

Crossing the Barvas River

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN HIS 'Description of the Western Islands of Scotland', first published in 1703, the Skyeman Martin Martin includes this paragraph in his account of Lewis: "The natives in the village Barvas retain an ancient custom of sending a man very early to cross Barvas River, every first day of May, to prevent any female crossing it first; for that they say would hinder the salmon from coming into the river all the year round; they pretend to have learned this from a foreign sailor, who was shipwrecked upon that coast a long time ago. This observation they maintain to be true from experience."

Why should anyone, foreign sailor or not, believe that salmon would shun a river just because a woman crossed it first on May-Day?

Well, this illustrates the traditional importance of the quarterdays to the Gael. It is now, during the summer quarter, that salmon come upriver to spawn; whether or not the salmon-fishing season will be successful is governed by what happens on the quarterday, when the door between this and the otherworld is temporarily ajar, time ceases to exist, and the events of the future are determined and foretold. May-Day, Beltane, *Bealltainn*, is the second most powerful quarterday after Hallowe'en, and could easily influence events for an entire year.

That is the Celtic part of the custom. Martin was not the first to write about it, however; that honour belongs to Hector Boece or Boetius, principal of Kings College Aberdeen, who wrote in 1527 in his Latin 'History of Scotland' (I give Bellenden's splendid Scots translation, 1536): "Passand forthwart to the north-nor-west seis, fornens Ros, is ane Ile namit Lewis, LX milis of lenth. In this Ile is bot ane reveir. It is said, gif ony woman waid throw this watter at the spring of the yeir, thair sall na salmond be sene for that yeir in the said watter: otherwayis, it sall abound in gret plente."

If you have difficulty reading Scots, try this English translation made in 1587 by Shakespeare's favourite historian Raphael Holinshed. "Ouer against Rosse, in an Ile named Lewis, 60 miles in length, in this Ile is but one fish riuer, it is said that if a woman wade through the same at the spring of the yeere, there shall no samon be seene there for a twelue month after."

Comparing the account of the Gael with that of the Lowlander, I get the feeling that Martin knows his Boece, goes to Barvas, asks about it, and discovers that the idea of a prohibition on women wading the river for the entire spring season is seen there as hilarious. How could they do their work if they can't get about? A mere Aberdeen professor can scarcely be expected to understand how the Gael sublimates the needs of the season in the quarterday. Just do things right at *Bealltainn* then, and you will be safe for at least three months.

A couple of generations later, however, and Dr Samuel Johnson tells us in his 'Journey to the Western Islands' of 1775 about something very similar in Martin's own island. "It is held that the return of the Laird to Dunvegan, after any considerable absence, produces a plentiful capture of herrings; and that, if any woman crosses the water to the opposite Island, the herrings will desert the coast. Boetius tells the same of some other place. This tradition is not uniform. Some hold that no woman may pass, and others that none may pass but a Macleod."

Credible enough, since presumably the need for a woman to go to Eilean Garbh at Dunvegan was seldom very pressing. But where is all this coming from? Why should women upset fish?

The answer is two little five-letter words. Blood and the Bible. Leviticus 15: 19 – "And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even."

In fact the whole of Lev. 15 consists of the rules for cleansing unclean men and women, just as the whole of Lev. 16 details the 'scapegoat' rules that gave rise to the Gaelic New Year custom of dressing up as an animal. The rules for men's body fluids are bad enough, but the women's rules involved separating them from society – a common custom among primitive peoples, as anthropologists have shown. "And if a woman have an issue of her blood many days out of the time of her separation, or if it run beyond the time of her separation; all the days of the issue of her uncleanness shall be as the days of her separation: she shall be unclean . . . But if she be cleansed of her issue, then she shall number to herself

seven days, and after that she shall be clean.”

In the days before personal hygiene became a multi-million-dollar industry, it seems that the only way for men to feel quite sure that their women weren't going to frighten the fish was to make them pregnant or let them grow old. In AD 77, a few centuries after Leviticus, Pliny wrote in his 'Natural History' that “on the approach of a woman in this state, must will become sour, seeds . . . sterile, grafts wither away, garden plants are parched up, and the fruit will fall from the tree . . . Her very look, even, will dim the brightness of mirrors, blunt . . . steel, and take away the polish from ivory. A swarm of bees, if looked upon by her, will die.”

Much more recently, Francis Bacon wrote in his 'Sylva Sylvarum' of 1627: “It is an Ancient Tradition . . . that a Menstruous Woman, looking upon a Glasse, doth rust it. Nay they have an Opinion, which seemeth Fabulous; That Menstruous Women, going over a Field, or Garden, doe Corne and Herbs good by Killing the Wormes.” And referring to a tradition that ale is spoiled by thunder and lightning, John Gay declared in his 'Shepherd's Week' of 1714:

*If e'er she brew'd, the drink wou'd strait grow sour,
Before it ever felt the thunder's pow'r.*

Likewise, Mr Bloom muses in Joyce's 'Ulysses' of 1922: “Wonder if it's bad to go with them then. Safe in one way. Turns milk, makes fiddlestrings snap.”

