

Some Traditional Penalties for the Infringement of Unwritten Codes of Conduct

J. B. SMITH

It is no secret that members of a tight-knit working team will observe rules affecting not only their own behaviour, but also that of outsiders who become involved with them, so that they too can incur penalties. For instance, in Fife a young man was noticed approaching a field where several women were working. One of them said: “We’ll give him doosy!” whereupon, he was seized and thrown on his back. Then, each of four seizing a limb, they playfully gave him several *duschts/dooshts* or heavy falls (*EDD*, 2, p. 125, source G.W[illiams?]; *SND*). Likewise in Fife, we encounter the synonym *bengie*: a field that was cutting was sacred to the shearers, and any trespasser was *bengied*, that is, seized and bumped on the stubble, until there was a compounding for money (*EDD*, supp, 6, p. 27; + *SND*?). This compounding for money could amount to the practice of paying one’s footing, as when, in many places, a gentleman taking up a tool and beginning to go through the motions of an occupation, would have his shoes wiped by the true practitioner, being expected in return to give money for drink. Thus, when a French scholar on a study trip to Kenmare in Kerry happened to enter a meadow where scything was going on, one of the mowers threw a handful of hay on to the visitor’s shoe. A companion explained to the Frenchman that he had been taken prisoner and could be released by paying a gratuity (Smith, 2005-06, 18).

The custom was by no means restricted to agriculture. In Dresden, anyone entering a baker’s inner sanctum without belonging to the bakers’ guild would be bound with a red tape and released only on payment of a ransom. Note in this connexion the German expression *einen schnüren* or *in die Schnur nehmen*, literally “to tape someone”. The original reference here is to the tape measure or plumb line of bricklayers or carpenters, with which they would take prisoner and ransom any newcomer to a building on which they were working. A newcomer might even be lured in with this in mind. So familiar must such expressions have been that they took on the idiomatic sense of “to obtain money from someone”, “to drive him into a corner”, “to cheat him” (Smith, 2005-06, 10)

So far, we have been concerned more with newcomers and outsiders trespassing, usually by accident, and less with members of a team whose behaviour does not conform with the unwritten code. An example of such a breach comes from north Yorkshire, where a member of a band of mowers or shearers who spoke out of turn in some way, would be required by his fellows to kiss some young woman or other. “If he demurred about doing how he was bid, or did it but not to the satisfaction of the others, the penalty was to *tag* him, or belabour him with twisted wisps of long grass.” (*EDD*, 6, p. 7).

A further example is to be found in William Barnes’s *Glossary of the Dorset Dialect* against the headword *groun*, where we read that *to groun* ‘a pick or hay-fork is “to put the end of its stem on the ground, as a bearing in raising a pitch of hay” (Barnes, 1886, p. 67; cf. Smith, 2004). This will perhaps satisfy students of old-fashioned haymaking techniques, but for anyone interested in the rules and conventions governing them there is a little more to be said.

Barnes himself points us in the right direction in his “Eclogue: The Best Man in the Vield”. Here two rival haymakers, Sam and Bob, express contempt for each other in no uncertain terms, each describing the other’s alleged shortcomings. Thus, in verse 7, Bob to Sam:

“... What dosten mind [‘What, do you not remember?’]
Thy pitchen to me out in Gully-plot?
...
An’ then how thee didst groun’ thy pick, an’ blow,
An’ quirk [‘grunt, wheeze’] to get en up on end ...” (Barnes, 1962, p. 81)

As Barnes himself tells us, having first explained the expression *to ground the pick* in words slightly different from those just quoted from the *Glossary*: “Young men, proud of their strength, would scorn such a mechanical aid.” (Barnes, 1962, pp. 117-119) Indeed, in some counties such a breach of punctilio as grounding the pick could lead to a fine. Thus, in Gloucestershire, *to ground the shuppick* [“pitchfork”], that is, put the end of the *stael* [“handle”] on the ground in order to raise the pitch [“fork-load”] of hay or corn, incurred the penalty of a quart of beer: “A quart! Thee’s grounded un!” (*EDD*, 2, p. 742: Wright’s correspondent S. S. B[uckman]).

Whether or not such sanctions obtained in the neighbouring county of Shropshire, there was a keen sense there that a worker was honour-bound to take up a sizeable quantity or *pitch* on his prong at any one time: “Jack oona [“will not”] ’urt ’imself – ’e dunna tak’ more at a pitch than yo ’coulnden [“could”] put on ooth [“with”] a toastin-fork.” (*EDD*, 4, p. 527).

