

Housekeeping, childcare and murder

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I'VE been delving into a fascinating book called 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland'. It's by John Gregorson Campbell, who was Established Church minister of Tiree towards the end of the nineteenth century. It was published in 1900 – long after he died, for the very good reason that a minister's job was supposed to be eradicating superstition, not preserving it.

The stories in it were mainly collected in the 1850s and 1860s, which means that a high proportion of Campbell's informants would have been born and raised in the eighteenth century.

There must be hundreds and hundreds of anecdotes in the book, and Freud would have had a field-day with them. Over and over it strikes you that what Campbell calls the 'doctrine' of fairy belief was a sort of psychic construct that allowed people to make sense of what they couldn't understand, explain away what they didn't want to acknowledge, or even provide a set of rules for living.

We still need to do all of these things nowadays, but we do them differently. What comes across is that in traditional Highland communities people faced much the same set of issues that we face nowadays – crime and social control, stress in the workplace, community relations, sex, marital problems, childcare, teenage behaviour and so on – but that their ways of dealing with them were different.

Let me begin with a very simple and innocent example. Nowadays handy tips for running a household can be picked up from "Home Eeks" classes in school, from magazines like 'Good Housekeeping', and from daytime TV. What did young women have who had no school, no magazines and no TV? Well, they would have heard this story in the ceilidh-house: "The Elves came to a house at night, and finding it closed, called upon *uisge nan cas* ('feet-water', i.e. water in which the feet had been washed) to come and open the door. The water answered from somewhere near that it could not, as it had been poured out.

"They called on the Band of the Spinning Wheel to open the door, but it answered it could not, as it had been thrown off the wheel. They called upon Little Cake, but it could not move, as there was a hole through it and a live coal on the top of it. They called upon *smàladh an teine*, the 'raking' coal, but the fire had been secured in a proper manner to keep it alive all night."

Campbell concludes: "This is a tale not localized anywhere, but universally known."

Over and over in these stories Fairies, witches and evil spirits are able to get into folk's houses to do their mischief simply because nobody has thrown out the water that the members of the family have washed their feet in.

Childcare next. Campbell tells the following as if it were simple fact: "A child was taken by the Fairies from Killichrenan (*Cille Chreunain*) near Loch Awe to the *sithein* in Nant Wood (*Coill' an Eannd*). It was got back by the father drawing a furrow round the hillock with the plough. He had not gone far when he heard a cry behind him, and on looking back found his child lying in the furrow."

As I see it, this is a story with a purpose. Children attended the ceilidh-house and were expected to listen carefully and keep quiet. They would have been terrified out of their wits by some of what they heard. Special little stories like that one would have been needed to reassure them so that they would go to sleep.

There's nothing more traumatic than an accident happening to a child, and several of Campbell's stories deal with the problem. For example: "A boy, a mere child, was left alone for a few minutes in the islet of Soa, near Tiree. The mother was making kelp there at the time, and in her absence the Fairies came and gave the child's legs such a twist that it was lame (*liùgach*) ever after."

Notice that it's not described as an accident. The Fairies have done it, and as Fairies aren't mortal, no human being can be blamed – certainly not the mother, certainly not the child. The child is lame now, and that's that. The mother mustn't blame herself.

Here's a longer one of the same type. "Some seventy or eighty years ago the herdsman who had charge of the cattle on this pasture went to a marriage in the neighbouring village of Balephuill ('Mud-Town'), leaving his mother and a young child alone in the house. The

night was wild and stormy; there was heavy rain, and every pool and stream was more than ordinarily swollen. His mother sat waiting his return, and two women, whom she knew to be Fairies, came to steal the child.

“They stood between the outer and inner doors and were so tall their heads appeared above the partition beam. One was taller than the other. They were accompanied by a dog, and stood one on each side, having a hold of an ear and scratching it. Some say there was a crowd of ‘little people’ behind to assist in taking the child away. For security the woman placed it between herself and the fire, but her precautions were not quite successful.

“From that night the child was slightly fatuous, ‘a half idiot’ (*leth òinseach*). The old woman, it is said, had the second sight.”

We can’t be quite sure whether this remark about the old woman having the second sight is relevant to the anecdote. If it is relevant, does it mean that Fairies were drawn to people like this, in this case to try to steal her granddaughter? Or that it allowed her at least to try to counteract the Fairies’ power? At any rate, in modern terms, it’s fair to say that something happened that night that left the child a little bit brain-damaged – but, we are told, it wasn’t the father’s fault, nor was it the grandmother’s fault. She did her best.

