

I.

FOLKLORE OF THE ABERDEENSHIRE STONE CIRCLES AND STANDING-STONES. BY THE LATE JAMES RITCHIE, CORRESPONDING MEMBER, F.E.I.S.

The mysterious has a fascination for the human mind. Any phenomenon beyond the comprehension of man challenges him to find an explanation of it that will satisfy his restless intellect. And as time passes and the once sufficient explanation becomes inadequate, it is replaced by further attempts at a solution of the problem. The tracing of such folklore has become a recognised branch of the study of human races; for it is clear that it reveals traits of mentality which otherwise fail to leave much mark in human progress. The tracing is not always easy, for before writing was invented memory was the sole repository of these traditions, and many factors, particularly the movements of populations, militate against their permanence. Nevertheless, a considerable number remain, and it is the purpose of this paper to gather together those which are still current in Aberdeenshire in connection with stone circles and standing-stones, so that they may not be altogether forgotten. A few traditional stories are included which, although not strictly belonging to the bounds of Aberdeenshire, fall within the same geographical district. They have taken many years and much patient inquiry to gather, as the subject is one on which many people are reticent.

The traditions as they have come to my notice show more variety than might have been expected. Yet there is a substratum of similarity in many which permits of their being ranged in a series of groups

each with a common motif, although it must be admitted that no classification can be regarded as hard and fast. In the following pages I group the Aberdeenshire traditions under these heads:—

- (1) The Influence of Good and Evil Spirits.
- (2) The Notion of Worship.
- (3) The Idea of Buried Treasure.
- (4) Human Associations.
- (5) Animal Associations.

These groups are not of equal import. Of the first three it may be said that they have a general significance and are exceedingly common and widespread, whereas Groups 4 and 5 have rather an individual significance, which tends to be of local instead of general interest.

(1) THE INFLUENCE OF GOOD AND EVIL SPIRITS.

The idea that the stone circles and standing-stones are under the special care of the spirit-world is widely prevalent, and has had a great deal to do with the preservation of these monuments from destruction at the hands of the utilitarian.

Many years ago some of the stones of Mains of Hatton Circle, Auchterless, were removed to form gateposts, but the spirits, it is said, resented human interference with the circle, and it was only with great trouble that horses could ever be induced to pass through the gate. So little was the farmer prepared to encounter the spiritual enmity thus clearly indicated, that he decided to replace, on their original site, the stones which had been taken away; but it was remarked that while two horses with difficulty dragged each stone downhill to the gate, one only found it easy work to pull a stone uphill from the gate to the circle. A somewhat similar story is told of the Drumel Stone on the farm of Old Noth, near Gartly. The stone was taken to the farm to make a lintel over a doorway in the steading, but thereafter the steading door was so often found open, and the interned animals wandering about the countryside, that at last it was decided to put the stone back again. When this was done the trouble ceased.

Near Auchleven, in the parish of Premnay, there once stood a stone circle now completely destroyed. The farmer who removed the stones, shortly afterwards lost many of his cattle from disease and was ruined. Disease and ruin have visited farmers before and since that time, but nevertheless many of the good man's neighbours considered

the fate of Auchleven a judgment upon him for destroying the circle. The devastation of his cattle herd by disease fell also upon the farmer of-Cairnfauld, in Durris parish, following upon his removal of some of the stones of the circle near-by.

The notion that ill-luck attends the destruction of the circles is not yet altogether dead, as is apparent from an incident which occurred in recent times at Corrydoun. Some alterations were being made on the farm buildings, and the mason employed to do the work reckoned that he could make good use in his building operations of the stones in the stone circle. So he set to work to trim one of them, but, finding the stone harder than he had supposed, made little progress. At the dinner-hour he returned to the farm, where it was noticed that he had damaged one of his fingers badly, an injury of which he was not conscious. Someone suggested that it was unlucky to interfere with the stones, and the workman, agreeing, made no further attempt to use them; but his tool-marks still remain.

