

THE SILVER BOUGH

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

By

F. MARIAN McNEILL

VOLUME TWO

**A CALENDAR OF SCOTTISH NATIONAL
FESTIVALS
CANDLEMAS TO HARVEST HOME**

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FOREWORD

Like many others, I was fascinated as a child by the curious rites we performed at certain seasons of the year, and often wondered what they meant. Why did we bathe our faces in May dew? Why did we gather St. John's Wort for divination on Midsummer Eve? Why did we "dook" for apples on Hallowe'en? Why did people come first-footing us on Hogmanay? And so forth.

Many years later I began to collect all sorts of fragments of Scottish oldlore, and when my task was completed I spread them all out before me like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. Eventually, after much juggling, there emerged a clear pattern—the cycle of the seasons, each with its festival, to one or other of which all the old rites and ceremonies pertained.

In the first volume of this work I deal with the background of our Scottish festivals—Druidism, Magic, the Fairy Faith, the Witch Cult and kindred matters. In this volume I follow the cycle of the seasons from Candlemas to the Festivals of the Corn, preceding them with an account of the medieval plays in our ancient burghs. (Since the New Year ceremonies strictly belong to Yule, they will be dealt with in the third volume, along with Hallowe'en, Martinmas and Anermas.)

Apart from the formal acknowledgments I will make later, I desire to express my deep indebtedness to the late Dr. William Watson, Professor of Celtic in the University of Edinburgh, and to Messrs. Oliver and Boyd for permitting me to draw freely on that treasure-house of Gaelic legend and lore, Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*.

F. M. McN.

Edinburgh, August, 1959.

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.

In the first volume of the Silver Bough, the author deals generally with Scottish folk-lore and folk belief, with chapters on ethnic origins, the Druids, the Celtic gods, the slow transition to Christianity, magic, the fairy faith and the witch cult. In this and the subsequent volumes she explores in more depth the foundations of many of these beliefs and rituals through the Calendar of Scottish national festivals, in which we find enshrined many of the fascinating folk customs of our ancestors. This second volume explores the opening seasons of the Calendar of Scottish National Festivals from the Festivals of Spring to the immemorial rites associated with Autumn Harvesting.

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

CHAPTER 1

THE MEDIEVAL 'PLAYS'

In the medieval Scottish burghs,¹ the place of the pagan festivals was taken by what were popularly known as 'play-days,' their principal feature being an annual procession called a 'play'—a name derived possibly from the pageantry that accompanied the procession, possibly from the acting of plays-miracles, mysteries and *ludi* (folk-plays of pagan origin)—with which it was concluded.

These 'plays' enjoyed the patronage of the town authorities, who occasionally directed them themselves, but more commonly delegated the task to a special official, a mock dignitary who bore the title of Abbot, and who is probably a direct descendant of the *Abbas Stultorum*² who presided over the Roman Feast of Fools. The Abbot appears in France as *l'Abbé de la Liésse*, where he directs the *Fête des Fous*, and in England as the Lord of Misrule. In Scotland his title varies. In Edinburgh we find the Abbot of Narent^{2a} and Lord of Inobedience; in Aberdeen, the Abbot of Bon Accord;³ in Inverness and Haddington, the Abbot of Unreason; in Peebles, the Abbot of Unrest; and so forth.

The office was no sinecure. In general terms, the duty of the Abbot, as laid down in the Aberdeen records, was 'the halding of ye guid toun in glaidnes and blythnes with dancis, farcis, playis and games in tymes convenientin particular terms, he arranged for pageants at Royal entries,⁴ regulated the craft representations at religious festivals, subsidised clerk plays and interludes, controlled the organised folk-games and ridings, budgeted for the preparation and upkeep of the play-fields.⁵ The fees came out of the burgh exchequer. The duration of the office is uncertain, but we know that both the summer and the winter festival had its *dominus festi*. In the sixteenth century, the Abbot became identified with Robin Hood, but his more usual title is King of the May.

