Talk of the devil

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

IN his diary for 15 June 1663, Samuel Pepys noted as follows: "Both at and after dinner we had great discourses of the nature and power of spirits, and whether they can animate dead bodies; in all which, as of the general appearance of spirits, my Lord Sandwich is very scepticall. He says the greatest warrants that ever he had to believe any, is the present appearing of the Devil in Wiltshire, much of late talked of, who beats a drum up and down.

"There are books of it, and, they say, very true; but my Lord observes, that though he do answer to any tune that you will play to him upon another drum, yet one tune he tried to play and could not; which makes him suspect the whole; and I think it is a good argument."

The disturbance was at the house of a Mr Monpesson at Tedworth, and took the form of an invisible drum being beaten every night for a year. It was reported all over the country that Monpesson's house was haunted. Montpesson told the king and queen it was true. The king sent Lord Falmouth to Wiltshire for corroboration, and the queen sent the earl of Chesterfield, who reported: "Wee could neither see nor heare anything that was extraordinary."

When Pepys says 'there are books of it' I suppose he means that the story had been written up and printed in chapbooks – pamphlets which were hawked from town to town and sold like hot cakes at country fairs, the tabloid press of the day. He can scarcely be referring to the 'Mercurius Publicus', clearly the **Free Press** of the time, which had examined the story quite forensically in its issue of 23 April and concluded that the invisible drummer was a certain William Drury, of Uscut, Wilts.

A year later, the king told Chesterfield that it had been a hoax and that Monpesson had admitted as much to him. Monpesson then had the confidence to deny, in print, that he had made any such confession. The whole thing furnished the plot for Addison's play 'The Drummer, or, The Haunted House'.

It's intriguing, isn't it, how Pepys speaks of the alleged haunting as 'the appearance of the Devil in Wiltshire'. People were constantly being reminded of the devil in sermons, and lots of stories described him minutely, so it's hardly surprising if intelligent men were on the lookout for authenticated sightings. And Pepys was vulnerable. On 21 May he had written: "Being at supper my wife did say something that caused me to oppose her in, she used the word devil, which vexed me, and among other things I said I would not have her to use that word, upon which she took me up most scornfully, which . . . I know not now-a-days how to check, as I would heretofore, for less than that would have made me strike her."

The issue was not one of superstition but of power. Pepys was quite happy to use the word himself. But it was a swear-word. His wife shouldn't use it. And he was a troubled man. His wife was taking dancing lessons. Under Cromwell dancing had been illegal, so she was merely catching up on necessary skills. The day before (14 June) he had come home from the Navy Office at lunchtime to find his wife dancing with Pembleton the dancing-master. And when he had got home from dining at his club in the evening Pembleton was still there. It was clear that they had dined together.

He must have begun to wonder who the devil actually was. The drummer in Wiltshire? Pembleton? Or even, perish the thought, himself?

The problems that Samuel Pepys had with the devil in 1663 have all sorts of echoes for us nowadays. The differing behaviour expected of communicants and adherents. Afghanistan during and after the Taliban. The devil and swearing in Gaelic and English. 'Sexual politics' throughout the western world.

The clergy have always enjoyed making the devil seem real. There was a custom in Welsh churches, first mentioned by William Bingley in his 'Tour Round North Wales' of 1800, of spitting on the earthen floor when his name was mentioned. From 1794 to 1827 the rector of Llanmerewig in Montgomeryshire actually encouraged his congregation to spit and stamp their feet as they prayed in the Litany to 'beat down Satan under our feet'.

Angus Campbell, the Puilean, tells a wonderful story in his book 'Suathadh ri Iomadh Rubha' about a communicant who lived in a lonely place. Early one Sabbath morning when there is very little to eat in the house he looks out of the window and what does he see just a few feet away but *cròicire mór damh féidh*, a great big antlered stag. Temptation sets in –

food standing there before him, a gun hanging on the wall, and no one around to see or hear.

He takes down the gun and kills the beast. Unfortunately two old women on their way to church see it all and go straight to the minister with the sad, sad tale.

Later that day in church the minister takes as his text how the sword of the elect must be unsheathed before the ever-changing form of Satan (*roimh chruth chaochlaideach Shàtain*). As the sermon progresses the guilty man begins to perspire. The minister goes so far as to declare that it is only a little over an hour since *an t-Àbharsair Mór*, the Great Adversary himself, appeared in the form of a deer to one of the communicants, who duly succumbed. This is too much, and our hero gets to his feet. *Ma-tà, a mhinisteir 's a dhaoine*, he says, *mas e bha siud gu corparra, cha chuir e dragh air duin' agaibh tuilleadh, oir rinn mise brod a raganaich dheth!* "In that case, minister and friends, if he it was in the flesh, he will not bother any of you again, because I laid him out as stiff as a poker!"

Now, you may have noticed that in neither of those two stories was the word 'devil' mentioned. He was called Satan or the Adversary. Why? *Thig an donas ri iomradh*. "Talk of the devil and he appears."

What this proverb shows is that the taboo on uttering the devil's name has lasted longer in Gaelic than in English. *An donas*, "the wickedness", is one of nearly forty nicknames for him in Gaelic. The index to Nicolson's collection of Gaelic proverbs lists thirteen entries under "Devil": out of these, only one uses the taboo word *diabhal* (from Latin *diabolus*) itself – *Dèan do shianadh bhon Diabhal 's bho chlann an tighearna*. By way of translation Nicolson offers the Scots version, "Sain thyself frae the Deil and the laird's bairns." And he explains helpfully: "This was probably addressed first by a father to his daughters."

