

## Domhnall Ruadh's year

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ETHNOGRAPHY is the study of writings about a people. So Gaelic ethnography is the study of writings about Gaelic-speaking people. These articles of mine are about Gaelic ethnography in general, and about the Gaelic calendar in particular.

Now one of the big questions about Gaelic ethnography is, to what extent is poetry a source for it? It is a question that has hardly ever been asked, never mind answered. The only way to answer it is through a clearly-focused, systematic study of Gaelic poetry. This is something that I intend to present in this series from time to time.

I will begin by looking at the poetry of Donald Macintyre from Snishival in South Uist, that is, *Domhnall Ruadh Phàislig* or *Domhnall Ruadh mac Aonghais Ruaidh*, who lived from 1889 to 1964. I will concentrate this time on what he has to tell us about the calendar, although if a few other things get caught up in the net that is fine too. Then in another article I will come back to see what he has to tell us about ethnographic matters in general.

Macintyre is a good poet to start with because his work is very easy to get hold of. His poems were brought together in a book called 'Sporan Dhomhnaill', edited by the Rev. Somerled MacMillan for the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society and published by them in 1968. They amount to ten thousand lines, and it is wonderful stuff. He possessed a huge stock of words and idioms and a fluid, lyrical imagination of startling originality. How many people, struck down with flu at an advanced age, would think to say as he did,

*'S mi leaghadh air falbh, a' searg mar sheileach,  
Mar sgealb 's an teine air a ceann.*

(‘As I melt away, drooping like a willow, / Like a lump of peat with one end catching fire.’)

He worked for many years as a bricklayer in Paisley, and some of his best poems provide an incisive left-wing commentary on the events of the day. But it is the traditional calendar I am concerned with here, so I will simply work through the year from January to December as it is found in his verse, beginning with this description of New Year from his autobiographical ‘Sùil air Ais’:

*Nuair thigeadh a' Bhliadhn' Ùr oirnn  
Gur sinne bhiodh gu sunndach,  
Bhiodh gillean air an urlar  
Le smùid orra 'n dram  
'S inbhe air an cùlaibh  
Ag amharc air na lùigein  
A chrathadh iad le surd  
Ann an tionndadh an danns'.  
Nuair gheibheadh iad a' chiad té  
Bu mhath leo air am bialaibh,  
Bhiodh stàilleag aig na miaran  
'S car fiaradh 'nan ceann  
Le gliogairsich 's gàire  
Gun diog ann ach a' Ghàidhlig —  
Bidh cuimhn' agam gu bràth  
Air a' chàbraid bhiodh ann.*

(“When New Year came upon us / It's we who would be cheerful, / There'd be lads on the dance-floor / Who'd had a dram or two / With more mature ones behind them / Looking at the girls / Whom they'd handle with aplomb / In the turning of the dance. / When they'd get the favourite / That they wanted in front of them, / Their fingers would snap / And their heads would whirl / Amidst clattering and laughter / With not a word except Gaelic — / I'll remember forever / The fun there would be.”)

The month of January in Gaelic is *am Faoilteach*, or *am Faoilleach*, but when Domhnall Ruadh uses the word *faoilteach* it is in its original meaning of one of the first of the winds or weather-periods of late winter and early spring (precisely the time of year we have reached now). The term can be loosely translated ‘wolftime’ or ‘wolfwind’. In his poem in praise of Géideabhal or Goat Fell, more commonly known in Uist as Beinn Mhór, he tells the mountain:

*S ioma faoilteach a bhlaist ort  
Agus caochan thug claise 'nad ghruaidhean*

(“Many a wolfwind has tasted you / And many a streamlet has furrowed your cheeks”). By contrast, in his epic poem ‘Aeòlus agus am Balg’ (Aeolus and the Bellows) we meet the *faoilteach* as weather rather than wind:

*Cha robh ann ach fèath an fhaoiltich*

*Bu ghrad bhith a' caochladh cruth'.*

(“It was only the calm of the wolftime / Which would transform itself so quickly.”) But usually there is no distinction between wind and weather:

*Mar shneachd an là fhaoiltich  
Air aonach nam beann.*

(“Like the snow of a wolf-day / On the mountain plateau.”) And its meaning covers the hard time at the tail-end of winter and the beginning of spring, as in a song about the mysterious disappearance of a man called Donald Alastair MacLean from Kilbride:

*S ioma taigh a bhios gaoir ann,  
Dol an coinneamh an fhaoiltich,  
'S e gun ghollad, gun chaoran.  
Cò their connadh á aonach?  
Cò nì 'n talamh a shaothrachadh?  
Cò nì feamainn a sgaoileadh?  
'S cò nì treabhadh no taomadh buntàta?*

(“Many a house will know hardship / As the wolftime approaches, / Without thick peats or brittle ones. / Who'll bring fuel from the wilderness? / Who'll work the land? / Who'll spread the seaweed? / Who'll plough or sow potatoes in lazybeds?”)

