Gaelic Lullaby: a Charm to Protect the Baby?[1]

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The traditional lullaby is still in use in Gaelic-speaking Scotland and Ireland, although its use has been steadily declining. The obvious functions of the lullaby in all countries are, firstly, to lull the baby to sleep and, secondly, to express the mother's love for her baby. Let me mention in passing that, in Ireland at least, other songs had the specific function, not often noticed, of soothing a cross or a sick child, without any intention of putting it to sleep (Petrie 1855: 6 and 172). I am suggesting that the Gaelic lullaby formerly had a supernatural function as well, namely as a charm to protect the baby from being abducted by the *Sí/Sìthichean*. The word *sí/sìthichean* is frequently translated 'fairies', which as a general term can have misleading connotations. The *Sí* were in fact the gods of pre-Christian Celtic Ireland, anthropomorphically conceived as like surpassingly beautiful humans—but immortal—and believed, in the Christian era, to be dwelling in otherworld palaces under the hills and prehistoric mounds such as the so-called ring-forts with which the Irish countryside abounds. Belief in the reality of the *Sí* survived fifteen centuries of Christianity and to some extent is still alive in rural areas in Ireland. Down to the early years of this century it was believed that when someone died they had gone into the company of the gods or the *Sí* (*e.g.* Müller-Lisowski 1948: 148–9, 157), and furthermore, that the *Sí* had the power to abduct humans prematurely, either babies or adults, for their own purposes. The sudden death of an adult in apparently good health, or the death of a mother in childbirth, so tragically common at that time, was commonly interpreted as abduction of this kind. As recently as 1985 a friend of mine living in a remote part of the west of Ireland told me of a remark recently made by the widow of a man who had died suddenly in early middle age: 'There was nothing wrong with him: he was *swept*' (*swept* being the technical term for 'abducted by the *Sí*'). Anyone who has read the material presented in Lady Gregory's *Visions and Beliefs of the West of Ireland* will be aware of the extent to which countryfolk lived in dread of the *Sí* whom they defensively called by such euphemisms as 'the Good People', or 'the Gentry', and in particular how a mother would fear that her baby might be stolen by them, and a deformed changeling left in its place.

It is not at all surprising, then, to find that magic charms were commonly used as a protection against the *Sí*. In seventeenth-century Scotland Robert Kirk, referring to the belief that women could be 'taken away when in Child-bed to nurse ffayrie Children', noted the material charms used for their protection: 'The Tramontaines to this day, put bread, the Bible, or a piece of iron in womens bed (*sic*) when travelling (''i.e. travailling''—Ed.) to save them from being stolen. . . .' (Kirk [1692] 1976: 54). A

number of verbal charms against the *Sí* were recorded from the end of last century from Ireland and the Isle of Man (*e.g.* Mackenzie 1891–2: 148–9; O'Fotharta 1892: 29; Hyde 1906: 2, 56). And for the protection of the baby material charms continued in use well into this century. The Irish poet Máirtín Ó Direáin in his poem 'Cranna Foirtil' enumerates charms which he told me his mother had used about his own cradle in his native Aran: the iron tongs, a garment of his father's beside the baby, something pointed in the fire (Ó Direáin 1957). What I am suggesting, then, is that the lullaby was formerly a sung charm for the same purpose.

