The feminine principle

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

WHEN the poet Màiri nighean Alastair Ruaidh portrayed Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray in her great song “An Talla ’m bu Ghnàth le Mac Leòid” she described how, among much else,

Leat bu mhiannach coin lùthmhor
Dhol a shiubhal nan stùcbheann
’S an gunna nach diùltadh r’a h-òrd.

“You loved to have strong hounds / For ranging the rocky hills / And the gun that refused not her hammer.”

The third line is an intriguing example of a phenomenon that exists in English as well – the tendency to use the feminine gender for certain things that men regard as having feminine properties, especially boats, cars and planes. “Keep her steady!” “Rev her up!” “She’s on course now!”

It extends to names as well. Lots of boats and ships have names like the Mary Jane or the Queen Elizabeth. How many have you come across called the Donald John or the King George?

No doubt there are reasons for this which have to do with psychology and superstition. Personally I’m interested in the female angle. How far do women go along with these speech customs, as Màiri did in her song? For example, if a man says to a woman, “Is she on course?” the reply may be: “No, she’s not.” But if the questioner were a woman, would she say: “Is *it* on course?”

All I know is that every so often when watching whodunnits on TV I turn to *bean MhicilleDhuibh* and say: “Did you hear what that girl just said? The script must have been written by a man. Surely women don’t talk like that.”

She replies: “I don’t know. Why don’t you put the kettle on?”

In Gaelic it’s slightly different. For one thing, there’s no neuter, so everything is masculine or feminine, as in French. That’s why *an gunna nach diùltadh r’a h-òrd* is odd: *an gunna* is grammatically masculine, but is referred to as feminine – *a h-òrd* “her hammer”.

For another thing, the principle extends beyond vehicles, not merely to guns but also to clothes, musical instruments, pretty much anything that could be defined as a manufactured object held in affection by men. What’s more, any of these things may be given names. This verse was made by the Jacobite poet Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair when the Disarming/Disclothing Act of 1746 took away the right to wear the tartan plaid:

Tha mi ’n-diugh gun ruith gun leum,
Tha mo chéile bhuam air chall;
Nic Suain mhaiseach t’ ainm baistidh,
Dh’fhuir’eadh agam, falbh ’s an tàmh . . .

“These days I do no running or jumping, / For my beloved spouse is lost to me: / Your baptismal name is lovely Nic Suain, / You used to be with me in motion and rest; / No matter how far I had to go, / You would follow me very closely – / You would never ever forsake me, / No matter what snow or floods there might be.”

Nic Shuain – what a marvellous pun for a garment used as cloak by day and blanket by night. “Daughter of Wrapping” and “Daughter of Slumber” as well as simple “MacSween”!

As for named guns, Gaelic literature and tradition are full of them. One of the best known is *NicCòiseim*, “Constantine’s Daughter”. Duncan Bàn Macintyre, who was a poet and a gamekeeper, bought her from a man in Glen Lochay whose name was *MacCòiseim*, “the Son of Constantine”.

In the same way, the Badenoch poet William Gow, *Uilleam Ruighe ’n Uidhe*, was given a gun by Col. William Grant of Rothiemurchus, whose patronymic was *Mac Ailpein*. He called her *nighean a’ Chòirneil* (“the Colonel’s Daughter”) or *Nic Ailpein* (“Alpin’s Daughter”) and

addressed her lovingly: *Cha tugainn blas do phòige / Air stòr nan Innsean thall*. "I wouldn't exchange the taste of your kiss / For the riches of distant India."

Another named gun was *an t-Slinneanach* which was used to assassinate Colin Campbell of Glenure, the government's factor for the Ardshiel estate, in the wood of Lettermore on 14 May 1752. The Disarming/Disclothing Act had reduced the number of usable guns in Appin to three, and apparently the young hotheads who planned the murder had held secret shooting matches to decide which was best, and who should fire the shot. The decision fell on the *Slinneanach* and Donald Stewart, nephew of the tacksman of Ballachulish.

The *Slinneanach* was a big long foreign gun. You can see it, or one very like it, in the West Highland Museum in Fort William. It was said that if a bullet and swan-shot were put in it, it would fire the two within an inch of each other at a distance of a hundred yards. In other words, it could be loaded with two balls, the second of which, known in Gaelic as the *fear-siubhail* ("traveller") or *ruagaire* ("chaser"), was only half the size of the first and normally more erratic in flight. Glenure was struck in the back by two bullets which passed through his body two and a half inches from each other.

