

The Law of Kilmachellaig (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

WHAT do you call a Lada with a sun-roof? A skip. Why does a Lada have a heated rear window? To warm your hands when pushing.

Jokes go in genres. Lada jokes, elephant jokes, now (I believe) lightbulb jokes. No doubt the ancient Egyptians had pyramid jokes. I suppose hard-working people have always had to be able to say, “Have you heard the one about . . .?” Equally, there has to be something or somebody that only has to be mentioned to make everyone smile in anticipation.

In every society there has been a community or two which became the butt of everyone else’s idiot-jokes. In England it was the Wise Men of Gotham in Nottinghamshire.

*Three wise men of Gotham
Went to sea in a bowl;
If the bowl had been stronger
My story had been longer.*

Washington Irving gave the name satirically to New York, and it’s no coincidence that Superman lives in a city called Gotham.

Now in volume two of his ‘Popular Tales of the West Highlands’ (first published in 1860), John Francis Campbell of Islay, in introducing a nice little collection of idiot-tales, says that in Sutherland and Ross-shire at least, the Asaintich or Assynt-folk were the butt of this sort of humour, and that no less than half of the children’s stories from those counties were about the mistakes of the Asaintich. For example, an Asainteach was once sent by his wife to take her spinning-wheel to the turner’s to get it mended. On the way back the wind set the wheel in motion, so he threw the whole thing down, saying, “Go on, you’re welcome.”

He struck across the hills, and when he got home he asked his wife if she had got her wheel yet.

“No,” she said.

“I thought as much,” he said. “I took a short-cut.”

Campbell’s biggest idiot-story however is not about Assynt but about Sgìre Mo Cheallaig, wherever that is. It’s really a compendium of idiot-jokes. Linking them together is a young lad who marries a farmer’s daughter from Sgìre Mo Cheallaig and goes to live there. During his first day he discovers that his wife, her father and her mother are all as daft as a brush. (It’s made clear that she doesn’t have any brothers or sisters, which I suppose is by way of underlining what a feckless lot they are.) Next day he goes off through the parish declaring that he won’t rest until he finds another three as daft as they are. He goes into a house and finds three women spinning on five wheels. Impressed, he says, *Cha chreid mi fhéin gur h-ann a mhuinntir an àite seo tha sibh*. “I don’t suppose you’re natives of this place.”

Tà, chan ann, they reply. *Cha chreid sinn fhéin gur ann a mhuinntir an àite sibh fhéin*. “We don’t suppose you’re from here either.”

To cut the story short, he offers a gold ring to the one who can make the biggest fool of her husband. Wife no. 1 tells her husband he is sick, then dead, and he believes her. Wife no. 2 tells her husband he isn’t there at all, so he goes off to the woods. Wife no. 3 goes to bed with her husband when he comes home, and next morning when the cry goes around for the burial of husband no. 1 she won’t let him get up, but when the *giùlan* or funeral procession passes their house he leaps up and asks for his clothes.

Tha do chuid aodaich umad, she says. “You have your clothes on.”

A bheil? “Do I?”

Tha, she says. *Greas thusa ort ach am beir thu orra*. “Hurry up and you’ll catch them.” So off he goes to the funeral. When the mourners see him advancing as naked as the day he was born, they assume he is mad and flee for their lives. He takes his place at the head of the coffin, and husband no. 2 comes out of the woods and says, “Do you recognise me?”

“No I don’t.”

“If I were Thomas,” says husband no. 2, “my wife would recognise me. But why are you naked?”

“Am I naked?” says husband no. 3. “My wife said I had my clothes on.”

“It’s my wife told me I was dead,” pipes up the man in the coffin. When they hear the dead man’s voice they take to their heels, and their wives all come and bring them home. The young man awards his prize ring to wife no. 1, and having found three people as daft as the ones he left behind, he goes home to them happily enough.

The implication is that if the whole parish was intellectually challenged, the young man could do well out of it and also have some fun, as the following episodes prove.

He sees a boat going off to fish. Twelve men are counted going into the boat, and when she comes back only eleven men are counted coming out. Nobody knows who has been lost, but the young man has spotted that the one who does the counting has forgotten to count himself. “What reward will you give me,” he says, “if I find the man you have lost?”

“Anything you want as long as you find him,” they say. So he takes a stick, thumps the first man with it and says, *Bitheadh cuimhne agadsa gun robh thu fhéin innte*. “Remember you were in her.” He does this to all twelve and they are so grateful to find that they are all there that they pay him all he wants and decide to lay on a feast for him as well.

