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WHAT'S NEW

## Electric Scotland's Weekly Newsletter for September 8th, 2023

### Electric Scotland News

Jordan Peterson

I would guess a lot of Canadians have heard of Jordan Peterson, the Canadian clinical psychologist. He's reckoned to be the premier educationalist on YouTube with millions of views.

I have a page for him and his daughter on the site where I've also embedded some of his YouTube videos. This week I watched his video discussing the book of Exodus with a small panel of experts and found it fascinating. It's over 2 hours in length but well worth listening to as are the other half dozen videos I've also added.

You can watch these and learn more about him at:

<http://www.electriccanadian.com/lifestyle/paterson.htm>

### Scottish News from this weeks newspapers

I am partly doing this to build an archive of modern news from and about Scotland and world news stories that can affect Scotland and as all the newsletters are archived and also indexed on search engines it becomes a good resource. I might also add that in a number of newspapers you will find many comments which can be just as interesting as the news story itself and of course you can also add your own comments if you wish which I do myself from time to time. Here is what caught my eye this week...

#### Highlands and Islands: Rural backwater to industrial powerhouse

The Highlands and Islands economy has long been seen as a drain of people and talent, or an expensive drain on funds. But that has changed, and the region is on the cusp of changing much faster, as a renewable powerhouse for the UK and beyond, and even as a launchpad for space.

Read more at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-business-66695143>

#### Scottish secretary to discuss Shetland tunnels plan

Under the proposals, three separate tunnels would connect Shetland mainland with Yell, Whalsay and Bressay, while a fourth would link Yell to Unst.

Read more at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-66700093>

#### The hypocrisy of Birmingham's council

Who is to blame for Birmingham City Council's dire financial situation? The council has long been struggling to pay its bills and effectively declared itself bankrupt yesterday. In a brief statement, a spokesperson for the Labour-run council pointed the finger at 'equal pay claims'

Read more at:

<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-hypocrisy-of-birminghams-council>

What's lurking behind Humza Yousaf's Sturgeon tribute act?

Humza Yousaf's programme for government Holyrood's duller, drabber answer to the King's Speech was mostly a Nicola Sturgeon tribute act.

Read more at:

<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/whats-lurking-behind-humza-yousafs-nicola-sturgeon-tribute-act/>

Yousaf's New Deal for Business needs time

It doesn't take much to lose trust, but a long time to re-establish it. The ropey state of relations between the SNP government and business is under repair, and the evidence of the Programme for Government statement is that it'll take time.

Read more at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-business-66737936>

Shinty's Camanachd Cup trophy to be replaced with replica

Shinty's biggest prize - the Camanachd Cup - is to be replaced with a replica as part of efforts to conserve the 127-year-old trophy.

Read more at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-66727736>

Canada launches public inquiry into foreign interference

Canada's federal government has named an appellate court judge to lead an inquiry into foreign interference in the country's elections. The announcement comes after months of pressure on Justin Trudeau's Liberals to launch a full inquiry amid claims of meddling by China.

Read more at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-66745270>

## Electric Canadian

David C. Weinczok

Author, Historian, Presenter born in Canada and now living in Scotland.

You can learn about him at:

<http://www.electriccanadian.com/lifestyle/DavidCWeinczok.htm>

Dick Kent In the Far North

A novel by Milton Richards [text file]

You can read this novel at:

<http://www.electriccanadian.com/lifestyle/thefarnorth.txt>

Jack Miner and the Birds

Some things I know about Nature by Jack Miner of Kingsville, Ontario, Canada (1923)

You can read this book at:

<http://www.electriccanadian.com/lifestyle/kackminer.htm>

Thoughts on a Sunday Morning - the 3rd day of September 2023 - New Beginnings

By the Rev. Nola Crewe

You can watch this at:

<http://www.electricscotland.org/forum/communities/rev-nola-crewe/26390-thoughts-on-a-sunday-morning-the-3rd-day-of-september-2023-new-beginnings>

Canada in Flanders

By Sir Max Aitken, M.P., with a Preface by the Rt. Hon. A Bonar Law, M.P., LL.D., Secretary of State for the Colonies and an Introduction by the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Borden, G.C.M.G., M.P., LL.D., Prime Minister of Canada (1916) (pdf)

You can read this book at:

<http://www.electriccanadian.com/forces/canadainflanders0000beav.pdf>

## Electric Scotland

This Farming Life

Farming in Scotland

An interesting series on YouTube which you can watch at:

<https://www.youtube.com/@thisfarminglife>

Scottish Society of Indianapolis

Got in their Aug/Sep 2023 newsletter which you can read at:

<https://electricscotland.com/familytree/newsletters/indianapolis/index.htm>

Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales

Selected and Edited with an excellent Introduction by Sir George Douglas, Bart. (1900) (pdf). I was very impressed with the Introduction and for that reason I've made it the story for this week whixh you can read below.

