

## Murdoch Matheson, spin doctor

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

Gaelic verse seldom tells a story. It's not like a ballad, with beginning, middle and end. Each verse is a self-contained module, which takes some aspect of the story as a whole and examines it afresh. I think one of the reasons for this is that songs seldom came by themselves. They were merely part of an oral information-pack.

So, for example, when 'Marbhrann Bhàtair' ('Walter's Elegy') was performed in the ceilidh-houses of Kintail, it would have been preceded and followed by the story of the battle of Àth nam Muileach (2 October 1721) and talk of the personalities and issues involved:—

The Jacobite colonel Donald Murchison, the Rob Roy of the North, whom the forfeited Marquis of Seaforth had appointed as his factor to collect his rents and send them to him in exile in Spain;

William Ross, Laird of Easter Fearn, marching west up Glen Affric with his redcoats behind him and his government commission as factor to the Glenmoriston, Strathglass and Seaforth estates burning a hole in his pocket;

And, wearing a red cloak at the head of the column, his foppish third son Walter, riding a white horse into a hail of Kintail bullets. He died on a stretcher of birch branches and wattles at Knockfin in Strathglass on the sad retreat down to Beaully, where he was buried, and Seaforth's poet, Murdoch Matheson from Kintail, made a mocking 'Marbhrann' to him in Easter Ross Gaelic which sums up everything the *Siarach* thought of the *Searach*. The third-last verse ranges over almost the whole story; *a' Cheannmhor*, Kenmore, was I believe a township at the top end of Loch Affric.

*'S ann an sid a bha 'n truaighe  
A dul suas tro na Cheanna-mhor,  
D'ar sadu le luaithe,  
'S d'ar bualu 'san eanachail,  
Bha na saighdearan Ruabha,  
Gabhal ruagu sa'n àma sin;  
'S b'fheudar teichu ro 'n fhuathas,  
Gus na bhuaile sinn a' Mhanachain  
A tigh'n' air ais!*

("How terrible it was / As we went up through Kenmore / Being fired at with lead / And being hit in the brain; / The red-coated soldiers / Fell back at this point / And we had to flee from the horror / Until we hit Beaully / On the way back!")

That's my translation. There's one, seemingly by Captain Alexander Matheson from Dornie, in a manuscript in Edinburgh University Library, which has fun with Easter Ross English, as I showed last time. At this point it goes: "It was there the mischief befell us / Going up through the Kenmore / Clifted and hunted with billets / Sticking deep in our brains / The red soldiers at this time / Dispersed fled and scattered / We had to retreat from the awful / Till we halted in Beaully / When coming back!"

'Marbhrann Bhàtair' is a particularly good example of poetry presented in context, because it is a *crossanachd*, that is, following each verse there is a piece of prose. Usually the prose is wholly comic, but here it teases a serious point out of the verse. *Ochan! e chuine! Grain air an fheoin a bha 'n sin, na saighdearan ruabha, na'm biu iad-san mar bu chòir doibh a bhi cha dreu Bhàtar a mharbhu fathast.*

Captain Matheson translates it like this: "Alas man! I disdain these men the red coat soldiers if they stood as they should have done Walter had not been killed yet."

What exactly had happened? According to an account published by Robert Chambers in 'Domestic Annals of Scotland', Easter Fearn had thirty soldiers and some armed servants of his own. He was, after all, supposed to be a factor come in peace to collect rents, not the general of an invading army. He wasn't entirely stupid, however, and had arranged to be met at Knockfin on the way up by a detachment of fifty soldiers under Lt. Brymer from the barracks at Glenelg.

That made about a hundred men on the government side – more than enough, it was

thought, to challenge Murchison's usual band of sixty. Unfortunately for Ross, Murchison was waiting at Àth nam Muileach not only with his own sixty men but also MacLeods and MacKenzies from Lewis under George MacKenzie of Kildun, Camerons from Lochaber, MacDonalds from Glengarry, and many of the very Grants and Chisholms who had made a pretence of submitting to Ross's authority on his way up through Glenmoriston and Strathglass! Over three hundred men, armed with long Spanish firelocks and posted strategically along the route.

