Notes on Collection and Research

'The Scotch Fiddle'

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The skin disease known as scabies or the itch is produced by a tiny mite which burrows in the cuticle of most parts of the body and especially about the hands. The mites, so small that they can only just be seen by the naked eye, are passed from person to person mainly by direct contact, less often by clothes or bedding. Their presence in the skin is attended with an intense itching, especially when the sufferer is warm abed or sits by the fire. In circumstances of prolonged dirt and neglect persistent scratching may cause septic sores to break out all over the body and a person so affected becomes a pitiable and repulsive object.

Avenzoar, an Arabian physician of the twelfth century, is credited with being the first man to have discovered the true cause of the itch but it was not until 1834 that a French scientist demonstrated beyond question the rôle of the itch mite by a series of experiments carried out on his own skin. If so many years had to pass before the scientific world agreed on the nature of the disease it is not surprising that ordinary people had divergent and erroneous beliefs as to its cause. Some blamed the weather, the bodily humours or miasmata for its appearance; others looked on it as an infectious disease like measles or smallpox. Still more common was the belief that certain foods, for instance salt fish, if taken in excess were responsible. In Scotland predominance of oatmeal in the diet bore the blame and reference to it as causing the itch often occurs in travellers' descriptions of the country. At the same time there was no doubt in people's minds that the itch was passed by contact from person to person. Indeed it was considered to be so highly contagious that the merest touch of skin or clothing could transfer the infection, which would immediately make its appearance as a rash covering the body. The itch is not, in fact, so dramatically eruptive but it spreads when close contagion occurs and is still a public health problem. For example, in Edinburgh in 1969 one hundred and five cases are known to have occurred among some seventy thousand school children. In 1970, when the school population was about the same, one hundred pupils were affected.

For many centuries the disease was widely prevalent in Europe and where poverty, uncleanliness and indifference were at their worst there the itch was most at home. It must be sadly admitted that in Scotland more than anywhere else in Britain conditions

for a long time favoured the infection and scabies came to be looked on as *the* disease of that country. There it was known as the itch, the scab, the scaw,* the yewk and, in Gaelic, *an tachas*. By about the year 1700 Scotland's reputation for the itch was widespread in England. An outcome of this was the introduction into popular speech of the term 'the Scotch fiddle' for the itch and the phrase 'to play the Scotch fiddle'. It is true that even today diagnosis of scabies may be in doubt for a time and in the past 'the Scotch fiddle' must not infrequently have been applied to itching conditions not caused by the mite. We are, however, justified in accepting the name as a synonym of scabies. As such it appears in standard dictionaries as well as dictionaries of slang and of dialect. According to Hotten to play the Scotch fiddle is 'to work the index finger of the right hand like a fiddlestick between the index and middle fingers of the left. This provokes a Scotsman in the highest degree as it implies that he is affected with the itch. It is supposed that a continuous oatmeal diet is productive of cutaneous affection' (Hotten 1874:279). Up to a point the whole Celtic Fringe seems to have had a bad reputation. Thomas Aubrey, a physician employed by the African slave traders, wrote in 1729 that yaws, a tropical skin disease, was as common among the slaves as was the itch in Wales or Ireland (Aubrey 1729:110) and Hotten mentions the use of 'Welsh fiddle' and 'Welsh hug' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as names for the itch.

The story of the treatment of scabies in Scotland begins in early days when reliance was put on herbs of the earth only. Progress came in the seventeenth century when wood tar imported from the Baltic, mixed with lard or butter, began widely to be used to prevent the scab in sheep and its use was extended to the cure of human scabies. About the beginning of the eighteenth century ointment of mercury, more effective but more costly, came into service. Sulphur, a still more powerful destroyer of the itch mite, is mentioned as early as 1617 when Sir Anthony Welden observed the popularity of 'burntstone (brimstone) oyntment' among the ladies of Edinburgh (Welden 1837, 1: 301) but it was not until the latter part of the eighteenth century that it replaced tar and mercury in popular use. Some thirty years ago sulphur in its turn gave place to benzyl benzoate which is equally potent and more agreeable to the patient (Boog Watson 1971:141-2).

The Oxford English Dictionary (1933) says that 'Scotch fiddle' appears for the first time in English writings in 1670 in Rochester's works. [Partridge (1949:734) corrects this to 1675.] Another early reference may possibly be a pictorial representation dating from the time of the Fifteen (Plate III): the London fugitive press was active after the battle of Sheriffmuir and among the broadsheets which have survived is one in verse dated 1715 entitled *A Dialogue between his Grace the Duke of Argyle and the Earl of Mar.* One of the two woodcuts on the sheet seems to represent a Scot riding woman-fashion (B.M. 1715). So crude is the workmanship that detail cannot be resolved

* In English 'scab' is the name given to a skin disease of sheep caused, like scabies, by a mite. In Scots 'scab' and 'scaw' were used to denote this condition also.

