

## The minister who loved superstitions

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I HAVE been writing these articles for fifteen years now. They have mainly been about folklore and the lives and traditions of the people, which is why they are called ‘The Quern-Dust Calendar’. ‘Callainnear an Dùdain’ in Gaelic, I suppose, or ‘Féillire an Dùdain’. It’s a reference to the *dùdan* or refuse of the *brà*, the quern or handmill for grinding the corn. The dance called ‘Cailleach an Dùdain’ (translated sometimes as ‘The Old Wife of the Mill-Dust’) is a figure for the cycle of the seasons, the growing corn in summer, its being put to bountiful death by the sickle in harvest, its long sleep in winter, and its revival in the spring.

I’m mainly dependent on books, articles and manuscripts for my information, though sometimes there are other sources too: things people have said to me, or written in letters or e-mails. One kind of source which I have simply never had time to make use of is the sound archive in the School of Scottish Studies; maybe that will change in the future.

Of all the books I have used, two of the most important are John Gregorson Campbell’s ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland’ of 1900 and ‘Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland’ of 1902. Campbell was minister of Tìree and these books are choc-a-bloc with genuine-looking Gaelic traditions. Sadly they are once again out of print now after being reissued by EP Publishing Ltd of Wakefield in Yorkshire in 1974.

Inevitably the comparison is with Alexander Carmichael’s ‘Carmina Gadelica’, a magnificent collection of Gaelic folklore which came out in six volumes between 1900 and 1974. The first two volumes of ‘Carmina’ came out twice, in 1900 and 1928, and an abridged edition of the whole collection was published in paperback by Floris Books in 1992, so it is better known and more available than Campbell’s books. There is another important difference too: in ‘Carmina’ primacy is given to the Gaelic texts, which appear with facing English translation, while Carmichael’s notes on traditions are strictly secondary; Campbell’s books consist of a discourse in English organised in chapters, and Gaelic originals appear only in the form of key phrases in brackets and slightly more extended quotations in footnotes.

Does this mean that Campbell’s work is less reliable than Carmichael’s, or less useful? Well, the authenticity of Carmichael’s work has been called into question, in fact the debate about it formed the most interesting academic controversy in Scottish Gaelic studies in the twentieth century. (‘Carmina’ took three quarters of the century to come out, then the last quarter was spent debating it!)

The authenticity of Campbell’s work is an important issue to me, because I have often found that one of those twin books of his was my only source for something. I noticed this when writing about water-horses here a few years ago. Particularly worrying was that the books came out in 1900 and 1902, a decade after his death in 1891.

So I decided to find out as much as I could about the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell. Are these books the work of a charlatan, or of a forgotten champion of Gaelic scholarship?

He was born at Kingairloch in Morvern, north Argyll, in 1836, fourth child and second son of John Campbell, captain of the steamboat *Cygnets*, and of Helen MacGregor of the MacGregors of Roro in Glenlyon. When he was three years old the family moved across Loch Linnhe to Appin, where every day he walked to school with his sisters.

He was sent to Glasgow, where he attended Anderson’s Institution and my own alma mater, Glasgow High. He is described there as a dreamy, quick-witted but somewhat indolent lad of whom his masters said, “If Campbell likes to work no one can beat him.” Unfortunately he was the only Highlander in the school (far from being the case in my day!) and had a lot to put up with. He later told how he suffered several hours’ imprisonment for fighting another boy ‘on account of my country’.

Interestingly, his biography in the introduction to vol. 5 of Lord Archibald Campbell’s ‘Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition’ remarks: “Like all who are steadily bilingual from early youth he recognised how powerful an intellectual instrument is the instinctive knowledge of two languages.” Not that he would have learned one word of Gaelic in Glasgow High School, if it was the same in the 1850s as in the 1950s.

He was much happier at Glasgow University, where, like me 100 years later, he was surrounded by Gaelic-speaking students and could indulge his interests. “At this early date his love for the rich stores of oral tradition preserved by his countrymen manifested itself. He sought the acquaintance of good story-tellers, and began to store up in his keenly retentive memory the treasure he has been so largely instrumental in preserving and recording.”

This fits well with a statement by the editor of the ‘Superstitions’ of 1900 (presumably Lord Archibald Campbell) that ‘much of the material was already collected before Mr. J. F. Campbell of Islay published his “Popular Tales of the West Highlands” in 1860’. The ‘Preface’ in ‘Superstitions’ is clearly by J. G. Campbell himself, and in it he says: “The writer’s information has been derived from widely separated districts in the North, West, and Central Highlands, and from the Islands. Naturally, the bulk of the information was obtained in Tìree, where the writer had most opportunity of making inquiries, but information from this or any other source has not been accepted without comparison with the same beliefs in other districts.”

