

‘Cacmhor an Comann na Goill’

WILLIAM GILLIES

ABSTRACT

This poem has not been edited before, but is of interest at several levels. I offer it to John MacInnes as one who has had a longstanding interest in the Highland-Lowland cultural interface, and more particularly as one who has written perceptively about the way Gaels perceive their Lowland neighbours, a perspective that can be obscured by the plethora of writings on the way the Lowlanders perceive the Gaels.

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Introduction

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The poem in question occurs in the Book of the Dean of Lismore (hereafter BDL), which was compiled in Fortingall, in eastern Perthshire, between 1512 and 1542.¹ It is ascribed to Duncan MacGregor, the Dean’s brother and coadjutor in the enterprise which is somehow reflected in BDL. With these credentials it offers a potentially intimate insight into the mind-set of the Dean’s literary circle, bearing in mind that Fortingall was at a meeting-point of Highland and Lowland culture in the early sixteenth century (MacGregor 2007: 37–8).

Cultural stereotyping and the stigmatising of racial or linguistic neighbours are pretty much ubiquitous human practices, and the Highland-Lowland divide has its own share of such manifestations. There are some well-known examples of anti-Gaelic sentiments in Late Medieval Scots literature, including the caricature of the Gaelic bard in Richard Holland’s *Buke of the Howlat* and the anonymous picture of the Highlander created by God from ‘ane horsse turd in Argyll’.² The traffic is not all one-way, of course. When William Dunbar castigates Walter Kennedy for his Gaelic origins and traits we know that it is part of a *jeu parti*, in which Kennedy will have his turn to satirise Dunbar’s Lowland ways; a one-handed flyting would not be much fun for anyone (Meier 2008: xcvi–cxvii and 88–179). Moreover, Dr MacInnes has published in the article just mentioned some rhymes from more recent times which show the contempt of Gaelic-speakers for the ‘Lowland carles’ (MacInnes 1989: 94–5, 100). It is useful, even so, to find this early sixteenth-century example, if only to counter-balance the Middle Scots anti-Gaelic items so frequently quoted.³ The terms of the Gaelic poem are pretty explicit, though the same can be said of Gaelic satire in general, and no less truly of the Scots flyting tradition. We should doubtless recall that BDL also contains scorching assaults on members of the Church and of the female gender (Gillies 1978:31–5 and 1983:71–6).

The burden of Duncan’s complaint is that the Lowlanders are *cacmhor* (‘full of shit’). Was this meant literally, or in the modified way that ‘shit’-words are often used nowadays, both in Gaelic (‘is iomadh *cousin* caca a th’agam’, etc.) and in English? We may recall that Sir Duncan Campbell’s poem *Créad dá ndearnadh Domhnall Donn?* (‘What is Donald Donn made of?’) identifies different sorts of dung or ordure, along with other unsavoury ingredients, in a fanciful analysis of Domhnall Donn’s physical make-up (Gillies 1983:76–82). Again, bodily functions and malfunctions are part of the rhetoric of Gaelic satire, one procedure of which is to bestialise its victims (McCaughy 1989: 109–19). However, a more literal interpretation may be suggested by the fact that some other

¹ National Library of Scotland Gaelic MS 72.1.37, p. 28.

² For the ‘bard owt of Irland’ in the *Buke of the Howlat*, see R. Watson 1995: 25; for the poem ‘God and Sanct Petir was gangand be the way’, see *id.* 143–4.