You can read this at:

<https://electricscotland.com/kids/stories/scottishfairyfol00doug.pdf>

Memorial Volume - The Mosstrooper

A Legend of the Scottish Border by Robert Scott Fittis With Introductory Biographical Sketch by A. H. Millar, FSAScot (1906) (pdf)

You can learn about the author and read his book at:

<https://electricscotland.com/lifestyle/mosstrooperlegen00fitt.pdf>

A Fragmented Masterpiece

Recovering the Biography of the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish Cross-Slab by Heather F James, Isabel Henderson, Sally M Foster and Siân Jones (2008) (pdf)

You can read this book at:

<https://electricscotland.com/stones/6-Book%20Manuscript-276-1-10-20211102.pdf>

War and Judgment

A Sermon preached in the Church of Crathie, in October, 1870 by Norman MacLeod D.D. (pdf)

You can read this at:

[https://electricscotland.com/bible/War\\_and\\_Judgment\\_a\\_sermon\\_on\\_Eccles\\_iii.pdf](https://electricscotland.com/bible/War_and_Judgment_a_sermon_on_Eccles_iii.pdf)

The Naval Miscellany

Volume VII Edited by Susan Rose (1938) (pdf)

You can read this at:

<https://electricscotland.com/history/scotreg/navalmiscellany0000unse.pdf>

St. Andrew's Church, Perth

Annual Report for 1876 (pdf)

You can read this at:

<https://electricscotland.com/history/perth/standrewschurchp00stan.pdf>

Story

#### INTRODUCTION

To the book: "Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales" by Sir George Douglas, Bart.

It is only within comparatively recent years that the homely stories in the mouths of the country-people have been constituted a branch of learning, and have had applied to them, as such, the methods and the terminology of science. No doubt a very noteworthy gain to knowledge has resulted from this treatment,—a curious department of research has been opened up, and light has been cast upon various outside things of greater importance than the subject of study itself. But, side by side with this gain to knowledge, is there not, involved in the method of treatment indicated, a loss to the stories themselves ? Classified, tabulated, scientifically named, they are no longer the wild free product of Nature that we knew and loved:—they are become, so to speak, a collection of butterflies in a case, an album of pressed wild flowers. No doubt they are still very interesting, and highly instructive; but their poetry, their brightness, the fragrance which clung about them in their native air, their native soil, is in large measure gone! Well then,—with all due recognition of the value of the labours of the scientific folk-lorist, the comparative mythologist, whose work I would not for one moment be understood to undervalue,—is there not room, even at the present day, to study these stories from another point of view, and that the simplest and most obvious one—the point of view, I mean, of the story-teller pure and simple ? One would hope that the time had not yet come when the old tales, considered on their own merits, have entirely ceased to charm ; and it is an undeniable fact that there are still persons among us who would regard it as a real and personal loss could they be made to believe that the ideal hero of their childhood, as he falls heroically, in a bloody battle, wounded to the death, is in reality a myth, or an allegory to embody the setting of the sun; and who would even feel themselves aggrieved could they be brought to realise that the bugbear of their baby years—their own particular bugbear—is common also to the aborigines of Polynesia. So great is the power of early association. Well then, my proposal is to consider the Tales of the Scottish Peasantry simply from the literary, critical, or story-teller's point of view,— from the point of view, that is, of persons who actually tell them, to whom they are actually told.

I suppose that most nations, whilst their life has remained primitive, have practised the art of storytelling; and certainly the Scotch were no exceptions to the rule. Campbell of Isla, who wrote about thirty years ago, records that in his day the practice of story-telling still lingered in the remote Western Islands of Barra; where, in the long winter nights, the people would gather in crowds to listen to those whom they considered good exponents of the art. At an earlier date,—but still, at that time, within living memory,—the custom survived at Poolewe in Ross-shire where the young people were used to assemble at night to hear the old ones recite the tales which they had learned from their fore-fathers. Here, and at earlier dates in other parts of the country also, the demand for stories would further be supplied by travelling pedlars, or by gabrielunzie men, or pauper wandering musicians and entertainers, or by the itinerant shoemaker or tailor—"Whip-the-Cat" as he was

nicknamed,—both of which last were accustomed to travel through thinly-populated country districts, in the pursuit of their calling, and to put up for the night at farm-houses,—where, whilst plying their needles, they would entertain the company with stories.

The arrival of one of these story-tellers in a village was an important event. As soon as it became known, there would be a rush to the house where he was lodged, and every available seat—on bench, table, bed, beam, or the floor—would quickly be appropriated. And then, for hours together—just like some first-rate actor on a stage—the story-teller would hold his audience spell-bound. During his recitals, the emotions of the reciter were occasionally very strongly excited, as were also those of his listeners,—who at one time would be on the verge of tears, at another would give way to loud laughter. There were many of these listeners, by the way, who believed firmly in all the extravagances narrated.

And such rustic scenes as these, as I hope presently to show, have by no means been without their marked effect upon Scottish literature.

