The little man of the Highlands

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

A WEEK or two ago I happened to be in the old graveyard at Cille Choirill in Brae Lochaber, and I was delighted to discover that, since my last visit, someone has given formal recognition to the tradition that the poet Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn is buried there.

For a long long time, you see, there has been an embarrassing problem. Let me explain.

Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh was the last of the great hunter-gatherers. His hunting-grounds were around Loch Tréig to the south of Brae Lochaber, where the West Highland Railway now runs, behind the mountains and on the very edge of Rannoch Moor. In his old age he lived at Fersit close to the north end of the loch, and his daughter Mary looked after him. This would have been about 1600.

Dòmhnall could scarcely do more now than move between his bed and the fire, but one day he was looking out the back window towards the hill, and what did he see but a great antlered stag grazing on the hill behind. “Quick,” he whispers to Mary. “Get my bow.”

His bow has been hanging in the rafters for years. Mary thinks the old man has gone off his head, but she gets it down. “String it,” he says.

“But there’s no one in the whole of Lochaber who could string it.”

“You try,” says he. And he helps her do it.

“Where are the arrows?” he says now.

Mary fetches the *bolg shaighead* and he takes one out. Balancing the bow on his knee, he takes aim through the window – no glass in those days – and fires. The stag drops dead. “Thanks be to God,” he says, “I didn’t expect to get the like of this ever again. That is my last hunt.”

He tells Mary to have him buried in Cille Choirill in the skin of that very stag outside the door of the church, with his face looking south towards Cròidhearg, the hill above Fersit.

Needless to say, it was done. His grave, wrote D. C. MacPherson in ‘An Gaidheal’ in 1876, can be seen today on the very edge of the brae where it begins to slope steeply down from the graveyard with a stone on it which Dòmhnall himself had carried on his back from the hills that he loved so much. MacPherson understood that it was Dòmhnall himself who said:

Fhir a cheumas air mo lic,
Seall a-rithist as do dhéidh
’S cuimhnich ged tha mi san uaigh
Gun robh mi uair cho luath riut fhéin.

(“O man who steps upon my stone, / Take another backward look / And mind although I’m in the grave / That I was once as swift as you.”) I suppose the idea is that in those days people would have climbed straight up the steep hill, using the stone as a marker for the church door that lay unseen behind. Nobody would do that today, because a road now snakes up the hillside from Achluachrach to a little car-park behind the church. The ‘backward look’ would have been across the valley of the Spean to the mountains of Loch Tréig beyond.

Now for the horror story. “Last year,” says MacPherson, “a turf and stone dyke and plantation were put around Cille Choirill, and the clumsy workmen who were employed to do it put one of the iron posts through the very middle of the stone just as if they were casting doubt on its authenticity!”

You can still see the stone with the iron stanchion plunged into its heart. And as if that Dracula touch were not enough, there’s more. Shortly after MacPherson published his article, Charles Fraser Mackintosh MP arranged for a magnificent monument to be erected at Cille Choirill to that other great Lochaber poet, Iain Lom. He consulted an old man who decided to be economical with the truth. Perhaps he didn’t actually know where Iain Lom was buried, perhaps he believed a story that he actually lies far away at Duthil in Strathspey. Anyway, up beside the Dracula Stone went a huge slab six feet high, beautifully decorated by John Rhind (who designed Mackintosh’s own Lochardil House and other buildings in Inverness) with a cross, tracery, a harp, the words “Ian Lom, Bard na Ceapaich”, and the verse:

An so 'n Dun Aingeal am Braigh Lochabar
Tha Bard na Ceapaich gu trom 'na chadal,
'S e Ian Lom Mac Dhomhnaill b'ainm dha:
Ian Lom, ach theireadh cuid Ian Manntach.

("Here in Dun Aingeal in Brae Lochaber / The Bard of Keppoch is sound asleep, / Iain Lom MacDonald was what they called him: / Bare John, though some said John the Stammerer.") My own understanding, from Stuart Macdonald's book 'Back to Lochaber', is that Iain Lom lies further up the brae, between the stones of Iain Dubh Aberarder and Bishop Ranald MacDonald.

After the monument had been duly erected, the parish priest, Fr John MacDougall, asked the old man why he had misled Mackintosh. The answer he gave may have had something to do with a tradition that Iain Lom had studied for the priesthood at Valladolid in Spain. "Iain Lom was fond of the scriptures," he said, "and I reasoned that he would like to be buried near the door of the church."

I wonder if there was a touch of superstition in it too. It used to be reckoned that you had a better chance of heaven if you were buried in the holy ground inside the church, rather than in the churchyard where fairs and markets were held and people chatted and fought and drank and children ran around and games like shinty and putting the shot were played. The result was that people attending services sometimes had to put up with bones and skulls protruding through the earthen floor on which they squatted – usually the bones and skulls of the gentry, who alone could afford the privilege!

Anyway, a measure of justice has finally been done to Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh, for a little granite slab has now appeared, sandwiched between Iain Lom's monument and the Dracula Stone. It's inscribed: "Domhnall MacFhionnlaigh / (Donald son of Finlay) / or / Donald MacKillop fl. 1600 / Keppoch Bard and Deer Hunter / Loch Treig."

