

In the name of the unholy spirit

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THERE'S a famous passage in Adomnán's 'Vita Columbae' in which his hero Calum Cille (St Columba) encounters a monster in the River Ness. Adomnán was writing in the second half of the seventh century about events that took place in the second half of the sixth. Let's have a close look at it, using the modern edition in Alan and Marjorie Anderson's 'Adomnan's Life of Columba'.

"On one occasion," says Adomnán, "when the blessed man was for some days in the province of the Picts, he had to cross the river Ness (*fluium Nesam*). When he reached its bank he saw a poor fellow being buried by some of the inhabitants. They explained that while swimming a short time before he had been seized and savagely bitten by a water beast (*aquatilis bestia*). Some men had gone to his rescue in a wooden boat, but they were too late, and they had taken out his wretched corpse with hooks.

"Hearing this, the blessed man nevertheless ordered that one of his companions should swim over and bring back a boat that was moored at the opposite bank. As soon as he heard the command of the holy and memorable man, Lugne Mocumin obeyed. Taking off all his clothes except his tunic, he plunged into the water. But the monster (*belua*), its appetite not so much sated as whetted for more prey, was lurking at the bottom of the stream. When it felt the water above disturbed by the man swimming, it suddenly swam up to the surface, and with gaping mouth and great roaring (*cum ingenti fremitu*) it rushed towards the man swimming in the middle of the river.

"While all that were there, the barbarians and even the brothers, were struck down with extreme terror, the blessed man, who was watching, raised his holy hand and drew the saving sign of the cross in the empty air. Invoking the name of God, he commanded the ferocious beast (*feroci bestiae*), saying, 'You will go no further. Don't touch the man. Turn back immediately.'

"Hearing this command from the saint, the beast (*bestia*) was terrified. It turned and fled as quickly as if it were being pulled back with ropes, even though it had got so near to Lugne as he swam that there was no more than the length of one short pole between man and beast (*hominem inter et bestiam*).

"Then, seeing that the beast (*bestiam*) had retreated and that their fellow-soldier Lugne had returned to them safe and sound in the boat, the brothers, full with amazement, glorified God in the blessed man. And the pagan barbarians who were present, driven by the greatness of this miracle that they themselves had seen, exalted (*magnificarunt*) the God of the Christians."

Well, what kind of creature is it? First of all, it's part of Adomnán's purpose in his biography to display the saint's power over the *natural* world, so we can't say that Calum Cille's method of dealing with it indicates by itself that it's a supernatural creature. On the other hand, it has attacked and fatally wounded a man, so it is no creature commonly found in Highland rivers today.

As Adomnán does not refer to it as a wolf, a bull, or any other known species, but simply as a *bestia* and a *belua* ('beast'), it may be assumed to be some mythological creature whose existence was believed in by his Gaelic-speaking informants without its name being known to them. Amongst the primal Celts divinity attached especially to rivers, which were named as deities, later thought of as water-spirits, and such gods and spirits could metamorphose at will into animals or humans. Professor Watson wrote in 'The Celtic Place-Names of Scotland': "Glen Cuaich in Inverness-shire is — or was till lately — haunted by a being known as *Cuachag*, the river sprite. The tutelary sprite of Etive is *Éiteag*; a man of my acquaintance declared that he knew a man who had met her in Glen Salach — after a funeral."

He goes on: "Dr George Henderson has recorded that when the northern Nethy gives signs of rising in spate the people used to say, *tha na Neithichean a' tighinn*, 'the Nethy sprites are coming'. A stream in Benbecula is called *a' Ghamhnach*, 'the farrow cow', and the custom in crossing it was to throw a wisp of grass into the water with the formula *fodar do'n Ghamhnaich*, 'fodder for the Gamhnach'."

If you read my last article you'll see where I'm coming to. Calum Cille's monster was the guardian goddess of the Ness, some metamorphic amphibian with no name perhaps but *an Niseag* ('Nessie') or the like. However, she represents more than a casual piece of seventh-century folklore, for the original target of the story was the Pictish king Brudei, sitting snug in his fortress on Tomnahurich. Additionally or alternatively, Adomnán's *bestia* and *belua* could have been the tutelary goddess of Brudei's tribe, or even of all the Pictish-speaking peoples, given that Brudei appears to have been a king of singular importance.

The saint's confrontation with the beast was thus no more and no less real than any sighting or alleged sighting of Nessie in the twentieth century, for it's the story that counts. Just as the twentieth-century mind has constructed a scientific theory (an amazing survival from the Mesozoic era) in order to allow a good story to be true, so had the sixth- or seventh-century mind constructed a religious theory (the superiority of Christianity over local gods) to allow this good story to be true. Only one thing in it really counts: *gentiles barbari Deum magnificarunt Christianorum*. "The pagan barbarians exalted the God of the Christians." But there is also a sub-text, vital to a warrior society — that Calum Cille the Irishman was an invincible leader who demanded loyalty unto death and was the match of Pictish gods and kings.

