

'Come-a-riddle, come-a-riddle, come-a-rot-rot-tot-tot,
 A little wee man in a reed, reed coat,
 A staff in eez han an a steen in eez throat
 Gin ye tell me ma riddle I'll gie ye a groat'

'Hings heich, cries sair,
 Has a heid, bit nae hair (or, bit wints e hair)'

The first was a cherry; the second was unequivocally understood to be a bell on a church steeple.

ALEXANDER FENTON

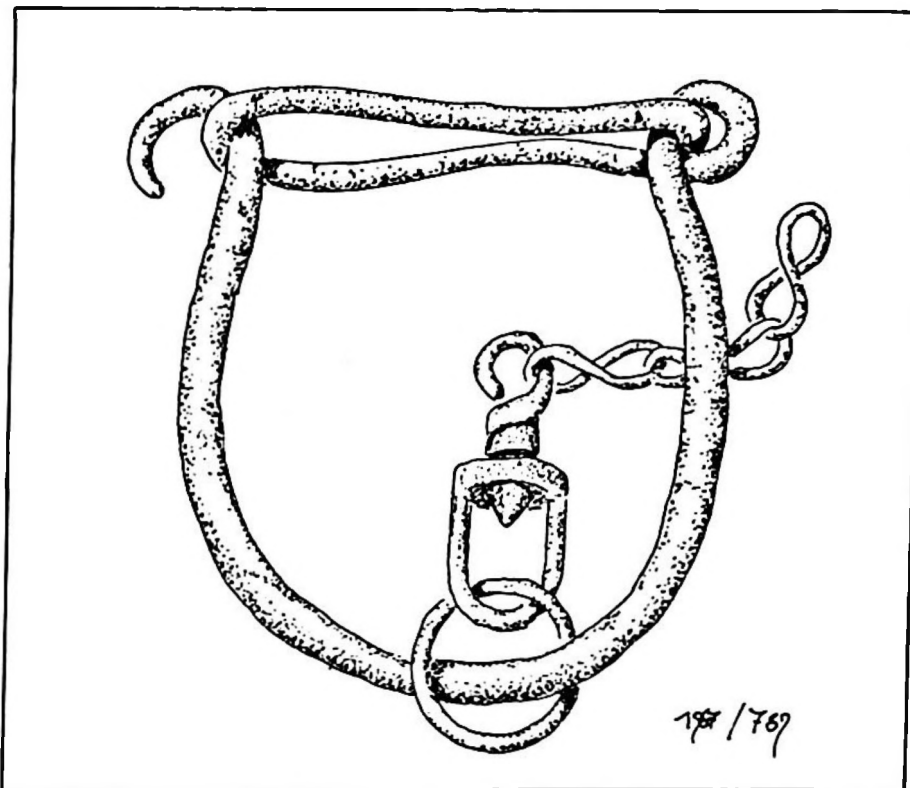
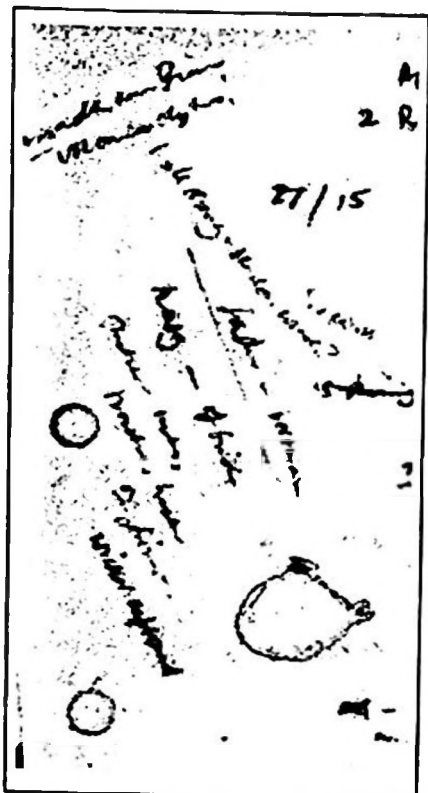
Nasg—a West Highland Tethering Device

The following description of a West Highland tethering device of birch twigs and wood, *nasg*, was recorded from the late Donald McColl, Gortan, Acharacle, North Argyll, in June 1975 by Donald A. MacDonald and Alan Bruford.¹