The spirit influence was not always exerted to protect the ancient monuments. It was sometimes, though this is a rarer belief, antagonistic to their preservation. Probably this belief pictures a phase of the everlasting warfare between the spirits of good and the spirits of evil. Thus the *Sunken Kirk* marks the site of a stone circle on Tofthills farm, in the parish of Clatt; but not a stone remains, and the absence is accounted for by the story that the spirits have caused the circle to-sink underground. A similar tale accounts for the name of *Chapel o' Sink* on the farm of Westerton, Fetternear. In the large and almost complete circle at Cothiemuir, in the parish of Keig, the recumbent stone is of peculiar rounded shape, and has numerous hollows upon its surface, caused by weathering. Two of these on the outside, rather larger than their fellows, are known as the "Devil's Hoof-marks," their shape resembling the mark of a cloven hoof.

(2) THE NOTION OF WORSHIP.

The notion of associating worship with the stone monuments is interlinked with the idea of spirit influence, for both meet in the belief in a supernatural world, the powers of which guard their own and must be propitiated. The belief that the circles were used for purposes of worship is very prevalent and very firmly established. Throughout Aberdeenshire they are almost universally known as "Druids' Circles" and "Druids' Stones," and by these names are more readily recognised by the country people than by any other name the

inquiring archæologist may care to use. A word of caution, however, is necessary: "Druid" to the archæologist and to the Aberdeenshire countryman do not mean the same. To the archæologist the term connotes a definite cult, associated with the oak tree and mistletoe, and it is doubtful if in this sense the Druids had ever any connection with the stone circles. But the countryman uses the term in a very wide sense—to mean anything *pagan* or *heathen*. Thus a "Druid Circle" means no more than a circle or temple employed in heathen worship. How long the term has been in common use it is impossible to say. Its origin has been attributed to John Aubrey, who derived his knowledge of it from Dr James Garden, appointed Professor of Divinity in King's College, Aberdeen, in 1680. But Dr Garden's letter to Aubrey, dated 15th June 1692, shows that the name was in use before his time. It is too deeply rooted among a class not given to reading archæological works to be of modern origin.

The circle at *Druidstone*, Premnay, gives its name to the farm, and the two pillar-stones near Montgarrie, Alford, are *Druids' Stones*, and their site *Druidsfield*. In addition to the names Druids' Circle or Druids' Stones, a number of these erections are also known as Druids' Temples or simply Temples. The recumbent stone and pillars of what must originally have been a fine circle on the home farm of Potterton, about five miles north of Aberdeen, are locally known as the *Druid Temple*, and the field in which they stand as the *Temple Field*. At South Ythsie stands another *Druid Temple*, again in a *Temple Field* or *Park*; the circle at Castle Fraser is *The Temple*, and the single stone at Inchmarlo Cottage, Banchory-Ternan, is a *Druids' Temple*.

The same idea of worship clings about the name "Auld Kirk" which sometimes attaches to the circles. Thus the remains of one in the neighbourhood of Alford are known as the *Auld Kirk o' Alford*; that on the farm of Denhead is the *Auld Kirk o' Tough*. The latter circle is now almost destroyed: only one stone remains on its original site, the others having been removed many years ago by a tenant on the farm. He is said to have formed one of the stones into a field-roller, which broke just after having been put to use—a just judgment upon his interference, said his neighbours. The name "kirk" appears also in the *Sunken Kirk*, to which reference has already been made.

A short distance, some 200 yards, from the Chapel o' Sink lies the *Ark Stone*, very likely the recumbent stone of the circle, which would help to account for its unusual name.

A number of circles used formerly to be called "Law Stones," probably because law courts were accustomed to be held near them.

The suggestion receives some support from the case of the Standing-stones of Rayne, a circle at which, in 1349, a court was held to settle a dispute between the Bishop of Aberdeen and William of St Michael concerning the ownership of certain lands in the neighbourhood.

