

OTHER SCOTTISH TABOOS

From

Scottish Folk-Lore and Folk Life

by

Donald A. Mackenzie p.81

THE HARE



Compiled by S. Pitcairn

OTHER SCOTTISH TABOOS

Other Scottish taboos are those involving fowls and fish. Highlanders were wont to refrain from eating “white flesh” and “feathered flesh”. The Sassenach (Saxon) was despised as an eater of white fish. Elton refers to the view that this prejudice was originally “derived from some ancient colonists from Asia”.¹ Salmon and trout were, however, freely eaten.

During the Great War (1918) the Scottish Fresh-water Committee issued a pamphlet entitled “The Common Eel and its Capture; with Suggestions applicable to Scotland”, in which it was set forth that “the prejudice which exists against the eel in Scotland is most unfortunate, since it prevents Scotsmen taking advantage of a most nutritious fish”. It is mentioned that in the Highlands the mackerel is not eaten, and that on the Solway, until recently, skate was despised as food.



Julius Cæsar found that the ancient Britons tabooed the hare, the domestic fowl and the goose. The hare is still taboo to many Scots.

Mr J. M. M’Bain testifies as to the prejudice against the hare in parts of Angus. In Arbroath and Auchmithie,

“Nothing would arouse the indignation of a fisher wife more readily than to shout after her, ‘there’s a hare foot in `yer creel’.”

The same writer tells of a sensation aroused among the fisher people by a practical joker who placed a stuffed hare on the bow of a boat drawn up on the beach. It was believed that the demon had sprung out of the earth to fix itself on the bow of the boat and work an evil spell.² Farther north a similar prejudice against the hare was shown not only by fishers but by agriculturists. The Rev. Walter Gregor³ has written in this connection:

“A hare crossing the path portended mishap on the journey. To counteract the evil effects of this untoward event, a cross had to be made upon the path and spat upon.

Hare lip was produced by a woman enceinte putting her foot into a hare’s lair. If the woman noticed she had done so, she immediately took two stones and put them into the lair. The evil effects were averted.

It was accounted very lucky if a hare started from amongst the last cut piece of grain.”

¹ *Origins of English History* (1881), p. 170.

² J. M. M’Bain, *Arbroath Past and Present* (Arbroath, 1887)

³ *Folklore of the North-east of Scotland* (London 1881), pp. 128-9.



Witches were reputed to assume the form of a hare. They also appeared as rats, cats, sheep, whales, cormorants and gulls.¹

The Rev. Walter Gregor records the widespread belief that in her hare form a witch steals milk from cows. She could not be shot by using a leaden bullet. A “crooked sixpence” had to be used instead. If such a hare crossed a sportsman’s path all his skill was baffled in pursuit of her, and the swiftest dogs were soon left far behind. The hare, had the power of rendering herself invisible for a time. If it was shot by a silver missile, the old woman would subsequently be found in bed “panting and bleeding”.²

In Galloway the last portion of a field of grain was at harvest time referred to as the “hare”, and the cutting of it as “cutting the hare”. The reapers carried home the pleated stalks called the “hare”. Which they presented to a maidservant in the farm-house kitchen, and she fixed it on the inside of the door, where it usually remained until the next harvest.

The bachelors ran from the field to the farm-house after the “hare” was cut in the parish of Minnigaff, and it was believed that the winner of the race would be the first to get married.³

In southern Ayrshire a similar harvest ceremony was formerly observed.⁴ The hare was associated with the final harvest operations in various parts of Germany in Transylvania, Norway, Sweden, Holland, France and Italy.⁵

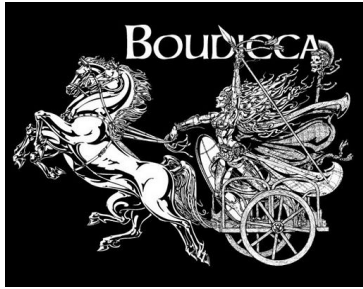
¹ J.G. Campbell, *Witchcraft and Second Sight* (Glasgow, 1902, pp. 10, 18, 23, 33, 42-4.

² Rev. Walter Gregor, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-9; Henderson, *Folklore of the Northern Counties*, pp. 201-4.

³ W. Gregor, Preliminary Report on the Folklore of Galloway, Scotland.” In *Report of the British Association for 1896*, p. 623; and Sir J. G. Frazer. *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild*, Vol. I, p. 279.

⁴ *Folklore Journal*, VII (1889), pp. 47 *et seq.*

⁵ Sir J. G. Frazer, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-80.



Dio Cassius (lxii, 3) tells that the British queen Boadicea (Boudicca) before her final battle against the Romans "loosed a hare from her robe, observing its movements as a kind of omen". When the animal "turned propitiously the whole multitude rejoiced and shouted".

In Ireland the hare was eaten in ancient times. The king of Tara claimed the right to be fed on "the hares of Naas".¹

The bones of hares have been found associated with relics of the Neolithic industry in England, indicating that the hare was eaten in pre-Celtic times.² In western Brittany, on the other hand, the peasants not only tabooed the hare as food, but could not bear to hear mention of the animal.³

The Welsh had curious lore regarding the hare. Pennant, in his *Tour through Montgomery*, tells that the natives refrained from killing hares and referred to them as "Sir Monacella's lambs". If a hare was pursued by dogs it was believed that it would escape if anyone cried out "God and St. Monacella be with thee!"

Evidently the taboos referred to by Julius Cæsar have had tardy survival.

¹ O'Curry, *Manuscript Materials*, Vol. II, p. 141.

² Sir William Boyd Dawkins, *Cave Hunting*, p. 217.

³ *Revue Celtique*, IV, p. 195.

^^^^^^^^^^^^