

A game of Chinese whispers

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“YIELD, cur!”

These words are uttered by Pistol as day dawns on the field of Agincourt. Following the stage directions ‘Alarums. Excursions. Enter French Soldier, Pistol, and Boy’, they introduce Act 4, Scene 4 of Shakespeare’s ‘King Henry V’. Thus challenged, the French soldier stammers: “Je pense que vous êtes le gentilhomme de bonne qualité.”

Picking up the last word, and trying to use the only foreign language he knows, Pistol retorts: “Quality? Callino, castore me! art thou a gentleman? what is thy name? discuss!”

“O seigneur Dieu!” the wretched Frenchman blurts out.

Pistol replies: “O, Signieur Dew should be a gentleman. / Perpend my words, O Signieur Dew, and mark: / O Signieur Dew, thou diest on point of fox / Except, O Signieur, thou do give to me / Egregious ransom.”

But what exactly is Pistol’s ‘Callino, castore me’?

As early as the eighteenth century, the great Irish editor of Shakespeare, Edward Malone, pointed out that these words were the title of ‘a Sonet of a lover in the praise of his lady, to *Calen o custure me*, sung at every line’s end’, published in 1584 – Shakespeare’s time – in a book called ‘A Handfull of Pleasant Delights’. Says Malone: “Pistol, therefore, we see, is only repeating the burden of an old song, and the words should be undoubtedly printed: ‘Quality! Calen o custure me. Art thou a gentleman, &c.’”

The twentieth-century editor of ‘A Handfull of Pleasant Delights’, Hyder Rollins, was able to establish that this English ballad ‘Calen o custure me’ made its way into the book via a letter written to John Allde on 10 March 1582. In due course the melody was published too, and in his ‘Musical Companion’ of 1673 Playford called it ‘an Irish tune’.

It might well be. In a late seventeenth century manuscript from County Fermanagh there is a poem that speaks plaintively of how women can be wooed with music. It begins:

*Mealltar bean le beagán téad.
Atá oram ’na oiréad,
Lór méad ar n-anfhorlainn as,
Daghfhoghlaím téad nár thógbhas.*

(“You can win a woman with some strings. / I most bitterly regret, / And have suffered much from it, / That I never learned to play strings well.”) The poet goes on to mention some of the melodies which he hears are much admired, and could have got him a wife if only he had been able to play them. One is called ‘Caoch an Trodair’, which probably means ‘The Scolder’s Rage’. Another is ‘Cas ar Sliabh’ – ‘Foot on a Mountain’, or ‘Turn to the Hill’.

Then there’s ‘Port na Mac Ríogh’ (‘The Princes’ Tune’), ‘Olc le hÁbhartach a Rádh’ (‘Harty Hates to Say It’), and ‘Port an Lámhchraínn do Luasgadh’, which sounds to me like ‘A Tune to Rock the Harp-Pillar’. It looks as if we’re being treated to the top ten in the charts. What’s next? You’ve guessed it . . .

*Dom anródh nár fhoghlaím mé
Seinm ‘Chailín ó Chois tSiúire’
I dtráth suain le sreing n-umha,
Nách beinn uaidh i n-aontumha!*

(“I much regret that I never learned / To play ‘Cailín ó Chois tSiúire’ / On a copper string when sleep-time came / So that I might not be unmarried!”) This at last gives us ‘Calen o custure’ in Irish, and the words mean ‘A Girl from Beside the Suir’.

The Suir rises in the mountains of Tipperary and reaches the sea at Waterford. What’s more, Allde and Shakespeare have given us an extra word, making it ‘Cailín ó Chois t-Siúire Mé’ – ‘I’m a Girl from Beside the Suir’.

Although we don’t have any more words than that, it must have been very popular in its day. A manuscript written by a Lucas Smyth in 1709-10 quotes an Irish translation of the Song of Songs which uses the refrain like this.

*Tuggach póg re póig a bhéil dhamh,
Callíon ó shruch Íordain mé.
As fearr do chíocha ná an fíon créurag,
Callíon ó shruch Íordain mé.*

This is basically S. of S. 1: 2 plus a ‘Cailín’ refrain. “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, / I’m a girl from the River Jordan. / For thy love is better than wine, / I’m a girl from the River Jordan.”

We can’t get any nearer to the Irish words of the English ballad that underlies Pistol’s ‘Callino castore me’. But Scottish Gaelic comes to the rescue, and why not? In Shakespeare’s day Ireland was ninety-five per cent Irish-speaking, Scotland was fifty per cent Gaelic-speaking, and in 1603 James VI came to rule over a United Kingdom which was, equally, about fifty per cent Celtic-speaking. There were no planters in Ulster yet, the sea was an open highway, and people came and went between the north of Ireland and the islands all the time.

There’s a whole plethora of ‘Calen o custure me’ songs in Scottish Gaelic, and they might just as easily have given rise to that English ballad known to Shakespeare. But there’s a difference. Scotland is far away from the Suir. The first half of the line is sometimes in the nominative case, *Cailin òg*, ‘Young girl’, sometimes in the vocative, *Chailin òg* or *Chailin òig*, ‘O young girl’. The second half varies even more. Sometimes it’s *a stiùradh mi*, ‘who would guide me’. Sometimes it’s *an stiùir thu mi?* ‘will you guide me?’ Sometimes it’s *nach stiùir thu mi?* ‘won’t you guide me?’ Or *gun stiùir thu mise!* ‘may you guide me!’ Or even *an stiùramaiche* ‘the guide’ or *as stiùramaiche* ‘who is guide’.

