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A sinister sort of stick

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

HAVE you heard about the time the minister called and left his umbrella lying open to dry in the corner?

It would have been a couple of generations ago, and I can well believe that it might really have happened. While the minister prayed the rain stopped and the light faded, and the precious umbrella lay forgotten when he departed. When they discovered it the crofter and his wife naturally wanted to convey it back to the manse, but try as they might they couldn't get it out through the door. Assuming that the minister must have made use of some supernatural agency in order to get it into the house in the first place, they finally solved the problem by dismantling part of the wall!

It was a pity that that particular minister did not observe the widespread superstition that an umbrella should never be opened inside the house. He certainly brought bad luck upon the household, at least until the wall was built up again.

What I find fascinating about this particular superstition is that it should be so universal despite being so new. The other superstitions I have looked at so far in this series — Friday the thirteenth, not walking under ladders, uttering a blessing after a sneeze — all seem to have their roots in the Bible or beyond, and can in general be traced at least as far back as the Middle Ages. Umbrellas, on the other hand, are not mentioned in the Bible, even though the Chinese had them by the 10th century BC, the ancient Assyrians and Egyptians used them, and they were a symbol of the Pharaoh's power. The ancient Greeks and Romans had them too, and the Romans were probably the first to use them against rain rather than sun. But the Celts never bothered with them, as far as I know, and Medieval Europe seems to have lost sight of them altogether.

Umbrellas reappeared in Italy in the sixteenth century as a symbol of papal and clerical power, and in 1611 the English traveller Thomas Coryat explained in his book 'Coryats Crudities, Hastily Gobled up in Five Moneths Travels': "Many of them doe carry other fine things . . . which they commonly call in the Italian tongue 'umbrellaes' . . . These are made of leather something answerable to the forme of a little caunopy and hooped in the inside with divers little wooden hoopes that extend the umbrella in a pretty large compasse."

From Italy and Spain umbrellas gradually spread to the rest of Europe by the eighteenth century, and were once again developed for use in rain rather than sun, so that by 1716 John Gay, in his satirical poem 'Trivia; or the Art of Walking the Streets of London', was able to say: "Good houswives . . . underneath th' *umbrella*'s oily shed, / Safe thro' the wet on clinking *pattens* tread." (A patten was a kind of overshoe consisting of a wooden sole secured to the foot by a leather loop passing over the instep, and mounted in turn on an iron oval ring, or something of the kind, by which the wearer was raised an inch or two out of the wet or muddy ground.)

Umbrellas were long regarded as exotic or effete, but by the turn of the nineteenth century they had finally arrived in fashion, and even British officers on active service in the Peninsular War carried them until forbidden to do so by the Duke of Wellington himself. No doubt he reckoned that a decent pair of boots was as good as an umbrella, and a lot less of a target. The technology of the collapsible umbrella had in any case not been perfected. (Has it now?) In 1833 a Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Hawker noted forlornly in his diary, "It poured with rain, and my umbrella broke all to pieces."

To take stock, then, if we are looking for the origin of the umbrella superstition, we will not find it in the Bible; if it is native to these islands, it is not going to be old; if it *is* old, it must surely relate to far-off countries, and to umbrellas designed to shield eastern or African dignitaries and their wives from the heat of the sun and perhaps to protect the whiteness of their skin. I have never come across an umbrella in Gaelic literature, except for a *sgàileagan* sent to Alexander Cameron, the poet of Tournaig in Wester Ross, about 1918 by the editor of the Inverness and Northern Counties Edition of the 'People's Journal' by way of payment for a series of articles he had written on traditions about the weather. Here's a bit of the song he made in return.

Móran taing don ghaisgeach ghrinn
Chuir am fasgadh os mo chinn —
Ged bhiodh frasan ann gun dìth
Cha tig nì 'nam chòir-sa!

('Many thanks to the handsome hero / Who put the shelter over me — / Even if there's showers aplenty / Nothing will come near me!')

Sìoda dubh air aisnean iarainn,
Gairdeanan den mhiotailt chiadna,
Cas den aiteann nach gabh fiaradh,
Cearcall briagha òir oirre.

('Black silk upon iron ribs / With arms of identical metal / And juniper handle that can't be bent / With a beautiful band of gold on her.')

Tha i taitneach anns an làimh,
Nì i bata air an làr,
Nì i taigh nuair théid i 'n aird'
'S gheibh mo nàbaidh sgeòd dhith.

('She feels pleasant to the hand, / She makes a stick upon the ground, / She makes a house when she goes up / And my neighbour will get a corner of her.')

Dh'ainneoin stoirm a thig den mhunadh
Cha chuir i idir ormsa cunnart,
Nì i stairirich air a mhullach

Ach cha bhuin i dhomhsa!

('Whatever storm comes off the moor / Will put me in no danger, / It will rattle on her roof / But it will never touch me!')

Nothing Gaidhealach about the brolly, then, and Alastair had his tongue in his cheek in that last verse, for no gamp ever resisted a Gairloch gale, surely. But to our superstition.

