

Aspects of Ritual Purity in West-Country Traditional Magic

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Consider the word *futile*, meaning “ineffectual”, “trifling”. Behind this lies the Latin *futilis*, more correctly *futtilis*, the original sense of which is “leaky”, and hence “unsound”, “unfit for purpose”. What interests us here is Latin *futtile*, a noun formed from the adjective in its original sense, and applied to water vessels that were not so much leaky as liable to overflow and shed what they contained, the reason for this being that they were broad above and pointed below. This shape ensured that they were constantly carried, so that they or their contents never came into contact with the ground. Had they done so, they would have been polluted and thus made unfit for ritual use in the service of Ceres and Vesta (*DM*, 3, p. 167; Lewis and Short, 1879, p. 798). For a not unrelated account from the classical period we turn to Pliny’s *Natural History*, where at 28, p. 41 we read that, to prevent pains in intimate parts of her body (“*muliebria loca*”), a woman must at all times wear on her arm a bracelet containing that tooth of her boy-child that was first to fall out *and never touched the ground* (*DM*, 3, p. 189).

A question arising from all this is whether in our own era there is any echo of the practices and beliefs described. In fact for Scotland we have remarkable accounts dating back to the seventeenth century (Hone, 1826-1827, 2, pp. 343-344). According to these, in 1628, certain persons were brought before the Kirk Session of Falkirk, accused of going to Christ’s well in that town “to seek their health”. This involved collecting water from the well with a receptacle that was not allowed to touch the ground, strict silence being kept throughout. A further magical condition was that the procedure must take place on the Sundays of May.

In 1657 numerous persons were summoned to the sessions and sentenced to be publicly rebuked for believing in the powers of the well of Airth, a village some six miles north of Falkirk, on the banks of the Forth. Thus on February 24th Bessie Thomson, one of those arraigned, “*declarit that schoe fetchit hom water from the said well and luit it not touch the ground in homecoming, spoke not as sha went, said the belief at it, left money and ane napkin thair.*” Whatever Bessie Thomson’s shortcomings in the eyes of the authorities, her attention to the requirements of superstition could hardly be bettered, for not only did she prevent the contents of her receptacle from touching the ground and maintain silence on her way home, but she also declared her belief in the powers of the water, and left money and a napkin as offerings at the well (Hone, 1826-1827, 2, pp. 343-344).

Rites such as these, recorded in the seventeenth century, lived on into the nineteenth in a New Year’s Eve custom of the Strathdown highlanders, when one of those gathered together to celebrate the festival would be sent to a *dead-and-living ford*, that is, one traversed not only by the living, but also by the dead on their way to be buried. There the visitant was in profound silence to draw a pitcher of water, *without the vessel touching the ground*, for fear the virtue of its contents be destroyed. On his return, every member of the gathering retired to rest, and rose early on New Year’s morning in order to drink the *usque-cashricht* (“consecrated water”), which would throughout the coming year ward off “the

spells of witchcraft, the malignity of evil eyes, and the activity of all infernal agency”. Once the water had been drunk, the head of the household would sprinkle the company with what remained (Hone, 1826-1827, 1, p. 6).

Extending our search to objects or substances similarly treated for ritual purposes, we note first of all that in north-east Scotland many beliefs surrounded cradles, a first-born child for instance never being put into a new one, but always into an old one, which must be borrowed, and must contain different items, such as a live cock for a girl, or a live hen for a boy. What interests us in particular is that the cradle *must not touch the ground* before being placed on the floor of the house in which it was to be used (Bennett, 1992, p. 31).

North-east Scotland provides us with further evidence, in the shape of the *fairy dart*, a prehistoric flint arrow-head coveted as a sure bringer of success, so long as, once found, *it was not allowed to fall to the ground*. Writing in 1881, Gregor tells us that, when a cow died suddenly, the *canny woman* of the district was sent for to seek out what in the vernacular was called the “faery dairt”, and in due course she would find one. From Pennant’s *Tour of Scotland* of 1771 we glean a little on how the cure was to be effected, the sick cow being touched with an arrow-head, here known as an *elf-shot*, or made to drink water into which such an elf-shot had been dropped (*DS*, p. 140).

