**Bovine Bodies and the Domestication of the Human Mind**

*Cozette Griffin-Kremer*

Very soon the novelty of it all [going to Heaven] will fade for Ansty. She will feel so ill at ease. It is all very fine and grand, but there is something missing in it. Something missing—"Thon amon dieul! the cow!"

—*The Tailor and Ansty* (Cross 1942, 161)

*Kine are the stairs that lead to Heaven; they are adored in Heaven itself.*

—*The Ramayana* (Coomaraswamy and Noble 1967, 372)

**LANDSCAPE**

People need not always make maps with a coordinate grid and to a precision scale in order to construct a rich and complex landscape of the mind. One of the most significant contributing factors in this process has been the domestication of plants and animals. I propose here to examine one particular case of relations with the latter—specifically cattle—in a sampling of sources from popular and written traditions from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, along with a look at some ethnographic and archaeological material from Europe and other continents, all to recall that the construction of these imagined states, which create meaning, is a constant in human endeavor. Indeed, in the often arduous business of getting on with everyday life, domestication has functioned as a continually changing conceptual tool in human development for millennia and we may consider the bovine body and behavior as a topos, the exploration of which has enabled us to define ourselves through comparison and opposition, as well as through the sharing of the deepest experiences. The ideal of consumption of a perfect product, obtained through profound consent, has also been one of the pathways that led humankind to conceive of the promise of a superhuman condition, immortality.

How have bovines and their bodies contributed to the making of the topos in which human beings invest their energy and passion, despair and desire? A medieval Irish source tells us that bovines made a part of our world, as we know it now. The Irish epic called the *Táin Bó Cúalgne*—“The Cattle Raid of Cooley”—ends its Homeric saga of death and destruction between the opposing forces of the provinces of Connacht and Ulster with a one-on-one battle
between the two primal protagonists of the tale, the bulls Findbennach and Donn Cúailgne. Brought with his heifers into the territory of the Connacht bull Findbennach, the Ulsterian Donn Cúailgne bellowed three times—a bold start, since no other bull dared even to low within hearing distance of Findbennach. Then both bulls did what bulls do in a dither: they pawed the ground, cast earth up over their withers, glared in battle fury, flared their nostrils, and charged, goring, tearing, and generally wearing each other down. This went on all day and night. On the morrow, Donn Cúailgne came back within sight of the men of Ireland laden with the fragmented remains of his rival. He let the liver of Findbennach drop and that became the place Crúachna Ae. He cast off a loin at the brink of Ath Mór, whence the name Ath Luain, then threw a thigh as far as Port Lárge, the ribcage to Dublin, whence the name Ath Clíath. Seeing him, women and boys exclaimed at the blinding sight of his approaching forehead, whence the place-name Taul Tairb.

The tale ends when Donn Cúailgne’s heart breaks like a nut in his breast (O’Rahilly 1970, 134–36, 270–72), yet the story itself is but the adumbration of another, and the bulls once lived in men’s bodies. They were even friends, recounts one of the remscéla or preliminary tales to the Tain Bó Cúalgne called De Chophur in Da Muccida, “Of the Transformations of the Two Swineherds.” In the latter, both men hold an honored place in their royal households, since they are the magician-swineherds of their kings, and both wield the magical power of transforming themselves into other beings. They begin their march toward grief when their respective folk, of Munster and Connacht, claim their own swineherd is more powerful. This leads to some tricky spells that stop swine from fattening, to reciprocal discontent, mockery, loss of a job, and a general downgrade in friendly relations. The two men recycle themselves as birds and tear each other apart, then take the form of water beasts and continue mutual carnage. This scenario is repeated in their subsequent avatars as stags, spirits, dragons, and water worms. In the latter form they impregnate two cows that give birth to the great bulls of the Táin Bó Cúalgne, whose final encounter creates geographic features and gives them their names.

As we see in a document some eight hundred years later, this conflict between bulls is enlisted again to characterize a classic regional opposition still familiar in our own landscape today. In his anthology of Scots Gaelic song and tradition, Alexander Carmichael (1928–1942, 4: 52–53) cites the song entitled “An Tarbh Gáidhealach” (The Highland Bull), which opens with a verse from the upland bull, followed by one from his lowland counterpart, each one vaunting their respective birthplaces, the heather ridge or the floor of a big house, and then ends with the pithy note that “the Highland bull turned on the Lowland bull and killed him.”

The medieval tales of the Táin Bó Cualgne and the avatars of the swineherds in their topological heritage can be seen as recapitulating a ritual process
for the appropriation of territory—as expressed in the Icelandic term of *landná-ma*—in which each feature of the landscape and its name have a primordial event as precedent. The significance of the bovine in this process, most especially of the character of the great bull called the Donn Cúalgne, could only have been underwritten by the omnipresence of his homonym, a divine figure in the earliest tales about the arrival of the Gaels in Ireland and a compelling shadow in the popular imagination well into the nineteenth century—the revered god of the dead, Donn, with his myriad of epithets (Müller-Lisowski 1946).

We find the bovine—this time inflected in the feminine—meeting with the divine and a place of special import in the hydronym of the River Boyne. The goddess Boand is the wife of Elcmar, a king of one of the Otherworld mounds that stud the Green Isle. The great god, the Dagda, desires her and casts a spell on Elcmar so that the king forgets the absence of his spouse. Boand’s union with the Dagda produces Oengus, the Mac Oc, or “Young Son,” often identified with Maphonos in the Gaulish pantheon. Boand’s end is also resonant of connections with continental Celtic traditions, in which the names of rivers are often formed on those of goddesses, such as Sequana (the Seine) or Matrona (the Marne), for Boand makes a fatal mistake. She dares make mock of the interdict on looking into the well of wisdom of the god Nechtan, even walking about it leftways, against the path of the sun and the proper order of the world. Three waves rise up from the well to pursue and engulf her at the mouth of the river that henceforth will bear her name—the Boyne, from Boand, *bó* plus *fhind*, (cow-white). Thus, the hydronym joins a constellation of toponyms like that of Boffin Island or Inis Bó Finn, a compound formation mentioned as long ago as Ptolemy in the form Buvinda.

If the bovine could converge with the divine and the place, it is hardly surprising to find it was a common element in the process of shaping the topos of a person through that identity marker par excellence, the personal name. So it is that the hero of the tale of *Cath Almaine*, “The Battle of Allen,” is called Donn Bó, the most noble of the youths of Leinster, a musician-magician and only son of a widow. When he departs to battle, his mother implores Saint Colum Cille to bring the boy back safe and sound, and the saint is as good as his word—when the youth is decapitated in the fray, his head goes on singing to console the dead, but as soon as it is placed on his body, they knit again and he returns home to his mother (Dillon 1946, 99–102).