In his tour through the Islands, Campbell of Isla —my authority for these particulars—visited one of the old story-tellers in his home. The man was far advanced in years, and he lived in a rude hut on the shore at South Uist. Campbell describes the scene in detail. The hut consisted of one room only. The fireplace was the floor, and the chimney a hole above it,—so that the air was dense with peat-smoke, whilst the rafters were hung with streamers and festoons of soot. The old man himself had the manner of a practised narrator,—he would chuckle at certain places in his story, and, like an Ancient Mariner or like one of the Weird Sisters, would lay a withered finger on the listener's knee when he came to the terrifying parts. A little boy in a kilt stood at his knee, gazing in his wrinkled face, and devouring every word. Whilst the story lasted, three wayfarers dropped in, listened for a while, and then proceeded on their way. The daylight streamed down the chimney, lighting up a tract in the blue mist of the peat-smoke and falling on the white hair and brown wrinkled face of the old man, as he sat on a low stool by the fire, and on the rest of the dwelling, with its furniture of boxes and box-beds, dresser, dishes, gear of all sorts,—until at last it faded away, through shades of deepening brown, to the black darkness of the smoked roof and the corner where the peat was stored.

To turn now from the story-teller to the stories.

Perhaps the most characteristic of the Highland tales are those—somewhat tedious they are, it must be confessed, with all their repetitions of dialogues, all their reproductions of what is practically one situation—which deal with heroes and giants. The shortest kind of popular tale, on the other hand, is that which is concerned with the dumb animals,—by no means dumb, of course, in the stories. The Highlands, too, are particularly rich in these tales; and it is easy to understand how the country-people generally—living so near to nature as they do—may come to have an insight into, and an appreciation of, the character of the brute animals; together with a sympathy with them in their tussle for existence, which is not attainable by those who lead a more artificial life. Some of the apogees and traits of animal life in which this knowledge and appreciative sympathy have been embodied are decidedly naive and quaint. Nor do they lack a pungent human application.

The class of stories next to be considered displays a higher degree of fancy. And it must not be imagined that this quality of fancy is anything less than a characteristic attribute of the minds of many of the Scotch peasantry. It displays itself in its simplest form perhaps in their nomenclature—in the names which they have given either to natural objects, or to places which are characterised by some striking natural feature. In the Highlands, the Gaelic place-names are often very elaborate indeed; but to turn now to the Lowlands. A waterfall in the Selkirkshire hills, where the water, after pouring dark over a declivity, dashes down in white foam among rocks, is known as The Grey Mare's Tail; twin hills in Roxburghshire, which have beautifully rounded matched summits, have been christened Maiden's Paps. Then, the cirrus, or curl-cloud, is in rustic speech, "goat's hair"; the phenomenon of the Northern Lights, among the fishermen of Shetland, is the "Merry Dancers"; the Pleiades are the "Twinkiers"; the constellation of Orion, with its star iota pendant as if from a

girdle, is the "King's Ellwand," or yard-measure; the noxious froth which adheres to the stalks of rank vegetation at mid-summer is the "Witches' spittle." There is a root of poetry, I think, in this aptitude for giving names; and, as a matter of fact, in the Lowlands of Scotland, rustic poets and rhymesters are far from uncommon. Nor are the peasantry, in their name-giving, wanting in literary allusiveness—allusiveness, that is, to the only book which has ever obtained universal currency among them. For example, among the fishermen of the East Coast, the black mark below the gills of a haddock is "Peter's Thumb"; whilst a coarse plant commonly found in corn-fields, which has its leaves strangely clouded and stained as if with droppings, and is called, I believe, by the botanists, *Polygonum persicaria*, is locally known on the Borders as "The Flower which grew at the Foot of the Cross."

Perhaps the deepest thinkers among a people who have their philosophers as well as their dreamers, are to be found among the hill shepherds. And it is chiefly through the instrumentality of one of these hill shepherds that we can now, in fancy, enter that realm of fancy, the world of Fairyland. James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, was one of those common men, plus genius, who every now and then in the history of literature give to a whole world of floating thought, fancy, tradition, a permanent substantial form. No man in literature is his master in the wierd tale. No man, but Shakespeake—not even excepting Drayton—has written so well of the fairies.

Hogg was born in the Arcadia of Scotland, Ettrick Forest, where, as Scott tells us, the belief in fairies lingered longer than elsewhere—about the year 1770. When he was a young man, the spirit of emulation was stirred in his breast by the example of the poet Burns. And so, as he wandered through the pastoral solitudes, keeping his sheep, he carried an ink-horn slung from his neck, and taught himself to write,—and so committed his first poem to paper. And as he thus wandered and mused, he is said to have fallen asleep one day, upon a green hill-side, to dream the dream of Kilmeny, and to bear her image in his heart for ever after.

