

The biggest animal in the world?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

YEARS ago on this page I gave an account of one of my favourite poems, Domhnall Ruadh Aonghais Ruaidh's 'Thug mi 'n Oidhche Raoir Glé Shàmhach' ('I Spent Last Night Very Quiet'). Domhnall Ruadh, Donald Macintyre, was a South Uist man who lived from 1889 to 1964 and spent most of his life as a brickie in Paisley, from which he has often been called Domhnall Ruadh Phàislig. His poems were brought together in 1968 in a book called 'Sporan Dhomhnaill' (edited by the late Rev. Somerled MacMillan), and he is certainly one of this century's best Gaelic poets.

'Thug mi 'n Oidhche Raoir Glé Shàmhach' is an account of a céilidh at which two women treated the poet to a welter of stories and information that would have put the 'Encyclopædia Britannica' to shame. I want to concentrate this time on the subject matter of just one of its 19 fascinating stanzas. It goes:

*Chuala mi mun Chìrean Chròin
'S mun mheudachd a bhiodh anns an t-seòrsa —
Nam biodh 'earball aig an Òban
Bhiodh a shròn aig Loch a' Chàrnain.*

I would translate it like this: "I heard about the 'Crest from Hell' / And the size the species was — / If his tail were at Oban / His nose would be at Loch Carnan."

Now Domhnall Ruadh was a very well-read man as well as being full of traditional knowledge, and he had probably read the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell's statement in 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland' of 1900 that the *Cirein Cròin* (sic) was the biggest animal in the world. Campbell deduces this from a rhyme, which he gives in English only:

*Seven herring are a salmon's fill,
Seven salmon are a seal's fill,
Seven seals are a whale's fill,
And seven whales the fill of a Cirein Cròin.*

Now the first two lines of this are given in Gaelic and English by Sheriff Nicolson in his 'Gaelic Proverbs', first published in 1880.

*Seachd sgadain, sàth bradain,
Seachd bradain, sàth ròin.*

Nicolson comments that the saying shows 'that our ancestors were well acquainted with the fact that the salmon eats herring, which has in modern times been a matter of question and inquiry among ichthyologists'. Even if there were no other sources it would be easy to work out the rest, but other sources there are aplenty. Clearly the rest of Campbell's original went:

*Seachd ròin, sàth muice mara,
Seachd mucan mara, sàth Cirein Cròin.*

What's more, there's more. Says Campbell: "To this is sometimes added, 'Seven Cirein Cròin are the fill of the big devil himself.'" Perhaps he didn't give the original because he didn't like to name the devil in Gaelic, given that this is much stronger language than naming him in English. The nearest I have to it is a version collected by the Rev. Alexander Cameron of Brodick (1827-88), a Badenoch man, and published posthumously in his 'Reliquiae Celticae' of 1894. Cameron appears to have heard:

*Seachd sgadain, sàth bradain,
Seachd bradain, sàth ròin,
Seachd ròin, sàth muice mara,
Seachd mucan mara, sàth an fhìr nach còir.*

('Seven herring are a salmon's fill, / Seven salmon are a seal's fill, / Seven seals are a whale's fill, / Seven whales are the unkind man's fill.') The 'unkind man', *am fear nach còir*, is of course one of the many names of the Devil. But that seems to have been only one of three or four different versions of the fourth line heard by Cameron. He got: *Seachd mucan mara, sàth mial mhóir*, 'Seven whales are the fill of the great beast.' And: *Seachd mucan mara, sàth mial mhór a' chuain*. 'Seven whales are the fill of the great beast of the ocean.' And, most interesting of all for us, *Seachd mucan mara, sàth cean-chrò*. He put a question-mark at *cean-chrò*, for he didn't know what to make of it, but clearly it is a version of our *Cirean Cròin*.

My next version is one collected by Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912) and published in volume 2 of his great collection 'Carmina Gadelica'. He says: "The following . . . was taken down in 1860, with much more old lore, from Kenneth Morrison, cottar, Trithion, Skye. Kenneth Morrison, old and blind, had much native

intelligence and interesting lore. I love to think of his calm face, of his kindly smile, and of his warm welcome.”

