

The cave of gold

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THERE can be few **WHFP** readers who don't know the story of the Cave of Gold. Briefly, the cave contains a treasure guarded by a monster. It comes farther and farther afield in search of food, harrying the countryside. The time has come to face it. One man volunteers. Saying farewell to his family, he enters the cave with his dog, playing the pipes. Mingled sounds of music, voices and conflict are heard by the people far beneath their feet. The piper seems to say:

*Is truagh, a Rìgh, gun trì làmhhan,
Dà làimh sa phìob is làmh sa chlaindeamh.*

“Oh Lord, I wish I had three arms, / Two for the pipes and one for the sword.” He's never seen again, but the dog emerges from a cave at the far end of the island, with its fur singed off.

One reason why most people know the story is that everyone has a Cave of Gold in their own area. All that's required is a cave-mouth in one place and a cave-mouth in another place, preferably back-to-back. The story joins them up, and will have been gratefully used by generations of mothers to warn their children away from places so unsafe.

Here are a few examples. In a Wester Ross version the piper goes in at Uamh an Òir in Torridon and the dog comes out fifteen miles away at Camas an Òir near Gairloch. The story is also told of Uamh an Òir at North Earradale and a cave at Melvaig. Near Ullapool, the entrance is an Uamh Dhearg in Static Point, Little Loch Broom, and the exit is at Sail Mhór, six miles away. In Arran it's told of the King's Cave on the west side; sometimes the dog comes out elsewhere in the island, sometimes across the water in Kintyre!

There are several references to the story in Otta Swire's delightful classic “Skye: The Island and its Legends”, which Birlinn has just reprinted (£7.99). When the piper is a MacArthur he goes in at Penduin in Trotternish. When he's a MacCrimmon, the cave belongs to “a beautiful woman, believed to have been the Fairy Queen”, who gives him the gift of piping. After a stated time he has to rendezvous with her, and this is where the motif of the singed dog comes in. Swire puts the entrance at Dhubaig near Greshornish and the exit at Harlosh, but it also connects with “Mac Coitir's Cave near Portree, with Fairyland, and, some say, with Hell itself”.

In Tiree, sounds of piping used to be heard going from Cnoc na Clàrsaich (Harp Hillock) to the top of Dun a' Chaolais. These are on either side of the eastern tip of the island. In Rathlin the piper goes in at West Cave, passing under Ushet Lough, the dog coming out at Doon. In Lismore the entrance is at Uamh Chràidh at Baile Ghrundail on one side of the island and the dog comes out at Uamh an Dùine at Creaganaich on the other. In Barra the cave stretches from Cliat on the west side to Port an Dùine in the east.

You may notice that in each of the last four examples the exit is by a *dùn* or fairy hill. Usually such sites are Iron Age ring forts. This is in line with Mrs Swire's description. The Cave of Gold is a subterranean passage leading to some normally impregnable otherworld. It looks small from the outside but is enormous inside. It can be called Fairyland, Hell or Purgatory, depending on your view of theology (or rather eschatology). It isn't heaven, though perhaps some of these pipers thought it was – often there's no ravaging beast, and the motive for entering the cave is curiosity.

It's a wonderfully minimalist tale. Hardly anything is explained. We, the audience, are not in the cave. No reality TV or prying cameras here. It's medieval radio. A few sounds and we guess the rest. The piper's song adds some useful detail however. I take this from “Tocher” no. 47.

*Eadarainn a' chruit, a' chruit, a' chruit,
Eadarainn a' chruit, mo chuideachd air m' fhàgail,
Eadarainn, a luaidh, a luaidh, a luaidh,
Eadarainn, a luaidh: 's i 'ghall' uain' a shàraich mi.*

“Tocher” translates: “Between us the harp, the harp, the harp, / Between us the harp, my companions have deserted me; / Between us, my love, my love, my love, / Between us, my love, it was the green bitch who wore me out.”

This helps explain what has happened. The piper has *not* entered the cave alone. His friends melted away as he played. He faces the *galla uaine* with nothing between him and her but the *crùit*. The “Tocher” editors discuss *crùit* in a note: a lyre, a harp, perhaps “a reference to a lost story of a rival fairy musician”, maybe even a bump in the floor.

I don’t buy any of that, but there are clues which I can’t discuss in a family newspaper, the keys to it being “the green bitch who wore me out” and Otta Swire’s “beautiful woman, believed to have been the Fairy Queen”. Violent otherworld women dressed in green occur frequently in Gaelic stories such as those collected by John Gregorson Campbell; their aim is seduction and murder, no great distinction being made between the two.

