

## Spotted hankies and strong praying

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I told a story about an event that had its origins in the Marymas market at Thurso in the 1820s. The story had to do with two of the 'Men' of Caithness and Sutherland, and with the gift of prophecy that was so often one of the marks of the Men. In this article I would like to say a little more about these saints of the north, and in my next I hope to focus on the gift of prophecy, which the Men shared on one side with some of the ministers, and on the other side with holy fools and secular seers like Coinneach Odhar. It's a fascinating topic, and although it has little to do with the calendar, it has everything to do with past, present and future, and with the belief that, through faith and prayer, the normal constraints of time could be sidestepped.

First, then, the Men. *Na Daoine*. They can be called a caste of lay guardians of the Faith. Their purpose in life was to wander the country speaking at fellowship meetings, supporting godly ministers, and opposing laxity in all its forms. They tended to lay a great deal of stress on the impressions made by Scripture passages on the mind, and were venerated for their piety.

Of the religion of the Men, a couple of tiny examples from Strath Halladale in Sutherland will do. "Have you ever seen the Wicked One?" asked Joseph MacKay (d. 1847), using a common kenning for the Devil — *an Droch Fhear*. He answered it himself. "When you see men strolling about the fields and shores on the Lord's Day, then you see him." Another Halladale man, an old soldier called Hugh Campbell (1744-1826), felt himself at one time in need of special spiritual help, and went to hear the ministers of various parishes. In one of them he waited for the minister at the church door after sermon.

"What brought you to this place?" said the minister.

"To hear the gospel."

"And didn't you hear it from me today?"

"I cannot deny that, and that your doctrine will be taken off your hands at the final account. But I did not hear today the gospel that I am looking for."

"What is that?"

"The transactions that take place between Christ and a soul."

"Oh, poor man," said the minister, "you will have to travel far before you hear such gospel as that!"

That particular aspect of preaching which Campbell longed so much to hear got the name of "Hugh Campbell's gospel".

Their dress could be as startling as their theology. One of the Men of Sutherland in the years before 1900, for example, is described as wearing the prophet's garb, a heavy cloak or mantle like a monk's. It covered the whole body from the shoulder down to the feet, and was fastened below the chin with a large brass clasp. He had a spotted handkerchief tied round his head. The handkerchief was symbolic, as the process of sanctification had not yet erased all the spots of sin. Then when he went to church or prayer meeting or funeral or market he wore a tile hat over the handkerchief. Seemingly this dress had remained unchanged (save for the tile hat) since the seventeenth century; the Men's cloaks, like those of the privileged beggars so well described in Scott's *The Antiquary*, were blue.

A fairly typical example of the Men was Dingwall blacksmith Kenneth MacKenzie, who lived about 1800. Refusing, as they all did, to conform to fashion, he wore a kilt and antique coat. He would be found by himself, poring over an old Latin book, spelling his way through a Hebrew grammar, or writing down his thoughts in a form of script which he had invented himself. On Saturday afternoons he cleared his smithy of iron and tools and replaced them with benches on which sat the young men of the neighbourhood while he gave them lessons in psalmody.

The disdain for modern dress was an expression of other-worldliness. On one occasion when Angus MacDonald, who was known as *Pòl Beag na Hearadh* (Little St Paul of Harris), had been at the Park communions in Lewis, the woman in whose house he had been lodging wrapped a suit of homespun in paper, and presented it to him as a token of her esteem. He set off on the Tuesday morning, delighted with his gift. After he had walked a mile or more, however, he began to ponder the matter a little more seriously. His step slowed and faltered, then he turned on his heel, walked back in the door and dumped the parcel back in the poor woman's lap, saying, "Satan has convinced me that it was for the sake of this gift that I came to the communions in the first place."

There are many anecdotes about the Men which bear witness to their knowledge of scripture or their sharpness of wit. For example, a choice saying of one of the most famous of the Men of Ross, Sandy Gair, was that the Lord got the people of Israel out of Egypt in one night, but then took forty years getting Egypt out of the people of Israel. And in his old age one of the Men of Sutherland, John Cuthbert of Golspie, came to the Creich communions by mail coach; it was still a novelty, and as he alighted he announced, "I have come with the goodwill of Immanuel on one of Pharaoh's chariots."

