

Unfinished underwater business

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THIS article is going to be all about thoroughly wet matters, because we have different pieces of unfinished underwater business. First of all there were those mysterious rocks of Martin Martin's which I mentioned a month ago. Remember? In his 'Description of the Western Islands' of 1703 and 1716 he talked of "two rocks in the passage through the Kyle [of Lochalsh]; they are on the castle side, and may be avoided by keeping the middle of the channel."

I invited readers to help, and so they have. First of all, it has been pointed out to me that since Martin is talking of avoiding rocks by keeping to the middle of the channel, he must mean rocks which are normally submerged. Secondly, there are indeed two submerged rocks on the Caisteal Maol side of the Kyle of Lochalsh. The String Rock is notorious and is only just avoided by keeping to the middle of the channel, for it is nearly halfway between the Skye shore (at Rubha na Sgillinne) and the Eileanan Dubha (off the mainland shore). Why it should be called the String Rock I cannot imagine, unless it is because at low tide it breaks the surface with a long string-like, ridge-like, rippling effect — I am assuming here that in Gaelic it is *Sgeir na Sreinge*, from *sreang* 'a string', and incidentally Dwelly points out that 'ridge' is one of the by-meanings of *sreang*. But no doubt there is once again somebody out there who can tell us.

The other reef is much nearer the shore and is called *Sgeir a' Chaisteil* for obvious reasons. It is in the shadow of the Castle, at the mouth of the Òb, a long stone's throw from the ferry — sorry, ex-ferry — slipway. At its west end it dries 3.2 metres, I am told, so it would be a danger to any vessel except of shallow draft and at high tide. My thanks to Charles Barrington of Ardvasar for this information.

Mr Barrington also picks up a remark I made about Martin's use of compass-points. Martin describes Kyleakin as being on the east side of Skye, and Kylerhea and Eilean Iarmain ('Island Dierman') on the south side, almost as if he had turned the island round clockwise by forty-five degrees. What Mr Barrington points out is that, although the map by Herman Moll in Martin's book is aligned to true north, mariners would have been using magnetic bearings all the time, and the magnetic variation from true would have been very considerable in his day. "Hence," says Mr Barrington, "the bearings given in Martin's account make good sense."

If you are feeling pretty wet after that, it is time now to start shivering as well. Back to the question in my last article, of why Loch Ness never freezes. I pointed out that this matter forms the only consistent thread that runs through writings about the Loch from the 16th century on. Well, I have now found an account which effectively ended the debate about the reason for the phenomenon.

Dr Johnson, if you remember, suggested that Loch Ness never freezes because it is sheltered from cold winds, exposed to mild winds, and agitated by the streams running into it, and he concluded: "Natural philosophy is now one of the favourite studies of the Scottish nation, and Lough Ness well deserves to be diligently examined." Twenty-five years later, in 1798, just such a person came along — Thomas Garnett, M.D. (1766-1802), physician and natural philosopher, Professor at Anderson's Institution, Glasgow, member of the Royal Medical, Physical, and Natural History Societies of Edinburgh, the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester, the Medical Society of London, and the Royal Irish Academy. What did he think?

"It never freezes in the severest winters," he intoned in his book, 'Observations on a Tour through the Highlands and Part of the Western Isles of Scotland', and he went on: "This fact, which is well ascertained, was doubted by Dr Johnson, though it is nothing different from what takes place in all lakes that are large and deep. The reason why it never freezes is its great depth, though the above-mentioned author, who was a better philologist than natural philosopher, asserts that this circumstance can have little share in its exemption."

The young professor explains. "It will not," he says, "require any intricate investigation to explain the reason why deep lakes are more difficult to freeze than shallow collections of water, even of much greater extent. The cold air in winter, which passes over the surface of the water, robs it of its heat, and condenses it; in consequence of its specific gravity being increased, it falls down to the bottom of the lake, and its place is supplied by the warmer and more rarefied water rising from below; this change of place will go on, till the whole of the water arrive nearly at the freezing point, before it can possibly freeze; and where lakes are very deep, the winter season is not sufficient to produce this effect. The water, when taken out of the lake, freezes very easily, as might be expected from its purity."

That's it then. Easy to see why, before his book had even come off the presses in 1800, the Royal Institution of Great Britain had snapped him up as its Professor of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry, and he had taken the long road south. His book is dry but very clear, and he has one other thing to say about Loch Ness that interests me. "The water of this lake is esteemed so salubrious, that people frequently come or send thirty miles for it, though it certainly possesses no mineral impregnation, but is extremely soft and pure."

Now this takes us back to the other thing often said about Loch Ness water, namely that it was medicinal. The first half of that sentence of Garnett's is taken straight from Thomas Pennant (1769), the second half is a refutation of Burt (1725), who says that the water is impregnated with sulphur. I am going to finish by telling the tale of how the water became medicinal in the first place. The story was quoted by James Fraser (1634-1709), minister of Wardlaw (Kirkhill), in his 'Chronicles of the Frasers', published by the Scottish History Society in 1905 as 'The Wardlaw Manuscript'.

Fraser is speaking of a leisurely journey through the Great Glen undertaken in the summer of 1559 by the Tutor of Lovat and the widows of two deceased Lords Lovat. The elder of the two women had been married to the Fraser chief who had been killed in *Blàr nan Léine*, the Battle of the Shirts, in July 1544, and she "was

curious to see Loch Lochy, quher Lord Hugh her husband was slain". I should explain that her home was by the church of St Corridon (Curadan or Boniface) near Bunchrew, while the younger widow lived at Castle Dounie, which was best reached from Loch Ness by striking west through Glen Convinth.

On their return journey they reach the Loch at Cillchuimein, now known as Fort Augustus, and they make off with St Cuimein's ancient bell, known apparently as *am Buadhan* or *am Buadhach*, which are best translated as 'the possessor of special powers'. Says James Fraser: "The bell of Cillchuimenn, called the Buyen or Bouach, is put aboard their boat to be carried over to Conventh or Corridon, whither at the ladyes desire or not who knowes, but it is certainly rumord that a cruel tempest arose and blew uppon the loch so as they could neither row nor saile, and lick to be sunk or set, one of the number desired to throw over the bell in the loch, and so a sudden calm enswes."

William Mackay, the editor of 'The Wardlaw Manuscript', points out that, in response to the group's sacrilege, this very loch which in a previous age had carried St Columba's coracle against the wind was now lashing itself into a tempest, refusing to be the bearer of the sacred relic — since which, says Mackay, the waters of the lake have been as good as medicine for man and beast.

James Fraser concludes: "Whither they turnd back with the bell to set it ashore quher they found it, or if it was cast in the loch, I got no certanty, or whither the lady desired to put it in the loch, I'm as uncertain, but it is a tradition that ever since the water (or as the vulgar calls it) the wine of Loch Ness is medicinall, and beasts carried to it or the water of the lake brought to beasts to drink, which I have often seen, and asked the reason, which was told me as aforsaid."

To the best of my knowledge, the bell was never heard of again, and within a year the Reformation had made such relics of superstition strictly illegal. Monster-hunters please note, perhaps they would kindly keep an eye open for it at the bottom of the Loch.

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