

Joseph Train's Letter to Sir Walter Scott Concerning *Wandering Willie*

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A sad item of news was published in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* on Thursday 25 April 1816. It reported the circumstances of the deaths on 20 April of

a poor man, with his wife and five children, who were travelling through the country with a small cart drawn by an ass, [and] being unable to find lodging, took refuge in a small sand hole at the side of the public road near Twynholm Kirk. In the course of the night a mass of earth which had been undermined in raking out the sand, unfortunately gave way and buried them all under it. Their bodies were dug out on Sunday morning and carried into the church.

It was about this time that Joseph Train wrote to Sir Walter Scott from Newton Stewart where he was then an officer in the Excise. Train was zealous in gleaning Galloway and Dumfriesshire legends and traditions for Sir Walter, and on this occasion must have written an account of William ap Prichard, by which name it seems that he knew the dead man although other sources suggest that his name was Hugh (see notes 1 and 23).

This man was blind and made a living as a minstrel, wandering 'between Greta Green and the Braes of Glennapp' in the southernmost corner of Ayrshire. It has been taken for granted that he was the prototype of blind Wandering Willie, one of the characters in Sir Walter's *Redgauntlet* which was published in June 1824. Scott did not acknowledge Train's contribution in any way, much to the latter's disappointment. However, he had acknowledged his help in others of his books which gratified Train more than a little, as witness what he told the Master in a letter (Abbotsford Collection fo. 193):

As I have said before, Sir Walter, my highest ambition has always been to be mentioned by you even in the most distant manner in any of your numerous works, but to be so honorably noticed in *Guy Mannering*, *Old Mortality* and now in the *Heart of Midlothian* is more than I ever expected.

In so far as *Redgauntlet* was concerned he had not given up hope that in future editions a note acknowledging his contribution might be added; and with this in mind he wrote a long letter to Scott in 1830 (Abbotsford Collection fos. 288-95). A part only of this letter, in an adapted form, was printed by John Patterson (1857:49-52): a fresh

transcription is now provided here since it supplies us with an unusually full and interesting account of a travelling musician.¹

Honored Sir Walter . . . I remember, Sir Walter, of having sent you upwards of 14 years ago some account of the Blind Minstrel, William ap Prichard of Llandegai, whom I once met accidentally on the road between Newton Stewart and the Ferrytown of Cree, but I was not, till I came to reside in this quarter, aware of that person being over the South of Scotland invariably considered to be the prototype of Wandering Willie in *Redgauntlet*. This is perhaps just like identifying Meg Merrilies to be no other than Flora Marshall, and proceeding from the extreme solicitude with which the people in this part of the country strive to point out the locality of every scene and the real history of every character in your inimitable Tales, that opinion has caused me, however, to collect every particular I could possibly find respecting the Minstrel as from the slight interview I had with him and being then upwards of 20 Miles distant from the place of his interment. I am afraid the sketch I sent you must have been very imperfect but through the kindness of John Rain Esquire of Twynholm and the Reverend John Williamson, Minister of that Parish,² who conducted the funeral obsequies of William ap Prichard and had afterwards some communication from Wales respecting him, I think I have obtained all the information that is now known of him.

I had visited a friend at the Ferrytown of Cree and was returning to Newton Stewart with my friend Captain Denniston, the Author of *Legends of Galloway*, when we met on the way the Blind Minstrel with his harp over his shoulder. He was led by a female whom we afterwards learned was his wife and was followed by several children, some travelling on foot, others seated in a small wicker cart of very rude construction, drawn by a little Cuddy of the old Gipsy kind. As we drew near to them the old man raised his Harp and began to play the popular Air "Kenmore's on and awa', Willie."³ It was a calm evening in the Month of April and the melodious sound of the Harp soon brought a crowd of peasants from the neighbouring fields of Kirroughtree and from the adjacent hamlets of Machermore⁴ which, with a fiddle played by one of the younger branches of the Minstrel's family, formed a band that called into action the dancing powers not only of the other children but likewise of several of the spectators.

