

Sniffing the sacred dewlap

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

WHFP reader Murdo MacDonald, who is archivist of Argyll and Bute Council, has kindly sent me a collection of extracts he has made from late-nineteenth-century school log books in his care.

What fascinating reading! They convey a vivid picture. Of cold, wet, ill-clad children too easily distracted by every passing herd of cows. Of parents who repeatedly kept them off school to attend to agricultural duties. And of teachers who were too fond of beating and caning their charges, and were unable to see their fluent Gaelic as a priceless inheritance or a stepping-stone to learning – to them it was simply an obstacle. In Kinlochspelve (Mull) there were huge rows about Gaelic education between the minister, who was in favour of it, and the teacher, who wasn't.

The children's mischief is another matter. But it wouldn't be right for me to give any examples, because it's what makes these extracts truly priceless, and Mr MacDonald may have thoughts of publishing them himself.

What I *will* refer to is the Old New Year. Over a hundred years had passed since the calendar had been changed by Act of Parliament, yet many schools were still keeping the New Year (sometimes calling it 'Christmas') on the pre-1752 date. Newton of Kilmeny, Islay, 11 January 1866: "Tomorrow is to be a holiday for the 'festivities of the Old New Year'."

In 1868 they held it on 1 January. The result? January 13th 1868: "Numbers sadly low. The approaching festivities of the Old New Year furnished the majority of absentees with an excuse."

They gave up and decided to have a holiday on both the 1st and the 13th. January 12th 1870: "Half day schooling before New Year holiday."

At Kinlochspelve in 1867 January 1st was an ordinary school day but January 11th was kept as a holiday. There is a clue at January 14th as to why holidays at this time of year were so popular: "Dismissed at 3 o'clock, schoolroom so cold."

The last mention of the Old New Year at Kilmeny was in 1886. At Kilchoman, also in Islay, the change took place in 1883. At Kilninver on the mainland it was in 1888. In Lochdonhead in Mull, on one year at least, they had a huge holiday. January 3rd 1890: "Holidays began on the First to continue till after the Old New Year's day."

Another reason why communities should have stuck so tenaciously to their Old New Year is that they had time-honoured customs to observe, and it would have been a mockery to observe them on the wrong day. John Gregorson Campbell, an Argyll man himself, described in his book 'Witchcraft and Second Sight' what went on on the afternoon of an old-style Hogmanay. "Men began to gather and boys ran about shouting and laughing, playing shinty, and rolling 'pigs of snow' (*mucan sneachda*), i.e. large snowballs.

"The hide of the mart or winter cow (*seiche a' mhairt gheamhraidh*) was wrapped round the head of one of the men, and he made off followed by the rest, belabouring the hide – which made a noise like a drum – with switches.

"The disorderly procession went three times *deiseal*, according to the course of the sun (i.e. keeping the house on the right hand), round each house in the village, striking the walls and shouting on coming to a door: *A challuinn a' bhuilg bhuidhe bhoicinn . . . Leig a-staigh mi.* (The *calluinn* of the yellow bag of hide . . . Let me in.)"

I've left out most of the rhyme because I quoted it in my last article. Campbell goes on: "Before this request was complied with, each of the revellers had to repeat a rhyme called *rann Calluinn* (i.e. a Christmas rhyme), though – as might be expected when the door opened for one – several pushed their way in till it was ultimately left open for all. On entering, each of the party was offered refreshments, oatmeal bread, cheese, flesh, and a dram of whisky.

"Their leader gave to the goodman of the house that indispensable adjunct of the evening's mummeries, the *caisein uchd*, the breast-stripe of a sheep wrapped round the point of a shinty stick. This was then singed in the fire (*teallach*), put three times with the right-hand turn (*deiseal*) round the family, and held to the noses of all.

"Not a drop of drink was given till this ceremony was performed. The *caisein uchd* was also made of the breast-stripe or tail of a deer, sheep, or goat, and as many as choose had one

with them.”

In volume one of ‘Carmina Gadelica’ there are two versions of a Hogmanay rhyme which demonstrates just how central the *caisein uchd* was to New Year traditions. The more complete of the two has seven verses and was got by Alexander Carmichael from Patruig Morrison, crofter, Baile nam Manach, Benbecula. Here are the three middle verses.

*Caisein Callaig ’na mo phòcaid,
Is mór an ceò thig às an fhear ud –
Chan eil aon a gheibh dheth àile
Nach bi gu bràth dheth fallain.*

“The Hogmanay Skin is in my pocket, / Big is the smoke that will come from that fellow – / No one who gets a sniff of its odour / Will fail to be healthy as long as they live.”

*Gheibh fear an taighe ’na dhòrn e,
Cuiridh e shròn anns an teallach;
Théid e deiseil air na pàistean
Is seachd àraid bean an taighe.*

“The man of the house will grasp it tightly, / And thrust its nose into the fire; / He will go sunwise round the children / And most especially round the housewife.”

*Gheibh a bhean e, is ì as d’fhiach e –
Làmh a riarachadh na Callaig,
Làmh a bhàirig càise ’s ìm dhuinn,
Làmh gun spìocaireachd gun ghainne.*

“His wife will get it, she deserves it – / Hand for distributing Hogmanay, / Hand that’s given us cheese and butter, / Hand unmiserly and unstinting.”

