

The real Green Island

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I'VE SHOWN in my last couple of articles that in the Gaelic traditions of Scotland there were two names for the mythical Atlantis. In Argyll it was called *an t-Eilean Uaine* (“the Green Isle”) and in the Outer Isles it was called *Ròcabarraigh*.

Some stories would lead us to believe that the Green Isle was between Tìree and Barra, while *Ròcabarraigh* was far out west beyond St Kilda. I suspect that in origin they were simply the Norse and Gaelic names for the same place. But as Gaelic speakers discovered the oceans for themselves in the company of men from other lands, I think they came to equate *Ròcabarraigh* with Rockall and *an t-Eilean Uaine* with a certain other green island in the Atlantic.

Let me begin however where I left off last time, with a couple more traditions jotted down by Alexander Carmichael (thanks again to **WHFP** reader Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart). In one of his notebooks, now Carmichael–Watson 105 in Edinburgh University Library, Carmichael declares: “A bell was placed on Rocabarrai.”

Then he gives a couple of verses which he seems to have picked up in Harris in September 1873. This is how they go, once the spelling is tidied up. I'm unsure of a word in the second line. It looks like *sunlar* but rhymes with *Rockal*, so I think it might be *dàmhair*. Anyway, the bell speaks:

*Tha mis' air an sgeir ris an can iad Rockal
'S mi chuile dàmhair a' sunndaigeadh,
Ag eubhach a-mach a' toirt caismeachd do chàch:
“Fanaibh gu h-àrd o m' chùrsa-sa!”*

“I'm on the sea-rock they call Rockall, / Tolling on every (?)occasion, / Crying out to warn everyone: / ‘Stay away from my position!’” The rock replies:

*Mun d'fhuaradh a-mach mi chuir mi pailteas gu bàs
A bha iomadach màthair ionndrainneach;
Mo mhollachd 's cha cheil mi air fear a chuir làmh
'Nam leithid, b'e phlàigh san dùthaich e.*

“Before I was found I put many to death / Whom countless mothers have mourned; / My curse, I'll not hide it, on the man who meddled / With my likes, he's a plague on the country.”

Even in this nineteenth-century poem there are a couple of things that have more to do with *Ròcabarraigh* than with the real Rockall. One is the rock's reference to itself as a “country”. The other is the bell.

The idea of a bell on Rockall is ridiculous. Until 1972 there wasn't even a navigation light. The idea comes partly from mariners' tales of hearing a bell tolling under the waves while sailing over the Atlantic, and partly from a well-known story about a bell said to have been placed by the Abbot of Arbroath on the isle of Inchcape, off the entrance to the Firth of Tay. When the Northern Lighthouse Board commissioned young Robert Stevenson (father of RLS) to build a lighthouse on it in 1806, he wrote: “There is a tradition that an Abbot of Aberbrothock directed a bell to be erected on the Rock, so connected with a floating apparatus, that the winds and sea acted upon it, and tolled the bell, thus giving warning to the mariner of his approaching danger. Upon similar authority, the bell, it is said, was afterwards carried off by pirates, and the humane intentions of the Abbot thus frustrated.

“Of the erection of the bell, and the machinery by which it was rung, if such ever existed, it would have been interesting to have some authentic evidence. But, though a search has been made in the cartularies of the Abbey of Aberbrothock, preserved in the Advocates' Library, and containing a variety of grants and other deeds, from the middle of the 13th to the end of the 15th century, no trace is to be found of the Bell Rock, or anything connected with it. The erection of the bell is not however an improbable conjecture; and we can more readily suppose that an attempt of that kind was made.”

So that, too, is folklore – which brings us back to Carmichael, and the following tradition about the Green Isle, also noted in Harris in 1873. “A Bute man Mac Eòin was coming from Bute to Locha Roag Harris. He was down off Barra and drifted. He was suspicious of the ground, so he sounded and found ten fathoms till he put out anchors and in the morning found a great deal of *fraic* round the shore of the isle, 12 x 12 miles.”

Fraic is the same as *roc*, tangles. Carmichael goes on: “There was a ford there, so he set to fish and got a great many salmon (*breac*). They were thick in the ford. He travelled through the isle and found it green and all under his knees frozen with honey. This was the *Eilean Uaine*. Then came the next storm and drove him to Eirinn, where he sold the salmon.

“He then set off again to find this isle, took his course, and although he was certain he sailed hundreds of times over it, never saw it again. The reef of Rockall is 12 x 12 miles and full of old iron and chains. Mac Eòin spent all his means in search of the Green Isle – no inhabitants. Green and beautiful isle.”