It is quite remarkable, both in Scottish Gaelic and in Irish, how frequently the lullabies make reference to abduction, some even having a direct order of banishment: *Gabh amach a bhóbobha*, 'Get out sprite.'[2] Indeed, writing of Scotland, Dr Alan Bruford has said that 'almost all "fairy-songs" are in the form of lullabies . . . It seems to be just that fairy songs and lullabies belong together' (1978: 5). And James Ross noted that 'many cradle songs are given fairy origins by folk aetiology' (1957: 141). I should like to illustrate the repertoire with one example each from Scotland and Ireland. In the Scottish Gaelic lullaby *An Cùbhrachan* (Tolmie 1910–13: 167; Moffat [no date]: 16; Shaw 1955: 165–7) the mother laments the loss of her baby whom she laid down 'here' (presumably on the heather) while she went collecting blaeberries. With consummate artistry and rapport with her environment she conveys the intensity of her search by enumerating all the unfindables that she found as she combed the glen *o cheann gu ceann* ('from end to end'): the track of the brown otter, the trace of the swan on the lake, the track of the speckled fawn, and even the trail of the mountain mist; *Ach, O! cha d'fhuair mi 'n Cùbhrachan* ('But oh, found not the Cubhrachan'). Lucy Broadwood pointed out, in a note to the Tolmie edition, that 'there is a strong likeness between this tune and that of an "Irish Lullaby" noted by P. W. Joyce in 1854', viz. *Do chuirfinn-si fēin mo leanabh a chodladh* (Petrie 1855: 144; O'Sullivan 1960: 21). In the Irish lullaby *A bhean úd thíos ar bhruach an tsruthāin*, 'O woman below on the brink of the stream' (Petrie 1855: 73–7; O'Sullivan 1960: 18) a human mother comes to the door of the *lios* or *sí*-dwelling apparently with her otherworld nurseling in her arms. Under pretext of singing the baby a lullaby she conveys a message to a woman washing clothes at a nearby stream, telling how one year ago on that day she had been snatched by the *Sí* from off her horse (probably indicating, as Eugene O'Curry surmised, the reality of her being killed in a fall from the horse) and giving her an instruction for her husband who would have his last chance next day to come and rescue her by means of the ritual and the charms which she indicates. Otherwise she will remain in the *lios* forever. A version of this theme recorded in Donegal has quite a different lullaby-text: *Suantraí na Mná a tugadh as*, 'The stolen woman's lullaby' (Ó hEochaidh & Mac Neill 1977: no. 17, pp. 66–9).

Given these beliefs, and given that charms were used as a protection, it would be entirely reasonable, *a priori*, to expect the use of song-charm; indeed that song would have been the original charm. Marius Schneider emphasised that in all ancient esoteric

rites there was never magic action without the intervention of an acoustic phenomenon. He related what he called the ubiquity of the musical phenomenon of the rites—*l'ubiquité du phénomène musical dans les rites* (1956; 56)—to the old commonplace that the entire life of the cosmos was unified by a common substratum, and that this substratum was essentially acoustic (*cf.* Schneider 1960, 1968; Sachs 1949: 26). The very act of creation itself was conceived of as an acoustic act. And so music was a supernatural instrument of power, as well as being universally the medium for communication with the supernatural (*cf.* Combarieu 1909: 22). The Irish and Scottish Gaelic tradition has clear echoes of such ideas. The gods, later the *Sí*, were closely associated with music and its origin, and the hallmark of their music was its transcendent beauty. They sometimes favoured mortals with the gift of music, usually instrumental, but sometimes vocal. This origin-theme was so common that it is scarcely necessary to cite examples, but I should like to remind this seminar of a few from the later Scottish tradition. The supernatural origin of harp music is the theme of a story recorded by James Ross from Hugh MacRae of Skye: *Mar thànaig ceòl an toiseach do na h-Eileanan an Iar* ('How music first came to the Western Isles') which I have had the pleasure of listening to here in the Sound Archive of the School of Scottish Studies (SA 1953/152). We read in MacDougall's *Folk-Tales and Fairy Lore* (1910: 174–9) how an Gille Dubh Macruimein got the gift of piping from the Bean-Shithe. And there is the lovely story recorded from Nan MacKinnon of Vatersay about Nic Iain Fhinn getting the gift of poetry from her fairy lover when she gave him her parting kiss, and how he offered her the gift of melody also if she would put her tongue into his mouth—which she was afraid to do: *Agus cha do rinn i so idir agus dh'fhàg e buaidh na bàrdachd aice ach bha e air a ghràdh nach cuireadh i fonn idir orra*—'And she would not do this at all and he left her the gift of poetry but they said that she could not put a tune on it at all' (Ross 1973: 135–7 from SA 1958/133/4 and SA 1961/53/A2).

