

Chapter Four

What determines a “lift” of a traditional stone?

Claidhidh foighidinn mhath na clachan

(Patience will wear out stones)

The advent of the internet has allowed far more discussion on many aspects of strength via the many dedicated Forums and Blogs that are available, however in relation to traditional stone lifting, many discussions centre around beliefs that a stone requires to be lifted at least into the lap or fold to accomplish a successful lift and although this in many instances is what is actually trained for and desired, what necessitates a successful lift in traditional Gaelic stone lifting is dependent on many factors which require to be fully explained.

Gaelic culture for all matters, certainly pre 1745 and for sometime after was most certainly not generic with factors such as geography, location and local tradition playing an important part in ensuring that, in relation to strength, what occurred in one Highland Glen may not well be mirrored in a neighbouring Glen. Aided by the fact that the language of the Gaels and its oral tradition was chiefly passed by word of mouth with a high level of illiteracy, written rules or codes just did not exist which opened the doors to many interpretations but underpinned by a complete lack of standards. What rules that existed did so within the isolation of a community itself and this is where any standards that did exist, were applied.

As we look today at the recognised Scottish Highland Games, the strength of known Gaelic activities have been standardised and codified to meet the requirements of a Victorian society that essentially gave organised sport to the world by introducing standards and rules, clearly evident in the plethora of sports such as Association Football, Golf, Curling, Tennis, Boxing etc that had their initial codes and rules initiated in Britain before the individual sports were exported throughout the world. The Highland Games is no exception to this and certainly for the heavy events to expand as they did throughout the Scottish Worldwide Diaspora this was a necessity, but in relation to stone lifting we have to examine the time before such codification.

Stone lifting as a competitive element of the Highland Games has made little inroads. The culture and differences in expected lifts as well as the varying size and shapes of lifting stones, in other words a lack of a generic standard weight almost single handedly ensured that there would have been extreme difficulty in replicating contests throughout the Highland Games circuit, but more decisively would be the fact that the application and acceptance of a lift, due to vast regional and cultural differences, just could not make stone lifting easily codified. Certainly in the modern idiom, the Atlas Stones derived and replicated from the McGlashen stones have overcome the problems regarding standardising traditional stones however the method of lifting, in this case either lifting onto a barrel or static plinth, does not completely account for the Gaelic cultural aspects of stone lifting.

In recognising that traditional lifting stones lacked standardisation it is first required to examine how the Gael looked upon a lifting stone. In essence there are two main reasons for lifting a stone with differences in those stones that were lifted singly as a test of strength, competition or for cultural reasons as opposed to those stones lifted as a feat of strength and

although these on many occasions crossover such as the Dinnie Stones being lifted traditionally as a test of strength, there are many other stones which owe their existence to having been lifted once and once only. This differentiation itself holds true to its own quirk of lifting style, that is lifting a heavy stone by using the plaid as a makeshift harness and a number of these stones certainly do appear to have been lifted in this fashion although by a further quirk of the Gaelic oral tradition, using the plaid as a harness appears to have been intentionally forgotten to make “remembrance”¹ of an individual’s strength that more extravagant and interesting.

In relation to the much misunderstood acceptance that manhood required the lifting of a heavy stone into the lap or fold, the preceding chapter on Manhood fully examines this concept however to once again highlight the true understanding, requires a realisation that there is a world of difference between an accepted lift as “a test of manhood” and “a feat of manhood” with the Gaelic language itself making the distinction.

Fearachas – A test of manhood²

Fearachd – A feat of manhood³

Culture itself thus determines how a lifting stone was drawn from the ground with many other aspects contributing to what we would in modern times refer to as a “good lift” but again it has to be emphasised that for many of the stones dual accepted practices were more than likely but it is more than often in the instances of a “test of manhood” that the modern assertions of an accepted lift have been derived, and in most instances misunderstood.

Another modern aspect applied to stone lifting is the assertion of weightlifting standards and rules being applied, especially so with the stringent requirements of the “overhead press” with the exacting analysis of a “full arm lockout” being subject to much debate and especially in those instances where the Inver Stone has been applied to those very few overhead lifts. Such stringent rules would never have been applied to traditional Gaelic strength, a culture which had no formal standardised weight measurement with stones being measured purely by a volume descriptive and hence a lifting stone known as an “Ultach” is defined solely by being an “armful” and a putting stone – “dornag” from its root “dorn” meaning handful. If weight could not be exacted rest assured a full arm lockout would be equally as foreign.

The rule of thumb therefore is not to assess a lift, within a modern standardised view but to assess the cultural requirements of the lift, albeit these by virtue of language, geography etc lacked any generic standard.

Of course many of the modern strength athletes who lift traditional Scottish lifting stones come from a variety of strength disciplines, with each its own different set of rules and codes of conduct which in underpinning standardisation within their own particular discipline, it is only natural to make comparisons in strength and this is a modern norm but it was certainly not the Gaelic way and with no overall organising body that regulates traditional stone lifting (God forbid)with the only rules that existed if any, were those that are traditional and cultural to the Gael.

¹ See Chapter Six “I do this for you to remember me by” – Gaelic culture and the imposition of remembrance through feats of strength.

² A Gaelic/English Dictionary in Two Parts. R A Armstrong (1825)

³ Dictionarium Scoto-Celticum: A Dictionary of the Gaelic Language, Volume 1. Ewen Maclachlan (1828)

A clue to required lifts are contained within the oral tradition of the Gael and one such story relates to Connal Gulban, a 5th Century King of an area which is now County Donegal in Ireland but whose story migrated to Scotland with the spread of the Dalriadic Gaels. As with oral tradition, there are many differing versions of the story however the story of Connal along with his brothers Eobhan and Claidhean remains unaltered in all and the story, being over 1400 years old clearly has a basis on the requirements of a stone lift -

***“Eobhan and Claidhean went to the stone; Eobhan lifted it to his shoulder top, and set it down; Claidhean lifted the stone up to his lap, and the Gruagach said to them, “There is neither want of strength or learning with you; I will give you over to your father. At the end of a few days after that, the Gruagach went home to the king's house, and he gave them to their father; and he said that the king's sons were the strongest and the best taught that there were in the sixteen realms. The king gave thanks and reward to the Gruagach, and he sent Conall with him. The Gruagach began to teach Conall to do tricks and feats, and Conall pleased him well; and on a day he took Conall with him up the face of Beinn Eidinn, and they reached the place where the round brown stone was. Conall noticed it, and he asked as his brothers had done; and the Gruagach said as he said before. Conall put his hands about the stone, and he put the wind between it and earth; and they went home, and he was with the Gruagach getting more knowledge.*”**

The next year after that they went up Beinn Eidinn where the round brown stone was. Conall thought that he would try if he was (na bu mhurraiche) stronger to lift the heroes' stone. He caught the stone, and he raised it on the top of the shoulder, and on the faggot gathering place of his back, and he carried it aloft to the top of Beinn Eidinn, and down to the bottom of Beinn Eidinn, and back again; and he left it where he found it.”⁴



The stone referred to in this story is the ***Clach nan Gaisgeach*** the “Stone of Heroes”, however what will be noted is that there are indeed four different lifts attached to it – Putting the wind underneath the stone, raising it into the lap, shouldering and finally shouldering and walking. Each of these is a well recognised application of traditional stone lifting and the story of Gulban is extremely old, so old in fact that Campbell in his *Popular Tales of the Western Highlands* Volume 3 makes mention of the story of Gulban being recorded on a stone slab (see opposite).

