

Victims of the powers of darkness

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article but one I remarked that the Gaelic tradition of spiritual experience is full of physical wrestlings. It's this dark area that I'd like to explore here – as before, in the context of the stories told by John Gregorson Campbell in his classic 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland'.

Let me begin with something which Campbell says happened around 1844. "A man in Tiree nicknamed the Poult (*am Bigein*) was haunted for several months by the spectre of the person with whom he was at the time at service. The phantom came regularly every evening for him, and if its call was disregarded it gave him next evening a severe thrashing.

"According to the man's own account, the spectre sometimes spoke, and, when he understood what it said, gave good advice. Its speech was generally indistinct and unintelligible. The person whose spectre it was, on being spoken to on the subject, got very angry, but the visits of the spectre ceased."

Let's examine this. First, the man is a landless cottar with a nickname that means 'Chicken'. Second, over several months he is subjected by the farmer for whom he works to a series of physical assaults. Third, the pretext of these assaults is that he has 'disregarded his master's call' the night before. Fourth, his boss is alleged to come in the form of a 'spectre' or 'phantom'. Finally, a rational modern analysis would probably conclude that this is a serious case of homosexual abuse.

I should point out that this isn't the only story in Campbell's book which is suggestive of homosexual behaviour. Take the following, which concerns Loch Anlaimh in the island of Coll: "At noontide, while the cattle were standing in the loch, the herdsman near Loch Annla was visited by a person in whose head he observed *rathum*, that is, water weeds.

"When going away the stranger jumped into the loch and disappeared without doing any harm. People used to hear strange noises about that loch, no doubt caused by the water-horse which was the herdsman's visitor."

In other words, the herdsman had a regular male visitor whose identity was unknown to the community, and rather than probe into what was going on around the swimming-pool, they were content simply to say the visitor was a water-horse.

The source of the *Bigein* story is not hard to guess. "The person whose spectre it was, on being spoken to on the subject, got very angry, but the visits of the spectre ceased." The man who had a word in his ear will have been Campbell's predecessor Neil Maclean, minister of Tiree from 1817 until his death in 1859; the man who told Campbell the story will have been 'Old Archibald' who was 'for half a century servant to the ministers of Tiree' and who "would insist to his dying day that, coming home at night with a cart from the parish mill, he heard the hand-mill at work inside *na Cnocana Ruadha*, the 'Red Knolls' near the road.

"He could put his foot on the very spot where he heard the noise. To ask him if he was naturally troubled with singing in the ears, or show any other symptom of unbelief, was resented as an affront, and neither minister nor elder, nor a whole synod, would persuade him there were no Fairies. He had heard them himself 'with his own ears'."

Let me return now to the concept – clearly believed by Archibald, if not by Neil Maclean – that a living person could have a spectre or phantom. Known as a *doppelgänger*, this is discussed by the late Eilidh Watt from Skinidin in her book 'Gun Fhois' of 1987. *Their cuid gu bheil coimeas dhinn, ach neo-chorparra, daonnan ceangailte rinn . . .* "Some say a copy of ourselves, albeit incorporeal, always goes with us, though some people's tether is longer than others'.

"The belief is pretty common around the world. In the Highlands and Islands it is called the *co-choisiche* ('co-walker'). Around the world it is better known as the *doppelgänger*. They say this shadow can reveal itself in our shape, our form, our clothing."

Let me tell another *doppelgänger* story of Campbell's. It brings us back to the female-on-male violence which is so prominent in his book. "In very recent times, not above four years ago," he says (this puts it around 1870), "as the driver of the mail-gig was going through *Coill an Eannd* (the Wood of Nant between Bonawe and Loch Awe) at night, he was met by the figure of his sweetheart, and received from it such a severe thrashing that he had to turn back.

“On telling this to herself afterwards, she acknowledged that on the night referred to she was very anxious about him, and wished she could intercept him in case at his journey’s end he should go to a house where fever had broken out.”

Now this *doppelgänger* is not so easily dismissed as a fraud as in the sad tale of *Bigein*. In fact it’s the kind of story that lends authority to the idea of the *co-choisiche*. So let’s find out if Eilidh Watt can shed any more light on it.

Eilidh, who died aged 88 in 1996, had the second sight herself. She was a splendid lady and a wonderful Gaelic writer. We corresponded quite a bit and although I never had the privilege of meeting her, it fell to me to write her obituary in ‘The Scotsman’. I hope I did her justice.

‘Gun Fhois’ is actually a book of short stories, but it’s what comes to my mind when faced with the task of explaining the physical aspect of spiritual experience. In her introduction Eilidh quotes William James’s ‘Varieties of Religious Experience’ on how it feels to be confronted with evil. “Fear came upon me and trembling made all my bones to shake. To all appearances it was a perfectly insane and abject terror without ostensible cause, and only to be accounted for, to my perplexed imagination, by some damned shape, squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the room and raying out from his foetid personality influences fatal to life.

“The thing had not lasted ten seconds before I felt myself a wreck, reduced from a state of firm, vigorous, joyful manhood to one of almost helpless infancy . . .”

This typifies the experience of many of Eilidh’s characters. In one story Seòras, a deacon and former seaman, has been visiting the minister. Despite the latter’s entreaties, he insists on going home rather than staying overnight. As he walks, he wonders why the minister said: *Na rach an greim riutha. Na toir dùbhlan daibh. Na biodh nàire ort teicheadh. Till ’na àm.* “Don’t tackle them. Don’t challenge them. Don’t be afraid to run away. Come back in time.”

