



# FEARCHAR LIGHICHE AND THE TRADITIONAL MEDICINES OF THE NORTH

Mary Beith

## **FEARCHAR BEATON: LEGEND & REALITY**

On the 5 March 1823, one John Kelly sent a letter from Skye to South Queensferry summarising three traditional Highland stories, the second of which related to:

Farquaar Bethune called in Gaelic Farquhar Leich [correctly: Fearchar Lighiche, Fearchar the Healer] which signifies the curer of every kind of diseases, and which knowledge he received from a book printed in red in which had descended in heritable succession and is now in the possession of Kenneth Bethunne ... of Waterstane [Waterstein] in Glendale, and which they contain both secret and sacred; – what instructions are contained therein are descriptive of the virtues of certain herbs in particular which he denied having any equal, nor being produced by any other country by Skye, it has been examined by Botanists from London and elsewhere and its non-affinity to any other confirmed. He was gifted with prophecy, and held conference] with the Brutal [natural] creation in that was quite a prodigy. This is only an outline of him.

What Kelly lacked in grammar and spelling is irrelevant; what is pertinent is that his remarks about Fearchar Lighiche neatly encapsulate the tangle of fact, legend and mystery in which the old Highland healers, official and unofficial alike, were held in awe by their contemporaries and subsequent generations.

The Fearchar of Kelly's note would have been a Beaton of Husabost in Skye, a notable family of hereditary, trained physicians who practised in the island from the 15th to the early 18th century, several of whom were named Fearchar. However, many legends concerning this dynasty of doctors, which also had branches in, among other places, Islay, Mull, Easter Ross and North Sutherland, became all-purpose apocryphal yarns about a specific local doctor – depending on where the tale was told.

## **The Fearchar Legend**

The 'origin' story of how these medical men first acquired their 'secret and sacred' gifts frequently pointed to a Fearchar of north Sutherland. We will begin with the legend and see how it merges with the facts.

*This Fearchar was a drover from the old Reay Country. One day, at a Lowland cattle tryst, he met a strange gentleman who, in the course of a warm and friendly chat, asked how he had come by his hazel staff. 'In Glen Golly, in the Reay Country', the drover replied, adding that if he were near it, he would certainly know the tree again.*

*'You'll get a rich reward from me if you return to the tree and see if there is a serpent's hole beneath it', the stranger said. 'If there is, you should wait a while and then you will see six brown serpents coming out of it. Let them be, and when they return a white serpent will be following them. Capture the white. Fearchar did as he was asked. Back at the hazel tree from which he had cut his stock, he found a hole as the man had described. After a while, six brown serpents crept out and slithered away across the grass. Shortly after this, they returned with a seventh, white snake. Fearchar put the creature into the bottle and made it fast with a cork.*

*When he met up again with the foreign gentleman, the man was delighted. He uncorked the bottle and shook the snake into a pot of broth that was simmering on a fire. Then the stranger instructed Fearchar to watch it didn't boil over until he himself returned. The man was not long gone when the liquid began to bubble fiercely and despite everything Fearchar did to dampen the fire, the broth looked set to lift the lid off the pot. As Fearchar tried to push the lid down, he burnt one of his fingers in the bree and thrust it into his mouth. In the Gaelic words of the Reay Country story:*

*Ann an tiota bha sùilean a thuigse air am fosgladh, agus fhuair èolais air dòigh leigheas air gach tinn is pian thainig riamh an car duine.*

*(In a flash the eyes of his understanding were opened, and he acquired the wisdom to heal every ache and pain that ever befell mortal beings.)*

*On his return, the stranger went straight to the pot, lifted the lid, dipped in a finger and sucked the bree. 'Aha,' he said to Fearchar, 'this is no use now. You didn't do as I told you, so you'll get no reward now.'*

*Just as the daughter in a Norse story of the Viper King deprived her father of gaining supernatural insight by taking the first mouthful of serpent's grease, so Fearchar's quick taste of the broth on his finger meant that he and not the mysterious stranger gained the wisdom. It could not be undone or altered. Fearchar returned home, and on his way healed all the sick people he met. At length he reached a town where he learned that the king was in agony from a sore leg. He was unable to walk and although the physicians had been most attentive, every remedy had been in vain.*

*When Fearchar heard of this he went to the castle gate and cried aloud: 'A' bhiasd-dubh air a' chnàmh gheal!' ('The black beetle to the white bone!'). On hearing him, the king asked for the man to be brought to him. 'Are you a doctor?' asked the king. 'Indeed I am, sir,' replied Fearchar. 'If you heal me,' declared the king, 'I will give you what you ask, even to the half of my kingdom.'*

