

## Nicneven: the witch at the crossroads

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

TWO weeks ago I wrote about the name Griadaich, which means an unbaptised baby girl and is associated with witchcraft. You can look out for it in place-names. In his recent book “The Gaelic Place-Names of Carloway”, Richard Cox points to shielings there called *Airigh Griadaich Bige* (or *Airigh Griadaich Bheag*) and *Airigh Griadaich Mòir*. Of the former he says: “Presumably a girl was born either at this location, or at *Airigh Griadaich Mòir*.”

Yes, although I have to say that if *Àirigh Griadaich Bige* and *Àirigh Griadaich Móire* are the correct forms of the names, it looks to me as if these shielings belonged to two women who were probably witches, Griadaich Bheag and Griadaich Mhór. If it's the shielings themselves that are big and small, I'd have expected *Àirigh Griadaich Bheag* and *Àirigh Griadaich Mhór* – or *Àirigh Bheag Griadaich* and *Àirigh Mhór Griadaich*!

There is, or was, a rock in South Harris called the Griadaich. I seem to remember that about twenty years ago there were stories in the papers about blasting it out of the way. Perhaps some reader will refresh my memory. Was it blocking the route of the proposed car-ferry to Uist at Leverburgh?

If so, this little Griadaich makes a pair with Maol Dòmhaich (“the Servant of the Lord”) at Castlebay, which I mentioned a few weeks ago. If I'm right, these are simply “bastards” in the pejorative sense, the difference between them being that Maol Dòmhaich is a huge male bastard who rears out of the sea to a height of 153 metres, while the Griadaich is a stealthy female one who lurks somewhere under high-water mark – so well hidden that I can't find her on the map!

I want to turn now to another witch-name, *Nic Naoimhean*. This means “the daughter of Naoimhean”, and Naoimhean means “Holy Man”, so it seems to be a witch-name of the same type as *Nic Mhaol Dòmhaich*. Was Naoimhean another name for an unbaptised baby boy?

Naoimhean has also given us the common Islay surname MacNiven. The Islay poets Duncan and Charles MacNiven, two brothers who died not so long ago and are commemorated in a roadside cairn near Bruichladdich, liked to spell it *MacNimhean*, which reflects their pronunciation. The name also suffers from the same complication that afflicts *MacNeacail* in the north – following “c”, the “n” tends to sound like a nasal “r”. So we meet spellings like *Mac Creamhain* and *Nic Creafain*. There was a story in Islay to the effect that the MacNivens are descended from a man called Craoibhean (“Little Tree-Man”) who was so called because he was found as a child at the root of a tree (*craobh*), and nobody knew to whom he belonged.

You'll find the story in “Tocher” number 25. I think there's a germ of truth in it, but not the truth as understood by Duncan MacNiven, Bonchioll, who told it to R. C. MacLagan over a hundred years ago. I would take it as evidence that *Naoimhean* was regarded as a suitable name for an illegitimate child; the offspring of this man were not called *Mac Craoibhan*, as it is spelt in “Tocher”, but *Mac Naoimhean*.

The confusion between N and R led to the ultimate indignity. In its most corrupt form, this fine old Gaelic name seemed to consist mainly of the consonants C, R and F, so parish schoolmasters and other anglicisers wrote it down as “Crawford”, as if it had something to do with that Lanarkshire name. In some places the distinction between MacNiven and Crawford then became lost altogether. For example, W. M. MacKenzie, the author of volume 2 of “The Book of Arran”, says hesitantly: “The Crawfords at Clachan were possibly a Lanarkshire lot: some are on record from Renfrew.”

It's much more likely that the Crawfords at Clachan were of the *Clann Mhic Naoimhean*, for Alexander Carmichael, who pursued folklore in every part of the Highlands and Islands, wandering about by foot and ferry, wrote in “Carmina Gadelica”, volume 2: “A woman in Arran said that her father, and the other men of the townland, made the neid-fire on the knoll on ‘La buidhe Bealltain’ – Yellow Day of Beltane. They fed the fire from ‘cuaile mor conaidh caoin’ – great bundles of sacred faggots brought to the knoll on Beltane Eve. When the sacred fire became kindled, the people rushed home and brought their herds and drove them through and round the fire of purification, to sain them from the ‘bana bhuitseach mhor Nic Creafain,’ – the great arch witch daughter Crauford, Mac Creafain, now Crawford. That was in the second decade of the nineteenth century.”

Who is this “great arch witch”? Well, there's no doubt who Carmichael's informant was referring to, and in so doing she provides us with the only Gaelic evidence for a figure with a Gaelic name, Nicneven, who has haunted the literature and folklore of Lowland Scotland since the sixteenth century. The rest of this article consists basically of a digest of the information provided about Nicneven by Alison Hanham in a fascinating study entitled “‘The Scottish Hecate’: A Wild Witch Chase”, published in volume 13 of “Scottish Studies” in 1969.

The story appears to begin in St Andrews in May 1569. The “Historie and Life of King James the Sext”, of which the relevant part was written before 1597, claims that in that place, month and year “a notable sorceres callit Nic Neville, was damnit to the death and brynt”. In a later manuscript of the work, printed in Edinburgh in 1804, the name is given as Nicniven. Curiously, a seventeenth-century writer turned her into a man. Perhaps he was thinking of “Auld Nick”. And perhaps we should be wondering how “Auld Nick” got his name in the first place.

