

The Brahan Seer: The Making of a Legend

Alex Sutherland

Introduction

The legend of the Brahan Seer

There is a legend circulating in the Highlands of Scotland and beyond concerning the Brahan Seer – a figure so celebrated for his prophetic gifts that books have been written about his prophecies, songs have been sung, plays have been performed and standing stones have been erected to commemorate his deeds and the manner of his death. The legend in its current telling encompasses historical events, folklore, oral tradition and literary romance. Each blends into the other to create an account of the past that defies orthodox historical explanation. The legend has been created over time, each enhancement being shaped from within the world-view of those making the additions. Facts and myths intermingle to create a fluid account of the past. This relates to the more general point that we more fully understand an event's significance by placing it in context, in its time and place, in relation to other events upon which it encroaches, and by studying the beliefs and actions of those determining the events. The Brahan Seer legend is a representation of cultural flux within a particular, relatively small, geographical region. The legend serves as an example of how a cultural production, once created, continues to influence conceptions of the past while being viewed from an ever-changing present. At the heart of the Brahan Seer legend are witchcraft, second sight and prophecy each of which relies on beliefs and practices that can best be examined through a methodological framework associated with 'cultural history'.

This book is concerned with the legend of the Brahan Seer and with placing the seer-figure and its story within the cultural, political and

social contexts that shaped its development between the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries. These contexts include the practice and prosecution of witchcraft; the phenomenon of second sight; the rise of Romantic literature; and the perennial use of prophecy. The Seer legend is considered in relation to each of these contexts to show how a cultural production is created and transmitted over time. It is a story that has significant implications for our understanding of the relationship between ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ culture. It is also one that requires us to try and understand the past as it was experienced by those involved.

In contrast to oral tradition, which only enters into the historical record when, long after its origin, someone decides to write it down, events are usually fixed in time and place by being written down when, or soon after, they happen. On 18 March 1875, Alexander Mackenzie, secretary and founding member of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, read a paper entitled, ‘The Prophecies of Coinneach Odhar Fiosaiche, the Brahan Seer.’¹ He did so because the prophecies existed among the people and he thought that, by placing them on record, he would allow future generations to test their faith in second sight – by comparing events with unfulfilled prophecies. After the success of his talk, Mackenzie serialised an extended version of the paper in *The Celtic Magazine*, of which he was editor, before publishing a slim volume entitled *The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer* in 1877, containing all the richness of language associated with Victorian Romantic literature.² A second edition appeared in 1878, it was revised in 1899 and subsequent editions appeared in 1903, 1907, 1912 and 1925. A second impression appeared in 1972 to be followed by a centenary edition, with a commentary by Elizabeth Sutherland, which has been reprinted nearly every year since.

According to Alexander Mackenzie, the name of the Brahan Seer is Kenneth Odhar, derived from the Gaelic *Coinneach Odhar, Fiosaiche* –

- 1 A. Mackenzie, ‘The Prophecies of Coinneach Odhar Fiosaiche, the Brahan Seer’, TGSI, 1875, Vol. III, pp. 196–211.
- 2 A. Mackenzie, ‘The Prophecies of Coinneach Odhar Fiosaiche, the Brahan Seer’, *The Celtic Magazine*, no XIII Vol. II (1876).

‘Sallow Kenneth,’ ‘the one who knows.’³ Possibly because his fate was so closely entwined with the family of Seaforth Mackenzies the Seer is also often referred to as Kenneth Mackenzie.⁴ Although there are several versions of Coinneach Odhar’s origins, the version which holds greatest currency is that some time in the seventeenth century he was born in a small community called Baile na Cille on the westerly shores of the district of Uig on the island of Lewis.⁵ One night before he was born his mother was tending her cattle overlooking the village graveyard. Around midnight she was horrified to see many of the graves open and the occupants fly away in all directions before returning at different times. Eventually, only one grave had not been reoccupied and Coinneach’s mother – curiosity giving her courage – resolved to speak with the returning spirit. She placed her distaff across the entrance and the presence of this worldly object made it impossible for the spirit to pass so that Coinneach’s mother was able to question her.

