



Secret Commonwealth

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scotland

Scottish

Advanced
21 min read

By Mr. Robert Kirk, Minister of Aberfoyle, 1691.

The Siths, or Fairies, they call Sluagh Maith, or the Goodpeople, it would seem, to prevent the dint of their ill attempts (for the Irish used to bless all they fear harm of), and are said to be of a middle nature betwixt man and angel, as were demons thought to be of old, of intelligent studious spirits, and light changeable bodies (like those called astral), somewhat of the nature of a condensed cloud, and best seen in twilight. These bodies be so pliable through the subtlety of the spirits that agitate them, that they can make them appear or disappear at pleasure. Some have bodies or vehicles so spongy, thin, and defecat [pure] that they are fed by only sucking into some fine spirituous liquors, that pierce like pure air and oil; others feed more gross on the foyson [abundance] or substance of corn and liquors, or corn itself that grows on the surface of the earth, which these fairies steal away, partly invisible, partly preying on the grain, as do crows and mice; wherefore in this same age they are sometimes heard to break bread, strike hammers, and to do such like services within the little hillocks they most do haunt; some whereof of old, before the Gospel dispelled Paganism, and in some barbarous places as yet, enter houses after all are at rest, and set the kitchens in order, cleansing all the vessels. Such drags go under the name of Brownies. When we have plenty, they have scarcity at their homes; and, on the contrary (for they are not empowered to catch as much prey everywhere as they please), their robberies, notwithstanding, oftentimes occasion great ricks of corn not to bleed so well (as they call it), or prove so copious by very far as was expected by the owner.

Their bodies of congealed air are sometimes carried aloft, other whiles grovel in different shapes, and enter into any cranny or clift of the earth where air enters, to their ordinary dwellings; the earth being full of cavities and cells, and there being no place, no creature, but is supposed to have other animals (greater or lesser) living in or upon it as inhabitants; and no such thing as a pure wilderness in the whole universe.

We then (the more terrestrial kind have now so numerously planted all countries) do labour for that abstruse people, as well as for ourselves. Albeit, when several countries were uninhabited by us, these had their easy tillage above ground, as we now. The print of those furrows do yet remain to be seen on the shoulders of very high hills, which was done when the campaign ground was wood and forest.

They remove to other lodgings at the beginning of each quarter of the year, so traversing till doomsday, being impotent of staying in one place, and finding some ease by so purning [journeying] and changing habitations. Their chameleon-like bodies swim in the air near the earth with bag and baggage; and at such revolution of time, seers, or men of the second sight (females being seldom so qualified) have very terrifying encounters with them, even on highways; who, therefore, awfully shun to travel abroad at these four seasons of the year,

and thereby have made it a custom to this day among the Scottish-Irish to keep church duly every first Sunday of the quarter to seun or hallow themselves, their corn and cattle, from the shots and stealth of these wandering tribes; and many of these superstitious people will not be seen in church again till the next quarter begins, as if no duty were to be learnt or done by them, but all the use of worship and sermons were to save them from these arrows that fly in the dark.

They are distributed in tribes and orders, and have children, nurses, marriages, deaths, and burials in appearance, even as we (unless they so do for a mock-show, or to prognosticate some such things among us).

They are clearly seen by these men of the second sight to eat at funerals [and] banquets. Hence many of the Scottish-Irish will not taste meat at these meetings, lest they have communion with, or be poisoned by, them. So are they seen to carry the bier or coffin with the corpse among the middle-earth men to the grave. Some men of that exalted sight (whether by art or nature) have told me they have seen at these meetings a double man, or the shape of some man in two places; that is a super-terranian and a subterranean inhabitant, perfectly resembling one another in all points, whom he, notwithstanding, could easily distinguish one from another by some secret tokens and operations, and so go and speak to the man, his neighbour and familiar, passing by the apparition or resemblance of him. They avouch that every element and different state of being has animals resembling those of another element; as there be fishes sometimes at sea resembling monks of late order in all their hoods and dresses; so as the Roman invention of good and bad demons, and guardian angels particularly assigned, is called by them an ignorant mistake, sprung only from this original. They call this reflex man a co-walker, every way like the man, as a twin brother and companion, haunting him as his shadow, as is oft seen and known among men (resembling the original), both before and after the original is dead; and was often seen of old to enter a house, by which the people knew that the person of that likeness was to visit them within a few days. This copy, echo, or living picture, goes at last to his own herd. It accompanied that person so long and frequently for ends best known to itself, whether to guard him from the secret assaults of some of its own folk, or only as a sportful ape to counterfeit all his actions. However, the stories of old witches prove beyond contradiction that all sorts of people, spirits which assume light airy bodies, or crazed bodies coacted by foreign spirits, seem to have some pleasure (at least to assuage some pain or melancholy) by frisking and capering like satyrs, or whistling and screeching (like unlucky birds) in their unhallowed synagogues and Sabbaths. If invited and earnestly required, these companions make themselves known and familiar to men; otherwise, being in a different state and element, they neither can nor will easily converse with them. They avouch that a heluo or great eater has a voracious elfe to be his attender, called a joint-eater or just-halver,

