

The whistling trick

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

FOR my first article of 2005 I'd like to set forth a puzzle of Gaelic folklore. It arises from a book about the '45, simply because I happen to have been reading a good deal about that lately . . .

The book is "The Lyon in Mourning". It was published in three volumes in 1895 and 1896 (and reprinted in 1975), but it consists of a wonderful hotchpotch of materials documenting the events of 1745 and 1746 from the Jacobite point of view. These were collected during the years 1746 to 1775 by the Rev. Robert Forbes, an Episcopal minister in Leith.

In volume two there's a transcript, nine pages long, of a paper written for Forbes in 1748 by Hugh MacDonald of Baleshare in North Uist. Baleshare had visited Prince Charles at Corodale in South Uist in May 1746, and in the paper he tells what he knows of the Prince's adventures in the Long Island, not only in Uist but also in Harris (his sister was married to Donald Campbell, Scalpay). Towards the end he says of Charles (his spelling): "Lachline McDonald of Dremstill, who supplied him and the few with him while at Glencoridile with victuals, tells me he was the man that attended him still while in the hills a-hunting.

"He kept plenty of all sorts of fowls in this hutt he stayd in and deer venison plentifully. But one day as they happend to go a-hunting the Prince with his feusee in his hand stood on a hillside and whistled so exact that you could not distinguish it from a plover. Some gather'd about him, of which he shot two on wing and two on ground.

"Lachline Dremstill said the art behoove to be witchcraft, for if it was not so the plovers would convene to his whistling as to his highness's. Dremstill takes the fewsee and falls a whistling, but tho' he stood there yet no plovers cam to his relief. The Prince a second time takes the feuzee, whistles and gathers a croud of the plovers about, and shot a good many.

"He said he never seed any to paralele with him at the gun, and that he 'd never risque being starv'd while he was master of the feuzee and plenty of amunition."

Why did Lachlan MacDonald of Dremisdale choose to describe this trick of the Prince's as witchcraft? Has it to do with Charles's rank and status? His religion? His place of origin? Or does it tell us more about Lachlan himself?

I should explain that what Baleshare calls a feusee, fewsee or feuzee is a *fusée* or flintlock musket. I've seen it spelt *fiùsaidh* in Gaelic. It's also worth making the point that Lachlan was no ordinary person. He was Lachlann mac Mhaighstir Alastair, third son of the Rev. Alexander MacDonald and younger brother of Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair the famous poet.

The brothers had grown up in the manse at Dalilea on the mainland. Aonghas Beag, the eldest, farmed at Dalilea and came out with the Prince in 1745. Alastair served the Clanranald family as law officer and factor, acted as a Jacobite agent, taught in various schools in Ardnamurchan, farmed at Kilmory in Ardnamurchan, and likewise came out with the Prince in 1745. Lachlan settled in his father's native island of South Uist, where Clanranald gave him a tack (rental) first of Gerrihellie and then of Dremisdale. He was bailie (factor) of the South Uist Estate in 1740.

The fourth brother, James, succeeded Lachlan as tacksman of Gerrihellie. Both Lachlan and James visited the Prince at Corodale. They were later arrested on suspicion of being involved in Charles's escape, but after being detained for a while they were freed for lack of evidence.

Now whether Lachlan was a poet like his elder brother I have no idea. But the very fact that he was tacksman of Dremisdale connects him with poetry. For generations Dremisdale was held by the MacMhuirichs (now called Curries or MacPhersons) in return for keeping a record of the genealogy and history of the MacDonalds. The MacMhuirichs were hereditary poets with a pedigree going back to the Irishman Muireach "Albannach" Ó Dálaigh, who came to Scotland about 1216. Dòmhnall MacMhuirich still had a tack of Dremisdale in 1728 but appears to have lost it shortly after – to our Lachlan, presumably. Did the Clanranald family switch its patronage from one family of poets to another?

There's much more to Lachlan than this, however. Since his death his ghost has been appearing to the people of South Uist, usually to tick them off for swearing. Fr Allan McDonald noted down a couple of instances. Prior to New Year's shinty matches a stone marking the goal used to be taken up in the hand and put round the head three times with the words: *Dà choilleag dhiag eadar mì is Dia gun deach i mach no nach deach*. This seems to mean: "Twelve goals between me and God whether it went out or not."

The Gaelic equivalent of Maradona's "hand of God", it is, as Fr Allan pointed out, "a gross enough violation of the Second Commandment". Shinty-players used it to settle disputed goals until Lachlan's ghost appeared at Bruthach na Saile Daraich and put a stop to it once and for all. Apparently it happened like this. Iain mac Dhòmhnaiill Òig 'ic Nill, who died about 1863, was playing shinty by moonlight one Sunday evening on the strand of Daliburgh. There was a dispute about a goal and Iain used *that* phrase, upon which the figure of an enormous stranger appeared at the tide-mark. The boys ran away, terrified.

Years later when Iain was working as a farm-servant at Dremisdale, now held by the parish minister, he went out one night to look for the cattle, having been told that they were devouring the hay. Everywhere he went he was confronted by an unknown man of great stature. Frightened, he said: *A Dhia 's a Mhoire, glacaibh m' anam!* "God and Mary, preserve my soul!"