*Seachd sgadain,
Sath bradain;
Seachd bradain,
Sath roin;
Seachd roin,
Sath muc mhara bheag;
Seachd muca mara beag,
Sath muc mhara mhor;
Seachd muca mara mor,
Sath cionarain-cro;
Seachd cionarain-cro,
Sath mial mhor a chuain.*

Carmichael translates it like this: “Seven herrings, / Feast of salmon; / Seven salmon, / Feast of seal; / Seven seals, / Feast of little sow of ocean (whale); / Seven little sows of ocean, / Feast of large sow of ocean; / Seven large sows of ocean, / Feast of ‘cionarain-cro’; / Seven ‘cionarain-cro’, / Feast of great beast of ocean.” So now we have the little whales feeding the big whales, the big whales feeding the *cionaran-cro*, and the *cionarain-cro* feeding *mial mhòr a’ chuain*. As an alternative to *cionarain-cro* Carmichael gives *cionarain-crothain*, which looks like an attempt to get the tongue around *Cìreanan Cròin*, plural of *Cìrean Cròin* with which we started. He adds: “I do not know what ‘cionaran-cro’ is unless it be the ‘kracken’, nor what ‘mial mhor a chuain’ is unless it be the great sperm-whale. ‘Sow’, and ‘sow of the sea’, is the ordinary term for the whale.”

My next version is the one given in Dwelly’s dictionary under *sàth*. There’s no need for me to give it in full. It’s the same as Carmichael’s, except that (1) Dwelly’s grammar and spelling is better, (2) he accidentally omits the original (but not the translation) of the two phrases *Sàth muice mara mhóir*; / *Seachd mucan mara móra* corresponding to lines 8 and 9 of Carmichael’s version, (3) his krakens are *cionnain crò*, yet another variation on the theme; and (4) his translation of lines 9-12 is: “Seven large whales, / a full meal for a bull whale; / Seven bull whales, / a full meal for the Leviathan of the sea.”

This ‘bull whale’ of Dwelly’s for *cionnan-crò* shows him trying to wrench the Gaelic language out of a mythological into a Linnæan atmosphere; to put it another way, with the arrival of the twentieth century he has opted for a prescriptive definition rather than a purely descriptive one. If we look up *cionnan-crò* itself we find that he gives: “The ‘leader’ of a school of whales. *Seachd mucan-mara beaga, sàth cionnan-crò*, seven small whales a full meal for a bull whale.” He is finding old words for outdated concepts and trying to make them useful again. We are still doing this today — *agallamh*, formerly a ‘colloquy’ and now an ‘interview’, being a good example.

Our final version was collected by the Rev. Duncan Campbell (1854-1938) and published by Donald Meek in ‘The Campbell Collection of Gaelic Proverbs’. It follows the same pattern as Carmichael’s and Dwelly’s, then lines 9-12 are: *Seachd mucan mara móra, / sàth cionnanain crò, / Seachd cionnanain crò, / sàth mìol mhòr a’ chuain*. “Seven big whales, / a full meal for a chief whale, / Seven chief whales, / a full meal for the great monster of the sea.” Before expiring, then, the kraken has become *cionnanan crò*.

So we have met the *Cìrean Cròin*, *Cìrein Cròin*, *cionarain-crothain*, *cionarain-cro*, *cionnan-crò*, *cean-chrò*, and *cionnanain crò*. Seven attempts to render the same name, some of them plurals masquerading as singulars, each a little more desperate than the one before. Certainly the only one I can make sense of is the first. The Scottish Gaelic epithet *cròn* means ‘brown, swarthy’, but scarcely exists other than in compound with *fiann* ‘white’ — *bó chròinfiann* ‘a grey-headed cow’. The early Irish noun *cróine* (‘a dark place’) indicated hell, the abyss: *eccla píasta na cróine*, given in one Irish dictionary, means ‘the fear of the beast of hell’. *Cìr* is a comb, *cìrean* a cock’s comb or crest, so all in all we can interpret *Cìrean Cròin* as ‘Hell’s Crest’. In a future article I intend to show how a creature seen in Loch Shiel in Moidart in 1926 answered to this description. In the meantime, let me finish by quoting the rest of what John Gregorson Campbell wrote about it. “This immense sea-animal,” he says, “is also called *Mial mhòr a chuain*, the great beast of the ocean, *cuartag mhòr a chuain*, the great whirlpool of the ocean, and *uile-bhéisd a chuain*, the monster of the ocean. It was originally a whirlpool, or the sea-snake of the Edda, that encircled the whole world.”

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