feeding on the pith and quintessence of what the man eats; and that, therefore, he continues lean like a hawk or heron, notwithstanding his devouring appetite; yet it would seem they convey that substance elsewhere, for these subterraneans eat but little in their dwellings, their food being exactly clean, and served up by pleasant children, like enchanted puppets.

Their houses are called large and fair, and (unless at some odd occasions) unperceivable by vulgar eyes, like Rachland and other enchanted islands, having fir lights, continual lamps, and fires, often seen without fuel to sustain them. Women are yet alive who tell they were taken away when in childbed to nurse fairy children, a lingering voracious image of them being left in their place (like their reflection in a mirror), which (as if it were some insatiable spirit in an assumed body) made first semblance to devour the meats that it cunningly carried by, and then left the carcass as if it expired and departed thence by a natural and common death. The child and fire, with food and all other necessaries, are set before the nurse how soon she enters, but she neither perceives any passage out, nor sees what those people do in other rooms of the lodging. When the child is weaned, the nurse dies, or is conveyed back, or gets it to her choice to stay there. But if any superterraneans be so subtle as to practise sleights for procuring the privacy to any of their mysteries (such as making use of their ointments, which, as Gyges' ring, make them invisible or nimble, or cast them in a trance, or alter their shape, or make things appear at a vast distance, etc.), they smite them without pain, as with a puff of wind, and bereave them of both the natural and acquired sights in the twinkling of an eye (both these sights, when once they come, being in the same organ and inseparable), or they strike them dumb. The tramontanes to this day place bread, the Bible, or a piece of iron, to save their women at such times from being thus stolen, and they commonly report that all uncouth, unknown wights are terrified by nothing earthly so much as cold iron. They deliver the reason to be that hell lying betwixt the chill tempests and the firebrands of scalding metals, and iron of the north (hence the loadstone causes a tendency to that point), by an antipathy thereto, these odious, far-scenting creatures shrug and fright at all that comes thence relating to so abhorred a place, whence their torment is either begun, or feared to come hereafter.

Their apparel and speech is like that of the people and country under which they live; so are they seen to wear plaids and variegated garments in the Highlands of Scotland, and suanachs [plaids] therefore in Ireland. They speak but little, and that by way of whistling, clear, not rough. The very devils conjured in any country do answer in the language of the place; yet sometimes the subterraneans speak more distinctly than at other times. Their women are said to spin very fine, to dye, to tossue, and embroider; but whether it be as manual operation of substantial refined stuffs, with apt and solid instruments, or only curious cobwebs, unpalpable

rainbows, and a phantastic imitation of the actions of more terrestrial mortals, since it transcended all the senses of the seer to discern whether, I leave to conjecture as I found it.

Their men travel much abroad, either presaging or aping the dismal and tragical actions of some amongst us; and have also many disastrous doings of their own, as convocations, fighting, gashes, wounds, and burials, both in the earth and air. They live much longer than we; yet die at last, or [at] least vanish from that state. 'Tis one of their tenets that nothing perisheth, but (as the sun and year) everything goes in a circle, lesser or greater, and is renewed and refreshed in its revolutions; as 'tis another, that every body in the creation moves (which is a sort of life); and that nothing moves but has another animal moving on it; and so on, to the utmost minutest corpuscle that's capable of being a receptacle of life.

