

“Butcher-meat — or else”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I had something to say about traditions in Uig (Lewis) of the *buannachan*. They were thought of in Uig as overbearing representatives of the Norse military occupation who were billeted upon the people and ate them out of house and home. *Marbhadh gach fear a bhuanna*, went the by-word, *agus marbhaidh mise mo bhuanna fhéin*. “Let each man kill his *buanna*, and I’ll kill my own *buanna*.”

Although the term was well known in Ireland too, the Norse connection seems to be well established. In Old Norse were the words *buandi* and *boandi*, later *bondi*, meaning a tiller of the ground, a husbandman or farmer. The word went downhill, as words sometimes do, for in Danish, apparently, *bonder* is a boor, and in Danish and Norwegian *bondi* is a term of contempt for the common people. It seems likely to me that the very English expression “bounder” is connected with it.

In medieval Ireland a *buanna* was a mercenary or billeted soldier, precisely as in the traditional memory of the Uigich. I think it makes sense that a man who was a tiller of the soil in Norway would become a mercenary or billeted soldier in Ireland or in Lewis, for, as the Icelandic sagas make abundantly clear, it was the same people who did both. And in fact a twelfth-century Irish saga, ‘Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh’, describes with great bitterness the system of billeting mercenaries practised by the Viking invaders of the previous century: “There was . . . a steward over every village, and a soldier in every house, so that none of the men of Ireland had power to give even the milk of his cow, nor as much as the clutch of eggs of one hen, in succour or in kindness to an aged man, or to a friend, but was forced to preserve them for the foreign steward, or bailiff, or soldier.

“And though there . . . was in the house but one cow, it must be killed for the meal of one night, if the means of a supply could not be otherwise procured.”

In quoting this in her article ‘Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland’ in ‘The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland’ (1978), Katharine Simms points out how interesting it is that one of the deepest humiliations borne by the Irish people during their ‘Babylonian captivity’ appears to have been the loss of power to extend voluntary hospitality to others. And the term *buanna* wastes no time in creeping into Gaelic literature. Simms quotes a twelfth-century tale, which she calls ‘The Quarrel about the Loaf’, in which the King of Munster sends his servant on billet (*for buannacht*) to a woman’s house in order to establish his right of lordship over an estate on the Leinster border. “There was baking for the ploughmen, when the servant arrived in the woman’s house. The first loaf thereof that was baked was put before the servant, so that he ate it, for the woman did not know that it was not simply to beg that the servant had come.”

The phrase ‘that it was not simply to beg’ is in the original *nach do fhoigdi chena* — in other words, it is an early example of the term *foighe* which became so common in Scottish Gaelic, as I showed over several articles recently. The tale goes on: “Another loaf, however, was being baked for the ploughmen. And then the servant said: ‘Woman,’ says he, ‘make that loaf better than you made the loaf a while ago.’

“‘Why do you trouble yourself about that loaf,’ said the woman, ‘since it is no business of yours?’

“‘It is, though,’ said the servant, ‘for the cake just now was my first snack, and that cake is my chief portion, for it is on billet from the King of Munster I have come.’”

Simms points to the narrow distinction in the tale between the solicitation of alms by a poor vagrant (*foigdi*) and the demand for billeting-rights (*buannacht*). “The servant’s insulting manner and excessive requirements reveal that he asks hospitality not as an individual,” she concludes, “but in the name and with the authority of the King of Munster.”

Perhaps due to some consciousness of its original meaning of tiller of the soil, *buanna* seems to have developed the sense of a native mercenary as opposed to a *gallóglach*, literally ‘Norse youth’ — Shakespeare’s “gallowglass” — which was the term used in Ireland for the mercenaries who poured across from the Western Isles. So in Ireland a *buanna* was a native Irish mercenary, I think, while in the Western Isles a *buanna* could have been any mercenary at all, and the word was proportionately more common there. *Buannacht* in Ireland was the right possessed by a lord or chief to quarter or billet mercenary forces upon a lordship, no matter whether such forces consisted of *gallóglach* or *buannadha*.

*Buannacht* and *buannadha* seem to have been taken into English as ‘bonaght’ and ‘bonaghtmen’. By the time of Edward Bruce’s invasion of Ireland in the early fourteenth century the billeting problem seems to have been huge. When in those turbulent days Donnchadh Ó Briain assumed the chieftainship of Corcovaskin in Co. Clare, “He quartered his bands and bonaghts in on the land, and so many were his kernes and attendants that the bonaghts would find out three cows, or two cows, or even a single cow that existed in the land.”

