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A Northern Charm: some popular uses of Sea-Beans

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FOR centuries sea-beans washed up on the shores of Western Europe have mystified and excited their finders. Whilst today they are most likely to be collected, polished and consigned to the shelf as souvenirs, at one time their various varieties served practical purposes, including supposedly curative and protective functions. These popular uses extended across Ireland, Scotland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Norway: all along the route of the Gulf Stream. One particular employment was as a childbirth charm. A Hebridean example, presented to the pioneering folklorist Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912) in 1869, is on display in the West Highland Museum, Fort William.[1] This object offers fascinating insights into contemporary charm practices, given that Carmichael collected not only the actual amulet itself, but also an accompanying verse and actions. All three were combined in a charm ritual performed to rescue a woman from 'near death' and ensure her baby's safe delivery. This essay primarily explores the diverse yet analogous uses of sea-beans in Scotland, but draws upon examples from Norway where the objects were also used as childbirth charms.

The exotic and enigmatic appearance of the sea-beans on the beaches of the Western Isles of Scotland enhanced their attraction and appeal, especially for their use in curative and protective charms by the islanders.[2] Various

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1 Carmichael Collection, WHM 1992 13 75.

2 The earliest reference to sea-beans washed up in the Hebrides ('*Molocco Beans* on the shoar of the *Lewes* or other [of] our Western Isles') is made by the politician and Highland virtuoso Sir George Mackenzie of Tarbat (1630–1714), later first Earl of Cromartie, in a letter of 9 July 1675 to the mathematician Professor James Gregory (1638–75). The letter was printed as 'Some observations made in Scotland'. Tarbat was possibly inspired by John Peachi's leaflet *Some Observations made upon the Molucco Nutts* (1672).

popular beliefs arose regarding the beans' mysterious origins, including that they were objects discarded overboard by sailors on passing ships, flotsam from shipwrecks, or perhaps the seeds of underwater plants.[3] As with intriguing perforated stones and fossils[4], these unusual and fascinating objects were collected and employed as charms. The beans, also commonly referred to as 'drift seeds', are the disseminules (the collective term used for true seeds, one-seeded fruits, fruits, and seedlings) of plants and vines common to both the East and West Indies. The seeds washed up on the shores of Europe have fallen from vines in the West Indies and been borne across the Atlantic Ocean by the Gulf Stream and, latterly, the North-East Atlantic Current. Most tropical disseminules do not float in salt water; in fact only an estimated one per cent of all disseminules have specific gravity low enough to be able to drift in the sea. To qualify as a proper drift seed, it must be able to drift for at least one month: it takes at least 15 months for small objects to drift across the Atlantic on surface currents.[5] Several of the seeds or fruit are still organically viable after this gargantuan journey and have been successfully grown by enthusiasts.[6] Once an understanding of sea currents became widespread, the belief in sea-beans' talismanic power gradually began to diminish. The Scottish folklorist John Francis Campbell (1821–85) referred to these sea-beans in the introduction to the first volume of his *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* as a metaphor to discuss the dispersal of international popular tales or *Märchen*:

> ... it is now held that nursery stories and popular tales have been handed down together with the languages in which they are told; and they are used in striving to trace our the origin of races, as philologists use words to trace language, as geologists class rocks by the shells and bones which they contain, and as natural philosophers used fairy-eggs in tracing the Gulf Stream.[7]

While Campbell uses the term 'fairy-eggs',[8] the inhabitants of the Hebrides used descriptive collective and individual sea-bean names that varied throughout the islands. The lack of uniformity in the names reflects the different types of drift seeds washed up on island shores; Nelson is able to

3 See Nelson 1983, 11–35.
4 For the wider context, see Cheape 2009, 70-90.
5 Nelson 1983, 11.
6 For further reading on the subject of sea-beans see Gunn and Dennis 1976 and Guppy 1917.
7 Campbell 1860, x.
8 In Victorian periodicals and newspapers the term 'fairy eggs' appear in connection with wrens' eggs, children's puddings, and fine bone china, but the researcher has yet to find a second reference to 'fairy egg' for sea-beans.

identify some seven separate species from descriptions given in early accounts.[9] Again, there is the question of local lexical variants, and the ad hoc nature of the terminology itself. The possibility thus arises of misunderstanding due to the unfamiliarity of the ethnographic collector, and possibly the informant, with the objects concerned.

