

From Rory Mor's cup to the fairy flag

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

MANY generations ago there was a man in Harris who used to drive his cattle to the hill. He would cry: *Ho, ho!* And: *Fuirich a-bhos!* "Stop here!"

One fine summer's day he went off with the cattle, crying *Ho, ho!* and *Fuirich a-bhos!* as usual. But to his astonishment a voice answered him, saying, *Ho, ho! Fuirich a-bhos! Slàn tilleadh leat agus slàn falbh leat!* "Have a safe return and a safe journey!"

He kept going, and paid no attention.

Eventually he came to a green mound. Hearing music, he stopped and saw an open door in the side of the hill. A beautiful young woman came over and welcomed him in. Then a little old man appeared with a big four-sided golden cup full of whisky and invited him to drink it to the last drop, for the fairies were having a big feast, he said, and everyone had drunk from it now but himself. Then the old man moved away.

While the Harrisman was drinking from the cup, the woman whispered to him to work his way bit by bit (*mion air mhion*) back to the door, because, she said, when he had drunk the whole cup the door would be shut and he would never get out again.

That's what he did. *Bha e toirt balgam agus balgam às a' chupa, agus a' sìor theannadh air an doras.* Taking one small sip after another, he worked his way to the door. When there was only one *balgam* left, he sprang through the door (*gheàrr e cruinnleum a-mach air an doras*) and sprinted homewards (*thug e na buinn dhith dhachaigh*) with the cup still in his hand.

The fairies piled out after him. Each time they got close he cried out: *Ho, ho! Slàn gun till thu is slàn gum falbh thu! Slàn ruighinn thu!* "Get there safely!" And the fairies stood still, but no sooner did he run away again than they were back in pursuit.

His wife heard the uproar (*iorghail*) and came to the door. *Fhionnghala, Fhionnghala! Mach an cuman mùin!* "Flora, Flora! Bring out the piss bucket!"

Ghrad chaidh i staigh . . . She dashed in and reappeared with the *cuman*. Her husband rushed past her. The fairies were almost upon her (*bha na sìthichean gu bhith aice*) when she chucked the contents of the bucket (*dh'fhiach i na bha sa chuman*) on them. The one in front received a torrent of urine (*steall mùin*). He was blinded and choked, and they all turned round and fled. They never troubled the man or his wife again.

MacLeod of Dunvegan heard about the golden cup, and came to look at it. He liked it so much that the Harrisman gave it to him, receiving a farm in freehold (*fearann saor*) in exchange. The cup is in Dunvegan Castle to this day. *Tha e ri fhaicinn aig duine sam bith a théid an rathad.* It can be seen by anyone who goes that way. *Sin agad sgeula cup' òir Dhùn Bheagain.*

Isn't it a good story? It was taken down by Kenneth Jackson in 1951 from Angus MacLeod (*Aonghas Tàilleir*), Malaclett, Sollas, North Uist, who had got it from a widow he knew in Kyles Scalpay. Professor Jackson published it in 'Scottish Studies' in 1958 and that is where I have taken it from. He called the *cuman mùin* a 'chamber pot' but surely it would have been the bucket people collected urine in for use at waulkings, at which stage the stuff was renamed *maistir*. Much more respectable!

It reminds me of a bit in 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands' where the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell gives two huge lists of ways in which the fairies could be kept at bay. One list is of ways to get rid of a changeling. It ends: "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. There can be no doubt these modes of treatment would rid a house of any disagreeable visitor, at least of the human race."

The other list is of ways of preventing women and children being kidnapped and consists mainly of charms. It begins and ends like this: "A row of iron nails were driven into the front board of the bed; the smoothing iron or a reaping hook was placed under it and in the window; an old shoe was put in the fire; the door posts were sprinkled with *maistir*, urine kept for washing purposes – a liquid extremely offensive to the Fairies . . . If the Fairies were

seen, water in which an ember was extinguished – or the burning peats themselves – thrown at them, drove them away. Even quick wit and readiness of reply in the mother has sent them off.”

The business of quick wit and readiness of reply is interesting. I think it’s in line with the advice given to women nowadays in dealing with a potential attacker. Don’t show you’re vulnerable; be confident; communicate. Anyway, here are some examples, starting with one where the alleged victim is a man. I say ‘alleged’ because he was known in Uist as *Niall Sgrob* or *Niall na Fìrinn*, and *fìrinn* is the stuff that politicians and other storytellers are economical with. He was always claiming to have been carried away by the fairies across the sky.

Neil has been away at work all week. On his way home on Saturday evening a malicious fairy bars his way and declares: *Tha mi aig d’ fhàrdaich, a Nèill*. “I’m at your house, Neil.”
Cha robh thu aig d’ fhàrdaich fhéin, ma-tà. “You haven’t been at your own house, then.”
Tha do bhean an déidh leanabh a bhreith. “Your wife has given birth to a child.”
Is cinnteach gun tàinig a h-àm. “Her time has certainly come.”
Rug i dithis. “She’s had twins.”
Dà eun san aon ugh. “Two birds in the one egg.”
Tha aon diubh marbh. “One of them’s dead.”
Chan fheum e éibheach air son teachd-an-tìr. “He won’t have to sing for his supper.”
Tha iad le chéile marbh. “They’re both dead.”
Nì ’n aon chiste-laighe feum. “One coffin will do the needful.”
Tha do bhean marbh mar an ceudna. “Your wife is dead too.”
Caomhnaidh sin a bhith a’ caoidh na cloinne. “That will save having to mourn the children.”

