

Talk of witches and revolution

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

The most celebrated witches of the past had some weird and wonderful names, and here I'd like to take a look at a few of them: *Gormal na Moighe* and *Bean an Lagain*, *Ball Odhar* and *Spòga Buidhe*, *Doideag* and *Nighean Dualachain às an Eilean Sgitheanach*, *Cas a' Mhogain Riabhaich* and *Caiseart Gharbh Nighean an Aodhair*.

Gormal was the greatest of all the witches. The name sounds as if it could mean “Blue-Eye” (*Gorm-Shùil*), and in his book “Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands” the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell mentioned a tradition that it originated in “the witch having one eye black or brown and the other blue”, but he went on to point out that it's actually a corruption of Gormla, “an ancient and pretty Gaelic name, usually rendered Dorothy”.

This is correct. In origin Gormla is *Gormfhlaith*, which means “Blue Aristocrat” or “Noble Princess”. It seems to have become a witch's name because it was borne by an infamous princess of the past. This Gormla was a daughter of Flann Sinna (Flann of the Shannon), a high king of Ireland who died in AD 916. She was married to three kings in a row – Cormac, who was both king and bishop of Cashel and died in 916, his conqueror Cerball mac Muirecáin who died in 909, and Niall Glúndub (Niall the Black-Kneed), who fell in battle against the vikings in 919. After that she died in poverty, which is a pretty good qualification for a witch. She had been quick to transfer her affections to Cerball when he defeated her first husband in battle; according to tradition she's the author of a sequence of poems about her husbands, her riches and her poverty. One of them begins:

*Ro charas trícha fo thrí,
Ro charas a naoi fo naoi;
Gé no charfuinn fiche fear,
Nocho n-eadh do mheallfadh mnaoi —
Do thréigios iad sin ar Niall,
Dob é mo mhian bheith dá réir . . .*

(“I've loved three times thirty, / I've loved nine times nine; / I could have loved twenty men, / But that would not attract a woman – / I forsook them all for Niall, / For what I wanted was his love . . .”) Another of the poems ends like this: “Cerball of the sword gave me three hundred cows and two hundred horses. Cormac gave twice as many as Cerball, and that was no mean act. But why should I hide from God the wealth I got from Niall? In one month Niall gave me three times as much as all that put together.”

In an article here in July 2002 I argued that this was the reputation that led to her name being used (as “Goneril”) by Geoffrey of Monmouth in “*Historia Regum Britanniae*” and by Shakespeare in “*King Lear*”. Anglicised as Gormelia (not Dorothy!), the name was surprisingly popular in Lewis down to a couple of generations ago.

Referring to a story I told here last month, John Gregorson Campbell says: “*Gormla Mhòr* from Meigh, Lochaber, was stronger than all the witches of Mull, and gave the finishing stroke, as already detailed, to Captain Forrest's ship. She met her death when astraddle on a mountain stream to intercept a salmon that had made its way up to spawn. A large fish made a rush, knocked her backwards in the water, and drowned her. There was a Gormshuil in the village of Hianish, Tìree, a most notorious local witch, and one in Cràcaig in Skye, equally notorious.”

The place Campbell calls Meigh is on the north shore of Loch Laggan in the high country between Lochaber and Badenoch, and this is where *Bean an Lagain* (“the Wife of Laggan”) comes in, for she and *Gormal na Moighe* appear to have been regarded as one and the same – the former being her name in Badenoch and the east, the latter in Lochaber and the west. This seems to be because the name *Bean an Lagain* really refers to a little-known Laggan a mile east of Kingussie, a nuance which would have been lost upon natives of the West Highlands, who would have linked her with Gormal's native parish of Laggan.

Ball Odhar was from Kintra (*Ceann Trà*) on the north shore of Ardnamurchan. Her name means “Sallow Spot”. Perhaps it refers to some ugly birthmark or burn-mark which left her

with no choice in life but to eke out a living peddling charms and telling fortunes. We'll meet *odhar* again later.

Spòga Buidhe was from Màiligeir near Staffin in Skye. Gregorson Campbell, who knew that area well, mentions her several times. The name means “Yellow Claws”, and is presumably meant to describe her hands. There's a story told in Uist about a mysterious highwayman nicknamed *Spòg Bhuidhe* (“Yellow Claw”) who robbed travellers crossing a bridge near Perth, and turned out to be the local innkeeper (you'll find it in Bruford and MacDonald's “Scottish Traditional Tales”). If the story is older than the witch, which is perfectly possible, it suggests a way in which some poor harmless woman could have got the name – children who had heard the story taunted her with the name, and tragically it stuck.

Doideag is likewise a nickname, but comes close to being a generic term. We talk about the *Doideagan Muileach* (Mull witches) and *Doideag Chanach* (witch from Canna). Gregorson Campbell says that *Doideagan* is “the well-known name of the Mull witches, and is given by children to the falling snowflakes, which they are informed are the Mull witches on their journey through the air”.

Doideag is the nearest we've got to a Gaelic term for a witch – after all, the usual word, *buidseach*, is “witch” itself in a Gaelic dress. (English W becomes Gaelic B, which is how Willie turned into Billy.) All *doideag* seems to mean is a peevish woman (from *dod*, a tantrum), which shows how ordinary such people were.