Sea-beans, or drift seeds, were also known in English as 'Molucca nuts', a name probably reflecting a supposed origin from the Molucca [Maluku] Islands, Indonesia. The comprehensive term for them in many Gaelic dialects would appear to be a variant on *cnò-bhachaill, cnò-bhàchain, cnò-bhàchair*, or *cnù-bhachair*. The first element is simply 'nut', though the second is unclear: Alexander Macbain (1855–1907) in his *Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (1896) suggested Irish *bachar*, 'acorn'. In a newspaper article for the *Glasgow Herald* on the subject, William MacKenzie (1851–1926) stated that this is the term by which sea-beans are generally known on the west mainland, but the first variant above is from Lewis, while the fourth is from Islay.[10] The local expression could be simpler still: while on an expedition collecting folk narratives in Uist in September 1859, John Francis Campbell noted:

> Shewed nuts to many people every one knew them at once. They are quite common they said. They come on shore after Gales of West wind. They grow on the sea weed. I have seen plenty of them myself. Told my friends what I knew thereanent and got great thanks. What do the old wives do with them here? Oh they make snuff boxes of them. What do they call them? Cnothan [nuts].[11]

Although there are numerous species of sea-beans to be found on the beaches, the three main species evident in Hebridean folklore sources are *entada gigas, merremia discoidesperm*a, and *caesalpinia bonduc*.[12] These individual species also had various appellations associated with them, depending upon usage and function. The larger *entada gigas* could be called a *cnò-spuing*, a 'tinder nut', from employment as a watertight container, or else *cnò Mhoire* [Mary's nut]. *Merrimea discoidesperm*a was also known as *cnò Mhoire* [Mary's nut], as well as *crois Mhoire* [Mary's cross] or *àrna Moire* [Mary's kidney]. The term *crois Mhoire* reflects the shape of the bean, with its naturally occurring cross on one side[13], *àrna Moire* corresponds to the kidney shape of the *entada*

9 Nelson 1983, 11–12.
10 MacKenzie 1895, 7.
11 Campbell NLS Adv. MS 50.1.13 fo.407^{v}
12 Carmichael's 'sea-bean' collection at the West Highland Museum contains thirteen varieties, however not all are true drift seeds for example the hazelnut.
13 A popular international name for the *merremia discoidesperma* is the 'Crucifixion Bean'.

gigas but was also applied to the *caesalpinia bonduc*. This third species is also referred to in early sources as 'Virgin Marie's Nut',[14] or 'Sanct Maries Nutt',[15] again, probably *cnò Mhoire* in Gaelic.[16]

Figure 1. *Entada gigas* from the Carmichael Collection, WHM 1992.13.76.5. © Carsten Flieger.

There was therefore much overlapping and confusion in sea-bean names. This will be discussed further in relation to the childbirth charm. The Marian provenance in the cognomina is found across the Hebrides, both Catholic and Presbyterian. A possible parallel is to be found in Carmichael's folklore compendium *Carmina Gadelica*, where he defines *cuilidh Mhoire* as follows:

> Cuilidh. Treasure, hoard, riches. Cuilidh Mhoire, the treasury of Mary, a kenning applied in Barra to the Western Ocean. A good woman in Bernery, Barra, was in sore distress over the impending famine among her people. As she lay awake wondering what she would do to mitigate the privations of her people, the form of the good woman who had died recently in Miu'alaidh appeared beside her bed, clothed in glory and light. Thubhairt an tè a bha marbh ris an tè a bha beò: 'Na bitheadh cùram ort, a ghràdhag nam ban, mu dheighinn cor do dhaoine, is farsainn Cuilidh Mhoire.' (The one who was dead said to the one who was living: 'Let there be no anxiety upon thee, thou dear one among women. Wide is Mary's Treasury.') That year there was an excellent fishing and there was no famine.[17]

The Marian reference may have been reinforced through seventeenth-century Counter-Reformation Catholic missionary activity, through which widespread traditional customs and beliefs were adapted into church practices.