"Talk of the devil" is first on record in Pepys's own day, when John Ray included it in his collection of proverbs (1678): "Talk of the Devil, and he'll either come or send." In her book 'Devonshire' of 1838 Ann Bray shows that the superstition was still as alive in rural England then as it is in Gaelic Scotland now. She speaks of 'a strange, squint-eyed, little, ugly, old fellow . . . who had a look very like a certain dark personage, who ought not at all times to be called by his proper name'. So in Gaelic one of his nicknames is *am fear nach ainmich mi*, 'the one whom I will not name'.

A contribution to 'Notes and Queries' of 1871 shows how, amongst Protestants especially, the devil's name had become a swear-word, and reveals in the by-going why the vicar of Llanmerewig wanted his congregation to spit after mentioning him. "There is an old woman now living in Wales . . . who was much vexed at my saying . . . Devil's Bridge, requesting me to wipe my tongue and spit for mentioning such a dreadful name . . . I ought to have called it *pont y gwr drwg* = the bridge of the wicked man or the evil one. Her fear was lest something evil might follow if his Satanic majesty's name should be mentioned."

Learners of Gaelic please note, because the same still applies. One of the devil's Gaelic nicknames is *an droch fhear*, the direct equivalent of *y gwr drwg*. And teachers of Gaelic might like to note that when cheeky youngsters ask to be taught how to swear in Gaelic, the best answer is to teach them how not to. *Dé an droch fhear a tha thu ciallachadh?*

Which brings me to the devil's Gaelic names. I have already mentioned six of them. The Rev. John Gregorson Campbell offers another sixteen in his book 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland': *am fear nach fhiach* ('the worthless one'), *am fear nach abair mi* ('the one I will not say'), *am fear ud* ('yon one'), *an aon fhear mór* ('the one big one'), *an t-aibhisteir* or *an t-aibhistear* ('the one from the abyss' – itself a euphemism for hell), *an rosad* ('the mean mischievous one', 'the jinx'), *an dòlas mór* ('the big sorrow'), *mac mollachd* ('the son of cursing'), *an riabhach* ('the grizzly one') or *an riabhach mór* ('the big grizzly one'), *an t-ainspiorad*, *an t-annspiorad* or *an droch spiorad* ('the evil spirit'), and *Dòmhnall Dubh* ('Black Donald'). In the North Highlands, adds Campbell, he is also known as *Bìdein*, *Dìthean* and *Bradaidh*; these will be from *bìd* 'bite' (as in snakebite), *dìth* 'loss', and *brad* 'theft'.

That makes twenty-two altogether. To these the Puilean adds *ceann a' bhròin* ('the head of grief', 'he who presides over grief'), *mac an dólais* ('the son of anguish'), *an nàmhaid* ('the enemy'), *am fear mór* ('the big one'), *am fear-millidh* ('the destroyer'), *fear nan sluic* ('the man of the pits'), *am mac-mallachd* ('the son of cursing'), *Piullaidh* ('Shaggy'), *an creachadair* ('the plunderer') and *fear nan crìoch* ('the man of the boundaries' – presumably because he haunts lonely places of that kind). That makes thirty-two.

Others that I have picked up here and there are *Moisean* or *Muisean* ('Nasty'), *am*

Breamas (‘the Mischief’), and *an crochadair* (‘the hangman’). *Am Breamas* is in Macbain’s dictionary, so it’s probably a Badenoch usage. That’s thirty-five.

I’ve also counted the names for the devil in Fr Allan McDonald’s poems. His favourite is *an nàmhaid* (‘the enemy’), with seven mentions. In second place equal with two mentions each are *Sàtan*, *a’ bhéist* (‘the beast’), and *an nathair* (‘the snake’). In both instances of *béist* the actual phrase is *neimh na béiste* (‘the poison of the beast’). There need be little doubt therefore about the nature of the beast. On one occasion each he uses *an donas* (‘the wickedness’) and *an t-aibhistear* (‘the one from the abyss’), which I mentioned before. The grand total, then, is thirty-seven.

Whether this can be paralleled from other cultures I have no idea. Next time I will ask the question, “What does the devil look like?” There are plenty of Gaelic stories about that, so I’ll finish this time with two short ones from the north of England about the devil’s names. Both from Opie and Tatem’s wonderful ‘Dictionary of Superstitions’, which I have found invaluable in preparing this article.

Firstly, the devil was sometimes called Harry. A character in Hardy’s ‘Denham Tracts’ (1895) declares: “My son Harry, I daurena ca’ye Harry at neet, for fear the deil should come.”

Secondly, a South Shields lady recalled to Moira Tatem a sticky moment that occurred when her German pen-pal Ursula came to visit in 1936. The first thing Ursula did when she was shown to her bedroom was produce a picture of Adolf Hitler and pin it over her bed. “When my mother saw it, she said, nodding in the direction of the picture, ‘Old Nick!’

“‘Who is Old Nick?’ asked Ursula.

“My mother pointed downwards, and whispered, ‘The Devil.’”

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