The slab is Pictish and was recovered as a headstone at St Braoch’s Church, Montrose⁵ with the usual academic assertions of biblical stories being adduced to the story on the stone slab with, in this case, the main

⁴ *Popular Tales of the West Highland Volume 3, JF Campbell (1890)*

⁵ *The slab depicting Conall is a Class 2 Pictish stone known as the “Cross Craig Slab” and is currently retained within the Montrose Museum. The image above has been taken from “Sculptured Stones of Scotland (1856)” which itself makes no mention of either the carved story depicting that of Conall Gulban or having any Christian relevance.*

clue being the story of Samson with the jaw bone of ass seen in the lower left but complete ignorance of the representation of the figure in the lower right. Campbell asserts that the symbolism fits into entirety with the story of Gulban with the figure on the lower right being that of Connal Gulban lifting the Stone of Heroes. Given the relative time period of the assimilation of the Picts into the language and culture of the Gaelic Dalriadan Scots, there is a high degree of probability that the stone is in fact a depiction of the story of Gulban with the engraving depicting perhaps the oldest feat of stone lifting in Gaeldom.

Although through oral tradition there are many other stories that incorporate stone lifting in the form of oral tales that of Conall Gulban is perhaps the oldest and as such may well be the origin of lifting and carrying events at today's modern Strongman competitions. Strength is not a modern invention; it has all been done before.

What has not been mentioned to this point is the relevance of time on culture and how strength has developed and adapted in Gaelic culture over many centuries although underpinning any adaptation through development of culture is always going to be the lifting to place the air/wind underneath the stone, the lift to the lap, the shoulder and the stone carry. All adaptations on these are simply those that appear at a later date.

To best examine this cultural aspect towards what is an accepted lift we will start with the most basic but least understood of lifts –

1. PUTTING THE AIR UNDERNEATH THE LIFTING STONE

This lift, as the statement itself implies is the simple lifting of a stone to the extent of a mere few inches but less than knee height and nothing more. Albeit this type of lift is more associated with a cultural application, i.e. the proving of manhood at puberty (in the Gaelic ***Fearachas***) this obviously is also determined by the size and weight of the stone. The requirements and reasons for lifting a stone to prove manhood in relation to age are thoroughly explored in Chapter Three - Manhood.

In language this lift was known as “***chuir e ga oth eadar a ‘ chlach thogail ‘s an talamh***” or “***air between the lifting stone and the ground***”⁶ and although this could be applied culturally, it is also the minimum of lifting requirements, even for those beyond puberty. The modern assessment of specifics and requirements almost blindly discounts the notion that the general Gaelic male population in the time of the Clans were not to a man, men of strength, not everyone was capable of lifting such as the Inver Stone into the lap or fold. For the most part lifting to the extent of putting the air underneath the stone would be achievable by most but going that bit further was for the stronger.

Stones such as the Clach Thogalaich on Colonsay⁷ have known to be lifted to this degree and accepted as a formal lift (against the grain of the modern) and no-where is this more accepted than on the island of North Uist where putting the air underneath the stone is highlighted by the predominant Gaelic culture still extant on the island, and who would disagree otherwise with the very culture that spawned the practice of traditional stone lifting.

⁶ *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, Volume 45 (1968)*

⁷ “It is termed the **Lifting Stone**, because the ability to raise it even slightly off the ground was, and indeed still is, regarded as an indication of **great strength**”. – *Skye and the Inner Hebrides, Alasdair Alpin MacGregor (1953)*

One must state however that the majority of the stones exceed 300lbs and therefore excessive weight rather than local culture may be more to the fore for the reason for lifting a stone to this limited degree.

In August 2014, Alex Roberts of England made a visit to North Uist in an attempt to lift the ***Ultach na-h'airde glaise***, a 380lb of pyramidal rock that had been lifted by a number of islanders many years before. Interest in the attempt was obvious by the presence of two of North Uist's respected senior citizens who knew about and could speak for hours on the history of strength on the island. Angus MacDougal and Alex MacAulay, both octogenarians had made comment that they had never seen the underside of the stone, meaning of course that in their lifetime they had never witnessed a lift (as there had been none). Alex lifted the stone a mere few inches clear from the ground to the excited cheers from both with Angus further emphasising "you will be remembered".

This is Gaelic lifting and few lifters will ever experience the opportunity of lifting a traditional stone in the presence of those whose culture stone lifting belongs to but the experience itself is merely a statement of what is an accepted lift.

Transfer this to a stone that has been lifted many times before – The Inver Stone in Royal Deeside where through modern assertions, an accepted lift is **only** a lift into the lap or fold which is more a contrivance and assertion of "rules" into a culture which fundamentally did not possess them in the first instance.

The aspect of lifting to this level, opens up the stones of strength being far more inclusional for those who have aspirations of lifting such stones into the lap or fold. Culturally this was an accepted lift in itself and as there is no ruling authority which had the right to un-qualify a lift on the basis that it did not reach a specific height. Success therefore in stone lifting should as always be defined by the lifter himself. The level of manhood displayed can be argued over whose lift is better but the definition of a lift is by its very foundations, extremely loose and only defined by culture.

In continuing the reasoning's for proving manhood we require to examine those lifts that the lifter may consider as better.

2. LIFTS TO THE KNEES, WAIST AND INTO THE LAP OR FOLD

This is where Gaelic culture becomes a little more difficult to understand as it hints towards an accepted definition of standards but which in reality are extremely loose in application. To best examine the Gaelic approach to strength, far different from today, we have to digress to the competitive aspect of the traditional stone putt. The stone putt as seen at a modern Highland Games would be no different from that of centuries before with perhaps two specific differences in attitude as it relates to competition. The Gaelic language has a word for it –

Raiteachas (Rajty- ach- as) – n,f trial of strength, a raiteachas air a cheile, competing, emulating each other from ostentatious motives, arrogance, pride.⁸

⁸ Page 206 A Pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary(fourth edition) , Neil McAlpine (1853)

This is indeed linked to ***Fraigal – ostentatious of strength*** and ***Fraigalachd – show of personal strength*** which emphasises that competitions were conducted with arrogance, pride and a fair degree of showing off, not something that would be commonly displayed by the modern heavy events athletes at a Highland Games, but that was the culture of the day. This was augmented by the fact that in such competitions there was only a winner with no relevance given to a second or third place because these throws were not marked. The furthest distance of the stone cast was the only one marked (not measured...Gaelic society did not have standardised methods of measuring) and the furthest cast was marked with a Kemp Stane.

“KEMP-STANE” – A stone placed as the boundary which has been reached by the first who kemps or strives at the Putting-Stone. He who throws farthest beyond this is the winner.”⁹

Although the kemp stane is Scots in language with no corresponding Gaelic equivalent it should be emphasised that the distance of the throw in the Gaelic language was known as ***Urchair (ur-char) – n,f a stone cast, throw of a stone, hammer etc***¹⁰. Gaelic culture therefore in relation to strength competition had no place for second best and in essence the winner demonstrated his manliness or degree or level of manhood over the other competitors. It is quite a simple analysis in that within a strength orientated culture such as that of the Gael, the strongest was seen as more manly and as such this ties in with the Gaelic disposition of remembering the strong in oral tradition.....it is a tradition that only remembers the winners.

How this manliness as a feat of stone lifting strength (***Fearachd***) is best explained is by recourse to a mirroring Irish Gaelic stone lifting culture –

“It was a great day in each young man’s life when he raised the stone from the ground and “gave it wind”, as they said. And if he raised it to his knees, he was a champion, the equal of the best. And if he raised it to his chest he was a hero, a phenomenon of strength and men talked of him.”¹¹

From this there are “manhood” distinctions of lifting the heavy stone to the extent of putting air underneath it, a knee lift and for the champion a lift into the lap or the fold. Personally I find it quite fitting that those who have managed lifts (in the modern sense) into the lap of the Inver Stone should be reminded of the reference to ***“and men talked of him”*** an obvious assertion of how important remembrance for strength was to the Gael and replicated today by the “Inver visitors book”. An extremely apt and modern view of Gaelic remembrance for those strong enough to merit it.

