The two Captain Forresters

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

TODAY, with the help of a seasonal glass of port, I'll try to solve one of the minor mysteries of Gaelic folklore.

The mystery is this. Why does a Portuguese character called Don Farëia or Pereira turn into Forrest, Forast or Forester after 1861?

Let me explain. The person I'm talking about is an officer of the Spanish galleon which sank in Tobermory Bay in 1589. In those days Portugal and Spain were united under the rule of King Philip – Portugal got back her independence in 1640, just as the Netherlands did in 1648, Belgium in 1831, Norway in 1905, Ireland in 1922 and Iceland in 1944.

So the Spanish Armada set sail in 1588 from Lisbon, which had the best harbour in Philip's empire. Modern scholarship shows that the ship which sank in Tobermory Bay was the *San Juan de Sicilia*, commanded by Don Diego Tellez Enriquez, but Argyll tradition knew nothing of such things. She somehow came to be called the *Florencia*, and the only member of her complement whose name was subsequently remembered was a man variously called Don Farëia, Don Fareija, Don Feraiya, Pereira or (in the twentieth century) Pottinger!

Tradition allocates two different roles to this man. Sometimes he's the captain, who was blown up with the ship, as was a woman called Viola, "the king of Spain's daughter". Otherwise he's a lieutenant who survived the wreck and was believed to have disclosed in Spain to the seventh earl of Argyll (who lived in exile in that country between 1618 and 1638) that the vessel had been carrying treasure.

The only name common to both roles is Pereira, a widespread Portuguese surname. I was in Portugal a couple of months ago, and counted 37 columns of Pereiras (and the same number of Ferreiras) in the Lisbon phone book.

What then of Forrest, Forast, Forester? Well, this name is restricted to what we may call the "sequel" to the galleon story. I haven't been able to find a version of the "sequel" that can be dated further back than 1861. If one turns up and Forrest, Forast or Forester is in it, my theory is up the spout. Meanwhile, I'll press on.

According to the "sequel" the king of Spain wanted to take out revenge on MacLean of Duart for the loss of his ship and of his daughter. I've told the story on this page before. Briefly, he sent Captain Forrest to cut off the right breast of every Mull woman, but a witch called Doideag, who was always faithful to MacLean, was ready for him. She shut herself up in a house at Rubha Ghuirmein near Duart Castle and raised a great storm by hoisting a hand-mill (*brà*, quern) up to a beam, then having it lowered and raised all night long.

Gulls (some say hoodie crows, others say cats) began to appear on the yard-arms of Forrest's ship. Forrest knew that these were witches in disguise, for he had the black art himself, and he went below to perform incantations of his own. He could hold the ship against eight or nine witches, but Doideag's power was too much for him, and before long there were sixteen or eighteen creatures on the yards.

When the greatest witch of all, Gormal, flew in from Lochaber, the ship sank with all hands in the Sound of Mull. The storm had taken the roof off Doideag's own house, but she was comforted in these words: *Ma tha thusa gun taigh, tha Captain Forrest gun long*. "If you are without a house, Captain Forrest is without a ship."

It's been pointed out that the nearest historical parallel to the sinking of Forrest's ship was an event that took place in 1653, during Cromwell's time. In July of that year a Colonel Ralph Cobbett landed in Mull to enforce the rule of the Commonwealth. Duart was garrisoned by a company successively commanded by Captain John Hargrave and Captain James Emerson. And three ships, the *Swan*, the *Martha and Margaret* and the *Speedwell*, sank during an eighteen-hour storm.

There's nothing in those names that suggests Forrest, Forast or Forester, however. We're forced to assume they're somehow derived from Don Farëia or Pereira.

It was when I was in Portugal in October that a solution came unexpectedly to hand in the shape of Joseph James Forrester (1809–61). JJ, as I will call him, was the outstanding personality in the history of port wine. The story of his life and death is in every decent guide to Portugal. He even has a toehold in history books.

His father, a goldsmith, was from Perth, but he himself was born in Hull. A descendant called him "a dynamic Scot, an energetic Victorian whose portrait revealed a firm strong jaw and an obstinate expression of the mouth". In 1831 he went out to Oporto to join his Perth-born uncle James in the service of Campion, Offley and Hesketh, Wine Merchants – subsequently Offley, Cramp and Forrester.

JJ threw himself with enormous enthusiasm into the business. Unusually for a member of the "British Factory" (effectively a colony) in Oporto, he learned to speak fluent Portuguese. Never afraid of controversy, in 1844 he produced a pamphlet called "One or Two Words about Port Wine" in which he voiced his objections to the practice of fortifying port with brandy, elderberry and sugar. He practised what he preached, producing wines which were neither to his customers' taste nor of the type to they were accustomed to.

This didn't endear him to his own company, but it made him a hero in Portugal. The growers liked his suggestion that wines be sold and paid for at the time of the vintage without the need for a long wait and for heavy expenditure on brandy and colourings. Most people also agreed with him that the grapes shouldn't be picked until completely ripe, and should be thoroughly trodden before the liquid was run into the vats or brandy added.

