

The people's laird

Mary Miers welcomes a biography of the inspirational historian, farmer, environmentalist and folklorist John Lorne Campbell of Canna

Biography

The Man Who Gave Away His Island: A Life of John Lorne Campbell of Canna

Ray Perman (Birlinn, £20)

FOR most southerners, the Highlands and Islands are a tourist destination of principal appeal for their scenery and sport. The late John Lorne Campbell spent much of his life railing against this narrow view, and, for those who value the region for its people and its culture, he remains a hero. Roy Perman's sensitive and moving account of his unusual life is a fitting tribute. Born in 1906 into the Argyll gentry and educated at Rugby and Oxford, Campbell was a romantic loner who, as a child, was never happier than when roaming the woods and meadows of his family's Taynish estate. As a young man, instead of socialising, he immersed himself in the unfashionable study of Gaelic. Tall, shy, hardworking and prone to depression, he felt himself a misfit and was disillusioned by his own class; in 1933, he turned his back on a conventional career and went to live on the Isle of Barra.

Barra was a turning point in Campbell's life. Here, he found a people and way of life that enriched him, met his wife, the American musician and folklorist Margaret Fay Shaw, and forged a long-lasting friendship with Compton Mackenzie, whose home was the centre of an unusual circle of local personalities and literary intellectuals. It was also the start of his life of political campaigning on behalf of the marginalised people of the Hebrides, and of his activities in support of wildlife conservation and sustainability long before they became fashionable. Most importantly, the Campbells spent



John Lorne Campbell (above) co-founded the Sea League with Compton Mackenzie; it campaigned for Hebridean fishermen

the early years of their marriage visiting the islands with their portable Ediphone, collecting the Gaelic songs and stories that had been passed down through generations—a disappearing oral heritage which they were the first to record.

In 1938, determined to prove that there was an alternative for a private island or Highland estate than simply becoming a rich-man's playground, Campbell bought the island of Canna (COUNTRY LIFE, August 23, 2001). He threw himself into a role that was, by now, virtually unique—that of a Gaelic-speaking, working laird 'who cared deeply for the failing traditions and stolen rights of the people of his area'. Although crippled by debt, often to the point

of despair, and frustrated by endless bureaucracy, he eventually turned Canna into a successful farm. Like his landowning forebears, he planted and drained, became a renowned breeder of livestock and greatly enhanced the natural beauty of the island, with its sheltered anchorage and fertile home farm, wind-sculpted plantations, terraced flights of meadows, and rough moorland pasture sliced by basalt cliffs.

Simultaneously, Campbell became one of the greatest authorities on the Celtic culture and language, amassing with his wife the most comprehensive private collection of books, recordings and early film. He produced many scholarly publications and demisted the

Celtic twilight world of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and her ilk; he was also a considerable expert on and collector of *Lepidoptera*.

Belying Campbell's reputation as a difficult and angular character, Canna House during these years was a haven of warmth and hospitality 'typical of the old Highland tacksman's house—learning, civilisation and conviviality in the middle of the seas... butterflies and insects in glass cases and books occupying every available space'. Here, the Campbells entertained a wide, intellectually stimulating circle of friends, from poets, artists, schoolteachers and academics to farmworkers, fishermen, politicians and scholar priests. With no heirs, Campbell gave Canna to the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) in 1981, an experience that was to prove not entirely happy, but which kept him alive and sharp in his later years, pursuing ongoing battles over various disputes. He died in 1996, followed by his wife in 2004 aged 101, and the NTS struggles to preserve their legacy on Canna. It's a daunting challenge, an undertaking that today it must sometimes regret, for, to Campbell, 'land, literature and language were inseparable and he intended that they should always be so'.



Canna House by T. Ravilious