

The Bulls' Stone

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN 1775 James Macintyre, the tacksman of Glen Noe in Argyllshire, made a song to Dr Samuel Johnson which begins like this:

*An t-ollamh thàinig á Sasann
'N coinneamh ri masl' thoirt do dh'Alba,
Ged fhuair e suairceas da chleachdadh
'Na astar air feadh nan Garbhchrioch,
Cho luaithe ràinig e dhachaigh
Gu garaidh altram an t-seana-bhruic
Na rug an trùileach an asaid
De bhreugan ascaoin 's de shalachar.*

This is how I translated it in my book “An Lasair”: “The doctor that came from England / For the aim of slandering Scotland, / Though he found civility practised / In his trip round the Highlands, / No sooner was he home again / In the old badger’s nursing-sett / Than the rogue bore a foetus / Full of coarse lies and rubbish.”

The “foetus” was Johnson’s book “A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland”, now a classic of English literature. The “coarse lies and rubbish” were Johnson’s views on the Scots in general, and on Gaelic language and literature in particular.

Here’s a taste of what Johnson wrote about Gaelic: “Of the Earse language, as I understand nothing, I cannot say more than I have been told. It is the rude speech of a barbarous people, who had few thoughts to express, and were content, as they conceived grossly, to be grossly understood.”

And about our two-thousand-year-old literature: “I believe there cannot be recovered, in the whole Earse language, five hundred lines of which there is any evidence to prove them a hundred years old.”

And the Scots: “They are seduced by their fondness for their supposed ancestors. A Scotchman must be a very sturdy moralist, who does not love Scotland better than truth: he will always love it better than inquiry; and if falsehood flatters his vanity, will not be very diligent to detect it.”

Johnson was building up a defensive structure around his long-held personal opinions. He was saying in effect: “Anyone who says that Gaelic literature is over a hundred years old is a liar. I’ve visited the Islands, so I know what I’m talking about.”

Macintyre and his friends were particularly upset. They worshipped Johnson, whose great English dictionary, which appeared in 1755 with the help of a team of assistants – notably a Highlander called Alexander Macbean – had so inspired them that they had got together to produce a Gaelic one.

Sharing out the letters of the alphabet, they worked for a decade. They were close to publication when Johnson’s “Journey” came out and the work stopped dead. Their manuscripts can be seen in the National Library in Edinburgh to this day.

They switched to poetry instead, of which Macintyre’s effort was the first to see the light of day. Their purpose was to attack Johnson, in Gaelic, in Johnson’s own lexicographic style – in print, using as many overblown words as possible, and explaining them in footnotes!

Macintyre was the only layman of the group. The others were the Rev. Dugald Campbell, the Rev. Archibald MacArthur, the Rev. James MacLagan, the Rev. Donald MacNicol, the Rev. Charles Stewart and the Rev. John Stuart.

This explains, I think, why the satire which I reproduced in “An Lasair” was not only the first to appear (in 1776), but also the only one to be published under a byline. Men of the cloth could not be too closely associated with such insults. We have three more such poems, all published anonymously during the 1780s. There was also a book rebutting Johnson, written in English by MacNicol and published under his own name in 1779.

Recently I was reading volume 3 of John Francis Campbell’s “Popular Tales of the West Highlands” and came across something too similar to the above-quoted verse to be coincidental. It’s at the start of a curious tale, written down by John Dewar (1802–72), a

native of Glendaruel in Cowal, presumably from his own recollection, in 1860: *Thainig roimh so tarbh dearg a Sasunn, a chum maslachadh a thoirt do Albainn*. “There came before now a red bull from England, for the aim of slandering Scotland.”

Is this Johnson?

The story isn't very long, so let me tell it here. It's set at the top end of Loch Lomond (*Loch Loimeinn*), where today the A82 from Glasgow strikes north from Tarbet to Ardlui in the shadow of Ben Vorlich. The red bull stood on the shoulder of Ben Vorlich (*Beinn Mhùrluig*) and bellowed: *Is truagh an dùthaich, is truagh an dùthaich*. “The country is wretched, the country is wretched.”

This certainly sounds like Johnson, who had a lot to say about the wretchedness of our countryside, and who had passed through Tarbet on 26 October 1773. What he wrote was balanced, however: “After two days stay at *Inverary* we proceeded *Southward* over *Glencroe*, a black and dreary region, now made easily passable by a military road . . . Being, by the favour of the Duke, well mounted, I went up and down the hill with great convenience. From *Glencroe* we passed through a pleasant country to the banks of *Loch Lomond*, and were received at the house of Sir *James Colquhoun*.”

