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John McBey and the “Wow o’ Rivven”

Madge Lobban

One day in the 1770s a man from Huntly was cutting peats in the Maelshach when he came upon a child abandoned in that desolate place. Some say he was a boy of a few years of age—others that he was an infant near naked. Be that as it may, he was brought to Huntly and put “on the parish,” poor relief, maybe, but the kindly townsfolk took him to themselves and saw to it that he never lacked. One charitable lady indeed—Mrs Ogg or Orr—provided him with a new suit each year. We know nothing about the child’s origins or how he came by the name of John McBey, but as he grew up, fairly strong and healthy physically, he proved to be mentally deficient—“nae wise eneuch.” This earned him the by-name of “Feel Jock.”

He was for many years a familiar figure in the streets of Huntly, and has never been quite forgotten. One still sometimes hears the saying: “Like Feel Jock, I’ll be wiser neist time.” That Jock had hopes of a “neist time” we shall see. He would have been known to George MacDonald, and to George Gray, author of *Recollections of Huntly in the 1820s*, who mentions him in his chapter on notabilities. Also Jock’s portrait was painted by a (probably) local artist. Prints of this still survive. We saw one recently in a rough frame, with an inscription on the back in beautiful copperplate writing. It reads: “1848 To remind you of Huntly. I now enclose a likeness of your friend, Jock. Isabella Smith.”

George Gray tells us that Jock was a harmless quiet fellow, only roused to anger when teased by mischievous laddies, and, even then, easily pacified. He had a good memory and was something of a mimic. Because of the disability in his hands there was little he could do in [end of page 10] the way of work so he spent much of his time idling in the streets, or roaming the countryside. The first great interest in his life was the local company of militia, or volunteers. He was present at all their drills and accompanied them on their annual inspection at Fraserburgh. Hearing of this, the Marquis of Huntly had a colonel’s scarlet uniform made for him, and this he wore on all military occasions, and at church. This earned him another nickname—“The Colonel.”

George MacDonald’s story, “The Wow o’ Rivven” tells of the bond

between Jock and a shy, delicate girl, Elsie Scott, lonely and unhappy living with her brother, yet bold enough to disperse a gang of boys who were teasing Jock and brave enough to come to his rescue when he was attacked by a savage bulldog. Elsie is an imaginary character, but Jock, for the most part, is true to life. MacDonald is not entirely sympathetic to Jock's mental condition. Only once does he call him by name. At other times he is "the fool," "the idiot" or "a tatter of humanity." He describes Jock's appearance as we see him in the portrait. He was:

an old man whose strange appearance and dress showed that he had little capacity either for good or evil. His clothes were comfortable enough in quality and condition for they were the annual gift of a benevolent lady . . . but being made to accomodate his taste . . . they were somewhat peculiar in cut and ornament.

Both coat and trousers were of a dark grey cloth; but the former, which in its shape partook of the military, had a straight collar of yellow, and narrow cuffs of the same; while upon both sleeves, about the place where a corporal wears his stripes, was expressed, in the same yellow cloth, a somewhat singular device. It was as close an imitation of a bell, with its tongue hanging out of its mouth, as the tailor's skill could produce from a single piece of **[11]** cloth.

He then goes on to tell how the military exercises had captured the poor man's fancy and gained him the honorary rank of Colonel. But the bell on his sleeves had a deeper significance.

One day in his wanderings Jock found himself on the road to Rivven, "where gang mair deid than livin'" (Rivven is Ruthven in the parish of Cairnie). There had been a church there until it was closed in 1762 and, in MacDonald's words, the building had crumbled away except for one gable, crow-stepped and ivy-mantled with belfry and bell still intact. The effigy of Tam o' Rivven, progenitor of one branch of the Gordon family, once inside the shelter of the church, is now exposed to the elements and sadly eroded. The graveyard is still used. When Jock entered a funeral was taking place, and the bell was tolling. This fascinated Jock. It seemed to be speaking to him: "Come hame, come hame." It seemed a welcome. From that day Jock attended every funeral in the old kirkyard, just to hear the bell. He gave it a name of his own—the "Wow," which has never been forgotten, and the words "the Wow" and "come hame" were forever on his lips.

To return to MacDonald's story. One summer evening, Jock and Elsie Scott happened to meet in the kirkyard, where Jock had lingered after a funeral. A breeze sprang up and set the Wow pealing out its invitation. At once Jock repeated it: "Come hame, come hame." The words touched Elsie, unwelcome in her brother's home and longing for a home, as much as they touched Jock. Thenceforth a bond of friendship was sealed between them. Elsie would visit Jock in his humble lodging and saw him on his death bed. His last words to her were: "I'm gaein' tae [12] the Wow, nae tae come back again." Then, just before he lapsed into unconsciousness: "Come hame." Be that as it may, the facts are that on Jock's death the people of Huntly, all honour to them, had him buried in the old kirkyard, as near as possible to the Wow, and erected a handsome gravestone to his memory. It reads:

Erected by the inhabitants of Huntly in memory of John McBey, better known as "Feel Jock" or "The Colonel" who died there on the 14th of March 1848, aged about 71. His remains lie here at his own request, near his especial favourite, the Bell of Ruthven. May he rest in peace.

There are people still alive who remember the bell ringing at funerals, and the bairns at Ruthven school (now closed) were told the story of Jock and the Wow. When they played in the kirkyard they would put flowers on his grave. As someone said: "He wisna sic a feel as they made oot." No. Things which are hidden from the wise and prudent can be revealed to babes. [13]