

# TRADITIONAL BELIEFS IN SCOTLAND

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In the year 1722 the last witch to die in Scotland because of the powers ascribed to her was burned at Dornoch, Sutherlandshire. She was accused of having transformed her daughter into a horse, and having had her shod by no less a person than the Fiend Incarnate himself. The only concrete evidence of her guilt was the fact that the daughter had a deformed hand, deformed reputedly because her mother had not restored her properly to her original form. The witch herself met her death with great composure and warmed her hands at the "bonny fire" (McPherson 1929:283).

A grim and ugly chapter in our country's history was thus closed. All one can say in extenuation is that ours was not the only European country that had pursued the practice of witch-hunting to a senseless extreme. The belief that certain persons had the power, acquired either as the result of a compact with the Devil or some other magic means, of transforming themselves into animal form still lingers. The legend about the farmer's wife who transformed one of her two manservants into a horse and rode him over long distances nightly (G. Henderson 1911:109-14; Campbell 1902:48-9) is still current in local tradition; it was recorded even as late as last June from a tradition-bearer who had not quite come to regard the whole story as purely fictitious. Some months ago I came in contact with another man who, in a mood of simulated seriousness, I suspect, maintained that he himself had shaken a bridle in the face of an old woman, whose daughter he was courting, and turned her into a sleek, black mare. He had her shod by a blacksmith and then saddled—after which he rode her to the far end of a neighbouring parish and back. In this case the story-teller had merely assumed the role of the other farm-servant who cleverly got

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hold of the bridle, shook it in the face of the farmer's wife and turned the tables on her. A noted Shetland story-teller (S.S.S. R.L. 797.5; 798.1), who is still very much alive, appeared to be quite familiar with a woman who once lived in his neighbourhood and who habitually changed her daughter into the form of a crow. Within the last twelve years several accounts of similar transformations have been noted down, transformation into a cat, a hare, a goat, a cow (I.F.C. MS. 1027:181-91, 213-4, 215-20; MS. 1013:385-6, respectively), a crow and in one instance into a clump of heather.<sup>1</sup> In most cases the transformed persons were girls who were jilted (or their resentful mothers) who waylaid the men against whom they bore a grudge. In most cases the informants stated that they fully believed the accounts that had come to them, and in one case the instance of transformation was witnessed and reported by a person of noted piety, a full member of the kirk.

In the whole field of folk-belief transformation from human to animal or any other form is one of the things that would first tend to be disregarded as fantastic and completely irrational. Strange as it may seem, the belief does not linger solely in the minds of the few surviving members of the community who are unlettered and have received no formal education. Two instances of transformation were recounted by an educated young man, who later rose to the position of bank manager (I.F.C. MS. 1027:180-1). The above belief is one that we, in this age, would have expected to have disappeared completely over a century ago.

In the last century it was, of course, a common belief that the witch changed herself into the form of a hare and was said to "mount on the cow's back, and sit for a time, and the milk departed, whilst she never wanted milk, though she had no cow at all, or, if she had one, though she was 'ferra'." (Gregor 1881: 189). Other means of abstracting milk were by a hair-rope made of hairs from the tails of all cows within reach, by milking a couple end or the pot-hook, or by placing a pot beside the fire at the very moment the calf dropped from the cow and thus drawing the milk into the pot (*ibid.*:189). The belief that certain women have the power to abstract milk from cattle, or steal the "milk-profit" with the result that there is no yield of butter, is still current in oral tradition and still finds a certain amount of credence.

The most noted covens of witches reputedly in league with the Devil were the Auldearn Witches, who flourished in the

middle of the seventeenth century. In their confessions—which may or may not have been forced—they revealed that they were on rather familiar terms with His Satanic Majesty. In the Highlands proper there was no persecution of unfortunate witches on any scale comparable to that in other parts of the country, but the belief that witches are in league with the Devil lingers up to the present day. Actually, there is no native Gaelic word for witch; the usual word is a late borrowing from Scots English, *bana-bhuidseach*, *buidseachd*. The older folk in the west tell of a certain woman who was asked to repeat the Lord's Prayer at a catechising meeting—*coinneamh cheist*—and she used the past instead of the present tense in the opening phrase of the prayer: *Ar nAthair a bha air nèamh*. On being asked by the catechist why she insisted on so doing, she replied that her Master was in Heaven at one time, but is no longer there (I.F.C. MS. 1027:204-7). The persistence of the story to the present indicates, of course, the persistence of the belief that the Devil was overlord and master of the witches. In certain communities, especially communities affected by the evangelicalism of the last century, it is sinful to tell stories that are lies. The above story was told as being perfectly true.