Personally, I have my doubts about the MacKillop business, because an awful lot has been written about Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh, yet I think the only person to claim that he was a MacKillop is Alastair MacDonell, in some notes written in 1891 and now republished in Ann MacDonell and Robert MacFarlane's splendid book 'Cille Choirill'. My understanding is that he was a Glencoe MacDonald; whether that means he could be a MacKillop as well, I don't know.

Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh's great poem was 'Òran na Comhachaig', which means 'The Song of the Owl'. It's a very serious (but occasionally comical) poem about old age, hunting, mountains, nature, and time. It's full of the strange power of names and naming. It conveys a tremendous sense of place and of belonging – a deep love of the hills and the deer, a disdain for the human race, at least in comparison with the people Dòmhnall had known (or known of) in the past. For Dòmhnall represents the little man of the Highlands.

It gets under your skin, because its mood is extraordinary. Mountains appear to move; there's a new-agey sense of alternative religion; religious terminology is used without reference to God or Christ; water is preferred to wine, water-mills to castles; the tone is pacifist and totally 'green'. Dòmhnall loves hunting with hounds, admittedly – but then, we only got round to banning that a couple of months ago. He's the man the bosses forgot, or never knew. Joe Bloggs na Gàidhlig.

The poem wanders around, and by the end Dòmhnall is challenging Death himself to a fight. But it has always been called 'Òran na Comhachaig', and that tells us something. The old owl that it begins with must be of fundamental importance. Let's listen to what she says.

Chunnaic mi Alastair Carrach,
An duine b' allail' bha an Albainn:
S minig a bha mi ga éisteachd
'S e a' réiteach nan tom sealga.

("I have seen Alastair Carrach, / Scotland's most famous man: / I would frequently hear him / Arranging the hunting mounds.") Alastair Carrach was a brother of Donald, King of the Isles. He fought at Harlaw in 1411, and was the progenitor of the Keppoch MacDonalds. But that grand sort of stuff is taken as read. The fly-on-the-wall (or rather owl-on-the-branch) technique shows Alastair indulging his hobby instead. A bossy fellow, he's telling everyone

exactly where to stand with their hounds on the leash and their bows and arrows at the ready when the deer are finally driven through the *eileirg* or deer-trap.

Chunnaic mi Aonghas 'na dheaghaidh.
Cha b'e sin 'n roghainn bu tàire.
Sann san Fhearsaid bha a thuineadh
'S rinn e muileann air Allt Làire.

("I saw Angus who followed him. / He was an excellent choice. / He took to living in Fersit / And made a mill on Allt Làire.") This was Alastair's son. Note that chiefs did not succeed automatically but were chosen out of an eligible kin-group. Note that, in the style of Gaelic poets, Angus was 'not the worst choice' – that is meant as strong praise, so I've used the translation 'excellent'. And note that, uniquely for Gaelic verse, Alastair is praised for his common touch. He lives locally and builds a mill. I can't recall anyone else being praised in traditional verse for doing something useful. Anyway the poet now says to the owl:

Bu lìonmhor cogadh is creachadh
Bha 'n Loch Abar anns an uair sin.
Càit am biodh tusa gad fhalach,
Eòin bhig na mala gruamaich?

("There were many wars and plunderings / In Lochaber at that time. / Where did you go to hide yourself, / Little bird of the gloomy brow?") And she replies:

Sann bha 'chuid mhór dem' shinnsear
Eadar an Innse 's an Fhearsaid;
Bha cuid eile dhiubh mun Déabhadh.
Bhiodh iad ag éigheach mu fheasgar.

("Well, most of my ancestors / Were between the Insh and the Fersit, / Others were around the Déabhadh. / They'd cry out at evening time.") Or if we wanted to be very literal we could say 'They would cry out around vespers' because that is the real meaning of *feasgar*. See what I mean about religious terminology?

The Déabhadh ('Draining') is the spit of land between the Eadarloch and Loch Tréig, so we're moving south into the mountains. But that last line is typical of the poem's coy ambivalence. As well as being a *comhachag* an owl is a *cailleach oidhche*. A nun of the night? What's more, if her ancestors did their evening hooting when alive, she is merely saying that, be they owls or nuns, they did their job. But taken as an answer to the poet's question, perhaps it means that the spirits of her ancestors called out at evening, and that their presence implied the sanctuary of a holy place. But then she adds:

Nuair a chithinn-sa dol seachad
Na creachan is am fuathas,
Bheirinn car beag far an rathaid
'S bhithinn grathann an Creig Uanach.

("When I would see the forays / And the horror going by, / I'd take a wee turn off the road / And spend a while in Creag Uanach.") Her *car beag* is a touch of humour, for Creag Uanach is far, far away at the top end of Loch Tréig, a beautiful spot on the edge of Rannoch Moor. What a wonderful, common-sense, little-man, totally anti-war statement!

So where did Dòmhnall get this intriguing owl? That's the question I want to ask next time.

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