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Not Burns – Duncan Ban MacIntyre!

Alan Riach (Friday 5 March 2016)

In the years after the Jacobite rising of 1745, Culloden in 1746, and the violent reprisals against the Highland clans that followed, two Gaelic poets produced two long poems that should be familiar to anyone who cares about Scotland: “Praise of Ben Dorain” and “The Birlinn of Clanranald”. Especially in the light of Trevor Royle’s new book, *Culloden*, they should be reappraised. These poems are among the great works of world literature.

I have loved them for many years but I have no Gaelic and no access to them other than through English translations. I read as many English-language versions of both poems as I could find, including that by Hugh MacDiarmid, made with the help of Sorley MacLean. All have fascination. None of them work. Or, they work in part, in different ways. I read essays, historical accounts, critical material relating to both poems and their authors, and went through them both with people who knew Gaelic, and who knew the poems and what they are about.

Their authors were contemporaries with Burns (1759-96): Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir or Duncan Ban MacIntyre (1724-1812) and Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair or Alexander MacDonald (c.1693/98-1770) but you couldn’t imagine three more different poets.

During the Jacobite rising they had been on opposite sides. The older man, Alasdair, fought with the Jacobites. The younger, Duncan Ban, fought on the Hanoverian side but reluctantly: he had to, as he was employed by the Hanoverian Campbells. At the battle of Falkirk, Duncan Ban had had enough, though, and famously discarded his sword, which had been lent to him by his chief. He would fight no more.

Duncan Ban MacIntyre was born and grew up in Glen Orchy, near Ben Dorain. He had no formal education. He could neither read nor write. From 1746 to 1766 he was a gamekeeper for the Earl of Breadalbane and then the Duke of Argyll, working among the hills and woods of the area. By 1768 he and his family had moved to Edinburgh; he joined the City Guard (the police), like many Highlanders. Robert Fergusson (1750-74), who was there at the same time, called them “the black banditti”. Here in Edinburgh, his poems were written down, published and sold well. In 1786, as Robert Burns’s poems were being published in the Kilmarnock edition, Duncan Ban and his wife were back in the Highlands and islands. As Burns was being lionised in Edinburgh, Duncan Ban was being warmly welcomed in the north-west. He returned to Edinburgh, left the City Guard in 1793, and was a soldier with the Breadalbane Fencibles, though now in his seventies. He retired in 1806, died in 1812, and he and his family are buried in Old Greyfriars churchyard. In 1859, a monument designed by John Thomas Rothead (1814-78), who also designed the Wallace monument at Stirling, was erected in the hills near Dalmally, overlooking Loch Awe.

Duncan Ban was in Edinburgh precisely when James Macpherson, Henry Mackenzie and Adam Smith were flourishing, Enlightenment and proto-Romantic writers. There is almost no recognition of Duncan Ban’s work or indeed of contemporary Gaelic literature in

their writing. To English-language readers, the Highlands were becoming recognised – or branded – through the work of Macpherson and later, Walter Scott.

This division of perception is one reason, perhaps, why “Ben Dorain” and “The Birlinn” have been neglected. Yet there is another division implicit in “Ben Dorain” itself, between the vision of the mountain and its plenitude of riches and the traditional Gaelic praise-poem for clan and clan chief. As the clans themselves had been violently put down after Culloden, so the ascendancy of English-language writing, and the gulfs between English, Scots and Gaelic worlds were opening up. These gulfs were not unbridgeable – Duncan Ban’s contemporary, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was familiar not only with Burns’s work but also that of James Thomson, whose *The Seasons* (1730) was the most famous Scottish poem of its time and effectively triggered the tradition of English-language pastoral poetry. However, “Praise of Ben Dorain” is very different.

Remember: Duncan Ban was illiterate. The poem was composed as a song in the poet’s mind before it was ever written down on a page. The “original” is not the written or printed version, nor any of the English-language translations, but something Duncan Ban made in his own head, that he would have made into sound through his own voice. There is no way to get back to that, and no way to replicate it. But when I decided to try to make my own English-language version of the poem, that’s what I was trying to represent.

I was cautioned severely. If you don’t know the language, what impudence, to think you could translate from it!

Well, yes. Sometimes you need impudence, to approach an immortal. It was a risky business, I knew, but the poem itself would not let me go. It had gone into my mind so deep, it seemed that the thing itself demanded expression.

