Back to the future: 2 views of 2000

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

TODAY I'd like to look at a different kind of prophecy from those of Thomas Rhymer. In the course of a week I found myself reading two prophetic articles about the Highlands, one in English, one in Gaelic. The first was in Newsletter no. 1 of the Appin Historical Society, which I had picked up in the co-op store at Port Appin, the other was in Sorley Maclean's book 'Ris a' Bhruthaich' which Acair has just reprinted.

The Appin article, by R. Laing, was about a set of predictions made in a book called 'In the Evening' in 1909 by Charles Stewart, an advocate who specialised in insurance. In a chapter 'The Highlands in A.D. 2000' he imagined returning to his native glen in that year. Maclean's article is called *An Tìr bu Mhiann Leam*, 'The Land I would Like to See'. It began life as a BBC broadcast, the book doesn't say when, but if written about 1953 or 1954 (as I suspect it was), it lies exactly halfway between Charles Stewart and today.

Stewart claimed the biggest changes in people's lives will have come from timber growing, co-operative schemes among farms and crofters, and the growth of home industries that women can do at home in their spare time. In his glen there will be a village institute with a public reading room and a library which will hold a lecture and singing concert every week. This, he says, will help to stop drinking.

No such paternalistic prescriptions from Maclean, perhaps because by 1953 they had been found wanting. *Cha ruigear a leas a ràdh*, he says simply, *gu bheil e an aghaidh reusain a bhith miannachadh gu robh a' Ghaidhealtachd air a h-àiteachadh le sluagh cuimseach an àireamh a réir meud na dùthcha agus toradh an fhearainn* . . . "It needn't be described as against reason to wish that the Highlands were inhabited by a population proportionate in number to the size of the country and the productiveness of the land; a healthy, decent, contented people; a Highland people; a people speaking the Gaelic language; a people of drive and prosperity; a people richly endowed with the virtues that a Gael can be proud of."

But how are we to be governed? Stewart lived in an era which was arguably the best in the history of the Highlands (I mean the period from the Crofters' Act to the First World War), and he does not suggest that anything is constitutionally wrong. He assumes that the cost of running the country will not have increased greatly, as people will be richer because of the co-operatives and the government will be making a profit from forestry. He expects very few indirect taxes but that everyone will be paying Income Tax on a steeply graduated scale. He predicts: 'There's little grumbling, for the other taxes are lighter, and living's cheaper."

Maclean would have been comfortable with that steeply graduated scale, but makes a different point. *Is e mo mhiann-sa gu robh a' Ghàidhealtachd 'na roinn inbhich de Albainn shaoir, sin Alba fo a riaghladh fhéin, le pàrlamaid dhi fhéin*. "I wish that the Highlands were a respected part of a free Scotland, that is a Scotland under home rule, with its own parliament." Interestingly, he feels it necessary to argue that its members should not belong to an elite of landlords (*uachdarain fearainn*), capitalists (*luchd an airgid mhóir*) or academics (*feallsanaich*). Which shows how democracy has made progress since then.

Coming to the welfare state, we find Stewart in tune with some current thinking. He says that during the twentieth century the government have started to provide a pension for old persons who aren't making a living for themselves, and that this has caused harm. People have become feckless and stopped providing for themselves. As a result he guesses that by now the system has been changed so that only those who have contributed to pensions will be obtaining them.

Maclean, like Stewart, would like to see the land under small farmers or big crofters, but goes further. "They should pay rent to the State," he says, "a State that can do more than the Board of Agriculture is able to do. People would thus be protected by the State when they became sick or grew old." Such linkage between rent and welfare has more to do with the clan system than with ideas of modern government. I think it assumes the nationalisation of land, as does Maclean's next suggestion: "It might be appropriate for some people to be moved from overpopulated to underpopulated districts. Some Lewis folk might perhaps be better off in Perthshire, but that would have to be done with the full consent of the people to be moved." No doubt he is thinking of the Irish government's 'Meath Gaeltacht' experiment of the 1930s, which met with mixed success.

Continuing the National Insurance theme, Stewart imagines that by now people are only having to pay fourpence a week (about the price of two glasses of beer) at the Post Office, and that when past work they get back maybe £20 a year. By making this compulsory, he thinks that people will feel independent and that poverty, misery and intemperance will have been reduced. As a result he expects a 60 per cent reduction in crime. Maclean has little interest in such things. *Chan e miann airgid a ghin 'Cumha na Cloinne' no ionnsaigh nan Gàidheal aig Cùil-lodair no saothair Dhòmhnallaich na Tòiseachd no saothair Chlach na Cùdainn no Mhurchaidh an Fhéilidh*. "It is not the pursuit of money," he growls, "that gave rise to 'The Lament for the Children' nor the Highland charge at Culloden nor the work of the Rev. Dr John MacDonald of Ferintosh nor of Alexander Mackenzie (author of 'The Highland Clearances') nor of John Murdoch (editor of 'The Highlander')."

The trouble with both Stewart's and Maclean's predictions is that they take no account of the destabilising effect of unemployment. There is a reason for this, of course. To Maclean in 1953, no less than to Stewart in 1909, there are three things that count. Land, land and land. Stewart in particular would have been shocked at the idea of land lying waste because its produce is simply not required. In returning to his glen in 2000 the first thing he notices is that there is more cultivated land and 'great stretches of lordly forest on the hillsides'. Each man has a cottage and enough garden for about an hour's work in the evening when he comes home from work on his own croft, on the bigger farms, or at the sawmills. His local co-operative makes butter and cheese, rears pigs, cures bacon, and keeps stallions, bulls and rams for members' use. There are also 500 centres throughout the Highlands for collecting fresh eggs and putting them on the market.

