

# An Interpretation of ‘how the Wran come out of Ailssay’ (Gavin Douglas, *The Palice of Honour*, 1. 1713) as a Version of the Cumulative Tale ‘Henny Penny’

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Gavin Douglas, poet and Bishop of Dunkeld (c. 1474-1522), is best known for his translation of Virgil’s ‘Aeneid’ into Scots which he completed in 1513. ‘The Palice of Honour’ was an earlier work that was probably composed in 1501 or shortly before that (Bawcutt 2003: xxviii). At the point in the poem with which we are concerned, there are a number of stanzas which describe what the poet is shown in a mirror, and the relevant stanza on narratives is sandwiched between one on hawking and one on displays of magical transformation. It runs (Bawcutt 2003: 109, ll. 1711-19; notes 205-7, 325):

I saw Raf Coilyear with his thrawin brow,  
Craibit Iohne the Reif and auld Cowkewyis sow,  
And how the Wran come out of Ailssay,  
And Peirs plewman that maid his workmen fow,  
Greit Gowmakmorne and Fyn Makcoull, and how  
Thay suld be Goddis in Ireland, as thay say.  
Thair saw I Maitland vpon auld beird gray,  
Robene Hude and Gilbert with the quhite hand,  
How Hay of Nauchtoun flew in Madin land.

The narratives listed include works in Scots, like ‘Raf Coilyear’, or English, like ‘Robene Hude’, and there is also reference to Irish tradition in the lines on ‘Greit Gowmakmorne and Fyn Makcoull’. It has not previously proved possible to identify the narrative concerning ‘how the Wran come out of Ailssay’ but it is suggested here, on the basis of comparison with Scottish Gaelic material, that it may have been the cumulative tale ATU 20C ‘The Animals Flee in Fear of the End of the World’<sup>1</sup>, familiar to the English-speaking world as ‘Henny Penny’ or ‘Chicken Little’. If so, an extension of the idea in the title might run: ‘how the wren came out of Ailsa, crying that the end of the world was at hand’. In the tale-type, a chicken or other creature is generally frightened when something falls on its head or tail, taking it that the sky is falling and that this is a sign of the end of the world. The earliest version published in the Anglophone world is the Scots form given below which appeared in Chambers (1842: 51). It was followed into print shortly afterwards by a longer English version in Halliwell (1849: 29-31) in which also the creatures aim to tell the king but are eaten by the fox. As will be seen shortly, Scottish Gaelic forms exhibit a closer relationship to the Douglas quotation, but these parallels suggest the possibility that the creatures, starting from the periphery, come towards a centre where they expect to find the king (cf. the point that the wren ‘come out’ of Ailsa). The Chambers version is as follows:

## THE HEN AND HER FELLOW-TRAVELLERS

A hen picking at a pease-stack, a pea fell on her head, and she thought the lifts were faun. And she thought she would go and tell the king about it. And she gaed,

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<sup>1</sup> In Uther’s classification of international tales (Uther 2004, I: 28).

and gaed, and gaed; and she met a cock. And he said, “Where are ye gaun the day, henny-penny?” And she says, “I’m gaun to tell the king the lifts are faun.”\* And he says, “I’ll gang wi’ ye, henny-penny.” And they gaed, and they gaed, and they gaed; and they met a duck. And the duck says, “Where are you gaun the day, cocky-locky, henny-penny?” “We’re gaun to tell the king the lifts are faun.”\* “I’ll gang wi’ you, cocky-locky, henny-penny.” “Then, come awa’, ducky-daddles.” And they gaed, and they gaed, and they gaed; and they met wi’ a goose. And the goose says, “Where are you gaun the day, ducky-daddles, cocky-locky, henny-penny?” “We’re gaun to tell the king the lifts are faun.” And he says, “I’ll gang wi’ you, ducky-daddles, cocky-locky, henny-penny.” “Then, come awa’, goosie-poosie,” said they. And they gaed, and they gaed, and they gaed, till they came to a wood, and there they met a tod. And the tod says, “Where are you gaun the day, goosie-poosie, ducky-daddles, cocky-locky, henny-penny?” “We’re gaun to tell the king the lifts are faun.” And he says, “Come awa’, and I’ll let you see the road, goosie-poosie, ducky-daddles, cocky-locky, henny-penny.” And they gaed, and they gaed, and they gaed, till they came to the tod’s hole. And he shot them a’ in, and he and his young anes ate them a’ up, and they never got to tell the king the lifts were faun.