As bovines can be the bones in toponyms and form the words by which we identify someone, so they enter into the names for classes or for peoples. As we must bear in mind, cattle—chattels—were the backbone of wealth in early Irish society and hence determined legal and social status. So it is that the Old Irish Laws call a freeman a *bóaire*, literally a “cow-freeman,” the rank just beneath the *nemed* class comprising the priests and poets in medieval Ireland. This is a social category Fergus Kelly compares to the twentieth-century notion of a
“strong farmer” in Ireland, and, in this reference to economic power, we might recall the more familiar admiration for straightforward physical force in the common present-day practice of nicknaming an especially massive man An Tarbh, “Bull.” Departing from the masculine for the delicate derivatives of the udder’s fruits, it has been proposed that one of them—curds—underlies the name of one of the so-called pre-Goidelic peoples or castes of Ireland, the Gruthrige, or Gruthriche, the “curd-folk,” a compound with the suffix -raige, used in similar formations designating their contemporaries, the forge-folk, rivet-folk, wheel-folk, cart-folk, and shield-folk (Gillies 1979, 80–81).

Names of men and women, of ethnic groups, of legendary heroes, or of a goddess—the traces of cattle on the landscape of the mind also appear in the humble places of the works and days of the rural economy. The name of the booley or summer pasture site, in Irish buaile, dots the map of the isle (Aalen 1965, 66; O Moghráin 1943, 67) and the Welsh beudy, “cowhouse,” is the most widespread of the words with which to say it, monopolizing the country in a wide band from North to South (Thomas and Thomas 1989, 10–3). If the possession of cattle was a measure of individual status in Irish medieval law, it long remained the measure of land; witness testimony to the Donegal perception of property values of about 1840, where “the land is never let, sold or devised by the acre, but by ‘a cow’s grass.’ This is a complement of land well understood by the people, being in fact the general standard” (Evans 1957, 29), a unit still perfectly familiar to today’s Irish farmer, if now considerably enlarged by the use of fertilizers (Glassie 1982, 205, 428).

If cattle marked people’s conception of their land in place names and units, bovines often came as close to the heart as home, since they also shared the house with their humans, hence the name byre-house, that dwelling honored by millennia of use. As the second Irish Hudibras says of the home of a late seventeenth-century lord—“At one of th’ ends he kept his cows, At th’ other end he kept his spouse” (Moffat 1724). This symbiosis was thought to be mutually enhancing—the cow helped to keep the house warm, it was thought unlucky if she could not see the hearth fire, and the resulting feeling of security meant that she gave more milk (Evans 1957, 29). This form of coexistence is perhaps the most concrete aspect in the thrust of practical and conceptual work that the archaeologists Ian Hodder (1990) and Jacques Cauvin (1994) speak of in their analyses of a long “domestication” of Europe and the Near East during the Neolithic, for which they posit a reflux movement of bringing the world into the house (the domus) and projecting the house out onto the world.

We shall come back to this intriguing notion about the processes involved in domestication shortly, but we hardly have to go far to find metaphorical use of the cow in our own vocabulary. For instance, we still speak of “milking someone dry,” although the numbers of people in any occidental population that
have personally milked a cow now verges on the infinitesimal. A similar notion had a legal status and a name in Old Irish law, where one of the categories of distraint (legal seizure of property) was *athgabál inmleguin*, where *athgabál* is “distraint” and *inmlegon* is “to milk” (Kelly 1988, 179–80). In a society imbued with a profound concern for cattle, even the value of human beings could be expressed in cow units. A standard measure of wealth was the female slave or *cumal* in early Irish law, and that entity equaled three milch cows, whence a whole gamut of calculations of personal worth—the honor price of a provincial king would run about fourteen *cumail* (which is forty-two milch cows), as against the face value of a young man still dependent on and living with his father, valued at the price of a yearling heifer (Kelly 1988, 4).

Outside the punctilious world of legal technicalities, we might recall that the injury or death of men in their prime was often closely bound up with the politically correct and violent acquisition of wealth through cattle rustling, even if there was a frequent aura of ritual about it. There is no end of cattle raids in Irish literature, and the practice is amply attested much farther abroad in the ancient Mediterranean (Meid 1970, 67). It held the prestige of a royal pastime (and requirement), and the custom had been superseded by gentrified manners only a generation or two before Thomas Pennant ([1769] 1809, 204–5) visited the Highlands in the mid-eighteenth century, where riding on a *creach*, the local name for a cattle raid, had been a young man’s best recommendation to his sweetheart, so that it also figured among the rites of passage in the life cycle.

Beyond the times of an individual life, we find the world of cattle has left its mark on the old rural calendar. Behind the four quarter days that once divided the year over much of Europe into the trimesters of February through April, May through July, and so on, there looms an earlier pattern based on division into dark and light halves, each presided over by a divinity. In Irish tradition, Saint Brigit (the inheritor of the goddess Brigantia) reigns over the dark half of the year, while the god Lugh is sovereign over the light half. Her animal companion is the cow, his is the bull. It has been suggested that the handsome cows and bulls among Pictish symbols carved on standing stones and other supports from the seventh to the eighth centuries may also refer to the calendar system (A. Jackson 1990, 113–18; Stephenson 1955, 98).

**Domestication**

The home, the land, social life and status, the annual cycle of the year, the life cycle—what was not marked by the relations between humans and their cattle (or cattle and their humans)? Even in the first written sources, we see these partners after millennia of constant rehearsal. How did they manage to become so inseparable? The process may have begun with some unmitigated sex discrimination.
The reader will surely notice in the following pages that more is said of the virtues of the cow than of those of the bull. One might well draw the conclusion that cows are somehow more intriguing than bulls. They are not, but cows are generally easier to get close to, even if they were originally reticent partners in a proximation process. In that deeply complex series of processes, which we often corral under the heading of domestication, humans most likely used the strategies on cattle that they use when appropriating members of their own kind. People lure away, kidnap, and adopt the young of other species. When mammals were not too large, people may have made them a member of the family by an efficacious form of imprinting, widely attested in ethnographic literature—breast-feeding (Serpell 1989, 12–13)—a sharing of body fluids that more often ran the other way in the case of bovines. Humans also court contact with other animals through gifts of taste treats such as salt, the most readily available form of which is often human urine, a tried and tested way of attracting bovines to human habitations (Simoons 1968, 19–20, 211–33).

This proximation process (as regards bovines) involves interspecies habituation that can take many pathways and pass through many stages, including varying degrees of contact, management, and utilization, ranging from random to controlled predation, to herd following, to loose or close herding, and eventually to our present-day factory farming (Jarman 1976, 93). (Of course, this does not preclude durable relations in which animals are appropriated without intervening significantly in their movements.9) Such relations can go on escalating, or narrowing, into the intensive reciprocity of milking and ploughing involved in the secondary-products, slow-play “revolution” of the late Neolithic (Sherratt 1981).

However, the later situation of close body contact between humans and bovines must not obscure the exquisite mysteries that remain about how it all came about. For one thing, cattle keeping does not always score very high in an analysis of cost effectiveness. Having a partly tamed *Bos primigenius* near the household can be a rather stressful affair. They attract large predators and invade anything that looks pleasantly green. Hence, cattle need to be fenced out or in much of the time. When fenced in, they cannot feed effectively at night, a life-threatening circumstance for ruminants. Kept anywhere very long in any numbers, they can quickly foul the household’s water source. Tight reciprocal relationships depend on close coexistence—even carried to the point of the cohabitation we have seen in the byre-house—but year-round contact often presupposes providing animals with water and fodder in lean times, as well as effective shelter and protection, a significant challenge to early agricultural and building techniques (Clutton-Brock 1981, 67–68; Jarman 1976, 91–93).

