

The curse of Neist (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ONE day last June we took a drive through Glendale in Skye and walked out to Neist Point, the most westerly place in the island. (I had sailed around Neist in 1965, but I had never seen it from the landward side.) It was a quiet day and nothing was to be heard except the seabirds as they wheeled around. It was hard to imagine what it might be like when you couldn't walk upright, waves were crashing on the rocks and spindrift was flying.

You go through Waterstein, with the great cliffs of Skye's west coast opening up to your left, park your car at the end of the road, and take a steep path down through the rocks that girdle the little peninsula. On your right are the cables of the long hoist used for provisioning the lighthouse station.

When you reach the foot of the path, you're on the inner half of the point, which is roughly in the shape of an 8. This half is all meadows and buttercups and traces of sloping lazybeds where the lighthousemen had their potatoes.

Once through the neck of the 8, with dramatic cliffs falling away to your right, cormorants poised on the rocks below and lovely views over to Uist, you're on the business half of the point. To the east, viewed against the backdrop of those Waterstein cliffs across the bay, is a landing place with a little stone pier and a winch. To the west is the lighthouse and its buildings. That's as far as you're allowed to go – unless, that is, you fancy a spectacular holiday in one of the loneliest spots it's possible to imagine. A sign says: "B&B or self catering. Evening meal if required. Tel. 01470 511200."

So I still haven't seen the outer extremity of Neist, at least not since I crewed on Ronnie Robertson's yacht. Which was a bit disappointing, because on that day in June this year I couldn't get a strange rhyme out of my head. I had just published it in "The Gaelic Otherworld".

*Gaoth 'n iar-'eas thun na h-Éiste
Ceò is uisge
Clann Raonuill air bord a' bristeadh
Leam cha mhiste
Eathar caol corrach
Seòl àrd biorach
'S luchd de bharraillean failmhe
'S taoim gu totachan
Sgioba fann frithire
Gun urram fir d'a chéile.*

John Gregorson Campbell, who seems to have collected it in Skye between 1850 and 1874, explained it like this: "The MacRanalds were coming to attack the MacNeills of Barra, to whom MacVuirich was favourable. Their boat was seen coming along the wild and rocky coast on the west of Skye, and was sunk by the mighty wizard uttering the following words: 'A south-west wind toward Eiste point, / Mist and rain, / Clan Ranald on a breaking board – / I reckon it not; / A narrow unsteady vessel, / A lofty pointed sail, / A lading of empty barrels / And bilge-water to the thwarts; / A weak irascible crew / Having no respect one for another.'

"As might be expected, such a boat did not go far before sinking."

As far as I know, the first person to put the curse in print was a Skye man, Sheriff Alexander Nicolson, in his "Gaelic Proverbs" of 1881. He had it like this:

*Gaoth an iar air rudh' na Feiste,
Oidhche dhorcha, ceò 'us uisge,
Clann Dònuill air bhòrdaibh briste,
Leam cha mhiste!
Birlinn chaol chorrach,
Siùil àrd bhinneach,
Sgioba fhann fheargach,
Gun urram aon d' a chéile.*

Nicolson had heard that it was a MacLeod curse on the MacDonalds, and certainly Neist is MacLeod country. "Nothing could be more terribly graphic," he says. "There is a genius in the imagination of the accumulated horrors. The 'Feiste' is a wild black rocky point on the west of Skye, near the grand cliff of Vaterstein, a place of dread for any distressed bark, in a dark night with west wind. The description of the galley, as 'slender and crank, with high peaked sails,' and that of the crew as 'weak, angry, none respecting his fellow,' is the beautiful ideal of nautical risk and of anarchy.

"A version somewhat similar was given to me as a MacDonald prayer for the MacLeods, but this is the better one."

In a paper on "Social Life in Skye from Legend and Story" in volume 29 of the Inverness Gaelic Society's transactions (1919), J. G. Mackay from Portree published a translation of Nicolson's version which picks up the sheriff's word "crank" – "slack", or perhaps "cranky" as we'd say nowadays. "West wind on the point of Feiste, / A dark night with mist and rain, / The Clan Donald on broken boards – / I don't object – / A slender crank galley, / High peaked sails, / The crew weak and angry, / None respecting his fellow."

Next on the scene (as far as I know) was the Rev. Archibald MacDonald of Kiltarlity with a version that he had found in a notebook belonging to the great Skye song-collector Frances Tolmie. He published it in volume 37 of the "Transactions" (1934).

*Gaoth an iar bho Rudha na Feisde,
Stoirm is uisge;
Clann Domhnaill air bhòrdaibh briste
Leam nach misde:
Coite caol corrach, siuil ard bhinneach,
Sgiobadh fann frithir gun urram caib d'a chéile.*

I translate: "A west wind from the Point of Neist / With storm and rain, / The Clan Donald on broken planks – / I do not mind; / Slim quirky boat, high pointed sails, / Weak fretful crew whose mouths don't respect each other."

In 1936 or 1937 the Rev. Dr Neil Ross, a Glendale man, broadcast a talk about Skye folklore on the BBC which was published in a book called "Am Measg nam Bodach". He used it to flesh out the background to the curse. Again I translate. "There was often another story in the old men's mouths – a tale of the Spoiling of the Dyke (*Cath Milleadh Gàraidh*). About 400 years ago an event took place which made a deep impression on the folklore of Skye. This was the burning of Trumpan church in Waternish.

