

The remarkable Father Rigg

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

GEORGE RIGG, parish priest of Daliburgh in South Uist from 1894 to 1897, was the subject of three Gaelic elegies, one of them by his own predecessor Fr Allan McDonald.

For the first ten years of the Crofters' Act Fr Allan had worn himself out in the service of the parish (a big one of over 2,000 souls) while working as a county councillor, publishing a much-needed Gaelic hymn-book, and collecting folklore. In January 1894, his health having broken down, the Bishop of Argyll and the Isles gave him his beloved island of Eriskay as a new little parish to himself and sent Fr George to Daliburgh. I don't know where Fr Rigg was from, but perhaps Fr Allan's poem provides a clue:

*Eadar Uibhist is Cnòideart,
Gach taobh bha luchd eòlais,
Tha iad uile fo leòn mu d' dheidhinn . . .*

("Between Uist and Knoydart, / Wherever your friends were, / Because of you they are all in distress . . .")

The second elegy is by a man who worked alongside the young priest – Donald MacCormick, who farmed at Kilpheder and was the 'Compulsory Officer'. His job, under the Education Act of 1872, was to ensure that all children under 10 attended school: no mean task when they had to travel miles on foot to get there and were badly needed at home for herding and other tasks.

A few years later MacCormick was described by Frederick Rea, the schoolmaster at Garrynamonie (in 'A School in South Uist', now again reprinted, Birlinn £6.99), as 'a fairly educated man who spoke, read and wrote Gaelic and English quite fluently' and had 'a thoroughly independent outlook on men and matters'; he possessed 'clean-cut good features in which were set a pair of lean gray eyes', and Rea judged 'that he had travelled a lot in his earlier days'. His elegy on Fr George has a classic grace.

*Se do bhàs a dh'fhàg sinn lapach:
Thréig ar neart sinn o chaidh fòd ort,
Fhir a thagradh dhuinn an ceartas,
'S tu mion-fhaicilleach ad' chòmhradh;
Bu tu ar sgiath g'ar dìon fo d' fhasgadh
Nach leigeadh 'nar caraibh fòirneart —
Leat a dh'èireadh buaidh gach tagraidh,
'S cha b'e 'n gealtair aig a' mhòd thu.*

("It's your death that has left us weak: / Our strength has left us since turf went upon you, / O man who'd seek justice on our behalf, / You being carefully correct in speech; / You were our shield of defence in your shelter / Which would not allow oppression to grip us — / You won victory in every pleading / For you were no coward at the court.") Fr George, it seems, had continued Fr Allan's stern defence of the people's rights.

The third elegy is by Kenneth Paterson and is remarkable for two things. Firstly, unlike the other two, it is remembered and sung to this day, in fact in 'Eriskay Where I Was Born' Capt. Angus Edward MacInnes calls it one of the loveliest songs ever composed in South Uist. Nor is the loveliness all in the melody.

*B' òg a chaidh na bòidean ort
'S a ghabh thu stòl 'nad làimh:
An ceann na dreuchd tha sòlaimte
Bha gliocas mòr 'nad chainnt;
Gum bu deagh fhear-comhairl' thu
Toirt rabhaidh dhuinn 's gach àm
Sinn uile dhèanamh aithreachais
Mun tachradh dhuinn bhith caillt'.*

(“You were young when you made your vows / And took the stole into your hand: / When engaged in the solemn duty / You had great wisdom in your speech; / You were an excellent adviser / In warning us unceasingly / That all of us ought to repent / For fear that we might be lost.”) Secondly, Kenneth Paterson was a Protestant, and sometimes it shows.

