

## The song that killed a man

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I said that I would tell the story of how a Gaelic satire once killed a man, and here it is. The story is told in John Mackenzie's 'Sàr Obair nam Bard Gaelach', first published in 1841. The man who made the satire was Kenneth Mackenzie, who was born at Castle Leather (*Caisteal Leathair*) near Inverness in 1758.

Kenneth's parents were comfortably off, and gave him a good education. When about 17 years old, however, he became a sailor's apprentice, and took to a life at sea. He brought with him on his voyages the bible his mother had given him and two other books — the Gaelic verse of Alexander MacDonald and Duncan Macintyre. These three books influenced him greatly, we are told, and most of his songs were composed at sea. His 'Moladh na Luinge' has tremendous verve, and suggests incidentally that part of his career was in the Royal Navy.

He returned from the sea in 1789, the year of the French Revolution, and started going around his native district taking subscriptions to enable him to publish his poems. One of the doors on which he knocked was that of a farmer at Cantray Down in Strathnairn called Alexander Macintosh. Macintosh refused to give him a subscription, and gruffly sent him packing. No doubt he had other things on his mind. He could hardly have foreseen the result. As John Mackenzie remarks, although Kenneth 'was evidently born with talents and genius . . . the habits of a seafaring man have a deteriorating influence over the youthful feelings'. Still smarting from the hardships and discipline of the navy, Kenneth made a satire in 18 eight-line stanzas which is so strong that we can virtually feel the lash as we read it. And he put it in his book under the title 'Aoir do dh'Alastair Mac an Tòisich ann an Cantra Dùn, air son e bhith 'na dhroch òlach' — 'A satire on Alexander Macintosh in Cantray Down, for being a bad òlach'. *Òlach* means farmer, husbandman, or host, and the poet moves pretty quickly from criticising Macintosh's farming to criticising his hospitality.

I don't have room to give much of the Gaelic, so I will paraphrase the song in English, putting in stanza numbers to keep track of its structure.

1 Macintosh can't eat his words. Kenneth is sorry that Macintosh lives in Cantray Down where noble-minded people used to be. Things have changed for the worse. 2 You may love your wealth, Kenneth tells Macintosh, but you can't take it to the grave. You scarcely know how to put as much as half a crown into improvement. I got a pretty muted welcome, and no wonder, since you're hungrier than a dog yourself.

3 Kenneth turns to 'rodent satire' mode. (A rodent satire is a means of getting rid of an infestation. One of the most ancient beliefs about vermin is that rats and mice are responsive to it. They will go where bidden and leave a poet alone. So part of the 'rodent satire' technique is to tell them to go and plague someone you don't like, and that is what Kenneth does.) "Every mouse in Daltullich will go to Cantray Down, and they'll get plenty in spite of you, because you're mean to musicians."

He adds that even if Macintosh is stuck on a rock ledge on the Fall of Foyers, no poet of any kind will carry him down. Whether that refers to some other kind of poetic magic I don't know, but in 4 he maintains the theme that the poetic profession has the backing of otherworld powers. For his meanness to the poet, all the muses in Parnassus will threaten to drown him; if Neptune finds him on the sea he will roughen it up, while Vulcan will turn the tip of every waterspout into foam-white fire.

5 Considering who else might be the man's enemies, Kenneth hits on the people of Lochaber. Perhaps it's a reference to the Cameron-Macintosh feud that had led to the battle of Mulroy 100 years before. If you were at the mercy of your ill-wishers in Lochaber, he says, you wouldn't have long to live (*cha bhiodh tìm dhuit ach gann*). "Some would want to stroke you (*do shliobadh*), some to scratch you with nails and to make you as smooth as the snowdrift with the violent slashing of swordblades." The basic image I think is of skinning a wild beast.

6 Now some comic relief. "It would be no harm to see you," says Kenneth, "clambering up the slope of a glen carrying a tinker's skin bag containing all your equipment, wheezing so loud that it echoes back from the rocks, a red scum around your fat mouth, and farting continuously."

7 That leads naturally to the fairground. The rights of fairs were established by ancient custom and enshrined in Acts of Parliament, and transgressors were subject to instant trial and punishment by those who ran the fair. The first picture is of Macintosh being pursued by hordes of people whom he has cheated. "Too bad I couldn't see you at the fair with hundreds of people pursuing you, you being run through the rods till you were skinned alive." Believe it or not, Kenneth provides a learned footnote in English to explain what he means. "A custom formerly among the Romans for punishing offenders, called running them through the rods. It was done thus: they made two files of 285 men each, facing one another, each with a rod in his hand, with a small interval between them for the offender to run in, every one laying on as he passed."

The second half of the stanza offers a third, and less judicial-sounding, way of flaying Macintosh alive. It speaks of rubbing his back with a skatefish to 'temper' his flesh (as the blacksmith tempers steel with his hammer) until what's left of his skin bursts out of his nose to provide food for the cat. The reference is to a real cat, but memories of the cat o' nine tails can't be far from the poet's mind. (For a very relevant account of an eighteenth-century Gael in the Royal Navy, read James Shaw Grant's 'Morrison of the Bounty', published recently by Acair.)

8 Remarking that should Macintosh die like a Christian it's not what he would have in mind for him, Kenneth then imagines another kind of slow death. First he'd like to see him torn apart between two horses (presumably by driving them in opposite directions) and *bhiodh faram aig triall do chuirp* — 'the tearing of your body would make a loud noise'. Then, he says, your innards which so often filled up with greed should be plucked out. The expression he uses is *do cheathramh mionaich*, where *ceathramh* is a firlot or bushel, literally a 'quarter' — very much the kind of word you'd have used in walking into a butcher's shop. So the best translation might be: "Your pound of sausages would be plucked out, which so often filled up with greed." This leads to

another butchering image. “Your head should be struck off your shoulders like the ears off a piglet.” The word he uses for ‘struck’ is actually *spadadh* — ‘slaughtered’.

