

Now you see him, now you don't

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“NOW you see him, now you don't.” That was the greatest skill of the Ardnamurchan pirate Mac Iain Ghiorr – Archibald MacDonald, who lived from about 1600 to 1650. The best-known tradition about him is that his boat was painted black on one side and white on the other. No one who saw him passing along the Sound of Mull in the morning would realise it was the same boat coming back in the evening. It became proverbial –

*Taobh dhith dubh is taobh dhith bàn
Mar bha bàta Mhic Iain Ghiorr.*

(“One side of her black and one side white / Like the boat of Mac Iain Ghiorr.”) An account of him collected far to the north in Gairloch from a man called Roderick Mackenzie (published in volume 2 of J. F. Campbell's “More West Highland Tales”) adds: *Bha dà sheòrsa sheòl aige dhi, feadhainn dhubha agus feadhainn gheala*. “He had two kinds of sail for her, black ones and white ones.”

A writer in the “An Teachdaire Ùr Gaidhealach” of January 1836 – probably the editor, Lachlan Maclean, a native of the isle of Coll – puts it differently, saying that he often changed the colour of his boat and sails, and that he managed to shift the blame for his plunderings to other people by copying the colour of their boats and banners.

Maclean (if he it was) goes on to explain that Mac Iain Ghiorr had got a tack of land (*gabhail*) in Ardamurchan from Campbell of Lochnell (*tighearna Loch-nan-Eala*). Lochnell, he says, had taken up residence in Mingarry Castle overlooking the Sound of Mull. This had been the stronghold of Mac Iain Ghiorr's people, the MacIans, who had lost their chiefship for ever. It was this kind of humiliation and loss of homeland and property that made people like Mac Iain Ghiorr into what today are sometimes called terrorists.

Mac Iain Ghiorr had been commanded by Lochnell, says Maclean (we'll call him that), to lie on a *seid* or shakedown bed in his bedroom (*seòmar-leapach*) and keep him company by telling him stories about the Féinn (*eachdraidh nam Fiann*) and other legends during the long winter night. He turned this to his advantage. He ordered his men to be ready, and chose one of the longest tales.

As he expected, or, as Maclean says, figured (*Mar bha fiughair aige*), Lochnell fell asleep before he was a third of the way through. He quietly left the room and joined his men at the shore. They pushed off the boats and sailed across to Mull, where the rest of his gang (*luchd-muinntir*) were waiting for them.

He helped himself to an entire fold of cattle (*thug e leis buaile iomlan chruidh*), which he saw safely to land on the Ardnamurchan shore. Then he went back and lay down on his *seid* while Lochnell was still asleep. *Tharruing e srann co làidir 's gu'n do mhosguil an tighearna, agus ghearain e gu'n do chuir a shranraich o chodal e, agus ge bu toigheach e mu eachdraidh na Féinne, nach éisdeadh e rithe tuillidh air a' chumha cheudna*. “He snored so loudly that the laird woke up and complained that his snoring had deprived him of sleep, and that although he liked stories about the Féinn, he would listen to them no more on those conditions.”

Mac Iain Ghiorr was none too sorry, for he had done what he meant to do, and starting where he had left off when the master (*fear a' bhaile*) fell asleep, he finished, then slept heavily for a long time.

The cattle (*am buar*) were missed immediately. Suspicion fell on Mac Iain Ghiorr, but he confidently left the matter to Lochnell's arbitration – *leig e gu neo-sgàthach gu ràidhe Loch-nan-Eala a' chùis*. That nobleman (*an t-uasal sin*) declared upon his honour that Mac Iain Ghiorr was not out of his own bedroom all night, and he was no longer a suspect.

Whether you believe that tale or not, it's worth telling because it shows that stories about Fionn mac Cumhail, Finn MacCool or Fingal (however you want to spell it) were the home videos of the day, it portrays Mac Iain Ghiorr in bed (literally, almost) with the Campbells, and it suggests who his main enemy was likely to be – the man who commanded those wide-open shores of Mull, MacLean of Duart.

Sure enough, John Gregorson Campbell tells us in “Witchcraft and Second Sight” that

Mac Iain Ghiarr, as he calls him, ‘stole so many cattle from MacLean of Dowart that he made that chief his deadly enemy’. He goes on: “On one of his roving expeditions he was passing at midnight the chapel or burying-ground of Pennygown (*caibeal Peighinn a’ Ghobhan*) on the Sound of Mull. Seeing a light in the chapel, he entered and found three witches sticking pins in a clay body (*corp crèadha*) intended to represent MacLean of Dowart.

“As each pin was stuck in, MacLean was seized with a stitch in the corresponding part of his body. Only the last pin remained to be stuck in. It was to be in the heart, and to cause death. Mac Iain Ghiarr scattered the witches, took with him the clay corpse, and made his way to MacLean, whom he found at death’s door. He took out in his presence the pins one by one, and when the last was taken out MacLean jumped up a hale man, and remained ever after the warm friend of Mac Iain Ghiarr.”

That’s one explanation. A more likely one is that Mac Iain Ghiarr gave Duart a regular kick-back in return for protection. Tradition shows him lurking in Mull – this milking-croon, for example:

*Ogha Ciarraig, iar-ogha Duinneig,
Cha toir Mac Iain Ghiorr am-bliadhna Mhuil’ thu;
Thug e ’n Dubh ’s an Geal ’s an Ciar uam –
S mór m’ eagal gun toir e mo chiall uam.*

(“Grand-daughter of Ciarag, great-grand-daughter of Duinneag, / Mac Iain Ghiorr won’t take you this year to Mull; / He robbed me of the Black, the White and the Grey – / Great is my fear he’ll rob me of my darling.”)