She was a princess from Norway who explained that she had been drowned at sea and buried by those who had found her body on the nearby shore. She was fated to make continual visits to her homeland until such time as somebody satisfied local custom and purchased her grave, thus allowing her spirit to rest in peace. She begged Coinneach’s mother to purchase the grave on her behalf. A sheaf of corn sufficed and as a reward the spirit gave her a stone with a hole in it which she was to give to her unborn son when he reached the age of seven. With this stone he would have the gift of prophecy. Eventually the child was born and one day, when he had reached the required age, his mother asked that he call his father to the house. The boy refused; his mother remembered the stone and offered it as a reward. Peering through the hole Coinneach made his first prophecy – seeing a whale stranded in the bay. This rich find of

3 A. Mackenzie, *The Prophecies of the Braban Seer* (London, 1977 (1877)), p. 25 and Elizabeth Sutherland’s commentary therein, p. 141. E. Sutherland, *Ravens and Black Rain: The Story of Highland Second Sight* (London, 1985), pp. 225–226.

4 Mackenzie, *Prophecies*, p. 27.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

meat and oil was welcomed by the community and laid the foundation for Coinneach's reputation for having the gift of second sight.⁶

By the time his fame had spread Coinneach Odhar had moved to Brahan in Easter Ross where he was employed on the estates of Kenneth of Kintail, third earl of Seaforth and chief of the Clan Mackenzie. When the earl visited Paris some time after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, Countess Isabella called upon the seer at a large gathering of the nobility at Brahan Castle to tell her how her husband was faring.⁷ The seer at first declined but the Countess persisted and eventually he relented and told her what he saw. 'My lord seems to have little thought of you, or of his children, or of his Highland home. I saw him in a gay-gilded room, grandly decked out in velvets, with silks and cloth of gold, and on his knees before a fair lady, his arm round her waist, and her hand pressed to his lips.'⁸ Enraged at this public humiliation the Countess ordered that the unfortunate seer be seized and dragged to the Chanonry of Ross at Fortrose on the Black Isle where, with the complicity of the church, he was found guilty of witchcraft and condemned to die in a barrel full of burning tar.⁹

Realising that no mercy was to be shown, Coinneach Odhar, the Brahan Seer, made a lengthy and detailed prophecy predicting the downfall of the Seaforth Mackenzies. The last Lord Seaforth would be surrounded by four great lairds each of whom would have some distinguishing physical characteristic by which all would know that the prophecy was coming to pass. Burdened by debt, beset by ill health and premature death, the once great family did come to an end through the direct male line in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The last Lord Seaforth, both deaf and dumb in line with Coinneach Odhar's prediction, was predeceased by his four sons. Coinneach had also said that the remnants of Seaforth's estate would be inherited by a white hooded lassie from the

6 Ibid., pp. 28–29.

7 Ibid., p. 106.

8 Ibid., p. 108.

9 Ibid., p. 114. A.B. McLennan, 'Traditions and Legends of the Black Isle No XII,' *The Highlander* November 22 (1873) p. 7.

east who would kill her sister.¹⁰ This could be taken to refer to the tragic death of Lady Caroline Mackenzie in April 1823 following an accident that occurred when her sister, Mrs Stewart-Mackenzie – who had returned from India in widow's weeds but had since remarried – lost control of the pony that was pulling the 'little garden chair' in which they were travelling.¹¹ The historical events surrounding the Seaforth's demise are well documented and form the fulfilment of the prophecy.

It is said that on leaving Brahan Castle, on the way to his execution, the seer threw his stone into nearby Loch Ussie, predicting that it would one day be found by one who would inherit his powers.¹² While these events were taking place, moreover, the Earl returned unheralded to Brahan and on hearing what had happened he rode as never before to prevent the execution. His horse, driven beyond endurance, died on the way so that the Earl arrived at Chanonry on foot; moments after the seer had been consigned to the flames.¹³ The Countess had goaded Coinneach Odhar to the last, telling him that he was bound for hell. The seer replied that he was bound for heaven though she was not. As a sign that this would be so a raven and a dove would circle the burning pyre and the dove alight on the smouldering embers. And so it proved, the symbol of hope alighting as foretold, the harbinger of doom flying away.¹⁴

There is no historical evidence that a Coinneach Odhar existed during the seventeenth century or that anyone was put to death for witchcraft by Isabella, Countess of Seaforth. Moreover, early in the twentieth century W. M. Mackenzie found the name of Coinneach Odhar charged with witchcraft in state documents dating from 1577, a century before the

10 Mackenzie, *Prophecies*, p. 110. McLennan, 'Traditions and Legends of the Black Isle,' p. 7.

11 *The Seaforth Muniments*, NAS GD 46/15, f.135,12. A narrative of the accident and the illness of 'our dear angel' in the hand of Mr Stewart-Mackenzie but told partly from the viewpoint of his wife.