The determining factor however is obviously the actual weight of the stone and as such, even a lift to the knees would have been considered as a tremendous feat of strength –

“.....about the middle of the island near the High road, a large round stone, which they say John Garbh, the foresaid chief and one or two of his people used to lift on their knees. Such is its weight that scarcely could the united strength of two of the

⁹ *Scottish Dictionary and Supplement Volume 1. John Jamieson (1841)*

¹⁰ *Page 280, A Pronouncing Gaelic Dictionary(fourth edition) , Neil McAlpine (1853)*

¹¹ *The Stone, Liam O’Flaherty (1928)*

stoutest men now to be found in the country be able to raise it one inch from the ground”

The stone mentioned above was located on the island of Rassay and although it is no longer extant, it is known that this was no Inver Stone and that a lift to the knees was a lift achievable by very few. In this case the actual weight of the stone determines an accepted lift and with this of course, it dispenses with any cultural assertions for lifting it.

Any premise that a stone requires to be lifted to a certain height is factually incorrect and what is obvious is that the level or degree of “manhood” is measured by strength in that a lift into the lap of the heavier stone proves more manliness than a lift to the ankles, determined by size of stone of course.

Lifting the heavy stone therefore is not strictly defined by any assertion that it has to be lifted to a certain height or level, the culture of the Gael clearly sees a lift being simply a lift but in the knowledge that some are better than others.

3. **SHOULDERING & OVERHEAD LIFTS**

With the lifts of putting the air/wind under the stone, lifting to the knees and the lift to the chest for the champion as previously mentioned, it is not too surprising that there is little mention of actual lifts that go further than this in strength. Shouldering the lifting stone and putting it overhead are rarely mentioned as to the Gael this was not seen as the ultimate in stone lifting strength but that is not to say that it did not occur. It was just the fact that superior strength to the Gael was demonstrated in a completely different manner as will be explained later.

Of all the known traditional stones, only one was known to have been required to have been “shouldered” being the ***Clach a Bhoisgean*** in Argyll where the required lift was essentially part of a pre-marriage ritual with every indication that the stone may well have been far lighter than the norm. The only stone known to be put “overhead” is the rather contentious ***Ultach Dhomhail Mhoir*** on North Uist where the use of the word “ultach” meaning “arm full” or “arms length” has been interpreted as put overhead at arm’s length.

Within the Gaelic culture of strength, its famous tale of Conal Culban who as the narrative explains was asked to lift a heavy stone and put the air underneath it to prove his manhood on Ben Edin. The story explains that Conal lifted the stone and then shouldered it then took it for a walk up and down the mountain. The oral folk-lore is unlikely to not mention occurrences of strength which were in common practice to the Gael and hence there can be no doubt that shouldering a heavy stone was known but not however common practice.

Although shouldering does have a some basis at least in Gaelic culture, putting a stone overhead is practically non-existent save one single reference that mentions that when a heavy stone was put overhead, the lifter returned the stone to terra firma by dropping it behind the head to fall behind the lifter’s back. This unusual approach does appear to something that is Gaelic in nature by virtue of it in some way mirroring the approach to the

“*Y Maen Camp*”, the Welsh putting stone of 75 to 100lbs which was thrown backwards over the head.

Another aspect of shouldering the lifting stone is the imposition of Scottish geography upon it meaning that not all stones are indeed capable of being shouldered. All known rounded stones, the iconic lifting stone shape such as those at Inver, Barevan, Ackernack, etc have a are based solely within the Central or Eastern Highlands with those further west having a tendency to be far more irregular in shape and also with a tendency to be heavier. It is not surprising that the knowledge of shouldering these stones is practically unknown. There are sound geographical reasons for this with the majority of the major river courses in Scotland flowing from the west towards the east, river courses that can spawn stones of strength such as the Tay, Dee and Don however there are no such equivalent rivers in the west.

Anything other about shouldering or putting the stone overhead in Gaelic stone lifting would most certainly be that type of history which is fabricated to suit as quite clearly the culture of the Gael measured strength in a completely different manner than modern expectations and it with the next forms of stone lifting where it is most expressed at its superior level.

4. LIFTING ONTO A PLINTH OR STONE DYKE WALL

The history of Gaelic strength is punctuated with many references where a heavy stone was required to be lifted onto either a plinth stone or indeed a stone dyke wall. In many of these instances the lifting onto a plinth stone has been assumed to be a test to prove manhood where the reality is the actual test was in many instances was a trial of strength to become part of an exclusive band of Clan warriors known as Buanachean. To many, lifting the heavy stone onto a plinth was an expected norm although it was most certainly, in all probability due to Highland geography, only practiced in selected areas and was not generic throughout. Stones that were known to have been lifted onto a static plinth or dyke wall are –

- a. The Puterach at Balquhidder. - Plinth
- b. The Saddlin Mare of the Sma Glen - Plinth.
- c. The Wallace Putting Stone at Sherrifmuir. - Plinth
- d. The Lifting Stones of Glenbuchat. - Plinth
- e. The Bodach a Chraigh Fianna, Glen Lyon. - Plinth
- f. The Putting Stone of the Clans, Barevan. – Dyke Wall
- g. The Lochaber Putting Stone. – Dyke Wall
- h. The Clach-neart Mheirichard. – Dyke Wall
- i. The Clachan-neart Achnack. – Dyke Wall
- j. The Inver Stone – Dyke Wall

And although it cannot be conclusively proved,

- k. The Clach Deuchainn of Skye. - Plinth

All these locations with the exception of the Clach Deuchainn on Skye are located on the mainland rather than the islands with perhaps the location at Balquhidder being the best example of a reception plinth stone and this site in particular and one this site in particular throws up some hitherto unknown approaches and considerations to lifting a heavy stone

atop a plinth. In this case most notably, none of the 4 sides of approach to the plinth are level and as such offer up four distinct degrees of difficulty and it is not surprising to find that the traditional lift was made from the east being the lift with the greater difficulty.

One must remember that the feat of lifting the heavy stone to chest height was seen in Gaelic culture as a feat of the champion and lifting onto a plinth stone or indeed a dyke wall may either, depending on height of the plinth, be seen either as a contrived replication of this feat or a lift with added difficulty. Again, local culture and a complete lack of a generic shows that each lift at these locations cannot be compared with others and indeed, the Glen Lyon stone with its former 3ft high plinth can in no way be considered as an equal lift as that of Sadlin the Mare in the nearby Sma Glen where the difficulty is not the lift of the stone but making it stick to a far higher sloping plinth. Equally, the Lifting Stones of Glenbuchat were known to be stacked one at top the other onto a pointed plinth suggesting that dexterity in this case was also a requirement in addition to raw strength.



The Puderag Plinth Stone

5. THE LIFT AND CARRY

The origin of the “lift and carry”, previously explained as having its origin mentioned in the story of Conall Gulban has unlike the shouldering of the stone, appeared to have sustained itself as a style of lifting from a time before the introduction of the Clan system to a period well after its demise.

Obviously as an accepted lift, the lift and carry of the heavy stone was seen in Gaelic culture to be such that only the superior of strength could do so with those of a lesser strength who were capable only of lifting to the extent of putting the wind underneath the stone or the superlative lift into the lap. There is one hitherto problem with the lift and carry which I hope should be obvious in the following texts when compared to the story of Connal Gulban and his ancient lift and carry of the Stone of Heroes.

