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Not Burns – Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair!

Alan Riach (Friday 12 February 2016)

At first reading, “The Birlinn of Clanranald” is very different from “Praise of Ben Dorain”, the poem we looked at in the previous essay in this series. This is a poem which describes a working ship, a birlinn or galley, its component parts, mast, sail, tiller, rudder, oars and the cables they are nestled in, the ropes that connect sail to cleats or belaying pins, and so on, and the sixteen crewmen, each with their appointed role and place, and it describes their mutual working together, rowing, and then sailing out to sea, from the Hebrides in the west of Scotland, from South Uist to the Sound of Islay, then over to Carrickfergus in Ireland. The last third of the poem takes us through a terrible storm, and we make it – only just – to safe harbour. It was written sometime around 1751-55 and first published posthumously in 1776.

Its author, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, also known as Alexander MacDonald, was a teacher and soldier, a Jacobite officer during the rising of 1745 and Gaelic tutor to Prince Charles Edward Stuart. His father was an Episcopalian Church of Scotland minister, who taught the boy and introduced him to Greek and Roman literature. He knew about sea voyages literally, in the Hebrides, but he also read about them in the poems of Homer and Virgil. In his poem, there is clear evidence that the author had experienced the sea, but there is also a supremely literary sensibility at work, especially when we come to the storm, where a wealth of poetic resources of hyperbole and imagery are drawn upon. The modernity of this passage is startling, and it could almost be described as psychedelic or surrealist.

Alasdair attended the University of Glasgow and grew quickly familiar with contemporary and classical literature and culture, Scots, English and European. In 1729, he became a schoolteacher, an English teacher, working in various parts of Moidart and the west of Scotland. In 1738 he was teaching at Kilchoan, Ardnamurchan. One of his most famous songs of this period was the lyrical, “Allt an t-Siucar” / “Sugar Burn”. In 1741, Alasdair’s *A Galick and English Vocabulary*, effectively the first Gaelic-English dictionary, was published, commissioned by the anti-Catholic, anti-Gaelic, Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), to help spread the English language and extirpate Gaelic. Alasdair had worked on it in the belief that it would help take Gaelic forward, but he soon came to oppose everything the SSPCK stood for. Making this book, if anything, confirmed his own commitment to his language and culture. His poems took on increasingly sharp edges. Called to account for satiric and inappropriate writing, it is said that he abandoned his teaching to join the Jacobite rising, and that he was among the first at Glenfinnan when the flag was raised on 19 August 1745. Many of his poems and songs openly extol the virtues of the Jacobite cause and satirise the Hanoverians and their Scottish supporters, the Campbells. He was a captain in the Clan Ranald regiment, in charge of fifty recruits, and taught Gaelic to the Prince himself. He converted to Catholicism, perhaps at this time, but perhaps much earlier. After Culloden, he and his family were fugitives. His house was ransacked by Hanoverian troops.

He and his family settled on the island of Canna in 1749 and stayed there till 1751, when he travelled to Edinburgh to publish a book of his poems, *Ais-Eiridh na Sean Chánoin Albannaich / The Reawakening of the Old Scottish Language*, replete with satires on the Hanoverian succession. In the poem, “An Airce” / “The Ark”, he promises that the Campbells will be plagued and scourged for their treason to Scotland, while he himself will build a ship of refuge for those Campbells true to the Jacobite cause, and all moderates who, after swallowing an effective purgative of salt sea water, would be willing to reject allegiance to the British crown. The authorities were outraged.

Aware of the threat of prosecution, he moved to Glen Uig but then moved again to Knoydart, then to Morar and finally to Sandaig, in Arisaig. He often visited South Uist, where his friend Iain MacFhearchair (John MacCodrum) was bard to Sir James MacDonald of Sleat. The MacDonalds and Clan Ranald were his people, and their family connections extended throughout the west of Scotland and to Ireland, to Carrickfergus.

On his deathbed, his last words were addressed to friends watching over him, who were reciting some poems of their own. Alasdair awoke, corrected their metres and versification, showed them how to do it with some verses of his own, then quietly lay back and drifted away. He is buried in Kilmorie cemetery, Arisaig.

The poem is so visceral and grainy in its depiction of realities, it almost seems hostile to metaphoric interpretation, but, as with “Praise of Ben Dorain”, the historical context in which the poem was written suggests one.

As noted, both poems were composed in the aftermath of the Jacobite rising of 1745 and the massacre at Culloden in 1746. The poems, perhaps, reflect upon this social and human disaster in ways that go further than their literal meanings.

“Praise of Ben Dorain” gives us a mountain, deer, and the hunt for the deer, in a world in ecological balance and a self-replenishing, self-sustaining economy. “The Birlinn” presents a clan and a crew of men working in extreme co-ordination, disciplined and intuitive, in conditions of knowledge drawn from experience, but they and their vessel are subjected to a storm of unprecedented violence, a natural imposition that calls up inimical forces from well beyond anything that might have been predicted.

