

The day of the battle of the cocks

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

FOR a hundred years or so, from about 1725 to 1825, the big sporting event of the early spring in the Highlands and Islands was the annual cock-fight. It was closely tied up with the education of Highland children — not with the splendid traditional Gaelic education that they got in the ceilidh-house, but with the alien education in English and (sometimes) Latin that they got at school. It was an import from the south, and like all such imports, it enjoyed the encouragement of the authorities.

When exactly was it held? It was imported as a custom of Shrove Tuesday, the festival that preceded Lent. Shrove Tuesday fell this week, on 7 March; in Lowland Scotland it was called Fastern’s E’en, the evening that preceded the fast. Usually Shrove Tuesday falls in February, however, and as cock-fighting had come with Presbyterianism to the Highlands, the pastime attached itself to the still more traditional February festival of Candlemas, which as a secular quarterday did not attract the kind of official disapproval which was targeted at Shrove Tuesday. Candlemas started off on 2 February, but after the Gregorian Calendar was introduced in 1752 it fell on 13 February. And on that day the cock-fight stuck.

What was it called? Well, in his ‘Memorabilia Domestica’ the Rev. Donald Sage from Dornoch describes that time of year as *Àm Cluiche nan Coileach*, ‘the Time of the Cock-Game’. In ‘Carmina Gadelica’ Alexander Carmichael describes St Bride’s Day (1 February Old Style, 12 February New Style) as *Là Cath Choileach*, ‘the Day of the Battle of Cocks’. *Cath Choileach* was also the term used by the Rev. Archibald Macdonald from North Uist in his paper ‘Hebridean Bards’ in the ‘Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness’ for 1890. And Alexander Stewart, in his account of the huge parish of Fortingall in Highland Perthshire called ‘A Highland Parish’, refers to it as *Latha Cogadh Choileach* or ‘the Day of the War of Cocks’.

For the Scottish schoolboy of that period it was probably the biggest event of the year. Of his own childhood in Cromarty, Hugh Miller (1802–56) remarks in his book ‘My Schools and Schoolmasters’ that ‘the school, like almost all the other grammar-schools of the period in Scotland, had its yearly cock-fight, preceded by two holidays and a half, during which the boys occupied themselves in collecting and bringing up their cocks’. But it was an important event for the adult population too. In describing the ‘great occasions’ of the island community of Berneray in the same period in his book ‘Orain Chaluum’, Alick Morrison speaks of ‘the delightful spectacle of Uistmen, wending their way to Berneray, their creels full of noisy fighting cocks for the annual tournament on Fastern’s Eve’.

Where did the cocks come from? Macdonald speaks for Uist of how ‘the boys scoured the country in search of the conquering rooster’, while Sage talks of a ‘universal scrambling’ for cocks all over the parish of Dornoch. He and his chums applied at every door, he says, and pleaded hard for them. “In those primitive times, people never thought of demanding any pecuniary recompense for the birds for which we dunned them.”

There were actually two very good reasons why people asked nothing for their cocks. One was historical — traditionally it was Lent, and eggs were off the menu, so the cock’s services could be dispensed with. More realistically, the annual cock-fight provided an essential part of the parochial schoolmaster’s income. “On the occasion of that great event,” wrote William Mackay in ‘Urquhart and Glenmoriston’, “it was the duty of every boy to bring a well-fed rooster to school. If he failed in this he was bound to pay the value of a bird to the schoolmaster.” Similarly, the author of the ‘Statistical Account’ of the parish of Applecross in the 1790s explains that the salary of the schoolmaster there was 200 merks (£134 Scots, roughly £11 sterling). But his perks included 1s. 6d. Scots per annum for pupils learning English only, 2s. 6d. per annum for those learning Latin as well — and the cock-fight dues, ‘reckoned equal to one quarter’s payment for each scholar’.

Where exactly was the cock-pit? Exceptionally, in Dornoch it was in the county court-house. Sage tells us that the very chamber where justice and municipal rule was administered, and where Sheriff MacCulloch held his legal tribunal, was surrendered to the occasion. With universal approval it was converted into a battlefield where the feathered brood could fight with bills and claws. “The council-board was made a stage, and the Sheriff’s bench was occupied by the schoolmaster and a select party of his friends, who sat there to give judgement.”

More usually, however, the arena was the schoolroom itself. Mackay describes graphically how a Gaelic-speaking sadist from Perthshire called Daniel Kerr presided over the parish school of Urquhart during the closing years of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth. “The schoolroom was for the time converted into a cock-pit; the fights took place in presence of the pupils and their parents — the minister, as a rule, gracing the meeting with his presence, and the schoolmaster being umpire and master of ceremonies. The victorious birds were restored to their proud owners — perhaps to fight another day. The dead birds and the ‘fugies’, or runaways, became the property of the master, whose modest stipend was thus in some small measure augmented.”

There are three different issues in that quote. The first is the endorsement of the occasion by the forces of social control, although it has to be said that this was not universal. The Rev. William Auld of Mauchline, ‘Holy Willie’ himself to whom Burns had such an objection, worked strenuously for the abolition of cock-fighting in his parish, and I cannot help but suspect that the decline of cock-fighting and the emergence of the Free Church in 1843 were two sides of the same coin. Indeed the custom had been condemned as early as 1748 by one John Grub, schoolmaster of Wemyss, in Fife, in a Disputation composed by him to be read by his pupils to their parents; not that it did any good, as cock-fighting lasted at Wemyss, as elsewhere, for another eighty years.