*Fearchar then revealed that instead of trying to cure him, the court physicians had been keeping the king's ulcers open by setting beetles to gnaw*

*at the flesh. After a proper poultice had been applied and the leg was healed, the grateful king inquired as to Fearchar's fee.*

*'The fee', said Fearchar Lighiche, as he was to be known from then on, 'is every island in the sea between Stoer Head in Assynt and the red point in Orkney.' 'Granted,' said the king, 'along with much land in your own country besides.'*

## **The Historical Record: Hereditary Dynasties & Clan Patronage**

Now for the historical record. A royal charter, dated 4 September 1379, confirms a grant of the lands of Melness and Hope in north Sutherland by Robert II and his son, Alexander Stewart (the Wolf of Badenoch), to 'Ffercado medico nostro'. In a further charter, dated 31 December 1386, Robert II grants 'our esteemed and faithful leech Fearchar' a number of islands from Stoer Point in Assynt to Armadale on the north coast 'for his service done and to be done to us'.

In the original charter, the first of the islands is called Jura but it is not the island known as Jura today. In Robert II's time, Jura was also the name of the one in Eddrachillis Bay now known as Oldaney. A note on the process by which the island's name was changed is included in a privately printed collection of Sutherland papers compiled by James Loch in 1859.

In 1511, Melness and Hope were resigned by a descendant of Fearchar to the chiefs of Mackay. Actual title to the islands must have been resigned somewhat earlier, as in 1504 they were gifted to Aodh Mackay by James IV. The 'red point in Orkney' of the legend may refer to Rubha Ruadh, an old Melness name given to the inshore Eilean Naoimh near Skerray, which looks from some view-points to be yet another rocky headland of a very irregular coastline. At the same time, the island stands out from its neighbours because of its pegmatite rock which glows a delightful rosy red in the sunlight. Eilean Naoimh is listed in the 1386 charter as 'Elaneuyofu', while the other islands (including the larger Eilean Roan) around the mouth of the Kyle of Tongue are simply referred to as 'et omnes insulas nostra jacentes inter'. From the mainland, the outline of Orkney may be seen across the Pentland Firth (weather permitting).

When the charters eventually arrived at Register House in Edinburgh they were accompanied by a letter (dated 13 April 1831) from James Loch, one of the more notorious of the first Duke of Sutherland's factors, to a John Mackay. Loch notes:

In 1511 McKay obtained from McCorchie [Mac Mhurchaidh] the lands of Melness and Hoip [Hope] which Lands had been granted by King Robert to Farquhar his Physician in 1376 [*sic*] and who in 1389 [*sic*] followed up this grant to the same person of all the Islands between Rhustore [Stoer Point] and Strathy point – are these the Charters alluded to by you under the date

of 1379 in the Charters in Lord Reay's possession? I think they must – Durness and Edderachyllis came still later into the family, indeed not till the 17th Century. In the Statistical Account of Edderachyllis Farquhar [*sic*] is stated to have been a person of the name of Beton and a native of Isla.

Loch gives the wrong dates for the original charters (he gives the correct dates in his 1859 collection), and the assignee of 1511 was a Donald Mac Donnchadh of Melness, described in the document of 30 September 1511 as 'descendit fra Farquhar Leiche'. A Mackay history, written in 1832 by Alexander Mackay of Blackcastle, claims Fearchar Lighiche as a Mackay rather than a member of the Beaton medical kindred. The minister of Eddrachillis had noted in the *Old Statistical Account* for the parish:

All these [Little Isles] from Roe-a-Stoir in Assint to Stroma in Orkney, were granted to one Ferchard Beton, a native of Isla, a famous physician, at his own request, by one of the Stewarts, kings of Scotland, whom he cured of a distemper. This Ferchard was a physician to the Mackays of Farr, who gave him in exchange for these islands, lands near Melness, opposite Tongue – the possession of which they recovered long since, yet it is said that some of his posterity remain still in the country under the name of Mackay.

Alexander Mackay conceded that the *Old Statistical Account* gives an inaccurate account of the transfer of land, but used the one mistake as 'proof' of another, adding: '... and presumably also inaccurate in saying that Ferchard was a Beaton, a native of Isla.' Mackay was concerned to show that Fearchar was a Mackay, citing the 'clear and unanimous testimony of the Reay charter chests'. This testimony relates to:

1. a genealogical manuscript found among the Reay papers in 1829, in which, says Alexander, 'a Ferchard is represented as being the son of Iye [Aodh], chief of Mackay who was killed at Dingwall ca 1370'.
2. a supposition that Mariota – a hand-fast wife of Alexander Stewart, Wolf of Badenoch, whose original grant of Melness to Fearchar was confirmed by his father, Robert II, in 1379 – was a daughter of Iye Mackay and, if so, was a sister of Ferchard'. Alexander Mackay's argument for making Mariota a daughter of Iye is that in the *Moray Registrum* (No. 271) she is described as a daughter of Athyn, and Mackay asserts that 'Athyn is a Latinised form of Iye' or Aodh.
3. the existence of the above-mentioned charters of land.

