

Kidnapping women (2)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I'M GOING to tell some stories about the kidnapping of women. First a fairy story through and through, then one with supernatural elements, then one with no supernatural elements, then one that's on the historical record. Maybe they'll help us understand the real meaning of stories about fairies that kidnap women.

My first one was told by the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell in 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands'. A weaver by the Bridge of Awe near the iron works at Taynuilt is left a widower with three or four children. He toils at his trade all day, and does odd jobs about the house in the evening as he looks after his family.

One moonlit night when thatching he hears the rushing sound of a high wind, and a multitude of little people settle on the roof and the ground like a flock of black starlings. He's told he must accompany them to Glen Cannel in Mull, where they're going for a woman. He refuses to go unless he gets whatever is foraged to himself.

This is like a story in MacDougall and Calder's 'Folk Tales and Fairy Lore' that says of a tailor whom the Fairies had in their power: "They could not hurt any human being except by means of another; and for that reason they used to take him with them, and make him throw the fairy arrows at the person to whom they bore ill-will." It can be explained as a *geas* or taboo imposed in specific circumstances on a particular tribe of Fairies, in the same way that certain taboos were imposed from time to time on Cù Chulainn and the Ulaidh, or on Fionn and the Féinn. There's a word for it in terms of modern belief too. He's the fall-guy.

On arriving at Glen Cannel the weaver is given an arrow to throw. This is another curiosity. Behind 'throw' lies *caith* which means both 'throw' and 'shoot (as an arrow)', but no bow is ever mentioned in any Gaelic fairy story that I know. Could it be because the 'arrow' is a gun?

Pretending to aim at the woman, our weaver 'throws' the 'arrow' through the window and kills a pet lamb. The animal at once comes out through the window, but he's told this won't do: he must 'throw' again. He does so, and the woman is taken away and a log of alder-wood (*stoc feàrna*) left in her place.

This sounds like murder to me. A log of wood can only mean a coffin. Alder is the worst kind of timber, and it seems to me that if you're a Muileach who has taken out a contract with some mainland ruffians for them to murder your wife and make it look like robbery (the lamb), you'll pick alder for her coffin. She's cost you enough as it is.

What's next? "The weaver claimed his agreement, and the Fairies left the woman with him at the Bridge of Awe, saying they would never again make the same paction with any man. She lived happily with him and he had three children by her."

In other words Campbell is claiming that the woman is not murdered at all, but kidnapped and given to the weaver. My own judgement is that she *is* murdered (you can't get around that log of wood), and by the weaver at that. So it must be some other woman who is kidnapped. The gang don't like this one bit, because they want to get away with a clean pair of heels, but the weaver is already in it up to the neck. What he wants is not blood money but a young wife, and what girl in Taynuilt will take on a shady character with four kids?

Fortunately there's a twist in the tale which reveals the kidnapped woman's identity. "A beggar came the way and stayed with him that night. The whole evening the beggar stared at the wife in a manner that made his host at last ask him what he meant. He said he had at one time been a farmer in Glen Cannel in Mull, comfortable and well-to-do, but his wife having died, he had since fallen into poverty till he was now a beggar, and that the weaver's wife could be no other than the wife he had lost."

Well well. The man's wife has died, yet here she is. So she hasn't died. It's a lie. She left him, or so he assumed. Men don't fall into poverty because their wives die – it's the other way round, their wives leave them because they're falling into poverty. Note that the Muileach stares at the woman, but we're not told that she acknowledges him at all. But what happens in the end? "Explanations were entered into, and the beggar got his choice of the wife or the children. He chose the former, and again became prosperous in the world."

That story's a classic. I don't know any other that needs so much arguing. Fairies are gangsters. Taboos are blackmail. Arrows are guns. Kidnap by shooting is murder. Logs are

coffins. Your wife dying is your wife leaving you.

If each of these equations can be proved valid in other instances, however, they're likely to be valid here. If I'm right, we have in Gaelic fairy stories a code of symbols no less complex than the one that operates in Gaelic poetry. Take the first equation, for example. According to the 'Dublin Evening Mail' of 18 April 1827, a schoolmaster in Co. Sligo named Connor was found hanged. He and his whole family had turned Protestant, it seems, but he had changed his mind and decided to 'read his recantation' in church the following Sunday. Warrants were issued for his father and two brothers on suspicion of murder: "These persons," declares the paper, "endeavoured to circulate a report that he had been hanged by the fairies."

My second story concerns a Lochaber man called Ewen MacPhie, who lived from about 1780 to 1850. We know quite a lot about him from different sources. He was an army deserter of heroic stamp who had been captured. He escaped while being brought in irons to Fort George, lived rough for a while on Loch Arcaig-side, and finally decamped to an island in Loch Quoich at the head of Glen Garry. Campbell describes his kidnapping exploit like this: "He took away by force a girl of twelve years of age, and, coming next day to her parents, said if it would give any satisfaction he would marry her, but refusing to part with her.

"A sort of ceremony of marriage was gone through, but MacPhie seems for several years to have looked upon the girl merely as his daughter. Her first child was born when she was eighteen years of age, and she had several more of a family. After his marriage MacPhie removed to the islet mentioned, and remained there undisturbed for many years."

