

The Lady of Lawers (3)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last two articles I presented the first thirteen of the prophecies of *Baintighearna Labhair*, the Lady of Lawers, the great seer of Breadalbane in the southern Highlands. Here now are the rest.

14. *There will be a mill on every stream, and a plough in every field, and the two sides of Loch Tay will become a kail garden.* This at any rate is the version in Archie McKerracher's 'Perthshire in History and Legend' (1988); in 'In Famed Breadalbane' (1938) the Rev. William Gillies has the plough not 'in every field' but 'in the hands of every lad'. Not to worry. The fact is, as McKerracher points out, that in the Lady's day such bounding prosperity must have seemed very far away. In 1644 the Royalist Highland army raised by Alastair mac Colla and the Marquis of Montrose had gone through Breadalbane in a whirlwind of rape, pillage and murder, and only one house was left standing along the whole length of Loch Tay.

The Highlanders of the time, who lived on meat, grain and milk, were contemptuous of the cabbage-eating Lowlanders. The Marquis of Argyll collected a force of Campbells and Lowland troops which met Montrose and Alastair's army at Inverlochry on 2 February 1645 — and lost. Said the delighted MacDonald poet Iain Lom:

*Alastair mhic Colla ghasta,
Làmh dheas a sgoltadh nan caisteal,
Chuir thu an ruaig air Ghallaibh glasa
'S ma dh'òl iad càl gun d' chuir thu ast' e.*

("Alastair son of splendid Colla, / Ready hand for splitting castles, / You put the rout on palefaced Lowlanders / And if they'd drunk kale you knocked it out of them.") In those days the juice of kale was drunk and the leaves were thrown away. It would have seemed strange to the Highlanders of Breadalbane in the 1670s that such a Lowland kind of prosperity could ever be heading their way, but that is exactly what happened. Gillies puts it at the end of the eighteenth century. "There were fourteen mills on the whole lochside; and on the south side alone there were nearly two hundred ploughs between Auchmore and Taymouth."

In the 1780s the 4th Earl of Breadalbane abolished the traditional land-holding system called runrig, brought in enclosures, and introduced potatoes and turnips. "By 1790," says McKerracher, "both sides of Loch Tay were being intensively cultivated by over 700 tenant farmers, and there was a plough in every field."

This prosperity lasted just one generation. Yes, one generation. When the 2nd Marquis — a man who joined the Free Church in 1843! — inherited in 1834 he put into practice the gospel according to Patrick Sellar.

15. *The jaw of the sheep will drive the plough from the ground.* The first of the Marquis's ploughmen to make room for sheep were 55 families from the west end of Loch Tay. By 1838 another sixty families had been removed from Glenquaich near Amulree. "These evictions were carried out with ruthless severity," wrote Gillies 100 years later. "No sooner were the people turned out of their homes than men with grapes climbed to the roofs. The thatch was thrown down, and the whole set on fire to prevent the poor people from returning."

Here now is the middle verse of a poem which was a product of these clearances. It is by James Kennedy, an evicted crofter and blacksmith from Loch Tayside who settled in Doune, and it is called 'The Highland Crofter' (I quoted the first stanza last time).

*The fish that swim, the birds that skim,
The fir, the ash, the birk is his;
The castle ha' sae big an' braw,
Yon diamond crusted dirk is his;
The roofless hame, a burning shame,
The factor's dirty wark is his;
The poor folk vexed, the lawyer's text,
Yon smirking legal shark is his;
Frae Kenmore tae Ben More
The world is a' the Marquis's.*

Gillies tells a story about a man who was very active as an agent in carrying out the Marquis's evictions. He himself was evicted and forced to emigrate. As he was leaving the township someone asked him, "Is there no more dirty work to be done in Breadalbane when they are sending you away?"

There was.

16. *The land will first be sifted, then riddled, of its people.* The 1830s evictions were only the start — the sifting. After the Disruption our loyal Free Churchman evicted another five hundred families before he was finished. That was the riddling.

Where did the Lady of Lawers get her imagery? Well, it is surely no coincidence that the graveyard at Lawers (which also has its share of MacKerrachers) is full of people called Crerar — *Mac a' Chriathrair*, 'the Son of the Sifter'. The story behind the name is that a Mackintosh of Monivaird came over the hills from the south to escape justice, and took refuge from his pursuers in the mill of Acharn. To disguise him the miller shook meal over him, placed the sieve (*criathar*) in his hands, and told him to carry on sifting the meal. His pursuers arrived but failed to identify him. He settled down at Acharn (which is near Kenmore on the other side of Loch Tay) and was ever after called *An Criathrair*, 'the Sifter'.