The idea of the witch as an evil sorceress who was in league with the devil is alien to Gaelic, and was brought in by Christianity. Exodus 22: 18 says: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Too bad if you didn't know what a witch was. In the Gaelic Bible this was made: *Cha leig thu le ban-fhiosaiche bhi beò*. The translators probably agonised over this, and opted for the word that would cause least trouble. By 1800, when they did their work, few Highland communities could confidently point to a *ban-fhiosaiche* (“prophetess”) in their midst.

I put in *Nighean Dualachain às an Eilean Sgitheanach*, “Dualachan's Daughter from Skye”, more in a spirit of enquiry than anything else. Does anyone know anything about her? *Dualachan* sounds to me like a nickname given to a child with braided hair.

Cas a' Mhogain Riabhaich and *Caiseart Gharbh Nighean an Aodhair* can be taken together. Both names refer to footwear of the most wretched kind. The first means “Brindled Headless-Stocking Foot”, the second “Thick Footwear the Herdsman's Daughter”. A *mogan* is a footless stocking (a common article of clothing in boggy country), *cas* is the foot and lower leg, and *riabhach* is “brindled”, that is, “streaky brown”, usually used of hide or rocks, but here of undyed wool, so *Cas a' Mhogain Riabhaich* could alternatively be translated ‘the Leg with the Undyed Footless Stocking’. In modern terms she would be “that woman who wears undyed footless stockings on her legs”. Not a fashion icon.

Campbell says of this pair that they “were anywhere but where the person who is telling about them comes from himself”. He adds: “Shaw, the Lochnell bard, makes them sisters dwelling in Glenforsa in Mull when Ossian was a little boy, and contemporaries of Mac Rùslain.”

This was James Shaw who lived from about 1758 to 1828; he was a native of Mull but spent most of his life at Lochnell near Oban. The verse in question was published in another of Campbell's books, “Clan Traditions and Popular Tales”.

*An cuala sibhse riamh iomradh
Mu Chaiseart Gharbh, Nic an Uidhir?
Bha i òg an Gleann Forsa
Nar bha Oisean 'na ghiullan;
Bha i falbh 's i 'na proitseach
Le Cas a' Mhogain a piuthar —
Is mis' an truaghan 'nan déidh
'S gun fhios gu dé thàinig riutha.*

“Did ever you hear mention / Of Caiseart Gharbh, Iain Odhar's daughter? / She was young in Glen Forsa / When Ossian was a laddie; / She went about as a lassie / With Cas a' Mhogain her sister – / I'm bereft to survive them / Without knowing what befell them.” *Nighean an Aodhair* has turned into *Nic an* (or *'Ain*) *Uidhir*, which rhymes better with *ghiullan*, *piuthar*

and *riutha*. *Odhar*, genitive *uidhir*, is the colour of porridge, and here means “pasty-faced”, indicating unhealthy skin of some kind – whether from any particular disease I don’t know.

A few words about the song wouldn’t be out of place. The poet tells how a stranger comes to him in a dream, warning him to beware of an ancient prophecy. The poet demands to know who he is. He was from Mull originally, he replies, with two grandmothers from that island and a grandfather from Morvern. That’s where our verse comes in, and the stranger appears to be saying that the two sisters, his grandmothers, loved the same man, Ossian the poet, who was therefore his grandfather on both his father’s and his mother’s side.

This puts the stranger’s otherworldly credentials beyond doubt, because Ossian’s mother was a deer, and irregularities of birth were virtually a prerequisite of having the second sight. (In another version there are *two* grandfathers from Morvern, but it doesn’t make a lot of difference.) The poet demands to know the stranger’s trade, and the answer is startling:

*“Gur mi am post anns an àm seo
Toirt fios na Frainge do Shasainn.”*

(“These days I’m the postman / Who brings word from France to England.”)

In that case, says the poet, if you witnessed the recent battles, tell me whether France or England is going to win the war. And the stranger replies:

*Nuair bhios an tuath air an creachadh
'S nach bi mart air am buailidh,
Ma thig am Frangach do Shasainn
Gur lìonmhoir' aig' iad na bhuaithe.*

(“When the tenantry are so robbed / That not a cow’s left in their cowfold, / If the Frenchman invades England / More will join him than not.”) Another version has not *Ma* “If” but *Nuair* “When”.

It’s a Highland view of British politics around 1800. The assumption is that the Clearances will spread through the Lowlands to England, and that the *tuath*, what Marx later called the proletariat, will join their French comrades in the class struggle. The poet describes the devastation of the Highlands, and makes it clear that the ancient prophecy referred to is the one that links sheep-farming with the destruction of culture:

*Cuiridh claigeann na caorach an crann o fheum
'S cuiridh ite geòidh an cuimhn' á daoine.*

(“The sheep’s skull will put the plough out of use / And a goose’s feather will deprive men of their memory.”) Shaw appears to blame the prime minister, William Pitt, for it all. He says that if Pitt were locked up in prison while the poor of the kingdom (*bochdan na rìoghachd*) sat in judgement upon him, they’d give him the death sentence – his soul might get eternal rest, but they’d give his corpse to the devil.

Finally the poet asks the stranger’s name, and he says he is Mac Rùslain. Thereby hangs a tale for another day, because Mac Rùslain is the great mischief-maker of Gaelic tradition, and this isn’t the only place in which his character is used by Gaelic writers of this period to express views in line with the French Revolution.

18 March 2005