

Home to Glenorchy
by Mhairi Ross, Ledaig

Anyone who has listened to Gaelic song will almost certainly have heard of Duncan Bàn MacIntyre. Those who have studied Celtic literature or even only occasionally dipped into the richness of its poetry, will be in no doubt as to the high regard this simple, illiterate man of the hills is held in, and the vast contribution he made over his very long life to the culture of the Highlands. Donnchadh Bàn Mac-an-t'saoir was born into a humble home, part of the clachan of Druim Liaghairt, at the southern end of Loch Tulla in the Parish of Glenorchy in the year 1724. His parents, like the other half-dozen or so families in the clachan, were tenant farmers, all scrabbling a living from the land. They grew what they could from their feannagan, or lazy beds, laid out on any available ground, and kept some small black cattle and a few sheep. The Celtic feudal system at the time of Duncan's birth had changed little in hundreds of years. Tacks were leased to 'gentlemen', often related to the clan chiefs who owned large swathes of the Highlands. These tacksmen then sub-let parcels of ground to tenants who paid their rent to them more often in kind than cash, and were obliged to offer their dues and services in battle and other occasions of the chief's bidding. The run-rig system of cultivation meant each tenant had strips of good land as well as poor, and souming, the proportion of beasts to area of land established by common consent, and common pasture ensured each family had a share of grazing. In summer, the cattle would be taken to higher ground where the young of the village would live with the beasts until weather and lengthening nights brought them down again. This was the life young Duncan enjoyed---a busy, happy time with planting and harvesting, fishing and hunting, herding and flirting at the airidh or sheiling, and spending convivial evenings making music and song.

As he grew to manhood, he spent some time in the Argyllshire Militia, ending up fighting for the 'King of the Whigs' at the Battle of Falkirk. And it was this battle that spurred him to compose his first poem.

On his return from the army, he settled down in the forests of Mamlorn between Glen Orchy and Glen Lochay. For twenty years, he worked as a forester and gamekeeper for the Earl of Breadalbane in Coire Cheathaich at the head of Glen Lochay, on the slopes of Beinn Dòbhrain in Auch Glen and at Craig and Dalness in Glen Etive. He was probably in his mid thirties

when he married his beloved Màiri bhàn òg, the daughter of the innkeeper at Inveroran. Not quite the girl next door but certainly just across the road.

We are not told why he decided to move his family to Edinburgh. Some say it was because sheep were beginning to replace people in the glens and the old way of life was changing, others that the hard life of a gamekeeper and the remoteness of his home was not convenient for him pursuing the opportunities of publishing his poetry. I suspect that, having buried four of his children, life might have lost some of its joy for him and he and his wife looked for a new start in a place far away from memories too painful to live with. The truth was, in all likelihood, a combination of many factors but move to Edinburgh he did and by the end of April 1767, another son, the second named Donald, was born. (It was a common practice to name a child after one who had died and this might account for the fact that Duncan and Màiri had two children called Peter, Donald and Anne). Not much is known of his life in Edinburgh other than seven more children were born to the couple and that he served, for a time, with the Breadalbane Fencibles. Later, like many displaced Highlanders, he found employment in the City Guard, a forerunner of the city's police force. The 'auld rottans' or rats the locals called them, suggesting they were not held in the esteem one might suppose their office merited. From them, though, he earned a pension sufficient to keep himself and his family.

He began composing his first songs in his early twenties and continued throughout his long life. He could neither read nor write and relied on what must have been a formidable memory to preserve his works. The oral tradition was the accepted means of handing down poems and songs from one generation to the next but to memorise at least sixty poems, many of considerable length and complexity, took some feat of cerebral dexterity. He formed a close friendship with the Reverend Donald MacNicol, minister on Lismore, and Duncan Bàn and his wife stayed with him for many months in 1766, with the minister scribing the poems and the bard taking off from time to time to wander the Highlands looking for sponsorship to publish his works. The growing popularity of his work and the first publication of his poetry, happening only a year after he moved to Edinburgh, must have reinforced his decision to concentrate on composing. In his Song to the Musket, which, along with the halberd, was the weapon of choice for the City Guard, he readily concedes that "I grew tired of labour and I vowed I would not deign to be a farm servant----'tis the man of leisure that survives the longest."

