

The Battle of the Birds (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

AS A teenager I was irresistibly attracted by the lure of the forest. I learnt German and spent three summers cycling and walking through lustrous green places that were full of shade and sunbeams and bore names like the Schwarzwald and the Odenwald.

It had something to do with having an excellent German teacher in school who loved Lieder and taught us lines full of Romantic yearning like *Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust*: “Wandering’s in the miller’s blood.” I wonder if that teacher ever worried that he’d been *too* influential. In any case he was succeeded in my admiration by one of my Gaelic teachers, and and first-year German at Glasgow University is mainly associated in my mind with the tedium of Schiller.

Maybe my life would have been different if we’d been prescribed the Grimms’ fairy tales instead. Over forty years later, I have the “Kinder- und Hausmärchen” before me and am enjoying them hugely. I’m not claiming they’re better than Campbell’s “Popular Tales of the West Highlands”: they’re just, well, different. But the point is this. Had it not been for the example set by the brothers Grimm in 1811, John Francis Campbell would never have set about collecting his “Popular Tales” in 1859 – and Gaelic would have been deprived of the work which, above all others, sets forth its claim to possess a world-class prose literature, as well as the world-class verse literature that everybody knows about.

I think the second story in volume one of the “Popular Tales” demonstrates this. It’s called “Cath nan Eun” or “The Battle of the Birds” and is outstanding for colour, humour, sensuality and visuality. I’m going to attempt to retell it here in a way that brings out these four qualities. It was noted down for Campbell in April 1859 by the gamekeeper at Ardkinglas on Loch Fyne, Hector Urquhart, from the telling of John Mackenzie, a fisherman from Lorn who was employed at the time in building dykes on the Ardkinglas estate.

The animals and birds are gathering for a battle, and *mac rìgh Cathair Shiomain* tells his father he’s going along to find out who’s to be their king for the coming year. His name’s a joke: *cathair* is a city, a throne or a chair and *sioman* is heather rope. Any prince of a kingdom whose name means a chair of heather rope is being visualised by the storyteller at the level of the poorest lairds in the Highlands!

The battle is nearly over when he arrives, and it’s down to a big black raven and a snake. He takes the raven’s side and beheads the snake. The grateful raven says: “For your kindness to me today, I’ll give you a sight (*bheir mise sealladh dhuit*): come up now on the roof of my two wings.”

This will be a reference to the second sight, which was passed on by physical contact – foot upon foot, usually. They fly off over seven hills, seven glens and seven moors. Each night they see a house where one of the raven’s sisters lives, and the raven sends the hero down to be looked after. On the third morning there appears the handsomest young man the hero has ever seen, with a parcel (*pasgan*) in his hand. When the hero asks him if he’s seen a big black raven he answers: “You’ll see the raven no more, for I am that raven – I’ve been under enchantments, but meeting you has released me, and for that, you’re receiving this parcel.”

The youth tells him to go back the way they came, staying at each of the same houses, but not to open the *pasgan* till he’s in the place he would most like to live (*anns an àite bu mhiannaiche leat a bhith chòmhnaidh*). He does as he’s told, but the last part of the journey to his father’s house lies through a dense forest. The parcel feels heavy, and he decides to take a peek. When he opens it he’s suddenly in the grandest place he’s ever seen – a great castle surrounded by a garden (*lios*) full of all kinds of fruit (*meas*) and herbs (*luibhean*).

He’s appalled. He wants this to be in the pretty green hollow (*air an lagan bhòidheach uaine*) in front of his father’s house, but he can’t get it back into the parcel. Fortunately a *famhair* appears. We’ve met *famhairean* on this page before – big men who live outside the law. “You’ve picked a bad place to build your house, *a mhic an rìgh*,” says the *famhair*.

The hero realises this is just the man to get the house and garden back into the parcel for him, but the *famhair* demands his price: the first son he has, when he reaches the age of seven. Marriage isn’t on the hero’s mind, so he agrees. “You’ll get that, if I have a son.”

The *famhair* pops the house and garden back into the parcel, and they part company. When the hero reaches his favoured spot (location, location, location, I’m tempted to say) he reopens the parcel, and up spring the castle and garden as before. There’s a bonus: when he opens the castle door he meets the most beautiful maiden he has ever seen. “Come on, *a mhic an rìgh*,” she says, “everything’s in order for you, if you marry me tonight.”

So they marry that night. The narrator doesn’t bother to mention that they have a son, but at the end of seven years and a day whom do they see approaching the castle but the *famhair*, so our hero quickly tells his wife about the deal. “Leave it to me to deal with him,” she replies.

She dresses up the cook’s son and hands him over. A short way off, the *famhair* puts a *slatag* in the boy’s hand and asks him what his dad would do with a stick like that. “He’d wallop the dogs and cats (*ghabhadh e air na coin ’s air na cait*) when they got too near the king’s food,” says the boy.

Is tusa mac a’ chòcaire, says the *famhair*. “You’re the cook’s son.”