Irish traditions were similar. Apparently one of the tricks of the cow-doctor, who where needed was called in, and kept a few arrow-heads handy, was to produce one by sleight of hand from the flank of the ailing beast. Alternatively, counter-magic could be worked by means of an arrow-head that *must not be allowed to touch the ground* once it had been found. The procedure seems to have been much as that outlined for eighteenth century Scotland by Pennant (Evans, 1957, p. 304). In the Leitrim, Sligo and Cavan of the late nineteenth century, the elf-doctor was typically, according to one description, an old man, kindly, guileless, full of ancient lore, keeping up a now dying tradition. On being called to treat a sick cow, he would arrive with his elf-bag containing flint stones or arrow-heads, a silver coin (cf. *DS*, p. 176; Grant, 1961, p. 308), and three coppers. Along with the aforesaid contents of his bag, plus the juice of herbs and a pinch of salt, an arrow-head was added to a pail of *three-mearing water* (water from a place where three townlands met), that had been scooped in silence against the stream, preferably just before sunrise. The cow was made to take three sups from the pail. Alternatively, three doses were bottled down her throat. What remained of the water was sprinkled and lightly massaged along her spine, together with some dirt out of her front hooves. The last drops were tossed into her ears (Meehan, 1906, 202-208).

Now turning our attention to southwest Britain, we find a relevant example, somewhat reminiscent of that quoted from Pliny in my first paragraph, in the work of the West Country philologist and anthropologist F. T. Elworthy. Writing in 1895 (p. 437), he tells us (my emphasis):

“The carrying of the knuckle-bone of a sheep, called commonly a ‘cramp-bone’, as a preventive against that ailment, is still a daily practice. I have known persons, well to do, and by no means generally ignorant, who always had one about them. *It must never have touched the ground or its virtue is lost*; consequently I have

known it placed in a little bag and tied to the pocket or the dress, lest it should fall.”

Elworthy's *West Somerset Word-Book* of 1888 (p. 164) contains a similar, if shorter, account, in which the final sentence, to the effect that the bone loses its virtue if allowed to touch the ground, is followed by a bracketed exclamation mark. This is interesting as an indication that Elworthy, despite his encyclopaedic knowledge of West Country language and tradition, was otherwise unfamiliar with the idea that a “sacred” object would lose its virtue through contact with the ground. Possibly, therefore, the idea was not widespread in the West Country.

Even so, a couple of examples do spring to mind. In a Devonshire verbal charm for inflammation, the charmer or healer hangs a branch of whitethorn on a wall, *without allowing it to touch the ground*. She then takes nine small pieces of different-coloured cloths tied in a bunch, and some raw cream. The patient sits under the thorn, the bits of cloth are dipped into the cream and “dapped” upon the inflamed area. This must be done an odd number of times. The procedure is accompanied by a narrative, in which the charmer describes how various types of inflammation are cured by mythical agents, namely three brothers travelling from the North West to the South (*TDA*, 31, 1899, 113).

A family from Great Torrington in Devon possessed a *kenning stone* for the cure of eye complaints. It had been handed down through several generations. and was kept (in 1899) carefully wrapped and tied up in a small wooden box. Although the stone, a good-sized bead with a string through it, was kept in a wooden box, it was “insulated” from that receptacle by the linen it was wrapped up in. When removed from that wrapping it must at all costs be kept from touching any wooden substance. Here we have an interesting variation on the requirement that “sacred” objects be prevented from touching the ground lest they lose their virtue (Davies, 1998, 49).

Another interesting variation comes from the north of England. A lady living near Stamfordham in Northumberland possessed a so-called “Irish stone”. It originated in Ireland, as the name suggests, and it was never permitted to touch English soil. When required for a patient with a sore leg, it was carried to him in a basket. The leg was rubbed with the stone, and the wound healed (Davies, 1998, 49; Henderson, 1866, p. 133).

Our motif can also crop up in connection with seasonal customs. Some time before 1883, an old mid-Cornwall farmer provided the following: “First of May you must take down all the horse-shoes (that are nailed to doors to keep out witches, &c.) and turn them, *not letting them touch the ground* [my italics].” (Courtney, 1890, p. 30).

