

The woman who ran with the deer

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

EVERY so often I come across a traditional story which asks more questions than it answers. In the ceilidh-house there would be silence for a bit after it was told, then others would speak, one by one, some with opinions, some with facts, some with fresh stories and songs as well – one at the back perhaps who knew a man who knew the man it was about, another who only knew his genealogy, one at the front who had sailed the seven seas and brought a knowledge of the world to bear, a woman who denounced the appalling treatment of her sex, a sceptic who pointed out that until people stopped blaming fairies for social ills the world could never be made better, another who declared that as fairies are mentioned in the Bible, disbelief in them is tantamount to disbelief in God . . .

Here is such a story. It's told by the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell in his 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland'. He says: "'MacCallum of the Humming Noise' (*Mac Challum a Chrònain*), who resided in Glen Etive subsequent to the '45, was the last to observe the habits of the Fairies and ancient hunters.

"He ate three days' allowance of food before setting out on his hunting expeditions, and when he got hungry merely tightened his belt another hole. The Indians of Labrador are said to do the same at the present day. These hunters can go for nine days without food, merely tightening their belts as they get thin.

"In MacCallum's time, a woman was for seven years observed among the deer of Ben Cruachan, as swift of foot and action as the herd with which she consorted. A gathering was made to catch her. The herd was surrounded by men and dogs, and on her being caught, she was taken to Balinoe, where MacCallum resided. There were rings on her fingers, from which it was ascertained that she came from France.

"Inquiries were made, and she was sent home by a ship from Greenock. She had been taken away in childbed doubtless by the Fairies. This story was believed by the person from whom it was heard. He had heard it from good authority, he said."

Let's examine the story. First we must take Campbell's word for it that MacCallum is a surname and not a patronymic. As for his intriguing nickname, we can't be sure exactly what it means. *Crònain* may be not a 'humming noise' but a 'lullaby', perhaps referring to something in MacCallum's childhood. Maybe a lullaby his mother had made for him had caught on throughout the district. Or perhaps he had a habit of humming to himself, as many solitary people do.

Maybe in fact it was the noise made by his arrows, for I assume that the use of arrows is one thing Campbell means by 'the habits of the Fairies and ancient hunters'. Mrs Ann Grant of Laggan, in her 'Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland' (1811), says: "Before, and indeed for some time after the year 1745, there were here and there, in remote glens in the highlands, persons whose chief subsistence was derived from hunting, and a few solitary individuals who devoted themselves entirely to it . . . They shot with arrows, long after such weapons had fallen into general disuse; the report of a gun rendering it unsuitable to the privacy of their pursuits."

Clearly MacCallum was one such. When Campbell says that MacCallum 'observed' the habits of the Fairies he doesn't mean that he watched them but that he practised them. And such habits included not only hunting with arrows but living in caves, stealing into people's homes, and kidnapping the odd human being for one purpose or another.

The precise relevance of MacCallum to the story is uncertain however. It is basically about the woman who ran with the deer. But she and MacCallum were occupying the same space at the same time, and when she was caught – not by MacCallum but by a sort of posse – she was brought to him at his house in Balinoe, which I take it is the farm now called Glennoe on Loch Etive, at the back of Ben Cruachan.

What was the connection between them, I wonder? Since he 'observed the habits of the Fairies' it may be that the people believed she was MacCallum's woman, kidnapped from somewhere and now gone mad. In this case the 'posse' would have been the kirk session of Ardchattan in its determination to assert its moral laws, their aim being to set up a public confrontation between MacCallum and the woman and to oblige him to marry her and accept his duty of care. But what happens? While MacCallum is vociferously denying any

connection with her, women are brought in to scrub her down. They remove many layers of clothing and grime, and lo and behold! She has rings.

This is the point at which MacCallum fades out of the picture. "There were rings on her fingers, from which it was ascertained that she came from France." But since we are not told that she has lost the power of speech, we have to assume that she speaks French to her captors and tells them who she is. I suppose it's obvious to the elders that these revelations are as much of a surprise to MacCallum as to themselves, so he is in the clear.

"Inquiries were made, and she was sent home by a ship from Greenock." What this suggests to me is that, in order to confirm or establish the woman's story, the company which runs the nearby iron smelter at Bonawe is asked to consult its records with regard to visiting French ships. When it is clear which ship was in Loch Etive around the time the woman appeared, a letter is written to the owner, and he in turn makes inquiries.

To try to find out how likely it is that a French ship in West Highland waters in the decades following 1745 would have been carrying a woman, and why such a woman might have wanted to escape, I've been reading a book by Suzanne J. Stark called 'Female Tars: Women aboard Ship in the Age of Sail', published in 1996. I found it fascinating.

Stark concentrates on the Royal Navy, but extrapolation is possible. France had a navy like Britain's. Like Britain, too, she had privateers – privately-owned armed vessels licensed to capture enemy ships – as well as merchantmen, armed and otherwise, and it appears likely that the same three categories of women associated with the Royal Navy were associated with naval ships, privateers and merchantmen of all nations.

