

## Seven years and a snooze

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST TIME I mentioned one of the stories about Dick Whittington and his cat – how he gave it to a sea-captain, who sold it for an enormous sum to the king of a part of Africa which was overrun with vermin. In one version this was Morocco. The implication is that in those days there were no cats in Africa, or in that part of Africa. This would have been about the year 1390.

Similarly, according to a tale told by Mrs John Morrison, Kilpheder, to Fr Allan McDonald in 1888, there were neither rats nor cats in Palestine in the time of Christ. This is how Fr Allan noted it down: “As our Blessed Lord went through Palestine doing good to all that stood in need, healing the sick and relieving the poor, there was an artful woman who pretended to him that she possessed nothing in the world.

“Yet at this very time she had a sow with a litter. The litter she carefully concealed under an upturned tub, while she went to plead her poverty to Our Divine Master. He paid no ear to her false tale, and after much unnecessary importunity she was obliged to desist, and her first care was to go and find the litter.

“As she raised up the tub what was her horror to behold the whole litter changed into nasty gnawing vicious beasts of a nature unknown to her. They rushed forth immediately and began their depredations, and would have destroyed the produce of the world, were it not that Our Lord created the cat to check their ravages.”

Rats were a late arrival in these islands. The late Hector MacDougall once pointed out (in a paper about animals in Gaelic tradition, published in volume 35 of the “Transactions” of the Gaelic Society of Inverness) that, judging from the old Gaelic laws, there were plenty of cats and mice in Ireland (and presumably therefore also in Scotland), but no rats at all. While still blind, a kitten was worth a penny; once sighted and able to catch a mouse, twopence; when able to bring home plunder, fourpence – the worth of a good calf. Should a person steal a cat which protecting grain in the barn from the depredations of mice, he must pay as recompense an unshorn lactating ewe.

Cats are great hunters, of course. Probably it’s their preference for hunting at night that gave them their reputation for being associated with witches and the devil. People used to believe that cats could actually see better in the night than in the day. The truth is that although cats’ eyes are well suited to seeing in the dark, if there’s no gleam of light at all the cat can’t see any better than any other creature.

It also used to be said – I take this from MacDougall – that a fast-moving cat sees the ground beneath it as a yawning chasm, and that this explains why a cat leaps when it runs. It’s jumping over the holes which it sees underneath it. In fact John Gregorson Campbell says that if it weren’t for the fear of being swallowed up by the ground, cats would run much faster than they do. This resembles the belief about the horse that it sees human beings far bigger than they really are, which explains why it shies away when they come close to its head.

Judging from a story told by MacDougall about fairy cats (*cait shìthe*), seeing things bigger than they really are is a problem that humans have too. In the Argyllshire island of Coll, a man called Iain Theàrlach Nèill Mhóir claimed to have seen four *cait shìthe* at Creag an Fhiarain. Every escape-route (*bealach*) he turned to, they were there before him. Finally, when he realised he had no alternative but to go forward, *chuir iad mùllaichean a bha aibhseach orra féin* – they put on enormous bristles. As he passed them, they whistled from their noses (*chuir iad fead as an srònan*), snarling threateningly (*le grùsdail mhaoidhteach orra*). Their tails were as thick as *dòirneag raimh*, an oar handle!

You won’t find *mùllaichean* in Dwelly, because it’s just MacDougall’s spelling of *mùrlaichean*. The adjective *mùrlach* means bristling and the noun *mùrlach* or “bristling one”, as Dwelly says, is a kingfisher, a woman with an ugly head of hair, or a dogfish. If you’re *mùrlach* you’re having a bad hair day. According to Campbell, *cait shìthe* are said “to be as large as dogs, of a black colour, with a white spot on the breast, and to have arched backs and erect bristles (*crotach agus mùrlach*).”

Another thing MacDougall tells us about is the *crudha-cait*. Dwelly spells it *crubha-cait*. The word is basically *crubh*, a hoof or claw. In cold weather, MacDougall says, children – and adults too – often get a *pliutadh*. A *pliutadh* is Raynaud’s disease: a tightening of the arteries to the hands in cold weather. The symptoms are identified by our family’s well-thumbed copy of “A Dictionary of Symptoms” as: “When cold, fingers become white and clumsy in handling for instance, change, or a door key. Then they turn a dusky red and swell, so that they feel like a bunch of bananas.”