³ M. Pía Coira remarks on an absence of anti-Lowland sentiment on the part of Gaels before the seventeenth century (Coira 2008: 149). This is certainly true of the ‘official’ poetry; but the present poem reminds us that what remains of that poetry is not the whole story.

texts of the time use allegations of insanitary habits as a mark of the backwardness and barbarity of racial neighbours. A well-known account of the native Irish in Elizabethan times, contained in John Derricke’s *Image of Ireland* (published in 1581) contains an illustration of an Irish chieftain’s feasting hall, complete with poet and harper, and also shows two men exposing their posteriors over by a wall, with the following legends attached to each: (1) *Aspice, spectator, sic me docuere parentes* (‘Behold, viewer, this is how my parents taught me’), and (2) *Me quoque maiores omnes, virtute carentes* (‘All my forbears too, lacking (any) decency’). Although it has been suggested that they are buffoons, part of the entertainment, the legends may rather suggest simply that they are about to defecate without going outside (Breatnach 1997: 124–6 and Plate III). A slightly later example of this canard, this time from within the Gaelic-speaking world, is found in a well-known poem against the bardic poets, *A lucht chumas bréag san dán* (‘All you who make up falsehood in verse’), attributed in the O’Conor Don’s Book to ‘An Pearsún Riabhach’ (Simms 2010: 43). Here we find the following accusation:

An fear do-ní istigh a [chac]
 ’s nach beireann amach a [mhúin],
 adéarthaoui re giolla an tuill,
 ‘Biaidh Banbha Chuinn aige súd.’⁴

For the present poem, it seems likeliest that both literal and dyslogistic levels are equally in play: as we shall see, the Lowlanders both shit without shame or discrimination and are ‘shitty’ in that they are devoid of manners and liberality.

Duncan MacGregor is credited with four other poems amongst those preserved in BDL. They are scattered throughout the MS as we have it. They are as follows. (1) *Marthain uaim go Eóin* (p. 7), a single quatrain of compliment to a friend;⁵ (2) *Féicheamhoin sibh, a chlann cuil* (p. 64), a moralising quatrain (Gillies 2008:218); (3) *Aithris fhréimhe ruanaidh Eóin* (p. 208), a substantial praise-poem addressed to the chief of the MacGregors (W. J. Watson 1937: 212–17); and (4) *Mairg bean nach bí ag aon-sagart* (p. 223), a substantial satirical poem on the sexual excesses of the clergy (Quiggin 1937: 80–1). Of these, *Aithris fhréimhe* shows some evidence of literary and historical learning, though it is not metrically or linguistically strict; *Féicheamhoin sibh* is more linguistically polished, but brief; *Mairg bean*, like *Cacmhor an comann*, has some neat touches, but is not meant to be a formally high-level production. As for the present poem, as well as being metrically and linguistically unambitious, it contains a couple of vernacular touches which are probably to be attributed to the poet: see Notes on 2c and 2d. Overall, the evidence of language and metre suggests that the author intended it as an upper-register Early Modern poem, like the rest of his compositions, but possibly with a couthy dimension.⁶

The imperfect legibility of this part of the MS, together with the novelty of the subject-matter, leaves some uncertainty over certain readings, but I hope enough has been correctly decoded to give a fair sense of what the poet intended. As in other recent editions of BDL poems, I have given first the MS text as we find it in BDL; then a ‘Dean’s version’, indicating what the Dean of Lismore may have understood as he read the poem in BDL, rendered in Gaelic spelling; and finally an edited version, in the fairly correct Early Modern orthography that the linguistic and metrical aims of the poet seem to demand.

⁴ (‘The man who defecates indoors and doesn’t take his urine outside, you (poets) would say to the lad with the (arse-)hole, “Conn’s Ireland shall be his”.’). The poem is edited in O’Rahilly, *Measgra Dánta I*, no. 13, ll. 33–36. The words in square brackets are omitted in O’Rahilly’s edition.

⁵ For a transcription (not wholly accurate) of the verse see Quiggin 1937: 95. For the identification of Eóin as John Campbell of Lawers see MacGregor 2007: 56 and Coira 2008: 154–6.

⁶ Compare *Och is mise an giolla (or gille?) mór*, in Gillies 1978: 41–5.

The MS Version

Duncha mak kowle voyl Gi *mirzin* sai *in dr*[...]