They are said to have aristocratical rulers and laws, but no discernible religion, love, or devotion towards God, the blessed Maker of all: they disappear whenever they hear His name invoked, or the name of Jesus (at which all do bow willingly, or by constraint, that dwell above or beneath, within the earth), (Philip, ii. 10); nor can they act ought at that time after hearing of that sacred name. The Taiblsdear or seer, that corresponds with this kind of familiars, can bring them with a spell to appear to himself or others when he pleases, as readily as Endor Witch did those of her own kind. He tells they are ever readiest to go on hurtful errands, but seldom will be the messengers of great good to men. He is not terrified with their sight when he calls them, but seeing them in a surprise (as often as he does) frights him extremely, and glad would he be quit of such, for the hideous spectacles seen among them; as the torturing of some wight, earnest, ghostly, staring looks, skirmishes, and the like. They do not all the harm which appearingly they have power to do; nor are they perceived to be in great pain, save that they are usually silent and sullen. They are said to have many pleasant toyish books; but the operation of these pieces only appears in some paroxysms of antic, corybantic jollity, as if ravished and prompted by a new spirit entering into them at that instant, lighter and merrier than their own. Other books they have of involved, abstruse sense, much like the Rosurcian [Rosicrucian] style. They have nothing of the Bible, save collected parcels for charms and counter-charms; not to defend themselves withal, but to operate on other animals, for they are a people invulnerable by our weapons, and albeit werewolves' and witches' true bodies are (by the union of the spirit of nature that runs through all echoing and doubling the blow towards another) wounded at home, when the astral assumed bodies are stricken elsewhere—as the strings of a second harp, tuned to a unison, sound, though only one be struck,—yet these people have not a second, or so gross a body at all, to be so pierced; but as air which when divided unites again; or if they feel pain by a blow, they are better physicians than we, and quickly cure. They are not subject to sore sicknesses, but

dwindle and decay at a certain period, all about an age. Some say their continual sadness is because of their pendulous state (like those men, Luke xiii. 2-6), as uncertain what at the last revolution will become of them, when they are locked up into an unchangeable condition; and if they have any frolic fits of mirth, 'tis as the constrained grinning of a mort-head [death's-head], or rather as acted on a stage, and moved by another, ther [than?] cordially coming of themselves. But other men of the second sight, being illiterate, and unwary in their observations, learn from [differ from] those; one averring those subterranean people to be departed souls, attending a while in this inferior state, and clothed with bodies procured through their alms-deeds in this life; fluid, active, ethereal vehicles to hold them that they may not scatter nor wander, and be lost in the totum, or their first nothing; but if any were so impious as to have given no alms, they say, when the souls of such do depart, they sleep in an inactive state till they resume the terrestrial bodies again; others, that what the low-country Scotch call a wraith, and the Irish taibhse, or death's messenger (appearing sometimes as a little rough dog, and if crossed and conjured in time, will be pacified by the death of any other creature instead of the sick man), is only exuvius fumes of the man approaching death, exhaled and congealed into a various likeness (as ships and armies are sometimes shaped in the air), and called astral bodies, agitated as wild-fire with wind, and are neither souls nor counterfeiting spirits; yet not a few avouch (as is said) that surely these are a numerous people by themselves, having their own politics, which diversities of judgment may occasion several inconsonancies in this rehearsal, after the narrowest scrutiny made about it.

Their weapons are most-what solid earthly bodies, nothing of iron, but much of stone, like to yellow soft flint spa, shaped like a barbed arrowhead, but flung like a dart, with great force. These arms (cut by art and tools, it seems, beyond human) have somewhat of the nature of thunderbolt subtlety, and mortally wounding the vital parts without breaking the skin; of which wounds I have observed in beasts, and felt them with my hands. They are not as infallible Benjamites, hitting at a hair's-breadth; nor are they wholly unvanquishable, at least in appearance.

The men of the second sight do not discover strange things when asked, but at fits and raptures, as if inspired with some genius at that instant, which before did work in or about them. Thus I have frequently spoken to one of them, who in his transport told me he cut the body of one of those people in two with his iron weapon, and so escaped this onset, yet he saw nothing left behind of that appearing divided; at other times he outwrested [wrestled?] some of them. His neighbours often perceived this man to disappear at a certain place, and about an hour after to become visible, and discover himself near a bow-shot from the first place. It was in that place where he became invisible, said he, that the subterraneans did encounter and combat with him.

