The Gaelic Whittington (2)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

TWO weeks ago I introduced the story of Dick Whittington in the two Gaelic versions which may be found in J. G. Mackay's "More West Highland Tales". One is called "An Dà Sgiobair" (The Two Skippers) and was told about 1859 by Alexander MacNeil, a fisherman from Kentangaval in Barra. The other is called "Mar a Chaidh Cait an Toiseach do'n Spàin" (How Cats First Went to Spain) and was told, probably to J. F. Campbell in the same year, by a man in London, apparently a MacRae.

The tale is basically about an arranged marriage. One rich merchant (the Provost of Edinburgh, according to MacRae) agrees with another (an Edinburgh bailie, says MacRae) for his eight-year-old daughter to marry the other man's eight-year-old son. When the Bailie goes bankrupt ten years later and dies, leaving his family in poverty, the Provost reneges on the deal, but his daughter finds the contract, gets to know the young man and puts him on his feet. It's just beginning to look like a love story when the young man sails off with a cargo of coal to Turkey (MacNeil) or Spain (MacRae).

Let's take the Barra version first. Landing in Turkey, he meets the proprietor of a big hotel (*fear taigh-sheinnse mhóir*). He sells him his cargo of coal and was invited to dinner (*chuir fear an taigh-sheinnse gu a thràth-nòin e*). When he goes in he sees twelve grey-haired old men coming forward, each with a stick (*a dhà dheug de bhodaich ghlas a' tighinn a-nuas, agus bata aig a h-uile fear riamh dhiubh*). "Don't be surprised," explains the hotelier. "There are creatures in this place that live in holes, and as soon as they smell food (*cho luath 's a mhothaicheas iad àileadh a' bhìdh*) they're at it (*bidh iad aige*). People must wait for them like this with sticks to keep them away while we're having our meal (*fhads a bhios sinn aig ar biadh*)."

Clearly the package holiday in hell was already familiar to Barra folk in 1859, but our hero has the answer. *Dèanaibh foidhidinn bheag*, he says, *agus na beanaibh do ur biadh*. "Be patient for a short while, and don't touch your food."

He goes back to his ship and brings a cat. *Gléidhibh ur cuid bhataichean*, he says. "Hold back your sticks." The cat starts killing, says MacNeil, the guests begin their meal, and in the end the rats are so frightened that they no longer come out of their holes.

The good people of Turkey have clearly never seen a cat before, and the hotelier is delighted. "Since you've been so kind as to bring me this creature, I'll give you a horse to ride (*each a bhios agad a' marcachd*) whose like was never seen in Christendom."

The hero sends the horse to the ship, and brings another cat. *Siud fear boireann agus fear fireann*, he says. *Sìolaichidh iad feadh na rìoghachd uile*. "There's a female one and a male one. They'll multiply all over the country."

"Since you've given me that," the hotelier replies, "I'll give you a golden bridle (*srian òir*) and silver saddle (*diallaid airgid*) for you to ride with all over Christendom."

These are sent to the ship, and they start drinking: *thòisich iad ri òl*. (A very Gaelic touch.) He feels very warm, goes out to the end of the house, and hears a voice underneath the key-stone (*fon chloich-stéidh*). It says: *An ann a' brath éirigh duit mar a dh'éirich do t' athair? A bheil fhios agad có tha bruidhinn riut?* "Do you want what happened to your father to happen to you? Do you know who is talking to you?"

Chan eil. "No."

Tha t' athair. Mharbh iad mise an-seo. "Your father. They killed me here."

In this version the hero's father was a sea-captain who died in Turkey. In Gaelic tradition nothing was more likely for a murdered man who had received no Christian burial than that his soul would haunt the place in search of peace. Or, from a humanist point of view, it's a voice of caution in the young man's brain. "Go in," it says. "The dram will affect you no more (*cha dearg an dram ort*) than cold water in your mouth. As soon as the hotelier falls down drunk (*cho loma luath 's a thuiteas fear an taigh sheinnse leis an dram*) get to your ship, cut the cables and go."

That's what he does, and I suppose the implication is that, be the liquor beer, wine or whisky, the Highlander can drink anyone under the table. The myth that Dick Whittington made his wealth by introducing cats to Spain or the Middle East was a persistent one in England – I mentioned it on this page a few weeks ago. How then does MacRae, living in London, tell the same story?

Well, the Turkish hotelier turns into the king of Spain, and, we're gravely informed, *bha ainm cho fiadhaich de na Spàintich nach leigeadh iad duine air falbh beò ás an rìoghachd*: "Spaniards had such a reputation for ferocity that they never allowed a man to leave the kingdom alive." Could this be English propaganda from the time of the Armada? That, explains MacRae, was why the Provost sent our hero to Spain in the first place.

The story of the dinner is much the same, except that *òrd mhath mhaide*, "a good wooden hammer", is thoughtfully placed in front of each guest at the table. If we knew which dialect had both *òrd* and *urram* (look out for *urram* later) as feminine, we'd know where MacRae was from. No ghost appears, drink is not mentioned, and the reward is different. Neither gold nor silver can purchase his cats, says the merchant to the king – they are a gift. The king is so pleased that he buys the coal, orders the ship to be laden with *airgead ruadh* (copper money), throwing in a suit of clothing (*deise aodaich*) for the hero, another for his wife, and two more for his sisters, all of a style not to be found in Scotland (*nach biodh an leithidean ri fhaighinn ann an Albainn*); also a horse without equal in Christendom, and many other precious things besides.