The appearance of the Blind Minstrel of Llandegai was somewhat singular. He was seemingly upwards of fifty years of age, of very diminutive stature, the small part of his countenance that was seen above his bushy beard was of a sallow complexion very much pitted by the small pox, and was nowise improved by his large sightless eyeballs that seemed to roll instinctively as he moved his hand along the strings of the Harp. His habiliments seemed to be just what chance had thrown in his way. On his legs he wore a pair of blue rig and fur hoeshins⁵ partly drawn over the knees of his small clothes, the original part of which had evidently been worn by a person of more capacious dimensions. His vest of red plush cloth with deep pockets before was in every way similar to that kept in the wardrobe at Eglinton Castle, stained with the blood of the unfortunate Earl who was shot by Campbell the Exciseman.⁶ The outside colour of the coat was brown, inside blue. It was the only part of his dress that bore any proportion at all to his person. On his head he wore the cap called in old times a Megirkie⁷ with a large Roman Letter in front such as was usually wore by Chattering Charlie, the last professional Jester retained as such in the family of Cassilies⁸ or I believe in the establishment of any Scotch nobleman.

The Jokes and repartees of Chattering Charlie, although he died about 40 years since, are yet as well remembered in Ayrshire as those of the celebrated Kipp Cairns are in Dumfriesshire and in Galloway.

During Charlie's residence with the Earl of Cassilies he, like Willie the Wandering Minstrel, wore the initial Letter of Culzean in front of his Cap, but when he took up his abode with any of the branches of that family, which he frequently did, he then changed the Character on his cap to that with which the name of his immediate residence commenced, so that all Carrick knew by Charlie's Cap where he had quarters for cracking his jokes.

The dress of Mrs ap Prichard was less conspicuous than that of her husband. She was stout made and above the ordinary size of women, although her countenance was evidently darkened by constant exposure to the weather. She had in her youth been rather comely than otherwise. She wore on her head an old Bandanna handkerchief loosely tyed below her chin with one corner hanging between her shoulders over the hood of a dark duffed Cardinal,⁹ the tail of which was long but not like the dress of the ladies in the time of Sir David Lindsay of the Mount, of whom he says

The turcomes of their tails I trow
Wad be a supper to a sow.¹⁰

The old Minstrel and his partner as well as their children seemed to enjoy the felicity themselves which sweet music and the simplicity of their manner imparted to others. They thankfully received the small sum collected for them, then moved away in search of a resting place for the night, little thinking the day of life was so soon to close upon them for ever.

William ap Prichard was a native of the Parish of Llandegai in Carnarvonshire but his chief residence had always been in the South of Scotland. I cannot find that he had been in the practice of attending professionally the Caledonian Hunt Assemblies or the fashionable Winter Balls either in Ayr or Dumfries, but at Merry Makings in Town and at Kirns in the Country. He was the Chief "Gut scraper" between Gretna Green and the braes of Glennapp, and like Habbie Simpson, the famous Fiddler of Kinghorn, "at Bridals he won mony placks".¹¹

For many years he was a constant attendant at the great Annual Fair of Kirkdomminie in Carrick.¹² There he usually laid by his Harp and by the enlivening strains of his Fiddle kept the youngers dancing till after sunset at nearly the longest day. Wandering Willie was noted for giving the longest Reel for a Penny of any Fiddler at Kirkdomminie. He succeeded there Blind Riddle, one of the best Musicians of whom Scotland yet can boast. He composed the popular Airs, Culzean Castle, Carrick Shore, the Merry lads of Ayr and Ayrshire Lasses, although the latter Tune has been by some person erroneously ascribed to Hugh, the last Earl of Eglinton.¹³

The Minstrel of Llandegai was returning from one of his casual visits to Wales when I met him by the way. He obtained quarters for himself and his family that night at a place called Skyreburn¹⁴ which was the Howff for more than half a century of Willie Marshall, the famous King of the Lowland Randies (Patterson 1857:149-50)¹⁵. Next day the whole retinue moved slowly over the Corse of Slakes¹⁶ and arrived at Laggan mullan¹⁷ in the Evening, just in time to assist the music at a Merry Making of friends there, of which the host has yet a lively recollection.

