

ULTACH DHOMHAILL MHOIR

(THE WEIGHTOR BURDEN OF BIG DONALD)



Ultach Dhomhaill Mhoir

Quite simply, why and how this particular stone for years has been unknown to the Scottish strength community let alone the worldwide community is beyond comprehension. This stone is the heaviest known traditional lifting stone in Scotland and yet it has never been written about and the sole knowledge of it, up until recently, has been retained verbally within the small Gaelic community of North Uist.

Perhaps the reason for the stone not being known further afield is due to the controversy that surrounds it and indeed this controversy rages on within the island community to this day.

The weight of Donald McLellan sits by the roadside near to the turn off for Griminish and is easily identifiable sitting on its concrete plinth with attached historic plaque and this is where the controversy arises.



The stone itself weighs over 400 lbs and is truly a massive test of strength however the now rusting plaque attached to the plinth at the site explains details of its *first* lift.

“This stone was lifted to arms length overhead by Donald Mor McClellan, Runa in circa 1876”

The reference to “*arms length*” is purely the translation of Ultach which in stone lifting

terminology means a stone lifted into the lap or the fold sometimes referred to as arms length. The controversy surrounds the claim that this stone was pressed overhead by Donald McLellan and this does not sit well with many of the islands current residents.

Underpinning this controversy of whether the stone was pressed overhead or not demonstrates another aspect of the culture of the Island and one which is deep rooted and extremely important to the Islanders of North Uist.

One may well be aware from reading previous chapters that religion and traditional stone lifting in Scotland are intertwined. The inhabitants of North Uist are Presbyterian and mostly members of the Free Church of Scotland who hold strong religious beliefs such as the observance of the Sabbath. Part of this culture is such that there is a strong disapproval of flippant or unsubstantiated claims and this includes the reference made on the plaque to the stone being pressed overhead.



Side view of the stone

Rear view of the stone

I have spoken personally to the grand-daughter of Donald McClellan, an elderly resident of the island who strongly repeats that her grand-father did indeed press the stone overhead and any attempt to convince otherwise meets with disapproval. In an extremely small and tight knit community, the McLellan family have many relatives who also believe that the stone was lifted overhead. For those that agree that the stone was lifted in such a manner, there is almost an equal number who quite vociferously state that it wasn't. When researching this stone I received numerous contacts from various islanders wishing to put their family slant on this particular stone.

Such is the immensity of this disagreement, a number of years ago, the grand-daughter of McClellan was interviewed by BBC Radio nan Gael. During this Gaelic speaking interview, she again reiterated the feat of strength by her ancestor. The next day she awoke early in the morning to find that the stone had been moved during the night and was now in situ blocking the front door of her house.

I have been informed of who was probably responsible for this act, however if you have the opportunity to visit and lift the stone then I would suggest a neutral stance to any claim is taken. That way no-one will be offended and it will of course allow the stone to remain in situ.

Regardless of whatever claim, there is absolutely no disagreement that the stone was indeed lifted circa 1870 by Donald McLellan. He was known as a very strong man with inclusion of “Mor” in his title being quite apt.

Another claim is that the stone was lifted 60 years ago by a Donald John MacDonald, into his lap, however the relatives of the McLellan family still hold to the fact that the stone has never been lifted since 1870. This said, and despite its weight, I am sure that there will be many of the worldwide strength community that could indeed lift the stone and perhaps when this has been done a few times and to the knowledge of the islanders, then this dispute over credibility may be laid to rest.

The stone is mentioned in the 56th Volume of the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness which was published in 1991 with the only addition to the history of the stone being a comment that Big Donald “lifted the stone with ease” and that the lift was witnessed by many. The article itself makes no mention of the stone being pressed overhead.