The first meaning of *nasg* in Dwelly's Dictionary is 'Tie-band, wooden collar for a cow, formerly of plaited or twisted birch or other twigs'. The meaning of Old Irish *nasc* according to the RIA Dictionary is 'a fastening, tie, spancel, ring, etc. in wide sense'; it also means a champion's honorific chain or collar or a legal bond, and nine other modern Scottish Gaelic meanings are given by Dwelly. The ninth meaning, 'wooden ring of a sieve or fan' (contributed by Rev. D. M. Cameron, Ledaig) is the one known to DAM from his childhood in North Uist, meaning the circular wooden rim of the traditional pierced skin riddle. The present sort of *nasg* appears in the Scottish National Dictionary as *nask*, and in the aphetic form *ask*, reported from Caithness only. The Old Irish references indicate that a form of *nasc* was worn by cows and was considered essential farm equipment. It may well be that the material and form of the implement as described here had not changed substantially from the Dark Ages until this century, when rope and iron can be got with less effort than birch twigs.

The Gaelic text has been transcribed from the School of Scottish Studies Archive tape SA 1975/58 B by DAM, and translated, introduced and annotated by A.B. in consultation with DAM. A few repetitive phrases in Donald McColl's rapid Gaelic have been omitted and shown by dots . . .

DAM: Bha rud eile bha sibh a' dol a dh'innse dhuinn cuideachd: sin agaibh a'



1. A rough sketch made by Dr. A. Bruford at the time of the interview, probably based on Donald McColl's own drawing.

2. A late nineteenth-century restraining device of iron from Angeln, Schleswig-Holstein, used for sheep but similar to devices (*bowsels*) used in Scotland for cattle. Its basic features—attachment of the tether chain at its base, ring and hook for the retaining bar or loop at the top—are functionally the same as for the *nasg* described here. Sketch by Felix Lühning (see note 4).

seòrsa nasg² a bha iad a' deanamh air a' chraobh bheithe airson a bhith ceanghal bheothaichean.

DMcC: O, nasg . . . *Well*, chan eil mi cinndeach ciamar a bha iad 'ga dheanadh . . . , ach 's e beithe bhiodh aca, slatan caol,³ fhios agad. Agus bha iad air an tionndadh, tha fhios agad, mu chuairt, mu chuairt; chan eil fhios 'am ciamar, cò-dbiubh bha bior air choireiginn aca dhan tionndadh mu chuairt, no dé . . . ach bha iad air an toinneamh na chéile. Bhiodh, och, gràinnean shlatan còmhla, bheil thu faicinn, agus bha iad cho ruighinn, a laochain, dìreach 's a ghabhadh iad . . . Agus chuireadh iad dul air a cheann furasda gu leòr.

Agus bha 'nasg,⁴ 's e, that fhios agad, dìreach pìos de shlat. Dh'fhaoidte gum biodh i mu—ó, cha bhiodh móran 's òirleach de thiughad innte, bheil thu faicinn . . . agus croman, croman beag mar sin air an aon cheann agus forc mar sin air a' cheann eile. Agus chuireadh iad an ròp barraich seo my chuairt air a' forc a bh'ann a seo, agus bha dul air a cheann eile gu rachadh e fairis air a' chroman a bh' air an taobh eile. Bhiodh i, ó, dh'fhaoidte a réir . . . cho mór 's a bhiodh am beothach, ach 's e daonnan, tha fhios agad, beothaichean òga a bha air an ceanghal mar sin. Agus bha sin an ròp a bha 'sa' nasg, bha e 'ga cheanghal ri maide, agus bha dula chruinn air a' cheann sin aige, agus bha e air a cheanghal ris a' nasg . . . *Well*, bha e

cruinn, fhios agad, dh'fhaoidte gum biodh gràinnean òirlich de leud ann a réir dé mheudachd a bha 'sa' phost . . . air a robh e ceanghailte, agus ruitheadh e sìos no suas . . . air a' mhaide seo: dh'fhaodadh e éirigh no laighe, bheil thu faicinn? Cha robh a' nasg a' cur dragh sam bith air. Agus mhaireadh sin na bliadhnachan 's na bliadhnachan 's na bliadhnachan: chan eil fhios dé 'n ùine a mhaireadh e.

DAM: A nis a' rud a bha seo a bha dol timcheall air a' phost . . ., dé 'n dùnadh a bh' air a seo?

DMcC: Bha e dìreach air a thoinneamh, bheil fhios agad, leis na slatan beithe—bha e air a thoinneamh gus an deanadh iad dìreach rud cruinn mar sin,⁵ bheil thu faicinn, agus bha e cho làidir, a laochain, cho làidir ri ròp 'sam bith. Bha e na bu làidire na iomadh ròp.

DAM: Bha *ring* a bha seo a bha timcheall air a' phost, bha i sin dùinte: cha ghabhadh i sin fosgladh ann?