14 Martin 1703, 39.
15 Morison 1907, 214.
16 Nelson (2000) provides a thorough examination of the nomenclature through various Scottish references.
17 Carmichael 2006c, 56.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the largest and most common sea-bean, *entada gigas*, was frequently employed in the Highlands as a snuff container.[18] The seed's durable shell and size made it ideal to carry, protect, and transport 'sneesing' or *snaoisean*. The kernel, if still present, was removed through a small hole, and a cork fitted to keep the contents dry. Alternatively the bean was cut open, cleaned out, and a hinge attached to create a snuffbox. Snuff was extremely popular in Scotland in the early modern period to the extent that life-size statues in full Highland garb were recognised markers for tobacco shops throughout the United Kingdom. Gradually these Highland figures came to be replaced by Native Americans.[19] Drift seeds polished up well and served the storage function effectively; the fashion for silver snuffboxes, however, eventually made them obsolete, at least among the gentry. Writing of sea-beans in the *Glasgow Herald*, William MacKenzie stated that 'Anyone visiting the Outer Hebrides in 1895 will find these primitive snuff mulls in use among old men and among such old women as take snuff.'[20]

A second popular and related use for *entada gigas* was to mount it in silver and use it as a matchbox. Also, because the kernel in this variety was often loose, they could be given to babies and children as a rattle toy.

Figure 2. *Merrimea Discoidesperm*a from the Carmichael Collection WHM 1992.13.76.2. © Carsten Flieger.

In terms of medicinal purposes, the earliest accounts of the sea-beans being used in the Hebrides to cure diseases in humans and cattle date from the late seventeenth century. In his manuscript account of Lewis, probably dating from the mid-1680s, John Morison, Iain mac Mhurch' 'ic Ailein, described how the kernel of *entada gigas* 'is ane excellent and experienced remedie for the bloodie Flux'.[21] Martin Martin, in the Lewis section of his *Description of the*

18 'It is observable, that the kernel of these Nuts will be fresh and sound, and the people make boxes for snuff of the Bean-husk.' (Mackenzie 1675, 398).

19 There is a fine example of such a Highland figure on display in the National Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh.

20 Mackenzie 1895, 7.

21 Morison 1907, 214.

Western Islands of Scotland, may have been drawing upon Morison when he wrote:

> For curing the Diarhea and Dysenteria, they take small quantities of the Kernel of the black Molocca Beans, call'd by them Crospunk; and this being ground into powder, and drunk in boil'd Milk, is by daily experience found to be very effectual.[22]

Ingesting powdered sea-bean was not the only way to obtain a cure.[23] There are numerous accounts of sea-beans immersed in milk or water, being employed to ward off the malign effects of witchcraft and evil eye. Martin recounts the following anecdote:

> Malcolm Campbell, Steward of Harries, told me, that some Weeks before my arrival there, all his Cows gave Blood instead of Milk, for several days together: one of the Neighbours told his Wife that this must be Witchcraft, and it would be easy to remove it, if she would but take the white Nut, call'd the Virgin Mary's Nut and lay it in the Pail into which she was to milk the Cows. This advice she presently follow'd, and having milk'd one Cow into the Pale with the Nut in it, the Milk was all Blood, and the Nut chang'd its colour into dark brown: she used the Nut again, and all the Cows gave pure good Milk, which they ascribe to the Virtue of the Nut.[24]

A belief that the bean changed colour as it absorbed evil is also noted in references to the seeds being worn on necklaces by children as protection from the omnipresent *droch-shùil*, or evil eye. Certain varieties of sea-beans were also associated with simple luck, Morison recounts how:

