

## The signs and Father Allan

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“A MAN coming towards you: Excellent sign. Cock looking toward you: Excellent sign.”

These are the first two “signs” recorded by Fr Allan McDonald (1859–1905) from South Uist tradition in the notebook now known as Carmichael–Watson 58A in Edinburgh University Library. They’re of the same kind as certain survivals well known elsewhere in the British Isles: “Black cat crossing your path: excellent sign.”

When we get to cats we’ll see that there’s enough to suggest that the Gaelic tradition of signs was distinct from the English one. Such signs had two possible purposes and three possible functions. One purpose was to find what was lost, the other was to foretell the future. One function was the *frìth* or “finding”, where the seer “reads” the signs that can be viewed from the door or the end of the house first thing in the morning. The second was in games played by young people at Hallowe’en or New Year, the purpose usually being to foretell whom they were going to marry. And the third was the interpretation of dreams.

Fr Allan now goes into a sequence of signs which might reveal the horoscope of whoever has paid for the service, or the fate that has befallen a missing person or animal. “A man standing: Sign of sick man recovering & casting off illness. A man lying down: Sickness. Continued illness. A beast lying down: Sickness. Continued illness. A beast rising up: Sign of man recovering & casting off illness. A beast lying down: death.”

You’ll notice that “a beast lying down” occurs twice here, once denoting sickness and once death. It’s difficult to comment on this without knowing what Gaelic lay behind the two phrases. Perhaps it was *beothach a’ laighe* “a beast in the act of lying down” the first time and *beothach ’na shìneadh* “a beast stretched out” the second time. It’s quite normal to translate both as “a beast lying down”, but this is ambiguous.

Fr Allan appears to have been noting the signs from a woman called Campbell in Smercleit. He tells us that at this point she said: “Dh’fhaodadh a chosguis a tharruinn thun a bhàis. Chunnaic mi tachairt roimh e.” She seems to have meant: “The cost of it could drag him towards death. I’ve seen it happening before.”

I think the point she was making was that the animal in question would belong to the person for whom the “horoscope” was being made. Most healthy animals would be on their feet grazing first thing in the morning. If they lay down it was a sign that they were weak and undernourished. The expense of dealing with this, whether by purchase of fodder, veterinary treatment or buying in more stock, could be ruinous and might lead to the owner’s death.

Fr Allan, or rather his informant, now turns to the passage of birds – and women. “Bird on the wing coming to you: Sign of a letter coming. Bird on the wing: Good sign. Woman seen passing or returning: Not so bad. Woman seen standing: Bad sign.”

It’s intriguing that, even in the view of a female “finder”, women were considered to be luckiest, or less unlucky, when on the move. And there’s more on this. After “Bad sign” Fr Allan wrote, in brackets, “Am bàs neo mì-chomhail rosadach air choireiginn.” Then he added: “’S bu chòir do dhuine e fhein a choisrigheadh nam faiceadh boirionnach an àm a bhith dianamh na frìth.”

In other words, “Bad sign” was defined as meaning “Death or an unfortunate chance meeting of some kind” and we’re told that therefore “a person should bless himself with the sign of the cross if a woman were seen during the making of the *frìth*”.

A couple of words here are of great traditional importance. *Comhail* or *còmhdhail*, from *comh* “mutual” and *dàil* “a meeting or delay”, is an accidental coming together, an “encounter” or “congress” of people. *Mì-chòmhdhail* is a bad encounter. Curiously, in Gaelic medium education today *còmhdhail* is known only in the meaning “transport”, for which *iomchar* would be a better word. A *còmhdhalaiche* or *còmhalaiche* is a person met by accident. *Rosad* is bad luck, so *rosadach* is “unlucky”, and a *mì-chòmhdhail rosadach* is an unlucky bad encounter. The opposite is *rath* or *sealbh* “good luck”, *rathail* or *sealbhach* “lucky”.

This can be described as the vocabulary of luck, which religion has wiped almost completely off the Gaelic map, even in Catholic areas, leaving English to fill the void – *bha e gu math lucky*. In philosophical terms I suppose the change happened because signs or encounters came to be regarded as indicating not good or bad but simply God’s will. In

practical terms I suspect it happened because none of these words were used anywhere by the translators of the Bible, so they came to be regarded as vulgar.

Certainly I can't find them in scripture. In 1 Samuel 21 where the King James Bible has "Ahimelech was afraid at the meeting of David" the Gaelic Bible has not "bha eagal air Ahimelech roimh chòmhdhail ri Daibhidh" or "bha eagal air Ahimelech roimh Dhaibhidh mar chòmhalaiche" but "bha eagal air Ahimelech ag coinneachadh Dhaibhidh". Over and over again "chance" is translated not as *rath* or *rosad* but *tuiteamas*. This is simply "how things befell", a neutral word.

Fr Allan now returns to bird-lore. "Fowls without cock in their midst: Not a good sign. Stonechat: Rosadach." Against "Rosadach" the Englishwoman Ada Goodrich Freer, who borrowed the notebook from Fr Allan and made great use of it in her own publications, wrote "untoward".

I think this proves that she had bought herself a Gaelic dictionary. MacAlpine's, which went through many reprints during the nineteenth century, gives a one-word definition of *rosadach*: "untoward". The more expensive dictionaries of the time have more to say: MacLeod and Dewar's, for example, defines the word as "mischievous, hurtful; unfortunate, untoward".

At this point Fr Allan's informant quoted at him a well-known saying, or, as he calls it, a "proverb of ill luck".

