

## All the colours of the rainbow

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

HAVE you ever looked at those Dulux colour charts with their amazing range of shades and all their daft names, like “Hawaiian Dawn” or “Banana Dream”?

One thing they prove is that colour, like devolution, is not an event but a process.

In English you have red, blue, green and so on. Gaelic, equally, has *dearg*, *gorm* and *uaine*. So-called primary colours. But in reality these are names which, due to an elusive concept called “culture”, a particular bunch of people using a particular language has come to apply at random to a particular part of the spectrum.

I never noticed when studying French and German in school, or Russian and Portuguese as an adult, that there was a huge difference between the “spectrums” of these languages and the English one. There *are* intriguing differences, however, and some of these suggest connections with Gaelic. For example, in French red is *rouge*, which sounds as if it must be related to *ruadh* rather than to *dearg*.

In Portuguese red has become *vermelho*, which is obviously “vermilion”, but if you go to Portugal you will soon learn that red wine is *vinho tinto* – “tinted”. More to the point, they have a word *roxo* which is clearly a first cousin to *rouge* (and presumably a second cousin to *ruadh*) but means purple or violet – in addition to which they have *púrpura* for purple and *purpúreo* for crimson, while over in Brazil, as in Spanish, there’s *colorado*, “reddish, red-coloured”. That’s the name of the Colorado River in the States, and precisely the same colour, I’m sure, as *Abhainn Ruaidh*, the River Roy in Lochaber that gave us Glen Roy and Roy Bridge.

So in any language one word will push another out as new dyes come in, other kinds of cultural influences are brought to bear, or people go abroad in large numbers and discover new colours for themselves. In a vigorous language the old words like *roxo* may be pushed into a more restricted part of the spectrum, and it’s healthy to have more and more words for more and more well-defined concepts, right down to Hawaiian Dawn and Banana Dream.

In a less vigorous language words may disappear altogether. Is *ruadh* in the vocabulary of Gaelic-medium education at all? Far too many Gaelic children’s books are simply translations, so if a concept like *ruadh* doesn’t exist in English, it’s less likely to be taught in Gaelic. (I must ask my daughters, now grown up, if they remember playing with a wee boy whom we always called *Dàibhidh Ruadh* from his shock of red hair.)

But the differences I’ve described so far are pretty modest and easy to grasp. I suspect you’d have to go to the developing world to find the same degree of deep-rooted difference between the native colour spectrums of close neighbours that there is between Gaelic and English.

You’d have to be careful, however. Thanks to the horrendous educational deficit that exists in our country, adult Gaelic speakers nowadays seem scarcely aware that they have a spectrum of their own. They’ve simply adapted their speech habits to English, using borrowings like *pinc* or maybe coinages like *bàn-dearg*.

My answer to that is this. Donnchadh Bàn described pink flowers and he had good Gaelic. If you know your flowers, identify a pink one in Donnchadh’s verse and tell me what he called it. I suspect he’d have been happy to call it simply *dearg*. Because in the Gaelic spectrum, as we’ve seen, there are two major reds, and *ruadh* marches all the way from red hair and carrots through orange into yellow. That leaves “pink” in the restricted domain of *dearg*, I think.

Which brings me to my other point. If you asked, say, an Urdu speaker about this, even after you’d battled through the thick layer of English influence on their day-to-day language, I think you’d find that he, or she, was comfortable, like the Portuguese, with the “strong” colours of a hot country: the pinks, the purples, the violets, the crimsons.

The Gaelic spectrum, on the other hand, is good on colours that Dulux would probably call “muted” or “subtle”. Expect a young person with a clipboard to call it a “temperate-zone minority-language”. You soon find this out if you’re buying a kilt. Hunting tartan or dress? Vegetable dye or artificial?

Personally I believe the Gaelic spectrum should survive, revive, and be taught. In the translation industry, Gaelic documents should use it. Even if it means a pink cardigan being *dearg*, on the basis that *dearg* excludes a great deal, but includes pink. Because I can’t think of anything else that exemplifies so well the most fundamental philosophical purpose of bilingualism – to be able to see the same thing in two different ways.

