MacCallum's heart and Lamont's conscience

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST month I did a couple of pieces here about the Rev. Donald MacCallum's splendid anti-landlord poem 'Domhnullan'. It was a real discovery for me. I found it at a very late stage in preparing 'An Tuil', my anthology of twentieth-century Gaelic poetry. In fact all I could do was squeeze a bit of it into the introduction, which, like most introductions, was the last part of the book to be written.

The reason for this, I am ashamed to say, is that for all these years I simply took Derick Thomson at his word when he said in his book 'Introduction to Gaelic Poetry' about 'Domhnullan', Angus Robertson's 'Cnoc an Fhradhairc' and two other long poems of the period 1921–1950 that "of these, 'Cnoc an Fhradhairc' approaches most nearly the conditions of poetry". A condemnation so strong that 'Domhnullan' seemed not worth the effort of seeking it out.

Big mistake. I have much to learn.

An extra reason I have for liking 'Domhnullan' so much is that it provides the genesis of my all-time favourite Gaelic story, Donald Lamont's 'Fear a Chaill a Chogais' ('A Man who Lost his Conscience'). Let me explain.

'Domhnullan' is a poem about a man who lost his heart. Donnie, if you remember, went off to fight in the Trenches after losing his heart to Catrìona. When he comes back, unexpectedly, she is married to another. Thinking he is a ghost, she tells him his heart is buried under *Craobh a' Gheallaidh*, the Tree of Promise. He finds it; it is broken, but he puts it back in his body. *Ceart mar gum b'e a bh' aige deigh, troimh fheòil / Chaidh crithean fuachd; 's 'na sglod thuit e san lòn*. "Just as if what he had was ice, through his flesh / Went shivers of cold; and he collapsed into the mud."

Waking up, he goes off and becomes a drover. He is no good at it, not as good even as *Calum Cràgach*, Calum the Grasper, who would have prospered mightily had he not died of drink. So Donnie goes to consult the businessman's oracle, the idol Mammon. Mammon is sitting with a golden scallop-shell on his knees full of precious stones. He laughs so much on hearing Donnie's tale that a particularly red stone falls out. "Darling," he says (I translate), "won't you / Be so kind as to pass that delectable jewel / Over there — it's the heart of Calum Grasper / Who served me well — into my scallop-shell? / And I will give you, Donnie, your answer."

The answer is, of course, that Mammon will look after him if he leaves him his heart. And so he does. Donnie becomes a rich man and a great landlord but it doesn't make him happy. He goes to get his heart back. Mammon and his two minions (*Sannt* and *Seòlta*, Greed and Cunning) have the heart stored in a garden cave. Grudgingly, Seòlta lights a brimstone cruisie and brings him there. Donnie gets the heart, puts it into himself, collapses, then wakes up *sa mhachair uain'*, 'in the green machair'. Scales as big as calfskins fall from his eyes, and instead of being yellow like gold the world is suddenly purple and green.

Donnie gives his money away and lives the simple life of a fisherman. On his deathbed he says: *Mo chrìdh, mo chrìdh*. 'My heart, my heart.' And God replies (again I translate): "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."

'Domhnullan' was published in 1925. Thirteen years later, in 1938, the Rev. Donald Lamont (an Argyll man, like MacCallum) published 'Fear a Chaill a Chogais' in the Gaelic Supplement of 'Life and Work', of which he was editor. It was reprinted in 1960 in a wonderfully entertaining book called 'Prose Writings of Donald Lamont', which as far as I know is still available from the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society. It starts quite abruptly: *Uair a chaidh fear de mhuinntir Lios-mór gu margadh an Òbain, chaill e a chogais*. "Once when a Lismore man went to the Oban market, he lost his conscience."

At first, says Lamont (clearly enjoying himself), the Lismore man thought he had better go back and look for it; but then he thought, no, he would miss the *Lochearn*, and he was just as well without it. And indeed, his step grew lighter, and eventually he began to tell all his neighbours that he had never enjoyed such lightness of mind since the day he lost his conscience, or such lightness of body since the day his appendix was taken out. He explained to them how the otherwise contented days of his youth had been ruined by his conscience. "If I were going to the Mull Fair, or to a dance in Duror, with the idea of taking my fill of the pleasures that are to be had at gatherings of that kind, my conscience wouldn't let me out of its sight for one minute. I might as well have had my mother and the minister and the schoolmaster with me."

But what had happened to the conscience? Well, Lamont describes it in terms reminiscent of those used by MacCallum of Mammon's dish of hearts. "On fair-days Corson's market stance is so full of mud that it wouldn't be easy for you to see a jewel in the mud, even if that jewel were shinier and cleaner than the Lismore man's conscience. The conscience he had lost was so rusty and dirty for lack of scrubbing that scores and even hundreds of people went past it all day without noticing it, until a young lad from Appin picked up that strange object that he had seen in the mud, a lad that had been sent by his mother to shepherd his father (*a bhuachailleachd 'athar*) on market day."

This is what I like about Lamont's story-telling. It is understated, with always just a touch of irony. The conscience is some sort of jewel, perhaps, but a dirty, rusty one, a 'strange object' (*rud neònach*) never fully described. But the lad picks it up and hands it to his father. *Athair, a bheil fhios agaibh ciod a tha an sin?* "Father, do you know what that is?"

