

The bubbling and steaming of a huge talent

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I'VE had a good deal to say recently about the poems of Fr Allan McDonald of Eriskay. I haven't said a lot about the man himself, mainly because John Lorne Campbell of Canna wrote about him in so many different books. And before Dr Campbell there were others – Amy Murray in 'Father Allan's Island', Neil Munro in 'Children of the Tempest', and so on.

It's not that he had an exciting life. He was born an innkeeper's son in Fort William in 1859, felt a vocation for the priesthood, and sailed through his education at Blairs in Aberdeen and the Scots College at Valladolid in Spain. Even then his ordination had to be delayed because he was still too young. When he was old enough to be ordained after a spell in Oban he was sent straight to Daliburgh.

This is where we get near the heart of the matter. He turned down a teaching post at Blairs, and declined to take on the parish of Fort William, because all along his mind had been set on a life of Gaelic literature, folklore and scholarship. And since the 'university' and the 'library' in which such a life was best pursued consisted not of ivory towers and books but of Gaelic-speaking people and what was in their heads, that was the sort of people among whom he wanted to live.

Of course he was also burning to serve such people as the best pastor he could possibly be. But he tried to do too much and his health suffered. So in 1893 he asked his bishop to transfer him to the vacant parish of Eriskay, which was small enough to let him do things properly. And his bishop said yes.

There he was, a fine man with a fine mind, serving one of Scotland's tiniest and most inaccessible parishes because that is what he wanted to do. Why that in itself should have made him famous is not quite so clear, since much the same applies to various Presbyterian ministers, some of them every bit as celibate as Fr Allan!

No doubt to some people he seemed like a throwback to the Age of the Saints, living like a hermit on a rock of the sea. I suppose it's no surprise that he was painted in Pre-Raphaelite style by John Duncan, who visited him in Eriskay and is remembered there as *Iain a' Chladaich*.

Of course the reality was different. One way to get at the reality is to examine his poems very carefully, and that's what I've been doing. There are many hymns that show that he had a very real gift for the attractive expression of theology. One of his Christmas carols, 'Biodh an Trianaid ga Moladh', has greatness written all over it. There are elegies, other personal poems, and superb ethnological items like 'Eilein na h-Òige'.

One of the personal poems, 'An t-Eòintein', shows a fine mind like Sorley MacLean's at work, the only difference being that the love he analyses is not of a woman but of God. Another, in which he hears the distant tramping of feet like a premonition of war, wouldn't have been out of place in MacLean's 'Dàin do Eimhir'. In fact had Fr Allan not died when he was 46 he would have celebrated his 70th birthday in the very month that MacLean entered Edinburgh University.

By the end of his life Fr Allan's poems were more secular than sacred. And he was beginning to show a predilection for satires.

By 'satires' I mean *aoirean* – a term that embraces vituperative as well as corrective verse. The clergy had long had an ambivalent relationship with *aoir*, stretching back to the formidable curses of Calum Cille and his predecessors the druids. In my book *An Lasair* I tried to shed some light upon this relationship, pointing out that as long as poetry, song and the ceilidh-house were fundamental elements in the lives of the people (as they were in the isles down to the First World War), they could be manipulated by the clergy in the interests of social control.

There can be no doubt but that Fr Allan was the agent of social control. He uses the word *cumhachd* ('power') four times in an eight-line description of the duties of the priesthood. There was no 'policeman' in Eriskay save himself. He seems to have taken a robust view on the holding of wakes, and may have been behind the unusually decorous manner in which betrothals were being conducted in the parish of Daliburgh by the 1930s. Then there's the specific matter of drink.

In his book 'Eriskay Where I Was Born' Captain MacInnes says of Fr Allan that he "was very much against drink. He managed to stamp it out among the younger generation, but there were older members well on in years who were given up as hopeless cases." There's evidence for this in the verse. In one place two girls are shown observing, at a safe distance, the tragi-comedy of a young man coming to seek the hand of a girl in marriage while under the influence of drink. It's exactly the picture painted by public service anti-drink messages on TV nowadays.

