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The Year of the Black Ugliness

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

MR BLAIR has apologised to the Irish people for the Great Famine of 1846. It killed over a million people, drove another million in rags across the sea to America, and (from the resulting economic desperation) snuffed out the use of the Irish language over most of the country.

Famine hit the Highlands and Islands too, however, and I feel I cannot approach it better than through the eyes of Hugh Miller of Cromarty. In his book "My Schools and Schoolmasters" he says, "I have been told by my maternal grandfather, that about the year 1740, when he was a boy of about eight or nine years of age, the head-gardener at Balnagown Castle used, in his occasional visits to Cromarty, to bring him in his pocket, as great rarities, some three or four potatoes; and that it was not until some fifteen or twenty years after this time that he saw potatoes reared in fields in any part of the Northern Highlands."

In the north-western Highlands especially, he adds, the use of 'these roots' increased nearly a hundredfold between 1801 and 1846, and he tells how, as a journeyman stonemason in summer 1824, he travelled across to Gairloch to fulfil a contract there. The west coast was entirely new to him, and he describes all he saw with a sense of wonder. "On approaching the cottage of our future labourer," he says, "I was attracted by a door of very peculiar construction that lay against the wall. It had been brought from the ancient pine forest on the western bank of Loch Maree, and was formed of the roots of trees so curiously interlaced by nature, that when cut out of the soil, which it had covered over like a piece of network, it remained firmly together, and now formed a door which the mere imitator of the rustic might in vain attempt to rival."

He continues: "We entered the cottage, and plunging downwards two feet or so, found ourselves upon the dunghill of the establishment, which in this part of the country usually occupied at the time an ante-chamber which corresponded to that occupied by the cattle a few years earlier, in the midland districts of Sutherland. Groping in this foul outer chamber through a stifling atmosphere of smoke, we came to an inner door raised to the level of the soil outside, through which a red umbry gleam escaped into the darkness; and, climbing into the inner apartment, we found ourselves in the presence of the inmates of the mansion."

By 'umbry' he means shadowy. He goes on: "The fire, as in the cottage of my Sutherland-shire relative, was placed in the middle of the floor: the master of the mansion, a red-haired, strongly-built Highlander, of the middle size and age, with his son, a boy of twelve, sat on the one side; his wife, who, though not much turned of thirty, had the haggard, drooping cheeks, hollow eyes, and pale, sallow complexion of old age, sat on the other."

They are there to offer the man a job, and this they do. "We broke our business to the Highlander through my companion — for, save a few words caught up at school by the boy, there was no English in the household — and found him disposed to entertain it favourably. A large pot of potatoes hung suspended over the fire, under a dense ceiling of smoke; and he hospitably invited us to wait supper, which, as our dinner had consisted of but a piece of dry oaten cake, we willingly did. As the conversation went on, I became conscious that it turned upon myself, and that I was an object of profound commiseration to the inmates of the cottage. 'What,' I inquired of my companion, 'are these kind people pitying me so very much for?'

"'For your want of Gaelic, to be sure. How can a man get on in the world that wants Gaelic?'

"'But do not they themselves,' I asked, 'want English?'

"'O yes,' he said, 'but what does that signify? What is the use of English in Gairloch?'

"The potatoes, with a little ground salt, and much unbroken hunger as sauce, ate remarkably well. Our host regretted that he had no fish to offer us; but a tract of rough weather had kept him from sea, and he had just exhausted his previous supply; and as for bread, he had used up the last of his grain crop a little after Christmas, and had been living, with his family, on potatoes, with fish when he could get them, ever since."

So Miller brings together three important facts. This typical Gairloch man in 1824 could see no purpose in learning English; he did not expect ever to leave Gairloch; and, for over six months of the year, his family depended on potatoes to keep them alive.

1846 was to change this scenario forever. It brought destitution to the parish, which was partly relieved by a massive programme of road-building. One of the two trustees of the Gairloch Estate, the dowager Lady Mackenzie, recalled: "There was no road then between Rudha 'n Fhomhair, at the upper end of Loch Maree and Slatadale. The potato disease commenced in August 1846, and this road was begun the following spring. When the government steamers called in at Gairloch, inquiring as to the distress and poverty caused by the potato disease, I did not advocate the sending of supplies of meal, &c., but urged continually, in speaking and by letters, both to the Destitution Committee and to the Home Secretary (Sir George Grey), and to Lord John Russell, that money might be granted to make the road from Rudha 'n Fhomhair to Slatadale, and thus to open up the country, I, on my part, as trustee, guaranteeing to support the people who could not work on the road."

