

The Dean Swift of the Highlands?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

*A Dhàibhidh, an téid thu bhuaibh
'S gheibh thu pàigheadh Di-Luain?
"Cha téid!" arsa Dàibhidh.*

("David, will you go reaping / And you'll be paid on Monday?" / "No I won't!" said David.)
That's the refrain of the song I introduced last time. The Rev. Angus Morrison, a native of Bragar in Lewis who was minister of Contin, was trying to persuade a weaver called David to help him with his harvest. Was he – as John Mackenzie alleged when he published the song in "An t-Aosdàna" in 1844 – the Dean Swift of the Highlands? Or was he just an insulting bully who behaved as no parish minister should behave? Well, he went on:

*Cha do chuimhnich mi do bhoineid
Air na chàraich thu 'm bréid soilleir
Air a' chùil a tha neo-loinneil
Dh'fhàs 'na ghadmainn ghartach ghoirid.
O, brògan àrd' air mo ghaol,
Dà chois stàbhach 's iad caol –
B'e siud mèirleach nam faobh,
Ceann nan cnàmh a dh'fhàs faoin.*

("I had forgotten your bonnet / With the bright patch you've fixed on it / On the hair so unsightly / Full of short hungry nits. / O, high boots on my darling, / Two thin spindly legs – / Yon was the thief of the spoils, / The bony head that's gone daft.")

"The cannonade," Mackenzie commented, "became louder and more loud,—every ball took effect with indescribable force,—every succeeding stanza excelling its precursor in pith, sarcasm, and power."

*Chan iarradh tu solas gu d' shuipeir,
Ach sathadh crom mar a' mhuc innt';
Bu leathann do lorg sa bhutar,
Bhiodh forc nan cùig miar gam putadh!
O fhir nach iarradh an sgian
Gu dhol sìobhalt san ìm,
Gum b'e 'n òrdag do mhiann
Cur greim geògach gu d' bhial.*

("You'd seek no light to your supper, / Just bending over to thrust like a pig in it; / Your track would be broad in the 'butters', / The 'fork' of five fingers pushing them! / O you who wouldn't ask for a knife / To cut the butter politely, / Your thumb is all you'd desire / To put a gluttonous bite in your mouth.")

It's a pretty good illustration of the principle that to praise a man you show him drinking, to mock him you show him eating. The five-fingered "fork" is obviously David's fist. As for the "butters", Mackenzie provides this explanation of *butar*: "So rendered by the poet, to make the eatables as odious and detestable as the eater. Highlanders never call butter which has been spoiled in process of churning, or otherwise dirtied or damaged, by its proper Gaelic name, *im*: such stuff is universally recognised by the word *butar*, which implies the whole deteriorating round of finger-marks, hairs, and dirt, on that esculent commodity."

As for the thumb, I've heard that's exactly how Highland housewives used to make a "piece" – into the churn went the thumb, out it came with a lump of butter, and what could be quicker than a thumbnail for spreading it on the bread?

Mackenzie sums up the story so far like this. "The weaver was put into the most ludicrous and pitiful position,—he now figured as a glutton, now as a Toby Toss-pot, and anon was metamorphosed into the paragon of all that is dirty, mean, and base. He began to wince,—the foundations began to shake,—the parson perceived the disposition to yield, and, like a

skillful general, taking advantage of the undermined state of his foe, he concentrated his energies, and hurled one final volley at the weaver.”

*An fheusag a b' fhaide gun bhearradh,
Chan fhàgadh na siaban glan i —
Chan eil duine beò air talamh
A dh'fhaodadh seasamh ri t' anail;
Leis an tòchd bha den bhéist,
Fuil is fèoil agus créis,
Fhir bu chailltich' air spréidh,
Tuiteam sìos air a' chléith.*

(“The beard that’s longest unshaven, / No mere rinsings will wash it – / No one living on earth / Could ever stand your breath; / With the smell off the monster, / What with blood, flesh and grease, / O thou destroyer of cattle, / All the wattles fall down.”) What Mgr Aonghas is saying here, I think, is that David’s body odour is so bad that it knocks down strong men, maims cattle, and causes the wattlework which holds in the walls of houses to give way. This, says Mackenzie, was enough.

*“A Dhàibhidh, an téid thu bhuain
'S gheibh thu pàigheadh Di-Luain?”
“Théid, théid,” arsa Dàibhidh.
“A bhean, càite bheil mo chorrán?”*

“Yes, yes,” says David. / “Wife, where’s my sickle?” Or, as Mackenzie puts it, “Yes, yes! I’ll shear for you for ever, if you promise not to make that song public. Alas! alas! that ever I refused you.—Come, goodwife, get me my sickle!”

David accompanies the minister to the harvest-field. He works hard, and when the day’s labours are over he is invited to the manse to wash away his fatigues (as Mackenzie puts it) in a draught or two of the beverage of the country. Following these refreshments David summons up his courage and says: “Now, Mr Morrison, after shearing so well, don’t you think me worthy of a song in my praise?”

“Yes,” says Mgr Aonghas, “most undoubtedly, my good fellow, and here goes.”

The four verses that follow have as their refrain:

*A Dhàibhidh, on chaidh thu bhuain,
Gheibh thu dàn agus duais.*

(“David, since you went reaping, / You’ll have a poem and reward.”) Does Mgr Aonghas flip the coin from dispraise to praise? Does he show David as a great drinker and warrior and hunter and lover, fierce as a lion, generous to a fault? Well . . .

