

## The curse of Neist (2)

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN 1903, at Dornie, from person or persons unknown, Alexander Carmichael noted down a snatch of the curse of Neist.

*Tuim gu totach  
Taoman bristeach  
Saoil ghan stracadh  
Ceò ghan tacadh  
Stiuir/Steoir gun ocar feuma*

It seems to mean: “Bilge to thwarts, / Baler fragile, / Sails being torn, / Mist choking them, / Helm insecurely anchored.” Nearly 40 years later, when his grandson, Professor James Carmichael Watson, was preparing it for publication, it had turned into:

*Taoim gu totach,  
Taoman bristeach,  
Seoil a’ stracadh,  
Sgeo a’ sacadh,  
Sneachd a’ tachdadh,  
Muir ag atach,  
Fir a’ rachdadh,  
Agus gach aitim sgaoilte.*

The translation that lay in front of Watson was: “Bilge to thwarts, / Bailer broken / Sails a-tearing / Haze a-suffocating / Snow a-choking / Sea a-swelling, / Men a-labouring, / And every orifice open.” He pencilled in a change (“broken” to “brittle”) and a remark (“rachdadh? technical term”). Then he published it more or less as it stood, although he must have worried about *gach aitim sgaoilte* – surely it means not “every orifice open” but “every tribe dispersed”!

Last time I presented five different versions of the curse. It was said to have been used by a MacLeod witch in the 1530s to drown a boatful of marauding Clanranald MacDonalDs off Neist, the most westerly point of Skye. These five versions were written down by five different people between the 1850s and the 1950s, all in Skye. They varied in length from ten lines to four. So what are we to make of the epic 34-line four-verse version in volume four of Alexander Carmichael’s magisterial “Carmina Gadelica”, of which the above is verse three? Is it genuine?

Ever since his own lifetime Carmichael has been suspected of doctoring his materials, and in 1983, in an article in “Scottish Gaelic Studies”, the late Alan Bruford compared the manuscript of the Deirdre story as collected by Carmichael from John MacNeil (Iain Donn, Buaille nam Bodach, Barra) in 1872 with the version which he eventually published as a book in 1905, describing it on the title page as “Orally Collected in the Island of Barra, and Literally Translated”.

Bruford found that Carmichael revised every sentence – adding words, removing them, changing expressions, generally polishing up the style. Most spectacularly by far, he inserted twelve entire pages of his own making, amounting to a quarter of the total! Bruford concluded: “There is reason enough here to apply stringent critical standards to everything that Carmichael published or prepared for publication. If no field notes or unedited transcriptions of these can be identified as the originals of an item, and no close parallels have been collected by others from oral tradition, we are entitled to accept, if not expect, the possibility of ‘improvement’ or even forgery.”

So let’s examine the rest of Carmichael’s “Curse of Neist”, or as he calls it himself, “Guidhe nan Leòdach: The MacLeods’ Petition”. You, the readers, are the jury; my job is to present the evidence. Was he a forger?

I have four exhibits. My first is the five versions which I quoted last time. We can assume they’re genuine. My second consists of four scraps, varying in length from eighteen lines to six, written out in Carmichael’s own hand in what is now Carmichael–Watson manuscript 495 in Edinburgh University Library.

Carmichael died in 1912 after publishing the first two volumes of “Carmina”. My third exhibit is a draft of the 34-line version, written in ink in copperplate with pencil annotations, also now in manuscript 495. I don’t know whose hand it is, but Watson must have had something to do with it, because he it was who edited volume four and had it published in 1941 – before going off to join the Navy and being drowned in the Mediterranean in 1942. My fourth exhibit is the published version itself.

There’s a certain amount of progression through the four exhibits, but there are missing links. One is Carmichael’s field-notes. Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart has been working on his notebooks, but despite his help I’ve been unable to track down his original note of any of the scraps.

An equally important missing link is the one between exhibits two and three. Carmichael may well be responsible for the 34-line draft, but it’s not in his hand. So the big question is: is exhibit three, the epic, derived in its entirety from exhibit two?

