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The threshing, the storm and the standard

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I wrote about how people used to identify dates, not by numbered day, named month and numbered year, such as 28 February 1997, but by reference to some fixed point that had stuck firmly in the communal memory. It might be a storm, such as 'the day of the great storm', an event in the food supply, such as 'the day of the great threshing', or it might be what Sir Walter Scott called a burst of civil commotion, such as 'the day of the lifting of the standard'. And, as I pointed out, once the year had run its course, such an event might give its name to the whole year — 'the year of the great storm', 'the year of the great threshing', 'the year of the lifting of the standard'.

People would remember these things because they would have stories about them. The older people would tell the authentic versions of the stories in the céilidh-house, or at weddings and wakes and so on, and the younger people would listen and learn and tell them among themselves. Some of us nowadays call this oral tradition. Others of us would recognise it as Community Education. Others yet again might identify it, from its effects, as a school history lesson given by a very skilled and popular teacher.

The funny thing is that modern society is so compartmentalised — contained in very small boxes with labels on them — that those who call it one of these three things would have difficulty in recognising it as any of the others. For instance, it can't be a history lesson because oral tradition isn't in a textbook, isn't on the curriculum, and can't be examined in writing. There again it doesn't matter — it all went on in Gaelic, so in the enlightened thinking of educational authorities down to the present day, it didn't really exist, though on second thoughts if it *did* really exist it was irrelevant, though on second thoughts if it *was* relevant it must be a threat to the established church and state and should certainly be abolished.

Anyway all I want to do today is exemplify my basic point by telling stories that I have found about the storm, the threshing and the standard.

I'll take them in chronological order, so the day of the great threshing, *latha a' bhualaidh mhóir*, comes first. This is a story told by the Rev. George Sutherland of Bruan in Caithness in his book "Folk-Lore Gleanings and Character Sketches". 'That afternoon,' he says, 'lived long in the Reay tradition as "the Day of the Big Threshing", and it became an era from which local events are dated.' So what happened?

Well, in Sutherland's account it is just one of a number of marvellous feats of communal enterprise performed by a man who had knowledge of the black arts, Domhnall Duaghail MacAoidh. This is also the name of a chief of the MacKays who was created the first Baron Reay in 1628, and it seems likely that the chief was a well-travelled man who introduced more 'efficient' methods on his estates and thus of course made himself thoroughly unpopular, earning himself the name of being in league with the Devil.

What happened was that Donald showed up at the house of a Caithness farmer and agreed to thresh his corn. There were no threshing mills in those days, corn being laboriously threshed with the flail. Donald enjoyed the farmer's hospitality, and before going to bed asked his host to have two teams of men ready at the barn in the morning — one to untie the sheaves and spread them on the threshing-floor, the other to shift the threshed straw and grain out of the way of the flails.

Morning came, and mid-day, and still no sign of Donald, who was still in bed. In the late afternoon he turned up at the barn and started giving orders. Tradition says that his workers were otherworld beings. I suspect they were simply that unfortunate caste of people so little mentioned in Highland history, the *sgalagan*, who were landless, unfree, and did not hunt or go to war; that the Caithness people never normally saw them; and that, having sent for them the previous night after eating and drinking the farmer out of house and home, Donald maintained his chiefly dignity by staying in bed until they arrived.

Once the work started the Caithness teams could hardly keep up with the threshers. By the evening the whole job was done, so Donald and his gang cleared another cornyard in the neighbourhood while they were at it, then promptly disappeared.

For the *Gallaich*, it was a lesson in the frightening power of a Highland chief.

Next, then, the standard. My source here is a paper by Charles Fergusson on the history of Strathardle in the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness for 1899-1901. Fergusson says that people dated their births, marriages, etc., so many years before or after 'The Day of the Lifting of the Standard', *Latha Togail na Brataich*. The 1715 Rising began on 6 September that year with the lifting of the Jacobite standard on the Braes of Mar in Highland Aberdeenshire. It was a magnificent creation, bright blue in colour, the arms of Scotland embroidered in gold on one side and the thistle on the other, with the words 'Nemo me impune lacessit' above it and 'No Union' below.

Speeches were made, and the men shouted themselves hoarse, but in the middle of it all an accident happened. It was a windy day, and the gilt ball on top of the flagstaff suddenly crashed to the ground. During the startled silence that followed, someone turned to one of the Perthshire Highland chiefs, Spalding of Ashintully in Strathardle, and whispered (rightly, as it happened) that it was a bad omen. *Coma leibh sin*, replied Spalding, *cha tàinig ach rud math riamh á gu h-ard*. 'Never mind that, nothing but good ever came from above.' And he threw his bonnet in the air and shouted, *Guma fada beò Rìgh Seumas*, 'Long live King James', upon which everyone cheered.

