

## A smell of honied apples

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“THE COATS of fairy women are shaggy or ruffled (*caiteineach*), and their caps curiously fitted or wrinkled. The men are said, but not commonly, to have blue bonnets, and in the song to the murdered elfin lover the elf is said to have a hat bearing ‘a smell of honied apples’. This is perhaps the only Highland instance of a hat, which is a prominent object in the Teutonic superstition, being ascribed to the fairies.”

This very peculiar description of Highland fairies is to be found in the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell’s ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands’ – written 1874, published 1900. What, we wonder, is the ‘song to the murdered elfin lover’? Why on earth should a hat, even a fairy one, have ‘a smell of honied apples’? Do Highland fairies wear hats, or don’t they?

Fortunately the first question isn’t hard to answer. The reason why Campbell was able to refer so casually to ‘the song to the murdered elfin lover’ is that by 1874 it had already been published four times, albeit under different names – three times in the original and once in translation.

First off the mark was Mrs Anne Grant, widow of the minister of Laggan, who included a discussion of the song and a few lines of English translation in her ‘Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland’ in 1811. Next came Donald MacCallum, minister of Arisaig, who produced a version of it under the title ‘Cumha le Té da Leannan Sìth’ (‘A Girl’s Lament for Her Fairy Lover’) in his 1821 collection of poems. Donald C. MacPherson from Lochaber published another version as ‘An Toman Cuilinn’ (‘The Holly Hillock’) in his book ‘An Duanaire’ of 1868. And there’s a version called ‘Gilbhinn’ – the Fairy lover’s name – in ‘Leabhar na Féinne’, a collection of Ossianic ballads published by John Francis Campbell of Islay in 1872.

Nor did it stop there. In 1889, before Gregorson Campbell’s book saw the light of day, Mrs Mary Mackellar gave the Gaelic Society of Inverness another version; meanwhile Alexander Carmichael was busy collecting more songs on the same theme, eventually published in 1954 in volume 5 of ‘Carmina Gadelica’.

The songs vary a good deal, but can safely be grouped together because they share a common story. I told it here last October in an article entitled ‘How the fairies got into the Bible’. At its simplest, it tells how a girl who had an otherworld suitor was betrayed by her sister, and how her brothers sought out this fairy lover and killed him. MacCallum expresses it quite bluntly: “Tradition informs us that secret intercourse had been carried on for some time, between this ill-fated maid and her fairy lover; that they spent many sweet and rapturous hours in his invisible residence, which was in the midst of a beautiful green mound, environed by a delightful grotto.

“Being frequently questioned by her sister respecting her absence, and many curious things given her by the fairy, at length, she disclosed her secret to her in confidence. The faithless sister communicated all she knew to her brothers, who watched the time of admittance to the fairy mansion, entered and pierced the heart of the hapless youth with their dirks.”

It’s extraordinary after this to come to Mrs Grant’s account. It’s different from the story as told by MacCallum, Carmichael and the others, yet touches it at many points. Exactly the same is true of her version of the song. She begins: “Our children learn very soon to regard with ridicule and contempt, the objects of terror-mingled wonder, by which their imaginations were first excited. Not so the little highlander!”

Now Mrs Grant was a posh lady, or was trying to be. Born in 1755, she was a Gaelic-speaker, daughter of the barrack-master of Fort Augustus, an Argyll man called MacVicar. She had married her husband when he was chaplain to the fort; now he was dead, she was 56 years old, and she had discovered that she could scrape a living by writing the sort of thing about the Highlands that people were interested to read. A bit like myself, except that she was a pioneer – no native Gaelic speaker had written about Highland life and tradition in English prose since Martin Martin a hundred years before.

She goes on to remark that the tales the Highlander first heard were ‘something like the music which Collins gives to Despair’ – a reference to the English poet William Collins

(1721–59), who had written a rather splendid ‘Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands’. She quotes Collins on the mood of these tales: “By fits ’twas sad, by starts ’twas wild.”

Then she turns to our story. “One of these, which I have heard children at a very early age sing, and which is just to them, the Babes in the Wood, I can never forget. The affecting simplicity of the tune, the strange wild imagery, and the marks of remote antiquity in the little narrative, gave it the greatest interest to me, who delight in tracing back poetry to its infancy.”

It’s startling to hear the girl and her lover compared to the Babes in the Wood, but, as Mrs Grant says, the song was sung by children, who saw the girl and her lover as themselves, and learnt something from it about strong emotions. That’s what modern pop-songs are for too. She goes on: “A little girl had been innocently beloved by a fairy, who dwelt in a tomhan near her mother’s habitation. She had three brothers, who were the favourites of her mother. She herself was treated harshly, and tasked beyond her strength: her employment was to go every morning and cut a certain quantity of turf from dry heathy ground, for immediate fuel; and this with some uncouth and primitive implement.”

At this point it’s not so much ‘Babes in the Wood’ as ‘Cinderella’ (in fact some versions make the woman her stepmother). As for the ‘tomhan’, Mrs Grant wasn’t the first Gaelic speaker to spell *toman* like this (the Rev. Patrick Graham of Aberfoyle has that honour), nor was she the last. She continues: “As she past the hillock, which contained her lover, he regularly put out his hand with a very sharp knife, of such power, that it quickly and readily cut through all impediments. She returned chearfully and early with her load of turf; and, as she past by the hillock, she struck on it twice, and the fairy stretched out his hand through the surface, and received the knife.”