“..... a large round block of granite, weighing more than I venture to guess, which the next heir, on succeeding to the supremacy of this Clan was always expected to carry in his arms upstairs to the dining room where his health was drank.”¹²

Perhaps surprisingly, this reference to stone lifting relates to a time before 1745 and refers to the heavy lifting stone at Menzies Castle. The comparisons with the Stone of Heroes should become more apparent with the following -

“One of the men who attempted the feat alluded to, was called Jock on the Maggot, who raised and carried and carried the Clach na cuddin from its place to the top of the Old Jail stairs, but was unable to bring it back. His competitor, a man of the name of McLean, also a townsman, succeeded in performing the feat by returning with the stone to the Cross”¹³

This above is reference to a lift and carry of a special “charter stone” not always associated with strength- the ***Clach na Cuddain*** of Inverness. Not considering the individual weights of the stones mentioned, each of the above has in relation to the Stone of Heroes the shared difficulty of not walking with the stone on the flat but strenuously carrying the stone up a steep incline be it, in two instances a flight of stairs or with Conall Gulban, the steep slopes of Ben Edinn. The degree of slope is rather a misnomer as traditional lifting stones were lifted and carried on the flat although, in line with Gaelic culture, the difficulty of the terrain would only add a degree of difficulty and make a particular lift and carry more ostentatious.

One of the most celebrated examples of the lift and carry took place on 15th September 1816 at Glengarry at one of the first of the organised Highland Games, held by as well officiated by, ***Alexander Ranaldson MacDonell of Glengarry***. As a Clan Chief he was known simply as Glengarry and although he contributed a great deal of self created pomp at his Games, in many extents his events held true to a Gaelic strength culture in having competitions of ***Maide Leasg¹⁴, Dorn Fhuar¹⁵, High Leap¹⁶***, Caber, Putting Stone, Hammer and throwing the Bar (of iron) he also has a lifting stone competition.

“The LIFTING OF THE STONE was next resorted to, and was practiced by the strong (in part) during the interval of the runners’ absence; in this; Sergeant Ranald MacDonell, “Na Craig”, from Glengarry, maintained his original superiority with great ease; next Allan MacDonell, from Glenlee, carried it 42 yards; Donald MacDonell, from Lundy, 30 yards; John MacMaster, from Dockinassy, 28 yards and a half; John Chisholm, from Glenmorrison; 26 yards; Donald Cameron, from Dockinassy, 20 yards

¹² p318 *Shetland and the Shetlanders*, Catherine Sinclair (1840)

¹³ *Reminiscences of a Clachnacuddin Nonagenarian*, McLean (1886)

¹⁴ *Maide Leasg* translated as “Lazy Stick” is a strength pulling event similar to the now popular Mas Wrestling.

¹⁵ *Dorn Fhuar* – “Cold Fist” – a true Gaelic spectacle of cultural strength where the leg of dead cow less than 4 years old was ripped off from below the knee but without breaking the skin.

¹⁶ The traditional High Leap was achieved by jumping over a Highland Garland Pony.

– several others tried it, in vain, or declined having their names inserted, from the little hand they made of it, and the well authenticated efforts of John More MacDonell, late of Montcraggie, in Glengarry, and of James MacDonell, “Mac Fear Balemhian”, from Abertarff with this very stone, were listened to with pleasure by all and astonishment by many.”¹⁷

What Glengarry purposely, no doubt through an understanding of Gaelic strength culture achieved, was to have a competition that seriously challenged the strong in attendance as highlighted by the number who obviously thought wisely to decline, however note the name **Allan MacDonell from Glenlee**, his name will reappear later.

In more modern times, who else other than AA Cameron would exhibit knowledge and put into practice a traditional lift. Knowledge that Cameron was more than adept at the “lift and throw”, Cameron once again demonstrated his Gaelic heritage by carrying out a lift and carry of the Dalwhinnie Stone circa 1912 when on lifting the stone, he carried and deposited it on the bar counter of the Loch Erich Hotel Public Bar, ostentatiously demanding a pint of beer in the process. This lift was reported in the local newspaper, no doubt raising some eyebrows but it is the feat itself, the fact that it is “fraigal” which makes the lifting of the stone cultural and not a gimmick. In *Of Stones and Strength*, this type of lift was mentioned as having been applied to the Inver Stone by Bill Kazmaier who lifted the stone and carried it to the public bar of the Inver Hotel. There is nothing better than good bit of modern folklore as it actually did not happen although, as David Webster who was present when Kazmaier visited states, there is no doubt that he could have done so with ease.

This lift and carry of the Inver Stone to the Public Bar of the Hotel does have some credence as a true story with I suspect, knowing how traditional the lift actually is, was perhaps carried out by AA Cameron a man whose Gaelic heritage would know the reasoning for it.

In the summer of 2013 James Graham from Australia conducted a tour of the stones with one highlight being a visit to lift the newly discovered **Clach-neart Glenlivet**. Of course local interest had allowed a small audience to tackle the rough terrain to reach the stone to witness the lift. The 130kg stone was lifted into the lap and duly applauded but it was when James decided to take the stone for a little walk that, even to an audience unfamiliar with stone lifting or strength, the physical strength displayed was something more spectacular with the level of appreciation considerably more. The walk is simply the icing on the cake. To the Gael it was a show of his ostentatiousness, a physical boast akin to “I’ve lifted this heavy stone but it is a mere pebble to me, so I will take it for a walk” and long may men of strength do the same in the modern era.

6. LIFTING THE HEAVY STONE AND THROWING IT.

Having previously shown that lifting a heavy stone and putting it over head was **not** the ultimate feat of strength that could be exhibited in Gaelic strength culture we now move onto a form of stone lifting that was the ultimate expression of strength and has its origins in ancient history yet its practice in the modern sense has been diminished at the expense of

¹⁷ *Sporting Anecdotes (1820) NB The stone used in this competition was most likely to have been the same “Glengarry Pebble” as used at his 1822 Games in Inverness.*

the overhead lift. There are cultural reasons behind lifting a heavy stone and simply throwing it away, rooted in the term *fraigalchd*, that ostentatious show of strength and no-where is it exhibited more than in the simple lifting and throwing of the heavy stone.

At this juncture it should be emphasised that although this could be carried out in two forms, that is throwing the stone over a static object, it could also be exhibited by simply throwing the stone away. In this case it is the manner the stone is thrown. Although being boastful in strength, ie talking up one's own strength in Gaelic culture was severely frowned upon, it was the manner that strength was exhibited which was fundamentally important. To show superior strength the strongest lifted a heavy stone and either threw it away or threw it over a static object in such as fashion to demonstrate that the feat was nothing and that the stone was a mere pebble. There is every indication that how a lifting stone was physically lifted which demonstrated the degree of ostentatiousness therefore the actual attitude of the lifter was important along of course his actual level of physical strength.

The following is an account of a trial of strength that took place at the court of King James VI in London before 1622 and which involved one of his Scottish courtiers – Sir Lachlan MacKintosh and which shows the use of this unique form of stone lifting being practised over 400 years ago .

“Upon one occasion when in London, several feats of strength were to be performed by gentlemen before the King and Court, and, amongst others, a large stone of a certain weight was to be put over a bar of so many feet high. Sir Lachlan ordered his servant before the company would assemble, in order if possible to ascertain its weight, as Sir Lachlan intended to be a competitor. The servant reported that if Sir Lachlan could raise his own brown horse (then in stable) by the forelegs, he could manage the stone. He accordingly tried that plan and succeeded. After the party had met to enjoy the amusements of the day, at last the trial of strength as to the stone came on and several attempted the task, but in vain. Sir Lachlan then came forward, and with apparently no great difficulty succeeded in turning the stone over the bar, much to the annoyance of the English.” ¹⁸

Sir Lachlan was a Gael however questions could be asked that there was also the possibility of this type of stone lifting being known within English culture but these were the days of the Scottish Stuarts ascension to the British throne and then it would not be surprising to see a certain degree of Gaelic influence at the court.