Cakkor in comynn ny^t gyle donny^t dyn clynn danne ny^t rai^t
 Ne weit fey prap rayn rai & gin chaky^t fai^t hai na fa vi[..
 Cakkit y^t geny^t sy^t goil gy^t hunty^t nyn sloy fane sacht
 Er chawni^t anne gaggit fa chaid cakkit said ir vith is [..
 Rannan^t er gy^t gow zane glory mnai^t sin don gyn smacht
 ma^t rymnit forrin nyn doyl^t ne rymnit bonn ais in va[.]t[..
 trow na^t dalyt *in* gud said myr zalit said *in* cac
 ona^t churrin ^{said} in bree anne rannach ran *im* be *in* cak
 lan lass lan^t cak bar be in nymit nyn gawle [...] C[..

‘The Dean’s Version’

Donncha(dh) mac Dhu(bhgh)a(i)ll Mhao(i)l⁷

Cac(mh)or an comunn na Goill daoine don c(h)loinn dána ria(mh)
 Ní bhíd faoi p(h)rap ré n rádh gan chacadh fá sháth na fá bhi[adh]
 Cacaíd ag aonach ’s ag ól go h-ionta(dh) nan sló(gh) fán seach
 Air cheann an gcacaíd fá chéad cacaíd séad air mhith is [air mhath]
 Rannan is air gach guth dhán glór mná ’s an dtón gan smacht
 Má roinnid foireann nan dtoll ní roinnid bonn as an bha[c]
 Trua(gh) nach dáilid an gcuid séad mar dháilid séad an cac
 Ó nach c<h>uireann séad an brí(gh) éan rann ’ach rann am bí an cac
 lán leas leana(i)s cac barr bí(dh) an n-a(dh)mad nan Gall [cac].

Cac.

Edited version

Donnchadh mac Dhubhghaill Mhaoil

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|---|--|--|
| 1 | <i>Cacmhor an comann na Goill,
daoine don chloinn dána a-ria[mh];
ní bhíd faoi phrapadh ré rádh
gan chacadh fá sháth nó biadh.</i> | The Lowlanders are a shitty crowd,
men of the impudent tribe (as) ever;
they’re never known to hesitate
from shitting at meal-time or food. |
| 2 | <i>Cacaíd ag aonach ’s ag ól,
go h-ionntódh na slógh má seach;
tar cheann a gcacaíd fó chéad
cacaíd séad ar mhith ’s ar mhath.</i> | They shit at an assembly and when drinking,
till every company in turn is repelled;
for all they shit, a hundred times,
they shit upon peasantry and nobility. |
| 3 | <i>Ránán ar gach guth dhá nglór,
[fir is] mná ’s a dtón gan smacht;
má roinnid foireann na dtoll
ní roinnid bonn as an bhac.</i> | Every word of their speech is a roar,
men and women with arses out of control,
if the (arse-)hole squad are dealing (?)
they don’t deal (?) a <i>bonn</i> from the <i>bac</i> . |

⁷ For the comment which follows Duncan’s name in MS see Notes.

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| <p>4 <i>Truagh nach dáilid a gcuid séad
mar dháilid séad a [gcuid] cac;
ó nach cuireann séad i mbrígh
aon rann seach rainn i mbí a gcac,
lén leas leanais cac [go] barr:
bídh a n-adhmad na nGall cac!</i></p> | <p>Sad that they don’t distribute their wealth
in the way they distribute their shit;
since they don’t think it of importance
whatever airt their shit is in,
shit adheres to their haunches to the top:
shit is always in the make-up of the
Lowlanders.</p> |
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NOTES