Of interest here are marginalia made, probably in 1860, by the Scottish folk tale collector John Francis Campbell of Islay in his copy of the 1858 edition of Chambers’s work *Popular Rhymes, Fireside Stories, and Amusements, of Scotland* (211), now in the National Library of Scotland. Campbell notes some differences in the version he knew. He gives ‘tail’ instead of ‘head’ in the first sentence and indicates the following interpolations at the points marked with asterisks in the Chambers text given above: ‘And he says, How do ye ken that henny penny & she says How should I no ken when it played nippy nappy on my rumpumpo.’ and ‘How do ye ken that henny penny said the duck. – How should I no ken said she when it played nippy nappy on my rumpumpo.’ In the second case the interpolation is introduced by ‘tell the king the lift’s faun’. Campbell notes that the tale was ‘told to me by my mother when I was a very small child about 1825 or thereabouts’. His mother, Lady Eleanor Charteris, was apparently not Gaelic speaking, giving us the earliest evidence to date, though fragmentary, of an English/Scots version.

### The Gaelic Traditions

In addition to the above, which are of English/Scots origin, there is also a fairly large body of variants from Gaelic traditions, nearly always recorded in the original Scottish or Irish Gaelic. These are worth examining in connection with Gavin Douglas’s allusion to Ailsa Craig, not only from their geographical proximity to the location, but from the fact that the closely following allusions in the work to ‘Greit Gowmakmorne and Fyn Makcoull, and how / Thay suld be Goddis in Ireland, as thay say’ make it clear that the author, to some degree, at least, was aware of prominent figures in the Finn Cycle, the most widely revered branch of Gaelic oral tradition of that time.

We should recall here that at the time *The Palice of Honour* was composed, Ailsa Craig was located close to the active maritime trade routes carrying economic and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Ailsa Craig is conspicuously situated in the Firth of Clyde, and is mentioned as *Aldasain*, ‘the Rock between Galloway and Kintyre’, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Irish manuscript the Book of Leinster. The etymology of the name is unclear; it is known in modern Gaelic as *Creag Ealasaid* (Watson: 173, 515).

The Gaelic traditions of Scotland and Ireland, like those of their Scots/English neighbours, have left us no variants of the story from earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century; their structure and content can be summarised in the following outline:

## AN INTERPRETATION OF ‘HOW THE WRAN COME OUT OF AILSSAY’

One character, or two (in some versions a hen, in others human) receives a signal that the sky is about to fall on the earth, or simply of the approach of death (*bàs*) or doom (*bràth*). In some variants they are down by the shore and are made aware of the impending disaster by being struck by an object falling from the sky. They set out to carry the news to others (animals or humans) in succession, all of whom bear distinctive, often comical names, using a formula along the lines of: “Who has seen or heard it?” “My eyes have seen it, my ears have heard it, and my soles (or back[-side]) have felt it”. They form a growing procession as they go through the country until they reach a destination of sorts: in many variants a white horse carries them to a river where they are drowned.

### *Scottish Gaelic*

In Scottish Gaeldom, the fright may be caused not just by the supposed falling sky, but also by an apprehension of a rising sea taken as a doomsday sign, and this factor suggests the setting on the island of Ailsa Craig as having a potential relevance.

The chicken in panic sets off to tell others and the companions accumulate new members as they proceed on their way, which is potentially from the periphery by the shore to a central location where they could tell the king. Scottish versions identify the originator as a woman called Mór (or a man or a hen). Although no known version features a wren at the start of the story, one Scottish Gaelic version from Islay does include an appropriately located wren later by adding *an Dreòlan a bha anns a’ chreig* (‘the Wren that was in the rock’) to the company (Campbell 1940: 64-65).