The story of Kilmeny is that of a girl of poetic nature, a lover of solitude, who, wandering alone at twilight, disappears in a wild glen among the hills. She is sought for by her friends—at first hopefully, at last despairingly. No trace of her is found. Years pass, and the mystery remains unsolved; but at the close of the seventh year, in the same twilight hour in which she had vanished, Kilmeny returns to her home. She has been rapt away by fairies, with whom the intervening years have been spent. But in the midst of Fairyland, her heart still yearns tenderly to her home; and when seven years have expired, and the fairies have no longer power to detain her against her will, she chooses to leave the life of pleasure which she leads among them, to return to the common earth. Such is an outline of the story; but the story is the least part of the poem. Its charm lies in its exquisitely flowing and melodious verse, in its suggestion of the twilight world, and of a world of shadows—"a land where all things are forgotten"—in its wistful tenderness,—in a word, in the unique and perfect aptness of the style to the subject. So magical, indeed, are the fairy touches throughout the writings of the Ettrick Shepherd, that one might almost be tempted to dream that the experience with which tradition credits Thomas the Rhymer had been shared by this rhymer of a later day.

As in England, tales of fairies caught sight of on the country green, at twilight or by moonlight, of services rendered by mortals to fairies and gratefully and gracefully repaid, find a place among the fables of the Scottish peasantry. But it is by no means in such airy, gracious, and harmless if not beneficent, creations as this that the genius of the Scottish nation finds its fancy's most congenial food. That genius is upon the whole essentially a sombre one—relieved, indeed, by a rough humour—but tending most to an affinity with gloom. The hostility of Nature, its permanence as contrasted with the transient character of man, its victoriousness in the never-ending battle waged against it by man,— a battle in which he fights for life, in which he gains a few trifling and temporary advantages, but in which he must recognise from the first that he fights against impossible odds: these are facts which a barren soil and a bleak and stormy climate have thrust forcibly upon the Scottish popular imagination, and which have impressed themselves deeply upon it. The shepherd battling for his life, and for the lives of his flock, against the force and darkness of driving snow, is a far more characteristic Scottish figure than that of James Hogg asleep on the hill-side, dreaming of Fairyland.

This gloomy view of Nature has tinged the superstitious beliefs, and through them the stories of the Scottish

peasantry. And upon the back of this gloomy view of Nature has come a sense, stronger perhaps than is felt by any other nation, of fate and doom, of the mystery of life and death, of the cruelty of the inevitable, the pain of separation, the darkness which enshrouds the whole. In this sense the Scotch are a nation of pessimists. They have found their religious vocation in Calvinism, the gloomiest and most terrible of creeds; and the spirit which embraced Calvinism like a bride informs their mythology and their fireside tales. Their tendency to devil-worship—to the propitiation of evil spirits—is illustrated by the hideous usage of the Good-man's Croft—a plot of ground near a village which was left untilled, set apart for, and dedicated to, the Powers of Evil, in the hope that their malignity might be appeased by the sacrifice, and that so they might be induced to spare the crops on the surrounding fields. Of the state of superstitious dread in which some Scotchmen passed their lives, Mrs. Grant, of Laggan, gives a further curious illustration when she tells us that, in the Highlands of her day, to boast, or to congratulate a friend, was to rashly court retribution; whilst to praise a babe upon the nurse's arm was to incur suspicion of wishing to bring down ill upon its head.

Holding such beliefs as these, it is not to be wondered at if, in their stories, the Scotch are the passed-masters of the weird. Their very nursery tales—many of them—would appear to have been conceived with a view to educating, for some strange purpose or other, the passions of horror and sorrow in the child to whom they are told. Such rhymes, for instance, as "The Tempted Lady," "The Fause Knight and the Wee Boy," "The Strange Visitor," are uncanny to a degree. In the two former, the Evil One himself appears, in specious guise. The Strange Visitor is Death. The nursery ballad of "The Croodin' Doo"—a term of affection applied to a child—is as full of combined piteousness and sinister suggestion of underhand wickedness as any little tragedy of its length could well be. The suggestion is that of a man's childless, lawful wife bearing a bitter grudge against another woman who has borne him a child.

The babe returns from a day's outing, and is questioned by his slighted mother as to where he has been, and what he has done. But he is tired, and cries out to be put to bed. The jealous woman, however, persists in her interrogatory, and asks him what he has had for dinner. He replies that he has dined off a "little four-footed fish." (The eft, or newt, is, like the toad, in the common superstition, venomous.) "And what was done with the bones of this singular fish?" asks the woman. They were given to the lapdog. And what did the dog do? After eating them, he "shot out his feet and died." There, with admirable art, the ballad ends. Its effect is immensely heightened by a burden, or refrain, in which, at the close of every verse, the child, with wearisome iteration, and with child-like importunity, cries out to his mother to "make his bed soon." This little song of child-life is queer fare to set before a child.

