

Ewan Ross
Glengarry Folklore
Cnoc Mór Bòcain - Big Bocan Hill
Transcribed by Chelsey MacPherson in 2017

Well, I better tell you a ghost story now. Yes, we have ghosts, but we still refer to them under their old Gaelic name of *bòcans*. But a *bòcan* isn't really a ghost, perhaps he's more like a hobgoblin. The kind that scares you to death and then laughs at you. Glengarry has two *bòcan* hills. [Both of which] our ancestors called *Cnoc Mór Bòcain*, that is Big Bòcan Hill. One is back near Kirkhill at Duncan the Hook's place, [currently Bruce and Chantelle MacLeod's place]. The other one is the north bank of the valley of the Baudette between Glen Roy and Green Valley, and especially that part toward the military road.

About [207] years ago, that is about 1810, population pressure drove our folks back into some of the less desirable land, and to them swamp land was very undesirable indeed. They had no way of draining it. And in its original state it must have been a fearful tangle of fallen trees, lodged trees, big trees, little trees, and holes you could fall into. A place to fear. A place to be avoided, and the barrier that cut one concession off from the next. The land around Munros' Mills was settled. And between there and the First of Kenyon a few Irish families moved in which gave the name of Connor Town to that area just northwest of Munros' Mills. And east of Munros' Mills, the winter road was swamped out along the lines between the east township and the two western ones. This trail was surveyed as a military road joining Lancaster and L'Original in 1841. It's now Highway 34. Where the 8th and the 9th of Charlottenburg crosses this road and then jogs north to become the 9th of Lancaster, a little settlement complete with store and tavern grew up. It was known as Greenfield's East Corner. But that has no bearing on our story. The fact that it had a tavern is important, because here of an evening the young and old would gather to spin yarns and tell tales of their homeland and to take a drop of whiskey as well. Most whiskey in those days was homemade and a few of us today know what it was like. Travelers of the day who wrote about Canadian backwoods' whiskey are unanimous as to its strength; they disagree on whether it poisoned people or just drove them crazy. Be that as it may, one nice summer night there had been a bit of a *céilidh* at the tavern and one Irishman in particular had all he could handle and a bit more perhaps. He at last was persuaded to start for home. And the folk at the tavern door saw him started, careening from tree to tree, making progress to the South at the same time. They knew he would turn west when he got to the 8th concession trail. Somebody remarked he'd be sober by the time he walked the seven or eight miles home. Others said that he wouldn't make it that night. He'd lie down and have a sleep somewhere. Then they all forgot about him.

But by and by, screams were heard coming from the bush southwest of the tavern. And as they listened the screams came nearer and grew louder. And all of a sudden, the drunken Irishman, who had left the tavern an hour or so before, burst out of the bush and headed for the tavern door with his hair standing straight up on end. His clothes half torn off of him and blood running from his mouth and nose. Straight through the tavern door he went, in behind the bar and crawled underneath it—still screaming. A couple of the fellows went behind the bar to see if they could calm him down a bit or at least find out what was wrong. Nothing doing. Just one long scream after another. Finally, someone got the idea of pouring a slug of white lightning into his mouth every time he opened to scream. Two or three doses half strangled him, and he had to stop screaming for lack of breath, besides that stump whiskey was fast acting. Continued treatment finally made him semi coherent and he started to babble about the devil jumping up and down in the middle of the road. “Beejeebers,” he said, “the lightning was flashing around and you could smell the brimstone. Then the devil grabbed hold of me and beat the hell out of me. But I got away and took to the bush and be damned if he and his lights didn't follow me and him all the time squealin' like a pig. By damned boys, I ain't gonna go down into that swamp no more!”

He eventually, the man, left for home. But he went home by the 3rd of Kenyon, which gave him a good extra five miles to walk. So, Cnoc Mór Bòcain became fearfully known in the community. And the passage of years only added to its ill theme. Horses were scared in the swamp. Lights were seen in the swamp. And at times blood curdling noises came from the swamp. There was no doubt at all a *bòcan* lived in that swamp, maybe a whole family of them. The story lost nothing in the telling over the years.

Indeed, it may have gained a little. When one night, by the light of the kitchen fire some 90 odd years ago, it served as a topic of conversation with the writer's grandfather and some cousins his own age. When the writer was a boy big enough to be all ears and young enough to be well scared. That was long enough ago for the conversation to be folklore in its own right now. One of the cousins owned land along the Baudette and had lived there all his life. He said, "Everything could be explained. The man was drunk, eh? And people often bought little pigs and brought them home in bags, eh? And it would be easy for a bag with two or three pigs in it to fall off of a stone boat or even a wagon. And if the drunk stumbled over the bag of pigs wouldn't it start them howling and no doubt when he fell on the pigs it was quite a wrestling match. And when he got on his seat and took off into the bush banging his head against trees, I'm damned sure he'd see lights. And when he started screaming, he thought his own screams came from somewhere else. And as for what has happened since, tree branches lock together and blown by the wind can make an awful screech. And that marsh gas often flames up. Well, as for horses you know if you ever got one stuck in a hole, you'll never get him near it again. And every tight team around here has had to been pulled out of that swamp sometime or another."

"John," my grandfather said, "would you go into that swamp at night?"

"Not on your life," was the answer.