Next night they were not so successful. After having passed through the Gatehouse of Fleet at nightfall, they solicited lodgings at the farmhouse of Tanneymaws¹⁸ and at several other places on their way to Bearlochan¹⁹ but were refused shelter even in any of the out-houses for the night. At length compelled by necessity these poor houseless wanderers lay down in a gravel pit fast by the great road to Portpatrick nearly opposite the old Mill of Twynhame, but alas ere morn the brow of the pit fell and buried the whole family, seven in number. The Cuddy was unyoked and left to browse on the adjacent brae and thereby escaped the fate of its owners, but next day its braying attracted people to the spot and, strange as it may appear considering the proverbial stupidity of that animal, Mr Rain assures me that it was observed pacing backward and forwards in front of the pit in which its Master and his family lay, braying anon, seemingly for the purpose of rousing them from their resting place.

The quantity of gravel that fell during the night on these unfortunate people was less than could have been supposed to cause such a sad catastrophe. Some of them were scarcely covered by the sand but they had all incautiously reclined with their heads to the bank by which the falling gravel covered their faces and deprived them of existence. Except a young child that lay at its mothers breast, by the composure of their features when lifted out of the pit, the whole family seemed to have died without a struggle.

I have the amount of the expense of their funeral in my possession. They were laid in three graves in Twynhame Kirkyard in that part called "The Stranger's Corner." (The ass and the cart were sold to defray the expense of the Funeral. What became of the Fiddle I have not been able to learn, but what remains of the Harp has fallen into my possession.)²⁰

The remembrance of this tragical event will be long kept up in the Country by the people superstitiously pointing out the "Harper's Hole" as a nightly meeting place of many an unearthly group of uncouth figures in human form. I pass the Harper's Hole nearly every week throughout the year and I seldom do so without calling to mind the melancholy event just related. I am certain, Sir Walter, that if you mention this spot in *Redgauntlet*, a monument will be erected there to point out the place in an appropriate manner to future ages.

I have, Revered Sir Walter, the Honor to be your Devoted Humble Servant
J. Train.

Castle Douglas 8 Oct 1830.

It has already been pointed out that Mr Train seems to have longed for his name to be mentioned in a later edition of *Redgauntlet*, and the last three lines of his letter are tantamount to asking Sir Walter to quote from his story and to give his name as a reference. As for a monument, he was no doubt aware that early in April Scott had offered to erect a stone in Kirkpatrick-Irongray to the memory of Helen Walker who had died in 1791, with an inscription making it quite clear that Helen was the original of Jeanie Deans in *Heart of Midlothian*.²¹ However, Train's hopes were finally dashed to the ground when Sir Walter died in 1832. Would that he could have foreseen that one day there would be two stones to the memory of the Wandering Minstrel standing in Twynholm kirkyard.²²

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 There is also a shorter account, to which my attention was drawn by Dr Athol Murray in the Broughton and Cally Muniments in the Scottish Record Office, GD 10, 924. I have omitted 32 lines of poetry which, with the preamble, are addressed to 'Mr. Thos. Roy, Mercht, Ringford in the parish of Tongland'.

'Hugh Prichard and his wife Ellen Hughs with their 5 children in the month of April 1816 all perished for want of a lodging near the village of Twinholm near Kirkcudbright. Their property consisted of an Ass and Cart and a Welsh Harp on which the mother, who was blind, and her Daughter, an interesting girl about 16, performed with eligence and taste, but their minstrelsy was not approved by the natives and their money being exhausted, they were reduced to the necessity of asking a shelter for the night but were refused with the addition of insult and reproach.

Indignant from such usage they resolved to pass the night in a shelter'd corner by the road side about 50 yards from the house where they were last refused entrance where, after having laid themselves down, they were much disturbed by some intoxicated ruffi[a]ns returning from a Market. On the following morning they were all found dead, lock'd in each others arms. 4 Coffins were prepared and the seven were buried in 4 Graves, and the Ass and Cart were Sold to defrey the funeral charges.

The Harp with some of their family papers remain at the Manse of Twynholm where they were examined by the Auther of this tribute to their Memory'.

This record could have been written shortly after the tragedy: certainly before Joseph Train gained possession of the harp. Nevertheless it is hard to believe that Train wrongly described the Prichard family. His story leaves no doubt in one's mind that the father was the blind harper. The unknown writer's statement that the mother was blind seems less convincing, though it is quite possible that she too played the harp.

