

The search for common ground

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

TODAY I had been going to write about the life and times of Thomas the Rhymer. He lived in Earlston in Lauderdale, in the Scottish Borders, in the thirteenth century, and he is more prominent in Gaelic tradition than Malcolm Canmore, Wallace, Bruce or any other medieval figure from south of the Highland Line.

The demands of the twentieth century are more pressing than those of the thirteenth, however, so although I am going to approach that subject I am going to do so very tangentially. I will leave the full mystery of Thomas till next time.

In the past month the Edinburgh papers have been full of controversy about the siting of our new parliament. Will it be put in the car-park at Victoria Quay in Leith, where the Scottish civil service apparently has a palatial new building? I say ‘apparently’ because I have never seen it, and that is symptomatic of the problem. Only a small proportion of people who live and work in Edinburgh, never mind the rest of Scotland, ever have occasion to go down that way. The capital city is more like Inverness or London than Portree or Stornoway: it certainly doesn’t revolve around its harbour or its docks.

Or will the parliament be housed at the dignified old Royal High School building on the slopes of Calton Hill? That is where it was supposed to be in 1979, when the late Murdo MacFarlane of Melbost lent his voice to the YES campaign.

Hi ri ri

Tha e tighinn:

Hi ri ri, nì tha bhuainn.

Coithional de Ghoill 's de Ghaidhil

Riaghladh Alba glic le buaidh.

(Hi ri ri / It’s coming: / Hi ri ri, what we want. / An assembly of Gall and Gael / To rule Scotland wisely and well.)

Or is there perhaps a third option close to the other end of Princes Street, adding to the steel, glass, concrete and fountains of Edinburgh’s glitzy new business quarter?

Each of the three options — if there are three options and not just the first two — is symbolic. They represent (1) secretive government, (2) the people’s choice, and (3) brassy business, in that order.

For the Secretary of State, Donald Dewar, the choice is an agonising one. He said in his white paper ‘Scotland’s Parliament’ that the cost would be under £40m. Leith could come in at well under that, even as little as £30m if its proponents can be believed. The Calton Hill would be over budget, because the Royal High building is a security nightmare and inadequate for the needs of the 21st century.

For a ‘Parliament on the Hill’ a complex of interesting new buildings would be necessary. It’s what the people want and it’s what Edinburgh’s Labour-run City Council want, but Donald Dewar is a man of his word and he can’t deliver the Calton Hill at the price stated. Will he have to take money from schools and hospitals?

So, in a word, a man called Dewar is swithering between Leith and the Calton Hill. Three names which awaken curiously symbolic echoes from deep in our country’s Gaelic heritage.

Let’s take ‘Dewar’ first. The Gaelic word *deòradh* is not in general use nowadays but has a fascinating history. It is pronounced roughly JAW-RUG, in Perthshire shortened to *deòr*, pronounced JAWR or DEWAR. It meant a stranger or pilgrim, and was the name given to the hereditary custodian of a sacred relic. Such relics were often carried great distances for use in religious ceremonies, for the taking of oaths — “I declare upon the sacred crozier of St Fillan . . .” — or for the retrieval of stolen cattle.

This last remained the prime duty of the dewars of St Fillan, and was carried out in return for a tack of land and a rent of meal payable by every inhabitant of Strathfillan, with an individual charge of fourpence or a pair of shoes and food for the first night of the pursuit. (That was in 1428.) The point of the relic was of course that it gave the dewar immunity, and it may be that the term *deòradh* was first applied to the relic, and only afterwards to its custodian. So for example St Munn’s staff, called the *Deòradh*, is on record in 1497 in the possession of a ‘procurator’ who held the nearby half-merkland of Pordeury (*Pòr Deòraidh*, Dewar’s Crop) at the foot of Loch Eck near Dunoon.

There appear to have been five relics of St Fillan, each in the charge of a family of *deòraidhean* — the *Farg* or Shrine, *Meann* or Jewel, *Beàrnan* or Gapped One (a bell), *Coigreach* or Stranger (a crozier), also perhaps the saint’s armbone, which, if we can believe Hector Boece, lay in Bruce’s tent on the eve of Bannockburn. In 1572 one Donald Dewar had a feu of Garrindewar (*Gar’ an Deòir*, the Dewar’s Garden) for ringing his bell at funerals in the parish of Kilmahog, near Callander. And the crozier, or at least its ornate head, is now in the Royal Museum of Scotland after spending a century or so in Canada.

The dewars belonged, like poets, harpers, lawyers, masons, fletchers, smiths, physicians and many others, to the privileged professional caste of Gaelic society. Even in post-medieval times, when often reduced to the status of beggars, they retained sacred rights to hospitality and immunity. They are commemorated in place-names stretching across Argyll and Perthshire but also in the ‘lost Gaidhealtachd’ areas of Wigtownshire (Glenjorrie) and upper Midlothian (Dewar in Heriot parish, Dewarton in Borthwick parish).

