

## The Green Isle of the Great Deep

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I told how the hero of “The Brown Bear” went to the Green Isle at the edge of the great deep – *don Eilean Uaine a bha ’n iomall torra domhain* – in search of the water of life. If “The Green Isle of the Great Deep” sounds familiar, it’s probably because it’s the title of a novel by Neil Gunn.

The Green Isle is the Atlantis of the Gaelic-speaking world. In “The Brown Bear” it may have sounded a little like Islay (being green, reached from Ireland and seemingly famous for distilling). But I think that’s too simplistic. The greenness of Islay as represented in songs is *gorm*, the rich shiny green of ripe grass, as in *Ille ghorm an fheòir*. *Uaine* is a much more enigmatic colour: the pithless yellow-green of new growth, the dye of fairy clothing, the pallor of weeds in shallow water, the unnatural hue of supernatural hounds. Sorley MacLean uses it in one of his poems to hint at mystery and magic: *coille uaine tìr an sgeòil*, “the pale green forest of storyland”.

To understand the Green Isle properly we must put it among the other descriptive Gaelic names for islands. There was, or is, *Eilean nam Ban Móra*, “the Isle of Big Women”. *Eilean Tìr fo Thuinn*, “the Isle of Land-under-Waves”. *Eilean na h-Oige*, “the Isle of Youth”. *An t-Eilean Glas*, “the Grey-Green Isle”. *Eilean nam Muc*, “the Isle of Pigs”. *Eilean a’ Cheò*, “the Isle of Mist”. *Tìr a’ Mhùrain*, “the Land of Bent-Grass”. And, yes, *Eilean an Fhraoich*, “the Isle of Heather”.

Some of these have a pedigree stretching back into our literature. I think they came into being for a series of reasons. They were poetic names given to islands that didn’t really exist except in the imagination. By the time Norse ceased to be understood, the meaning of the names of our islands was lost; that’s an uncomfortable feeling for a people who love to discuss words. Finally, mariners needed code-names to allow them to speak about islands without wishing evil upon themselves. So these became the by-names (or in one case the actual name) of Eigg, Tìree, Eriskay, Scalpay, Muck, Skye, South Uist and Lewis.

Why didn’t *an t-Eilean Uaine* attach itself to a real island? Well, it may have been a bit of an insult. (*Eilean nam Muc* certainly wasn’t – times have changed.) Also, it was believed to be under the sea. For this idea I’m indebted to an article by John Gregorson Campbell published under the title “The Green Island” in Volume Five of the “Scottish Historical Review”. Campbell begins: “In the Hebrides there are traditions of an Island away in the West, submerged by enchantments, in which the inhabitants continue to live as formerly, and which will yet become visible and accessible. Traditions regarding its position vary, each locality placing it near itself, and the tales are of interest as showing the direction popular imagination has taken on such a topic. It would be strange if men, placed on the margin of a boundless sea, and in whose evening entertainments song and poem occupied a prominent part, did not people the cloudy distance with inhabited islands.”

Campbell was minister of Tìree, and despite what he says, I get the feeling that traditions about the Green Isle were focused on Tìree and Barra in particular. Perhaps this explains why Tìree is *Eilean Tìr fo Thuinn* rather than simply *Eilean fo Thuinn*. Was *Tìr fo Thuinn* next door and down the stairs?

Campbell goes on: “The *Sgialachds*, or winter evening tales, often make mention of the ‘congealed sea’ (*muir-teuchd* or *muir tiachd*), the name now commonly given to jellyfish. It was supposed to be the region where sea and sky meet. The water there is like jellyfish, and boats cannot move through it from its consistency. This fancy very likely originated in vague rumours of the Polar ice. Before arriving at this distant region lay ‘The Green Island in the uttermost bounds of the world’ (*an t-Eilein Uaine an iomall an domhain tur*), which is at present invisible from being under enchantments (*fo gheasaibh*).”

He remarks in a footnote that for *an iomall an domhain tur* some say *an iomall an domhain dàmhair*, “but can give no explanation of what *dàmhair* means”. I don’t understand *tur* either. In “The Brown Bear” it’s given as *’n iomall torra domhain*, which makes sense to me as “at the edge of the belly (*tàrr*) of the world”.

Campbell tells us that in ancient lore about giants, Lochlin, the kings of Ireland and distant voyages, Tìree figures as *an t-Eilein Iomallach*, “the Remote Island”. He adds that it was also known as *Rìoghachd Bharrai-fo-Thuinn*, “the Kingdom of Tops-under-Waves”, from a belief that much of it was lower than the surrounding sea.

This could also be understood as “Barra-under-Waves”, and it’s to Barra he turns next. “There was also a tradition that the Island was at one time separated from Barra only by a narrow sound. A woman, milking a cow in Tìree, could throw the cow-shackle (*buarach*) across to another in Barra. Probably the tradition has originated from the existence of peat-mosses under the sandy beaches of the island and the neighbouring sea. After heavy storms, large pieces of peat are cast ashore.”

