

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman
Darwin Thoreau Twain
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chambers Irving
Bunner Richter Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
Doré Dante Pushkin Alcott
Swift Chekhov Newton



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**Folk Lore Superstitious Beliefs in
the West of Scotland within This
Century**

James Napier

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PREFACE

The doctrine taught concerning Satan, his motives and influence in the beginning of this century, supplied the popular mind with reasons to account for almost all the evils, public and private, which befell society; and as the observed ills of life, real or imaginary, greatly outnumbered the observed good occurrences, the thought of Satan was more constantly before the people's mind than was the thought of God. Practically, it might be said, and said with a very near approach to truth, that Satan, in popular estimation, was the greater of the two; but theoretically, the superiority of God was allowed, for Satan it was believed, was permitted by God to do what he did. It was commonly said, "Never speak evil of the Deil, for he has a long memory." This Satanic belief gave rise to a great amount of Folk Lore, and affected the whole social system. Historians who take no account of such beliefs, but regard them as trivialities, cannot but fail to represent faithfully the condition and action of the people. Folk Lore has thus an important historical bearing. Every age has had its own living Folk Lore, and, beside this, a residuum of waning lore, regarded as superstitious, and so it is at the present day. When we speak of the Folk Lore of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, we believe that we are speaking of beliefs which have past away, beliefs from which we ourselves are free; but if we consider the matter carefully we will find that in many respects our beliefs and practices, although somewhat modernized, are essentially little different from those of last century. Among the better educated classes it may be said that much of the superstitions of former times have passed away, and as education is extended they will more and more become eradicated; but at present, in our rural districts especially, the old beliefs still linger in considerable force. Many think that the superstitions of last century died with the century, but this is not so; and as these notions are curious and in many respects important historical factors, I have thought it worth while to jot down what of this Folk Lore has come under my observation during these last sixty years.

In this collection I do not profess to include all that may come under the head of Folk Lore, such, for example, as the reading of dreams and cups, spaeing fortunes by cards or other methods—that

class of superstitions by which designing persons prey upon weak-minded people.

One principal object which I had in view in forming this collection, was that it might supply a nucleus for the further development of the subject. The instances which I have adduced belong to one locality, the West of Scotland, and chiefly the neighbourhood west of Glasgow, but different localities have different methods of formulating the same superstition. By comparison, by separation of the local accretion from the constant element, an approach to the original source and meaning of a superstition may be obtained.

I have hope that the Folk Lore Society, just instituted, will consider such details and variations, and endeavour to trace their history and origin, and fearlessly give prominence to the still existing superstitions, and exhibit their degrading influence on society.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.



The primary object of the following short treatise is to give an account of some of those superstitions, now either dead or in their decadence, but which, within the memory of persons now living, had a vigorous existence, at least in the West of Scotland. A secondary object shall be to trace out, where I think I can discover ground for so doing, the origin of any particular superstition, and in passing I may notice the duration in time and geographical distribution of some superstitions. But, on the threshold of our inquiry, it may be of advantage to pause and endeavour to reach a mutual understanding of the precise meaning of the word Superstition—a word apparently, from the varied dictionary renderings given of it, difficult to define. However we may disagree in our definitions of the word, we all agree in regarding a superstitious tone of mind as weak and foolish, and as no one desires to be regarded as weak-minded or foolish, we naturally repel from ourselves as best we can the odious imputation of being superstitious. There are few who seek to know what superstition in its essence really is; most people are satisfied to frame an answer to suit their own case, and so it happens that we have a multiplicity of definitions for the word, many of which are devoid of scientific solidity, and others have not even the merit of intelligibility. A recent definition, extremely elastic, was propounded by a popular preacher in a lecture delivered before the Glasgow Young Men's Christian Association and reported in the newspapers,—“Superstition is Scepticism,” which may be legitimately paraphrased “Superstition is not believing what I believe.” Although this definition may be very gratifying to the self pride of most of us, we must nevertheless reject it, and look for a more definite and instructive signification, and for this end we may very properly consult the meanings given in several standard dictionaries and lexicons, for in them we expect to

find precision of statement, although in this instance I believe we shall be disappointed. Theophrastus, who lived several centuries before the Christian era, defines "Superstition" according to the translation given of his definition in the *Encyclopædia Metropolitana*, as "A cowardly state of mind with respect to the supernatural," and supplies the following illustration: "The superstitious man is one, who, having taken care to wash his hands and sprinkle himself in the temple, walks about during the day with a little laurel in his mouth, and if he meets a weasel on the road, dares not proceed on his way till some person has passed, or till he has thrown three stones across the road."