Ascription

To the right of the author’s name another hand has added some additional words, which are not easy to understand. It looks at first sight as though MS *Gi mirzin sai* (or perhaps rather *Gi minzin sai*) is a present-tense verb (*go m...eann sé* or *go mb...eann sé* or similar), which could constitute a comment on Donnchadh by another of the Dean’s associates, or even by Donnchadh himself, rather as the second scribal hand has added *An Ridire Maith* ‘the Good Knight’ after the name of Duncan Campbell above the poem *Mairg ón deachaidh a léim lúidh* (Gillies 1981: 277). However, the lines immediately before the present poem in BDL are the final lines of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh’s poem on the *dreén* (‘wren’, ScG *dreathan*), and the added words here may constitute a comment on the preceding poem (note that the last legible letters are a new word beginning with *dr...*), either on its content or on the fact that the first part of the wren poem has been separated from the last part by an early dislocation, so that it now appears at the foot of p. 11 of the MS (see Ó Cuív 1977: 13–18).

Verse 1

1a: *cac(mh)or* MS, cf. Mod ScG *lionar* for *lionmhar*, etc., or the elimination of the *-f-* of the future after verb-stems ending in consonants.

1b: I am by no means sure that my reconstruction has captured the meaning of this line. For *donny*’ = *duine* (rather than *daoine*), cf. *zonna* (= *dhuine*) Quiggin, *Poems*, LXXV 9a, and *eandon* (= *éanduine*) id., XXXVI 3c beside *eandvnni* 4a.

Although MS *-ai-* stands sometimes for *ia* in conventional spelling, *a/á* or *ea/éa* would be more normal; compare Gillies, “‘*Créad fá seachnaim-sa suirghe?*’”, 219, notes 5 and 6, for some not untypical statistics.

1c: MS *prap* stands for *prapadh* with the modern Perthshire Gaelic apocope of *-adh* in nouns and verbal nouns. The longer form is needed to rhyme with *cacadh*. I take the phrase to mean, literally, that the *Goill* ‘are not under an eye’s blink’ before they relieve themselves.

1c: *rén rádh* (Dean’s text): The scribe seems to have understood *rádh* as agreeing with ‘they’ (literally ‘they are not to be said’); but this should have been *ré n-a rádh* in Classical Gaelic, which may suggest reading *ré rádh* and linking it with *prapadh* (literally ‘an eye’s-blink to be said’).

1d: *fá sháth ná fá bhi[adh]* MS, but this is hypermetric; one can eliminate either *ná* or (as above) *fá*.

Verse 2

2a: If the conjoining of ‘fair’ (noun) and ‘drinking’ (verbal noun) is deemed uncomfortable, we could omit ‘*s*’; but *ól* can mean ‘drinking bout, carousal’ as well as ‘drinking’.

2b: For *ionntódh* see *Dictionary of the Irish Language* [hereafter DIL], s.v. *intód* and compare the much commoner *tintód* (Modern ScG *tionndadh*). I assume it means ‘turning away, repulsion’ here.

Another possibility might be to read *iongnadh* ‘astonishment’, but this is usually *eny*^f in B (e.g. Quiggin XLIV, 1a and 18d).

2bd: The rhyme between *seach* and *math* is unusually loose. For *math* rather than *maith* see W. J. Watson 1937: xxxii and Glossary, s.v. *math*.

2c: Here, as elsewhere, BDL’s *er* (for *air*) represents earlier *t(h)ar* ‘despite, against’ (cf. ScG *air cho beag* ‘however small’, etc.). It has to be said that *ceann* is more usually *kenn* or similar in BDL. I have also considered *ar chaomhna*, for which see DIL, s.v. *cáemna* ‘(protection), entertainment, cheer’. If this were correct, the phrase would mean ‘when being entertained, receiving hospitality’ (with *air* < *ar*).

