Bracken Lore

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“A che quando si taglia a sghembo lo stelo di una felce, ci si vede la figura dell’Aquila bicipite?”

A voracious reader with an ear for oral tradition in Devon and farther afield, the Victorian botanist and folklorist the Reverend Hilderic Friend recorded much that still invites attention. Some of his notes on the bracken, *Pteridium aquilinum* L., are for instance worth pursuing, in particular the one which has it that the root of that plant, cut across, reveals the image of a minuscule oak (Friend 1886, p. 279).

It is easy enough to match this note. Thus, an informant tells me that, as a child in the 1950s at Cudworth, near Ilminster in south-west Somerset, he was taught to pull a bracken root out of the ground and then, for the clearest image of an oak-tree, to slice diagonally across the root (Patten 2002). My own variant of this practice, learnt in the early 1940s in North Staffordshire, involved rather cutting across the stem, to reveal an image of the oak in which Charles II hid. Writing in 1989, a Londoner even recalls being told as a boy that he would see Charles himself in the oak, and wondering as a result what those would have seen who split bracken stems before 1651 (Vickery 1995, p. 44). There is an answer to this question, as we shall see.

For the moment, however, our concern continues to be with the version of the tradition that even led, in West Somerset, to *Pteridium aquilinum* being called the *oak-fern*. On this, in 1888, Elworthy comments “that if the stalk is cut across near the root there are dark markings on the section which strongly resemble a very symmetrical oak tree” (Elworthy 1888, p. 529). The identical Norfolk name, recorded in 1878, is rather similarly explained. It comes “from the appearance of the vascular bundles in the rhizome” (Britten and Holland 1878-86, 1, p. 180). To these rather
detached accounts another should perhaps, finally, be added, in which superstition plays a part. Dating back to 1853 and relating to “Croydon and elsewhere”, it reads, “Cut a fern-root slantwise, and you’ll see a picture of an oak-tree: the more perfect, the luckier chance for you” (Gibson 1853, 152).

All this suggests a widespread and uniform tradition. In fact, there are variations. A West Sussex note of 1878 refers to the custom “of cutting the common brake or fern just above the root to ascertain the initial letters of a future wife’s or husband’s name” (Vickery 1995, p. 44). About 1830, the same custom was known in East Anglia, while an Irish tradition recorded some thirty five years later has it that the root of a fern cut transversely reveals the initial of a chief, “and to him it is thought the land on which this plant grew formerly belonged”.

Yet another strand of the tradition can be followed as far back as 1816, to Thomas Wilkie, a native of the village of Bowden near Melrose in southern Scotland. He wrote that the witches there detested the bracken, “because it bears on its root the letter C, the initial of the holy name Christ, which may plainly be seen on cutting the root horizontally”. The theme is taken up as late as 1979, when a correspondent, writing to a newspaper about a childish game called “Holy Bracken” as played in Scotland some seventy years before, spoke of the initials

JC revealed by severing a fern stalk close to the ground. To find a well-formed example of this sacred signature was considered very lucky (Opie and Tatem 1989, p. 148). Parallels from south of the Border seem to be lacking, but could presumably still come to light.

If the evidence so far cited were complete, one might well assume that the practice of severing fern stalks or roots to reveal one shape or another is peculiar to the British Isles. Nothing could be further from the truth. Consider the present-day Latin name, _Pteridium aquilinum_. This goes back to _Pteris aquilina_, chosen in 1752 by Linnaeus, who in 1745 had noted: “Cut across obliquely, the root contains a fair likeness of the Imperial Eagle.” The reference here is to the Two-headed or Double Eagle that from the twelfth century had formed the

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German Emperor’s coat of arms and was, in 1806, to become the emblem of the Austrian Empire.

Whether or not Linnaeus was here recording his own observations, they were not without precedent. As early as 1551, the Protestant priest, physician and botanist Hieronymus Bock had written: “One other thing I must mention, that seems to me quite miraculous. It is that, as soon as the rhizome is cut through, each side of the section reveals a black bird with outspread wings, the whole representing an eagle with two heads against a white background.” After explaining that this is in reality made up of tiny black veins in the rhizome, he goes on: “Have I not often wagered that with a single cut or stroke I would produce a clear-cut image of the Emperor’s coat of arms?” Later, in 1625, another authority wrote: “If in Germany you cut the rhizome of the great fern across, you find an eagle in it. If you uproot it in France, you find a lily in it.” (Marzell 1943-79, 3, pp. 1169-1170).

