

MacAskills of Rubh' an Dùnain Society



The Dun Hill

Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

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IN THE year 1780 a Perth bookseller called John Gillies published a little work called “The History of the Feuds and Conflicts among the Clans . . . to which is added, A Collection of Curious Songs in the Gallic Language”. Gillies had no Gaelic himself, apparently, and the poems seem to have been edited for him by a man called Hugh MacPherson. Among them is a curious one headed “Ghailbh an Gothidh”, and it’s only when you read it carefully that you realise he means *Dh’fhalbh an Gobha* – “Off Went the Smith”.

No, spelling wasn’t Hugh MacPherson’s strong point. I wonder if he was a Skyeman? For there, right in the first line, is the man I wrote about last time, MacAskill of Rubha an Dùnain.

*Shin nar huirte Fearr Ruigh ’n Dunain,
Dhuine Bheil as Dhruid e Shuilin,
'Laibh na Feilidh bheirin Cruin dhuit
Air son Unsa dheth 'n Tom othir.*

“That’s when the Tacksman of Rubha an Dùnain, / Shutting his mouth and closing his eyes, / Said: ‘On the day of the fair I would give you a crown / For an ounce of the dun-coloured heap.’”

What’s going on here? It doesn’t sound like the first line of a song at all. There’s something missing. And how or why MacAskill should speak with his mouth shut isn’t clear; but then, this isn’t great poetry. Most importantly, what is “the dun-coloured heap”?

The same phrase occurs at the end of the next verse, spelt *Tomoghar* this time; these rhyme with each other, which is why I’m so confident about the meaning. These are early references to tobacco.

In due course “tobacco” settled down happily as *tombaca*, just as “potato” settled down as *buntàta*. *Buntàta* is actually in this song, spelt *Buntate*, and *tombaca* is in the next item in the book, spelt *Tombacca*. Monoglot Gaelic speakers used to play around with new words like these to try and make sense of them. *Buntàta* was understood by many to represent *bun taghta* “excellent root”. *Tom odhar* “dun-coloured heap” for tobacco is on the same lines. In fact it’s so close to “Dunhill” as to be uncanny. Second sight? Here’s the next verse.

*Shin nar labhair am Bailidh,
Theid mi Chillidh Ruigh 'mairich,
Reice mi fearr dhu na Paistin
Air son mo Tshath dhen Tomoghar.*

“That is when the Factor spoke, / “I’ll go to Kilmarie tomorrow, / I will sell one of the children / For my fill of the dun-coloured heap.”

This would seem like a simple little joke if it weren’t for the recent history of the district. The song is probably a few years older than 1780, which brings it closer to the horrible events of 1739. Remember *Long nan Daoine*, which was so seared into Sorley MacLean’s ancestral memory that it surfaces several times in his poems?

Isabel Grant gives a thorough and honest account of *Long nan Daoine* in her book “The MacLeods”, even though it marks the lowest point in the history of the clan. It’s well worth remembering this year as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. In November 1739 the magistrates of Donaghadee in Ireland reported that ninety “felons” had escaped from a ship, the *William*, that had touched there on her way from Skye and Harris to America.

On closer examination, the magistrates found that nearly thirty of the “felons” were women and children, “many of whom did not seem to exceed ten years of age”. The rest were mostly young men, “and in the whole they were the most miserable objects of compassion and the most helpless creatures that had ever appeared to us”.

These people had been snatched from their communities in Skye and Harris by a representative of their own chief, Norman MacLeod of Dunvegan, to be sold as slaves (or “indentured servants”, to use the technical expression). MacLeod was short of money; by tradition he was absolute ruler of his people, and he thought he would sell a few. But knowing there were moral and legal arguments against it, he had arranged for Norman MacLeod, younger of Berneray, to do the dirty work for him. His neighbour Sir Alexander MacDonald of Sleat, whom he had under his thumb, was also complicit.

Witnesses described how the job was done. First an order to arrest “felons” was forged. The ship called at Loch Bracadale and Finsbay at the dead of night. The people were tempted down to the shore by a promise of contraband brandy. Over forty men, thirty women and thirty children were dragged aboard. The “dregs” were dumped ashore bit by bit at Canna, Rum and Jura – ten children under five, the corpse of a young woman who died on board, an old sick man, “two big-bellied women”.

