

Why the duck is blessed

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I ENJOY walking down by the river near where I live. It's full of ducks and no matter how I'm feeling at the start, by the time I've watched their antics for a bit I'm in a good mood.

Those birds have a sense of humour superior to most humans'. You can tell it from the way they zoom in for a spectacular river-landing against the current, all splashing and rudder-wake. And from how they sit looking so poised and serene while flashing down the rapids, bobbing up and down like a cork.

Most hilarious of all is the delight which they obviously take in diving underwater as soon as they see you coming, causing you to stare entranced at the spot where they suddenly disappeared – then resurfacing somewhere totally different in their normal horizontal position, preceding demurely at their customary two-and-a-half knots as if they had never been away.

Unlike the moody heron who just stands there motionless for hours on end, the ducks have a highly developed sense of the ridiculous. From being dignified and graceful, suddenly their feathery bottoms are pointing skywards as they investigate unseen delicacies on the river-bed. Usually it's synchronised feathery bottoms, three or four in a row like at the Olympics. And they enjoy nothing better than to puncture the serenity of a beautiful day on the river with the raucous satire of their quacking, be it in squabble or in soliloque.

Some of it may have something to do with the universal concerns of hunting, gathering and mating. But mostly it seems like nothing more or less than joi-de-vivre. That's why, when I'm watching them, the words of Alexander Carmichael often come into my mind. The duck, he wrote, has three lives and three joys – the joy of earth, the joy of air, and the joy of water. "Nay," he adds, "a fourth life and a fourth joy – the joy of under the water."

Carmichael says this in volume 2 of 'Carmina Gadelica', and for good reason. He has been telling the story of the two beetles which I told here before Easter, and it brings to his mind the story of the hens and the ducks, which, he points out, was also current in Uist. Christ's enemies, he says, were pursuing Him to try to kill Him, and He came to a townland where a crofter was on a hillock winnowing his corn. "Hide under here," says the crofter, and he pushes Christ in under his heap of grain.

The crofter then goes into his barn to get more grain to pile over Christ. While he is away, the hens and ducks have a field-day plundering this delicious heap of corn under which the Saviour of mankind is hidden. They go round the heap and over the top of it, gorging themselves as quickly as they can. But there is a difference between them. The ducks are content just to eat the corn and trample it down, as is their wont. But the hens insist on scattering it about with their feet, with the result that by the time the crofter comes back Jesus has been exposed to view.

As a consequence of her disservice to Our Lord in His hour of need, says Carmichael, it was left as a heritage to the hen and all her descendants that she should be hen-toed, that she should be confined to land, that she should dislike hail, rain, sleet and snow, that she should dread thunder and lightning, that dust and not water should be her bath, that she should have no oil with which to anoint herself and preen her feathers, and that she should have only one life and only one joy in life – the joy of land.

Hence the saying about a wise man, I suppose – *Cha reic e chearc ris an latha fhliuch*. "He won't sell his hen on a rainy day."

By contrast, says Carmichael, since the duck was willing to eat the corn without exposing the person of Christ, it was left to her and her descendants that she should be web-footed, that she should not be confined to land, that she should rejoice in hail and rain and sleet and snow (and even in thunder and lightning), that water and not dust should be her bath, that she should have oil with which to anoint herself and preen her feathers, that she should be most dressed when the hen was most draggled, that she should be most joyous when the hen was most miserable, that she should be most hopeful when the hen was in most despair, that she should be most happy when the hen was in most dread, and that she should dance with joy when the hen quaked with fear.

This is wonderful stuff from Carmichael, beautifully written; I look forward to finding it in the original some fine day. What Carmichael does supply in Gaelic is a couple of rhymes

to back it up. First there's the saying:

*Tha do chridh' air chrith
Mar chirc ri torrainn.*

("Your heart is quivering / Like a hen in thunder.") The opposite, says Carmichael, is true of the duck, for when she hears thunder she rejoices and dances to her own *port á bial* – it's nice to think of a duck's quacking as a *port á bial!* – which gave rise to the saying,

*Is coltach thu ri tunnaig
'S a fiughair ri torrainn!*

("You are like a duck / Looking forward to thunder!")

Fr Allan McDonald tells much the same story in his folklore papers. Our Lord, he says, once sought shelter in a barn, where He lay down among some straw that was scattered over the grain. The hen scratched away the straw, but the duck covered Him up again. So the duck is blessed.

A similar story, says Fr Allan, is told of the sheep and the goat. Christ comes one day to a stream that is swollen with heavy rain. There is a goat by the bank; He asks it to take Him across, but it refuses. Then there comes a sheep, which willingly takes up the sacred burden. So the goat is cursed while the sheep is blessed. I suppose this reflects the differing status of the two animals in traditional Gaelic society – goats were kept by the poorest of the poor and grazed in rocky places, while sheep were pampered little animals which lived around the house and grazed with the cows.

