

When each waterfall is pregnant

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

TOMORROW, the tenth of March, is St Kessock's Day, in Gaelic *Latha Fhéill Mo Cheasaig*. Not exactly a saint that everyone has heard of, but the late John Lorne Campbell once described him as 'the national patron of Scotland before St Andrew', and there is some evidence to suggest that he was the son of a king of Alba and a chaplain of St Patrick.

St Kessock is associated with Luss on Loch Lomond and points east (Buchanan, Callander, Comrie, Strathearn and Auchterarder), probably also Kessock at Inverness and Balmokessaik in Carrick. *Port Cheiseig* was the Kessock Ferry, and now we have the Kessock Bridge. *Drochaid Cheiseig*, I suppose.

St Kessock's cult seems to have given rise to the surname Kesson (*Ceasanach*). The writer of the 'Statistical Account' of the parish of Callander in the 1790s tells us about the Kessons. "Near the top of Benledi," he says, "there is a small lake, called Lochan-nan-Corp, the Small Lake of the Dead Bodies, which got its name from a whole company attending a funeral having dropt through the ice, and being drowned, when passing from Glen-finglass to the Chapel of St Bridget."

He goes on: "The most numerous clan, in this devoted company, were the Kessanachs, who were formerly a considerable people in this country; but since this disaster befel them, they have dwindled very much."

The Kessons' graveyard, *Cladh nan Ceasanach*, can be found by Glen Finglas Reservoir above Brig o' Turk. A few miles east is Callander, and over the hills is Comrie, both of which places boasted a *Tom Mo Cheasaig* (St Kessock's Hillock).

Féill Mo Cheasaig remained the greatest of the Callander fairs in the 1790s. By then it was being held on St Kessock's Day Old Style, 21 March. By 1890 it was more commonly known as the 'Tenth of March Fair' even though it was held (principally for the hiring of farm servants) on the third Thursday of the month.

Féill Mo Cheasaig in Comrie had settled on the third Wednesday of the month by 1845. St Kessock's Fair on 10 March at Auchterarder was granted in 1200 by Gilbert Earl of Strathearn to the Abbey of Inchaffray, and a market was still being held in the town in the nineteenth century on the last Tuesday or Wednesday of the month.

There is a little rhyme that seems to refer to the frustration of trying to get through the old roadless Highlands of Perthshire to *Féill Mo Cheasaig* in the season of spring thaw and swollen burns, in order to buy or barter essential provisions after the long, hard winter. It goes:

*Latha Fhéill Mo Cheasaig
Bidh gach easan torrach.*

("On St Kessock's Day / Every little waterfall is pregnant.") *Torrach* here means 'pregnant' in the sense of 'swollen' or 'fruitful'. It may seem a strange word to use of a waterfall, but I think it's an example of the kind of prognostication referred to by Captain Edward Burt, who travelled a great deal in the Highlands in the 1720s and returned again and again in his published 'Letters of a Gentleman in the North of Scotland' to the problems of fording rivers – not surprisingly, as he was involved in surveying for the roads to be built by General Wade. He says: "When the uppermost Waters begin to appear with white Streaks, the Inhabitants who are within View of the Height say, *The Grey Mare's Tail begins to grow*, and it serves to them as a Monitor of ensuing Peril, if at that Time they venture far from Home; because they might be in Danger, by Waters, to have all Communications cut off between them and Shelter or Sustenance. And they are very skilful to judge in what Course of Time the Rivers and Bourns will become impassable."

Whenever our rhyme was previously printed the word *easgann* ('eel') appeared in place of *easan* ('little waterfall'). *Easan* actually makes better rhyme with *Cheasaig*, however (the final *a* being open), and is the reading in an unpublished collection of proverbs made around 1769 by the Rev. Ewen MacDiarmid, an eighteenth-century minister of Comrie. *Easgann* we owe to another Perthshire man, the Rev. Donald Mackintosh, who published his 'Gaelic Proverbs' in 1785.

Were we to take *easgann* seriously we would not necessarily have to research the spawning habits of the eel, because there was a widespread tradition that hairs (especially horse hairs) left in standing water would eventually turn into eels, and were therefore of course very dangerous if the water were drunk. One traditional account from Harris tells of a man who went mad after eating eels and tried to fight a horse; he was so violent that he had to be shot.

There is actually a long thin water worm which looks very much like an animated hair, and other stories tell of how individuals have been cured of a mysterious sickness through the offending creature being enticed out of their throat by a bowl of food, then grabbed by the head and hauled out! Frederick Rea told the story in 'A School in South Uist', for example.

