

‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ (5)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THIS final article on ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ I would like to try and reach a judgement about the authorship of the famous song. Was it by Tormod Bàn, the MacLeod from Lochbroom? Or was it by Murdoch Matheson from Kintail, Seaforth’s family poet?

Having looked in turn at the best-known version of the poem, at the ‘Alness affair’ of October 1715 which gave rise to it, at the two men’s alleged connections with it, at a less well-known version of it, and finally at Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair’s ‘Dìomoladh Chabar Féidh’ which reacts to it, we are surely in a good position to reach a conclusion.

But the contest is still very finely balanced, so there is one more check that must be made. What do we know of the personalities of the two men that might help us reach a decision?

With Tormod Bàn it’s easy. All that I know about him can be expressed in the words of the Rev. Dr Thomas Ross, writing in 1834. “Norman McLeod, (alias *Tormaid Bàn*) the author of the well known song of *Caberféidh*, and of many other very popular and highly poetical productions, was a native of this parish.” Of the rest of his ‘very popular and highly poetical productions’ I know nothing. I dare say they are gone forever. But he sounds like a poet of the people.

Matheson is a different kettle of fish. John Mackenzie says about him in ‘Sàr Obair’ of 1841: “This poet flourished in the seventeenth century. He lived in Lochalshe, Ross-shire, where he had free lands from the Earl of Seaforth, and was called his bard. He was a poet of great merit, and composed as many poems as would occupy a large volume; but as they were not committed to writing, they . . . were lost by being trusted to memory alone . . . ‘*Cabar Féigh*’ was not composed by him, as stated by some collectors of poetry.”

Writing in ‘The Celtic Monthly’ in 1907, Alexander Macbain brought together many interesting traditions about Murdoch. Born around 1670, his mother was Anna MacRae from Kintail. His father died when he was young, and he was brought up in the house of his mother’s employer Alexander MacRae of Conchra.

As is usual for Gaelic poets, there were stories designed to show his precocity. He wanted to be a poet when he grew up (hardly surprising, as the visiting poet was the centre of attraction in every ceilidh-house) and was told that he couldn’t be one if he didn’t make a verse for his mother. One day his mother was baking and had cakes in a space in the fire. Murdoch started picking them up and biting them. On being scolded, he turned it into a joke:

*Am balach tha ’n taigh Alastair,
Bu leannan an lon-chraois dha,
'S mo bheannachd aig do gheanshuilean,
A bhean a fhuair mo shaothradh!*

“The boy in Alexander’s house, / The greedy gannet was his soul-mate, / And your kind eyes have my blessing, / O woman stuck with bearing me!”

Conchra was married to Flora, daughter of Lachlan MacKinnon of Corriechatachan. She liked to go to Skye to visit her relatives, bringing Murdoch as her page. On one occasion after crossing to Kyleakin they had got as far as the inn at Lusa when they met Lachlan MacKinnon (*Lachann mac Theàrlaich Òig*), the poet, drinking there with some companions. (I introduced Lachlan in an article here a couple of years ago.) Lachlan was in good form, and as the drinking-cup went round in the traditional way he told Murdoch he would have to give his name and pedigree in verse before he could get a taste of the dram. Says Murdoch:

*S ainm dhomh Murchadh MacMhathain
Á teis-meadhon Loch Aillse:
Clann MhicRath á Cinn t-Sàile —
Cinneadh màthar dhomh ’n dream sin;
Car eile dhiom do Linneanaich thuathach,
Luchd a bhualadh nan lann glas,
Ach bha urram na bàrdachd
Bhon a bhàsaich Iain Manntach.*

(“My name is Murdoch Matheson / From the very middle of Lochalsh, / The MacRaes of Kintail — / Those people are my mother’s kin; / I’m also kin to northern MacLennans, / The smiters with grey swordblades, / But there’s been a prize for poetry / Since the death of Iain Manntach.”) I’m not sure who Iain Manntach was; it was an alternative nickname for the great poet Iain Lom, but he seems to have still been alive in 1707.

Anyway, Lachlan liked this very much and replied:

*Math an gille,
Math an sloinneadh,
Math a phas,
Faodaidh e ’n còrn a sguabadh às!*

(“Good is the lad, / Good is the pedigree, / Good is his pass, / He can drain the goblet!”) But Murdoch wasn’t

finished. He said,

*Ach a Lachlainn duinn mhic Theàrlaich,
S leat urram an dàin air fad;
Ciamar thuig thu mo dhìomhaireachd
'S nach d'fhiosraich thu riamh mo phas?*

“But brownhaired Lachlan son of Charles, / Yours is the prize of poetry; / How did you understand my secret / When you didn't know I had a pass?” At least that's what it seems to mean. The ‘pass’ was a humorous warrant in verse in which an *ollamh* or senior poet gave a newcomer permission to compose poetry. I take it that Lachlan's verse was such a pass, and that Murdoch in his reply was claiming to have one already.

It was following this encounter that Seaforth was advised to bestow the title of family poet on Murdoch. For perfection in the art of the *fear-dàna* Seaforth sent him to the poet *mac Mhurchaidh* (or *Mhuirich*) *mhic Iain Ruaidh* in Kintail. He was deemed to have reached this level when he made a satire on his tutor. He became known as *An t-Aos-Dàna MacMhathain*, or *Am Bàrd MacMhathain*, seemingly denoting his special status.

