

The Untilled Field

By T. D. DAVIDSON

AMONG the earliest records of the reformed Church of Scotland occurs the following entry. "In the district of Garioch the Kirk resolved to apply to Parliament for an Act—Anent the horrible superstition used in Garioch and diverse parts of the countrey, in not labouring ane parcell of ground dedicate to the Devill, under the name of the Goodmans Craft: The Kirk, for remedie therof, hes found meitt that ane article be formed to the Parliament, that ane act may proceid from the Estates therof, ordaining all persons, possessours of the saids lands, to cause labour the samein betuixt and ane certane day appointit therto; utherwayes, the cace of dissobediencie, the saids lands to fall in the Kings hands, to be disponit to such persons as pleases his Majestie, quho will labour the samein."¹

In many parts of Britain, but particularly in the north-eastern counties of Scotland, there were to be found pieces of ground in many farms kept apart and uncultivated. Known variously as the Goodman's Croft, Halyman's Croft, Goodman's Fauld, Gi'en Rig, Deevil's Craft, Clouties Craft, and the Black Faulie, these untilled acres were considered uncanny and none dared touch them with a spade or plough.

At Forgue, on the 3rd of March 1650, Norman Leslie and James Tuicks were delated "for having given away a fold to the goodman as they call him to make their cattle 'stand' (thrive) and confessed they went to a fauld and promised to let it lie unlaboured as long as they possessed their tacks, and in testification thereof, they did cast some stones in over the dyke of the field." The Session judged this to be a most impious and superstitious act, referred them to the Presbytery, and ordered the land to be laboured. At the meeting of the Presbytery on the 21st of March in the same year, Tuicks appeared and confessed that because the "guids were falling away they resolved once more to lay out a piece of land unlaboured, to essay if that might be a means of making their cattle thrive."²

On the 25th of November 1646 William Seifvright and George Stronath, of Glas, being "accused of sorcerie in allotting and giving over some land to the old goodman (as they call it) denyed the same; but because it was so

¹ *The Booke of the Universall Kirk of Scotland: Acts and Proceedings of the General Assemblies of the Kirk of Scotland from the year MDLX*, Edinburgh, 1845, pt. 3, p. 834.

² J. M. McPherson, *Primitive Beliefs in the North East of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1929, p. 138.

allegit they promised to manure said land. The brethren, taking the matter to their consideration, continued their censure till the performance of their promise."¹ As the result of a visitation of the Kirk of Rhynie in 1651, it was admitted by Sir William Gordon of Lesmore that a part of his *mains* or home farm was given away (as is commonly said) to the Goodman, and used not to be laboured, "but that he had a mynd, by the assistance of God, to cause labour the same."² The Presbytery of Strathbogie, in 1631, ordered land in Rothiemay dedicated to the goodman to be manured, and sixty years later in the same place, John Clark was delated for giving a piece of his land as "helly man's ley."³ A witness at the time said the reason for Clark's action was that his predecessor in the farm had thirteen head of cattle and horse that died. In the Presbytery Book of Garioch we find records of similar crofts at Oyne and Inverurie; in Oyne in 1650 there were three pieces of ground called Goodman Folds, and in 1655 notice was taken of some land in the parish of Inverurie, "dedicated to the devill commonly called the Gudeman's Fold."⁴

On the farms of Belscamphie and Brogan in Slains pieces of land separated by a ditch from the rest of the farm were known as the Goodman's land or Goodman's Fauld, and in 1649 the tenant was severely reprimanded by the church, and ordered to labour the land.⁵ Two parishes in the Presbytery of Fordyce also provide evidence of such dedication, and the visitation of Boyndie in 1649 brought to light a piece of ground unlaboured called "the halie man's ley dedicated to superstitious uses."⁶ In the following year a small piece of land near Nether Buckie was reserved and "man used to cast faills⁷ and deavets on it." This too was ordered to be tilled.⁸ In 1602 some men from Clachmarras in the parish of Elgin were brought before the Sessions to give a reason "quhy they reserved a peise of land to the devill callit the Gudmanis." A year later an elder reported a tenant for labouering "a piece land to the gudeman (devill) for the noltis cause."⁹

One of the charges against Andro Man of Aberdeen, who was convicted of witchcraft in 1597, was: "Thow hes mett and messurit dyvers peces of land callit wardis, to the hynd knight quhom thow confessis to be a spreit, and

¹ S. Stuart, *Presbytery Book of Strathbogie*, Aberdeen, 1843, p. 71.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 208-9.

