

The earliest Highland inns

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I have sometimes wondered, given the importance to the Highlands and Islands of tourism in general, and of the hotel industry in particular, why it is that the story of the latter does not seem to have been written. Perhaps I am wrong, of course, in which case I look forward to receiving enlightenment from readers.

In fact I would also be glad to hear from readers if I am right, because this is a subject to which everyone has a contribution to make, whether it be as owners, workers, eaters, drinkers or sleepers! It's a story that keeps going on, and (in many ways) keeps getting better.

Anyway, in this article and the next, and perhaps occasionally thereafter, I'll have a stab at the early part of the story, the bit that ultimately brings us into the present (soon to be the past) century, when someone else is welcome to take over! It's a subject that belongs somewhere along the edges of what I have called Gaelic Ethnography, that is, writings about the way of life and beliefs of Gaelic-speaking people; the main sources for it are travellers' tales in English and verse and stories in Gaelic.

Before there were hotels there was hospitality. Hospitality was sacred; it was free; it was vital to the preservation and transmission of Gaelic culture; it could also be pretty ruinous to a local economy. The old praise poems are full of it; it also came to underpin Highland presbyterianism, because in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thousands of people would flock from parish to parish to attend communions, and they certainly didn't stay in hotels.

As long as the exchange of hospitality was mutual, the system worked very well. It was the life-blood of Gaelic language, literature, tradition, religion. It helped preserve Highland political, religious and cultural solidarity. And that was its downfall. There was little room in this system for outsiders, none at all for unsympathetic outsiders. Which is why the Statutes of Iona of 1609, the first serious attempt by central government in Edinburgh and London to legislate for the Highlands and Islands, ordained that inns should be established.

Now to legislate is one thing, to make it actually happen is another. John Knox had legislated in 1560 or so for a school in every parish, but it didn't happen for over a hundred years. It took almost as long for inns to begin making their appearance. The first word on the subject that I know of comes from a book published in 1679 under the title 'A Modern Account of Scotland by an English Gentleman'. The gentleman in question was Thomas Kirke, apparently of Crookwige in Yorkshire, and he speaks of Scotland in general, not of the Highlands in particular. "They have not inns," he says, "but change-houses (as they call them), poor small cottages, where you must be content to take what you find, perhaps eggs

with chicks in them, and some lang cale; at the better sort of them, a dish of chap'd chickens, which they esteem a dainty dish, and will take it unkindly, if you do not eat very heartily of it, though for the most part you may make a meal with the sight of the fare, and be satisfied with the steam only, like the inhabitants of the world in the moon.”

The distinction between inn and change-house is quite a useful one. A change-house is, in origin at least, just a house where a change of horses can be obtained. It was a term that stuck: *taigh-seinnse* came into Gaelic and stayed there, distinct to some extent from *taigh-òsta* which was a hostelry but is now in general use for a hotel. (Of course, ‘hotel’ is just ‘hostelry’ in French.) It is worth noting that both Gaelic terms are borrowed: the idea of paying for hospitality with money was alien.

It seems that a change-house in 1679 was not a place that could change your horses for you, just a house close to such a place, for Kirke goes on: “Your horses must be sent to a stablers (for the change-houses have no lodging for them) where they may feed voluptuously on straw only, for grass is not to be had, and hay is so much a stranger to them, that they are scarce familiar with the name of it. The Scotch gentry commonly travel from one friend’s house to another, so seldom make use of a change-house; their way is to hire a horse and a man for two pence a mile; they ride on the horse thirty or forty miles a day, and the man, who is his guide, foots it beside him, and carries his luggage to boot.”

Judging from the account of John Ramsay of Ochtertyre (1736-1814), a Perthshire laird whose reminiscences were published in 1888 as ‘Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century’, it took a little while for Highland innkeepers to grasp the new concept. “At the first setting up of inns,” he says, “there were several great originals among the publicans. A few of them had some drops of gentle blood in their veins, which they imagined could not be better evidenced to their guests than by reversing the manners of their country. In place of being generous and disinterested towards strangers, they thought too much could not be charged; from being troublesomely kind and officious, they were proud and inattentive.”

He goes on to give an example. “A number of years ago I happened to be in a Highland public-house, the master of which was more high and mighty than the Duke at whose gate he dwelt.” (It sounds like Blair Atholl.) “An Anglo-Scots lady of the company was so ill-advised as to reprimand this gentleman for the dirtiness of his house and his assurance in taking the first glass of wine to himself, upon which he and his servants disappeared on the eve of dinner; and we, who had fifteen miles to return in heavy rain, and across a rapid river, were likely to have fared very ill. But luckily for us, a person of the country came in, and hearing from our host how ill he had been used in his *own house*, procured us dinner and a night’s lodging, on condition the lady should ask pardon. Mortifying as it was, she submitted to make concessions.”

He has another example. “Some years before,” he says, “another of these gentlemen who condescended to sell whisky on the road to one of the inland forts, refused a company

admittance till they should give their word of honour not to complain of any treatment they might meet with in his house.”

