

III.

EXAMPLES OF THE SURVIVAL IN SCOTLAND OF SUPERSTITIONS
RELATING TO FIRE. BY REV. ALEXANDER STEWART, LL.D., F.S.A.
SCOT., NETHER LOCHABER.

The vitality of superstition and superstitious rites is very marvellous. If it had not been that the following story is well authenticated, I should have hesitated—not having seen it with my own eyes—to believe that so extraordinary a survival of heathen practices was possible. But my informant is a man of most respectable character, as well as of high intelligence; and the following is the gist of his statement:—

It was in the month of March of this year that I had occasion to go to Glen —, in order to give certain instructions to a shepherd, whom I found to be from home, and his house shut up. But noticing some smoke in a wooded hollow beside the burn, I thought the women were having a washing there, and I resolved to leave my message with them. When I had pushed my way through a few bushes, I found myself on the top of a bank, and below me, on a plot of grass beside the burn, I saw five women engaged in a way that astonished me. Two of them, standing opposite each other, were holding a hoop vertically between them, and the hoop all round, except where they held it in the middle, was wrapped in something that was burning briskly, emitting small jets of flame and a good deal of smoke. Opposite each other, on either side of the opening of the hoop, stood other two, engaged in handing backwards and forwards to each other, through the centre of the hoop of fire, a child, whose age, as I afterwards learned, was eighteen months. The fifth woman, who was the mother of the child, stood a little aside, earnestly looking on. They did not notice me, and I stood quietly viewing the scene until the child, having been several times passed and returned again through the fiery circle, was handed to its mother; and then the burning hoop was carried by the two women that held it to a pool of the burn, into which it was thrown. I knew the women would be vexed if they thought I had been a spectator of their

performance ; so I kept out of sight, and going round to another part of the brae, I called one of them, and giving her my message for the shepherd, I proceeded home. I was, of course, anxious to find out what the strange performance could mean, but I knew very well that no reliable information could result from any inquiries I might make in the matter. They would either refuse to make any answer, or would tell me the most plausible story they could invent, so as to hide the real truth. But a few weeks afterwards my wife went to the glen and called upon the child's mother, from whom she managed to extract the following information:—The child was a weakling, constantly clamouring for food, which it ate voraciously, and yet it did not thrive ; and although a year and a half old, was not yet able to walk, or even to stand alone. It was, besides, fractious and fretful, so as to be a torment to everybody in the house. A doctor had been consulted, but the child grew worse rather than better ; and then a ' wise woman ' in a neighbouring glen having been sent for, she diagnosed the case at a glance—the child was under the influence of an evil eye of great power ; and nothing but that it should be subjected to the rite I had witnessed (called in Gaelic *Beannachd na Cuairte*—the Blessing of the Round, or of the Circle) could avail to counteract the evil influence under which it pined. Then it began to be asked, Whose could have been the evil eye which had blighted the child? and the mother remembered that, about six months before, an old woman-tramp, as ugly and witch-like a creature as she had ever seen, came to the door of the cottage asking charity. The mother, having at the moment the child in her arms, offered the beggar-woman a piece of bread ; but this was refused, the old woman saying that she would take nothing but money. When this was refused it was remembered that she peered into the child's face, saying, ' Oh, what a beautiful child ! ' and, with a chuckling laugh, turned upon her heel and went her way. It was concluded that beyond any doubt it was this old woman's evil eye that had put the wasting into the child (*a chuir an t' seacadh 'san leanabh*), that at the same time put the hunger into it (*a chuir an t' acras ann*), making it greedy as a cormorant for food, which yet benefited it not a whit. It was to counteract this that the ' wise woman ' now resolved. The child's mother and four of the neighbouring women having been duly initiated into the mysteries of the *Beannachd Chuirte*, an iron hoop that had once encircled the rim of a big washing-tub was got hold of, and a straw rope (*siaman*) wound round it. Here and there along the windings of the *siaman* a little oil was dropped to make it burn the brighter when it should be set on fire. Thus prepared, and a hidden place by the side of a running stream selected for the rite, the child was to be passed and repassed through the fiery circle in the way I have already described ; and the passages and repassages must be eighteen in number—one for each of the eighteen moons that represented the child's age. My wife could not find that there was any incantation said in connection with the rite. The child's mother thought there

was not; or if there was, that it must have been said by the old woman over the hoop at a moment when she happened not to be present. Besides the performance which I had witnessed in part, the only other thing done was, that when the child was carried home again, it was fed and put to bed; and when it had fallen asleep, the old woman took out of her bosom a small bunch of *roid* or bog-myrtle, and this she suspended by a string to the top of the bed, ordering it on no account to be touched, until she came herself to take it down. This she did at the time of the next crescent moon—*nuair 'thainig a cheud fhàs soluis mu 'n cuairt*—and then indeed, to the delight of its mother, the little fellow was seen to be already very visibly improved both in health and temper. I saw him the other day, and a healthier two-year-old there is not in the country.