From one of the oldest references of the lift and throw, we jump forward to the last known occasion when it was known to be exhibited in Gaelic culture –

“He was another time in Perthshire. There was a big boulder besides a dyke and they said that only a powerfully built man would be able to lift it. Alexander went and lifted the boulder and threw it over the dyke where it lies to this very day. I’ve no idea who would be able to move it now”.¹⁹

The Alexander in question was at the height of his strength at the beginning of the 20th Century and was none other than the celebrated Scottish Highland Games athlete – AA

¹⁸ Appendix No 1, *Dunachton, Past and Present, History of the MacKintoshes*. Charles Fraser MacKintosh (1866)

¹⁹ Taken from John MacDonald of Highbridge and transcribed by Calum Maclean on the 4th and the 25th of January 1951 - <http://calumimaclean.blogspot.co.uk>

Cameron. Cameron was also known to have lifted both the Inver and Dalwhinnie stones and for one of these, he exhibits yet another traditional form of lifting.

The lift and throw was regarded as the most ostentatious of lifts and on occasion was carried out for the reasons of that quirk of Gaelic culture - the great desire within the male population at least, to be remembered by future generations.

“When he was setting out he took a round heavy stone and threw it from him on the roadside that it might serve as a memorial for him in case he might not return. His servant lifted the stone with ease, carried it some distance, and then threw it from him on the roadside saying, “Lie there as a memorial of both should we not return”²⁰

Remembrance and strength is examined thoroughly in ***Chapter Six (I do this for you to remember me by)*** but it has to be asserted that no lift to be remembered was ever known to have been carried out by putting a heavy stone overhead, it was done so in Gaelic cultural terms and not on the basis of modern perceptions.

“.....and he is accounted a strong man who can lift it in his arms to the top of the standing one, which is about four feet high,—and a very strong man who is able to toss it over without coming in contact with the upright one”²¹

Once again we have yet another reference to the ultimate in Gaelic physical strength, in this instance the Wallace Putting Stone at Sherrifmuir and although this stone is extant, even for the most strong and despite knowledge that the stone has been reduced in weight, the lift and throw of this boulder over the former plinth (now recumbent) is, as oral tradition asserts, a show of strength that would in cultural terms cause the lifter to be remembered. Not everyone is capable of this level of strength but which in the modern sense, would certainly separate the wheat from the chaff. There are many modern strength athletes that could achieve this, but it is a factor that defines the stronger from the strong.

On 15th September 1822 another Highland Games organised by Glengarry was held at Inverness with the usual itinerary of Highland strength as displayed at his Games six years earlier with one crucial difference – the stone lifting competition was different.

“At lifting the stone, Allan MacDonell, first, as putting over the bar at No 9; Hugh Fraser, second, by doing it with great ease at No 8; Ewen MacDonald ,from Uist, at No7”²²

What should not be lost on the reader is that Glengarry through over the course of two separate Games, included two forms of stone lifting seen by the Gael to be the most ostentatious – the “lift and carry” and now the “lift and throw”.

On this occasion, Allan MacDonell of Glenlee was victorious however when the event was reported on by the Inverness Courier Newspaper, the lifting and throwing of this 18 stone pebble was stated to have been won by putting the stone over the bar at 5ft although the better reference shown above hints at 4ft 6inches through what appear to be 6inch

²⁰ p158 *The Records of Argyll, Lord Archibald Campbell (1885)*

²¹ *“Dunblane Traditions”. John Monteath (1887)*

²² *Sporting Magazine*

graduations in height. Worse still, the Courier newspaper failed to name the victor referring to him only as an “**unknown stonemason**”.

Recently this event has been reintroduced by the athletic director of the Inverness Highland Games who unwittingly has caused the event to be called “The Stonemason’s Challenge” with further assertions of the winner’s anonymity. Gaelic strength is underpinned by cultural remembrance and his name is **Allan MacDonell of Glenlee**. Few can replicate this ultimate feat of Gaelic strength so the name Allan MacDonell should be remembered.

One aspect about the lift and throw is that a number of stones associated with it, have intimated that the feat itself was never expected to be repeated, hence the particular stone in Perthshire thrown by AA Cameron allegedly remains where it landed after his lift and throw. Again this underpins the ostentatious lift, lifting a heavy stone and throwing it over a wall with the feat of strength exhibited being so great, that it is incapable of being repeated. This also applies to other stones such as the **Lochaber Putting Stone** and the **Clach-neart Mheirichard**.

7. ASSISTED LIFTING – USING THE PLAID

The expression “assisted lifting” is perhaps not the greatest of terminology to apply to a unique form of stone lifting as it implies that in some way cheating was allowed in Gaelic Strength Culture. Not so the case as Gaelic attitudes towards strength were underpinned by a rather harsh upbringing where anything that was seen as weak or soft was despised and frowned upon. With the exception of the Puterach Stone at Balquhiddy, which required to be lifted onto a plinth but had a known resting ledge at the halfway point on the plinth, there are certainly no known instances where some form of assist made the lift easier.

There is an old Gaelic tale of a Clan Chief and his entourage being caught out overnight in harsh winter snows. Wrapping their plaids around themselves they in the Highland way went to sleep. During the night the Chief awoke and saw that his son had made a pillow of snow to make himself more comfortable and one would not think anything of this in a modern sense but, this is a Gaelic tale and the son was seriously rebuked for his show of softness and display of qualities that could be deemed as showing weakness. This is a well known oral tale but its telling is an assertion of a despised attitude to anything that is unmanly and weak. One can draw comparisons in the feat of tossing the Caber where throwers were originally expected to up-right the caber themselves before throwing. Not so today and a fundamental principle of Gaelic culture has been lost within the specific rules now made up for this event. Centuries ago this would have been seen as a weakness.

In stone lifting there was no assistance and the modern use of “tacky” to improve grip would no doubt have earned a similar rebuke as that for making a pillow of snow. It is simply not the Gaelic way.

So what is an assisted lift? The answer is the simple use of the plaid in making a form of harness to assist in the lift of an **extremely** heavy stone. Notable for their size, the majority of these stones lack any cultural reason for their lifting and the stories attached to them appear to be more folklore than fact but they were lifted.



The Achnangart Stone

The Plaid worn by the Highlander was a multipurpose garment of value. It was more commonly used as a contrived form of sleeping bag if the Highlander had to spend the night under the stars and was also known to be used as a form of rope when twisted and on one occasion used for **abseiling**. Not surprisingly, the plaid was used for carrying and lifting and was applied to the stones.

- **Glenelg Church Stone** – carried in the plaid used as a form of haversack
- **Clach Thogalaich, Colonsay** – carried in the plaid but unknown how.
- **Putting Stone of the Clans** – lifted by a woman using an apron as a harness
- **Achnangart Stone** – lifted and carried using the plaid as a makeshift harness.

And with the following stones more likely to have been lifted in a similar fashion –

- **The Murchison Stone** – lifted and carried to form part of a wall.
- **The Lealty Stone** – a test of strength for Clan Munro
- **The McCrimmon Stone** – also a lift and carry.

With little or no cultural reason attached to this form of lifting, each stone requires an examination in its own right and each are discussed fully later in this book however underpinning each is the absurdity that the common lifting methods mentioned above could be simply applied. The strength required to lift these types of stones defy belief and, with the propensity for oral folklore to occasionally expand on actual strength, it too could in instances omit factors which in doing so emphasises further the strength of the individual.

