The fixed points of time

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

IN 1968 the late Eric Cregeen of the School of Scottish Studies asked Domhnall Chaluim Bàin of Tiree (Donald Sinclair, now also deceased) about *Blàr nan Sguab*, the Battle of the Sheaves. Domhnall Chaluim Bàin told him the story, and it is printed in "Tocher" no. 18. The *Lochlannaich* came ashore in Tiree at harvest-time, and the Tireemen attacked them with their sheaves of corn. They thrust the sharp ends of the sheaves into the Norsemen's bodies, killing them all.

Domhnall Chaluim Bàin then said: *Dé an ùine ach a bhios bhuaithe sin? Bheil trì cheud bliadhna bhuaithe sin, tha fhios gu bheil, bhon a bha na Lochlannaich a' tighinn do na h-Eileinean seo a ghoid 's a spùinneadh?* ('How long is it since then? Is it three hundred years since then, surely it is, since the Norsemen were coming to these Islands to steal and plunder?')

He was amazingly far out in his guess. Eleven hundred years would have been nearer the mark, in fact if I am not mistaken it is twelve hundred years this year, 1997, since the Vikings started appearing around these shores. How could he have been so wrong? Well, it may be that a tradition-bearer like him had such a vivid view of his material that a Viking battle was as if it happened yesterday. And it may be that language and psychology gave him ways of measuring time that do not match our modern obsession with decimal counting.

Certainly dates as we understand them today have little to do with traditional knowledge. In 1972 another stalwart of the School of Scottish Studies, Donald Archie MacDonald, was visiting Hugh MacKinnon at Cleadale in Eigg. MacKinnon told him stories about Eóghain Mór, son of the Rev. Malcolm MacAskill, and Donald Archie asked him when Eóghain Mór died. (This is in "Tocher" no. 10.) *Cuin a-nist a chaochail e, bheil beachd agaibh?*

O, ghaoil, chan eil. Chan eil. Tha mi . . . O . . . ma fhìor thoiseach . . . an ochdamh linn deug, eighteen hundred, na dh'fhaoidte na bliadhnachan ma dheireadh . . . dhen a' cheud roimhe sin. What a question! 'Oh, my lad, I don't know. I've no idea. I think . . . Oh . . . about the very beginning . . . of the eighteenth century, 1800, or maybe the last years . . . of the century before that.'

Such men as Sinclair and MacKinnon came of a tradition which had ways of dating things, but they also knew the modern ways, tried to respond to them, and ended up falling between two stools. Modern dating by numbers can be a very convenient short-cut, but we all know that it doesn't work very well for the simple reason that if the right numbers haven't entered the brain in the first place, the right numbers won't come out of it afterwards!

Dates are what most of us hated about history lessons, and clearly dates did not figure in the 'history lessons' — the historical tales — told in the céilidh house. I have the feeling that Donald Archie should have tried asking questions like, 'Now who was alive at the same time as Eóghain Mór? Who would have been about the same age?'

And when he got to someone whose dates were likely to be a matter of historical record, like the Chief of Clanranald, he might have said, 'Now would he have been younger or older than Eóghain Mór? How much younger? How much older?' MacKinnon would have thought of stories that brought the two together as young men or teenagers, perhaps, when one year makes all the difference, and come up with an answer.

I suppose the point is that modern education has to be quick and efficient because it is on a commercial basis. It costs money. A céilidh-house education was quite different. It cost nothing. It was an entertainment as well as an education. If a question gave rise to a story or two before it could be answered with certainty, and if communal knowledge had to be pooled before the solution could be reached, that was fine. There was all night, and every other night of the winter too, and part of the purpose was to use up those long empty hours of darkness. And if a child fell asleep before the answer was reached, it would be a splendid excuse for his peers to reconstruct the stories for him while out herding the cows the next day.

I mentioned language and psychology. Note the words *linn* and *ceud*, both of them used by Hugh MacKinnon. The late Rev. William Matheson taught me that the word for a century is *ceud*, literally of course 'a hundred'. Of course we also talk about the likes of the *ochdamh linn deug*, 'the eighteenth century', as MacKinnon did, but that is a special use of *linn* and really it means 'the eighteenth era'.

Domhnall Chaluim Bàin's astonishing *trì cheud bliadhna* since the time of the Vikings makes me wonder if in the back of his mind — and this is where psychology comes in — he was thinking of the three *linntean* of Highland traditional history, and obliging Cregeen by turning them into centuries.

There was *linn Oisein*, the era of Ossian, also called *linn an àigh*, the era of prosperity, a golden age of innocence when Christ was unknown and the land was open and free, provided it was defended from pirates such as the Vikings.

There was *linn nan creach*, the era of the plunders, when the tribes fought each other over cattle in order to get enough to eat.

And there was a third age which began in each district when the true gospel of evangelical protestantism (or of counter-Reformationary catholicism) drove out the selfish old ways. It might variously be called *linn an t-soisgeil*, or *linn Chailbhein*, or *linn nam bodach*, or just *linn mo sheanar* — the era of the gospel, or of Calvin, or of the old men, or of my grandfather.

