The wool that I collected

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

IN recent articles I have been trying to follow a particular strand through the history of the Highland people, and I intend to continue with it right through to the twentieth century.

The strand is hospitality in general, as exemplified by the very ancient and very persistent custom of *faoighe* or 'genteel begging' in particular. We have arrived at the post-Culloden period, for which there is no better commentator than that thoughtful Perthshire laird John Ramsay of Ochtertyre (1736-1814), the original of Scott's 'Antiquary', whose ten bulky manuscript volumes of memoirs were eventually published in 1888 as 'Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century'. Says Ramsay: "Hospitality was regarded by the Highlanders as a first-rate virtue; and a man by shutting his door against the meanest stranger would not only have forfeited the esteem of his neighbours, but have run a risk of being ill received wherever he or the story was known. And by practising it universally, even to the beggar in rags, valuable connections were sometimes formed. The strangers, especially if under circumstances of danger and distress, retained a lively sense of the favour; and there are traditions of attachments in the Highlands, founded on hospitality, that are equally romantic with the story of Glaucus and Diomed."

What Ramsay clearly has in mind here is a story like that of the MacGregor chief who took in a wandering Lamont to his house one night in Glen Strae. Lamont's pursuers arrived soon after — he had murdered MacGregor's own son the night before in the King's House Inn. But as his guest, Lamont had earned his protection, so the old man escorted him safely back to his home country of Cowal. Instead of leading to a blood feud, therefore, the murder led to an alliance; and when, years later, MacGregor was driven by the Campbells from his home, he found safe haven among the Lamonts, and died a guest of his son's murderer in his castle at Toward.

It's a story told among others by Alasdair Alpin MacGregor in a section called 'Folk-Tales of Highland Hospitality' in his book 'The Peat-Fire Flame' of 1937. To me it begs the question of just how long there has been an 'inn' or a 'king's house' at the top of Glen Coe and Glen Etive, but that's one for another day. Ramsay goes on, entertainingly: "If, however, selfish motives must be assigned for this virtue, none is more obvious than the amazing thirst of the Highlanders for news.

"As there were no periodical papers of intelligence amongst them, they naturally expected much precious information from a guest who came perhaps from a far country; and thus a number of years ago a notorious criminal, being brought to the place of execution, happened to spy as he was mounting the gallows a man coming towards them in some haste, whereupon he earnestly requested the judge to be respited for a few minutes till he might speak to that man — which, being complied with, all the wretch said to him was, 'What news?'"

But we must get back to the *faoighe*, which, as I explained last time, was known in English as 'thigging'. There are many proverbs about it, which shows its importance in society about this time.

Faoigh' a' ghliocais, 'the thigging of wisdom', refers to a newly-married couple going out to cadge bits and pieces like wool and seed-corn to help them set up house — a perfectly normal practice, equivalent to the wedding presents of today, except that it was additional to the consumables, usually hens and drink, that the guests would have brought to the wedding itself.

The *faoighe* can be the article thigged as well as the act of thigging itself. So *faoighe fir gun chaoraich*, 'the contribution of a man without sheep', refers to a gift of wool from a man who has no sheep, and may therefore be a polite way of referring to something as stolen property. *Faoighe fir falaimh*, 'the contribution of an empty man', that is, a man who has nothing, is presumably another way of saying the same thing. Of course you could use it more charitably for 'robbing Peter to pay Paul'.

Just like today, then, there were two views on begging. Sheriff Nicolson, in publishing these sayings in his 'Gaelic Proverbs' of 1880, took the less charitable line, no doubt reflecting the views of his informants; the more charitable line is mine.

Here's another: *Chan fhacas fear-faoighe riamh gun tombaca*. Nicolson makes this 'A beggar was never seen without tobacco'. Note the word 'beggar', which is less sympathetic, and to us nowadays more loaded, than 'thigger'. But it strikes a chord. In Edinburgh where I work there are huge numbers of beggars on the streets. When I see one from afar I put my hand in my pocket, then when I come close and see that he or she is smoking, as they often are, I keep my charity to myself. Is that fair? Perhaps readers will tell me.

Sometimes it's the other way round, a word other than *faoighe* coming out as 'thigging'. Nicolson gives this: *Is fhearr màthair phocanach na athair claidheach*. It means "Better to have a bag-carrier for a mother than a sword-carrier for a father." Last time, if you remember, we met just such a bag-lady — the thigger's maid encountered in Sutherland in 1760 with 'a bundle at her back'. Nicolson explains that the saying is actually borrowed from the south, where it is known as "Better a thigging mither than a riding faither." The sworded and riding father means a freebooter, what here in the Borders was called a reiver.

In his 'Aoir nan Tàilleirean', composed in or about the year I have just mentioned, John MacCodrum satirises the North Uist tailors for being unwilling to do a job for him.

Càit am faic sibh òganaich
Cho spòrsail ris na tàilleirean?
Faire faire có bhiodh ann
Nam foghnadh dannsa 's gàireachdaich?
Ma bheireas dragh no trìleach orra,
Drip le mnaoi no pàistean,

Sann a chithear feadh na tìre iad
'Nan aoigheachdaich 's 'nan ànrachdaich.

