

The glittering bridle

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I sketched the history of a tale-type which we can call ‘Water-Horse and Farmer’. It involves a farmer, or in earlier times a warrior like Cù Chulainn, wrestling with a supernatural horse that comes out of a lake, and harnessing it to the plough, or, in Cù Chulainn’s case, to his chariot. I pointed out that as early as 1699 the Welshman Edward Lhuyd was told that ‘one of these horses was wont to come out of Loch Frisa in Mull, to help a man to plough, returning to the sea at night’.

The Rev. John Gregorson Campbell, minister of Tiree, offers no less than five different versions of the Loch Frisa story in his book ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland’ of 1900. All of them concern a young warrior-farmer called *Mac Fir Arois*, the son of the Tacksman of Aros. I will give each of them in Campbell’s own words.

In no. 1 we note that, like Cù Chulainn’s chariot-horse the Liath Macha, the mare is grey. “A remarkably handsome grey mare came among horses belonging to the tenant of Aros pasturing on the rushes at the end of Loch Frisa. One day his son haltered and mounted it. The grey stood quite quietly till it got the young man on its back. It then rushed into the loch.”

In no. 2 the warrior-farmer’s end is expressed in violent-sounding terms. “The young man found a mare in the hills, which he took to be one of those belonging to his father. He caught it with the intention of riding home, but the mare took out to Loch Frisa, and he was there devoured by Water-horses.”

In no. 3 the horse’s liver appears. “In spring a band of men went to the hill to catch a young horse wanted for harrowing or to send to market. They were unable to catch it, and next day Aros’s son himself went with them. He caught what he supposed to be the horse wanted and jumped on its back. The horse rushed at full speed towards the loch, and the young man found he could not throw himself off. The horse’s liver came ashore next day, the animal, it is supposed, having been killed by the other Water-horses tenanted the lake, when they felt the smell of a man off it.” This idea of the water-horse being killed by its fellows for consorting with a human being is by no means unique — it is found in other water-horse stories.

In no. 4 a cow-shackle is introduced. “The Water-horse was kept all winter, with the cow shackle about its neck, and remained so quiet and steady, that at last the shackle was neglected. The son of the tenant rode it one day to the peat-moss, three other horses following behind in usual form, when it suddenly rushed away to the lake, and nothing was ever seen of the youth or the horses but the livers.”

No. 5 has a clear and authentic ring, the innards this time being stated unambiguously to be those of the man, which is the usual thing for water-horse stories — be the victim man, woman or child, the heart, lungs or livers float to the surface in the morning and are all that is ever seen of them again. “Mac-fir Arois was twice taken away by the Water-horse. The first time, he managed to put a foot on each side of a gate, in passing through, and allowed the horse to pass on. The second time, a cap which hitherto had kept the horse, was forgotten. In the terrible career of the steed to the loch, the young man clasped his arms round its neck, and could not unclasp them. His lungs came ashore next day.”

So this time the horse has a ‘cap’! It’s a pity that Campbell’s original notes don’t survive, as I would very much like to know what word underlies ‘cap’. It’s clearly a different object from the ‘cow shackle’ — presumably *buarach* — of no. 4. The terms I know of from other water-horse stories for the equipment restraining the water-horse are *buarach* itself and *srian*, ‘a bridle’, while Campbell’s own definitive presentation of ‘Water-Horse and Farmer’ reflects only *buarach* (as ‘cow-shackle’ or ‘shackle’) and *taod* (as ‘halter’). He begins: “Stories to the following effect are common in Mull and the neighbourhood. A strange horse, which cannot be driven away, is seen all winter among the rest of the farm horses. In olden times horses were little housed during winter; the stable door was left open, and the horses, after eating the little straw allowed them, went out to pick up what they could.”

He goes on to tell the basic story. “When spring work comes on the strange horse is caught like the rest and made to work. Perhaps for greater security the cow-shackle is put round its neck. It proves as docile and easily managed as any horse could be. It is the best horse the farmer has, and is fat and sleek when the rest are lean and ragged. It works thus all spring, and in summer is employed to take home peats from the moor. It is placed foremost in a string of three or seven horses, which have creels on their backs, in ancient fashion, and are tied each to the tail of the horse before it.

“The farmer rides the foremost of the team. On the way it becomes restive and unmanageable, and sets off at full speed, followed by the rest, towards the loch. Observing that the shackle has slipped off, the man, in passing through a narrow gateway, plants a foot against each pillar and throws himself off its back, or he tumbles on the sands of the shore, and jumping up, cuts the halter of the hindmost horse. Those that remain tied are dragged into the loch, and next day their entrails or livers come ashore. The most celebrated tale of this class was that of the son of the tenant of Aros, in Mull.”

