

“Bàrdachd nam Beann”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE South Uist poet Donald Macintyre, Domhnall Ruadh Phàislig, laboured for much of his life as a brickie on Clydeside and died in 1964. He was a Socialist and a Nationalist, but that is not why he has been a favourite of this column in the past. What I like most of all about his verse is its realism. He uses words wonderfully to describe things exactly as they are and as they were. And he adds a touch of humour.

Domhnall Ruadh’s songs and poems were published after his death in a book called “Sporan Dhomhnaill”, edited by Somerled MacMillan. One of the songs in it that has always most intrigued me is called “Bàrdachd nam Beann”, in inverted commas. It’s in an old heroic metre once used for the praise of warriors, and it’s set mainly in a place I remember well from the 50s and early 60s — MacLaren’s shop at 268 Argyle Street, just outside the shadow of the Highlandman’s Umbrella, looking down Oswald Street to the Broomielaw.

I recall MacLaren’s ever-dwindling stock of Gaelic books, inherited from the halcyon days of the 30s when they were the leading Gaelic publishers. Eventually they moved to West Nile Street or thereabouts and sold off all their Gaelic stock to Derick Thomson’s Gairm Publications. By then they were selling mainly magazines and stationery. Maybe fags too, I forget. Anyway the song starts:

*Am feasgar a cheannaich mi
“Bàrdachd nam Beann”,
Siud feasgar a mheall mo thuras mi.*

(“The evening I bought / “Bàrdachd nam Beann” / Was the evening I wasted my trip.”) This is the only mention of the title of the offending book in the whole song. Now I have never come across a book called “Bàrdachd nam Beann”, but there is one called “Òrain nam Beann”, and if my theory is right, I suspect that Domhnall Ruadh may have changed the title a little in order to save blushes in case he ever encountered the author or his relatives. “Òrain” can be substituted for “Bàrdachd” without affecting rhyme, rhythm or metre. Perhaps Domhnall Ruadh sang “Òrain” when he was safe in the company of Uibhistich. He goes on:

*Gum b’ fheàrr dhomh mo chrùn
A chosg anns a’ bhùth
Air fear nach robh ùr no urad ris.*

(“I’d have been better to spend / My five bob in the shop / On something second-hand or cheaper.” Cheaper or smaller, either translation would do.) So he spends 5/- (25p) on a book which is new and possibly quite large. Well, I have in front of me a copy of the magazine “An Gaidheal” from April 1946 with an ad in it headed “MacLaren’s Publications: Please send for our Book Catalogue”. Third in the long list of books for sale is: “Òrain nam Beann. 26 Gaelic Songs with music. Price 5/-. Postage 5d.” The poet goes on:

*Nuair ràinig mi ’n stall
Aig doras Mhic Labhrainn
Chunnaic mi thall san uinneig e,*

*’S cha ghluaisinn mo shàil
Gus coimhead air càch —
Thug esan an deàrrsadh uil’ asta.*

(“When I reached the stall / At MacLaren’s door / I saw it over in the window, / And I couldn’t move my heel / To look at the rest — / It took all the shine out of them.”) A fine, bright-coloured book then? Well, my copy of “Òrain nam Beann” is bright yellow and measures 12 inches by 10. Not usual for those days, when Gaelic books were singularly boring in appearance. How does Domhnall Ruadh describe it?

*Bu shnasmhor a bhian,
Bu lainnearach fiamh
Mu iomall ’s mu bhial nan duilleagan.*

*Bha sgrìob air mun cuairt
Bu rìomhaiche snuadh
’S i sìos agus suas ’na h-ullagan.*

(“Neat was its pelt / Which was sunny of hue / Round its edge and the start of the pages. / It had a pattern around it / Of most attractive appearance / With vertical loops and rings.”) Well, “Òrain nam Beann” has a nice cover with a knotwork design all around it, and two thicker vertical columns of knotwork inside that. Open it, and you find that the title page has some Book-of-Kells-style tracery with animal heads. The back cover is blank. Plain sunshine yellow.

To save space, I’ll give the next bit in English only, without obliques. “What came into my head, on

considering its size, was the many verses and songs in it. Letters were written showing the price, and I said to myself, 'I'll have you. When I get my hands on you, home early I'll go, and Mary will certainly honour me.' I gave him the money and scuttled away, and sat down on a tram in a sweat.

"When I got home down there [south of the river, he means], her mouth opened wide: 'Have you lost your marbles or something? It isn't your habit to get home so early, and where on earth have you brought that guga from?'"

Mary is a South Uist woman herself and no guga-eater, so when she calls his parcel a guga she just means a big shapeless mass. Probably the shopkeeper had found a bit of brown paper, rolled the book gently into a tube-shape and rounded off the parcel with a bit of string, 1950s-style. But in any case when I look at the weird creatures on the title-page of "Òrain nam Beann" I can't think of a better word for them than gugaichean. Plucked and ready for the pot.

