

Transactions

OF THE

BANFFSHIRE FIELD CLUB.



The support of The Strathmartine Trust toward
this publication is gratefully acknowledged.

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TUESDAY, APRIL 19, 1932.

A meeting of the Club was held this evening, the president, Sheriff J. W. More in the chair, when a paper was given by Rev. J. M. M'Pherson, D.D., Forglen, on Folk Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland and their Ethnic Significance.

There was an interesting discussion at the close. One matter brought out in its course was the explanation of the name of Well Market given to a historic fair at Tomintoul in August which has disappeared from the calendar of that part of the country only in recent years through the incursion of the mart system. The market was for long held at the site of Fergan Well, overlooking the ancient churchyard of Kirkmichael on Aven-side, and when, many years ago, it was transferred to Tomintoul, it continued to bear the name of the Well Market.

Rev. Dr M'Pherson was warmly thanked for his contribution on a subject on which his authority is widely recognised.

The paper was as follows:—

FOLK BELIEFS IN NORTH-EAST.

The primitive beliefs and usages which still survive or survived till a comparatively recent period are of value as revealing the different races that have at one period or another tenanted this North Eastern part of Scotland. True, one may find sporadic observances the ethnic value of which it is difficult to appraise. The burry man who used to be resorted to at Buckie and Fraserburgh in times of bad fishing is a case in point. In Buckie down to the middle of the 19th century and in Fraserburgh, as late as 1864, when the herring fishing proved a failure and dire want faced the community, resort was had to the burry man. Dressed in a flannel shirt, covered over with burrs, he was carried through the town in procession in a hand-barrow in Buckie. In Fraserburgh, he was mounted on horseback. This ancient ceremonial was be-

lieved to change the fortune of the fishing: and only when it failed to accomplish the desired end, did the custom fall into disuetude. The burry man as so employed largely resembles the scapegoat of antiquity. The practice may have been brought to these shores by sailors who, in other lands, had become familiar with similar rites. It is otherwise with well defined groups of belief which disclose a racial invasion of our coasts, and speak of more than one nation that have left their mark on the early religion of the people.

Fire Festivals.

The fire festivals fall into two groups—1st those which speak of affinities with the nations on the other side of the North Sea, 2nd those associated with the Celtic religion.

As to the former, we find distinct traces of them from the Shetland Isles in the North to Stonehaven in the South. These all take place about Yule or Hogmanay.

At Lerwick there used to be a fire ceremonial on old New Year's Day. There was a procession through the streets of the town of a band of youths dragging large tar barrels filled with chips and tar and mounted on platforms of wood. The blazing effect of this mass was described "as truly grand and terrific."

Dingwall some 60 years ago had a great fire celebration on Hogmanay night. It was termed the "Burning of the Crate." The crate had been filled with combustibles well soaked with paraffin. It was dragged into the town by an old nag, escorted by a company of musicians who played on a variety of instruments. On arrival in the High Street, the contents of the crate were fired. The burning mass was dragged by the horse towards the Cross, the processionists engaging in a riot of whooping and dancing and finally scattering the flaming contents of the crate as the clock struck twelve. It was spoken of as "burning out the old year and lighting in the new."

At Burghead, on Hogmanay night, O.S., the Burning of the Clavie still takes place. Down to the 18th century, the Clavie was burned at Findhorn and Lossiemouth, as we gather from

the Presbytery records. The Church records are of interest also as showing that at that period clavie and torch were synonymous. At Burghead, a tar barrel is secured, and sawn in two, one part forms the groundwork of the Clavie, which is fixed upon a salmon fisherman's stake, called the spoke. The Clavie is filled with pieces of wood and tar, a place being reserved for a burning peat, which is received by "the Clavie king" and placed in position. Soon the contents burst into flame. Then the Clavie bearer, popping his head between the staves, sets out with his blazing burden, and marches through the chief streets of the old town. Halts are made at appointed places when pieces of the burning faggots are thrown inside open doors. The circuit of the old town being completed, the Clavie is borne along the main street to a small hill near the northern extremity of the promontory, called the "Doorie." On the summit, a freestone pillar has been built for its reception, the spoke fitting into a socket in the centre. There is nothing ancient or sacred about this pillar, which has only been the Doorie since 1809. Fresh fuel is now heaped on the Clavie. It blazes for about half an hour and then amid great excitement, the blazing mass is scattered down the side of the hill. There is a general scramble for the burned embers which are highly prized as bringers of good luck.

