The harpless harper

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

TUCKED away in the west of Skye is the broad green valley of Talisker. It's arranged like a stage, with high mountains on either side, fronted by the sea, backed by the moorland that separates it from Carbost where the distillery lies.

"Stage" is the right metaphor. Around 1640 the poet Alexander MacKenzie from Achilty in Ross-shire declared: *Nì air mhaireann mac Mhic Leòid / An Talaisgeir bu ròd nan cliar*. "The son of MacLeod no longer lives / In Talisker where poet-bands flocked." *Ròd nan cliar* is literally "the anchorage of the poet-bands". MacKenzie seems to have been referring to William MacLeod, but by now another son of a MacLeod chief – Roderick, a soldier – was in his place.

Roderick was followed by his son John, who presided during 1675–1713 over the extraordinarily talented "Talisker circle" of poets and musicians, which included MacLeods, a MacKinnon, a MacLean from Mull, a MacKay from Gairloch, and Roderick Morison, the blind harper of Bragar in Lewis. *Ròd nan cliar* all over again. When the harper made John's elegy in 1713 he seems to have sensed that music and gaiety wouldn't return to Talisker, and marks the moment with a memorable pun: *Se 'n Clàr Sgìth an clàr rosgìth* . . .

Clàr is a board or baking-dish or a lump of land. The *Clàr Sgìth* is Skye – it contains the same element that we have in "Skye", in *an t-Eilean Sgitheanach*, and *an Cuan Sgìth* (the Sea of Skye, the Minch). But *sgìth* also means "tired". So he says: "The *Sgìth* land is the very *sgìth* land, / The land of loss and misfortune, / The land that's joyless, full of sighing, / The land where tears wet the eyelids, / The bitter land, the sore land, the sad land."

In 1773 Samuel Johnson and James Boswell visited Talisker. Their host was John's grandson, also John, also a soldier. They were well entertained, but Johnson described his feelings like this: "Talisker is the place beyond all that I have seen, from which the gay and the jovial seem utterly excluded; and where the hermit might expect to grow old in meditation, without possibility of disturbance or interruption."

When I saw this I was struck by the contrast with MacKenzie's *ròd nan cliar*. Of course the harper's words of 1713 form a halfway-house between the exuberance of the 1630s and the gloom of the 1770s. But it made me think of the curiously shifting relationships between place, time and people.

Let me put it this way. Talisker is a place, a well-defined one. It never moves, but it can change. Change is a complex time-line which alternates regularly between night and day, storm and calm, summer and winter, sunshine and mist, and also brings the gradual alterations of history. Houses are built and crumble to dust. Cattle and goats give way to herds of sheep. Runrig townships are divided into busy little crofts which disappear under bracken. A tarmacadamed road takes the place of the track over the hill.

The third perspective is man's. Even at the same point of time two people in Talisker might see it differently. Indeed, as there are few people in Talisker at any time, the place might "move" after all and become a figment of memory or imagination, perhaps transmuted into art via poetry, song, paint, photography. Sorley MacLean clearly wasn't there when he made the definitive word-picture that begins *Nan robh sinn an Talaisgeir air an tràigh* . . . "Were we in Talisker on the shore where the great white mouth opens between two hard jaws, Rubha nan Clach and the Bioda Ruadh, I would stand beside the sea, renewing love in my consciousness, while ocean filled Talisker Bay: I would stand there on the bareness of the shore till Preshal bowed his stallion head."

So our "stage" is viewed from the actors' perspective. We're looking out through an open mouth like Jonah in the belly of the whale. The poet expresses his love through images of permanence. Nothing is more permanent than place, symbolised here by the hill called Preshal that rears up behind you when you stand on Talisker beach. His love will outlast even this.

If we take time as a fixed point, the variables are places and people. What's everyone else in the world doing as you read these words? Billions of things, conditioned by where they are. The biggest single category is "sleeping".

If we take a person as a fixed point, what he or she does through life is shaped by where and when, and by other people as well. But I want to take another fixed place, the inn at Glenelg. Not today's Glenelg Inn, which claims (wrongly, I think) to be where Johnson and Boswell stayed, but the house beside the ferry terminal. Here, between 1688 and 1693, came our friend the harper. *A' chiad Di-Luain den ràithe*, he begins, *Ged bhà mi leam fhìn* . . . "The first Monday of the quarter, although I was alone, I got nobody that day who came up to see me and ask how I was, or would I like to go down and leave this Totamor, it being no place for me. It was clear to us that of all the folk in the district around, not one would treat me neighbourly, as I was used to."

So it was the First Monday of the Quarter. There were many superstitions and celebrations connected with the quarter-days, which marked the four great divisions of the ancient year, but determining the right day to observe them was a science in itself. In the time of the druids I'm sure the quarter began with every third new moon, skipping one occasionally to stay in line with the solar year. When the Christian calendar came in it became the first day of February, May, August and November. Better understanding of doctrine then put it in line with the first day of the week – Sunday to Catholics, Monday to Protestants. Meanwhile in the legal calendar it had mostly drifted to later dates in the month, so that the term-days of Scots law are Candlemas (2 February), Whitsunday (15 May), Lammas (1 August) and Martinmas (11 November).

