

## From *seanachas* to shoes

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A FEW weeks ago I discussed the idea of using verse as a source for ‘Gaelic ethnography’, the study of writings about Gaelic-speaking people. I would like to continue that theme today.

I began by looking at the poems of Donald Macintyre from Snishival in South Uist (*Domhnall Ruadh Phàislig*, 1889-1964, whose work was published by the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society in 1968 as ‘Sporan Dhomhnaill’) as a source for information about the calendar. That served as a taster.

The next stage must be to look over his ethnographic content as a whole to see what other types of information there are. That will allow the setting up of matrix of categories organised in some kind of logical order.

After that, the next stage will be to test our matrix against the work of other poets, adding, merging or redefining categories as necessary until we have built some kind of framework suitable for holding, examining and presenting the ethnographic content of Scottish Gaelic verse as a whole. I am talking about a computer database, of course, but that is in the future.

What I have done so far is this. I have copied out everything ‘ethnographic’ in Domhnall Ruadh’s poems. First I extracted everything to do with the calendar. Then I juggled the rest about on the computer, categorising it all by a process of elimination. ‘Material culture’ emerged, then ‘superstition’, ‘panegyric code’, and ‘meteorology’. What was left resolved itself into ‘way of life’ and ‘other’, and finally I realised that ‘other’ could be nicely comprehended under the old name ‘seanachas’.

These were my seven categories. I think they work for Domhnall Ruadh. The only thing I am unsure about is what to do with his great céilidh-house poem, *Thug mi ’n oidhche raoir glé shàmhach* — ‘I spent last night very quiet’ — which I discussed on this page on 13 January 1989. It is very like Colin MacKenzie’s poem ‘An Seanchaidh’ which I discussed two weeks ago. They are both ethnographic from start to finish, but whether they belong in ‘way of life’ (because the céilidh-house was part of people’s way of life) or ‘seanachas’ (because that is what they actually consist of) I’m not sure. Probably the latter. But the best thing in such cases is to take the scientific approach — suspend judgement until you have a bigger sample, because the categories might change anyway.

Let me now present my seven categories.

**Panegyric code.** This is the collective name given by Dr John MacInnes to the images used and re-used in traditional Gaelic praise poetry. I am using the term here for just one kind of image — a placename qualified by a descriptive phrase, for example *Uibhist an eorna* ‘Uist of the barley’. Domhnall Ruadh does this fifteen times. The effect can be highly poetic, for example *Eilean Uibhist nan cluan seamragach*, ‘the Isle of Uist of the primrose meadows’, although it can be argued that simplicity is best — *Uibhist nam bó* ‘Uist of the cows’. There is also *Cuan Uibhist an eorna*, ‘the Sea of Uist of the barley’, and only twice does he (1,676) both times to *Muille nam mor-bheann*, ‘Mull of the great mountains’.

**Seanachas.** A hard word to translate, but the examples I have collected suggest a definition like ‘history, mythology and traditional wisdom’. There is also naming practices, for example under ‘seanachas’ I have noted the name *Cille Bhànain*, which I suspect refers to a saint who got his name from the sea-god Manannan mac Lir. For history, I would point to a song made by Domhnall Ruadh for the present queen at the time of her coronation, in which he speaks of Alexander II King of Scots, who died of a fever in Kerrera off Oban in 1249 when asserting his claim on the Western Isles against that of the King of Norway.

*Chaidh Alastair an Cearraraigh,  
Triath agus ceannabaidh ar seòrsa,  
A shloinneadh a-nìos gar n-ionnsaigh  
'S cha b'ann le beith-luis ri ògham  
Ach le Gàidhlig mhilis bhlasta  
Nan laoch gasta chleachd bho tòs i.*

‘Alexander in Kerrera, / The lord and leader of our race, / Was traced back up to ourselves / And not by spelling with the alphabet / But with the sweet tasteful Gaelic / Of the heroic warriors who used it from its beginning.’ This is a very fundamental piece of ‘seanachas’. It asserts the Gaelic origins of the Queen’s dynasty, for Domhnall Ruadh was clearly referring to the coronation of Alexander III later in 1249, at which it was said by a chronicler, “King Alexander then, mere boy as he was, seated under a canopy on the stone chair in the cathedral, and clothed in costly robes, was anointed by the Archbishop of St Andrews. And lo! a certain Scot of the mountains, such as they call a Wild Scot, hoary with age, then appears in presence of the nobles, and in these words, spoken in his native tongue, salutes King Alexander: Benach De Re Albin Alexander, mak Alexander, mak William, mak Henry, mak David. And thus he declared the genealogy of the king up to its first beginning, all in the Irish tongue, and not in the English spoken by us southern Scots . . . Man by man, without a break, this said Wild Scot recounted the said genealogy, until he arrived at the first Irish Scot who, setting out from the Ebro, a river of the Spains, was the first to set foot in Ireland.”