He grabs the boy by the ankles (*air dhà chaol cois*), knocks his brains out against a stone, and goes back to the castle in a rage, yelling that if the king’s son isn’t sent out to him *gum b’e a’ chlach a b’ àirde a’ chlach a b’ isle bhiodh don chaisteal*: that the highest stone of the castle would become the lowest. This threat also appears in the song “Griogal Cridhe”, which dates from 1571 and is still often sung today, where a beheaded man’s furious widow claims that all she needs to accomplish it is the power of flight and her late husband’s strength:

’S truagh nach robh mi ’n riochd na h-uiseig,

Spionnadh Ghriogair ’na mo làimh:

Si chlach a b’ àird’ anns a’ chaisteal

A’ chlach a b’ fhaisge don bhlàr.

(“If I had the shape of a lark / With Gregor’s power in my hand, / The highest stone in the castle / Would be the nearest to the land.”) This almost certainly proves that our story was going the rounds already in 1571. Anyway, we go through the same routine with the butler’s son. When asked what his dad would do with the stick, he says: “He’d wallop the dogs and cats when they got too near the king’s bottles and glasses.”

Is tusa mac a’ bhuidealair, says the *famhair*, knocking the boy’s brains out; back he goes to the castle uttering the famous threat, so the hero’s own son is produced, and becomes the hero himself from this point on. The *famhair* brings him up, and one day when the *famhair* is out the young man hears, coming from a room at the top of the house, the

loveliest music he has ever heard. Up he goes, and sees the loveliest face he has ever seen. The girl beckons him close and tells him to come back about the dead of midnight – *mu mharbh mheadhain na h-oidhche*.

It's the *famhair*'s daughter. When he comes back, she explains that next day he'll be offered the choice of her two sisters in marriage. He must say he'll take no one but herself, for her father wants her to marry *mac rìgh na Cathair Uaine* – *ach is coma leam è*. This man is prince of the Green City, Throne or Chair (which suggests he's a fairy) and she doesn't like him one bit.

Next day the *famhair* brings out his three daughters and makes a speech. "Now, *a mhic Rìgh na Cathair Shiomain*, you haven't lost out from being so long with me. You may have either of my two elder daughters as your wife, and you may take her home after the wedding."

The hero replies: "If you give me this lovely little one, I'll take you at your word."

The *famhair* is enraged and, in true fairy-tale style, imposes three tasks upon the hero before he'll agree to the marriage. The first is to muck out the byre, which contains seven years' worth of dung from a hundred oxen. It's to be so clean by the evening 's *gun ruith ubhal òir o cheann gu ceann dhìth* – that a golden apple will run from one end of it to the other. "Otherwise, not only will you not get my daughter, but I'll quench my thirst tonight with your blood."

Our hero sets to, but he might as well be trying to bale out the ocean. By the time his beloved comes in to see how he's getting on, the sweat is pouring off him. "Come over here," she says, "and have a rest."

He sits down beside her and is so exhausted that he falls asleep. When he wakes up she's gone, but the byre is so clean that a golden apple could run from one end of it to the other. In comes the *famhair* who says, *Chairt thu 'm bàthaich, a mhic an rìgh*. "You've mucked out the byre."

Chairt mi, says he. "I sure have."

Chairt neacheigin i. "Somebody has."

Cha do chairt thus' i co-dhìù, says the hero. "You didn't muck it out anyway."

Seadh! Seadh! says the *famhair*. Which means "Indeed! Indeed!" or perhaps "Hurrumph! Hurrumph!" And he issues the next challenge – by this time tomorrow our hero must thatch the byre with birds' feathers, no two of which are the same colour. *Gheibh thu gus an àm seo a-màireach gu tubhadh a' bhàthaich seo le clòimh eòin gun dà ite air an aon dath*.

He's up before sunrise with his bow and quiver (*a bhogha 's a bhalg-saighead*) and spends the morning chasing birds till the sweat's blinding him. Around midday his sweetheart appears. *Tha thu gad phianadh, a mhic an rìgh*, she says. "You're harassed."

Tha mì, he replies. *Cha do thuit ach an dà lon dubh seo, agus iad air aon dath*. "All that's fallen is these two blackbirds, and they're both the same colour."

Thig a-nall, says she, 's *leig do sgìos air a' chnocan bhòidheach seo*. "Come over here and rest on this lovely little hillock."

You can guess what happens. When he wakes up and finds her gone the narrator says, *faicear am bàthaich tubhte leis na h-itean*, "the byre can be seen thatched with the feathers", which is quite laconic, but that's my point: we've had humour and we've had sensuality, we've had colour and now we have colour imagined. This is *visuality*. The narrator doesn't describe the colours, but like a film-maker he gives us time to feast our eyes on them all the same while the *famhair* arrives and gapes. *Thubh thu 'm bàthaich, a mhic an rìgh*.

Thubh mì.

Thubh cuideigin i.

Cha do thubh thusa i.

Seadh! Seadh!

I could rest my case, but we're only halfway through the story, and the evidence in the second half is even better.

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