

The seven wonders of Scotland

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

HERE'S one for VisitScotland, or maybe the Cultural Commission. What are the seven wonders of Scotland?

To the sound of axes grinding, I'd suggest: the toll-free Skye Bridge, Billy Connolly, the Book of Kells, the new Parliament, the School of Scottish Studies sound archive, Dolly the Sheep, and the Gaelic language (a great national treasure, says the Cultural Commission).

What are yours?

I'm inspired to ask the question by an item in a hilarious satirical magazine called "A' Bheithir Bheuma" ("The Smiting Dragon") published in 1845 by John Mackenzie from Gairloch. It's headed *Iongantasan!* ("Wonders!") and reads simply: *Tobraichean Ghlinn-Iuch!* – *Mòr-chùis a' Phuist!* – *Drochait Abar-Pheallaidh!* – *Clach a' choire a'm Baile-pheatrais!* *Cluig-Pheairt!* – *A' Chlach-Tholl an Asaint 'us an Gramar-Dùbail!* *Seachd iongantasan mòra, mòra, na h-Albann!*

I'd translate it like this: "The wells of Linlithgow! – The conceit of "am Post"! – The bridge of Aberfeldy! – The kettle stone in Balephetrish! The bells of Perth! – The stone with the hole in it in Assynt and the Double Grammar! The seven great, great wonders of Scotland!"

I bet you didn't think of any of those. They consist of two natural and three man-made wonders as seen from a traditional Gaelic point of view, providing a comic framework for two more where Mackenzie has a satirical axe to grind. But let me take each of the seven in turn.

John Gregorson Campbell wrote that Linlithgow was "celebrated for its wells", and W J Watson confirms in his "History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland" that "its wells, reckoned as one of the marvels of Scotland, are *tobraichean Ghlinn Iucha* (or *Iuch*)". *Linn* may have turned into *Gleann*, but the town's name means essentially the same in both English (actually it's Welsh) and Gaelic: "the Lake of Damp Hollow".

The place has always been remarkably well watered. At its centre is the Cross Well. In 1633 it was adorned with a carved unicorn to mark the visit of Charles I, and in 1806 it was made into an elaborate fountain on three levels. The stone figures are believed to represent people from Linlithgow's past, such as the town drummer and a flute-player. They were the work of an Edinburgh mason called Robert Gray. Remarkably, he had lost a hand fighting in the Napoleonic Wars and executed these intricate carvings with a chisel in his good hand and a mallet attached to the stump of his other one.

East along the High Street, where the roundabout is today, was the Whitten Fountain. It took its name from a former Sheriff Clerk of Midlothian, who died in 1889 and left £1,700 for a wrought iron fountain to be erected there on the site of a former well. Then there's St Michael's Well, which still bears Linlithgow's motto: "St. Michael is kinde to strangers."

For those who didn't want to walk to the Cross for their water there were three wells between it and the West Port – the Lion Well, the Dog Well and the New Well. The stone structure which housed the New Well can still be seen in the street, but the others have gone. No doubt their water gushed out of the carved mouths of a lion and a dog.

Linlithgow has a royal palace, built by James IV and improved by James V, father of Mary Queen of Scots. It was where she was born. In the inner courtyard James V placed an elaborately-carved fountain whose surrounding figures are said to represent the Three Estates – lords, clergy and merchants. The palace was one of the first buildings in Scotland with a piped water supply, and this was linked to the new fountain. The town council followed suit, piping water to all the wells to ensure consistency of supply. Linlithgow was one of the first towns to do so.

As if all this wasn't wonderful enough, on festive occasions the Palace well flowed – so they say – with wine. According to Robert Chambers, the last time it happened was when Prince Charles passed through on 15 September 1745. "Charles was conducted in triumph to the palace, where a handsome entertainment was prepared for him by Mrs Glen Gordon, the keeper of the house, who, in honour of the visit, set the palace well flowing with wine, of which she invited all the respectable inhabitants of the burgh to partake. The Prince mingled in their festivities with his usual grace."

Sounds like a riot, but it wasn't. No doubt Mrs Gordon did put some wine in the fountain in honour of tradition, but other sources tell us that the Prince spent the day quietly in the Palace, making plans for the capture of Edinburgh. He slept that night in a farmhouse three miles east of the town.

Mackenzie's second wonder is "the conceit of *am Post*". This refers to a nom-de-plume in a monthly magazine called "Teachdaire nan Gaidheal" which apparently ran for thirteen issues from January 1844 to January 1845. It was edited by John Forbes, a schoolmaster at Fort Augustus who later became minister of Sleat. I've only ever seen the first issue, and there's no sign of "am Post" in it, but obviously he wrote in some of the others, because Mackenzie mentions him elsewhere in "A' Bheithir Bheuma". For example, a review under the heading "Teachdaire nan Gaidheal" announces the publication of the new journal by *comunn a' chul-taigh ann am Baile nam breabadairean* ("the back-yard association in Tradeston"?) whom it names as "an Cuairtear", "am Pungar", "am Post" and "an Gille Fionn-umh". It mocks their platitudinous poetry and their bad Gaelic, detailing their many errors at length. There's also a satirical piece on "an Gille Fionn-umh", referring to his lack of success in love and his intention to emigrate to America. And in his "postbag" section, Mackenzie reassures one of his four alleged correspondents, *Beul gun Fhaitheam, an Dun-Breatainn* ("Seamless Mouth, in Dumbarton"), that "turas a' Phuist thun na h-airidh" ("the Post's journey to the shieling") will be published at the first opportunity. That's a send-up of the stock-in-trade of all Gaelic magazines since time began!

