

The story of the three knots

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I WAS very struck recently by something written by the Rev. Angus Smith, who is Free Church minister of Cross in Lewis. Concluding a booklet (“An Eaglais Mhór”) on the history of the Large Church at Cross, he says: “In fifty years, what I have written may mean nothing to the people of Ness. The heritage of the Gaelic speaking world may have gone like the moan of the wind.”

It is a thought-provoking comment, as it was meant to be. About Gaelic, about tradition, about religion, and about the careless extinction of all these things. But it is my job to dwell not on his message but his metaphor. The moan of the wind is something that always returns. No matter how hard you think it blew before, it will come back and some day it will blow harder than ever.

People have always tried to make sense of the behaviour of the wind. Its origins have been pondered by everyone from sailors becalmed with their water supply running out, to hungry crofters huddling around a fire and listening to its howl. Anthropologists, all the way through from Sir James Frazer in his “Golden Bough” to Lyall Watson in his “Heaven’s Breath”, have recounted the myths and stories that explain it.

Watson points out that many myths show the wind coming out of a cave or a hole in the wall or ground. The Maori tell of a hero called Maui who captured the winds and imprisoned them in caves — all but the persistent west wind, which continues to this day to elude him. Nearby in the Chatham Islands the hero Tawhaki collected his winds in a basket. In Samoa they were held in a coconut, in Hawaii in a gourd, and in the Cook Islands the sky was a huge calabash with holes in it.

In the Odyssey, as Watson points out, the warden of the winds was Aeolus, son of Poseidon the sea god. He kept the winds chained in a cave, but became so tired of their constant grumbling and moaning that when the seafarer Odysseus came along he made him a present of them in an oxhide bag. When Odysseus left and fell asleep in sight of home, his greedy crew opened the bag in search of treasure and their ship was swept away in the gale that issued forth. Only Odysseus himself ever saw Ithaca again.

There are similarities between the Greek story and the Gaelic one which I am going to tell. It has to do with the control of the wind by magic. Frazer is particularly good on this. He demonstrates how peoples all over the world have recognised the wind for what it is — a physical force which happens to be invisible. So in places like Indonesia, Australia and Tierra del Fuego they have attacked strong winds and tried to kill them with firebrands, swords, spears, boomerangs and shells.

Frazer offers circumstantial accounts of eskimos trapping a wind as if it were some invisible polar bear. A fire is kindled. In a chant, the wind is invited to come and warm himself. When he is believed to be there, a bucket of water is thrown on the flames, then a hail of arrows is fired at the spot. Finally guns are fired in various directions, and in one case the captain of a visiting European vessel is invited to open up on the wind with his cannon.

Best of all is Frazer’s rendering of Herodotus’ story about how the people of what is now Tripoli in Libya went to war on a wind from the Sahara which was drying up their water-tanks. “When they entered the desert the simoom swept down on them and buried them to a man. The story may well have been told by one who watched them disappearing, in battle array, with drums and cymbals beating, into the red cloud of whirling sand.”

In the trading ports of northern Europe wind became a saleable commodity. Sir Walter Scott wrote this of Kirkwall in Orkney. “We clomb, by steep and dirty lanes, an eminence rising above the town, and commanding a fine view. An old hag lives in a wretched cabin on this height, and subsists by selling winds. Each captain of a merchantman, between jest and earnest, gives the old woman sixpence, and she boils her kettle to procure a favourable gale.”

Usually, however, the wind was controlled by tying knots in a piece of string. Finnish wizards sold winds to storm-stayed mariners. When they undid the first knot a moderate wind sprang up. The second produced half a gale, the third a hurricane. In places like Stonehaven, Shetland, Lewis and the Isle of Man, old women carried on a brisk trade in such bits of string. “Shetland seamen still buy winds in the shape of knotted handkerchiefs or threads from old women who claim to rule the storms,” says Frazer. “There are said to be ancient crones in Lerwick now who live by selling wind.”

The three knots entered Gaelic folklore, and the School of Scottish Studies has recorded versions of the story of the three knots in Barra, South Uist and Benbecula. It has also appeared in print from various places like Lewis, Harris, Gairloch, Sutherland and Cromarty. But the most recent version to be published is a telling by Joe Neil MacNeil of Cape Breton Island, in John Shaw’s “Tales until Dawn”.

Joe Neil got the story from Michael MacLean, who said it had happened to a group of his own relatives including his grandfather’s or his great-grandfather’s brother. They were going to market by boat, he said, and on the way there they stopped for a rest at a house where an old couple lived by themselves. They brought up some tea and tobacco from the boat and shared it with them, and the old man asked one of them if any of his family had been *sna blàir*, in the battlefields. Yes, he replied, he had lost two sons that way.

“Too bad,” said he, “you didn’t come to me before they went to battle. If you had, they would have been magically protected from lead (*bhiodh iad air an seunadh bhon luaidhe*).”

As they were leaving, the old woman fetched a piece of woollen thread (*pìos do shnàth clòimheadh*) with three knots (*tri snaoimeannan*) on it. “Take this with you,” she said, “and when you are well out, take one knot off this thread and you will get a breeze (*soirbheas*). Carry on, and when you are well under way and you think she can take more of a breeze, take another knot off this string and you will get a good strong favourable breeze (*soirbheas fàbharach làidir gu leòr*). But take care that you do not take the third knot off the thread under any circumstances. If you do, things will not go so well. *Cha bhì ’n gnothach cho math*.”

