

The messiah of the Gael

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last couple of articles I have been looking at Thomas the Rhymer as he was remembered in Lowland tradition. Now I would like to consider how he appears in the Gaelic traditions of the Highlands and Islands, where he was known as *Tòmas Reumhair*, *Tòmas Réim*, or the like. The main source is a book published in 1900, the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell's 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland', but there are many other sources, and the traditional memory of him has survived in some cases even to this day.

The Highland stories agree with the Lowland ones that Thomas got the gift of prophecy from an otherworld woman; that he is still in the otherworld; and that he will come back. But there is a curious difference in emphasis. In the Highlands it is, or was, the third of these motifs that was to the fore. Quite simply, *Tòmas Reumhair* was seen as a messiah who at a certain time would come forth from the otherworld and save the Gaelic race.

This messianic quality is well seen in accounts of Thomas's birth. A messiah has to have some kind of miraculous birth, and as Thomas is a warrior messiah there is a tinge of violence to it. In Argyll and Perthshire at least, he was commonly called *mac na mnà mairbh*, the dead woman's son. I am not suggesting for a moment that this is necessarily grounded in biographical fact; it was simply a way of substantiating his quasi-supernatural status, and of prefiguring the 'return from the dead' theme which, as I say, Highland tradition turns into the most important thing about him.

Three different explanations used to be offered to explain the name. Each seems to be a bizarre variation on the one before. The first is simply that his mother dies giving birth to him and he is taken out 'through her side', i.e. by Caesarian section, immediately afterwards.

The next has it that his mother dies and is buried. The cry of a child is heard coming from the grave, and when the grave is opened Thomas is found in the coffin.

The third explanation is of a woman whose husband has been cut in four pieces. She makes a deal with a tailor that if he will sew her husband together again she will consent to sleep with the tailor. He works fast, as one would expect, does the job in two hours flat, and gets his reward. Some time after, the woman dies and is buried. One night her ghost comes to the tailor and leads him to her grave, where the child is found. He is, presumably, the tailor's son.

In the Lowlands the hill where Thomas lies sleeping is of course one of the Eildons. In the south Highlands it is Dumbuck, *Dùn Buic*, near Dumbarton. The last person that entered that hill found him resting on his elbow with his hand below his head. Thomas said, "Is it time?" And the man fled.

It has to be said that the symbolism of Dumbuck has surely to do with the old British (Cumbric, Welsh) kingdom of Strathclyde, of which Dumbarton Rock was the political capital. A few weeks ago I pointed out that Thomas seems to me to have been a thirteenth-century Gaelic-speaker from the Borders whose real connection with the alleged otherworld under the Eildons was simply that he collected a stories about it from the last surviving Cumbric speakers of the district. Is it possible that the Gaelic-speaking people of the south Highlands retained some traditional memory of this Cumbric connection, but relocated it to a more familiar and more obvious place? My friend John MacInnes has pointed out that what he calls 'an alternative formulation of the Gaelic messianic hope' seems to appear in a classical Gaelic poem of about 1600:

*Ceannas Ghaoidheal 'na chéim cleachtuidh
Ag aoinfhear d'fhéin Breatuin bhíos.*

In other words, "The leadership of the Gael in his customary step / Will fall to a champion of the warband of Britain." It may derive, as John MacInnes said, from prophecies attributed to Merlin, but it might very well apply to Thomas as the last champion of the Britons of Strathclyde.

In the north Highlands the hill where Thomas lies sleeping is *Tom na h-Iubhraich* (Tomnahurich, the Hill of the Yew Wood) by Inverness. Alternatively, it was sometimes said that Fionn and *his* warband sleep there. There is a huge chain suspended from the roof, and if any human being has the courage to go in and strike it three times with his fist, the heroes will arise again. One man went in and struck it twice, and was so terrified by the howling of the big dogs (*donnal nan con mòra*) that he fled. A voice called after him, *A dhuine dhona dhòlaich, s miosa dh'fhàg na fhuair*. "You evil mischief-making man, you've left things worse than you found them."

Thomas, or at least his ghost, attends every market looking for suitable horses, just as otherworld people in the north of Ireland were said to attend fairs to steal linen and other goods that are exposed for sale. He needs a horse with certain characteristics. He has collected so many that he now needs only two, *searrach blàr buidhe*, a yellow foal with a white forehead, and a white horse that has got *trì Màirt, trì Màigh, agus trì Iuchara a bhainne mhàthar*, three Marches, three Mays and three Augusts of its mother's milk. Some people used to say that all he needs now is the former. In Mull they said that one of the horses had to be from the meadow of Kengharair in that island.

When he has all he needs, he will become a mortal man again, and will fight a great battle on the Clyde. Again, the location suggests a connection with the Britons.