*Nach e 'n truaghan a th' ann, 's chan fhóghnadh
'N coltas gòrach bh' air, a shìorr'achd!
Eadar a chion misnich 's na dh'òl e
Chan eil sgòd de thùr 's de chiall ann!
Bheir mise dhut mo bhriathran
Nach fhaigh e 'm-bliadhna nighean Lachlainn –
Nuair a chì 'm bodach riochd a chliamhain
Cha dèan e ach a shiabadh dhachaigh
'S na coin a leigeil ann!*

("What a loser, as if his appearance / Wasn't stupid enough as it was, my goodness! / Between his cowardice and his drinking / There's not a bit of brain or sense in him! / I will give you my word upon it / That Lachlan's daughter's not his this year – / When the old man sees the state of his son-in-law / He'll just send him packing off home / And set the dogs on him!")

That's exactly what happens. There's no happy ending. Yet our innkeeper's son was no teetotaler. In a wedding ode he remarks good-humouredly:

*'S ged chuirinn anns a' chrannaig smùid dhìom
Ann an dùimh ri luchd na pòite,
Tràghaidh mi 'n t-slige seo gu sunndach
Ann an dùrachd dha na phòs dhibh.*

("And though steam may come out of my ears in the pulpit / In irritation at sons of Bacchus, / I'll happily drain this scallop shell / In very best wishes to you who've got married.")

The eighteenth-century examples which I presented in *An Lasair* show the Protestant clergy getting involved in using satire – the power of public exposure and ridicule. They used it to deal with chronic cases of wife-beating, fornication and prostitution. It appears that ministers either commissioned (and paid) poets to make such satires for them or simply made them themselves; they were then injected into the ceilidh-house grapevine and travelled like wildfire.

I also presented a peculiar poem relating to South Uist, 'Dòmhnallan Dubh', which is partly a satire on the forces of superstition as represented by healing women who peddled charms and cures, partly also a satire on the alleged wealth and immorality of the Roman Catholic clergy. I pointed out that this might mean that the Protestant clergy had something to do with composing it.

After that, it's startling to find Fr Allan operating across the whole spectrum of satire from corrective to invective. And it's hard not to conclude that this is because as a clergyman tradition gave him the right to do so in the interest of social and moral control, and as a poet he wanted to exercise that right.

In two poems on the theme 'Pàrlamaid nan Cailleach' Fr Allan shows that he could be a pretty shrewd judge of human nature. The central image in the first one is of the women bent over their tasks as the talk and the laughter go on, as was normal in any ceilidh-house, but at the same time there's a subversion of normality. They're performing a task, rope-making, usually done by men; what's more, the ropes are of weird and wonderful kinds, not merely heather but also manilla, bents, fine grasses, 'the brown hill's vegetation' (*cochall na beinne duinne*), rushes, straw, bracken.

It becomes clear that the ropes are metaphorical and serve but one purpose: catching men. It's a superb image and a very world-knowing one. Fr Allan had discerned that the women's secret was intelligence-gathering, the exchange and evaluation of information. It's what the men lacked, it's why the women had a parliament, and it's why the outdoor action which ensues is a spying mission!

Fr Allan proceeds to show the women spying on behaviour which, by the mid-twentieth century, was being called 'juvenile delinquency'. The language is racy (*a sglùraich ghlais* 'you useless hussy'), the dialogue funny (after banging at his door in the middle of the night a drunken young man says to his prospective father-in-law, *Chuala mi gun robh sibhse fàs bodhar, / Is shaoil nach fhòghnadh dhuibh aon ghnogag!* "I'd heard that you were getting deaf / And thought that one little tap wouldn't do!"). And the irony and invective are splendid. Says the father:

*Nach ceutach fhéin an comann dhaoín' iad!
Cion tuair, cion aodaich, cion céille,
Cion nàire – gur déistinn an t-saoghail iad!*

("What splendid specimens of humanity! / Short of decorum, of clothes, of intelligence, / Of shame – they're the scum of the earth!")

There are two wedding odes. In 'Banais Eóghainn agus Màiri' there are just a few satirical straws in the wind; it has a slight corrective function, Fr Allan taking the opportunity to encourage early marriage. But 'Banais nan Caimbeulach' reminds me strongly of the priestly power to satirise. It was to be a public occasion, and I think any modern clergyman who reads it will agree that he goes too far.

