

MacMhuirich and the beast

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LET me tell another of the stories jotted down by Fr Allan McDonald in his folklore notebooks. He got this one from Widow Malcolm Morrison, South Boisdale, South Uist, in 1889, and it's to be found at CW 58A in Edinburgh University Library. He gives the first sentence in English and the rest in Gaelic, so I'll translate as I go.

He says: "McVurrich's dogs in the course of their ramblings got hold of a cub belonging to a *bèiste* or monster that dwelt in the lakes about Stilligarry. *Air greis de'n oidhche thàinig a bhèiste ag ràdh 'A Mhic Mhuirich Mhoir Staolaigearraidh cuir a mach am Buraiceallach'* (At some point during the night the monster came saying, "Great MacMhuirich of Stilligarry, send out the Buraiceallach.")

"*'Cha chuir' os esa 'Cha 'n ann air a shon sin a thug mi dhachaidh e, gus an dian thu clachan air Loch Staolaval (?) a bheir a null 's a nall mo chuid each is chruidh gun bhàn gun dearg'*. ("I will not," he said. "That's not what I've brought him home for, until you make a causeway over Loch Staolaval (?) that will bring my horses and cattle back and forth without white or red.")

"*'Och! Och' os ise 's i falbh*. ("Och! Och!" said she, as she went away.)

"*Mu mhiadhoin oidhche thainig ise 's i gràdh:— 'A Mhic Mhuirich Mhor Staolaigearraidh cuir a mach am Buraiceallach— tha sud diante'* (About midnight she came saying: "Great MacMhuirich of Stilligarry, send out the Buraiceallach – that's done.")

"*'Cha chuir fhathasd gus am bi a h-uile fàd dhe'm chuid mòine a th' air an t-sliabh nan torr aig ceann mo thaighe am màireach'*. ("No, I will still not send him out until every peat that I have out on the moor is stacked at the gable of my house tomorrow.")

"*'Och! Och' os ise 's i falbh Thàinig i greis romh ghairm a choilich 's i 'gràdh 'A Mhic Mhuirich Mhòir Staolaigearraidh cur a mach am Buraiceallach tha sud diante'*. ("Och! Och!" she said, going away. She came back shortly before cockcrow saying: "Great MacMhuirich of Stilligarry, send out the Buraiceallach, that's done.")

"*'Cha chuir mi mach am Buraiceallach', os esa, 'gus an geall thu nach fhaicear d'aghaidh no d'aodann air an fhonn chiadna gu bràch'* ("I will not send out the Buraiceallach," said he, "until you promise that neither your face nor your countenance will ever be seen on the same land again.")

"*'Och Och', os ise 'ged a tha gach nì cruaidh 'se sin cùis a's cruaidhe'*. ("Och! Och!" said she. "Though everything has been hard, that's the hardest thing of all.")

"*Thog e 'n uinneag 's chuir e mach an t-isean air an uinneag*. (He raised the window and put the cub out through the window.)

"*Thoisich ise ri seinn, 'san t-isean air a druim, 's i falbh*. (She started singing, as she went off with the cub on her back:)

"*'S fhada bhuan fhein bonn Beinn Sheadarainn
'S fhada bhuan fhein bealach a Mhorghain
Cùl nam monaidhean, 's beul nam bealaichean
Bho bhonn gu bonn bonn Beinn Sheadarainn
'S bho bhonn gu bonn bealach a Mhorghain.*"

("Far from me is the base of Beinn Sheadarainn, / Far from me is the pass of the Morghan, / The back of the hills and the mouth of the passes, / From base to base, the base of Beinn Sheadarainn / And from base to base, the pass of the Morghan.")

This quaint little tale is as rich in symbolism as any Gaelic story I know, and is going to lead us in a surprising direction. But before we can understand it as a metaphor, we have to be clear about what's going on on the surface. So let's start by considering the three characters and the verse.

