

## The brewery of eggshells

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“A WOMAN had a child in a cradle, but he was not growing. When she went to work she discovered on her return that the milk would be all drunk, & the house in confusion.”

That’s the beginning of a story exactly as noted down by Fr Allan McDonald from the widow of Malcolm Morrison at South Boisdale in South Uist on 18 October 1889. I found it the other day in one of his notebooks, CW 58A in Edinburgh University Library, and I’m grateful to the library for permission to reproduce it here. Fr Allan goes on: “She could not understand it & went to an old wise man. ‘Thoir an aire nach e *bodach* a th’agad’ said he.”

He underlined *bodach*, so the advice means: “Take care you don’t have a changeling.” Seemingly Mrs Morrison herself sensed the need for an explanation at this point, for Fr Allan writes: “(‘Bhiodh na sithichean a toirt air falbh cloinne nach robh air am baisteadh ’s a cur bhodach ’nan àite’ says the narrator)”. In other words she says, “The fairies used to take unbaptised children away and put old men in their place.”

I’m not sure I’ve ever heard the link between baptism and changelings made so explicit. But it makes sense to explain why the people felt that prompt baptism was directly conducive to a child’s survival and good health. The story goes on, in the wise man’s words: “‘Thoir dhachaidh’, os esa ‘torr shligean am màireach nuair a bhios tu ’tilleadh bho’n tràigh agus sgaoilidh tu air an ùrlar iad, ’s theid thu fhein gu sgairte-(?)falaich’.”

The question-mark is Fr Allan’s. Clearly the expression *sgairte-falaich* was new to him, and I can’t find it in his own posthumously-published book “Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay”, but it’s in Dwelly, taken from volume 2 of Alexander Carmichael’s “Carmina Gadelica”: *sgairte falaich* or *sgarta falaich*, “rift, rent, cleft, cave, recess in a rock in which to hide or shelter”. The wise man’s instructions mean: “Bring home a pile of shells tomorrow when you are coming back from the beach, spread them on the floor, and take yourself off to a hiding-place.”

Fr Allan goes on: “She did as she was told & hid on the roof of the house watching thro’ the ‘*Luithear*’. Dh’eirich ann an sin croitheall mòr bodaich, ’s dh-fhosgail e ’chiste ’s dh’òl e ’m bainne ‘Ubh! ubh! ubh’ os esa ’s e faicinn nan sligean ‘Tha mi corr is leth-chiad bliadhna is cha n-fhac mi riamh leithid so ’thogail’. ‘Togail!’ osa bhean ‘Togail!’”

The *luithear*, usually spelt *luidhear*, was the smoke-hole, that is, the gap in the thatch where the smoke was allowed to find its way out in the days when the fire was in the middle of the floor and there was no chimney. In his haste to get Mrs Morrison’s words down, Fr Allan switches at this point from instant translation of the narrator’s voice to noting her words in the original.

Here we need a little help, because the word *croitheall* is unknown to me. And that help is forthcoming from volume 5 of “Carmina Gadelica”, where, under the title “Bodach: Fairy Changeling”, Carmichael gives (with translations) a series of three changeling stories, throwing in some verses as well. An ornate version of our story appears at page 264. No narrator’s name is given, but it’s set in Upper Bornish, South Uist.

Curiously, one of the “ornaments” in this version is an expression which the late Alan Bruford was able to *prove* Carmichael had added to a story he got from John Macneill, Buaile-nam-bodach, Barra: *O bhith ’s aodaich*, meaning something like “Oh food and clothing!” In Carmichael’s version of our story, when the wise man tells the woman that what she has in the cradle is a changeling, she replies: *O a bhìdh is aodaich, ’d é nì mise ris a nis?* “O food and clothing, what shall I do about him now?”

To return to our *croitheall* problem, Carmichael has: *Dh’eirich a sin a’ chruthaill bhodaich mhóir as a’ chreadhaill*. “The big shambling changeling then arose from the cradle.” And in fact, his next and final version of the story *begins* with the word, and is almost unbelievably alliterative. *Fhuaradh a’ chruthaill mhór bhodaich ’na chruilisg chruinn chrotaich ann an creadhaill an leinibh*. “The big shambling changeling was found crouching, round and hunched, in the child’s cradle.”

So the key to *croitheall* is found amongst the vocabulary in volume 6 of “Carmina”, which tells us of *cruthaill bodaich* that it’s *cruchail* in Ness, Lewis, and that we should note Dwelly’s *cruthlach* and *crullsach*. Dwelly glosses *cruthlach* as “tall, bent person; large, clumsy person; ghost; fairy”. That’s helpful. The joke is that the child looking up at you from

the cradle resembles Donald Dewar or Eamonn de Valera. So let's go back to Fr Allan and translate. "A big cadaver of an old man got up then and opened the kist and drank the milk. 'Ubh! Ubh! Ubh!' says he, seeing the shells. 'I'm more than fifty years old and I've never seen such a *togail* as this.' 'Togail!' says the woman. 'Togail!'"

More explanations needed. First, *ubh* doesn't seem to mean "an egg". Carmichael's editor, Angus Matheson, spells it *Ùbh! ùbh! ùbh!* and translates simply: "Uv! uv! uv!" The changeling is treading on seashells, so I think we should say: "Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!"

