

## Minding your P's and Q's

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

JOHN Ramsay of Ochtertyre, an eighteenth-century Perthshire laird, tells us about a Highland ritual performed in springtime. “Human urine is supposed to be endued with hidden virtues. Thus in Breadalbane, when the plough is first yoked, it is the custom yearly to sprinkle the horses and then the coulter with it. And the wisp of straw used for that purpose is thrown between the mould-board and the beam.”

He then shows urine being used similarly at other important beginnings: the quarter-days (the 1st of February, May, August, November), New Year, and birth. “Upon the evening of every day at the end of a quarter of a year, and sometimes oftener, it is also customary to take a wisp of straw, dip it in human urine, and sprinkle all the cattle in the byre with it.

“In Glenlyon, the landlady takes care to rise early on the morning of New Year’s Day. She ties together some straw in the form of a brush, and sprinkles urine with it upon the whole family as they are getting out of bed. In Morven and Breadalbane, the old woman who officiates as midwife commonly sprinkles the bed of the lying-in woman, and sometimes every person in the room, with the same liquor.”

I believe the MacLean warrior *Ailein nan Sop* (“Allan of the Wisps”) was so called because of the huge number of urinary wisps sprinkled on his mother when in labour. We know he was overdue – by fifteen months, tradition says! Witchcraft was blamed.

So why should this most unpleasant and impure of liquids be used like holy water? Ramsay points us in one possible direction: “We learn from Strabo and Diodorus Siculus that the Celtic and other barbarous nations made use of human urine in their lustrations and lavations.”

In other words, two thousand years ago Roman writers claimed that we used our urine for ritual cleansing and purification. And it may well be part of the answer to say that eighteenth-century Highlanders sprinkled urine on ploughs, plough-teams, cattle, families and parturient women because 1,500 years earlier the druids had told their ancestors to do it.

It still doesn’t tell us *why* the druids taught this, but that’s always part of the problem when dealing with pre-Christian religion in these islands – we know very little about it. What we can say is that it’s a satisfying theory, because we know that all the elements in it were familiar to the pre-Christian Celts: ploughing, cattle, horses, straw, the four quarter-days and the New Year. We could argue the case from the negative too. Ramsay’s doesn’t mention anything new like potatoes, or anything Christian like Easter.

Fortunately an answer is to hand in the works of the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell of Tiree. And it’s a more satisfying answer than one that involves leaping cheerfully over 1,500 years of history, because it comes from the same people who performed the ritual.

In different parts of his work, Campbell mentions the same customs from his own experience, connecting them each time with the fairies or the evil eye. For instance, when a woman was ready to give birth, “an old shoe was put in the fire” and “the door-posts were sprinkled with *maistir*, urine kept for washing purposes – a liquid extremely offensive to the Fairies”.

The fairies didn’t like the smell. Campbell points out that fairies were “driven away by the smell of burning leather or a drop of urine”. He speaks of “the dislike of the Fairies to strong smells being also part of the Teutonic creed”, having presumably spotted it amongst the works of the brothers Grimm.

What parents were terrified of was that the fairies would come and substitute some wizened, crotchety old creature for their baby. We can understand this easily enough by calling it a fear of sickness, abnormalities and malnutrition.

Campbell points to the fairies again when he speaks of the custom being practised on the quarter-days: “*Maistir*, or stale urine, kept for the scouring of blankets and other cloth, when sprinkled on the cattle and on the door-posts and walls of the house, kept the Fairies (and indeed every mischief) at a distance. This sprinkling was done regularly on the last evening of every quarter of the year (*h-uile latha ceann ràidhe*).”

According to world-wide belief, those who are envious of your possessions can take them from you by witchcraft, and their “evil eye” must be warded off by counter-enchantments. Says Campbell: “Stale urine (*maistir*) should be sprinkled on the doorposts and about the byre. It keeps away the evil eye. There was an old woman in Coll who was taken notice of by her neighbours for sprinkling cows and doorposts every night. Her intention no doubt was to make assurance doubly sure.”

This is Coll in Argyll, not in Lewis, though no doubt plenty of Lewiswomen did the same. If we want to rationalise the practice, we can see it as a desire to seem to have nothing worth stealing. Many of us are familiar with this from our grandmothers. Nothing in their day was worse than over-praise. Children, in particular, were never praised.

If you praised your own family or property in private the fairies might hear. If you praised them to a neighbour she might cast her evil eye upon them. If you praised someone else’s family or property the consequences could be terrible, for the evil eye was involuntary, and you could be blamed for their sickness, death or destruction. But if your animals or chickens were praised you could avert disaster by saying a little rhyme, like this:

*Dia bheannachadh do shùil,  
Sop mùin mu do chridhe.*

“May God bless your eye, / With a wisp of urine round your heart.”

