We'll a' get up at the first toot

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I HAVE good news today, for Ross-shire readers in particular. Hugh Miller's books are being reprinted. The first to appear, earlier this year, was his autobiographical "My Schools and Schoolmasters". I have quoted it in these columns before, especially his wonderful description of what happened in Cromarty one Thursday in 1838 when the Queen's coronation celebrations coincided with the sacramental Fast Day.

His "Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland" has now come out. This is better news still, because in my experience second-hand copies of it are not so easy to find. I had not read it before, and as I anticipated, it is a classic of legend, anecdote, antiquarian detail and sheer good writing, focusing (like its sister volume) on the burgh of Cromarty.

Both books are attractive paperbacks. Both are a bargain at £8.99 each. Both are published by B & W Publishing of Edinburgh. I don't know their address, but you could always get them from Frieda Gostwick, Hugh Miller's Cottage, Cromarty. And I look forward now to "Old Red Sandstone".

This isn't a review, but I'll say a couple of things because these editions have been prepared by a former student of mine, Dr James Robertson. A big thing and a small thing. The big thing is that it makes me mad when reprints like this come out and the opportunity to provide a handy index at the end has been missed. With word-processors, making an index is easy. Type in the key-words with their page-numbers as you read the proofs, call up "SORT", and wheech! There's your index. Well, more or less.

The small thing, a Sheumais, is that 'Allt Graad' doesn't mean 'Swift River'. Miller's own spelling of the name, 'Auldgrande', not to mention the Gothic spinechiller he has to tell about it, makes the meaning clear. It's *Allt Grànd*, 'Ugly River'.

The ghastly scene that met the eyes of the lady of Balconie in the chasm of the Auldgrande should lead me directly to my topic, the fearful sacred groves of the druids, but I would like to take a slight detour to it through one of Miller's shortest anecdotes. "I remember," he says, adding that it is a very early recollection, "that when a Justice of Peace Court was sitting in my native town, many years ago, a dark cloud came suddenly over the sun; and that a man who had been lounging on the street below, ran into the Court-room to see who it was that, *by swearing a false oath*, had occasioned the obscuration."

This reminds me, firstly, of the 'Invocations for Justice' collected by Carmichael in South Uist and published in volume 1 of "Carmina Gadelica". God is invoked, through prayer and ritual, to give weight to a person's pleas in a court of law, because, as Carmichael points out, the people could not trust the human agencies of justice in the Highlands and Islands.

It reminds me, secondly, of a very ancient story told by Carmichael's son-in-law Professor Watson in his "History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland". Fuat, son of Bile, is on his way to Ireland. He lands on an island called Inis Magdena, whose soil has the unusual effect that no-one standing on it is able to tell a lie. Fuat cuts a sod of it and brings it with him to Ireland. It is used there for pronouncing judgments. If the judge or king stands on it and his verdict is wrong, the sod turns itself upside down (and presumably the judge or king falls on his bottom).

The sod is called *fód na fírinne*, the sod of truth, and is placed on Fuat's hills, *Sliabh Fuaidh*, which are now the Fews Mountains in Ireland (in Co. Armagh, I think). Now Watson points out that this is also the location of the only instance of the very important placename *Nemed* in Ireland. *Nemed* is the Old Irish spelling of an early Celtic word *nemeton* which means a sacred grove. The place came to be associated with St Patrick, and Watson says: "Here, then, we have an ancient sacred place of judgment, which at a later time was in a manner christianized."

Now there may have been only one 'nemeton' in Ireland, but the Celts of Britain and Europe appear to have had many. This fact seems to lend weight to old traditions that locate the source of druidic teaching outside Ireland, and particularly in Britain. Julius Caesar wrote that "it is thought that this system of training was invented in Britain and taken over from there to Gaul, and at the present time diligent students of the matter mostly travel to Britain to study it". There is an early Irish reference to a *fili* or learned poet returning from study of the arts of poetry and prophecy in Britain. It is pretty well known, I think, that the Irish regarded *Alba* as a land of magic, and that Cú Chulainn travelled to *Alba* to learn the martial arts from a sorceress called Sgáthach. *Alba* meant the whole of Britain before it became restricted to Scotland, and many people like to associate Sgáthach with Dunscaith in Skye.

What might a nemeton have looked like? Well, Lucan in his poem *Pharsalia* gives this lurid description of a sacred wood which Caesar felled near Marseilles. "A grove there was, untouched by men's hands from ancient times, whose interlacing boughs enclosed a space of darkness and cold shade, and banished the sunlight from above. No rural Pan dwelt there, nor Silvanus, ruler of the woods, no Nymphs; but gods were worshipped there with savage rites, the altars were heaped with hideous offerings, and every tree was sprinkled with human gore. On these boughs, if antiquity, reverential of the gods, deserves any credit, birds feared to perch; in those coverts wild beasts would not lie down; no wind ever bore down upon that wood, nor thunderbolt hurled from black clouds; the trees, even when they spread their leaves to no breeze, rustled among themselves. Water also fell there in abundance from dark springs."