Maclean has the advantage of observing the Soviet model of collectivisation, but his model is not much different from Stewart's. "In addition to the land that would be under small farmers," says Maclean, "here and there I would like to see a big farm held jointly by a fair number (*aig àireamh chuimseach an co-phàirt*), the Gael having the choice to be a small farmer on his own, or a member of a company working a big farm in partnership, as is done already in some European countries."

He adds: "It would be appropriate for Highland farmers to get from agricultural colleges every kind of advice and service that the State might able to give, and that all possible use be made of Highland limestone for fertilising the ground. I believe the Highlands must go back to rearing cattle for slaughter, and that sheep by themselves are inadequate. Cattle are so good for the land, and the weather and shelter of the Highlands are so good for wintering them." Curiously, that passing reference to agricultural colleges is the nearest either Stewart or Maclean comes to the idea of a University of the Highlands, and neither of them mentions tourism at all.

Did they predict white settlers? Well, both spoke of repopulation, and both said effectively the same thing. In 1909, says Stewart, his village had a population of 120 with just the inn, the post office, the blacksmith's and the shop, none of them doing much. He finds now in 2000 that there are more than 600 people, many of them the children and grandchildren of earlier residents who have been coming back from the towns and cities. There are now, he says, about 100 houses. (Note that his prescription gives an average of six people per house.)

Maclean, in turn, regards it as obvious that Scotland's trade will decrease and that the cities will not be able to sustain so many people. "Of course more people will have to make their living from the land, and if some people have to come from the towns and cities to the Highlands, I hope that those who come will be the descendants of Highland people (*sliochd nan Gàidheal*)."

What will all these folk be doing? Stewart says they will be employed on 'regular country trades', in the fields, on the hill, or in the forest. The parish will be turning out far more wool, timber and farm produce than it can manufacture, so nine-tenths of it will go to the towns for the factories. The remaining tenth will be put to local needs and small factory work, including making butter and cheese. Stewart assumes that in 2000 the government owns the forests, that there is a demonstration forest and a practical school of forestry, and that felling and hauling timber is creating far more work than there was when the land was under sheep. He expects there to be 50,000 men employed in the forests and another 50,000 in the sawmills, pulp-mills and celluloid factories that have sprung up all over the Highlands. His village now has 'big sawing mills, mills making pulp for the paper makers, bobbins and spools, butter casks, tool handles, furniture cases, sleepers for the railway companies and supplies for the building trades'.

By 1953 this rural idyll has diversified into something like the HIDB's 'growth areas' scheme. "In addition to working the land," says Maclean, "I hope that other sources of employment will be dispersed around the country as the Government of Ireland is doing just now; look at how quickly they built up a big international airport while we were trying to make full use of Prestwick. And if hydro power (*cumhachd nan uisgeachan*) is utilised for the good of the country, that can be done despite there being little coal in the Highlands."

But neither prophet scores well on transport. In 2000, says Stewart, timber will be going to Oban, Perth and Inverness for the furniture factories there and for building carts and carriages. (In other words, transport has to stay as it was in 1909 in order to make use of all that wood.) Maclean says: "Railways and steamers must be nationalised so that the people as a whole can have a voice as to how the necessities of life are distributed." Nationalisation didn't stop Dr Beeching or Colin Paterson. But then, perhaps a Scottish parliament would have.

On education, Stewart says the young people of 2000 are not taught just to be clerks or shop girls for the towns but to be good farmers and good farmers' wives. Maclean brings things forward: "I would wish every boy and girl in the Highlands to be educated in line with their gifts and abilities no matter how poor their parents, and that the following message underlie every other message: that Scotland and the Highlands of Scotland is their country, and that what is expected of them is that they do their best for the Highlands and for Scotland and not for themselves in India or Africa or anywhere else."

And what about Gaelic? Stewart expects that by 2000 it will have fallen out of use, but that the Gaelic songs will be kept up and sung at the weekly concerts. For Appin, that's pretty accurate. In a world of Gaelic-medium units and electronic media, it's Maclean's wish-list that seems quaint: "I would want Gaelic to be enlarged by new words from Latin and Greek so that it would be as easy for a learned man to speak of the profoundest thing in creation in Gaelic as in English. I would like half-a-dozen Gaelic newspapers to be read in Gaelic-speaking homes."

Coming to religion, Stewart thinks that by 2000 all Presbyterians and Episcopalians will have come together in a new established church and that this and the Roman Catholic church will be the only surviving denominations. There will be good religious teaching in the schools, he says — more real religion and duty and less theology; a more systematic moral education that teaches children practical things like patriotism, thrift, sobriety, courage and unselfishness, and shows them exactly how to put these things into practice. As an islander, Maclean is more guarded. He restricts himself to: "I would wish that zeal for the Psalms of David would not make so many Gaels despise the songs of William Ross."

Finally, it's clear that the role of women in 1998 would have astonished them both. Says Stewart in predicting 2000: "The women have their hands full, keeping the house and the bairns in order; no time for politics with them; more time for motherhood." Which is how his glen packs 600 people into 100 houses, obviously. As for Maclean, he has learned by 1953 that the issue of women, like religion, is best left alone. Girls should have equal educational rights with boys, he says. The adult of the species is not mentioned.

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