

“Bha, Tha agus Hallaig”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE poetry of Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin (whom I introduced in my last article) possesses a fascinatingly elusive metamorphic quality, both in regard to space and to time.

In regard to space, it's seen in his poems to women. Other poets (and traditions, and stories) may visualise nature as a woman, but Dòmhnall visualises women as nature. “The shining of the sun / In the young maytime morning / Is the picture I'll make of you, / Gold-jewel of the white palms.” Of Angela Binnie, South Lochboisdale, he says: “Like the blackbird's hue among the snowflakes / Is your hair that flows in ordered arrangement; / The warmth of summer swims in your cheeks / And honey's mixed into the hue of your loveliness (*Tha mhil ga suaineadh an snuadh do bhòidhche*).”

Addressing his fellow-poet Mary Maclean in Grimsay, he takes the honey idea a stage further: “Like rays of sunshine out in the west / Is the girl's serene appearance, / There's warmth and friendship, and self-possession, / There's Christianity in your flesh; / There's beauty swimming in your face — / Each kind of flower that's loveliest, / Roses and apples are in your cheek / And beeswax around your mouth (*'S céir-bheach mun cuairt do bheòil*).”

“Beeswax around your mouth”? A thousand years of tradition lurk behind that one. Maybe it's no coincidence that Dòmhnall said it to a poet, for a less knowledgeable lady might have misunderstood him. Dòmhnall worked with a courtly tradition of symbols, many of his own devising. *Tha blas na meala air do phògan*, a songmaker might have said, “The taste of honey's in your kisses”, or, if the girl were doing the singing, *Fear na gruaige mar an t-òr / 'S na pòig' air bhlas meala*, “The man whose hair is like gold / And whose kiss tastes of honey”.

But kissing was not Dòmhnall's business, for the girls and women he praised were not to be linked to himself, but to the beauty and bounty and colour and promise of nature. If we search the fifty or more poems that he made in praise of girls and women for clues as to how he knew them, we find relatives and neighbours, nurses and home helps, but also people whom he spotted at Mass, or whose picture he saw in a newspaper, or, in one case (Essie Stewart), *An leabhar-eachdraidh an luchd-cuairte / Dhearc mo shùil air dealbh na gruagaich; / Thug a h-ìomhaigh aobheil shuairce / Iomadh bruadar gu mo smaoin*. “In the visitors' record-book / I noticed the girl's picture; / Her lovely kindly appearance / Brought many dreams to my thoughts.”

So Dòmhnall never kissed Mary Maclean, but beeswax is first cousin to honey, and by speaking of it he says in one word that her lips are sweet (though not necessarily available for tasting), and red, and smooth — and of the highest quality. There are other waxes, but bees' wax is the best.

I asked an art historian if there is a painter who does this. She mentioned Dali for the sheer surrealism of it all, then Delacroix for romanticism, but we settled for Hornel, a homelier artist who had set off, as did Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin, on the road that leads from realism to symbolism. I'm looking at Hornel's ‘The Brook’ (it's in the Hunterian in Glasgow), and it's hard to say whether the subject is the brook or the three (or is it four?) young girls who, sharing the colours of the landscape, look resolutely towards an apple-tree and away from the artist. And in the Kelvingrove there's a picture by Hornel's friend George Henry that is pure Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin: called ‘Autumn’, it shows a woodland scene in which the figure of a girl has to be guessed at, only her face being clearly visible among leaves and tree-trunks. Though Dòmhnall couldn't sing and denied ever having been in love, his ‘Mo Reul Iùil’ (‘My Guiding Star’) is in my opinion one of the finest Gaelic lovesongs of the twentieth century, and in it he says:

*Gur eireachdail' air ùrlar thu
Na gàrradh-fhlùr fo bhlàth,
Cho dreachmhor ris an ùrchoill'
Fo ungadh drùchd bho 'n àird;
Mar bhogha-frois' san iarmailt
Le dathan ciatach àigh
'S gach ceann dheth ann am fion-lios
Gu riarachadh ar càil.*

(“You're better poised on a dance-floor / Than a flower-garden in bloom, / As fine in form as young forest / Anointed by heaven's dew; / Like a rainbow in the sky / With pretty colours from providence / And each end of it in vineyards / To gratify our tastes.”)

