

The bin Laden of the Gael?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE LATE John Lorne Campbell once pointed out that what he called ‘the Gaelic mind’ existed in a vertical plane, while ‘the consciousness of the modern Western world’ is on a horizontal one. You’ll find it at p. 7 of his book ‘Strange Things’ (1968); as it happens, his theory sums up today’s world crisis.

On the one hand, he explained, you have ‘a community where oral tradition and the religious sense are still very much alive’ – one in which ‘memories of men and events are often amazingly long’ and ‘there is an ever-present sense of the reality and existence of the other world of spiritual and psychic experience’. This, I am quite sure, describes the poor of the Middle East, whose understanding of the world will be influenced more by oral tradition gleaned from grandparents, village elders and religious leaders (vertical) than by formal education (horizontal). In our terms, it’s *ceilidh-house v. school*.

Campbell goes on: “On the other hand there is a standardised world where people live in a mental jumble of newspaper headlines and BBC news bulletins, forgetting yesterday’s as they read or hear today’s, worrying themselves constantly about far-away events which they cannot possibly control, where memories are so short that men often do not know the names of their grandparents, and where the only real world seems to be the everyday material one.”

By this theory, it’s their vertical plane that makes it difficult for the Pushtun (Highland) people of Afghanistan and Pakistan to sympathise with the people of New York. Seen on the horizontal plane, Osama bin Laden is criminal, evil, a psychopath, a mass murderer. Seen on the vertical one – well, I’ll tell you who he is, in terms of Gaelic tradition. He is *Tòmas Réibhear*. Thomas Rhymer.

Thomas Rhymer was a Lowland stranger who was going to save the Gael. With great patience he went from market to market buying up the horses that would make his army the best in the world. One by one he brought them to his cave. Some said it was under Tomnahurich at Inverness, others thought Dumbuck near Dumbarton. No one was quite sure. When his cavalry was complete and the time was right, his army would ride forth for the greatest battle the world had ever seen. The Clyde would run with blood (or maybe it would be the Ness). The Gael would win. The poor would be raised up. And a young king would be on the throne.

These thoughts came to my mind yesterday when I read a manuscript in Edinburgh University Library (Carmichael-Watson 470) written at Carbost in Skye in 1861 by Alexander Carmichael from Lismore. Forty years later this 29-year-old extrovert was to be famous as the author, or rather editor, of ‘*Carmina Gadelica*’. For the moment he had his job as an exciseman, his good education, his eye for the ladies, and his hobby – writing.

He loved stories, and was enthralled by ‘*West Highland Tales*’, the first volume of which had come out the previous year. He had written to its editor, J. F. Campbell, offering to collect tales in Skye, and remarking bitterly that he had travelled his home districts of Kingairloch, Appin, Benderloch and part of Lorne without hearing a single old story. For this he blamed alien landlords, farmers, factors and some of the clergy, especially those who were now in the new Free Church.

At Carbost, however, he began to make progress. He got the story of Thomas Rhymer. He explains: “John Mac Kenzie who told me this ‘story’ was the skipper of a smack belonging to my friend Mr MacLellan of Watersay, Barra. He belonged he said to the island of Coll. He was at Carbost with a cargo of furniture belonging to Mr Mac Lellan and while wind bound there I got this and only this ‘story’ extracted from him.

“He and his companion, a young man belonging to Barra, were the most unsuitable for sailors and especially for a smack that a person could possibly conceive. Each of them I should think was an inch or two at least over six feet in height, with strong muscular frames to correspond. Each had on trousers of *curainn*, loose below of course, and long jackets of *clo* with broad blue bonnets to protect their heads from the Atlantic rains.”

Dwelly gives *cùrainn* as coarse woollen cloth, flannel, serge, etc., and *clò* is homespun tweed. Anyone who has read ‘*Carmina Gadelica*’ will have noticed that Carmichael never bothered to put accents on long vowels. Clearly the habit started early. Anyway, he goes on: “They both stooped perceptibly from the crouching position they had to maintain in the ‘den’

of the smack. I saw them both often and I often thought how well they would suit the front ranks either of the Scots Fusilier Guards or one of our noble Highland regiments!

