

Ultach Na- H' Airde Glaise (also known as Ultach Alasdair Mor)

Grid reference - NF775737



Knowledge of this stone was derived from **Angus MacDougal (Malacleit)** and **Alex MacAulay (Paible)**. The stone is also mentioned in “**On the Crofters Trail**” (David Craig 1990) where the author is informed by **Norman Johnston (Lochmaddy)** that the stone is known as Big Alastair’s stone, lifted by Alastair Matheson during the period of the Sollas clearances.

In the 1930/40’s while preparing the modern road, the following men lifted the stone –

Earddsaidh Mor Dhomhnuill Sheumais (Archie MacDonald)

Eoghainn Lachlainn Aoidh (Ewan McLean)

Domhnull Eardsaidh a’n Aonghais ‘ic Ghalleasbuig Eoin (Donald Archie McRory)

Domhnull Dhonnrachaidh an Dubhghallaich (Donald MacDougall)

All from Sollas.

In August 21014 **Alex Roberts (Birmingham, England)** put the wind underneath the stone in the presence of **Angus MacDougall** and **Alex MacAulay** and the lift was highlighted in the Island News and Advertiser Newspaper.

Ultach Dhomhaill Mhoir

Grid Reference - NF748749



I was initially informed of this stone by both **Angus MacDougal (Malacleit)** and **Alex MacCaulay (Paible)** as well as number of the **McLellan family**. I am more than sure that its prominent position will insure that it is well known by many from North Uist.

Oral tradition and the plaque beside the stone mentions that Donald McLellan lifted this stone above his head circa 1870. My understanding is that the manner in which this stone was lifted (above the head) is deeply contested on the island to this very day however to be honest, such debate only adds colour and flavour to the history of stone lifting by not engaging in the sterile factualness of the modern. This is a stone that underpins Gaelic oral tradition in that the factual element is that indeed **Donald McLellan** did lift the stone as otherwise the oral tradition would have not existed in the first place. It is only the actuality of the degree of lift that can be contested.

There are however three contradictions of evidence. When I spoke personally to Big Donald's grand-daughter she asserts that he lifted the stone when he was over 50 years old. This contradicts the statement on the plaque in the knowledge that Donald was born in 1846 with the likelihood that he was in his 30's at the time of the lift.

Secondly, the feat of strength is mentioned in the **56th Volume of the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness (1991)** where the writer states that Donald **"lifted the stone with ease"** although to what extent is unstated.

Contradictory to the alleged statement however is that, with over 100 known lifting stones extant and lost, this is the only stone that is known to be lifted overhead. Although the following may not have been generic to the Hebrides, the most ostentatious way of lifting a heavy stone (as Dwelly states – Fraigal) appears to be the lifting of the heavy stone and either throwing it away or throwing it over a static object. There are numerous accounts of this style of lifting on the mainland where the attitude of the lifter is paramount. It is akin to saying this stone is a mere pebble and I have thrown it away. There are absolutely no accounts of lifting a heavy stone overhead in Gaelic stone lifting culture.

The last account of the lift and throw was exhibited by the celebrated Gaelic Highland Games champion AA Cameron when circa 1912 he lifted a heavy stone in Perthshire and threw it over a dyke wall laying a challenge to others to lift it and throw it back.

In the modern context I do not think that any of the known Worlds Strongest Man competitors would get anywhere near lifting the stone to the extent of Big Donald and this is where my reservations about the stone enter. When known to the worldwide strength community, the lore surrounding the stone and indeed its weight will draw men of strength to it like a moth to a flame and with the inherent flaws relating to the history of this stone – non Gaels will assert this as evidence of what is known as the “overhead press” and introduce modern standards to a strength culture that had no such standards.

Ultach Dhomhnail Iain Dhonnachaidh Eabhail –The Weight of Donald John MacVicar.



Donald Alick Nicolson with the Lift of Donald John MacVicar

I was informed of the location and history of this stone by **Donald Ferguson** and **Donald Alick Nicolson**.

