

Murchadh, Mionachag and the berries

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

YOU probably know the story. Murchadh and Mionachag go to pick berries. As fast as Murchadh picks, Mionachag eats. Murchadh goes off to find a rod (*slat*) to beat Mionachag with. “What’s your news today, a Mhurchaidh?” says the *slat*.

“I’m looking for a rod to beat Mionachag with,” says Murchadh, “because she’s eating my berries.”

“You won’t get me,” says the rod, “till you find an axe (*tuagh*) to cut me down with.”

Murchadh approaches the *tuagh*. “What’s your news today, a Mhurchaidh?”

“I’m looking for an axe to cut down a rod to beat Mionachag with, because she’s eating my berries.”

“You won’t get me,” says the axe, “till you find a stone (*clach*) that polishes me.”

Murchadh approaches the *clach*. “What’s your news today, a Mhurchaidh?”

“I’m looking for a stone to polish an axe to cut down a rod to beat Mionachag with, because she’s eating my berries.”

So it goes on, till Murchadh explains to a baking-woman (*bean-fhuinne*): “I’m looking for a bannock (*bonnach*) for the lad who looks after the barn (*gille-sabhail*) who’ll give me a wisp (*sop*) of straw for the cow (*bó*) who’ll give milk to the cat (*cat*) who’ll hunt a mouse (*luch*) who’ll scrape butter (*im*) to rub on the feet of a hound (*gadhar*) who’ll chase a deer (*fiadh*) who’ll swim some water (*uisge*) which will wet the stone (*clach*) that will polish the axe (*tuagh*) that will cut down the rod (*slat*) to beat Mionachag with.”

“You won’t get a bannock from me,” says the woman, “till you bring some water (*uisge*) to bake it with.”

“How?” says Murchadh. “I’ve nothing to carry it in except that sieve for sowans (*criathar cabhrach*).”

I explained here a few months ago that sowans (*cabhraich*) is a poor cousin of porridge made from oat husks. You steep the husks with some fine meal in water for about a week, then strain them through a cloth (or sieve). You leave the liquor in a jar to ferment and separate, and the solid matter at the bottom is sowans. When you boil it with water and salt it turns into a thick jelly. This you eat like porridge, adding butter if you have any.

Murchadh approaches the water with the *criathar cabhrach*, and every drop goes straight through. A crow (*feannag*) appears above him and remarks, as crows do, *Gòrrag, gòrrag*. “Silly ass, silly ass.”

“You’re right, crow,” says Murchadh.

Crèadh ruadh ’s còinneach, crèadh ruadh ’s còinneach, says the crow. “Red clay and moss, red clay and moss.”

Murchadh lines the sieve with red clay and moss, fetches the water, gets a bannock from the woman, gives it to the lad who looks after the barn in return for a wisp of straw for the cow, who gives him milk for the cat, who hunts a mouse, who scrapes some butter for rubbing the feet of the hound, who chases a deer, who swims some water which wets the stone that polishes the axe which cuts down the rod to beat Mionachag with. ‘*S nuair a thill Murchadh bha Mionachag an déidh SGÀINEADH!* By the time Murchadh gets back Mionachag has BURST!

It’s great fun, and kids have enjoyed it for longer than anyone can guess. There are lots of Gaelic versions, including one published in colour as a delightful children’s book, “Biorachan Beag agus Biorachan Mòr”, in 2003. (Get it from Stòrlann in Lewis or the Gaelic Books Council.) But I’ve taken mine from Volume One of J. F. Campbell’s “Popular Tales of the West Highlands” (1860), because I want to explore his comments. He says he got it “from Ann Darroch, James Wilson, Hector MacLean, Islay, and many others in other parts of the Highlands”, and adds: “This is the best known of all Gaelic tales. It is the infant ladder to learning a chain of cause and effect . . . There are few variations. In one version the crow was a light bird; in another a gull was introduced, which advised the use of the sand to stuff the riddle.”

What’s a “light bird”? A misprint for “night bird”? Anyway, he goes on: “The tale has sixteen steps, four of which contain double ideas. The English house that Jack built has eleven. The Scotch old woman with the silver penny has twelve. The Norsk cock and hen a-nutting twelve, ten of which are double. The German story in Grimm has five or six, all single ideas. All these are different. In Uist the actors are Biorachan mor agus Biorachan Beag; in Sutherland, Morachan agus Mionachan.”

What does he mean by “double ideas”? Well, the steps seem to be: (1) red clay and moss to line the sieve (2) which carries the water (3) which bakes the woman’s bannock (4) which feeds the lad who looks after the barn (5) who provides a wisp of straw to feed the cow (6) who gives the milk (7) which feeds the cat (8) who hunts the mouse (9) who scrapes the butter (10) which rubs the feet of the hound (11) which chases the deer (12) which swims the water (13) which wets the stone (14) which polishes the axe (15) to cut down the rod (16) that Murchadh wants to beat Mionachag with.

I suppose the ideas that Campbell calls “double” are the ones with two nouns rather than one. I count five of these, not four: nos. 1, 3, 5, 10 and 16. No. 4 looks double but it isn’t because “the lad who looks after the barn” is just *gille-sabhail*, which Campbell translates “barn gillie”. Maybe he didn’t count no. 16 because Mionachag had already burst!

