Gaelic Folklore:
NATURAL OBJECTS WITH SUPERNATURAL POWERS

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The Celts, in common with other ancient races, regard the world of nature as the world of the numina. Each hillock, rock, stream, loch, and the very sea itself, is the domicile of a preternatural being who can either be friendly, or unfriendly, according to its mission in life, or the whim of the moment. But, in addition to all that, the Celts cherish a belief which is common to several oriental peoples, i.e. that so-called dead matter is in reality very much alive, and possesses psychic and cosmic properties, and in some cases intelligence, which transcends that of humans.

Celtic folklore affords numerous proofs and instances of this.

We take our first illustration from running water. All running water is sacred. All evil spirits recognise as sacrosanct streams and wells, particularly those marking a boundary between townships or crofts; these they can never cross in pursuit of their terrified victims. The burn over which "the living and the dead pass," has, on account of its great psychic power, been the salvation of multitudes besides Burns's *Tam o' Shanter.*

A married couple in Skye, well known to me in boyhood days, were, on a bright moonlight night, returning home late from a ceilidh which they attended in a neighbouring township. Crossing the intervening backland, a billy-goat suddenly appeared before them, as if from nowhere. Their own instinct, and the creature's wild appearance and behaviour, told them that it was not natural. Moreover, no crofter or farmer in the whole district kept goats in those years. The uncanny animal dogged their footsteps all the way, and sometimes stood in their path, staring them hard in the face. When my informants

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eventually reached the burn which tumbles in a cascade over the steep boundary brae, the weird billy-goat vanished as mysteriously as it appeared. It made no effort to cross the burn which in that particular place marks the march between both townships.

Hallowe'en is the only night of the year on which the adolescent population is given its freedom. The games played of old, on Halloween, were not as a rule wantonly mischievous. Games they were, and in addition to being very amusing, a few of them were aetiologically occult. Here is a very popular method of divining the name of one's future marriage partner.

On Hallowe'en, the boy or girl, or both together, must go to a boundary well, or rivulet, go down on hands and knees, take a mouthful of water and walk to the nearest ceilidh house, without attempting to speak or laugh en route, else, the water is either swallowed or spilled, and the spell is broken. The party has to stand at the outside door until he hears a name mentioned in song, tale, or conversation, and the name in question is that of the spouse to be.

Nobody but an utter rascal, or insane person, would ever defile, or otherwise violate a well. Whenever a well has been so desecrated, it was known as if in angry protest to abandon that particular locale, for another spot in the vicinity.

Certain metals, like iron and silver, have psychic attributes which prove to be most effective in warding off such evil entities as ghosts and witches. Should anyone have the temerity to shake hands with a ghost, he may find his hand seriously injured thereby. As a safeguard in such a contingency, a person ought to have an iron object in his right palm, when offering it in greeting to a ghost.

Witches which have transformed themselves into the shape of bird, animal, or monster, may be rendered utterly harmless, or compelled to revert to their true identity, if fired at from a gun which has a small silver coin for ammunition.

A silver coin was also inserted inside the hoop of a churn, to prevent a witch spiriting away the substance—"toradh"—from the cream.

From remote antiquity certain species of wood were known to have psychic powers. In the Old Testament, we read about Moses' staff and the many wonders it performed. That shepherd's rod became his sceptre, once he assumed leadership in Egypt, and never was there a sceptre which figured so much in folklore. Indeed, the very custom of wielding a sceptre,

or wand, must have arisen, to begin with, from people's implicit faith in its occult, psychic force.

In our own land, rowan and hazel trees were widely used in counteracting the machinations of witches and wizards. Hence the prevalence of so many rowan trees growing in front of houses and byres. A rowan twig placed under a basin of cream in a milk house kept witches at a safe distance, and on Hallowe'en, we, as children, burnt hazel nuts on the hearthstone, to ascertain what budding romance was fated to end in wedlock, or "on the rocks."

It is not surprising, therefore, that wood, even when it is not to be used in connection with the dead, gives out its own "manadh" or omen, a day or two in advance, when nothing more serious than a change of location is impending.

