

Whigs and tories

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

AS MY contribution to next Thursday's General Election, I'd like to examine the Gaelic connections of 'whig' and 'tory'.

I'll start with 'tory' because no etymologist has ever disputed its Gaelic origin. Its root is simply Irish *tóir*, Scottish Gaelic *tòir*, 'pursuit'.

At the point in the seventeenth century where it entered English it meant, according to the 'Oxford English Dictionary', one of the many Irish who had been dispossessed by plantations of English and Lowland Scottish settlers, and who had therefore become outlaws. They subsisted by plundering and killing settlers and soldiers, and were otherwise known as bog-trotters and rapparees (Irish *rapaire*, 'a robber').

Later the term 'tory' was often applied to any armed Irish Catholic or Royalist. The earliest citation in the 'OED' is from 1646, to 'some others of the Irish called Tories', but a more graphic one is from Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke's 'Memorials of the English Affairs' – he tells of eight officers who in 1650 were 'murder'd by those bloody Highway Rogues called the Tories'.

In those early days of the word it could be a verb. People 'went torying', and 'to tory' is defined by the 'OED' as 'to live as an Irish Tory or outlaw'. A letter written in 1651, now in the Irish State Papers, says that 'Sir Phill and Cormack Mulhallon Torye about Braintree woodes'. (This will be Brantry in Co. Tyrone, not Braintree in Essex!) And in his pamphlet 'The Author and Case of Transplanting the Irish into Connaught Vindicated' of 1655, Vincent Gookin commented that, rather than enduring famine in Connacht, 'many Inhabitants, who are able to subsist on their Gardens in their present Habitations, will rather choose the hazard of Torying, than the apparent danger of starving'.

There is one gap in our record of the word. Irish dictionaries give *tóraidhe*, *tóiridhe*, typically explaining it (as does Dinneen) as 'a tory, a robber, a highwayman; a persecuted person', but, as the 'OED' points out, this native form 'has not been found in writing, outside of dictionaries'. The monumental 'Dictionary of the Irish Language' confirms that this is indeed the case.

What we do have however is *tóraidheacht*, meaning the act of pursuing, hunting or searching, and thus a hunt, pursuit or search. It describes a whole series of wonderful tales which used to hold ceilidh-house audiences throughout Scotland and Ireland in thrall. A glance at the late Alan Bruford's book 'Gaelic Folk-Tales and Mediæval Romances', which has a chapter devoted to 'Pursuits', reveals many of their names. *Tóraidheacht an Chairthe Sgárlóide*, 'The Quest of the Rock of Scarlet'. *Tóraidheacht an Chuill Chorcaire*, 'The Quest for the Purple Hazel'. *Tóraidheacht an Ghiolla Dheacair*, 'The Pursuit of the Difficult Servant'. *Tóraidheacht Eilinn Sgiamhaighe go Críochaibh Lochlann*, 'The Pursuit of Beautiful Eileann to the Lands of Lochlann'. *Tóraidheacht Fhiacail Ríogh Ghréag*, 'The Quest for the King of Greece's Tooth'. And so on.

The gap in the record exists in Scotland too. The only Scottish Gaelic dictionary which unequivocally offers the word itself, as opposed to its root *tòir* or its derivative *tòrachd*, appears to be Armstrong's of 1825. He gives: "TÒIRICHE, *s. m.* (from *tòir*.) A persecutor, a pursuer. *N. pl.* toirichean." Dwelly reproduced this, a little doubtfully, marking it **, meaning 'from Armstrong'.

Authentic or not, *tòiriche* is a solidly Gaelic-sounding word for a tory, and in any case the English word has a Highland history of its own. The 'OED' points out that 'tory' was extended to '(a) robbers or bandits of other races, as Border moss-troopers, Scottish Highlanders, (b) Rajput marauders or outlaws'. The 'Mercurius Scoticus' of 28 October 1651 (the **WHFP** of its day, obviously) reported: "The Highlanders under Marquesse Huntley and Lord Balcarras . . . are now betaking themselves to the High-ways to play the Tories and Robbers." And referring back to that same period in his 'Secret and True History of the Church of Scotland' of 1690, James Kirkton wrote of how 'Middleton had undertaken to command the tories on the hills in Cromwell's time'.

As for the use of the term for a Rajputani marauder or outlaw in India, this comes from John Davies's 1662 translation of Mandelslo's 'Travels', in which he refers for example to 'the distractions which then shook the State wherein there were eight Armies of Tories, or common Rogues'.