At Stonehaven, the last night of the year still witnesses the ceremonial of the "Fireballs." The balls are circular in shape and about the size of a bees' skep. They are made of combustibles and well inoculated with tar. To each ball, a piece of wire is attached, by which it may be swung by the celebrants. Some sixty balls are employed and whirled about with great gusto, as the procession marches backwards and forwards along the High Street of the old town, till the balls are nearly burned out. Then as midnight strikes, the burning fragments are thrown to the sides of the street and into the house doors.

In the early form of celebration, the fire was carried round the boats in harbour. What was the object of this fire ritual? By the divine fire to destroy all the powers of

evil and darkness and so ensure prosperity by land and by sea in the coming year. While the fire ritual in each of the localities has its distinctive forms, there is a wonderful sameness. The celebration is always confined to the ancient part of the town—the burning flames are destructive of every maleficent power and possession of the dying embers is regarded as a harbinger of good fortune for the New Year.

All these fire festivals took place at Hogmanay. They all occurred on the sea coast and they have their affinities with the fire festivals of Scandinavia.

Hallowe'en Rites.

On the other hand, there are distinct traces of fire celebrations at Hallowe'en, the beginning of the Celtic year. Their object was the same, the ritual was similar—by the power of the divine fire to destroy every evil influence and ensure fertility in the coming year. In East Aberdeenshire, lads went from house to house begging a peat, commonly with the words, "Gie's a peat t' burn the witches." An interesting survival was to be found at Balmoral in Queen Victoria's time. Its resemblances to the Hogmanay celebrations on the coast are very marked. It was called "burning the witch." A huge bonfire was kindled in front of the Castle, opposite the principal doorway. The clansmen were mustered, arrayed in Highland garb. At a signal, headed by a band, they marched toward the palace. The bonfire was lit so as to be in full blaze when the procession reached it. The interest of the promenade centred in a trolley—the shandy dann—on which was fixed the effigy of a hideous old woman or witch. As they neared the fire the pace was quickened to a run, then a sudden halt was made a dozen or so yards from the blaze. Here, amid breathless silence, an indictment was read why this witch should be burned to ashes, and with no one to appear on her behalf, she is condemned to the flames. With a rush and a shout, the trolley and its occupant are hurled topsyturvy into the fire. This is the action of the whole clan. They burn the witch as the em-

lodiment of the powers of evil. Rev. Dr Pratt (of Pratt's "Buchan"), writing in 1858, said "Hallow Fires are still kindled on the Eve of All Saints by the inhabitants of Buchan and present a singular and animated spectacle, from sixty to eighty being frequently seen from one point."

Here we see the Celtic influences at work in the inland parts of the North East. The Celts brought their religion with them and while not confined to the hills—for there are evidences of Hallowe'en celebrations even on the Moray Firth coast villages—still it is chiefly in the landward parts that we find evidences of fire worship at Hallowe'en.

The Deity in Water.

Turning to the worship of sacred wells, springs, and rivers, one finds that even in our own day belief in the holy well and the offering of gifts to propitiate the presiding deity has not yet died out. When the Aberdeen football team cross the Tay to play the Hearts, they throw coppers into the river, for good luck they would say. What is this but an offering to the Spirit of the River? It has been frequently remarked of late the number of travellers from the other side of the Atlantic who pitch coins into the Forth when crossing the Bridge. The idea is the same.

But the holy wells have been the most universal objects of man's devotion. Every parish had its holy well: often more than one. The boons which the deity of the well granted to the worshipper varied. Often it was health to the sickly: there were whooping cough wells, as the well at Logie in the Garioch; wells whose virtue lay in curing fevers, as the well at Rushland, near Kintore; toothache wells, such as St Mary's Well, near the Burn of Craig, in Auchindoir. Others had the power of curing a variety of diseases. There were fertility wells, which had the power of making the barren woman rejoice and become a joyful mother of children. One such was the well of Melshach, a lonely spring on the Wardhouse Moors, in the parish of Kennethmont. There were also oracular wells, one of the most noted being the well of S. Michael near the

parish church of Kirkmichael, Banffshire. "If the sober matron wished to know the issue of her husband's ailment or the love-sick nymph that of her languishing swain, they visited the well of St Michael." (S.A. xii, 465).

Amongst the more famous wells of the North East were the well of Seggat, the well of Spey at Orton, S. Wallach's well in Glass and the Well of the Wood at Culloden. The well at Culloden still retains some of its ancient fame, for it is still visited by thousands of devotees on the first Sunday of May. In the olden time crowds used to flock from all parts of the north and west arriving on the Saturday night before the first Sunday in May. A silver coin, or it may be copper, is dropped into the well: a wish is formulated to which some at least of the pilgrims attach more importance than what an outsider might imagine, and a rag or piece of clothing is attached to the thorn bush beside the well. This act of fixing the rag to the tree, by which of old the disease was transferred to the sacred tree, is a remarkable relic. A similar sight may be seen in Bible lands where the suffering Bedouins attach a bit of clothing to the holy tree, thereby transferring their sickness.

