XII.—On the Scottish Formula of Congratulation on New Year’s Eve.  

"Hogmanay, Trollalay."


[Read to the Society 28th February 1831.]

There are few things more important in the history of nations than their festivals, their anniversaries, and days of public rejoicing. Their peculiarities, their true character, are strikingly manifested on such occasions; old traditions and customs are revived; the mind, relaxed from the cares and pursuits of every day, exhibits its predilections without reserve, and in this freer state it delights to recall ancient reminiscences, and to rehearse, as it were, a lesson of the past. By these means solemn festivals form a chain of connection between the present and the very remote past ages.

That which on a common day would appear ludicrous or childish to do or say, we do or say without hesitation or scruple on the day appointed, for our ancestors were wont on that day so to say and do. Nay, the keeping up of the custom we are prone to consider as a religious duty, even though its object may have vanished, or though we may have lost the key to its true meaning and import.

The formula "Hogmanay, Trollalay," offers a case in point for these observations. Its high antiquity is admitted by all inquirers; but no man will pretend to determine when it first was brought into use. The words, as we cannot for a moment doubt that they express some definite meaning, show by the very idiom that they belong to ages far remote; for they are not at present generally understood, and no one has as yet succeeded in explaining their meaning from the dialects now spoken in the British Isles, or elsewhere in Europe.

By referring to Dr Jamieson’s Dictionary (sub voc. Hogmanay), the reader will observe that none of the explanations offered have completely satisfied the mind of that diligent and learned antiquary, although he seems to give a preference to an opinion expressed in the Caledonian Mercury, February 2, 1792.

The connection between the French formula there mentioned, Au gui menez," and the Scottish "Hogmanay," I feel no inclination to doubt; but if my explanation shall appear the true one, then it will be almost evident that the Philologus of the Caledonian Mercury has mistaken the daughter for the parent;—that the Scottish formula is not derived from the French, but the French from the Scottish;—that the Scottish formula was once quite intelligible in Scotland, and that it perfectly agreed with the idiom and traditions of the country;—but that the French formula was never intelligible in that country;—that one half of it gives at best a forced and constrained meaning in French;—that that meaning is entirely founded on conjecture;—and that the remainder of the formula is left entirely unexplained.

It is stated that, on the fete des fous, companies of both sexes used to run about, fantastically dressed, with Christmas boxes, under a chief called Rollet Follet, and to enter churches during service crying "Au gui menez. Rollet Follet. Au gui menez. Tiri liri. Mainte dii blanc, et point du bis." The syllable gui, which happens to mean mistletoe in French, furnishes the only foundation for an explanation, coupled with the circumstance, that it is said the Druids used to cut the mistletoe, crying as they went along, Au gui menez: yet the author does not venture to assert that the Druids spoke French! as they could only have done so by anticipation. The author derives some consolation from the possibility that gui, perhaps, may mean mistletoe in some Celtic or Scandinavian dialect: Why, such a thing is easily ascertained. The author could easily have satisfied himself as to the Celtic dialects. Respecting the Scandinavian, we can assure him that in none of them gui means the mistletoe, although in all probability the French word guy is derived from the Icelandic vithr (pron. wihtr); but this would be of no service for the explaining of the supposed Druidical gui. And what would be gained if the gui were found to be Druidical, unless the other words au and menez were Druidical too, which they cannot be, unless the Druids spoke French by prophecy?

If the explanation which I have to offer shall appear admissible, the French formula au gui menez is only a corruption of the Scottish Hogmanay, as it would be spelt in the French fashion, and accommodated to French organs of speech; but it is without any sense in the French language whatever.

Rollet’s invocation of old Rollo the Walker (Gaungu Hrollfr),
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and obvious meaning in the ancient language of the country. According to my view, therefore, the formula

"Hogman [properly Hogmen] aye, Troll a lay,"

contains two words in the former line, and three in the latter, signifying

The Elves for ever,

The Trolls (i.e. the evil genii) into the sea,

the whole of the formula being good Anglo-Saxon or even old English words. This assumption needs both a philological and also an historical illustration. The philological illustration is short. Hogh or Hog is Anglo-Saxon, meaning a hill, and Hogmen, hillmen; for the Elves were by all northern nations believed to reside in hills.

