The clothing blessing

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

Meal is caith e! "Enjoy it and wear it!" Or maybe: *Gum meal 's gun caith thu e!* "May you enjoy and wear it!"

Many **WHPF** readers will have said this when pulling a brand-new jumper over their children's heads, or will at least have happy memories of hearing it said when they were children themselves. But I wonder how many readers know that it used to be considered unlucky for a woman to say it?

This could be quite tricky when you consider that all clothes used to be home-made, and every aspect of their manufacture was women's work – except one. A tailor would come around and stay a week or two, plying his needle and telling stories. So, says the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell, any time a man put on a new suit the tailor should wish him luck of it, "if he had the good sense".

Intriguingly, Campbell goes on to tell us that prudent women delayed their congratulations and good wishes till they were satisfied that some male friend had spoken first, but that it was "less unfortunate" if the woman had had a male child. In Tiree, when a man put on a new suit for the first time, a woman who met him might say: *An d'thuirt iad riut e?* "Have they said it to you?"

On the other hand, if the woman were married and her firstborn were a son, she could use the expression freely. She would add the reassurance: *Faodaidh mise a ràdhain.* "I am allowed to say it."

It's a good example of a thing that may seem innocent and charming to us nowadays, but if it happened in a story, in the minds of the traditional audience it helped build up an atmosphere of impending doom.

One example is the tale *Gille nan Cochall Craicinn* ("The Lad of the Skin Coverings"). The hero of this is a smart young lad called Ceudach. When playing shinty with his two best friends the ball sails through a window and smashes a woman's silverwork. (Silverwork? That suggests that it's a very old story.) When Ceudach asks very politely if they can have their ball, she gives it to them but prophesies that they will die in battle *cùl ri cùl* – "back to back".

Like musketeers, off they go to win *nighean Rìgh na Cathrach Iarainn*, the daughter of the King of the Iron City, for the best-born of the three. She is guarded by a monster, whom Ceudach manages to defeat after the other two fail. The princess insists on having Ceudach as her husband, but demands that they all meet again after a year and a day.

Ceudach tells his bride that he intends to go and find the famous warrior Fionn. That night she makes him *deise chraicnean gun mhear gun uireasbhaidh*, a suit of skins without fault or flaw. She helps him into it and declares: *Gum meal 's gun caith thu do dheise, 's tu Fear nan Cochalla Craicinn.* "May you enjoy and wear your suit, you are the Man of the Skin Coverings."

Oops.

Ceudach and his wife find Fionn and his warrior-band, the Féinn. Fionn gives him a job as cook, and he works his way up to being a warrior himself. Fionn asks Ceudach's wife if he may bring her husband on an expedition. She extracts from Fionn a promise that he will bring him back to her whether he is alive or dead.

The expedition is successful, and when they are on their way back Ceudach sees two ravens flying by. He goes up to join them. Fionn goes to look for him, and finds him and his two old friends *cùl ri cùl marbh air lianag ghorm an clachan a' chladaich*, back to back on a green meadow amongst the stones of the shore.

The Féinn bring home Ceudach's corpse, and his wife laments him throughout the night. As dawn breaks she sees a *curach* nearing the shore. On board are two men, *fear san toiseach 's fear san deireadh, 's claidheamh an t-aon aca 's iad tilgeil nan ceann far a-chéile*. "One in the bow and one in the stern, each with a sword and each throwing each other's head off."

They come into the shore, and she says: *Nach feuch sibh an cleas beag o chian air an fhear a tha 'na laighe 'n-seo?* "Won't you try the little trick of old on the man that's lying here?"

Obligingly, one of them cuts – well, "throws" – the dead man's head off with his sword, and up springs Ceudach as healthy as the day he was born. The two men are his old childhood friends.

Fionn and his warriors appear. They carry the three men on their shoulders to Fionn's house, and proceed to hold a feast lasting seven days and seven nights, the second-biggest feast that the Féinn have ever had.

