The Three Soldiers

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST year a mention of the Green Isle in “The Brown Bear of the Green Glen”, the ninth story in John Francis Campbell of Islay’s “Popular Tales of the West Highlands”, sent us off on a voyage of exploration across the Atlantic that lasted for months.

I have no idea what’s going to happen this year. But let’s start by seeing what the tenth story, “The Three Soldiers”, has in store for us. Campbell got it from his assistant, the Islay schoolmaster Hector Maclean, who had it from “a young lad of the name of James McLachlin, who is at present in my own employment”.

That was in 1859 or 1860. If you ask how a mere country schoolmaster could be an employer, my answer is this: the single biggest difference between then and now is that down to those times there was a huge pool of cheap labour of both sexes for hire to do every sort of work both inside and outside the house.

This isn’t well understood, because down to Campbell’s time class distinctions were so rigid that those who could write wasted little ink on those who couldn’t. When Samuel Johnson and James Boswell wrote about their tour of the Highlands and Islands in 1773, Johnson, the older man of the two, failed to mention that there were three of them on the journey, while Boswell makes it clear that some readers would think him soft in the head for introducing a member of the underclass: “Dr Johnson thought it unnecessary to put himself to the additional expense of bringing with him Francis Barber, his faithful black servant, so we were attended only by my man, Joseph Ritter, a Bohemian, a fine stately fellow above six feet high, who had been over a great part of Europe, and spoke many languages. He was the best servant I ever saw. Let not my readers disdain his introduction. For Dr Johnson gave him this character: ‘Sir, he is a civil man, and a wise man.’”

Another answer is that country schoolmasters were expected to eke out their meagre salaries by running a farm or croft. Campbell was paying Maclean to find stories and write them down for him. He couldn’t do both. Probably Maclean passed Campbell’s money straight to MacLachlan for looking after his cattle while he went collecting. Campbell gives MacLachlan’s designation twice as “servant, Islay”.

Late in 1859 or early in 1860 Maclean told Campbell that MacLachlan got both “The Brown Bear of the Green Glen” and “The Three Soldiers” from “an old woman that lives somewhere up the way of Portaskaig, who, he says, can repeat several more, and to whom I intend immediately to apply”. On 27 May 1860 he reported back: “After speaking to the old woman MacKerrol, I find that, from age and loss of memory, she is unable now to tell any of the tales she was wont to repeat.”

What a pity no one collected Gaelic stories in Johnson and Boswell’s day. But such an activity would have been directly contrary to Johnson’s philosophy. He genuinely believed that civilisation, which he liked to call “politeness”, came from God through kings and flowed downwards and outwards through their courts and governments. “Every chieftain is a monarch, and politeness, the natural product of royal government, is diffused from the laird through the whole clan . . . As government advances towards perfection, provincial judicature is perhaps in every empire gradually abolished.”

So much for devolution. In the eighteenth century it took Macpherson, Hume, Rousseau, Voltaire and the American and French revolutions to make a dent in the first half of this philosophy. In the nineteenth it took the emergence of nationalism – a necessary antidote to imperialism – to make a dent in the second half. When the Grimms invented the art of folktale collecting in 1810–12 it was as German-speaking citizens of Napoleon’s empire. And the first person to publish a Gaelic folktale, in 1836, was John Mackenzie, a Gairloch man who had no love for the establishment, and is no stranger to this column.

The plot of “The Three Soldiers” is this. When their regiment marches out of Dublin (*Bailecliath*), a sergeant, a corporal and a private soldier (*saighdear singilte*) called Iain are so busy seeing their sweethearts that they are left behind. Setting off in pursuit, they come at night to an empty house where they find food on the table and three beds. Iain helps himself, and the other two nervously follow his example.

After eating they lie down. Soon three big red-haired girls (*trì nigheanan mòra ruadha*) come in. They each lie down *aig beulthaobh gach té de na leapaichean* – “at the front of each of the beds”, that is, as you would expect, on the side of the box-bed that opens upon the room. This sort of thing gave the Victorians big headaches, and Campbell translates it as “one of them stretched herself near each one of the beds”!

Red-haired women are bad luck at the best of times, and the soldiers are clearly in some sort of otherworld dwelling, for in the morning the women disappear and the men find the food on the table again as if they had never touched it. This all happens three times, because Iain is having a good time and insists on staying. When the women come back the second night *chaidh té laidhe anns a h-uile leaba dhiu* “one lay down in each bed” but Campbell says they “went to lie down as before”. When they come back the third night the soldiers are already in bed as usual and *laidh iad as an déigh* “they lay down after them”. That’s what Campbell says too.

On the third morning each woman has a gift for her man. The sergeant gets a purse (*sporan*) which is always full of gold and silver no matter how often he opens it. The corporal gets a tablecloth (*tuthailt*) which will be full of food whenever it is unfolded. And Iain gets a whistle (*fideag*) which will put him in the middle of his regiment whenever he blows it. The women then leave, but Iain is desperate to find out who they are, so he follows them but finds them weeping. *Dé th’ oirbh?* he says. “What’s the matter?”

