

## The fast food of the Gael of old

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THIS article I would like to try something a little bit different. I propose to take a single strand in Gaelic ethnography and trace it through a series of writers from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. Ethnography means writings about the people, their way of life and their beliefs, so of course Gaelic ethnography is writings about Gaelic-speaking people. In this way I will be able to introduce briefly the writers of some of our most important Gaelic ethnographic texts.

The strand I have picked for the purpose is the topic of graddaning. It's in all the dictionaries. Chambers' English dictionary, *graddan*, 'to parch in the husk', from Gaelic *gradan*. The Concise Scots Dictionary, *graddan*, 'parch (grain) in the ear'. Dwelly's Gaelic Dictionary, *gradain*, *gradanadh*, 'parch grain preparatory to grinding it'. And Dwelly gives a great deal more under the noun *gradan*, 'expeditious mode of drying grain for the quern by burning the straw', which I will quote in its due place.

My earliest writer in the series rejoices in the name of John Major. This at least was the Latin form of his name, as he always wrote in Latin. In his native Scots however he was John Mair, for he was from Gleghornie near North Berwick in East Lothian. He lived from 1467 to 1550, and was a professor of theology in the medieval mode, studying, teaching and writing in Cambridge, Paris, Glasgow, St Andrews and then back to Paris.

John Major had something in common with his celebrated namesake of the 1990s. One of his Victorian editors, P Hume Brown, writing in 'Scotland before 1700', declared that he had "a shrewd, candid, though curiously limited intelligence", and went on: "When Major wrote, the studies of the schoolmen had ceased to interest the best minds, and the revival of classical studies had opened up new horizons for the future. That, with the new light breaking around him, therefore, Major should doggedly have gone on producing his interminable folios, is sufficient proof that he was deficient in real insight and breadth of mind."

However, one of Major's folios is of lasting interest. In 1521 he published his 'History of Greater Britain' (*Historia Majoris Britanniae*), and this contains information on the way of life of the Scottish people, including the following: "The oats having been grown in a soil of a middling richness, they roast the grain thus: a house is built in the manner of a dove-cot, and in the centre thereof, crosswise from the wall, they fix beams twelve feet in height. Upon these beams they lay straw, and upon the straw the oats. A fire is then kindled in the lower part of the building, care being taken that the straw, and all else in the house, be not burnt up. Thus the oats are dried, and thereafter carried to the mill, where, by a slight elevation of the upper millstone, the outer husk gets shaken out. The flour alone then remains, dried, and in good condition, more excellent by far than the flour that is used by confectioners in any part of the world. From this dried grain, which from its resemblance to lentil flour they call by that name, after it has been ground small in the manner of meal, the oaten bread is made. As the common people use it both leavened and unleavened, oats are very largely grown. Just eat this bread once, and you will find it far from bad."

There are two points to note here. Firstly, this is not presented as a solely Highland custom. Indeed, Major goes on to say that this bread is the food of almost all the inhabitants of Wales, of the northern English, and of the Scottish peasantry. It is typical of early Scottish ethnographic writings that many (but not all) of the differences that appear later between Highlands and Lowlands are absent — so, as later with aspects of Calvinism, what we might think of as Highland customs are really just late survivals of something much more general.

Secondly, what is Major describing? Oats being dried in a kiln, then milled into flour. Fire is not being applied directly to the corn. Nevertheless, the point appears to be that the corn is so parched in the kiln that the grain falls out of the husk without any need for threshing. This is certainly what Major's editor took from it, for he devotes a long footnote to clear instances of graddaning, which he calls "a like method".

Now for another Lowland cleric. Bishop John Lesley (1527-96) was the son of a priest who was an ecclesiastical judge, and followed in his footsteps, with training at Toulouse, Poitiers and Paris. Equivocal in religion at the time of the Reformation, he became a Lord of Session in 1564 and Bishop of Ross in 1566, but supported Queen Mary and ultimately left Scotland again, becoming Bishop of Coutances in 1592.

After going into exile, Lesley published in Rome a Latin 'History of Scotland' in 1578. In 1596 it was put into Scots by Fr James Dalrymple, a monk of Ratisbon in Bavaria, and this is the version which I will quote from. Substitute 'wh' for 'quh' and the Scots presents few difficulties. "Lykwyse of heipes of corne, through the same ingine (ingenuity)," he says, "breid wil thay make quiklier eftir thair opinione nor vthirwyse. For thay thresche na stuf, bot with fyre thay singe it into the pile vpon the ground. Quhen thay haue singet it, thay winnow it. Quhen it is winnowit, thay grind it in a hand mil, quhilke properlie we cal the queirnis. Thaireftir thay sift it. Frahand (straight away) thay make breid aftir casting it vpon the girdle, or than setting it til a stane, thay bake it at the harth, quhilke breid is nocht different far frome that breid quhilke the ald fathers calles subcinericius, or bakne vnder the asse (ashes)."

So this time the corn is singed with fire, winnowed in the wind, and ground into oatmeal, but still without the back-breaking work of threshing. And who is Lesley referring to, the Highlanders or the Scots as a whole? Well, his subject throughout has been the 'ald Scottis', yet here as elsewhere he writes in the present tense. And the question is answered directly in his very next paragraph, which is worth quoting. "Behaulde now the maneris, wt quhilkes the Scottis of ald war induct. Bot quhy say I of ald, quhen thay, quha this day wt vs speik the ald Scottis toung, planelie haue the selfe sam maneris? For quha this day ar, haue hithirto keipet the institutiounis of thair elderis sa constantlie, that nocht onlie mair than 2 thowsand yeirs thay haue keipet the toung hail vncorrupte; bot lykwyse the maner of cleithing and leiueng, that ald forme thay vnchanget aluterlie (completely) haue keipet."