The study of placenames has shown that lochs were thought of as belonging to their rivers, and were named after them. I think we can safely take it that this includes spirits and deities, and that the notion of 'the spirit of the loch' which I discussed last time is derived from the earlier notion of river spirits as represented by the beast met by Calum Cille. Lochs Ness, Shiel and Morar are all large freshwater lochs with a short and turbulent river to the sea; on the analogy of the *Niseag*, it seems to me that the *Seileag* and *Mòrag* started life as the spirits of these rivers.

Last time I talked about the *Seileag* of Loch Sheil; now for the *Mòrag* of Loch Morar. There is a remarkable account of her in a book called 'Tales of the Highlands, by a Mod Medallist', published by 'The Highland News' in 1907. Its author was a Mallaig fisherman called James Macdonald. "Who has not heard of the Mhorag?" he writes. "I will tell them her story, and because it is a true story they must hearken to it and be able to repeat it again to their children when the night is long, and the wind loud, the ingle cheery, and the young mind pleading the elder for a good *naigheachd*."

"The Mhorag as a rule only shows herself on Loch Morar whenever a member of a certain clan is about to die. We durst not name the clan, but the clan there be, and woe betide someone on the night when the Mhorag detaches herself upon the surface in three distinct portions — one portion representing death, another a coffin, and the third a grave."

This is an important statement — particularly for Gillieses obviously, being the clan whom the author is so reluctant to mention, but also because here again is confirmation that the 'spirit of the loch' is an omen of death visible to those afflicted with the second sight. There are implications here for Calum Cille's *bestia*, whose alleged repulsion by the saint would I think have been well understood by the story's audience as an omen of death for Brudei or his kingdom. It is also worth remembering that the Loch Ness Monster suddenly began to be seen over and over again during that long hot summer of 1933 when Hitler had just been elected Reichskanzler, the Reichstag was burned down, the heroic Dimitrov was tried, and the Nazis were busy putting their gospel of hatred into action. Not superstition; just psychology.

Macdonald goes on: "When the Mhorag appears in her normal state she is, as far as one can judge, a most attractive creature. The face is fair and prepossessing as that of the most winsome maid. Her blue eyes and wreaths of yellow hair, which are the most prominent proofs of her assumption to beauty, come upon the onlooker as a glad surprise, and thus confronting her she very much resembles a mermaid, only the Mhorag's body is more cumbersome than that of the latter. In fact, it is more in affinity to the sea serpent's than the *Mhoighdin Mhara*'s."

"I met the Mhorag one night in January, 1887, when crossing the loch by moonlight to stalk a deer at Raitlan. Had I belonged to the particular clan whose name, as already stated, I dare not mention, instead of a Macdonald, I would have been greatly intimidated. In fact, I would have gone home and counted my beads to prepare for the next world . . . A man from Brinicory told me that the Mhorag once chased a boat from Scamadale all the way to Romasaig, and, after swimming in front, she raised herself almost clean out of the water, and on revealing a snowy bosom she afterwards began shaking a cluster of yellow hair with such magic grace that every time the tresses discurled themselves they rained showers of gold."

Here we have entered the realms not merely of the supernatural but of the grotesque. Influenced perhaps by the well-known poems 'Moladh Móraig' and 'Miomholadh Móraig' by Alexander MacDonald (*mac Mhaighstir Alastair*, c. 1698-1770) from nearby Moidart, this most feminine of sea-serpents has taken on the attributes of an inflatable rubber woman or of some Brobdingnagian maid of honour from 'Gulliver's Travels'.

The tale moves to its irresistible close. "Enhanced by the glow of the saintly violet eyes, dainty mouth, and teeth," a young man called Gillies "plunged into the water to embrace the alluring creature . . . The two sailed down, down, down towards the maiden's submarine palaces below, in that terrific depth between Swordland and Meoble. But the amorous maid, on finding her swain cold and irresponsive to her superb terms of endearment, she once more tenderly twined her arms round him, raised him from his silky couch, and did not part with her precious charge until he was laid upon the shingly beach at Swordland."

I will have more to say next time about the appearance of the spirits of Loch Morar and elsewhere as death omens. So I will finish now with an afterthought of a totally different kind. 'Moladh Móraig' and 'Miomholadh Móraig' are respectively poems in praise and in dispraise of a young woman with a big — in the latter case, gigantic — sexual appetite. I wrote about them in my little book 'Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: The Ardnamurchan Years', published in 1986 by the Society for West Highland and Island Historical Research. If James Macdonald's account is genuinely traditional, it provides us with an extra point of reference with which to try to understand the mysterious Móraig of the poems.

To the late Dr John Lorne Campbell, Móraig of the 'Miomholadh' was 'a promiscuous nymphomaniac with every possible moral and physical defect'. To the people of Morar (and especially the Gillieses), we are told, Móraig was a voluptuous monster who showered men with gold from her hair and then dragged them down in her arms to everlasting perdition.

Which came first? Are they one and the same?