

The plague and Mary of Callart

by Ronnie Black

One of the Gaelic stories collected and written down by John Dewar in the 1860s has a particular resonance for us today. It's about how the plague came to the shores of Loch Leven, and how true love defeated it.

The location is Callart, on the north shore, opposite Glencoe. The Camerons of Callart seem to have lived in a little three-storey tower-house. Dewar begins with the history of the family, and speaks of Mary of Callart, who was so kind that on a cold winter's day she cut her twelve-yard plaid in two and gave half of it to a beggar-woman. For this she had a huge row with the family, and took to living alone in the attic.

One day an Italian merchant-ship came into the loch with fine fabrics. Everyone except Mary went to see them and buy some. But they were contaminated with the plague.

Mary's father, mother, sister and five brothers suffered and died, and so did the servants. She was trapped in the attic, afraid to go down.

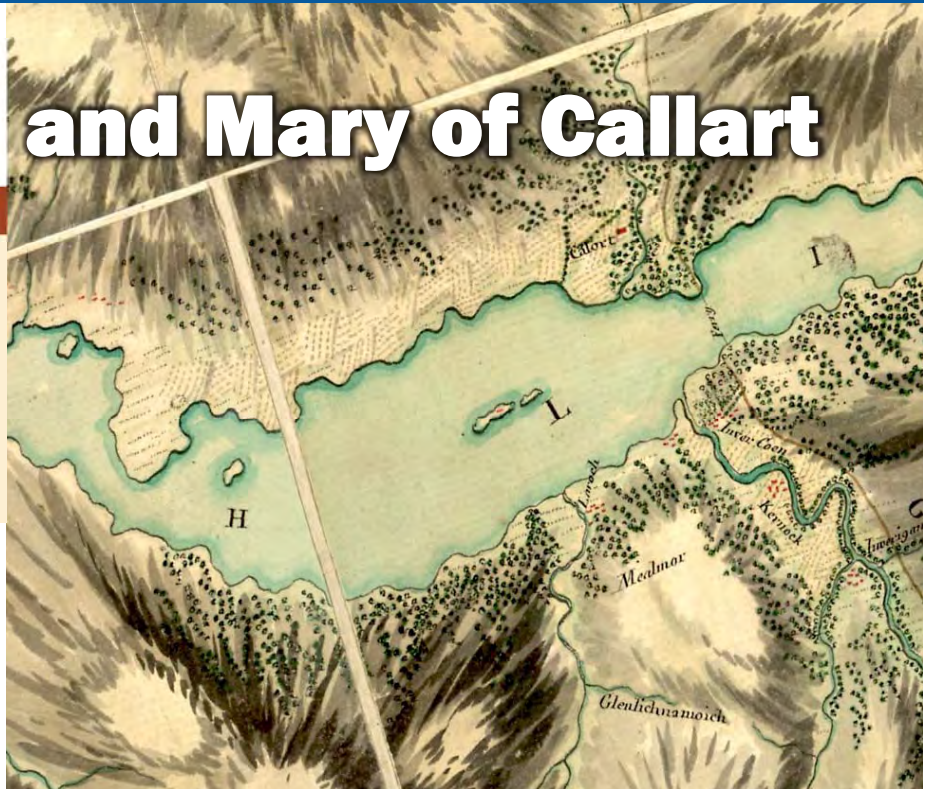
The people of the district held a meeting and decided that Callart House must be burned down. A man called John Cameron was chosen for the job, but refused to do it until Mary had died. So once a day he went and shouted to see if she was still alive. Guards were placed everywhere to warn travellers that there was plague in the place. Every effort was made, says Dewar, to prevent the plague spreading through the district.

One day when John Cameron went to the house Mary shouted that she would like young MacConnachie Campbell of Inverawe to know the plight she was in. He was in love with her, and they were to be married. Cameron promised to bring the message, and somehow he evaded the guards.

As he approached Inverawe, which is near Taynuilt by Loch Etive, Cameron met a young man who proved to be MacConnachie himself – he'd been dreaming about Mary, and was on his way to visit the family. Cameron told him about the awful events, and MacConnachie said, "Would you be willing for us to try and save Mary if we can?"

"Yes," said Cameron.

At this point we've reached the central part of the story, which is a long one, so I'm going to give this bit in a full literal translation.



William Roy's 1747-1755 map showing "Callart" from the National Library of Scotland

"MacConnachie went home to Inverawe. He got an eight-oared galley ready to put to sea with oars and all that was needed, and found an eight-man crew. He brought with him some clothes belonging to one of his sisters, then they set off down Loch Etive, around the promontories to the Firth of Lorn, and up by Appin. Night had fallen before they were past Ardsheal. When turning into Loch Leven they began to see beacons in front, at the Ballachulish Ferry. They realised there were lookouts there ahead of them.

"When they arrived off Lettermore they put in to land. Some of the men knew the district. They went to Lettermore, found a haystack, stole armfuls of the hay and brought it to the boat. They soaked it and made straw ropes of it, then wound the wet straw around the oars so that they would make no noise against the gunwale. They organised themselves so that only two oars would be rowing at any given time, and when the straw ropes on the two oars that were being used for rowing gave out, the men plying them would stop, and two others with oars that had straw ropes on them would start, and those who'd stopped rowing would put straw ropes on their own oars so that they'd be ready to start rowing when their time came around again.

