

Notes and Queries

Doolie

An absentee from Katharine Briggs's *A Dictionary of Fairies* is *doolie*, a Scots word for a hobgoblin, spectre, or bogeyman. The *Scottish National Dictionary* quotes an Aberdeen source of 1908: "For him the world swarmed with preternatural beings ... to all of which he applied the generic name of *doolies*." A second sense of *doolie* is "scarecrow". Note in this connection *potato doolie* or *tatie-doolie*. A third sense is "hardened discharge from the nostrils". Compare the synonym *boakie*, *bockie*, along with the note in *SND* to the effect that this is probably associated with *bockie*, "hobgoblin". All this brings us to the widespread *bo* for a hobgoblin or sprite, alongside north Yorkshire *bo-crow* and the like for "scarecrow", and the west Yorkshire *bowman*, probably for *bo-man*, meaning "dried moisture of the nostrils" (J. Wright, *English Dialect Dictionary*).

Dialects of German provide us with similar series of meanings. See for instance *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, which has as a headword the Swiss-German *Böög*, with the relevant senses 1. "spectre", 2. "scare-crow-like figure", "frightening effigy", 3. "*mucus nasi*". The expression *Popel* carries a similar range of meanings. The Danish *bussemand*, corresponding to German *Butzemann*, "bogey", means "bogeyman" but also "semi-solid or solid mucus removed from the nostril".

In my experience, a child afflicted by *bogeymen* or *jim crows* would be subjected to thorough and humiliating attacks, the principal weapon of which was a maternal handkerchief well moistened with saliva.

J. B. Smith

Bamullo

Against *bamullo* (alias *bomullo* or *bomulloch*) in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* we find the saying *to dance, laugh, or sing Bamullo*, glossed as "to make one's mirth into sorrow", "to make one cry". As an example of its use there follows the quotation "I'll gar ['make'] you lach, sing, or dance Bamullo," apparently used as a threat when children refuse to go to sleep at bedtime. According to the *Scottish National Dictionary*, the expression is probably from Gaelic *bo*, a reduced form of *bòcan*, "hobgoblin", and *molach*, "hairy". There follows a reference to "a little familiar spirit, a little hairy creature ... called Meg Mullach", who followed the Grant family and served them, adroitly performing innumerable tasks. See for instance Katharine Briggs on Meg Mullach etc. in her *Dictionary of Fairies*, pp. 284-285.

In *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue (up to 1700)* we find *ramulloch*, possibly an error for *bamulloch*, later *bomulloch* etc. The quotation given is from a manuscript of 1568: “Syne gart all the bairnis sing Ramulloch in thair beddis.”

Although portrayed as an excellent housekeeper, Meg Mullach had a more sinister side to her nature. She was the wife or mother of the Broonie, who in the mill at Glen Fincastle near Tummel Bridge had boiling water thrown over him by an interloper, on whom Meg Mullach in the end took terrible revenge. See “Maggie Moloch” in Katharine Briggs’s *Dictionary of Folk-Tales*, B1, pp. 307-308.

For a Canadian variant that lacks the sequel with Maggie Moloch’s revenge, see Beverly J. Rasporich, *Made-in-Canada Humour: Literary, Folk and Popular Culture* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2015, p. 100). Here, instead of having boiling water thrown over him, Maggie Moloch’s son is beaten to death with a stick.

J. B. Smith

“Killing the Devil”

As often as not, the dialects and folklore of the south-western peninsula of England are best viewed against their wider linguistic and cultural background, as the following note will perhaps help to show. Its starting point is a story collected by Alfred Williams in the Vale of White Horse in Berkshire, and beautifully transcribed by him. Since even those with a good grasp of the closely related dialects of more westerly parts may well experience the odd difficulty here, I append a translation into Standard English, with a few notes. As Williams tells us, there were, when he was writing in the early 1920s, those who still remembered the old times, and could entertain you with interesting tales and gossip, if you were not above sitting in the chimney-corner and conversing with them at one or other of the local inns. The inn he takes us to for the present scene is the Baker’s Arms at Uffington, where those in colloquy are the shepherd, the carter, and the blacksmith. It is the blacksmith who narrates, prompted by a question from the carter. His tale and the variants that follow are labelled alphabetically.