The second issue is terminology. The most successful cock, says Alexander Carmichael, was called *coileach buadha*, ‘victor cock’. The defeated bird was *fùidse*, ‘craven’, or *coileach fùidse*, ‘a craven cock’. It comes from ‘fugie’ (as in fugitive). The ‘craven cock’ was proverbial, and had been since the middle ages. Dwelly gives *fùidse* (‘a coward’) and *fùidsidh* (‘craven’). Being a pretty traumatic experience for a young lad, cock-fighting

was engrained in the memories of the Gaelic-speakers of the time, giving rise to expressions like *a' farraid fuidse*, literally 'seeking out a coward' — that is, 'challenging to combat'.

The third issue is how the fugies became the schoolmaster's property. In 'The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century' Henry Grey Graham tells us: "The cocks slain in mortal combat became the teacher's property; while those cocks which would not fight, called 'fugies', were fixed to a stake in the yard and killed one after another at cock-throwing, at one bodle for each shot.

"The schoolmaster got the bodles (in later years the half-pence), and sumptuously feasted his family on the corpses for days together, as a pleasing relief to the monotonous diet of oatmeal — having regaled the scholars in modest hospitality with liquor (ale, and it occasionally happened whisky, later in the century) in recompense."

Miller says that there was such an array of fighting birds in Cromarty that the whole day of the festival was spent from morning till night in fighting out the battle. "For weeks after it had passed, the school-floor would continue to retain its deeply-stained blotches of blood, and the boys would be full of exciting narratives regarding the glories of gallant birds, who had continued to fight until both their eyes had been picked out, or who, in the moment of victory, had dropped dead in the middle of the cock-pit."

What of the victor? Well, he got his bird back, and a great deal more besides. "The possessor of the victorious bird," says Macdonald for Uist, "was king for the nonce."

It is as clear an illustration as we could have of how the purpose of formal Scottish education was to instil an instinct for violence, bullying and hierarchy. The owner of the winning cock was crowned and feted by the community. Says Sage: "He was declared king, while he who came next to him, by the prowess of his feathered representative, was associated in the dignity under the title of queen . . .

"A day was appointed for the coronation, and the ladies in the town applied their elegant imaginations to devise, and their fair fingers to construct, crowns for the royal pair. When the coronation day arrived, its ceremonies commenced by our assembling in the school-house. The master sat in his desk, with the two crowns placed before him; the seats beside him being occupied by the 'beauty and fashion' of the town. The king and queen of cocks were then called out of their seats, along with those whom their majesties had nominated as their life-guards.

"Mr MacDonald [the schoolmaster] now rose, took a crown in his right hand, and after addressing the king in a short Latin speech, placed it upon his head. Turning to the queen, and addressing her in the same learned language, he crowned her likewise. Then the life-guards received suitable exhortations in Latin, in regard to the onerous duties that devolved upon them . . .

"A procession then began at the door of the schoolhouse, where we were all ranged by the master in our several ranks, their majesties first, their life-guards next, and then the 'Trojan throng,' two and two, and arm in arm. The town drummer and fifer marched before us and gave note of our advance, in strains which were intended to be both military and melodious. After the procession was ended the proceedings were closed by a ball and supper in the evening. This was duly attended by the master and all the 'Montagues and Capulets' of Dornoch."

Alexander Stewart pointed out that, 'in an age in which the connection between education and punishment was supposed to be very close', there was one good thing about all this. "The owner of the victorious bird was made head of the school for the ensuing year. One of his privileges was that he had some say in mitigating the penalties which his less fortunate fellows had to endure."

But Miller, that stalwart of the Free Church, disapproved completely. He called the cock-fight a relic of a barbarous age which seemed like evidence for an intolerant one too. Every pupil without exception, he explained, had his name entered on the subscription-list as a cock-fighter, and had to pay the master twopence. This was ostensibly for permission to bring his birds to the pit, but, 'amid the growing humanities of a better time, though the twopences continued to be exacted, it was no longer imperative to bring the birds; and availing myself of the liberty I never brought any'.

Insisting that he only attended the cock-fight twice, and only for a few minutes on each occasion, he explained: "I could not bear to look at the bleeding birds. And so I continued to pay my yearly sixpence, as a holder of three cocks, — the lowest sum deemed in any degree genteel, — but remained simply a fictitious or paper cock-fighter."

He went on to muse as to why he disliked it so much, and concluded that he had been influenced by his uncles. "They were loud in their denunciations of the enormity; and on one occasion, when a neighbour was unlucky enough to remark, in extenuation, that the practice had been handed down to us by pious and excellent men, who seemed to see nothing wrong in it, I saw the habitual respect for the old divines give way, for at least a moment.

"Uncle Sandy hesitated under apparent excitement; but, quick and fiery as lightning, Uncle James came to his rescue. 'Yes, excellent men!' said my uncle, 'but the excellent men of a rude and barbarous age; and, in some parts of their character, tinged by its barbarity. For the cock-fight which these excellent men have bequeathed to us, they ought to have been sent to Bridewell for a week, and fed upon bread and water.'"

WHFP 10 March 2000