

### The eclectic tradition-bearer

#### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

*THA fear-òraid sa bhaile seo shuas againn  
'S chan eil seanchaidh san dùthaich a shuathas ris —  
Bha mi raoir aig' air chéilidh  
'S chuir e 'n tàthadh a-chéile  
Na thug barradh gu léir air na chuala mi.*

(There's an orator in our township up here / That no shennachie in the country can equal — / I visited him last night / And what he placed side by side / Quite excelled all I'd ever heard previously.) This is the start of a poem by the Rev. Colin MacKenzie from Harris, who died a couple of years ago. It was published in 'Gairm' in 1965. It goes on:

*Bha 'bhreithneachadh domhainn gu rannsachadh  
Gach gné chàis mu'm bi daoine ri connsachadh —  
An robh gaiseadh 'thaobh nàdair  
Sa chrodh chaol chunnaic Phàroh,  
'S dé tha bacadh muir làn aig na conntraighean?*

(His mind was profound for dissecting / Each question that folk like to speak about — / Did the lean cows that Pharaoh saw / Have some natural failing, / And what restrains the ocean at neaptides?) It is a poem very like one by Domhnall Ruadh Phàislig which I described on this page a few years ago, except that in Maighstir Cailean's poem the eclectic tradition-bearer is a man in Uig, Lewis, while in Domhnall Ruadh's it is two women in South Uist. It goes on:

*Fhuair mi eòlas air nithean bha 'n duathar orm —  
Mar a chailleadh Clach Sgàin 's mar a fhuaras i,  
Cuin a thogadh Tùr Bhàbail,  
Cia lìon troigh a bha dh'aird air,  
'S gun robh cungaidh chum slàinte sa bhuaghalan.*

(I found out about things that were unclear to me — / How the Stone of Scone was lost then retrieved again, / When the Tower of Babel was erected, / How many feet high it measured, / And how the ragweed was a curative treatment.)

The reason I am interested in these two poems is very like the reason I am interested in the history of fairs and markets. It is a commonplace in writing about the Highlands and Islands to claim that these parts were largely ignorant of both trade and education. For example, a senior official in Oliver Cromwell's customs and excise service, Thomas Tucker, described Strathnaver, Assynt and the Western Isles in 1655 as "places mangled with many arms of the Western Sea, imbosoming itself within many parts thereof, and destitute of all trade, being a country stored with cattle, craggy hills, and rocks, and planted with the ancient Scots or wild Irish, whose garb and language they do still retain amongst them". It is certainly true that very little trade went on that was known to the Customs and Excise; this was because for long periods foreign trade was in the hands of Highland chiefs, Galway merchants and Dutch skippers, any or all of whom might well be designated the King's (or Cromwell's) enemies at any given time, while domestic trade depended not on currency but on barter, and took place at myriad little fairs and markets uncontrolled by any Act of Parliament. It is a mistake to claim that trade did not exist when there is every reason to believe that it was deliberately kept clear of written record.

It is the same with education. It is quite normal to say that until the SSPCK (Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge) was set up in 1709 'for the advancement of education in the Highlands and Islands', there were no schools at all. And technically that is true. But what is overlooked is that every Gaelic-speaking community had its céilidh-house, and that the céilidh-house was an educational institution well in advance of its time. It functioned simultaneously as school, university, technical college, council chamber and concert hall; a by-product was 'Men's Day', *Latha na Ceiste* at communions. It had **one** important feature in common with the schools of the time, **four** important features in common with the state schools of today, and **one** vitally important feature which it did not share with either sort of school. I will list these in turn.

First, in common with the schools of the time, it operated on a seasonal basis — essentially during the winter months, when children could be spared from domestic and agricultural labour. Next, the four features in common with the state schools of today:

- Children were not whipped or humiliated for speaking Gaelic or failing to remember their lessons.
- These were community education centres in which children and adults learned together.
- To the best of my knowledge, girls and boys learned as equals.
- The quality of learning did not depend on the strengths and weaknesses of one individual, for visiting specialists came around regularly and were eagerly listened to.

And finally, that vital feature that sets the céilidh-house apart from schools ancient and modern: the fundamental means of imparting knowledge was not reading and writing backed up by printed books, but oral transmission backed up by the power of memory. In this respect, when the céilidh-house gave way to schools there were equal gains and losses. Reading and writing are very powerful tools, but so too are oral communication and a strong memory. As long

as the Gael had **both** céilidh-house and school, he could conquer the world — and, my goodness, considering the history of the world in the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, he very nearly did.