How general was the indulgence of the people in plays and pastimes we may gather from Miss Anna Jean Mill's valuable study, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland*.

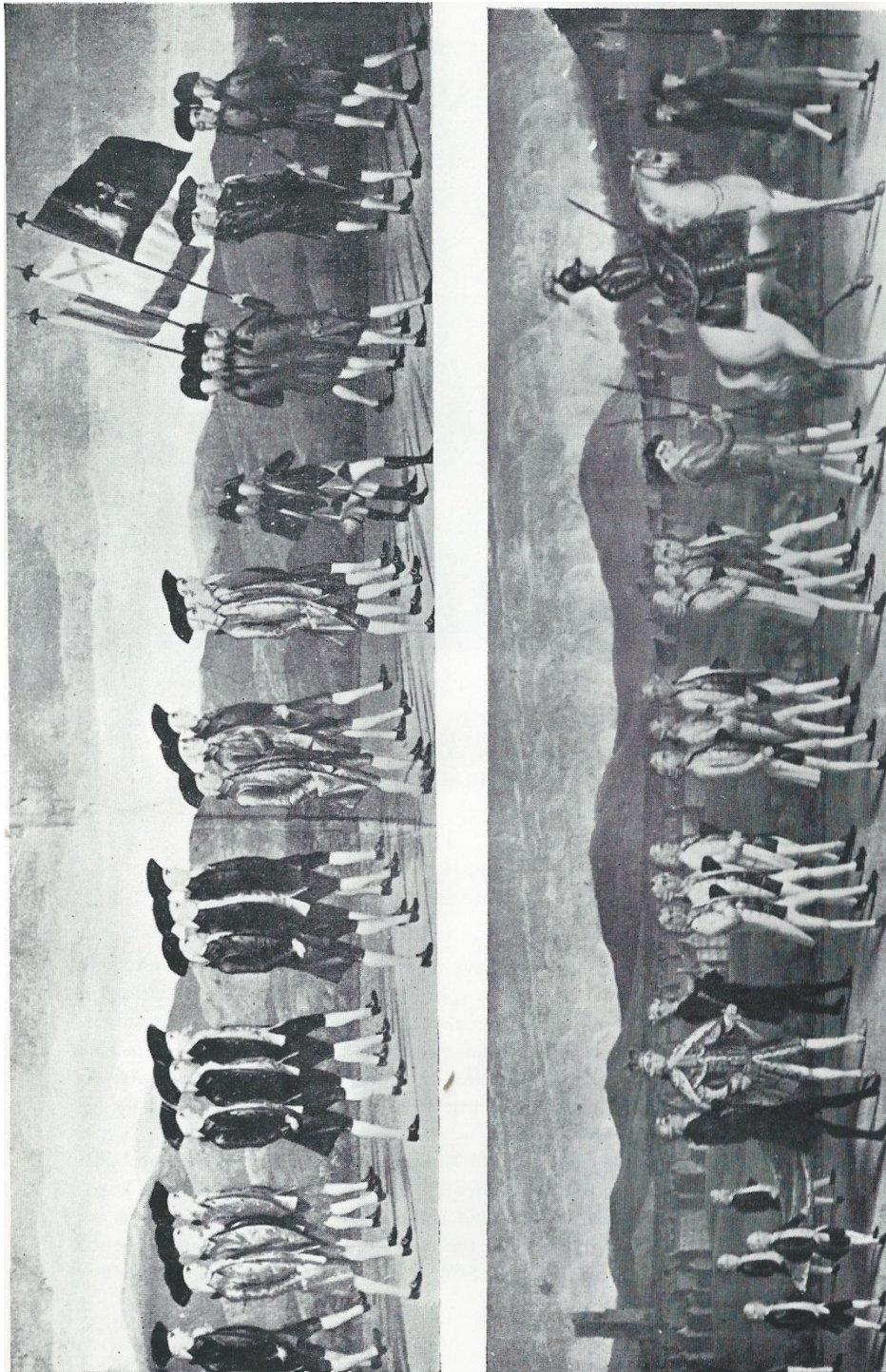
'Troupes of professional minstrels, in defiance of civil and ecclesiastical interdict, roamed the countryside, playing their spectacula to delighted townsfolk, tempting students from their classes

