

## Breath, Bible, key, sieve and shears

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THIS article I would like to look at some of the unorthodox uses to which the Bible used to be put. In former times it was often the only book that many people ever saw, or at least that they were allowed to handle. It was therefore not only a sacred object but also a uniquely powerful piece of material culture, and it was assumed that its power could be transferred in ways other than reading.

I will begin with a custom called *gaoth roimhn leabhar*, ‘wind before the book’. This at any rate is the phrase used by the Welsh traveller Edward Lhuyd when commenting on an account of it noted down for him around 1699.

*Gaoth roimhn leabhar* was, apparently, used in the Highlands as a cure for bad dreams. If a person regularly suffered sleepless nights, the note said, ‘they say such are not baptised or have not got enough of water’, meaning I take it that lack of baptism has resulted in a lifelong dehydration which a mere cup of water by the bed cannot possibly put right – an interesting variation on the doctrine of the humours. “For cure of this they clap a Bible frequently on their Faces,” concludes the note. And Lhuyd explains: “*Viz.* they let the leaves fly with their thumbs and this they call *Gy rwin leabhair*.”

Around the same time, Martin Martin was visiting Colonsay. His host had a member of his family who was sick with fever, and one evening he asked Martin if he might borrow his Bible for a few moments. Martin was surprised at first because he knew the man could not read, but the man proceeded to fan the sick person’s face with the leaves of the Bible. He did it again the following morning and evening, and told Martin that the sick person was much the better of it.

My third instance of *gaoth roimhn leabhar* comes from Eriskay. This time it is used as a cure not for fever but for second sight. According to J L Campbell and Trevor Hall’s book ‘Strange Things’, on 19 February 1896 a child, Marion MacRury, was in the enclosure in front of the schoolhouse door with her teacher’s sister, Miss Margaret MacAskill. Young Marion saw the head of a man and a woman outside the wall coming round on the south side. She asked Miss MacAskill who they were and Miss MacAskill said she couldn’t see anyone.

Marion then saw them come in by the east gate. The man had a waterproof and the woman a grey shawl on her arm. She saw them go on into the front door of the schoolhouse, just a yard or two in front of her. Again Miss MacAskill couldn’t see them, but rushed inside to tell her sister Harriet what had happened. “Marion MacRury was taken in and told she had seen a *taibhse* and Harriet MacAskill got a bible and closed it to Marion’s face so that the wind might go in her eyes. ‘If it wasn’t for that,’ says Marion, ‘I might be as bad as the *Tàilleir Ruadh*, but I never *saw* anything since.”

The Bible was in particular demand for childbirth – naturally enough, since prior to baptism an infant was regarded as being in especial danger. What we would simply call ‘death’ appears to have been regarded by the Rev. Robert Kirk as theft by otherworld beings (the fairies). In his ‘Secret Commonwealth’ of 1691 he tells us that the Highlanders of his time used to put a Bible into the bed along with a woman in childbirth ‘to save them from being stolen’.

This notion of protecting your baby with a Bible lingered for a long time. James Napier’s ‘Folk Lore: or, Superstitious Beliefs in the West of Scotland’ of 1879 tells how in Glasgow in the early 1800s a labourer’s wife became the mother of a very pretty baby. The neighbours, he says, urged her never to leave the child without placing an open Bible nearby.

The idea that the Bible should be open to release its power is of course only one step short of *gaoth roimhn leabhar*, and sure enough we find *gaoth roimhn leabhar* being practised both before and after childbirth. John Gregorson Campbell tells us in his ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands’ (1900) that the Bible was opened and the breath blown across it into the face of the woman in childbed. And Anne Grant described in 1811 how before baptism the bed containing the mother and child was pulled out into the middle of the floor, and an incantation containing suitably scriptural-sounding commands was performed. “The attendant took a Bible, and went thrice round it, waving all the time the open leaves, and adjuring all the enemies of mankind . . . to fly instantly to the Red Sea.”

Even when people were able to read the Bible for themselves, it didn’t necessarily mean

that they contented themselves with the comfort or inspiration that this could bring. At Hallowe'en young girls liked to make themselves dream of their future husbands by going to sleep with a Bible under the pillow after reading a suitable verse – like Job xvii: 3, “Lay down now, put me in a surety with thee; who is he that will strike hands with me?” Or Ruth iii: 8-9, “And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was afraid, and turned himself; and, behold, a woman lay at his feet. And he said, who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman.”

