

Standing stones and Norsemen

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

People have been in touch, and the result is as usual when people have been in touch. One step back, one forward!

Let's take the step back first. Four weeks ago I said there was a house at Melness in Sutherland which is called *Taigh an Tursaich* because there's a standing stone on the croft. Now it turns out to be at Tongue, it's called *Taigh an Tursa*, and the standing stone is in the garden. Oh dear.

The whole thing is bogus, or, to put it another way, exemplifies "the invention of tradition". Apparently a family of incomers put up a standing stone and asked what they should call their house. The answer, *Taigh an Tursa*, was provided by a Harrisman and is exactly what you would expect if the stone were in Lewis or Harris.

Of course, it depends how you phrase the question. Say somebody asks: "What's the Gaelic for a standing stone?" One way to answer it is to look up a dictionary, and sure enough, two of the most recent ones, Mark's and Watson's, give *tursa*.

That's the top-down approach. The bottom-up approach is to ask around the district and say: "If there had been a standing stone here for thousands of years, what do you think it would it be called?"

That might have drawn things like Rob Donn's songs into the discussion. Who knows what might have come out. Maybe *Taigh an Tursa*, maybe *Taigh na Cloich*, maybe something else. All I can say is that I still don't know if standing stones were ever called *tursachan* outside Lewis and Harris, for one little bit of evidence has disappeared from under my feet. I feel like the old "Moderate" minister who was in the habit of reading the newspaper to his congregation before the service started. One Sunday morning he climbed into the pulpit, spread his arms wide and declared: "My friends, it was all lies I told you last Sabbath day!"

The truth seems to be that the Gaelic word for a standing stone depends on what part of the country you're in. Still, I shouldn't complain. If folk are going to start inventing traditions, it's as well if they're easily found out.

In the ancient Irish stories about how the warrior Cuchulainn tied himself to a pillar-stone in order to die on his feet, the word is *coirth*. It also appears several times in the oldest Scottish Gaelic document in existence, the twelfth-century notes from Aberdeenshire in the Book of Deer, where the monks of Deer define the boundaries of their land as stretching from one *coirth* to another.

Coirth found its way into various place-names in the east of Scotland – Pitcorthie in Fife, Pitforthie in Angus, Pitforthie in Kincardineshire. The change from "ch" to "f" is common, for example *Uachdar Chlò* in the Black Isle became Auchterflow. In the west of Scotland *coirth* turned into *carragh*, which is the regular word for a standing stone in Tiree, for example, as in this song about a fowling-piece:

*Shiubhail mi gach àite leath'
'S a' Charragh Mhaol gun ràinig mi
Is sgrìob an Gàrradh Phàil bha mi
Is bràigh na croit aig Teàrlach.*

"I wandered everywhere with her / And reached the Blunt Standing-Stone / And took a jaunt to Gàrradh Fàil / And the slope of Charles's croft."

When I put this in my book "The Gaelic Otherworld" I assumed at first that *Gàrradh Phàil* was "Paul's Enclosure", especially as there are MacPhails in the district, but Niall Brownlie, to whom I defer in all matters Tiristeach, preferred to make it *Gàrradh Fàil* "Turf Dyke".

Which brings me neatly to our little step forward. After reading my piece on "The last Norsemen in the Isles?" my old friend John Murray got in touch from Barvas to tell me about a couple of names there. One of them is *Tom-a-dire-fàil*, a kind of road up to the moor on the south side of Barvas Glen. It's always spoken very fast, says John, did-did-did-dà, and though he has often asked what it means, nobody can explain it.

Well, in his book on Lewis place-names Donald Maciver made it “the knoll of the sheep or cattle turf dyke”. Which bit of that is *dire* I don’t know. All I can think of is *dìreadh* “a climb” or *dìthreabh* “a wasteland”. Something’s wrong, and John has a better idea, *Taigh Muinntire Phàil* (my spelling). “The House of Paul’s People”?

Again, you see, there were MacPhails not far away, at Carloway, probably descendants of Páll Bálkasson, the Norwegian king’s governor of Skye, killed in 1231.

Also in Barvas are *Àirigh Alabhair* (Alabhair’s Shieling), *Leathad Àirigh Alabhair* (the Slope of Alabhair’s Shieling) and a stream called *Halagro* – Norse for “river of the hills”? John tells me there used to be a little rhyme about cattle *ag ìonaltradh mu Halagro is Alabhair a’ bhainne mhóir*, “grazing around Halagro and Alabhair of the big milk”.

