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The Wicker Man: Virgin Sacrifice in Dumfries and Galloway¹

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The aboriginal inhabitants of . . . stern and wild Caledonia . . . [brought] from the East . . . their reverence for Baal. Fire was his earthly symbol, and from his name, Baal, Lord, and the Celtic *tein*, fire, comes Beltane . . .² The rites were the same in North Britain as in Tophet, the Valley of Slaughter, when the Lord complained they broke the law . . . The Druids . . . decreed that a huge wicker cage in the form of a colossal mortal should be woven, and in it were cast a holocaust of human victims. These were not only prisoners . . . parents gave their best beloved. Rude music made by striking tightly-stretched hides deadened their dolorous cries. When they had thus paid sanguinary homage to their god, when the lurid flames, lit in his honour, had devoured the giant cageful of their choicest and fairest, the assembled company held high revel, danced and caroused.³

This sensational, judgemental account of Caledonia—at once ‘stern’ and ‘wild’—is typical of the highly speculative, pagan survivalist studies of traditional customs, which were common from the eighteenth century onwards. *The Wicker Man*, a film first released in 1973, both flirts with, and subverts, this type of alarmist, and alarming, folklore.

The film, initially, showed as a B feature, and was neither widely successful

¹ This chapter was first delivered as an introductory talk to a showing of *The Wicker Man* at The Robert Burns Film Theatre, Dumfries, in 1999.

² Eve Blantyre Simpson, *Folk Lore in Lowland Scotland* (1908; London: EP Publishing, 1976) 1-3.

³ Simpson, *Folk Lore in Lowland Scotland*, 4-5. Since this chapter was first written, of course, there has been a newer version of the film: 2006, dir Neil LaBute, and starring Nicholas Cage; here, I am discussing solely the 1974 first version.

nor well distributed; it was pulled, for instance, from the Cannes film festival — despite a Wicker Man erected on the sea front there. The 1977 review of the film in the American science fiction magazine *Cinefantastique* is widely credited with turning round the film's fortunes and encouraging its wider showing; now, of course, it has become a cult classic.⁴

The Wicker Man, as is widely known, was filmed in Galloway, and the timeless qualities and perceived remoteness of this area is a major factor in the film's success. In the 1998 *Ex-S* documentary, celebrating the 25th anniversary of the first release, Edward Woodward commented "This is a timewarp . . . We shot this 25 years ago . . . and nothing's altered".⁵ It does look superficially the same, and there are still stumps of wood visible from the film's climactic scene. The enduring beauty of this area is one of the most appealing aspects of the film. As two American fans commented in the documentary, "We're going to visit the West Highlands or the West wherever the hell it is, we're going to check that out".

The setting is an amalgam of real Galloway places: Burrowhead, with its schoolhouse; the streets of Kirkcudbright; the pub in Creetown where, to quote

⁴ On the history of the film and its reception see the publications, which post-date this chapter's writing, Benjamin Franks (ed.) *et al.*, *The Quest for the Wicker Man: Historical, Folklore and Pagan Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2006), Jonathan Murray (ed.) *et al.*, *Constructing the Wicker Man: Film and Cultural Studies Perspectives* (University of Glasgow Crichton Publications, 2005), and Allan Brown, *Inside the Wicker Man. The Morbid Ingenuities*, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 2000).

⁵ *Ex-S The Wicker Man* PSMM53SD (16/12/98) Series Editor May Millar, Director Simon Parsons. Since this chapter was written, again, the Wicker Man festival has become a fixture of the Scottish music festival scene. See <http://www.thewickermanfestival.co.uk/> for further information.

Woodward again, “the best scenes in the movie” were shot. Logan Botanical Gardens were used for the gardens of the Big House and Gatehouse of Fleet also features.