John Mackenzie described the day in "Sàr Obair nam Bàrd". The Highlanders, he said, had a practice that was still observed in certain parts at time of writing (1841). "The custom to which we allude, was to meet at an appointed house, on the first Monday of every quarter, to drink a bumper to the beverage of the succeeding, and wish it better or no worse than the present."

Traditionally, if a family had enough to eat on the quarter-day, it would have enough to eat throughout the quarter, so it was a day for a special meal. In the same way, the First Monday had become an excuse for friends to toast the success of their local still over the next three months.

This then is a recurring point of time, which is what the "Quern-Dust Calendar" used to be about. But here we have a fixed place.

The harper isn't happy in Glenelg. He's a Lewisman, he's blind, he doesn't know his neighbours. He seems to have fallen out with Iain Breac, the MacLeod chief at Dunvegan, who has given him a bit of land to farm at Totamor (near where the school is today). It's about as far from Bragar, Dunvegan or Talisker as he could be without leaving traditional MacLeod territory. But suddenly things improve. *Sin nuair chuala Fearchar / Mi 'n dearmad aig càch* . . . "That's when Farquhar heard that everyone was neglecting me. He came to visit me, since he knew my ways. He led me by the coat-lappet to his wife's room. 'Anna, fill the stoup for us, and don't begrudge the measure. Although he's broke (*falamh*), he well deserves this glass to be given him, for he'd have plenty of friends if his pocket were full.'"

As William Matheson pointed out in his book "The Blind Harper", Farquhar was probably a MacLennan. That he had an inn or dram-shop is clear from the phrase *seòmar a mhnà* – "his wife's room". Innkeeping was women's business. The man of the house distilled the whisky, ran the farm, presided over the table, and was frequently (if travellers' tales are to be believed) drunk, overbearing, and rude to the guests. Compared to them, Basil Fawlty was your ideal host.

The poet goes on: *Labhair a' bhean chòir sin / Gu banail eòlach glic* . . . "That kind woman spoke demurely, knowing, wise: 'See the lamb without a mother, the harper with no harp, the book without a reader which is likely to be closed, the arrows lying unused in the badger-skin quiver. Though you're broke you well deserve to be given this glass, and let's drink two of them to the pock-marked man's health (*air slàinte 'n fhir bhric*).'"

These were wonderful compliments to a lonely poet and satirist, neatly rounded off with one to the king, Iain Breac. (In MacLeod's lands in King William's day, there was no king but MacLeod.)

Cheered up, the harpless harper devotes the rest of his song – and there's a lot of it – to an emotional plea to Iain Breac to remember him, and to a whole series of elegant pleas to neighbouring clans (Camerons, MacPhees, MacMillans, MacDonalds, MacKenzies, MacRaes) to leave his cattle alone, presumably on the basis that a polite request made on the First Monday should be honoured for three months at least!

On 1 September 1773 Johnson and Boswell arrived. By now the inn was a two-storied building of slate, lime and glass. Johnson says: "Of the provisions the negative catalogue was very copious. Here was no meat, no milk, no bread, no eggs, no wine. We did not express much satisfaction. Here however we were to stay. Whisky we might have, and I believe at last they caught a fowl and killed it. We had some bread, and with that we prepared ourselves to be contented . . .

"Out of one of the beds, on which we were to repose, started up, at our entrance, a man black as a Cyclops from the forge. Other circumstances of no elegant recital concurred to disgust us. We had been frighted by a lady at Edinburgh, with discouraging representations of Highland lodgings. Sleep, however, was necessary. Our Highlanders had at last found some hay, with which the inn could not supply them. I directed them to bring a bundle into the room, and slept upon it in my riding coat. Mr Boswell being more delicate, laid himself sheets with hay over and under him, and lay in linen."

Boswell adds some detail. "There was nothing to give the horses, so they were sent to grass with a man to watch them . . . A lass showed us upstairs into a room raw and dirty; bare walls, a variety of bad smells, a coarse black fir greasy table, forms of the same kind, and from a wretched bed started a fellow from his sleep like Edgar in *King Lear*: 'Poor Tom's a-cold.'

"The landlord was one Munro from Fort Augustus. He pays £8 to MacLeod for the shell of the house, and has not a bit of land in lease. They had no bread, no eggs, no wine, no spirits but whisky, no sugar but brown grown black. They prepared some mutton-chops, but we would not have them. They killed two hens. I made Joseph broil me a bit of one till it was black, and I tasted it. Mr Johnson would take nothing but a bit of bread, which we had luckily remaining . . ."

What conclusions can be drawn? Dr Johnson wrote "The Lives of the Poets", but when he came to places made famous by poetry and music, he spoke only of misery or food. It wasn't his fault. Nobody mentioned Gaelic poets, or told him they were as good as the ones he wrote about.

If Johnson's ghost came back to Glenelg today it would get a decent meal and a good bed. But it still wouldn't hear about the harpless harper. Language can be a bigger gulf than time itself.

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