

Standing stones: tall tales?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

AFTER my last “Quern-Dust” appeared in the paper I got a call from WHFP reader Nicolas Maclean-Bristol. I had blotted my copy-book. “You said you published a book called ‘Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: The Ardnamurchan Years’,” he said. “No you didn’t. I did!”

Too true. Nicolas, in his guise as chairman of the Society of West Highland and Island Historical Research, is indeed the kind soul who published that book. All I did was write it. I’m proud to say that it’s one in a series of beautifully-produced, colourful booklets on the history of the West Highlands and Islands, “glossies” as Nicolas calls them, seven of which are still available at £5 each plus postage and packing from the Society at Breacachadh Castle, Isle of Coll, Argyll, PA78 6TB, email swhihr@btinternet.com.

Two deal with Ardnamurchan, one with Tìree, one with Mull, Coll and Tìree, one with Knoydart, one with Iona, and one with the raising of the 79th Highlanders. The only one out of print is on Telford’s Highland churches. Whatever about mine, the others are excellent. And there are two more on the way, one on the church in Coll and one – me again, sorry – on the second half of Mac Mhgr Alasdair’s life. I ran out of space last time, halfway through.

The Society is currently celebrating the 35th anniversary of its busy little newsletter called “West Highland Notes & Queries”. It’s always been full of lively bits and pieces but it has a peculiar problem. When you look at it you get the impression that Breacachadh Castle is the centre of the universe and that places like Skye and the Outer Isles are away beyond the horizon. “That,” says Nicolas, “is only because I have to write so much of it myself. We’d love to have more contributions from further afield.”

Sounds like a good idea to me. And it’s always been a very “Gaelic-aware” sort of publication which would welcome more input on that side. I’m as guilty as the next person for not contributing. For example, in the latest issue Alastair Campbell contributes a piece on old surnames that mentions McCrechery, which looks to me like a fascinating name, *Mac Reachdaire*. A *reachdaire*, as I understand it, was a reciter, a man whose job in the court of the Lord of the Isles was to recite poems after the poet had handed them over. And “McPhreist”! Extrordinary! Surely one thing you would never expect would be Gaelic *Mac* joined to English “priest”!

There must be some other explanation, but it’s beyond me. Anyway, if you want to receive “Notes & Queries” regularly it costs £10 a year, and you get a free “glossy” as well.

Another thing I mentioned last time was the words *tuirseach* and *tùirseach* meaning “sad” or “tired”. I was talking to Mary Beith on the phone last week and she remarked that a neighbour of hers at Melness lives at *Taigh an Tursaich*, which he understands to mean “Sad House.”

“Is there by any chance a standing stone on the croft?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Mary.

Sure enough, when you look it up in Dwelly’s dictionary, *tursach* meaning a standing stone, as in *Tursachan Chalanais*, just isn’t there. That suggests it’s a Norse word not usually found in Dwelly’s southern Highland stamping-grounds. Donald Maciver explains it in his book on Lewis place-names by pointing out that *thurs* is Old Norse for a giant.

Mary suggested that the names given to standing stones would be an interesting topic, and of course she’s right. By sheer chance after I spoke to her I came across a reference in a book published in 1792 which shows that even if her neighbour was wrong, he was in good company. Colin Mackenzie, in “An Account of some Remains of Antiquity in the Island of Lewis”, reported that the stones at Callanish “are called by the country people by the general name of *Taoursanan*. *Taoursach* signifies mournful: if it be true that human sacrifices were offered on the Druidical altars, such a name would be very applicable, and may be the origin of the appellation.”

In fact, I think most of the names given to standing stones, and the stories about standing stones, make them people of one kind or another. Another name for the Callanish stones is *na Fir Bhréige*, and if you think about *an Eaglais Bhréige* on the coast of Skye, it helps you understand it: the *Eaglais Bhréige* is a rock formation that looks like a church, the *Fir Bhréige* are a rock formation that looks like men. Not the “lying men” but the “artificial men”.