“We’re bewitched (*fo gheasan*),” they explain, “till we find three young men who will sleep with us (‘spend three nights with us’, says Campbell) without asking any questions, and if you hadn’t followed us we would be free!”

“Is there any other way for you to get free (*ma sgaoil*)?”

“Yes! There’s a tree at the end of the house, and if you were to come back at the end of a year and a day and uproot it (*a spìonadh*), we would be free.”

The three soldiers decide not to rejoin their regiment but walk back to Dublin. Iain takes it into his head to visit the king's daughter, and the others fail to dissuade him. This seems strange until we realise that, including the sweethearts at the beginning, we've met two kinds of women, and *nighean an rìgh* is the third. Iain is fired up and looking for a challenge.

He asks to speak to the king's daughter and offers her his *fìdeag*. "When you play it," he says, "you'll be in the middle of such and such a regiment."

Quite rightly, she kicks him down the stairs, but not before relieving him of the *fìdeag*.

"How did you get on?" say the sergeant and the corporal.

Mheall i 'n fhìdeag uam. "She tricked me out of the whistle."

He gets a loan (*coingheall*) of the purse from the sergeant, and the same thing happens, so he borrows the tablecloth from the corporal, and in he goes again. This time he's ready. He gets the princess to stand on one corner of the tablecloth so that he can open it out properly, then he makes a wish, and sure enough, in five minutes they're on a desert island – *ann an eilean iomallach na doimhne*!

Now this is typical of story-tellers. We've been told it's a tablecloth which always has food on it. Suddenly it's a carpet which flies through the sky. It doesn't matter. These motifs are fluid and international. The Gaelic audience knew its "Arabian Nights" as well as any in Europe.

They come to a beautiful hollow, and Iain "puts his head in her lap and takes a death-grip of her apron" (*chuir esan a cheann 'na h-uchd-se 's rinn e gréim bàis air a h-apran*) so that she can't get away without him noticing. This is what you might call a compromising situation. Campbell translates it faithfully, and gives us a clue in his introduction as to what he thinks it means: "Translations are vague, because translators are bashful; but those who have travelled amongst half civilized people, understand what is meant when the knight lays his head on the lady's knee, and she 'dresses his hair'. In German, Norse, Breton, and Gaelic, it is the same."

When Iain falls asleep she unties her apron, leaves him there, stands on the *tuthailt*, wishes that she were back in her father's house, and off she goes.

Waking up alone, Iain discovers two sorts of apples. One sort gives him a deer's head (*chuireadh iad ceann féidh air*), the other takes it away again. I wonder if this has anything to do with scurvy, whose horrors I recounted last time?

He gathers a store of both kinds, and is rescued by a ship. The sailors sprout deer's heads after stealing some of the apples. The captain promises to give him the ship and its cargo if he cures them, which he does. They dock in Dublin and he goes around the streets in rags selling apples. The princess leans out of a window and asks to buy a pound of them. He gives her one to taste and she gets a deer's head.

The king announces that anyone who can cure his daughter will have a peck of gold, a peck of silver and her hand in marriage (*peic òir is peic airgid, 's i féin ri phòsadh*). Iain goes in in his rags and proceeds to demonstrate for us the medieval belief that disease is primarily caused by sin. Producing a book like a vengeful angel, he demands to know if she ever tricked a poor soldier out of his whistle.

Mheall. "I did."

"If that's not found, I can't cure you."

The whistle is brought, he gives her a piece of apple, and *thuit fear de na cabair dhith*: one of her antlers fell off. "I can't do any more today," he says, "but I'll be back tomorrow."

He makes contact with the sergeant and corporal, whom he finds *a' buacadh aoil 's a' tarraing uisge do chlachairean* – slaking lime and drawing water for stonemasons. They don't recognise him, and he gives them ten shillings each. Then he returns to the ship.

Over two days more he repeats the rigmarole until he has the purse and the tablecloth, the princess is cured, and he gets his peck of gold and his peck of silver, but when he's told he can marry the princess now he says: "I'll be back tomorrow." That night he tells the captain he can keep his ship and his cargo as he has enough for himself, and next day he comes back to the palace.

"Are you going to marry me today?" says the princess.

Chan eil na 'màireach. "Neither today nor tomorrow."

He gives the sergeant back his purse and the corporal his tablecloth. It's a year and a day since he promised the three women he would be back. They buy horses, gallop off to the house in the country, and uproot the tree. The three girls appear, *geal, gàireachdach agus saor o na geasan* – bright, smiling and free of enchantment. They all go back to Dublin and get married.

A bottomless purse, a magic tablecloth, three women bewitched, a greedy princess, apples that can give you a deer's head, and apples that can take it away. Would you expect to find all these elements in a German story as well as a Gaelic one? Watch this space.

5 January 2007