

Fairies, Faith, and Fatherland in James Hogg's 'The Brownie of Bodsbeck'

By Charles Snodgrass

As we hurtle further into the darker days bookended by Samhain guising on the one end and Hogmanay rituals on the other, it seems an appropriate season to revisit James Hogg's curious and enduring tale of a Scottish fairy beguiling Christian folk, his roots in the Autumn Celtic festival of Samhain overlaid with the Christian trifecta of All Hallows' Eve, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day. In *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night*, Nicholas Rogers observes that '[W]hat was especially noteworthy about Samhain was its status as a borderline festival. It took place between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice. In Celtic lore, it marked the boundary between summer and winter, light and darkness. In this respect, Samhain can be seen as a threshold, or what anthropologists would call a liminal festival.'¹ Apart from the novel being set topographically deep within the Scottish Borders of Hogg's native Ettrick lands, he enshrouds the narrative in a veil between Celtic and pagan lore on the one hand and Christian and Covenanter ideology on the other. In order to arrive at this bifurcated analysis it should be noted at the outset (with a spoiler alert) that Hogg's tale does not, in fact, evince an *actual* fairy; granted, such an omission may appear as a glaring omission or even a bait-and-switch tactic within the present special issue on fairies and supernatural creatures. However, my purpose in this exploration is to lift this deftly woven veil to better understand the origins of Hogg's brownie and how and why it functions as a curious national identity signifier.

In their groundbreaking work *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History*, Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan assert that '[W]hat we can prove is that many Scots people, who lived mainly in the period from c. c.

that fairies actually existed'; however, 'the only dispute concerned fairies represented, questions of whether the guid neighbours were manifestations of divine providence or legions of hell.' Readers of *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (first

personages], allows his scruples to be overcome if the thing be done in a genteel, delicate, and secret way.’⁶ So, thus far, characteristics of a Scottish brownie are: short, brown, shaggy in ragged clothes, hard working, quite strong, susceptible to bribes sub rosa, and mercurial when if criticised or given the wrong food.

Some of these characteristics can be said to describe Hogg’s brownie in the novel as when readers first learn about the creature during an exchange between the main character of the novel, Walter (‘Wat’) Laidlaw, and his wife Maron Linton Laidlaw. Wat asks Maron, ‘has the Brownie o’ Bodsbeck been ony mair seen about the town?’ (p. 6). The frightened and agitated Maron, who throughout the novel conjures the protective spirit of Christianity, replies that ‘ye’ll no have a servant about yer house, man, woman, nor boy, in less than a fortnight, if this wicked and benevolent spirit canna be put away — an’ I may say i’ the language o’ Scripture, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” It’s no ae Brownie, nor twa, nor half-a-score, that’s about the house, but a great hantle — they say they’re haf deils ha’f fock — a thing I dinna weel understand.’ (p. 6)

A creature that lacks discernment in both form and temperament should remind us of the precarious Celtic-Christian threshold upon which Scottish fairies as a whole rest. Curiously, as Douglas Mack elucidates in his ‘Note on the Text’ (pp. xx-xxvii), Hogg’s manuscript was both expurgated and corrected for consistency in manuscript and in proofs. For example, Maron’s description of the brownie being ‘wicked and benevolent’ appears in Hogg’s manuscript and, thus, helps to underscore the mercurial nature of such a sprite, one that might, for example, transform into a boggart if offended. However, in both the 1818 first edition and in the 1837 republication, Maron’s description becomes ‘wicked and malevolent’ (p. 180). Editorially one might argue for adjectival consistency here in that ‘wicked and benevolent’ are at odds with each other and, thus, confuse the reader, but this juxtaposition is precisely the sort of nuanced characterisation Hogg congeals in his description of this brownie before the truth is discovered.

In fact, much of the mistaken identity revealed at the end of the novel — (spoiler!) that the Presbyterian Covenanting martyr John Brown (1627-1685) was the supposed ‘brownie’ in various guises and scenes⁷ — relies upon an amorphous and slippery characterisation of what Hogg describes as ‘mysterious and unaccountable incidents’ surrounding the brownie (p. 29). Through further textual evidence Mack lays bare the heavy-handed editorial process at the House

of Blackwood, especially in the preface, that 'there is no clear evidence that Hogg intended to censor (p. xxii). How and why such substantive emendations remain as mysterious as whether brownies truly exist. Reports that the heavy-handed editor(s) and/or publisher(s) tended toward bowdlerization, especially in the case of religious or theological allusions, profanity, and the like.

