bram Stoker visited in the 1890’s he may well have been told the story of those two massive immovable stones. Unlike Stoker, many others have visited to view these stones as a pilgrimage of strength that has no equal.

What can be written about the Dinnie Stones, the most notorious and indeed best known lifting stones in the world of strength? The stones mean so much too so many and their iconic status is reflective of their popularity amongst all strength disciplines. Whereas many who visit Scotland to tour and test their mettle with other known stones of strength; there are many who are simply satisfied in attempting the Dinnie Stones and adding their individual name to the short list of those who have been fortunate enough to have achieved an accepted “Dinne Lift”.



The Dinnie Steens with the singular authority on the stones - Mr David P Webster OBE

The stones have invoked argument, discussion and emotion with regards to what is and to what is not acceptable and much rhetoric has been written regarding previous known lifts,

¹ Page 138 *Mystery of the Sea*. Bram Stoker (1902)

comparisons and judgements have abounded and quite simply a book on its own could in fact be drawn over the attempts on these stones. This particular narrative however sticks to the historic and is primarily an examination of not only the stones themselves, but an analysis as to the circumstances as to why the stones exist in the first instance as well as an examination of the culture of the area when these stones were first lifted. To progress with the known history of the stones we have to examine the many areas that have hitherto not been looked at and assess this in relation to the stones. The conclusion of this examination should only emphasise just how important these stones are in the larger history of traditional Scottish Stone Lifting and underpin their status with fact and not supposition.

To commence this examination, we first have to state the obvious in that there are three facets to the Dinnie stones.

1. ***Stones used as a feat of strength***
2. ***Stones used in traditional stone lifting***
3. ***Stones used as a possible trial of strength***

Over the years there has perhaps been an over emphasis on the replicating of that individual feat of strength by Donald Dinnie to the extent that their use as traditional lifting stones and as trial stones have been overshadowed. To the stone lifter however, knowledge of all three lifting aspects will allow for a better understanding of these iconic stones. In addition, understanding the stone lifting culture of the time of Dinnie, as well as the culture that Dinnie was exposed to, will hopefully allow a greater appreciation of these icons of strength.

This particular narrative will not examine individual lifts in any detail if at all; the lifting history of the stones has always been well recorded and documented so this would indeed be a futile exercise and would detract from the true purpose of revealing the history of the stones.

The first point to make regarding the Dinnie Stones is a simple comparison. The Dinnie Stones are not the Inver Stone, nor the Barevan Stone, nor the Fianna and nor are they similar to any known traditional stone known in the Scottish Highlands and Islands. Both stones, as is well known, possess Iron ringed handles and it has to be stressed that in the history of Gaelic stone lifting, there is no account whatsoever of lifting stones by applying strength to an iron handle. It has to be emphasised however that in Gaelic culture, "lifts" of strength were not only applied to stones but also to anything heavy including all sorts of ironmongery; the lifting of cannon being especially popular ². With stone lifting, the only generic is that a stone was lifted and as previously explained not only the culture being applied to strength was subject to many factors but also the obvious wide variety of types and weight of a stone emphasised a complete lack of standards. In this respect, although the lifting of stones with iron handles appears to be lacking in relation to a generic type of stone, the fact that there was absolutely no generic makes a simple anything goes application to strength.

There are certainly other known stones that are similar to the Dinnie Stones and indeed the Iron handled lifting stone at Closeburn, Dumfries has a history that predates the Dinnie Stones by over 100 years, but yet these stones exist in the Southern Uplands of Scotland and not the Highlands. It has to be stressed that there is absolutely no history of stone lifting

² *Lifting iron canon as a feat of strength was known to have taken place in Caithness, Applecross as well as on the island of Harris. There are also known feats of strength involving the lifting of heavy iron gates.*

in this manner, that is lifting simultaneously two heavy stones by gripping attached iron- rings and neither would it be the case if the stones were lifted singularly. This however does not diminish the stones in anyway; it only emphasises how unique they actually are.

To commence the examination of the history of the stones it is necessary to examine the area of Potarch, the Bridge, the River Dee and the culture of the people who resided there at the time these stones were originally lifted. In essence we are examining the culture of Donald Dinnie himself. This culture, from the offset is decidedly Gaelic, not Scots and as such the history of these stones has to be seen through the eyes of the Victorian Gael; not the eyes of a lifter from outside Scotland or to emphasise still, not even Scottish eyes are sufficiently experienced to view the culture of the times of Donald Dinnie. For many, this will be seen as controversial as many beliefs and perception regarding these fabled stones are based on, dare I say an ignorance of culture. Examining these stones, as many have done and challenging the history of them by virtue of what men within the modern idiom of strength can achieve, or rather not achieve, is subject to producing an ill-informed account of the stones as quite simply, all traditional stones have a reason, a cultural reason for their existence and lifting.

The examination of these stones in comparison with others mentioned in this book is rather lengthy however it has been considered necessary to emphasise every facet of history and culture known that would relate to these stones. The Dinnie Stones are that important.

To commence the examination we should look at where the stones are actually situated and why the location itself is important in the history of stone lifting.

THE HISTORY OF POTARCH –

Fundamental to knowledge of the stones is indeed knowledge of the Potarch itself and its importance both geographically and culturally, as without this stone lifting would never have existed here in any form whatsoever.



[The Potarch Hotel, home of the steens](#)

Let us start with a fundamental, the location of the stones – Potarch is not spoken as **Po – tarch** and stressing its Gaelic origins from being named after a nearby salmon pool within the river Dee known as the *Bulls Pool (Poll Tairbh)*, the correct pronunciation is indeed **Pi – terch**. This emphasis on the vernacular spoken language of the area has been much overlooked and it should also be emphasised that in this part of Scotland, these stones are **Steens** and not stones as they have often appeared in various writings.

The Potarch is not a town nor indeed would it be called a village. All that exists is the Hotel and a scattering of few nearby houses. Modern geographers have placed Potarch just outside their notion of a dividing line between the Highlands and the Lowlands and as if this line of demarcation was important, there is a road sign further west of Potarch that proudly states that you are now entering the Highlands. For many this line may actually mean something important. Stand somewhere such as in the middle of the island of Coll, an island so full of Gaelic culture and there are no highlands to be seen emphasising that Gaelic culture was not determined by how high the hills and surrounding mountains aspired to as the culture expanded over well established and known physical boundaries.

The history of the Potarch is rather scant but what is known is vitally important. As a place, the Potarch was known to exist as early as the 16th Century. Why it existed is the prime reason that stone lifting took place at this location. Known as a stop-over for Highland drovers driving their cattle along the now non-existent road that stretched along the south banks of the River Dee, the Potarch was also the stop where the great North road met the hurdle of the River Dee and shortly upstream, a ferry service was known to exist for centuries allowing a safe crossing of the river.

In the ancient history of Scottish Liquor Licensing, small unkempt, unclean houses provided Spartan accommodation for cattle drovers. Illicit whisky would be served and the Highlander would simply lay his plaid down on the floor to at least allow him the luxury of one night not sleeping rough under the stars. These early attempts at hospitality were known as “shebeens” or “change houses” and the Potarch Hotel as it stands today inevitably started its existence as such an establishment. The Potarch was not alone, the importance of the Highland drove roads is important to the history of stone lifting. On such roads, and located at the old inns, shebeens being proper, many had a lifting stone. As a place of gathering, and being of a predominately Gaelic male culture, stone lifting took place to alleviate the boredom. This would have been the case with the Inver Stone, Dalwhinnie and the Glen Roy Stones. They owe their existence to the location of a shebeen....a drinking den.

It would be quite conceivable to expect that well before the arrival of the Dinnie Steens that there was indeed another lifting stone in situ at Potarch. The history of stone lifting makes this almost a certainty and a good reason for the existence of the Dinnie Steens themselves. The cattle drovers and whisky smugglers would have undoubtedly have engaged in stone lifting at Potarch, lifting in traditional Gaelic style and perhaps with a rounded stone similar to that of the Inver Stone. Stone lifting activity was as a consequence of location and culture and this was the case well before Donald Dinnie arrived on the scene. It is also important to stress that in this time frame, the 16th to 18th Centuries, the language spoken in the area was the Gaelic, the language of the Gael and in tandem it would have been the Gaelic culture that prevailed.

THE BRIDGE –

“On the granite stone bridge”

Without the existence of the Potarch Bridge there would have been no Dinnie Steens.

18th Century Scotland was a difficult and ever changing place. After the Act of Union with England in 1707 followed by the Jacobite uprisings of 1715 and 1745 the then British Government attempted to push for a military stranglehold on the wild lands of the Highlands. Military roads and bridges were quickly constructed primarily to insure the movement of troops around the Highlands and as early as 1792 it was recognised by pro-union locals that a bridge over the River Dee was a military necessity.



The Bridge at Potarch

“But in no place is a bridge so much wanted, nor could one be built that would accommodate this parish, and the public in general, so much as at Pot-arch, over the Dee near Inchbair. The great North and South roads passes the Dee there. This road is greatly frequented, and is used by the military, being much nearer to Edinburgh to Fort George than along the coast. During this very season (1792), the military had occasion to use this road repeatedly, once going north to quell the riots in Ross-shire.”³

This plea for a bridge at Potarch extended for a few pages extolling the dire need for a crossing of the river Dee at this point however the bridge was not built until 1813. Many local plans had been drawn up but it was the most eminent engineer of the day, Thomas Telford

³ *The Statistical Account of Scotland Volume Nine*

who actually drew the design for this now iconic structure. The Inn at Potarch, now no longer regarded as a shebeen was already in situ as early as 1740 so when the bridge was finally constructed, the location would not look too dissimilar to that at present..

Now that the bridge is in place, it is the mighty River Dee itself that underpins the legend of the Dinnie Steens. The source of the River Dee (*Uisge Dè*) is the highest of any British river being situated over 4000 feet above sea level on the mighty Braeriach, one of the highest peaks of the massive Cairngorm Mountain Range. The proximity of Potarch to the source which is then fed by many tributaries makes the River Dee flood quite spectacularly and without warning. Sixteen years after its construction (1829) the bridge at Potarch was damaged by a serious swell in the river and the localised flooding was extensive. The power of the River Dee was always respected by the people of Deeside who had seen over many years, numerous collapses and the total destruction of river crossings. Another aspect of the cultural language vernacular of Deeside is that albeit today, the use of the "Cairngorms" is a modern expressive, in the time of Dinnie they were known as ***Am Monagh Ruadh*** or "The Red Hills in English which was perhaps the most common name applied to the range at the time.

