

## The Isle of Mist

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

SINCE *Eilean a' Cheò* is now the official name of the electoral district of Skye, it seems worth while to ask where on earth it came from. Let me try and state the facts in chronological order, as far as I understand them.

The story seems to begin with an ancient Ossianic ballad about the death of Cuchulainn. It contains this verse:

*A ghaisgich thréin nan iomad buaidh,  
Is cian a ghluais do chliù san strìth:  
Dùn Sgàthaich 'na cheathach bròin  
Bhith gun chruit gun cheòl gun rìgh.*

“O brave warrior of countless virtues, far did your fame in battle spread: Dunscaith has become a mist of grief for lack of harp or tune or king.”

Now enter James Macpherson, who heard many such ballads sung on winter nights as he grew up in Badenoch in the years around 1745. Macpherson was lucky enough to have a university education at Aberdeen. This gave him the notion of turning the ballads into a great Highland epic on the lines of Homer’s “Iliad” and “Odyssey”.

Fundamental to his plan was the idea of rooting Fingal, Ossian and the other traditional heroes more firmly in Scotland. Instead of being Irishmen who roved around the Gaelic lands as far as Scotland, they would be Scots who roved around the Gaelic lands as far as Ireland.

This meant making as much as possible of those bits of the genuine ballads that presented the warriors in a Scottish setting – for example, Cuchulainn’s seven-year training in the martial arts at Dunscaith in Skye by the amazon Sgàthach, who gave the castle her name.

Another ballad shows Cuchulainn sending his son to Dunscaith in turn, rather like Prince Philip sending Prince Charles to Gordonstoun.

*Gur mi Conlaoch, mac Cuchulainn,  
Oighre dligheach Dùn Dealgain —  
Is mi an rùn a dh’fhàg thu ’m bruid  
An Dùn Sgàthaich gam ionnsachadh.*

“I am Conlaoch, Cuchulainn’s son, the legal heir to Dundalk – I’m the darling you left captive in Dunscaith for my education.” A different version brings him to a different castle in Skye:

*Seachd bliadhna dhomh an Dùn Tuilm  
A’ foghlam gaisge o mhàthair.*

“I spent seven years in Duntulm / Learning the arts of war from a mother.” This was enough for Macpherson to make Cuchulainn a Skye chief. But eighteenth-century people disliked too much detail in their works of art, and in any case it was in Macpherson’s interest to obscure the changes he was making. What’s more, Rousseau had called for a return to nature, and for the exaltation of the Noble Savage. So Macpherson decided that plot, character and humour must fade into the background and give way to mountains, sea and elements. Cuchulainn son of Seimh-suailte, hero of the Ulstermen, therefore becomes (as Macpherson himself points out in the introduction to “Fingal” of 1761) “Cuchullin, the son of Semo, lord of the Isle of Mist, one of the Hebrides”.

This is how Macpherson introduces the Isle of Mist in his text: “Nor slept thy hand by thy side, chief of the isle of mist; many were the deaths of thine arm, Cuchullin, thou son of Semo.” And in case there’s any doubt, he footnotes “isle of mist” like this: “The Isle of Sky; not improperly called the *isle of mist*, as its high hills, which catch the clouds from the western ocean, occasion almost continual rains.”

Macpherson mentions the isle of mist altogether six times more. If I put them all together, it sounds like this. “O strike the harp in praise of my love, the lonely sun-beam of Dunscaich. Strike the harp in the praise of Bragéla, of her that I left in the isle of Mist, the spouse of Semo’s son . . . Chief of the isle of mist . . . the king of the isle of mist . . . Spread now thy white sails for the isle of mist, and see Bragéla leaning on her rock . . . Hills of the isle of mist! when will ye answer to his hounds? . . . king of the isle of mist . . . Peace to thy soul, in thy cave, chief of the isle of Mist!”

As is well known, Macpherson made a lot of money out of this tosh but got into hot water for pretending it was a direct translation of ancient manuscripts. He did have some old manuscripts, such

as the Book of the Dean of Lismore, but took very little trouble over them and used his imagination instead.