Now, in none of our quotations so far has there been any suggestion that the water-horse is already harnessed when he appears from out of the loch. But sometimes that *was* the case, judging for example from a paper called ‘Highland Superstition’ delivered by Alexander Macbain to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1887-8: “The water-kelpie may appear either as a horse or a man. In the former case the horse is ready caparisoned.”

My next quotation from Campbell’s book suggests that it was by no means only in Macbain’s native Badenoch that the horse was thought of as being ready harnessed, because Campbell is referring here to his own parish of Tiree. What’s more, he uses yet another term, ‘reins’. He says: “A son of one of the

chamberlains of the island, last century, found a horse on the moors, and being struck with its excellence mounted it. The horse tore away at full gallop and could not be stopped. It galloped all round the country, till at last one side of the reins broke, and the horse rushed out on Loch Basibol, carrying its ill-fated rider with it.”

‘Reins’ in Gaelic is *srian* itself, usually in the singular, so the original of ‘one side of the reins’ is likely to be *dara taobh na sréine*. Dwelly defines *srian* as: “Bridle, curb, bridle and reins. 2 Restraint. 3 Stripe, streak.” He also quotes the Rev. John MacRury (1843-1907), a native of Benbecula, as pointing out that *srian* in the Western Isles generally means the headgear and lines together, and *claigeann* (‘skull’) the part of the reins about the head. *Claigeann* is distinctly reminiscent of ‘cap’. To the best of my knowledge, the usual term for a skullcap, *currac*, is nowhere used in the literature of horses; *copan sréine* is, however, given by the dictionaries for ‘the boss of a bridle’.

All in all it would appear that in Gaelic generally *srian* is used of bridle and reins together and that other words such as *bann* ‘a strap’, *smeachan* ‘a chin-strap’, *iall* ‘a thong’, *gad* ‘a withe’, *copan* ‘a boss’ and *claigeann* ‘a skull’ could be used as appropriate to denote specific parts of the *srian*. That seems to account for Campbell’s ‘cap’. As for the bit, there seem to be a remarkable variety of words for it: *aill-bheul* and *àill-bhil* (= *iall* + *beul* ‘mouth’?), *beulannach*, *cab*, *cabasdair*, *cabasdan*, *cabsda(i)r*, *camagan sréine*, *meilleag*, *mireannach* (or *mirfhionnach*), *sparrag*. And *sròiniall*, the ‘nose-thong’ or musrol of the bridle, can be compared to the common word *barriall*, a ‘tip-thong’ or shoelace.

I have gone into that in some detail because it relates to the description of a water-horse in a wonderful story called ‘Each-Uisge Pholl nan Craobhan’, a romanticised version of ‘Water-Horse and Farmer’ told in Gaelic by the Rev. James MacDougall, who had perhaps got it from the Rev. Duncan MacInnes from Oban, minister of Cromdale on Speyside from 1856 to 1886. The story is printed in MacDougall’s ‘Highland Fairy Legends’. Poll nan Craobhan, or Pot Cravie, is a pool in the Spey at Cromdale, so what we know of the habitat of the water-horse and the kelpie would suggest that this is a kelpie, not a Highland beast at all.

The horse’s coat, says MacDougall, was black and glossy. On his head was a glittering bridle (*srian loinnireach*), on his back a saddle with stirrups of silver (*diollaid le stiorapan airgid*). To catch a man he fawned on him (*dheanadh e sodal ris*) by rubbing his head on his breast. Losing all fear, the man would jump into the saddle, whereupon the horse plunged into Poll nan Craobhan. The man would never be seen again, while the horse disappeared for a year and a day.

Deciding to destroy the horse, a man called Iain Beag sought the advice of the black wife of Alnaic (*cailleach dhubh Allnaig*). She consulted her divining stone (*clach fhiosachd*) and said, “This is what you must do. The horse will be feeding on the meadow on Beltane Eve (*ag itheadh ’san lòn air feasgar Bealltuinne*). When the sun begins to set you will kill the speckled ox (*an damh ballach*). You will put the skin about yourself and go on your hands and feet like an ox. Before the sun goes down get someone to herd you with the cows to the side of Poll nan Craobhan. The horse will come up out of the water and begin feeding with the cattle.

“Draw nearer and nearer till you get between the horse and the water. The bridle has neither bit nor chin-strap (*Cha’n ’eil ’san t-srèin aon chuid sparrag no smeachan*). You will make a spring at the bridle and pull it off (*bheir thu leum a dh’ionnsaidh na sréine agus spionaidh tu dheth i*). The horse will do whatever you want as long as you keep the bridle from him (*cho fad is a chumas tu an t-srian uaith*). Be careful of the bridle (*Bi cùramach mu ’n t-srèin*).”

To find out what happened, watch this space.

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