Repairs to the bridges over the Dee were extremely common and the bridge at Potarch, sturdy and solid in construction as she is, was no exception. Occasionally, the bridge piers would require some repair. To perhaps have some idea how this was carried out, it was known that in 1812 someone further upriver decided to cut down some local timber and float it down the River Dee with total disregard to the bridge under construction at Potarch.

As the timber travelled swiftly down the River Dee, on reaching Potarch the logs smashed violently against the scaffolding attached to the bridge, ripping it from its ties and the supports for the arches were also destroyed. How was the scaffolding tied to the bridge under construction? No-one will know but it is more than likely that heavy stones with iron rings were used to attach or tie in the scaffolding. Indeed, there is still present local knowledge that can point to the location of the outcrop of granite where the Dinnie Steens were sourced. Victorian engineers would not have went to all the trouble of having heavy stones brought from afar to the location for use in construction. The stones were sourced locally and simply left behind on the conclusion of the construction of the bridge. It cannot be proved but it is the most probable reason for the arrival of the Dinnie Steens at Potarch. The stones would have been in situ during construction and then left, perhaps with the knowledge they would be used for repairs in the future.

One important point to emphasise is that at the time of Donald Dinnie there were indeed many bridge crossings over the river Dee yet only one had recognised lifting stones. Of course the existence of similar stones was most probable at other bridge locations yet only at Potarch was located the unique combination of ancient track, shebeen and bridge. The final and most conclusive reasoning for the location of the stones was the presence of the much overlooked Potarch Fair.

THE POTARCH FAIR -

“and on one market day”

These are the words ascribed to Dinnie when he mentions his lifting of the steens. A mere five words which have been overlooked but that are nevertheless important towards an understanding of the stones. When referring to lifting the steens at a Market day, Dinnie is in fact making reference to the Potarch Market or as it was better known, the Potarch Fair.

By virtue of the fact that it is known that Dinnie's feat of strength took place at the Fair it would be expected to reasonably place a specific date to his lift. Unfortunately, and even with an abundance of knowledge of when the Fairs were actually held, the date cannot be confirmed. Unfortunately there is no reference that accurately, and with evidence, can confirm exactly what age Dinnie was when he lifted the stones. By common consent it is often quoted that the year of lift was in 1860 when Dinnie himself was 23 years of age and from this the October and November fairs at Potarch would be a reasonable assumption as the alternative Fair that year, held in May would have been prior to his 23rd Birthday.⁴

The local fairs held in the area were formally held at “**Marywell**” however this fair was moved to Potarch in 1813 which coincides with the opening of the Potarch Bridge one year before.

By 1846 we know that there were indeed four fairs held at Potarch each year.—

“Four fairs are held at Bridge of Potarch, in April, May, October and November, for cattle, sheep, horses, coarse linen, sacking etc, that in October being the principle.”⁵

These fairs were reduced to three per year with only one fair in October concentrating solely on the sale of livestock or goods. The two remaining fairs at Michaelmass (May) and Martinmass (November) had a specific purpose as hiring fairs for farm labourers.

The corresponding dates for each respective fair are as follows -

May - 2nd Wednesday of the month

October - Thursday before the 22nd

November - Thursday before the 22nd⁶

This of course gives us three possible dates for the date of the lifting of the steens by Dinnie but none of which can be accurately ascertained as the year of the lift is not known. It does however give a reasonable idea of when they were lifted in relation to the known frequencies of the Fair itself and understandably a rough approximation of an anniversary of the feat of strength can be obtained although there are three possibles. My own thoughts tend to favour the fair in May.

⁴ The closest reference to the year of the lift is contained within the Glasgow Herald dated 9th May 1972 however only states – “The legend of the Dinnie Stones dates back to **about** 1860”. It is not conclusive.

⁵ A topographical dictionary of Scotland. Samuel Lewis (1846)

⁶ Information obtained from The New Edinburgh Almanac, Oliver & Boyd (1857)

The “fair” at the time of Donald Dinnie was not as one would suspect, a quaint rural social gathering and the underlying culture of these fairs was no doubt the reason why Donald lifted the stones in the first instance.

The fairs held in May and November were known as **“Feeing Fairs”**. They were reflective of the changing agricultural practices installed during the period to support the ever-growing markets of the large towns and cities undergoing the Industrial Revolution. Farming, particularly in Aberdeenshire was manpower intensive but the work was seasonal. The Feeing Fair was primarily an opportunity for a local farmer to recruit farm workers for a fee hence the name.

“At the Homburn you once more enter Aberdeenshire, and after a pleasant drive of two miles more along the river's banks, we reach the twenty-fourth mile-stone, and the Bridge of Potarch. On the southern extremity of the bridge is a commodious inn, kept by Miss Lindsay. An extensive lawn, hedged by woodland, fronts the house. Here the “Feeing Market” for the district is still held twice a year”⁷

The Feeing Fair/Market at Potarch would have been like the many others of its type held within the County of Aberdeenshire but the practice itself on occasion attached itself to a local fair traditionally held to commemorate a particular Saint. The “feeing” or employment aspect was purely Victorian and introduced as a need to adapt to the times. The feeing fair was the primary means for a local farmer to hire labour twice a year and indeed its concept was not Scottish but developed from the “hiring markets” held in England for many centuries before.

During the course of the fair the young men would stand on one side of a selected area and female farm servants opposite.

“Those who became hired or fee'd, men and women, stand out upon the street, as a rule, the females on one side, the men on the other, and the masters push out and in among them, inspecting their physical points much as they would do those of an ox or a sheep, for it is the bodily parts of the servants that alone can be recognised in the hiring market.”⁸

There was only one qualification for a master (farmer) to consider and that was the physical attributes of the worker.

“At present the great qualification is mere power of body – physical strength”⁹

There were no formal tests of strength instigated by the Farmers to make comparisons between possible employees although throughout the duration of the fair exhibitions of strength did take place. Unlike in Sweden where a potential farm labourer was expected to lift a heavy stone to prove his worth, strength was viewed by local farmers throughout the duration of the fair simply by young men doing what they do, test their strength in various ways. The feeing aspect of the market was short in comparison with the actual duration of

⁷ Page 36 Deeside Guide (1889)

⁸ The Graphic Newspaper 14th September 1878

⁹ Fife Herald 8th April 1852

the fair with the keen eyed master (farmer) taking note of the physical attributes of a prospective farm servant while he tests his strength.

In locations such as that at New Deer in Aberdeenshire, the strength of prospective farm-workers was tested with a unique grip competition involving pulling on metal levers ¹⁰. Test your strength stones existed at many north east feeing markets such as at the St Figgat's Fair ¹¹ and in many other areas of Scotland the use of Victorian Dynamometers¹² were common practice. Of course there was also stone putting, throwing the hammer etc so the farmer would have some idea whom he wished to employ before the line up for hiring.

Once the "feeing" aspect of the fair was completed this was when the complete aspect of manliness shone through and it was not for the faint of heart.

"To return from a feeing market entirely sober was an evidence of meanness and lack of manly qualities, and sometimes young lads managed to get uproariously tipsy upon a gill between three of them, just to show that they were made of the proper stuff. Fierce fights were of frequent occurrence, for to go to a feeing market and not have a "fecht" was considered rather effeminate." ¹³

**ABERDEEN SHERIFF CRIMINAL COURT
Tuesday - (before Sheriff Dove Wilson)**

Assault by a shepherd - Alexander Ross, shepherd, residing at Auchabrack Forest, Parish of Birse, was charged with having, on the 24th ult, assaulted a cattleman, named Andrew Farquhar, on the Potarch Market-stance, by striking him with his clenched fists on the face to the effusion of blood. The libel further set forth that he conducted himself in a disorderly and outrageous manner, challenged the lieges to fight, and committed a breach of the peace. He failed to appear, and his bail of £1 was declared forfeited. Warrant was also granted for his apprehension. ¹⁴

So at the Fair there is strength and there is copious quantities of alcohol consumption and fighting with the end result being fornication –

"From the excitement of the drink and the dancing what else could be predicted but the fighting which afterwards disgraces the streets, and the debauchery which swells the percentage of illegitimacy in the Registrar General's returns." ¹⁵

So the atmosphere of the Potarch Fair or market was one that was decidedly such that no self respecting member of the local community would take their wife and children to visit. It

¹⁰ The Banff and Buchan Collection – interview with Jimmie Thain, New Deer- "There wouldn't be a dance at a feeing market, just straight to work. There were tests of strength, one with levers to test your pulling power. There were some big hefty lads".

¹¹ St Figgat's Fair is held at Grantown on Spey. The actual history of the origins of the fair suggests that the actual location was determined by how far a heavy stone was carried. (Scottish Studies No 23) The stone used as a "test your strength stone" may well have been either one or both of the Clachan-neart Achernack

¹² The Stirling Observer Thursday 8th April 1852.

¹³ The Aberdeen Journal 12th May 1912- An article entitled "Feeing Fairs" highlights the culture of Victorian Aberdeenshire Feeing Fairs.

¹⁴ Aberdeen Weekly Journal 13th November 1878

¹⁵ The Graphic 14th September 1878

was not a fair in the romantic sense of tartan cheerfulness and candy but more so a fair of alcohol inspired debauchery, strength, violence and sex.

So a “good fecht” was part of the culture of the fair/market and Donald Dinnie himself immersed himself in it. In May 1891 Dinnie attended the Bartle Fair at Kincardine O’Neil and for some reason ended up in argument with four local men but which was finalised by Dinnie punching all four, knocking them to the ground at the same time with much blood being spilled. On 6th June 1871 he appeared at Aberdeen Sheriff Court to answer four charges of assault. He plead guilty and was fined 20 shillings as an alternative to 5 days imprisonment.¹⁶

The fair however was another thorn in the side of the Established Church who over many years attempted to halt attendance as the moral fortitude of its attendants were perhaps not akin to the principle of Christianity. As such it was not uncommon for certain religious groups to attend the feeing markets and make representations on the attendees suggesting that they shun such evils. It would be fair to say that they were indeed fighting a losing battle and the following text details such a group attending a fair at Potarch where Donald Dinnie may well have been present.

