

# ALEXANDER C

## 'A fine Celt'

Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912) is an interesting if controversial figure in Scottish literature. Son of a farmer and publican on the island of Lismore, he spent much of his life travelling the west coast collecting snatches of folklore in the form of stories, songs, prayers, incantations and charms.

His career as an excise-man gave him the freedom to travel the country but it also hindered him. Many people were wary of telling their tales to a government official, especially stories of an illicit nature. Nonetheless, his postings in Carbost on Skye, Lochmaddy on North Uist, Benbecula, Barra and Oban gave Carmichael access to a rich oral tradition in Gaelic culture.

After a stint in Dublin, it was his second posting on Islay which gave him his first job collecting stories. He volunteered to assist John Francis Campbell on the four-volume 'Popular Tales of the West Highlands', an austere compendium which proved not to his tastes.

Carmichael's romantic leanings motivated him to

attempt an Ossianic reconstruction of Celtic history. It is in this endeavour that his body of work remains contentious.

James MacPherson's tales of Ossian claimed to be an ancient work he had translated. Many doubted how much of the poetry was original and how much was his own composition.

The same criticisms were levied at Carmichael. Hamish Robertson in 1976 accused him of meddling and altering texts, of invention and deception. However, this does not necessarily diminish the importance of the work. Carmichael confessed that he spent much time rewriting pieces as he gained fragments of similar tales from different sources. When he left the Highlands for Edinburgh with his wife and four children, he retained a strong sense of pride in his ancestry and culture. An acquaintance from this period noted: 'When he entered the room, every eye seemed to say: this is a fine Celtic gentleman'.

With the release of a six-volume boxed set in Gaelic and English, perhaps his work will reach a new audience. As Dr Domhnall Uilleam Stiubhart said: 'No-one with an interest in any aspect of Gaelic culture can ignore the *Carmina Gadelica*'.