Whether witches such as the Auldearn coven were in league with the Devil or not, and whether they were solely interested in the means of making woe, there is no doubt that they could and did participate in beneficent rites and had tremendous prestige, even though they were in a position to terrorise the whole neighbourhood. Even when women with extraordinary powers used their gifts for good purposes such as healing, they came, nevertheless, under the ban of the Church for healing by "unwarrantable" means (McPherson 1929:241), but even then sober and respectable elders of the kirk had recourse to charms when disease struck their cattle. Even to this day "charmners" are remembered as people with tremendous prestige, e.g. in the Central and Eastern Highlands they still speak of Grigor Willox of Tomintoul (*ibid.*:260-1), who possessed two powerful objects, a kelpie's bridle and a mermaid's stone, both of which had descended to him through relatives. Willox's work was devoted entirely to good purposes, the curing of illness, the breaking of spells, the detection of theft and the return of stolen property. Closer to our own day we get much insight into the life and character of "charmners" in the Highlands from Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*. Far

from being a "heathenish and motley crew", the reciters whom Carmichael met and whose charms he noted down were men and women of great sensibility and refinement.<sup>2</sup> They were also respected members of the community, often the "elite" as far as cultural standards and values were concerned.

Less than ten years ago it was my privilege to meet a person of the very same stamp as those from whom Dr. Alexander Carmichael noted down the charms and incantations of *Carmina Gadelica*. I had heard a great deal about her<sup>3</sup> before I went to visit her. She was over eighty years of age and lived in a little thatched house along with an unmarried son. In that little community her prestige was enormous and she was held in esteem and affection by all. Whenever a person or animal was struck with sudden illness, someone was sent to her house so that she would make a *snàithle*, a thread, to counteract the Evil Eye and cure the illness. She always knew when the Eye had been cast on some person or animal, for the messenger was invariably told that she had been expecting him. She could tell the sex of the culprit and whether he or she had been alone or in company when the Evil Eye fell on the victim. When the *snàithle* was duly made, it was then taken and placed in the clothing of the person affected or tied on the horn or tail of the stricken animal. Never once was a *snàithle* made by her without efficacy. People came to her from all surrounding parishes. She never accepted any money in return for services, for she maintained that the acceptance of money would render the charm completely valueless, but she would accept small valueless tokens such as a pin or button. For over fifty years she had cured people stricken by the Evil Eye. All came to her irrespective of creed or denomination and she never refused to help anyone. In appearance she was a beautiful old lady with very bright blue eyes and a ready smile. She had all her faculties and a most alert mind.

It was on my third or fourth visit to her that she asked me if I would like to write down the Charm for Counteracting the Evil Eye. There was, of course, no harm in repeating it to a member of the opposite sex. She could not, however, repeat the charm to one of her own sex. I wrote it down from her recitation. It was very close to the version in *Carmina Gadelica* Vol. II, p. 52.

She had another charm, the Charm for Toothache, and, strangely enough, this was the English and not the Gaelic version of the international motif (Tillhagen 1958:162; Gregor

1881:48; W. Henderson 1879:172): Peter sat on a marble stone weeping. Christ came by and said, "What aileth thee, Peter?" Peter said, "My Lord, My God and my tooth." Christ said, "Arise, Peter, and be well. Whoever shall carry those words in My Name shall never feel the toothache."

In the case of this charm the above words were written out on a piece of paper and given to the sufferer to carry in his or her clothing.

These, as far as I am aware, were the only charms she had. She made much less use of the toothache charm than the other. Her mind, however, was full of legends, old songs, prayers and other lore. I have seen a *snàithle* she did make. It was of grey worsted thread about a foot long and folded in lengths of about three inches. It was wrapped in a small sheet of white paper.

My last visit to the old lady was paid in the company of a noted tradition-bearer, who, at that time, complained of a sore leg. He wished to have a *snàithle* made to see if it would effect a cure. He and the old lady had a long conversation embracing many topics, and, in the midst of it, he asked, almost casually one would have thought, whether a *snàithle* could be made for his sore leg. Without any hesitation she got up and lit a small lamp, and with it disappeared into the other end of the house. It had darkened by this time. Ten minutes later she re-appeared with two threads wrapped in separate pieces of white paper, one of which he was to sew on the inside of his shirt next his breast and the other he was to carry in his pocket. The whole ritual of making the thread and pronouncing the charm over it was carried out in seclusion and secrecy.

