

The Bush of John the Baptist

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last two articles I tried to demonstrate that, in the religious traditions of the old Kingdom of the Isles, the identities of the god Manannan and of St John the Baptist merge completely into one another. The conclusion must be that the cult of Manannan was strong in the islands, and that with the coming of Christianity this cult was made respectable by the simple device of turning Manannan into John.

Most of the evidence came from the extreme ends of the kingdom, Lewis in the north and Man in the south, while some of it came from Iona in the middle. Today I would simply like to add a postscript by telling the extraordinary story of Roderick, and pointing out that here again is an instance of the cult of St John in the islands, this time in the most isolated, wave-girt, ocean-bound island of them all — St Kilda. Is it possible that for the Christian St John in this story we are to read the pagan Manannan? Is it possible that John of St Kilda was in Gaelic not *Eoin* but *Seònaidh*, the same figure to whom sacrifices of ale or gruel or porridge were made in the waves off the west coast of Lewis to ensure a good harvest of seaweed to fertilise the crops?

The trouble is that (to my knowledge) there are only two sources for the story of Roderick, and both of them are in English. One is ‘A Voyage to St Kilda 1697’ by the celebrated Skyeman Martin Martin, who met Roderick in the flesh. It is by far the longer of the two accounts. The other, curiously, is by a man who bore the very name, Buchanan or *MacMhannain*, which (as I pointed out last week) may derive from the cult of Manannan in Uig, on the west side of Lewis.

John Lane Buchanan is worth saying something about, as his book is not nearly so well known as are Martin Martin’s works on the Western Islands and St Kilda. Buchanan was missionary minister to the Isles from the Church of Scotland. In 1793 he published ‘Travels in the Western Hebrides: from 1782 to 1790’. By the Western Hebrides he means what are nowadays called the Western Isles, and one of the reasons he gives for publishing the book is that the Western Isles (as now defined) were not visited or described by Johnson and Boswell. As an islander himself, however, he goes far beyond the remit of the traveller, and in fact the word ‘travels’ is a misnomer: it is a work not of travel but of ethnography and trenchant social comment. It was the era of kelp, and Buchanan’s sympathies were entirely with the people. He sorrows at their condition, marvels at their spirits, and pulls no punches in his condemnation of evil landlords. “It is truly mortifying,” he says, typically, “to find a people naturally industrious, altogether crushed.”

It is a great pity that so little is known of John Lane Buchanan. We have to assume, I think, that the publication of his views made it impossible for him to obtain advancement in the Church, and that after 1793 he died, emigrated, or faded back into obscurity. I hope his book can be reprinted, and soon. His heart was very much in the same place as that of the ‘West Highland Free Press’.

But on to Roderick. Martin calls him comely and well-proportioned, red-haired, and outstanding among the people of St Kilda for strength and climbing ability. He was illiterate, and had never been to the Western Isles.

Once when eighteen years old Roderick went fishing on a Sunday, which was completely against the customs of the island. On his way home, he claimed, a man appeared before him in Lowland dress — cloak and hat. Roderick fell flat on the ground in shock, at which the man told him not to be surprised at his presence, for he was John the Baptist, come straight from heaven with good tidings for the people of the place, who had been for such a long time in ignorance and error. He had a commission, he said, to instruct Roderick in the laws of Heaven for the edification of his neighbours.

To this Roderick replied that he was in no way qualified for so great a charge, but St John told him to be of good courage, for he would instantly make him capable of carrying out his mission. He then prescribed a set of observances in which, Martin points out, the laudable customs of the Church are so mixed up with Roderick’s own diabolical inventions that it was impossible for so ignorant a people to tell the difference.

First of all, says Martin, Roderick imposed a strict Friday fast. No-one was to take any kind of food before nightfall, not even a snuff of tobacco, of which everyone in St Kilda was extremely fond. Unlike elsewhere in the Isles, this fast was not combined with any religious observances.

Secondly, he persuaded the people that some of their deceased neighbours had become saints in Heaven. Everyone thus had a special advocate in Heaven, and the anniversaries of these saints had to be commemorated by their devotees. The anniversary had to be celebrated by a great feast of beef, mutton or chicken, with Roderick as the chief guest, and Roderick’s wife and children as principal beneficiaries.

Thirdly, he commanded that every family should slaughter a sheep on their own threshold, not with a knife but with a *cas chrom* or ‘crooked spade’. This was enormously cruel as the wooden blade of a *cas chrom* is almost half an inch thick. It was to be done in the evening, but if anyone tasted the meat that same night, the same number of sheep must be slaughtered in the same way the following day.

