

## The gift of prophecy: big toes and holy fools

### The Quern-Dust Calendar: Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I showed how, in the mind of the godly, there is (or was) no such thing as luck. Everything that we might now call accident, chance, coincidence, childish whim or a mistake was the will of God, and part of His covenant. I suppose that is why good old words like *rosad* and *rosadach* (bad luck and unlucky), *rath*, *rathail* and *mì-rathail* (luck, lucky and unlucky) seem to have disappeared from the Gaelic language, while the English words *luck* and *lucky* and *unlucky* have come in to fill the vacuum.

Here is a story to show how attitudes have changed. When the evangelist Finlay Munro first came to Berneray, Harris, he unfortunately arrived in spring when the people were getting ready to go and reap seaweed. The men did not want to lose a beachful of precious fertiliser in fine weather, but courtesy demanded that they stay behind and attend Munro's prayer meeting. To get over the difficulty, one of them said, *Cuiridh sinn duine far na peighinn don choinnimeh*. "We'll send a man off the penny to the meeting." Which I understand to be good idiomatic Gaelic for: "Let's toss a coin to see which of us should go to the meeting."

When the story was told in the *Free Church Monthly Record* of 1927, the writer adds: "This was considered at the time to be a judgement as wise as any Solomon might make." The point I take out of it is that the fall of the coin was considered to be in God's hands; if He wished everyone to go to the meeting, He could easily make the coin come down heads every time. Even among the unconverted, it seems, there was no such thing as luck.

I have been considering the gift of prophecy, firstly as possessed by ministers, and secondly as possessed by 'Men'. My third category is holy fools, but before I come to that I want to tell a strange story that has a connection with how the gift of prophecy can be passed on. Ailean Tàillear, a pious Lewisman who lived at Ardhasaig in Harris, held a prayer meeting in his house one Communion Monday evening. It began at 11 p.m., and Ailean finished the last prayer as the cock crew on Tuesday morning. Some of the participants stayed on for a belated supper at seven o'clock in the morning, and one woman at the table remarked, *Ailein, sann a theann mi null, nuair a bha thu 'g urnaigh, ach am beirinn air ordag mhòr na coise agad ach an toireadh tu steach do na Flaitheanais mì comhla riut fhéin*. "Allan, I leaned over, when you were praying, to try and catch hold of your big toe so that you could bring me into the Heavens with you."

*An cuala tusa, a Ragnaid*, says Allan, *ciòd a bha Maighstir Ruairidh Bhràcadail ag ràdh ri muinntir an Eilein Sgitheanaich?* "Have you heard, Rachel, what the Rev. Roderick MacLeod of Bracadale told the people of Skye?" *Tha dùil agaibh, a mhuinntir an Eilein Sgitheanaich, gun téid sibh a-staigh do na Flaitheanais an earball a' chòta mhòir aig Ruairidh, ach cha bhi air ach am peitean beag san latha sin*. "You think, people of Skye, that you will go into the Heavens on the tail of Roderick's greatcoat, but he will have nothing on that day but a little woollen shirt."

Now why on earth should Rachel want to catch Allan by the big toe, *ordag mhòr na coise*? Well, this is very reminiscent of what was said of seers. There is much on the topic in H E Davidson's collection of essays entitled "The Seer in Celtic and other Traditions". Davidson herself says, "There certainly seems no doubt that use of parts of the body formed an important part in the seer's training, and that the power to see might be transmitted by touch." In many different cultures, she says, that which was distant in time or space could be seen by putting the thumb in the mouth, and she quotes one of Macbeth's witches:

*By the pricking of my thumbs  
Something wicked this way comes.  
Open locks, whoever knocks.*

In the same book, Dr John MacInnes points out that a seer in the act of seeing can share the experience with another person through the act of touching. Specifically, the would-be participant usually holds the seer's hand while placing a foot on his foot and looking over his shoulder. Eilidh Watt confirms this in her essay: "The generally accepted method is by placing the feet of the postulant on the feet of the seer when he is actually having a vision." Bearing in mind that the Gaelic word for "thumb" and "toe" is the same (*ordag*), I have no doubt that Rachel was seeking to share in Allan's vision in the ancient and traditional way.

It would be interesting, also, to know if (like the Moslems) Allan had removed his shoes, the better to be in touch with his Maker. Alexander Carmichael tells us in "Carmina Gadelica" that to make a *frith* or augury, "the augurer, fasting, and with bare feet, bare head, and closed eyes, went to the doorstep and placed a hand on each jamb. Mentally beseeching the God of the unseen to show him his quest and to grant him his augury, the augurer opened his eyes . . ."