“Well do I remember my first introduction to the feeing market campaign under his guidance, it was in May, 1862. On the 13th we went to Ellon, in Aberdeenshire. Here, supported by a number of earnest pastors, we preached till nightfall the words of eternal life, Duncan’s voice reaching well over the whole fair in an earnestness all his own. Next day we went to Potarch market, up Dee-side, and there we met with strong opposition. A goodly number of labourers, pastors, and evangelists—several of whom, as Major Gibson and Colonel Ramsay, are now with the Lord—drove down to the fair. This was about as hard a battle-field as we were on in all the campaign. We had had much prayer about it, but the opposition, or rather indifference, was very marked.”¹⁷

This particular group were indeed shown the exit via the bridge and were known to have also been beaten physically during their attempts to convert the men of Potarch but what has been demonstrated is not a colourful rural fair but a fair of masculine extreme – who was the strongest, who could drink more, who was the best fighter and indeed yes there were women there to tend to the needs of this testosterone induced party.

So we have the backdrop of the celebrated feat of strength very much grounded in a predominately male orientated culture where manliness was exhibited in many ways. The strength aspect of the fair and its attitudes towards cultural strength can be ascertained by the language spoken by the attendants at the Potarch Feeing Market.

Any notion that Victorian English was spoken by all at the Potarch Fair should instantly be diminished as it was a mix of various languages obviously implying that associated cultures would also be shown. Some indication as to how people spoke at the fair is derived from Robert Dinnie who penned a poem called “***When I was a youngster***”, a narrative about attending the Marywell Fair before it moved to Potarch.

¹⁶ Dundee Courier & Argus. 8th June 1871

¹⁷ Life and Labours of Duncan Matheson, The Scottish Evangelist. Rev John MacPherson (1876)

***Some chattin' at Gaelic an' some at braid Scotch,
Some English, some Irish, an' some at hotch-potch***¹⁸

The fair itself was a demonstration of the ever changing cultures and attitudes of Royal Deeside of the period. Change was swift as the Industrial revolution was in full swing but cultural attitudes often did not keep pace with modernism and was slow to adapt with a tendency for people to hold onto what they were comfortable with.

Dismissing the attendance of those from Ireland as it includes no direct reference, Dinnie himself is emphasising three major language cultures pertaining to the residents of the Parish of Birse. Braid Scotch (Broad Scots) is the Doric language of the North East, some would say it is like the Poetry of Robert Burns but on steroids and, to even those with a grasp of the "Scots", its unique dialect is difficult to understand. The Doric was at the time of Dinnie the language spoken by the commoner, the farm servant, labourer and even those of a more professional status such as Robert Dinnie himself as he writes all of his poetry in this manner. It was at the time the major language spoken in this area of Deeside and for all intents and purposes, it was the language that Donald Dinnie was brought up with and the language that he spoke. This said however, there are two important aspects of the background of those that spoke Scots. For whatever reason, and there were many that could be applied, the Scots language supplanted the usage of the Gaelic language due to the forbidding of teaching and indeed speaking of Gaelic in Parish Schools and although this came under enactment through the Education (Scotland) Act 1872, the reality is that these strictures were being imposed far earlier.

The emphasis with this in the time of Dinnie is that many inhabitants who spoke primarily Scots would have Grandparents who spoke the Gaelic language. Although the language of the Gael was beginning to disappear, the cultural influences of the Gael, their practices and beliefs were being eroded at a far lesser rate.

Those whom spoke the "English" as mentioned by Dinnie are not the commoners but those most likely to be landowners, visitors to sporting estates and those Scots educated further south and who entered the Professional educated classes such as Parish Minister or Doctor. The English language is of course the language of the modern but within the time of Dinnie it was a language of Class and not the major language spoken in the area in the mid- Victorian period. So in mid-Victorian Deeside the prevalent spoken languages are indeed the Doric Scots and the Gaelic neither of which by virtue of the difficulty in their understanding would avail itself to those whom simply spoke English.

The debauchery of the "feeing fair" was the backdrop of the celebrated feat of strength by Donald Dinnie and there is good reason to assume that his lift and carry was not the only lift of the stones that day. Many drunken ploughmen would have had an attempt at trying to lift the steens, probably in many in different ways including lifting one of the stones onto the bridge parapet but nevertheless they would have been attempted. It is in such circumstances where ad hoc competitions take place, fuelled by alcohol and the cultural reasons for the fair,

¹⁸ *When I was a youngster, Robert Dinnie*

that the steens for most men in attendance would have been a focus to assert their individual manliness.

We of course in modern times refer to the stones after Donald Dinnie but they were not known as such at the time of his lift. When used in ad hoc competitions of strength they would have been simply referred to as **“Liftin Stanes or Steens”** by those of the Scots language and **“Clachan Thogail”** by the Gaels.

Gaelic strength culture would by virtue of the aforementioned be prevalent at the Fair. In essence it is the reason why the steens were lifted by Dinnie in the first instance but there would be certain aspects of this culture that would apply.

The testosterone and alcohol fuelled manliness creates a gathering around the stones but attitudes to them would be decidedly Gaelic in the approach to lifting them. In the Gaelic language there was a special word relating to such trials of strength -

Raiteachas (Rajty- ach- as) – n,f trial of strength, a raiteachas air a cheile, competing, emulating each other from ostentatious motives, arrogance, pride.¹⁹

Ostentatious or showing off in Gaelic culture is letting the physical individual strength do the talking as boastfulness of strength was frowned upon. The compulsion in male Gaelic culture was to be **fraigal** – ostentatious of strength. What this means is that the degree of ostentatiousness that drives the physical strength is displayed by carrying out a feat of strength that cannot be replicated. It is for this very reason that so many stones were exercised by the **lift and throw** whereby a heavy stone is thrown over a static object such as a dyke wall and was carried out in such a manner that a challenge is laid down to anyone to lift and throw it back. The idea being that no-one should be able to do so. Ad hoc lifting competition in Gaelic culture was therefore to eliminate the opposition through carrying out a feat of strength which could not be replicated.

This fits well into the **lift and carry** of the steens by Dinnie and no doubt his primary motive for doing so as the culture of the Fair and its attendants furnished the reasons for it to occur in the first instance. Dinnie wished to show arrogance and pride in his strength. It should also be understood that the Dinnie feat of strength, carried out in a Gaelic cultural manner by emulating the lift and carry is a traditional application of stone lifting that makes no provision whatsoever for stops or the occasional drop of the stones. The feat is fraigal because it is unbroken from start to finish.

Now having carried out this remarkable feat of strength, the legend commences. Gaelic and Scots culture has always celebrated physical strength and those of exceptional strength were always spoken of. There was no writing down of such feats of strength and recourse for the remembrance of the strength of an individual was purely by word of mouth, a well known aspect of Gaelic and Scots culture known as **Oral Tradition**.

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¹⁹ Page 206 A Pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary. Neil McAlpine (1833)

ORAL TRADITION –

Most commentators on the Dinnie Steens in modern times have always appeared to have made arguments about the feasibility of Donald Dinnie's feat of strength by either making modern assertions regarding the content of his famous letter²⁰ or have made comparisons in strength, all with the point of disproving the actual strength of the man himself. To most it is the contents of this letter that underpins the history of this special feat of strength. It has been dissected and analysed to an extent that is unprecedented in strength history however every analysis has failed to account for the strength culture of the time and how this is represented in language and this will be further explained later. Another overlooked aspect of the history of the stones is the fact that the oral tradition with regards to Dinnie lifting the steens was overwhelming.

High levels of illiteracy in Victorian Scotland, whether Scots or Gaelic caused a reliance on the oral tradition. Storytelling based on actual occurrences has underpinned Scottish culture for centuries in fact it is as traditional as tartan, whisky and haggis. Obviously nowadays there is absolutely no need for this tradition to be seen as important although on the islands of the Hebrides, the story teller is still revered.

Considering that Dinnie lifted the stones at the Potarch Fair, there were obvious witnesses to this feat of strength. As tremendous the feat was and with the reverence that Dinnie was held in insured that people would talk of him. Word of the feat would be passed by eyewitness to others and by hearsay passed on again and again. This is how oral tradition works and it is known that many had heard of the feat of strength with those two stones at Potarch.

What is evident is that without any knowledge of the letter written by Donald Dinnie, the story of his lift and carry was still known. The letter itself only corroborates the oral tradition.

When David Webster heard of the Dinnie Steens and began his quest to find them it was not as a result of knowledge of Dinnie's letter but as a consequence of the oral tradition. The feat of strength was explained to him by his father and it was through this that he conducted his research and found the stones. Knowledge of the letter only came through contact with the Dinnie family so it has to be emphasised that the primary source of evidence towards knowledge of the feat of strength is simply the oral tradition passed on by the original eyewitnesses to the event.

There is a danger with oral tradition in that human nature causes many flaws to be attached to it. When the initial story may well be accurate, in the space of many generations it can be altered but in this an assessment as to the validity can still be seen. In Gaelic storytelling the story of Connal Gulban and the Stone of Heroes has been mentioned many times in this book. The story has many versions depending on orator but the underlying story is obvious and this can also be seen in many facets of even more modern stories such as that of Donald Dinnie lifting and walking the steens. The original eye witnesses story would be mostly all similar but as the story is orated and passed on by others, the story will change. Of course one of the drawbacks of the oral tradition is the capacity or rather lack of it to be retained accurately but the factual element is that the story would not have been told if indeed the feat of strength had not taken place in the first instance.

²⁰ The letter is contained within "Donald Dinnie; the fist sporting superstar" (Dinnie/Webster)

The importance of the oral tradition in Scottish culture can be evidenced by the plethora of websites given over to recording the various stories which if not recorded would eventually be lost. Modern historians tend to record these oral testimonies for posterity and there is a wonderful website called ***Tobar an Dualchais*** that holds many recordings of the Gaelic and Scots oral tradition. The site also contains stories of Donald Dinnie but a cautionary note for those who aspire to writing any narrative on the stones – if you can't understand the language (Gaelic and Doric Scots) and the culture surrounding it – don't put pen to paper.

It has to be emphasised that each and every traditional lifting stone mentioned in this book has wherever possible a historic narrative referenced to a specific written text however each and every one is only a written account of the oral tradition known to the specific writer. Not all known stones, including the Dinnie Steens, are fortunate to have an abundance of written references that can be associated with it. The Fianna Stone in Glen Lyon as well as the Puterach at Balquhiddy have a rich abundance of texts which can be referenced and from which the history of the stone can easily be derived. Other stones such as those in Glen Roy and in North Uist are sourced primarily through oral tradition and it should be further emphasised that even the celebrated Inver Stone falls into this category as well as the Dinnie Steens.

