

The Uig Flood as judgement?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I HOPE I'll be forgiven if I devote one more article to the Uig Flood of 14 October 1877. It gets a mention in a splendid new book called 'Hebridean Song-Maker: Iain MacNeacail of the Isle of Skye' by Thomas A McKean, which was published this year by Polygon of Edinburgh.

The book is a careful study of the background to the songs of John Nicolson, *An Sgiobair*, who lives at Cuidreach near Uig. It comes with a CD of recordings. As well as the songs themselves it is full of conversations with the poet, and there are many fine photographs.

For example, on the page facing the Skipper's account of the flood there are two photographs of Uig Bay in the 1890s, in one of which Captain — or Major — Fraser's tower features very prominently. Fraser it was who had bought the Kilmuir Estate from Lord MacDonald in 1855, and he was an unpopular landlord of the rackrenting type — while reducing substantially the amount of land available to crofters, he almost doubled their rents. Writes McKean: "Many families were driven from the more fertile north side of Glenconon to the meagre topsoil of the Siadar side, the rocky coastline of Cùil, and overseas as well."

Fraser built his tower as a gasworks, apparently. "You've seen the tower," said the Skipper to McKean, "and there was the *Sea Horse*." This was Fraser's boat. "She would be coming in and they would be firing two shots from the tower, welcome, you know, or saluting him when he would come." Anyway, here is McKean's conversation with Iain MacNeacail about the flood, just as it stands in the new book.

IM: [His house] was in the centre, down at the bay . . . Well just at the edge, . . . maybe fifty yards out [i.e. inshore] from the sea anyhow, but that's where Captain Fraser had his house, down there, and the lodge when he had it.

TM: Is there anything left of it? . . .

IM: Well you see the foundations where it was, oh yes, 1877, that was [when] the flood came, in October.

TM: Were there heavy rains?

IM: No, definitely not. I heard my father and mother speak about it at times. [It was] coming down just, you know, gently, but it continued for twenty-four hours. And what was very strange, there was no estate in Skye that suffered but Fraser's estate. Whether there was judgement coming on the laird or not, people did believe that at that time. And . . . Màiri Mhór was saying too that it was [a] judgement that came on him some way, [because] the bodies were coming in[to] Talisker, on the shore.

Of Màiri Mhór, more later. As to whether Fraser's was the only estate in Skye which suffered, the Skipper was overstating the case, but not by much. According to D A Maclean's 'Weather in North Skye', Broadford experienced floods of unprecedented magnitude on 12 October, two days before Uig. Broadford was certainly not Fraser's property.

On the 14th itself, says Maclean, "Considerable flooding, loss of crops, and drowning of stock were caused more or less simultaneously in the adjacent valleys of the rivers Rha and Hinnisdale, and across the Ridge in the valley of the Kilmartin River, although fortunately no loss of life was reported from any of the three areas. The Hinnisdale Bridge and a wide stretch of the abutting embankments were demolished . . . On the east side of the Trotternish Ridge whole fields of crops were washed away soil and all, and many sheep were trapped and washed out to sea." All of these places were part of Fraser's estate, I believe.

Finally, Maclean points out that 'in Portree the Square was filled with water to a considerable depth and people were unable to enter or leave their homes', and that not only were the Uig and Hinnisdale bridges destroyed, but that seemingly only two of the 'new' bridges in the whole northern half of Skye remained intact.

It would certainly have seemed as if God's finger was pointed at Fraser's property, and that the good people of Broadford, Portree and elsewhere were being asked to suffer a little inconvenience in order that Fraser be punished. To people for whom all of nature was a continuous manifestation of God's pleasure or His wrath, the signs were perfectly clear, and the text was Genesis chapter 6, God's reasons for the Flood. This is how the matter was expressed by the man who wrote to John Murdoch's paper 'The Highlander': "The belief throughout the parish is that the disaster is a judgment upon Captain Fraser's property. It is very remarkable, it is said, that all the destruction of property in Skye is confined to his estate."

He continued: "At Uig, there are two rivers about half a mile apart. These came down with dreadful rapidity . . . What looks so singular is that the two rivers should break through every barrier and aim at Captain Fraser's house. Again it is strange that nearly all the dead buried in Uig during the last 500 years should be brought up as it were against the house, as if the dead in their graves arose to perform the work of vengeance which the living had not the spirit to execute. But although the living would not put forth a hand themselves against the laird, they do not hesitate to express their regret that the proprietor was not in the place of the manager when he was swept away."

