

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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MARGARET BENNETT AND EMILY LYLE

'It Sits Heich, It Cries Sair'

'Perhaps there were a couple of riddles that I remember . . .

To ma riddle, to ma riddle, to ma rot, tot, tot,
I met a man in a reid, reid coat,
A staff in his hand and a stane in his throat,
To ma riddle, to ma riddle, to ma rot, tot, tot.

And the answer to that was a cherry. And another one I remember was:

It sits heich, it cries sair,
It hes the heid but it wants the hair.

And that was a rooster'

(School of Scottish Studies Archive, SA 1976/256 A4-5)

When I recorded these two riddles from Alec Smith in Sydney (derived ultimately from his native Buckie), both the answers he gave seemed satisfying. It was only recently that I realised, through reading Stewart Sanderson's note 'Two Scottish Riddles', that the answer to the second riddle is an unusual one; in all the cases quoted by Sanderson the answer given is 'bell' or (once) 'townclock'. However, the riddle has been judged unsatisfactory when taken with these answers. Archer Taylor observes in his head-note to nos. 3-4 'Head, No Hair' in *English*

Riddles from Oral Tradition (1951: 11) that '[the riddler's] reference to a supposed "head" of a bell is confusing and obscure'. Sanderson (1967: 105) agrees with Taylor that the import of the reference to the 'head' is unclear and tentatively offers two possible explanations:

Firstly, the riddlers may visualise the bell as having a position up at the 'head' of a bell-tower ('has the head'). Alternatively (but admittedly a far-fetched explanation), since 'head' or 'heid' is pronounced [hi:d] there may be a punning allusion to the idea that people pay heed to the bell.

It seems to me that the rooster—which undoubtedly has a head—provides a better fit than the other solutions offered. The 'cries sair' would then refer to the cock's loud crowing, and the 'sits heich' (or 'stands high', as in two versions) to the position taken up by the cock, as, for example, on top of a dunghill. The high position taken by the cock is noted in two Polish riddles mentioned by Taylor (1951: 229) which say that the cock 'stands on a fence in a red jacket' or 'stands on a hill in a red bonnet'. The idea of the cock's head not having hair is found, with reference to the beard only, in a set of riddles given by Taylor (1951: 193) as nos. 539-540. No. 540d, from Jamaica, runs:

As I was going through Bramble hall,
An old man gave me a call;
His beard was flesh, his mouth was horn,
And this old man was never born.
—Rooster.

This riddle includes mention of the sound made by the rooster and provides a distant parallel to the 'sits heich' riddle if this is interpreted in the sense given to it by Alec Smith.

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EMILY LYLE

FOOTNOTE:

In my schooldays in Auchterless, not too far from Buckie, riddles were still in active service. The versions I learned of the two riddles discussed by Dr. Lyle were:

'Come-a-riddle, come-a-riddle, come-a-rot-rot-tot-tot,
 A little wee man in a reed, reed coat,
 A staff in eez han an a steen in eez throat
 Gin ye tell me ma riddle I'll gie ye a groat'

'Hings heich, cries sair,
 Has a heid, bit nae hair (or, bit wints e hair)'

The first was a cherry; the second was unequivocally understood to be a bell on a church steeple.

ALEXANDER FENTON

Nasg—a West Highland Tethering Device

The following description of a West Highland tethering device of birch twigs and wood, *nasg*, was recorded from the late Donald McColl, Gortan, Acharacle, North Argyll, in June 1975 by Donald A. MacDonald and Alan Bruford.¹

The first meaning of *nasg* in Dwelly's Dictionary is 'Tie-band, wooden collar for a cow, formerly of plaited or twisted birch or other twigs'. The meaning of Old Irish *nasc* according to the RIA Dictionary is 'a fastening, tie, spancel, ring, etc. in wide sense'; it also means a champion's honorific chain or collar or a legal bond, and nine other modern Scottish Gaelic meanings are given by Dwelly. The ninth meaning, 'wooden ring of a sieve or fan' (contributed by Rev. D. M. Cameron, Ledaig) is the one known to DAM from his childhood in North Uist, meaning the circular wooden rim of the traditional pierced skin riddle. The present sort of *nasg* appears in the Scottish National Dictionary as *nask*, and in the aphetic form *ask*, reported from Caithness only. The Old Irish references indicate that a form of *nasc* was worn by cows and was considered essential farm equipment. It may well be that the material and form of the implement as described here had not changed substantially from the Dark Ages until this century, when rope and iron can be got with less effort than birch twigs.

The Gaelic text has been transcribed from the School of Scottish Studies Archive tape SA 1975/58 B by DAM, and translated, introduced and annotated by A.B. in consultation with DAM. A few repetitive phrases in Donald McColl's rapid Gaelic have been omitted and shown by dots . . .

DAM: Bha rud eile bha sibh a' dol a dh'innse dhuinn cuideachd: sin agaibh a'