Praise, dispraise and social control

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

IN HIS famous anthology “Sàr Obair nam Bàrd Gaelach”, which was first published in 1841 and went through many editions, John Mackenzie tells a story about the poet Duncan Ban Macintyre.

Macintyre was a member of the Edinburgh City Guard, the forerunner of the police force, and the story has to do with a character much further up the social scale in the town, John Campbell of the Breadalbane family, who was Cashier of the Royal Bank. “When he composed the inimitable panegyric of John Campbell of the bank,” says Mackenzie, “he waited on that gentleman, repeated the poem, and demanded a bard’s gift. ‘No;’ replied Mr Campbell, ‘what reward do you deserve for telling the truth? You must confess that you could say no less of me; let us hear how you can dispraise me, and then, I shall know, if you have been able to compose what you have repeated.’

“Well,” writes Mackenzie, “Macintyre commenced in the same measure, and continued in flowing and ready numbers till the gentleman was glad to stop him by giving him his reward.”

The praise of John Campbell of the Bank can easily be found today in Angus MacLeod’s edition of Macintyre’s poems, and it really is a splendid piece of work. It’s a little over the top for a banker. I heard Derick Thomson singing it once, in the heart of Breadalbane actually, and again he made a splendid job of it, because although he was a professor to trade he has, or had, a very fine singing voice.

I couldn’t help smiling, which put Derick out a little bit, and I had some trouble explaining to him afterwards that what I was laughing at was the incongruity of such a well-crafted song being so well sung in honour of the Cashier of the Royal Bank of Scotland, with his hat and his curly wig, as if he were a warrior or a hunter or a lover. *Banc an òir bhith fo d’ sgòid*, says Duncan, *ann an còir dhleastanaich* . . . (“A bank full of gold tucked under your coat by right of employment . . .”)

I wonder if John Campbell, equally, suspected that the mickey was being taken. Could that be why he wanted to know exactly what Duncan would do differently if he set out to insult him? Did he say to himself, “If this is praise, who needs dispraise?”

Duncan’s impromptu song of dispraise to John Campbell of the Bank has not been preserved, so we don’t know what it was like. But the relationship between praise and dispraise in Gaelic tradition seems to have been every bit as close as Mackenzie’s anecdote suggests. You praised a man by calling him a lion, you dispraised him by calling him a hedgehog. You praised him by showing him hunting on a high mountain, you dispraised him by showing him hunting on a dunghill. You praised him by showing him drinking, you dispraised him by showing him eating.

It’s rare to find praise and dispraise of the same person by the same poet. The most famous example is Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair’s praise and dispraise of the beautiful Mórag. She was his lover, or so he claimed, and the dispraise was made at the insistence of his wife. As this is a family newspaper, I can say no more about it here.

You can imagine, then, how pleased I was when I came across some verses called “Dàibhidh Greòsgach Crom Ciar”, consisting of praise and dispraise of the same man, by the Rev. Angus Morrison, minister of Contin in Ross-shire. This was a real bonus, because the use of satire by members of the clergy (both Protestant and Catholic) in the interests of social control is another topic that fascinates me, and it isn’t easy to find examples.

Morrison, who lived from about 1660 to 1740, was a son of John Morrison, tacksman of Bragar in Lewis. He was a younger brother of a more celebrated poet, Roderick Morrison, *an Clàrsair Dall*. The late Rev. William Matheson tells us all about both brothers in his book “The Blind Harper”. Mgr Aonghas certainly did use satire in the interests of social control. At a wedding, he is supposed to have said to the bridegroom:

Ge salach i ’s ge rapach i
’S ge dubh lachdann riabhach i,
Se do chuid-sa ’n-dràst’ i.

("Dirty and untidy as she is / And black, sallow and grizzled as she is, / She's yours for now.")

The bridegroom replied: *Mas e sin mar a tha i, tha gu leòr agam dhith*. "If that's how she is, I've had enough of her." And he refused to continue with the ceremony.

When another couple came to the Rev. Angus to be married, the young man remarked to him that he had bought a churn and a quarter pound of tobacco at a fair, and that the tobacco had been stolen from his pocket. At the *banais* afterwards, Mgr Aonghas intoned:

Ghoideadh an cairteal tombac' ás do phòcaid
Chuireadh an raipeas air do bhòrr bhuidhe,
Is mura bitheadh e air do ghualainn
Is e a bheirte bhuat am muidhe!

("From your pocket was pinched the quarter pound of tobacco / Which would have left a dirty stain on your yellow gob, / And if it hadn't been up on your shoulder / It's the churn that would have been taken from you!")

When the bridegroom heard that he said, "I will give you sixpence if you will praise me."