This notable Islay version was provided to the tale collector John Francis Campbell some time shortly after the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, apparently recited by a nurse on the island, no great distance from Ailsa Craig. It was published in a posthumous collection, titled *More West Highland Tales* (Campbell 1940: 62-66):

Mór the daughter of Smùid falls and thinks that death (*Bàs*) has come. She meets Ewan MacAlc, saying to him, ‘Beware of death’. ‘Have you seen or heard him?’ She replies, ‘My ear has heard, my eye has seen, and my foot has felt’. She then encounters a series of characters: Priest Speckled Boy, the One-eyed Man, the Lark that was on the Nest and the Wren that was in the Rock, the Thatcher of the Kiln, the Grinder of the Mill, Little Rory of the Rock, Big Rory of the Rock, and the Old Woman of the Bothy. Finally as they flee together they come to a river and the Horse with the White Trews offers to take them across. They all climb up on his back and the whole group of them are carried away by the river.

The old woman’s companions, much like the English traditions we know well, are given comical names, of which four and probably five of the 11 refer either to a bird and/or to a large rock or crag:

The Lark that was on the Nest ‘*An Uiseag a Bha air an Nead*’  
The Wren that was on the Rock ‘*An Dreòlan a Bha anns a’ Chreig*’  
Little Rory of the Rock ‘*Ruairidh Beag na Creige*’  
Big Rory of the Rock ‘*Ruairidh Mór na Creige*’

At first glance, *Aon Sùil Fhear* translated ‘One-eyed Man’ would not seem to belong to the set, but the editor J.G. McKay rightly notes that the name is ‘bad Gaelic’ and provides the very plausible suggestion that it is a misinterpretation acquired in transmission of *An Sùlair* ‘The Solan Goose or Gannet’ (Campbell 1940: 65).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ailsa Craig is ‘home to the third largest gannet colony in Scotland’ (<http://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/rspb-news/news/280200-rspb-stress-importance-of-ailsa-craig-but-are-not-in-negotiations-to-purchase-iconic-landmark>) whose presence has been recorded ‘since at least 1526’ (Haswell-Smith: 4).

Thus, in addition to the intriguing reference to ‘The Wren that was on the Rock’, we are provided with a few details regarding the rock or crag in the story and may wonder whether it was indeed Ailsa Craig.



Scottish variants from further up the west coast also contain items of interest. Two closely similar settings (D.J. MacDonald MSS 8: 690-97; 49: 4556-68) from storytellers in South Uist, in the Outer Hebrides, open with a man on the shore hearing a rustling under a rock (*fo chreig*). In his flight, he encounters the same Big Rory of the Rock, and the whole company is eventually drowned in the sea. Further north in Bernera, Harris, a rendition recorded in the late 1960s from Mrs Kate Dix (SA 1967/88/A3) gives us the story of the Speckled Hen on the shore, who on her way to town to heal her leg encounters a series of birds: a seagull, a crow, and a rook. They meet with a fox who attempts to eat them all, but the Speckled Hen escapes and reaches the town.

One complete mainland variant from Morar, on the western coast, was recorded in Gaelic-speaking Nova Scotia in 1978 (MacLellan 2000: 350-53, 417; Shaw 2007). It opens with the main character Croma-Ghille Cromaidh walking on the shore and taking fright as the sea rises, perceiving it as a sign that the day of doom is imminent:

Croma-Ghille Cromaidh is walking one day along the seashore and the sea comes in about his feet and he becomes frightened. So off he runs until he reaches Donna-Ghille Donnaidh who asks, “What is wrong?” Croma-Ghille Cromaidh replies ‘The day of doom is coming’ (*‘Tha am bràth a’ tighinn’*). ‘Who saw and heard it?’ (*‘Cò chunnaic ‘s a dh’fhairich e?’*) his companion asks, and Croma-Ghille Cromaidh replies, ‘It is I that saw and heard it.

