The Water of Life

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

THE NINTH story in volume one of J. F. Campbell's "Popular Tales of the West Highlands" is "The Brown Bear of the Green Glen". Noted down near Inveraray in 1859 from a "travelling tinker" called John MacDonald, it bears a remarkable similarity to the Grimms' *Das Wasser des Lebens* – "The Water of Life", first published in 1815.

Here's how it goes. The king of Ireland was old and blind, and had lost the strength of his legs (*lùgh nan cas*). The youngest of his three sons, Iain, was said not to be *glic na leòir* (wise enough), but the other two said they would go to the Green Isle at the edge of the great deep – *don Eilean Uaine a bha 'n iomall torra domhain*, where *torra domhain* is probably *tàrr an domhain*, "the belly of the world" – in search of the three bottles of water that would cure him.

Iain thought he would go too, but in the first city he reached in his father's kingdom, whom did he find but his brothers, living it up. "Off you go home, and quick," they said, "or we'll have your life."

"Have no fear of me," he replied, "I don't care to stay with you."

On he went. He was riding through a forest as night fell, so he tied his *each bacach bàn* (lame grey horse) to a tree and climbed up amongst the branches. He hadn't been there long when he saw *math-ghamhainn a' tighinn 's eibhleag theine 'na bheul* – a bear coming with a cinder of fire in his mouth. (I suppose the storyteller had heard of bears in the New World, but confused them with dragons.) *Thig a-nuas, a mhic rìgh Éirinn*, says the bear. "Come down, son of the king of Ireland."

Iain is unwilling but the bear makes it clear that if Iain doesn't come down, he will climb up. I expect this reflects many a céilidh-house debate about whether bears can climb trees. So Iain comes down agus *thàinig iad gu cracaireachd* – they fell a-chatting. After that the bear provided some roast roebuck for dinner, then Iain slept safely between his paws.

In the morning they set off, Iain riding on the bear's back, though he fell off at first. They travel like that all day and in the evening the bear deposits him at the house of an ogre (*famhair*) for the night. The ogre wonders aloud, as ogres will do, whether to send Iain into the ground with his feet or into the air with his breath, but Iain responds by pointing out, as his furry friend had advised, that he had been sent by *mathghamhainn donn a' ghlinn uaine* – the brown bear of the green glen.

That works like a charm, and works again with the next ogre next day, but the bear isn't so sure about the third ogre. You'll have to wrestle him, he says, but if it's too hard, just tell him, "If the brown bear of the green glen were here, he'd get the better of you."

That's how it turns out. The ogre gives Iain such a squeeze that he yells out for the bear, who promptly appears and saves the day. *Seadh! Seadh!* says the *famhair*, who like all Gaelic ogres has the gift of prophecy. "Yes! Yes! Now I know your business better than you do yourself!"

The ogre orders his shepherd to slaughter his best wedder. "Now, Iain," he says, "an eagle will come and settle on the carcase, and it will have a wart (*foinneamh*) on its ear, and you have to cut it off with one blow of this sword without drawing a single drop of blood."

This Iain does, and the eagle invites him onto his back, "because," he says, "I know your business better than you do yourself". They fly off over lands and seas till they reach the Green Isle. "Now, Iain," says the eagle, "be quick, fill your bottles; remember the black dogs are away just now."

Iain fills his bottles with water from the well, but sees a little house. Curious, he goes in, and in the first room he sees a bottle full of *uisge-beatha*. He fills a glass, drinks it, and when he looks down, the bottle is as full as ever. "I'll have this bottle," he says, "as well as the bottles of water."

In the second room he finds a loaf (*buileann*). He cuts a slice, eats it, looks down, and the loaf is as whole as ever. So he takes it. In the third room he finds a big cheese (*mulachag mhòr chàise*). He cuts a slice, eats it, looks down, and it's as whole as ever. So he takes it. In the fourth room he finds, lying there, *an t-aon àilleagan boireannaich bu bhòidhche a chunnaic e riamh* – the most beautiful woman he has ever seen.

Well. We know that nineteenth-century Gaelic storytellers took this sort of thing in their stride. Like 21st-century film-makers, they could handle sex. Unfortunately, nineteenth-century publishers couldn't. Perhaps some day I'll find what "really" happened amongst Campbell's huge collection of papers in the National Library. For now, here's the printed version: *Bu mhòr am beud gun phòg beòil a thoirt dhuit, a ghaoil*, says Iain. "It were a great pity not to kiss thy lips, my love." Soon afterwards, he jumped on the eagle's back . . .

So Iain leaves the Green Isle, and the eagle brings him back to the great ogre's house. Now this ogre sounds like an eighteenth-century landlord. It's rent-day, and the house is full of "farmers, ogres, food and drink". The great ogre genially asks Iain if he's ever seen such drink in his father's house in Ireland. *Puth!* says Iain. *Tha deoch agamsa nach ionann*. "Pooh! I have a drink that's unlike it."

