

“Shame upon the mothers of Lochcarron”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I pointed out how the arts of prophecy and poetry have interacted in the Celtic world from druidic times onwards. This time I want to look at another intriguing relationship — the one between satire and religion.

It’s a truism (I think) that the druids, and their successors the medieval poets, used satire as a weapon to get what they wanted, and that the power of satire was so strong that it could bring out boils on a man’s face. In fact there is an example from as recently as the late eighteenth century of a satire killing a man. It’s a good story and I will save it for another time.

What are harder to find are examples of the druids’ *other* successors, the clergy, dabbling in satire to achieve their own version of social control. Here is what I have found so far.

Firstly, on 1 December 1694 we find the Rev. Alexander Macdonald (*Maighstir Alastair*), parish minister of Moidart, writing to his lawyer in Edinburgh about the possibility of raising an action against his brother-in-law, Allan Macdonald in Cregvrodden, after his sister’s death. His letter is quoted in volume 50 of the ‘Transactions’ of the Gaelic Society of Inverness. “Albeit I cannot lay the blame of my sister’s death on her husband, yet, as I may prove, he hath behaved himself so rudely, barbarously if not brutally, towards her before her delivery, that in all likewise the same hath occasioned her abortion; and, after her delivery, dealt so churlishly, if I may not say so unchristianly, that impartial men might construct that he had but small care of her recovery.”

Mgr Alastair goes on: “I know that will redress nothing of what is past, and God forbid I should judge him any . . . accessory to what became of her intentionally. Yet his being censured publicly for such savageness and baseness (which I might more fully enlarge but that I am loath to trouble you with the like) would cure him and such from the like in times to come, and necessitate them to be more cautious and generous whenever so circumstantiated as he then was. The persons named who might make this aware are Maolmory Mc Cahil vc Murchy and a blank for three or four more that may be inserted.”

In those days there were two kinds of public censure. One was denunciation from the pulpit, along with any action taken by the Kirk Session; the other was bardic satire. In Moidart Mgr Alastair *is* the Kirk, but since he feels he cannot use his authority in this particular case, and since the man he has chiefly in mind to carry out public censure looks very much like a son of the great Benbecula poet Cathal MacMhuirich (who lived from about 1600 to 1650), it is crystal clear that the weapon which he is planning to use is bardic satire. In order to distance himself from the business, he is getting his lawyer to arrange it; no doubt the lawyer will discreetly arrange (yes, all the way from Edinburgh) that Maol Moire will be paid for his trouble.

We don’t have Maol Moire’s proposed satire, nor indeed do we know if it ever materialised. What we *do* have however is at least one satire by Mgr Alastair’s catechist son, also Alastair, that bears marks of having been commissioned in similar circumstances. I have told the story in my little book ‘The Ardnamurchan Years’. A certain Mary MacDonald is cited in the records of the Presbytery of Mull as an adulteress in the parish of Ardnamurchan in 1739, and subsequently as an adulteress in the parish of Kilninian in Mull in 1747, ‘but who lived formerly as Stron’tsithen’.

The reference is to the mines run by the York Buildings Company at Strontian, where Mary appears to have provided services to the English miners until the workings closed in 1740. A Clanranald MacDonald, apparently, she transferred her business to the neighbourhood of Tobermory, where the minister was John Maclean, a friend of the young catechist and himself a poet. The result is Alastair’s mock elegy ‘Marbhrann na h-Aigeannaich’, published in 1751. It is set to a pipe tune and portrays Mary’s sins in disgusting detail. Only occasionally is there a slight lapse from obscenity, as here:

*S iomadh lasag chruaidh
Bhiodh mu m’ luaidh-s’ an Uibhist,
Eadar Seile bhruach,
Bun na Stuagh, ’s Loch Uthairn.*

Maybe we can translate it like this: “Many a flame weak but rising / Would be about my lass in Uist, / Between banked Shiel, / Bun na Stuagh, and Loch Hourn.” It’s interesting that Alastair later forced Donald MacQueen, minister of North Uist, to listen to it whether he liked it or not. In the presence of Alastair and members of the clergy, the Uist poet Iain MacCodrum has sung one of his bawdy songs, I forget which. *Ud, ud, tha sin ro shalach buileach, Iain*, says MacQueen. “That’s too dirty altogether.”

Na abair diog gus an cluinn thu ‘Marbhrann na h-Aigeannaich’, says Alastair. “Don’t say anything till you’ve heard ‘Marbhrann na h-Aigeannaich’.”

It sounds to me as if satirical rebukes to the wicked, misogynistic ones in particular, were considered appropriate fare at that time for ecclesiastical gatherings. Which brings me, later in the century, to the Rev. Lachlan Mackenzie (*Maighstir Lachlann*, 1754-1819).

Mgr Lachlann is of course the evangelical parish minister of Lochcarron whom I introduced in my last article. I have now come across a book of his sermons and lectures published under the title ‘The Happy Man’ by the Banner of Truth Trust in 1979, and it contains much of relevance here. For example, Mgr Lachlann was no stranger to forceful language. After an induction service he said once that ‘there would be streets in hell paved with the heads of graceless ministers’. When an evangelical soulmate, Roderick

Mackenzie of Torridon, advised him to mind his tongue, he told him to ‘take good care that your own big head won’t be in it’.

Mgr Lachlann simply couldn’t abide moderates, nor they him. Once when he arrives late at a presbytery meeting the moderate minister of Glenelg says, *An tàinig thu, a Lachlainn luirgnich?* “Have you arrived, long-legged Lachlan?”