("Where will you find lads / As merry as the tailors? / For shame, who'd be there but they / If dance and laughter would suffice? / If trouble or vexation catch them, / Overwork with wife or children, / They'll be seen throughout the land / As thiggers and as wanderers.") Here the key word is *aoigheachdaich*, from *aoigheachd*, 'hospitality'; perhaps rather than 'thiggers' we should translate it as 'spongers', or, to use a word I introduced last time, 'sorners'.

Finally this time I want to present the greatest of all thigging songs, Donnchadh Bàn Macintyre's 'Òran do Chaora'. It too was made in, or close to, 1760. He was working as forester (gamekeeper) in Glen Etive at the time. It's a waulking song (for reasons that will become clear) so it has wonderful pace and rhythm and a chorus that goes like this: *Hem ó, ho ió, hó ró chaora ceannfhionn, hem ó, ho ió.*

The sheep of the title is a whiteface of the old kind that were treasured as family retainers. *Sann bu choslach ris an t-sìoda / Caora mhìn nan casa geala.* "Comparable to silk was / The soft-fleeced ewe with the white legs." They were kept close for milk as well as wool, not let loose around the hills. *Chumadh i rium gruth is uachdar / Air fhuairead 's gum biodh an t-earrach.* "She'd keep me in crowdie and cream / No matter how cold the spring." He had received her as a present from a lady in Lochaber, and she has served him wonderfully. *Bhiodh aice dà uan sa bhliadhna / 'S bha h-uile h-aon riamh dhiubh fallain.* "She'd have two lambs every year / And every one of them was healthy."

But now a fox has killed the ewe among the bracken. He laments her, describes the scene of carnage, and says: *On a chaill mi nis mo chaora / S coslach do m' aodach bhith tana.* "Since I have now lost my ewe / It's likely my clothes will be threadbare." *Cia leis a nìtear dhomh còta / O nach beò a' chaora cheannfhionn?* "What will a coat for me be made with / Now the whitefaced ewe is dead?"

Tradition provides the answer. *H-uile bean a th' anns an dùthaich / Tha mi 'n dùil an dùrachd mhath dhomh.* "Every housewife in the country / Is well disposed to me I think." *'S théid mi dh'iarraidh na faoigh'-chlòimhe / Air mnathan còire an fhearainn.* "So I'll go and seek a wool-thigging / From the kind women of the district."

He begins a journey round Glen Etive. *Tadhlaidh mi air Inbhir Ghìneachd / 'S innsidh mi na bhios air m' aire.* "I will call at Inbhir Ghìneachd / And I'll tell about my problem." *Gheibh mi tlàm a chlòimh nan caorach / On a tha mi dh'aodach falamh.* "I'll get a handful of sheep's wool / Since I'm destitute of clothing."

We have to imagine the cheers and whoops of delight from the audience at the waulking as each place in turn is mentioned in this song that Donnchadh has given the women to waulk his cloth with. *Gheibh mi rùsg an Taigh na Sròine / On mhnaoi chòir a bha san Arthar.* "At Strone House I'll get a fleece / From the kind wife who lived in Narrachan." *An Gleann Ceitilein an fheòir / Gheibh mi na rùisg mhóra gheala.* "In Glen Ketland of the grass / I will get the big white fleeces."

Thigging takes time. It involves hospitality — and news, stories, or a song, in return. Donnchadh reaches the local dram-shop. *Gheibh mi làn na slige-chreachainn / O nighean Domhnaill Ghlais an drama.* "I'll get the fill of the scallop-shell / From the daughter of Domhnall Glas the distiller." *Cuiridh mi siud thar mo rùchan / As fheairrd' a ghiùlaineas mi 'n eallach.* "I'll put that over my thrapple / The better to carry my load."

The song isn't made in a day, of course. Perhaps this bit of it precedes him on his rounds, brought by children running back and forth. *Ruigidh mi bean Cheann Loch Éite, / Tha mi 'n éiginn, 's cha bu mhath leath'.* "I'll reach the wife of Kinlochetive, / I'm in a fix, and she wouldn't wish it." *Gheibh mi uaipe tlàm a dh'fhaoighe, / Tlàm eile a thaobh bhith 'm charaid.* "From her I'll get a thigging handful, / A second one because I'm kin."

So he crosses the river and goes on to Guala Chuilinn where the wife gives him a dram, and to each of the various houses in Druim a' Chòthais, Inbhir Charnain, and Dalness where he had started. *Thig mi dhachaigh leis na gheibh mi / 'S tomad dheth cho mór ri gearran.* "I'll come home with what I get / With the bulk of it as big as a garron."

That then is a detailed picture of a thigging. But the song isn't over yet. We've had 88 lines, there are another 70. He gives two lines to the spinning (though it takes a year), two to the weaving, 26 to the waulking (the climax), two to the drying, then, with an echo of MacCodrum's problem, two to the only bit that is man's work: *Mur tig e 'm ionnsaigh, an tàillear, / 'S nàr dha e, 's gun tug sinn bean da.* "If he doesn't come to me, the tailor, / It's shameful of him, since we gave him a wife."

So it will be done. *Sann an-sin a théid mo chomhdach / Leis a' chlòimh a rinn mi theanal.* "Then will I be covered / By the wool that I collected." Our thigger returns to lamenting his lost ewe, but ends in the endearing fashion that has made him the most loved of all Gaelic poets. *S fhearr bhith cridheil leis na dh'fhuirgheas / Na bhith tuirseach mu na chailleas.* "Better to be glad with what remains / Than to be sad for what one loses."

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