and monks from their cells. The members of the two older universities of St. Andrews and Glasgow not only organised ridings in disguise, but celebrated the feast of St. John with scurrilous farces and popular interludes. Household minstrels, Court "makaris," members of the royal retinue, wandering bards and jugglers, Clerks to the Chapel, bands of folk players from the town, professional jesters, all combined in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries to make the Scottish Court a favourable nursing-ground for dramatic activities. The idea that the masks of Mary Queen of Scots were delicate exotics from France in 1561 is untenable.'

In the burgh records there are many references to May plays, Abbot plays and Robin Hood plays. None of these has survived; indeed the only title preserved is Trik, a play which was performed on the first Sunday of May, 1598, in the parish of Samuelston, East Lothian, 'to the delight,' it is said, 'of the whole countryside, and to the embarrassment of the Laird, who was held responsible by the irate Presbytery of Haddington.'



From a painting by Peggy Caird A TOURNAMENT AT GREEN SIDE Edinburgh's old Playfield, showing Mary, Darnley and other members of the Court. Designed as a drop-curtain for the King's Theatre, Edinburgh



PROCESSION OF ST. CRISPIN IN DUNDEE

The Church of Rome allotted to every craft guild a patron saint, and every craft celebrated its saint's day with a splendid pageant. After the banning of the saints' days by the Reformers, St. Crispin, the patron saint of the Cordiners, became King Crispin, and the religious procession a secular parade. The Earl Marshal, on a black horse, is followed by a mail-clad Champion on a white horse. King Crispin is crowned and royally robed, and four pages hold up his train. The horseman with his back to the procession is unidentified. Three bannermen follow in the wake of Auld Mahoun, the Saracen. Deacons and; past, deacons wear white satin coats and knee-breeches, and the craftsmen wear knee-breeches, embroidered tailed coats and cocked hats. The mural, though no masterpiece, is

an interesting relic of the old burghal life. Originally designed for the old Trades Hall (since demolished), it is now in the Rotunda Art Gallery.

The principal Church feasts—Candlemas, Corpus Christi,⁶ St. John's and St. Nicholas'—were high holidays in the burghs. In Edinburgh, the town 'ports'⁷ were decorated, the streets were filled with music and banners, and there were splendid processions of priests and laymen in which the various civic bodies took part, carrying tapers, banners, and the shields of the guilds. In Aberdeen, the artificers were enjoined to appear in their best array, each wearing on his breast the badge of his art, and every craft was instructed to carry a banner emblazoned with armorial devices, and a pair of torches 'honestlie maid of four pund of wax.' In later times tableaux were introduced into the pageant, together with impersonations of Biblical and legendary characters. It is recorded that in 1496 the Edinburgh Hammermen were responsible for furnishing Herod and his knights for the Corpus Christi procession, and that Dundee had an elaborate processional pageant with the Host, showing tableaux from Old Testament stories, the Nativity, the Passion, the Resurrection, and the lives of the saints.

At the feast of St. Giles, the patron saint of Edinburgh, on September 1st, the crafts went in procession with the relics of the saint, and prominent in their midst was a bull-drawn cart bearing one of the heavier treasures of the Church.

The various craft guilds, too, had their own processions. In Edinburgh, the most gorgeous of all was the Cordiners' (Shoemakers') procession on October 25th, in which 'King Crispin' appeared in his gilded coach, a 'Black Prince' in full armour, on a magnificent mount, and several 'heralds' in red and gold tabards. The proceedings ended with a mock coronation at Holyrood.