I said at the beginning that the elusive metamorphic quality applies to time as well as to space. What I meant was this. Women and nature are Dòmhnall's two big themes, but the world of men and women in times gone by exists as a sub-set within nature. Nature has its cycles, and these are much pondered in his work: there is the cycle of the year, spring, summer, autumn, winter; there is birth, childhood, sorrow, death, Cnoc Hallainn, and the hereafter; but there is also the cycle of history. This cycle is part of nature and entirely subservient to it. So for example in a poem called ‘An t-Eilean Aghmhor Bòidheach’ (‘The Prosperous Lovely Island’) the cycle of the seasons is lovingly described, and man makes an appearance in just one verse:

*Bidh Oidhch' Shamhna, mar bha i riamh,
Gar riarachadh le sòlas
Nuair bhios an òigridh oirnn mun cuairt
A' gabhail duain is òrain.*

(“Hallowe'en, as it has always done, / Will entertain us mightily / When the young folk come to call on us /

Performing songs and rhymes.”) No-one could quarrel with Dòmhnall’s choice of Hallowe’en as man’s main mark on the annual cycle, because that is when, traditionally speaking, he disappears suddenly from mother nature’s radar screen by moving indoors. But did you notice the tense he used? It is the future, or at least the present continuous which in Gaelic terms is the same thing. *Bidh. Bhios*. In the four decades in which Dòmhnall made his poems, from about 1960 to 2000, was it ever true to say that Hallowe’en was *mar bha i riamh* and that the young people performed *duain is òrain*? Maybe in 1960; hardly in 2000. Will it come again? Who knows?

So we begin to notice that Dòmhnall presents the world of the past by means of a subtle range of tenses and techniques. Sometimes, as in ‘Eich Éirisgeigh’ (‘The Eriskay Ponies’), it is simply that — the world of the past, viewed through the past and conditional tenses. “To bring seaweed from the shore they were strong and plucky too (*bha iad làidir agus treun*), / With no trouble at all they’d bring up a pair of creels (*Bheireadh iad gun spàirn an àirde paidhir chléibh*); / They would climb up the pale green hills (*Dhireadh iad na h-uain’-chnuic*) as nimbly as the deer, / Heat and cold never bothered them (*Cha chuireadh teas na fuachd orra*), to be brave was in their blood (*b’e an dualchas bhith treun*).”

More often however Dòmhnall uses some variation on what I’d call the Hallaig Tense. ‘Hallaig’ is the famous poem by Sorley MacLean in which he sees the birch trees of Hallaig as the girls and women who lived there in the past. Describing people (especially clan chiefs and warriors) as trees is a very ancient thing in Gaelic verse. Now I have a confession to make which in this newspaper will sound blasphemous. I don’t actually *like* ‘Hallaig’. Even though I suspect the vision which it describes was a very real experience, I think the symbolism in which that vision is expressed is very contrived. Maybe it’s just too difficult for me.

However, Dòmhnall presents the ghosts of the past in a less ostentatious manner and that is why we need an expression like “The Hallaig Tense” to draw attention to them. The Hallaig Tense is seeing, feeling, hearing or otherwise experiencing the past in the present.

‘Siubhal Chluaintean’ (‘Walking the Meadows’), for example, is as good a Clearances poem as has ever been written — all the best Clearances poems were made in the twentieth century anyway. Part of its success is its mood of happiness. After all, if you are genuinely visualising a pre-Clearances township, you should be pleased, not depressed like MacLean. “There are many contentments amongst these meadows,” says Dòmhnall, because, as he goes on to point out, in the midst of the beauty of nature “although there’s no buildings or people living there / love and kinship reigned once in the valleys of mist,” and he goes on to describe the vanished community mainly in terms of sound: “the sound of the carding” (*fuaim a’ chàrd*), “the labour of quern grinding barley grain” (*saothair bhrà bleith nan grànalach eòrna*), “spinning-wheel busily humming” (*cuidheall-sníomha gu dian ri crònan*), “violent blows being given to a shuttle there” (*buillean làidir gan toirt air spàl ann*), “dexterous women waulking the tweeds” (*mnathan làmhchair a’ luadh nan clòithean*), while “joy and love on their friendly faces” are contrasted with the surrounding “peace of silence in the upland moors”.