An old woman told me that she was standing one day on a lawn, at the back of her own dwelling. She heard a continuous noise, which resembled wooden boards striking against each other, coming in her direction from a nearby track. The cause thereof puzzled her, for no one was in sight. Next day, she happened to be in the same place, when, to her astonishment, a man came in view walking along the said track, carrying two or three long planks on his shoulder. The planks were so pliant that their ends beat with each step their bearer made. The woman immediately recognised the sound, because it was exactly what she had heard the day before.

Tools of trade, or of household crafts, were known to be impregnated or animated by their owner's industrious zeal. Thus, the good housewife saw to it that the special cord which made her spinning wheel go round was removed from the wheel on Saturday night. If this important duty was neglected, there was a danger that the spinning wheel would automatically go on working on Sunday. An old friend of the writer remembered having seen a spinning wheel working in this inexplicable manner, all through the Sabbath, although no one was near it. A classic example is Saint Maol-Rubha's bell.

About the latter part of the seventh century, Saint Maol-Rubha, a native of Ireland, who had made Applecross in Ross-shire his headquarters, brought the gospel to Strath, in the Isle of Skye.

When Maol-Rubha landed at a place called Aiseag, in Strath, he found a rock there which made an excellent pulpit, and a tree nearby in which he hung up his bell. Whenever the saint arrived from Applecross, on the mainland opposite, he

rang his bell from the tree to summon his followers to worship. As long as Maol-Rubha was alive, the bell was left in that position, and when he died, it continued of its own accord, without human intervention, to ring every Sunday whenever the accustomed hour for worship drew nigh.

This carried on for many centuries, until at last the tree, so says tradition, grew round the bell and it was hidden from sight. However, that made no difference at all to the ringing which was heard as clear and as strong as ever, all over the wide district, each Sunday at the appointed hour.

Even after the ancient church at Aiseag was abandoned for the new one, which was built at Kilchrist, about two or three miles away, the bell from the heart of the tree at Aiseag never failed to remind folk at a particular hour each Sabbath of their sacred duty. At last, the parish minister, a Reverend Mr. MacKinnon, decided to have the old tree transplanted to the new church at Kilchrist. This was very carefully done, but alas, never again was Saint Maol-Rubha's bell heard throughout the parish of Strath. To this day, people solemnly aver that the tree should never have been removed from its original place, which was so hallowed by him, who was the first to bring the Good News there.

Material objects, too, may become possessed by their owner's strong emotions and wishes, as is exemplified in a short story collected by the late John Gregorson Campbell: "A young woman, residing in Skye, had a lover, a sailor, who was away in the East Indies. On Hallowe'en night she went, as is customary in country frolics, to pull a kail plant, that she might know, from its being crooked or straight or laden with earth, what the character or appearance or wealth of her future husband might be. As she grasped a stock to pull it, a knife dropped from the sky and stuck in the plant. When her lover came home, she learned from him, that on that very night and about the same hour, he was standing near the ship's bulwark, looking over the side, with a knife in his hand. He was thinking of her, and in his reverie the knife fell out of his hand and over the side. The young woman produced the knife she found in the kail-stock, and it proved to be the very knife her sailor lover had lost."

This point in my thesis is well borne out by the tale: Scian In Aghaidhe Na h-Urchóide, "Knife Against Evil" (Ó Heochaidh 1954: 172-4). A summary will suffice.

"On a certain day in January, some fishers were out at

sea setting their net. After the net was a while there, the weather changed, and they went out to bring it back to land. On their return journey, the wind arose, with a wild sea behind them. The first wave went past without causing great damage. The second wave was much worse, but immediately a third arose which looked as if it would send the boat to the bottom.

"A young man, who sat in the stern, noticed a knife, which was used for cutting bait, on the floor of the vessel. He picked it up and said: 'I am throwing you against the evil.' No sooner did the knife pierce the wave, than the sea calmed and the crew were able to reach their homes in safety.