The Achnangart stone in Glen Shiel is one example of the reason to thoroughly examine folklore and dissect the underlying truth. This stone is in fact one of the most written about stones in stone lifting tradition and which is used to emphasise the strength of Duncan MacRae. Every anecdote that mentions this particular stone states the strength of the man in lifting it and walking a distance with it after selecting the stone to form a door lintel for a house however none of the texts mentions that the stone was lifted using the plaid. Oral tradition within the MacRaes still extant within the Glen affirm his use of the plaid.

The photo above clearly shows that any lift that would be deemed the norm could simply not be applied to the Achnangart Stone as it would be beyond any known physical strength limits. Try throwing this stone over a dyke wall but as the true story asserts, it would be thoroughly possible to lift with some form of assistance.

It is this tendency for Gaelic tales to be economical with fact that requires to be accounted for and using the plaid as a harness for lifting a heavy stone does seem to, on the occasions where it was utilised, to have been conveniently discarded giving a false representation of the physical strength of the individual mentioned.

In emphasising the complete lack of cultural reasons for lifting stones by this method, only one stone, ***the Lealty Stone***, implies a cultural reason, in this case a testing stone for the Clan Munro but most certainly not a test in the normal sense.

Of the stones mentioned above, most seem to be ad hoc lifts as feats of strength with little grounding in stone lifting culture proper but so little is actually known about lifting stones using the plaid that there is the possibility that lifting stones on the boundary of human strength such as the ***Martins Lifting Stone*** and ***Crawford Putting Stone*** could for convenience be put easily into this bracket but unlikely in my opinion. It is simply not possible to expand any further on assisted lifting in Gaelic culture as so little is known but the fact remains that knowledge that it did exist helps further our understanding of stone lifting culture.

The question remains though is how was the plaid constructed into a lifting harness?

8. **LIFTING RINGED STONES**

Although the Dinnie Stones hold the accolade of perhaps being the most famous of lifting stones this position is almost entirely due to the man Donald Dinnie and his feat of strength with those two iconic stones at Potarch, Aberdeenshire. Though the notoriety of these stones an implied acceptance that in some way the lifting of ringed stones is or rather was an accepted and adapted style of stone lifting known to the Highlander. The true reality is that there is absolutely no evidence to support this. Again, there is every likelihood that where ringed stones existed and for whatever their original purpose, there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that a trial of strength would have been engaged.

Whereas the Dinnie Steens are dated to circa 1860 the oldest known example of a lifting stone with a ringed handle can be dated to the reign of King James V of Scotland (1513 to 1542) by the known existence of the ***Lifting Stane at Lifting Stane Farm, Closeburn***. Not much is known of this stone except that it was a large single stone with an attached iron

handle broad enough to admit two hands. One can only suspect that the stone was either lifted or lifted and carried a distance however the existence of this stone some 500 years ago can hint at some Gaelic origin.

The village of Closeburn is just north of the southern town of Dumfries and as far as possible from the Scottish Highlands as one could possibly imagine however the time frame for this stone and its location is important. Geographically, the hamlet of Closeburn is located within the Nith Valley which long after the introduction of the “Scots” language was still a recognised Gaelic speaking stronghold and the existence of this stone, culturally extremely similar to that of the lifting stones at Old Dailly Church, owes its existence to the remnants of a culture which would be mirrored in the Highlands and Islands. In this respect it is entirely feasible that the lifters of this ringed stone would have shared similar cultural values and in some cases, even the Gaelic language of the Highlanders.

The lifting of ringed stones was most certainly not a common practice and in no way could be considered a generic style of lifting stone known throughout the country. Ringed stones only highlight the adaptability and attitude to the testing of physical strength and it should be noted that around the time of Donald Dinnie lifting and walking with the stones at Potarch, young men at Airth in the Scottish Lowlands were competing with each other in lifting the ringed stone located outside their local Blacksmith and now featured as the **Smiddy Stane** at the Airth Highland Games.

What the ringed stone provides, not through the lack of existence of these types of lifting stone, but rather a unique outlook on physical strength where what was available to lift was simply lifted in manly competition. Anecdotes of Highland physical strength lifting all sorts of ironmongery, be it cannons, heavy gates and so on, abound with a level of frequency that suggests that the attitude was simply to lift anything that was heavy. Traditional non-ringed stones have a degree of cultural significance surrounding their physical lifting however nothing like this can be attached to ringed stones implying that when they were lifted, it was more than likely that they were lifted in ad-hoc competition and nothing else.

One final point to make regarding ringed stones is that the push to attach cultural reasons for their lifting are perhaps more evident with the Dinnie Stones than any other. Consider that the stones at Potarch were known to have been lifted without use of the ring onto the wall of the Potarch bridge and this is merely a replication of a well established cultural lift of the stones themselves. It should also be noted that both Dinnie Stones were recovered by David Webster on the south bank of the River Dee well below the bridge parapets suggesting that there is also the possibility that each stone, in line with culture may have been subjected to the lift and throw, a style of lifting where the end result is making the stones irretrievable through an ostentatious feat of strength.

What can definitely be applied to the Dinnie Steens is their lift and carry aspect in Gaelic culture and the ostentatiousness of such a lift most certainly does not allow the provision of putting them down occasionally to walk a determined distance. The chapter on the **Eastern Highlands** fully examines the Gaelic heritage of Donald Dinnie and explains just why he lifted and walked with those famous stones.

In conclusion, ringed stones were lifted, they were perhaps not identified as being traditional but rest assured they would have been lifted within whatever parameters of Gaelic strength

culture could be applied and in this vein, lifting heavy ringed stones has much in common with the cultural aspects of the lift and carry as in most instances, they are a variant lift of the same.

PLACING LIFTS INTO A TIMESCALE

What is evident from the preceding is that culture and geography have played a substantial part in the story of traditional Gaelic stone lifting. There are clearly lifting styles such as “putting the wind underneath the stone” and the “lift and throw” that seem to have lost favour as a traditional style of lifting but were once the norm. Equally, with the advent of modern strength, older practices such as “shouldering” have now become an accepted norm however this is the wonderment of strength cultural history – attitudes change although it is fundamentally important to assess the cultural and historic reasons for a lift and put it into a proper context and time frame.

In this respect, assessing a Gaelic lifting culture requires an insight into the turbulent history of Scotland and simplifying major corresponding time frames with less emphasis on a micro analysis of geography and dialect but by talking a general and more practical overview of the major influences on a stone lifting culture. In this respect there are three important time scales which are relatively obvious.

- ***TIME BEFORE THE CLANS (5TH TO 11TH CENTURIES)***

Whatever way one looks at the history and early formation of Scotland, there are substantial academic arguments whether the Gaelic culture and language emigrated with the Dalriadic Scots of Ulster which colonised most of which is known today as the areas of Kintyre and Lochaber, or whether Gaelic culture was essentially in place before this. Whatever is the truth, there is no question that major elements of culture and language were shared in what later became Ireland and Scotland.

Underpinning this culture is Religion, which we do know was brought to Scotland via the establishment of monasteries instigated by St Columba, such as that at Iona. As previously discussed, the oral tradition of shared Irish and Scottish stories such as that of Connal Gulban give some insight into the strength culture of this period and to reiterate, this particular story describes four variant lifts.

1. Putting the wind underneath the stone
2. The Lift into the lap or fold
3. Shouldering the stone
4. The Lift and Carry

Also of interest in this time frame is the story of the establishment of Monkland’s Parish, now the town of Coatbridge where as tradition states, a Monk carried a large stone some 13 miles as an act penance and where he deposited the stone he was required to set up a new

Church. This particular stone is known as the **Pilgrims Stone** which is examined in Chapter Seven, "The Stones of the Lowlands".



