Stick us a' in Aberlady

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

MY LAST piece was about knots. One tradition I didn't mention claims the only trade the devil was never able to learn was tailoring. When he went to try it, every tailor left the room. Undeterred, he began sewing away anyway, but since he had no one to teach him, he omitted to put a knot on the thread he began to sew with. Each time he pushed the needle through the cloth and pulled it, the thread came away, because there was no one there to tell him to put a knot in it!

After telling this story, the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell says: "It is presumed that he wanted to learn the trade to make clothes for himself, as no one would undertake the making of them." But what I would like to know is: is this the story that gave rise to the reel "The Deil Amang the Tailors"?

It's pretty strange if the devil didn't know how to tie a knot. After all, none of the witches he was in league with seem to have had any difficulty. I think the story must be propaganda from a time when people were so terrified of the devil that they needed to cheer each other up with stories about how stupid he was – like soldiers' yarns about Kaiser Bill, Hitler or Stalin.

Another tradition about knots is this one cited in "Taboo and the Perils of the Soul" by Sir James Frazer. "A Scotch cure for a sprained leg or arm," he says, "is to cast nine knots in a black thread and then tie the thread round the suffering limb, while you say:

The Lord rade,
And the foal slade;
He lighted
And he righted,
Set joint to joint,
Bone to bone,
And sinew to sinew.
Heal, in the Holy Ghost's name!"

This is interesting for several reasons. For one thing, it's one of the best known of all Gaelic charms.

Nuair thàinig Crìost ri làr
Shlànaich e cas eich —
Chuir e smuais ri smuais
Agus cnàimh ri cnàimh,
Chuir e fuil ri fuil
Agus feòil ri feòil,
Sùgh ri sùgh, agus féith ri féith.
Mar a shlànaich e sin,
Gun slànaich e seo.

("When Christ alighted / He healed His horse's leg – / He put marrow to marrow / And bone to bone, / He put blood to blood / And flesh to flesh, / Juice to juice, and sinew to sinew. / As He healed that, / May He heal this.") For another thing, as Frazer points out, Jacob Grimm was able to show that the words were based on an incident in the myth of the old Norse god Balder, whose foal put its foot out of joint and was healed by Woden. "Christ," says Frazer, "has been substituted for Balder in the more modern forms of the charm both in Scotland and Germany."

What Frazer probably didn't know was that in some of the Gaelic versions Calum Cille is substituted for Christ. Or it could have been the other way round – from Balder to St Columba to Christ.

Frazer's source is a book by Robert Chambers called "Popular Rhymes of Scotland", first published in 1826. I have the 1841 edition in front of me, in which Chambers adds a footnote explaining that he found the charm in the records of seventeenth-century witch trials, and giving this other version of it, which mentions blood and flesh like the Gaelic one:

Our Lord rade,
His foal's foot slade;
Down he lighted,
His foal's foot righted.
Bone to bone,
Sinew to sinew,
Blood to blood,
Flesh to flesh.
Heal in name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Chambers concludes proudly: "It is worthy of remark, that by means of the former version of the rhyme, as presented in a former edition of this work, Jacob Grimm has been enabled to explain a German charm of the tenth century."

Chambers's book is well worth the attention of anyone interested in Gaelic traditions. I think he was the first person ever to print the New Year rhyme *A Challainn a' bhuilg bhuidhe bhoicinn* and a description of

how it was shouted by lads as they went around the township beating at a dried cow's hide, sniffing a sheep's singed dewlap (*caisein uchd*), and so on. It's not very well spelt, but here it is.

Collin a Chuilig,
Bhuigh bhoichin,
Buol in chraichin,
Callich si chuil,
Callich si chiel,
Callich cli an ceun im tennie,
Bir na da Huil,
Bir na Gillie,
Chollin so.

He translates it like this: "Hug man a', / Yellow bag, / Beat the skin, / Carlin in neuk, / Carlin in kirk, / Carlin ben at the fire, / Spit in her two eyes, / Spit in her stomach, / Hug man a'." The use of Scots suggests that his informant was a Gaelic/Scots bilingual from somewhere like Perthshire – quite normal in those days. Note that *Callainn* comes out as "Hug man a'" – Hogmanay. And "spit" (Gaelic *bior*) is the kind you roast meat on.

There's lots more Gaelic, especially in the sections "Rhymes on Places", "Family Characteristics", and "Slogans". It also happens to be a very good-humoured book. In fact, I can't resist quoting in full the story Chambers tells about the expression "Stick us a' in Aberlady!" Aberlady is near Muirfield golf course in East Lothian and is very posh nowadays. He explains: "An honest man who dwelt in Aberlady coming home one day, was suddenly convinced of what he had never before suspected – that his wife was not faithful to the nuptial vow.

"In a transport of rage he drew his knife and attempted to stab her, but she escaped his vengeance by running out to the open street, and taking refuge among the neighbours. The villagers all flocked about the incensed husband, and, as is usual in cases of conjugal brawls, seemed disposed to take part with the wife.