"Late that same night, the young fisherman was asleep in bed. Someone outside his window, calling him by name, awakened him. 'Who is that, calling me?' he asked. 'Oh, get up, come to the door, and you will see,' replied the voice. The fisher dressed quickly, went to the door, but not knowing his visitor, asked 'Who are you, where did you come from?' 'I do not wish to give my name,' was the reply, 'but I would like you to come with me where you will engage in some doctoring work. I have a good animal here and shall be obliged if you will accompany me on its back.' 'I have no knowledge of the healing art,' explained the other, 'I never did anything but fishing.' 'If you come along,' pleaded the stranger, 'I know that you can do what is required, and it will be a great service for me.' 'I will not leave my home until morning, unless you promise to bring me back here without hurt or mishap.' 'I will give you my hand and promise that what you ask will be done.'

"The fisher mounted the horse, sat behind its owner, and both went off. It was not long until the travellers entered the sea and they continued thus for two hours, but at last they reached a rock. A door opened in the rock, and both rode in. The riders kept advancing until finally a large castle came in view. On arriving there, the two wanderers went from chamber to chamber, until they ultimately came to a beautiful room where there were many people feasting and merrymaking. They left this room and came to another where lay a most beautiful woman. The fisher looked at her, and to his great astonishment saw the knife which he threw into the large wave, sticking out of her side, near the heart.

" 'Now,' continued the host, 'since dinner-time, to-day, many a man has tried to pull this knife out, but all of them failed to remove it. You try to withdraw it now, if you please.' No sooner did the young man take hold of the knife, than he

dislodged it with ease. Weapon in hand, he addressed the woman: 'I will not leave this house until you promise that you will never pursue any of my people while at sea.' 'I promise,' she said, 'that I will not do the like again, nor will anyone else belonging to me.' He thereupon left her and came back to the banqueting room. There were many acquaintances among the happy guests. They all pressed him to partake of food, but one old lady went forward and said: 'Young man, take my advice, do not taste anything here or if you do, you will suffer for it.'

"Acting on the lady's advice, our hero withdrew. On reaching the outside door, horse and rider were there awaiting him. He again jumped up behind his leader and arrived home safely."

In addition to the knife's latent psychic power, we perceive how much it was dominated by the strong wish of him who threw it, when only he could extract it from the side of her who had caused the storm. The practice of raising storms at sea was commonly attributed to witches.

Standing stones were held in great awe throughout Gaeldom. In my Islay parish, there are three monoliths forming a triangle, although a considerable distance separates the one from the other. In ancient times, anyone seeking sanctuary had only to run to either stone, and if he was able to place his hand on the monolith before his pursuers got up to him, he was safe. No one would dare arrest him there. Any large boulder, especially one found on the seashore below high water mark, is believed to have healing virtue; at least, several diseases can be transferred to it from the human body.

Well water is not the only element which is capable of taking offence. The common earth, too, has its own delicate sensibilities, which can retaliate, if abused.

A young Islesman was walking briskly home, one very dark night, at the close of the village ceilidh. So murky were the heavens above, that no star shed the faintest glimmer of light on his path, which led through an uneven stretch of land, full of ruts and holes. As he strode merrily along, all of a sudden, his boot struck a hard knoll, or rise in the ground, and before he knew what had happened, he was stretched out full length on the field. Having been somewhat of a cross nature, he quickly got up and launched out a volley of oaths at the object which tripped him.

No sooner did he cross his own threshold, however, than

he heard the most startling noise on the roof, clods and stones being hurled with terrific force against the door and all round the dwelling.

He ran out to ascertain the cause of this fury and pandemonium, but quicker still, he was obliged to retreat under cover, else he would have been blinded and brained within a couple of seconds. Chunks of sod and rock, the size of a fist, were falling in heavy showers in all directions. This continued without ceasing, until at last the man was fully persuaded that there was something censorious about the eerie proceedings. He thereupon remembered how he had cursed the ground where he stumbled shortly before. So alarmed was he that the place would not stand up any longer to such incessant bombardment, that he went to the door a second time and begged the powers that be to desist, solemnly promising that he would never again swear or curse the earth. As if the invisible agents invoked had heard his confession and request, the storm without ceased and troubled him no more.

The earth, on the other hand, can reciprocate very strong human attachment. An Arab herdsman, or shepherd, having removed his flocks to a new area, becomes psychically conscious of the sorrowful yearning of the rock on which he was wont to sit while herding in the old pasture. Gaelic poetry is full of the same sentiment. The firm bond of friendship between exiles and the "hills of home," is the theme of many of our best songs.

