

The Ghost of Coilig Ravine

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“IN EVERY settled community the ploughshare is of greater value – though less glory is attached to it – than the sword or any other weapon, and in the Highlands the same terrors were attached to the hiding of so useful an instrument which afterwards, and in a more commercial state of society, were believed to follow the secreting of gold.

“The unhappy man who hid it, and died without revealing his secret, could not rest in his grave.”

These are the words of the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell, writing in his book ‘Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands’. He goes on to give a specific example. “Peter Brown at Dun Crosg in Glen Lochy hid a ploughshare (*coltair*) and died without telling where. In consequence his ghost long haunted Eas Choimhlig, a waterfall in the neighbourhood, but no one had the courage to speak to it and ascertain the cause of its unrest.”

‘Glen Lochy’ is Glen Lochay in west Perthshire, which winds its way down from the hills around Beinn Dórain to Killin at the west end of Loch Tay. A beautiful part of the world, it has given hospitality to more than its share of Gaelic poets, Duncan Ban Macintyre and Uilleam Ros among them.

Dun Crosg – *Dùn a’ Chroisg*, the Fort of the Crossing – lies on the north side of the glen where Allt Dhùn Croisg meets the river Lochay, and Eas Choimhlig is one of the streams that flow into the Lochay to the east of Allt Dhùn Croisg. Campbell says that ‘Peter Brown’s ghost was commonly seen as a roebuck (*boc earba*) that followed people passing the ravine of Coilig after dark, but also as a horse, dog, man, etc., and disappeared only about forty years ago’.

Since he was writing in or around 1874, that puts the date of its disappearance at about 1834. He goes on: “A weaver had the courage to meet it, and had a long talk with it. He was told what would happen to his family, and that his daughter (whose marriage was then spoken of) would never marry. When he returned home he took to his bed and never rose.”

The date of the story can be confirmed in another way, because it’s told in full, in Gaelic, by James Macdiarmid (a local man) in volume 26 of the ‘Transactions’ of the Gaelic Society of Inverness. He had used it to entertain the society at its meeting of 18 February 1904, after getting it from an old man called MacLaren in Edramucky near Morenish on Loch Tay-side. He makes it clear that the event took place in the time of *Maighstir Eoghan*, and this can only be the Rev. Hugh Macdougall, who was minister of Killin from 1795 to 1827.

Macdiarmid writes the name of the place not as ‘Eas Choimhlig’, certainly not as ‘the ravine of Coilig’ – though *eas* in Perthshire and mainland Argyll is, or was, a steep, rough gully with water flowing through it – but as *Eas na Coimh-Sheilg*. It probably means ‘the Ravine of the Shared Hunting’, but if there’s a story to explain it, I don’t have it.

According to MacLaren and Macdiarmid the ghost lived at a big stony place (*clachan mór*) called *Sgiath-ille-fhrioghain*. It’s a curious name which seems to mean ‘the Shield of the Surly Lad’. *An Gille Frioghain* must have been a giant, and his ‘shield’ a big flat stone.

According to MacLaren the ghost was not that of Peter Brown but of *Iain Mac-ill’-Dhuinn*, John Brown. He began by telling how his own father, who was working as a shepherd in Glen Lochay, had crossed the Coilig (*chroisg m’ athair a’ Choimh-sheilg*) the very night before the weaver (*figheadair*), a big man called MacPherson, met the ghost.

It was about midnight on a warm, calm summer’s night, said MacLaren, and his father could neither hear nor see anything worse than the noise of the birds fluttering (*itealaich*) amongst the branches. But the place is rocky and sinister (*uamhalt*), he pointed out. Below the old road at the spot where MacPherson was going to meet the ghost, the river Lochay (*abhainn Lòchaidh*) is both deep and dark. In fact the Morenish poet Angus Campbell (*bàrd Mhór-Innis*) said of the Coilig:

*An t-àite b’ àbhaiste a bhith o thùs
’Na chuilidh ùraisgean nan còs.*

“The place most frequently from the beginning / Haunted by spectres coming out of the

crannies.”

MacPherson’s house and croft were on the Killin side of Dun Crosg. The house lay in a warm, dry, sheltered hollow (*glaic chiùin, bhlàth, thiorail*) protected on all sides by hills and woods.

The night after MacLaren’s father passed by, MacPherson was coming home from Killin. As he came close to an oak tree something dreadful (*nì oillteil*) approached him. He knew the face. It was John Brown, the tenant at Dun Crosg, now many years in the grave.

Big and muscular though he was, the weaver shuddered – *chlisg e*. He tried to evade the ghost (*taibhse*) but it kept getting in his way (*chuir i bacadh air an-siud ’s an-seo*). When he went uphill it was in front of him, when he tried going downhill it was there too. He could go neither forwards nor backwards. *Air adhart cha robh dòigh aige dol, agus air ais chan fhaigheadh e*.

The *taibhse* was steadily closing in. He tried to get to a young oak-tree before it caught him. He succeeded, but the ghost caught the tip of his coat-tail (*bha beir-air-bheir aig an taibhse air earball a chòta*). He wrapped his arms around the trunk (*bun na craoibh*) and held on for dear life.

