

The Lady of Lawers (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN May every year the Celtic Department of Edinburgh University takes its students on an excursion to the Perthshire Highlands.

The origins of it have nothing to do with tradition, but there happens to be an element of tradition in it, because back in the 20s and 30s Professor Watson used to do the same, except that in those days he might bring half a dozen students to his cottage at Fincastle to stay the week, while nowadays we whizz around half-a-dozen sites in a bus with fifty students in a single day.

I'm sure the students don't learn anything like as much from us as they did from Professor Watson, but at least we keep them safe! Sorley MacLean told me of how he went for a swim in a pool in the River Lyon called Poll an Sgeulaiche and the water was so bitterly cold that he very nearly drowned.

It took a full day's motoring to get from Edinburgh to central Perthshire in those days, in fact it was much quicker by train. Nowadays you're at Perth in an hour and at Loch Tay in two. Another difference is that in Watson's day Highland Perthshire was still a Gaelic-speaking place. When I first brought students to the Loch Tay area twenty years ago we knew of an elderly man in Killin called James Anderson (a local name) who was a Gaelic speaker from the district. There were Perthshire Gaelic speakers in Edinburgh too, such as a man from Balquhidder who lived in Inverleith Row. They are all dead now, I think.

Of course you will come across plenty of Gaelic-speakers from the Islands, but they tend to treat Perthshire as if it were the Lowlands (speaking of "Loch Tay" for example rather than *Loch Tatha*), which I always find quite irritating because the place-names in Perthshire are nearly all pure Gaelic and easy to understand, while the ones at home are mysterious and full of Norse.

Our annual trip was last Saturday and it was a beautiful day. Our first stop was Dunkeld. I told the students the story of the row about 1830 when for the first time a non-Gaelic-speaking minister was nominated for the parish of Little Dunkeld. The case went as far as the General Assembly. "Dunkeld is not in the Highlands," said one speaker. "It is in the mouth of the Highlands."

"Whoever heard of a Highland mouth without a Highland tongue?" came the reply, and the Assembly declared Little Dunkeld to be a Gaelic-essential parish.

Then we went on to Kenmore on Loch Tay where experimental archaeologists from Edinburgh University have built a replica of an Iron Age *crannag* (lake dwelling on piles). Much more interesting to visit than (say) Edinburgh Castle. I learn something new every time I go. This time the curator casually produced what she called a 'rattle', which she had turned out on a primitive lathe using a single piece of wood. It immediately made me think of Rob Donn's lines about an unpopular herdsman:

*Sgriobhar suaicheantas Dhàibhidh —
Ceann gaibhre is càbag,
Rotach gleadhach is fàladair geur.*

("Davie's coat of arms will be carved — / A goat's head and a cheese, / A noisy rattle and a sharp scythe.") I had always known that a *rotach* was a rattle for frightening cattle but I never had a clue what one looked like. Now I could begin to guess. This one resembled an ornamental rolling-pin with wooden rings trapped around its neck which made a rattling noise when you shook it. The trick is obviously to make one as light but as noisy as possible. I commissioned one on the spot!

Then on to the students' perennial favourite, the ruined village of Lawers where the greensward slopes gently down to the sparkling water. They can laze by the loch-side in the sun and exchange all the cares of looming examinations for a half-hour of bliss. Being a mile from the road, there's no noise here but the birds singing in the trees.

At one time a bell would have tolled out across the Loch to Ardtalnaig, for the most substantial of the ruins among the tall trees is the church. A substantial two-story building, the huge lintel of its door lies on the ground facing the loch, clearly inscribed "1669".

Before you come to the church however there are the remains of a large stone house which people call the Lady of Lawers' house. The Lady of Lawers, *Baintighearna Labhair*, ranks with Calum Cille, Thomas Rhymer, the Brahan Seer, Alexander Peden, the Rev. Lachlan MacKenzie of Lochcarron and the Rev. John Morrison of Petty as one of Scotland's great makers of prophecies.

I have written about all of these except the Brahan Seer on this page over the years, and the Lady of Lawers is the most frustrating. Her prophecies are given in some detail in three books that I know, the Rev. William Gillies's 'In Famed Breadalbane' of 1938, Elizabeth Sutherland's 'Ravens and Black Rain' of 1985 and Archie McKerracher's 'Perthshire in History and Legend' of 1988, but in none of these is the Gaelic original cited (with one small exception) or the source specified.

That, as I pointed out to the students, is two fundamental rules of the game broken straight away. And now I am breaking number three — instead of trying to solve the problem, I am complaining about it. Ah well, watch this space.

