

The many names of October

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

October is, literally, the ‘eighth month’, because it got its name before Caesar added January and February to the calendar. In Gaelic it was traditionally *mìos mu dheireadh* (or *mìos deireannach*) *an fhoghair*, ‘the last month of autumn (or of harvest)’. There is a song which begins like this:

Air mìos deireannach an fhoghair,
An dara latha, s math mo chuimhne,
Ghluais na Breatannaich on fhaiche
Dh’ionnsaigh tachairt ris na nàimhdean . . .

(On the last month of autumn, / The second day, I remember it well, / The British marched from the plain / To meet the enemy . . .) It is about the Battle of Walcheren, fought by the Gordon Highlanders on 2 October 1799, and it is by Alexander Mackinnon (1770-1814), a Morar man who took part in the battle. Mackinnon’s air was known as ‘Am Mìos mu Dheireadh den Fhoghar’ when used by other poets for other songs.

In his manuscript of proverbs in the National Library, James Macintyre from Balquhiddy gave October’s names as: “*Mios mu dheire an Fhaoghari, no Mios na Feill Micheil*. Last month of Harvest, or St Michael’s.” The former simply reflects Macintyre’s Perthshire dialect, the latter is more remarkable — here is a month named from a feast which, strictly speaking, is over before the month has begun. It might be thought to be a name which reflects a system of lunar rather than of calendar months, but in fact it is more likely to have to do with commerce. Macintyre tells us that the tryst at Falkirk called the *Féill Micheil* was held on the second Tuesday of October New Style, which is a date closely equivalent to Michaelmas Old Style (29 September), and in the southern Highlands of his time (he lived from 1783 to 1835) this would have been the event that governed the month.

Donald Cameron, in his book ‘The Field of Sighing: a Highland Boyhood’, associated October mornings with the taste of mushrooms and crispy bacon, the tang of salt and wood-smoke in the air, and the stags’ roaring which, rolling down from the peaks, made everyone stop what they were doing around the farm and listen, and enticed the men up the hill to watch. High on the moor, day and night, he says, the bellowing never stopped. (Actually I suspect that ‘Donald Cameron’ was a pseudonym for the late Alasdair Maclean, the author of ‘Night Falls in Ardnamurchan’, a very similar book, but that is another matter.) The noise is of course the one so lovingly described by Duncan Bàn Macintyre:

S binne na gach beus
Anail mhic an fhéidh
A’ langanaich air eudann
Beinn Dobhrain . . .

(Sweeter than every bass / Is the deer's son's breath / Belling on the face / Of Beinn Dóbhraín . . .) Many years before, the Welsh scholar Edward Lhuyd, who toured the Highlands in 1699-1700, had noted that the Gaels talked of a season called *an dàmhair* which lasted two weeks at this time of year. *Cóí' latha deug na dàmhair*, he called it, "the Fortnight of Rutting (in October). Because 'tis rutting time with the deer. The great stags" (and here he breaks into his native Welsh) "are rutting at this time in a bog because of their desire for a white hind with red legs and still failing to get her."

An Dàmhair, which we now use for October itself, means the Rutting; in origin it is *damh-dhàir*, 'stag copulation'. All the rest of the year the *làn-damh* (full stag) has run with the other stags. Now he leaves them and (if he can) takes to himself a herd of hinds (*éildean*), roaring, chivvying them around and restlessly defending his rights to them against the other stags. No wonder he was sometimes called *ùdlaiche*, originally a Norse word meaning 'outlaw'.

In an average year the stags have been in condition for killing since 12 August. In the case of a stag with a very fine head, the stalker will probably not want to shoot it until the horns are free from velvet, which may not be until well into September. Roaring begins in the last days of September, and by just about now, 11 October, the stags are losing their condition.

A good stag for hunting is generally eight or ten years old at the least. He casts his horns every spring, and it used to be thought that the hinds eat the old horns, because they are hard to find. A stag which has twelve points to its antlers is called in English a royal and in Gaelic *dà mhiarach dhiag*, a twelve-pointer. Alexander Carmichael tells us in volume 6 of 'Carmina Gadelica' that the people considered the stag especially wholesome, and used every part of it — *dà mhiarach dhiag làn suill agus saill agus smior bho bharr a chabair gu sàil a luighein*, 'a royal full of fat and of suet and of marrow from the tips of his horns to the heels of his hooves'. The horns were crushed and boiled into jelly, he says, and candied sugar and honey added, the result resembling calf's foot jelly.

We can find the word *dàmhair* ranging in meaning from the rut itself through 'rutting time' to the calendar month of October. In a long poem composed as a prisoner of war in Poland in 1944, Angus Campbell (Am Puilean) from Ness in Lewis offers a kaleidoscope of Highland memories:

Dàmhair dhamh chabrach féidh
'S a ghréigh dhearg am bràighe frìth,
Caoraich bhàn air blàr a' criomadh,
Buar ag ionaltradh 's a' geum;
Bradán balla-bhreac deas gu leum,
Bras-shruth eas aige ri dhìreadh,
Spionnadh sùlaire cur still
Sìos tren tonn a sholar éisg;
Conaltradh 's spòrs taigh céilidh,
Ceòl, 's sgeulachdan gan inns',
Còisir luinneagach nan nìonag
Luadh nam plaide mhìn air cléith.

