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The daddy of all couch potatoes

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

THAT great Gaelic writer Angus Campbell ('Am Puilean'), who came from 44 Swainbost in Ness, Lewis, and lived from 1903 to 1982, has a wonderful satirical poem about fleas called 'Deargadan Phóland 1944' which dates from his time as a prisoner-of-war. You can almost hear the slapping and growling and creaking of Krupp's iron bedsteads as the wretched soldiers defend themselves against this new enemy.

The Puilean devotes a verse to each of his Gaelic-speaking comrades, one at a time. It's the best entertainment they can get in the circumstances. Then, mercilessly, he turns his attention (so it seems to me at any rate) on the ones without Gaelic, who have to suffer some indignity until the joke is explained to them.

I almost wish I could have been there, because the Gaelic is so deep in places that I need it explained to me. I suspect that for the Gaelic-speaking men, the discussions about the Puilean's words and idioms must have been part of the entertainment. It probably went on in whispers long into the Polish night along with the scratching, slapping and cursing. Here's one verse:

Faic am fear ruadh, tha ceann uachdrach 's tòin air
Cho cruinn thiugh ri buacaire buanna nan geòcair,
Seasgair dhuibh suaineadh ri fuachd agus reòtachd
'Na chuaileanan òir sam bheil còsan 's 'curl'.

This is how I've attempted to translate it, with the help of the Puilean's son Donald John:
"See the one with red hair, his top end and his backside / Are as round and as fat as any gluttonous layabout's, / You'll find it cosy to sleep when it's cold and it's frosty / In his golden ringlets with their hollows and curls."

The big problem here is, what is *buacaire buanna nan geòcair*? The meanings given by Dwelly under *buac* and *buaic* suggest that a *buacaire* was, shall we say, a prominent manufacturer of the dung used in the bleaching process, or the ammoniac used in the waulking of cloth. (That's right, they wasted nothing in those days.) *Buanna* is given by Dwelly as a billeted soldier, a billet master, an idler, straggler or mercenary, quoting *Sè buannachan deug MhicDhomhnuill* which he translates "MacDonald of the Isles' sixteen billet-masters". Intriguing. *Geòcair* is given by Dwelly as a glutton, so that one's easy. Put them together and we appear to have a phrase meaning 'the scatophilic billet-master of the gluttons', or, more loosely, 'the father and grandfather of all couch potatoes'.

Such a discussion is going to be pretty characteristic of Scottish Gaelic scholarship in the first half of the 21st century, I think, because there's a huge backlog of satire to be assessed, belonging mainly to the sixteenth, eighteenth and twentieth centuries, and it's only now in 1999 that we're getting to the point where the older boys and girls can sit in a tutorial room together and discuss the words for bodily functions with minimal embarrassment, and where such things can be properly discussed in print — though not of course in a family newspaper. (Note those centuries by the way. Morality is cyclical. I hereby predict a return to Victorian values in the Western World in the second half of the 21st century.)

But it is those *buannachan* who are the real purpose of this article as they have a place, albeit a far from creditable one, in the history of Gaelic hospitality. Going through some back numbers of 'An Gaidheal' a couple of years ago, I was intrigued to find them popping up in a letter to the Editor from 'Samson' of 32 Swainbost, Lewis, dated 8 October 1943, in the November 1943 issue. (This and all my other quotes from 'An Gaidheal' were in Gaelic, but I'll give them in translation.) "The first settlers of the township of Swainbost were families that had been expelled from Uig when the townships were cleared. When I was a lad I often heard the words 'the *buannachan* of Uig' and '*marbhadh gach fear a bhuanna is marbhaidh mise mo bhuanna fhìn* — let each man kill his *buanna* and I'll kill my own *buanna*' — being used by the old folk. Who were 'the *buannachan*'? What is the origin of the expression 'let each man kill his *buanna* etc.'?"

I will return later to the identity of 'Samson'. There appear to have been two replies. The first was in the December issue, signed 'Creag Mhor'. It went like this: "The *buannaichean* of old were themselves, as the poet said of certain others, *'air an sònrachadh gu mortadh'* ('made for murdering'), and they were importunate beggars (*bleidirean*) in many a house, but what a cruel revenge those old fellows in Ness exacted from them. We don't believe they slaughtered people like gugas at all: there's traditional authority for the saying,

Mharbh Samson leòghan, b' ion da sin,
Ach mharbh na Nisich buannaichean;
Chuir e tòimhseachan air Philistich,
Ach có a nis a dh'fhuasglas e?

('Samson killed a lion, as well he might, / But the Nessmen murdered *buannaichean*; / He posed the Philistines a riddle, / But who's now going to solve it?')

The answer duly came in the February 1944 issue, signed and dated A.M., Strachur, 11/1/44. "Dear Sir, — Here is the tradition that I heard, a long time ago, about the *buannaichean*. It was said that they were Norsemen. One of them was billeted (*air thigheadas*) in every home in the parish of Uig. The *buanna* did not

work, or earn, or pay, but the people of the house had to serve him and feed him with all the best of everything that they could command.

