Barebones and Smasher

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

In one of his folklore manuscripts, now in Glasgow University Library as Gen. 1090 (28), Fr Allan McDonald noted down the story of Clocan an Ruamhair and his wife Corrachniostag as he got it from John MacKinnon in Daliburgh on 15 January 1896.

Clocan an Ruamhair, says Fr Allan, spent his time digging while Corrachniostag spent her time spinning. All she had was a distaff and spindle. He would be digging all day, and whenever he came home she would put a length of thread against his leg from his knee to his ankle and say, *Se 'n duine 'n t-aodach 's chan i cholainn threupach*. Which means something like: "A man is his clothes and not his troublesome body."

One day Corrachniostag asked Clocan an Ruamhair to stay in so that he could bring her the balls of yarn (*cniabagan*) from in under the bed, because she was going to make a web of cloth for him. He was very pleased. She had put as much as would make five yards, measured on her back, under the warping-pegs in the ground, she said. *Chuir ise fo na fuaintean ann san talamh na dhianadh cóig slatan air a druim*. (Look at Dwelly's sketch of a *dealbh*.)

She asked him to go down on his knees and throw down to her the clews of yarn that were under the box-bed so that she could get started. All he found there was one ball of yarn, and he threw it down. She caught it and threw it up. He caught it and threw it down.

When they were tired of transferring it back and forth like this, with her supposing it was a new one he was getting every time, she said she had plenty, and that he could go and dig now. Then, as was her custom every day as soon as he was out of the house, off she went to take a nap. "*Cha bhi mise staigh romhad*," she said, "*nuair a thig thu staigh o ruamhar idir, agus cuiridh mi 'n deilbh am broinn na plàd agus feumaidh sibhse dhol leatha gu taigh a' bhreabadair*. I won't be in at all when you get in from digging, and I'll put the warping frame in the bag and you'll have to bring it to the weaver's."

A *plàd* (or *plàt*, as in those lines of Màiri Mhór's, *Na fir a' dèanamh cainnteig / 'S na plàtaichean 'nan tòrr*) was a great big bag woven from *muran*, bent grass. Anyway, Clocan an Ruamhair was pleased. When he got home in the evening the *plàd* was waiting for him. In fact Corrachniostag had got into it herself when he was out. He picks it up and off he goes to the weaver's with her on his back.

On the way to the weaver's Corrachniostag pees in the bag. *Ùradh bréineig!* he declares cheerfully to himself – meaning the grease and filth in the cloth that has been newly made by some slovenly woman or other, which the waulking process will soon take out of it.

Clocan an Ruamhair arrives at the weaver's and explains that his wife has sent him with five yards of weaving as measured on her back. The weaver tells him to put it down at the bottom end of the house. "I'll put it in as soon as the loom's ready."

Clocan an Ruamhair goes home. Corrachniostag is there before him, having got out of the *plàd* and taken a short-cut. She asks him when the weaver is going to put the cloth into the loom, and he tells her that the weaver said that he would put it in as soon as the loom was ready.

A few days later she goes off to see if the weaver has put her cloth in the loom. "I haven't, and I won't," says the weaver. "There's only the weaving of one ball of wool there – *Chan eil an-siud ach deilbh aona chniabaig*."

She retorts that the weaving of five yards measured on her own back was in it and that he would have to make up five yards of cloth on her back for her. He declares that he will do no such thing. She says that he will or else she will use the law to get it off him.

When the weaver realised that she was nothing but a bitch (*nach robh innte ach a' bhiast*), he decided it would be better for him to make up five yards for her than be dragged before the law.

Well, as John MacKinnon puts it, there was not one single day that she would come there that she did not go to the weaver's to look at the cloth. And the weaver made very short work of finishing the five yards!

When Corrachniostag had received her cloth in finished condition she carried it away. On the road home she saw a crow cawing on a beam. "*An tù 'fùcadair?* Are you the waulker?" says she.

Theireadh an fheannag gu robh gu robh. "The crow said she was she was."

Fùcadair frìthe fàgaidh mis' agad e, says she. “Open-air waulker I'll leave it with you.” And off she goes without cloth or anything else.

When she gets home Clocan an Ruamhair asks her if she has the cloth. “Yes,” she says.

“Where is it?”

“I left it with the waulker for him to waulk it.”

“What waulker was that?”

She explained that there was a crow on a beam and that the crow and the beam would waulk the cloth like any other. Realising then that she was nothing but a *baobach* (coward) after all, off he went to see if he could find any trace of the cloth.

Not one strand of it did they recover. *Bha esan fo dhomhadas agus fo chall.* “He was frustrated and bereft.”

A similar story is told about Bodach an Ruamhair and his wife Corra Chriosag in volume 1 of J. F. Campbell's ‘More West Highland Tales'. Hector MacLean transcribed it for Campbell about 1860 from an 84-year-old tailor called Alexander MacAlister at Bowmore in Islay. Again we find that Bodach an Ruamhair was hard-working but Corra Chriosag was lazy and dishonest. She would spin, but never got past the first hank of wool, which she would throw into the corner, saying for her husband's benefit: “You stay there with the rest. There are many more like you.”