The 'nothing but good' remark became a sort of proverb in Strathardle, and the second half of the story tells how it was used again a century later, when years of war and bad seasons had made everything very dear, and the people were suffering an unusually severe winter, with hard frosts and snow lying long and deep. The poorer people were starving, and one particular man had to listen to his children crying with hunger while his well-to-do neighbour hoarded his potatoes in a great pit in the stackyard, hoping to get a good price for them in spring.

Some of the young men of the strath decided to do a good turn. They brought a bag each to the stackyard, filled it up, and brought it to the poor man's house. As they didn't want the poor man to know where the charity

was coming from, they climbed on to the low thatched roof and poured the potatoes down the great open hanging chimney, which was a normal feature of houses in those days. As this manna from heaven rolled around the floor, up wafted the poor man's voice: *Gu dearbha s fìor thuirt Tighearna Eas an Tulaich là togail na brataich, nach tàinig droch rud riamh á gu h-ard*. 'Indeed it's true what the Laird of Ashintully said on the day of the lifting of the standard, that no bad thing ever came from above.'

Which brings me finally to the great storm, *an stoirm mhór*. What caught my eye here was the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod's remark in his book "Reminiscences of a Highland Parish" (the parish being Morvern in Argyll) that a certain snow-storm 'was a sort of date in the parish, and people counted so many years before or after "the great storm"'. His story concerns a woman called old Jenny who lived far up at the top of Glen Immeren. This had been shieling country, but sheep-farming had come, and the shielings were falling into ruins. However, Jenny still lived up there among the ghosts, summer and winter.

Once a year she came down and visited her friends, but in any case she knew all the old cures from the herbs and roots that grew on the hills and in the glen and so she was frequently sent for. And anyone who passed her house on the way across the hills to the glen on the other side always called in on her to give her the news of the district.

Jenny was a cottar. All she had was a goat and a few hens. But she got wool from one family, meal from another, and peats from another, so thanks to the community she was kept clear of the indignities of the Poor Law. The hardest time for her was the spring, the time of year we are in now, when her gifts of meal had run low in the kist, and pasture was very scanty for the goat. On this particular occasion, all the food she had left in the house was her hens and a little milk from the goat. She was just about to take a trip down the glen to see her nearest neighbours when a terrible snowstorm came on.

The people in the glen had never seen such a heavy and persistent fall of snow, or such deep snowdrifts. When the sky cleared the whole face of the countryside was changed. It was some time before anyone thought of Jenny. 'What has she been doing all this time?' She became the main topic of conversation, but fresh storms came down from the hills and for another week or so it was impossible to think of mounting an expedition.

Eventually, three men set off up the glen with food in their plaids, wading through the snow. The people watched them till they became three black dots on the hillside.

The men reached a rock at an angle where Jenny's house should have been, but all they could see was a white sheet of snow topped by black rocks. They could hear nothing. Then one of them saw a faint puff of smoke. Going to the spot, the found nothing visible of the house except two little hollows in the snow leading down to the hanging chimneys.

One of the men called down, 'Jenny! Are you alive?' To his surprise, a big fox jumped out of the chimney and darted off among the rocks.

Jenny called back: 'Alive! But thank God you have come to see me. I can't say come in by the door, but come down, come down.'

The men broke in by the smoke-hole, and shook Jenny by the hand. 'Oh, woman! How have you lived all this time?'

Jenny took a fit of hysterical weeping, then told them. 'Just as I have always lived — by the power and goodness of God, who feeds the wild beasts.'

'Wild beasts indeed,' said one of the men, 'did you know that a wild beast was in your own house? Did you see the fox that jumped out of your chimney as we came in?'

'My blessings on the dear beast,' said Jenny. 'May no huntsman ever kill it, and may it never lack food either summer or winter!'

The men looked at each other in the dim light of Jenny's fire.

She knew what they were thinking, and told them the story. How she had her goat and her hens in the house, with enough fodder for the goat to keep it alive, though it lost its milk. How she had peats for the fire. How she had very little meal, yet had never lived better, even though she had managed to keep her hens alive for the summer. 'I dined on meat every day, too, a thing I haven't done for years. I've lived like a lady.'

The men looked at each other again. 'Where did you get your meat, Jenny?'

'From the fox.'

'The fox?'

'I'll tell you how it was,' she said. 'He was the best friend I ever had. The day of the storm he looked into the chimney, and came slowly down, and set himself on the rafter behind the hens, yet never once touched them. He is much miscalled. Every day he provided for himself, and for me too, kind neighbour as he was. He hunted regularly like a gentleman. He brough game for his own dinner, a hare nearly every day, and what he left I got. I washed it, and cooked it, and ate it!'

No wonder people remembered the storm.

***WHFP* 28.2.97**