³ J. M. McPherson, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

⁴ J. Davidson, *Inverurie and the Earldom of the Garioch*, Edinburgh, 1878, pp. 308, 311.

⁵ J. B. Pratt, *Buchan*, Aberdeen, 1858, p. 452.

⁶ W. Crammond, *The Church and Churchyard of Boyndie*, Banff, 1866, p. 12.

⁷ Faill, large and thick turf used for roofing, or when mixed with dung as manure.—*Scottish National Dictionary*.

⁸ W. Crammond, *The Church and Churchyard of Rathven*, Banff, 1885, p. 20.

⁹ W. Crammond, *The Records of Elgin*, Aberdeen, 1903-7, II, p. 105.

puttis four stanis in the four nokis of the ward, and charmes the samen, and theirby haillis and guidis, and preservis thame fra the lunsaucht, and all vther diseasis, and thou forbiddis to cast faill or divett thereon, or put plewis therein; and this thow did in the Manis of Innes."¹

At Killiesmont, in the parish of Keith, there was a croft which measured about two hundred yards by twelve. The farmer, James Scott, resolved to bring it under cultivation, but the moment the plough touched the soil one of the oxen fell dead, killed by a fairy dart, or as the folk put it, the animal was "shot a dead." A century later Robert Watt decided to cultivate the dreaded plot. Three women, Maggie Barber, Jane Turner, and Janet McConnachie, sat by and watched the foolhardy farmer, expecting any moment to see him shot by the fatal bolt. But nothing untoward occurred.² Early in the nineteenth century there was a "deevil's faulie" or "black faulie" of about four acres on a farm near Huntly. The farmer decided "that the deil had lang eneuch o't and he wad hae a turn o't neist." He took his turn, cultivated it, and no evil befell him.³ A field on the farm of Dullarg, in the parish of Parton, lay unploughed until late in the nineteenth century. There was a local saying, "The man that ploughed the ley would never cut the crop." Eventually a farmer, Peter McCutcheon, ploughed the field and sowed it. He died before the crop was reaped.⁴ In Corgarff, two such plots, one on the side of Tornashaltic (Fire-hillock), and the other on Tornahaish (Cheese-Hillock), were sprinkled yearly with milk on the first day of April. This libation was to keep "the evil one out of the hoose, the milk-hoose, the byre, an' the barn."⁵ Finally from Edinburgh comes what is probably the last record of laying off a croft. According to Sir James Simpson, writing in 1861, a relative of his had bought a farm within twenty miles of Edinburgh not many years before. Amongst his first acts was the enclosure of a small triangular corner with a stone wall. This was the Goodman's croft, an offering to the devil that he might abstain from blighting or damaging the rest of the farm.⁶

So much for examples. The most interesting is unquestionably the Forgue

¹ *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, Aberdeen, 1841, I, p. 120.

² W. Gregor, *Trans. Banff Field Club*, Banff, 1884, p. 97. This account is authenticated in a letter communicated by Mr Henry Simpson, Aberdeen, and dated 2 June 1943, who stated that his father was born on the farm in question and that his uncle was well aware of the situation of "The Gudeman's Craft" within its borders. He never buried any dead cattle within the confines of the croft, for had he done so, other beasts were certain to die.—L. Spence, *The Fairy Tradition in Britain*, London, 1948, p. 328.

³ J. M. McPherson, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-7.

⁴ *Ethnological Survey of the United Kingdom*, London, 1897, Report No. 5, pp. 494-5.

⁵ *British Calendar Customs, Scotland*, London, 1939, II, p. 196.

