

As daft as old Sam Coleridge?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN HER account of the tour of Scotland undertaken in 1803 by her brother William, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and herself, Dorothy Wordsworth tells (with a sparkle in her eye) how William and Samuel spent a long time one day discussing the precise meanings of words like ‘grand’, ‘majestic’, ‘sublime’ and ‘picturesque’.

Coleridge, in particular, was deeply interested in the development of terminology, carefully defined, to aid the construction and criticism of a new poetry. The terms were put to work on the hills of the Lake District by poets and meteorologists alike as they set out to establish clearly classified categories of visual experience.

Imagine the two men’s anxiety, then, as their coach rumbled into Scotland, to see if the same terms would work amidst new landscapes, and if fresh insights could make their meaning even more precise. Reaching Cora Linn on the Clyde, Coleridge was thrilled when another ‘scenic tourist’, a total stranger, turned to him and said, “Sir, it is a *majestic* waterfall.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Coleridge, “it is a *majestic* waterfall.”

“Sublime and beautiful,” enthused the stranger.

Dorothy concludes wryly: “Poor C. could make no answer.”

There’s a further irony, not noted by Dorothy but obvious to most readers of this paper I should think, that the Gaelic speakers who lived there a thousand years ago had named the place not for the waterfall but for the pool beneath it, which was a lot more useful no doubt.

It’s a salutary lesson as I go down for the third time in the pool of terminology I have created! I have been putting the poems of Fr Allan McDonald of Eriskay (1859-1905) under the microscope of ‘Gaelic Ethnography’ – a term I coined years ago to mean writings about Gaelic-speaking people, their way of life and way of thought.

I’ve been sorting the ethnographic content of Fr Allan’s poems into seven categories which I call ‘panegyric code’, ‘superstition’, ‘seanchas’, ‘meteorology’, ‘calendar’, ‘way of life’, and ‘material culture’. In my last two articles I covered the first five; now for ‘way of life’ and ‘material culture’.

‘Way of life’ means types of activity where the focus is on the activity itself rather than the objects used to pursue it (that’s ‘material culture’). It includes customs (not calendar customs – that’s ‘calendar’) but is much wider than that, because there’s also work and play. Maybe we could say that there are three sub-categories here, ‘work’, ‘play’ and ‘customs’ (Sam would have been proud of me), but I suspect it would be difficult to keep them separate. For example, in Fr Allan’s famous song about Eriskay, ‘Eilein na h-Òige’, are the lines:

*Fuaim nam feadan feadh nan creagan,
Leinibh bheaga dannsa,
Luchd na mara a’ sàr tharraing
Canabhas ri cranntaibh;
Éibh nan gillean shìos mun linnidh
Iad ag iomairt trang ann.*

(“Chanters sound among the rocks, / Little children dancing, / Expert mariners are hoisting / Canvas sails to masts; / Shout of boys down round the rock-pool / Intent upon some ploy.”) Work and play all mixed up. There’s plenty of work in ‘Eilein na h-Òige’, which is a truly great ethnographic poem, but let’s follow the ‘play’ strand instead.

*Luingeas bhioran aig na giullain
Air gach linn’ an snàmh iad:
Fear gan ligeadh, fear gan tilleadh
Air gach iomall bàghain;
Siud an iorram nach dian ciorram
Chuireas mir’ air àite,
Coimhling loinneil ud na cloinne –
Leam bu toil bhith ’m pàirt riuth’!*

(“The little boys have a fleet of sticks / On each pool where they can float: / One sets them off,

one turns them back / At each end of a little bay; / It's the boat-song that can hurt no one / And makes a place sound happy, / That cheerful racing of the children – / How I would love to join them!”)

No wonder he called the place *Eilein na h-Òige*. The Isle of Youth.

I hope I don't risk being labelled a Romantic like Sam when I point out how intertwined work and play could be in the Gaelic verse tradition. That's because song existed partly in order to make work a little lighter. The *iorram* ('rowing song') mentioned there is one example. The ceilidh-house – where people worked at the same time as singing, telling stories or discussing any subject under the sun – is another.