“With few honourable exceptions Highland proprietors prefer sheep and deer to men, and as a necessary consequence there are no Highlanders left to fill the ranks of the Highland regiment. And as a necessary consequence the ranks of the Highland regiments are recruited from the scum and strippings of the large cities and not from the brawny hardy wights of the Scottish Highlands. Indeed I believe that but few of the men now in the Highland regiments have ever seen *Tir nan gleann ’s nam beann ’s nan gaisgeach* – ‘the land of the glens the hills and the heroes.’

“These poor shauchling spindleshanks may possibly feel themselves inspired ‘to do and to dare’ because they occupy the place of the descendants of those who made the invincibles of Rome bite the dust and those of Napoleon reel in their steel coverlets. If so, poor souls, they are welcome to it!

“But to our purpose: While John Mac Kenzie was wind bound at Carbost a number of boys used to go out to the smack at night and there they would remain till nearly bed time, to the great anxiety of their dear mammas, listening to all the wild legends of *Iain mor* – ‘big John’, and his equally big companion. These big men were to these little boys as gentle as lambs and they asked no better companions. I was on friendly terms with them and did all I could to get at some of the wild and wonderful legends which the boys told me ‘*Iain mor*’ and his companion were telling them every night; but all to no purpose.

“It was well known – for it could not be concealed – that ‘Maighstir Carmicheil,’ or ‘Gaidsear an fheile,’ was always writing down whatever he could hear, for some mysterious purpose, possibly for printing them and exposing their names for telling the ‘foolish tales.’ And of course it would not do to let him hear anything.”

Our *gaidsear an fheile* (kilted exciseman) was clearly determined to be a folklorist if it killed him. He tried winding MacKenzie up a little. “Is this smack a good sailor – I think I have heard shies?”

The word behind ‘shies’ (‘jibes’) was probably *slaicean*. MacKenzie rose to the bait. “There is no a better that ever breasted a wave in a strong breeze,” he declared. “But it is only when others require reefing or are perhaps even thinking of taking shelter from the storm that this one – *an te so* – shews what stuff she is – *a sheallas i gu de an stuth a th’ innnte*.”

Carmichael is reproducing the key words and phrases of the original, just as I do when telling stories in ‘The Quern-Dust Calendar’. MacKenzie goes on: “Not longer ago than the week before last we had a trial between herself and the Doctor’s boat (Dr MacGillvary — — brother-in-law to Mr MacLellan.) We were bringing cattle from — — and the Doctor was steering his own boat and indeed not a bad hand is he at the helm.”

Carmichael is editing out the names of places. MacKenzie continues: “The Doctor’s boat is a beautiful boat and he is very proud of her and he keeps her in the order of a yacht. She goes like a cutter in a smooth sea and gentle breeze but is nothing to this one – or this boat, in a gale, or a storm. Well, we left, each boat full of cattle and a bad cargo – *luc* – they are.”

Another Carmichaelism – *luc* for *luchd*, ‘cargo’. Back to MacKenzie: “I myself was at the helm and — — was at the sails. There was on the sea a grin, or foam, *cair*, when we left the Island and if there was it wasn’t long till it grew into a regular storm.”

Cair should read *càir*. MacKenzie: “*Bha gh*— The wind was fair on our side a little over our shoulder and the Doctor’s boat was well on right ahead of us. And gallantly did the Doctor strive to keep his position; but it was no use. The seas was running mountains high – it is awful the sea that rises from the Western ocean – *an cuan an Iar* – that we could hardly see each other at times and the Doctor’s boat was taking in too much water to be comfortable (safe?) so the Doctor had to take in another reef while we still carried on under full sail.

“We soon passed the Doctor and my only fear was that she (the smack) would send the mast over her side.”

