

All the way from baking to weaving

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THIS article I would like to push forward the question of how to assess the usefulness of Gaelic poetry as a source for material culture. As before, I am using the poetry of Donald Macintyre from South Uist, *Domhnall Ruadh Phàislig*, as my sample.

Cookery is an example of material culture, and I must say I feel like one of those TV chefs who say, “Here’s one I prepared earlier.” Before starting the article I identified every passage of Domhnall Ruadh’s verse that could be described as ‘material culture’, then I went through these passages giving each topic a label of its own — clothing, living conditions, house, thatch and so on.

Now when I last discussed the ethnography of Gaelic verse I remarked that material culture was such a big subject that it might benefit from subdivision. “Internal, external and animals, perhaps? Food, fuel and clothing?” Of course life isn’t as simple as that — the same objects and animals can move indoors and outdoors, sheep provide us with both food and clothing, and anyway there are many other categories.

Domhnall Ruadh’s poems alone seemed to offer about forty categories, in fact. Everything from baking and basketry to transport and weaving. And a few others suggested themselves, items such as guns and woodworking which don’t seem to be mentioned by Domhnall Ruadh but which would be bound to feature in any survey of material culture in Gaelic verse as a whole. That increased the number of categories to about fifty. How was I to impose some kind of order on such a mass of miscellaneous information?

Well, first I brought together, under what seemed to be the key-word in each case, some items which appeared to have a natural affinity — **cattle**, byre, herding, for example; **corn-drying**, kiln; **fertilising**, dunghill, seaweed; **fish**, fishing, fishing-tackle; and so on. That reduced the total number of categories to 38.

Then I tried to find a few umbrella terms which would each cover anything between half-a-dozen and a dozen of the 38 categories, and these are what I came up with: ANIMALS, COMMODITIES, ENVIRONMENTS, OBJECTS, PROCESSES. Here then is a categorisation of material culture which seems to work for Domhnall Ruadh’s verse and a little more besides. Let me now list the categories in each of the five groups and give one or two examples of each.

Under ANIMALS we have: **cattle**, byre, herding; **dogs**; **fish**, fishing, fishing-tackle; **goats**; **horses**, harness, stable; **poultry**; **sheep**, shearing, wool-working. Domhnall Ruadh has examples of all of these except goats and wool-working. Here is an item that comes up under ‘sheep’: the *minicneag* or lambskin which is placed under the horse’s packsaddle.

*Nì e plàta théid fon t-srathair
Air son tarraing na mònachd
'S i air minicneag, molt beannach,
A thiormaich air aradh
Far na thilgeadh i 's t-earrach
Nuair a ghearradh a' chlàimh dhith.
Molach bhon deamhais
A laigheas gu comhnard,
Seasgair le clumhtaich
Ri seiche na brùideadh.
Am-feasta cha dùthchas dhi
Rùsgadh no tòcadh,
Aotrom ri giùlan
Air aonach no ùtraid.*

(Under the packsaddle goes a straw mat he’s made / For bringing home the peats / Over a horned wedder’s lambskin / That’s dried out upon the rafters / Where it was thrown in spring / When shorn of its wool. / Left shaggy by the shears, / It lies quite flat, / Snug with fur lining / Against the animal’s hide. / It’s never inclined / To grind away or ruffle up, / And it’s light to carry / On mountain or township road.)

Under COMMODITIES we have: **dyes**; **food (general)**, famine; **fuel**, peat; **heather**; **milk** and milk products; **potatoes**, lazybeds; **shellfish**. Domhnall Ruadh has all of these except dyes. I decided fish were animals but that shellfish were commodities; I think the makers of traditional verse, who regarded fish as noble and shellfish as ignoble, would have agreed quite strongly with this. But, says Domhnall Ruadh,

*Bhiodh an sitigean làn
Dhe na sligean 's càir dhearg orra.*

(Their dunghills would be full / Of limpet shells red from roasting.)

*'Bhliadhna ghais am buntàt',
S mise dh'fhaodadh a ràdh,
Fhuair am maorach an dà shearbhadh dheth.*

(In the year of potato blight, / It’s I who could say it, / Bitter shellfish were tasted twice over.)

*Cha robh portan ri tràigh
Nach do chochlaich 'nan ràimh —
Chuir a' ghorta 's gach cearn fargradh orr'.*

(All the crabs of the shores / Went into shell in their oars — / Universal starvation reported them.)

