The epitome of a colour

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

HERE'S a story from Islay told by Lord Archibald Campbell in his book "Records of Argyll" (1885). A man and a young woman are going to marry, but he has to leave the country for a while – to make some money, I suppose – so they each agree to let seven years go by before marrying anyone else.

Off goes the man. Of letters Campbell says nothing, so perhaps the girl can't read or write. By the time six years or so have gone by her friends and family are getting impatient. An arrangement is made for her to marry another man, and she agrees.

She and her bridesmaid go off to invite some special guests to the wedding. Who do they meet on their way but our hero, newly returned from abroad and hurrying to see her before his seven years are up.

The bride-to-be goes past him without knowing who he is. Given what we're told later, his most prominent feature now seems to be the colour of his skin, which is *glas*. I suppose from being a healthy Highland lad, tanned and ruddy from exposure to sun and rain and wind, he has acquired the pallor of a man of business who travels in coaches, buries himself in counting houses, and wears a powdered wig.

He recognises her however, and when she's gone past he asks the bridesmaid if she has any news. "The newest thing I have," she says, "is that my friend there is to be married."

"I would be very willing," he says, "to go to the wedding."

"If so, were there none to ask you but me, you will be at the wedding."

When the bridesmaid catches up with the bride, the latter says, within the man's hearing: *Có an corra-ghille glas ris an robh thu a' bruidhinn?* "Who's that funny pale-faced fellow (or "that odd sallow lad") you were talking to?"

"I don't know," replies the bridesmaid, "but I've invited him to the wedding!"

Not only does the *corra-ghille glas* turn up at the bride's house for the wedding, but at the breakfast prior to the ceremony he sits as nearly opposite her as he can. He declares he will gladly sing a song, and the others say they will gladly hear him. So he sings:

Se labhair i, le còmhradh borb,
Gun robh mi 'm chorra-ghille glas.

Is glas am fochann, is glas am feur,
Is glas a' choill fo a duibhneul;
Is glas an dos tha 'm bàrr a' chroinn,
'S ar leam fhéin gur glas an cuileann.

Is glas an claidheamh tha san truaill,
Is glas an tuagh sa bheil a' chas,
'S ma bhios a faobhar gu tana geur,
Gu dé as misd' a mèinn bhith glas?

Is geal am bainne thig bhon bhuar,
Is milis 's is buan a bhlas;
'S nuair sgaras an gruth on mheadhg
Tionndaidh e thaobh 's bidh e glas.

It's a discourse on the colour *glas*, which, as Lord Archibald points out (he was a Gaelic speaker himself), "has no exact equivalent in English. It signifies certain kinds of grey, vegetable green, and sallowness of complexion." My translation is based on his, but where he has "grey", I've preferred "sallow".

"What she declared, with wild speech, / Was that I was an odd sallow lad. / Sallow's the young corn, sallow's the grass, / Sallow's the forest beneath her black gloom; / Sallow's the tuft at the top of the tree, / And in my opinion sallow's the holly. / Sallow's the sword that's inside the scabbard, / Sallow's the axe in which is the handle, / And if its blade is shallow and sharp, / How is it worse if its ore is sallow? / White is the milk that comes from the cows,

/ Sweet and enduring is its taste; / And when the curds separate from the whey / They turn to one side and then they go sallow.")

This is as good a list as you'll find anywhere of things on dry land that can be *glas*, with the possible exception of holly – note *ar leam fhéin*, "in my opinion", on that one, because most people would consider the deep green of holly leaves to be *gorm*.

If you liked riddles, as the wedding guests would have done, it would have struck you that these things promised food, fertility and defence; as for holly, trees were ranked as good and bad, with holly among the good. Lord Archibald concludes: "When he had finished singing the song, the bride perceived who he was. She leaped over the table where he was; and all the folk at the wedding could not prevail on her to marry the other man. So she and the odd grey lad were married."

Now John Gregorson Campbell tells a related story (first published in his "Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands" in 1900) to explain the point that "ready wit repulses the fairies". A fairy woman comes to steal a baby and says to its mother, by way of hinting that it's going to die anyway, *Is glas do leanabh*. "Your child looks pale."

The word Campbell uses is "grey", but I think "pale" works better here. The mother retorts: *Is glas am fiar, 's fàsaidh e*. "The grass is pale, and it grows."

The fairy persists. *Is trom do leanabh*. "Your child is heavy."

The woman replies: *Is trom gach torrach*. "Everything that's fruitful is heavy."

