

Caterwauling and Demon Raising: The Ancient Rite of the *Taghairm*?

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‘Last evening-tide
Brian an augury tried,
Of that kind which must not be
Unless in dread extremity
The Taghairm called...’ (Scott 1810: 146)

This is, so as far as I am aware, the only mention of the *taghairm* in verse. It appears in the fourth canto (suitably entitled ‘The Prophecy’) of Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). Some appreciation of the literary interpretation of the tradition concerning this dread rite can be established: firstly, that it was only performed as a last resort due to its extremely dangerous repercussions; and, secondly, that the results, if the rite was performed in accordance with the instructions given, could, in fact, predict a future event usually to the practitioner’s benefit. This was the motive for undertaking the rite in the first place.

Before giving examples from earlier writers who discuss this so-called ‘awful ceremony’, it would be pertinent to give an etymology of the word *taghairm*. John Gregorson Campbell (1836–1891), the famous folklorist and minister of Tiree, referred to the *taghairm* as ‘giving his supper to the devil’ (J.G. Campbell 2005: 167). Many writers variously spell *taghairm* as *tighairm*, *tigh ghairm*, *taighairm*, or even *taigheirm*, which may reflect the dialect of the writer’s local area. This has led some to fall into an etymological trap by explaining *taghairm* from *taigh* [house] and *gairm* [call], thus giving the ‘House of Invocation’. This is an understandable, if incorrect, folk etymology. John Gregorson Campbell understood the meaning as ‘spirit-call’, as in ‘the calling of spirits from the vasty deep’, stemming from *ta*, a root closely related to such words as *taibhse* or *taidhbhse*, *tannasg* or *tamhasg* which have shades of meaning such as apparitions, ghosts, wraiths or even visions (*ibid.*: 170). According to *The Dictionary of the Irish Language*, the word *taghairm* developed from *togairm* (sometimes *tagairm*), the verbal noun of *do-gair*, attested in the Gaelic of the ninth century. It has a range of senses including calling, invoking, petitioning and conjuring. An example taken from Keating’s seventeenth-century *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* [History of Ireland] is especially relevant in this context: *do thoghairm na ndeamhan*—‘to conjure up demons’ (Royal Irish Academy 1913–75: T, 215–16).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the *taghairm* traditions in their cultural context and, more specifically, to analyse the most bizarre *taghairm* rite involving cat sacrifice, or feline immolation, rendered by MacKay *taghairm nan cat* [summons of cats] (MacKay 1893: 432–33). Before going on to discuss the *taghairm* of cats in greater detail, the other methods of the *taghairm* will be analysed and discussed in the light of various antiquarian notices, especially from those accounts given in both Irish and Welsh traditions.

Water Summons: Martin’s First Description of the *Taghairm*

An early writer who mentions the *taghairm* (though he does not use the actual word itself) was Martin Martin (c. 1668–1718),¹ one of the first indigenous travellers to write about the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. In *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1703), the writer offers a hotchpotch of fascinating insights, folk customs, superstitions and ethnographical observations, as well as much factual detail. Among his observations, Martin includes three important accounts of this divination practice, which may be labelled as the water, hide and cat summons, the first of which is as follows:

It was an ordinary thing among the over-curious to consult an invisible oracle, concerning the fate of families, and battles, &c. This was performed three different ways; the first was by a company of men, one of whom being by lot; was afterwards carried to a river, which was the boundary between two villages; four of the company laid hold on him, and having shut his eyes, they took him by the legs and arms, and then tossing him to and again, struck his hips with force against the bank. One of them cried out, “What is it you have got there?” Another answers, “A log of birchwood.” The other cries again, “Let his invisible friends appear from all quarters, and let them relieve him by giving an answer to our present demands”: and in a few minutes after a number of little creatures came from the sea, who answered the question and disappeared suddenly. The man was then set at liberty, and they all returned home to take their measures according to the prediction of their false prophets; but the poor deluded fools were abused, for the answer was still ambiguous. This was always practised in the night, and may literally be called the works of darkness (Martin 1994: 172).

The first two of these ways, the water and the hide summons, are sometimes found in combination but for the sake of clarity they will be treated as separate methods for this study and I will then go on to consider the third way, the summons of cats, which is the main focus of this article.

Referring to this method of performing the *taghairm*, Martin adds, somewhat credulously:

I had an account from the most intelligent and judicious men in the Isle of Skye that about sixty-two years ago the oracle was thus consulted only once, and that was in the parish of Kilmartin, on the east side, by a wicked and mischievous race of people, who are now extinguished, both root and branch (Martin 1994: 173).

Unfortunately, Martin does not provide any details concerning why the oracle was consulted, although he makes it clear that their practice and they themselves were beneath contempt. John Gregorson Campbell adds that the ‘race of people’ who performed the rite were *Clann ’ic Cuithein* [MacQueens] a minor sept of Skye, in *An Eaglais Bhréige* (see fig. 1), which he translates as the ‘Make-believe Cave’, in Trotternish on the eastern side of Skye, near Tote (Campbell 2005: 169). Contrary to Martin’s report, they were more likely to have been absorbed into Clan Donald than to have been totally extirpated (MacLean 1985: 300), despite the rather disparaging local rhyme:—

*Clann 'ic Cuthain chur nam briag,
Clann 'ic Cuithein chur an t-sodail,
Clann 'ic Mhannain chur na braide
Ged nach b'fhaid' iad na cas biodaig.*

The M'Cuthans, expert in lies,
The M'Quithens, expert in base flattery,
The M'Vannins, expert as thieves,
Though no bigger than a dagger handle (Campbell 2005: 169).²

John Ramsay of Ochtertyre (1736–1814), describes the use of both the water and hide methods of *taghairm*, also in Skye:

Another species of it is called *Taghairm an uisge*—i.e., *taghairm* by water. It was last used by a tenant of the name M'Curdhean, whose predecessors were also farmers³ for that art. He lived in the Isle of Skye, near a beautiful cascade, on the water of *Eas-bhereraig*;⁴ and when consulted on any matter of consequence, he covered his whole body with a cow's hide, and placed himself between the water of the cascade and rock. Another man attended with a heavy pole, whose office it was to give repeated strokes to the water and to the man concealed behind it, crying now and then, "*An maide fearna so?*"—i.e., "Is this a stock of arn?" This operation was continued till it was perceived that M'Curdhean was frantic or furious; and he was then thought to be in a condition to answer the most important questions. He was frequently consulted about futurity, and his responses were attended to, as proceeding from something more than human. A degree of frenzy seems to have been affected by those Highland seers [...] (Ramsay 1888: 2, 460).

The two types of wood referred to in this account and in the one mentioned earlier by Martin are of some interest: alder (*arn* in Scots) and birchwood, both of which, according to traditional Gaelic cosmology are servile (*daor*) rather than noble (*saor*).

In this version of the water summons, the location is given as Eas Bhearraig, which is on the Scribreck coast directly below the Storr Lochs, just north of Portree.



Fig 1. *An Eaglais Bhrèige* (sometimes referred to as *An Eaglais Bhreugach*), or ‘The False Church’, is a gigantic boulder around forty feet in height that sits on the east shore of Trotternish, Skye. It is holed right through by a cave thus giving rise to its name as it has a strong resemblance to a church. © John Allan and licensed for reuse under the Creative Commons License.

According to the Rev. Norman MacDonald, it was none other than the Rev. Dr Donald Macqueen of Kilmuir (c. 1716–1785), whose erudition so impressed the man of letters and lexicographer, Dr Samuel Johnson,⁵ that put a stop to this heathen practice as the ‘learned cleric walked all the way from Kilmuir, a distance of over twenty miles, to censure the querent and his companions’ (MacDonald 1970: 19–20). In fact, according to this minister’s own testimony, it was not he but rather one of his ancestors who took it upon himself to put a stop to this pagan practice. The Rev. Dr Donald Macqueen wrote a letter on December 17, 1781 mentioning the *taghairm* when he visited Beareraig in the company of Sir James Macdonald:

Where the Mauliens in their Hereditary office, gave responses at a beautiful cascade of water, which jets out over the Rock, so far as to leave an opening about the middle of the Precipice, where four or five men could stand in the crevice dry, tho’ the body of water passed over their heads. Here one of the Priest’s associates laid himself down covered with a cow’s hide when Maluien laid on as many blows with a rung, as seemed to drive him out of his senses, the length of a *Prophetic fury*. Then his groans and words, twisted, squeezed and moulded by the Revered Priest, afforded materials for an answer to every enquirer, who gave each a sheep as a Recompence for his drudgery and abuse. This oracle was called *Ti-ghairm* (*Taghairm*), i.e. an address to the Being (God), for it seems they pretended by prayer to obtain the Gift of Prophecy [...] The Oracle of Beareraig was suppressed but about two hundred years ago by one of my ancestors who took a short cut to his

Reformation by coming to the cascade on the appointed night and driving off the Priests under the discipline of a hazel rung threatening worse usage, if ever they returned to the same place for the purpose of imposing on their neighbours (MacLeod 1931–33: 386–87).