That story is from an account of the miracles wrought in heaven by St Senan, and it goes on to speak of how Donnchadh Ó Briain himself set out to plunder the saint’s churches. When Senan’s coarb — the hereditary keeper of his relics — heard of Donnchadh’s approach, he sent for his fellow coarb and all the monks. “Then they raised a great noise — clerks, and bells, and hand-bells, and *bachaill*, croziers — so that they perturbed his mind, and confused his brain in his head. He said to them: ‘Receive my bonaghts,’ said he.

“‘We will do so,’ said the monks, ‘and we will set Senan at you afterwards.’” Sure enough, through the miraculous vengeance of the saint, Donnchadh and all his *buannadha* were killed in battle soon afterwards.

Documentary evidence for the *buannadha* creeps closer to Scotland in 1579. In that year, the Irish rebel leader James Fitzmaurice wrote a letter in Gaelic to Ronald MacDonald, who was son of Colla nan Capall (an Islay MacDonald who had settled in Antrim) and uncle of the famous Colla Ciotach. I quoted the letter from an Irish source in a paper on Colla Ciotach which I read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1973. It goes:

*Gnás na litre, a bhille, ó t-Séamus mac Muiris mic an iarla, chum a charaid agus chum a compánuidh féin .i. cum Raghnuill mhic Colla maoiduibh, agus innis dó go ndubhart-sa ris an mhéid do bhuanadhuibh is mó fhéudfas sé do chruinniughadh, agus teacht cugam, agus go bhfuighidh sé a dhíol do réir a thoile féin . . .* (“The custom of the letter [i.e. salutation], dear piece of paper, from James, son of Maurice, son of the Earl, to his friend and companion, Randal, son of Colla Maeldubh: and tell him that I told him to collect as many *buannadha* as he can, and to come to me, and that he will get his pay according to his own will . . .”)

When wars are over and people need no protection, the reputation of soldiers in their own neighbourhood often goes downhill pretty rapidly. In both Irish and Scottish Gaelic *buanna* came to mean a bully, a glutton and a show-off — in one word, a bounder. Two other Irish words for mercenaries, *amhsanna* and *fianna*, went the same way. Which brings me, finally, to the stories of Scottish *buannachan*. MacDonald of the Isles is said to have had a band of sixteen of them, hence *sè buannachan deug Mhic Dhomhnaill*, “MacDonald of the Isles’ sixteen billet-masters” as quoted by Dwelly. MacLeod of Dunvegan made do with twelve, but these twelve were bad enough, if we are to believe the following story which J G Mackay, Portree, told the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1919. When these men had nothing special to do, says Mackay, they went about either fishing or hunting as they fancied, and billeted themselves on any tacksman by the way for their food.

On one such occasion they were in Glendale, and when they felt hungry they called at the house of Finlay MacLeod of Galtrigil and demanded food. Finlay’s wife put before them a big spread of bread, butter, cheese and milk. This wasn’t good enough for the *buannachan*, who reckoned themselves to be gentlemen. They demanded butcher-meat. Finlay’s wife protested that she had none, but one of them, seeing a good-looking stirk grazing in front of the house, went out and stuck his dirk into it.

Quickly they skinned it, brought a piece in, and told Finlay’s wife to cook it for them. She quietly sent one of her little boys to tell his father, who was doing something on the hill not far away. Finlay came back, and on his way to the house he went into the barn and picked up the flail (*sùist*). Passing the window, he noticed that the visitors were sitting round the table, and decided what to do.

Finlay came quietly into the room, then twirled the flail around their heads and ordered them to throw their claymores on the floor. Any man refusing immediately had the flail uncomfortably circling round his head, and they all had to accept the situation as best they could. After disarming them, Finlay called to his wife to get some ropes made of rushes (*gàdagan*) and throw them into the room. Then he ordered each man to tie his neighbour’s hands behind his back, and took good care that it was properly done; the last man he tied himself.

With his wife’s help Finlay then tied the twelve greedy *buannachan* in pairs, ordered them out, and marched them in file to Dunvegan. Thanks to the flail constantly circling round their heads he had no difficulty in keeping them in marching order. We can be sure that news of the spectacle went far and wide, and before they got to Dunvegan, MacLeod himself came to meet them. Fortunately he was amused. “What’s the meaning of this?” he says.

“There are your champions for you,” says Finlay, “and if you have no use for them you had better send them home, and not be having them going about oppressing people, as they are in the habit of doing.”

When MacLeod heard about the stirk he turned his anger on the *buannachan*. As well he might. In 1609 the Statutes of Iona were pushed in front of the distinguished nose of Ruairi Mór MacLeod of Dunvegan. They included a clause limiting the number of individuals in a chief’s household and committing the chiefs to support them by their own means rather than by a tax upon their tenants. He signed.