209

Images for making rain

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I HAVE just had a week in Orkney and a week in the Black Isle, and a splendid holiday it has been. I think the total rainfall was about average. The thing was, nearly all of it fell in a single hour one evening in Kirkwall, and for the rest of the fortnight we basked in almost continuous sunshine.

At the museum in Rosemarkie I picked up a copy of a fascinating book which I had never expected to buy other than second-hand, James Mackinlay's "Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs", which has now been reprinted a century after it first appeared in 1893. One thing that immediately drew my attention was Mackinlay's interpretation of the ritual washing of the image of St Fumac. He saw it as a rain-charm, and given our holiday weather, I felt more than willing to believe him.

It occurred to me to bring together here what I have gathered about surviving images of saints in the Highlands. Not only to see what evidence we have for their use as rain-charms, but also because the accounts of how they were destroyed at the hands of the Reformed church make highly entertaining reading.

First, however, to show what underlies Mackinlay's point about the rain-charm, I will quote Sir James Frazer's survey in "The Golden Bough" of the world-wide evidence for dipping saints in water. He begins: "At various places in France it is, or used till lately to be, the practice to dip the image of a saint in water as a means of procuring rain. Thus, beside the old priory of Commagny there is a spring of St Gervais, whither the inhabitants go in procession to obtain rain or fine weather according to the needs of the crops. In times of great drought they throw into the basin of the fountain an ancient stone image of the saint that stands in a sort of niche from which the fountain flows. At Collobrières and Carpentras a similar practice was observed with the images of St Pons and St Gens respectively."

Frazer moves on to evidence from Spain. "In several villages of Navarre prayers for rain used to be offered to St Peter, and by way of enforcing them the villagers carried the image of the saint in procession to the river, where they thrice invited him to reconsider his resolution and to grant their prayers; then, if he was still obstinate, they plunged him in the water, despite the remonstrances of the clergy, who pleaded with as much truth as piety that a simple caution or admonition administered to the image would produce an equally good effect. After this the rain was sure to fall within twenty-four hours."

He concludes by demonstrating that Catholic countries have no monopoly on this method of rain-making. "In Mingrelia, when the crops are suffering from want of rain, they take a particularly holy image and dip it in water every day till a shower falls; and in the Far East the Shans drench the images of Buddha with water when the rice is perishing of drought."

Against that perspective, I can now introduce our Highland images, beginning in the eastern foothills with St Fumac. Fumac was the patron saint of the parish of Botriphnie (Fumackirk), on the river Isla six miles south of Keith in Banffshire, where St Fumac's Fair was held on 3 May. His name is probably a corruption of *Fionnmac*. Only one saint of the name is recorded in the martyrologies of Gorman and Donegal, a bishop whose day is November 10.

The wooden image of the saint was, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the keeping of an old woman who washed it faithfully and with much formality every year in St Fumac's Well on the occasion of the Fair. Finally however it was swept away by a flood all the way down the Isla and the Deveron to Banff. It came into the hands of the parish minister, who duly burnt it as a monument of superstition.

That story is recorded only in a solemn work called "Illustrations of the Antiquities of the Shires of Banff and Aberdeen". It was Mackinlay who saw the supreme irony in it, pointing out that if it was a rain-charm it must have been a highly successful one to have caused such a flood.

My next image is that of St Fergus. He was particularly noted for his relics. His arm was kept in Aberdeen Cathedral. His head was preserved at Scone in a silver case ordered for it by James IV, who made an offering to it of 14 shillings on 11 October 1504. According to the Aberdeen Breviary, his crozier once stilled a storm by being thrown into the waves. That of course is the opposite of a rain-charm, and probably a lot more useful in our climate.

Above all, however, Fergus was revered in Wick as the patron of the town, and a stone image of him survived there until 1613. In that year it was destroyed by the Rev. Dr Merchiston of Bower, and the townsfolk were so enraged that they laid hands on the minister when he was returning home and drowned him in the river of Wick. The murderers were never identified, because the people testified that St Fergus himself did the drowning. Someone claimed to have seen the saint astride the minister and holding him down in the water.

St Fergus' Day was in November, and Fergusmas survived in Wick as a cattle market to the end of the nineteenth century, held on the fourth Tuesday of that month. It was known as *An Fhéill Fhearghais* to the Gaelic-speaking people of Upper Caithness and Sutherland.

No direct evidence for rain-charms there, although it is interesting that drowning plays such a large part in the story. On the other hand we have a clear account of an image of St Fillan being dipped to procure rain. Fillan, whose cult was strongest in Kintail and Perthshire, was quite a little weather saint. His day was 9 January, and a Perthshire tradition-bearer, James Macintyre, states that that day, *Latha Fhéill Faolain*, marked the start of the fortnight of snowstorms called the *faoiltich gheamhraidh* or 'winter wolftimes'. So a rhyme goes:

Cur 's cathadh
Sneachda 's reothadh
Feitheamh na Féill Faolain.