"The man told his tale, with many protestations, expecting their sympathy to be all on his own side; but what was his disappointment, when the women with one consent exclaimed, 'If that be what you have to complain of, you might *stick us a' in Aberlady!*'

"The inhabitants of Aberlady to this day feel aggrieved when this unlucky expression is *cast up* to them. Not many years ago, an English gentleman, residing with the late Earl of Haddington at Tyninghame, was incited by some wags at his lordship's table, after dinner, to go forth and cry 'Stick us a' in Aberlady,' at the top of his voice, through the principal street of the village.

"He did so, and was treated for his pains with so severe a stoning, that he was carried to bed insensible, and it is said that he never altogether recovered from the effects of the frolic."

Chambers was a wonderful folklore collector. He has a splendid chapter on the prophecies of Thomas Rhymer, and because I live in Peebles I'm fascinated by his account of Powbate (the *Poll Bàitht'*, I suppose, or "Drowning Pool"), a big deep well on top of a high hill near here. The mouth was covered by a grate; the people believed that it filled the whole interior of the mountain, and that if a willow wand was thrown into it, it would arrive, peeled, in a little lake at the foot of the hill called the Water Loch. "The hill," he says, "is expected to break some day, like a bottle, and do a great deal of mischief. A prophecy, said to be by Thomas the Rhymer, and bearing some marks of his style, is cited to support the supposition –

Powbate, an ye break,
Tak the Moorfoot in your gate . . ."

The Moorfoots are the green hills I can see from my window, for Robert Chambers was a Peebles man himself. Along with his brother William, he was the man who gave his name to "Chambers Encyclopedia" and "Chambers Dictionary". Their father was in the cotton trade here, and I often walk along a little narrow street called Biggiesknowe where the weavers lived. One house stands out because it's painted white and is bigger than the rest. The date 1796 is carved in the stonework. Underneath is a plaque that says: "William Chambers LLD / was born in this house / on 16th April 1800 / and also on 10th July 1802 / his brother / Robert Chambers LLD."

I'm going to be mentioning Robert Chambers's name repeatedly in a Gaelic connection over my next few articles, so I'll say a little bit about him here. When he was about twelve the family moved to Midlothian, but he and his brother were sent to school in Edinburgh. They lived in lodgings in the West Port, and Robert took to wandering around the narrow wynds and gloomy streets of the city – they fascinated him, and he must have soaked up everything he heard, because one of the first books he wrote (published in 1823 when he was only 21) was "Traditions of Edinburgh". It's still in print, it's full of stuff that was fast dying out even then, and apparently even Walter Scott wondered "where the boy got all the information".

William, always well organised, became a bookseller's apprentice. Not so Robert. He taught a bit in Portobello, got two jobs as a junior clerk in rapid succession, and was discharged with equal rapidity from both. Obviously he had a problem with authority. William suggested he try bookselling, so Robert rented a tiny shop in Leith Walk, opposite Pilrig Avenue. It had space for a stall in front, which he filled with his own school-books, the old books in the family home, and a few cheap pocket bibles.

Amazingly, he prospered, though whether it would have lasted without William I don't know. William started his own business elsewhere in town, and founded "Chambers's Edinburgh Journal" in 1832. Since Robert could write and William could sell, it was a spectacular success, and the publishing firm of W. and R. Chambers came into being.

I think the key to Robert's success as a writer was that he put himself about, listened, wrote well, and produced what people wanted to read. One of his first books (1824) was "Fires which have Occurred in Edinburgh since the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century". Another, "Picture of Scotland" (1826), was the result of his travels around the countryside. Another, "History of the Rebellion in 1745-6" (1828), came mainly from talking to people whose parents had lived through those years.

And so the list goes on. Did Robert Chambers ever do anything exciting? Sort of. The "Dictionary of National Biography" describes him as "a man of true, though unsectarian piety", and he had one book of a different kind in him. About 1840 he went off to live quietly in St Andrews, and in 1844 – the year after the Free Church was founded – his "Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation" was published anonymously in London.

It was a clear and able exposition of a theory of creation by gradual development, which Darwin later described as having done excellent service to prepare the ground for his "Origin of Species". Speculation was rife as to who could have written it – even Prince Albert was mentioned. The main problem was William, who refused to allow the dread secret to be divulged during his own lifetime.

The brothers were active in politics, and in 1848 whispers about Robert's unorthodox opinions lost him the chance to become Lord Provost of Edinburgh. There were no such worries about William, who served in the post from 1865 to 1869. His great achievement was to sweep away some of the slums that had given Robert's books their character, and replace them with a very grand thoroughfare that goes nowhere in particular. It was called Chambers Street after him.

Robert had gone back to social history and folklore. Among much else he produced "Domestic Annals of Scotland" (1859-61), which I've quoted in this column occasionally, and "The Book of Days" (1862–64), a huge miscellany of popular traditions about the calendar from all over the world, including anecdotes, biographies, curiosities of literature, and oddities of human life and character. The labour of producing it damaged his health. "That book was my death-blow," he said.

Twice married, he died in 1871, aged 69, and is buried in St Andrews. William died in 1883, and is buried here in Peebles.

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