Secondly, *togail*. In Carmichael's version the changeling says: *Tha mo chasan air an gearradh agus mo shealladh air a chur dha m' dhìth. Tha mi corr agus ciad bliadhna a' tàmh san tolman, agus chan fhaca mi riamh a leithid seo a thogail!* The translation in "Carmina" is: "My feet are cut and my sight destroyed. Over a hundred years have I been living in the knoll, and never have I seen such a lifting (i.e. rearing, treatment of a child?) as this!"

"Togail!" *os a' bhean*, "togail do dhunaidh ost!" *os an té bha shuas*. "Lifting!" said the woman, 'lifting of thy mischief be upon thee!' said she who was above."

The word "lifting" will be Carmichael's. The words "rearing, treatment" are expressed in a footnote, and will be Matheson's. All very peculiar, but there's an explanation. This story is internationally known under the name "The Brewery of Eggshells". It was first published, I think, by Thomas Keightley in his book "The Fairy Mythology" (1828). The idea is this. The baby is suspected to be a changeling. The wise man advises its mother to get some eggshells, and put them to boil or (in Gaelic versions) lay them on the floor. The baby will ask what she's doing, and she must tell him she's brewing.

She does this, and the baby, who clearly fancies he knows a thing or two about beer, is so surprised that, when he thinks she's not listening, he reveals his age and the fact that he's a fairy. The fifty-year-old baby in Fr Allan's version is the youngest I've ever come across. Keightley's is fifteen hundred years old and proud of it.

In the Gaelic versions, the "brewing" element seems to be on its way out; eccentric behaviour is all that matters. In "Popular Tales of the West Highlands", for example, the woman simply fills the eggshells with water, pretending they're very heavy, and arranges them around the fire. In John Gregorson Campbell's, the eggshells are empty. In one Argyll version in James MacDougall's "Folk Tales and Fairy Lore" there's only a single eggshell, but it's filled with water, and the baby is told: *Tha mi a' dol a theasachadh uisge a bhogadh bracha*. "I'm going to heat water to steep malt in." In another, the woman brings in a basket of eggs and places them in a circle on the floor. The baby says: *Gu dé tha thu 'deanamh mar sin?* "What are you making like that?"

*Tha coire-togalach*. "A brewing cauldron."

*Coire-togalach? Tha mi còrr agus trì cheud bliadhna, agus gus a-seo chan fhaca mi a leithid sin de choire-togalach!* "A brewing cauldron? I'm more than three hundred years old, and I never yet saw a brewing cauldron like that!"

This, then, is where *togail* is coming from. It means "brewing" and "distilling" as well as "lifting" and "rearing". But by Fr Allan's day the Gordon-Cathcart regime had destroyed many of the traditional arts in South Uist. And when we read Fr Allan's version we feel confused. Milk left in the kist for the baby to drink, seashells (not eggshells) spread on the floor for him to see – where does *togail* come into it?

By the time we get to "Carmina" the matter is being resolved. The milk in the kist becomes a device to lure the baby across the room where he will step on the seashells. He complains of cut feet and blindness – dizziness? Carmichael is unsure about *togail*, but Matheson explains it as child-rearing. The transformation of the story is complete.

Having established that the baby is a changeling, it must be got rid of. Fr Allan writes: "He returned to cradle at once & she entering asked 'An d'fhairich thu duine air fheadh an taighe an diugh?' 'Cha do dh'fhairich' os esa. 'Am beil an t-acras ort'. 'Tha' os esa. She gave him some food 'Ma ta 'ghaoil theid thusa comhla rium am maireach do'n traigh mhaorach' os ise 'Theid' os esa."

This then is how the conversation goes: "Did you notice anyone going about the house today?"

"No," says the baby.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," says he.

She gave him some food. "Well, my love, you'll come with me tomorrow to the shellfish strand," says she.

"All right," says he.

Fr Allan continues: "She wrapped him next day in a great gown or coat she had & carried him to the shore, & going out to the furthest skerry she could reach she laid him down saying 'Caidlidh tusa an taobh na creige gus am bi mise ullamh de'n mhaorach' 'Caidlidh' os esa."

That is: "You go to sleep beside the rock till I've finished gathering shellfish."

"All right," says he.

In "Carmina" this poignant moment is expressed very tenderly as a lullaby in three verses. *Caidil thusa taobh na tuinne . . .* "Go to sleep beside the waves . . ."

Carmichael says no more, but Fr Allan continues. "The tide came in & she left him without suspicion." (The word "suspicion" is corrected from "suspecting any".) "As the sea began to reach him he wakened up and stood up & gazed to the beach saying 'N ann mar so a tha? Na'n robh fios agamsa dhianainn rudeigin ort' said he menacing futile vengeance." ("Is this how it is? If I had known I'd have done something to you.")

"He was swallowed up by the sea, & the woman on going home found a fleasgach de ghille briagh a stigh aice 's b'e so a mac fhein." In other words, "a stalwart of a handsome lad in her house and this was her own son".

All this raises two big issues. One has to do with literature and folklore, the trustworthiness of "Carmina Gadelica" and the comparisons offered by Fr Allan McDonald's unpublished collections. The other is social and historical, for if you set aside its supernatural elements, "The Brewery of Eggshells" is nothing more nor less than an attempt to justify the practice of child abandonment. I'll try to unravel these issues next time.

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