The story ends there, abruptly, but it doesn’t matter because we know that MacKenzie lived to tell the tale – and an older tale as well, for on 8 January 1861 Carmichael wrote down his version of ‘Thomas Rhymer’. A clue as to why MacKenzie relented thus far was given by Carmichael when he wrote it out again five years later: “Note – This is one of those stories which are half believed in by some persons who deem themselves above common *sgialacs*. Lochmaddy N. Uist 1st March 1866.”

Both versions are in Gaelic, and it is interesting to compare them. Carmichael the creative writer lurks everywhere. Words and phrases are changed to make them more old-fashioned (like *sam bith* to *air bith*) or for effect, or for clarity, or for the sake of meddling itself.

So to our story. There was once a man at the Mull Fair buying horses, and he would only take those that were allowed to run at their mother's side. He needed six, and they all had to be *blàr buidhe* – that is, as Carmichael explains, 'with a white spot on the face and the rest dun'.

He got one, the last one he is known to have bought. In due course he was noticed by a girl that used to work for him. "Oh!" says she, "there's my old employer Thomas Rhymer."

She went over to talk to him. "What eye did you recognise me with?" he replies.

"The right eye," she says. So he puts his finger on her right eye and she never saw as much as a gleam with that eye again. She had worked for him for three years and never till that day did she know that Thomas Rhymer was not of this world (*nach bu duine saoghalta e*). Although she had been seeing his court in all its splendour and beauty she had never given it a second thought (*cha do chuir i riamh umhail sam bith*). She lived for a long time afterwards in Mull and often spoke of Thomas Rhymer and his house.

Two farmers were once coming into Dumbarton. They each had two carts of meal for sale. They were met by a man with the air of a gentleman who said, "Where are you going with the meal?"

"To sell it."

"I'll buy it from you."

They agreed on a price and the gentleman asked the farmers to follow him with their carts. Following him into *Dùn Buic* (Dumbuck), they found themselves in a huge hall. It was amazingly beautiful, and they reckoned they had never seen nor heard of any place like it.

After they had deposited the meal the gentleman offered to show them around. *Mo riar fhein b'e sin an tigh!* What a house. They couldn't believe the number of men they were seeing. They were sleeping everywhere – countless numbers of them. Each had his hand under his cheek and his weapons beside him on the floor.

Thomas Rhymer (for that is who it was) told the farmers that on no account (*air na chunn iad riamh*) must they touch anything they saw. They wandered around in utter amazement. Seeing a chain coming down from the roof, one of the farmers put his finger on it and it started clinking and clanking and filling the hall with sound – *thoisich an t-slamhraidh air glingaraich 's air glingaraich (gliongarach?) agus an tigh gu leir air fuaim*. All the multitudes around them woke up and every man jumped to his feet, grabbing his weapons and shouting: *So an t-am! So an t-am!!* ("The time has come! The time has come!!")

Cha'n e fhathast, commands Thomas. "Not yet. Lie down as you were."

They lay down again. Thomas was furious at the farmer who had touched the chain and said, "Why did you do that? Didn't I ask you not to touch anything you saw?"

He escorted them out of the house and no one else has seen it since. But as *Coinneach Odhar* has said,

*'S nuair dh-eireas Tomas le chuid each
Bi'dh glaodh (eubh) nan creach mu Chluaidh.*

("When Thomas and his horses rise / Clyde will ring to cries of plunder.") On that day five hundred freeholders (*coig ciad fear fearainn shaoir*) will fall and a young king will be crowned. Happy is the man who lives after that. All will be well with Scotland from that day on. As a sign of the truth of this prediction, a woman will bear a son with seven thumbs. He will be a miller in Fearraig and will be called *muillear nan seac ordag*, 'the miller of the seven thumbs'.

Carmichael comments in English: "Fearraig I understand to be Partick near Glasgow or now rather part of Glasgow."

This miller, the story concludes, is there now and many people have seen him. *Tha am muillear so ann gun teagaibh. Agus 's iomadh fear a chunnaic e.*

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