

Innkeepers: the dog's drooping snout?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

In this article I would like to cast a spotlight on the Highland innkeepers of the past. But before I do that I owe Mary Beith an apology. At the Martin Martin conference earlier this month she pointed out to me that Martin (writing in 1703) mentions an inn in Tìree. This led me to say in my last piece that the only inn mentioned by Martin was the one in Tìree. In fact, as Mary now tells me, he mentions two others, one in Gigha and one in North Uist. (I bet it was Creagorry.) As it happens, what Martin says about North Uist corroborates three different points which I made in my last article. “There was never an Inn here till of late,” he says, “and now there is but one, which is not at all frequented for eating, but only for drinking; for the Natives by their Hospitality render this new-invented House in a manner useless.”

As for Tìree itself, Martin says that there were three ‘Ale-houses’ there, then goes on to talk about ‘the Ale that I had in the Inn’. Is an inn the same as an ale-house? Judging from what he says about North Uist, the answer would seem to be yes. On the other hand, I had always assumed that the Highland community of the past had of necessity to have a house where ale was brewed and a house where whisky was distilled, and that such places would draw the old soaks like bees to the honey-pot. They might have no money, but could always trade a hen or a little meal for some liquor. *Taighean-dòil* or *taighean-dramaichean* then, but still hardly inns.

So by one definition, Martin mentions five inns in the Isles in his day, of which three were in Tìree; by another definition, he mentions only three.

I am assuming that the defining factors that made an inn an inn were the use of money and the authority of the chief to accommodate strangers on his behalf — as Dr Johnson defines it, ‘houses where travellers are entertained for money’. Exactly one hundred years after Martin published his book, James Hogg toured the Highlands and Islands, and he fills out the definition in a practical way. Does the traveller identify an inn from its rusty old sign creaking in the wind? By no means. At Achnashellach Hogg ‘came to a change-house, of which I do not know the name, at the north-east corner of a lake in the middle of the Strath. I recognised it as such by a half-mutchkin pot that stood on the window.’ And at Kinlochewe, ‘a slated house appearing on a plain beyond the river I made toward it. I was obliged to wade through the river once, which being in a swelled state was very deep, and getting to the house asked if it was an inn, and was answered in the affirmative.’

The slates on the roof are a sign that the wealth and labour of the estate have been put into the building, while the half-mutchkin pot in the window is by way of an invitation to the world at large.

Having waded the river and got to the inn it is time now to deal with the innkeepers, and I would like to start with two innkeepers of very long ago. At any rate, I have a theory that they might have been innkeepers, or at least dram-shop owners. There is a place called Macmerry in East Lothian and a place called Macallan on the Spey. They are both Gaelic names, and it is possible that, although one is in the Lowlands and one in the Highlands, they shed some light on each other. In each case the ‘Mac’ can best be explained as Gaelic *magh*, a plain or meadow, leaving Mary and Colin (or Allan) as the other element — Mary’s Plain or Meadow, Colin’s (or Allan’s) Plain or Meadow.

Macmerry will have got its name in the period between about 850 and 1050 AD when Gaelic was the dominant language of Lothian. But for more detailed background we must turn to Macallan.

The property of Macallan Distillers includes the little old churchyard of Macallan, and Macallan was the name of the parish until united with Knockando centuries ago. A representative of the company once suggested to me that Macallan was the saint’s name Mo Chailín or Mo Cholm, and she pointed to the Mannoeh Hill road (*manach*, a monk) by which the brothers of the Columban church may have come over from Pluscarden to fish on the Spey below Macallan.

One old name for Macallan is ‘St Colin’s’; that suggests that the name behind the second element is Colin rather than Allan, but the fact that the placename is Macallan rather than Kilmacallan points away from a real saint and towards a formation of the ‘Macmerry’ type.

The bank of the Spey rises steeply at this point, but there is good flat land above it, containing upland cattle-rearing farms rising to the peat-clad hills that stand between there and the Morayshire plain. One of the few fords on the river lies just below the distillery, and until Thomas Telford built a bridge nearby in 1814 Macallan Farm served as an important gathering place on the drove route from Moray to the Crieff and Falkirk markets.

The fact that the distillery was licensed only ten years later suggests that whisky had long been made at Macallan from local barley and used to entertain the drovers, who, in return, would have carried the whisky and its reputation to the Lowlands. This may have led to the early legalisation of the operation.

The stances or level holding fields for the cattle can still be seen with traces of their earth and stone walls, and suggest a derivation for Macallan of *Magh Cailein*, ‘Colin’s Meadow’, in the same way that Macmerry seems to be *Magh Màiri*, ‘Mary’s Meadow’. The droving trade of Morayshire pre-dates the West Highland droving trade by centuries, and where there was droving there were inns. That is why I believe that Colin of Macallan and Mary of Macmerry were not saints, but innkeepers. At the same time, anyone who could produce a whisky as good as Macallan must have had some of the qualities of the saint about him.