And what is the net result of all this evident effort as applied to cattle, at least in the archaeological record of early animal husbandry techniques?
Usually not much more than a pile of old bones, indicating the animals died, often that they were butchered, but leaving a massive gap in our knowledge about what preceded the final act—why they were kept and how they were used (still less about why some were not kept or used\textsuperscript{10}). In fact, the remains of early animal husbandry sometimes approach near invisibility because of the ephemeral nature of the activity. “They are techniques with few tools, ‘without objects’—which goes far in explaining why stock-raising is so poorly represented in most ethnographic museums—but in which, on the other hand, abstract operations (counting, manipulation of series and sets), knowledge based on observation, as well as know-how, take on the preponderant role” (Digard 1988, 44).

Such techniques may well be largely lacking in the concrete objects we associate with a tool kit, but they enlist simple items that are often not very durable in nature, if quite powerful in effect, and they do indeed call upon some of the most persuasive implements utilized by human actors. For instance, they mobilize one of the most sophisticated, if indeed intangible, appanages of any species, the voice, and sometimes specifically human speech, to manage animals’ behavior and fine tune relations. Few people have given us more eloquent testimony to the art of speaking to a cow than that attentive Scot, Alexander Carmichael (1928–1942, 4: 40–41):

Occasionally a young animal during the day separates himself from the herd and remains, after they have gone homeward, grazing in some hidden hollow, oblivious of the approach of night. The herdsman, fearing that the truant may have been caught in a bog or fallen over a rock, searches high and low, near and far. At last coming in sight of him, he addresses him in terms and tones different from those he used to the others. The animal stops grazing and looks up—it is only for a moment: he is off at his hardest, taking the nearest way for home, over a lakelet, across a river, over whatever obstacle may lie in his path.

One of the prerequisites to this verbal stinging of a freedom-loving laggard is that he or she be responsive, that is, be accustomed to responding to a call to discipline. But who is responsive, when not identifiable? Herders must know which animal they are addressing and the animal must recognize its name. Irish and Scots Gaelic traditions provide us with an enchanting store of cow names. Carmichael (1928–1942, 2: 260–61) cites the song of a sea-maiden tending her sea cows and calling them by name—Cuachag, Gumag or Guamag, Guileag or Guaillionn, brown Cruinneag, Gorag, Dubhag, Dothag, Muileag, Moileag, and brown Muirneag. Cows’ names were often cited in song, as in the Irish “Driumfhionn Donn Dilis,” addressing a cow qualified as the “silk of kine,” the
“Faithful White-Backed Brownie” of the title (O’Sullivan 1981, 143–44). In Scots Gaelic, one version of “Gu dé ni mi nochd ri m’ nàire?” (What shall I do tonight to my darling?) a Barra songstress speaks of the cows that have suckled in the pasture—Buidheag and Blàrag, approximately “Brightie” and “Blaze” (Caimbeul and Collinson 1977, 160–61, 250). Niall O Dubhthaigh, a man who recalled country life in Donegal in the nineteenth century, remembered many a cow name from his mother’s and grandmother’s seasons spent at the summer shieling, among them Bentbhorn, Hoofy, Spotty, Brindle, or Bee. In the Gaelic original, they were called Cromaigh, Crúbaigh, Breacaigh, An Riabhach, or Teileán (O Dubhthaigh 1983–84, 50; 1943, 146).

When we name, we are already far along on our way down the path of human cognitive development and the more closely we look at this process, the more complex an aura it takes on. Naming cattle often involves an interplay of descriptives including color, coat pattern, horns, other physical or personality characteristics, status, and place in a bovine family hierarchy. When one has a considerable herd of cattle to account for, the memorization work involved in identifying individuals, especially those inconspicuous by their absence, can represent a stunning effort, precisely the sort of knowledge characteristic of “tool-less” pastoralist technology. We know from contemporary herders that the search to identify can follow several crosscutting paths—running through a community of cattle by appearance, by age, or by habits in leading, liking the middle of the herd, following, or deliberately straying, for instance. Another crosscut retrieval method is to count out how many cows belong to one herder or owner or to recite one’s cattle’s lineages in order to recall all the “heads” in the family (Galaty 1989, 219–28). There is no reason to assume that the Masai of today are more or less expert in this process than traditional cattle keepers in Europe. In a version of the Scots Gaelic “‘N robh thu ‘s bhein” (Were you on the hill?) recorded from Barra singers as recently as 1938 and 1950, exactly this sort of appeal to a cow’s lineage is made. “Were you on the hill,” the song asks and “did you find the cows?” No, is the answer, not even half of them. And which was missing? The first cited is “Nighean Buidheag, ogha Ruadhain, Nighean na bà ‘s fheàrr ‘s bhualidh” (the daughter of Buidheag, the granddaughter of Ruadhain, the daughter of the best cow in the cattlefold) (Caimbeul and Collinson 1977, 160–61, 251). A cattle lineage that runs parallel to a human genealogy is commonplace for a Masai herdsman, and one of the favorite ways to calm a milch cow in Highland Scotland was to sing her the genealogy of her greatest protectress, St. Brigit, the “Sloinntireachd Bhride” (Carmichael 1928–1942, 1: 174–75).

If ever a method was invented to make a cow stand still, it was the song. It is filled with gentle names, promises, and praise of the cow’s beauty and understanding, as in the Anglo-Irish song “The Limerick Rake,” which describes a
cow that can be milked without clover or grass because she is pampered with corn, good barley, and hops; is free in her paps, and will milk without spancel or halter. The singer of another piece, “The Black Stripper,” may have a slightly handicapped cow, but he loves her and the magic of her milk. “I have but one cow, and she has but one tit, / But she’s better to me than one that has six.” He goes on to affirm that a drop of her milk is enough to make the house ring and the old woman in the corner sing, and the investment involved is worth it. “Ten acres I hold and ten acres I plough, / And all that it grows goes to the black cow” (O Fiannachta 1992, 125–26). Of course, it also helps to remind the animal of how fully her cooperation will be rewarded. The cowherd’s song willingly promises the cow, for instance, a fine fetter of silk passed “kindly around her legs,” the shelter she needs, and the best of foods, the very “wine” of elements from the steep bens—the grazing of hill, heath and plain, meadow-grass, and club-rush and stubble (Carmichael 1928–1942, 1: 268–69).

Not just everyone can make a song carry to the heart (and udder) and cows appear to have demanded a rich repertory to keep them from the thrall of boredom; witness Alexander Carmichael’s (1928–1942, 1: 258–59) comments on Highland cowmaids:

The milking songs of the people are numerous and varied. They are sung to pretty airs, to please the cows and to induce them to give their milk. The cows become accustomed to these lilts and will not give their milk without them, nor, occasionally, without their favourite airs being sung to them. This fondness of Highland cows for music induces owners of large herds to secure milkmaids possessed of good voices and some “go.”

