

Abandonment

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I told a little story from one of Fr Allan McDonald's folklore collections, comparing it with a version in volume 5 of Alexander Carmichael's "Carmina Gadelica".

It's about an ugly baby with a voracious appetite. He drinks all the milk in the house but never grows. His mother consults a wise man, who tells her it must be a fairy changeling, and suggests a way of testing this. It involves strewing seashells about the house to see how the baby reacts.

Sure enough the baby is surprised, and reveals itself to be an elderly supernatural in disguise. She brings it down to the shore at low tide and leaves it on the furthest-out skerry she can reach while she is gathering seaweed. Cursing her roundly, it's swallowed up by the sea.

When she goes home, she finds a stalwart young lad in its place. *B'e so a mac fhein*, Fr Allan concludes. "This was her own son."

As I showed, it's a variation of an international tale known as "The Brewery of Eggshells". Carmichael actually offers three versions. The first, set in Benbecula, is the fullest and is arranged like a musical. When the changeling sees the shells on the floor he hops out of his cradle and sings fourteen lines of "Crònan nan Sligean" ("The Croon of the Shells").

Is this a genuine part of the tale? Well, ten of the lines consist of lists of types of shellfish; the other four describe how the shells hurt the singer's feet, and that's certainly part of the plot, so there's no reason to think that Carmichael falsified the record in any way.

The abandonment, which in this version is specifically prescribed by the wise man, is portrayed touchingly and at length in both prose and verse. The mother gently puts down her child and says: *Caidil thus, a lurain, caidil, a luaidh nan daoine, anns a' phlaide mhìn bhlàth an cois na tuinne, agus seinnim-sa an crònan lurach dhu'sa agus togam-sa dhut am fonn fhad 's a bhitheas mi ris a' mhaorach*. Carmichael translates: "Sleep thou, my pretty treasure, sleep, beloved of men, in the smooth soft plaid beside the wave, and I will sing thee the pretty croon and raise the melody for thee while I am working at the shellfish."

Caidilidh, a mham, replies the child. "Yes, mamma."

He's now called a *laprachan*, the meaning of which is obvious, but there's no inhumanity in what the storyteller says next. *Dhùin e shùileaga beaga bìodach anns a' chadal chaomh chiùin agus thog e strann throm chadail*. Carmichael: "He closed his little tiny eyes in a pleasant placid slumber and gave forth a heavy sleepy snore."

Carmichael here presents the mother's lullaby in seven verses. Again I ask myself: does it really belong to the story, or has he dragged it in from elsewhere? Again I have to say that I think it belongs to the story, for three reasons.

The first is that Carmichael's next version of the story ends in three similar verses.

The second is that in the first verse the singer tells her child, in Carmichael's translation: "Sleep thou by the wave's side, / Sleep thou, my love, / Sleep thou by the wave's side, / Till I cease from the shellfish gathering."

The third is that the other six verses consist of lists of delicious foods and drinks which she would give her child, ending each time with the chilling words *'S thu bhith dha m' ghean, a ghaoilein!* For *ghean*, as Carmichael points out, we may read *ghein* or *ghin* – "If you were my conception, darling!"

This ties the verses to our story but gives us something to think about if we don't believe in fairy changelings. Cue the wicked stepmother whom I'll be talking about later.

Returning to prose, this version ends unsentimentally. The child is called a *seòltaiche* or trickster. As the woman sings and gathers he leaps to his feet. *Am prioba nan sùl bha na sgriollaich aig a' bhodach mar a' chrann-fhaoileag aig sìol sgadain. Thog na sìfirean leotha am bodach air bharras-dha'n t-sidhean*. Carmichael: "In the twinkling of an eye the changeling's screechings were like the seagull at herring fry. The fairies lifted the changeling on the tops of their palms away with them to the fairy hill."

The woman, described here as a *bochdag bhrònach* ("sad wretch"), goes home, finds "her own fair little child" in the cradle, and makes sure she has this one baptised by a clergyman (*pears-eaglais*) before the fairies can get him.

It's clearly meant to be a happy ending for everyone. The *sidhean* or "fairy hill" is the Purgatory of Roman Catholic doctrine. The woman obeys the commands of the leader of her

community. In due course she's rewarded with another baby. And the communion to which the *pears-eaglais* belongs gains another soul.

Carmichael's second version is much shorter. As I pointed out last time, it's set in Upper Bornish in South Uist. It ends with a three-verse variant of the lullaby. The first verse is the same. The second places sinister emphasis on *taobh na tuinne*, "by the wave's side", where *fuaim a' bhuinne* ("the billow's sound") will be '*n cluas mo chuilein ghaolaich* ("in the ear of my beloved puppy"). In the third she sings that water from the well is not good enough for him, so she must milk her goats and sheep. This sounds like poverty to me.

Carmichael's third version is quite different. We're not told where it's set. A changeling is found in the baby's cradle and thrown out the door. He's heard lamenting the loss of his hammer and his anvil. The cradle is duly searched, and two pebbles are found and thrown out after him. They hurt his feet, but he goes off singing to *Coire nan Sìodh*, the Corry of the Fairies. Eight lines of his song are given; it's a triumphant rant about how well he dined and drank in the house, ending: '*S thug iad dhomh am bainne cìch*. "And they gave me the breast-milk."

