

## ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ (1)

## The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A COUPLE of years ago I received an e-mail from a gentleman who said he was looking for classical panegyric poetry of the Clan Munro for a project he was doing for the Clan Munro Centre. He intended to put the poetry together, as he expressed it, with the seanchas and stories of their battles and legends of medieval times.

I pointed out in reply that there were many poems to the chiefs of other clans, or to the Highland clans in general, which had stanzas here and there in praise of Munros, but that the only extended piece of verse devoted to the Munros that I could think of was ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’, which praises the MacKenzies and satirises the Munros at great length.

To my knowledge ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ had never been translated into English, and I told my correspondent that I would be willing to attempt this, as well as translating for him the stanzas from here and there in praise of the Munros. I assumed that he would want his presentation in the Clan Munro Centre to be a balanced one anyhow.

To my surprise, he did not reply to what I thought was quite a generous offer. I never heard from him again. I can only assume that even after nearly 300 years the Munros are still smarting from ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’, and that the last thing they want is for their indignity to be exposed to a world-wide audience through the English language.

Well, I have news for them. I have done it anyway. And I had a lot of fun because ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ is a genuinely funny piece of work (unless, apparently, you are a Munro). For example, the priceless lines

*Ruith nan Rothach s math ur gnothach,  
Thug sibh sothadh maidne dhaibh*

have become “Chasing Munros is your excellent pastime, / You gave them their morning dip”, and the verse beginning

*Tha ’m brochan a’ toirt sàr dhuibh,  
’S tha ’n càl a’ toirt at oirbh . . .*

has come out as: “You’re sated with porridge, Munros, / And swollen with kale, / But no warrior’s the worse of it / For filling you up free; / Though you carried much cheese / From the shielings of Assynt / I’ve seen no feast in Foulis / Though many were the chickens there; / Pointy castle, nest of eagles, / Starving dogs and servants there, / Not a stick is seen on fire there / Unless there’s a drop of porridge there; / No beef is seen in any pot there / Without a chicken to make gruel / For they’re gathered in by begging / When the cost goes up too high for them.”

The rest of my translation, and about another sixty songs and poems besides, will be published in time for Christmas by Birlinn of Edinburgh in a bilingual anthology of eighteenth-century Gaelic verse to be called ‘An Lasair’. But that verse sums up the song quite well. In traditional Gaelic verse people are praised for what they drink and satirised for what they eat. Unlike the heroic MacKenzies — whose totem is the stag, and whose emblem is its antlers — the Munros (the poet alleges) are a bunch of east-coast softies who subsist on porridge, kale and chicken soup. Their chickens come as rents paid in kind, their castle is Foulis, and their emblem is the eagle. In fact the eagle comes in for some ferocious mockery.

*Chan eil ian san t-saoghal  
R’a fhaotainn tha coltach riut . . .*

“There’s no bird to be had / In the world that resembles you: / Your flesh can’t be eaten — / Scripture has cursed it. / Though your plumage is straight / Like a true pointed arrow / And though they’ve called you the ‘true bird’ / You’re tantamount to the devil. / Many a herd on a cold mountain / Armed with a cudgel of a stick / Prays all the time you’ll be taken away / And beats the bravery out of you / When you make a strike upon the lambs / And hunger drives you mad — / When you come across deer’s antlers / You must do what he commands.” In other words it ends:

*Nuair thachras cabar féidh ort  
Gum feum thu bhith snasadh dha.*

Anyone who has ever heard ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ sung, even once, knows the high dramatic pitch that has been reached by the time you get to that eighth and last couplet in each verse. In fact most of the verses end with the words *Nuair dh’éirich do chabar ort!* “When your antlers rose over you!” Like this, for example: “You put down the Clan Munro / Though they considered it impudent, / Driving them before you in a fearful rout / While Novar went up in sparks / And flames rising to the skies / When your antlers rose over you!”

The first person ever to publish any comments on ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ was I think John Mackenzie in ‘Sàr Obair nam Bàrd Gaelach’, which came out in 1841, and he says this: “Nothing can surpass the exultation of the bard while he sings the superiority of the clan McKenzie over those who have drawn upon themselves

the lash of his satire. The line *Nuair dh' éireadh do chabar ort!* falling in at the end of some of the stanzas, has an electrifying effect; and, although figurative in its language, is so applicable as to transport us beyond ourselves to those feudal times when our mountain warriors rushed to the red field of battle to conquer or to die."

