

The Uig Flood of 1877

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THIS article, as promised, is an account of the Uig flood of Sunday night and Monday morning 13-14 October 1877.

One of the sources for it is a letter in ‘The Clarion of Skye’ of September 1952. Dugald Matheson from Bernisdale, now living in Campsie, New South Wales, pointed out that *Tuil Ùige* was well remembered by his uncle and aunts who were living in Glenhinnisdale at that time, while a more distant relative, Calum Mac Dhiarmaid, who lived at Uig, composed a song about it. He refers to

*Na beanntan ard’ as àillidh dreach
 ‘S an currac geamhraidh làn den t-sneachd’ —
 Gur h-ioma linn a chaidh mu seach
 ‘S gun chruthaicheadh iad roimh Àdhamh.*

(‘The high mountains most beautiful of form / With their winter cap full of snow — / Many an age went past in turn / And they were created before Adam.’)

The River Conon and its many feeder burns were already full when the rain started on the Sabbath evening, shortly after the evening service got under way in the Free Church on the Cnoc Uaine. D A Maclean explains in ‘Weather in North Skye’ what happened next. “Many of the steep soggy banks either gave way in landslips, or were torn loose by the raging waters and tossed into a temporary but effective dam in the vicinity of the turn where the straight running current hit the right bank of the ‘dog-leg’ leading to the gorge. This immense power, once released through its natural funnel — the gorge — would explain how rocks weighing between one and two tons were moved bodily seaward as part of the accumulated debris.”

The next obstacle was the road-bridge. The river was already hurling boulders against it as the last worshippers passed safely over it on their way home. “A second loch,” says Maclean, “was formed above and behind the jammed bridge and the road embankment.”

When this second obstacle gave way around midnight, waves of enormous power were released which caused the river to depart from its natural course. Carrying with it as battering-rams the stones of the bridge and countless boulders from the gorge, the river made straight for Uig Lodge, the summer residence of Major Fraser, the proprietor of the Kilmuir estate.

As floodwaters swirled around the Lodge, David Ferguson, the 52-year-old estate manager, who lived in a house up the hill, decided to go down to check the safety of the building’s contents. His family did not want to let him go, but he is said to have insisted with the words, *Tha an deagh sheirbheiseach dileas dha mhaighstir*. “The good servant is faithful to his master.”

Ferguson’s son became increasingly worried as the floodwaters rose, and decided to try and reach his father. He was joined by the farm grieve and another friend. By the time the three men got to the garden wall the water was up to their waists. Soon after that, one of them was carried off his feet by the current. They shouted to attract Ferguson’s attention, but could not make their voices heard against the roaring of the flood. By now the water was up to their chins, and they were forced to retreat, praying that Ferguson could save himself.

Ferguson’s fate was recalled to the readers of ‘The Clarion of Skye’ in April 1952 by his granddaughter, Mrs M C Davies of Birmingham. She was only three weeks old at the time of the flood, but was told the story many times by her grieving grandmother, who survived her husband by twenty years. She had watched his lantern going from room to room until it disappeared.

When dawn broke on Monday 14 October the people of Uig surveyed a scene of utter devastation. The face of the landscape was altered. The glen had turned into a lake. The bridge was gone. The garden wall of the Lodge had disappeared. The Lodge was a ruin, the flood having undermined its foundations. The fields and stands of timber surrounding it had been swept out of existence.

Above all, the people’s crops of grain and potatoes were destroyed — “washed away,” in the words of Alexander Ross, who described the scene to the Inverness Scientific Society and Field Club, “or covered to a depth of a couple of feet by masses of stones and debris, many of the former being a ton in weight, completely destroying the crops, and not only the crops but the land for future cultivation”. For days and weeks afterwards they scabbled to recover potatoes from the wreckage.

There was no trace at first of David Ferguson, but a sight much more ghastly than that of his corpse met people’s eyes. Among the rubbish and debris in what used to be the Lodge garden were naked bodies (many of them recognisable), coffins, skulls and bones. These were the contents of the cemetery, most of which had broken away from the hillside in one of the many landslides that had taken place on Conon’s banks during the night. Not far from the Lodge a newly-buried body was found hanging in a tree-trunk and duly identified by the recently-bereaved widow. Only three graves and a tombstone survived intact on the face of the brae, but tier upon tier of bleached skeletons could be seen suspended over the valley where they had been buried.