Not only did the *snàithle* she made cure man and beast but its usefulness had also advanced with the progress of modernisation. A local haulier acquired a new motor-lorry. On its very first trip to a coastal port to fetch goods, the lorry stopped and, skilled mechanic though he was, the driver completely failed to get it started again. The engine appeared to be in perfect order but would not start again. The driver was at his wit's end, when who should come by in her car but his sister, the local district-nurse. Between them they came to the conclusion that some malignant eye must have lighted on the new lorry. The nurse, although she had become slightly too sophisticated to believe in the efficacy of charms, was induced to go to the old lady for a *snàithle*. She went as stealthily as she could to the old lady's house and got the

charmed thread. As soon as it was wound round the radiator-cap of the lorry, the engine started up again and off it went. Something similar happened again in the case of a new car brought to the district by an American emigrant on a visit to home. The car was loaned to a relative for a drive round the district. The engine stopped unaccountably and the poor man was distracted because he imagined he had ruined the other man's property. In desperation word was sent to the old lady for a charmed thread. As soon as it was obtained, the car started off again.

In the year 1933 a medical practitioner in one of the Inner Hebrides discovered a thread with three knots on it around the wrist of a patient. The Charm for Sprain (*Eolas air Sniomh*) had been used. The charmer was subsequently contacted and the charm noted down. It was the Gaelic version of the international charm. The three knots represented the Trinity. In her recently published book, *The Silver Bough*, Miss McNeill states that she had "seen and handled the buinneagan, or witch-balls, that were the property of a Highland 'wizard' (now dead) and were said to have been 'worked' by him with dire effect between the two World Wars" (McNeill 1957:145).

As to the fairies, belief in their actual existence has not entirely gone. Tunes and songs of fairy origin are still played and sung in different parts of the country, while in very many areas fairy knolls are pointed out and have been entered on Ordnance Survey maps. The belief that certain individuals and families received the gift of music or poetry or some other accomplishment from them is still common. Among people in rural areas there seems to be a good deal of reluctance to dismiss the belief entirely, and informants will not commit themselves either way. What is commonly reported is that fairies were last seen over fifty years ago or so. One informant in 1947 was quite convinced that he had heard fairy music inside a hill. The same gentleman was quite adamant that he had seen a mermaid sitting on a floating lobster-box combing her flowing tresses. Within the last ten years, however, fairies were actually seen by a couple of young school-children in the west.<sup>4</sup> They were described as small people about three feet high and were dressed in green. The peculiar feature of the children's description was that the fairies in this case did not walk, dance or run but went around a hillock with a hopping motion. The children ran away home and were

visibly upset and terrified by their experience. They gave perfectly consistent accounts to all who questioned them.

Closely allied to fairy belief is the belief in the existence of the "host of the air" *sluagh*. Some writers maintain that it has its root in a natural phenomenon, the whirlwind that raises dust and straws when there is a perfectly still, calm evening (Gregor 1881:65). In Gaelic it is called *oiteag sluagh* and in the north-east a "furl o' fairies' ween" (*ibid.*: 65). The spirits of the dead travel unseen through the air and they are the *sluagh* but in the west the fairies are not associated with it. One of Alexander Carmichael's informants described the aerial throng: "They fly about in great clouds up and down the face of the earth like the starlings and come back to the scenes of their earthly transgressions. No soul of them is without clouds of earth, dimming the brightness of the works of God, nor can any win Heaven till a satisfaction is made for their sins on earth." In Scandinavian tradition there is a similar belief (Christiansen 1938:332), while in Ireland the *sluagh* are the fairies, for there fairy belief is closely interwoven with the spirits of the dead (Hartmann 1942:157-63).

The *sluagh* may remove a person or animal. Mortals are sometimes obliged to travel in their company. As they pass, they are accompanied by an unintelligible murmuring, *monabar*. They drop whatever they lift, if a bonnet, a left shoe, a naked knife or earth from a molehill is thrown at them. The legend is told about a mortal who, travelling unseen with the *sluagh*, rescued a person stranded on a cliff edge. Many years later the rescuer remonstrated bitterly with the rescued person for not giving him a pipe of tobacco. It was only then that the man stranded on the cliff realised how he had been saved. A mist had suddenly enveloped him and he felt himself being carried bodily to the top of the cliff and to safety (I.F.C. MS. 1030:94-6). There is another story about a young man who wished to accompany a person who travelled with the *sluagh*. They were to go to a certain spot to await the host. The man who had previous experience of travelling with the *sluagh* induced his companion to return home, saying that he himself had no other alternative but to go where he was going, but he would much rather if he had not to do so. It would not do his companion any good if he once started going with the *sluagh*.<sup>5</sup> Another mortal who had seen the *sluagh* said that in the throng there was the spirit of a female weaver who, in this life, had misappropriated

thread and that thread became entangled about her legs and impeded her movements as she travelled through the air.

