

## Like tulips planted in dung

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I HAVE read more travellers' accounts of the Highlands and Islands in the past than I can remember, and I think the central and fundamental picture that has formed in my mind is this: the traveller bends his head to enter a house so wretched that it can hardly be distinguished from the peatstack or the side of the hill; once inside, he can see little at first but a swirl of smoke lit by the fitful glow of a cruise; he is amazed at the courtesy, the dignity and the learning of those whom he meets around the fire; he is then overwhelmed by generous hospitality in the midst of such evident poverty.

If I then go back to try and check the sources that planted this picture in my mind, I am not disappointed. On other matters, such as the alleged laziness of the Highlanders, different writers had very different views; but on this central picture and its component parts, there is something close to unanimity. It is neatly summed up for us I think by Oliver Goldsmith when he compares the Scots and the Dutch. "There you might see a well-dressed duchess issuing from a dirty close," he says, "and here a dirty Dutchman inhabiting a palace. The Scotch may be compared to a tulip planted in dung; but I never see a Dutchman in his own house but I think of a magnificent Egyptian temple dedicated to an ox!"

It is a nice compliment to us, really. I would rather be a tulip in dung any day than an ox in a palace. I'm going to concentrate in this article on the tulip, and leave the dung for another time; suffice to say that, according to the Welshman Thomas Pennant, who visited the Highlands and Islands in 1769 and 1772, "the habitations of the Highlanders are the disgrace of North Britain, as its lakes and rivers are its glory".

What then was it about our forebears that made them seem so attractive? In 1726, Captain Burt spoke of how they had "a kind of stateliness in the midst of their poverty", but we must return to Pennant for some detail. "The manners of the native Highlanders," he says, "may justly be expressed in these words: indolent to a high degree, unless roused to war, or to any animating amusement; or I may say, from experience, to lend any disinterested assistance to the distressed traveller, either in directing him on his way, or affording their aid in passing the dangerous torrents of the Highlands: hospitable to the highest degree, and full of generosity: are much affected with the civility of strangers, and have in themselves a natural politeness and address, which often flows from the meanest when least expected . . ."

Dr Johnson arrived in 1773, hard on Pennant's heels, and found himself "treated in every house as if he had come to confer a benefit". He was warm in his approval of this behaviour; what is more, he had an explanation for it. "Civility," he wrote, "seems part of the national character of Highlanders. Every chieftain is a monarch, and politeness, the natural product of royal government, is diffused from the laird through the whole clan."

Now this is interesting. Johnson here produces a model of social development according to which civilised behaviour is generated by the widespread application of monarchic principles on a community level — in other words, by the 'clan system'. It is a model perfectly familiar to the student of Gaelic literature, in which the kindred is regularly portrayed as an all-protecting tree, with the common ancestors as the trunk firmly rooted in the soil, every family and its individual members as the branches, twigs and leaves, and the chief as the highest, sweetest apple of them all. Such literature is itself an important part of the process of diffusion, because the community's poets and other professional men mediated between chiefs and people, making sure that the former were constantly reminded of their responsibilities to the latter. The chief was called *rìgh* or 'king', and so was God; *rioghail*, by contrast, was a word applied to everybody, for it meant 'royal' and 'royalist' and 'loyal', that is, 'kingly' and 'kinglike' in every way.

So Johnson did not invent the model, it was the one described to him as still applying to Highland communities in the 1770s. What intrigues me is the mystified reaction of Johnson's English editor, Peter Levi, a classical scholar who was Professor of Poetry at Oxford from 1984 to 1989. In his introduction to the Penguin edition of Johnson's 'Journey', Levi writes: "Some of his prejudices are strange, or strange to us. He genuinely believed that civilized manners are the product of kings and their courts, from which they soak down to permeate human societies. Where does that view come from? Some philosopher of the eighteenth century, or an interpretation of Shakespeare, or a sense of degree and propriety from conservative Derbyshire and Staffordshire, provincial Lichfield? Johnson's view that old Scottish manners depended on the numerous courts of chieftains is as strange to me as his friend Gibbon's explanation that disbelief in ancient Roman religion must have spread through servants overhearing the jokes of their masters as they waited at table."

If the Gaelic society of the 1770s had not been destroyed and replaced by the worst kind of landlordism, Levi would scarcely have been so puzzled. Poetry is the key to understanding the problem, but not poetry in a language that Professors of Poetry are expected to understand.

Johnson's model was elaborated by his younger contemporary John Ramsay (1736-1814), who was laird of Ochertyre in Perthshire, and whose memoirs were published as 'Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century'. He wrote: "Not only the *duinewassals*, but strangers and travellers, were welcome, uninvited, to the chieftain's house and table. And occasionally the better sort of commons had access, and were treated with kindness; the chief distinction consisting in the liquor allotted to them, and in their place at table. According to tradition, those primitive manners subsisted in some noble Highland families as late as the middle of the last century, and they remained in all their purity among the remote chiefs within the last fifty years."