It may be assumed from the above descriptions that both Ramsay and Macqueen were familiar with Martin's *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*.

Hide Summons: Martin's Second Description of the *Taghairm*

In *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, to which I now return, Martin moves on to an account of the hide summons, after treating the water summons, in which a man is wrapped or tied into an animal hide (usually that of a cow or an ox):

The second way of consulting the oracle was by a party of men who first retired to solitary places, remote from any house, and there they singled out one of their number, and wrapt him in a big cow's hide, which they folded about him; his whole body was covered with it except his head, and so left in this posture all night until his invisible friends relieved him by giving a proper answer to the question in hand, which he received, as he fancied, from several persons he found about him all the time. His consorts returned to him at break of day, and then he communicated his news to them, which often proved fatal to those concerned in such unwarrantable enquiries (Martin 1994: 173).

The Welsh antiquarian, Thomas Pennant (1726–1798), in *A Tour in Scotland, and Voyage to the Hebrides* (1772), also mentions the *taghairm* as practised in Skye:

A wild species of magic was practised in the district of Trotterness, that was attended with a horrible solemnity: a family who pretended to oracular knowledge practised these ceremonies. In this country is a vast cataract, whose waters falling from a high rock, jet so far as to form a dry hollow beneath, between them and the precipice. One of the impostors was sowed up in a hide of an ox, and, to add terror to the ceremony, was placed in this concavity: the trembling enquirer was brought to the place, where the shade, and the roaring of waters, increased the dread of the occasion. The question is put, and the person in the hide delivers his answer, and so ends this species of divination styled *Taghairm* (Pennant 1774: 311).

In his *The Magic Arts of Celtic Britain* (1945), Lewis Spence mentions the *taghairm* with regard to evidence of the rite in Welsh tradition: '[...] that this was practised in Wales is clear from the statement in the tale known as 'The Vision of Rhonabwy', in which Rhonabwy, a warrior of Powys, beheld a vision of the court of King Arthur while sleeping on the skin of a yellow heifer, as we read in the *Mabinogion*' (Lewis 1945: 97). A translation from medieval Welsh, taken from the thirteenth-century *Mabinogion*, shows how the vision is said to have taken place:

[...] And they went to sleep. Rhonabwy's two companions fell into a deep sleep, after the fleas and discomfort had tormented them. But

Rhonabwy, since he could neither sleep nor rest, thought he would suffer less if he went to sleep on the yellow ox-skin on the dais. And there he slept

And soon as sleep entered his eyes he was granted a vision, that he and his companions were travelling across Maes Argyngroeg, and his inclination and intent, so he thought, was towards Rhyd-y-groes on the Hafren [...] So loud was that commotion, Rhonabwy awoke. And when he awoke he was on the yellow ox-skin, having slept for three nights and three days (Davies 2007: 215, 226).

The *taghairm* was not to be taken lightly, as can be seen from the traumatic psychological effect of a performance of the rite described in a testimony recorded by Martin:

Mr. Alexander Cooper, present minister of North-Uist, told me that one John Erach,⁶ in the isle of Lewis, assured him it was his fate to have been led by his curiosity with some who had consulted this oracle, and that he was a night within the hide, as above mentioned; during which time he felt and heard such terrible things that he could [not] express them: the impression it made on him was such as could never go off, and he said that for a thousand worlds he would never again be concerned in the like performance, for this had disordered him to a high degree. He confessed it ingenuously, and with an air of great remorse, and seems to be very penitent under a just sense of so great a crime. He declared this about five years since, and is still living in Lewis, for anything I know (Martin 1994: 174).

One can theorise that the methods employed in performing the *taghairm* caused sensory deprivation, or attenuation, and that this in turn caused heightened mental awareness, or consciousness, thus inducing a trance-like meditation receptive to higher, or preternatural, intelligences. This type of method is common enough in shamanic operations where there is a need to heighten concentration, to dull normal sensory input, control breathing and so forth, in order for the desired effect to occur: an alternate (usually higher) state of consciousness. Such a type of process may have in fact brought the practitioner into contact with the workings of the sub-consciousness, or higher self, rather than incorporeal elementals.

The theme of mantic technique has been discussed by Nora K. Chadwick, where she cites evidence from early Celtic literature (Chadwick 1942: 5–6). It is no coincidence that a similar type of method was used for poetic composition, for Martin describes the way in which the *Aos Dàna*, or poets, would undertake sensory deprivation in order to attract the muses:

The orators, in their language called *Is-dane*, were in high esteem both in these islands and the Continent,⁷ until within these last forty years they sat always among their nobles and chiefs of families in the *streach* or circle [...] The orators, after the Druids were extinct, were brought in to preserve the genealogy of families, and to repeat the same at every succession of a chief; and upon the occasion of marriages and births, they made epithalamiums and panegyrics which the poet or bard

pronounced. The orators by the force of the eloquence had a powerful ascendance over the greatest men of their time [...] I must not omit to relate their way of study, which is very singular: they shut their doors and windows for a day's time, and lie on their backs, with a stone upon their belly, and plaids about their necks, and their eyes being covered, they pump their brains for rhetorical encomium or panegyric; and indeed they furnish such a style from this dark cell, as is understood by a very few [...] (Martin 1994: 176–77).

The utterance of poetic prophecy in language readily understood only by the initiated few is attested from Irish, Welsh and Norse sources. The connection of poetic and mantic language goes further back into roots of Indo-European poetic tradition (Leavitt 1997: 9–16). Geraldus Cambrensis, or Gerald of Wales (c. 1146–c. 1223), in his twelfth-century *Descriptio Cambriae*, or *Description of Wales* (1194), provides an account of Welsh seers called *Awenyddion* which compares well with Martin's own account. From the brief but tantalising description given by Gerald of Wales, it seems that they practised a kind of oracular seership, for they were attributed with the ability to go into trances at will from which their mantic utterances would emanate.⁸

One thing that can be made clear is that the *taghairm* has a pre-Christian origin. If the traditional stories from Geoffrey Keating's (c. 1570–c. 1644) *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* can be taken at face value, they allegedly go back in time to a period when Druidic practice was to the fore and, although Keating's specific link with Druids should be discounted since Keating is not a reliable source in such matters as these, it may well be the case that the practice was an ancient one:

Dála na ndrúadh, is é feidhm do-nídís do sheithidhibh na dtarbh n-iodhbarta, a gcoimhéad ré hucht bheith ag déanamh coniuuration, nó ag cor na ndeamhan fá gheasaibh, 7 is iomdha céim ar a gcuirdís geasa orra, mar atá silleadh ar a sgáile féin i n-uisge, nó ré hamharc ar néallaibh nimhe, nó ré foghar gaoithe nó glór éan do chlos. Gidh eadh, an tan do cheileadh gach áisig dhiobh sin orra, is eadh do-nídís, cruinnchliatha caorthainn do dhéanamh 7 seithidhe na dtarbh n-iodhbarta do leathadh orra, 7 an taobh do bhíodh ris an bhfeóil do chor i n-uachtar dhiobh, 7 dol mar sin i muinighin a ngeas do thoghairm na ndeamhan, do bhuain sgéal diobh, amhail do-ní an togharmach san chiorcaill aníú. Gonadh de sin do lean an seanfhocal ó shoin, adeir go dtéid neach ar a chliathaibh fis, an tan do-ní dícheall ar sgéalaibh d'fhagháil (Keating 1930: 24–25).

