

From Goddess to Witch

By Tom Muir

How old is a story? That is something that is very difficult to tell. We know of stories that travel from one country to another, brought by migrants looking for a better life overseas or by traders looking for wealth. Stories remain where people settle, told to their children and their grandchildren as they sit by the fireside on a cold winter's night. Here you can find a comparison with stories from other areas; these 'migratory legends' point to the origins of the people who once told them, and therefore we have an idea of the time from which they come. In Orkney we have a wealth of beautiful folktales that is a mix of the Nordic and Celtic worlds, but which one is dominant and from where did it derive?

Professor Bo Almqvist addressed this very topic in this very place just over ten years ago. In a talk given as part of the Orkney Storytelling Festival of 2001 Bo argued that, contrary to what the much respected Scottish folklorist Alan Bruford had said, Orkney's folktales seem to be more Scandinavian than Scottish. From my own research over the years I would agree with him on this point. The majority of folktales seem to have parallels in the Nordic world, but there are a significant number that has Scottish parallels, while some have a distinctly mixed-up Orcadian flavour.

As stories were passed down through the generations they have been altered to suit the times in which they were told. Christianity has had a strong influence on some of the stories and we do have to approach that with a note of caution. Many of the Orkney stories were recorded and published by one man, Walter Traill Dennison of Sanday. Dennison was born in 1825 and as a child used to listen to these stories being told by old people on the island. His written versions, published just before his death in 1894, can bear the influence of his staunchly Free Kirk beliefs. But Sanday went through an evangelical 'Religious Rival' in 1860, so maybe some of the stories were thought to be in need of Christianisation, especially if they were being told to children.

But what of the role of women in these stories? What, if anything, can be said about their status in society? To be honest I hadn't thought much about this until I received a phone call from Julie Gibson, Orkney's County Archaeologist, asking me to become an

honourary woman for the day and to give a talk on women in Orkney folktales. Being given a task to perform I began thinking about how they are portrayed in a supernatural context, working on the assumption that a selkie woman would be treated much the same as her human counterpart.

In my opinion the earliest story existing in Orkney is that of the Mother of the Sea. Like her land based sister, Mother Earth, the Mother of the Sea was the force that gives life to the sea and all the creatures that live in it. She stilled the stormy seas of winter and during her reign in the summer provided people with the means to catch food for themselves and their family. It was her life-giving force that made the creatures of the sea fertile, so her reign was a time of plenty. However, she had a rival, and not surprisingly it was a man. Teran was the male spirit who ruled the seas in winter and caused the storms that wreck ships and cost people their lives. During the summer months Teran was bound in chains at the bottom of the sea and guarded by the Mother. As the year progressed she began to lose her power; her life force drained by her good work. Then Teran's strength grew and he breaks free from his bonds and does battle with the Mother of the Sea, beating her and driving her from the sea to live in exile on the land. The storm caused by this fight was called the Gore Vellye, or autumn destruction. The Mother lives quietly on land, unseen by mortal eyes, while Teran rules the sea, bringing death and hardship where the Mother had brought life and prosperity. But after her rest the Mother of the Sea once again regains her strength and by the spring she is ready to return to the deep. She slips unseen into the water and once again fights Teran, but this time she is mightier than he is and she defeats him and binds him at the bottom of the sea. The storm caused at this time is called the Vore Tullye, or spring struggle. Teran remains there until the Mother's strength wanes and he once again takes control in a never ending cycle.

Here we see not a creature of flesh and blood but a spirit with no known form. It is tempting to think that the Mother of the Sea is an early goddess; the embodiment of the fruitful sea. We also have the duality of a female and male spirit, one that gives life and one that takes it. As women are the ones that give birth it is an obvious link for an early society to make between women and fertility. They may have tended crops, gathered plants, roots and nuts, the gifts of an earth goddess. Men, on the other hand, might have been the hunters who take life, not give it. They kill animals for food and, in

times of danger, they kill each other too. So in the Mother of the Sea we see women in a role of provider; the giver of life, a force for good that was loved and respected by the communities that relied on her benevolence.