The use of the word to mean an Irish outlaw seems to have become quite stereotyped by the end of the seventeenth century. The parish priests of Kerry were obliged in 1675 to declare and denounce from the pulpit all 'toreys, murtherers, thieves & Robors'; typically, an Irish historian remarked in 1693 that the Rapparees 'never can be reputed other than Tories, Robbers, Thieves, and Bogg-trotters', and the term was finally enshrined in law in 1707 when an act was promulgated 'for the more effectual suppression of tories, robbers, and rapparees'.

By then, however, it had taken on an important new meaning. In 1679–80 a campaign took place at Westminster to exclude James, Duke of York, from succeeding his brother Charles II as king on the grounds that he was a Roman Catholic, and the 'Exclusionists' moved a bill to this effect. Writing about 1734 in his book 'Examen', Roger North described amusingly how this Bill of Exclusion "led

to a common Use of slighting and opprobrious Words; such as *Yorkist*. That . . . did not scandalise or reflect enough. Then they came to *Tantivy*, which implied Riding Post to Rome . . . Then, observing that the Duke favoured Irish Men, all his Friends, or those accounted such by appearing against the Exclusion, were straight become *Irish*, and so *wild Irish*, thence *Bogtrotters*, and in the *Copia* of the factious Language, the word *Tory* was entertained, which signified the most despicable Savages among the Wild Irish.”

It was racist, and it caught on. In his diary for 24 October 1681, Oliver Heywood wrote of ‘a new name lately come into fashion for Ranters calling themselves by the name of Torys’. He went on: “A gentleman . . . had a red Ribband in his hat . . . he said it signified that he was a Tory, whats that sd. she? he ans. an Irish Rebel . . . I hear further since that . . . instead of Cavalier and Roundhead, now they are called Torys and Wiggs.”

North pointed out that the Anti-Exclusionists had thus been successfully stigmatised. “The Faction had found a sarcasmous Name to fling upon the Loyallists, . . . that of *Tory*, the same as savage Brute and Idiot.” With a delicious sense of irony, the distinguished editors of the ‘OED’ choose this point to declare: “Hence, from 1689, the name of one of the two great parliamentary and political parties in England, and (at length) in Great Britain.”

In the whole history of ‘tory’, then, there is only one weak link. The history of ‘whig’ is full of weak links, none weaker, in my opinion, than received opinion. Take John Ayto’s ‘Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins’ (1991). “*Whig*,” says Ayto, “appears to be short for the now obsolete Scottish term *whiggamaire*. This presumably originally meant ‘horse-driver’ (it is assumed to have been formed from the Scottish verb *whig* ‘drive’, whose origins are not known, and *maire*, a Scottish form of *mare* ‘female horse’), but its earliest recorded application was to Presbyterian supporters in Scotland. It was later adopted as a name for those who opposed the succession of the Catholic James II, and by 1689 it had established itself as the title of one of the two main British political parties, opposed to the Tories.”

Adrian Room’s ‘Brewer’s Dictionary of Names’ (1993) takes a similar line, but cites *whiggamore* instead. “This was a nickname for one of a group of Scottish rebels who in 1648 joined in an attack on Edinburgh in what was known as the *Whiggamore* Raid. The name itself probably derives from Scottish *whig*, ‘to urge’ and *more*, a form of *mare*. It was the Whigs who provided the nucleus of what became the Liberal Party in the 19th century.”

What is this word *whig* ‘to urge’, and who were these rebels? The ‘Concise Scots Dictionary’ gives ‘whig’ as ‘spur, urge (a horse) on’ (from late seventeenth century), adding that it is probably chiefly imitative, like ‘wheech’. But these rebels were Covenanters from the far south-west, which in 1648 means people whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents were very likely to have been Gaelic-speakers. Bring these facts together, and we have a likely derivation of ‘whig’ from *chuige* or *chuig* – ‘Go to it! Go on!’ There used to be something like this in the neighbouring dialect of Arran, which survived to the twentieth century – *thilg e thuige* ‘he threw to windward’.

Good evidence is forthcoming in Bishop Gilbert Burnet’s ‘History of his own Time’, written in 1715. “Those in the west,” he declared, “come in the summer to buy at Lieth the stores that come from the north: And from a word Whiggam, used in driving their horses all that drove were called the whiggamors, and shorter the whiggs.”

