

The underbelly of history

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I'VE SAID it before, I'll say it again. As long as the Highlands and Islands had both ceilidh-houses and schools they had an education system second to none. Isn't it a pity that the school system was set up from the start to destroy the ceilidh-house? In so doing it has destroyed itself.

Let's take an example. It's extraordinary how different the bottom-up "ceilidh-house" story of the Highlands and Islands can be from the top-down "school" story of the Highlands and Islands. Now you may imagine that I'm going to talk about the Clearances, but no, I'll leave that to people who know more about them than I do.

I'm simply going to tell the story of an individual from the past who is totally lost from the history books. His name was Archibald MacDonald, but in the ceilidh-houses he was much better known as *Mac Iain Ghiorr*, the Son of Short John. The Rev. John Gregorson Campbell spells his name Mac Ian Year, which displays the pronunciation very nicely.

To the people of north Argyll, west Inverness-shire, Lochaber and the Small Isles, Mac Iain Ghiorr was the most famous MacDonald of Ardnamurchan who ever lived. But if you look for him in the histories of the Clan Donald – the three-volume one by the two Macdonald ministers, or the more recent single-volume one by MacDonald of Castleton – you won't find him. He isn't there.

Why? Well, unlike Clanranald, Sleat, Glengarry or Keppoch, MacIan of Ardnamurchan lost his land to the Campbells at an early stage, around the same time (the early 1600s) that the MacLeods of Lewis lost out to the MacKenzies. Campbell lairds and Cameron tenants poured in, and MacIan's people had to live by their wits or disappear. Mac Iain Ghiorr chose the former.

What it meant in practice was that he became thief, brigand, pirate, cattle-lifter – a member of the mafia, if you like. Despite Rob Roy, the history of such people has still to be written. It would be an "alternative history of the Highlands", because for two hundred years the Highlands and Islands had a black market economy as well as a legitimate one. It was laid open to inspection after the '45 when the estates of some of the Jacobite leaders were forfeited and censuses were taken.

In 1755–56, for example, Wester Finnart in Rannoch had ten joint tenants and five cottars. With their families they made up a population of 62. The number of acres in tillage was 24, the number of acres in hay was nil. Yet they had 190 head of cattle, 67 horses, 233 sheep and 162 goats. One joint tenant alone, Janet Cameron, had 26 head of cattle, while one "landless" cottar, John Cameron, had 72 head of sheep and goats!

They were about to be steered from the economics of Cù Chulainn to the economics of Adam Smith. There are no crofters in Finnart today, never mind cottars.

Since Mac Iain Ghiorr belongs to alternative history, you have to go to alternative sources to find him. The ceilidh-houses themselves are gone, but some of the education they provided lives on in the pages of nineteenth-century periodicals like "An Teachdaire Ùr Gaidhealach", early twentieth-century ones like "The Celtic Monthly", classic papers in the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness like Mrs Mary Mackellar's "The Sheiling" of the 1880s, books like John Gregorson Campbell's "Superstitions" and "Witchcraft" of 1900 and 1902, John MacFadyen's "Sgeulaiche nan Caol" of 1902 and J. F. Campbell's "More West Highland Tales" of 1940 and 1960 – and the archives of the School of Scottish Studies, represented in print by articles in "Tocher" like Morag MacLeod's "Mac Iain Gheàrr" in 1996.

Of course about half of that stuff is in Gaelic. And that's the answer to Highland historians who claim they don't need to know the language. They can manage, but their work is top down. There's a big underbelly and they usually don't even know it exists.

So let's look at the basic facts about Mac Iain Ghiorr. First, all sources agree that his name was Archibald MacDonald. Mrs Mackellar says: "He was of good family, being of the Macdonalds of Mingarry in Ardnamurchan. His mother had been early left a widow, and she married a farmer in Mull."

When did he live? Well, one of the salient facts about alternative history is that it doesn't give dates. You have to work them out using the clues given, like in a crossword puzzle. In

his historical poem “Blàr Shùnadail” the Islayman William Livingston made him a native of Sunart and a contemporary of Ailean nan Sop. Ailean nan Sop died about 1552, so that would put Mac Iain Ghiorr in the early 1500s. On the other hand, about 1870 an old man claimed to John MacFadyen that his own grandfather had once been in a band of men pursuing Mac Iain Ghiorr across Mull after he had stolen their horses; that would appear to place him in the early 1700s.

An anonymous contributor to “An Teachdaire Ùr Gaidhealach” in 1836 (perhaps the editor, Lachlan Maclean) claimed that Mac Iain Ghiorr was a native of Appin who inherited a small farm, lost it when young, took instead a tack of a much more substantial one in Ardnamurchan, and, after many adventures, deceptions and narrow escapes, died about 1650. This information was eventually picked up by M. E. M. Donaldson, who claimed in her “Wanderings in the Western Highlands and Islands” of 1923 that his new property in Ardnamurchan was Girgadale and that he was believed to have brought two sculptured slabs from Iona to mark his parents’ grave at Kilchoan.

The writer of 1836 tells the story of Mac Iain Ghiorr’s last raid. He landed with his men on one of the smaller islands off the coast (*aon de na h-eileana beaga bha air a’ chòrsa sin*) and quietly gathered its cattle, but their owner mounted a vigorous defence of his property and one of the raiders stupidly shot him dead. Mac Iain Ghiorr was tried for the crime at Inveraray but acquitted.

