

How Donnie gave his heart to Mammon

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ANYONE who knows anything about the history of Skye has heard of the Rev. Donald MacCallum. MacCallum was the outstanding example of a churchman who stood up for the people in their time of need. And he was of the Established church! When he was minister at Hallin-in-Waternish he spoke at meeting after meeting of the Land League, and even went to prison once for ‘inciting the lieges to violence and class hatred’. In 1886, as Donald Meek tells us in his book ‘Tuath is Tighearna’, he was arraigned before the Presbytery of Skye and censured. Meek compares him with certain RC priests in some present-day Third World countries (Fr Colin MacInnes springs easily to mind), and remarks that he preached the ‘land gospel’, a form of what would now be called liberation theology.

MacCallum was an Argyll man, born in Craignish in 1849. His parishes read increasingly like a roll-call of places that resisted their landlords: Morvern (as assistant), Arisaig and South Morar 1882–4, Waternish 1884–7, Heylipol in Tiree 1887–9, Lochs (Lewis) 1889–1920. He can only have picked Lochs (sorry, Lochs can only have picked him) because of the Park Deer Raid of 1887. The Lochs people have many memories of him. Professor Derick Thomson, whose mother was from Keose, has a story about how he opened proceedings at a concert there: *Dèanamaid ùrnaigh, is gabhaidh Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhig òran, is bidh ridhl’ againn, is bidh ochdnar againn*. “Let us pray, and Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhig will sing a song, and we’ll have a reel, and we’ll have an eightsome.”

When politics went quiet the doughty MacCallum turned to poetry. Meek prints a satire, ‘Bodach Ìsgein’, that he published in 1912 on Joseph Arthur Platt, to whom the Park deer forest had been leased in 1886. For years he entered every literary competition the Comunn Gaidhealach was able to invent. His output was prodigious.

One of various books of verse he published was ‘Domhnullan’. It came out in 1925, when he had returned to Skye to live in retirement in Glendale. In my opinion it earns him a very respectable place among the Gaelic poets of the twentieth century. Not that you would guess it from the reviews published at the time — probably because the most important thing of all about the book was its anti-landlordism, and to most newspapers that was a taboo subject. The ‘Highland News’ said: “The poem is didactic, a high moral tone pervading it from beginning to end, and a feature of it is the lucid, idiomatic diction and ever-changing metre.” The ‘Stornoway Gazette’ used humour: “He has tried to portray for us in verse the adventures — actual and imaginary — of a modern Gaelic youth. The portrayal, however, is mostly an excuse for Mr MacCallum’s impulse to song. We feel sure that the author, even if addressing his grocer, would do so in verse.”

There is some truth in all of that, but it avoids the issue. The Rev. Donald MacCallum is above all the twentieth century’s most brilliant exponent of anti-landlordism in Gaelic verse. (His activism belongs to the nineteenth century, but his poetry to the twentieth.)

‘Domhnullan’ (‘Donnie’) is a poem of 1,670 lines. It is reminiscent of grand opera, or at least Gilbert and Sullivan. It is in four cantos, and in this article and the next I will tell the story.

In the first canto, Domhnullan takes the King’s shilling. Torn between heart and mind at having to leave his sweetheart Catrìona, he gives her his heart and off he goes to the war in the trenches. In a fearful battle, his friend Gilleasbaig Bàn is killed, and they both win honour. Joyfully he returns home, and there is an astonishing ‘return’ scene.

*“Nach tig thu staigh ’s nach urrainn mi, an-dràst,
Dhut frithealadh.” Siod rinn e, ’s troimh a’ cheò
Bha ’g éirigh às a’ mheasair-nighe mhòir
A bh’ air a bheulaibh, chunnaic e a ghaol
A’ seasamh suas, ’s a cruth mar dhuilleig craoibh,
La eignidh fogharaidh, ’s a gnùis air fiamh
Na crèadha: ’s dh’ éibh i, sealltainn, “Ciod as ciall
Da seo? O thannaisg Dhomhnuillein, nach tì
Tha riochdail! Mar a bha e beò, on ùir,
Sa ghréin tha aiseirigh. ’S mur faicinn fhèin
Le m’ shùilean e san t-sealladh thugt’ o Nèamh,
E tuiteam ann an teas a’ bhlàir san lòn,
Is air a thiodhlacadh ’na éid’ fon fhòid,
Gun saoilinn e bhith ’t’ àit’. Is cinnteach mì,
On t-saoghal thall, gur ann a thagradh ’chridh
A thàinig thu?*

Now, in 1927, two years before his death, MacCallum published a little book called ‘English Translation of the First Canto of Domhnullan, A Gaelic Epic in Four Cantos’. If he ever translated the rest, I have no knowledge of it. I suspect that he knew his life’s labours were at an end. So we have his own translation of that bit. It’s pretty free, but it has the big advantage of displaying the rhyme-pattern of the original: “Whoe’er thou art, / Withdraw the latch, I’m busy and insist”; / This did he and full dimly through the mist / That rose from out a washing tub, he saw / His own loved one, but held in awe / That made her shiver as a leaf, when

blows / The gale, and from her cheeks withdrew the rose / Of life and joy to make them blanch and fade / As those on whom the coffin lid is laid, / And wildly staring in his face, she cried: / “O, Shade of Domhnullan, my love, who died / Upon the field in France, how like thou art / To him the day he gave to me his heart!”

So Catrìona thinks he is a ghost, but what MacCallum’s own translation fails to make clear is that at the end she says, “But I am sure, / From yonder world, that it’s to claim his heart / You’ve come?”