> in old tymes women wore [them] about ther necks both for ornament and holding that it had the vertue to make lucky or fortunate in catle and upon this account they were at the pains to bind them in silver, brass or tinn, according to their abilitie.[25]

There was also a belief that any house containing a sea-bean would be safe from fire. These associations with protective power emphasizes the strong

22 Martin 1703, 11-12.
23 In Ireland it was believed that the sea-beans were good for the liver when ground up and boiled (Colgan 1919-20, 36).
24 Martin 1703, 39.
25 Morison 1907, 214.

belief the islanders had in seeking protection from the perils that seemed beyond control.

Figure 3. ***Caesalpinia Bonduc, Àirne moire*** **childbirth charm, WHM 1992.13.75. © Carsten Flieger.**

The silver-mounted *caesalpinia bonduc* in the West Highland Museum was presented to Alexander Carmichael 'in 1869, as a particular mark of favour from Neill Macgilleonain the nearest living representative of the old Macneills of Barra'.[26] His work required him to travel extensively throughout the islands, allowing him opportunities not only to record popular lore and tradition, but also to add to the objects in his growing personal ethnographic collection.[27] Carmichael's status as a native Gaelic speaker and his increasingly detailed local knowledge gave him a rapport with islanders that is evident from the wealth of folklore and artefacts they were willing to give him. The label attached to the sea-bean, written by Carmichael himself in 1874, states that the object was used as a childbirth charm: midwives would place one in the hand of the parturient woman while reciting or chanting a prayer. Over the course of his collecting career, Carmichael would record at least five versions of this *Àirne Moire* text. The following example is printed in *Carmina Gadelica*:

26 Carmichael Collection, WHM 1992 13 75.
27 For further reading, see Cheape 2008, 115-35.

Àirne Moire	Kidney of Mary
'Faic, a Mhoire Mhàthair,	'Behold, O Mary Mother
A' bhean 'si ris a' bhàs.'	The woman and she near to death.'
'Faic fèin i, a Chrìosda,	'Behold Thou her, O Christ,
O's ann dha t'iochd atà	Since it is of Thy mercy
Fois a thoir dh'an leanabh	To give rest to the child
'S a' bhean a thoir a spairn.	And to bring the woman from her labour.
'Faic fèin i, a Chrìosda,	'Behold Thou her, O Christ,
O's tu Rìgh na slàint,	Since Thou art the King of health,
Thoir a' bhean o'n eug	Deliver the woman from death
Agus seun an leanabh bà,	And sain the innocent child,
Thoir-sa fois dh'an fhìonan,	Give Thou rest to the vine-shoot,
Thoir-sa sìth dh'a mhàthair.'	Give Thou peace to its mother.'[28]

The prayer highlights the dangers of childbirth, especially prior to the Midwives (Scotland) Act 1915 when there was rarely a qualified medical expert to attend the parturient woman and newborn baby in the remoter areas of the country.

An account of the childbirth charm in *Carmina Gadelica* signals an inconsistency in Carmichael's notes concerning the specific variety of sea-bean in question:

> Arna Moire, kidney of Mary; 'tearna Moire,' saving of Mary. This is a square, thick Atlantic nut, sometimes found indented along and across, the indentations forming a natural cross on the nut. It is occasionally mounted in silver and hung around the neck as a talisman. Every nurse has one which she places in the hand of the woman to increase her faith and distract her attention. It was consecrated on the altar and very much venerated.[29]

The description is somewhat non-committal, with Carmichael recording that the nut was 'sometimes' found bearing the natural cross. If the same species, *merremia discoidesperma*, was being employed, then of course the cross would always be found. A similar childbirth charm of this variety is preserved at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, with the MacNeill motto *Vincere aut Mori* engraved on its silver bands.[30] This may indicate that the specific bean species employed was secondary to the charm ritual itself: that