A festival peculiar to Perth was St. Obert's Play. Obert, Berth, or Bert was the tutelary patron of the Perth bakers. Of this holy man nothing is known, and no traces of him appear in any of the Calendars; but on the 10th of December, which was known as St. Obert's Eve, the bakers of the city staged a 'play' in his honour, perambulating the town in disguise, with lighted torches in their hands, and dancing or prancing to the music of pipes and drum. The central figure in the procession was a man—presumably St. Obert—mounted on a fantastically decorated horse, which ambled in men's shoes; whilst another participant was clad in what was called the 'Devil's Coat.'

The pageants seem to have been regulated in much the same way on both sides of the Border. The ordering of the procession was in the hands of the bailies (*anglicé* aldermen) or their representatives; the deacons or masters of the crafts were responsible to the town for the furnishing of the pageants; and a defaulting craft was held liable for a heavy fine. The costs of the pageants were borne by the respective crafts.

Of the Mystery Plays associated with the ecclesiastical festivals, those whose names survive include *The Haliblude* (Haly Blude), which is conjectured to be a rude representation of the Last Supper, and the ordination of the Holy Sacrament; *Candlemas Day*, in which appear Herod, Joseph, Mary, Simeon, Anna, angels and soldiers. *The Conversion of Saul*, with the Deity, Saul, Ananias, Caiaphas, Belial, Mercury, priests, poets and knights; and *Mary Magdalene*, which is believed to have been the finest of them all.

The *ludus* derives from the pagan fertility cult. The 'stream of consciousness making for fertility,' or what George Bernard Shaw calls the Life Force, dries up, or appears to do so, on the approach of winter, and re-appears in spring. Believing this spirit to be incarnate in some particular splendid beast or flowering tree, men dressed themselves in the skin of slaughtered animals

(whence that curious survival, The Procession of the Bull, played by the *Gilleann Callaig*, or Hogmanay Lads, in the Highlands and Hebrides) or in green leaves (whence the Burry Man who appears at Lammas in South Queensferry and perambulates the district). In ancient times, we learn from Frazer, one man, more gifted mentally or physically than the rest, takes the leading part in such rites, and he is the medicine man who works the charm. From medicine man he advances to the status of priest, and from priest to semi-divine King. But the potency thus acquired does not endure. It diminishes in the winter, and another rises who seeks to slay the exhausted leader and take his place in the festival of a new spring. But the medicine man is cunning and proves his skill and his value to the community, and contrives to prolong his reign—eventually for life—by offering for sacrifice a substitute for himself. In the course of time the sacrifice is abandoned, but the festival retains its Mock King.

The only *ludus* that has survived in Scotland to the present time is *The Goloshan*, which is still performed by the guisers on Hogmanay.⁸

THE PLAYFIELDS

Play-fields were attached to all the leading burghs. In 1456, James II, under his Great Seal, granted to the Magistrates and community of the city of Edinburgh 'and their successors forever,' the valley and low ground lying between the rock called Craigin-galt in the east, and the commonway and passage on the west, known as Grenesyde, for all manner of sports. The Town Pipers appear in the records as far back as 1487; in the Acts of the Lord High Treasurer there are many entries of payment made to harpers, fiddlers and pipers; and it is recorded that in 1554, the Town Council ordered its Treasurer to pay 'to Walter Bynning five lib. for making of the play-ground, painting the hand scenes and the players' faces, and for preserving so as to be forthcoming to the town when required, eight play hats, a king's crown, a mitre, a fool's head, a fox's head, a pair of angel's wings, two angels' hair, and a chaplet of triumph.'

Glasgow's playfield, which remained intact until the end of the seventeenth century, was known as the Old Green. It extended from the River Clyde on the south to St. Enoch's Croft on the north, and from the Stockwell tenements on the east to St. Enoch's Burn on the west. In its Charter under the Great Seal, there is a reference to the Auld Playfield of Stirling, 'jacentera prope castrum de Striviling ex boreali latere ejusdem.' The plan is preserved in *The Stirling Antiquary*. The Perth Playfield was situated at the end of the High Street, beside the old amphitheatre of St. Johnston, in which Lyndsay's *Satyre of the Thrie Estatis* is said to have been acted in 1535. Dundee's lay just outside the West Port. Aberdeen's original play-field was a natural auditorium on the Windmillhill, but in 1559 a new one was made on the west side of the Woolmanhill.