Statue of the monk carrying the Pilgrim's Stone

What is assumed regarding the Pilgrims Stone is that, like Conall Gulban, it was carried on the shoulder as the Monk walked all those miles to establish his Church. Whether or not the basis of the story is factual, it is the fact that once again the lift and carry of a stone is highlighted as the ultimate lift of a heavy stone in this time frame, a time when the majority of the European nations as we know them today had yet to be established.

There is another story of stone lifting from this time period which is especially unique. The story is centred around the mission of St Mungo bringing Christianity to the lowland areas of Scotland centred around what is now Glasgow. Two local brothers listened to the teachings of St Mungo with one of them converting to Christianity but the other, in a statement of defiance towards the new religion, lifted a heavy stone above his head which promptly fell back down upon him killing him instantly. These two brothers were Picts not Gaels and so little is known of their basic culture and language that little can be explained other than it is stated that prior to battle, it is recorded that feats of strength by lifting heavy stones were carried out in the presence of the opposing enemy. How this was done is anyone's guess but what can be confirmed is that this time frame holds the origin of many but not all of what could be regarded as a traditional lift of a stone.

This was the time before the Scottish Clans and in the latter part of the period, the Gaelic language and its culture were in its supremacy throughout the entire country and for a time

extended for many years into the next important period of strength tradition and culture, a period when attitudes to strength and associated lifts make a substantial change.

- **THE FORMATION OF THE CLANS AND ESTABLISHMENT OF GAELIC CULTURE (12th CENTURY TO 1746)**

The Scottish Clans are, like all family associated groupings worldwide no different in that their ethnicity is not as culturally pure as perceived by most. In relation to the Scottish Clans it is the influx of other cultures that has possibly caused stone lifting, the cultural reasons for doing so and the method of lifting to be so different from that before however to what degree can only be speculated.

The origins of each Scottish Clan, established over a period of 3 centuries are linked to three individual ethnic groupings – each with its own culture that would in some way be assimilated.

Firstly we have those Clans that were formed through intermixing of the Dalraidic Scots previously mentioned with the indigenous Picts. In all likelihood both cultures would have been similar however the Gaelic of the Dalriadan's as they expanded over many areas of Scotland supplanted the Brythonic language, especially in the lowlands and hence Gaelic culture and obviously its strength practices such as the putting and lifting stones took root. This is the chief reason that stones such as the Blue Stones of Old Dailly and the Blue Stone of Kingcase owed their existence.

The second grouping of Clans are those whose basis is a mixture of Dalraidic/Picts with those Vikings who chose to stay and become assimilated into Gaelic culture with most of these Clans not surprisingly having a Hebridean island origin. It may come as no surprise that the known stones of the islands have a tendency to be more Icelandic in shape rather than the iconic oval such as that of the Inver Stone. There are sound geographical reasonings for this difference in shape however oval stones would still be available. There is no firm academic evidence however to suggest that a Norse influence would have played a part in the culture of Hebridean lifting stones but there are substantial differences in size, shape, lifting style as well as actual Gaelic nomenclature to assert that some influence did take place.

The final Clan grouping is again the insertion of the Norman French after 1066 with lower order knights being offered lands in Scotland after the battle of Hastings and subsequently they too became assimilated into a Pictish/Dalraidic culture. Perhaps the best associated stone with this ethnic mix is the **Menzies Stone** with the Clan origin being rooted in this Gaelic/Norman ethnic fusion.

Each of these groupings can be reasonably placed into geographical areas however from the 11th to the 18th Centuries; Gaelic culture became more similar with shared cultural practices however never to the extent that a "generic" culture could be established. This is the primary reason for the variance in strength cultures during this period, perhaps the greatest in Scottish history.

With regards to lifting styles there was still an emphasis on putting the wind underneath the stone and as explained within the Chapter on Manhood this became established as a requirement to show individual strength to practice in weaponry at the onset of puberty. It is during this period that, and as befitting a culture that was predominately warlike, attitude

counted to a massive degree and the strong were respected through oral tradition. There is no doubt that the lift and throw became established culturally during this timeframe as there is simply no mention of it beforehand. The lift and carry continued on from the previous time frame and although demonstrated with the likes of the aforesaid Menzies Stone, themselves a Clan of Pictish/Dalriadic and Norman mix, was still been a commonplace form of lifting.

The only lifting style that appears to have been dropped in this period is the “shouldering” of the stone. There are no accounts of it in oral tradition nor are there any recorded examples and one can only assume that the lift and throw has somehow for cultural reasons displaced the shoulder lift completely. This is also in this time frame that lifting a heavy stone onto a static object became established with its introduction most likely to have been established through cultural reasons for doing so. The vast majority of male Clan members would not have been sufficiently strong enough to be able to lift a heavy stone onto a 4ft or similar stone plinth. Strong men did exist within the Clans but it would be extremely naive to suggest that lifting onto a plinth was a rite of passage with associated cultural assertions, all evidence suggests that such a trial of strength was for selection of the strongest of the Clan who could become full time men at arms. Unlike putting the wind underneath the stone, a lift that was meant to include, the trial of lifting onto a plinth excluded all but those of superior strength.

Again it has to be emphasised that there are absolutely no records or stories in oral tradition that mention a stone being put overhead however there are many that mention the lift and throw which was obviously seen by the Gael as the greatest feat of strength that could be achieved.

Strangely, it also in this time frame that we first hear of stones being lifted with an iron handle which in essence established this type of lift having an older inheritance than putting the stone overhead.

In terms of strength measurement, the following is a list of lifts in order of cultural strength achievement for this time frame –

1. Putting the wind underneath the stone
2. Lifting into the lap or fold
3. Lifting onto a plinth
4. The Lift and Carry
5. The Lift and Throw (either with or without static object)

(NB The use of the Plaid in assisting a lift also appears in this period however so little of this method of lifting is actually known about and in any case would have unlikely appeared as a “trial” of strength and perhaps better suited under the banner of a “feat” of strength)

- ***THE DEMISE OF THE CLAN SYSTEM AND THE PRESENT (1746 till now)***

The five variant styles of lifting the heavy stone mentioned in the last section in all probability sustained itself for some many years into this particular important time frame but sadly, the knowledge of cultural requirements associated with a lift became to be corrupted and the influence of a new British culture co-terminus with a demise in the Gaelic language and its unique culture and its people, led to a substantial loss of knowledge of and the importance attached to stone lifting.

The Clan system was for all intents and purposes completely destroyed after the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie at the battle of Culloden in 1746. What had gone before was no more and the life of the Gaelic Highlander completely changed for many reasons. Perhaps the greatest death knell was the atrocity of the Highland Clearances, probably instigated many years before through a desire for the Stuart Monarch's of Great Britain located in London, to subject Clan Chiefs to have their sons educated at English educational establishments and thus the slow erosion of the Clan system had actually been instigated many years before the battle of Culloden.

Of course, the loss of over 170,000 Highlanders to the new lands in Australia and North America played its part in a culture drain that included strength and reasons for being strong. In essence, Gaelic culture pre 1746 had its basis in a readiness for war with opposing Clans and strength was structured around an ability to be successful in battle. With the Clan system being almost completely wiped out there was now no need to encourage strength and although it did still exist, its practice was no-where near as prevalent as it was during the height of the Clan system.

Concentrating on known lifts of this period, the practice of lifting to put the wind underneath the stone was still prevalent on the likes of North Uist although the Gaelic cultural requirements of proving manhood at puberty were now completely disassociated. Likewise the lifting of the heavy stone onto a dyke wall was still a common practice as well as the lift and throw and stone carry.

