

Water-Horse and Children

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I THINK it's fair to say that water-horse stories fall into three basic types. One is the type I gave an account of last time. We can call it 'Water-Horse and Woman'. Another, 'Water-Horse and Farmer', is the most complex of the three, and I will turn to it next time.

Perhaps the simplest is 'Water-Horse and Children'. The formula is: "Number of children given. (It is Sunday.) They mount strange horse. It gallops into loch. One child has leaves of Bible / swings himself off by tail / cuts off finger which adheres to horse. Children's lungs / livers / entrails appear (and give their name to place)."

The Rev. John Gregorson Campbell of Tiree sums up this tale-type in his book 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland' (1900) under the title 'The Nine Children at Sunart', beginning with an example. "A number of children went on a Sunday to amuse themselves in the neighbourhood of the 'Loch of Disaster' (*Loch na Dunach*) in this district. They fell in with a horse, caught it, and in their thoughtless sport mounted it. Its back got longer till they were all mounted, except one, who had a Bible in his pocket. He touched the horse with his finger, and had to cut it off to save himself. The horse rushed into the lake, and the children, nine in number, were never more seen. The liver of one of them came ashore next day. This tale is widely spread, and is obviously a pious fraud to keep children from wandering on Sundays to play in lonely places, and from meddling with any horse they may find."

There's no doubt about the wide distribution and consistent structure of the story. A quick check reveals half-a-dozen different books where it appears, always containing a selection of the elements in the 'formula'. Many readers will recall being warned in their childhood to stay away from a particular loch or pool, to keep away from horses, or not to play outside on Sundays, for fear the water-horse would get them. But what is interesting I think is that the story is also well known in Scandinavia. I take the following from a paper 'Waterhorse Legends' by Bo Almqvist, Professor of Folklore in University College Dublin, published in the journal 'Béaloideas' in 1991: "The riders are children (usually several in number) who, one after the other, mount the mysterious horse, which is also not infrequently said to elongate himself in a supernatural fashion so to accommodate them all.

"Furthermore it is stated, or indicated, in many cases that those who have mounted the horse adhere to it and are unable to free themselves, until somebody — as a rule the youngest child — finally shouts out something that renders the horse powerless. In a form of this story, found mainly in southern Sweden, this ejaculation takes the form of a surprised outcry, in a rhymed couplet, containing the name of Christ (e.g. *Jesse Krestti kors, sicket att llångt hors!*, 'The cross of Jesus Christ, what a long horse!'). In other forms the waterhorse is frightened away by hearing — or imagining himself to have heard — his own name: *näck*, *nikur*, or the like. Sometimes these words are accidentally pronounced by the smallest child who is not yet able to speak clearly. In these legends we are thus dealing with a punning motif that lends the story a comical tinge."

As between Scotland and Scandinavia, then, we have an identical story with a sharply different ending. Both serve the purpose of a moral tale, however. In Scotland it is 'don't play on the Sabbath, don't ride stray horses, keep away from moorland lochs'. In Scandinavia it is 'don't ride stray horses, keep away from lakes'. In Scotland the children are drowned, except one who has a Bible and mutilates himself. In Scandinavia the children are saved, thanks to one who utters the name of Christ or the like.

In Ireland the tale can't be said to exist at all. The most obvious parallel is in the Fenian tale 'Tóraidheacht an Ghiolla Dheacair' ('The Pursuit of the Difficult Fellow'). Fifteen men of the *Féinn* mount the Difficult Fellow's giant horse, then find themselves stuck to its back as, led by the giant Difficult Fellow himself with the halter, it races off. Pursue him as they might, the rest of the *Féinn* can't catch up with him before he and his horse and the fifteen men on its back plunge into the ocean; but ultimately they cross it by boat and track them down in *Tír Tairngire*, 'the Land of Prophecy', that is, the Otherworld.

Less obvious perhaps is the connection to 'Water-Horse and Children' of a sequence of events in the Life of St Féchín of Fore, the manuscript of which is dated 1329. The following is based on a translation published by Whitley Stokes in the Paris journal 'Revue celtique' in 1891. "At another time Féchín is at Fore, and he hears that the king of Leinster has seized a hostage who was under Féchín's protection. Féchín goes with his monks to ask for the hostage, and one of the two horses that are under his chariot dies. Says Féchín: 'There is a horse in this river-pool (*linn*) to the west, and I permit him to come under my chariot.'

