

## Drink, dreams and gardyloo

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

Last time I looked at some stories about housekeeping, childcare and murder in John Gregorson Campbell's book 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland'. These stories were mainly collected in the 1850s and 1860s and reflect the post-Culloden world of the eighteenth century. They're ostensibly about fairies, but over and over we notice the fairies being used as cover for some issue in society that people are unwilling to face.

Take drink, for example. "A former gardener in *Tìr Mhìne* ('Meal Land') in Glenorchy, a good deal given to drinking, was crossing Loch Awe one night in a boat alone. He saw a little man sitting in the stern of the boat, and spoke to him several times but received no answer. He at last struck at the little man, and himself tumbled overboard."

Campbell goes on: "Now, asked the old woman who told this story, what could the little man be but a *brughadair* (i.e. one that came from the Fairy dwelling, an Elf)? To the reader the case will appear one of simple hallucination produced by ardent spirits, but it is of interest as shewing the interpretation put upon it under a belief in the Fairies."

What it really shows is a woman who is not willing to accept that this particular man has a serious drink problem. Probably she was related to him. I think we have all known women like that. To coin a phrase, had the Fairies not existed, she would certainly have invented them.

I can't help feeling that drink may have something to do with the following story too, even though it isn't mentioned. "A man cut a slip from an ash-tree growing near a Fairy dwelling. On his way home in the evening he stumbled and fell. He heard the Fairies give a laugh at his mishap. Through the night he was hoisted away, and could tell nothing of what happened till in the morning he found himself in the byre, astride on a cow, and holding on by its horns."

The phraseology would fit a drinking binge very well: . . . way home in the evening . . . stumbled and fell . . . heard . . . a laugh at his mishap . . . hoisted away . . . This man has come home, reached as far as the byre, fallen over the cow (whose warmth is attractive anyway) and ended up astride her. We're not told she actually stood up with him on top, but the storyteller allows us to imagine it if we wish, although in Campbell's book as a whole 'hoisted away' usually means 'brought flying through the air by the fairies'.

What then are we to make of 'cut a slip from an ash-tree'? This will be the rowan or mountain ash, which was sacred to the fairies, and we can well understand that if you wanted a bit of rowan to guard your property with, you should take it from a tree well away from a Fairy dwelling. Is it possible then that 'cutting a slip from an ash-tree growing near a Fairy dwelling' was a sort of metaphor for having too much too drink? Imagine the scenario. *Dé tha ceàrr air Dòmhnall?* "What's the matter with Donald?"

Ù, says some woman like the one related to the gardener, *cha d'rinn e ach sliseag a ghearradh á caorann a bha fàs faisg air sìthein*. "Oh, he's just cut a slip from an ash-tree growing near a Fairy dwelling."

One way in which belief in Fairies could be justified was by interpreting dreams as the revelation of a spirit world normally unseen. Once again I'll try to prove my point by moving from a simple story to a more complex one. The simple story has only one sentence: "A band of four was heard crossing over the bedclothes, two women going first and laughing, and two men following and expressing their wonder if the women were far before them."

Now 'dream' may not be mentioned there, but 'bedclothes' are. Note also that these appear to be tiny fairies like the ones mentioned in Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet', not the man-sized ones usual in Gaelic tradition. If we accept that anecdote as a tentative admission that Fairies are the stuff of dreams, it helps us understand this next one, I think. "The husband was with his wife in the fields working and looking about, when they saw a great company of riders on white horses coming where they were, and as they came near one of the riders caught hold of her and took her away.

"Her husband did not know what to do. He went wandering about looking for her, but never finding her, till one day, to his great wonderment, he saw a glimmer of light on the side of the hill. He reached it, and saw an opening. He put a pin in the side and went in, and saw a great company feasting and dancing, with his lost wife in the middle of the dancers. She saw

him also, and began to sing loudly:

*Take no food here Ialai o horro horro,  
Ask no drink here Ialai o horro hee.*

No one took any notice of him. He got near her, and putting his arm around her, whisked her out of the circle of dancers. He took her home, but she became discontented, and was never the same being as she had been before.

“At last it happened when they were again out together that the riders on white horses came their way. On parting with him this time she said, if at any time he wished her to come back, he was to throw her marriage dress, which had *craobh uaine* (i.e. green tracery) on the right shoulder, after her when he saw her passing in the company, and she would return home.

“Thinking she did not belong to this world, he did nothing, and she passed and never returned to him.”

