

Changelings or child abuse?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ONCE upon a time in Glengarry there was a widow who had a baby boy. One day when he was sleeping quietly in his cradle she went to the well for water, and when she got back he was screaming as if in great pain.

She gave him a drink as quickly as she could. That calmed him down for a bit, but he soon broke out again as badly as ever. She gave him another drink, and this time while he was at her breast she noticed he had two teeth, each more than an inch long, and that his face was looking old and withered. She said to herself: *Tha mi deas a-nis. Ach fuirichidh mi sàmhach fiach am faic mi ciod a thig às a-seo.* “I’m finished now. But I’ll keep quiet and see what comes of this.”

Next day she picked up the baby, covered him with a shawl and set off *mar gum biodh i dol don ath bhaile leis* – as if she were bringing him to the next township. There was a big burn in the way, and as she was wading through the ford the wizened creature stuck his head out of the shawl and said: *Is iomadh buaile mhór a chunnaic mise air dà thaobh an uillt seo!* “Many a big fold have I seen on the banks of this stream!”

She didn’t wait to hear any more. She threw the baby into a deep pool below the ford, where he tossed about in the swirling water, screaming that ‘if he had known in advance that was the trick she was going to play on him, he would have shown her another’ (*nan robh fhios aige ro làimh gum b’e siud an cleas a bha i dol a chluich air, gun d’fheuch esan cleas eile dhi*).

Then she heard a sound like a flock of birds flying around her, but saw nothing until she looked at her feet, and there was her own baby ‘with his bones as bare as the tongs’ (*gun mhìr air cnàimh d’eth nas motha na air a’ chlobha*).

She brought him home, and he gradually got better, and in the end he was as healthy as any other child.

That story comes from a book by the Revs James MacDougall and George Calder, ‘Folk Tales and Fairy Lore’, published in 1910. It’s a pretty basic ‘changeling’ story. The concept of the changeling (*tàcharan*) is known to folklore in many countries. It’s based on ‘theft of substance’ no less than when the fairies steal the cream out of the milk. The fairies steal your real, healthy, growing child, and leave the unreal shadow of a child in its place – old, obnoxious, with all the sap dried out of it.

Let’s pick up the main points of the story to see how it might relate to reality. First of all the woman is a widow. That means she and her child are at risk. At best she’s a cottar. To have a cow she must pay rent for grazing; can she provide services enough to pay that rent? Probably not. More likely she’s sold the cow, or it’s died, and she’s trying to manage with goats alone.

Secondly, the changeling is substituted for her baby while she’s at the well. Superstition provided various ways of safeguarding against this, involving such things as the strategic placing of iron (such as a horseshoe), rowan, or coloured threads, or the sprinkling of *maistir* – urine, which was collected for use in waulking cloth, but which the fairies much disliked (who’s to blame them)?

Thirdly, the changeling reveals its age in two different ways, both of which are common in such stories. One is having prominent teeth and being wizened. The other is more entertaining – being an old codger, the fairy can’t resist droning on about the old days. “Many a big fold have I seen . . .”

The fourth point is perhaps the most important. The woman tries to kill her baby – sorry, the fairy changeling – by drowning him. We’re not told that she leaves the house with the intention of doing this. Motivation takes place in three stages. First she discovers her baby’s physical condition. Next she sets off towards the next township, where presumably relief for her baby’s physical condition can be obtained. Finally the baby speaks, and that’s the last straw: she tries to drown him.

But there’s more. The fairy host come around the woman in the form of birds which she cannot see. (We’re reminded of the stork.) They deposit her own baby at her feet. Then a detail which the late Alan Bruford pointed out was ‘quite unusual’ in changeling stories: the real baby seems starved even though he has only been a short time away, his bones being ‘as

bare as the tongs’.

My own interpretation of the story – I suppose you could call it a Marxist view – is this. There’s no such thing as fairies. The woman is pregnant, destitute, starving. She has nothing to give her son but breast milk. She comes back from the well to find he is teething. She has been a long time because she was foraging for food. “He looks so old,” she says to herself.

So he does, because he’s a year old and malnourished. The teeth being ‘more than an inch long’ is a Dracula-type exaggeration. No doubt it feels like that as the baby sucks. Then she gets labour pains and sets off to find help. The swollen burn blocks her way. Her son is fretting and screaming.

She tries to wade across, loses her footing, drops the baby into the water. He drowns. On reaching the bank she goes into labour and gives birth to a healthy son. She gets to the township, where she and the child are well taken care of. Perhaps because it’s more than nine months since her husband died, she allows the women to believe that her new-born child is the one she gave birth to many months before. That’s why it strikes them that ‘his bones are as bare as the tongs’.

This then is a case where the changeling may be identified as a troublesome year-old child, and the ‘real’ baby as a new-born one. I think it’s important to see changeling stories in the perspective of a society in which famine was endemic, as was the case in the Highlands down to the nineteenth century. Changelings are always voracious.

