

Welcome, new moon of harvest

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

It is to Eilidh Watt from Skinidin in Skye, who died on 25 August aged 88 — a splendid lady, and a superb Gaelic writer — that I am indebted for the expression *gealach nan carn*.

Eilidh got the expression from a friend of hers who was a native of the Grantown area in Strathspey. This was typical of Eilidh, because in so many ways she was an interpreter for us between the old Gaidhealtachd and the new, and few indeed would be the natives of Strathspey nowadays who would have a store of Gaelic expressions.

Gealach nan carn, literally ‘the moon of the cairns’, seems to be something similar to the Freebooters’ Moon and the Michaelmas Moon. Eilidh thought that it might refer to cairns erected to the memory of cattle-lifters at this time of year who were killed in the pursuit. I think she was right about the cattle-lifters, but wrong, for once, about the cairns. Surely the reference is to *cuirn* (cairns) in the sense of rock-strewn hillsides full of caves and other hiding places — the sort of terrain into which entire herds of cattle might disperse and disappear, and the sort of terrain incidentally which gave the cairn terrier its name? In the eastern Highlands the term is even applied to entire mountains and mountain ranges, of which *Carn Gorm* is of course the best-known example.

Strathspey lies at the foot of the *Carn Gorm*, and as the Highland territory next to the Lowlands of Moray, it is a very likely place indeed for an expression of this kind to be remembered. Thomas Pennant, in his ‘Tour’ of 1769, tells us that: “There are said to exist some very old marriage articles of the daughter of a chieftain, in which the father promises for her portion, 200 *Scots* marks, and the half of a *Michaelmas moon*, i.e. half the plunder, when the nights grew dark enough to make their excursions. There is likewise in being a letter from Sir *Ewin Cameron* to a chief in the neighborhood of the country of *Murray*, wherein he regrets the mischief that had happened between their people (many having been killed on both sides) as his clan had no intention of falling on the *Grants* when it left *Lochaber*, but only to make an incursion into ***Murray-land*** where every man was free to take *his prey*.” (The italics are Pennant’s.)

Writing of cattle-lifting a generation before that in his ‘Letters from the North of Scotland’, Edward Burt tells us that “the principal Time for this wicked Practice is the Michaelmas Moon, when the Cattle are in Condition fit for Markets, held on the Borders of the Lowlands. They drive the stolen Cows in the Night-Time . . .”

As a result of all this activity, the moon gained a crop of sinister nicknames which named some of the most feared and celebrated culprits. *Buad Mhic Pharlain*, MacFarlane’s lantern. *Buad Mhic an Tòisich*, Mackintosh’s lantern. *Buad Mhic Dhomhnaill Dhuibh*,

Lochiel's lantern. *Buad Mhic Bhannain*, Buchanan's lantern. *Buad Locha Buidhe, ceannuidhe nam meirleach*. The lantern of Lochbuie, prime resort of thieves.

One man who had read his Pennant and his Burt — and his Sir Walter Scott, of course — was the novelist Neil Munro. At one place in his stirring tale of seventeenth-century Campbells, 'John Splendid', he writes: "The Highlanders of Lochaber, as the old saying goes, 'pay their daughters' tochers by the light of the Michaelmas moon'. Then it was that they were wont to come over our seven hills and seven waters to help themselves to our cattle when the same were at their fattest and best . . . This Michaelmas my father put up a *buaille-mhart*, a square fold of wattle and whinstone, into which the herdsmen drove the lowing beasts at the mouth of every evening . . ."

That then is Eilidh Watt's freebooters' moon, but of course the moon at this time of year is still more famous as the Harvest Moon.

The Harvest moon rises in splendour at the same time for several nights in a row at the point in the agricultural year when the light she can give is especially vital — and memorable. An Easter Ross man, Colin MacDonald, recalled in his book 'Echoes of the Glen' how mid-October usually saw the crop safely under broom thatch and *sìoman* (straw rope), and that he and the other youngsters then played *cluich-nan-cruach* ('the fun of the stacks'), chasing each other around the cornfield by the light of the Michaelmas moon, while the older ones, to the children's disgust, found some dark corners for a bit of *suirghe* — courting.

