

Sir Donald, Laird-of-the-Pinnacles

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I introduced the Rev. Donald MacCallum (1849–1929), the Church of Scotland minister who made his name in the nineteenth century as an orator in the cause of land reform and the defence of the people, but who went on to become the twentieth century’s most brilliant exponent of anti-landlordism in Gaelic verse.

I was telling the story of ‘Domhnullan’ (‘Donnie’), the long poem in four cantos which MacCallum published in 1925, and we had just reached the part in Canto 3 where Domhnullan, having survived the First World War but lost his sweetheart Catriona to another, had turned to drovering and given his heart to Mammon. We now come straight to one of the best bits of the poem, the rise and rise of Domhnullan. It’s headed grandly “SIR DÒMHNALL, TRIATH-NAM-BINNEAN”. And I can think of no better translation for that than “SIR DONALD, LAIRD-OF-THE-PINNACLES.” I’ll give the first few lines of the Gaelic here, then I’ll go into English only, laid out as prose.

*Nuair chruthaichheadh an cruinne-cé chaidh crò
Dha fhéin a chur a-mach san astar ghorm
Gu ruith a réis, is crìochan air nach biodh
Aig rionnag còir bhith briseadh steach gu sìor
Mar sin gu bith, mar Thighearn’ Tìr . . .*

“On creation of the universe, a special place was set apart for him out in the blue expanse to run his race, with bounds which other stars would have no right forever to invade at any time, as Lord of Land; and when His Majesty the King proclaimed the knight of whom I sing, in freedom an estate was given him and his heirs in perpetuity, with right to call upon the Royal Navy and his army too, from rebels to defend him in his battlements; for see! from droving’s shady deals he took two vessels of some size — the *Dragon* and *Sea-Devil* — which despatched down to the sea-bed anything that challenged them to battle and destruction; and his title was a new creation specially for him: ‘Sir Donald, Laird-of-the-Pinnacles’.

“And to make of him, my warrior, with all the great men of the land, an idol worshipped by the people, and make sure the incense of their piety for him in fragrance rises up, His Majesty the King commands a wise man to devise an ancient pedigree on calfskin, worked with all the marks of genuine antiquity, for him, the new-created Lord, whose awfulness would glorify his name, and raise him to the stately throne of Landlords so that he could do with it whate’er he liked, and Ó! in arbitrary rule and evil deed from Hell itself comes nothing more disgusting (*’nan reachdarachd, an olcas gnìomh, / Na b’ oillt á luthairne cha b’ urrainn bhith.*)”

The Rev. Donald is having a lot of fun here. There is nothing he likes better than pricking pomposity.

*Sann bho dhaoine treun sa chòmhraig
Fuil an nàimhdean gu bhith dòrtadh,
Dh’ éirich Triath mo ghaoil, Sir Dòmhnall,
'S anns a' cheòl dhiubh cuiream trian.*

(“From great warriors bold in battle, / Quick to spill their enemy’s blood, / Came my darling lord, Sir Donald, / And I’ll set three of them to music.”) He has switched from grand heroic couplets to a cheerful song metre. Here are Donnie’s newly-invented ancestors:

*Uilleam Cosgarach, an Spàinnteach,
Chuir na mìlt’ gu grunn na sàile,
Thar an déile shleamhainn, ghàbhaidh,
Chì mi deàrrsadh anns an liath.*

(“William Slaughterer, the Spaniard, / Who sent thousands to the sea-bed, / Off the slippery perilous plank / Which I see shimmering in the blue.”) That deals with the claim of the Gael to have come from the Holy Land via Spain and Ireland, while solving the problem that Irish descent was out of fashion in 1925.

*Fearchar-na-Straillich-Dhrùidhtich,
Chiad fhear rugadh dhiubh ’nar dùthaich,
Ann an léirsgrìos bha cho cliùiteach
'S a chuir smùid ri baideal riamh.*

(“Farquhar-of-Impressive-Rattling / The first of them born in this land of ours, / Who in destruction was as celebrated / As any who ever set fire to fortress.”)

