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Deer's feet and ceilidh-houses

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I'VE just had my oddest experience to date in the poetry business. The late Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin's book 'Smuaintean fo Èiseabhal: Thoughts under Easaval' came out a couple of weeks ago. I had edited it for Birlinn. It included a poem called 'Taigh Tasgaidh Chill Donnain' which Dòmhnall made in honour of the museum at Kildonan in South Uist a couple of years ago.

He had been invited to perform the opening ceremony, and the poem is basically a list of what you can see in the museum but an enchanting little piece for all that. It includes the line *Tha casan an fhéidh ann rinn ioma ceum feadh na mòintich*. On the face of it it means "The feet of the deer are there that made many steps through the moor."

I was a bit surprised by the line. Deer's feet? An unlikely exhibit. So I looked at a copy of Dòmhnall's own translation of the poem which I had in his own handwriting. Perhaps with hindsight I should say 'English version' and not 'translation'. It reads at this point: "We shall see the antlers of the stag that often roamed the moors."

Aha, that makes more sense, I thought. Then of course I had to work out how *casan* had come to mean 'antlers'. I knew of *casan*, 'feet', in such meanings as 'the spokes of a wheel'. I knew that *casan cainbe*, 'hempen legs', were rays shooting out under the sun through watery clouds — a sign of bad weather, especially in the early morning. I remembered a story about a young servant in Luing or Easdale who recalled the horror of being asked by her mistress to fetch the master's chest down from the loft. *Bha*, she said, *am bogsa dubh ud tarsainn nan casan-cairbeil!* "Yon black box was across the sunspokes!"

So, as Dòmhnall's Gaelic was a million times better than mine, I convinced myself that *casan* to him must be the tines on a deer's antlers. Anyway, I thought, surely deer don't have feet. They have hooves, and a deer's hoof in Gaelic is *eang* or perhaps *ionga*, the word most of us have nowadays as *ìne*, 'a fingernail'. So into the translations in the book went the line: "The antlers of the deer are here which made many mountain paths."

Well well, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. As the book was rolling of the presses in Wales an e-mail arrived from Dana Macleod, the Comhairle's museums officer in Uist which gave me quite a start. I'm sure she won't mind if I quote a bit of it here. She said: "During the opening of the Kildonan Museum I read a translation that had been done of the 'Taigh Tasgaidh Chill Donnain' poem and I was struck by a reference to some deer feet slippers that were on display. Quite horrible yet fascinating objects."

She goes on: "DAB [Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin] had suggested that they had once been running out in the glens behind the museum whilst still attached to their original owner and were now preserved behind glass for all to see. Then when I read another copy of the same poem, this comment had changed to 'the antlers of the deer'."

She finishes by saying that this was not merely her own misty memory of the phrase, but that Effie MacMillan of Comann Eachdraidh Uibhist a-Deas recalled it too. "Maybe one day we'll get to the root of it."

So suddenly it made sense. 'The feet of the deer that made many steps through the moor' were the horrible deer feet slippers. At some stage, for reasons best known to himself, DAB must have decided to change the original line to *Tha cabar an fhéidh ann rinn ioma ceum feadh na mòintich*, which is why that English version in my possession says: "We shall see the antlers of the stag that often roamed the moors."

I had been caught in a deer-trap. But I'm looking forward very much to seeing the horrible deer feet slippers next time I'm in Uist. Because they help me understand a line in a famous late-sixteenth-century poem as well as one in that not-quite-so-famous late-twentieth-century one. In a version of 'Òran na Comhachaig' ('The Song of the Owl') by the Lochaber hunter-poet Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn (another Donald MacDonald, come to think of it) is the verse:

Uaibh cha téid mi air shiùbhlam,
Òlaidh mi á Tréig mo theann-shàth —
Boinne brisg geal ro-ghlan fallain
O iong an fhéidh a nì an langan.

("From you I will not travel far, / From Loch Treig I will drink my fill — / A brisk bright pure health-giving drop / From the hoof of the deer that roars.") Until I received Dana's e-mail I had never understood this verse. Now I realise that Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh had made himself a cup out of a deer's hoof. Loch Treig was last mentioned in this column as a haunt of water-horses and therefore an otherworldly place. If the poet hoped by drinking its water in this way to take for himself some of the deer's swiftness, it would be very much in the spirit of his long and extraordinary poem.

Deer's feet slippers are just one item out of many in DAB's verse that belong to the realms of 'Gaelic ethnography', that is, writings about the traditional life of Gaelic-speaking people. A few years ago on this page I presented an ethnographic analysis of the work of another South Uist poet, Donald Macintyre. It fell into seven categories — 'panegyric code', *seanchas*, superstition, meteorology, calendar, 'way of life' and material culture. I found that material culture was the biggest category and that it could itself be broken down into animals, commodities, environments, objects and processes.

Given DAB's favourite subject-matter of women and nature, his poems are not especially rich in ethnography, but there are echoes of the 'panegyric code' and bits of calendar and (as we have seen) material culture here and there. There is also one very important topic in the 'way of life' category about which he has a great deal to say — the ceilidh-house, and that is what I would like to concentrate on in the rest of this article, although it is really a more appropriate subject for the winter.