- 2 Ordained 2 Sept. 1802; died 28 Sept. 1834.
 3 There are versions of this song in Johnson 1839 and Cromek 1810.
 4 1 mile south of Newton Stewart.
 5 *rig and fur*: ribbing of a stocking; *hoeshin*: stocking without a foot.
 6 Alexander, tenth Earl of Eglintoun; born 1723, died 24 Oct. 1769. He was shot by an exciseman named Mungo Campbell whom he had challenged for using a gun in poaching on his grounds at Ardrossan (see Paul 1906:III. 458).
 7 *Megirkie*: woollen cloth worn by old men in winter, for protecting the head and throat.
 8 For the family of Cassilis see Paul 1906:II. 492.
 9 *duffle*: coarse woollen cloth with a thick nap or frieze; *cardinal*: a short cloak worn by ladies.
 10 *turcumis*: filth, ordure, excrement. Train is quoting from Lyndsay's 'Supplication in Contemplation of Syde Taillis' (*Scottish Texts Society* 1: 121, line 105).
 11 The quotation is from Robert Sempill's poem 'The Life and Death of the Piper of Kilbarchan', and refers to Habbie Simpson. The famous fiddler of Kinghorn was Pate Birnie who is mentioned by Patterson (1857:48).

- 12 Kirkdominae in the parish of Girvan, on the coast of Carrick, Ayrshire, where there once stood the Chapel of Kirkdominae, dedicated to the Holy Trinity. The ruins served to give a rallying point and a designation to the great annual fair, held on the last Saturday of May (*Imperial Gazetteer* 1854:II, 726b, *s.v.* Girvan. This fair is not included in Sir James Marwick's *List of Markets and Fairs now and formerly held in Scotland* (1890).
- 13 Hugh, twelfth Earl of Eglintoun 1739–1819, was succeeded by his grandson Archibald William 1812–61, the thirteenth Earl who actually was the last.
- 14 Skyre Burn Bay is 2½ miles south-west of Gatehouse of Fleet.
- 15 Willie Marshall, the King of the Randies, who encouraged the insubordination of the peasantry of Galloway in 1724. Their attack was principally directed against the fences, and the Levellers found him an active leader. (See also Abbotsford Collection fos. 13 and 134; C. H. Dick 1916:98–100.)
- 16 Corse of Slakes is on the Old Military Road 3½ miles east of Creetown.
- 17 Lagganmullan (or Laggan Mullon) is 4 miles south-west of Gatehouse of Fleet.
- 18 Tawney Maws: see Patterson 1857:51.
- 19 Barlochan is near Twynholm.
- 20 The lines in brackets are a footnote in Train's MS.
- 21 Preface to *Heart of Midlothian* (1893) p. xxix. In a letter 1 Apr. 1830 from Abbotsford, Sir Walter quotes a letter from Mrs Goldie, wife of Thomas Goldie of Craigmue who was extremely anxious to have a tombstone erected in Irongray churchyard and with an inscription written by Sir Walter. She may have inspired Scott who eventually erected a stone, at his own expense. For the inscription see the *New Statistical Account* 1844:IV, 269.
- 22 The first was erected in 1871 by the ministers at Anworth, Twynholm, Balmaclellan and Kirkcudbright. It is to the memory of a nameless 'Welsh Soldier who was discharged because of blindness that came upon him in Egypt, of his wife who was a Harper and the daughter of a Welsh curate, and of their five children, one of them an infant at the breast, who, on their homeward way from Ireland . . .' perished in the gravel pit near to the Old Mill at Twynholm as reported in the Edinburgh papers.

The second was erected by the Galloway Association of Glasgow on 20 Apr. 1946, exactly 130 years after the tragedy. On one side of the stone an inscription reads 'In Memory of Hugh Prichard, his wife and five children who wandered thus far from the Parish of Llandegai, Caernarvonshire . . .'. On the other side another inscription records that the 'Nameless Minstrel' was the prototype of 'Wandering Willie' in *Redgauntlet* (vol. I, chs. X and XI, and that 'He is now known to have been Hugh Prichard of the Parish of Llandegai . . .' in North Wales.

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