217

Who was the son of the earl of the white banners?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I AM sure most readers have heard the traditional song *A Mhic Iarla nam Bratach Bàna*, 'O Son of the Earl of the White Banners'. It has a wonderful brisk tune and I don't think it is any less popular now than when Calum Kennedy used to sing it. But the question I want to ask is, who is the earl?

The most complete version that I know is one sung by Ruairi Iain Bhàin (Roderick MacKinnon) in Barra and recorded from him by John Lorne Campbell in 1938. It was published in 1950 in a booklet called "Gaelic Folksongs from the Isle of Barra" and again in 1981 in vol. 3 of Campbell's "Hebridean Folksongs". Campbell does not attempt to answer the question that I have posed; he simply remarks that the line *No 'n Dùn Bheagain, s beag on làr e* ('Nor in Dunvegan of no great height') implies "that the son of the Earl of White Banners, whoever he was, lived in a grander castle than Dunvegan".

As printed in "Hebridean Folksongs", the song begins:

A bhean ud thall a nì 'n gàire,
Nach truagh leat piuthar gun bhràthair
'S bean òg gun chéile 'n làthair?

Here is a translation of this, and of the section that follows. 'O woman yonder who is laughing, don't you pity a brotherless sister and a young wife without a husband by her? That is the same as how I am, my mind heavy, my joy having left me because of the handsome valiant hero, hunter of venison from the forest of the high mountains and of the grey seal from the mouth of the salt sea inlet, the little roe deer that moves so nobly with a splendid silver thonged belt above his white shirt.'

Finally we have the portion that gives the song its title.

Mhic iarla nam bratach bàna,
Chunnaic mi do long air sàile,
Bha stiùir òir oirr' 's dà chrann airgid
'S cupla dhan t-sìoda na Gailmhinn,
Sìoda reamhar ruadh na Spàine,
'S cha b'ann á Glaschu a bhà e
No 'n Dùn Bheagain, 's beag on làr e,
No 'n Dùn Tuilm na brataich bàineadh!

('O son of the earl of the white banners, I saw your ship on the ocean, she had a golden helm and two silver masts and shrouds of Galway silk, the thick red silk of Spain, and it did not come from Glasgow nor in Dunvegan of no great height, nor in Duntuilm of the white banner!')

Let me summarise this. The earl's son has died leaving a sister and a young widow. He was a hunter of deer and of seals who liked to dress well. The woman who sings the song boasts that his ship, in particular, was quite marvellous, with no expense spared. She has almost an obsession with silk, and it has been brought from far away — not from Dunvegan, Duntuilm or Glasgow, but from Galway and from Spain.

These are all motifs. That is, they appear in other songs about other people. But some motifs are more widespread than others, and here we have a very common one and a much less common one. The common one is hunting. Hunting is perhaps the foremost of all praise motifs — if you hunt you are a fine fellow. It really tells us very little, and the mention of seals serves only to confirm the song's western, maritime setting.

The less common motif is this marvellous ship. We can strip away the golden helm, the silver masts and the silken shrouds, because they come purely from the imagination and can tell us nothing. But silk from Galway and from Spain — that is a matter of economic history.

First then we must gather together all the other mentions of silk and its origins that can be found in traditional Gaelic verse. There are not many. They are of two kinds — silk used in arrow-making, and silk used for ship's rigging. In arrow-making we have:

Bogha a dh'iubhar Easragain,
Sìoda na Gailmhinn,
Saighead a bheithe an Doire Dhuinn,
Ite fireoin Loch Tréige.

('A bow of the yew of Easragan, the silk of Galway, an arrow of the birch of the Doire Donn, the feather of the eagle of Loch Tréig.') This is given in "Carmina Gadelica". Easragan is in Lorn, the Doire Donn or 'Brown Grove' is in Glenorchy, and Loch Tréig is in Lochaber. The silk would have been imported raw or unthrown, and used to bind the birds' feathers to the arrowshaft. A MacGregor poem of about 1600 describes the process:

Sìod á h-Éirinn
'S meòir ga réiteach:
Cha tig bréin fir-cheaird air sin,

Ach fleisteir finealt'
O Ghleann Lìobhann,
Sìor chur sìd air chalpannan.

('Silk from Ireland with fingers distributing it: the crude work of a jack-of-all-trades will not do for it, but that of a skilled fletcher from Glen Lyon, ever putting silk on arrowshafts.') Later on in the seventeenth century, shortly before bows and arrows were completely superseded by guns, Mary MacLeod from Harris describes

Glac nan ceann lìomhta
Air chur sìos ann am balgaibh,
O iteach an fhìreoin
'S o shìoda na Gailmhinn.

('The arrows of the polished heads thrust down into leather bags, made with the feathers of the eagle and with the silk of Galway.')

The last recorded use of bows and arrows in Highland warfare was at Killiecrankie in 1689.

Turning now to silken shrouds, we have this from the song *An Fhìdeag Airgid*, 'The Silver Whistle'.

Có a sheinneas an fhìdeag airgid,
Mac mo rìgh-s' air tighinn a dh'Alba
Air luing mhóir thar na fairgeadh
'S air luing rìomhaich nam ball airgid
Le stiùir òir is dà chrann airgid
'S cupaill oirr' de shìod na Gailmhinn
'S ulagan òir air gach ceann dith?