It seems to be a love story but operates on different levels. It could be said to be about dealing with grief. If you were cynical, you could claim it was designed to justify the actions of a man whose wife had disappeared in suspicious circumstances. If you prefer a Marxist interpretation of that ‘great company of riders on white horses’ to a Freudian one, it becomes a nightmarish memory of the time after Culloden when Cumberland’s army went on a spree of murder, rape and abduction. Yet another issue is whether it’s a man’s story or a woman’s. One way or another it has a dreamlike quality not particularly common in Gaelic stories, so the point I am making is that, like the previous anecdote, it may have started life as a dream.

Now for something different. Every so often in Gaelic verse you notice the poet struggling to express some alien concept in terms of familiar words. For example, in the sixteenth century a MacGregor woman described a gun as *fùdar caol neimhe*, ‘a slender powder of poison’, as if it were a species of snake. And an eighteenth-century church elder in Badenoch described quadrilles as *cluich air an ùrlar / bha sgùirte le siabann* – ‘playing on the floor / that was scoured with soap’, that is, I suppose, dancing on a deal floor polished with ‘French chalk’ or soapstone.

In a similar way, here are a couple of stories which (in my opinion) show the Fairies being used as a kind of linguistic device to help people visualise something they had heard of but never seen. The first one goes: “A person who had a green knoll in front of his house, and was in the habit of throwing out dirty water at the door, was told by the Fairies to remove the door to the other side of the house, as the water was spoiling their furniture and utensils. He did this, and he and the Fairies lived on good terms ever after.”

Gardyloo!

‘Gardyloo’ was what people shouted in Edinburgh before throwing slops out of the window into the street. It’s supposed to have something to do with the French words *gare l’eau* or *garde d’eau*, ‘beware of the water’. Even today the tenements of Edinburgh’s Old Town are amazing for their height, and in the eighteenth century they must have been one of the wonders of the world. For every Gaelic speaker of those days who had seen them with his or her own eyes there must have been many who simply had to guess. Every Highland home had its cow in the byre, its dunghill at the door, its chickens on the thatch and its well of water hard by, so even Dunvegan Castle couldn’t have prepared people for the concept of families stacked in little stone cages, soaring into the air up to maybe a dozen storeys high. How could anyone live like that? Well, I think that anecdote was one way to make sense of it. Change the question to ‘Who would want to live like that?’ and quick as a flash the answer would come. *Tà, sann mar sin a tha na sìthichean beò*. “Well, the fairies live like that.”

*A Mhoire, sann da-riribh*. “Oh, so they do.”

The more you try to think about what life might be like in a tenement, the more problems you see. That’s where the next anecdote comes in. “In the evening a man was tethering his horse on a grassy mound. A head appeared out of the ground and told him to drive his tether pin somewhere else, as he was letting the rain into their house, and had nearly killed one of the inmates by driving the peg into his ear.”

Notice that the word ‘Fairy’ wasn’t mentioned this time!

Having examined separately some of the elements in these stories, I’ll end with a classic example of one that operates on several different levels of meaning. “A trampling as of a

troop of horses came round a house in which a woman lay in childbed, and she and the child were taken away.

“At the end of seven years her sister came upon an open Fairy hillock, and thoughtlessly entered. She saw there her lost sister with a child in her arms, and was warned by her, in the lullaby song to the child, to slip away out again.

*A phiuthrag, 's a phiuthrag chaidreach,  
An cuimhne leat oidhche nan capall?  
Seachd bliadhn' on thugadh às mi  
'S bean mo choltais riamh chan fhacas.  
Ialai horro, horro,  
Ialai horro hì.*

(Little sister, little loving sister, / Do you remember the night of the horses? / Seven years since I was taken / And no wife like me has ever been seen. / Ialai horro, horro, / Ialai horro hì.)”

According to a strict interpretation of the story, then, the girl is married to a Fairy, but she doesn't say she's unhappy, in fact 'no wife like me has ever been seen' could be a very appealing line to a teenage girl – she is, she implies, admired as exotic, beautiful, unique, something special.

So what are the possible elements here? It could be a dream of teenage *angst*. It could reflect post-Culloden atrocities. It could be a way of coping with the death of a sister. It could also show how women have always gone away to marry, but if so, there seems to be a twist in the tale. Did she elope? Was she abducted? Was she, perhaps, in Edinburgh or elsewhere in the Lowlands? It was in the late eighteenth century that young Highland people began to find their way there, usually attracted by harvest work on the big Lothian farms.

Whatever the answer, it's worth remembering that, given the nature of education in those days, communication between women was the kind most likely to be 'oral'. Some men could read and write, very few women could. So the verse can be seen as an eighteenth-century text-message, passed on through many a ceilidh-house by a chain of Gaelic singers, perhaps from as far away as Edinburgh.

Like a message on some abandoned mobile phone, we have no idea whether it ever reached the little sister. But it has reached us.

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