2cd: The necessary rhyme between *chéad* and the 3 pl. pronoun which is usually *siad* prompts the question whether the *é* in *chéad* could have been diphthongised to *ia*. But since this breaking is not an expected feature in the dialects of Perthshire, and since a rhyme between the 3rd plural pronoun and a word in *é* is also needed 4ab, it seems preferable to assume that Duncan used a 3 pl. form *séad* here. Note the similar usage in a poem by Fionnlagh am Bard Ruadh: *giodh oirdheirc a méad ’s a gcosnamh / ní f(h)earr éad ’ná ar n-each-ne* (W. J. Watson, XVII, ll. 1315–6, *sic leg.*); compare also Ó Murchú 1989: 357, where the form *éad* is reported beside the more widely recurrent *ád*. Because it is used here in both the occurrences where rhyme can be checked, I have generalised *séad* throughout the poem, surmising that its use was a deliberate stylistic matter. (For Duncan’s use of the form *iad* elsewhere, compare Quiggin LXIX 8b, *eaid* = *iad*.) I have also noted one example of *éad* : *éag* in a putatively Irish poem (a dialogue between Mac Liag and Mac Coise): see Quiggin XXXVI, 3cd; but this could be a local Scotticism not original to the poem.

2d: The phrase *mith agus math* ‘lowly and gentle folk’ is found only in Mod. ScG, so far as I am aware; similarly with the adjectival use of *mith* found in *mith-òrain* ‘folksongs’. DIL gives *mith* beside *meith* as a gen. sing. of *meth* ‘wasting, decay, failure, etc.’, and gives examples of its being used attributively, e.g. *bliadain meith* (M 118.6), *athig mith* (M 118.8–14). I suspect that an adjective *mith* was abstracted from such usages and then substantivised as ‘peasant, churl’. The jingling possibility of *mith agus ma(i)th* may have helped. So may the existence of *mid-* ‘middling, sub-optimal’, and perhaps also that of the EIr (*fer*) *midba(d)* ‘small-holder’ and its derivative *midbaid* ‘dependents’ (DIL M 131.18–25).

Verse 3

3a: Dwelly gives *rànan* (and *ràn* etc. is common in ScG); for the formation cf. *langan*, *nuallan*. By an interesting coincidence, the Irish bard in Holland’s *Buke of the Howlat* is pictured as making his entry with a *rane rocht* (glossed as ‘rough rant’ by R. Watson 1995: 25). I am unclear whether DIL’s 2 *rann* and *rannán*, which apparently refer to some sort of noise, are to be connected.

3b: The supplied [*fir is*] is a guess. The unexplained and unnecessary *-is* of *rananis* in MS 3a may suggest textual corruption: perhaps an earlier writing of the poem had omitted the beginning of 3b and the missing words were supplied above the line, whence they were partially restored to the text, but in the wrong place.

3cd: *roinnid* can mean either ‘distributes (money, gifts, food)’ or ‘deals out (cards or similar)’; see DIL R 13.56–8 for its use with ‘suppressed object’. This variability makes it hard to be sure what the couplet means; perhaps the ambiguity was intended. (1) If *foireann na dtoll* is the subject of the verb, it must mean ‘the people with the (arse-)holes’, or ‘the Ass-holes’ in contemporary American parlance; cf. *giolla an tuill* in the verse quoted above from *A lucht chumas bréag san dán*. (2) If the subject is ‘they’, carrying on from the previous verbs, then *foireann na dtoll* will be the object of the verb and could refer to ‘the holed pieces’ of a chess-set or similar game. On assumption (1), the

relevant meanings of *bonn* and *bac* are open to various interpretations; on assumption (2) they could be technical terms of some form of gaming (see next note).

