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The "Carmina" and the stars

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THIS article I would like to take a look at some material which Alexander Carmichael prepared for inclusion in his great six-volume work "Carmina Gadelica", but which has never seen the light of day. It is in one of many surviving bundles of field notes and other stuff belonging to Carmichael in Edinburgh University Library.

The material in question is a three-page typescript entitled "*Reuladaireachd*: Astronomy", and it is entirely in the style of "Carmina Gadelica". It was proofed for publication in Alexander Carmichael's hand. He inserts accents here and there and indicates (with arrows and the instruction "Indent") that every second line of verse on p. 2 should be indented. We may assume I think that the typist was his talented and beautiful daughter Ella, who receives a warm tribute in Volume 3, which was not published until many years after her death and that of her father.

The material begins: "A woman died in the island of Boreray, North Uist, some years ago who had a wonderful knowledge of the heavenly bodies and of their movements. She could tell the times of their rising and their setting, the coming and the going of the moon, the times of the tide and ebb, and many other things. She had the names of many of the stars, and had a great many interesting rhymes about them. Raghnaid nighean Domhnaill Òig was alive in my time, but I did not know of her till too late. She was a weaver, much loved and respected in her island home."

There follows a poem about stars headed "Nighean Rìgh Mheangain". It is really three different versions of the same poem, I think. Below is Carmichael's translation headed "(on opposite page) King Meangan's Daughter". This is clearly the constellation otherwise known to tradition as *Nighean Rìgh Mheallain*, suggesting that the origin of the name may perhaps be, in the style of medieval romance, "the Daughter of the King of Milan"; Carmichael identifies it as Orion. Here is the material in Gaelic and in English just as in the typescript, with no changes of spelling.

Nighean Rìgh Mheangain
Agus a triùir leannan,
Agus a cù agus a gille,
Agus a còcaire.

(Daughter of King Meangan / And her three lovers, / And her dog and her gillie, / And her cook.)

Nighean Rìgh Mheangain,
A triùir leannan,
A cù, a gille,
A ban-nighidh,
A ban-fhighidh,
Agus a banaltrum.

(Daughter of King Meangan, / Her three lovers, / Her dog, her gillie, / Her washing woman, / Her weaving woman, / And her nurse.)

Nighean Rìgh Mheangain,
Agus a dithist leannan,
Fear dhiubh air thoiseach,
Fear dhiubh air dheireadh.
Am fear tha air thoiseach
Chan fhuirich e rithe;
Am fear tha air dheireadh
Chan fhuirich i ris.

(The daughter of King Meangan / And her two lovers, / One in front of her, / One behind her. / The one in front / Will not wait for her, / And the one behind, / She will not wait for him.) An alternative reading, *Cha bheir e oirre*, is offered for the last line, with its translation: "He will not overtake her."

The second page of notes goes like this. "The people of Uist say that three stars appeared in the sky simultaneously with the birth of Christ. They call these Na Trì Reuil, the three stars, Na Trì Rionnaig, the three planets, An Triùir Bhuachaillean, the three herdsmen. These stars, they tell, represent the three Persons of the Trinity, showing themselves in the sky to signify their approval of what occurred on earth. Bearing on this the people quote fragments of poems, partly Christian, partly pagan, but so broken and disjointed as to be rarely serviceable. The following is an example: —

Bha triùir rionnag anns an adhar
Ris nach dèanadh gadhar comhart;
Bha triùir rìghrean air an talamh
Ris nach gabhadh Geigean gnothach.

(Three stars there were in the sky / At which hound would not bay; / Three kings there were upon the earth / With whom Geigean would not meddle.)"

It is a long time since I mentioned Geigean in one of these articles. He is a figure that represents winter, like Jack Frost. Perhaps that is significant here.

The text goes on:

"Bha triùir mhaighdeana beaga caomh
A' rugadh an aon oidhche ri Crìosd:
Masa beò dhaibhsan air an t-saoghal,
Is beò dhutsa, a ghaoilein mhìn.

(Three lovely little maids there were / Born on the same night as Christ; / If they still live in this world; / Thou livest too, thou gentle darling.)"

It is interesting that Carmichael corrected the words "mhaighdeana beaga caomh" from "mhaighdeanan beaga caomha". The typescript phrase is good conventional Gaelic, the correction may be described as Carmichaelesque.

The words "Another example: —" are now typed, then this version with incomplete translation, all firmly scored out.

"Tha mac is piuthar is brathair ann;
Cha mhac piuthar no brathair iad:
Mac Righ Guaillionn, ogha Righ Guaillionn,
Is nighean Righ Guaillionn 's a mhathair ann.

(Son and daughter and mother are there; / Nor son nor daughter nor . . .)" The typist begins again, and this time gets the translation right. Perhaps Carmichael was dictating the material to his daughter.

"Tha mac 's a phiuthar 's a mhàthair ann;
Cha mhac piuthar no bràthar iad:
Mac Rìgh Guaillionn, ogha Rìgh Guaillionn,
Is nighean Rìgh Guaillionn 's a màthair ann.