Ramsay's 'duinewassals' were the *daoine uaisle* or gentlemen of the kindred — in other words, anyone who could prove a genealogical connection with the chief, which at that time meant practically everybody. Revealingly, the Rev. John Lane Buchanan wrote in 1793 of the people of the Outer Isles: "In defiance of the

hardships these oppressed people suffer, they retain part of their former state and dignity, at their meetings and partings. They address one another by the title of gentleman or lady (*duin-uasle* and *bheanuasle*) and embrace one another most cordially, with bonnets off.”

Anyway, Ramsay continues: “The commons profited greatly from their familiarity with the gentry. They formed themselves on the model of their superiors, and endeavoured to adopt their manners and sentiments. And hence that class of men in the Highlands have always been more courteous and intelligent, more gallant in their manners, and more scrupulous about personal honour, than persons of that humble station in other countries.”

There is of course much more to it than that. For one thing, hospitality was one of the long-standing ideals of a heroic society. Ramsay again: “The middling and inferior classes of Highlanders, who have been little out of their own country, retain the domestic manners of their forefathers in great purity. In the remote countries, apart from military roads, the traveller will meet with hospitality worthy of the patriarchal or heroic times. The being a stranger entitles him to a kind reception, provided he comes not to molest or dispossess the old inhabitants.”

For another thing, hospitality was an instrument of social cohesion, of alliances. Ramsay: “Hospitality was regarded by the Highlanders as a first-rate virtue; and a man by shutting his door against the meanest stranger would not only have forfeited the esteem of his neighbours, but have run a risk of being ill received wherever he or the story was known. And by practising it universally, even to the beggar in rags, valuable connections were sometimes formed. The strangers, especially if under circumstances of danger and distress, retained a lively sense of the favour; and there are traditions of attachments in the Highlands, founded on hospitality, that are equally romantic with the story of Glaucus and Diomed.”

Finally, it was an instrument of cultural exchange, of news. Ramsay points out that the stranger is likely to be offered something to eat and drink at every house he passes, with nothing expected in return but news and a little tobacco, while Pennant confirms that “we scarce passed a farm but the good woman, long before our approach, sallied out and stood on the road side, holding out to us a bowl of milk or whey”. Says Ramsay: “If, however, selfish motives must be assigned for this virtue, none is more obvious than the amazing thirst of the Highlanders for news. As there were no periodical papers of intelligence amongst them, they naturally expected much precious information from a guest who came perhaps from a far country.”

In fact, a number of commentators remarked on the inquisitiveness of the Highland people. Pennant listed it among the fundamental features of Highland character, like this: “Are excessively inquisitive after your business, your name, and other particulars of little consequence to them: most curious after the politicks of the world, and when they can procure an old newspaper, will listen to it with all the avidity of Shakespeare’s blacksmith. Have much pride, and consequently are impatient of affronts, and revengefull of injuries.”

Those who knew the Highlands better than Pennant had evolved strategies to deal with the situation. Ramsay again: “The inquisitiveness of the common Highlanders is perhaps the least pleasing part of their manners to a stranger. They stop passengers on the road, asking them whence they come, where they are going, what are their names and business? But one learns to evade them by answering their questions indirectly, as they themselves constantly do. For however curious a Highlander may be in other men’s matters, no man can be closer with regard to his own affairs.”

And Buchanan again: “They converse familiarly with one another by the term of *naby*, or neighbour; or *carrid*, a friend; *ghaole*, or *cagger*, love; and such endearing expressions; but, though naturally frank, they are very reserved to strangers at first: yet they modestly ask a vast many questions from every stranger whom they chance to meet; that being the only vehicle through which they can hear of public transactions carried on in the country or nation at large.”

He goes on: “On that account, any man that wishes to pass the nights at any of their huts, must be at pains to collect all the news, by making regular enquiries, as he passes along, and when they are carefully arranged, and properly delivered, he is sure of meeting with a hearty reception. His history is believed like oracles, which they faithfully retail to their neighbours; and are sure of reciprocal returns on similar occasions, displaying the same inquisitive spirit and hospitality with the Germans, as described by Tacitus.”

I will finish with a story told by Ramsay. A few years ago, he says, a notorious criminal was being brought to the place of execution. As he was mounting the gallows he spotted a man coming towards them in some haste, whereupon he earnestly asked the judge for a few minutes’ respite in order to speak to the man. This being granted, he turned to the new arrival and said, “What news?”

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