The bells of Perth

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

AS I POINTED out last time, in 1845 the Gaelic writer John Mackenzie listed *cluig Pheairt* (the bells of Perth) among the seven wonders of Scotland.

Early in the early eighteenth century there had been a saying: "Glasgow for bells, Linlithgow for wells." Glasgow had grown, however, and Mackenzie lived down in Clyde Street, where he probably couldn't hear the bells. To anyone who knew the pipe tune *Cluig Pheairt* (and Mackenzie was a piper), it was Perth that was famous for its bells.

And for perfectly good reason. In the account of the parish of Perth in "The New Statistical Account of Scotland", written in 1837 but not published until 1845, the Rev. Dr William Thomson spoke at length of the bells in the great square tower of his own charge – St John's, the main church of the town. "There was at one time in it a set of bells of celebrated power and tone," he begins, and he quotes from the burgh records, listing the findings of the council's "visitatioune about the Steepell and Bellis", 21 March 1652.

First there was a "Preaching Bell". This is still in use today and is also known as the Bourdon – a French name meaning a "burden" in the sense of a refrain, bass drone or humming tone. Made in Mechlin (Malines) in Flanders, it weighs 28 cwt 4 lbs and bears a Latin inscription which tells us: "I am called John the Baptist / the voice of one crying in the wilderness / Peter Waghevens made me at Mechlin / Let him be blest who made all things / 1506."

Then there was the "Common Bell". It was big too. "This bell is in the diameter in wydnes wt.ne the lippis 1 ell 1 quarter and ane half." In other words well over a metre wide "within the lips". It was made in Mechlin by Georg Waghevens in 1520; also engraved on the metal were symbols of John the Baptist and a picture of Christ riding an ass with people crying.

In 1618 the Council passed an act prohibiting the inhabitants from being outdoors after 10 p.m. This curfew was not observed, the people pointing out that they didn't know what time it was. It was therefore ordained that the Common Bell be tolled every night at ten. This went on "till some years ago", says Thomson, "when it was broken and destroyed". So the Preaching Bell was used instead, "and has continued to be so to the present time".

Before that there had been a Curfew Bell. In the session register of 6 February 1586–87, a Nicol Balmain is ordained "to ring the Curfew and workman bell" from 4 to 4.15 a.m. and from 8 to 8.15 p.m. Apparently the good people of Perth were expected to get up at 4 a.m., go to work at 6 a.m. and go to bed at 8 p.m.!

Then there was what the councillors of 1652 called the "skelloche littill Bell". They reported that "anno dom. 1400" was engraved on it and that it was therefore 253 years old. Thomson points out that skelloche in what he calls "Northern Scots" was a shrill cry or squall, but also quotes "Skellat, a small bell, a sort of iron rattle" from Jameson's Scots Dictionary. I can't help wondering if Gaelic *sgeulaiche*, "a storyteller", has something to do with it. The MacGregor pipers of Glen Lyon in Perthshire were *Clann an Sgeulaiche*. The information I have on "Cluig Pheairt" however is that it was composed not by them but by another family of Perthshire pipers, the Macintyres of Rannoch.

The councillors go on: "Seven houre Bellis without the steepill viz. on Bell for the haill hor. and six for the haff hour." Noting these bells outside the steeple as having been made in 1526, they say: "Inter Ja omnes heving / The notes of the haff hor musick being 32 notes". There then follow twenty-one words in English, the syllables of which appear to represent the text played by the bells: "The Son of Adam answered them. All glorie to the Sone of man, the Father and the Spirit with . . . and p[er]petualy." A gap is left between "with" and "and". I calculate that if the missing word was trisyllabic, we have our 32 notes.

The councillors then say: "Efter the English musical notes of Perth / Vel salutatis Anglica / Ave Maria Benedictata inter mulieres / Et benedicta sit fructus ventris tui." If I understand it correctly, "Vel salutatis Anglica" introduces what follows as "the alternative Anglican greeting". It's the Hail Mary, but with a couple of phrases missing. If we add them in ("gratia plena, dominus tecum") and take away "sit" and the last syllable of "Benedictata", as I think we may, we again have 32 notes.

Thus do the bells speak. *Sgeulaichean*?

Actually the council kept investing in bells. In 1657 there's "an act requiring obedience to the ringing of the bell for putting out fires". In 1769 they bought one which measured 3 feet 1 inch between the lips, inscribed: "I was made for the town of Perth in the reign of George III, in the year 1769 – Congregate – Lister, Pack, and Chapman of London." While ringing for the afternoon service on Sunday 11 September 1836, says Thomson, it cracked and became useless.

By Mackenzie's time they'd had two more made in London anyway, a 3 ft 9 ins one in 1785 and a whopping 4 ft 4 ins one in 1805. As for the "little skelloch bell", in 1810 it was loaned to the builders of the "depot" for housing prisoners of war. "It is now to be seen," says Thomson, "attached to a paltry temporary building, opposite to the sheriff-clerk's office, for the purpose of being rung at the stock-market meetings."