Her husband would say: “Are you going to the weaver at all? I think it's time for you to go to the weaver.”

And she would say: “I'm going soon.”

She did go once, filling a bag full of peats and putting her single hank on top to pretend it was full of yarn. On her way there she drove the weaver's cow into a bog, and when the resulting confusion had been sorted out she claimed to the weaver that while she was helping him with his cow one of his men had stolen her yarn from the bag and replaced it with peats. “Since my problem was the cause of it,” said the weaver, “I'll give you a web of cloth myself to make up for it.”

On her way home with the web of cloth Corra Chriosag met a crow calling: *Gòrag! Gòrag!* (“Silly woman! Silly woman!”)

It sounded to her like: *Is mise am fùcadair! Is mise am fùcadair!* (“I'm the waulker! I'm the waulker!”) So at any rate she claimed to her husband, when she had got home after leaving the web of cloth to the crow instead of bringing it with her to organise a waulking.

Alexander Carmichael collected a version of the story in Uist which appears in volume 6 of ‘Carmina Gadelica'. In this one the wife's name is Mary but she is also referred to as *a' chorra-chrosgag* and *Leòmag* (‘Smasher') while the poor husband is *an gille còir* (‘the decent lad') or in one place *Maolan* (‘Barebones').

The decent lad, says Carmichael, was proud of having married such a *leòmag*, but soon every garment, every linen, every shoe, every stocking that he had got from his mother was ragged and tattered and riddled like a sieve. *A Mhàiri*, says he, *fiach an cuir thu an t-snàthad mhór an sàs, fiach an cuir thu greim anns a' bhriogais dhomh a thàirneas i ri chéile gus mo nàire a chòmhdach dhomh, agus greim anns an stocaidh a chumas i gun mi ga call.* “Have a go with the big needle and put a stitch in my trousers that will pull them together to cover up my shame, and a stitch in the stocking that will keep me from losing it.”

A ghràidhean nan daoine, she replies, *is niarachd dhutsa, a ghaoil, gun aodach agus gun anart, gun bhrògan agus gun osain a bhith agad agus a liu ceairle mhór mhath agus crosgag mhìn bhlàth tha agamsa ann an cùil an t-snàth a' feitheamh ort!* “Darling, you're so lucky, my love, to have no clothes or linen, or shoes or stockings, when I have so many good big clews and smooth warm hank-reels of wool waiting for you in the yarn-corner!”

She would go and fetch a hank and a clew of yarn that she had got from her mother. She would take a finger's length or two from the clew and measure her husband's foot and calf for making him a pair of hose. Then she would throw the clew and the hank back into the yarn-corner, saying, *Seo, biodh sibhse sin gu'n an cuir mise feum oirbh, far a bheil gu leòr eile dha bhur seòrsa.* “There, you stay there till I need you, where there's plenty more of your kind.” In the end poor old Barebones died of the cold when cutting seaweed and Smasher made a lament for him:

Cha bhàs le fuachd
'S an clò gun luadh,

Cha bhàs le fuachd
A fhuair mo dhuineachan.

Bha còta mór aige
’S bha còta mór eil’ aige
’S bha seana chòta mór mór
Mór a-staigh aige.

Cha bhàs le fuachd
A fhuair mo luaidh,
Cha bhàs le fuachd
A fhuair mo dhuineachan.

(“It isn’t the cold / From cloth being unwaulked, / Isn’t the cold / My wee hubby died of. / He had a big coat / And another one too / And he had a big big big / Old coat at home. / It isn’t the cold / My darling died of, / It isn’t the cold / My wee hubby died of.”)

The last time I mentioned the name Corra Chriosag on this page I said it probably meant ‘Preggers’ (from *corra* ‘sticking out’, *crios* ‘girdle’, and the feminine suffix *-ag*). Perhaps so, perhaps not. Carmichael seems to have come across it in various forms, which he spells *corra-chrosgag*, *corra-chrosdag*, *corra-chriosgag* and *corra-chriosdag*, defining them all quite neatly as ‘a term applied in Uist to a woman who pretends to be good at *calanas*, wool-working’. As used in the tale, *crosgag* seems to mean a hank-reel with a cross-piece at each end for winding yarn, Dwelly’s *crois-iarna*. Perhaps a *corra-chrosdag* is a woman who is *corra-chrosda* (‘outstandingly perverse’), with a pun for good measure on *corra-chrosgag* (‘a long hank-reel’)?

As for her poor husband, in Islay he was *Bodach an Ruamhair*, which could mean ‘the Digging Husband’ or ‘the Digging Peasant’. Fr Allan makes him *Clocan an Ruamhair*, and I think *clocan* must be the word that Dwelly spells *cleòcan*, referring to the same inadequate clothing that his widow was so sensitive about. *Clocan an Ruamhair*, then, is ‘the Little Cloak of Digging’. But Barebones seems to have had yet another name, for Fr Allan entitles the story ‘Plocan-an-Ruamhair agus Corrachniostag’.

The Digging Clodhopper?

17 May 2002