

The “finding” and Father Allan

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

TWELVE years ago on this page I devoted two articles to the *frìth* or “finding”, and the time has come to revisit the subject. The *frìth* was a way of finding a lost person or animal by means of shamanic trance. The last practitioner of the art was Penelope Morrison, who died in South Uist in 1990.

I never met Penelope Morrison, as far as I know, and in the second of those two articles I cited the sources which I had drawn upon to piece together my presentation. These were the fifth volume of Carmichael’s “Carmina Gadelica”, William Mackenzie’s paper on incantations, charms and blessings in the Inverness Gaelic Society’s transactions of 1891–92, W M Mackenzie’s second volume of “The Book of Arran”, and Dr John MacInnes’s paper in Hilda Davidson’s book “The Seer in Celtic and Other Traditions”.

William Mackenzie was the first secretary of the Crofters’ Commission, and he took advantage of his peripatetic duties to indulge his hobby of collecting folklore and songs. He tells us that he got most of his information on the *frìth* from Fr Allan McDonald, then of Daliburgh, later of Eriskay.

Now Fr Allan has had a very raw deal. He was one of the leading folklorists of his time, and amassed an important collection, but hardly any of it was published under his own name. In particular, his notebooks were used and misused by Ada Goodrich Freer, an attractive Englishwoman who had had a rather disreputable career in the Society for Psychical Research in London, but took advantage of Fr Allan’s kindness to the extent that she was able to publish several articles and a book (“Outer Isles”) about Gaelic folklore despite not having a word of the language.

All this is well known, having been carefully documented by the late John Lorne Campbell in his book “Strange Things”. Most of Fr Allan’s folklore notebooks survive, and it’s important that their contents be published. What Freer put into “Outer Isles” was just the tip of the iceberg, with hardly any of the original Gaelic, and mistakes and misunderstandings scattered around. Campbell’s edition of the work, based mainly on photocopies of four large notebooks in Glasgow and Edinburgh, lies in Canna House in typescript, fully indexed.

A few years ago I was asked by a former student of mine who was now editing “Am Pàipear”, the monthly Uist community newspaper based in Balivanich, if I could help her ensure a flow of Gaelic articles. I’ve been doing that ever since. One of my ideas was to put Fr Allan’s folklore notes into print in monthly instalments. An Edinburgh friend, Mrs Flora Komori, agreed to do the transcribing, and the work has been going on merrily now for three years. Curiously, the start of the enterprise coincided with an e-mail from the parish priest of Daliburgh to the Catholic Chaplain of Edinburgh University, enquiring about the documents. The enquiry was passed straight to me. Our aim was exactly the same – to find a way of returning the contents of the notebooks to the people of South Uist and Eriskay, to whom they rightly belong, since it was their forebears who gave them to Fr Allan.

So the May issue of “Am Pàipear” contains Fr Allan’s notes on the *frìth*, used by Mackenzie and Freer, but never previously published as they stand. Transcribed word for word, they’re not easy to follow, especially if you don’t read Gaelic. So here they are with explanations added. Fr Allan begins: “Frìth, dian frìth taking a horoscope. The practice is not at all extinct in Uist, & is often had recourse to when the fate of friends at a distance is unknown. Several instances are given where the coincidence between the horoscope & the actual facts seems striking. These coincidences may be philosophically explained in the words of a native when questioned as to how stupid silly people could fore-tell the future. An duine ’bhitheas daonnan ris na briagan, innsidh e ’n fhìrinn uair-eiginn.”

Dian frìth means “make a finding”, or, as Fr Allan, would have it, “make a horoscope”. He always writes *dian* for *dèan*. The proverb at the end means: “The person who is always telling lies will tell the truth some day.”

This brings us straight away to the shamanic, in-between nature of the *frìth*. “Stupid silly people” are, or were, reckoned to be “with God” (*le Dia*) in a way not open to the rest of us. They were therefore thought capable of access to the supernatural. Fr Allan goes on: “Of such uncanny people, & especially of those of them who are vindictive & imprecate special

curses, it is said ‘Gheibh baobh a guidhe ged nach fhaigh a h-anam tròcair’ ‘She will get her curse, but her soul will not get mercy.’”

Fr Allan actually wrote “who are vindictive & curse”, but changed his mind and altered it to “who are vindictive & imprecate special curses”. He’s talking about the particular type of ignorant person to whom I devoted my last four articles – the witch – but fails to translate the word he uses for her, *baobh*, saying simply “she” instead. John Gregorson Campbell defined *baobh* as “a wild furious woman, a wicked mischievous female who scolds and storms and curses, caring neither what she says nor what she does, praying the houses may be razed (*làrach lom*) and the property destroyed (*sgrios an codach*) of those who have offended her”.

Fr Allan goes on: “The following notes were taken down during a conversation with an old woman Campbell well informed in such matters.” At this point the word “Frith” appears in the margin in the hand of Ada Goodrich Freer, who borrowed the notebook for some time. William Mackenzie makes it clear that the Campbell woman lived in Smercleit. No doubt she can be identified exactly.

