

## What colour is the sea?

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN English or in Gaelic, what colour is the sea? If you're reading this on a ferry, or if your living-room overlooks the sea, you can decide for yourself.

Of course the real answer is that the colour of the sea depends on light and perspective, so let me temporarily change the question. What's the Gaelic for "the deep blue sea"? That is, what's the quintessential colour of the sea in Gaelic?

I think I found the answer to this the other day when I was reading Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair's long poem "An Àirc" from about 1750, in which he visualises a flood coming over Argyll, advises the Campbells to build an ark to save themselves, and discusses which of them are worth pulling out of the water and which are not.

One of the latter kind was the Rev. Lachlan Campbell of Ardnamurchan, of whom the poet says sarcastically:

*On chaill e càirdeas gach tìre  
'S gach Crìostaidh rìoghail air thalamh,  
Na toir fairge ghlas is tìr dheth —  
Dèan ìobradh do rìgh na mara!*

Since the minister has "lost the friendship of every land and of every loyal Christian on earth", he's saying, "don't take both *fairge ghlas* and land from him – make a sacrifice to the king of the sea!"

In other words as he's lost the land, give him the sea instead. This is the sea generalised, as opposed to the land, just the sort of place where we might say "the deep blue sea" in English. So what exactly is *fairge ghlas*?

Well, the late Angus MacLeod of Oban High School translated the third line "Do not rob him of green sea and land." I'm not sure about "green sea". With the exception of our habit of referring to vegetables as *glasraich*, the green qualities of *glas* are history. Most people nowadays would tell you that *glas* was grey. I think the problem for MacLeod was that "grey" in English, unlike *glas*, is devoid of positive or dynamic qualities. Personally I'd bite the bullet, accept that *an fhairge ghlas* is "the deep blue sea", and render the third line as: "Do not deprive him of blue sea and land."

What I mean is that we have to accept that in English the characteristic colour of the sea is blue, and that in Gaelic it's *glas*. Then we can ponder the definition of *glas*.

Personally, I had a go at defining *glas* quite a long time ago, in my book "Cothrom Ionnsachaidh". I described it as: "grey, ashen, wan; pale green; 'green' in the English sense that refers to a rookie or raw recruit, e.g. *manaidsear glas* 'an inexperienced manager'. Dull grey of hair, as opposed to *liath*; *pàipear glas* 'brown paper' (Tìree). The colour of new growth, young grass, leaves or corn; becoming light (as opposed to *ciar*), e.g. *glasadh an latha* 'dawn'."

As far as the spectrum is concerned, then, *glas* seems to cover the stretch from milky white through grey to pale green. The *pàipear glas* which I picked up in Tìree in 1979 seems to be the exception, but I think it can be explained. What we call (or used to call) "brown paper" is often yellow or greenish yellow, a pale indeterminate colour. But it's also often quite shiny, and I think that's an important quality of *glas*. It's never used of cattle, so there's no such thing as *crodh glas* or *bó ghlas*, which sounds ridiculous.

Meaning "sallow", *glas* was so common as an epithet – *Dòmhnall Glas* or the like – that it gave rise to a surname, Glass, in parts of Easter Ross and Sutherland. I now think *glas* can only refer to the skin, never the hair. This is a big fault-line for Gaelic colours. White or blond hair is *bàn*, white skin is *geal*. Red hair is *ruadh*, a red complexion is *dearg*. Grey hair is *liath*, a grey complexion is *glas*. The skin colours are changeable, like the sea.

So *glas* is grey with a sheen – a bright, living, dynamic grey. Nothing proves this better, I think, than its use for swords.

When swords appear in the earliest Gaelic poetry they are *gorm*, the word used nowadays for blue. That's because they were made of unrefined burnished iron, whose colour was black, hence "blacksmith". Anything black and shiny, be it an iron sword, a horse, or a head

of hair, was in Gaelic *gorm*. This fed into English usage, so we hear of “blue blades” and “Blue Donald”.

Gradually blacksmiths learned the techniques of improving the quality of iron by heating it in the fire and striking it on the anvil to burn off as many impurities as possible. This resulted at first in a speckled appearance, as we find in a description of arrowheads in a MacGregor poem from about 1600:

*Cinn bhreac sgiathach  
Air dhreach dialtaig:  
Cha tig iarann garbhcail orr’.*

“Speckled winged heads / The shape of a bat: / Coarse iron isn’t good enough for them.”

