

The cats of Skye

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I tried to show that a tale about two men roasting cats in Mull to summon the devil (*taghairm nan cat*) is really an encoded account of how Lachlann Catanach, chief of the MacLeans of Duart from 1496 to 1523, was thrown out of the estate of the MacLaines of Lochbuie. I only told the second half of the story, where it's explained what the two men, Lachlan Odhar and Ailean mac Eachainn, actually wanted.

This is how the first half goes, in John Gregorson Campbell's telling: "Lachlan Oär and a companion *Ailein mac Eachainn*, Allan the son of Hector (some say he had two companions), shut themselves up in the barn at Pennygown on the Sound of Mull, and putting cats on spits roasted them alive at a blazing fire.

"By-and-by other cats came in and joined in the horrible howling of those being roasted, till at last the beams (*sparrun an taighe*) were crowded with cats, and a concert of caterwauling filled the house. The infernal noise almost daunted Lachlan Oär, especially when the biggest of the cats said, 'When my brother the Ear of Melting comes — '"

The "Ear of Melting" is Campbell's translation of *Cluas an Leoghaidh*. It's more likely to mean the "Ear of Mangling" – "String Lug", as the late David Stephen expressed it in his classic children's novel "String Lug the Fox". The devil had been in a brawl or two! Alternatively, *Cluas an Leoghaidh* may be a garbled version of *Cluasan Leabhra*, the big cat's name in other versions of the story: "Long Ears" or "Floppy Ears".

Campbell continues: "Allan the son of Hector did not allow the sentence to be finished. 'Away, cat,' he cried, and then added to his companion, in an expression which has become proverbial in the Highlands when telling a person to attend to the work he has in hand, and never mind what discouragements or temptations may come in his way, *Dé sam bith a chì no chluinneas tu, cum an cat mun cuairt*. 'Whatever you see or hear, keep the cat turning.'

"Dun Lachlan, recovering courage, said, 'I will wait for him yet, and his son too.'

"At last the Ear of Melting came among the other cats on the beams, and said, while all the other cats kept silence, *Lachainn Uidhir 'ic Dhòmhnaiill 'ic Néill, is olc an càramh cait sin*. 'Dun Lachlan son of Donald son of Neil, that is bad treatment of a cat.'

"Allan to this called out as before, 'Whatever you see or hear, keep the cat turning.' And the fearful rite was proceeded with.

"At last the Ear of Melting sprang to the floor and said, *Ge b'e có air am mùin Cluas an Leoghaidh chan fhaic e gnùis na Trianaid*. 'Whomsoever the Ear of Melting makes water upon will not see the face of the Trinity.'"

An alternative translation would be: "No one String Lug pees on will ever see the face of the Trinity." Then this half of the story concludes: "*Crois a' chlaidhimh ad' cheann, a bhiast, 's tu mùn fallais!*" answered Dun Lachlan. 'The cross of the sword in your head, wretch, your water is sweat!' And he struck the cat on the head with the hilt of his two-handed sword. Immediately the devil, under the potent spell, assumed his proper shape and asked his wild summoners what they wanted with him."

So the cross-hilt of Lachlan's sword is the crucifix which conquers the devil. What's more, any liquid coming out of String Lug can only be sweat, thanks to the heat of the fire beneath him, which enables Lachlan to turn his insult back against him, and I'll re-translate: "The cross of the sword be on your head, you brute – you're the pee of sweat!"

In 1517, around the time that he was trying to achieve a stranglehold on Lochbuie, Lachlann Catanach received a magnificent reward from the Privy Council (the Scottish government) for all his plotting and bullying against his neighbours on their behalf. Their main anxiety was to curb MacDonald ambitions following the recent forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles. Lachlann Catanach had begun his chiefship as their placeman; then he had become a rebel; now he was back in the government's camp, but, as Nicholas Maclean-Bristol points out in "Warriors and Priests", his rediscovered loyalty came at a price. "His price was remission for the crimes he and his followers had committed in the recent uprising, permission to collect the King's rents south of Ardnamurchan Point, except from the lands belonging to Macian, and a heritable grant of land worth one hundred merks free of all duties in Tiree and Mull.

“The Council agreed to his conditions except concerning the land in Tiree and Mull, which he was to receive for the duration of the King’s minority only. Instead, among other grants, he received a gift of the four merklands of the Isle of Scalpay off Skye. It had belonged to Archibald Dubh, leader of the Macdonalds of Sleat, who had died without legitimate issue. This was a grant that not only marks the beginning of Maclean ambitions in the lordship of Skye, but underlines Maclean pre-eminence in the non-Macdonald camp in the Isles.”

So instead of consolidating his hold on Mull, the big cat unexpectedly gets Scalpay and Pabbay in Broadford Bay instead. I’ve had occasion to mention Pabbay on this page before. In 1549 Dean Monro described it as “a main shelter for thieves and cut-throats”. The late Otta F. Swire told in that marvellous book of hers, “Skye, the Island and its Legends”, how these Pabbay pirates performed a *taghairm* to get rid of their enemies. They made a great fire on the beach and roasted three cats alive with appropriate spells. Several minor demons appeared, she says, but the robber chief insisted that he would do business only with the devil in person. “At length Satan himself rose from the earth and asked their will. He was told to kill two men whom the chief feared. ‘The price of two lives is two souls,’ said the Devil.