With regard to the music he says that it "forms one of the most spirit-stirring airs that can be played on the bagpipe; so popular, indeed, has this tune been in many parts of the Highlands, that it was not danced as a common reel, but as a sort of country-dance. We have seen 'Cabair-feidh' danced in character, and can bear testimony that, for diversified parts, for transitions, mazes and evolutions, it yields not, when well performed, to any 'Cotillon brent new from France'."

There are two intriguing questions hanging over 'Moladh Chabar Féidh'. One has to do with the incident that gave rise to it, and therefore of course its locus and date. The other has to do with its authorship — was it composed by Norman MacLeod (*Tormod Bàn*) from Assynt in Sutherland, or by Murdoch Matheson from Kintail, the Earl of Seaforth's poet? I'll concentrate on the first question in this article, and leave the other till next time, possibly even the time after that.

To start with, then, this is how John Mackenzie describes the origins of the song in 'Sàr Obair'. "The earl of Sutherland issued a commission to William Munroe of Achany, who, with a numerous body of retainers and clansmen, by virtue of said commission, made a descent on Assynt and carried off a great many cattle.

"This predatory excursion was made in the latter end of summer, when, according to the custom of the country, the cattle were grazing on distant pasturages at the shielings, a circumstance which proved very favourable to the foragers — for they not only took away the cattle, but also plundered the shielings, and thus possessed themselves of a great quantity of butter and cheese.

"Indignant at the baseness and injustice of such cowardly conduct, McLeod invoked the muse and composed 'Cabair Feidh', or the clan-song of the McKenzies — making it the vehicle of invective and bitter sarcasm against the Sutherlanders and Munros, who had antecedently made themselves sufficiently obnoxious to him by their adherence to the Hanoverian cause in 1745."

The trouble with this account is that it doesn't fit very well with the song itself, which, as we have seen, has a great deal to say about events in Easter Ross — the sacking of Novar, for example. Professor William J. Watson, himself a native of Boath, which is only five miles or so over the hill from Evanton, Novar and Foulis, refuted Mackenzie's account point by point in an article in 'An Gaidheal' in 1930. Mackenzie's assertion that the song was composed after the '45 appears to be disproved by the existence of a verse of 'Moladh Chabar Féidh' devoted to Uilleam Dubh, Earl of Seaforth, who was long dead by then; Mackenzie omitted this verse from 'Sàr Obair'. More importantly there are the key lines, quoted above, "Though you carried much cheese / From the shielings of Assynt / I've seen no feast in Foulis . . ." In the original these are:

*Ge mòr a thug sibh chàise  
Far àirighean Asainne  
Chan fhacac cuirm am Fòlais . . .*

As Watson points out, however, Assynt (Gaelic *Asaint*, from Norse *áss*, 'a rocky ridge', and *endi*, 'end'), is not merely a huge parish in south-west Sutherlandshire. It is, or rather was, also an important farming township at the mouth of Glen Glass near Novar in the Munro country, and its shielings would have lain east of Loch Glass in the hills of the parish of Alness; the name survives today in Assynt House behind Evanton. The point of those three lines, then, is not that the Munros brought away cheese that did not belong to them from Assynt in Sutherlandshire, but that the plentiful cheese from their very own shielings in the parish of Alness made no public appearance at any feast in Foulis Castle.

In other words the Munros are mean, and that is all there is to it.

Confusingly, there is another mention of Assynt in the song. The poet says to Seaforth:

*Dh' éireadh leat an còir 's an ceart  
Le trian do neart, gu bagarach,  
Na bh' eadar Asainne 's fa dheas  
Gu ruig Sgalpa chraganach . . .*

"There'd rise with you in right and justice / With a third of your strength, threateningly, / All between Assynt and the south / And away out to rocky Scalpay, / Each man seizing a firearm, / A grey sword or a little gun — / Sir Donald of Sleat would be with you / When your antlers rose up on you!" Scalpay here is Scalpay Skye, and Assynt is Assynt Sutherland.

So if 'Moladh Chabar Féidh' isn't about a Munro raid on Assynt in Sutherland, what exactly *is* it about? That is the first question which I intend to answer next time.

**WHFP 22 Sept. 2000**