"There was war at the time between the MacLeods of Skye and the MacDonalds of Clanranald. Without going into the cause of the dispute I will simply say that the Clan Ranald landed at Trumpan on a Sunday when the people were in the church. They set fire to the church with them inside. The entire congregation was burnt to death except one woman who escaped – Margaret MacLeod.

"The MacLeod war-band hurried there from Dunvegan and attacked the Clan Ranald beside a dyke that had been built to keep out the sea. The MacLeods won. They knocked down the dyke to bury the slain MacDonalds. That is why the battle was called the Spoiling of the Dyke. Those of the Clan Ranald who escaped got away in their galleys, and a storm of wind sprang up in the Minch. I've heard Murchadh mac Ailein singing the old curse made by a MacLeod at the time:

*Gaoth an iar-dheas far na Féiste,
Gaoth is uisge, gaoth is uisge,
Clann Ràghaill air bhòrdaibh briste
Leam cha mhiste, leam cha mhiste.*

It was on this ferocious battle that Iain Odhar MacCruimein made the wild tune that pipers call *Blàr Bhatarnais* (The Battle of Waternish) to this day."

In 1959 Isobel Grant told the story in much greater detail in her book "The MacLeods", dating the battle to the 1530s. She had information from Donald Beaton, Stein. For example, of Margaret MacLeod: "She scrambled through a window in the East Gable of the church which was so very narrow that, in her struggle to get out, she left her breasts in the opening. Her home was in Unish near Waternish Point and she made for there but collapsed and died near a well a few miles from her home, which is to this day known as Margaret's Well."

Grant introduces our curse in the middle of the story of how the dyke was spoiled. She explains that, after discovering that the MacLeods had set their boats adrift, the Clan Ranald made their last stand by a dyke in Uilleastan. "Here they were all killed with the exception of a few stragglers in hiding and a boatload which had previously escaped. A great gale sprang up and this boat was swamped off Neist Point and the crew was drowned. It is said that a local witch had cursed the boat with the words:

*Gaoth an iar gu na h'eist
Muir gu caomidh
Buirid gu briseadh
Clan Raonail air bhord a briste
Leum cha bhistidh.*

'West Wind to the Neist / Sea to bailing / Board to breaking / Clan Ranald on boat a' breaking / I'm not caring.' The stragglers in Waternish were caught and hanged at a place still known as Hangman's Hill in Trumpan. The bodies of the main part of the enemy who were killed at Uilleastan, were piled up behind the dyke which was pushed over on top of them."

Grant's translation of the curse isn't bad, but as with so many otherwise careful historians her Gaelic is a mess – *caomidh* should be *taomadh*, *bhord a* should be *bhòrdaibh*, *Leum cha bhistidh* should be *Leam cha mhisde*.

So there you have five versions of the curse of Neist – Campbell's, Nicolson's, Tolmie's, Ross's, Beaton's. And to my mind, there's something odd about them. Two different dynamics are operating. On the one hand we have a kind of versification called *snéadhbhairdne* ("swift verse") which consists of lines containing eight syllables, then four, then eight, then four, and so on, the only rhyme being at the end of the short lines. Campbell's version is close to being in perfect *snéadhbhairdne*, the only defects being that the line *Eathar caol corrach* is three syllables short, *totachan* ("thwarts") should read *tota* ("thwart"), and the last two lines should be rearranged as

*Sgioba fann frithir gun urram
Fir d' a chéile.*

Elsewhere there's a structure of which the Harris poet Màiri nighean Alastair Ruaidh (yes, a Dunvegan MacLeod!) was particularly fond. Here's an example from her work:

*Cha sùrd cadail
An rùn-s' air m' aigne,
Mo shùil frasach
Gun sùrd macnais
Sa chùirt a chleachd mi
Sgeul ùr ait ri éisteachd.*

Each verse can have any number of lines provided that they all rhyme with each other and that the last line contains an extra word which rhymes with the last word of every other verse. This seems to be the dynamic of Nicolson's version, but we have to break some of the lines to see it working:

*Oidhche dhorcha,
Ceò 'us uisge,
Clann Dònuill
Air bhòrdaibh briste,
Leam cha mhisde!
Birlinn chaol chorrach,
Siùil àrd bhinneach,
Sgioba fhann fheargach,
Gun urram aon d' a chéile.*

The first line, *Gaoth an iar air rudh' na Feiste*, rhymes with the last, *Gun urram aon d' a chéile*, as if caught between the two dynamics.

The remaining versions fit into this scenario one way or another. Tolmie's starts as the first type and finishes as the second. Ross's is the first type, but repeats the short lines to turn them into long ones. And Beaton's is like Màiri's type turned upside-down.

I think what we can see here is *snéadhbhairdne*, a kind of chant used for satire by literate poets like the MacMhuirichs (who usually championed the Clan Ranald and held land from them in South Uist), being turned into song of a kind enjoyed by the MacLeods in the seventeenth century. Incidentally, just as the MacMhuirichs got the reputation of being wizards, Màiri got the reputation of being a witch.

I've deliberately missed out Alexander Carmichael's epic version of the curse, because it has a special dynamic of its own. Watch this space . . .

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