Variant A. Carter: “Dost mind when the owl’ bwoy killed the devul, blacksmith? That was Aishbury way, was’n’ it?” ... Blacksmith: “Aa! Tha send un up aater the coulter, as we’d a mended, bi night, an tried to vrighten in, but tha couldn’ do that; ’e was too derrin’. A ’ed to come along the grounds there to Odstone, an one an ’em put a cow-skin awver is ’ed, ’arns an’ all, an’ set an the stile under the tharnin boughs. When the owl’ bwoy come up an’ sid un a top o’ the stile, a sed: ‘Out o’ the rawd, an let I get awver’, but t’other un set still, an’ never squatched a word. ‘Out o’ the rawd, an’ let I get awver’, the owl’ bwoy sed agyen. No answer. Then a ses: ‘If thee dossen’t get out o’ the rawd an’ let I get awver, I’ll fetch tha down wi’ this coulter’, an’ begad if a didn’t, too, an’ killed un, right anuf, an’ went whum an’ telled

'em all a'd bin an' killed the devul, an' thaay went along wi'n an' found matey dead, wi' the cow-skin wrapped all roun' in." ¹

Carter: "Do you remember when the young fellow killed the Devil, blacksmith? That was down Ashbury way, wasn't it?" ... Blacksmith: "Yes! They sent him up [to us at the smithy] at night to collect the coulter that we'd mended, and they tried to frighten him, but they couldn't do that, he was too bold. He had to come through the fields over yonder at Odstone, and one of them put a cow-skin over his [own] head, horns and all, and sat on the stile under the thorn boughs. When the young fellow came up and saw him on top of the stile, he said: 'Out of the way, and let me get over', but the other chap sat still, and never uttered a word. 'Out of the way, and let me get over', the young fellow said again. No answer. Then he says: 'If you don't get out of the way and let me get over, I'll fetch you down with this coulter', and by God if he didn't, too, and killed him, sure enough, and went home and told them all he'd been and killed the Devil, and they went along with him and found matey dead, with the cow-skin wrapped all round him."

Now compare this with an anonymous, non-dialectal variation on the same story. It was published in 1925, some twelve years after the appearance of Williams's version, and is located in the Brendon Hills of West Somerset. Here is a summary:

Variant B. Since the small village of Rodhuish, situated near Croyden Hill in the northern Brendons, had no blacksmith, farmers had to take their implements to Roadwater for repairs. One dark evening, four ploughboys met at Roadwater forge. One was on foot, and carried a coulter that needed sharpening. The other three, who were having their horses shod, played on the superstitious fears to which the pedestrian was prone, telling him he would be sure to meet the Devil as he passed through the wood on his way home. One of the three then quickly rode to his own cart-lin hay to fetch a bullock's hide that was drying there. Wearing this, he went and sat on a gate in a wood through which the lad with the coulter must pass. When the latter reached the gate, there was our horned figure barring the way. "Be 'e the Devil or ba-an't 'e?" said the lad with the coulter. Receiving no answer but groans to this reiterated question, he raised the coulter and brought it down on his tormentor's head, splitting his skull. Although the perpetrator was allegedly tried for manslaughter, we are not told whether he was acquitted. What we are told is that at the age of ninety eight he still believed he had "killed the Devil" some eighty years before, maybe in the 1840s. The impression is given that the anonymous author of the piece obtained all this information in a personal interview with the Devil-slayer, whom he refers to as "my old friend". ²

Whatever the relationship between Alfred Williams's story **A** and its counterpart **B** from the Brendons, they are matched by two further West Country tales that deserve consideration here. The first of these, published in 1992, but dating back to the early twentieth century, is set in Maiden Newton, Dorset, and bears the title "The Prank that Backfired". It runs as follows:

Variant C. "When I was a child in the early years of the [twentieth] century, my father often told the tale about the lad who lived at Maiden Newton, and who was always boasting how he

was afraid of nothing. One night when he was walking home in the dark alone, the other village lads planned to play a joke and catch him out. One of them dressed in a white sheet, lay in wait, and popped up behind a hedge making a screeching noise. The lad, who really wasn't afraid of anything, beat him over the head with the hames from the horse harness he was carrying, and killed him. My father used this as a cautionary tale to warn me, and the other children, not to play foolish pranks.”³

Finally, we come to a variant that appears to owe nothing to oral transmission. Rather, it shows every sign, down to details of topography, of being a retelling of Variant B. It is Ruth Tongue's "The Croydon [sic] Devil Claims His Own", which stands out from other tales in her *Somerset Folklore* in being unattributed. Here, then, we have further evidence, if such is needed, that we are dealing with an adaptation rather than a tradition in its own right.

