

## Casting the heart

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

MY text for today is about the heart, but it doesn't seem to be very romantic.

*An cridhe da bhioradh  
'S an tilgeadh da shireadh  
'S an laigse da philleadh  
Gu minig dan anntoil.*

It's the fifth of eight verses of a song by Alexander MacDonald, Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair, who lived from about 1698 to about 1770. Its precise meaning isn't immediately obvious, so let me fill in a little of the context. The song is called "Tinneas na h-Urchaid" and begins like this.

*Gu bheil tinneas na h-urchaid  
Air feadh Àird nam Murchan  
Ri sìor ghabhail phurgaid  
Chuir turaraich 'nan ceann orr'.*

"Venereal disease is throughout Ardnamurchan – they're forever taking purges that send their heads spinning." So the song turns out to be a health warning. The poet, a married man with a young family, was working in Ardnamurchan for the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge as a schoolmaster and catechist, which made him a leader of the community.

It was about 1732, and there was a serious problem in the parish resulting from the presence at Strontian of large numbers of immigrant labourers in the York Buildings Company's lead mines. Prostitution and gangsterism were rife, and the company was paying its workers in silver and gold at a time when money of any kind was almost unknown to the ordinary people of the Highlands.

Local men who needed work, and local women who weren't afraid for their souls, were being drawn to this hell-hole, so the catechist, simply doing his job in the manner of the time, stepped in. His second and third verses deal with the effect of *an clap* on men and women in turn. Some of it is too graphic to print here. "The men full of the disease all the way to the backbone . . . The women emaciated, leaking from their kidneys . . . Gnawed by their conscience, their guts are extruded, their eyes become sunken and their rennet goes sour."

Rennet (*binid*) is a metaphor typical of a cattle-based society. You get rennets from a calf's stomach and you need them for curdling milk to make cheese with. Here the "rennet that goes sour" is the young woman's fertility.

It's at this point that the verse about the heart comes in; then Alastair returns to the exterior symptoms of venereal disease. "Harpstrings and refuse are drawn out of their mouths, their face swollen and red and their cheeks full of styes. Their skin dry and shrivelled, their bums notched and chapped by scabby hacks full of heat like the stinging of nettles."

In a ringing conclusion, he connects with his flock by switching pronouns. *Thig oirbh easlaintibh coimheach, / Bolgach, plàigh agus cloimhean . . .* "You'll have alien diseases, smallpox, plague and the scabies, defiling and destroying you like mangy horses grown old."

It's particularly interesting that he lists scabies (if I've understood *cloimhean* correctly) as an alien disease, because at this period "the itch" was regarded by Lowlanders as a well-known symptom of Highland uncleanness. It's perfectly possible that in the Highlands it was seen as a well-known symptom of *Lowland* uncleanness. If so, Alastair rubbed it in by having the song printed in a book ("Ais-Eiridh na Sean Chánoin Albannaich") in Glasgow in 1751, helpfully informing his readers that it should be sung to the tune "Tha mi fhìn suarach mu ghruaman an t-seann duine". Anyone know it?

The "heart" verse is the only difficult one. In puzzling over it, the presence of the words *cridhe* and *tilgeadh* began to ring a bell in my head, and I started pulling old issues of "Gairm" off the shelf. Eventually, in no. 35 (spring 1961), there it was – an article called "An Tul Fhìrinn" by the late Norman MacLeod (Contair, Tommy Contair), who was deputy head of Lionel Junior Secondary in Ness and liked to write under the name "Am Bàrd Bochd".

This is the story Contair tells. Before the First World War there was a young boy in one of the townships of the parish who suffered from epilepsy (*an tinneas-air-ais*). The older he got, the more violent and frequent the fits (*cuairtean*) became. No doctor succeeded in giving him any relief, and his family were enormously worried. As modern ideas had spread among the people, the old cures had lost their grip. But this boy was so cruelly afflicted that his family decided to try their forefathers' method and cast his heart (*'s gun tilgeadh iad a chridhe*).