What is of importance for our present purpose is the time when the pilgrimages were made to the wells of virtue. In great distress, it was open to the suppliant to go at any moment or season, but there were certain times when the wells were believed to be of peculiar potency and the spirit of the well most eager to help and heal. All the evidence tends to show that the first Sunday of each quarter in the Celtic year was the proper day for the suppliant to pay his vows at the holy well. The first Sundays of November, February, May and August were the chief days of resort to the healing fountains. Owing to the inclemency of the seasons, February and November recede into the background. Beltane and Lammas continued to see throngs of pilgrims rendering their homage at the venerated springs. The Well of Spey, Fergan's Well on the south-east side of Knock Fergan, St Wal-

lach's Well, the Craiguck Well near Cromarty, St Conon's Well in Glenberrie, and the Well of the Wood at Culloden all attracted their devotees on the first Sunday of May.

In the records of the Church, too, we find the difficulty the ecclesiastical authorities had in suppressing the Lammas pilgrimages. These seem to have been part of an ancient festival. There were "great confluences" at St Mary's, Orton, reported by the minister of Rathven—these occurred on the three Saturdays before Lammas, and three Saturdays after Lammas. The conventions were held all night.

What is worthy of note is that the pilgrimage to the Wells, judging from the times they were frequented by their votaries, may be regarded as part of our Celtic inheritance. The well worship was the well worship of the Celtic Church, observed at the seasons which were sacred to the ancient Celt. There are however some traces of Christian influences in the later periods. Pasch Sunday was a favourite day for going to the Well of Seggat: Easter Sunday shared with the first Sunday in May the glory of visiting Fergan's Well. In all probability, the worship of the sacred fountain was not only pre-Christian but pre-Celtic: but in the examples which have come down through the 19th century, one may say that the times when homage was offered at the sacred springs were the seasons hallowed by the primitive Celtic religion.

Megaliths.

I pass to the megaliths which are such a feature of the North East of Scotland. Leaving out the stone circles, which may have a different significance from the monoliths, I wish to connect these ancient standing stones with our own time. Pillar worship we find in many lands. Jacob's pillar at Bethel was more than a landmark. It was anointed just as idols were in antiquity, and the pillar, not the place in which it stood, was called Beth-EL, "house of God." As with other natural objects to which homage was rendered by man, the veneration of sacred stones is primitive. Certain natural rocks and boulders,

appealing to the untutored imagination, were believed to be living objects with power to help or hurt mankind. Clach-na-Bhan, a huge granite rock on the top of Meall-ghaineah, a hill on the east side of Glen Aven, was held in high repute for its fertilising virtues; and The Kelpie Needle in the Dee near Dinnet possessed similar powers. The Shargar Stone in Fyvie at one time had the power of bestowing health on sickly children. Many a story is told of the evil that followed, when in an unbelieving age the sacred stones or pillars were removed from their places and devoted to some secular purpose.

In the historical period, there are two examples of setting up a sacred stone with a definite religious purpose. In the bounds of the Presbytery and parish of Elgin, Andro Man in 1649 was accused of idolatry in setting up a stone and using some superstitious ceremonies to it, such as taking off his "bonat" to it. Like his namesake of Rathven "who laid off wards to the Hind Knyght," the Elgin man was engaged in perpetuating an ancient worship. Several witnesses deponed they saw Man, as he passed to the monolith, take off his "bonat," but whether in homage to the stone or not, they could not say. Despite his protestations that it was intended as a march stone between him and his neighbour, two elders and four honest men were appointed to go and see the stone broken in pieces, a commission they faithfully performed. The Church authorities, who had the best means of knowing, were persuaded the man was engaged in some unlawful act, some heathenish practice. It was a survival of pillar worship.

This is confirmed by the second example some 200 years later. It is provided by the late Bishop Chisholm in a paper he read to this Field Club in 1884. "When the late Dr Cooper took the farm of Auchorachan, in Glenlivet, a neighbouring well-wisher walked solemnly round the farm march, reciting certain words, and placing in certain places upright stones. This was to keep off the evil eye, generally to bring good luck to the farm." Here the upright stones were, as in the previous case, boundary stones. but boundary stones were

originally sacred stones, the habitations of divine power and life. In the mind of this Glenlivet farmer in the 19th century, they were the abode of guardian spirits who warded off all ill from the fields and cattle, and to these sacred pillars man paid homage. Canon MacCulloch in his *Religion of the Celt*, says "This would seem to show the Gauls had a cult of pillar stones associated with the god of boundaries." But it was not confined to the Gauls.