Mackenzie’s account actually makes Duart the man in the bed instead of Lochnell, but this has to be told after the *corp crèadha* tale, since the two men start as well as finish on the friendliest of terms. Twelve cattle have been stolen from Duart’s land during the night, and his farm-servants convince him that Mac Iain Ghiorr (spelt Mac Iain Ghearr this time) is the culprit.

He goes to confront him, and tells him of his loss. *Cuiridh mi geall*, replies Mac Iain Ghiorr, *gun robhas ga shamhlachadh sin ri Mac Iain Ghearr!* “I’ll wager that was likened to Mac Iain Ghearr’s work!”

An tà, bhà, a bhròinein, says Duart. “Well, yes, it was, my friend.”

An tà, cha ruig thusa leas sin a chreidsinn, says Mac Iain Ghiorr. *Ach bhon a thàna tu, fuir’idh tu cuide rium fhéin a-nochd.* “Well, you don’t need to believe that. But since you’ve come, you’ll stay with me tonight.”

Tha mi deònach, says Duart. “I’d like that.”

The best place Mac Iain Ghiorr has for his guest to sleep is the stable (they didn’t go in for bedrooms in those days, except in castles). *Agus théid mi fhéin a laighe cuide riut aig do chasan*, he says. “I’ll go and lie down at your feet.”

He brings a bottle and joins him there, and the pair spend the evening drinking and swapping stories. Duart falls asleep, Mac Iain Ghiorr goes down to the shore, sails over to Mull with his men, steals twenty more of Duart’s cows, comes back and lies down. When Duart wakes up Mac Iain Ghiorr asks him, *A bheil thu blàth?* “Are you warm?”

O is mi thà. A bheil thu fhéin blàth aig mo chasan? “O yes. Are you warm at my feet?”

O is mi thà, says Mac Iain Ghiorr, reaching for the bottle. He pours Duart a dram and starts telling another story.

An tà, says Duart, *tha mi an dùil gun robh mi cluinntinn sgeulachdan ’na mo chadal an oidhche raoir.* “I think I was hearing stories in my sleep last night.”

An tà, tha mise ga do chreidsinn, lean mi treis orra an déidh dhuit cadal, ’s mi an dùil nach robh thu air cadal cho luath, says Mac Iain Ghiorr. “Well, I believe you, I carried on with them for a while after you had gone to sleep, I didn’t realise you had gone to sleep so quickly.”

While they’re still chatting over their dram, one of Duart’s men comes in to tell him more cows have been stolen, and he says: *Nach cumadh sibh rium roimhe gur h-e Mac Iain Gheàrr a bha a’ goid a’ chruidh anns a h-uile àite? Ach a-nis tha e soilleir, an duine a bha ’na laighe cuide rium fhéin, nach robh e a’ goid a-raoir.* “Weren’t you all constantly telling me it was Mac Iain Gheàrr who was stealing the cattle everywhere? But now it’s clear, the man who was sleeping along with me, he was not stealing last night.”

Lachlan Maclean tells a story about how a certain rich man was leading his horses home through a wood by a long halter (*taod*) which he held in his fist. Tied to each other by the tail, they were loaded with freshly-ground meal from the mill. The going was soft and the horses were unshod, as was normal in those days, so the only noise was that of the rich man walking along humming a song to himself (*agus dùrdan òrain aige*).

Mac Iain Ghiorr got one of his men to undo the *taod* from the head of the lead horse while he himself held it up, walking along at the same pace as the animal. When the rich man arrived at his door and called for help to unload the meal, he turned round and found his horses had disappeared!

I think the important thing about this is what Maclean tells us about the rich man in his preamble. He was noted for meanness (*spiocaireachd*), he says, and was infamous for refusing a poor old widow a small portion of meal. That makes Mac Iain Ghiorr into a Robin Hood who took from the rich to give to the poor. The rich man must have been a Campbell.

I told last time how one of Mac Iain Ghiorr's men murdered MacLean of Muck during a raid on that island. Mac Iain Ghiorr was now in deep trouble, and he extracted himself by means of his usual skills. Using a favourable wind, two boats and some good horses, he got himself to Inveraray by dawn next morning. He had information that Stewart of Appin, an old acquaintance, had been in town for some days on legal business. Seeing him deep in discussion in the street with the Sheriff of Argyll, he greeted him and walked on past.

When the Sheriff had gone, Mac Iain Ghiorr approached Stewart again and demanded to know why he had failed to reply when he had greeted him at that same spot the previous morning. Not wishing to be thought rude, Stewart apologised, saying that of course he had recognised him, but that he had been in a hurry and was sure he would be forgiven.

It was a neat alibi. Good enough, in fact, to get him off the murder charge, though a glance at p. 200 of Nicolson's "Gaelic Proverbs" suggests that it may not all have been plain sailing. According to Nicolson, MacNeil of Barra was very hard on Mac Iain Ghiorr at a court of justice on some occasion (presumably having been one of his earlier victims), leading to this classic threat: *Ged as fhad a-mach Barraigh, ruigear e*. "Though Barra is far out, it can be reached."

Lachlan Maclean says that some of Mac Iain Ghiorr's men were caught in Ross-shire and hanged by Seaforth for the murder. He adds colourfully: *Leig Gilleaspuig, an déigh so, dheth a bhi ri mór-shlad, ach ri beagan mu na h-ioma-dhorsan*. "Archibald, after this, put grand larceny aside and stuck to the petty kind round the back doors."

I explained last time how Mac Iain Ghiorr's spin-doctors let it be understood that he enjoyed supernatural assistance in the form of a female water-spirit. John Gregorson Campbell says: "When her former master died, she gave a shriek that roused the echoes of Ben Resipol (*Réiseapol*). The same night she was seen in the Coolin hills in Skye, and after that neither her shadow nor her colour (*a du no dath*) were anywhere seen."

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