

## St John of the Sea

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

TONIGHT, Friday night, is the eve of St John's, *Oidhch' Fhéill Eathain*. St John's, 24 June, was an important day in the traditional calendar of the Highlands and Islands. It marked midsummer, the summer solstice, the high point of the shieling season. The crops should be established, and it was time for counting and equalising stock.

It seems to me that we had two St Johns, St John of the Highlands who was remembered mainly by fire, and St John of the Islands who was remembered mainly by water. Both represent St John the Baptist, but there the similarity stops. St John's Eve in the Highlands was like St John's Eve all over Europe, celebrated by bonfires because this was a midsummer fire festival inherited from our pagan ancestors, and symbolically christianised as St John's, perhaps, because his baptismal water would quench the flames. St John in the Islands appears to be a christianisation of the sea-god Manannan mac Lir, and is not associated quite so strongly with midsummer.

So let me say something about these fire-festivals and water-festivals.

Bonfires were so strongly associated with St John's that the Gaelic name for them, even in the Islands, was *teine Fhéill Eathain*, St John's fire. The basic idea, as eighteenth-century writers repeatedly tell us, was for farmers to go round their growing corn, flocks and herds with burning torches. John Ramsay of Ochtertyre in Perthshire put it like this: "The cowherd goes three times round the fold, according to the course of the sun, with a burning torch in his hand. They imagined this rite had a tendency to purify their herds and flocks, and to prevent diseases. At their return the landlady makes an entertainment for the cowherd and his associates."

This fire custom is on record in the Highlands from Perthshire in the south to Glenmoriston in the north. But it may be an import from elsewhere in Europe, because it seems to have been much more common in the Lowlands and in Orkney. There is a description of a midsummer gathering on the top of Ben Ledi in Perthshire which may represent a variety of the St John's custom indigenous to the Highlands — there is a lot of evidence to suggest that the Celts liked to celebrate ritual in communal hilltop gatherings. Unfortunately the description is very late, from the 'Old Statistical Account' of the 1790s, and I don't quite know what to make of it: "The people of the adjacent country, to a great distance, assembled annually on its top, about the time of the summer solstice, during the Druidical priesthood, to worship the Deity. This assembly seems to have been a provincial or synodical meeting, wherein all the different congregations within the bounds wished to get as near to heaven as they could, to pay their homage to the God of heaven. Tradition says that this devotional meeting continued three days."

Turning now to St John in the Islands, it is worth noting first of all how he is portrayed in the hymns and charms published in 'Carmina Gadelica'. He is *dalta Moire* 'the fosterson of Mary' and *comhdhalta Chrìosta* 'the fosterbrother of Christ', which in Gaelic eyes placed him in a relationship to them closer almost than blood itself. St Brigid was seen as midwife to Mary and fostermother of Christ, and in the anxious prayer to Brigid of a woman in labour we find him invoked.

*Mar a rug Eile Eoin Baistidh,  
Gun mhara-bhith dh'a dhìth,  
Cuidich thusa mise 'm asaid,  
Cuidich mi, a Bhrìghide!*

"As Elizabeth bore John the Baptist, / With no fault in him at all, / You help me to give birth, / Help me, St Brigid!"

By divine intercession, John was born to St Elizabeth and her husband St Zachary in their old age, and they have always represented the perpetual hope of childless couples. So John symbolises fertility, and his cult in the Islands was more of spring fertility than of summer fire, but the fertility in question is that of the land, and of how it can be helped by the sea. John, under the name Shony (*Seonaidh*) reigns in the sea, and provides seaweed to fertilise the land.

The classic description of the rites of St John of the Sea is by Martin Martin in his 'Description of the Western Islands' of the 1690s. "The inhabitants of this island [Lewis] had an ancient custom to sacrifice to a Sea-God, called Shony, at Hallowtide [the eve of Holy Thursday in Easter Week], in the manner following. The inhabitants round the island came to the Church of St Mulvay [Ma-Luidhe, in Ness], having each man his provision along with him. Every family furnished a peck of malt, and this was brewed into ale. One of their number was picked out to wade into the sea up to the middle, and carrying a cup of ale in his hand, standing still in that posture, cried out with a loud voice, saying, *Shony, I give you this cup of ale, hoping that you'll be so kind as to send us plenty of sea-ware, for enriching our ground the ensuing year*: and so threw the cup of ale into the sea."

Martin goes on: "This was performed in the night-time. At his return to land, they all went to church, were there was a candle burning upon the altar; and then standing silent for a little time, one of them gave a signal, at which the candle was put out, and immediately all of them went to the fields, where they fell a-drinking their ale, and spent the remainder of the night in dancing and singing, etc. The next morning they all returned home, being well satisfied that they had punctually observed this solemn anniversary, which they believed to be a powerful means to procure a plentiful crop. Mr Daniel and Mr Kenneth Morison, Ministers in Lewis, told me they spent several years before they could persuade the vulgar natives to abandon this ridiculous piece of superstition, which is quite abolished for these 32 years past."