Even more fascinating however is the thought that, as education now becomes more visual, more skills-oriented and inter-personal, with basic literacy and numeracy giving way to the ability to conjure a result from a computer screen or a calculator, and great encouragement being given at last to oral and communication skills, it can be argued that the principles of a céilidh-house education are coming back into relevance. This is especially true as we try to devise ways of nurturing rural communities back to health and strength. For the céilidh-house taught community values, while the school taught the values of the world. I was very struck the other day by these words, ascribed in his autobiography by the Very Rev. Dr Norman MacLean (Braes, Skye) to the Victorian educationist the Rev. Dr Kenneth Mackenzie: “Open the eyes of the young to the opportunities the wide world affords, and they would not continue to scratch the living out of the barren soil of the heathery hillsides.” Such slogans were only too successful, and our need today is to find ways of putting them into reverse.

A virtue of the céilidh-house, as Maighstir Cailean’s poem seems to suggest, was that it had the community at its centre but radiated out to the whole world. It goes on:

*Thug e tarraing air sgeul Mhic an t-Srònaich dhomh —  
Mar a bhiodh e am falach 's an tòir ac' air,  
Mar chaidh Eilidh a léireadh  
Le droch chuilbheartain Bhénuis  
'S mar thug gaisgich na Gréige á Tròas i.*

(He mentioned the story of Stronach to me — / How he hid when his pursuers were following him, / How Helen was tormented / By Venus’ evil intentions / And was brought out from Troy by the Grecian warriors.) So Mac an t-Srònaich, on the run in Lewis, fades into Helen of Troy. This is something that a standardised modern education system finds very difficult — for example, even ‘O’ Grade History through the medium of Gaelic has to follow an appallingly London/Lowland-centred curriculum which consigns the Highlands and Islands to one periphery and the rest of the world to the other. School education has marginalised the Gael even in his own mind — during the course of the past week I was forced to listen to an exiled Sgitheanach calling himself ‘eccentric’ and an exiled Tiristeach calling himself ‘peculiar’. Both men, in my view, were perfectly normal in every respect except their own perception that they were not.

Maighstir Cailean’s marvellous poem has nineteen stanzas, so I am certainly not going to quote it all here. I’ll skip the fifth and give you the sixth, because it shows the geography going nicely into reverse.

*Cia lìon ainmhidh rinn Nòah a shàbhaladh  
'S ciamar chum e rian anns an Àirc orra,  
Mar a thàinig Sliochd Mhìlidh  
Às an Spàinn roimh an dùile,  
'S gun robh coilich gun chirein am Bearnraigh ac'.*

(He knew how many animals Noah had rescued / And how he had the Ark organised below decks, / How the Milesians came / From antediluvian Spain / And that they had cocks without combs in Bernera.) The Milesians were the legendary ancestors of the Gael, and it’s important to know who your people were (or thought they were).

Of course the poem is a satire and a brilliant bit of fun, and no doubt some of this sennachie’s *seanchas* came out of schoolbooks in the first place, but I believe it is one of many building-blocks that can help us build up a full picture of the traditional céilidh-house. Domhnall Ruadh’s poem is another, and Carmichael’s introduction to ‘Carmina Gadelica’ is another. The point is that here was a general education. Among the subjects our poem mentions, we have already met biblical studies, tides, Scottish history, medicine, Lewis history, classical mythology, Celtic mythology and poultry. It also ranges through the history of the Papacy, gastronomy, contemporary issues, nonconformism, natural history, horology, Egyptology, 20th-century Europe and the supernatural. And we encounter the *Marie Celeste*, Duns Scotus and Montezuma. The poem ends with a comment that reminds us of the most important difference between the book learning of the poet and the oral learning of his subject.

*Se mo bharaill ged dh’fhanaim gu sìorraidh ann  
Nach biodh traoghadh air comhradh a’ chrìostaidh ud,  
'S gum bi farsaingeachd 'eòlais  
'Na chùis iongnaidh ri m' bheò leam —  
Ged a-nis tha 'chuid mhór dheth air dhìochuimhn' orm!*

(I do believe if I’d stayed till eternity / That good man’s talk would still not have ebbed on him, / And I’ll marvel for always / At the breadth of his knowledge — / Though I forget quite a lot of it already!)

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