"The burden eventually weighed down so heavily upon the people that some of the heads of households met to see what could be done. One of those present said, 'Let each man kill his *buanna*, and I'll kill my own *buanna*.' That's what happened, and *mas breug uam e, is breug thugam e*. If I've told a lie, I've been told a lie.

"'Creag Mhór' says that it was the Nessmen who killed the *buannaichean*. That may be, for there were heroes in Ness before Samson's time, but I would like to find out from the readers of 'An Gaidheal' whether there is any description or mention of such people in old writings, history, or even oral tradition of other parts of the Western Isles."

There *was* a reply (of a sort) but before I come to that I would like to say a little bit about 'Samson' and 'A.M.', with thanks to Donald John Campbell and Allan MacLeod. Norman MacLeod, 'Samson', certainly lived at 32 Swainbost, but he was not the kind of person likely to write a letter in Gaelic to 'An Gaidheal' or any other newspaper. He was, apparently, a big strapping fellow of great presence and full of boisterous good humour, unusual in a Free Church elder. He had been a sergeant in the Seaforths, serving in the Boer War and the First World War. The Puilean's brother, the Bocsair, describes him like this in his song on the Swainbost Home Guard (1940):

Se Samson comanndair gun athadh
A dhùisgeas mac-talla le eubh —
Gun chriothnaich an talamh ri chaithream
Nuair chaidh iad a-mach air pareud.

('Samson's the fearless commander / Whose shout arouses an echo — / The earth shook to his orders / When they went out on parade.') Like most Swainbost people he was descended from crofters evicted from Ardroil in Uig about 1840. Seventeen of these families were re-settled in what was then marshland in Swainbost, among them Samson's grandfather, Tormod Mór, then a boy. So the Uig connection is clear. (If you have the Puilean's book 'Suathadh ri iomadh Rubha', you'll find stories about Tormod Mór and his son Angus, Samson's father, at pp. 72-74 and a picture of Angus facing p. 99.)

But who wrote Samson's letter? He was no scholar, barely able to read Gaelic, and nobody Donald John has spoken to in Swainbost could believe that he would ever have written to the press. The finger actually points to 'A.M.' himself. This was Angus Murray, *Short a' Phost*, of 30 Swainbost, who had been a headmaster in Edinburgh before retiring to Strachur. He was a contemporary and lifelong friend of Samson's, and when Samson died aged 70 in 1950, it was he who sent the 'Gazette' a tribute to Samson which also recalled his grandfather, Tormod Mór, as a fine *taigh céilidh* raconteur of Uig traditions — the source of information on the *buannaichean*, no doubt.

Personally, I suspect the whole thing was cooked up by the editor of 'An Gaidheal', the Rev. Malcolm MacPhail, a Shawbost man I believe, who was minister of Balquhidder and who was no doubt short of material because of the War. (As for who 'Creag Mhór' was, I have no idea.) In the March 1944 issue, MacPhail turns to the *buannaichean* in his own 'Facal san Dol Seachad' column. First he repeats the gist of the correspondence, summing up the conclusions about the *buannaichean* like this: *Bha iad 'nan seorsa de dhaoine uaisle, 'nam beachd fhein, am measg nàisinn an àite*. "They were a type of gentlemen, in their own opinion, amongst the original inhabitants of the place."

MacPhail then comes to the rather surprising point that he must have been planning to make all along. "This tradition is correct. It was in the time of the Norsemen — when the Western Isles were *fo chìs aca*, subject to them — that the saying arose. And Uig was the Norsemen's capital (*ceanna-bhaile*) in the Island of Lewis and the seat of government (*caithir-ùghdarrais*) for the whole Island. The Norsemen in those days were all over the Islands and on the coasts of Scotland and Ireland just as the Germans are all over Europe just now. The *buannaichean* in those days were the Gestapo of the Norsemen. And the *buannaichean* were of the same nature (*nàdur*), the same type (*gné*), and the same evil disposition (*aingidheachd*), as the Gestapo. This is what gave rise to another saying: *An t-Ùigeach leig seachad e*. 'Don't meddle with the Uigman.' And perhaps yet another: *Daoine uaisle Uig*. 'The gentlemen of Uig.'"

I am reminded that the term *Ùigeach* is the exact equivalent of 'Viking'. Anyway, MacPhail concludes: "So it comes as no surprise at all that on some night or other the Gaels should decide to do away with the *buannaichean*. '*Marbhadh gach fear a bhuanna agus marbhaidh mise mo bhuanna fhein*. Let each man kill his *buanna* and I'll kill my own *buanna*.'"

Three months later the D-Day landings took place. And far away in their ghastly camp in Poland in that same year, the Puilean — yet another descendant of those Uigmen — scratched and slapped and cursed with his friends, and the phrase *buacaire buanna nan geòcair* somehow came into his head.

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