

## Vowing on the swan

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

JOURNALISTS love anniversaries. Nothing annoys them more than discovering they've missed one. It's just happened to me. And it was the best kind, a centenary, where I won't be around to get another shot. So here goes anyway . . .

Seven hundred years ago and just a tiny little bit, on 22 May 1306, the 66-year-old King Edward I, Hammer of the Scots, brought his nobles together in the Great Hall of Westminster Palace for what became known as the Feast of the Swans. He had knighted 267 men that day in the largest such ceremony ever held in England, described by one chronicler as "the most splendid event since King Arthur was crowned at Caerleon".

In a private ceremony, he also knighted his 22-year-old son, the first-ever Prince of Wales, who as Edward II was to be the big, big loser seven years later on the field of Bannockburn. There was a good political reason for the old king's magnanimity. News had come in that on 10 February, in the Greyfriars' church in Dumfries, Robert Bruce had murdered John Comyn, leader of Scotland's Balliol faction, which recognised Edward's overlordship. Bruce's power was growing, and he must be stopped. There would be war.

In the Feast of the Swans, as Edward I's most recent biographer, Michael Prestwich, has pointed out, "chivalric impulses were carefully directed towards the coming campaign in Scotland by a series of oaths". The banquet cost £130, a huge sum. Eighty minstrels played. At the high point of the meal, a magnificent device featuring two gilded swans was brought in by a host of minstrels.

Whether they were real or artificial is unclear, but the chronicler tells us that the king swore *Deo caeli et cygnis* ("by God of heaven and the swan") that he would set out for Scotland and avenge the death of John Comyn. Should he live or die (*vivus sive mortuus*), he went on, he would justify the faith placed in him by his Scottish subjects, and if ever he took up the sword again it would be in the cause of the Holy Land.

The old man was always a hard act to follow. The Prince of Wales declared in his turn that, in order to help his father keep his vow, he would never sleep in the same place twice until he reached Scotland.

Prestwich is unable to grasp the symbolism of vowing upon swans. "There may have been a link with northern French practices," he says. "Poems record vows made there to a peacock and a sparrow-hawk, but the choice of swans remains a mystery."

He might have mentioned "the Vow of the Pheasant". This was sworn by a hundred and fifty knights in 1454 at a gorgeous banquet at the court of Philip of Burgundy, the purpose being to rescue Constantinople, which had just fallen into the hands of the Turks. But King Edward's is the first such vow in historical record, and we know that he tried throughout his reign to position himself as the successor to Arthur as the rightful king of the whole island of Britain.

Arthur was the hero of the biggest best-seller of the day, Geoffrey of Monmouth's "History of the Kings of Britain". In it is this prophecy by Merlin: "A Mountain Ox shall put on a Wolf's head and grind its teeth white in the Severn's workshop. The ox will collect round itself the flocks of Albany and those of Wales; and this company will drain the Thames dry as it drinks . . ."

"The Ox itself will be burned up on the summit of Uranus. The ashes of its funeral pyre will be turned into Swans, which will swim away upon dry land as though in water. These Swans will eat up fish inside fish and will swallow men inside men. When they become old they will take the shape of Sea-Wolves and continue their treacherous behaviour beneath the sea. They will sink ships and so gather a treasure-house of silver. Then the Thames will begin to flow again . . ."

These words were as familiar to the King's audience as a passage from "The Da Vinci Code" would be today. He was the warrior who had conquered Wales and called his baby son its prince. Here they were now in a hall beside the Thames, drinking.

And the swan? The swan, as Geoffrey of Monmouth clearly knew, symbolised shape-shifting. The Children of Lir (in Gaelic tradition, not in Geoffrey's account of them, which became Shakespeare's "King Lear") turned into swans. This idea pervades our stories and traditions to the present day. As John Gregorson Campbell puts it: "It is a popular saying that

seals and swans are ‘king’s children under enchantments’ (*clann rìgh fo gheasaibh*). On lonely mountain meres, where the presence of man is seldom seen, swans have been observed putting off their coverings (*cochall*) and assuming their proper shape of beautiful princesses in their endeavours to free themselves from the spells. This, however, is impossible till the magician who imposed them takes them away, and the princesses are obliged to resume their coverings again.”

It would be possible to speculate further on this theme of metamorphosis and its relevance to the Feast of the Swans. Was the old man getting in a dig at his son’s homosexuality? One thing I feel sure of, however, is that roast swan *was* on the menu that day. Before the century was out, another Geoffrey – Chaucer this time – had penned these lines about the monk in his “Prologue”:

*Now certainly he was a fair prelat:  
He was nat pale as a forpynded goost [like a wasted ghost];  
A fat swan loved he best of any roost [roast],  
His palfrey was as broun as is a berye.*

Why this interest in swans, you may ask? Well, I’ve been provoked into it by twice finding myself in discussion recently with young ladies who simply refused to believe that anyone would ever eat swan. I’d call that a superstition. I know of no religious or scientific reason why we shouldn’t eat swan and as far as I know it isn’t an endangered species. Perhaps somebody will write in and enlighten me.