This repertory could consist of several sorts of songs, which Carmichael (1928–1942, 4: 64–65) qualifies as croons, lilts, and lullabies. He affirms that the cows differentiate between the songs, “giving their milk freely with some songs and withholding it with others. Occasionally a cow will withhold her milk until her own favorite lilt is sung to her,” and these traits of character are the object of lively discussion among cow owners.

This question of “withholding” milk—technically referring to a physiological process called milk letdown—brings us immediately round to a particularly thorny point in discussions of domestication, as Juliet Clutton-Brock stresses in her remarks about the obstacles inherent to any illusion of a Neolithic milkmaid or cowboy blithely walking out towards a herd of cattle to milk a cow:

It is very unlikely that a tamed aurochs cow would allow itself to be milked, because considerable effort and guile has to be put into persuading a cow of an unimproved or primitive breed to let down her milk. The
cow must be quite relaxed and totally familiar with the milker, her calf must be present, or a substitute that she identifies with the calf, and it is often necessary to stimulate the genital area before the milk-ejection reflex will allow secretion. (Clutton-Brock 1981, 67)

Now we are getting down to the fundamentals of pastoralist technology. The “stimulation” she is speaking of is done with a technique generally termed “blowing” by the anthropologists who watch the Nuer, Dinka, or Masai milking their cows. They stand behind an animal and blow into her uterus until she begins to relax. Another widely practiced method of persuasion was “kicking,” which involved just that—a good, firm blow to the udder. Coming from a familiar milker, this is not at all offensive or painful—it is exactly what a calf does to its mother to get her hormonal stimulation complex going (Amoroso and Jewell 1963, 126–35). These were among the tricks of the trade of the finest cowmaids, the women Alexander Carmichael (1928–1942, 4: 74–75) says owners sought out so avidly. He cites a paragon among them—Mary MacNeill—and also tells us of the powers her laird believed she wielded:

Mary MacNeill was known as Màiri Raghail, Ranald’s Mary, or Màiri ni Raghail, Mary daughter of Ranald. She had been ceanna-bhanachaig “head milkmaid” for fifty-five years with the MacNeills of Barra. Feeling herself become too frail for her work, she left Eòlaighearraidh and went to live in a little bothy by herself. When General MacNeill came home from the wars, he asked Màiri ni Raghail to come and sit . . . at the gateway of the fold, watching the calves go in and out . . . “The eye of Mary daughter of Ranald is putting lustre and fatness upon my calves,” he was wont to say. . . . My informant said, . . . “Scores and scores, hundreds and hundreds of songs of fairies and of the world, lilts of shieling, of cows and of milking had Mary daughter of Ranald. The crossest cow that was ever in MacNeill’s fold, Mary could quiet her and make her give milk to calf and to milkmaid. She had a musical voice and a rare way with her.” Almost all the many songs and lullabies that this wonderful woman knew died when she died or when the evicted people of Barra were scattered over northern Canada.

This woman’s skill, especially her voice, seem to have embodied the ultimate in the powers of communication. But the voice is itself “embodied,” in the sense that it has its seat in the human brain as well as in the vocal chords. In his discussion of child development, Paul Shepard (1978, 72–75) analyzes physical contact with animals in psychological ontogeny, the development of a human being, and the liberating or tyrannizing impact of sounds, most particularly
music. As we know from the study of speech or sight loss, music memory dominates both speech and visual data, being a deep-brain complex. Since we are looking at reciprocal relations, we might ask whether this is also true for the cow? Did those Highland cows, bathing in a rich musical (and affective) culture, remember a voice and its song as well as they remembered the cowmaid’s appearance and body language, her touch or her smell? A Highland proverb is clear about the matter of animal memory: “Seven years the memory of the cow, till doomsday the memory of the horse” (Carmichael 1928–1942, 2: 347).

Memory work was an integral factor in the partnership of human and cattle in matters of space and movement management, as well as in the realm of optimizing productivity. Milch cows lived in an environment of physical freedom inconceivable today, bound mainly by the memories of affectionate contact, which we might call habit, if it were not obvious that we are dealing with often enigmatic phenomena in the domestication complex. In an explicit example, Niall O Dubhthaigh (1983–84, 50) gives us a detailed description of how Donegal milkmaids bound their cows to the milking site at their shielings. Of course, part of this binding work was done materially, with the fetter, which we saw as a “gift” offered in song, or a tether to attach the cows to stakes for milking morning or evening, or during the night. Even this procedure had a preamble in “kindness,” which became habit-forming in the relations between young woman and cow.

They usually threw down to them a little bundle of coarse grass or the like, which they gathered along the edge of the streams. This was called a “kindness,” anything which coaxed a cow to be more fixed in the place where she was tied. When the cows had some little practice of this, they returned by themselves in the evening, as they wanted to get a little “kindness” of that sort. The cattle were clever out of measure in this coming out and in, and often when one of the cattle was missing from the milking, the girl would call out to it by name, when it was perhaps half-a-mile away and that cow would walk directly to her at the shieling. Then, maybe, she would give it a handful of oatmeal in warm water, and that would coax it the next time it was called. Those cows were as clever as humans, they were so accustomed to being put out and in, so there was no trouble or work at all with them. Then, when they had been milked in the morning, all that was to be done was to drive them up the hill to where the young animals were, and they grazed there until evening came again.

Obviously here, even the ephemeral constraint of the fetter was unnecessary, so far had intensive bonding taken the partnership toward full consent, and this is explicitly stated elsewhere, again in song. The pride and joy of the composer
of an Irish folksong, his “beloved” black cow, was so gentled that the singer could say “no spancel ever went on the leg of the cow that was the image of the Glas” (O’Sullivan and O Súilleabháin 1983, 63–64), referring to the legendary paragon of cowdom in Irish tradition that we shall meet in person shortly.

This ultimate refinement in the binding-bonding complex—when one can count on voice control alone and the deep-seated development of memory it supposes—is hardly startling within the social and economic context of cattle keeping in the traditional societies described by Carmichael or O Dubhthaigh. By the nineteenth century, it was indeed young women who seem to have been most often delegated by their communities to share much of their lives with cows and calves, although even then, exceptions abound. Furthermore, there was still a strong memory of the days when the division of labor was different and of the significance of that workplace in the processes of transmission within a community. The geographer Estyn Evans (1956, 15) recalls the facts and another name for both an occupation and an age group:

In the old days every country child began his emancipation from his mother’s skirts as a herder: we are reminded that this is the meaning of the Irish word for a boy (buachaill). The old folk too passed their time tending the grazing stock in the fields, so that life began and ended with the watching of cattle. The herders themselves were kept on a short tether, never leaving the cows, and the association of old and young amid the sights and sounds of nature was no doubt a means of passing on knowledge and lore and keeping alive tradition. Both young and old were put out of work when the hedged ditch replaced the bare banks and the balks of the open fields.