(Blizzard and drifting / And snow and frost / Are awaiting St Fillan's Day.) And Macintyre offers an anecdote and rhyme which suggest that St Fillan's may equally bring a change for the better. On the eve of *Féill Faolain*, he says, according to ancient tradition, two children were found after being lost in the snow, and their genius or spirit is supposed to have thus addressed the parents:

Si nochd oidhch' Fhéill Faolain,
Nì e caochladh sìn —
Moladh do Rìgh nan Feart,
Bheir E 'n sneachda seo dhinn.

(Tonight is St Fillan's eve, / It will bring a change of weather — / Blessed be the Mighty King, / He will take away this snow.)

The view of Fillan as a weather saint is strengthened by local tradition at Struan in Atholl. There is, or was, a *Tobar Faolain* there, nearly a hundred yards west from the church, at the foot of a bank close to the River Garry. It was already overgrown with grass and weeds in the late nineteenth century, but the water remained clear and cool. In pre-Reformation days an image of the saint was kept in the church, and when rain was needed it was brought in procession to the well and its feet were placed in the water.

So far we have had three images, one of wood, one of stone, one of material unknown. I will finish with two further images, both of wood, those of St Finan and St Barr. I know of no particular traditions that connect them with rainmaking, but given the evidence above, I would be surprised if they were not used for that from time to time.

Finan was a saint of many places, especially Moidart and Strath Nairn, but the day of Finan of Moidart was 18 March, while the day of Finan of Strath Nairn was 17 February, and they are listed separately in Irish martyrologies. So I think they should be regarded as different people.

The records of the Presbytery of Inverness and Dingwall record the survival of an image of St Finan in Strath Nairn down to the year 1643. The circumstances of its destruction were as follows. The Rev. Alexander Thomson had been minister of Dunlichity since 1623. He was a constant source of trouble and annoyance to the Presbytery. For example, on 6 September 1639 he was ordered to absent himself from the Saturday market in all time coming. Then at a visitation on 7 September 1643 it was found that he "had neither book, baptism, marriage nor roll of catechising to present to the Presbytery; that the Communion had not been dispensed for three years, and that family exercise was not kept in the minister's house".

The brethren also observed that there were some crosses of timber standing in the common way and some monuments of old superstition — not defined — in the Kirk. They ordered Thomson to take these away immediately under the pain of suspension. Then on 23 November it was reported to Presbytery "that there was in the Paroch of Dunlichitie ane Idolatrous Image called St Finane, keepit in a private house obscurely". The brethren appointed Thomson himself, along with Lauchlan Grant, minister of Moy, and Patrick Dunbar, minister of Dores, "to try iff possible to bring the said Image the next Presbitrie day".

They were successful, and on 7 December Thomson "presentit the idolatrous Image to the Presbitrie, and it was delyverit to the ministers of Inverness with ordinance that it should be burnt at their markat corse, the next Tuysday, after sermone". On 21 December "the ministers of Inverness declairit that according to the ordinance of the Presbitrie the last day, they caused burne the Idolatrous Image at the Merkat Corse, after sermone, upon Tuysday immediately following the last Presbitrie day". One can only echo the words of the late William Mackay: "How unfortunate it is that it was not preserved for a place of honour in one of our museums!"

In the eyes of Presbytery Dunlichity was in a woeful plight, and they finally passed sentence of deposition on Thomson at some point before 6 October 1646. A ministry of singular ineptitude, as one historian commented, was thus brought to an end.

And so to Barra, where, says Martin Martin, the people used to swear by St Barr. The church of Kilbarr *(Cille Bharra)* is at Eoligarry by the cockle strand, and a wooden image of St Barr was kept in it. When people went on a journey they made a present of clothes or linen to the saint to ensure their safety. Every 1 February there was a ballot for fishing-banks for that year, and the priest commended the fishermen to the protection of St Barr, St Brigid, the Virgin Mary and the Holy Trinity.

Every 25 September (*Latha Fhéill Barra*: St Barr's Day) the image, clad in its best linen shirt, was taken in procession around the church; people came after mass on that day to ride around Kilbarr three times on horseback, man in front, wife or girlfriend behind. The women gave the men presents of wild carrots which they had secreted earlier. This shows Barr in the role of guardian of the harvest and giver of fertility, a role performed elsewhere by St Michael on 29 September, but very suited to a saint whose name meant (or seemed to mean) "Crop".

At the end of the day they went down to *Traigh Bharra*, where the plane — sometimes — lands now, for sports *(oda)*, horse and foot races over the sand. The last full *oda* took place in 1828, and by 1840, thanks to evictions, emigration and poverty, the custom was almost dead. In any case the image of St Barr had been

missing since the previous century, although in the 1930s Dr J L Campbell heard it said darkly that “when it is found it will be found in the keeping of a certain family”.

— *WHFP* 19.8.94