In ‘Bàgh Hartabhagh’ (‘Hartavagh Bay’) Dòmhnall evokes the deserted township (settled 1846, resettled 1920, soon abandoned again) in terms of sight and colour: *Chì thu . . .* “If life ever happens to bring you to this place on a visit, you’ll see sights with your eye to stimulate your thoughts.

“You’ll see moors under heather growing in little green tree-shapes while the loveliest of lawns are changed to gold in colour. You’ll see wells that are deserted and the cold sites of houses providing evidence galore of a time that’s gone by. You’ll see memories aplenty and you’ll get knowledge that’s new, all the histories will come so readily to your view. You’ll see the folds of the milk-cows on each side of the glen giving witness by their stories to the heroes that were there.

“You’ll see weirs (*cairidhean*) in the bay, work of hands that was hard, a device to catch fish that shows the people’s plight. You’ll see doves, you’ll see snipe, you’ll see moorhens and geese, the guillemot who swims the waves and the wren who lives in holes. You’ll see the taloned eagle gleaming gold in the skies — it’s in isolation she dwells up high on Sgòrr an Fhéidh. Nature’s beauty on all sides, peace and gentleness all round, an ancient silence without fear — what people like the best.”

That intriguing ending, that loud silence, is pure Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin. He can surprise us, even shock us, but he doesn’t do it often.

In ‘Cha Mhór tha ri Àireamh’ (‘Not Many are Left’) the Hallaig Tense is the use of negatives — people can’t do what they used to do because they’re dead. “Under unchanging locks in the dark of the coffin / They can’t wake in the morning with joy or delight; / They can’t till the field, they can’t plough or harvest — / They’ve reached the end of their visit to the lawns of this life. / They can’t go to sea at the fill of the ebb-tide, / They’ll never get a boat’s mast into its shoe, / They can’t fasten or loosen the tight-knotted rope, / They can’t row to windward and her sail will not fill.”

In ‘Còmhradh an Eilthirich ris an Stuaidh’ (‘Conversation between an Emigrant and a Wave’) the Hallaig Tense is not trees but footprints. In his own translation (he did this sometimes) Dòmhnall says: “When you reach the sea shore / The white sand will be on the edge of the land; / You will find there my footprints / Unless they have failed through time. / When I was a young hunter / I used to wander around the bays; / My footsteps can be traced / Where the dove makes his abode.”

There are also real tenses and no tenses. The highly experimental ‘Miosan na Bliadhna’ (‘The Months of the Year’) achieves its timeless effect by using no tense at all. In February, for example,

*Truaghantachd a’ lorg gach creutair,
Deò na beath’ air thuar an tréigsinn —
Teachd-an-tìr cho gann dha’m feuman
Anns an sguabaig.*

“Sadness seeking out each creature, / The vital spark about to leave them — / Their food inadequate for their needs / In the sweeper.” The sweeper (*sguabag*) is one of the winds that blow in that time of year. Then a poem like ‘Taigh Tasgaidh Chill Donnain’ (‘The Kildonan Museum’) conjures up the past through the simple listing of artefacts in the

present tense. “There’s the plough and the harrow here, the riddle and the flail, / And there is horses’ harness here, a collar-band and crupper . . .”

Finally the future. One of Dòmhnall’s best lyric poems, ‘Cha Till an Òige’ (‘Youth will not Return’), makes the world of the past as inevitable as the seasons. “Harvest will come back around, / Land folk will be busy reaping, / The scyther with a powerful stroke / Bringing down the ears in sheaves. / High tide will return, return.”

*Tillidh foghar ruinn mun cuairt,
Bidh luchd fearainn trang a’ buain,
Fear na speal’ le buille chruaidh
Toirt nan dias a-nuas ’nan dlòth.
Tillidh, tillidh am muir-làn.*

“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 at 7.30 p.m. today, Friday 28 July. ‘Smuaintean fo Éiseabhal: Thoughts under Easaval’, a new book 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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