This "pure wine" campaign of JJ's is reminiscent of the controversy about blended whiskies in the 1960s which led to the resurgence of malts and the survival of many small Highland distilleries. Port didn't actually change much, but the Portuguese government rewarded JJ in 1855 with the title of *barão* or baron.

Meanwhile he was busy improving safety standards at the docks in Oporto and surveying the Douro with a view to making it safer for navigation. He completed a detailed map of the river in 1843 and it was published in 1848. He followed this with a prize essay, "Portugal and its Capabilities", in 1853.

In his spare time JJ turned out oil paintings, watercolours, sepia drawings and portraits, and was a pioneer of photography. A popular man, he entertained freely in his home at Vila Nova de Gaia. Look at a label on a bottle of port and you'll probably see the town mentioned.

The part of his job JJ liked most was travelling, and in 1855 he published "Journeyings in the Minho Province". He particularly enjoyed sailing up-country in his luxuriously appointed *barco rabelo*, and claimed to be the first person ever to reach the Salto da Sardinha by boat.

Unfortunately JJ's own *barco* was out of service on 12 May 1861 when he needed it most. In a smaller vessel than was wise, given that it was crowded with sixteen souls, he found himself negotiating the gorge of Cachão de Valeira after two days of heavy rain. *Cachão* means "a bubble of boiling water".

I've read many accounts of what happened. They're all on the border of fact and folklore. The main actors are: JJ himself; the formidable millionairess Dona Antónia Adelaide Ferreira, another outstanding personality in the saga of port, whose vineyards covered huge areas of the Douro, and whose image (I couldn't help noticing) adorns many a bottle of excellent Portuguese wine to this day; her daughter; and her second husband, Francisco José da Silva Torres.

The problem appears to have been that Dona Antónia and her family had gone with some friends to dine at the Quinta de Vesúvio, which belonged to her first husband. JJ found them there on his way down-river and hospitably offered to bring them home. The pilot should have lashed the rudder to prevent too much "play"; JJ noticed this and remarked to Senhor Torres that there would be an accident. According to another version the rudder was lashed the wrong way: "Whether intentionally or not, no one will ever know . . ."

The boat hit a rock on its way down the Cachão and capsized. Senhor Torres saved himself by holding on to a cask of olive oil. A boatman took hold of Dona Antónia's daughter and dragged her ashore. Dona Antónia went under but her huge crinoline skirt pulled her to the surface. She called to a boatman: "Save me and I will give you . . ." He didn't hear the rest but got her to the bank, where she gave him a sovereign.

All the ladies were saved by their crinolines, if tradition can be believed, and only three people were lost – a manservant, a female cook, and, although he could swim like a fish, JJ.

One witness claimed that JJ grasped a ledge of rock but was pulled away by the stream. According to some sources he was wearing high boots which filled with water. Another persistent legend has it that he was weighed down by his money-belt, which was full of gold sovereigns for paying growers up and down the river, these canny farmers having little faith in the escudo.

JJ's son William was said to have been told that a peasant down-stream at Pinhão confessed on his deathbed that he had found JJ's corpse very early one morning, robbed it of the gold and his watch, and sunk it. In his book "Port" George Robertson wrote: "Some have suggested that he was drowned on purpose so that the gold could be stolen."

Just about the only cause of the disaster that I haven't seen suggested is witchcraft. But the irony of this excellent man's fate didn't go unnoticed. His death was widely reported in the British press, the "Gentleman's Magazine" of July 1861 noting, for example, "a sad and remarkable close of the life of this ardent and energetic man that he should at last have fallen victim to the floods of that river for which he had done so much and which he had so zealously laboured to improve". Indeed the Cachão de Valeira now lies under the calm waters of a reservoir.

I'm intrigued by the thought that this Portuguese tragedy, involving two Ferreiras and a Forrester, may have influenced the existing Gaelic tale about the drowning by witchcraft of a Portuguese captain called Don Farëia or Pereira. How could it happen? Through the story being made the subject of a sermon, I suppose, or by newspapers and magazines being read and translated in the ceilidh-house.

And when? In 1861, obviously. The earliest version of the story known to me is the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell's. He collected his material between 1850 and 1874, but his version is full of references to Tiree – a Tireeman lowers and raises the quern for Doideag, she goes to Tiree for help, a Tiree witch is specified by name as coming to her aid – and 1861 is precisely the year when he came to Tiree as minister!

Lord Archibald Campbell called the captain Forester in 1885, and the marquis of Lorne called him Forast in 1898. If we thought they had both heard the story elsewhere in Argyll we would have a problem explaining how the name had changed so consistently in less than forty years. But both these men knew Tiree well, and that will be where they both heard it.

So let's fill a glass with port this Christmas and toast Captain Forrester. "To the black arts!" After all, both these Forresters possessed them.

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