

## The eagle of Loch Tréig

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

HERE'S a seasonal story from Lochaber. It's about *Oidhche Bhealltainn*, Beltane Eve. Beltane is May-Day so *Oidhche Bhealltainn* was Tuesday night. According to the story a great golden eagle used to live at Ardvean (*Àird Mheadhoin*) by the side of Loch Tréig. For as long as she could remember she had been grey with old age, which made her feel she must surely be the oldest living creature of her time. But she often thought it would be nice to go on a trip to see if, just in case, one of her contemporaries might perhaps still be alive somewhere.

On this particular year, there came the coldest Beltane Eve she had ever felt or seen. *Thàinig an aon Oidhche Bhealltainn a b' fhuair dh'fhairich no chunnaic i riamh.* She reckoned this was as good an excuse as any to fulfil her secret ambition (*a rùn falaich a chur an gnìomh*).

So early on the morning of May-Day, *mun do bhlaic na h-eòin eile an t-uisge* (before the other birds had tasted the water), off she travelled.

Not one living creature (*dùil bheò*) did she meet but she enquired, if it had any semblance of being old (*ach nial na h-aoise bhith oirre*), *Am fac' thu Oidhche Bhealltainn riamh cho fuar ris an oidhche raoir?* "Did you ever see a Beltane Eve as cold as last night?"

But none of them had.

Never mind, it was early yet – *bha 'n latha às a thoiseach* – so on she flew without resting until she met a kindly old wren (*seann dreathan-donn còir*).

*Fàilt' air an dreathan Latha Buidhe Bealltainn*, says she. "Greetings to the wren on Lucky Beltane Day. *Am fac' thu riamh Oidhche Bhealltainn cho fuar ris an oidhche raoir?*"

But old though the wren appeared to be (*sean 's gun robh tuar agus dreach an dreathain*), he wasn't aware that he had. Not that he knew any creature older than himself, not personally anyway; but he had heard that there had been an old blacksmith bird (*seann ghobha dubh*) long since in Bunroy, and that if he were still alive it would be very typical of his kind, if there had been such a night, that he would have seen it. And he showed her the way.

The eagle thanked the wren, and flies off to the smithy at Bunroy – *togar oirre gu ceàrdach Bhun Ruaidh*. She arrived, but found nothing but *làrach fhuar*, a cold ruin. *Thriall gach mith 's gach math ach an gobha dubh, 's bha esan fhéin bho chian dall leis an aois, agus an déidh toll a dhèanamh san innean a' glanadh a ghuib.* "Rich and poor alike had gone save for the blacksmith bird, and even he was long since blind with age, and had made a hole in the anvil cleaning his beak."

She wished the blacksmith bird the compliments of the season (*Chuir i fàilte na Bealltainn air a' ghobha*) and explained the reason for her visit. *Am fac' thu riamh Oidhche Bhealltainn cho fuar ris an oidhche raoir?*

The blacksmith bird gave a sudden wretched stare (*Thug an gobha glaomadh bochd air fhéin*) and said no, he had never seen nor heard of such a thing; but that an old stag had been hanging out for goodness knows how long in Insh Forest (*gun robh seann ùdlaiche bho chionn fhios cuine tathaich Choill' Innse*) whose fur had been grey with age since he could remember fluttering around the bushes as a tiny fledgling (*gun robh a chalg air liathadh leis an aois bhon bu chuimhne leis-san a bhith 'na bhùta beag a' sgiathais air feadh nam preas*). He went on: *Bu tric leis, ùine 's aimsir an déidh sin, tighinn a-nall air chéilidh orm, a chur seachad na h-oidhche faide geamhraidh agus a thoirt sgeòil domh air cor na dùthcha. Ach sguir sin.* "For a good while after that he often came across to visit me, to pass the long winter's night and give me news of the state of the country. But that ceased.

*An turas mu dheireadh a bha e bhos, bha 'n aois cho trom iar laighe air 's gum beil eagal orm nach eil e 'n urrainn gluasad mór a dhèanamh. Thug sinn cho fad an coimhearsnachd a-chéile 's gun dèan mi, mar a thuigeas tusa, sogan ri sheann langan, tùchanach mar a thà, an uair a chluinneas mi e sa chamhanaich.* "The last time he was over, old age had got such a hold of him that I'm afraid he's scarcely able to move. We spent so long in each other's company that I take great pleasure, as you will understand, in that old roar of his, hoarse though he is, when I hear him at dawn.

*Se 'n creutair as sine tha 'n làthair an-diugh fad m' aithne 's m' eòlais. Agus ma nì thu*

*guth aige san dol seachad, innis dha fàth do thurais, agus gum fac thu mise. 'S mur d' thàinig caochladh air nì e do làn di-beatha.* “He’s the oldest living creature today to the best of my knowledge. And if you have a word with him in passing, tell him the reason for your journey, and that you’ve seen me. And unless he has changed he’ll make you welcome.”

The blacksmith bird then told the eagle of particular events that happened in the time of the chiefs whom he remembered seeing, and about the deeds of his ancestors, and about the success of his family. As they wished each other *madainn mhath* he insisted that she call again the next time she came by.

