Mermaids, monsters — and little girls

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I HOPE you enjoyed Roger Hutchinson's "Twelve Books that Changed the Highlands" as much as I did. What a thought-provoking assignment!

The mantra of my teaching days was that the three landmark Gaelic books were Bishop Carswell's translation of John Knox's "Book of Common Order" of 1567 (the first Gaelic book ever printed in Scotland or Ireland), Alexander MacDonald's "Aiseirigh" of 1751 (the first secular Gaelic book), and MacLean's "Dàin do Eimhir" of 1943 (on Roger's list). And I wonder if Roger thought about James Macpherson's "Fragments of Ancient Poetry" (1760)? It turned the Highlands inside out.

I'd also add J F Campbell's "Popular Tales of the West Highlands" (1860–62). It's the one I'd take to a desert island. It belongs on the same shelf as Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. If Roger had asked the question "which Highland books are classics of world literature?" he couldn't have avoided putting it at no. 1.

The trouble with the "Popular Tales" is that it depends who reads them. They're there in Gaelic and English. The Gaelic is as fresh and alive as it fell from the lips of the reciters. This is not true of all such collections. James MacDougall's "Folk and Hero Tales" (1891), for example, are vitiated by a cloying romanticism that you can trace back to Macpherson. But the English of the "Popular Tales" is awful. They need to be retranslated.

Classic of world literature? Well, let me present Campbell's tale no. 4, "A' Mhaighdean Mhara" ("The Sea Maiden"). It was written down by Hector Urquhart in April 1859 from the dictation of John Mackenzie, a fisherman at Kenmore near Inveraray who had it from an old man in Lorn. It's a long tale consisting of encounters with four monsters. I use this word, Latin *monstrum*, in its original sense of "a creature which embodies an evil omen". The first monster is a mermaid, of whom more anon. The second is a *famhair*.

Now clearly the *famhair* is what appears vaguely in folklore as a "giant", but that's a little unsubtle. *Famhairean* are the piratical "Fomorians" of Irish mythology. Each time we've met them in tales on this page I've tried to define them from the information given. They've been: "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." And: "Big men who live outside the law." And: "Big men who live in the countryside, dodgy-sounding characters whose families intermarry with fairies and often practise witchcraft, especially the women."

The third monster is a beast with many heads that lives in a loch and swallows men and women whole. And the fourth is a "fawning little old woman", *cailleach bheag bhrosgalach*, who lives in a castle full of jewels and has a magic wand (*slacan druidheachd*) which bestows life or death.

As you read about these four monsters and the cast of characters who confront them – basically father, son, son's wife and two brothers – it dawns on you that they represent the worst fears of ordinary people. The mermaid is the fear of drowning and infant mortality. The *famhair* is the fear of death by accident or disease. The many-headed beast is war. And the *cailleach* is the grim reaper who'll get you in the end even if you evade all the others.

This kind of symbolism, if valid, transforms a pointless story of weird people, love, strange beasts and random violence into a classic fable of universal truth. So is it valid?

The best way to answer that question is to look at each of the four types of monster first inside and then outside this tale, and say, what connects the mermaid with drowning and children? What connects the *famhair* with accident or disease? What connects the many-headed beast with war? What connects the *cailleach* with death in old age?

That gives us an easy start. The *cailleach* must be connected with death in old age because she is old. The mermaid must be connected with drowning because she lives in the sea. The *famhair* must be connected with the hazards of everyday life because he's a sinister character present in many tales – a criminal, a bogeyman.

I think death in old age is always represented as old – Auld Nick, Old Father Time. The dying hunter in "Òran na Comhachaig" wrestles with *aois ghrànda chairtidh na pléide*, "ugly smoke-stained old age of spite", who tries to take away his bow and replace it with a walking-stick. We're left exquisitely unsure as to which of the two wrestlers speaks the

defiant last words of the poem, “Many a better hero than you / Have I left stumbling and feeble / After knocking out of his standing / One who was once a lively youth.”

Is iomadh laoch a b’ fheàrr na thusa
Dh’fhàg mise gu tuisleach anfhann
An déidh fhaobhach’ ás a sheasamh
Bha roimhe ’na fhleasgach meanmnach.

This ambiguity leaves open the possibility of an afterlife. So too in our tale the brothers, killed by the first stroke of the *slacan druidheachd* in the old wife’s “black castle” (the coffin?) are resuscitated by a second stroke, and help themselves to her gold and silver. Heaven?

Turning to the many-headed beast, our reciter throws in a number of clues that help us connect it with marauding armies. For one thing, it has a great appetite for women, and on first meeting it we’re told that a person has to be sacrificed to it every year. This year the lot has fallen on the king’s daughter, but she’s to be saved by her suitor, who is – wait for it – a general.

When the general comes near the beast he goes into a funk and disappears, but the hero, a fisherman’s son, takes his place at the girl’s side. The girl is of course a decoy. In a tension-heightening scene reminiscent of every good war story, our hero sleeps soundly at night after instructing how he should be wakened. In the morning he does battle with the monster and cuts off one of its heads. The general reappears, commandeers the head and takes credit for the victory.