The next woman on our journey is the mermaid. Her beauty is legendary, her desires insatiable. Dennison said that in Orkney the stories that he had heard relating to mermaids were the most common, while a Shetland writer had said that the first that he had heard of them was in works of English fiction. The mermaid story was strong in Orkney, and had a subtle difference from the story over the water in Scotland. Mermaids, or at least the Sanday variety, weren't encumbered with a fish's tail, but possessed a beautiful petticoat embroidered with silver and gold that could be drawn around the feet while in the sea to give the impression of a tail. In two of Dennison's stories we find a mermaid using her tail-like petticoat as a paddle and as a weapon. It seems to be capable of moving of its own accord, animated by the magical powers of its owner. The Orkney mermaid was not hampered by a tail but enjoyed the best of both worlds.

One characteristic of the mermaid was her sexual appetite, which was a feature that Dennison knew about but that didn't appear in the stories. He explained that a mermaid wanted to take a human lover for a very good reason. If she married a Fin man, who were said to be the men folk of the mermaids (but I rather doubt this) then she would progressively lose her stunning beauty over succeeding periods of seven years until she was a grotesque hag. Being extremely vain and proud of her looks she craved a mortal lover because by having sexual relations with him she would keep her stunning beauty for all time. The man too would remain forever young living under the sea with her in a palace made of coral and crystal. A big improvement on a cottars turf hut on a stony, barren hillside. In one story a Sanday man, Arthur Dearness, is carried away by a mermaid called Auga, the only time that we hear the name of a mermaid in Orkney lore. He lives like a king in a sumptuous palace, deep under the spell of the mermaid who had kissed his lips and breathed into his mouth to make him forget Clara Peace, the girl he was to marry, and his home and family. Arthur is 'rescued' by Clara's aunt Marion, a well known wise woman, who uses her magic and knowledge to break all of Auga's spells and deliver Arthur back to his family on Sanday.

Mermaids are free spirits who know what they want and will stop at nothing to get it. They use their beautiful looks to ensnare mortal men, but they also have another powerful weapon in their arsenal; their voice. The song of the mermaid is so sweet and bewitching that it can bring on a dream-like drowsy state on the listener and instil a great yearning in their heart. They fall hopelessly in love and will not rest until they have the mermaid as a wife. Johnny Croy, also from Sanday, was thus charmed by a mermaid and agreed to her conditions that if she married him he would go to visit her family after seven years, taking with them everything that she owned. The seven years pass and a boat arrives for them and they are never seen again. All leave except the youngest child, a baby boy, who was being fostered by Johnny's spae-wife mother and who had branded him with the sign of the cross. Here we find Christianity creeping into the stories, although it may originally been some other symbol or spell that the grandmother cast on the boy if the story proves to be older than Christianity.

Christianity has a dominant feature on these stories. The mermaid cannot stand the sight of the cross or the sound of prayers. When Johnny Croy marries his mermaid bride in the kirk she stuffed her hair into her ears to prevent herself from hearing the Christian service. Another tale that Dennison recorded was of how the mermaid got her fish's tail, although it is obviously a Christian invention and may post-date the mermaid stories. It tells of how, back in the beginning when the world was young, Eve and some other women were walking along the shore when they saw the mermaid sitting naked on a rock, combing her golden hair and singing. Eve was horrified by the mermaid's beauty and also her brazenness. She talked to the other women and they all agreed that mortal women stood no chance against the beauty of the mermaid, and also her lack of inhibition. They went and got a fine dress and Eve offered it to the mermaid, hoping that she would cover up her nakedness from the eyes of the men. The mermaid looked on the dress with disgust and then sang a verse saying that she wasn't ashamed of her body and no dress would defile her skin. The only thing that she would wear, she told them, was her own flowing hair. Eve was outraged and went to see God to complain. She said that mortal woman stood no hope against the beauty of the mermaid and that she should be made to look unattractive to men. Make her wear a fish's tail, they insisted. So God agreed, and the mermaid got her tail. But the men knew about this deal and they felt pity for her, so they asked God if he could

deem it that if a mortal man was to fall in love with a mermaid then she would have the power to take off her tail forever. God agreed, and so the mermaid was always on the lookout for a human husband. This story is at odds with the others and seems more from a literary tradition than oral storytelling. The mermaid's sexual liberation, long before the swinging 60s of any century, had been looked on with distaste by the Victorians, but maybe in the earlier versions of the stories she was viewed more as a strong, independent character. Her beauty and flamboyant lifestyle made her a supernatural celebrity of the day. As a child Walter Traill Dennison, along with a group of other children, visited an old cottar woman to hear her tell stories of the mermaid; he describes the scene:

