

## The Italian Connection

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

WRITING in “The Celtic Magazine” in 1876, a certain Alexander Mackay claimed that in the traditional Gaelic mind, the country above all others in which the “Black Art” (by which he meant witchcraft) was to be acquired was Italy.

At first sight this may seem like a very strange claim to make. Today we associate Italy with sun, smart cars, pasta, smart suits, gondolas, ice cream, Inter Milan, the Mafia, hmm, the Pope. HmMMM. Could it be that there is some basis for the idea after all? Throw in fine wine and Signor Berlusconi, and you begin to get a feel for how the traditional Gaelic mind was working.

Actually if we were to explain it by reference to such things, the explanation is none of the above. We can exclude the Pope and the Catholic Church completely, because the belief is a very old one and comes up as much in Catholic areas of the Highlands as in Protestant ones. In fact the culprit seems to be the first phase of the Renaissance.

A thousand years ago the first Arabic treatises on science and medicine were appearing in the Italian-speaking world, and a college sprang up at Salerno in which they could be translated and studied. In due course universities were established further north in Italy, in places like Rome, Florence, Padua and Milan.

Among the scholars who worked on these texts was one of our own, Michael Scot, who has been described as “the leading intellectual in western Europe during the first third of the thirteenth century” – that is, 800 years ago. According to Lowland tradition his birthplace was Balwearie in Fife, his principal residence Aikwood Tower near Selkirk, and his last resting place Melrose Abbey, but he is known to have spent his life in the rapidly-developing universities of France, Spain and Italy. Gaelic tradition is full of stories about him, and in all of them he is a wizard who knows how to call up the devil.

The tales about Michael Scot don't say where or how he acquired his skills, but other Gaelic stories about the black arts make it quite clear that their source is in Italy. Take “The Chisholm's Black Chanter” (*Feadan Dubh an t-Siosalaich*), which was collected for J. F. Campbell nearly a century and a half ago and is published in “More West Highland Tales”. Long ago, it begins, Chisholm of Strathglass travelled to Italy to learn black magic – *chaidh an Siosalach Glaiseach air aiseag don Eadailt a dh'fhaotainn leasan don sgoil duibh*.

His wife became very uneasy about his absence, and sent their piper, a man called Cameron, to look for him. He found him in a church in Italy and told him that at all costs (*air na h-uile cor*) he must go home. They went to the master of the school (*Char iad an sin a dh'ionnsaigh a' Mhaighstir-Sgoile*), who urged them to go, telling them that there was a man lying in bed with the lady of Strathglass, but that for a certain sum of money he could transport them both home to Chisholm's house at Erchless before daybreak (*gun cuireadh esan iad le chéile gu tìr an Earghlais mun tigeadh an là*). He gave him a chanter (*thug e feadan da*), which they had to keep playing till the cock crew. Chisholm asked him to give it the power (*buaidh a thoirt air*) to tell him every event (*na h-uile car*) that would ever happen to his family, and so he did.

*Bha fear mu seach dhiubh a' cluich gu fada den oidhche, agus thuit iad 'nan cadal, agus dhùisg iad ann an coillidh Roise, fo Chaisteal Earghlais, am beul an latha.* “They played it turn about far into the night, and fell asleep, and woke up in Ross Wood, below Erchless Castle, as the day was breaking.”

Naturally Chisholm ran to the castle to see who was with his wife, and the “man lying in the bed” turned out to be his own son, a bouncing baby boy born just the previous night. So all was well, and the chanter continued to do its good work, for death never came to a Chisholm without a crack appearing in it. Each time this happened a silver band (*cearcall airgid*) was fitted around it. There are five on it now, the storyteller says, but some have fallen off, because it has always been in use as a pipe chanter (*'na sheannsair do phiob*).

The presence of five silver bands on the chanter made it a powerful object, in the occult sense. Just one silver band on your walking-stick was enough to keep the devil away. So they say.

