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COLLECTANEA.

"THE KEENER" IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS.

THE "Banshee" has an ascertained place in the English language, and, while the word literally means 'woman fairy,' Joyce¹ defines it as a female spirit attending upon certain families heard "keen-ing" round the house when some member is about to die. At funerals the wake or watching of the body, *laithi na canti* (the days of lamentation), have from the oldest times on record even to the present day been accompanied by what Spenser calls "dis-pairful outcrys." This was the *cai* or *caoi*.

The exact equivalent of the Banshee in the West Highlands is the Caonteach, Cointeach, Caointeach, or its diminutive Caointeachan from *caoin* (weep, lament). One reciter in telling of lamentation heard before the death of an old man in Argyleshire said that at first it was supposed to be the Caointeachan, but after the man's death his daughter passed the window weeping, and it was agreed it was not the Caointeachan, which is supposed to be attached to particular families, but only a *manadh*, i.e. a warning which may happen to anyone.

The Caonteach is spoken of throughout Argyleshire, Gigha, Islay, Jura, Tyree, the Long Island, and Skye. Families to which it is said to be attached in these districts are Macmillans, Mathisons, Kellys, Mackays, MacAffers, Duffies, Macfarlanes, Shaws, Maclergans, and Curries—in Gaelic MicVorrán, MicMhurraidh, MicMhurrich. MicVorrán, since Gaelic has no *v*, might be represented as Micmhourn.²

¹ P. W. Joyce, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, vol. i, p. 264.

² The name Currie itself might conceivably have been considered as connected with *cura* (care, guardianship), and the Caonteach looked upon as their

The appearance taken by the Caonteach varies considerably. It is generally described as "small," "a little woman," "a very small woman in short gown and petticoat with a high crowned white cap," and also, like other fairies, "in a green petticoat with a high crowned mutch." Another reciter described it as "like a real little child"; the woman who saw it, going up to it and putting her hand on its head, asked "what makes you weep?" and found the child's head "awfully soft." It is described, however, as something even more diminutive; it is "a little white thing." One of the Curries had it in his hand, and it was white and soft as wool. This is a frequent description of it. Another said it resembles a small tuft of wool, and is soft to feel, having neither flesh, blood, or bones. It was hard to understand how it could be so differently described, as it is said to have been an ordinary woman, and taken up into his machine by a man driving. When we are told, however, that it is the soul of the person who is to die, we understand why it should be light and white, and as a further deduction appear as what is white and light, namely, a tuft of wool.

In the burying-ground in Glen Macaoidh in the Rhinns of Islay there is the appearance as of the impression of a human foot, and less clearly of a human hand, on a stone said to be haunted by a Caonteach, who, however, only comes at certain times of the year for a few weeks, especially in harvest.

That the "keener" should walk round the house accords with all precedent, as, for instance, in the *deasa*, the right-handed lucky turns made at funerals, weddings, boat launchings, and Hogmanay visitations. The "keener," however, is not lucky, and this may account for its being specially mentioned as "passing the back door of a house," "passing behind the house," "the back window," "moving slowly about houses" and stack yards, and even "seen on the dunghill." Evidently this points to an inferred connection between the word *caoin* (kind, soft, lowly), and the name Caointeach. The resemblance to a woman and to a soft material of some sort is peculiarly clear in the statement of an

curatrix (guardian). It seems possible that a fanciful connection with the English "mourn," to lament, may be a cause of the connection of the MacVorrans and the Caonteach.

Islay man that his granduncle, coming home from Gartacharra and Conispio, saw the Caonteach beating clothes on a stone; "he lifted her; she felt very light and soft in his hands just like a tuft of wool; she is a kindly creature, and would do harm to nobody." One reciter considered its low wailing cry as evidence of a naturally sympathetic nature.

The form taken by its crying varies according to different accounts. Generally it is described as a "mournful wailing," and also as a "bitter weeping," the "most mournful weeping ever heard." But it is also described as a "fearful noise," "three fearful screams," but, strange to say, also "like the splashing of water." It is undoubtedly confused with singing in the ears, which, if noticed before a death, is called *Caointeachan cluaise* (the ear keener). A Gigha informant says that the Caointeachan is a warning of death, but other stories point to her as a sort of foreteller of future events. If the prophecy is that of a drowning accident, there seems nothing but a filling of the usual roll. But we are told that one of the Curries got the information that his circumstances would improve so that he should die the owner of a conveyance, an equivalent no doubt to the respectability conferred by the possession of a gig. Another foretold a woman's second marriage while her husband was still alive. Another prophecy, signifying no doubt death, was when a man was informed that the errand on which he was engaged was not to his advantage, as "the core of your heart and your two paps will go;" this was fulfilled by the death of his wife and two children within a few days. A parallel story to the above is the information the Caointeachan gave to the man who took her up beside him in his machine. He had two children ill at the time; one, she said, would die, and the other recover, and, further, his wife would die before himself, all which is said to have come true. The Caointeachan who was asked why she wept only answered "you, Flora Currie, are here;" Flora, who was going to visit a child, found the child dead on her arrival. All of them, however, are not so mild-mannered, one having given a slap on the cheek to a man which caused paralysis. His offence was putting his hand under a stone frequented by her and taking from it a flint, which he used to light his pipe.