*Chaidh na bairnich air chrith
Leis a' ghàir a bha muigh,
Och, a bhràithrean, thig sgrìos marbhaidh oirnn!*

(The barnacles shivered / At the cry heard outside, / O brothers, massacre will befall us!)

*Cha robh nàdarrachd glic
Chuir am fàs sinn air lùc
Ann an sàs far an ruig sgealb oirnn.*

(Mother nature was not wise / To set us growing on slabs / Placed where hammer can reach us.)

Under ENVIRONMENTS we have: **house; living conditions**, lighting; **personal hygiene; plinishings; shieling; thatch**. It seemed sensible to bring these domestic items together, and 'environments' is as good a word as any. Domhnall Ruadh has all of these categories, and is particularly good on living conditions.

*S iomadh fardach gun loinn
Air bheag airneis 'na broinn
Bha eadar Arainn 's Beinn Charbhaig,*

(Countless dwellings without pride / With little furniture inside / Existed from Arran to Beinn Charbhaig.)

*Far am biodh an sparr-ghaoith
A' cur thairis le sùith
'S nach do ghlanadh bho linn Charmaig i.*

(With the cross-joint of their roof / Overflowing with soot / And never cleaned since the rule of King Cormac.)

*Gum b'e 'n t-urlar am poll
Air a stampadh fo 'm bonn,
Ach gun crathadh iad tonn ghainmhich air,*

(The floor was just mud / Stamped underfoot, / Save that they'd shake a dash of sand on it.)

*Agus fraighnigh 'na sruth
Leis na ballachan dubh' —
An rud as lugh' orra 'n-diugh ainmeachadh!*

(And dampness streamed / Down the sooty walls — / Which today they're most loth to mention!)

Under OBJECTS we have: **boats; clothing; fixtures; guns; implements; ropes and lines**. Domhnall Ruadh has all of these except guns. I must admit I am a bit unhappy about separating 'personal hygiene' from 'clothing', so perhaps the latter should come under 'environments' instead? 'Fixtures' and 'ropes and lines' come mostly from a marvellous account of how a crofter went about battening things down before a storm.

*Fhuair e greim air ceirsle shìomain,
Ghreas e chas 's ghnìomh e làmh,
Sheall e air arbhar 's air iodhlainn,
Dh'acraich e mulain ri làr.*

(He seized a coil of heather rope / And with hurried step and busy hand / Checked his corn and checked his stackyard, / Anchoring cornstacks to the ground.)

*Chuir e fìaragan mu'n timcheall
Nach biodh iomagain air 'na sgàth
Ma bha Dia ga fhaicinn iomchaidh
'S gun robh ioma-ghaothach an dàn.*

(Around them he put slant lines / In order not to worry / In the event that God saw fit / To introduce a whirlwind.)

*Air am fìaradh 's air an tarsainn
Cha robh gainne air sìoman fraoich,*

*'S cha robh lùb gun ultach cloiche
Innte an crochadh air gach taobh.*

(Slanting and crossing over / Without stint of heather rope / While every loop had its weight of stone / Suspended from it on each side.)

Finally, under PROCESSES we have: **baking; basketry; corn-drying**, kiln; **fertilising**, dunghill, seaweed; **harvesting**, hay; **leatherwork**, shoes; **metalwork; ploughing**, digging; **sowing; transport; weaving; woodworking**. Domhnall Ruadh has all of these except metalwork, ploughing, sowing and woodworking, and he is magnificent on basketry. But here to conclude is what he has to say in three different poems about three forms of transport in use in his day (1889-1964) — slipe (sledge), horseback and “Shanks’s pony”.

*Gum b’e ’n t-srathair ’s na cléibh
Inneal thairrnidh nan steud —
Cha robh ’n carn ach gu glé ainmig ann.*

(Pack-saddle and creels / Were the horse-powered traction — / The slipe was seldom employed.)

*S iomadh aon anns na bailtean
Gun ghearran gun chapall
Cho math ri MacThómais —
Na crìostaidhean bochd’ ud
A lìonas am poca
'S a chàireas air bota
Ri an croit ann an ròp e.*

(Many in the townships / Lack a garron or pony / As well as MacThómais — / Those wretched human beings / Who fill up their bag / And prop it on a peat-bank / In a rope against their back.)

*Beannaich an dà phoca chaoran
'S an t-sopag fhraoich ’s gum bu lùigeach
Mì gan tarraing air mo dhronnaig
À Gleann Chill Donnain le sùgan.*

(Bless the two bags of brittle peats / And the heather roots I staggered / From Kildonan Glen with / All tied by rope upon my back.)

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