

## The King of the Cats

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

SPEAKING of cats in his book “Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands”, John Gregorson Campbell wrote: “The animal was disliked by the MacGregors, and the Camerons of Glenevis could not tolerate it at all.”

Why on earth should that be? Campbell answers part of the question himself by telling a story. He says: “Cameron of Doini, or Glenevis, was out hunting, and killed a wildcat. The animal, when expiring, asked him to tell, when he went home, that *Rìgh nan Cat* (‘the King of the Cats’) was dead, or according to others, *an Iuchair Chath* (‘the Key of Battle’) or *a’ Bhruchail Bhreac* (‘the Streaked Brindled One’).

“As he told his story, the little black kitten in the ash-hole (*an toll na luath*) bristled up and swelled till it was as large as a dog. Cameron said, ‘You are swelling, cat.’

“The cat answered, *Tha m’ iteagan ’s m’ atagan ag atadh ris na h-éibhleagan!* ‘My feathers and my swellings are growing bigger with the heat!’ And, springing at the chieftain’s throat, killed him.

“The scions of this family (*Teaghlach Dhomhainnidh no Ghlinn Ibheis*) till quite recent times would not tolerate a cat in the house, from the memory of this tradition.”

Now if this story were unique it would be a perfectly good explanation of why the Glen Nevis family didn’t like cats. But it isn’t. Known as “The King of the Cats”, versions of it have been collected in Iceland, Ireland, England, France, Holland, Germany, Denmark, Estonia and Finland as well as Scotland, and it may have been going the rounds since the 9th century AD. So what we have to ask is, why did it get attached to the Camerons of Glen Nevis in particular? And if we look into the history of the family, there are some very good answers.

Long ago, as I pointed out last time, the cat was adopted as the symbol or totem of certain kindreds. There’s the *Cataich* or “Cat People” of Sutherland (*Cataibh*) and their leader *Iarla Chat*, the “Earl of Cats”, who became the Duke of Sutherland. It’s from them that the Norsemen gave Caithness its name, “Cat Promontory”. *Innse Chat*, the Cat Isles, was an old name for Shetland. (Though in between is Orkney, “Pig Isles”, whose Gaelic name *Arcaibh* means “Pig People”!)

Similarly, the cat is woven very deep into the traditions of the *Clann Chatain* or Clan Chattan, especially the Mackintoshes. They claim descent from a certain *Catan*, “Cat-Man”. Some sources make him *Gille Chatain*, that is, a person named after St Chattan, in other words we can’t be quite sure which came first, the saint or the totem animal.

Since some kindreds were cats, others were allergic to cats. For centuries the Mackintoshes enjoyed feudal superiority over Lochaber, where the Camerons and Keppoch MacDonalds lived. Mackintosh’s son once paid Keppoch a visit. The reason was obvious – the rents were due. Young Mackintosh began politely by giving the MacDonald chief his father’s compliments. Keppoch replied wryly: *Beannachd a’ chait a dh’ionnsaigh na luch!* “The cat’s compliments to the mouse!”

The feud was long and bitter. It ended at the battle of Mulroy in 1688, where a Mackintosh piper went into the fight playing: *Thàinig na cait, thàinig na cait*. “The cats have come, the cats have come.”

Having established that any cat in a story from Lochaber is likely to be a Mackintosh in disguise, let me turn, as promised, to the Camerons of Glen Nevis. And the first thing to note is that they were really MacDonalds in origin. They used to be called MacSorleys because they were descended from *Somhairle Ruadh*, a warrior of John, Lord of the Isles.

Somhairle had a son who was known to tradition as *Iain Dìleas*, Faithful John, and for good reason. After the battle of Inverlochy in 1431 the progenitor of the Camerons of Lochiel, a man called Dòmhnall Dubh, fled to Ireland. In his absence, Mackintosh paid a visit and uplifted his tenants’ rents. Rents were paid in kind in those days, and Iain Dìleas managed to recover sixteen horse-loads of butter and cheese, which he stored near his residence in Glen Sulaig. Mackintosh came back to Lochaber, lifted a big *creach* (plunder) of cattle and brought Iain Dìleas back as a prisoner to his lair at Moy near Inverness.

Meanwhile, Dòmhnall Dubh was in Ulster playing dice with a man called Ó Fearghail. One night they quarrelled about the game, and Dòmhnall accused Ó Fearghail of cheating. It led to a swordfight, the Irishman ended up dead on the floor and Dòmhnall decided it was time to come back to Lochaber.

Finding what had happened to Iain Dìleas, Dòmhnall raised a company of men and set off in pursuit of Mackintosh and the cattle. He was able to capture three of Mackintosh’s sons, and eventually reached Moy. Surrounding the house with his warriors, he initiated a parley with Mackintosh, who was inside, and offered to trade the three brothers for Iain Dìleas.

Mackintosh refused. Dòmhnall hanged one of the brothers before his eyes, then offered the other two. Mackintosh still refused. Dòmhnall hanged the second brother and offered the third. Again Mackintosh refused. So Dòmhnall hanged the third brother, and Iain Dìleas was never seen again. Perhaps he was dead already.

