

Making fun of Walter's folk

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IT'S some weeks now since I first quoted from 'Marbhrann Bhàtair' ('Walter's Elegy'), a satirical composition by Murdoch Matheson from Kintail on young Walter Ross, son of the Laird of Easter Fearn, who died of wounds received at the battle of Àth nam Muileach in Mid Ross in 1721.

I'd like to pick it up again at a verse which sets the scene nicely. As before, I'm reproducing the spelling used by John Mackenzie in his book 'An t-Aosdàna' of 1844 to mimic the sounds of Walter's Easter Ross Gaelic.

*Ged nach eil mi ri tuiru,
Is mòr mo mhulad 'san àma so;
Dal a chaidh sibh air thuras
'S nach do bhuinig sibh ainm leis,
Thug sibh coinneamh do 'n duine,
Bu mhath fuireach 'sa gharbhlach,
Bhual am peileir stàn uras,
'S leag e fhuil thun' na talbhuinn,
'S i ruith gu bras!*

("Although I'm not grieving, / Great now is my sadness: / When you went on a journey / And came away with no credit, / You challenged the hero / Who stood firm in the rough ground – / The bullet hit him below / And his blood flowed to the earth / Running swiftly!")

This confirms that Walter's principal wound was in the lower body. *Stàn uras* is a curious expression, a bit of Easter Ross Gaelic no doubt, but Mackenzie helpfully glosses it *Gu h-ìosal* – 'low down, below'. What's more, in a translation now in Edinburgh University Library, Captain Alexander Matheson of Dornie gives the line as 'His Ball struck him low'. As for 'the hero / Who stood firm in the rough ground', this is Col. Donald Murchison, 'the Rob Roy of the North', the factor of the exiled Jacobite Marquis of Seaforth, whose rents Walter's father was on his way to collect when he and his troops marched into this hail of bullets.

'Marbhrann Bhàtair' is a *croasanachd*, that is, each verse of poetry is followed by a piece of comic prose. *Ochan! e chuine! na'm biu Bhàtar beò gus an lath'n diugh, cha be sid an fhuil nach dreu a pheu; — ach is dochair a thuirt mi sid, a chuin na'm biu e beo cha dreu a mharbhu. — Ach bi'dh latha ga chunntu a's latha gu pheu; cha deach da cheann an t-shaobhail cuideachd fathast, a chuin, ach ciod an càs?*

Captain Matheson's translation catches the flavour of this beautifully. "Alas man! If Walter had lived till this day that is not the blood but would have been paid. But how wrongly I have said that, for if he had lived he would not have been killed but there will be a day to count it and a day to pay it, the two ends of the world did not meet yet man but what of that."

If it sounds a bit daft, it's meant to. The verse is mock-heroic but the prose is mockery, pure and simple.

*Ach be sinne na Rothaich,
Bha ri gnothaich na'm faodu,
'S na faighe sinn Monair,
Bu mhogha onair nan daoine,
'S ann a bha ar cuid gillean,
Air am millu le maorach,
Ri tional nan siolag,
'Sa toirt biabh as an fhaochag
Le prine glas!*

("But we were the Rosses / With a mission if possible, / And if we got Monar / Greater still the men's honour / Would be, for our lads / Were ruined with shellfish, / Gathering sand-eels / And getting food out of winkles / With a grey pin!")

Captain Matheson made the first line “But we were the Munroes”; as I have pointed out, in Murdoch Matheson’s day Wester Ross folk like him seem to have made no distinction between Munroes (conventionally *Rothaich*) and Rosses (conventionally *Rosaich*). Walter was a Ross, of that there is no doubt.

The point about Monar (in Mid Ross) is mock-heroic – those who possessed it would dine off venison and beef, in contrast to the alleged seafood diet of the Munroes and Rosses.

Curiously, Captain Matheson translates *Ri tional nan siolag* not as ‘Gathering sand-eels’ but as ‘Gathering Husks and seedlings’. That’s certainly another meaning given for *siolag* in the dictionaries, but I don’t think there’s any doubt but that sand-eels are meant. They were traditionally caught by drawing a sickle through the sand by moonlight at low spring tides in autumn in places like the Uist fords, Northbay in Barra, and – presumably – Nigg Bay or the Dornoch Firth. *Cha chlibist a ghlacas an t-sìolag*, ‘it’s no accident that catches the sand-eel’, was said in Barra, because if not quickly seized they would slip back into the sand.

Sand-eels were used for bait in *creagach* (rock-fishing), but nowadays, with the explosion of the seal population, they’re becoming scarce. Perhaps there never were any sand-eels in rocky Loch Duich, so Captain Matheson misunderstood the word. Or perhaps he just couldn’t imagine people eating them. Our poet seems to count them as *maorach*, however, and Dwelly says they were ‘largely used as food’. On the traditional scale of what is respectable to eat, then, venison is at the top, shellfish at the bottom, and sand-eels even lower!

The prose picks up the hunting theme, but sticks to making fun of the facts. Walter was a laird’s son, and certainly never ate shellfish or sand-eels. *Ochan! e chuine! bu mhath an sealgair Bhàtar féin dal bha e beò, — bheru e air na féigh na fuiru iad ris. — Ghlacu e leòbagan anns a’ charaidh na’m biu an dìge duinte; mharbh e ’n fheannag a bh’ anns’ a phàirc, agus theiru Seanaid agam fin gu’m bu bhòidheach an t-eun sin a phidheid, a chuine!*

Captain Matheson: “Alas man! But Walter was a good hunter when he lived. He would catch the flying deer if they stopped to him. He would catch a lion in its den if the ditch was shut. He shot the royston crow that haunted the big rock at Brahan and a magpie in a park. My daughter Janet used to say it was a handsome burd the Magpie O man!”

