

Keep the cat turning!

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I DON'T know if you have ever experienced the surprise, as I have, of finding the Gaelic word *taghairm* in your English dictionary, along with some such definition as 'a method of divination formerly practised in the Scottish Highlands'. I will explain next time how it got there, but on this occasion I'll content myself with telling you about just one kind of *taghairm* – roasting cats alive.

The word means, quite simply, 'a summons', for no matter how it was performed, the *taghairm* was a means of summoning the Devil (or, if you like, the powers of the Otherworld) to come and work for you in such a way that he, or they, would be completely under your power.

The first person to tell us about the *taghairm* (though he doesn't use the word) was Martin Martin, in his 'Description of the Western Islands', first published in 1703. He tells us how people would take a live cat and put him on a spit. "One of the number was employed to turn the spit, and one of his consorts inquired of him, 'What are you doing?'"

"He answered, 'I roast this cat until his friends answer the question.'"

The question, I take it, could be an enquiry about the future, or about a missing person or object, or something like that. "And afterwards a very big cat comes, attended by a number of lesser cats, desiring to relieve the cat turned upon the spit, and then answers the question."

The best source of information about the *taghairm* is the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell's 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland' of 1900. Campbell devotes an entire section of the book to what he calls: "*Taghairm*, or giving his supper to the Devil". *Toirt a shuiparach don Fhear Mhór*, I suppose, but the label is meant to be ironic. There is absolutely no evidence that the roast cats were for the Devil to eat – he appears as a cat himself, and shows sorrow and anger for what is being done to his innocent relatives. He then proceeds to act as a distorted mirror of Christ, basely serving the greeds and lusts of man in order to save his fellow felines from this ghastly inferno created for them by humankind. "He was compelled," says Campbell, "to grant whatever wish the persons who had the courage to perform the ceremony preferred, or, if that was the object of the magic rite, to explain and answer whatever question was put to him."

Although they concerned different people, the details of the Mull version of the ceremony corresponded so exactly with those in the Lochaber version that Campbell thought they must both be descended from an older legend. "Nothing," he says, "appears to create a suspicion that the one account was borrowed from the other."

The Mull version focuses upon a man called Lachlann Odhar (a MacLean, presumably) and his accomplice Ailein mac Eachainn. A third man may have been involved also. The action takes place in the big barn at Penngown (*sabhal mór Peighinn a' Ghobhann*) on the Sound of Mull.

Once they have locked themselves in, the men start roasting cats alive on spits over a blazing fire. I take it that they tie the cats to the spits rather than injuring them in any way. Naturally the cats screech and howl, and in due course other cats come in and contribute to the ghastly noise till the beams of the house, *sparran an taighe*, are crowded with them above the men's heads, and the sound fills the entire building. It is almost too much for Lachlann Odhar, especially when the biggest of the cats says, "When my brother *Cluas an Leoghaidh* comes . . ."

Ailein mac Eachainn interrupts. "Away, cat," he cries, and turning to Lachlann he says: *Dé sam bith a chì no chluinneas tu, cum an cat mun cuairt*. "Whatever you see or hear, keep the cat turning!"

This became a popular saying, as Alexander Nicolson pointed out in his 'Gaelic Proverbs', and was used whenever a person had to be reminded to attend to the work in hand, and to disregard whatever discouragements or temptations were in the way. Nicolson says incidentally that performing the *taghairm* took four days. As for the chief cat's name *Cluas an Leoghaidh*, Campbell says that it means 'the Ear of Melting'. He was thinking of *leaghadh* ('melting'), but *leoghadh* or *leodhadh* is an old word meaning 'cutting', 'hacking' or 'mangling' (it's in the Irish dictionaries).

That's what gave this tough old moggie its name, I think – 'the Ear of Mangling', 'Mangled Ear'. Remembering that classic of children's writing, David Stephen's 'String Lug the Fox', let's call him that. String Lug the Cat. Anyway Lachlann Odhar pulls himself together and says, "I will wait for him yet, and his son too."

Eventually the huge, glowering eyes of String Lug himself join those of the other cats amidst the swirling smoke upon the beams, whereupon all the others fall silent and String Lug says, *Lachainn Uidhir 'ic Dhòmhnail 'ic Néill, is olc an càramh cait sin*. ("Lachlann Odhar, son of Donald, son of Neil, that's bad treatment for a cat.")

