

The two Easter beetles

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“THE travellers believe that Jesus Christ knew that there was goin to be a crucifixion an He took off, an He went off on His own where no one would find Him in His wanderin. An He passed by this field where the people wis cuttin the corn wi the sickles, an He stopped an He spoke tae the men. He says, ‘If anybody passes by here an asks fir Jesus of Nazareth,’ he says, ‘tell them yes, A passed by when ye were cuttin the corn. Tell them the truth.’

“An they said, ‘Yes, we’ll tell them the truth. If anyone comes lookin fir You tomorrow we’ll tell them the truth, tell them we were cuttin the corn.’

“An lo an behold, the next day, when the troops came tae look fir Him, they came tae the men who were in the fields; they were workin in the fields. An they said, ‘Did ye see a man called Jesus of Nazareth passin by here?’

“‘Yes,’ he said, ‘He passed by here.’

“‘When did he pass by?’

“He said, ‘He passed by when we were cuttin the corn.’

“So naturally one looked at the other – maybe there wis six or maybe seven, maybe eight o them – looked at the other an says, ‘That must be a long, long while ago,’ he says, ‘when He passed by.’ He says, ‘Look at the corn. It’s all stacked – cut, sheaved an stacked, in stacks, ready fir winter.’ He says, ‘It must have been a long, long time ago when He passed by here.’

“An the black beetle come up oot the earth, an he stopped in front o the troops an he said, he said, ‘He passed by here yesterday. Yesterday He passed by.’

“An fae that day on for evermore, to the end of Eternity, the beetle remains blind an cannot see; it has no eyes of any description. That wis his punishment fir tellin on Jesus Christ Almighty.”

Thus did the traveller Duncan Williamson tell the story of ‘Why the Beetle is Blind’ in 1978. I’ve taken it from ‘Tocher’ no. 33, and I hope the editors won’t mind. It’s a wonderful story with Easter coming up, and of course Duncan tells it beautifully. Did you notice the way Christ behaved like a sensible travelling man? “He knew that there was goin to be a crucifixion an He took off, an He went off on His own where no one would find Him in His wanderin.”

Did you notice, too, that Christ performed a miracle for the reapers? Overnight the corn was cut, sheaved and stacked, ready for winter. He did the reapers a favour, and He did Himself and all of us a favour at the same time, for His miracle allowed Him to be saved without anybody telling lies, and that’s a good example for us to follow.

But then the black beetle popped up and ruined everything.

Now when the story is, or was, told in Gaelic the black beetle is not at the end but at the centre of it. Fr Allan McDonald tells the story in one of his notebooks of South Uist folklore now in Glasgow University Library. “When our Blessed Lord was being pursued by Herod’s men on his flight to Egypt,” he wrote, “the beetle is said to have spoken thus to his pursuers on the road:

Sann an-dé

Sann an-dé

Chaidh Mac Dé seachad.

(‘It’s yesterday / It’s yesterday / The Son of God passed.’) The large sharded beetle called *ceardubhan* then said:

Cuist, a bhradag!

A’ bhliadhna gus an-dé

Chaidh Mac Dé seachad.

(‘Whisht, you imp! / It’s a year ago yesterday / The Son of God passed.’) The *daol* is always trampled to death mercilessly and the *ceardubhan* is treated with respect.

“The untruthfulness of the *daol* is quite overlooked,” concludes Fr Allan, “and only his well-meaningness is considered. A fine precedent to many or an apology for telling lies.”

I think Fr Allan was getting his beetles mixed up in that last bit. It's the *ceardubhan* or scarab, not the *daol* or common beetle, whose untruthfulness is overlooked. In the Gaelic story, unlike Williamson's, Christ had failed to provide the *ceardubhan* with a miracle that allowed him to tell the truth.

Now I wouldn't want to make too much of this, but there may be a difference showing up here between Protestant and Catholic teaching on sin. In Williamson's story no lies are told, full stop. Eighth commandment. God provides. God's will is done. The Gaelic story, on the other hand, has a more Catholic approach – as the Jesuits used to say, a lie is no sin if the person you're telling it to has no right to know the truth. By the way, did you notice that Fr Allan called the *ceardubhan* a 'sharded' beetle? It means one that lives in dung, and shows that Fr Allan knew the furthest recesses of Shakespeare, cultivated man that he was, for it's in *Cymbeline* –

*And often to our comfort, shall we finde
The sharded-Beetle, in a safer hold
Then is the full-wing'd Eagle.*

Alexander Carmichael came across the same story, or one very like it. He tells us in volume 2 of 'Carmina Gadelica' that when Christ's enemies were in search of Him, they met a *daol* (grave-digger beetle) and a *ceardubhan* (dung-beetle, sacred beetle) foraging for food for their families.

The Jews asked the beetles if they had seen Christ pass that way. Proud to be asked, and anxious to please, the *daol* said: "Yes, yes! He passed here yesterday evening, when I and the people of the townland were digging a grave and burying the body of a field-mouse that had come to an untimely end."

But the *ceardubhan* said: "You lie! You lie! It was a year ago yesterday that Christ the Son passed here, when my children and I were searching for food, after the king's horse had passed."

