

## To respond to all the thiggers

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

HIGHLAND hospitality came in many shapes and forms, and in this and the next article I would like to introduce a custom known as *faoighe*. *Faoighe* meant going around your neighbourhood cadging small items such as wool and seed which, when put together, could be made into something bigger, a garment or a crop of corn for example. Being quite distinct from common mendicancy, it has been called “genteel begging”. It entailed no stigma on the supplicant; the only stigma was the dishonour — *nàire*, shame, loss of good name — that attached itself to anyone who refused such a request.

I don’t know how widespread the custom was in Europe during the Middle Ages, but it was known in Scots as “thigging” and in Irish as *foighdhe* or *faighdhe*, and it came into the English of Ireland as “foy”.

Here then to start with is an example from medieval Ireland. The ‘Life of St Colmán mac Luacháin’ tells how seven clerics, all from a noble family, come on Easter Monday to beg (*do fhaighdhe*) of the wife of the erenagh of Lann. An erenagh or *airchinneach* was a hereditary church officer, a steward of church lands, the sort of person who had both the motivation and the means to offer charity (*Mac an Airchinnigh*, incidentally, became the surname McInerney). Unfortunately the erenagh’s wife has neither food nor drink ready. “Henceforth,” say the clerics, “may every company be dissatisfied with you.”

“O clerics,” she says, “for God’s sake give me death rather than this curse!”

“We will give it,” they say, “if on every Easter Monday each year a meal of drink and food for seven people be given to us always.”

Coming now to Scotland, an early example of thigging is provided by Hugh MacDonald in his history of the MacDonalds, written about 1670 and published by the Scottish History Society in the first volume of its ‘Highland Papers’. Around 1500, says MacDonald, Domhnall Gallda, son of Alastair mac Gilleasbaig, who is a direct descendant of a King of the Isles and a claimant to the Earldom of Ross, is in a very low condition. He has, however, been given a davoch of land by his uncle Lord Lovat. A *dabhach* or ‘vat’ is a measure of agricultural land — in origin, as much land as will fill a tub of a particular size with grain. So what does he do? “He gathered,” says MacDonald, “a great many necessaries, such as seed, etc., among the best men in Ross, for his being a great man’s son.”

MacDonald goes on: “There was a common fellow in his company, Paul, who gathered together his thigging in Ross. This man asked Donald Gauld what he meant to do with all the trash he was gathering? Donald Gauld answered, that mean and low as that was, he could do no better, and as it was God’s will to reduce him to that low and dependent state, he ought to be content.

“Then, says Paul, if you will be advised by me, you will sell all your seed and thigging, for you will never raise yourself to any notice or respect by continuing a farmer; therefore, it is your interest to make money of all you have gathered, and hire as many men therewith as you can.”

In other words, Domhnall Gallda has done what anyone does to get started in farming; now he must turn his gains into gold and turn his gold into warriors, because fighting and not farming is his proper business.

My next story dates from 1543 and relates to this time of year. Three parties of the Macdonalds of Glencoe, six men in each, go in different directions on a *faoigh-Nollaig*, what we may call a ‘Christmas cadging’. It must have been a poor harvest. They meet by appointment at the Black Mount, and start dividing the proceeds. After everything else has been shared out they find that that some leftover cheese, apparently called a *cùl-càise* or ‘cheese-back’, is still to be disposed of. It goes from words to blows, not with fists either but with dirks, and by the end of it only one man of the eighteen is left.

A loch at the spot got the name of *Lochan na Fala*, the bloody lochan, but where exactly this is I don’t know. Sheriff Nicolson tells the story in his ‘Gaelic Proverbs’ to illustrate the saying, *Bidh rud uime nach robh mun chùl-chàise*: “Something will come of it more than of the cheese-back.” I take it that this was said when a course of action had something to commend it, but not necessarily very much.

Edward Dwelly cites a saying, *Faoighe do MhacGriogair, is leig leis fhéin a togail*. “Give a gift to a MacGregor, and let him help himself to it.” Here *faoighe* applies not to the expedition or to the request but to the gift itself, and as Dwelly remarks, the point seems to be that no MacGregor will be bashful in accepting it. One can well imagine that *faoighe*, as practised in its prime, was well hedged around with courtesies and conventions aimed at lessening shame to the thigger. “Oh, really, I can’t.” “But I insist.” “It’s *too* kind of you.” “Just a token of our appreciation.” “It’s what I’ve *always* wanted . . .”