⁶ E. B. Simpson, *Folk Lore in Lowland Scotland*, London, 1908, p. 27.

case, for here we obtain evidence of the reason for, and the ritual employed in, dedicating a corner of a field. Disease had overtaken the cattle on a farm, many were dying, and the reason was unknown. Therefore it must come from some supernatural source, an unseen evil spirit whose rights had been violated or neglected. By way of propitiation a portion of good land was dedicated to him, and the ritual of dedication was probably as follows. The farmer went to the field, and repeating some words, probably in the form of a degenerate prayer, promised the land should lie uncultivated. In token of this promise he cast stones in over the dyke of the fold, thereby indicating that he renounced his right to the land.

There would appear to have been two kinds of dedicated croft. There was the croft known from time immemorial as sacrosanct to the spirit of the Goodman or the Halyman, as in the case of the Killiesmont rig, at one end of which there was found, among a heap of stones, a rude cist containing ashes, and scattered around many loose irregular stones bearing marks of fire. A similar croft was found on the farm of Strathairy of King-Edward.¹ These are obviously remains of some ancient religious place of worship where sacrifice was offered and blessing was invoked upon the cattle and produce of the fields. Sir Walter Scott was very near to the point when he suggested that these crofts correspond to the *Temenos* of the pagan temples: a piece of ground kept apart from common uses and dedicated to the god.² The other type was one which was dedicated to the same spirit when new ground came under tillage, as we have shown in the Edinburgh example. In all such dedication the intention was evil in the eyes of the church, and the custom became so general, and the fields dedicated so numerous, that the church resolved to apply to Parliament for an act to deal with the owners of these unlaboured fields. The act, the terms of which are given in the opening paragraph, does not seem to have been granted, but the church embarked on a crusade to have the crofts broken up and an end made of this superstitious usage. The crusade, however, appears to have had very little effect.

In Scotland numerous patches of ground were formerly regarded either as the dwelling-place of the fairies or of the dead, and were considered sacred to these spirits. To cultivate this ground or permit livestock to damage or pollute it in any way was to ensure their vengeance. There are many examples to illustrate this belief. Murrain among beasts—the fifth of the dreaded plagues of Egypt in the day of Moses—befell the cattle of a farmer in Caithness who interfered with a fairy plot, and so serious was the plague that the

¹ *Statistical Account of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1793, xi, p. 408.

² W. Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, London, 1884, p. 78.

need-fire¹ had to be employed to stay it.² Many attempts were made to build the first castle of Glamis on the hill of Denom in that neighbourhood because it was associated with traditions of the fairy race, and its foundations were nightly overthrown by the outraged fairies.³ Substantially the same tale is told of the castle of Melgund in the parish of Aberlemno.⁴ Sir Walter Scott tells us that a certain Mary Campbell of Aberdeen was abducted by the fairies, but was restored to her husband on the understanding that the ground in the neighbourhood of the fairy demesne remained untilled.⁵ Fairy arrows (neolithic flints) were discharged at those who endeavoured to cultivate such patches, as was shown in the Killiesmont tale; and to remain on these plots after sunset was to risk abduction by the devil.

Furthermore the association of fairies with the soil, and the sacrosanct nature of the fairy soil, indicates clearly the terrene or chthonic character of the ancestral fairy spirit. It was firmly believed by the Highlanders of Scotland that the souls of their predecessors dwelt in fairy hills, and according to Kirk, in his *Secret Commonwealth*, "A Mount was dedicate beside every churchyard, to receive the Souls till their adjacent Bodies arise, and so became as a Fairie-Hill."⁶ At Burrafield in Unst there was a piece of ground known as the Field of the Dead. The ground was uncultivated and the tradition was that no one must put spade in it or misfortune would certainly befall him. Once a woman dared, and dug up a portion. Shortly afterwards her best cow died. Nothing daunted, she delved again and actually sowed corn on the spot. "Then her husband died, and after that she left the rig alone."⁷ Throughout the Scottish witchcraft records there are numerous instances to prove the association of fairyland with the pre-Christian Hades or home of the dead. Alison Peirson of Byrehill, who was convicted and burnt in 1588 for the crime of witchcraft, paid several visits to Fairyland where she met Maitland of Lethington;⁸ Bessie Dunlop of Dalry, in 1576,

