

Thigging and sorning

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

In my last article I introduced the topic of *faoighe*, known in English as ‘thigging’ and sometimes called ‘gentle begging’, especially as it applied in the sixteenth century. Here is a characteristically dignified description of the practice by Alexander Carmichael, relating to much later, about 1800: “When the sons and daughters of the higher classes married, they went *air faoighe*, a-thigging, to help them to set up in the world. Others followed their example down to the lowest grade.

He goes on: “The writer conversed with an old man of ninety-nine years of age who went round thigging with the daughter of his chief after her marriage. The lady, who was very lovely, rode a beautiful black pony, and my informant was her *coiseachan*, footman. She and her husband were well received and hospitably entertained everywhere, and after an absence of some weeks they returned home with a miscellaneous herd, enough to stock a large farm.”

Of all the traditions of Highland hospitality, *faoighe* is the one which our sources have the most to tell us about. But we noticed last time that there seemed to be two sides to the story. Here is a sensible old custom. Those who have a surplus — of wool, of seed, of stock — share a little of it with those who do not. Yet, as Gille Chaluim the *ollamh* found out to his cost, such decent, generous people run the risk of being plundered out of house and home.

It shows that there is nothing new about society’s welfare problems. On the one hand there are those in employment, working hard and earning a decent wage; behind them lurks a very powerful minority who do too little, have too much, and want even more. Facing them on the other side are those who, through no fault of their own, are cast upon the mercy of society. Behind them, again, lurks a small number of social security scroungers, who, with the help of the criminals, thugs and unruly adolescents, ruin things for everybody. Or so we’re told. But it’s really all caused by the failure of the system to ensure that everyone has a job to do, a house to live in and enough to eat. Depressingly familiar?

In 1792, the Minister of Fortingall in Highland Perthshire expresses the dichotomy very well in his contribution to the Old Statistical Account. “The begging poor,” he writes, “have a share of every thing the tenants can afford: meal, wool, milk, etc. They go about, twice or thrice a year, lay by a little, then apply to spinning, or some little industry. It would be deemed impious to refuse an alms, or a night’s quarters to a poor person.” But then he goes on to complain of the number of beggars from other places, “swarms of tinkers, sailors, and vagrants, from the great towns, who, by dreadful imprecations and threatenings, extort charity, and immediately waste it in drunkenness and riot. These are often guilty of theft, sometimes of robbery.”

We are thus given a picture of what we may call the deserving and undeserving poor, or perhaps we should say the local and vagrant poor. There is nothing new about this picture. All through history the Highlands and Islands, Ireland and Wales have had a surplus of population, people living on the edge whom bad weather, bad management or bad luck might throw upon the mercy of the rest of society, moving about in their own territory and gradually drifting away. There have always been Celtic beggars, criminals, drunks and prostitutes in England and elsewhere. It’s the reason why there are so many slang words of Celtic origin in English, words like grotty and phoney, gawky and snazzy, shindig and hooley, spree and shenanigans, keelie and scallywag, swig and galoot, malarkey and gimmick, shindy and hooligan, gob and shebeen. Even ‘truant’ seems to be Celtic in origin, but the term has become respectable even if the activity hasn’t; something similar is true of ‘toy’, which has a surprisingly shady history in every sense of the word.

The distinction between deserving locals and less deserving vagrants is clearly recognised in the terminology of both English and Gaelic, just as we all know the difference between ‘social security’ and ‘charity handout’ nowadays — one is a right, the other a privilege. In Gaelic the distinction is between *faoighe* (whose root means ‘wish’) and *déirc* (whose root means ‘love’). In English it is between ‘thigging’ (from a Norse word meaning ‘take’) and ‘sorning’ (from an Irish word *sorthan* meaning ‘free maintenance’ or ‘free quarterage’, referring originally to the quartering or billeting of troops on a community).

These distinctions often seem to have been lost on governments, just as every social security budget is one too many for them today, and Gille Chaluim’s experience suggests that they may have had a point. In 1414 the Scottish Parliament passed an Act against both thiggers and sorners. And in the Statutes of Iona, which the Government coerced the Island chiefs into signing in 1609, no less than four of the eight provisions were aimed at the linked issues of hospitality and culture.

Under provision no. 2, **inns** are to be established in the islands (a) for the convenience of travellers and (b) as houses of public entertainment for tenants and labourers of ground. The purpose of this statute is to open up the Highlands to incomers, to put the Highland people under the same roof with them, to encourage a cash economy. It will work against the *ceilidh*-house and thus against the solidarity and continuity of Highland culture. It will remove from chiefs control over the movement of travellers and over military intelligence; from communities it will remove control over drinking habits.

No. 3 deals with so-called **idlers**. (We can recognise the practice of thigging here.) No-one is to live in the islands unless he has either (a) sufficient revenue of his own or (b) some trade or other. A limit is to be put on the number of individuals in a chief’s household, and chiefs are to support them by their own means rather than by taxing their tenants. (One effect is that after 1609 Ruairidh Mór MacLeod leases the virgin lands of Talisker, Berneray, Greshornish and Hamer to his sons, and sends them there to get on with it.)