He begins with a tirade about Campbells, extending even to words like *béist* and *nimheil* which he usually reserves for the devil. I think his audience would have been deeply shocked until he got to the point, which is that his housekeeper, Kate Campbell, is being taken from him in marriage by a man also named Campbell, in the same way that Campbells would descend upon MacDonalds in the bad old days and lift their property. J. L. Campbell admittedly reported, "The late Ewen MacLennan who kept the shop of Eriskay from 1890 to 1900 and was present at the Campbell wedding, told me he did not recollect its being recited."

To me that's not surprising. What surprises me is that Fr Allan saw fit to make such a poem in the first place. He teases some real humour out of the idea –

*Chan eil mi idir dol a chantainn
Nach eil mi 'g altram gnè de dhòchas
Nach fhaod e bhith nach eil an déis seo
Cho neo-spéiseil ris a' chòrr dhuibh.*

("I certainly amn't going to maintain / That I'm not nurturing some kind of hope / That it's not impossible that this pair / Are not quite as awful as other Campbells".) But he keeps coming back to the nastiness.

*'S ged as suarach fuathach nimheil
An fhine dhe'm bheil sibhse còmhla,
Bheir sinn dhuibh le chéile 'n t-urram
Gur sibhse 'n gràinne-mullaich eòrna,*

(“And although vile, repulsive and spiteful / Is the tribe you belong to together, / We will accord you both the distinction / That you are the topmost grain of the barley.”)

To tell the bride and groom that they are “diamonds found in mud”, as he then does, may be imaginative and even complimentary to them, but it’s deeply insulting to their relatives. Some poetic demon was howling in the depths of his mind.

Curiously, the two poems he made about his friend Dùghall mac Thormoid, who kept the Eriskay post office, display the same pattern. The first, ‘An Gaisgeach fo Uidheam Réitich’, contains some self-deprecation (always a healthy sign in a satirist), and if there are one or two ill-judged straws in the wind, these are balanced by the corrective function – Fr Allan was perfectly entitled, as he does here, to satirise the sin of excessive pride. And again, it’s full of humour. But the other one, ‘Luinneag an Amadain Bhig’, comes across as a very clever but nasty poem which should never have been made. Fr Allan lets rip with a torrent of racy invective. It’s classic *aoir*, aimed straight at the diminutive Dùghall mac Thormoid, mocking him for his size by the technique of miniaturisation – Dùghall fits into a bottle of rum, lives in a wrinkle, and so on.

It seems extraordinary to me, in the light of J. L. Campbell’s description of Dùghall as ‘quiet and rather shy’, that his own pastor and confessor should be so insensitive, and so abuse his position, as to make fun of the little man in this way. Neil Munro wrote of Fr Allan: “As we walked on his island with him, his folk came about him unabashed and affectionately; it was to us a little strange to find them on such a footing with him of free speech, and even raillery, the raillery that intuitively knows the proper bounds and is based on esteem and fondness.”

Can it seriously be argued that this kind of raillery ‘knows the proper bounds’? One possible explanation is that Dugald was making satires too and that Fr Allan’s were responses in a battle of wits. But there’s no evidence for it in the poems themselves.

My conclusions are that, just as he never actually delivered ‘Banais nan Caimbeulach’ at the Campbell wedding, he probably never revealed ‘Luinneag an Amadain Bhig’ to its target, but kept it well hidden in his notebook; and that effusions like these are symptoms of a major poet in the making.

These two poems may have come involuntarily to Fr Allan in a state of sleep, or between sleeping and waking (perhaps in his sickbed), as ‘Kubla Khan’ came to Coleridge, and ‘Coin is Madaidhean-Allaidh’ to Sorley MacLean. An inveterate scribbler, he would have been unable to resist the temptation to write them down. They have nothing to do with social or moral control, over himself or anyone else; they simply represent the bubbling and steaming of a huge talent, spilling over and lifting the lid of the pot.

- *‘Eilein na h-Òige: The Poems of Fr Allan McDonald’ will be published next month by St Mungo’s Gallery Books, 143 High St., Glasgow, G1 1PH, price £12.95.*

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