

## Fuddy Andy Duddy

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I introduced two different versions of a satirical song said to have been composed by an old MacLennan woman in Beaully in 1721 when the body of young Walter Ross, son of the Laird of Easter Fearn, was brought down from the battle of Àth nam Muileach, ‘the Mull Men’s Ford’ at the head of Loch Affric.

One version, placed on record by Inverness solicitor William Mackay, ends like this:

*Guidheam ceud buaidh-thapaidh leat,  
A Dhòmhnaiill ghasta ghleusta,  
A Dhòmhnaiill threubhaich churanta  
Nì feum dhe arm 's dhe éideadh!*

(“I wish you a hundred brave victories, / O splendid expert Donald, / O bold heroic Donald / Who makes good use of his arms and equipment!”) This is Col. Donald Murchison, the heroic factor of the exiled Jacobite Marquis of Seaforth, who was defending the Seaforth estates against all attempts by the Forfeited Estates Commissioners to take control of them and thus prevent him gathering the rents to send to the Marquis in France or Spain. They had appointed the Laird of Easter Fearn as their factor; the killing of his son, as he led the column of troops towards Kintail wearing a scarlet cloak and riding a white horse, was the result.

The other version, noted by Captain Alexander Matheson of Dornie in Kintail, comes to an end like this:

*Fudaidh andaidh dudaidh!  
Nach bu tubaisteach a' chòmhail  
Dar thachair prasgan ullamh oirbh  
Aig Beul Àth nam Muileach còmhlà.*

(“*Fudaidh andaidh dudaidh!* / Wasn’t the rendezvous unlucky / When a well-prepared war-band / Met you at the Mull Men’s Ford.”)

What’s *Fudaidh andaidh dudaidh*? Captain Matheson gives it as ‘How mean vile and trifling’, but this reeks of too much dictionary-thumbing – Macleod and Dewar’s, probably. Mackay’s version of the line is *Ud ud! Ud ud! Ud ud ian!* which I suppose we could translate as “Dear me! Dear me! Dear me John” or the like, John being nobody in particular.

Personally I would translate the line as “Fuddy Andy Duddy.” *Fudaidh* is ‘a vile, worthless fellow’, see Dwelly (his *fucaidh* is a misprint, I understand). *Andaidh* (Andy, Andrew) is a common name among the Rosses (*Clann Ainndreis*). *Dudaidh* is probably related to *tudanan* which we met last time in another composition on the event, ‘Marbhrann Bhàtair’, and can be interpreted as ‘a vile farting fellow’.

I would go further and say that this whole line raises the issue of the origin of the English slang expression ‘fuddy-duddy’, which the ‘Oxford English Dictionary’ gives as ‘origin unknown’. Its earliest occurrence (1904) is in America, though ‘Duddy fuddiel’ meaning ‘a ragged fellow’ was logged by the OED from Cumberland dialect in 1899.

Whatever lies behind it all, then, our line provides a very relevant first chapter in the history of the expression ‘fuddy-duddy’, so, whether we like it or not, it may be Gaelic in origin! Funny, isn’t it, to think that those Gaelic-speaking Rosses could be the first fuddy-duddies on record – the earliest old farts?

This sets the tone for me to introduce ‘Marbhrann Bhàtair’ (‘Walter’s Elegy’). It’s extraordinary that a relatively minor event like Walter’s death should have spawned so much art, but I think there are two emotions that can explain it. One is a sort of racial hatred – as I pointed out last time, he seems to symbolise all that the folk of Mid and Wester Ross disliked about the folk of Easter Ross and the Black Isle.

The other is guilt. Walter seems to have been little more than a boy, and in his description of the battle Captain Matheson is at pains to point out, no doubt reflecting oral tradition of the event, that his white horse and red cloak made him a conspicuous figure, and that the men who shot him had taken him for one of the Commissioners.

This doesn't mean that 'Marbhrann Bhàtair' articulates guilt. On the contrary, it sanitises it, anaesthetises it, and finally expels it through mockery and laughter. Significantly, it is said to have been composed by none other than Murdoch Matheson, *An t-Aosdàna MacMhathain* himself, Seaforth's family poet, the Kintail man who praised Seaforth (and Donald Murchison) with tremendous verve and energy, and who also seems to have been partly responsible for that other satirical tour-de-force, 'Moladh Chabair Féidh'.

Matheson chose for it the *crostanachd* mode, which mingles verse and prose and goes back in origin to medieval Ireland. The *crosein* who gave it its name appear to have been 'cross-bearers' in church processions who turned into strolling satirists. They praised their patron in the verse and satirised his enemies in the prose.

*Crostanachd* had great impact, and must have been enormously popular in the ceilidh-houses. It seems to have been performed as a duet. The verse was sung (in this case to the tune 'Òran na Feannaig' or 'The Song of the Crow'); the prose was declaimed, no doubt with much miming, mimicking, fooling about and the odd burst of instrumental music – right from its beginnings *crostanachd* was associated with the bagpipe.

The mimicking comes through strongly in 'Marbhrann Bhàtair' as it is spelt by John Mackenzie from Gairloch in his book 'An t-Aosdàna: or a Selection of the Most Popular Jacobite Songs' of 1844, and I will reproduce it here exactly as he gives it. He says it is 'by the Aosdàna MacMhathain, Seaforth's Poet, in mockery of the Munros and of the Gaelic of their district' (*leis an Aosdana Mac-Mhathain Bàrd Mhic-Choinnich, mar mhagadh air na Rothaich agus air Gàellig an dùthcha*). As I pointed out last time, the term *Rothaich* means Rosses as well as Munros. This is how it begins:

*Nach dubhach an sgeula so  
'Chuine 'dhéisd mi bho'n gearstoir,  
'M fear a b'fhearr anns an teughbail  
Thighinn o'n treud air muin eachu,  
'S ioma fear a bha deurach,  
Dal bha e leum air a leth-chois:  
Leam is duilich ri leughu  
Mar a dhéirich do 'n ghaisgeach.  
'Se dul bho rath!*

("How sad is this news, man, / That I've just been hearing — / How the best man in battle / Left the host dragged by horses; / Many grown men shed tears / As he hopped on one leg: / I find it wretched to read / What happened to the hero / When his luck changed!")