The Icelandic analogy confirms the supposition here advanced; for the Elves were by the Icelanders called "Haugmen" and "Haugbær," i.e. Hillmen and Hilldwellers; and indeed the belief that the Elves inhabit hills is well known to every one who is at all acquainted with fairy mythology, and needs not therefore to be proved by any further authority; and Hoghman, in plural Hoghmen, being pure Anglo-Saxon for Hillmen, I think it sufficiently proved in a philological respect, that Hogmen aye means the Elves for ever.

I humbly conceive that no philological doubt or difficulty can be urged against this interpretation of Hogmen aye. We do not, it is true, find the compound word Hogmen in our Anglo-Saxon vocabularies or dictionaries; but we find both Hug for hill, and Men for men; which, put together, can have no other signification than Hillmen,—a most appropriate name for the Elves, and similar to that which we know they received in the Icelandic tongue; no weak argument to those who are aware of the perpetual parallelism in forms and phrases between that language and the Anglo-Saxon.

We shall see that the assumption, that Hogmen means Hillmen, renders the interpretation of the formula consistent in all its parts, and perfectly reconciles it with popular traditions of this as well as other northern countries.

Still it may be asked, Why did our forefathers cry "the Elves for ever?"

\(^1\) Not Hug, as Spelman says; for, to tell the truth, Spelman appears not to have been acquainted with the Anglo-Saxon system of declensions, and therefore he sometimes mistakes some oblique case or other for a different form or variation of the nominative.

\(^2\) See the Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, III. 162, 5th ed. for the Scottish belief on this subject.
Whence this address to them on New Year’s Eve? This is an historical question which must be solved.

The removing term or Lady-day of the Hoghmen or Elves was the night preceding New Year. Magnusen, in his Mythological Dictionary (sub voce Alfarim, p. 279), says, “Nocte quae novum annum precedit, Ailf in Islandia nova habitacula petere, et intrare perhibentur.” We shall soon see that this popular belief was common to other northern countries, and that it also existed in Scotland. Even Magnusen says, immediately after the passage here quoted, “Similis superstitione solstitioris nocte, a vulgo vicinorum boreae regnorum fovetur.”

Now although the temper of the Elves or Hoghmen was little to be depended upon, they still were upon the whole Good Genii, and in fact they have on that account been termed in Britain Good People and Good Neighbours; therefore, their moving away was considered as a calamity, inasmuch as it was a sure forerunner of one. No wish was therefore more appropriate, at the very moment when it was feared that the capricious Elves might change their residence, than this, “May they—may the Good Genii of your habitation—stay with you for ever.”

And, moreover, this was not an empty wish; for the Elves heard it, and, like all people who know their great influence, they loved to be held in respect. Thus, then, a wish piously expressed might avert even an intended migration.

But New Year’s Eve, or rather the very moment of midnight—for all Genii are punctual—was a general removing term for Genii, not only for good, but also for evil ones. The latter are in old English called Trolle, Icel. Trol. They too heard the address of man, and it was one comfort that they were in many instances (powerful as they were) bound to listen to it, and to obey it. Their removal was very desirable, and therefore an address to them was added immediately after the former one to the Hoghmen, or the Good Genii, by which the Trolles were called upon to change their habitation, or even commanded to do so.

We are not to wonder that such mighty Genii would, or even felt themselves compelled to obey the command; for it is a most interesting, and at the same time a most comfortable point in fairy demonology, that the words of the children of men, when uttered in season, are of the most surprising power, and, if all formalities are observed, Genii must fulfil them to the letter. I could prove this by many instances from northern as well as Arabic and Persian fairy lore.

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But I must here return to philology.

Trolle are Evil Genii,—that part of the formula is settled; but what is a lay? This, I think, is derived from two Norse words, a lay, in Icelandic pronounced en lay, the former word being a preposition meaning in or into, and the latter the Sea. Lay in this sense is an old, poetic, Icelandic word: thus, in the Hafuddedum of Egil Skallagrím’s son,

Kán gríðar le, A gígar skà;— i.e.

The ocean [or the tide] of the axe
Fell on the Nereid’s window.1

The interpretation, therefore, which I have given above (p. 204) of this hitherto mystic formula will, it is hoped, both on philological and on historical grounds, stand the test of the most rigid criticism; seeing that, while it is now shown to have an obvious meaning in the northern languages, it at the same time rests on well-authenticated popular traditions, believed and prevalent in all the northern countries, not excepting Scotland.