*Nuair thig Tòmas le chuid each
Bidh latha nan creach air Cluaidh,*

*Millear naoi mìle fear math
'S théid rìgh òg air a' chrùn.*

(When Thomas comes with his horses / The day of plunders will be on the Clyde, / Nine thousand good men will be drowned / And a young king will attain the crown.)

The battle will be so fiercely fought, says the prophecy, that it will be possible to walk across the Clyde dry-shod on men's bodies, and the miller of *Muileann Phearaig*, Partick Mill, a man with seven fingers, will grind the corn for two hours with blood instead of water. Given this location, it sounds as if the battle is to be in the stretch at Glasgow where the fords used to be and the Kingston and Jamaica bridges are today. A stone used to be pointed out in the river on which a *bigein*, a rock-pipit or some other little bird, would perch and drink its fill of blood without bending its head. In the nineteenth century it was blasted away by the River Trustees in order to permit the dredging of the river, or, as the Rev. Mr Campbell claimed, in order 'that the prophecy may not come true'.

After the battle, the prophecy goes on, men will be in such short supply that sixteen ladies will pursue one lame tailor, *bidh sia baintighearnan diag as déidh an aon tàilleir chrùbaich*. There is an echo here of Isaiah 3-4, "Thy men shall fall by the sword, and thy mighty in war . . . and in that day seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, We will eat our own bread, and wear our own apparel, only let us be called by thy name, to take away our reproach."

A variant of the prophecy was current at Blair Atholl. *Nuair thig an crodh bàn do Bhlàr, cuirear seachd cuir de chuibhle mhullinn Bhlàir le fuil sluaigh*. "When the white cows come to Blair, the wheel of Blair Mill will be turned seven times by human blood." Campbell was told that the Duke of Atholl had brought white cattle to Blair but that nothing special had happened.

Another Church of Scotland minister, Alexander Stewart, Onich, told in his book 'Twixt Ben Nevis and Glencoe', published in 1885, of how he got a surprising reply from a respectable old lady of the district when he was quizzing her about water-horses. She had been telling him how such creatures emerged from lochs already equipped with bridles. "How," he asked, "do water-horses happen to have bridles? Who could ride or drive them? And if they can neither be driven or ridden, why should they have bridles?"

"Thomas the Rhymer," the old lady replied, "or some other magician and prophet of the olden time now detained in Fairyland, is destined yet to reappear upon earth with some companions almost as powerful as himself; then shall the water-horses be bridled and saddled by a brave company of Scottishmen from Fairyland, some Highland, some Lowland, bridled and saddled, and fearlessly mounted; a great battle will be fought; all Englishmen and other foreigners will be driven out of the country; the crown will again revert to the rightful heirs, and Scotland once again become a free, independent, and happy kingdom!"

I think that sums up very well what was believed about Thomas in the Highlands. And I will finish this time by referring to a paperback that can be got in almost any bookshop, I think, for a bargain price of £2. It is called 'Scottish Fairy Tales' and has no author. (Fair enough.) The very first story is called 'Thomas the Rhymer' and is a basic presentation of his alleged visit to the otherworld.

Later we find 'Canonbie Dick and Thomas of Ercildoune', about how at the dead of night a Border horse-dealer encountered a ghostly stranger who was keen to buy his animals — we know what he wanted them for, and sure enough, when Canonbie Dick follows Thomas in under the Eildons, there they are. "The curious thing about this mysterious cave was that, along one side of it, ran a long row of horse stalls, just like what one would find in a stable, and in each stall stood a coal-black charger, saddled and bridled, as if ready for the fray; and on the straw, by every horse's side, lay the gallant figure of a knight, clad from head to foot in coal-black armour, with a drawn sword in his mailed hand. But not a horse moved, not a chain rattled."

Another story of great interest in the book is called 'The Fairy Boy of Leith'. It derives from Richard Bovey's 'Pandæmonium, or the Devil's Cloister Opened' of 1684, and tells how a Captain George Burton met a boy of 10 or 11 who was famed for drumming to the otherworld people as they danced under Calton Hill. "There are, sir," the boy told him, "a great company both of men and women, and they are entertained with many sorts of musick, besides my drum; they have, besides, plenty of variety of meats and wine, and many times we are carried into France or Holland in a night, and return again, and whilst we are there we enjoy all the pleasures the country doth afford."

Burton asked him how they got under the hill. "To which he replied that there was a great pair of gates that opened to them, though they were invisible to others; and that within there were brave large rooms, as well accommodated as most in Scotland." And when Burton asked for proof that this was true, the boy said that he would read his fortune . . .

I think I know now why Donald Dewar didn't choose Calton Hill for the Scottish parliament.

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