

Why are penguins so called? (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I WANT to thank WHFP reader Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart (not for the first time!) for sending me some information bearing on one of my recent scribblings. This time it's an article about "O'Brazeel" in the 2006 issue of a Dublin magazine called the "Field Day Review".

You may remember that a month ago I described the contents of a letter allegedly written by William Hamilton in Derry in 1674 to his cousin in England, and printed in London in 1675. Hamilton tells how a ship from Killybegs under the command of one James Mac Donnell discovers the lost isle of O-Brazile where they speak the "old Scotch language".

The "Field Day Review" writers, Michael Griffin and Breandán Mac Suibhne, put this in the context of the Irish literary discourse of its day. The story, they say, was written by Richard Head, son of a minister who was killed by Catholic rebels in Carrickfergus in 1641, and it "allegorizes the transplanting of liberty from the modern mercantile centre to the benighted periphery". In case we begin to guess that it refers to the plight of Ulster Presbyterianism – adrift from its roots, lost in the mists somewhere off Donegal, far out of sight of government, coming clearly into view only when "fire was kindled upon the island by some good Christians", buffeted by the Anglican establishment on one side and the Catholic majority on the other – they choose to stress that "Head's O'Brazeel texts are political rather than religious allegories, and they are culturally and politically Anglocentric".

Never mind, the important thing is that it's an allegory, which means we're entitled to ask what Head was getting at. And by this time, 1675, Brazil has a very real meaning. It's a huge warm country on the far side of the Atlantic, a rediscovered Garden of Eden peopled by innocent savages, or savage innocents. If liberty is to be found by uprooting themselves once again and crossing the Atlantic, that is what the Presbyterian people of Ulster must do.

And so they did. Head died in 1686, and within twenty years they were on the move again. Their plantations had been too successful. The bogs were drained, the fields were cleared, their linen and woollen industries were competing with English mills, and their clamour for religious and civil liberties was shrill and incessant. Queen Anne's government politely suggested that they do it all over again, and helped provide transportation to Philadelphia. In one year alone ten thousand "Ulster Scots" arrived there. Many of them had to travel on south before finding land to their liking at a price they could afford, and during 1746–53 five new counties were created in North Carolina just to accommodate them.

It was at this very point that another allegory was composed, a great poem in Scottish Gaelic which we now call "Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill". It shows the heroes of Clanranald sailing southwards through a great storm, replete with the imagery of Culloden, to arrive safely at Carrickfergus. The poet, Alexander MacDonald, sent a copy of it to a Catholic Irish scholar, Charles O'Conor of Belanagare in Sligo.

Why Carrickfergus? Was MacDonald suggesting that, with Uist bursting at the seams, the islanders be resettled on land vacated by the Ulster emigrants?

Curiously, the "Scots Irish" soon found that their new neighbours in Carolina were to be, of all people, Gaelic-speaking Highland emigrants. When the Revolution came in 1776, the Gaels held firm for the King, and the Ulstermen came out for George Washington's fledgling republic.

P-P-Perplexed? Never mind, I want to talk about p-p-penguins.

The word "penguin" enjoys the same curious trajectory as the name "Brazil". It first appears in one of the Celtic languages; it shows up on early maps of the North Atlantic; it changes its meaning and drifts far to the south; its story is the exciting one of the exploration of the New World in the years around 1500.

Let me explain. Look up any dictionary, and you'll find something like the following information about the word. It's a former name for the now-extinct great auk. Its most obvious derivation is the Welsh words *pen* "head" and *gwyn* "white". Cornish and Breton have the same words with the same meaning. We have them in Gaelic too, as *ceann* and *fionn*. They come together in the likes of Donnchadh Bàn's *caora cheannfhionn*, "white-faced ewe".

The trouble is that penguins don't have white heads. Neither did great auks – they had black heads with two white patches. To get around this problem, other possible derivations have been suggested: English *pin-wing* and Latin *pinguis* "fat". Indeed a contributor to "Zoologist" in 1854 claimed that Newfoundland folk who knew the bird always called it a "pin-wing", as if it had undergone the operation of "pinioning", restricting its wings, or "pin-winging" as it was apparently called in at least one part of England.

Maybe so, but Welsh (or Cornish, or Breton) is still considered to be the front runner, albeit with a question-mark. The Welsh origin of the word was accepted as early as 1638, and many years ago I noted what seemed to be confirmation of it from a manuscript of 1677, said to be a transcript of notes made on Sir Francis Drake's voyage of 1578: "Infinite were the number of fowles, which the Welsh men named Penguin, and Magilanus teamed them geese."

Let's look at some biological facts. The great auk was 30–34 inches high and flightless. It produced one egg a year. It had tiny wings and stood upright. It had a black back, a big white belly, a black bill and a brown head with a white patch in front of each eye. In summer the throat and chin were brown; in winter they were white, but the white eye-patches disappeared, and in any case the bird was seldom seen in winter, when it was at sea. In summer it came ashore on rocky islands to breed, living in large colonies.