Under no. 4, all persons not native of the islands found **sorning**, defined as ‘living at free quarters on the poor inhabitants’, are to be tried and punished as thieves and oppressors.

No. 8 deals with **bards** ‘and other idlers of that class’. Chiefs are forbidden to encourage them. Bards are to be punished by the stocks for a first offence, and banishment for reoffending. The poets therefore start becoming ministers, given that a different statute is aimed at shoring up the Church in the Highlands.

I may return to look at the Statutes in more detail another time. For the moment, suffice to say that there was a great deal in them that suited the chiefs’ self-interest. From this point on, many of them set about enriching themselves rather than routinely giving away their wealth in the form of hospitality, and over the next hundred years the poets who survived statute no. 8 had to work hard at reminding them of their obligations to society. Says Màiri nighean Alastair Ruaidh to Ruairidh Mór’s son Norman of Berneray:

*Thoir an t-soraidh seo uam
Gu talla nan cuach
Far am biodh tathaich nan truagh dàimheil.*

(‘Bring this greeting from me / To the hall of the drinking-cups / To which the kindred poor would resort.’) Fortunately for the Highland Welfare State, change is very slow. The Rev. James Kirkwood, that great distributor of Bibles, writes thus of thigging in the 1690s in his ‘Collection of Highland Rites and Customes’: “To thig is to beg assistance of Friends which is very ordinary among persons of every Quality. Men thig Horses and corn; women thig cows, sheep and goats. When a person of Quality thigs he is attended with a great many servants, whereof one is the Spokesman and intimates to the Master of the House the end of their coming. By this means they get a great deal of one kind and other.”

He concludes: “When young men of the common sort are to plenish they thig corn, both in Seed time and harvest. Sometimes great persons onely send Letters, with one or other to receive their good will.” By good will he means a gratuity or gift.

In the same decade, the Skyeman Martin Martin demonstrates in his ‘Description of the Western Islands of Scotland’ that the Statutes have had little impact on North Uist, except in one pernicious way. “They are a very charitable and hospitable people, as is anywhere to be found. There was never an inn here till of late, and now there is but one which is not at all frequented for eating, but only for drinking; for the natives by their hospitality render this new-invented house in a manner useless.”

Turning to thigging, he goes on: “The great produce of barley draws many strangers to this island, with a design to procure as much of this grain as they can; which they get of the inhabitants gratis, only for asking, as they do horses, cows, sheep, wool, &c. I was told some months before my last arrival there, that there had been ten men in that place at one time to ask corn gratis, and every one of these had some one, some two, and others three attendants; and during their abode there, were all entertained gratis, no one returning empty. This is a great, yet voluntary tax, which has continued for many ages; but the late general scarcity has given them an occasion to alter this custom, by making acts against liberality, except to poor natives and objects of charity.”

The old distinction between *faoighe* and *déirc*, thigging and sorning, is clearly having to be reinforced.

By 1727 or so a young surveyor called Edmund or Edward Burt has been plying his trade in the Highlands in connection with General Wade’s military roads. He leaves a fascinating work called ‘Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland’ which I gather has now been republished by Birlinn of Edinburgh, though I haven’t seen the new edition yet. This is what he has to say about thigging: “At a young Highlander’s first setting up for himself, if he be of any Consideration, he goes about among his near Relations and Friends; and from one he begs a Cow, from another a Sheep; a third gives him seed to sow his Land, and so on, till he has procured for himself a tolerable Stock for a Beginner. This they call *Thigging*.”

It is, clearly, what we would now call start-up funding but in an economy which still had little cash, very much in line with the definition of *faoighe* in the ‘Highland Society Dictionary’ of 1828 as ‘an asking of aid, in corn, clothing, or other stuff, usual with young persons newly married, or about to stock a farm, and still practised in many parts of the Highlands and Islands’.

Starting up is clearly not the problem of the last character whom we will meet. In 1760 Richard Pococke, Anglican bishop of Ossory, is travelling in Sutherland. He has already been to Mesopotamia, and is not the kind of visitor who stays in inns — albeit a well-liked, good-humoured man, he likes to travel comfortably with two servants, staying at mansions and manses. Normally he is more interested in antiquities than in living people, but he cannot resist noting the appearance of an old lady whom he encounters on 22 or 23 June. “I this day met an aged person, who had much the look of a gentlewoman. She had about her shoulders a striped blanket, and saluted us genteely.

“She was followed by a maid without a cap or fillet, with a bundle at her back; this was a sort of decayed proprietor, who, I suppose, was going round a-visiting; and as they are very hospitable to all, so they are not uncivil to such unfortunate persons.”

By cap or fillet he means *bréid* or *stiomag*, the simple hairband or starched linen coiffe which are respectively a woman’s badge of virginity and of marriage. The lack of either of these is a sign of poverty. The ‘going round a-visiting’ and the bundle on the maid’s back are a dead giveaway — they are *air faoighe*, thigging.

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