As a Scot, understanding the oral tradition and culture is a simple acceptance of what underpins the actual story. The oral tradition needs no critical analysis in the modern context as it is widely accepted as truth. This is as a consequence of Gaelic and Scots cultures. Understandably when the story travels further afield aspects or knowledge of the oral tradition is completely unknown allowing those furth of Scotland to question. The reality is that it matters not whether some weight lifter in the USA wishes to challenge the basis of the feat of strength demonstrated by Dinnie as quite simply the culture is not his to even suggest a contradiction. Living and being brought up in the culture of oral tradition is imperative for an understanding of Dinnie and the steens but nor does that even apply to all people of Scottish birth as most over the years have been subjected to Anglicisation and they have simply forgotten the importance of this tradition..

Anglicisation of Royal Deeside certainly would not have helped this tradition to be retained but in common with many other aspects of culture, the ravages of war probably caused a complete diminishing of its importance and knowledge.

So let us examine some of the few texts that highlight this tradition before the time of the repatriation of the stones by David Webster as this will give us some indication as to the scope and depth of Dinnie's feat of strength.

"His father was a mason and a builder, and Donald worked with him. He could single handed lift and place granite slabs of half a ton. Once he carried across the River Dee a huge boulder that no other man could lift" ²¹

The single outlined sentence, written in 1940 and well before David Webster made his investigation into the steens is simply the writers interpretation of the story known to him through oral tradition. This is wholly understandable and accepted as this is how oral tradition works but it all points to a celebrated feat of strength by Dinnie being exercised at the River Dee. It is unlikely to be another separate incident of strength but whereas the oral

²¹ *The Sunday Post* 25th July 1943.

tradition known to David Webster via his father was the lift and carry of two stones, from separate sources and by the passage of time, the story has been altered from the lineage of a single or more witnesses.

There were most likely to be many variations on the theme of Dinnie's feat of strength. Oral tradition would have insured that indeed many of these variations would be perhaps more colourful than the original feat of strength but this is the beauty of cultural strength. For more years than I can personally remember, I was told by my own father that Dinnie walked the "length" of the bridge with the stones. Whether breadth or length is superfluous, what underlies all this oral tradition of course is the fact that a stupendous feat of strength was carried out and witnessed. Donald Dinnie then in cultural tradition was "spoken of" and remembered for his strength. Oral tradition is not folklore nor indeed is it myth and although it can on occasion be embellished the principle reason for speaking of him is down to his feat of strength.

One interesting facet of the oral tradition surrounding Dinnie's feat of strength is that it was so widely known yet there is absolutely no criticism of it. If anyone was likely to have a say about the stones it would have most certainly have been Donald's Brother in Law – William McCombie Smith. Smith was an adversary of Dinnie on the Highland Games field who never got the better of him but they were indeed polar opposites. Whereas Donald's formative years were surrounded in strength, Smith was an educated man, a schoolteacher as well as an author of a number of books. One of his works, ***The Athletes and Athletic Sports of Scotland, Including Bagpipe Playing and Dancing (1891)*** is an excellent narrative on the Highland Games heavy events but throws much criticism towards various records held by Dinnie highlighting many aspects of a lack of sporting standards such as the variation in length and thickness of hammer shafts as well as the downhill sloping of some Games fields.

I doubt whether there was much brotherly love exhibited between both as Dinnie hit back at Smith with a letter published in the Peoples Journal of Saturday 14th May 1892 in which he gives criticism to Smith for not only his methodology but actual knowledge of the heavy events. His letter keenly flows to such an extent that it was required to be split into two parts with second part appearing in a later addition of the newspaper.

Suffice to say it is known that McCombie Smith would have known well of his brother in law's feat of strength as he himself was known to have lifted the larger of the two stones at Potarch yet there is no record of Smith having in anyway formed any opinion that Donald did not lift and walk with both stones. If there had been any doubt as to the credibility of Dinnie it would have been politely and very much in a Victorian fashion condemned by Smith; but it wasn't.

An extremely strange expansion of the oral tradition is the known appearance of Louis Cyr at Potarch and his carry of one of the stones. The visit by Cyr to Great Britain was made in January 1892 returning to the USA in May of that year and during that tour it is stated that Cyr visited Potarch and tested his mettle on the larger stone. Dinnie was however not there at the time as he was in Melbourne, Australia.

The above mentioned letter by Dinnie published on 14th May of that year states "I have not yet met Louis Cyr" so there was no meeting of great strengths however the question has to be asked is how did Cyr know of the stones? He most certainly didn't read about them

leaving only the expansion of the oral tradition to be the single reason for his attendance at Potarch.

Strength history tells the story of the meeting of Cyr and Dinnie although no specific year is given and it is known that both men had a great and healthy respect for each other. The meeting was mentioned in “The Strongest Man That Ever Lived” by George Jowet (1927) and from which the following appears -

“Proof of his great manpower is evidenced by his ability to carry a huge stone with a ring in it that some of the world’s strongest men could scarcely move off the ground”

²²

This single sentence is indeed the first account of the Dinnie Steens that appears in any form of print and was published in the USA in 1927. Of course the reference mentions only a single stone but its mention is again derived from the strong oral tradition.

The Dinnie Steens of course have been known to many in the world of strength for well over half a century. Drawn of course to the stones by the writings of David Webster in his early books on the Highland Games of Scotland and latterly the biography on Dinnie himself, those interested have scoured the pages of the various narratives in these books and on occasion have plagiarised a substantial amount of historic investigation with some even going that step further in becoming authorities to the extent of challenging and dismissing fact.

Now having explained that the steens are in a select company of traditional lifting stones that have their notoriety known only through oral tradition there are however only two known stones in the entire collection of Scottish traditional stones where the feat of strength remembered has been able to be confirmed – The Dinnie Steens.

Whereas the oral tradition of the stone lifting feat of Donald Dinnie is the primary evidence, the supportive corroborative evidence is supplied by Dinnie himself who merely through the medium of a written letter has provided us with a factual account of his feat of strength and there is no doubt that at the time of writing he was well aware of the many numerous and various accounts of what took place at Potarch on that fateful day.

The problem with Dinnies written account however is that every facet of it and indeed every word of it has been dissected and analysed incorrectly. There is absolutely no written account by any in the world of strength which assesses the culture of Potarch at the time of Dinnie’s feat of strength nor indeed how that culture has made a profound impact on the meaning of his letter.

The language of strength and how it is spoken has changed considerably in Scotland over the last 200 years. The Gaelic culture which was at one time was dominant laid down some essential cultural rules in how strength was carried out and how it was spoken of so in this context it is necessary to assess the cultural influences on Donald Dinnie for indeed if he has a Gaelic cultural approach, that famous letter previously mentioned takes on a whole new meaning and understanding.

²² Page 106 The Strongest Man that ever lived - George Jowet



Donald Dinnie looking more Gael than Scot - a drawing of Dinnie in action at the Braemar Games in 1862

DONALD DINNIE – THE GAEL

Within Chapter One – “A Gaelic Strength Culture” it is explained that the Gaelic attitude to strength is far different from the international strength culture that surrounds everyone in modern times. Rules if any that were applied were not generic with an abundance of cultural reasons behind the application of strength but with the sole purpose being to encourage strength rather than measure it. As such, the language of strength and how it was expressed vocally is also different and when translated to English it does require explanation.

Before moving onto an analysis of the “Dinnie Letter” it is necessary to understand what culture or cultures did Dinnie adhere to. In Scotland at the time of Donald Dinnie there were three prevailing cultures that would have made a profound difference on his attitude and what he did and what he said. These cultures, all profoundly different from each other would have been known to Dinnie and his personal life would have required too fit in with each with regards to whom he was with or where he was.

The three opposing cultures were that of British, Scots and Gael. The question is quite simple in that any examination of the man and his strength also requires an understanding and knowledge of all three opposing cultures and perhaps more importantly, what culture was Dinnie more comfortable with? What did he see himself as?

Whatever Dinnie was in relation to his cultural identity is extremely important. If he was a modern Scot of the Victorian era who embraced the culture of Anglicisation sweeping into Deeside from the south, there would have been every possibility that he would not have been a Highland Games athlete. Was Dinnie a Scot, and by that it is meant the cultural identity of the people who did not reside in the Highlands or Islands, the people of lowland culture to whom the Gaelic was feared, unknown and on many occasions looked down upon? The truth is that some aspects of both these cultures would have been seen in Dinnie, especially when he left Deeside and travelled worldwide but the prevailing cultural influence on him was decidedly Gaelic.

Why should this make a difference is answered quite simply through the attitudes and language of the Gael and what is known, how in strength terms, this is exhibited by Dinnie through what is known by his life. The simple fact is that, if Donald Dinnie was a Gael then the understanding of what he did and what he said cannot then be examined and interpreted in any English based culture. If you are indeed English, American or Australian and regardless of your knowledge of Highland Games, then you will simply not be in the position to comment on the strength of Dinnie as pertains to the steens. The Dinnie Steens, their lifting and lifting culture are Gaelic. Understand the Gaelic strength culture and you will understand Donald Dinnie.

There are many clues to a strong Gaelic influence on Donald Dinnie and this would have had a profound impact on his strength. Walk along the Main Streets of the many small towns and villages of Royal Deeside today and not one word of the Gaelic language would be heard. In the days of Dinnie it would have been a far different experience, those with the Gaelic tongue would speak it as their first language, as is the practice on the likes of North and South Uist nowadays. The Gaelic language would immediately cease in the presence of a non-speaker and in the Victorian Highlands this in the majority would have been the landlords and owners of rich Highland estates. Queen Victoria herself would have been well versed in this culture knowing full well that her servants on Balmoral Estate would have conversed with each other in Gaelic but in her presence, or in the presence of her family or visitors, the speaking of Gaelic would have been seen as disrespectful. As a consequence, the daily use of the language has become less and less and after the ravages on the male population after WW1, the Deeside Gaelic, a unique dialect in itself went into a severe decline with the last remaining speaker dying only a few years ago.

Dinnie was born and grew up at Birse in an atmosphere where through Anglicisation the Gaelic language was being suppressed but his Gaelic identity is still seen through what is known of his life.

"On the granite stone bridge that crosses the River Dee at Potarch there were, and still are, two large stones weighing about 8cwt the pair, placed in a recess. In the early 1830's massive iron rings were placed in them, to which ropes were fixed so that scaffolds could be attached for pointing the bridge. Now, one of these stones was somewhat heavier than the other. Very few strong men of that day could lift the heavy one with both hands, but my father could raise one in each hand with apparent ease, and could throw the heavier stone of the two on to the top of a parapet wall of the bridge.