I thought I would seek out the English, Scotch, “Norsk” and German versions, partly for fun, but also to make sure I understand what he means by “double ideas”. Let’s take the “Norsk” version first – easy to track down, because George Dasent’s “Popular Tales from the Norse” (1859) was the book that inspired Campbell to collect Gaelic tales in the first place. It begins: “Once on a time the cock and the hen went out into the hazel-wood to pick nuts; and so the hen got a nutshell in her throat, and lay on her back, flapping her wings. Off went the cock to fetch water for her; so he came to the spring and said, ‘Dear good friend spring, give me a drop of water.’”

But the spring wants some leaves first, so that sets off a chain which comes out at the end like this: (1) a charcoal-burner gives charcoal (2) to pass on to a smith (3) who makes an axe for a woodcutter (4) who chops wood for a baker's wife (5) who bakes a bannock for a thresher (6) who gives some corn for a sow (7) who provides bristles for a shoemaker (8) who makes shoes for the Virgin Mary (9) who provides a red ribbon with a golden edge to wrap round a lime-tree (10) which sheds leaves for the spring (11) which gives the cock a drop of water (12) for the hen who recovers. Campbell says ten of the twelve ideas are double, and sure enough they all contain two nouns except nos. 2 and 12.

Now for the Grimms' tale, which Campbell says has five or six steps, "all single ideas". He must mean the one that begins: "A louse and a flea kept house together and were brewing beer in an eggshell. Then the little louse fell in and burnt herself. At this the little flea began to scream loudly. Then said the little room-door: 'Little flea, why are you screaming?'"

"'Because the louse has burnt herself.'

"Then the little door began to creak. At this a little broom in the corner said: 'Why are you creaking, little door?'"

"'Have I not reason to creak? The little louse has burnt herself, the little flea is weeping.'"

And so on. This time there's no intermediary like Murchadh or the cock being passed back through a chain of events and forward again at the end. It's a simple sequence of copycat hysteria, recited from the beginning each time we move on, till at last a spring asks a girl why she's breaking her water-pitcher, and she explains: "The little louse has burnt herself, the little flea is weeping, the little door is creaking, the little broom is sweeping, the little cart is running, the little ash-heap is burning."

"Oh ho," says the spring, "then I'll begin to flow!" And everything is drowned – girl, tree, ash-heap, cart, broom, door, flea, louse. So this time it's the bit at the end that goes backwards! Each of the steps is a single idea consisting of a noun and a verb: "The little flea is weeping", etc. But there are seven ideas (or nine if you add the girl breaking her pitcher and the stream flowing), so I'd conclude that Campbell's "five or six" was purely from memory.

How does "The house that Jack built" fit into this? Well, we don't know what Campbell's source was, but he seems to have had one step less than the version in "The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book", which has twelve. Or perhaps he didn't count the first one. It moves steadily forward from "This is the house that Jack built", adding a step each time, but in reverse order, newest first, till we reach "This is the horse and the hound and the horn, that belonged to the farmer sowing his corn, that kept the cock that crowed in the morn, that waked the priest all shaven and shorn, that married the man all tattered and torn, that kissed the maiden all forlorn, that milked the cow with the crumpled horn, that tossed the dog, that worried the cat, that killed the rat, that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built."

Incidentally "The Old Woman who Bought a Pig", which Campbell doesn't mention, is on the "Murchadh" principle: a chain of refusals, then when someone says yes, we return through the chain as everything starts to happen.

Finally, "the Scotch old woman with the silver penny" has twelve steps, says Campbell. He must be referring to the tale published by Robert Chambers in his classic "Popular Rhymes of Scotland" in 1841 as "The Wife and her Bush of Berries", for it begins: "There was a wife that lived in a wee house by hersel', and as she was soopin' the house one day, she fand twall pennies. So she thought to hersel' what she wad do wi' her twall pennies, and at last she thought she couldna do better than gang wi' t to the market and buy a kid."

I don't think Campbell's memory had let him down this time. He'll have heard a version in which the woman found one silver penny rather than twelve copper ones. After 1707 a Scots silver shilling was worth an English copper penny, and both were in circulation!

The woman buys her kid, but while leading it home she sees a bonny bush o' berries, so she asks the kid to look after her house while she goes back to pull the berries. The kid refuses, as goats are inclined to do, so the woman looks for a dog to bite it. The rigmarole goes on, with distinct echoes of "Murchadh", each creature and object declining to bite, strike, burn, drown, drink, slaughter, polish, hang, cut or kill the one before on the charitable grounds that it "never did me ony ill". The last is a cat who declines to kill a mouse, to which the woman replies: "Do it, and I'll gie ye milk and bread."

That does the trick, and we go back through the chain. The cat kills the mouse (children don't know what that means, remember), who cuts the rope, which hangs the smith, who polishes the axe, which slaughters the ox, who drinks the water, which drowns the fire, which burns the rod, which strikes the dog, who bites the kid, who looks after the house for the woman, who pulls her bonny bush o' berries. Twelve steps!

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