

How the Mackintoshes got a roasting

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

WHEN we're told that Camerons of Glen Nevis and MacGregors disliked cats, we needn't take it literally. It's code for disliking the Mackintoshes, who were feudal overlords of Lochaber and were called *cait* (cats). We can't understand the precise reason why Mackintoshes were so disliked, however, unless we know the *seanchas* or traditional stories of the district in question, which in this case turned out to be the neighbouring territory of Rannoch.

That sums up what I had to say last time, but there's more. *Dail a' Chait* ("the Cat's Meadow") and *Linne a' Chait* or *Poll a' Chait* ("the Cat's Pool") on the River Lochy, in the very heart of Lochaber, were the scene of a ghastly rite called *taghairm* which I described on this page a few years ago. Cats were roasted alive to summon the devil, who was himself a big cat. The person said to have performed the ceremony is *Ailean nan Creach*, "Allan of the Plunders", who was chief of the Camerons from about 1460 to 1480 and son of Dòmhnall Dubh, whom I mentioned last time.

Dòmhnall's achievement, you may recall, was to capture three of Mackintosh's sons and hang them one by one before his eyes in order to try and persuade him to hand over his own faithful warrior Iain Dìleas. You could even argue that the idea of roasting cats one by one until the devil appears is a metaphor for that particular story. But there are too many mismatches, I suspect. The hanger was Dòmhnall, the roaster was Ailean. The hangings took place at Moy near Inverness, the roastings on the Lochy in Lochaber. And why should hanging turn into roasting anyway?

We must also pay some attention to the circumstantial evidence provided by the *taghairm* story. Whenever it's told in full about Ailean, his purpose in summoning the devil ("the King of the Cats") is to find out from him how to atone for his misdeeds. After telling him that he must build seven churches – one for each of his great plundering expeditions – the devil disappears into *Poll a' Chait*, and Ailean proceeds to build the churches. The location of these became a topic keenly debated in the ceilidh-houses of Lochaber. Kilmallie, Kildonan (Kilmonivaig), Cille Choireil, Kilchoan (Knoydart), Arisaig, Morvern and Kilkillen (Loch Laggan) were popular candidates.

I think it's obvious when it's told like this that the devil is the Pope, and that it's a Protestant version dating from the seventeenth century. So we should take careful note of what John Gregorson Campbell says about the roasting: "It was performed by *Ailein nan Creach* (Allan the Cattle-Lifter) at *Dail a' Chait* ('the Cats' Field'), as it has since been called, in Lochaber, and by *Lachann Odhar* (Dun Lachlan) in *sabhal mòr Peighinn a' Ghobhann*, the big barn at Pennygown in Mull.

"Allan was a native of Lochaber, the most notorious district in the Highlands for cattle-lifters, and derived his name from having lifted a *creach* 'for every year of his life, and one for every quarter he was in his mother's womb'. He died at the age of 34.

"The details of these two ceremonies are so exactly the same that there is reason to think they must both be versions of an older legend. Nothing appears to create a suspicion that the one account was borrowed from the other."

Campbell then provides a detailed telling of the Mull version, and it contains nothing whatever about misdeeds, atonement or churches. On the contrary, when the devil asks the roasters (there are two of them) what they wanted, Campbell says: "One asked *conach is clann* ('prosperity and children'), and Dun Lachlan asked: *Cuid is conach, is saoghal fada 'na cheann*. 'Property and prosperity, and a long life to enjoy it.'

"The devil rushed out through the door crying, *Conach! Conach! Conach!* 'Prosperity! Prosperity! Prosperity!'

"The two men obtained their desires, but were obliged (some say) to repeat the *taghairm* every year to keep the devil to the mark."

Given that Campbell had gone out of his way to tell us that the Mull and Lochaber versions were "exactly the same", I think we may take it that this represents the original Lochaber tradition about Ailean nan Creach before it was turned into Protestant propaganda. Campbell's version is presumably the one which continued to be told by Lochaber Catholics. In fact it contains a little Cameron in-joke, for the devil's eccentric reaction in rushing out

through the door crying *Conach!* involves a pun. Certainly *conach* means “prosperity”, but it also means “doggy” or “canine”. The Mackintoshes were *cait* and as they attacked the MacDonalds of Keppoch at the battle of Mulroy in 1688 their piper played: *Thàinig na cait!* “The cats have come!” When the Camerons gathered their war-cry was: *A chlanna nan con, thigibh an-seo agus gheibh sibh feòil!* “Kindreds of the dogs, come here and you’ll get flesh!”

From this, just as a *Catach* was a “Cat-Man” or a Sutherland, so a *Conach* would be a “Dog-Man” or a Cameron.

I’d assume, then, that the tale of Ailean nan Creach and the *taghairm* is a metaphor for some incident or other in which captive Mackintoshes were tortured in order to wring concessions out of their chief, who then came to Dail a’ Chait to parley. The nature of these concessions is described in the story as prosperity, children, property, prosperity (again) and long life. This could be a way of expressing things like peace terms, remission of rent and rights to the land. Afterwards Mackintosh must have exited in undignified fashion by wading across the river to the other side where, no doubt, his forces were drawn up.

We know that Ailean nan Creach was a nasty piece of work. Somerled MacMillan tells in “Bygone Lochaber” how Ailean persuaded the minor Lochaber tribes to become Camerons and accept him as their chief. The head of the MacQuilkins, Dòmhnall Mór, who lived by Loch Oich where the Caledonian Canal is today, refused to do so and one fine summer’s day Ailean paid him what appeared to be a friendly visit. He was hospitably received, and after a good meal, got up to take his departure. Dòmhnall Mór saw him to the door. Once outside, Ailean stepped behind him saying, *Dé ’n uair a tha e?* “What time is it?”

