

The Lady of Lawers (2)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I introduced *Baintighearna Labhair*, the Lady of Lawers, the great seer of the southern Highlands, and the first four of her prophecies.

Since writing it I have been casting around to see if I could find any of the prophecies in the original Gaelic. No luck on that score, but I have found another one relating to the ash tree (or, much more likely, mountain ash or rowan) which she is said to have planted by the north wall of the now-ruined church of Lawers. That brings the number of her prophecies to twenty-four. I will put the new one, which I found in Hugh MacMillan's book 'The Highland Tay' of 1901, in as no. 5.

5. *When an ash tree grows out of the wall of the church, and attains a sufficient size to overshadow its roof, the sacred building will be converted into a barn.* Says MacMillan: "This prophecy has been fulfilled, for an ash whose seed had been originally dropped into a crack in the north wall, has now become a considerable tree, and instead of guarding the building, as the old superstition connected with that tree alleged it ought to have done, it hastened its decay, and the church is now used for storing agricultural produce."

The largest group of prophecies said to have been uttered by the Lady were about the Campbells of Breadalbane. These were the local magnates. The Campbells were by no means indigenous to the area, having gradually moved east from Argyll in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, using their MacGregor vassals as shock-troops. Until 1693 the district was owned by the Campbells of Lawers, to whom the Lady of Lawers (herself a Stewart or MacCombie from Appin) was related by marriage. But then it was bought by John Campbell of Glenorchy, who had been raised to the peerage as the 1st Earl of Breadalbane, and the Lady said:

6. *John of the three Johns, the worst that has come or will come, but nothing will be right until Duncan arrives.* The man who became 1st Earl of Breadalbane in 1677 was the third John in a row to hold the title of Campbell of Glenorchy. Called *Iain Glas nan trì Iain*, or *Iain Glas mac 'Ain 'ic Iain*, 'Grey John' was universally disliked. "He was cunning as a fox, wise as a serpent, but as slippery as an eel," said one contemporary. He it was who marched the Breadalbane men all the way to Caithness in an attempt to enrich himself with that earldom as well as his own.

*Tha pìob agus bratach
À Bealach toirt caismeachd,
Beinn Labhair 'na lasair
'S na gaisgich ag éirigh;
A bhodaich nam briogaisean,
Nan lùireach 's nam briogaisean,
A bhodaich nam briogaisean,
S mithich dhuibh éirigh!*

("Pipe and banner / From Balloch bring warning, / Ben Lawers is aflame / As the heroes arise; / You carles wi' the breeks, / Wi' the breastplates and breeks, / You carles wi' the breeks, / It's time to arise!") They fought a battle at Allt nam Mèirleach in Caithness, and sure enough it put *òr Ghallaibh air bòrd Bhealaich*, as the saying had it, 'the gold of Caithness on the table of Balloch', though whether it put any gold on the tables of those carles wi' the breeks from the shores of Loch Tay is another matter. Who then is the Duncan of the prophecy, whose arrival can alone make things right? That I will deal with under prophecy no. 10.

7. *The earldom will not descend beyond a grandson in one line.* Archie McKerracher explains this in his book 'Perthshire in History and Legend'. The Lady said this about 1681, he claims, and it became known as 'the Curse of the Breadalbanes'. The 1st Earl's grandson (the 3rd Earl) died without an heir in 1782. The earldom thus passed out of the main line, going to John Campbell of Carwhin, who was made 1st Marquis of Breadalbane in 1831. His son became 2nd Marquis in 1834, but died without an heir in 1862. So it happened again, just as the Lady said. Despite the earls becoming marquises.

These men were horrendously powerful. By the nineteenth century it was said to be possible to ride a hundred miles across the middle of Scotland without leaving their territory, from their castle at Taymouth (previously Balloch, Gaelic *Bealach*) between Aberfeldy and Kenmore in central Perthshire to the islands of Seil and Luing south of Oban. Some readers may be familiar with that most splendid of anti-landlord poems, James Kennedy's 'The Highland Crofter'. According to McKerracher, Kennedy was an evicted crofter from Lochtayside who settled in Doune. His poem begins:

*Frae Kenmore tae Ben More
The land is a' the Marquis's:
The mossy howes, the heathery knowes
An' ilka bonnie park is his,
The bearded goats, the towsie stots
An' a' the braxie carcasses;
Ilk crofter's rent, ilk tinkler's tent
An' ilka collie's bark is his,
The muir-cock's craw, the piper's blaw,
The ghillie's hard day's wark is his —
Frae Kenmore tae Ben More
The warld is a' the Marquis's.*

8. *When a broken branch from a fir-tree falls on another fir-tree, then grows as part of the tree on which it has fallen, the MacNab lands will be added to the Breadalbane estates.* This is a very poetic piece of symbolism going on here about the unscrupulous way the Breadalbane lands were accumulated. The MacNab chief fled to Canada in 1820,

leaving his estate to be gobbled up by his chief creditor, the 1st Marquis. The Rev. William Gillies wrote in his 'In Famed Breadalbane' of 1938: "It is said that such an instance of grafting did actually take place about the second decade of the last century when the Macnab lands were acquired by the First Marquis of Breadalbane."