There are symbols there which I don't understand.

Now I don't know who Carmichael got those stories and songs from and I don't think his original notes of them have survived, but WHFP reader Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart has kindly sent me a photocopy and transcript of Carmichael's field-note of a different changeling story. It's in a notebook now labelled CW 106 in Edinburgh University Library. Dòmhnall Uilleam thinks Carmichael got it from Dòmhnall MacAonghais, aged 74, Baile Gharbhaith, Iochdar, S. Uist, on 21 September 1872. Many of the words are abbreviated, but when these are expanded it seems to read: "Mac Uistein Ghriminis, North Uist, had a *sealladh* (vision). He had married Boisdale's daughter.

"He had a *cairiste* (hairst, six days' service in spring or harvest) and he went out to see how they were getting on at shearing. On passing *sithean mòr Ghriminis* (the big fairy hill of Griminish) he heard *rànaich cloinne* (the crying of children) and *briagadh mhnathan* (the soothing words of women) and heard a *sithiche* (fairy) say, *Uistibh gus an suidhichear clàr mòr Mhic Uistein 's gheibh sibh ur leòir*. 'Be quiet till Mac Uistein's big dish is prepared and you'll get your fill.'

"He turned home and the *bean fuine* (baking woman) set to bake the food for the *cairiste*. She filled the *clàr*, and being too full, bits of dough were falling over it. She was going to take them up, but Mac Uistein stamped his foot at her, so the *sithichean*, seen by him but unseen by her, were coming to pick up the bits.

"He then went past the *sithean* and there was *ceòl us aighear* (music and mirth) within. While standing looking at the *sithean* he saw the *sithiche* coming with a *crìdheal mòr bodaich* (big cadaver of a changeling) and placing it in a *clais* (furrow) and taking a child left there by a woman who had suckled hers and who had to come herself.

"The *crìdheal bodaich* began crying. She ran to take up the child. Mac Uistein stamped his foot at her and would not allow her. In course of time the *sithiche*, seeing the *crìdheal bodaich* breaking his heart-string, came and replaced the right baby and took up the *bodach*. Mac Uistein forbade any woman again to take a baby to the harvest field and to stay at home if she could not come otherwise."

The translations in brackets are mine. The style is telegraphic and very similar to Fr Allan's. Both men practised simultaneous translation, writing most of the story in English but leaving words and phrases of particular interest in Gaelic.

This is *not* the style of "Carmina Gadelica", where the Gaelic is given in full and separately translated, replete with alliterations and fine phrases like *thog iad leotha an leanabh air fras-mhullach an guaillibh*, "they lifted the child with them high on their shoulders". My impression is that Carmichael treated his prose tales (noted mainly in English translation) as mere summaries to be expanded at will, and his songs and verses (noted in Gaelic) as fragments to be re-assembled. Then, tidy man, he often threw his field-notes away. Spin, yes; lies, no.

Now consider this. Once upon a time there was a poor woodcutter who lived with his wife and his two children, Hänsel and Gretel. There was famine in the land, and one night his wife proposed that they bring the children to the middle of the forest next day, light a fire, give them each a piece of bread and leave them there. The woodcutter was horrified, but that's what they did.

The children had heard them however, and Hänsel brought a pocketful of white pebbles which he dropped to mark their path. They shone in the moonlight, and the children found their way home, where their father rejoiced.

Soon afterwards the woodcutter's wife said: "We have one half loaf left, and that's all. The children must go." The woodcutter protested, but she insisted, locking the door to prevent Hänsel collecting pebbles.

Next day each child was given a tiny piece of bread, and on the walk through the wood Hänsel laid a trail of crumbs. But the birds ate them up. The children were lost for three days and nights till they found a house built of bread and covered in cakes with windows of sugar, which of course they nibbled.

In the house lived an old woman. She brought them in and treated them kindly at first, but she was really a witch who ate children. She locked Hänsel in a stable and made Gretel feed him until he was fat. Then she tried to push Gretel into an oven to bake her but Gretel pushed her in instead and she burned to death.

The story was noted by the brothers Grimm from their next-door neighbour in Cassel, Dortchen Wild, about 1810. It ends with the children finding chests full of jewels and stuffing their pockets with them, then a kindly duck ferries them across a great river. They find their way home and throw themselves around their father's neck. His wife, he tells them, is dead; but as analysts of the tale have pointed out, that's because the witch is a symbolic manifestation of the stepmother, who, in the Grimms' unexpurgated first edition, was the children's biological mother.

"Hänsel and Gretel", like our "Brewery of Eggshells", is about abandonment. The plot is old, first appearing in print in French in 1698 (a time of dreadful famine in Scotland, incidentally), but abandonment of sick, disabled and unwanted children remained a fact of life until the nineteenth century. One historian, William Langer, calculated that in 1832–52 thirty per cent of all live births fell victim to infanticide in one form or another. That's in Europe as a whole, but as the period includes the Potato Famine of 1846 and the high point of the Clearances, the figure is likely to be perfectly accurate for the Highlands.

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