

The dangers of being poor

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A MONTH ago I pointed out that the name *Maol Dòmhnach*, “Servant of the Lord”, used to be given to a baby boy prior to baptism. If the child was illegitimate, baptism might well be refused by the kirk session in order to try and persuade the mother to improve her habits or change her way of life, ideally by marrying the father. If the child were the product of adultery, rape or incest, that was hardly going to happen. So the boy might remain a *Maol Dòmhnach* all his life. In Tìree at least the name *Nic Mhaol Dòmhnach*, “Maol Dòmhnach’s Daughter”, is associated with witchcraft, because the people we are talking about are the poorest of the poor, and have no other trade to turn to.

What if the child was female? Alexander Carmichael tells us in volume 6 of “Carmina Gadelica” that the name for an unbaptised baby girl was *Griadach*, and he cites these verses.

*'S i ghriadach a dh'fhoghainn dhomh,
'S i ghriadach a leòn mi,
'S i ghriadach a dh'fhoghainn dhomh
Is gobha dubh nan dòrainn.*

*Gobha dubh nan tubaistean,
Gobha dubh nan dòrainn,
Gobha dubh nan tubaistean
An-diugh a rinn mo leònadh.*

(“The *griadach* has done for me, / The *griadach* has harmed me, / The *griadach* has done for me / And the black smith of the torments. / The black smith of disasters, / The black smith of the torments, / The black smith of the torments / Has wounded me today.”)

Carmichael clearly saw the singer as a young woman who had had an illegitimate baby girl by a man who happened to be a smith. If we ask why she should claim that he wounded her today rather than nine months ago, I suppose the answer is that today is the day he repudiated the child. If we had the rest of the song we would know; perhaps a reader can help.

The song can be read differently, however, for *griadach* seems to have come to mean a witch, while smiths, thanks to the nature of their trade, were traditionally credited with having occult powers. In the English language a blacksmith works with iron and a whitesmith worked with tin; the Gaelic for these terms is simply *gobha* and *ceàrd*, so *dubh* (“black”) in the song seems to denote the man’s character rather than his calling. Taken in this way, the verses suggest that the singer believes that a witch and a smith have joined forces to destroy him (or her) through sudden illness, an accident, or cattle disease. By this analysis the *griadach*, more “bitch” than “witch”, will be a neighbour and may be the smith’s wife.

Griadach is not a common name and there seems to be adequate evidence to connect it with the double stigma of illegitimacy and witchcraft – which, of course, includes possession of the second sight. In “A Treatise on the Second Sight”, published in 1763 and written (if I recall correctly) by William MacLeod of Hamer in Skye, there’s the following story. “Margaret Morison, a widow of good repute, relates from what was told her by her father, that a knot of four women being at supper in his house, and having fish set before them in a kneading trough, one of them, Greadach Munro, a notable Seer, rose on the sudden and threw up her meat; being inquired about her ailment, she told them, that soon after they began to eat of the fish, she saw a little corps stretched over the trough in his winding sheet, which disappeared in the twinkling of an eye, upon which she turned sickish, so as she had no stomach to partake further of what remained of the fish.

“In a few days thereafter, Donald Chisholm, then tenant in Glendale, going with a child to be baptized at Killmuir, and night coming on in his return, as he came to Doctor Morrison’s house, took up his quarters there that night, where the child died before day of a sudden ailment. His father having no timber for his coffin, Doctor Morrison gave him the said trough (not having heard then of the Second Sight about it), which, with a little help of more boards, served for the purpose.”

The records of church courts tell us a great deal about immoral and criminal behaviour and the lives of the poor in times past. The minutes of the presbyteries of Inverness and Dingwall have been published, and the name Griadach, or something like it, floats to the surface. When the gentlemen of the presbytery of Dingwall visited Lochalsh on 16 August 1649, in Oliver Cromwell's time, "hearing that ane Christine neine ean vic Kenneth, incestuows within the Ile of Sky, did reside in Lochalsh, ordained that she sould be removed and not suffered to abyd in the countrey vntill she proported a testimoniall from Mr. Archibald Macqueen".

In other words, *Cairistiona nighean Iain mhic Coinnich* was being accused of incest and thrown out of Lochalsh until the minister of her native parish of Snizort could vouch for her good behaviour. But when the Presbytery moved on to Lochcarron next day the stories got worse. "Greadich nein ean vic Conchie Ryach" being "declared fugitive", she was "ordained to be summarlie excumunicat the nixt sabbaoth for her incest, adulterie, and severall fornicatione". Having seen to this, the minister of Lochcarron was to "mak report of the same to the presbyterie, and to advertise the rest of the hieland ministers to mak intimation theirotff".

So Cairistiona, otherwise *Griadach nighean Iain mhic Coinnich* (or *Dhonnchaidh?*) *Riabhaich*, turns out to have been a common prostitute. Having left the district without submitting herself to church discipline, she was excommunicated, and the ministers of other Highland parishes must be warned to look out for her.