Now who’s taking the mickey? “If they stopped to him” is of course a literal translation of *nam fuirgheadh iad ris*, ‘if they waited for him’. But the ‘lion in its den’ is no such thing. That bit really means “He would catch flounders in the weir if the dyke were shut”, the reference being to trapping fish by building a dyke on a tidal estuary or *cairidh*. Are we supposed to believe that Captain Matheson didn’t know what a *leòbag* was? Hardly. Or are we dealing with a translation which mocks the English of Easter Ross folk as mercilessly as the original mocks their Gaelic? That would make us think again about those ‘husks and seedlings’.

*Ach gur sinne bha cràiteach,
Dal chaidh t’fhàgail ’sa mhonu,
'S gur h-e torrunn na làmhach
A rinn Bhàtar a ghonu,
Ach na’n gleu sinn slàn thu
'S mor a thearnu tu dh’ onair,
Bhiu tu ’n ath-bhliadhna’ am Fearnaig
'S do chuid àraich am Monair:
A’s t-eacha glas.*

(“But we were shattered / That you fell on the mountain / When a thundering volley / Left Walter wounded, / For if we’d kept you whole / You’d have won immense honour – / You’d have been next year in Fernaig / With your cattle in Monar / And your grey horses.”)

That’s my translation. In Captain Matheson’s the second line runs: “When thou were left on the wold in the deasert”. He uses this (to me) ridiculous word ‘wold’ at every opportunity (‘In the wolds you have meet him’, for example, for *Thug sibh coinneamh do ’n duine*), and I now realise he must be making fun of book-learned southern English. It was 1721, remember, and to a bonnet laird like Easter Fearn it was time to educate his sons out of Gaelic and Broad Scots and into English so that the commercial opportunities of the fourteen-year-old Union could be grasped.

Matheson's translation of *do chuid àraich* is useful: 'thy shealing and dairy'. Whether *àrach* ('rearing') and *àirigh* ('shieling') are being deliberately confused is not the point. Either way, summer pasture for cattle is meant. Winter in Fernaig, summer in Monar. As for *t'eacha glas*, Matheson makes it 'thy gray steed', and who knows, it might be a reference to the 'white' horse Walter was alleged to have been riding when he was shot.

Back to prose. *Ochan! e chuine! is mòr an coll a chuir sid air Seanaid a'm-sa, bàs Bhàtair! Cha n-eil latha bhiu Bhàtar a' fasgnu nach faighu Seanaid am-sa boitean de 'n t-siol-choirce agus dà sgillig thun a phàpair thombac. Thuilleadh air sin mi-féin a bhi air mo chomharracha sios thun na Gàeldachd a dh'iarraidh bunndaist do dh' fhear-an-teth [Taighe] nach biu e ceart as aonais; a's ioma mìr de dh'fheoil fìobh [Feidh] a chuir e riamh tarsuinn gu mo bhial thuilleadh air sin — ach ciod an càs?*

Captain Matheson makes this: "Alas man! It has been a sad affair to my Janet the death of Walter. There is not a day Walter would be winnowing but my Janet got a small bag of corn and two pence for the Tobacco. Moreover that myself was pointed out for going to the lowlands for the landlords bounty for he would not be right without it. Many a tender but of Deers venison he has put over to my lips but alas the harm which befal him."

There are many things about ordinary people's lives to learn here. The Treaty of Union declared that the Scots currency would be worth one twelfth of the English, which is why *sgillig* ('a shilling') became the Gaelic for a penny, and so it remains to this day. Two shillings Scots (two pence sterling) bought Janet *pàpair thombac*, 'a paper of tobacco'.

And where exactly was Janet's dad appointed to go? *Sios thun na Gàeldachd* are the exact words – 'down to the Highlands', or rather 'down to Gaelic-speaking lands'. Look what Dwelly says under *sios*. "In *W. of Ross* *shìos* and *sìos* naturally mean west and westward respectively, that is, down the course of the streams and valleys, and *shuas* and *suas*, east and eastward. Yet, *shìos rathad Chataibh, down the way of Sutherland*, is the usual way of speaking of the part of Sutherland on the Moray Firth. These meanings of *sìos* and *suas* are now perpetuated in a curious way in the east of Ross-shire when speaking English . . ."

Gazing upon the world from the Hill of Fearn, it must have made perfect sense. North, west and south were all downwards, all Gaelic-speaking. Six years later a first cousin of Walter's condemned a woman in Dornoch to death for being a witch, the last such sentence ever pronounced in the newly united kingdom (and he was reprimanded for it). So these Rosses had some clout in Gaelic-speaking lowland Sutherland. As for the *bunndaist* or 'bounty' which the Laird of Easter Fearn wouldn't be right to do without, it is, quite literally, 'bondage', a feudal obligation on the part of a tenant to cut his landlord's corn.

As I interpret it, then, Janet's father was given the doubtful privilege of crossing to Sutherland in harvest-time to bring home a cargo of corn which had to be shorn for him gratis by Easter Fearn's tenants there – a dangerous-sounding mission, as bondage rights caused huge resentment. Typically the tenant worked three 'bondage days' in the year. James Murray's 'Life in Scotland' puts it like this: "The landlord might take the three days whenever he pleased; and when he demanded them at harvest the tenant had often grudgingly to neglect his own crops in order to secure those of his laird.

"In a climate where the weather cannot be depended on, it was a common spectacle, the husbands employed working for their masters while the wives toiled in the field securing their own corn. This arrangement was manifestly one-sided and unjust."

5 October 2001