

Michaelmas Day

On the 29th of September a festival in honor of St. Michael is held throughout the Western coasts and isles.

The Eve of St. Michael is the eve of bringing in the carrots, of baking the *struan*, of killing the lamb, and of stealing the horses. The Day of St. Michael is the Day of the early mass, the day of the sacrificial lamb, the day of the oblation *struan*, the day of the distribution of the lamb, the day of the distribution of the *struan*, the day of the pilgrimage to the burial ground of their forefathers, the day of the burial ground service, the day of giving and receiving the carrots with their wishing and acknowledgements, and the day of the *oda* -- the athletics of the men and the racing of the horses. The Night of Michael is the night of the dance and the song, of the merry-making, of the lovemaking, and of the love gifts.

Some days before the festival of St. Michael the women and girls go to the fields and plains of the townland to procure carrots. The afternoon of the Sunday immediately preceding St. Michael's day is specially devoted to this purpose, and on this account is known as *Domhnach Curran* -- Carrot Sunday. When the soil is soft and friable, the carrots can be pulled out of the ground without digging. When, however, the soil is hard, a space is dug to give the hand access to the root. This space is made in the form of an equal-sided triangle, technically called the *torcan*, diminutive of *torc*, a cleft. The instrument used is a small mattock of three prongs called *tri-meurach*, three-fingered... The three sided *torcan* is meant to typify the three-sided shield and the three-fingered *sliopag*, the trident of St. Michael, and possibly each to symbolize the Trinity.... Each woman intones a rune to her own tune and time irrespective of those around her.

The people do not retire to rest on the Eve of St. Michael. The women are engaged all night on baking *struain*, on household matters, and on matters personal to themselves and to others, while the men are out and in watching their horses in the fields and stables. It is permissible on this night to appropriate a horse, wherever found and by whatever means, on which to make the pilgrimage and to perform the circuiting.

The people act upon this ancient privilege and steal horses without compunction, owners and stealers watching and outwitting and circumventing one another. It is obligatory to leave one horse with the owner to carry himself and his wife on the pilgrimage and to make the circuiting, but this may be the worst horse in the townland. ... A male lamb, without spot or blemish, is slain.

A cake called *struan Micheil* is made of all the cereals grown on the farm during the year. It represents the fruit of the field, as the lamb represents the fruit of the flocks. Oats, bere and rye are the only cereals grown on the Isles. These are fanned on the floor, ground in the quern, and their meal in equal parts used in the *struan*. The *struan* should contain a peck of meal and should be baked on a lamb skin. The meal is moistened with sheep's milk, the sheep being deemed the most sacred animal. ... The *struan* is baked by the eldest daughter in the family, guided by her mother, and assisted by her eager sisters. As she moistens the meal with the milk the girl softly says:

*Progeny and prosperity of family,
Mystery of Michael,
Protection of the Trinity*

A *leac struain* or *struain flag*, brought by the young men of the family from the moorland during the day, is securely set on edge before the fire, and the *struan* is set on edge against it. The fire should be of *crionach caon*, sacred fagots, such as the fagots of the oak, the rowan, the bramble, and others. The blackthorn, wild fig, trembling aspen and other 'crossed' woods are avoided. As the *struan* gains consistency, three successive layers of a batter of cream, eggs and butter are laid on each side alternately. The batter ought to be put on with three tail feathers of a cockerel of the year, but in Uist this is generally done with *badan murain*, a small bunch of bent-grass. This cake is called *struan treao*, family *struan*; *struan mor*, large *struan*; and *struan comachaidh*, communal *struan*. Small *struans* are made for individual members of the family... If a member of the family be absent or dead, a *struan* is made in his or her name. This *struan* is shared among the family and special friends of the absent one in his or her name, or given to the poor who have no corn of their own. In mixing the meal of the individual *struan*, the woman kneading it mentions the name of the person for whom it is being made.

The individual *struans* of a family are uniform in size but irregular in form, some being three-cornered, symbolic of the Trinity; some five symbolic of the Trinity with Mary and Joseph added; some seven, symbolic of the seven mysteries; some nine, symbolic of the nine archangels; some round, symbolic of eternity. Various ingredients are introduced into the small *struans*, as cranberries, bilberries, brambleberries, caraway seed, and wild honey. Those who make them and those for whom they are made vie with their friends who shall have the best and most varied ingredients. Many cautions are given to her who is making the *struan* to take exceptional care of it. Ills and evils innumerable would befall herself and her house should any mishap occur to the *struan*. Should it break before being fired, it betokens ill to the girl baking it; if after being fired and before being used, to the household. Were the *struan* flag to fall and the *struan* with it, the omen is full of evil augury to the family. A broken *struan* is not used. The *fallaid*, or dry meal remaining on the baking board after the *struan* is made, is put into a *mogan*, a footless stocking, and dusted over the flocks on the following day -- being the Day of Michael -- to bring them progeny and plenty and prosperity, and to ward from them evil-eye, mischance and murrain. Occasionally the *fallaid* is preserved for a year and a day before being used.

After the father and mother have distributed their gifts to the poor, the family mount their horses and set out on their pilgrimage to perform the circuiting of St. Michael's burying-ground.

One dance is called *Cailleach an Dudain*, carlin of the mill-dust.

It is danced by a man and a woman. The man has a rod in his right hand, variously called *slachdan druidheachd*, druidic wand, or *slachdan geasachd*, magic wand. The man and woman gesticulate and attitudinize before one another, dancing round and round, in and out, crossing and re-crossing, changing and exchanging places. The man flourishes the wand over his own head and over the head of the woman, whom he touches with the wand, and who falls down, as if dead, at his feet. He bemoans his dead carlin, dancing and gesticulating around her body. He then lifts up her left hand, and looking into the palm, breathes upon it, and touches it with the wand. Immediately the limp hand becomes alive and moves from side to side and up and down. The man rejoices and dances around the figure on the floor. And having done the same to the right hand, and to the left and right foot in succession, they also become alive and move. But although the limbs are living, the body is still inert. The man kneels over the woman and

breathes into her mouth and touches her heart with the wand. The woman comes to life and springs up, confronting the man. Then the two dance vigorously and joyously as in the first part.

Another dance is called *cath nan coileach*, the combat of the cocks; another *turraban nan tunnag*, waddling of the ducks; another *ruidhleadh nan coileach dubha*, reeling of the black cocks; another *cath nan curaidh*, contest of the warriors. ... The sword dance was performed in eight sections instead of four, as now.

When eating them, they threw a piece over each shoulder alternately, saying:

*Here to thee wolf, spare my sheep;
Here to thee fox, spare my lambs;
Here to thee eagle, spare my goats;
Here to thee raven, spare my kids;
Here to thee marten, spare my fowls;
Here to thee harrier, spare my chickens.*