

Otherworld messengers of death

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I quoted an extraordinary description of the woman-monster of Loch Morar, *a' Mhórag*, from a book published in 1907 by a local man, James Macdonald. The *Mórag* appeared when a Gillies was about to die. The description is reprinted in Elizabeth Campbell's book 'The Search for Morag', published in 1972. Another item of particular interest in Campbell's book is an interview which she taped in 1970 with a John Gillies who had seen the *Mórag*, recalling a conversation with an old man who was then 86. This is how Gillies recalled the conversation.

Old man: "Tell me where you saw it."

Gillies: "Between Meoble and Eilean Allmha, just outside the rocks there."

Old man: "Quite right; that's where all the old people have seen it; the last time I heard of its being seen, about 60 years ago, that's where it was . . . It's not your Gillieses that has to die, nor the MacDonnells; it's the old Gillieses from Loch Nevis side. The last of them was Malcolm Gillies who was at Swordlands . . . I'm not going to speak to nobody about it [referring to Campbell]. I didn't see it but I know it's there, my grandfather and grandpeople told me about it."

Gillies (to Campbell): "He said his grandfather and the old people used to tell him about the Mhorag and he doesn't believe there's *not* such a thing, he believes it. The big beast with humps on it. In those days people didn't bother so much."

Apart from such pre-1933 material, Campbell's book doesn't add greatly to the sum of human knowledge. Basically what led to its publication was that in August 1969, at a time when Loch Ness was buzzing with monster-hunters, two Loch Morar fisherman, William Simpson and Duncan MacDonell, got the fright of their lives when their boat suddenly collided with some kind of a large beast. They defended themselves with an oar, which the beast snapped in two, then they fired a shot at it which drove it away.

This encounter got into the papers, and for a while all the hopeful monster-hunters at Loch Ness decamped to Morar. It was a salutary incident in a way, in that it reminded the public, even if only for a moment, that genuine tradition speaks not loudly of one huge monster in Loch Ness, but quietly of lesser but no less elusive ones all over the place, in lochs, in rivers, and in people's minds.

What Loch Ness and Loch Morar have in common is their unfathomable depth. It seems fairly obvious to me, from a study of the ubiquitous water-horse tradition, that if people could find the bottom of a piece of water they weren't frightened of it. But if they couldn't, it was a potential gateway to the otherworld, through which otherworld creatures could come. If people drowned (or were believed to have drowned) in some relatively small piece of water and their bodies disappeared, it was taken as evidence of such a gateway to the otherworld, and therefore of the presence of aquatic otherworld creatures, or of humanoid otherworld creatures capable of changing shape. If body parts such as liver and lungs (or something resembling them) subsequently floated to the surface, it was taken as absolute proof.

The kelpie of Lowland tradition lived in the deep, deep pools of fast-flowing rivers. The water-horse of Highland tradition lived in quiet reed-filled moorland lochans, the kind whose bed you can't see for the peat-murk in the water. But spirits of other kinds needed hidden gateways too. Even if the *Niseag*, as I showed last time, belonged principally to the River Ness (where she was more likely to find a victim), Loch Ness, being bottomless, was necessarily her gateway to the otherworld. The same goes for the *Mórag* and the *Seileag*. Like the Ness, the Morar and the Sheil are short and by no means bottomless, as far as I know, so when the spirits of these rivers went home to the otherworld it was through the loch they had to go.

You can imagine how people must have felt when the first bridge was built over the Ness, then (much later) over the Sheil, then over the Morar. They would have heard the water-spirits screaming in rage, and retreating in frustrated fury to their loch, perhaps never to return.

The basic point here is that what I have been calling 'the spirit of the loch' was in origin a river spirit and had no name but that of the river. Loch spirits have lived on, but in the era of bridges, river spirits have been forgotten. Peadar Morgan of CLI has kindly drawn my attention to a couple more, *Speitheag* and *Éireag*, the spirits of the Spey (*Spé*) and Findhorn (*Éire*). The source is a paper about Badenoch read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness by Roderick Barron in 1947 and published in volume 39/40 of their Transactions. It's in Gaelic, so I'll translate.

Barron begins by referring to our ancestors' reputed belief that our rivers were goddesses, and remarks that he is not surprised. "I don't cross a river without stopping on the arch of the bridge to look down. And it's no stream of water I see there, but the likes of a living creature running and jumping, rising and falling, singing, roaring and forever in motion. What signs do we have of life, or that something is alive? Aren't they the power to move, to grow, to change and to speak?"

It's a remarkably similar view to that of Mrs Marjory Moir, which I quoted here a month ago from Tim Dinsdale's book 'Loch Ness Monster'. Her father as a boy, growing up on a farm high on the hills above Loch Ness, was often frightened by servants who said that the water kelpie would get him, and as a small child she herself was frightened by the noise of the river rushing over the boulders at the Islands in Inverness and the 'quick flashing lights on it', which to her were a water horse. Finally in 1936 she saw the monster in Loch Ness — "three humps, head and neck . . . my 'Water Horse' in truth at last".

