

## Longfellow, Wordsworth and Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

DONALD MacDonald — Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin of South Lochboisdale, South Uist, who died in March this year aged 73 — was a very accomplished poet. The baby of the family (his father died a few months after he was born), he was a shy man who felt overwhelmed by the richness of artistic talent that surrounded him in the district that he liked to call *Gleann na Ceòlraidh* — ‘The Valley of the Muses’. He was born on 12 December 1926:

*An Uibhist ghorm nan stùcan  
Far 'm bu dùthchasach an ceòl  
A dh'fhosgail mi mo shùilean —  
Toiseach Dùllochd madainn m' òig';  
'S ged dh'fhàiltich sneachd' a' gheamhraidh mi  
Aig doras gleann nan deòir,  
Bha slànusan is cluarain ann  
Nach mill gaoth tuath no reòdh.*

(“It’s in blue-green Uist of the mountains / Where music was in people’s blood / That I first opened my eyes — / Early December the dawn of my youth; / And though winter snow was my welcome / At the door of the valley of tears, / There were healing plants and thistles / Which no north wind or frost can destroy.”) According to Mary Beith’s book ‘Healing Threads’, the *slànlus* or ribwort plantain was placed on cuts and other small wounds as a styptic to stop the bleeding and give quick relief. And she points out that the head of the *cluaran* or thistle used to be cut off, placed on a flat stone and broken open by pounding with another stone — the inside was sweet and good for chewing. The *cluaran* may be the symbol of Scottish nationhood, but to the likes of young Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin it was a sweetie. It was clearly a good place to be young, as he says in ‘Gleann na Ceòlraidh ’nam Òige ’s ’nam Aois’ (‘The Valley of the Muses in my Youth and Old Age’).

*Bu mhòr an togail inntinn  
A bhith cinntinn anns a' ghleann —  
Bha bàird ann, agus pìobairean,  
'S luchd mìneachaidh le peann;  
Bha ceòl air feadh nam bruachan ann  
Le suairce nach bu ghann,  
'S bha beòshlainte ri bhuannachd ann  
Le bàt' 's seòl ruadh air chrann.*

(“Great was the excitement / Of growing up in the glen — / There were poets there, and pipers, / And explicators with a pen; / There was music all around the braes / And unstinting hospitality, / And a living could be won there / From boats with red sails to the mast.”) It is the community documented by Margaret Fay Shaw in ‘Folksongs and Folklore in South Uist’. One family of poets stood head and shoulders above the rest. The songs of Seonaidh Dhòmhnail 'ic Iain Bhàin, whom Dòmhnall described to me as ‘the nicest man I ever met’, were published as ‘Òrain Ghàidhlig le Seonaidh Caimbeul’ in 1936. Seonaidh’s elder brother Iain was also a good poet as well as being an accomplished stonemason who built hotels in Oban and the Catholic church in Castlebay. Four of Iain’s five sons, Roderick, Iain, Aonghas Iain and Seumas, were talented singers and songmakers. Roderick, who was known locally as *Ròidseag* and further afield as *An Case* (because where others bought a bottle of beer on leaving a bar he bought a whole case, or so I’ve been told), was the man who composed ‘A Pheigi a Ghràidh’ and other songs which, thanks to his life on the high seas, are known all over the Western Isles. Seumas, the last of these tradition-bearers, married Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin’s only sister, Chrissy, who survives them all. He died in 1979.

No wonder then if Dòmhnall felt that his own earliest attempts at versmaking were poor stuff. He consigned them to the flames. But in truth he was mostly a very different sort of poet, and the clue to this lies in those ‘explicators with a pen’. He was greatly influenced by one of his schoolteachers, Annie Macphee, who loved poetry of a different kind and introduced him to the likes of Byron, Shelley and Keats. As a result, out of the 136 of Dòmhnall’s poems that I have read, over fifty are on that favourite theme of the Romantic poets, the beauty of nature. At least another fifty are on the Romantics’ *other* favourite theme, the beauty of womanhood. Dòmhnall was, you might say, a Lakeland poet who lived two hundred years late and composed not in English but in traditional Gaelic metres (with the odd little experiment). One experiment, his epic ‘Miosan na Bliadhna’ (‘The Months of the Year’), was inspired, he tells us, by Longfellow, while his ‘Bean na Buana’ (‘The Harvest Girl’) seems to owe something to Wordsworth’s ‘Highland Lass’. It ends:

*Falt cho briagha ann an rìomhadh  
'S chaidh riamh bho chian a chireadh —  
Bean na buana shuairce shitheil,  
S bòidheach i air achadh buain.*

(“Hair as lovely in arrangement / As has been combed since time began — / Gentle peaceful harvest girl, / Fair is

she on harvest field.”)