We might remember Evans-Pritchard’s oft repeated remark that African herders spent most of their time watching their cattle and that the cattle faithfully returned the compliment, so that we have a rich tapestry of “invisible” relations here running both horizontally in time between humans and cattle and vertically between generations of human workers. This depth of shared experience among humans is reflected in their knowledge of how cattle society should unfold smoothly from generation to generation, from cow to calf, and—as we have seen in song—to granddaughter calf. Living with cattle is not only a question of integrating them into the human familia of production but also of recognizing and appreciating their own depth of lineage and intraspecies social needs. To take a familiar example, it is sufficient to leaf through modern-day descriptions of milking parlors to see that the élan of technology can be brought to a standstill by a fundamental need of the cow—sociability. She still does not give her milk when she cannot see her sisters and never stops fidgeting if their own social hierarchy
has not been respected (Bennett et al. 1991). In order to make use of an animal’s own production and reproduction cycle, it is necessary to respect the socialization process that makes a cow tractable, and that work is carried on in large part by other cows, who shepherd a calf into adulthood through communication, considerable physical contact, social play, and learning (Noske 1989, 18–21).

The interpenetration of the human family and the family of the cow is a subtle affair and much of the discussion about domestication revolves around human intervention in reproduction. In the case of cattle, one of the most frequently explicit constraints on behavior is not letting a heifer breed until she has reached a safe maturity. Cows are generally put to the bull in their third year in modern breeding practice, but the Old Irish laws affirm that cattle keepers were careful not to do so until a heifer’s fourth year (Kelly 1988, 113). On the other hand, thirteenth-century Welsh law tells us heifers were let calve in their third year, when they became true cynflith, literally “first-milk” cows (Owen 1841, DCII sec.12). Veterinary research in the osteology of medieval cattle indicates their breeds were smaller and took longer to mature than present-day dairy animals (Watson 1990, 92), perhaps one possible explanation for delaying first mating. If breeding practices were intriguingly variable, this is equally the case today, and what is sure is the factor of human interference.

However, this manipulation of mating was not extended to what we might term subsequent family life since traditional wisdom balked at separating a cow from her calf, outside of what was necessary to tap off part of her milk production. Irish tradition speaks of this in straightforward legal terms in a tale concerning that most contentious of social groups, clerics. Once upon a time, Saint Columcille borrowed a book from Saint Finnian of Moville and, aflame with love for the words in it, Columcille copied it by night, thus flaunting every standard of courtesy and copyright of his times. Finnian was outraged and pled his case before the high king Diarmait mac Cerbaill. In his judgment on the celebrated dispute—that Columcille must give back the copy to Finnian forthwith—Diarmait clinched the matter by reference to precedent in the proverb “the cow and the calf ought always to go together” (Glassie 1982, 627).

As a general rule, the calf is seen as a full member of a triadic partnership between the milker, the cow, and her progeny, as in the Highland milking song “Beannachdh Bleoghain” (The Milking Blessing), where the singer says “my speckled heifer will give me her milk, and her female calf before her” and goes on to recall the lineage of love—“my heifer gentle, gentle, beloved, thou art the love of thy mother” (Carmichael 1928–1942, 1: 262–63). However, first motherhood is not self-evident for a young cow, and this is a point where intraspecies socialization is given a helping hand by interspecies support and persuasion. Encouraging a cow to “take to her calf” was such an important step in insuring the continuity of production that the great Saint Columcille himself was said to
have made a song for the task. “My heifer beloved, be not alone, let thy little calf be before thee . . . coax thy pretty one to thyself, till thou sendest to the fold a herd” (Carmichael 1928–1942, 4: 54–57). But how could one work on this partnership between cow, calf, and human—the crux of milk production—if the progeny was lost? Alexander Carmichael’s (1928–1942, 2: 317–18) informants told him it had once been the job of an ersatz. The dead calf was skinned and the skin fitted over a wickerwork frame, then rocked under the befuddled cow until her milk let-down got under way. (In the support system for another species, Welsh shepherds still skin dead lambs and put the skin over orphaned ones to help a bereaved mother adopt another’s offspring.) What would remain of a wickerwork covered with a calfskin, cast aside after its (by definition) one-time use? Yet it is a model of cognitive development, of patient ruse and persuasion, of the ephemeral implement.

This association of cow, calf, and human is of evident economic interest, but the concern with helping a young animal become a good mother is also linked to notions of the beauty of the cow body. The udder of a nonmilking cow quickly shrinks and grows hairy, and the behavior of an animal deprived of intensive handling takes a slide for the worse. Scottish wisdom says that a cow without a calf is “ugly and bristling of shag,” a leaper of walls, a head of mischief, the vexation of neighbors, the curse of the herdsman, despised among cattle, a cow without profit, and so on (Carmichael 1928–1942, 4: 55–61). In regard to the last point, a cow without calf has upset the balance of a complex profit-sharing strategy and does not return the gifts of the keeper—the silk fetter, the “kindness,” or the joys of rich grazing in an atmosphere of benevolent protection—with the counter-gift of her milk.

In discussing beauty or other desirable traits, we must note that a bovine body is no longer familiar ground to most of us. In fact, this unfamiliarity can take on startling proportions, as we see in an anecdote from *The Tailor and Ansty* (Cross 1942, 54), that medley of wisdom, tale, and neat tricks from a rural community in Ireland. (One might add that it is a model of universal humor that has now long outlived the pettiness and cruelty of its local detractors.) You must imagine the Tailor out watching his cow grazing contentedly: “What started it was a woman who walked down the road the other day while I was standing to the cow. When she saw the cow, I declare to God didn’t she ask me if it was a bull or a cow”—and she a married woman, to the Tailor’s unending astonishment. The upshot of the discussion this event engendered in his tiny farming community was the Tailor’s conclusion that people do not learn the things they used to. Not long ago, many people spent a lifetime in close contact with cattle, and hence their notions of beauty, grace, and quality of character were often applied as easily to cows as to humans. “Crónán na Bó” (The Cow’s Chant) says, “there is not a cow in the whole of Ireland, comelier and prettier than her; her small shapely head pleases
the eyes of all, and a splendid udder has my own little cow! Quiet and good she
stands beside me, and yields abundant wealth of milk” (O’Sullivan 1981, 33).

In such an environment of familiarity, the cow is a metaphor for human
love and the songs are explicit: “I’m as fond now of your kisses, as young calves
of milk they’re drinking.” (Fergusson 1978, 208–10) says a Hebridean singer. A
South Uist song is unfettered in its comparison: “My own little heifer is my dar-
ing, if I got my milk-pail full, a female of thy form would need a careful herds-
man at her heel” (Shaw 1977, 158–59). Cows were loved for the comeliness of
their own particular forms and did not need to stand in the mirror of humanity.
The breed of Highland cattle with red ears was reputed to be the offspring of
“sea cows” that had come ashore once upon a time, and one could sing to such
a cow in these terms of endearment: “my treasure thou, and thou art of the sea
kine, red eared, notch eared, high horned; urine was sprinkled on the rump of

Care and Use

In India, no one would be surprised to hear urine cited as a product of cattle; it is
one of the five fruits of the cow, along with milk, curds, ghee, and dung, mixtures
of which are used to anoint statues of Vishnu and Krishna (Visser 1986, 94).
Urine takes pride of place in traditions about the care and protection of bovines
in many rural societies, and Highland Scotland was no exception. In his eigh-
teenth-century travel journal, the Welsh savant Thomas Pennant ([1769] 1809,
185–86) notes of the area around the Conan river, not far from Castle Braan, that
he “was in this neighborhood informed of other singular customs of the
Highlanders. On New-year’s day they burn juniper before their cattle, and on the
first Monday in every quarter sprinkle them with urine.” (Actually, this prophy-
lactic prescription also applied to human beings and their own “product,” when
confronted with the threat of a night meeting with the fairies in Ireland [Danaher
1972, 122].) In quite recent Irish practice likewise, nothing was better than cow
urine—euphemistically known as “all-flower water”—to calm recalcitrant beasts
(or to insure good health and good luck in the human subject) (Evans 1957, 217).

