

A Gaelic carol analysed

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THIS article I would like to look at “Beannaicht’ E, Beannaicht’ E”, the classic Christmas carol of Gaelic tradition.

Now ‘Christmas carol’ is perhaps not the right word, although it is used in one case by Alexander Carmichael. From 1560 on the Reformers had been doing their best to abolish Christmas, and many religious customs probably attached themselves to the New Year instead. When the calendar was changed in 1752, the customs of Christmas and the customs of the New Year became further entangled. Christmas (New Style) on the new 25 December attracted any new or revived Christmas practices, and was followed by New Year (New Style) on 1 January, with a reversion to any surviving Christmas customs for Old Christmas on 5 (later 6) January, with a return finally to New Year customs for Old New Year on 12 (later 13) January.

It was a hopeless mess, but as this was a ‘dead’ time of year agriculturally in any case, the result was more or less what we would now call an annual three-week holiday. The terms *Nollaig* and *Callainn* became freely interchangeable, just as nowadays we might talk one minute of the “Christmas Holidays” and the next minute of the “New Year Holidays”, meaning the same thing. In fact, in many places there arose a term *Callaig* which we may probably see as a combination of the two words into one. *Nollaig* could describe both Christmas and the New Year, and when a distinction was required, the former could be called *Nollaig Mhór* (Big Christmas) and the latter *Nollaig Bheag* (Little Christmas).

Nollaig comes from Latin *natalicia*, the Nativity, while *Callainn* is from Latin (and ultimately Greek) *calendae*, meaning the first of the month, or very literally the ‘calendar day’. Nowadays Christmas is staging a spectacular revival, the term *Nollaig* has come back, and *Callainn* and *Callaig* are being ditched in favour of *A’ Bhliadhna’ Ùr* ‘The New Year’.

The earliest source for “Beannaicht’ E, Beannaicht’ E” is I think a paper by William Mackenzie called ‘Leaves from my Celtic Portfolio no. 5’, published in the ‘Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness’ for 1879-80. Mackenzie, a Wester Ross man, was the first Secretary of the Society, and went on to become the first Secretary of the Crofters’ Commission.

Mackenzie’s introduction to “Beannaicht’ E, Beannaicht’ E” is succinct. He says: “By way of variety, I will next give you a *Duan Challuinn*. I need not explain to an assembly of Highlanders what a *Duan Calluinn* is, but the following specimen is unique. It differs materially from the ordinary and sometimes meaningless rhymes which, in our younger days, we were wont to chant outside our neighbours’ houses at Christmas and New Year time: it is really a sort of benediction, referring to the birth of the Saviour.”

This demonstrates that, in Mackenzie’s part of Wester Ross at least, the position is as I have stated it. An incantation which clearly refers to the Nativity has become incorporated into a general tradition of *duain Challainn* or ‘New Year rhymes’, rhymes chanted by young guisers as they dance around the houses driving off the evil spirits of the Old Year, seeking hospitality, and cursing those who refuse it.

Here is Mackenzie’s version in full. As far as I know, it has never been translated before. In my translation I will omit *Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!* (‘Ho King! Ho King!’) but include everything else.

Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht’ e, beannaicht’ e!
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht’ e thàinig san àm.
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaich an taigh ’s na bheil ann,
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Eadar chuaille ’s chlach ’s chrann —
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Thugadh do Dhia e eadar bhrat ’s aodach
Slàinte dhaoine gun robh ann.

(Blessed be he, blessed be he! / Blessed be he who now has come, / Bless the house and all within, / Including stick and stone and beam — / He’s been given to God between cover and clothes / For mankind’s salvation.)

Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht’ e, beannaicht’ e!
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Guma buan mun tulach sibh,
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Guma slàn mun teallaich sibh,
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Guma lìonmhor cabar san fhardaich
’S daoine slàna a’ tàmh ann.

(Blessed be he, blessed be he! / May you and yours live forever round the hill, / May you and yours be safe round the hearth, / May many a rafter be in the house / And healthy people therein.)

*Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht' e, beannaicht' e!
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht' e, beannaicht' e!*

(Blessed be he, blessed be he! / Blessed be he, blessed be he!)

*Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Nochd Oidhche na Nollaige Móire,
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht' e, beannaicht' e!
Rugadh mac na h-Òighe Moire,
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht' e, beannaicht' e!
Ràinig a bhonnan an làr,
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht' e, beannaicht' e!
Shoillsich grian nam beann ard,
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht' e, beannaicht' e!
Shoillsich fearann, shoillsich fonn —
Chualas am fonn air an tràigh.*

(Tonight is the Eve of Big Christmas, / Blessed be he, blessed be he! / Born is the son of the Virgin Mary, / Blessed be he, blessed be he! / His soles have touched the ground, / Blessed be he, blessed be he! / The sun of the high hills has lit up, / Blessed be he, blessed be he! / Lit up country, lit up land — / On the strand has the melody been heard.)

*Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht' e, beannaicht' e!
Ho Rìgh! Ho Rìgh!
Beannaicht' mo Rìgh
Gun toiseach gun chrìch,
Gu suthainn, gu sìor,
Gach linn gu bràth!*

(Blessed be he, blessed be he! / Blessed be my King / Without beginning or end, / Forever, eternal, / In each age that's to come.)

In volume 1 of 'Carmina Gadelica', first published in 1900, Alexander Carmichael presents three more versions of "Beannaicht' E, Beannaicht' E", in the original and in translation. For no obvious reason other than the need to call them something, he entitles them 'Nuall Nollaig — Christmas Hail', 'Duan Nollaig — Christmas Carol', and 'Duan Nollaig — Christmas Chant'. "The three poems which follow," he says, "were taken down from Angus Gunn, Ness, Lewis, then over eighty-four years of age. Angus Gunn had been a strong man physically and was still a strong man mentally. He had lived for many years in the island of North Roney, and gave a graphic description of it, and of his life there. He had much oral lore which he told with great dramatic power."

The first of Gunn's three versions is very similar to Mackenzie's, but there are enough differences to set us a-thinking. Is it possible that the oft-repeated *beannaicht' e* refers not to Christ but to the house at New Year — 'let it be blessed'? Mackenzie has *Thugadh do Dhia e eadar bhrat 's aodach*, which I translated 'He has been given to God between cover and clothes', taking it to refer to Jesus lying between the coverlet and the bedclothes of the cradle; Carmichael has *Iomair do Dhia, eadar bhrat is aodach*, which he translates 'Consign it to God from coverlet to cover', taking it to refer to the house.

Mackenzie has *Chualas am fonn air an tràigh*, in which *fonn* reminded me of the chorus of angels, whereas in 'Nuall Nollaig — Christmas Hail' Carmichael has *Chualas an tonn air an tràigh*, in which *tonn* is 'wave' — 'Heard was the wave upon the strand', as Carmichael says, and it makes perfect sense, but what does it have to do with Christmas? The following stanza of 'Duan Nollaig — Christmas Carol' is the key to both.

*Shoillsich frìth dha, shoillsich fonn dha,
Nuall nan tonn le fonn nan tràigh
Ag innse dhuinne gun d'rugadh Crìost,
Mac Rìgh nan Rìgh á tìr na slàint';
Shoillsich grian nam beannaibh ard dha —
Ho ro, biodh aoibh!*

Carmichael translates it like this: 'The mountains glowed to Him, the plains glowed to Him, / The voice of the waves with the song of the strand, / Announcing to us that Christ is born, / Son of the King of kings from the land of salvation; / Shone the sun on the mountains high to Him, / All hail! let there be joy!'

By contrast, the third Gunn/Carmichael version, ‘Duan Nollaig — Christmas Chant’, reads very much more like a *duan Callaig* than a Christmas carol. There is nothing about the birth of Christ. *Beannaicht’ e!* could refer to either God or the house. The word which Carmichael translates as ‘Hail King!’ is *Hoire!* — is this what we would nowadays spell ‘Hurray’? Above all, it reads as a house-blessing from start to finish, and would sit comfortably with the tradition that is now called ‘first-footing’; the words *brat* and *aodach* each appear twice, and whatever exactly they may mean, it is clear that they refer to the plenishings or contents (the loom, perhaps?) of the Highland home. Here are two of the stanzas in original and translation exactly as in ‘Carmina Gadelica’.

*Beannaich an taigh ’s na bheil ann,
Eadar chuaille is chlach is chrann;
Imir do Dhia eadar bhrat is aodach,
Slainte dhaoine gun robh ann,
Hoire! hoire! beannaicht e! beannaicht e!*

(Bless this house and all that it contains, / From rafter and stone and beam; / Deliver it to God from pall to cover, / Be the healing of men therein, / Hail king! hail King! blessed is He! blessed is He!)

*Iobair dh ’an Ti eadar bhonn agus bhrat,
Eadar chuaille agus chlach agus chrann;
Iobair a ris eadar shlat agus aodach,
Slanadh shaoghal a dhaoine th’ ann,
Hoire! hoire! beannaicht e! beannaicht e!
Hoire! hoire! beannaicht e! beannaicht e!
Ho, hi, beannaicht an Rìgh,
Ho, hi, biodh aoibh!*

(Offer to the Being from found to cover, / Include stave and stone and beam; / Offer again both rods and cloth, / Be health to the people therein, / Hail King! hail King! blessed is He! blessed is He! / Hail King! hail King! blessed is He! blessed is He! / Ho, hail! blessed the King! / Let there be joy!)

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