

The Highland welfare state

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I WAS very taken with a comment made recently by Alastair McIntosh, of Edinburgh University's now-to-be-axed Centre for Human Ecology. Referring in an article in 'Scotland on Sunday' to the beliefs of Mahatma Gandhi and of the Scottish people as a whole, he remarked that "the yardstick of civilisation is how a society treats its poor".

I believe that this is very true, and the phrase struck a major chord with me because I began to notice a long time ago that traditional Gaelic praise poetry refers again and again to what I call the 'welfare state' of the kindred. For example, the Kintyre poet William MacMurchy called the MacDonalds

*An fhine bu teinne ri dòrainn
'S nach iomaireadh foirneart air fainne.*

('The kindred most cohesive in hardship / And who'd never oppress the weak.') That was said about 1750, but for a hundred years and more before that, the Highland welfare state had always been described specifically in terms of the social contract that existed between the leader and his people. In other words, the chief was first among equals; he was placed in command of his people and charged with the twin duties of leading them in war and protecting their interests in peace. The details of the contract are laid out in the poetry in a manner which is wonderfully flexible in literary terms but very consistent and well-defined with regard to themes. The 'welfare state' is just one of many themes, but it is a fundamental one. So for example around 1710, toward the end of a song of praise to Allan of Clanranald (or perhaps to his brother Ronald) Iain Dubh mac Iain mhic Ailein spoke of the chief's military responsibilities in both defence and attack, then:

*Ga mhéid 's gun cost thu chùisean ris
Chan fhaic thu dìth air tuathanach;
Do bhantraichean 's do dhilleachdain,
On se do nì-se dh'fhuasglas orr',
Dèanamaid urnaigh dhìcheallach
Gun cum an Rìgh a-suas duinn thu.*

('No matter how much tax you spend on it / You'll let no tenant suffer want; / For widows and for orphans, / Since it's your wealth that maintains them, / Let us pray with earnestness / That the Lord keep you in health for us.') And that is the flourish with which the poem ends.

Tenants, widows, orphans — these are three of the most clearly defined categories, and we may add two more, the homeless and the disabled. Let me give one or two examples of each, beginning with tenants. In an elegy on Sir Lachlan MacLean of Duart, who died in 1649, Eachann Bacach said:

*Cha b'e fuath mhic a' mhàile
Fear do shnuaidh theachd 'na fhardaich.*

('No-one owing rent had any horror / Of the man of your countenance entering his dwelling.') The tenant is here picturesquely called *mac a' mhàile* 'the son of rent'. More usually he is referred to as a *tuathanach*, a word which we would be inclined to translate nowadays as 'farmer', as in this by Lachann mac Thearlaich Òig to MacKinnon of Strath about 1695:

*Cha do thog sinn riamh bó Shamhna dhuit,
An àm Bealltainn cha do léibh,
Cha mhó thug oich air tuathanach —
Bu mhó do thruas ri 'm feum.*

('We've never exacted a Hallowe'en cow for you, / Nor levied one at Beltane, / Nor have we persecuted a tenant — / Great was your sympathy for their need.') The poet has put this statement in the mouths of *Iochd* and *Gràdh* and *Fiùghantas*, Mercy and Love and Charity, as a means of reinforcing the ideals of the welfare state, hence the use of the first person plural; we learn from them of what sounds like a very ancient privilege of exacting a cow at Beltane and Hallowe'en, which demonstrates very well that Gaelic society, like any other, experienced the tensions of differing attitudes to taxation.

Collectively the tenantry were of course the *tuath*, for example Iain Lom had said of MacKinnon of Strath about 1660:

*Cha b'e an cleachdadh a bh' aig càch
A ghlac thusa mar ghnàths —
A bhith smachdail mun mhàl air tuath.*

('It was not the custom of others / That you adopted as practice — / To be severe about rent with your tenants.') Once again then we have a picture of differences in policy, and we realise how crucial is the role of the poet — as is that of the media today — in pressing tirelessly for social justice.

Next, widows, orphans and the homeless. A widow is *bantrach*, an orphan *dilleachdan*. John MacCodrum referred to Sir James MacDonald of Sleat as

*Thusail ri dilleachdain
'S cuimhneach air àiridh.*

(‘Kindly to orphans / And mindful of the needy.’) Also in the eighteenth century, when traditional society was collapsing, William MacMurchy reacted like this to the news that MacDonald of Largie was thinking of selling his land:

*Cia le’n riarar easbhaidh ’n deòraidh?
Cia bheir foirneart geur fo smachd?
Cia thagras cùis na baintrigh’,
Nì dìon ’s tearmann don bhochd?*

(‘Who will meet the needs of the homeless? / Who will control the evils of violence? / Who will plead the widow’s case, / Give shelter and sanctuary to the poor?’)

Which brings us to the homeless, in this case represented by *deòraidh* — a pilgrim, beggar or wanderer. The importance of this category is underlined by the statistic that, according to Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, by the time of the Union one person in five in Scotland was a beggar. Another word here is *déirceach*, from *déirc* ‘alms’, as in this elegy by Màiri nighean Alastair Ruaidh on her patron Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray, Harris, who died in 1705:

*Gun bhuirb gun ardan,
Gun diùlt air mhàl nan déirceach.*

(‘With no violence or arrogance, / With no refusal of alms to the indigent.’) ‘Alms’ was here expressed as *màl* ‘rent’, showing how rent was to be ploughed back to the most deserving of the people.