There seems to be a connection between our story and that of Thomas Rhymer, who made love seven times in one night to the Queen of Fairyland at the Eildon Tree and went with her through wondrous caves into her realm. In fact the late Alan Bruford pointed out in volume 24 of “Scottish Studies” that the Cave of Gold was “a notable example” of a story whose distribution suggests a P-Celtic (Pictish, British, Welsh) origin rather than a Gaelic (Irish) or Scandinavian one. In Lisbon a few weeks ago I was looking at an astonishing painting called “The Temptation of St Anthony” by Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516), and I suspect the Cave of Gold is the same sort of lurid morality tale. Look at what follows:

*Mo thaobh fodham, 's m' fheòil air breothadh,
Daol am' shùil, daol am' shùil:
Dà bhior iarainn gan sìor siaradh
Ann am' ghlùin, ann am' ghlùin.*

“Tocher” translates: “I lie on my side, my flesh decaying, / A beetle in my eye, a beetle in my eye, / With two iron spikes being constantly jabbed / Into my knee, into my knee.” It’s the vision of hell that Bosch (a surrealist long before Dali) painted for us. The song continues:

*Bidh na minn bheaga 'nan gobhair chreagach
Mun tig mise, mun till mis' á
Uamh an Òir, Uamh an Òir.*

“Little kids will be mountain goats / Before I come, before I return from / The Cave of Gold, the Cave of Gold.” There are another 13 lines, each fresh image stretching the time-span a little further: before he returns, colts at the harrow will be saddled horses, little calves will be milking cows, nursling boys will be men of war, young maidens will have passed away . . .

This, too, is reminiscent of Thomas Rhymer, who spent many years in Fairyland.

The Cave of Gold is the subject of one of Sorley MacLean’s long poems, “Uamha ’n Òir”. He mentions the *gala* (*galla*) several times and it’s clear he thought of her as a dog, not a woman. He says she was *de choin uamhalta bhàis* “of the eerie dogs of death”. On the surface, the poem is about two MacCrimmons – the one who entered the cave, and Dòmhnall Bàn, who was killed at the Siege of Moy in 1746. In Dòmhnall Bàn’s case the cave becomes a metaphor for foretold death, suicide even: *chaidh a' ghala 'na cheann / 's 'na chridhe*, “the bitch went into his head / and his heart”.

The Dunvegan MacLeods were on Cumberland’s side in 1746. Finlay Munro the blind catechist also comes into it, so I *think* Sorley is saying that siding with Cumberland and evangelicalism was the Gael’s way of committing suicide. But I find the poem very difficult.

Fortunately Mr Neil McRae of Broadford seems to understand it better. In a letter published in the **WHFP** on 5 May he described “Uamha ’n Òir” as “in many ways more accessible” than “Dàin do Eimhir”. I hope he will write in again and explain it. But no matter what the cave and its guardian are metaphors for, there’s no doubt that they are wonderful metaphors! So I was thrilled the other day when re-reading volume one of Campbell of Islay’s “Popular Tales of the West Highlands” to find them lurking there.

The fifth, sixth and seventh tales in Campbell’s book are variations on a theme. In “Conall Cra Bhuidhe” the king of Norway is going to hang Conall’s three sons for theft, but is willing to release them one at a time if Conall can show he was ever in a worse jam than

that. So Conall tells three stories about himself. (This is the basic premise of the Decameron and the Arabian Nights, too.) In “Sgeulachd Chonail Chrobhie” the three stories become a serial, but Conall repeatedly brings it to a cliffhanger and refuses to proceed unless one of his sons is released. In “Sgeulachd Chonaill” the stories are told as Conall’s biography, then his sons get into their jam, and Conall recounts his three adventures in verse to get them released.

In “Conall Cra-Bhuidhe” he falls into a hole near the seaside and finds himself in a cave. He’s threatened by an ogre who is blind of an eye and wants to eat him. The ogre is five times called a *famhair* (a big man who lives outside the law and intermarries with fairies) and three times a *béist* (beast, monster). Pretending he can cure the ogre’s eye, Conall blinds the other one instead, then escapes by killing a goat and wrapping himself in its skin. The ogre gives him a ring for his finger, but the ring keeps saying: *Tha mi an-seo!* “I’m here!” Conall cuts his finger off and throws it into the sea. The ogre pursues the voice and is drowned, so Conall goes back to the cave and helps himself to his hoard of gold and silver.

In “Sgeulachd Chonail Chrobhie” the ogre is againn called both a *famhair* and a *béist*. This time Conall goes down the hole to rescue a beautiful damsel whom the ogre is holding captive. Conall hides in a heap of gold and silver, but the ogre chooses that moment to count it. Conall is found, but the ogre has had his dinner and decides not to eat him till next day. When the ogre is fast asleep and snoring, Conall drives a red-hot stake into his open mouth, then decapitates him with his own sword.

In “Sgeulachd Chonaill” the ogre is simply a *famhair*. He lives above ground beside a deep hole which is entered by means of a pulley. He likes to promise people a bag of gold if they will go down and send him up a creelful of gold and silver. He always pulls up the treasure and leaves the people to die in the hole. He does this to Conall, but for a reason explained in the verse, Conall doesn’t die.

The ogre sends his son down with a *claidheamh solais* (“sword of light”) as a lantern. Conall seizes the sword and decapitates him. Then he fills the creel with gold, gets in himself, and gives the rope a tug. When he reaches the top he leaps out and decapitates the ogre. The verse goes:

*Naoi tràtha ann an uaimh an òir
Se bu bhiadh dhomh a’ cholainn chnàmh . . .*

“For nine mealtimes in the cave of gold / My food was the body of bones, / The sinews of feet and hands. / At the end of the ninth meal / I saw a creel coming down, / So I seized the creel, / Put gold below me and above me / And hid in the creel, / Bringing the sword of light – / The best bit of work I ever did.”

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