

The king of Connacht and his pillow-talk

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I tried to show how Queen Mab of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* derives from Meabh (Maeve), queen of Connacht in the 'Ulster Cycle' of Irish tales. These depict a chariot-driving Iron Age warrior society around the time of Christ.

Before moving on to Meabh's husband, however, I can't forbear to mention Shelley's long poem 'Queen Mab', partly because (as Chris Whyte's new edition of 'Dàin do Eimhir' makes clear) the youthful Sorley MacLean was so taken with Shelley's work that he planned to write a book about him. "For years Shelley was almost everything to me," he said in 1941.

Shelley composed 'Queen Mab' when he was 18 and it was published underground in 1813. The fairy Queen Mab carries off in her chariot the spirit of the maiden Ianthe, shows her the past history of the world, and explains the reasons for its miserable state. She rails against kings, clergy, statesmen, marriage, commerce, Christianity. "There is no God," she says. Finally she reveals a future world in which 'All things are recreated, and the flame / Of consentaneous love inspires all life'.

The poem is difficult, but Shelley added substantial notes which make his philosophy clear. Basing his arguments on science and logic, he is against war, marriage, Christianity and capitalism, and in favour of democracy, vegetarianism and free love. For example, Mab warns of the poor man 'when his son / Is murdered by the tyrant, or religion / Drives his wife raving mad' and 'Whom the morn wakens but to fruitless toil; / Who ever hears his famished offspring's scream' that 'he little heeds / The rhetoric of tyranny; his hate / Is quenchless . . .' Shelley backs this up with a note: "There is no real wealth but the labour of man. Were the mountains of gold and the valleys of silver, the world would not be one grain of corn the richer; no one comfort would be added to the human race.

"The poor are set to labour – for what? Not the food for which they famish: not the blankets for want of which their babes are frozen by the cold of their miserable hovels: not those comforts of civilisation without which civilised man is far more miserable than the meanest savage . . . no; for the pride of power, for the miserable isolation of pride, for the false pleasures of the hundredth part of society.

"English reformers exclaim against sinecures – but the true pension list is the rent-roll of the landed proprietors: wealth is a power usurped by the few, to compel the many to labour for their benefit."

Like many a Hollywood star, the queen of Connacht was a good role model for some of these values, a bad one for others. Vegetarian, anti-capitalist, pacifist? It was her obsession with adding a bull to her already magnificent herd that led to a war that engulfed all Ireland. Atheist? No problem there, St Patrick hadn't arrived yet. Democrat? Well, she represented the right of women to own property, control their own bodies and have a good time. Free love? Sure. "I never had one man without another waiting in his shadow." But anti-marriage? Oh no. The more husbands the better. Queue up, lads. Each one younger than the one before.

Which brings us to Ailill. It was his pillow-talk that started the whole *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. In Kinsella's translation, "It is true what they say, love," says Ailill. "It is well for the wife of a wealthy man."

"True enough," says Medb (Kinsella uses the old spelling). "What put that in your mind?"

"It struck me," says Ailill, "how much better off you are today than the day I married you."

"I was well enough off without you!"

"Then your wealth was something I didn't know or hear much about. Except for your woman's things, and the neighbouring enemies making off with loot and plunder."

That gets Medb going. She is queen of Connacht in her own right, she points out. She lists off all the wealth and blue blood in her family, and all the suitors she had before she picked Ailill, a mere prince of Leinster. So Ailill does the same. "It still remains," says Medb, "that my fortune is greater than yours."

"You amaze me," says Ailill. "No one has more property or jewels or precious things than I have, and I know it."

They have all their possessions and stock brought together to be counted. At the end of it they are totally equal except for one great bull called Finnbennach who had been a calf of one of Medb's cows, but refused to be owned by a woman, and crossed over to Ailill's herd. "There!" says Ailill.

Medb has enquiries made. Where in all Ireland is there a bull to match Finnbennach? A man called Dáire has one in Cuailnge, she is told, and she sends a messenger to bargain for it. "You'll get a portion of the fine plain of Ai equal to your own lands, a chariot worth twenty-one bondmaids, and Medb's friendly thighs on top of it all."

Dáire is so delighted that he jumps for joy till the seams of his cushion burst under him. But the deal unravels, as deals do. For Cuailnge is in Ulster, though only just. It's the Carlingford Peninsula nowadays. A sensitive place. It leads to war, and everyone loses. Ailill. Medb. Dáire. The plain people of Ireland. Everyone in fact except Cú Chulainn, who becomes the most famous warrior who ever lived.

Now I want to ask a question. Since it can be shown that Medb turned into Mab, queen of the fairies, is there any trace in recent times of Ailill, king of the fairies?

My question has mainly to do with Alexander Carmichael's 'Carmina Gadelica', where (as I pointed out last time) there appears the line *Is tu meann na Meabha laidir*. Carmichael, who says he got it from a crofter at Carnan in South Uist, translates: "Thine is the courage of Maebh the strong."

If Ailill's name were to appear in 'Carmina', it would probably have an 'r' in it. It was perhaps the fourth most common name in early Ireland, but survived the middle ages only amongst the O Haras and O Garas. By the seventeenth century it had taken the forms Irial and Irrill, and was being anglicised 'Oliver'. Sure enough, in the waulking song 'Seathan Mac Rìgh Éireann' ('Seathan Son of the King of Ireland', in volume 5 of 'Carmina') we find:

*B' annsa Seathan sa choill bharraich
Na bhith sa Mhaigh Mhild le h-Airril,
Ged bhiodh sròl is sìod fo chasaibh,
Cluasagan òr-dhearg air lasadh.*

"Dearer Seathan in the birch wood / Than to be in Magh Meall with Airril, / Though he had satin and silk under his feet, / And pillows lustrous with red gold."