In “The Birlinn”, the courage and skills of the crew and the strength of the ship carry them through, but at a cost, and without any sense of inevitability. The safe harbour they come to connects the Celtic worlds of Scotland and Ireland. In “Ben Dorain”, the skills and stealth of the hunter on the mountain carry him through to the kill, but the beauty and treasure of the deer are valued at their true worth, in a world of natural balance sustained by both self-conscious design and intuitive understanding and sympathy.

The journeys that both poems take us on are, also, signals of an ancient kinship, across differences, of the Celtic peoples, of the human needs of all people, and of the relations between these and sea, earth and nature.

They are both emphatically and intrinsically opposed to the inimical forces in nature and the anti-human forces in the political world that intervene to wreak havoc and destruction on us all. Their triumph is in regeneration.

Their value now, in pre-independence Scotland, was never greater.

So much depends not only on what our education provides, but also what the current attitude to experience is, what we are encouraged to remember, and what our state of culture insists we should forget.

So now that Burns night is well and truly over for another year, let's think of his great Gaelic contemporaries and their poems, and ask why we know so little about them.

The kind of education in Gaelic and Scots languages needed in Scotland has never been more effectively summarised than by Emeritus Professor Ronald Black in his letter to *The National* (26 January 2016). It deserves to be quoted again: "The Scotland I want to live in is one in which the speaking of languages other than English is not seen as an affliction of the elderly but as a wonderful gift which benefits the individual and society as a whole. Basic Scots and Gaelic should be taught in every primary school. Advanced Scots and Gaelic should be available in at least one secondary school in every local authority area. Ultimately it should be possible for pupils in any part of Scotland to be taught Scots or Gaelic for the entirety of their educational career. The teaching of English grammar, spelling and literature should also be strengthened. Fluent Gaelic speakers should be tempted into education [...] And generally speaking, this sort of educational background should be sine qua non for applicants to culturally-sensitive posts."

In a Scotland like this, these poems would be at least as familiar as Burns. So, show me the education minister willing to stand up for that.

[Boxed off:]

From "The Birlinn of Clanranald" by Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (Alexander MacDonald), translated by Alan Riach

From "The Blessing"

May the great lord god of movement

carry us safe,

on all the choral waters of this world,

the seas and oceans, currents and streams, enable us,

take this craft upon them, across them, and cradle us –

We are launched on Day One
this craft of my clan
Each one of the crew
being tough, strong and true
Each man hears this call –
Bless them all.

From “The Storm”

Hoist sail at dawn on the day of Saint Bride,
bearing out from the mouth of Loch Eynort, South Uist.

Furnace-gold, hot-yellow, yolk-yellow, brass-brazen sun, burning
through fish-nets of clouds, trellises meshed, burning them open,
emerges, and the clouds burn back, close in once again,
cover all things, changing, sky becomes ash, blackening, and a blue
splash there, and then thickening, bulging, effulging,
turning sick, pale, brown, beige, tawny, impending, bellying
down, and the fretwork rematches itself, closes in, hue
thick as tartan, dark weaves, anger flashes, and there high in the west,
a broken shaft, a dog-tooth of rainbow, colour stripes swelling,
a fang of sharp colour, clouds moving faster to cover it over, and the winds
pick up speed, toss the clouds as if showers of boulders,
grey fragments of stone, chips of earth, avalanching in sky.

They lift up the sail, they spring up to stretch
the stiff-solid ropes to their places, secure now,

tough and unbreakable, there from the deck
to the high, hard, tapering, resin-red point of the mast,
secure all the knots, faultless all joints, rope connections between
all bolt-rings and hooks, made impeccable,
run up and tied down, tense and unflexing as iron,
assured, reassured, now firmly, secured.

The sea all lifts up, like a great black coat,
rising to cover the sky, like a shroud, thrown out,
soaring up, like a blanket, coarse stuff,
shaggy its surface, a big horse's pelt in black winter,
a cataract rising, a waterfall soaring, returning itself to its source,
unnatural, screaming and screeching and howling and yowling,
and ocean becomes: mountains and bens and valleys and glens,
all rough with the forest and bushes and grass.
Sea opens its mouth, is all mouth, all agape,
widening, opening, sharpened the teeth, all
crocodile-strong, hippopotamus tusks, and gripping and turning,
as if wrestling was fun, forcing over each one –
Sky shrinks and clenches long ribs on its brow –

It has turned to ferocity now –

The fight to the death has begun.

“The Birlinn of Clanranald” by Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, the original Gaelic poem and the English translation by Alan Riach, is published by Kettillonia:

www.kettillonia.co.uk

Alan Riach will be reading from “The Birlinn” at StAnza, the St Andrews Poetry Festival, on Saturday 5 March, 11.30am.