Scots Word of the Season: ‘Bogle’

By Maggie Scott

bogle *n.* an ugly or terrifying ghost or phantom; also (figuratively) a scarecrow

Although bogles can be found in literature from around the British Isles, their earliest known exploits are recorded in Scottish texts from the early sixteenth century. The prologue to book six of Gavin Douglas’s 1513 translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* warns readers: “Of browneis and of bogillis ful [is] this buke”, and William Stewart’s *Buik of the Chroniclis of Scotland* (1535) emphasises their frightful nature: “like ane bogill all of ratland banis (rattling bones)”.

The origins of the term are unclear, but similar words occur in other European languages. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) notes Welsh *bwg* (pronounced like ‘boog’) and German *boggel-mann*, both meaning ‘ghost, goblin’. These may provide some indication of the source of the word; however, the presence of similar terms in these languages may point towards a commonality of usage stretching back to the Indo-European language, from which many European languages — including the Celtic and Germanic languages — are descended. English also has the term *boggard* or *boggart*, sometimes associated with specific places and memorialised in local names such as Boggart Hole Clough in Greater Manchester.

One literary bogle appears in the speech of Alfred Tennyson’s ‘Northern Farmer: Old Style’ (1864): “D’ya moind the waäste, my lass? naw, naw, tha was not born then; / Theer wur a boggle in it, I often ‘eärd ‘um mysén”. George Byron’s *Don Juan* (1823) takes more poetic licence: “Oh, ye ambrosial moments! always upper / In mind, a sort of sentimental bogle, / Which sits for ever upon Memory’s crupper, / The ghost of vanished pleasures once in vogue!” Robert Burns made further use of metaphorical ghouls in ‘O Poortith Cauld’ (1793): “How blest the wild-wood Indian’s fate! / He woos his artless dearie — / The silly bogles, Wealth and State, Can never make him eerie”.

John Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1808) describes a children’s game, rather like tig, called *bogill about the stacks*, ‘in which one hunts several others around the stacks of corn in a barnyard’. Walter

Scott later invokes this term in his novel, *Waverley* (1814): “I circumvented them — I played at bogle about the bush wi’ them”.

The terror-inducing aspect of the bogle is further invoked by its secondary meaning, ‘scarecrow’, often found in the combination ‘tattie-bogle’ from the need to protect crops of tatties (potatoes). As reported in the *Aberdeen Evening Express* on November 2nd of this year, various bogly events took place at Crathes Castle, with “Young guisers […] invited to attend the Children’s Traditional Scottish Halloween, where they made their own tattie-bogles”.

Bogle is also a surname, as in the name of folk-singer and songwriter Eric Bogle. The name is understood to have arisen — with apologies to Eric and others — long before political correctness, through the uncharitable application of bogle as a ‘nickname for a person of frightening appearance’ as noted by Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges in their *Dictionary of Surnames* (1988).**bogle *n.*** an ugly or terrifying ghost or phantom; also (figuratively) a scarecrow

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