In his poem on the months of the year DAB touches on it at the end of September: "A little snarl in the south-

east wind / Reveals a change to come in the weather — / The stars concealed from us by clouds, / While in the skies the hunter's moon / Proves that ceilidh-house entertainment / Is coming near us." Then in 'Gleann na Ceòlraidh' ('The Glen of the Muses') he puts it very firmly in its seasonal setting. *Nuair thig an geamhradh fòireiginn* . . . "When winter's tyranny arrives / From north come freezing wind and snow, / While the peat-fire flame / Banishes the cold; / There are tales and conversations, / Orations and heroic poems — / And time takes wing and sails away / Like a full-rigged ship on the ocean."

The stress that DAB puts on 'ceilidh-house weather' is unique in my experience and of great interest, because I used to have impression (why, I don't know) that people relied on fine weather — moonlit nights, for example — to get to the ceilidh-house. DAB is crystal clear on this point. "Even if wolftime (*faoilteach*) were blowing on us / And the keen blade of the northerlies, / Even if snow were cascading down / And piling up on the hillsides, / Even if frost were as hard as steel / Up to the high tops of the stacks, / It wouldn't keep us from the ceilidh / Where story and song could be heard. / Even in torrential rain / Full of cold squally showers / With hailstones coming from the sky / Being swept round about us, / No flood or downpour kept us back / Nor did we feel tired or gloomy / As we were being told stories / By some calm, competent reciter (*Le seanchaidh sìtheil, suairc*)."

Again, in 'A' Ghaoth an-Iar tha Séideadh thar na Mara' ('West Wind that Blows across the Sea') DAB puts great stress on this loyalty (*dìsle*) of attendance. *Bha dìsle ann an tathaich an taigh-chéilidh* . . . "They came with loyalty to the ceilidh-house / Where they heard the stories and heroic poems, / Where they knew the kindness in the converse / Round joyful hearths as was traditional. / Where they'd hear adventures being told, / Every word explained into their ear (*Gach facal air a mhìneachadh dha'n cluais*), / They'd trace relationships and ancestors, / Reminiscing over times now long gone by."

The reason I am so interested in the ceilidh-house is that it was an educational institution perfectly geared to community needs. It wasn't called a school because no reading or writing was taught and no corporal punishment was used. But it seems to me to have been a school in every other respect, and when I find historians (even Gaelic-speaking ones) declaring that there were no schools in the Highlands and Islands until the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge established them in 1709 I don't know whether to laugh or cry. The ceilidh-house provided an existing educational structure which just needed sympathetic long-term development and encouragement with regard to books, curriculum, training and equipment (including lighting).

This pedagogic function of the ceilidh-house is I think revealed in DAB's fondness for the word *mìneachadh*. "Every word explained into their ear." So, I take it, those who understood taught those who didn't. Here it is again, in 'Fuaim an t-Sàile' ('The Sound of the Sea'): *Far an cual' iad iomadh sgeula / San taigh-chéilidh ann an nàbachd, / Comhairlean an t-seann duin' shìobhalt' / Air am mìneachadh gu bàidheil*. "Where they heard so many stories / In the neighbouring ceilidh-house, / The counsels of the kind old man / Lovingly explained."

That verse is probably unsurpassable in its summing-up of the ceilidh-house as a perfect balance of entertainment and education. DAB's poem 'Sgeulachdan nan Taighean-Céilidh' ('The Tales of the Ceilidh-Houses') lays it all out in much more detail. In seven splendid verses he refers to genealogy, the fishing industry and its problems, stories of accidents and drownings, 'the Great War of the Kaiser with all its wounds and pointlessness', reminiscences of life on the high seas, the recitation or singing of the great eighteenth-century poem 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill' ('Clanranald's Galley'), a story about the piratical MacNeil chief Ruairi an Tartair or 'Rattling Rory', and tales of ghosts and fairies and of the carefree days of the shieling where 'untroubled peace and freedom / encompassed the cowfolds'.

But there was still more to it than that. It was a technical education as well as an academic one, because all the indoor crafts were going on at the same time. As DAB says in 'Cha Mhór tha ri Àireamh' ('Not Many are Left'):

Sa gheamhradh gum b' éibhinn bhith triall don taigh-chéilidh
Far an cluinneamaid sgeul ris an éisteadh gach seòrs' —
Bhiodh snìomh agus càrdadh, bhiodh lìn ann ri'n càradh
'S bhiodh ìm agus càis' air a chàrnadh air bòrd.

"It was grand in winter to go to the ceilidh-house / Where we'd hear a story to which all sorts would listen — / There'd be spinning and carding, and nets to repair, / With butter and cheese heaped up on a table."

- "Bàrd Éiseabhail", an exhibition of the life and work of Donald MacDonald, Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin, can be seen at Kildonan Museum in South Uist. His 'Smuaintean fo Éiseabhal: Thoughts under Easaval' can be obtained for £7.99 from Birlinn Publications, Unit 8, Canongate Venture, 5 New St., Edinburgh, EH8 8BH, tel. 0131 556 6660. A recording of him reading 23 of the poems is available from the Kildonan Museum price £5.50 (CD) or £4.50 (tape). All prices include postage.

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