A calendar term which Domhnall Ruadh is fond of using is *dùldachd*, the South Uist form of a word known elsewhere as *dubhlachd*. Nowadays it is used for the month of December, but in origin it seems to be connected in some way with the English word ‘doldrums’ and to signify weather that is dull, dark or still. So in a love-song to his wife called ‘Fhir a dhìreas am Bealach’, Domhnall Ruadh says:

*Gun rùisginn dhut gaoirdean an dùldachd an fhaoiltich  
Ri gnùise na gaoithe a b' fhaobharach greann.*

(“I'd bare arm for you in the doldrums of wolftime / In the face of the wind that was sharp-bladed and snarling.”) There is a distinct menace to the term. He uses it again in ‘Maighdeann a' Chùil dhualaich’:

*Mar bhios dùil ri samhradh  
Ann an dùldachd geamhraidh,  
Thig do ghnùis gun ghreann  
Mar dhlùthadh àm an earraich.*

(“Just as summer is longed for / In the doldrums of winter, / Your unscowling face comes / Like the onset of springtime.”)

The *faoilteach* is only the first of the winds of spring. There is also the *sguabag* or ‘sweeper’. As Domhnall Ruadh says in a wonderfully ethnographic satire called ‘Macphàil 's MacThómais’,

*Chan fhaicear air saod  
Dol a ghearradh maois',  
Ach na their am faoilteach  
'S an sguabag dha.*

(“He's never seen bustling / To cut any seaweed / Except what the wolfwind / And the sweeper bring in.”) MacThómais, in particular, is a lazy man, and his horse gets so hungry that:

*Cha chaisgeadh an sguabag  
Bho chnuasach nan lòn e.*

(“No sweeper could keep him / From rummaging in puddles.”) The next wind is the *gearran* or ‘cutter’. In ‘Aeòlus agus am Balg’, the crew of a storm-tossed ship pray to God saying,

*Réitich aodann na mara dhuinn  
'S caisg am faoilteach 's an gearran  
'S an sguabag.*

(“Still the face of the sea for us / And stifle the wolfwind and cutter / And sweeper.”) Like the *faoilteach*, the *gearran* was weather as well as wind:

*Cha toir earrach no samhradh  
Cis a' ghearrain 's a' gheamhraidh seo dhinn.*

(“Neither spring nor summer / Will remove the tax of this cutter and winter.”) The ‘tax’ in question is the death of King George VI, in an elegy commissioned from Domhnall Ruadh by the BBC. And the *gearran* eventually turned into February, the first month of spring.

*Tha 'n t-side cho doirbh tha 'n lorg an earraich  
Mum falbh an Gearran 's am Màrt,  
Nuair thig e le faoilteach, gaoth 's gailleann,  
Se taobh na cagailt' a b' fhearr.*

(“The weather’s so bad that spring brings with it / Before February and March are out, / When it comes with wolftime, wind and storm, / The best place is the side of the hearth.”)

The last of the winds of spring is the one called the *cailleach* or ‘hag’ which blew around *Latha Cailliche*, ‘Lady Day’, 25 March. She was often called the *cailleach bheur*, which was understood in Scotland to mean the ‘shrill-voiced hag’, although in reality her name goes a thousand years back in Irish literature and folklore to the *cailleach Béara* or old wife of Beare, which is a place in West Cork. Domhnall Ruadh’s mention of her comes in a stanza about Roderick MacNeil of Barra, who resorted to piracy during the reign of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, thus demonstrating one of the reasons why the traditional Gaelic verse of that era is full of references to luxury goods like wine, silk, swords, linen and beeswax from Galway, from France and from Spain.