He travelled often through the Highlands in his forties and fifties to raise money and sponsorship. Many first hand accounts of seeing him in Inverness-shire and Sutherland, Perthshire and Argyll describe him as “dressed in the Highland garb, with a checked bonnet over which a large bushy tail of a wild animal hung; a badger’s skin fastened by a belt in front, a hangar by his side and a soldier’s wallet was strapped to his shoulders.” By other accounts he was “fair of hair and face, with a pleasant countenance and a happy, attractive manner.”

He returned to Glenorchy for the last time when he was almost eighty and wrote perhaps his best-known and most poignant poem, *Cead Deireannach nam Beann*---Last Farewell to the Mountains. In it, he mourns the passing of the old ways, with sheep replacing people in the glens and the loss of his boyhood friends. He also mourns the loss of his own youth but with resignation that things have to change, rather than any sense of bitterness. Although the song is tinged with great sadness, it is primarily a final blessing on the hills and way of life he loved so much. It was also a fitting epitaph for a man who brought the world a precious insight into the Highlands----their values, traditions and unsurpassable beauty.

In the spring of 2008, Oban Gaelic Choir organised a 120-mile walk from Duncan’s grave in Edinburgh to his birthplace in Glenorchy to raise both money for choir funds and the profile of this amiable man of the hills and prolific contributor to Gaelic culture.

We started our walk at Greyfriars Kirkyard early on a bright May morning. The monument marking Duncan’s last resting place is an elaborate representation of many of the dearly held aspects of his life. Above the pedestal, the obelisk depicts sword and shield, fish and rod, musket and powder horn, hare, fowl and stag and a be-ribboned scroll, all interwoven as they would have been in life. I picked a daisy from his grave and put it safely in my pack.

The route had been carefully worked out to take in as many places as possible with a connection to the bard. We had already passed the Lawnmarket where the redoubtable Màiri bhàn òg, when she was not quite so òg, had a howff where she sold illicit whisky to members of the City Guard and other ‘citizens of repute’. Her gentle and amiable disposition

obviously hadn't prevented her from seeing a money-making opportunity and she was, apparently, an expert distiller.

The Union Canal led us, surprisingly peacefully, out of the capital and along the road to Falkirk. In many ways, it was here that it all began. As a member of the Argyllshire Militia, Duncan Bàn was obliged to join the Government troops when they sensed an easy victory over the weary Jacobite forces retreating from Derby. We get the impression from some of his later poems that he was a closet supporter of 'the rightful king' but hedged his bets by composing flattering eulogies to many Argyll Campbells, including Colin of Glenure. He was only riled enough to commit his true feelings to song when the despised proscription of Highland dress was brought in after Culloden. "It is a bad development for us that the young prince has suffered such misfortune," he complained----"that King (George) doesn't belong to us and has insulted us woefully."

The truth was that Duncan was not politically minded enough to come out on one side or the other and, probably like many other young men of the time, held less passion for the Prince and his cause than some takes on Highland history would have us believe.

He composed his first poem in revenge for an injustice, having had to flee for his life from the battlefield at Falkirk. The town also gave him, in later years, an opportunity to compete in an annual bardic competition set up by the London Highland Society. As we devoured our late lunch and thoughts of Duncan's connection with Falkirk occupied my mind, the Wheel did its party piece for us, but not impressively enough for us to forget our throbbing feet and need to rest. We moved off on the final five miles for that day and fell asleep within minutes of hitting the pillow.