DMcC: O cha ghabhadh sin fosgladh—cha ghabhadh, o cha robh: bha i sin glaiste, bheil thu faicinn an dòigh a bha iad air a dhèanadh, chan fhosgaileadh i idir . . .

DAM: Agus a nis a' ròp a bha eadar a' fàinne bha sin agus a' nasg . . . 'n ann air beithe bha 'ròp a bha sin air a dheanamh cuideachd?

DMcC: 'S ann, 's ann, 's ann. O, chuile gearradh dheth den bheithe. 'S ann.

DAM: Agus 's ann 'na choileir timchioll air amhach a' bheothaich a bha e 'dol, an ann?

DMcC: 'S ann . . . nam biodh peansail agam: . . . ceanghal ann a seo an dòigh nach fhosgaileadh e, agus bha lùb air ann a seo a rachadh fairis air a' chromag seo, bheil thu faicinn. Agus seall, dal a bha thu 'ga fhosgaladh, *well*, rachadh seo a-staigh na b'fhaide, bheil thu faicinn, 's cha robh a duilich, fhios agad, a thoirt a-staigh na b'fhaide agus . . . gheibheadh tu an dula far a' chromag a bha seo. *Well*, a nise, bha seo am pìos eile den bheithe air a thoinneamh ann a seo: bha e air a cheanghal ann a sin ann an dòigh nach fhosgaileadh e, 's bha e dol a-nunn, agus bha seo . . . a' maid' seo ann a seo, bheil thu faicinn: nise bha seo air a chur mu chuairt ann an dòigh eile nach fhosgaileadh e, agus ruitheadh e'n àird 's a leis air a sin . . .

DAM: Agus ciamar a bha seo air a cheanghal ann a sheo . . .?

DMcC: *Well*, bha e air a cheanghal dìreach ann an dòigh nach fhosgaileadh e, fhios agad. Bha e air a thoinneamh 'na chéile ann an dòigh nach fhosgaileadh e, agus bha seo, bheil thu faicinn, bha lùb air a chur air gun gabhadh e cur fairis ann a seo, agus fhosgaladh—bha e furasda gu leor fhosgaladh, chionn . . . rachadh e staigh go chéil', fhios agad, agus an deaghaidh sin bha streun air 'ga cumail nach fhosgaileadh e . . . bha streun gu leòr air, bheil thu faicinn, ach ghabhadh e gluasad a-mach no a-staigh, tha fhios agad . . . a' nasg.

DAM: Agus chunnaig sibh fhéin seo?

DMcC: Och a laochain, . . . gràinnean mór bhliadhnachan, dar bha mi òg, bha sin aca: sin agad an dòigh a bha iad a' . . . *Well*, 'se bràthair mo mhàthar . . .

bhitheadh e 'ga dhèanamh ceart gu leòr. Tha mi creidsinn gur ann aig 'athair a chunnaig e e. Bheil fhios agad, 'san am sin, cha robh sian eile 'dol ach sin, 'seadh an am mo sheanar.

DAM: Agus a nis, a' ròp a bha siod, a' fear a bha null a siod, 's ann air beithe bha sin air a dhèanamh cuideachd, an ann?

DMcC: 'S ann, 's ann, 's ann.

DAM: Agus an cearcall a bha seo, 'se beithe?

DMcC: An cearcall a bha sin, bha sin, 'sè, 'a ann den bheithe bha sin air a dheanamh cuideachd.

DAM: Ach bha 'm pios a bha seo, bha e nas gairbhe na 'n còrr?

DMcC: O bha, bha. Chan eil e go deifear dé fiodh a bha seo. Dh'fhaodadh gur e darach, 's dh'fhaodadh rud 'sa' bhith ann.

DAM: Seadh. Dh'fhaodadh. 'Se fiodh eile bha 'sa' choileir mar gum bitheadh?

DMcC: 'Se. 'Se deifear fiodh a bha sin mar bu bhitheanta. Cha chreid mi gu robh 'm beithe a sin uair 'sam bith, ach bha e bitheanta bhiodh darach aca, fhios agad? Bha.

DAM: Ach bha e 'n còmhnaidh 'na seòrsa V ann a shiod, a robh?

DMcC: Bha, bha V ann, *well*, airson gun cumadh e, fhios agad, nach rachadh e far a' chinn: bha e 'ga chumail, bheil thu faicinn, gun fhosgladh a sin . . . bha. Och, bha iad furasda gu leòr fhaighinn: gheibheadh tu gu leòr nasgan air feadh an àite, far an robh coille, gheibheadh tu gu leòr . . . O, bha e math, 's cha thachdadh e idir iad . . . Bha e sàbhailte gu leòr.

