

Ròcabarraigh revisited

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

EVEN before America was discovered, people in the Western Isles knew that something was out there. Partly because places like St Kilda and Rockall really *were* out there, partly because they found molucca beans and other exotic things washed up on their shores, partly because wise men from Plato onwards had spoken of a lost Atlantis, a Utopia destroyed by an earthquake but still lying under the sea.

When Columbus set sail in 1492 his years of research had convinced him of three things. The world was round. Asia extended east to within a thousand miles of Europe. And there were large islands in between.

Belief in this last point was so strong that the Spaniards later had a clause inserted in their treaty with Portugal reserving “the islands which had not been found” to themselves, while the people of the Canaries petitioned the king and queen to be allowed to annexe “the Isle of the Seven Cities”.

St Kilda lies 40 miles due west of the Sound of Harris. Rockall lies 190 miles due west again, 230 miles from both the Western Isles and Ireland. So wherever the fabled isle of Ròcabarraigh was to begin with, sooner or later it was bound to be identified with Rockall, the existence of which was “proved” by a Dutch map of 1655 showing a large island there without a name. When nothing was found, or when the real Rockall was found (a mountain-top in the ocean, with shallow-water shells in the surrounding sea-bed), it was deemed to appear only once every seven years.

The folklorist Alexander Carmichael had no doubt but that Ròcabarraigh was Rockall. “A bell was placed on Rocabarrai,” he writes in one of his notebooks; he jots down a couple of verses to prove it, then explains: “Composed by Kenth Macasgail Caolas Scalpay to a bodach sannt at Airdhasaig who was sggesting to poet to go to Rockal for fraic.”

Now, as far as I know, Carmichael’s Ròcabarraigh material has never been published before. It was kindly sent to me by Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart after he read my last **WHFP** piece. It’s in three notebooks in Edinburgh University Library (CW 90, 105 and 119) dating from 1871–73. I’m grateful to the Library for permission to use it here.

These are field-notes, so Carmichael takes short-cuts. People are speaking to him in Gaelic but he scribbles it down in English (the language of his education), except for verse, distinctive phrases, and words whose translation is less than obvious, such as *fraic* for *roc*, “tangles”. And he abbreviates: *bodach sannt* is *bodach sanntach* “a greedy old fellow”.

I’ll save the verses for next time. Meanwhile, let me tell Carmichael’s three Ròcabarraigh tales, which look much older. I’ll use his words, tidying up and condensing to save space. The first tale is interesting because it relates to Pabbay, where MacLeod’s baillie for St Kilda resided, and because the hero is an archer, at least his name is *Ìobhar a’ Bhogha Mhaide*, which seems to mean “Ivor of the Wooden Bow” – or “Straight Bow”?

Ivor, a son of MacPhie of Colonsay, lived in Pabbay. He had a friend from Ròcabarraigh who came to see him. Ivor asked him to stand *goiste* (godfather) to his child. He declined, but Ivor pressed him and ultimately he agreed. However, when the clergyman came and performed the ceremony the man handed his *dalta* (fosterchild) to Ivor and said: “I consented to stand *goiste* to your child because you pressed me, but I now leave for Ròcabarraigh and will never come to see you again, for I’ve listened to the clergyman’s prayer (*ùrnaigh a’ phears’ eaglais*) and my *sianta* have left me.”

A *sian* is a protective incantation. The implication (I think) is that Christian prayer has destroyed his defences and he must flee to the safety of his otherworld. The Ròcabarrach concludes: “I leave you a mark of my goodwill, that as long as any of your race (*treubh*) remains in Pabbay neither mouse nor rat nor verminous creatures will live in it, and if they come there they will die.”

He vanished, says Carmichael, and was never seen again. “As long as any of Ivor’s race were in Pabbay no mouse nor rat lived there, but now the island is overrun.”

Carmichael appears to have got his next story in March 1871 from Donald Mackinnon, aged 98, Grianaig, Dalabrog, South Uist, but again it brings us to the Sound of Harris. Mackinnon's grandfather seems to have been in the thigging entourage of Mór mhór Nic Leòid na Hearadh, a daughter of MacLeod of Dunvegan, when she married Ragnall Mór mac 'ic Ailein of the Benbecula family. This would have been in the first half of the eighteenth century.

"Thigging" or "genteel begging", Gaelic *faoighe*, was done by a young couple who were setting up house together. It consisted of going around receiving wedding gifts – in this case from the people of Berneray, which belonged to the bride's father. It would be fair to call it a form of taxation.

Mackinnon told how his grandfather went into a house, presumably to negotiate some kind of gift, along with a man called Dòmhnall mac Iain 'ic Lachlainn 'ic Iomhair – a descendant of Ivor the archer? They heard an *ochan* (groan) at the back of a chest. "Is that a sick man?"

"Yes," said the voice, "and if you will give me a bit of tobacco I'll tell you a story of Ròcabarraigh."

The implication is that information about a little-known Atlantic island was worth a lot more than a bale of wool or some cheese. The tale begins: "I went with three others to kill *bioraichean* (dogfish)."

Almost immediately, however, there's an interruption. Carmichael writes: "Here poor old Donald Mackinnon fell on the floor off his stool in a swoon & I thought he was dead. There were only two little children in, a boy & a girl, & I request them to run for the neighbours. I raised the old man's head & placed a bag with some *diasan*, bere heads [ears of barley], under his head. He vomited. A neighbouring woman came, but she seemed as scared as myself. I placed two shillings in his hand and left. Poor man! Death would be a relief from such wretched poverty & rags & disorder & dirt. Wretched! Wretched! Wretched!"

