

# THREE LEGENDS FROM THE AYRSHIRE COAST

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## *Introduction*

The three legends presented below were recorded in November, 1962, from the recitation of Mr. Alexander Archibald, Sergeant of police in Prestwick, Ayrshire. Sergeant Archibald was born in Ballantrae in 1912, and has lived most of his life in Ayrshire. He combines the talents of an expert and entertaining raconteur with a love of the stories and traditions of his native district, with the result that his fund of material, and certainly his eagerness to share it, seems endless.

All three stories have been strongly localised, both geographically and historically, along the coast of Ayrshire between Ayr and Ballantrae, yet all have more widespread connections, the most important of which are discussed in the notes following each tale. The discussions are preceded by annotation from standard reference works. For further information the reader is referred directly to the works cited.

## *The Origin of Ailsa-Craig—Text*

This is a tale from Arran. The *cailleach* of Arran—she used to develop cannibalistic tendencies like her pal Sawney Beane,<sup>1</sup> and would straddle the channel between Kilmorey in the south of Arran and Carrick in Ayrshire, and when the ships come up she would drop stones on them, you see, and she would sink the ships and grab the cargo and eat the men. And one day a French skipper saw this, but by a very adroit handling of his mizzen-mast he tickled her in the obvious place that you would expect a Frenchman to tickle a woman, and she let a skelloch out and dropped the stone in a shallow part of the sea, and that was Ailsa Craig. The Frenchman apparently escaped.

### *Annotation*

Motifs: Thompson 1955.

F531.3.2. Giant throws a great rock.

A955.6. Islands from stones cast by giantess.

F531.3.5.4\*. Giantess stands astride ocean channel.

G11.2. Cannibal giant.

R219.3\*. Escape from giantess by tickling her.

Valerie Höttges 1937.

Type AI—Erklärungssagen: Steinwurf und Steintragen der Riesen. Motiv 1—Steinwurf ohne Ziel.

Cf. no. 3: Riesen von Schwarzenbeck warfen die Steine, die im Hamfelder Teich liegen.

Cf. no. 4: Lübecker Riesen warfen mit Steinen und liessen sie im Spiel übers Wasser laufen. Daher Land und See voller Steine.

Motiv 4—Stein- und Hammerwurf der Riesen gegen Menschen und andere Wesen.

Type B IV—Erlebnissagen: Räuberriesen.

Motiv 45—Riesen als Menschenfresser.

Reidar Th. Christiansen 1958.

Types 5020 ff. "Norwegian legends in which the trolls play a part are usually connected with some local landmark such as isolated boulders and stones, steep valleys and creeks, striking formations of hills, etc.; all explained as being caused by the activities of trolls in former days . . . parallels may be found in many other countries. These have not been included in the index, because of being primarily told as explanations, and accordingly having decided local characteristics."

### *Discussion*

There are several features which make Sergeant Archibald's version of this international legend particularly Scottish. Geographical localisation aside, the most important of these is the nature of the supernatural creature to whom the origin of Ailsa Craig is attributed, the *Cailleach* of Arran. The *cailleach* is a creature native to Irish and Scots Gaelic tradition, having the same name in both languages. The words "hag" and "witch" are the most commonly employed English equivalents. These hags, sometimes of superhuman size as well as power, are often localised, both in Ireland (Ó Súilleabháin 1942:447) and in Scotland: the Rev. A. M. MacFarlane has written that

in the period between one hundred and two hundred years ago, "there was scarcely a parish in the Highlands but had its 'cailleach,' some more than one" (1927-8:139). The Isle of Arran, being very much a part of the area sharing what might be called Highland culture, would naturally have had its *cailleach* as well. The persistence of the Gaelic name in Ayrshire, long after the disappearance of Gaelic itself, may be accounted for by recalling that the Clyde provided a much-travelled avenue of intercourse between Arran and Ayrshire, a connecting link rather than a boundary. We may note in this connection that the source of Sergeant Archibald's version of the tale was a Ballantrae fisherman, who had in all probability made the voyage to Arran many times himself. It is understandable that the tale of the Cailleach of Arran should have achieved currency in Ayrshire, as her great left foot was firmly planted in Carrick as she watched for ships to waylay.