Highlanders may have made gifted distillers but they were poor innkeepers. John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, a Lowland Perthshire laird who lived from 1736 to 1814, made no bones about it. “On the Highland roads there are at present some excellent houses, kept by persons properly educated, for which the traveller is indebted to the noble proprietors of the country,” he wrote. “I would, however, caution the English, and even my countrymen the Lowlanders, not to form any character of the Highlanders from the specimens they meet with in those inns. It is no pleasing view of human nature that men in their advances towards civilisation imbibe with more facility the vices rather than the virtues of an improved state. And in no capacity does the native Highlander make a worse figure than as an innkeeper, an ostler, or a waiter. He too often ingrafts pride, and sloth, and contempt of cleanliness, on the worst qualities of an English publican.”

But that is a Lowland viewpoint. Then as now there appear to have been many Lowlanders and Englishmen in the Highland innkeeping trade, and then as now the Gaelic-speaking Highlander did not take kindly to being treated as an unwelcome stranger in the midst of his own Gaelic-speaking Highlands. Take the poet William Ross, newly arrived at Killin to take up a schoolteaching post around 1785:

A thaigh Chill Fhinn, cha bhuannachd leinn,
Air chinnt ged tha thu bòidheach,
A bhith ri sneachd a’ dìol mo leapa
Dhan t-Sasgannach dhòite.

(O house of Killin, it’s no benefit for us, / Though you are certainly splendid, / To be paying for my bed in snowy weather / To the singed [or stung] Englishman.)

Twenty years or so before, Lachlan MacPherson of Strathmashie (1723-67) had reacted in the same way to a man called Johnstone who was the innkeeper at Dunkeld. He composed a ‘mouse satire’ in aid of the innkeeper at Dalnacardoch, who was plagued by the little beasts. This is an ancient Gaelic tradition; the rats or mice are always encouraged to go somewhere else, and MacPherson invited the Dalnacardoch mice to take themselves to Johnstone’s inn with a stop at Blair Castle on the way. Here, to finish, is a bit of it.

Fear Dail na Ceardaich seo thall,
Thug iad a thaigh thar a cheann,
Gach gleus as uaisle a th’ ann —
Am fion, a’ bheòir, ’s an dram.

(Dalnacardoch’s tenant out by, / They brought his house round his ears, / Every noblest ‘proof’ that there is — / The wine, the beer, and the dram.)

Ach tha mi ’g àithn’ oirbh uile gu léir
Bhur n-dìgridh ’s bhur sinnsear ’nur déidh,
On chuir sibh mo chairdean á feum
Fàgaibh am bail’ aca fhéin.

(But I order you all complete / With your young and your old folk behind you, / Since you’ve put my friends out of business / Leave them their place to themselves.)

Gabhaibh an rathad as fhearr,
Srath Athaill, ’s bhur casan cho gearr,
’S ma theirgeas an latha mu Bhlàr

S ra-mhath an t-àit 'ghabhail tàimh.

(Take the direction that's best, / Strath Atholl, your legs being so short, / And if daylight runs out around Blair / It's an excellent place to rest.)

On fhuair sibh bhur cleachdadh sa chùirt
Ruigidh sibh caisteal an Diùic;
Gheibh sibh macnas ann 's muirn
'S deicidh seachdnar anns gach rum.

(Since you've had your training at court / You'll get to the castle of the Duke; / You'll have fun there and pleasure / And seven will fit in each chamber.)

Caithibh an oidhch' ás a ceann
An ròbann, an leumnaich 's an danns,
'S ged dh'òladh na béistean na th' ann
S urrainn e fhéin anns a' chall.

(Spend the whole night till it's over / In robbing, in leaping and dancing, / And if the creatures drank all that's there / He'll go surety himself for the loss.)

Falbhaibh ás glé-mhoch, se as math leam,
Mar tha 'm pas ri leth-taobh Gairidh
'S bidh sibh 'n oidhche sin ra-mhath
Shìos aig Seonstanach Dùn Chaillinn.

(I'd like you to leave very early / Where the pass goes by one side of Garry / And that very night you'll be fine / With Johnstone down in Dunkeld.)

Fanaibh ann bliadhna no dhà
Gur fàgail lìonmhor le àl,
'S na dealaicheadh sìolag ri càch
Gu sìorraidh mur iarr mis' à.

(Stay there for a year or for two / To make sure you've a plentiful brood, / Let not one baby mouse part from the rest / Forever unless I request it.)

Tha mi air sian oirbh 'na thràth —
Na biodh biadh no deoch no snàth,
Lìon-anairt no plaide bhàn,
Anns nach feuch sibh meud bhur càil.

(With proper timing I've charmed you — / Be there no food, drink or thread, / Linen sheet nor white blanket, / That you don't try the size of your appetite on.)

Ithibh 's òlaibh 's gearraibh
Gach aodach, gach brògan 's gach anart;
Taomaibh gach stòp anns gach glaine —
'S fàgaidh sin maodal an òlaich nas taine!

(Just be eating and drinking and cutting / All clothes, little shoes and all linen; / Drain every stoup in each glass — / That'll leave the landlord's paunch slimmer!)

Bithibh mar chàdaidh on sgoil
'S na sguiribh gu bràth gun bhur toil;
Bàs air an fhear leis am b' oil —
Cha b' e fhéin ach spliug a' choin.

(Be like a prefect from school / And never stop till you've had all you want; / Death to the man who'd object — / He'd be just a dog's drooping snout.)