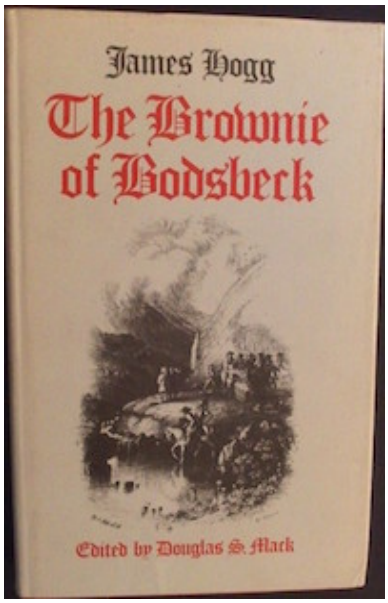
Fairies, Faith, and Fatherland in James Hogg's 'The Brownie of Bodsbeck'

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 Hallow's 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.* 1450 to *c.* 1750, had no doubt

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 published in 1818) realise quickly that the novel is set during Scotland's tumultuous Presbyterian Covenanter's upheaval and church schism of 1680–1688, and the late Douglas Mack notes that the novel is set precisely in 1685 at the height of the 'Killing Times' during which Hogg's narrator recalls how 'Graham of Dundee, better known by the detested name of Clavers, set loose his savage troopers upon those peaceful districts, with peremptory orders to plunder, waste, disperse, and destroy the conventiclers, wherever they may be found.'[2] Hogg's setting falls squarely within this era when many Scots had no 'doubt that fairies actually existed', and the novel would have held less supernatural sway over his post-Scottish Enlightenment readership of the early nineteenth century when advancements in science and medicine spread.

Before deist notions from the Enlightenment began to supplant ostensibly pagan beliefs in the ubiquity of Scottish fairies, there remain competing notions of what constitute Hogg's choice of a brownie — as opposed to a litany of other supernatural Scottish creatures such an elf, selkie, kelpie, bodach, wulver, caoineag, bean nighe, glaistig, Nicnevin, and so on.[3] As Theresa Bane describes in *Encyclopedia of Fairies in World Folklore and Mythology*, the Scottish brownie is 'short of stature, only standing about three feet tall. If clothed at all, these brown faced and shaggy headed fairies wears [sic] ragged brown clothing' and perform domestic and farm chores; however, if you criticise their work, they 'may become offended' and 'could turn into an injurious Boggart' that 'hates cats, cheats, misers, ministers, and teetotalers.'[4]

Although Carole Silver does not discuss the alleged brownie in Hogg's novel, she does note that Hogg's character Merodach — who appears to be a brownie in the 1828 short story 'The Brownie of the Black Haggs' — 'works harder than others, is preternaturally strong, and lives entirely on bread and milk.'[5] 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.'[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 scenes[7] — 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 when we take into account that 'there is no clear evidence that Hogg read the proofs of the first edition' (p. xxii). How and why such substantive emendations were made will likely remain as mysterious as whether brownies truly exist, but other textual evidence supports that the heavy-handed editor(s) and/or printer (the case for whom is muddled) tended toward bowdlerization, especially when it came to Hogg's Scriptural or theological allusions, profanity, and the nature of the devil and evil.[8]

A particularly glaring example of this religious expurgation occurs just after the narrator recounts young vagrant Kennedy's horrifying experience of having fallen into a pit 'at least fifty fathom deep' and 'found himself immediately beside a multitude of hideous beings, with green clothes, and blue faces' before feeling 'a weight upon his breast that seemed heavier than a mountain' that eventually 'bore him away for hundreds of miles, amid regions of utter darkness' back to Walter's doorstep at Chapelhope (pp. 27-28); here appears but one example of the brownie's preternatural strength. The gudewife Maron's response to such a traumatic tale is rendered as, 'O the vails! the vails! — the vails are poured, and to pour' (p. 28). Yet in the manuscript there is a much longer and more polemical version her speech that is 'deleted in ink in MS' that is written as: 'O that we could rely — O that we could believe — O that we could trust in the works of creation and providence — that then we might be enabled to see the wheel within the wheel, and fly into the bosom of the holy Catholick Church, the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins! O the vails! the vails! the vails!' (pp. 182-183). Even in a post-Enlightenment era over a century after the 'Killing Times' the long arm of the Church of Scotland reached into Hogg's novel in the form of exorcising any Papistry predilections.

One might construe Maron's use of 'holy Catholick' in its fundamental sense of church universal, but even tolerance for such interpretation would have been risky in a staunchly Presbyterian Edinburgh of 1818. Rural Ettrick folk like Maron, and to a lesser degree her Covenanter sympathising husband, amid a 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

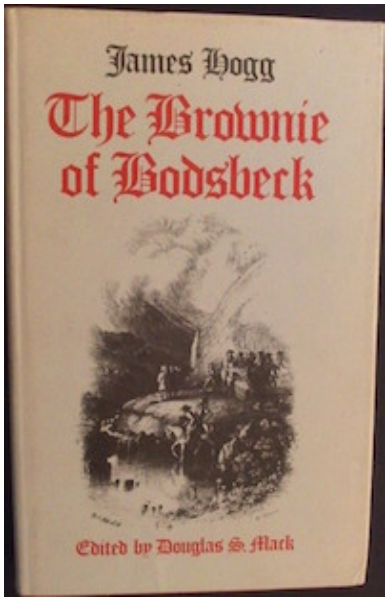
deeply culturally embedded belief systems had been under siege from various Christian quarters, denominations, and schisms. Elsewhere in the novel we are reminded that 'the murder of a priest, Mass John Binram, was discussed at full length' (p. 56), so that just as zealous Covenanters are hunted down for their religious convictions, so, too, are Catholics for their prelatic 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 *Daemonologie* 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 beleeue 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

so that any form of 'Papistrie' becomes heretical — and fairy belief diminishes among the gudefolk of Ettrick. Recently, Barbara Leonardi provided an astute analysis of Walter's daughter Katherine who represents a complex admixture of Scottish national identity through which 'Hogg fuses the primary and the secondary heroine in a unique character symbolic of the Scottish nation',[11] a heroine who bows to the politics of her Southern neighbor while simultaneously threatening to destablise that very Union. Leonardi's analysis identifies and engages a dialectical tension that remains in Scotland, a dialectics of liminality poised between and on borderline festivals, autumnal equinox and winter solstice, summer and winter, light and darkness, and, yes, faith and fairies. How we carefully we continue to trace those borderline roots remains as close to us as Samhain and Halloween masks, the open or closed doors during Hogmanay, or the open or close pages of Hogg's inventively powerful tale of heritage, loss, and redemption.



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(c) The Bottle Imp