And so to the disabled. In 1649 the MacLeod poet Pàl Crùbach (who was disabled himself) lamented his dead chief, Iain Breac of Dunvegan, like this:

*A ghnùis na féile,
Nach do bhreugnaich riamh t’ fhacal aon uair,
Ceann-uidhe nan deòraidh,
Nan airceach gun treòir ’s nan truagh.*

(‘O countenance of generosity / Who never once went back on your word, / The destination of the homeless, / Of the powerless disabled and the poor.’) The phrase *airceach gun treòir* has a hugely modern ring.

Other categories are a little less precise in a social sense. We meet the *àiridh* or ‘deserving’, those who are *feumach* or ‘needy’, *anfhanh* ‘weak’ or *bochd* or *dàibhir* ‘poor’, *bochdan* or ‘paupers’, and those who are *truagh* — ‘wretched’ or, again, ‘poor’. *Nochd* or ‘naked’ (which rhymes with *bochd*) comes up a lot, too, but I find it sounds better in modern English if I translate it as ‘ragged’ or ‘wearing rags’, as in this from Iain Lom’s poem to MacKinnon of Strath:

*A ghnùis a dhiùlt a bhith bochd
'S nach do chuir cùl ri fear nochd,
Lean thu ’n dùthchas ’s an stoc bu dual.*

(‘O countenance that refused to be mean / And never shunned a man wearing rags, / You’ve followed your forefathers’ example.’) Clearly the provision of clothing was fundamental, as in this by Anndra Mac an Easbaig on Sir Allan MacLean of Duart, who died in 1674:

*Gach nì b’ àill leis
Don fhìor àiridh
Gun sion dàlach;
Bu chinnt don dàibhir comhdach.*

(‘Everything he wished for / The truly deserving received / Without the slightest delay; / The poor could be sure of being clothed.’)

Some quotations sum up the traditional welfare state very comprehensively for us. One such is this from an anonymous elegy on a MacAllister of Loup in Kintyre, perhaps dating from about 1700.

*Bu saoitheil rìoghail ’s gach aiceachd
An leòghann mòrdhalach reachdmhor —
Caraid éiginn ’s airce,
Trom air tuath cha do chleachd thu,
'S dam biodh fear lompais gun bheartas
Mhaithte an t-suim dha mun creachte e:
Iad a-nis gun chùl-taice sa mhòd.*

(‘Wise and regal in each precept / Was the splendid lawgiving lion — / A friend in need and distress, / No oppression of tenantry did you practise, / And if some man of slender means were short / His debt would be written off lest he be ruined: / They’re now unsupported in court.’) Unsupported, of course, because of the death of the chief — a constant theme.

The last word must, I think, be given to John MacCodrum, who witnessed the collapse of the social contract in North Uist in the 1770s. His *Òran do na Fògarraich*, Song to the Emigrants, remains a thought-provoking poem for today.

*Ciod am fàth dhomh bhith 'g innse
Gun d'fhàs sibh cho mìodhar
'S gun spothadh sibh frìghde
Far an dìreadh i fàrdan?
Dh'fhalbh na ceannardan mìleant'
Dhan robh sannt air an fhìrinn,
Dhan robh geall air an dilsean
Agus cuing air an nàmhaid;
Air an tuath bha iad cuimhneach,
Cha b'ann gus an sgriobadh;
Bhiodh bantraichean 's dilleachdain
Dìolta gu saidhbhir,
Gach truaghan gun dìth air
Mun cuairt air na suinn sin
Nach sealladh gu h-iseal —
Bha 'n inntinn ro stàtail.*

(‘What’s the point of my telling / That you’ve become so mean / That you’d geld even a louse / If it gained a farthing in value? / The warrior chiefs are gone / Who yearned for the truth, / Who respected their followers / And held back their enemies; / Ever mindful of their tenants, / But not to fleece them — / Widows and orphans / Liberally provided for, / Each pauper looked after / All around those heroes / Who would never look low — / Their minds were too stately.’)

*Seallaibh mun cuairt duibh
'S faicibh na h-uaislean
Gun iochd annt' ri truaghain,
Gun suairceas ri dàimhich;
Sann tha iad am barail
Nach buin sibh don talamh —
'S ged dh'fhàg iad sibh falamh
Chan fhaic iad mar chall e;
Chaill iad an sealladh
Air gach reachd agus gealladh
Bha eadar na fearaibh
Thug am fearann s' on nàmhaid:
Ach innseadh iad dhomhsa
Nuair théid sibh air fògradh
Mur caill iad an còir air
Gun dòigh air a thearnadh.*

(‘Look all around you / And you’ll see the nobility / With no pity for the poor / And no kindness to their kin; / They’re of the opinion / That you don’t belong to the soil — / Even if they’ve left you destitute / They see it as no loss; / They’ve lost all sight / Of each law and each promise / That bound the men / Who took this land from the foe: / But let them just tell me / When you go into exile / If they’ll not lose their right to it / Without means of saving it.’)

WHFP 21.6.96