## AN INTERPRETATION OF ‘HOW THE WRAN COME OUT OF AILSSAY’

Didn't it come beneath the soles of my feet?' (*'S mis' a chunnaic 's a dh'fhairich . Nach ann fo 'm bhonnaibh a thànaig e?'*)

Croma-Ghille Cromaidh goes on to meet a typical cast of characters, and finally, to complete the circle, meets Big Finn mac Crùslaig (a possible reference to the Finn Cycle), who averred that the day of doom would not arrive just yet

### *Irish Gaelic*

The tale type is more abundantly recorded in its Irish variants, which are with one or two exceptions in Irish Gaelic. In his work *The Types of the Irish Folktale*, Seán Ó Súilleabháin (1963: 338) lists manuscript sources, along with some 20 printed versions from the 20<sup>th</sup> century published mostly in obscure Irish-language periodicals. Thanks to the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin, we have had access to field transcriptions of an additional 20 examples of the story, again nearly all from Irish speakers. The Irish versions available appear to show a greater uniformity than those we have examined from Scotland.

Typically, an object from above lands on the tail of a hen by the seashore. She takes fright and runs off to tell the others that a heaven and earth cataclysm is about to occur, or that doom is approaching. In the course of this she assembles a motley procession, often but not invariably consisting of other birds such as a rooster, a gander, a goose or drake; or occasionally animals such as a ram or a bull. In a few versions, as in Scotland, the procession can consist of characters with strange and comical names. They are met by a crafty fox who leads them into his den, and devours them, or by a white horse who carries them into a river where they perish. The story is reinforced throughout by a repeated formula along the lines of: 'It is my two eyes that saw it and my two ears that heard it; it struck my backside and had it been a heavy rock, I would be long dead.' One Irish version of the tale printed in *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge/The Gaelic Journal* (Mac Tíre 1889) ix; 339-341) in 1889 was noted down in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century from a Brigid Boyle of Glenties, Co. Donegal. It features names that correspond strikingly to those in the Islay version published by John Francis Campbell, some 30 years earlier:

<u>Glenties</u>		<u>Islay</u>
<i>Mórnaic O Smuile</i>	:	<i>Mór nighean Smùid</i>
<i>Ruaidhrí Beag na Carraige</i>	:	<i>Ruairidh Beag na Creige</i>
<i>Ruaidhrí Mór na Carraige</i>	:	<i>Ruairidh Mór na Creige</i>

The last two names may be particularly significant, where the Irish *carraig* is simply another word for *creag* 'rock', providing a close parallel and perhaps a shared origin with the Islay story.

From our comparisons of the written and field evidence available, we cannot state conclusively that the passage in Gavin Douglas's *Palice of Honour* refers to the widespread folktale, 'Henny Penny' (ATU 20C). However, it does provide a likely explanation for an allusion that is otherwise obscure. The allusions to Irish Gaelic traditions, in particular the Finn cycle (which was very much alive in Scotland in his day), bear witness to an interest in Gaelic legend shared by Gavin Douglas's Lowland contemporaries, together with an awareness of oral sources differing little if at all from the one suggested here. The Wren in the Rock appears on a list of characters involved in the closest geographical variant to Ailsa Crag, that recorded in Islay. Similar lists of characters in variants further removed, extending up the western coast of Scotland and throughout the west of Ireland, feature various varieties of birds fleeing the catastrophe, with a notably close counterpart to the Islay variant taken down in Donegal. The possible

reference to the folktale is further supported by the mention of the sea in some descriptions of the impending cataclysm, recalling the location of Ailsa Crag in the western part of the Firth of Clyde.

If our suggestion is correct, Gavin Douglas will have provided the earliest known reference in the British Isles to a widespread international folktale, setting its first appearance in the record back from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## MANUSCRIPTS AND FIELD RECORDINGS IN THE SCHOOL OF SCOTTISH STUDIES ARCHIVE

‘*Tuairéadaire Teallaich*’. D.J. MacDonald MS 8: 690-97.

‘*Tuairéadaire Teallaich*’. D.J. MacDonald MS 49: 4556-68. SA 1967/88/A3.

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