

When waulking is murdering

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“TOCHER” no. 58 popped through the letter-box recently and I’ve found it absolutely fascinating. It’s the bilingual (or should I say trilingual?) magazine published once or twice a year by the School of Scottish Studies, consisting mainly of excerpts from the School’s sound archives and manuscripts.

The theme of no. 58 is witchcraft. Scottish Gaelic witchcraft stories are second to none in sheer entertainment value, and the selection in “Tocher” is no exception.

When you get to know a culture fairly well, be it stories, songs, paintings or whatever, the fun of first acquaintance – the shock of the new, it’s been called – turns into another sort of fun, the love of fresh twists and new variations. That’s what Gaelic poetry used to be all about and stories are the same. I knew most of these stories in “Tocher” already but they still came as a revelation. Every single one was in a *version* new to me and the more exciting for it.

Take the one called “A’ Bhò-Bhuidse” or “The Cow-Witch”. It’s the tale known to folklorists as “Attack by slighted lover”. In John Gregorson Campbell’s version, a man in the Western Isles has two sweethearts, and is fonder of one than of the other. He hears they’re both to be at a waulking, so he goes along. Only the one he likes less is there, so he leaves quite soon and goes off to visit the other.

On the way, he has to cross a ford on stepping-stones. A cormorant comes and splashes him fiercely with water. He gives the bird a whack on the back with his cudgel. Then he goes on his way.

On his return journey he passes the house where his less favoured sweetheart lives. Her mother meets him at the door and says she can’t understand what’s wrong with her daughter – she got suddenly ill the night before and is very ill with a sore back. He tells her he knows why, and will never speak to the girl again. The mother threatens him, but nothing comes of it.

I know another version of this, also from the Western Isles. A man breaks off courting a particular girl. A waulking is to take place one evening, and on his way there in the darkness he’s attacked from behind by an otter. He’s horribly lacerated, but by invoking the help of St Mary and St Peter he’s able to fight back until the creature runs away.

When he reaches the house where the waulking is to take place, he finds his former sweetheart in agony from a blow which a man has given her on the way there. Eventually she confesses to having turned herself into an otter.

So we’ve met a cormorant-witch and an otter-witch, now let’s look at the cow-witch in “Tocher”. This version was recorded by Donald Archie MacDonald from Donald Alasdair Johnson at Aird Mhór in South Uist in 1970. Again, a young man has been courting a young woman but has grown tired of her, or, as Donald Alasdair puts it, *Bha nist mar gum biodh an ceannach air fàs flodach, na mar gum biodh ise ’g amharasgaigeadh gun robh e falbh còmh’ ri té a choreigin eile*. “It now seemed as if the relationship had turned lukewarm, or else as if she suspected he’d taken up with some other girl.”

And Donald Alasdair should have a fair idea, because the young man was his own grandfather, *Dòmhnall mac Iain ’ic Ragnail!*

One evening around this time of year, Dòmhnall had been slaughtering sheep at Kildonan, and heard there was to be a waulking that night in his ex-sweetheart’s house. When halfway there he heard the lowing of a cow. This was surprising, because the weather was cold, and the cattle should have been housed. Suddenly the beast attacked him and knocked him to the ground. She rolled him around and was about to finish him off when he remembered he still had his slaughtering knife (*sgian dubh*). He struck upwards into the cow’s *achlais* (oxter). *Agus leig i ’n aon ràn aiste. Agus cha robh ’n ath shealladh aigesan oirre*. “And she emitted one cry. And he didn’t have another sight of her.”

Cleaning himself up, he went on to the waulking-house. To his surprise he could hear no banging of cloth or girls singing. A woman explained what was wrong: *Nighean an taighe seo, thuit i air a’ chléithidh agus tha i shuas, air a toirt dhan leabaidd ’s chan eil fhios gu dé ’n rud a th’ oirre*. “The daughter of this house, she collapsed at the waulking-board, and she’s been taken up to bed, and no one knows what’s wrong with her.”

He found the bedroom full of people and ordered everyone out except the girl’s parents. She was holding the bedclothes tightly, refusing to let anyone see what was wrong. *Tog an t-aodach far do chinn*, he says. “Lift the bedclothes over your head.”

Cha tog, she says. “No.” In fact she pulled them about her more tightly than ever (*sann a bhaganaich i na b’ fheàrr e*).

He grasped the bedclothes firmly and pulled them away. *Dh’ éirich i ’na con-shuidhe leis an aodach ’s an greim a bh’ aice air*. “She sat up like a dog with the bedclothes and the grip she had on them.”

That’s when he saw the blood. *Fhalbh thusa*, he says to the mother, *agus faigh fear-sgil. Agus mura dèanainn-sa sin air an nighean sa, dhèanadh an nighean na bu mhios’ ormsa. Tha sgian air a chur innnte ann a shin. Bha i a’ luadhach an-seo air a’ chléith, agus gam mhurt air an rathad*. “Away you go and get a man of skill. And if I hadn’t done that to the girl, the girl would have done worse to me. A knife has been stuck into her there. She was waulking here on the board, and murdering me on the road.”