The physical strength of the MacVicar's of North Uist is highlighted numerous times within the Hebridean Connection (MacDonald/Fergusson 1984) and indeed there is every suggestion that the last lift of the **Clach 'Ic Caoilte** on Creag Asduinn was possibly carried out by the grandfather (still being researched) of **Donald John MacVicar**.

The stone was pointed out to Donald John sometime before 1910 and he lifted it when he was 17 years of age.

Ultach Heisgier

Knowledge of this stone was derived from **Alex MacAulay (Paible)** and **Donald Ferguson (Lochailort)**. The stone is associated with the Stewart boat builders from Grimsay and was allegedly lifted by a number of the same family on visits to the island. The exact location of the lifting stone is unknown although I do recall mention of it being near a harbour or jetty.

Clach 'ic Caoilte

Grid reference - NF740671 (?)

This stone so requires to be found as it has the most wonderful example of Gaelic folklore and oral tradition attached to it that surpasses the legendary **Bodach Craigh Fianna** in Glen Lyon (Lifting this stone entitles the lifter to be allowed to lift the heavy spear of Morven (Fionn)).

At the long end of the great world Creag Asduinn was situated in the majestic ocean on the flat plain of the seabed known as An Domhain (the beginning place). This was the home of Manan who was the son of Lir (Lidhir), the king of the sea. One day Manan asked the son of Caoilte (Ic Caoilte) who was a Fomorian (a semi divine race who preceded the Gods) to take the stone of destiny (the Lia Fail) and return it to Tara, the high seat of the Kings in Ireland.

Manan told the son of Caoilte that he should take no longer than one thousand years and one day to return the stone or else there would be consequences. The son of Caoilte began his quest to return the stone to Tara however on his journey, for some reason or another, he became distracted and forgot entirely about his promise to return to Creag Asduinn within the allotted time.

Manan was not pleased when Ic Caoilte returned one year and one day late. He shouted at him telling him that as punishment he had to lift a large stone, shoulder it and then carry it and place it upon the highest spire of his palace. Manan pointed to a large black rock and demanded that the punishment be carried out forthwith. Ic Caoilte approached the stone and lifted it with ease (as they were under water), then shouldered it and climbed to the top most spire of the palace whereupon Manan immediately drained the ocean of water and the true heavy weight of the stone became excessive for Ic Caoilte who dropped it onto the sea bed. He again repeated the task but each time he reached the highest spire, the water was again drained. This continued for exactly one year and one day when Ic Caoilte dropped down dead through exhaustion.

This is the bare bones of the story of Clach 'Ic Caoilte and Creag Asduinn although there are a number of variances one such being that the water was not drained but the spires protruded from the water's surface making the task impossible. Another variance involves the length of time of the punishment. In many ways the story is similar to the Greek story of Sisyphus.

Within the Hebridean Connection (MacDonald/Fergusson -1984) there are indeed many references to the story including two variations of it however it is also hints that the stone is not of the type linked to the lore of a ten ton boulder lifted and thrown by Ossian, Fionn or indeed by the Devil and every suggestion supplies hints that the stone is of "liftable" proportion.

***"This is illustrated by Donald MacVicar, the uncle of young Marrion, the famed 19th Century sennachie, who was the last of the North Uist men to lift Clach 'ic Caoilte, the big boulder on the slope of Creag Asduinn, for years used as a decisive test of strength on North Uist."** - Page 164*

"The stone of the son of Caoilte to this day is lying on the shoulder of Creag Asduinn"- Page 349

***"My mother put some food and drink for us in a bag and we held the picnic on top of the rock of Asduinn. Afterwards we walked across to the boulder of the Son of Caoilte..."** - Page 210*



The texts clearly state that the Clach 'ic Caoilte is a large dark stone lying on the "slopes" of Creag Asduinn. Topography is important in assessing location. The western and southern slopes are pretty much ill defined with land contouring not suggesting that these could be considered slopes and the northern aspect is perhaps too steeply sloped for anything akin to stone lifting having taken place. This leaves the eastern slope of the Creag which being the leeward side and to a degree sheltered from westerly winds, probably the most likely place where stone lifting took place.