Under "Superstition," in the *Encyclopædia Metropolitana*, the following definitions are given:—

1st.—Excess of scruple or ceremony in matters of religion: idle worship: vain reverence: a superfluous, needless, or ill-governed devotion.

2nd.—Any religious observance contrary to, or not sanctioned by, Scripture or reason.

3rd.—All belief in supernatural agency, or in the influence of casual occurrences, or of natural phenomena on the destinies of man which has no foundation in Scripture, reason, or experience.

4th.—All attempts to influence the destiny of man by methods which have no Scriptural or rational connection with their object.

Walker's Dictionary:—

"Unnecessary fear or scruple in religion: religion without morality: false religion: reverence of beings not properly objects of reverence: over-nicety: exactness: too scrupulous."

Chambers' Dictionary:—

"A being excessive (in religion) over a thing as if in wonder or fear: excessive reverence or fear: excessive exactness in religious opinions and practice: false worship or religion: the belief in supernatural agency: belief in what is absurd without evidences: excessive religious belief."

These dictionary meanings do not, of course, attempt to decide what should be the one only scientifically correct significance of the

term, but only supply the varying senses in which the word is used in literature and in common speech, but they suffice to show that it is used by different persons with different significations, each person apparently gauging first his own position, and defining superstition as something which cannot be brought to tell against himself.

After pondering over the various renderings, it occurred to me that the following definition would embrace the whole in a few words: *Religion founded on erroneous ideas of God*. But when I set this definition alongside the case of an otherwise intelligent man carrying in his trousers' pocket a raw potato as a protection against rheumatism, and alongside the case of another man carrying in his vest pocket a piece of brimstone to prevent him taking cramp in the stomach; and when I consider the case of ladies wearing earrings as a preventive against, or cure for, sore eyes; and, again, when I remembered a practice, very frequent a few years ago, of people wearing what were known as galvanic rings in the belief that these would prevent their suffering from rheumatism, I could not perceive any direct connection between such superstitious practices and religion, and the construction of a new definition was rendered necessary. The following, I think, covers the whole ground: *Beliefs and practices founded upon erroneous ideas of God and nature*. With this meaning the term "Superstition" is employed in the following pages, and if the definition commend itself to the reader, it will at once become apparent that the only way by which freedom from superstition can be attained is to search Nature and Revelation for correct views of God and His methods of working. Notwithstanding our pretensions to a correct religious knowledge, a pure theology, and freedom from everything like superstition, it is strange yet true, that, if we except the formulated reply to the question in the Westminster Catechism, "What is God," scarcely two persons—perhaps no two persons—have exactly the same idea of God. We each worship a God of our own. In one of the late Douglas Jerrold's "Hedgehog Letters" he introduces two youths passing St Giles' Church at a lonely hour, when the one addresses the other thus:—"The old book and the parson tell us that at the beginning God made man in his own image. We have now reversed this, and make God in our image." A sad truth, although not new; Saint Paul made a similar remark to the philosophic Athenians; but the remark applies not to