The motif of the rocks thrown to sink ships subsequently becoming landmarks is also to be found in a story contained in Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe's *Historical Account of the Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland* (London and Glasgow 1884) 19 f. The tradition relates that Saint Patrick, his holy work in Scotland having antagonised the Devil, was pursued by witches to the banks of the Clyde, where he found a boat and attempted to make his escape over the water. The witches broke off great fragments of rock from a neighbouring hill and hurled them after the fleeing boat. The rocks fell short of their target and formed Dumbarton Rock. So holy a man as Saint Patrick would presumably not have taken the practical course of action followed by the quick-witted French skipper in a similar situation. Without knowing the source of Sharpe's anecdote, it is impossible to say with certainty, but it seems at least possible that the creatures which Sharpe calls witches were in fact *cailleachan* originally.

Some versions of the legend describing the origin of Ailsa Craig omit altogether the element of cannibalism, and therefore the French skipper or any other character with the same function. These merely relate that Ailsa Craig was dropped in the ocean by giants, or witches, or the Devil himself, on their way over to Ireland. Two such versions may be found in Robert Lawson's *Ailsa Craig: Its History and Natural History* (Paisley 1895), and in the *Official Guide to Girvan* (1963 edition). Several of many parallels to this story from elsewhere in Scotland may be found in the section relating to "Landmarks

Formed by Witches," in R. M. Robertson's *Selected Highland Folktales* (Edinburgh and London 1961) 100 f.

*The Heir to Knockdolian—Text*

Where the River Stinchar runs into the sea—the Waters of Moyle, the lovely poetic name for that part between Scotland, Galloway and Ireland in the old days—there were a lot of mermaids in there. This mermaid was accredited with being very beautiful: she had long yellow hair, fish tail, and all that sort of thing, and she used to swim up the River Stinchar every night to a beautiful pool in which there was a stone, a large boulder; and this pool still is a lovely salmon pool if you want a day's fishing on it. And beside it was the ancient Castle of Knockdolian. Knockdolian is the hill, shaped, funnily enough, the same as Ailsa Craig, but lying five miles up from Ballantrae along the River Stinchar, between Colmonell and Ballantrae. And it was called the False Craig, because the lads beatin' home from Ireland in the old days sometimes got smashed by running . . . taking this hill, the inland hill, you see, as the point for steering instead of Ailsa Craig. They always called it the False Craig.

This castle was inhabited from generation to generation by Kennedys, Grahames, MacAlexanders—I'm not sure—and another family. I think it was a woman, the woman of the house she was a Grahame anyhow—this was long ago—and this night she was sitting before the great fire, you know, in the old ancestral hall, and she'd be spinning or something, or she'd be carding wool, and she was rocking her baby in the huge cradle in front of the big log fire, when she hears this devil of a wailing outside on the stone, you see, and here's this lassie, the mermaid, combing her long yellow hair and singing. Now this pool is covered with trees round about, you know, covered over with trees, and it's a dark and eerie place, you see. Everything is conducive to this hair-raising stuff. She gets so fed up with this continual singing night after night, that she says to the foresters, "go out and smash up the boulder." I went back to prove something to myself: I still think that the fragments of a huge boulder are in the bed of the stream, and the rock, I have been told by some geologist or other, is not the same rock as in the surrounding area. You know the glacial actions supposedly brought it in. However, the lads went out and they smashed this huge boulder. The mermaid

came up the next night, and there was no stone, so they hear the eerie singing then coming through the night:

“Ye may keep your cradle, while I’ll ne’er have my stane,  
But there’ll never be an heir to Knockdolian again.”

The baby dies under some queer, mysterious circumstance. The story more or less finishes there with this: that there never was a direct male heir in that house. Now I’m telling you a fact. Because I got this from old Jimmie Hannah, the skipper of the sloop *Annabella*—I’m fifty almost—say forty-five years ago. Jimmie was then, say, eighty. His father would tell him it. So in his lifetime, and in mine, there never was a male heir. Never.

#### *Annotation*

Motifs:

B81. Mermaid.

B81.13.8. Curse by mermaid.

M.369.7.2. Prophecy about birth of heir.

Q 556. Curse as punishment.

