

The sacred duty of the Gael

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN this article I want to say something about the earliest origins of Highland hospitality, and I can do no better than begin with the words of the Rev. Donald MacQueen of Kilmuir (c. 1716-85), probably the best-known and most distinguished Highland minister of his time.

MacQueen contributed an appendix on Hebridean customs to a book published in 1772 by the Welsh traveller Thomas Pennant; it was eagerly read by Johnson and Boswell, who lost no time in seeking out MacQueen during their visit to Skye the following year. Boswell called him ‘well-informed, nay learned’ (from him, praise indeed), while Johnson declared: “A critical man, sir.”

This, then, is what MacQueen said about Highland hospitality; he begins in the past tense, as his purpose is antiquarian, but now and again he slips revealingly into the present. “Of all virtues their hospitality was the most extensive; every door and every heart was open to the stranger and to the fugitive; to these they were particularly humane and generous, vied with one another who would use them best, and looked on the person who sought their protection as a sacred *depositum*, which on no consideration they were to give up.”

By *depositum* MacQueen means what he seems to mean, a deposit: by this token, the stranger, the fugitive, the pauper, or the beggar is seen as placed on the doorstep by divine providence as a test of Christian mercy. What MacQueen says is in direct line with a medieval Gaelic text on ‘The Duties of a Husbandman’ which declares: “Since every guest is Christ, better is humanity, better gentleness, better liberality towards him.”

MacQueen goes on: “Men of narrow principles are disposed to attribute the uncommon hospitality of the Highlanders not so much to generosity as to self-love, the absolute want of inns making it necessary to receive the stranger, in hopes of being repaid in their own persons, or in that of their friends.”

This raises two fundamental issues. One is the question of whether hospitality was extended in the hope of ultimate payment, and indeed of whether such voluntary payment was expected, presumably in the form of a ‘gift’. That may well be, although I suspect that in most cases the gift amounted to no more than news, information, a song or two and a story. Remember the rule of the céilidh house? *A’ chiad sgeul air fear an taighe, sgeul gu latha air an aoigh*. “The first tale from the man of the house, a tale till dawn from the guest.”

The other is ‘the absolute want of inns’. I have discussed the coming of the earliest Highland inns on these pages before; the concept of the inn, a place where hospitality was exchanged for money, was deeply un-Highland and un-Celtic, but they began to be planted in the Highlands for the use of incomers as early as the sixteenth century, and by 1772 there were one or two even in Skye. The full story has yet to be told of how traditional Gaelic concepts of hospitality — ‘guesting and feasting’, as Katharine Simms called it — turned into the dram-shops, inns and communion welcomes of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, and so ultimately to the hotels and B&Bs of today.

Anyway, MacQueen finishes by responding to his ‘men of narrow principles’, and in the bygoing he mentions the ‘weights and measures’ that typify the new brand of hospitality purveyed by the inns: “Hospitality,” he says, “was founded on immemorial custom, before the thoughts of men were contracted by the use of weights and measures, and reckoned so far a sacred obligation as to think themselves bound to entertain the man who from a principle of ill-will and resentment, sorned upon them with a numerous retinue, which went under the name of the Odious Visitor, *Coinimh Dhuimigh*. Of this there have been instances within a century back; which kind of hospitality could scarce be supposed self-interested.”

So, argues MacQueen, the nature of hospitality as a sacred obligation is proved by the fact that people felt bound to entertain even those who were deliberately taking advantage of them. This central conundrum is what led Katharine Simms to remark so memorably that Gaelic hospitality ‘was an extraordinarily sensitive topic in the medieval period, evoking deep and confused emotions’. The verb ‘to sorn’ is one that appears over and over in the public records of Scotland. It is defined by ‘The Concise Scots Dictionary’ as to ‘exact free board and lodging by force or threats, beg importunately’, but that is an outsider’s view; as far as I know no equivalent Gaelic terms, the nouns *faoighe* and *déirc* for example, have any pejorative force.