The ghost pulled him this way and that with tremendous strength, but he kept his grip. Then it spoke, saying: *Mur bhith gun robh do bhacan cho teann san talamh bhiodh do leabaidh a-nochd ann an grunn Linne nan Gamhna*. “If your sticks weren’t so deep in the ground your bed for the night would be at the bottom of the Stirks’ Pool.”

It stopped pulling and said: “Go to my family and tell them none of them is doing right except the youngest.” Then, drawing aside its cloak, it said: “Look here, and say if you have ever seen a sight like this.” Its chest was aglow with red flame (*’na chaoir dhearg theine*) as if a lantern were lit in its torso.

MacPherson recoiled in horror, but the ghost went on: “Be sure to ask my son to search the top of the wall of the kiln (*mullach balla ’n àtha-chruadhachaidh*) till he finds the teeth of a harrow (*fiaclan cliath-chliata*) and plough irons (*iarannan chroinn*) wrapped in an old clout.

“If you do that I will trouble you no more. I stole those things when I was alive, and my spirit will have neither rest nor peace till they are revealed and given back to their owners. Do you promise to do as I ask?”

The wretched man was so afraid he would consent to anything. *Tha mi co-aontachadh*, he said. “I agree.”

The ghost went away, and as Gregorson Campbell says: “There is now a bridge where the ford was formerly, and it was at the top of the bank above the ford the ghost was seen. It once fought a strong man, and the marks of the conflict long remained on the ground and trees.”

The big weaver’s ghastly encounter may have been over, but his moral dilemma was only beginning. If he went to the family he was afraid they would be none too pleased – they would regard him as slanderous (*tuaileastach*) and untruthful. But if he didn’t, the *taibhse* would surely come back to haunt him.

He did not go near Dun Crosg for a day or two, but sure enough, each night the *taibhse* came to the window, saying: “You haven’t done as you promised, or as I asked you.”

It’s no wonder he was unsure what to do, for the Dun Crosg family were highly regarded (*measail*). They would certainly regard it as insulting (*tàmailteach*) if he told them their late father was a thief and had stolen plough-irons (*iarannan*). But every night the beast was muttering at the window. *Bha a’ bhéist a’ barbhanaich aig an uinneig*.

He was getting no sleep at all, and he had to give in. He went to the family, and sure enough they took it badly. They ‘scourged him with their tongues’ and threatened the kirk session (*an seisein*) on him. They didn’t let on, of course, but rumour has it that they found iron teeth just as the *taibhse* had said they would.

MacPherson was duly reported (*chaidh a chasaid*) to Maighstir Eoghan, who was obliged to summon him (*dh’imir esan a ghairm*) before the session to examine the case (*a chum gun rachadh a’ chùis a rannsachadh*). MacPherson declared to the meeting: “I promised to go to the family and tell them everything the ghost asked me to, but if my accusers (*mo luchd casaid*) won’t be silent, I am able to tell more than I have done so far.”

Maighstir Eoghan said: *Leigibh leis an duine – cha bu chòir dha bhith air a thoirt air ar beulaibh idir. Falbh dhachaigh, a charaid*. “Leave the man alone – he should not have been

brought before us at all. Go home, my friend.”

Needless to say, it caused a stir in the neighbourhood. For many years (*car iomad bliadhna*) neither MacLaren’s father nor anyone else took the Coilig road without fear in their heart, eyes casting about for a ghost (*tannasg*) in every bush and at every stone. There was reason for dread (*adhbhar uamhais*), because the big weaver was never right in body or mind from there on (*á sin suas*).

He ceased to prosper (*cha robh rath air tuilleadh*) and was no use for anything (*bha e air a chur gu buileach o fheum*). On his death-bed his wife told him that Mrs John Campbell, Kenknock (*bean Iain Chaimbeul, Ceann a’ Chnuic*), had come to visit. “Tell this woman what you saw and heard on the road.”

He did just that, thus making it clear that to the very hour of his death he believed that he had seen John Brown’s ghost.

The last person ever to be given a fright by the apparition, round about 1834, was one of John Brown’s own sons. A well-educated young man, he didn’t believe in ghosts, but was obliged to change his mind – *chaidh a thoirt gu mùth’ barail*, as MacLaren put it. He had been out one night near Coilig, and came home shaking like a leaf, his face white as a sheet with fear – *a’ critheadh mar dhuilleag, ’s a ghnùis mar anart le h-eagal*.

The family (*muinntir an taighe*) asked him why he was in such a state. *Cha d’fhuair an ceasnachadh freagairt uaith-san, ach thuig iad gur e nì uabhasach éigin a thachair air*. “From him their questioning elicited no answer, but they realised he had encountered some terrible thing or other.”

We may leave the last word to a ‘half-wit’ (*leth amadan*) called Uilli Chaluim who lived in Killin. One day, long after the episode was over, one of John Brown’s sons was teasing him (*a’ caig air*). He retorted: *Bha m’ athair-sa falbh ’na charbad nuair a bha d’ athair-sa falbh ’na thaibhse!*

There’s a play on words doesn’t work in English, but what he meant was: “My father was going around in his carriage when yours was going around as a ghost!”

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