More pillow-talk? Carmichael and Kenneth Macleod seem to have got it from Kenneth's auntie Janet (who had a great wealth of inherited knowledge) at the schoolhouse in Eigg in January 1905. They asked her: '*S càite bheil a' Mhagh Mhild?* "And where is Magh Mell?"

Aig an t-Sealbh 's aig na Sidhichean tha brath, ach tha e coltach gur h-e àite bòidheach ceòlor a bh' ann, far nach robh olc no mulad, 's far nach b' fhaochadh atharrachadh. “Goodness and the fairies only know, but it seems that it was a beautiful, merry place, where there was no sin or sorrow, and where a change would be no improvement.”

She got that one right. Magh Meall (‘Pleasant Plain’) is well known in Irish literature as a name for the otherworld, the abode of gods or of fairies.

Có bh' ann am Brian Buidhe? “Who was yellow-haired Brian?” They’re referring to a later line (*Piuthar a dh’Aodh ‘s a Bhrian Buidhe mi* ‘I am a sister of Aodh and yellow-haired Brian’) which looks as if it may reflect the name of Brian Boru who defeated the vikings at Clontarf in 1014.

Ceatharnach ainmeil an Éirinn, 's air liom gum bu rìgh e, Janet replies. “A renowned warrior in Ireland, and I think he was a king.”

Agus Airril? “And Airril?”

Gràinne mullaich na h-uir-thalmhanta ann am maise pearsa 's ann an subhailcean cridhe. “The topmost grain of the whole world in beauty of person and virtues of heart.”

Well, that sounds like Ailill king of Connacht all right. If this were the only Airril in ‘Carmina’, just as Meabh is the only Meabh, it would look as if the case were proved. But it isn’t. There are eleven more instances. Take the hunting blessing in volume 1 which Carmichael got from a crofter called Angus Mackintosh at Dungaineacha in Benbecula.

*An ainm Mhicheil mil nan slogh,
An ainm Airil og nan snuadh,
An ainm Uiril nan ciabhan oir,
Agus Ghabrail fadh Oigh nam buadh.*

“In name of Michael chief of hosts, / In name of Ariel youth of lovely hues, / In name of Uriel of the golden locks, / And Gabriel seer of the Virgin of grace.” It’s our beautiful person again, but look at the company he’s keeping. St Michael the Archangel. The Archangel Gabriel. And Uriel, one of the leading angels of non-canonical lore, whose name means ‘fire of God’, whom Milton calls ‘Regent of the Sun’, and who stands ready at the last trumpet to break down the gates of Hades and bring to judgement the ghosts of the ancient Titans, of the giants, and of all whom the Flood overtook.

Yes, Airil of ‘Carmina’ is the angel Ariel – that ‘Lion of God’ who is the ruler of winds in gnostic lore, the spirit of Jerusalem amongst Jewish mystics, the pugnacious sprite of Shakespeare’s ‘Tempest’, the rebel angel overcome by a seraph on the first day of fighting in heaven in Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’, and, by a weird coincidence, the pseudonym of Shelley himself!

Over and over, Airil appears with the angels and saints. A bed-time blessing taken down in 1866 from Mary Macrae, a dairywoman at Northton in Harris, has him as *ail nan og* (‘the beauteousness of the young’) between the Virgin Mary and Uriel on one side, and the archangels Gabriel and Raphael on the other. Similarly, in a version got from Cairistiona Macinnes, a cottar at South Hacleit in Benbecula, “Uriel shall be at my feet, / Ariel shall be at my back, / Gabriel shall be at my head, / And Raphael shall be at my side.”

At sowing time Lachlan Macdonald, a crofter at Griminish in the same island, blessed his seed ‘In name of Ariel and the angels nine, / In name of Gabriel and the Apostles kind’. And in case any doubt remains about his Christian credentials, consider the version of the ‘Hail Mary’ that Carmichael got from Iseabail Galbraith, a crofter’s wife at Sgalary in Barra. It includes:

*Tabhair duinn, a Fhreimh an aigh,
O 's tu copan nan grasa fial,
Creid Eoin, is Phead, is Phail,
Le sgeith Airil an aird nan nial.*

“Bestow upon us, thou Root of gladness, / Since thou art the cup of generous graces, / The faith of John, and Peter, and Paul, / With the wings of Ariel on the heights of the clouds.”

Finally, in a herding blessing got from Angus Maceachen, a cattleherd at Stoneybridge in South Uist, *comraig Airighil oirghil* (‘the keeping of Ariel the gold-bright’) is invoked for the cows between God, Christ, Cormac, Calum Cille and Cairbre on the one hand, and Brigid, Mary and (again) Christ on the other. Here then is Ariel (Airighil) in the company of God and the Celtic saints.

Carmichael himself calls Airil the angel Ariel. He writes: “The people speak of ‘Airil nan og’, Ariel of the youth; ‘Airil ail nan og’, Ariel beauteous of the youth, and other endearing terms. Those who were under his care enjoyed perpetual youth and perpetual beauty. Ariel is called the ‘city of Judah’, ‘the strength of God’, ‘the lion of God’, and other favoured names.”

This is a bit confusing. I don’t think Carmichael means us to understand that the *people* called Ariel the ‘city of Judah’ – this and the two names that follow would have come up for him, as they have come up for me, in the published literature about angels.

But even after that, a question remains. Why was this obscure angel so popular in Gaelic invocations? Is it thanks to Shakespeare? To Milton? Or to the king of Connacht and his pillow-talk?

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