

Water-Horse and Farmer

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last couple of articles I sketched two of the three main types of traditional Gaelic water-horse tale — ‘Water-Horse and Woman’ and ‘Water-Horse and Children’. Now it’s time to begin examination of the most complex type, ‘Water-Horse and Farmer’. In general outline, it goes like this: “Farmer ploughs with strange horse / uses it tied by tail to other horses to carry goods. Must not plough after sunset / must keep shackle on horse / must pour water over it. Neglects this. Horse carries him into loch / he propels himself off by feet while passing through gate / cuts off finger which adheres to horse / other horses pulled into loch. Lungs/livers/entrails appear (and give their name to place).”

In 1991, in the Irish folklore journal ‘Béalóideas’, Professor Bo Almqvist reviewed work on this tale-type by Finnur Jónsson, C. W. von Sydow and himself, and remarked that it could be shown with some certainty to be of considerable age in Ireland. He concluded that ‘there are numerous intricate problems, but the balance of the evidence favours the likelihood that the oldest Irish literary treatments of the legend date back to at least the 12th century. That its oral prehistory goes a good bit further back is highly likely.’ Referring to the migration of water-horse legends to Atlantic islands where Old Norse was spoken, he added that ‘it would appear likely that these borrowings took place during the Viking Age, in which case it would be natural to assume that the legends in question were fully developed before c. 1000’.

The main example he cites is from the thirteenth-century Sturlubók version of the Icelandic ‘Landnámabók’. The likely Irish or Scottish origin of this story was acknowledged by Jónsson who, he points out, ‘was ordinarily extremely reluctant to accept the notion of any Irish influences on Icelandic tradition’. It

concerns a certain AuDun, whose father Vali the Strong lived in the Western Isles and whose wife, Muireann daughter of Bláthmac, was Irish. “One autumn he caught sight of a dapple-grey stallion running down from Hjardarvatn to his stud horses. He got the better of AuDun’s stallion. Then AuDun went and caught the grey horse and yoked him to a sleigh, such as two oxen used to draw, and carted home all the hay from his infield.

“This stallion was easy to deal with while it was midday, but as the day wore on he would stamp into the hard ground up to his fetlocks. After sunset he broke his harness, ran to the lake and was never seen again.”

In view of this, I was very interested to discover recently that a scaldic kenning for Iceland about the year 1190 was *næfrland nykra borgar* — “the birch-bark country of the nixes’ castle”. A nix is a Scandinavian water-spirit, first cousin of the Anglo-Saxon nicker which makes an appearance in ‘Beowulf’. Received opinion in Scandinavia apparently has it that the nixes’ castle is the sea and the birch-bark the ice-cap, but it seems to me that the kenning sees Iceland in the same terms as the *Tír Tairngire* of the Gael, that is, an otherworld across the ocean guarded by a water-monster. That way, the nixes’ castle is not the sea but the island itself, topped, certainly, by its ice-cap. Was Iceland the otherworld stronghold of the pre-Christian Gael? That is, the centre of both their heaven and their hell? It is noticeable that in Gaelic Christian tradition hell is not hot but cold, *ifhrinn fhuar*.

The nix in the form of a horse is not recorded for medieval Norway or Sweden, but appears in both countries in the eighteenth century, with traces of an eastward migratory pattern, the first recorded Swedish example being from the formerly Norwegian province of Bohuslän in 1742. It seems suggestive of Scottish and/or Irish origin.

Returning to the Irish evidence, it’s generally accepted that the Liath Macha (‘Grey of Macha’) and Dub Sainglend (‘Black of Saingliu’), which together drew the chariot of Cú Chulainn, the most celebrated hero of the pagan Irish, may be described as water-horses. They came out of lakes, and, according to texts on the death of Cú Chulainn, they returned to the same lakes.

The manuscript history of these texts begins vestigially in the eighth century, but belongs principally to the fifteenth and sixteenth. The finding of the two horses is described in a story called ‘Fled Bricrend’ (‘Bricriu’s Feast’). Its earliest manuscript, Lebor na hUidre (‘The Book of the Dun Cow’), was written about 1100, while the text itself was dated by the Scottish scholar George Henderson on linguistic grounds to not earlier than c. 875 AD. Here’s his translation of the relevant passage, slightly revised. “Said Cú Chulainn, ‘I am tired and broken today, so that until I have taken food and slept I will not hold a duel.’

“And indeed that was really so, since that was the day he had happened upon the Liath Macha by the side of the Linn Liath (‘Grey Pool’) in Sliabh Fúait. Cú Chulainn had crept towards him after he had come out of the loch and put his two hands around his neck so that the pair of them began wrestling and in so doing made a complete circuit of Ireland until that night he came with his chariot horse to Emain Macha. He then found the Dub Sainglend in the same way in Loch Duib Sainglend.”

