

## The Water-Horse's Bridle

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE water-horse's bridle, *srian an eich-uisge*, is well known to Gaelic folklorists as an object in its own right, the mere possession of which can bring good fortune. The classic presentation of the motif is by the Rev. Alexander Stewart, 'Nether Lochaber', in his book 'Twixt Ben Nevis and Glencoe', published in 1885. His chosen medium was the literary essay, in English, and he liked to sugar things a bit, but he would also throw in the odd quotation in Gaelic, which is useful.

Stewart was minister at Onich. He mentions a certain man 'who has been wonderfully successful in life; from very small beginnings having become a person of considerable substance in horses, cattle, and lands'. The man is not named, but turns out to be a grand-nephew of Domhnall Dròbhair, of whom more later. One day Stewart happened to be chatting to a certain old woman when this man came into the conversation. They both knew him well.

Stewart remarked that it was curious how everything the man took up seemed to prosper. The good old lady agreed, but remarked that what he owed his success to wasn't that much of a mystery. She and some others knew it, she said. And had long known it.

Stewart begged her to tell him the secret. Being a bit of a favourite with the old lady, she promised to gratify his curiosity if he called on her in the evening when she would be 'quite alone'. (I suppose this reflects the presence of a domestic servant, as was common in those days.)

"We did call on her in the evening," writes Stewart — in the manner of the English essayists of old, he grandly refers to himself in the plural — "and when we had shut the door and barred it at her request, she invited us to a seat by the ingle cheek, and in a low voice informed us that the secret of the success in life of the man about whom we had been speaking in the forenoon was that he possessed a water-horse bridle, *srian Eich-Uisge*.

"A water-horse bridle!' we exclaimed, hiding, however, our astonishment and inclination to laugh outright under an assumed air of simple curiosity. 'Where in the world did he get hold of such a thing?'

"I can tell you all about it," she continued. 'His granduncle, who was a drover, was once returning home from a cattle market at Pitlochry, in Perthshire. As he was coming through the Moor of Rannoch the night overtook him, but as it was in the autumn time, and the moon rose full and bright behind him, he continued his journey as easily as if it was the clear noonday; and he was, besides, perfectly acquainted with the way, having often travelled it at all seasons.

"With his stick in his hand, and his plaid over his shoulder, he walked along hastily, without stop or halt, till he reached *Lochanna Cuile*, where he sat down to refresh himself with some bread and cheese, and a bottle of milk he had got at a shepherd's house on the way; for *Dòmhnall Mòr Dròbhair*, as they called him, was a very sober man, and seldom drank whisky."

Now a word or two from me at this point. The name of the loch in Rannoch Moor is correctly *Lochan na Cùile*, the Lochan of the Neuk. *Dòmhnall Mòr Dròbhair* can I think be identified as the man referred to by Stuart Macdonald in his book 'Back to Lochaber' as Donald Macdonell, Donald the Drover. Born in 1826, he was described by George Borrow (of 'The Bible in Spain' fame) in his book 'A Tour in Scotland' of 1858 as a stout, athletic young man 'with red beard and girdle'. On meeting him with two companions on the road at Roybridge, Borrow demands to know if they have any old songs. Domhnall Dròbhair, who is the youngest and can speak English, replies that one of his two friends does. He goes on to remark that his uncle, an old man who lives far off, is the chief of the MacDonells. "They were gentlemen, though rustics," concludes Borrow.

According to Stuart Macdonald, the old uncle whom Domhnall Dròbhair refers to as the rightful Chief of Keppoch is Ranald MacDonald (1781-1863), then tenant in Brackletter. On his death in 1863 the claim to the chiefship passed to his younger brother Alexander (1783-1867), tenant in Inveroy, then to Alexander's eldest son, Huntly (born 1822), who emigrated to Australia and whose only son Alexander became an Australian politician. If any readers can tell me who Domhnall Dròbhair's prosperous grand-nephew was, I would be glad to hear from them. But let's return to the old lady's story about Domhnall Dròbhair himself.

"As he sat on a stone by the side of the lake he saw something glittering in the moonlight, which, on taking it up, he found to be a horse-bridle. *Dòmhnall Mòr* carried the bridle home with him, and was surprised next morning to find that the bit and buckles were of pure silver, and the reins of a soft and beautifully speckled sort of leather, such as he had never seen before. What astonished him most was that on touching the silver bit it felt so hot as to be unbearable. He was very much frightened as well as astonished, and now wished that he had let it lie where he found it.

"It was only when a "wise woman" was sent for from a neighbouring glen that the truth became known. She declared it to be a water-horse's bridle, the bit of deep down, subterranean silver still retaining part of the heat which belonged to it in its primeval molten state. The reins, she said, were the skin of *Buarach-Baoibh*, a sort of magical serpents, dreadfully poisonous, that frequent such rivers and lakes as are inhabited by the kelpy and water-horse.