So what is *Alabhair*? Well, judging from Richard Cox’s splendid book “The Gaelic Place-Names of Carloway”, it must be the same Norse name as in *Cleite Allghair* in Carloway – Oliver. As I said last time, Oliver was an ancestor of the MacLeods.

There are no flies on John Murray. There never were. Long ago, he says, he created a picture in his mind of two tribes of Norsemen settled in Barvas with control over the *cladach* or shore (Claddach was the old name of the parish). Perhaps they were what we would now call MacPhails and MacLeods.

What’s more, John remembers coming over the road from Stornoway with a man who pointed to a bog on the town side of Tom Roisneabhal and said it was *botaichean chlann ic Niocail, far an deach na bh’ air fhàgail dhiubh am bàthadh*. “The pools of the Nicolsons, where all that were left of them were drowned.”

This seems to reflect the tradition that Lewis was Nicolson territory before it fell into the hands of the MacLeods. There are quite a few stories about the MacLeods defeating the Nicolsons, and most of them involve drowning. The Rev. William Matheson put it like this in volume 51 of the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness: “What could well have happened is that Murdoch, grandson of Leod, residing in Harris, married the daughter of a Nicolson chief, and that their son Torquil fell heir to Lewis, possibly after rivals of his mother’s kin had been eliminated, by drowning or otherwise.”

We could interpret such an event as one bunch of Vikings fighting another. Or one bunch of Gaels fighting another. But it’s also possible that these stories reflect a cultural and linguistic struggle – Gaelicised MacLeods whose new allegiance was to the embryonic kingdom of the Isles, ruled by MacDonalds, rooting out Norse-speaking Nicolsons who had remained loyal to the king of Norway.

There are many tales of that kind, in fact sometimes I wonder if every island and district has its “last Norsemen” story.

For Tìree, there’s one about *Latha Cath nan Sguab*, “the Day of the Battle of the Sheaves”. Fionn and his men had gone to harvest their corn at Kilmaluag, leaving their weapons five miles away in the *dùn* or fairy hill of Caolas. The Norsemen came ashore at Vista and the two sides joined battle, the Féinn arming themselves as best they could while Caoilte went to fetch their weapons. *Bha sguab coirce dol gu crios ann an cneas Lochlannaich an latha sin*. “A sheaf of oats was driven into a Viking’s skin down to the waist on that day.”

The Coll story concerns Lachann Bronnach, chief of the MacLeans. When sailing from Duart to Tìree, which was already his, he put in at Coll to take in food and water. He met a woman who told him contemptuously that if he had a drop of Gaelic blood in his veins he would not allow the Norsemen to continue their reign of terror. Their chief, *Amhladh Mór* (Big Olaf), she explained, had his stronghold on an island in *Loch Amhlaidh*, Olaf’s Loch, and the only way to reach it was by an underwater causeway which zigzagged this way and that.

It’s a motif that occurs in many stories, such as one about the Neishes’ castle in Loch Earn. Anyway, Lachann disguises himself as a musician, finds a guide to take him over the causeway, entertains the Norsemen, waits till they are drunk, throws their weapons into the loch, then goes back and fetches his men. The Norsemen gather, but so do the natives, and Lachann leads them to victory at a place called Grimsary.

Coll tradition says of the Norsemen *cha d’fhàgadh fuil fineig dhiubh beò anns an eilean*, “not the smallest remnant of them have left a trace of their blood in the island”. The reason seems to be that they scuttled off to Uist. North Uist tradition has it that some of the MacAulays there came from *na h-Eileanan Tarsainn*, “the Athwart Islands”. As Willie

Matheson pointed out in volume 52 of the “Transactions”, for most Hebrideans this must have meant Coll and Tiree, “which lay across the important sea-route from north to south”. They were, presumably, Big Olaf’s men.

Which brings me back to Lewis. There was a tradition in Uig and Ness of Viking warriors called *buannaichean* who were billeted on the people, one per house. A *buanna* did no work and paid nothing, but had to be fed and served hand and foot.

The people met in secret and agreed to move in for the kill on a particular night. *Marbhadh gach fear a bhuanna agus marbhaidh mise mo bhuanna fhìn.* “Let each man kill his *buanna* and I’ll kill my own *buanna*.”

As a proverb, it stands as a memorial to the last Norsemen in the isles.

14 September 2007