As to the druids, the use they made of the hides of the bulls offered in sacrifice was to keep them for the purpose of making conjuration, or laying geasa on the demons; and many are the ways in which they laid geasa on them, such as to keep looking at their own images in water, or gaze on the clouds of heaven, or keep listening to the noise of the wind or the chattering of birds. But when all these expedients failed them, and they were obliged to do their utmost, what they did was, to make round wattles of the quicken tree, and to spread thereon the hides of the bulls offered in sacrifice, putting the side which had been next the flesh uppermost, and thus relying on their geasa to summon the demons to get

information from them, as the conjurer does nowadays in the circus; whence the old saw has since been current which says that one has gone on his wattles of knowledge when he has done his uttermost to obtain information (Keating 1902-13: 2, 349–51).

The connection of bull hides and the raising of demons is made clear and, as shown earlier, is the second *taghairm* method noticed by Martin. The development of ‘magical concentration’ can also be seen from the above passage.

The evidence so far adduced from earlier sources strongly suggests a connection between poetic inspiration and premonition as argued by Nora K. Chadwick (1891–1972) in her article ‘*Imbas Forosnai*’ (Chadwick 1935: 97–135). The *Imbas Forosnai* [Ir. *imbas*, great knowledge, poetic talent, inspiration; *forosnai*, that illuminates], as far as can be gleaned, produces a mantic sleep not unlike that of Rhonabwy who lay down in a yellow ox-skin, mentioned previously. It also rings with the description of the *Aos Dána* [people of poetry] which Martin described earlier. Further, Chadwick quotes a passage translated by Kuno Meyer (1856–1919) from *Sanas Cormaic* (‘Cormac’s Glossary’):

Imbass forosnae .i. dofūarascaib sec[h]ip rēt bas maith lasin filid & bes adhlaic dó d’foillsiugad. Is amlaid didiu dogníther ón .i. concā in file mīr do c[h]arna dirg muice nō c[h]on nō c[h]ait] ocus dobir iarom for lic iar cūl na comlad & dichain dīchetal fair & adodpair do dēib īdal & cotagair dó & nī fabaib īarnabāroch, & dochain iarom for a dī bois & congair dēo īdal cuige arnā tarmascthar a c[h]odlud & dobeir a dī bois ima dī lecaín & contuli & bīthir og a foraire ar nachn-imparræ & nach toirmescae neach, agas doadbanar dō iarom annī aradmbi co cend nómaide nō a [col. 2] dōu nō a trī, fut ngair conmeassad ocind andbairt. Et ideo imbass dicitur .i. bas disīu & bass anal in a gaíd nō im a c[h]end. Atrorbe Pātraic anísín, & an teim laoda & fotroirgell a brīathar nā bad nimhe nā talman nach aon dogēnai, ar is dīultad bathis. Dīc[h]etal doc[h]ennaib immorro fodrācbad sōn i cōrcus c[h]jerdæ, ar is soas fodera sōn: nī ēcen audbairt do demnaib oca, achi aísneis do c[h]ennaib a chnāmae fochēdōir (Meyer 1907–13: 64).

The *Imbas Forosnai* sets forth whatever seems good to the seer (*fili*) and what he desires to make known. It is done thus. The seer chews a piece of the red flesh of a pig, or a dog, or a cat, and then places it on a flagstone behind the door. He sings an incantation over it, offers it to the false gods, and then calls on them to him. And he leaves them not on the next day, and chants then on his two hands, and again calls his false gods to him, lest they should disturb his sleep. And he puts his two hands over his two cheeks till he falls asleep. And they watch by him lest no one overturn him and disturb him till everything he wants to know is revealed to him, to the end of nine days, or of twice that time, or, how ever long he was judged at the offering (Chadwick 1935: 99–100).⁹

Thomas F. O’ Rahilly states that the ‘object of the *fili* or seer was to commune with the Otherworld in order that he might tap [...] the divine omniscience for his own ends. By being sacrificed to the deity, the animal became in a sense deified; and so the

seer, by chewing some of the animal's flesh and by wrapping himself in its hide, was believed to be able to acquire some of the knowledge possessed by the deity, which was imparted to him when he fell into a sleep or a trance' (O' Rahilly 1946: 325).

With reference to the hide *taghairm*, Nagy writes that 'the hide [...] has come off an animal just killed, as well as the seeker of knowledge wrapped in it, are suspended in a liminal state between life and death. The seer identifies with the slain animal and exists between the categories of human and beast during the ritual. As a marginal member of society who [...] acquires special knowledge' (Nagy 1981–82: 138). Generalising from the specific instances of each type of techniques for all these *taghairm* rituals, Nagy comments that the "poet-seer uses liminal devices (anomalous food, tips, hurdles, skins) in liminal places (near a door, between civilisation and wilderness) to create a liminal 'atmosphere' in which he gains access to the source of knowledge' (*op.cit.*: 138).

Episodes like this occur in older tales such as the *tarbfeis* [bull-feast] in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* [The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel] in *Lebor na hUidre* [The Book of the Dun Cow], the oldest manuscript entirely written in Gaelic compiled before 1106 at the great monastic centre of Clonmacnoise on the Shannon (MacKillop 1998: 43). A rather terse description of the *tarbfeis* is given which is relevant as it offers an example (albeit implicit) of a type of ceremony not unlike that of the *taghairm*. The *tarbfeis* is used to legitimise the claims of legendary *Conaire Mór mac Eterscélae* to the throne as the rightful future king of Ireland:

Marb in rí iarunn .i. Eterscéle. Con-grenar taibfeis la firu Hérenn .i. no marbad tarb leó & ithead oenfear a sáith de & no ibead a enbruithi & no chanta ór firindi fair ina ligiu. Fer at-chichead ina chotlad is é bad rí, & at-baildis a beòil in tan ad-beiread gai [...] (Knott 1936: 4).

After that, the king, Eterscélae, died. The men of Ériu then assembled at the bull feast: a bull was killed, and one man ate his fill and drank its broth and slept, and an incantation of truth was chanted over him. Whoever this man saw in his sleep became king: if the man lied about what he saw in his sleep, he would die [...] (Gantz 1981: 65).

A particularly detailed description of the *tarbfeis* is contained in the tale *Serglige Con Culainn* [The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn] and a version of this tale also appears in *Lebor na hUidre*. The comparison of this passage, and other similar ones from early tales, with the *taghairm* methods, demonstrates clear similarities, suggesting that they reflect quite a well-known practice of ancient divination within a Celtic context.

The water and hide methods of the *taghairm* would seem to have their origins from at least the medieval period, and it seems that they compare well with similar methods described from classical sources. If the descriptions of the locations in which the *taghairm* revelations are examined, then a glimpse of their remote antiquity may be gleaned—Dalyell, paraphrasing Martin, has recorded that in the rite 'the Taighairm' the querent was 'carried by assistants to a solitary spot, or left under the arch formed by the projected waters of a cataract' (Dalyell 1894: 495). Removing oneself to a remote location outwith 'society' or 'civilisation' in order to gain the right conditions for the desired effect to occur seems to be a universal practice. Divinatory rites practiced in ancient Greece are clearly similar, as Pythagoras 'after

being cleansed by the Ideaen Dactyls, slept by a river on the skin of a black lamb' (Ettlinger 1946: 106). Like Rhonabwy, mentioned before, there is a reference to Virgil's Bryttys who 'laid himself down on the pelt of a white hind' (*ibid.*: 107). In addition to this, Leslie D. Johnston writes that 'the oracle-consultant who slept upon the raw skin gained contact [...] with the spirits of the dead enticed to him by the bloody skin' and then goes on to state that the 'best literary account of the power of blood to draw the spirits of the dead' occurs in the *Odyssey* 11.23 ff. (Johnston 1948: 349). The ability of a seer to summon the dead through the use of fresh blood and then to gain prophetic insight from the resultant commune is at least as old as the *Odyssey* (11. 23–25). Tiresias is said to have been summoned when Odysseus slaughtered a sheep and then let its fresh blood drain into a pit. Odysseus then fended off all the other spirits until Tiresias drew near and spoke thus to him: 'Nay, draw back from the pit, hold off your sharp sword so that I may drink of the blood and speak to you true words [...]' (*ibid.*: 351). Other similar occurrences from Vergil as well as Ovid are given (*ibid.*: 350–51) and where a summary of the former citation is given:

Latinus, on his part, sacrificed one hundred sheep [...] and after spreading out the fresh skins, lay upon them. A voice was then heard, coming from the deep woods [...] (*ibid.*: 350).