The speakers of this "ald Scottish toung" were, of course, the Gael.

Next in time is a Gaelic source, *Òran na Comhachaig* (the Song of the Owl) by the Lochaber hunter Domhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn, who lived around 1600. It is a long, difficult, fascinating poem, in which the poet expresses a profound empathy with the deer and his environment. He says:

*B' annsa leam na durdan bodaich  
Os cionn lice ag eararadh sil  
Bùirein an daimh 'm bi gnè dhuinnid  
Air leacainn beinne 's e ri sìn.*

(To the churl's muttered incantation / As he parches corn over a flagstone / I prefer the bellowing of the stag in whom is the epitome of brownness / Facing into the gale on a mountain slope.) *Eararadh* or *fuirireadh* is a form of graddaning in which the corn is parched by being roasted in a pot over the fire — that is to say, if I understand correctly a reference to it in 'Carmina Gadelica', the burning-off is *eararadh* or *fuirireadh*, the roasting is *gradanadh*.

In 1624, an anonymous work published in London called 'A New Irish Prognostication, or Popish Callender' describes graddaning like this: "In the remote places of Ireland, in the stead of Threshing their Oats, they vse to burne them out of the straw, and then winnowing them in the wind, from their burnt ashes, they make them into meale." And when Dr Johnson had visited the Isles in 1773 he wrote this highly critical account of the practice which he found there: "Of that which is obtained with so much difficulty, nothing surely ought to be wasted; yet their method of clearing their oats from the husk is by parching them in the straw. Thus with the genuine improvidence of savages, they destroy that fodder for want of which their cattle may perish. From this practice they have two petty conveniencies. They dry the grain so that it is easily reduced to meal, and they escape the theft of the thresher. The taste contracted from the fire by the oats, as by every other scorched substance, use must long ago have made grateful. The oats that are not parched must be dried in a kiln."

The Rev. John Lane Buchanan was, I think, a native of either Uig in Lewis or of Harris. A missionary to the Isles, in 1793 he published his 'Travels in the Western Hebrides', which was not so much a travelogue as a searing indictment of the social system under which the poor of Harris were suffering. More of him, as of Johnson, another time. He says: "They burn the straw of the sheaf, to make the oats dry for meal: and though the grain is black by the ashes, and the meal coloured, yet it is not unpleasant to the taste, and it is thought to be very wholesome food . . . Their cakes are made of barley meal, and toasted against a stone placed upright before a good fire; and sometimes, when either haste or hunger impels them, they are laid on the ashes, with more ashes above, to bake them more quickly."

The next quotation is my first from a dictionary. Dictionaries can be very good sources of ethnographic information. Neil MacAlpine, an Islayman who lived from 1786 to 1867, published a Gaelic dictionary in 1832, and this is how he defined *gradan*. "*Gradan* was corn or meal prepared after the ancient custom of the Gael. A woman sitting down, took a handful of corn and holding it in her left hand by the stalks, she set fire to the ears, which were at once in a flame. In her right hand she held a stick, with which she dexterously beat the grain out the very instant the husks were quite burnt. By this simple process, corn may be cut down, winnowed, ground, dried and baked within half-an-hour. In separating the meal from the husks, instead of sieves, they made use of a sheepskin stretched on a hoop, minutely perforated by a small hot iron. The bread which is thus made is considered very salubrious, and is extremely pleasant to the palate of the Gael."

Ironically, meal was MacAlpine's downfall. He was teacher of the parochial school at Kilmeny, and when blight struck the potato crop in 1846 he wrote to the authorities drawing their attention to the starving condition of the Islay people. The result was that a cargo of meal arrived in Lochindaal. The landlord took exception to being by-passed in this way, and eventually succeeded in getting MacAlpine, now an elderly man, dismissed from his post. He died in receipt of Poor Relief.

Next the Rev. Duncan Campbell (1854-1938), a native of Benderloch in Argyll, minister, teacher, and collector of the proverbs and sayings published by Donald Meek as 'The Campbell Collection'. He taught in Grimsay, North Uist, for a while around 1905, and reported to Edward Dwelly that in Uist the three processes called *ealchadh*, *eararadh* and *gradan* were still practised. "The grain end of the sheaf is put into the flame of the fire; when the chaff and ends of the straw are well alight, the sheaf is held over a clean-swept part of the hearth, or over some vessel, when the grain drops off." Campbell explained to Dwelly that *ealchadh* was the pounding of grain in the corn-pounder prior to its being ground, in order to facilitate the grinding process.

But Neil Munro had already expressed what was good about graddaning in this wonderful cameo in his novel 'John Splendid' of 1898. "In this same Carnus, in later years, I have made a meal that showed curiously the resource of its people. Hunting one day, I went to a little cothouse there and asked for something to eat. A field of unreaped barley stood ripe and dry before the door. Out the housewife went and cut some straws of it, while her daughter shook cream in a bottle, chanting a churn-charm the while. The straw was burned to dry the grain, the breeze win'd it, the quern ground it, the fire cooked the bannocks of it. Then a cow was milked, a couple of eggs were found in the loft, and I sat down in a marvellously short space of time to bread and butter, milk, eggs, and a little drop of spirits that was the only ready-made provand in the house. And though now they were divided between the making of coronachs and the building of their homes, they still had the art to pick a dinner, as it were, off the lichened stone."

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