

Seeing through the cheese

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“THEY esteemed cheese a security against wandering in mist, from which they often run much in danger whilst passing over trackless muirs and mountains in foggy weather.”

That’s a curious statement, isn’t it? I came across it the other day in an account of the superstitions of the Highlanders written about 1800 by a Perthshire laird, John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, and published much later in a book called “Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century”. How could cheese prevent anyone being lost in mist?

Well, I’m not sure I could explain it in terms of modern science, but I can explain it in terms of custom and belief. John Gregorson Campbell tells us in his account of New Year in the Highlands and Islands that cheese, known as the *càise Callainn* (“Hogmanay cheese”, or more literally perhaps “calendar cheese”), was an important part of what he calls the refreshments. “A slice cut off at this feast, or a piece of the rind (*cùl na mulchaig*), if preserved and with a hole made through it, has strange virtues. It was called *laomachan*, and a person losing his way during the ensuing year, in a mist or otherwise, has only to look through the hole and he will see his way clearly.”

So there was a well-known principle of magic (that is, primitive science) in operation, the one we call “inbetweenness”. The cheese had to be made at Hogmanay, the interstice between two years. You had to make a hole in it. And if you were lost in mist you had to look through the hole. Was there a modern scientific principle of optics or psychology at work here too? Is it possible that narrowing the field of vision to what could be seen with one eye through a hole in a piece of cheese really could help you find your way?

A look at the term *laomachan* might help us understand. You won’t find it in Edward Dwelly’s dictionary but you’ll find it in volume 6 of Alexander Carmichael’s “*Carmina Gadelica*” with the meaning “little mouldy one”. That tells you what a *laomachan* looked like but I don’t believe it explains how it got its name. The root word *laom* has two entirely different meanings – on the one hand a crowd, or overgrowth without fruit, or the verb *laom* meaning lodge, fall to the ground, as corn from exuberant growth; on the other hand a blaze of fire or sudden flame. The adjective *laomach* derives from this second definition and means glittering, gleaming, blazing. And from *laomach* comes *laomachan*, a little glittering, gleaming, blazing thing.

That, it seems to me, is how our “little mouldy one” got its name in the first place: like a pocket torch, it was capable of lighting up a path through the gloom. Carmichael makes much of *laom* as mildew, but it seems to be as a secondary meaning derived from *laom* in the sense of (as he puts it) “phosphor light, light or fire without heat”.

Carmichael goes on to define the *laomachan* as a rind of cheese used for divination. “The cheese,” he says, “must be made on one of the four old festivals of the year: *Bealltain*, Beltane; *Lùnasd*, *Lùnasdal* or *Lùnasdain*, Lammas; *Samhain*, Hallowtide; and *Féill Brighde*, the Feast of Brigit; but on which of these is now uncertain. The milk used was that of a cow which had eaten the *mòthan*, pearlwort, for since the plant was sained the cheese was sained also.”

By “sained” he means blessed, in what we might call a druidical rather than a Christian sense: “charmed”, perhaps. As for those four quarter-days, they had equal status with New Year as times of inbetweenness. In fact it’s thought that *Samhain* (Hallowe’en) was the original New Year of the Celts. And the need to use the milk of the cow that ate the *mòthan* appears to be corroborated by William Grant Stewart, who gave the following advice in his book “Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland” in 1823: “Go to the summit of some stupendous cliff or mountain where any species of quadruped has never fed nor trod, and gather of that herb in the Gaelic language called *Mohan*, which can be pointed out by any ‘wise person’. This herb you will give to a cow, and of the milk of that cow you are to make a cheese, and whoever eats of that cheese is for ever after, as well as his gear, perfectly secure from every species of fairy agency.”

This makes you wonder if mist was thought of by the superstitious as being created by “fairy agency”. I think that is very likely. Carmichael doesn’t specifically mention the use of the *laomachan* for finding one’s way in mist, but comes at it obliquely, suggesting a reason why it might be a very good idea to narrow the field of vision: “The *laomachan* safeguarded its wearer from the wiles of the fairies of the mound, from the venom of the hosts of the air, and from the misleading light of the *teine mór* or *teine sionn*, will o’ the wisp.”

He is more specific about the use of the *laomachan* in smoke than in mist. “Twelve months after the cheese was made it was used,” he says. “A small hole was made through the rind, and through this the diviner looked down through the *fàrlas*, smoke-vent of the house. The name of the first person thus seen through these two orifices was the name of the future spouse.”

