

## Codes for violent abuse?

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE preoccupation of the media with the cases of unnatural violence that erupt every so often within our society – especially when behavioural boundaries between men, women and children are violated as horribly as at Soham recently – is nothing new. A glance at any 100-year-old newspaper will tell you as much.

Things that *are* new, I think, are the willingness of the media to report matters of detail, the vocabulary that is now widely available for the purpose, and the rejection of the ‘Christian’ assumption that women are the root of evil. This last point may have something to do with the fact that there are more women in the media than ever before, although of course it’s not as simple as that.

These are just a few of the thoughts that arise from a consideration of the fairy stories in the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell’s book ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland’ of 1900. Some things in these stories are very perturbing, if we can make the assumption (which I think we can) that the fairies are being used as a ‘code’ for certain inconvenient moral issues – issues which society does not fully wish to face up to, and does not possess the vocabulary to describe, although I have to say that I believe that in the Gaelic original the meaning of these stories would have been clear enough to those hearers equipped to understand them, for they operate on different levels. If you, as a reader, disagree with any of my interpretations, it means that they are still operating on different levels today.

Here’s a good one to start with. “A gentleman of the name of Evan Cameron (it does not appear where) on his way home across the hills was overtaken by nightfall and lost his way. He was accompanied by a greyhound and three terriers. He saw a light in a bothy or hut, used in summer when the cattle were at pasture among the hills, but deserted during the greater part of the year.

“He made towards it, and on looking in at the door, saw a woman sitting by the fire, all wet and combing her hair. She looked towards him and said, *Nach d’thig thu ’n déidh do shùil, Eóghain?* ‘Will you not come after your eye, Evan?’

“*Cha d’thig an-dràst*’, he replied. ‘Not just now.’

“After some further conversation he was obliged to allow his dogs to attack the strange creature. He himself held on his way, and in a few hours reached home. The greyhound found its way home, but without any hair upon its body. None of the terriers was ever heard of more.”

Several things come across quite clearly from this. The sexual nature of the encounter – ‘a woman sitting by the fire, all wet and combing her hair’. The alleged provocation by the woman – *Nach d’thig thu ’n déidh do shùil, Eóghain?* The possible presence of a code-word meaning more than it says – ‘conversation’. The astonishing use of the word ‘obliged’ to defend the man’s appalling action in setting his dogs on the woman – he has, after all, been stated to be a ‘gentleman’! And finally, to exonerate him completely from what sounds to me like sexual assault followed by sadistic murder, we have the claim that the greyhound came home without any hair on its body – a common motif that denotes a narrow escape from the fairies or the devil, as anyone who has read Sorley MacLean’s ‘Uamh an Òir’ will know.

Three different points deserve to be made. First, we have here the interesting definition of a ‘gentleman’ as a person who murders women by setting his hunting-dogs on them rather than by the more vulgar method of punching them and dragging them through the fire. Second, the woman is nowhere called a fairy – merely a ‘strange creature’. She is real. Third, I am by no means claiming that all fairy stories can be interpreted in this way. The majority of fairy stories have no discernible social implications whatever – which is why I am able to say without hesitation exactly what ‘without any hair upon its body’ is intended to imply.

If there are stories about attacks on women, it’s logical to assume that there will be

stories about how women can defend themselves. The following, I believe, is one such. “A water-horse in man’s shape came to a house in which there was a woman alone; at the time she was boiling water in a clay vessel (*crogan*) such as was in use before iron became common. The water-horse, after looking on for some time, drew himself nearer to her, and said in a snuffling voice, ‘It is time to begin courting, Sarah, daughter of John, son of Finlay.’

“‘It is time, it is time,’ she replied, ‘when the little pitcher boils.’

“In a while it repeated the same words and drew itself nearer. She gave the same answer, drawing out the time as best she could, till the water was boiling hot. As the snuffling youth was coming too near she threw the scalding water between his legs, and he ran out of the house roaring and yelling with pain.”

Water-horse my foot. This was a real man, except it wasn’t polite to say so. The story is a very common one, and is told not just of the water-horse but of every supernatural creature in the Gaelic bestiary. It’s a woman’s-eye view of self-defence against a predatory male, but curiously Campbell gives us a whole string of man’s-eye stories about predatory females. First, however, here’s one where the tables are turned. “A man in Mull, watching in the harvest field at night, saw a woman standing in the middle of a stream that ran past the field. He ran after her, and seemed sometimes to be close upon her, and again to be as far from her as ever.