“This worried the band and an argument began. Now, the chief had been in the habit of boasting that if only he and his men could get swords that would not melt, they would conquer Hell and capture the Devil himself. Satan reminded him of this and offered to kill all his enemies and then return, with subordinate devils, and fight the band for their souls, ‘here on the shore where swords do not melt’.

“This was agreed. Satan carried out his share of the bargain and returned. A fearful battle ensued, the Devil and his legions overcoming all the bandits who were armed with claymores or broadswords but failing to harm the chief, whose sword had a cross hilt. Suddenly a great black cat jumped from nowhere in particular on to his sword arm, causing him to drop his blade.”

Swire concludes: “He was never seen again. The blackened stones where the evil fire was lit and Satan stood may be seen on the beach near Ardnish in proof of the truth of this tale. But I have never seen them.”

Well, well. “Satan himself” who “rose from the earth” can be none other than Lachlann Catanach. Typically of the man, he does some dirty work for the pirates then comes back for his reward. They fight him, and the old sword-hilt trick nearly works again, but “a great black cat” jumps on the pirate chief’s sword-arm. This will be a Mackintosh from Lachlann’s Republican Guard, I suppose.

Strath, the area behind Broadford, had belonged to the MacKinnons of Mishnish in Mull since 1437, when they received it from the Lord of the Isles. Their capital city, if I can call it that, bears an interesting name – *Coire a’ Chatachain*, “the Corry of the Little Cat-Man”, now Corry for short. Who was the little cat-man? A loyal member of the Guard?

The Mackinnons were in Lachlann Catanach’s pocket. When he got his remission in 1517 it also listed his cronies Donald MacLean (his uncle), Gilleonan MacNeil of Barra, Dunslaff MacQuarrie of Ulva, Lachlan MacLean of Ardgour – and Neil MacKinnon of Mishnish. Part of Scalpay remained in Duart hands till at least 1609, but eventually a trade-off was made – the rest of Scalpay was passed to MacKinnon by Hector MacLean of Duart in exchange for some lands in Mull. This was remembered when Sir John MacLean died in 1715:

*Eadar Sgalpa ’s Caol Ìle,
Ged a b’ fharsaing na crìochan,
Bha roinn de gach tìr dhiubh
Fo chis dhuibh a’ pàigheadh.*

(“Between Scalpay and the Sound of Islay, / Though far-flung were the territories, / Part of each of those lands / Was paying you its taxes.”)

Another place in Skye where the *taghairm* is said to have been performed is the *Eaglais Bhréige* or “Make-Believe Church” on the shore at Tote. All the classic writers on Skye have mentioned it – Martin and Pennant as well as John Gregorson Campbell, Otta Swire and so on. Either the story is just a copy-cat (pardon the pun) of the Pabbay tale in a suitably weird location, or, yet again, it’s the codification of a small kindred’s act of defiance against a big one. That the rite was alleged to have been performed by a small kindred is certain. Martin

calls them “a wicked and mischievous race of people, who are now extinguished, both root and branch”. Pennant has them as MacQueens. So does Campbell. Swire calls them MacCoitirs, but says they’re also called MacQueen (MacCuithen). That will be because MacCoitir is just *mac a’ choiteir* “the cottar’s son”, “the peasant’s son”.

I have two theories. One is that “MacCoitir” was seen as connected not with cottars but with cats (*mac coitfhir*, “son of cat-man”), so attracting the *taghairm* story to the *Eaglais Bhréige* from Pabbay. Alternatively, the story codifies a real situation in which the big kindred is the MacLeods. Duncan Campbell’s “Collection of Gaelic Proverbs” includes: “*Cho measail air ’s a tha an Leòdach air a’ chat*. As fond of it as a MacLeod is of a cat, i.e., not at all fond of it. It is said that a cat once killed a man named MacLeod. Since then MacLeods are supposed to dislike cats.”

Too bad Campbell doesn’t tell us more. I suppose, since *na cait* was a nickname for Waternish folk (as William Mackenzie tells us in one of his books), that the incident he’s talking about is this one related by Otta Swire. Two hundred years ago a Dunvegan boy aged twelve was sent by his parents with a message to his grandmother in Waternish. On his way back he took refuge from a storm in an abandoned house and there, when half asleep, he saw three huge cats changing into three old women whom he knew. They threatened to kill him if he told what he had seen.

He was in such a state of shock when he got home that his mother persuaded him to tell her the reason. She went to look for the minister but he was away, so she confided in a neighbour. Soon the whole township knew. For a year nothing happened, but next summer the boy was sent once again on a message to Waternish. Again he was caught by a storm and took shelter in the ruin. His body was found next day. “He appeared to have been done to death by long, sharp claws.”

It’s a simple witchcraft story, probably dating only from the seventeenth century. Swire makes it later still. Could the proverb relate to something older? Do we have to accept the negative interpretation Campbell puts on it? Is it possible that the *taghairm* at Tote represents an act of defiance against the MacLeods? After all, the Dunvegan MacLeods held Trotternish as a whole at various times until finally driven out in a battle on the Snizort river in 1539, and I believe the Raasay MacLeods had a farm at Tote until 1846.

Personally I smell Mackintoshes again. Lachlann Catanach was the most powerful man in his day in the Isles. His greatest ally was Alastair Crotach of Dunvegan, who married his sister. Alastair Crotach was chief of the MacLeods from about 1480 to 1547. Did Lachlan send him some “cats” to help in the struggle for Trotternish? Were they about as popular in Skye as Saddam’s Republican Guard used to be in Iraq?

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