The question we need to ask is whether, beyond this Gloucestershire penalty, there existed a more widespread code enforcing discipline and good practice within a band of haymakers, harvesters, or other workers. Some evidence there is. In Warwickshire, we are for instance told, the *boot* was “a punishment inflicted with a pair of boots on one laid flat on a bench, for misdemeanour during harvest-time.” (*EDD*, 1, p. 334). The victims were said to be *booted*, or *given the boot*. For Northamptonshire, John Clare has rather more to say concerning *boot*, to the effect that it is “a kind of punishment to such boys as have carelessly neglected their duty in the harvest, or treated their labour with negligence instead of attention, as letting their cattle get pounded, or overthrowing their loads, &c.” He continues: “A long form is placed in the kitchen, upon which the boys who have worked well sit, as a terror and disgrace to the rest, in a bent posture, with their hands on each other’s backs, while a strong chap stands on each side with a boot-legging, soundly strapping them as they scuffle over the bridge, which is done as fast as their ingenuity can carry them.” (*EDD*, 1, p. 334; Clare, 1821, p. xxiii). For Wiltshire we have an account provided about the middle of the nineteenth century by an old lady who was nearly ninety at the time. She said that if, during the harvest, a load was thrown down, the person through whose fault this happened was booted at the harvest-home supper. This meant that, after the cloth had been removed, he was taken and laid on the table face downwards. Then, the head carter, having procured one of his master’s boots, took hold of it by the foot end, and gave the delinquent three blows with the top end of it, “in a manner more calculated to injure his honour than his bones”. (Carrington, 1854, 87).

The use of one of the master's boots is significant here. As Bushaway points out, in such instances discipline was administered on behalf of the master, as is shown by the use of his boot, but by a representative acting independently of him. That representative was the workers' leader, who was often elected by them. It was in the workers' own interest to function as a disciplined, self-regulating team under his authority, not in order to underpin the power of the landowner, but in effect to safeguard their own employment and rewards (Bushaway, 1982, pp. 115ff).

Our search for in-group penalties now takes us northwards to Scotland. In Wigtonshire, according to *SND*, the expression "Winter" was applied to the last person to turn up for Hogmanay, but also to the person who during harvest took the last load of grain to the stackyard and for this was treated somewhat roughly: his fellow-servants would watch out for the opportunity to dash over him a quantity of dirty water, "the dirtier the better". The same custom seems to have obtained in Lanarkshire, judging by a note on p. 139 of Alexander Fordyce's book of poems entitled *A Country Wedding* (1818): "Leading in the last cart of corn is called 'Bringing in winter', and the person driving the cart [is] frequently saluted with a pailful of water thrown about his ears. I have been at a loss to discover the mystical significance of this."

Compare now Walter Gregor in his *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland* (1881, p. 182): "The one who took the last of the grain from the field to the stackyard was called the 'winter'. Each one did what could be done to avoid being the last on the field, and when there were several on the field there was a race to get off." He continues: "The unfortunate 'Winter' was the subject of a good deal of teasing, and was dressed up in all the old clothes that could be gathered about the farm and placed on the bink ['bench'] to eat his supper."

We also note the modern expression *skittery winter*, recorded in *SND* for the last person to arrive for or, less frequently, to leave work in a factory, mine, school, etc. on Hogmanay (West Mid Scots, 1970). Against *skitter*, *SND* has an Ayrshire quotation dated 2000: "You no up yet, skitterywinter?" in which *skitterywinter* [spelt thus] seems no longer to betray anything of its agricultural background. Returning to this, we note an Orkney phrase, recorded in 1870, *to skitter the slaps*, for "to take home the last load of corn at harvest."

Abbreviations

- EDD** Wright, Joseph, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, 1898-1905, rpt London, Oxford University Press, 1970.
SND *Scottish National Dictionary*, online.

References

- Barnes, William, *The Poems of William Barnes*, ed. Bernard Jones, Vol. 1, London, Centaur Press, 1962.
Barnes, William, *A Glossary of the Dorset Dialect*, London, Trübner, 1886, 2nd edn, St. Peter Port, Toucan, 1970.

- Bushaway, Bob, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700-1880*, London, Junction Books, 1982.
- Carrington, F. A., "Ancient Wiltshire Customs", *The Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 1 (1854), 87.
- Clare, John, *The Village Minstrel and Other Poems*, Introduction, "Booted Hogs", London, Taylor and Hessey, 1821.
- Fordyce, Alexander, *A Country Wedding*, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1818.
- Gregor, Walter, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland*, Publications of the Folklore Society, 7, London, E. Stock, for the Folklore Society, 1881.
- Smith, J. B., "Grounding Picks", *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries* (March, 2004), 331-332.
- Smith, John B., "Making Sweet Hay: A West Country Custom in its Wider Setting", *Folk Life: Journal of Ethnological Studies*, 44 (2005-06), 9-29.

Independent Researcher, Chester
johnbersmith@gmail.com