*Cha robh corp a chaidh don ùir
 O chionn lethcheud bliadhna dh’ùin’
 Nach d’èirich thogail fianais suas
 ‘S gun leag Dia làmh air.*

(‘Every corpse that had been buried / For half a century of time / Rose up to bear witness / That God had laid his hand on them.’) Dead human bodies and live animals alike had been swept down the flooded river and out to sea, and were washed up even at Greshornish, seven miles away across Loch Snizort. From one farm alone 250 head of sheep were lost. At sea, the remains of hundreds of human corpses could be seen tossing about amongst smashed coffins and sheep carcasses, and were carefully retrieved.

Siud far ’n robh na daoine fialaidh
Nuair rachadh iad le ’m bàta dh’iasgach —
Nuair a ghlacadh iad na ciadan
Riaraidheadh air càch iad.

(‘That’s where the people showed their kindness / When they went to fish with their boats — / When they’d caught them by the hundred / They delivered them to their kin.’) People searched the shores for weeks afterwards looking for human remains. These were collected in boxes and buried in the new churchyard at Beinn Sòbhraig behind *Eaglais a’ Chnuic Uaine*, the Free Church.

Late on Monday evening a coal boat arrived in the Bay. The story of what happened could be straight out of ‘Para Handy’. The skipper and one of the crew rowed ashore in the gloaming and began looking for a long flat stone to which they could tie the mooring ropes of the boat. They knew nothing of the disaster, and in their search for a suitable stone they stumbled on a child’s coffin lying near the shore. It gave them such a shock that they scrambled back on board in a panic and sailed back out to sea.

The following day Donald Matheson, *Domhnall Alastair mhic Nèill*, was on his way on horseback from Kilmuir to Portree. His account of what he saw as he came through Uig was relayed by his son Angus to John A Macleod. “He rode along the shore, past the site of the Uig Lodge, and the scene there defied description. Bodies in all states of decay were huddled together, along with pieces of coffins and remains of shrouds, and, on the top of one heap, he recognised the well preserved remains of a Kilmuir man who had died a few weeks before the disaster.”

Where David Ferguson’s body was found is not entirely clear. One account claims that it was recovered from a cellar of the ruined house. At any rate, his granddaughter inherited one of his ‘In Memoriam’ cards, in which the date of his death was given as 14 October 1877, along with the text, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

Also related to David Ferguson is the poet Aonghas MacNeacail, who was born in Uig in 1942. In ‘Oideachadh Ceart’, which appears in his book of the same name published by Polygon last year, he says:

*cha b’e eachdraidh ach cuimhne
là na dìle, chaidh loids a’ chaitpein
a sguabadh dhan tràigh
nuair a phòs sruthan rà is chonain
gun tochar a ghabhail
ach dàthaidh an sgalag
a dh’fhan “dìleas dha mhaighstir”
agus cuirp nan linn às a’ chladh . . .*

In his own translation: “it wasn’t history but memory / the day of the flood, the captain’s lodge / was swept to the shore / when the streams of rha and conon married / taking no dowry / but david the servant / who stayed ‘true to his master’ / and the corpses of centuries from the cemetery . . .”

My main sources for the Uig Flood are a book by D Nairne, ‘Memorable Floods in the Highlands’, published in 1895, and a series of articles by that indefatigable Skyeman John N Macleod — *Alasdair Mór* of ‘The Stornoway Gazette’ — in ‘The Clarion of Skye’ of January-March 1952, for copies of which I am grateful to the Portree Library. Having obtained some useful input from readers like Mrs Davies, Macleod returned to the subject in his column in ‘The Northern Chronicle’ for 20 January 1954.

He adds an interesting postscript. Shortly after the flood, a letter reached John Murdoch’s radical newspaper, ‘The Highlander’, claiming that the destruction of the Lodge was the judgement of God upon Major Fraser for ill-treating his tenants. In Murdoch’s absence on business, his deputy unwisely published the letter. Fraser sued the paper for £1,000 damages and was awarded £50.

Murdoch’s total bill of £50 plus £34 costs could only be met with the help of a well-wisher from Skye (John Mackay, Hereford). He was ruined. Macleod wrote: “The ‘Highlander’, which always pursued with great skill the cause of the distressed Highland crofter, ceased to carry the banner of the crofters’ freedom as from that day. That lawsuit caused bitter disappointment to the veteran John Murdoch, and it virtually broke his heart.”

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