Two points are worth noting: the stress laid on wrestling — which is equally prominent in the many much later Scottish Gaelic versions of Water-Horse and Farmer — and the fact that the horses in this tale-type are not intended to be ridden but to be harnessed to a chariot, a plough or a harrow. Both motifs are to the fore in the tales surrounding the water-horse of Loch Frisa in Mull, of which the Welsh philologist Edward Lhuyd learned when he visited that island in 1699. He wrote his account in Welsh; here, from the book ‘Edward Lhuyd in the Scottish Highlands’, is Derick Thomson’s translation: “They believe that there are in the freshwater lochs creatures which they call *tarbh-uisge* (or *tarbh-feirigh*) (water-bull) and *each uisge* (water-horse); and that these serve the (ordinary) cows and mares . . . The above-mentioned water-horses used formerly to change their shapes, and to disguise themselves as men, &c. There are stories similar to these in

Wales. One of these horses was wont to come out of Loch Frisa in Mull, to help a man to plough, returning to the sea at night.”

Lhuyd’s remark that ‘there are stories similar to these in Wales’ is presumably, in part at least, a reference to the *ceffyl dwr* which frequented the wells of his native land: not by any means as prominent a creature in Welsh as in Highland folklore. But as it happens, thanks to John Gregorson Campbell we possess a full suite of stories about the water-horse of Loch Frisa and of the aspiring hero who wrestled with it and failed, *Mac Fir Àrois*, the Son of the Tacksman of Aros. In his ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland’ (1900) Campbell introduces them like this: “The heir of Aros, a young man of great personal activity, and, it is said, of dissolute manners, having an opinion of himself that there was no horse he could not ride, was taken by a Water-horse into Loch Frisa, a small lake about a mile in length in the north-west of Mull and devoured. “This occurred between his espousal and marriage, and the Lament composed by his intended bride is still and deservedly a popular song in Mull. There seems to be this much truth in the story, that the young man was dragged into Loch Frisa by a mare which he was attempting to subdue and drowned. It would appear from the song that his body was recovered. The popular details of the incident vary considerably, and are of interest as illustrative of the growth of tales of superstition.”

The young man’s transitional state, ‘between his espousal and marriage’, is worth noting. He was in an in-between condition, and therefore, I take it, the sort of person the people of the otherworld found it easy to pluck from among us. I’ll present Campbell’s five versions of the tale next time, and will finish this time by pointing out that ‘Grown-Ups Ride on Water-Horse’ has been distinguished by Scandinavian scholars as a tale-type in its own right. Brita Egardt considered the type, even as found in Scandinavia, to be of Celtic origin. She defined it as: “A person catches sight of a horse and mounts it; the horse runs away towards the water in order to drown the rider, but he mentions the name of God (or some other powerful word), whereupon he is thrown and thus saved.”

Bo Almqvist has said that there appear to be no Irish examples of ‘Grown-Ups Ride on Water-Horse’, that Scottish examples are few in number and sometimes confused, and that these Scottish examples, like some Icelandic ones, lack the happy ending, the rider being pulled down into the water and drowned. This set of facts leads him to the conclusion that the Scottish examples are more likely to be isolated offshoots of the Nordic tradition than its source, and that Egardt was therefore wrong in ascribing a Celtic origin to the legend; indeed, he goes further and applies this to Water-Horse and Children as well.

The same facts can, however, be used to defend Egardt’s case. If we see Grown-Ups Ride on Water-Horse as a mere derivative of Water-Horse and Farmer, it becomes easy to understand why it did not develop everywhere. That the Loch Frisa legends are precisely such a derivative is suggested by Lhuyd’s reference to a horse coming out of that loch ‘to help a man to plough’.

Above all, perhaps, the ‘lack of a happy ending’ cannot be regarded as a token of modernity. It is not at all the same sort of Presbyterian motif as the Sabbath-breaking and Bible-leaves of ‘Water-Horse and Children’, which I presented last time. I firmly believe, as I have shown, that the water-horse’s success in bringing his victims into the lake by allowing them to ride upon him is no different from the Fairy Queen’s success in bringing Thomas the Rhymer into Eildon Hill by allowing him to make love to him. The lake is clearly an entrance to a Celtic otherworld which coexists with our own, and if some Icelandic versions lack a happy ending in which the water-horse is defeated by the word of God, logic suggests that the legend’s migration was from the Celtic world to the Scandinavian, from the primal world of Cú Chulainn to the Christian one of

AuDun son of Vali the Strong.

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