The being replied: *Tha sin glé mhath, ach cha b'i sin a' chainnt a bh' agad nuair a chuala mise mu dheireadh thu*. "That's fine, but it isn't how you were talking when I last heard you." He explained that he was the apparition on Daliburgh strand; he appeared to Iain on several other occasions and told him that he was Lachlann mac Mhaighstir Alastair.

Fr Allan's explanation for Lachlan's troubled spirit was this: "He was a Catholic at one time of his life, but afterwards forsook the faith. When dying he sent for Fr Campbell's great-grandfather to get a priest for him, but the family of Arivullin would not allow the priest near, and so the man died without the rites of the Church, though it is hoped in the hands of Charity."

The Arivullin (Milton) family, Flora MacDonald's people and Lachlan's first cousins, were Protestants. Fr Allan concludes: "There are many remarkable stories told of his appearing after death to various persons, to several of whom he is said to have declared that he is to wander through the world till the day of Judgment as a punishment for neglecting his religion."

I think there are two or three elements in this. Firstly we have a memory of an old-style factor who superintended the morals of the people in his care. This would have been part of his job – as factor of South Uist he will have chaired the island's baron bailie court (*mòd*), trying cases, settling disputes, reaching judgements, sentencing. He would have had the power (delegated by Clanranald) to impose the death penalty, removed from baron courts by legislation in 1747. So he was probably the last hanging judge in South Uist.

Secondly, the religion thing. His brother Alastair is famous for his conversions. Like Lachlan he began life as an Episcopalian. He turned Presbyterian to become a schoolmaster, but seems (unlike Lachlan) to have died a Catholic in the arms of Holy Mother Church. Perhaps all this squirming from faith to faith is the reason why some people claim that the apparition is not of Lachlan at all but of Alastair. There again, perhaps it's because Alastair was a poet, and upset so many people with his satires.

Lachlan's alleged belief in witchcraft adds another dimension. By 1740 the Scottish legal establishment no longer believed in witchcraft, but a witch had been burned at Dornoch as recently as 1727, the Witchcraft Act was only repealed in 1735, and Lachlan may have heard enough evidence in his courtroom to convince him that there was something in it. Many a woman on the South Uist Estate was still busy sticking pins in effigies (for a fee).

The next question is whether Lachlan believed that Charles was capable of performing acts of white magic because he was a prince. I suppose that's possible. The essence of Jacobitism was a belief in the divine right of kings. According to this doctrine there was a sacred and immutable hierarchy of power over the natural world which flowed down from God through kings and princes to noblemen and chiefs and disseminated itself amongst the *uaislean* or gentlemen of a clan. This doctrine was the reason for the instinctive attachment of Gaelic-speaking people to the Stuart cause. It was cultivated by the Stuarts themselves, for example in touching for King's evil or scrofula, an act said to have been performed by Charles at Holyrood in autumn 1745. Forbes collected relics of the Prince – pieces of his clothing or of a boat he had travelled in – with as much piety as the most ardent Catholic seeking a fragment of the True Cross. I don't know whether he dipped them in water before giving it to a sick animal to drink, which would have made it witchcraft, but I do know that on special occasions he used as drinking vessels the brogues Charles had worn when dressed as Betty Burke.

I think we can say for sure that Lachlan did not believe that Charles practised witchcraft because he (Charles) was a Protestant, a Catholic, an atheist or a devil-worshipper. Lachlan, a son of the manse, knew far too much about religion for that. Curiously, Baleshare's paper provides the best evidence we have of Charles's religious beliefs, for, being a Protestant himself, he pumped him hard on the issue. "I starts the question if his highness wou'd take it amiss if I shou'd tell him the greatest objections against him in Great Brittain. He said, Not. I told him that Popery and arbitrary government were the two chiefest. He said it was only bad constructions his enemys pat on't. 'Do you 'no, Mr. McDonald,' he says, 'what religion are all the princes in Europe of?' I told him I imagin'd they were of the same establish'd religion of the nation they liv'd in. He told me then they had litle or no religion at all."

This provokes a note by Forbes containing information from Baleshare's brother Captain Donald Roy MacDonald. On the march to Derby various officers tried to persuade Charles to take part in divine service with a Protestant clergyman, as this would be very helpful to his cause "especially among the English". Charles replied: "Pray, gentlemen, can you assure that I will not be obliged to return to foreign parts? Satisfie me as to this point, and then I will know what to do."

What he meant was that his only hope of getting troops from the king of France or Spain was by acting the good Catholic. Which brings me to my last question: could it have been Charles's place of origin that led Lachlan to describe the whistling trick as witchcraft?

My answer is yes, yes, yes. In Gaelic tradition, as I will prove next time, Italy was virtually synonymous with witchcraft. Charles was born and brought up in the Palazzo Muti in Rome. And in 1727 his cousin the duke of Liria wrote that Charles "was now six and a half, and besides his great beauty, was remarkable for dexterity, grace, and almost supernatural cleverness . . . he could ride, could fire a gun, and more surprising still, I have seen him take a cross-bow and kill birds on the roof".

Practice makes perfect.

7 January 2005