There was still an old man in the parish who could do it, and who knew the words that had to be said during the ritual (*seirbheis*). He was duly summoned, and one night in the dark time of the moon – *dubh na gealaich*, the first night of the new moon – he arrived.

Everything was got ready. With no light in the house but the fire, the shape of the boy's heart was gouged out of a peat, and molten lead was poured in while the old man said the appropriate charm (*na briathran gisreagach a bha chum feuma*) under his breath. When this leaden heart solidified it was lifted out of the peat and carried sunwise (*deiseal*) around the fire, out of the door and down to the shore.

The boat had already been launched, and the crew went on board. The old man sat on the stern-seat (*sguit*) and the oars were plied. They struck out to a great depth. Nobody aboard except the old man, possibly not even he, had any idea where the heart was cast out. In the dawning of the day the boat returned to land.

From that night on the boy's health changed for the better. Years went by till he was married with a house and family of his own, as healthy as a trout and making his living out of the herring fishing.

*Bha e air a thighinn gu greis latha . . .* He had reached middle age when the fits began to come back, in a small way at first, then after a few more years they returned with all the violence and frequency of his childhood. It was puzzling, because the people had never heard of epilepsy returning to a person whose heart had been cast. Following discussion, they came to what seemed like a logical conclusion.

Around the time that the far-apart fits came upon him, the first trawlers had started scraping the ocean bed near the land. The trawls didn't exactly scrape the bottom, but their wheels disturbed the heart in the deep. That, the people thought, was what had caused the infrequent fits. But when the seine-netters came they would scrape even the sea anemone (*cìoch-na-mna-sìdhe*, 'the fairy woman's breast') off a stone on the bottom of the ocean.

No one doubted but that a seine-netter had brought the heart to land in the mesh, and that the wretched invalid suffered for it until the day he died.

Now this, it seems to me, is the story told over two centuries before by Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair when he's desperately trying to convey the message to the young people of Ardnamurchan that sexually-transmitted diseases can lead to the collapse of the internal organs. You may have noticed the words *da philleadh* – or *dha thilleadh*, as Contair would have said. I think the verse means: "Their heart is being stabbed and their cast is being sought, while their weakness returns it against their will frequently."

In other words, first venereal disease "stabs" the heart. That the heart is then "cast" as described by Contair is not even stated, because in 1732 it was the obvious and universal cure for heart disease (more on that later). In any case, thanks to the mines, there was no shortage of lead in Ardnamurchan. When Alastair says "their cast is being sought" he can only mean that it's being sought on the bottom of the sea by the powers of good and evil which control sickness and disease. It was his duty as a catechist to say this. Curious, isn't it, that in the twentieth century these powers of good and evil became seine-netters. Finally, says Alastair, gonorrhoea-induced weakness brings back the leaden heart "against their will frequently" – in other words, the clogging of the arteries will cause epileptic-type fits.

In her book "Healing Threads" Mary Beith gives examples of "casting the heart" being used to cure insanity, typhoid and epilepsy. The fundamental purpose, obviously, was to cure heart disease. This was pointed out by the late Duncan MacDonald, Sandwickhill. Addressing the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1934, he defined *crìdhe-luaidhe* as: "A lump of lead shaped like a heart and thrown into the depths of the sea. This is supposed to cure any cardiac trouble."

I'd like to add a neat little postscript from the Contair's piece in "Gairm". Not only would casting the heart bring comfort and new life to those who believed in it, he says, but occasionally it might reveal something that was hidden at the time. There was a middle-aged spinster in another parish who was tormented by epilepsy, and she put her faith in the one remedy the people had for it. When her leaden heart was lifted out of the peat it was observed that it had a beautiful shapely little heart dangling from it. They were thrown as they were – and the spinster got relief from her condition for the rest of her life.

*Mìos no dhà an déidh sin bha e nochdte don sgìre gun robh a' mhaighdean a bha seo gu bhith.* A month or two afterwards it became clear to the parish that this spinster was expecting.

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