

THE SILVER BOUGH

**A FOUR VOLUME STUDY OF THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL FESTIVALS OF
SCOTLAND**

By

F. MARIAN McNEILL

VOLUME ONE

**SCOTTISH FOLK-LORE
AND FOLK-BELIEF**

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THE AUTHOR

F. Marian McNeill was born in 1885 at Holm in Orkney where her father was the minister of the Free Presbyterian Kirk and it was this early life on the islands which would shape her life-long passion for Scottish culture and history. She moved from Orkney so that her secondary education could be continued in Glasgow and then Paris and the Rhineland. She travelled extensively as a young woman, visiting Greece, Palestine and Egypt and then living and working in London as part of the suffragette movement.

Her first book *Iona: A History of the Island* was published in 1920 following her visit to the island. Her only novel, *The Road Home*, was published in 1932 and was loosely based on her years in Glasgow and London. The Scottish traditions which Marian had been brought up on shaped two of her books, *The Scots Kitchen* (published in 1929) and *The Scots Cellar* (1956), which both celebrated old recipes and customs and provide a social history of northern domestic life.

Marian MacNeill was most proud, however, of this, her four-volume work, *The Silver Bough* (1957–1968), a study of Scottish folklore and folk belief as well as seasonal and local festivals. The Scottish Arts Council celebrated the completion of this work by giving a reception in her honour.

THE SILVER BOUGH

The Silver Bough is an indispensable treasury of Scottish culture, universally acknowledged as a classic of literature. There is no doubt F Marian McNeill succeeded in capturing and bringing to life many traditions and customs of old before they died out or were influenced by the modern era.

This, the first volume of *The Silver Bough*, deals with Scottish folklore and folk-belief. There are chapters on the ethnic origins of the national festivals, the Druids, the Celtic gods, and the slow transition from Druidism to Christianity. There are accounts of magic, the fairy faith, second sight, selkies, changelings and the witch cult, including tales of “witches” being hung, or worse. There are old familiar rhymes and a wealth of information on the Scotland of old, now gone for ever, where the people feared witches and “faeries”. Readers are bound to find something fascinating about somewhere in Scotland they didn’t know before.

As man makes greater and greater advances in the understanding and control of his physical environment, the river between the known and the unknown gradually changes its course, and the subjects of the simpler beliefs of former times become part of the new territory of knowledge. The Silver Bough maps out the old course of the waterway that in Celtic belief winds between here and beyond, and reveals the very roots of the Scottish people’s distinctive customs and way of life.

The Silver Bough is a large and important work which involved many years of research into both living and recorded lore. Its genesis lies, perhaps, in the author’s subconscious need to reconcile the old primitive world she had glimpsed in childhood with the sophisticated modern world she later entered. How much more so can we, today, echo the words of the author:

“I do not believe that you can exaggerate the importance of the preservation of old ways and customs, and all those little things which bind a man to his native place. Today we live in difficult times. The steam-roller of progress is flattening out many of our old institutions, and there is a danger of a general decline in idiom and distinctive quality in our Scottish life. The only way to counteract this peril is to preserve jealously all these elder things which are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. For, remember, no man can face the future with courage and confidence unless it is solidly founded upon the past. And conversely, no problem will be too hard, no situation too strange, if we can link it with what we know and love”

F Marian McNeill

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FOREWORD

The Silver Bough of the sacred Apple-tree, laden with crystal blossoms or golden fruit, is the equivalent in Celtic mythology of the Golden Bough of classical mythology—the symbolic bond between the world we know and the Otherworld. The analogy of the title with that of Sir James Frazer's stupendous work may well make it seem a pretentious choice—the more so as I have made no attempt to cover the whole corpus of Celtic folk-lore, but only so much as is necessary for the better understanding of our national and local festivals, which are dealt with in the subsequent volumes in this series. It is thus no more than a sturdy spray of the Silver Bough that I offer, paradoxically, to a country in search of its roots.

Two other books have borne the title, *The Silver Bough*. (Actually, I discovered them both only after I had made my own choice.) One is an anthology of Irish poetry, the other a book by that distinguished Highland novelist, Neil Gunn. A volume of verse, a novel, a study in folk-lore—what more diverse kinds of book? Yet in all three, I like to think, one may detect the scent of the apple-blossom.