A large part of *The Wicker Man's* success is due to imaginative casting. Woodward was chosen as a ‘box office name’: television’s Callan. He represents an anti-establishment ‘different kind of detective’. This was reshaped into the role of , to quote the director, Robin Hardy, the “Virgin Christian copper” Sergeant Neil Howie of the West Highland Police. Howie is a target for fun from early on but, ultimately, achieves dignity. Britt Eckland as the physically-pliable and manipulative Willow is the perfect foil to Woodward, and, again, ‘box office’. Even so, a Galloway body double, Jane Jackson stood in for intimate scenes. Miss Peter, a Soho stripper, doubled for Eckland during the erotically-charged ‘Willow’s Song’. The choreographer, Stewart Hopps, was disappointed as he had hoped for “a very magical dance . . . luring him” and instead he got “bump and grind”. Christopher Lee was cast to subvert audience expectations, as an “icon of the great Hammer films . . . we thought it would be wonderful to take him from that sort of horror film and put him in something quite as scary but not, perhaps, as hackneyed”. Lee was eager to be involved, recalling “the part was written for me and that doesn’t happen very often . . . when you’ve got an author of the calibre of Shaffer what more can you ask for?”

The screenplay, by Anthony Shaffer, is a cumulatively terrifying experience.

Shaffer sought to go beyond the Hammer model, to explore “the origins of this sort of black arts which really was a perfectly straightforward Celtic religion that all of us who live in the British Isles once had”. A Stukeley engraving of a wicker man, apocraphylly, was an inspiration. Despite its reimagining such tradition in a creative way, strangely, this respectful viewpoint invests the film with some authority.

The film works, creatively, in several ways. It is part Hammer Horror, part conventional murder and part supernatural thriller. Aspects of this are reflected in the setting in an isolated place and the cast reference implicit in using Lee. The theme of a virgin at risk — initially a little girl and later, ‘Virgin Copper’, is an inspired subversion of the chosen genres. In addition, *The Wicker Man* flirts with Hollywood notions of Scotland (the notion we have supernatural affinities, prevalent from the comic *Ghost Goes West* onwards; in later films this could be called the second sight of *Braveheart* phenomenon. On one level, the film is an anti-*Brigadoon*, but the strangeness of the Galloway village does have echoes of the legendary village accessible to outsiders only once every hundred years. Then again, the filming draws on the style of ethnological documentary, like Robert Flaherty’s staged documentary of customs and beliefs in *Man of Aran* (1934) and Werner Kissling’s *Eriskay — A Poem of Remote Lives* (1935). The concern for a remote rural area, for character types as well as psychology; the filming techniques, particularly in following the procession, and viewing the contents of a baker’s window, gives the

illusion of reality. As Sharon Sherman notes, “All folkloristic films isolate . . . examples . . . elements of culture, and aspects of human behaviour”. Furthermore, films that “attempt to reconstruct the past, or view folklore as text/object typically are narrated and rely on a montage of images”.⁶

So, too, *The Wicker Man* has Woodward as the narrator and discoverer of the traditions we encounter. This device allows the film to present a montage of traditions, through a naïf character, and to identify aspects of human behaviour in responses to traditions. The traditions Woodward encounters are unfamiliar to him, but integral to the community he encounters. *The Wicker Man* proclaims itself to be a ‘researched’ amalgam of Scottish (or perhaps British) traditions. The ‘group solidarity’ of shared customs and beliefs is one of the key factors in the film; we can see how local identity is created and maintained through celebration and traditional practices, to the exclusion of outsiders.

One of the key motifs is that of Midsummer celebration. Jake Wright, the first director, commented that “the bedrock of this script was the Beltane fire-festival fertility rite”. Beltane is traditionally a time of celebration, of “singing and the soundis” of Peblis to the Play in *The Kingis Quair* by James I (1424). Fires were lit on hill tops and traditional food was consumed, including the Beltane bannock, an

⁶ See *Man of Aran* (1934) videorecording (Burbank, Calif.: Hollywood’s Attic, 1996) and *Eriskay – A Poem of Remote Lives* (1935) videorecording (Glasgow: Scottish Screen, n.d.); Sharon R. Sherman, *Documenting Ourselves. Film, Video and Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998)

oatcake baked on the evening before Beltane, made of oatmeal 'watered' with a thin batter made of whipped egg, milk or cream and oatmeal, in places including Daviot and Kingussie. Sometimes pieces of oatcakes were broken off to offer protection to horses and sheep against foxes and eagles. On other occasions, oatcake lots were cast; drawing a charcoal-blackened piece of oatcake meant leaping through the fire three times. Fathers might also carry their children over the fire for their future protection.⁷