The great auk's habitat was around the top of the Atlantic but underneath the Arctic Circle, from Norway through the British Isles, Iceland and southern Greenland to Newfoundland. Its end was tragic, provoked by a demand for great auk eggs and skins – there are eighty stuffed great auks and seventy-five great auk eggs in European and American museums. By 1300 it was gone from Norway and by about 1800 from Newfoundland.

The last of them were apparently killed in the Faroes in 1808, in Orkney in 1812, in Greenland in 1815, in St Kilda in 1840 and in Iceland in 1844.

Their final safe refuge was an Icelandic island named after them – Geirfuglasker. It was destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 1830, and the surviving birds settled on nearby Eldey (“Fire Island”) which, unfortunately, was easily accessible from land. On 3 June 1844 the last pair was beaten to death and its egg broken.

Both its English names, auk and garefowl, seem to be Norse in origin – *alka* and *geirfugl*. That tells us something. In German it’s *Riesenalk* (giant auk), *Meerganse* (sea goose) or *Fettganse* (fat goose), while in French it’s *pingouin*, an Antarctic penguin being *manchot* or *grand pingouin*. This shows that the French were involved in the development of the word. The Spanish have it as *alca gigante* or *pingüino*.

These French and Spanish terms are clearly influenced by Latin *pinguis*. And the bird’s scientific name, as fixed by Linnaeus in 1758, is *Pinguinus impennis*, meaning a fat bird with no large wing-feathers. But none of this explains where the -e- of the English term and the -n- of the English, French, Spanish and Linnaean terms come from.

Turning then to the Celtic languages, my Welsh dictionary tells me that an auk is *math o aderyn y môr*, *awc* (“a kind of sea-bird, auk”) and that a penguin is not *pengwyn* but *pengwin*, which shows that, at least in its present meaning, it has entered Welsh from English. Not much help there, nor am I aware of any recorded sightings of the bird in Wales, Cornwall or Brittany.

Its Gaelic history is an entirely different matter. In “Carmina Gadelica” Alexander Carmichael noted its name as *gearr-bhall* or *gearra-bhall*, translating this as “the squat spotted one” and describing it as follows: “The extinct gair-fowl, the great auk. It was a low-set bird, with a patch of white on each side of the head, and the name is descriptive.”

I’m not convinced. *Gearr-bhall* or *gearra-bhall* is “a short spot”. For “the squat spotted one” I’d expect *gearrbhallach*. To me *gearr-bhall* and *gearra-bhall* look like Gaelic adaptations of *geirfugl* or “garefowl”. *Fugl* is “fowl” but the “Oxford English Dictionary” can’t explain *geir*. I don’t see how it can be Gaelic *gearr* “short” because it was a very big bird. But it could certainly be Gaelic *geir*, which means tallow, fat, grease or suet – in which case *geirfugl* and “garefowl” join an already substantial list of Norse and English words influenced by Gaelic.

Carmichael gives two St Kilda songs which mention it.

*M’ eudail thusa, mo lur ’s mo shealgair,
Thug thu ’n-dé dhomh ’n sùl ’s an gearrbhall.*

(“You are my darling, my love and my hunter, / You gave me yesterday gannet and garefowl.”)

*Bheir thu ’m fulmair ’s bheir thu ’n gearrbhall,
’S bheir thu ’n sgarbh á calg an rubha.*

(“You’ll bring the fulmar and you’ll bring the garefowl / And you’ll bring the skart off the point of the headland.”) In Martin Martin’s day it was clearly a common bird in St Kilda, for he says in his “Late Voyage to St Kilda” of 1698: “The sea-fowls are, first, Gairfowl, being the stateliest, as well as the largest of all the fowls here, and above the size of a solan goose, of a black colour, red about the eyes, a large white spot under each eye, a long broad bill; stands stately, its whole body erected, its wings short, it flyeth not at all, lays its egg upon the bare rock, which, if taken away, it lays no more for that year; it is *palmyes*, or whole-footed, and has the hatching spot upon its breast, *i.e.*, a bare spot from which the feathers have fallen off with the heat in hatching; its egg is twice as big as that of a solan goose, and is variously spotted, black, green, and dark; it comes without regard to any wind, appears the first of May, and goes away about the middle of June.”

I’m intrigued by this reference to the first of May – *Latha Buidhe Bealltainn*, a witching day – because there’s a tale (I found it on the internet) that the last garefowl to appear in St Kilda was destroyed in the belief that it was a witch. It was alleged to have happened in 1840, when the island had had a resident minister, the Rev. Neil MacKenzie, for ten years, and even if there’s truth in it, I don’t know whether it means the islanders had too much religion or not enough. I’ll try and find out more.

Next time I’ll tell the story of Penguin Island off Newfoundland, which holds the secret, I believe, of this triple mystery – why a black-headed bird from the North Atlantic was called a “white-head”, why “white-head” was in Welsh, and why the name was transferred to a black-headed bird from the South Atlantic!

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