“Losing temper, he swore himself to the devil that he would follow till he caught her. When he said the words the object of his pursuit allowed herself to be overtaken, and showed her true character by giving him a sound thrashing.

“Every night after, he had to meet her. He was like to fall into a decline through fear of her, and becoming thoroughly tired of the affair, he consulted an old woman of the neighbourhood, who advised him to take with him to the place of appointment the ploughshare and his brother John. This would keep the Fairy woman from coming near him. The Fairy, however, said to him in a mumbling voice, ‘You have taken the ploughshare with you to-night, Donald, and big, pock-marked, dirty John your brother,’ and catching him she administered a severer thrashing than ever.

“He went again to the old woman, and this time she made for his protection a thread which he was to wear about his neck. He put it on, and, instead of going to the place of meeting, remained at the fireside. The Fairy came and, taking him out of the house, gave him a still severer thrashing.

“Upon this, the wise woman said she would make a chain to protect him against all the powers of darkness, though they came. He put this chain about his neck, and remained by the fireside. He heard a voice calling down the chimney, ‘I cannot come near you tonight, Donald, when the pretty smooth-white is about your neck.’”

Behind ‘the pretty smooth-white’ will be *am mìn-gheal bòidheach* or the like – *geal* is the colour of both silver and snow, and here it happens to denote silver. The likely code-word in this story is ‘thrashing’ – it comes up three times, and we’ll meet it again in a minute. Anyway, so far there are more questions than answers. Once again the woman is wet when the man first sees her, but she is specifically said to be a fairy and the middle of a boundary-stream does sound like the sort of in-between place a fairy would be; Campbell calls the relationship an ‘affair’, but I wouldn’t make too much of that. So let’s try another story. “A man in Iona, thinking daylight was come, rose and went to a rock to fish. After catching some fish he observed he had been misled by the clearness of the moonlight, and set off home.

“On the way, as the night was so fine, he sat down to rest himself on a hillock. He fell asleep, and was awakened by the pulling of the fishing rod which he had in his hand. He found the rod was being pulled in one direction and the fish in another. He secured both, and was making off when he heard sounds behind him as of a woman weeping. On his turning round to her, she said, ‘Ask news, and you will get news.’

“He answered, ‘I put God between us.’ When he said this, she caught him and thrashed him soundly.

“Every night after, he was compelled to meet her, and on her repeating the same

words and his giving the same answer, was similarly drubbed.

“To escape from her persecutions he went to the Lowlands. When engaged there cutting drains he saw a raven on the bank above him. This proved to be his tormentor, and he was compelled to meet her again at night, and, as usual, she thrashed him.

“He resolved to go to America. On the eve of his departure, his Fairy mistress met him and said, ‘You are going away to escape from me. If you see a hooded crow when you land, I am that crow.’

“On landing in America he saw a crow sitting on a tree, and knew it to be his old enemy. In the end the Fairy dame killed him.”

To sum up, following some funny stuff with a fishing-rod God’s name has proven ineffective, and after two ‘thrashings’ and a ‘drubbing’ this extraordinary woman (who is specifically called ‘his Fairy mistress’) does our man to death. I would like to know what Gaelic words lie behind ‘thrashing’ and ‘drubbing’. *Bualadh? Slaiceadh? Collainn?* The Gaelic tradition of spiritual experience is full of physical wrestlings (usually at night, as here) with the devil or his disciples, often resulting in actual injury; here we have been offered a ‘top shelf’ version in which the devil comes in female form. And if there is any lingering doubt about the sexual nature of the relationship, note the words ‘Fairy love’ in the anecdote that follows it: “At the time of the American War of Independence, a native of Tíre, similarly afflicted and wishing to escape from his Fairy love, enlisted and was drafted off to the States.

“On landing he thanked God he was now where the hag could not reach him. Soon after, however, she met him. ‘You have given thanks,’ she said, ‘for getting rid of me, but it is as easy for me to make my appearance here as in your own country!’”

That apparent code-word ‘thrashing’ reappears in my final story, which reads so like the plot of ‘The Graduate’ that you feel in your bones the hero must have been called Dustin. “A young man in the island of Lismore was out shooting. When near Balnagown Loch he started a hare and fired at it. The animal gave an unearthly scream, and it then for the first time occurred to the young man that there were no hares in Lismore. He threw away his gun in terror and fled home.

“Next day he came back for the gun, and heard that a reputed witch of the neighbourhood was laid up with a broken leg. Ever after the figure of this woman encountered him and gave him severe thrashings. This preyed on his mind, and he never came to any good. He proved brooding, idle, and useless.”

**6 September 2002**