

“It’s an unco place, the Bass”: A Scottish EcoGothic interrogation of Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘The Tale of Tod Lapraik’

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Nick Groom, in his article considering the Celtic roots of a Scottish Gothic, states that its Scot-Celtic past evolves from ‘antiquarianism, racial politics and national identity, and, as such, the terms [Celt and the Celtic] are not dissimilar to “Goths” and the “Gothic”.’¹ This Celticism, whilst akin to Gothic imaginings, also has a rooted tradition in that ‘[the Celts] identified themselves through a kinship with natural environments rather than via tribal history.’² The overpopulation, or the pollution of ‘English’ industry wrought havoc upon the once agricultural, rural and Celtic way of life of the Highland Pre-Union imagination. It is through this Celtic national pride that the Highlands, as synecdoche for the nation of Scotland,

weaves an ecologically anxious consciousness into their relationship with the Union of 1707.

This national pride therefore welcomes a commentary that de-emphasises an Anglo-centrism originally posed by earlier iterations of Scottish Gothic criticism, in favour for the transmission of literary culture between the collective islands of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, surrounding islands and landmasses (Scandinavia) and

England that the latter eclipses. This archipelagic criticism ('archipelagic' also bearing connotations of natural land masses) of cultural transmission is a school of thinking developed by John Kerrigan, that favours the impact of each of the countries and islands within the British-Irish archipelago on anglophone literature.³ The Celtic traditions championed by Groom that form a foundation for this Scottish EcoGothic paradigm are therefore of a culture preceding the progressivist changes of English industry and enlightenment. In the fearful retrospective tradition that Gothic inherently plays upon, it begs the question of how far Scottish EcoGothic sees the past as the feared, or whether it is the inverse.

An exemplar of Scottish EcoGothic anxiety can be found in the work of Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson offered much to his contemporaries regarding the state of Scot-Celtic cultural identity and the natural landscape of Scotland. Though known for his seminal *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) which illustrates the well-accepted trope of Scottish dualism, degeneration and regression in the fin de siècle, Stevenson's shorter pieces produce an arguably greater commentary on this Scottish-oriented ecocritical Gothic angle. The natural response when considering Stevenson and his shorter Gothic works would be to consider his Calvinist Gothic 'Thrawn Janet' (1881). However, another otherwise overlooked piece deserves more attention when considering this paradigm: Black Andie's ['The Tale of Tod Lapraik'](#) (1893).

Published in 1893, this short tale forms much of a chapter in Stevenson's David Balfour historical adventure series, *Catriona* (1893). Told to a collective of Highlanders, this short piece is framed as an anecdotal story of the peculiar events of the Bass Rock off the coast of North Berwick. Though this might not immediately provoke a nationalist ecocritical thought, it is upon closer inspection that this potential becomes evident.

Firstly, the archipelagic transmission of Celtic and Highland culture is apparent in Stevenson's embedding of this story within his larger text. The text of *Catriona* is the sequel to *Kidnapped*, a series that deals with the lamentation of a dying Highlander way of life in shadow of the Union and the battle of Culloden, which in itself recalls *Waverley* to the Scot and non-Scot reader alike. Writing this in the fin de siècle, Stevenson's work critiques progress, as Julia Reid states:

Stevenson's historical fiction [...] engages rather differently with the narrative

*of inevitable advance from savagery to civilization. His historical novels unsettle the progressivist anthropological narrative by exploring critically the effects of the 1707 Act of Union on eighteenth-century Scotland.*⁴

Catriona's historical fiction sympathetically laments the loss and negligence the Union caused. This political event not only fractured the Scottish identity, but incited the rebellion that led to the Highland Clearances, and with the loss at Culloden, 'the British government imposed restrictive laws that compromised the power of the clan chiefs and the Gaelic culture that underpinned it'.⁵ The Highland Synecdoche of identity as a Celtic/Gaelic culture was progressively broken down and consumed. In *Catriona* and *Kidnapped*, the historical journey north to a queered outsider culture denotes a Gothic retrospection. As Kirsty Macdonald argues: '[...] the north, and more specifically the Highlands, is a Gothic topography, an environment that accommodates an internal other: Celtic, Gaelic-speaking and primitive.'⁶ Though this views the Celt as the other that inspires fear due to its degeneration by stressing primitivism, it is exactly this that is romanticised in Stevenson's work and particularly in 'Tod Lapraik' due to Celtic-Highlander affiliation with the natural environment. Barry Menikoff states:

