

## The Bunbury incident

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I DON'T know to what extent dictation tests are used in teaching Gaelic these days. Certainly anyone who studies Gaelic in Edinburgh University will have to sit one at least once in his or her career. A passage is read out to the class, slowly, and perhaps repeated phrase by phrase. The student has to write it down as correctly as possible, and a mark or two is taken off for every blank and every spelling mistake.

Probably the most extraordinary — and immoral — use ever made of a Gaelic dictation test was in a small port town in Western Australia on Friday 29 April 1927. “RUNAWAY SEAMAN WRECKED BY DICTATION TEST” runs the headline in a local newspaper, ‘The South Western Times’.

A copy of the article lies before me. The story is pretty well known in South Uist, and a version of it was told by the man at the centre of it, Hugh Laing, in his book ‘Gu Tìr mo Luaidh’, published by Stornoway Gazette Ltd in 1964. Lately however I have been in touch with his daughter, Miss Jean Laing, who has kindly furnished me with well-researched details of her father’s life as well as of the newspaper article in question, and has granted me permission to lay out the story with this fresh evidence. (I am also grateful to the forthcoming ‘Australian Dictionary of National Biography’.)

Hugh Boyd Laing, *Uistean Dhòmhnail Iain mhic Anndra*, was born in 1889 in Stoneybridge, South Uist. He took a degree in Glasgow University, then studied Semitic languages with a view to training for the ministry of the Church of Scotland. Feeling however that he was not cut out to be a clergyman, in 1913 he emigrated to Western Australia.

He entered the teaching profession, starting at Scotch College before joining the State Education Department in 1915. He taught at Goldfields High School in Kalgoorlie until 1918, being rejected four times for active service because of a minor physical disability. He then taught for seven years at Perth Modern School before moving on to Bunbury High School in 1925. His subject was English and he was a popular teacher, by all accounts. They called him ‘Whizzy’ or ‘Whizz-Bang’ from his Gaelic name *Uistean*, and it is abundantly clear from his writings that he was an erudite man with a great love of literature and a fascination for languages ancient and modern. But from what he tells us himself, his career was going nowhere very fast until fame — or rather ill-fame — thrust itself upon him one autumn day in April 1927.

What happened was this. On Saturday 26 March 1927 a South African ship, the *SS Erica*, docked at Bunbury from Busselton, a coastal station a few miles to the south. Laing later gave her name wrongly as the *SS Apolda*. The purpose of her visit appears to have been to take on board a cargo of Australian hardwood for use in constructing the South African railways.

The Sub-Collector of Customs at Bunbury, Francis John Carey, boarded the *Erica*, and the master duly showed him the crew list, as he was obliged to do under the Australian Immigration Act of 1901–25. This was the act which served to reinforce the government’s ‘Keep Australia White’ policy in some very strange and devious ways, as we will see. Carey personally mustered the crew and found them all present and correct according to the list.

Over a fortnight later, on Wednesday 13 April, three crew members ‘jumped ship’, presumably by simply walking out of the dock. Their names were Gabriel Clarivette, John Petersen and Percy Small. Their absence was not reported to the authorities until Tuesday 19 April, presumably because their desertion could get the master into trouble: indeed, according to Laing, for every non-white that a ship brought into port and failed to take away again, the Customs & Excise Board were entitled to demand a fine of £100.

As the vessel was about to sail, Carey returned to the ship, mustered the crew once again, and established that the three men were still missing. Their nationality was given in the crew list as South African, their race as Coloured. The master then signed a bond authorising the ship’s agents to appear in any proceedings that might be taken in consequence of the non-recovery of the men.

On the morning of Friday 29 April Carey was notified by the police that the three men were in custody. Apparently the men had been caught in a small town 30 miles from Bunbury as early as 16 April. As they refused to rejoin their ship they had been brought to prison in Bunbury, tried for desertion, and each sentenced to a month in prison. Carey telegraphed Canberra for instructions, pointing out that the three men refused to return to their native land. Back came the reply: they must be deported immediately.

Now it appears that the inherent racism of Australian immigration policy was operated in an entirely covert manner. The law stated that right of entry to Australia was subject only to passing a dictation test in any spoken European language. At first sight, such a law seemed liberal in intention — it encouraged skilled labour and discouraged illiteracy, while offering an open door to poor Europeans of whatever country and to any Chinese and others who could read and write English. But in practice, the law could be turned against any undesirable alien by the simple expedient of imposing on him a test in a language which he could not possibly know.

This, then, was the morally indefensible duty to which Carey now applied himself. He first thought of the languages spoken by settlers ten miles north of Bunbury — Italian, Greek, Macedonian, other Slav dialects. But although these people possessed an astonishing variety of linguistic skills (not to mention great ability in cultivating potatoes and fruit in a harsh climate), the skill of conducting dictation tests according to the rules of the Australian Customs & Excise Board was not among them.