Domhnall Ruadh continues: "I said, 'There's music in it, many sorts in it, we'll find fun and lament in it. And when we stay up in the long winter nights, I'll use it to make original poems with.'" That at any rate is my understanding of his line *Nach mise their duan na druinich air*. What he means I think is that, thanks to "Òrain nam Beann" providing sol-fa and staff notation as well as lots of verses for 27 different songs, mainly of Ross-shire origin and therefore new to him, he will get plenty of fresh inspiration. New tunes, new topics. But when he settles eagerly down in his chair by the fire with a cup of tea and his prize, his eyes pop out of his head. I'll start and finish in Gaelic and give the rest in English only.

*Nuair sheall mi 'na broinn
'S a leugh mi na roinn,
Sann thuirt mi rium fhìn, 'Cò 'm bumailear?'*

"When I looked inside it and read the verses, I said to myself, 'Who's this bungler? Who's this blubbering bard who raised you on high, attempting a craft when incompetent?' What I'd call it is not the poetry of the bens that would suit the sons of the mountains, but verses and lines without strength, without life, adequate for idiots and Lowlanders.

"There was an epoch in the Land of the Mountains, before the times grew so sorrowful, when if their ears had heard rubbish so awful, the people would surely have shot him. I chucked it away to lie in a corner, I couldn't bear to see it any longer; no use would it be save for cleaning the rear of a man rushing off with diarrhoea."

*Cha dèanadh e dh'fheum
Ach glanadh 'na dhéidh
Aig fear bhiodh 'na leum 's a' bhuinneach air.*

Fortunately the author of "Òrain nam Beann" was not alive to hear this priceless piece of literary criticism, that is, if I am right in guessing that "Bàrdachd nam Beann" is a post-war poem. He was a gentle-sounding man from Ullapool called Angus Morrison who spent most of his life as a tea and coffee merchant, based in Edinburgh and travelling around the Highlands with his samples, picking up airs and songs. He died alone and unmarried in Edinburgh in 1943. He first published "Òrain nam Beann" in 1913 when he was already 48, and it cost 5/- (25p) even then. MacLaren's bought the stock from the original publishers, and published new editions around 1932 and 1946. According to Donald John MacLeod's "Twentieth Century Publications in Scottish Gaelic" the 1946 edition cost 6/- (30p). I bought my copy brand new from Gairm Publications last month for £2. So here is a book with a long shelf-life which has effectively been dropping in price for a century.

Why did Domhnall Ruadh dislike it so much? It contains traditional songs mostly from Ross-shire, interspersed with half-a-dozen subtitled "Air and Words by Angus Morrison". Peculiar rhymes are to be found on nearly every page, but the proportion of faults shoots up in Morrison's own compositions. He seems to have no understanding of internal rhyme, or even of the need for the rhyme-pattern set by the first verse of a song to be continued through the rest. This gets worse through the book. I can guess Domhnall Ruadh's frustration, and the subject-matter fails to make up for it — there isn't much to inspire socialist realism in *Gu òg 'sa ghleann* ('In Boyhood's Days'), *Tha'n samhradh air tighinn* ('Welcome to Summer'), or *Mo nighean donn nan caorach* ('My Pretty Shepherdess').

I have a soft spot for Angus Morrison, however. Unlike Domhnall Ruadh he was a poet not born but made. He went on to teach himself the craft, and his "Dàin agus Òrain Ghàidhlig" of 1929 is a huge collection of competent stuff in good rhyme, and in one case in flowing free verse — one of the earliest examples of it in Gaelic. There is quite a hard edge to his subject-matter too. There are poems to Gladstone and Lloyd George, in fact his is the very voice of traditional Highland Liberalism, and I will finish with these wise words of his (with minimal rhyme!) from *Alba Saor* — 'Scotland Free'.

*Tha Pàrlamaid Bhreatann
Air fàs cho mì-chumadhtha,
Mar ghearran ri ùinich
'S a luchd ga chur ceàrr:
Gum b' fheàrr a bhith sireadh
Bhith 'g imeachd gun ùspairt
'S ro chudrom an lod
Ga roinn mar a b' fheàrr;*

*Mar sin nam biodh Albainn
A' réiteach a cùisean
Is Sasann gu fuasgailte
Seach i bhith 'n sàs,
Bhiodh ceartas is cothrom
A' stiùireadh ar cùrsa
'S ar siùil air an séideadh
Le deagh-ghean is gràdh.*

(“The Parliament of Britain / Has grown as unwieldy / As a pony that stumbles / When its load puts it wrong: / It's better to seek / To proceed without strife / While the weight of the load / Is distributed sensibly; / In that way if Scotland / Could run her affairs / With England released / And no longer involved, / Justice and opportunity / Would navigate our course / While our sails would be filled / With goodwill and love.”)

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