

‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ (4)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I introduced the two contenders for the honour of having created that great song ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’, Murdoch Matheson from Kintail (Seaforth’s family poet) and Norman MacLeod (Tormod Bàn) from Lochbroom. I also pointed out how the late Angus Matheson drew attention to an alternative version of the poem in the MacLagan collection of manuscripts, wondered aloud if it contained the bones of the solution, then left it at that. So what does this alternative ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ consist of?

Well, for a start it only has 72 lines, compared to 176 in the well-known version. It begins in the same way, with a toast to the exiled Seaforth over the water, and speaks, as the main version does, of how his own people will rise, and MacDonald of Sleat too. Brahan Castle is pictured with wine and whisky being consumed while pipes play. If you had stayed in the north without moving, the poet says to Seaforth, King George wouldn’t have been given such a fright in ’15.

Toasts will be drunk to the faraway *cabar Frangach* (French antlers) in Tullibardine and Kintail, says the poet. Then he turns political. The Whigs are being driven into a corner, and he believes King George is on his way back to Hanover, leaving the field to King James and the bishops. It’s clear that he is an Episcopalian, because, he says, the people of Scotland should move smartly to dissolve the Union, but as long as ‘Whigs and Papists’ (*Whigs is Pàpanaich*) are so numerous, Highlanders should take no risks — *S beag feum do chlannaibh Gàidheal / Iad fhéin chur an cunnart leo*.

Does he end with a rousing fanfare to Seaforth and his antlers? Not at all. He advises the Gael:

*Gun bhith call an nì ’s an daoine
Le iartras chùirteir preamalach
Nach seas le rìgh no rìoghachd
Ach do réir mar nì sibh cheannaigheachd!*

(“Not to waste their men and property / Obliging you flatulent courtiers / Who won’t stand by king or country / Except for what you can buy and sell!”)

Well well. Could this be the work of Seaforth’s family poet, the Kintail man who helped raise rents after the estate was forfeited and send them to the exiled chief? Yes. It’s the work of a man steeped in politics, embittered by the failure of the ’15, but willing to be heartened by the many hopeful developments that took place between 1716 and 1719. It’s an inclusive, peace-making poem, the sort of diplomatic effort you would expect of a Marquis’s family retainer. And there’s not a single mention in it of Munros.

So far, then, Angus Matheson’s hunch is plausible. The loyal Murdoch Matheson composes a rousing toast to Seaforth and tacks on some good political advice. Tormod Bàn, who has a thing about Munros, considers Matheson’s tune too good to waste and turns it into a comic tour-de-force about the events of October 1715. Right?

Wrong, I think. For one thing, there’s a lot missing from the short version as we have it. The tune ‘Cabair Féidh’ consists of alternating theme and variation, and that’s what we have in the long version: twelve verses, each consisting of theme and variation. But this short version consists of six themes and three variations, all out of order, so there’s a lot missing — 24 lines at the very least.

Then there’s that other song spawned by the tune, Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair’s ‘Dìomoladh Chabar Féidh’ (‘The Dispraise of Cabair Féidh’). As I showed last time, the man Alastair had in his sights was *am Bàirdean Sàileach*, ‘the little Kintail poet’, who sounds like Matheson, certainly not Tormod Bàn. So let me pick out some lines from here and there in the ‘Dìomoladh’ which may shed some light on the ‘Moladh’.

*Chan éireadh leat fir Mhùideirt
’S cha b’ fhiù leo bhith ’n ceangal riut.*

“No Moidartmen would rise with you / Nor deign to be in league with you.” The lines *Dh’ éireadh leat fir Mhùideirt / Nuair rùisgte do brataichean*, “The Moidartmen would rise with you / When your banners were unfurled” appear in the long ‘Moladh’ but not the short one.