An tusa th’ ann, amadain na Cléire? he retorts. “Is that you, the fool of the Presbytery?”

Scripture forbids calling a servant of Christ a fool, and Mgr Lachlan is in trouble. At the next meeting the matter is to be discussed, but instead of sitting down he immediately engages in prayer. As he goes on a storm breaks out and the building shakes. In the middle of it all he cries out, *An abair mi e? An abair mi e?* “Will I say it?”

What he means will never be known, because he stops, picks up his hat and goes out.

That is enough to corroborate the statement of his own niece, Ann Mackenzie, that he ‘possessed great powers of satire and repartee’. Was he likely to use these powers in the interests of social control? Of course he was. He was the only minister in Wester Ross to preach against clearances, taking as his text Isaiah 5: 8, “Woe unto them that join house to house.”

Donald Sage recalled that he denounced the sin in question in a manner that was ‘singularly appalling’. The owner of the farm adjoining the manse was so incensed that he told Mgr Lachlann that he would turn his church into a sheep pen and his manse into a shearing shed, to which the minister is said to have replied, “If I send a message to Big John [Kennedy] of Redcastle and Robertson [of] Kingussie, and if they report your conduct to their Father, there is not in heaven or on earth that can prevent your being cast into hell.”

Mgr Lachlann also used his gifts in the misogynistic direction that so interested the son of Mgr Alastair. In his lecture on II Corinthians V: 10-11, published in ‘The Happy Man’, he says: “Let me give a word more to the communicants and to the unnatural parents in this parish. You have heard of the wicked man called Balaam. He was a conjurer and a wicked prophet who attempted to curse the children of Israel. It was his covetousness that made him attempt this. When he saw that his scheme defied him he gave a very bad advice to Balak. It was this. He advised Balak to gather a number of beautiful girls and to send them to the camp of Israel.”

He continues: “He no sooner sent them to the camp than the Israelites began to commit fornication with these well-looking harlots. This is the Scripture account of Balaam. And do you, ye Christian mothers, imitate or follow Balaam’s advice? Do ye come with your daughters, your well-dressed daughters, to tempt lewd fellows to sin? Christ hated Balaam’s advice, and you follow it. Shame upon the mothers of Lochcarron.”

Next we must now confront the fact that Mgr Lachlann was a poet, or at least, as Iain Murray, the editor of ‘The Happy Man’, puts it, “Though, as Dr Kennedy, ‘he was no poet, he often rhymed’ and more than once his rhymes became arrows which pierced the consciences of the thoughtless.” Murray tells for example of two brothers who used to pass his church during the hours of public worship on their way from their farm at Tullich to Lochcarron Inn. Mgr Lachlann brought them to heel with a piece of verse which Murray gives in English like this:

*John and Ewen do drink;
They order half-mutchkin about;
If both will go to glory
Peter and Paul will go out.*

No prizes for guessing what it must have been in Gaelic:

*Bidh Iain is Eoghann ag òl,
Ag òrdugh leth-bhodach mu seach;
Ma théid iad le chéile gu glòir
Thig Peadar is Pòl a-mach.*

It’s a masterly put-down with more than a hint of the doctrine of predestination.

So all the ingredients are there to suggest that Mgr Lachlann could have made satires in the mac Mhaighstir Alastair mode, and the proof (I believe) is to be found in a pamphlet called ‘Muckle Kate, or Sovereign Grace: Much More Abounding’, or its Gaelic version ‘Ceit Mhór agus Mr Lachlainn’. I have not seen either of these, but Murray reprints the English version. Ceit Mhór was Mgr Lachlann’s *Aigeannach* — ‘a wicked old sinner . . . who was supposed to have been guilty of every forbidden crime in the Law of God except murder’. Even in her old age she never attended church, preferring instead the pleasures of the céilidh-house. “It was customary among the Highlanders,” explains the author of ‘Muckle Kate’, “to meet at night-fall in each others houses, and spend the long evenings in singing Gaelic melodies. The women brought with them their distaffs and spindles, while the men mended their brogues or weaved baskets and creels. This was called ‘going on kailie’.”

Innocent stuff, but not good enough for Mgr Lachlann. “Kate devoted herself to this practice with eagerness. Her minister knowing this, and having a turn for rhyming, composed a Gaelic song in which all Kate’s known sins were enumerated and lashed with all the severity of which the composer was capable. This song Mr Lachlan set to music, and sending for some persons who were known to ‘go on kailie’ with Kate he taught them the song and instructed them to sing it in her hearing on the first opportunity.”

The fact of the song, and the devious method adopted to present it, is of course our main focus of interest, being in line with the other examples I have given of ecclesiastical satire. I don’t imagine we will ever know

the words of the song. So I will finish the story quickly. Ceit Mhór acquires a conscience. She takes to wandering, goes blind, is driven mad by guilt. “She was a ‘wonder to many’, as well she might be, for at her age, between 80 and 90, it is rare to see a person called by grace.”

After three years it is communion time at Lochcarron. Mgr Lachlann bids her come to the Lord’s Table. She refuses: “My presence would profane that blessed ordinance, and would be enough to pollute the whole congregation.”

At the end of communion (in the open air, of course) the tables have been served and the elements removed. The minister has returned to his ‘tent’ to give the concluding address when a great cry of anguish goes up from the back of the congregation. It is Ceit. Mgr Lachlan picks his way through the people, leads her back by the hand, seats her at the table and orders the elements to be brought back. In solitude, gazed on by thousands, she partakes of the emblems of Christ’s body and blood.

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