In his book “The Clan Gillean” of 1899 the Rev. Alexander Maclean Sinclair identifies the murdered man as Hector MacLean of Muck (second son of Lachlan MacLean of Coll, who lived from about 1582 to 1642 and had fought heroically at the battle of Kilsyth in 1645). So all in all it looks very much as if Mac Iain Ghiorr lived from about 1600 to 1650 – precisely the period in which the MacDonalds of Ardnamurchan became broken men.

As I will show next time, like Saddam Hussein, Mac Iain Ghiorr became famous in folklore for practising a particular type of deception which can best be described as: “Now you see him, now you don’t.”

He also seems to have been adept at spin. In his case, it meant manipulating to his advantage the superstitious fears of ordinary people. The writer of 1836 put it like this: “To frighten his countrymen (*chum giorag a chur air a luchd-dùthcha*), he took care to have frequent intercourse with a glaistig who was reputed to be in the district, about whom his own followers told so many tales of the authority he had over her, that they [his countrymen] were so frightened of him, that they did not have the nerve to keep watch upon their cattle, by which means this wily trickster (*an cealgair carach so*) was able to get hold of them with ease.”

That then is why there is a story that tells how Mac Iain Ghiorr’s thieving skills were given to him in the first place by a glaistig, just as the MacCrimmons got their piping skills from the fairies, and the Beatons got their healing skills from a salmon.

A glaistig is a supernatural creature that haunts Highland streams; I suspect the word is Pictish in origin and means “a female river-spirit” – if it were originally Gaelic it would be *glaiseag*. John Gregorson Campbell tells the story like this. “He and his brother Ronald (his own name was Archibald) were out hunting, and having killed a roe, took it to a bothy and prepared it for supper. He threw himself on a bed of heather, and Ronald sat by the fire, roasting pieces of the roe on his dirk.

“A woman entered the hut, and made an effort now and then to snatch from him some of the roasted flesh. Ronald threatened unless she kept over her paw (*sall*) he would cut it off with his knife. She appealed to Archibald: ‘Ho, Archibald, will you not put a stop to Ronald?’

“‘I will put a stop to him, poor creature,’ he said.

“He told Ronald to allow the poor woman – that they had plenty, and perhaps she was hungry. When leaving, the glaistig asked him to the door, and it is supposed then bestowed upon him his wonderful gift of theft.

“He built a large byre when he had not a single ‘hoof’ to put in it, and before long it was amply stocked. He hired the glaistig to herd for him, and she was to be heard at night on the tops of the cliffs crying, ‘Ho ho, ho ho,’ to keep the cattle from wandering too near the verge.”

The writer of 1836 tells us about this byre, too. After coming from Appin and getting a tack of land in Ardnamurchan, he says, Mac Iain Ghiorr put up a huge byre even though he

appeared to have no stock except a single filly (*loth*). His neighbours thought it was a huge joke, but he told them to relax (*iad a dheanamh air an socair*), that they would see his byre full by Christmas (*mun tigeadh an Nollaig*). And so they did. The filly seems to have become his faithful accomplice, like Roy Rogers and Trigger, and he taught her how to find her own way through the mountains with a string of other horses – stolen ones carrying plunder I suppose – tied to each other by the tail.

Gregorson Campbell continues his tale of the *glaistig*. “Her wages were to be a pair of brogues of untanned leather, and when she got these, like the rest of her kind, she disappeared. She seems, however, only to have returned to her former haunts, which extended all over Ardnamurchan from the Point to Loch Sunart.

“During her period of service with Mac Ian Year she made her appearance whenever he raised his standard, however far away she might be. Ronald’s dog had a great aversion to her, and chased her whenever she came near. She was then to be heard calling out, *Hó, ’Lasbaig, nach caisg thu ’n cù?* ‘Ho, Archibald, will you not call off the dog?’ – a common phrase in Ardnamurchan and the Small Isles to this day.

“It is related of her that to escape from her attentions Mac Ian Year and his brother resolved to remove to the Outer Hebrides. They had barely kindled a fire in their new dwelling when the *glaistig* called down the chimney they had forgot the old harrow, but she had brought it, and that she was only on the top of the Coolin Hills when the first clink (*snag*) was given to the flint to kindle the fire. There was nothing for it but to return to Ardnamurchan.”

Campbell points out that “this story of *glaistig* officiousness is an appropriation of a floating tale that had its origin long previous to Mac Ian Year’s time”, and that seems to be true, for it corresponds in many respects to a story called “An Dà Bhràthair a bha an Odhanaich agus *Glaistig na Beinne Brice*” (“The Two Onich Brothers and the *Glaistig* of Ben Breck”) told by MacDougall and Calder in “Folk Tales and Fairy Lore”.

What is unusual, and intriguing, is the suggestion that Mac Iain Ghiorr (or rather Mic Iain Ghiorr, the two brothers) could have been drafted into the story by their followers as “evidence” of their supernatural connections, much as civil servants in Whitehall were shown recently to have plagiarised a ten-year-old thesis from California to bolster the shaky case for war against Iraq!

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