He now moves on to traditions of the lost island known in places north of Tìree as *Rocabarra* or *Ròcabarra*. This, he says, is attached to Barra, just as the Green Isle is attached to Tìree. He marks the vowel short, but John MacInnes tells me that he has only heard it long. This is worth emphasising, because I can’t find it anywhere in that wonderful new book, “Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes” (Birlinn, £30). Campbell says: “According to the Barra people, there is an Island away to the north-west of themselves, at present submerged, but to reappear in the time of ‘Roderick of the three Rodericks’ (*ri linn Ruaraidh nan trì Ruaraidhean*), a chief of the McNeills of Barra.”

Campbell now refers to “a man prophesying with a shoulderblade”. This would be the Barra seer, Mac a’ Chreachaire, who was renowned for practising scapulimancy (*slinneineachd*), that is, foretelling the future from marks on the shoulderblade (*slinnein*) of a sheep, a world-wide custom. This was his prophecy: “In the time of the last of seven Rodericks, every one of whom was to have a black spot on his shoulder (*ball dubh air a shlinnein*), and of the miller with three thumbs (*muilleir nan trì òrdag*), Roca Barra would appear, or (as the expression may also be explained) a heavy burden was to come on Barra (*thig Roc air Barra*).”

In Uist the tradition was that Rocabarra had appeared twice, and that its third appearance would mark the end of the world: *Nuair thig Rocabarra ris / Is dual gun téid an saoghal sgríos*. (“When Rocabarra is exposed / It’s said the world will be destroyed.”) Campbell explains: “The name of the imaginary island is Roca Barra, and it is alleged to be the property of the ancient family of the MacNeills of Barra. It was sunk by an earthquake at the time a great part of Tiree sank, and its inhabitants every year put past the rent in the eye of a lime-kiln (*sùil àth*) till a chief of the MacNeills comes to claim it. The Island is not large, but is very beautiful, and, according to the Barra people, is the real ‘Green Island’ of old tales. Barra itself has been sold by the MacNeills, and the fourth Roderick in a direct line has been chief, but Roca Barra has not yet been seen.”

Extra strength was given to these traditions by the knowledge that Rockall was marked on sea-charts. For example, Campbell remarks: “It is said that in Hamilton Moore’s *Book of Navigation* the latitude and longitude of Roca is given. Rocabarra is believed by some to be Rockall.”

Campbell now tells a series of eight stories. In the first, a stranger in Mull asks to be ferried across to the Green Isle, which, he tells them, is near Tiree. The only person the boatmen meet there is an old woman with a remarkably healthy appetite. When they leave, they take their eyes off the island. It has never been seen again since.

In the second, a native of the Green Isle marries and has a family in Barra. Over the years he builds a peatstack on Ben Tangaval. When old, he asks to be brought fishing. He instructs that if the night is dark and the boat is away a long time, the fire on Ben Tangaval must be lit. They reach an island. It has one house with one old woman in it. When they get back to the boat, a heavy mist comes down. The bank of shingle on which the boat is beached disappears, and the old man along with it. The beacon on Ben Tangaval guides the boatmen home.

The third is a Tiree version of this. The old man, who is blind, is brought out to the banks to the north-west. He makes them row until Tiree looks like two islands. Then he guides them to the exact spot by feeling the fish they catch. Reaching the island, the boatmen go ashore and find an old woman eating potatoes in a solitary house. They report back to the old man who says, “Aye, Big Sense has got her appetite yet.” They bend down to get their oars. When they look up, the island has gone, and the old man with it.

In the fourth, a Barra fisherman finds a man tangled in his line and pulls him in. He brings him home to live with himself and his family. In seven years the man never says a word, but laughs on three occasions. On a beautiful day in midwinter he finally speaks, remarking that it’s a fine day for thatching in the place he came from. His host promises to bring him home if he will tell the reason for his three laughs.

The first, he says, was on hearing a servant cursing a pair of shoes that was being made for him for being too thin, because he knew the man would never wear them anyway. Indeed he died soon after. The second was on seeing his host’s wife coming in with barley beads on the back of her clothes and her husband obligingly pulling them off. They were there, he says, because she was frolicking with the servant in the barn. The third was on seeing a young woman weeping, for he knew she was weeping for her laughter of last year. After that his host can’t get rid of him quick enough!

Then there’s the Tiree version of the same. The man is fished up off the north-west shore. His name is MacCeallaich and he’s a prior (“sort of judge”), for when he’s let down again the people below are heard exclaiming: *An d’thàine tu, Bhritheir? Do bheatha ’s do shlàinte, a Bhritheir*. “Have you come, Prior? Welcome and good health, Prior.”

In the sixth story, a ship’s crew call at Rocabarra and are hospitably entertained by the islanders. When they go back on board they’re made to leave their shoes. The island then disappears. If they had kept their shoes, even a single particle of dust, it would still be visible.

In the seventh, a Barra man finds a cow on the shore. It breeds so well that soon he has nearly a whole herd from it. When it gets old, he speaks of killing it. It overhears, and disappears with all its progeny. “It was supposed the cow came originally from Roca Barra.”

The final story is similar. A reddish speckled calf is found on the shore. It becomes an excellent milch cow, but at calving time it always disappears and none of its calves are ever seen. “It also was believed to have come from the Green Island.”

This explains the fairy cattle which are said to have come ashore so mysteriously at many different places around Skye and the Western Isles.

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