The Lady of Lawers was an Appin woman, not a Stewart however but a MacCombaich or Colquhoun. Round about 1650 she seems to have married a younger son of a Campbell of Lawers and to have come here to live with him. I have read that in this part of Perthshire the women of Rannoch had a great reputation for the second sight, and that seems to have applied to her too, being from a land out beyond Rannoch.

I have counted twenty-three prophecies attributed to the Lady in the sources I have mentioned. They divide up like this. Four relate to our ruined village. Nine are about the local magnates, the Campbells of Breadalbane. Five have to do with the Perthshire Clearances. And another five are, shall we say, general. I will present the first four in this article and leave the rest till next time.

1. *The ridging stones will never be placed on the roof. If they are, then all my words are false.* My sources say that this was the Lady's first prophecy but clearly it wasn't, unless of course it was tradition and not she herself that added the second sentence, the purpose of which is to impress us with her confidence in her powers. "This one's far-fetched, but if it's wrong, everything I've said is wrong."

The church was probably being built by Sir James, 6th Campbell of Lawers, who may have been her brother-in-law. She watched with interest as it went up — then uttered her prophecy. Says Gillies: "The builders brought stones for the ridge from Kenmore by boat, and as the workmen threw them on the shore they said, 'We shall prove the Lady to be a liar.' That night, however, a terrific storm raged along Loch Tay, the stones were swept into the depths, and no attempt was made to recover them."

McKerracher adds that one or two of the stones can still be seen today, buried in the shingle, while Gillies (a Skyeman from Eilean Iarmain who was minister of Kenmore) tells us that the ridge of the church was then covered with some other material.

2. *The tree will grow, and when it reaches the gable the church will be split asunder, and this will also happen when the red cairn on Ben Lawers falls.* The Lady is said to have planted a tree by the church. McKerracher says it was an ash tree, on the north side, the back of the building. There are rowans (mountain ashes) there now, while a couple of much larger trees are growing at the front. Planting a blessed tree like a rowan may have been a superstitious act but the Lady could be sure that until the age of superstition passed by no-one would dare cut it down.

Gillies, who only gave the first half of this prophecy, thought that it was fulfilled when the Free Church split away from the Church of Scotland in 1843. McKerracher, who clearly has more local knowledge (some of the stones in the nearby churchyard bear the name McKerracher), says that 'the tree reached the gable in 1833, and in that year a violent thunderstorm demolished the west loft of the church, which fell into the middle of the building, causing it to be abandoned as a place of worship from that time on'.

The 2nd Marquis of Breadalbane (of whom more later) believed that great wealth was hidden in the rocks of his estate, and had begun a quartz mine on Meall Cruadh, one of the spurs of the mountain. The slopes of Ben Lawers can be clearly seen from the ruined village, and McKerracher explains that the miners had built a cairn of red stones. "This collapsed in 1843, the year of the Disruption of the Church of Scotland, when the congregation of Lawers joined the Free Church. Thus the Lady correctly predicted the splitting in two of both the physical and spiritual church."

We should see this in the context of the great awakening that had taken place in the district. The most memorable sermon ever delivered by the Rev. Dr John Macdonald of Ferintosh, 'the Apostle of the North', is said to have been on a communion Sabbath at Ardeonaig on the other side of the Loch in 1817. He had been preaching on both sides of the Loch since the Thursday, presumably at Lawers among other churches, arousing such excitement and curiosity that the crowd at Ardeonaig is said to have been the largest gathering ever seen in Breadalbane.

3. *When the ash tree reaches the ridge of the church the House of Balloch will be without an heir.* The House of Balloch is Taymouth (*Bealach*), seat of the Campbells of Breadalbane. The tree is said to have reached the ridge of the church in 1862 when the 2nd Marquis died without leaving an heir. He represented the height of his family's fortunes. Simultaneously a clearer of people and a stalwart of the Free Church, in 1842 he had entertained Queen Victoria at Taymouth, having her rowed up the Loch by boatmen singing Gaelic oar-songs.

4. *Evil will come to him who harms it.* This is the saying with which the Lady protected "her" tree. Down till the end of the nineteenth century the house in which she is said to have lived, next to the church, was occupied by the tenants of the farm of Milton of Lawers. Says Gillies: "About sixty years ago [c. 1878] John Campbell the tenant of the Milton farm along with a neighbour had the temerity to lay an axe to the stem of the tree. As they did so the neighbours shook their heads, feeling assured that they were courting disaster."

McKerracher says this happened twenty years later, in 1895. At any event, Gillies concludes: "The neighbours' fears were shortly confirmed. John Campbell was gored to death by his own Highland bull, while his assistant lost his reason, and had to be removed to the district asylum. Even the horse that was employed in carting the tree away did not escape. It came to a sudden and unaccountable end, although quite a young, strong animal."

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