Fair a-bhos i, said Mgr Aonghas. "Hand it over." And he declared:

Fhuair mi sia sgillinn
Air son an fhir ud a mholadh,
'S cha rachainn thairis air cuspair
Ged theirinn Busaidh ri Borraidh —
Busaidh! Breunaidh! Borraidh!
Se Busaidh fhéin
A b' fheàrr a fhreagradh ort!

("I've received sixpence / To praise that man, / And I'd not miss the target / If I called Gobby a Smouty – / Smouty! Filthy! Gobby! / It's Smouty in fact / That would suit you best.")

A glance at *fudaidh* in Dwelly's dictionary reveals who had taught him such impious language.

So far, it seems that Mgr Aonghas scarcely understood what praise was, and that he also knew very little about the behaviour appropriate to a man of the cloth. So let's turn to "Dàibhidh Greòsgach Crom Ciar". It was published by John Mackenzie in a shorter anthology, "An t-Aosdàna", in 1844. Mackenzie explains it like this. "The Rev. Angus Morrison, minister of Contine, Ross-shire, and brother to the celebrated Rory Dall the Harper, is considered the *Dean Swift* of the Highlands.

"Mr Morrison, one harvest-day, had gone round among a few of his parishioners, canvassing for shearers to cut down his corn, which was then over-ripe, and shaking with the wind. Among others, he called upon a weaver of the name of David, and implored his assistance, which, however, the weaver stoutly refused, and continued to ply his shuttle, to convince the minister that he was in a hurry with his web.

"His reverence was not to be put off so easily. He stood aside the loom, folded his arms akimbo, and commenced satirizing his gruff parishioner, asking at the end of every stanza, by way of episode, '*A Dhaibhidh an téid thu bhuain?*' *&c. i.e.* 'Will you come and shear, David?'"

This is how the poem begins.

Dàibhidh greòsgach crom ciar,
S gile 'n ròcas na bhian —
Bha mi eòlach air riamh,
Fear bu ghreòiliche fiamh . . .

("Grinning, swarthy, hunchbacked David, / Whiter is the rook than his hide – / I know him only too well, / Man of most filthy complexion . . .") Mackenzie explains: "The weaver, like a strong built impregnable fort, withstood the bomb-shells of his antagonist for a considerable time, and sulkily answered the query with "No, never!"

After the first four lines Mackenzie prints a row of asterisks, showing I suppose that there were four more lines which his informant had failed to supply. Then the poem continues.

Nuair thogadh tu rithe h-aodach
'S a lìonadh tu balg na gaoithe,
Cha bhiodh crann gun ròpan caol ris,
Toirt abhsadh bho thaobh gu taobh dhith;
Gur h-e 'm buamastair blàr
Bheireadh ruaig air an spàl –
Fhir bu luainiche làmh
Timcheall chuach am biodh snàth!

("When you would hoist her sails / And fill the bag with wind, / No mast would lack a slender rope, / Slackening her sail from side to side; / The dark-skinned white-faced rascal / Would go mad with the shuttle – / O man most restless of hand / Around cups full of thread!")

Now William Matheson called the poems of Mgr Aonghas "rather tasteless effusions", but there's something a little deeper here which reminds me of the superb satirical technique of Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair. A traditional craftsman himself, Mgr Aonghas looks to a variety of traditional crafts for his imagery, each distinguished by a fresh end-rhyme – "ao", then "à".

First there is seamanship. Is Mgr Aonghas saying that David sails a boat as well as working his loom, and should therefore be good at reaping the harvest too? I have my doubts about that, because Contin (Strathpeffer to you and me) is an inland parish. So is the boat a metaphor for his loom? A glance at Dwelly's presentation of *beart-fhigheadaireachd* shows that a loom had a *crann*; *aodach* (cloth), *ròpan* (little rope) and *abhsadh* (slackening) are all as relevant to weaving as to seamanship; *balg na gaoithe* (the windbag) is as good a metaphor for the weaver's own puff as for the sail of a boat.

Then, with a nod to animal husbandry, we come to the loom itself. I have translated *blàr* as "dark-skinned white-faced" because it denotes a white splash on the nose of a cow or horse. As for the "cups full of thread", Mackenzie treats us to a footnote. "The Highlanders, in warping tartan fabrics, before *pirns* and *reels* were known to them, were wont to keep the thread balls distinct, by confining them separate in hollow dishes.

"As the colours were sometimes numerous, it was necessary to put in requisition *every* variety of household utensils; and the poet's allusion to these sources of supply for the loom, conveys an effective description of the ludicrous motion of the hand in passing the variegated streams of thread. The above mode of warping is still general with country weavers."

Far from being crudely insulting, these verses seem – so far – more like a tribute to the weaver's skill. Is it possible that Mgr Aonghas really deserved to be bracketed by John Mackenzie along with the author of "Gulliver's Travels" as the Dean Swift of the Highlands? We'll see next time.

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