

Where religion meets superstition

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A few years ago on this page I set out a scheme of what I called ‘Gaelic verse ethnography’. Ethnography is writings about a people, their way of life and their way of thought. What I call ‘Gaelic ethnography’ is writings about Gaelic-speaking people, their way of life and way of thought. Most ethnography is in prose, and this can be of two sorts – travellers’ tales, or people writing (or talking) about themselves in their own words, ideally their own language.

A certain amount of riddling and sifting is often needed to isolate the ethnography. For example, if the writer talks about himself, the scenery, or the antiquities, well, those are other subjects altogether.

If we then consider Gaelic verse as a source of ethnography, it’s a bit like panning for gold. Most verse isn’t ethnographic, except in a broad sense, but every so often, maybe when you’re least expecting it, you find a nugget.

So in that article a few years ago I proposed a method. I took a big chunk of Gaelic verse (Donald Macintyre’s book ‘Sporan Dhòmhnail’), extracted everything that seemed to fit the broad definition of ‘ethnography’, then worked out a set of categories – labels, if you like – that would make sense of it all.

There turned out to be seven categories. I called them ‘panegyric code’, ‘superstition’, ‘seanchas’, ‘meteorology’, ‘calendar’, ‘way of life’, and ‘material culture’.

Recently I’ve been working on another substantial body of Gaelic verse, this time the poems of Fr Allan McDonald of Eriskay, so I thought it would be interesting to test my earlier theory against it and see if it still holds water. Once again I identified everything that looked ethnographic. Then for each item I asked myself if one of those seven labels would cover it.

Results have been very positive, and full of interest. You may already have spotted one potential landmine that I had laid for myself – ‘superstition’. Almost anything in a hymn by a Roman Catholic priest is going to be labelled ‘superstition’ by someone of the opposite persuasion. To a Free Church communicant, Fr Allan’s work wouldn’t *need* riddled – it’s ethnographic from start to finish!

On the other hand, if I find any superstition at all in his work, pious Catholics might be upset. By theological definition, superstition is the Devil’s work and should be rooted out and destroyed. Well, I’m not saying that Fr Allan was superstitious, just that sometimes he mentions superstitions or uses words associated with them.

It’s a big issue. There are people nowadays who allow their kids to watch TV full of sex and violence every day of the week, but draw the line at bringing them to ‘Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone’ or ‘The Lord of the Rings’. In Fr Allan’s own day, the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell of Tiree devoted his life to collecting superstitions and witchcraft traditions, but he left his collections to be published when he was safely ten feet under. I hope to have quite a bit to say about them in the New Year.

Anyway, in this article and the next, I want to take my seven categories in order, starting with ‘panegyric code’. This is a term coined by Dr John MacInnes for the lens through which the makers of praise poetry saw their subjects, and there’s a superb example of it in a poem made by Fr Allan for Fr John Mackintosh of Bornish when the latter was leaving Uist in 1900 to become parish priest of Campbeltown. Fr John was a tall, burly, active man who had seen the crofters through very difficult times. Unlike Fr Allan, who preferred to walk, he went around on horseback all the time, so he was called *Sagart Mór nan Each*, ‘the Big Priest of the Horses’. Look at what Fr Allan says about him.

*Gnùis na féile measg na cléir’ e,
Bhiodh na ceudan cruinn mun bhòrd leis;
Sealgair e às na miltean –
Cha tàrradh guilbneach no còrr às,
Leagadh e an lacha riabhach
’S b’ uidheamaiche bian nan ròn e.*

*Cha robh ciùird a thug e làmh air
 Nach tug e bàrr air na fir eòlach —
 Iomanaiche math is aireach,
 'S bu mhath an cuideachd ri spòrs' e.
 Bu ghrinn air gach inneal ciùil e,
 Bu shiùbhlach an fhidheall fo mheòirean;
 Sheinneadh e sgail air an dùdaich
 'S bùirein á craos tarbh-nòna!*

(“He’s the hospitable face of the clergy, / Hundreds would join him around the table; / He’s a hunter in a thousand — / No curlew or heron could escape him, / He would slaughter the mallard / And he was a wearer of sealskins. / In any trade he turned his hand to / He would excel the professionals — / A fine player of shinty and a cattleman, / He’d be good in a team at any sport. / Skilled at any musical instrument, / The fiddle would sing to his fingers; / He would nurture a toot from a horn / And a blast from the deep throat of a trombone!”)