A story is told of one of the Macmillans of Dunmore. A man in the neighbourhood heard the "keener," and asked her the cause of the lamenting: she told him one of the family had died at Sligo in Ireland; he asked for some proof, and was told he would find a hole burned in his plaid next morning. Sure enough the hole was there, and the body of the dead man was subsequently brought to Dunmore for burial.

A Tyree man spoke of the Caointeachan as a male, and that to see or hear him was a fortunate thing, for what *he* said for good or evil would happen without much delay.

In the outer islands more especially we hear of the "Washer Woman" Bean Nigheachain, otherwise Bean Nighidh. Accounts of her are common in Lewis, Harris, Uist, and Coll, and she is credited, when seen, with foretelling some fatality, but is not specially attached to particular families. A reciter in Lewis said she is supposed only to appear in connection with some general fatality.

This "water nymph" "resembles a woman somewhat," is of small size, and one of our informants said that her feet were red and webbed like a duck's. Like other "superior kinds of fairies" she is credited with a green dress, and was said to come about gentlemen's houses at night, and, though seen "after dark and by children going to school in the early morning," she evidently shuns daylight. She is invariably seen in the neighbourhood of water, a necessary consequence of her occupation as a Washer Woman, and what she washes is described as "clothes of the battle" and shrouds (*aodach mairbh, ais-leine*). There is in a burn in the parish of Kinloch-Spelvie in Mull a flat stone, on which she would be seen "posting clothes," *i.e.* beating them with a beetle, or tramping them. The noise made by her is likened to "clapping hands, as of one washing clothes," and also as "like the splashing of water."³

The result of interviews with the Bean Nighidh varies considerably, as may be supposed when we are told by some that she is of a friendly disposition and that her appearance has no significance in association with death, but by others again that,

³ Cf. vol. xxi., pp. 180, 189 (Co. Clare); and, for the *lavandières de nuit*, P. Sébillot, *Le Folk-lore de France*, Tome iii.

though hurt follows her appearance, it is not her doing. A lad who saw one and went down to her was dipped by her in the river, she abusing him for going too near her. An onlooker who sees the Washer Woman first has nothing to fear, but if she sees him first she will get the better of him. Some men who worked on the Highland Railway, and "were as respectable as other folk" and came from the Reay country, were descendants of a Bean Nighidh. A boy going to school with his two sisters, who saw one while he himself did not, shortly afterwards took ill and died, the girls apparently being none the worse. A woman had become so accustomed to the sight of a Bean Nighidh who frequented the neighbourhood in which she lived, Lochcarron, that, when asked by her husband who the little woman he saw was, answered him "*cha'n 'eil ann ach a' bhean-nigheachain*," (it is only the Washer Woman). On this occasion the Bean Nighidh had not perceived them at first, but, when she did, she left the stream and went under a little bush growing on the bank and in an agitated manner began breaking off the points of the branches and throwing them away. The reciter of this story did not think of her as associated with death, and in fact considered her appearance of little or no significance. From Coll we are told of a man crossing a stream after dark seeing what he supposed to be a woman washing. Considering her appearance as untimely, he thought to "try her with stones;" the result was that, after a few of these missives, she disappeared, and he concluded that she was a Washer Woman. The person to whom this happened was the uncle of the reciter's brother-in-law, and the story was told in all good faith.

Some maintained that the Washer Woman did not foretell death and was different from the Caointeachan, giving the former credit for being sympathetic, a sympathy apparently shown by her preparing the shroud, and some say that any request made to her she must grant if the inquirer can get between her and the water where she is washing. Like other fairy gifts, however, wealth acquired in this way was said at least in one case to be of little benefit to the receiver.

The identity of the Caointeachan and the Washer Woman appears very clearly in the belief we find in Islay that the Caoin-

teachan does not like to be disturbed when washing, and, if a person should come too near her at such a time, he might expect to get a switch with the shroud across his legs which would take them off. They seem irritable creatures, for we are told that near the Free Church in Bernera, Harris, two of them were seen fighting.

There is a large flat stone in Gleann-na-gaoithe in Islay with a deep hole scooped out of its surface, and this is called the Caoin-teachan's tub. A man on his way to Portnahaven crossing the Glen put his foot on the so-called tub, and immediately his head was twisted round until his face was almost at his back. As this uncomfortable condition continued for some time, he was advised to go and sit on the tub till the Caonteach came to him, and then boldly to refuse to move until she put his head right. She made her appearance in due course, and in answer to his request she promised to cure him on condition that he would never put his foot on her tub again. This he was glad to undertake, and she fulfilled her part of the bargain.