17. *Many holdings will become one holding.* "In 1800," says McKerracher, "the north and south shores of Loch Tay had a population of nearly 3500, and today it is no more than 100."

18. *The homesteads on Loch Tay will be so far apart that a cock will not hear its neighbour crow.* “That,” says McKerracher, “is the situation today.” It is all big farms, and a cock at Lawers will certainly not hear its neighbour crow four miles away at Fearnan.

*But near, mair near, God’s voice we hear —
The dawn as weel’s the dark is his;
The poet’s dream, the patriot’s theme,
The fire that lights the mirk is His.
They clearly show God’s mills are slow
But sure, the handiwork is His;
And in His grace our hope we place;
Fair Freedom’s sheltering ark is His.
The men that toil should own the soil —
A note as clear’s the lark’s is this —
Breadalbane’s land — the fair, the grand —
Will no’ be aye the Marquis’s.*

That is the conclusion of Kennedy’s poem, and it came true (as I showed last time) as far as the Breadalbane family was concerned. But the Lady made one more prophecy which refers to them, or at least to their stately home at Balloch (Taymouth).

19. *When Clach an Tuirc, the boar’s stone at Fearnan, topples over, a strange heir will come to Balloch.* Says Gillies: “*Clach an Tuirc* is a mighty boulder, and it is difficult to conceive of it ever toppling over; but the Lady’s prophecy regarding it gives an added interest to this landmark.”

In other words, it’s a prophecy of the most interesting type of all, an unfulfilled one. Taymouth has had some strange heirs, having done time as civil defence HQ, military hospital, luxury hotel, and golf clubhouse. But as far as I know *Clach an Tuirc* stands fast. So the strangest heir is surely yet to come.

20. *The feather of the goose will drive the memory from man.* This is an easy one. As Gillies says, “In olden days when people in the Highlands could neither read nor write many persons were to be found who could recite thousands of lines of poetry from memory.” To take just one example, Màiri Mhòr nan Òran could scarcely write her name, but remembered about 13,000 lines of her own verse and 18,000 lines of other people’s.

21. *Fire-coaches will be seen crossing Drumochter.* The railway, obviously. It’s not the only one of the Lady’s prophecies which has been attributed to other seers as well — Coinneach Odhar, for example.

22. *A ship driven by smoke will sink in Loch Tay with great loss of life.* It’s said that this prophecy kept a great many people — including the last Marquis — from ever using the steamboats that used to ply up and down the loch. However McKerracher says that a Gaelic scholar has re-translated it as “When a ship driven by smoke comes to an end on Loch Tay there will come a great loss of life.” Infuriatingly, he doesn’t give it in Gaelic, but it doesn’t require a huge knowledge of the language to guess that the key words in question were probably *a-sios* (‘down’) and *gu crìoch* (‘to an end’), which rhyme on the same sound and could therefore have been substituted for each other in different versions.

McKerracher goes on to point out that the last steam-driven vessel was withdrawn from service on Loch Tay in September 1939, when the Second World War began. That then was the ‘great loss of life’.

23. *The time will come when Ben Lawers will become so cold that it will chill and waste the land around for seven miles.* In her book ‘Ravens and Black Rain’ Elizabeth Sutherland says of this one: “Just as Coinneach’s black rain is thought by some to predict nuclear fall-out, so the Lady of Lawers might be witnessing the nuclear winter.”

And finally, one which (thanks to Gillies) we *do* have in Gaelic. 24.

*Caith mar a gheibh
Is gheibh mar a chaitheas;
Caomhain ’s có dha?
Cuimhnich am bàs.*

(“Spend as you get / And you’ll get as you spend; / Save, and for whom? / Remember death.”) Gillies tells us that this saying (it can’t really be called a prophecy) of the Lady’s was inscribed, in the original Gaelic, on a peculiarly shaped stone that used to lie near the summit of Ben Lawers. It disappeared in the 1880s, he says, ‘having probably been carried away by a collector of antiques’.

It would be nice to imagine that it might turn up some day. The sentiment is a religious one but wonderfully primitive and pre-Victorian. Perhaps the stone was built into a wall somewhere. Keep a look out for it.

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