

Captain Forrest and the witches

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I showed that in Gaelic tradition, the home of witchcraft appears to have been Italy, but today I'll present an example in which the black arts are connected with Spain. It's a good story, so I'll give it from the beginning, basically as told by John Gregorson Campbell in his book "Witchcraft and Second Sight", with some extra comments here and there. It's a common story however, found all over Argyll at least. It's in three parts, and these can be told separately, or all together.

In the first part we're told how Viola (*Bheòla*), daughter of the king of Spain, dreamed of a remarkably handsome man, and vowed not to rest till she found him. She fitted out a boat, and in the course of her wanderings came to Tobermory Bay. Here she saw MacLean of Duart, who turned out to be the man she was in search of. He received her with lavish hospitality, and that night all her dreams were fulfilled.

Unfortunately MacLean was a married man, and his wife in her jealousy paid her servant, a Lowlander called Smollett, to blow up the ship when the princess was on board. Smollett set fire to a fuse leading to the magazine, then made his escape, and by the time the explosion took place he had reached Pennygown, ten or twelve miles away. The cook was blown to Strongarve (*Sròn Gharbh* "Rough Point"), near Tobermory, where a cleft still bears the name of *Uamh a' Chòcaire*, "the Cook's Cave". The princess's body came ashore in Morvern and was buried at Kiel (*Cill Chaluim Chille*) near Lochaline.

That's the first part, and we can see straight away that the story is designed to explain the blowing up of a Spanish galleon in Tobermory Bay in 1589. In fact Spanish sources confirm that John Smollett, no servant of the Duart family but a Dumbarton merchant, was among those who provisioned the *San Juan de Sicilia* as she lay in the bay. Smollett gained easy access to the ship and the confidence of the crew, and it seems that as the Spaniards were drying out some of their remaining powder on the forward deck, he was able to drop a piece of smouldering lint nearby before departing.

The Spanish connection is very clear. Sometimes the princess is described not as of Spain but as of *Lochlann* (Scandinavia), but I think that represents storyteller's licence. The vikings are the favourite enemy of Gaelic stories, and are liable to pop up anywhere.

The second part takes place in the graveyard at Kiel. Two young friends in the district had been discussing a strange superstition, firmly held at one time, that the spirit of the person last buried had to keep watch over the graveyard, and could therefore not attain the delights of heaven until the next funeral came; in fact when two funerals were held on the same day it often led to a race and even a fight between the two parties to get their own corpse buried first. It was called *faire chlaidh*, the graveyard watch. The pair agreed that whoever died first, the other would watch the churchyard for him.

This was done, and the survivor, when keeping the promised watch, found that he had the *dà shealladh* or "two sights" – he was seeing the spirit world through the eyes of his dead friend as well as seeing this world through his own. Each night he saw ghosts leaving the churchyard and coming back before morning. Noticing that one of the ghosts was always behind the rest when returning, he spoke to it, and it turned out to be the spirit of the Spanish princess. Her fellow-countrymen had brought the body away to Spain, but due to the explosion one of her little fingers had been left behind, and she had come back to look for it.

The third part of the story concerns the king of Spain's revenge for the destruction of his ship and the murder of his daughter. This is where the black arts come in. The king, we are told, sent Captain Forrest to take vengeance on the Mull people by taking off the right breast of every Mull woman. It sounds as if this is aimed at Duart's wife, on the "Herod" principle that if Captain Forrest and his crew attacked every woman they could find in Mull, with luck the guilty party would be among them.

Now Forrest sounds more like an English name than a Spanish one, but there's a reason for that. Successive earls and dukes of Argyll took a keen interest in the matter for the simple reason that the wreck in the mud of Tobermory Bay was believed to contain enormous wealth, and it was long understood in their family that the captain of the stricken ship was called Don Faréia. In Inveraray people spoke of a Lieutenant Pereira who survived the wreck and was the man who told the earl of Argyll in Spain that the vessel was full of treasure. Of course the name is mangled by oral tradition in various ways – as well as Forrest we find Don Fareija or Feraiya, Forester and even Pottinger.

So what was the real name of the captain of the ship that went down? Over the centuries since 1589 most people have understood that the ship in Tobermory Bay is the *Florencia*, but research in Spanish archives suggests that she is actually the *San Juan de Sicilia*, commanded by Don Diego Tellez Enriquez. So the commander of the stricken ship is not the commander of the ship sent to avenge the deed, and the name Forrest is best explained by the story about Lieutenant Pereira. Pereira is a Portuguese name, but in 1589 Portugal was part of the king of Spain's dominions, and in fact the Armada set off from Lisbon.