"Holy folly" stretches back into the mists of time. The "holy fool" is an apparent simpleton who attaches himself to some cleric and regularly pricks his bubble, often revealing himself in the process to be both wiser and holier than the reverend gentleman himself. In Irish tradition, holy fools sometimes became saints; conversely, saints often acted like complete fools. Here we have Gilleasbaig Aotrom, who attached himself to the Rev. Mr Souter of Duirinish and became his tormentor. We also have a wonderful character in John Murray's short story *A' Chaora Chonadail*, where this situation is visualised:

**Minister:** . . . *far an tuit a' chraobh gur h-ann a — —* "Where the tree falls that is where — —"

**You:** (*a' seasamh*) *Rubbish! Maidseachan! Plancaichean!* "(standing) Rubbish! Sticks! Planks!"

**Minister:** *Suidh, a thruaghain, eil fhios agad càit a bheil thu!* “Sit down, you wretch, do you know where you are!”

**You:** *Cha shuidh, a thruaghain, agus tha!* “I will not, you wretch, and I do!”

**Minister:** *Bheil thu ag ràdh anns an eaglais seo nach eil thu a’ creidsinn ann an Dia, a dhuine?* “Are you saying in this church that you don’t believe in God, my man?”

**You:** *Chan e sin a tha cunntadh, ach a bheil Dia a’ creidsinn annamsa?* “That’s not what counts, but does God believe in me?”

Now my purpose is to show that holy fools, like ministers and ‘Men’, might possess the gift of prophecy. I will give two examples. The first, Angus MacDonald who was known as *Pòl Beag na Hearadh*, was really one of the ‘Men’, but his behaviour shows that, like others of his kind, he was close to madness. As I mentioned here a few weeks ago, he lived day and night in such close communion with his maker that he would mutter to himself as he walked along the road, and would sing and pray loudly even in his sleep. The writer in that same *Monthly Record* of 1927 comments that it therefore comes as no surprise that he knew the Lord’s intentions, and cites the following instance of prophecy.

Angus was summoned to pay his arrears of rent, and the Factor told him he was being evicted. *Bithibh tràcaireach, a Mhaighstir Domhnallach, agus pàighidh mi tre ùine na fiachan.* “Have mercy, Mr MacDonald, and I’ll pay the arrears in due course.”

*Cha bhi*, said the Factor irritably. *Air a’ Bhealltainn sa tighinn tha thu mach às t’ fhearann.* “I will not. Next Whitsunday you are out of your land.”

Angus looked him in the eye and said in a matter-of-fact way, *S mise am fear mu dheireadh a chuireas sibh às a chuid fearainn.* “I’m the last man you will put out of his land.” And he left.

Some of those who were present asked him how he knew what was going to happen. He replied: *Nuair a bha e labhairt rium agus sin gu frionasach, labhair an Fhirinn seo rium, ‘Tha an daoibh a’ casadh fhiaclean ris an t-saobh, do bhrìgh gur dlùth dha là a sgrios.’* “When he was speaking to me so angrily, the Truth said this to me, ‘The wicked grinds his teeth at the just, for the day of his destruction is nigh.’” The words are those of Psalm 37:

*Tha ’n t-aingidh cumadh lochd don t-saobh  
’S a’ casadh ’fhiaclean ris;  
Nì Dia air fanaid: oir dha s léir  
Gur dlùth air là a sgrios.*

(The wicked plots against the just, / And at him whets his teeth; / The Lord shall laugh at him, because / His day he coming seeth.)

The factor was in Eternity by next Rent Day. Some said he committed suicide.

Finally the tale of a true holy fool called Jamie or *Seumaidh* who lived at Petty during the ministry of John Morrison, the Petty Seer, whose own prophecies I discussed last month. ‘Jamie Petty’ lived in a bothy within sight of the manse study window. The bothy had been his father’s and his mother’s before him, and he was supported by the generosity of the community as was the way of the time. He spent his time in church, or in bed, or in a corner making incomprehensible noises, or in making little windmills out of paper, pins and a bit of stick. These he would display to the children of the village, and they would run around in a crowd, leaping and yelling in delight as the little paper arms whirled around in the wind, with Jamie’s own voice the loudest in the chorus.