this age or to Saint Paul's age alone—its applicability extends to every age and every people. As Goethe remarks, "Man never knows how anthropomorphic he is." Our minds instinctively seek an explanation of the cause or causes of the different phenomena constantly occurring around us, but instinct does not supply the solution. Only by patient watching and consideration can this be arrived at; but in former ages scientific methods of investigation were either not known, or not cared for, and so men were satisfied with merely guessing at the causes of natural phenomena, and these guesses were made from the standpoint of their own human passionate intelligence. Alongside the intelligence everywhere observable in the operations of nature they placed their own passionate humanity, they projected themselves into the universe and anthropomorphised nature. Thus came men to regard natural phenomena as manifestations of supernatural agency; as expressions of the wrath or pleasure of good or evil genii, and although in our day we have made great advances in our knowledge of natural phenomena, the majority of men still regard the ways of providence from a false standpoint, a standpoint erected in the interests of ecclesiasticism. Churchmanship acts as a distorting medium, twisting and displacing things out of their natural relations, and although this influence was stronger in the past than it is now, still there remains a considerable residuum of the old influence among us yet. For example, we are not yet rid of the belief that God has set apart times, places, and duties as specially sacred, that what is not only sinless but a moral obligation at certain times and places becomes sinful at other times and places. Ecclesiastical influence thus familiarises us with the distinctions of secular and sacred, and we hear frequent mention made of our duties to God and our duties to man, of our religious duties and our worldly duties, and we frequently hear religion spoken of as something readily distinguishable from business. But not only are these things separated by name from one another, they are often regarded as opposites, having no fellowship together. Hence has arisen in many minds a slavish fear of performing at certain times and in certain places the ordinary duties of life, lest by so doing they anger God. In certain conditions of society such belief, erroneous though it be, may have served a useful purpose in restraining, and thereby so far elevating a rude people, just as now we may see many among ourselves restrained from evil, and influ-

enced to the practice of good, by beliefs which, to the enlightened among us, are palpable absurdities.

Before reviewing the superstitious beliefs and practices of our immediate forefathers, we may, I think, profitably occupy a short time in gaining some general idea of the prominent features of ancient Pagan religions, for without doubt much of the mythology and superstitious practice of our forefathers had a Pagan origin. I shall not attempt any exhaustive treatise on this subject, for the task is beyond me, but a slight notice of ancient theology may not here be irrelevant. The late George Smith, the eminent Assyriologist, says:—

"Upwards of 2000 years B.C. the Babylonians had three great gods—*Anu*, *Bel*, and *Hea*. These three leading deities formed members of twelve gods, also called great. These were—

1. *Anu*, King of Angels and Spirits. Lord of the city Eresh.
2. *Bel*, Lord of the world, Father of the Gods, Creator. Lord of the city of Nipur.
3. *Hea*, Maker of fate, Lord of the deep, God of wisdom and knowledge. Lord of the city of Eridu.
4. *Sin*, Lord of crowns, Maker of brightness. Lord of the city Urr.
5. *Merodash*, Just Prince of the Gods, Lord of birth. Lord of the city Babylon.
6. *Vul*, the strong God, Lord of canals and atmosphere. Lord of the city Mura.
7. *Shama*, Judge of heaven and earth, Director of all. Lord of the cities of Larsa and Sippara.
8. *Ninip*, Warrior of the warriors of the Gods, Destroyer of wicked. Lord of the city Nipur.
9. *Nergal*, Giant King of war. Lord of the city Cutha.
10. *Nusku*, Holder of the Golden Sceptre, the lofty God.
11. *Belat*, Wife of *Bel*, Mother of the great Gods. Lady of the city Nipur.
12. *Ishtar*, Eldest of Heaven and Earth, Raising the face of warriors.

"Below these deities there were a large body of gods, forming the bulk of the Pantheon; and below these were arranged the Igege or

angels of heaven; and the *anunaki* or angels of earth; below these again came curious classes of spirits or *genii*, some were evil and some good."