There are many stones on this side of the Creag that could be the Clach 'ic Caoilte however perhaps the most likely stone is that as shown in the photograph above. This stone when

visited was lying at angle attached to the far larger rock mass and from a distance actually appeared to be part of the same rock. In up-righting the stone it was clear that the stone was actually separate from the rock mass and appeared to have been lain against it. (Note the darkened area where the stone has been feed from the earth)



The stone with the summit of Creag Asduinn in the background

Although the shapes of the lifting stones on North Uist are not known to have any particular desired shape there does appear to be an affinity for irregular shaped stones with weight distribution unequal and with each stone having a “heavy bottom end”. In this respect the stone lifter would lift the stone from the heavier end with the least dense part of the stone at the top. Equally, a lifting stone does tend to have smooth sides and of all the stones on the leeward side of Creag Asduinn I would consider this particular stone as a likely candidate for the Clach ‘ic Caoilte. There are obvious similarities with this stone when compared to both ***Ultach Na- H’ Airde Glaise*** and ***Ultach Dhomhnail Iain Dhonnachaidh Eabhail***

Of course much of the above is based on a desire for a lifting stone to exist at this location and until such times as the stone is identified locally as the Clach ‘ic Caoilte then it will remain pure speculation.

Ultach Griminis

From my conversations with **Donald Alick Nicolson**, he had also lifted this stone although it’s precise location is uncertain. He referred to the stone as ***“Ultach Griminis”***. Donald Alick also mentioned lifting this stone to **Donald Ferguson (Lochailort)** and that the stone was opposite Vallay. Other than being a separate stone I suspect that the stone in all probability is the ***Ultach Na- H’ Airde Glaise***.

Ultach (Hosta)

Again the knowledge of this stone was obtained from **Donald Alick Nicolson**. From what he said about the stone is that it was in the vicinity of Scolpaig and Hosta. Donald Alick lifted the stone but did not give a name for it.

Ultach Neil 'ic Uis – The weight of Neil MacCuish

This is another stone mentioned in the Hebridean Connection and from which it is quite clear that the stone is unlikely to be repatriated.

“He was particularly concerned with the welfare of the family of Neil MacCuish for he had great admiration for strong men like Neil – a man as strong as any in Uist. (The “Weight of Neil MacCuish”, a large stone, lay in the boundary between Red Ewen son of Alexander the younger son of Edmund son of Archibald, at the back ridge of Balemor, until the desecration by the masons building a new school at Bayhead, who removed the “weight” which they placed in the foundations. This was the heaviest weight used in weightlifting on North Uist. There is no doubt that lifting the stone was a trial of strength by strongmen long before the age of Neil MacCuish and it is probable that it was so named in consequence of the tragedy of Neil being taken away so suddenly in the prime of strength”. - Page 254

“He was also good at weight lifting, the test of strength among the men of old. In his day, he and Archibald son of Alexander son of Hugh in Balemor and Donald son of Ewen on the Claddach of the Hill of the Flax were best at the weight in Paible. They used to try the “Weight” of Neil son of Uis at the back of the High Ridge in the boundary between Ewen the Red and Edmund son of Archibald....though none of them could lift these weights” - Page 91

From memory, I was informed that the school referred to still exists and is indeed now the grocery shop in Paible.

Clach Eorna -The Barley Stone

“Donald MacRury.....Archibald son of Alexander son of Hugh in Balemor and Donald son of Ewan on the Claddach of the Hill of Flax.....They could all lift the Barley Stone at the end of my father’s barn.”- Page 91

This stone is yet another mentioned in AJ MacDonald’s “Hebridean Connection”. The oral tradition of the stone is contained in page 91 and was derived from the story told by MacDonald’s father who according to the book resided at **No 8 Knockline**. I suspect that this stone due to location was not so widely recognised as a test of strength but simply a stone that the MacDonald family and friends would practice with.

Ultach Aillean Raghnaill

Grid reference- NF825652

I was informed of this stone initially by **Alex MacAulay** and latterly by **Donald Ferguson** and **Donald Ailck Nicolson**. The history of this stone, which if still extant would have been one of the greatest strength tests in the entire country, serves as a memory and a reason why a formal record of such stones is necessary.