*Thall mun teallach faic a' chailleach
Cur 'na deannaibh cuibhle,
Fear an taighe, s luath a làmhan,
Dubhan cam ga rìghleadh;
Taigh a' bhealaich s mór an tathaich
Th' ann de dh'fhearaibh 's nìonag
'S fear dha'm b' aithne le sàr anail
Gabhail rann na Féinne.*

(“See the goodwife by the fireside / Setting a wheel spinning, / The man of the house, quick are his hands, / Is turning a bent fish-hook; / The house on the pass is filled to the rafters / By a crowd of men and girls / And a man who's able with breath unfailing / To sing a Fingalian ballad.”)

Waulkings are another example. First you gathered your team:

*Cha do dh'fhàg i tràigh no mòinteach
Nach do shiubhail i roimh àm fada
A thional nan nìonagan bòidheach
A bha sa chòmhlán thar a' mhaide –
Tha aon trì diag diubh sa chòmhlán . . .*

(“There wasn't a strand or piece of pasture / That she didn't visit in a short time / To gather in those lovely girls / Who formed the team round the waulking-board — / Thirteen of them made up the band . . .”) Six on each side of the table to sing the refrain, one at the head of it like a preceptor to give out the line.

*Gast' am faram aig a' bhannal
Th' air an teanal thall ud –
Luadhadh daingeann air na maidean
Chuireas plaid' an teanndachd;
Trom am buille, treun an ruighe,
Trang a' bhuidheann bhaindidh,
'N clò 'na shiubhal, dol an tiughad,
Rann cur ruith gun taing air.*

(“Fine's the noise made by the women / Gathered over yonder – / A firm waulking on the planks / Which distresses blanket; / Stout the wallop, strong the forearm, / Brisk the feminine band, / The cloth keeps moving, getting thicker, / A verse making it run freely.”)

In a very real sense the song was what brought out the nap on the cloth. Lauchie MacLellan of Cape Breton Island makes this very clear in John Shaw's splendid new book 'Brìgh an Òrain'. In Shaw's translation: “When they were singing the song and singing it correctly it was no effort . . . If they had a particular piece for making milled cloth it would require about four milling songs. Some songs contained twenty-eight verses, but there were other songs shorter than that and it would take perhaps four of those. But for blankets or the like, two of the big, long songs would do.”

If we considered that the cloth or the waulking-board and the words used for them were the most important thing about a description of waulking, we could log it under 'material culture' instead. Fr Allan does have something to tell us on this score – we've already met both *thar a' mhaide* and *air na maidean*, because the waulking-board was just a temporary structure consisting

perhaps of three long planks (*maidean*) or a door (*còmhla*) taken off its hinges; after the waulking it was put away in the barn and the space cleared for a dance. However the traditional term for a waulking-board was not *maide*, *bòrd* or *còmhla* at all but *cliath* ‘a hurdle’ or *cliath-luadhaidh* ‘a waulking hurdle’.

When I put my toe into verse as a source for Gaelic Ethnography on this page in 1996 (yes, you read it here first), I used as my sample the poetry of Donald Macintyre, *Dòmhnall Ruadh Phàislig*. I concluded that in his work ‘material culture’ could be sub-divided into ‘animals (including fish)’, ‘commodities’, ‘environments’, ‘objects’ and ‘processes’. At the risk of sounding as daft as Sam Coleridge, when I applied this yardstick to Fr Allan’s work I was delighted to find that all my categories were there. So here’s an example of each.

‘Animals (including fish)’ means of course ‘work connected with animals (including fish)’ – Fr Allan’s descriptions of wildlife for its own sake are excellent but they are not ethnography. The category could include, for example, herding (*buachailleachd*), wool-working (*calanas*), or, as here, rock-fishing (*creagach*):

*’N àm na Callainn’ feadh nan carraig
Bhiodh na feara greòd dhiubh:
Là gun dad aca gan ragach’,
’S latha sgaid gu leòir ann;
Fear a’ pronnadh, ’s fear a’ solladh,
Tional poball ghòrag –
Tàbh ga thomadh thun an tochair
’N-sin ga thogail fòpa!*

(“All over fishing rocks round the New Year / There stood the men in a crowd: / One day nothing to stiffen their line, / Another day plunder galore; / A man bruising shellfish, a man throwing it in, / Attracting a daft congregation – / A spoon-net dipped in as far as the seaweed / Then lifted up underneath them!”) The first four lines are about men working with ordinary baited lines, in the second four they’re catching young saithe and lythe – cuddies – by bringing a spoon-net up underneath them. A marvellous description.