On one occasion, I have been told, he took one stone in each hand and carried them both to the end of the bridge and back – this achievement has been pronounced the greatest feat of strength ever performed in Scotland.

Those stones are still on the bridge and I myself lifted one in each hand on many occasions and one market day, I carried them across the bridge and back, some four to five yards." ²³

This indeed is the direct evidence that any historical analysis underpins, contained within a hand written letter by Donald Dinnie himself, it is to most in the strength community the only evidence that substantiates the interpretation of that remarkable feat of strength. There are however substantial problems with asserting or even trying to interpret what is meant by these two simple paragraphs because for most, and in this respect I speak of those who wish to challenge the accepted history, the challenge is done in respect of the “modern” with absolutely no understanding of the cultures of Royal Deeside in the time of Dinnie, and how these cultures opposed each other which as a consequence means that the statement made by Dinnie in his letter **requires** to be read and understood in a different perspective.

The statement of course is written in English, understood by many throughout the world and hence as such it can be open to variations in understanding, particularly by those commentators from the USA who have written against the known history. It is understandable that men of strength would want to speak of and indeed write about their exertions with these fabled stones but it is when such commentators delve into Scottish history and culture that weakens any argument or narrative, and in this respect, those further of Scotland perceive Scottish strength in generics where rules were applied and are accorded with specifics that justify a lift of a stone of strength.

Gaelic stone lifting has more to do with culture than being seen as a competitive sport with many reasons why simply a stone was lifted. One of these reasons for lifting a heavy stone was to be “remembered”, a facet of Gaelic culture which was still extant until the mid 20th Century whereby a deep compulsion by the Gaelic male to be recalled by future generations for either his strength, deeds, poetry or story-telling. Gaelic culture recorded its history through oral tradition and meant a great deal within the culture and in many ways still does. This concept of “remembrance” applies equally to the Dinnie Steens and will be explained later.

To commence, we first have to assess the culture of the Parish of Birse in the time before and after the birth of Dinnie himself. Who were the locals, what was their language and what impositions were being enforced at the time?

There was indeed one major influence on Donald Dinnie who was not surprisingly his father Robert. From Robert Dinnie we can to a degree learn and then assert cultural influences on Donald Dinnie.

As previously mentioned, the Gaelic language was in a severe decline due to more assertive cultures implying their will on the people. Robert Dinnie was born in 1808, a mere 62 years after the Jacobite uprising of the “45” and its finality at the battle of Culloden (1746). What should be remembered is that the “15” uprising some 30 years earlier had commenced with

²³ Donald Dinnie *The First Sporting Superstar*, David Webster & Gordon Dinnie (1999)

the Earl of Marr raising the standard at Braemar as, and has always been the case, support for the Stuart line in retrieving the British Crown was indeed massive in Deeside and was exactly the same in the “45”.

The romanticists of many pre Victorian and Victorian writers made a particular emphasis in asserting the Highlander with a loyalty to the reigning British Monarch for whom, within living memory, was the opposing side in battle. Even the during the times of Donald Dinnie there was still latent Jacobite sympathies on the most part never observed, but they were there.

“Within one mile of that terrace, in September 1715, the Earl of Mar, surrounded by minor chiefs and thousands of vassals, struck the flagstaff of the house of Stewart in the earth, and unfurled its challenges to the Highland breeze. On another day of September 1848, a royal lady, the heiress of the house of Hanover, her husband and her children, stood on that terrace, to receive the homage and the welcome of the descendant’s of those Highland Chiefs and the fragments of the tenantry still left in the land..... The country that had furnished their ancestors, whenever their standard was raised, with many thousand followers, was drained to make an exhibition of Highland Games before royalty.”²⁴

To assume that all Deeside Highlanders were Union Jack waving, fully paid up subscribers to the British Empire would be churlish. It will never be ascertained the actual depth of Jacobite sympathies during that period but in the time of Donald Dinnie, the imposition of either Jacobite or Union tendencies would be a factual reality. The most obvious aspect of effect was the horrendous Highland Clearances where people were removed from the land and exported either to the Lowlands of Scotland or worse still, abroad to another country. The subject history of the Clearances is extremely complicated involving many issues including ideas of ethnic cleansing to rid the land of a Gaelic underclass –

“Collective emigration is, therefore, the removal of a diseased and damaged part of our population. It is a relief to the rest of the population to be rid of this part “²⁵

This particular statement emanated not from as probably expected England but rather it was statement of contempt that the now Anglicised lowland Scot had towards the Highland Scot. Suffice to say the Gael held the lowlander in equal contempt, some may say unforgiving, the primary put down being the loss of their native Gaelic language and ease of conversion to the “Inglis”. Although the romantics of the period, so justified as Queen Victoria adored her Highland Men, painted a picture of happiness and contentment in Royal Deeside the true fact is that there was indeed tensions and mistrust that was evident in everyday life. Transition from Highland Gael to Highland British came at a cost and took a very long time to achieve.

Regardless of social or political reasoning’s, it was in many cases the manner in which people were forcibly ejected that made the enforcement even less palatable with burnings of crofts, rapes and even murder of expelled people. This was the backdrop of the times of certainly Robert Dinnie and indeed took place within the formative years of Donald himself so, and with known clearances in Glen Feardar and even closer in Glen Tanner, both being Deeside Glens, this social political turbulence would have had an effect on Dinnie. Donald

²⁴ P10/11 Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine (1849). From an article called “The Dee”.

²⁵ The Scotsman. 26 July 1851. Donald Dinnie was 14 years old when this attitude was made known

Dinnie, as astute as he was, never made any mention of political leanings however his father did and the following is a fragment of evidence that points towards a more decidedly Gaelic rather than Scots sentiment towards the clearances. –

Adieu to Glentanner, for ever fareweel!
An' the mony blythe days I spent in thy beil.
An' noo, I maun leave thee ! ah, noo, we maun part
But I caua leave thee but wi' a sair heart.
Though my liviu' was scanty, my haddin' but sma'.
Contented an' happy I aye wrought awa'.
Glentanner, I lo'e thee ; thou'rt still dear to me.
Although, like an' exile, I'm banish'd frae thee.

Adieu to Glentanner, for ever fareweel !
I'll aye think about thee whaur'er I tak' beil ;
I'll aye see the sun wi' his bonnie bricht beams
Sheen over thy pine-tappit hills in my dreams ;
An' sle'epin' or waukin' I'll haunt my auld ha' —
A' the comfort that's left me noo whan I'm awa'.

But death comes at last, wha nae ane can withstan',
An' mak's poor fowks as rich as the lairds o' the lan' ;
Whan we'll a get a dwallin', an' a' get a share,
Whaur nane thinks o' shiftin' their neebor for mair ;
A little wee fauld bauds the great fowks an sma',
An' ends a' distinction whan they are awa'.²⁶

The narrative by Robert Dinnie entitled “Fairwell to Glentanner” is a heartfelt rendition of the times that he had spent there while younger and is a serious inference that the father of the celebrated Donald Dinnie was himself subject to the forcible removal known as the Clearances.

²⁶ Fairwell to Glentannar – Robert Dinnie

An important fact should be emphasised about the Clearances however is that they were not all as forcible as that in Sutherland, Caithness and in the Hebrides, in fact what would pass as the Deeside Clearances in the area of Birse was known to have taken place with local landowners, particularly in Glentannar, giving substantial assistance to crofters to help them relocate locally. There was no shipment to the colonies from here.

The townships where Robert Dinnie lived in Glentannar were decidedly Gaelic. Culturally displaying that unique migration of the Highlander to the high summer shielings where not surprisingly, as Gaels do, they lift stones. -

“In Glentanner there was one (lifting stone) near the head of the Boonie, which cannot now be identified”²⁷

Robert Dinnie in his poem makes his thoughts well clear in respect of the clearances when he states “Whaur nane thinks o' shiftin' their neebor for mair”, a direct reference to the acquisition of wealth over the established Gaelic rules of tenantry which had dissolved after 1746 and the break-up of the Clan System.

The inference however is that Robert Dinnie was most likely to have been a Gaelic speaker with the culture that he mentions in Glentanner decidedly Gaelic and not Scots. It should also be noted that Robert Dinnie wrote this specific poem well into his 60's, probably a time of life where releasing his “political tendencies” would have no financial bearing on him as he was retired by this age and by all accounts, had a desire to be left alone with his wife in his country..



Robert Dinnie

²⁷ The place-names of Aberdeenshire by William McCombie Alexander (1952).

The influence of the Jacobites as previously mentioned was always a serious concern to the British Government in London and in a rather futile attempt to adjudge the possible size of a resistant army, as late as 1891 a Scottish Census was carried out where every household occupant was asked whether they spoke Gaelic and English or solely Gaelic. This was no serious attempt by the British Government to utilise the data gathered to assess and perhaps halt a decline in language, rather ignorantly they associated Gaelic speaking with Jacobite sympathies, a simple assumption but flawed in respect that by this time many had simply adapted to a sense of Britishness and others, perhaps more suspiciously, simply answered “No” to both questions. The 1891 census has long been discussed regarding its degree of accuracy as so many had a notion of its political reasoning. The fact that Robert Dinnie said “No” is of little consequence.

Who Robert Dinnie associated with also points to more than an inference of Gaelic cultural acceptance. The story of how Donald Dinnie was given his name, perhaps more folklore than reality but the story goes along the lines that having been so impressed by a lift of the Inver Stone by a Skye man called Donald MacDonald, Robert expressed that he would call his first boy after him. Now if the story is true, I wonder what was the language spoken between both men? It most certainly would not have been Doric Scots.



One extremely good friend of Robert Dinnie was a man a good bit older than him and almost the best living example of the archetypal Gael of the period – Alexander (Sandy) Davidson. Davidson was born at the Mill of Inver in 1792 and in as much as he was born into a family noted for its strength, it is the fact that Davidson was as far removed from being Scots as Queen Victoria was as being a Gael that should be emphasised. In just about all aspects of his life he exhibited Gaelic culture and held by it regardless of an imposing Anglicised culture. Sandy Davidson was first and foremost a Gaelic speaker, being his first language it was his preferred means of communicating and although he did speak English, as is even today, most Gaelic speakers speak a very precise and clear English which in no way resembles the Scots or Doric dialects. How Robert Dinnie and Davidson spoke to each other is unknown however they did and they spoke about strength.