In the old Gaelic mythology the gods used music as an instrument of power, to overcome mortals. There is the well-known story of the annual destruction of Tara by Aillén mac Midhna, who rendered its defenders helpless with his music (rationalised[3] in the literary tale as putting them to sleep):

> For it was *Aillén mac Midhna* of the *tuatha dé Danann* that out of *sídh Finnachaidh* to the northward used to come to Tara: the manner of his coming being with a musical *timpán* in his hand, the which whenever any heard he would at once fall asleep. Then, all being lulled thus, out of his mouth Aillén would emit a blast of fire. It was on the solemn *samhain*-day he came in every year, played his *timpán*, and to the fairy music (*ceol síde*) that he made all hands would fall asleep. With his breath he used to blow up the flame and so, during a three-and twenty years' spell, yearly burnt up Tara with all her gear.

Finn undertook to defend Tara, protecting himself against the music with the magic spear given him by Fiacha mac Congha. Fiacha prescribed:

> 'whenever thou shalt hear the fairy melody: sweet-stringed timpan and dulcet-breathing tube, from the javelin's head strip its casing and apply the weapon whether to the forehead or

> to some other of thy parts; so shall the noxious missile's horrific effect forbid that sleep fall on thee.'

The protection was effective and Finn dealt with Aillén's incendiary efforts. 'When Aillén mac Midhna was aware that his magical contrivance was all baffled, he returned to *sídh Finnachaidh*', but was killed by Finn at its entrance, with a thrust from Fiacha's spear (O'Grady 1892: I. 130–2; II. 142–4).

Supernatural beings were themselves susceptible to the powers of music, a belief which survived in the late folk tradition. Another of the stories recorded by James Ross from Hugh Mac Rae is by way of being a folk aetiology of the *puirt-a-beul*, purporting to tell how this kind of song first came to the Western Isles. He tells us that the King of *Tir-bho-Thonn* ('Land under Wave') had a daughter called *Binne-Bheul*, so called because of her virtuosity in singing *puirt-a-beul*. And in the joy of her wedding morning she commenced this kind of song. *Agus bha na puirt cho binn agus cho blasda*—'and the *puirt* were so sweet and so eloquent'. And there was a great giant (*famhaire mòr*), who was a sore affliction to the fishermen and crofters of the Western Isles, destroying their nets *etc*. And when he heard the music of Binne-Bheul he began to dance. And it is told that he began to dance early in the morning, and by mid-day he was dancing so powerfully and leaping so high that he leapt past the Coolins of Skye and past the Coolins of Rum, and by evening he was far out in the Atlantic Ocean on the other side of the Isle of Lewis, and he dancing so powerfully! And Binne-Bheul kept on, so happy was she on her wedding-night, and the more she sang the more the giant danced. And at last . . . he became so exhausted that he lay down, near St Kilda, and was drowned. And he was no more trouble to the fishermen nor the crofters of the Isles . . . (SA 1953/152: this writer's English summary). For Hugh MacRae the significant thing was that the singing of *puirt-a-beul* in the Isles was explained as a practice in grateful commemoration of Binne-Bheul's destroying the wicked Giant. But we are justified in seeing here an echo of a belief—again somewhat rationalised—in the power of music to overcome a supernatural being.

Even in real life the practice of using the esoteric power of music to influence and even control others is attested in the Celtic and Gaelic traditions. Diodorus Siculus, summarising Posidonius on the Gaulish druids and bards, says

> And it is not only in the needs of peace but in war also that they carefully obey these men and their song-loving poets, and this is true not only of their friends but also of their enemies. For oftentimes as armies approach each other in line of battle with their swords drawn and their spears raised for the charge these men come forth between them and stop the conflict, as though they had spell-bound some kind of wild animals. Thus even among the most savage barbarians anger yields to wisdom and Ares does homage to the Muses' (Tierney 1960: 251–2).