*A chabair ghealtaich chealgaich
Ge bearganta fileant’ thu,
Ciamar fhuair thu dh’eanchainn
Na dh’ainmich mo chinneadh-sa
Éirigh mar luchd-leanmhainn
Le d’ sheann bhrataich inisgich
’S gum b’ iochdaran fo m’ shinnsreadh
Do Shìophort bhon chinnich e?*

“O cowardly cheating antlers, / Though you’re devious and glib, / How did you have the nerve / To speak of my kindred / Rising as followers / Of your disgraceful old banner / When your Seaforth’s been subject / To my forebears since he surfaced?” There’s nothing like this in either the long or the short version, but it sounds as if one of them had referred to the Clan Donald in general.

*Chan éireadh leat fir Shléibhte
’S nan éireadh b’e ’m breamas e.*

“The Sleatmen wouldn’t rise with you / And if they did it would be tragic.” The lines *Bu leat Sir Dòmhnall Sléiteach / Nuair dh’éireadh do chabar ort!* (“Sir Donald of Sleat would be with you / When your antlers rose over you!”) appear in both versions, long and short.

*Chan fhaod mi sheachnadh, san dol seachad,
Gun a ghlacadh farasta
Càil a’ Mharcais air sgàth facail
'S lagh ceart 'na mhearachd leis,
A' coimeas Shìophort ri neart rioghachd
Ann an gnìomh no 'm fearachas —
Le'r leanmhainn bhuig gun èolas
Is móran dìth ro aineolach!*

“In passing, I must not neglect / Or fail to mention seriously / The Marquis’s appetite for words / While he deemed true law erroneous, / Comparing Seaforth to a kingdom’s power / In performance or in manliness — / With your raw untrained adherents / Of whom many are most ignorant!” This suggests to me that in the ‘Moladh’ Seaforth was compared ‘to a kingdom’s power’, but I can’t find anything in either version that answers to that.

*Ach ar leam fhéin gur gòrach
A dh’fhògradh Mac Cailein leibh,
'S gur sgeul e chaidh o chòmhstri
Gur connspann air aineol e.*

“But in my view it’s stupid / That Mac Cailein (the Duke of Argyll) was warned off by you, / When it’s beyond all dispute / That he’s a hero abroad.” This must refer to the lines in the long version which declare “That there was no tribe in Scotland, / Even if in bed with Mac Cailein (*Ged shìneadh Mac Cailein ris*), / Who’d hold up their face to you / When your antlers rose over you!”

*Gach neach sunndach sìos san iorghaill
Le'n cuilbheirean acainneach:
Fead na luaidhe, sgread nam faobhar,
Sùrd neo-chaomh ri sracaireachd;
Bidh lannan dùbhghorm dol gu'n dùbhlán
Gearradh smùis is aisnichean —
Bidh fannghal truagh air feadh na h-àraich
'S gearan cràiteach acainneach.*

This doesn’t fit the tune, but at any rate it means: “All gladly charge into the tumult / With their well-fitted muskets: / Lead whistling, blades screeching, / Savage zest for ripping; / Blue-black swords will do their utmost, / Cutting marrow-bones and ribs — / Piteous cries will fill the battlefield / And tortured moans of anguish.” Again it’s in praise of the MacDonalds, and two phrases (*Le'n cuilbheirean acainneach* and *lannan dùbhghorm*) are taken from the verse at the end of the long ‘Moladh’ which says that MacDonalds and MacKinnons will rise with Seaforth.

*Tharraing thu le d' bhòilich
Clann Dòmhnail an coimeas riut:
Mas fear thu bhios ri òran,
Bi èòlach mun can thu e;
Nam faiceadh tu Di-Dòmhnaiach
Am pòr ud nuair tharraing iad,
Chan aithnìcht' duine beò dhiubh
Seach leòghainn is nathraichean.*

“You compared in your gasconade / Clan Donald with yourself: / If you’ve got to make a song, / Bone up before you sing it; / If you’d seen on Sunday / That tribe when they were mustered, / Not one could be distinguished / From lions or from serpents.” He’s saying MacDonalds may be like lions or snakes but certainly not deer! But it wouldn’t be true to say that MacDonalds are *compared* with MacKenzies in either version of the ‘Moladh’.

