

Calum: The Boy who Blethered

It was a cold night in May, with an unseasonal wind when Calum came into the world.

Mairi's first, he was a big baby, but the midwife wasn't worried: Mairi was healthy and fit, had carried the baby well, and everything looked like it was going to go swimmingly.

A baby boy was born, the first of the new generation to this family of crofters on South Uist.

The boy, named Calum for his grandfather, was a lovely wee thing, and all who visited his delighted parents commented on what a bonny baby Calum was.

As Calum settled into life, and his eyes became focussed he would often see things that just weren't there. His eyes would fix on one spot and he'd watch with such intensity that sometimes Mairi, feeling unsettled to her very bones, would snatch him up and turn him so he'd have to look elsewhere.

Growing, his watching progressed to being entertained by the invisible. His eyes would flicker about, following the antics of some part of his young imagination, and suddenly he'd be giggling away at nothing at all, or reaching out hands to shadows. He'd play with invisible friends with the same enthusiasm reserved for those made of flesh and blood. Mairi and her husband ignored this, but they'd look away, not wanting to be privy to something that might make them question too much.

Calum grew quickly, and by the time he was a few years old, he was rarely inside, much to the delight of his father, who felt there was nothing better for a young lad to be out of doors all day, playing and getting mucky with it. If nothing else, it might calm and temper his imagination.

Soon everyone had forgotten how unsettling he'd been as a baby, for as a child he was incredibly entertaining. He told stories, endless stories, that delighted and piqued the attention of even the least romantic of the locals. He'd settle down and tell them all about the lapwing, how she'd laid two of her eggs and that she had great hopes for many more. He'd tell tales of conversing with seals, and inform all of the news contained within the corn bunting song. People would stop the work when they saw Calum coming and they'd settle down awaiting his new tales. The stories were rarely repeated, but the stuff that came out of that wee mouth was always unexpected, and always wonderful.

"Jings, that lad's a wee blether", they'd say in admiring tones. "You never know what he's going to come out with next."

"You know, the other day he was telling me about what the ravens thought of the harsh winter this year; you'd never credit it," they'd chuckle away. "Apparently we're in for a better spring." And they'd put their heads together and laugh, but none would remember this joke when the longer days of spring dawned reliably bright and bonny, with just enough rain to get their crops going, leading into a warm summer.

No, no one credited any of the words that came out of Calum's mouth as anything but idle chatter, even when it was only and always truth that he spoke. He knew things without knowing how they came to be known and the animals really did converse with this odd boy. No one guessed this, passing it all off as the whimsy and fancy of a youngster and there to be appreciated while it went on.

"Acht, there's no harm in a wee boy's stories, is there?" they would repeat to one another.

"He'll grow out of it soon enough, and surely we'll all miss it when he does."

But Calum didn't. As he grew older and wandered further, his stories became more and more far-fetched. He told of watching a mermaid dance and swim with the seals around Rubh' Aird-mhicheil, and of the black horse that lurked around the edges of Lochan Sgeireach. He'd tell tales of what the eagles were up to, and when people laughed and asked him how he knew, in all seriousness, he'd answer with a casual "they told me so". He'd tell about storms that would be coming before any sight of them was on the horizon; he'd know about a lameness that couldn't be seen; and could find the lambs that were lost before their mothers knew they were missing. Unfortunately, the uncanniness of Calum meant that people would pay his wisdoms no attention, and if they did start to wonder, they'd brush it off as something everyone would have known, if they'd taken the time to look.

As the years drifted past, and Calum showed no signs of slowing down his imagination, people were becoming fair wearied with it all. When he appeared, and started to blether away as per usual, folks would now glance at one another, not quite meeting the other's eyes, but just to see if they were thinking the same. Time was rolling on, and their own children were long past the stage of telling stories: was that normal, or was he?

Soon after the different reactions Calum's stories were receiving from people became more and more pronounced. Whereby before they'd been a welcome diversion from everyday life, a wee bit of the mystical to take them places new, so that folks would down tools, sit a moment and listen to the wee lad. Now, there was a subtle shift and soon, people could be heard quietly saying: "I don't have time today to stop and listen to Calum's blethering. Here, quick, I'll just nip off as he's coming." And soon these words were being repeated not-so-

quietly and it became a truth that Calum was just a hopeless blether, and could do with learning some manners.

Calum now found that backs would turn as he approached, the field would suddenly be empty as he jumped the dyke. Feelings were running high, but Calum either didn't notice, or just didn't want to. He didn't stop blethering away, friendly-like, but now, when people called him a blether, they weren't saying it with a smile on their faces. It was meant negatively: a pest, a bother, a nuisance.

It wasn't in Calum's nature to stop telling stories about the wonderful experiences he'd had, or what he'd heard from the wildlife around. He didn't realise that people no longer enjoyed them, and in fact the first moment that he realised something might be amiss, came from his ma.

She'd called him in for his tea, which she'd sat in front of him with a thump. The women had been gossiping today, until one, forgetting she was there, or maybe remembering but not bothering, started to moan about young Calum.

"He's a blinking pain", she'd started with, "I can't get a moments peace before he pops up telling his tall tales."

And as the others chimed in with their similar tales of woe, Calum's mother sneaked off, shamefaced and sore-hearted, knowing tonight she'd have to talk to her son.

Calum sat at the table and started to blether. He'd had a busy day, helping out on the croft, and was just telling his mum that the milking cow, Daisy, had complained of a pain in her hind foot, when she cut him off.

"Calum, will you stop with your stories for a moment?"

“But ma, it’s not a story, it’s really true.”