28 Carmichael 2006c, 192.
29 Carmichael 2006b, 225.
30 NMS H.NO 41

is, the species was variable but the procedure remained the same. The *Àirne Moire* or *Tearna Moire* charm consisted of the ritual of words, actions, and amulet combined. A variation of the charm was for the mother to hold the bean in her right hand and recite three Hail Marys followed by the midwife taking the sea-bean and making a sign of the cross, while reciting an incantation.[31] There was an obvious appeal to the darker seed, *merremia discoidesperma*, with the cross indented on one side, as evident in the image. This variety was less frequently encountered on Hebridean shores and possessed a more elevated status than *entada gigas* which was a common find and therefore allocated a practical use as a snuff box. The pale-coloured *caesalpinia bonduc* was extremely small and, given its colour, difficult to distinguish on sandy island beaches. It was therefore consistently deemed the 'most prized' variety.

The esteemed status of the childbirth charm is mentioned in an 1866 journal note published in the memoirs of the Scottish toxicologist and physician Robert Christison (1797–1882). The entry records that a Dr Macdonald in Lochmaddy was eager to obtain some West Indian seeds, but that he had had no success in securing a *guilandina bonduc*[32] because

> ... it is rare, and is so prized as a charm during childbirth that the midwives wear the seeds set in silver, for the women to hold in their hands while in labour; and a husband, who had two, refuses twenty shillings for one of them, saying he would not part with it for love nor money till his spouse be past childbearing.[33]

This statement raises the question of how Carmichael was presented with the charm in 1869. A reference in the notebooks again sheds light on how he obtained a second childbirth charm. This sea-bean was presented to him on 16 October 1867 by Anna MacIsaac née MacLellan of South Uist.[34] The related notebook entry provides a great deal of information regarding the charm.[35] The precious bean, that was at one stage mounted in silver, had been in her family for many generations and was passed down via the maternal line. The entry continues in Gaelic stating that the charm was blessed on the altar by a priest, that it would protect any woman from the perils of childbirth and prevent fire in any house. The note recounts the prayer and actions for the

31 Beith 1995, 208.
32 The *guilandina bonduc* is synonymous with the *caesalpinia bonduc* in drift seed literature.
33 Christison 1885, 256-7. There is a *caesalpinia bonduc* from Colonsay, Inner Hebrides, on display in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (NMS H.NO 53) that was donated in 1898 as the charm's power was thought to be depleted.
34 This particular sea-bean charm has not been identified in the collection. Perhaps Carmichael or his wife kept it with their personal belongings.
35 Carmichael Watson Collection, GB 237 Coll 97 CW87/22.

charm. It continues to highlight how MacIsaac would not part with the bean for her daughter nor 100 guineas but because of the immense affection she and her husband Hector had towards Carmichael, she wanted to present it to him. The date Anna gave this precious bean to Carmichael was two months prior to Carmichael's marriage to Mary Frances Macbean in January 1868, and Stiùbhart suggests that the charm was a wedding gift to the young couple.[36]

These descriptions of the childbirth charm mention that the sea-bean amulet was openly consecrated by Catholic priests on the southern islands of the Outer Hebrides. While the northern islands of Lewis and Harris were strongly Presbyterian, it was recorded that the sea-beans were widely used, although covertly. The invocation of Mary for childbirth is also unusual, considering Brigid is the traditional figure for protection of women during childbirth amongst many other causes. Meaney suggests that Mary inherited the powers and attributes of her heathen predecessor in a region newly won for Christianity.[37] The most recent account of the childbirth charm dates from 1936 and MacNeill relates that:

> ... a young man arrived breathless at her friend's house and begged the loan of the seed. He explained that his wife was expecting their first child and was already in labour, and that the wife of one of his friends had died in childbirth; he was resolved to take no risks. The borrowed seed was safely returned with the news that the mother and baby were well.[38]

A greater awareness of medical advances accelerated the decline in childbirth charms from the early twentieth century but long-standing beliefs are often stubborn, especially when they are related to measures taken to avoid death.[39]