It was not only girls who did such things. James Clow, a miller and joiner in Kilmuir, Skye, told Dr Robert MacLagan in the late nineteenth century how once on Hallowe'en when he was a young man he had gone to bed, then read Job xvii: 3, placed a sixpence on the verse, closed the Bible, put it under his pillow and gone to sleep. He dreamed of a woman. Many years later he met her, he said, and many years later still he married her.

Note the sixpence, the sacred number three – twice. I don't think they had threepenny bits in those days. The purpose of the sixpence was to mark particular words of scripture in a way that would make them effective. It is a Highland variation on a custom which seems to have been pretty universal in England, Wales and the Lowlands for many hundreds of years – that of ‘trial by Bible and key’. I imagine it wasn't practised in the Highlands because in the Highlands ordinary folk didn't have keys.

Let me explain. If a theft had taken place in a community, the guilty party was identified by means of a Bible and key. First the Bible was opened at a suitable verse. It might be Ruth i: 16, “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest I will go.” Or Song of Solomon viii: 6–7, “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave . . .” Or Psalm l: 18, “When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him . . .” Or the 49th psalm, which treats of the misery of the wicked.

Next, you took a key. It had to be a big old-fashioned one whose wards were thicker than the shaft, otherwise as soon as you held the Bible suspended from it the Holy Book would simply slide off it to the floor. You placed the wards exactly upon the verse or verses in question, leaving the bow projecting. You carefully closed the Bible and tied it up tightly with twine, cord, or, ideally, if you were a woman, the garter from your right knee – presumably on the principle that if it could prevent your stockings crumpling around your ankles, it could prevent a Bible crashing to the ground.

The Bible and key were now picked up and held in the air by two people by extending the tip of the middle finger of the right hand and pressing it against the underside of the bow. This is not easy to do, and sooner or later the pressure of the two fingers would result in the bow suddenly turning round, the Bible turning with it. The key might well slip completely between the two fingers so that the whole contraption tumbled to the ground.

While the Bible and key were thus suspended, words and names were recited. These might consist of the verses of scripture in question followed by the name of a suspect, or simply something like: “The Lord do so to me and more also, has — got my husband's shirt?”

The ritual could equally be used, like James Clow's sixpence, to identify a future spouse. In Norfolk about 1900 while the Bible was being suspended the words recited were: “Many waters cannot quence true love, neither can the floods drown it. Love is strong as death, but jealousy is as cruel as the grave, and burneth with a most vehement flame. If a man should give all the substance of his house for love, it would be utterly consumed.” If the Bible turned to the left the lover would be false, if it turned to the right he would be true.

According to Opie and Tatem's ‘Dictionary of Superstitions’, an 80-year-old Berkshire woman recalled in 1952 that first a text from the Song of Solomon was recited, then:

*If — begins my true lover's name,  
May the Bible turn round and the key do the same.*

Grandmothers have something to answer for! About 1963 a teacher in Cumnock in Ayrshire told Iona Opie that ‘Key and Bible’ had been a craze with the 14-year-old girls just a couple of years before. They asked the Bible questions, and it answered ‘yes’ by turning one way and ‘no’ by turning the other. “You can find the name of your future boy-friend by going through the letters of the alphabet.”

‘Bible and Key’ can be traced back as far as 1303, but it’s nothing like as old as ‘Sieve and Shears’, from which it seems to be derived. Theocritus mentions ‘Sieve and Shears’ around 275 BC: in Creech’s translation,

*When I design’d to prove  
Whether I should be happy in my Love . . .  
To Aggrio too I made the same demand,  
A cunning Woman she . . .  
She turn’d the Sieve and Sheers, and told me true,  
That I should love, but not be lov’d by you.*

‘Sieve and Shears’ must have remained basically the same for over 2,000 years. You took your shears and stuck them firmly into the thick wooden rim of your sieve. The handle of the shears was then placed on the ground and two people held it there with their forefingers. The sieve was thus suspended upside-down in the air while the appropriate words and names were intoned. Sooner or later the two blades of the shears would spring apart, causing the sieve to turn around, and so the lover or thief was duly identified.

No particular chapter of the Bible is on record as being used; instead, in instance after instance from 1584 to 1892, Peter and Paul are invoked, no doubt representing the two blades of the shears. Opie and Tatem’s 1892 example is from Yorkshire: “He remembers the household of the hall being gathered together, and some one . . . taking a sieve in which a pair of shears had been stuck upright, and going round to each person, and repeating . . . ‘Bless St Peter, bless St Paul, bless the God that made us all. If — stole this money, turn sieve!’”

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