

The religion of the yellow stick

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I can't remember when I first heard the expression *creideamh a' bhata bhuidhe*. It might have been in South Uist, for reasons which I will explain later. Or I may just have found it in Dwelly's dictionary.

Look it up for yourself if you like. It means "the religion of the yellow stick", and it's the Gaelic for proselytism. Here's what Dwelly says: "A Coll priest of former times was accustomed to drive recalcitrant natives to church by a smart application of his walking stick, those who yielded were thus said to come under 'creideamh-a'-bhata-bhuidhe'.

"Another version says Hector, son of Donald Maclean of Coll, was the one who applied the yellow stick. Hector was laird in 1715, and as the religion of the yellow stick was introduced into Rum in 1726, it is beyond dispute that Hector was the author, or propagator of it. He was dignified in appearance and stern in manners, and could no doubt wield the yellow stick gracefully and with efficiency."

That's as circumstantial an account of the yellow stick as you'll find anywhere. Let's read it more closely now, with the help of Nicholas Maclean-Bristol's splendid new book "From Clan to Regiment". As I said last week, it's a complete history of Coll, Rum, Muck and Quinish in Mull – the Maclean of Coll estate.

Dwelly makes it clear first of all that proselytism is a two-way street. Catholics might be forced to become Protestants, but Protestants, or backsliders, might equally be made to turn Catholic. Dwelly doesn't put a date on it, but the era when a priest could have driven people to mass in Coll with a stick is clear enough. Lachlan Maclean, head of the Coll family from 1676 until his death in 1687, had married a Catholic, a daughter of Macdonald of Clanranald. What's more, the king from 1685 to 1689 was James VII and II, a Catholic. So for two years at least, 1685 to 1687, if Lachlan wanted to please his wife, gain friends in high places and be a dutiful subject, he could do it all at once by allowing a priest to drive his tenants to mass with a stick.

Of course there's more to it than that. Lachlan seems to have been involved in the lucrative new droving trade. In 1679 he even pops up in London. Maclean-Bristol says that he may have converted to Rome himself. "Alternatively he may have refused to do so and this was one of the causes of the breakdown of his marriage. Meve was later to complain to the Council" – the Privy Council in Edinburgh – "that her husband was not supporting her adequately."

Certainly Lachlan's brother Donald had converted to Rome. A list of the Coll family made in 1679 is headed by "Donald McLaine, Coll's brother, a papist", probably one of those "deluded by Father O Donnell". This must be the name of the very priest mentioned by Dwelly. What's more, when Lachlan's son Iain Garbh died in 1688, Donald succeeded him, and remained chief of the Macleans of Coll until his death in 1729.

Now there's an apparent inconsistency here. Dwelly says that Donald's son Hector "was laird in 1715, and the religion of the yellow stick was introduced into Rum in 1726". How so, if Donald lived until 1729?

The solution is this. It was a tradition among Highland chiefs, adhered to pretty strictly by the Macleans, that when the eldest son married he took over the day-to-day affairs of the kindred and his father retired into the background. The Jacobite standard was raised on the Braes of Mar on 6 September 1715. Hector's marriage contract was signed on 14 September 1715. He was about twenty-six years old. He it was who raised the men of Coll and Quinish for the Jacobites. He failed to raise any in Muck, and the figure for Rum is unknown. Then he marched with his men in November to the battle of Sheriffmuir.

The battle ended in a draw, the rising failed, King George remained secure on the throne, and it was time for the Macleans of Coll to demonstrate their support for his regime. This, then, was the context in which Hector sallied forth nine years later – assuming Dwelly has the date right – to bring the wretched inhabitants of Rum into line.

Dr Samuel Johnson visited Coll in 1773 and was given a little more detail. He wrote: "The rent of *Rum* is not great. Mr *Maclean* declared, that he should be very rich, if he could set his land at two-pence halfpenny an acre. The inhabitants are fifty-eight families, who continued Papists for some time after the Laird became a Protestant.