What was a sacred duty to the Gael, then, was a criminal act to the Gall, and in acts such as the so-called Statutes of Iona of 1609 the old Scots parliament repeatedly legislated against ‘sorners and other idlers’. In her discussion of the situation in Ireland, Simms sums up the dilemma rather neatly. She points out first of all that in a statute originating with a native Irish archbishop who died in 1346, the provincial synod of Armagh issued sanctions ‘against mimes, jugglers, poets, tympanists or harpers, and especially against kernes and importunate and wicked seekers, or rather extorters of gifts’. The statute was renewed in subsequent generations, and theoretically, says Simms (herself a daughter of an Archbishop of Armagh), a conscientious provider of hospitality in Ulster should have faced a moral dilemma, for according to the Vision of Adhamhnán he would burn in hell if he failed to entertain such wandering bands, and according to the archbishop of Armagh he might be equally likely to burn if he did!

MacQueen’s ‘numerous retinue, which went under the name of the Odious Visitor, *Coinimh Dhuimigh*’, is intriguing. One might have expected him to call these predatory sorners the *Cliar Sheanchain*, ‘Seanchan’s Poet-Band’, since that is the name by which they are remembered in Gaelic tradition right down to today. Or possibly the *Trom-Dhàmh* or ‘Heavy Poet-Band’, since that is how they were referred to in at least one early Irish story. But *Coinimh Dhuimigh*? It looks to me like *Coinnmheadh Dhiombach*, which we could translate as ‘Dissatisfied Billeting’. *Coinnmheadh* appears in Dwelly as *coinbheath* ‘feast, entertainment’, but it is an old technical term common to both Scotland and Ireland in the meaning of quartering or billeting — the free

quartering of a lord's soldiers and followers upon the country. It entered English and Scots as 'coyne' or 'conveth', and comes up in Scottish placenames. The old parish of Conveth in Kincardineshire would have been so named because it bore the special burden of quartering the household troops of the local magnate; and the same presumably applies to Glenconvinth in Inverness-shire.

I have referred three times to Katharine Simms. In every case I was quoting from her paper 'Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland' which appeared in 'The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland' in 1978. This paper provides us with the starting-point and framework which we need for the study of the origins of Highland hospitality. As with so much else in Scottish Gaelic tradition, what we must do is look at the situation in Gaelic Ireland and say, do we have that? If we do, what slant do we put upon it? If we don't, why not, or do we have something else in its place?

Simms' framework consists of four sections. First there is THE ENTERTAINMENT OF TRAVELLERS. Who entertained the travellers? Three kinds of people — hereditary holders of church lands; professors of poetry; and certain leading tenants who might bear the title of *brughaidh* ('hospitaller') or *biatach* ('food-provider'). This suggests that in Gaelic Scotland we should be looking at hereditary custodians of church lands, offices and relics such as the dewars (from whom we have the surname Dewar); at leading members of the learned families such as the MacMhuirich poets, the Morrison brieves, the Beaton physicians (curiously, there was a family of Beatons in Glenconvinth); and at landed families in general, and references in the poetry to the terms *brughaidh* and *biatach* in particular (even more curiously, perhaps, *biatach* gave us the surname *Mac a' Bhiataich*, better known to biscuit-eaters as MacVittie).

And what travellers were entertained? Six kinds of people — kings; bishops; minor ecclesiastics such as wandering friars; men of art such as poets; soldiers; and ordinary folk indulging in *foighdhe* or what was called here *faoighe*, 'genteel begging', 'thigging', or 'sorning', depending on your language and your point of view. For Gaelic Scotland we have more evidence of this sixth category than of all the others put together.

Simms' second section is THE LORD'S RIGHT TO HOSPITALITY FROM VASSALS. Here she has much to say on two terms which are pretty evocative in Scottish Gaelic. One is *cuid oidhche*, literally 'a night's portion', which entered English and Scots as 'cuddy' and 'cuddihy': the entertainment (food, drink and lodging) which the chief exacted for himself and his train from his subjects. Members of Gaelic choirs will be interested to know that the other is *còisir*, a word tentatively derived from French *causerie*, 'a chat'; more on that some other time.

Next is THE MAINTENANCE OF THE KING'S RETINUE, where the key words are *coinnmheadh* and *buanna* (look it up in Dwelly).

And finally we have CEREMONIAL BANQUETS, which can easily be paralleled from Scottish Gaelic sources, but as they were principally held at religious festivals such as Christmas and Easter I would be inclined to take in under this heading all the little food-giving rituals that used to take place in Highland and Island communities at special times of year such as *Oidhche nam Bannag* — 'Bannock Night'.

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