

*An Account of the Manner in which the Lammas Festival used to be celebrated in Mid Lothian, about the Middle of the Eighteenth Century.*

*By James Anderson, L. L. D.*

No branch of the history of man is so much involved in obscurity, as that which relates to manners and the progress of useful arts. In the progression of civil society, things are perpetually changing. Improvements are made, proportioned to the state of our knowledge at the time. Peculiar customs originate from the present state of arts, which prevail for a season, and gradually disappear as the circumstances that gave rise to them fall into oblivion. What deserves most to be regretted is, that those circumstances, though of much importance in the history of civil society at the time they prevail, are no sooner passed, than they are entirely forgotten. At the time they universally prevail, no person thinks of describing them with care, because they are then deemed to be of such public notoriety, as to be known to all; and, when they begin to fall into disrepute, they are despised as unworthy of notice, and are suffered to slide imperceptibly into the gulf of forgetfulness, from which they are sometimes attempted to be recovered by the laborious antiquary, who, from incidental allusions of poets, or transient notices from other authors, is able, at best, to give but a faint and imperfect view, often an erroneous picture of those objects, which a few lines from a contemporary author would have transmitted with indelible force and precision to the latest posterity.

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Considering these things, I imagine the members of this Society cannot in any instance more effectually accomplish the object for which it was chiefly instituted, (that of transmitting to posterity a true account of this country as it now is, and has been in times past,) than for each individual to recollect with care any peculiar customs of the people, in any part of the country, which he remembers to have prevailed, that are now fallen, or are falling into disuse; and to give into this Society such an account of them as he knows to be just, that the knowledge of them may be preserved in the archives of this Society, at least, if they should be forgot in all other parts of the earth.

With this view, I beg leave to communicate the following account of an ancient custom that long prevailed in the Lothians, and which, within a few miles of this city, was universally known about thirty years ago, though it is now fallen almost entirely into disuse.

In an uninclosed corn country, unless the soil is remarkably fertile, a part of the fields must be left in grass for the pasturage of horses, cattle, or sheep; and as all these must be guarded by *herds* while at pasturage, it will necessarily happen, that in these circumstances, a great number of boys and young lads will be employed during the summer months in tending the beasts. At the period I mention, this was generally the case, with the greatest part of the county of Mid-Lothian. And as it is natural for young persons, who have much idle time on their hands, to search for amusement, these herds devised many kinds of pastimes with which they occasionally diverted themselves; but as the celebration of the Lammas Festival was by far the most remarkable of these entertainments, I shall here confine myself to such a description of that, as I have often seen practised, and know to be true.

All the herds within a certain district, towards the beginning of summer, associated themselves into bands, sometimes to the number of a hundred or more. Each of these communities agreed to build a tower in some conspicuous place, near the centre of their district, which was to serve as the place of their rendezvous on Lammas day. This tower was usually built of fods; for the most part square, about four feet in diameter at the bottom, and tapering to a point at the top, which was seldom above seven or eight feet from the ground. In building it, a hole was left in the centre for admitting a flag staff, on which was displayed their colours, on the great day of the festival. This tower was usually begun to be built about a month before Lammas, and was carried up slowly by successive additions from time to time, being seldom entirely completed till a few days before Lammas; though it was always thought that those who completed their's soonest, and kept it standing the longest time before Lammas, behaved in the most gallant manner, and acquired most honour by their conduct.

From the moment the foundation of the tower was laid, it became an object of care and attention to the whole community; for it was reckoned a disgrace to suffer it to be defaced; so that they resisted, with all their power, any attempts that should be made to demolish it, either by force or fraud; and, as the honour that was acquired by the demolition of a tower, if effected by those belonging to another, was in proportion to the disgrace of suffering it to be demolished, each party endeavoured to circumvent the other as much as possible, and laid plans to steal upon the tower unperceived, in the night time, and level it with the ground. Great was the honour that such a successful exploit conveyed to the undertakers; and, though the tower was easily rebuilt, and was soon put into its former state, yet the news was quickly spread by the successful adventurers, through the whole district, which filled it with shouts of joy and exultation,

exultation, while their unfortunate neighbours were covered with shame. To ward off this disgrace, a constant nightly guard was kept at each tower, which was made stronger and stronger, as the tower advanced; so that frequent nightly skirmishes ensued at these attacks, but were seldom of much consequence, as the assailants seldom came in force to make an attack in this way, but merely to succeed by surprise; as soon, therefore, as they saw they were discovered, they made off in the best manner they could.