The gods of the Greeks were numbered by thousands, and this at a time when—according to classical scholars—the arts and sciences were at their highest point of development in that nation. Their religion was of the grossest nature. Whatever conception they may have had of a first cause—a most high Creator of heaven and earth—it is evident they did not believe he took anything to do directly with man or the phenomena of nature; but that these were under the immediate control of deputy-deities or of a conclave of divinities, who possessed both divine and human attributes—having human appetites, passions, and affections. Some of these were local deities, others provincial, others national, and others again phenomenal: every human emotion, passion and affection, every social circumstance, public or private, was under the control or guardianship of one or more of these divinities, who claimed for men suitable honour and worship, the omission of which honour and worship was considered to be not only offensive to the divinities, but as likely to be followed by punishment. The vengeance of the deities was thought to be avertable by the performance of certain propitiatory deeds, or by offering certain sacrifices. The kind of sacrifice required had relation to the particular department over which the divinity was supposed to be guardian; and these deeds and sacrifices were in many cases most gross and offensive to morality. The phenomena of nature, being under the direction of one or more divinities, every aspect of nature was regarded as an expression of anger or pleasure on the part of the divinities. Thunder, lightning, eclipses, comets, drought, floods, storms—anything strange or terrible, the cause of which was not understood, was ascribed to the wrath of some divinity; and men hastened to propitiate, as best they might, the divinities who were supposed to be scourging or threatening them. These deputy-gods were supposed to occupy the space between the earth and moon, and, being almost numberless and invisible, their worshippers held them in the same dread as if they possessed the attribute of omniscience.

For the purpose of guiding men in their relations towards these gods, there existed a large body of men whose office it was to un-

derstand the divinities, their natures and attributes, and direct men in their religious duties. This body of men acted as mediums between the gods and the people, and not only were they held in high esteem as priests, but frequently they attained great power in the State. Often this priestly incorporation had greater influence and control than the civil power; nor is this to be wondered at, when we remember that they were supposed to be in direct communication with the holy gods, in whose hands were the destinies of men.

The sun, the giver and vivifier of all life, was the primary god of antiquity, being worshipped by Assyrians, Chaldeans, Phoenicians, and Hebrews under the name of Baal or Bell, and by other nations under other names. The priests of Baal always held a high position in the State. As the sun was his image or symbol in heaven, so fire was his symbol on earth, and hence all offerings made to Baal were burned or made to pass through the fire, or were presented before the sun. Wherever, in the worship of any nation, we find the fire element, we may at once suspect that there we have a survival of ancient sun-worship.

The moon was regarded as a female deity, consort of the sun or Baal, and was worshipped by the Jews under the name of Ashtoreth, or Astarte. Her worship was of the most sensual description. The worship of sun and moon formed one system, the priests of the one being also priests of the other.

Apart from the priestly incorporation of which we have spoken, there was another class of men who assumed knowledge of supernatural phenomena. These were known as astrologers or stargazers, wizards, magicians, witches, sooth-sayers. By the practice of certain arts and repetition of certain formula, these pretended to divine and foretell events both of a public and private nature. They were believed in by the mass of people, and were consulted on all sorts of matters. By both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities their practices and pretensions were sometimes condemned, and themselves forbidden to exercise their peculiar gifts, but nevertheless the people continued to believe in them and consult them. Their pretensions were considerable, extending even to raising and consulting the spirits of the dead.

This leads me to notice the ancient belief concerning the souls of the departed. By almost all nations, Jews and Gentiles, there was a prevailing belief that at death the souls of good men were taken possession of by good spirits and carried to Paradise, but the souls of wicked men were left to wander in the space between the earth and moon, or consigned to Hades, or Unseen World. These wandering spirits were in the habit of haunting the living, especially their relations, so that the living were surrounded on every side by the spirits of their wicked ancestors, who were always at hand tempting them to evil. However, there were means by which these ghosts might be exorcised. A formula for expelling wicked spirits is given by Ovid in Book V. of the *Fasti*:—

"In the dread silence of midnight, upon the eighth day of May, the votary rises from his couch barefooted, and snapping his fingers as a sure preventative against meeting any ghost during his subsequent operations, thrice washing his hands in spring water, he places nine black beans in his mouth, and walks out. These he throws behind him one by one, carefully guarding against the least glance backwards, and at each cast he says, 'With these beans I ransom myself and mine.' The spirits of his ancestors follow him and gather the beans as they fall. Then, performing another ablution as he enters his house, he clashes cymbals of brass, or rather some household utensil of that metal, entreating the spirits to quit his roof. He then repeats nine times these words, 'Avaunt ye ancestral manes.' After this he looks behind, and is free for one year."