Beltane was, equally, the chief festival of witches, along with Halloween. As Mary MacLeod Banks said, in *British Calendar Customs* (1941), the time when "new members of the community were introduced, and various rites and practices of magical forms were prescribed". On the night before May Day (1 May), traditionally, witches travelled as hares to take milk from cows; fairies danced on this night too and conducted raids on human beings.

John Glover noted that in Galloway "no one would give fire or water out of a bowl on May Day – to do so was unlucky", although washing your face in the dew ensured beauty for the coming year.⁸ In Kirkmaiden, as recorded in the 1897 *Ethnographic Survey of the United Kingdom*, it was recommended to "take a snail on the morning of May Day and shut it up in any kind of dish. Omens are drawn from

intro. xi.

⁷ Simpson, *Folklore in Lowland Scotland*, 8-9.

⁸ John Glover, *Dumfries and Galloway. Notes and Queries* (vol. 1).

the figures made by the slime". Strangely,

In the north of the Stewartry, there is a green howe dipping down to the joining of two hill streams, on the face of the hill stands a great white stone and it was a matter of belief that every May this stone came down to wash itself at the meeting of the waters, and then returned to the hillside to stand guard over the sleeping valleys for another year.⁹

In nineteenth century Scotland it was considered unlucky to marry or be born in May; but it was a good time for visiting wells and shrines for healing. Revels at this time of year were regulated to some extent, with traditional figures like Robin Hood, Little John, the Abbot of Unrest (Peebles), Abbot of Unreason (Inverness), Prior of Bon Accord (Aberdeen), and so on, in charge. This is part of the European tradition of charivari: licensed – often masqued – misrule is permissible at certain times of year as a safety valve for conventional behaviour at other times.

There is, then, a selective use of traditions in *The Wicker Man*, creatively adapted to enhance the plot and its development. In the film, incidentally, the Beltane shots were set up. Shooting took place in October and November, with the occasional shower of snow and sleet. Fake apple trees were brought in to give a summery feel to the shoot. In the naked dancing scenes, the director describes "a sort

⁹ Marion MacLeod Banks, *British Calendar Customs* (London: William Glaisher, 1941) vol. 3, 231, 219.

of wandering Dunsinane Wood". In other scenes Woodward was pursued by a trolley with trees, which ran in front of him as he passed by a section of blossom.

Fire festivals, of course, were significant in Scotland at various times of the year. Still, on Hogmanay, fire-balls are swung at the sea in Stonehaven, and a bonfire is lit in Biggar. On Old Style New Year, 11 January, the tar barrel of the Clavie is lit in Burghead, near Elgin, and carried around this coastal town by a crew of twelve, before reaching its final resting place on Doorie Brae. Then there is Up-Helly-Aa in Shetland.¹⁰

There are parallels to the Wicker Man idea of burning effigies in the customs associated with Guy Fawkes. Other parallels include Burning Bartle (an above life-sized effigy) at West Witton, Wensleydale, Yorkshire, on the Saturday near St. Bartholomew's Day (24 August). The effigy is soaked in paraffin and thrown onto a bonfire and fireworks are lit. Burning Judas, traditionally took place on Good Friday at Liverpool docks where, representing Judas Iscariot, straw effigies were burnt by groups of children.

Calendar customs have various functions within community traditions, and the film does a good job of implying many of these exist in the practice of customs in

¹⁰ See Valentina Bold and Thomas A. McKean (eds), *Northern Folk: Living Traditions of North East Scotland* (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen's Elphinstone Institute, 1999) on the Burning of the Clavie, and Callum G. Brown, *Up-Helly-Aa: Custom, Culture and Community in Shetland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

their fictional place. Calendar customs are often related to the passing of the year (harvest and term days, for instance). They often involve ideas of death and rebirth and may be closely related to beliefs (for example, in the context of Halloween customs). Customs are related to community identity, creating and reinforcing it for 'us' while excluding 'others'. They demarcate time, making it accessible to our minds and memories.

