



The Seal-Wife

mar chuimhneachan air¹ Alan Hacker

Judith Woolf

It must be thirty years, near enough, since I last told this story, but it goes back a good bit farther than that. The old man who told it to Annie Laurie's grannie when she was a wee girl claimed to have known it all his life, and Annie Laurie was an old woman when I was a wee girl and she told it to me. And I'm getting to be an old woman myself now, so you can work out for yourselves how long ago it all took place. I can't vouch for the truth of it, mind, but this is the way it goes.

There was a man in those days, a fisherman, who lived on the Isle of Lewis, and his name was Duncan Macrae, but he was so fond of acting the big man that they called him Duncan Mhòr.² Now it so happened that late one moonlit night this Duncan Mhòr was making his way homeward, most likely with whisky taken, when he came upon a great pile of seal skins lying on the shore. There was money to be had in those days for a fine seal skin, and he reckoned that just the one out of so many would never be missed, so he took the finest pelt of all from the top of the pile and rolled it up and tucked it under his arm and went on his way.

He was walking along the machair,³ so the soft turf muffled his footsteps, which was probably just as well, for suddenly ahead of him he saw a group of people, very tall and slender and as naked as if they were new born, all dancing together in the moonlight on the great curve of white sand which ran down to the sea. And their skin was as pale as the sand and as bright as the moonlight, and their eyes were like the great dark eyes of a seal. Now a person with any sense at all would have put that seal skin straight back where he found it, but Duncan Mhòr Macrae was a brave man and a reckless man so he carried the seal skin home with him and hid it between the turf thatch and the top of the box-bed. And early the next morning he put his plaid over his shoulder and went down to the shore to see what he would find.

What he found was a woman, cold and afraid and alone. Her eyes were round and dark, and her face was round and pale, and her skin was as white as if sunlight had never touched it, and she had nothing to shield her modesty except her long flowing hair, which was silvery like the pelt of a seal though it was easy enough to see that she was young. Duncan Mhòr stepped up to her and bowed, as gallant as you please, and asked could he be of help to her in any way at all? And the very next minute, a great bull seal reared up from the waves and opened his mouth and sang:



Those five notes were full of longing and loss and loneliness, and there was something in the sound of them that would make the hairs stand up along your arms. Duncan Mhòr knew then that this must be the king of the seals and, without waiting for the great beast to come out of the water at him, he just wrapped his plaid quickly round the seal-wife and hurried her away from the shore. She didn't have a choice but to go with him, for where else was she to go now that she was not able to return to the sea?

If it comes to that, Duncan Mhòr didn't have much of a choice either or the minister would have had something to say about it. So he married her, and for the next seven years they were neither more nor less unhappy than any other couple, though she wouldn't have stayed a night with him had she known what was hidden above the box-bed where she lay by his side. They had only just the one child, a boy with great dark eyes like a seal. And a strange enough child he was too, as quiet in his ways as his mother and always gazing about him with those big, uncanny eyes. They called him Duncan after his father, but because his hair was as white as shell sand he always went by the name of Duncan Bàn.

Now in those days the island folk prided themselves on being courteous to strangers, and once the seal-wife was dressed in clothes from the bottom of the kist that had belonged to Duncan's mother, and with Duncan's mother's old wedding ring on her finger, and her silvery hair braided up and covered with a shawl, she looked like enough to the other women, if you didn't peer too closely. It's a well-known fact that the people of the sea can speak as good Gaelic as the people of the Isles, so the seal-wife could have told her story had she wished, but she kept mum about it even to her husband, and of course Duncan Mhòr never let on what he knew, still less what he had done. If she was grieving over her own folk out on the skerries, no one ever saw her shed a tear, but sometimes of an evening she would take her little boy by the hand and go down to the shore and stand sighing and gazing out at the sea. And then folk would whisper, was she maybe thinking of a former husband who had maybe drowned in the shipwreck that cast her up on the island?

But as for Duncan Mhòr, he was finished with the sea. He was a brave man and a reckless man but he wasn't stupid, so from then on he put away his nets and stuck to the crofting for a living. But it was a poor enough living he made of it, and every now and then, when his wife was away from the house, he would take down the fine seal skin and look at it and wonder should he try to sell it. Until at last a day came when his wife, who walked as quietly as a seal moves through the water, came very softly to the house door and saw what her husband was holding. Then her heart stood still within her for anger and for joy, for she knew at last who had stolen her seal skin.

She turned and walked away as softly as she had come and Duncan Mhòr never heard her. But the next day, when he came home, there was no pot on the fire and no fire on the hearth and the house was empty. He went down to the shore then, and found his small son sitting all alone on the sand, playing a game with a handful of pebbles and a wedding ring. He was smiling to himself as he played, but the tears ran down his cheeks, and he looked up from his game and sang in a dry, sad little voice:



And that is how Duncan Mhòr Macrae learnt that his seal-wife had found her seal skin again and gone back to her own people.

Now, the old man who told that story to Annie Laurie's grannie, his name was Duncan Bàn Macrae. But there are many men called Duncan Macrae in the Western Isles, and as for the byname, he was white-haired right enough, for he was getting on for ninety years old. And of course Annie Laurie's grannie couldn't ask was he the Duncan Bàn of the story, for you will understand that there is no mannerly way to ask a man does he have seal blood in him. But however that may be, he not only had the story, he had the bit of tune that the seal-king sang to the seal-wife, and he sang it to Annie Laurie's grannie. And many years later, when I was a wee girl, Annie Laurie sang it to me.