That 'some of [Fearchar's] posterity remain still in the country under the name of Mackay' is highly likely; but Alexander Mackay's 'testimony' needs more stringent investigation. There might well be a case for suggesting that the royal patronage of Fearchar was linked with the Wolf and Mariota – if she was genuinely a Mackay (other sources claim she was a Ross). However, Mackay simply assumes that the Fearchar son of Aodh is one-and-the-same as Fearchar Lighiche. Fearchar was not, however, an uncommon forename.

Alexander Stewart's lawful wife, Euphemia, Countess of Ross, complained to the Church over her husband's poor treatment of her and his

relationship with Mariota. In November 1398 the Bishops of Moray and Ross pronounced his excommunication. Pope Clement VII had been made aware of the situation and it appears that the medieval 'latinisation' of Mariota's Gaelic patronymic in the contemporary correspondence was not from *Nic Aoidh* but from *Nic Eachainn* – daughter of Hector, as Eachann is usually anglicised. Athyn/Eachann certainly makes more sense than Athyn/Aodh. A 'Latin' Odo or Hugo might have been a more likely contemporary adaptation of Aodh which was often anglicised as Iye.

According to Mr Hugh Macdonald of Skinnet, Melness, local oral tradition also maintains that Fearchar was a Beaton (or MacBeath) and that, while some of his descendants took on the Mackay identity, and may also have served as physicians to the Mackay chiefs in the north, the main line of Fearchar's descendants became hereditary physicians to the Munros of Foulis. The *Munro Writs* record the names of Beaton doctors (under such variations as McVey and McBeyth) from the early 16th century, although they claimed to have held lands in the area as far back as the 13th century.

It might be argued that the historical occurrence of numerous hereditary medical families of the same name in disparate parts of the islands and mainland – eg Islay, Mull, North Uist, Skye, Melness, Delny, Glenconvinth – points to a 'trade-name' rather than one signifying blood relationship, though there may have been inter-marriages. Certainly patronage by the well-to-do meant that in the middle ages, and especially in the hey-day of the Lordship of the Isles, native Gaelic-speaking doctors could afford the best official medical training of their time – whether in Salerno, Montpellier, Bologna, Padua or Leiden. On returning home, they combined this professional education with their native custom, giving rise to a unique healing tradition. They also left a fascinating legacy of Gaelic medical manuscripts which form the bulk of pre-18th century Gaelic manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland.

In his rigorously researched work on the Beaton medical kindred, Dr John Bannerman is in no doubt that Fearchar of Melness was a member of that professional dynasty. In addition to the charters, this Fearchar is named in late-14th century *Exchequer Rolls* as 'Ferchardus Leche' or 'Ferchardus medicus' for receiving gifts of money in 1381, 1390 and 1397. Bannerman also points out:

Fearchar's attribution to Islay [noted in the *Old Statistical Account*] is further confirmation for the ongoing tradition that all medical Beatons derive ultimately from there no matter their eventual location ... . The contemporary official records suggest that Fearchar originally hailed from the neighbourhood of Inverness, and this would be a more likely centre if he was an ancestor of later Beaton medical families of the mainland division.

## **A Non-Fearchar Legend**

Special knowledge of healing in North Sutherland has another 'origin' legend, however, which makes no mention of Fearchars or Beatons, and is

very similar to one told of the renowned Welsh medieval Physicians of Myddfai. As such, the link may suggest an earlier Celtic, perhaps pre-Gaelic, line of healers. Here is the gist of the tale:

*As an elderly widow came out of her cottage on a slope of the Carrach, above Swordly Mill near Bettyhill, to fetch water, she heard high-pitched cries from the top of the fairy knoll. The woman, who was friendly with the fairies, hurried up the wee hill where she found a tiny girl lying in the grass with a raging fever and an equally small boy standing beside her. The boy chattered frantically and, though the woman could not make out a word he was saying, she understood the meaning exactly. She was to take the girl back to her house and care for her since there was nothing more the fairies could do and they feared she would die.*

*Taking a fresh handkerchief from her pocket, the woman placed the girl gently in it and took her into the cottage where she nursed her constantly for seven days until the fever broke. After a week of convalescence, the old lady returned the child to the top of the Carrach where a crowd of grateful fairies was waiting. The tiny boy who had called for her help gave her a bunch of beautifully scented miniature flowers which, so long as the woman lived, never lost their bloom.*

*Then the little girl spoke and while the woman could not make out the strange words, she knew exactly what the fairy was saying. She was promised that her daughters and all their descendants until the end of time would be splendid nurses.*

The similarity of this story with the fairy gift of knowledge to the healers of Myddfai is undeniable.

