

## The chattering books of Raasay

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IF you've been following the ramblings of the "Calendar" lately you've probably diagnosed that I'm up to something with Dr Johnson and Mr Boswell. Yes, it's true, Birlinn asked me a long time ago to produce a new edition of the two books about their journey to the Western Isles in 1773, and I'm finally getting around to it. It's to be called "To the Hebrides" and will be out in the summer.

In one place Johnson refers to George Wheler and Jacob Spon, who "described with irreconcilable contrariety", as he puts it, "things which they surveyed together, and which both undoubtedly designed to show as they saw them". In Lyons in 1678, Spon had published a book called "Voyage d'Italie, de Dalmatie, de Grece, et du Levant par Jacob Spon & George Wheler". In London in 1682 Wheler had followed it up with "Journey into Greece, by George Wheler Esq, in company of Dr Spon of Lyons". True enough, Wheler frequently contradicts his friend's account of what they had both seen and heard!

It's hard not to visualise Wheler and Spon as a big fat booming florid man and a pale skinny squeaky little fellow. Johnson and Boswell aren't *quite* like that, though Boswell's father described them as Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, and John Ramsay of Ochertyre likened them to a man-o'-war and a pinnacle. Boswell regarded Johnson as a person to be agreed with if at all possible, so the differences have more to do with culture-shock. Johnson was a philosopher who mocked nations but was the soul of discretion when it came to individuals; Boswell had a journalist's instincts, holding people up to scrutiny by describing their foibles and reporting their words.

Johnson was sixty-three, Boswell thirty-three. Johnson's voice reminds you somehow of the seventeenth century, Boswell's of the twentieth. The late Finlay J MacDonald, who wrote a book called "A Journey to the Western Isles – Johnson's Scottish Journey Retraced", pointed out that Johnson once described a rock as "perpendicularly tubulated". In other words, as Boswell would have said if he had been interested in rocks, it had a hole down the middle.

So books talk to each other. Sometimes at cross-purposes. They ask questions; other books answer. Sometimes they get things wrong; other books correct them. Sometimes they don't seem to know the answer to the questions, and their silence can be deafening.

Let me take Raasay as an example of how Johnson's and Boswell's books relate to each other and to newer ones. There's been a plethora of books about the island recently. In 2002 we had Norma MacLeod's "Raasay: The Island and its People" and John Nicolson's "I Remember: Memories of Raasay". In 2006 we got Roger Hutchinson's "Calum's Road". I've read them all and they're very good. But some time ago I began to hear reports of a fourth one. Nobody seemed to remember the name, but everyone said it was by Beathag NicÀidh. (These particular conversations all happened to be in Gaelic.)

In the end I tracked it down and I also contacted Beathag, who points out that she's not the author of the book, though she certainly helped put it together. If you want a copy you can get one for £12.50 plus postage by emailing her on [osgaig@lineone.net](mailto:osgaig@lineone.net) or writing to her at Osgaig Park, Raasay. I certainly recommend it.

So the mystery of a book with no author and no title is solved, because it lies before me. The author is Urras Dualchas Ratharsaidh, Raasay Heritage Trust. The title, when I first tracked it down in the National Library's on-line catalogue, was claimed to be "Ouanagan, Oain is Oualchas". I drew the mistake to their attention and they've fixed it. Beathag tells me she once saw it advertised as "Quanagan, Qain is Qualchas". Yes, you've got it – they used Celtic script on the cover and the title-page, and as everyone knows, the main qualification for compilers of advertising copy and catalogues is sheer stupidity. I mean it. I was a cataloguer once myself.

The book has somehow never been reviewed in this paper so I hope what follows will make up for it. (Bear with me, I'll come back to J&B in a minute.) It was published in 2001, before any of the other three. Its full title is "Duanagan, Dain is Dualchas a Eilean Ratharsair, Fladaidh is Eilean Tighe: Songs, Poems, Stories and Prose Emanating from the Rich Treasure of History and Traditions of Raasay, Fladda and Eilean Tighe". It's beautifully illustrated and choc-a-bloc with fascinating stuff.

Let me give a few examples. Ann MacDonald describes the island's archaeology. Julie MacLeod Allan, Calum of the Road's daughter, gives her memories of life in Arnish when there were people there. Margaret MacKay recalls growing up in Eilean Tighe and going to work elsewhere – hers is one of those autobiographies that make you say, “Ah, this is the story of Gaelic-speaking women in the twentieth century.”

David Roberts presents a detailed architectural history of Raasay House. Torquil MacLeod writes about the Raasay MacLeods in Australia, and there's a fascinating letter about the MacSwans written in 1912. Andrew Currie presents a naturalist's view of the island in that gently flowing style of his that's so well loved by WHFP readers.

I suppose Raasay's main gifts to the world, apart from her people, have been the Free Presbyterian Church and Sorley MacLean's poetry (the two are strongly connected). Well, the book includes a history of the Raasay FP congregation by the Rev. James Tallach and an English translation of a short paper by Sorley. Maybe the third great gift is the songs about Iain Garbh's drowning; Rebecca MacKay contributes an encyclopedia of Raasay drowning tragedies, not including Iain Garbh's, which is covered by John MacInnes.