On a rather different note, we have a detailed account from an unspecified location somewhere in Devon of how, when a lad, the writer came into contact with an old woman called Mother Butt, who was suspected by one Billy Gray of being a witch. To counteract the spell Gray thought Mother Butt had cast upon him, he was advised by a white witch to go to a blacksmith's shop and there obtain a long horseshoe nail that *must not be allowed to fall on the ground*. With this he was to draw blood from Mother Butt in accordance with the by no means unusual procedure of *scratching a witch* with some sharp object. What does stand out here is that the nail must remain “unearthed” (*TDA*, 31, 1899, 117-118).

Little known, or at least little noticed though it is, the requirement does find expression in the Devonshire *Transactions* for 1880, where *maiden* nails procured from a blacksmith are said to render a witch powerless. Freshly made from bar iron, and never before used, these must not be allowed to fall or be put on the ground, lest their virtue be lost. Driven into the witch's threshold, such a nail would prevent her from crossing it. Driven into the witch's footprint, it would rob her of her power of mischief for the day. According to the correspondent providing this information, the charm had been practised at Kenton "within the last few years", in other words presumably during the 1870s (*TDA*, 12, 1880, 104). In another account it is, paradoxically perhaps, an alleged witch, Mrs D of Countisbury who practises the charm. Wishing to annoy a neighbour, she takes a hammer and a *new* nail, and drives the nail into the neighbour's footprint in the churchyard. Until the nail is removed he cannot leave that place (*TDA*, 39, 1907, 104).

At this point it will be worthwhile quoting a Somerset account recorded in 1894 concerning an event that had taken place some years before that date at the village, or hamlet, of Knowle Hill, just to the south of Chew Magna. A man called George was concerned about his sister, who appeared to have been *overlooked* ("bewitched") by a rejected suitor we will refer to as "Henry". George therefore consulted a (male) white witch at Somerton. In what follows, *her* stands for "he" or "his". "Her told un [him] to goo whoam an' goo to the blacksmith an' get a *new* [my italic] nail, an' not to let thick [that] nail out of her hand till her'd a zeed un ['him', that is, Henry] make a track, then her were to take an' nail down the track." George did as he was told, and Henry "did goo limping vrom that time, and George's sister she got well." Henry, on the other hand, "wer' took very bad" and died. Anxious to look into the matter, George's wife gained access to the laying-out of Henry's mortal remains, "an' zhure enough there wer' a place right under his voot, as if so be a nail had been hammered into un." (Elworthy, 1895, pp. 84-85). Particularly interesting for us is not only that the nail, specially made by the blacksmith, apparently for a penny, is new, but that it must not leave George's hand, so that it will in effect not touch the ground until it has fulfilled its purpose of spiking Henry's footprint.

From as far away as Siberia comes an analogous belief attested among the Russian population of Lake Baikal, to the effect that the best remedy against sorcery was a needle *that had not yet been used for sewing* (my italics). Kept on one's person, it rendered all magic harmless. If a witch came to one's house, the needle must be stuck in the door, as a result of which she could not leave. A similar procedure would also prevent her from entering (Bolonev, 1992, pp. 75-76).

What emerges from these reports is that a nail that has been prevented from touching the ground is much the same as a new or unused nail, otherwise known as a *maiden* nail. Underlying all this is the belief that purity, newness, "maidenliness", are obligatory for ritual purposes. Of course the word "maidenly" refers primarily to persons without blemish, innocent young children for instance, or mature persons free from taint. An excellent example, one of many from Devon and elsewhere, is provided by the nine unmarried, and therefore unblemished, females from whom were collected nine sixpences to be made into a

silver ring, this to be worn by a man from Chudleigh so that he would no longer suffer from fits (*DS*, p. 328).

In folk belief the concept of maidenliness can transcend the human sphere and extend to objects such as nails, as we have seen. A striking and by no means uncommon example is provided by the *maiden tree*, defined by men skilled in woodcraft as “a self-sown tree, that has neither been transplanted nor lopped in any way” (*Hand*, p. 12; cf. Barnes, 1996, p. 80; *EDD*, 4, p.11; *OED*, 9, p. 209); in fact, as W. Pengelly put it, “a tree with which man has had nothing to do.” (*TDA*, 9, 1877, 94). Such a tree, nearly always an ash, was much used in southern England in a cure for hernia in young children. Here is an example provided by a gamekeeper called W. French, who was questioned about “some peculiarity” in ash saplings in a wood at Spitchwick near Ashburton in the 1880s. With evidently perfect faith in his reply to the questions, French reported that, when a young infant was afflicted with rupture, a small maiden ash was split for a length of five or six feet down the middle, as it stood growing in the wood. The split halves were then forced asunder, and the squalling infant was passed three times in the same direction through the opening, in an attempt to cure the defect. The tree was then restored to its natural shape, usually, one may add, by being bound round, and as it throve, so did the child (*TDA*, 8, 1876, 54). Whether in the wood at Spitchwick there still grow ash-trees with “some peculiarity” I cannot say.