*[Stevenson] was concentrated, instead, on the loss suffered by the indigenous culture, focusing on how the law of the state was utilized for ends that had nothing to do with justice and everything to do with the preservation of power.*⁷

It is Stevenson's love for the preceding culture, slowly eclipsed by the Anglicised dominant culture in the name of progress, which allows an ecocritical reading of Stevenson's *Catriona* and his Gothic insertion. 'The Tale of Tod Lapraik', therefore, before even considering the full content, already exhibits a land affiliation that is Celtic, but one that distinctly places itself in a locality in Scotland: the Bass Rock.

Moving on to the oral tale itself, we are welcomed to it with ominous declarative, 'its an unco place, the Bass.'⁸ Already we are set to understand that this place is unusual, possibly even supernatural. The location of the Bass as off mainland Scotland places it in an ethereal, queered space of desolate wilderness. David observes himself 'in the old falling ruins of a prison, among the endless sounds of

the sea and sea-birds', solidifying the Bass as its own unique solitary place in nature.⁹ This lays the foundations not only for a challenge to the archipelagic transmission of Celtic culture into the anglicised Scots, but the natural world and the Celtic's interaction to be displayed in full view of the narrative.

Here, David's previous mention of the prison ruin offers up the ecocritical dialogue between the exploited land mass that is the Bass and human progress. The Bass, now reclaimed by the natural forces that it once conquered, is already providing an epilogue for the tale before it truly begins. In this, 'Tod Lapraik' is eventually successful. We have already addressed the surrounding aspects of Stevenson's placement of the tale within a larger anthropological narrative, but the details of Andie's narrative bring a more thoroughly ecocritical standpoint.

The antagonist and namesake for the story, Tod Lapraik, the weaver who vies against Tam Dale for dominion of the Bass, is the main conduit for the natural world and its defence. Upon Lapraik's introduction, Andie raises suspicion: 'The second was ane Lapraik, whom the folk ca'd Tod Lapraik maistly, but whether for his name or his nature I could never hear tell.'¹⁰ This is a well-phrased reflection from Stevenson insomuch that Tod is Scots for 'A fox. [...] In early use in place-names and as a personal name.'¹¹ This works doubly, implying a cunning nature but also again hinting at Tod's motives as a creature of the natural world. Hans-Jörg Uther discusses the connotations of the fox in literature:

*The fox is a symbol of the devil, an image of demons, and because of its slyness and cunning it characterizes both the ruler who does not fear god (Herod, for example) and a cunning person in general [...] The equation fox = heretic.*¹²

Here, Uther is highlighting the already culturally established slyness and cunning that Andie appears to be observing. However, Uther also is bringing the matter of demonic religious imagery of the fox into question. This is effective, as Stevenson's work is set on the Covenanter prison land mass. And its heretic point also fits Tod's character. Not only this, but the heretic nature of Tod and the fox name ties to supernatural ability and transformation '[...] the idea that foxes are spirits, witches, or devils endowed with the ability to shape-shift is widely reported' that Tod later demonstrates through witchcraft.¹³

Witchcraft and magic associated with Celtic paganism is defiantly heretic in the eyes of Stevenson's narrative. However, to come to the conclusions of Tod being a warlock, evidence is necessary. Firstly, Tod's lodgings are secluded and make others uncomfortable:

*Tod had his dwallin' in the lang loan benorth the kirkyaird. It's a dark uncanny loan, forby that the kirk has aye had an ill name since the days o' James the Saxt and the deevil's cantrips played therein when the Queen was on the seas; and as for Tod's house, it was in the mirkest end, and was little liked by some that kenned the best.*¹⁴

Tod lives away from human society, in a place explicitly away from the church. Andie's reference to devilish trickery prompts demonic association and informs that Tod's house was on the darkest part of this cow path. Tod's locating himself in nature excludes him from human societal order and out of the reaches of the church presences on the Bass. Though Stevenson and the narrator may stress the demonic and devil-like quality of Tod, it is his motives that require greater scrutiny, as beneath the maliciousness of his actions, it appears his behaviour favours returning the Bass to nature. In fact, Tod's actions belie the tenets of Garrard's deep ecology position in Ecocriticism. Much like the Celtic and Gaelic folklore Stevenson draws upon to create this anecdotal tale, the stresses on magic appear to delineate that of Celtic paganism and witchcraft which, already established, ties heavily with a rural natural lifestyle, much like Tod's lodgings.

