

There's a new fad in MacLean lands

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I remarked that the old-style ceilidh-house wasn't called a school because no reading or writing was taught and no corporal punishment was used.

I wasn't joking. It's too easy to forget nowadays that violence was once considered an integral part of formal education. I was repeatedly belted in primary school by teachers, or rather by one elderly female teacher. By the time I got into secondary the belt was beginning to go out of fashion, though admittedly our music teacher was still fond of belting anyone who lost the place in the music.

So if we go back in history to the eighteenth century, it's no surprise to find the principle of corporal punishment being lauded even by the finest minds. What is more interesting is to find that there were some people who disagreed with it. One such was Lady Errol, a pious, sensible, good-hearted woman who 'did not use force or fear in educating her children', according to James Boswell's 'Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides'. Says Dr Johnson:— "Sir, she is wrong. I would rather have the rod to be the general terror to all, to make them learn, than tell a child, if you do thus or thus, you will be more esteemed than your brothers or sisters."

The good doctor explains: "The rod produces an effect which terminates in itself. A child is afraid of being whipped, and gets his task, and there's an end on't; whereas, by exciting emulation, and comparisons of superiority, you lay the foundation of lasting mischief; you make brothers and sisters hate each other."

There may be something in what he says. Our class certainly closed ranks against belt-mad teachers. The only emulation I recall was the respect given by the class to the child who had been belted most since the start of term (our arithmetical skills were put to good use in keeping a careful tally). For a while it was me; I was enormously proud of that. The record was taken away from me by a boy who is now a GP, and I never got it back.

It must have come as quite a shock to Highland communities when schools were established after 1709. Before that there were very few; in that year the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge began planting schools and schoolmasters to teach English, arithmetic and the Catechism. And spurred on by their example, many heritors began at last to find money to maintain parish schools, as they were supposed to do under laws which had existed since John Knox's day.

I'm not suggesting that corporal punishment was unknown in the Highlands before schools came. The evidence is in the proverbs. *Comhairle do dhuine glic; slat do dhruim an amadain*. "Advice for a wise man; a rod for a fool's back." *Is treasa slat na cuaille*. "A rod is stronger than a club." More subtle than a club, that is, I suppose. As for 'spare the rod and spoil the child', it has its origin in the Bible. "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." (Prov. 13: 24.) But note that the relationship here is the father's to his son, and that the Gaelic proverb, unlike the English one, has stayed faithful to scripture. *Ge b'e chaomhnas an t-slat, is beag air a mhac*. Not 'child', but 'son'.

So the idea that a complete stranger could enter your community and brutalise your children must have taken some getting used to. People weren't stupid. They knew what child abuse was, then as now. And the name of God and the importance for salvation of knowing the catechism must have been invoked a great deal at first to get angry parents to back off.

I will give three examples of such abuse, in reverse chronological order. My first is from Alexander Carmichael's 'Carmina Gadelica'. It's one of many cases that I could cite of corporal punishment being used to try and wipe out the Gaelic language. It refers to the second half of the nineteenth century. A young lady told Carmichael: "When we came to Islay I was sent to the parish school to obtain a proper grounding in arithmetic. I was charmed with the schoolgirls and their Gaelic songs. But the schoolmaster — an alien like myself — denounced Gaelic speech and Gaelic songs."

She goes on: "On getting out of school one evening the girls resumed a song they had been singing the previous evening. I joined willingly, if timidly, my knowledge of Gaelic being small. The schoolmaster heard us, however, and called us back. He punished us till the blood trickled from our fingers, although we were big girls, with the dawn of womanhood upon us."

My second example is from the 1750s or 1760s and is a verse from a song by Lachlan MacPherson, son of the tacksman of Strathmashie in Badenoch. The song is a good-natured one about a wedding which the poet claims to have gate-crashed. The guests line up to denounce him. This is what we are told when it comes to the schoolmaster's turn:

*Thuirt am maighistir sgoile liath,
"Mas e gleus-air-mhàs a mhiann,
Mo roghainn-s' e thar seachd ciad —
Si 'cheàird bha riamh cur ann domh."*

("Said the grey-haired dominie, / 'If he wants his buttocks spanked, / I'd choose him over seven hundred — / It's the job I've always loved.") It's the only verse which goes beyond a joke, and since songs by a tacksman's son are likely to have a great deal to do with social control, I take it as a warning shot across the man's bows.

My third example takes us back to the aftermath of 1709. Dating from the 1720s, it's an entire poem devoted to our subject, and a very peculiar one. For one thing, it's a *crossanachd*, that is, a satire consisting of verse alternating with prose. For another, it gives us a fresh angle on the whole issue — when Charles MacLean, the Laird of Drimmin in Morvern, spans an adult male on the bare buttocks, he's accused of taking over the schoolmaster's job. It's by Iain mac Ailein (John MacLean, c. 1660 – c. 1740) and I take it from John Mackenzie's book 'Sàr Obair nam Bard Gaelach'. This is how it starts.

*Tha bith ùr an tìr na Dreòllainn
As còir dhuinn aithris;
Tha mòran dheth tighinn am bitheant'*

“There’s a new fad in MacLean lands / Which we must tell; / Much of it closely resembles / What goes on in England.”

