Inns — the case for and against

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

In this article I would like to look at the variety of reasons why inns began to be set up in the Highlands and Islands, and to give examples of these, especially from Gaelic verse.

Perhaps the easiest way to start is to point out that there were reasons why inns should *not* be set up. These were to do with economics, with social and political control, and with the internal balances within Gaelic society. Inns were for travellers and were places where drink (and, to a limited extent, food) could be obtained for money. While Gaelic society remained intact it was not in the interests of the chiefs and their tacksman to encourage the consumption of alcohol by those who worked the land for them, and in any case such people did not have access to money.

One then has to ask what kinds of people might be travelling. The answer I think is the chiefs themselves and their retinues, poets and other professional men, pedlars and beggars, strangers, plunderers and cattle-thieves.

The chiefs and their retinues certainly did not require inns. Like medieval nobility and like royalty today, when in their own territory they stayed in their own houses, and when in other peoples' they were entertained by their peers. Their peers would not have had it otherwise, for reasons of both honour and security.

The services of professional men such as physicians, lawyers and musicians were indispensible to the warrior class, and when they travelled they went from big house to big house. Nor did they hesitate to stay in the houses of the less well off when they had to, and it is said of the Beaton physicians for example that they never charged for their work — they had their own income from grants of land.

Those who were not always quite so welcome were the poets, but the last place they wanted to go was an inn. Their aim was to mingle with the wealthy, to praise them in return for abundant hospitality and to set an example by satirising them if they weren't satisfied. So a sixteenth-century poet praises MacGregor of Glenstrae like this:

Dàimh gad mholadh,
Triall gu solar:
Bhiodh do sporan earlaidh dhaibh.

(Poet-bands praising you, / Travelling to hospitality: / Your purse would be ready for them.)

Beòir air chuachaibh,
Òl aig t' uaislibh
Anns gach uair dhan tarladh sinn.

(Beer in goblets, / Your nobles drinking / Every time that we would meet.) As for pedlars and beggars, they had to meet the people to survive, and the rules of hospitality meant that they were never turned away from the door.

It was in the interests of all these classes of people that the existing principles of hospitality should remain as they were. If inns were introduced, these principles would be compromised, and their livelihoods would suffer.

As for travelling strangers, the best way for the chiefs to keep tabs on them was to make sure that they were dependent for their well-being on the chief himself and his kinsfolk. And finally, of course, an excellent reason for *not* setting up inns was that they could be used to great advantage by plunderers and cattle-thieves.

When cattle-lifting turned into legitimate droving, the argument was reversed. That was a change that began around the 1690s, and became a flood after 1707. One example is the early appearance of an inn at Glenelg, the main crossing-point for cattle from Skye. There is a song by the Lewis poet Roderick Morison (the Blind Harper), who lived from about 1656 to 1713-14, which consists mainly of his plea to the cattle-lifters to leave his stock alone, as he is living at Glenelg and is getting ready to send his cattle up to their summer pastures, it being the May quarter-day. It begins:

A' chiad Di-Luain den ràithe,
Ged bha mi leam fhìn
Cha d'fhuair mi duine 'n latha sin
A thàinig am' ghaoith
A dh'fhiaraich ciamar bhà mi
No 'm b' aill leam dhol sìos . . .

('On the first Monday of the quarter, / Though I was alone, / I got no-one that day / Who came my way / To ask how I was / Or would I like to go along . . .') This reflects a handselling custom, by which neighbours met at a particular house on the first Monday of the quarter 'to drink a bumper to the beverage of the succeeding', as John Mackenzie put it in 1841, 'and wish it better or no worse than the present'. But the harper's luck had not run out after all.

Sin nuair chuala Fearchar
Mi 'n dearmad aig càch;
Thàinig e 'nam chomhdhail
On b' eòl dha mo ghnàths —
Thug e leis air sgòid mi
Gu seòmar a mhnà . . .

('Then when Farquhar heard / That I was neglected by all / He came to visit me / As he knew my ways — / He led me off by the coat-lappet / To his wife's room . . .') We wonder at first who Farquhar was, and his 'wife's room' is quite a puzzle, but only until we realise that Farquhar is an innkeeper of the old breed who stands aloof from the vulgar business of accepting money for hospitality, and leaves that to his wife. He says:

Anna, lìon an stòp dhuinn
'S na sòr oirnn a làn —
Ged tha e falamh, 's ro-mhath 'n airidh
'Ghlaine seo thoirt dà . . .

