

## How the fairies got into the Bible

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN AN article here a month ago I mentioned the point of view which existed at one time that as fairies are mentioned in the Bible, disbelief in them is tantamount to disbelief in God. You'll search your concordance for 'fairies' in vain, so I had better explain what I meant.

I was taking my cue from the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell. Around 1874 he wrote in 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands' (which was not published until 1900, many years after his death) that the use of the term *leannan sìdh* by the translators of the Gaelic Bible 'is made a great handle of by the common people to prove from Scripture that Fairies actually exist'.

It's true that the expression *leannan sìdh* is in the Bible. In fact it's used fourteen times. Later on I'm going to have to quote some scripture, then ask what on earth the term is doing there. But first let me try to show exactly what it would have meant to people.

A *leannan sìdh* is a fairy sweetheart or lover of either sex. Six weeks ago I presented some examples from Campbell's book of fairy lovers who were female, troublesome and violent. Campbell doesn't use the term *leannan sìdh* for them. He calls one a 'Fairy mistress' and another a 'Fairy love'. But the more stories of this kind I read, the more I feel these women of Campbell's have a touch of propaganda about them. In the context of two thousand years of tradition, they're not so much *leannain shìdh* as *baobhan* – wicked, mischievous females who invoke curses and spread evil.

I think the question 'What is a *leannan sìdh*?' is slightly better answered by a series of seven stories in volume 5 of Alexander Carmichael's 'Carmina Gadelica'. In one of these, 'An Leannan Sìdh', a girl is herding cattle in the upland of Coire Chrothadail in South Uist. It's a hot day and she falls asleep. Nine months later she bears a son. She has no idea how she became pregnant, but there's a *sìdhean* full of fairies in the upland of the Corry, and having taken advice, she leaves her baby at its door. Sure enough a little man comes out, picks up the child with the utmost tenderness and sings a lullaby. *Ciod a ghaoil a nì mi riut . . . ?* "What, my love, will I do with you . . . ?"

Another story, 'A Mhór, a Ghaoil' ('Mór, My Beloved'), is very similar except that the girl knows perfectly well her *leannan sìdh* is the father of the child, and his lullaby is much longer.

Next come three related stories all entitled 'An Leannan Sìdh'. In the first a young girl, Sorcha, is pining away with love, disappearing every evening and coming back goodness knows when. Her sister, Slàine, promises their mother that she'll find out what's going on.

Slàine allows Sorcha to swear her to secrecy – *Is luaithe thig e mach air mo ghlùn na air mo bhial*. "Sooner will it come out at my knee than at my mouth." So Sorcha tells Slàine about her *leannan sìdh* – how he lives in a *sìdhean* at the back of the mountain, *agus gum bitheadh e gabhail ceòl sìdh dhi an Gleann Doire nan Dos*. "And that he would be singing fairy music to her in the Glen of the Grove of the Thickets."

Slàine goes straight back to her mother, who tells her sons, and they kill the *leannan sìdh*.

The second version is a little like Cinderella. No one is named, but I'll call the girls Sorcha and Slàine again. This time the woman is Sorcha's stepmother, and Slàine is her stepsister. No promises are made, no oaths sworn – Slàine is a tell-tale, it's as simple as that. Nor does she have anything more scandalous to tell than that 'a fairy would be coming to keep company with her sister, to herd the sheep, to pen the lambs, and to protect herself from the wolf and the small stock from the fox'.

It's enough. The stepmother sends out her sons, they kill the fairy, and Sorcha withers away 'like the white lily under the black frost', singing: '*Ille bhig, 'ille bhig shùgaich hó . . . Chum thu 'raoir am' dhùsgadh mi*'. "My little lad, my merry little lad . . . Last night you kept me awake."

The third version is from Kintail. For convenience I'll call the girl Sorcha again. Off she goes every morning to herd the cattle, and she never comes back till evening. She's wasting away with love for her *leannan sìdh*, and her mother is driven to distraction. One morning her father takes control. "Off you go to Mass," he tells Sorcha. "I'll herd the cattle today."

When he gets close to the *sìdhean* he hides. Seeing the cattle, Sorcha's sweetheart appears and sings: *Cuim nach tànaig laogh mo loinn . . . ?* "Why has the calf of my joy not

come . . . ?”

Sorcha’s father breaks cover and runs towards him, swearing by the devil that he’ll make sure he never comes out of the *sidhean* again. But suddenly he can see neither *sidheach* nor *sidhean*. “He fancied that a mist had come over his eyes and that he was under spells. And by Mary and her Son,” the storyteller concludes, “I fancy myself that that is what he was under.”

Next is ‘An Sealgair agus a’ Bhean-Shìdh’ (‘The Hunter and the Fairy Woman’), told in 1902 by Catriona MacNeil, a cottar at Brevig in Barra. The hunter has a *leannan sìdh*, but in due course he leaves her for a mortal wife. His wife is pregnant for a whole year and still cannot give birth. He wanders up the glen and whom does he meet but his ex-lover. “How is your wife?” she says.

He says she is fine. “So what brings you up to the hills?”

“Well,” he replies, “I saw a doe bringing a fawn into the world, and not succeeding.”

“Not succeeding, though the *mòthan* was under her foot!”

The *mòthan* is the bog violet or butterwort. “Are you sure it wasn’t your own wife?” she says.

“Oh, no.”

“Well, I’ll give you a fine effective *crios* (belt, girdle), and if you put it around her middle the child will come into the world.”