By ‘commodities’ I mean ‘materials and food’, including things like dyes, food and famine, fuel, peat, heather, milk and milk products, potatoes, lazybeds and shellfish. A phrase like Fr Allan’s *griolag bheag bhuntàta ’s cudaig* (‘some small tatties and a cuddy’) would come in here. And look at this:

*Tha fraoch aig Màiri Mhór snìomh sìomain
’S Catrìona ’ic Iain ri manilla,
Is muran se bh’ aig Cairistìona
Is fiar grinn aig Isabella;
Cochall na beinne duinne
Aig Fionnghala far na Teanga,
Luachair, connlach is rainteach,
Se sin a th’ aig an fheadhainn eile.*

(“Big Mary’s splicing rope with heather / And Catrìona ’ic Iain with manilla, / And what Christina had was bents / While Isabella used fine grasses; / Flora from the Tongue made use / Of the brown hill’s vegetation, / While rushes, straw and bracken fronds / Were what the rest made ropes of.”)

He’s subverting the natural order of things. Rope-making is a ceilidh-house task but a men’s one; this is no ordinary ceilidh-house and it’s the women who are doing it. Why? Because it’s *Pàrlamaid nan Cailleach*, ‘the Women’s Parliament’, and they’re making ropes of every imaginable kind to catch men with! What a metaphor!

By ‘environments’ I mean houses, living conditions, lighting, personal hygiene, plenishings, shielings, thatch and so on – the domestic environment. For instance, in a philosophical poem clearly inspired by Burns’s ‘To a Daisy’ Fr Allan says: *Ris a’ gheamhradh cha téid eòintean / Seach a’ chòmhlaidh bhig aon eang*. (“In wintertime no daisy goes / A twelfth of an inch past the little door.”)

So the poor wee flower is stuck outside; but what exactly is the *còmhla bheag*, ‘little door’? I haven’t come across the term before, but two-leaved doors were common in the Western Isles –

you opened the top one to let the smoke and the light in, or the bottom one to let the dog out and the children in. If one leaf were smaller than the other, as seems likely, it would be called the *còmhlà bheag*.

'Objects' refers to boats, clothing, external fixtures, guns, implements, ropes and lines. When Fr Allan is making fun of a man who is both vertically and horizontally challenged – Dugald MacMillan, who kept the Eriskay post office – he makes Dugald's girl-friend say:

*Cuimhnich, 'ille, 'n crioma tartain
'S cruas a' mhaide bha gad fhàsgnadh!
Bha mi smaoineachadh do luadhadh,
'S dh'iarr té shuas do chur san àmhann!*

("Remember, boyo, the tartan stitch / And the hardness of the plank that squeezed you! / I thought of waulking you, and a woman up there / Wanted to put you into the oven!")

She seems to be listing four ways of increasing Dugald's height or girth. The third and fourth are clear enough – putting him on the waulking-board to thicken him like cloth and in the oven to make him rise like bread! The first two are not so clear, however. I suppose the plank (*maide* again) could be a wooden cheese-press, bearing down upon him at the turn of a screw. And perhaps the 'tartan stitch' (if that's what *crioma tartain* really means) is quilting?

Admittedly there were processes there along with the objects, and in my final quotation there's an object involved in the process. But it's still a process – we learn nothing new about foot-ploughs from it, and it fits perfectly into the definition of 'processes' which I published here on 12 April 1996: 'baking; basketry; corn-drying, kiln; fertilising, dunghill, seaweed; harvesting, hay; leatherwork, shoes; metalwork; ploughing, digging; sowing; transport; weaving; woodworking'.

*Bodaich throma, 'n cas air sgonnan
Chasa-croma, sgìths dhiubh –
Sruth den fhallas air am malaidh
Toirt air talamh strìochdadh.*

("Sturdy old men, their feet on the pegs / Of foot-ploughs, tiredness resulting – / Sweat in a stream upon their foreheads / Forcing the earth to yield.")

- 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. 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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