

III.

TRACES OF RIVER-WORSHIP IN SCOTTISH FOLK-LORE.

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In the midst of our modern civilisation we come across certain beliefs and practices difficult to explain unless we look back to the beliefs and practices of days long past. Survival, indeed, is the watchword of folklore. What would be absurd now was not at all absurd at a time when mental culture was of a much lower type. Our remote ancestors regarded nature from a standpoint of their own. They did not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. The world in all its parts was to them supernatural. In other words, they did not recognise what we call *matter* in contradistinction to *spirit*. Earth, air, water, fire were accordingly regarded as manifestations of life. They were living beings, they were spirits endowed with individuality. Sir John Lubbock observes:¹—"The savage accounts for all movement by life. Hence the wind is a living being. Nay, even motionless objects are regarded in a particular stage of mental progress as possessing spirits." If movement could be explained by life, what was more fitting than that the movement of a river was due to its life? There are, of course, sluggish rivers, where movement is reduced to a minimum, but as a rule the chief feature of a river is its rapid flow. In ancient times water was deified by civilised nations like the Greeks and Romans; and savages to-day revere it as a god. We need not, therefore, be surprised that our Scottish rivers were held in reverence by the ancient dwellers in our land. If to us, with nineteenth-century science within reach, a river has a certain mystery about it, how much more awe-inspiring must it have been to men ignorant of the commonest laws of nature!

Dr E. B. Taylor speaks of certain tribes in India "to whom the local rivers are the local deities, so that men worship according to their watersheds, and the map is a pantheon."² This must have been to a

¹ *Origin of Civilisation*, p. 203.

² *Primitive Culture*, vol. ii. p. 193.

large extent the case with Scottish tribes in remote days. Under the influence of a crude anthropomorphism, they thought of a river as a creature hungering, or rather thirsting, for their lives, and only waiting for a chance to secure a victim. But there were two sides to the question. A river might be helpful as well as hurtful. When supplying drink or floating a canoe, it would seem to be of a friendly disposition. On the other hand, when, swollen with rain, it rushed along, sweeping into its depths any living creature within its reach, it would be counted man's enemy.

It was an article of archaic belief that when any one was drowned, he was taken possession of by the spirit of the water. Here we have the key to the otherwise meaningless superstition that it is unlucky to save a drowning man. There is a reference to this in Sir Walter Scott's *Pirate*, in the scene where Bryce the pedlar warns Mordaunt against saving a shipwrecked sailor:—"Are you mad," said the pedlar, "you that have lived sae lang in Zetland, to risk the saving of a drowning man? Wot ye not, if you bring him to life again, he will be sure to do you some capital injury?" Any one falling into the water becomes the prey of the monster or demon inhabiting it; and whoever rescues the drowning man incurs the monster's wrath by cheating him of his victim. Certain charms were believed, indeed in some districts are still believed, to insure the recovery of a drowned body. A loaf of bread, with or without quicksilver in it, is placed on the surface of the water and allowed to drift with the current. The place where the loaf becomes stationary marks the spot where the body lies concealed. According to Miss Florence Peacock, this method continues to hold its own in Lincolnshire.¹ In such a practice there is a virtual recognition of a water-spirit, who can, by certain rites, be compelled to give up his prey, or at any rate to disclose its whereabouts. According to a Deeside tradition, a man called Farquharson-na-Cat, *i.e.*, Farquharson of the Wand, so named from his trade of basket-making, had on one occasion to cross the river just above the famous linn. It was night. Farquharson lost his footing, fell into the linn, and was drowned. Search was made for his corpse, but in vain. His wife, taking her

¹ *The Antiquary* (Nov. 1895), p. 334.

husband's plaid, knelt down on the river's brink, and prayed to the water-spirit to give her back her dead. She then threw the plaid into the river. Next morning, her husband's corpse, with the plaid wrapped round it, was found lying on the edge of the pool.¹ In this case the plaid, thrown into the Dee, was virtually an offering made to the river-spirit to procure the recovery of the body. The loaf of bread already referred to performed the same function.² Till lately, a custom prevailed among the fishers of the Tweed of strewing salt over the nets and on the water, to secure a good catch of fish. It was believed that the river-fairies would thereby be propitiated. In cases like the above, the existence and power of river-spirits are acknowledged, though there is nothing to indicate the form assumed by them.

The guardian of the flood sometimes appeared in human shape. A characteristic example of this is mentioned by Hugh Miller in association with the river Conan in Ross-shire.³ He says:—"There was not a river in the Highlands that used, ere the erection of the stately bridge in our neighbourhood, to sport more wantonly with human life; and as superstition has her figures as certainly as poesy, the perils of a mountain-born stream, flowing between thinly inhabited banks, were personified in the beliefs of the people by a frightful goblin that took a malignant delight in luring into its pools, or overpowering in its fords, the benighted traveller. Its goblin, *the water-wraith*, used to appear as a tall woman dressed in green, but distinguished chiefly by her withered, meagre countenance, ever distorted by a malignant scowl. I knew all the various fords—always dangerous ones—where of old she used to start, it was said, out of the river, before the terrified traveller, to point at him, as in derision, with her skinny finger,

¹ *Folk-Lore* for 1892, p. 71 f.