Christiansen 1958:

Cf. Type 4060. “*The Mermaid’s Message*. On a certain occasion somebody (A1) at sea or by a lake (A2), met, saw (A3), caught (A4) or shot at (A5) a mermaid (A6) or some watersprite (A7). The sprite offered to answer a question (B1), or gave valuable information (B2) or prophesied impending disaster (B3), or made some enigmatic remark (B4). The question was asked (C1), and the sprite in derision answered or laughed (C2), hinting that he could have made another question of greater value to himself (C3).”

#### *Discussion*

In searching for a kernel of historical truth in this legend, for its basis in reality, one is struck by the number of families which did indeed become extinct while in possession of Knockdolian.<sup>2</sup> The Grahames, about whom Sergeant Archibald relates the legend, were the first holders of the Barony, having acquired it towards the close of the fifteenth century. The title and property passed soon after 1628 into the hands of the Kirkmichael family, and later came into the possession of the McCubbin family, but the circumstances surrounding these changes in possession are not known with any certainty. There

seems to be no tradition or historical documentation connecting any specific member of the Grahame or Kirkmichael families with a prophecy or curse such as the above tale contains.

There is, however, a tradition parallel to the mermaid story related with much more circumstantial detail about the McCubbin family. During the reigns of Charles I and Charles II, the Barony of Knockdolian was in the possession of one Fergus McCubbin, the last proprietor of that name. He was a keen supporter of the Covenant, and upon several occasions gave protection and maintenance to the well-known preacher, Alexander Peden, for which he was severely fined. When Peden again appealed for protection, McCubbin refused him, whereupon, or so tradition asserts, Peden declared that there would be no male heir to Knockdolian. Both of Fergus McCubbin's sons were killed soon afterwards, one by falling from a tree, and the other by drowning in the Bay of Ballantrae. His daughter, Margaret, succeeded to the property, and from her were descended the Cathcarts of Knockdolian, the next line to hold the Barony.

Robert Chambers, in his *Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London 1892) 331 f., presents a version of the legend which is similar to that related by Sergeant Archibald. It is not particularised, the mermaid's stone being destroyed by an indeterminate "lady of Knockdolian," who found the nocturnal singing an annoyance to her baby. The rhymed curse of the mermaid in Chambers' version runs thus:

"Ye may think on your cradle, I'll think on my stane,  
And there'll never be an heir to Knockdolian again."

The baby was shortly afterwards found dead beneath its overturned cradle, and "it is added that the family soon after became extinct."

In R. H. Cromek's *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* (London 1810, reissued 1880) 186 f., the story is one of several related about one specific and well-known mermaid, the Mermaid of Galloway. Cromek's version, unconnected with the Barony of Knockdolian, is as follows:

"A devout farm dame, in the time of the last persecution, was troubled in spirit at the wonted return of this heathenish visitant [the Mermaid of Galloway]. A deep and beautiful pool, formed in the mouth of Dalbeattie burn, by the eddy of Orr Water, was a beloved residence of the Mermaid of Galloway. 'I' the first come

o' the moon' she would seat herself on a smooth block of granite, on the brink of the pool, comb her golden links of hair, and deliver her healing oracles. The good woman, in a frenzy of religious zeal, with her Bible in her hand, had the temerity to tumble this ancient chair into the bottom of the pool. The next morning her only child was found dead in its cradle, and a voice from the pool was often heard at day-close, by the distracted mother:

“Ye may look i' yere toom cradle,  
And I'll look to my stane;  
An' meikle we'll think, and meikle we'll look,  
But words we'll ne'er hae nane.”

All the noxious weeds and filth that could be collected were thrown into the pool until the stream was polluted, and the Mermaid departed, leaving a curse of barrenness on the house, which all the neighbors for several miles around, are ready to certify has been faithfully fulfilled.”

It will be noted that the rhymed curse and its general effect persist in all three versions of the legend, although differently worded and variously applied, as is to be expected in a traditional tale.

#### *False Sir John Cathcart and Jean Culzean—Text*

Gamesloup . . . this is a two hundred foot cliff, again in this area north of Ballantrae, and it is a half mile south of the village of Lendalfoot. Where the Lendal Water runs in, there's a little fishing place, you see, and at this Lendal there's a castle called Carleton. And the persons who lived in the Carleton Castle for long and weary were the Cathcart family. And this man, False Sir John Cathcart, lived—let me see—maybe fifteenth to sixteenth century. I'm not sure of the date. But he was a great boy. He cultivated the daughters of the various landlords in the district, and married seven of them, and subsequently disposed of them by various means. Most of the disposals were done, actually, by throwing them over this cliff, this Gamesloup. Well, he took his wives there and threw them over. But in Girvan—my wife'll tell you about this—in the Byne Hill, the big hill that sits south of Girvan, there's a rock face called the Bride's Bed, and that is reckoned to be the dying place of one of Sir John's lassies. On her bridal night, when she saw what he was like, she hopped it and tried to get back home, possibly to Ballochoul Castle, or one of the castles of the Kennedys from where he took his brides.