The most recent case<sup>6</sup> of reputed abduction by the *sluagh* occurred in the winter of 1951-52. An old lady of over seventy years of age went to a neighbouring house to *céilidh* one dark evening. At eleven o'clock she left to return home, a mere distance of seventy yards. By midnight she had still not put in an appearance, and her relatives went to the house where she had been and were told that she had left for home an hour before. She had had an electric torch to light her way. Search parties were organised. There were no traces of the old lady in the immediate vicinity of her home. She was finally found at four o'clock the following morning at a spot a distance of over two miles away. Between her home and the place where she was found there were two lochs, many bogs and streams swollen with heavy rainfall and high fences. Obviously a woman of her age and frailty could not have clambered through the wire-fences unaided, nor could she have avoided the many bogs, streams and the two lochs that lay in her path. She had no torch when she was found. The informant (who, incidentally, was the person who found the old lady) stated that, before reaching the spot where she was, he heard murmuring voices, *monabar*, away to his left in an easterly direction and the sound appeared to proceed northwards. He at first thought that the old lady had been found and that some party was bringing her home along the main road. He called in the direction whence the sound came, but received no reply. He carried on and found the old lady. She was soaking wet and in her hair there were water weeds. She was never able to explain how she got there. The finder was joined by others, but on the way home they had to break down two fences to get the old lady past. Despite the fact that the area where this occurred had for a long time been open to modern ideas, sophisticated trends and influences, and was for a long period previously a base occupied by a large contingent of Service personnel, the general opinion there is that the old lady was carried off by the *sluagh*.

Certain customs now tend to become respectable, but in essence they differ little from what might be regarded as "superstitious and primitive" practices. When a noted lady or personage breaks the champagne bottle over the prow of a ship during the ceremony of launching, it is nothing more than a modification of a heathenish practice. The late Dr.



Gregor notes that when new boats were brought home to the fishing villages of the North-East, there was an initiation ceremony. He reports that at Portessie the fisher folk gathered beside the boat, and one of them "flang bere in ower the boat, sang oot the boat's name, and three cheers wiz gi'en" (Gregor 1886:11). The modern champagne is hardly more than a sacrificial offering to the Old Man of the Sea. There was also a similar agricultural custom in the North-East when ploughing commenced after harvest. A piece of bread and cheese was placed on the beam of the plough (Gregor 1881:181).

Even despite the introduction of modern agricultural machinery and the almost complete disappearance of sickle and scythe, the Harvest Maiden or Clyack Sheaf is still cut and brought home. Several informants in different parts of the country stated that they hung it on their walls; some said they did so until recently, others declared that they still did it. As recently as 1954 I saw a Clyack Sheaf on the wall of a house in Laggan, Badenoch.<sup>7</sup> I should venture to say that the practice is more widespread than is generally thought. It is also pleasant to notice that the practice of giving an extra sheaf of corn to horses and cattle on Christmas or New Year's Day has not stopped either.

Certain beliefs and practices connected with the main events in human life, birth, marriage and death, are still adhered to over a wide area, e.g. the giving of silver coins to newly born infants and the avoidance of marriage in the month of May. Last year 42,672 marriages were registered in Scotland. The figure for the month of May was 1,164. The next lowest figure was for November—2,130. In 1956 out of a total of 43,971 marriages only 1,193 were registered in May—the next lowest month being January with 2,618. The previous year the figure for the month of May was 1,345 out of a total of 43,212; the next lowest figure being 2,451 for November. In 1954 out of a total of 41,975 marriages only 1,246 were registered in May, while the figure for the next lowest month, November, was 2,516. In the year 1946 as many as 45,851 marriages were registered in Scotland. The figure for the month of May on this occasion was 2,177, while the figure for the next lowest month, February, was 2,806. In the year 1936 there were 37,914 registered marriages but the figure for May was 1,147, while February, the next lowest, had 2,119. It will be seen that the figure for the month of May has been consistently the lowest, and, except in the case of the

year 1946, it was almost 50 per cent lower than that of any other month.<sup>8</sup>

Death is still foreshadowed by omens such as strange lights and sounds, even by the howling of dogs. The corpse is touched to prevent dreams about the dead, and (in certain cases even yet) the coffin is taken out of the house through a window to prevent the return of the departed. There have been fairly recent instances of chairs and tables supporting the coffin before it was borne away, being turned over in case the dead should return. The sunwise, *deisecl*, approach to the graveyard is still observed in places.<sup>9</sup>

