

Bramble berries in the wolftime

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE people used to call this time of year the *faoilleach*, *faoilteach* or *faoillteach*. They understood it to mean ‘wolftime’ – from *faol*, ‘a wolf’.

The wolftime began a fortnight before St Brigid’s (1 February) and ended a fortnight after it. So, New Style, it began last Saturday; Old Style, it doesn’t start till next Thursday. As long as the Old Style survived it was thought of as being equivalent to February, but when the Old Style was forgotten it turned into January.

One of my favourite stories is ‘Smeuran Dubha san Fhaoillteach’. The version I’m going to summarise here was written down about 1860 for John Francis Campbell of Islay by Hector Urquhart from the dictation of ‘John McDonald, Tinker, Inveraray’. It was published in ‘More West Highland Tales’ in 1940. The original translator, John G. MacKay (1869-1942), called it ‘Bramble Berries in February’.

There was once a king of Ireland, said McDonald. After bearing him a baby son, his wife died. But before she passed away she said, *A-nis, a rìgh shaoghalta, pòsaidh tu a-rithist*. “Now, my earthly king, you will marry again.”

Cha phòs, cha phòs, m’ eudail. “No, I will not, my darling.”

The king’s son was coming home from school one day along with fifteen other young scholars, *agus iad ag iomain rompa dhachaigh* – driving a shinty ball before them. The king had married again, and the new queen was chatting to the hen-wife (*cailleach chearc*) when the latter said: “Even if you had children, here’s a young earthly king coming towards you just now. He’s not hard to recognise, with his golden shinty stick and silver ball. But for a very small reward, I could show you how to get rid of him.”

“What reward would you be looking for?”

Làn mo bhalgain duibh de chlàimh, agus làn mo chrogain duibh de dh’im, agus fad agus leud mo bhròige de staoig. “My little black bag’s fill of wool, my little black crock’s fill of butter, and my shoe’s length and breadth of steak.”

Ciod è làn do bhalgain duibh de chlàimh? “How much wool would it take to fill your little black bag?”

Na théid a lomadh air do thaighean lomaidh gu ceann sheachd bliadhna. “As much as is shorn in your shearing houses in seven years.”

Ubh ubh, is mór am balgan a tha agad, ach ged a tha e mór fhéin, gheibh thu sin. “Oh dear, it’s a big bag you have, but although it’s very big, you’ll get that.”

They go through the same rigmarole for the hen-wife’s other demands. The fill of her little black crock of butter is ‘as much butter as is made from your cowfold’ (*na théid a dhèanamh de dh’im air do bhuaile*) in seven years. And her shoe’s length and breadth of steak turns out to be ‘as much as is killed in your slaughter-house’ (*na théid a mharbhadh na do thaigh-spadaidh*) in seven years. The hen-wife is skilled in the black arts, you see, and has an *alter ego* who is that big.

The queen promises she’ll have it all, and in return receives a prescription. It’s what you would call a *siubhal*, a *ruith*, a run, spell or charm. *Cuir thusa, ma-tà, mar chroisibh is mar gheasaibh air, is mar naoi buaraichean mnatha-sìthe siùbhlaiche seachranaiche, gille maol carrach as miosa na a ghille-bhròg fhéin a thoirt a chinn is a chaomh bheatha dheth, is lodan gun dol às a bhròig no tàmh air a shùil, is far an caidil e aon oidhche nach caidil e a dhà, gus am faigh e dhuitsa am fiodh nach eil cam no dìreach*. “You place, then, as taboos and spells upon him, and as the nine cow-fetters of a swift-moving shape-shifting banshee, that some coarse scabby servant lower than his own boot-boy will take away his head and his grand life, and that no puddle will leave his shoe and no rest will be upon his eye, and that where he sleeps one night he will not sleep two, unless and until he gets you the wood that is neither bent nor straight.”

The Queen sent for Iain and made the spell over him: *Tha mise cur mar chroisibh is mar gheasaibh ort . . .*

It worked like a charm, to coin a phrase. *Dh’fhalbh Iain nas faide na’s urrainn dòmhsa innse dhuibhse no sibhse innse dhòmhsa ged a bhiomaid ag innse gus an tràth seo a-màireach, gus an robh na h-eòin bheaga bhuchallach bhachallach a’ gabhail tàimh ann an innseagan beaga bòidheach air gach taobh den rathad mhór*. “Iain went further than I can

tell you or you can tell me even if we were telling till this time tomorrow, until the fluffy curly birdies were going to rest in lovely little meadows on each side of the highway.”