As well as the tradition of pagan worship, the tradition of Christian worship also lingers about some of the early stone relics of Aberdeenshire. In such cases, of course, it is simply that a Christian name and memory have superseded an earlier pagan tradition, for it was a policy inculcated by Pope Gregory the Great upon his missionaries that they should utilise as far as possible the sacred places of the heathen; and so it may have happened that the circles became recognised meeting-centres of the new faith. Thus we find that some of the circles are associated with the names of the early saints. The remains of a circle on the farm of Bankhead, near Tillynaught in Banffshire, are known as St Brennan's Stanes, i.e. *St Brandan's Stones*, after the patron saint of Boyndie. A little further afield, in Banffshire, just beyond the Aberdeenshire boundary, two standing-stones represent all that remains of a circle which stood on the site of the present parish church of Marnoch. The taller of the two is known as *St Marnan's Chair*, though it bears no resemblance to such an article of furniture in its present state. As, however, it seems likely to have been one of the pillar-stones associated with the recumbent stone, its original position may have given some excuse for the designation. St Marnan, or Marnoch, was a seventh-century missionary who is said to have died at his church here in 625. Close against the outside of the wall of the old church of Logie-Coldstone is an upright standing-stone known as *St Walloch's Stone*, after St Walloch, a southern missionary who is said, though the statement cannot be substantiated, to have laboured in Aberdeenshire about the first quarter of the eighth century. It may also be noted that the parish church of Midmar, which is dedicated to St Nidan, occupies part of the area of a stone-circle, the recumbent stone and pillars of which, as well as several of the circumference stones, are still standing.

(3) THE IDEA OF BURIED TREASURE.

The tradition of buried treasure is associated with a number of the ancient stone monuments. Although one is frequently told of a pot of gold, or a bull's hide filled with gold, being concealed somewhere underneath a stone, not much faith is now placed in these stories, notwithstanding that they are still kept in remembrance. There is, of course,

little, if any, foundation for such a belief, which may have originated in times of invasion or civil war, when valuables had to be concealed, and the sacred vicinity of the monuments afforded as good a place as any. At Sinnahard, Towie, there is a standing-stone near which a pot of gold is said to be buried. On one of my visits a good many years ago, the farmer announced that he had no faith in the tale: the only gold he hoped to gain from the place was that of the golden grain then ripening for the harvest. A similar tale is connected with a large block of quartz, known as the White Cow, near the parish church of Marnoch. The story goes that many years ago some local adventurers made up their minds to run the risk of removing the stone to reach the treasure. They did not manage to complete the task that evening, and on returning to resume their labours on the following day, they discovered their excavations filled in and the stone back in its former place. The work was abandoned.

Sometimes the tradition varies a little. At Cortiegraw is a standing-stone of large size, which leans over partly on its side. Tradition relates that once it stood upright, but on an occasion tipped over and crushed to death a man who was digging for the pot of gold supposed to lie beside it.

The story of a bull's hide filled with gold is connected with many stones. At its simplest it is found at the Binghill stone circle on Deeside, at Lulach's Stone near Kildrummy, at a standing-stone at Glenkindie close by a branch road to Towie, and at the Muckle Stane o' Clochforbie, near the steading of the farm of that name. The last may be a broken recumbent stone, but there is nowadays no standing-stone near it. In this case also an attempt was once made to remove the treasure, but the great efforts made to shift the stone proved fruitless, and a warning voice having been heard from beneath the depths of the stone to command "Let be!" the advice was taken and the stone has remained undisturbed ever since.

The farm of Camiestone, in the parish of Kintore, derives its name from a standing-stone similarly named, where the leader of an invading army of Danes is reputed to have been killed. On the neighbouring farm of Braeside is a stone cist, called Camie's Grave, which the farmer opened. At his death he left a considerable fortune, and this was attributed to his having found treasure in the cist, though the wealth had a more prosaic origin in farming skill and hard work. The top of the ridge above his farm carries a number of cairns scattered irregularly, and one of these also is said to conceal treasure, though the difficulty of deciding the lucky cairn is solved with a touch of Scottish humour by designating it the "eastmost wastmost carn."

(4) HUMAN ASSOCIATIONS.

Here I have grouped a number of stories which have little connection except that they are associated with the memory of persons. In some of the traditions dealt with in the second section a personal significance attaches to the memorials, but in such cases the individual stood as a symbol of his religion. It is a curious fact, however, that whereas the missionary stones are usually the remains of circles, those to which reference is made in the present section are chiefly isolated and single standing-stones. It may almost be assumed that many of the nameless standing-stones were erected as memorials of individuals, whose names and deeds are long since forgotten; but how far tradition and truth may be assumed to agree in those cases where the names have been preserved is impossible to decide.