Seventeen years later there are faint echoes of something similar. Meeting at Dingwall on 11 September 1666, the Presbytery excommunicates a woman called Grudach Nickillandris. On 2 April the following year they "relax" the sentence, presumably on hearing reports of improved behaviour. What she had been found guilty of is not recorded, but "Grudach" looks like a misreading of Griidach (Griadach); judging from the rest of her name, *Nic Gill' Anndrais*, she was a Ross.

There's enough there, I think, to back up what Carmichael says, and to paint a picture of women at the bottom of the social heap. But what does a *ghriadach* actually mean? I'd suggest that it started off as a masculine noun, *an crèadhach*, meaning something like "the lump of clay" and perhaps also denoting the kind of person who eked out a living by making and selling "clay corpses", *cuirp chrèadha*, images of people into which pins could be stuck to bring on injury, illness and death. *Crèadh* is the same word as *cré* and *creubh*, so *crèadhach*, when feminine, ends up meaning the same as *creubhag*, a little body, a little woman, what used to be called in Scots "a puir body".

I've been brought to this conclusion by thinking about the name of a particular witch, Cré, Creubh or Creibh of Inverness. An old song says:

*Diol na Cré mhóir a bha 'n Inbhir Nis dhuit!
Dh'fhuiling ise dórainn, 's bu mhór a tiodal —
Bhiodh i cur na diollaíd air fear a taighe,
Làraichean nan cruidean a chaidh 'na làmhan
'S àileachan nan sréin air a bheul air caitheamh.*

("May you be treated like the big Cré in Inverness! / She suffered agony and richly deserved it — / She would put the saddle on the man of her house, / The marks of the hooves that turned back into hands / And the bit of the reins ground down on his mouth.") William Grant Stewart, a native of Strathspey, wrote in 1823 that she was called *Crea Mhoir cun Drochdair* and that she was "burnt and worried at a stake at Inverness, about two centuries ago, for bewitching and keeping in torment the body of the provost's son"; *cun Drochdair* will be for *cù 'n droch fhir*, "the devil's hound".

Some more circumstantial detail is supplied by John Maclean, "the Clachnacuddin Centenarian", in an account first published in 1842. Creibh lived with her sister in a bothy in the Millburn valley (a mile east of Inverness), a sinister spectre-haunted place which was still notorious for witchcraft as late as 1745. Some children found a *corp crèadha* in the burn, stuck all over with pins. "One of the children said she often saw her grandmother, 'Creibh Mhor', make the like of that." Gossip led to a judicial enquiry. Creibh was arrested and tortured, but denied practising witchcraft. Her sister was then tortured. She "acknowledged their mutual guilt" and stated that the effigy was meant to represent Cuthbert of Castle Hill, a

prominent merchant in the town. Both sisters were condemned and a stake was prepared for them on the Barn Hill opposite the Castle.

According to a separate tradition, for which the best source is Hugh Barron's papers in the "Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness", Creibh fled to Flichity in Strathnairn, where she was caught in Pàirc Druim a' Chàil. She asked for two plates. They gave her one and she made a wing of it; she asked for another, and when it was refused she said: *Mur toir sibhs' an truinnsear eil' dhòmhs' cha chum sibh fad' seo mi.* ("If you don't give me the other plate you won't keep me here for long.") They brought her to the Longmans (*chon na Longmans*) and before they had burned her she cursed Flichity. *Fhads a bhith an allt aig Flichtidh ruith dhan taobh tuath, bidh mollachd air Flichtidh. Ma gheobh an tuathanach math cha gheibhinn an tighearna agus ma gheibhinn an tighearna math cha gheibhinn an tuathanach.* "As long as the burn at Flichity runs north, Flichity will be cursed. If the farmer prospers the laird will not, and if the laird prospers the farmer will not."

Creibh was burned first. According to some sources she cried out for water. An onlooker went to get some, but when "a so-called wise man" was told it was for her, he emptied the vessel upon the earth. Seeing this, Creibh cursed them but also said, "If only I had got a mouthful of that water I would have turned Inverness into a peat bog."

One source ascribes this story not to Creibh but to "a contemporary of hers – one of the last witches burnt in the town". Having betrayed her, her sibling also considered escaping, but was brought to watch her burn, and the chief constable began helping himself to the "massive Highland brooch" which fastened her plaid. "Well, well," she said, "if I had thought it would have come to this, there would have been many who wear scarlet cloaks here today!" And she denounced the Cuthberts.

The scarlet cloak was a sign of gentility, and what she meant was that many of the ladies of Inverness were as much involved in the black art as *purchasers* of charms, spells and fortunes as she and Creibh had been as *purveyors* of them, which was self-evidently true.

Creibh and her sister may be identified as two married women named McQuicken and McRorie who were tried and executed for witchcraft in Inverness in 1695 by commission from the Privy Council. No more women were ever tried for witchcraft in the town, but two men, George and Lachlan Rattray, were tried and burnt there in 1706.

What is illustrated by the stories of Cré, Creubh or Creibh, and perhaps of every woman called Griadach, is the danger of being "a pair body".

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