An account produced some time after 1944 (Thorne, n.d., p. 51), relating to Wellington in Somerset, close to the boundary with Devon, may be selected from many to provide us with a third example that will be useful in giving a further impression of the restrictions surrounding the passing-through procedure, and of how these could vary from one instance to another. We note in particular the belief that the youthfulness of those performing the rite, a girl and a boy, makes them “maidens” in our sense of the word:

“The belief in the efficacy of passing a child through a split ash tree for the cure of hernia is deep-rooted in Somerset and Devon. The idea and practice is to take the child out in the early morning, when the dew is on the grass and the ash sapling grown from seed and never topped must be split for a length of about three feet then prized open. The child – naked – must be passed through the split from east to west, handed in by a maiden and received by a boy. The split tree is then bound up again with much care, and if it continues to grow and the split heals over the child will be cured; if the tree dies, the child will not be cured.”

The writer tells us that this was done on Monument Hill “some seventy years ago” – in other words in the mid-1870s or later. Rather more remarkable is that the procedure was being carried out as recently as in the 1920s. The author’s evidence for this is a split ash some twenty years old at the time of writing, which will have been some time after 1944. It is, or was, at West Buckland, just past the school.

Our fourth example, collected in the late nineteenth century from a gentleman living near North Petherwin to the north west of Launceston, and much persuaded of the cure’s efficacy, refers to an ash, but does not state that it must be a maiden. Nevertheless, there are other interesting features. One is that the cure is to be carried out on a particular day, namely Good Friday. Although this is unusual if not unique in the West Country at least, it does

remind us that “occasional” customs can become “seasonal” customs, tied to one festival or another. Another feature is that the patient must, as is quite common, be treated before sunrise, but also, much more unusually, before he or she is washed. The text runs as follows (Chope, *TDA*, 68, 1936, 239-240, originally published in *Notes and Gleanings*, 2, 1879):

“Find a promising young ash tree, about four or five inches through. Split the tree east and west, open it with wedges, so as to pass the child or person through, and on Good Friday, before the sun rises or the patient is washed, pass naked through the place thus opened in the tree, the mother standing the east side, reaching the child or person through the tree to the father, he passing it round north to the mother three times. This being done take out the wedges and drive two or three nails through the tree and bind it tight with straw binds.”

The little-noticed matter of washing or not washing requires some attention. Looking at the text we detect an apparent paradox. Ritual purity normally equates with washing and cleanliness, but not so here. An account of a passing-through rite from Shaugh in Devon will perhaps cast a little light, for here the patient must, before being handed through the split ash, be washed for three successive mornings in dew from the leaves of the “charmed tree” (*DS*, p. 6). Clearly, as in our previous example, conventional washing would be incompatible with ritual purity, which has little to do with hygiene in its everyday sense.

In an account concerning a nineteenth century South Molton healer of king’s evil, alias scrofula, we have an explicit reference to washing and not washing. This man acquired his powers through being, as a newborn child, placed out in the snow before being washed for the first time. As a grown man he would visit a sufferer every Wednesday morning for nine weeks, before that person had washed, eaten, or drunk. The healer would *strike* (“lightly stroke”) the affected area nine times with his hand, and would continue the treatment for the full nine weeks, even if the disease had already disappeared before the end of that period. Compare a mid-nineteenth century account of three Devonport sisters, one an eleventh, one a ninth, and the other a seventh daughter. All three were able to touch for the king’s evil, though both healer and patient had to be unwashed and fasting (Davies, 1998, 48).

