

**JOHN GREGORSON  
CAMPBELL**



**WITCHCRAFT &  
SECOND SIGHT  
IN THE HIGHLANDS  
& ISLANDS  
OF SCOTLAND**

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# **Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland**

**Enriched edition. Tales and Traditions Collected  
Entirely from Oral Sources**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Brett Morgan*

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# Introduction

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In *Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland*, John Gregorson Campbell traces the charged boundary where everyday labor meets the unseen, showing how communities articulate fear, hope, and obligation through stories of malefic power and prophetic vision that are at once practical explanations and expressions of wonder, so that what looks like superstition reveals a lived logic shaped by landscape, kinship, and memory, while what passes for skepticism must reckon with testimony delivered in calm voices, the moral pressures of small places, and the persistent feeling that another order lies just behind the visible.

This work is a folkloric study grounded in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, where Campbell gathered accounts of witchcraft, charms, uncanny encounters, and the phenomenon commonly called second sight. Compiled from oral tradition in the later nineteenth century and published in the early twentieth century, it belongs to a formative period of Scottish folklore scholarship. The book situates belief within place—from coastal villages to inland townships—without treating it as curiosity or spectacle. Its approach is descriptive rather than polemical, attentive to the social contexts in which tales were told, and shaped by the slow transmission of memory across generations.

The book reads as a carefully assembled sequence of short narratives, beliefs, and illustrative notes rather than a

single linear argument, inviting readers to listen as one might in a fireside circle. Campbell's voice is measured and observant, introducing motifs, tracing variations, and allowing informants' phrasing to set the cadence. The tone is calm, precise, and unsensational, even when the subject matter involves fear or harm. Explanations are economical, with brief framing that clarifies local custom and belief without overruling them. The result is a contemplative, steadily accumulating portrait of a worldview in which the extraordinary remains proximate to daily life.

Among its central themes is the negotiation of risk and responsibility through stories of witchcraft, where misfortune demands explanation and words are believed to carry force. Second sight, treated not as spectacle but as inherited capacity or circumstance, offers a language for fate, warning, and obligation. The landscape—sea lanes, moor, and weather—presses on these beliefs, giving them a practical cast. Community norms emerge as both shield and pressure: reputation matters, hospitality has a moral charge, and secrecy marks the border between safety and danger. Repeatedly, the material suggests that narrative itself is a technology for living with uncertainty.

For contemporary readers, the collection opens a usable past. It illuminates how communities construct knowledge, assign causation, and manage fear without relying on institutions distant from daily life. The patterns it records resonate with current debates about rumor, testimony, and the felt reality of extraordinary claims. It also bears on questions of cultural resilience, showing how local stories can preserve identity while negotiating change. Rather than

endorsing or dismissing its subjects, the book models patient attention to how belief functions in practice, offering tools for reading today's narratives of risk, cure, mischance, and foresight with nuance and ethical curiosity.

Campbell's method privileges accumulation over argument, letting an array of brief testimonies and customs build meaning. He organizes material by topic and situation, linking motifs that recur across districts while preserving local distinctiveness. Explanations are sparing, and when patterns are indicated they are grounded in what people said and did, not in speculative theory. This editorial restraint allows readers to do comparative work, noticing how similar fears or hopes are expressed differently from shore to shore. The book's arrangement also honors the fragmentary nature of oral record, where memory, habit, and circumstance produce variations that are more suggestive than definitive.

Approached in this spirit, *Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland* is both an archive and a work of literature, its quiet cadence carrying the weather of a people's thought. It preserves voices that speak from specific shores yet reach beyond them, offering an education in attention, patience, and the ethics of listening. The book matters now because it refuses easy binaries—credulity versus reason, myth versus fact—and instead shows how people make sense of risk and relief together. Read it to encounter a world near our own, where explanation is a form of care.

# Synopsis

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Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland gathers John Gregorson Campbell's late nineteenth-century fieldwork into a sustained portrait of belief. A minister and folklorist immersed in Gaelic communities, Campbell records stories, practices, and explanations told by islanders and Highlanders, presenting them thematically rather than as curiosities. Posthumously issued from his manuscripts, the book aims to preserve a living tradition in the words of its bearers, while supplying brief commentary to situate each account. The opening chapters treat witchcraft, its supposed operations, and the counter-measures people trusted, establishing a social landscape where misfortune, suspicion, and remedy closely interlock.

