

## The Black Knife with the Bent Handle (2)

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I introduced the song ‘Sgian Dubh an Sprogain Chaim’ by the Skye poet Lachlan MacKinnon, *Lachann mac Thearlaich Oig* (c1665 -1734). I explained how he had come by his ‘Black Knife of the Bent Handle’ in the course of playing a drunken game of *iomlaid bhiodag* or ‘swapping dirks’ at a feast in Scalpay, Skye, and I showed how the knife’s large willow handle seems to have come to resemble an animal’s dewlap or a man’s beard through being used by its previous owner, who was one of *Clann ’ic Rath Mholach* or the Hairy MacRaes from Kintail, as a *loinid* for whisking buttermilk into *omhnaichean* or milkshakes. This handle is so big and hairy that ‘a wright could easily take out of her the white whisk’s *crosg*,’ he says, referring to the cross-piece of a *loinid*.

The song has twelve verses. I quoted the first four last time, and this time I will go through the other eight. All of them have things of interest to tell us. In the fifth verse Lachann turns to his own dirk, the best of all the knives thrown into the lottery. Some lucky Lochaberman seems to have got it.

*Chuir MacFhionghain bairlinn  
An tràth sa mach san tìr,  
Chuir e na seachd barrantais  
Gu Donnchadh Mac-a-Phì  
Gabhail gu Caol Arcaig leo  
Mun ghabh i tàmh san tìr  
'S a muinntir fhéin thoirt coinne dhi  
'S gur soilleir i do m' dhùth.*

(“MacKinnon’s sent a summons / Just now about the land, / He sent the seven warrants / To Duncan MacPhee / To take them to Kyle Arcaig / Lest she’d settled in the land / For her own folk to meet her / She having clearly abandoned me.”)

My interpretation is that Duncan MacPhee, despite his Lochaber-sounding name, is a tenant of the MacKinnon chief, and that the poet thinks that the person who got his knife comes from somewhere around the narrows of Loch Arcaig in Lochaber.

I have kept the knives’ feminine gender throughout my translation, partly because the poets always described their weapons as female companions (Donnchadh Bàn’s gun *NicCòiseim* is just one example), and here I think it is essential if we are to get the full sense. It sounds as if the ‘seven warrants’ were applied in cases of desertion. Is there anything in Scots Law to that effect?

Now Lachlan turns back to the MacRae knife. The Lochaberman may have made himself scarce, but MacRae himself is still present, and gets a full blast of the poet’s wit.

*Chan ion-mholaidh ’ghrath-bhat sin  
Thug thu steach thar chaol,  
An t-arm a bha gun chaisrigeadh  
'S a b’ olc leam air mo thaobh;  
S mairg sliasaid air am facas i,  
A’ bhiodag phaiteach mhaol —  
B’ iomlaideach air bhordaibh i,  
Sgian dubh an sgornain chaoil.*

(“That cravat deserves no praise / That you brought in over kyles, / The unconsecrated weapon / Which I loathed upon my side; / Pity the thigh she’s been seen on, / The blunt carbuncular dirk — / She’s unreliable on tables, / The black narrow-throated knife.”)

The ‘cravat’ must refer to the wedge-shape of the willow handle, and the ‘narrow throat’ to the spindliness of the blade where it enters the haft.

*B’i siud a’ bhiodag rosadach  
A b’ olc leam air mo chliath’,  
Si ruadh-mheirg uil’ as coltas di  
Fo dhos de dh’fhionnadh liath;  
Bha maide reamhar geinneach innt’  
'S car ’na h-amhaich fhiar —  
Cha ghearradh i sgiath cuileige  
Le buille no le riach.*

(“That was the unlucky dirk / Which I hated on my hip, / All she looks like is red rust / Under a thicket of grey fur; / She had a thick wedge-shaped stick in her / And a twist in her crooked neck — / She couldn’t cut the wing off a fly / With a thrust or a sideways swipe.”)