In the course of a short paper it is impossible to say very much about beliefs and customs that have survived to this day. Beliefs, for instance, about lucky and unlucky things and actions are still very much alive. The belief that it is unlucky to hear the cuckoo on an empty stomach is international and widespread, and is commonly met with in this country still. Perhaps the most widespread beliefs in Scotland to-day are those connected with lucky and unlucky numbers. In a recent issue of *John Bull*, a noted British racing motorist maintained that he was not superstitious, but he did like to have the number 7 on his car, and he and his wife were married on the seventh day of the month. He revealed, of course, an attitude of mind that is fairly common: a little superstition may not be a bad thing, though it is discreditable to be and be considered superstitious. On certain streets in Scottish cities no houses are given the number 13 and in some hotels, even large ones, the thirteenth room is numbered 12A. At a recent piping competition in Scotland's third city the thirteenth piper bore the number 12A. When the 13th day of the month is a Friday, it is considered a very unlucky day. The belief, of course, has a Biblical origin; there were 13 persons present at the Last Supper and the 13th betrayed Christ. The covens of witches had 13 persons in them. It is unlucky for thirteen people to sit down at table together. Should that happen, one of them will die within a year (Macgregor 1922: 43). It may be that beliefs with Biblical associations have stood more chance of survival than any others in this country, and that for reasons which are quite obvious. There is another popular and persistent belief that it is unlucky to walk underneath a ladder. In the first place it is a sensible and practical belief, for the danger that tradesmen may drop something on one's head is real enough, but it really has its origin in the

legend that, at the Crucifixion, the Devil in human form stood underneath the ladder while the bodies were being removed from the Cross (*ibid.*: xi).

Should we imagine that all traditional beliefs are gone from our midst, we need only consider how often in our daily lives we use such expressions as "Touch Wood", or "Keep fingers crossed". Beliefs and customs hardened by long usage are extremely difficult to eradicate. In the early years of the century it was commonly believed that with the advance of knowledge and education most traditional beliefs and customs would eventually disappear, that they would be dispelled by the light of science and rationalism. If beliefs and customs have decayed, it is due to social rather than intellectual reasons. Ignorance and superstition have to a great extent become coterminous, and because of reasons of social prestige, people with any measure of pretentiousness will disclaim any knowledge of or adherence to popular beliefs and customs. In many ways the sophisticated city-dwellers are as prone to what is vulgarly called "superstition" as country people. The city dweller may be less simple, but he will go on touching wood and avoiding walking under ladders as well as being reluctant to sleep in a room numbered 13. In this country superstition has descended to the level of a term of abuse that is hurled by one religious sect against another or by natives of one part against their benighted countrymen in another. Such a state of affairs is unfortunate indeed, for it renders the collection of material for the study of custom and belief rather difficult. But it is only to be hoped that traditional beliefs and customs will, by some means or other, become respectable, and in this country of ours some strange things have become respectable. What was written in the year 1913 by the late Sir James Frazer still holds good: "We should deceive ourselves if we imagined that belief in witchcraft is even now dead in the mass of the people. On the contrary there is ample evidence to show that it only hibernates under the chilling influence of rationalism and that it would start into active life if that influence were ever seriously relaxed" (Frazer 1913: viii).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Recorded from the late Angus Maclellan, Benbecula.

<sup>2</sup> Carmichael frequently refers to the fine character of many tradition-bearers. *Vide: Carmina Gadelica* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh) Vol. 1 (1928), XXI, XXII, XXIV; Vol. 2 (1928) 377, 379, 381; Vol. 3 (1940) 164-5 *et pass.*; Vol. 4 (1941) 190-1, 236-7 *et pass.*; Vol. 5 (1954) 168-9.

- <sup>3</sup> I do not disclose the identity of this person nor the locality in which she lived. I have generally adhered to this throughout.
- <sup>4</sup> Information received on 26th December 1953.
- <sup>5</sup> Information received on 16th March 1950.
- <sup>6</sup> Information received on 20th June 1958.
- <sup>7</sup> Since the time the above paper was written the writer saw the Last Sheaf in a house at Craignish, Argyll (14th October 1958). A week later he met two farmers in Western Perthshire, who had brought home the Sheaf a short time previously.
- <sup>8</sup> I am deeply indebted to Mr. Gardiner of Statistics, Register House, Edinburgh, for drawing my attention to these figures. They appear in the Quarterly Returns of the Registrar-General published by H.M. Stationery Office, Edinburgh.
- <sup>9</sup> Observed at a funeral in South Uist on 11th June 1954 and two days later at a funeral at Arisaig, Inverness-shire.

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