“Robert Dinnie, the father of the great athlete, Donald Dinnie, told the writer that he and Davidson measured legs, and that each was 18 inches round the calf” (Author note- Donald Dinnie’s calf measurement is regularly given as 17¼ inches);²⁸

Sandy Davidson

²⁸ P138 *The Romance of Poaching*. William McCombie Smith

What Davidson was more famous for was his poaching ability, his penchant for taking game be it grouse, deer or salmon which in essence he was not entitled to and he was notorious for it.

Here again the imposition of the Clearances and resultant attitudes are to the fore. Former Clan lands had been sold off to rich landowners whose idea of Highland Sport was not the Putting Stone, Caber or Hammer it was a gentleman's rural pursuit of the rich Scottish wildlife that drew visitors, usually Royalty and those of wealth, to the vast Highland Estates.

People, and in this respect in many cases, the indigenous Gael, had been forcibly removed from such estates but the Highland way or the Gaelic way was always a respect for the land in that the Highlander could take from it what he needed to feed himself and his family. Underpinning the belief system of the likes of Davidson was that, in his culture he had every right to take game whenever and wherever and in the process showing scant regard for the newly imposed Poaching Laws. Davidson was found dead on the high moor above Glenbuchat, quite a distance from Inver and the spot he died is, as in Gaelic tradition it is marked with a memorial cairn. In a curious quirk of fate Davidson was born no more than 100 yards from the lifting stone at Inver and died the same distance from the lifting stones of Glenbuchat but he is remembered and he was 100% Gael, a thorn in the side of the Deeside gentry but a friend to Robert Dinnie.

The history of Davidson as a poacher is well documented, with again that Victorian habit of asserting romanticism to it. In this respect, and although my own individual tendencies are to believing what Davidson believed, the cold harsh reality is that he was a man who was individually not respected due to his constant law breaking. As the histories of cultures wax and wane, holding firm to a cultural belief in such an assertive manner as exhibited by Davidson was a massive slap in the face for what was becoming the new Deeside, the Royal Deeside and many would have known this. In this respect it may well have been somewhat naïve to associate oneself with a man with such a stringent belief and friendship with him would have been of no benefit to Robert Dinnie, unless of course they shared similar values and beliefs. That is, inherent Gaelic beliefs and in a minor way, the beliefs of Davidson somehow rubbed off on a certain Donald Dinnie some number of years later.

Another notable Gael that Robert Dinnie met was a man called "**Auld Dubrach**". Peter Grant was born in 1714 at Dubrach (**An Dubh Bhruthach**), a farm steading north of the Linn of Dee west of Braemar. Dubrach fought for Bonnie Prince Charlie at the Battle of Culloden in 1746 and as a Jacobite rebel, he was captured and imprisoned in Carlisle Castle where he made good his escape back to Deeside. Robert Dinnie physically sought out Dubrach (108 years old at the time) when he was a young man, for what purpose is not known but Dubrach to the end of his life was committed to the Jacobite cause and a staunch believer of the "old ways".²⁹ He was a Gael.

Robert Dinnie was also the author of "An Account of the Parish of Birse", a work which shows to a large degree, an extensive knowledge of Gaelic through the numerous translations explained by Dinnie as well as a thorough explanation of many aspects of Gaelic culture and folklore. Within the narrative, Dinnie explores Gaelic culture, its stringent belief in

²⁹ *Cheltenham Chronicle* 7th November 1891

an underworld occupied by Fairies and Kelpies and along with it he provides numerous translations of the Gaelic language.

In the days of Dinnie, the spoken Gaelic, although in demise would still be reasonably strong and although most Gaels of the time respected the Church, it was understood by many of the time, that the Church was attempting to fully anglicise communities and dispense with all aspects of the prevailing culture. Most evident within Presbyterian communities was that the minister was not held in same reverence and respect as the Roman Catholic Priest.

Presbyterianism at its basic level allowed an understanding that the actions of the Minister and indeed the Church could be open to the possibility of being incorrect. The premise that man can fail but God would not, allows a belief system that challenges on occasion the actions and dictates' of the Church and to this very day, the actions of the Church in assisting to some degree with the Highland Clearances has always played heavy with the Gael although, in Presbyterianism, such disagreements do not however effect the fundamental belief systems. The Minister can be wrong but he is just a man and people still go to Church.

To the Gael however there was always a lingering suspicion as to the activities and actions of the Church in relation to all matters concerning the old ways. This suspicion is in modern times difficult to account for, but one such way where the level of distrust can be measured is in the official recording of births, deaths and marriages using Parish records maintained by the clergy. With knowledge that the church's stance was very much not pro- Gaelic culture and its retention, then the Gael would question the need for such formal recordings of for instance the records of births.

216
 At Bendorry Parish of Aboyne
 Robert Dinnie, Mason, and his wife, Eliza Kay,
 had a daughter born 16th Feb^r 1834 and baptised
 18th February 1834, & named Sarah; wit-
 nesses - William Bowers & Peter Kay. —
 also, a daughter, born 15th Sep^r 1835 and baptised
 20 Sep^r 1835, & named Barbara; witnesses
 Adam Burgess & Barbara Kay. —
 also, a son, born 5th June 1837, baptised 24 June 1837
 & named Donald; witnesses James Jeffray & James
 Lighton. —
 also, a son, born 10 Nov 1839, baptised 28 Nov 1839,
 & named Edmund; witnesses James Rae & Jane Dinnie.
 Dinnie also, a son born 3rd Sep^r 1842 & baptised 20 Sep^r
 1842 & named Montague; witnesses Robert Mathieson
 & Elsie McKezie. —
 also, a son, born 10 Aug^t 1844 & baptised 24 Oct^r
 1844, & named Lubin; witnesses Alexander Anderson & Jane Thom.
 also, a daughter, born 26 Feb^r 1846 & baptised
 10th March 1846 & named Clarinda; witnesses
 Alexander Anderson & Isabel McKezie. —
 also, a son, born 4th January 1848 & baptised 4 Feb^r
 1848 & named Digby; witnesses Robert Mathieson
 & Jane McGregor. —
 also, a son, born at Wood Cottage, 26 Dec^r 1850
 & baptised 12 March 1851, and named Walter
 witnesses Alexander Anderson & Jane Hosie. —
 3rd December 1854
 Alexander, son of George Merchant & his
 spouse Margaret Burward, residing at
 Stanley, Aboyne, (born on 13th Nov^r 1854)
 Merchant was baptised by the Rev^d J. J. Jenkins in
 presence of James Melie & Mrs. Dunning
 witnessed.

Robert Dinnie was Presbyterian and it is known that his beliefs were strong, evident when after the collapse of a bridge he was constructing in Glen Esk, he refused to effect repairs on a Sunday as it may be construed the wrong way. This however does not mean that Dinnie fully believed in the actions of the Church and like many he was clearly distrusting. The above is a difficult to read facsimile of the record of Donald Dinnie's birth. Detailed below is a transcription of the same document and contains the birth record of Donald Dinnie —

At Banchory, Parish of Aboyne

Robert Dinnie, mason and his wife, Celia Hay had a daughter born 16th February 1834 and baptised 18th February 1834, and named Barbara; witnesses Adam Burgess & Barbara Hay –

Also, a son born 6th June 1837; baptised 24th June 1837 and named Donald; witnesses Jessie Jaffrey and James Lighton –

Also, a son born 10th November 1840, baptised 28th November 1840 and named Edmund; witnesses James Rae and Jane Dinnie –

Also, a son born 3rd September 1842 and baptised 20th September 1842 and named Montague, witnesses Robert Mathieson and Phinnie McKenzie –

Also, a son born 10th August 1844, and baptised 24th October 1844, and named Lubin Wits Alex Anderson and Jane Thom

Also, a daughter born 26th February 1846 and baptised 10th March 1846 and named Clarinda, Witnesses Alexander Anderson and Isobel McKenzie

Also, a son born 4th January 1848 and baptised 4th February 1848 and named Digby, witnesses Robert Mathieson and Jane McGregor –

Also, a son born at Wood Cottage 26th December 1850 and baptised 12th March 1850 and named Walter, Witnesses Alexander Anderson and Jane Hosie

31st December 1854

There are three interesting aspects to this transcription of this handwritten document, which if read closely shows a certain haste in its recording through a few overwrites of dates as the entries are being recorded. Firstly, all Parish records were chiefly recorded in a chronological fashion. There should in fact be a single entry for each new born family member close to the actual birth date but in the case of the Dinnie family this did not take place.

Donald Dinnie was born in 1837 yet the official record of his birth is not recorded until 1854. The reason for this delay is quite obvious. Being a Gael, Robert Dinnie would have exercised a degree of distrust in the Church, and it is clear that it was his intention that the births his of children should never be known to them. Why was then there such a hurry to have all his children, including Donald, recorded by the Parish Minister?

On 1st January 1855, the recording of Births, Deaths and Marriages fell under the auspices of the newly appointed Registrar with various offences being introduced for the failure to register, for example a birth, within a specified period of time. This was state control, partly introduced as it was well known that it was indeed common for Gaels to conveniently forget to register under the Old Parish system but now failure to do so with the local Registrar was punishable.

It can be reasonably suggested that to Robert Dinnie, the consequences of not having an official birth record for his children, could in the future be some way harmful to them and as late as possible he had the local Parish Minister formally record, what is in essence, retrospective information as to the birth of the Dinnie children.

The final aspect of a Gaelic cultural influence on Robert Dinnie is indeed his attitude to death.

“His gravestone, partly hewed by himself and ready to be inscribed, stood at the door of his cottage on a wooded height in the valley of the Dee less than a couple of miles from Kincardine O’ Neil.”³⁰

The rather strange aspect of having ones prepared gravestone waiting in readiness at the front door may easily be put as a consequence of Robert Dinnie being a stonemason and hence the relevance of it could be easily glided over. Suffice to say, this action by Dinnie is another example of Gaelic culture at play within his life.