This of course was the letter which provoked Fraser to take out a libel action against Murdoch for £1,000 damages. But after the court awarded Fraser £50, a colossus strode upon the scene in the form of Màiri Mhór nan Òran, a native of nearby Skeabost. Her song 'Duilleag bho Bhealach nan Cabar' is addressed to the Skye Camanachd Association in Glasgow. She seems to have been in Skye when she composed it; the title means in effect 'A Letter from Bealach nan Cabar', but I don't know where Bealach nan Cabar is.

She begins with good wishes to the Skye exiles in Glasgow, coming rapidly on to the topic of Fraser (whom she calls by his patronymic Mac Ùistein) and his clearances. There are 18 stanzas altogether, and it is in no. 9 that she comes to the matter of the flood:

*'S ged thog thu aitreabh luachmhor
Air làrach na mnà-uaisle,
Na mairbh a bha san uaigh,
Gun do sguab iad sìos don ghainimh i.*

(‘And though you built a grand dwelling-house / On the lady’s foundation, / The dead from their graves / Swept it down to the strand.’)

*Gun dh’aithnicheadh a chuid rìomhachd
Air cladaichean Chinn Tìre,
'S cuid eile dhiubh 'nam mìrean
A' dol air tìr an Talasgair.*

(‘Its fine furnishings were recognised / On the coast of Kintyre, / With some of them in splinters / Washed ashore at Talisker.’) I take it *Cinn Tìre* is Kintyre as I know of no such place in Skye. I think Màiri Mhór is exaggerating here for satirical effect, but who knows . . .

*'S a' chuid a bha e pianadh
'S nach fàgadh e leth-bhliadhna,
Gun tug an cuirp an fhianais
Gun do dhìoladh an cuid fala air.*

(‘And those whom he tormented / Without a term’s remission of rent, / Their bodies bore witness / That their blood had been avenged on him.’)

*'S gun smaoinich e a-pluim
Gun robh nis an lach air cheann aig'
Nuair a dh'eubh e mìle bonn
Air an dream a bha cur sgannail air.*

(‘And he thought right away / He’d a sitting duck in his sights now / When he sued for a thousand pounds / The people who’d slandered him.’)

*'S an àite nan deich ceud
A dhèanadh pàirt den chall a lionadh,
Cha robh ach lethcheud spìocach
'S gun d'rinneadh fhiach de dh'fhanaid air.*

(‘And instead of the thousand / That would part pay for the disaster, / He got a miserable fifty / And the same amount of mockery.’)

*'S gur e mo chrìdh tha cràiteach
A' faicinn dìol mo chairdean
Gam pianadh ris an àiteach
'S nach dèan am barr an fhallaid dhaibh.*

(‘And my heart is in agony / Seeing the plight of my kinsfolk / In thrall to tilling fields Whose crop won’t dust their bread.’) *Fallaid*, as Dwelly explains, is the remains of meal on the baking-board after a batch of bread has been baked — used for dusting over the cakes already made, or for making a little extra cake with. “No thrifty wife would think of dusting the baking-board into the meal girmel.”

*An uair a thig an samhradh
Gan riasladh air a' Ghalldachd,
'S na gheibh iad a chur cruinn
Ga thoirt dha 'n geall nam feannagan.*

(‘When the summer comes / They struggle in the Lowlands, / And what they manage to save / They give to him for the lazybeds.’) She is referring here to the women who worked as domestic servants or herring-girls, and the men who fished from Lowland ports or went to reap the earlier Lowland harvest.

*'S nan robh muir 's mòinteach
Air fhàgail mar bu chòir dhaibh,
Bhiodh éideadh agus lòn aca
'S dòigh ann air am fanadh iad.*

(‘And if the sea and the moorland / Had been left as was right for them, / They’d have clothing and food / And the means for them to stay.’) So Màiri Mhór reminds us of the point with which I began, many articles ago —

that the Uig Flood, *Tuil Ùige*, must be seen against the context of the people's constant struggle to find enough to eat. But let's finish, as she does, on a pleasanter note:

*Beannachd leibh, a chairdean,
'S gun soirbhich anns a' bhlàr leibh,
'S ma thig sibh mu Fhéill Màrtainn
Se Ùig ur n-àite camanachd.*

(Farewell to you, my friends, / And may you win on the field, / And if you come about Martinmas / Uig is your place for shinty.)

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