In Campbell's portrayal, witches are not distant figures but implicated in everyday economics and neighborly relations. Narratives attribute to them injuries to cattle and dairy, the theft or transfer of milk, and the raising or stilling of winds that imperil boats and harvests. Shape-changing, blights cast through spoken charms, and the use of substances from the household appear as recurring devices. Equally detailed are the protections: iron, fire, blessed objects, ritual fumigation, and the assistance of experienced charmers. The emphasis falls on how communities interpreted unexplained loss, managed risk, and repaired

trust, rather than on courtroom drama or theological polemic.

Accounts of malefic influence are balanced by examinations of detection and remedy. Campbell records the reputations of local specialists who unraveled suspected charms, the diagnostic signs that guided their judgments, and the careful etiquette of confronting a neighbor without provoking further harm. He notes recurring images of nocturnal travel, uncanny helpers, and substances imbued with force, but he frames them as narrative structures rather than as proofs. The book neither repudiates belief nor endorses it; instead, it preserves the logic by which practitioners acted, the counter-logic by which others resisted, and the social rhythms that kept both in motion.

From these materials Campbell turns to second sight, the reputed faculty of perceiving events at a distance or before they occur. He outlines how the gift is described, when it is said to manifest, and what sorts of scenes recur: glimpses of arrivals, accidents, weddings, and deaths. The seer's experience, often involuntary, ranges from faint tokens to vivid tableaux that may align with later happenings. Campbell attends to reported rules that hedge the faculty, to the burden it places on those marked by it, and to the constant uncertainty over whether a vision warns, foretells, or merely shadows a possibility.

Death-portents, omens, and spectral doubles occupy a central place in his treatment of second sight. Stories recount phantom funerals and lights, processions that precede a real burial, or the appearance of a living person's wraith near a threshold. Maritime communities preserve

tokens linked to storms and drownings, while inland districts note signs that cluster around household thresholds and churchyards. Campbell traces how these images guide behaviour—detours taken, messages sent, watch kept—without insisting on a single interpretation. The ethical weight of such visions lies in the obligations they stir, binding individuals to kin, neighbors, and places through anticipatory care.

The volume's method is cumulative. Campbell juxtaposes variants from different islands and glens, noting consistencies of image and shifts in emphasis, and occasionally commenting on language, phrasing, and the circumstances of telling. He is attentive to how Christianity overlays older patterns without erasing them, and to how changing livelihoods alter the sites where power is felt. While he cites neither authorities nor archives beyond his informants, he treats their testimony with disciplined reserve, indexing motifs and marking uncertainty where appropriate. The result is a reference work built from remembered incidents, soberly arranged to show how belief coheres without formal doctrine.

By closing on enduring patterns rather than singular marvels, *Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland* offers more than a cabinet of wonders. It preserves a worldview in which hazard, obligation, and foresight intersect, and in which communal remedies matter as much as individual gifts. For readers and researchers, the book remains a vital record of Gaelic oral tradition in transition, clarifying how people explained mischance and responsibility in a demanding environment. Its lasting

resonance lies in the clarity of its ethnographic focus and the scruple with which it sets testimony beside testimony, inviting reflection without insisting.

# Historical Context

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John Gregorson Campbell, a nineteenth-century Highland clergyman and folklorist, compiled the materials published posthumously as *Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland* from fieldwork across Gaelic-speaking communities. His sphere was the western seaboard and Hebridean islands, where parish structures, crofting townships, and kin networks shaped oral transmission. Writing in the later Victorian period but drawing on memories reaching back to the eighteenth century, he documented beliefs about malefic magic, fairy lore, and prophetic visions known as second sight. The resulting volume presents regional testimony rather than literary invention, situating narratives within local place-names, occupations, and ecclesiastical routines.

Scottish attitudes to witchcraft were framed by law and kirk discipline. The Witchcraft Act of 1563 criminalized consulting with or practicing witchcraft; royal and presbyterian authorities pursued waves of prosecution, notably the North Berwick cases of 1590–92 and the nationwide panic of 1661–62. Parish session minutes and Privy Council commissions recorded interrogations, confessions, and executions. The last judicial killing in Scotland for witchcraft is commonly dated to 1727, when Janet Horne was burned at Dornoch. Parliament's 1735 statute repealed earlier laws and penalized only the

pretense of magical powers, shifting witchcraft from capital crime to social superstition.

