

## Kisses and cuddles all round

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST week a student drew my attention to an extraordinary thing in the English-Gaelic section of Malcolm MacLennan's Gaelic Dictionary, and my eyes popped when I saw it. "Cuddle," it said: "*laigh sìos, crùb a steach.*"

Now as every Gaelic speaker knows, *laigh sìos* means simply "lie down" and *crùb a steach* means "crouch in". Why would MacLennan try to claim that "cuddle", defined by my English dictionary as "hug, embrace, fondle; lie close and snug together", is the same as "lie down" and "crouch in"?

Well, I think I have the answer, but it's a long story. I started by gently reminding the student that MacLennan's dictionary isn't one I recommend, in fact I issue regular warnings against using it, because although it was published in 1925 and has since been reprinted and is quite generally available, its English-Gaelic section was taken straight from John Mackenzie's dictionary of 1845 without acknowledgement, and is horrendously out-of-date.

I gave my student some examples. "Train" in Mackenzie is given as: "*Mealladh; cuideachd, buidheann; slaod, earball, iomall; òrdugh, cùrsa; luchd-leanmhainn.*" MacLennan gives exactly the same (but misprints *cuideachd* as *cuideach*). This entry was brought to my attention many years ago when a student wrote an essay about going to the station and catching a *mealladh*. It took a bit of working out, because of course *mealladh* means deception or temptation. "Train" as we know it developed out of "train of carriages", "train of waggons" and the like and was already being used on its own by 1830. But Mackenzie, a Gairloch man living in Glasgow, would have known these principally as iron horses; to him, a "train" was above all something dragged along the ground to make a scent or trail, pieces of carrion or the like laid in a line for luring (*mealladh*) foxes into a trap. A lure, in other words.

Then there's "hobby". Look up MacLennan and you will find it given as "*seòrsa seabhaic; eachfiodha*". Here he has made an effort — Mackenzie's entry in 1845 was "*Seòrsa seabhaic; each-maide, làir-mhaide*". But pity the poor student who has to write about his favourite hobby and has forgotten that a hobby in the sense of pastime is *cur-seachad*. *Eachfiodha* (presumably a misprint for *each-fiodha*), *each-maide* and *làir-mhaide* are all variants on the theme of 'wooden horse', hobby-horse that is. But *seòrsa seabhaic*? It means 'a kind of hawk', and sure enough the second meaning of 'hobby' given in my English dictionary is 'a small species of falcon'. What this entry shows is that Mackenzie expected his dictionary to be used by fluent Gaelic speakers like himself who needed to know what English words meant. To his users of 1845, an explanation was as good as a synonym.

Now let's go back to my student who wanted to write about "kisses and cuddles all round" when old friends meet. It struck me straight away that if MacLennan, or rather Mackenzie, could translate 'cuddle' as *laigh sìos*, surely it must be because they were seeing behind it the Gaelic word *cadal*, 'sleep'? It also occurred to me that 'sleep' in Irish is not *cadal* but *codal*, which is nearer still to the sound of 'cuddle'. In fact it's virtually identical.

First, then, to English dictionaries. Has *codal*, 'sleep', ever been suggested as the origin of 'cuddle'? The answer is no. What the great 'Oxford English Dictionary' says however is that it is a dialectal or nursery word of uncertain derivation. It then makes some doubtful-sounding suggestions about English 'couth' in the sense of 'snug' or 'cosy' and Dutch 'kudden' in the sense of 'come together', and concludes rather despairingly, "Further evidence as to its early use is wanted, there being at present known only one doubtful example before 1700."

Now in my experience the makers of the OED knew nothing of Celtic languages, and failed over and over again to consider the possibility that a 'word of uncertain derivation' might be from one of them. Is 'cuddle' such a case?

The next step is to consult the earliest Gaelic dictionaries. This yields interesting results. For 'cuddle' Mackenzie in 1845 gave not "*Laigh sìos, crùb a steach*" but "*Laidh sìos, laidh ri làr*" — 'lie down, lie on the floor'. To him, it seems, cuddling in a vertical position was out of the question. Going backwards, the 'Highland Society Dictionary' of 1828 had the same entry, except that it was spelt *luidh sìos, luidh ri làr*. Armstrong's dictionary of 1825 has something quite different: for 'cuddle' it gives "*Curaidh, crùb, dean curaidh, dean crùban, dean beadradh.*" In other words, 'Squat, crouch, squat down, crouch down, fondle.'

Now back to the OED to trace the history of 'cuddle'. How old is it? Any Celtic connections? Any sign that it originally meant 'sleep'?

Well, the earliest occurrence is in a song dating to about 1520 and published in 1841-3 in a book called 'Reliquiae Antiquae: Scraps from Ancient Manuscripts' — "cuddlyng of my cove". It is, as the OED editors admit, a doubtful example. Then, following a gap of nearly 200 years, there's a spate of quotations. Edward Ward's 1711 translation of 'The Life and Notable Adventures of that Renown'd Knight, Don Quixote de la Mancha' yields: "Who would in Spite of Wedlock Run / To Cuddle with the Emp'rour's Son." In his poem 'The Dove', published in 1718, Matthew Prior speaks of a partridge that "cuddles low behind the brake". And Thomas D'Urfey's 'Wit and Mirth: Or Pills to Purge Melancholy, being a Collection of Ballads and Songs' of 1719 gives us: "'Twas playing with her at Cuddle my Cuddy".