What of Big Donald Himself? In his time he was regarded by the islanders as perhaps the strongest of men on the island. There was however some competition. Donald was born on the island in 1846 making him about 30 years of age when he lifted the stone. When I spoke to his grand-daughter regarding this feat of strength she distinctly emphasised that Donald was in his 50’s when the feat was achieved and although the passage time may make the reality slightly confused, this could equally apply to how the stone was actually lifted. In any case, Big Donald or give him his Gaelic patronym “*Domhnaill Mor mac Dhomnaill mhic Aonghais mhic Dhomnaill Ruaidh MacGill ‘Fhaonlain*” was a member of the Naval Reserve however for most of his life he was a lobster fisherman fishing the waters off the Hebridean Islands and West Coast.

Donald was related to another man of strength, Donald Morrison of Berneray through his mother’s lineage (see ULTACH GHILLE MHOIRE)

Whatever, the stone still waits to be lifted by a non islander however I would stress again the importance of observing the Sabbath on the island and a reminder that stone lifting on a Sunday may well be perceived as being disrespectful.

The stone itself is so different from the perceived oval granite eggs so associated with Scottish stone lifting. There are no substantial rivers in North Uist that over the centuries could round and shape a good lifting stone so the actual shape of the stone should make grip, so often a problem in lifting Scottish stones, far less problematical in this instance. It is however extremely heavy and in essence pure raw strength is the requirement for lifting the stone from its plinth. As the stone sits at angle and on a flat plinth it is relatively easy to move it about. Don’t let this deceive you as it is extremely heavy.

To perhaps demonstrate the size of the stone itself the following are the recorded dimensions;

Length- 30 inches

Breadth – 16 inches

Height – 14 to 16 inches

Girth at centre – 59 inches



The stone situated by the roadside.

It is quite obvious that the size and weight of this stone will favour comparably with that of the Criccieth Stone in Wales. Similarly the stone lifting history, in modern times has yet to be written and this stone's inclusion will no doubt in the future be the subject of many discussions over what constitutes an acceptable lift. This is how traditional stone lifting should be, but remember long before the strength community centred on such discussions, the Islanders of North Uist had already entered the debate decades before.

When visiting North Uist, what is evident and most striking is the remoteness of its small communities. The nearest community to this stone is at Griminish, a collection of less than a dozen or so small crofts, but still a community known for its ancient strength.

Aongas Mac Uisdean Ghriminish (Angus the son of Hugh of Griminish) or Angus MacDonald was a native of Griminish. Although he was a Church of Scotland Minister he was also known for his exceptional strength.

“This clergyman was noted in the country as a man of extraordinary muscular strength. He had no equal in the place for lifting ponderous weights (stones), or for any of those athletic exercises that required great bodily power” Page 57 of the Celtic Magazine Volume V (Published 1880).

Angus preached on many of the Scottish islands and indeed as far south as the Island of Gigha where he was first given the respect due to his strength in being called “*Ministear Laidir*” – the Strong Minister. Angus had a grand- daughter called “*Fionghail nighean Raonuill ‘ic Aonghais Oig, un Airidh Mhuillin*” - Flora the daughter of Ranold, the son of Angus, the younger of Milton. She is otherwise known as Flora MacDonald, the great heroine of Scottish history who assisted Bonnie Prince Charlie in escaping from English (British actually) troops and was celebrated in the famous boat sail from North Uist to Skye in the Skye Boat Song.

Directions – The stone requires little effort to find it on the island of North Uist but does require some planning to get there in the first instance. The quickest ferry service to North Uist is from Uig on the island of Skye which is connected to the Scottish mainland by bridge. From crossing onto Skye it is a journey of one hour to Uig and the ferry trip has a journey time of 90 minutes. On arriving at Lochmaddy on North Uist follow the A865 signposted for Sollas. This invokes a right turn after leaving Lochmaddy onto a single track road. Follow the road for a distance of 13 miles through various small communities until a small track to the hamlet of Grinish is reached. At that point, on the south side of the road there is a conspicuous deer fence. The stone is situated about two hundred yards further on adjacent to the deer fence and is really quite obvious.