"I have seen an old withered woman, with grey hair and wizened face, her head in a sooty cap, a sooty square of homespun over her shoulders, a torn, dirty petticoat of homespun over her knees, her left foot stretched before her on the hearth-stone, that foot in a stocking through which the big-toe protruded, her naked right foot stretched out over her left, while she was busy darning the stocking she had pulled off for that purpose; while, in the midst of her poverty and squalor, she was painting in the most glowing colours, to a group of youngsters, the unequalled charms of the mermaid. The old woman seemed wholly absorbed by the beauty of the being she described; her hands dropped onto her knees, her eyes glowed with the enthusiasm imparted by her description; and from the manner in which she emphasised her laudatory words, you could not for a moment but believe that she had seen with her own eyes the charming creature she described, while we youngsters, with eyes wide open and gaping mouths, sat around her spell-bound, believing every word she said."

In a life of poverty the mermaid and her home was seen as an escape from the daily trials of life; a role that is sometimes filled by drugs or alcohol in modern society. The mermaid represented sexual freedom and independence; she is the one in control, the one that men should beware. She lives for pleasure and is nobody's slave. How very different things were for her selkie sister.

It was said that the selkies were the souls of people who had drowned, some say it was a fate reserved only for suicides, but instead of entering into some blessed afterlife they were condemned to take the form of seals and to live in the ocean. They

could only remove the skin and take on human form at certain times of the year, most commonly Midsummer. It was only the larger Atlantic Grey Seal that were selkies, the Common Seal were called tang fish and had no supernatural protection from the hunter.

The story of the selkie woman, or seal maiden, who loses her skin and is forced to marry the man who possesses it, is well known. She is powerless to resist, a passive victim of male lust and aggression. Her pleas for the skin to be returned falls on deaf ears as the man is captivated by the uncanny beauty of the selkie woman. But he possesses her skin and so, in turn, he possesses her too. She lives with him as his wife, looks after the house and bears children to him. But she never stops searching for her hidden skin; she never loses the hope that one day she will be free to return to her home in the sea. The whereabouts of the skin is usually betrayed by one of her children who has seen where their father has hidden it. On hearing where it is the selkie woman bids farewell to the child and runs to get it. Sometimes there is a meeting between her and her husband, once she is back in the sea and beyond his control; it is normally in rhyme.

Geudman o' Westness, farewell tae thee,
I liked ye weel, y'wir geud to me,
But I far prefer me man o' the sea.

Other rhymes show the terrible dilemma faced by the selkie woman of having to choose between her children of the land and her children of the sea.

Woe is me, oh woe is me!
I have seven bairns on land,
And seven in the sea.

Her fate is not a happy one. She has been held against her will on land, but she loves all her children. At the end of the day, as one selkie wife said to her husband, 'I am a creature of the sea and if I see my seal skin again I don't know if I will be strong enough to resist the call of the sea.' While this selkie woman had already decided that she wanted to remain on land with her husband and children, fate tears her from them when she accidentally discovers her skin.

Occasionally the shoe could be on the other foot when selkie men were attracted to mortal women. The song 'The Great Selkie of Sule Skerry' is about one such relationship, as is the longer ballad 'The Play of the Lady Odivere', the fragmented remains of which Dennison stitched together with additions by himself to fill up the gaps. In it we find a mother nursing her newborn son and lamenting that she didn't know the child's father. He appears before her, ghost like, and tells her that he is a king among the selkie folk and that he will come for his son after a time and pay her the nurse's fee. His disdainful treatment of the woman is quite shocking; she is merely the vessel for carrying his child and nurturing it until such time that it is strong enough to be taken away. But he concludes by making a terrible prophesy, that she will marry a gunner who will shoot and kill both her own child and the Great Selkie of Sule Skerry, and so it comes to pass.