In Ireland down to the beginning of this century song was an instrument of such efficacy that if a person made a request of another in song—*achainí cheoil*, 'a sung request'—it would be very difficult to refuse. In fact the only honourable way to refuse would be if

the other person could sing the refusal, or in other words ward off song with song (Ó Madagáin 1985: 160–4). One suspects that such moral pressure was an echo of something stronger.

To come back to the lullaby. When we examine the texts of the lullabies that have survived, especially in Irish, we find that they usually have a refrain of repeated meaningless vocables, such as those in the refrain of the Irish lullaby which we considered earlier—*A bhean úd thíos. . . .*

Refrain: *Seó hín, seó hín, seó hín, seó hín,*
Seó hú leó, seó hú leó,
Seó hín, seó hín, seó hín, seó hín,
Seó hú leó, seó hú leó.

These are usually taken to be no more than soothing syllables for the baby, which indeed is very plausible. Francis Collinson so regarded them (Collinson 1966: 87). But certainly in Irish the vocables which occur almost invariably in the lullaby chorus find no place in recorded speech outside of lullaby. And on the other hand their formula corresponds remarkably to what Combarieu described as the characteristic magic chant, namely a repetitive, incantatory, unintelligible formula (Combarieu 1909: 13). He attached special significance to its being humanly unintelligible, for communication with the spirit world. That the Gaelic folk mind had some awareness of this communication function of nonsense vocables is strongly indicated by a story which Donald Archie MacDonald and Lisa Sinclair recorded from Nan MacKinnon concerning the person who went to the fairy mound to ask for the return of the family's pot. 'The fairy man asked him why he had come, and he said he had come for the pot. "*Cha do dh'iarr thu ceart i*," *os e fhéin*—"You haven't asked for it properly," said he—"You ought to ask for it properly." "I don't know," said he, "how to ask for it properly except to say I've come for the pot." "*Feumaidh tu ghràdh*" *os e fhéin*, " '*Orra mhùga 's orra mhanga 's orra ghangaili*' *mus fhaigh thu 'phoit*"—"You must say," said he, " 'By your mooga and by your manga and by your gangalee,' before you can have the pot'"—from which the narrator concluded that 'the fairies must have had a special language' (MacDonald and Sinclair 1978: 195).

Dr John MacInnes has written that in Gaelic choral work songs the vocable refrains 'may well represent the most primitive part of them' (MacInnes 1968: 36), something which would tie in with Maurice Bowra's theories on primitive song (Bowra 1962: 59). I have suggested elsewhere that in the keen (*caoineadh, tuireadh*) or lament for the dead, the refrain of vocables may well have been originally anterior to the dirge (Ó Madagáin 1985: 154, n. 78): in other words it may have been the original keen. So too with the lullaby: it would seem quite likely that what is now the refrain of vocables represents the original lullaby, and that the singing of verses was a later development. Some of the lullabies that have been preserved both in Scotland and Ireland had vocables only, to be repeated over and over: P. W. Joyce printed the tune of one such, with the note, 'I have been all my life familiar with this lullaby; but I have never heard it sung with any words

except "Shoheen-sho u-lo-lo, shoheen-sho as thu mo-leanav'" (Joyce 1873: 74). Instead of such being defective examples in which the verses had been forgotten (which of course is entirely possible), they might, on the other hand, be survivals of the original formula. An example from Connemara consisting entirely of repeated vocables—except for the words *mo leanbh* ('my child') and, perhaps significantly, the command *gabh 'mach tú a b(h)ogha* ('out with you sprite') was recorded with the note that 'the mothers of Connemara have a great reverence for the tune, believing that it was used by the Blessed Virgin in putting her child to sleep' (Costello 1923: 66–7). Similarly from the Western Isles we have *Tàladh Chrìosta*, 'The Christ-Child's Lullaby', with its associated story of Mary using it to soothe the orphan banished by his stepmother (Kennedy-Fraser 1910: I. 26–8). These could be examples of the common trick of folk aetiology, of justifying the continuation of a pre-Christian practice by ascribing a Christian origin to it, as, when the Church last century was vehemently condemning keening for the pagan practice that it was, folk aetiology had it that the first keen was sung by the Blessed Virgin on Good Friday (Partridge 1983: 99–100 *etc.*).

