The Gaelic Whittington (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I'VE been reading a lot of traditional Gaelic tales lately, with new Gaelic novels in between. It's been a weird experience. The tales are full of second-sighted people, partially-sighted people, casual violence and arranged marriages. The new prose – things like "Na Klondykers", which Aonghas MacNeacail reviewed here a couple of weeks ago – contains none of the above, and is as good as anything ever written in Gaelic.

I say "written" advisedly, because like anything else collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, traditional tales as we have them tend to be gapped and illogical. When they were edited by J. F. Campbell of Islay or J. G. Mackay from Portree in the two main collections, "Popular Tales of the West Highlands" and "More West Highland Tales", different versions of the same story often had to be compared together to fill gaps and explain non-sequiturs. Mackay was especially good at this.

These were oral tales, meant to be heard, not read; many of the reciters (in 1859, mostly) were not as good as those from whom they had heard them; what's more, the process of noting by hand was full of pitfalls. By the time tape-recorders took over nearly a century later, the tales themselves were further degraded, so the end result was neither worse nor better. But genius still comes shining through.

I should explain what I mean by "second-sighted people" etc. Firstly, it's common in these stories for the hero to be told by some other person what's going to happen later, and how he must deal with it. The prediction is always correct. "Partially-sighted people": the hero is regularly not recognised by his own mother, father, brother, sister or lover when he returns from his wanderings. Casual violence: people are mutilated, disembowelled, flayed or decapitated without a pause for thought.

Don't worry though, most of these conditions are easily cured by a good doctor or herb. In one case, the healer can't find the herb he needs in a particular field, but he knows it's in there somewhere, so he has the patient dragged all over the field by the heels. That does the trick. As for decapitation, it seems to work for humans but not for giants. If you decapitate a giant you have to get between the head and the body and stay there for three days, otherwise they'll join up again and he'll be as right as rain.

Oh, and "arranged marriages": they knew all about love and sex, these storytellers. Arranged marriage, with dowry, was normal, but probably the best single way of understanding the dynamic of the tales is to examine what *actually* happens to women in them. Arranging a marriage is a mere human activity, and fate and magic have also to be contended with. Fate is what is seen, incompletely but in astonishing detail, by second-sighted people. And magic is cause and effect: for example, if a marriage contract is put in writing, or an oath is sworn, it can't be broken, even by a young couple in love. But it can be bent!

I'll attempt to re-tell such a story from two different versions and we'll see where it takes us. It will exemplify some of the things I've mentioned. I've picked the Dick Whittington story, because I mentioned it here a few weeks ago without realising that it existed in Gaelic. As "An Dà Sgiobair" (The Two Skippers) it appears in "More West Highland Tales" volume 1 (1940). And as "Mar a Chaidh Cait an Toiseach do'n Spàin" (How Cats First Went to Spain), it appears in "More West Highland Tales" volume 2 (1960). Both volumes have been reprinted by Birlinn.

"An Dà Sgiobair" was told, probably to Hector MacLean, by Alexander MacNeil, fisherman, Kentangaval, Barra, who had heard it from Alastair mac Ruairidh Bhàin. "Mar a Chaidh Cait" was told, probably to J. F. Campbell, by a man in London, apparently a MacRae. In telling the story I'll also make use of J. G. Mackay's notes, as he had the advantage of having read, or heard, several other versions as well.

Two wealthy merchants once contracted that the infant son of the one and the infant daughter of the other would marry when they came of age. MacNeil says the two men were skippers; MacRae makes them the Provost of Edinburgh and one of the bailies. At any rate, they were very friendly with each other. *Thug iad dachaigh pears' eaglais*, says MacNeil. *Bhaisteadh a' chlann agus phòsadh iad*. "They brought home a clergyman. The children were baptised and married."

Each had a copy of the marriage contract, but left the children in total ignorance of it – and their mothers too, says MacRae. Of course there was money involved. MacRae: *Bha tochradh nighean a' Phrobhaiste a réir beairteis a h-athar, is thug am Bàillidh an aire nach biodh esan an déidh làimh ann a bhith fàgail gu leòr aig a mhac*. "The Provost's daughter's dowry was to be according to her father's wealth, and the Bailie made sure he was not behind in providing adequately for his son."

A few years later, says MacNeil, the bailie hit hard times, lost his money, died of a broken heart, and left his family destitute. MacRae says the boy's father sailed to Turkey and died there, upon which his creditors closed in, leaving the family without a penny. Mackay sums up what happens next: "The other man, in treacherous violation of the joint contract, determines to convert the goods of his dead friend to his own use, settle them on his own daughter, and have her eventually married, not to the original bridegroom, but to some other suitor whose riches shall make him, in the worldly view of the treacherous man, more of a match for her."