Some nations in addition to a personal formula for laying the ghosts of departed relatives, had a national ritual for ghost-laying, a public feast in honour of departed spirits. Such a feast is still held in China, and also in Burmah. In 1875 the following placard was posted throughout the district of Rangoon, proclaiming a feast of forty-nine days by order of the Emperor of China:—

"There will this year be scarcity of rice and plenty of sickness. Evil spirits will descend to examine and inquire into the sickness. If people do not believe this, many will die in September and October. Should any people call on you at midnight, do not answer; it is not a human being that calls, but an evil spirit. Do not be wicked, but be good."

But I do not propose to write a treatise on Pagan theology, nor do I propose to trace in historical detail the progress through which Christian and Pagan beliefs have in process of time become assimilated, when I have occasion, I may notice these things. I intend, as I said at the beginning, to deal with superstition, no matter from what source it may have arisen, recognising superstition to be as already defined—beliefs and practices founded upon erroneous ideas of God and the laws of nature. In many things, I believe, we are yet too superstitious, and our popular theology, instead of aiding to destroy these erroneous beliefs, aids them in maintaining their vitality. Orthodox Christians believe in a general and also in a special providence; the ancients, on the other hand, believed that all events were under the control and direction of separate and special divinities, so that when praying for certain results, they addressed the divinity having control over that phenomenon or circumstance by which they were affected, and when their desires were gratified, they expressed their thankfulness by offerings to that divinity. If their desires were not granted, they regarded that circumstance as a token of displeasure on the part of that divinity, and besought the aid of their priests and sooth-sayers to discover the reason of his anger, and offered sacrifices and peace offerings. Now, orthodox Christians in the same circumstances pray to God for special and personal blessings, and when they are granted, they feel grateful, and sometimes express their gratitude. A common method of expressing this gratitude is by giving something to the church. Thus we find in our church records entries like the following:—

£ S. D.

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|---------------|--|-----|
| From — — — —, | As a thank-offering for the recovery
of a dear child. | — — |
| " — — — —, | Peace-offering for reconciliation with
an old friend. | — — |
| " — — — —, | Offering for the preservation of a
friend going abroad. | — — |
| " — — — —, | Thank-offering for a fortunate transaction | — — |

in business.

Such offerings are remarked upon favourably by the leaders of the Church, and regarded as examples worthy of being imitated by all pious Christians. But should the prayers not be granted, there is no gift. The non-fulfilment of their desires is regarded perhaps not altogether as an evidence of God's displeasure, but at least as a token that what was asked it was not His pleasure to grant. They make little enquiry concerning the real cause of failure, but take credit to themselves for humbly submitting to God's will. This unenquiring submission is often, however, both sinful and superstitious. Every result has its cause, and it is surely our duty, as far as observation and reason can guide us, to discover the causes which operate against us. The great majority of the afflictions and misfortunes which befall us are punishments for the breakage of some law, the committal of some sin physical or moral, and this being the case, it behoves us to find out what law has been transgressed, what the nature of the sin committed. This principle is acknowledged by our religious teachers, but the laws which have been broken, have not been wisely sought after. The field of search has been almost exclusively the moral, or the theological field; whereas the correct rule is, for physical effects, look for physical causes; for moral effects, moral causes. This rule has not been followed. A few cases illustrative of what I mean will clearly demonstrate the superstitious nature of what is a widely diffused opinion among the religious societies of this country at the present time.

Forty-six years ago, when cholera first broke out in this country, it was immediately proclaimed to be a judgment for a national sin; and so it was, but for a sin against physical laws. I well remember the indignation which arose and found expression in almost every pulpit in the country, when the Prime Minister of that day, in reply to a petition from the Church asking him to proclaim a national fast for the removal of the plague, told his petitioners to first remove every source of nuisance by cleansing drains and ditches, and removing stagnant pools, and otherwise observe the general laws of health, then having done all that lay in our power, we could ask God to bless our efforts, and He would hear us. All sorts of absurd causes were seriously advanced to account for the presence of this alarming malady. One party discovered the cause in a movement