I was well trounced in my discussion with the second young lady. I’d been reading the songs of Ailean Dall MacDougall (c.1750–1828) from Lochaber and was struck by the number of references he makes to the hunting of swans. To save room, I’ll give them here in translation only. He calls his friend Alexander MacRae “Foe of the swan and the goose / And the duck who lands on the meadow, / With a gun that responds to its hammer / And would wound them in the air”.

To the laird of Glengarry he says: “You’re the hunter of venison / In the forest of slim stags / With the gun you’d rely on / To hit the stag of the roaring; / And the green-headed duck, / Your lead would seduce her, / Birds that would rise from the sea – / And you were the foe of the swan.” He also calls him “Bitter foe of the roebuck / And the black-cock in half-light / Before he moves in the morning, / And the white swan of cold feet / Who swims on the wave-tops – / You often seduced her around to the land”.

In a song to Dùghall Òg MacLachlan, placed in the mouth of MacLachlan’s sweetheart, he says: “You would slay the swan on the beach / And stop the geese from swimming; / From your lead they’d not rise up whole / And the seals were not safe from your hand.” Finally, in an elegy to a man called Dòmhnall Mór Òg, Donald Cameron, he says: “You were the foe of the cock / Who’d call at dawn in the tree, / And the hunter of swan / Into wind in spring wolftime (*San fhaoilleach earraich ri gaoith*): / When you pulled the trigger / She’d have English lead in her side, / And she’d be unable to fly / Away home over kyles.”

I remarked to the young lady that the poet was blind. She replied: “Exactly.”

The truth is that, in recent times at least, the killing of swans has been regarded as unlucky. I’ve listened to stories in the School of Scottish Studies’ sound archives which exemplify the kind of *rosad* (bad luck) that befalls those who shoot at them: a fall from a horse, a spent cartridge in the eye. One Harrisman said: “Nobody from up our way would kill a swan even if you gave him a reward.”

That in itself suggests why oaths were sworn upon roast swan. The meat is dark and – well, powerful. There are European traditions of taking oaths over peacock, pheasant and heron. The English poet John Lydgate (c.1370–1451) speaks of “Vowis of peacock, with all ther proude chere”. But it was an old German custom to swear upon the swan. And in Scotland the swan is all we hear about.

It begins around 1500 in a poem addressed by William Dunbar to James IV. Apparently there was a proverb “God gif ye war Johne Thomsounis man!” Being “John Thomson’s man” meant being guided by your wife. Dunbar enjoyed the Queen’s favour and wished he had the King’s. So he said:

*I wad gif all that ever I have*

*To that condition, sa God me saif [save],  
That ye had vowit to the Swan  
Ane yeir to be Johne Thomsounis man.*

By 1703, when Martin Martin wrote his description of the Western Islands, the custom had reached North Uist. “The Swans come hither in great numbers in the Month of *October*, with North-East Winds, and live in the fresh Lakes, where they feed upon Trout and Water-Plants till *March*, at which time they fly away again with a South-East Wind. When the Natives kill a Swan, it is common for the Eaters of it to make a Negative Vow (*i.e.* they swear never to do something that is in it self impracticable) before they taste of the Fowl.”

What I take from this is that it had become mandatory to swear a vow – no matter how pointless – before tucking into roast swan, as if to absolve the eater of guilt for the murder. When Alexander Carmichael picks up the tradition in volume two of “*Carmina Gadelica*” the vows are not “negative” but banal.

*Feumaidh mi mo ghruag a ghearradh  
'S m' aithreachas a dhùbladh,  
Mo bhòid gu gramail thoir' dhan eala  
Feuch am mair mo chliù mi.*

“I must get a haircut / And redouble my repentance, / And vow with firmness to the swan / To try and keep my reputation.” Blind Allan himself gives us a variation on this. In his “*Òran don Mhisg*” (“*Song to Drunkenness*”) he describes in five verses how his friend Ronald gets him so drunk in a tavern that he makes a fool of himself. Then he says:

*Is còir dhomh nise thoirt fos near  
An t-aithreachas a dhùbladh,  
Mo bhòid gu gramail thoirt dhan eala  
Dh'fheuch an lean mo chliù rium:  
Cha téid deur a-staigh fo m' dheudaich,  
Is fheudar tighinn as iùnaidh –  
Chan fhaigh fear falamh seòl air aran  
Ach le fallas gnùise.*

“I ought now to consider / Redoubling repentance, / Firmly vowing to the swan / To try and keep my reputation: / Not a drop will pass my teeth, / It must be dispensed with – / A man who's broke can only get bread / By the sweat of his brow.” Ronald then promises to look after Allan and his family, but Allan sticks to his vow, so Ronald reminds him that he it was who found him a wife. “And since you don't like the story told, / It's time for us to part.”

We seem to have found a custom drifting slowly from Germany to Uist. Where it finds fertile soil, it takes root. Underlying it is the idea that by eating swan one ingests its qualities, and nowhere are these qualities better summed up than in this charm against dangers in war:

*Is tu mac eala chiùin sa bhlàr,  
Seasaidh tusa 'measg an àir,  
Ruithidh tusa troimh chóig ceud  
'S bidh fear t' eucorach an sàs.*

“You're the calm swan's son in battle, / You'll stand firm midst the slaughter, / You'll run between five hundred / And your tormentor will be caught.”

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