Streeking the Plough.

I turn last of all to primitive beliefs associated with agriculture. These have their affinities in the classical world. They are relics of the worship of the Corn spirit.

The "streeking the plough" was a semi-religious rite observed in the north-eastern counties when the plough was first put into the soil after harvest. About an hour after the plough was at work, the "guid-wife," or principal female servant, proceeded to the field with bread, cheese, and a jar of home-brewed ale or whisky. The cakes were usually specially prepared, being rubbed with cream before they were put on the girdle to be cooked. The salutation to the man between the stilts was in the well-known form, "Guid speed the wark," to which he replied, "may Guid speed it." An alternative form was "Weel fah the lawbor." The ploughman then seated himself on the beam of the plough, and after sundry forms of good wishes for the health and prosperity of the family during the year for which he had just begun the labour, cut the cheese and partook of the dainties carried to the field. A piece of oatcakes was given to each horse. Bread and cheese carefully wrapped in paper was firmly tied to the beam of the plough. There were of course variations in the ritual in different localities. A friend of mine, a native of Glenlivet, says the custom was observed there by some who took bread which had been blessed. Then it was put under the first furrow. The whole household partook of the bread and cheese at supper—the Pleuch Feast.

In 1887, Mr Rhind was ploughing at the farm of Ironhill, Roseheart, about the beginning of

November when the farmer's wife, Mrs Chapman, came to the field bringing oatcakes, cheese and home-brewed ale. The oatcake was broken over the plough, a piece of it was given to Mr Rhind and the horse, the ploughman also receiving cheese and ale. Mrs Chapman said, "God speed the plough." I have had ample evidence of this custom in other parts of Aberdeenshire, Banffshire and Kincardineshire. I take these two as the witnesses are still alive.

The "streeking the plough" is the survival of an agricultural festival well known in antiquity. In ancient Greece, Demeter was invoked and propitiated by the Greek ploughmen before the autumnal ploughing and sowing. Then took place the offering of the first fruits, not immediately after the harvest, but at the ceremonial that inaugurated the ploughing. This feast was called the Proerosia, i.e., before the ploughing. The Roman *Feriae Sementivae* seems to have fulfilled the same purpose.

The clyack sheaf is still a familiar name to the harvesters of the north-east. It is the last sheaf cut or gathered in the harvest, and round it used to centre an ancient ritual. In the old days, before the introduction of the scythe, the corn was cut by sickle or heuck. This lent itself to the ritual of cutting and gathering the clyack. It continued when the corn was cut by the scythe. The clyack sheaf was brought up to my manse door at Newmill with instructions that it was to be kept till Christmas and given to the cow. The clyack sheaf seems universal. It was known in Angus as the Maiden. In Northumberland it was termed the "kern baby." In North Germany, there was a similar ritual in regard to the last bunch of grain in the field. In India, the clyack is known as the Corn Baby, where it is a general institution, save among the Mohammedans. It is the embodiment of the ancient Corn spirit. The primitive nature of the religion of which these customs are survivals is evidenced by the fact that there is no priesthood, no temple, no gods. "Compared with the corn mother of Germany," says Sir James Frazer, "and the harvest maiden of Scotland, the Demeter and Persephone of Greece are later products of religious growth."

Even the "meal and ale" once so familiar an institution when the clyack sheaf was gathered or when the farmer had "winter," has its prototype in the classical world. "And in the gruel of oatmeal and ale," says the author of the Golden Bough, "which the harvesters sup with spoons as an indispensable part of the harvest supper, have we not the Scotch equivalent of the gruel of barley-meal and water, flavoured with penny royal, which the initiates at Eleusis drank as a solemn form of Communion with the Barley Goddess Demeter? May not that mystic sacrament have originated in a simple harvest supper held by Eleusinian farmers at the end of the reaping?"

It is many years now since I have tasted the meal and ale, but one is inclined to agree with Sir James Frazer's interpretation of the affinity of the Eleusinian Feast with the central rite of the harvest home celebration: for after all, to the ancients, a feast, a sacrifice, was something which gods and men shared, and who can imagine anything more likely to appeal to our forebears as a feast fit for the gods than just that ancient concoction made by loving hands and known as "the meal and ale?"