In its general nature – scraps recorded from different people at different times – exhibit two is very like exhibit one. And exhibit three says: “From Archibald Maclellan, master-mariner [‘ship-master’ is added then scored through], Lochboisdale, South Uist. / John Pearson, cottar, Ceanntangabhal, Barra / Catriona Phearsan,

coiteir, Ceanntangabhal, Barra / 14th March 1873 / Found also in Kintail in 1903.” This information is repeated almost word for word in exhibit four, the published book.

So who are these people? Well, Maclellan also gave Carmichael a sea prayer and is described as having “much topographical lore of great interest and value”.

The Pearsons were descendants of a Protestant chaplain brought by MacNeil from Ireland. John Pearson had been a soldier in the U.S. army in the Civil War. He gave Carmichael a lullaby, a love charm and *Duan an Dòmhnai* (“the Sunday Hymn”). Catherine seems to have been his sister, a reputed witch, widow of Alexander MacFarlane, Ceanntangabhal. She gave Carmichael the Arthurian ballad *Am Bròn Binn* and a love-song addressed to Campbell of Shawfield.

Exhibit two looks like Carmichael’s transcript of his various field-notes of the curse, brought together from his notebooks for the first time. He jots down the sources of two of the scraps. The fourth (ten lines) is “From [blank] Dornie Kintail” and the third (18 lines) is “From Mrs Maclellan nee Matheson Dornie”. This is Mrs Flora Maclellan, who also gave him *Eòlas nam Màm* (“the Charm of the Swellings”) and a lovely little rhyme called *Eónagan* (“Little Bird”).

If we may assume that the scraps are in the same order as the published list of informants, the first (six lines) will be from Capt. Maclellan and the second (16 lines) from the Pearsons. It contains a line *Us deoir air am mnathan ceile* (“And tears being shed by their wives”) which has the feel of something remembered by Catherine, the widow.

Having identified the sources and established what they gave Carmichael, let’s now take each of the four verses in “Carmina” and work out what exactly went into its making. I did this for verse three at the start of the article. What about verse one?

John(?) Pearson begins: *Gaoth an iar air fiacaill Rudh na feiste / Gaoth gun chiall nial/ceo/sian us uisge*. (“A west wind on the tooth of Neist Point, / A senseless wind, cloud/mist/storm and rain.”) Mrs Maclellan begins: *Clann Domhnuill air b[h]orda briste / Shuas air / Mach ri Stron na Feiste*. (“The MacDonalds on broken planks / Upon / Going out by Neist Point.”) Later she offers: *Gaoth an iar air Rudh na Feiste / Gaoth gun chiall bochunn baisteach/baistidh*. So she lacks the “tooth” image but throws in what I would spell *bochthonn baistidh* (“a swelling surge of rain”). In Watson’s transcript (exhibit three) we find:

*Gaoth an iar  
Air fiacaill Feiste,  
Gaoth is corr,  
Ceo is uisge.*

His translation runs: “Wind from West / On teeth of Feiste / Wind and more / Mist and rain.” But there are additions. Two alternatives are given for the second line: *air Rudha na Feiste* and *mach ri sron na feiste*. These are both from Mrs Maclellan. *Muir a falach / Talamh is athar* is added in pencil, and these words appear in “Carmina” with the translation: “Sea concealing / Earth and heaven.” Where did they come from?

John(?) Pearson and Mrs M both have the line about MacDonalds on broken planks. In fact Mrs M has it twice. Pearson follows it with *Leom cha mhisd an eubha’glaodha* (“I’m not bothered by their shouting”). Mrs M prefers *Dhomh(sa)/Leomsa cha choir a cheiltin* (“I shouldn’t hide it”). Watson’s transcript sorts it all out like this:

*Clann Domhnuill  
Air bhòrdach briste  
Gun sgòd dha’n tuigse  
Leam cha mhisd an glaodh*

His draft translation runs: “The Macdonalds / Upon broken planks / Without grain of sense / To me not bad their cries.” But this isn’t the end of it – “their cries” is scored out, *an glaodh* is encircled and “*an gaoireachd / an gaoirich / their loud distress*” is pencilled in. So where did *Gun sgòd dha’n tuigse* and *gaoire/gaoirich* come from?

