

We were all in the tailor's house

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This is a story recorded by Calum Maclean, in Gaelic, from Captain Dugald MacCormack in 1953. It is archived in The School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. This version was developed by Ian Stephen from a translation by Mairi MacArthur.

We were all in the tailor's house

We were all in the tailor's house. The tailor's house in Fionnofort. That's always where the ceilidh was. There would always be a good light in the tailor's house because he had to see his stitches. It was the Tilley lamp then so it gave off a good heat as well. And the stove was blasting away burning peat like there was no tomorrow. Kettle on all the time and the teapot well topped up.

Now the night I'm talking about, there was a cold spell on. It was freezing hard. That doesn't happen so often on Mull but the snow was lying. But we were all snug in there, yarning away as usual. But then a shadow goes across the lamp and a blast of cold air comes through the house. The door's open and there's a man standing there.

He's very tall. Dark beard and a very pale face. You can see the glint of the brass buttons. It's a seaman's jacket. And he's just dripping wet.

“Will you do something for me?” he asks.

“We'll talk about that when you're in by the stove. Come on in and get a heat, man.”

“No, I won't come in but can you help me?”

We all tried again to persuade him in but he stays at the door and he says, “Will you go down in the morning to the white sands. The white sands of Erraid and you'll find me there. And just so you're sure it's me, you'll find a bandage that was on my thumb. It will be about this much” – and he held out a hand about three feet from his white face – “this much from my head.”

Of course we all said aye, we'd do what we could but he'd to come in. But he was gone. The tailor sends a young fellow out to bring him back but the fellow came back in without the gentleman in the seaman's jacket.

“I couldn't find him.”

“What do you mean you couldn't find him? Could you no follow the footprints?”

“There's no footprints.”

So someone gets up then to get a cloth and wipe up all that water that was dripping onto the floor by the door. The floor was dry.

Now the ceilidh is well and truly finished. No-one is in a mood for teasing or

laughing any more. And we know we've to get up and catch that tide in the morning. So everyone's away home to get some rest if they can.

In the morning we're gathered down at the ebb. The tide's out a long way and we're out in a line but it's not long before we see it. There's a long dark shape on the white sand. Sure enough, it's wearing a seaman's jacket with brass buttons. You can see where there's been a big gash on a thumb and sure enough, 3 feet from the head, the bandage that fell off it is lying there.

Now that body belongs to someone and it's still freezing weather so we've a few days grace to try to find who that seaman was. We got hold of a decent cart before the tide came back and brought that poor soul ashore. He was placed decently in an outhouse and word was sent out.

Sure enough an answer came back from Appin, Argyll. This was a Macpherson. He traveled over as soon as he could. He identified the body.

"That's the body of my son John Macpherson. I'm very grateful to you for looking after him. We hadn't hoped to have the comfort of a funeral. This will make it easier for us all to bear."

He didn't seem that shocked or anything. So someone asked when John had been lost.

"My son was mate aboard a merchant vessel, the Fair Holm. She failed and went down off Torrey Island. Northwest side of Ireland."

"And when was that?"

“That was over two weeks ago.”

Now, when he said that, everyone around went quiet, I'm sure that poor man knew there was a story but no-one was going to tell him it. It wouldn't have helped.

But if you go to the cemetery in Fionnofort, you can see for yourselves. There's a stone that stands out a bit – it's black slate. It's engraved with the name of John Macpherson, mate of the Fair Holm. It says how his body travelled all those sea miles and fetched up on the sands of Erraid. How he found his way back nearer home in Argyll.