If we want to know what kind of treatment this might have been, we can do no better than consult Captain Burt. Burt left a series of ‘Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friend in London’, first published under that title in 1754 when they had ceased to have implications for national security. He appears to have been an agent of the Government stationed mainly in Inverness, and his task had something to do with servicing or provisioning the regiment of engineers which commenced the building of roads through the Highlands in 1726.

‘Spy’ is one possible word for Burt, but spies come in many shapes and sizes. We know nothing of his formal dispatches, but his ‘Letters’ show him to be intelligent, sympathetic, voluble, reasonable, likeable, humorous, observant, gossipy, capable of a joke against himself, a stickler for cleanliness, a lover of good wine — and very, very fussy about his food. Over and over again he comes back to the topic of Highland inns; unfortunately he does not ever say where they are.

He does, however, tell us where he first experienced the culture-shock of a Scottish inn, for it was clearly seared into his memory to the extent that he recalled it again in a subsequent letter. It was in Kelso, and he had ordered potted pigeons. “Two or three of the Pigeons lay mangled in the Pot, and behind were the Furrows, in the Butter, of those Fingers that had raked them out of it, and the Butter itself needed no close Application to discover its Quality. My disgust at this Sight was so great, and being a brand-new Traveller in this Country, I ate a Crust of Bread, and drank about a Pint of good Claret.”

Butter was quite a problem. Burt enjoys telling a joke about an English gentleman who “had some butter set before him in which were a great number of hairs; whereupon he called to the landlady, desiring she would bring him some butter upon one plate and the hairs upon another, and he would mix them himself”.

Poultry in Highland inns was seldom much better than in Kelso, and the good Captain has a story about a foreigner who did not like the look of the ‘fowl’, whereupon the landlord brought him a piece of fresh salmon and asked if he would prefer it. “It is very fine salmon,” said the foreigner, “and no wonder, for that is of God Almighty’s feeding; if it had been fed by you, I suppose it would have been as lean as this poor fowl, which I desire you will take away.”

Familiarity with salmon bred contempt, it seems. Burt tells us of a Highland gentleman in a London tavern who orders a rump steak for himself and some salmon for his servant. The steak cost him eightpence, but the salmon nearly eight shillings!

So much for the food; let us now take a look at the bedroom. First of all a typical inn in places like Inverness. “Your Chamber,” he says, “to which you sometimes enter from without-Doors, by Stairs as dirty as the streets, is so far from having been washed, it has hardly ever been scraped, and it would be no Wonder if you stumbled over Clods of dried

Dirt in going from the Fire-Side to the Bed, under which there often is Lumber and Dust that almost fill up the Space between the Floor and the Bedstead. But it is nauseous to see the Walls and Inside of the Curtains spotted, as if every one that had lain there had spit straight forward in whatever Position they lay.”

In country inns the smoke was more obvious than the dirt, and in fact Burt is quite often surprised at the excellent state of the bed-linen, because, as he says, “The Spinning descends from Mother to Daughter by Succession, till the Stock becomes considerable; insomuch that even the ordinary People are generally much better furnished in that Particular, than those of the same Rank in England — I am speaking chiefly of Sheeting and Table-Linen.”

Burt tells us of his stay at a country inn arranged like a motel — not surprisingly, since due to timber shortages Highland houses were often very small. “Notice at last was brought me that my Apartment was ready,” he says. “But at going out from the first Hovel, the other seemed to be all on Fire within: for the Smoke came pouring out through the Ribs and Roof all over; but chiefly out at the Door, which was not four Feet high, so that the whole made the Appearance (I have seen) of a fuming Dunghill removed and fresh piled up again, and pretty near the same in Colour, Shape, and Size.”

He here explains that Highlanders told him that they loved the smoke: it kept them warm. “But I retired to my first Shelter till the Peats were grown red, and the Smoke thereby abated. This Fuel is seldom kept dry, for want of Convenience; and that is one Reason why, in Lighting or replenishing the Fire, the Smokiness continues so long a Time; — and Moggy’s puffing of it with her Petticoat, instead of a Pair of Bellows, is a dilatory Way.”

He goes on: “I believe you would willing know (being an Englishman) what I had to Eat. My Fare was a Couple of roasted Hens (as they call them), very poor, new killed, the Skins much broken with plucking; black with Smoke, and greased with bad Butter. As I had no great Appetite to that Dish, I spoke for some hard Eggs; made my Supper of the Yolks, and washed them down with a Bottle of good small Claret.”

He returns to his ‘bedroom’ and this time he can see through the smoke. “My Bed had clean Sheets and Blankets! But, which was best of all (though Negative), I found no Inconvenience from those trouble-some Companions with which most other Huts abound. But the bare Mention of them brings to my Remembrance a Passage between two Officers of the Army, the Morning after a Highland Night’s Lodging. One was taking off the slowest kind of the two, when the other cried out, ‘Z— —ds! what are you doing? — Let us first secure the Dragoons; we can take the Foot at Leisure.’ But I had like to have forgot a Mischance that happened to me the next Morning; for rising early, and getting out of my Box pretty hastily, I unluckily set my Foot in the Chamber-Pot, a Hole in the Ground by the Bed-side, which was made to serve for that Use in case of Occasion!”