DAM: Agus a nis, robh iad a' coimhead airson pìos, nam b'e darach no fiodh mar sin a bha seo, robh iad a' coimhead airson pìos fiodh' aig a robh an cumadh a bha sin gu nàdurrach . . .?

DMcC: O *well*, bheil fhios agad, bhiodh iad 'ga lùbadh, bheil thu faicinn, 's tha fhios, dh'fhaoidte gu robh iad 'ga *steamadh* uaireannan cuideachd, fhios agad. Bhiodh iad 'ga lùbadh agus tha *chance* gu robh iad 'gan ceanghal ri chéile, bheil thu faicinn: bhiodh iad 'ga lùbadh 's a' cur ceanghal orra nach gluaiseadh iad, gus an tigeadh a' chumadh sin orra, bheil faicinn? 'S è, sin agad mar bhà.

DAM: A *well*, tha sin math.

DMcC: Bha e uamhasach math. Bha e cho math ri ceanghal 'sa' bith agus bha e sàbhailte. Bha e sàbhailte, cho sàbhailte 's a ghabhadh. Bha.

DAM: Bha: cha biodh e 'teannachadh mu amhaich a bheathaich idir . . . Cha bhiodh e 'fàs teann idir mu . . .

DMcC: O cha robh, tha fhios agad, bha gu leòr . . . a rùm ann: cha robh e *tight* idir orra. Cha robh.

TRANSLATION ·

DAM: There was something else you were going to tell us about too: that was the

kind of ring² they used to make from birch wood to tie up cattle.

DMcC: Oh, the *nasg*. . . Well, I'm not sure just how they made it, but it was birch they used, slender³ twigs, you know. And they were wound, you know, round and round: I don't know how, whether they had some sort of pin to twist them round with or what, but they were twisted together. There would be, och, several twigs together, you see, and they were just as tough, my lad, as they could be. And they could put a loop on the end of it easily enough.

And the *nasg* [proper],⁴ you know, that was just a bit of wood. It would maybe be about—oh, it wouldn't be much more than an inch thick, you see, with a hook, a little hook like this on one end, and a fork like this on the other. And they'd put this birch rope round the fork here, and there was a loop on the other end so that it went over the hook on the other side. It would be, oh, I suppose big enough to fit the beast, but you know it was always young cattle that were secured like this. And then the rope from the *nasg*, it was tied to a stake, and there was a circular loop on that end of it, and it was fixed to the *nasg*. Well, it was circular, you know, it might be a few inches across, depending on the size of the post it was tied to, and it could run up or down on this stake: it [the cow] could stand up or lie down, do you see? The *nasg* didn't hamper it at all. And that would last for years and years and years—there's no knowing how long it might last.

DAM: Now, this thing that went round the post, how was it fastened?

DMcC: It was just twisted out of birch twigs—it was twisted till they simply made up a circle like this,⁵ do you see, and it was as strong, my lad, as any rope could be. It was stronger than many a rope.

DAM: This ring that was round the post, it was closed; it couldn't be opened?

DMcC: Oh, that couldn't be opened—it couldn't, oh no: this one was locked together, you see, the way they made it, so that it couldn't open at all . . .

DAM: Now the rope that went between this ring and the *nasg*. . . was it birch this rope was made of too?

DMcC: Yes, yes, yes. Oh, every bit of it birch. Yes.

DAM: And it went round the neck of the beast like a collar, did it?

DMcC: Yes . . . if I just had a pencil . . . (as he speaks, making a sketch which unfortunately cannot now be found). . . fixed here in such a way that it wouldn't come loose, and there was a loop on it here that would go over this hook, you see. And see, when you were undoing it, well, this would go in a bit further, you see, and it wasn't hard, you know, to push it further and . . . you would get the loop off this hook here. Well now, this was the other piece of birch wound up here: it was fixed here so that it wouldn't come loose, and it went over here, and this . . . this stake was here, you see: now this was put round it in another way that wouldn't come loose, and it could run up and down on this.

DAM: And how was this fixed [to the collar] here . . .?

DMcC: Well, it was just fixed so that it wouldn't come loose, you know. It was

twisted together so that it wouldn't come loose, and then, you see, there was a loop on it so that it could be put over here, and taken off—it was easy enough to take it off, because the ends could be pushed in together, you know, and afterwards the strain on it kept it from opening: there was enough strain on it, you see, but it could be moved out or in, you know, the *nasg*.

DAM: And you've seen this [in use] yourself?