The beautiful spring weather held as we turned sharp right at Kelvinhead, and leaving the reassurance of the canal, headed north over the first rise of hills towards Fintry. Passing the Carron Reservoir, an opening into an old cemetery lured us from our course and a quick glance round confirmed that this was a special place. Wreaths had been laid recently and the graves were well tended. Later research discovered that Kirk o' Muir had been among the first places to celebrate the post-Reformation form of communion and had a strong link with the Covenanters. The Kirk is nowadays part of St. Ninian's Parish, Stirling, and the minister holds an

annual service to keep alive its history. Kirk o' Muir was also close to Sir John de Graham's castle to which Wallace often retired after a hard day guarding Scotland. Unfortunately, the luckless Graham was killed at the earlier Battle of Falkirk during the Wars of Independence but not before he sired the line which eventually produced the Marquis of Graham, Duke of Montrose. And it was he who was largely responsible for the removal of the hated Disarming Act of 1746 which forbade the wearing of Highland dress and the possession of arms. Even the bagpipe, classed as an instrument of war, was banned. The repeal of the Act in 1782 gave Duncan Bàn a great excuse to proclaim his pride in his heritage and he wrote, with unconcealed joy, at being given 'sanction to don our garb'.

Descending the Fintry hills at Buchlyvie placed us in just the right position to fortify ourselves in the wonderful tearoom there before attempting to cross Flanders Moss. Had it not been incredibly dry for the previous month, the moss would have been a daunting prospect, given that we had to cross the Kelty Water which we thought had a bridge, and the truculent infant Forth which we hoped had one. Even with little water, crossing on foot would have been dangerous with heavy packs so our relief was palpable when we discovered some considerate benefactor had supplied us with a brand new structure just six months before.

We toasted him and our good fortune as we fell through the door of the Rob Roy Motel near Aberfoyle and managed to persuade the staff setting up for dinner that we hadn't had any lunch. They were kind enough to produce some pea and ham soup which we downed with gratitude and in silence and that sustained us over the Rob Roy Trail to Kilmahog. We were to meet up with the MacGregors again later on our journey.

Road walking plays havoc with feet so we opted to use the old route through the hills of Glen Ample to Lochearnhead and from there up Glen Ogle by the disused railway line. Arriving at Killin, I felt we were in Duncan Bàn's territory at last. Glen Lochay, which runs west behind Killin, was his first post as a forester for the Earl of Breadalbane. He lived at Badour near the head of the glen when he left the army and from there he could watch over the Forest of Mamlorn and the comings and goings of a 'nighean donn òg' called Mary MacNaughton. She appears to have been the first beauty to steal his heart and he promised her a life free from the usual dairy-maid's toil. He would take her to Edinburgh and buy her smart shoes. There, she could sing and dance to her heart's content. Whether she

rejected him or his move from Glen Lochay made their romance difficult to sustain, we don't know, but the romance ended.

When Campbell of Achallader removed him from Badour and put one of his own friends in his place, Duncan lost no time in telling the world what he thought of his successor, a man who had 'never wandered far from the kitchen fire.'

In retaliation for being deposed, he wrote a vitriolic Lament for the Misty Corrie---Cumha Coire a' Cheathaich---in which he spares the feelings of neither the new incumbent nor his employer.

"The corrie has been blighted---and MacEwan, who lives there now, is like a stone in lieu of cheese."

John Campbell of Achallader, predictably was not well pleased and, on meeting Duncan at Killin Fair, struck him hard with his staff and said, "Make a song to that!" And, of course, he did. Campbell's less than perfect physical features were lampooned mercilessly and, if his temperature had been raised before, he could not have been other than incandescent when he heard himself described as cross-eyed, thin-necked and resembling the lowest of the low---a public hang-man!

The second love of Duncan's life was Mary from Lochlairig, near Balquhidder. His Òran Gaoil to her has a mild hint of desperation about it and may suggest he was getting on a bit and still hadn't secured a wife. She was related in some way to him and he hoped this kinship tie would be enough to persuade her he was a good choice.

"I am hoping---thou art pleased I am of thy people, and will not forsake me, and that I shall get thee in the firm bonds of wedlock."

She obviously wasn't pleased enough for he went off to Ais an t-Sithean in Auch Glen to nurse his broken heart for a second time.