Well, they set off, and when they were out from the shore they untied the first knot and got a breeze, then

they untied the second one and got a good driving wind which brought them in sight of their destination.

When they were so close to being in harbour that they reckoned they were safe, they untied the third knot and threw the thread into the sea. *Ach ma chuir, thàinig an stoirm*. And what a storm! They only just got into harbour without being drowned. Anyway at market they laid in enough tea and tobacco to last the old couple a good while. On the way back they got a good wind and pulled in again at the house. They handed over the tea and tobacco and got great thanks for that. But the old woman said, "You didn't do as I asked you."

"Yes we did."

"No you didn't. And as you didn't, I had a very hard time (*mìobhadh mór*) saving you from the storm." And she showed them the thread. "Here's the thread you threw away. *Bha feum agad gun robh thu cho faisg air a'chladach*. It was as well you were so close to the shore. It was hard enough for me to save you as it was. But we are glad that you returned safely anyway."

When told by the Cuddy (John MacPherson) in Barra, the story concerns a fisherman from Tangusdale called Donald who went to Glasgow with his crew to sell a cargo of goods. Before he left, he gave permission to a neighbour called Mary to graze her cow on his croft for as long as he was away. It was the beginning of July.

All went well, but on the way back they heard the roll of the waves between them and Barra, and there was a gale of wind coming down from the west-north-west, so they turned round and put into Corraig Bay in the island of Coll. Next day they tried again, and the next, and the same thing happened. There was a wall of wind between them and Barra.

No-one could understand it. Harvest came, and potato lifting, and winter and céilidh, but still they couldn't get across. One night they followed the Corraig folk into a céilidh house and in the middle of a story the crofter's horse came in covered in hailstones. Donald was next to the old lady of the house and he heard her say, "Oh you dun horse, isn't the cailleach who is in Barra tonight playing havoc when you came home and had to take shelter under the roof?"

Donald whispered to her, "Mistress, I would like very much to have a talk with you."

"So would I, Donald," she said. And when the céilidh was over she said to Donald, "You are a kind-hearted man, and you gave grazing to the cow of the widow, Mistress So-and-So. And she it is that is keeping you wind-bound in Coll. But if you do what I say, I will see you ashore in Barra before sunrise." And she produced her *cuigeal* or distaff, and span about a fathom of thread, and put one knot in it, then another, then another. Three in all, and she gave the standard instructions on how to use them, and handed over the *snàithlean*.

They left right away with the aim of being back in Barra before the widow of Tangusdale got out of her bed. The first knot gave them a breeze, the second a rattling wind. They were between Kishimul Castle and the shore in Castlebay when Donald thought he would test the strength of the witch in Coll. He untied the third knot, and a gust came from the north-west which threw boat, cargo and men on the shore. If he had opened it out at sea they would never have been seen again.

When he got back to Tangusdale the widow met him and said, "I am very glad you have come."

"Get out of my house," he replied, "you witch, that kept me in Coll since July." So she left, and sold the cow, and never came back to Tangusdale.

There are many other variations on the story. In one, the knots are obtained from a witch in Lewis by a man from the Southern Isles in return for a pound of tobacco, and they have names. The first is *Thig gu Fòill*, "Come Gently". The second is *Teann nas Fhearr*, "Get Better". And the third is *Cruaidh-Chàs*, "Dire Straits". When *Cruaidh-Chàs* is untied near harbour, a wind comes fit to blow away the hills (*séideadh nan cnoc*) and send the thatch of the houses into the furrows of the ploughland, and the boatman is drowned.

In Harris the final twist was different. There they said that the boat was drawn up on land and secured before the last knot was untied. She was capsized and smashed to pieces.

A Sutherland version puts the knots not in a thread but in the boat's sheet rope. The man who unties the last knot vanishes at once and his body is found near the shore next day.

A version in Dixon's book "Gairloch" points the finger firmly at Stornoway in the late 1700s, when the herring boom started. It is very circumstantial. The Gairloch man, MacRyrie by name, is directed to the witch by a man he meets in the street, and Dixon concludes: "It is said that at that time there were several women about Stornoway who had power by their arts to make the wind favourable."

All in all, the story seems to have attached itself to any famous witch, or to any place liable to be full of frustrated, idle sailors who have money to spend and are desperate to get home. For example, in Sutherland the witch was *Mór Bhàn*. In Affleck Gray's overcooked "Legends of the Cairngorms", *Cailleach Beinn a'Ghlò* brandishes a rope with three knots in it at some terrified hunters, and boasts of what it can do. And in his "Scenes and Legends" Hugh Miller tells of a Cromarty crew stormbound at Tarbatness. They consult *Stìne Bheag*. At her bidding, they bring her money and also a water stoup. She stops up the mouth of it with straw, and tells them not to remove the stopper until they are safe in Cromarty Harbour.

All goes well. They sail south in perfect conditions and when they have safely passed into the shelter of the Suitors of Cromarty they take the stopper out of the bottle. Immediately a gale arises and they are driven back to Tarbatness.

Homer would have recognised that one.

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