He saw a light in the darkness and when he reached the house he went in. Who lived there but his mother’s sister! He explained the pickle he was in, and she washed his feet with water and milk, dried them with a mantle of satin silk (*brat sìoda sròil*) and put him to bed with the *Cruit Chànanaich Chiùil* at his head to help him sleep. A music-box, perhaps?

It was a good start, and it got better. In the morning Iain’s auntie went to a saw-pit (*sloc sàbhaidh*), filled a little bag with the sawdust (*min an t-sàbhaidh*) and gave it to him. *Thoir seo don bhainrighinn dhona dhòlaich a chuir na geasan ort!* “Give this to the wicked mischievous queen who placed the spells on you!”

The Queen saw him coming up the road and said to the hen-wife, *Tha an t-òganach seo a’ pilltinn le làn balgain de mhin sàibh!* “This young fellow’s coming back with a bag full of sawdust!”

“But,” says the hen-wife, “you will send him away again,” and she says the spell all over again, finishing . . . *gus am faigh e dhuitsa smeuran dubha san fhaoillteach!* “until he gets you bramble berries in the wolftime!”

So the lad has a very quick turnaround and everything is the same as before till he gets back to his auntie’s house. *Och, och, Iain bhochd*, says she, and she tells him that many a *rìgh agus ridire* (king and knight) had gone looking for these brambles, and that not one had lived to tell the tale, for they grew in a certain room due to the heat of the corpses stored in it by three giants.

This time Iain didn’t take a wink of sleep – off he went to the giants’ house. Entering, he finds a beautiful woman sitting weeping with her baby. *O, a mhic rìgh Éireann*, she says, *cìod è thug an-seo thu? Bithidh tu marbh a-nochd.* “Oh, son of the king of Ireland, what has brought you here? You will be dead tonight.”

Cha dèan tùirse ach truaghan, says Iain. “Moaning won’t help.” Or, as Alexander Nicolson translates it in his ‘Gaelic Proverbs’: “None but the pitiful pine!”

Following this comes a wonderful passage. Who says the ceilidh-house wasn’t pure theatre? *Cha b’ fhada a bha e an-sin an uair a chualas stioram, staram, stararaich a’ tighinn aig na famhairean.* “He wasn’t there long when *stioram, staram, stararaich* could be heard coming from the giants.”

This solves a problem with one of Fr Allan McDonald’s poems in a book I published recently. Fr Allan mentions *goileam Staoram fhéin, am burraidh* – ‘Even the boasting of Staoram, the bully’. He must have understood *Stioram* (or *Staoram*), *Staram* and *Stararaich* to be the names of the three giants as well as the rumbling, roaring, rattling noise they make!

Anyway, *bha fìor thalamh a’ dol á measg a-chéile, agus crith a’ tighinn fon ursainn ’s fo shuidheachain an taighe, clachan beaga a’ dannsadh ri clachan móra, is clachan móra a’ dannsadh ri clachan beaga.* “Solid ground was coming apart, and the doorpost and foundations of the house began to shake, little stones dancing with big stones, and big stones dancing with little stones.”

Imagine the children in the ceilidh-house listening to that . . .

Now the big men are seen coming. Iain hides himself among the bodies and fills his pockets with the brambles. Shock-horror is piled upon shock-horror. When the giants appear, *bha cailleach mharbh a’ slaodadh ri geinneag còta gach fir aca* – each of them had a dead *cailleach* hanging from his coat button.

The joke’s on those in the audience who don’t know that *cailleach mharbh* can be a black sea-bream – called in English the ‘old wife’, apparently – because its head looks like an old woman wearing a mutch. A *cailleach mharbh* is the usual meal for a giant, and there’s a story in which the giant brings ‘a dead old woman for his own supper, and a fresh-water salmon for that of the king’s daughter’. Anyway our three giants give their *cailleachan* a bit of a roasting, you might say (*seòrsa dathaidh*), and have a good supper (*tràth feasgair*).

Follow that! Well, next morning they eat what’s left of the *cailleachan*, then the biggest giant asks the littlest giant to go up and take a steak (*staoig*) out of the freshest and fattest body he can find. And so he does. He takes a slice out of Iain, from his hip (*cruachan*) down to his knee. This is only their breakfast, of course . . .