Opie and Tatem's 'Dictionary of Superstitions' offers some even more modern examples. A servant girl, reported in the journal 'Folklore' of 1934, refused to cut some steak to make a pudding with, on the grounds that she was menstruating and that if she cut the steak it would undoubtedly go bad. Seven years later a Fenland clergyman reported to 'Folklore' that it was believed in his parish that a woman must take nothing to do with slaughtering a pig during her period. At Stratford St Mary in Suffolk in 1956 girls were kept strictly away from cured hams for fear they might be menstruating and the meat would go off. And in 1985 a woman recalled how, during the war, the butcher at Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire had told her it would be impossible to employ women as butchers – they would have to take a week off every month, or they would taint the meat.

A woman was also likely to be regarded as unlucky when she had given birth. According to Leviticus 12, after bearing a son she is unclean for seven days and must undergo purification for a further thirty-three. “She shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification be fulfilled.” After bearing a daughter she is unclean for two weeks, and undergoes purification for sixty-six days. After all that, she brings to the priest at the tabernacle a lamb as a burnt offering and a pigeon or a turtle-dove as a sin-offering.

It's no surprise that this was reflected in the rabbinical customs of the reformed church in Scotland. Says Thomas Pennant in his 'Tour in Scotland' of 1776: “The mother never sets about any work till she has been kirked. In the church of Scotland there is no ceremony on the occasion: but the woman, attended by some of her neighbours, goes into the church, sometimes in service time, but oftener when it is empty, goes out again, surrounds it, refreshes herself at some public house, and then returns home. Before this ceremony she is looked on as unclean, never as permitted to eat with the family; nor will any one eat of the victuals she has dressed.”

By 'surrounding' the church, Pennant presumably means that she walked round it three times *deiseil*, sunwise, for luck. Other sources confirm the same range of beliefs, but, as so often happens, it's to England we must look for the most peculiar variations. One is from East Anglia, reported in 'Folklore' of 1939: “The mother must not enter a neighbour's house before the churching has taken place, or the neighbour will become pregnant within a year, and a baby is sometimes taken on its first outing to a house where a child is desired. This custom is known as 'shaking feathers', and the hostess will become a mother within a year.”

The other variation is that until she has been 'churched' a woman who has given birth should avoid crossing the road. According to Opie and Tatem, it was first recorded in Hampshire in 1854. “A woman in this village, when going to church for the first time after the birth of her child, keeps to the same side of the road, and no persuasions or threats would induce her to cross it. She wears also upon that occasion a pair of new boots or shoes.”

The boots or shoes are a clue – as Leviticus says, the woman's body is assumed to be

unclean; her uncleanness must not be communicated to the road, or, like foot-and-mouth, it may travel. This is clarified by a very startling quotation from ‘Notes and Queries’ of 1873: “My grandmother used to say, that if a woman after childbirth crossed a cart or wheel rut before she was churched, a man might shoot her, and he could not be punished for it.”

We are to visualise, then, the supposed uncleanness being picked up by cartwheels and brought around the high-roads of England, just as, it seems, it might be picked up by the water of the Barvas River or Loch Dunvegan and communicated to the fish.

There are of course situations, notably on board ship, where the presence of any woman under any circumstances was traditionally regarded as unlucky. Probably that had something to do with basic human nature. But even on land there seems to have been a pretty universal superstition that seeing a woman first thing in the morning was unlucky, and of course that connects with the idea that it was unlucky if the first person to cross the Barvas River on the first day of summer were a woman. Let me give some examples.

First there is a reference to the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) ‘running back to his house with no small consternation . . . if the first thing in a morning, he met an old woman’. In Gaelic Scotland, of the *frìth* – a rite of divination performed by observing the sex, species, appearance or movements of live creatures, begun before sunrise on the first Monday of the quarter – it was said, *Bu chòir do dhuine e fhéin a choisrigeadh nam faiceadh e boireannach an àm dha bhith dèanamh na frìthe*. “A person should cross himself if he saw a woman when making the *frìth*.”

There are also many stories, some quite recent, of fisherman or miners turning round and going home if they met a woman on their way to work. The ‘Oswestry Advertiser’ reported from Denbighshire, North Wales, in May 1874: “A woman is employed as messenger at one of the collieries . . . and meets . . . great numbers of colliers going to their work. Some of them . . . consider it a bad omen to meet a woman first thing in the morning, and . . . waited upon the manager and declared that they should remain at home unless the woman was dismissed.”

Trevelyan’s ‘Folk-Lore of Wales’ declares that ‘it is bad to meet an old woman early in the morning’, and of course everyone knows that a first-foot at the New Year has to be a man. It seems then that in a hierarchical scheme of things in which all living creatures must be deemed good, bad or indifferent, original sin has provided an excuse to put women at the bad end of the spectrum (especially first thing in the morning) and also an excuse to make them pregnant.

Fortunately the good people of Barvas had devised a simple ritual to dispose of the problem. Curious, isn’t it, that the dreaded taint of superstition made them ‘pretend’, in Martin’s words, ‘to have learned this from a foreign sailor, who was shipwrecked upon that coast a long time ago’?

WHFP 15 June 2001