

The MacAskills of Rubha an Dùnain

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE MacAskills are one of those old Norse families that I mentioned a couple of articles ago. They are a representative example of the type – that is to say, they maintained themselves very successfully as an outpost of the MacLeod empire, they had a specific hereditary role to play in that empire, they were renowned as warriors, and they lovingly preserved the memory of their Norse origins by using a unique forename.

“MacAskill” is derived from Norse *Ásketill*, which comes from *fás* “a god” and *ketill* “a cauldron”. So *Asgall*, to use the Gaelic spelling, means something like “cauldron of the gods”.

Somewhere along the line *Asgall* acquired an extra consonant, and this unique MacAskill forename became *Tasgall* or Taskill. I never heard of a Taskill from Skye in recent years but I’ve heard of Taskills from Berneray – it’s typical of these trusted warriors that some of them were sent to help guard that most fertile outpost of MacLeod territory. Berneray was the birthplace of the celebrated Cape Breton giant Angus MacAskill, who was 7 feet 9 inches tall and lived from 1825 to 1863.

Traditionally the MacAskills’ job had been to protect the coast, and to do this they served aboard the MacLeod fleet as what we might now call “commanders of marines”. At first they were based in Dunskaith Castle in Sleat. When Sleat was overrun by the MacDonalds they were moved to Rubha an Dùnain, and that remained their base for centuries.

Let me now bring in Fr Allan McDonald of Eriskay. In one of his folklore notebooks – Carmichael–Watson 58B in Edinburgh University Library – he talks about the last of the MacAskills of Rubha an Dùnain, and I don’t think this information has ever appeared in print before. He wrote this in Daliburgh in 1890: “McCaskill in South Uist. Are from Ru-an-dùnain in Skye. The first settler was grand uncle to the last McCaskill of Ru an dùnain, who ran thro’ the property.”

He goes on: “The settler in question came to Barra to fish herrings & McNeil demanded of him ‘Airgiod teoir.’ But this McCaskill refused & McNeil & he engaged in fight. McCaskill who was shod in ‘cuarans’ in the struggle had his foot thrust thro’ his cuaran but yet proved a match for McNeil who said ‘S tu a chiad duine a fhuair os cionn m’ analachsa.’ They afterwards became friendly & McCaskill married a ‘ban-stiubhard’ of McNeils. Later on he came to Uist & settled as Clanranalds grazier or aireach at Caolas Staolai.

“My informant is Rory McCaskill now in Eriskay nearly 80 years of age who says that when he was young he used to call at Ru an dùnain to see an old man McCaskill (Donald) who had the place, & who had spent much of his time in America but returned & was in ill-health. The son of this Donald was the last McCaskill who had Ru an dùnain.

“Roderick’s patronymics are Ruaraidh Mac Dhonuill ic Iain Bhain ic Phadruig ic Dhonuill ic Dhonuill. One McMillan who was afterwards in Uist had the management of the “*Stall*” of Ru an dùnain when the 2nd. last McCaskill was in America.

“The McKays in Kilpheder are also McCaskills one of their ancestors having adopted the name McKay to oblige a Glasgow merchant of the name McKay with whom he dealt.”

Finally Fr Allan repeats the name of his informant: “Roderick McCaskill Eriskay.” And Ada Goodrich Freer, who seems to have sat studying the notebook with Fr Allan in the priest’s house in Eriskay about ten years later, jots in the margin: “died in 1897.”

A few comments from me are needed, I think. If Roderick MacAskill was 80 in 1890, his visits to Rubha an Dùnain took place in the 1830s, and the last MacAskill left Rubha an Dùnain around 1850 or so. As for unusual words used by Fr Allan, we can of course look them up in John Lorne Campbell’s “Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay collected by Rev. Fr. Allan McDonald”.

This book makes it clear that the *airgiod teòir* which McNeil demanded of MacAskill was “shore money”. It quotes our own example, saying: *Bha Mac Nill Bharraidh ’g iarraidh airgiod teòir air fear de chlann Tasguil a Rubh’-an-Dùnain ’s e ri iasgach a’ sgadain.* “MacNeil of Barra was asking one of the MacAskills of Rubha an Dùnain, who was fishing for herring, for shore money.”

Whether *teòir* is the English word “shore”, Dwelly’s word *teòr* “mark, limit”, *tiùrr* meaning the tide-mark or *deòir* “a pilgrim” is a question far too thorny to bother us here!

Suffice to say that MacNeil demanded harbour dues, MacAskill refused, and it ended in a fight in which the latter's "cuarans" (*cuarain*) played a role. Let's look at that next.

A *cuaran* was not a shoe in the true sense of the term at all, that is, several pieces of tanned leather shaped, stitched together and stretched on a last to match a particular foot. It was really just a foot-bag. You took an animal's hide, put your foot on it and cut out a piece big enough to cover the entire foot, leaving the flesh on the inside and the hair on the outside. Then – the tricky bit – you had to take your needle and thong, gather in all the flaps around the ankle, and sew them up as tightly as possible.

Of course you had to do the same all over again for the other foot. *Feumaidh fear nan cuaran éirigh uair ro fhear nam bròg*, goes the proverb, "the cuaran-wearer has to get up an hour before the shoe-wearer" – not because you made a new pair of shoes every day, but because no matter how carefully you had taken your cuarans off the night before, you would still need to find a needle and stitch yourself back into them in the morning. Nevertheless it's an exaggeration, for I'm sure a seasoned cuaran-wearer like MacAskill could stitch himself in in a minute – provided he had a needle.

Now let's consider what happened in the fight. The only way MacAskill could have "had his foot thrust thro' his cuaran" was if MacNeil grabbed one of the flaps and pulled upwards so hard that his opponent's toes burst through the leather at the other end. The storyteller puts that in to show how tough MacAskill was. The fight seems to have been a draw, and MacNeil declared: '*S tu a chiad duine a fhuair os cionn m' analach-sa*. "You are the first man that got above my breath." Meaning I suppose that he had run out of puff but MacAskill was still going strong.

There are a couple of other things to explain in the story. MacNeil's *ban-stiùbhard* or stewardess was what Dwelly defines as "housekeeper". And the *stall* of Rubha an Dùnain, which we are told was "managed" by a MacMillan while Donald, the second-last MacAskill of Rubha an Dùnain, was in America in the years around 1800, must have been its sea-birds – guillemots, puffins, divers, cormorants.

I suppose the Rubha an Dùnain tack normally included Glenbrittle, Soay and the intervening headlands, including Rubha an Dùnain itself and the steep slopes on the northern shore of Loch Brittle where such birds would have nested at the foot of *Beinn an Eòin*, the appropriately-named "Bird Hill". They must have been just about the only natural resource of this barren district.

Stall or *stalla*, meaning a rock ledge, is a Norse word in origin. It's intriguing to think that this word may have designated the principal source of income of the tacksman of Rubha an Dùnain ever since he was an axe-wielding Norse-speaking jarl called *Asketill*. But it just goes to show that when these MacAskill tacksmen had no alternative source of income, such as soldiering, their income was next to nothing.

They come fleetingly into view in the 1770s when the father or grandfather of Donald MacAskill (who, as we have seen, spent a long time in America) signed a "voluntary obligation" committing himself, along with the other tacksmen on the MacLeod estate, to pay a seven-and-a-half per cent increase in rent, in order to save their chief from bankruptcy. A surviving Gaelic poem from around that time, printed in 1780, seems to portray the same man as desperate for an ounce of tobacco, and MacLeod's factor as a crook. But that's my subject for next time.

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