He walked out of the house and the story ends.

Bha i a’ luadhach an-seo air a’ chléith, agus gam mhurt air an rathad. Those words leapt out at me from “Tocher”, because I can’t recall any other version in which we’re explicitly told the girl was in two places at once. But this is intrinsic to traditional belief. In the second volume of “More West Highland Tales” John G. Mackay wrote: “A divisible personality is not unknown in Gaelic mythology, and characters sometimes become two, or even three different persons or creatures, with a corresponding ability to appear in two or

more different places at once, so that one and the same old *bodach-sidh* might appear both in Benbecula and Skye at the same time . . .

“In the well-known tale of ‘Dùn-Bhuilg’, the fairies are able, though locked out of the house, to pound and kick the head of the sleeping goodman, who is inside the house, which they could only have done on the supposition of a divisible personality. And in the case of ‘Luran’, a farmer, a man who had suffered severely from fairy depredations, the poor fellow actually sees himself helping the fairies drive his own cows away to the fairy knoll, so that divisibility was possible even for mortals.”

It’s the *doppelgänger* or *co-choisiche* or *alter ego*. Instances have been on record since the seventeenth century, when the Rev. Daniel Morison reported from Lewis that a young woman in his parish was “mightily frightened” by seeing her own image whenever she came out into the open air. It was dressed like herself, but always had its back towards her, and was thus not a reflection as in a mirror. George Mackenzie, later Lord Cromarty, commented: “The parson kepted her a long time with him, but had no remedy of her evil, which troubled her exceedingly. I was told afterwards that when she was four or five years older she saw it not.”

The late Mrs Helen (Eilidh) Watt from Skinidin in Skye, who died aged 88 in 1996, had many such experiences, and detailed some of them in a book called “The Seer” edited by Hilda Davidson. For example, one night as she fell asleep she decided to visit her brother. The following evening her brother’s wife rang and asked after her health. Eilidh said she was fine, at which her sister-in-law said, sounding exasperated, “Well, your brother is very agitated and will not phone himself. He was convinced that you must have died. In the afternoon he returned from walking the dog and sat down to rest for a moment or two. Then you walked in.”

It transpired that Eilidh’s sister-in-law had been sitting out in the sunshine. She found it difficult to convince her husband that it would have been impossible for Eilidh to have walked in without being seen. When he realised Eilidh was a ghost, he was convinced she had died. Her sister-in-law concluded: “I do wish that you would stop your ploys.”

How was it done? Clearly there was an involuntary element, as the Lewis example suggests. But Eilidh and her relatives were quite clear that she could do it deliberately. Her own exact words are: “Failing to fall asleep immediately on going to bed, I decided that in sleep I would visit my brother . . . I accepted the rebuke, but found the time-lag of some sixteen hours interesting. I myself had no knowledge of the visit.”

The process is what Campbell calls “strong and undue wishes”. He explains: “It is in fact part of the creed in the second sight that a person should never indulge in strong wishes, lest he overstep proper bounds and wish what providence has not designed to be. Such wishes affect others, especially if these others have anything of the second sight.”

And he cites numerous examples. A man when smoking expresses a wish that a certain woman could have a draw of his pipe; that woman is tormented all night by a vision of him offering her a smoke which she is unable to accept. The same thing happens to two women, one of whom has a bowl of milk and wishes the other could enjoy it too, and to a man working away from home who is tormented by a vision of his wife offering him porridge.

A young woman is anxious in case her sweetheart, a mail-gig driver, goes to a house where fever has broken out; her image duly confronts him as he’s driving through a wood, and gives him such a thrashing that he has to turn back.

Campbell’s list goes on. A man meets a ghost and throws his knife at it; far away, the woman “whose likeness it bore” is struck blind of an eye. On Hallowe’en a sailor is standing at the ship’s side thinking of his sweetheart when a knife drops out of his hand. At that moment she’s pulling a kail plant to play a traditional game of telling the future by studying the roots; a knife falls from the sky and sticks in the plant. And finally another version of “Attack by slighted lover”: a man meets a ghost of his sweetheart; it throws him down, he strikes it with his dirk, and when he reaches the house where his sweetheart lives she is dead.

So we can see quite clearly that the “strong and undue wishes” of the woman scorned in all the tellings of “Attack by slighted lover” are sufficient to send forth her own double to give her straying boyfriend a good thrashing. *Bha i a’ luadhadh an-seo air a’ chléith, agus gam mhurt air an rathad.*

“Tocher” would make a terrific Christmas present. These days it’s a glossy illustrated magazine, beautifully produced with Gaelic and English in double columns. A subscription for two issues costs £11 from the Dept of Celtic and Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University, 27 George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9LD, tel. 0131 650 3056, email fran.beckett@ed.ac.uk. Their website is www.celtscot.ed.ac.uk.

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