Well well. This is twentieth-century man ingeniously described in terms adapted from those of the seventeenth. “Hundreds would join him.” Does this reflect the size of the priest’s house at Bornish? (If you’ve seen it, you will know what I mean.) Or does it simply reflect generation upon generation of Gaelic verse in which the head of the kindred was praised by the number of visitors he entertained – *thig còig ceud a shealltainn ort*, for example, ‘five hundred come to see you’, as was said of a MacGregor chief?

Then there’s the hunting. Hunting was the noble activity *par excellence*, and traditional verse is full of it. Deer-hunting especially, perhaps because there’s something of the cosmological rite about it. Man’s triumph over the otherworld. But wait a minute, Fr John hunts curlews, herons, mallard, seals . . .

Does Fr Allan approve? I don’t think so, and here I’m going to quote a passage from ‘Eilein na h-Òige’ (his most famous poem) which I had actually logged under ‘superstitions’.

*Ròn le chuilean air an t-siubhal —
 Cò nach ludhaig spéis dha,
 'S e cho miosail air an isean
 Mun dian clibist beud air?
 Ri àm cunnairt, siud air mhuin e,
 Falbh an t-sruth gu réidh leis:
 Gum bu tubaisteach dhan duine
 Chuireadh gunn’ air ghleus ris.*

(“A seal with her young one on the move — / Who will not admire her, / She being so careful of her pup / In case some accident befall him? / When danger looms, with him on her back, / They cleave the current together: / No good fate’s in store for the man / Who could load a gun to shoot her.”)

Fr John suffered nothing but sickness when he went to Campbeltown. Bright’s disease. The people of his new parish hardly got to know him at all. And despite Fr Allan’s good wishes (in translation, “Good luck to him in Campbeltown / Since that is where he wants to go – / And to wear a bishop’s cap before he’s grey / Is our wish for the Christian who’s leaving us”) he died there on 16 March 1903.

Did Fr Allan have the second sight? Well, so they used to say. But I would prefer to point out that Fr Allan was only too well aware of legends connecting the people of North Uist, in particular, with the seals. In one of his folklore manuscripts, now in Edinburgh, he wrote: “It was a tradition that the McCodrums of North Uist had the power of changing themselves into seals. They are called *Sliochd an ròin* [‘the Tribe of the seal’]. Sometimes when in the guise of seals they were killed. On one occasion some people of North Uist were hunting seals at Causamul a rock in the West Atlantic. They slaughtered some and took them home. After the family had gone to bed, a female was observed to come into the house and say to the seals which were lying on the floor at the other end of the house

Spòg! Fionnghal ['Flipper! Flora']
Spòg! mo nighinn Fionnghail ['Flipper! my daughter Flora']
Spòg, spaideig! ['Flipper, my gorgeous girl!']
Spòg, mo chuilein chaoimh chaidrich! ['Flipper, my gentle affectionate pup!']"

Finally, as for Fr John's skill on the trombone, I think it's unlikely that he had ever heard of jazz. He had spent five years studying for the priesthood in France and Spain, and I suspect he learned to play it for ceremonial occasions such as Corpus Christi processions.

And so to 'superstition'. On at least two occasions in Eriskay Fr Allan made poems which he delivered as part of a wedding speech. He ended one of them by complimenting the ladies on the beautifully embroidered tablecloth and adding:

Dh'fhóghnadh dha na mnathan sìdhe
Bhith cho grinn air dannsa.

