

The wrapping in the hide

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last two articles I presented two of the three ways in which a rite of black magic called the *taghairm* or ‘summons’ was said to have been practised in Gaelic Scotland. Its aim was to summon an oracle to foretell the future. Cats were roasted alive until the Devil appeared, or, in the ‘summons by water’, a man was placed in running water and physically assaulted until he entered a state of shamanic trance.

The third method appears on the face of it to be a survival of a pre-Christian Irish ritual called the *tairbh-fheis*. This ‘bull feast’ (or ‘bull sleep’) was a means of choosing a king. A white bull was killed, and a man ate his fill of its flesh and drank its broth. After an incantation had been said over him by four druids, he lay down to sleep in its hide, and the person he saw in his sleep was the future king.

An account of a ritual bearing remarkable similarities to this was given by Martin Martin in his ‘Description of the Western Islands’ of 1703. It was performed, he said, “by a party of men who first retired to solitary places, remote from any house, and there they singled out one of their number, and wrapt him in a big cow’s hide, which they folded about him; his whole body was covered with it except his head, and so left in this posture all night until his invisible friends relieved him by giving a proper answer to the question in hand, which he received, as he fancied, from several persons that he found about him all that time.

“His consorts returned to him at break of day, and then he communicated his news to them, which often proved fatal to those concerned in such unwarrantable enquiries.”

Martin cites a specific instance of the ritual being performed. It involved a man in Lewis called ‘John Erach’ – *Iain Hearach*, I suppose, which was most likely in those days to mean that he had been fostered in Harris. Says Martin: “Mr Alexander Cooper, present minister of North Uist, told me that one John Erach, in the isle of Lewis, assured him it was his fate to have been led by his curiosity with some who consulted this oracle, and that he was a night within the hide, as above mentioned; during which time he felt and heard such terrible things that he could [not?] express them: the impression it made on him was such as could never go off, and he said that for a thousand worlds he would never again be concerned in the like performance, for this had disordered him to a high degree.

“He confessed it ingenuously, and with an air of great remorse, and seemed to be very penitent under a just sense of so great a crime. He declared this about five years since, and is still living in the Lewis, for anything I know.”

The Welshman Thomas Pennant, in an account of his tour in Scotland in 1772, describes the *taghairm* in a way that suggests both the ‘summons by water’ and the ‘wrapping in the hide’. He sets it in Trotternish in Skye and says that it was practised by ‘a family who pretended to oracular knowledge’ – presumably a reference to the MacQueens. “In this country is a vast cataract, whose waters falling from a high rock, jet so far as to form a dry hollow beneath, between them and the precipice.

“One of these impostors was sowed up in the hide of an ox, and to add terror to ceremony, was placed in this concavity: the trembling enquirer was brought to the place, where the shade and the roaring of the waters, increased the dread of the occasion. The question is put, and the person in the hide delivers his answer, and so ends this species of divination styled *taghairm*.”

By contrast, Pennant’s contemporary John Ramsay of Ochtertyre (1736–1814), whose memoirs were published in 1888 under the title ‘Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century’, keeps the two kinds of summons quite separate. Last week I quoted his account of the ‘summons by water’, which he says quite clearly was practised by the MacQueens; here now is his account of the wrapping in the hide, which he says ‘was used in Skye not many years ago’. He begins: “The diviner covered himself with a cow’s hide, and repaired at night into some hollow-sounding cave, whither the person who wanted to consult him followed soon after all alone.

“At the mouth of the cave he proposed aloud the questions of which he wanted a solution, and the man within pronounced the responses. Indeed the awful silence of night, the gloominess of the place, and the sounding of the cave, must have often produced in both a fit of terror not less suspensive of the due exercise of reason than fury or madness. I need hardly

remind my learned readers that some of the most celebrated heathen oracles were given in caves.”

Now Martin’s and Pennant’s books were well known to Sir Walter Scott. As for Ramsay, Scott knew him so well that in due course he modelled upon him the delightful character of Jonathan Oldbuck, ‘The Antiquary’ of the novel of the same name. In 1810, however, four years before Ramsay’s death, and long before he wrote ‘The Antiquary’, Scott completed his edition of the works of Dryden (whom I quoted at the end of my last article) and began his long poem ‘The Lady of the Lake’. An instant best-seller, it introduced the term *taghairm* to an adoring public which drooled over every word.

*. . . Last evening-tide
Brian an augury hath tried,
Of that dread kind which must not be
Unless in dread extremity,
The Taghairm called; by which, afar,
Our sires foresaw the events of war.
Duncraggan’s milk-white bull they slew . . .*

The scenario picked by Scott for ‘the wrapping in the hide’ turns out to be the composite one presented by Pennant.