9 Having suggested all these horrible deaths, he says his own preference would be for thousands of people to decide the magnitude of Macintosh’s sins by casting lots. Then he promptly suggests that he be tortured on what he calls a *spioicaid*, with his crafty tongue speechless and his big cheating throat *dlùth ri toinneamh nam ball*, ‘close to the twisting of the limbs’. By *spioicaid* Kenneth can hardly mean ‘spigot’, which is a tap; he may mean a ‘picket’, in the definition given by Chambers’ dictionary of ‘the old military punishment of standing on one foot on a pointed stake’; or perhaps, given the twisted limbs, he is referring to being roasted on a ‘spit’.

10 Calling Macintosh *sgamhan òlaich gun mheas*, an unpopular scumbag (literally ‘lung’) of a host, Kenneth now says he is sorry that his kinsfolk didn’t deal with him properly when bringing him up, for example by taking his eyes out or quietly drowning him in his mother’s pee. 11 Then he throws in a few more zoological insults. Macintosh has a big wobbly head on top of a long neck like a water-horse’s, a dog’s body, and a long snout like a pig’s; he gabbles noisily, has a smooth tongue full of entrapments, a deceitful double-crossing heart, and no conscience.

12 The nature of Kenneth’s resentment then bursts out as he wishes that Macintosh could suffer daily from frost, ice and stormy seas until he is in such a disgusting state that nobody will ever put up with him. He wishes too that his own kinsfolk will detest him and drive him away until his only comfort is death.

13 Macintosh is rich and selfish. No dew ever touches him, in other words, unlike honest working people, he never has to sleep in the open, but simply having him thrown into a rugged mountain corry — or is it the Devil’s cauldron? — won’t be good enough. Then there is something about the Devil knocking him into an auger-hole, but that won’t do either, as in that case he can’t be pulverised with a stick like charcoal. 14 Then some animal tortures. Too bad I can’t see you on a sea-skerry, says Kenneth, with a bee in your ear and a mouse in your oxter praying that someone should come and put a stone in your big ugly gullet so that a crow can come and take away the tip of your tongue.

Next Kenneth helpfully suggests ways for Macintosh to make himself scarce. 15 Your country would be little the worse, he says, should you go off to the stormy seas on a ship without oars or crew, without rudder, sails or yards, so that all that will ever be seen of you again will be your ghost. 16 Alternatively, he says, I can see you galloping off to England on some bony old mare without bridle, saddle or stirrups, while the *eilbhuinn* in her legs makes her want to take old Stinky (*Breunan*) a mile down under the waves. He explains in a footnote what he means by *eilbhuinn*: “Just as if a person put his feet on a hot coal at the fire-side he would jump and dance as long as his sole kept the heat.” In other words this old mare is like a cat on a hot tin roof, and the fate Kenneth has in mind for Macintosh is that of people carried off to the otherworld by the water-horse, their lungs bobbing to the surface in the morning.

17 On the other hand, many people, says Kenneth, would be delighted if the *sluagh* or fairy host of the skies would scoop you up, some slashing you and some scourging you with a whip, finally dumping you in Ireland *air chùl gréine ’m bun cnuic*, ‘behind the sun at the foot of a hill’. 18 Finally, he says, may your thatch suffer every day the pressure of the snow before the thaw, so that your hair rots off till you are a baldie (*sgallpan*) and the full force of the west wind gets between your skin and your flesh so that you send a pound of tobacco as smoke out of your backside.

John Mackenzie, who knew the genre well, called the song a ‘cynic production’ full of ‘periods of fire’, ‘an impetuous torrent of bitter irony and withering declamation, rich in the essential ingredients of its kind’. Kenneth’s book was duly published in Edinburgh in 1792 under the title ‘Òrain Ghàidhealach agus Bearla’, and, according to John Mackenzie, Macintosh died three days after seeing a copy of it.

Kenneth was appalled. “Distressed at this mournful occurrence, which he well knew the superstition and gossip of his country would father upon him, McKenzie went again among his subscribers, recalled the books from such as could be prevailed upon to give them up, and consigned them to the flames.”

John Mackenzie adds that ‘this accounts for the scarcity of his books’. However, the book is not particularly rare at all. Ferguson and Matheson’s ‘Scottish Gaelic Union Catalogue’ lists surviving copies of it in the Mitchell Library, Inverness Public Library, the Free Church College, Trinity College, Baillie’s Library, the library of An Comunn Gaidhealach, the university libraries of Edinburgh, Aberdeen, St Andrews and Cambridge, Edinburgh Central Library, the National Library, the Signet Library, the British Library, the National Library of Wales, and the West Highland Museum — 16 in all. For a Gaelic book of its time, that’s a lot.

Kenneth Mackenzie spent the rest of his life well away from Castle Leather, Daltullich and Cantray Down. Thanks to the influence of Lord Seaforth and the Earl of Buchan he got a commission in the 78th Highlanders. Then he became postmaster of Mallow in Co. Cork, where, as John Mackenzie tells us, “He indulged in the genuine hospitality of his heart, always keeping an open door and spread table, and literally caressing such of his countrymen as chance or business led in his way. We have conversed with an old veteran who partook of his liberality so late as the year 1837.”

What John Mackenzie means by ‘literally’ we can only wonder.

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