So old Sir John would get on his palfrey, you see, and he would ride along and he'd pay court to the girls. In these days, the squires would just pull the clothes off the lassies and say, "pick whatever one you want." You know the idea. And they would get a good tocher or dowry to go home with. You know about this. Well, the last lassie was Jean Culzean, and he takes this lassie with her lovely finery to this Gamesloup cliff, and he says, "light down, light down, and take off your silken gown," he says, "it's o'er good and o'er fancy to rot in the good sea faem." And he tells her, he says, "you're going in there—I've drowned seven already in there, and the eighth one you're going to be." So she turned and she said, "O, turn yourself about, Sir John, and look to the leaf of the tree, for it never became a gentleman a naked woman to see." So he turned round, you see, and she gripped him around the waist and threw him into the sea, and she says, "you lie now in a colder bed than ane you meant for me." So she rides home to her father's castle, which was at Culzean, you see, and that was the demise of False Sir John. We got that as children, you see.

#### *Annotation*

#### Motifs:

K1645. Woman ordered to strip has lover turn his back; pushes him into water.

C312.1. Tabu: man looking at nude woman.

K551.4.3. Making modesty pay. Robber insists on disrobing woman before throwing her from precipice. She pleads to have him turn his face while she disrobes. She pushes him off.

A972.5.5. Rocks or hill-tops flat because persons slept or cooked on them.

Francis James Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston 1882-98), vol. I, ballad no. 4.

#### *Discussion*

This third legend will be recognised as a strongly localised prose analogue of Child ballad number 4, *Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight*. The tale preserves a few lines of ballad verse and the "emotional core" of the ballad, the triumph of the girl over the villain by the same means as he had meant to use in murdering her. The similarity between this theme and that



of the Bluebeard type of international folktale (see Aarne-Thompson types 311, 312, 955) has been noted on several occasions (as, for example, by Tristram Coffin, Introduction to *Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight* in Helen H. Flanders (ed.), *Ancient Ballads Traditionally Sung in New England*, v. 1, Philadelphia 1960, 82), but this should not be taken as an indication that the two traditions are in any way directly connected.

In his extensive headnote to the song, Child writes, "Of all ballads this has perhaps obtained the widest circulation. It is nearly as well known to the southern as to the northern nations of Europe." He goes on to document this statement in detail, with summaries and discussions of many versions of the ballad from throughout the European continent. Holger Nygard, in his excellent study of the ballad in its international relationships, concludes that the ballad originated in the Netherlands, and had already circulated about Western Europe by 1550 (1958:15).

Surprisingly, no versions of the ballad which are definitely from Ayrshire have appeared in print, either in Child's monumental collection or elsewhere. Nevertheless, several writers have attested to the ballad's currency in that area. Robert Chambers, for example, in his *Scottish Ballads* (Edinburgh 1829) 232, presents a composite text, collated from Herd, Sharpe, and Motherwell, but states in his headnote that "the ballad [not merely a prose analogue] finds locality in that wild portion of the coast of Carrick (Ayrshire,) which intervenes between Girvan and Ballantrae." James Paterson, in *The Ballads and Songs of Ayrshire* (Ayr 1846) 38, also informs us that the ballad was popular in Carrick. It would appear that the legend based upon the ballad has superseded the ballad itself.