The *William* arrived at Donaghadee for a refit on 20 October. The people were locked up in two barns, men in one, women and children in the other. On the night of 4 November they all escaped, but were pursued, captured, bound and beaten with cudgels. In due course it was established that “none of the men as well of course as the women and children had been charged with any crime punishable by death or transportation”. Among the men was a Donald MacAskill, whose name appears with two Morrisons in the accounts of MacLeod’s lawyer as receiving cash to defray the cost of their journey back to Skye; incriminatingly, they are called “three of the men carried to Ireland”.

None of this is likely to have happened without the connivance of MacLeod’s factors (*bàillidhean*, chamberlains) for Harris and Bracadale. I’m not sure who the factor for Bracadale was in 1739: perhaps Roderick MacLeod of Ullinish, Norman MacLeod of Drynoch or Donald MacLeod of Groban. What I do feel sure of, however, is that the factor mentioned in the song, who is going to “sell one of the

children” to buy tobacco at the fair in Kilmarie, is being satirised for his part in *Long nan Daoine*. The third and last verse contains a slight clue about the date:

*Dhailbh an Goibha 's loisge Cheardich,
'Reice e Bhriggis bha ma mhaisibh:
Cha dage dad an roibh stath in't
Ach sheana Bhuntate bha air Reothidh.*

“Off went the smith and burned down his smithy, / He sold off the trousers from round his buttocks: / He left behind nothing of any utility / Except some old frost-bitten potatoes.”

The song is about the power of a drug, tobacco. It seems to be saying that it drove the smith mad. And the clue lies in the trousers. The only time in our history when it would have been mad to sell your trousers would have been in 1747–57, when the Act anent the Highland Dress was being strictly enforced – six months in jail for a first offence, seven years’ transportation for a second.

If you think that’s over the top, consider the next item in the book: AULTICH AN TSNAOSAIN (“The Snuff Grace”).

*Failt oirt fein a Bhogais,
'S do Chleite mhath ma riut,
Tombacca math birich donn
Churrigh Breime e Gearran.
Air a lommigh air a phronnigh:
Air a Chuir ri Teine,
A Sheichnigh an Troin,
'S a rigidh an Teannachin,
Bheirigh an Tanam san Chaillich
A Chaillich fochion sheichd Bliana.
Nach heil arc fuail na Tiunta Brammigh,
Na ghne ghalair 'tha 'n Aoire Duine,
Nach curridh e as a dheoin na dhaindeoin.
Sheo oirt a Shroin,
Fregair a Thoin
Math am plibbirnich Snaosin
Amen, a Bhoxa.*

“Hail to thee, O Snuffbox, with your fine quill by your side – good brown piercing tobacco that would make a horse fart. Threshed, pulverised, and set on fire to avoid the nose and reach the brain, it would put life into the old woman who died seven years ago. There’s no urinary complaint or constipation or any kind of ailment in man’s constitution that it wouldn’t cure one way or another. Here’s a toast to you, O nose; respond, O backside. What a good servant is snuff! Amen, O box.”

Obviously the addictive “brain-reaching” qualities of tobacco had been noticed. But the idea that it had curative qualities was normal for the time. For example, this advertisement for “Mayelston’s Famous Pectoral Tobacco” was placed by a grocer called Charles Mayelston in the “Edinburgh Evening Courant” of 12 May 1752. “In smoaking this Tobacco, (which is vastly pleasant) there are introduced directly into the minutest Ramifications of the Lungs, efficacious Particles of the most powerful Pectoral Balsams, whose Virtues remove the deepest and most inveterate Obstructions; penetrating into the Blood, purifies it, gives a surprising Ease to the

Respiration, bringing out abundantly the slimy and corrupt Phlegms that stop the narrow Passages of the Wind-pipe.

“By these happy Effects, it cures all Sorts of Coughs, Colds, Shortness of Breath, Asthmatic Oppressions and Stoppages; cleanses and heals in a short Time Exulcerations and Suppurations in the Substance of the Lungs, sweetens and removes a stinking Breath, and is the best Preservative against the sad Effects of unwholesome Air, and consumptive Disorders arising from it; since by repairing the Lungs, which are the chief Organs of the Sanguification, it restores the whole Body to its Health and Strength. (Price Six Shillings a Pound.)”

Mayelston's shop was at the “Foot of Niddery's Wynd” where Bannerman's pub is today. His tobacco was also sold by the postmaster in Stirling, a bookseller in Montrose, a grocer in Haddington, a white-iron smith in Dundee, and a factor in Perth. But he was “determined to allow it to be sold in every public Place in Scotland, by one merchant only in each Place”, and to this end he invited “any who incline to embrace this Opportunity of having the Privilege to sell my Tobacco” to write to him.

Just the job for a cash-strapped factor in Skye?

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