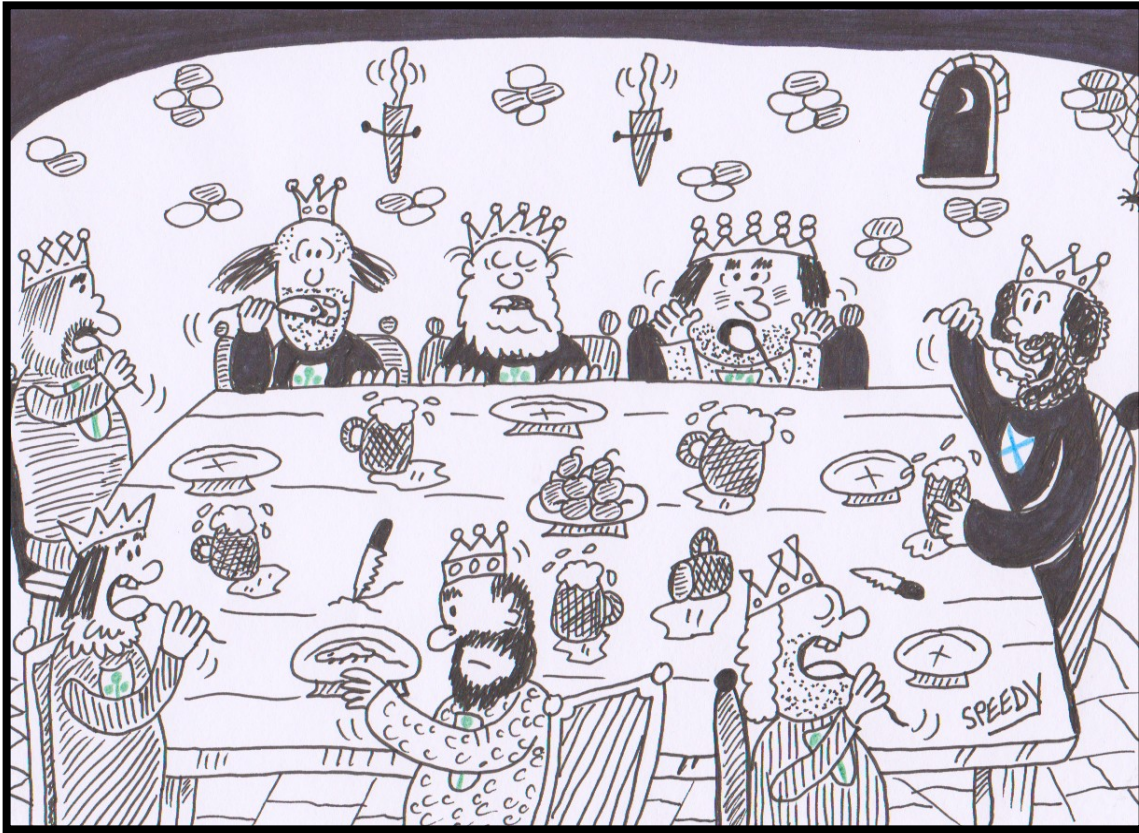


SCOTTISH MOUSE FEAST



SCOTTISH FOLK-LORE

BY DONALD A. MACKENZIE

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There is evidence of the impersonation of the cult of the god Apollo Smintheus (“Mouse Apollo”), or “Apollo, Lord of Mice”, as Andrew Lang puts it.¹

In the *Irish Book of Leinster* there is a remarkable account of a ceremonial mouse feast in Alba (Scotland) in connection with the events which led to the battle of Mag Mucrime.

A Munster ruler named Lugaid Mac-con had been defeated in battle and took flight to Scotland. Lugaid concealed his identity from the king of Alba, to whom he and his band of warriors gave military service, which was greatly appreciated. Lugaid feared that Art, High King of Ireland, might ask the Scottish king to put him to death. He therefore forbade his men to mention his name or treat him as their ruler, and the whole band therefore behaved “as if every man of them was a king to the other”.

¹ Custom and Myth, p. 103.

The king of Scotland came to hear of Lugaid's flight from Munster and strongly suspected the identity of his ally. He wished to help Lugaid, and therefore ordered that a number of mice should be killed and supplied to the Irishmen as food! The *Book of Leinster* story proceeds:

“Then he (the king) puts on the portion of each man of them a mouse, and it red raw, with its hair on. And then their portions are set before them, and they are told that they would be killed unless they ate the mice . . . Therefore they became very pale. Never had a more grievous annoyance been brought to them.”

The king instructed his major-domo to inform the Irishmen that they would be killed unless they ate the mice. The guests were consequently in great distress.

“No luck be to him by whom (this) was commanded!’ said Lugaid, putting he mouse into his mouth, while the king observed him.

“Thereat all the men put them (into their mouths). There was one unhappy man of them who would vomit when putting the tail of the mouse to his lips.

“A sword across thy throat.’ said Lugaid. ‘The eating of a mouse includes its tail.’

“ Then the man swallows the mouse.

“ They¹ do something for thee,’ says the king from the door.

“ So do I for them,” says Lugaid.