Then take *Clach an Truiseil* at Balantrushal. This time it’s not a matter of the name (Maciver says that *Truiseal* is the Norse for “the Hill of Mares and Foals”) but of the story, according to which a passer-by once heard the stone speak. It said:

*Is Truisealach mis’ an déidh nam Fiann,
Is fhad’ mo thriall an déidh chàich —
M’ uilinn anns an àird’ an-iar
'S mi gu m’ dhà sgiath an sàs.*

“I am a Truisealach after the Féinn, / Long is my journey after the rest – / My elbow is jutting out to the west / And up to my two wings I am stuck.”

I think what has happened here is that Taistealach, the name of a warrior of the Féinn (Fionn’s men, the Fingalians if you like), has locally turned into Truisealach for obvious reasons. His name means “Traveller” – hence the rhyme.

The Féinn are always described as giants, and the existence of a standing stone in the neighbourhood was always a good excuse for telling a story about them. *Clach Fhinn*, a monolith at Killin in Perthshire, was supposed to be Fionn’s burial place. But Fionn, like King Arthur, never really died: he’s waiting underneath to come back and save us all some day. The same was said of Steinigie Stone in Harris.

*Their cuid anns a’ bhaile
(Mas e firinn neo breug e)
Gur clach-chinn i bh’ air ceannard
Ann an cogadh na Féinne.*

*Ma bhios armachd is eallach
A-rithist ag éirigh
Nach e gheibh an damaist
Tighinn a-mach fo Chlach Stèineagaidh!*

“Some say in the township / (Be it truth or a lie) / She’s the headstone of a chief / In the war of the Féinn. / If his arms and equipment / Are to rise up again / He’ll not come undamaged / From under Steinigie Stone!”

What *Stèineagaidh* means exactly I don’t know, but I assume the *Stèin* bit is Norse for “Stone”, just as in *Clach Stèin* at Bayble and in Eoropie and the standing stones at Steinacleit and Clach Stei Lin in Airidhantuin. It seems to show that all these monoliths were already there when the Norsemen came.

If you have a standing stone in your area you’ll have a story about it. The chances are it will be a petrified giant, and may even be heard to speak. Why not tell the letters page? So let me finish on this one. It brings us back to Coll where we started, and may well provide the answer to the question of what *tursachan* are called where the Norse influence isn’t as strong as in Sutherland or Lewis.

When James Boswell and Samuel Johnson were in Coll in 1773, along with the laird’s high-spirited son (whom they called “Coll”), they rode past a huge lump of rock balancing on some small stones. Boswell explains: “The tradition is that a giant threw such a lump at his mistress up to a hill or little mountain at a small distance to the southwest, and that she in return threw this lump down to him. It was all in sport: *Malo me petit lasciva puella.*”

The first “lump” can be seen to this day on top of Beinn Hogh, also balanced on small stones. Both lumps will be glacial deposits. Boswell’s Latin is a quote from Virgil, and when rendered in full it means: “Galatea, saucy girl, throws an apple at me and runs into the willows to hide, first making sure I see her.”

A few minutes later they passed two standing stones, six feet high and forty-six feet apart. “Of latter times,” their young host explained, “they are used for putting a trick on any stranger who is passing that way. He is desired to lie down behind the easternmost one (or westernmost, according to the route he is on) and told that he will hear everything that is said by the company, who stand at the other stone; and while he is lying in patient attention, the company get off and leave him; and when he at last gets up, he finds himself all alone!”

Boswell concludes: “The stones are called Sgeulachdan, that is to say, ‘Long tales’. Coll said if it had not been too late, he would have made me go through the ceremony.”

Boswell (no Gaelic speaker he) got it slightly wrong. The late Hector MacDougall pointed out that the stones were not called *Sgeulachdan* “Tales” but *Sgialaichean* “Tale-Tellers, Storytellers”, and that there was a tradition that “two ogres or ogre’s children are buried there and each is a headstone for one of them”. Doesn’t it seem likely that these two “ogres or ogre’s children” were the same pair of rogues who threw rocks up and down the mountain, and that other accounts might have said that the standing stones *were* the ogres?

I think the real point of the name *Sgialaichean* is this. You only have to look at these stones, or think about them, and some story of ogres or giants of the Féinn presents itself. I’m doing it now . . .

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