Lucan goes on: "The images of the gods, grim and rude, were uncouth blocks, formed of felled tree-trunks. Legend also told that often the subterranean hollows quaked and bellowed, that yew-trees fell down and rose again, that the glare of conflagration came from trees that were not on fire, and that serpents twined and glided round the stems. The people never went there to worship at close quarters, but left the place to the gods. When

the sun is in mid-heaven or dark night fills the sky, even the priest dreads their approach and fears to surprise the lord of the grove."

We have to allow for poetic licence, hearsay evidence, bias and sensationalism, but there is some truth in this description. Our ancestors did not try to contain their gods in temples built of stone. This was a ridiculous Roman idea which has now left our country full of empty buildings that drain away precious church finances. They sought their gods, and the Christian God that followed them, amongst the works of nature, not of man. Yes, there is some evidence of human sacrifice, but since there is evidence of so many other types of sacrifice as well, it seems likely that, in Nora Chadwick's words, "human sacrifice among the Celts, although of great ritual significance, may have been practised more commonly at times of communal danger or stress, rather than as part of regular ritual observance". The approach of Caesar's armies offers one such example of communal danger and stress!

Occurrences of the placename element *nemeton* indicate the location of such sites. Drunemeton ('Chief Nemeton') was the sacred place of the three Celtic tribes of Galatia in Asia Minor; much as on *Sliabh Fuaidh*, they met there to judge cases of bloodshed, leaving lesser offences to be judged in lesser places. Nemetobriga was in Galicia in Spain, while there were many nemetons in Gaul. A medieval Breton charter refers to a forest called Nemet. Nemetodurum became modern Nanterre. Near the mouth of the Rhône was Augustonemeton, named in honour of the Roman god-emperor, alternatively in Gaulish Nemossos or Nemausus, now the town of Nîmes. There were three Vernemetons in Gaul and one in England (between Lincoln and Leicester). *Aquae Arnemetiae* was the Latin name for the spa at Buxton in Derbyshire, Arnemetia being a goddess whose name meant 'Before the Sacred Grove'.

Medionemeton ('the Central Nemeton') was somewhere in southern Scotland. Roseneath on the Clyde is *Ros Neimhidh*, the Peninsula of the Sacred Grove. Other Scottish nemetons are Navitie in Fife and Nevay and Navar in Angus. Both of them became places of Christian worship; the latter is only a mile away from two massive Iron Age hill forts called the Caterthuns, which could have contained a pagan population of thousands. Duneaves at Fortingall in Perthshire is *Taigh Neimhidh*, the House of the Sacred Grove; hard by is the ancient yew tree in the parish churchyard. There are many more nemetons up the east coast as far as Navidale in Sutherland, most of them still sacred places to this day. Nonakiln in Ross-shire is *Neo'* (for *Neimheadh*) *na Cille*, the Nemeton of the Christian Church.

I will finish by telling stories of two of these Scottish nemetons, one from Miller's "Scenes and Legends", the other from a chapter called "Some Personal Experiences of the Second Sight" by Eilidh Watt from Dunvegan, Skye, in a book called "The Seer in Celtic and other Traditions" edited by Hilda Davidson.

Miller talks humorously of a man in Cromarty called Alexander Wood, who died in 1690. Wood was a generous man, he says, but when injured or insulted "there was a toad-like malignity in his nature, that would come leaping out like the reptile from its hole, and no power on earth could shut it up again . . . He was full of anecdote; and, in all his stories, human nature was exhibited in only its brightest lights and its deepest shadows, without the slightest mixture of that medium tint which gives colour to its working, everyday suit."

But Wood is remarkable for his grave. The graveslab is plain to see as you drive up the road past St Regulus' churchyard in Cromarty, for it lies on the steep verge outside the fence. (It is right opposite the eerie entrance to a tunnel dug by the laird of Cromarty to enable his servants to come to his house without his having to look upon them, but that is another story.)

Wood asked to be buried outside the churchyard for a very specific reason — namely, there was a superstition that when the trumpet sounded on the Day of Judgment all the people of the shire of Cromarty must line up before their maker on the moor overlooking the sea to the south of the town. Wood had been tricked in life by his neighbour, a glib-tongued little shoemaker, and was determined to outdo him in death. "Bury me ayont the saint's dyke on the south side," he told his son, "and dinna lay me deep. Bury me there, and yourself and the old wife, when your hour comes, may take up your places beside me. We'll a' get up at the first toot, the ane helping the other, and be halfway up the moor afore the shoochlin, short-legged body wins over the dyke."

And what was the name of this sacred place of judgment? Navity, in Gaelic *Neamhaidigh*, from the same root as 'nemeton'. Moreover, it was church land and had a chapel.

But in my opinion Eilidh Watt's story is best of all. It out-Millers Miller and out-Lucans Lucan. This is how it goes. "Once when I was motoring in Fife with a friend we decided to stop and drink from our flasks of tea at the first attractive spot we found. There was one with groups of trees, two streams converging and an air of tranquillity which seemed admirably suited to our purpose, and leaving the car we made for the clearing. My friend was unpacking the basket when I cried out in panic: 'I can't stay here! There have been blood sacrifices here!' and fled.

"In the car I asked her what the place was called. 'Shank of Navitie,' was the answer. From the name it may have had early Christian associations, but I am unable to account for my panic and for my declaration. I have been affected by other places but never to such a degree."

***WHFP* 25.11.94**