

Kidnapping women (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I'VE spent most of my recent articles trying to show that what the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell called the 'doctrine' of fairy belief was a sort of psychic construct that allowed people to make sense of what they couldn't understand, to explain away what they didn't want to acknowledge, or even to provide a set of rules for living.

In so doing I've covered a variety of types of behaviour that lie just under the surface of our 'fairy stories', including child abuse, infanticide, drink-related crime, male-upon-female violence, female-upon-male violence, homosexuality, and so on.

One word I *haven't* used yet however is 'kidnapping'. Kidnapping is commonplace in Gaelic fairy stories. It happens so much, especially to women and children, that you get the impression it wasn't taken as seriously as it is now. The history of the term corroborates that. There's no special Gaelic word for it – Thomson's dictionary just gives *goid air falbh*.

'Kidnap' itself doesn't appear until the seventeenth century, according to the 'Oxford English Dictionary'. It's a sort of slang which (unlike most words) means what it says – nab kids. In 'Pilgrim's Progress' (1684) Bunyan says: "Thou practisest the craft of a Kidnapper, thou gatherest up Women, and Children, and carriest them into a strange Countrey." So, through being used of women, it came to apply to adults generally.

Bunyan's words could be used unaltered of the fairies. In Campbell's book 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands' there's an entire section entitled 'Stealing Women and Children'. It begins: "Most frequently it was women (not yet risen from childbed) and their babes that the Fairies abducted. On every occasion of a birth, therefore, the utmost anxiety prevailed to guard the mother and child from their attacks. It is said that the Fairy women are unable to suckle their own children, and hence their desire to secure a human wet-nurse. This, however, does not explain why they want the children."

Some of that is a red herring if we're trying to trace the real history of kidnapping. Nobody's going to steal a woman in childbed. The alleged 'abduction' of women and newborn babies by the fairies is simply a metaphor for their death. Again, where we're told (as we often are) that the woman or child is turned into a block of wood, the metaphor is clear. It's their coffin.

Once the birth is safely over, however, both woman and child become valuable commodities. Not to fairies – there's no such thing, remember? – but to those kindreds in the Highlands who lived outside the law, coming out of the mist to lift cattle and other booty and then disappearing back into the hills.

*Bonny Babby Livingstone
Gaed out to see the kye,
And she has met with Glenlyon,
Who has stolen her away.*

Why should they want nursing women? Presumably, given their unsettled lifestyle, because their own women had a higher-than-normal incidence of perinatal mortality. Why should they want children? Because they had so many cattle to herd, and *buachailleachd* was a job for children of five and over. And why should people blame fairies for things that evil men do?

Ah, that's the big question which opens up the issue. Cattle-lifting then (like poaching now) had always been part of everyone's lives. The world was ever thus. How else could you live in a place like Rannoch? Camerons, Stewarts, MacDonalDs – they all had relatives who were 'broken men'. They stole from the Lowlands as far as they could. That benefitted the whole Highland economy. How could you deny them their right to women?

Don't take my word for it. Consider Sir Walter in his notes on 'Rob Roy'. The Highland imagination was less shocked at the idea of 'this particular species of violence' than might be expected from their kindness to their own families – but, he explains, 'all their views were tinged with the idea that they lived in a state of war', and in such a state the female captives are 'the most valuable part of the booty'. He goes on: "The annals of Ireland, as well as those of Scotland, prove the crime to have been common in the more lawless parts of both

countries; and any woman who happened to please a man of spirit who came of a good house, and possessed a few chosen friends, and a retreat in the mountains, was not permitted the alternative of saying him nay.”

*Four-and-twenty Hieland men
Came down by Fiddoch side
And they have sworn a deadly aith
Jean Muir suld be a bride.*

*And they have sworn a deadly aith,
Ilke man upon his durke,
That she should wed with Duncan Ger,
Or they'd make bloody worke.*

Scott says in effect ‘don’t take my word for it’, just as I have done. He quotes the view of ‘a respectable woman’ on such marriages. “She said that there was no use in giving a bride too much choice upon such occasions: that the marriages were the happiest lang syne which had been done off hand.” And she averred that her ‘own mother had never seen her father till the night he brought her up from the Lennox, with ten head of black cattle, and there had not been a happier family in the country’.

Maybe I saw too many cowboy films when I was a boy, but when I read what Campbell has to say about ‘the folk’ – the fairies, that is – travelling in what he calls an ‘eddy wind’, I get a picture of tartan-clad men on Highland ponies urging a stolen herd of black cattle towards the hills. “When ‘the folk’ leave home in companies,” he says, “they travel in eddies of wind. In this climate these eddies are among the most curious of natural phenomena. On calm summer days they go past, whirling about straws and dust, and as not another breath of air is moving at the time their cause is sufficiently puzzling. In Gaelic the eddy is known as *oiteag sluaigh* (‘the people’s puff of wind’) and its motion as *falbh air chuisseagan treòrach* (‘travelling on tall grass stems’).

