

Joining the dots: the kissing-game

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

SOCIAL history, at its worst, is a game of join-the-dots. The dots are there, speckled around the sources. Can you join them up to make a picture?

The game is called ‘continuities’. Here and there we are told of a custom or belief of some kind. If the mentions of it are close together with regard to time and place, we are in business — we can probably learn a lot about that custom or that belief by putting these mentions together. At the same time, we must be alert for the possibility of writers and tradition-bearers copying each other (perhaps from memory alone), and so repeating each other’s mistakes and misunderstandings.

If, on the other hand, the mentions are far apart in time and place — well, we may have a continuity, or we may not. If our dots are a thousand years apart, as so often happens in Celtic matters, we won’t end up with a very credible picture. But it is fun to try.

To illustrate the point I will take what (for lack of a better word) I will call the kissing-game. The word is not mine, but was used by R H Coats — in his classic ‘Travellers’ Tales of Scotland’ — of the activities of Dr Johnson at Corriechatachan, which of course was within a few miles of where this newspaper is published. However, the good doctor comes last in our long slack chain of continuities, so he is hereby banished to the bottom right corner of the page.

By the kissing-game I mean the forward or flirtatious behaviour of women. It starts in the Celtic world with a piece of gossip by the ethnographer Dio Cassius, who was a contemporary of Julius Caesar. It concerns a lady who, like her husband Argentocoxus, was a native of Caledonia. A Roman lady (Julia Augusta, the wife of Severus) jokes with her one day about the free intercourse of her sex with the men of Britain, and she replies with great dignity. “We fulfil the demands of nature in a much better way than do you Roman women,” declares the Caledonian lady, “for we consort openly with the best men, whereas you let yourselves be debauched in secret by the vilest.”

Now this is very well put, and to the student of Gaelic literature it rings a bell. Loudly. Two thousand years later the women of South Uist and other places were still singing proudly of “consorting with the best men”, and there are countless passages in waulking songs like this: *Tha mi torrach, cuime ’n ceilinn?* “I am pregnant, why should I hide it? For it is not by a man who is puny or short. Well do I know your genealogy. You are no Cameron or MacKenzie: you are a MacDonald, handsome, strong and shapely. You’d go first, fearlessly, and would be the first to attack, the last to retreat. To no other will I go, will I go!”

We can only assume that this reflects a common attitude among Highland women during the era in which such songs were coming together, let’s say the 15th to 17th centuries. So we can look for corroboration in the historical sources, and if we look hard enough, we are pretty sure to find it.

“The men are small in stature, bold and forward in temper; the women, fair in complexion, comely and pleasing, but not distinguished for their chastity, giving their kisses more readily than Italian women their hands.” So wrote Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, who visited Scotland as a diplomat in the reign of James I, that is, 1394-1437.

In fact, the same freedom among women was noted by certain foreign travellers in England, as can be seen here and there in, for example, Rye’s classic ‘England as seen by Foreigners’. A century later the Dutch scholar Erasmus has an amusing letter on the custom of kissing among English women, so it is perhaps unlikely that the custom would have changed in Scotland by that time. Indeed we seem to have confirmation of this in a letter written in 1498 by Don Pedro de Ayala, who was the ambassador of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain at the court of James IV of Scotland.

Now this letter is mainly celebrated as the latest evidence for Gaelic being spoken by a king of Scots. Ayala says of the young James IV that “his own Scotch language is as different from English as Aragonese from Castilian. The king speaks, besides, the language of the savages who live in some parts of Scotland and on the islands. It is as different from Scotch as Basque is from Castilian.” If it is possible for Ayala to make such a strong distinction between Highlanders and Lowlanders at this period, it may well be that we can read nothing relevant to the Highlands and Islands into his comments on Scottish women. That is something which I will pick up another time; suffice it to say that leading Lowland writers took the view that the Highlanders of today were the whole Scottish nation of yesterday. For example, Bishop John Leslie (1527-96) began an account of traditional Scottish customs like this: “Behold now the manners with which the Scots of old were endowed. But why say I ‘of old’, when they, who this day with us speak the old Scottish tongue [he means Gaelic], plainly have the selfsame manners? For they have hitherto kept the institutions of their elders so constantly, that not only more than two thousand years have they kept the tongue wholly uncorrupted, but likewise the manner of clothing and living, whose old form they have kept completely unchanged.”

So with this in mind, back to the Spaniard, Ayala, for his comments on Scottish women. “The women,” he says, “are courteous in the extreme. I mention this because they are really honest, though very bold. They are absolute mistresses of their houses, and even of their husbands, in all things concerning the administration of their property, income as well as expenditure. They are very graceful and handsome women. They dress much better than the English, especially as regards their head-dress, which is, I think, the handsomest in the world.”

A couple of things, at least, can be said about this. One is that we are looking at the makings of a tradition of ethnographic writing about the Scottish people in which women are given a prominent place. Shakespeare’s *Lady Macbeth* is no accident. Ayala’s contemporary, Hector Boece, who was Principal of

King's College Aberdeen, wrote a hugely popular 'History of Scotland' in which his sole concern was to present his subject in the most striking and attractive fashion possible, and it is he, therefore, who is ultimately responsible for the witches in 'Macbeth' and for much else besides that was long considered characteristic of Scottish traditional life. So clearly there are myths in this subject as well as realities.

The other thing is the head-dress. Ayala is presumably describing a form of ladies' kerchief which at this period in the Lowlands consisted of a lofty structure in the form of two horns. At first it had been made by arranging the hair in horns, but as the fashion became exaggerated, these were made with false hair stiffened with hemp and flax. Whatever its exact form, the *bréid* or linen kerchief is constantly mentioned in Gaelic verse from this period on, and one gets the very strong feeling that fashion comes from the south — from the Lowlands, from England, and ultimately, no doubt, from France. *Thig mo chrìos á Dùn Èideann*, sings the girl in the song of the shieling bothy in Brae Rannoch — "my belt will come from Edinburgh", *'s mo bhréid á Dùn Chailleann*, "and my kerchief from Dunkeld".

But back to the kissing-game, and it is still to the fore in the 18th-century Highlands, though apparently by then it is much less in evidence elsewhere. Captain Edmund Burt, an English spy who wrote in his 'Letters from the North of Scotland' about the Highlands as he found them in 1726, was startled to find himself kissed quite frankly and ingenuously by well-bred hostesses on his bidding them farewell. "The two young ladies," he wrote, "on my saluting them at parting, did me a favour which with you would be thought the utmost invitation; but it is purely innocent with them, and a mark of the highest esteem for their guest. This was no great surprise to me, having received the same compliment several times before in the Highlands, and even from married women, who, I may be sure, had no further design in it. But I am not singular, for several officers in the army have told me they received the same courtesy from other females in the hills."

And so finally to Dr Johnson. When he came to Skye he was a formidable, portly old fellow, 63 years old, but this did not deter one particular Highland lady, at least. In any case he had been known to encourage this sort of behaviour — we are told how he had once set upon his knee a certain young woman "who came to consult him on Methodism". Anyway, according to Boswell what took place at Corriechatachan on the evening of 27 September 1773 was that "one of our married ladies, a lively pretty little woman, good-humouredly sat down upon Dr Johnson's knee, and, being encouraged by some of the company, put her hands round his neck, and kissed him".

As Coats pointed out, the doctor was in no way embarrassed by these attentions, and challenged his fair admirer to make a kissing-game of it. "Do it again," he exclaimed, after one taste of the ruby lips, "and let us see who will tire first!"

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