(The rutting of the antlered stag / And his red herd of hinds in the high hills, / White sheep nibbling on the plain, / Cattle grazing and lowing; / Speckled salmon nimble at leaping / With a cascade's swift current to climb, / The strength of a gannet diving / Down through the wave in search of fish; / Repartee and wit in the céilidh-house, / Music, and stories being told, / The girls' chorus of work-song / In waulking smooth blankets at the board.) Going back much further, a traditional stanza from Harris ascribed (wrongly, perhaps) to An Ciaran Mabach, who lived in the late seventeenth century, goes like this:

A Dhomhnaill Bhàin mhic Mhaol-Chaluim,
 S tìm dhut teannadh a-nall
 'S mise leigeil throimhn àite
 Greis fo shàile nam beann
 Far an leagainn san dàmhair
 Damh na cràice 'na dheann
 'S eilid bhinneach nan caolchas
 Direadh aonach nan gleann.

(Domhnall Bàn son of Malcolm, / It's time you came over / And let me through the district / For a spell under the mountains' heel / Where I'd kill in the rutting / The antlered stag in his haste / With the sharp-snouted slender-legged hind / Climbing the high wastes of the glens.) It's not quite clear whether the poet here is targetting the hinds as well as the stag, though I suspect, given seventeenth-century hunting methods (as many deer as possible were driven by dogs into a trap, then slaughtered en masse), that he was. Hinds are in best condition for shooting in November and December.

Among the incantations in volume 2 of 'Carmina Gadelica' is this verse got by Carmichael from Mary Macinnes of Hacleit in Benbecula:

Laoigh bhreaca bhoireann,
 Laoigh bhreaca bhoireann,
 Laoigh bhreaca bhoireann,
 Doineann anns an dàmhair!

(Speckled female calves, / Speckled female calves, / Speckled female calves, / Storm in rutting time!) As so often with Carmichael, it is ambiguous. Is the 'storm' the noise of the stags? The frenzy of the rut? The actual weather? Or all three? Elsewhere (in volume 6) Carmichael tells us that the characteristic weather of the season is *dusrach na dàmhair*, 'the cloudiness of the rutting', which he describes as 'a week or ten days of cloudy weather supervening at rutting time'.

In my next quotation, at least, it is clear that we have finally come to *dàmhair* in the sense of a time of year. This is from the autobiographical song 'Se mo chaochladh mór a thàinig' by the late Donald Macintyre of South Uist and Paisley, Domhnall Ruadh Phàislig:

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 left the spring of my lifetime, / My summer is behind me; / The black winter of the doldrums has come, / My August has gone and my October.) But language is a funny thing, for this word of ours which means 'the copulation of stags' seems also to have forked

out in quite a different direction to mean ‘time’ or ‘season’ in a general sense, and something like ‘climax’ or ‘middle’ in particular. This development seems to have taken place in the Northern Highlands from the Inverness district in the east to Lewis in the west. So from these places we have picturesque expressions like *mun dàmhair sa an-dé* ‘about this time yesterday’, *aig an dàmhair seo dhen bhliadhna* ‘at this season of the year’, and *dàmhair na h-oidhche* ‘the middle of the night’. Dwelly adds a couple of good ones where the meaning is ‘middle’, with or without reference to time: *an dàmhair a’ mheadhon oidhche* ‘in the dead of midnight’, *an dàmhair a’ chuain* ‘in the middle of the ocean’. The poet William Ross, born in Skye and raised in Gairloch, has the word at the beginning of his ‘Òran Cumhaidh’ (Song of Lament).

Ge fada ’na mo thàmh mi
Tha ’n dàmhair dhomh dùsgadh.

(Though long have I been silent / It’s time for me to waken.) And in Sutherland the word took one final twist, becoming *teamhair*, for example *aig an teamhair sa den bhliadhna* ‘at this time of the year, at this season of the year’, and *teamhair fhuar* ‘cold weather’. Without knowing this it would be very hard indeed to understand Rob Donn’s use of it in ‘Òran nan Casaga Dubha’ (The Song of the Black Cassocks), for here is a man expressing himself entirely in metaphor as he tries to straddle the political fence. His people, the MacKays, had stayed firmly loyal to the Government in the ’45, but now this same Government had imposed the reviled Lowland dress — the Black Cassocks of the title — on Highland friend and Highland foe alike. This is what he says:

Tha mi faicinn bhur truaighe
Mar nì nach cualas a shamhail —
A’ chuid as fhearr de bhur seabhaig
Bhith air slabhraidh aig clamhan;
Ach ma tha sibh ’nur leòghainn
Pillibh ’n dòrainn s’ ’na teamhair
’S dèanaibh ’n deudach a thrusadh
Mun téid bhur busan a cheangal.

(I see your misery / As a thing whose like’s not been heard — / The best of your falcons / Chained up to a buzzard; / But if you are lions / Repulse this tyranny in its time / And gather up the teeth / Before your cheeks can be tied.)

Repulse this tyranny, he is saying, in its *teamhair*, the height of its season, the very act of its consummation.