F. M. McN.

Edinburgh, December, 1956

*Reason discounts for the most part
All stray overflowing of life's deeper flood,
Instincts, intuitions, religion, art,
And though a small part of the whole
Would fain have entire control.*

*But who reason well know all too well
That that unseen tide now and again
Lifts into consciousness far greater truths
Than reason itself can attain,
Truths to thought I wis
As thought to feeling is.*

Hugh Macdairmid: *Thalamus*.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

Those of us who grew up in homes where our national festivals were celebrated know how much warmth and colour they brought into our childhood. In some of us, at least, they seemed to stir a racial memory and link us more closely to the generations that had gone before us.ⁱ

In our own time, the development of science has tended to estrange us from our racial traditions. We are so clever at making things, we moderns—all sorts of fascinating things from telephones and microphones to submarines and aeroplanes—that we may be excused a little childish vanity in our achievements and a measure of preoccupation with them. But presently we shall take them for granted, shall perhaps weary of them a little, and shall come to feel with the poet:

*I care not if you bridge the seas,
Or ride secure the cruel sky,
Or build consummate palaces
Of metal and of masonry.*

*But have you wine and music still,
And statues and a bright-eyed love,
And foolish thoughts of good and ill,
And prayers to them that sit above?ⁱⁱ*

These are the vital things, the enduring things, and our blood asserts it, whatever our reason may say.

Living, as I did mainly while writing this book, in Edinburgh, where the bright young people of one's acquaintance ran to cinemas, dance halls and cocktail parties, and the more sober ones discussed the merits and demerits of Epstein and Einstein, Communism, Fascism, Douglas Credit and the rest, the world I knew as a child in the 'nineties seemed as remote and unreal as a dream. That was an island in Thule, where the sound of wind and waves was always in our ears, and in our nostrils the smell of heather and peat-reek and the salt sea spray. On wild winter nights the wind howled in the chimney-pots, the windows rattled in their sockets, and fearful shadows leapt from their ambush as one crept upstairs to bed by the light of a flickering flame. In contrast were the opalescent beauty of the summer nights, when sunset merged into dawn, and the crystalline beauty of the autumn nights, when the stars shone bright in a frosty sky and the northern heavens were lit up by the aurora borealis or 'the merry dancers,' as we called them. We lived in an eerie borderland between the seen and the unseen worlds, and, Manse bairns and all as we were, duly trained in the Shorter Catechism and in respect for the eternal verities, we had (like most Scots, I fancy) more than a dash of the pagan beneath our Presbyterian veneer. What a thrill we got from an unchancy encounter with an old wife reputed to have the evil eye, an uncanny tapping on the window-pane, or the appearance of a 'shroud' in the candle-flame; whilst the sight of a cat walking widdershins on Hallowe'en—that was a thing to send a shiver down the spine! Dominated by a great arch of sky,

surrounded by wide seas, and looking out to far horizons, we could not if we would escape the sense of mystery and awe that is engendered by long and close contact with the elements; and though in due course we came south and studied logic and mathematics, and read Shaw with avidity and Wells with an effort, we found ourselves always a little out of tune with this brave new world of the twentieth century. It is an age of science, they say. Maybe so, but the province of science is bounded by the five senses, and how much lies beyond!^{iiia}

'When the mind of man looketh upon secondary causes scattered,' writes Bacon, 'sometimes it resteth in them, but when it beholdeth them confederate and knit together, it flieth to Providence and Deity.'

Even if the glass is clearing a little, we still see 'in a glass, darkly.' The Mystery remains unsolved.

But what, it may be asked, has all this to do with the subject of Festivals?

The answer is, quite a lot.

'The religious sense,' writes Ronald Campbell Macfie, 'always involves, with a sense of wonder and mystery, the sense of an infinite Intelligence and Power behind all things—and though there always have been, and perhaps always will be, men who are blind to the mystery of things—men who may be said to lack the sense of Final Cause... yet to-day science has elevated and confirmed intuitive religion by showing the vastness of the universe, and the disciplined energy and fruitful intelligence at work in all natural processes, and especially in the processes of life.'ⁱⁱⁱⁱⁱ

It is to this sense of wonder and mystery in our remote forebears, and to the same instinct or intuition on which modern theism is based, that we trace our ancient Scottish festivals—which, of course, like those of every other nation, are not national in origin, but are world festivals that have acquired a national complexion.

In every age and in every land, the spirit of a people finds expression not only in its music, its art, and its literature, but also—and most revealing of all—in its religion. Besides myth and dogma, we find in all the great religious systems a series of symbolic rites and ceremonies associated with a ritual that has developed in accordance with the spiritual needs of the times. The great seasonal festivals have always played an important part in the religious life of mankind. Yet, strange as it may seem, they are less mystical than utilitarian in origin, deriving directly from the concern of primitive man with his food supply. The two strongest human instincts are self-preservation and race-preservation, or, in other words, the two main interests of primitive (and not so primitive) man are food and children.^{iv} It is not easy for us moderns, living in a world where scientific agriculture and rapid transport have ensured abundance of food at all seasons (though the plight of Europe after two World Wars gave us an inkling), to realise what it meant to our forefathers to be entirely dependent upon local produce and to live in constant dread of the failure of the harvest.