A rather different example springs to mind. On August 10th, 1876, the *North Devon Journal* published a letter dated August 7th, 1876 from High Street, Barnstaple, in which one E.P., who seems to have been an apothecary or the like, writes as follows:

“Last Friday an old woman came into my place and requested to have a *new* bottle and a *new* cork [my italics]. On their being handed to her, she said, ‘The bottle has been washed out; I want a bottle that has had no water in it.’ ”

She went on to explain that she had been *witched*, so would take the bottle home, fill it with needles and pins, and cork it tightly down. The pins and needles would then stick in the heart of the person who had *witched* her, and that person would be bound to appear in her presence. She concluded by saying that the same remedy had worked perfectly on a previous occasion (*TDA*, 9, 1877, 97).

Here again, conventional washing and ritual purity do not agree. Sarah Hewett's account (*DS*, p. 195) of how to destroy the power of a witch points in a similar direction, stating that stone jars are required, the contents of which must include the liver of a frog stuck full of *new* pins (my italic). Compare Henderson's account of 1866 from the Teesside of c1830, according to which the heart of a cow allegedly killed by witchcraft must be stuck with nine new nails, nine new pins, and as many new needles (quoted in *DS*, p. 195). In short: what is clean is not necessarily pure, and what is pure and new is certainly not always clean!

We return to the maiden ash. The West Country provides further examples of its medical, or in the present instance veterinary, uses. In 1916, a Mr Rawlence wrote that a few years before, while going over a Dorset farm, probably at Holwell (which I take to be, not the Somerset Holwell near Nunney, but Holywell near Evershot, some twelve miles to the north-west of Dorchester), he had observed the carcass of a prematurely born calf placed high up in the fork of an ash tree in a hedge. Asking the farmer what had led him to place it there, he was told that if a dead calf was placed with its head towards the east in the fork of a "maiden" ash, that is one grown direct from seed, this would prevent other cows in the herd from casting their calves. Further information, elicited from a Mr J. J. Young of Pinford, was to the effect that, when he was a boy, the custom was quite common in the neighbourhood of Glanvilles Wootton in Dorset. Rawlence had also heard of a farmer in the neighbourhood of Wincanton in south Somerset, who was a great believer in the specific. If a cow was known to have cast her calf, all his men would have to turn out and walk the farm till the foetus had been found and placed in an ash tree (Udal, 1922, p. 226, repeated pp. 253-252, with "Holnest" for "Holwell").

Although, as we have seen, the custom is quite well documented for west Dorset and south Somerset, it appears to have been little recorded elsewhere. Opie and Tatem have only two relevant examples (*DS*, p. 65). One is to the effect that, in Danby-in-Cleveland in Yorkshire, the carcass of a lamb would be hung in a tree, properly a thorn, though any fruit- or berry-bearing tree would do. The last case under the correspondent's notice had been a rowan-tree. Opie and Tatem's second example, from the Weald of Sussex, refers to dead horses or calves suspended by the four legs from the horizontal branch of an unspecified tree. In neither example is the reason for the custom given, though we may speculate that, as in the West Country accounts, it is to prevent further miscarriages. The third account given by Opie and Tatem is from Norfolk, and is not strictly relevant, since here we have not a foetus, but an afterbirth placed in a whitethorn, to prevent milk fever and other ills. Similarly, in Hampshire as recently as 1939, suspending the afterbirth of a calf from a hawthorn was seen as "a preventative of fever for the cow" (Vickery, 1995, p. 170). We note in passing the role played in such customs by thorn and rowan, trees no less "magical" than the maiden ash in the Dorset narratives.

Returning now to the rite of passing-through, we find that, although it has been recorded in a number of European countries, from Scandinavia to Germany, France, Italy and Spain (Hand, 1980, *passim*), nowhere do we to my knowledge come across the notion that, of the different trees used, often an oak and never an ash, the specimen chosen should be a maiden. Looking westward, however, to Newfoundland, we find that a kind of mountain ash,

Pyrus americana, is, or was, favoured. It is the maiden dogwood, a specimen being selected that “grows alone and never blossoms”. The rite must be performed before sunrise on May 1st in the presence of the parents of the ruptured child. Trees of the type described are “sequestered plants upon which human eyes have not fallen” (Hand, pp. 12, 137; cf. *DNE*, p. 145). An idea of the awe they inspired is conveyed by the statement: “I’d as lief cut my right hand off ... as cut down a maiden dog-berry tree; a man is sure to die as does it.” (*DNE*, p. 319). In passing, we also note another “maiden” tree imbued with magical powers in Newfoundland. It is the *maiden-fir*, neither more nor less than seven sprays of which were boiled to produce a substance likewise known as *maiden-fir*. This was used as a cure for eczema (*DNE*, pp. 319-320).