"The crew took good care to have the flood tide with them to allow them to pass quickly through the narrows at Ballachulish and Carness. There was one big beacon on Rubha a' Phìobaire, one on Rubha Charnais, and one on Eilean Choinnich, with crowds of people gathered around each of the fires. MacConnachie himself sat at the helm. They went through the narrows at Ballachulish as quietly as they could, and as the light of the fire was in the sentinels' eyes, none of them spotted the boat going past. They passed Rubha

Dhonnachai le feathad ceann a bhreacain thòimh an toll bhà thòimh mhullach an taigh Dh'ionnsaich Mhairi, Bheir Mairi air ceann a bhreacain agus streap i a naid ris a bhreacain gus an do rainig i mullach an taill, Chuir Mac Dhonnachai a bhreacain rimps, agus dh'fhalbh iad comhla chun taobh a chladair far an dh'fhàg Mac Dhonnachai aodach a pheathar. agus dh'ionnluid Mairi i fein gu math anns an t-sàile, Chaidh Mac Dhonnachai a-stear beag mach anns an loch le Mairi, agus nigh e i, gus an robh ar-leis, na'n tugadh nigheadh a phlèighe bhàrr craicinn meach, nach robh fuigheal air bhith de'n phlèighe iar fhàgail gun nigheadh bhàrr Mhairi, Thug e dh'i aodach a pheathar gu chuir e air a chuir e a chuir e a bhreacain a thila se mach air an loch e.

The washing in Loch Leven: "If washing took plague out of a person's skin, there wasn't a scrap of plague left that hadn't been washed off Mary."

Charnais and Eilean Choinnich in the same way that they'd passed Rubha a' Phìobaire. And so they evaded the sentinels without being seen.

"They brought the boat ashore a little closer to Port Eachainn than to Callart. The ferryman at Port Eachainn was on guard where his ferry was tethered. Not having a fire going, he could see about him better than the guards at Rubha a' Phìobaire, Rubha Charnais and Eilean Choinnich, given how a beacon was burning in front of their eyes. He saw the boat coming to land, and approached them to stop them landing. When he realised who they were, and came to understand the nature of MacConnachie's mission, he allowed MacConnachie himself to come ashore, but refused to let the others do so.

"The men brought the boat away, and went to an islet called *Eilean a' Chòmhra* ('Coffin Island') at the end of Eilean Mhunna. They waited there until they got word from MacConnachie to come and bring him aboard again.

"MacConnachie left his sister's clothes at the shore, and made for John Cameron's house. John Cameron came with him straight away until they were near Callart House, where he shouted, 'Are you still alive, Mary?'

"Mary replied, 'Yes, but I'm afraid you're coming too often.'

"Cameron responded, 'Peter MacConnachie of Inverawe has come to see you.'

"Mary wept, and an earnest conversation took place between her and MacConnachie, who became emotional, and asked Cameron if he'd be able to find a long ladder.

"John said he would. He went away, found one and brought it back to MacConnachie, who took it and propped it up against the back of the house. Then he made a hole in through the roof towards where Mary was, and said to her, 'Mary, take off every stitch of clothes you have on till you're as naked as you were the night you were born. When you've done that, I'll pull you up.'

"Although Mary was appalled at the idea of going naked into the presence of a man, she stripped off her clothes and threw them away for fear some of the plague might adhere to them. MacConnachie let the end of his plaid down to Mary through the hole he'd made in the roof. Mary grasped the end of the plaid, and climbed up it until she'd reached the top of the hole. MacConnachie wrapped his plaid around her, and they went together to the edge of the shore where MacConnachie had left his sister's clothes. Mary washed herself well in the salt water. MacConnachie went with her a short distance out into the loch and

washed her until he reckoned that, if washing took plague out of a person's skin, there wasn't a scrap of plague left that hadn't been washed off Mary. He gave her his sister's clothes to put on, then put a stone in his plaid and threw it out into the loch.

"When Mary had dressed herself in his sister's clothes, MacConnachie signalled to the boat's crew, and they came in to the shore where he and Mary were. Mary and MacConnachie got into the boat, and pushed out from the shore. They couldn't go down the loch for the time being, but the crew rowed the boat up the loch while John Cameron went back to Callart House and set fire to it. MacConnachie and the crew were only a short distance past Port Eachainn when they saw the house engulfed in flames.

"They went on in the boat until they reached a small island near the top end of Loch Leven called Eilean na Banna. They landed on it, and stayed there for a while until the way was clear for them to go home. When the guards who were watching the roads saw that the Big House of Callart had been set on fire, they supposed that the plague had been burned with the house, and that the danger of its spreading through the district was past. So they left off watching the roads, and each of them went back to his own home.

"When MacConnachie was satisfied that the guards had ceased their vigil and the passage was open to them, they went back home to Inverawe. But when they got there, they weren't allowed to go to Inverawe House. They climbed Ben Cruachan until they were halfway up to the summit. The men who were with them put up bothies for them, and they



Loch Leven

stayed in those bothies for six weeks, spending part of the time keeping themselves supplied with food by hunting and fishing.

"When MacConnachie and Mary of Callart had been more than six weeks in the bothy, some people had stopped being worried that they'd contracted the plague. They came down to Inverawe, got married, and went to live in Inverawe House, where they were happy as long as MacConnachie lived."

There's a great deal more to the story. MacConnachie died in battle at Inverlochy, 2 February 1645. Mary married again, unhappily; she made many songs in praise of her first husband and in dispraise of her second one. And she died under a landslide.