Fourthly, he forbade the use of the Lord’s Prayer, Creed and Ten Commandments, and substituted other prayers containing unintelligible words which he claimed to have got from St John the Baptist. These prayers included the names of God, Christ, and the immaculate Virgin, but also of “Eli, our Preserver”. Martin also points out that “he used the Irish word *Phersichin*, i.e. verses, which is not known in St Kilda, nor in the North-West Isles, except to such as can read the Irish tongue.” By which he seems to imply that Roderick had some second-hand knowledge of the written Gaelic of the day.

Fifthly, the holy place of the new creed was upon a little spot of rising ground called ‘John the Baptist’s Bush’. This, claimed Roderick, was where he had had his visions. He declared it sacrosanct. Any cow or

sheep that touched it must be slaughtered and eaten by Roderick and its owners; if they refused, they would be excommunicated until they acknowledged their faults and complied with his desires.

Sixthly, he imposed a set of penances on his followers, pretending that these were founded on the authority of John the Baptist himself. The usual penance was to make them stand in cold water, summer or winter; if more than one person was involved, they were to pour the water on each other's heads. Buchanan stresses that all the women in St Kilda became members of the new creed, and says that if any of them opposed him he made them walk over a large beach of loose round stones without moving them — an impossibility, given that the stones are round and loose. If a stone jingled, the guilty woman's punishment was to stand naked under a cataract while a mighty torrent of water descended with great force on her head and body.

"Private confession," says Buchanan, "was his great engine, and the greatest secrecy was enjoined, under the pain of hell fire." He taught the women a hymn which he claimed had been sent to him by the Virgin Mary. This hymn was never uttered in public, always in a private house or in some remote place. He persuaded the women that no-one who could repeat it by heart would die in child-bearing. And each woman paid him a sheep for teaching her the hymn. "The place and manner of teaching this hymn," says Martin, "afforded him a fair opportunity of debauching many of the simple women; and this some of their number acknowledged to the Minister and me upon examination." He persuaded the women that if they complied in all respects with his new revelation they would be carried to Heaven, riding across the sky on white horses.

This was his undoing. He had converted to his creed the wife of the *maor* or ground officer, MacLeod's representative in the island. She admitted to her husband what was expected of her in exchange for the Hymn of the Virgin Mary. When Roderick arrived for the lesson, the *maor* hid in the next room. When Roderick began caressing his wife, he jumped out.

Roderick blustered his way out of the confrontation to the extent that he and the *maor* entered into a bond of friendship at the baptism of Roderick's next child, in the usual way of the Western Isles, by tasting a drop of each other's blood; but it was the beginning of the end. People began to doubt Roderick's sincerity, and when three lambs belonging to a man called Maol Domhnaich were found feeding on the sacred bush, Maol Domhnaich refused to slaughter them. Word of the sect got to the Steward of St Kilda, who lived in Pabbay, Harris, and Roderick was brought away to Skye to face his chief and judge, MacLeod of MacLeod.

Roderick expected MacLeod to ask him to preach, but was much disappointed when the chief forbade him to preach any more on pain of death. He was allowed to return home, it seems, for when Martin Martin arrived in St Kilda in 1697 with John Campbell, Minister of Harris, he was back in the island, and the people begged the distinguished visitors to take him away forever. Martin and Campbell interviewed him. Martin reported that Roderick said that every night after he had assembled the people, he would hear a voice outside saying, "Come you out."

When he heard that, he had no power to stay inside. He would go out, and John the Baptist was always there, and would tell him what to say to the people at the meeting. St John would give the discourse only once, and he would hardly remember one sentence of it, so he would ask the Saint what to do, and the answer would be: "Go, you have it."

This he believed so implicitly that when he went back in he was able to deliver fluently every word of the sermon which he had just been taught. He would preach for hours on end until most of his hearers had fallen asleep.

Martin and Campbell got Roderick to repeat his full statement in public after divine service, in the presence of all the islanders and of all the visitors who had come with them from Harris. The Minister and congregation prayed for Roderick's repentance and pardon, then brought him to the Bush of John the Baptist, and ordered him to demolish the wall which he had got built around it. The stones were scattered far and wide so that the people's posterity would have no chance of seeing "such a monument of folly and ignorance". Martin and Campbell reproved the people for their gullibility, and they replied that they had believed in Roderick when they saw him "endued, as they fancied, with a powerful faculty of preaching so fluently and frequently, and pretending to converse with John the Baptist".

It is hard to believe that John the Baptist was not a figure of great ritual importance in St Kilda. As for Roderick, he was brought to Pabbay by Martin and Campbell, and handed over to the Steward's men. The last words in Martin's book are: "He remains still in custody in order to his trial." So we do not know what happened to him, but it is said that Martin's account of Roderick led directly to the founding in 1709 of the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, which established schools all over the Highlands and began the process of eradicating the Gaelic language.

— WHFP 21.7.95