

Dream signs

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

If you know your clan traditions, you'll know that MacAllisters and MacDonalds are one and the same. MacAllister was the surname adopted by *Clann Dòmhnail na Lùibe*, the Clan Donald of Loup in Kintyre, presumably to distinguish them from their neighbours the MacDonalds of Largie.

Which leads me to the following anecdote. In Arran, which is next door to Kintyre, the dream sign of MacAllisters and MacDonalds alike was the sheepdog. A young woman called MacAllister told her mother one morning that she had dreamed that when walking across a moor she was followed by a dog, and that in the end the dog jumped on her and swallowed her up. Her mother laughingly replied that it looked as if she would not change her name when she married, and so, the story goes, it happened: she married another MacAllister.

Similarly, the dream sign of the MacKelvies was the pigeon. Someone once dreamed that a flock of pigeons landed on a certain field and made themselves at home. It was decided that this meant that the bit of land in question would pass into the possession of the MacKelvies. MacKelvie is *MacShealbhaich*, from an ancestor called *Sealbhach* – “Lucky”!

They were keen on dream signs in Arran. In the second volume of “The Book of Arran”, the author, W M Mackenzie, provides a roll-call of Arran families, each with its sign. It goes like this: MacGregors bloodhounds (*coin dhubha*), Curries plovers, MacNicols cats, Hamiltons hares, MacLardys donkeys, Bannatynes mice, Robertsons rats, Stewarts lions (?), MacKinnons rabbits, Sillarses frogs, MacKenzies bees, Cooks pigs or bulls, Kerrs sheep, MacNeils the dun bull, MacMillans wood-pigeons, Fullartons geese, MacMasters pigs, and MacNeishes cats.

There are several things to say about these. One is that such traditions are very local. For example, MacKenzies may have been bees in Arran, but in the north they are deer (remember *cabar féidh*), while in the west, as we noticed last time, they are *eich bhuidhe*, “yellow horses”. Alexander Carmichael translates it “dun horses”, but is it possible that *each buidhe* could be a term for a bee? On the other hand, it would be strange if local tradition were not influenced here and there by something broader. If Stewarts are lions it must have something to do with their royal status; elsewhere pigs are Campbells, so if pigs in Arran are MacMasters, perhaps it indicates a connection between MacMasters and Campbells. Finally, it's surely no coincidence that in Arran MacGregors are bloodhounds, while the home of the MacGregor chiefs was at *Sròn Mìolchon* (“Greyhound Point”) in Glen Strae, and the MacGregor chief celebrated in the sixteenth-century song “Griogal Cridhe” was tracked down by bloodhounds.

It's also worth making the point that some of these symbols are not very complimentary. There must be a story behind the identification of the Arran Robertsons as rats. Whatever the story was, you wouldn't have been well advised to tell it in the tavern at night when a Robertson might overhear you. These signs are close to being nicknames, ready for use in a feuding situation. For example, the MacLeods' crest shows a bull's head, but in MacDonald songs the MacLeods were referred to as *Sìol na Làire*, “the Seed of the Mare”, and in a flyting between a MacLean poet from Coll in Argyll and a MacLeod poet from Skye, the Collman said:

*Is tric a mharcaich mi le m' shréin
An dream dh'am bheil thu fhéin 's do bhean.*

(“Often rode I with my bridle / The race you and your wife belong to.”) It's clearly very insulting. There's nothing wrong with being descended from a horse, provided it's clearly understood that the horse is a stallion symbolising courage and heroism, like the “Italian Stallion” of the movies. But if somebody says you're descended from a mare, this implies the illegitimacy which always attaches to descent from a named female.

It might be thought that the association of the Campbells with pigs was insulting in the same way. Curiously, it wasn't. I think the reason is that the story behind it was so well known. Diarmad O Duibhne, from whom the Campbells claimed descent (in the Middle Ages their surname was Ó Duibhne, *Caimbeul* “Bent Mouth” being merely a nickname), famously hunted a great boar or *torc* which had a single bristle. Like Achilles, Diarmad had one weak spot, his heel. He slew the boar, and as it fell, the bristle penetrated his heel, and he died. It was a heroic death, so the Campbells never felt shame at being connected with pigs. Which goes to show that it's the story that counts and not the name that comes out of it.