The third wonder is the bridge at Aberfeldy. This is Wade's bridge, which, as Hugh MacMillan pointed out in "The Highland Tay", was "reckoned as the greatest architectural wonder of the North in its day". You can still walk or drive across it today. Built in a single year, 1733, it has a sixty-foot middle arch, and two more on either side. General Wade saw it as the climax of his ten years of work in building roads and bridges all over the Highlands. This is the man of whom it was said: "Had you seen these roads before they were made, you would lift up your hands and bless General Wade."

The fourth wonder is the kettle-stone at Balephetrish in Tiree. Poised on some smaller stones, it's a "rock gong" – a huge granite erratic covered with fifty-three cupmarks, the deepest of which are at the most resonant parts. All over the world, rock gongs have been used as playthings, accompaniments for singing and dancing, gathering signals, church bells, death announcements, warnings of the approach of enemies, or a way to summon the supernatural. The idea of a rock with a voice is a powerful one and the sounds they emitted were often believed to be the voice of an ancestor or other spirit.

John Gregorson Campbell tells how the Barra seer *Mac a' Chreachaire* was asked to prophesy the fate of Kishimul Castle. "He was very reluctant, but at last, on being promised that no harm would be done him, he said the castle would become a cairn for thrushes (*càrn dhruideachun*), and this would happen when the Rattle Stone (*Clach a' Ghlagain*) was found, when people worked at seaweed in Baile na Creige (*Rock-Town*, a village far from the sea), and when deer swam across from Uist and were to be found on every dung-hill in Barra."

This will refer to a rock gong in Barra which had been lost or destroyed. The kettle-stone was said to contain a crock of gold – but if ever it was split, Tiree would disappear beneath the waves. Thus the legend contains both a motive for destroying such stones and a warning against doing so; no doubt this applied to *Clach a' Ghlagain* as well.

The fifth wonder is the bells of Perth. As there's a lot to say about them, I'll deal with them separately next time.

The sixth wonder is the stone with the hole in it in Assynt. It gave its name to the township of Clachtoll near Stoer. Mackenzie's Gaelic is more correct: *A' Chlach Tholl*. The first we hear of it, I think, is in Hugh Miller's "Scenes and Legends" (1835). Miller says that Coinneach Odhar, the so-called Brahan Seer, predicted "that a huge natural arch near the Storhead of Assynt would be thrown down, and with so terrible a crash that the cattle of Ledmore, a proprietor who lived twenty miles inland, would break from their fastenings at the noise".

Miller heard that "some of Ledmore's cattle, which were grazing on the lands of another proprietor, were housed within a few hundred yards of the arch when it fell". In his book on Coinneach's prophecies (1877), Alexander Mackenzie added that it happened in 1841. Leadmore's cattle ran home, he said, "in a frantic fright, tearing everything before them".

In 1889 John Mackay described the rock to the Gaelic Society of Inverness. “On the seashore is a hill of soft-red sandstone, through the softer parts of which the sea made a large hole, gradually increasing it, and forming the hole, as it were, into an archway, which could be discerned from a great distance. Many years ago this arch was destroyed by a slip in the strata, which is composed of red sandstone, alternating with beds of marl, dipping to the sea. The western limb of the arch slid down with the dip of the strata, and the arch gave way.”

He then told the story about the cattle, but when he co-authored “Sutherland and the Reay Country” with the Rev. Adam Gunn in 1897, it changed. “Here, until quite recently, were two large boulders, with another on the top of them, forming an opening. One piece of the upper stone gave way at the French Revolution. It was predicted that the structure would entirely collapse on the arrival of some other important event; and the Disruption of the Church in 1843 saw the prophecy fulfilled!”

Which brings us to the seventh wonder, the “Double Grammar”. This was published in 1843 by John Forbes, the editor of “Teachdaire nan Gaidheal”. It was an intelligent but complex bilingual work whose stated purpose was that “the natives might learn the structure of both English and Gaelic, or either, through the medium of the Gaelic itself, their vernacular language”. Had the Gaelic schools of the 1840s gone from strength to strength and entrenched their aims in the fabric of the nation, leading to a confidently bilingual Scotland with two official languages, Forbes’s grammar-book might have become a blueprint as fundamental to public life as the “Caighdeán” in the Republic of Ireland; instead the glens were emptied, the Education Act of 1872 swept away the Gaelic schools, the ensuing struggle was for minimal rights to the land, and Highland children who might have gained much from the “Double Grammar” learned a very different kind of English on the back streets of Partick and Govan.

Unfortunately Forbes, who was a pedant, chose to write a scathing review of a book by John Mackenzie, who was not. The book was “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa”, to which I gave so much space on this page last year. The review duly appeared in “Teachdaire nan Gaidheal”, and Mackenzie’s “A’ Bheithir Bheuma” was the response. It worked. On the page before the “seven wonders” is a gleeful announcement about the demise of Forbes’s magazine. *Teachdaire nan Gaidheal mac a’ Chuairtear* has ceased publication, John declares, and *comunn a’ chul-taigh* has announced that it will be replaced in due course by a fresh periodical, this time without mistakes!

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