

In search of a mythical owl

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A MONTH ago I told the story of the eagle of Loch Tréig. You will recall if you read it that the eagle goes to see if it can find a creature older than herself. She is directed to a wren, then a blacksmith bird, a stag, and finally a trout, who proves himself to be the oldest creature alive.

One of my aims in telling the story was to ponder the origins of the owl in the famous poem ‘Òran na Comhachaig’ (‘The Song of the Owl’), composed by Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn in the years before 1600, for Dòmhnall and his owl, like the eagle, are very much associated with Loch Tréig.

I suggested that perhaps the old blacksmith bird (*an seann ghobha dubh*), who lived in the smithy at Bunroy, had become the owl, or was thought of as being an owl, rather than a mountain ouzel, water ouzel or blackbird as given by Dwelly. For the blacksmith bird tells the eagle in the story about particular events that happened in the time of the chiefs whom he remembers seeing, just as the owl does in the poem. I also pointed out that at one point the blacksmith bird puts on a *glaomadh bochd* – a sudden wretched wide opening of the eyes. Just like an owl.

Various stories have been told to explain the owl. One of them has to do with the little loch called the Eadarloch at Fersit, which disappeared when the level of Loch Tréig was raised to provide hydro-electric power. There was a crannog in it which was used by the MacDonalds of Keppoch for councils and feasts. One of its names was *Taigh nam Fleadh*, ‘the House of the Feasts’. Ragnall Gòrach of Keppoch, who was chief from 1554 to 1587, prepares a feast on the island to which Dòmhnall is not invited. He arrives when it’s all over, and on his disconsolate way back to his beloved Creag Uanach at the south end of the loch he hears an owl hooting on Sròn na Garbh-Bheinne. To this owl he composes the poem.

A second story has it that in his old age Dòmhnall marries a young wife who doesn’t treat him well. One day she brings home a feeble old owl as a companion for him and his old dog. To this owl he composes the poem.

A third story, a pretty modern one I dare say, has it that Dòmhnall composes the poem while lying drunk in a barn at Laggan. That would make the owl a barn-owl, obviously.

A fourth tradition is that Dòmhnall is benighted at the top of Creag Uanach. He lights a fire at the foot of an old hollow tree. An owl flies out. To it he composes the poem.

However, these are stories, not myths. If we could link ‘Òran na Comhachaig’ with something that has mythic force it might help us understand the poem better. For example Dòmhnall says to the owl:

*A-nis on a tha thu aosta
Dèan-sa t’ fhaosaid ris an t-sagart
Agus innis dha gun euradh
Gach aon sgeula d’a bheil agad.*

(“Now that you are old / Make your confession to the priest / And tell him with no holding back / Everything you have to tell.”) The owl replies defiantly:

*Cha d’rinn mise braid no breugan
No cladh no tèarmann a bhriseadh;
Air m’ fhear fhéin cha d’rinn mi iomluas —
Gur cailleach bhochd ionraic mise.*

(“I’ve committed no theft, told no lies, / Violated no grave nor sanctuary; / I haven’t cheated on my husband – / I’m a poor honest old woman.”) It seems like an attack on the moral standards of present-day Keppoch leaders, whom she proceeds to compare unfavourably with their ancestors:

*Chunncas mac a’ Bhrithimh chalma
Agus Fearghas mór an gaisgeach
Agus Torradan liath na Sròine —
Sin na laoich bha dòmhail taiceil.*

(“I’ve seen the son of the valiant Judge / And great Fergus the champion / And grey-haired Torradan of Strone – / Those were the heroes sturdy and strong.”) Dòmhnall is astonished that her memories should go so far back. After all, Fergus is supposed to have been the first Gaelic king in Scotland. He replies:

*On a thòisich thu ri seanchas
S’ éiginn do leanmhainn nas fhaide.
Gun robh an triùir sin air fóghnadh
Mun robh Donnghail anns an Fhearsaid!*

(“Since you’ve started genealogising / You must be followed further. / Those three men had done their bit / Even before Donnghail lived in Fersit!”)

Clearly then it’s not so much a matter of who this old owl *is* (the stories) as who she *represents* (the myth, if there is one). She seems to represent history and morality, a morality which is neither Protestant nor Catholic. That fits the story of the eagle of Loch Tréig, so let’s return to it.

First of all, the story suggests that the eagle, wren, blacksmith bird, stag and trout are the five oldest creatures. In his 'Gaelic Proverbs' Nicolson offers this saying:

*Trì aois coin, aois eich;
Trì aois eich, aois duine;
Trì aois duine, aois féidh;
Trì aois féidh, aois firein;
Trì aois firein, aois craoibh dharaich.*

In other words, a horse is three times older than a dog, a man three times older than a horse, a deer three times older than a man, an eagle (*fior-eun*, 'true bird') three times older than a deer, and an oak-tree three times older than an eagle. The last point is acknowledged by the owl in the poem when she says:

*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'm as old as the little oak / That was a sapling in the moor. / I've seen many a generation. / I'm the wretched owl of Strone.") As for *fior-eun*, the Loch Tréig eagle was herself called this, not as a single bird who was very old but as a tribe of birds whose feathers were uniquely prized for fletching arrows. The perfect Highland bow and arrow, according to the Rev. Dr John Smith (1747-1807), a native of Glenorchy, consisted of:

*Bogha dh'iubhar Easragain,
Ite firein Locha Tréig,
Céir bhuidhe Bhaile na Gailbhinn
'S ceann bhon cheàrd MacPheidearain.*

("A bow of the yew of Easragan, / The feather of the eagle of Loch Tréig, / The yellow wax of Galway City / And an arrowhead from the smith MacPhedran.") Easragan is on the north side of Loch Etive.