This same fairy myth appears in Ross-shire and Sutherlandshire, the name applied being the "Vow." The most notorious locality at which she is said to appear is the river Carron. The Vow is not here spoken of as audibly plaintive, but she is said to show malevolence, which takes the form of causing death by drowning to those crossing the waters she frequents; she loses her importance, therefore, where fords have been replaced by bridges. They speak of her also as a "kelpie" who warns those to be drowned. Kelpies are of either sex. The Highland *each-uisge* (water horse) and *tarbh-uisge* (water bull) are other forms of the kelpie; compare Icelandic *kalf*; O.H.G. *chalba* a calf, also the calf of the leg; Lhuyd, *colpach*, a colt, bullock, or heifer. Local information tells us nothing of outcry in case of the Vow. The localities frequented by her are fords, and her occupation is that of beetling clothes on a flat stone, like the "Washer Woman." A Gaelic speaker described her appearance, as seen when he was fishing in the Carron, as "*cruban* at a place on the river where was a ford." *Cruban* (sitting squat) is Gaelic for a "crab," and is applied to a "claw, hoof, or paw," and, as already mentioned, the Bean Nighidh is credited with peculiar feet and could crouch under a low bush.

The Vow is evidently a Teutonic name for an equivalent to the Banshee, Caonteach, and Bean Nighidh.

In the district of Carradale in Kintyre is a point called Sroin na h-Eannachair; as our reciter said, "the haunt of a supernatural being which makes a fearful noise before the death of any of the Clan Macmillan." *Eannachar* is evidently the local name for the Caonteach of the Macmillans, and a translation of the name shows the union of innocence and a connection with a pass and water such as we find in the case of the Washer Woman and of the Vow. *Eanach* (Dinneen), *eannach* (O'Reilly), and *eannach* (Armstrong) all mean "innocent," "free from sin," "spotless," "pure," as we should expect from the descriptions we have of the Caonteach. *Eanach* (Dinneen and O'Reilly) is "a marsh," "a lake," common in place names, e.g. Annaghbeg, Annaghbane, etc., and is connected with *ean* (a bird, fowl of any sort), bearing out the description of the Caonteach having red feet webbed like a duck. *Eanach* (a marsh) is the haunt of wild fowl. *Eanach* is also given as "a pass," "a road," recalling the preference of the Vow for fords.

We advance the thesis that all these stories have some common origin in nature, and we suggest that the weird calling at night of wild animals such as wolves and owls, when they vary a little from the more usually recognised sounds, are the probable cause from which these traditions have been built up; the appearance ascribed is not merely from something seen, but also the result of after consideration of the names applied or applicable. In support of this the Banshee seems to be a modern expression for what appears in old Irish romance as the Bodb, the goddess of battle, naturally connected with families of importance to whom she may be supposed to have rendered service. She is the *bodhbh* or grey crow, the so-called royston, scald crow, as being "noisy," "blustering," and as the goddess of battle presided over sudden death.

Hilpert in his Dictionary gives *wauwau* as provincial for a "bugbear," "old bogie," an onomatopoeia for the barking of a dog, which at once shows the connection of the Vow with noise. May not *bodb*, *bodhbh* be a Gaelic nominative formed from *bhodhbh* (vov), the *b* taking the place of what was considered its asperated form? In Moray to howl is expressed as *wow*, the same

being the case in the north of England, and is applied to the mewling of a cat and the wail of an infant. The Latin *ululare* is to cry as a wolf, and connected with this is *ulfw* the Suio-Gothic for a wolf, while *ululae* are screech owls, in Gaelic *coinnil* (Meyer). The connection of owls with women in Gaelic is shown in the name *cailleach oidhche* (the night woman). *Coinnill* (screech owls) are evidently so-called from *cóinim* (to complain, bewail), a word we find in the Manx *caayney*, *caoiney* (to bewail, to sing), the Welsh *cwyno* (to mourn or lament), the Cornish *cwyna*, and the Breton *keina*, *keini*. In Greek we have *κλύπος*, and also *μῦνπος* meaning to complain, the latter specially with a low voice, which suggests that the former has *κλυω* as its root as has, for instance, *κίναδος* a fox; *κλύπος* therefore is a whining, and with this compare the Latin *cano* (I sing) and *canis* (a dog). Primitive singing must have been a mere exaggeration of the rise and fall of the voice when speaking, rhythm being achieved by accompanying the outcry with clapping of hands. The Latin *cano* has possibly influenced the Gaelic *canim*, I sing. What we wish to make clear to our readers is that the lamenting of the "keener" after a death is the survival of an early form of what we now know as singing. The Bodb, the Banshee, the Caonteach, and the Vow are probably identical in origin, commemorating grief as expressed by the voice, and the Washer Woman tradition commemorates the clapping of the hands common both at keening and at clothes washing.

The information I have used in writing this paper has been gathered from living reciters, and I would gratefully acknowledge much local information given by Miss E. M. Kerr, 137 Craiglea Drive, Edinburgh, formerly of Port Charlotte, Islay.

R. C. MACLAGAN.

SOME WHITE RUTHENIAN FOLK-SONGS.

1. *Notes on the People.*

THE accompanying songs, which are both in words and music extremely characteristic, have been collected within the radius of