There would undoubtedly have been practitioners of medicine in the north before the rise of the medieval physicians, and it is likely that many, if not most of them would have been women. Female healers again came into their own between the demise of the old medical kindreds and the early 20th-century implementation of the Highlands and Islands Medical Scheme.

### **Fearchar in Surviving Oral Tradition**

More of the 'unofficial' healers later. We have not yet done with Fearchar. The 14th-century doctor is still strong in the memories of some present-day Melness people. Hugh Macdonald, Alec George Mackay and Joseph Mackay can identify three sites in Strathan Melness which belonged, they were told in their younger days, to a school of medicine that had been endowed by a king of Scots. This school, tradition has it, was founded for the training of surgeons for the Scottish army.

Of particular interest is a remark made to me by Hugh Macdonald that 'Fearchar was a specialist in eye diseases'. Robert II, who gifted Melness to Fearchar, had, among other chronic health problems, much trouble with his eyes. The ground occupied by the school itself (just above the west side of

Achiniver Bay), was ploughed over some years ago and no remains are visible. The second site, known as the ruin of the doctors' house (presumably where the students were accommodated), is by the burn which flows towards the Strathan Melness road, just to the south of Dalnafree. The third, known in Gaelic as *An Larach Taigh Fhearchair* ('the ruin of Fearchar's house'), is situated in a field just across the road from Dun Buidhe and is by far the most interesting. Although it no longer stands – its stones were used for a nearby byre and dykes – it was situated on what is probably an Iron Age mound overlying a possible souterrain. Stories abound of 'underground houses' and a network of underground passages in Strathan Melness – a place ripe for sensitive archaeological exploration.

There is a story about the poisoning of a medieval Sutherland doctor named Fearchar. This is the gist of it:

*A doctor named Fearchar was called to attend to an Earl of Sutherland who was dying of poisoning at his castle on the east coast, but on his return home by boat to the north (Fearchar Lighiche's territory), the doctor himself became seriously ill by poisoning and was put into an island where he was attended by monks who failed to save his life, as indeed, the doctor had failed to save the life of the earl.*

Robert Gordon recounts the fatal poisoning of several people, including an Earl of Sutherland at Helmsdale in 1567. This is obviously far too late a date for Fearchar Lighiche, but if the scenario fits in with the traditional story of a poisoned Dr Fearchar, the latter may have been a descendant of the former. It is a macabre tale on a par with the last scene of Hamlet.

In 1567 Isobel Sinclair, wife of Gilbert Gordon of Garty and daughter of William Sinclair of Dunbeath, hatched a plot with her brother, William, and the Earl of Caithness, to do away with the Earl of Sutherland, with his pregnant second wife and with the Earl's only heir and son of his first marriage, Alexander. The idea was to give Lord Caithness control of Sutherland. The story runs thus:

*At a hunting lodge near the river Helmsdale, the conniving Isobel gave poison to the earl and countess of Sutherland which killed them after a lingering agony of eight days. However, the young Alexander, whose death was crucial to the conspiracy, escaped supper when he returned late from a hunting trip in Kildonan. When he arrived at the lodge, the already stricken earl – apparently unable to speak a warning – swept the cloth from the table, thereby spilling the poisoned wine and causing the 15 year-old boy to flee to Dunrobin where the earl and countess were also taken.*

*Meantime, and with uncanny dramatic irony, John Gordon, Isobel's eldest son, chanced to call at the Helmsdale lodge and, being thirsty after his journey, asked a servant for a drink. The servant, in all innocence, handed him some of the poisoned wine. John Gordon died two days later. Isobel Sinclair was tried and condemned in Edinburgh, and is said to have committed suicide hours before she was due to be executed.*



It is feasible that an astute Highland doctor correctly diagnosed the victims' condition and the particular poison that had been administered, and was similarly despatched in order to silence him.

## **TRADITIONAL FOLK HEALERS AND THEIR CURES**

Just under a century and a half later, an end also came to the system of medicine and training of native Gaelic-speaking doctors under clan patronage. Through the inspiration of the great Hermann Boerhaave of Leiden (1688-1738), official European medicine abandoned its previous reliance on increasingly complex potions and turned to a simpler, more clinical approach to healing the sick. The Edinburgh Medical School was to become pre-eminent in the new medicine; and the hereditary medical kindreds of the Gaels, whose own ancient social order was in decline, either chose to practise outwith their own region, or pursued careers in teaching or the church.