Macbeth's Stone at Lumphanan is said to mark the spot where the Scottish king was killed on 15th August 1057, and *Macbeth's Cairn*, fully a mile further north, the place where he was buried. *Lulach's Stone* at Kildrummy is associated with a son of Macbeth's wife, namely Lulach, who was slain at Strathbogie in 1058; and *Luath's Stone* on the hillside some distance north of Whitehouse Station on the Alford railway, is reputed to mark the site of the death of "Luath," said to be a son of Macbeth. Some doubt must attach to the tradition, which is repeated in connection with another site a good many miles away; even the existence of a son so-called is doubtful. The colour of the stone suggests that the present name may have been derived from the Gaelic word *liath*, meaning "grey"—the "Grey Stone" and nothing more. The *Crichton and Federate Stones*, now badly dilapidated, mark the place near Rayne where a duel was fought between representatives of these families.

Not far from the last, on the farm of Knowley, stands an upright pillar known as the *Tow Stone*. Its significance is doubtful. Dr Stuart thought that it might have been the seat of tax-gathering in far back days (*Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, vol. ii. p. 44). But Professor Watson suggests to me that the name may be connected with the Gaelic *toll*, signifying a hollow.

Often it is apparent that the names now in use have no connection with the origin of the monument, but are recent and frequently trivial additions. *Johnnie Kelly's Lass*, a large cup-marked standing-stone on the farm of Balhalgardy, near Inverurie, perhaps the sole remnant of a circle, furnishes a good example of the trivial origin of what may be curious and puzzling names. The name is just a century old. Johnnie Kelly, for long a farm servant at Balhalgardy, when old age came upon him, took to knitting stockings, a common country occupation in those

times. On fine days he climbed to the stone, resting against it as he worked, and scanned the rich plains of Garioch; the humour of the countryside dubbed his constant companion "Johnnie Kelly's Lass," and the name stuck. Perhaps some such petty incident is responsible for the name of a stone, very like the recumbent stone of a circle, which lies close to the steading of Upperton, Durris—*The Sutor's Mither*. Professor Watson has pointed out that the Gaelic form of sutor indicates a tanner, but who the tanner may have been legend leaves no hint. The *Piper's Stone* and the *Bell Stone*, both near the parish church of Bourtie, mark respectively the place where the piper who accompanied marriage parties took his stand, and the stone on which the hand-bell of the church rested, perhaps under a wooden covering.

To the *Grinago Stone*, near Old Meldrum, attaches one of the somewhat obvious and usually absurd tales invented to account for a puzzling name. After the defeat of the Comyns at the Battle of Barra in 1308, Bruce pursued the retreating army towards Buchan, whence it came. Having risen from a sick-bed to fight the battle, exhaustion compelled him to rest against this stone as he passed. To the appeals of his men that he should rest a while he gave a blunt refusal; it was his but to "grin an' go," hence Grinago! The name, which Professor Watson regards as likely to be Gaelic, has become too seriously corrupted to be identifiable.

A tradition of equal historic worth attaches to the *Maiden Stone*, an elaborately carved cross-and-symbol stone close to the roadside, half a mile west of Chapel of Garioch. The maiden of Drumdurno, a farm near-by, was complimented on her skill in baking by a stranger, who at the same time remarked on her lack of speed. On her remonstrance, he challenged her to bake a firloft of meal while he took in hand the building of a road to the top of Benachie, the stake to be the maiden's freedom. Confident in the impossibility of the task of the would-be road-maker, she accepted the challenge, but just as her last "cakes" were ready for the fire she looked up, to see that the road was finished and the Devil, as she now perceived him to be, was approaching to claim her. She fled, and, as her pursuer laid a hand upon her shoulder, uttered a prayer to God for deliverance. At once she was turned into stone, but the place where the Evil One's hand touched her shoulder is marked by the large triangular niche in the Maiden Stone's profile. The origin of the name Maiden Stone is unknown, but it is possible that it may be corrupted from St Medan, to whom several Aberdeenshire sites were dedicated.

(5) ANIMAL ASSOCIATIONS.