*Gu bhith sgoltadh chinn sna blàraibh
Is na dh’fhàgadh beò san àr chur,
Cò a chual thu riamh thug bàrr air
Calum-Geàrr-nam-Mogan-Iall?*

(“For splitting skulls in battles / And dispatching the survivors, / Who have you ever heard was better / Than Short-Calum-of-Cross-Garters?”) So Donnie’s escutcheon seems to consist of a pirate’s plank, a burning castle and some cross-gartering! The satire continues with a splendid toast to this new member of the aristocracy, of which this is just one verse:

*Na biodh tuagh luchd-diùltadh-màil
Geug, gu bràth, dhìth a' milleadh,
Is, mar th' againn, gum bi ghnàth
Aig gach àl Fear-nam-Binnean.*

(“Let not the rent-refusers’ axe / Ever destroy a branch of it, / And, just as we have, let all generations have, / A Laird-of-the-Pinnacles.”) Donnie’s next job is to organise his estate, so we get some stanzas headed “STUAMACHD” (‘sobriety’), e.g.

*Seachainibh an t-òl,
Òrain na siribh,
Sin a bheir gu’r bòrd
Ròst Fear-nam-Binnean.*

(“Avoid ye the drink, / Songs seek ye not, / That’ll bring to your table / Roast beef from Pinnacles.”) But then the plot thickens. The next bit starts

*Nuair dh’ éirich Domhnullan a-suas gu bàrr
Na beinn’ as àirde ceann an Tìr-na-Stàid
Is sheall e as a dhéidh air Sléibhte Stòr
San robh e saothreachadh fad iomadh lò
Gu goirt, is air a shon gun aige nì
G’a thoileachadh . . .*

(“When Domhnullan ascended to the top / Of Stateland’s highest mountain peak, and looked / Behind him at the Hills of Wealth Material / In which he’d laboured hard for many a day / Without a break, and nothing in return for it / Like happiness . . .”) So he is in the States, it seems, and in case we had been wondering if the model for Donnie was the long-dead Sir James Matheson, this shows that there is a bit of Andrew Carnegie in him too. Anyway, for Donnie’s depression three physicians are called with MacCallumesque names: “Ian-Ciar-na-h-Uamh”, “MacLaomainn-Bhaile-Phàil” and “Goraidh-’n-Oir”. Ian-Ciar-na-h-Uamh’ gives him a *searrag* with this on the label:

*Seo fuil nan luibhean dh’fhàsas
Air àirde nam beann,
A chruthaicheadh gu slàinte
Thoirt dhàsan bhios fann.*

(“Here’s blood from herbs growing / On the tops of the bens, / Made to restore / The health of the weak.”)

*Ach feumaidh tu luasgadh
Gu cruaidh ann ad’ dhòrn
Mun dòirtear gu réidh dhuit
Nas fheudar dhuit òl.*

(“But first you must shake it / Hard in your fist / Then pour out with care / The amount you must drink.”)

*Se sin agad làn spàinne
Mar as àbhaist sa chùis
Nuair bhriseas ort am fàire,
'S gu tàmh nuair théid thù.*

(“One spoonful precisely / Is the dose we recommend / When the day breaks upon you / And when you go to your bed.”)

*'S ma theirear leat nach bi e
Ro ghrinn anns a’ bhlas,
Aon ghloinn’ aqua vitae
A bhrìgh cha toir às.*

(“And should you be told / That it doesn’t taste nice, / One glass of whisky / Won’t change the result.”) I quoted that bit only because I like it so much. The ‘Stornoway Gazette’ said MacCallum would probably speak in verse even to his grocer. Being able to versify the label on a medicine bottle is one sign of a talented poet! Anyway, it does no good. On to the next physician, MacLaomainn, who recommends travel. The poetry at this point becomes highly lyrical and enters the mainstream of the Gaelic satirical tradition. On Mount Ararat Donnie meets a *cailleach* called *Atra Cùra* who offers him her love, and in an old heroic metre he tells her to go to hell:

*A chailleach ghnò
As bioraich’ sròn
Na gob na ròcais dhubh-cheannaich,*

(“You glowering hag / Whose nose is more sharp / Than the beak of the black-headed rook,”)

*Mur teich thu, fòs,
Mun stad an ceòl,
Bidh tu air spòig aig Sàtan.*

(“If you don’t shove off / Before the music stops / It’s on Satan’s claw you’ll be hooked.”) Before the music stops? It sounds as if MacCallum had an opera performance in mind.