The fact that the priest or seer sleeps upon the hide and then goes on to see apparitions, and that he speaks with Acheron, who resides in the infernal regions, is not without significance. The similarities between this ancient method of divination and the *taghairm* are striking. Chadwick states in her *Poetry and Prophecy*: "The association of inspiration and knowledge of whatever kind acquired by supernatural means is ancient and widespread. Inspiration, in fact, relates to revealed knowledge. Revelation covers the whole field of human consciousness. It includes knowledge of the past and the hidden present, as well as the future' (Chadwick 1942: 41). To sum up, it may be said that many such practices were not only common but that they also have a long pedigree.

Cat Summons: Martin's Third Description of the *Taghairm*

The features noted above do not fit easily, if at all, into the most interesting and bizarre method of performing the *taghairm* noticed by Martin:

There was a third way of consulting, which was a confirmation of the second above-mentioned. The same company who put the man into the hide took a live cat and put him on a spit; one of the number was employed to turn the spit, and one of the consorts inquired of him. What are you doing? He answered, I roast this cat until his friends answer the question, which must be the same that was proposed by the man shut up in the hide. And afterwards a very big cat comes, attended by a number of lesser cats, desiring to relieve the cat turned on the spit, and then answers the question. If this answer proved the same that was given to the man in the hide, then it was taken as a confirmation of the other, which in this case was believed infallible (Martin 1994: 173–74).

William MacKenzie (1851–1935) slightly fleshes out the above account: "Tradition suggests pagan rites being carried out at the Eaglais Bhréige (lying church) at which

his Satanic Majesty presided. Black cats were roasted alive as one of the sacrifices. A young MacQueen woman is said to have been inveigled to their rites. Her whereabouts became known to her people, who assembled and put to rout the idolatrous assemblage, rescued the young woman and removed the Cùbaid, Satan's seat, to where it now stands [...] (MacKenzie 1930: 15–16; see also Forbes 1923: 178).

There is, however, a slightly earlier reference to *taghairm nan cat* dating from c. 1685 (and, as far as I am aware, the earliest reference to such a rite) in a section "Of their Augury, Predictions & Second Sight" of a treatise entitled *A Collection of Highland Rites and Customs*, probably penned by the Rev. Robert Kirk, or Kirke (1644–1692), famous for his fascinating treatise, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (1690/1),¹⁰ on fairy belief and second sight:

RHAMANTA. When they'd have a Response there are four or more sturdy persons who go to a Loch end, or a Kiln which hath two Doors; in which they roast a Cat alive backwards [...] One of them goes under a Cauldron, a third invocats the Divil and a fourth faceth him. Sometimes there appear men with their heads in their hands. The Devil first asks somewhat, then they take the Cat & throw it <at> his Face. Then they ask the Devil & get answers, and obtain Requests, as the having meat, Lives prolong'd &c. (Hunter 2001: 60).

It would also seem that this particular method of the *taghairm* is unique to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland as it does not seem to have been mentioned elsewhere. Such were the dire consequences of *taghairm nan cat* that, according to John Gregorson Campbell, there were only three recorded mentions of its actual performance in the Highlands and Islands. Apart from the young MacQueen woman mentioned above, the two others who are said to have performed *taghairm nan cat* were Allan Cameron (c. 1448–c. 1480), who succeeded his father around 1461 as chief (and first to be styled captain) of Clan Cameron. In Gaelic tradition he is known as *Ailean nan Creach* ('Allan of the Forays') and is said to have performed the ritual at *Dail a' Chait* ('The Cat Meadow'), near Torcastle, Lochaber (see fig. 2). The other performance is said to have been carried out by *Lachlann Odhar* ('Dun Lachlan') in *Sabhal Mòr Peighinn a' Ghobhainn* ('Big Barn of Pennygowan') in Mull c. 1600.¹¹

There are, however, some other instances of *taghairm nan cat* that can be identified and added to this number. These include an instance from Islay mentioned by R. MacDonald Robertson (Robertson 1977: 119–20); another mentioned in a manuscript of John Francis Campbell of Islay (1821–1885) which tells of the MacArthurs of Glassary performing the *taghairm* (Henderson 1911: 269–70); a Glenmoriston tradition noted by William MacKay (MacKay 1893: 432–33); and a passing mention referenced by Alexander Stewart, where he cites a standing stone named *Clach Taghairm nan Cat*, in Blackwood, near Fortingall, Perthshire (Stewart 1928: 333). A further interesting mention of the *taghairm* is made in a fairly long tale, *Eachdraidh Mhànuis* ('History of Manus'), collected in South Uist by Fr Allan McDonald (1859–1905), where the rite is resorted to by a certain Horst Mac Chatha Chathaich, on the eve of a battle, in which he would be subsequently killed, so that he could find out that he would father a son who would later become the future king of Ireland.¹² The *taghairm* was also known by a tradition bearer from Benbecula, Angus MacLellan, who mentions the rite in passing in connection with Mull and also with

Cameron of Lochiel.¹³ Two brief mentions are made of the *taghairm* in the MacLagan MSS, one of which explains that the branch of the MacLeans to which Lachlann Odhar belongs was ‘exceedingly fierce and on this account they used to be called [...] “Siol a’ chlaidheamh iarunn, a dh’fhag an Tighearna air diochuimhne” (The seed of the iron sword which left the Lord out of their thoughts).’¹⁴ Finally, there is a mention of one other *taghairm* tradition from Strath Nairn (specifically Dunlichity), and, although it contains no added detail, it is significant that this vestigial memory was retained up to modern times (Cumming 1978–80: 520–21).

John Gregorson Campbell notes that the details of the Mull and Lochaber traditions ‘are so exactly the same that there is reason to think they must be versions of an older legend’ (Campbell 2005: 167). In other words, what is being dealt with here is a migratory legend. The similarities go so far as to replicate the actual dialogue verbatim strongly indicating that the Lochaber and Mull versions have a common source or, alternatively, that one is a redaction of the other. I shall first give the Lochaber version of the tale.



Fig 2. Engraving of Torcastle, Lochaber, which was the seat of Gillechattan Mòr, the founder of Clan Chattan, of whom the MacIntoshes later became chiefs. The sketch was drawn by a Mr Rhind, of Inverness, for Charles Fraser-MacKintosh, in 1871, who imaginatively reconstructed the ruinous castle of how it may have looked in the late thirteenth-century. The place where the *taghairm* rite is said to have been carried out by Ailean nan Creach is nearby. Reproduced from Fraser-MacKintosh 1875: facing 49.

As mentioned earlier, the Lochaber version is usually attributed to *Ailean nan Creach*, but John Stewart of Ardvorlich argues that it would be better to attribute the tradition to his son, *Eòghain MacAilein* (‘Ewen, son of Allan’). This would be more in keeping with the dates, so he argues, in which *Gormshuil Mhòr na Maighe* (‘Great Gormula of Moy’) is said to have lived (Stewart 1981: 20–21). This famous witch appears in quite a few supernatural tales in Lochaber (and elsewhere) and she is alleged to have had

not a few dealings with the chiefs of Clan Cameron. The reason for the tale's attribution to *Ailean nan Creach* was his notorious fame as a cattle reiver: 'He is said to have made 32 expeditions into his enemy's country for the 32 years that he lived, and three more, for the three-fourths of a year that he was in his mother's womb' (Drummond 1842: 24). After which he is said to have regretted the misdeeds of his past and have undergone the rite of *taghairm nan cat* in the hope of gaining salvation. John Stewart of Ardvorlich's argument is based upon the fact that his untimely death, at the age of thirty-two, would have scarcely given him enough time to have lifted every *creach* said to have been attributed to him, far less to have regretted them.¹⁵ And, further, his son, Ewen, according to tradition, gained an even greater notoriety for cattle reiving than his father, and the event which led him to undertake *taghairm nan cat* was said to have been the death of Ewen's son Donald.

