

## Cadging all the way there

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I quoted Donnchadh Bàn Macintyre's song about how he went around the communities of Glen Etive 'thigging' (*faoighe*) for wool to make a coat from. I suspect it would be the very coat he would have been wearing when he arrived in Edinburgh to join the City Guard.

Of course the song describes an event, but it is also prescriptive. The task of a poet is to show how people should behave, be they high or low. Donnchadh is telling us that if you don't have any sheep of your own and cannot afford a coat, the proper thing to do is to go round your friends and neighbours and thig for the wool to make it with. They will make you welcome with a dram and a bite to eat and a bit of wool to put in your bag. What you will give them in return is more precious than any of these — news and knowledge, learning and stories, songs and traditions, some talk maybe about proverbs and words. The person who has none of these things to give is poor indeed and will be lucky to have clothes to his back.

Of course it's a slow process and you must be patient. First of all there's the thigging itself. That might have taken Donnchadh a week or two, for hospitality can't be rushed. I know that myself from having sold Gaelic books out of a suitcase from door to door in the sixties, all the way from Eoropie to Vatersay. The open door, the tea, the scones, the butter, the crowdie, the jam, and more tea.

Once the thigging's done and the wool collected, the spinning takes a year and you're as well to give a week each to the weaving, the waulking, the drying, the waiting for the tailor to arrive, and then, finally, the tailoring. That's 59 weeks, about 14 months. But it's legal and legitimate, and I suspect the finished garment would no longer be thought of as *faoighe*. Look at this clothing blessing given by Alexander Carmichael in volume four of 'Carmina Gadelica':

*Chan ath-aodach seo  
'S chan fhaoigh e,  
Cha chuid chléir e,  
Cha chuid sagairt e  
'S cha chuid dedèir e —  
Ach do chuid fhéin,  
A mhic mo chré,  
Ri gile 's ri gréin,  
Am fianais Dhé,  
'S gléidh agad e!*

(‘No second-hand cloth is this / And no thigging is it, / Not the clergy's is it, / Not the priest's is it, / And not the dewar's is it — / But your very own, / O son of my flesh, / By moonlight and sunlight, / As God is our witness, / And keep it for yourself!’) Curious, isn't it, that the dewar, the hereditary keeper of a saint's relics, should pop up here as a man you owe taxes to. Anyway, the first two lines of the blessing also appear twice in volume one. Carmichael tells us what a traditional waulking was like, and says: “When the women have waulked the cloth, they roll up the web and place it on end in the centre of the frame. They then turn it slowly and deliberately sunwise along the frame, saying with each turn of the web:

*Chan ath-aodach seo.  
Chan fhaoigh seo.  
Cha chuid cleir no sagairt seo.*

(‘This is not second clothing. This cloth is not thigged. This is not the property of cleric or priest.’) In other words, as I understand it, irrespective of how the wool was obtained, this is new cloth — not got by unstitching old clothes, and not thigged as cloth.

Here's another puzzle. The Iona poet Angus Lamont (1770-1856) made a satirical song called ‘Òran don Chladach Fheamainn’ (‘Song to the Seaweed Shore’) with this chorus:

*Ath-ha-a-lam, Ath-ha-a-lam,  
Ath-ha-a-lam o Ceann Anndraidh,  
B'e siud an t-àite comhalach  
Nuair thig an ròd sa gheamhradh;  
Bithidh bodaich agus crogain aca,  
Crios mu 'n còta teann orra —  
Ma théid thu shireadh faoighe orra  
Gheibh thu dorn sa cheann bhuath'.*

It seems to mean, “Ath-ha-a-lam, Ath-ha-a-lam, / Ath-ha-a-lam from Ceann Anndraidh, / That would be the place to meet / When the seaweed comes in winter; / There'd be old misers with graips / And a belt tight around their coats — / If you go to ask them for a thigging / You'll get a fist in the head from them.” But there are uncertainties. *Bodaich* used to be pejorative, so I've translated it 'old misers', but it would be unlikely to be used like that nowadays. A *crogan* would usually be an earthenware jar or pitcher, but I can't see what

use that would be for gathering seaweed, and as Dwelly offers ‘muck-fork’ or *gràba crom* as another synonym, then graip or pitchfork it must be.

What is the belt doing tight around their coats? I can only guess that that’s how they carry their harvest of seaweed around, for fear that if they stack it on the shore someone will take it. And what about this ‘fist in the head’ that you get if you go thigging? Well, it’s what it sounds like, but there’s surely a mischievous pun or two lurking there, because it could also mean ‘You’ll get an extra fistful from them’ — thigging would usually yield a fistful of wool, seed or corn, but here it’s a punch in the nose. Why? Well, as the man who collected the song, the Rev. R. Lamont Ritchie, pointed out to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1899, “A certain vagueness exists in sea-ware rights. The vagaries of weather send this gift of Neptune to unexpected places, where the next tide may recall its offering. ‘First come, first served’ is an unwritten law among neighbours, and our bard, I fear, had the admitted weakness of the sons of song — an unreadiness.”

So kindness to the thigger had its limits.