In an article on 'Hebridean Lullabies' published in 1949 Miss McNeill adverted to the possibility that the 'nonsense rhymes may have been used magically'. She then goes on to say that 'Traces of the belief in the lullaby as a charm to protect from enchantment linger in the Hebrides' (McNeill 1949: 16). Unfortunately one cannot take her statement at its face value as she does not document these 'traces' beyond a reference to the well-known 'Lullaby of the Fairy Woman', which undoubtedly could be significant in this context. Frances Tolmie published a version of this lullaby, *Oran Tàlaidh na Mnà-Sidhe*, with a version of its legend:

> One day in the island of Skye, many centuries ago, a woman of wonderful aspect—in point of fact a fairy or 'banshee'—appeared suddenly at the door of Dunvegan, the castle of Macleod of Macleod. She entered the castle without invitation, and went straight into the room where the infant heir lay asleep in his cradle. Taking him in her arms she sang a song, of which the foregoing verses are only a fragment. Then, laying him down, she passed out of the castle, and vanished over the moor as mysteriously as she had come. Her fairy lullaby was ever after regarded as a charm to protect the young heir of Macleod from every evil. No woman was allowed to be his nurse who could not sing it over him. But in course of time the meanings of certain words and expressions became obscure; it must be at least a hundred years since a nurse to Macleod's heir used the lullaby, literally as an 'incantation' . . . (Tolmie 1910–13: no. 20, 174–7; other versions of lullaby and legend in Carmichael 1954; v. 184f.).

The starting point of this legend was, presumably, the lullaby itself and the practice of singing it for this socially important baby. As the real origin of the lullaby must have been human, its ascription to a fairy visitor would seem to have been by way of providing an aetiology for an old-established usage with otherworld implications.

Finally, for some years now I have been making enquiry in the various Irish-speaking areas in Ireland, and this summer in the Western Isles of Scotland, from people old enough to remember the general belief in abduction, asking them whether the lullaby was regarded as a protection. With only one major exception my informants had no

recollection whatever of any such idea (and to their credit be it said that they did not try to please me or make a mark by inventing some!). The exception was Dr Seán Ó hEochaidh, the well-known professional collector with the Irish Folklore Commission. Seán was quite emphatic that in his youth in Donegal some of the old women—not all of them—regarded the lullaby as a charm against the *Sí*. He added an unexpected detail which strengthens the credibility of the testimony: *agus dá dheise is dá bhinne is dá uaignídis dá bhrónaí a chanfí í is ea ba mhó an buaí a bheadh inti mar chosaint*: 'and the more beautifully and the more sweetly and the more lonesomely and the more plaintively it were sung, the better would it be as a protection.' One is reminded of Binne Bheul's singing: *bha na puirt cho binn agus cho blasda*, 'the strains were so sweet and so eloquent'.