Perth is still noted for its bells today. A carillon of thirty-four bells was installed in 1935, and they can be made to play a great variety of tunes. According to a speaker at last year's Piobaireachd Society conference, "Cluig Pheairt" is one of them. There are altogether sixty-three bells in St John's church. Apart from the thirty-five still in use, fifteen are displayed in the church, and another thirteen hang in a belfry on the north side of the spire. These include the oldest of all, the "Ave Maria", cast in the early fourteenth century.

To return to the idea of bells speaking, we need only think of this:

Oranges and lemons
Say the bells of St Clement's.

You owe me five farthings
Say the bells of St Martin's.

When will you pay me?
Say the bells of Old Bailey.

When I grow rich
Say the bells of Shoreditch.

When will that be?
Say the bells of Stepney.

I'm sure I don't know
Says the great bell of Bow.

This rhyme was discussed by Jean Harrowven in her book "Origins of Rhymes, Songs and Sayings", which I bought recently as a reprint. Until the mid-eighteenth century, she says, ships sailed all the way up to London Bridge to unload their cargoes, and the citrus fruit berth was near St Clement's Eastcheap. The "bells of Old Bailey" were those of St Sepulchre's, which stands opposite the famous criminal court. The tower is 150 feet high and contains a peal of ten bells responsible for the line: "When will you pay me?"

The "great bell of Bow" was the Curfew Bell. It defined the boundaries of the City of London. Harrowven tells the story of Dick Whittington – he's a poor orphan who gets work as a scullion in a merchant's kitchen. It's the custom of the household for everyone to contribute something to the master's ship when it departs for foreign lands. Dick hands over his cat. Despairing of ever making his fortune, he leaves his job and trudges out of London. Reaching the top of Highgate Hill he hears Bow Bells – quite possible in those days, says Harrowven – and they seem to be pealing out a message for him, over and over again: "Turn again Whittington, Lord Mayor of London."

He returns to the great man's household and hears the news: the ship has returned. It had reached a part of Africa which was overrun with vermin. The captain had sold the cat to the king there for an enormous sum. So now the boss is rich. Dick goes on to marry his daughter, and sure enough becomes Lord Mayor of London. Apparently a Richard Whittington really was elected Lord Mayor of London – in 1398, 1406 and 1419. Some people think his "cat" was really a brig built on the Norwegian model, with narrow stern, projecting quarters and deep waist.

You can imagine the supernatural influence that people must have ascribed to the speaking of bells. They carried all the weight of Christian authority. They were also made of iron, which was taken from the naked rock, and therefore had the same kind of primeval power as the "rock gongs" which I described last time. So are there any Gaelic stories about this?

Yes, and it brings us back to within a few miles of Perth.

Comhairle clag Sgàin:
An rud nach buin dut, na buin dà.

("The advice of the bell of Scone: / What you do not own, don't touch it.") Nicolson, in his "Gaelic Proverbs", explains it like this: "The voice of the Bell of Scone, the ancient seat of Scottish royalty, was taken to represent the voice of Law and Justice, of which the fundamental maxim is 'Suum cuique'."

That is, "To him who owns." Well, Nicolson was a lawyer, and that's how he saw it. I'd make a couple of different points. This area was rich farmland close to the Highland Line, ripe for the picking by lawless kindreds like the MacGregors. If that's what the bell said, the message was meant for them.

But you also have to think, what was the traditional authority for the message? What was its origin? The answer seems clear enough to me. The original bell of Scone would have been in the Augustinian abbey there, hanging high in the tower above *Clach Sgàin*, the *Lia Fàil*, the Stone of Destiny, upon which the kings of Scotland were inaugurated. Geoffrey Barrow wrote in his biography of Bruce: "The Stone of Destiny, on which the kings of Scots had been enthroned since time immemorial, was the innermost sacrosanct mystery among the insignia of Scottish monarchy."

So in 1296, after quelling the revolt of his puppet king John Balliol, Edward I had the stone removed from the abbey church of Scone and placed in Westminster Abbey. As Barrow puts it, it was the act "of a conqueror anxious for trophies and determined to crush the pride of an independent people". No theft in Scotland was ever as well-remembered. I find it curious that Nicolson chose to forget it. When the Stone was brought back in 1950 the socialist poet Donald Macintyre seemed to echo the bell:

Ma thilleas iad gu Sgàin i
Bidh duinealas ar nàisein
Nas fheàrr ann am blas . . .

"If they return it to Scone / The manhood of our nation / Will improve much in flavour, / Since they snatched it from the rabble / Who sat their buttocks on it – / And that's not the only thing / The rascals should return. / There's much else again / About the Stone that was in Scone, / Which we'd drag from the hands / Of the pale-faced usurpers; / The person who lives / In the company of thieves, / He must stow his furniture / Under lock and key."

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