² For a Bohemian example of this ceremony, vide *Primitive Culture*, vol. ii. p. 195.

³ *My Schools and Schoolmasters*, chapter x. Mr David MacRitchie, F.S.A. Scot., has drawn my attention to a piece of Irish folk-lore, picked up at first hand by Mr John Sampson, of Liverpool, and contributed by him to the *Journal of the Gipsy Lore Society* (vol. iii. pp. 23-25). The story has to do with the river Boyne. Its first part suggests a parallel to Hugh Miller's account of the Conan wraith. "Did you ever hear of the Red Man of the river Boyne? He rises half out of the water when a man is going to drown himself. Scores and scores and families of friends have seen him, like a red man, with a winding-sheet around his head."

or to beckon him invitingly on; and I was shown the very tree to which a poor Highlander had clung, when, in crossing the river at night, he was seized by the goblin, and from which, despite of his utmost exertions, though assisted by a young lad, his companion, he was dragged into the middle of the current, where he perished." The Rev. Dr. Walter Gregor narrates a legend about a water-spirit on Donside, who appeared in a male form. On one occasion a man had to cross the Don by the Bridge of Luib, Corgarff, to get to his wife, who was then very ill. When he reached the river he found that the bridge—a wooden one—had been swept away by a flood. He despaired of reaching the other bank, when a tall man suddenly appeared and offered to carry him across. The man was at first doubtful, but ere long accepted the proffered help. When they reached the middle of the river, the kelpy, who had hitherto shown himself so obliging, sought to plunge his burden beneath the water. A struggle ensued. The man finally found a foothold, and, disengaging himself from the kelpy, scrambled in all haste up the bank. His would-be destroyer, disappointed of his victim, hurled a boulder after him. This boulder came to be known as the *Kelpy's Stane*. Stones were thrown on it by passers-by, till a heap was formed, locally known as the *Kelpy's Cairn*.¹ The following is the substance of another Aberdeenshire legend, told by Dr. Gregor. A Braemar kelpy stole a sackful of meal from a mill to give it to a woman for whom he had taken a fancy. As the thief was disappearing the miller caught sight of him, and threw a fairy-whorl at his retreating figure. The whorl broke his leg, and the kelpy fell into the mill-race and was drowned. Such was the fate of the last kelpy seen in Braemar.²

In both Highland and Lowland districts the spirit inhabiting rivers, whatever its form might be, usually went by the name of the water-kelpy. In a Border ballad occur the lines:—

"The side was steep, the bottom deep,
Frae bank to bank the water pouring;
And the bonnie lass did quake for fear,
She heard the water-kelpie roaring."³

¹ *Folk-Lore Journal* for 1889, p. 200. ² *Ibid.*, p. 201. ³ Ballad of Annan Water.

The attributes of the kelpy were practically the same as those of the Icelandic *Níkr*, whence has come our term *Old Nick*, applied to the Devil. Miss Dempster tells the following story regarding a kelpy inhabiting the river Oikel in Sutherland:—"One William Munro and the grandfather of the person from whom we have this story were one night leading half-a-dozen pack-horses across a ford in the Oikel, on their way to a mill. When they neared the river-bank a horrid scream from the water struck their ears. 'It is the Vaiegh,' cried the lad, who was leading the first horse, and, picking up some stones, he sent a shower of them into the deep pool at his feet. She must have been repeatedly hit, as she emitted a series of the most piercing shrieks. 'I am afraid,' said Munro, 'that you have not done that right, and that she will play us an ugly trick at the ford.' 'Never mind, we will take more stones,' he answered, arming himself with a few. But the kelpy had had enough of stones for one night."¹ According to the Rev. Dr Alexander Stewart of Ballachulish, "In the South the kelpy is an inhabitant indifferently of rivers and lakes, while in the Highlands he is almost always associated with solitary rivers, where they wind their murmuring way through wild and uninhabited glens, or with those deep, dark, eddying cauldron-pools that mountain torrents so frequently scoop out for themselves as they plunge and roar adown the steep in their mad and headlong gallop to the sea."²

So far the water-spirit has been referred to as embodied in human shape, but it often assumed other forms, notably those of the horse and the bull. The water-horse, called in Gaelic *Each Uisge*, usually strayed beside the margin of a lake or river, all bridled and saddled, and if any one chanced to mount him he plunged with his rider into deep water. Tradition tells of a noted Inverness-shire water-horse that drowned its victims in Loch Ness. In 1819 MacCulloch found the belief in the water-bull a living faith in the west country, particularly in the districts of Loch Rannoch and Loch Awe. He tells of a farmer who employed his sons to search for one of these creatures, while the farmer himself carried a gun loaded with sixpences to be discharged

¹ *Folk-Lore Journal* for 1888, p. 228 f.