12 Mackenzie, *Prophecies*, pp. 109–110. McLennan, 'Traditions and Legends of the Black Isle,' p. 7.

13 Mackenzie, *Prophecies*, pp. 116–117.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Brahan Seer's fateful encounter with Countess Isabella. These documents, found in a Munro of Fowlis family chest, implicate Coinneach Odhar in a plot by Lady Munro of Fowlis to kill her stepson by witchcraft so that her natural son could inherit the family title. Mackenzie dismissed the legend on the basis of the discrepancy of nearly a century between the witch's *floruit* and that of the Countess.¹⁵ William Matheson, emphasising the connection between the sixteenth century Coinneach Odhar and Gaelic oral tradition, argues that Alexander Mackenzie's account in *The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer* is not 'sober history' but 'a mere congeries of folklore motifs, devoid of historical content.'¹⁶ However, several writers of folklore accounts, including Otta F. Swire and Alastair Alpin Macgregor, have concluded that the Coinneach Odhar of the Fowlis affair and the Coinneach Odhar who carries the appellation of the Brahan Seer must be two different people.¹⁷ Elizabeth Sutherland surmises that even if the Countess did not condemn a man by the name of Coinneach Odhar she may have condemned some other man. She 'ventures to suggest' the name of Kenneth Mackenzie on the grounds that people of that name claim descent from the seer in the present day.¹⁸ 'Sober' historians dismiss the legend on the basis of documentary evidence while folklorists and popular historians accept it by the mere fact of its existence.

15 W. M. Mackenzie, 'The Truth About the Brahan Seer.' *Glasgow Herald*, 25 January 1936, p. 4. C. T. McInnes (ed.), *Calendar of Writs of Munro of Fowlis* (Edinburgh, 1940), No. 92.

16 Wm. Matheson, 'The Historical Coinneach Odhar and Some Prophecies Attributed to Him,' TGS Vol. 46 (1968), pp. 66–88, p. 71.

17 Among them are R. C. Macleod in *The Island Clans During Six Centuries* (Edinburgh, 1930); Otta F. Swire in *Skye, the Island and its Legends* (Glasgow, 1961) and again in *The Outer Hebrides and their Legends* (Edinburgh and London, 1966). In *The Scots Magazine* of October, 1969, Mairi MacDonald asks 'Were There TWO Brahan Seers?' It is a rhetorical question; she answers in the affirmative. Alastair Alpin Macgregor in *Over the Sea to Sky* (London, 1926) concurs. MacLeod, p. 164; Swire (1) p. 112 and (2) pp. 56–57; MacDonald, pp. 34–38; Macgregor, p. 115.

18 E. Sutherland in her 'Commentary' in A. Mackenzie, *Prophecies of the Brahan Seer* (London, 1977), p. 141.

This book, in contrast, adopts an approach loosely based within 'cultural history' in order to combine historical evidence and oral tradition. Although reliant on documentary proof from primary sources, it goes beyond their 'factual accuracy' to examine cultural productions, such as patterns of belief, which may be transmitted orally.¹⁹ It is 'intended to be realistic and honest' in its treatment of the legend, without allowing contemporary value judgements to cloud our understanding of past beliefs and practices.²⁰ This need not imply a lack of discrimination in seeing all practices and beliefs as equally valid. Rather, it requires that the writer report events as they are presented by the evidence without introducing descriptive statements or drawing inferences that are not already explicitly stated in the material, thus 'providing insights into the way the world is experienced in other times and other places.'²¹ It is an approach that, as Peter Burke has argued, requires 'a cultural translation from the language of the past into that of the present, from the concepts of contemporaries into those of historians and their readers. Its aim is to make the 'otherness' of the past both visible and intelligible.'²²

Early approaches in 'cultural history' relied on elite conceptions of culture and on elite primary sources.²³ 'Culture' equated to the intellectual life of the educated elites. This approach often looked at culture as if it were unitary and ignored different attitudes and beliefs, especially those held by people at the bottom of the social scale. In the pursuit of factual objectivity the recording of myth, anecdote, personal and fictional accounts were relegated to a secondary place. To overcome these problems historians have increasingly looked to anthropology for methodological support and I draw on this approach here in order to study the narratives of oral tradition and legend associated with the seer.²⁴ To this

19 J. Baxendale and C. Pawling, *Narrating the Thirties: A Decade in the Making, 1930 to the Present* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 8.