That is where we learn that MacRae's knife isn't even straight. MacRae responds by thrusting into the table the ghastly object from Morar that *he* has ended up with, then launches into a spirited defence of his own much-maligned implement. Says Lachlan:

*Nuair chaidh mi dh'iarraidh breitheanais  
Cha d'fhuair mi leithid riamh:  
Sin nuair thuirt an Sàileanach  
Nuair chàirich e rium biast  
(Mathalt de chuirc Mhòrairich  
Da'm beil an ròibein liath,  
Duirceall dubh gun fhaobhar  
'N àm taobhadh ris a' bhiadh),*

("When I went in search of judgement / I never got such a thing: / That's when the Kintail man said / As he showed me a shocker / (A blunt basket of a knife from Morar / Which leaves a grey scum behind, / A black rusty dirk that's bladeless / When anywhere near food,")

*"Bu mhath sa Bhruighean Chaorthainn i  
'S an caonnag nam fear mór:  
Se Fionn thug dhith an latha sin  
An t-ath-bhualadh 'na dhorn;  
Thug e na brath-mhionnan sin  
Nach d'fhàg i duine beò  
'S nach robh neach dha'm beanadh i  
Nach gearradh i gu 'bhròig."*

("She did well in the Rowan-Tree's Enchanted Hall / And in the battle of the giants: / Fingal gave of her that day / The second strike in his fist; / He swore such knowledgeable oaths / That she left not a man alive / And that every man whom she touched / She split as far as his shoe.")

A' *Bhruighean Chaorthainn*, 'The Rowan-Tree's Enchanted Hall', is a traditional tale of murder and mayhem. MacRae is doing well, but Lachann will have none of it.

*Thuirt mi fhìn, "Chan fhìor dhut sin,  
Sann chaill thu d' chiall le aois —  
Ciod a' chuimhn' as fhaid' agad  
On stad i gu bhith maol?  
Chaidh mi air mo ghlùn dhi  
Mun do rùisg i rium a taobh  
'S thug i na seachd sgairtean aist'  
Gus 'n tug mac talla glaoth!"*

("I replied, 'What you say isn't true, / You've lost your sense with old age — / What is your longest memory / Since it gave all that up to be blunt? / I went down on my knee to her / Before she'd bare me her side / And she let out the seven screams / Until echo shouted back!")

In other words, the knife was so stuck in its sheath that Lachann had to kneel on the floor to pull it out. (It is a relief to know that some of these knives were sheathed; the fact that the blindfold man in the game wore a *glove* when he went under the table to dole out the knives suggests that this couldn't be depended on.) MacRae continues:

*"Bu cheithir bliadhna fichead dhi  
Bhith 'n cidsin Mhorair Gall  
'S fhuair i urram còcaireachd  
Thar móran de na bh' ann;  
Bha MacAoidh ga teachdaireachd  
Mun deach e chomhraig theann  
'S b' fhoirmeil anns a' chogadh i,  
Sgian dubh an sprogain chaim."*

("She spent twenty-four years / In Lord Caithness's kitchen / And was praised for her cooking / Above many that were there; / MacKay summoned her to come / Before going into thick of battle / And she was lively in war, / The black bent-handled knife.")

But of course it's the poet's privilege to have the last word:

*Ged thigeadh Clanna Domhnaill  
'S na seòid a tha mu thuath,  
MacAoidh an tùs feachda leo  
'S garbh bhratach an taoibh tuath,  
Nuair thig a' bhratach Cheannasàileach  
'S a thairnear rithe suas,*

*S tearc fear gun chaisein gaoiseid air  
Bho smeig gu mhaodail nuas.*

(“Should Clan Donald arrive / And the heroes of the north, / MacKay in their army’s van / With the thick  
silken flag of the north, / When the Kintail men’s banner comes / With men drawn up about it, / Scarcely one  
will lack a dewlap / From his chin down to his paunch.”)

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