It has always been a mystery to me why the *caisein uchd* should have been singled out in this way. I don’t know of any other culture which has given it ritual significance. It means literally ‘breast curl’. Dewlap, the word usually used to translate it, sounds like a lappet that sweeps the dew, but according to the ‘Oxford English Dictionary’ that’s mere popular etymology. In Danish it’s *døglæb*, in Norwegian *døglap*, in Swedish *dröglapp*, and scholars don’t actually know what the first element represents.

It’s clear, however, that certain cultures in the past have made much of the dewlap as a sign of a fine animal. The Sabhal Mór Ostaig bull, which is from a Pictish stone at Burghead, doesn’t have one at all, but an internet search reveals that the zebu bull from the Indus region had an enormous one like an apron covering its knees. Shakespeare spoke in ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ of hounds ‘bred out of the Spartan kind’ which were ‘crook-kneed and dewlap’t like Thessalian bulls’, while the Chinese sage Lu Yu (d. 804) declared: “The best quality tea must have creases like the leathern boot of Tartar horsemen, curl like the dewlap of a mighty bullock, unfold like a mist rising out of a ravine, gleam like a lake touched by a zephyr, and be wet and soft like a fine earth newly swept by rain.”

He liked his cuppa, Lu Yu. But what I’m trying to understand is whether the dewlap could be separated from the live animal. According to Mrs Mary Mackellar, lecturing to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1889, when the celebrated Ardnamurchan cattle-lifter Mac Iain Ghiorr went about his business he ‘only left the breast-bit, or *caisean-uchd*, of each cow to indicate that they need not look for them again upon the hill’.

To my mind, that means three things. One, the *caisean-uchd* could be separated from the live animal – cow as well as bull. Two, it served as a memento of a particular beast, like a lock or curl of hair for a human being. And three, all this was true of the West Highlands in Mac Iain Ghiorr’s day – anything from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

I have no other evidence. The nearest I can get to it is in ‘The Book of Husbandry’ published in London in 1534 by a Master Fitzherbert. It contains this cure for a cattle ailment called ‘longe sought’, the symptoms of which were poor appetite and coughing. “And there be many men, that can setter them, and that is to cutte the dewlappe before, and there is a grasse that is called settergrasse, take that grasse, and broyse it a lyttell in a mortar, and

thane put therof as moche as an hennes egge in-to the sayd dewlappe, and se[e] it fall not oute. Thus I have seen vsed, and men haue thought it hath done good.”

Even here, then, the dewlap isn't cut off completely – an incision is made, and the bruised settergrass (stinking hellebore) is put into it for the animal to breathe.

Whatever the precise origin of the *caisein uchd*, it's clear that it was regarded as a symbol, and could have many forms. Fr Allan McDonald defined the *caisean Cullaig* as a sheep's tail wrapped in a rag and steeped in grease. “This,” he declared, “is the New Year's candle.”

Norman MacLeod, in his book ‘Highland Parish’, defined the *caisein uchd* as ‘the piece of skin covering the breast bone of sheep or cow – more especially the former, with its short curly wool’. It was applied to the nose of everyone in the house, then carried to the byre where it was given to the cattle to sniff. Inhalation was clearly important – the Welsh traveller Thomas Pennant found that at Hogmanay in the North Highlands cattle were made to smell burnt juniper.

In volume two of ‘Carmina Gadelica’ Carmichael sketches in a little more detail. He defines *caisean-uchd* as a strip of skin from the breast of a sheep killed at Christmas, New Year, and other sacred festivals. “The strip is oval, and no knife must be used in removing it from the flesh.

“It is carried by the carollers when they visit the houses of the townland, and when lit by the head of the house it is given by each person in turn to smell, going sunwise. Should it go out, it is a bad omen for the person in whose hand it becomes extinguished. The inhaling of the fumes of the burning skin and wool is a talisman to safeguard the family from fairies, witches, demons, and other uncanny creatures, during the year.”

In ‘The Golden Bough’ Sir James Frazer emphasises the purificatory nature of scapegoat rituals. Everyone, it seems, should share in the blessings conveyed by the first animal sacrificed in the New Year, which is perhaps what the *caisein uchd* represents. “Among the Arabs of Morocco the Great Feast, which is the annual sacrificial festival of Mohammedan peoples, is the occasion when men go about beating people with the kindly intention of healing or preventing sickness and benefiting the sufferers generally.

“In some tribes the operator is muffled in the bloody skins of sacrificed sheep, and he strikes everybody within reach of him with a flap of the skin or a foot of the sheep which dangles loose from his arm . . . the skin-clad mummer sometimes operates with sticks instead of a flap of the skin, and sometimes the skins in which he is muffled are those of goats instead of sheep, but in all cases the effect, or at least the intention, is probably the same.”

In the still more exalted context of ‘processions with sacred animals’, Frazer cites Campbell's description of the Highland Hogmanay, comparing it with the ‘hunting of the wren’ which is (or was) ubiquitous at the same time of year in Ireland, Wales, Man and France, and by no means unknown in England. Like the *caisein uchd*, the captured wren was paraded from house to house, usually on the end of a pole. Frazer concludes: “Formerly, perhaps, pieces of the cow-hide in which the man was clad were singed and put to the noses of the people, just as in the Isle of Man a feather of the wren used to be given to each household.

“Similarly, as we have seen, the human victim whom the Khonds slew as a divinity was taken from house to house, and every one strove to obtain a relic of his sacred person. Such customs are only another form of that communion with the deity which is attained most completely by eating the body and drinking the blood of the god.”

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