### **The Role of Women**

This change coincided in the Highlands with the turbulent years of the 18th century. Few trained physicians were tempted into the area, and those who were usually charged fees well beyond the means of ordinary people. It was during this time, and throughout the following century with its clearances, poverty and hardships, that folk healers, especially women, came into their own.

Unlike other parts of Scotland, the Gaelic-speaking areas remained largely free of the witchcraft persecutions of the 16th and 17th centuries. Throughout that time there were only 89 indictments in the then more populous Highlands and western islands, most of them relating to the isle of Bute, the east coasts of Ross and Sutherland and the largely non-Gaelic county of Caithness.

In terms of traditional healing this meant that, where Gaelic culture still held sway, there was a freedom to perpetuate the old knowledge in a way unparalleled in the rest of Britain or much of mainland Europe – where peasant and feminine lore were perceived as a threat to orthodoxy. In Gaeldom the old ways survived, not as the province of the outcast or through the whim of genteel enthusiasts, but in the natural context of a pre-industrial society.

Perhaps because of this acceptance, the healers themselves tended to be generous and caring. A woman known as Sandy Skipper's wife, who lived in Latheronwheel, Caithness, in the middle of the 19th century, was typical. She was believed to have exceptional healing powers and her speciality was children's ailments. She used only incantations and mystic rites, and no one seems to have taken her to task for this. A Caithness minister, the Revd

George Sutherland said: 'Her services were willingly and cheerfully rendered without money and without price to all who sought them. The belief that she was benefiting her fellow human beings was her sufficient reward'.

## **Use of Natural Materials**

### *Bogbean*

Although charms and rituals were widely used – and many had a psychological benefit – most remedies employed herbs and other practical means. Of all the many herbs that were used in the north, there were some which were especially popular. One of these was the bogbean, and it certainly cannot have been celebrated for its taste which is extremely bitter and somewhat nauseous. Sugar or a proprietary sweet drink was sometimes used to disguise the cascara-like flavour.

The dried or fresh roots and stem were chopped and boiled in water until the liquid was the colour of dark rum. This liquid was then strained off, cooled and stored until required for healing gastric complaints, particularly ulcers. In the form of a homemade beer (in which bogbean took the place of hops), it was taken in small amounts as a tonic before meals to create an appetite and strengthen weak stomachs. The fresh juice of the roots was taken for tuberculosis; a poultice of bogbean leaves was applied to boils and skin eruptions, followed by a drink of juice to clear the blood; and right across the Highlands and Islands the plant was used for a variety of problems: jaundice, constipation, chills, colds and coughs, asthma, dropsy, heart troubles, rheumatism, for healing wounds, for worming, as a chest rub and as a general tonic in all cases of convalescence and debility. The dried leaves were sometimes even used as a substitute for tobacco. In all events, it had to be used with discretion. Too much of it causes vomiting and diarrhoea.

In Melness, it was used successfully to treat ulcers. One such cure that is still remembered 100 years later, involved a soldier who was pensioned out of the army on account of chronically bad stomach ulcers. Army doctors in India, where he was stationed, could do nothing for him. Edinburgh doctors declared him incurable. Back home in Melness, he went to an elderly relative, Giorsail, who was noted for her cures. She took him in and treated him with regular infusions of bogbean, which grows profusely in the area. He made a complete recovery and lived in good health for many years.

### *Seaweeds*

Giorsail (Grace) also used seaweeds in her cures. In this she was following an ancient Gaelic tradition. A large rock jutting out of the sea below the cliffs to the west of Achininver Bay, and only accessible by boat, is known as Fearchar's rock since it was there, local tradition has it, that the famous 14th-century Melness healer collected his supplies of carrageen, a valuable food for invalids.

Dulse soup was not only a nourishing addition to anyone's diet, it was said to be an excellent remedy for skin disorders caused by general ill-health if taken several times a week. Sometimes a dish of boiled dulse was simply prepared with butter. Dulse soup, *càl duilisg*, was also believed to be very good for indigestion and other stomach disorders.

### *Other plants*

The use of heather for promoting refreshing sleep lingers on, though now it tends simply to be in the form of a sprig under the pillow. In 1582, the Scots historian George Buchanan remarked on the healthy Highland custom of using heather shoots for bedding:

In this manner they form a bed so pleasant, that it may vie in softness with the finest down, while in salubrity it far exceeds it; for heath, naturally possessing the powers of absorption, drinks up the superfluous moisture, and restores strength to the fatigued nerves, so that those who lie down languid and weary in the evening, arise in the morning vigorous and sprightly.