('Who will sound the silver whistle, the son of my king having come to Scotland on a great ship across the sea and on the beautiful ship of the silver ropes, with golden rudder and two silver masts and shrouds on her of Galway silk, with golden pulleys at each end of her?') The king's son here has often been assumed to be Prince Charlie, but the song is much older than that. Irish kings, the Lords of the Isles and Highland chiefs were all *rìgh* or king to their people. The mention of the silver whistle suggests a sixteenth century date, because the honorific use of the silver whistle on ships goes back at least to the early sixteenth century. For example, it was in 1532 that Henry VIII enacted that all English ships' masters should wear silver whistles with silver chains. A Barra version of the same song has these familiar-sounding lines:

Bha stiùir òir is dà chrann airgid
'S tobar fìona shìos 'na garbhlach,
Cuplaichean dhan t-sìoda Frhangach,
Ugalan òir air gach ceann dhiubh.

('There were a golden rudder and two silver masts and a well of wine below in her hold, shrouds of French silk with golden pulleys at each end of them.') Another one has:

Bha stiùir òir is dà chrann airgid
'S tobar fìona shìos 'na garbhlach,
Cuplaichean dhan t-sìoda Frhangach,
Ugalan òir air gach ceann dhiubh.

('There were a golden rudder and two silver masts and a well of wine below in her hold, shrouds of French silk with golden pulleys at each end of them.')

So the traditional verse of the 16th and 17th centuries tells us that silk came to the Highlands and Islands from Spain, from France, and from Galway in Ireland. Uniquely, *A Mhic Iarla nam Bratach Bàna* mentions Galway and Spain together. None of this is surprising. All the same places are mentioned in such verse with regard to other commodities — wax and linen from Galway, Spanish swords, wine from France and Spain — and when currency is mentioned it is usually Spanish dollars and testoons.

Clearly Galway was the entrepôt for trade between the Highland chiefs and the Mediterranean countries. Again, this is not surprising. From about 1500 to 1640 Galway was Ireland's second town. It was celebrated for its trade with Spain, its merchants dominated trade routes west and north of Ireland. With regard to silk, however, there was no Irish silk industry until the Huguenots brought it to Dublin at the end of the 17th century. There were of course imports of silk cloth, for example Galway's charter of 1361 allowed the town to take a halfpenny for every cloth of silk for sale. All I can do is point out that the silk industry came to Sicily and Andalucia in the Middle Ages, and that, of all the Irish ports, Galway was particularly noted for its trade with Andalucia. But this is where the earl's son comes in.

The affairs of Galway were dominated in the 1560s and 1570s by the three turbulent sons of Richard de Burgo, 2nd Earl of Clanricard, known collectively as *mic an Iarla*. These were Ulick, John and William Burke. It was a time when Ireland and the Western Isles formed a single culture-province, but in any case the brothers were well known to the Scottish Gael, thanks to the *Gall-Òglaich* — those professional soldiers from the Western Isles who were called gallowglasses by Shakespeare. "Assisted by large bands of some of the finest fighting material in Europe, seasoned Scots mercenaries," says M D O'Sullivan's "Old Galway" of the

two elder sons in 1566, "Ulick and John ravaged all before them, showing themselves particularly destructive of any elements savouring of loyalty to the English Crown."

The de Burgos had been among the founders and protectors of Galway, and had governed the city with almost absolute control for over two centuries, but the patent that made Sir William de Burgo the 1st Earl of Clanricard had taken away from him all exactions in the town, thus effectively ending the family's authority there. Queen Elizabeth's rule was now imposed on Connacht in such bloodthirsty fashion that the Mac an Iarlas, as James Hardiman calls them in his "History of Galway", were forced more than once into rebellion, supported by increasing contingents of *Gall-Òglaich*. By 1574, says O'Sullivan, Connacht was overrun with them. "Travellers were being regularly waylaid by natives acting as guides to the Scots."

In 1577 the three brothers escaped from prison in Dublin. "They crossed the Shannon by night, threw off their English apparel, and put on the dress of the Irish; sent for all their friends to meet them, and bring the Scots whom they had solicited; and being assembled in considerable force, they marched towards Athenry, which they took and sacked, destroyed the few houses which were lately built there, set the new gates on fire, dispersed the masons and labourers who were working, and broke down and defaced the queen's arms."

They next hired a huge force of two thousand *Gall-Òglaich* and besieged Loughrea. In retaliation, English forces moved in to crush their lands with savage ferocity, sparing neither old nor young. A price was put on the brothers' heads, but they had become popular heroes and the people did not betray them.

In 1579 Ulick, John and the Earl their father all submitted voluntarily and were pardoned. William, the greatest firebrand of all, remained at large until he was captured with a son of the Earl of Thomond in 1580. These two young men, notes Hardiman, "were taken near Galway, and, after a summary trial, were both condemned to die. The sentence was carried into execution by William Martin, the marshal, who caused them both to be hung at the Market-cross, outside the east gate, and cruelly hastened their death, before their pardon, which was solicited and obtained by the mayor, could arrive."

The circumstances could hardly have been more dramatic. Is William the dashing *mac iarla nam bratach bàna* who left a brotherless sister and a young wife without a husband? Was the story brought back to the Western Isles in song by the thousands of soldiers and sailors who had seen Galway and its shops full of Spanish silk? Was this perhaps the first mention of 'Galway silk' in Gaelic song, the one from which all others sprang?

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