When the Gaelic “originals” of Macpherson’s text finally appeared in 1807, nine years after his death, those who believed in the authenticity of Ossian for patriotic reasons were duly convinced, and anyone else who could understand Gaelic could see that they were a fraud. Naturally “the isle of mist” had become *eilean a’ cheò*, “the king of the isle of mist” had become *rìgh eilean a’ cheò*, and “the lord of the isle of mist” had become *triath eilean a’ cheò*.

I could be wrong, but I believe there was then a seventy-year pause before the expression began to be used in Gaelic songs. Certainly in the late 1870s and early 1880s it caught on like a house on fire. This coincided with a surge of confidence in the Gaelic-speaking community. Was the use of the expression a consciously creative act in the mind of Neil MacLeod or Màiri Mhór? Or had it been on the lips of the people as a synonym for Skye ever since 1807?

I don’t know the answers to these questions. No doubt they are lurking in the periodicals of the time. All I can do here is say a little about the “misty island” explosion of the 1870s and 1880s and the people responsible for it.

Màiri Mhór was born in 1821 but made no songs at all until 1873 or 1874, when her work began to appear in newspapers. Perhaps the whole thing started with the great song “Eilean a’ Cheò” itself, every single couplet of whose twenty-two magnificent verses is linked by rhyme on the sound ò. It’s full of variations on the theme of mist, without being misty in a Macphersonic way. Exactly the same technique was used by another Skye poet, Alexander MacLean, in 1883, in a song about the Glendale martyrs; it’s in Donald Meek’s book “Tuath is Tighearna”, and is notable for the variation *muinntir Eilean a’ Cheò*, “the people of the Isle of Mist”.

In Màiri Mhór’s verse the mist became a leitmotif. The actual words *eilean a’ cheò* don’t appear anywhere in her other great homeland song, “Soraidh le Eilean a’ Cheò”, but the mist itself is right there at the beginning:

*Soraidh leis an àit’  
An d’fhuair mi m’ àrach òg,  
Eilean nam beann àrda  
Far an tàmh an ceò.*

Variations on the three simple words *eilean a’ cheò*, like *eilean àrd a’ cheò* and *eilean uain’ a’ cheò*, appear in various other songs. Sometimes it’s *tìr a’ cheò*, “the land of mist”. And in at least one other case (“Fàgail Eilean a’ Cheò”) the expression appears in the title only. It had become synonymous with Skye.

Then there was Neil MacLeod, who was born in 1843. His father Donald, *Dòmhnall nan Òran*, had published his own songs in 1811, and I can’t find any trace of *eilean a’ cheò* in them at all. Yet Neil, whose collection “Clàrsach an Doire” first appeared in 1883, puts it into four different songs. In two of them he uses the variation *eilean gorm a’ cheò*, almost as if correcting Màiri, as *gorm* is a more healthy and flourishing shade of green than *uaine*. He calls one song “Cumha Eilean a’ Cheò” and another “Coinneamh Bhliadhnail Clann Eilean a’ Cheò”. This is addressed to a meeting of the Skye Association in *baile Chluaidh* – Glasgow, I suppose – and ends: *Biodh clann mo dhùthcha mar bu chòir, / ’Nan cliù do Eilean Gorm a’ Cheò*. “May my compatriots be as they should, a credit to the Green Isle of Mist.”

Most interesting of all, in a way, is a love-story at the end of MacLeod’s book which shows the expression arriving in prose. It begins: *Ann an aon de ghlinn uaigneach, ach maiseach, Eilean-a’-cheò, bha duin’-uasal còir, saibhir a chòmhnuidh . . .* “In one of the hidden but beautiful glens of the Isle of Mist lived a kind, wealthy gentleman . . .”

James Macpherson may have intended the words “isle of mist” to imply something wild, raw, pagan. But by helping to forge a whole literary movement called romanticism he only succeeded in making them respectable. Now, exactly 200 years after the publication of the Gaelic Ossian, which piled fabrication upon fabrication and first put the expression into print, we can enjoy the final irony. *Eilean a’ Cheò* is being used by bureaucrats. Yes, it’s official.

22 June 2007