Alongside aspects already considered, the concept of ritual purity can extend to colour, as in Alabama according to Wayland D. Hand, where a *madstone*, that is, a concretion of hair gained from the stomach of a solid-coloured cow that has never given birth and thus qualifies as a maiden, is used to combat hydrophobia. The requirement that the colour of animals used in cures should be “solid”, that is, unmixed with any other colour, can be found elsewhere, and especially in respect of black cats whose coat should not contain a single white hair. Here again our authority is Wayland Hand, who tells us that in Newfoundland such a cat is credited with curing styes, in Nova Scotia epileptic fits, and in the German tradition of Pennsylvania consumption and erysipelas (Hand, 1980, pp. 195-196). As early as 1607, Edward Topsell, in his history of four-footed beasts which draws on still earlier works, recommends that, for afflictions of the eye, the head of a black cat “which hath not a spot of another colour in it”, should be burnt to a powder and then blown with a quill into the affected eye three times a day (*DS*, pp. 59-60; cf. Hand, pp. 189-190).

We continue, not with a superstition, but with a narrative from Herefordshire that combines the idea of purity of colour with other purity motifs we have discussed. The story is about a church bell, called Great Tom of Kentsham, that on its way from beyond the sea to Kentsham, which may be Kinsham or Kentchurch in Herefordshire, was lost overboard in deep water somewhere near our shores. Asked what should be done to recover Great Tom, a cunning-man replied that the bell should be hauled out of the water and up a nearby hill, but in no ordinary way: “Take six yoke of white milch kine which have never borne the yoke,” he said, “and take fresh withy bands which have never been used before, and let no man speak a word neither good nor bad, until the bell is at the top of the hill.” Everything was proceeding in accordance with this when the requirement of ritual silence was broken, the withy bands snapped, and Great Tom bounded back into the waves, never to be seen again (Leather, 1912, pp. 170-171).

It is interesting that we have here “white milch kine”, because a little farther on we find “milch white kine”, which I consider to be the “correct” version, meaning “milk-white kine”, kine that we may safely take to be of a pure white colour. In another version, located at Marden in Herefordshire, the reference is to “twelve white freemartins” (Leather, 1912, pp. 168-169), a *freemartin* being a cow that has never borne young and never will, and hence a “maiden” in our sense of the word. A further relevant point is that the kine had never borne the yoke, and were harnessed with fresh withy bands “which had never been used”. Here

again the concept of “maidenliness” extends beyond its everyday sense, embracing the idea of “new” and “unused”.

Just as, harking back to the beginning of this exploration, we recall that water required for ritual purposes must be taken fresh and unsullied from its source, so in the thinking of our ancestors ritual fire must be no less pure and pristine. Such virgin fire, obtained through the toilsome friction of wood against wood until combustion took place, was known as *needfire* alias *forced fire*, the Gaelic counterpart of which was *tin eigin*. Here is an early eighteenth century account of how *tin eigin*, thought to be a remedy for the plague or murrain in cattle, was produced in the Western Isles of Scotland (*EDD*, 6, p. 155):

“All the fires in the parish were extinguished and then eighty-one married men ... took two great planks of wood, and nine of ’em were employed by turns, who by their repeated efforts rubbed one of the planks against the other until the heat thereof produced fire; and from this forc’d fire each family is supply’d with new fire, which is no sooner kindled than a pot full of water is quickly set on it and afterwards sprinkled upon the people infected with the plague, or upon the cattle that have the murrain.”

This is highly interesting for us, not least because virgin fire is used to produce water that is as pure and undefiled as the fire itself and, one may say, no less pure than the water from Christ’s well at Falkirk and the well of Airth, mentioned in our opening paragraphs.

Alternatively, the cattle threatened with disease, rather than being sprinkled with water as in our Hebridean account, were driven through the smoke produced by the fire, as in an account from Cumberland, according to which during the cattle plague of 1841-42 the needfire was kindled, and then kept alive for weeks, so that the cattle could be driven through its smoke again and again (*EDD*, 4, p. 244). Writing of the same county in her *A Description of the English Lakes*, the social theorist Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) tells of one farmer who, after treating his beasts with needfire, sent his ailing wife through the smoke. So far as we know, the last place in Cumberland to see the use of needfire was Troutbeck in 1851 (Rollinson, 1997, p. 111). It is unlikely that the practice survived much longer elsewhere.