A rather more incredible version of this tale relates that Ewen, on his way to Rome on pilgrimage, fell ill in Holland, and, taking this as a portent, returned to consult *Gormshuil*, who told him that he must perform *taghairm nan cat* in order to relinquish the burden of his past misdeeds. Ewen then went to a place named *Dail a' Chait* ('The Cat Meadow') and built a wattle hut. On the strict instruction given by *Gormshuil*, he was to be attended only by his ghillie and a captured cat. He then ran a spit through the non-vital parts of the cat over the fire within the hut, while Ewen stood guard outside with his claymore in hand. The excruciating wild screams of the roasted cat attracted all the other cats in Lochaber, who were supposed to have been a legion of demons in feline form. If Ewen's nerve failed, or if any false move was made, then he would have been shredded to death. However, Ewen's resolution stood up well in the face of imminent disaster, when he is alleged to have coolly said: '*Ciod air bith a chì, no chual thu, cuir mu'n cuairt an cat*' (Stewart 1981: 23). An alternative rendition of this proverbial phrase is: '*Ge b'e chì no chluinneas tu, cùm an cat mun cuairt*.—Whatever you see or hear, keep the cat turning' (Nicolson 1996: 216). Another version of the same story states that the cats were endowed with the power of human speech, and, as the Rev. Somerled MacMillan relates, they each in turn cried out: 'This is ill-usage for a cat,' to which Ewen retorted: 'It will be better presently' (MacMillan 1971: 193). On the point of being torn limb from limb, Ewen said that he would only release the cat on the condition that the King of the Cats came himself. He duly appeared as a gigantic one-eyed black cat called *Cam Dubh* (Stewart 1981: 26). Silencing the other cats he then asked Ewen: 'Why are you torturing my brother?' Ewen replied that he would only stop if he could inform him of the best way to make atonement for his past misdeeds. 'You must,' said the head of the feline tribe, 'build seven churches—one for each of the seven forays' (MacMillan 1971: 193). Ewen duly assented to this and released the scorched cat who then rushed from the hut, followed closely by the host of other felines, who then flung themselves into the River Lochy in a place still known to this day as *Poll a' Chait* ('The Cat Pool'). Afterwards the cats swam down the river to the first bend where they then climbed out and merged into the night. This part of the river is still known as *Buinne a' Chait* ('The Cat Eddy'). A more prosaic explanation for these place-names is their long association with the Clan Chattan, whose totemic symbol is the wild cat (*ibid.*: 117–18; Fraser-MacKintosh 1888: 467–68). These points will be returned to when discussing the historical interpretations of the *taghairm nan cat* tradition.

The source for most of the Mull versions would seem to be an article that appeared in the *London Literary Gazette* (1824) by an anonymous writer (Anon. 1824: 172).¹⁶ However, quite a long version of the tale, which may have been based

on this, appears in John Gregorson Campbell's *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*:

Lachlan Oär and a companion, *Ailein mac Eachainn*, Allan the son of Hector¹⁷ (some say he had two companions), shut themselves up in a barn at Pennygowan on the Sound of Mull, and putting cats on spits roasted them alive at a blazing fire. By-and-by other cats came in and joined in the horrible howling of those being roasted, till at last the beams (*sparrun an taighe*) were crowded with cats, and a concert of caterwauling filled the house. The infernal noise almost daunted Lachlan Oär, especially when the biggest of the cats said, "When my brother the Ear of Melting comes—"

Allan the son of Hector did not allow the sentence to be finished. "Away cat," he cried, and then added to his companion, in an expression which has become proverbial in the Highlands when telling a person to attend his work he has in hand, and never mind what discouragements or temptations may come in his way, *Dé sam bith a chì no chluinneas tu, cum an cat mun cuairt*. "Whatever you see or hear, keep the cat turning."

Dun Lachlan, recovering courage, said, "I will wait for him yet, and his son too."

At last the Ear of Melting came among the other cats of the beams, and said, while all the other cats kept silence, *Lachuinn Uidhir 'ic Dhòmhnail 'ic Néill, is olc an càramh cait sin*. "Dun Lachlan, son of Donald, son of Neil, that is bad treatment for a cat."

Allan to this called out as before, "Whatever you see or hear, keep the cat turning." And the fearful rite was proceeded with.

At last the Ear of Melting sprang to the floor and said, *Ge b'e có air am mùin Cluas an Leoghaidh chan fhaic e gnùis na Trianaid*. "Whomsoever the Ear of Melting makes water upon will not see the face of the Trinity."

Crois a chladheamh ad' cheann, a bhiast, 's tu mùn fallais! answered Dun Lachlan. "The cross of the sword in your head, wretch; your water is sweat." And he struck the cat on the head with the hilt of his two-handed sword.

Immediately the devil, under the potent spell, assumed his proper shape and asked his wild summoners what they wanted with him. One asked *conach is clann* ('prosperity and children'), and Dun Lachlan asked: *Cuid is conach, is saoghal fada 'na cheann*. "Property and prosperity, and a long life to enjoy it."

The devil rushed out through the door crying, *Conach! Conach! Conach!* "Prosperity! Prosperity! Prosperity!"

The two men obtained their desires, but were obliged (some say) to repeat the *taghairm* every year to keep the devil to the mark (Campbell 2005: 167–68).

A Gaelic version of this story appears in *Am Measg nam Bodach* (Mac a Phì 1938: 54–55), and compares favourably with the English version, strongly indicating that the latter came from this very source. It is a pity that the narrator of the Gaelic version

did not give a fuller version, but this may have been due to the exigencies of time as it was scripted for a radio programme.¹⁸ In addition, there is an account of the *taghairm* from the pen of the Rev. Norman MacLeod (1812–1872), affectionately known as *Caraid nan Gàidheal* [the friend of the Highlanders], who wrote a succinct rendition of the various episodes involved in the story but adds little.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the greatest number of *taghairm nan cat* tales to appear in various publications over the years are from Mull, and the reason for this was probably the fact that the Mull version was published in the *London Literary Gazette*.

Donald A. MacKenzie in *Tales from the Moors and Mountains*, offers additional information concerning *taghairm nan cat* with reference to the Mull version. In this account and the following one there is reference to another kind of *taghairm* not included by Martin, namely *taghairm nan daoine* ('summons of men').

Now there are two forms of this ceremony, the "*taghairm* of men" (*Taghairm nan Daoine*) and the "*taghairm* of cats" (*Taghairm nan Cat*). In one the magic-worker entered a big cauldron in an ancient burial-ground, and caused the dead to appear and walk past him. From one or other he received an answer to the question he happened to ask with regard to either the future or the past. The *cat taghairm* was performed by roasting cats on a big fire for four days and four nights, during which time the magic workers had to observe a strict fast (MacKenzie 1931: 44).

MacKenzie then relates the tale, more or less as in the previous two versions. The *taghairm* of men is, of course, a form of necromancy, and thus differs in kind from the *taghairm* of cats, which is a form of demonology. They both, though, share the same nefarious ends. A similar version hailing from Glenmoriston also differentiates between these two types:

Somewhat akin to witchcraft was the species of DIVINATION which was known by the name of TAGHAIRM. Two forms of it were practised in Glenmoriston—Taghairm nan Daoine (the Taghairm of Men), and Taghairm nan Cat (the Taghairm of Cats). The last expert in this black art was Alasdair Mac Iain 'Ic Iain, who flourished at Ballintombuy, in that Glen, in the beginning of last century. When he wished to operate with men, he placed himself within a large boiler just outside the entrance of the ancient burying-ground of Clachan Mheircheird, and from there summoned the dead to rise and pass before him. This they did until one appeared who was able to communicate the information which he required. On one occasion, when he was in this way making an unusually bold attempt to solve the mysteries of the future, the dead arose and streamed out of the burying-ground, until three thousand of them crowded the surrounding fields; but still no glimpse of the future was given to the seer. At last the form of his own dead niece appeared, and revealed to him the evils that were to befall himself. He never practised his art again—but his niece's prophecies were in due time fulfilled, and his career was closed by a party of Lochabermen, who threw him down as he tried to turn back the cattle which they were in the

act of taking from him. He fell three times before he expired, and the places are marked by three cairns to this day (MacKay 1893: 432–33).