Note that Domhnall Ruadh is careful to assert the precedence of oral tradition, of ‘seanachas’, over the written word, especially when the latter involves translation. So ‘sweet tasteful Gaelic’ (*Gàidhlig mhilis bhlasta*) is more reliable than ‘spelling with the alphabet’ (*beith-luis ri ògham*). He uses these words *beith*

(birch, the letter B) and *luis* (rowan or quicken, the letter L) in another poem, ‘Moladh nam Bard Uibhisteach’, like this:

*Le beith, luis, agus ògham  
Fhuair iad eòlas a leughadh.*

(‘With B, L and spelling / They learned how to read it.’) There is much more to ‘seanchas’ than this, of course. There are the phrases that constitute the graces of the Gaelic language, like *a Luan ’s a Dhomhnaich*, ‘of Monday and of Sunday’, meaning all the time. There are references to stories and to the figures of mythology, like

*Cha robh Fear Eabaid le luirg  
No Builfheartach thar chuain*

‘Neither the Man of Habit with his staff / Nor the sea-crossing Muilgheartach’. The Muilgheartach or ‘Builfheartach’ was a one-eyed giantess who personified the sea in its ugly moods. Finally we have the Creative Literature lesson:

*Mura seinn thu dhuinn dàn  
Mu thìr nam beann ard’  
Chan eil annad ach bard balbhanach.*

‘If you sing us no poem / Of the high mountain land / You’re nothing but a dumb poet.’ A dumb poet! For Gaelic, a total contradiction in terms. All these quotes were from different poems, demonstrating that ‘seanchas’ is a valid category. Perhaps, on reflection, it could be defined as ‘a céilidh-house education’, as opposed to *foghlam*, ‘a school-house education’.

My other categories won’t take so much explaining. **Superstition** can be described perhaps as ‘seanchas’ taken out of the céilidh-house and affecting people’s beliefs. In ‘Aeòlus agus am Balg’, for instance, we have this version of a common saying:

*Mhionnaich i nach tigeadh rath orr’ —  
Iomraich Shathairne no Luan.*

‘She swore that luck they’d never bring — / A Saturday or Monday flitting.’ In ‘Iarraidh Dhomhnaill Alastair’ the poet wonders if the lost Domhnall Alastair has been brought by the fairies into the *sìthein* or borne aloft by the *sluagh* or fairy host and dumped far away. And in ‘An Coileach a chaidh air Chall sa Phosta’ there is a wonderful description of a cailleach (Anna Nic Suain or *Anna nighean Iain Mhóir*, who came from Howmore but lived latterly at Stoneybridge) who made spells with threads and incantations to counteract the evil eye.

*An àm bhith dèanamh an t-snàthainn  
Bhiodh dath a’ bhàis air a bilean  
Gus e bhith ceart.*

‘When working the magic thread / She’d get the colour of death in her lips / Making it right.’

Charms and cures go together and it would be hard to know whether to draw a line between them, but medical matters don’t feature in Domhnall Ruadh’s poems, so the question can be set aside for now. The science that does interest him is **meteorology**. ‘Aeòlus agus am Balg’ contains a wonderful passage in which Pàdraig Mór goes out in the morning to check the weather, reads the signs offered by the sky, the birds of the air, the sheep and the movement of the sea, and knows that a storm is coming. And if ‘Aeòlus agus am Balg’ is the weather demonised, ‘Gaoth an-Iar’ is a meteorological praise poem setting out in detail the qualities of the West Wind.

**Calendar** I dealt with before, and it leads on naturally I think to **way of life**, as represented by evocative passages like this from ‘Uibhist an Eorna’:

*Air latha na féille ’s gum b’ éibhinn leam à,  
Bhiodh nuallan na spréidh’ ag éirigh an aird;  
Mnathan ’s fir ann a’ tighinn ás gach cearn —  
Bho Rubh’ an Taigh Mhàil gu Grìminis.*

‘On the day of the fair I enjoyed it so much, / The lowing of cattle would rise upon high; / Women and men on their way from each district — / From the Point of the Rent House to Grìminish.’ This category features in ‘Aeòlus agus am Balg’ in the form of Pàdraig Mór’s morning devotions before going out to check the weather, but ‘Sùil air Ais’ is a way-of-life poem almost from start to finish — the poet looks back on his childhood to describe his clothing, physical condition, the effect of the cold, their food, and all the mischief that he and the other boys got up to. He also describes a New Year’s dance (which belongs perhaps at ‘calendar’) and mentions the céilidh-house (which belongs perhaps at ‘seanchas’):

*Chan fhanamaid bhon chéilidh*

*Far 'n cluinneamaid an sgeul  
Ris an éisteamaid balbh.*

'We'd never miss the céilidh / Where we'd hear the story / To which we'd listen dumb.'

The final category is **material culture**. When Pàdraig Mór has checked the weather-signs and made his diagnosis, the detailed technical account that follows of how he battens things down for the storm is material culture. 'MacPhàil 's MacThómais', a satire on two lazy crofters, deals with their personal appearance, clothing, house, cattle, other stock, house, fuel, peatcutting, basketwork, horse, digging, seaweed-cutting, fishing and shellfish-gathering, in that order. Clearly it comes close at times to 'way of life', and clearly it is a big category that might benefit from subdivision — internal, external and animals, perhaps? Food, fuel and clothing? 'Material culture' is a huge subject, and verse like Domhnall Ruadh's is a fruitful source for it, so I'll pick it up another time, and content myself just now by quoting a couple of stanzas from 'Mar thuit an t-Each' about this poor old horse that collapsed on the road.

*Thuirte fear a mhuinntir Staoinebrig,  
"Tha earball air 's tha gaoisid ann,  
'S an corr chan eil ri fhaotainn air  
A b' fhiach do dhaoine dhol 'na chòir."*

'There said a man from Stoneybridge, / "He's got a tail with horsehair in it, / But of the rest there's nothing to be had / To make it worth going near him."

*Ach thuirte fear dhe na h-iasgairean,  
"Tha seiche tha fuathasach fiachar air,  
'S ma reiceas tu ri griasaiche i  
Sann bhios i 'm-bliadhna dèanamh bhròg."*

'But there said one of the fishermen, / "He's got a very decent hide on him, / And if you sell it to a shoemaker / It can be making shoes within a year."

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