Although not mentioned in all descriptions, an essential feature was that, as in the Western Isles, fires that were already burning in the houses of a parish must, without exception, since no longer regarded as new and undefiled, be quenched and then relit from the freshly generated virgin needfire. Other requirements, such as the Hebridean one that nine times nine men be brought together to generate the fire, are likewise of magical significance, nine being a magical number, but are not essential to the rite. Many crop up elsewhere, and hence strike us as familiar. Thus in parts of Germany the transaction must begin at sunrise, must be performed in silence, or with equipment that is new and otherwise unused, while the practitioners are for instance chaste youths who are twins, or at least brothers or individuals sharing the same given name (*DM*, 1, pp. 500 ff. and 3, p. 174). This makes one wonder, incidentally, whether in Martin Martin’s Hebridean account the nine times nine *married* men should strictly speaking be *unmarried*.

So far our examples have been from the north of Britain, but also from northern Germania. Many survivals have been recorded from these northern locations, but more southerly regions can also contribute to the overall picture. In Appenzell and other parts of Switzerland, herd boys plagued by unremitting thick fog in the mountain pastures where they watched their cattle would play a game rooted in an archaic way of thinking that personified the fog and made use of needfire to banish it. The game, called *castrating the fog*, involved jamming a cylindrical piece of wood between the wooden doorpost and half-closed door of a mountain hut, wrapping a cord round the cylindrical piece of wood, and vigorously pulling the ends of the cord back and forth until the extremities of the rotating wooden cylinder, overheating from the friction to which they were subjected, eventually burst into flame. At the same time a verbal charm was intoned that threatened the fog, seen as a male personage or even the devil, with castration. At this the fog took fright, and rapidly disappeared.

Although the Swiss pastime of castrating the fog is excellently documented (*DM*, 1, pp. 504-505; Röhrich, 1991-1992, 2, p. 1086), there is no doubt that the production of virgin fire on which it depends becomes less common as we travel southwards from the north of Germany. Is there a similar decline as we travel south in Britain? Certainly the production of virgin fire through the friction of two pieces of wood is amply recorded for Scotland (e.g. *EDD*, 2, p. 455; 4, pp. 243-244; 6, p. 155), and we also have Cumbrian accounts, two of which have already been quoted. After that, until we reach southern Wales there is complete silence on the matter, broken in dramatic fashion by the folklorist Marie Trevelyan, who gives us an account of needfires in the Vale of Glamorgan that is almost too good to be true. Detailed though this is, one is struck by the rather offhand way in which she describes the production of the virgin flame, simply saying: "One of the men would then take two bits of oak, and rub them together until a flame was kindled." (Hutton, 1996, pp. 223-224). Compare for instance the rather more convincing Scottish accounts according to which fourscore and more men would labour long and hard to achieve ignition. It is perhaps understandable that Trevelyan's reliability as a witness, here and elsewhere, has been called into question (Hutton, 1996, pp. 420-421 and p. 517, note 33).

Less surprising and indeed perfectly plausible is that for Trevelyan needfire is an essential part of May Day celebrations. Surveying the many accounts of needfire, we find that it could be generated as a cure when epidemics broke out, or, as in the Swiss example just given, when the atmospheric conditions made it necessary. As a preventive measure, it was, however, often integrated with seasonal bonfire celebrations such as those of May Day or Midsummer. Although, now transferring our attention to the West Country, we apparently find no mention anywhere of needfire, we can at least hold out the possibility that, where and if cattle were driven "for luck" through May Day or Midsummer fires, these fires were originally needfires, ignited through the friction of one piece of wood against another. All we can do in the circumstances is list those West Country festivals in which, in the interest of their wellbeing over the coming year, cattle were driven through the smoke and flames of fires that were not on the face of it needfires.

Our first witness is Mrs Bray, who writes (1, 1838, pp. 281-282):

“In the counties of Cornwall and Devon, ‘May fires’ were long numbered amongst the sports of Mayday, though I believe in *our* county [Devon] they are now fallen into total oblivion. So likewise is that very ancient custom with the peasantry of the Moor, to collect together a quantity of straw, to pile it up on one of the heaps of stone, and then setting fire to it to force their cows to pass over the expiring embers, in order to make them fruitful in milk, and to preserve them from disease during the rest of the year. As nothing has been heard of this custom of late years I conclude it is extinct.”