On the whole, then, I think it more than likely that this was formerly a prime function of the lullaby. I am not without some uneasiness, however, and hence the question mark in the title of the paper. One would have expected more external evidence, firstly in the living Gaeltacht, which has clear memory of belief in abduction and still sings the lullabies.(On the other hand no superstitious associations survived to our time in connection with the singing of milking or churning songs, which were almost certainly ritualistic in origin with esoteric function.) Secondly one wonders at the total absence of any such reference in the written accounts from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, either from Scotland or from Ireland, especially as their writers took a lively interest in the beliefs and superstitions of the people, and noted many stories of abduction.(On the other hand again, perhaps the lullaby was of such a private unobtrusive nature that outsiders would not have been much aware of it). Nor has international comparison so far been particularly helpful. While not claiming to have exhausted the literature I have sifted through a great deal of it, and it has proved very difficult to find comprehensive accounts of lullaby. Alan Merriam's *Ethnomusicology of the Flathead Indians* may be taken as rather representative in saying that, 'In general, lullabies do not seem to be an important song form among the Flathead, though there are some indications that they may have been more prevalent in the past' (Merriam 1967:65). So too, to give a European example, in Bartók's monumental collection of Serbo-Croatian, and Yugoslav and Rumanian folk music, we are told that 'lullabies seem to be almost non-existent . . . The Slovaks and Turks have them, but in the Hungarian material they have already disappeared . . .' (Bartók 1967: 3. xlii). However, some isolated texts and practices have been recorded which may be at least significant straws in the wind. Avenary has written of the Old-Hebrew apotropeic usage of bells, which 'were fastened round the necks of animals, to the cradles of babies, and the clothes of royal princes' to ward off evil powers (Avenary 1957: 25). From the Zuñi Indians of the American South West Carlos Troyer published two lullabies in 1904, one entitled 'Incantation upon a Sleeping Infant' and the other 'Invocation to the Sun-God' for protection of the sleeping child (Troyer 1904: 9785–6).[4] Much nearer home, from the Shetlands, there is the so-called Bressay lullaby[5] consisting of vocable refrain,

Baloo balilli, an explicit order of banishment to the fairies, and an invitation to the angels:

Baloo balilli, baloo balilli,
Baloo balilli, baloo baa.

Gae awa, peerie fairies
Gae awa, peerie fairies

Gae awa, peerie fairies
Fae wir bairn noo.

Baloo balilli, etc.

Dan come, boannie angels,
Ta wir peerie bairn;
. . .

Baloo balilli, etc.
(Robertson 1973: 27).

Such examples, of course, do not establish a parallel with the hypothesis of this paper, but they would, nevertheless, be remarkably consistent with it as echoes of an earlier belief.

Finally, in 1985 at the International Council for Traditional Music colloquium in Japan, a Japanese scholar, Yoshiko Ikegami, presented a paper[6] on 'The lullaby as magic . . .' demonstrating, 'on the basis of traditional Japanese lullabies, that there is a close similarity between the way the lullaby is performed and the way magic is performed' (Ikegami 1986: 105).

I should greatly appreciate any further enlightenment on what has proved to be a rather elusive subject. At least from the point of view of Gaelic and Irish scholarship the lullaby has some importance—apart altogether from the great artistry that it frequently exhibits—as it very probably represents one of the oldest strata in our folk repertoire, both musically and culturally. And of even greater import, if my interpretative approach is generally correct then the lullaby may be just the tip of the iceberg, so that under an artistic surface a very great deal of our singing tradition may formerly have had esoteric or supernatural function.

NOTES

1 Paper presented at a seminar in the School of Scottish Studies, October 1987, on work in progress. It is published here on that basis and in the hope of eliciting further information.

2 'H-Ó Abha-ínn' [lullaby] on Folkways Record *Sorcha Ní Ghuairim sings traditional Irish songs*, album No. FW6861, where the above words are mistranscribed as *go moch is go mall*. Cf. *gabh 'mach tú a b(h)ogha* (Costello 1923: 65). The forms *bo*, *bó* and *bogha*, from *badhbh*, were commonly used in Ireland of the *bean sí* 'banshee' (Lysaght 1978: 54–5; 1986: 34f).

3 For other literary rationalisations in this and other tales *cf.* Murphy 1953: LIII–LIV and XXIX.
4 I am indebted to Phyllis Kenney for this reference.
5 Copy kindly supplied to me by Dr Alan Bruford.
6 My thanks to Dr Peter Cooke for copy.

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