*Chunnaic mi 'n t-seilcheag 'an talamh toll,  
Chunnaic mi 'n clacharan air lic luim,  
Chunnaic mi searrach 's a chùl rium  
Ch— a chuthag orm  
Dh-aithnich mi nach reachadh a bhliadhna leam  
Chaill mi bean-an-taighe 's a chlann.*

I'd translate it like this: "I saw the snail in ground full of holes, / I saw the stonechat on a bare slab, / I saw a foal with its back to me, / The cuckoo sh— on me. / I realised the year would not go well with me. / I lost the woman of the house and the children."

Fr Allan goes on: "Uiseag: good. Dove: good. Crow & Raven: bad & death. Glaisean: Not lucky but blessed. (It is a sign of the death of a child. Two or three come every day to the door for a fortnight before a child's death often.)"

The *uiseag* is the lark and the *glaisean*, meaning "green bird" I think, will be the chaffinch. The distinction "not lucky but blessed" is interesting. It seems to reveal the interface between the pagan traditions of magic and soothsaying and the Christian traditions of predestination and consolation. The *glaisean* is certainly "not lucky" in so far as it brings or foretells the death of a child, but it is "blessed" in so far as it is a messenger from heaven.

The next thing Fr Allan wrote is mainly in Gaelic so I will put it in italics. *A bird she described as "Iain blàr beag is coileir geal mu mhiadachd curraçaige 's e anabarrach bòidheach."* *Goirid romh 'n bhàs thig e faisg air an doras agus gairmidh e dha no tri uairean mu cheann an taighe. 'Sann aig comh-thràth na h-oidhche a thig e, 's cha 'n fhac mi e 'tighinn riamh nach robh am bàs 'na dheaghaidh". She could not tell the name. She thought it might be the "liantarag".*

The first thing to say about this is that *Iain* is not a man's name but *eun*, "a bird", which Fr Allan usually spells *ian* in line with pronunciation. The second thing is that if you look up *liantarag* in John Lorne Campbell's book "Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay", the definition is taken from here: *ian blàr beag* . . . "a small bird with a white spot and a white collar, about the size of a plover, and extremely pretty".

I think it must be a bird which frequents shallow ponds and lochs and feeds upon the green pond-weed known as *liantarach*. This would give it an otherworldly reputation, since such places are always associated with the fairies. The Campbell woman tells Fr Allan: "Shortly before a death it comes near the door and calls two or three times around the end of the house. It comes at twilight, and I have never seen it coming without a death to follow."

Fr Allan here wrote "tàmhasg called" then scored it out. A *tàmhasg* is a spectre. Presumably he was thinking of the bird. He then concluded his bird-signs: "Lacha Wild duck: good. Tunnagan Ducks: good (for sailors especially it means safety from drowning.

She here introduced a story of the ducks covering our Lord with straws when the hens were exposing his place of concealing by dragging away the straw.”

Beside *Lacha* Ada Goodrich Freer wrote “widgeon”. This is the spelling in MacAlpine’s dictionary. *Lachainn* are indeed wild duck or wigeon and *tunnagan* are tame ducks. The story of how the ducks saved Christ is a popular one which I’ve told on this page before. It may very well be what led to ducks being regarded as a good sign, which goes to show that, like everything else in Gaelic tradition, the signs included Christian elements mixed up with pagan ones.

Fr Allan now deals with dogs, cats, pigs, calves and lambs. “Cu – good luck. Cat – rosadach, being the form so often taken by witches. Good for McKintoshs only. Muc – good for Campbells, indifferent for others when facing them, bad with its back to you. Calf & lamb – lucky with face to you, good with side.”

This brings us to totemism. It’s a big subject, with many local variations. Briefly, each tribe had its totem animal – the cat for Mackintoshes, the pig for Campbells, and so on. If a young woman dreamed of a cat, she would marry a Mackintosh. There’s a great deal of cat lore in Gaelic. I’ll save it for another time.

Next, horses. Fr Allan writes: “Each or horse: lucky, means land & a gentleman. Each donn: is the best. Each Ruadh: bad sign, death.”

With “land & a gentleman” we seem to be dealing with marriage again. *Each donn* is a brown horse, *each ruadh* a roan (*ruadh*, reddish-coloured). The Campbell woman now gives Fr Allan a rhyme:

*Each donn, fearann,*  
*Each glas, fairge;*  
*Each ruadh, reilig,*  
*Each dubh, mulad.*

(“Brown horse, land, / Grey horse, sea; / Red horse, graveyard, / Black horse, sorrow.”) This is known from other sources, but it’s followed by a note containing a unique variant: “Each glas reachd na fairge & Each buidhe riochd Chlann Choinnich she thought.” This rhymes too, so we should lay it out like this:

*Each glas,*  
*Reachd na fairge;*  
*Each buidhe,*  
*Riochd Chlann Choinnich.*

(“A grey horse, / The law of the sea; / A yellow horse, / MacKenzies’ appearance.”) Totemism again. And for once the MacKenzies are not represented by the deer!

These colours bring us to the last of the signs. “A woman with red red hair,” says Fr Allan, is “not *sealbhach* (not lucky)”. When her hair is *bàn bàn* (“very blonde”) she is, again, “not *sealbhach*”. Black hair is “lucky”, however, and hair which is *donn* (brown) is “luckiest”. Fr Allan concludes wistfully: “She said that there was a rhyme on the colour of women’s hair showing the character of each, but she wouldn’t tell me what it was. Perhaps it was indelicate.”

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