Ghlac an duine a' chogais eadar a chorrag agus 'òrdag, ach a cheart cho luath is a rinn e sin thug e leum as, oir chaidh saighead troimh 'fheòil agus 'fhéithean agus a chridhe mar gum biodh gath dealanaich. "The

man took the conscience between his finger and thumb, but as soon as he did so he leapt, for an arrow went through his flesh and his veins and his heart like a bolt of lightning."

Lamont explains that this is the difference between a conscience being touched by someone who already has one, and one being touched by someone who doesn't. The old soak proceeds to have terrible nightmares. The rabble of Oban with the sheriff at their head, for example, shout *Bàthaibh e, bàthaibh e!* — "Drown him, drown him!" — as he sinks off Oban pier, while his neglected wife (pregnant again) stares down at him with their children from the top of Beinn Shiant in Ardnamurchan where he got drunk for ten days with Rob MacPhail when they went there to buy some stirks . . .

He wept and wailed with his nightmares for two months, and people thought it was *bròn diadhaidh*, an experience of religious conversion, but it was just the fear of hell and a drunkard's dreams. So in disgust one evening in *Na h-Iuchraichean Òir*, the Golden Keys in Oban, he threw the conscience behind the bar when the publican, Seòras Mór Mac Thómais, wasn't looking.

Next morning when Seòras was sweeping up, he spotted something glittering in the corner. *Faicear rud-eigin a' deàrrsadh ann an oisean an t-seòmair*. He bent to pick it up, but — wait for it — as soon as he touched it, a thousand arrows went through him like pins and needles (*mar gum biodh cadal-deilginneach*) in every part of his flesh. Then he started having visions so strange that he didn't know whether he was seeing them with his physical eye or dreaming, but they were so clear before him that he said to his wife he had got the second sight — *rud*, says he, *a tha dùthchasach dhomh*. "It's hereditary for me."

He went on: "You needn't look at me like that. That's not what's wrong with me at all. It was as if I was seeing a regiment of ghosts between me and the pier, all grinning toothlessly at me (*agus càir air aodann a h-uile fir dhiubh rium*), as if it was my fault they're no longer in the flesh."

His first customers that day were a boat's crew. They all asked for a pint, but instead of serving the beer he started breaking all the bottles on the shelves and advising them to keep clear of strong drink. Well, they may have thought he was nuts — *as a chiall* — but there was nothing nuts, says Lamont, about the next thing he did. He started gathering all the street kids of Oban, and gave them food and clothes and shoes.

George didn't sell a drop of whisky that day, and his wife was afraid they would end up in the poorhouse. That night, as he slept like a baby, *ghabh i fàth air a phòcanna a shiubhal gus a chogais a chur as an t-sealladh m'an éireadh e*. "She took the chance to rifle his pockets to get rid of the conscience before he woke up." Presumably because she was a woman and therefore knew all about consciences (well, I'm saying that, not Lamont), she took care not to touch it with her fingers, but threw it out into the street with a pair of tongs.

Who was going past but a bunch of tinkers, *bannal cheàrd*, if you'll pardon the expression, on their way from Taynuilt to the islands on business. The publican's wife offered them a shilling if they would pick the thing off the street and throw it out at the back of Kerrera (*nan togadh iad an rud a bha air an t-sràid, agus nan tilgeadh iad a mach e air cùl Chearara*).

They said they wouldn't touch a thing when they didn't know what it was.

"If you want to know," said she impatiently, "what it is, it's a treasure (*ulaidh*) that you people have great need of, a treasure that will make you tell the truth whether you want to or not."

Seasaibh air 'ur n-ais, a chlann, says the head tinker, *agus na beanaibh ris an rud chunnartach air son an t-saoghail; b'e sin dhuinne ar còir-bhreith a reic air neoni*. "Stand back, children, and don't touch that dangerous thing for the world; for us that would be selling our birthright for nothing."

With that, Lamont concludes his fable. He doesn't know where the Lismore man's conscience found its last resting-place, he says. *Ach ma bha coltas neònach oirre, bu neònaiche na sin a' bhuaidh so a bha innte, gum fàsadh na daoine a ghabhadh rithe aotrom agus sona, agus gum fàsadh an fheadhainn a bha as a h-eugmhais a cheart cho aotrom agus cho sona*. "But if it looked strange, stranger than that was this quality that it had, that those who accepted it grew light and happy, and those who were without it were just as light and happy."

A strange conclusion, you might think, but that's the Established Church for you. What's worrying me now is, if a heart provided MacCallum with a fable for the twenties, and a conscience provided Lamont with a fable for the thirties, what organ would provide one for the nineties?

Do *not* send your answers on a postcard, but note that the special offer to **WHFP** readers of 'An Tuil: Anthology of 20th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse' for £12 + £1 p&p still stands (it's published on 22 November, price in shops £19.99). Send cheque, payable to 'Scottish Book Source', to Polygon, 22 George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9LF, or to order by Mastercard or Visa call the Polygon Sales Line on 0131 650 8436.

19 Nov. 1999