In other words, on one of those four festivals when young people loved to play games of foretelling the future, they got up on the roof of a house and used the *laomachan* to peer through the smoke-hole. Inbetweenness again, and no doubt the cheese was physically “fit for purpose”. It would

have served as a mask, the dust particles adhering to it rather than entering the eye. Campbell tells us the same: “By scrambling to the top of the house and looking through it down the *fàr-lus* (the hole in the roof that served in olden times for chimney and window), a person can ascertain the name of his or her future husband or wife. It will prove to be the same as that of the first person seen or heard named.”

Ramsay found an interesting variation on this in Breadalbane, that is, the Loch Tay area of Perthshire. “Young men and women leave their shoes near a large fire, get to the top of the house, and look down through a silver brooch, or through a piece of cheese. It is thought they will then see the persons they are to marry removing their shoes from the fire; but no other body must be in that part of the house at the time.”

Two of our authors also noted that, presumably when no longer fit for purpose, the *laomachan* became simply a lucky charm. Campbell: “A piece of *laomachan* is also valuable for putting under one’s pillow to sleep over.” Carmichael: “When the *laomachan* was placed under the pillow, the sleeper would in dreams see his future spouse coming towards him with gifts; were the person seen receding, it indicated a parting.”

This reminds us that cheese has always had the reputation of being an aphrodisiac. William Grant Stewart points to this in his description of wedding festivities in the Strathspey/Tomintoul area. As soon as the church ceremony is over, he says, the more unruly guests make a dash, some on foot and some on horseback, for the bridegroom’s house, where the rest of the wedding is to be held. “A volley of firearms announces their arrival,” says Stewart, “and the company, assembled at the door to welcome the bride, assail her with a basket of the bridal bread and cheese, the properties of which are well known.”

I think by now we know enough about cheese to guess what may lie behind the following funeral rite described by Ramsay: “It was also the custom to lay some iron, cheese, a plate with salt, and sometimes a green turf, on the dead person’s breast. Some of these things were perhaps used to prevent the corpse from swelling; but the salt, the iron and the cheese intimate some purpose of superstition.”

If you’re thinking what I’m thinking, you’ll agree that the cheese will be a relic of the *laomachan*, intended to ease the journey of the deceased through the mist on the hills to a better place, or perhaps, who knows, through billows of smoke to a worse one (although that’s less likely, because the Celtic hell is a cold place).

In matters of popular tradition the last chapter often belongs to the children, whose record of keeping up calendar customs is second to none. So we find, I think, with the *laomachan*, still associated with one of the quarter-days (the first of August), but now bearing a different name. Campbell says: “When leaving the summer pastures in the hills on Lammas day and returning with the cattle to the strath, a small cheese made of curds was made from that day’s milk to be given to the children (and all who were at the *àirigh*) for luck and goodwill. The cows were milked early in the morning, and curds were made and put in the cheese vat (*fioghan*). This hastily-prepared cheese was the *mulchag imrich*, and was taken home with the rest of the furniture for the purpose mentioned.”

The *àirigh* is of course the shieling or summer pastures, and the point, as I see it, is that cheese made on a quarter-day is a good luck charm in general, but also offered children the reassurance that they would see their way through a mist on the long walk home – and if all came to all, having been freshly made that day, they could eat it!

In principle I’d like to give the last word to Carmichael, because he’s very good at last words: his prose, like the traditions and rhymes which he presents, is highly polished. But it will have to be the second-last word because he inserts a subliminal message which I want to point out. He says: “For naming, for dreaming and for safeguarding, the *laomachan* was effective only on the anniversary of the festival on which it was made, and only to those who had faith and sincerity of heart; only to those who bowed to them were the names true. Many curious rites and ceremonies connected with the *laomachan* and its use are now but dimly to be descried through the darkness of ages.”

Well, well. “Only to those who bowed to them were the names true.” This is a powerful statement about superstition. Let’s say a girl spied through the *laomachan* and the smoke-hole, and the first person she saw was called Donald. She could bow to supernatural forces and reject all suitors in future *not* called Donald, in the belief that the lucky *laomachan* was guiding her towards good fortune. Or she could learn to listen to her own heart and mind, and forget what the cheese had dictated.

It’s clear what Alexander Carmichael thought she should do.

17 March 2006