Variant D. "One evening at Rodhuish [sic] Forge a local bully – a red-haired butcher's boy – fell foul of a young plough-boy from Croydon and thought he would give him a scare. In the talk round the smithy fire he began to tell tales of the Croydon Hill Devil, who appeared on the lane with horns and tail, groaning. Everyone drew away from him, for it was unlucky talk, and soon he went away to the butcher's, where a bullock had been lately flayed and he knew he could find horns and a tail to suit his purpose. The other lads were reluctant to go home in the dark after the name that had been spoken, but the Croydon lad had three miles to go, and he set out alone with the plough coulter, which he had brought to have mended, over his shoulder. The group had not yet broken up when he came running back like one mad, with a blood-stained plough coulter in his hands.

'I've a-killed the Devil', he said. 'There he were on gate a-groaning at I, horns an' all. I asks 'n be he the Devil or no, 'cause I'd a-got to take plough coulter to farm. But he bellows that terrible afore I knows it I just up an' hits un with coulter so 'ard's I could, 'n her fell down dead. I've a-killed the Devil!'

The blacksmith had a good guess who the Devil had been, so he and a few more from the village went up the hill to look for the body. At the gate to Croydon Lane they found a bullock's hide with a great gash on its skull, but the butcher's boy was never seen again. The Devil of Croydon Hill had taken his own. On stormy nights the butcher's boy can still be heard groaning and shrieking, and when the Devil rides over Croydon Hill the butcher's boy is among the souls that follow him.

This is said to have happened rather over a hundred years ago. I have met people who knew the old man 'who had killed the Devil' when he was a boy.”⁴

A comparison of Variant D with its presumed prototype Variant B reveals a series of features that clearly bear the mark of Ruth Tongue as a "storyteller reworking fragments of tradition, not as a reliable collector".⁵ Thus, at the beginning we are told that the plough-boy's tormentor is "a local bully – a red-haired butcher's boy". In Tongue's writings, red hair is a recurring motif. Since the Vikings and Judas had red hair, it is for her something negative and suspicious. It is thus also well suited to a bully.⁶ The fact that the bully is a butcher's boy

is presumably calculated to make him even less sympathetic, while conveniently giving him access to paraphernalia such as bullocks' hides. But it is the gratuitously pseudo-mythological ending that best signals Tongue's intervention, with the information that, following his death at the hands of the plough-boy, the butcher boy is never seen again, though on stormy nights he can be heard groaning and shrieking, as he joins the lost souls in the Devil's train.⁷ Tongue then finishes with the observation that, though all this is said to have happened over a century before, "I [my emphasis] have met people who knew the old man 'who had killed the Devil' when he [viz. the old man] was a boy." Here, although Tongue is uncritically copying the first-person personal pronoun "I" from Variant B, the casual reader is left with the assumption that it refers to herself, and not to the author of her source.⁸ Finally, comparing the opening words of D with those of B, we note that, in the former, Tongue has given Rodhuish a forge, though in B the village is stated to be without one, so that farmers needing to get their implements repaired have to make their way to the blacksmith's shop at Roadwater.

Unlike Variant D, Variant C is a genuine product of oral transmission that shows interesting features when compared with Variants A and B. Unlike these, its trappings are those of an ordinary present-day ghost story. The only relic of the ghost-killer's visit to a smithy is the hames that in other variants is a coulter, while the white sheet he drapes himself in is a rather more conventional version of the cow's/bullock's hide of A and B. Of particular interest is that C functions as a cautionary tale, warning children against playing foolish pranks with white sheets, so much more familiar and easily obtainable nowadays than a bullock's hide would be. Further, we note that while in C the "ghost" pops up from behind a hedge, the "Devil" of A sits on a stile, and his counterpart in B sits on a gate. This reminds us of the close traditional relationship between denizens of the otherworld and boundaries such as hedges and fences, but also the gaps in these represented by stiles and gates. As Alwyn and Brinley Rees say, "... boundaries between territories, like boundaries between years and between seasons, are lines along which the supernatural intrudes through the surface of existence ..." "Stiles", they continue, "were favourite perches for ghosts"⁹ – and, one might add on the strength of the material under discussion, for the Devil himself.