All this happens three times, but the third time the general is exposed as a fraud because he can’t untie the string holding the heads together. The hero marries the girl, but the monster reappears and has to be defeated again. This is accomplished by destroying its “external soul” in the way I described for another tale, “Rìgh Òg Easaidh Ruagh”, in January. And yes, the word *anam* (“soul”) is used: *anam na béiste*, “the soul of the monster”. When it’s finally destroyed, it’s portrayed in terms reminiscent of an army destroyed in battle. *Bha i uabhasach ri sealltainn oirre, bha na trì chinn dhith gun teagamh, ach ma bhà, bha ceann os cionn cheann oirre, agus sùilean, ’s cóig ceud cas*. “It was horrible to look at, the three heads were gone certainly, but even so, it still had head upon head, and eyes, and five hundred legs.”

“A’ Mhaighdean Mhara” begins with an encounter between the fisherman and a mermaid. She asks him how he is doing. Not very well, he says. “If I put plenty of fish your way,” she replies, “will you give me your first-born son?”

Since he doesn’t have a son and his wife is getting old, he agrees readily enough. The mermaid promptly gives him three *spilgeanan* (“grains”, or “pills” as we’d say nowadays) for his wife, three for his bitch, three for his mare, and three for his garden. In due course, as well as plentiful catches of fish, he has three sons, three pups, three foals and three trees.

Three years later he goes to meet the mermaid again, but being very fond of his eldest son, he fails to bring him. The mermaid shows him her own three-year-old baby and says: *A bheil do mhac-sa cho brèagha ris?* “Is your own son as bonny as him?”

She gives him another four years, but points out that parting, when it comes, will be even harder. Four years later the same thing happens and this time she gives him a seven-year extension. When the next tryst is looming the father tells the son about the mermaid, and the son solves the problem by going off to seek his fortune – which is why he meets the other three monsters.

So “A’ Mhaighdean Mhara” connects mermaids with infant mortality. Is there evidence for such a connection outside our story?

Highland mermaid traditions boil down to four types. First there’s the sighting of the mermaid and the belief that to see her is unlucky, for as Hugh Miller puts it, “she had a power through her connexion with the invisible world over human affairs . . . she never exerted this power in a good direction except when compelled to it”.

Second is the compelling of a mermaid to grant three wishes. Third is when she follows boats at sea, which is extremely dangerous: it’s assumed to bring on storms and loss of life. Fourth is marriage to a captured mermaid. It always ends with the creature rediscovering her

tail, which her husband has hidden, and returning to her home in the sea, abandoning her children.

In all the accounts I've read of the first three types, I've only once come across a mention of a child – that is, with the exception of the extraordinary descriptions given by Alexander Carmichael. Most of these are in volume two of "Carmina Gadelica". First he tells of a crofter at Ceanntangbhal in Barra, Colin Campbell, who thought at first he saw an otter on a reef holding and eating a fish, but when he looked through his telescope it turned out that "the object before him had the head, the hair, the neck, the shoulders, and the breast of a woman, and was holding a child".

Carmichael's next account is from Neill MacEachain, crofter, Hough-beag, South Uist. His skiff was becalmed on a hot day coming out of the Sound of Mull when a creature appeared about two yards away. "Its head, neck, breast, and shoulders resembled those of a woman, though its hair was more coarse, and its eyes more glassy. All below the breast was in the water." MacEachain could offer no explanation, but one of his companions said that it was the mermaid and that he had seen one like it before while making kelp at Airdmaoilean in South Uist. No mention of children there, at least.

In the third account, from Benbecula about 1830, the mermaid is herself likened to a child. She was seen alive by a woman, and some boys threw stones at her. A few days later she was found dead at Cuile, Nunton. "The upper portion of the creature was about the size of a well-fed child of three or four years of age, with an abnormally developed breast. The hair was long, dark, and glossy, while the skin was white, soft, and tender. The lower part of the body was like a salmon, but without scales."

Finally, among Carmichael's papers in Edinburgh University Library (reference CW 504C) I've found a note in his handwriting. When translated, it reads like this. "Duncan MacLellan saw the mermaid when going up to the Isle of Muck from Canna. She was on her way up towards the Point of Muck. She was about three score yards – a step behind us. Her face was like a seven- or eight-year-old child's and her bosom like a nursing mother's. Her skin was tawny and tanned – that sort of dark.

"Oh dear no – it wasn't a seal at all. Far from it. We all saw her for a minute or two. When she rose up on the wave-tops you could see not only her head and her bosom but down to her waist. She was very very like a girl, a little girl with a big big bosom for her age. The mermaid is only seen in stormy weather and when she's seen you can be sure that if a storm isn't blowing already, it's near at hand."

What's going on here? Campbell connects mermaids with infant mortality. Carmichael gives us swimming child-women. Could it be that mermaids are little girls in purgatory? If we knew for sure, we'd be an inch or two closer to understanding "A' Mhaighdean Mhara".

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