20 L. Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000), p. 94.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

22 P. Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 193.

23 Jordanova, *History in Practice*, pp. 32–33.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–42, 170 and 203.

end, a key term of analysis has been invoked. 'Appropriation,' as Burke puts it, explains the receipt of a cultural production by different groups while removing the focus of attention from the giver(s), who may invest the production with particular meanings, symbolism and significance, to the receiver(s) who may invest it with the same, or totally different meanings, symbolism and significance.²⁵

Despite Burke's sensitivity in identifying differences within and between cultures, John Mullan and Christopher Reid refer to his model as 'bi-polar' because it focuses on differences between popular and elite culture, rather than on interrelations between them. They also criticise the model for playing down the degree to which there may be differences between groups within either culture.²⁶ As Bob Scribner also points out, appropriation occurs between different groups within the same culture and blurs the edges of the distinction between 'elite' and 'popular.'²⁷ The complex system of relations between groups in the *ancien régime* led Roger Chartier to conclude there was no such thing as 'the people' and that what was required was to study 'the systems of representations' through which individuals choose to articulate what gives meaning and value to their world.²⁸ These might include literature, mode of dress and other cultural forms and practices. The criticisms of Mullan and Reid and the findings of Chartier and Scribner are central to the contemporary debate over differences between elite and popular culture. They suggest that a more nuanced approach is required to the examination of culture as a whole to see if the distinction between elite and popular culture is justified. This study of the Brahan Seer legend provides one contribution to the

25 Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*, p. 196. Michel de Certeau (trs. by S.F. Rendall), *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1984 (1980)), pp. xvi, xxi, 33, 36.

26 J. Mullan and C. Reid (eds), *Eighteenth-Century Popular Culture: A Selection* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 2–3.

27 B. Scribner, 'Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?' *History of European Ideas* Vol. 10 (2) (1989), pp. 175–191. p. 179.

28 R. Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (Princeton, 1987), p. 11.

debate by examining the beliefs – relative to witchcraft, second sight and prophecy – of different groups within a society at different times over the past four centuries. The interrelation between beliefs of educated elites and popular culture – what German social historians describe as folk culture – indicate little difference at a fundamental level, with the latter continuing to have a reciprocal relationship with the former.²⁹

Until the advent of widespread literacy a significant part of ‘popular culture’ was transmitted orally, and oral tradition, which had once played a key role in Scottish Highland culture, was sustained especially in rural and island areas until the mid-twentieth century.³⁰ Oral tradition played a significant role in the creation of the Brahan Seer legend by providing regional accounts of how the Seer acquired his supernatural powers and by acting as a source for the myriad prophecies he is alleged to have uttered. Jan Vansina defines oral tradition as ‘verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation.’³¹ The content of the message must extend beyond the lifetime of the narrator. For this reason he excludes oral history, the recollection of contemporary events from personal reminiscences, hearsay or eyewitness reports.³² However, the act of meeting to impart information was seen as an important aspect of Highland culture and this practice requires a broader definition than the one offered by Vansina. The dictionary definition of tradition is ‘the handing down from generation to generation of the same customs, beliefs, etc. especially by word of mouth.’³³ This, in turn, raises the problem that beliefs, by their very nature, are often unverifiable in terms of their provenance. As Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have pointed out, a person or a people can believe that something is traditional when it is of relatively recent origin, including productions created within the life-

29 Scribner, ‘Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?’ pp. 179 and 182.

30 T. A. McKean, *Hebridean Song-Maker: Iain Macneacail of the Isle of Skye* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 93.