Certainly there turns out to be a well-established link between bracken and heraldic eagles. The German common name is in fact Adlerfarn, “eagle fern”, and dialects of the language echo this in various ways. No doubt similarly influenced by Linnaeus, other languages make the same connection, from Scandinavia to Italy. Even in France, despite Poppe’s contention that there a lily is the plant one might expect to see, Pteridium aquilinum is fougère à l’aigle or fougère impériale, the first of which is matched in Italian with felce aquilina (Marzell 1943-79, 3, pp. 1169-1170), a name echoed in my epigraph. This is from the work of Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863-1938), and reads, “Do you know that when a fern stalk is cut across obliquely, an image of the Two-headed Eagle is revealed?” (Battaglia 1972, p. 791).

Compare here an anecdote recounted by the Viennese geologist and politician Eduard Suess (1831-1914). When, in the autumn of 1868, he was travelling in the Bergamasque Alps, he was held up by torrential rain, and had to spend two days in the hut of an ancient goatherd. Here he was fed on goat’s milk and celery, and questioned much about his native land. Inspired by their lively talk, on the second day the goatherd took his guest by the hand and led him through pouring rain to where a large specimen of Pteridium grew. Cutting through its stem, he said portentously: “Do you see? Here God the Father has left the Emperor’s imprint on our land. Here in the mountains we now know that it will again be his.” (Marzell 1943-79, 3, pp. 1169-1170).
Interestingly, there was another set of Continental variants, recalling the Scottish tendency, mentioned above, to see Christ’s initials in the bracken’s stem or root. In Germany, from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards we find names along the lines of *Jesus-Christus-Wurzel* (“Jesus Christ root”), and these lead us back, not to Scotland, but now to Ireland, where *Pteridium aquilinum* was, we discover, *fern of God*, “from an old belief that if the stem is cut into three pieces there will be seen on the first slice the letter G, on the second O, and on the third D” (Marzell 1943-79, 3, pp. 1169-1170). We conclude, however, with the Breton name *cran-n*, allegedly used for the rhizome. Rolland comments as follows: “This plant is sacred, for it provided swaddling clothes for King Grallon. One day, a woman who went astray in the woods was taken in labour and brought to bed in the bracken. When she who had been thought lost was found, to their surprise the rescuers also discovered a baby, its head protruding from among the clumps of fern. They immediately named it *cran-n-lôn*, that is, ‘child of the bracken’, and it kept that name. God, whose will it was that the child should become a great king, performed a miracle to mark its birth. In the very heart of the bracken he inscribed the two first letters of the name that had been given on the spur of the moment. As a result, a cut across the rhizome will reveal on the cross section two black lines that quite well represent the initials C and L, standing for *cran-n-lôn*” (Marzell 1943-79, 3, pp. 1169-1170).

One legend leads us to another. Compare the following account from the Cotswolds, in which a pious man, employed in a sawmill and given to singing hymns while working, is taunted for his Christian faith by an aggressively atheistic workmate. Holding up a piece of wood that awaits the saw, the atheist says: “I ood as soon believe in thuk thur Cross as thee doost zeng about as I ood believe as thur’s a cross in this yur bit o’ ood!” Lo and behold! As the saw cuts through the wood, the perfect form of a cross is revealed at its centre. From that day on, the atheist is a different man (Hall 1991, p. 205).

This legend, which has a medieval ring about it, matches the accounts of sacred symbols to be found in bracken. These thus turn out not only, as we have seen, to have close counterparts in Europe, but also to be part of a wider tradition, according to which plants and even some creatures carry within them evidence of divine truths. Here again, Hilderic Friend is a useful source of information. In the garden of a Cistercian convent in Rome there was, he tells us, a *zucca*, or gourd, which, when cut through, showed a green cross inlaid on the white pulp, and having at its angles five seeds, representing the five wounds (Friend 1886, pp. 189-190).
Perhaps, though, the most elaborate representation of the Crucifixion is to be found in the passion flower *Passiflora caerulea*, which gets its very name from what Spanish friars saw in it on first coming across it in America. For them, it mysteriously displayed all aspects of Christ’s passion, from the five wounds to the crown of thorns (Friend 1886, p. 192; Marzell 1943-79, 3, pp. 587-588; Vickery 1995, pp. 276-277).