In Jura the deer were connected with the Buies or *Clann 'ic Ille Bhuidhe*. To dream of a deer there was to dream of a Buie. There was a great tradition of longevity in Jura and it's said when Buie of Knockbreck reached old age he asked his sons to help him reach *sliabh Bheinn an Òir*, the hillside of Beinn an Òir, one of the Paps. When seated there he said:

*Is mise Mac Ille Bhuidhe nam fiadh
'S mi 'm shuidh' air sliabh Bheinn an Òir,
'S ged a tha mi aosmhor liath
Is comasach le Dia mo dheanamh òg.*

(“I am Buie of the deer / Sitting on the side of Beinn an Òir, / And although I'm old and grey / God has the power to make me young.”) The deer were thought of as fairy cattle, belonging to the otherworld and therefore not subject to death like other animals.

Speaking of death, the screech of an owl was said to portend the death of the chief of the MacNabs. I take it that this suggests a totemic relationship between owls and MacNabs, but I can't be sure. Another puzzle has to do with the MacQuarries. In John Gregorson Campbell's book “Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands”

we're told that "in some districts horses meant the Macgnanean". What on earth is "Macgnanean"? A misprint for MacQuarries? Or could it perhaps be the MacEachrans or MacKechnies? After all, their name has "horse" in it – *MacEacharna*, from *Eichthighearna* "Horse Lord". And isn't it curious that they come from the area of the Mull of Kintyre which, two thousand years ago, Ptolemy of Alexandria denoted with the Greek words *Epidion Akron* – "Horse Point"? These things are very deep.

Campbell tells us about some signs which weren't animals. To dream of raw meat indicates impending trouble, he says. Dreaming of eggs means gossip and scandal, dreaming of herring means snow, dreaming of meal means earth, dreaming of a grey horse means the sea, dreaming of a white horse means a letter.

Some of these signs are clearer than others. I suppose eggs are a convenient symbol for sex. Why dreaming of herring should mean snow I have no idea. And when Campbell says that dreaming of meal means earth, I think this must be taken in the context of marriage prospects – he's surely trying to say that the girl who dreams of meal can expect to marry a farmer or some other person who owns land, just as the girl who dreams of a grey horse will marry a sailor. He adds: "To dream of women is unlucky; and of the dead, that they are not at rest." It's possible to imagine why it may be unlucky for men to dream of women, but it would be interesting to know whether it's also unlucky for women to dream of women.

Of course, as I showed last time, the signs aren't all about dreaming. They could be used just as well when awake, provided you performed some ritual to produce a trance-like state of inbetweenness. Campbell talks of shutting the eyes, making one's way to the end of the house, and opening the eyes to look around. "Whatever is then seen is an indication of fortune during the year. It is unlucky to see a woman, particularly an old woman bent with age and hobbling past. A man is lucky, particularly a young man riding gaily on a mettlesome horse. A man delving or turning up the earth forebodes death: he is making your grave, and you may as well prepare. A duck or a hen with its head below its wing is just as bad, and the more that are seen in that attitude the speedier or more certain the death.

"A man who had the second sight once made a 'trial' for a sick person at the request of an anxious friend. He went out next morning to the end of the house in the approved manner. He saw six ducks with their heads under their wings, and the sick man was dead in less than two days . . .

"When a trial was made to ascertain whether an absent friend would return, if on going out to the end of the house a man is seen coming, or a duck running towards the seer, his safe arrival will soon be; but if the object be moving away, the indication is unfavourable. By this trial it may also be known whether the absent one will return empty-handed or not."

Finally, Campbell provides us with an interesting sign and the charm that goes with it. If a young woman is interested in a particular young man, she should look between her fingers at him and say the following. If he raises his right arm it means that he loves her.

*Tha deuchainn agam dhuit,
Tha sealltainn agam ort
Eadar còig aisnean cléibh Chrìost;
Ma tha 'n dân no 'n ceadachadh dhuit
Feum dheanadh dhiom,
Tog do làmh dheas a-suas
'S na luaith i nìos.*

Campbell translates: "I have a trial upon you, / I have a looking at you / Between the five ribs of Christ's body; / If it be fated or permitted you / To make use of me, / Lift your right hand / And let it not quickly down."

I've discussed this, and many other such charms, in my new book "The Gaelic Otherworld" (Birlinn, £16.99). As I've said there, I think there's something wrong in the last line, and that it should be *'S na lugh i nìos* – "And don't flex it upwards", referring to the arm as a whole rather than merely the hand. The straighter the arm, the better the sign?

27 May 2005