Stoddart, the tourist, long ago pointed out the contrast between the fairies of the English popular mythology and those of the Scotch; and certainly the delicate, joyous, tricksy, race of moonlight revellers whom we meet in the pages of Shakespeare are scarcely to be recognised as belonging to the same family with the soulless, man-stealing, creations of the Scottish peasant's fancy. The effect exercised upon popular superstition by the ruling passion of Calvinistic religion is one of the most striking things in Scottish folklore. For example, the belief in fairies did not cease to exist. It does not seem even to have been universally discountenanced by the Church; for we find mention of cases in which Ministers of the Gospel combine with their parishioners to take measures for the restitution of infants which the fairies had changed at nurse, or for the recovery of women who had been spirited away. And, indeed, two of the most curious pieces of composition known to me are, a pamphlet on the Second Sight, written by a Minister of Tiree, and an article on the Fairies, written by a Minister of Aberfoyle,—both in the Seventeenth Century. Both writers were obviously firm believers in the superstitions upon which they wrote; and in both cases the gross ignorance and darkness of the writer's mind is only equalled by the authoritative weight and pedantry of his style. The Solemn League and Covenant had left its mark even upon the fairies, as the touching little story of "The Fairy and the Bible-reader" shows.

The fairies, and that rough, grotesque, humour-some, but good-natured figure, the Brownie, occupy, however, but a small space in the popular mythology in comparison with such shapes of awe, of terror, or of ill-omen, as the ghosts, "more real than living man," which the Highland Ezekiel saw borne past him on the wind, in Morven of the gloomy skies; or as the witch, the wraith, the a warning," the waterkelpie, the man or woman who has the

"second sight," the evil or lost spirit.

The characteristic rough humour of the Scottish peasant, as it affects the creations of the fancy, embodies itself almost exclusively in the Brownie. This was a half-human creature, of uncouth appearance.

"His matted head on his breet did rest;  
A lang blue beard wan'er'd down like a vest;—  
But the glare o' his e'e hath nae bard exprest."

During the day he would lurk in out-of-the-way corners of some old house which he had chosen to inhabit ; and in the night-time would make himself useful to the family to which he had attached himself. But the conditions of his service were the most disinterested ever drawn up, and on the slightest attempt being made to reward him for his labours he would disappear for ever. The Brown Man of the Moors is another of these twilight, or half-seen, creations; but he is not of a domestic character. Wanderers upon lonely moors might, on rare occasions, catch a glimpse of him squatting in a hollow—a short, thick, powerful figure; earth-coloured, or of the tint of the surrounding ling. "Shellycoat" dwelt in the waters. He was accustomed to appear decked out with the spoils of the sea—his coat being hung with shells, which clattered as he moved; and his delight was in mischief,—such as, for instance, like the Spunkie, or Will-o'-the-Wisp, in leading travellers astray. "Nuckelavee," the Sea-Devil of the Orkney Islanders, a more formidable figure, seemed to be shaped like a man above and like a horse blow: and his peculiar horror lay in the fact that, being skinless, his raw, red flesh was exposed to view. Then there was the River Horse, a supernatural being supposed to feed, in the shape of a horse, on the shores of Loch Lochy, and when disturbed to plunge into its waters. The River Bull emerged from the lake to visit the cow-pastures; and there were cow-herds who pretended that they could distinguish the calves of which he was the sire. Most of these creatures of the fancy are peculiar to the Scotch; and one cannot help fondly speculating as to the poetic use which Shakespeare would have made of them, had they happened to be among the associations of his childhood. But a more subtle water-spirit than any of those yet mentioned was the Kelpy, whose appearances were generally timed either to give warning of death by drowning, or to lure men to a watery grave. The Kelpy story of The Doomed Rider, to be found in the present collection, admirably illustrates the sentiment of fatalism inherent in the Scottish peasant's mind. In illustration of the kindred feeling of the "malevolence of Nature," inherent there also, the poet Alexander Smith has aptly quoted the following popular rhyme —a dialogue in which two rivers are supposed to be the speakers:—

"Said Tweed to Till, What gars ye rin sae still? Said Till to Tweed, "Though ye rin wi' speed, And I rin slaw, For every ane that ye droon I droon twa!"

Here it appears that the elements are our enemies, and war against us to the death.

But, beyond a doubt, the most valuable element in the peasant tales, considered from the poetic standpoint, is not the fanciful or the imaginative element, but the human. This is, in some cases, brought out in extraordinary strength by the juxtaposition of the supernatural. Space allows me to cite but a single instance. By far the strangest, the most startling, and to us the most incomprehensible, of all the Scottish superstitions is the belief in the periodical return of the dead to their former homes—not as night-walking ghosts, encountered only by solitary persons in the dark—but as social beings, come back to join the family circle, and share in its festivities, —in short, in the old phrase, come back "to dine and dance with the living." How anything so incredible should ever have come to be believed, we may well be at a loss to understand. Yet believed it seems to have been. There are two of the old ballads which are concerned w7ith the belief, and they are two of the most beautiful which have come down to us.

