

## The double stigma

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I told the fantastic story of how the witches sank Captain Forrest's ship. I pointed out that the "real" witches of the past were the poorest of the poor, landless widows and spinsters who made a living by pretending to have power over the unseen, selling their services, and claiming credit for things (like storms) that were going to happen anyway.

This is the interface between fact and folklore, and I'd like to pursue it here. How exactly does a real person turn into a myth? Why does society sometimes turn viciously against its most defenceless members? This is as important an issue as it ever was before. All over Europe from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, even as close to the Highlands as Inverness and Dornoch, witches were burnt. Until recently whenever women got into trouble it was universally deemed by the law to be their own fault. In the twentieth century Hitler gassed Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and the disabled. Now there's Guantanamo, and this is what helps us best to understand all these centuries of bullying and scapegoating. Because they *might* be terrorists. Mightn't they?

It has to be said that historians have been completely unable to find any evidence for the persecution of witches within Gaelic society itself. Instead, until quite recently young men dressed up in animal skins at New Year and, with a great deal of banging and shouting, performed a cleansing ceremony that looks every bit as old as the sin offering in Leviticus 16. That seems to have done the trick. Everyone had a lot of fun and no one was at any greater risk of being hurt than on the shinty field next day. Could it be that we had the balance about right?

The worst we did to witches was that we allowed them to be poor, and used them to frighten our children into not wandering too far away from home or going into strangers' houses. If you're told something frightening as a child it may well stick. And witches make good material for stories.

In his book "Witchcraft and Second Sight" John Gregorson Campbell, who was minister of Tiree from 1861 to 1891, made the point that the best-known witch-names seem to have been mere nicknames, given perhaps to more than one old woman. *Nic Mhaol Dòmhnai*ch is a case in point. In one place in his book Campbell reports that this was the name of a witch in Caolas, at the extreme east end of Tiree. This is the story he tells about her: "A boat from Tiree, going for a cargo of wood, was caught in a violent gale and driven north past Ardnamurchan Point. With difficulty the boatmen, four in number, secured her in a creek. They remained in a cave for four days till the storm abated.

"The suddenness and violence of the gale caused much anxiety to their friends, and two women (one of whom had two sons and a son-in-law in the boat, and the other, a widow, her youngest and only surviving son) consulted a famous witch, *Nic-ill'-Dòmhnai*ch, in Caolas, as to their fate. The witch told them to come next day, and she would tell them.

"Early next morning the widow went. 'Yea,' said the witch, 'they live, and they had no little amusement last night fighting for the *fallaid* bannock, and your son had his own share of it.'

"When the young men came home, they were questioned as to their seeing anything the night the witch was sent for news. They said a grey gull was seen by them sitting on the edge of the rocks that overhang their place of shelter and peering down at them. One was for throwing stones at it, but the rest dissuaded him. It was only seen that night and next morning."

What can we make of this? Firstly, the name is not *Nic-ill'-Dòmhnai*ch but *Nic Mhaol Dòmhnai*ch. For there to be a woman's name spelt *Nic-ill'-Dòmhnai*ch there would have to be a man's name *Gille Dòmhnai*ch and to the best of my knowledge there has never been any such name. Secondly, the *fallaid* bannock is a little one made from the leavings of the meal after the baking is done. Thirdly, the men were assuming that the grey gull was the witch. They had heard countless stories about witches transforming themselves into a great variety of creatures – of which hares, gulls and cormorants topped the list.

When my friend Niall M. Brownlie from Tiree wrote about witches in "Gairm" in 1971 he had the name as *Maol Nic Domhnai*ch á *Tiridhe*, though he didn't say where in the island she was from. It is just possible that we can pin her down historically, because among those

from Caolas who who appeared at Scarinish on 23 April 1716 to surrender their weapons after the '15 rising was "Mildonich McIlchallum in taur", that is, *Maol Dòmhnach mac Gille Chalum an t-Saoir*, a carpenter's grandson. Could she have been his daughter?

The seagull story is remarkably similar to a tale about a very real tragedy that occurred on 8 July 1856, in which at least nine, perhaps twelve or more, of forty fishermen on seven boats from Balephuill in the west end of Tìree were drowned. It's remembered in Tìree as *Fuadach Bhaile Phuill*, the Balephuill Drowning. Niall has told it in Gaelic and English in his book "Bailtean is Ath-Ghairmean a Tiriodh". He says: "At the time there was a famous witch in Balephuill by the name of Mairead . . . On the evening of the storm, an exhausted seagull (*faoileann chlaoidhte*) alighted on the gunwale (*stoc*) of Calum Bàn's boat. One of the crew wanted it killed, as he considered it to be a bird of ill-omen (*gum b' e droch chomharradh a bha innte*). But Calum told him to let it be, as it was only a bird of passage (*eun siubhail*). That night Mairead informed the villagers that Calum Bàn's boat and all on board were safe and nearing Islay."