3d: *bonn as an bhac*: rhyme and alliteration enable us to pinpoint the forms involved in this difficult phrase, whose general meaning is nevertheless clear. If we are dealing with a board game (assumption 2 above), then *bonn* most probably has the primary meaning ‘coin’, and is to be translated in the present context ‘counter’ or ‘piece’, while *bac* could perhaps refer to the ‘angle’ or ‘corner’, of a playing-board where unused or forfeited pieces are stored or held by one player. On another tack, I sense that there is some uncertainty about the meaning of ‘back’ in ‘backgammon’ (< *ba(c)k* + *gamen*), and wonder if there could be a connection here. (Cf. also Scottish National Dictionary, s.v. *back* (vb.) 2 (5) ‘wager’.) If, on the other hand, a board-game is not being specifically referred to (i.e. assumption 1 above), *bonn* may have the meaning ‘sou’, i.e. the smallest coin, perhaps in an extended meaning ‘the slightest iota’; and *bac* may mean ‘stack, pile’ or similar. The phrase could then simply mean that the *Goill* are exceptionally mean. I note the expression *bun-bac* ‘portion of horizon, part of roof next to wall’, plural *bunnacha-bac* (or similar), in Dwelly, but cannot see any way of relating these entries to the present context.

Verse 4

4ab: On *séad* : *séad* see note on 2cd.

4b: This line is hypometric; either add *gcuid* as above or perhaps replace *mar* with *amhail*.

4c: For *cuir i mbrígh* ‘deem important’, compare *ní chuirfeadh siad sin i mbrígh* (W. J. Watson, XXVII 8d); *díoth carad ná cuir i mbrígh* (Mac Cionnaith no. 26, 7b).

4d: MS *rann [se]ach rann* looks to contain an example of the ScG idiom seen in *fear seach fear* ‘one or the other, either one’ etc., corresponding roughly to the Early Gaelic usage of *fer sech aroile* etc. Has the initial *s-* of *seach* been omitted by scribal error, or does it represent *sheach*? I have no other evidence for the lenition of *seach*, though other prepositions certainly undergo it in ScG (e.g. *thar* for *tar*, *throimh* for *troimh*), and a parallel exists in the reduction of *feuch an* ‘to see whether’ to *ach an*.

A further question arises in regard to the syntax of the proposed sentence. While I have taken MS *ane* as representing *éan* ‘any’, it is worth asking whether it should rather be taken as *an* = interrogative particle + copula.

4ef: I assume, for reasons of sense and rhetoric, that this verse is the *corránach* variety of the metre, rather than half of another verse. Cf. the BDL poem *Námha dhomh an dán* (Mac Cárthaigh and Uhlich 2012: 317–45), whose final verse contains two extra couplets, making a build-up to a final ‘punch-line’.

4e: I take it that *leanais*, where *leanaidh* continues Early Gaelic *glenaid* ‘sticks to’ as well as *lenaid* ‘follows’, means literally ‘has cloven to’ = ‘is inseparable from’. For the meaning, cf. *lean an aiste chéadna oirn* (W. J. Watson XXIV, 7d, translated there ‘the same nature has adhered to me’), and, in more recent Gaelic, *An uair bha dùil gun leanadh sinn / se ’n dealachadh a b’fheudar* in the Lewis song *On dh’fhàg thu mi ’s mulad orm*.

leas: The meaning ‘buttock, thigh’ (i.e. 3 *les* in DIL; cf. W. J. Watson XXX 8c), seems inherently more likely than ‘courtyard’ (i.e. 2 *les* in DIL), though the latter certainly suggests a picture of sorts.

The line is a syllable short. Textually and in terms of sense, the simplest emendation is to add *go* as above, though other prepositions are also found with *barr*.

4f: I believe *adhmad* (with ScG /d/ > /t/) is the most natural interpretation of the MS spelling *ymit* as it stands (though **eymyt* would have been more clear-cut); other possibilities worth considering

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include *imirt* ‘practice’ (with /rt/ > /t/) and *imeacht* ‘proceeding’ or perhaps, more concretely, ‘stepping’ (with /xt/ > /t/ as in ScG *giorrad*, *liuthad*, etc.). Whereas ‘make-up, constitution’ is the most obvious translation of *adhmad* in an Early Modern context, note also Mac Cionnaith no. 108, 17b, glossed *cinéadh* (‘race’).

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