It's interesting that Campbell says the girl was twelve, because that was the legal age of consent. Edward Ellice tells us in 'Place Names of Glengarry and Glenquoich' that Ewen was already living in Loch Quoich when he took her, but doesn't mention her age. "His bothy built, he must needs have a wife; so one fine morning he stepped across the hill to Glen Dulochan, where he had previously made the acquaintance of a girl, and, without much more courting, popped her on his back, and returned to his island, where they were duly married."

If he really 'popped her on his back', she can't have been a grown woman.

My third source is an article published in 'Cuirtear nan Gleann' in 1841, during Ewen's lifetime. Probably written by the Rev. Dr Norman MacLeod, *Caraid nan Gaidheal*, it says Ewen was living in a shieling bothy in the Coire Buidhe south of Loch Quoich. *Thug e a chridhe do dh-ainnir òg àluinn, aois cheithir-bliadh'-deug – ruith e air falbh leatha, phòs iad, agus a nis tha còigear chloinne aca.* "He gave his heart to a lovely young girl, aged fourteen – he ran away with her, they married, and now they have five children."

Subsequently they moved to the island, where they are now living off their goats, says the 'Cuirtear', with plenty of fish and venison to supplement their diet. Mutton too, we may add, when the neighbours moved out and the sheep moved in, but that was Ewen's undoing – Ellis says he ended his days in jail.

All accounts agree that there was something not canny about Ewen. Campbell says a water-horse was often seen in Loch Quoich. Ewen himself claimed that one stormy night there was a rattling at the door and he knew it was a water-horse in the shape of a man. "He fired twice at it, but it did not move. He called to his wife to bring a silver coin, and when he put this in the gun and fired, the figure went away and was heard plunging into the loch."

We have to hope it was a water-horse, because Ellis tells us that Ewen's wife once fired at two sheriff's officers who were rowing across to the island. He also says the people looked up to Ewen as a seer, a curer of cows and a maker of charms, while the 'Cuirtear' says *tha seòrsa do sgàth air muinntir an àite roimhe* 'the local people hold him in a kind of awe' – some on account of his heroic reputation, others 'thinking he has some knowledge not of the best kind, the type of witchcraft and second sight (*fiosachd*) which it is unlucky to offend'.

My next story brings us face to face with the kind of outlaws who lifted cattle and women. Some time around 1600 Rachel, daughter of MacGregor of Dunan (the furthest-out settlement in the Braes of Rannoch) is being courted by an old bachelor from Lochaber, Ragnall na Ceapaich, whom she despises. One day he and a dozen comrades abduct her while she is walking in a birch wood. They take her to a lonely bothy where Ragnall demands that she accept him. She refuses.

One of the men now proposes that she be 'dishonoured' and allowed to go back to her father if that is what she wants. Cameron of Blàr a' Chaorainn objects and suggests she be

given the choice of all present. Someone says: *Am boireannach nach toir a roghainn á triùir, bheir i a dedìn às a dhà dheug*. “The woman who can’t choose between three will take what she wants out of twelve.”

She chooses Cameron, and they’re married next day in Lochaber. Her father pitches in with a dowry of twenty cows and a bull. The marriage, by all accounts, is a happy one.

My last kidnapers are the sons of Rob Roy, and their crime – committed sixteen years after their father’s death – is very much on the record, thanks partly to Sir Walter Scott. The victim is Jean Key or Wright, 20, two months a widow, whose property is estimated at up to 18,000 merks. In today’s values that’s £100,000. Enough to buy a house and a couple of acres.

Jean is living with her mother at Edinbilly near Balfron. On the night of 3 December 1750 three of the four surviving sons of Rob Roy – Seumas Mór, Donnchadh and Roban Òg – rush into the house brandishing swords and pistols. They demand that Jean be handed over because, says Seumas, his brother is ‘a young fellow determined to make his fortune’. They drag Jean out of hiding, tear her from her mother’s arms, mount her on a horse in front of one of the gang, and carry her off ‘in spite of her screams and cries, which were long heard after the terrified spectators of the outrage could no longer see the party retreat through the darkness’.

In an effort to escape, Jean throws herself off the horse and wrenches her side, so they lay her over the pommel of the saddle and transport her through the moors and bogs until the pain forces her to sit upright.

They call at several houses. No one tries to stop them. One witness is the future Professor William Richardson of Glasgow University, who describes to Scott the ‘terrible dream’ of their ‘violent and noisy’ arrival at the house where he is staying. “The Highlanders filled the little kitchen, brandishing their arms, demanding what they pleased, and receiving whatever they demanded. James Mohr, he said, was a tall, stern, and soldier-like man. Robin Oig looked more gentle; dark, but yet ruddy in complexion – a good-looking young savage. The victim was so dishevelled in her dress, and forlorn in her appearance and demeanour, that he could hardly tell whether she was alive or dead.”

They bring her to Rowardennan, where Seumas holds Jean up by force as an obliging priest marries her, protesting loudly, to his little brother. They lock the pair up in a house, then bring them to Balquhidder parish church, where the minister only asks if they are married. Roban says yes; Jean says nothing.

This time there’s no happy ending. The Court of Session sequesters Jean’s estate. She dies – of smallpox, it’s thought – in Glasgow on 4 October 1751. Seumas’s trial begins in 1752, but he escapes from Edinburgh Castle with the help of his daughter, and dies penniless in Paris in 1754. Donnchadh is found not guilty and disappears. Roban is tried in 1754 and hanged.

Fairies?

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