Putting up an umbrella inside the house brings bad luck. But how old is the superstition, and what kind of bad luck does it bring? The earliest quotation under UMBRELLA OPENED INDOORS in Opie and Tatem's 'Dictionary of Superstitions' answers both questions for us. It is from Charlotte Burne's 'Shropshire Folk-Lore' of 1883, and it goes: "It is unlucky to open an umbrella in the house, especially if it is held over the head, when it becomes a sign of death."

So the answer to the first question is 'not old', and the answer to the second one has, surprisingly perhaps, nothing to do with rain. Personally I have heard of children being told not to open an umbrella in the house because if they did they would never grow any taller; my informant regarded it as obvious that the real reason for the prohibition was the fear of putting someone's eye out. But this is not borne out by Opie and Tatem. Their quotations mention neither children nor spokes, yet death comes up again in their excerpt from the journal 'Folklore' of 1909, relating to Hartlebury in Worcestershire: "If you open an umbrella in the house and hold it over your head, there will be a death in the house before the year is out." And, as if to emphasise the widespread nature of the superstition in its basic form, their only other quotation earlier than 1932 is this from Stromness in Orkney, also 1909: "It is unlucky to open an umbrella in the house."

Opie and Tatem actually offer four other categories of umbrella superstitions. These are: from 1883, UMBRELLA ON TABLE (it is unlucky to put an umbrella on the table); from 1895, DROPPING UMBRELLA/WALKING-STICK (variously an omen of meeting a friend, of your mind giving way, of a quarrel, of bad luck generally, of bad luck if you pick it up yourself, and of good luck for another person who picks it up); from 1923, UMBRELLA ON BED (it is unlucky to put an umbrella on the bed); and in 1982, UMBRELLA AS PRESENT (it is unlucky to give an umbrella as a present).

These can perhaps shed a little light on UMBRELLA OPENED INDOORS. For one thing, one can see what looks like logical development. If it is accepted that an open umbrella in the house brings death, then it is obvious why even a *closed* umbrella on a table, on a bed or as a present might be regarded as sinister. I am particularly taken by Opie and Tatem's quote from J B Booth's 'Pink Parade' of 1933: "If you really want to damn a play's chance utterly, place an umbrella on the prompter's table." Superstitious people, actors.

DROPPING UMBRELLA/WALKING-STICK stands apart, I feel, partly because the symbolism of the omens involved is pretty easy to understand, and partly because here it seems we have the umbrella taking over the superstitions as well as the functions of the walking-stick, while bringing its own more sinister reputation to bear. If we compare the earliest two quotations here we find that the walking-stick in itself is friendly, and that it seems to be by association with the umbrella that it takes on sinister attributes. First Sidney Addy's 'Household Tales' of 1895 (northern England): "If you let your stick fall you will be sure to meet a friend immediately afterwards." Then James Shaw's 'Country Schoolmaster' of 1899 (Dumfriesshire): "To drop your umbrella or walking-stick shows that your mind is likely to give way."

So the umbrella is a sinister sort of stick. Why? Well, it cannot have anything to do with its function, which is the perfectly wholesome one of protection from the rain. In any case, if function could lead to superstition in modern times we would surely have sinister superstitions about guns, and Opie and Tatem offer none whatsoever — the only gun traditions they offer are happy, positive ones involving the noise they make, such as at weddings. Knives, on the other hand: well, that's a different matter. Knives are ancient. Knives are covered in taboo.

So I believe the explanation has to do not with function but with appearance. Umbrellas intended for the rain, whether made of leather, oilcloth or silk, were invariably, I suspect, black or dark in colour, and I have the feeling that their ribbed appearance when open would have reminded people of bats. In any case, bats were associated with rain. In English it is said that 'it will rain if bats cry much or fly into the house'; so too in Gaelic, *Thàinig ialtag a-steach, bidh frasan a-mach air ball*. "A bat has come in, showers will be out right away."

A glance at Opie and Tatem under BAT confirms that from ancient times, in the shape of Pliny's 'Natural History' of 77 AD, and through the Middle Ages, the bat has been associated with witchcraft and death. In particular, a whole string of quotations shows that a bat in the house is reckoned to be an omen of death. Take this, from Richard Jefferies' 'Wild Life in a Southern County' of 1879: "Occasionally a bat will come into the sitting-room, should the doors be left open on a warm summer evening. This the old folk think an evil omen, and still worse if . . . it should chance to knock against the candle and overturn or put it out."

And this, from Burne's 'Shropshire Fok-Lore' of 1883: 'At Pulverbatch it is accounted very unlucky to bring a bat into the house."

And this, from 'Lore and Language' of 1972, relating to Coalisland, Co. Tyrone: "If . . . a bat comes into the house it's a sure sign of a death in the family."

We could bring all these quotations up to date by substituting 'open umbrella' for 'bat'. If I am right about this, the umbrella superstition is (like the rest) as old as the hills after all, except that it has taken this curious twist in order to survive in the modern world.

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