When we move from protectives to veterinary treatment, we find traditional
cattle cures a baffling (to us) mix of common sense and outrageous leaps of the
imagination, but they generally fit well into the conceptions of their time for the
treatment of ailments in the human subject, which often involved burning or bleed-
ing. Though the medieval Irish law tract on cattle, the Bóshlechta (Cow-Sections)
is unfortunately lost (though attested in ample references in later commentaries)
(Kelly 1988, 275–76), we nonetheless have significant witness to knowledge of
large quadruped anatomy in the surviving treatises on horse medicine (O Cuív
1952, 1985) and, more recently, in the popular traditions of cattle cures (Harris
1960; Saunderson 1961). Insofar as animal bodies were concerned, the words to say it with were certainly not lacking. Alexander Carmichael (1928–1942, 2: 225, 262, 350) notes that Highland Gaelic vocabulary once had a term for the placenta of each species of female animal, and in the matters of care, we find the song again has a central function. Cow keepers intoned a cud-chewing charm to soothe an animal suffering from surfeit, repeating it three times, as one should always do—“Poor ‘Gruaigein’ of the hard paunch, loved one, chew thou thy cud”—likewise invoking the right numbers of good things—the grass of nine bens, nine fells, nine hillocks, and the water of nine falls, nine streams, nine lakelets—that are too much when overindulged in (Carmichael 1928–1942, 2: 140–41). In his glossary on terms, Carmichael (1928–1942, 2: 238, 280, 303) mentions some of the ailments that could strike cattle: red murrain; red-water, or bloody flux; and the throat disease called the *gluglaich*. Traditional cow doctors as often attempted to treat “elf-shot” (pixilation) as they did murrain, which made for an imaginative repertory, but this should not obscure the fact that groping around can come very close to experimentation. Some older conventional treatments may even have felt their way into an empirical exploration of immunization, as in the nineteenth century Irish cure for the dreaded “black quarter,” or blackleg (an enzootic, often fatal, affliction of young cattle), which involved inserting scrapings from an infected animal carcass under the skin of a healthy one (Mason 1928, 223). In a remarkable passage, an early Irish law text makes a parallel comment on responsibility for injury to another owner’s animals—it is illegal to drive cattle into a disease-ridden cow house, unless they have come out of the same one already (Kelly 1988, 146).

Certainly, anyone used to cutting an animal up was deeply familiar with its anatomy, whether they understood concepts such as blood circulation or not, and playing at being an animal, often actually getting into its skin, is not limited to the young of our species. This helps recall that the uses of livestock and bovines in particular are not limited to food, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, clothing, shelter, glue, and what not but could extend to the actions undertaken in festival practices. Butter was thrown into lakes for good luck and to protect livestock for the August quarter day in Ireland, and milk was a regular offering to the fairy folk on May Eve (Danaher 1972, 174–75; Evans 1957, 272). New Year’s Eve or Hogmanay carolers in Highland Scotland came to perform with one participant in the “hard hide of a bull with the horns and hoofs still attached.” When they came to a house to wish it luck and blessings, they ran sunwise (clockwise) around on its broad support wall, the “bull” shaking its hooves and horns and the other performers creating a gleeful din by striking the hide with sticks. After that, they did what carolers usually do—sang an intriguing song to the household for their supper (Carmichael 1928–1942, 1: 148–55). The bull hide in holiday custom recalls another ritual process in older Irish tradition where a particular form of divination existed, as recounted in the medieval tale of *Da Derga’s Hostel* (Rees and Rees
1961, 245–46). In it a man ate his fill of the slaughtered bull, drank the broth, laid down on the hide, and went to sleep under spells to see the future.

In the memory of Alexander Carmichael’s (1928–1942, 3: 278) informants, the uses of bovine bodies approached those with which we are familiar, but there were still beliefs about right ways and times to make food of livestock. Witness the Highland dictum that an animal should not be slaughtered during the waning moon or its flesh would be without substance. Such precautions are part of a more general “physics” of liquid flow, such as that of sap and blood, which is all the more intriguing when we recall that blood played a practical role as an important supplement in the everyday diet. As among the Masai or the Nuer of the twentieth century, blood from live animals not only was considered palatable and good for the complexion but appears to have been a commonplace in the diet of Irish countryfolk before the arrival of the potato and the gentrified tastebud.11 Unless the import of this form of consumption be reduced to the strictly dietary, we might note that cow’s blood was also tasted as a part of some holiday festivities (Danaher 1972, 117–18) and that there are underlying notions about consubstantiality here. We might recall that it was thoroughly conceivable to drink human blood, not of an enemy out of revenge, but of a loved one as a proof of love. Alexander Carmichael (1928–1942, 2: 296–97) notes that the blood of a (live) friend was drunk as a mark of affection, a custom even more poignant as a last act of love, as in a folksong recounting how a woman bereaved of her husband by interclan carnage laments “and they poured thy blood to the ground; had I there a cup in my hand, I would have drunk of it my fill,” which is but one in a series of references to drinking the blood of a betrothed or a beloved foster son.

Luckily for those of us with delicate digestions, people usually stuck to milk, elegizing its uses and praising its source—the cow teat, which was conceived of as a vessel of abundance par excellence. The informant who gave the Scottish Gaelic “Ora nan Sine” (Prayer of the Teats) to Carmichael (1928–1942, 2: 226, 4: 62–63, 78–81) told him that each pap had a quality unto itself—one held more butter, the other more cheese, the third more sugar, and the last more fat. She had a name for each, and when she sang her song to bless them, she put each one under the protection of a different patron: Mary, Brigit, Michael, or God. As each teat produced milk of a different nature, the Highland cow’s udder had four “flows,” a belief seconded by Welsh wisdom, though for one less flow. The first flow of the udder was called the blaenion, or “foremosts,” in Welsh and was kept aside for use in cooking or to drink, but not for butter making. The second, the armel, was the epitome of fine milk for butter and could be mixed with the third flow, the tical, for the churning, unless the last was set aside as especially nourishing fare for poorly infants or for baking holiday cakes. Similarly, the benefits of beestings, or colostrum, a cow’s first milk, were well known in both Irish and Welsh tradition (Tibbott 1983, 57, 48, 66, 62; Lucas 1960, 25).
All this contact with bovine bodies and body products can be seen as part and parcel of what behavioral scientists analyze as a human being’s building process. For instance, Paul Shepard (1978, 68–74, 219, 253–55) evokes the “inner past” created by this lifelong feeling-the-other-out, the endeavor to understand what is on both sides of the body boundary by creating bonds of relatedness and consciousness of what is related, but other. Play at “being” an animal helps children differentiate and define their own *topos*, and stepping in and out of animal skins contributes to the ability to conceive of one’s own body transformations, as well as eventually to stand back from them, as when quitting a game, or a skin. The gradually growing familiarity with feelings that one can attribute to animals, and eventually to oneself, helps construct a taxonomy of the affect and perhaps even conceptions of transcendence, a subject taken up from a different angle later here. Needless to say, the exploration of such fundamental principles does not perforce take the same pathways in all cultures, and we often need an outside observer to remind us of how bound we are to our own inner past. Perhaps the closeness of this contact between humankind and the bovine is best elucidated by the double mode of sharing they engage in—they share sorrow and profit.