“ Art thou Lugaid?’ asks the king.

“ That is my name,’ said Lugaid.

“ Welcome to thee in sooth!’ says the king. “Why hast thou hidden thyself from me?’

“ For fear of thee,’ says Lugaid.

“ I would avenge thy sighing up to this day had I known thee.”

The king of Alba was as good as his word. He raised a strong army and, invading Ireland, won a great victory which brought the overlordship of the whole island to Lugaid.

In this narrative² a mouse feast takes the place of the blood covenant which obtained in Ireland, the blood of the parties concerned being dropped into a vat, mixed with new milk and wine and then drunk by the contracting parties.³ Lugaid and his men became “mouse brothers” to the king of Alba and his subjects.

¹ The Mice. ² *Revue Celtique*, Vol. XIII, pp. 426 *et seq*, translation by Whitley Stokes.

³ *Revue Celtique*, Vol. XIII, p.75.

There is no record of an ancient mouse ceremony of this kind in England or Wales or, indeed, in Western Europe. One must, seek for the source of origin in the Near East, where Apollo Smintheus was adored. Andrew Lang in his *Custom and Myth*¹ would have it that the connection of the mouse with Apollo, the mouse place-names, the mouse names of individuals and the mouse feasts at Rhodes, Gela, Lesbos and Crete provide evidence of totemism. He refers to the mouse feast mentioned in *Isaiah* (Ixvi, 17)

“They that sanctify themselves and purify themselves in the gardens behind one tree in the midst, eating swine’s flesh, and the abomination and the mouse, shall be consumed together said the Lord.”

It will be noted that the pig and mouse are associated in this passage.

The curious lore associated with the mouse and the reputation of that animal as a “life giver” appear to have had origin in ancient Egypt. When in the Nile valley, during the inundation, mice were seen emerging from cracks in the soil, their hind parts covered with mud, it was thought the animals had been created from earth by the combined generative influence of the “new water” and the sun. This belief is referred to by Pliny² and Diodorus Siculus (I, 10), the latter remarking that nowhere else in the world can such a wonder be witnessed. There is evidence that the mouse was sacred to the Letopolite Horus, to whom figures of mice were dedicated. This god was usually referred to by the Greeks as Apollo. It may be that the influence of Egypt is to be traced in the mouse lore connected with Apollo Smintheus in Anatolia.

The earliest instances of devouring mice as medicine have been obtained from Egypt. In the pre-dynastic cemetery at Naga ed Dèr in upper Egypt were found many bodies which had been naturally preserved in the hot, dry sand. Professor G. Elliot Smith, who dissected a number of them, found “the remains of mice in the alimentary canals of children under circumstances which prove that the small rodent had been eaten after being skinned”. Dr. Netolitzky informed him that the body of a mouse was the last resort of medical practitioners in the East several millennia later as a remedy for children *in extremis*, as it still is in Europe.³ The writer in his boyhood once saw an elderly Highland woman taking the liver from a newly caught mouse to be given to a child who was supposed to be dying. The cure proved satisfactory, for the child revived and ultimately recovered. Roasted

¹ Pp. 103-20. ² National History, IX, 84. ³ G. Elliot Smith, *The Ancient Egyptians* (London, 1923, 2nd edition,) p.50.

mouse was reputed in Scotland to be a cure for whooping-cough and smallpox.¹ It was also a cure for jaundice. The field-mouse, called “the thraw mouse”, running over the foot of a person, was supposed to produce paralysis of the foot.² The writer has heard it stated that if a mouse runs over a sleeping person or domestic animal, the parts traversed become paralysed. “Mouse medicine” is still regarded as a cure for whooping-cough in Gloucestershire, Leicestershire, Norfolk and Suffolk.³ Mr. Warren R. Dawson gives many instances of the use of mice as medicine in ancient and modern times.⁴ In the Beaumont and Fletcher play “The Knight of the Burning Pestle” the wife of the Bell Inn, hearing that young Michael is suffering from chilblains, advises Mrs. Merrythought, his mother, to have his feet rubbed with the skin of a newly caught mouse. Mrs. E. Tawse Jollie, Hervetia, S. Melsetter, South Rhodesia, in a letter to the writer tells that Boer women give roasted mouse to children as “a cure for weakness of the bowel”.

In the north of Scotland the writer used to hear old gardeners declare that a mouse should be buried under an apple tree and a cat under a pear tree to ensure good crops of fruit. Professor W.J. Watson informs me that at Fortingal in Perthshire a standing stone is known in Gaelic as that of “my little (or sacred) mouse”. Evidently the Near Eastern mouse cult reached Scotland as well as England, but it is only in Scotland that the ceremonial mouse feast can be traced. In Ireland there are ancient manuscripts references to “mouse lords” which were demons.

¹ A. MacGregor, *Highland Superstitions* (Stirling, 1901), pp. 37-9

² Rev. Walter Gregor, *Folklore of the North-east of Scotland* (London, 1881), p.127

³ E.S. Hartland, *County Folklore – Leicestershire and Rutland* (London, 1895), p.55.

⁴ *The Bridle of Pegasus* (London, 1930), pp. 101 *et seq.*