Fòil! Fòil! says the big giant. “Hold on! This is the best meat I ever tasted. Away up and bring down another slice out of the same body. Then throw the body into the water barrel (*togsaid uisge*) to keep it fresh till we get back.”

And that's what's done. Off the giants go to hunt, and Iain climbs out of the water barrel, stiffly I should think. He is *eadar dà dhoras*, between the kitchen door and the outer door, when he bumps into one of the giants, who has come back to look for an arrow. "Ho ho!" says the giant. "I've long been expecting you – it was prophesied (*bha san fhàistneachd*) that you would come."

Giants often inform heroes that their meeting has been prophesied. Being creatures of the otherworld, they keep in touch with the second sight. The big fellow went on: "I really don't know what to do with you. *Chan fhiach leam d' ithe*. I don't believe you're worth eating."

The giants decided to have some fun with him instead. They tied him to the horses and set the dogs after him, then when they reckoned he was dead they threw him over a cliff (*thilg iad thar creig e*).

Now remember the woman? While the giants were out she took off with her baby. When they found she had gone they sent the dogs after her, but the only trail the dogs would follow was Iain's, what with all the blood he had left behind. His trail stopped at the edge of the cliff, so the dogs came back with their tails between their legs, and the giants were so angry that they shot their arrows through them (*thilg iad saighead trompa*).

It wasn't just the woman who had got away. There was an eagle's nest halfway down the cliff, and Iain had fallen into it. He was so hungry he ate the eagle's chickens, but the eagle didn't seem to mind. In fact every night she kept him warm, bringing him meat and venison.

It was a good life, but eventually he tired of it. One night when the eagle was asleep he roped himself to her claws with his braces and tie (*le a ghallais is le a chràbhat*). She woke up and flew off as usual, this time with Iain slung below (*a' slaodadh rithe*).

The first place the eagle landed was in the great garden of Iain's father in the kingdom of Ireland – *gàradh mór athair Iain ann an rìoghachd Éireann*. Everyone there was amazed to see black brambles at that time of year!

Gnashing their teeth, the Queen and the hen-wife had one more go. This time Iain had to fetch *Steud Choire Chiarraich* – the Steed of the Kerryman's Corry. But Iain had learnt a trick or two himself. He placed a counter-spell on his stepmother which made her stand on the castle roof, twisted and steered by the wind, till he got back.

Off he went to the house of the giant (*An Ciarrach*, I suppose) who owned the Steed. He offered his services as stable-boy. "Just what I need," says the giant. *Am fear a bha agam mu dheireadh, sin a cheann air an stob thall*. "The last one I had, that's his head on yon stake."

One night Iain jumps on the horse, and off they go. In the morning the giant gets up, misses the horse, blows his whistle, and wow! *Ma bha iad luath a' falbh, bu sheachd luaithe air ais iad*. "If they were quick going, they were seven times quicker coming back."

This giant is straight out of a Bond movie. He had known Iain was coming because it was prophesied, and has his tortures all ready. An oil lamp, for example, that cuts off Iain's foot with the first drip, and his leg to the knee with the second. *An robh thu an càs riamh cho cruaidh seo, Iain?* "Have you ever been in a fix as bad as this, Iain?"

Moire, bha! says Iain, and tells him his adventures. On overhearing them, the giant's mother rushes out of the kitchen. "A *chrochaire na croiche!* That's the man who saved you and me from the giants when you were a baby!"

"*Marbhaisg oirbh a bhean!* Dammit woman, why didn't you tell me that sooner?" The giant reaches for a *searrag ìocshlaint* (medicine flask). Soon Iain is in one piece again, leaving us worrying only that the dramatic unities may have been breached.

The apologetic giant gives Iain the choice of his daughters in marriage. The girl mounts the Steed behind him and off they go. Iain's father is a sick old man, but the nearer the pair come to the castle the better he feels. As they arrive, Iain's bewitched stepmother crumbles to dust and falls from the tower.

Iain and his young bride enjoy a magnificent wedding that lasts forty days and forty nights. They send sixteen men to cut green oakwood (*glas daraich*) to make a big fire. They throw the hen-wife into the middle of it, *agus*, concludes John McDonald, *bha i 'g éigheachd 's a' sgreuchail dar a dh'fhàg mise iad!* "She was still shouting and screaming when I left them!"

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