

The summons by water

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I described a rite of black magic known as the *taghairm* or ‘summons’, which, according to certain tall tales much enjoyed in the ceilidh-house, involved roasting cats alive to summon the Devil and then holding him to ransom to ensure wealth and prosperity for the summoners.

In his book ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland’ (1900), John Gregorson Campbell told the Argyll version of the tale, where the summoners appear to have been two MacLeans called Lachlann Odhar and Ailein mac Eachainn, along with a servant who (presumably) stoked the fire and strung up the struggling cats.

Campbell pointed out that the Lochaber version, which was almost identical, ascribed the performance to the famous freebooter Ailein nan Creach (‘Allan of the Raids’), the twelfth chief of the Camerons, and gave the location as a place known ever since as *Dail nan Cat*, the Cats’ Field. Ailein derived his name, says Campbell, “from having lifted a creach for every year of his life, and one for every quarter he was in his mother’s womb. He died at the age of 34.”

I now find in John Stewart’s history of the Camerons that the *taghairm* was said in Lochaber to have been performed by Allan’s son Ewen, the thirteenth chief, who died in 1546 – he was tried and beheaded, and his head fixed over the burgh gates of Elgin. Stewart says that the roasting of cats alive was a common practice among primitive people.

According to one version of the story, following the death of his son Ewen sent his priest and confessor (a MacPhail from Corpach, seemingly) to ask the Pope how he should atone for his sins, and the Pope said that he must build six churches to six saints. This he did, and the remains of the churches can be traced to this day at Kilmallie, Kildonan, Kilachoireil, Kilchoan (Knoydart), Kilkellan (Laggan) and Arisaig.

According to another version, however, it was not the Pope whom Allan consulted at all but Gormshuil the Witch of Moy. “The penance ordained required that he should go to a field, since called *Dail a’ chait*, and there he should build a hut; he was to take one servant or *gille* with him and a cat. He was to run a spit through the non-vital parts of the cat, and the gillie was to roast the cat over a fire, whilst he guarded the entrance of the hut against all intruders. He would then be told how he could atone.”

What happens next resembles the Mull version. Cat after cat appears and demands that their cousin be released from torture, but Ewen keeps them at bay with his sword. When the chief of all the cats appears he is called not *Cluas an Leoghaidh* (‘String Lug’) but *Cam Dubh* (‘Black Crook’). Ewen says that he will release the cat if Cam Dubh tells him how to get forgiveness for his misdeeds, and Cam Dubh tells him, surprisingly, to build six churches to atone for his six great forays. “Ewen immediately ordered the release of the cat, which dashed from the hut, and hurled itself over a cliff into a deep pool in the river Lochy. This pool, which is close to Torcastle, has been known ever since as *Poll a’ chait* (The Cat Pool). The part roasted cat was followed by the whole tribe of cats; they swam down the Lochy and dispersed to their various homes!”

The story sounds to me like a Protestant slander on the pre-Reformation church. How else can we explain the Devil telling Ewen to atone for his sins by building churches? For the Witch of Moy read an abbess, for cats read priests and bishops, for the Black Crook read His Holiness of Rome. Mind you, I have been reading a biography of Cardinal Beaton (Tom Winning’s predecessor bar one), who was assassinated the same year Ewen was executed, and I have to say that the slander was richly deserved. Perhaps he and not the Pope was the ‘Black Crook’.

Campbell also appears to have got the cat-roasting story from Skye informants. “The third instance of its performance,” he says, “was by some of the ‘children of Quithen’ (*Clann ’ic Cuithen*), a small sept in Skye, now absorbed, as so many minor septs have been, into the great family of the Macdonalds. The scene was a natural cavity called the ‘Make-believe Cave’ (*an Eaglais Bhréige*), on East Side, Skye. There is the appearance of an altar beside this church, and the locality accords well with the alleged rite.”

He is talking here about the MacQueens, of whom he goes on to say: “The race have not borne a good reputation, if any value is to be attached to a rhyme concerning them and other

minor septs in Skye.” He gives this as:

*Clann 'ic Cuthain chuir nam briag,
Clann 'ic Cuithein chur an t-sodail,
Clann 'ic Mhannain chuir na braide
Ged nach b'fhad aid na cas biodaig.*

I think it can be translated: “MacCowans are best at telling lies, / And MacQueens at flattery, / Buchanans make terrific thieves / Though no bigger than a dagger haft!”

As early as 1703 Martin Martin, in his ‘Description of the Western Islands’, had mentioned the same connection between the East Side and the *taghairm*, but he put it very differently: “I had an account from the most intelligent and judicious men in the isle of Skye that about sixty-two years ago the oracle was thus consulted only once, and that was in the parish of Kilmartin, on the east side, by a wicked and mischievous race of people, who are now extinguished, both root and branch.” By Kilmartin he means roughly what we would now call Staffin.