Tod's ultimate goal of returning the Bass to nature is a deep ecology standpoint that involves removing human threats to the ecosystem and defending the notoriously large solan (A northern seabird otherwise called a gannet) population. His aim of removing the humans in favour of non-humans would mean a beneficial 'flourishing' that 'requires a smaller human population.'¹⁵ His understanding of them is made apparent early on in the narrative when being compared to his double, Tam Dale: 'Baith were weel qualified, for they had baith been sodgers in the garrison, and kent the gate to handle solans, and the seasons and values of them'.¹⁶ This shows that both are aware of the solan behaviour and their 'kent the gate' means they understand the method and conduct to capture them. However, when solan and man interact, it is Tam who is trying to capture and exploit, whereas the suspicions of Tod are to defend the solans and, by extension, kill the

male leader of the Bass.

Tod is feared by Tam and Andie in the narrative, as when they approach Tod weaving in a dream-like trance, Andie says: ‘There, he sat, a muckle fat, white hash of a man like creish, wi’ a kind of a holy smile that gart me scunner’.¹⁷ They fear what they do not understand and Tod’s state of trance is identified as something unholy by Tam: “‘Dwam!’ says he. “I think folk hae brunt for dwams like yon.”¹⁸

But this practicing of witchcraft was not alien to Celtic societies, in fact, Ronald Hutton advocates that the divisive opinions of witchcraft fell into three primary categories:

*[peoples] may broadly be divided into those with a dread of witchcraft; those who believe that it exists but do not in practice much worry about it; and those who do not concern themselves with it [...] it can now be proposed that the Celtic societies [...] fell into the second of the three classes, and the other societies of the archipelago into the first.*¹⁹

Again, we are returned to archipelagic thinking. The Celtic societies that form the Scottish Gothic ecocritical paradigm fit within the second category that are aware of it but do not fear it. Tam and Andie certainly fit the first category. However, their dread is from a Covenanter Presbyterian standpoint established earlier in the narrative and an anglicised lowland mindset set forth by Menikoff. Tod practices witchcraft and represents the Celtic other which shirks the progress of anglicised industry in favour of the rurality of Celtic religious practice, in hopes of purging the Bass of the invasive humanity and defending nature.

Tod’s trance is indicative of yet another witchcraft practice with a connection to the world of nature. Though Tod’s name connotes fox imagery, it also includes a shapeshifting possibility. Stevenson, when crafting this story, took the French lycanthropy tale that became a Celtic weaver-turned-goat beast and pushed this further to fit the locality of the Bass rock, by making his weaver become a localised solan. It is almost a were-geese story; however, it is through witchcraft and trance exhibited by Tod that we can in fact see it is more a spiritual transformation or use of a familiar. Emma Wilby’s analysis on witchcraft and use of familiars indicates:

*In the latter case, it was only the spiritual part of the human (which in Christian terms would be called the soul) [...] leaving the material body behind, an event which generally occurred when the human was dreaming, sick, or in some kind of trance.*²⁰

Here, Tod's trances are akin to his spirit no longer occupying his body, and in fact, gaining agency through the connection with the solan of the rock. In turn, he may control the solan, yet his body remains at the loom, sheltered in the darkest parts of the natural landscape on the Bass.

The solan that attacks Tam whilst he hunts is notably described much like Tod. Earlier Tod was described as 'muckle fat'²¹, but the solan that Tam is threatened is also 'he was awaur of a muckle solan, and the solan pyking at the line. He thocht this by-ordinar and outside the creature's habits.'²² This solan is by implication either Tod in solan shape, or a familiar working at his behest. Tam's awareness that this bird is not behaving normally is first met with trivial attempts to bat it away. It is not until the solan 'keekit doun into Tam's face' that he sees that the bird is no normal creature.²³ Here, the Gothic trope of horror is felt by Tam Dale: 'There gaed a cauld stend o' fear into Tam's heart. "This thing is nae bird," thinks he. His een turnt backward in his heid and the day gaed black about him.'²⁴ This 'cauld stend' is a Scots idiom for a great chill, one that constitutes the overwhelming fear of the bird's uncanny nature, and the powerlessness Tam is beginning to feel. Fred Botting's description of the feeling of horror bears note:

*It is the moment of negative sublime, a moment of freezing, contraction and horror which signals a temporality that cannot be recuperated by the mortal subject. Horror marks the response to an excess that cannot be transcended.*²⁵

Tam's horror is not only for his own life in peril — it is the feeling of powerlessness when confronted with nature that no longer will stand for being oppressed, most importantly a Scots-Celtic nature of a dying culture. This solan is a creature Tam initially thinks can do him no harm and is simply the basis for the population's diet. However, in this instance, in the totally natural space of a cliff face, Tam realises how horrifyingly defenceless he is against nature. This is Tam's own moment of negative sublime — the excess is his gaining power over the Bass

and the consumption and hunting of the solan population, and this horror is causing him to faint in the sheer power of this uncanny creature in such a natural and perilous expanse. Once he attempts to retreat from this overpowering nature, the solan not only strikes fear in him, but emasculates him by causing him to lose consciousness. He understands he is outmatched:

*[...] it seemed the solan knew about signals [...] and it seemed the solan understood about knives [...] as sune as that thing was gane, Tam's heid drapt upon his shouther, and they pu'd him up like a deid corp.*²⁶

Tod's control of the solan, combined with the overpowering horror the spectacle on the crag provides, is enough to bring Tam into an illness which he 'lay a' the simmer'. It is this profound horror, combined with the spectacle of Tod's dance later that argues the reclamation of the Bass by nature.²⁷

Regarding the witchcraft practiced by Tod: once Tam is bed-ridden, Tod can engage in ritualistic dancing. Tod's dancing takes place during the summer, this may potentially be linked to a Midsummer celebration in the Celtic calendar. His celebration being a midsummer one propels the ritualistic theory of Tod's dance to fit Emily Lyle's analysis of Indo-European Celtic festivals. She explains: 'Snorri Sturluson spoke of three annual sacrifices taking place [...] 2) at the summer night in mid-April (for victory).'²⁸ This coincides with the events of Tod's springtime attack as a solan, and therefore a victorious dance for Midsummer.

On the matter of the dance itself, Tod is performing alone, as 'He was in a crunkle o' green brae, a wee below the chaipel, a' by his lee-lane, and lowped and flang and danced like a daft quean at a waddin.'²⁹ Here, Tod has once again immersed himself in green space, in the *crunkle o' green brae*, or rather, crease of a hill upon the Bass. His dancing is not unlike that of the witches of Robert Burns' Scottish Gothic poem *Tam o' Shanter*. Stevenson has introduced, yet made even more uncanny, the canonical and nuanced reference to the unholy witch performance. Once again, the Scottish Gothic reader is made voyeur to a witches' dance. However, in contrast to the doubling between female and male transgression in *Tam o' Shanter*, we are given a far more rural and ecocritical incarnation of this Celtic witchcraft ritual. Tod's dance appears to be solitary:

*But there would be fowk there to hauld them company [...] and this thing was its lee-lane. And there would be a fiddler diddling [...] and this thing had nae music but the skirling of the solans.*³⁰

Tod's apparent solitude mirrors the solitary mass of the Bass; however, he is anything but. The solitary dance in the wilderness is Tod's own celebratory dance among nature, not alone, but with nature, as the solans provide the music he requires, and they are the 'fowk' who encourage and egg him on. This is a triumphant spiritualistic dance that is a victory over the pollution, and exploit of the natural expanse of the Bass. The doubling tenet of Scottish Gothic here is the doubled agent of Tod as both among man and against them, a modern Scot and a Celtic other. It is this instance that confirms it.

Sadly, as is the invasive and polluting nature of man, Tod is shot for his transgressions. From David Balfour's narrative we understand that now the Bass is barely inhabited; all that remains is Andie as prefect and the livestock of farmers. In a sense Tod Lapraik's transgressive use of Celtic witchcraft has reclaimed the Bass to a more natural and rural state.

Ultimately, Stevenson's short tale does much with his Scottish Gothic short story. Much like Scott's 'Wandering Willie's Tale' in *Redgauntlet*, Stevenson selected his content carefully to deliver a supernatural piece that had profound impact on its readership. This reflective tale harkening back to Gaelic folklore, is placed effectively within a text for British readership to ensure underlying nuances for Scottish and Celtic readership. But more covertly, this piece presents an impactful story of the battle between pollutant Anglo-progressivism and an ecologically concerned retrospective nationalism.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*