MacDougall explains that a person has the *pliutadh* when he is unable to write, tie a knot – or make a *crudha-cait*. A *crudha-cait* is simply the tips (*barran*) of the five fingers brought together like the five claws (*dubhain*) of the cat. *Crudha*, or rather *crubh*, also comes into this rhyme about the *faoilleach* or “wolf-month” of late winter:

*Faoilleach, faoilleach, crubh an crios,  
Faoilte mhór bu chòir bhith ris.*

Campbell translates it: “Wild month, wild month, hoof in belt, / Much rejoicing should be held.” I’ve been puzzling over this for a long time. Years ago I found out that putting the *crubh* into the belt was a symbolic act of submission to an enemy. This means the *crubha-cait*, of course, the fingertips together. But I’m only now realising just how misleading Campbell’s word “hoof” is here. The whole *point* of the symbol is the cat’s ferocity. As MacDougall says: *Bha an cat air a chomharrachadh daonnan mar eiseamplair no mar shamhuil air cruas is diorras an cath. Cha chuir e imcheist sam bith air a’ chat, gu sònraichte cat boireann aig am bi piseagan, dol an caraibh coin cho mór ’s gum bi e.* “The cat was always distinguished as an example or

symbol of toughness and tenacity in battle. It doesn't bother the cat at all, especially a female cat that has kittens, to tackle a dog no matter how big it may be."

This toughness and tenacity is the main reason why the cat was adopted in prehistoric times as the symbol or totem of certain kindreds, of whom the Sutherlands and Mackintoshes are the best surviving examples. But the cat has other good qualities too. He is a weather forecaster, and he can be very, very clever.

The cat's weather-forecasting was seen as a manifestation of the supernatural – a knowledge of things to come. If he sits close to the embers, facing away from the fire, rain and bad weather are on their way. If he sits facing the fire but a bit away from it, the weather will be good. If he puts his paw behind his ear when washing his face, the next day will be fine. If he doesn't put his paw so far over (*mur cuir e cho fada sin an nunn a spòg*, says MacDougall), there may be some rain.

So the cat "writes" the weather forecast with his paw, which will be why the proverb says: *Tha sin sgrìobht' am bathais a' chait*. "That's written in the cat's forehead." Or alternatively: *Chithear sin ann an aodann a' chait*. "That can be seen in the cat's face." Although it sounds to me like a way of avoiding the question: "How do you know? How can you be so sure?"

There's more. If the cat jumped into a creel or basket, it wouldn't be long before it would contain fish. This links up with another saying, *Miann a' chait anns an tràigh, ged nach toir e fhéin aist' e*. "The cat's desire is in the ebb, even if he doesn't take it out himself." What Campbell calls "strong and undue wishes" are operating, I suppose. The cat goes into the basket to dream about fish, the cat is in touch with the supernatural, so the fish arrive in the basket. The other point being made of course is that cats don't like getting wet. There was an English saying: "The cat would eat fish, and would not wet her feet." Which is why Lady Macbeth talks of: "Letting *I dare not* wait upon *I would*, like the poor cat i' the adage."

MacDougall tells a good story about the cat's cleverness. His father was once a member of a boat's crew which spent so many months fishing away from home that they built themselves a bothy. They had a tabby-cat with them, who made herself a den (*fail*) somewhere outside, perhaps because a litter or two had previously been drowned on her. Clearly she gave birth to kittens there, because she was constantly in and out of the bothy when food was available. But the men never found out where they were.

Time went by, and it came to the last night that the crew were sleeping in the bothy. No preparation was made (*cha robh deanamh-deas sam bith ann*), but the men chatting (*a' bruidhinn thall 's a bhos*) about going home next day. As the cat was around, it was mentioned (*thugadh tarraing air*), the men asking each other what the cat would do now, or what on earth they should do with it in respect to the kittens, now that they were leaving.

The men went to bed as usual, and when they got up in the morning, they were amazed to see the cat with her three big kittens sitting there on the floor ready to leave with them! MacDougall concludes: *Cha b'urrainn dhoibh aobhar fhaotainn air a' chat a thoirt dhachaidh nam piseag mar so ach gu'n do thuig e an còmhradh a bha aca mu'n teine mu'n deach iad a laighe an oidhche roimhe sin*. "The only reason they could think of why the cat should have brought home the kittens like this was that she had understood the conversation they had had before going to bed the previous night."

They say cats have nine lives, and nine years is a good age for a cat, though they can live twice as long as that. This rhyme sums it all up:

*Seachd bliadhna aois a' chait,  
Sin gu h-éibhinn agus ait;  
Seach sin cadal 's turra-chadal.*

"Seven years is the age of the cat, / Cheerfully and happily at that; / When these are past it's sleep and snoozing."

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