A spring tonic of nettle broth or tea continues to be taken by some people as a continuation of an old custom, rather than as a born-again interest in herbs prompted by current fashions. And in the Reay Country Gaelic of north-west Sutherland, the blaeberry – known as *fiagag* – was highly rated in the area for dissolving kidney stones.

Some treatments survived into our own times because of their cosmetic value, especially for toning or softening the skin. An infusion of fir club moss, once used as a powerful purge, was still being used in the first half of this century as a moisturiser by women and girls in north-west Sutherland. The moss was collected in quite large quantities, boiled and then the liquid was strained off, cooled and applied to the skin.

Traditional medicine was always open to new ideas and materials, and the humble tattie is proof of that adaptability. Within only a few decades of its introduction to the Highlands, it had established itself as an 'old remedy'. In Brora, on the east coast, a piece of raw potato was strapped to a rheumatic hip.

## **Use of Manufactured Materials**

In post-Clearance times, remedies often involved industrial, domestic and veterinary materials, rather than natural ones.

Brora miners had an unusual cure for toothache: a small piece of dynamite was placed in the offending cavity, the active constituent being nitroglycerine which, dissolved under the tongue in the form of glyceryl trinitrate tablets, is an orthodox remedy for the pains of angina and the paroxysms of severe asthma attacks. The miners would also suck on a small piece of coal in order to relieve heartburn. (Pregnant women are prone to

heartburn and quite a number have a craving for chewing coal, usually without knowing why, since instinct is very much to the fore during pregnancy. Did miners learn of this remedy from their womenfolk, or vice versa?)

Carbolic soap was mixed with a sprinkling of sugar to draw a boil, with the mixture being held in place with a bandage. Sugar was also a remedy for sore throats: one dessertspoonful was soaked in as much vinegar as it could absorb and then taken before going to bed. Another cure for a boil was to add boiling water to a lump of bread, slap it over the part and tie it down. This was repeated as often as necessary. It was also used for drawing poison from cuts.

Shepherds would use the balsam formerly used for treating the cuts made to neuter lambs (before the days of rubber rings), to paint any accidental cuts to human limbs. Before chemical dipping came in, sheep were smeared with a mixture of Archangel tar and butter, and this proved an effective preservative from the parasites and skin diseases to which stock are liable. The tar was also applied to some human ailments. For rheumatic pains in the back, a little Archangel tar, mixed with a bit of new-made butter the size of a hen's egg, was boiled in a pot, spread on a piece of paper and applied to the affected part.

## **Purging and Blood-Letting**

Writing of north coast remedies in the 1930s, the Revd George Sutherland said: 'A course of purgatives was gone through every autumn and every spring so as to adapt the body to the change of season. At an earlier date it was bleeding, not purgatives, that were in use at those seasons.' When a purgative was needed, the cheapest and most effective was sea water, but Epsom salts dissolved in a decoction of senna leaves was also largely used.

Long after bleeding as a way of 'purifying the body' had been discounted by mainstream medicine, it was still carried out in the Highlands (and by the British army for troops stationed in hot countries, especially India) well into the 19th century. A North Uist doctor recalled in 1896, 'I remember when lancets were a part of the equipment of the manse, and my father, till later years, bled his parishioners when he or they thought it beneficial.' The Revd Donald Sage wrote of one of his father's tenants in the Strath of Kildonan, 'Mr Donald Macleod, parochial schoolmaster ... was very useful in the parish, for he could let blood ...'.

The Highlands do not seem to have suffered from the obsessive and debilitating (and sometimes fatal) enthusiasm for blood-letting that pervaded most of medieval Europe. The official Gaelic physicians themselves laid down rigid rules for the prudent employment of bleeding.

It was claimed that Murdo Macpherson of Melness who died ca 1880 was 'bred from Fearchar Lighiche's breed'. Murdo used the horse leech, *gearrach-dall*, to bleed people with fevers. His son Donald lived to the ripe

age of 93 (another son, Robert, lived to be 97), and claimed that his longevity was due to never having put salt on his food. No salt was used in cooking by the family. 'If anyone wanted salt, they'd add it later at table,' Hugh Macdonald of Skinnet said. Long daily walks were another of this family's prescriptions for a healthy life. Such practices are certainly reminiscent of the advice given by the Beaton.

## Ways with Warts, Corns and Snakebites

Cures for warts are mysterious and abundant – everyone remembers at least one 'miracle cure' from childhood days – but then warts themselves are quirky, and can literally disappear overnight for no apparent reason. Clinical tests have verified that they can indeed be responsive to hypnosis.