Those who are unseund, or unsanctified (called fey), are said to be pierced or wounded with those people's weapons, which makes them do somewhat very unlike their former practice, causing a sudden alteration, yet the cause thereof unperceivable at present; nor have they power (either they cannot make use of their natural powers, or asked not the heavenly aid) to escape the blow impendent. A man of the second sight perceived a person standing by him (sound to other's view) wholly gored in blood, and he (amazed like) bid him instantly flee. The whole man laughed at his airt [notice] and warning, since there was no appearance of danger. He had scarce contracted his lips from laughter when unexpectedly his enemies leaped in at his side and stabbed him with their weapons. They also pierce cows or other animals, usually said to be Elf-shot, whose purest substance (if they die) these subterraneans take to live on, viz. the aërial and ethereal parts, the most spirituous matter for prolonging of life, such as aquavitæ (moderately taken) is amongst liquors, leaving the terrestrial behind. The cure of such hurts is only for a man to find out the hole with his finger, as if the spirits flowing from a man's warm hand were antidote sufficient against their poisoned darts.

As birds, as beasts, whose bodies are much used to the change of the free and open air, foresee storms, so those invisible people are more sagacious to understand by the books of nature things to come, than we, who are pestered with the grossest dregs of all elementary mixtures, and have our purer spirits choked by them. The deer scents out a man and powder (though a late invention) at a great distance; a hungry hunter, bread; and the raven, a carrion; their brains, being long clarified by the high and subtle air, will observe a very small change in a trice. Thus a man of the second sight, perceiving the operations of these forecasting invisible people among us (indulged through a stupendous providence to give warnings of some remarkable events, either in the air, earth, or waters), told he saw a winding shroud creeping on a walking healthful person's leg till it came to the knee, and afterwards it came up to the middle, then to the shoulders, and at last over the head, which was visible to no other person. And by observing the spaces of time betwixt the several stages, he easily guessed how long the man was to live who wore the shroud; for when it approached the head, he told that such a person was ripe for the grave.

There be many places called fairy-hills, which the mountain people think impious and dangerous to peel or discover, by taking earth or wood from them, superstitiously believing the souls of their predecessors to dwell there. And for that end (say they) a mole or mound was dedicate beside every churchyard to receive the souls till their adjacent bodies arise, and so became as a fairy-hill; they using bodies of air when called abroad. They also affirm those creatures that move invisibly in a house, and cast huge great stones, but do no much hurt, because counter-wrought by some more courteous and charitable spirits that are everywhere ready to defend

men (Dan. x. 13), to be souls that have not attained their rest, through a vehement desire of revealing a murder or notable injury done or received, or a treasure that was forgot in their lifetime on earth, which, when disclosed to a conjuror alone, the ghost quite removes.

In the next country to that of my former residence, about the year 1676, when there was some scarcity of grain, a marvellous illapse and vision strongly struck the imagination of two women in one night, living at a good distance from one another, about a treasure hid in a hill called Sith-bruthach, or fairy-hill. The appearance of a treasure was first represented to the fancy, and then an audible voice named the place where it was to their awaking senses. Whereupon both rose, and meeting accidentally at the place, discovered their design; and jointly digging, found a vessel as large as a Scottish peck full of small pieces of good money, of ancient coin; and halving betwixt them, they sold in dishfuls for dishfuls of meal to the country people. Very many of undoubted credit saw and had of the coin to this day. But whether it was a good or bad angel, one of the subterranean people, or the restless soul of him who hid it, that discovered it, and to what end it was done, I leave to the examination of others.

These subterraneans have controversies, doubts, disputes, feuds, and siding of parties; there being some ignorance in all creatures, and the vastest created intelligences not compassing all things. As to vice and sin, whatever their own laws be, sure according to ours, and equity, natural, civil, and revealed, they transgress and commit acts of injustice and sin by what is above said, as to their stealing of nurses to their children, and that other sort of plaginism in catching our children away (may seem to heir some estate in those invisible dominions) which never return. For swearing and intemperance, they are not observed so subject to those irregularities, as to envy, spite, hypocrisy, lying, and dissimulation.

As our religion obliges us not to make a peremptory and curious search into these abstrusenesses, so the histories of all ages give as many plain examples of extraordinary occurrences as make a modest inquiry not contemptible. How much is written of pigmies, fairies, nymphs, syrens, apparitions, which though not the tenth part true, yet could not spring of nothing; even English authors relate [of] Barry Island, in Glamorganshire, that laying your ear into a cleft of the rocks, blowing of bellows, striking of hammers, clashing of armour, filing of iron, will be heard distinctly ever since Merlin enchanted those subterranean wights to a solid manual forging of arms to Aurelius Ambrosius and his Britons, till he returned; which Merlin being killed in a battle, and not coming to loose the knot, these active vulcans are there tied to a perpetual labour.

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