That’s the origin-legend of the MacSorleys. History tells us that in 1456 the Lord of the Isles granted Glen Nevis to Somhairle son of Iain Dìleas. This Somhairle died in 1495, around the time that the Lordship of the Isles was forfeited to the Scottish crown. According to tradition, he and his family were practically wiped out by the Mackintoshes at a spot in Glen Nevis called *Cnocan na Mi-Chomhairle*, “the Hillock of Bad Advice”.

Bearing in mind that Mackintoshes were simply cats (*cait*), you can see that “The King of the Cats” could apply to some of that. Iain Dìleas, or it might be his son Somhairle, kills a wildcat, the wildcat tells him to say when he goes home that he has killed such and such a warrior-cat, and when he does so, the humble servant-cat swells up, flies at his throat and kills him.

Not convinced? Well, there's more. John Gregorson Campbell's mother, born in 1803, was a MacGregor from Ardlarich on the north shore of Loch Rannoch. The three main offshoots of the MacSorleys of Glen Nevis are the Camerons of Camghouran on Loch Rannoch, of Donie near Torlundy in Lochaber, and of Glenmoriston. Those of Camghouran are descended from Ewen MacSorley, a younger brother of the Glen Nevis chief, who made his home beside Loch Rannoch some time around 1550 and married Marsaili, daughter of MacGregor of Ardlarich. It ended in tragedy; here's what happened.

There were a lot of unruly Camerons on the south side of Loch Rannoch in those days. A party of them turned up at Ardlarich with some corn to be ground at the mill there, and tethered their horses to Marsaili's father's corn-stacks. When he objected, one of them took off his horse's halter and gave the old man such a blow on the face that he fell bleeding and unconscious. Later he died.

Marsaili's uncle and brothers demanded that the Camerons surrender the perpetrator. They refused. The MacGregors therefore invited the Camerons' feudal overlord, Mackintosh, to come over from Badenoch, and between them they fell on all the Camerons in the district and slaughtered them. Some, including Ewen, tried to escape by swimming across the loch to the north side. Many of these got tangled in the weed, but Ewen reached a promontory called Creagan Dearg, where he was seized by the MacGregors and brought before Mackintosh and Marsaili's uncle (the new MacGregor of Ardlarich). Mackintosh said: *An cuir thu thu fhéin fo mheachainn Mhic Griogair no fo mheachainn Mhic an Tòisich?* "Will you surrender to MacGregor or Mackintosh?"

*Fhads a bhios Griogarach beò air thalamh cha chuirinn mi fhìn fo mheachainn cait*, replied Ewen. "As long as there's one MacGregor on earth I would not surrender to a cat."

Ardlarich looked at him fiercely and said: *Ged gheall mi nach togainn claidheamh, cha do gheall mi nach togainn biodag ad' aghaidh.* "Though I promised I would not raise a sword, I never promised not to raise a dirk against you."

Perhaps this was a reference to his niece's marriage contract. Anyway, he plunged his dirk into Ewen's heart. Ewen cried out to his absent wife: *A Mharsaili, se bràthair t' athar a rinn e.* "Marjory, it's your father's brother who did it."

Mackintosh said: *Ud, ud, nan robh thu air thighinn am' mheachainn-sa, Eoghain, cha tachaireadh seo.* "Oh dear, if you had surrendered to me, Ewen, this wouldn't have happened."

Clearly the King of the Cats, if we may call him that, had wanted Ewen alive, but now he was incensed beyond measure at Ewen's insult, and decided to take it out on his offspring. He sailed over to Ewen's house on the south side, where Marsaili was waiting with her four young boys to receive him, surrounded by a cordon of Mackintoshes. "Marsaili," he says, "I have to inform you that Ewen, your husband, is dead."

"That's bad news," she said.

"I have to inform you further that he was killed by the hand of your uncle, MacGregor of Ardlarich."

"That's worse news," she said.

"And don't you cry at such news?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I suppose crying would not mend anything."

"But you must cry," said Mackintosh.

"But I must not and will not cry," she said firmly.

Mackintosh now seized her eldest boy by the legs and said, "Suppose I were to dash this boy's head against that stone, would you cry?"

"If the devil put that into your heart," she replied, "my crying would not prevent it."

He dashed the boy's head against a stone and scattered his brains around. Marsaili stayed firm. So he took the second boy and did the same. She still stayed firm. So he took the third boy and did the same. By now Iain Biorach ("Sharp-Featured John"), her fourth son, was clinging in terror to his mother and trying to hide in her dress from the terrible man. This made her burst into tears, and Mackintosh said: *A bhean gun chiall, b' fheàrr a-chianamh na 'n-dràsta.* "You stupid woman, it would have been better earlier than now."

That then is the origin-legend of the Camerons of Camghouran. It's easy now to see why a woman from Ardlarich should tell her son, John Gregorson Campbell, that the cat "was disliked by the MacGregors, and the Camerons of Glenevis could not tolerate it at all". Campbell thought of the Camghouran Camerons as Glen Nevis Camerons, because that is what they were.

On the other hand, if historical circumstances were fully reflected in "The King of the Cats", we should be looking for a Cameron who kills Mackintosh himself or one of his warriors, boasts of it in his own house, and is murdered in revenge by a Mackintosh servant. I'd be happy to hear from any reader who knows such a story.

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