Magnusen has, in his Mythological Dictionary (sub voce Trol), shown that in Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Scotland and other parts of Great Britain, the Genii were believed to change their residences on New Year’s Eve. He has proved this by numerous conclusive instances. And whoever will consult the three copious articles in his Dictionary, Alfar, Trol, and Veitr, will find every part of my historical arguments, although proposed in a very different way, there amply confirmed. I have, however, borrowed nothing from my learned countryman. The results which I have had the honour of laying before the Society, I had arrived at without inspecting his book; and I wrote the first draft of this article off-hand, in the presence of a gentleman who did me the honour of consulting me on the meaning of “Hogmanaye, Trol a lay,” and in that draft all these results were contained. It greatly strengthened my confidence in the accuracy of my interpretation, to find, afterwards, that the popular traditions which Magnusen had collected all agreed with my hypothesis.

Feeling convinced that I had in some measure fulfilled the eternal and invariable rules of true interpretation, I entertained no doubt of the correctness of

1 The ocean of the axe is a Norse poetical figure, meaning the blood of the slain; it fell on the Nereid’s window, i.e. into the sea.
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the one here proposed. I found a set of words in an obsolete language (and yet, be it remembered, a language of the country), which I rendered word for word in a modern idiom; and this interpretation gave a natural sense conformable with known tradition: this, I humbly conceive, is all that can be expected, all that can be wished, from an interpreter. The only thing capable of overthrowing my interpretation would be if another set of words were found, either in the same language or in another, expressive of a more natural sense, and equally agreeing with the known sound of the formula. After my opinion was once formed, I had no great fear of such an event; still it behoves every writer to consider that the conviction of others is often weaker than his own. It was therefore a welcome discovery to me when I found, in Percy's Relics, the following lines, which I hope will remove every further doubt from the mind of even a very stubborn sceptic. These lines run as follows:

Troll on away,
Synge hove and howe,
Rombelow,
Troll on away.

These lines, which contain a very ample confirmation of the interpretation of "Hogmen aye, Troll a lay," given above, have, as far as I know, never been interpreted before; and yet I find they are good old English, certainly of no more modern date than the 13th or perhaps 14th century, judging merely from the language. It is quite evident that Percy has here copied, from a verse voice delivery, a set of words which neither he nor his Rhapsodes understood. In order to demonstrate this more clearly, I shall place side by side his reading and the correct ancient spelling of the same sounds:

Percy's Reading. | Correct Ancient Spelling.
---|---
"Troll on away," | Troll on away,
Synge hove and howe, | Synge hive and howe,
Rombelow, | Rum belowe,
Troll on away." | Troll on away.

The word hove he gave according to modern English orthography, which for this sound has at least three different spellings, hove, hooe, and hooce, and it was a mere chance that he chose the first of these. He did not think of hice (although this in old English is the correct spelling of the same sound), for that would, in his as well as in our days, be pronounced hate. Rombelow, is certainly two words, and not one, and the first must in old English be spelt Rum, and not Rom; but the difference did not appear in pronunciation. And,

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after all, there remains an error in the first line, for both the metre shows that it cannot be "Troll on away," there being one syllable too much; and the sense, too, as there are two prepositions of, and, instead of one. This mistake is easily accounted for: it was originally, doubtless, "Troll on way." This was not understood by modern repeaters of the song, and they made it Troll on away, wishing it to contain at least one word intelligible to them; and they were not much in the wrong, only they should then have eliminated the on, which became superfluous when the a was added to way. It is a homage to common sense, that the people have an aversion to repeat what they do not understand; and thus they frequently transform words unintelligible to them into others which they understand. Hence Scottish Necessity, Turkish Stambul, &c. "Troll away" is still a popular glossa for the original, Troll on lay or Troll on lee, at one time similarly pronounced. And, finally, the rhyme shows that the first line of the ditty, as Percy has given it, is missing; and the context makes it evident that the missing line is no other than the words "Hogmen aye," and a further evidence of that fact is, that we find in the still subsisting congratulation-formula, Hogmenaway coupled with Troldelay.