*Di-Dòmhnach 's tu siubhal leargan
Nuair a bha càch anns an t-searmoin,
Chaidh muc is torc riut a sheanchas:
Creididh clann gur sgeula dearbht' e,
A leòghainn euchdaich mo ghaoil
Chuir na béistean ud aog
Leis a' bhéigileid chaoil —
Cluinnear sgeul ort 's gach taobh!*

(“On Sunday as you were travelling hillsides / When everyone else was at the sermon, / A pig and a boar arrived to converse with you: / Children will believe it’s a proven story, / O heroic beloved lion / Who slew those beasts / With the slender bayonet – / News of you is everywhere heard!”)

*A' bhliadhna chaidh an crodh na bheinn ort
'S a chaill na gobhair na minn ort,*

*Lìonadh tu phoit chun a' chuibhrig
De dh'uisg' an uillt 's de chàl;
Chaithte 'n fhéist air an làr,
Cha bhiodh spéis ac' do chlàr —
H-uile fear aig nach biodh spàin
Bheireadh e slig' às an tràigh.*

("The year the cattle went to the hill on you / And the goats lost the kids on you, / You would fill up the pot to the lid / With water from the burn and cabbage; / The feast would be spread on the floor, / They'd have no respect for a table – / Every man who didn't have a spoon / Would take a shell off the beach.")

*Chan fhac' mi riamh do cho-ionnan
Gu biadh a chur air bialaibh duine —
Cha b'e cnag de bhonnach tioram
Ach truinnsear crom is sgonn im' air;
An éigh an-sin air a' chàis,
An té bu tighe 's a b' fheàrr —
Cha b'i sgian dubh an droch fhaobhair
Bheireadh caob aiste gun bhlàths.*

("I've never seen your equal / For putting food in front of people – / No little crust of dried-up bread / But curving plate with lump of butter; / Then the cry goes up for cheese, / The thickest and the best one – / No black knife of bad blade could take / A slice from it without exertion.")

*Cha robh ceàird san d'fhuair thu t' fhoghlam
San tugadh duin' eile còrr ort —
Bu mhath thu gu snìomh na clòimhe,
Ga h-armadh le ìm 's le eòlan;
'S bu mhìn bog òigheil do làmh
'N àm a sìneadh do chàch,
Am boinne fallais le do mhala
'S an leac theallaich fo do shàil.*

("There's no trade which you've been learned in / At which anyone could surpass you – / You'd be good at spinning wool, / Greasing it with oil and butter; / Smooth, soft, girlish was your hand / When you'd stretch it out to others, / The bead of sweat going down your brow / And the hearthstone underneath your heel.")

What's going on here? Real poetry, for one thing. But what does it mean? Well, it started as traditional praise – of a sort. David was a lion, successful in the hunt. But he did his hunting when he should have been at church. He slew the beasts with a bayonet (there will be a story behind that). And children will believe it. Only children?

Then we had a verse about hospitality. But David's hospitality was a damage limitation exercise. The year he lost his cattle and goats he provided his servants with cabbage soup, which they scraped off the floor with shells from the beach. It's as close as we get to being told his guests got anything to drink. If this is praise, who needs dispraise?

The next verse, too, was about hospitality. Again it approached something like praise. David served not bread but butter. But his cheese was very hard. And really, it wasn't very polite to mention food at all in a praise poem, except for something special like wheaten bread.

Finally there was that verse about greasing wool, a girlish hand, a bead of sweat and a hearthstone underneath the heel. It's beginning to sound a little bit steamy. We will never know into quite what territory Mgr Aonghas was taking us however, for at this point, says Mackenzie, David began to claw his head, and to grin like a badger, and just as the minister had finished the fourth stanza, he exclaimed: *Stad, stad, a Mhaighstir Aonghais, chan eil mi 'n dùil nach co math an dìomoladh fhéin ris a-sin!* "Stop, stop, Mr Angus, by my soul, I cannot distinguish between the abuse and the praise!"

So, was the Rev. Angus Morrison the Dean Swift of the Highlands? Well, this stuff is scarcely “Gulliver’s Travels”. There again, I think it was unfair of the Rev. William Matheson to dismiss it as “rather tasteless effusions”. Here was a man who satirised and satirised again to get the social control that he craved. I suspect he regarded praise as being for God alone.

There’s a curious epilogue. When Mgr Aonghas was on his death-bed, says Matheson, his wife was at his side with one of the elders. His wife was continually rocking herself, sighing and saying, *Ochadan mar tha mi ’n-diugh*. Finally Mgr Aonghas said from the bed:

*Ochadan mar tha thu ’n-diugh
'S Aonghas Dubh a' dol gu bàs —
Cha dèan e pòsadh no baisteadh
Is chan fhaigh thu dad bho chàch.*

(“Alas for how you are today / With Black Angus on the brink of death – / He’ll marry and baptise no more / And you’ll get nothing from anyone.”)

The elder protested. “Mr Angus, Mr Angus, isn’t it time for you to give up that sort of thing, when it’s more than likely that you are to part from the world in a very short time?”

The answer came from the bed:

*Dealaichidh sinn ris an t-saoghal
Is dealaichidh an saoghal rinn,
'S ged bheir thu ’n t-aodach dhen gharman
Leanaidh armadh ris an t-slinn.*

(“We will part from the world / And the world will part from us, / And even if you take the cloth off the beam / Some dressing-oil will stick to the sley.”)

The beam and sley are parts of a loom, and what Mgr Aonghas meant was that old habits die hard. But why pick a weaving metaphor? Is it possible that David was in his thoughts?

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