Seaforth gave him land in the Kirkton of Lochalsh, and another story has him in the north of Skye buying cattle. He was taking a short-cut through a field near Duntulm when he came upon a mad bull with MacDonald of Sleat and some of his men in hot pursuit. MacDonald shouted to Murdoch to turn the bull back, but instead he made a mocking verse. MacDonald didn't enjoy the joke — he put Murdoch in irons, tried him and sentenced him to death.

When Murdoch was about to be hanged, MacDonald took pity on him, because he was a well-made, brave young man, very competent physically as well as mentally. MacDonald offered him his life provided he married his sister, an ugly wretch of a woman with the pallour of sickness in her face. As soon as Murdoch saw her he decided that instant death was the better option. “Up with me! Up with me!” he cried.

Impressed, MacDonald ordered that he be released and his sister hanged in his place. Well, so the story goes.

Poets of Murdoch's stature functioned as the ambassadors of Highland chiefs. That is why on 12 January 1692 he was in Glencoe House on his way home from Inveraray, where he had been conducting Seaforth's business with the Earl of Argyll. He and one of MacIain's sons escaped the famous massacre with their lives, and when he returned to the glen next day, he sat on a hillock and made a powerful elegy.

*A' call na fala fo'n léintibh
Bha na fir bu mhór féil ri luchd-dàin . . .*

(“Oozing blood under their shirts / Were those men of great kindness to poets . . .”)

Murdoch lost his land in 1719, when the MacKenzies fought and lost the Battle of Glenshiel. In his old age he moved to Fernaig in Kintail, became very religious and started making hymns. He died in Fernaig at a great age around 1757.

The late Angus Matheson wrote in ‘Gairm’ in 1954 that there were only three songs in print which were definitely Murdoch's work — one to Lovat (c. 1717), one to Seaforth (1719), and one to Alastair Dubh of Glengarry (1724). These are all very fine praise-poems of a traditional kind. My analysis of Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair's ‘Dìomoladh Chabar Féidh’ last time seemed to suggest at first that it was in reaction to a serious song of that type, identifiable as the short version of ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ except that it also presented a ‘gathering of the clans’.

So is Tormod Bàn exclusively responsible for the rib-tickling parody which mocked the Munros? Well, there are three different places in which Alastair echoes parts of the long version which deal with the Munros' disgrace in the ‘Alness affair’. All are from early on in the long version — the second and third verses.

*Theich iad uile, cha d' rinn fuireach
An treas duine bh' acasan.*

“They all fled, there waited on / Not one man in three of them.” Alastair here mocks the MacKenzies for their miserable performance at the Battle of Auldearn in 1645 by repeating the exact words used of the Munros, Roses, Fraser, Grants and Forbeses in the long version.

*Gun dùisgte braise gun bhonn taise
Le barrachd spraic sa h-uile fear.*

“Unflagging courage would be stirred / With greater force in every man.” So Alastair speaks of the MacDonalds, reflecting the final phrase in a line about the fleeing Munros in the long version: *Mar sgaoth a dh'èoin nam fuarbheann / Is gruaim air a h-uile fear*, “Like a bird-flock from the bleak hills / With a scowl upon every man.” And finally:

*Meirghe a' Chabair thàrr i ás,
Gun tug i mach 'na buidealaich —*

“The antler banner got away, / And off it went like wildfire.” So Alastair mocks the MacKenzies' performance at Sheriffmuir in 1715. The first line echoes *MacAoidh nan creach gun thàrr e ás* (“MacKay of plunders got away”) in the long version.

This demonstrates conclusively that the ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ which Alastair knew, and which he said was by *am bàirdean Sàileach* — ‘the little Kintail poet’, presumably Murdoch — contained part at least of the satire on the ‘Alness affair’ as well as praise of Seaforth and the ‘gathering of the clans’. In other words, there is a lost ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ which contains all three elements.

That then is the evidence. What is the summing-up? I would like to offer a ‘conspiracy’ theory and a ‘cock-up’ theory.

The ‘conspiracy’ theory is that Murdoch Matheson, who was clearly capable of making comic satires, was responsible for everything, and regretted it. His ‘gathering of the clans’ fell foul of Mac Mhaighstir Alastair; his ‘Alness’ material fell foul of the Munros and others who, having come out on top in 1716, must not be further offended. The popular songmaker Tormod Bàn, conveniently far away in Lochbroom, was paid to claim responsibility, his payment being land in neighbouring Assynt, which the MacKenzies (finding it hard to control) had been busy mortgaging back to MacLeods ever since they obtained it in 1690.

If you think that’s far-fetched, try the ‘cock-up’ theory. Murdoch Matheson composes a song in praise of Seaforth which offers political advice and lists his potential allies (the ‘gathering of the clans’). It has a terrific tune and is a hit. The ‘gathering of the clans’ falls foul of the MacDonalds, and has been quietly forgotten by the time the ‘short version’ is written down. The tune is too good to waste, however, and Tormod Bàn uses it (along with quite a few of Murdoch’s words) in a song about the Alness affair which he composes to annoy his business rival William Munro of Achany. Not surprisingly, his first three verses creep into the version heard by Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair.

But it’s above all a Ross-shire song, so the version best known in Ross-shire — Tormod Bàn’s — is the one that’s remembered today.

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