Belief in second sight—an *dà shealladh*—was especially associated with Gaelic districts and had been described long before Campbell's time. Martin Martin's *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703) devoted an extended section to the phenomenon, while Robert Kirk's late seventeenth-century treatise *The Secret Commonwealth* discussed visionary encounters with fairies and spirits; it circulated in manuscript before its nineteenth-century publication. Enlightenment skepticism tempered official enthusiasm for prosecutions, yet descriptions of omens, funeral processions, and death tokens persisted in island testimony. Campbell's informants frequently echoed episodes recognizable from these earlier accounts, anchoring his collection within a well-documented vernacular tradition.

Campbell worked amid the late Victorian consolidation of folklore as a scholarly field. The Folklore Society was founded in London in 1878, and comparativists such as E. B. Tylor and Andrew Lang promoted systematic collection and classification of traditional narratives and beliefs. In Scotland, learned bodies and presses supported Gaelic studies and island ethnography; the Gaelic Society of Inverness (founded 1871) and Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* (1900) exemplified this revivalist energy. Campbell's manuscripts circulated among such networks and were shaped into volumes after his death in the early 1900s. The book's catalogues of practices and motifs reflect

efforts to preserve oral lore amid rapid social and linguistic change.

The Highlands and Islands had undergone profound upheaval between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. Agrarian reorganization and the Clearances displaced many tenants, prompting migration to coastal crofts or overseas. The Napier Commission of 1883–84 investigated grievances that culminated in the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act of 1886, granting security of tenure and rent controls. Meanwhile the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 mandated schooling largely through English, accelerating language shift and reducing the domains of Gaelic tradition. Campbell's urgency to record testimony reflects these pressures, as informants framed stories within memories of eviction, resettlement, seafaring, and the altered rhythms of crofting life.

Religious institutions shaped both the beliefs Campbell recorded and the means by which he accessed them. After the Disruption of 1843, the Free Church of Scotland became especially influential in Gaelic parishes, combining evangelical preaching with close pastoral oversight. Kirk session records in earlier centuries had documented suspected charms and popular healers; in the nineteenth century, ministers often denounced practices as "superstition" while tolerating harmless customs. As a clergyman fluent in Gaelic, Campbell moved easily among households, ferries, and market gatherings, gathering accounts from elders and tradition bearers whose religious commitments coexisted with convictions about the efficacy of blessings, curses, and protective rites.

Victorian intellectual life offered competing explanations for extraordinary experience. Spiritualism spread in Britain from the 1850s, while the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, investigated apparitions, telepathy, and premonitions using case histories. Anthropologists advanced cultural evolutionist models of "survivals," interpreting charms and omens as vestiges of earlier belief systems. Campbell's emphasis on firsthand testimony and careful attribution aligns with these documentary currents, yet his materials remain grounded in Gaelic vocabulary, kin relations, and occupational settings such as fishing and cattle tending. The book thus intersects with national debates on evidence and belief without reducing Highland accounts to laboratory specimens or parlour entertainment.

Read against this background, *Witchcraft & Second Sight* functions as both record and reclassification. It gathers islanders' accounts of charms, malevolent acts, and visionary warnings, but treats them as folklore to be described, sourced, and compared, not as crimes demanding punishment. The organization of motifs, frequent Gaelic terms, and references to earlier printed authorities situate the work within disciplined Victorian collecting. At the same time, its attention to place, livelihood, and kin honors community perspectives shaped by clearance, education reform, and evangelical church life. The book thus reflects its era's push toward modernity while preserving voices from a rapidly changing Highlands.

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# **CHAPTER I.**

## **BLACK WITCHCRAFT.**

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Witchcraft introduces us to a class of popular superstitions entirely different from those connected with Fairies[1q]. Fairies, water-horses, and kindred supernatural beings were distinct from the Evil Spirits that gave to witches their unhallowed powers. They could not be compelled or conjured by mortals to appear when wanted, or enter into contracts of service. The Powers of Darkness, on the other hand, were always at the service of their votaries, and, by means of charms and incantations known to the initiated, were made to lend their aid in any scheme of malevolence.

A belief in magic widely, almost universally, prevails among the tribes of mankind, and the witchcraft of the Christian era, while it undoubtedly gained strength and character from mistaken interpretations of Scripture, owes many characteristics to the delusions of Pagan times.