('Anna, fill the stoup for us / And don't grudge us its full measure — / Though he's broke, it's very proper / To give him this glass . . .') Anna agrees, saying:

Ged tha thu falamh s ro-mhath 'n airidh
'Ghlaine seo thoirt duit
'S gun òlamaid a dhà dhiubh
Air slàinte 'n fhir bhric.

('Though you're broke it's most proper / To give you this glass / So we can drink two of them / To the pockmarked man's health!') The poet does not say that he is in an inn, but he doesn't need to — the location, the date and the references to his being *falamh* ('broke') make it clear enough.

Another reason for there being an inn at Glenelg was of course the presence of the barracks. We can be sure that Farquhar's wife gave no free drink to the English soldiery.

All in all I think I have said enough to show that inns in the Highlands and Islands have always been a marker of non-Gaelic influence. But this influence could be of different kinds. For example, in the eastern Highlands there were magnates such as the Earls of Atholl who owed their position to feudalism rather than to ties of kinship with the tillers of the soil; for an early inn in Atholl, see below. In the southern Highlands there were the Campbells who (when it suited them) liked to go along with the Crown and its statutes in such matters as the setting up of inns in their territories; as Mary Beith has pointed out to me, the only inn mentioned by Martin Martin in his 'Description of the Western Islands' of 1703 is in Tiree, part of the Campbell realm. Around the Highland fringes the requirements of trade had brought inns to the Highlands at an early date, as I hope to show next time. And finally, large-scale droving led to inns being set up for Highlanders, while barracks and roads led to inns being set up for soldiers and engineers.

What this means in practical terms is that inns seem to have spread gradually across the Highlands from east to west from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-twentieth, arriving at last on the west coast of Lewis in the 1960s. One early account that fascinates me is of what happened on the night of Monday 7 December 1562. (I am indebted for it to Dr Martin MacGregor.) Griogar Ruadh, the MacGregor chief who had come of age in that year, wished to declare war on the Breadalbane Campbells. How did he do it? By attacking an inn.

This is what happened. Griogar Ruadh, along with Donnchadh MacGregor in Roro, Gille-Caluim MacGregor alias Ceann Mór, Donnchadh Òg MacGregor the grandson of Donnchadh Làdasach, and Donnchadh Mac Iain Duibh younger, along with an estimated 120 men, all in war array with coats of mail, steel bonnets, bows, arrows, swords and axes, rode to the inn by Allt Girnaig in the glen of that name above Killiecrankie in Atholl. Lodging there for the night (on their way back from a fair at Perth to Glenlyon) were nine men, including five Campbells: Tearlach, Alastair, son of Iain Campbell of Oib, Lachlann, Iain Odhar, and Alastair, son of Aonghas Campbell of Barbreck. They were undressed and getting ready for bed when Griogar Ruadh and his accomplices arrived. The inn was besieged and set ablaze. When the occupants came out, of the nine men bound for Glen Lyon, Campbell of Barbreck's son was wounded in the stomach by an arrow, and the other eight were killed.

It is very like Pearl Harbor. The MacGregors, it seems to me, had attacked a target that was of both strategic and symbolic importance, far to the east of their usual hunting-grounds. Martin MacGregor believes that they were acting on the intelligence of Anndra MacGlashen, apparently the owner of the inn. If this is so, did he know they were going to burn it down, I wonder?

I suspect that the concept of inns and the values that they represented were repugnant to those MacGregors — that the inn at Allt Girnaig was, in a word, a cultural target. I wonder if Indians in the Wild West ever had the foresight to by-pass a wagon train and attack a saloon instead. Not that I am suggesting that Griogar Ruadh was a prohibitionist for himself. The Highland warrior class were great wine-drinkers. No, what may have worried him was the thought of the Highland serf class, those who were at home in the ceilidh-house while the hundred-and-twenty went to war, having unlimited access to cheap alcohol for themselves. So it is fascinating to find a mention of an inn in some verses made by an unknown woman for MacGregor of Roro a few decades later.

Ort a bheirinn-sa comhairl'
Nan gabhadh tu dhiom i:
Nuair théid thu 'n taigh-òsta
Na h-òl ann ach aon deoch,
Gabh do dhrama 'nad sheasamh
'S bi freastlach mu d' dhaoinibh,
Na dèan diùthadh mu d' shaitheach —
Gabh an ladar, no an taoman.

('I'd give you advice / If you'd take it from me: / When you go to the inn / Have only one drink there, / Take your dram standing / And watch over your men, / Don't fuss over your vessel — / Use the ladle, or the baler.')

Clearly inns had come to stay, but MacGregors could not risk drawing attention to themselves by complaining or causing a fracas. Dating to about 1600, that is the first mention of inns in Gaelic poetry.