From several communications elucidatory of the subject of the superstitions relating to the fiery circle, the following are selected as being the most interesting:—

From Mr John H. Wallace.

“REDCLIFFE PLACE, BRISTOL,
11th Dec. 1889.

“The superstition you have described reminds me of a practice common in Wigtownshire in my school days, upwards of half a century ago. When a pair of new cart wheels had to be ‘shod,’ or rimmed with iron, at our local smiddy, the event was viewed as one of great importance, not only by the smith and his couple of sturdy ‘prentices, but by all the people—by all the males at all events—of the scattered hamlet around.

“Before the smiddy door was a circular slab, which was the gauge of all the cart-wheels made in the parish. It lay flat on the ground, and when a wheel was to be shod the iron tire was first brought into a perfect circle by bringing it to a red heat, and fitting it round the circumference of the slab. If it fitted exactly, it would also fit the wheel when it came to be put on. In the centre of the slab was a circular hole about a foot in diameter, and corresponding with this hole the earth beneath was dug out to a depth of twelve or fifteen inches. This circular hole in the slab was for a comfortable bed for the nave of the wheel to rest in when laid down to be shod.

“When wheel-day arrived, the tire, already made as nearly circular as possible, was laid flat on the ground, and a fire of peat, coal, and sticks was built all round it, there not being room enough at the forge fire for the final operations. When the fire was well lit all round the circle, the smith and his ‘prentices walked slowly round it three times *sunwise*, that is, from left to right, in single file, the smith *last*, and not leading, as one would have expected. The

tire was then allowed to arrive at a white heat; and when it was quite ready to be applied to the slab, I have seen a man suffering from illness (a kind of wasting consumption, I suppose, and melancholia, in the case I particularly remember) take his place in the centre hole of the slab. When the smith and his assistants took the tire, now at white heat, to the slab, the patient bent down a little, and the tire was let down over his head until it encircled the slab; so that the sufferer was now in the centre of a fiery ring, and there he remained while the tire was being beaten with hammers until it was a perfect fit to the gauge. The tire was then raised over the patient's head from the opposite side from that on which it was laid down, and the patient stepped out of the hole, and was congratulated by his friends on having thus undergone a ceremony which it was believed would bring about a perfect cure. Whether it did or not I cannot now remember; but I remember perfectly well seeing the man standing in the middle of the fiery ring."

From Mr Duncan Grahame.

178 EGLINTON STREET, GLASGOW,
8th December 1889.

"I never saw, nor did I ever hear before of, the *cearcall teine* superstition. You say it is called *Beannachd Cuairte*—the Blessing or Beneficence of the Circle or Round; and it now occurs to me that it was also called *Leigheas Cuairte*—the Healing of the Circle. In an old song to be found in one or other of our Gaelic collections—Turner's, I think—there is the following verse:—

"Mo nighean bhoidheach an fhuilt rèidh,
Gur speiseil leam a ghluaiseas tu;
Ged a robh mi tinn gu bàs,
Do ghràdh bu *leigheas cuairt'* dhomh e."

"(Beautiful maiden of smoothest hair,
Delightful to me thy every movement,
Even if I were sick unto death,
Thy love would be as the *healing of the circle* to me.)"

I have often heard this song sung, and always wondered what the *leigheas cuairt'* could mean. The thing is now plain enough: the reference is to the popular belief in the efficacy of the burning hoop or circle in cases of extreme illness."

From the Rev. Dr Scott, St George's, Edinburgh.

"In the West country (South Lanarkshire, bordering on Ayrshire), as late as my grandfather's day, new-born children were 'passed through the fire,'—*i.e.*, through the smoke of the kitchen hearth,—to defend them against the evil eye

and all sinister influences. As a child, I was taught by my Highland nurse to believe in the evil eye, and for some years I lived in terror of an old woman who was considered a witch."

The burning hoop of Glen—— and the Wigtownshire red-hot cart-wheel tire seem to be the same rite, and derivable from the same origin. I have had no opportunity of finding out what our best local Seannachies have to say about the cart-wheel tire business, as described by Mr Wallace. The only one I have talked with on the subject has no recollection of any act of healing being associated with such an event; but he recollects seeing the *deiseil* or sunwise walk by the smith and his assistants round the tire, whilst it was being brought to white heat in the fire. He referred also to the fact that up to a comparatively recent date the local smith was the armourer of his district; and it is a tradition of the Seannachies that in the forging of warlike weapons there were many old-world superstitious ceremonies and observances to be faithfully followed if the weapons were to be all they ought to be. Sword and dagger blades, for example, when the smith or armourer had done the best he could with them, were buried for seven days in the nearest *Sithean* or Fairy Knowe, in the belief that the Fairy armourer, whose name was Gorman an Uird (the Little Green Man of the Hammer), would, in the course of that time, give them such finishing touches in the way of fineness of temper and keenness of edge as no mere mortal skill could impart to them. There were also, he said, some smiddy superstitions connected with the manufacture of horse shoes and horse shoeing; but except the *deiseil* already referred to, he was not aware of any particular rite or superstition connected with the tiring of wheels.