

## The little Lourdes of the Islands

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THIS article I would like to put under the microscope an event of Gaelic literary history which is enormously instructive about the way people used to think.

It is not exactly the event itself that can be examined (we know very little about it, really) but the reasons that have been suggested to explain it. The event is the banishment of the Harris poetess Màiri nighean Alastair Ruaidh, who is thought to have been born about 1615. I will go through the seven different reasons that have been put forward by seven different people to try to explain her banishment. Then I will put forward a Quern-Dust-Calendarish sort of argument for what may really have brought her to her place of exile.

This place of exile, according to most accounts, was the island of Scarba. On the face of it, it was a terrible place for a gregarious old woman to have been sent. She had given her life as a nurse to the household of the MacLeod ruling family at Dunvegan. Now, about the age of 60 (one of her songs shows her in exile after the year 1675), she was banished to this barren lump of rock far, far to the south in the watery borderlands of the MacLeans.

Scarba is chiefly distinguished for the whirlpool of Corryvreckan off its steep southern shore. I was there once, in the 60s, and it was a frightening experience. We walked uphill through mist, heading south, soaked to the skin. Gradually we became aware of a roaring noise. It seemed to be ahead of us. Suddenly the mist parted between our feet and there, far down below in an almost vertical line, was a livid green patch in the middle of a dark sea flecked with white. The curtain had opened on the edge of the cliff to show us Corryvreckan. Seconds later it closed again. Màiri has a song of exile which matches this atmosphere:

*S muldach mì o chionn seachdain  
'S mi an eilean gun fheur gun fhasgadh.  
Ma dh'fhaodas mi, théid mi dhachaigh  
Gu Uilbhinnis a' chruidh chaisfhinn  
Far an d'fhuair mi gu h-òg m' altram.*

(‘I’ve been wretched for a week / Being in an island without grass or shelter. / If I may, I will go home / To Ulinish of the white-legged cows / Where I was reared when young.’) In another song, the isle of her banishment is mentioned by name.

*'S mi am' shuidh' air an tulaich  
Fo mhulad 's fo imcheist,  
'S mi a' coimhead air Ìle,  
Sann de m' ioghnadh san ama seo;  
Bha mi uair nach do shaoil mi,  
Gus an do chaochail air m' aimsir,  
Gun tiginn an tùbh seo  
Dh'amharc Dhiùraigh á Sgarbaigh.*

(‘It’s with surprise that I find myself at this time sitting on a hillock, worried and depressed, looking at Islay, for until my circumstances changed, I had previously never thought that I would come this way to look at Jura from Scarba.’) It was a fine day, at any rate, if she could see Islay. Another version has as the last line *Dh'amharc faoileagan Sgarbaigh*, ‘to look at the seagulls of Scarba’. Clearly this lively, witty, talented woman had little to do.

What, then, had caused the change of circumstances? What led to her banishment?

**First**, Alexander Mackenzie suggested that MacLeod of Dunvegan took offence at her praising his cousin, Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray, and his son John.

**Second**, Frances Tolmie pointed out that overpraise of young children is thought to bring ill luck. You don’t sing a song of welcome to a new-born baby — you spit on it, for fear of tempting the fairies to carry it off and leave a changeling in its place.

**Third**, more generally, ‘some song or other’ caused offence, said John Mackenzie, and John MacInnes has pointed out that Màiri had a reputation for composing satirical and even obscene songs. With regard to satirical songs, she is said in Skye tradition to have taken an active part in the celebrated flyting between Nic Iain Fhinn of Barra and Nic a’ Mhanaich of Uist which begins *Cha téid Mór a Bharraigh bhrònaich*. It is certainly an insulting song. The Uist woman says Barra is where they dig cockles with their fingers and pull razorfish out of puddles, the Barra woman says the Uist woman’s grandfather stole barley and that her father was left tied up with a stream from his snout among the puddles.

With regard to obscene songs, Mór Aonghais ‘ic Eachainn of Frobost in South Uist told Donald Archie MacDonald in 1963 that Màiri was a compulsive maker of songs and rhymes. “They used to stop her. *Cha robh, fhios agaibh, ma dh'fhaoidte, cha robh iad — uair a bhiodh iad math agus uair a bhiodh iad air atharrachadh. Bheil sibh a' tuigsinn?* They weren’t, you know, perhaps, they weren’t — sometimes they were decent and sometimes they were otherwise. Do you understand? Well, you know, people stopped her, she didn’t dare sing them. At first she’d sing them indoors. Then she was forbidden to sing them either indoors or outdoors. *Bha i nuair sin — sheasadh i eadar-a-bhì 's doras, air a' mhaide-bhuinn — cha robh i*

*muigh 's cha robh i staigh, 's bha i ann a-shin, 's bha i nuairsin ag obair air a-sin.* Then she — she would stand in the doorway, on the threshold — she was neither indoors nor outdoors, and there she was, then, singing away!”