After I had heard that story, I used to go down to the shore myself and look for seals. But our east coast seals are wary and keep their distance from the land. I would see their heads sometimes, bobbing far out, and once I found a dead one on the beach. But I never saw a live one close to, and I never heard one sing.

Afterword

This version of one of the many Scottish and Irish legends in which seals take on human form was devised for 'Magical Animals', a programme of folktales and folk songs performed in the Lyons Concert Hall, University of York on 18 May 1985. Back then, university open days were not admissions marketing exercises but opportunities for local schoolchildren and their parents to discover something of the creative side of academic life. On that particular occasion, the ground floor of the Music Department resounded with the bonging of gongs as small children set about the Department's treasured gamelan with big, soft-headed mallets, while upstairs larger children and their parents sat in a semicircle listening to stories and songs. Because of the oral nature of the occasion, I consigned my story to memory rather than writing it down, where it has remained for almost thirty years.

The starting point for the story was the seal music, which was played by the great clarinetist Alan Hacker. Alan, who taught in the University of York's Music Department for ten years from 1976, was a musician of extraordinary energy, inventiveness and generosity of spirit. He is probably best known for his reconstruction of the original basset clarinet scores of Mozart's clarinet concerto and quintet, and for the bravura playing and mastery of extended techniques which inspired major works by Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies, among many other composers, but his musical range encompassed the entire history of the clarinet, and even some of its prehistory. When, in 1979, York archaeologists unearthed an almost complete set of Viking pan pipes, miraculously preserved by the boggy conditions in which it had lain buried, they took the waterlogged little slab of boxwood to Alan, who was able to produce five clear notes from it, unheard for a millennium.

Alan was proud of his Highland ancestry (his middle name, Ray, was an anglicisation of Macrae) and he had a great love of folk music, often finishing a classical concert by performing 'She Moved Through the Fair' or 'My Lagan Love' on the chalumeau, a simple, keyless clarinet which he had made from 'a hollowed out piece of elder about 6" long into which [he] cut tone holes and fitted a tiny, single reed mouthpiece'.⁴ One of the most memorable of the many words and music projects on which I worked with him was a student production of Harrison Birtwistle's music theatre piece 'Bow Down', based on variants of the ballad of 'The Two Sisters', for which I was the mask-maker and costume designer. It is typical of Alan's eclecticism that he paired this with Beethoven's incidental music for Goethe's *Egmont*, an equally violent and passionate story from a completely different historical and cultural box, for which I wrote a short verse drama to stand in for Goethe's five-act tragedy.

I first encountered the seal music in David Thomson's haunting book *The People of the Sea*, in which he tells us that it was transcribed by the musicologist Francis Collinson from one of the recordings of the voices of grey seals 'at play, in love, in anger, in distress', which the wildlife broadcaster Ludwig Koch made 'in the caves and on the cliffs and shores of the island of Skomer', and that it was sung 'during a terrible storm' by 'a bachelor seal, lonely and disconsolate upon a rock'. Thomson adds that 'One cannot get a true idea of the phrase by playing it on the piano. The chanter or the fiddle get nearer to it'.⁵ Although he does include Collinson's annotation that the fourth note is 'rather sharp in pitch', it was only a few days ago, when I checked out the original source of the transcription, the December 1951 issue of *The Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, where it appears under the charming title *Actual Song of the Seal*, that I discovered that the phrase was 'followed by a short sound of indeterminate high pitch'.⁶ Paradoxically, since it didn't feature in our performance, it is this unimaginable sound, which he would have been able both to imagine and to create, that brings Alan back most vividly. In the chapter on 'The Clarinet in 20th-Century Music' which he added to Frederick Thurston's valuable little

book, *Clarinet Technique*, he shares some of the secrets of 'tone shading and split notes'⁷ which gave him his exceptional command of harmonic colour and multiphonics.

Even without that final split note, Alan brought an extra touch of Hacker magic to what must have been the shortest couple of solos of his career by playing the seal music without moving his fingers on the keys of the clarinet, making the production of the sound seem utterly mysterious and otherworldly. I recently described this musical conjuring trick to Jonathan Sage, one of Alan's former students and himself a brilliant young virtuoso clarinetist, and found that he had no idea how it could have been pulled off.

Sadly, Alan died in April 2012, so the secret of the seal music is lost forever, and his playing of it was never recorded. I have tried to capture an echo of it in this retelling of the tale.

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I am grateful to the English Folk Dance and Song Society for permission to quote the music transcription first published in the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, vol. VI, no. 3, p. 64, under the title 'Actual Song of the Seal'.

Notes

1. In memory of.
2. The Great.
3. A strip of sandy, grassy land near the shore.
4. Alan Hacker, sleeve notes, *Clarinet Collection* (Finchcock, Kent: Amon Ra, 1983, ASIN: B000050V36), 4. This recording, made with the keyboard player Richard Burnett, is still available on CD, and is an excellent introduction both to the history of clarinet music and to Alan's distinctive musical voice.
5. David Thomson, *The People of the Sea: Celtic Tales of the Seal-Folk* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), 222-3.
6. Francis Collinson, 'Actual Song of the Seal', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 6, no. 3 (1951), 64.
7. Alan Hacker, 'The Clarinet in 20th-Century Music', in Frederick Thurston, *Clarinet Technique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 45.