So also, according to J. H. Dixon's book "Gairloch", with the help of funds from the Destitution Committee, the roads were built from Poolewe to Aultbea, from Dundonnell to the Ullapool road, along the side of Loch Maree, and along the north and south sides of Gairloch and the west side of Loch Ewe.

That of course is just one parish, but the blight struck everywhere. People were made sick by the mere smell of potatoes rotting in the fields, and when the potato pits were opened, the stench was worse. So in Lewis 1846 was called *a' Bhliadhna Lobh am Buntàta*, the Year the Potatoes Rotted, or *a' Bhliadhna Thàinig an Cnàmh dhan Bhuntàta*, the Year the Blight Came to the Potatoes, or, more graphically still, *Bliadhna a' Ghràinde Dhuibh sa Bhuntàta*, the Year of the Black Ugliness in the Potatoes. The blackness was caused by the withering of the leaves, while the tubers rotted and the spores of the disease (Phytophthora Infestans)

passed from plant to plant through the damp air.

In Uist it was *a' Bhliadhna Ghais am Buntàta*, the Year the Potatoes Rotted, and the South Uist and Barra clearances were a direct result of it. The 'Coddy' — the late John MacPherson, Northbay — recalled being told about it by a man called Neil MacNeil. "It came in one night, the blight, and covered the whole of the potato crop. And I remember clearly seeing a man who made up his mind to leave the Island of Barra. His name was Neil MacNeil. The smell that was off that blight was enough to choke you, and so he decided to pack his bag and went to Castlebay to get some conveyance — a boat or ship — to take him to the mainland. And that he did. And that was his description of what happened the night of the blight. It was about the 14th August."

In Argyll it was *a' Bhliadhna dh'Fholbh am Buntàta*, the Year the Potatoes Went Off. Alexander MacDonald, ground officer in Mull, wrote from Bunessan on 29 July 1846 of fields that were previously "beautiful and in full bloom" being blackened "as if overrun by fire". Near Bunessan is a field called *Dail an Òir*, the Meadow of Gold, seemingly so called because its potatoes remained untouched by the blight. In the same way, according to Màiri MacArthur, an Iona rhyme from the Famine has the hens telling the ducks where to go for food — to the Convener of the Iona Relief Committee, Angus Lamont, whose task was to distribute emergency supplies of meal.

"Fhalbhamaid, fhalbhamaid!"
"Càite, càite?"
"Buntàta mòr tioram
Aig Aonghas MacLaomainn!"

("Come on, come on!" "Where to, where to?" "Angus Lamont's big dry potatoes!")

In Skye, meanwhile, many of MacLeod's people wanted the fairy flag (*a' bhratach shìdhe*) brought out, since it was believed that when unfurled it would relieve its followers from danger. In his book on his own parish of Strath, the Rev. Donald Lamont wrote of how parents and children roamed the shores "like other animals" gathering shellfish. "I had a dream," said a little boy to his mother one morning, "that I would grow, oh, so big and so strong, if I got enough to eat from my own mother."

The Church of Scotland folk, says Donald Lamont, blamed the Disruption for the famine. The Free Kirkers replied that there had been well nigh a famine in 1836 when there was no Disruption. Hugh Miller pointed out that a writer in 'The Witness' — of which Miller was Editor — blamed the Irish famine on the Government's endowment of the new training college for Catholic priests at Maynooth, while another letter, never published, pointed out that Maynooth cannot have been the cause, since the Highlanders, "who were greatly opposed to Maynooth", suffered nearly as much.

This latter writer put forward a reason which will strike a chord nowadays. "Both the Irish and Highland famines were judgments upon the people for their great homicidal efficiency as soldiers in the wars of the empire — an efficiency which, as he truly remarked," says Miller, "was almost equally characteristic of both nations."

Miller concludes: "For my own part, I have been unable hitherto to see the steps which conduct to such profound conclusions; and am content simply to hold, that the superintending Providence who communicated to man a calculating, foreseeing nature, does occasionally get angry with him, and inflict judgments upon him, when, instead of exercising his faculties, he sinks to a level lower than his own, and becomes content, like some of the inferior animals, to live on a single root."

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