However, one Highland remedy for warts also had a fine reputation for removing corns and, as most people know to their regret, corns are not at all receptive to 'magicking' away, let alone easily got rid of by practical means. In Gaelic, the slug and the black snail are known by the same name *seilcheag*, and they were used in the same way for removing warts and even corns. A few years ago, an eight year old boy in Kinlochbervie was cured of a mass of warts on his hands when his grandmother treated them with slime from a black slug.

As elsewhere in Gaeldom, the traditional north Sutherland remedy for a snakebite was to wash the wound with water in which a dried adder's head had been steeped. It was perhaps a homely forerunner of the use of snake venom extract in official medicine.

## Charms and Rituals

Although a belief in the touch of a seventh son of a seventh son appears to have disappeared earlier in the north – though it was still the custom in the Southern Isles of Barra and Uist but sixty years ago – the area once included the feminine 'touch' in this respect. In Caithness and Sutherland, it was claimed that a seventh son could cure the King's Evil (*scrofula*) in a woman, while a seventh daughter could do the same for a man.

Another belief was in the power of the caul, the membrane which sometimes covers the head of a newly-born infant. It was greatly prized by the Gaels, and particularly by seafarers, and once had a considerable market value owing to the belief that it offered protection against drowning. The caul of a child was of special value, but those of animals were also treasured. In the 1970s, a woman on the east coast of Sutherland was known to carry her own caul about in a special purse which she always kept in her handbag.

Beliefs about the evil eye – in Gaelic, the *droch shùil* – were much the same in Highland tradition as elsewhere in the world, the possessor of the 'eye' being perceived as not necessarily consciously responsible for any ill

befalling the victim. The 'evil eye' was believed to stem from jealousy, therefore those who incurred it were considered to have brought it on themselves by inciting envy or resentment. 'Antidotes', however, were plentiful.

A preparation of water in which gold, silver and copper – usually coins or rings – were placed, formed the basis of the cure for the 'evil eye'; and doubtless it worked on a psychological level. The water was fetched from a place 'where the living and dead passed by' – that is near, or under a bridge which served as a common path for daily travel and the route bearing of coffins to the cemetery. The cure consisted in sprinkling handfuls of the water on the affected person or animal while invoking the Trinity. Any remaining water was poured on a fire or taken outside and spilled on a rock in front of the house.

In Strathhalladale, the water was given to the human or animal victim to drink. Sometimes water from a special spring might be used without adding gold and silver. The water from *Fuaran Deòraidh* (Spring of the Afflicted) was in great demand for curing bewitched animals in the Durness area.

Loch Mo Nàire, in Strathnaver, was famous in the north for its healing water which was supposed to be resorted to on the first Monday of a quarter – the May and August ones being the most popular, probably because the weather was better. Most patients came from Caithness, but many came from Ross-shire, Inverness-shire and Orkney, as well as other districts of Sutherland, since it was believed a more certain cure was to be had from waters outwith one's own parish. Severely mentally-afflicted invalids arrived the day before taking the cure, and were kept tied up and fed sparingly until sunset. At around midnight, they were unbound and assembled near the loch where they were stripped naked. As the first streak of dawn appeared, their attendants directed them to walk backwards into the dark, cold waters of the loch until they were fully immersed. While this was done, coins were thrown into the water. The patients were then pulled out, dressed in silence and walked sunwise around the loch's edge. Then they had to walk away, without once turning their heads, until they were out of sight of the water before the sun rose.

Many of the people who underwent this stringent ritual were suffering some form of mental distress, in varying degrees of severity from mild depression to outright mania, and it is possible that the sheer drama of the setting and events, and the trauma of the immersion acted as a shock treatment. The long-lived popularity of the proceedings suggests there must have been the occasional cure. Coachloads of Caithness people visited the loch until at least the late 1930s.

## **A Neat Prescription**

The water of life, whisky, was rather more frequently relied on for an instant cure that is unlikely to go out of fashion. On the north coast, there was a

saying to advise on the quantity of whisky that might be drunk at a sitting with safety and benefit:

*Aona ghloin', chan fheàird' 's cha mhisd'.*  
*Dà ghloin' 's fheàird' 's cha mhisd'.*  
*Trì gloineachan 's misd' 's chan fheàird'.*

(One glass, not the better of it or the worse of it.  
Two glasses, the better of them, and not the worse of them.  
Three glasses, the worse of them and not the better.)

A variation of this was:

*Aon ghloin' chan fheàird' 's cha mhisd' mo chorp no m'anam e.*  
*Dà ghloin', 's fheàird' mo chorp e, 's cha mhisd' m'anam e.*  
*Trì gloineachan 's misd' m'anam e, 's chan fheàird' mo chorp e.*

(One glass, neither my body nor my soul is the better or the worse of it.  
Two glasses, my body is the better of them, and my soul is not the worse of them.  
Three glasses, my soul is the worse for them, and my body is not the better of them.)

