

God of the Moon, God of the Sun

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ALEXANDER Carmichael's famous collection of Gaelic folklore, 'Carmina Gadelica', the first two volumes of which were first published in 1900, is full of strange things. The prayers, charms, cures and incantations have a strange beauty — and dignity — all of their own. In them are many strange words, words that Carmichael misheard, perhaps, or misremembered, or could not get down on paper fast enough. His texts were collected before the era of the tape-recorder, after all, and as many of them were meant to be chanted quickly, privately and under the breath, it is a wonder that they were collected at all.

Carmichael translated everything on a facing page, and many of his translations, too, are strange. His is the work of a poet, not a scholar. He often picks the unexpected word, or hazards a guess, or departs quite brazenly from his original. Sometimes one gets the feeling that what he is translating is not those cold black words which he has struggled to transcribe as best he can from his notebook, but rather, when the notebooks are making little sense, some more vivid oral memory of what was said to him by the fireside. So the Gaelic and the English versions each have a strange half-life of their own.

The English versions have received much attention, most recently from Floris Books, whose single-volume paperback edition of them has proved very successful, and quite rightly so. But it is high time that the spotlight was switched back to the Gaelic versions. They deserve to be edited afresh, and I have no doubt but that the process will be revealing and rewarding.

I will underline the point in this article by looking at a particularly strange little invocation in volume 2 called 'Dia na Gile, Dia na Greine — God of the Moon, God of the Sun'. It appears at p. 168 of the book. Carmichael got it, he tells us, from Ann Macvuirich, a crofter's daughter at Iochdar in South Uist, and this is how he presents it.

*Dia na gile, Dia na greine,
Dh' orduich dhuinne Mac na meine,
Muire min gheal air a glun,
Criosda Rìgh nan dul 'n a h-uchd.
Is mise an cleireach stucanach,
Dol timcheall nan clach stacanach,
Is leir dhomh tulach, is leir dhomh traigh,
Is leir dhomh ainghean air an t-snamh,
Is leir dhomh calpa cuimr, cruinn,
A tighinn air tir le cairdeas duinn.*

On the opposite page Carmichael offers this translation: "God of the moon, God of the sun, / Who ordained to us the Son of mercy. / The fair Mary upon her knee, / Christ the King of life in her lap. / I am the cleric established, / Going round the founded stones, / I behold mansions, I behold shores, / I behold angels floating, / I behold the shapely rounded column / Coming landwards in friendship to us."

Let's look at this, and try to say exactly what the thing is about. "God of the moon, God of the sun" is I think accurate for *Dia na gile, Dia na greine*. The word *gile* means just 'brightness' but there seems to be plenty of evidence that it was used for the moon. The invocation that precedes this one in the book is entitled by Carmichael 'Dia na Gile — God of the Moon'; he got it, he says, from Oighrig Maccriomthain, a cottar in St Kilda, and it starts like this:

*Dia na gile, Dia na greine,
Dia na cruinne, Dia nan reula,
Dia nan dile, tir, is neamha,
Dh' orduich dhuinne Rìgh na feile.*

("God of the moon, God of the sun, / God of the globe, God of the stars, / God of the waters, the land, and the skies, / Who ordained to us the King of promise.")

I don't think *Dh' ordaich dhuinne mac na méinne* means "Who ordained to us the Son of mercy", exactly, more "Who ordained to us the ideal son". The word behind *méinne* is *miann*, which is a desire, or the object desired. So *mac na méinne* is the ideal son, the perfect son, the son desired or longed for.

The third line is poorly written even by Carmichael's rough-and-ready standards. It should be *Moire mhìn gheal air a glùin*, and once again the given translation is scarcely adequate. *Min* means smooth or gentle, while *geal* can certainly mean 'fair', and in Mary's case it may also imply 'immaculate'. Let's settle for "Gentle, fair Mary on her knee".

Why was she on her knee? Not as an act of obeisance, I can tell you, but in order to give birth. The technique of kneeling, or at least squatting, at childbirth is an entirely natural one and is, I believe, becoming fashionable again. It must have been a particular favourite in the Highlands and Islands and also in Ulster, because the universal term for a midwife in Scottish Gaelic and Donegal Irish is *bean-ghlùin* or 'knee-wife', while elsewhere in Ireland more general terms like *bean tuismidhe* and *bean chabhartha* are used. Over and over again in 'Carmina Gadelica' we find the expression *dol air a glùin* 'going on her knee' being used of giving birth, in fact the second stanza of 'Dia na Gile — God of the Moon' goes like this:

*'S i Moire mhìn chaidh air a glun,
'S e Tì nan dul a chaidh na h-uchd,
Chaidh durch is diuir a chur air chul,*

'S chaidh reul an iuil an aird gu much.

(“It was Mary fair who went upon her knee, / It was the King of life who went upon her lap, / Darkness and tears were set behind, / And the star of guidance went up early.”)

