

## Dargo the mighty

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“TOMORROW the enormous Dargo comes to try the force of our race . . . Oscur! I have the blood, the soul of the mighty Dargo . . . Dargo the mighty came on, like a cloud of thunder. His brows were contracted and dark. His eyes were like two caves in a rock. Bright rose their swords on each side; dire was the clang of their steel . . . Diaran rose at my side; and the youthful strength of Dargo . . . Who sat in the midst of the wise, but Dargo of the mighty deeds?”

Yes, I was watching Inverness Caledonian Thistle play Ayr United in the Cup on TV the other week. It wasn't very pretty, but Caley Thistle won 2–0. Dargo opened the scoresheet with a penalty in the 38th minute. This bit from the team's website sums up the feel of it: “Two minutes from the break Phillips spilled a Black shot and Dargo raced in to collect – the angle from the right was acute and he hit over. Ross Tokely collided with Ramsay just on the whistle and Ramsay did not reappear for the second half.”

By “hit over” they mean “kicked the ball over the net”. I could get used to that sort of journalism again. I haven't tried to write footballspeak since I covered a Hibs match at Easter Road for the “Sunday Post” as a trainee reporter in 1969. Anyway, Craig Dargo is Caley Thistle's striker and he seemed to be everywhere, all 5'6" of him. I couldn't help thinking of Dargo, the Ossianic hero in my introductory quote, and wondering where wee Craig got his surname, so I did some digging.

Craig's from Edinburgh, and sure enough there seem to be more Dargos in the Edinburgh phone book than anywhere else – six altogether. Not a lot. George F. Black's “Surnames of Scotland” doesn't give the name, but it does give Dargie, and that provides a clue, because it's from the village of Dargie in Angus.

Dargie will be Gaelic *Deargaidh* “Red Place”, or perhaps *Deargaibh* “Red Places”. In the same way, Dargo will be Gaelic *Deargaibh* “Red Places” or perhaps *Deargaidh* “Red Place”. We can compare Largo in Fife which is *Leargaibh* “Slopes” or perhaps *Leargaidh* “Slope”. I can only guess that, a thousand years ago, a band of Gaelic-speaking settlers from the west discovered a spot in Lothian where the soil was rich and deep with red patches. I wonder if it was somewhere in that little triangle of Gaelic names, Cockenzie, Gullane and Drem?

So Dargo may be lost now as a place-name, but it has survived as a surname, and clearly comes from Gaelic *dearg* “red”. And what about the Ossianic Dargo, he whose eyes were like two caves in a rock? He is Gaelic *Dearg*, “Red” pure and simple, and we don't need to go back a thousand years to explain it: 250 will do nicely.

James Macpherson was born in Badenoch in 1738. Were he alive today he would support Kingussie in shinty and Caley Thistle in football. He certainly learned to handle a caman. At the age of eight he witnessed appalling brutality being inflicted by the British Army on his home community. From then on Badenoch was locked into a spiral of social and economic upheaval, poverty and emigration. So, 250 years ago when he was 18, Macpherson could think of nothing but how to make his fortune.

By the time he was 22, in 1760, he'd been to Aberdeen University and was working as a private tutor in Perthshire. In that year he produced a little book called “Fragments of Ancient Poetry”. It introduced two Dargos to the world. One was a famous warrior, slain by Oscar and Diarmad, who both loved Dargo's daughter, with tragic results. The other was a Briton who led an invading fleet against Fionn and his Fingalian war-band.

“Fragments of Ancient Poetry” was a huge hit with the sophisticates of Edinburgh and London. This wasn't accidental, since Macpherson had written it entirely for them. The fashionable philosopher Rousseau had been expounding his concept of the “noble savage”. As a fluent Gaelic speaker Macpherson realised that Fionn and his war-band, the subject of hundreds of ballads sung every winter's night around the cosy hearths of Badenoch, fitted the “noble savage” template to perfection, for they were pre-Christian heroes with a lofty code of honour. Fifteen years previously a war-band perceived to be of this kind, led not by Fionn but by Prince Charles, had captured Edinburgh, Carlisle, Manchester and Derby, and could have taken London had they so decided.

Macpherson's tutor in Aberdeen had written a book demonstrating the qualities that made Homer's heroic poetry so appealing. Armed with this information, all Macpherson had had to do was write a pastiche of some bits of the genuine old ballads in the popular prose style of the day – lugubrious, melodramatic, humourless, dark, full of nature in the raw. But to make doubly sure of present and future sales, he put forward certain claims which were to haunt him later. “The translation is extremely literal,” he wrote, leading his readers to understand that he wished not to be regarded as the author of the work but its translator. And there was more. “In particular,” he wheedled, “there is reason to hope that one work of considerable length, and which deserves to be styled an heroic poem, might be recovered and translated, if encouragement were given to such an undertaking.”

It worked! “Fragments of Ancient Poetry” and its sequels “Fingal” (1762) and “Temora” (1763) brought him fame and fortune to an unimaginable degree. He went to live in London but it's probably true to say that he despised the English. He bedded many women there but wedded none, and had five children. He bought an estate in Badenoch, spent as much time there as he could spare from his business activities, and spread as much wealth as he could around his home community.