The Highland witches have of course many points in common with their sisters of the south, but comparatively there is little repulsive or horrible in their character. Tales regarding them make no mention of incubus and succubus, midnight meetings and dances with the devil, dead men's fingers, and more of the horrible and awful, the ravings of poor women driven crazy by persecution and torture. Neither is there mention of their riding through the air on broomsticks, nor, like the witch of Endor, raising the dead. Their art was forbidden, and their powers came from the

devil; but it does not appear under what pacton, or that there was any pacton, under which this power was to be got. It was in the name of the devil, and against the name of the Trinity, they set about their cantrips, but a knowledge of the necessary charms, and the courage to use them, seem to have been all that was requisite. Those having the reputation of being witches were (and are, for a few still survive) usually old women, destitute of friends and means of support, and naturally ready to eke out a miserable livelihood by working on the fears or the simplicity of their more prosperous neighbours.

There are instances in which a farmer has bribed a witch by yearly presents not to do harm to his cattle; and we must remember that in days of scarcity and famine, poverty with icy hand and slow-consuming age will make people resort to shifts of which they would never dream when food was abundant. In most cases, the reputed witch was merely a superstitious and perhaps ill-favoured old woman, possessing a knowledge of rhymes and charms for the healing of disease in man and beast, and taking pains to *sain* her own cattle, if she had any, from harm. Sometimes she was also dishonest, desirous of being looked upon with awe, and taking advantage of nightfall to steal milk from her neighbours' byres and corn from their stackyards. Her powers of witchcraft satisfactorily accounted to the popular mind for her butter and cheese—even if she had no cows—being abundant when the stores of others failed. In dark uncultured times a claim to influence over the unseen powers of nature, and to intercourse with spirits, had only to be made to be allowed, and the mere pretension too readily

invests the claimant with awe to make it safe for any one to denounce the imposture. Many believed in the efficacy of the arts they practised, and in their own possession of the power with which the credulity of mankind was willing to accredit them. Unusual natural events and phenomena can easily be turned into proofs of a witch's claim; imposture readily leads to delusion, and hence among the poor and uneducated it is no wonder to find witchcraft practised and believed in.

The power of witches was always at the disposal of those who were willing to pay for it, and the fact that the rewards of witchcraft did not sometimes exceed a pound of tobacco, alone shows how much the urgencies of want had to do with the pretence to supernatural powers. Unless payment was given the witch could do nothing; her spells were then of no avail. To explain the anomaly that witches possessed such tremendous powers and yet remained always in indigent circumstances, it was said the poor wretches could not benefit themselves; their power, as might be expected, considering the source from which it was derived, was only one of mischief and doing harm to others. Much of the superstition is at variance with this popular explanation, as, for instance, the taking of milk from the neighbours' cows and the substance from their butter and cheese, but contradictions and absurdities never stand in the way of credulity and superstitious fears.

The Gaelic name '*Buidseach*' is identical in meaning with the English '*witch*,' a word it also somewhat resembles in form. The term '*Bao*' is sometimes translated wizard, but is properly only a careless conversational form of *Baobh*, a

**8** Gaelic for “Serpent Stone,” a type of amulet or bead (also called serpent glass or adder stone) traditionally dipped in water and used as a cure or protective charm; classical and later writers associated similar objects with Druidic and folkloric beliefs about serpent-eggs.

**9** A vernacular form of Columba (Colum Cille), the 6th-century Irish monk and missionary associated with Iona; his name commonly appears in Highland charms and prayers invoking his protection or healing power.

**10** A Gaelic term for a protective charm or spell (also written seun or Scot. sain), which could be words, strings or plants and was given or worn to guard people or animals against specific dangers.

**11** A form of a folkloric name recorded in the text, probably a corruption of Manannán (Manannán mac Lir), the sea-deity/magical figure of Irish and Manx tradition often associated with mist, magic and otherworldly powers.

**12** A Scottish Gaelic word meaning 'fire'; here it is noted as the first element in a compound name and compared with other Gaelic plant/animal names (e.g. 'dearbadan dé').

**13** A Gaelic term used here to mean a graveyard or burial-place; the passage describes going to the 'roluig' as part of a folk cure for toothache.