9. *The house of Glenorchy will attain its height of glory when a certain prominent rock is covered with trees.* "The rock referred to," says Gillies, "is not known; but it may be taken that the splendour of Taymouth was never greater than when the second Marquis entertained Queen Victoria in 1842."

10. *Great and perplexing doubts will arise as to an heir.* With so much at stake, it is hardly surprising if the Lady got this one right too. On the death of the 2nd Marquis several claimants came forward for the title, and the so-called 'Breadalbane Case' dragged on for five years until 1867 when the Court of Session decided that the rightful heir was John Campbell of Glenfalloch.

This, I believe, is where Duncan of no. 6 comes in. As explained by Gillies, when he became 1st Earl of Breadalbane Iain Glas was allowed to nominate as his successor 'any one of his sons whom he should designate in writing'.

Now this was very peculiar. Outside the Highlands the reason was alleged to be the feeble-mindedness of the Earl's eldest son, Duncan, Lord Ormelie, and indeed on Duncan's own statement he was easily deceived through the 'facility of his nature and want of knowledge'. *Inside* the Highlands, where Duncan was better known — and much better liked than his father, obviously — the real reason was believed to be that Duncan and his sons were Jacobites, and that the conniving Iain Glas was terrified that if Duncan succeeded to the earldom and the estates they would end up being forfeited to the Government.

All this came to light as a result of the Breadalbane Case, in the course of which a Fort William man called Donald Campbell claimed to be Lord Ormelie's great-great-grandson in direct line of succession and thus the rightful heir to the Breadalbane title and estates. Says Gillies: "The evidence brought forward is based upon the tradition, and upon verses quoted from Gaelic ballads; but it is not such as would be likely to carry much weight in a court of justice."

I imagine the prophecies of the Lady of Lawers, including no. 6 which was so favourable to Duncan, must have figured in these traditions. Of course there is no need for me to guess. The documents survive in Edinburgh. As I have said before — watch this space.

11. *In time the estates of Balloch which were put together in hides will be put asunder in laces.* That, at any rate, is Gillies's version. McKerracher cites the last word as 'lace', and argues: "The vast estates had been acquired in large chunks, or hides, by judicial marriage, or by fair means or foul. The process of disintegration began in 1922 when the 3rd Marquis was forced to sell off Taymouth Castle and 50,000 acres at Kenmore to meet tax demands. After his death in 1922 the estates were put in trust until 1933, and during this period almost half the estates in Argyll and Perthshire were sold off in small lots, or lace, as the Lady referred to them."

Now obviously if we had no. 11 in the original Gaelic it would settle the matter, and I live in hopes. My guess is that it would prove to be something like: *Chaidh oighreachdan Bhealaich a chur ri chéile 'nan seicheannan, théid an cur as a-chéile ré ùine 'nan iallan.* I'd be a lot happier with this if it rhymed, as is usual with traditional sayings.

Gaelic-speaking readers will see that I have made *iallan*, 'thongs', of Gillies's 'laces'. In other words, land acquired in big pieces would be lost in small ones. It is an appropriate metaphor, because titles to land — especially land acquired by Campbells — were carefully written on sheepskin. When such titles were no longer valid the sheepskin would be no use for anything except perhaps for being turned by tailors into tape-measures.

That, at any rate, was the fate of some of the ancient Gaelic manuscripts of Uist, according to Lachlan MacMhuirich, who was reported in 1800 as saying that 'he is not certain what has become of the parchment but only thinks that some of them were carried away by Alexr. MacDonald son of Master Alexander Mac Donald [of Arasaig,] and others by Ranold MacDonald son to the former Alexr., [who lives in the island of Egg] — and that he had seen two or three of them cut down by Taylors in order to make laces to take measures with'.

12. *In time the estates of Balloch will yield only one rent, and then none at all.* After disposing of the estates bit by bit — lace by lace? — the 9th Earl was left in 1946 with nothing but Kinnell House at Killin and one farm. Then in 1948, according to McKerracher, 'this last remnant was sold to Archibald Corrie Macnab, and there was no property left to pay rent'.

Fate at Kinnell had turned full circle. Macnab was a descendant of the man who had fled to Canada in 1820. According to the version of the story told by Elizabeth Sutherland in her 'Ravens and Black Rain', the pine trees that had grafted together in that year were on Innis Bhuidhe, the MacNab burial island in the Dochart at Killin. "The trees continued to grow as one until 1948 when Archibald Corrie Macnab, the twenty-second chief, bought back his ancestral estate. Thereafter the grafted branch began to die."

13. *The last laird will pass over Glenogle with a grey pony leaving nothing behind.* Says McKerracher: "One person who saw this come true was Mr James Anderson, now living in retirement in Killin, who was employed in 1946 as a gardener at Kinnell House. Like most of the people of the district he was acquainted with the prophecies of the Lady of Lawers, but even so he was astounded when he saw the Countess of Breadalbane arriving back from Killin station one day in 1946 with a trap drawn by a small, grey pony. He recalls turning to a colleague, and exclaiming, 'The grey pony of the Lady of Lawers! This is the end!'"

"And when Kinnell was sold two years later in 1948, the last laird, the 9th Earl of Breadalbane, did go over Glenogle leaving nothing behind, and with him went the little grey pony which Jimmy Anderson accompanied on the train."

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