Hugh Cheape has a paper in the latest volume of the “Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness”, just out, on the origin of the MacCrimmons. He quotes a remark made of Dòmhnall

Duaghail, a MacKay chief with an uncanny reputation: *Nach robh e san Eadailt far an d'ionnsaich e an sgoil dhubh?* "Wasn't he in Italy where he learnt the black art?"

The celebrated Gaelic writer the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod, Caraid nan Gaidheal, tried to turn the Italian connection from folklore into history. He wrote in 1840: *Thainig a' cheud fhear do 'n ainm so maille ri Mac Leòid o bhaile anns an Eadailt d' am b' ainm Cremona. Bu chruitear a bha san duine so. Bha e 'na fhear-ciùil ainmeil 'na latha 's 'na linn féin. Ghabh e ainm an àit anns an d' rugadh e, agus na thainig uaithe dh' ainmich iad Clann-'ic-Chruimein.* "The first man of this name came with MacLeod from a town in Italy called *Cremona*. This person was a harpist. He was a famous musician in his own day and generation. He took the name of the place in which he was born, and his descendants they called the MacCrimmons."

Now the name MacCrimmon may be Norse or it may be Irish, but it certainly has nothing to do with a town in Italy. Perhaps MacLeod had heard the pipe tune "The Battle of Cremona", no doubt he knew about the *feadan dubh*; anyway, he put two and two together and made three. The comments of Fred T. MacLeod in his book on the MacCrimmons are revealing: "The oft-repeated statement that the first member of the MacCrimmon family was a native of Cremona in Italy, and that MacLeod of Dunvegan, when on a visit to that town, took this man into his service as a musician and brought him home to Dunvegan, giving to him the name 'Cremonach', is, in my view, erroneous.

"It has been suggested that this man became MacLeod's piper and that his descendants, following the usual highland custom, prefixed 'Mac' to their surname. So far as I have been able to ascertain, these statements first appeared in the short account of the MacCrimmons written in Gaelic by the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod (Caraid nan Gaidheal). Dr MacLeod, unfortunately, throws no light on the source of his information.

"When in Skye over thirty years ago I conversed with my grandfather, who was then bordering on 100 years of age, and from him and other old people in the MacCrimmons' native parish I endeavoured to ascertain local knowledge as to the origin of the family, and I found the Cremona view strongly supported, which I at first regarded as important. It was, however, frankly admitted to me by the people who expressed that view that they were simply following the lead of Dr MacLeod, with whose Gaelic account of the MacCrimmon family they were familiar."

Norman MacLeod, the old man in question, was born in 1802 and died in 1901. Fred MacLeod was quite impressed by reports of the Cremona tradition being heard in St Kilda, but it has to be said that the essays of Caraid nan Gaidheal would have been read in the ceilidh-house – or indeed in the church – there as elsewhere. When Caraid nan Gaidheal's son-in-law, the Rev. Archibald Clerk, reprinted the offending essay he quietly added some words at the beginning of the statement to absolve his father-in-law from blame: *Tha iad ag ràdh gu'n d' thainig a' cheud fhear de 'n ainm so maille ri Mac Leòid o bhaile anns an Eadailt d' am b' ainm Cremona . . .* "They say that the first man of this name came with MacLeod from a town in Italy called *Cremona* . . ."

I recall that in the 1960s the deputy director of the College of Piping in Glasgow, Thomas Pearston, took advantage of a holiday in Italy to research the matter in Milan's Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Not surprisingly, he found nothing!

I described this process as putting two and two together and making three. Maybe it would be better expressed as subtracting one from two and making three. The Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod didn't believe in things like the fairies or black magic and thought he could subtract the supernatural elements from folklore to turn it into history.

What he didn't understand is that folklore is about psychology and sociology as well. "Italy" was a good word for "somewhere else". And in my next article I aim to show that "Spain" occasionally did the business in the same way.

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