Accordingly, the verse, restored to its pristine integrity, runs thus:—

| Percy's Reading. | Correct Ancient Spelling. |
---|---|
Hogmen aye, Troll on lay. | Vivant in aeternum Genii boni! |
Synge hive and howe, | Abest mali in profundum! |
Rum belowe, | Castet famulitium colleget! |
Chorus, Troll on lay! | Jam erit quies in regionibus inferne! |
Chorus, Abrust, mali Genii, in profunde. |

Why were the servants of a family to sing at the departure of the Trolloes? Because the Evil Genii often marred their work, and took pleasure in subjecting necessity, Turkish or Danish.

1 I shall subjoin the glossary to this ditty.

Hogman, an Elf, as already explained: in the plural number, Hogmen, the Elves.
Trollo, Evil Genius, Giant, Witch, &c. See every northern Dictionary, Icelandic, Swedish, or Danish.
Lee, the Sea; Icel. Vasta planities, Lee, Lay, the Sea; Icel. Pronounced in the same way, confer. Anglosax. Lee, Lee, Lye.
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Hogmen aye, Troll on away.
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And this is the translation.

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ing them to a variety of annoyances; as, on the other hand, the kind Elves aided and assisted them, when the servants treated their sacred haunts with due respect. The hills were to sing at the removal of the Evil Genii, because they were the common place of residence for all Genii both good and bad; and as the Trolles were in their temper and character entirely opposed to the Elves, undoing whatever good they did, or throwing obstacles in their way, and in many ways afflicting and vexing both the Elves themselves and those amongst mankind whom they favoured and protected, the latter had great cause to rejoice when the former departed, not only because they were their antagonists, but because after their departure there would be more room below.

A doubt may be started respecting the Icelandic word lay, the sea. For, it will be asked, how was such a foreign word introduced into a Scottish formula or song? The answer is, it is not foreign. The labours of so many eminent philologists have now satisfactorily proved, that although the Norse and the Scottish undoubtedly belonged to two different families (the one being the parent of all Scandinavian Gothic dialects, and the other a branch or daughter of the Teutonic), yet both were derived from the same remoter parent stock; and also the constant intercourse, sometimes hostile and sometimes peaceful, between the Scottish and the Norwegians (who spoke the language now called Icelandic), so assimilated the two idioms in Scotland, that Scottish and Norman understood each other without difficulty: and that the Scottish directly borrowed many words from the Norse has been amply demonstrated by Dr Jamieson. But if any one is not satisfied with this account of the word lay, let him spell it Lee, and say it is Anglo-Saxon; the meaning of the Anglo-Saxon word is similar to that of the Icelandic; Lee means vasta planities, and say there is no

NOTE BY THE AUTHOR, TO THE FOREGOING COMMUNICATION.—In addition to the remarks made in the preceding Essay, on the attempts at explaining Hogmanay made by earlier authors, I shall briefly notice a few more opinions on the subject, partly with the view of satisfying the reader that I have not overlooked these opinions, and partly by way of placing before him, velut in tabula, the most current explanations, that he may with the greater ease compare them, and judge of the admissibility of each respectively, and of the comparative claims of the one submitted in the preceding paper in particular.

I. The basis of one of these explanations is the conjecture that Hogmanay is corrupt Greek, and that it means Ἕλιος νυσσ, which, although it literally means Holy Moon, has been interpreted Holy Month. By this Greek cry or explanation it has been surmised that the commencement of the New Year was announced to the public, or even that the ignoble reigns themselves, by these two Greek words, announced the commencement of the year to one another.

My objections to this opinion are as follows:—1st. By no calendar, either old or new, does any holy month commence on the 1st of January. Nay, an holy month could never commence, for no such month is recognized by the ritual of any church. 2d. The common people in the north of Europe never showed any predilection for Greek, either in ancient or modern times; and even the clergy were by no means fond of apostling Greek during the middle ages. Who does not recollect their common excuse—"Greece and non leguntur." 3d. The words Ἕλιος νυσσ bear but a small resemblance to Hogmanay, particularly when the accent is considered, which generally is the most lasting and unchanging part of every word. Hogmanay is always accented on the last syllable, and Ἕλιος on the penultimate. 4th. In this explanation only one half of the formula is taken into consideration, for no interpreter has said that Troltaly was Greek. 5th. It rests entirely on conjecture, and is not supported by any record or tradition.

