

Notes and Comments

*Aonghus nan Aoir: A Case of Mistaken Identity**

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Aonghus nan Aoir's speciality as a bard was the squib or petty lampoon (*aoir*); hence the designation (usually translated 'Angus of the Satires') by which he was known in Scottish Gaelic tradition. The past is the appropriate tense. It is doubtful if even his name would now be remembered¹ but for the fact that, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the Rev. Donald MacNicol (1735–1802), minister of Lismore, made a manuscript collection of his spiteful rimes (Nat. Lib. MS. Acc. 2152). These were all published in the *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* by Dr George Henderson in a paper entitled 'Aonghus nan Aoir or an Irish Bard in the Highlands' (Henderson 1910:458–66). The reason for the alternative title is that Henderson identified the subject of his paper as the Irish poet Aonghas Ó Dálaigh (Henderson 1910:458). This identification has prompted the present enquiry.

Dr Henderson was following a lead given by MacNicol, who wrote that 'Angus nan Aoir possessed an Estate in Ireland which was forfeited in Queen Elizabeth's Reign; this change in his circumstances soured his temper and made him commence Bard or rather Lampooner' (Nat. Lib. MS. Acc. 2152). Imprecise, and even erroneous, as this statement may be, it seems likely that the reference is in fact to Aonghas Ó Dálaigh, whether MacNicol knew of him by that name or not. What MacNicol apparently did not know was the Irish tradition as to where he met his death.

Aonghas Ó Dálaigh was known in his day as An Bard Ruadh and also as Aonghas na n-Aoir (O'Reilly 1820:clxxvii). He attained notoriety as the poet who composed a slanderous satire directed against the most notable Irish families of his time, including those Anglo-Norman families who had adopted the Irish language and mode of life. His conduct was foolhardy in the extreme, and retribution was not long delayed. At the end of the satire as we now have it there is appended a prose passage according to which he was murdered while a guest in the house of the O'Meaghers in Tipperary. He had the temerity to vent his spleen on the head of the family, and thereupon a servant stabbed him to death (O'Donovan 1864:84).

* This note was written as a contribution to an unpublished collection of papers by former pupils and colleagues presented to Professor K. H. Jackson in June 1976 to mark his completion of 25 years as Professor of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh (1950–75).

That a man who maligned his own people so viciously should meet with a violent end can be readily believed, having regard to the conditions prevailing at the time. Doubts have been expressed arising from the difficulty of reconciling the story of his death with a supposed contemporary reference. He has been identified as Æneas Roe O'Daly who died on 16 December 1617 (O'Reilly 1820:clxxvi), and this does not accord with a belief that the poetic circuit of Ireland (O'Donovan 1864:23) which, in the traditional narrative, ended with his murder could only have taken place between 1599 and 1602. It is thought that this was the period when the satire was commissioned by the agents of the English government as represented in Dublin by the Earl of Essex, or his successor Lord Mountjoy, and Sir George Carew (O'Reilly 1820:clxxvii; O'Donovan 1864:22). There are several untested assumptions here. But for the present purpose it is sufficient to note that, whether the Irish poet died in 1617 or at an earlier date, no one disputes that he died in Ireland.

On the other hand, it is now possible to assert with some confidence that Aonghus nan Aoir, author of the verses collected by the Rev. Donald MacNicol, died in Scotland. MacNicol himself must have believed that this was so; he quotes the bard's last words, couched in a verse the subject of which was Chisholm of Strathglass (Nat. Lib. ms. Acc. 2152; Henderson 1910:465). Dr Henderson, who was familiar with sources of information about the Irish Aonghas na n-Aoir, including the account of his murder in O'Meagher's house, dismisses this piece of evidence as 'erroneous' (Henderson 1910:460). But, since he wrote, further evidence has come to light.