Carmichael came back for the rest of the story later, and this, according to Mackinnon, is what the Berneray man said: "When out some time we lost sight of land from a thick mist that came down. We were sailing and rowing and at long last we spied land and went ashore. The people of the place met us on the strand and brought us to their houses and kept us there and told us we were in *Ròc a-barai*."

"When there a year and a day one of us saw a vessel passing and wished to be on board, kind as the *Roacabarai* people were. They understood his wish and sent him out. After another year and a day another of us saw a ship. He, too, said: *A rìgh, nan robh mis' air bòrd na té ud, ge b'e ceann an t-saoghail gu bheil i seòladh, bu mhath e seach seo*. 'Lord, if I were on board that ship, no matter what end of the earth she's sailing to, it would be better than this.'"

Clearly he got his wish, for the story resumes: "At the end of another year and a day, they sent me and the other home, to the astonishment of our friends. Here I still am, alive to tell the adventure of the occasion when I went to the haaf to fish *bioraichean*."

The "haaf" is a Norse word for the ocean that stuck fast in Harris Gaelic. Sometimes it's spelt *tabh*.

Carmichael got his third and best Ròcabarraigh story from Duncan Maclellan, mason, Carnan, South Uist, on 26 April 1872. A man came to Barra – no one knew from where – and had three sons. When they went fishing they always went further than the other boats and got a better catch. When he grew old and half blind he said to his sons, "I'm going home now, and you had better come with me to Ròcabarraigh."

"What sort of place is that?"

"*Eilean sianta*. A charmed island. People see nothing but sea over it, but it's quite dry. Come with me and live there."

"No."

"Well, whether you come or not, I'm bound to return, and I'd wish you to follow me."

Some time later he said, "We ought to go fishing today, lads. Bring every barrel, hogshead and pail and put them in the boat."

The other fishermen said, "*Nach ceacharra dhuinn fhìn!* Aren't we stupid! We must follow till we see where they get the fish."

They went out far into the ocean (*cuan*). The other three *sgothan* (skiffs) caught up and were hauling in fish all around them. “Now I’m leaving you,” said the old man, “but there’s this one fishing-bank (*an aon iola seo*), and I’d like to teach it to you before we part. It never failed me. We’re near it now. It’s called *Iola nam Muca Mara*, the Bank of the Whales. Go on till you see three *stuaghannan* (waves), one of them high and the other two folding in on it. Watch out for anything unusual in the sea round about (*comharraichte feadh a’ chuain*).”

“There’s nothing.”

“Time to move on then.”

“No,” said the lads. “Not while the fishing is so plentiful.”

“I don’t advise you to fish. Look well all around (*mór thimcheall*).”

“There’s nothing.”

They sailed on and soon the old man said: “This is *Iola nam Muca Mara* and today is *latha cheann na bliadhna* (the last day of the year), the day *muca mara* (sea pigs, whales) come to sport and frolic (*cluich agus cleasachd*). If we’re in their path, pity us.”

“It’s hard to see,” said one son, “but I’ll stand up. I see like a breaker on a rock. But there never was a *bogha* (reef) there.”

The son reached for the *ball* (anchor rope). “Don’t wait to lift the *cruaidh* (steel),” said the old man, using the fisherman’s word for the anchor. “These are the whales.”

They cut the *ball* and set to before the wind, with canvas out. Before they got away the whales were there in their hundreds. “What has possessed the *bodach*?” said the other crews. “Surely he hasn’t filled his boat.”

He waved to the other crews to get away. At first they only laughed, but before they could escape, the whales were in their midst, breaking and drowning them. They were never seen again. In their fury, many of the pigs followed the old man’s boat. He was continually asking what the pigs were doing and his sons were saying, “The same will happen to us, since you would’t follow our advice.”

The pigs were close astern. They had seven hogsheads of fish. They threw one out. The pigs played with it till they broke it, and so on with five more. They were running near the shore (of Barra, I take it!) when they threw out the last. They got ashore *air éiginn* (only just).

Next day the *bodach* said, “Now, lads, you must send me home. I’ve taught you *aon iola iasg a’ chuain* (the prime fishing-bank of the ocean). Mark *latha cheann na bliadhna*. That’s the only day you have to fear. Mark also the signs I taught you. Send me home now today. So let’s go.”

They stood over to the ocean. “Steer west-south-west and keep open *Bealach na h-Àirigh air Beinn Bheàrnach Bharraigh* (the Shielling Pass on the Gapped Hill of Barra).”

They kept going till they were immoderately far out. The eldest son said, “How stupid we are, going to *cuan mór na h-àirde ’n-iar* (the great ocean of the west) where land is never seen. Had we not better go back? You haven’t named the place yet.”

They went on, and the second son said, “It’s stupid. Let’s go back.”

“No, not yet. I should think we’re not far from the home of my youth now.”

“Nothing is to be seen here but the *cuan mór* (great ocean),” said the youngest son.

The old man said: “You heard the lads who were fishing and landed on the island which created so much talk in Barra. That was Ròcabarraigh, the home of my youth and affection. Though blind, I guess we are near it – *seallaibh uaibh* (look out). Do you see a bit of the *cuan* (ocean) calm and level, nothing but three waves going one way? You can see it different from the rest. We’re in it.”

“What can we ever make of you? We can’t throw you out. You are our father.”

“Do you see the three waves I mentioned? Throw me out there. *Caithibh mise mach an-sin*.”

They threw him out and returned home to Barra after *móran maille* (much delay). Carmichael concludes: “This story is firmly believed in the Long Isle. The reciter heard this from his grandmother.”

15 September 2006