It used to be believed that crops ripened as much by the light of the harvest moon by night as by the sun by day, which is why she was called *gealach an abachaidh*, the moon of ripening. Of course in the days before tractor headlights, a good harvest moon was the means of reaping a crop through the night. And this had its pitfalls. Under runrig, arable land consisted of rigs or strips of corn sown by different individuals, and the story was told in Arran of a woman in Glenree who took advantage of a fine harvest moon to cut her rig, only to find in the morning that the reaping she had done was not of her own, but of a neighbour's crop; worse still, in snatching 'straps' to bind her sheaves from (as she thought) somebody else's standing corn, she had really been encroaching on her own.

Under a harvest moon the glint of the sickle and the swish of the falling corn must have been a ghostly business, especially if accompanied by a reaping song. Even in an urban environment the moon at this time of year can have an outstandingly dreamlike quality.

Now the harvest moon is the second of the three moons of the autumn quarter (August to October) and is connected above all with the period of Michaelmas — 29 September Old Style, 10-12 October New Style. Many of her Gaelic names reflect this. *Gealach (bhuidhe/mhór/fhionn) na Féill Mìcheil*, the (yellow/big/white) moon of Michaelmas. *Gealach (bhuidhe/mhór) an abachaidh*, the (yellow/big) moon of ripening. *Buidheag mhór na Féill Mìcheil*, the great yellow one of Michaelmas. *Gealach bhuidhe*

buain a' choirc, the yellow moon of the oat harvest. *Gealach abachaidh an eorna*, the moon for ripening the barley. And so on.

The paler October moon has her traditional names too. *Gealach nan sealgairan*, the hunters' moon. *Gealach a' bhruic*, the badger's moon. *Gealach bhuidhe nam broc*, the yellow badgers' moon. "That's the moon that catches winter," remarked a Loch Fyne fisherman to Angus Martin when he was researching his book 'The Ring-Net Fishermen', and indeed a proverb warns of *atharrachadh nan sìon ri gealach a' bhruic* — 'the change of the elements during the badger's moon', reflecting the need to finish the harvest in time and lay in a stock of provisions against the first appearance of severe weather. The badger, it was reckoned, knew that winter was coming, and it was as well to follow his example. Alexander Carmichael noted this in vol. 6 of 'Carmina Gadelica'. "The shy badger," he wrote, "has his home in a retired gully, burrowed deep into the earth. Like other hibernating animals he grows very fat in the fall of the year, *an t-Sultain*."

He went on: "During the October moon he cuts grass and on a fine moonlight night a cautious spectator may see him turning and drying the grass round about his den. By daylight he has taken it all inside. The grass is for warmth in winter and for food. This process is called *am broc a' caoineachadh a' bhoitein*, the badger winning or drying his pottle of grass. At Sloc an Luaidh, the gully of the waulking, in Barcaldine, a badger had its den for many years. Hard by were fields under the usual crops — corn, potatoes, etc., and plots of vegetables. The badger helped himself occasionally to the corn, but if carrots were sown he would leave very little of the crop."

I think it is correct to say that the true harvest moon is the first full moon after the autumnal equinox (23 September). This year she is early — new on Friday 13th (tonight), at first quarter on Friday 20th, and full on Friday 27th. By the way, it used to be considered very lucky to be the first to see the new moon, and the harvest moon above all, so if you are the kind of person that prefers to spend Friday 13th safely in bed, keep a good lookout on Sunday 15th, or failing that Monday 16th, and if the night is very clear you may be the lucky one. Make sure you have money in your pocket at the time, and when you see that sliver of watery moon, say as the old people did, *Fàilte dhut, a ghealach ùr*, or better still, *Fàilte dhut, a ghealach ùr an abachaidh!* Welcome, new moon! Welcome, new moon of harvest! Then turn around the money in your pocket, and prosperity should be ensured for the duration of that moon at least.

I will have some more to say about such things on 27 September, because on that night the harvest moon will be full — but eclipsed.