The Bannatyne ms, now in the muniment room of Dunvegan Castle, is a history of the MacLeods written (c. 1830) by Dr Bannatyne William MacLeod (1790-1856) of the Indian Medical Service (Mackenzie 1889:212-13; Mackinnon and Morrison 1970:74-5). Dr MacLeod was a native of Harris, and a feature of his work is that it contains a great deal of information deriving from the oral tradition of a century and a half ago.² In the course of his narrative he writes that 'two persons whose names are familiar to every Highlander' were contemporaries of his ancestor John MacLeod who died in 1557.³ These were 'Angus or Aeneas nun Oeair [Aonghus nan Aoir]⁴ and Kenneth Ouir [Coinneach Odhar]'.⁵ And he continues:

The former of these was a famous bard and Satirist whose verses and Sayings have been handed down by tradition from generation to generation to our own times and Display a richness of Imagery a Depth of thought and Extent of knowledge which is almost incredible as well as a terseness of Style and purity of language which we look for in vain in latter bards and Satirists of the Highlands and Isles This man was a native of Harris and born of very poor parents his father being a scallag* or Thrall of a Petty farmer. Angus when about fourteen years of age was on a Day timing† (Delving) with another man whose share in this Species of labour was to place the turf in its proper position when cut by Angus who used a kind of wooden Spade shod with Iron Angus happened to wedge his spade in the

* Gaelic *sgalag*.

† Gaelic *taomadh*.

Cleft of a rock and in his endeavour to Extricate it The wooden part separated from the iron Instead of expressing himself in the usual mode He said

Thugg me Bullie huigge
Ann in Oishin Creigge
Ghag me heis i n keibb
s thugg me Nuous i maidd

[*Thug mi buille thuige
ann an oisean creige;
dh'fhàg mi shìos an caibe,
's thug mi nuas am maide.*

I gave a thrust forward
in the cleft of a rock;
I left the spade down there
and pulled up the wood.]

The other man in his astonishment turned round to Angus and said you have Composed a good Rhyme on a trifling subject. Angus replied if thats whats Called a Rhyme my delving day[s] have Ceased and Suiting the action to the word he flung the Spade away and from that hour Commenced his reputation as a bard and more especially as a Satirist. He travelled over most of Europe and Died at an advanced age at Strathglass where the Cheif of the Chisholms had him buried with all the honors and rights [rites?] of a Chcif. (Bannatyne MS:112-13; MacLeod 1927:108-9.)

There is of course an element of unrestrained exaggeration running through this narrative. To take up one point only, it may be doubted whether the bard's scathing tongue earned him a funeral marked by such tokens of respect. All this, however, does not affect the fact that, besides the Rev. Donald MacNicol, we have here another witness prepared to state that the Aonghus nan Aoir who figures in Scottish Gaelic tradition died in Strathglass. Given that this was so, he cannot have been the same person as Aonghas Ó Dálaigh, otherwise known as Aonghas na n-Aoir; he merely shared the latter name and the sort of notoriety that it implied.

There is a tailpiece to the foregoing, and it concerns the first impromptu verse that sent Aonghus nan Aoir on his vagabond way. The following variant survives in the oral tradition of North Uist:

*Tionndadh sìos
aig bonn na creige,
dh'fhalbh a' chas leam,
's dh'fhàg mi 'n caibe.?*

Delving down
at the base of the rock,
the shaft came away,
and I left the spade.

But there is no accompanying memory of Aonghus nan Aoir: the verse is now (almost inevitably) ascribed to John MacCodrum.

NOTES

- 1 Dr John MacInnes, of the School of Scottish Studies, has heard a reference to *Aonghus nan Aoir*, *bard bhilidh*, in Skye, but what the last word is remains obscure.
- 2 It is possible that some of the traditions in the manuscript were recorded at an earlier date: see Grant 1959:21.
- 3 He is on record in 1533 and 1542 (Mackinnon and Morrison 1970:16).
- 4 The words 'nun Oceir' have been omitted from the published text, which has been considerably paraphrased and abridged (MacLeod 1927:108).
- 5 On Coinneach Odhar, see Matheson 1971:66-88.
- 6 For a transcript of the Bannatyne MS the writer is indebted to Mr Alick Morrison.
- 7 Heard in 1936 from Mr Angus Mackenzie (Aonghus Anndra), now living at Hougharry, North Uist.

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