Barron goes on: "These signs can be found in every river worth the name, but especially in Spey. She moves so swiftly in places that no horseman can keep up with her; she grows steadily during her journey to the sea from small burn to great flood; she constantly alters her appearance — now foaming white, now

spreading out with a clear sandy bed, now diving into a sequence of deep black pools. She changes from time to time, calm and smooth in the morning; brim full and black at noon; by evening a flood that nothing can withstand. And whether her voice is big or small, loud or restrained, her melody has as many notes as a musical instrument.”

He continues: “Is it any surprise then if there were people in Badenoch to whom Spey was a living creature, to whom it was best to be civil for fear of something worse? Spey (*Spé*) was not her name either, but *Speitheag*. Every year she came fetching her due, and kept coming back till she got it. Her due was hay and oats, fat cows and fat sheep, and a man’s life. You’re lucky (*sona*) if she seeks it not from you, but if she does, there’s no escape. You’ve no cause to complain. All you can say is, *Thug Speitheag leithe a cuid*. “Speitheag has taken her due.”

Barron tells for example of a man from Strathdearn who takes a farm in Badenoch close to the Spey. In autumn when he harvests his crop his neighbours advise him to gather it in from the field before the arrival of *tuil na Lùnasdainn*, the Lammas flood. He tells them, *Thug mi fichead bliadhna ri taobh Amhainn Éire, amhainn cho bras is a th’ ann, ’s cha do chaill mi sràbh no boitean*. “I spent twenty years beside the Findhorn, as turbulent a river as there is, and never lost a straw or a sheaf.”

Next morning when he looks out his crop isn’t there. Spey has taken it away during the night. He just says quietly, *O Speitheag, Speitheag, chan ionann thus’ is Éireag bheag bhoichd agam fhìn*. “O Speitheag, Speitheag, you’re not the same as my own wretched little Éireag.”

It would be good to know of other stories about loch and river spirits with names like this. There are many rivers in the Highlands with names ending in *-ag*. Perhaps we should think of it as meaning ‘the spirit of’. In his ‘Celtic Place-Names of Scotland’ Watson devotes four pages to river-names of this type, from the Pattack (*Patag*, ‘the Spirit of the Pot’?) to the Arcaig (*Airceag*, ‘the Spirit of Distress’?) and on to names in *-agan* and *-an*, which presumably represent masculine river-spirits.

The Arcaig is of particular interest as it is one of those very short swift rivers draining a huge loch, *Loch Airceig* — just like the Ness, the Sheil and the Morar. Is there any record of the *Airceag* as monster or spirit? Well, back to Elizabeth Campbell. From a book by Lord Malmesbury called ‘Memoirs of an Ex-Minister’ (of the Government variety, I take it) published in 1884 she cites the following: “October 3rd 1857. This morning my stalker and his boy gave me an account of a mysterious creature, which they say exists in Loch Arkaig, and which they call the Lake-horse. It is the same animal of which one has occasionally read accounts in newspapers as having been seen in the Highland lochs, and on the existence of which in Loch Assynt the late Lord Ellesmere wrote an interesting article, but hitherto the story has always been looked upon as fabulous.

“I am now, however, nearly persuaded of its truth. My stalker, John Stuart, at Achnacarry, has seen it twice, and both times at sunrise in summer on a bright sunny day, when there was not a ripple on the water. The creature was basking on the surface; he only saw the head and hind quarters, proving that its back was hollow, which is not the shape of any fish or of a seal. Its head resembled that of a horse . . .

“The Highlanders are very superstitious about this creature. They are convinced that there is never more than one in existence at the same time, and I believe they think it has something diabolical in its nature, for when I said I wished I could get within shot of it my stalker observed very gravely: ‘Perhaps your Lordship’s gun would miss fire.’”

Some comments are in order. First, I take it that ‘Lake-horse’ represents *each-locha*. I suppose it’s not surprising if it had lost the name *Airceag* since that was now the name of the river and the loch. Second, if anyone has seen Lord Ellesmere’s article about the creature in Loch Assynt I would be glad to know about it. Third, the animal’s allegedly diabolical nature, together with the statement that there was believed never to be more than one in existence at a time, points to its being regarded not as an earthly creature at all but as an otherworld messenger of death.

Last but not least we have to consider Stuart’s sombre response that Malmesbury’s gun might misfire. What was he getting at? Well, we have seen that the appearance of the *Mórag* presaged the death of a Gillies from Loch Nevis-side. Loch Morar had previously belonged to MacDonnell of Glengarry: “It’s not your Gillieses that has to die, nor the MacDonnells,” said the old man to John Gillies. And on this page a month ago I presented evidence that when Lord Howard died in 1926 his gamekeeper Ronald MacDonald saw the *Seileag* emerging from the waters of Loch Shiel. In other words, we seem to be dealing with a tradition by which the appearance of a loch’s spiritual guardian signifies the death of its temporal one.

Two conclusions then. One, Stuart was warning his employer that the gun might blow up in his face. Two, in former times the appearance of the *Airceag* meant the death of Cameron of Lochail.