Now at this point there is a complication, but fortunately it leads me into the two other methods of performing the *taghairm*, or rather of ‘consulting an invisible oracle’, as Martin puts it. Martin says that there are, or rather were, three ways of doing it, of which roasting cats is the last. “The first,” he says, “was by a company of men, one of whom being detached by lot, was afterwards carried to a river, which was the boundary between two villages; four of the company laid hold on him, and having shut his eyes, they took him by the legs and arms, and then tossing him to and again, struck his hips with force against the bank. One of them cried out, ‘What is it you have got here?’

“Another answers, ‘A log of birchwood.’

“The other cries again, ‘Let his invisible friends appear from all quarters, and let them relieve him by giving an answer to our present demands’: and in a few minutes after, a number of little creatures came from the sea, who answered the question and disappeared suddenly.

“The man was then set at liberty, and they all returned home to take their measures according to the prediction of their false prophets; but the poor deluded fools were abused, for the answer was still ambiguous. This was always practised in the night, and may literally be called the works of darkness.”

With this we can compare a ritual described in the memoirs of John Ramsay of Ochtertyre (1736–1814), which were published in 1888 under the title ‘Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century’. Ramsay calls it *taghairm an uisge* (‘summons by water’) and says it was last practised by ‘a tenant of the name of McCurdhean’ – a misprint, obviously, for McCuidhean or MacQueen. “He lived,” says Ramsay, “in the isle of Skye, near a beautiful cascade, on the water of *Eas-bhercraig*; and when consulted on any matter of consequence, he covered his whole body with a cow’s hide, and placed himself between the water of the cascade and the rock. Another man attended with a heavy pole, whose office it was to give repeated strokes to the water and to the man concealed behind it, crying now and then, ‘*An maide fearna so?*’”

Ramsay translates into Scots: “Is this a stock of arn?” In English it would be: “Is this a stick of alder?” Then he continues: “This operation was continued till it was perceived that McCurdhean was frantic or furious; and he was then thought in a condition to answer the most important questions. He was frequently consulted about futurity, and his responses were attended to, as proceeding from something more than human.”

Now I don’t know of any other accounts of ‘the summons by water’, so all I can do is try to make some sense of these two. First of all, the summoner is placed in a state of inbetweenness: standing either in a river that formed a parish boundary, or between a waterfall and the rock behind it. Secondly, he is in darkness, either through his eyes having been shut (presumably by means of a blindfold) or by covering his whole body in a cow’s hide. Martin says the ritual was always practised at night anyway.

Thirdly, he is repeatedly assaulted, either by being held by the arms and legs and crashed by the hips against the riverbank, or by being thumped with a heavy pole through the waterfall. And fourthly, he is brainwashed by his tormentors, it seems, into believing that he is made of wood. Says one man in Martin’s account: “What is it you have got here?”

“A log of birchwood,” says another.

“Is this a stick of alder?” says Ramsay’s torturer.

It is profoundly psychological. It means, I think, that before he can become an oracle the human being must truly believe that he is no longer flesh and blood but a humble tree instead. I don’t think it can be coincidence that both of these timbers, alder and birch, were traditionally regarded as servile (*daor*) rather than noble (*saor*). Perhaps any of the servile timbers (alder, aspen, birch, briar, elder, elm, hawthorn, rowan and whitethorn) could have been named in the ritual; I could be wrong, but my impression is that many of these nine have the kind of otherworld or black-magic associations which are foreign to the eight noble ones (apple, ash, blackthorn, fir, hazel, oak, woodbine and yew).

Fifthly and finally, then, the combination of violent assault and mortified flesh turns the victim into an oracle. The two writers treat this differently, however. In Martin’s account the first torturer says: “Let his invisible friends appear from all quarters, and let them relieve him by giving an answer to our present demands.”

This is very reminiscent of the way the cats come to the aid of their cousin who is roasting on the spit. Says Martin: “In a few minutes after, a number of little creatures came from the sea, who answered the question and disappeared suddenly.”

In other words, the voices are regarded as physically distinct from the voice of the victim. Compare Ramsay: “This operation was continued till it was perceived that McCurdhean was frantic or furious; and he was then thought in a condition to answer the most important questions. He was frequently consulted about futurity, and his responses were attended to, as proceeding from something more than human.”

Here again, then, the voices are stated to be superhuman, but this time it is acknowledged to be because the victim has entered a state of psychic trance. In other words MacQueen is a shaman, and indeed the route to spirit-possession which he has taken, along with the purpose for which he has taken it, displays much in common with shamanic rituals worldwide.

I will come to the third form of *taghairm* next time, but I will end here with Ramsay’s concluding words on the subject of the summons by water. “A degree of frenzy seems to have been affected by those Highland seers not unlike the description we have of the Sibyl,” he says, and he ends with some lines in Latin from Book 6 of Virgil’s ‘Aeneid’ which, in John Dryden’s magnificent translation, go like this:

*Struggling in vain, impatient of her load,
And lab’ring underneath the pond’rous god,
The more she strove to shake him from her breast,
With more and far superior force he press’d;
Commands his entrance, and, without control,
Usurps her organs and inspires her soul.*

WHFP 13 July 2001