Because of this, says Carmichael, when a *daol* is found he is always killed, but when a *ceardubhan* is found he is spared, but since he had told a lie he is turned upon his back. He wriggles and wriggles, and he may die in that position, but if he manages to right himself, it's unlawful to molest him further.

Carmichael adds, intriguingly, that in some places the *daol* is killed for a different reason – namely, that he will otherwise profane the grave of the grandmother of the person who passes him by. This fits with the use of *daol* (along with *cnuimh*, a worm or maggot) for the insect portrayed in Gaelic religious verse and elegies as the creature that devours the body in the grave. The Badenoch poet Mary MacPherson (*Bean Torra Dhamh*) says for example:

*Nì na daola cuilm den chreubhaig
'M fad 's a mhaireas reud gun chost dhith.*

("The beetles will feast upon the flesh / As long as anything unused of it remains.") And in a different extension of its use, Fr Allan himself applies it in one of his poems to whatever person is responsible for crucifying Christ.

*Tha thu bàidheil, truasail, tràcaireach
Dhan daol a tha gad cheusadh.*

("You are loving, kind and merciful / To the brute who's crucifying you.")

Ada Goodrich Freer wrote in the London 'Contemporary Review' in 1898: "Beetles are seen everywhere during Lent, possibly because this is about the winnowing time and they are disturbed in their winter quarters, and it is believed that they are specially restless at this sacred time on account of the curse upon them. The stone with which they are crushed should always be left upon the remains, otherwise they may get into a child's ear at night."

Now it was from Fr Allan's notebooks that Freer got nearly every word she ever published, but that statement might easily have been a piece of English tradition, because Opie and Tatem's 'Dictionary of Superstitions' has lots of English lore about the dung-beetle, which was clearly believed there to have magic properties. It tells us for example that Cockayne's 'Anglo-Saxon Leechdoms' prescribes this for tummy-ache: "When thou seest a

dung beetle throwing up mould, catch him along with his casting up, wave him strongly and say thrice, *Remedium facio ad ventris dolorem*, then throw the beetle over thy back away. Take care thou look not after it.”

Opie and Tatem also relay a Lincolnshire tale from 1866 about a little girl who is sent by her mother to a neighbour clutching a little paper box with the request that if she finds a black clock (beetle) she should send it round straight away.

“What does your mother want you to do with it?”

“To hing round sister Madelina’s neck, who has got king cough, that as the clock decays away, her cough may go away too.”

What is most fascinating to me, however, is that English (and Welsh) tradition is in line with ours. Over and over again, through examples ranging from 1879 to 1981, Opie and Tatem tell us that killing a dung-beetle, often called a black beetle, is held to be unlucky, but in a very particular way – it will cause rain. In 1879 Richard Jefferies wrote: “Slender beetles come forth from the cracks of the earth and run swiftly across the paths, glittering green and gold. These are locally called sun-beetles, because they appear when the sun is brightest. Be careful not to step on or kill one; for if you do it will certainly rain.” And a thirteen-year-old Swansea girl had this rhyme in 1952:

*Step on a black beetle,
It will rain;
Pick it up and bury it,
The sun will shine again.*

I’d like to finish with one of the beetle rhymes collected by Carmichael. He got a short one in Melness in Sutherland, and two versions of a longer one, one from a herd-boy called Aonas Iain Macrury at Scolpaig in North Uist, the other from a cottar called Mór Mackay out in Heisgeir nan Cailleach, of whom he says, “Her isolated little cot stood among the green grassy mounds of the ruined nunnery.”

I prefer Mackay’s version to Macrury’s because it makes more sense. In both of them the pursuers meet a *daol* and a *dealan-de* (butterfly) in the first verse. But we know from the story that what they met was a *daol* and a *ceardubhan*. In both versions the *daol* replies in the second verse, the *ceardubhan* in the third. In Macrury’s the *ceardubhan* is called *cearr-dubhan feach*, which I don’t understand, but in Mackay’s it’s called *cearran cre nan each*. Not only does this make sense, but it provides the solution to the *dealan-de* puzzle. For *dealan-de* read *cearran cre*, and all falls into place, like this:

*Duair bha Crìosta fo choill
Agus naimhdean air a dhéidh,
Se thuirf faochaire na foill
Ris an daol ’s an cearran cré,*

*“Am facas seach an-diugh no ’raoir
Mac mo ghaoil-sa, Mac Dé?”
“Chunna, chunna,” ors an daol,
“Mac na saorsa seach an-dé.”*

*“Breug! Breug! Breug!”
Orsa cearran cré nan each,
“A’ bhliadhna mhór chun an-dé
Chaidh Mac Dé seach.”*

(“When Christ became an outlaw / With enemies pursuing Him, / The cheating rogue said to the beetle / And the scarab of the clay, / “Have you seen today or last night passing / The lad I love, God’s Son?” / “I saw, I saw,” said the beetle, / “The Son of Redemption passing yesterday.” / “A lie! A lie! A lie!” / Said the clay scarab of the horses, / “It’s a full year ago yesterday / That God’s Son went passing by.”)

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