“*Calum.*” The tone had been too sharp, she looked at him to ask forgiveness, but as he looked at her through his too-long fringe, with his pale blue, curious eyes, she felt fury, rather than pity. “It’s gone on long enough, you’ll be leaving the school soon, and you cannot keep telling these nonsense tales. You’ve got to grow up.”

Try as he might, Calum could not persuade Mairi that his stories weren’t nonsense: she would listen to him no more. Finally, back held rigid with indignation, proudly upright and hiding the upset he was feeling, Calum left the house to seek solace in the land he knew so well.

He walked and walked; it was June so the sun would be shining well past ten o’clock, and it was still early when he left the house. His legs kept going, and every time he considered turning around he remembered his mum’s words: “No one believes you, Calum. In fact, you’re becoming the laughing stock of the township, and I won’t have it any more. Better you say nothing at all than take us for fools with your silly stories.”

After a couple of hours of walking, Calum ended up at the top of Beinn Mhor, the big hill; a place where he often sought sanctuary with the eagles. He hunkered down in the last sunlit portion of the cairn and closed his eyes as he wished to be seen. Soon enough, he felt the air around him become charged with intention and he opened his eyes knowing what would be looking back at him. There, on the other side of the cairn, sat his friend, the king of all the eagles, looking down at the boy with compassionate eyes.

Calum by this stage was in his mid-teens. He’d grown tall and gangly, not yet having weight to fill out his bones. He was handsome, but his long, clever fingers and shaggy mop of hair

was at odds with his stocky contemporaries, who had hands that were thick with overuse, and close-cropped hair. He stood out, and it was only when he was in the company of other animals that this didn't seem to matter: humans were more judgemental than all the others put together.

"Well met, Calum, how are you this evening?"

The story burst out of Calum before he could stop it. About how he was the one that was different, how he had no true friends, about the fear of his future amongst those that seemingly hated him, for they so strongly disliked that which made him *him*.

The eagle looked down at Calum. The one that had been gifted to them at the oddest moment in time. Every bird and beast had thought that the last seer was gone, but here, in this fourteen-year old boy, there was a new one with the strongest sight that had been seen for a long time. Sadly, he'd had the misfortune of being born in a time when people were turning their backs on the old-ways, and the stories of a seer were no longer a joy.

"Calum, this is what I have to say to you, and heed my words well.

"Your time is not now. Your moment has not yet arrived. You must be patient. Find a way of coping with the day-to-day that you'll have to live until you achieve what you need to achieve.

"Another will come, another with a sight like you, and she won't arrive soon, but she will arrive. And your job will be to ease her through this world, help her to find her place: help her find her home. She'll be born into a world that none of us will recognise, but you'll be her friend and you must save your learnings for her.

“Remember though, that there’s wisdom in what you do. You can help people without your stories; you can see into their hearts, their pain, and their problems, and with this information you can help them. See you do it well, and you’ll live your best life.”

Not all eagles are prophets, just like not all humans are seers, but this eagle was bestowed with powers beyond that of the ordinary, and as he spoke his words, the boy felt a peace growing in his heart, that he knew would last forever. He’d received his prophecy, and live by this he would.

Calum grew up different from what we’d expect. After the night he spent on Beinn Mhor, only returning as the morning dawned bright and early, he grew quiet, much to the relief of all. He continued to grow tall but with every inch of height, some of his words seemed to become stolen and after a while of almost pure silence, when he started to speak again, slowly and uncertainly, what he did say was of such value that people knew to listen.

He knew when the wind would come before anyone else could feel it, and would set to the work of making sure everything was protected. He quietly told the milkers that the cows would be going off their milk, or the fishermen that the tides were changing and what could be done about both. He knew when to plant the crops and when to wait, and his knowledge was shared selflessly, simply and seemingly without personal gain.

He would sooth babies that would not sleep, giving their frantic mothers some respite. He’d provide a calm passing for those near death’s door and was better than any doctor at diagnosing ills – both visible or hidden, and could cure them too. Calum could bring calm to

chaos, just by his presence, for no one could ever seem to recall how he'd done it after normality had resumed.

In all, he became a widely respected member of the township, and not one of his neighbours suspected that what they knew of Calum wasn't all that there was to know. Not one knew that he'd been swimming with mermaids, precisely where he'd first seen them fifteen years before, or that he'd sired a child with a selkie, and once the ten years of his selkie-life was over, the boy would be given into Calum's care. Not once did anyone wonder why Calum, the boy who blethered, had become so silent as he grew up: not once did anyone wonder what happened that night he slept on Beinn Mhor.

The lack of curiosity excited by this gentle giant, meant that his life passed unnoticed. Throughout Calum's life he awaited the arrival of the unknown child that he would need to lead. His selkie son was passed off as the boy of a distant, mainland cousin, who was coming to live with Calum. The fact that he grew up to be so like his supposed-uncle in looks and behaviour only incurred slight gossip, but was quickly overlooked and forgotten. Skelly sank into place like he'd been born to it: accompanying Calum on all his wanderings, and brought a brightness to the township as he went. He was a bright, intelligent boy, and was beloved by all. His marriage to one of the bonniest girls on the islands came as a surprise to no one, and it was only when Katie was born that people started to notice the family and the older ones commented on how much she reminded them of a young Calum.

Here she was: the new generation's seer.

Calum looked down at her wee head, at the dark hair already growing soft across her skin, and knew her to be the one he'd been told about all those years before. She was the

granddaughter of a seer, a daughter of a selkie-childe; something rich flowed through her veins and her journey was not certain at all.

As her gaze caught sight of the wee man that was dancing about her cot to entertain her, invisible to all but her and her grandfather, Calum knew with certainty in his heart that the protection of his granddaughter was his, and that the prophecy had now come true, for the boy that blethered.