Category 1 is prostitutes. From the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, whenever a British naval ship was in port the crew shared their hammocks with hundreds of them. There were two reasons why the practice was condoned – the crews were of pressed men, who would promptly disappear if allowed ashore, and if not provided with females they might fall back upon homosexuality, which was a capital offence.

The women were brought out in bumboats and might live on board for weeks at a time. Many were children, the age of consent being 12. (Many of the sailors were young boys, too, but that doesn't make it any better.) Lord Nelson wrote to Admiral Jervis one day in 1801: "I hope there will be orders to complete our complement, and the ship to be paid on Saturday. On Sunday we shall get rid of all the women, dogs, and pigeons, and on Wednesday, with the lark, I hope to be under sail for Torbay."

There were always officers who disliked the practice. One, Captain Robert Wauchope, found himself facing the First Sea Lord in 1829 as a result – no less a man than Admiral Thomas Hardy, Nelson's old companion. According to Stark the interview went like this: "I understand you object to women going on board."

"I object to prostitutes going on board."

"You go contrary to the wishes of the Admiralty and will therefore give up your commission."

"No. If the Admiralty choose to *take* my commission on this account, they may. I will not give it up."

"As one of the Lords of the Admiralty, I consider it right that women should be admitted into ships. When I was at sea, I always admitted them."

"Sir Thomas, it is written that *whoremongers shall not enter heaven*. Many officers hold the same opinion about admitting women aboard as I do."

"I am sorry to hear it sir. You have given up your commission."

Were prostitutes ever on board when a ship weighed anchor? Obviously it could happen, but Stark's examples are medieval. When the earl of Buckingham set out on 8 November 1377 to attack the Spanish fleet a number of prostitutes were still on board – we know this because the expedition was a failure, and Fr Thomas Walsingham described its failure in his history of England as God's retribution upon the sailors for bringing 'public women' to sea with them.

Two years later when Sir John Arundel set out from Southampton on a similar mission he had sixty women in his fleet – some prostitutes, others ladies whom the sailors had kidnapped from an abbey. (What were they doing in an abbey?) When a gale blew up, the sailors, even more superstitious than Fr Thomas, threw all sixty overboard.

Category 2 is the wives of such people as the master, purser, chaplain, surgeon, boatswain, gunner, carpenter, cooper, sailmaker and cook, sometimes even of petty officers

and leading seamen, all of whom regularly accompanied their husbands to sea. Often, to complete the happy family, they brought their maids and children as well. Despite all this, Stark finds little evidence in naval records of sexual harassment, and only one case each of attempted adultery and rape.

Such women played a valiant part in naval engagements, assisting the surgeon and carrying powder to the guns from the magazine. Stark tells of how it was decided in 1847 that a general service medal should be awarded to all then living who had taken part in naval battles against Napoleon. Three women applied. Two of them had fought in the Battle of the Nile (1798) and one at Trafalgar (1805).

The committee of admirals first agreed that the women should have their medal, then suddenly changed its mind. According to Stark it was probably Queen Victoria herself, a bitter opponent of women's rights, who had intervened – resulting in the anomaly that Daniel Tremendous Mackenzie received a medal simply for being *born* aboard HMS *Tremendous* during the Battle of the Glorious First of June, 1794, while not one woman got one. Not even his mother.

Women served in the French navy too. When the seventy-four-gun *Achille* sank at Trafalgar Nelson's men pulled two Frenchwomen from the water. One, Jeannette, had been handing up powder to the gun decks when the ship caught fire. She climbed through a gunport and leapt into the sea just before the ship exploded. By a miracle her husband was also safe and sound, and they were set ashore at Gibraltar. The other woman was naked when fished out, having shed her clothing to stay afloat. A Marine subaltern gave her 'a large cotton dressing-gown' to wear and she, too, was released at Gibraltar.

Category 3, a small but extraordinary one, is women who joined the Navy or Marines disguised as men. According to Stark there are more than twenty verified cases of this from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Why women should join voluntarily when men had to be pressed takes some explaining; it has mainly to do with the frustration of being a woman in a time when women had no rights and couldn't even own property. They had to like cross-dressing, of course.

Being agile, women could do well on a sailing-ship, and they also enjoyed two advantages over men – they could leave without fuss whenever they liked, simply by confessing their identity, and lesbian behaviour was treated not as a crime but a joke.

So which category did the woman who ran with the deer belong to? Well, we're told that 'she had been taken away in childbed doubtless by the Fairies'. What that refers to traditionally is the alleged need of the Fairies for human wet-nurses, because, it was said, of the inability of Fairy women to suckle their own children.

As I remarked last time, 'Fairies, my foot'. I would deduce that she had been snatched from a French port by a skipper who needed a wet-nurse for his child (as in Category 2), then hired out to the crew (as in Category 1).

If so, no wonder she absconded. Perhaps, like Jeannette, she climbed through a gunport and leapt into the sea.

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