This has been my fourth article on *faoighe*. I have traced the custom in a direct line from the Middle Ages. When did it die? Well, like so much else in Gaelic society, news of its death was much exaggerated. In his book ‘Lewis: A History of the Island’, Donald MacDonald seems to suggest that the Poor Laws killed it. “Until the Poor Law Act was passed in 1844, the paupers in each village were dependent on the ungrudging charity of their neighbours, with occasional aid from the proprietor or the church.”

He goes on: “Each village cared for its own poor, and these unfortunates were treated with respect as they went begging from house to house. This asking for alms was called *foidh* and occasionally they extended their activities to other townships, especially if they could claim relationship, however distant, with anyone there. The gifts so freely given were usually potatoes, grain, eggs, butter, meal, wool and clothing. Rural beggars avoided Stornoway as there was not the same hospitality to be found there.”

When Norman MacLeod and Daniel Dewar published their Gaelic Dictionary in 1866, however, *faoighe* was still alive. They define it as ‘an asking of aid in corn, wool, and sometimes cattle; a custom formerly very common, and still partially practised’.

On then to 1880, when Sheriff Nicolson published ‘Gaelic Proverbs’. *Chan e rogha nam muc a gheibh fear na faighe* he translates — in deference to the Poor Law Act? — as “It is not the pick of the swine that the beggar gets.” We might now prefer to say “The thigger doesn’t get the favourite pig.” He explains: “In the ‘good old times’, when dearth was as common as a bad season, it was not considered degrading for respectable people to go foraging among their friends for grain, wool, &c. . . This kind of begging was also practised by or for young couples about to marry, or newly married, to help them in setting up house . . . I think it may now be said to be obsolete.” He adds: “The practice, however, of giving useful presents to young couples is encouraged in the very highest ranks of modern society.”

“I think it may now be said to be obsolete.” Those cautious words seem to be confirmed by Fr Allan McDonald (1859-1905). In his ‘Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay’ there is an entry under *fàidheadh*, a peculiar spelling. He says (note the past tense): “The young wife had to go round the township to collect wool from all her neighbours, *air fàigheadh chlàmhadh*. The man had to go too, but I don’t know what he collected.”

Imagine my surprise, then, when I read Angus Edward MacInnes’s ‘Eriskay Where I Was Born’, published by Mercat Press exactly a year ago. Speaking about his childhood between the wars (he was born in 1925) he says: “Pollachar, at the west end of the Sound of Eriskay, was the hub of activity in the old days. There was always an inn there to cater for people travelling between the Sounds. If you went cadging seeds or corn you had to go through there, then start the round of houses all the way to Boisdale. I can still remember some of their names: Alick Hugh MacRae and Allan Mhuiler (Allan, the son of the miller), so called because his father had a mill at one time. They were the worst pair, calling us for everything.”

He explains: “Allan had a boat which he used to fish in the Sound with small lines for flounders. At this time Eriskay boats had started to use trawls for a couple of months during the winter. Allan was always blaming the Eriskay crowd for all the scarcity. If you went to Allan’s house and asked him had he caught any flounders the last time he was fishing that was enough to get him riled. He would start off saying, ‘You’ve had them trawled long ago.’”

I phoned Capt MacInnes on Christmas Eve. Oh yes, he told me, cadging seeds (*siol*) or corn (*arbhar*) in Uist was quite normal for the Eriskay people in those days, because the Eriskay crofts were small and the Uist ones were large. I noticed he said *càidseadh*, cadging. Had he heard *faoighe*? “No, but every island has its own way of talking.” Maybe it explains the trouble Fr Allan had with the word.

Capt MacInnes comes back to cadging later on in the book, very entertainingly, so I will give him the last word. I hope he won’t mind if I standardise his Gaelic spelling. “With corn so scarce there was always somebody’s cows having dizzy turns in spring, with the result that all hands would be called for the usual ritual of lifting them up. It was then that the cadging expeditions would start going over to the Uist side for corn, everyone with a tale of woe about their poor, starving beasts.

“Somebody went over one day to a local worthy’s house, Iain Mac Ruairidh Mhòir, and started giving him the usual tale of want. His house would be one of the first, as he was well acquainted with all of them from his sailing days. ‘What on earth,’ says Iain, ‘were you giving them before they came to this trancing state?’

“‘Wind,’ says the Eriskay man.

“‘What a feed they must have had the day of the big gale,’ says Iain.

“There was another worthy, Mac Dhùghaill Bhàin, next to him, swearing like a trooper, which was one of his special talents whenever he would see a face from Eriskay, knowing well what they were after. However, his was a good house if everywhere else failed as his wife belonged to Eriskay. I believe the poor soul must have left himself short a few times rather than see them go back empty-handed.

“So you carried on all the way to Boisdale on these cadging expeditions, some of them for a laugh putting you on a bum steer telling you so-and-so had seeds or corn they were sieving yesterday. On arriving at the house you probably found out to your dismay that the house was on a common grazing and they had no croft. Then kids howling with laughter would start shouting after you, ‘Skate worth of corn’, skate being an unmarketable fish, as it could not be salted. All this carry-on just to ensure a drop of milk in the tea for about half the year . . .

“Carrying a load of corn on your back all the way from Boisdale was no mean feat. I remember carrying a bag of seed from Calum Aonghais’s house in Boisdale to Ludag. I was cadging all the way there.”

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