*Bhiodh Ruairidh air reubainn  
Air uachdar Cuan Éireann  
Le luath-luing bu gheur  
'S bu réidh-shleamhainn bord;  
Muir gruamach ag éirigh  
Mu guailleann 's mu sléistnean,  
'S an fhuar chailleach bheur  
Cumail séideag 'na seòl.*

(“Roderick used to plunder / On the Ocean of Ireland / With his swift sharp-prowed ship / Of smooth-sliding timbers — / A surly sea rising / About her shoulders and thighs / As the cold shrill-voiced hag / Kept a breeze in her sail.”)

Domhnall Ruadh and his people were Catholic, and they clearly liked to have something special on the table before and after Lent. He laments:

*Tha sinn gun bhuntàta,  
Chan eil im no càise,  
Chan eil giadh no ràcan  
Bhios air Càisg no Inid.*

(“We have no potatoes, / No butter or cheese, / There’ll be no goose or drake / For Easter or for Shrovetide.”) St Patrick’s, too, was a landmark of the year. In ‘Sùil air Ais’:

*Se casan a bhiodh cràiteach  
San earrach mu Fhéill Pàdraig  
Le sgagaidhean 's gàgan  
A' sgàineadh gu'm buinn.*

(“Feet would be painful / In spring about St Patrick’s / With open cracks and hacks / Bursting to their bases.”) And the poet was quick to remind the lazy MacThómais of the masses of seaweed waiting to be cut for fertiliser at that time of year.

*Reothairt na Féill Pàdraig  
Bu chòir dha  
Gun gearradh e na tràigheanan  
Comhnard.*

(“At the spring-tide of St Patrick’s / He should / Cut the beaches down / Level.”)

Domhnall Ruadh mentions one other festival from the first half of the year, and that is *a' Chaingis*, Whitsunday. The context is of great ethnographic interest, because it illustrates the revulsion felt by an older generation in the Highlands and Islands at the idea of eating eels. ‘Òran nan Easgannan’, the Song of the Eels, celebrates a mix-up that resulted when Alexander Morrison (*Alastair Mór mac Aonghais Ruaidh*) bought some eels from Donald Ferguson, merchant, Lochboisdale. The van-man delivered the bag of eels to the wrong *mac Aonghais Ruaidh*, namely our poet, who blithely accepted it, but got a torrent of abuse from his father and his eldest sister. ‘I’ll give this in translation only. “My father flew into a rage, / Seized his four-cornered stick, / And said, ‘Put them out of my sight / Before they bring us fever or plague; / Hit the dunghill till morning, / Don’t come near the house / And don’t show me your face / Till your clothes are washed tomorrow / And you get clean.”’ The eels were rotten anyway, but in the face of such prejudice, the poet rose to their defence.

*Sin thuirt mise ri Flòraidh,  
'Éist òinseach 's bi sàmhach,  
Iasg as fhearr thig á fairge,  
Théid móran airgid ga phàigheadh;  
Ceithir bliadhna na Caingis  
Bhon thug an t-sreang às a' charn iad —  
Gur iad tha math air an sailleadh!  
Sann orm tha sgath gu buntàta,  
Tog air a' phrais.'*

(“Then I said to Flora, / ‘Listen daftie and be quiet, / The best fish in the sea, / It costs a lot of money; / It’s four years come Whitsun / Since they were hooked from the sea-bed — / How well they’ve been salted! / I’m dying for potatoes, / Put on the pot.”)

Young Donald spent the night freezing on the dunghill, and had to have a bath to get rid of the smell, not to mention the disgrace of accepting another person’s property.

The year can be quickly finished. In his old age the poet used seasonal terms to describe the stages of his life.

*S fhad bhon dh'fhàg mi earrach m' ùine,  
Tha mo shamhradh air mo chùlaibh;  
Thàinig geamhradh dubh na dùldachd,  
Dh'fhalbh mo Lùnastal 's mo Dhàmhair.*

(“It’s long since I departed the spring of my time, / My summer’s behind me; / The black winter of the doldrums has come, / My August has gone, and my October.”) And finally there is a poem made in Paisley in wartime. He says:

*Tha gach nì cho gann  
Bhon thàinig àm na dùldachd.*

(“Everything’s so scarce / Since the doldrums time arrived.”) Clearly *dùldachd* here is the back end of the year, because a parcel then arrives from Uist and he rejoices:

*Fhuair mi aig an doras  
Roinn de chaora Nollaig —  
S fheairrde broinn mo cholainn  
Sgolaidhean dhe sùghadh!*

(“I got at the door / A joint of Christmas mutton — / My stomach will enjoy / The juices of its gravy!”)

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