Years later, a young girl called Seònaid Nic Aonghais was herding cattle in the glen behind Ballachulish House when she found a gun in a hollow tree. She brought it to the house and showed it to old Stewart of Ballachulish. He said: *Se sin gunna dubh a' mhì-fhortain, a Sheònaid*. "That's the black gun of misfortune, Janet."

The first thing to notice about the name *an t-Slinneanach* is that it's grammatically feminine. *Slinnean* is a shoulderblade, but having said that, writers on the Appin Murder (and there have been many) get stuck. What exactly have guns to do with shoulderblades?

Well, a *slinneanach* is a scapulimancer, a person who makes predictions by reading the marks on a sheep's shoulderblade – a widespread custom whose origins are in Asia. There are long Arabic treatises about it. So *an t-Slinneanach* was "the Soothsayer" or "the Fairground Fortune-Teller". A gun so accurate that it could foretell the future. And sure enough the one in the West Highland Museum has been identified as having come from Afghanistan or India. It was called a *Spainnteach* ("Spanish gun") and was probably made in Portugal.

The assassin was never caught, but the leading man on the estate, *Seumas a' Ghlinne*, was hanged for being "art and part" in it. Years later, Donald Stewart was hunting on Rannoch Moor with Alexander Campbell, the murdered man's brother. They had no luck all day, then towards evening they saw a deer a long way off. Donald fired, the animal fell, and Alexander exclaimed that he would not have thought any gun could shoot so far so accurately.

When they examined the carcase they found it had been killed by two balls striking close together, halfway between the back of the shoulder and the short rib. "That is the way my brother Colin was struck," said Alexander.

"Are you saying that I killed your brother?" said Donald. "If so, you will not go home living."

"I am not," said Alexander. But they chose to go home by different roads, and there was a coldness between them ever after.

Later poets, such as Duncan Campbell from Cowal, who published his songs in 1798, picked up the gun-as-woman idea. *Tha t' anail gu neo-chùbhraidh*, he remarks to his gun, *nuair thig àm a brùchd bho d' chreubhaig*. "Your breath is far from scented when it's time to belch it from your body."

Sometimes it's hard to tell whether he's talking about a gun or a woman. It may be both. In another song he tells how a girl points a gun at an ardent suitor and it goes off. Why, I wonder, does he set it to the tune of mac Mhaighstir Alastair's song "Tinneas na h-Urchaid" – "Venereal Disease"?

Duncan Campbell was a soldier. So too, in the twentieth century, was Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna from North Uist. When there was a George on the throne, such people often called their gun *Nighean Deòrsa* – "George's Daughter".

Dòmhnall Ruadh portrays his whole army career as a love affair with his gun; it ended in the trenches. *Se gaol na mosgaid a dh'fhàg / Fo ghlas-làmh aig a' Chrùn mi* . . . "It's the love of the musket / Has handcuffed me to the Crown – / The love I had in my youth / For guiding her always – / But when we were married, / Grief reared up behind her, / And a sorrow beset me / That we'd never have sought / When I got George's dowry / With yon

slender young bride: / Brass, copper and pewter, / Lead, cordite and powder, / An oil-bottle in her pouch / To be cleaning her always, / Since I gave my vows / That I'd carry Morag / Till we fell side by side / Or I turned her into the store."

For thousands of young men from the islands, this was historical truth. They joined the territorials, went to Fort George once a year, enjoyed themselves, were given a gun. Then in 1914 they got more than they bargained for.

Turning finally to musical instruments, the MacCrimmons had a pet name for their pipes: *an Òinseach*, "the Comedienne". And there's a song addressed to a fiddle by Alexander MacDonald, son of the tacksman of Ardnabie in Glengarry, beginning: *Gum b' ait leam bhith làimh riut, / A Mhàiri nighean Deòrsa*. "I'd love to be near you, / Mary, daughter of George."

Mac Mhaighstir Alastair replied with a song praising MacCrimmon's pipes. It begins: *Is iomadh baintighearn' bha spéiseil / Mun chéile bh' aig Mòraig*. "Many ladies were partial / To Morag's companion." It's a political point – if *nighean Deòrsa* is "King George's daughter" (which is not really what young Ardnabie meant), *an céile bh' aig Mòraig* is equally "Prince Charlie's companion", Morag being the Prince's code-name. And he tells the bagpipe in his last verse: *Is ionmhainn leam fhéin thu / Seach an céile bh' aig Deòrsa*. "I prefer you myself / To George's companion."

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