The fragment entitled The Wife of Usher's Well sets forth how a thriving country-woman made provision for her three sons by sending them to sea. But they have not been long away from her, when she hears that they have perished in a storm. Then, in the madness of her grief, she puts up a blasphemous prayer to heaven,—praying that the conflict of wind and wave may never cease until her sons come home to her, in their likeness as she

knew them of old. Her prayer is heard, and answered.

"It fell about the Martinmas,  
When nights are lang and mirk,  
The carline wife's three sons cam' hame,  
And their hats were o' the birk.

"It neither grew in syke nor glen,  
Nor yet in ony sheuch;  
But, at the gates of Paradise,  
That birk grew fair eneuch!"

Rising to a height of simple, unconscious, tragic irony, which is little less than sublime, the ballad goes on to detail the domestic preparations made by the mother to fete the home-coming of her sons. In a fever of happiness over the restoration of her lost ones, she issues her orders to her maids. The fatted calf is slain, and so on; and a brief hour of joy goes by. Then, as it grows late, the young men betake themselves to rest. The mother has prepared their bed with her own hands. But the dawn draws near —the period of their sojourn is almost up. The cock crows; and they recognise the signal for their departure.

"Up then crew the red, red, cock,  
And up and crew the grey:  
The eldest to the youngest said,  
"Tis time we were away!"

"The cock he hadna craw'd but ance,  
Nor clapt his wings at a',  
When the youngest to the eldest said,  
"Brother, we must awa."

"The cock doth craw, the day doth daw,  
The channerin' worm doth chide;  
Gin we be miss'd out o' our place,  
A sair pain we maun bide.

"Then, fare-ye-weel, my mither dear  
Fareweel to barn and byre!  
And fare-ye-weel, the bonny lass  
That kin'les my mither's fire!"

In this instance, the superstition of the return of the dead to their homes, to visit their friends, is complicated with the idea of punishment for a rash utterance, or impious prayer. But in the other ballad which deals with the same theme—The Clerk's Twa Sons o' Owsenford—the fundamental idea appears in its simplest form. In other respects the two stories resemble each other; except that, in the second case, the young men, two in number, are represented as paying the penalty of death—like the cavaliers of the Tour de Nesle — "for a little of dear-boucht love," and that their home-coming is timed at Christmas.

These two tales are probably the wildest in the whole range of Scottish popular story; but, wild as they are, they contain, I think, a distinct and deep human significance. It will be observed that, in either case, the home-coming of the dead is placed at a season of relaxation and festivity—at martinmas, namely, in the one case, and at Christmas in the other. At such seasons as these, the thoughts of the working-people, set free for a space from their daily occupations, are at liberty to wander; whilst it is a fact that the annual recurrence of such red-letter days, or land-marks in time, with their familiar accompaniment of ceremonies and usages, bring

bygone years before the mind with a peculiar clearness—or, at least, brings them before the minds of people who lead simple, monotonous, lives, with few events to vary them. Nothing is commoner at such seasons than to hear people refer to the friends whom they have lost since that time last year, dwelling, as they do so, upon the characters, ways, and particular acts of the departed. Well, from this peculiar vividness of mental realisation, it is, for a bold and poetic imagination, but a single step to conjure up the actual bodily presence of the lost ones. Hence may have arisen these wild stories; and hence, no doubt, arose the fancy—a beautiful and touching one, I think,—that at Christmas the dead return to their homes to dine and dance with the living.

The few specimens at which we have now glanced must suffice to illustrate for us the more striking characteristics of the Scottish peasant-tales generally, —these characteristics being, as I take it: first, an ever lively and inventive fancy. Secondly, a powerful imagination. The Scottish peasant story-teller is, like Homer, “qui sibi res, voces, actus, secundum verum, optime fingit” as Quintilian hath it;—we should say, perhaps, that he had “poetic vision”; but the phrase does not cover quite the same ground. And this powerful imagination is apt to be gloomily affected, and at times distempered, by the natural features of the country, the conditions of life there, and the broodings of the national mind.

Thirdly, a love of humanity, coupled with a keen sense of the hardness of its lot, manifesting itself in a poignant pathos. Of course, in a country of mixed races, like Scotland, the general characteristics of the tales vary widely in different parts of the country. The Celt of the West Highlands, for instance, has a penchant for giants, and a perfect callousness of the feelings—at which it is impossible not to marvel—where the lives and sufferings of the said giants and of their belongings are concerned. In one word, the giant of the West Highland tales is always “fair game”—you cannot, by any contrivance, take a mean advantage of him. Again, the trolls, trows, “hill-folk,” or “grey neighbours,” of the Norsemen of the Shetland Islands have a character of their own, distinct from that of the fairies of the rest of Scotland, and harmonising perfectly with the colourless landscape of their native melancholy shores. In general terms, it may perhaps be said that the Highland tales display the more inexhaustibly luxuriant invention, whilst those of the Lowlands have the advantage of a more clearly defined outline, and enjoy a monopoly in depth of human significance.