All this was set aside every Sunday. As long as Morrison was minister the church was packed to the doors for every sermon; there was always an influx from other places, despite the presence of evangelical ministers in Ardersier, Croy, and other parishes round about, and the Petty folk had to be up early to be sure of a place. Morrison was regularly in his study on Sunday mornings before the first fire flickered back to life in the parish, and the first smoke he always saw was at the smokehole of Jamie’s bothy. Jamie would be ready to enter the church as soon as the bellman opened the door.

One communion Friday, Jamie approached Mr Morrison and applied for admission to the Lord’s table. After recovering from his shock, the minister began questioning him to find out if he had any idea of what this implied. Jamie proved to have a language of his own. One of Morrison’s first questions was, “Are you accustomed to pray?”

“What do you mean, *a dhuine* (man)? I don’t understand you.”

Morrison did his best to explain the concept.

“Oh, I see, *a dhuine*, what you mean,” said Jamie. “You mean *bùirich nam bruach* (the bellowing of the banks). *Cha bhithinnsa beò mura b’e bùirich nam bruach.* I wouldn’t be alive were it not for the bellowing of the banks.”

Jamie, it seems, used to go among the hillocks and dunes by the shore and give vent to his soul-longing in such a way that his unintelligible sounds found an echo among the banks. No minister could fail to be intrigued by this, and Morrison persisted. Gradually he came to understand Jamie’s terminology, and so to discover that here was a man driven by genuine knowledge and love of Christ and His work. In perplexity, he told Jamie to see him after the Saturday service, then got out his horse and went to consult the Rev. James Calder in Croy. Calder’s opinion was that Jamie had satisfied him with regard to knowledge and was clearly a lamb of Christ’s flock, so he had no warrant to refuse the request.

By the time he had slept on the matter, Morrison had concluded that God must have some direct way of making Himself known to those such as Jamie whose intellect was impaired. As he handed him his communion token after service on Saturday he said, “There is one thing which I ask of you, and it is this: if,

when you are at the Lord's table tomorrow, you see or hear anything particular, will you tell that to me on Monday?"

Like many idiots Jamie had a way of repeating his words, and he said, *Innisidh, innisidh, nì mi sin, nì mi sin*. "Yes, yes, I'll do that, I'll do that."

Sunday came and went, and Monday came. When services were over Jamie Petty duly presented himself and the minister said, "You were at the Lord's table yesterday?"

*Bha, bha, bha mì*. "Yes, yes, yes I was."

"Did you see anything while you were at the table?"

*Chunnaic, chunnaic, chunnaic mì*. "Yes, yes, yes I did."

"And what did you see?"

*Chunnaic mi fear brèagha, fear brèagha, brèagha*. (I saw a beautiful man, a beautiful, beautiful man.) *Bha deise gheal, gheal air, bha deise gheal, gheal air*. (He wore a white, white robe, he wore a white, white robe.) *Thàinig e steach aig ceann a' bhuird*. (He came in at the head of the table.) *Bha e tighinn air adhairt, air adhairt*. (He was coming forward, forward.) *Bha e cur a làimh air ceann a h-aoin an-seo, air ceann a h-aoin an-siud, a h-aoin an-siud, cha do chuir e a làmh air ceann na h-uile*. (He was putting his hand on the head of one here, on the head of one there, of one there, he did not put his hand on the head of all.) *Thàinig e far an robh mise, far an robh mise*. (He came where I was, where I was.) *Chuir e a làmh air mo cheann-sa*. (He put his hand on my head, on my head.) *Bha e ga mo shliobadh, agus thubhairt e, "A ghille mhaith, a ghille mhaith, bi thus' a do ghille math gus an tig mise. Bliadhna o 'n-diugh thig mise gad iarraidh. Bheir mi leam thusa don àite bhrèagha, bhrèagha a th' agam fhéin"*. (He was stroking me, and he said, "Good lad, good lad, you be a good lad till I come. A year from today I will come to fetch you. I will bring you to the beautiful, beautiful place that I have myself.")

Morrison recovered sufficiently to say, "Jamie, that's quite enough. That will do. You may now leave. But remember what you were told, and wait for Him."

He kept a close eye on Jamie and his movements from then on. When the anniversary of that Sunday dawned, he was in his study as usual. He saw smoke beginning to rise from chimney after chimney all over Petty, but never a puff came out of Jamie's smokehole. He sent a servant over to the bothy to see if anything was wrong.

The man found Jamie lying peacefully, as if still cradled in all the gentleness of sleep. He was dead.

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