

The Black Knife with the Bent Handle (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN this article I would like to examine the words of a song that has always fascinated me, but which I have never found easy to understand. The song is called ‘Sgian Dubh an Sprogain Chaim’ (‘The Black Knife with the Bent Handle’), and it is by a Skye poet called Lachann mac Thearlaich Òig, Lachlan MacKinnon.

First, what do we know of Lachann mac Thearlaich? Well, he was born about 1665 in Scalpay, Skye, and died in 1734. His father, Tearlach Òg, who was second son of the MacKinnon chief, was tacksman of Scalpay; his mother was Marion MacLeod of Drynoch. Alexander Nicolson tells us in his ‘History of Skye’ that he was twice married, first happily to a daughter of Campbell of Strond in Harris, then unhappily to a woman (not named) who made his life a misery. He had a love-child, a daughter who looked after him in his old age, he says, and this is corroborated by John Mackenzie in his account in ‘Sàr Obair nam Bard Gaelach’ of 1841.

Lachann seems to have enjoyed a privileged life going from place to place with his fiddle and enjoying the hospitality of others on the strength of his reputation as a poet. More than half of Mackenzie’s biography of him consists of a distinctly unedifying story of how he once badly abused the hospitality of a farmer in Lochalsh by deflowering his daughter and murdering her pet dog. The result, he claims, was the aforesaid ‘love-child’, who also inherited his poetic talents. But it has to be said that the personality that comes across from his surviving poems is attractive, and that applies especially to this one. It begins:

*Dh’innsinn sgeul mu mhalairt dhuibh
Nam fanadh sibh gu fòill,
Mar dh’èirich don chall bhreamais dhomh
Nuair chaidh mi do Dhùn Gleòis:
Air bhith thall an Sgalpaigh dhomh
Air cuirm aig Lachann Òg,
Fhuair mi ’bhiodag thubaisteach
Le a caisein-uchd bha mór.*

(“I’d tell you a tale of an exchange / If you’d stay for a while, / How my accidental loss worked out for me / When I went to Dùn Gleòis: / When I was over there in Scalpay / At a feast of Lachann Òg’s, / That’s when I got the accursed dirk / With her dewlap that was big.”)

Some of this needs explaining. According to Nicolson the poet farmed Pabay, along with the peninsula of Ardnish at Broadford. In 1549 Dean Monro had described Pabay as ‘ane myle lang, full of woods, gude for fishing, and for thieves to await on leill mennis geir, perteining to Mckynvin’; in another version it was ‘a maine shelter for theeives and cutthrots’. That was long before Lachann’s time, but it helps set the scene.

Mackenzie explains that poet happened to be one of a party at the house of Lachann Òg, a relative of his own. I take it that this house is the Dùn Gleòis of the poem; perhaps a reader can tell me whether it really is the name of a place in Scalpay, or whether the poet has made it up, for it means roughly ‘the Fort of Good Trim’ or even ‘of Tuning Up’. A musical-sounding place.

Anyway, when the guests had had a bit to drink, a game started that was called *iomlaid bhiodag*. It means ‘swapping dirks’, and is not recommended for children’s parties. Mackenzie gives the rules. “The lights are extinguished, and every man casts his dirk under the table. The dirks are then shuffled with a staff, after which a person, having his right hand tied to his side, and a glove on his left, is blindfolded and put under the table to hand out one by one in rotation to every man who had cast a dirk in: and every body had to keep the dirk which fell to him in this way.”

Lachann mac Thearlaich got the worst of it. His dirk had been by far the best in the whole collection, and in its place he ended up with an old coarse dagger belonging to a Kintail man who was present. That’s where the large *caisein-uchd* or ‘dewlap’ comes in, and this is explained in the next verse.

*Bu mhath a’ chuirm a bh’ ann a-sin
’S mo bheannachd-sa ’na dhéidh,
’N fhear ud duin’ a chunnaic i
A dhì-mol i gu léir;
Ach fhuair mi fhìn bloigh biodaig ann
Nach tig an là nì feum
’S stiallaire mór feòsaig oirr’
Mar fhear d’a seòrsa fhéin.*

(“It was a good feast that happened there / And my blessing goes to him, / The devil a man who saw it / Totally dispraised it; / But I got myself a scrap of dirk there / That will never be any use / With a big sprout of whiskers on her / Like a man of her own tribe.”)

Mackenzie explains that the Kintail man in question was of the *Clann ’Ic Rath Mholach*, the Hairy MacRaes. A *caisein-uchd* or dewlap is the fold of loose skin hanging from an animal’s throat, much to the fore until recently in New Year celebrations, where a *caisein-uchd* was singed in the fire and passed around to

be sniffed by all present for good luck in the coming year. Here it has become the beard of one of these Hairy MacRaes; how it applies to the knife will appear later.

*Mas oil leibh an athais ud
Gun robh i agaibh riamh:
Loinidean 's omhnaichean
An-comhnaidh dhuibh bu bhiadh;
Ged dhèanadh sibh cruinneachadh
Tuilleadh 's cóig ciad,
S tearc fear gun chaisein-uchd aige
Cho ghairbhe ri torc fiadh.*

(“If you object to that reproach, / Well, it’s one you’ve always suffered: / Whisking sticks and milkshakes / Have ever been your food; / Even if you gathered / More than five hundred men, / Scarcely one would lack a dewlap / As thick as a wild boar’s.”)

So the poet ascribes these MacRaes’ hairiness to their diet. They are turning into Highland cows, he says. Not like the clean-shaven, meat-eating MacKinnons! Martin Martin has a wonderful description of how cows’ or goats’ milk is whisked up with a *loinid* to make *omhan* or milkshake, which he calls ‘oon’. “A quantity of milk or whey is boiled in a pot, and then it is wrought up to the mouth of the pot with a long stick of wood, having a cross at the lower end . . . It may be thought that such as feed after this rate are not fit for action of any kind; but I have seen several that lived upon this sort of food, made of whey only, for some months together, and yet they were able to undergo the ordinary fatigue of their employments, whether by sea or land; and I have seen them travel to the tops of high mountains as briskly as any I ever saw.”

*Chuir an tìr sa 'n duileachd mi
Nuair chunnaic iad mar bhà:
Bha gach neach ga choisrigeadh
Roimhn dos a bh' air a barr;
Bha sgonn de mhaide seilich innt'
Bu gheinneanta rinn fàs —
Bheireadh saor neo-chronail aist'
Crosg dhan loinid bhàin.*

(“This land doubted my paternity / When they had had a look; / Everybody blessed themselves / At the bush upon her top; / She had a chunk of willow wood / As wedged as ever grew — / A wright could easily take out of her / The white whisking-stick’s cross-piece.”)

This explains it. The knife has a handle consisting of a huge lump of willow, broad enough to turn into the *crosg* or business end of a whisk. Lachann is (I think) accusing MacRae of holding his knife by the blade and using the handle to whisk up his whey. That is why it is white and disgusting. Willow is full of tough fibres which go into strands like a beard when they get damp.

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