Next in time are the lines "They bill'd, they chirp'd all day, / They cuddled close all night", from William Somerville's 'Occasional Poems, Translations, Fables' of 1727. In 1743 Horace Walpole writes rather confusingly to Sir Horace Mann that "Mamie herself could not have cuddled up an affair for his Sovereign

Lady better”, meaning presumably that it had been arranged very comfortably. There’s only one other eighteenth-century example: Burns’ lines “Till bairns’ bairns kindly cuddle / Your auld gray hairs”.

During the nineteenth century a spate of dialect dictionaries demonstrates that ‘cuddle’ was to be found all over England, but that it had not yet reached standard English. About 1825 Forby’s ‘The Vocabulary of East Anglia’ defines it as meaning ‘to hug and fondle’. In the same year Brockett’s ‘Glossary of North Country Words’ gives it as ‘to embrace, to squeeze, to hug’. And in 1888 the ‘West Somerset Word-Book’ states helpfully: “Two children lying very close together in bed would be said to be *cuddled together*. Again chickens are said to *cuddle in* under the hen.”

But perhaps the OED’s most interesting group of entries is one where ‘cuddle’ is defined as ‘to curl oneself up in going to sleep; hence, to lie down to sleep’. This, after all, includes most of what our Gaelic dictionaries were saying. First we have, in 1822, John Galt (like Burns, a Scottish writer) in his book ‘Sir Andrew Wylie of that Ilk’: “Whar am I to cuddle.” Next in 1847 there’s Albert Smith’s ‘The Struggles and Adventures of Christopher Tadpole’: “Many a shining-coated insect cuddled itself up within the little tents thus made.” And finally, from America in 1888, Elizabeth B Custer, who was General Custer’s wife I believe, writes in her ‘Tenting on Plains’ of a tame beaver: “He cuddles up under my gown, or on my arm, and goes to sleep.”

Let me try to summarise. Firstly, there are no Irish examples at all, but the form of the word has consistently been ‘cuddle’. Apart from one isolated instance in 1520, it popped up quite suddenly in 1711 and remained fashionable for a few years thereafter, perhaps due to its use by Ward in his translation of ‘Don Quixote’. It seems to have spread all over the English-speaking world, including all corners of England as well as Lowland Scotland, before finally losing its dialect status about 100 years ago. As to its meaning, it seems to be mainly associated with sleeping and with a crouched posture (what is sometimes now called the foetal position), and it doesn’t necessarily involve more than one person.

What I would suggest from the evidence is this. It seems to me that a link between cuddling and sleeping is established, and that the word underlying ‘cuddle’ must therefore be *codal*. There is nothing in particular to connect it with Ireland, whereas its use by Burns and Galt points to Scotland. That is not a big difficulty, *ascodal* has always been known in Scottish Gaelic as well as *cadal*, and was in fact the form chosen by the translators of the Bible. Although not unknown there previously, it gained a new lease of life in England during the period around the Union when that country was swamped with the Scottish poor — if I recall correctly, Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun calculated that as a result of the famines of ‘King William’s Ill Years’ in the 1690s, one person in every three in Scotland was a beggar. It was vagrants, Gaelic-speaking Irish no doubt as well as Gaelic-speaking Scots, who brought the word to every parish in England, and that is why it took a long time to rise through the barriers of the class system into standard English.

What did the word denote? Sleeping as Gaelic-speaking Scots and Irish sleep, curled up and crowded together close to the fire for warmth. I don’t think beds were a major feature of the lives of our ancestors down to that time. *Cadal cha dèan e san smùr*, says Domhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn of the stag, comparing his habits favourably with those of humans — “He doesn’t sleep in the peat-dust”. Traces of such habits remain in Gaelic today. *Thalla a laighe*, “Go and lie down”, is a more natural thing to say than *Thoir do leabaidh ort*, “Go to bed.” When MacLennan wrote *laigh sìos, crùb a steach* for ‘cuddle’ he was I believe giving his 1925 Gaelic equivalent of ‘go to bed’ — ‘lie down’ or ‘crouch in’ to a *crùb* or sleeping-recess in the wall. When in 1828 and 1845 the Highland Society Dictionary and John Mackenzie wrote *laigh sìos, laigh ri làr* for ‘cuddle’ they were I believe giving the equivalent for their own day of ‘go to bed’ — ‘lie down’ or ‘lie on the floor’.

When Armstrong said *dean curaidh* or *crùban* or *beadradh* I suppose he meant much the same, except that with *beadradh* he brings us back to cuddling. But then, if we say nowadays that somebody sleeps with somebody it’s not quite the act of sleeping that we have in mind. All in all I believe that non-Gaelic speakers adopted *cadal*, or rather *codal*, with enthusiasm because it provided a handy euphemism for a tabu subject.