As for creatures, rather than plants, that testify to Christ’s sufferings, there is the pike, which bears the instruments of the Passion in its head, while in the bones of a cod you may see a cross (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927-42, 2, p. 361; 5, p. 1706). Compare also the cross on the back of the ass, a sign of its services to Christ, and the stag with a cross in its antlers, the sight of which converted the huntsman given to pursuing game when he should have been at church on red-letter days (Schneider, 1994, p. 394).

For present purposes, however, the closest match to the bracken is, improbably perhaps, the banana. Of this Friend says that, in places as far apart as China and the Canaries, people shied away from cutting it through with a knife, because to do so would reveal an image of the Crucifixion (Friend 1886, p. 190). A more recent account reflects rather less sacred concerns. According to this, a girl can “ask” a banana whether her boyfriend is being faithful. “When the question has been put, the lower tip of the fruit is cut off with a sharp knife, and the answer is found in the centre of the flesh, either a Y meaning ‘Yes’ or a dark blob ● meaning ‘No’ ” (Opie and Opie 1959, p. 336). Not surprisingly, perhaps, the same method could be used to solve other kinds of personal problem (Vickery 1995, p. 24). As with the bracken, a single aspect of one and the same plant is the focus of religious or quasi-religious belief on the one hand, and self-interested superstitious practice on the other.

The subject of bracken is far from exhausted, but one other aspect will suffice. In the seventeenth century, Friend says, people set fire to growing ferns in the belief that to do so would produce rain. He continues with an intriguing statement: “There can be little doubt that the custom of ‘firing’ the bracken which grows in such quantities on the Devonshire moors originated in this practice” (Friend 1888, p. 342). Such a hypothesis would be hard to prove, and Devonians must in any case have had other reasons for firing bracken. Apart from anything else, its rampant growth requires control. The fact remains that the process was indeed once believed to lead to rain. Witness a letter written on 1 August 1636 by the Lord Chamberlain, the Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, to the High Sheriff of Staffordshire in anticipation of a visit to the county by Charles I: “His Majesty taking notice of an opinion entertained in Staffordshire that the burning of Ferne doth draw downe rain, and being desirous that the country and himself may enjoy fair weather, as long as he remains in those parts, His Majesty hath commanded me to write unto you, to cause all burning of Ferne to be forborne, until his Majesty be passed the country” (Friend 1888, pp. 342-343; Wright 1970, 2, p. 336; Vickery 1995, p. 44).

Similar beliefs attached to the burning-off of heather in parts of Scotland (Wright 1970, 2, p. 336), and it has been suggested that the winds favouring this activity would also be those most likely to bring rain (Ss 1852, 301). That being so, what reaches us as a superstition results, not from any addition to the truth, but rather from the disregard of one element in a chain of events, that is the fact that certain winds cause rain.
While in Scotland the season for firing heather was the spring, bracken was burnt off towards the autumn. Traditional as this activity was, it led in Cornwall to the saying: Like a ferny-fire, soon hot and soon cold, used figuratively of a hot-tempered person whose ire soon cooled. In the same county, in the parishes of St. Levan and Zennor, fine weather round about 18th October, St. Luke’s Day, lent itself to the cutting of bracken for winter fuel. Hence the expression St. Luke’s summer for such weather then. Compare the variant Luke’s little summer from Cheshire (Wright 1970, 2, p. 337; 3, p. 688).

Notes

1. This is a revised version of the article first published as J. B. Smith (2005), and appears here with the kind consent of the editors of Pteridologist.
2. On this information is based Vickery’s fourth account, under the headword bracken, of how to find an oak in a fern. The attribution, there given as “Bath, Avon, January 1991” (Vickery 1995, p. 44), would benefit from amendment in the light of what I have said above.
3. Although its Italian name might lead one to believe otherwise, the felce quercina (Battaglia 1972, 5, p. 791) does not contain the image of an oak (“quercia”). It is the Polipody, Polypodium vulgare L., once, but now no longer, known in English by the parallel name of oak fern, “because that species is frequently seen perched on the stems and branches of oak trees” (Britten and Holland 1878-86, 1, p. 180).

References

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