We have seen the praise in song heaped on the owner’s beloved black cow, compared to the legendary figure of the Glas. This elegy was a eulogy, in fact, an Irish keening song lamenting the cow’s death by drowning in a bog hole, and the singer cries out as one would for a human love lost—“*O rú, O rú, black cow, my love!*” In another song from the same collection, a dying man, knowing the tobacco and coffin are ready for his own wake, finds that what he regrets most of all is no longer seeing his cows and tender calves (O’Sullivan and O Súilleabháin 1983, 63–64, 112–14). Carmichael’s (1928–1942, 1: 270–71, 3: 279 4: 58–59, 76–77) singers bequeathed us a series of songs in which they evoke the burden of sorrow for lost progeny and clearly state that they share this grief with their milch cows. “My black cow, my black cow, a like sorrow afflicts me and thee, thou grieving for thy lovely calf, I for my beloved son under the sea” or, in another song, “the same lot is mine and thine, may thy little black calf not be lost to thee, but mine only son beloved is beneath the sea.” A third chant echoes the same plight: “O Hornless One, give thou the milk, it is thy calf thou art bewailing . . . but cease I from my crooning, my love is in the linen shroud, my calf is in the cold grave, and he shall not stir in spring.” It is no wonder that, in light of this conviction about shared sorrow, people rushed likewise to share joys with their cows, for instance, to tell them (if they had not noticed already) that the new moon, “beloved of cows,” had come out to brighten the world of man and beast.

The sharing of grief and joy hardly seems possible outside a matrix of the sharing of profit and the intimate reciprocal acquaintance this entails. After all,
bees and milch animals are those beings whose reproductive systems we tap into directly, to use the food destined for their offspring for ourselves. It was the principal task of the skilled milkmaid to organize the right balance in this “profit sharing,” so that a cow would suckle her calf but still give milk enough for the human family’s needs. In the Irish song “Na Gamhna Geala” (The Lovely Calves), the singer boasts that “my own calves are the lovely calves, they eat the grass and they don’t drink the milk” (O’Sullivan and O Súilleabháin 1983, 84). It is not always clear just who had right-of-way at the udder and for how long—milker or calf. Niall O Dubhthaigh (1983–84: 42, 44, 50) speaks of how milkmaids handled their charges in the nineteenth century Donegal shielings: the birthing cows could be taken into a shieling “so they could get a hot drink,” but then “the young animals were never taken into the shielings. At night they were close around the shieling and when daybreak came the girls got up and herded them up on the hillside and they stayed there” until evening when they came back down. Apparently, when the mothers had been milked in the morning, they were driven back up the hill to where the young were to graze. This does not help us much on the details of weaning the calves from direct suckling, though we have ample attestation to the sort of prickly collars often put on calves to make their mothers shy away from them. Given the readiness to expend much time and patience on good relations, perhaps the calves were coaxed into grazing by “kindnesses” of the sort he mentions being given to their mothers. It is evident that the young already off first milk could be kept going successfully with the buttermilk from the day’s production of butter, and O Dughthaigh mentions pouring buttermilk out onto the grass because the calves cannot drink it all up (O Danachair 1983–84, 46, O Dubhthaigh 1983–84, 38).

Weaning means going on to the next stage in the age hierarchy (and their progressive values) of milch cows, so richly detailed in Irish and Welsh law (Owen 1841, DCII sec.12; Kelly 1988, 113–14). This positive separation from maternal dependence has an intriguing, though hardly negative, shadow in the event of the death of a calf. If it did not happen naturally often enough, it would be necessary anyway, for renneting is an important element in making the cheese products which help stabilize and conserve the cow’s abundant but highly perishable flow of production. Many techniques are available to curdle milk, but among the most efficacious is using the dried extract of the calf’s fourth stomach, the abomasum. So the perennity of a cow’s milk supply could be insured by the death of her offspring. However, this is not the dream of domestication as we see it in literature and folk tradition. The dream is for life, for reproduction and abundance without end, and this desire, thought out through the cow and its body, engenders a category of legendary beings that we shall call by an appropriate name—the Wonder Cow.
Beyond Care and Woe

If people dream of a cow beyond cows, it may be the cow’s own fault to begin with. That wise Irish character we have already met “standing” to his cow, the Tailor, once said: “The pig, the pig! . . . The pig is only a bank, but the cow is the hub of the household.” And he was not short on the specifics—if you want to get things straight, the first thing to have is a wife who is a fine milker, then a cow, and later perhaps a pig that will grow fat on the buttermilk. With luck, you get the cow as dowry with the wife, anyway. How could you drink tea or eat potatoes or bake a cake without milk and buttermilk, and then, there is the butter that brings hard cash into the poorest household. The cow’s manure makes the potatoes and cabbage grow and she costs so little to feed. As the Tailor concludes, “when she has done all this good work, it is then that you might start thinking about a pig” (Cross 1942, 121–3).

That munificent flow of the cow for half of the year brings glowing ideas into a cow owner’s head. What if there were no seasons and the cow gave abundant milk—as in the Land of Cockaigne (see Del Giudice, this volume)—milk to feed armies, throughout the year, all the while producing a host of calves that multiply the wealth endlessly? This is precisely what Irish tradition says that legendary cow, the Glas Ghoibhleann did—until the evil Balar stole her and her calves. Popular legend said that the Glas filled every pail put under her by her owner until a jealous hag vowed she would find a vessel the Wonder could not fill—and most wickedly milked her into a sieve! Wherever the Glas slept, the fields produced grass that gave any cow that grazed there abundant milk (O hOgain 1991, 44, 240–1; Dinneen 1927). Another renowned cow called the Máel Flidaise produced milk sufficient to quench the thirst of the men of Ireland on their cattle-drives (O’Rahilly 1966, 45). Similar tales were told in Welsh tradition of the Stray, or Brindled, Cow and her mighty progeny, the twin oxen, who were movers of mountains (Owen n.d., 219–20, Gwyndaf 1995, 72). The white, red-eared Corc Duibhne nourished Saint Brigit on her milk, and the saint was renowned in popular tradition for her powers to mystically produce milk and butter for the needy (O hOgain 1991, 63).