Pondering the matter, Carey took a stroll out of his office and up the street where he met a businessman of his acquaintance. Where, he asked, would he find someone who could administer a dictation test in some obscure European language to the Cape Coloureds who had jumped ship? Try that young Scotsman in the High School, said his friend.

In a few minutes Carey was at the school door, asking for Laing. Carey first asked if Laing could do the test in Latin. Yes, said Laing, but he doubted if it would be legal, as Latin was no longer a community language in any part of Europe. Ancient Greek was no more suitable, nor would Hebrew or Arabic do, not being European languages. "I told him," recalled Laing, "that there was a lady in the High School who was very skilled in German and French, and that perhaps they would do. He said no. German was too like Afrikaans, and if we gave the dictation in German, he was afraid the Coloureds might not fail. On top of which, one of them had spent three years in Mauritius, where French was spoken."

In desperation, Carey finally asked if Laing knew any other European languages. "Yes," he replied, "I think I could read Scottish Gaelic, although I haven't spoken it for over fourteen years."

Carey asked where this language was spoken, and if it wasn't just the kind of strange English he had heard Glasgow people speaking, or like in Harry Lauder's songs, whereupon Laing stoutly defended the status of Gaelic as a living European language spoken every day by over a hundred thousand people. "Thus did it come about in the history of Australia," he later ruefully remarked, "that Scottish Gaelic was numbered amongst the languages that kept the country white."

Laing and Carey came face to face with the three men in Bunbury Police Station at seven o'clock that evening. Carey explained what was required. The penalty for failure, he said, would be immediate court proceedings for deportation. Laing first read his chosen passage through, then dictated it slowly. Only Clarivette, the man who had been in Mauritius, made any attempt to write. The most graphic account of the event is that given long afterwards by a pupil of Laing's, Charles Staples, who recalled, "I remember Laing returning from the testing greatly impressed by the black man's surprising ability with languages. Although he was clearly not familiar with Gaelic he was able to take down the dictation test in the most competent phonetically correct spelling."

The five men met again in court the following morning. The charge stated that they had been "required by an officer within the meaning of the Immigration Act 1901-25 to pass a dictation test and failed, and that they had entered the Commonwealth [of Australia] within three years before 29th April 1927 and were therefore deemed to be prohibited immigrants".

Carey explained the circumstances, then the Resident Magistrate invited the three men to ask questions. As reported by 'The South Western Times', Clarivette informed the R.M. "that he could write in any ordinary language, bar the one they gave him. That was impossible and he could not get on with it at all."

R.M.: "What language was it?"

Laing: "Scottish Gaelic."

R.M.: "And they failed?"

Laing: "Two of them made no attempt at it, but Clarivette did."

Clarivette: "Can you tell me what language it is?"

Laing: "Scottish Gaelic."

Clarivette: "It is supposed to be a European language?"

Laing: "It is a European language."

Clarivette: "It beat me; I could not get on with it at all." (Laughter.)

Carey: "You can be tested in any spoken European language."

Clarivette's attempt at Scottish Gaelic was handed to the Bench, but not made public.

According to Laing, Clarivette protested again and again that he did not wish to return to South Africa, and as for the dictation, "If it's a language, it's the very devil of a language."

"Be quiet, be quiet," said the R.M. "That kind of talk is not permitted in this court."

The three men were found guilty. Carey asked for a six-month sentence followed by deportation, the R.M. made it three months with deportation to be effected as soon as possible, and Laing's understanding was that the men were to be put on board the SS *Apolda* at 4 p.m. that same day, which is where that ship enters the picture.

I only wish I knew the fate of Gabriel Clarivette. What I do know is the fate of Hugh Boyd Laing. He was paid £1 as a witness and £2 for administering the test. He also admitted to having enhanced his fame — or ill-fame — more by that one dictation test than by over twenty years of teaching. People would stop him in the street and say, "Don't you think, Mr Laing, that it's disgraceful to be throwing poor souls out of Australia because they can't speak Gaelic? Will Customs & Excise try to throw me out because I can't speak Gaelic?"

"I can't speak for Customs & Excise," Laing would say, "but if I were you, I'd start learning Gaelic right away."

So he enjoyed telling the story, while coming (as his daughter tells me) to deplore such use (or abuse) of his mother tongue and the part he had played in it; the 'Dictation Law' was abolished in 1932 and 1958.

Still, in 1929 he was promoted and in 1942 he became a headmaster. He retired in 1954, and began to come home to Uist on holiday as often as he could. I had the pleasure of meeting him, a delightful old gentleman with a craggy appearance, in Lochboisdale in 1966; he died in 1974.

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