

The spirit of *carthannas*

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I WAS very struck recently in reading Donald Meek's new book about the Gaelic poetry of the Clearances and the Land Agitation, 'Tuath is Tighearna: Tenants and Landlords', how close to my own was his view of the essence of traditional society. "The poets' aims," he says, "can be focused in one word — 'community'."

At first I thought, no, don't talk about that this time. It's the last article before Christmas. Find something about presents and carols and *bodach na Nollaige*. Then it occurred to me that, as long as it doesn't turn into a sermon, there is nothing, repeat nothing, more Christmassy than community. Because community is family *plus*. Looking after your own, sure, but also pulling together with your neighbours to look after those around us who are less fortunate. And there is a third element to community — those in authority above us making sure that resources are evenly spread, and taken from the haves if necessary and given to the have nots.

So let's listen carefully to what Donald has to say. "In resorting to song, the primary motivation of the majority of poets was the preservation of the traditional Gaelic community in its local or wider Highland forms. Their perceptions of that community derived from the normal practices maintained across the centuries, and were based on such considerations as kinship, co-operation and collective defence. Maintenance of the community, as they knew it, was possible only when its ethical and social values were preserved. Violation of these values was part and parcel of the intrusion of external agencies, and had to be resisted."

He goes on to give references to particular poems which provide examples. I will take him up on some of these. "The poets therefore react strongly," he says, "against the manner in which the traditional mores of their communities are breached by Lowland shepherds (Poem 1), the firing of houses (Poem 2), the intrusion of officials (Poems 20, 21), the arrival of gunboats (Poem 19), and the removal of the people (Poem 5), sometimes by force or by a failure of the traditional system of mutual support which linked tenant to landlord."

He continues: "John Smith of Lewis (Poem 14) identified the cement of the community as the intrinsically spiritual quality of 'kindliness', or consideration [*carthannas*], and he saw the development of commercial landlordism as essentially antipathetic to traditional values. Economic determinism was, in his opinion, at variance with the preservation of a society based on mutual support."

Before I quote from the poems, let me say two things about this analysis. In the first place, it strikes me immediately that an excellent and continuing example of the 'intrusion of external agencies' of which he speaks is the coming of inns, about which I have had so much to say on this page recently. More on that later. Secondly, a quick look at that list of depredations reminds you that these were all phenomena with which the Gael were familiar from their own turbulent times. With the coming of a deeper religious sense they thought they had put them all behind them. The last thing they wanted now was to turn the clock back.

Now for some of the poems pointed to by Donald Meek. His book provides translations as well as originals, and his translations are in the same rhythmic style which I like to use myself. Poem 1 is Blind Allan MacDougall's 'Óran do na Ciobairibh Gallda' of about 1798, and of course I can't resist depicting the intrusion of Lowland shepherds as they sit in that other intrusion that eased their path, the inn.

*Nuair shuidheas dithis no trìùir
San taigh-òsda 'n cùis bhith rèidh,
Chìtear aig toiseach a' bhùird
Ciobair agus cù 'na dhèidh;
Bu chòir a thilgeadh an cùil,
'S glùn a chur am beul a chlàibh,
Iomain a-mach dh'ionnsaigh 'n dùin,
'S gabhadh e gu smiùradh fhèin.*

(When two or three sit down / to be chummy in the hostelry, / at the head of the table can be seen / a shepherd and a dog at heel; / he should be thrown into a corner, / and a knee thrust into his chest; / he should be chased out to the midden, / and allowed to tar himself.) It is a long time since I wrote here about smearing, the very messy process of protecting sheep before dipping was introduced. Our older readers will remember it. Imagine asking today's crofters to return to it! They would react with the same horror and disgust as Ailean Dall.

*'S olc a' chuideachd do chàch
Neach nach àbhaist a bhith glan;
Cha chompanach dhaoine as fiach,
Fear le fhiaclan a' spoth chlach
Ann an garbhuaic air a ghlùinean,
Le chraos gan sùghadh a-mach;
'S ma leigeas tu 'n deoch ri bheul,
'Na dheaghaidh na fiach a blas.*

(Poor company he is for others, / this man whose custom is not cleanliness; / no companion for worthy folk is he / who uses his teeth to remove testicles, / on his knees in the slimy sheep-dirt, / sucking them out with his jaws; / and if you let him have a drink, / don't dare taste it after him.) The rhetoric of traditional verse is coming through here, in a negative way. If the price of 'progress' was such uncleanness and utter lack of pride, what was the point? Of course the Highland shepherd sees it quite differently today.

The poem about the firing of houses is Donald Baillie's satire on Patrick Sellar.

*Chaidh thu fhèin 's do phàirtidh
An àirde gu bràighe Rosail,
Is chuir thu taigh do bhràthar
'Na smàlaibh a-suas 'na lasair.*

(You yourself and your party / went up to the braes of Rosal, / and you set fire to your brother's house, / so that it burned to ashes.) Having expressed the savagery of Sellar's sin in Christian terms — 'your brother's house' — Baillie goes on to suggest that he can expect retribution in kind.

