

Weather, weddings and social control

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I began assessing the poems of Fr Allan McDonald (1859–1905) as a source for ‘Gaelic ethnography’. The seven categories I use for assessment are ‘panegyric code’, ‘superstition’, ‘seanchas’, ‘meteorology’, ‘calendar’, ‘way of life’, and ‘material culture’. I covered the first two last time, so I’ll resume now with ‘seanchas’.

I would define ‘seanchas’ as ‘history, mythology and traditional wisdom’. As a Gaelic word, you could say it means ‘a ceilidh-house education’ as distinct from *foghlam*, ‘a school-house education’. For example, in one poem Fr Allan quotes someone as saying:

*Bha mi thall an tìr nan Rogal,
An crìochaibh Lochlainn tha ’n t-àite.*

(“I’ve been across in the land of the Rogals, / A place that is up Scandinavia way.”) John Lorne Campbell says in his book ‘Bàrdachd Mhgr Ailein’ that *Tìr nan Rogal* is a nickname that the Barra people had for Uist, but nobody I know from Barra has been able to confirm this. It sounds suspiciously like *Ro-Ghall*, which would mean ‘an out-and-out Viking’, and I get the feeling that the idea of a ‘Rogal’ as a Uistman is a red herring.

Another piece of ‘seanchas’ that has me puzzled is this, from a poem Fr Allan delivered as part of a wedding speech:

*Sibh Chlann ’IcilleMhaoil le chéile –
Bhith fadalach bu bheus don phòr ud!*

(“You are both of the Clan MacMillan – / They had a reputation for being late!”) Fr Allan had a very mischievous sense of humour, and is telling the couple that they had taken a long time to tie the knot. The trouble is that, as far as I know, traditional wisdom says this not about the MacMillans but the Mackintoshes – *fadal Chlann an Tòisich*, ‘the delay of the Mackintoshes’. Is Fr Allan taking liberties?

In this same piece (‘Banais Eóghainn agus Màiri’, ‘The Wedding of Ewen and Mary’), Fr Allan puts his eye on one of the wedding guests and tells him where to find himself a wife – in Bunavullin.

*Cha toir e sùil air leòmaig Dhòmhnach
’S an luath air Luan ’na gruaig ’s ’na sùilean
’S a cluasan làn de smùr na mòna,
Ach taghaidh e maighdeann cho grinn diubh
’S a chithear an taobh sa ’n Eòrpa.*

(“He won’t look at some Sunday smasher / Who has ash in her hair and eyes on Monday / While her ears are choc-a-bloc with peat-dust, / He’ll choose from them a girl as lovely / As any that’s seen on this side of Europe.”) It’s another piece of ‘seanchas’. *Maighdeann Sàbaid is capall Lùnastail* ‘a Sabbath maiden and a Lammass mare’ (alternatively *each Samhna ’s bean Dòmhnach*, ‘a Hallowtide horse and a Sunday wife’) were proverbially more showy at those times, not to be hastily chosen. Horses were displayed in particularly good condition at Lammass and Hallowtide fairs (1 August, 1 November).

Other forms of ‘seanchas’ in Fr Allan’s verse are the naming of places, battles and folk-tale characters. Of a man who goes about in rags he says: *Thug thu géill do Chorra Chriostag* – ‘You have given in to Corra Chriostag.’ This refers to the tale of Bodach an Ruamhair and his wife Corra Chriostag, which is told in J. G. MacKay’s ‘More West Highland Tales’.

Bodach an Ruamhair was hard-working but Corra Chriostag was lazy and dishonest. She would spin, but never got past the first hank of wool, which she would throw into the

corner, saying for her husband's benefit: "You stay there with the rest. There are many more like you."

Her husband would say: "Are you going to the weaver at all? I think it's time for you to go to the weaver."

And she would say: "I'm going soon."