Our next line is, in improved spelling, *Crìosta rìgh nan dùl 'na h-uchd*. For reasons best known to himself, Carmichael has consistently chosen to translate the common phrase *rìgh nan dùl*, ‘the king of the elements’, as ‘the king of life’. The line means “Christ the king of the elements in her lap” (or in her bosom, at her breast).

So far, then, both of these ‘Dia na Gile’ incantations might well deserve the label of Christmas carols, like the texts I discussed in my last article, just before Christmas. But let’s go on. *S mise an cléireach stucanach / Dol timcheall nan clach stacanach* is a peculiar pair of lines, but Carmichael’s translation “I am the cleric established, / Going round the founded stones” is more peculiar still. How he got ‘established’ and ‘founded’ out of *stucanach* and *stacanach* I cannot imagine. It is no use saying these meanings are given by Dwelly — they are given by Dwelly because Dwelly got them from ‘Carmina Gadelica’! Both words refer to mountain crags, and the best I can make of it is: “I’m the cleric of the mountaintops / Enveloping the towering stones.” It might be worth remembering that these are the words of a South Uist woman, who would be accustomed to the sun’s leisurely morning stroll along the ridge of Hecla and Beinn Mhór.

So the sun (or moon) speaks, it seems, referring to itself quaintly as a cleric, that is, a man who represents God. But in the last four lines the speaker is, I think, the reciter herself — the objects seen when the sun (or moon) appears over the mountain-tops appear to radiate out from the home. In *S léir dhomh tulach, s léir dhomh tràigh* Carmichael’s ‘mansions’ are eccentric but helpful, the *tulach* being the rising ground on which the house is set. In *S léir dhomh ainglean air an t-snàmh*, these floating (or rather swimming) angels are probably the light catching the rippling waves of the sea. But this is where the link with Christmas carols becomes particularly strong, because in Volume 1 Carmichael presents a rhyme for Christmas Eve or *Oidhche nam Bannag*, the Night of the Bannocks (Gifts), called ‘Bannag nam Buadh — The Gift of Power’, and the sixth of its seven couplets goes like this:

*Is leir 'omh tulach, is leir 'omh traigh,
Is leir 'omh ainglean tighinn air snamh.*

Carmichael translates this as “I see the hills, I see the strand, / I see angels heralding on high”, for which *snàmh* (‘swimming’) seems to me to be a peculiar word, though not impossible.

‘Bannag nam Buadh’ is particularly helpful when we come to the final couplet of ‘Dia na Gile, Dia na Greine’, the one that goes *S léir dhomh calpa cuimir, cruinn, / A' tighinn air tìr le cairdeas duinn*. This ‘shapely rounded column’ which comes ‘landwards in friendship to us’ might well be thought to be the moon or sun reflected as a shining path across the sea, were it not that ‘Bannag nam Buadh’ finishes like this:

*Is leir 'omh calaman, cuimir, caon,
Tighinn le caomh is cairdeas duinn.*

Carmichael translates this, very acceptably, as ‘I see the dove shapely, benign, / Coming with kindness and friendship to us’. This puts paid to our column of light — *calpa*, it seems, is just a misunderstanding of *calaman* ‘a dove’.

These readings allow us to shed a little light on another rhyme for *Oidhche nam Bannag*. This is the one Carmichael called ‘Heire Bannag — Hey the Gift’ which he got from Roderick Macneill, a cottar in Mingulay. It ends:

*Chi mi tulach, chi mi traigh,
Chi mi ullaim air an t-snamh.
Chi mi ainglean air an luinn,
Tighinn le cimh is cairdeas duinn.*

There are some strange words here — *ullaim, luinn, cimh*. Carmichael translates ‘I see the hills, I see the strand, / I see the host upon the wing. / I see angels on clouds (waves?), / Coming with speech and friendship to us.’ But we can’t place much faith in that. Given the other versions, it seems likely that Macneill or Carmichael (or both) made some mistakes, that we should read *ainglean* for *ullaim*, *calaman cuimir caoin* for *ainglean air an luinn*, and *caomh* for *cimh*. That would make perfect sense in both languages.

Let’s go back now to ‘Dia na Gile, Dia na Greine’, and see how it came out in the end. This is what it seems to mean: “God of the Moon, God of the Sun, who ordained for us the longed-for son: gentle fair Mary on her knee, Christ the king of the elements at her breast — I’m the cleric of the mountaintops, enveloping the towering stones; I see hillock, I see strand, I see angels on the wing, I see a shapely gentle dove coming with kindness and friendship for us.”

So it is about *lux in tenebris*, light in darkness. The dove is Christ himself, I suppose. It is a Christmas carol, and no doubt it served as a very acceptable *rann Challainn* to welcome the New Year. It can serve as that for us now.

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