In another story a selkie man waits until such time that a girl is left alone in the house and arrives at the door, soaking wet from a storm and begging shelter and warmth. She reluctantly lets him in, but finds it strange when he prefers to sit by the door away from the fire. That night he talks his way into her bed and in the morning is gone. When she gives birth to a boy it is said that he can don his flippers and whiskers once a month and join his father in the sea.

Our last selkie story is very unusual, as it tells of a very independent woman who lived in Stronsay in the 17th century; Ursilla Balfour. Ursilla was the daughter of the laird, his only child, it seems, and heir to his estate. She refuses her father's pleas to find a husband because she is in love with a servant who works on her father's farm. On her father's death she is free to marry whoever she likes without the threat of being disinherited. The first that her future husband knows about it is being told by Ursilla that she wants him to get ready for their wedding. Obediently he does what his new laird tells him to and they are wed, much to the scandal of the Orcadian gentry. Finding the marriage to have been a mistake she decides to take a lover from among the selkie folk and so she goes to the rocks and sheds seven tears into the sea. Some people said that they were the only tears that she ever shed in her life. A large selkie swims towards her, uncovering his face to ask her what she desires from the selkie folk. When she tells him of the loveless marriage he offers to come to her in human form every midsummer. They meet secretly, and she falls pregnant to him. When it is born the child has webbed hands and feet, which

the nurse clipped repeatedly until they grow as hard skin on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. Her descendants are still said to suffer from what was known as 'hard hands' to this very day.

Having passed from being a goddess to a promiscuous mermaid and victimised selkie we come now to our final destination; a witch. I shan't dwell on this subject too much as it is being covered by another speaker, but we now see woman depicted in a very different light. As in other areas it was the vulnerable old woman who lived alone on the edge of society that was the focus of suspicion. Orkney had a high number of witch trials in the early 17th century and it usually didn't end well for the accused.

In folktales witches are usually seen as malevolent figures that steal the profit from their neighbours' cows and sink boats in revenge of an insult. The 17th century story of Scotta Bess in Stronsay is a good but shocking example of rough justice for suspected witches. She was said to create sea fog and lure ships onto the rocks, and indeed the word Scodda in northern Norway means a sea fog; so she should have been called 'Foggy Bess'. She was murdered by a group of men in the barn at Huip; beaten to death with flails washed in holy water; in reality it was just the water in which the communion chalice had been rinsed out. Her body was weighted down and dumped into a loch, but in the morning she was back on the surface. They tried again, with heavier weights, but with the same result the following day. They then sank her body a third time and carried a large quantity of rocks and earth and poured them over her, thus creating a holm in the loch.

Witches had the power to control the winds, as was witnessed on many occasions here in Stromness by two renowned witches, Bessie Millie and later Mammy Scott. Bessie lived in a small tumbled down cottage on Brinkies Brae and sold a fair wind to visiting sailors in exchange for sixpence. Mammy Scott followed Bessie's lead, selling pieces of straw with a coloured thread tied to it. When thrown into the sea in the correct order they could raise just the right amount of wind needed, but if the last one was thrown in it raised such a storm that the sailors were blown right back to Stromness again.

In later Victorian stories, as found in *Around the Orkney Peat Fires* they were depicted as the hapless victims of the age in which they lived, which, of course, they were. Victorian sentimentality softened the stories and turned them into melodramas more suited to the taste of the times. Witches were still believed to exist within communities in Orkney right up until the 20th century. My own grandfather in Westray lost the profit of his best cow to a woman with the reputation of being a witch sometime in the 1920s or 30s. She wanted to see this amazing cow that produced so much milk, but my grandfather was reluctant to let her see it, but after persistent badgering he relented and took her to the byre to see her. She muttered over the cow, stroking her along the back and saying what a 'fine coo' and 'bonnie coo' she was. From that moment on she stopped milking. He was advised by a neighbour who knew a thing or two about spells and how to break them, that he would never again get milk from her. He had to sell the cow and once the transaction was complete her milk would return, and so it proved to be.

So, from a Goddess to a witch, from respect to blame, the fortune of women in Orkney's long tradition of folktales has been, I am sad to say, a long, downhill journey. But now, at last, we can just enjoy the stories for their beauty, for they are not a condemnation of women, but rather, a celebration.