Mrs M answers the *sgòd* question. She has: *Leom(sa) cha leon ’s cha mhise / Am beoil bhi leonta briste / ’S am por (bhi) gun sgot nan eigin. / Am por gun sgot dh’an ceille / S am poor bhi sgite sgeitse*. It means something like: “I’m not pained or bothered / By their mouths being wounded and broken, / Their seed being destitute, / Their seed being senseless, / Their seed being exhausted, worn out.” Her *sgot dh’an ceille* becomes Watson’s *sgòd dha’n tuigse*.

Catherine(?) Pearson answers the *gaoire* question. She has: *Am por bhi sgite/sgiota / Am beoil bhi briste / An ceo bhith silteach / Us deoir / ’S na deoir air am mnathan ceile. / Leom cha leon an gaoire*. (“Their seed being exhausted / Their mouths broken / Their mist oozing (?) / And tears / And tears being shed by their wives. / I’m not pained by their distress.”)

In the end Watson published *Gun sgòd dh’an tuigse – / An glaodh leam cha mhise!* “No shred of sense left them – / I pity not their bawling!” It was a bad decision, because the verse should have finished *glaodha*, *gaoire* or *gaoirich* to provide end-rhyme with the rest of the curse.

Moving on to verse two, this is what appears in “Carmina”:

*Coit chaol chorrach,  
Crainn ard reamhar,  
Sèdìl phait phlaideach,  
Luchd bharailean falamh,*

*Cathadh mara  
Dol dh'an adhar,  
Sàl dh'an dalladh,  
Is Cuan nan Gallan saor dhaibh.*

“Skiff crank and narrow, / Masts tall and stout, / Sails coarse and bulging, / Cargo of empty barrels, / Spindrift flying / Up to heaven, / Brine blinding them, / And Cuan nan Gallan free to them.” The first three lines correspond to the sources except that *reamhar* (“stout”) should read *reamhach* (*reangach* “thin”)! *Luchd bharraillean falamh* is in none of Carmichael’s own sources, but I know that he found it around 1906 in John Gregorson Campbell’s papers. Did he steal it? As for the last four lines, I can’t find them anywhere, but I don’t believe he made them up, because *Cuan nan Gallan saor dhaibh* sounds so unlike a curse.

The main source for verse four is Captain Maclellan, who says: *Sgioba bhras bhrothach/bhorb / Gun urram coin dha cheile. / Gun mhodh a choin dha cheile. / Gun mhodh nan/na troich dha cheile. / Guidh buan nan Leodach / Do shluagh Chlann Domhnuill eitidh*. In other words, skipper-like, he offers a line “A rash scabby/savage crew”, variations on the theme “Without a dog’s/dwarf’s respect for each other”, and a dignified conclusion: “The MacLeods’ eternal wish / For the folk of frightful Clan Donald.” Catherine(?) Pearson throws in *urram muic* “a pig’s respect”. Carmichael liked the “crew” idea but didn’t seem to care for how it was done. “Carmina” reads:

*Sgioba lag-lamhach,  
Ardanach aineolach,  
Mór-bhriathrach,  
Beag-chiallach,  
Gann-rianach,  
Dall-ghnìomhach,  
Mì-sgiamhach,  
Gun urram Dhia na dhaoine!*

“Crew weak-handed, / Haughty, ignorant, / Big of speech, / Small of sense, / Scant of reason, / Blind of action, / Ugly of form, / Without respect to God or men!” Almost the only concessions to our sources are in Watson’s notes in exhibit three – in particular, he altered the last line to *Gun urram fir dha cheile*, “Without respect of man for his neighbour”, then changed it back again!

What does all this make Carmichael? A fabricator? A creator of genuine antique reproductions? An epic poet? An honest enquirer who carried too much in his head? The jury’s out, probably muttering: “Insufficient evidence . . . more forensics needed . . .”

**11 November 2005**