There's quite a good story about this. It was told by Alexander Campbell, a Fort William solicitor, in a paper read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1905. The famous seventeenth-century Keppoch cateran, Dòmhnall Donn of Bohuntin, he said, once made a raid into Glencoe which went badly wrong. Instead of coming home with a *creach* of cattle and horses he had to flee for his life, and was hotly pursued by the Glencoe men into the heart of Lochaber.

When he reached Inverlochty he gave his pursuers the slip by fording the Lochy at a point about half a mile above the present suspension bridge. As he reached the north bank a Glencoe archer appeared on the other side and let fly an arrow at him, shouting: *Sin agad ite firein Ghlinn Iubhair!* "There's a Glenure eagle's feather for you!"

The arrow whizzed into the river-bank beside him. Quick as a flash Dòmhnall put an arrow to his own bow and fired back, shouting: *Sin agad ite firein Locha Tréig!* "There's a Loch Tréig eagle's feather for you!" It pierced the Glencoe man to his heart.

We can see then that the eagle of Loch Tréig has a pedigree, though perhaps not in quite the mythic direction that we had hoped for. If we turn however to the very first creature visited by the eagle in our story, we collide headlong with a major European myth, the tale of King Wren. It's told in German by the brothers Grimm and in Gaelic by Nicolson and J. F. Campbell. The eagle and the wren have a competition to see who can soar the highest, the winner to be King of the Birds. After climbing and climbing through the sky the eagle can see no sign of the wren and says: *Càite bheil thu, dhreathainn duinn?* "Where are you, wren?"

Tha mis' an-seo os do chionn, says the wren. "I'm here above you."

She has been perched on the eagle's back all the time!

King Wren was seen by all the peoples of Western Europe as a sacred bird whom it was extremely unlucky to kill – except at Christmas or New Year, when a party of young people in fancy costumes hunted and killed a wren and paraded it around the houses, drums beating, fifes playing. The king is dead! Long live the king!

I've just come back from a holiday in Kerry where I picked up a book called 'Green and Gold: The Wrenboys of Dingle' by Steve MacDonogh. Yes, the hunting of the wren is alive and kicking there – except that, being very politically correct, they don't have an actual wren (*dreoilín*) any more. Instead the focus of the parade is now a hobby-horse like the Welsh *Mari Lwyd* and Manx *laare vane* (our *làir bhàn*).

If you believe Sir James Frazer's 'Golden Bough', this is as important a myth as there is. "The worshipful animal," he says, "is killed with special solemnity once a year; and before or immediately after death he is promenaded from door to door, that each of his worshippers may receive a portion of the divine virtues that are supposed to emanate from the dead or dying god."

As is well known, Frazer's aim in all this, as a lapsed Free Church man from Glasgow, was to provide an anthropological context for the death and resurrection of Christ. And he quite properly finishes his chapter by pointing to the tradition of parading around the houses at Hogmanay in the Western Isles, where the place of the wren has been taken not by a hobby-horse but by the *caisean uchd* or breast-strip of a sheep or cow.

Now I'm not sure where all this has got us, except into deep waters. 'Òran na Comhachaig' is underpinned by a world of belief of which ninety-nine per cent is lost. Two such beliefs, common to many if

not most other peoples, is that the soul may take the shape of a bird, and that there was a time *an uair bha Gàidhlig aig na h-eòin*, when birds had the power of speech. Which leads me to one last story and one last point.

In his book 'Bygone Lochaber' the Rev. Somerled MacMillan tells a story about a stonemason in Fort William called Dugald MacMillan who loved to imitate the call of the thrush, not because he was particularly fond of its song but in order to tease one of his workmates, a young man from Mull called Hector who was nicknamed *Clachair a' Mhairt* ('The Cow-Mason') because he was only good for building byres. Dugald would put on his thrush-voice and sing:

*Dùghall beag, Dùghall beag, Dùghall beag,
Eachann òg, Eachann òg, Eachann òg,
Clachair a' mhairt, clachair a' mhairt, clachair a' mhairt!*

From the time of Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair on, poets liked to put the praise of their kindred into the mouth of a *smeòrach* or thrush. Why did they do that? Perhaps simply because mac Mhgr Alastair did it and his was the example they all liked to follow.

If we then ask why mac Mhgr Alastair did it, it may be that each kindred once had its own talking bird and that the thrush represented Alastair's own Clanranald MacDonalds.

Could it be that the talking bird of the Keppoch MacDonalds was that wise old hunter of the night, the owl? Or the blacksmith bird of Bunroy, which I have suggested may be one and the same? For Bunroy is at Keppoch House where the Roy meets the Spean, the heart and soul of the Keppoch *dùthchas*.

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