'May the Lord preserve us from the disease whisky cannot cure!' was a popular Highland saying. In their time, there was also very little the hereditary physicians of Highland Scotland, Fearchar among them, could not cope with through their unique blend of traditional and academic knowledge.

### *Acknowledgment*

My thanks to all the people of the area, especially Hugh Macdonald, Skinnnet, Melness, who have given information relating to old remedies; to Ronald Black for his constant advice and encouragement throughout my researches into the traditional medicines of the Gaels; to John Bannerman for permission to quote from *The Beatons: A Medical Kindred in the Classical Gaelic Tradition*; to the late Kirsty Lerner for her insights into the ways of folk healers; to Olive Geddes and Roger Miket for tracing the charters and John Kelly's letter; to Morfydd Owen for help with the Swordly/Myddfai legend; and to Elizabeth Sutherland for comments that Mariota was most likely a Ross (possibly a cook's daughter) from her research for *The Five Euphemias: Women in Medieval Scotland, 1200-1420*. Special thanks to Alasdair Mearns for checking the quotations in Reay Country Gaelic.

### *References*

#### *Manuscript:*

National Library of Scotland:

MS 874 ff xxvi, 275-6: Letter to I. Train, Supervision of Excise, South Queensferry, Edinburgh, from John Kelly, in Dunvegan.  
Blackcastle MS (Signet Library).  
Black, R. *Catalogue of the Classical Gaelic MSS. in the National Library of Scotland*. (Publication forthcoming.)

Scottish Record Office:

Cal. Charters: RH 6/772.  
Reay Papers: RH 6 1/74, RH 6 1/86, GD 84.2.2.  
Munro Writs: GD 93

*Printed:*

- Banks, M.M. *British Calendar Customs: Scotland*. vol. I. 1937.
- Bannerman, J. *The Beatoons: A Medical Kindred in the Classical Gaelic Tradition*. 1986.
- Beith, M. 'Deanamh a' Leighis: Gaelic Medical Tradition', in *West Highland Free Press*. July 1989 onwards: *passim*.
- Beith, M. *Healing Threads: Traditional Medicines of the Highlands and Islands*. 1995.
- Buchanan, G. *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* (1582), trans. James. Aikman, *The History of Scotland*. 1827.
- Caledonian Medical Journal*. Edinburgh. 1883-1968. (The early volumes, 1890-1910, contain many papers on Highland remedies.)
- Cameron, J. *Gaelic Names of Plants*. 1900.
- Comrie, J.D. *History of Scottish Medicine*. 1932.
- Dewar Report. *Report of the Committee on the Highlands and Islands Medical Services*. (Cmnd 6559). 1912.
- Gordon, R. *A Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland*. 1813.
- Hamilton, D. *The Healers*. 1981.
- Hand, W.D. 'The Folk-Healer: Calling and Endowment', in *Journal of the History of Medicine*. vol.26. 1971.
- Henderson, G. *The Norse Influence on Celtic Scotland*. 1910.
- Larner, C. *The Thinking Peasant: Popular and Educated Belief in Pre-Industrial Culture*. 1982.
- Larner, C., Lee, C.H. & McLachlan, H.V. *A Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft*. 1977.
- Lightfoot, J. *Flora Scotica*. 1777.
- Loch, J. *Dates and Documents relating to the Family and Property of Sutherland extracted chiefly from the Originals in the Charter Room at Dunrobin*. 1859.
- McCutcheon, A. 'Some Highland Household Remedies', in *Pharmaceutical Journal & Pharmacist*. 19 April 1919.
- MacFarlane, A. 'Gaelic Names of Plants: Study of their Uses and Lore', in *TGSI*. 32. 1924-5.
- Old Statistical Account: Caithness & Sutherland*. 1793.
- Owen, M.E. 'A Preliminary Survey of Some Medieval Medical Writing in Wales', in *Studia Celtica*. X-II. 1975-6.
- Sage, D. *Memorabilia Domestica*. 1899.
- Scottish Home & Health Department: *General Medical Services in the Highlands & Islands*. HMSO (Cmnd 3257). 1967.
- Sutherland, G. *Folklore Gleanings and Character Sketches from the Far North*. 1937.
- Temperley, A. *Tales of the North Coast*. 1977.
- Thomson, D. 'Gaelic Learned Orders and Literati in Medieval Scotland', in *Scottish Studies*. 12. pt 1. 1968.
- Wood, J. 'The Fairy Bride of Legend in Wales', in *Folklore*. 103. 1992.