“The men of Easdale are true Celts—daring boatmen and intense dreamers speaking the fine tongue that many southerners deem, nearly extinct, but which still remains the common and cherished speech of Lorne and the Hebrides. He who walks among their houses will note, here and there, large slabs of stone set up on end. These have been purchased and preserved—does the reader guess for what purpose? For gravestones; reserved by the owners to mark their own places of rest. Here and elsewhere in the Hebrides, one not only finds the islander preparing his own shroud, but buying his own tombstone. There they stand, daily monitors of the Inevitable, with the great ocean murmuring forever close to them—a daily preacher of the Eternal.”³¹

The relevance of this finality is revealing as this peculiar action, in many aspects part of the strong sub-culture of “remembrance”, is wholly Gaelic and most definitely not Scots. Being remembered had an extremely strong cultural relevance within the Gaelic male and was demonstrated in many ways, including of course strength. This compulsion to be remembered extended to at least 4 known feats of strength that centre around the acquisition of a gravestone which perhaps emphasises how divergent Gaelic culture truly is but whatever the reason for doing so, Robert Dinnie was certainly exercising the same cultural views.

Quite clearly, all the cultural historical evidence provided thus far is more than conclusive that in the ethnic mix of Royal Deeside in the mid-Victorian period, Robert Dinnie exercised more than sufficient cultural similarities with the Gael demonstrating that his prevalent attitude was Gaelic and not Scots. He may not have been 100% Gaelic in comparison with say, his friend Sandy Davidson and perhaps any limitations to displaying his cultural heritage was as a consequence of the ever changing cultural landscape of the times, with Gaelic and its culture clearly on the way out and with an imposing Anglicisation being the obvious winner, adaptation was required but the true culture of Dinnie still exposes itself.

Robert Dinnie was a Gael, and nothing less and this is important in relation to an understanding of those stones at Potarch. Gaelic culture had a deep respect for strength however the manner in which strength was exercised, and indeed spoken of, was far removed from what could be viewed or read through anglicised eyes. In many ways how strength was spoken of by the Gael was underpinned by cultural rules and hence how Donald Dinnie speaks of strength has to be examined in this vein.

³⁰ *The Evening Telegraph, Friday 30th October 1891*

³¹ *P99 The Land of Lorne, Robert Buchanan (1871)*

That Robert Dinnie was a Gael is firmly established but the question to be asked is just how much of this cultural heritage was indeed passed down to his eldest son. There are fewer examples of cultural application that can be put towards Donald than those regarding his father but suffice to say, the biggest influence on Donald Dinnie was most likely to have been his Gaelic orientated father.

What is known about Dinnie in his formative years is that he assisted his father in the construction of numerous Churches and monuments throughout Deeside and in Glen Esk. Most of these structures required much physical labour to construct and indeed quite a few would have been employed, locally from the area of construction. There is no doubt that during the construction the chief language spoken would have been the Doric Scots but in some areas, such as the upper reaches of Glen Esk, that "hotch potch" of language may well have been predominant.

As Donald Dinnie grew up, he was obviously influenced by strength and in particular the heavy events of the Highland Games. It is pretty well understood that the games of the Victorian era replicated traditional strength activities that had been participated for centuries within the Highlands and Islands and although some reasonable argument could be suggested that the arrangement of events could have been a Victorian creation, the actual events themselves were decidedly Gaelic in origin. The participants in the early Highland Games most certainly had a bias to Gaeldom. Gaels do what Gaels do, lift and throw heavy stones and although the time period did have some good non-Gael competitors, the very nature of the games would draw the strong Gael towards participation.

So in the days of Dinnie's early competitive forays, standing in the arena aside his brothers in strength and as they still do today, there would be much talk. I would suspect that in the majority of occasions, advice or perhaps a good joke would be spoken in English but I would gather that occasionally the Gaelic would be spoken, especially so if all were Highlands based.

Now having being raised in relative financial comfort, knowledge of a rather unfortunate incident that had befallen Dinnie, again gives some indication of his nature and Gaelic culture.

Scotland and in particular the Highlands with its large tracks of rugged land occupied by various wildlife and rivers famous for its salmon were during the time of Dinnie, turned over for the sporting life. Country sports such as shooting and fishing, very much in demand by those wealthy Victorians were drawn to the large hunting estates which now proliferated the Highlands. In effect, large areas of the land were now no-go areas to the populous and mere trespass was usually dealt with at the end of a gun barrel. In contrast, only a hundred years prior to this, the Gael thought nothing of in unquestionable right to roam and take of the land as he needed for his subsistence. The philosophy, so much part of Gaelic and Highland culture was extremely hard to dispel and as consequence, some draconian laws were introduced to protect the rights of the wealthy landowners. Very much in direct contrast to the views and disposition of the Gael to whom, acceptance of his right to take when needed was regularly exercised. Scottish legal law is inundated with a variety of laws preventing the illegal taking of game on Highland Estates or fish from its waters.

Donald Dinnie fell foul of one such law, which is suspected to have been a contravention of the Poaching Prevention Act, an old statute which by the swearing of an oath of verity requires only one witness to prove.

Donald unfortunately was spotted on private property, a sporting estate, by an estate worker with whom he was not on friendly terms with. He was duly charged.

The offence was constituted by Dinnie apparently searching for game with his trusty dogs. At the time of the offence Dinnie was well established on the Highland Games circuit and was in no way in such dire straits that he required to hunt the land for sustenance. His notoriety was such that had he probably asked for permission, in all likelihood it would have been given but Donald instead seemed to exercise what he saw as his right, to roam and take game. I dare say he could have well afforded the fine of two shillings and sixpence but his guilt was good news, for amongst many others, the Dundee Courier as shown below.

The Courier & Argus

MONDAY, MARCH 24, 1873.

A silk mill at Govan, Glasgow, was, with its contents, nearly destroyed by fire on Saturday afternoon, causing a loss of some £12,000.

Donald Dinnie, the famous athlete, has got practical experience of the existence of the Game Laws. He was fined by the Aberdeen justices on Saturday in the sum of 2s 6d, with £4 0s 9d expenses, for poaching.

Personally, I would suggest that with the ever changing cultural attitudes of the times it should perhaps be conceded that Donald perhaps demonstrated a more Scots cultural bias rather than the Gaelic of his father yet this said, he would still know and occasional exhibit Gaelic cultural tendencies. Cultural change from Gaelic to Anglicised Scot was a slow process and certainly not immediate so Donald Dinnie clearly would have demonstrated Gaelic traits. The best example of this is the lifting of the stones at Potarch and to fully understand the "lift" firstly requires some knowledge of Gaelic attitudes towards strength, attitudes that Donald's father would be well aware of.

There are no rules to basic traditional Gaelic stone lifting other than those imposed by cultural tradition. Underpinning these loose cultural rules is the actual attitude of the lifter and his compliance with culture. Deep rooted in this culture is the awareness and respect of physical strength and for as long as the Gaelic language survives, so too will its attitude towards strength. Pre 1745 Gaelic strength was functional for a singular purpose and that was to acquire a strength in arm for battle and nothing more. Heavy stones were lifted, hammers thrown and stones were putted for many cultural reasons such as manhood and

the selection of Buanachean, the warrior elite of a Clan. These men at arms trained everyday with the implements of battle and also trained physically by doing simply what the heavies do at a Highland Games. They were few in number but physically strong and this is where “remembrance” kicks in within the culture. Many Clan autobiographies, usually written by a prominent and knowledgeable Clan member occasionally remark of an individual known for his physical strength, sometimes mentioning a specific feat of strength alongside. Many Gaels have been remembered for their poetry or story telling but to be remembered for strength was an accolade of the highest order but there are three specific cultural rules that apply.

The first is that it was for the community to decide on who should be so remembered. To the mostly illiterate Gael, oral tradition underpinned just about everything and to have stories told of your strength was simply not down as a desire for so by the lifter, it was more an acceptance by the community of a remarkable strength. In essence, the man of strength was not expected and nor was it culturally appreciated, to talk up his own strength. His actions spoke for him by the manner and nature of his strength. So the first rule is that when talking of your own strength it is watered down and does not verge on boastfulness. Being boastful on strength was certainly not a Gaelic cultural practice as when it happened, it was usually met out with some form of banishment or worse, a mocking song.

It would have mattered not to the Gael if you had placed the Inver Stone on your head and balanced it whilst carrying the Dinnie Stones – if you had beaten your chest after it and professed your greatness, you most definitely would have been remembered for all the wrong reasons and would have been spoken of in rather impolite terms.

For many who have attended at Potarch and lifted the stones, I am more than sure that the true culture pertaining to those stones was such that “boasting” was frowned upon and this is certainly a lesson to be learned when visiting Scotland as it is not American nor English nor any other cultural rules that are being applied – It is Gaelic rules.

Whereas the Gael by limitations of culture was not allowed to be boastful of his strength, the culture implies that it is in the act of strength where ostentatiousness is encouraged. The individual strength does the talking and not the mouth. Being ostentatious of strength is not singularly applied to stone lifting but was applied to all Gaelic strength disciplines but perhaps the best example of how it works in culture is demonstrated in stone lifting.

When lifting the heavy stone, to be ostentatious meant that something more was required to be done to assert that no other could do the same. In this vein, this is why there are so many references and anecdotes to lifting a heavy stone and then throwing it away or over a wall and this was carried out in a manner where the lifter, through his attitude, strength and action, was basically saying “I have lifted this heavy stone and I have thrown it away as it is a mere pebble”. This attitude is expressed via strength and remember, not words which would be seen as boastful. In this respect we are looking at a culture which the modern strength enthusiast to a degree cannot fully understand.

If ever given the opportunity, a visit to the predominately Gaelic speaking Outer Hebrides should be encouraged. Many of the older members of the Gaelic community still subscribe naturally to the rules mentioned above, not that they are written but rather engrained into their culture, a culture where physical strength is admired and respected. One thing will

become evident in that when a Gael talks about strength, he will do it in a format which is unique to themselves. The strongest man will talk about the strength of his father, his grandfather and he may even talk about the strength of others but what he will not do is talk openly about his own strength and if he does, it will appear diminished. Nothing will induce a boastful statement of what he can do as if he did, he would be mocked.

No quarter is spared when the Gael suspects any comment made which goes against the grain of their cultural beliefs and this is applied even today in relation to strength. Another aspect of Gaelic culture is the sense of belonging and exclusion. The language itself is littered with specific names and terminologies that apply to non-Gaels and in this respect, the vast majority of the Scottish population are also included. There is a vast difference between the Gael and the Scot and the Gaelic people differentiate this, however there should be no surprise that the Gaelic people embrace Donald Dinnie as one of their own. To the Gael he was not a Scot but was of Gaelic blood and obviously he demonstrated many aspects of his father's culture for this status to be attributed to him.