¹ Need fire, Gaelic *teine eiginn*, "churned" or "forced" fire was made on the outbreak of cattle plague, and as a charm against murrain. The fire was produced by the friction of two pieces of wood. In Mull, for example, it was kindled by "turning an oaken wheel over nine oaken spindles from east to west."—G. Henderson, *Survivals in Belief among the Celts*, Glasgow, 1911, p. 213. The cattle were then driven over the fire, in the belief that the purifying action of the smoke would purge the disease. In some cases, in immediate connection with the need fire, cattle have been known, even as late as the nineteenth century, to be sacrificed. See *Folk Lore*, London, 1891, II, p. 300; 1899, x, pp. 101, 353; Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

² A. A. MacGregor, *The Peat Fire Flame*, Edinburgh, 1947, p. 2.

³ J. C. Guthrie, *The Vale of Strathmore*, Edinburgh, 1875, p. 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁵ W. Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders*, Edinburgh, 1932, II, p. 329.

⁶ R. Kirk, *Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies*, London, 1893, p. 23.

⁷ J. M. McPherson, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

⁸ R. Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1833, I, p. 161.

obtained her salves from a "fairy man," Thomas Reid, who was slain several years before at Pinkie Battle (1547), and in her confession claimed to have seen him walking along the High Street in Edinburgh.¹ Dalyell reports that the Orkney witch, Catherine Jonesdochter, "saw the Trowis ryse out of the kirkyard of Hildiswick, and Haliecross kirk of Eschenes and on the hill called Greinfall."² Somewhat similar to this is the tale of Adam Donald, the prophet of Bethelnie who used regularly to visit the churchyard and hold converse with the departed spirits, from whom he gained much hidden knowledge.³

As a tailpiece one example of the superstition known as "lowsin a gaun plough" may be cited. A tenant of Honey-nook, New Deer, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, was evicted from his farm. In revenge, he drove his twelve-ox plough, with all the earth it would carry, off the farm, and unyoked it on the neighbouring farm of West Affleck on a part called the "Goodman's Faul."⁴ In this way he took away the luck from the farm and transferred it to the "Goodman."

¹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 49.

² J. C. Dalyell, *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland*, Glasgow, 1835, p. 533.

³ W. Alexander, *Northern Rural Life*, Edinburgh, 1888, p. 193.

⁴ J. Milne, *Myths and Superstitions of Buchan District*, Aberdeen, 1881, p. 31.

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one that is unlikely to be repeated. One could not but be impressed by the interest and anticipation that the whole occasion aroused. The sense of drama was heightened by the glare of the floodlights of several television companies and the continual discharge of photographers' flashbulbs. If the ghosts of all the lords of the twenty-two manors had been lingering in Holborn on that November afternoon they could hardly have restrained a smile at the nature of the last rites which the progressive society of the twentieth century was according to the Honour of Beaumont.

MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE

The Reading University Museum of English Rural Life will be opened to the public at a ceremony to be held on the 27th of April 1955. Four years after it was founded it is at last possible for some of the collections to be

displayed. From 27 April onwards the times of opening will be as follows:

- 1 May—31 October. Tuesday-Saturday, 10.30-5.00; Sunday, 2.30-5.00.
- 1 November—30 April. Wednesday and Saturday only, 2.30-5.00.

SUMMER SCHOOL IN LOCAL HISTORY

The University College of Leicester held a Summer School in English Local History at Beaumont Hall, Leicester, from August 4th to 14th, 1954. Some two dozen history teachers, archivists, and research students attended. Two concurrent courses were offered, one on the history of the English town, the other, conducted by Dr Thirsk, on the agrarian history of England from the Roman period to the present day. The school was much appreciated by all who took part in it.