Work like this should not be so hard to imagine. Bagpipe-players learn tunes through “translating” them from sounds that can be sung by the human voice (canntaireachd) into music played on the pipes. Thus the accuracy of replicating written or printed annotation is of secondary importance to the primacy of conveying meaning through the music, whether in bodily human voice or a fashioned material instrument. This also relates to the teaching or transmission of a tune without written manuscript. So, I argued, the same might apply to the poem.

Its shape is essential to its meaning. It was composed to the musical structure of a pibroch – in Gaelic the spelling is piobaireachd – the classical music of the Highland bagpipe. It is also known as “ceol mor” or “big music” or “great music”. The word for music, ceol, has nothing to do with the muses: it signifies sound made by breath moving through tubes or pipes, imagined or physical, constructed, bodily.

It is in eight parts, a base theme and variations on, or journeys around, it. (1) The opening gives the main theme or “urlar”: the mountain, the deer, and the first-person singular narrator of the poem, a young man who will hunt the deer, not for sport but for the nourishment of himself and his people; (2) then the first journey takes each of the preceding

three main component parts and extends, expands, or elaborates some aspects of them; (3) then there is a return to the main theme; (4) then the second journey; (5) then the main theme once again; (6) then the third journey, or variation; (7) and then the main theme is returned to for the last time; and finally (8) there is the culmination of the entire poem, its crowning or bringing together of all the elements in the onslaught of the hunting dogs and the killing of the deer. In the last few lines there is a confirmation that the poem as given is not enough, and never could be, to encompass everything it sets out to describe.

Seen in this way, there is a cyclical, or seasonal, sense of repetition. The main theme is given four times, each time followed by a transitional “variation” or journey between them, and at last the “culmination” brings things to a conclusion, but with the promise of further repetition or regeneration – although, obviously enough, not for the particular individual deer killed in the last section. Yet at the same time, this structure, once experienced, may be read or listened to again and again with an increased awareness of tension. Even on a first reading there are clues that the end will be bloody and climactic. This balance or combining of a regenerating, cyclical structure and a linear, increasingly suspenseful, narrative, is stunningly achieved, and appreciated more deeply after several readings.

The question remains, whether “Praise of Ben Dorain” may be read in the twenty-first century as a poem not only of praise, but also of sorrow, resistance and anger, a permanent protest against the devastation some folk bring upon others. This is not explicitly depicted in the poem, but its historical context implies it: after Culloden and before the denudation and exploitation of the mountain and the land all around it. In the twenty-first century, most of the deer and the forests, the natural plenitude of Ben Dorain, has gone. It is a beautiful, but bare mountain. In this, perhaps, it is comparable to that other great poem of sorrow, the persistence of memory and the demand for justice, Sorley MacLean’s “Hallaig”.

And that gets us to the question of land ownership in Scotland, which, as readers of *The National* know only too well, is in urgent need of redress.

So perhaps in the eighteenth-century Gaelic poem there is an implicit political significance here for us now. “Praise of Ben Dorain” is a register of loss: not a praise poem for a chief, hero, leader or clan, but a praise poem for a non-human source of economic health and human well-being, a politically balanced ecology, a mountain that is not simply the “earth-mother” myth idealised but a reality, a promise of what health is, what regeneration requires. It is sublime, but it is also utterly realistic.

Let it be a manifesto for land-ownership in Scotland. Let it be read and held in mind and mortal memory. It warrants such, repays as much, every bit as richly as any songs of Burns.

Next week: Not Burns – Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair!

“Praise of Ben Dorain” by Duncan Bàn MacIntyre, the original Gaelic poem and the English translation by Alan Riach, is published by Kettillonia: www.kettillonia.co.uk

[Boxed off:]

The opening of “Praise of Ben Dorain” by Duncan Ban MacIntyre, translated by Alan Riach

1. Urlar: The Main Theme

Praise over all to Ben Dorain –
She rises beneath the radiant beams of the sun –
In all the magnificent range of the mountains around,
So shapely, so sheer are her slopes, there are none
To compare; she is fair, in the light, like the flight
Of the deer, in the hunt, across moors, on the run,
Or under the green leafy branches of trees, in the groves
Of the woods, where the thick grass grows,
And the curious deer, watchful and tentative,
Hesitant, sensitive: I have had all these clear, in my sight.

A herd of the deer: each startles at once,
And they leap, as if one, and it starts!
The bounding of bodies, the weight in their forms,
In movement away, their white rumps up, bobbing,
Away in a spray, an array:
They are grace, in their movement, yet skittish.
Prompted by fear, carried by muscle, charged by instinctual sense;
Equally so, the shy, sombre stag,
In his warm brown coat,
The russet of fur, his antlers raised high,

Stately and slow, he walks by.