² *Twixt Ben Nevis and Glencoe*, p. 40.

when the monster appeared, silver alone having any effect on such beasts.¹ Sir Walter Scott refers to the same superstition in his *Journal*, under date 23rd November 1827, where he relates how some Highlanders sought to catch a certain water-cow inhabiting a lake, by leaving overnight two small anchors, each baited with the carcass of a dog killed for the purpose. In the morning the bait was found untouched. "It is something too late in the day," concludes Sir Walter, "for setting baits for water-cows." What would the author of *Waverley* have thought had he known that more than half a century later people in the Highlands retained their belief in the existence of such monsters? Mr J. H. Dixon, in his *Gairloch*, mentions that, as late as 1884, rumours were current in Ross-shire that a water-cow was to be seen in or near a loch on the Greenstone Point in Gairloch parish. In the same work Mr Dixon gives a minute account of measures taken some forty-five years earlier to destroy a water-cow whose home was in another loch in the same parish. The proprietor of the estate, under pressure from his tenants, made an attempt to drain the loch, which, except at one point, is little more than a fathom in depth; but when his efforts failed, he threw a large quantity of quicklime into the water to poison the monster. Some people who saw the water-cow, or thought they did, described it as resembling "a good-sized boat, with the keel turned up."² Mr J. F. Campbell of Islay, in his *Tales of the West Highlands*,³ expresses the belief that the old Celts revered a destroying water-god, to whom the horse was sacred, or who assumed the form of a horse. On the same principle we may account for the belief in the water-bull.

Various river rhymes might be quoted as embodying animistic ideas, but I shall refer only to those that allude to the craving for human victims, already pointed out. The following examples must suffice:—

"Blood-thirsty Dee
Each year needs three;
But bonny Don
She needs none."

¹ MacCulloch's *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, vol. ii. p. 185.

² Dixon's *Gairloch*, p. 162.

³ Vol. i. p. 87.

It is said that a witch called *Cailleach Bheathrach*, i.e., *The Thunderbolt Carlina*, once tried to make these two rivers flow together, by biting out part of the mountain range between them. In the Glen of Morven, on the course of the Weaver's Burn, is *Sloc-na-Cailleach*, i.e., *The Witch's Den*. It represents what was actually done towards the desired object, but the witch found the task harder than she expected, and accordingly gave it up in despair.¹

“The dowie Dean
It rins its lean,
An' every se'en
Year it gets ean.”

The last word alludes to its “catch” of one drowned person every seventh year. The Dean is a deep, sluggish river of Forfarshire, flowing out of Forfar Loch, and falling into the Isla near Meigle.

“Tweed said to Till
'What gars ye rin sae still?'
Till said to Tweed
'Though ye rin wi' speed
An' I rin slaw,
Yet whar ye droon ae man
I droon twa.'”

Tweed and Till join their waters at Tillmouth, on the English Border.

The veneration once paid to rivers finds an echo in another department of folk-lore, viz., in folk-medicine. Curative power has been attributed, under the influence of superstition, to the water of rivers, as well as to that of consecrated lochs and springs. One has only to mention St Fillan's Holy Pool, in the river Fillan, in Perthshire, resorted to for many centuries, to suggest thoughts of a healing power, connected, it is true, with the name of a Christian missionary, but derived, one can hardly doubt, from the beliefs of an earlier faith.² Healing virtue was attributed to water taken from a river at what was called a dead and living ford, i.e., one where the dead were carried and the living walked across. The same belief was entertained with regard to the water of a

¹ Grant's *Legends of the Braes o' Mar*.

² *New Statistical Account of Scotland*—(Parish of Killin).

south-running stream. The invalid had to go to the stream and drink the water and wash himself in it. Sometimes his shirt was taken by another, and after being dipped in the south-running water was brought back and put wet upon him.¹ Near Dunskey, in the parish of Portpatrick, Wigtownshire, is a stream which at the end of last century was much resorted to for its health-giving properties. Visits were usually paid to it at the change of the moon. It was deemed specially efficacious in the case of rickety children, whose malady was then ascribed to witchcraft. The patients were washed in the stream, and then taken to an adjoining cave, where they were dried.² Other instances might be cited by way of illustration, but I trust that those already given are sufficient to show that reverence was anciently paid to rivers by the inhabitants of our land.

¹ Dalrymple's *Darker Superstitions of Scotland*, p. 85.

² *Old Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. i. p. 47.