Mac an Deòir, the Son of the *Deòr*, became the surname Dewar; one descendant of the family founded the famous Perth whisky-blending firm of Dewars, while another, Sir James Dewar (1842–1923), gave his

name to the Dewar-flask or thermos. So dewars are the custodians of a heritage which stretches back beyond Bannockburn to the Gaelic missionaries who brought christianity to our land: this custodianship bringing privileges but also responsibilities, notably the leading of processions and the seeking out and restoring of stolen property.

Now let's take the Calton Hill. In Edinburgh this is pronounced without the 'L', and I had always assumed that it is in origin the Gaelic term *coitcheann*, pronounced roughly COHTYON. If I said the word was still common in Gaelic (which it is) I'd be committing a pun, because that's certainly what it means. Common.

Now as a noun meaning 'common' as in Greenham Common, the word goes deep into the naming practices of Gaelic Scotland, most notably in Lothian, where the Kings of Scots established a Gaelic-speaking administration shortly after the turn of the millennium. In his standard work 'The Celtic Placenames of Scotland', first published in 1926, Professor William J. Watson identified four positive instances of the term, all spelt (more or less) Cathkin, in four different parts of Scotland. One is 'Cuthkin Eklismagirgill', the Common of Exmagirdle, somewhere in the North-East. Next is the Cathkinmuir at Muthil in Perthshire, usefully defined in the thirteenth century by Fergus, Earl of Strathearn, as "land which . . . was in the time of all my ancestors free and common pasture to all the men residing around the said pasture, so that none might build a house in the pasture, or plough any part of it, or do anything that would interfere with the use of the pasture . . ."

The third is the Cathkin Braes behind Carmunnock, south of Glasgow. Then we have Catcune in Borthwick parish, upper Midlothian. The earliest reference to it is in a document of 1296 which speaks of 'Thomas de Catkune', and Watson says: "Here, then, we have a glimpse of the Gaelic people settled round their *coitchionn* or common pasture at some time, probably not very long before the time of Thomas de Catkone."

There is also a reference to 'Catkunyslandis' used by the burgesses of Lauder, just over the hills in Lauderdale; as these lands now belong to the Lord of Borthwick they may represent the Borthwick Catcune again, but on balance it seems more likely that the Lauder Commons would be at Lauder (and indeed the Lauder Common Riding takes place annually to this day).

This brings us to within a few miles of Thomas Rhymer's home town during his lifetime, and there need be little doubt but that the Gaelic language was well to the fore in Earlston every market day. Watson tells us that early spellings of Catcune in Borthwick include Catcun, Cotcun, Cathkin, Cattun, Caltun and Caltoun. The curious thing then is that he is silent about Edinburgh's Calton Hill. Is the Calton Hill in origin the *Coitcheann* or Commons of the burgh? If the parliament is established upon it, could it therefore be known as *Taigh a' Choitchin*, which we could translate equally as 'Calton House' or 'the House of Commons'?

Frustratingly, the answer is no; fascinatingly, the name is Gaelic, all the same. Thanks to a 1947 thesis on the placenames of Midlothian by Norman Dixon, I now know that Calton Hill is actually from Gaelic *calltainn*, 'hazel'. It is on record as Caltin in the medieval 'Registrum de Dunfermelyn', as Calton Hill in the mid-seventeenth century, and is misleadingly marked as Caldoun Hill on A. and M. Armstrong's 'Map of the Three Lothians' of 1773.

What reveals it as *calltainn* is a burgh record of 1456 that speaks of 'all the whole the valley and low ground now callit the Grenesyd lying between the rock commonly called Cragingalt on the east side, and the common way and road towards the town of Leith on the west'. Cragingalt is certainly our hill, and it looks to me like *Crag an Calt* where we would now say *Creag a' Chaltainn*. This then is the ungrammatical way Gaelic was being spoken in its last days as a widespread vernacular in the capital city, perhaps around Thomas the Rhymer's time.

And what of Leith? Just one little thing, really, apart from the fact that every Gaelic learner has to be taught the difference between *Lìte*, which has a long EEEE sound and means Leith, and *lite*, which has a short EE sound and means porridge. In the early seventeenth century, when Leith was the chief port of Scotland and episcopalianism was being imposed from above, little 'kists o whistles', many of them imported from Germany, were set up in private chapels and churches. One such, if we can believe the poet Iain Lom, was brought to the cliff-top fortress of Dòmhnall Gorm at Duntulm in Skye to add to the cacophony of carousal and crashing waves, described by the poet as:

*Foirm nam pìoban
'S orghain Liteach
'S cuirn gan lionadh ard.*

"The roar of the pipes / And Leith organs / And drinking-horns filled up high."

Let's hope the dewar leads us with his bell to find some common ground among the hazels, and leaves Leith to the organ-grinder's monkey.

WHFP 7.11.97