The Wicker Man uses several elements drawn from 'real' customs. In Scotland, May Games were common, and an early reference to the king and queen of May, and summer sports, is found from the wife of Robert Bruce; she found her husband's coronation at Scone in May 1306 a bad omen.¹¹ May was a popular time for dancing and carolling, as referred to in Gawain Douglas' translation of the *Aeneid*. Dancing round the Maypole is mentioned as a popular custom in James Brown's *History of Sanquhar* (1891). This was, traditionally, often a time for riding the boundaries or waulking cloth, although later this took place in June. The treatment of Mayday in the movie is reminiscent of celebrations in Padstow, Cornwall, with its Mayday horse, or at Abbots Bromley, Staffordshire – Violet Alford called it the most primitive dance in Europe. Carnival behaviour and cross-dressing, as at Abbots Bromley, was also associated with the Maytime festivals, as it is in *The Wicker Man*.

The festivities in the film, too, have international parallels: the gruesomely spectacular coffin and sun breads, for instance, are reminiscent of the *pan de muerte* (bread of the dead) associated with Latin American Halloween traditions. The erotic song, encouraging that “parts of every gentleman do stand up to attention” seem to draw on a notion that Scottish music is at once primitive and strange. Christopher Lee, in the Ex-S documentary, commented “it’s like going to a really fine opera . . . The [Wicker Man] music is meant to lull you if you like into a sense of security”.

Scotland, of course, has a long-standing tradition of folk drama, as described by Brian Hayward in *Galoshins: The Scottish Folk Play* (1992). His study includes a Castle Douglas version of *Galoshins*, a resurrection drama, featuring Bold Hector (aka Bold Slasher) carrying a sword and pistol against King Beelzebub, armed with a frying-pan and a club, and a miraculous cure by Doctor Brown.

The film also features a rather gruesome traditional cure. William George Black, in *Folk Medicine* (1883), described how, in late nineteenth century Cheshire, a young frog was held for a few moments, head-first, in the mouth of people suffering from aptha, or thrush. It was thought that the frog took on the patient’s illness by the established traditional medical process of transference. An old Shropshire woman recalled seeing this done and noted to Black “I assure you . . . we used to hear the

¹¹ Banks, *British Calendar Customs*, vol. 3, 206.

poor frog whooping and coughing, mortal bad, for days after”.¹²

Such traditional cures, as Lauri Honko has noted, allow lay practitioners, such as the one we briefly see in the film, to act as shaman, medicine man, and psychologist. He “awakens the collective faith, and promotes the integration of the group . . . the myths, the religious dogmas, the group feeling of solidarity and the patterns of role behaviour”.¹³

There are traditional characters here too: Willow is the archetypal witch and seductress; implicitly in league with the Devil, in the tradition of Tam o’Shanter’s Cuttie Sark. Dumfries and Galloway has a wealth of traditional tales about witch rides and night flights. Locally, the notorious Hallowmass Rades, with its gathering hymn invoking a “gray Howlet [owl]”. “grinning cat” and yowling “tod [fox]”, were presided over by the Gyre Carline, Nicniven, the head witch of Scotland.¹⁴ The Gyre Carline was an evil woman to cross. She turned the Lochermoss, then a place for anchoring ships, ranging from Solway sea to Locher-brigg Hill, into a myre, provoked

¹² William George Black, *Folk Medicine: A Chapter in the History of Culture* (London: The Folklore Society, 1883) 35.

¹³ Laurie Honko, qtd. by Don Yoder, “Folk Medicine”, *Folklore and Folklife*, ed. Richard Dorson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1972) 191-215.