It continues: “There’s no gentleman or commoner / Or countryman / Who does not want, for great advantage, / An extra trade. / The Laird of Drimnin has a new trade / Which we find harmful: / He’d like to put himself in place of / The schoolmaster. / That same master who was tutored / To sound of Latin — / He’s seized, without his kin’s permission, / The trade he had.”

Now the prose begins. To a ceilidh-house audience, prose sections like this turned a lively song into full-scale theatre. *Se an t-adhbhar a thug do dhaoine aire a thoirt do shannt an sgoileir seo . . .* “What drew people’s attention to this scholar’s ambition, when he coveted his tutor’s trade, was that he was disinclined to practise it as the tutor himself practised it. For when the tutor chastised his pupils (*Nuair a ghabhadh an t-oide foghlaim air a dhaltachan*), he would chastise the children, but this ambitious scholar would chastise the adults (*na daoine àrsaidh*) too. When the tutor chastised his pupils, he would chastise the guilty, but the ambitious scholar would chastise the innocent. That is why it has been said: ‘He who is idle supposes that his is the best hand on the tiller.’ But it is seldom true.”

I have to say that I have been quite restrained in translating *an sgoileir sanntach* as ‘the ambitious scholar’. It has connotations of ‘the greedy scholar’, that is, a man who wants another man’s job, and also of ‘the lustful scholar’.

Who exactly was Charles MacLean? My friend Mrs Jo Currie, an expert on MacLean history, points out that the Rev. Alexander Maclean Sinclair gives an account of him in English in his book ‘The Clan Gillean’. A similar account appears in Gaelic in Sinclair’s ‘Maclean Bards’, where part of the poem is also given. Shortly after the Earl of Argyll seized the MacLean lands in Mull and Morvern in the 1680s, the barony of Drimnin had been bought from him by Charles MacLean’s forebear, also Charles, who was tacksman of Ardnacross in Mull.

When a young man our Charles had spent some time on a warship, which may explain his temperament. He once punched no less a man than MacLeod of Dunvegan on the street in Edinburgh. He was married, with four sons and some daughters, and as was usual in those days he employed a tutor to educate them. One day he sent this man to fetch a pair of shoes from the shoemaker. The shoemaker said he hadn’t been paid for the last pair of shoes he had made him. This the tutor reported back to Charles. Charles dragged the poor man back to the shoemaker, who swore that he had never said such a thing. This suited Charles very well, and grabbing the tutor, he lifted up his kilt and assaulted him with the shoemaker’s belt.

Our poem is of course the result. It goes on, in verse: “He doesn’t teach children, or infants, / In the way that he should, / Until they are elderly people / Under full beard. / No sillier judgement was given / In Cill Mo Cheallaig / Than for the buttocks to pay for / What the top end had done.”

The Cill Mo Cheallaig folk were the dafties of Gaelic tradition — when they found a man leading a horse and cart carrying a stolen cow, they hanged the horse for stealing the cow. There follow two more verses: “Chastising in old age with a belt / An old man’s buttocks — / Long will it be before that can teach / Sense to a tongue. / No matter who speaks to that man / Truth or falsehood, / His bottom will be lashed by strokes / Of a kilt belt.”

The next prose section is of huge interest. It conveys reflections on the new educational methods by a major poet who, thanks to the efforts of people like him, could see ancient tradition, new songs, real knowledge and sound principles being passed on effortlessly to old and young alike every winter’s night in the ceilidh house. It begins with words which show that the *crossanachd* was performed as a duet. *Agus b’ fhìor don duine sin*. “And that man was right.

“Nothing worse for tutoring a malicious tongue has ever been found than belabouring the buttocks for the sake of the tongue, so that the tongue would understand that it was because of it that the buttocks had received that great chastisement. Even if such a thing did not make the tongue’s meaning worse, it would certainly not make it any better. That’s why it has been said: *Am fear nach ionnsaich làimh ri ghlùn, chan ionnsaich làimh ri uileann*. ‘He who can’t teach with his hand on the knee can’t teach with his hand on the elbow.’”

Sinclair ends the poem there. Mackenzie carries it on for two more verse sections and two more prose sections. These mainly concern the amazed reactions of the shoemaker’s wife to what appears under the tutor’s kilt, and the related issue of how James Campbell of Stonefield, Sheriff Depute of Argyll, got the worse of an encounter with a Spanish lady. But there are two verses of interest: “There’s a new fad in MacLean lands / That the Baron’s started, / That every man who speaks plain truth / Must bare his tail. / If the fad that Charles has started / Spreads through each land, / It’s more than likely in due course / He’ll be paid back.”

It’s a threat, of course. Not necessarily a physical one, more a threat of full bardic satire and utter ridicule. In fact the ultimate fate of Charles MacLean was a violent but curiously honourable one. He died in 1746 fighting for Prince Charles at Culloden. The self-same John Mackenzie tells us in his book ‘Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa’ (again I translate): “When the Laird of Drimnin was about to flee the slaughter with his life he saw two of his sons wounded and was told that the third was lying dead on the field.

“‘That won’t go unrevenged,’ he said, and although this noble man was so old that he had not one hair on his head, he ran back to the slaughter, killed one trooper and wounded another, but fell for the last time a moment later with three troopers’ blades thrust into his body.”