The tradition connecting the ballad story with the Cathcarts of Carleton and the Kennedys of Culzean has been recorded by a number of collectors. These include Robert Chambers, in the work quoted above, who presents a synopsis of the legend much as Sergeant Archibald has related it, and George Eyre-Todd, in his guide to *Ayrshire* (Dundee, n.d.) 39. A variant tradition, prefixed to a broadside version of the ballad, is mentioned by Motherwell, in his *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern* (Paisley 1873) lxx, namely, that "the lady . . . celebrated [in the ballad] was of the family of Kennedy, and that her treacherous and murder-minting lover was an Ecclesiastick of the monastery of Maybole. In the parish of

Ballantrae, on the sea coast, there is a frowning precipice pointed out to the traveller as 'Fause Sir John's Loup'." Chambers gives the name of this cliff as Gamesloup, the placename also used by Sergeant Archibald. It is interesting to note from Sergeant Archibald's recitation that the legend has been connected with a second place in the same area, the Bride's Bed on the Byne Hill, south of Girvan, thus intensifying its local ties.

Although the localising tradition is strongest in Ayrshire, the Ayrshire names, in their various forms, occur in versions of the ballad from other parts of Scotland, as for example in those of Herd (Child C), Sharpe (Child D), Scott (Child H), Greig (1925:3) and Gilchrist (1938:189, from Orkney). This proliferation of the names False Sir John, May Culzean, and Carleton Sands, suggests a number of conclusions to Nygard, one of which at least deserves comment in the light of the legend presented above.

Nygard takes the villain's name, False Sir John, "less [as] a name than a denigrating sobriquet for an ecclesiastic, to be met with as early as the fourteenth century, but certainly much in use during the later periods of religious strife." When considered against Ayrshire tradition, this theory prompts certain questions, for in Ayrshire at least, Sir John is used in reference to a specific, if fictional, personage.<sup>3</sup> Did the people of Carrick associate a current generic name, already in the ballad, with a locally prominent family in which John was a common given name, or did folk in certain other parts of Scotland, unfamiliar with the Cathcarts of Carleton, understand the specific Sir John (Cathcart) to mean merely priest, or cleric? Put differently, did the Ayrshire particularisation to Sir John Cathcart occur first, or was the generic Sir John an earlier feature of the tradition? The weight of evidence seems to indicate that the name entered the tradition originally through the Ayrshire localisation.

There are, to begin with, three separate references to ecclesiastical figures connected with the ballad tradition in Scotland: Child's Dd text is from a broadside which identifies Sir John as a Dominican friar, his H text, from Scott's Materials for the *Border Minstrelsy*, makes him a "falsh priest", and a preface to the second broadside mentioned by Motherwell (quoted above) states that he was "an Ecclesiastick of the monastery of Maybole." However, all these occurrences are antedated by many years by the version published by Herd,

the first Scottish version to appear in print which is known to us today (1776:93-5). It is illuminating to note that Herd's False Sir John is "a gentleman," and that his heroine is May Colven, a variant of May Culzean. Thus they correspond to the characters in the dominant Ayrshire tradition.

Furthermore, however the distinctly Ayrshire name of May Culzean spread to other parts of Scotland—whether by oral transmission or through print (broadside) as Nygard convincingly contends—the important thing is that it did in fact diffuse and was taken up outside Ayrshire. It is therefore logical to infer that the name of Sir John Cathcart, intimately bound up with the girl's name in Ayrshire tradition, diffused with it and was the source of the Sir Johns which appear in the other Scottish versions in conjunction with heroines named May Culzean (or variants thereof). If this be the case, we may take Motherwell's "Ecclesiastick of the monastery of Maybole" as an adaptation, very likely by a broadside writer, of the dominant tradition documented throughout the years by Chambers, Paterson, Eyre-Todd, and now by ourselves from Sergeant Archibald. The other two references to ecclesiastics would thus be secondary adaptations.

The few lines of ballad verse which remain in Sergeant Archibald's prose tale are traces of the original ballad tradition. The single version containing the closest parallels to these lines is that of Herd, with all but the "light down, light down" line in Sergeant Archibald's tale. We do not, unfortunately, know the source of Herd's version. The phrase, "light down," occurs in the texts of Peter Buchan (Child A), Sharpe, and Greig.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sawney Beane was a legendary robber, murderer, and cannibal who terrorised the Galloway coast during the reign of James I of Scotland. See J. Nicholson 1843:72-80.
- <sup>2</sup> The following discussion is based upon information contained in James Paterson, *History of the Counties of Ayr and Wigton*, v. 3—Carrick (Edinburgh 1864) 159-64.
- <sup>3</sup> The reader is referred to Paterson's *History* for a record of the many John Cathcarts in the family's history. Attempts at identification of the False Sir John Cathcart are futile.

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