The sea-bean folklore across the North Sea in Scandinavia is distinctly similar to the Hebridean lore. Early written accounts date back to the Norwegian bishop and botanist Gunnerus in 1765 and the Danish bishop and antiquarian Pontoppidan 1762[40] providing a similar timeline to Martin's 1703 account of the beans' uses in the Western Isles. The *entada gigas* is the forerunner in terms of value with names often reflecting their use as childbirth charms: *lausnarsteinn* (Iceland)[41], *løsningsstein* (Norway)[42], *vitunýra* (Faeroe

36 Stiubhart 2013, 36-7.
37 Meaney 1983, 36.
38 MacNeill 1957, 175.
39 For wider context on Scottish charms and amulets, see Black 1892-3, 433-526.
40 Alm 2003, 228.
41 Meaney 1983, 33.
42 Alm 2003, 227.

Islands)[43]. *Løsningsstein* was the term for the childbirth charm derived from *løsning* [to relieve or loosen] and *stein* [stone]. Meaney writes that the fertility goddess Freyja's prized possession *brísingamen* was a beautiful girdle with a sea-bean incorporated into the design.[44] Therefore, the Marian associations are not found in Norway, despite pre-Reformation Catholicism. However, the introduction of Protestantism could have eradicated vernacular names and interpretations.

According to Alm, there were various methods of using the sea-bean during labour: the woman could hold the seed in her hand; the seed could be rubbed against the stomach of the woman in labour; the seed could be tied to the thigh or to the arm or held in the hand; the seed was placed in boiling water, and the 'extract' was given to the woman to drink; the woman was given an alcoholic beverage (beer, wine or spirits) contained in the hollow seed shell; or the seed could be placed in the labour bed.[45] Similarly the charm or *bustein* was a female possession, and was passed on from mother to daughter. Sea-beans were also used to cure diseases in cattle, while in Sami traditions they were used to aid calving heifers. The amulets were rarely touched by hand. While this aspect was not recorded in Scotland for the beans, it was commonly practised for other charm components, most notably *uisge sèimh* [still or calm water]. The elevated status of the charm was to be maintained by purity, which would assist in its potency.

In Ireland, Kelly discusses the sea-beans as precious nuts that are to be traced back to Old Irish Laws and how they were deemed beautiful and valuable.[46] Beyond this intriguing value of the sea-beans there is a paucity of lore surrounding them. Their primary use was for protection against fairies and the Evil Eye. In *Letters from the Irish Highlands* it is noted: 'The unlearned natives of Cunnemarra have, however, found a fanciful use of these nuts, by laying them under the pillows of their straw bed, as a charm against the nocturnal visits of the fairies.'[47] In fact in Ireland an effort by an Irish naturalist Nathaniel Colgan (1851–1919) to collect all the information and folklore relating to sea-beans in Ireland proved disappointing. There was, however, a comparable birthing practice in Ireland for the pregnant woman to wear some article of clothing belonging to her husband during the labour.[48]

The sea-bean is a symbol of endurance to Hebridean and Norse folk having withstood an impressive transoceanic journey to reach the shores of

43 Young and Clewer 1985, 671.
44 Meaney 1983, 33.
45 Alm 2003, 242.
46 See Kelly 2010, 211-19.
47 Blake 1825, 319.
48 For further reading on the topic of childbirth traditions in Ireland see D'Auria 2007, 48-78.

Western Europe. While the origin of this common childbirth ritual is beyond the scope of this essay, it can be understood that at the time of their recording it had undergone a transformation on both sides of the North Sea. The paucity and irregularity of information surrounding their names and uses again highlights how the name and use varied from island to island and country to country. Although the seed was acting as a placebo, there was a profound confidence in its potency as expressed in the notes of Carmichael's notebooks. In the Hebrides the sea-beans occupy an unusual position on the continuum between charms and prayers owing to their consecration by local Catholic priests. Even today, despite the diminished confidence in sea-beans as charms, they are still a source of wonder for those lucky enough to discover one.

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