Dulux understand very well that the way we see colours is based on the things we have (or want to have?) in our “culture”. If asked to define “red”, you might mention a pillar-box (a point

in the spectrum, not a whole segment). If asked to define *dearg* a modern Gaelic speaker would probably say the same: a pillar-box. Some would call this the twenty-first-century Gaelic spectrum, others would say it was just the English one.

If asked to define *dearg*, Donnchadh Bàn might well have mentioned a pink flower. I don't think his red soldier's coat would have sprung to mind so quickly. Redcoats were sometimes *saighdearan dearga*, sometimes *saighdearan ruadha*, sometimes *saighdearan màdair*. In other words it was an exotic colour on the edge of the known spectrum and there was some uncertainty about it.

The Gaelic spectrum is based on three elements. Two of these are lost to us today, which is why there's a problem. The first is the fixtures of the Highland environment: rocks, soil, rivers, lochs, sea, sky. Their colours are preserved in place-names, which means they stay with us even in English: the Cairngorms for example, or Glen Roy as we've seen. I hope to say something about sea-colours next time.

The second is hides and skins, fur and hair, both animal and human. So much has changed here that the system struggles to cope. The Gaelic language offers incredible subtlety with regard to cattle colouring: *odhar*, *riabhach*, *cròinfhionn* and so on. That spills into human colouring, which is not quite so important (we have better-known names than cows, we live longer, and we don't have monetary value, as my car insurance company pointed out to me yesterday).

Cattle have mostly given way to sheep, which have little to offer by way of colouring. You may want to argue that *people* have stayed the same, but they haven't. A *duine dubh* is a black-haired white person. The colour of a black man's skin – shiny black – is *gorm*, which most people would regard as the primary colour called in English "blue", though I think Donnchadh Bàn might have been hesitant about that.

However, in the Gaelic-speaking world, wherever there have been black people there has been English influence. So there aren't many Gaelic speakers left, I think, who would recognise a *duine gorm* as a black man nowadays, or who would be certain that a *duine dubh* was a white man with black hair.

The third is plant life (including lichens), which gave us our aforesaid vegetable dyes as well as our flowers and therefore also the brightest and most dynamic parts of our spectrum. Again the switch from cattle to sheep has done irrevocable damage, to the extent that we're reduced to guessing what some of the most prominent plants in Gaelic tradition, like the *mòthan* and the *mungan*, might actually be.

So I'm going to end with a quote about plants and flowers. It's from "Pigeon Holes of Memory", a book on the life and times of Dr John Mackenzie of Eileanach (1803–86), edited by his great-granddaughter, a lady from London whom I used to know, the late Mrs Christina Byam Shaw.

Mackenzie, who liked to call sheep "vermin", said this about the Gairloch of his childhood: "Only cattle ever bit a blade of grass there, and the consequence was that the braes and wooded hillocks were a perfect jungle of every kind of loveable shrubs and wild flowers, especially orchids – some, of the *Epipactis* tribe, being everywhere a lovely drug that I often got many thanks for sending to botanic gardens in the South.

"The milk cows never troubled their heads to force through this flowery jungle, laced up with heaps of honeysuckle and crowds of seedling hazel and other native trees and shrubs. Till my Father's death in 1826, no sheep's hoof defiled the glen unless passing through it to the larder.

"But very soon after, an offer of a trifling rent for sheep pasturing let these horrid brutes into the glen, and every wild flower, and every young seedling bush or tree was eaten into the ground, so that an offer of £1,000 would not find one of my loved wild flowers or a young shrub from seed – nothing but a bare lot of poles, whose very leaves were all eaten up the instant one of them appeared.

"Those who remembered the wooded glen in 1826, and now looked at it, would never believe it was the same place – unless seen from a distance, for the sheep could not eat up the beautiful wild hills."

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