He gives the ogre a drink from his bottle, and it's as full as it was before. The ogre offers him £200 for it, throwing in a bridle and saddle as well. *Is bargain e ma-tà!* says Iain. "It's a deal! Except that my first sweetheart must have it if she comes this way."

This is, of course, the lady of the Green Isle. Iain leaves the loaf and cheese with the other two ogres on the same condition, then goes on to his father's city, finds his brothers, and gives them each a suit of clothes, a horse, a saddle and a bridle, before they all set off for their father's house. But his brothers beat him up, relieve him of the three bottles of water, and leave him for dead. He's saved by a smith, but through being tossed about in a cart full of rusty iron, the rust gets into his wounds, and he becomes *maol carrach* – bald and scabby.

Now we return to the young lady, the daughter of the king of the Green Isle. After nine months she bears a son, but she has no idea whose it is. A hen-wife has the answer: “Here’s a bird,” she says (a cock, I suppose). “As soon as he sees the father of your son, he’ll jump on his head.”

The whole population of the Green Isle is rounded up, but the cock jumps on no one’s head. On she goes to the mainland. She gets her bottle, her loaf and her cheese, and finally comes to the palace of the king of Ireland. All the people of Ireland are gathered together, but the cock doesn’t jump until the *gille maol carrach* is brought in. She falls upon him with kisses. “Iain,” says the king, “it’s you who got the bottles of water for me.”

“Indeed it is,” says Iain. His brothers are done away with, he marries the daughter of the king of the Green Isle, and they live happily ever after, though that’s not quite how MacDonald puts it – he prefers to describe the sounds of a seven-year wedding, liquor gurgling, corks popping and gold being hammered.

So we have basically four scenes. The bear helps Iain get to the Green Isle; he finds the water, whisky, loaf, cheese, woman; he leaves these like a trail and is beaten up by his brothers; she bears him a son and comes to find him.

The German tale is also about a king and his three sons. Again, they are told that only the “water of life” can cure him. The eldest son goes in search of it, but offends a dwarf by telling him to mind his own business, and is imprisoned in a ravine. The same thing happens to the second son. The third son is polite to the dwarf, who tells him that the water of life springs from a fountain in the courtyard of an enchanted castle, gives him an iron wand and two loaves, and tells him what to do.

Reaching the castle door, the prince strikes it three times with the wand. It opens to reveal two lions with gaping jaws. To each he throws a loaf, then he finds a hall where sit some enchanted princes. He draws the rings from their fingers, and helps himself to a sword and a loaf from the table. Opening a door, he finds a beautiful maiden who kisses him and tells him to come back in a year’s time so that they can be married. He collects the water of life and escapes just before the clock strikes midnight.

On his way home he visits the dwarf, who tells him that the sword will slay whole armies and that the bread will never be exhausted. Rather unwillingly, he explains where his brothers are. He releases his brothers, and they ride through three kingdoms. Each time he lends the king his sword to defeat his enemies with, and the loaf to feed his people with. Seeing this, the jealous brothers steal the water of life when he’s asleep and put sea-water in its place.

When they get home the father drinks the sea-water and gets even worse. Producing the real water of life, the elder brothers accuse the youngest one of trying to poison him. The king drinks it and gets well, then orders his huntsman to shoot his youngest son. The huntsman deliberately lets the lad escape. Then three waggons of gold arrive as gifts from the kings whose kingdoms he had saved, and the old king realises his mistake.

Just as in the Gaelic story, the last scene belongs to the princess. Wilhelm Grimm was much more of a prig than Campbell, and no son is mentioned. She simply wants the young man to come and marry her. She has a golden road made to her palace, and orders that whoever rides straight along should be admitted. The eldest son reaches it and says: “It would be a sin and a shame if I were to ride over that.”

He rides along the right-hand edge, and is refused admittance. Thus also the second son, who says: “It would be a sin and a shame, a piece might be trodden off.”

He rides along the left-hand side, and is refused admittance. But in due course the third son comes riding up the middle, and she receives him with joy. Their wedding is celebrated, and before the old king can punish his other sons, they put out to sea and are gone for good.

These two stories are amazingly similar. They’re both the same length but the German one is easier to summarise because it has less humour, less magic, less imagination and less verbal exuberance. This is typical of the difference between Gaelic and German tales. The reason the plots are so similar is that the whole of Europe seems to have shared a common pool of them. That’s a well-known fact. But what gives me a kick is finding how much the German tale helps me appreciate the Gaelic one. Hector Urquhart, who took down the latter, followed MacDonald’s recitation as closely as possible, but found it “difficult to keep him stationary”. Campbell explains: “It should be much longer, but the wandering spirit of the man would not let him rest to dictate his story. They had to move to an outhouse and let him roam about amongst the shavings, and swing his arms, before this much was got out of him.”

Above all, *Das Wasser des Lebens* makes me wonder: is the Gaelic tale designed to show how the secret of distilling was obtained from the Green Isle of the Great Deep?

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