The eagle promised politely that she would, and took off for the Forest of Insh, where she found the stag crouched in the shelter of an old alder stump with icicles hanging from his nostrils – *'na chrùban am fàsgadh seann stuic fheàrna agus spideanan deighe le cuinneanan a shròine.* She gave him the Beltane greeting and explained the object of her quest. The stag was so old that he had to rest his antlers on his shoulder, but he said in a totally relaxed way (*air a mhìn-athais*) that he couldn't remember seeing such a thing.

She found him hospitable and welcoming (*faoilteach furanach*) and he enquired kindly after the blind blacksmith bird. Then they spent a while (*treallan*) reminiscing and genealogising (*air seanchas agus air sloinnteachd*), and the eagle was thinking of claiming the record for old age (*urram na h-aoise*); but as they were parting, the stag said there was a one-eyed trout (*breac cam*) in Lochan Choire na Ceanainn, whom he had got to know when he was a young calf following his mother over the Làirig Leacach from Beinn a' Bhric – Trout Mountain? *Bha smalaich na h-aoise air an uair sin fhéin,* he added, *agus ma tha ùine agad, is fiach dhut dol dh'a choimhead. Is cnacaiche gast' e.* “The infirmity of age was on him even then, and if you have time, it would be worth your while going to see him. He’s a great talker.”

Off the eagle went, and she reached the lochan. She toasted the one-eyed trout (*Chuir i 'n deoch-eòlais air a' bhreac cham*) with a sip of water and explained her quest. “Yes,” replied the trout. “I have seen another such Beltane Eve. It was so cold that, though I was hot-blooded and strong, I had to start leaping about to keep warm.”

He explained what happened next. *Sùrdag dha'n d'thugas, leumar às an uisge 's buailear mo lethcheann ris an lic dhuibh ud thall. Ach bha nimh an reothaidh cho dian 's mun d'fhuair mi mi fhèin a thoirt air m' ais gun do lean mo shùil ris an lic. 'S dh'fhàg sin an-diugh mise cam!* “One leap that I made, I jump out of the water and hit my cheek against yon black slab over there. But the sting of the frost was so hard that before I managed to get back my eye had stuck to the slab. And that’s what’s left me one-eyed to this day!”

The storyteller doesn't say so, but no doubt the eagle looks up and sees the trout's eye staring down at her from the rock. She paid the trout the honour and respect due to age (*thug i modh agus urram na h-aoise don bhreac*) and flew back to Ardvean to tell the news to her grandchildren. And as long as she could move a wing, never a Beltane Day went past, be it cold or hot, but she took off for a while to visit her old friends the wren, the blacksmith bird, the stag and the trout.

This story was written down by D. C. MacPherson (1838-80) from Bohenie in Glen Roy. I've taken it from the 'Celtic Monthly' of 1908 but I'm sure I've seen it somewhere else, published by him during his lifetime no doubt. I make no apologies for giving it at length because it's beautifully told and full of things that look and feel very old. For example, the creatures celebrate the pre-Christian festival of Beltane, and nothing Christian is mentioned at all.

But if you read my last article you'll realise that I have another reason for telling the story. I'm wondering if there's any connection between it and 'Òran na Comhachaig' – 'The Song of the Owl' by Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn, who lived and hunted by Loch Tréig in the years before 1600. The poet begins:

*A chomhachag bhochd na Sròine,  
A-nochd is brònach do leabaidh.  
Ma bha thu ann ri linn Donnghail  
Chan iongnadh ge trom leat t' aigne.*

(“O poor owl of Strone, / Sad is your bed tonight. / If you were here in Donnghail's time / It's no wonder your spirits are low.”) And the owl replies:

*Is comhaois mise don daraig  
Bha 'na faillean anns a' mhòintich.  
S iomadh linn a chuir mi romham.  
S mi comhachag bhochd na Sròine.*

("I am as old as the little oak / That was a sapling in the moor. / I've seen many a generation. / I am the poor owl of Strone.") She goes on to tell, like the blacksmith bird in the story, of the chiefs she has seen; after that the poem celebrates the mountains and the deer and speaks of the struggle between old age and death.

There are no eagles, wrens, blacksmith birds or trout in the poem, and there's no owl in the story. But I find it hard to believe that they're not connected in some way, because the eagle comes from Loch Tréig and so does the owl. Ardvean is on the western shore (or was, until it was flooded when the level was raised) while Strone is on the other side.

I think the story must have inspired the poem, not the other way round. The poem is very famous and clearly dates from a bit before 1600. So if the poem inspired the story, the story would have mentioned the owl. The story is not famous, but *could* be very old.

There are two ways for the owl to have been introduced. One is for it to have entered the story, slotting in along with the other three birds, possibly taking the place of one of them. The other is for something in the story (apart from the obvious facts that owls are wise and old) to have suggested an owl to Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh.

One candidate is the eagle herself, for the simple reason that, like the owl, she is feminine in Gaelic, while all the other creatures in the tale are masculine. The other is the blacksmith bird (mountain ouzel, water ouzel or blackbird, as Dwelly would have it). The tale says at one point: *Thug an gobha glaomadh bochd air fhéin*. "The smith gave a sudden wretched stare." Now *glaomadh* isn't given by Dwelly, but it's given by Fr Allan McDonald (D. C. MacPherson's second cousin) in the book 'Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay'. *Glaomadh*, says Fr Allan, is 'a sudden wide opening of the eyes as of a person waking suddenly'.

Could this have made Dòmhnall think of an owl?

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