

## Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

**Macbain, Alexander** (1855–1907), *philologist*  
by Ronald Black  
© Oxford University Press 2004–12 All rights reserved

**Macbain, Alexander** (1855–1907), philologist, was born at Balguish Farmhouse, Glenfeshie, Badenoch, Inverness-shire, on 22 July 1855, the illegitimate son of John Macbain, farmservant, and Margaret Mackintosh, maidservant. A fluent Gaelic speaker who grew up in poverty as a cowherd, he learned English when at Insh General Assembly school, Badenoch, between 1863 and 1870, under its teacher Alexander Mackenzie. Himself in sole charge of Dunmullie School at the age of fifteen, he developed an insatiable thirst for education. Between two spells at Baldow school, Badenoch, he worked for the Ordnance Survey in Scotland and Wales (1871–4). He went as a bursar to Old Aberdeen grammar school (1874) and King's College, Aberdeen (1876), graduating MA with honours in philosophy.

In 1880, Raining's school, Inverness, founded in 1727, was expanded to provide secondary education for the whole highland area. Macbain became its rector in July of that year, and presided with distinction over the last and finest period in its history. In 1894–5 it was incorporated into the High Public School, where Macbain remained until his death. In 1901 Aberdeen University made him an LLD, and in 1905 he received a civil-list pension of £90.

Macbain contributed much to the proceedings of the Gaelic Society of Inverness and the Inverness Field Club, and many of his papers grew into substantial works. His first book, *Celtic Mythology and Religion*, was published in 1885 and reprinted in 1917. *Personal Names and Surnames of Inverness* appeared in 1895. His most important work, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*, was first published in 1896: its philological judgements have stood the test of time. The first edition was sold out within a year; the second, in preparation at his death, was published in Stirling in 1911, and reprinted in 1982.

On the death in 1888 of the Revd Dr Alexander Cameron of Brodick (a native of Badenoch and Scotland's senior Celtic scholar), Macbain and his close friend the Revd John Kennedy, another Badenoch man, set about preparing Cameron's voluminous transcripts of manuscript texts for publication. These appeared as *Reliquiae Celticae* (1892–4), a treasure-house of primary materials whose usefulness to scholars has proved enduring. Equally, Macbain's 1902 edition of W. F. Skene's *Highlanders* launched a prolonged period of reassessment for the work of that influential but over-confident historian. Macbain's excursus and notes display the forensic intelligence which, in contrast with Skene's, obliges us to rank Macbain among twentieth- rather than nineteenth-century scholars.

Macbain also edited *The Book of Deer* and Alexander Mackenzie's *History of the Mathesons*, jointly edited Evan MacEachen's *Gaelic Dictionary*, and wrote on the Picts in *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*. He wrote much for newspapers and magazines, and was sole editor of the *Celtic Magazine* from 1886 to 1888, joint editor of the *Highland Monthly* from 1889 to 1902, and author of the review

section of the *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* (1880–1903). His *Gaelic Reader* went through three editions, and his *How to Learn Gaelic* (co-authored with John Whyte) through four.

From about 1888 to 1907, Macbain appears to have been the lynchpin of a group who met frequently in Inverness and Edinburgh and who may be described collectively as the Gaelic intelligentsia. As the sole representative of the generation born between 1839 and 1859, he provided a bridge between the older members (Alexander Nicolson, Alexander Carmichael, Donald Mackinnon) and the younger (Father Allan McDonald, William Watson, and ex-pupils of his own such as George Henderson and Kenneth MacLeod). If Carmichael was the group's heart, Macbain was its head. His intellectual stimulus was such that both Henderson and Watson went on to fill the kind of academic posts in Celtic studies which were his by right had he survived.

Macbain was a full-blooded man who worked hard, enjoyed life to the full, and never married. He died of a cerebral haemorrhage at the Station Hotel, Stirling, on 4 April 1907, and was buried in Rothiemurchus churchyard, Badenoch.

#### RONALD BLACK

**Sources** W. J. Watson, *Celtic Review*, 3 (1906–7), 381–6 · T. M. Murchison, 'Raining's School, Inverness: a seed-bed of talent', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 52 (1980–82), 405–59 · W. J. Watson, introduction, in A. Macbain, *Celtic mythology and religion* (1917), v–xviii · J. A. Smith, 'An educational miscellany', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 53 (1982–4), 248–309 · A. Macbain, journal, vol. 1, 1855–71, U. Edin. L., Carmichael–Watson collection, MS 50A · d. cert. · *DNB*

**Archives** U. Edin. L., journal, notebooks and corresp.

**Likenesses** group photograph (with students), repro. in Macbain, *Celtic mythology and religion* · photograph, repro. in *Celtic Review*, 381

**Wealth at death** £434 10s. 5d.: probate, 4 July 1907, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

---

© Oxford University Press 2004–12 All rights reserved

Ronald Black, 'Macbain, Alexander (1855–1907)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34670>, accessed 14 March 2012]

Alexander Macbain (1855–1907): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/34670