Our next authority is Mrs H. P. Whitcombe, who in her *Bygone Days* of 1874 mentions a Midsummer custom “formerly practised by the peasantry, of setting fire to a heap of straw and forcing the cows to walk over the expiring embers, in the belief that it would preserve the animals from disease, and cause a good supply of milk.” (quoted by Chope, *TDA*, 70, 1938, 384, from Mrs H. P. Whitcombe, *Bygone Days*, 1872, p. 30). The odd thing about this brief account is that it does not differ significantly from Bray’s, and might well have been copied from it, with the slight (!) difference that Whitcombe is referring to Midsummer, whereas Bray is concerned with May Day. There can be no doubt that our third witness, Ruth Tongue, is referring to Midsummer Day when she gives us the following information, obtained from a farmer’s daughter at Holford in the Quantocks in 1915: “An old farmer used to pass a lighted branch over and under all our cows and horses, and singed the calves and foals. He refused to tell us why.” (Tongue, 1965, p. 166).

Finally, for the nineteenth century historian John Mitchell Kemble, an expression for virgin fire obtained through the friction of wood on wood is *will-fire*, and this kind of fire, he claims, was used on the occasion of cattle epidemics, not only in Scotland, but also in Devonshire “within the memory of man”. No authority is given, nor is further relevant information provided (Kemble, 1876, p. 360, note 2). The reference to *will-fire* is, however of some interest. Kemble seems to have taken the term from an account in the *Mirror* for June 24th, 1826, which describes a Perthshire farmer’s attempt to cope with a cattle epidemic through the use of *will-fire*, “that is fire obtained by friction”.

This *will-fire*, clearly a variant of *wildfire* and a synonym for *needfire*, appears with the meaning “needfire” in no dictionary I have consulted. Compare, however, Frazer, writing in *The Golden Bough* (1922, chap. 62, p. 638): “Sometimes the need-fire was known as “wild fire”, to distinguish it no doubt from the tame fire produced by mere ordinary methods. Among Slavonic peoples it is called ‘living fire’.” Pursuing this, we find that during both human and animal epidemics in Siberia, “living fire” (*zhivoi ogon*) was obtained by friction of wood upon wood and would then be carried through a village, “fumigating and driving out the foulness”. Our authority continues: “Living fire, used during epizotic diseases as an apotropaic and purificatory agent, has a function similar to that of *healing and living water* in Russian fables,” all of which, he claims, shows the great antiquity of such ideas. He also points out other uses to which “living fire” was regularly put (Bolonev, 1992, p. 80). Especially important in Slavic countries was Kupalo’s Day or Midsummer, when celebrants leapt through bonfires, the fire of which was “new”, obtained by friction rather than from an existing flame (Ivanits, 1989, p. 10).

Clearly, expressions such as *wildfire* and *living fire* are highly significant. Wild fire is the opposite of tame or “domesticated” fire. Living fire is the opposite of “dead” fire. “Dead” in this context does not mean “extinguished”. Rather, it refers to fire that still burns, but has through constant use been exhausted and sapped of its spiritual strength. To summarise Grimm: fire that had been used again and again was considered profane, unsuitable for sacred purposes. Just as water for sacred purposes must be drawn direct from its source, so fire for such use must be new and full of life (*DM*, 1, p. 501). What we now need, having sketched an outline, is to fill it in, little by little, with further evidence from the West Country in particular.

Abbreviations

- DM** Grimm, J., *Deutsche Mythologie*, 4th edn, Meyer, Berlin, 1875-1878, rpt. Graz, Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1968.
- DNE** Story, G. M., W. J. Kirwin, and J. D. A. Widdowson, eds, *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, Toronto, Buffalo, and London, University of Toronto Press, 1982.
- DS** Opie, I., and M. Tatem, *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.
- EDD** Wright, J., *The English Dialect Dictionary*, London, Henry Frowde, 1898-1905, rpt London, Oxford University Press, 1970.
- OED** Simpson, J. A., and E. S. C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.
- TDA** Devonshire Association, *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and the Arts*.

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