The women behind King Lear

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

FOUR years ago I introduced Geoffrey of Monmouth to this column, pointing out that his best-selling 'History of the Kings of Britain' has been called 'one of the greatest romantic novels of all time'. Published in Latin in 1136 as 'Historia Regum Britanniae', it was soon being read avidly all over Europe. Nowadays it's a Penguin Classic.

One of Geoffrey's aims was political. By creating a national epic for William the Conqueror's son Henry I, he would help legitimise the new French-speaking ruling class as champions of the rights of the indigenous British in opposition to those of their previous rulers, the Anglo-Saxons.

Geoffrey may have had a Norman name, but his father was called Arthur, and the secret of his success was that he drew on traditional Celtic sources without hesitating to embroider them. The result was a splendid piece of joined-up writing that gave the peoples of Britain a common sense of belonging. King Arthur was presented for the first time as a national rather than a local hero, and the stream of writing about him has flowed ever since.

But let me tell another of Geoffrey's stories, one that appears in the 'History' long before the reign of Arthur – in the time of the prophet Elijah, says Geoffrey helpfully.

It should sound familiar. Leir son of Bladud becomes king of Britain and reigns for 60 years. He builds a city on the river Soar which the Britons call Kaerleir and the Saxons Leicester. He has no male issue – no, no Manannan – but three daughters. Goneril, Regan and Cordelia.

Now Leir is very fond of his daughters, especially Cordelia, the youngest. When he has been king for a long time he decides to marry them all off to suitable husbands and divide his kingdom between them. But first he questions them to find out which of them loves him most.

Goneril calls the gods of heaven to witness that he is dearer to her than the very soul which dwells within her body. Leir is pleased. Regan then swears that she loves Leir more than any other living person. Again Leir is pleased, but Cordelia reaches for the sick-bag. She says: "My father, can there really exist a daughter who maintains that the love she bears her own father is more than what is due to him as a father?

"I have always loved you as my father. If you are determined to wring more than this out of me, I will tell you. You are worth just as much as you possess. That is the measure of my love for you."

Leir is furious. He marries Goneril to Maglaurus duke of Albany and Regan to Henwinus duke of Cornwall, and gives each of them as dowry a quarter of his kingdom, keeping half for himself. (Geoffrey might just as easily have said that Leir gives Scotland to Maglaurus, Wales and Cornwall to Henwinus, and keeps England to himself.)

When a suitor comes for Cordelia – Aganippus, king of the Franks – Leir refuses her a dowry, but Aganippus takes her anyway, saying with great good taste that he wants the girl for one reason only, to have children by her.

When Leir begins to grow weak with age, Maglaurus and Henwinus rebel against him and take his half of the kingdom – England, presumably – for themselves. In exchange for giving up his royal power, Maglaurus agreed to maintain him with 140 knights so that he should not end his days alone and in obscurity.

Within two years Goneril has decided that her father has too many servants. They keep wrangling with her own servants because they are not offered more plentiful rations each month. Goneril speaks to her husband, who agrees that Leir's retinue should be reduced to 30.

Leir is furious. Again. He goes off to live with Regan and Henwinus, but before a year is out the same thing has happened, and Regan orders that his retinue be reduced to five. Leir goes back to Goneril, who swears by all the gods in heaven that Leir will not lodge with her at all unless he contents himself with a single servant.

As Leir sits brooding in his misery and his poverty he thinks of Cordelia in far-off Gaul. She will hardly help him, he reckons, considering how he treated her. Still, things can't be any worse, so off he goes across the sea.

To his surprise, Cordelia and Aganippus welcome him in Karitia – Calais? – with great

kindness. Aganippus gathers an army from all parts of Gaul. He marches with Leir and Cordelia against Maglaurus, Goneril, Henwinus and Regan, and defeats them. (Note the sub-text: French invasion of England justified on moral grounds.)

So Leir is restored to his kingdom. Three years later he dies. So too does Aganippus, king of the Franks, leaving Cordelia to rule Britain alone, and Geoffrey nicely rounds off his account of King Leir with what looks like a genuine remnant of twelfth-century Celtic folklore from middle England. "She buried her father in a certain underground chamber which she had ordered to be dug beneath the River Soar, some way downstream from Leicester.

"This underground chamber was dedicated to the two-faced Janus: and when the feast-day of the god came round, all the craftsmen in the town used to perform there the first act of labour in whatever enterprise they were planning to undertake during the coming year."

This curious little underwater ceremony reminds me of two things. One is the Gaelic custom of performing on the first day of the quarter an act symbolic of the work that is to follow – reaping a handful of unripe barley on 1st August and baking a cake from it, for example.

The other is the tradition in the islands of sacrificing a little ale or porridge to the waves on Thursday of Easter Week every year in hopes of encouraging a good harvest of seaweed to spread on the crops. In Lewis this was done in the name of Shony – John the Baptist, I'm sure – but in Iona and elsewhere his earlier identity was revealed. Look at what the Rev. Coll Macdonald, a native of Iona, said on the BBC in 1936, duly printed in 'Am Measg nam Bodach' (1938): *Chuala mise gu'm biodh muinntir I a' dortadh measan bhrochain anns a' mhuir mar iobairt do Mhananan aig toiseach na naodhamh linn deug . . . Bha fiughar aca gu'n cuireadh Mananan feamainn a' Chéitein 'na mill air na cladaichean*.