("Fairy women would be delighted / To be as graceful at dancing.") True enough, the fairies were famous for their skill at dancing. Coming from a famous folklorist – and a man who enjoyed the odd reel himself, as far as I can make out – it was a nice compliment.

Now let's get a little closer to that hazy area between religion and superstition. Fr Allan refers more than once to the ocean as *cuile Mhoire*. In 'Laoidh an Iasgair', for example, 'The Fisherman's Hymn', he says:

Gum mealamaid a' bheannachd Bharrach —
Toradh mar' á cuile Mhoire.

("May we enjoy the Barra blessing — / The fruit of the sea from Mary's store.") This idea of the sea as 'Mary's store' connects with the Mother of Christ being 'the Star of the Sea'. Fr Allan wrote in one of his notebooks: "There is a tradition in Uist that Barra was anciently blessed by a Saint, by St. Brendan or by whom I know not, with the following blessing: *Toradh mara gu tìr a Cuile-Mhoire* – may the produce of the sea come to the shore from Mary's Treasury."

Two hundred years before, Martin Martin mentioned what looks like an extension of the idea – in North Uist, he said, "The Parish-Minister hath his choice of all the young Seals, and that which he takes is call'd by the Natives, *Cullen-Mory*, that is, the Virgin *Mary's Seal*." *Cuilean Moire* is more literally 'the Virgin Mary's pup'.

My last little item of 'superstition' is this. Many of Fr Allan's poems were hymns and over and over again in them he refers to Christ's crown of thorns using the word *droigheann* – 'blackthorn'. In 'Eachdraidh Chrìosta' ('The Biography of Christ') he says for example:

Am fochaid lùbadh glùn dhut
'S dh'fhigheadh dhen droighinn crùn dhut.

("In mockery they knelt before You / And wove for You a blackthorn crown.") Yet in my experience of eighteenth-century protestant hymns, at least, the crown of thorns is not of *droigheann* but of *sgitheach*, whitethorn or hawthorn. For example, Dugald Buchanan says in 'Fulangas Chrìost' ('The Suffering of Christ'):

Do rinneadh crùn den sgitheach leo
Is dh'fhigh iad e gu teann.

("A hawthorn crown was made by them / And tightly did they weave it.") The status of these two plants in Gaelic folklore is very different. As I pointed out on this page last April, *droigheann*, blackthorn, whose blossom appears around Easter, was associated with Christianity and all that was good, while *sgitheach*, whitethorn or hawthorn, whose blossom appears around May-Day, was associated with paganism, the otherworld, the fairies, and all that is evil or dangerous. Entrances to the *sìthein* or pagan otherworld were marked by a

whitethorn. That left the blackthorn free, in theological terms, to symbolise Christian redemption, and no doubt this is part of Fr Allan's purpose. Whether a Gaelic-speaking audience was listening to Dugald Buchanan in Rannoch in 1750 or to Fr Allan in Eriskay in 1900, there is one thing of which we can be absolutely sure – they knew their folklore! So it's not a subtlety that they would have missed.

That then is what I mean by 'superstition'. Fr Allan, like Buchanan, knew his audience, and was skilful at bending his congregation's superstitious ideas to make them point in whatever direction he chose.

Next time I'll turn to my other categories, 'seanchas' and so on. In the meantime, *Bliadhna mhath Ùr dhuibh uile.*

- These poems are in 'Eilein na h-Òige: The Poems of Fr Allan McDonald', to be published in February. The book will cost £12.95 but the publisher is making it available to **Free Press** readers at £10 per copy, post free. This offer remains open until 31 January. You can order 'Eilein na h-Òige' (ISBN 1 901157 61 X) direct from St Mungo's Gallery Books, 143 High St., Glasgow, G1 1PH, tel. 0141 552 5523, e-mail books@stmungo.org, or from your local bookshop.

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