Clearly this is a magic knife – the fairies were great smiths – and it performs the function of MacCallum’s ‘many curious things given her by the fairy’. Mrs Grant goes on: “The mother, however, told the brothers, that her daughter must certainly have had some aid to perform the allotted task. They watched her, saw her receive the enchanted knife, and forced it from her.

“They returned, struck the hillock, as she was wont to do, and when the fairy put out his hand, they cut it off with his own knife. He drew in the bleeding arm, in despair, and supposing this cruelty was the result of treachery on the part of his beloved, never saw her more.”

Having reviewed the video, so to speak, Mrs Grant now turns to the music. “I am very sorry, that the spirit of this most primitive song could not be transfused into English, but it is as volatile as the fragrance of the wild lily, and would, like it, evaporate when moved from its place. I shall try, however, how two or three stanzas will look in literal English. The maiden speaks . . .”

This is Mrs Grant’s translation:

*I behold yonder the tomhan covered with rowan and holly.  
Dear to me is the treasure which it contains.  
Sweet and deep was my slumber  
On the brink of the lake of many salmon.  
I awoke, and half of my bed remained not.  
I see yonder the tomhan of rowan and holly, &c.*

*I see my brothers afar yonder,  
Mounted on sleek swift grey steeds:  
They ride, but my heart goes not with them.  
I see yonder the tomhan, &c.*

*I see the house of my mother afar off;  
Not as it were a house, but a place deserted.  
While sweet slumber falls on others,  
Green flames shall encompass her feet.  
I see yonder the tomhan of rowan and holly;  
Dear to me is the treasure it contains.*

The beginning corresponds to a line in our versions of the original: *Chì mi 'n toman caorainn cuilinn*. “I see the hillock of rowan and holly.” Salmon are mentioned in them, too, but in a violent way – the girl wishes *sgoltadh a' bhradain fhìor-uisg*, ‘the splitting of the freshwater salmon’, on her sister’s body. The ‘half of my bed’ is strange – it reminds me of the word spelt by Dwelly *comh-leabach*, ‘a bedfellow’, but there’s nothing like it in our Gaelic versions. And we have a verse to the brothers, but it begins:

*Chì mi mo thrìuir bhràithrean thallad  
Air an eachaibh loma luath . . .*

(“I see my three brothers yonder / On their sleek swift steeds . . .”) Where Mrs Grant’s ‘grey’ has come from I don’t know.

The mother appears in one of Carmichael’s versions, but not like this. Mrs Grant rightly draws attention to the powerful curse with which her fragment ends. “The final verse contains something like an imprecation on her mother . . . Here, too, occurs an expressive figure, consonant to the stile prevalent to this day, in their emphatic language. – ‘I see the house of my mother, not as if it were a house, but merely a bare place . . . I see the habitation of my mother with as much indifference as if it were a deserted spot.’

“The green flames which are to surround or consume her mother’s feet, while others slept sweetly, must have been a figure to denote a disturbed mind; or, perhaps, it might be descriptive of some punishment inflicted by the offended fairies.”

If Mrs Grant’s original is gone forever, we’re all the losers. But what about that ‘smell of honied apples’? Mrs Mackellar’s version begins:

*Far am biodh mo leannan falaich,  
Cha b’ iongnadh mise a bhith ann,  
Fàile nan ùbhlan meala  
Dhen fhodar a bha fo cheann.*

(“Where my secret love would be, / It’s no surprise if I were there, / For the smell of honied apples / Was off the straw where his head lay.”) It’s clearly a reference to the lover’s breath, for, as Mrs Mackellar tells us, the girl’s brothers ‘found the lover resting on a bed of straw that the maiden had made for him at their trysting place’. However, Donald MacPherson gives the verse as:

*'S far am beil mo leannan falaich,  
'N iongnadh mis' a dhol ann?  
Tha fàileadh nan ùbhlan meala,  
'Chrùn na h-aid' a th' air a cheann!*

(“And where my secret lover is, / If I go there is it surprising? / For the smell of honied apples / Is off the crown of the hat on his head!”) This is so bizarre that it can’t be right. I don’t think it’s a deliberate bowdlerisation. A more likely explanation is provided by rhyme – *meala* provoked the change of *fhodar* into *aid*, then *ùbhlan* suggested the additional flourish *'Chrùn*.

That disposes of the only Highland fairy ever recorded as wearing a hat. Not that there was anything unusual about fairies wearing hats – the brothers Grimm demonstrated in a learned essay that it was pretty normal all over Europe, and remarked of Irish fairies that ‘a hat or cap is indispensable’. Anyone who has been a tourist in Ireland can see that fairies don’t have to be Teutonic to wear hats, and that’s backed up by traditional evidence.

On the other hand it’s hard to find fairy headgear in Scottish Gaelic stories, though I can think of one where a female fairy has on her head *boineid uaine le dos iteag airgid a' dannsadh 'na mullach* – ‘a green cap with a tuft of silver feathers waving from its crown’. It’s probably fair to conclude that the fairies wore more or less what the people wore, and that meant a simple blue bonnet.

Or maybe a green one?

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