

## When the animals speak

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

JOHN Francis Campbell's epoch-making "Popular Tales of the West Highlands", one of the world's great pioneering works of folklore collection, was published in 1860–62. The first story in volume one is "Rìgh Og Easaidh Ruagh". It was taken down in 1859 by Hector MacLean, an Islay schoolmaster, from James Wilson, a blind fiddler, who had got it about 1820 from Angus MacQueen, Ballochroy, Port Askaig, Islay.

*Easaidh Ruagh* is obviously Assaroe in Co. Sligo, and the king's son who is the hero of the tale is described as acquiring "the best wife in Ireland, and the two best horses in Ireland". But that doesn't necessarily mean that the tale is Irish, or that it's about real kings and queens.

Stories were escapism. Assaroe was as distant and glamorous in 1859 as Acapulco is today. Everyone in these tales is well up the social ladder, because people whose lives have been spoiled by poverty don't want to be reminded of it in their entertainment.

Anyway, the story was widespread. J. F. Campbell had also received versions of it told by John Campbell, Strath Gairloch, Ross-shire, and Donald MacPhie, South Uist, who had got it about 1800 from John MacDonald, Aird a' Mhachair. These are among Campbell's papers in the National Library, still waiting to be published. The South Uist version is set not in Ireland but in Greece.

What's more, as I will show in both this article and the next, the story is international. "It's the economy, stupid!" is what politicians may say if they like. Folklorists say: "It's the plot, stupid!"

The first half of MacQueen's story tells how the hero won his wife and his two horses from a male supernatural with a curiously female name, the *Gruagach Charsalach Dhonn*, which could be translated "the Carswell with the long brown hair". It marks him out as the ghostly guardian of Carnassary Castle in mid-Argyll, the stronghold of the Carswells. John Gregorson Campbell defined *gruagach* as a "tutelary being haunting farms and castles".

The second half of MacQueen's story tells how the hero came home after killing the *gruagach* and found his servants all tied up, back to back. They said: *Thàinig famhair mòr agus thug e air folbh do bhean agus do dhà each*. "A big *famhair* came and took away your wife and your two horses."

J. F. Campbell translates *famhair* as "giant" but that's not entirely helpful. It's the Irish word *fomóir*, "a Fomorian", the name of a mythical people who are prominent in the legendary history of Ireland. Three derivations have been suggested. The first is from *mór* ("large"). It's the least likely of the three, but that didn't stop people thinking of *famhairean* as giants. The second is from *muir* ("sea"). Most scholars dismiss that as well, but it never stopped people thinking of them as pirates. The favourite explanation is that the word means "phantom", as in German *Mahr*, English *nightmare*, French *cauchemar*.

So there you have it: large phantom pirates. Or to put it another way, people who lived outside the clan-based structures of civilised society and who could be freely hunted down and killed because they were not regarded as human.

Anyway, the hero sets off into the *coill' uaine* ("greenwood") to find his wife and his two horses. In three long formulaic passages, he encounters a dog (*cù seang na coill' uaine*, "the slender dog of the greenwood"), a hawk (*seobhag liath na creige glaise*, "the hoary hawk of the grey rock") and an otter (*dóbhran donn na h-aibhne*, "the brown otter of the river"). Each of them has the power of speech, and each of them knows how badly the big *famhair* treated the hero's wife and his two horses here last night: *B' olc dìol do mhnatha 's do dhà each an-seo a-raoir aig an fhamhair mhòr*.

Each of them also feeds him, the dog fetching *beathaichean* ("some creatures"), the hawk bringing *trì lachan 's ochd coilich dhubha* ("three duck and eight blackcock") in her beak, and the otter finding *trì bradain* ("three salmon"). Each of them also protects him while he sleeps, encourages him in his task, and offers further assistance in the future if he needs it: *Ma thig cruadhchas no càs ort, iarr mo chuideachadh, 's bidh mi agad a thiotadh*. "If you're in any tight spot or difficulty, ask for my help, and I'll be with you in an instant."