Notes

1. Alfred Williams, *Villages of the White Horse*, London, Duckworth, 1913, rpt. Stroud, Nonsuch Publishing, 2007, p. 234.
2. *Echoes of Exmoor: A Record of the Discussions and Doings of the Men of Exmoor Club*, 3rd series, London, Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, and Kent, 1925, pp. 80-84.
3. Somerset Federation of Women's Institutes, *Somerset within Living Memory*, Newbury, Countryside Books, 1992, p. 71.
4. R. L. Tongue, *Somerset Folklore*, ed. K. M. Briggs, London, The Folk-Lore Society, 1965, pp. 125-126; Katharine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970-71, rpt. London, Routledge, 1991, B, 1, pp. 59-60.
5. Jacqueline Simpson, and Steve Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 363.

6. I owe this point to personal communications from Bob and Jacqueline Patten in the early 1990s. On Ruth Tongue's "recurrent themes and phrases" and her attitude to her sources, see Simpson and Roud, p. 363. For a study of Tongue, see Bob Patten, and Jacqueline Patten, "Ruth Tongue (1898-1981)", in Carmen Blacker, and Hilda Ellis Davidson, eds, *Women in Tradition: A Neglected Group of Folklorists*, Durham, North Carolina, Carolina Academic Press, 2000, pp. 205-216.
7. Cf. Briggs, 1991, where relevant motifs are listed, including "Soul carried off by the Devil" and "the Wild Hunt".
8. This point was made in John B. Smith, "The Devil of Croyden Hill: Kinship, Fiction, Fact, Tradition", *Folklore*, vol. 116, no. 1 (April, 2005), 66-74, which forms the basis for the present note.
9. Alwyn Rees, and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1961, p. 94.

J. B. Smith

Foal-Melts

Our subject is an item by Theo Brown in her Folklore Report for *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* for 1966, in which she quotes an advertisement in the *Western Morning News* for December 11th, 1963 under "Horses &c Wanted": "URGENTLY WANTED Small Piece of Flesh found in mouth newborn colt, size of fig. Box —." Brown suggests that this is the foal-melt or mucus-plug sometimes found in the mouths of newborn colts and requiring immediate removal to prevent it being swallowed. She adds that the object can be used as a charm, "though its purpose is not known". The following note is based on information likewise published in the *Transactions* (Smith, 2009), supplemented by material that has since come to light.

Although the primary sense of *milt*, alias *melt*, is "spleen", the term can also be used to mean "roe or spawn of male fish", or, more interestingly for present purposes, "foal's mucus-plug", as we have just seen. That such plugs are no new discovery is shown by a quotation from a work of 1587 on animal husbandry: "If a colt when he is fold [foaled] do not cast his milt, husbandmen say he will not live long, ... some colt [sic] will cast two miltes." Moreover, from a work of 1599 comes: "In the first foalinge of a Mare, her Foale hath ... on the tung a peece of fleshe which resembleth the Milt of an Oxe, and of some is also called a Milt." Finally, if we take literally a remark in a work dated 1677, the colt can get rid of the plug by sneezing (?): "Horsemen have not agreed what that is the foal is said to sneeze, which they call a milt." (*Oxford English Dictionary, OED*)

To put all this into some sort of perspective, we now consult a publication issued by an American saddle-club union and containing an article on the matter in hand (Ritter). In the spring of 1985, when preparing for her mare to give birth, the author found in a book unnamed by her a paragraph describing *milt*, *melt* or *melch* as similar in appearance to liver and present in the mouth of some new-born foals. When her mare foaled a few months later, she did indeed find an object with the colour and texture of raw liver, about three inches wide

and four to four-and-a-half inches long, but of unspecified thickness. Such milts are held in the foal's mouth till birth, and then quickly ejected. The author hypothesises that they prevent fluid from entering the foal's lungs during gestation. Although the milt is often not found, and is hence so little known about that even experienced breeders can be ignorant of it, the author claims since to have located it in roughly four out of seven births, lying a short distance from the afterbirth. She suggests that such milts do not occur in, say, calves, "because the birth of a foal is much more forceful, making the foal more susceptible to fluid intake".

Continuing to quote her unnamed authority, the author adds that a milt of the type described "should be dried and kept in the clothing of the person who finds it, or placed on the roof of the stable", the belief being that it is endowed with "magic powers, destroying all evil forces that pursue the carriers or the inmates of the stable". She concludes, presumably on the strength of personal experience, that anyone finding a foal-milt and wishing to save it should allow it to dry uncovered, and not in an airtight container. If preserved as recommended, it will be odourless. Otherwise it will be in the owner's interest (!) to discard it very soon. The accompanying photograph shows a roughly oval, liver-coloured object that might at first glance be taken for a flattish pebble (Ritter, 1-2).