It would seem, then, that the genesis of the book published in 1900 was J. G. Campbell’s notes from his fellow-students and others in Glasgow in the 1850s, when he was between 14 and 24 years old. This adds authenticity to the book, and also suggests that (to the best of my knowledge) Campbell’s collecting career began even before Carmichael’s.

“After leaving college,” we are told, “he read law for a while with Mr. Foulds.” Presumably he had done a general degree which included theology but not law, and Foulds was a ‘writer’ (solicitor) of the old-fashioned kind who took apprentices to learn the work of preparing legal documents. “In his lonely island parish he later found his legal training of the utmost assistance. Many were the disputes he was called upon to settle, and, as he has recorded, few there were of his parishioners who needed to take the dangerous voyage to the Sheriff’s court on a neighbouring island [Mull, I suppose]. At once judge and jury, his decisions commanded respect and acquiescence.”

I would add that he must often have provided such legal services in exchange for traditions and superstitions, a part of the people's inner lives not normally revealed to a parish minister.

He was licensed to preach by the Church of Scotland Presbytery of Glasgow in 1858. Already he was suffering from inflammation of the lungs – the result of a chill caught in damp student lodgings, no doubt. Forbidden to preach for six months, he spent the time collecting folklore in places like Ayrshire and Blair Atholl.

In 1860 he was presented by the Duke of Argyll to the vacant parish of Tiree. That is how things were done in those days, and it clearly caused a great deal of difficulty, for the records of the church tell us that the settlement was opposed by the parishioners. Was it his health? Possibly. His bachelorhood? Surely not. A young man described as 'tall and fair, with deep blue eyes full of life and vivacity' would surely soon get a wife (actually he didn't). Was it his interest in folklore, and especially superstitions? That's what I think. The church existed to eradicate superstition, not to encourage it. John Gregorson Campbell was ahead of his time, and it was a thing that would have horrified many.

The matter was brought to the General Assembly, who decided in Campbell's (or rather the Duke's) favour. The young folklorist was duly ordained on 23 August 1861, and served the parish of Tiree for the rest of his life. No doubt he had his enemies, both in the Free Church and in his own flock, but clearly he could stand up for himself – he was noted both for his kindly manner and for his caustic wit.

One has the sense of a bargain being struck. Never in his lifetime did he publish any superstitions. Instead he threw himself into collecting tales and ballads. In due course these appeared in two volumes of 'Waifs and Strays', in the transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, and in many other places.

He began by corresponding with that great organiser of folktale collection, John Francis Campbell of Islay. "Superstitions are very interesting," wrote J. F. Campbell on 16 January 1871, "but I should fear that the people will not confide their superstitions to the minister . . . Even to me they will not confess their creed in the supernatural. I have a great lot of stuff that might be useful to you, and I shall be glad to serve you, because there is a certain narrow-minded spirit abroad."

It may be that a minister *did* have certain advantages when it came to eliciting superstitions from his parishioners. And in 1891 J. G. Campbell echoed J. F. Campbell, remarking: "It cannot but be deplored that the 'rigid righteousness' and rigid wisdom have led to the loss of much valuable matter."

Even more interesting are J. F. Campbell's many remarks about the importance of recording tales exactly as heard. "I am much obliged by your promise to put some one to write for me," he wrote on 28 March 1871. "If he writes from dictation will you kindly *beg him to follow the words spoken* without regard to his own opinion, or to what they ought to be . . . If you are sceptical I hold to my creed of the people. But creed or no creed I want to get the tradition as it exists and I would not give a snuff for 'cooked' tradition."

J. G. Campbell heeded this advice. It was not his fault if the Gaelic originals of the tales he collected were not always published. His translations were literal, very often including key phrases in the original, and he never ceased to stress that what he printed was what he had heard. For example, when he published 'The Muileartach' in 'The Scottish Celtic Review' in 1881, he wrote: "For archaeological or other scientific purpose, it is essential that ballads of this kind, and indeed everything got from oral sources, should be presented to the reader 'uncooked', that is, without suppression or addition, or alteration, which is not pointed out."

Accuracy and authenticity were obviously of huge importance to J. G. Campbell, and he would certainly have disapproved of Alexander Carmichael's tendency to doctor his materials. In his elder sister Mrs Jessie Wallace of Hynish he had a willing collaborator who was to publish Gaelic tales in her own right, employing the same methods, while in Lord Archibald Campbell he had a conscientious editor. It appears to have been to these two that he entrusted the 'Superstitions' and 'Witchcraft and Second Sight', to be published when he was safely under the sod. Perhaps it is no coincidence that they appeared right on the heels of 'Carmina Gadelica', as if as a corrective.

In his 'Superstitions' preface, J. G. Campbell pays tribute to the intelligence of his informants, and stresses that he uses no sources but the mouths of the people – no books, no letters. I find myself hugely reassured. He had clearly carried out the brief that J. F. Campbell had taught him.

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