At 8 a.m. on Monday 2 October, says Chambers, Brymer and his men peeled off and were never heard of again, and by mid-day the battle was lost. These, then, are the soldiers who failed to 'stand as they should have done'. Were they trying to outflank the enemy? Or were they like NATO troops in the Balkans today, deployed as peacekeepers to assist the civil authority but under orders to avoid confrontation? Seen in that light, Brymer's aim may have been to avert a massacre, and if so he succeeded: the 'battle' consisted of an exchange of fire, some injuries (Walter's proving fatal), and a capitulation.

There appear to have been some on Murchison's side, especially the Camerons, who would have preferred major bloodshed, Srebrenice-style. I think we should see 'Marbhrann Bhàtair' in that light. There was one death that mattered, and it became the focus of a substantial propaganda effort by Seaforth's own poet. Walter's Elegy is 'spin' from start to finish, pretending as it does to have been made by an Easter Ross poet. Look at the second-last verse:

*Ach nach sinne 'bha dàna  
Dul an dàil na cuis-eagail.  
Ged bhiu sinn tuille 's na bhà sinn  
Gu 'n dreu Bhàtar a legu!  
Bha na reubaltaich ghràd' ann  
'S iad gun chràbh gun chreidu,  
B'ann diu sin Do'l Sàileach,  
A's Do'l na Spàinte le pheileir,  
A rinn an sgath.*

("But we'd been foolhardy / To face up to the monster / For had there been more of us / We'd still have lost Walter – / The ugly rebels were there / With no piety or religion / Including Donald of Kintail / And Spanish Donald with his bullets / Who did the damage.")

The focus here is on individuals. *Dòmhnall Sàileach* is Murchison himself. *Dòmhnall na Spàinte* is also well-known. Captain Matheson points out in his introduction that at one time a large sum had been sent to Seaforth in Spain 'by a desperate fellow from Lochalsh named afterwards in consequence *Donallban Spaintach* i.e. Spanish Donald Ban', and his translation of the last two lines makes this the man who killed Walter: "And Donald the Spainard with his billet. / That made the scath which fell him dead."

This is not borne out by his introduction, in which responsibility for the deed is diplomatically shared by Malcolm MacRae and Donald Derg MacLennan from Morvich. However, the ensuing prose section speaks hilariously of Dòmhnall Bàn and his gun. *Ochan! e chuine! O an t-uabhas! seachd gràinean air an fhear a bh'ann an sin, Do'l mòr Spàinteach; na'm biu tu ann, a chuine, cha do ghobh thu riamh a leithid a dh' eagal. Dal a bheiru a ghunna "puth!" theiru a' chraig "pôuthar!"*

Matheson translates: "Alas man! the terror! coundound him Seven times that dreadful man tall Donald the Spainard, if you had been there man you had never taken such a fright when his gun would give the report *puth* the rosks would reviberate *pouthar* i.e. dibble."

By 'dibble' he means 'double'. Visualise the ceilidh-house performer picking up a six-foot stick, aiming it at the delighted children in the audience, closing one eye, squeezing the imaginary trigger and making those wonderful noises. Pooh! Pooh-ar!

*'S mòr bha ghionach an t-saoghail,  
'Sa loin-chraois ann a' Bhàtar,  
Chaill e nàir' agus onair,  
A dul gu dona ' Chinn-tàile,  
Dal a shaoil leis an duine*

*E thoirt buileach a mhàil uath,  
Dal a chunnt iad a' bhuinig,  
Cha drobh ac' urrad na beàrnaich,  
A bhiu air clach!*

("There was much worldly avarice / And violent hunger in Walter, / He lost his shame and his honour / By going with greed to Kintail — / Although the man thought / He would lift their whole rent, / When they counted the winnings / They'd not as much as a limpet / Stuck to a stone!")