"The water-horse (*ech usci*) comes to them and is harnessed to the chariot, and it is tamer and gentler than any other horse. And Féchín goes to the Fair of Carman, where are the kingfolk of Leinster including their king, Ailill son of Dunlang. He asks Ailill for the hostage who is under his safeguard. The king replies that he will not deliver him unless he gets the horse that is under Féchín's chariot, and Féchín says that he will not give the horse.

"The king goes to partake of the feast that is laid before him. Féchín follows him. The king tells the doorkeeper not to let Féchín in, and to show disobedience to him. An angel says to Féchín: 'I will open the lock of the heavenly kingdom and of the fortress before you.'

"The angel goes before Féchín to the fortress. Then there comes a great earthquake, so that the whole city is made to tremble, and the bonds of the captives in the fortress are broken. Féchín comes with his hostages out on the green, and 'leaves leavings' on the fort of Naas, namely, every hostage therein to be kept without escaping: for neither locks nor shackles remain upon them. When Féchín goes out to the place wherein is

Féichín's Cross, before the fortress, the king dies in the house after him. And the dead king is taken to Féichín. And Féichín brings the king of Leinster from death to life.

"It is then that Ailill son of Dunlang gives, in reward for his resuscitation by Féichín, *Telach Fabra* (the Hill of Fore?) to Féichín, and complete freedom from his tribute to Féichín and his mill, and Féichín's tribute for ever upon Leinster from one sea to another. Féichín 'leaves leavings' upon the king of Naas, namely, a dead man's hue upon him every day continually, in sign of the miracle. Then he frees the captives and goes in his chariot to Fore, and permits the water-horse to enter the same river-pool, and says: 'May you harm no-one and may no-one harm you from here on forever.' And God's name and Féichín's are magnified thereby.

"At another time Féichín is in his cell, praying, when he hears the noise of the children hurling (i.e. playing shinty) on the green beside the cell, and they disturb Féichín at his devotions. Says Féichín: 'I permit you to go and be drowned in the lake, and your souls will be free to ascend to heaven.' Then the children go into the lake, and they are drowned and obtain a reward for their souls. Wherefore from them *Loch Macraide* 'Children's Lake' is so called for ever, and God's name and Féichín's are magnified thereby."

Given the story 'Water-Horse and Children' as we have it from more recent sources, I find it difficult to believe that the juxtaposition of a water-horse story and an account of how children are drowned in a lake for a religious misdemeanour can be entirely coincidental. Does our 'Water-Horse and Children' derive from the Life of St Féichín, or is it the other way round? The answer must be that it is the other way round, because the fact that an almost identical tale-type is well established in both the West Highlands and southern Sweden suggests that the story dates at least from the time of the Vikings, AD 800-1263.

It might be a good idea to pick up the appearance of sea-horses and water-horses in the lives of other Gaelic saints. St Maedoc travels between Ireland and Wales on a horse that comes out of the sea. A similar story is told of St Bairre. St Brendan turns seals from the ocean into horses, but when King Diarmaid's men try to ride them they go straight to the Boyne and turn back into seals. Thirty blue horses rise out of the sea and come to St Ruadán, who races them successfully at Tara, then gives them to King Aed Guaire, but he and his warriors get no benefit from them as they promptly return to the sea.

West Highland water-horses are lake creatures, of course, so that is what we should be looking for. Of this I have two examples. In one, St Crónán summons two glossy black horses with golden bridles (in the original Latin, *duo equi cerulei cum frenis aureis*) from Loch Cre and presents them to a king whose horses have been stolen. And in the other, St Cainnech wants to give an obdurate king a fright with regard to possession of an island in Loch Ris, so he orders a fiery chariot with fiery horses and a frightful charioteer to cross the lake to the island.

These incidents and many others are discussed by Sister Mary Donatus in a fascinating book called 'Beasts and Birds in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints', published in Philadelphia in 1934. She remarks that they represent 'Druidic magic Christianized'. But what strikes me very strongly is that the names of all these saints can be shown to have been known in Pictland, and above all that of Féichín himself, who appears to have imposed his name on two of Pictland's most important sacral sites, St Vigeans and Aikey Brae. What's more, Féichín's water-horse, unlike all the others, comes from a river-pool (*linn*), the habitat not of the Highland water-horse but of the Lowland kelpie.

Can it be that the cult of the kelpie was of particular importance to the Picts? Until Féichín and other Irishmen came to persuade them otherwise, did they worship the kelpie above all else?

[WHFP 2.7.99]