Fr Allan now defines the term. “The horoscope or frith is a looking forth towards the sea or over the country to see signs or omens of good or evil luck to men or women or cattle who are at home in ill health or also in good health, or to men or women who are away of whose fate little or nothing is known. A *frith* may be also made looking forth on the sea, but it is not so easy ‘a thaobh’s ’s gu bheil seòl-sithe fopa ’sa mhuir.’”

This means “because they are propelled by fairy motion on the sea”. *Seòl-sithe*, usually *siubhal sìthe*, is a gliding motion, the way the fairies were supposed to move. The Rev. James MacDougall once defined it like this as applied to a giant in a story: “With great speed, but without any perceptible effort. He moves his hands and feet so rapidly that they become invisible, and that he seems to glide through the air without touching the ground.”

Fr Allan now describes a “finding” in numbered steps. First: “The mode of making the ‘frith’ is first in the morning you say a prayer ‘an ainm Mhoire air sealbhadh na frithe.’ This is the Hail Mary. The ‘frith’ is considered holy as it is said to have been practised by Our Lady & St Joseph when looking for the Holy Child when he was lost for 3 days.”

An ainm Mhoire air sealbhadh na frithe means “in Mary’s name for the success (or luck) of the *frith*.” The story about Christ being lost is universal in “finding” traditions.

Second: “The person next proceeds with closed eyes till he reaches the ‘maide buinn’ or doorstep. He opens his eyes then, & if he sees ‘Crois Chrìosta’ were it only made of 2 straws crossing each other, it is a sign that all will end well.”

Crois Chrìosta is the Cross of Christ. The doorstep is important to the *frith* as an in-between place, neither inside nor outside the house.

Third: “Going out he proceeds ‘deiseal’ or sunwards round the house.” Judging from other accounts, this ritual was performed when the fire was not in the middle of the floor. When the fire was in the middle of the floor the *fritheir* walked around it three times “sunwards” (clockwise) and ended up making the *frith* in the doorway.

Fourth: “While proceeding round the house he recites the following formula

Dia romham,
Moire am dheaghaidh
'S am Mac a rug Rìgh nan dùl
'S a chàirich Bhrìde 'na glaic.
Mis' air do shlios a Dhia
Is Dia na'm luirg.
Mac Moire a's Rìgh nan dùl
A shoillseachadh gach ni dhe seo
Le ghràs mu'm choinneamh.”

This means: “God be before me, / Mary after me / And the Son born to the King of the elements / And whom St Brigid cradled in her bosom. / I at your side, O God, / With God in my footsteps. / May the Son of Mary and the King of the elements / Clarify everything about this / With His grace in front of me.” This is a variant of a charm common to all *frith* traditions. The presence of St Brigid in the Holy Family as midwife and nurse is a standard part of Gaelic belief.

Although Fr Allan doesn't say so, by now the *frìtheir* is in shamanic trance, steadily intoning this and other charms as she takes in the scene. He describes the fifth step simply enough: "Then the objects before one are looked at and give the information sought for though not such is desired always."

Actually he began the concluding phrase "if", then crossed it out and wrote "though" instead.

I'm going to leave our "finder" in her trance for a couple of weeks. The rest of Fr Allan's account is devoted to "reading the signs", and this complex science deserves an article to itself. I'll finish here by telling you about another useful account of the "finding" which was not in print in 1993. It's in John Gregorson Campbell's "The Gaelic Otherworld", edited by yours truly for Birlinn and now out, price £16.99.

Campbell's survey of the *frìth* is culled mainly from Argyll tradition in the years 1850–74 and is mixed up with comments on what he calls the *deuchainn* – a much simpler "cast" or "trial" aimed at foretelling the future, usually made as part of the fun at Hallowe'en or Hogmanay. It seems to me that when it's performed in daylight and involves interpretation of the appearance and movements of people and animals, it's a *frìth*; otherwise it's only a *deuchainn*. The closest Campbell comes to the *frìth*, I think, is when he describes how one may "shut the eyes, make one's way to the end of the house, and then (and not till then) open the eyes and look around. Whatever is then seen is an indication of fortune during the year."

He also describes a man making a "cast" to find out what sort of woman he will marry. "The approved plan is for him to go at night to the top of a cairn or other eminence where no four-footed beast can go, and whatever animal is thence seen or met on the way home is an omen of the future husband or wife. It requires great shrewdness to read the omen aright."

This is a *deuchainn* employing the structure of symbols provided by the *frìth*. But note that, once again, a form of inbetweenness is involved, a symbolic (or shamanic) passing into the otherworld where time does not exist and where knowledge of the future can therefore be obtained. Campbell provides one other good example. Some seers who made "trials" for reward, he says, made the person who consulted them burn straw in front of a sieve and then look through to see "what they should see". From the objects seen the seer foretold what was to befall.

This is fairground stuff, in which the signs are provided by the customer, then interpreted by the "expert".

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