Campbell prefaces our last ‘childcare’ tale with the remark: “The Elves sometimes took care of neglected children.” It goes like this. “The herd who tendered the Bailephuill cattle on Heynish Hill sat down one day on a green eminence (*cnoc*) in the hill, which had the reputation of being tenanted by the Fairies. His son, a young child, was along with him.

“He fell asleep, and when he awoke the child was away. He roused himself, and vowed aloud that unless his boy was restored he would not leave a stone or clod of the hillock together. A voice from underground answered that the child was safe at home with its mother, and they (the ‘people’) had taken it lest it should come to harm with the cold.”

So here the Fairies are evoked again, and the fact that they sometimes opted to do good rather than harm is very much within their character as set out by Campbell in his introductory chapter. But if we were to seek a rational explanation for what happened, one springs to mind very quickly. The members of a traditional Highland community quietly look out for each other but have no desire to be accused of meddling. This would especially have been the case when a child was in the care of its father. A female neighbour must have discreetly brought the child home to its own front door, then whispered in the herd’s ear on her way back home!

The fine balance between neighbourliness and meddling was a difficult one. It still is, with one important difference: if a man is beating his partner or you think a child is being molested, there’s someone to call. But what if there were no police, no social services? Well, what emerges from Campbell’s anecdotes is a society in which the family as a unit was still sacred. No one interfered. Take this for example: “A man, somewhere on the mainland of Argyllshire, suspecting his wife had been stolen by Fairies, hauled her by the legs from bed, through the fire and out at the door. She there became a log of wood, and serves as the threshold of a barn in the place to this day.”

Strong stuff. What does it mean? First set aside the fiction that the wife has been stolen and a sort of shadow – a *tàcharan*, ‘changeling’ – left in her place. I’d read the tale as a whispered accusation in which crimes are spoken of mainly in symbols. I’d suggest that the wife’s being ‘stolen by Fairies’ is her alleged adultery, and that her ‘becoming a log of wood’ is murder – think of the English expression ‘as dead as a doorpost’.

In between the two, what the husband does to her is entirely real. In a house in which the fire is in the middle of the floor, domestic violence was always likely to include a woman being dragged through the fire. As for ‘the threshold of a barn’, we are being told where to dig if we wish to establish her husband’s guilt.

If that story were unique, it would be possible to explain it otherwise. But there’s enough of the kind to suggest a pattern. In his chapter ‘The Water-Horse’ Campbell tells a story which is good enough to deserve a bit of creepy scene-setting all of its own, but which, if I had my way, would be in a chapter called ‘Serious Crime’. Campbell heads it ‘The Water-Horse at Loch Basibol, Tiree’; I’d have headed it ‘Man murdered by brothers for dating their sister’. Campbell writes: “On the north side of this loch, which has been already mentioned as a haunt of the water-horse, there was a farm where there are now only blowing sandbanks, called *Baile nan Cràganach* (‘the Town of the Clumsy Ones’) from five men who resided there having each six fingers on every hand. They were brothers, and it was said the water-

horse came every night in the shape of a young man to see a sister who stayed with them.

“With the tendency of popular tales to attach themselves to known persons, this incident is related of Calum Mòr Clark and his family. Calum had three sons, *Iain Bàn Mòr* (‘Big Fair John’), *Iain Bàn Òg* (‘Young Fair John’) and *Iain Bàn Meadhonach* (‘Middle Fair John’).

“The four conspired to beguile the young man from the loch who came to see the daughter into the house, and got him to sit between two of them on the front of the bed. On a given signal these two clasped their hands round him and laid him on his back in the bed. The other two rushed to their assistance; the young man assumed his proper shape of a water-horse, and a fearful struggle ensued. The conspirators cut the horse in pieces with their dirks, and put it out of the house dead.”

You can imagine the mafia doing something like that to someone who’d ‘dishonoured’ a member of their clan. But I’d like to conclude by pointing to a one-sentence anecdote in which Campbell says simply: “A woman taken by the Fairies was seen by a man who looked in at the door of a *brugh*, spinning and singing at her work.”

A *brugh* is a Fairy residence, usually called a *sithein*. In effect what we have here is a case where a young woman has disappeared. Yet we’re being told there’s no need to look for her – that she’s safe and sound and in a happier place. Whether she’s been murdered by a drunken husband, molested and killed by a relative or seduced and done away with by a stranger, society clearly doesn’t want to know.

These stories may be about Fairies, you see, but they aren’t old. They don’t reflect a heroic world of blood feuds, revenge and kissing the dirk, but a post-Culloden one of keeping your head down and trying to survive.

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