The heart is under *Craobh a’ Gheallaidh*, the ‘Tree of Promise’ or Trysting Tree. He finds it, and it is broken; he puts it back in its place, and: *Ceart mar gum b’e a bh’ aige deigh, troimh fheòil / Chaidh crithean fuachd; ’s ’na sgìod thuit e san lòn . . .* “Just as if what he had was ice, through his flesh / Went spasms of cold; and into the mud he collapsed . . .”

In the second canto, Catrìona recovers her health with the help of her husband, Ruairidh-Òg-nan-Cluan, and in a long flashback, we catch up on the story from her point of view — while Domhnullan was in the trenches, an extraordinary vision of his death was seen by peatcutters at Blàr na Fala, the Plain of Blood; the truth of the vision was confirmed to her by the *Filidh Aost’* (Aged Poet), leaving her free to bury Domhnullan’s heart at the tree and to marry Ruairidh instead. Then there is a scene in which the war memorial of Innis Bhrògaig is erected with Domhnullan’s name on it.

So far we have had Victorian melodrama with a dash of Celtic mysticism. Now you have to imagine stretching your legs, buying your partner an ice-cream or a glass of wine, whatever you like to do in the interval at the theatre. (Perhaps *Domhnullan* will be done at Eden Court some day.) Then when you settle back in your seats for the start of Canto 3 you are in for a shock. Our Donnie wakes up at the foot of the tree with his heart inside him. He goes off and becomes a drover and is not very good at it. His mind nags him:

*Thug thu tuilleadh ’s an dà phrìs
Air na sìochairean dhamha,
Cheannaich thu bho Chalum Shìm,
’S tu bhith shìos is math an airidh.*

(“You paid more than twice the price / For those dwarves of bullocks / That you bought from Calum Shìm, / You’ll be broke and you deserve it.”)

*’N ann mar sin a dh’èirich ’n àird
Calum Cràgach gu onair,
’Rinn a mhìle luideag slàn
Mun deach chàradh san roilig?*

(“Is that how Calum the Grasper / Rose up to distinction / Who made himself a thousand quid / Before they stuck him in the grave?”)

*Nuair a thàinig e don àit’
Se na bha air a chreideas
Lethcheud tastan ’s còta-bàn,
’S sin cha b’ àill leis gun ceilear.*

(“When he came to the district / All he had to his credit / Was two pound ten and a waistcoat / And he didn’t care who knew it.”)

*Is nan d’fhan e gun bhith ’g òl
Sùgh an eòrna mar ghamhainn,
Dh’fhaodadh e bhith fhathast beò,
Às na bròin toirt nan caran.*

(“And had he managed not to drink / Barley bree like a stirk / He could still be alive, / Diddling the darlings.”) So says his mind, but his heart responds that if he can’t deal honestly he’d better try being a crofter-fisherman instead. In his dilemma, he goes to consult the great idol, Mammon. Mammon laughs so much at Domhnullan’s tale that out of a golden scallop-shell full of precious stones that he keeps on his knees falls one that is the colour of the reddest wine, and Mammon says:

*“Ghaoil, nach bi
Thu fhéin cho math ’s gun cuir thu ’n neamhnaid bhriagh’
Sin — se cridhe Chalum Chràgaich, riamh
Bha dìleas dhomh — am’ shlige-chreachainn nìos
Is freagairt dhuit, a Dhomhnullein, bheir mì.”*

(“Darling, won’t you / Be so kind as to pass that delectable jewel / Over there — it’s the heart of Calum the Grasper / Who served me so well — in my scallop-shell / And I will give you, Domhnullan, your answer.”) The answer of course is that if he gives Mammon his heart he will be looked after very well. So he gives Mammon his heart, and while this is going on we are introduced to the *dà Dhroch-Spiorad, ri’n canar Sannd is Seòlt’* — ‘two Evil Spirits, called Greed and Guile’ — who stand on either side of the throne. MacCallum is getting more and more outrageous by the minute, for after kissing Mammon’s outstretched *ladhar-mhór* (hoof) Domhnullan finds himself out on the moor and as he goes home the birds sing:

*Bidh t' ìomhaigh gléidhte
Mar chreud sna h-eaglaisean,
Is facal Dhé annt'
Bhith leughadh dleasaidh tu.*

(“They’ll keep your image / As a creed in the churches, / And to read God’s word in them / You’ll have earned the privilege.”)

*Gur h-olc a dh’éireas
Don treun a ghlacar leat,
'S e dol ri mòintich
Air tòir damh-cabarach.*

(“It will go hard / With the hero caught by you, / As he climbs up the hill / In pursuit of a stag.”)

*Nuair gheibh e shaorsa
'S an saoghal farsaing aig',
Gu Manitoba
Se 's còir dha chasan thoirt.*

(“When he gets his freedom / And the world’s before him, / To Manitoba / He’d better take off.”) It’s not hard to see where MacCallum is coming from, or where he is going. Park had been leased to Joseph Arthur Platt by Lady Matheson, the widow of the man who made his fortune out of opium, the very woman who once said to the Barvas crofters in 1888, “These lands are mine, and you have nothing to do with them.” Next was Lord Leverhulme, whose grandiose schemes for Lewis collapsed in the early 20s, leaving mass unemployment in their wake.

It was at that point that three Canadian Pacific Railways steamers took away the cream of the island’s young people. Many of them, like the poet Murdo MacFarlane, were heading for the great plains of Manitoba. Many had never been out of the island before. In April 1923 the *Metagama* sailed with 300 emigrants. In April 1924 the *Marloch* took 290. A few weeks later it was the *Canada*, with 270. And, as I have said, ‘Domhnullan’ was published in 1925. In my next article I will show how our Donnie becomes Sir Donald, *Triath-nam-Binnean*, the-Laird-of-the-Pinnacles.

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