There are articles on Raasay's geology and fossils and on the island's iron mine, with the detailed evidence thrown up by a row over the use of German prisoners as miners in the First World War. And there's important new material on the land raiders of 1921. But for me, personally, the outstanding contributions are one by John MacInnes in Gaelic on the island's traditions, and one by Rebecca MacKay in English on the people and places of the south end, from Osaig round to Eyre. There's a chilling sentence in the latter: “No Ratharsaireach was permitted on the road in front of Raasay House.”

You wouldn't want to read “Duanagan” as your first book about Raasay if you didn't know the place, because the overall historical strand that allows you to put things like the Land Raids in perspective just isn't there – for that you need to go to Norma MacLeod's book, which is serious history, or Hutchinson's, which is potted history, even better in a way.

Every reader of “Duanagan” will find their own thread of interest running through it. At the moment mine is J&B, as I've made clear, and this is where I come back to the way books talk to each other.

Let me give some examples. David Roberts twice quotes Boswell as saying that Raasay House had “eleven fine rooms”. In fact, the handwriting in Boswell's journal had been misread. He actually wrote “eleven fire rooms”, but it comes to something similar, since a “fire room” was a room with a fireplace in it.

Then, Andrew Currie says that Boswell danced a jig on the top of Dun Caan “in the presence of Samuel Johnson”: yes, he danced a reel on the mountain-top, but Johnson wasn't there, because he stayed behind in a comfortable fire-room and let Boswell go around the island without him. Johnson actually saw very little of Raasay.

Next, Ann MacDonald notes “Dr Johnston” (a common error that) saying that elf-bolts, triangular flint arrow-heads, were often picked up. In that case, why, she wonders, does nobody find them now? That's a very good question. I spent two whole pages of my book “The Gaelic Otherworld” discussing fairy arrows and I never asked it. This is a good example of one book asking a question and another one being struck dumb.

John MacInnes's article, on the other hand, provides a good example of books chattering away to each other for the general benefit. Boswell talks of meeting Janet, second wife of the deceased laird of Raasay, Malcolm MacLeod. “She was called only Mrs MacLeod now,” he says. “I know not if she was ever called *Lady*.” Maybe so, but as MacInnes points out, she was “lady” in Gaelic: *Baintighearna Dhubh Òsgaig*, “the Dark Lady of Osaig”.

This brings us to her place of residence. Boswell says that “she lives in a small comfortable house . . . just adjoining to the old castle of the family”. Does he mean Brochel at the north end? That's what both John MacInnes and I assumed at first, because Boswell goes straight on to say “We saw the old castle . . .”, meaning Brochel. But no. The Raasay tradition-bearers were quite clear that she lived at Creagan Beaga in Osaig. Boswell had pointed out earlier that an “old castle”, mentioned by Martin Martin as a three-story tower, “was taken down and the stones of it employed in building the present house”. In other words, Raasay House.

The chatter continues. “Folly on the one side, and probably interested cunning on the other,” says Boswell, “had produced the second marriage.” Well, according to the story John MacInnes got from Seonaidh Dhòmhnail Iain Bhàin, Janet was a maidservant in Raasay

House and took a notion to a lad who worked there. The cook advised: “Stand behind the door and when you hear him coming, jump out and kiss him. He’ll notice you then!”

She heard a man’s footsteps, jumped out and kissed him. It wasn’t the lad at all however but the chief, Malcolm himself. That’s how the affair began. Some people used to say she was called *dubh* because she was Raasay’s mistress (*bean-diolain*).

Boswell says that Malcolm had “most absurdly married again”. Not so absurd, surely, since we know from another book, Donald Gillies’s “Life and Work of the Very Rev. Roderick Macleod of Snizort”, that Malcolm divorced his first wife in 1735, citing a servant called Beaton as co-respondent. Gillies says that his second marriage was irregular. Not so, says MacInnes: “Their marriage lines are in Dunvegan Castle.”

Another thing MacInnes mentions is *Dùn Cana* (Dun Caan). Boswell said it was “certainly a Danish name”, just as he called the Pictish broch at Borrodale a “Danish fort”. But as MacInnes points out, as long ago now as 1976 Colm Ó Baoill of Aberdeen University showed (in “Scottish Gaelic Studies”) that the Old Irish story “*Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin*” portrays a man called Cano whose father’s name is Pictish (Gartnait) coming to Ireland from an island called *Inis Moccu Chéin* near a larger island called *Scí*. This not only explains Dun Caan but gives us the old names for Raasay and Skye. Presumably Cano lived in *Dùn Bhorghadail*.

Then there are questions which all the existing books on Raasay, on Johnson and on Boswell fail to answer. Here’s an easy one and a hard one. First, both Johnson and Boswell speak of a cleft in the rocks running towards the sea “a little off the shore westward”, roofed over with long stones and turf, where oars were kept. Where is it exactly? Well, it’s time for people to talk, instead of books. Rebecca knows the place, and informs me it’s called *Uamha nan Ràmh*. No doubt she’ll tell us all about it in her forthcoming book on Raasay place-names . . .

Now the hard one. In Raasay House each evening, says Boswell, “many songs were sung, one in particular to encourage the emigrants, which had a chorus ending always with *Tullishole*.” What’s this? *Tuilleadh siùil*, “more sail”? *’N toll ìseal*, “the hold”? Anyone know the song?

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