She did go once, filling a bag full of peats and putting her single hank on top to pretend it was full of yarn. On her way there she drove the weaver's cow into a bog, and when the resulting confusion had been sorted out she claimed to the weaver that while she was helping him with his cow one of his men had stolen her yarn from the bag and replaced it with peats. "Since my problem was the cause of it," says the weaver, "I'll give you a web of cloth myself to make up for it."

On her way home with the web of cloth she met a crow calling: *Gòrag! Gòrag!* ("Silly woman! Silly woman!") It sounded to her like: *Is mise am fùcadair! Is mise am fùcadair!* ("I'm the waulker! I'm the waulker!") So at any rate she claimed to her husband, when she had got home after leaving the web of cloth to the crow instead of bringing it with her to organise a waulking . . .

It's clear from this, then, why a man wearing rags might be referred to as *an duin' aig Corra Chriosag*, 'Corra Chriosag's husband'. In one of his folklore manuscripts, now in Glasgow, Fr Allan noted the name as *Corra-Chniostag*, and I see from John Shaw's marvellous new book 'Brìgh an Òrain: A Story in Every Song' that the Cape Breton tradition-bearer Lauchie MacLellan, who was born in 1910, had it as *Corra Chriostag*.

In Skye a *corra chriosag* was a small insect like a leather-jacket, but as a woman's nickname *Corra Chriosag* is likely to signify "Preggers", if you'll pardon the expression – from *corra* 'sticking out', *crios* 'a girdle', and the feminine suffix *-ag*.

One more like this, then on to meteorology. Fr Allan says about a bumptious individual:

*Goileam Staoram fhéin, am burraidh,
Cha b' urra dha tighinn dlùth air!*

("Even the boasting of Staoram, the bully, / Couldn't come anywhere near him.") Does anyone know who Staoram is?

Meteorology, in the sense of Gaelic weather terminology, is the first subject I ever wrote about on this page. Fr Allan refers for example to

*Sìde chorrach ghruamach
Mar bu dual dhi san fhaoilleach*

('Rough gloomy weather / As is usual in wolftime'). *Am faoilleach* or *am faoilteach* means January nowadays and has earned itself a capital F, but it used to be a period of cold windy weather on either side of St Brigid's Day (1 February), usually reckoned as being four weeks long. So it starts next Friday. Being basically a wind-name it's often expressed in the plural, for example *na faoillich* or *na faoilleachan*.

I call it 'wolftime' in English because it was popularly believed to have something to do with *faol* 'a wolf', but amongst some jokes noted down by Fr Allan in a notebook now in Edinburgh University Library I came across this: *Dh fhairtlich orm riamh fhaighinn a mach de cheart fhacal a th' aca 'sa bheurla air son nam Faoillich? Theagamh le'r cead a Mhr. Iain nach robh na faoillich aca 'san àite 'san robhas a dianamh na Beurla.* ("I have never managed to find out what is the correct word they have in English for the *faoillich*." "Perhaps, if you don't mind my saying so, Father John, they didn't have the *faoillich* in the place where English was invented!")

I dare say Fr Allan got the joke from Fr John Mackintosh of Bornish.

Both my other two bits of meteorology have to do with springtime – February to April, that is. In one of them Fr Allan uses the word *crannadh*:

*Ma thig earrach air le crannadh
Gur neo-fhallain bhios a ghreann.*

(“If springtime comes with its shrivelling wind / Most unhealthy is its scowl.”) *Crannadh* is the noun ‘parching’ or ‘shrivelling’. It’s not a common word, but Fr Allan would have been reminded of it every New Year. On the stroke of midnight people would go out to the front of the house, because the wind at that moment was believed to predominate throughout the year, and so, with the help of rhymes like this, they could forecast what their food stocks were going to be like:

*Gaoth a-deas: teas is toradh.
Gaoth a-tuath: fuachd is feannadh.
Gaoth an-iar: iasg is bainne.
Gaoth an-ear: tart is crannadh.*

(“South wind: heat and produce. / North wind: cold and flaying. / West wind: fish and milk. / East wind: drought and parching.”)