Of course Dòmhnall was surrounded by lakes and hills. And though he was a bachelor who lived alone (after his mother died, that is), he *did* see plenty of girls and women in his day, because he suffered a dreadful series of illnesses and seems to have spent half his life in and out of hospitals, everywhere from Daliburgh to Raigmore and from Stornoway to Canniesburn. Nurses, health visitors, home helps — to Dòmhnall each and every one of them was beautiful, and a surprising number of them got a poem from him that said so. This is to ‘Ina’:

*Gur e mis’ a th’ air mo dhòigh —  
Ghabh Rìgh na Glòrach truas ri um  
An uair a fhuair mi Rìbhinn Bhàn  
A chumas blàth bhon fhuachd mi.*

*Anns a’ mhadainn nì i tea  
'S gun sgrìob i mach an luath dhomh,  
Glanaidh i dhomh piob an stòbh —  
Gach sìon air dòigh mun gluais mi.*

(“I’m in the seventh heaven — / The King of Glory pitied me / When I got a Fair Maid / Who’ll keep me warm from the cold. / In the morning she makes tea / And rakes for me the ashes, / She cleans out my stove-pipe — / All done before I stir.”) From Ina we may turn to no less a figure than her boss, Mrs Cathy Laing, head of the Uist home help service, who visited Dòmhnall at home:

*Tha i laghach agus bàidheil,  
Air a h-aodann fiamh a’ ghàire;  
Tha h-anail mar ghaoth a’ ghàrraidh  
Far am fàs na blàthan fallain.*

*Tha i coingeis Beur’ no Gàidhlig,  
Tha i comasach sna dhà dhiubh;  
Bhuilich freastal oirre tàlann  
A thug àrd i ann an aithne.*

In Dòmhnall’s own translation: “She is nice and pretty, / And on her face a lovely smile; / Her breath is like the freshness / Coming from a garden of flowers. / She can talk English and Gaelic, / She is fluent in both languages; / She is blessed with talents / Which brought her to high office.”

There’s a realism, then, in his poetry — sometimes a highly practical realism, as he acknowledged when he jotted the simple words “Drawing water to my own mill” at the end of that translation! It was *his* world, be it of the present or the past. ‘Mìosan na Bliadhna’ contains at July an evocation of how he had herded cattle as a boy.

*Feur gu àilgheas cruith is chaorach  
Fàs air achaidhean is caolshrath,  
Am buachaille gun uail no gaoid  
Ag iomain tàine;  
Gucag-bhàit’ nam bileag uaine  
Fàs am measg na cuilc cho snuadhmhòr —  
Sann le dànadas a bhuainear  
I bho frìth-bhac;  
Uiseagan gu h-àrd sna speuran  
Le’n cuid luinneagan gan gleusadh  
Meadhrachais am measg a-chéile  
Cho sgèimh uallach;  
Toradh buaile pailt ri fhaotainn,  
Cuachan làn de bhainne daonnan  
Gu ar càileachd . . .*

(“Grass to the taste of cows and sheep / Growing upon fields and narrow strath, / The herdboys unspoiled and unblemished / Driving cattle; / The water-lily with its pale green leaves / Growing amongst the elegant reeds — / It takes audacity to pluck / Her from her barb; / Larks on high up in the skies / Busy practising their ditties / Frolicking amongst each other / So fair and proud; / Yield of cowfold in abundance, / Cups at all times full of milk / To satisfy us . . .”) *Se toiseach is deireadh an duine a’ bhuachailleachd* — “The beginning and the end of life is herding” — is the proverb that begins the account of Dòmhnall in Timothy Neat’s book ‘The Voice of the Bard’ (which has Dòmhnall’s very distinctive face on the cover), and Dòmhnall told Neat how he had been a herder from the age of nine till he left school at fourteen. “It was the ideal job for old soldiers and boys, taking the cows out, bringing them in for the women to milk. It was my grandmother’s cows I herded, over on the west side of the island.”