Gradually more and more impurities were removed, till by 1700 the colour of a sword had become *glas*. So *glaslann a tharraing ri d’ shròin* was “to draw a grey blade to your nose” – in salute, that is. And in Mac Mhaighstir Alastair’s “Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill” we find:

*Gum beannaicheadh Dia ar claidhean  
’S ar lannan Spàinnteach geur glas.*

“May God bless our claymores / And our sharp grey Spanish blades”. The best swords at that time came from Toledo in Spain.

The fourth stage was steel, in which iron is tempered with carbon and other substances, producing a silver sheen, so that by 1800 swords were no longer routinely *glas* but *geal* – “bright”. There’s a consistent parallel between the *glas* of swords (black iron gradually turning white as technology develops), the *glas* of dawn (night becoming day), and the *glas* of vegetation (colourless shoots emerging from soil to become, in due course, fully-fledged plants).

Now let’s go back to “Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill” to find an answer to my first question: what colour is the sea?

The poem describes a voyage from South Uist to Carrickfergus, through the sea in all its moods. Thirteen different colours are mentioned in it, but if we strip away everything that doesn’t refer to the sea, this is what we find: *glas* occurs seven times, *gorm* six, *dubh* and *geal* three each, and *ciar*, *lachdann*, *liath* and *odhar* once each, totalling twenty-three references to the colour of the sea in the course of 569 lines of verse.

That’s probably as good an answer as you’ll find anywhere, and it makes interesting reading in different ways. Firstly, it confirms that *glas* is the pre-eminent colour of the sea. Secondly, *uaine*, the primary colour green, is nowhere to be found. Thirdly, three of these eight colours (*ciar*, *lachdann*, *odhar*) have disappeared from the modern Gaelic lexicon and I doubt if any of them are to be found in Gaelic medium education textbooks, except in old songs. They dropped out of people’s consciousness somewhere between the poetry of Sorley MacLean (1911–96), who was heavily influenced by the old songs, and of Iain Crichton Smith (1928–98), who wasn’t. In fact when I went looking for the colour of the sea in Smith’s poetry the first one I found was *uaine*.

*Chaidh thu air chall  
am measg lusan dìomhair a’ ghrunna  
anns an leth-sholas uaine gun ghràdh.*

“You went astray / among the mysterious plants of the sea-bed / in the green half-light without love.”

Let’s look at the “Birlinn” findings in a little more detail, firstly to check how *ciar*, *lachdann* and *odhar* are used – after all, these are usually cow-colours, not sea-colours. *Ciar* comes up in a metaphor about the ocean pulling its *mantal ciar-dhubh*, “brown-black mantle”, over itself as a storm approaches. *Lachdann* (“dun”), *odhar* (“sallow”) and an instance of *gorm* are packed into this magnificent verse describing the same thing.

*Dh’fhàs i tonn-ghorm, tiugh, tàrr-lachdann,  
Odhar, iargalt’ –*

*Chinn gach dath bhiodh ann am breacan  
Air an iarmailt.*

“It grew wave-blue, thick, dun-bellied, / Sallow, surly, / With every colour in a tartan plaid / Spread on the sky.” That at any rate is how I translated it in my book “An Lasair”, but there are problems. *Tàrr-lachdann* isn’t “dun-bellied” but “belly-dun”, “belly-brown” – the sea took on the colour of a cow’s belly. And in *tonn-ghorm* the colour is shiny black. I should have said not “wave-blue” but “wave-black”.

So is *glas* the colour of the sea when calm, *gorm* when in storm? There’s some evidence for that in the poem. *Glas* occurs four times when the birlinn is being rowed, twice when she’s being prepared for sail, once in the storm. *Gorm* occurs twice when rowing and four times in the storm.

But it may also be a matter of perspective. An oarsman interacts with the sea, stirs it up, looks down into it. A sailor looks at the surface and the horizon. And nothing is simple. When the oars strike *mullach nan gorm-chnoc gleannach*, “the tops of the valleyed *gorm* hills”, is *gorm* the rich green of grass-covered hillocks or the shiny blue-black of storm-tossed waves?

The answer is: this is world-class poetry. So it’s both. And for *gorm* as rich green, watch this space.

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