In “Fingal” Macpherson kept the characters of the first two Dargos going and introduced a third. This Dargo, the son of Collath, accompanied Ossian on an expedition against Dunthalmo, lord of Teutha, was killed by a boar, and was lamented by his widow Mingala. My introductory quote is a collage of Macpherson's descriptions of all three Dargos.

In his book “The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson’s Ossian” Derick Thomson discussed the relationship between Macpherson’s Dargos and the three characters called Dearg who inhabit the real Gaelic ballads. He concluded that it was in the Dearg ballads that Macpherson found the motif of a son avenging his father’s death, but that he was more familiar with its occurrence in “Conn Mac an Deirg” than in the poems on Dearg himself.

In particular, Thomson points to Macpherson’s Dargo son of Collath and to a ballad noted down in the 18th century by a Perthshire man, James Maclagan, which seems to be something like what Macpherson was referring to when he wrote: “Dargo, the son of Collath, is celebrated in other poems by Ossian. He is said to have been killed by a boar at a hunting party. The lamentation of his mistress, or wife, Mingala, over his body, is extant.”

Macpherson provides a translation of this “lamentation”, and, as Thomson points out, “for the sake of consistency he has refrained from making the translation too literal”. So it seems, at any rate, when we compare it with Maclagan’s version, for example:

*Dearg mac Cholla craobh an iùil  
Leis an seinnte gu ciùin cruìt;  
'S ionmhainn aoigh air nach laigh fearg —  
Chlaidheadh an Dearg leis a' mhuic.*

We could translate this: “Collath’s son Dargo’s the guiding tree / Who would calmly play the harp; / Dear is the guest who’ll not be enraged – / Dargo was overcome by the pig.” And if we turn to Macpherson, we find that he has: “Thy hand touched the trembling harp: Thy voice was soft as summer-winds. – Ah me! what shall the heroes say? for Dargo fell before a boar.”

You can see that Macpherson touches base occasionally with the genuine Gaelic ballad. He does this elsewhere in the poem too.

I’ve said enough to show that behind Macpherson’s Dargos lie echoes of three Gaelic heroes called Dearg, presumably fictional, but celebrated in traditional ballads. Thanks to collectors more honest and more professional than Macpherson, we have many of these in writing. Funnily enough, they can be said to be about a thousand years old.

The best-remembered of the three was Dearg mac Draoibhil. His name seems to mean “Red son of Druid-Tree” and is supposed to frighten us with its awful pagan sound. We’re told that he sails west from *Tìr nam Fear Fionn* (“the Land of the Fair Men”) to avenge the death of his father on the Fingalians of Ireland, and lands at *Beinn Eudain* (Howth in Co. Dublin).

Note the geography. These traditions were Irish in origin. Dearg mac Draoibhil was coming from what is now Scotland, or at least the northern half of Britain, and he’s to be thought of as a Briton, a Saxon, a Norseman or a Pict coming to attack the Gael in his heartland. When this was sung in (say) Badenoch it conveyed a clear message about who the singers perceived themselves to be. *Gaidhil*. Gaels. Many people thought Beinn Eudain was Beinn Iadain in Morvern, and saw nothing wrong in its being described as in *fearann Fiann Eireann* (“the land of the Fingalians of Ireland”). After all, we were their favourite hunting-ground, and what do you find at the top of Beinn Iadain but *Ceumannan Fhinn* – Fingal’s Steps?

Anyway, Dearg captures and binds Ireland’s lookouts on the Hill of Howth, brings them to King Cormac, demands tribute, and defeats the battalions that Cormac sends against him, so Cormac sends for Fionn and his Fingalians. Dearg slays one of their battalions as well, agrees to single combat, slays Faolan, and is finally slain by Goll mac Morna, who takes a year to recover from his wounds. Most of the ballad (60-odd verses) is in the form of conversation, and it sparkles.

The second Dearg is a Fingalian warrior. His ballad is set in Scotland, where Fionn has come to hunt. Fionn and Dearg are separated from their companions and Fionn falls asleep. They’re found by a young man who has a grudge against Fionn for (guess what?) killing his father. He’s called *mac Cannaibh* and comes from *tìr Channaibh*. He could be a Pict, the son of Cano from Raasay, if *tìr Cannaibh* can be identified with *Dùn Chana*, but it’s a big “if”. Dearg defends his sleeping master against mac Cannaibh; Fionn wakes up to find the two corpses and laments his faithful servant.

The third Dearg is Dearg mac Cholla whom we’ve already met. There’s also a fourth great Dearg ballad, “Conn Mac an Deirg”, which builds on the first one by showing how Conn son of Dearg mac Draoibhil comes to Ireland to avenge his father, and how Goll eventually kills him, too.

Since I wrote this, Craig Dargo has faced the might of Rangers, conjuring a crucial goal out of nothing in the 13th minute to counter Kris Boyd’s strike in the 8th. So let me finish by translating afresh these words from a genuine Gaelic ballad. They’re not dark but full of colour. *Dh’imich an Dearg bu mhaith dreach / Chucasan an-sin a-steach . . .* “Dargo of the splendid frame / Laid into them right away, / His yellow-brown hair like polished gold / Crowning his body of finest form. / Two sharp eyes of the purest blue / Shone from the face of the buckaroo, / His cheeks were the hue of crimson moss / And as smooth as the yew of burial knolls.”

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