I think the reason for all this variation is that the Irish version really did come first. When *Cailín ó chois tSiúire mé* drifted north on the lips of the people, a game of Chinese whispers took place, and it turned into some weird and wonderful things – even before it left the shores of Ireland, if we can judge from Grattan Flood’s ‘A History of Irish Music’ of 1906, which states: “In the same year (1537) the Annals of Ulster place the death of O’Keenan, a famous instrumentalist – namely, Bryan son of Cormac O’Keenan – who is said to have composed the charming melody, *Cailin og a stuir me*.”

When was the game of Chinese whispers taking place? Well, it was certainly before 1689, because Murchadh Mór mac ’ic Mhurchaidh – MacKenzie of Achilty, an Easter Ross man who made a career out of the Lewis fisheries and died in that year – made a song that begins:

*Is garbh a-nochd an oidhch’ ri m’ thaobh,
A chailin òig, nach stiùir thu i?
Tha luingeas aig càch fo sheòl,
A chailin òig, nach stiùir thu i?*

(“Rough tonight is the night beside me, / O young girl, won’t you steer her? / Others have ships under sail, / O young girl, won’t you steer her?”) So even by 1689 it was a pretty meaningless refrain.

A lot of the Scottish *Cailin Òg* songs are waulking songs, and the motifs that make up the waulking song tradition were coming together between 1400 and 1700. I actually think the Chinese whispers will have taken place in the first half of that period, for two reasons. Firstly, from about 1610 the Ulster plantations broke the cultural link between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland, so it’s unlikely to have happened after that. Secondly, in his masterly analysis of the *Cailin Òg* songs in ‘Hebridean Folksongs II’, John Lorne Campbell showed that behind the waulking songs lay a lost ballad, and it certainly seems to me that if the waulking songs were coming together during the seventeenth century, the ballad must have been current during the sixteenth. But the whole process could just as easily have been happening a hundred years before that – which could bring us back to as early as 1400. We don’t know why Grattan Flood chose to father the song on Brian Ó Cianáin, but his date of c. 1500 may be spot on.

Dr Campbell’s reconstruction runs like this. A young man meets a girl. She swears to be faithful to him. The man is taken ill with fever for fifteen months (*cóig ràithean*), at the end of which the girl arrives. *Ghlac i ursann anns gach làimh dhith, / Dh’fhaighneachd i gu dé mar bhà mi*. “She grasped a doorpost in each hand, / And asked of me how I was keeping.” Presumably as a result of her visits, he recovers well enough to win a shinty match.

The girl now says she is ashamed. The man complains about the fickleness of women, comparing them to various unstable things – a November wind (*gaoth Mhàrtainn*), a foal running to its mother (*searrach a’ ruith gu mhàthair*), a Maytime lamb jumping a dyke (*uan Céitein a’ leum gàraidh*), a jellyfish on smooth white rocks (*muirtiachd air leaca bàna*), an eel in a muddy puddle (*easgann an lodan làthchadh*), and so on. He ends by saying that a dairymaid needs a herdsman (*S.fheàirde banchaig buachail’ aice*).

All through this storyline runs the refrain *A Chailin òig, an stiùir thu mi?* – ‘O young girl, won’t you guide me? won’t you lead me?’ – or the like, which has the effect of putting her in the driving seat throughout. Whatever her emotions, whatever her actions, she’s in control. Whether he’s dying of fever or beating the opposition all over the shinty-field, he’s a puppet on a string. No wonder this pop-song was a hit in three countries. No wonder Shakespeare knew it.

Campbell gives several different versions of the waulking-song in his book. But most of them

only contain part of the storyline, and very often (as is the way with waulking-songs) the bits are in a different order. So I'll give here a version published in 1911 by the Revs A. and A. Macdonald from North Uist in 'The MacDonald Collection of Gaelic Poetry', partly because it has never been translated before, but mainly because it happens to present all the elements of the storyline except one (the complaint about fickleness) in a succinct way. After each line comes the refrain '*Chailin òig, o hurabhotho*'.

*'Chailin òig, an stiùir thu mi?
Latha dhomh 's mi falbh na sràide
Thachair orm an donn-bhean dàna.
Thug i don eaglais air làimh mi
'S thug i mionnan mór an là sin
Nach gabhadh i fear 'nam àite.
Laigh mis' anns an fhiabhras ghràineil,
Thug mi bliadhna mhór is ràith' ann,
'S thàinig an cailin donn dàna
'S dhìrich i 'n uinneag a b' àirde.
"Ille sin shuas, ciamar thà thu?"
"Olc le m' charaid 's math le m' nàmhaid!"*

*Dh'èirich mise làrna-mhàireach
'S ghabh mi ceum beag chun na sràide;
Chuir mi leth na chuichd air Mànas
'S an leth eil' air Rìgh na Spàine.
"Chailin, cuimhnich buachaile lean thu —
S fheàrrde banchaig buachail' aice
Chuireadh an crodh laoi gh gu fàsgadh."*

"O young woman, will you guide me? / Walking down the street one day / I met a brazen brown-haired girl. / She took my hand, brought me to church / And swore a great oath on that day / That she'd have no one in my place. / Struck down by a loathsome fever / I spent a long year and a quarter, / Then the bold brunette came back / And climbed up to the highest window. / 'Yon lad up there, how are you doing?' / 'My friend says ill and my enemy well!'

"I got up on the following day / And made my way down to the street; / I scored two goals, the first from Magnus / And the second from the King of Spain. / 'Remember, girl, the lad who followed you — / Any dairymaid needs a herdsman / To bring the cows and calves to shelter.'"

In their introduction to the song the Macdonald ministers sum up the 'Callen o custure me' phenomenon for us. "The air is common both to the Western Isles and to Ireland . . . It is interesting to find the title of a Gaelic song transplanted into the very heart of English literary culture more than 300 years ago."

Make that 400 now, going on 500?

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