Is it as unlikely as it sounds? Well, in August 1987 'Pravda' reported that an 11-year-old girl in Sabirabad, Azerbaijan, had swallowed a 26-inch Caucasian cat snake after falling asleep while picking tomatoes in the sun. She woke up after starting to choke, was given a salt solution, and vomited the snake into a washbasin. The creature had bitten the inside of her stomach, but she recovered after being treated for the resultant swelling.

Admittedly the Soviet press had a predilection for telling unlikely stories from remote parts of the Soviet empire: the more remote the source, the more unverifiable the story, the more exaggerated it became. I would be tempted to think there was a grain of truth in it, if it were not for the fact that two entire pages of volume two of John Francis Campbell's 'Popular Tales of the West Highlands' are full of similar stories. For example, a woman in Argyll had a voracious appetite, but was reduced to a skeleton, and when a doctor was summoned he ordered a sheep to be roasted in front of her.

It was as the doctor thought – tempted by the smell, an ugly reptile slithered out of her mouth and made for the meat. It was the *lon-chraois* ('gullet-elk'), a creature variously – and revealingly – defined by Dwelly as 'bull-head,

bulimia, May-fly, water-spider, water-beetle, water-demon, water-glutton, angler-fish, canine appetite, and inordinate desire or appetite'. Clearly eating disorders are nothing new; all that has changed is the way we talk about them.

The well-travelled John Francis Campbell went on to point out that he had heard similar tales told in Norway, in Africa and in London. In Norway it was how a snake was tempted out of a girl's mouth by means of a bowl of milk. In Africa it was how a baboon was tempted out of a girl's mouth by means of a banana. And in London it was how a snake was tempted out of a patient's mouth by means of a mutton chop.

If taking a drink of water was really believed to result in swallowing eels, it's no wonder the old Highlanders disliked drinking water, and preferred it distilled as spirits. As Para Handy once memorably remarked, "I would say there iss nothing worse for a man's inside than watter; look at the way it rots your boots!"

By coincidence, a gruesome event of modern times reads almost like a motif-index of the cult of St Kessock. Early in 1895 Loch Lomond froze from shore to shore, and the challenge – involving a great deal of money – went out to be the first man to skate across. A man called Colquhoun took up the challenge, went through the ice and was drowned. After the thaw had come a diver went down to search for the body. When he came up he was asked if he had found him. "I did," he said. "I saw him, and the devil eel has got a hold of him, and even if I got all the money of the Colquhouns I wouldn't go down again."

No doubt it was stories like these that inspired the scene in John MacDougall Hay's novel 'Gillespie' where a decapitated corpse recovered from the harbour begins to writhe. "It's movin', my Goäd, it's movin'!" says one character. "God it's movin', see!" says another. Hay writes: "Andy, who was standing at the foot of the body, jumped backwards. Gillespie, stepping to the barrels, lifted the torch. His shadow stood out solid and deep. He went back to his former position, and keenly scrutinised the trunk at the shoulders. At that moment the trunk gave a violent convulsion . . ."

The person who revealed the mystery was the doctor. "He paid another visit to the store, examined the headless corpse, put his hand in at the hole where the head had been severed from the body, and caught something slippery. With an exclamation of disgust he pulled out a black eel, which had borrowed in through the sodden trunk, swung the serpent-fish by the tail, and brought its head crashing down on the concrete floor. It gave a convulsive movement down the length of its body, and lay still."

There are two other possible explanations of the *easan/easgann* rhyme. One is that the word is not *easgann* but *easgan*. *Easg*, according to Dwelly, is a ditch formed by nature, a fen, a bog; *easgan*, then, would be a small natural ditch, a small fen, a small bog. If these are pregnant they are swollen and the effect of the rhyme is the same as in the case of *easan* 'a waterfall'.

Another variant is strongly suggested by a cheerful St Patrick's Day rhyme quoted by James Macintyre, another Perthshire proverb-collector. It goes:

Latha Fhéill Pàdraig earraich
Bidh gach measan torrach,
Bidh laogh boireann blàr
An cois gach àil
Latha Fhéill Pàdraig earraich.

("On St Patrick's Day of spring / Every little plant is pregnant, / A female calf with white spot in the face / Will be added to every herd / On St Patrick's Day of spring.")

Here, then, is not *easan* or *easgann* or *easgan* but *measan*. Its usual meaning is a little dog, a lapdog, and it has entered the English language in Scotland as 'messan', meaning a tyke, a cur, a mongrel, or even a little nuisance of the human variety. It presumably derives from *meas* 'fruit', however, and this vegetable explanation is the one preferred by Macintyre himself, who translates the second line 'Every plant shall teem or bud'.

At any rate, whether dog or plant, it suggests nothing more than the general fecundity of nature at this time of year. The least exciting explanation of all!

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