What is interesting about both these accounts is the reference to a more formal ceremony normally absent from the other versions which, as noted earlier, is a common practice in magical or shamanic operations. The ceremony is said to have begun at midnight and lasted four days and four nights.

In a variation of the Lochaber version, which adds local colour to the tale, *Abrach* (Donald C. MacPherson) relates that Sir Ewen Cameron (1629–1719), whom the historian Macaulay referred to as the Ulysses of the Highlands, allegedly encountered *Gormshuil*:

Nise, an luib na bròig-airgid a fhuair Sir Eobhan 's an taghairm, fhuair e buaidh air cruaidh, air luaidhe 's air buidseachd, 's cha robh sin gun fhios da [...] (MacPherson 1875: 113).

Now, in connection with the silver shoe that Sir Ewen got when he performed the taghairm, he received power over steel [swords], lead [musket shot] and bewitchment, and this was not unknown to him [...]

This is as good an example as any in which an older tradition has been latched onto a famous personality. One of the most fluid elements in historical folklore narratives, and oral tradition in general, are names, which thus have to be treated with caution. The first mention of this magical shoe is given along with the *taghairm* tale in the *London Literary Gazette*, where the author recounts: ‘Cameron of Lochiel performed the Tagheirm some time before this and was presented with a small silver shoe, which has to be put on the left foot of every son born in that family; and this custom was continued, until the shoe was unfortunately lost when Lochiel’s house was consumed by fire in 1746. This shoe fitted all of them but one; and he afterwards turned his back to the foe at Sheriff Muir, having inherited a large foot by his mother, who was of another race’ (Anon. 1824: 172).

For the sake of completeness, a legend from Glassary in Argyll concerning the *taghairm* will be given as it contains some unique features in comparison with the other accounts of the *taghairm*. It was sent to John Francis Campbell by the Rev. Thomas Pattison in 1863 at the time Campbell was collecting and editing a vast store of Gaelic oral tradition.²⁰

The Mac Arthurs of Glassaridh had a long field which when they had gathered together as they were in the habit of doing in the spring time—they used to plough up in one day. On a certain occasion having finished their work—earlier than usual—they thought they would make a “Taoghairm.” It seems if you make a “Taoghairm” the “Mac-Mollach” will come and tell you anything you ask him. The Mac Arthurs accordingly made their Taoghairm—and they asked to know [what] was in land and sea—and the “Mac-Mollach” was obliged to show it to them. One of their number at last—a strong man and a champion—got under the mouth of a corrie near the seashore—and he called on all that was dead or alive within the sea to come and fight with him. At once the sea began to roar and the waves rolled red and flaming up the Corrie

where the Mac Arthurs lay. But he got terrified when he saw this. And leaping out of the Corrie he rushed along the land to escape. The sea still followed however roaring and red and flaming—till at last the man reached Octomore and ran breathless into a house there—where as his good luck would have it two women happened to be just there making a “teine-eigin”—rubbing two sticks together—this saved Mac Arthur. The last roll of the sea just reached the gable of the house he entered and knocked a great hole in it but immediately before the “teine-eigin” the waves receded and he was safe.²¹

There is no direct reference to the roasting of cats, although this may be made implicit from the name mentioned Mac-Mollach (i.e. *Màg Molach*, meaning either hairy hand or paw), as suggested by George Henderson (Henderson 1911: 269). In all probability it means *Mac Mollachd* (lit. ‘cursed son’) which equates the name with the Devil. Although a reference to *taghairm nan cat* cannot be made with any degree of confidence, it does show, at least, a variation in the ending. The young champion challenging the living and the dead of the sea and then escaping its vengeance through the effects of the *tein’-éigin* (‘need-fire’) seem rather odd, at least in comparison to the other traditions. It should also be noted that the *tein’-éigin* was a well-known method to neutralise the effects of evil through enchantment, as MacArthur found out to his advantage (Martin 1994: 174; Davidson 1955: 132–36).

The tradition of *taghairm nan cat* seems to invite further speculation rather than definitive answers. Why, for example, does such an unusual tale as the *taghairm* have such a paucity of sources? Could it be that it was more common before it was recorded (a common enough occurrence with regard to oral traditions)? Why does *taghairm nan cat* seem to be unique to the Scottish Highlands and Islands? What are the actual origins of the *taghairm nan cat*? Is *taghairm nan cat* as ancient as it would first appear?

Over a number of articles, Ronald Black (MacilleDhuibh 2001a: 15; 2001b: 15; 2001c: 15; 2005a: 21; 2005b: 17; 2005c: 17), writing under his Gaelic name, Ragnall MacilleDhuibh, has put forward the idea that the various traditions of *taghairm nan cat* can be traced to historical events and are strongly, if not exclusively, connected with the Clan Chattan, especially the MacIntoshes, whose totemic symbol is, of course, the Scottish wild cat (*Felis silvestris grampia*). As well as this, this version of the *taghairm* can be interpreted as a type of pantomime based, so it is argued, on Protestant satire upon the Roman Catholic church as well as being a none too subtle satirical jibe upon the Clan Chattan, or the MacIntoshes. Certainly, there was great enmity between the Camerons and the MacIntoshes which led to one of the longest feuds ever to have been recorded between two Highland clans. According to Black, it is possible that the whole story is a kind of metaphor of how captured MacIntoshes ‘were tortured in order to gain some concessions out of their chief’ (MacilleDhuibh 2005b: 17). Or, in the Mull version, where Lachlann Odhar, himself related to the MacLean chief, Lachlann Catanach, who, in extremity, may have brought over some of his MacIntosh relations from Badenoch (cat country) to quell any unrest (*ibid.*: 17), when the said Lachlann Catanach was thrown out of the estate of Lochbuie in Mull. The very machinations behind this plot led to the MacLean chief—who held sway over Duart from 1496 until his death in 1523—being awarded Scalpay and Pabbay in Broadford Bay in the Isle of Skye. Apparently Pabbay was the refuge of a band of outlaws which caused a great deal of trouble for

the locals. According to Otta F. Swire in her book, *Skye, the Island and its Legends* (1961), the chief robber decided to get rid of their enemies by performing the *taghairm*:

So they made a great fire on the beach and roasted three cats alive with appropriate spells [...] Several minor demons appeared, but the robber chief insisted that he would do business only with the Devil in person. At length Satan himself rose from the earth and asked their will (Swire 1961: 6–7).

An argument arose and the bandits were slaughtered to a man. This ‘Satan himself’, it might be interpreted, could have been Lachlann Catanach who, through political expediency, once this robber band had served their purpose, decided to simply get rid of them (MacilleDhuibh 2005c: 17). Further, the Skye version of the tale might simply be an example of the migratory nature of this legend and, so the argument goes, became ‘the codification of a small kindred’s act of defiance against a big one’ (*op.cit.*: 17). This might well have been the case, but there is perhaps less strength to this interpretation since the MacIntoshes, or Clan Chattan, are featured less in this version of *taghairm nan cat*, despite the fact that Lachlann Catanach was married to a sister of *Alasdair Crotach* of Dunvegan (c. 1450–1547). Although there are valid historical interpretations for some of the *taghairm nan cat* variants—those that have a definite connection with the MacIntoshes or Clan Chattan—they cannot all be explained by this linkage which is probably reflected by the migratory nature of its (albeit slight) variants. This connection, however, does indicate the development of *taghairm nan cat* within the cultural milieu of Gaelic tradition.

It nevertheless remains strange that there is no mention of *taghairm nan cat*, as termed, in early Gaelic or Celtic literature, as far as I know. Why it occurs only in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland remains unclear. And yet, cats are renowned to have been witches’ familiars and have also had a close connection (and sometimes identification) with the Devil from medieval times. Moving further back in time, the worship of cats as animal deities goes as far back as the Egyptians who personified them in their feline goddess Bast (Harvey 1993: 109–21). Bast (and her alter-ego, Sekhmet) played an important role in Egyptian culture, to such an extent that the death penalty was meted out to anybody who had the temerity to kill a cat.