So the fairy, illogically, tries the opposite tack. *Is eutrom do leanabh*. "Your child is light."

At this point (speaking as a grandad) I'm reminded of present-day health visitors who come regularly to weigh your baby. Even if it's bouncing with health, they never seem satisfied unless it's on the correct percentile of a World Health Organisation weight-chart.

There again, maybe the fairy meant "light-minded", because the brave mother seizes on the double meaning: *Is eutrom gach saoghaltach sona*. "Every happy human being is light." Then she bursts into song:

Is glas an duilleach, is glas am feur,
Is glas an tuagh am bheil a' chas,
'S chan eil nì thig roimh thalamh
Nach eil gnè ghlaise 'na aoraibh.

"*Glas* is the foliage, *glas* is the grass, / *Glas* is the axe in which is the handle, / And there's nothing that comes through the earth / Whose nature doesn't epitomise *glas*."

That puts an end to the encounter. "On finding herself outwitted," says Campbell, "the banshi left."

There's a good deal to say about those four lines of verse. Campbell declares in a footnote: "The first two lines of this quatrain occur also in a song on the deceitfulness of women, by a young man, whose first love had forsaken him. She 'killed him with a stony stare,' and merely asked, 'whence comes the sallow stripling?' (*Co as tha'n corra-ghille glas?*)"

Clearly Campbell had heard (perhaps in Tiree, where he was minister) a variant of the Islay story – in which, however, the song is certainly not on "the deceitfulness of women". And there's a great deal wrong with the quatrain as the minister prints it: no rhyme links the first line with the second, or the second with the fourth.

But the concept of *gnè ghlaise*, "the epitome of the colour *glas*", is a fascinating one which doesn't appear in the Islay version at all. As I pointed out when reprinting some of this material in "The Gaelic Otherworld", the idea of the "epitome" of a colour also occurs in the late sixteenth-century song "Òran na Comhachaig" by the Lochaber poet Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn:

B' annsa leam na dùrdan bodaich
    Os cionn lice ag eararadh sìl
Bùirein an daimh 'm bi gnè dhuinnid
    Air leacainn beinne 's e ri sìn.

"I'd prefer to a peasant mumbling a charm / Over a flagstone while graddaning corn / The roar of the stag that epitomises *donn* / On the slope of a hill facing into a storm."

In each case the phrase consists of the word *gnè* (which besically means “type”, “species”, “sex”) with the genitive case of the abstract noun formed from the colour: *glaise* “greyness”, *duinnead* “brownness”.

It’s a helpful concept. It’s all very well to provide a list, such as the above “complexion, young corn, grass, leaves, buds, holly, sword-blades, axe-heads, iron ore, curds”. What such lists fail to convey is the central meaning of a word – its epitome.

This point can be made about more than colours. In my days as a teacher of Gaelic literature my students were often baffled at the variety of meanings provided by Dwelly for a given word. I used to say: “Don’t just pick a meaning at random. Look at *all* the meanings and try to make a picture in your head of what they have in common. Everything called a *crann* will be pole-shaped. Everything called a *cliath* will be grid-shaped. Everything called a *cròic* will be like the ice-cream in your cone before it begins to melt.”

So the *gnè* of a colour is its essence. To many people the essence of “red” is a pillar box. In Gaelic the essence of *dearg* is blood, but the poets also liked to say *cho dearg ri bhermilion*, as red as vermilion – mercuric sulphide, a pigment brought around by the packmen. *Gnè ghlaise*, our Tiree story says, is the colour of all vegetable matter as it emerges from the ground.

And *gnè dhuinnid*? Well, Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh believed that “you are what you eat”, and he enjoyed his venison. He contrasts the ignoble human being “graddaning” his corn – burning a small amount of grain off the husk to prepare meal quickly for baking – with the noble deer. The epitome of *donn*, he says, is the red-brown coat of the healthy stag.

This red quality helps us understand why in medieval Gaelic poetry *donn* is used of a lady’s painted fingernails. But colours have metaphorical significance too. It’s part of their *gnè*. If you’re *glas* you’re young, fresh, inexperienced, a rookie. And if you’re *donn* you’re noble.

That’s the contrast Dòmhnall was seeking to make between the stag and the *bodach*. It’s also part of the significance of those fingernails, and of the name *Donnchadh* (*Donn-Chádh*) or Duncan. Not just “chief with reddish-brown hair” but “noble chief”.

25 April 2008