*Bidh sibh fhathast, mar as caithear,
Ann an tabhainn eagalach:
Bidh gàir-catha le sian claidhimh
Cur gu Brathainn teicheadh oirbh;
Cruaidh ga crathadh, cuirp gan snaidheadh,
Gearradh cheann is easgaidean —
'S bidh iomadh pìob ag éigheach
Ratreut air a' Chabar ud!*

“You will yet be, as is proper, / In fearful extremity: / Battle shout with scream of sword / Will send you fleeing to Brahan; / Steel being brandished, bodies carved, / Heads and houghs being wounded — / And many pipes will loudly sound / Retreat for that antlered head!”

These eight lines reflect different passages of the same length in both the long and the short ‘Moladh’, in both of which the basic picture is of Seaforth’s triumphant return to Brahan, wine and whisky being consumed, pipes playing. Both long and short versions finish: *Bu lionmhor pìob ga gleusadh / Nuair dh’éireadh do chabar ort!*

(“Many pipes would be tuned / When your antlers rose over you!”) Lines 3–7 are the same, more or less, in the long and short versions: “Wine will be drunk all over your house / And the whisky of the still; / With your father’s kin attending you, / Who would dare to threaten you?” Alastair reverses the sentiment, of course!

But what’s most interesting in this case is that Alastair reflects a phrase that’s in the short ‘Moladh’ but not the long one. The first couplet in the short version is *Chì mi fhathast, mar bu chaithear, / Ann am Brathainn bhaidealaich . . .* (“I will see yet, as was proper, / In battlemented Brahan . . .”) But the long one has: *Bidh tu fhathast gabhail aigheir* (“You will once again be cheerful”) / *Ann am Brathainn bhaidealaich . . .*

*Chan éireadh leat Triath Chnòideart,
A ròpaire mhearachdaich:
Gur cuimhneach leis mar stròic sibh
An Stròm is Loch Carrann deth;
Ach faic-sa, Rìgh na Glòire,
Os dòibheart a bh’ ann an-siud,
Gum faigh sinn pàigheadh saobhir
De shaill an daimh Charrannaich!*

“No Laird of Knoydart would rise with you, / You much-mistaken fabulist: / He remembers how you grabbed from him / Strome and Lochcarron; / But please, O King of Glory, / Since that was an evil deed, / See that we’re richly paid / With the fat of Lochcarron’s stag!” This refers to how the MacKenzies got Strome Castle and Lochcarron from MacDonald of Glengarry between 1580 and 1607. It perhaps reflects a line *Dh’ éireadh leat Triath Chnòideart* which is in neither the long nor the short version.

The same is true of Alastair’s *Chan éireadh Clann Ghill’ Eòin leat*, “MacLeans would not rise with you.” MacLeans are not mentioned in either the long or the short version. The same is not quite true of Alastair’s line *Chan éireadh leat Clann Fhionghain*, however, because MacKinnons are mentioned as Seaforth’s allies in the long version.

What emerges from my analysis so far is that Alastair was reacting to a version of the ‘Moladh’ that wasn’t identical to either our long *or* our short version, but which contained some elements of both, and more besides. It seemed to me at first that he was reacting to a serious political song by Murdoch Matheson, very similar to our short version except that it also presented a ‘gathering of the clans’, and that Tormod Bàn must be solely responsible for the parody of it which mocked the Munros.

However, as I will show next time in my final article on ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’, there are three different places in which Alastair echoes parts of the long version which deal with the Munros’ disgrace in the ‘Alness affair’ of October 1715. That seems to put responsibility for the whole song firmly back in Murdoch Matheson’s court. Or does it?

WHFP 3 November 2000