Sporan 2023/24: Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir

Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir, or Duncan Bàn MacIntyre, was born on the 20th of March 1724 in Druim Liaghart, Glen Orchy in Argyll. He was one of the most famous Gaelic poets of the 18th century.

When Donnchadh Bàn was a young boy, there were no schools near his home and so he never learned to read or write. This meant he had to remember every word to every song he had ever composed! But this was how many songs were passed down in the Gaelic tradition, through hearing them from other people at cèilidhs and in the community, and because people enjoyed his songs so much, they remembered them well. A minister in Lismore later wrote down his songs for him and many have survived to this day.

During the Jacobite rising of 1745-46, he fought on the Hanoverian side – this means he fought against the Jacobites for King George. However, it is clear from two songs he composed about the Battle of Falkirk in 1746 that his heart was not really in it.

He composed songs on many topics – politics, war, love – but it is his poetry on nature that he is most famous for. He spent many years as a forester for Lord Breadalbane, and as a gamekeeper in Argyll and in Perthshire for the Duke of Argyll. His most famous work, Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain (In Praise of Ben Dorain) show us just how important the environment in which he lived and worked was to him.

He composed a song for Màiri Bhàn Òg (Young Fair Mary), who he married and went on to have at least four children with. They eventually moved to Edinburgh where he served in the Edinburgh City Guard until 1806.

Although we can't know for sure what Donnchadh Bàn looked like, he was once described by the Reverend MacCallum in Arisaig:

"He was 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 hanger by his side and a soldier's wallet was strapped to his shoulders."

Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir died on the 14th of May 1812 and is buried in Greyfriars Kirkyard in Edinburgh. There is also a monument to him overlooking Loch Awe, near his birthplace.