It may be that the same type of religious reverence was afforded to cats by other ancient peoples including the Celts. R. A. S. Macalister (1870–1950) writes of animal worship in pre-Celtic and pre-Christian times with reference to cats:

Probably “Irusan mac Arusain,” king of the cats, of whom there a grotesque description in the rollicking satire on the bards called *Imtheacht na Tromdhaimhe*, is a parody of some cat divinity. We have some evidence for cat worship in that singularly interesting biographical dictionary, as we may call it, known as *Cóir Anmann*. This compilation tells us that Cairbre Cat-head, who led the revolt of the serfs, that is, the enslaved aborigines, in A.D. 9 (according to the chronology of the Four Masters) was so called “because his god had the shape of a cat.” Clearly that is no reason for such a name, and it could not have been invented as a reason. It must have been in existence as a separate story about Cairbre, and have been adapted by the writer of the

treatise. It does not necessarily prove that the aboriginal inhabitants worshipped cats but it does show that their Celtic masters asserted that they did so (Macalister 1921: 240).

Macalister's remark at the end exercises due caution in reading too much into the evidence of cat worship in pre-Christian Ireland. It would seem that the entry for *Cairbre Cenn Cait* ('Cairbre Cat-head') in *Cóir Anmann* ('Fitness of Names') is really medieval word play, and thus cannot be taken as concrete proof of cat worship.²² In effect, the mythological character Cairbre has been given the name of cat-head in order to demonise his character. Though needless, perhaps, to say, cats are mentioned not infrequently in Gaelic, both Irish and Scottish, animal folklore (see, for example, Ó Néill 1991: 167–88).

Other evidence, such as that offered by Joseph Ennemoser (1787–1854) in *The History of Magic* regarding *taghairm nan cat*, emphasises the demonic element: 'Not only in Scotland, but throughout Europe, cats were sacrificed to the subterranean gods, as a peculiarly effective means of coming into communication with the powers of darkness' (Ennemoser 1854: 105–6). This comment made by Ennemoser offers, I think, the most likely interpretation of *taghairm nan cat*. He further adds, citing Horst's *Deuteroscopy*:

...black cats were indispensable to the incantation ceremony of the Taigheirm, and these were dedicated to the subterranean gods, or later, to the demons of Christianity. The midnight hour, between Friday and Saturday, was the authentic time for these horrible practices and invocations; and the sacrifice was continued four whole nights and days, without the operator taking nourishment. 'After the cats were dedicated to all the devils, and put into a magico-sympathetic condition by the shameful things done to them, and the agony occasioned them, one of them was put upon the spit, and, amid terrific howlings, roasted before a slow fire. The moment that the howls of one tortured cat ceased in death, another was put upon the spit, for a minute of interval must not take place if they would control hell; and this continued for the four entire days and nights. If the exorcist could hold out still longer, and even till his physical powers were absolutely exhausted, he must do so.'

After a certain continuance of the sacrifice, infernal spirits appeared in the shape of black cats. There came continually more and more of these cats; and their howlings, mingled with those of the cats roasting on the spits, were terrific. Finally appeared a cat of monstrous size, with dreadful menaces. When the Taigheirm was complete, the sacrificer demanded of the spirits the reward of the offering, which consisted of various things; as riches, children, food and clothing. The gift of second-sight, which they had not had before, was, however, the usual recompense; and they retained it to the day of their death (Ennemoser 1854: 104–05).

On a comparative basis, there are seventeenth-century church records which refer to a bull-sacrifice on the island in Loch Maree, Ross-shire, which have led commentators to the belief that it may have been a practice of pre-Christian pagan worship which

was later usurped by St Maelrubha. It is recorded that in 1678, Hector Mackenzie, in Mellon of the parish of Gairloch, along with his sons and grandson, were called before the Presbytery of Dingwall ‘for sacrificing a bull in ane heathnish manner’ on St. Mourie’s Isle (Isle Maree), in Loch Maree, ‘for the recovering of the health of Cirstane Mackenzie, spouse to the said Hector Mackenzie, who was formerlie sicke and valetudinarie’ (Mackay 1896: 338; Mitchell 1860–62: 258). Earlier, in 1656, the Presbytery of Dingwall records that the inhabitants of the surrounding districts were discovered to have been in the habit of sacrificing bulls on the feast-day of the saint (August 25) with ‘other idolatrous customs’, including ‘circulating’ ruinous chapels associated with the saint’s memory—marching round them sun-wise, no doubt; of learning the future, ‘in reference especiallie to lyf and death in taking jurneys’, which was clearly the practice of divination rites (Mackay 1896: xxxviii, 280). From the nineteenth century, there seems to be a vestigial, if corrupt, folk memory of a rite entitled *Calluinn a Bhuilg* [Hogmany of the Sack] that is not at all too dissimilar from the hide method of the *taghairm* that was collected by Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912) in his *Carmina Gadelica* (1900):

The ‘gillean Callaig’ carollers or Hogmanay lads perambulate the townland at night. One man is enveloped in the hard hide of a bull with the horns and hoofs still attached. When the men come to a house they ascend the wall and run round sunwise, the man in the hide shaking the horns and hoofs, and the other men striking the hard hide with sticks. The appearance of the man in the hide is gruesome, while the din made is terrific. Having descended and recited their runes at the door, the Hogmanay men are admitted and treated to the best in the house. The performance seems to be symbolic, but of what it is not easy to say, unless of laying an evil spirit. That the rite is heathen and ancient is evident (Carmichael 1928–71, i: 149).

The revellers involved also chanted a version of the following song as they carried out their festive custom:

<i>CALLIUNN a bhuilg,</i>	HOGMANAY of the sack,
<i>Calluin a bhuilg,</i>	Hogmanay of the sack,
<i>Buail am boicinn,</i>	Strike the hide,
<i>Buail am boicinn.</i>	Strike the hide.
<i>Calluin a bhuilg,</i>	Hogmanay of the sack,
<i>Calluin a bhuilg,</i>	Hogmanay of the sack,
<i>Buail am craicinn,</i>	Beat the skin,
<i>Buail am craicinn.</i>	Beat the skin.
<i>Calluin a bhuilg,</i>	Hogmanay of the sack,
<i>Calluin a bhuilg,</i>	Hogmanay of the sack,
<i>Sios e! suas e!</i>	Down with it! up with it!
<i>Buail am boicinn.</i>	Strike the hide.
<i>Calluin a bhuilg,</i>	Hogmany of the sack,
<i>Calluin a bhuilg,</i>	Hogmany of the sack,
<i>Sios e! suas e!</i>	Down with it! up with it!
<i>Buail am craicinn.</i>	Beat the skin.
<i>Calluin a bhuilg,</i>	Hogmanay of the sack,
<i>Calluin a bhuilg.</i>	Hogmanay of the sack.

(*ibid.*: 148–49)²³

Ennemoser's valuable insight, with regard to *taghairm nan cat*, is his belief that cats as demonic animals were sacrificed to chthonic deities. Although the origins of the *taghairm nan cat* are obscure and there does not seem to be a direct ancient source of such a practice, there are too many liminal elements within the tradition to dismiss it as something which could be described as relatively new. It has been argued that cats were venerated during pagan times and then, during medieval times, cats came to be associated with witchcraft. Such was the fear that cats are said to have instilled in some members of the populace, that large-scale massacres of felines (that ironically encouraged the spread of the Black Plague due to a resultant uncontrollable rat infestation) began after Pope Gregory IX (c. 1155–1241) issued a Papal Bull, *Vox in Rama* ('A Voice on High'), in 1233, which placed the Devil at the witches' sabbats in the form of a gigantic black cat. This Papal Bull had been prompted by a report of unsubstantiated allegations made upon heretics by Conrad of Marburg, a fanatical, ascetic priest (Kors and Peters 2001: 114–15). Further to this, many of the fire festivals which were widespread throughout Europe involved the sacrifice or burning of cats. On Shrove Tuesday during the medieval period, black cats were routinely hunted down and burned (Frazer 1922: 610, 656). Shrove Tuesday is, of course, the last day before Lent and it subsequently became popular for divination among many other activities. This was no doubt due to the liminal status of this particular day, a time of feasting and celebration that contrasted with the self-denial and abstinence of Lent. As noted above, women cat-owners were accused of witchcraft, as their feline companions were said to have been familiars. By medieval times, cats in Christendom had more or less lost their vestiges of divine status, although they were still believed to have magic powers. In some respects, the cat had by now gained a liminal status of its own, as it could both be a symbol of luck to some as well as being an instrument of evil to others. The connection of the cat as a witch's familiar was most likely the reason for the persecution and ill-treatment of the animal during the seventeenth century.