I’ve been quite charitable to the young widow, for she may have deliberately murdered her child. The evidence for changeling stories being a cover for infanticide is quite strong. In ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands’ the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell provides a list of the ways in which (according to tradition) such children could be got rid of. He uses a curious metaphor for murder which we have met before – conversion into the stock or stump of a tree. He says: “The changeling was converted into the stock of a tree by saying a powerful rhyme over him, or by sticking him with a knife.

“He could be driven away by running at him with a red-hot ploughshare; by getting between him and the bed and threatening him with a drawn sword; by leaving him out on the hillside, and paying no attention to his shrieking and screaming; by putting him sitting on a gridiron, or in a creel, with a fire below; by sprinkling him well out of the *maistir* tub; or by dropping him into the river.”

The one thing missing from this grisly catalogue is the most obvious way of getting rid of an unwanted child – suffocation. What strikes me is that, considering recent high-profile cases, these are not the ways in which an unbalanced single mother carries out a mercy-killing. They’re more like the ways in which a psychopathic father, stepfather or other male will systematically torture a baby under the guise of ‘punishment’ while the helpless mother looks on. Today’s cigarette-butt may be yesterday’s gridiron.

What then is the position of fathers or other adult males in ‘changeling’ stories? I will tell you. In the limited sample which I’ve looked at, the spotlight falls on tailors.

Tailors had a unique role in Gaelic society. All trades except one were carried on either by the people themselves in or around their own homes (dyeing, say, or rope-making, or butchering) or by craftsmen in their own workshops (metal-working, shoemaking, milling, weaving). With the partial exception of peddling (the pedlar didn’t stay long), the tailor was the only craftsman who plied his trade in his customers’ own homes, staying in the same house night after night if need be till his task was completed.

This means that the reputation of tailors is of unheroic men, often crippled, not highly regarded, but great gossips, poets, storytellers, tradition-bearers. And baby-sitters.

Consider the following from Argyll, also told by MacDougall and Calder. At Kentallen (*Ceann an t-Sàilein*) in Duror lived a woman whose baby son ate far more than was natural but never stopped crying. It was harvest-time, and everyone in the township was out with their sickles – everyone, that is, except the woman (who was afraid to go out for fear her son broke his heart crying) and a tailor (who was busy making clothes).

The tailor was a shrewd, observant man, and he soon became suspicious of the baby. *Faodaidh tusa dol thun na buana*, he said, *agus gabhaidh mise cùram den phàist*. “You can go to the reaping, and I’ll take care of the child.”

He stared at the withered object (*cranndas*) in the cradle as it shrieked and bellowed. Eventually he lost patience and cried in a sharp, angry voice: *Stad, ’ille, den cheòl sin, air neo cuiridh mi air an teine thu*. “Stop that music, my lad, or I’ll put you on the fire.”

The crying stopped, then after a while it began again. *An ann fhathast, a phìobaire an aon phuirt? Cluinneam an ceòl sin agad tuilleadh agus marbhaidh mi thu leis a' bhiodaig.* “Still at it, piper of the one tune? Let me hear any more of your music, and I’ll kill you with the dirk.”

When the fairy saw the tailor glaring at him with dirk in hand he took fright and kept quiet for a good while. But the tailor was a cheerful man, and began to hum a tune (*port a channtaireachd*) as he worked. That set the fairy howling again, and at this point the story takes a peculiar twist. Picking up the dirk again, the tailor said: *Tha gu leòir againn den cheòl ud. Glac a' phìob-mhór cheart agus thoir dhuinn aon phort math oirre, air neo cuiridh mi a' bhiodag annad.* “We’ve had enough of that music. Take the proper pipes and give us one good tune on them, or I’ll put the dirk in you.”

The fairy sat up in the cradle, took the pipes and played the sweetest music the tailor had ever heard. The reapers heard it too, dropped their sickles and ran towards it. But before they reached the house the tune had stopped; they didn’t know who was playing or where it was coming from.

I can’t explain that episode, other than by remarking that the tailor clearly tried to make the child do something – walk, perhaps? – at the point of a dirk, that it was common for harvest workers to be entertained with pipe music, and that skill in piping was universally believed to be one of the fairies’ gifts.

Anyway, that evening the tailor took the woman aside and told her the child was a changeling. She should bring him to the Ardsheal side of the bay, he said, and throw him into the loch.

She took his advice. As soon as he hit the water he became a big grey-haired old man and swam to the other side of the bay. When he got to dry land he shouted that if he had known beforehand what she was going to do he would have made her never think of doing such a thing again. She returned home and found her own child at the door, safe and sound.

What are we to make of this? That the child was abused and survived? That the child was abused and died, but that the woman had another in due course? That the tailor was a hero? That the tailor was a villain, and is being set up as a scapegoat to take the blame off a local man’s shoulders?

What’s clear to me at any rate (from these two stories and many others like them) is that whatever happened to a child it was reckoned to be the family’s own business, and that belief in fairies was a nice big woolly carpet under which a community’s moral misfortunes could be swept.

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