"Great MacMhuirich of Stilligarry" is a favourite of South Uist tales. We've met him a few times on this page. But the MacMhuirichs are as well known to literary historians as they are to folklorists. They served as hereditary poets to the Lords of the Isles for hundreds of years before appearing as servitors to Clanranald in Benbecula and South Uist, where they retained a tack of Stilligarry until the eighteenth century. Many of their poems have survived in manuscripts which are now safely preserved in the National Library of Scotland and the National Museums of Scotland.

Because the MacMhuirichs' speciality was their ability to read and write, they got the reputation in folklore of being magicians as well as leaders of men – not good people or bad people, just wizards who were in touch with the supernatural and could do things like raise a wind.

I think that's where the *bèist* or "monster" comes in, for clearly she possesses supernatural powers which MacMhuirich is capable of harnessing. There are several clues to her identity; they all point in the same direction, but let me take them one at a time.

The first clue is MacMhuirich's demand that his horses and cattle go back and forth *gun bhàn gun dearg*, "without white or red". White red-eared cattle are fairy cattle, so it sounds as if the *bèist* is of the fairy tribe, and that MacMhuirich wants to keep his breeding-stock unmixed. When Alexander Carmichael tells the same story at much greater length in volume 5 of "Carmina Gadelica", the phrase is *gun bhàn gun dearg 'nam measg*, which he translates "without a white or red one among them".

The second clue is the *Buraiceallach* or *isean*, Fr Allan's "cub". In Carmichael's version it's referred to in a number of ways: *creutair beag biodach brònach* "a tiny little sad creature"; *am bròinein beag beothaich*, the "poor little creature" (which MacMhuirich carries off nestling in his plaid); *isean* "chick" or "cub" (though Carmichael prefers the translations "whelp" and "brat"); *cuilean* "puppy" (or as Carmichael says again, "whelp"); *mo bhuiceallach* "my bouncing boy"; *mo bhucallach bhuidhe* "my bouncing yellow boy"; *mo bhuracallach* (which Carmichael, or his editor, translates "my whelp" with a footnote "*buraclach, buaraclach*: the whelp of the water monster"); and finally *curralach na béiste móire*, translated by Carmichael as "the great monster's brat".

The phrase "whelp of the water monster" is helpful. These names all point to the mythical creature known in Skye and Tiree as the *gruagach* or "long-haired one" and on the mainland as the *glaistig*, whose offspring was called an *isean*, a *mèilleachan* ("bleater"?) or a *gocan* ("plug, bung, perky little fellow"). John Gregorson Campbell defines *glaistig* as "a woman of human race who has been put under enchantments and to whom a Fairy nature has been given". The term seems likely to be Pictish, meaning "a female stream-dweller", though in the mainland Highlands she has lost her connection with water, becoming instead a sort of phantom helper attached to a particular house, doing the things that such ghosts do best – tidying up, housekeeping, banging around in the night and frightening or even assaulting people.

Further evidence is provided by Carmichael's version. Here MacMhuirich imposes a third task: building "a dwelling-house with nine couples in its roof, thatched with birds' feathers, and no two feathers of the same hue" (*taigh tàmh agus naoi lànain 'na cheann, air a thughadh le iteach ian agus gun an dà ite air an aon dath*).

It's a motif which we've met before on this page, and it lines up our *béist* with the *glaistig* of Lianachan in Lochaber, who was captured by a man called Kennedy and forced to build him a magnificent house (or some say barn). Carmichael's *béist* sings a song of eight verses as she works, listing her building materials and ending:

*Gach fiodh sa choill ach fiodhagach,
Gach fiodh sa choill ach fiodhagach,
Gach fiodh sa choill
Gu taigh na foill
Ach critheann chroinn is fiodhagach.*

Carmichael translates: "Every timber in the wood save the wild fig, / Every timber in the wood save the wild fig, / Every timber in the wood / To the house of treachery / Save the aspen of the cross and the wild fig."