It was long before clocks were known in Lochaber. When Dòmhnall shaded his eyes with his right hand to try and tell the time from the sun, Ailean severed his head with one stroke of his broadsword. As the *sgeulaiche* expressed it: *Mun robh am facal air bàrr a theangaidh, bha a cheann air bàrr a bhròige.* “Before the word was on the point of his tongue, his head was on the point of his shoe.”

Ailean then went down Loch Lochyside to see MacMartin of Letterfinlay and warned him that if he didn’t take his name and follow his banner he would suffer the same fate as MacQuilkin. *Nì mi cleas MhicMhuilcein ort!* “I’ll do to you as I did to MacQuilkin!”

Now, if the cats in the *taghairm* story are really people, why is it also associated with Pennygown in Mull? To answer this we need look no further than Lachlann Catanach, who was chief of the MacLeans of Duart from 1496 to 1523. He was an equally nasty piece of work. Writing in the 1830s, a MacLean historian says when he comes to speak of Lachlann that “he wishes his pen was in other hands than that of a Maclean”. He explains: “This chief, whose natural violence of temper and neglected education led to acts of the most savage cruelty, was altogether such a character as to make one regret that the noble line of Duart’s lords had ever been tarnished by his being of their number.

“In early youth he exhibited such symptoms of a bad disposition, and reckless indifference to the lives of his inferiors, that while residing among the Clan-Chattan, his mother’s kindred, he twice narrowly escaped falling by the hand of some injured vassal.”

A glance at Nicholas Maclean-Bristol’s excellent book “Warriors and Priests: The History of the Clan Maclean, 1300–1570” provides some examples. Lachlann once extended a friendly invitation to the young Stewart of Appin, with whose family he had been at feud, to visit him at Duart. During the feasting Stewart’s servant went missing. Stewart found the poor man being flayed alive by fourteen black slaves whom Lachlann kept there. When Stewart fled from this hell-hole, Lachlann’s men caught him and killed him. On another occasion Lachlann took against his Campbell wife, allegedly because she wasn’t good in bed, and had her left to die on a tidal rock near Lismore, ever since called the Lady’s Rock. She was rescued however and brought to Inveraray. In revenge for her attempted murder, her brother and fourteen men broke into the house where Lachlann was sleeping on a visit to Edinburgh and stabbed him to death.

Lachlann was illegitimate. He was said to be the offspring of his father’s relationship with the daughter of a Mackintosh chief. His father resigned the Duart estate to him on the same day that he was legitimated, 8 October 1496.

According to John Gregorson Campbell, the two men who roasted cats at Pennygown were Lachann Odhar mac Dhòmhnail mhic Nèill and Ailean mac Eachainn. Nicholas Maclean-Bristol tells us in “Warriors and Priests” that Lachann Odhar mac Dhòmhnail mhic

Nèill (whose father Donald was Lachlann Catanach's second cousin) was once described as "a bold resolute man", that he was responsible for the recovery of MacLaine of Lochbuie's estate from Lochbuie's tutor (Murdoch MacLaine of Scallastle), and that he and Ailean mac Eachainn (of the Lochbuie family) achieved this by fighting and defeating Murdoch in battle at Grulin.

This brings the two men together in opposition to Lachlann Catanach. Lachlann seems to have become chief of the MacLeans of Duart through the patronage of the king of Scots rather than by the will of the people, and no doubt he brought in plenty of "cats" from Badenoch to reinforce his rule. It will have been in his time that the neighbouring Lochbuie estate was alienated from its young chief, Murchadh Geàrr, and no doubt Murdoch MacLaine of Scallastle was in Lachlann's pocket. John Gregorson Campbell describes what happened while discussing how people used to foretell the future from a sheep's shoulder-blade. He dates the episode a hundred years too early: "When *Murchadh Geàrr* (Murdoch the Short), heir to the lordship of Lochbuy in the island of Mull *c.* AD 1400, was sent in his childhood for protection from the ambitious designs of his uncle (the laird of Dowart) to Ireland, he remained there till eighteen years of age.

"In the meantime his sister (or half-sister) became widowed and, dependant on the charity and hospitality of others, wandered about the Ross of Mull from house to house with her family. It was always 'in the prophecy' (*san tairgneachd*) that Murdoch would return.

"One evening, in a house to which his sister came, a wedder sheep was killed. After the meal was over, her oldest boy asked the farmer for the shoulder-blade. He examined it intently for some time in silence, and then, exclaiming that Murdoch was on the soil of Mull (*air grunnnd Mhuile*), rushed out of the house and made for Lochbuy, to find his uncle in possession of his rightful inheritance."

This happened about 1534, eight years after Lachlann's death, and it looks as if we should date the battle at Grulin to some point during the preceding eighteen years. Grulin is only three miles from Pennygown, and both places were on the Lochbuie estate. By this scenario, Lachann Odhar and Ailean mac Eachainn issue a challenge to the powers-that-be by torturing some captive Mackintoshes at Pennygown. This draws Lachlann Catanach's puppet, Murdoch MacLaine of Scallastle, into their net and they defeat him at Grulin. The big cat, Lachlann himself, is forced to abandon his claim to Lochbuie, and in due course Murchadh Geàrr comes back from Ireland. Plausible?

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