It might well be the case that the roasting of cats for sacrificial purposes had its origins in pagan Celtic practice which later surfaced as 'calendar dates of mass cat-killing in medieval and early modern Europe' (Engels 1999: 128).

Conclusions

Pagan practices such as this came under the scrutiny of a society which was becoming Christianised and therefore regarded such ceremonies as quite antithetical to such a development. An undercurrent of pagan beliefs, nominally Christianised, may well have been still apparent, and at times would have been powerful enough so that such rites (or folk memories of them) could not be fully submerged. Christianity, after all, had been making use of pagan festivals, holy sites and so forth over the centuries in order to make the new faith more acceptable and more readily digestible to the newly converted. Thus, the same type of development may have occurred with reference to the *taghairm* as an out-moded ceremony with definite occult overtones, which would have been unacceptable within a society progressing towards a Christian morality and religious outlook. Certainly, when the *taghairm* traditions were said to have been performed in the Scottish Highlands and Islands, the area had been Christianised for well over a millennium. Thus, instead of the *taghairm* being invoked to attract the help of 'invisible friends', as put by Martin Martin, it would naturally be identified

with supernatural powers, especially with demonic powers, given the associations of sacrificial cats in *taghairm nan cat*.

Although the water and hide methods of the *taghairm* have ancient classical equivalents, the same claim cannot be made for the cat summons. That *taghairm nan cat* seems to be unique to the Highlands and Islands seems to be due to a later development from the medieval persecution of cats, with its demonical connections as witches' familiars which then naturally became associated, if not identified, with the totemic symbol of the MacIntoshes, or Clan Chattan. Most of the *taghairm nan cat* traditions are fairly homogenous in nature, especially the Mull and Lochaber traditions which, in all likelihood, stem from the same source. These variants strongly indicate a migratory legend, and make for compelling and interesting accounts. Like all good migratory legends, *taghairm nan cat* has been adaptable, with a few variations that reflect its ability to change, not only over space but also over time, from its epicentre of where the MacIntoshes in the guise of Clan Chattan once held political sway (in Lochaber), together with its development of the story as a satirical swipe at the Roman Catholic church, but that also reflects its deep roots in traditions of the *taghairm* from pre-Christian times. In this sense then, *taghairm nan cat* might be interpreted as a survival of animal sacrifice to chthonic deities performed in order to gain some favour (in the hope of receiving some reward or another), which later received a Christianised interpretation as the invocation of infernal spirits.

While the rite of *taghairm nan cat* cannot make a claim to be truly ancient, with regard to the modern form into which it has been adapted so as to fit into an early modern Gaelic cultural milieu, its substance from earlier methods of executing the *taghairm*, which may be termed an incubation-oracle, clearly stretches far back into antiquity. The necessity of gaining succour for an unknown future in an uncertain world, by whatever divinatory method so used, can be seen to be a very human characteristic and, as such, is a concern as relevant today as it has been for those who are said to have undertaken that so-called 'awful ceremony' involving the roasting of cats.

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NOTES

¹ I am grateful to Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, University of Edinburgh, for supplying Martin Martin's correct dates. For more information on Martin's career, see Stiùbhart 2004: 963–64, and also his forthcoming biographical study.

² These are respectively the MacCowans, the MacQueens, and, probably, the Buchanans (Campbell 2005: 427, n. 579). For a tradition of the Skye Buchanans see Forbes 1923: 273.

³ This is a misprinting for 'famous'.

⁴ Eas-bheraraig is a misprinting for Eas-bhercaig, i.e. Eas Bhearraig, six miles to the north of Portree (Campbell 2005: 427, n. 578.)

⁵ The Rev. Dr Donald Macqueen, among others, provided both Johnson and Boswell with a great deal of material. See Jemielity 1974: 403–20, for further details, especially with regard to the faculty of second sight.

⁶ Most likely to be Iain Hearach, John of Harris, as this individual may have been fostered on that particular island.

⁷ Presumably what Martin means here is the Hebrides and the mainland Scottish Highlands.

⁸ Gerald of Wales 1978: 246–47, where an editorial note adds that the word *awenyddion* is the plural of *awenydd*, a word that means poet-prophet and which derives from *awen* ('inspiration') 'oracular frenzy'.

⁹ As quoted from Meyer 1907–13, iv: § 756.

¹⁰ For the most recent scholarly edition with explanatory notes and commentary, see Hunter 2001: 38–41, 77–117.

¹¹ According to the Rev. A. MacLean Sinclair (Sinclair 1899: 426), *Ailean nan Sop* ('Allan of the Straws') died in 1551 and his grandson lived two generations afterwards which would make the date roughly either at the end of the sixteenth century or at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

¹² GUL MS Gen 1090/28 [Notebook 5], 117–52 This story was recorded from Angus MacInnes, Smerlcete, South Uist, on 16 October 1896. The *taghairm* appears not to be mentioned in other versions of this tale.

¹³ IFC MS 1031, 420–21.

¹⁴ Maclagan MSS, 2337, collected from a Mr Macdougall in Colonsay; the other mention of the *taghairm* is given at Maclagan MSS, 2025–26, collected from another Mr M^cDougall, a native of Mull.

¹⁵ Ailean nan Creach met his end when the Camerons fought against the combined forces of the MacDonalds of Keppoch and the MacIntoshes *c.* 1480. After a hot fight, the Camerons eventually retired demoralised after their chief had fallen. For an account of the battle, see Drummond 1842: 24.

¹⁶ This article was later published word for word by Lachlan MacLean (1798–1848), *Lachlann na Gàidhlig*, strongly indicating his authorship of the article in the London Literary Gazette (MacLean 1840: 264–66). For a sketch of Lachlan MacLean’s life, see MacLean 1914: 25–30.

¹⁷ According to the Rev. Alexander MacLean Sinclair (Sinclair 1889: 351), Allan MacEachainn was evidently Allan Og, son of Hector, son of *Ailein nan Sop*, which would make his Gaelic patronymic *Ailean Òg mac Eachainn 'ic Ailein nan Sop*. Further, according to the Sobieski Stuarts, Allan mac Eachainn was a MacLean of the family of Lochbuie and who associated with one of the ‘*Sliochd a chlaibhich iorain*’, ‘The race of the iron swords’, or MacLeans of Ross (Stuart & Stuart 1845: 82). The Sobieski Stuarts write that the gravestone of Allan mac Eachainn lies in the cemetery of the ruined church of *Peighinn a’ Ghobhainn* (*ibid.*: Pl 1. fig. 15).

¹⁸ MacLean, Lachlan, *Taghairm*, SA 1963/32/A6. Recorded by E. Sinclair and Morag MacLeod. The informant, prompted by the fieldworkers, relates that one of the MacLeans of Duart frequently performed the *taghairm*, or convocation of cats, in Pennygowan barn. It is a skeletal version of the story given in *Am Measg nam Bodach* (Mac a Phi 1938: 54–55), which shows that memories of the tradition were still extant up until at least the 1960s.

¹⁹ For this see MacLeod, 1901: 32–35. It may be added in the passing that MacLeod knew either MacLean’s account (see MacLean 1840: 264–66) or the account given in the *London Literary Gazette* (see Anon. 1824: 174).

²⁰ These appeared as *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, a large collection of traditional stories edited by J. F. Campbell in the wake of the interest shown in folklore initiated by the work of the Brothers Grimm. Much of the material which Campbell was instrumental in collecting remains in manuscripts which Campbell deposited at the Advocates’ Library that subsequently became the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

²¹ NLS, Adv.MS.50.1.13(ii), 485^r–86^v. It may also be added, judging by the handwriting and the lack of punctuation in Pattison’s hand, that the account given here is a summarised version.

²² I am indebted to Dr Sharon Arbuthnot, formerly of the Department of Celtic, University of Aberdeen, for her expert advice on *Cóir Anmann* which she, at the time of writing, is editing for publication for the Irish Texts Society.

²³ Alexander Carmichael (Carmichael 1928–71: ii, 346) states that this item was collected from Alexander MacDonald, a shoemaker, from Bailanloch, North Uist.

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