Never was a lover more eloquent in appraising his beloved's virtues, than is Duncan Ban MacIntyre in his praise of Ben Dorain and Coire Cheathaich. Here, Mountain and Corrie are described in the most endearing terms. The bard, in extravagant eulogy, refers to their laudable qualities, and when old age has caught up with him in the southern city, making it quite impossible for the erstwhile nimble-footed hunter to tread his beloved hills again, he composes his heart-moving "Farewell to the Mountains." The poem ends in an invocation of a thousand blessings on the selfsame scenes, which from the earliest days, have won his affections and inspired his immortal epics.

In the same strain, John MacFadyen, when sailing round his native Mull and gazing across from deck, on familiar vistas, sings ever so nostalgically:

Gum bheil cagar maoth 'nam chluais
Bho gach bruaich air na bha

"A kind whisper greets mine ear from each hillock on which I have so often sat."

The sea, in its own way, shows a similar friendly spirit. If it takes its heavy toll of humanity, even then, the sea is just another mother claiming her own, and bringing those home on whom she has set her heart. "The sea", says the Gaelic proverb, "will search the four russet corners of the earth, until she finds her children", i.e. those bodies of the drowned that have been reclaimed and buried in a churchyard. Hence, the fear of the sea breaking its bounds or conspiring with a neighbouring river to flood the place, and sweep the dead from their earthy resting places down to their true home. Such an event was by no means uncommon in the Highlands.

The Celt is a firm believer in the psychic and cosmic influences of the moon. All work which pertains to sowing and planting should be done under a waxing moon. A waning moon is supposed to have a retarding effect on all growth in its initial stage. Neither is it a propitious phase for slaughtering animals for butcher meat which, in consequence, has a tendency to shrink in process of cooking.

A common saying regarding a pregnant woman whose accouchement was eagerly awaited—"wait until the new moon comes, and you will see a speedy delivery," and sure enough, on the day of the new moon, the woman was delivered.

The following relevant passage, I have translated from a Gaelic article, *An Clachan A Bha Ann*, by Kenneth MacLeod.

"One night coming home from the ceilidh, I saw a light in a house in which I rarely saw a light at a late hour, and fearing that there was something wrong, made straight for the door. At the same moment, a woman I knew came out—an old midwife who was as full of runes, charms, and incantations, as the whelk of the good shore is of food—and I knew without asking, what business brought her forth from her own home at midnight. 'You have guessed it,' said she, although I did not open my mouth, 'a baby boy was born here to-night under a waxing moon, and I was coming out to see how the tide is—the sea, the sea, my lad, what is its portent?' 'There is a flowing tide just now,' I replied, 'it is no news to you whose cottage is at its shore.' 'The luck and blessing of good news be upon you, man who came—

Saint Columba my beloved
Was born at a flowing tide,
Under a waxing moon,
And a beautiful jewel was he.

Seeing you are young and active, you will now go to Saint Columba's Well, and in the name of the Trinity, take therefrom this bowl full of water, you will then go to the nearest creek and in the name of the Trinity, put three drops of sea water in it and bring it back to me immediately.'

"Whether or not there was any delay about my errand, the midwife was waiting for me on the doorstep, and no sooner did I give her the bowl than she blessed its contents in the name of the Trinity, in Michael's name and in Clement's, and poured three palms full of it on the babe's head:

> Cascade water on your head,
> Misfortune will never rest on you,
> Neither sea nor fresh water will drown you,
> Nor sorrow be your lot on land.

'A byname,' she explained, 'is his until he is baptised, until then he shall be called Maol Domhnaich, and peradventure, the holy name and the needle which I placed in the little darling's shirt will protect him from evil spells and tricks of fairies.' "

Here we have further evidence of popular belief in the psychic protective power of so small an article of iron or steel as a needle. It was common, too, for mothers when going on a brief errand, to place the tongs beside a child in its cradle to prevent the fairies from stealing it, and anyone can keep the door of a sithean-fairy hillock open long enough to ensure his escape, if he places an iron nail at its foot, when going in.

REFERENCE

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