

The reason of the cow's hide

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

DR SAMUEL Johnson noted in his 'Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland' how he was told in 1773 by MacLean of Coll of 'an odd game, of which he did not tell the original, but which may perhaps be used in other places, where the reason of it is not yet forgot'.

The game was this. "At New Year's eve, in the hall or castle of the laird, where, at festal seasons, there may be supposed a very numerous company, one man dresses himself in a cow's hide, upon which other men beat with sticks. He runs with all this noise round the house, which all the company quits in a counterfeited fright: the door is then shut.

"At New Year's eve there is no great pleasure to be had out of doors in the Hebrides. They are sure soon to recover from their terror enough to solicit for re-admission; which, for the honour of poetry, is not to be obtained but by repeating a verse, with which those that are knowing and provident take care to be furnished."

It's an interesting example of the aristocracy playing as a 'game' what the ordinary people of Coll were simultaneously enacting as a seasonal custom or ritual – Johnson's 'original'.

The good doctor was quite right in guessing that the ritual was 'used in other places'. The cow's hide part was to be found in some shape or form all over the West Highlands and Islands in the nineteenth century and survived in Lewis down to the First World War. The rhymes are still half-remembered in South Uist, and dozens are now in print. 'Soliciting for re-admission' – albeit not with a rhyme but with a lump of coal in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other – is what the first-footer of the Lowlands was doing down to my own childhood and is presumably still doing today in many places, provided there's a dark-haired adult male in the house to do the job.

But when Johnson ponders 'the reason of it', he raises a good question. Half of the answer comes from Sir James Frazer's monumental 'Golden Bough'. Dressing up a man in an animal skin at New Year, belabouring him with sticks and parading noisily through the community is characteristic of what Frazer calls 'the periodic expulsion of evils'. In his volume called 'The Scapegoat' he says: "Every year on the fourteenth of March a man clad in skins was led in procession through the streets of Rome, beaten with long white rods, and driven out of the city.

"He was called Mamurius Veturius, that is, 'the old Mars', and as the ceremony took place on the day preceding the first full moon of the old Roman year (which began on the first of March), the skin-clad man must have represented the Mars of the past year, who was driven out at the beginning of a new one."

We may also recognise in this skin-clad man the scapegoat of Leviticus 16, although, as Frazer points out, 'the word translated "scapegoat" in the Authorised Version is Azazel, which appears rather to be the name of a bad angel or demon, to whom the goat was sent away'.

In the eastern Highlands a dog seems to have been preferred. An eighteenth-century Perthshire laird, John Ramsay of Ochertyre, wrote that on the morning of New Year's Day it was usual in parts of his county 'to take a dog to the door, give him a bit of bread, and drive him out', saying: *Bis, a choin duibh! A h-uil' eug earchaill a bhiodh a-staigh gu ceann bliadhna gun robh ad' chreubhaig!* ("Get away, black dog! May every death from cattle-loss which could occur in this house till the year's end be in your body!")

Numerous other quite modern examples of the practice can be cited – for example, in Poland a man was led about at Christmas with a wolf's skin over his head. It's possible that in pre-Christian times the man was sacrificed; indeed, in comparable festivals in Mexico, the skins worn by Aztec priests were those of human victims.

The other half of the answer comes from the granddaddy of all Hogmanay rhymes, quoted by some of the earliest and best sources on the subject. The *gillean Cullaig* (as they were called in Uist) went around the township banging away at the hide and the walls for all they were worth and bawling:

*A Challainn a' bhuilg bhuidhe bhoicinn,
Buail an craicionn –
Cailleach sa chill,
Cailleach sa chùil,
Cailleach eile 'n cùil an teine,
Bior 'na dà shùil,
Bior 'na goile
A' Challainn seo.
Leig a-staigh mi!*

(“Hogmanay of the yellow buckskin bag, / Strike the skin – / One old wife in the graveyard, / One old wife in the corner, / Another in the fireside corner, / A pointed stick in her two eyes, / A pointed stick in her stomach / This Hogmanay. / Let me in!”)

We can understand this with the help of other seasonal customs. The *cailleach* is the last sheaf, which in October was decorated with ribbons like a woman, and passed on from farmer to farmer until it found its final resting-place in the house of the man most behindhand in bringing in the harvest.

It thus represents hunger, and the verse shows her being found by visitors in the house and ritually slaughtered. This answers two other questions – what the unfortunate recipient of a *cailleach* did with it at the end of harvest when no one remained to whom it could be passed on; and how and when he could be released from its spell.

It's no surprise to find Hogmanay rituals connected with those of late October, for it's believed, with justification, that *Samhain* (1 November) was the Celtic New Year, which means that the customs of harvest home and New Year were originally one and the same.

The outline of the development of the custom can be seen in the rituals themselves and the associated rhyme, confirmed by Frazer's examples. First, in its earliest form the rituals may have involved human sacrifice. The presence of the *cailleach* and the extreme violence done to her in our rhyme form the evidence for this. It's perfectly possible however that the victims put to death were not old women but prisoners who were called *cailleachan* on account of their lack of success in battle. Probably like the straw *cailleach* they were bound and decked in ribbons at harvest-time but not sacrificed until New Year.

Second, Frazer cites countless examples from all over Europe of the last sheaf being given the name of an animal. One of the most common was the goat. Typically, traces of this symbolic animal resurfaced in the customs of New Year and of early spring, when it was fed to the plough-team or otherwise put back into the soil. In Skye the last sheaf was the *gobhar bhacach* or 'crippled goat'; our rhyme speaks of a 'buckskin bag'. Perhaps then in Skye a goat was sacrificed on the harvest-field and a buck at New Year. Such a practice would have had the scriptural authority of Leviticus.

The third stage is the one described for us by Johnson and others. (Or we could call Johnson's description the fourth stage, since he says it's a game.) The victim beaten by sticks as he is paraded around the houses is neither human sacrifice nor animal, but a human masquerading as a sacrificed animal.

My next article will appear at the time of year when these customs were actually celebrated, 'Old New Year'. I'll discuss what happened once the *gillean Cullaig* got inside the house – that most mysterious ritual of all, the *caisein uchd*. Till then, *Bliadhna mhath Ùr dhuibh uile*.

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