

How the forests were burned

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

EVERY so often amongst the peat at this time of year you may come across a great stump of gnarled oak or pine, buried deep in the bog. Sometimes it will be charred and burnt black. It is obvious to all of us that the Highlands and Islands were once covered in a blanket of trees. For example, the late Very Rev. Tom Murchison used to point out that in his boyhood in Kylerhea they still spoke of a time when from Kyleakin to the Point of Sleat, some thirty to forty miles, the trees were so thick that a white horse which entered at one end of the forest could not be seen again until it emerged at the other.

It is also well known that the stands of Scots pine in such places as Glenfeshie or Mar Lodge are but a precious remnant of a 'Great Caledonian Forest' that may have covered the mainland from coast to coast, and that the deer of the hills are forest creatures who have adapted to a changed environment. But how did the forest die? Why is so little of it left, and what are we to make of the fragments that have been burnt?

These are questions that our forefathers discussed while resting from the labour of peat-cutting in the summer, and pondered while watching a crackling ceilidh house fire in the winter. When they appealed to tradition, to the ancestral memory, stories to explain it all were not wanting. We have them from all over the Highlands and Islands, but they do not vary a great deal. They point the finger of guilt at two women. I will begin with Mary Queen of Scots, and then go back in time to the King of Norway's Daughter.

It was Alexander Macbain, a Badenoch man, who told the Queen Mary version of the story to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1890. There is a touch of humour in it, and it may stem from the fact that Mary's men ravaged the Earl of Huntly's lands and burnt his woods, or possibly from the great deer drive which the Earl of Atholl made in 1563 for the Queen. In addition, as Hugh Cheape has pointed out in an article on woodlands on the Clanranald estate in Christopher Smout's recent book "Scotland Since Prehistory", woods in the Central Highlands were variously said to have been burnt on Mary's orders to eliminate the hiding places of robbers, political enemies, or wolves. In Strathglass, too, it was said that the woods were burnt in the time of Queen Mary.

One written account of the deer drive claims that two thousand men took two months to drive a herd of two thousand red deer from the woods and hills of Atholl, Badenoch, Mar and Moray to the place of slaughter, and that in one single day the dogs, guns and arrows of the hunting party killed "360 deer with five wolves and some roes". What the people of Badenoch remembered, however, was that Queen Mary caused their forests to be burned, and I would guess from this that one of the less scrupulous stratagems used by the Earl's men to bring such a mass of deer together may have been simply to burn them out.

According to Macbain's story, the Queen had visited the Highlands and when she returned home the first thing that her husband (or, in another version, the Marquis of Huntly) asked her was not how she was, but how his forests were. They were, after all, a treasured resource for boatbuilding and iron-smelting, to name but two of their most precious economic functions.

So, Macbain says, the Queen travelled north again, took up a vantage point at a place ever afterwards called *Sròn na Bàrainn* (*Banrighinn*) or the Queen's Ness, overlooking Glenfeshie, and gave orders to set the woods on fire. I must say this offers a new twist to what tourists are told about places like the 'Queen's View' above Loch Tummel, namely that she liked the scenery. Maybe she did, maybe she didn't; but the people who would have passed on the traditions of the place weren't very interested in scenery, and if tradition put Queen Mary on Queen's View, it was more likely to be a tradition about hunting or fires than about scenery. To put it in modern terms, if the Queen came along and privatised the people's deer or the people's trees they would have remembered it; if she had come along and just looked, it wouldn't have bothered them one way or the other.

Anyway, as Macbain concludes, the Queen's orders were obeyed. "The Badenoch forest was set burning, and the Queen, Nero-like, enjoyed the blaze from her point of vantage. But many glens and nooks escaped, and Rothiemurchus was left practically intact."

Every era has its villains, and that I think is a Protestant updating of a much older legend that puts the blame on the savage Norsemen. Hugh Cheape points out that places like Claish Moss at the west end of Loch Shiel were said to have been burnt by 'the Danes', and that Norse tradition as related in *Heimskringla* makes scorched earth a strategy of attack. Specifically, all over the Highlands and Islands the burning of the forests is ascribed to a daughter of the King of Norway called *Dubh a'Ghiuthais* (the Black One of the Pine Tree) or *Dona* (Evil One) or sometimes *Donan* (Little Evil One?) or *Donnan* (Little Brown One?).

Basically the story goes like this. Once again it has to do with that most deadly of the seven mortal sins, envy, but here it is the envy of sharp business practice. The King of Lochlann was warned by Viking adventurers that the woods of the Highlands were so splendid that they would eclipse the value of his own Scandinavian forests. As a version of the story in John Gregorson Campbell's "Clan Traditions and Popular Tales" has it, *bha coille ghiuthais Loch Abair a'fàs 's a'gabhail roimhpe cho mòr 's gum faodadh e bhith gun cuireadh i stad air coille dhubh na Suain*. "The pine forest of Lochaber was growing and increasing so much that it might be that it would put a stop to the black forest of Sweden." This should be carefully noted, because it is now precisely Scandinavian (especially Finnish) timber that has effectively destroyed the pulp industry set up by Wiggins Teape in Lochaber.