A particularly glaring example of this is the story of the brownie after the narrator recounts young vagrant being thrown into a pit 'at least fifty fathom deep' and finding a multitude of hideous beings, with green faces and weight upon his breast that seemed headless. The brownie 'bore him away for hundreds of miles, amid the mountains of the North, and deposited him at Walter's doorstep at Chapelhope (pp. 27-28); here the brownie's preternatural strength. The gudewife is a traumatic experience for the narrator, and the brownie's strength is a key element of the story.

deeply culturally embedded belief systems had been under siege from various Christian quarters, denominations, and schisms. Elsewhere in the novel we are reminded that ‘the murder of a priest, Mass John Binram, was discussed at full length’ (p. 56), so that just as zealous Covenanters are hunted down for their religious convictions, so, too, are Catholics for their prelatric hegemony. So for as ‘superstitious as Maron was’ (p. 56) and other Lowland Borders folk like her were to abdicate their supposed ‘superstitions’ — whether in the form of worshiping a statue of the Virgin Mary or taking comfort in having a domestic fairy — this belief system dialectic demonstrates what we know and love about Hogg, that he remained keenly attuned to the imbrication of both the faith and the fairy folkways of his kith and kin so that as Suzanne Gilbert rightly reminds us Hogg’s alchemic ‘gold may still be found in the oral traditions of Borders culture.’⁹

We may reach further back genealogically in the Foucaultian sense to unearth the stigmata on Scottish brownies by examining a chief architect of ideological fairy proscription in none other than a titular father of Scotland, King James I & VI (reign, 1603-1625), whose 1597 *aemonologie* gave its imprimatur to disavowing fairy belief. The three-volume tome takes the form of a dialogue between the fairy and magic skeptic Philomathes and the fairy-knowledgeable Epistemon, who eventually sides with Philomathes to put all fairies and demons to death under civil and moral law. According to James in the third volume, Gentiles concocted the notion that upon every person is bestowed a good sprite (*genus bonus*) and an evil sprite (*genus malus*) and that Christians should not only recognise this as a sham, but also reject the *genus malus* while privileging the *genus bonus* by arguing:

And yet the Deuill for confirming in the heades of ignoraunt Christians, that errour first mainteined among the Gentiles, he whiles among the first kinde of spirits that I speak of, appeared in time of Papistrie and blindnesse, and haunted diuers houses, without doing any euill, but doing as it were necessarie turns vp and down the house: and this spirit they called Brownie in our language, who appeared like a rough-man: yea, some were so blinded, as to beleue that their house was all the sonsier, as they called it, that such spirites resorted there.¹⁰

We certainly cannot admit that Walter Laidlaw’s servant-stricken and bannock-bereft Chapelhope was sonsier for any supposed brownie having haunted the homestead. However, we can discern that Hogg privileges Christianity — so much

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is preternaturally strong, and lives entirely on bread and milk.’¹⁶ Moreover, in the same year Hogg’s macabre short story appeared, the pioneering Irish folklorist Thomas Keightley traced the Teutonic and Celtic origins of fairies in his two-volume 1828 *The Fairy Mythology* in which he chronicles that the ‘Nis, Kobold, or Goblin, appears in Scotland under that name of Brownie’, and ‘he is shocked at anything approaching to the name of a bribe or douceur, yet, like [great personages], allows his scruples to be overcome if the thing be done in a genteel, delicate, and secret way.’¹⁷ So, thus far, characteristics of a Scottish brownie are: short, brown, shaggy in ragged clothes, hard working, quite strong, susceptible to bribes sub rosa, and mercurial when criticised or given the wrong food.

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Restoration-era Church schism, would have not only found it difficult to abandon entirely belief in fairies or brownies, but they would have also been understandably conflicted about supporting a murderous Protestant Claverhouse just as the Roman Catholic James II & VII (reign, 1685-1688) took the throne the same year in which the novel is set. At the risk of *reductio ad absurdum*, Hogg taps into the troubled and troubling ethos of a people whose traditional and deeply culturally embedded belief systems had been under siege from various Christian quarters, denominations, and schisms. Elsewhere in the novel we are reminded that ‘the murder of a priest, Mass John Binram, was discussed at full length’ (p. 56), so that just as zealous Covenanters are hunted down for their religious convictions, so, too, are Catholics for their prelatric hegemony. So for as ‘superstitious as Maron was’ (p. 56) and other Lowland Borders folk like her were to abdicate their supposed ‘superstitions’ — whether in the form of worshipping a statue of the Virgin Mary or taking comfort in having a domestic fairy — this belief system dialectic demonstrates what we know and love about Hogg, that he remained keenly attuned to the imbrication of both the faith and the fairy folkways of his kith and kin so that as Suzanne Gilbert rightly reminds us Hogg’s alchemic ‘gold may still be found in the oral traditions of Borders culture.’²⁰

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