But let me get on with the story. Forrest knew the black arts, and whether by chance or design, the black arts were the means chosen by Duart's wife to sink his ship when it was seen approaching the shores of Mull. She sent for Doideag, the Mull witch, who shut herself up in a house alone at Rubha Ghuirmein near Duart and began her incantations. A rope was put through a hole in a rafter, and all night long her quern or hand-mill (*brà*) was hoisted up to the beam, lowered, and hoisted again.

John Gregorson Campbell, who was minister of Tiree, was told about a Tireeman who happened to come to Doideag's house that evening and stumbled upon her activities. She made him hoist and lower and hoist the quern-stone all night without rest or refreshment while she flew away to various islands and districts for help. When she came back she told him that while in Tiree she had been held up by having to put out a fire which had been caused by a spark falling among the fodder in his own byre.

As the quern was raised a gale sprang up, and increased in fury as the operation went on. At the same time gulls (in some version hoodie crows, in others black cats) appeared on the yard-arms of Forrest's ship. Forrest went below to perform his own incantations, and when a sailor came to tell him that another gull had appeared in the rigging he said, *Fòghnaidh mi fhìn dhi seo fhathast*. "I will still be able for this one."

His counter-charms enabled him to defend his ship against eight or nine witches, but at the height of the storm there were sixteen or eighteen on the yards. He told a sailor to look up and see how many gulls were on the yards: *Seall suas co miad faoileann air an t-slat*. On being told eighteen, he said, "We are lost."

As Campbell points out, the names of the witches involved vary according to the fancy of the narrator. These names are all very interesting and I will devote an article to them sometime. All the *doideagan Muileach* or Mull witches were there, along with their most powerful sisters from surrounding districts. But all accounts agree that it was on the arrival of *Gormail Mhòr bha sa Mheigh* – Big Gormail from Mey in Lochaber – that the ship finally sank.

In the morning Doideag was told that the thatch and roof-timbers of her house had been stripped off by her own gale, but she was comforted by being told that the dreaded ship had gone down in the Sound of Mull opposite *Bàgh Coire na h-Anshocair* – the Bay of Corrynachency, "the Corry of Sickness". *Ma tha thusa gun taigh, tha Captain Forrest gun long*. "You may be without a house, but Captain Forrest is without a ship!"

It's a wonderful story which operates on different levels. First there's the historical one. Terence McCaughey of Trinity College, Dublin, has pointed out that it mixes up events that took place in 1589 and 1653. In the latter year a Colonel Ralph Cobbett landed in Mull to enforce the rule of Oliver Cromwell and his Commonwealth. Duart Castle was garrisoned by a company successively commanded by Captain John Hargrave and Captain James Emerson, and three ships – the *Swan*, the *Martha and Margaret*, and the *Speedwell* – sank during an eighteen-hour storm. What's more, says McCaughey, when the story is told in more southerly parts of Argyll the location of the princess's burial shifts from Morvern to Kintyre, and MacLean of Duart turns into MacDougall of Dunollie.

So it seems that Captain Forrest's name and the alleged reason for his voyage comes from 1589, but that what happened to him comes from 1653. What then of the black arts? Well, two types of people were traditionally believed to dabble in witchcraft, women and the secular intelligentsia – men who read books but weren't priests or ministers. It seems clear enough that Forrest was made out to be such a person because he was Spanish or Portuguese. There will be a connection here with the fact that the great Spanish and Portuguese mariners of the sixteenth century were literate men who used books, maps and compasses to accomplish their voyages. They also had close connections with Genoa and Venice, which brings us back to Italy as the seat of the black arts: Christopher Columbus was Genoese, and the *San Juan de Sicilia*, despite her name, appears to have been a Venetian ship from Ragusa – modern Dubrovnik!

Finally, it's a women's story, and this is the aspect that speaks to us today. History is mangled to portray women threatened in different ways, fighting back in different ways, taking power into their own hands. And who are these ridiculous witches who become crows, gulls or cats? History shows that they're the poorest of the poor, landless widows and spinsters who make a living by pretending to have power over the unseen, selling their services to people like Duart's wife, and claiming credit for things that are going to happen anyway.

A bit like doctors, economists or politicians nowadays.

18 February 2005