

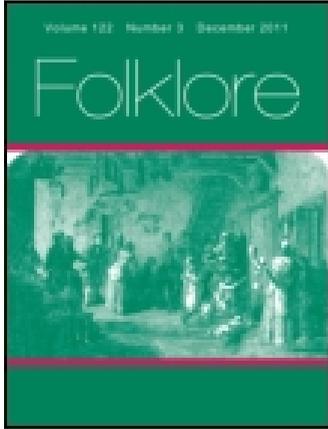
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Folklore from the Hebrides

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MISCELLANEA.

FOLKLORE FROM THE HEBRIDES.

I.—An-t-Each-Uisge.

The following legend of the "water-horse," and the place where it is said to have occurred, have been well known to the writer from his earliest years.

The story is that the water-horse came in the shape of a young man (*riochd fleasgaich*) out of his native element, and sat down beside a girl who was herding cattle on the banks of the loch. After some pleasant conversation he laid his head in her lap, in a fashion not unusual in old times, and fell asleep. She began to examine his head, and to her alarm found that his hair was full of sand and mud. She at once knew that it was none other than the "Each-Uisge," who would certainly conclude his attentions by carrying her on his back into the depths of the loch. She accordingly proceeded as dexterously as she could to get rid of her skirt, leaving it under the head of the monster. No sooner did he awaken than he jumped up and shook the skirt, crying out several times, "Ma's duine tha'n so's aotram e, mu'n dubhairt an-t-Each-Uisge" ("If this be human it's light, as the water-horse said"), then rushed down the brae and plunged into the lake. The girl's brother met the creature next morning at the same spot, and after a severe hand-to-hand fight killed it with his sword.

The scene of the above legend is a little knoll on the island of Lewis, which bears the name of "Cnoc-na-Bèist," the hillock of the monster. It lies on the border of a fresh-water loch named "Loch-à-Mhuileinn," the loch of the mill. Its ancient Norse name was "Loch-brae-vat," *i.e.* the beautiful water. The writer often sat and played there with other youngsters, discussing the origin of the name of the little knoll, and the incidents of the legend from which it derived its name, never dreaming that it was "a cock and bull story."

II.—Lag-a' Bhocain.

There was a place in the march between Bragar and Shawbost, island of Lewis, less than a mile from where I was brought

up famous in my young days as "Lag-a' Bhocain," *i.e.* the hollow of the spectre or apparition. But times have so changed since that one scarcely hears any allusion to it nowadays. It got its name from the fact that a ghost or spectre met solitary pedestrians who had occasion to pass through that neighbourhood alone at night. It grappled with the person it met alone and threw him down, and greatly disconcerted the individual so treated. This superstition had its origin in the belief that the ghost of a murdered person ever haunted during the night the spot where he was murdered, until it met with one stronger than itself who threw it down in wrestling and forced it to speak and give an account of itself. Or in Gaelic: "Gus na thachair duine ris a thug comhradh as, or cha b' urrainn e tàmh oidche gabhail gus an tachradh so. An deigh sin cha choinnicheadh e ri duine tuilledh" (*i.e.* until it met with one that forced it to speak, it could not rest at night). After that, however, it would never be seen again. I often heard from old people the name of the man in the neighbourhood, well known for muscular strength, who met it, wrestled with it, and forced it to speak, after which it was never seen again.

III.—*Keeping up Gentility in spite of everything.*

In another part of the same island, at a place called "Braighe na-h-Uidhe," a man down on his back after a wrestle with a "Tan-nasg," *i.e.* a ghost, was asked by the spectre, "An e so an càs as cruaidhe anns an robh thu riamh? Ma ta ars' easan cha'n e? Còid eil arsa'm Bochan? Càs is cruaidhe anns an robh mise riamh, an uair' bha mi eadar an Fhèile agus an Aimbairt, agus a' cumail na-h-uaisle suas a dh-aindoin. Is maith a chur sin ruit arsa an 'Tamasg.' Eirich agus bi dol or cha tachair an càs sin ruitsa tuilleadh" (*i.e.* If this were the worst plight he ever was in? "Not at all," said he. "What then?" said the ghost. "The worst plight I ever was in was when I was between *Hospitality* and *Want*, and keeping up gentility in spite of all." "Well it is for you that the case is so," said the ghost. "That was hard work," said the ghost, "but get up, you'll never encounter those two again.") And so he let him go.

This is the supposed origin of the common proverb, "*An uaisle ga cumail suas a dh'aindoin.*"

IV.—Muintir Fhionlaidh, i.e. Finlay's People.