*. . . His reeking hide
They stretched the cataract beside,
Whose waters their wild tumult toss
Adown the black and craggy boss
Of that huge cliff, whose ample verge
Tradition calls the Hero’s Targe.*

However, Scott knew his folklore well enough. In a note he describes the *taghairm* like this: “A person was wrapped up in the skin of a newly-slain bullock, and deposited beside a water-fall, or at the bottom of a precipice, or in some other strange, wild, and unusual situation, where the scenery around him suggested nothing but objects of horror. In this situation he revolved in his mind the question proposed, and whatever was impressed upon him by his exalted imagination, passed for the inspiration of the disembodied spirits, who haunt these desolate recesses.”

*Crouched on a shelve beneath its brink
Close where the thundering torrents sink,
Rocking beneath their headlong sway,
And drizzled by the ceaseless spray,
Midst groan of rock, and roar of stream,
The wizard waits prophetic dream . . .*

The idea of the cave behind the waterfall was picked up and used by James Fenimore Cooper in his book ‘The Last of the Mohicans’ of 1826, in which ‘The Lady of the Lake’ is directly quoted. As for the outcome, it is placed by Scott in the mouth of the wizard Brian himself:

*“The shapes that sought my fearful couch,
An human tongue may ne’er avouch;
No mortal man, — save he, who, bred
Between the living and the dead,
Is gifted beyond nature’s law, —
Had e’er survived to say he saw.
At length the fateful answer came,
In characters of living flame!
Not spoke in word, nor blazed in scroll,
But borne and branded on my soul; —
WHICH SPILLS THE FOREMOST FOEMAN’S LIFE,*

THAT PARTY CONQUERS IN THE STRIFE.”

Not a very world-shattering prediction after all Brian’s trouble, you might think, but Scott’s hero found it helpful, and his readers lapped it up. Which is why the Gaelic word *taghairm* appears as an entry even in relatively modest English dictionaries, such as Chambers’s, to this very day.

It didn’t really take off, but it might have done. As far as I can make out, Scott popularised nine words which are wholly or partly Gaelic (or at least, in one case, Celtic) in origin. In alphabetical order, they are ‘cateran’, ‘coronach’, ‘kern’, ‘pibroch’, ‘raid’, ‘sassenach’, ‘scone’, ‘slogan’ and ‘taghairm’. You will know perfectly well what at least five of these mean. If Scott had informed his readers that *taghairm* simply meant ‘a summons’ rather than ‘divination by black magic’, it might well have become as common a word in modern English as ‘scone’ or ‘slogan’!

You will find an entry on *taghairm* in Dwelly’s dictionary too. He begins by giving the meanings ‘echo’ and ‘gathering summons’, and also lists *taghairmeach* ‘echoing, responsive, oracular’. He got these definitions from Peter Macfarlane’s ‘New Vocabulary’ of 1815 and from the Highland Society of Scotland’s Gaelic dictionary of 1828, where *taghairmeach* is cited as being ‘in common speech’.

Dwelly also quotes at length from Nicolson’s ‘Gaelic Proverbs’ of 1880 (on roasting cats alive) and from Armstrong’s dictionary of 1825 (on wrapping in the hide). It’s interesting that three of these four sources date from those two decades when ‘The Lady of the Lake’ was as popular as ‘EastEnders’ is nowadays. Clearly if you didn’t know all about the *taghairm* in those days you weren’t considered much of a Gaelic expert. Armstrong, a Perthshire man who ran a boarding-school for noblemen’s sons in London, rose to the occasion. “When any important question concerning futurity arose . . . some shrewder person than his neighbours was pitched upon, to perform the part of a prophet.

“This person was wrapped in the warm smoking hide of a newly-slain ox or cow, commonly an ox, and laid at full length in the wildest recess of some lonely waterfall. The question was then put to him, and the oracle was left in solitude to consider it.

“Here he lay for some hours with his cloak of knowledge around him, and over his head, no doubt, to see the better into futurity; deafened by the incessant roaring of the torrent; every sense assailed; his body steaming; his fancy was in ferment; and whatever notion had found its way into his mind from so many sources of prophecy, it was firmly believed to have been communicated by invisible beings who were supposed to haunt such solitudes.”

This sounds knowledgeable as well as graphic, but I don’t think it reflects Perthshire tradition. There’s very little in it which doesn’t reflect Martin (“solitary places”, “invisible friends”), Pennant (“the hide of an ox”, “the roaring of the waters”), Ramsay (“consulted about futurity”) or Scott (“thundering torrents”).

In fact, I would go further and say that Scott’s ‘waterfall *taghairm*’, inspired mainly by Pennant who had set it in Skye, seems to have become the definitive one to which Armstrong felt obliged to adhere. Yet there are elements in Scott which seem to go all the way back to the original Irish *tairbh-fheis* – especially the ‘milk-white bull’.

Wasn’t it Scott’s ‘newly-slain bullock’ that put those phrases ‘warm smoking hide’ and ‘his body steaming’ into Armstrong’s mind?

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