Nicneven makes her first appearance in literature hard on the heels of the St Andrews burning. Alexander Montgomerie (?1540–?1610) was a soldier-poet from Ayrshire. Maurice Lindsay says in his “History of Scottish Literature” that Montgomerie had some experience of the Highlands, earning himself the nickname “Eques Montanus”, the Highland Trooper, a point not lost on his flying adversary, Polwart. In one manuscript of the “Flying with Polwart”, written before 1595, Montgomerie describes how his adversary had been nursed as an infant by “Nicknivin with hir nymphis” and schooled by them in witchcraft “with chairmes from

Cathnes and Chanrie of Ross". When they have finished with the child, "Vnto the cocatrice in ane creill they send it."

A cockatrice is a monster with a cock's head, a serpent's body and a dragon's tail: in a word, the devil. But when printed from a different manuscript by Hart of Edinburgh in 1629, "the cocatrice" turns into "Kait of Creife", and "Kait of Creif" is also the reading in a second surviving manuscript.

Kate seems to have been quite a legend in that part of Perthshire, and her surname was MacNiven. An account published in 1881 has it that she was employed as a nursemaid by the Grahams of Inchbrakie in the parish of Crieff. One day Inchbrakie went to dine at Dunning, bringing his own knife and fork as was customary. At dinner he was annoyed by a bee buzzing around his head, and put down his knife and fork to shoo it away. When he went to pick them up again they had disappeared.

When he got home, Kate found the implements in their usual place. She was accused of having turned herself into the bee and stolen them. She was tried and condemned to be burnt, the minister of Monzie and his friends playing a leading role in the prosecution. In return she prophesied that as long as the Shaggie Burn ran west, there would be no lineal descendant to the house of Monzie, nor would the minister of that parish ever prosper. The only person who spoke on her behalf was Inchbrakie himself. In gratitude Kate spat a bead out of her mouth and declared that as long as it was preserved by the family, the house of Inchbrakie would never lack a direct heir. All these prophecies came true.

A history of Crieff, published in 1912, informs us that "Kate Nike Neiving" was burnt on what was still called "Kate Macnevin's Craig" on the Knock of Crieff. According to this version, Kate was dismissed from her post at Inchbrakie on suspicion of trying to poison the laird's son. She returned to her native Monzie, but fell under further suspicion and was dragged before the Presbytery of Auchterarder, who condemned her to death. When the sentence was about to be carried out, the young laird of Inchbrakie attempted to rescue her. She spat a blue bead to him from a necklace she wore, saying that as long as it was kept in the house of Inchbrakie, the estate would never be alienated. But she cursed the laird of Monzie, on whose land she was executed.

The charm worked well. Described as a moonstone sapphire, it was set in a ring, which the ninth laird ceremonially placed on the finger of each of his daughters-in-law to ensure a supply of heirs. But in the 1870s the house was let, and the ring was brought in the family charter-chest to another house for safekeeping, thus breaking Kate's injunction; bit by bit the estate was sold, and in 1926 the eleventh laird died unmarried in Canada.

This Nicneven woman can be pinpointed historically. On 24 November 1643 a man called John Brughe of Fossoway in Kinross-shire was tried for witchcraft. The record of the trial alleges that he learned his charms from a "wedow woman namet Neane VcClerith of thrie scoir of yeirs of aidge quha was sister dochter to Nikneveing that notourous and infamous witche in Monzie quha for hir sorcerie and witchcraft was brunt four scoir of yeir since or thairby."

In other words, Nicneven was burnt about 1563; her sister married a man called McClerith (*Mac Cléirich*, "Clark") and bore him a daughter who practised as a witch and was known simply as *nighean Mhic Cléirich* ("Clark's daughter"), or, as we would say nowadays, Miss Clark.

Now, 1563 is very close to 1569, when, as we have seen, "Nic Neville" was burnt in St Andrews. Or was she? The relevant passage in the "Historie and Life of King James the Sext" tells us that the Regent Moray went to "Sanctandrois, whare a notable sorceres callit Nic Neville, was condemnit to the death and brynt, and a Frenchman callit Paris, wha was ane of the devysers of the Kings death, was hangit in Sanctandrois". Perthshire tradition is adamant that Nicneven was burnt in Crieff, and as Hanham points out, the repetition of "Sanctandrois" is odd. Could the Regent have attended Nicneven's execution elsewhere on the same journey?

So Kate Macneven becomes a representative figure, the mother of all witches, one who blows in the wind and shapes the landscape, the Lowland equivalent of the *cailleach*. Montgomerie placed her in Caithness and Chanonry (Fortrose). R. H. Cromek, writing in 1810, found her in Dumfriesshire. Donald A. Mackenzie called her "an interesting Gaelic survival in the Lothian and Border Counties". Thomas Davidson says that she was used to frighten children in Fife. And, with the spread of Protestantism, Alexander Carmichael found her in Arran.

The conclusion which I would draw from Alison Hanham's evidence is this. Thanks to the presence of the Regent Moray at her strangling and burning, Catrìona Nic Naoimhein became an important symbol of everything that terrified Lowlanders about Highlanders. Her home was on the Highland Line, bang in the middle of Scotland. She lived on this linguistic boundary at a time when fifty per cent of Scotland was Gaelic-speaking. The Reformation took place in 1560 and she was burned nine years later. There was a great deal of fear. Half of Scotland, the Gaelic half, was still Catholic. The country was evenly split. Whose side would God take?

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