Derived from 3 separate sources the story behind this stone is as follows. In the early part of the 20th Century **Alan MacDonald (Iolaraigh)** was 18 years old when he lifted this stone which was estimated to weigh 5cwt. It is suspected that the reasoning for his lift followed the ancient trait of male Gaelic culture requiring a desire to be remembered. This is underpinned by, when necessity dictates that leaving the local community is required that if failing to return you will be forgotten. There are indeed a number of known traditional lifting stones which were lifted for similar reasons.

Alan was required to seek work out-with North Uist and prior to leaving lifted the stone. He secured work in the shipyards of Glasgow and only weeks later he died in an industrial accident.

Although in relative terms the stone is modern its importance in culture cannot be understated however it is unfortunate that when the A867 Lochmaddy to Clachan road was been widened, the contractors inadvertently moved the stone to either the bottom of the Loch or under the road itself. I am aware that after this unfortunate accident that some local people who knew of the stone made some remonstrations with the contractors who placed a “replacement stone” at the roads edge in a relatively similar position.



The replacement stone

Suffice to say as a memorial to Allan MacDonald the present stone is unsuitable and probably more so, un-liftable. It should perhaps be noted that the weight/ lift of Allan MacDonald in relation to size and shape is not too dissimilar to the array of boulders that break the loch from the roadside further west however we are not that fortunate that the stone was used as one of these breaks.



Donald Alick Nicolson photographed in 1983 with the Ultach Ailean Raghnaill

The above photograph courtesy of **Donald Ferguson** is the only known image taken of the stone and which, unlike other North Uist lifting stones, shows itself to be symmetrical.

If this stone had been still extant it would have without any doubt been highly revered by the worldwide strength community.

Ultach na Lìona aig Creaga - The Weight of the Plain

“.....and the Weight of the Plain on the plain of Creag Asduinn, though none of them could lift these weights. ...I do not know who lifted it, but Donald son of Donald son of Angus (MacVicar) was the last to lift the “weight of the plain”. (This stone is still in the original position on the plain of Creag Asduinn; a sum of two pounds sterling was donated by two of us in Sydney to defray the cost of its removal to the museum lately erected by the pupils of Paible Junior Science School at Claddach of the Hill of Flax, plus a suitable inscription; no steps have been taken to carry out our wish. A.J.M)” - Page 91

On a visit to the Plain of Creag Asduinn I spoke to **Angus MacDonald** a local farmer whose livestock graze on this expanse. Angus confirmed the existence of a lifting stone however could not specify its precise location. It can be assumed from the text that this stone and its location was relatively well known until recently.



[The Plain of Creag Asduinn](#)

The area where the Weight of the Plain is located is expansive. From my conversation with Angus MacDonald there was an initial supposition that the stone was located near to the local sheiling visible in the upper left of the above photograph. To this extent we have to assert and question the boundaries of the Plain of Creag Asduinn.

Certainly not obvious from the photograph and indeed was completely overlooked by myself in the course of my research until recently was a configuration that I have seen so many times in relation to traditional stones of strength and that is the obviousness of a “roundish stone” and “plinth stone”. This configuration can be made out in the lower right of the photograph.



Close up of "round stone and plinth configuration"

Although this configuration is more widespread on the mainland Highlands, it has appeared in the Hebrides with a lifting stone known as the ***Clach Altruman Mor*** on the island of Coll.



Clach Altruman Mor- Island of Coll

There are obvious similarities between the stones in both the Plain of Asduinn and that at Torastan on Coll although with the latter the stone exists due the plinth stone being close to an old graveyard and as a known stop the coffin of the deceased was rested atop the plinth stone for the coffin bearers to rest.

This said I have not personally visited this stone and cannot verify its dimensions. Again local verification of the “weight of the plain” is necessary and although the stone identified may well not be the stone, I do suspect that due to the configuration that the roundish stone was probably subject to “ad hoc” lifting at some point in history.