Animal associations account for the nomenclature of a large number of the Aberdeenshire stones; but even here appearances are deceptive,

for some names which at first sight recall animals have quite a different origin. There are *Ramstones* in the parishes of Drumblade and Monymusk, and several *Harestones* in the county; but these seem to be boundary marks, and it is doubtful if their names have any direct connection with animals. *Harehill*, near Bourtie, on which there stands a pillar-stone at one time connected with a cairn, may possibly have been named from the abundance of its hares before the ground was broken in; and the *Whitecow Stone* at Marnoch is obviously so-called from its resemblance at a distance to a white cow resting in a field. The *Crow Stone* at Rhynie is said to have gained its name from the numbers of crows which rested upon it—a somewhat unlikely supposition, since crows prefer the ground to a stone perch. It may be that the name is a corruption of “cross stone,” for it stands in a field beside the parish church, and, although there is no cross upon it, it bears several of the symbols associated with early Christian worship; but Professor Watson suggests that the word may be that used in the Gaelic *Teampull na Crò Naomh* at Galson, the “Temple of Holy Blood.” The “Cro” Stone would then be the “Stone of Blood.” The *Wolf Stone* lies prostrate at the roadside in Auchterless and is now a boundary mark. The origin of the name is unknown, though it may well be connected with a time when wolves were abundant in Scotland.

The county has several *Gowk Stones*, generally explained as favourite resting-places of the cuckoo. There is, however, another possibility. North-east ($3\frac{1}{2}$ miles) and south-west ($1\frac{1}{2}$ mile) of Strathpeffer are remains of cairns each of which is known as an *Clachan Gòrach*, or the Foolish Stones. (The second group is more often called Brodie's Graves.) Now *gowk* in north-east Scotland means a fool as well as a cuckoo, and it may be that, as applied to some of the Aberdeenshire *Gowk Stones*, it is a translation of an older Gaelic appellation like those at Strathpeffer.

Last in our list, the name “candle,” attached to various ancient stone monuments, may have an indirect animal association. The *Candle Stone* is a large pillar-stone which stands at *Candle Ridge*, Drumwhindle, near Arnage, and there are three *Candle Hills*, one at Oyne, one in the parish of Rayne, and the other near Inch, within a few miles of each other. On each of these *Candle Hills* there are remains of a stone circle, so that all these candle-names appear to be associated with either stone circles or a standing-stone. The association has given rise to the idea that candles were employed in the ceremonies performed by the “Druids” at such places; but Professor Watson tells me that the Gaelic word signifies not a diminutive candle, but even a huge torch, so that the word might well be applied figuratively to a tall stone suggesting the shape of a torch. Another

explanation of the name, however, is possible. In former days wax candles were much used in Church services, and since the wax was derived from bees, whose honey was used for sweetening, it was not over-plentiful, and was accordingly highly valued. Thus gifts of wax frequently find mention in old deeds and charters: two stones of wax were dedicated in 1233 by the Earl of Buchan to the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin at Rattray, and another grant of $5\frac{1}{2}$ pounds is referred to in the confirmation of a charter of John Lord of the Isles in 1460. Grants of wax for Church use came to be associated with land suitable for bee-keeping: thus the *Candlelands* at Ellon were dedicated to the use of the church there, and had to provide twenty-four wax candles three times a year to burn before the high altar of the Church of Ellon. These Candlelands are only some 5 miles distant from the Candlestone and Candle Ridge of Drumwhindle. It may be no more than a coincidence that the Candle Ridge near Ellon and the three Candle Hills in the Inch district have each a standing-stone or a stone circle. Naturally hill-top monuments would escape much of the destruction which visited similar monuments on arable land, so that out of the large numbers of these monuments which must have existed at one time, the hill-top examples stood every chance of survival; further, the very conditions which would account for the preservation of the stones, rough, rather high ground with abundance of heather and the characteristic vegetation of such places, would be just those best suited for the keeping of the bee-stocks which were to produce the sacred candle wax. The suggestion, therefore, is that the ancient stones have only a casual connection with candlelands from which beeswax was obtained or levied.

So far as I am aware, there appears to be no trace in Aberdeenshire of a legend otherwise rather widespread, and exemplified at Stanton Drew in Somerset, and "Long Meg and her Daughters" near Little Salkeld, Cumberland, where the circles of stones are said to represent persons who were turned into stone as a punishment for desecrating the Sabbath Day by dancing.

The old stories, inconceivably absurd and even childish as many seem nowadays, have played their part in past times in satisfying the deep-seated hankering after explanations of origins; but they have been of some service even to the moderns, for the mystery and superstition with which they surrounded the circles and standing-stones have been factors of no little importance in preserving these relics throughout the dark ages.