"I've heard that the Iona folk used to pour dishes of porridge into the sea as a sacrifice to Mananan at the start of the nineteenth century . . . They wanted Mananan to pile seaweed in heaps upon the shores in early May."

Now Manannan was the son of Lir in Celtic mythology; his name has something to do with the Isle of Man, with Clackmannan, with Kildavannan in Bute, and with Clann 'ic Mhannain in Uig (Lewis) and elsewhere whose name has been anglicised into Buchanan. I'm not aware that Lir gave his name to any place at all – certainly not to Leicester, which was called 'Ligera Ceaster' in AD 917, seemingly after a tribe called the Ligore, who gave their name to a stream there called the Leire. That's how the connection arose!

Geoffrey would have known Manannan mac Lir in his father's native Welsh as Manawydan fab Lyr. But it seems to me that, at least for the baddies in his story, he chose Gaelic names; and of course most of these are now familiar from Shakespeare's 'King Lear'.

Regan is the easy one – Geoffrey clearly took her name from Irish *ríoghan* or *ríogan*, 'a queen'. In Scottish Gaelic, just as *leughadh* is pronounced *leubhadh*, so *ríoghan* became *rìbhinn*, a poetic word for a girl. *An téid thu leam, a rìbhinn òg*?

Taking Cordelia next, Hanks and Hodges' Dictionary of First Names says that 'it may be a fanciful elaboration of Latin *cor* (genitive *cordis*) heart', but I think we can go a little further. This same Latin word gave the English of Geoffrey's time a word *cord* meaning 'agree'; this died out, but not before it had given 'accord' and 'cordial' to English – and *còrd* meaning 'agree' or 'please' to Gaelic!

Henwinus and Maglaurus are presumably meant to be Welsh/Cornish and Gaelic respectively. 'Henwinus' looks like 'Old White One', from *hen* and *gwyn*, and it's conceivable that in Maglaurus we have the earliest MacLaren – Mac Labhrais.

Maglaurus's wife's name is less straightforward but more interesting. If Geoffrey had gone into a tavern in Monmouth, found himself an Irishman, bought him a pint, explained his problem and asked him the word for a queen, the answer would have come back: *ríoghan*. If Geoffrey had then said, "Come on, what's a good name for a queen? Who's the most famous queen in Ireland?" the answer would have been: *Gormlaith*.

Gormlaith's story would have appealed to Geoffrey no end. She has been called 'one of the most romantic figures in Irish history'. Daughter of the high-king Flann Sinna, who died in AD 916, she was wife to three kings in a row – Cormac, king-bishop of Cashel, slain at Belach Mugna in 908, his conqueror Cerball mac Muirecáin, who died in 909, and finally Niall Glúndub, 'Neil the Black-Kneed', who fell in battle against the vikings in 919 – 'after all which royall marriages,' say the Annals of Clonmacnois, 'she begged from doore to

doore, forsaken of all her friends and allies, and glad to be relieved by her inferiours.'

Anything familiar there?

Osborn Bergin, who edited the dozen surviving poems attributed to Gormlaith, remarked that our own Book of the Dean of Lismore shows some of them being recited as early as the fifteenth century, 'and in their original form', he says, 'they may well go back two or three centuries earlier'. Which brings them into Geoffrey's time.

Of course there's no need to imagine that Gormlaith composed these songs herself, any more than that, say, Bonnie Prince Charlie composed 'Over the Sea to Skye'. No, two centuries were enough to make her a legend. She bore Niall a son Domhnall who was drowned, says that legend, and she made 'many pittifull and learned dittyes in Irish' lamenting all that had gone wrong.

And then there was the little matter of the bed-post. One night she dreamed that she saw her late husband Niall whom the vikings had killed. She sat up in bed to look at him, say the Annals, upon which the wraith turned to leave the chamber. "As hee was departing in that angry motion (as shee thought) shee gave a snatch after him, thinking to have taken him by the mantle, to keep him with her, and fell upon one of the beddstickes of the bedd that it pearsed her brest, eaven to her very hart, which received no cure untill she Died thereof."

Uaithne don iobhar áluinn
Fám iomdhaigh is eadh tárruinn;
Tarla mh'ucht fan uaithne ccorr,
Gur ro scoilt mo chroidhe a ccomhthrom.

("A post of the beautiful yew / That held up my bed was what I seized; / My breast came against the tapering post / So that it split my heart in the middle.")

That story would have been worth another round in any tavern in Monmouth. Even if Geoffrey weren't paying.

Gormlaith means 'blue aristocrat' (*Gorm-Fhlaith*). I can't *prove* it's the name that suggested 'Goneril' to Geoffrey, but it seems likely. In Scotland, where it came to be pronounced 'Gormail' and misinterpreted as *Gorm-Shùil* 'Blue-Eye', it became a remarkably popular name for witches. *Gormuil Mhór na Moighe* from Moy in Lochaber was the most powerful witch who ever lived in the Highlands. It was a common girl's name in Lewis down to a couple of generations ago, anglicised Gormelia, and Derick Thomson has brought the name full circle with his long poem 'Gormshuil':

'Ach bha mi uair 'na mo bhàn-righ' —
chan eil mi cinnteach
dè choisinn sin dhomh,
sòlas no doilgheas . . .

('But once I was a queen' – / I'm not sure / what that brought me, / joy or sorrow . . .)
Strange, isn't it, to think how this most tragic of Gaelic heroines seems to have been turned into that most tragic of English heroes?

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