So the reason for sprinkling family and property with urine seems to have been to make them disgusting and undesirable. Campbell probably goes to the heart of the matter when he says: “The cause of fairy aversion to ordure is that it is matter out of which the substance has been already taken. Hence also their objection to dirt of every kind, and the reward given by them, according to the Teutonic creed, to tidy servants.”

I think fairies were seen as having no bodily functions of that kind. By Frazer’s principle of “magical contagion”, if they were touched by matter without substance, they too would lose their substance, that is, I suppose, they would return to being invisible spirits.

Here are a couple of stories which underline the fairies’ revulsion. The first, from volume 3 of “Scottish Studies”, was told to Kenneth Jackson in 1951 by Angus MacLeod, *Aonghas Tàilleir*, of Malacleit, Sollas, North Uist, who had it from the widow of a story-teller in Kyles Scalpay, Harris. A man herding cattle begins to hear voices, then reaches a green mound and hears music. He sees an open door and goes in to join the feast.

An old fairy hands him a golden cup full of whisky but a young girl warns him that when he drinks the last drop the door will swing shut and he'll be stuck there for ever. Sipping the whisky slowly, he makes his way back through the crowd then leaps through the door with the cup still in his hand. He heads for home, the fairies pursuing him in full cry.

As they approach his house his wife hears the racket and comes out to see what's going on. *Fhionnghala, Fhionnghala, mach an cuman mùin!* Jackson translates: "Flora, Flora, out with the chamber-pot!" A *cuman* is a bucket made of wooden staves, but I suspect that a precious vessel of this kind was used strictly for urination, and that for anything else people were expected to take a turn round the hillock (*car mun chnoc*).

Anyway, she rushes in to fetch it and as her husband reaches the door, *dh'fhiach i na bha sa chuman air an treud shùthichean. Fluair am fear a bh' air thoiseach steall mùin às a' chuman; bha e air a dhalladh agus air a thachdadh còmhladh. Chuir e mun cuairt e fhéin 's na bha còmhla ris. Cha do chuir iad an còrr dragh air fhéin na air a bhean.* "She aimed the bucket's contents at the troop of fairies. The one in front got a spurt of urine from the bucket. He was blinded and choked at the same time. He turned back, as did his companions. They never gave the man or his wife any more trouble."

There's a neat end to the story. MacLeod of Dunvegan hears what happened and comes to see the cup. He likes it so much he gives the man a farm free of rent for it. *Tha 'n cupa fhathast an Caisteal Dhùn Bheagain gus an latha 'n-diugh; tha e ri fhaicinn aig duine sam bith a théid an rathad.* "The cup is still in Dunvegan Castle to the present day; it can be seen by anyone who goes that way."

Well, not quite. Rory Mor's famous four-sided cup is made of wood and silver, not gold. But it's over a thousand years old, stands on four curious little fairy feet, and is certainly the one meant.

My other story is one of Campbell's. A woman in Morvern is kidnapped and brought to Beinn Iadain, the fairy mountain. She's placed in the lap of a gigantic hag, who tells her it's useless to try to escape, because her arms will close round her

*Mar an eidheann ris a' chreig  
'S mar an iadhshlat ris an fhiodh,  
Mar an fheòil mun chnàimh  
'S mar an cnàimh mun smior.*

"As the ivy to the rock / And as the honeysuckle to the wood, / As the flesh around the bone / And as the bone around the marrow." Campbell says: "The woman answered that she wished it was an armful of dirt the Fairy held. In saying so, she made use of a very coarse, unseemly word, and as no such language is tolerated among the Fairies, the big woman called to take the vile wretch away, and leave her in the hollow in which she had been found (*an lag 'san d'fhuaradh i*), which was done."

In stories from Ireland, when women are kidnapped in this way their relatives get them back by throwing at the fairies a mixture of human urine and chicken's droppings.

Sometimes you find accounts of customs like the ones Ramsay describes in which the substance used is not urine but wine, menstruum (water into which a piece of silver had been dipped) or "water from a dead and living ford" (that is, where funerals cross). Now "wine" is easily dismissed. It's a typo for "urine"! When I was editing "The Gaelic Otherworld" I found a couple of cases of it in John Gregorson Campbell's books, as when he says about New Year's day: "Certain ceremonies were carefully observed by the superstitious: juniper was burnt in the byre, the animals were marked with tar, the houses were decked with mountain ash, and the door-posts and walls, and even the cattle, were sprinkled with wine."

The other two aren't explained away so easily, however, and I'm left wondering what they have in common with urine. "Water from a dead and living ford" has been touched by death, yet I've known it to be called *uisge coisrigt* – holy water. Far from lacking substance, menstruum has value *added*. Am I missing something? Our ancestors prized their urine as an ammoniac for waulking cloth and as a mordant for dyeing it. Is it possible that fairies disliked it not because it was smelly and lacked substance, but because it was powerful magic?

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