31 J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985), p. 27.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

33 *Collins English Dictionary* (London, 1995).

time of the narrator.³⁴ The approach adopted by Richard Bauman would appear to overcome this problem. He points out that tradition has, until recently, always been construed as both the process and the content of something transmitted from the past. However, by reinterpreting tradition 'as symbolically constituted in the present,' scholars facilitate a greater understanding of 'the social need to give meaning to our present lives by linking ourselves to a meaningful past.'³⁵

It is Bauman's approach that is used in following chapters when considering the need of recorders and collectors of oral tradition to link their 'present lives' to a meaningful past as perceived from their world-view. This should provide a clearer understanding of their beliefs and how they viewed their traditions in the context of their time. Bauman's interpretation accommodates the inclusion of recently invented traditions believed to be true such as local events of significance which may become part of oral tradition when they are retained and repeated beyond the original telling. For present purposes the definition of oral tradition is 'the transmission by word of mouth of any anecdote concerning the past which at some time was held to be true and contained common meaning and values for narrator and audience.'

This book is concerned with a particular type of oral tradition, namely legend, which, together with myth and folktale, constitute the main forms of oral narrative (epics, sagas, riddles and proverbs being others). The terms have generated much controversy among scholars partly because they are not always used to mean the same thing and partly because the content of an oral narrative may refuse to sit neatly within the confines of a single definition.³⁶ William Bascom has provided a generally accepted

- 34 E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).
- 35 Richard Bauman, 'Folklore,' in R. Bauman (ed.), *Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments* (New York and London, 1992), pp. 31–32.
- 36 R. Finnegan, *Oral Tradition and the Verbal Arts* (London and New York, 1992), p. 142.

model for defining the terms.³⁷ Myths are believed to be true and are set in the remote past and in another world, either the earth before its present state or the underworld or the heavens. The characters in myths are supernatural beings and they provide an explanation for the phenomena of the natural world. Legends are also believed to be true. They relate to the recent past and although concerned with identifiable persons, times and places, their human agents may interact with supernatural powers or beings. Folktales are believed to be fiction. They are set in indeterminate time and place, are populated by humans and non-humans, they are told for entertainment.

These definitions centre on the concept of what people believe. However, the difference between fact and fiction, even if this could be ascertained, provides insufficient grounds for separating belief in one narrative from another, especially when a narrative contains elements of the natural and the supernatural. The difficulty of identifying differing levels of belief in regard to legends has been explored by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi.³⁸ They argue that although legends are believed to be true it is not an objective truth about the particular content of a particular legend that is believed but a truth more generally assumed concerning the concept about which the legend is told. A legend about a ghost is about ghosts, and the narrator may be trying to convince her audience that there are ghosts, that there are no ghosts, or perhaps that there used to be ghosts somewhere. The level of belief in the concept by teller and audience can vary from total acceptance to outright scepticism and is not relevant to the telling of a legend. However, some overall belief in the concept would have a bearing on the success or otherwise of a particular legend's continued appeal. The demise of one legend would entail the creation of a different legend, or legends, about the same gen-

37 W. Bascom, 'The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,' in *Journal of American Folklore* No. 78 (1965) pp. 3–20. Also cited in Finnegan, *Oral Tradition and the Verbal Arts*, pp. 146–149. See also Dan Ben-Amos, 'Folktales,' in Bauman (ed.), *Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments*, pp. 101–118. pp. 101–102.

38 Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, 'Legend and Belief' in Dan Ben-Amos (ed.) *Folklore Genres* (Austin and London, 1976), pp. 93–123.

eral topic if such topic continued to be an object of belief. The central point of any legend is that it is an instance of a more general belief held ‘*sometime, by someone, somewhere*’ (original emphasis).³⁹ For completeness Dégh and Vázsonyi could, and should, have added ‘about *something*.’ On this reading a belief in the Brahan Seer is less important than a belief in witchcraft, second sight and prophecy. Belief in these, especially the effectiveness of prophecy, is what has sustained the legend of the Brahan Seer over the centuries.

The Scottish context

Among the few to specifically treat of the elite/popular relationship in a Scottish context is Edward J. Cowan who discusses popular culture in an all-inclusive sense in a number of places. He does so most notably when examining ‘The Covenanting Tradition in Scottish History’ with reference to the ‘killing times’ of 1679–1689 when the persecution of Presbyterians for the sake of their conscience gave rise in oral tradition to tales of saints and martyrs prepared to die for their cause.⁴⁰ He looks in particular at the case of the Wigtown Martyrs, Margaret Wilson and Margaret McLachlan, who, legend has it, were tied to stakes between the high and low water mark and drowned when they refused to abjure.⁴¹ Wilson’s gravestone in Wigtown churchyard and monuments to the martyrs as far afield as Stirling and Toronto attest to the executions despite strong historical evidence against them ever having taken place.⁴² The ‘people’s history’, derived from oral accounts, was committed to print by, among others,

39 Ibid., p. 119.

40 E. J. Cowan, ‘The Covenanting Tradition in Scottish History’, in E. J. Cowan & R. J. Finlay (eds), *Scottish History: The Power of the Past* (Edinburgh, 2002) pp. 121–145.