If ‘whiggam’ was used to drive a horse, it can only I think be Gaelic *chugam*, nowadays more often *thugam* or *thugainn*, “Come on!” Perhaps in Galloway it was pronounced *chuigeam*, but I think *chugam* would produce the English spelling ‘whiggam’ anyway.

Of course, if ‘whiggamaire’ and ‘whiggamore’ are from ‘whiggam’, the second element is unlikely to be a mare – which is just as well, since the idea of a Covenanter being called a “drive-a-mare” seems far-fetched to me. Why would anyone say that?

Turning once again to the ‘OED’, then, I find the term in all sorts of spellings – not only whiggamaire, whiggamore and whiggamor but whigimyre, whiggamair, whiggamer, whigmuir, wickhamer, wiggomer, whiggamoor and whigamore. Whiggamaire and whiggamore are the earliest on record (1649), followed by whigimyre in 1654, whigmuir in 1662 and wickhamer in 1666.

These can all be easily explained as Gaelic, Irish, Scots and English forms of *chugam* or ‘whiggam’ with an agential suffix. In Scottish Gaelic *chugam* would give *chugamair*, just as *clach* (‘stone’) gives *clachair* (‘a stonemason’). In Irish *chugam* would give *chugamóir*, just as *scríobh* (‘write’) gives *scríobhnóir* (‘a writer’). In Scots ‘whiggam’ would give ‘whiggamer’. And in England, where ‘whiggam’ would not be understood, it was reinterpreted as ‘Wickhamer’, presumably on the analogy of ‘Wykehamist’, a former pupil of Winchester College!

So I think I have managed to show that ‘whig’ is likely to have come either directly from *chuig* or via *chugamair*, *chugamóir* or ‘whiggamer’. In fact, both processes seem to have taken place. ‘Whig’, meaning a country bumpkin from south-west Scotland, is on record from 1645, four years before ‘whiggamaire’ and ‘whiggamore’. By the eighteenth century, at least, it was generally believed to be taken from a Scots word ‘whig’ meaning the sub-acid liquid that gathers on the surface of whey or buttermilk – which underlines my point that ‘whig’ meaning ‘urge’ looks like a late arrival in

Scots from Gaelic. Daniel Defoe wrote in 1717: “The word is said to be taken from a mixt drink the poor men drank in their wanderings compos’d of water and sour milk.”

From being a nickname for the Covenanting rebels of 1648, ‘whig’ came to be more generally applied to adherents of the presbyterian cause in Scotland. In 1679, as we have seen, it was applied to the Exclusioners at Westminster, and thereafter to one of the two great political parties of England and (from 1707) Great Britain. Referring to another term, ‘Birmingham Protestant’, North wrote in 1734 of the debate on the Exclusion Bill: “This held a considerable Time; but the word was not fluent enough for hasty Repartee; and, after diverse Changes, the Lot fell upon Whig, which was very significantive, as well as ready, being vernacular in Scotland, (from whence it was borrowed) for corrupt and sour Whey.

“Immediately the Train took, and, upon the first Touch of the Experiment, it run like wild Fire, and became general. And so the Account of Tory was balanced, and soon began to run up a sharp Score on the other Side.”

Contemporary chroniclers substantiate North’s account pretty well. In 1681 Narcissus Luttrell wrote: “The latter party have been called by the former, whigs, fanaticks, covenanters, bromigham protestants, etc.; and the former are called by the latter, Tories, tantivies, Yorkists, high-flown churchmen.” And the derivations of ‘Whig’ and ‘Tory’ were neatly summed up in 1683 by John Norris:

*The one of Caledonian race,
T’other has an Hibernian face.*

I must give the last word to a Gaelic poet, however. The Gaelic poets of 1680–1780 never used a term for ‘tory’ because they were tories themselves. On the whole, they believed in a Stuart restoration and were opposed to democratic principles in church and state government. That didn’t prevent them criticising failed leadership or exalting the dignity of labour. But they were *na Gaidhil* and they were *dileas* and *rioghail* and knew who their enemy was – *a’ Chuigse*.

Yes, they had borrowed the word back again in its English plural form. Whigs. As Sìleas na Ceapaich put it in 1715:

*Se rìgh na muice
'S na Cuigse Rìgh Deòrsa . . .*

(“The king of the pigs / And the Whigs is King George . . .”)

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