*S ann a fhuair thu d' àrach
Leis a' Mhana bheò
Bha aig Maois 's aig Aaron,
Aig Sadoc, agus Iòb;
Is chaidh sìol nan gràsan
Chur san àit' seo leat ro mhòr —
Cha dìoch'nich an t-àit' seo thu
No 'm blas bha 'n cainnt do bheòil.*

(“You were indeed brought up / Upon the living Manna / That Moses had, and Aaron, / And Sadoc, and Job; / And you sowed the seed of graces / In the place to great effect — / This place will not forget you / Or the flavour of your speech.”) Like myself, Kenneth Paterson was a Protestant with great respect for Catholicism. He goes on:

*A Rìgh, bu deas air altair thu
Le d' phearsa bha gun sgòd,
Do chulaidh 's iomadh dath innte
Toirt Flaitheanas f'ar comhair;
An sluagh a bha gad éisteachd
Toirt adhradh dhan Dia Mhòr
'S an Iobairt naomh ga tairgse leat
Air son nam marbh 's nam beò.*

(“O King, how fine you were on altar / With your unblemished frame, / Your many-coloured garment / Bringing Heaven before us; / The people who were listening / Worshipping Great God / While you offered the holy Sacrifice / For the dead and for the living.”)

‘Unblemished frame’ or no, Fr Allan wrote in his diary of Fr George’s ‘struggles against his strong self, his struggles to be regular under circumstances that militated most against regularity, his suspicions that self was really at the bottom of the physical prostrations that came over him, whereas it was a weak heart and a weak constitution . . .’

This scrupulous, rather serious young man was faced in the summer of 1897 with an appalling situation. An old woman in Glendale was sick with typhus, and her own relatives were too afraid to look after her. Fr Allan (translation only, to save space): “Those in need were forsaken, / The parish lacking compassion / Enough to help a sick fellow-being; / You wished to give diligent / Service to Jesus / As He’s in the image of the poor in distress.”

Fr Allan wrote of Fr George’s ‘fidelity in serving for Christ’s sake alone persons to whom he had no personal attraction but the reverse’. And Paterson said: “You were very sorely tried / Amongst the people who had typhus (*luchd fiabhrais mhòir*) / Without anyone to help you / Or to put folk at their ease; / The disease was so infectious / That all sorts were too afraid, / But you’d go to every one of them / As you had promised in the oath.”

The Glendale people were fondly recorded and photographed by Margaret Fay Shaw in the 1930s for her book ‘Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist’. One of her informants, Peigi Anndra, whose own relations were neighbours of the woman in question, described the affair like this (again I translate). “Everyone in the house died. And he would be coming every day, Father George, to the house, and he would go in, take off the clothes he was wearing, put on other clothes, and go in; he would see to them, clean everything out, prepare food for them, they were getting no food anyway except milk, that’s the food they were getting.

“He would clean the house and sweep the house, and clear everything out, he would make everything so clean. No one else would go in at all, at all, at all.” Fr Allan said:

*Cha tillte le sgràth thu
Bho shaothair do Shlàn' eir,
Is chite gach latha 'nad leum thu
Thoirt sòlas dhan fhàdrach
'N robh còmhnaidh na plàighe —
Taigh brònach gun bhlàths gun chéilidh.*

(“Fear could not turn you back / From the work of your Saviour, / And you'd be seen every day in a hurry / To bring cheer to the dwelling / Which the plague had infested — / A sad house without warmth or visitors.”)

Peigi Anndra: “The old woman, the children's grandmother, she brought the youngest of the children down home with her. She lay down with the fever, and when she lay down, there was no one who would look after the child whom she had brought with her, and the child had to return home; some one went to look for him, and they brought him home out of it.

“The old woman died. She was lifted out of the house by means of a rope, they had found her dead inside, and no one was with her. They found her dead inside. They put a rope around her feet to get her out of the house.

“No one would go in, they were all too afraid to go in. It's with a rope she was lifted out, and they had to get a drink of whisky and those who were around her putting her into the coffin outside had to have taken drink, just to be half drunk, for fear they would catch the fever.

“None of them caught the fever. They put her in the coffin, and none of them caught the fever. That person's [grand]children were saved, and their mother was saved, they did not die, they were well enough after that.”

Fr Allan felt strongly enough about what happened to touch upon it in his famous song about Eriskay, ‘Eilein na h-Òige’. He scored this part through and suppressed it, but it was published in 1965 by Dr John Lorne Campbell.