Aberdeen played a leading role among Scottish towns in the performance of those mystery and miracle plays which gave birth to the modern drama. The earliest dramatic performance recorded in Scotland is that of *The Haliblude* on the Windmillhill in 1440, and similar dramas were produced in the city until the middle of the sixteenth century. Perth, too, has an old-established dramatic tradition, and there is evidence that what successive managers addressed as 'the nobility, gentry and inhabitants of Perth' were enthusiastic play-goers when Perth was a county town in the fullest sense of the word.⁹

There is reason to believe that at one time the city of Aberdeen maintained, besides its 'Abbot,' a second minister of mirth—a Civic Jester. At least, a clown of the city was of such note that

he was summoned to the Court of James IV, and the Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer attest his Majesty's delight in 'Jok, the fule of Aberdene.'¹⁰

THE BANNING OF THE FESTIVALS

In 1555, the 'Abbot,' in his various aliases, was unfrocked by Act of Parliament. This was not entirely the effect of Protestant prejudice, as is too readily assumed. For one thing, the Reformation was as yet strenuously opposed by the Court; for another, as Miss Mill reminds us, 'This attitude of hostility towards folk-plays and itinerant minstrels and of disapproval of clerical participation in lay revels was characteristic of the mediaeval Church in Western Europe.... As regards folk plays and the spectacles of the minstrels, the Reformed Kirk of Scotland merely reinforced the declared official policy, if not the consistent practice, of the Roman Catholic Church.' Again, although the Kirk worked to suppress the May Games and the pagan rites associated with the summer and winter festivals, during the period of the Reformation there was no general denunciation of plays as such. On the contrary, the drama was recognised by the early Scottish Reformers as a valuable means of propaganda,¹¹ and it is not until a generation later that we find a rigorous ban on dramatic performances.

In 1575, the General Assembly drew up an Article urging the prohibition of all holy days except the Sabbath and the punishment of all those who should persist in keeping Yule and other festivals by ceremonies, banqueting, playing, feasting, and 'sic uther vanities and in 1581, the observation of saints' days was prohibited by Act of Parliament.

In the minutes of the Kirk-Session Records of Perth (1577), the citizens are taken to task for having disobeyed the express command of magistrates and ministers and 'played Corpus Christi play upon Thursday, the sixth of June last, whilk day was wont, to be called Corpus Christi Day, to the great slander of the Church of God and dishonour of this haill town.'

St. Obert's play, which seems to have had more of the character of a pagan folk-rite than of a Christian ceremony, came under the same ban.

'This annual procession,' we are told, 'excited the peculiar ire of the kirk-session, but notwithstanding all the denunciations against it, the bakers held out until 1588, when they entered in their records an agreement that none would be entitled to the privileges of their "craft," but would be "banished the town forever," who had any concern in St. Obert's Play. This completely finished St. Obert.'

At Elgin, too, severe measures were taken. In 1580 it was ordained that 'Na persone within this burgh sail pretend or caus mak ony fyris upon the calsey of this burgh on Sanct Jhonis ewin or Sanct Peteris ewin in the monethis of Junij or ryd in disgysit maner within this burgh on Sanct Nicolas ewin in the monethis of December in ony tymis cuming under the pain of tinsall of thair freedom that are burgessmen and burgessquiffis (wives).' Others were to be fined or put in ward.

In 1579 and 1580, the Edinburgh Town Council found it necessary to issue further proclamations; in the Glasgow Kirk Session Records of May, 1603, there is an intimation that 'no person go to Rugland (Rutherglen) to see vain plays on the Sabbath; and until far on into the seventeenth century there were frequent prosecutions of May-time revellers.

The only relic of the old Aberdeen pageants which survived the Reformation was the New Year's Day procession of the servants and apprentices of the artificers.