Fr Allan also has this to say: "In the islands a duck always scratches from the top of a heap, but the hen from the bottom or edge." Now this seems to be at variance with tradition – surely if the hen had been scratching from the edge of the heap where Christ was hidden, and the duck from the top, it's the duck and not the hen who would have exposed Him to view. My suspicion that something is wrong with Fr Allan's information is proved correct by a version of the story recorded by Angus John MacDonald from Roderick MacDonald, Carnoch, North Uist, in 1967, and printed in the very first number of 'Tocher' in 1971. The Roman soldiers were in pursuit of Christ, said Roderick, and everywhere they came they would say, *An fhaca sibh colas Mac Dhé a' dol seachad ann a-sheo?* "Have you seen the likeness of the Son of God going past here?"

No one would tell them the truth – some people just said they hadn't, others said they had seen him a week ago even if He'd been there the day before.

One day Christ comes upon some men who are *a' càthadh shìl*, as Roderick said – winnowing grain. *Tha na saighdeirean Ròmanach air mo thòir*, says the Son of God, *'s gun iad fad' air dheireadh orm*. "The Roman soldiers are after me, and they aren't far behind."

O ge-tà, they reply, *chan fhaigh iad thu air an turas seo idir!* "Oh, but they won't find You this time!" And they put Him lying face down (*'na shìneadh air a bheul fodha*) and start winnowing grain over Him.

By the time the soldiers come there is a big conical heap of grain (*tòrr mór bireach de shìol*) on top of Him. *Am faca sibh Mac Dhé a' dol seachad ann a-sheo?* they ask. "Have you seen the Son of God going past here?"

Chunnaic, they reply, *tha trì Diar-Daoin as déidh a-chéile bho chaidh Mac Dhé seachad*. "Yes, it's three Thursdays in a row since the Son of God passed by."

Now the ducks come and they start eating the grain at the edge of the heap (*aig iomall an tòir*), but then the hens come and they proceed straight to the top of the heap (*dìreach a mhullach an tòir*) and begin to scatter it with their feet. They are scattering more and more, and the men are terrified that they will uncover Christ right under the soldiers' eyes. But at last the soldiers go away. Christ has only just escaped and no more (*shàbhail Crìosta 's cha robh an còrr ann*).

Apparently the hens were punished (*thàinig peanaist air na cearcan*), said Roderick, for how near they came to putting Christ into the hands of His greatest enemy (*a dhearg nàmhaid*) that day. *Se 'n pheanaiste sean gun drùdhadh gach meall a thigeadh às an adhar orra, ach chun an latha diugh cha dèan na meallan ach sleamhnachadh far itean nan tunnagan 's cha dhrùdh iad idir orra*. "That punishment is that every shower that might

come down from the sky would drench them to the skin, but to this day the showers will only slip off the ducks' feathers and won't soak them at all."

The difference is borne out in other traditions which I have been able to find about hens and ducks. There are lots of Gaelic proverbs about hens but what they amount to is that they live on the dunghill, are a law unto themselves, are rather feckless, and are not highly thought of. *Cridhe na circe an gob na h-airce*. "In the beak of poverty you'll have the heart of a hen." The plucky *tunnag*, on the other hand, has this to say:

*Fà-ug, fà-ug, fà-ug,
Fà-ug, a phartain ghlais;
Mura tàrr thu ás
Brisidh mi do chas,
Fà-ug, fà-ug, fà-ug.*

("Quack, quack, quack, / Quack, grey crab; / If you don't go away / I'll break your leg, / Quack, quack, quack!")

What is most fascinating of all to me is that in English folk tradition, at least, a duck's breath was regarded as having curative qualities. Perhaps it had something to do with its healthy lifestyle; perhaps, as in Gaelic tradition, there was something sacred about it. According to Opie and Tatem's 'Dictionary of Superstitions', a deposition taken at York in 1604 stated of two women described as 'common charmers of sick folkes' that 'they use to bring white ducks or drakes, and to sett the bill thereof to the mouth of the sick person, and mumble upp their charmes in such a strange manner as is damnible and horrible'.

It was still going on much more recently. In 1853 'Notes and Queries' described how thrush was cured in Devon. "Capture the nearest duck . . . and place its mouth, wide open, within the mouth of the sufferer. The cold breath of the duck will be inhaled by the child, and the disease will gradually . . . take its departure."

'Notes and Queries' records the same cure for Ireland in 1881, with one minor-sounding alteration: "A goose . . . was brought to the little patient's side, and the bird's head was thrust into the child's open mouth, and held there for about five . . . minutes, for nine successive mornings. By that time the inflammation had disappeared."

All I need now is a Scottish example of this, and my story will be complete. Ducks or geese will do.

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