DMcC: Och, lad . . . for a good few years, when I was young, they had this: this was how they . . . Well, it was my mother's brother . . . he made them right enough. I believe he saw his father with it. You know in those days there was nothing else to be had but that, I mean in my grandfather's time.

DAM: And now, that rope there, the one that went across [the collar] there, that was made of birch too, was it?

DMcC: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

DAM: And this loop, that was birch?

DMcC: That loop there, yes, that was made of birch too.

DAM: But this bit, that was more solid than the rest?

DMcC: Oh yes, yes. It didn't matter what wood that was. It could have been oak, or it could have been anything it was made of.

DAM: Yes. It could. This collar was made of another [kind of] wood, so to speak?

DMcC: Yes. That was a different sort of wood generally. I don't think it was ever made of birch, but they usually had oak, you know? Yes.⁶

DAM: But it was always a sort of V shape there, was it?

DMcC: Yes, there was a V in it, well, to hold it, you know, so that it would not go over the top: it kept it, you see, from coming off there . . . yes. Och, they were easy enough to get: you could find plenty of *nasgs* throughout the district, where there was woodland you would find lots . . . Oh, it was fine, and it wouldn't throttle them at all . . . It was safe enough.

DAM: And now, did they use to look for a bit, if this bit was oak or some such wood, did they look for a bit of wood that had that shape naturally . . . ?

DMcC: Oh well, you know, they used to bend it, you see, and certainly, I dare say they would steam it sometimes too, you know. They would bend it and possibly they'd tie [the ends] together, you see: they'd bend them and bind them so that they couldn't move, until they took that shape, do you see? Yes, that's how it was.

DAM: Ah well, that's good.

DMcC: It was extremely good. It was as good as any sort of tether and it was safe. It was safe, as safe as it could be. Yes.

DAM: Yes: it wouldn't tighten round the cow's throat at all . . . It would never get too tight round . . .

DMcC: Oh it wasn't, you know, there was plenty of room: it wasn't tight on them at all. No.

NOTES

- 1 A short feature on Donald McColl, who died in 1977, appeared in *Tocher* 34 (1980: 248-251).
- 2 At the beginning of the interview DAM was thinking of the *nasg* in terms of something like the circular one he knew, a continuous collar made, as for instance Dwelly's definition suggests, of birch twigs. See note 4 below for the actual meaning to Donald McColl.
- 3 The Gaelic adjective *caol* is also used as a noun to mean the osiers or saughs used in making wicker baskets; its use might be taken to imply that the birch twigs here were of a similar thickness, but they may well have been thinner.
- 4 *Nasg* is here primarily the name of the U- or V-shaped branch of wood which formed the greater part of the collar, though it may also include the birch-twig with the permanently fixed to it, closing it at the top and the fixture beneath attaching it to the tether-stake, which Donald usually simply refers to as *ròp* ('rope'). A parallel appears to be an example from East Holstein, illustrated by A. Lühning, 'Stopping the cattle from running away', in H. Cheape (ed.), *Tools and Traditions. Studies in European Ethnology presented to Alexander Fenton*, National Museums of Scotland 1993, 118 (Fig. 3). This example has openings through which a pin goes, instead of hooks over which the fastening band goes as in the iron version (Fig 2).
- 5 Both the larger loop here and the smaller one at the other end would presumably be made by twisting round the end of the withe and knitting the twigs in among the strands further back, much as the end of a basket handle is made.
- 6 Oak seems to have been preferred, no doubt for strength, and perhaps also because many of its branches would naturally have the beginnings of the sort of curve needed for the collar. These practical reasons probably meant more than any survival of druidic beliefs in the tree's magical powers: powers of magical binding in recent times have been more closely associated with the more flexible *buarach* or fetter which bound the cow's hind legs together for milking.

ALAN BRUFORD AND DONALD A. MACDONALD

Clawbare, otherwise
Ruchlaw West Mains, Stenton,
East Lothian (O.S. NT 617 729)

'Ruchlaw West Mains is sometimes known as Cla-bair but the meaning of these words is obscure, and the name is not agreeable, for some reason, either to proprietor or tenant' (Lang 1929, 189).

The farmers in the area of Stenton, East Lothian, today (1992) know the farm by the name of Clawbare or Clawbair (they have no particular spelling for the name), especially the family of Jeffrey, branches of which farm Bielgrange, Deuchrie and Halls, and whose descendants have been in this area since the nineteenth century. The farmer at Ruchlaw West Mains today, Mr Dobson, knows of the name but does not use it as much as the Jeffreys (he and his family have farmed here since the late