

*THE BEATONS, A MEDICAL KINDRED IN
THE CLASSICAL GAELIC TRADITION*

John Bannerman.
Edinburgh: John Donald Ltd., 1998.

 John Donald Publishers continue to generously contribute to the field of Scottish history with the introduction of the first paperback edition of John Bannerman's book *The Beatons, A Medical Kindred in the Classical Gaelic Tradition*. Previously released in hard cover, this work on Scottish medical history is well worth reading. I am delighted to be given the opportunity to provide a review for this book.

John Bannerman has chosen to examine the exclusive and knowledgeable Beaton family of medical men who served several centuries of Scottish noblemen, an area previously unexplored in any great detail. The task Bannerman undertakes is difficult, given the scarcity and range of sources necessary to provide an adequate picture. However, as an experienced scholar, Bannerman provides well-documented and well-founded information on his subject.

The book is divided into five parts. The first is not so much a chapter as a section, dealing with the pedigree of the various Beaton medical families in the West Mainland and the Islands. This part of the book is of particular fascination to those interested in genealogical history. Bannerman traces the family's emigration to Scotland from Ireland in the early fourteenth century, and discusses the evolution of the last names and kin associations held by the various subdivisions of the Beaton family up until the eighteenth century. Surnames of the clan Beaton over this time period include MacBeth, MacBeatha, MacBhethad (or MacBethadh), MacLeay, MacVeagh, McVey, Beda, Betonus, Beaton, and Bethune, to name the most prevalent. He clearly distinguishes between the Bethunes of French origin and the

Beatons/Bethunes of the medical tradition, dispelling any myth that may have linked the two. Bannerman briefly discusses Norman Bethune and his relationship with the medical division of the Beaton family. Here Bannerman also discusses Gaelic terminology traditionally used in reference to the Beatons, such as *ollamh* (master of the craft) and *leich* or *lighiche* (doctor). Bannerman gives delineated Beaton family trees and justifies the position of each person in terms of historical proofs. This section is peppered with anecdotes and details of interest, which is useful as, on occasion, the genealogical relationships he is outlining begin to read somewhat like the Old Testament.

The second chapter deals with the social position of the medical Beatons, focusing mainly on the medieval period when the physicians were regarded as *daoin-uaisle*, or noblemen. In several instances, the Beaton men would marry the daughters of the clan tacksmen for whom they worked, thereby strengthening their position in terms of both employment and political standing. In a brief discussion of the decline in status of the Beatons later in the early modern period, which Bannerman links to the decline of the clan system of kinship, he points out the increased interest in the clergy as an alternative, acceptable social position. His intention is to show that throughout this long period, the Beatons were considered as distinct members of the upper class in Scotland and were treated accordingly. With such status came land, thereby facilitating the tracking of this group over time when using Scottish records.

Bannerman goes on to provide an overview of the role of what he terms “medical men” in Scotland. The purpose here is to discuss the role of physicians and their methods of practice in medieval Scotland. He includes international influences, and looks at the different types of doctors available (for example, “stone-cutters” for kidney stones and *chirurgeons* or barber-surgeons). There is also a discussion of the slight differences between Highland and Lowland physicians. What is interesting is that Bannerman still focuses on the rare physicians and Beatons in this section rather than describing more fully the medical situation in Scotland. He does not mention the role of apothecaries, itinerant doctors, or popular medicine in the towns

and countryside in any detail. Perhaps a more detailed description of the status quo in the medical community as a whole would help the reader glean a better understanding of the contribution and importance of the Beatons.

In his later chapters, Bannerman elaborates on what a Beaton's unique training entails. Here is the real meat of the book, if genealogy does not appeal to the reader. Although Bannerman does not provide a point of comparison in the medical community, one can still appreciate the contribution made by this medical group. The position of medical doctor was inherited through primogeniture, though younger brothers or cousins could also be included in the training. Potential Beaton physicians were sent out to be trained by other dominant members of the family for a period of several years prior to undertaking their own practice. The Beaton community strongly emphasized literacy and ensured that any potential candidate was able to read Gaelic and Latin, amongst other selections. Bannerman outlines several instances where the extensive personal libraries of Beaton doctors were listed for posterity, whether through wills, or, in the case of a later Beaton, loss through Revolutionary war. Bannerman also uses Martin Martin's *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* as a reference for contemporary impressions of Beaton literacy.

The Beatons could not only read but wrote as well, and they took great pride in their orthography. It was traditional for Beaton physicians to write manuscripts of their experiences and pass them down through the generations for future reference. Those remaining provide an excellent source for historical study, and Bannerman uses these extensively. Bannerman points out that while myth holds that Scottish medicine is based on herbal remedies, these manuscripts indicate that the Beatons looked beyond their gardens for methods of healing. It would have been interesting for Bannerman to provide more concrete examples of the curative procedures recommended in the manuscripts, rather than just hinting at the content. Nevertheless, this section of his book provides a great deal of information on medieval Scottish medicine at the highest level of Highland society.

Finally, Bannerman looks at the decline of this classical

tradition. Bannerman uses his concluding section to prove, again through genealogical discussion, that the Beatons were not practicing as frequently in the early modern period, nor did they hold as exalted a position in their Highland communities as they had in the past. Unfortunately, Bannerman does not provide adequate explanation as to why this might have occurred. He holds that the influence of anonymous Lowland-educated physicians and anglicization of the country were responsible for enticing the young Beatons away to other pursuits, and the subsequent loss of traditional medical families. While this may have contributed to the decline of the Beaton family practice, it cannot have been the only factor in a Highland society that still valued tradition. There could have been more of a discussion of the external factors influencing Scotland's medical profession as a whole, namely the increased availability of Scottish universities famous for their medical programs (which, incidentally, were based on a European approach rather than anything England had to offer at the time). Nor does Bannerman investigate the methods and success rates of the Beatons, or their perceived role by their actual communities to explain what had happened. Bannerman's theories are interesting to read although many questions are raised in one's mind that remain unanswered.

Despite some gaps in the analysis of his data, and some tedium in the genealogical framework of his book, Bannerman has been brave to tackle an untouched subject with such vigour. Most obviously, the information provided on the Beatons is effectively presented and quite thorough in many regards. In addition, Bannerman's work is interesting to those curious to know more about family traditions, social organization, and Scottish medicine over the period that the Beatons were prevalent. On a grander scale, this book is a significant contribution to the history of medieval medicine as it firmly outlines the organization of a hereditary group of physicians unlike any other as yet studied in Western history.

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