The suppression of Gaelic culture and language post 1746 has obviously had a major impact on strength and stone lifting. Not surprising that with a loss of culture, knowledge of how things were done also departs although many aspects of a reason to be strong were simply transferred to the Victorian advent of improved agricultural techniques that required strong farm workers. This was most evident in the tests of strength known to exist at **feeing fairs** although in many aspects these were restricted to agricultural areas such as Aberdeenshire, Perthshire etc but with much of the actual Highlands discarded. It is from this period that standards are introduced and in respect of weight, the 56lb weight was to be found in most farms. Gaelic strength feats such as throwing the weight simply become standardised whereas before there was none.

The creation of the modern Highland Games too had an influence on Gaelic strength, codifying and standardising events and perhaps this was what was required for a retention of Gaelic strength but in doing so, those events difficult to codify, perhaps through being more cultural than competitive in aspect, simply dropped off. Feats such as Maide Leasg, Dorn Fhuar and of course stone lifting, appearing as they did with Glengarry as mentioned above simply disappeared but it is the attitude of the heavies where tradition still remains.

Donald Dinnie lifted the stones at Potarch in what could be stated as a non-traditional manner however he was also known to have lifted other stones, with a particular favourite in Glen Esk which he lifted into his lap and took a walk with (lift and carry). Later we have knowledge of AA Cameron displaying many aspects of cultural strength with the stones. The question has to be asked why lift stones when they do not appear at an organised Games?

The answer to this is that it was part of both Cameron and Dinnie's culture of which there can be no doubt and there is good reason to believe that this would have also been evident

in other Highland Games heavies of the day but after two World Wars, the toll on youth simply destroyed the knowledge base.

How this knowledge dissipated is easily demonstrated in the number of known lifting stones in Scotland pre 1996. Up until this year there were only two, the Inver Stone and the Dinnie Stones and from which little or no cultural knowledge of Gaelic stone lifting could be truly derived. With the release of "**Of Stones and Strength**"²³ a few more traditional lifting stones were made known but still insufficient to determine cultural applications to stone lifting.

One would expect the Scottish Highland Games circuit to demonstrate true cultural aspects of stone lifting but they too have been effected by a loss of Gaelic culture and again some cultural assertions have been made which only cloud the true picture although what has to be said is that these Games is that the differences are relatively minor in nature.

The previously mentioned Stonemason's Challenge at the **Inverness Games** perhaps have the accolade of having a stone lifting event that holds true to culture by demonstrating the **lift and throw** with the exception that the stone is not traditional but a fabricated Atlas Stone and "Tacky"²⁴ is used to assist the lifters grip on the stone. Further south, the annual Gourock Games, traditionally the first on the Scottish calendar has a stone lifting competition that incorporates the two ultimate's of stone lifting culture. The Gourock Games incorporate stone lift of a 170lb oval stone which has been referred to as the **Kempock Stone** although I am informed that the name relates solely to its unique putting stone and that the lifting stone has no name. The competitors lift the stone which is then carried a distance to a horizontal Caber suspended 3ft from the ground with the competitor being timed to throw the stone over commencing from its starting point. Obviously this incorporates both the Lift and Carry as well as the Lift and Throw which is an interesting corruption on Gaelic strength although perhaps, and even although I have seen failures in lifting the stone, at 170 lbs it could well be considered too light in comparison with the stone used at Inverness.

²³ *Of Stones and Strength*, Steve Jeck & Peter Martin. Published by Ironmind Enterprises (1996)

²⁴ *There is nothing to suggest that any substance was used to give a lifter any advantage whatsoever in Gaelic culture. What can definitely be stated that the culture, most certainly during the time of the Scottish Clans was adverse to any display of "softness" with an emphasis on doing things the hard way. In the modern idiom best demonstrated with the raising of the Caber prior to throwing. Early Caber tossers were expected to raise the caber themselves which is most likely to be in tune with Gaelic culture of old and transferring this to the stones, any advantage would go against the grain of Gaelic culture itself. "Tacky" was not around when stones were lifted and if was, it would not have been used.*



Gregor Edmunds of Scotland stone lifting at the Gourock Games

The previously mentioned Menzies Stone is of course well associated with the **Aberfeldy Games** where holding true to tradition, the competition is a Lift and Carry for distance. Again the use of “Tacky” is permissible and each year is returned to Menzies Castle for more traditional lifters to experience the feel of granite intermixed with sticky dried grass! An experience to be avoided at all costs. In the Lowlands again, the **Airth Highland Games** incorporates the lift and carry of the ringed **Smiddy Stone** which I do suspect has a basis in competition as part of an emulation of the more celebrated Dinnie Steens. The **Rossneath Games** has a traditional lifting stone called the **St Modans Stone** which is available for lifting but with an associated history which slightly askew (lifting into the lap to prove the move from puberty to manhood).

There are of course many other stones used at various Highland Games but on the whole there does appear to be a lack of Gaelic culture at the expense of “Games” culture with so many romantic assertions of strength. The traditional Lift & Throw Gaelic style is now known within Highland Games circles as **“Inverness Style”** probably as a consequence of the 1882 Games held by Glengarry but the nomenclature itself implies that it is so named as a result of a Highland Games rather than been seen as a traditional form of lifting and this is very much a problem when asserting a stone lifting culture in competition. If the basic history and culture is unknown, then the resultant corruption can manifest itself into a contorted and unrealistic history. Some Games express the history of the “Clan Champion” as attached to the feat of stone lifting where the truth is, in most instances it was not a singular position and

the nomenclature should be “Clan functional killer” because that’s what their purpose was. Romanticism of Scottish history can occasionally overtake itself quite spectacularly.

What is obvious is that no individual Games have a stone lifting event which is a mirror of another in the circuit underpinning an obviousness that there is a massive gap in understanding the fundamentals of Gaelic stone lifting. Although it would be fair to state that a number of Games provide a colourful and perhaps contrived associated history with the stones, it would be also fair to state that they all to a degree still demonstrate elements of the actual Gaelic requirements in relation to stone lifting.

Expanding the stones worldwide, many attempts have been made to replicate Gaelic stone lifting in many different fashions, one of which includes lifting a stone for repetitions. Without stating the obvious, there is absolutely no record either written or passed down orally of any traditional Scottish lifting stone having been required to be lifted for “reps”. Certainly have a competition in stone lifting for repetitions but it would be an affront to try and carry this off as an aspect of Gaelic culture as it is non-existent.

Lack of knowledge has thus, in regards to modern strength allowed the assertion of five types of lift, two of which did not even apply culturally to the Gael.

- a) The Lift into the lap or fold.
- b) The shouldered lift.
- c) The Lift and Carry.
- d) Putting the stone overhead.
- e) Lifting for repetitions.

Modern strength culture therefore dismisses the main stays of Gaelic stone lifting culture that is, its lowest lift, putting the wind underneath the stone as well as its most supreme, the throwing of the lifting stone but worse still, many contrived assertions of culture have been made to fit into the modern thus completely distorting or indeed corrupting the very origins of a stone lifting culture. Suffice to say that there is scope to include all aspects of lifting a traditional stone, be it culturally correct or modern as it has to be emphasised that there were no generic formal rules of stone lifting, just an application of culture. So if we turn the clock back some 300 years and witness the Inver Stone being put overhead, rest assured the person that did it would have been talked about and remembered. It is superfluous that this did not happen and remember underpinning everything about Gaelic strength is the ostentatiousness of the lifter, not the must do requirements of standardisation.

This is true Gaelic stone lifting and any future discussion about what is and what isn’t a lift should be only a discussion over whose lift was better. So when lifting that heavy stone do so with an approach that demonstrates the extremes of individual strength, do it with attitude and style whether modern or ancient. Lift it in Gaelic style and be ostentatious with it.