To glance now at the literary bearing of these tales. In this respect, the oral traditions of the Scottish peasantry have enjoyed particular advantages, from the fact that the rich mine which they afford has been industriously and admirably worked by modern Scottish writers. Perhaps the most marked features of Scottish poetry have been, in the earlier times, its national, and in later times its popular, character. Well, in modern times at least, both of these characteristics have been shared by Scottish prose. This may not indeed be true, or at least not without large reservations, of the writings of Smollett; but, from Smollett’s day onward, the Scottish prose belles-lettres have been essentially a “growth of the soil.” And the Scotchmen who have laboured the field of popular tradition have been far from working it upon the lines of such writers as, for instance, Musams, Tieck, and La Motte Fouque,—making the popular tale a mere foundation upon which to rear their own structures of philosophy or fancy, and often transforming it almost, if not quite, beyond recognition. Neither have they worked in the spirit of such a writer as Theophile Gautier, who, though he would sometimes use the popular tale as material to work on, had, in this regard, nothing national about him,—being before all things a “stylist”—an artist, pure and simple, indifferent, isolated from ties of country, from ties of kindred, almost from ties of humanity. The Scottish writers, on the other hand, are, in the first case, objective; and, in the second, highly national.

First and foremost among these writers ranks, of course, Sir Walter Scott. Neglected as, in comparison with his other books, his Border Minstrelsy has been, the fact remains that he produced no more highly characteristic work; whilst of that great literature of fiction of which he afterwards became the author, the best and most vital parts may, I think, truly be said to “have their roots in the hearts of the people.” And the further he departs from that source of his inspiration, the less valuable his work becomes. Though not born in the peasant class himself, Sir Walter knew the Scottish peasantry, in his own way, as few men have known them, and he lived on terms of friendly intimacy with his valued Tom Purdies and Swanstons, and of close literary confidence with such men as William Laidlaw and Joseph Train.

The two writers who rank next in the group alluded to were, however, peasants born. James Hogg has already been spoken of. Allan Cunningham, born in 1784, was a son of the land-steward on the estate on which Robert Burns occupied a farm,—a circumstance which, no doubt, had its effect in stimulating the poetic impulse that was in him. On growing up, he adopted the trade of a mason. An antiquarian, Cromek by name, was at that time engaged in forming a collection of "Remains of Galloway and Nithsdale Song," on the model of Percy's Reliques; and he applied to young Cunningham to collect old poems for him. "Honest Allan," as his friend Thomas Carlyle styled him, was not successful in his quest; but, nothing daunted, he set to work to compose songs and ballads which, if they could not in the nature of things possess the quality of age, should at least be as good as old, or better if possible. These he transmitted to his employer, without explanation. Cromek's love for antiquity would appear to have been a pure passion, inasmuch as he seems to have loved it for the sake of any xuso? or profit, which was to be derived from the attachment, and for no other reason. He was delighted with his young correspondent's contributions to the "Remains of Galloway and Nithsdale Song;" and Cunningham's literary career was thus begun. His Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry are perhaps the best of the many books which he wrote; and are especially distinguished by the sweetness of his style, and by the picturesque traits of old-fashioned country-life and the exquisite touches of fresh naturepainting in which they abound.

After Cunningham comes Campbell of Isla, born in 1822. He was of gentle birth, but understood, and sympathised with the peasantry. A proficient in the Gaelic language, he went about on foot among the people of the West Highlands and Islands—like a sort of Romany Rye, or like Catskin, the Wandering Young Gentleman of the Garland—and got them to tell him stories, which he accurately noted down. In his writings, therefore, we get the stories as nearly as possible in the exact words in which they were told. He died about six or seven years ago.

Then there is Dougal Graham, the chap-book writer, who has been called the a Scottish Rabelais." He began life as a chapman, and came in course of time to be skellat bell-man of Glasgow. His magnum Opus is a metrical narrative of the Jacobite Rising of '45, in which he himself took part; and to him are also attributed the invention of Turnimspike, and John Cheap, and the history of the Witty Exploits of George Buchanan, the King's Jester.

Then, after Graham, come Robert Chambers— whose fame as a publisher has somewhat obscured his well-earned fame as a writer; Hugh Miller, the geologist; and, among men of merely local reputation, James Telfer, of Saughtree, and many others.