41 Ibid., p. 132.

42 Ibid., p. 137.

Rev. Robert Wodrow some thirty years after the events, and countered propagandist pamphlets which showed the Covenanters in a poor light.⁴³ Although the case represents an example of ongoing tension between oral tradition and documented corroboration it would be an oversimplification to suggest that it represents a dichotomy between elite and popular culture. Historical dispute about the incident continued. In the nineteenth century Mark Napier was only the most passionate in his condemnation, not only of Wodrow, but also of Thomas Babington Macaulay – calling them ‘two of History’s most “incorrigible calumniators”’ – for perpetuating the martyr legend.⁴⁴ Using historical evidence in the form of legal precedent and parallels he engaged with his contemporaries in a robust and convincing defence of the Crown against the execution of the Wigtown Martyrs.⁴⁵ The persecutions also attracted the attention of nineteenth-century Romantic writers such as Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg who added their own gloss to events. Scott, his head perhaps turned by the dashing, cavalier images of their persecutor, John Claverhouse of Dundee, condemned the Covenanters in *Old Mortality*. However, after that work had received an anonymous review (its author was in fact Thomas McCrie) accusing the writer of ‘violating both truth and probability,’ Scott’s later output was more sympathetic to the Covenanters’ cause.⁴⁶ What is clear is that the Covenanting tradition is robust and what has come down to the present is a mix of oral tradition, historical

43 R. Wodrow, *The History of the Suffering of the Church of Scotland*, 4 Vols. (Glasgow, 1721–2 (1823)) Vol. I, pp. xxvii–xlii; cited in Cowan, ‘The Covenanting Tradition,’ p. 127. See also John Howie, *The Scots Worthies, Containing a Brief Historical Account of the Most Eminent Noblemen, Gentlemen, Ministers, and Others Who Testified or Suffered for the Cause of Reformation in Scotland, from the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century, to the Year 1688* (Glasgow, 1775 (1845)).

44 Cowan, ‘The Covenanting Tradition,’ p. 129.

45 M. Napier, *Memorials and Letters Illustrative of the Life and Times of John Graham of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee*, 3 Vols. (Edinburgh, 1862), Vol. I pp. 145, 148, 155; Vol. II, pp. 43, 59, cited in Cowan, ‘The Covenanting Tradition,’ pp. 133–137.

46 [Thomas McCrie], *A Vindication of the Scottish Covenanters: Consisting of A Review of the First Series of the ‘Tales of My Landlord,’ Extracted from the Christian Instructor for 1817* (Glasgow, 1824), pp. 4, 33–34, cited in Cowan, ‘The Covenanting Tradition,’

events and literary romance based on the world-view of reporters from different times. It also highlights the complex interrelation between folk tradition and elite culture and demonstrates that any account of the past that chooses to ignore that relationship is imbalanced.

The relationship between folk tradition and elite culture in the history of Scotland has been explored in the context of examinations of ballad texts from a historical perspective. Seen as the preserve of folklorists and literary critics, they have been currently overlooked by historians according to Cowan, because '[r]ecord-thirled historiography has scant regard for oral or popular tradition.'⁴⁷ Ballad texts, he argues, are worthy of study for their historical content because it is possible they have preserved events of local significance that have otherwise been lost.⁴⁸ Charles Duffin points out that this is not to suggest we will find objective historical 'truths' but 'we could expect to find the kind of culture-bound "truths" that emphasise group consciousness and cement the world-view of a traditional, oral community.'⁴⁹ However, ballads, he laments, are no longer passed down by word of mouth so they cannot be subjected to the authority and democratic criticism of the singer's audience. It was this, he argues, that formerly ensured the historical integrity of the message, irrespective of artistic merit. Instead, ballads have become fixed in literary texts where they have been subjected to the editorial refinements of the writer.⁵⁰ Oral tradition no longer mediates its own history; collectors and writers have intervened and placed themselves as arbiters between the ballad singer and audience. Despite this, Lizanne Henderson argues that ballads remain a valuable historical source for the investigation of

p. 139. See W. Scott, *The Bride of Lammermuir* and 'Wandering Willie's Tale' in *Redgauntlet* for examples of Scott's sympathetic treatment of the Covenanters.