Our journey continued along Glen Lochay, over the hills at Kenknock and into Glen Lyon, from where we skirted the now dammed and enlarged Loch Lyon. We dropped into Auch Glen, beautiful in prospect and surrounded by steep-sided slopes. From his home there, Duncan couldn't escape seeing the impressive west flank of Beinn Dòbhrain, which became the subject of one of his most poignant and descriptive eulogies.

Most of Duncan Bàn's poems were designed to be sung either to a tune of his own creation or an established one. It made them easier to remember for one thing. What makes *Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain* unusual is that it is set to a Pibroch or classical pipe tune with a ground or theme (*Ùrlar*), variation (*Siubhal*) and finale (*Crunluath*). It depicts, in minute and loving detail, every aspect of the mountain, from the herbs and wild flowers to the woods and moors on her flanks. His love for all the creatures that lived on her slopes is evident and it's as if he knew every hind, doe and stag individually, such is his awareness of their habits and characteristics. He cared deeply for their welfare but shot them when required without compunction. 'He always gave a wild creature its chance, never killed a mother or its young and never killed more than he needed.' Such was the job of a gamekeeper.

We crossed and recrossed the Allt Kinglass, all the while scanning the slopes of Ben Doran for any sign of wildlife. Not a deer to be seen and certainly little evidence of the otter that gave its name to this magnificent hill.

It was while he was based in Glen Etive, his third post as forester and gamekeeper, that it would appear he finally struck lucky in love. Whether it was on a visit to his family home or just a chance meeting at the ale-house at Inveroran, he fell under the spell of Màiri bhàn òg, the innkeeper's daughter and also a MacIntyre. She was considerably younger than he and his love song to her has found a place amongst the best-loved Gaelic love songs. The two settled at Dalness in Glen Etive and began producing their family. Whatever catastrophes or events overtook them, Duncan and Mairi left four of their children behind in the ground before they moved to Edinburgh—one at Kenmore, one at Killin and two at Clachan an Dìseart, the old name for Dalmally. (Mally's field was actually on the south side of the river where the present hotel now stands.)

There had been a church at the clachan virtually since the days of Columba and his influence had been felt right across to Glen Lyon and beyond. Clachan an Dìseart refers to the township of the monastery which stood on the island between the River Orchy and the Orchy Bheag, its off-shoot. It was considered a holy site, as evil spirits were not thought to be able to cross water. There appeared to have been a major pilgrimage route from Iona to Glen Lyon through Glen Orchy. Beinn Mhanach to the north of Glen Lyon is translated as the hill of the monks while the oldest known

Gaelic name for the glen is Glen Fasach---the desert or monastery glen. The mediaeval church there had been rebuilt by Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy in 1615. Since the 14th century, the churchyard had also been the burial ground of the Clan Gregor who came originally from Glen Strae. Indeed, the old track along the north side of Loch Lyon is still known as the MacGregor's coffin road.

Despite his personal loss, Duncan never made reference to his children. He wrote odes to ewes, cockerels and foxes and songs to glens and regiments but couldn't bring himself to sing of the loss of those dearest to him. The nearest we get is when he writes of being 'resigned to everything that befalls us.' Some memories are beyond sharing.

From the foot of Auch Glen, our route took us on to the West Highland Way, which skirts the foot of Ben Doran and cruelly enticed us through the door of the Bridge of Orchy Hotel. We had a quick refreshment amid the bikers, hikers and Bank Holiday trippers. We didn't stay long. The noise and crowds were too much and too sudden.

Walking the final three miles was a good opportunity to reflect on the man I felt I had come to know well since leaving Edinburgh. This 'illiterate peasant' had contributed not only a wealth of song in his native language for the pleasure of the Gael but had given the outside world an insight into his private world. His laments, lampoons and love-songs were cleverly constructed and his evident love of the natural world and the Highlands was inspiring and stirring. I felt privileged to have walked with him.

Members of the choir met us as we reached Inveroran and accompanied us to the old clachan at Druim Liaghairt, where stands a cairn commemorating his birth. In this setting of extraordinary beauty and peace, I placed the fading daisy. The warm wind from the corries on Stob Ghabhar carried it off to lie amongst the stones and we turned to go home.

Bibliography

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