There was a black Highland bull, the story goes on, on the other side of Loch Lomond, by the hill ground of *Dùn Pholl a' Chrò*, and he roared: *Cia ás a tha thu?* “Where are you from?”

Á tír do nàmhaid. “From your enemy's land.”

Ciod e do theachd an tír? “What do you live on?”

Cruinneachd 's fìon. “Wheat and wine.”

This sums up Johnson's diet pretty well, or at least those parts of it which seemed extraordinary to the Highlander of the day. Johnson drank prodigious quantities of wine in London when he wasn't “on the waggon”, and had never tasted whisky in his life until he ordered a gill of it in the inn at Inveraray on 23 October, drinking all but a drop. When he and Boswell met some people in Glenshiel, Johnson wrote, “Mr *Boswell* sliced the bread, and divided it amongst them, as he supposed them never to have tasted a wheaten loaf before.”

Back to our story. The black bull declares: *Chuirinn thu an comhair do chùil*. “I'll drive you backwards.”

Càit an do rugadh tu? “Where were you born?”

An Crò an Dùin, replies the black bull. “In the Cattle-Fold of the Ring-Fort.” A *dùn* is an Iron Age fort or broch, or a hill that looks like one, and the word carries supernatural undertones, implying that this was a bull of no ordinary strength. This particular *dùn* has already been mentioned: *Dùn Pholl a' Chrò*.

The place is easily identified. “Doune” is a mile down from the top of Loch Lomond, on the east side. “Pollochro” is the next inhabited spot, two miles further south. Nowadays both are on the “West Highland Way”. This is Rob Roy's country, his native Glengyle being only a couple of miles over the hill to the east.

Back to the story. The red bull demands: *Ciod bu bhiadh dhuit on bha thu ad' laogh?* “What have you lived on since you were a calf?”

Bainne 's bàrr fraoich. “Milk and heather tips.”

The red bull now issues his challenge. *An adhrac chrom seo am beul do chléibh!* “This curved horn in the front of your chest!”

Chugad mi! Chan eagal dhomh! “I'll attack you! I'm not afraid!”

The black bull went round the end of the loch. They met on the upper shoulder of Ben Vorlich, put their heads together and fought (*ghleac iad*). The black bull drove the red one back to a big stone, which they upset (*chuir iad car den chloich*), and it rolled down to a plain beside the main road about five miles up from Tarbet (*taobh shuas an Tairebeart Loimeanach*) and three miles down from the top of the loch. The black bull put his horn into the red bull's chest and killed him.

So, Dewar concludes, *Clach nan Tarbh* (“the Bulls' Stone”) is the name of the stone to this day, and it's the biggest stone in the three kingdoms.

This is “Pulpit Rock”. It was used for communions, and has a doorway cut in it to shelter the minister. Is the tale, as has been suggested, an echo of the Iron Age, which produced a famous Gaelic story from Ireland, “*Táin Bó Cuailnge*”, about bulls fighting? Can it be about Johnson and MacNicol? Or does it have something to do with Rob Roy, who lived a little bit earlier (1671–1734)?

We're *supposed* to ask such questions. The story's a riddle, a gobbet to provoke informed debate in the ceilidh-house, like a film in a current affairs show on TV.

This is what I think. The red bull can only be Johnson. He was often likened to a bull, and in particular to John Bull, a character invented just before his time by a Scot, John Arbuthnot.

So which of the various people I've mentioned was born, like the black bull, at *Dùn Pholl a' Chrò*? The answer is, quite possibly Rob Roy. His exact birthplace is otherwise unknown; his people were from Glengyle in Aberfoyle parish, but he was baptised in Buchanan, the parish that covers most of the eastern shore of the loch – in fact the Arrochar/Buchanan boundary runs between Doune and Pollochro.

There *is* a connection with Macintyre's group, however. The minister of Arrochar at the time of Johnson's visit was the Rev. John Stuart (1743–1821). He was no ordinary minister but one of the translators of the Gaelic Bible, and according to Arrochar tradition he possessed supernatural powers. He certainly preached at *Clach nan Tarbh*.

Given the incremental way in which folklore works, I think this is what happened. First there was a legend of two bulls. Then it was applied to Rob Roy (whose trade was black cattle) and an exploit involving redcoats. Finally, thanks to Stuart's preaching (and his association with the poems), the redcoats turned into Dr Johnson.

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