II. In the very moment I was going to read the above Essay to the Soc. Antiq., I was favoured with a note from an eminent antiquary, merely containing an interrogatory, "Whether I were acquainted with that Hogmanay which the Goths were wont to sing before the emperors in Constantinople?" I had no difficulty in comprehending that this query referred to the Gothic song, as the emperor calls it, which Constantinus Porphyrogentius has inserted in his work on the Ceremonial of the court of Constantinople, b. i. chap. 83. I have long been acquainted with that song, and at one time I paid more attention to it than, according to my present conviction, it deserves. I must say there is no "Hogmanay" in that song; but I shall not determine whether the words Ἕλιος νυσσ which occur in it have first led etymologists to the theory of Ἕλιος νυσσ above mentioned. The emperor has not only given the song, but accompanied it with two glossaries (perhaps either one or both of these glossaries are inserted by later transcribers); but I have no longer any doubt that both the song and the glossaries are after nonsense, and such seems to be the mature opinion of the learned commentator, Dr Reiske. Respecting the Gothic song, the historical fact seems to amount to no...
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more than this,—that on the ninth day after Christmas, the Goths, and, as it seems, those who formed the Gothic guard called Bagyo, were in the habit, or were even appointed to entertain the great emperor with a song and dance in their own way. The language of their song seems to have been a sort of a lingua franca. Such, at least, must have been the idea which the emperor, or the author of the above-mentioned glossary, entertained respecting it; for there some words are derived from Hebrew, others from Latin. But, at all events, it does not resemble Ulphilas's Gothic, or any other kind of Gothic, ancient or modern, now known; neither does it appear to resemble Slavonic: some words of it bear a greater resemblance to bad Greek than to anything else; and, to a certainty, it contains nothing in any way applicable to, or likely to throw the least light on, Hogmanay.

III. Other interpreters have said that Hogmanay was Latin, and ought to be spelt Hoc mane; that these words were the beginning of the matins in the Roman Catholic service, &c. There are many objections to this theory, and among others this, that the matins on New Year's day begin with no such words as Hoc Mane. The objections 3, 4, and 5, to the Greek derivation, also apply to this opinion, besides many others.

IV. Some have asserted that Hogmanay, Troilais, was French, and should be written "L'homme est né! Trois Rois la!"

Objections.

No MAN par excellence was born on New Year's Eve; and no Three Kings made their appearance on that night. Objection 5 to the Greek derivation above also applies here, besides many others.

V. Mr. Callender's learned paper, in vol. ii. page 1 of these Transactions, ought to be taken into consideration. Although some of the objections here mentioned apply also to his theory, and although I humbly conceive his interpretation to be deficient in point of consistency, I perfectly agree with him in his interpretation of the word Troil; and from the spirit of inquisitiveness and fairness manifest in his paper, I almost flatter myself, that if he had had the same data before him as I, he would either have arrived at the same result, or approved of those which I have had the honour of laying before the Society.

The word dyu is translated πιθοφόρος in the glossary, and νέος, είκοσι τά Νέος. The words dyu and νέος are not placed together consecutively in the song.

XIII.—On the Burial Place of John Napier of Merchiston, the Inventor of Logarithms.


[Read to the Society 9th May 1831.]

DEAR SIR,

The inestimable benefit which John Napier, Baron of Merchiston, conferred on science by his invention of Logarithms, has rendered any memorial of him in the highest degree interesting to every one that can appreciate its value, and to every native of the country which gave him birth. In his time abstract science was just recovering from the torpor which had overtaken and suspended its powers during the ages which had intervened between that period and the days of Archimedes and Apollonius, and Physical Science had just advanced so far as to be capable of profiting by his labours. Few of his contemporaries were qualified to judge of the immediate benefit of his invention, and certainly none could foresee how much it was to conduce to the progress of future discovery. He lived in a rude country, and in an age under the dominion of superstition and bigotry. In Scotland improvements in science were then but little regarded in comparison to differences on points of religious belief. The minds of men were also continually agitated with questions arising out of the struggles of political parties. At such a period, and amidst so many conflicting interests, the discovery of a property of abstract numbers, and any application of it, however useful, were not likely to excite great attention among the chroniclers of that age.

It is no doubt from the combination of these causes, that although we know the exact period when one of the greatest men that Scotland, or even Europe, ever produced, left the stage of mortal existence, yet, with the exception of what I am presently to communicate, there is no record, so far as I have been able to discover, of the place where he was buried.