Now let's leave the story there for the time being and consider the question: why do animals speak? You may never have stopped to ask yourself this, because when we were children we all found it perfectly natural, no matter whether we met it in the course of play, or in our parents' bed-time stories, or in a book of fairy-tales, or in a comic, or in one of Walt Disney's films. The

answer, or at least one answer, is supplied by anthropology in the shape of Sir James Frazer's classic work "The Golden Bough".

Animals speak when, thanks to witchcraft, they are really humans in animal form. Being enchanted, they can do magical things, as we will find the dog, hawk and otter doing in due course when they are summoned. The connection is proven by the Ross-shire version of the tale, in which we are told that when the hero first meets the dog, the hawk and the otter, they turn into men before they speak.

Frazer pointed to belief-systems all over the world in which individuals, sexes or tribes joined themselves to a particular animal. Among the Fans of Gabon in West Africa, for example, every wizard was believed at initiation to unite his life with that of a wild animal by a rite of blood-brotherhood. He drew blood from the ear of the animal and from his own arm, then inoculated the animal with his own blood, and himself with the blood of the beast.

This is what has been called totemism. In the Highlands the only totemic relationship that we know of was between an entire tribe and an animal (the Mackintoshes and the cat, for example), but that could arise through the tribe claiming descent from a totemistic individual when totemism was on the wane.

Only in Australia did totemism divide the sexes. Frazer found that in the south-east of that country men were usually linked to bats and women to owls. The women defended the fern owl or "large goatsucker" when the men tried to destroy it, and the men defended the common bat when the women tried to kill and eat it. This led to fights in which the men by no means always came out on top, because they preferred to fight with spears while the women came in close and set about them with yamsticks.

The most interesting evidence concerns the Kurnai of Gippsland in Victoria. This is a chilling coincidence, because they became the victims of a series of infamous and well-documented massacres by Gaelic-speaking settlers from Scotland. The principal murderer was a Skyeman, Angus MacMillan (1810–65), who was himself born and brought up in excruciating poverty in Glenbrittle. Migrating to Australia in 1838, he explored the hills of eastern Gippsland and helped himself to whatever land he wanted for grazing, clearing it brutally of its inhabitants.

MacMillan's favoured modes of execution were shooting people and pushing them over the edge of a cliff. He required no legal justification, as the killing of an aborigine was no more an offence in law than was the killing of a *famhair* in the traditional stories which he heard in his childhood in Minginish. Moral justification was a different matter, but this was provided by another expedient which belongs entirely to folklore – the alleged abduction by the aborigines of a white woman, exactly as in our tale.

Stories about abductions of white women by aborigines in Gippsland are exactly that. Stories, none of which were ever substantiated.

Anyway, as Frazer puts it, among the Kurnai all Emu-Wrens (*Stipiturus malachurus*) were "brothers" of the men, and all the men were Emu-Wrens, while all Superb Warblers (*Malurus cyaneus*) were "sisters" of the women, and all the women were Superb Warblers.

This leads Frazer straight to the concept of the "external soul" which, as I will explain next time, provides the dramatic climax to our story. The concept is known all over the world. The most powerful sorcerers among the Yakuts of Siberia, for example, are those whose external souls have the shape of stallions, elks, black bears, eagles or boars. Frazer prefers an Australian example for his conclusion, however: "If my brother John's life is in a bat, then, on the one hand, the bat is my brother as well as John; and, on the other hand, John is in a sense a bat, since his life is in a bat. Similarly, if my sister Mary's life is in an owl, then the owl is my sister and Mary is an owl. This is a natural enough conclusion, and the Australians have not failed to draw it."

That, then, is why the animals speak, whether in Angus MacMillan's stories or in those of his victims. As for the Gippsland Massacres, they are now regarded as the worst case of genocide ever perpetrated by Gaelic-speaking Scots outside their own country.

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