On his way home he tries putting the *crios* around an old tree-stump. It shatters in four parts from top to bottom. So he plucks some *mòthan* instead and puts it under his wife’s soles.

She gives birth quickly and safely. But next year when she is pregnant once again and near her time, the hunter is out in the hills and hears his ex-lover singing a song about his wife being shrouded. And when he gets home she is dead.

The seventh story, told by Mary MacMillan, a crofter at Iochdar in South Uist, is equally well told but very similar. It’s mainly of interest for its conclusion. *Tha na mnà-sìdh mar na mnà saoghail*, says Mary, *fuairidh geuraidh guineach chon na té chaidh eadar iad fhéin agus cridhe mhic an duine. Dia eadar sinn agus farmad gach mnà-sìdh agus gach mnà saoghail!* “The fairy women are like the world women, cold and keen and cutting to her who has come between themselves and the heart of the son of man. God be between us and the envy of every fairy woman and every world woman!”

Let me turn now to how *leannan sìdh* is used in the Bible. In Leviticus 19:31 we have: *Na biodh suim agaibh dhiubh-san aig am bheil leannain-shìth, agus na h-iarraibh a dh’ionnsuidh luchd-fiosachd, gu ’bhì air-bhur truailleadh leo.* The Authorised Version has this as: “Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them.”

So *leannain-shìdh* are ‘familiar spirits’, while *luchd-fiosachd* (literally ‘seers’, ‘fortune-tellers’) are ‘wizards’. But perhaps Lev. 20:6 explains what set the translators’ minds running on fairy lovers. *An t-anam a théid a thaobh a dh’ionnsuidh muinntir aig am bheil leannain-shìth, agus a dh’ionnsuidh luchd fiosachd, gu dol le striopachas ’n an déigh, cuiridh mise mo ghnùis an aghaidh an anama sin, agus gearraidh mi as e o mheasg a shluaigh.* “The soul that turneth after such as have familiar spirits, and after wizards, to go a whoring after them, I will even set my face against that soul, and will cut him off from among his people.”

What’s more, Lev. 20:27 prescribes for those who have a *leannan-sìdh* the kind of death that we associate with adultery. *Bean no duine mar an ceudna aig am bheil leannan-sìth, no ’bhitheas ri fiosachd, cuirear gu deimhin gu bàs iad: clachaidh iad le clachaibh iad; bithidh am fuil orra féin.* “A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones; their blood shall be upon them.”

What exactly is a ‘familiar spirit’ then? Campbell explains: “The Hebrew word so translated is rendered ‘pythons’ by the Vulgate, and ‘consulters of the spirits of the dead’ by modern scholars. Those said to have familiar spirits were probably a class of magicians who pretended to be media of communication with the spirit world, their ‘familiar’ making himself known by sounds muttered from the ground through the instrumentality, as the Hebrew name denotes, of a skin bottle.”

‘Python’ in the Vulgate (the Catholic Bible) has nothing to do with snakes. My dictionary defines it as ‘a familiar or possessing spirit, one possessed by a spirit’ – from Pytho, the oracle of Apollo at Delphi.

As I see it, the translators’ problem was that the nearest thing to this concept in their own

society was the gypsy ‘medium’ whom they might come across on the fairground. She wouldn’t be a Gaelic speaker, and there was no Gaelic word for her. In more traditional terms, ‘spirit possession’ is shamanism; there are traces of shamanism in Gaelic folklore if you know how to look for them, but again there’s no Gaelic word for it. ‘Shaman’ itself has entered English from Russian.

Facing the task of translating into Gaelic a word for a belief that no longer existed in Gaelic society, the translators solved it by referring to one that did exist. “No harm,” one can imagine the minister of Luss remarking to the minister of Killin, “if we knock fairies and lovers on the head in one blow!”

Yes, but the consequences for scripture are rather peculiar. It’s all right to claim with Deuteronomy 18:11 that those who consult with fairy lovers are an abomination unto the Lord. But what of 1 Samuel 28:3, where Saul is made to drive from the land all who had fairy lovers? Which leads to his extraordinary encounter with the witch of Endor in 1 Sam. 28:7-9. Flouting his own command, he tells his servants to find a woman who has a fairy lover. There’s a woman with a fairy lover in Endor, they say. Wishing her to invoke Samuel so that he can consult him, he goes to her in disguise and says, in Gaelic of course, “Divine unto me by the fairy lover, and bring me him up whom I shall name unto thee.” And she replies, “Behold, thou knowest what Saul hath done, how he hath cut off those that have fairy lovers out of the land.”

By the time the translators had toiled through Kings and Chronicles they had begun, thankfully, to change their mind. ‘They that have familiar spirits’ occur three times in Isaiah, twice in the company of ‘wizards’. The first time (8:19) they become *ban-fhiosaichean* (female seers, fortune-tellers) and the wizards are *druidhean* (druids). In 19:3 the translators slip back to *leannain-shìth* and *luchd-fiosachd* (seers). But in 29:4 there are no wizards. ‘One that hath a familiar spirit’ is simply *fiosaiche*, a seer.

After Isaiah there are no familiar spirits, no pythons, no *leannain shìth*. It’s just as well. Those instances of *sìth*, abomination or no, had merely served to back up with scriptural authority the people’s countless stories about the fairies, and to lend weight to Mary MacMillan’s verdict. For as she said, ‘the fairy women are like the world women’.

And, we might add, the fairy men are like the world men.

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