How this effects the lifting of the Dinnie Stones is quite simple –

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE DINNIE LANGUAGE

Hopefully the readers of this book will have after dissecting the initial Chapters understood and realised that traditional stone lifting in Scotland has never been subjected to sporting but rather cultural rules and as such many factors such as language effect that understanding. Chapter One regarding “A Gaelic Strength Culture” emphasises most of these cultural rules and especially the importance of oral tradition as well as the manner of how strength in general was spoken of.

Having emphasised so far the importance of oral tradition in relation to Dinnie's feat of strength as well as at some length giving considerable attention to the flux and change of the major cultures effecting Dinnie, it is clear to be seen that his father was in everything but language someone who demonstrated Gaelic cultural traits over the emerging Anglicisation which later dominated and dispensed with Gaelic tradition. This transition as stated did not take place over night and as the Gaelic language was being supplanted, cultural traditions as well as methods and attitudes still prevailed.

With the backdrop of Anglicisation even in a later period the likes of AA Cameron demonstrated Gaelic approaches to stone lifting so there is more than a high probability that Donald Dinnie was fully conversant with these cultural rules. These rules are expressed in what is done with a heavy lifting stone and what is talked about it. In this respect the most famous statement in the world of strength being that contained in “Donald Dinie, the world's first sporting supertar” requires to be read and dissected not in a modern context but in the context of the cultural influences that were more than apparent on Donald Dinnie himself.

"He (Robert Dinnie) was a man of great physical strength and a notable athlete in his day. At wrestling or fighting – “rough and tumble” – he excelled and was, indeed, so I have been told , the Champion of Deeside..and his power to lift very heavy stones placed him at great advantage.

This first paragraph follows the usual Gaelic emphasis on primarily speaking about your father's strength. Note also that Dinnie is indeed making reference to ORAL TRADITION regarding his father's strength. The most poignant section of the paragraph is the "I have been told" inferring that his father had never directly told him of his own feats of strength. Again this is reflective of Gaelic culture when speaking of strength, even towards your own son would be seen as boastful. It is for others to tell your offspring regarding strength. Note also the comparison with the story of Angus MacDougal on North Uist. His father lifted the "Ultach Na- h'airde Glaisse" but never told him. Knowledge was derived from an external source.

In the Deeside District there are many stories told of his extraordinary feats. Just let me tell you one.

"Many stories" simply again this is a reference to the heavily weighed oral tradition in Gaelic and Scots culture. Extraordinary feats of strength were remembered in this tradition through the telling of oral stories"

On the granite stone bridge that crosses the River Dee at Potarch there were, and still are, two large stones weighing about 8cwt the pair, placed in a recess. In the early 1830's massive iron rings were placed in them, to which ropes were fixed so that scaffolds could be attached for pointing the bridge. Now, one of these stones was somewhat heavier than the other. Very few strong men of that day could lift the heavy one with both hands, but my father could raise one in each hand with apparent ease, and could throw the heavier stone of the two on to the top of a parapet wall of the bridge.

Again Donald Dinnie is displaying the culture of the Gael in the manner of speech used by asserting once more his father's strength. At this juncture Dinnie supplies us with three known lifts –

- 1. Lifting a single stone using the iron ringed handle with two hands*
- 2. Lifting a single stone using the iron ringed handle with one hand.*
- 3. Lifting a single stone onto the parapet of the bridge –replicating the traditional lift of the heavy stone onto a plinth.*

The final sentence of this phrase emphasises the frequency of use of the stones as a trial of strength. Probably attempted more so at the "Potarch Feeing Fair".

On one occasion, I have been told, he took one stone in each hand and carried them both to the end of the bridge and back – this achievement has been pronounced the greatest feat of strength ever performed in Scotland.

This phrase again is an emphasis on the "oral tradition" and in respect of remembrance for personal strength is wholly Gaelic in origin. Once again Dinnie talks of his father but he has heard of the feat of strength through hearing of it through oral tradition rather being informed directly by his father. Once again this is a not an unusual practice in Gaelic culture of old.

Those stones are still on the bridge and I myself lifted one in each hand on many occasions and one market day, I carried them across the bridge and back, some four to five yards. I did not, however, attempt to go to the end of the bridge as my father had done.

This is the most contentious and least understood statement in strength. For the same reasons that Dinnie's father was loath to express the feats of strength performed by him to his own son, the same principle in Gaelic culture applies when speaking about your own individual strength, even in the form of a letter. At this point Dinnie is well aware that his feat has been cemented in the local oral tradition and remembrance of feats of strength. At the time of the letter he may well have been aware of how the story has evolved as it does through the passage of time and quite simply Dinnie is emphasising what he has done in the simplest of terms, without expansion and very much understated. If he had done so he would have been breaking well established Gaelic cultural rules in the language of strength.

Once again Dinnie emphasises two further methods of lifting the stones-

- 4. Simultaneous standing lift of both stones using the iron ringed handles. (The Dinnie Lift)*
- 5. The standing lift as above and then the traditional "lift and walk" (The feat of strength and the one remembered through oral tradition)*

NB. The current trend that the reference to "many times" implies that Dinnie lifted the stones for "repetitions" is an absurdity followed only by those ignorant of Scottish/Gaelic strength culture. Dinnie resided close by and hence had the opportunity to lift the stones "many times". The word "repetition" in relation to strength appears in many of his letters to Aberdeenshire broadsheets in his later years when indulging in his stage shows of strength with dumb bells etc. Dinnie was well aware what a repetition was but never used the word in the context of the stones.

*About three years ago, one of the strongest athletes of the present day heard of these feats while on a visit to Aberdeen. There upon he motored to Potarch Bridge to see "the stones" and have a go at them, but it is said that he only succeeded in raising the two clear off the ground."*³²

This visit is unlikely to be that Louis Cyr which occurred in 1871. Whoever it was the reader has to ponder as it reference to the feat of strength was in the early 20th Century was recorded nowhere in written format. The fact that the visiting strongman could only lift both stones simultaneously is superfluous. More important is the fact that the oral tradition of Dinnie lifting the stones and walking with them was so widespread that there was perfectly no need for a written record. Whoever this man was he attended at Potarch to lift the stones as he had heard about it through the strong oral tradition rather than as most in the modern context do, read about it.

The striking aspect of the entire text is how Dinnie emphasises quite extensively the strength of his own father yet seriously waters down his own feat of strength. This is how in Gaelic culture strength was spoken of and it is extremely principled within that society. It is most

³² Donald Dinnie The First Sporting Superstar, David Webster & Gordon Dinnie (1999)

certainly not the principles of the modern and it is pretty hard to take on board a full understanding if you are not acquainted with it. Dinnie grew up with a heavily Gaelic influenced father and in the everyday life of the Parish of Birse Gaelic culture although severely in decline was still evident. In this respect we cannot in anyway directly read what he said in the contents of his letter and interpret it into our modern culture.

It is in the knowledge that Dinnie was well aware of the fact that his feat of strength was spoken off in the strong oral tradition in the Highlands that he has explained the basics of his feat but constrained within cultural rules that he was aware of. Expanding on his strength simply would fall into that category of boastfulness such as that which was not obvious in his father. We also have to consider that of all the known feats of strength spoken of in the oral tradition only one due to its recent nature has allowed the subject to comment on his feat. This of course was afforded to Donald Dinnie, his strength, being superlative and demonstrated on that fateful day at Potarch he being well aware of it has in simple cultural terms decided to put perhaps some of the most ludicrous deviations on the story quietly to bed. He states what he did- he lifted the two stones simultaneously and walked the breadth of the bridge and back but with in a Gaelic cultural manner, he understates it.

Now it would not take the most astute observer to point out that the feat of strength by Robert Dinnie in walking the length of the bridge with the stones is far more superior than that of his son but we do have to put this into context.

Donald Dinnie is the only single source of this feat having ever taken place although he states that he heard of it through oral tradition. One can only assume by comparisons that it was so well known through the oral stories in Aberdeenshire that Donald lifted and carried the stones across the bridge and back and that this was sustained in the oral tradition for many years yet the story of his father was far less well known.

The timing of carrying out both feats of strength then comes into play. Donald was known to have carried out his feat of strength at the Potarch Feeing Market, one of the busiest times of the year for local people to congregate and indeed observe and witness the feat. The more people present the greater the remembrance of the actual feat orally. Had the feat by Robert Dinnie been carried out with far fewer present then quite simply the oral tradition is not as strong and indeed like many other feats of strength simply pass away unforgotten,

This said there are elements of the Dinnie oral tradition that may well have overlapped and warped through the passage of time. Once again I refer to my own first account on hearing of Dinnie lifting the stones told to me by my own father and that was that he had walked the length of the bridge carrying both stones. It could have well been the case that the reason for Donald stating as he does is to reaffirm the feat of his father's strength in comparison to his own especially in emphasising the aspects of distance carried but this is the beauty of the oral tradition and it is simple to understand although those at sceptical do not appear to have grasped the concept of it in that the oral tradition only exists as a consequence of a tremendous feat of strength and the purity of the truth of Donald Dinnie carrying out his lift and carry is wonderfully wrapped up in it.

The more variations on the theme of his lift, whether it be the length or breadth of the bridge or whether it be a single stone is not the means to apply a conjecture of scepticism it merely reinforces the truth.

To summarise the feat of strength exhibited by Dinnie it is hoped that all aspects as to why it occurred has been explained. Starting with the location of Potarch it is quite clear that all aspects of its location have contributed to it being such a location where one would find traditional stones of strength.

Moving on, the reason for the lift and walk by Dinnie is underpinned by the very culture of the Potarch Fair. Not the pleasant notion of tartan and bagpipes as I am sure many have assumed but a backdrop of manliness in all forms. It is no wonder why the feat of strength took place when it did.

The explanation of the strength of Gaelic/Scots oral tradition –the primary evidence of the feat having taken place is explained and remember that existed for just short of 100 years before the story of the stones ever appeared in print.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the stones and Dinnies attitude to them is explained by the obvious Gaelic influences on him. Gaelic cultural strength attitudes are far different from that of the modern and this leads us to understanding what Dinnie actually meant in his letter regarding the stones.

Overall there is a combination of proof that makes any argument to the contrary regarding Dinnie's feat of strength totally nullified. There is more than a sufficiency of evidence that Dinnie lifted and carried those stones and perhaps some day his feat of strength will be replicated and indeed if some of the energy displayed by some in contradicting the history was put forth towards the stones then perhaps someday we will be speaking about another superlative in strength that will also be remembered.