In a word, then, where we have centuries, the traditional mind had eras — a history governed sensibly by events rather than artificially by mathematics. And again, if we turn to the smaller units of time, we find them all being defined by reference to fixed points. In a paper read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1900, Charles Fergusson from Strathardle put it this way. 'The Highlanders seldom used figures for their dates, but always reckoned from some great event in their history, so that people dated their births, marriages, etc., so many years before or after "The Day of the Lifting of the Standard", or "The Day of Culloden". The last of these noted events

from which dates were reckoned, and which was very commonly used in my youth in Strathardle, was the famous year 1826, *Bliadhna a' Bharr Ghoirid* — "The Year of the Short Corn" — when the straw was so short it could not be cut, so was pulled up by the root.'

The Day of the Lifting of the Standard, *Latha Togail na Brataich*, is in our parlance 6 September 1715, and the Day of Culloden, *Latha Chùil Lodair*, is of course 16 April 1746. What Fergusson demonstrates is how a fixed point may begin as one memorable day from which other days are reckoned, and how subsequently, with the passage of years, it may give its name to the year which it dominates. So 1746 became known as *Bliadhna Chùil Lodair*.

Other fixed points may originate as entire years rather than days. *Bliadhna an Fheachd*, or *Bliadhna Thearlaich* — 'the Year of the Army', or 'the Year of Charles' — is 1745, or 1745-6. (In Scotland until 1600, and in England and Ireland until 1752, the year began officially on 25 March, so people had little difficulty in visualising a year that lay on both sides of 1 January.)

In a story called 'Cuairt a' Mhinisteir Ghallda', written in (I think) 1829 by the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod, *Caraid nan Gaidheal*, a minister is talking to an old man called Eachann. Eachann says: *Tha mi aois mhòr a-nis, rugadh mi Bliadhn' an Fheachd, an uair a bha na Gàidheil ag oidhirpeachadh an rìgh Pàpanach a chur thairis oirnn: cunntaibh fhéin sin, a Mhinisteir*. 'I am a great age now, I was born in *Bliadhn' an Fheachd*, when the Gael were endeavouring to set the Papist king over us: count that yourself, Minister.'

Tha sin gad dhèanamh ceithir fichead bliadhna 's a ceithir, replies the minister. 'That makes you 84.'

Further examples were given by Alexander Macbain in a paper about Badenoch which he read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1890. Speaking of *Call Ghàig*, an avalanche disaster which took place in the first week of January 1800, he said, 'The Loss of Gaick is a local epoch from which to date: an old person always said that he or she was so many years old at Call Ghàig. So in other parts, the Olympiads or Archons or Temple-burnings which made the landmarks of chronology were such as the "Year of the White Peas", "the Hot Summer" (1826?), the year of the "Great Snow", and so forth.'

Macbain's Olympiads, Archons and Temple-Burnings are of course references to ancient Greece, an archon being one of the nine magistrates of Athens.

Whether measuring years, months or days, then, the 'fixed point' is the cardinal principle of the traditional calendar. But there are two kinds of fixed point. The first is the dramatic, 'one-off' kind exemplified above, which Sir Walter Scott helpfully defined in these words, placed in the mouth of a character in "The Antiquary": 'The eras by which the vulgar compute time have always reference to some period of fear and tribulation, and they date by a tempest, an earthquake, or burst of civil commotion.' I don't know about earthquakes, but the rest is all very true of the Gaelic calendar; Fergusson mentioned two bursts of civil commotion, while famous famines and storms (and our avalanche) certainly account for Scott's tempests and periods of fear and tribulation.

The less dramatic fixed point is the day of the week or the annual festival, which might be a quarterday or saint's day. There are countless examples of this in Gaelic literature. Reckoning is not by numbered day, named month and numbered year — 14 February 1997, for example — but by reference to the nearest quarterday, saint's day or other festival. *Mu Bhealltainn*, for example, 'about Beltane', or *roimhn Fhéill Màrtainn*'before Martinmas'. If precision is needed, the name of the day of the week provides it, like this from Iain Lom's song on the Keppoch Murder:

S fada cuimhne na h-Aoine
Dh'fhàg a-chaoidh sinn fo sproc,
Ann an com na Féill Mìcheil:
Cha bu nì chaill ar ploc.

('Long will the Friday be remembered / which has left us for all time in gloom, / in the heart of Michaelmastide: / it was not of cattle that our land was bereft.') Michaelmas day is 29 September; the Keppoch Murder took place in the run-up to that festival, on Friday 25 September 1663.

Finally, the Gaelic calendar defines spring, summer, autumn and winter very precisely as beginning on the quarterdays, so the quarters take the place of the months, as in a song from Kintail:

A' chiad Aoine den gheamhradh fhuar
S daor a phàigh sinn duais 'nar sealg —
An t-òg bu chraobhaiche snuadh
'Na aonar uainn 's fhaotainn marbh.

('On the first Friday of cold winter / Dearly did we pay the price in our hunting — / The youth of freshest complexion / Being separated from us and found dead.')

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