47 E. J. Cowan (ed.), *The Ballad in Scottish History* (East Linton, 2000), p. 1.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

49 C. Duffin, 'Fixing Tradition: Making History from Ballad Texts,' in E. J. Cowan (ed.), *The Ballad in Scottish History*, pp. 19–35, p. 21.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

fairy belief as they can contain factual and emotional truths not otherwise found in the records.⁵¹

Elsewhere, Henderson and Cowan investigate the nature of Scottish fairy belief from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Their study overlaps in so many ways with the present area of interest in that it discusses belief in witchcraft and second sight and touches on some similar issues and some of the same personalities. They are not concerned to prove or disprove the existence of fairies but what their study does show is that from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries many Scots believed that fairies were real.⁵² Belief, as they point out 'is not the easiest of subjects to study,' because it forms part of a person's mental world and may be expressed through the spoken or written word and then perhaps through the mediation of others.⁵³ Cowan and Henderson point out that testimonies from witch trials are essential to their study as they seek to hear the voices of witches through the mediating language of their persecutors. Only when their voices cease to be trivialised is it possible to hear what the witches believed and recognise that this included belief in fairies who were thought to be 'guid neighbours' from a supernatural world with whom it was possible to interact. They had human characteristics and so could be good as well as bad. This belief became demonised under the witch prosecutions instigated by King James VI whose slim volume *Daemonologie*, published in 1597, helped the elite and the pious suppress the beliefs and practices of the majority and give greater worth to the cultural beliefs of an elite minority.⁵⁴ By redefining fairies as hallucinatory agents inspired by the Devil to do his work, the elites ensured that all who believed in them were at risk of prosecution.⁵⁵

51 L. Henderson, 'The Road to Elfland: Fairy Belief and the Child Ballads,' in E. J. Cowan (ed.), *The Ballad in Scottish History*, pp. 54–69. p. 69.

52 L. Henderson & E. J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton, 2001). pp. 2 and 12.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

Despite the attack on folk culture, learned men of the late seventeenth century believed in the existence of fairies. Rev. Robert Kirk believed in, and wrote extensively and authoritatively about, a distinct order of God-created beings living in a subterranean world, generally invisible but with whom 'seers or men of the second sight have verie terrifying encounters.'⁵⁶ Kirk's account stands as a bulwark against the advancing Age of Reason and shows that the elite minority was not homogenous; believers in fairies could still be found among their ranks. It need hardly be said that Romantic writers such as Scott and Hogg seized on fairy lore to nourish their art, although Scott, late in life, observed that men of breeding could no longer sustain such beliefs which had been 'banished to the cottage and the nursery.'⁵⁷ Judging by the practice of leaving cloth offerings at Doon Hill, Aberfoyle, where Kirk died, fairy belief, with or without men of breeding, continues to the present day.⁵⁸ For good measure, as Cowan and Henderson point out elsewhere, belief in witches has also persisted through the twentieth century among the 'peasantry' and the 'educated.'⁵⁹ These various works in Scottish popular culture show the difficulties of treating elite and popular culture as dichotomous entities. They parallel the present work on the legend of the Brahan Seer and provide a context in which it can be viewed.

56 R. Kirk, 'The Secret Commonwealth: Or a Treatise Displaying the Chief Curiosities Among the People of Scotland as They Are In Use to This Day, 1692' in M. Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science and Second Sight in Late 17th-century Scotland* (Woodbridge, 2001), 77–106. p. 79.

57 J. Hogg, *The Three Perils of Man: War, Women and Witchcraft*, D. Gifford (ed.), Edinburgh, 1996), p. xvii, cited in Henderson & Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p. 198.

58 L. Henderson & E. J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p. 214.

59 E. J. Cowan & L. Henderson, 'The Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief,' in J. Goodare (ed.), *The Scottish Witch-hunt in Context* (Manchester, 2002) pp. 198–217. p. 217.