**Fourth,** Alexander Nicolson pointed out that Roderick, chief of the MacLeods from 1693 to 1699, was an anglicised sort of person who expelled a number of dependants. But she would have been nearly eighty by then.

**Fifth,** William Matheson reckoned that there was a superstitious fear of women who composed big songs of praise, as opposed to the lighter songs used to accompany their work. Once when confronted about this, Màiri excused herself by saying, *O chan eil ann ach crònan.* “Oh, it’s only a lullaby.” Which would have infuriated the men poets, because her craftsmanship in verse was second to none!

Matheson points to burial practices to make his case. Màiri was said to have been buried in Rodel face downwards. In Mull it was said that another female maker of big songs, Mairearad nighean Lachainn, was placed face down on the surface of the ground and stones piled on top of her. And in Norse times, as the ‘Laxdaela Saga’ shows, it was the fate of a witch to be buried under a heap of stones.

**Sixth,** Alick Morrison wondered if the reason for Màiri’s banishment was political. Her patron Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray went into exile on the Continent in 1656 after taking part in the disastrous battle of Worcester in 1651.

**And seventh,** I would point to the jealousy of professional poets — all male — who had spent years in training, and who depended on the craft of poetry for their livelihood. For centuries these men had had a huge constituency of patrons to draw upon, from Cape Wrath in Scotland to Cape Clear in Munster. Suddenly in the 1640s Ireland was lost to them, and those with Highland connections, men bearing names like MacMhuirich and Ó Muirgheasáin, came back to Scotland. No doubt others came too. Cathal MacMhuirich wrote: “So many Munster poets come to the Highlands that they are complained against throughout every locality — why find fault?” They got a particular welcome at Dunvegan and Berneray, as their surviving manuscripts show, and they laid into amateur poets with sarcasm like this: “Even if you throw butter or meat viciously at the host, you are still called a scholar, your honour cannot be impugned. God did not impose on you the hardship of waiting for grace or asking for news before snatching brose from the table!”

But why Scarba? Why, especially, should a 60-year-old woman be sent so far away?

The answer began to dawn on me when I read David Hamilton’s book ‘The Healers: A History of Medicine in Scotland’. Hamilton says in his chapter on the Middle Ages: “The first impulse of the great mass of the people during illness was probably to attempt some personal therapy, rather than consult a trained or untrained healer. Nor would their first choice always be the widely known herbal remedies, since the power of the healing stones and wells was highly regarded, as was prayer or pilgrimage to the holy places in Scotland, such as the relics of St Ninian at Whithorn or the chapel of the Virgin on the island of Scarba.”

Was Màiri sent? Or did she go of her own volition? Or both?

Scarba emerges from the record as the little Lourdes of the Islands. About 1380, John of Fordun, a chantry priest at Aberdeen, gathered materials for the early history of Scotland, and his work formed the basis for the ‘Scotichronicon’ of Walter Bower, who lived from about 1385 to 1449. Listing all the islands from Man and Arran in the south to Lewis and Orkney in the north, Bower singles out for comment “Scarba, fifteen miles long, where there is a chapel of the Blessed Virgin, at which many miracles are performed. Beside this island rushes down the mighty whirlpool of Corrievrekan.”

Bower grossly overstates the size of Scarba, and his description has the attraction of a modern holiday advertisement. But of the existence of the Chapel of the Virgin there is no doubt. The island’s only settlement (deserted when I was there, but with one habitable house) is still Kilmory (*Cille Moire*), and the ruins of the chapel survive by the shore. I know of no other source for the reputation of the place, except this in 1703 by Martin Martin (who was born about 1655-60, and may have known Màiri personally): “A woman of the Isle of Scarba, near the north end of [Jura], lived seven score years, and enjoyed the free use of her senses and understanding all her days; it is now two years since she died.”

Màiri had spent her life as a children’s nurse, which means that she knew a thing or two about traditional cures. She sounds to me like just the sort of person — lively, independent, superstitious — who would have been attracted to such a Lourdes of the Islands. Perhaps the year is 1675 or 1680. She is being gently eased out of her job at the age of three score. Young Martin Martin tells her cheerfully of the woman who is twice her age. MacLeod then produces a manuscript of the ‘Scotichronicon’ and jabs his finger at the mention of Scarba. Yes, she agrees, she has heard of the Chapel of the Virgin. “I have a boat leaving for Glasgow tomorrow,” says MacLeod. “It will take you there.”

She is said to have lived to be 105.

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