(A son and his sister and his mother are there; / Nor son of sister nor of brother are they: / Son of King Guaillionn, grandson of King Guaillionn, / And daughter of King Guaillionn and her mother are there.)" An alternative rendering of the last word, "iad", is added. This would make the translation end "are they" instead of "are there". Clearly Carmichael is being failed by his notes, his memory, or both, for we then meet the word "Otherwise" followed by an alternative attempt at reconstruction:

"Tha mac is piuthar is màthair ann;
Cha mhac piuthar no bràthar iad:
Mac Rìgh Guaillean, ogha Righ Guaillean,
Is nighean Rìgh Guaillean 's a màthair ann.

(Son and sister and mother are there; / Nor son of sister nor of brother are they: / Son of King Guaillean, grandson of King Guaillean, / And daughter of King Guaillean and her mother are there.)"

It must be on account of the unsatisfactory nature of this text that the entire section on astronomy was left out of "Carmina Gadelica" — a decision which, I believe, reflects credit on Alexander Carmichael. As for the identity of King Guaillean, I would point to Guaire, king of Connacht, famed in all Gaelic tradition for his generosity and hospitality; the change from "r" to "ll" is quite common. On the other hand, it is quite possible that "Rìgh Guaillean" should be read as "the King of Guaillean" rather than "King Guaillean". The suggestion that Carmichael's "King Meangan" may in fact be "the King of Milan" offers an analogy. The King of Genoa, perhaps?

The third and last page of the text is devoted to terminology. It begins: "The Morning Star was called A' Mhaineag, A' Mhaidineag, A' Mhaduinneag, A' Mhaidearag. The Evening Star is Feasgag, Feasgnag, Feasgarag, Rionnag a' Bhuachaille, 'the herdsman's star'. An Crann is the Plough in Ursa Major. Vega was called Am Buachaille, 'the Herdsman'. Orion was Nighean Rìgh Mheangain, &c. The Pleiades are Grioglachan, from griog, a white quartz pebble, griogag, a small quartz pebble; also Griuglachan, Grigneachan, Gnigneachan, from gnige, a group, cluster — gnigne ghruagach, a band of maidens; gnige thaighean, a cluster of houses. The Pleiades are said to get their course on the Eve of St Michael and to lose it on the Eve of New Year."

The word "white" is xxxd out by the typist and in fact everything from the words "from griog" to "a cluster of houses" is scored out, no doubt by Carmichael himself or at his direction. What was originally typed at the end of the last sentence was "on the Eve of St John", but "St John" was xxxd out and "New Year" typed instead. On the other hand, the number "421" is typed at the start of the text, seemingly indicating that it was copied from field-notes. I would conclude that Carmichael and his daughter were systematically going through his materials — she typing; he explaining, amplifying, adding, subtracting, changing his mind. This may be how the whole of Volumes 1 and 2 of "Carmina Gadelica" was originally put together, and we presumably owe the survival of the typescript on astronomy to its never having been sent to the printers.

As for Carmichael's remark about the Pleiades (as corrected), it is in line with this saying collected by his younger contemporary the Rev. Duncan Campbell: *Tha an Grioglachan a'call a chùrsa naoi oidhchean roimhn*

Nollaig Mhóir, "The Pleiades lose their course nine nights before Christmas", which I discussed on this page a long time ago.

The next text on p. 3 is a list of moon-names. "The moon is called seasonally: — Gealach bhuidhe an abachaidh, the yellow moon of ripening. Gealach bhuidhe Shamhna, the yellow moon of Hallowmass. Gealach bhuidhe Mhìcheil, the yellow moon of Michaelmas. Gealach bhuidhe a' bhruic, the yellow moon of the badger, when the badger prepares his winter retreat. Gealach bhuidhe bhó, the yellow moon of cows. Gealach an Ruadhain, the reddening moon, when vegetables begin to get brown."

Preceding the text as a whole is the number 412; preceding the last item, *Gealach an Ruadhain*, is the number 425. Clearly two separate sections of Carmichael's field-notes have been brought together here, and this is reflected in the published work. At page 366 of "Carmina Gadelica" Volume 2 is a passage which reflects the content and phraseology of no. 412 (" . . . the badger . . . retires to his winter retreat . . ."), while page 80 of "Carmina Gadelica" Volume 6 has no. 425 on its own and almost verbatim: "**gealach an ruadhain.** The reddening moon, at the time when vegetables begin to get brown." So once again our typescript is shown to be a compilation of earlier materials which were to find their way quite separately into print.

The relevance of the final text to astronomy is not immediately obvious, but it certainly has a connection to the heavenly bodies. Preceded (like the list of moon-names) by the number 412, it goes: "Mìosachan: a stone in the island of Heillsgeir and another near Clachan a' Ghluip, North Uist, are called Leac a' Mhìosachain, 'flagstone of the monthly'. The slab near Clachan is over 20 feet long."

A better translation might be "Calendar Flagstone". The function of such stones, evidently, was as sundials: they cast a shadow — or, to be more accurate, a shadow was cast upon them — in such a way as to indicate with some precision the passing of the *mìosan* or months. We may assume that they were full of natural steps, angles, cracks and other markings which could be "read" in conjunction with the shadows cast by and upon them much as the conjunctions of lines, words and figures of a printed calendar can be studied nowadays. They would have had to be large to contain all the necessary features.

These three ordinary-looking pages are very special. For one thing they contain Gaelic traditions and rhymes about the stars and the heavenly bodies which may not have been recorded anywhere else. And for another thing, they offer a vivid snapshot of Alexander Carmichael and his daughter busy assembling the "Carmina Gadelica".

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