This is interesting because it describes the Green Isle in some detail and compares and contrasts it to the “reef” of Rockall. The “old iron and chains” is very odd. In the traditions of the North Atlantic more generally, however, the Green Isle was well enough known, though doubt was cast on its existence. In a paper by Thomas Westropp about the legendary islands of the North Atlantic, published in the proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy in 1912, we're told: “The Bretons had their submerged city of Is; the French and Portuguese told of

the mythic Isles of Maida, Asmada, or Asmanda and Isle Verte, or Ilha Verde, suggesting the *Inis Glas* of other legends.”

Of the *Inis Glas*, regrettably, Westropp says no more. I doubt if he means our *Eilean Glas*, which is Scalpay Harris. Perhaps it's the Irish equivalent of an *t-Eilean Uaine*, given that *glas* in Ireland means green. The only enchanted island that Westropp appears to have heard of in Scottish tradition is *Flaith Inis*, by which I assume he means *flaitheanas* – “heaven”! He says: “Scotland . . . had her ‘Flaith Inis,’ which was surrounded by clouds and tempests, with an island, ‘Caerecennfinn,’ between Scotland and Ireland, where the Irish of Ulster placed their ‘Tir Hudi’.”

“Caerecennfinn” sounds to me like *caora cheannann*, “a white-faced sheep”. Was somebody pulling Westropp's leg? But with the *Isle Verte* of the French and the *Ilha Verde* of the Portuguese we are, quite literally, in charted territory. A Catalan compass chart of c. 1480 shows, due west of County Kerry and due south of the eastern coast of a large island called “Fixlanda” (presumably Iceland), two small islands marked as “Ylla de Brazill”.

Almost twice as far west again are two much larger islands, a round southerly one marked (again!) as “Ylla de Brazill” and a rectangular northerly one called “Illa Verde”. Together they occupy an area equivalent in size to half of Iceland, or to one of the four provinces of Ireland. Much later, in Faden's Atlas of 1776, Green Island or Ilha Verde is given in longitude 24° – due south of the western tip of Iceland.

The location of these “green islands” on the charts points to a “green island” which is very well known indeed. In fact, as we know now, it's the biggest island in the world. Greenland.

Greenland was discovered and named by the Norsemen. According to their sagas, Erik the Red was exiled from Iceland for murder. Along with his extended family and his slaves, he set out to find the land rumoured to be out to the west. After settling there, say the sagas, he called it Grønland (“Greenland”), perhaps to entice more people to come.

On early maps, Greenland was also called *Gruntland* (“Ground-Land”). There's no way of knowing whether “Green” is an erroneous transcription of “Grunt”, referring to shallow bays, or the other way round. But it's worth noting that the southern portion of Greenland, where not covered by permafrost, is very green indeed, at least in summer.

Whether or not there was any truth in the saga of Eric the Red, when settlers arrived from Iceland in about 982 AD they found Greenland completely uninhabited. They established three settlements near the southernmost tip of the island, which is due west of Fair Isle and much, much further south than Iceland. The fjords there were lush and enjoying a mild climate, thanks to the “Medieval Warm Period” in which Northern Europe, too, was basking.

The settlers lived off farming, hunting and trade with the motherland. When Iceland turned Christian in 1000, a bishop was installed in Greenland as well. It became a staging-post for lands still further west and south, to which the Norsemen gave names like Helluland, Markland and Vinland.

Around 1200 the first of the Inuit began to migrate southwards down the Greenland coast from the Arctic islands of what is now Canada. The settlers seem to have coexisted quite peacefully with them at first. But with the arrival of the “Little Ice Age” during the fourteenth century, the climate deteriorated. Contact with Iceland, whose communities were themselves suffering badly, was lost.

By about 1450 the Greenland settlements had disappeared. Historians have put forward various reasons – famine (bones discovered in recent years from this late period were in a condition consistent with malnutrition); bubonic plague; extermination by the Inuit; and attacks by Basque or English pirates, or even slave traders from the Barbary Coast of Africa.

It's clear, then, that the Catalan who drew that map around 1480 put the “Illa Verde” in more or less the right place for the south Greenland settlements, and that he had reason enough to know they were there (or had been, until recently). He placed “Ylla de Brazill” south of the “Illa Verde” but a whopping five thousand miles due north of today's Brazil, with a smaller “Ylla de Brazill” much nearer Ireland; again this was a correct summary of available information, because (as I will show next time) in 1480 the name “Brazil” had as close a connection to Ireland as “Illa Verde” had to Scotland, and since Columbus had not yet discovered America, the name “Brazil” had only one meaning: a mysterious island somewhere out to the west of Ireland.

Turning finally to those Gaels of Scotland who seemed so unsure whether the *Eilean Uaine* existed or not – whether a myth of a lost Elysium, a land under the ocean, or a magic place which appeared every seven years – we can see in these beliefs the doubts and worries of a people who were themselves being affected by climate change, as the rain fell harder, fogs and storms closed down the seas, and fertile upland settlements reverted to bog and waste.

29 September 2006