Literature takes the life of tradition, and then embalms the dead body. What stories, then, have taken the place, as genuine peasant-tales, though belonging to a period of decadence, of the old stories which introduce the supernatural and have ceased to be believed? Well, there are a variety, which do not tax the power of credulity quite too far. Stories of old local battles, for instance, and of how some neighbouring stream, or river, ran discoloured with blood for three whole days after the fighting. Stories of buried treasures:—there is the English knight whom Jock of Heavyside slew, and who lies buried, in his silver armour, not far from Agricola's Camp at Pennymuir. Then there is a neighbouring treasure which lies, wrapt in a bullock's hide, buried in a hill. It is said, circumstantially enough, to have been concealed by two brothers, in time of war; but is described, with judicious vagueness, as lying exactly midway between two places, only one of which is known. A third treasure is more particularly localised. The field in which it lies buried is well known; but if any man set spade in that field to dig for it, the sky, we are told, will ere long grow dark, and a muttering of thunder will be heard, and a flash of lightning seen. (This story certainly does trench perilously near to superstition.) Then, again, there are other treasures, with which—even if one did happen to light upon one of them—it would not be safe to meddle. They are supposed to have been buried in a time of the plague—perhaps as sacrifices to appease some Unknown Power—and the infection Of the pestilence is supposed to have been buried with them; so that, were they to be unearthed, the plague would probably break out again. On the sea-coast, sunken treasure-ships take the place of buried treasures. Then there are the stories of mysterious caverns, into which people enter, but from which

they do not come out. There is one cave of this kind into which a huntsman and a pack of hounds are said to have pursued a hunted fox; but from which neither fox, hounds, huntsman, nor horse, were ever known to emerge again. Then there is another cave into which a piper penetrated, playing upon his pipes. He never came out either. His music was listened to for a long time by persons at the mouth of the cavern. At first it was loud and cheerful, then it grew fainter and fainter, more plaintive and more plaintive, until at last it died away in the bowels of the earth. Then, there are kindred stories of subterranean passages of great length—sometimes said to have been fashioned by the monks—uniting ancient castles or religious establishments. Then, there are modern varieties of the hero-tale,—stories of fights, and of adventures by flood and field—a favourite one is that of a prodigious leap taken by the hero in escaping from pursuit. There are, also, stories of remarkable local characters—the desperate ones being preferred. There is, for instance, the sceptical country-gentleman, who, having led a merry life and scoffed at the Minister, preserved at least the virtue of consistency by leaving directions in his will that he was to be buried, in a vaulted chamber, seated at a table, with a church-warden pipe in his mouth, and a bottle and a glass before him. Or else there is that other reprobate, who, when lands were gone and money spent, resolved to put an end to his life. So he blindfolded a favourite mare, mounted her, and rode towards the cliff-heads. There he put her to the gallop, and prepared for a leap into space. But, just as she reached the brink, by some instinct the blind mare swerved and turned. He set her at the frightful leap again, and again she refused; and, after a third failure, he is said to have seen the error of his ways, and to have ridden home, and from that day to have led a reformed life. Then, lastly, there is the murder-tale—the narrative of some desperate deed. It must not be hastily classed with the literature of the "penny dreadful" and the "shilling shocker" order; for, whatever may be the shortcomings of Arcady, vulgarity at least is not one of them, and the peasant tales never sink to so low a level as that. Blood may be spilt in them—and spilt freely it often is; but there are always present redeeming touches of fancy, of poetry, of character-painting, of the picturesque, to raise the terrible histories from the rank of the "sensation novel" to that of the poetic tragedy.

What, in conclusion, is there in these rude "old-wives' tales" to justify their withdrawal from the limbo of forgotten things? They have a place, though it be a humble one, in the history of the workings of the human mind. They are the manifestation, in its simplest form, of the literary, or poetic, impulse; and nothing that has been thus generated, and that has stood the test of time as these tales have done, can ever, I believe, be unworthy of our study. To take an instance from another art. Anthropologists tell us that, ages and ages ago, there was a savage, dwelling in a cave, in a bleak northern country, among mountains which were covered with pine-trees. He was agile, able-bodied, and ingenious; and he faced the mighty beasts of the forest in his hunting, to obtain food for his wife and children. We know next to nothing about him; but we do know that, one day, it somehow occurred to him to make a drawing on the wall of his cave of something which he had seen and had no doubt admired. So he etched a little picture of a reindeer, copying faithfully the outline of the body, and the branchings of the antlers. This, reader, is the man whom we speak of as Paleolithic Man. His performance had the innate permanence, from a human point of view, of all true art. It remains, and it continues to interest, to this day; for it is the outcome of the first faint stirrings in the human breast of two passions: the Love of Beauty, and the Thirst for Fame. "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin." The lapse of countless centuries does not prevent our entering into the feelings of that simple artist; and what he felt, in his day and hour, is felt, in their degree,' by the tellers of the Tales of the Scottish Peasantry. Art is not only a thing of bound volumes and of exhibitions; and the Scottish peasant has shown perhaps as keen a sense of it—of the story-teller's art, at least—as his mental development and the conditions of his existence would admit.

GEORGE DOUGLAS.

You can read the whole book at:

<https://electricscotland.com/kids/stories/scottishfairyfol00doug.pdf>

END.

Weekend is almost here and hope it's a good one for you.

Alastair