The coming of the tattie-root

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I BROKE off my series on Highland famines and named years a month ago after reaching the early 1840s. Before I pick it up again with *a' Bhliadhna Ghais —* or *Lobh,* or *dh'Fholbh — am Buntàta*, the ghastly potato blight of 1846, I feel it is only right and fair to say something about potatoes, considering that every crop in the names of years down to 1846 was one of oats or of barley. If the humble potato was such an upstart, how could its failure have been so catastrophic?

Well, let's see. Potatoes have been known in Britain since the days of Sir Walter Raleigh. But, very like the sheep that followed them, they started off as something a great deal more puny, and more subject to frost and disease, than the plump hardy creatures that we know so well today. Until the middle of the eighteenth century they were restricted to gentleman's kitchen gardens and were regarded as an exotic rarity. Down to the seventeenth century the staple crop of the Highlands and Islands appears to have been a primitive form of barley *(eorna)* called bere or bear; this was succeeded by oats *(coirc)*.

The introduction of potatoes as a field-crop in Scotland was imitative of Irish example. There seem to be almost as many stories about it as there are about the killing of the last wolf, which happened more or less around the same time, but they are probably more verifiable. They focus on Kilsyth and South Uist.

In South Uist, we are told, Clanranald (or his brother, Boisdale) introduced the potato in 1743. It would have been propagated from Boisdale's great garden whose high walls still stand at Kilbride in the south of the island. I suspect that in the harsh spring of that year or next there would have been little difficulty in persuading the people to eat a root which was, after all, not all that dissimilar to the wild *brisgein* or silverweed which they would dig out of the machair.

Not so further south! John Ramsay of Ochtertyre tells us that it was about 1746 or 1747 that the Irish method of cultivating them in the open field was practised with great success in the neighbourhood of Kilsyth. From thence, he says, it spread by degrees far and near, and he adds: "In 1749 or 1750, George Henderson in Drys went to Kilsyth for a bag of them to plant in the field. It succeeded so well, that many of his neighbours cultivated them in the same manner. And they have ever since been a stated part of the crop. Before that time there had been a few in tenants' kailyards. Old George Bachop, a peevish crabbed man, being told by his wife that she had got potatoes for his supper, said, 'Tatties! Tatties! I never supped on them all my days, and will not tonight. Give them to the herd, and get me sowens.'"

General David Stewart of Garth in Glenlyon, writing in 1822, tells us that the first person in Scotland to plant potatoes in the open field was a Mr Prentice, who lived near Kilsyth and died in 1792. He, too, talks of the difficulty of getting tenants accustomed to them. "It was not till after the year 1770 that my father planted potatoes, which were the first raised in the field in his district; and it required some time and persuasion to induce his servants to eat them. This vegetable, which is now the principal food of the Highland peasantry, was then considered as incapable of supporting a man employed in active labour."

So most of the revolution took place in a single generation. Alexander Fenton says in his 'Scottish Country Life' that potatoes were introduced to Lochalsh in 1750, to Clyne (Sutherland) and Lewis in 1756, to Dornoch in 1758, to Eddrachillis in 1760, to Urray (Ross), Kilmallie (Sutherland) and Boleskine and Abertarff (Inverness-shire) in 1764, and to Assynt in 1766. By 1845, he says, they had so far become the staple crop that they constituted 75-88% of the Highland diet.

The Gaelic for potato is *buntàta*. It is taken from "English" *potato*, which was taken in turn from Spanish *patata*, which was taken in turn from the Haitian for the sweet potato. If we ask why the Gaelic word is so different from the English one, the answer is simple. The Gaelic-speaker has tried to make sense of it, for *bun* is a root. (The same can perhaps be said of *pot* in the English word.) *Buntàta*, then, is the root of the *tàta* plant. I've often heard it said that *tàta* was in turn explained by the old people as *taghta*, "choice, excellent", but the fact of the matter is that we say *bun tàta* and not *bun taghta*. Perhaps it was 1846 that put a stop to that nonsense.

One wonders whether Clanranald and his baillies had a hand in naming the plant. The *bun* idea would have been a useful bit of propaganda, if we can believe stories that some of the old folk boiled up the leaves and threw away the tubers!

Once they had worked out which end to use, it didn't take long for people to find that the *buntàta* allowed more people to live on less land for less labour. Rhymes like this became pretty common:

Buntàta pronn is bainne leo,
Biadh bodaich na h-Aird.

('Mashed potatoes and milk, / The food of those yokels from the Aird.') That was said in the Inverness area. Then there were variations.

Buntàta proinnte 's bainne leò,
Biadh bodaich Uachdair Chlò.

('Mashed potatoes and milk, / The food of those yokels from Uachdar Chlò.') I'm not very sure where Uachdar Chlò is. Badenoch, perhaps, as the rhyme was recorded by the Rev. Alexander Cameron of Brodick, who was a native of Badenoch. The rhyme went further still — William Mackay wrote in his book 'Urquhart

and Glenmoriston' that a singing-class in Glen Urquhart was taught by the precentor to avoid debasing the sacred words of the Psalmist by substituting the following:

Buntàta pronn is bainne leo
An-comhnaidh dha mo bhroinn —
Nam faighinn-sa na dh'ithinn dhiubh
Gum bithinn sona chaoidh!

('Mashed potatoes and milk / Always going into my belly — / If I could get as much of them as I could eat / I'd be happy forever!') The point is, of course, that except at formal worship, it was sinful to sing the actual words of the Psalms; for learning, practising or rehearsing the tune, the proper thing to do was to sing worldly words to it, and as church music was widely taught in Gaelic schools down to 1872, such words were very widely known indeed. In his delightful book 'My Uncle George: The respectful recollections of a backslider in a Highland manse', the late Alastair Philips recalled hearing one of the most venerated of psalm tunes floating loud and clear out of the Free Church Manse kitchen, to the words:

There was an Auld Seceder cat,
And he was unco grey,
He catched a moose within God's hoose,
Upon the Sabbath Day.
The people all were horrified,
And unto it did say,
"O thou perverted, wicked cat
To break the Sabbath Day . . ."

This was at Fearn in Easter Ross under the ministry of the Rev.George Mackay. On other occasions the kitchen maid chose to practise the ineffable 'Bangor' like this:

The high, high notes of Bangor's praise
Are unco hard to raise,
And trying for to reach them gars
The lassies burst their stays.

But this has become a digression, even if the distance from potatoes to manse kitchens is not very far. If this were TV, I would probably finish with a recipe; as it is the Quern-Dust Calendar, I will finish with a potato-quote from a famous author. Enter Dorothy Wordsworth, who toured the Highlands with her brother (the poet) in 1803. It is September, they are in Argyll, and they have reached Loch Creran. "We found only women at home at the ferry-house," she says. "I was faint and cold, and went to sit by the fire, but, though very much needing refreshment, I had not heart to eat anything there — the house was so dirty, and there were so many wretchedly dirty women and children; yet perhaps I might have got over the dirt, though I believe there are few ladies who would not have been turned sick by it, if there had not been a most disgusting combination of laziness and coarseness in the countenances and manners of the women, though two of them were very handsome."

She goes on: "It was a small hut, and four women were living in it: one, the mother of the children and mistress of the house; the others I supposed to be lodgers, or perhaps servants; but there was no work amongst them. They had just taken from the fire a great pan full of potatoes, which they mixed up with milk, all helping themselves out of the same vessel, and the little children put in their dirty hands to dig out of the mess at their pleasure."

Next time I will begin with our own Hugh Miller, who paints an altogether more agreeable picture of potato-eaters, before going on to the events of 1846.

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