**14** A Gaelic ritual direction meaning to move sunwise or keep an object on the right hand (clockwise); in the book it describes walking 'deiseal' three times around a pool as part of a cure.

**15** Translated in the text as 'the Hole Stone,' a named stone near Crossapol on the island of Coll through which

people were traditionally made to creep as a folk remedy for consumption (tuberculosis).

**16** A Gaelic name rendered in the chapter as the 'King of Enchantments'—a figure in local folklore whose daughter features in a tale; the term designates a mythic or fairy ruler in the story context.

**17** The Gaelic phrase printed as the chapter subheading and literally meaning 'the two sights'; it is the local term for the phenomenon commonly called 'Second Sight,' i.e., purported visions or apparitions.

**18** A Highland Gaelic term used here for a premonitory sight or omen of an absent person's arrival — often experienced as footsteps, sounds, or a spectral presence; commonly translated in English as a forewarning or wraith in Scottish second-sight lore.

**19** A Gaelic word in the text for the 'double' or shade of a living person thought to cause a *tàradh*; it denotes a phantom counterpart or fetch associated with second-sight experiences.

**20** A traditional Gaelic festival on May 1st marking the beginning of summer in the Celtic calendar, historically observed with bonfires and seasonal rites; the chapter uses it simply as a calendrical reference for when a vision was seen.

**21** Described in the book as a death-light — a luminous object in the sky often leaving a tail (*dreallsach*) and said to indicate an impending death; folklorists commonly link such accounts to will-o'-the-wisp-type phenomena.

**22** A traditional Scottish and Irish belief in a hereditary or acquired clairvoyant power to see future or distant events

(visions or apparitions); accounts and interpretations of the faculty vary by region and storyteller.

**23** A Gaelic word used here to mean 'to bind' or 'to fasten away'; in the passage it denotes the ritual idea of binding the second sight so that it departs from a person.

**24** A Gaelic term for alms or a charitable gift; in the story a payment of déirc is given as part of a ritual attempt to remove the second sight.

**25** A Gaelic term for a seer or diviner (here a celebrated seer from Tíree) who is consulted to reveal or interpret visions; regional spellings and usages may vary.

**26** A Gaelic place-name in the text referring to a waterfall or ravine; eas is the Gaelic word for waterfall, so here it denotes the locality (a waterfall near Dun Crosg in Glen Lochy) mentioned in the folk story.

**27** The name of the local man in this Highland tale who is said to have hidden a ploughshare and whose ghost haunted the waterfall; he is presented as a figure of local folklore rather than a widely documented historical person.

**28** The Scots word for New Year's Eve/celebration (Dec 31-Jan 1) with traditional customs such as first-footing and house-visiting; its exact origins are debated and include both local and broader British/European influences.

**29** A traditional Scottish/Highland food, typically a porridge-like preparation made from fermented oat husks or meal (the text gives the Gaelic phrase cabhruich/'half-boiled'); recipes and names vary regionally and over time.

**30** A Gaelic name often translated as the 'Wolf-month' or 'Storm month' marking late winter/early spring in the

traditional Celtic calendar; its precise dates and length varied by district and it corresponds roughly to January-February in the modern calendar.

**31** A Christian feast celebrating St. Bridget (St. Bride) observed in the Highlands as the first day of spring; the chapter gives it as 1 February (old style) — 13 February (new style) — and links it to Irish traditions about the saint.

**32** A medieval Scottish scholar (commonly Michael Scot, c.1175-c.1232) who became the subject of later popular and legendary tales associating him with astrology and magic; Highland tradition in this text credits him with supernatural journeys in some local stories.

**33** Refers to the 'translation' (movement) of the relics of St. Martin of Tours into the cathedral at Tours, an event dated in the text to about AD 397, which gave rise to a feast-day observed in parts of medieval and early modern Europe.

**34** A Gaelic seasonal name corresponding to Lammas (early August) used in the Highlands, associated in the text with harvest rites and cattle-saining; the author notes it may derive from Latin (e.g. *luna augustalis*) rather than from native Gaelic roots.

**35** An older English term for the Holy Cross or 'True Cross' on which Christians believe Jesus was crucified; 'Roodmas' (Rood Day) is the feast observing the Cross, here dated around September 14.

**36** The Gaelic word used in the chapter for the bonfires kindled on Hallowe'en (Samhain); these were community fires lit at the end of autumn as part of traditional seasonal observances.