We have a MacGregor to thank for this week’s last item. The ‘Book of the Dean of Lismore’ was completed in 1542 (the year before Lochan na Fala) by Sir James MacGregor, who was Dean of Lismore and curate of Fortingall in Perthshire. In it is a poem about thigging by a man called Gille Caluim who seems to have been one of the MacMhuirichs who served the MacDonalds of the Isles. It is in a verse-form called *snéadhbhairdne* or ‘swift metre’, which alternates eight-syllable lines and four-syllable lines and was a great favourite for satire. Edited by W J Watson in his book ‘Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore’, it starts like this.

*Mór an feidhm freagairt na bhfaighdheach  
Thig fá seach,  
An drong gus dtigid go h-aidhbhleach  
Ar gach leath.*

(“To respond to all the thiggers that come turn by turn is a great effort for those upon whom they come hugely from every side.”)

The poet explains. Thiggers are dreaded, he says, for they can reduce a place of strength to poverty. “I will characterise for you a little of the thiggers’ character when the men of thigging come to thig for cattle.”

*Beagán do shloinneadh na bhfaighdheach  
Sloinnfead duibh  
An uair thigid fir na faighdhe  
D’ fhaighdhe chruidh.*

They are courteous, he says, friendly and kindly. When invited to stay, which of them fails to understand? They can be difficult guests, however. When offended, they bend and gather their eyebrows one after another and say, “Never will we be friends to you in a dispute.” As soon as day dawns, off they go, saying things like, “How we regret coming here. How very true are the old treasured sayings on which men set store — ‘sad is the plight of unwelcome friends who have travelled far’.”

Well, when I hear that, says the poet,

*Éirghim-se ann sin ar sgáth náire,  
'S budh ghnáth bhruid;  
'S do-bheirim dhóibh lán na láimhe  
Do mo chuid.*

“I get up there and then for fear of shame, a regular bondage it is; and I give them a whole fistful of what I own.”

How do the thiggers respond? They laugh lightly for the liberal gift and say: “When wealth was dealt out, great is the upland (*is mór an bráighe*) that you received. No son of Adam has the like.”

Having promised some *sloinneadh*, the poet now provides it. The thiggers, he says, are men like *meic Uí Shúiligh* (Roving-Eye’s sons), *meic Uí Anmoich* (Fly-By-Night’s sons), *meic Uí Mhoichéirghe* (Early-Riser’s sons), *meic Uí Shirthigh* (Spy’s sons), *meic Uí Shanntaigh* (Grasper’s sons). As for the women, they all come in turn to thig a sheep. Here comes a woman, he says, with a borrowed straw pillion on her horse, thigging a saddle; she brings a couple of spies to back her up, a sweet young maidservant who’s kind to everyone, and so many clothes that she needs another servant just to carry them; but unless she is given a sheep this retinue of hers will turn threatening.

Then there are the people who come looking for a horse. Gille Caluim is an *ollamh*, a poet of some substance, which means that he has a stud of horses and a groom to look after them. Some thiggers, he says, go whispering to his groom. “Which is the poet’s best horse? *Gá h-each as fearr thá ag an ollamh?* How does he go at the front? What’s he worth?” The next thing he knows, back in the house he is being asked for the very horse in the stud that’s best for strength and colour.

So Gille Caluim thinks to himself, what am I going to do about this? “To the thronging house of John MacDonald, who reddens spear-points, will we go, to thig from him, the generous man of ready hand.” He sets off, addressing his lord and master: “We don’t care what we have given away as long as the son of John pays us back. You may feel that it is crooked justice (*Gíodh ceart cam leat*) to have to repay thiggings you never got, but it was to your own people that I gave property (*crodh*). All the nobility of Scotland are your people, and yours, too, are the thiggers, my curly-haired one.”

So the *ollamh* proceeds to do what he is paid for. He praises his chief. After a few stanzas he says: “Then to me the blue-eyed slim-waisted generous lord will say, as he quaffs drinking-horns, ‘I will repay you the thigging I never got. You will have it straight away, and better still, for every horse you let go you will have a colt sleek, lithe, mettlesome and well bred, a king of studs; and for every cow, a cow.’”

So, finally, in stanzas 32-35, Gille Caluim thanks him in advance. “‘You are the sternest in rocking combat’ — that’s what I’ll say. ‘You are the most liberal food-provider of all your time, you are the best wielder of a keen-edged tapering sword. You are the best of all MacDonalds for gold and treasure. No more to you is all your liberality, as you bestow it heap by heap, than a spot of water to wash your tapering hand. You’re the most hardy at winning land that’s not yet yours — to confront you, king of Islay, great is the effort!’”

Clearly, then, there are two sides to the story, and that is what I will look at next time.