It appears that a migratory legend has attached itself to the famous storyteller Calum Bàn as one of the best known sons of Balephuill, even though he was only a boy at the time and was not on any of the boats that day; it is, however, true that two of the boats reached safety in Islay, one of them carrying a Malcolm Macdonald, who was rescued when his own boat sank. Interestingly, Calum Bàn's son Donald also attributed the disaster to witchcraft, but the women he blamed were Mary Campbell and Isabella Maclean, *née* Black (his own great-aunt), both of whose husbands perished.

Now when John Gregorson Campbell tells how Captain Forrest's ship was sunk, he lists the witches involved and says: "*Nic 'Ill' Dòmhnach* from Tìree is commonly mentioned. A family of this name has had down to the present day a reputation for witchcraft. The last of them was known to the writer as a poor woman of much shrewdness and inoffensive character. She professed great skill in healing cattle by means of charms and suchlike *white* witchcraft."

This brings us down to Campbell's own day, and the same woman is mentioned in "Carmina Gadelica" as giving Alexander Carmichael an "envy spell" for cattle. Carmichael describes her as *Nic-al-domhnach*, cottar, *Bail-a-phuill*, and comments: "This woman had known many such runes, but was forgetting them."

Is it possible that her name was Mairead and that she was the *Mairead Dhubh* who figured in the story of *Fuadach Bhaile Phuill*? There is actually a reason why the name *Nic Mhaol Dòmhnach* should be associated with witchcraft and the black arts, and it is this. According to Alexander Carmichael himself (in volume 6 of "Carmina Gadelica"), *Maol Dòmhnach* was the name given to an unbaptised male child. "When the child was baptised and recognised by the Church this temporary name ceased. For a natural child, however, baptism was not always to be got, in which case the temporary name remained, occasionally for life."

*Maol Dòmhnach*, then, was a name that denoted the double stigma of illegitimacy and refusal of baptism; *Nic Mhaol Dòmhnach* was the daughter of such a person. We're in murky waters, but at least the meaning of the name is perfectly clear. *Maol Caluim*, Malcolm, is the literally the "tonsured one", the "servant" or at least "devotee" of Calum Cille, that is, St Columba; in exactly the same way, *Maol Dòmhnach* is the "tonsured one", the "servant" or "devotee" of *Dòmhnach*, that is, Dominicus, the Lord.

Such a person was in the direct care of God. Carmichael: "When the father of the child failed to provide for it and the mother was poor, the woman got a dole from the Church funds. In this case the luckless child was called *Isean Eaglaise*, 'Church chick'. In Caithness and Sutherland he was called *Isean Circ* (*Circe*), 'Kirk chick', and generally received in English the surname Kirk or Kirke."

When anglicised, *Maol Dòmhnach* became Ludovic (German Ludwig, English Louis) for the simple reason that both names have the same string of consonants L, D, V/MH, C/CH. So, as Carmichael points out, in English an illegitimate child raised by doles from the Church came to be called "Ludovic" in Skye and Argyll and "Louis" in Lewis. As for that big, bare, uninhabited island called *Maol Dòmhnach* which blocks the entrance to Castlebay Harbour in Barra, I take the name to be a bad seaman's joke meaning "Bastard".

Carmichael cites a very tender song – three verses and a chorus – by a mother from Grimsay in North Uist to her illegitimate child, beginning:

*Se dh'fhàg mi gun tuar nach d'fhuair mi dhut baisteadh,  
A leinibh mo luaidh, bha 'n dualachas agad –  
Si charachd gun bhuaidh agus fuarachd t' athar  
A bhuaich cho fad thu 'd Mhaol Dòmhnach.*

I think I would translate it like this. “What’s left me distraught is not getting you baptised, / My love, though you’ve earned it by your pedigree – / It’s the pointless deceit and your father’s coldness / That have left you so long a *Maol Dòmhnach*.” The key phrase is *bha 'n dualachas agad*: the paternity, the line of descent, was yours, so why did your father see fit to deny it? She is sick, she says, when she sees the lads going to the ball with the girls to have fun while she sits alone, but she will never give up her baby for all King George’s gold and land –

*Gum b' fheàrr leam thu fhéin gun spréidh gun earras  
Ged 's geur a cheannaich mi òg thu.*

(“I’d rather have you without cattle or wealth / Though I bought you so dearly when young.”)

To be a *Maol Dòmhnach* for life was bad enough, then, but to be the daughter of such a person, *Nic Mhaol Dòmhnach*, was the worst possible start. As for the name given to unbaptised baby *girls*, this tells us just as much. I’ll pick it up next time.

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