To give the alarm on these, and other occasions, every person was armed with a tooting-horn; that is, a horn perforated in the small end, through which wind can be forcibly blown from the mouth, so as to occasion a loud sound; and, as every one wished to acquire as great dexterity as possible in the use of this instrument, they practised upon it during the summer, while keeping their beasts; and towards Lammas they were so incessantly employed at this business, answering to, and vying with each other, that the whole country rang continually with the sounds; and it must no doubt have appeared to be a very harsh and unaccountable noise to a stranger who was then passing through it.

As the great day of Lammas approached, each community chose one from among themselves for their Captain, and they prepared a stand of colours to be ready to be then displayed. For this purpose, they usually borrowed a fine table napkin of the largest size, from some of the farmers wives within the district; and, to ornament it, they also borrowed ribbons from those who would lend them, which they tacked upon the napkin in such fashion as best suited their fancy. Things being thus prepared, they marched forth early in the morning on Lammas day, dressed in their best apparel, each armed with a stout cudgel, and, repairing to their tower, there displayed their colours in triumph; blowing horns, and making merry

in the best manner they could. About nine o'clock they sat down upon the green; and each taking from his pocket, bread and cheese, or other provisions, they made a hearty breakfast, drinking pure water from a well, which they always took care should be near the scene of their banquet.

In the mean time, scouts were sent out towards every quarter, to bring them notice if any hostile party approached; for it frequently happened, that, on that day, the herds of one district went to attack those of another district, and to bring them under subjection to them by main force. If news was brought that a hostile party approached, the horns sounded to arms. They were immediately put into the best order they could devise; the stoutest and boldest in the front, and those of inferior prowess behind. Seldom did they wait the approach of the enemy, but usually went forth to meet them with a bold countenance, the Captain of each company carrying the colours, and leading the van. When they met, they mutually desired each other to lower their colours in sign of subjection; and, if there appeared to be a great disproportion in the strength of the parties, the weakest usually submitted to this ceremony without much difficulty, thinking their honour was saved by the evident disproportion of the match. But, if they were nearly equal in strength, none of them would yield, and it ended in blows, and sometimes bloodshed. I heard of a battle of this kind (but it was before my day) in which four were actually killed, and many wounded, so as to be unfit for work for weeks; but I never actually saw an engagement of this kind, though I once was witness to a meeting of this sort, where there was I suppose better than a hundred on each side, who were so nearly equal, that neither of them would yield, and who were upon the point of engaging; when a farmer, a stout active young man, who dreaded the consequences, came galloping up to them, and going between the two parties, with great diffi-

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culty, by threats and entreaties, got them to desist till he should speak coolly to them. He at last got the matter compromised one way or other, so as to end the strife without blows. I was then so young as to be in no way made acquainted with the arguments that were employed.

When they had remained at their tower till about mid-day, if no opponent appeared, or if they themselves had no intention of making an attack, they then took down their colours, and marched with horns sounding, towards the most considerable village in their district; where the lasses, and all the people, came out to meet them, and partake of their diversions. Boundaries were immediately appointed, and a proclamation made, that all who intended to compete in the race should appear. A bonnet ornamented with ribbons was displayed upon a pole, as the prize of the victor; and sometimes five or six started for it, and ran with as great eagerness as if they had been to gain a kingdom. The prize of the second race was a pair of garters, and the third a knife; they then amused themselves for some time, with such rural sports as suited their taste, and dispersed quietly to their respective homes before sun-set.

When two parties met, and one of them yielded to the other, they marched together for some time in two separate bodies, the subjected body behind the other; and then they parted good friends, each performing their races at their own appointed place. Next day after the ceremony was over, the ribbons and napkin that formed the colours, were carefully returned to their respective owners. The tower was no longer a matter of consequence, and the country returned to its usual state of tranquillity.

The above is a faithful account of a singular ceremony that was annually repeated in all the country, within the distance of six miles west.

went from Edinburgh, about 30 years ago. How long that custom prevailed, or what had given rise to it, or how far it extended on had each side, I am entirely ignorant; but will be glad to have such further elucidations concerning it, as any of the Members of this Society can give. The name of Lammas-towers will remain (some of them having been built of stone) after the celebration of the festival has ceased. This paper will at least preserve the memory of what was meant by them.

I never could discover the smallest traces of this custom in Aberdeenshire, though I have there found several towers of stone, very like the Lammas-towers of this country; but these seem to have been erected without any appropriated use, but merely to look at. I have known some of those erected in my time, where I knew for certain, that no other object was intended, than merely to amuse the person who erected them.

If this shall be acceptable to the Society, I shall at some future time give an account of several other remarkable customs that have disappeared in my time.

*A Disquisition*