“By throwing one’s left (or *toisgeul*) shoe at it, the Fairies are made to drop whatever they may be taking away – men, women, children, or animals. The same result is attained by throwing one’s bonnet (saying, *Is leatsa seo, is leamsa sin*, ‘This is yours, that’s mine’), or a naked knife, or earth from a molehill.

“In these eddies, people going on a journey at night have been ‘lifted’, and spent the night careering through the skies.”

That word ‘lifted’ is the very one used for stealing cattle by the likes of Rob Roy. Which confirms my feeling that when in a state of moral denial, the people resorted to the fairies. Imagine a rat-tat at the door. It’s the factor in his three-cornered hat. “Donald, I hear your daughter has gone off with that blackguard Robert MacGregor.”

“Indeed sir no, the fairies took her.”

“Fairies be damned, there is no such thing.”

“Indeed sir there is not, but they took her all the same.”

Or words to that effect. Now in order to prove my case, what I need is a circumstantial account from oral tradition about a woman being kidnapped by fairies, along with a circumstantial account from historical record about a woman being kidnapped by cattle-lifters, in which the detail of one matches the detail of the other.

That’s not quite as unlikely as it sounds. On this page at Christmas 1989 I published a traditional yarn, told as far away as Cape Breton, about how the evil ‘Black Officer’ of Ballachroan in Badenoch was in league with the devil and lured men to their deaths in an avalanche. At New Year 1990 I followed it up with a statement of the facts of the case, taken from witnesses a few years later by the parish minister (who later became Moderator of the Free Church General Assembly) in an attempt to stem the flood of superstition that had engulfed the tragedy.

I haven’t found anything as good as that yet on the kidnapping theme, so I’ll do the next best thing. I’ve chosen a series of five or six stories, beginning with a couple (one now, one next time) where the kidnapers are stated to be fairies, then moving on through one or two which contain supernatural as well as factual elements and finishing with a pair which seem to be entirely factual – in fact my last one will be based on documentary evidence. I’ll hope

to prove my point by showing how similar they are to each other.

My first story picks up on that custom of saying: *Is leatsa seo, is leamsa sin!* It was told long ago by a Strathspey man called William Grant Stewart in his book 'The Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland'. A certain John Roy, who lived in Glenbrown in the parish of Abernethy, was out 'traversing the hills for his cattle' one night when 'he happened to fall in with a fairy banditti, whose manner of travelling indicated that they carried along with them some booty'. Stewart goes on: "John Roy took off his bonnet, and threw it towards them, demanding a fair exchange in the emphatic Gaelic phrase, *Sluis sho slumus Sheen.*"

It's clearly Strathspey dialect – *S leibhs' seo, s leamas sin.* "They abandoned the burden, which turned out to be nothing more or less than a fine fresh lady, who, from her dress and language, appeared to be a *Sasonach.*"

John Roy brought her home where she was 'treated with the utmost tenderness for several years' and gradually integrated into his family and community. When soldiers came to build roads through the Highlands, he provided an English captain and his son with accommodation under his own roof. They got on well, but John Roy was made very uneasy by the way in which the pair kept staring at 'his English foundling'.

One day the son remarked how much she resembled his late mother, and the father replied that she did indeed look like his late wife, mentioning her name – upon which the lady 'instantly recognised her tender husband and darling son'.

What had happened, Stewart explains, was that 'some of the hordes of fairies, inhabiting the "Shian of Coir-laggack"' had gone to the south of England and kidnapped the woman in childbed, depositing in her place a 'stock' – an adult changeling – which died a few days later and was buried 'in the full persuasion of *its* being the lady in question, with all the splendour which her merits deserved'.

He concludes: "Thus would the perfidious fairies have enjoyed the fruits of their cunning, without even a suspicion of their knavery, were it not for the 'cleverness and generosity of John Roy, who once lived in Glenbrown'."

Well well. The first thing to ask is if this John Roy could possibly be the swashbuckling Jacobite poet Colonel John Roy Stewart (1700-49), who fought at Culloden – a relative of the author's, perhaps? But I think not. Glenbrown is near Tomintoul, far away over the hills from the Colonel's stamping-ground by Aviemore, and the military road through Tomintoul, part of the link between Coupar Angus and Fort George, was built during 1748-57.

Glenbrown and Tomintoul were wild country, however, full of broken men, especially MacGregors, who lifted cattle from far and wide and grazed them around the Cairngorms. "Fairy banditti" my foot. These were real banditti, and John Roy would have been related to some of them. The south of England is only mentioned to put us off the scent.

My guess is that they had lifted their *ban-Shasannach* at Coupar Angus or some such place when the army arrived there in 1748 to make a start on the road; that they took her because they thought she might be worth something; that they disposed of her to John Roy for the price of a bonnet because she was a lot of trouble; and that John Roy was happy to have her because he could use an extra pair of hands to fetch his water and milk his cows.

As for her husband and son thinking that they had buried her, it must have been because a corpse or skeleton was found in the hills after she was lifted, and assumed to be hers.

The broken men of the Highlands didn't murder women. But try explaining that to a Redcoat after Culloden.

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