MacNeil's tale is finished off more quickly than MacRae's, so let's take it first. When the merchant gets home he goes to his mother's and she doesn't recognise him. This is designed to emphasise how much he has been transformed by wealth – the mothers in the audience are intended to gasp in amazement. As if to underline that it's a motif, MacNeil omits the actual words: *Is mise do mhac*. "I am your son."

Then the hero goes to his father-in-law's house, where he finds that his wife has borne him a child. Ironically, her father thinks the baby is illegitimate. *She* has no difficulty recognising her husband. Next day they all go to the quay where his ship is being unloaded. Bag after bag of gold is piled up (no coppers in this version). They each sit on a bag – nice touch – and she says: *M' athair, nach iarr sibh air an fhear seo mise a phòsadh?* "Father, won't you ask this man to marry me?"

This shows that the tradition of arranged marriages could be used by a girl to suit herself, but her father replies: *Cha phòsadh am fear ud nighean an rìgh as fheàrr a bha riamh air an t-saoghal, agus na tha an-seo de dh'òr aige*. "That man wouldn't marry the daughter of the best king who was ever in the world, seeing how much gold he has here."

A bhodaich, she replies contemptuously, *rinn thu ormsa mar a rinn thu a chionn gun robh esan bochd agus thusa beairteach. Tha mise pòsta a-cheana aige – tha do leabhar an-siud, 's do bhriathran ann*. "Old man, you did to me what you did because he was poor and you were rich. I'm married to him already – your book is there, with your words in it."

So they go up to the house, the child is baptised, and they all live happily ever after, or at least, as MacNeil says, *bha toil-inntinn mhór aca* – they were very content.

In MacRae's version seven years have passed, and the merchant lands from Spain at Aberdeen. He comes to a river in flood; nine people are waiting to cross, and he brings them all safely over by telling them each to hold on to a strand of the black horse's tail (*dual am fear de dh'earball an eich dhuibh*).

Now he notices that a gentleman has arrived in his carriage (*carbad*). He brings him over too by tying the carriage-horses to his own horse's tail. (The use of horses' tails in this way for pulling harrows and ploughs was noted as a cruel practice by eighteenth-century travellers in the Highlands.) This man turns out to be the son of the Provost of Aberdeen, on his way to marry the daughter of the Provost of Edinburgh, and our hero naturally conceives a sudden desire to get to Edinburgh before him. As he spurs his horse away the Provost's son asks his name. *Is mise am math a bhà, 's a chaidh a dholaidh*, he replies. "I am the good that was, and went to waste."

"That's a strange name," says the young man, producing his pocket-book. "I can't write it down." So the merchant writes it down for him.

As in the other version, when our hero reaches Edinburgh he goes to his mother's house and she doesn't recognise him. He asks for a bed and pays generously for everything, but says that his identity must not be revealed.

Meanwhile the gentleman from Aberdeen arrives at the Provost's house. The formal ceremony of engagement (*còrdadh*) is gone through, or as MacRae puts it, *chaidh an réiteach is gach cùmhnanta eile a bha fasanta seachad gu tlachdmhor* – "the betrothal and all the other contracts that were fashionable passed off pleasantly". The wedding is fixed for the following day, and a convivial evening is being enjoyed by both sides when the bridegroom remembers his travelling companion *a gheall a bhith maille ris san àm* ("who had promised to join him for the occasion"). He takes out his pocket-book to read the name, and everyone crowds round to marvel at it. When the bride sees it she leaves quietly, goes straight to the Bailie's widow and asks if she has a stranger in her house.

Yes, says the widow, but she isn't allowed to say who. Despite her protests, the bride gets a light, enters her lover's bedroom, and tells the widow it's her son. *Air ball chaidh i a laighe leis. Is beag nach deach an duine bochd a mhort le a mhnaoi, le a mhàthair, agus le a dhithis pheathraichean còmhla ga phògadh san leabaidh.* "She immediately lay down with him. The poor man was nearly murdered with his wife, his mother, and his two sisters all kissing him at once in bed."

By now every drum and bell in the town is sounding for her – *bha a h-uile clag is druma sa bhaile a' bualadh air a son*. In the morning the Bailie's son and his wife and sisters put on their Spanish clothes and parade along the street (*chaidh iad a ghabhail sràid*). They pass the Provost's house several times, but their clothes are so exotic that no one recognises them except the Provost who says: *Mur bitheadh an t-aodach a tha air a' mhnaoi uasail ud, theirinn gur i mo nighean fhéin a th' ann*. "If it weren't for the clothes that lady was wearing, I'd say it was my own daughter."

The hero retorts: *Is i do nighean a th' ann, a bhodaich* . . . "It *is* your daughter, old fellow. Though you did me a good turn I won't give you many thanks – you did your best to keep her away from me. She's my wife now, and we don't care what you can do to us (*tha sinn coma de nì sam bith as urrainn duitsa a dhèanamh ruinn*)."

The hero now apologises to his young friend from Aberdeen, explaining that he and the lady are already married and showing him the contract. But he has two sisters of his own who are just as charming and attractive, he points out, and he can offer a bigger dowry than the Provost himself.

The delighted Aberdonian chooses a sister, and two weddings are celebrated on the same night.

The wicked Provost ends his days happily amongst his six grandchildren, and his daughter never regrets staying faithful to the Bailie's impoverished son. *Agus a thuilleadh air sin*, concludes MacRae, *bha an urram aice gun robh i 'na meadhon air na ciad chait a chur do rìoghachd na Spàine!* "What's more, she had the honour to be the means of sending the first cats to the kingdom of Spain!"

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