Readers familiar with Gaelic will have noticed all sorts of peculiar things, so I'll make some explanations at this point. Firstly, it's in very good rhyme. Secondly, throughout the whole poem John Mackenzie assists the readers of 'An t-Aosdàna' by glossing many of the words with tiny numbered footnotes, as if this were a foreign language. He explains 'Chuine as 'Dhuine, gearstoir as Ceart-uair, eachu as Eich and Dal as 'Nuair. The effect is a bit like on TV nowadays when someone talks in such a thick accent or dialect that they provide subtitles. It's not exactly flattering to the person concerned!

Thirdly, Captain Matheson made a translation which is now in Carmichael-Watson MS 123 in Edinburgh University Library. I have used it, but haven't stuck rigidly to it, although it has been very helpful. For example, the fourth line means very literally 'To come from the flock on the back of horses'; Matheson made it 'To come from the Host between Horses', and I have made it 'Left the host dragged by horses'. Clearly it depicts Walter being dragged down Strathglass on his slipe made of birch poles and wattles.

I have disagreed with Captain Matheson on the sixth line. He made it 'When he leaped with his steed there', and I have made it 'As he hopped on one leg'. There's no mention of a horse in the line at all, and as I said four weeks ago, John Mackenzie's understanding was that Walter's leg had been taken off by *peileir canoin*, literally 'a cannon bullet'. I can't visualise Col. Murchison's little army dragging cannon around the hills of Kintail, but Matheson tells us that Walter drew the fire of two of Murchison's best marksmen, Malcolm MacRae and Donald Derg MacLennan from Morvich. They must have shattered his leg. To say he 'hopped on one leg' is viciously cruel but probably true, and will have given rise to hilarious antics in the ceilidh-houses.

Each of the prose interludes is headed *Labhairt* – ‘Speaking’. The first one is: *Ochan! e chuine b’esan sin an gaisgeach na’m biu e air faighail tiom, nach drobh ach dà-bhlein-deug do dh-aois, a’s thogu e’m bol eòrn air mulach an each le barr òrdag a chas agus a làimhe gun aon aon duine ga chuideachu ach e-féin ’chuine!*

Matheson’s translation goes: “Alas man! He was a champion if he had lived; He was only twelve years of age when he could lift a Boll of Barley on the Horse’s back with the point of his toe and that without any help but himself man!”

This captures the flavour of the thing, but again it’s not quite accurate. ‘With the point of his toe’ should read ‘with the point of his toe and his thumb’. And did you notice the bad grammar as well as the funny use of words? Mackenzie glosses *mulach* as *muin*, *druim*, but also *each* as *eich*. If you thought things like *mulach an each* were being invented by the present generation of pupils in Gaelic-medium education, think again. This is a Wester Ross man accusing the Easter Ross folk of bad grammar in 1721.

The verse resumes:

*Gu’m b’e sid an sàr-ghaisgeach  
A mharbh an cat ’san àllt ghràda,  
Clamhan gobhlach nan cearc  
A thoirt o’n chaisteal le làmhaich;  
Marbh e sid a’s a’ chuthag,  
Le gunna buidhe a bhràthar,  
Robi-roid ’san dà phidheid,  
'S cha b’ fhear gun sithinn e’n là sin,  
A reu ’m pait!*

(“Now that was the true champion / Who killed the cat in the Allt Grànd, / To knock the fork-tailed kite that killed the chickens / Off the castle with his shooting; / He killed that and the cuckoo / With his brother’s yellow gun, / The robin redbreast and two magpies — / And he was no man without meat that day / To go in the pot!”)

The prose picks up the remark that ‘he was no man without meat that day’. *Ochan! e chuine cha b’e na là eile. Gonu latha ’chaidh e riabh a mach le gunna buidhe ’bhrathair féin, nach deanu e fuil mas tigu e.* “Alas man! Indeed he wasn’t, nor any other day either. Never a day did he ever go out with his own brother’s yellow gun but he drew blood before he got back.”

There’s an inversion of traditional heroic motifs going on here. First, the hero doesn’t have a weapon to his name. The fine gun with its polished yellow wood is not his at all but his brother’s!

Second, *sitheann*, which I have translated ‘meat’, means primarily venison, because the noblest of all pursuits was the hunting of deer, and secondarily game in general. Look at the ‘venison’ that Walter brings home from the hunt! A kite sitting on a castle wall, a cuckoo, a robin and two magpies.

There needn’t be much doubt where the verse is set. Foulis Castle, seat of the Munros, is only a couple of miles from the Allt Grànd. Maybe its name led satirists to associate it with various kinds of fowl. In ‘*Moladh Chabair Féidh*’ it’s the eagle of the Munro crest: *is breun an t-isean i air iteig* – ‘she’s a putrid chicken on the wing’.

Finally, what’s this about killing a cat? I think there’s more to it than meets the eye. The syntax at this point suggests to me that ‘the true champion / Who killed the cat in the Allt Grànd’ is not Walter himself but some legendary hero of the Munros and Rosses to whom he is being compared. If you read my articles here about *taghairm* a couple of months ago you will remember that the Devil sometimes appeared in the form of a cat. This would count for very little if it weren’t for the fact that the Allt Grànd (‘Ugly Burn’) has diabolical associations. Watch this space . . .

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