Now, the Sgìre Mo Cheallaig folk have a good trout loch, so he says to them, “Why not drain the loch to get fresh fish for the feast?”

So they drain the loch and all they find is a great big eel. “That’s the beast that has eaten all our fish!” they say, and while they are trying to catch it to go and drown it in the sea, he makes a sharp exit, to coin a phrase, and on his way home he comes upon four men struggling to put a cow up on the roof of a house in order to eat the grass that is growing out of the thatch.

“What reward will you give me if I bring down the grass?” he asks. We’re not told the answer, but anyway he goes up and gets the grass and brings it down to the cow.

The final episode is rather special, and it is the only one in which the young hero of *Sgeulachd Sgìre Mo Cheallaig* is merely an onlooker. He sees a man coming along the road with a cow in a cart, and the people of the township accuse him of stealing the cow, and arrange for a *mòd* or trial. The *mòd* duly takes place and the horse is condemned to death for carrying the cow.

Now this is what has made *Sgìre mo Cheallaig* truly famous. *Lagh Sgìre Mo Cheallaig*, the Law of the Parish of St Mo Cheallaig (also known as *Lagh Chille Mo Cheallaig*, the Law of Kilmachellaig) is proverbial for an unjust judgment. In my next article I will show how this judgment has been cited over the centuries, but I want to conclude this one by asking two questions. Who was St Mo Cheallaig? And where was this extraordinary parish of his?

There is no certain answer to either question. The Calendar of Oengus the Culdee mentions a saint called Mo Chellóc whose day is 26 March, and he says of him,

Hilletha dorochair
Mochelloc iarlathib.

(‘In Letha there fell / My Cellóc after many days.’) This is the wood of Letha in Munster. The Martyrologies of Gorman and of Donegal give four saints of the same name, at 23 January, 1 February, 7 March and 23 December; of the last of these Gorman says,

Mo Chellocc ard erlam,
Co gleglan mar ghelgrein.

(‘My Cellóc high and ready, / Bright and pure like the white sun.’) Watson, in his ‘Celtic Place-Names of Scotland’, mentions yet another Irish source which lists six saints of the name, but also points out that there is a Cill Mo Cheallaig in Islay, and that the saint commemorated there may be Cellach, who was abbot of Iona from 802 to 815. (He was the abbot in charge during some of the worst Viking raids on the island, and may have overseen the making of the so-called Book of Kells and its removal to safety in Ireland.) There are, or were, also places called Cill Mo Cheallóig (anglicised to Kilmallock or Kilmakillock) in the Irish counties of Limerick, Wexford, Wicklow and Laois.

Where does this get us? Well, the original Sgìre mo Cheallaig may be in Ireland, in fact if it is really a parish, as the term *sgìre* suggests, it MUST be in Ireland, for there has never been a parish of that name in Scotland; and if so, the most likely candidate is Kilmallock in Co. Limerick. That would make it a Scottish joke about the Irish. Against this is the simple fact that none of our sources give the slightest hint that the people of Sgìre Mo Cheallaig were anything other than Scottish Gaels.

I say ‘none of our sources’, but of course so far I have given only one! *Sgeulachd Sgìre Mo Cheallaig* was written down for Campbell of Islay by Hector Urquhart from the telling of John Campbell in Strathgairloch, Ross-shire, in June 1859. John Campbell was 63, and he had learned the story from his father forty years before. It is surely interesting that a Ross-shire informant should pick on Sgìre Mo Cheallaig rather than on Assynt, and I imagine that John Campbell was one of the MacIver Campbells of Gairloch, who were of Argyll origin. That would seem to point the finger at the people of Cill Mo Cheallaig in green and fertile Islay. Were they regarded by all their neighbours as the ultimate hicks?

And two final points. One is that horse nicknames were tremendously widespread in Argyll communities, and were not regarded as complimentary — Iona, Jura, Glassary and Kintyre folk were all called *na h-Eich* by their neighbours, and Jura folk in particular would be enraged by it. It may go deep into totemism, a belief in a special relationship with the animal, even descent from the animal in the same way that the MacCodrums claim descent from the seals, and so ultimately there are undertones of pagan beliefs and pagan practices. It is of particular interest, I think, that Peter Campbell, the author of ‘The Clan-Iver’, claimed that the horse was a ‘symbol or friend’ of the MacIver Campbells of Glassary. Can it be that the sacrifice of a healthy horse is some misunderstood relic of pagan ritual, perhaps designed to avert some calamity such as a famine?

Secondly, there is some evidence, not very good evidence, that locates Cill Mo Cheallaig in Glengyle on the Stirlingshire/Perthshire border. But I will deal with that next time.

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