At the start of the last canto we meet the third physician, Goraidh-n-Òir. For Donnie’s depression and insomnia he prescribes *a bhith dol san lòn / Air lorg an fhéidh, ’s an oidhch’ bhith cumail féist, / Le ceòl is dannsadh gus an goir an t-eun* (‘going in the day-time / Chasing the deer, and holding a feast at night, / With music and dance until cock-crow’). As Donnie sleeps in his feasting hall, ignored by his guests, he sees a vision of his old comrade Gilleasbaig Bàn, who was killed in the Trenches and is in heaven, apparently, or at least in Flath-Innis. *Nach d’fhuair / Thu miann do chridh?* he asks. “Didn’t you get / Your heart’s desire?”

“*Ghilleasbaig anns an uair,*” / *Do fhreagair e, “mo chridh aig Màmmon ta.”* ‘Archie, as of now,’ / He said, ‘Mammon has my heart.’

“*Bi falbh,*” a *deir a charaid ris, “gun dàil / Is faigh do chridh.*” “Be off,’ replied his friend to him, ‘at once / And get your heart.’

Which, after seeing the dawn break, he does. Even the rooks that guard his own castle warn him that he will lose the adulation of his peers and flatterers if he takes his heart back. He goes anyway, and finds Mammon’s courtiers Sannd and Seòlt *Mar bhodaich ghreannach, chruaidh, is ac’ fo’n deud, / G’a chagnadh greim tombaca.* “Like surly hard old men, between their teeth / Chewing a twist of tobacco.” After Mammon has warned him that he will get no more help if he takes his heart back, Sannd and Seòlt bring him to an Eden-like garden where the hearts are kept, with birds singing a hymn to Mammon — things like:

*Gu cur umad sìoda ’s sròl,
Air do bhòrd cearc fhraoich is tunnag;
Seirbheisich gu’n cur air dòigh
Bheir a Mhórachd, Màmmon.*

(“You’ll get dressing up in silk and satin, / With grouse and duck upon your table, / And servants to arrange them all / From His Highness, Mammon.”) Seòlta brings him through the garden to a cave and lights *crùisgean pronnaisg*, a brimstone cruise. He gets the heart, puts it into himself, collapses, and wakes up *sa mhachair uain’*, in the green machair. Scales as big as calfskins fall from his eyes, and instead of being the yellow of gold the world is purple and green. He and Calum Beag, his friend, “when all his riches / Melted in his generosity like snow, / On high when maytime sun shines, agreed / To buy a fishing-boat with what was left / And strive together as they did in times / Gone by”. Before Donnie dies he says: *Mo chridh, mo chridh.* And God says:

*“Le m’ chridhe fhéin
Do chridh-sa ta gu mùirneach agam; ’s fòs,
An sgàineadh ud a bh’ ann, o làithean t’ òig’,
Do chàirich mi, ’s cha bhrisear e nas mò.”*

(“Along with my own heart / Yours too I have, I’m glad to say; what’s more, / That crack that’s been in it since you were young / I have repaired, nor will it break again.”) Painlessly he goes to heaven and is lamented in simple language by Calum Beag:

*Gur goirt mo chridh, mo dheagh charaid,
’S do chorp sint’ air déile daraich,
Gur goirt mo chridh, ’s mi leam fhìn,
Mo Dhomhnullan, mo Dhomhnullan.*

(“Sore is my heart, my good friend, / With your corpse laid out on a deal of oak, / Sore is my heart, and I on my own, / My Domhnullan, my Domhnullan.”)

22 Oct. 1999