A key to at least some of the questions arising so far is to be found in a word of Greek origin, namely *hippomanes*, literally "horse-frenzy". According to classical authors, the reference was to a slimy humour flowing from a mare in heat, and employed to excite desire in humans, but also to a small black membrane said to occur on the forehead of a newborn foal, and used in the making of love-potions (*OED*; Beitzl, p. 607 (headword *Nutzen*); Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli, cols 73-74; Lewis and Short, p. 856). Much later, at least from the latter part of the sixteenth century to judge by the above-cited *OED* references to *milt*, the term *hippomanes* will have come to apply to something by now more familiar, namely a milt-like object also known as *foal's bread* or *foal's tongue* and found on the tongues of new-born foals, but generally swallowed by them at their first intake of breath. If it is indeed regularly swallowed, this will explain the fact that the *foal-melt* remained little known, even among experts. What has been said so far will also suggest why, where known, it is much sought after, presumably for aphrodisiac or other arcane purposes, but also perhaps in homeopathy. Valuable anatomical information, good illustrations, and a wideranging bibliography have been provided relatively recently by a specialist in the field in a paper on the origin and development of hippomanes in horse and zebra (King). Folkloric aspects require further investigation, as will be clear not least from the following accounts.

In Lincolnshire and quite possibly elsewhere the foal-melt was known as the cud. In a report by Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* (*EDD*) correspondent E[dward]P[eacock] in the north-west of the county, we read that the cud, an enlargement of the epithelium of the tongue of a horse's foetus, slips off at birth, and is found only in the young of single-hoofed animals. Peacock continues: "The people here think it to be the organ by which the unborn animal sucks, which is of course nonsense. On this account it is very frequently called the 'teat'." From Wright's *EDD* correspondent R. E. C[ole] in the south-west of the county

comes a description of the tissue as hard and black, “and about the size of one’s finger”. (EDD, 1, p. 832)

A Welsh reference to the foal-melt or cud now gains our attention. It is to be found against the headword *tafod yr ebol* (literally “colt’s tongue”) in a work on the Demetian dialect of North Pembrokeshire. In the commentary the item under discussion is described as the fleshy tissue attaching to a colt’s forehead when it is cast. There follows the information that the old-time farmer would carefully remove it and nail it to the stable door, “to ensure that good luck would attend the colt”. (Morris, pp. 288-289).

Here now is a Scottish-Gaelic account recorded on the Hebridean island of Barra in 1976:

“When a foal is born, it sneezes before trying to get to its feet so as to dislodge *dubh-liath* [looks like cormorant or rabbit’s liver, about the size of a crown coin] from its nostril. [The informant] kept one to prove its existence to young people. If it is kept for seven years, a four-leafed clover will grow from it. A person searching for four-leafed clover will not find one.” (Vickery, p. 74)

This is supplemented in an audio recording entirely in Gaelic provided by the informant John MacNeill and summarised in English as follows:

Foals sneezing at birth. When a foal is born it sneezes to dislodge the *dubh-liath* [flank, spleen] from its nostrils. If kept seven years a four-leafed clover will grow out of it. Discussion about the clover and how cows are different to horses because of the *dubh-liath*. (MacNeill).

There follow two accounts that I have selected from information sent in by readers of *Horse and Hound* in 2010 and displayed on the magazine’s website (see reference below). The first, received at 12.30 pm on April 13th, 2010, is from a correspondent identified as Beatrice 5:

“I found the hippopotame (can’t spell) [!] when my mare gave birth and it was kinda greenish/yellow colour slippery like kidney shaped thing. I then promptly lost it [sic] somewhere in the deep straw but at least I had picked it up and [sic] seen it:) It was a reasonable size though about 10 cm long by about 4 cm I’d guess.”

Here now is the second, received at 01.15 pm on April 13th, 2010 from a correspondent identified as todd 1074:

“I was always told it was lucky to find the melt ?? .. I lost a foal 13 years ago when it was born in the sac and found the melt which we kept. When it dried it dried in the shape of a perfect heart. Later that year we ... saw a foal with the exact same heart on his head and bought him. He turned out to be the most amazing horse I ever owned and I still have him today.”

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