To go to school Dòmhnall walked the other way. From 1922 to 1937 it was in a place called Glaic Ruairidh, equidistant from the three townships of South Lochboisdale, Glendale and Hartavagh.

*Sann fo iomall nam fuar-bheann*

*Is fàsadh na tuath-ghaoith'  
A bha taigh-sgoile Glaic Ruairidh 'na òrdagh —  
Air làrach bheag uaine  
Le fraoch air a chuartachadh  
Far am fàsadh an cluaran bu bhòidhche.*

(“Under the edge of the cold hills / And the shelter of the north wind / The schoolhouse of Glaic Ruairidh was located — / On a little green clearing / Surrounded by heather / Where there grew the most beautiful thistles.”) Dòmhnall devoted two poems to Glaic Ruairidh and there was clearly something otherworldly about it. Perhaps I may quote Henry Marsh’s description of it in his introduction to ‘Smuaintean fo Éiseabhal: Thoughts under Easaval’, the book of Dòmhnall’s poems which will be published later this month. Says Marsh of Dòmhnall: “Going to school involved a walk of two miles over the moor to what he affectionately described as the ‘tin hut’ at Glendale. The children went barefoot in summer. They ate their pieces as soon as they arrived and, except for some milk at lunchtime, went hungry for the rest of the day. Margaret Fay Shaw, the American who collected songs and made a remarkable record of life in South Uist in photograph and film, was gratefully remembered as having made soup for the children at lunchtime.”

*Siud an òigrìdh bha fonnmhor  
A’ ruith ‘s a’ leum feadh nan tom ud,  
A’ grunnachadh troimh pholl is troimh chòinnich,  
A-muigh air aodann nam fireach  
Ged bhiodh a’ ghailleann ‘s an dìl’ ann —  
Cha robh iomradh san tìm ud air brògan.*

(“Those youngsters contentedly / Ran and jumped through those hillocks, / And waded through mud and through mosses, / Out exposed on the moorlands / In stormy weather and rain — / There was no talk in those days of shoes.”)

*Cha robh ar n-éideadh ro phrìseil,  
Cha do dh’fhiosraich sinn sìoda,  
Cha robh seudan an rìomhaidh gar còmhdach —  
Cha d’fhuair sinn mar dhìleab  
Ach cruaidh-chàs na h-ìsle  
A chum fodha san dìg sinn gu’r sròn.*

(“Our clothes weren’t pricey, / We knew nothing of silk, / We wore no triumphs of fashion — / Our only inheritance / Was the hardship of inferiority / Which kept us down in the ditch to our noses.”) That is Dòmhnall’s bitterest statement. But ‘Taigh Sgoile Glaic Ruairidh’ ends with pride.

*Ged bu luideach a bhà sinn  
Ann an aimsir an ànraidh  
Chaidh eu-tredòir nan càs sin air fògairt —  
Chaidh cuid dhinn gu sàile  
Gu ruigheachd ionadan àraid  
Air drochaidean àrd’ luingis seòlaidh.*

(“Though we were indeed ragged / In those difficult days / The weakness of hard times has been banished — / Some of us went to sea / And reached exotic locations / On the high bridges of merchant fleets.”)

“Bàrd Éiseabhail”, an exhibition of the life and work of Donald MacDonald, Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin, will be opened by Margaret Fay Shaw of Canna at Kildonan Museum in South Uist on Friday 28 July. ‘Smuaintean fo Éiseabhal: Thoughts under Easaval’, which includes photographs of the poet and a selection of his poems in Gaelic and English, may be obtained for £7.99 (post free) from Birlinn Publications, Unit 8, Canongate Venture, 5 New St., Edinburgh, EH8 8BH, tel. 0131 556 6660.

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