So it's a wonderful story about friendship and marriage and the after-life. Don't take it too seriously, but note the message that unless women enjoy excellent relations with the otherworld they shouldn't be quick to say: *Gum meal 's gun caith thu e!*

In surviving Gaelic tradition, there's some ambivalence about whether women should utter the clothing blessing or not. Campbell himself tells us that when they have waulked the cloth, the women sing:

Ath-aodach seo, 's na na faoigh e,
Cha chuid cléir no sagairt e
Ach a chuid fhéin, 's gum meal 's gun caith e e.

("May this be second cloth, not cadged from others, / Nor the property of cleric or of priest / But his own property, and may he enjoy and wear it.")

Campbell explains *ath-aodach* as meaning that the cloth should still be as good as new "when turned, or made into a second suit". He also points out that the cloth found on dead bodies was a perquisite of the priest's, and that "in olden times the seventh yard (*slat*) of chequered cloth (*clò breac*) was given to the factor and priest, as well as the seventh lamb from the fold".

What Campbell doesn't explain is how the women could be allowed to sing *gum meal 's gun caith e e*. But these words are noticeably absent from other versions of the rhyme, and I think the explanation is to be found in Ada Goodrich Freer's book "Outer Isles" where she tells how the women sang all their waulking rhymes, then ended with a grace seeking God's protection for the man wearing the cloth (from the evil eye, and from danger in battle). "And then," she says, "some man of the party – it would not be etiquette for a woman – turns to the owner and says with emphasis: 'May you possess it and wear it.'"

Freer got her information from Fr Allan McDonald of Eriskay, who confirms in one of his folklore manuscripts: "It is considered unlucky if a woman should be the first to say to a person with a new article of dress *Gum meal 's gun caith sibh e*."

This brings us to another story, that of *Eoghan a' Chinn Bhig*, "Hugh of the Little Head". Eoghan was a MacLean of Lochbuie in Mull whose head was so mangled in battle that he became a ghastly spectre. The events leading up to the battle are described with much accumulation of detail. Early on, Eoghan meets a washer-woman at the ford. *Agus an tig mi fhéin beò ás a' chath, a mhuimeag?* "And will I escape alive from the battle, little foster-mother?"

Thig, she replies, *ma bheannaicheas do bhean dha do dheise chlò*. "Yes, if your wife blesses your suit of cloth."

On the morning of battle he puts on new clothes. A servant woman comes in at that moment and says: *Meal is caith e!*

Hugh snaps back: *Na na meal thusa do shlàinte*. "May you not enjoy your health."

These exchanges are loaded with ambiguity. Had his wife borne him a son? Was the woman more than a servant? Anyway, it's as a living corpse that he leaves the battlefield.

Under *meal*, Dwelly – of all people – confirms how the clothing blessing is made a curse. *Na 'n na mheal thu e!* "May you never enjoy it! May you never live to wear it!" It's the dominant theme of a Jacobite song by the poet Alexander MacDonald, containing all the usual characters: Prince Charles and his father King James, Duke William of Cumberland and his father King George.

"*Na na mealadh mise casag* . . . May I never wear a cassock, or my short coat made of tartan, if I'm not glad to go and tear them to muck out George Hanover homewards.

"*Na na mealadh mi mo léine* . . . May I never have my shirt on, though it's the warmest of my clothing, if I'm not keen to go and shred it for George's flight and James's crowning.

"*Na na mealadh mi mo bhreacan* . . . My plaid, too, may I not enjoy it, nor all my wealth – no, nor my person, if I'm not glad to give them up now for the King's cause and the cause of justice.

"*Na na mealadh mi mo ghòirseid* . . . May I never wear my gorget, the pistol, dirk, and this great broadsword, if I'm not glad to use them in battle to banish William to Hanover's ground.

"*An t-anam fhéin, ge geur ri ràdh e, na na mealadh mise ràith e* . . . The soul itself, though it's hard to say it, may I not have it for one season unless I'm glad, with kinsfolk's blessing, to go and use it in Charles's interest."

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