From *crannadh* comes a wonderfully expressive adjective *crainntidh* (‘parching’, ‘shrivelling’, ‘death-dealing’). The great Lochaber poet Ewen MacLachlan had used it in a poem in which he speaks of the last of the winds of spring, the dreaded *cailleach* – *Crainntidh chailleach as beurra friodhan*. “Withering is the hag whose cutting edge is shrill.” As a Lochaber man himself Fr Allan would have known it well, and this is how he Christianises MacLachlan’s sentiment:

*Gaoth an earraich crainntidh séideadh,
Bian a’ chuain le rinn ga reubadh,
Cumaidh Micheil mìn fo sgéith sinn
Saor bho ghàbhadh ’s bho chruaidh éiginn.*

(“When the death-dealing wind of springtime blows, / And the ocean’s hide is being torn by its blade, / Gentle St Michael shields us under his wing / Free from danger and dire necessity.”)

St Michael was the patron saint of the islands and indeed of the church Fr Allan built in Eriskay; the people held him in such reference that Fr Allan was constantly being asked if his day, 29 September, was not a Holy Day of Obligation (a day kept like Sunday for ‘hearing Mass and resting from servile works’). With some embarrassment he had to tell them that it was not.

This brings us to my next category, ‘calendar’. Among Protestants the traditional season for weddings in the Highlands began as soon as the harvest was in, and lasted till the beginning of spring labour. So it was roughly co-terminous with the winter quarter, the months of November, December and January. For Catholics however there were certain exceptions laid down by the Church. Says Fr Allan:

*Bho thùs Aidbhein na biodh banais
Gu’n tig dà-là-diag den Nollaig
No sa Charghas gu Màrt Mionchaisg
Air son smachdachadh na colainn’.*

(“From the start of Advent let there be no wedding / Till there come twelve days of Christmas / Or in Lent until the Tuesday after Easter / For the mortification of the flesh.”)

In other words, Advent (from the Sunday nearest St Andrew’s to Christmas Day) was to be observed as a penitential season, extended for this purpose by the twelve-day period between Christmas and the Epiphany (6 January). So weddings could begin again after 6 January. They had to stop in February when Lent (*an Carghas*, from Latin *quadragesima* ‘forty days’) began, and could not resume until *Màrt Mionchaisg*, Low Tuesday in April

(literally ‘Tuesday of Little Easter’, the Tuesday following *Dòmhnach Mionchaisg*, Low Sunday, ‘Sunday of Little Easter’, the Sunday after Easter).

In saying this, Fr Allan was slightly at variance with the official ruling of the Church, which actually permitted marriage from Low Monday onwards! Perhaps his objection to weddings on Low Monday was due to the necessity of travel and preparation the previous day. By the way, at one time Low Sunday was also known in Gaelic as *Càisg nam Bodach*, ‘the Servants’ Easter’. There’s a loaded term for you.

In the same spirit of social control, Fr Allan reinforces the rules in one of his wedding odes where he cheerfully informs his audience not only who he expects to be getting married next, but when . . .

*’S mun tig Carghas oirnn, no Inid,
Fàsaichear spirisean gu leòr dhuinn
’S òlar galan leann – no dhà dhiubh –
Oidhche bainnse Màiri Móire!*

(“And before Lent comes, or Shrovetide, / Hen-roosts galore will be emptied for us / And a gallon of ale will be drunk – or two / Of them – on Big Mary’s wedding night!”)

I’ll cover ‘way of life’ and ‘material culture’ next time.

- The poems discussed are in ‘Eilein na h-Òige: The Poems of Fr Allan McDonald’, to be published next month. The book will cost £12.95 but the publisher is making it available to **Free Press** readers at £10 per copy, post free. This 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, or from your local bookshop.

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