After the first mile or so Seòras becomes very tired – as if walking into a wind, though there is none. “It was neither tiredness nor wind that drove him off the crown of the road, yet the ditch was his choice of pathway when he wasn’t stumbling and crawling.”

Back he goes to the manse, where the minister pulls him in the door as if he has swum through the sea from a shipwreck. They fall to prayer, the minister sweating with effort till eventually he says: *Dh’eug e, ach faodaidh gum bi tròcair Dhé éifeachdach. Cha deach agam air caim a chur mu thimcheall. Bha e ro fhad’ às. Ach dòcha fhathast.* “He has died, but perhaps God’s mercy will be effectual. I didn’t manage to put a circle round him. He was too far away. But perhaps yet.”

It isn’t till the following morning after breakfast that all is explained. *Is math nach do chum thu ort. Bha Iain Dubh ris a’ bhàs is feachdan an dorchadais a’ cruinneachadh gus aoi gheachd a thoirt dha. Ach is motha cumhachd Dhé.* “It’s as well you didn’t keep going. Iain Dubh was on his death-bed with the powers of darkness gathering to take him in. But God’s power is greater.”

In another story we meet an intended victim of the powers of darkness at first hand. ‘Ain Mór, a big bully of a shepherd, arrives at the manse demanding to be allowed the protection of communion. He has just spent the night in a lonely bothy where he was woken by his dead father’s voice. He sensed a presence – as did his dog, a collie bitch. *Thàinig bìùg fann gear bhuaipe is phlùisg i aig mo chasan.* “She uttered a pathetic little whine and expired at my feet.”

He saw nothing, but kept his back to the wall and his eyes where a man’s face would be on coming in the door. “I can’t describe to you how the Spirit of Evil took control of my mind. *Bhuail gach drabasdachd is gach truaillidheachd orm is mise a’ sabaid ’nan aghaidh.* All kinds of obscenity and corruption assaulted me as I fought against them. I think my soul parted from my body, from which the strength had completely melted, and that another spirit had come to fortify me, another mind to guide me. If it weren’t for that I’d have collapsed like the dog.

“*Bha mi ’nam bhlàr cogaidh aig feachdan uabhasach nach faca mi . . .* I was a battlefield fought over by terrible unseen forces. Then I was left alone, and thanked God – I who had no need of God. Though the awful forces had gone, I thought I could smell them like in July when I stumble across a dead sheep infested with worms. Except worse, worse even than if every sheep I’d ever lost were piled on top of each other in a pit.”

The minister lets him take communion, though it takes some explaining to the Session.

'Ain Mór's life is not greatly changed, the minister tells us drily, except that when he rises to the Question on Men's Day he speaks with an authority that roots his hearers to the spot.

Yet another of Eilidh's stories concerns Pàdraig, an old soldier who has seen strange things. It's put in the mouth of his neighbour Alasdair 'Ain Òig, who lives 15 minutes' walk away.

Three times this walk is described. The first time Alasdair is seeing Pàdraig home after an evening's visit. "I felt a thickness of mist creeping clammily round my legs and making it difficult to walk. I glanced at Pàdraig. Have you ever seen a man walking on a shore where there's any depth of seaweed? Or walking through mud? Though Pàdraig was on the hard crown of the road, that's how he was walking."

On the way back Alasdair feels that the woods on either side are full of eyes and paws.

Two weeks later Pàdraig comes again. He looks sick. "Some people say there's no such place as Hell," Alasdair tells us. "I disagree. Whatever place or condition is Hell, Pàdraig's soul at that time had been pulled and sucked into it." On the way through the trees the powers of darkness are out in force. "In the darkness I could see Pàdraig reeling like a boxer on whom punches were raining down."

Coming home, Alasdair feels he is walking in a shell. "Though my body was on the road it was as if it wasn't my mind guiding it."

The third time, Alasdair wakes up at night sensing that Pàdraig is calling for help. Seizing a Bible, up the road he goes in his shell to find Pàdraig's wife cowering in a corner while Pàdraig stands with his back to the wall, foaming at the mouth, fists flailing, grunting every so often as if he has given or taken a punch. Alasdair leaps to his side, holds up the Bible and shouts, *Cobhair ann an ainm na Trianaid!* "Help in the name of the Trinity!"

A punch from Pàdraig sends the book flying. *Rinn mi air mo mhàgan gus an leabhar a thogail, ach bha mo làmhan is mo cheann air am bualadh mar gum biodh le spògan móra anns nach robh cnàimh ged a bha neart anna.* "As I crawled to retrieve the book, my hands and head seemed to be struck by big paws which had strength without having bones."

He tries again. Pàdraig is now using his hands to protect his throat and face. Repeatedly calling on the Trinity, Alasdair puts his arms around Pàdraig. Alasdair's strength drains out of his body, and he calls to Pàdraig's wife. She comes as if wading through deep water, and they embrace Pàdraig until he says, "They've gone. They won't attack me again. You came in time."

Pondering how the driver of the mail-gig was thrashed by the *co-choisiche* of his sweetheart as he passed through the Wood of Nant, I suspect it represented nothing more or less than the terrors of his own conscience, arrived from Hell to torment him. Had fever really broken out in the house at his journey's end, or was it a rival attraction? *Bhuail gach drabasdachd is gach truaillidheachd orm . . .*

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