“Muintir Fhionlaidh” were a numerous band of fairies. Hence the Gaelic proverb current on the island of Lewis, “Cho lionmhor ri muintir Fhionlaidh.” They were believed to be the strong gusts of wind that sometimes occur on calm days and carry along with them dust and straws, &c. It was believed long ago in my native place that they thus carried with them imperceptibly for short distances one caught sleeping in their track. I know a place where it is said they so carried one from a knoll near a river to a knoll on the opposite side, yet he found himself none the worse of the journey, as he might have had good reason to expect, when he awoke. Hence the malediction, “Togail Muintir Fhionlaidh ort,” *i.e.* “May you get the lifting or the taking away of the Finlay people.”

V.—A Shepherd's Dogs attacking him unprovoked.

In one of the islands of the west, not many miles as the crow flies from the place in which the writer lives, the story is told that a shepherd's dogs, his own dogs, unaccountably and unprovoked, attacked him so fiercely in a secluded spot of the moor, quite close to the sea, that he barely escaped with his life. This part of the story is well authenticated. The origin of the story is this. A stranger, a packman, lodged with this shepherd over night. The following morning they were seen leaving the house in company in the direction of that part of the moor where the dogs attacked him. The stranger went amissing and was never heard of again. The belief was that the shepherd murdered him there, and that he was attacked there by his own dogs the first time he visited that very spot with them. Can any scientific explanation be given of so strange an occurrence?

VI.—Charm against Bochans.

I used to hear it confidently asserted in my young days on the island of Lewis that if one carried a *Latin* New Testament about his person no Bochan would ever trouble him, however much a place might be haunted by them. It is obvious this superstition came down to us from Roman Catholic times. One does not hear this superstition even mentioned at the present day.

VII.—Funeral Customs.

There was sometimes much time spent at funerals in some of the islands, one of the reasons being that after the funeral procession arrived at the churchyard considerable time was spent at the open grave before one was found courageous enough to begin to fill in the grave, as it was believed that either the first one who did so, or some one of his relatives would be the next whose grave would have to be filled in.

VIII.—Murder will out.

The people of Lewis had in olden times a curious method of detecting murder, as the following legend shows. It is related of a boat's crew from Bragar that, while fishing with the hand-line, one of their number hauled into the boat a human bone. This was looked upon by all present as a sure omen that one of the crew must be a murderer. To ascertain the guilty person, as was the custom, each one present had to go through the ordeal of deliberately handling the bone, and to pass it along to his next neighbour. No sooner had the culprit taken it into his hand than it spurted blood into his face. The murderer, of course, was at once detected. He confessed his crime, and told that he had murdered such and such a person, at such and such a time and place, and then thrown the body into a lake, mentioning the lake, which is about two miles from the sea. They seem to have had a firm belief in this mode of detecting murder. Blood thus spurted could never be wiped out.

IX.—Ordeals.

When a person was found dead on the island of Lewis, and no clue to the cause of his death could be obtained, according to an unwritten law all the people of the surrounding districts were obliged to come to the place where the dead was found, and there, in the presence of trustworthy witnesses, each had to go through the ordeal of touching the corpse with his ungloved hand. The body, it was believed, would then squirt blood into the murderer's face. One can easily imagine how naturally a murderer who had any faith in this superstition would betray himself by the cautious, timid manner in which he would attempt to go through the ordeal. My own impression is that this method of detecting murder

originated in the brain of some shrewd observer of human nature. I was familiar in my young days with the story of a person who adopted a similar method of detecting a thief among his servants.

The story is, that a theft had been committed in a gentleman's family, and that no clue could be obtained to indicate the guilty party. He adopted the following method to find out the thief. He placed a cock under a *coire* (boiler or kettle) turned upside down with a small aperture on its side. He then assembled all his servants together and told them that he had discovered a way of finding out who the thief was. He explained to them what it was, viz. that there was a *ferce creature* under the boiler which would seize the culprit's hand as soon as he put it through the hole on the boiler's side, but would do no one else the slightest injury. Then each in succession was taken into the room in which the boiler was placed with its "unearthly" occupant. Those who were innocent had no hesitation in thrusting in their hand through the small aperture, and the creature inside indicated that they did so by a slight movement. When, however, the culprit had to go through the ordeal he showed such trepidation and fear that he could not muster courage to do as the rest had done, and so unmistakably spotted himself as the thief.

A few years ago I was asked to annotate a MS. of Orcadian old customs by an Edinburgh antiquarian friend. I was not a little surprised to find the above legend among them almost word for word. It was also remarkable that it was used there as a method of detecting theft.

MALCOLM MACPHAIL.

THE HARE.

Amongst my father's servants at Rhayader (of which parish, and the adjoining one of Cwmtoyddwr, he was vicar for twenty-three years) was an old man of the name of Thomas Savage. He had been in early life a shepherd; and he had a large stock of stories, which were the delight of my early childhood. Amongst the rest he used to tell how he once formed one of a party who, in the dead of night on the hill to the north of Rhayader, were