"The "wise woman" directed the bridle to be hung up on a *cromag* or crook made of rowan tree, which, while permitting free escape for all its beneficial influences, would yet effectually check the radiation of any evil that might be inherent in it. This was done, and from that day forward *Dòmhnall Mòr* was fortunate and successful in all his undertakings. At his death, having no family of his own, he bequeathed the magic bridle to his grandnephew, the present owner; and this man has been prosperous just because of the possession of a water-horse "bridle of luck"."

So this bridle includes bit, buckles and reins. The bit and buckles are from mines of silver deep, deep under the earth, in the otherworld no doubt, and the reins are of the skin of *buarach-baoibh*, 'a sort of magical serpents'. *Buarach-bhaoibh*, or *buarach na baoibh*, is defined by Dwelly as (1) 'lamprey' and (2) 'kind of eel, supposed to inhabit rivers and to possess magical powers'. In many of the stories about 'Water-Horse and Farmer', *buarach*, 'a cow-shackle', is the object tied by the farmer around the water-horse's neck to restrain it, and it may be that we are to understand the *buarach* in general terms as the horse's reins.

Both *buarach* and *baobh* have strong magical associations, summed up by the common saying *eadar a' bhaobh 's a' bhuarach*, 'between the witch and the cow-shackle', which means in effect 'between the devil and the deep blue sea' and refers to a superstition that a blow from a cow-shackle will render a man impotent.

*Baobh*, a death-messenger in the form of a witch or scaldcrow, is the Scottish Gaelic derivative of the early Irish term *badb*, *bodb*. The war-goddess known as the Bodb normally appeared in the form of a crow. Her presence was an omen of death, and she fluttered down onto the heroic Cú Chulainn's shoulder when, strapped to a pillar-stone by his charioteer to hold him upright, he faced his enemies for the last time. Anyone who has ever been in the General Post Office in Dublin has seen her atop Oliver Sheppard's magnificent bronze statue 'The Fall of Cuchulain' which stands as a memorial to the 1916 Rising. The beautiful hero slumps, strapped to the stone, his head hanging limp, shield still in his right hand, sword in his left, and the crow on his right shoulder which is now as high as his head. In later Irish folklore the *badhbh* becomes a banshee and a 'washer at the ford', a washerwoman who spreads into the river the blood that foretells death.

So the *buarach baoibh* is the witch's cowfetter or magic reins, and the lampreys or eels in Highland lochs are water-horse's bridles. But Stewart does not leave it there. "How," he asks the old lady, "do water-horses happen to have bridles? Who could ride or drive them? And if they can neither be driven or ridden, why should they have bridles?"

Her alleged answer is a brilliant one, linking the water-horse with the Gaelic tradition that Thomas the Rhymer still sleeps in Dumbuck, venturing out at night to seek horses for a last great battle upon the fords of Clyde. "'Thomas the Rhymer,' the old lady replied, 'or some other magician and prophet of the olden time now detained in Fairyland, is destined yet to reappear upon earth with some companions almost as powerful as himself; then shall the water-horses be bridled and saddled by a brave company of Scottishmen from Fairyland, some Highland, some Lowland, bridled and saddled, and fearlessly mounted; a great battle will be fought; all Englishmen and other foreigners will be driven out of the country; the crown will again revert to the rightful heirs, and Scotland once again become a free, independent, and happy kingdom!'"

I quoted that when I was giving a paper about Thomas the Rhymer at an academic conference last month in Cork. To my surprise a great cheer went up from the audience which put me off my stride.

I know of no other source that suggests that Thomas's steeds are water-horses, but that needn't detract from Stewart's conclusion: "Such, in substance, is a very respectable old lady's account of a superstition which, on inquiry, we find to be known, and more or less believed in, everywhere." Certainly belief in the magical powers of a water-horse's bridle seems to have been universal in the Highlands at one time. Storytellers liked to refer to such a bridle as belonging to the water-horse ridden across the sea by Manannan mac Lir himself.

In her book 'A Highland Chapbook' of 1928 Isabel Cameron claimed that there were innumerable tales of magic bridles which, shaken over a person, could turn him into a horse. "From Dornoch, from Tiree, and from Ulster," she says, "come the tales of a magic bridle which was able to transform human beings into horses, and there is one Scottish family who possesses a magic bridle with rather a strange power. It can call up and mirror in a water pail the apparition of a worker of evil. It can also make the figure of the absent one present. This bridle was said to have belonged to a water horse, Manannan's famous steed."

I have a pretty good idea what family she is referring to, and they are *not* the Macdonells of Domhnall Mòr Dròbhair. It's to that family I'm going to turn next time.