Allan simply calls out again, *Dé sam bith a chì no chluinneas tu, cum an cat mun cuairt*. "Whatever you see or hear, keep the cat turning!"

So the work goes on, and in due course String Lug says, *Ge b'e có air am mùin Cluas an Leoghaidh chan fhaic e gnùis na Tríanaid*. ("No one whom String Lug pees upon will ever see the face of the Trinity.")

Lachlann Odhar retorts defiantly: *Crois a' chlainn ad' cheann, a bhias – is tu mùn fallais*. ("The cross of the sword be on your head, you brute – you're the pee of sweat.") And, quickly grasping his great two-handed sword by the blade, he raises it aloft and bangs String Lug on the head with its crossed hilt.

Campbell calls this a 'potent spell', and it looks to me like a combination of sanctification and of reversing an insult to turn threat into satire – any liquid coming out of String Lug can only be sweat, thanks to the heat of the fire beneath him. This is pure pantomime, and it will have gone down a treat in the ceilidh

house, especially one with a leaky roof. “Oh yes I will!” “Oh no you won’t!”

So the Devil (for it is he) assumes his proper shape, and asks these wild summoners what they want with him. Ailein mac Eachainn asks for *Conach is clann* (“Prosperity and children”). Lachlann Odhar asks for *Cuid is conach, is saoghal fada ’na cheann* (“Property and prosperity, and long life as well”).

The Devil rushes out through the door crying, *Conach! Conach! Conach!* (“Prosperity! Prosperity! Prosperity!”) Why he does this I’m not quite sure, but I dare say the scene was acted out to great comic effect in the ceilidh house. *Conach* is potentially a pun meaning ‘dog-like’, perhaps that has something to do with it. Anyway both men get what they ask, but according to some tellings of the tale they have to repeat the *taghairm* every year to keep the Devil to his word.

There is a postscript, thanks no doubt to an appeal on the lines of “Tell us more!” Lachlann Odhar is on his deathbed, and his nephew comes to see him. It’s quite common to find in traditional Gaelic stories and poems that the old folk are pagans while the members of a newer generation have found religion; that’s what we have here. In an effort to frighten his uncle into seeing the light, the young man goes through a stream near the house and comes in squelching. *A mhic mo pheathar*, says Lachlann, *car son a tha bogan ad’ bhròig?* (“Son of my sister, why is there something soft in your shoe?”)

His nephew explains that on his way to the house he met the ghosts of two men long since dead – the very two who had performed the *taghairm* with his uncle. To get away from them, he says, he had to cross the running stream several times, but not before they managed to tell him they were living in Hell these days, but that they had come to fetch Lachlann, who would have to go along with them unless he repented.

Lachlann listens to this and declares: *Nam bithinn fhìn ’s mo dhà chompanach ann, ’s trì groilleinean againn nach lùbadh ’s nach briseadh, cha bhiodh deamhan a-staigh nach cuireamaid an làimh.* (“If I were there with my two comrades, and we had three short swords that would neither bend nor break, there would not be a demon in the place that we wouldn’t take prisoner.”) *Groillein* or *greidlean* is a wonderful word meaning a wooden girdle- or griddle-stick for baking oatcakes on the fire, and so also a throwaway word for a sword when you want to make fighting sound easy. So in the end Lachlann’s nephew gives up all hopes of leading him to repentance.

And there’s more. A man from the isle of Coll comes to see him with his wife. In due course Lachlann enquires what has brought them. *A dh’iarraidh*, says the Coll man, *seisreach each a fhuair thu fhéin on Donas.* (“To request a ploughteam of horses that you yourself got from the devil.”) Whether they want to borrow them or keep them I’m not sure, but it sounds like the *faighe* or ‘genteel begging’ that I wrote about here a year or two ago.

Lachlann refuses the request and the pair go on their way, but Lachlann sends someone to listen to what they might be saying to each other. The wife says, *Nach b’ fhiadhaich an t-sùil bh’ aig an duin’ ud!* (“What a wild eye yon man had!”)

Her husband replies, *Saoil am b’i sùil an t-slabhcain seach sùil an t-saighdeir mar bu chòir?* (“Do you suppose it was the eye of a miser rather than the eye of a soldier as should be?”)

When this was reported to Lachlann, he called the Coll man back and gave him the horses.

Next time I will discuss two other ways of performing the *taghairm* – walloping a man against a river bank as if he were a log of wood, and wrapping him up in a bull’s hide.

WHFP 29 June 2001