*Nuair a thig am bàs ort,
Cha chàirear thu anns an talamh,
Ach bidh do charcais thodharail
Mar òtrach air aodann achaidh.*

(When death comes upon you, / you will not be placed in the ground, / but your dung-like carcass will be spread / like manure on a field's surface.)

The intrusion in poem 20 is that of a detachment of police to Glendale in Skye, probably in 1883.

*Chaidh an Dùdach Mhòr a shèideadh,
Chaidh na piobairean ri gleusadh,
Dh'fhairich mi cailleach ag èigheach,
'Clann nan Gàidheal, O cha till!'*

(The Great Horn was sounded, / the pipers began to tune their drones, / and I heard an old woman shouting, / 'The Children of the Gaels, Oh, they won't retreat!') A horn used for this purpose is preserved in Glendale to this day. The atmosphere of the poem, which is by Alexander MacLean, evokes the heroic spirit of tradition.

*Siud far an robh sealladh àlainn,
Direadh ri bruthach an Fhàsaich,
Brataichean ri crannaibh àrda
'S iad a' snàmh gu sèimh sa ghaoith.*

(What a beautiful sight that was, / advancing up the brae of Fasach, / banners fluttering from high staffs / and waving gently in the wind.) It's interesting to note that MacLean is quite happy to end his poem in an inn.

*Nuair a ràinig sinn an taigh-seinnse,
Gu robh 'n oidhch' againn 's sinn sgìth.*

(When we reached the public house, / night had come upon us, and we were tired.) Yet in poem 21, addressed satirically to a sheriff's officer deforced by the same Glendale people in the same year, we have a crystal-clear picture of the same inn and its innkeeper carrying out their time-honoured role as agents of intrusion.

*'S i bean taigh-seinns' an Dùine
Thug dhuibh an uidheam ghiùlain;
A Rìgh, b' e 'n t-iognadh liomsa
'Na smùr nach do chuireadh e.*

(It was the hostess in the Dunvegan change-house / who provided you with a means of transport; / King above, I was amazed / that it wasn't smashed to dust.)

Coming on rapidly now to John Smith of Iarshader's great poem 'Spiorad a' Charthannais', I would like to wonder aloud whether the conventional translation of *carthannas* as 'kindness' is not a little bland. The point surely is that *spiorad a' charthannais* is the spirit or sense of communal welfare, effectively the Gaelic equivalent of the 'Welfare State', carried out not by the agencies of a modern nation state but by the community itself under benign native leadership.

Leadership is important. So are those two qualifications. It must be benign, and it must be native. And that is where another of the poems in Donald's book comes in. I refer to 'Na Croitearan Sgiathanach' by the now rather unfashionable Neil MacLeod. MacLeod distinguishes between *uachdarain rìoghail* and *uachdarain stràiceil*, terms which Donald translates as 'regal landlords' and 'pompous landlords'. The latter, as he says, are the newcomers, the former are their predecessors, 'who mixed happily with the local population at church, and loved to hear the Gaelic language'. This reflects MacLeod's poem.

Bha 'n dachaigh 's an còmhnaidh

*Le an sluagh mar bu chòir dhaibh,
'S iad fiosrach is eòlach
Mun dòigh anns gach càs;
Nuair thachradh iad còmhla
Sa chlachan Di-dòmhaich,
Cho coibhneil gam feòraich,
Gu còmhraiteach blàth.*

(They lived with their clansfolk, / as was always their practice; / they were fully informed / of their plight at each time; / when they would foregather / at church on the Sabbath, / so concerned was their asking, / so warm and so kind.) There are a couple of things here where my analysis would be a little different from Donald's. One is my translation of the second-last line, which means 'Asking after them so kindly'. More importantly, we must ask ourselves why a Highland chief was called *rìoghail*, and the answer is, in brief, that a Highland *rìgh* was a member of the tribe, set up to provide leadership as first among equals; he was *rìoghail* in the sense of being a king and also *rìoghail* in the sense of loyal. Loyal to the tribe, to his overking (of Scotland, Britain, whatever), and to God, his *àrd-rìgh*. As Iain Lom expressed it,

*Chuir sinn romhainn craobh shìthe
Chumadh dìon oirnn gu leòr.*

(We placed before us a tree of peace / To protect us adequately.) Did it work in practice? Well, Donald rightly says that the historical boundary for these things lies around 1770, and I have just been reading the biography of a chief who *does* appear to fulfil Neil MacLeod's rosy stereotype, Ewen MacPherson of Cluny (1706-64). It is by Alan G Macpherson, it is called 'A Day's March to Ruin', it is not a eulogy, it can be got from the Clan Macpherson Association, The Clan House Museum, Newtonmore, and I recommend it.

My conclusions are these: that the clan chief, the *rìgh*, was, down till 1770, the best leader for a Highland community, the best defender of *carthannas*; but that if community leadership is to be successful in the future it must likewise be *rìoghail*, that is, native and benign.

Nollaig charthannach dhuibh uile.

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