MacNeil tells us that the boy, thus impoverished, went to seek his fortune. *Seachain seòladaireachd* is his mother's only advice: "Avoid sailoring!" It was springtime – cold, with showers of snow – and as luck would have it, he came by the rich skipper's house. By now this man had eight merchant ships trading with India (*bha ochd luingeas marsandachd aige a' tarraing ás na h-Innsean*) and eight stores (*bùithean*) on land. His wife told the lad to go to the kitchen to warm himself, but let him leave without offering him food or drink. In the kitchen were her daughter and an old woman, who started to weep. *Gu dé sin ort?* says the girl. "What's the matter with you?"

Chan eil móran orm fhìn de thinneas no de ghoirteas ach na smaointinnean a tha tighinn fa-near dhomh. "I'm not troubled much by sickness or pain but by the thoughts that are bothering me."

Gu dé na smaointinnean a tha tighinn fa-near dhuit? "What thoughts are bothering you?"

Tha mi smaointeachadh an gille bha an-siud, gun robh uair eile 's nan tigeadh e, nach ann mar siud a leigteadh air falbh e. "I'm thinking about yon lad that there was a time when if he had come he wouldn't have been allowed to leave like that."

She refused to explain further except to say that if the girl went to her father's room and opened a drawer (*seotal*), she'd find everything explained in a little book. The girl told her to fetch the young man back, and meanwhile she found the book with the contract in it.

MacNeil then presents a long and enjoyable passage in which the girl becomes the boy's bank-manager. After a grilling in which she finds out that he's off to seek his fortune with no education and no money, she gives him a book and £8. *Bi a' falbh leis an leabhar, agus a h-uile duine choinnicheas air an rathad mhór thu, iarraidh thu air leasan a thoirt dhuit. Agus seo dhuit ochd puinnd Shasannach, agus an ceann na bliadhna thig thugamsa, agus m' ochd puinnd Shasannach fhìn agad dhomh, agus ma nì thu fhéin rud sam bith leis na h-ochd puinnd Shasannach, is leat fhéin e.* "Off you go with the book, and everyone that meets you on the road, ask him for a lesson. And here's £8 – come back to me at the end of the year with my own £8 for me, and if you make anything for yourself with the £8, it's yours." She advised him to start as a pedlar with needles (*snàthadan*), knives (*sgianan*), rings (*fàinneachan*) and thimbles (*meurain*).

My guess is that the book was about arithmetic, and being printed in English, he'd learn reading, English, and arithmetic. When Dr Johnson took a liking to an innkeeper's daughter in Glenmoriston in 1773, he presented her with a copy of "Cocker's *Arithmetick*" which he bought for himself in Inverness because, he said, "a book of science is inexhaustible". Boswell pulled his leg about it for years.

Each time the lad came back he had more education and more money, and each time she sent him away again with a bigger investment in his business, till finally he returned as a successful merchant himself, seeking shelter for his goods (*bathar*) and carts (*cairtean*).

MacRae deals with all this much more briefly. The Provost's daughter finds the contract by accident, seeks out the Bailie's son, discovers that he has been moved to a cheaper school, pays for him to go back to his old school, and gets to know him and his mother very well.

This is the point, in both versions, where the girl's father re-enters the story. In MacRae's version it's straightforward. The Provost is horrified to see his eighteen-year-old daughter being familiar with the lad in the street, and decides to get rid of him by sending him off with a cargo to Spain. The daughter retaliates by showing the contract to her sweetheart and advising him to do as her father says. *Thuirt i ris, e thoirt luchd guail leis agus cat fireann is cat baineann, agus gum faiceadh e ann an tìm feum nan cat agus a' ghuail – bhiodh e seachd bliadhna air falbh, agus dh'fhanadh ise gun phòsadh seachd bliadhna ris.* "She told him he should bring a cargo of coal and a male and female cat, and in due course he'd see the need for the cats and the coal – he'd be seven years away, and she'd wait for him for seven years without marrying."

In the Barra version the girl is more up-to-date. She shames her father into putting up the young merchant and giving him room for his goods and his carts, then cheats him into selling him a ship. Her father has eight vessels, of which four are in port and he has lost hope of ever seeing the other four again; she intercepts some papers which contain the news that these four have now also come in; she tells her sweetheart to offer to buy the rights to the oldest and most valuable of these, with its cargo of silk and jewels from India; he buys ship and cargo for £300; then, pretending innocence, the girl passes on to her father the papers which reveal that this ship is now in port.

The young man offers to cancel the deal, but her father will have none of it. *Biodh i agad fhéin*, he says. *Tha gu leòir de chuid an t-saoghail agamsa ás a h-aonais.* "Have her. I have wealth enough without her." So the young man sells the cargo, loads the ship with coal, and sets sail for Turkey.

Mackay says of the girl's father: "In several stories, he gives the sailors orders to throw him overboard, or maroon him. Sometimes the boy is to be slain on arrival." To find out what really happens to him, meet me for my 500th article on this page in two weeks' time.

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