Primitive man could never escape from the menace of famine, and the object of his religious festivals was, first and foremost, to placate the earth-powers, the hidden life-giving forces of nature, and so ensure fertility in the soil he tilled, in his domestic animals, and in his own family.

Primitive man was an intense realist: otherwise he could not have survived. If he worshipped the sun and the moon and the heavenly bodies, it was not primarily for their inherent mystery, as Miss Jane Harrison has noted,^{iva} but because they mysteriously regulated the seasons and brought him food. He observed that at certain seasons the plants and the animals which formed his food appeared and disappeared, and the dates of his festivals synchronise with the focal points of his interest in the food supply. On these dates, which vary, of course, in different climates, he kindled

bonfires, offered up sacrifices, and performed certain symbolic acts in order to encourage the bounty of Nature.

The supreme event in Nature's calendar is the resurrection of vegetation in Spring. The prototype of the great class of resurrection gods, whose worship originates in the intense desire of man that nature, which seems dead, shall live again, is the Egyptian Osiris, whose Greek equivalent is the god Dionysos.

'In the ancient days,' writes Plutarch, 'our fathers used to keep the feast of Dionysos in homely, jovial fashion. There was a procession, a jar of wine, and a branch; then someone dragged in a goat; another followed bringing in a wicker basket of figs, and, to crown all, the phallos.'^{iv}

'It was just a festival of the fruits of the whole earth,' comments Miss Harrison; 'the wine and the basket of figs and the branch for vegetation, the goat for animal life, the phallos for man. No thought here for the dead; it is all for the living and food.'^{vi}

It is probable that the mariners who brought the first seeds and agricultural implements to Britain, traversing the route marked by the megalithic monuments of North Africa and Western Europe, introduced at the same time the agricultural calendar and the magical or religious rites associated with it.

THE CALENDAR

The whole life of nature is, as we know, dominated by periodic events. The rotation of the earth produces day and night; the rotation of the earth round the sun produces the cycle of the seasons; the phases of the moon, which before the introduction of artificial light were of vital importance to man, are also recurrent; and primitive calendars are based upon this periodicity.

Our forefathers were profoundly conscious of the rhythm of life, of the secular wheeling of the seasons. At the approach of winter, they rent their garments and bewailed the death of vegetation, and at the approach of spring they hailed its resurrection with frenzied dancing and orgiastic rites. Our modern urban civilisation has cut us off from the old close contact with nature, and we have come to take such natural phenomena for granted; yet so deep is it in our blood, that we have never entirely lost our awareness of the long, slow pulse of the seasons.'^{vii}

To our remote ancestors the phases of the moon were much more obvious than the solstices and equinoxes, and in the pre-Christian era the calendar in general use was lunar; time-reckoning was lunar; festivals began on the rising of the moon—that is, on their eve; and many agricultural operations were governed by its phases. In the first century B.C., there was a reaction against the lunar calendar throughout the Roman Empire, and in 46 B.C., under Julius Caesar, there was drawn up what we know as the Julian calendar, in which the motion of the moon was ignored and the civil year regulated entirely by the sun.

In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII had the Julian calendar amended in such a way as to check the slow backward movement of the seasons. The Gregorian calendar was immediately adopted in Catholic countries and slowly in Protestant ones. In Great Britain, the change was not made until 1751, by which time the discrepancy between the Julian and Gregorian calendars amounted to eleven days; but since 1800 was not a leap year, the new and old styles of reckoning now differed by twelve days—i.e., January 1, Old Style, became January 13, New Style. The change met with strong opposition from the people, who clamoured for their lost days. Well into the latter half of the nineteenth century, Scottish country folk still kept their festivals by the Old Style reckoning, and in

some of the remoter parts of Shetland, the Hebrides, and elsewhere, the custom has not yet entirely died out.

The date of the New Year varies in different periods and in different countries. The ancient Celtic year began with the entry of winter on November 1, or, more correctly, on its eve (our modern Hallowe'en). In 527 A.D., New Year's Day was fixed by the learned Dionysius at March 25—the day already long observed as such in the Jewish calendar—and not until a thousand years later was January 1 substituted. In Scotland, James VI decided that the turn of the century was an appropriate time for the change, and by an Act of the Privy Council passed at Holyroodhouse in December, 1599, it was ordained that the first day of the following month should be reckoned the first day of the new year, in conformity with the new Continental calendar.

As regards the Christian festivals, only so much of the ritualistic ceremonial as derives from pre-Christian sources will be dealt with in this book.