Tha do thaigh air a losgadh gu làr. “Your house has burned to the ground.”
Nuair a chithear an ladhar, aithnichear an sìthiche. “When the hoof is seen, the fairy is recognised.”

Nam biodh tu agams’ aig muir. “If I had you at sea.”
Le long fodham. “With a ship under me.”
Le toll innte. “With a hole in her.”
Agus cnag ann. “And a plug in it.” Headed off by Neil’s clever retorts, the fairy lets out a shriek and flees.

I found that in the Gaelic Society of Inverness’s transactions for 1967–8, but there’s a better example in Campbell’s own book. A fairy woman comes to take away a child and says to its mother, *Is glas do leanabh*. “Pale is your child.”

Is glas am fiar, ’s fàsaidh e, replies the mother. “Pale is the grass, and it grows.”
Is trom do leanabh. “Heavy is your child.”
Is trom gach torrach. “Heavy is each fruitful thing.”
Is eutrom do leanabh. “Light is your child.”

Is eutrom gach saoghaltach sona. “Light is each happy earthling,” says the mother, and she sings:

*Is glas an duilleach, is glas am feur,
Is glas an tuagh am bheil a’ chas,
'S chan eil nì thig roimh thalamh
Nach eil gnè ghlaise ’na aoraibh.*

“Pale is the foliage, pale is the grass, / Pale is the axe in which is the handle, / And there is nothing that comes through the earth / That isn’t essentially pale in its nature.”

Finding she has met her match, the banshee clears off.

In another of his books, ‘Clan Traditions and Popular Tales’, Campbell published a version of this with a twist in the tail. It was sent to him in 1871 by his celebrated fellow-clansman John Francis Campbell of Islay, who had got it from a man called John Cameron in Barra. There was a time before children were christened when they used to be taken by the fairies, Cameron told him. A child was born and it was in the midwife’s lap. A fairy woman came and said to her, *Is trom do leanabh*. “Heavy is your child.”

Is trom gach torrach, the midwife replies. “Heavy is each fruitful thing.”
Is aotrom do leanabh. “Light is your child.”

Is aotrom gach saoghalach. “Light is each earthling.”

Is glas do leanabh. “Pale is your child.”

Is glas am fiar ’s fàsaidh e, says the midwife. “Pale is the grass and it grows.” And, says Cameron, the banshee came day by day with words and with singing of verses to try if she could ‘word’ him away with her (*fiach am briathraicheadh i leatha e*). But the woman always had her answer ready. There was a lad recovering from a fever in the house and he heard all these words, and learned them, and put the song together afterwards. And after the child was christened the fairy came back no more.

What is this song that the lad heard the fairy sing? Well, Campbell of Islay didn’t make a very good job of noting it down, but he did it well enough for us to recognise a song published by Frances Tolmie a few years later.

*Se mo leanabh mingiliseach, maingiliseach
Bualadh nan each, glag nan lùireach,
Nan each crùidheach ’s nan each snagach,
Mo leanabh beag . . .*

I won’t give all the words, because they’ve been reprinted quite recently by Llanerch in Tolmie’s ‘One Hundred and Five Songs of Occupation’, but here’s a new translation: “My kid-sided, fawn-sided child is all galloping steeds, jingling harnesses, clattering horse-shoes and clip-clopping horses, my little child.

“If only I could see your cowfold high high up on the slope of a mountain, with a well-tailored well-wauked coat of green around your two white shirt-clad shoulders, my little child.

“If only I could see your ploughteam, men attending it in the evening, well-met women coming home and the sowers sowing seed.

“O warrior soft, O warrior soft, born of my womb, my breast you sucked, you were raised on my knee.

“My child is my armful of yew, merry and plump, my delicate bulrush, my flesh and my eggs who will learn to speak, you were under my girdle (*criosan*) last year, plant of fertility, and you’ll be this year bright and playful on my shoulder around the township, my little child.

“Obh ìrinn obho, may I not hear you’re hurt, obh ìrinn obho, turn grey as you should, obh ìrinn obho, may your nose sharpen, obh ìrinn obho, till the end of your days.

“Obh ìrinn obhinn thu, you’re not a MacKenzie, bhirinn obhinn thu, you’re not a MacDonald, bhirinn obhinn thu, you’re of a tribe I prefer, the Clan MacLeod of the swords and breastplates, your ancestors’ home was Scandinavia.”

Now the story behind this lullaby as told by Tolmie – and many others since – is not as Campbell of Islay heard it in Barra. Basically it goes like this. A MacLeod chief of long ago had a *leannan sìth*. A fairy lover. As soon as she had given birth to his child she fled Dunvegan, but one cold night when the MacLeods were feasting and the baby was crying unheard she came into the castle, went straight to the baby’s room, wrapped him in her *criosan*, soothed him to sleep with this song, then vanished as quickly as she had come.

The *criosan* is of course the fairy flag, so it’s nice to note that the late Isobel Grant wrote in her definitive work on the MacLeods: “The silk of which the Flag is made is, according to the expert opinion of Mr. Wace of the Victoria and Albert Museum, of Syrian origin, and he thinks that it was probably a garment, a relic of a saint, before it was a flag.”

This article seems to have come full circle, somehow . . . *Nollaig chridheil dhuibh uile.*

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