*Dhe na ciontan tha sna h-uile
Gu bheil unnainn còir dhiubh,
Coimhearsp, Ceanraig agus Carachd,
Bleid an fhiabhrais mhóir ud —
Shadadh buileach ás ar cuideachd
Far na tuinne 'm pòr ud.*

(“Of the defects that all men have / We possess our own fair share, / But Hanging Back, Stubbornness and Guile, / Yon epidemic's Selfishness — / Those faults are now completely cast out / From amongst us across the sea.”)

When printing this, Campbell remarked that ‘this epidemic brought out the best qualities in some people – and the worst in others’. Too true. Peigi Anndra concluded: “In the house next door they died, every one. They were all killed in that house. Father George, he went home then, and lay down inside, and he died himself, he died in the hospital in Daliburgh. He was an extremely fine man too.”

Fr Allan: “You were a hero alone / Because no one would go with you / To the battle of mercy when needed; / You received a bad wound / And a hard death as you wished it, / With a blessed life of glory as blood-price.” *'S beath' bhuadhach na glòir' 'na éirig.*

Fr George had died on a red-letter day in the South Uist calendar, a day when, as we are told in ‘Carmina Gadelica’, the first fruits of the harvest were reaped and celebrated – the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, 15 August 1897. *Bha am poball sa truagh dheth / Féill Moire na Buana . . .* “This congregation mourned him / On Our Lady's of Harvest — / They were suddenly wounded, / Struck by a blow that was hard / The day that noble man died, / The day their good shepherd forsook them.”

Fr Allan pointed out in his diary that the ‘heroic charity’ of Fr George ‘was crowned

with a martyr's death and reward', and this theme was taken up by all three elegists. MacCormick: *Dheònaich Dia do thoirt 'na fhianais . . .* "God's wish is to bring you into His presence / For you to have the prize for your goodness: / Since you were shepherding His flock / With your deed you have proven your mercy — / For fear of one of them being lost / You sacrificed all wealth and possessions / Along with your life which was extra precious / Just as you promised to do in the vows.")

Paterson said: *Gun d'fhàg thu againn eisimpleir / Nach fhac' a bheag tha beò.* ("You have left us an example / That few alive today have seen.") And Fr Allan: "The most faithful shepherd of all / Who've accepted Christ's burden, / Your last hours proved that reputation: / Your love was of the degree / Most beloved by Jesus — / You laid down your life for your flock."

Do shaogh'l lig thu dhìbh dha d' threud e. It was a terrible thing to happen. "Poor diocese of Argyll and the Isles!" wrote Fr Allan. "The one priest of all others, the wisest and holiest, the most thoroughly permeated by the true spirit of the priesthood to be taken away . . . What a trial his Uist life was . . . Poor Fr Rigg will yet be known and appreciated and the influence of his life and death will go to teach us to hate self and to suspect self and to love our fellow man whoever he be as the brother of Christ.

"Since his death I see his character more clearly than I ever did when he was alive, and I will consider it a happiness for the rest of my life to have been acquainted with him. May his sincere holiness, and the clear perception of the duties and dignity of the priesthood that he had, teach me to think what I ought to be and to strive to be what I should be."

Coming from a man who had saintly qualities himself, this is worth noting. For these two men were different. "Decency" is the quality most remarked on in the three elegies, but "uprightness" is the one I associate with Fr Allan, whose intolerance of sinful behaviour (including the taking of strong drink) is still remembered in Eriskay. Finally, Fr Allan says:

*Tha càrn dhut an Tàllan,
Nì bàird dhut an dàintean,
Gheibh t' ainm air na pàistean spéis dhaibh . . .*

("Your monument's in Hallin, / Poets will praise you, and children / Will win honour by bearing your name . . .") And so it happened. Paterson named a son after Fr George, as did many others. In fact, anyone at all from South Uist called George is likely to be preserving the memory of the remarkable Father Rigg.

- These poems are in 'Eilein na h-Òige: The Poems of Fr Allan McDonald', to be published in February. The book will cost £12.95 but the publisher is making it available to **Free Press** readers at £10 per copy, post free. The offer remains open until 31 January. You can order 'Eilein na h-Òige' (ISBN 1 901157 61 X) direct from St Mungo's Gallery Books, 143 High St., Glasgow, G1 1PH, tel. 0141 552 5523, e-mail books@stmungo.org.

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