The *fiodhagach* (wild fig or bird-cherry) and *critheann* (aspen) are unlucky because of their association with the crucifixion, and these words occur in the story of the *glaistig* of Lianachan as well as our own. Incidentally I notice that one of Carmichael's variant readings is *Gu taigh Mhic Raing* ("To Rankin's house"); this means that at least one of his informants associated the song not with the MacMhuirichs but with another family of gifted professionals, the Rankin pipers of Coll.

Finally there's the verse about Beinn Sheadarainn and Bealach a' Mhorghain, which many readers will have recognised. These seem to be places in the mountains between Uig and Staffin in Skye, but the song is inseparable from the story of *Colann gun Cheann*. This is the "Headless Body", widely thought to be that of a Trotternish woman, which terrorises some part of the mainland – Morar, Arisaig, Moidart – until some young hero like Iain Garbh of Raasay or Ragnall mac Ailein Òig of Morar confronts it in armed conflict, whereupon it flees homewards singing the song.

Now let's pull these strings together. We have two versions of a story – or perhaps we should say many, for Carmichael's is freely admitted by his editor to be "a conflation of many MS. versions, some of them fragmentary". The first character we meet, MacMhuirich, is human but dabbles in the occult. His general reputation is neither good nor bad. If the *béist* is some sort of *glaistig* or *Colann gun Cheann*, MacMhuirich is performing an act of exorcism, but he comes across as a liar and a cheat. In Carmichael's version the *béist* calls him a *duine dona* ("wicked man") and it is she, not he, who employs Christian imagery – she refuses to build with unholy timber, and also threatens him with the devil as he appears in Genesis:

*Sgrith sgrath sgolban
Gu ceann taigh a' chealgair,
Sgrios na nathrach obann
Air bogha a' bhalgair.*

Carmichael: "Gravel (?), divot, wooden wattle / To the roof of the deceiver's house, / The sudden destruction of the serpent / On the scoundrel's vaulted roof." *Balgair* is a particular kind of scoundrel – a greedy, gluttonous one like a fox.

Whether the *béist* is a reflection of a *glaistig* or of *Colann gun Cheann*, other stories show her in a good light. Even the *Colann* wasn't necessarily evil until she lost her head, and her song is about love of homeland. This *béist* is loving, loyal, hard-working, diligent, naive. Carmichael presents a wholly sympathetic picture of her that could be from Disney (I hope he didn't make it up): *Cha robh màthair-eòin san ealtainn ghrinn ghuirn nach tànaig le ite gu cuideachadh tughadh an taighe leis an truas a bha aca ris a' bhéist*. He translates: "There was not a brood-bird in the beautiful blue sky that did not come with a feather to help with the thatching of the house, out of compassion for the monster."

The conclusion I'm drawn to is that in nineteenth-century South Uist, under the odious Gordon-Cathcart regime, our story was a coded way of describing a clearance. The *béist* sounds like a cottar. MacMhuirich (always an establishment figure, but never *uasal*) is the factor. The cottar does everything he demands of her, but is cleared anyway.

And why should a poor widow be called a *béist*? Consider these words from "The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales" by Maria Tatar. "As Andrew Lang has declared, the 'metamorphosis of men into animals and animals into men is as common in household tales as a sprained ankle is in modern novels'. But despite the profusion of transformations and the ease with which men slip into the role of beasts, there surely is a deeper significance to these metamorphoses, to the seeming interchangeability of man and beast . . .

"Oddly enough, it is generally the human bridegrooms who indulge in shockingly uncivilized behavior and remain unrepentant to the bitter end. Their bestial counterparts, by contrast, are models of decorum and dignity. A ferocious or repugnant countenance can prove wholly misleading in fairy tales. Contrary to the conventional wisdom about fairy-tale appearances, physical ugliness is not necessarily a sign of maral deformity; it can throw moral beauty or other merits and distinctions into sharp relief."

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