This next one was told of Donald Cameron of Guisachan, *Domhnall Ruadh Ghiuthsachain*, one of the Men of Sunart who lived in the mid-nineteenth century, and who was the father of Hector Cameron, a celebrated minister of Back in Lewis. He was on his way to a communion season with a bag or parcel in his hand when he was overtaken in Glen Tarbet, Ardgour, by the Rev. Alexander MacLeod, Free Church minister of Strontian, in his pony and trap. MacLeod greeted him with: "There is no evidence that Moses carried a travelling bag when going through the wilderness."

“I am not sure what he carried,” replied Donald, “but I am certain he did not travel in a two wheeled dogcart!”

John Cuthbert was once climbing a brae with his head bent, muttering “Eternity, eternity.” He failed to notice the Free Church minister of Golspie, a man called Keith, coming downhill on the other side of a hedge.

“Well, John,” says Keith, “how near do you think you are to eternity?”

“As you are the minister,” says Cuthbert, “I will return the question before I answer it.”

“Well, often when I take off my clothes at night, I don’t know if I will ever put them on again. How is it with you, John?”

“Sometimes,” says Cuthbert, “when I let out the one breath, I don’t know if I will draw in the next.”

Another of the Men of Sutherland, Donald MacKay of Clashchreggan (d. 1848), was leading his pony across the hill with a load on its back when it sank deep into a bog. Realising that he could not pull the horse out by himself, he chose a sheltered spot in a nearby peat bank in which to ask God to send help. He had scarcely gone down on his knees when a voice cried out over his head, “What’s the man doing here praying while his horse smothers in the mud?”

“Oh,” exclaimed Donald, “you have come already, have you? Well, we will go and take him out.”

When this Donald married he did what all Highlanders did and built a house for himself, finding roof timbers for it in the form of remains of trees which he dug out of the neighbouring bog. Timber, whether dug from the bog or found on the shore, was invariably deemed to be the landlord’s property. Unfortunately, Donald proceeded to fall out with his landlord, who was a military man. Under the terms of his lease he had to present himself for a few days’ labour on the estate every year. He arrived late, the proprietor swore at him, Donald rebuked him for his profanity, and the proprietor knocked him down with a blow to the head. Donald picked himself up and offered the other cheek. The proprietor did not hit him again but terminated his lease instead. Donald went straight to Gordon of Swiney and got the lease of a piece of land at Clashchreggan. He built a new house there, supporting the thatch with the timber which he had dug out of the bog. This was enough to have him arrested. He was marched to jail at Wick, then allowed to return home without charges being brought. When subsequently asked about the time the proprietor knocked him down he said, “That blow was better to me than twenty pounds.”

“How so?”

“Because whenever I felt the least rising of anger, when I remembered it I was compelled to go and pray for the proprietor, and I could not get peace until I had done so.” This was good overcoming evil, no doubt, but this, too, was the scriptural model of pacifism preached by the people’s leaders during the Sutherland clearances.

It was a characteristic of the Men that they were powerful in prayer and much in communion with God. Of one of the Men of Berneray, Harris, *Tormod mac Alastair*, it was said that when leading his horses under their burdens of seaweed from the shore to his fields, a distance of about a mile, he would abandon his loaded beasts two or three times during the course of the journey while he disappeared into solitary places to pray. By present-day standards, some of the Men appear to have been close to madness. *Pòl Beag na Hearadh*, for one, lived day and night in close communion with his maker. He would mutter to himself as he walked along the road, and sing and pray loudly even in his sleep. Two or three times a night he would get up to pray. Once during a communion season, when sharing a bed with a fellow communicant, after he had been praying for a while around midnight he shook his partner awake with the words, *Éirich, a dhuine, agus gairm air do Dhia*. “Get up, man, and call upon your God.”

Some of the Men were addicted to shouting out in prayer, none more so than William MacBeath (1771-1848), the mason of Olig in Caithness, whose “strong crying” seldom ceased while he was at prayer, and who could be heard praying for more than a mile around his house. He could not pass through a crowd of people without being overwhelmed at the thought of the eternal interests they had at stake. He would pray loudly as he went, and argue with complete strangers about the state of their souls. A man from Wick who had known him once recalled that it was no easy task to walk down the High Street with him.

From such strength of prayer it was but a short step to prophecy, because, as was said at the time, how could such men fail to know what was in the Lord’s mind?