¹⁴ Thomas Davidson, *Rowan Tree and Red Thread. A Scottish Witchcraft Miscellany of Tales, Legends and Ballads; together with a description of the witches’ rites and ceremonies* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1949) 8. The hymn is as follows:

When the gray Howlet has tree times hoo’d,
When the grinning cat has three times mewed,
When the Tod has yowled three times I’ the wode,
At the red moon cowering ahind the clud;

When the stars hae cruppen deep I’ the drift,
Lest cantrips had pyked them out o’ the lift,
Up Horsies a’, but mair adow.

by a tide during a Rade, swept away by her steeds. Of course, Galloway also suffered witch persecutions during the seventeenth century and associations like this, perhaps, enrich the supernatural feel of the film.¹⁵

The Wicker Man certainly makes use of witch traditions. Witches, for instance, apparently enjoy ceremonial ring dances, accompanied by songs, and there is an example of this in the film. New witches can be initiated by renouncing their faith, being re-baptised, marked in a secret place and given a new name. The policeman could choose this option, perhaps through sexual baptism, but his refusal, unwittingly, encourages his fate. As one critic noted in the *Ex-S* documentary this inverts the usual relationship between sex and death in the most popular horror films.

Christopher Lee as the evil laird, Lord Summerisle, is inherently demonic. Traditionally, the Devil comes in various forms but often, as in *The Wicker Man*, as a tall man in black, who walks as if he has no joints (see for instance, his incarnation in James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* of 1824). Perhaps, though, Lee's character is more like a traditional Druid. Notions of them, popularly, as strange creatures presiding over "foul orgies of heathen darkness". Jameson commented that at the end of the eighteenth century, Highlanders were still calling God "the Arch Druid".¹⁶ Druid's have been defined as,

One of a class of priests, teachers, diviners, and magicians of ancient Celtic (perhaps pre-Celtic) religion . . . They were physicians, historians, mathematicians, astronomers. Their rank was next to the king, but their decisions were final in all matters . . . They functioned at all rituals of naming, burial and sacrifice. Old Irish texts mention the druids in

Ryde, ryde, for Locher-brigg knowe.

¹⁵ Witchcraft in Scotland was first legally punishable by an Act of Parliament, 1563.

¹⁶ Simpson, *Folk Lore of Lowland Scotland*, 5.

connection with the terrible human sacrifices associated with Beltane and Cromm Cruac and also Tara.¹⁷

The film plays, too, with notions of established religion. Christianity, of course, came early to Dumfries and Galloway, and we see some evidence of it, in the churchyard scenes of the film, subverted. Its co-existence with an essentially older culture is one of the major themes of the film (just as, in a real site like that of Whithorn, Pictish symbol stones are found side by side with Christian monuments).

The hero's experiences are, of course, meant to be paralleled with the experiences of Christian martyrs. It plays, in this respect, with the notion that the truly religious are those prepared to suffer for their faith. The notion is, in some respects, reversed, as here the sufferer is punished for refusal to accept the Old Religion. As Christopher Lee's character says, "We are talking here about conflict . . . of belief . . . between organised religion for the lack of a better faith, and . . . paganism". The film reflects both neo-paganism and 'Celticism'. Intriguingly, as the 1998 special issue of *Ethnologies* on 'Wicca' has discussed, modern pagans, typically, reclaim Midsummer for their own, as a pure, pre-Christian religion.

In a sense, like the audience, Woodward is as much cultural tourist as he is victim. He observes local customs, but his mission – to solve a crime – prevents his real participation in this society. He does not appreciate the nature of the villager's belief, as a phenomenon which both invests the mundane world with order and is self-perpetuating, because of his complete upholding of an unyielding Christian belief.

Christopher Lee has drawn attention to the unsettling qualities of the film, and particularly its morally ambiguous ending.

The Wicker Man is one of the most remarkable films ever

¹⁷ Funk and Wagnall's *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, ed. Maria Leach (London: New English Library, 1972) 325.

made, let alone made in this country . . . The great thing about *The Wicker Man* is not only that it is a very amusing, very romantic, very erotic but it's also a very disturbing film and a very frightening film. And the end of course is a tremendous shock.

Ultimately, *The Wicker Man* is a very chilling amalgam of Scottish traditions, convincing acting and skilful writing which goes far beyond the Hammer model it experiments with.