PLATE III. 'The Scotch Fiddle'. Woodcut on a broadsheet dated 1715. (See p. 142.)

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with certainty, but the rider appears to be playing the fiddle, and this interpretation is supported by Dick in his *Songs of Robert Burns* (1903:464). During the Forty-five an eye-witness description of the playing of the Scotch fiddle was written by a young Englishman who took part in the campaign on the side of the Government. In November 1745 James Ray, a soldier by profession, set off with his regiment from Kent to join in the pursuit of the retreating Jacobite forces. He was present at the battle of Culloden and later wrote *A Compleat History of the Rebellion.* Ray was a man of inquiring mind, interested in the manners and customs of the people he encountered on the march north, and at Dunkeld he observed with distaste the villagers and their cottages: 'They have generally two apartments in their houses by means of a slight partition; one end they lie in themselves, having a fire in the middle, and chaff of corn or heather is their bed; the other end is for their oxen, calves etc, which are exceeding small; a full-grown ox is seldom bigger than one of our calves of a year old. The smell of the cattle's dung (which is generally very thick about the house) and their peat fire I believe keep them in health, but not free from the itch which is as common as their oatmeal; and their better sort of people are rarely free from this malady, which they seldom mind to cure any other way than by their dumb music (they having their instruments always about them); and when the spirit moves them, which is most frequent, they are very dexterous in playing both with their arms and fingers; nay their whole bodies would very often move. You must think, this gave us not a little diversion, but at the same time we had great fear, lest they should present us with a Fiddle' (Ray 1749:117).

By the beginning of the nineteenth century readers in the United States and Canada were familiar with the Scotch fiddle. In February 1826 John Randolph of Roanoke sent a letter to his friend Josiah Quincy, into which he introduced what he imagined to be a Scots vernacular phrase. 'I hope that you'll pardon my using the Waverley tongue', he continues, 'which I fear bodes no good to the old English and which I shall therefore leave to them that like it. . . . In short, I have not catched the literary "Scotch fiddle"' (Quincy 1869:421). The term is also employed in Haliburton's *The Clockmaker,* in the second chapter of which the author rebukes the natives of Nova Scotia, or blue-noses as he calls them, for their overweening conceit. This he attributes to their contact with the Royal Navy. 'These blue-noses have caught this disease, as folks do the Scotch fiddle, by shaken hands along with the British' (Haliburton 1837:143).

So long as the itch was a common affliction among them the words 'Scotch fiddle' must have been offensive to the Scots and it is not until the nineteenth century, when the prevalence of scabies in Scotland no longer exceeded that in England and the gibe had lost its sting, that references appear in Scottish writings. Three extracts are given here. The first occurs in Headrick's *General View of the Agriculture of Angus.* In it the author, discussing the feeding habits of the country-folk, observes that 'Farm servants live chiefly on oatmeal and potatoes and milk. . . . Much ridicule has been thrown upon the Scotch on account of this immoderate use of oatmeal. This has been

represented as inflaming the blood and producing their favourite disease called the *Scotch Fiddle* and other cutaneous eruptions. But oatmeal is as much used in some districts of England as in any part of Scotland; and cutaneous eruptions are much more frequent in some of those districts than they are here, where they are seldom seen or heard of. The latter ought rather to be ascribed to dirty linen and clothing than to oatmeal or any particular species of food' (Headrick 1813:501). Penny's *Traditions of Perth* provides the second mention. Speaking of past days Penny remarks that no luxury was equal to a seasonable scratch: 'Certain it is about fifty years ago, the fiddle was in such general repute that few allowed themselves to be absolutely idle, the fiddlers devoting all their spare moments to this agreeable pastime. It is only those who have come through the trying ordeal and searching purification necessary to overcome this insidious disease that can fully appreciate the advancement which society has since made and emphatically thank God their hands are clean' (Penny 1836:126). The third reference comes in a saying of Dr John A. Easton (1807–65), professor in Glasgow and lecturer in Materia Medica. We are told that when discussing the therapeutic uses of sulphur and its efficiency in curing scabies he would employ such words as these: 'Our friends south of the Tweed speak of this disease as the Scotch fiddle or Caledonian Cremona. But, gentlemen, its silent notes have been attuned in other lands than that of the mountain and the flood. We claim no monopoly in any such disease and we trust our countrymen's hands are as clean as we know their hearts are pure' (Murray 1927:237).

An even later reference to the fiddle has come to light in a biographical sketch of Dr Robert Pairman (1818–73), surgeon in Biggar, written by his son. On one occasion Dr Pairman is said to have remarked to an acquaintance 'I'll guarantee to cure scabies, or what is called the Scotch fiddle, with flowers of sulphur'. The words were spoken before 1873 but the biography, still in manuscript and in the possession of the family, was written about 1900. Since then the term 'Scotch fiddle' seems to have passed out of currency, although *Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1970 edition) still has this entry: 'Scotch fiddle—the Itch (from the motion of the fingers against the palm)'.

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