The last bit of prose rounds it all off beautifully. *Ochan! e chuine! thuirid mi sid riubh mas dh'falbh iad, ach cha chreidu ad mi. Cuiru iad a nis' air leth a' bhuannachd — cha chuir urrad a' mhulan-pheatais!* As Captain Matheson expresses it: "Alas man! I told them that before they left but they would not believe me let them now count their profit no! not so much as the worth of the peat stack."

Here is something else which shows that 'Marbhrann Bhàtair' is 'spin'. In publishing it for the first time in his book 'An t-Aosdàna' (1844), John Mackenzie from Gairloch described it as *Leis an Aosdana Mac-Mhathain Bàrd Mhic-Choinnich, mar mhagadh air na Rothaich agus air Gàellig an dùthcha. Tha'n t-òran air a' chur, mach ann an ainm Dhòmhnuille Munro bàrd Thighearna Bhaile nan Gobhan eipisg de dhuine dòchasach a bha beo mun àm ud.* I translate: "By the Aosdàna MacMhathain, Seaforth's Poet, in mockery of the Munros and of the Gaelic of their district. The song was put out in the name of Donald Munro the Laird of Balnagown's poet, a conceited bishop-like fellow who lived around that time."

As I said on the very first page of my book 'An Lasair', *Aos-Dàna* was a title given in this period to poets who were 'servants of their chief and kindred'. It meant in origin 'People of Poetry', but given Murdoch Matheson's activities, the best translation I can think of is 'Spin-Doctor'. As for poor Donald Munro who was so insulted and misrepresented, he may not have been a Munro at all but a Ross – the Laird of Balnagown was a Ross, and whenever these Wester Ross men talked of *Rothaich* they seem to have meant Rosses or Munros indifferently.

Mackenzie goes on to allege that Donald had made a 'very comical elegy' (*marbhram ro àit*) for his master that began like this:

*Thog iad air na maidean thu,  
Sa' mhadainn moch di-ciadain,  
Sios do Chille Chuimein bheag,  
Be sid a' cholainn chiatach!*

("They lifted you upon the sticks / On Wednesday morning early, / Down to little Fort Augustus — / What a lovely corpse it was!") The translation is mine, the spelling of the original is Mackenzie's.

*'S tric a bha mi ann do theth,  
Far am biodh an fhialach,  
Liteachan a's calachachan,  
A's labhanan air miosan, &c.*

("I was often in your house / Where there was hospitality — / Porridges and husks of grain / And flummeries on platters!") The key words are (when spelt more respectably) *taigh* 'house', *fialachd* 'hospitality', *càileachan* 'porridges' and *làghan* 'flummeries', the joke being that Balnagown gives his poet the dregs of his grain harvest to eat and he loves it. Or claims to.

Mackenzie then gives us the very words in which (he says) Donald told of receiving the gift of poetry. *Dh'iarr fear mo ghràidh orm féin ronn a dheanamh dha ach dig cha lamhainn a deanamh, 'nuair chunna mi sud chuir mi car dhidedhe dhion timchioll an sgurrach ach cha danu ronn no ronn ach fa dheru thainig roinn agus be ronn i.* ("My beloved man asked me to make him a verse but not one cheep could I compose; when I saw that I took a stroll round the hill to ease the digestion but neither a verse nor a verse came but at last verses came and

what a verse!”)

There are jokes here too. *Car dhidedhe dhion*, or rather *car dìotadha dhiom*, is a dinner-time stroll, a stroll to ease the digestion, a post-prandial visit to the loo. And *rann*, ‘a verse’, is being pronounced *ronn* as if it were the word meaning slaver or spittle. If you like bathroom humour, read it again. Finally here’s the *ronn* that came, and it rhymes well enough:

*Tighearna Bhaile nan Gobhann  
Olach foghainteach fo phlàncaid  
Ged nach eil e deanamh chloinne  
Cha n-e ’s coireach ach a’ bhaintigh’rn’!*

(“The Laird of Balnagown, / Sturdy yeoman under blanket – / Though he’s not making children, / He’s not to blame, but the Lady!”)

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