The King of Lochlann was not of course wrestling with the economic might of toilet paper — what he was afraid of, in this version, was *nach bitheadh mòran meas air a'chonnadh aigesan*, "that his fuel would be of little esteem". In other words, the Lochaber storyteller saw the principal worth of timber as lying in

charcoal for smelting, and thus, by implication, in its value to the armaments industry — above all, I think, in the manufacture of cannon, and before that of swords, spears, pikes, arrowheads, dirks and Lochaber axes.

The King did not deal with the problem in person, but relied instead on the black arts in the form of his daughter. Some versions say she was already skilled in the *sgoil dhubh* or witchcraft, others that she undertook training specially for the purpose.

When she reached Lochaber, or wherever the story is located, she kindled a fire *an iomall a gùin* or *'na h-ultach* — in the lappet of her gown, or you might translate it “in her apron” or “in her bosom” or “in her lap” or “in the selvage of her dress”. She started travelling through the forests, and as she was just as capable of flying through the clouds as of walking, she would rise up, and while she was rising and whirling (*a'cur cuairteig*) through the air, sparks of fire would leap from her gown in all directions, borne on the wind, and set the trees on fire until the whole country turned into a blazing fireball enclosed in a pall of smoke so thick that hardly a gleam of light could be seen through it. And it was because she grew blacker in the smoke and soot than any pine of the forest that she was called *An Dubh Ghiuthsach* or *Dubh a'Ghiuthais*.

In Macbain's version she starts in Sutherland and burns as far as Badenoch. A different Badenoch version has her starting in *Gallaibh* (Caithness) and finishing at *Ceann a'Ghiuthais*, Kingussie. In the Lochaber version she is finally stopped at *Crò Chinn t-Sàile* in Kintail. But in many ways the most circumstantial version of how she was stopped is one that comes from Wester Ross, and has her meeting her end at Little Loch Broom. It was got by the Rev. Charles Robertson, and read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1905. A man who lived at Kildonan, on the north side of the loch, reckoned that *Dubh a'Ghiuthais* would have been familiar with flocks and herds, and devised a plan using animals to stop her.

The Lochaber version in fact makes much of her veterinary credentials right at the start of the story. The point is, I think, that the *sgoil dhubh* had much to do with cattle — stealing the substance from a neighbour's milk, placing the evil eye on her cows, causing and healing all sorts of specific bovine ailments for malice or for money. So we are told of the young *Dubh a'Ghiuthais* that there was no *sian* (charm) or *sùil* (evil eye) that might land on any living creature in the fold that she could not lift, nor any *tuaineal* (dizziness) or *ceangal* (trap?) they got into that she could not resolve, so that it was said that the sweetest of all music for putting her to sleep was *geumnaich cruidh* (the lowing of cattle), *blaomannaich laogh* (the crying of calves) and *ràcaireachd ghamhna* (the calling of stirks), and that she would respond to the voice of cattle even if she were asleep in the middle of her father's black forest when their lowing came from the bottom end of the edge of the world (*'s an geum o cheann iochdar iomall an domhain*).

So the man from Little Loch Broom had guessed right. He had all the horses, cattle, sheep and goats, with their young, brought from miles around and assembled at *Achadh Bad a'Chruiteir* above Kildonan. When her great black cloud was seen passing overhead between *a'Bheinn Ghobhlach* and *Beinn nam Ban*, he ordered every mare to be separated from her foal, every cow from her calf, every ewe from her lamb, every nanny-goat from her kid. What a cacophony! It is marvellously described in a Lochbroom version sent by a John Morrison to the magazine *An Gaidheal* in 1872. *Gach bò a'geumraich, gach làir a'sitirich, gach caora a'méilich, gach gobhar a'meigeadaich, 's gach seòrsa beathaich eile a'sireadh an gnè féin*. “Every cow lowing, every mare neighing, every sheep baaing, every goat bleating, and every other species seeking their own kind.” So *Dubh a'Ghiuthais* comes out of her cloud to investigate, and is promptly shot dead with an arrow, or in other versions with a silver bullet or a silver sixpence, or else she comes crashing dead to the ground when a woman at a shieling above Kildonan blesses her in the name of the Trinity.

Speyside versions of the story have some interesting touches. As told in Affleck Grey's “Legends of the Cairngorms”, for example, the ewes, cows and mares are put on the east side of the Spey, the lambs, calves and foals on the west.

Elsewhere there are one or two quite different traditions about the burning of the forests. In Gairloch, according to Robertson, it was said to have been done by a witch called *a'Chuilisg* who was eventually surrounded and done to death in *Fèith Chuilisg*, the Cuilisg's Bog near Melvaig. And in his book “Norse Influence on Celtic Scotland”, George Henderson told a very peculiar tale in which the King of Lochlann's Daughter comes every year to Scotland in a glass apparatus to set fire to the forests. Instead of gathering animals, this story tells of gathering pipers — eighteen of them in couples, “arrayed circularly so as always to be moving round”. Attracted by the noise, she also begins to go around until she falls in her glass gear in the middle of the pipers and is dashed to pieces. I take it that this story belongs to an era before pipe bands were common (it has been claimed that they were invented in 1783!) and that the pipers were playing against each other like bees in a hive, thus driving this music-loving girl to distraction.

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