The name Shony has given rise to a good deal of needless speculation, for example about a Norse sea-god called Sjoni. If there was a Norse sea-god called Sjoni then he, too, was based on John the Baptist. Because if we patiently follow the accounts of this custom first described by Martin Martin, we are led back via Manannan the Celtic sea-god to the Manx customs of 24 June, the Feast of St John. What the name Shony really tells us is that this cult of St John in the Western Isles must have been a relatively recent Christian imposition on an existing pagan cult of Manannan, for the name Shony or *Seonaidh* is just Scots 'Johnny' in a Highland accent.

It may be that the worship of Johnny was brought by the fishermen from ports in such places as the Netherlands and Fife who started coming around the Western Isles in such numbers in the sixteenth century. And in fact, when the custom surfaces again in Lewis (despite the valiant efforts of Daniel and Kenneth Morison) about 1800, it is about attracting fish, and the saint is no longer named. This from 'Tocher' no. 20 (1975), noted down about 1900 by R C Maclagan: "A native of Lewis describes a superstitious ceremony which is said to have been in common use in olden times, to procure good luck in connection with the fishing industry. He says he got the description from his father, who was able to remember, when he was a young boy, being present on the occasion when the last such ceremony was performed in that part of the island to which he belonged . . .

"A sheep or goat was offered as a sacrifice. The oldest man of the sea was expected to take the lead, assisted usually by the one who came second in respect of seniority and experience. The animal was brought down to the edge of the sea, and after a certain order of procedure was observed, the officiating person, who was a kind of priest for the occasion, in the midst of dead silence, and surrounded by the whole company of those interested, who stood looking on, went down on his knees, and proceeded to kill the victim, whose blood was carefully caught in a dish.

"This over, the officiating man waded out into the sea as far as he could, carrying the vessel in which the blood was, and scattered the blood as widely as he could on the water round about him. Then followed the disposing of the carcase, which was cut up into pieces corresponding to the number of poor persons in the district, and a piece was sent to each such person, to be eaten by them; but none else would touch it. This concluded the ceremony, and the fishing industry was thereby supposed to have been placed under good luck for what remained of that season."

Did the custom die out about 1800? Well, no. Alexander Carmichael wrote that it continued in Lewis into the nineteenth century; Anne Ross pointed out in her book 'The Folklore of the Scottish Highlands' (1976) that she had met people in the Outer Isles who remembered what she called "sacrificial offerings to a sea-god" taking place in their childhood, and that as a resident of Southampton she had recorded such traditions from natives of Lewis living there. But then, it was Martin Martin, not the people of Lewis, who had called Shony a sea-god; what the people were doing was perfectly scriptural.

It has to be admitted that Carmichael had muddied the waters. The custom survived in Iona (of all places) too, and Carmichael got from somewhere the very words chanted by the man who walked to the waist into the sea at midnight on the eve of Holy Thursday and poured out his offering of mead, ale or gruel.

*A Dhé na mara,  
Cuir todhar san tarraing  
Chon tachair an talaimh,  
Chon bailcidh dhuinn baidh.*

Carmichael translates: "O God of the sea, / Put weed in the drawing wave / To enrich the ground, / To shower on us food." And he goes on: "Those behind the offerer took up the chant and wafted it along the sea-shore on the midnight air, the darkness of night and the rolling of the waves making the scene weird and impressive. In 1860 the writer conversed in Iona with a middle-aged man whose father, when young, had taken part in this ceremony."

Carmichael says that the offering is to "the god of the sea", but does not name him. That task was left to the Rev. Dr Coll MacDonald, a native of Iona, writing in a little collection of Gaelic radio broadcasts published in 1938 under the title 'Am Measg nam Bodach'. I translate. "Without disrespect to David Livingstone, I am sure superstition in Africa is no different from superstition in Iona a thousand years after the preaching of St Columba. Don't you know Dùn Mhananain? They worshipped Mananan, for the Celtic tribes believed that he ruled the sea, and I have heard that the Iona folk used to pour dishes of porridge into the sea as a sacrifice to Mananan at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They were sending the pullet's egg to seek out the goose's egg. They reckoned Mananan would leave the seaweed of May in heaps on the shores."

Was Dr MacDonald simply extrapolating from Carmichael's "god of the sea" and from Dùn Mhananain? I suspect that he was, but that he was right, and in my next article I will move on still further south to the Isle of Man in search of some definite answers.

— WHFP 23.6.95