These fountains of milk join the pantheon of magic cows spread through traditions, from the Scandinavian Audhumbla (Turville-Petre 1964, 275–7) to the mystical cow Surabhi in the Hindu myth of the churning of the Ocean of Milk, in which the ambrosia that grants the gods, the Devas, their immortality is produced (Coomaraswamy and Noble 1967, 314–6). Surabhi is herself one of the infinite avatars of Vishnu, so that she is both cow and divinity. Her heritage, in the conceptions of gentleness and abundant generosity in Indian tradition, was perhaps best expressed by Mahatma Gandhi: “To me, the cow is the embodiment of the whole infra-human world; she enables the believer to grasp his unity with all that lives” (Barloy 1978, 57–58). Through the believed and real
benefits of drinking cow’s milk, human beings may have conceived not only the ideal of perfect health, but taken the notion a step further, to that of an immor-
tality conferred by ritual consumption.

The German historian of culture Eduard Hahn (1896, 77–80) endeavored to explore one of the great puzzles of domestication—how humans ever came to drink cows’ milk in the first place, even when we disregard the considerable obstacles to simply getting (and getting to) it. He proposed that both ploughing and milking might have been undertaken as part of a fertility cult. When we lis-
ten to recent popular tradition, we discover conceptions that make Hahn’s propo-
sition well worth consideration, especially in the light of notions of mystical participation. On a less lyrical plane, it is certainly no surprise to hear of traditions in which the consumption of particular beverages is linked with traits of character and, logically enough, even creates them. Welsh proverbs identified water drinking with long life, calm and innocuity; milk drinking with health and wisdom; mead drinking with melodious speech and affection; beer drinking with a taste for strife; and wine drinking with foolishness (Morganwg 1860). Drinking the milk of “Lightfoot,” the beloved cow celebrated in the Irish folksong “Crónán na Bó” (The Cow’s Chant) banishes the fear of want and makes the pain of wounds, disease and old age vanish like mist (O’Sullivan 1981, 33). The song titled “The Limerick Rake” attributes the same results of vigor and youthfulness to drinking milk from its pampered cow. It is obvious that good nutrition con-
tributes to making anyone hale and hearty, although it may not quite guarantee, as does the Rake, that “the feeble old hag will get supple and free” (O Fiannachta 1992, 126). Our own society certainly could not say it has banished the dream of an elixir of youth, so we dare not mock such dreams in the beliefs of others.

Alexander Carmichael’s (1928–1942, 2: 110–11, 329–31, 355–36, 4: 78–79) Highland informants alluded to a tandem of products that definitely went a step farther than ordinary health and well-being in what we can term the “milk-mòthan complex.” The second term is for the mòthan plant (perhaps the pearlwort, perhaps a bog-violet or a thyme-leaved sandwort), which was said to promote every form of happiness—in love, life, encouraging good, and warding off evil. It was used in a magical binding process to ensure the life-long love of a girl’s suitor, just as it protected women during childbirth or wayfarers on their journeys and could even obtain acquittal for the guilty in trials (although this was regarded as an abuse). And the ultimate in good fortune is indicated by the proverb uttered when a man makes a miraculous escape from death—“he drank the milk of the guile-
less cow that ate the mòthan.” Even the fairies could not harm a man nor kidnap an infant with “the milk of the cow that ate the mòthan in the folds of his throat.” This was equally true if one ate of the cheese from the milk of a mòthanized cow, and perhaps this is but a logical extension of the belief in the mòthan’s powers to keep milk fresh.
When we look at the food and drink linked in Indian mythology in such narratives as the “Churning of the Cosmic Ocean” or the “Tale of Varishtha’s Cow” (Dumézil 1968, 532–6)—that is, particular herbs, milk, and the Indian counterpart of ambrosia, amrta—we glimpse a complex of products from both the animal and plant worlds that were believed to grant immortality. It reminds us of the breadth of meaning that words for “milk” might take on in Irish and Scots Gaelic. A term that figures in Carmichael’s (1928–1942, 2: 223) collection of Highland song lore and appears to echo one in the medieval Irish Vision of MacConglinne (Kenneth Jackson 1990, 146) is as or àis, whose denotations run from milk or milk product to delicacy, to ambrosia, even to wisdom.12

It seems the door to health and happiness, even to immortality, was opened by a plant used in combination with milk and that the Wonder Cow of popular traditions holds out to human beings the ultimate dream of domestication—total lack of want, forever, and a source of health that makes the old or tired young and fresh anew. This is actually not so far a cry from what our own society has come to expect from its “health foods,” among which certain milk products loom large. So we nourish our dreams and expectations in our world of instant milk, instant health, and instant gratification, just as could a Scots milkmaid or an Irish cowherd, dreaming and wishing through the long hours of watching animals be. The people who sang these songs, told these legends, or made these myths are dead, as it is our own lot to die and go on to the other shore. It may be a lonely voyage indeed. Yet, opinions differ about that, so we shall close our journey through the labyrinth of human-bovine relations with a word from Ansty, the Tailor’s wife and perfect foil in The Tailor and Ansty. Among her great joys in life was hearing of the success of Eric Cross’s book on the old couple and their world, and their friends remarked that there was a “look of shy pleasure in her face whenever a reviewer referred favourably to The Cow” (O’Connor in Cross 1942, 7).

Notes
1. The ongoing discussion of domestication has generated a voluminous bibliography. For a modest sampling of more recent definitions and some ideas of the tenor of discussions, see Cauvin 1994; Clutton-Brock 1989; Digard 1988; Hodder 1990; Ingold 1980, 1988; Mourant and Zeuner 1963; Piggott 1981; Reed 1977; Rindos 1984; Ryder 1983; Sigaut 1988; Simoons 1968; and Ucko and Dimbleby 1969.
2. Roider 1979, see her discussion on pages 62–78 of the loose translation of ch(l)op(h)jur as “transformation” and page 78 for her analysis of the term as representing “einen Begriff wie etwa ‘zyklische Wiedergeburt.’”

5. For discussion of the status and “face-value” of the bóaire class, see Kelly 1988, 10 and index, s.v. “bóaire,” completed by Kelly 1998, 27–66.

6. Vendryes, Bachellery, and Lambert 1980, B-108 s.v. “búaille” (1), proposes this is a loan from Latin bouile or bualium.

7. For discussions of the historical development of the byre-house and the present-day testimony to structures, see O Danachair 1964, 64, 70; Audouze and Büchenschütz 1991, 132–34; and Wiliam 1992.

8. Varying aspects of the complex development of the Brigit veneration have been covered in the work of Laurent 1990, 6; MacCana 1970, 34; Ross 1967, 361; and MacNeill 1962. For the most recent discussion, see O Catháin 1995.

9. Analysis of minimal interference in movement has been developed by Ingold 1980 and of the spectrum of possible uses by Sigaut 1988, 63–64.

10. Analysis of the repercussions of options not to use has been developed by Sigaut 1988 and, within the context of various religions, Sigaut 1995, 268.

11. The subject of blood as food in older texts was explored by O’Rahilly 1977, mentioned for historical and recent attestations by Evans 1957, 35–36, and then made the object of an in-depth study by Lucas 1989, 200–22 within the larger context of cattle-raising in ancient Ireland.


WORKS CITED