“Their adherence to their old religion was strengthened by the countenance of the Laird’s sister, a zealous Romanist, till one Sunday, as they were going to mass under the conduct of their patroness, *Maclean* met them on the way, gave one of them a blow on the head with a *yellow stick*, I suppose a cane, for which the *Earse* had no name, and drove them to the kirk, from which they have never since departed. Since the use of this method of conversion, the inhabitants of *Egg* and *Canna*, who continue Papists, call the Protestantism of *Rum*, the religion of the *Yellow Stick*.”

This makes sense. We know that Hector’s father, Donald, was a Catholic, so it’s no surprise to learn that Hector had been reared a Catholic, and that he had a sister who had remained one. As for the cane that “had no name”, I imagine what Hector was using to poke and beat the Rumaich into church was a rattan or bamboo from India, a weird kind of “yellow stick” that they had never seen before. Maclean-Bristol explains that it was about 1760 (six years after Hector’s death) that islanders began to enlist in the service of the East India Company. In 1726 the swish of a long yellow bamboo had novelty value and would certainly have been well remembered.

Maclean-Bristol gives an alternative version of how it happened. This he takes from an anonymous report on the islands to the British Fisheries Society, written at some point in the years following Johnson’s tour. Maclean-Bristol got a copy of it from the late John Lorne Campbell; I remember being shown it by that well-loved Lewisman the late Iain F Maciver when it first came into the National Library.

First the writer explains that Hector “had a child at nurse in Rume”. Whether this is a reference to simple wet-nursing, or to actual fosterage, whereby a high-status family placed a child with an ordinary family to give it a safe, healthy, normal childhood, I’m not sure. “Happening to go and see it of a Sunday, it occurred to him to ask a friend of his, a Clergyman, who chanced to accompany him, to preach. A Roman Catholic man present went out of the room, the Nurse, also a Roman Catholic followed him with the Child, this circumstance enraged Maclean to such a degree that running after the man he beat him most unmercifully with a stick adding ‘get back you rascal to the Kirk’. This drubbing frightened the inhabitants so much they none of them ventured more to go to Mass.”

The late Hector MacDougall, a native of Coll, differed from my other sources. In “Handbook to the Islands of Coll and Tiree” he tells us that Hector’s uncle Lachlan, the chief who married a Catholic and died in 1687, turned Protestant and beat his people into church at Cill Ionnaig in Coll with his yellow stick. He also remarked that the same story was told of Lachlan in Rum, and of others in Uist and Benbecula.

I’m still looking for confirmation of MacDougall’s point about Uist and Benbecula. Has anyone there heard the story? I know from John Lorne Campbell’s writings that in 1770 Colin Macdonald of Boisdale launched “an odious attack” on the religion of his tenants, backed by threats of eviction, as a result of which a hundred people left Uist for Prince Edward Island in 1772.

All I can find in Fr Allan McDonald’s manuscripts is that Boisdale used a form of entrapment. On one occasion he treated his tenants to dinner inside the great walled garden of Kilbride. (You can still see it today. I camped in it once, now someone has been allowed to build a bungalow in it.) Then he asked them to give up their religion.

On another occasion he shut them up in the stackyard on the machaire of Boisdale. Things seem to have turned ugly. A young man from Daliburgh threatened to break every bone in his body unless he let the people go.

And the people of Rum? They held out for 102 years, then the last of them were cleared en masse to Cape Breton in 1828 by Alexander Maclean of Coll. He was much criticised for it, and his son-in-law, who organised it for him, was grilled by a parliamentary committee. There’s a full transcript in Maclean-Bristol’s book. It makes fascinating reading.

Alexander died seven years later aged eighty-four, and Maclean-Bristol’s verdict is scathing. “Fortunately for him he was not to live to see the collapse of his ‘improvements’. His policy to integrate his family into the English aristocracy was to have equally disastrous results.”

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