Scots Peasant Proverbs

The words "peasant" and "proverb" are fairly self-explanatory, but some definition may be useful. In this case, the peasants are the subsistence farmers who, up to at least 1600, formed the bulk of the Scottish population. A "proverb" is any saying which expresses an opinion or attitude about life, is fairly common knowledge within a community, and is regarded as traditional. In an illiterate community, such as that of sixteenth-century Scottish peasants, proverbs to some extent take the place of newspapers, books, radio and television—they express the community's outlook and values. Consequently, far more proverbs may be in use than in a literate community; and in fact over two thousand of the Scots proverbs current before about 1600 have survived—many others must have disappeared.

The peasant's way of life was changing and ultimately disappearing; slowly from about 1600, and much more rapidly from about 1700. As farming methods improved through the seventeenth century, living conditions in Scotland did get sporadically better, although even in the 1690s there was widespread famine, the famous "seven ill years." After that most farmers operated above the basic subsistence level, and starvation became unusual, something that killed off individuals rather than groups. Partly because of the much greater farming yields, fewer people were required to work the land, and an increasing number turned to other occupations and became, for example, butchers, carters, wheelwrights, stone-masons, clock-makers—more or less full time. Any many of these, perhaps most, lived in villages or towns. Meantime, literacy was spreading rapidly. About one quarter of the men who wished to subscribe to the Covenant of 1638 were able to sign their own names, though probably a much smaller proportion of the peasantry. By the middle of the eighteenth century, about two-thirds of Scotsmen were literate. In the intervening period, one would expect to find the country's oral culture considerably encroached on by a
literate one, and this seems to have been the situation. By the earlier eighteenth-century, publishers such as Allan Ramsay, with his *Tea-Table Miscellany* (1724-37) and *Collection of Scots Proverbs* (1736), are evidently trying to preserve a threatened tradition. (There is, of course, a paradox in trying to preserve oral culture in written form, and something important is lost.)

The world of the Scottish peasants, before 1600 or even before 1700, is now very hard to discern. History is largely the study of written documents, and of course these people left none; and they appear only peripherally in the records of the upper classes or townspeople. They have left behind hardly anything tangible, such as household utensils, or even tombstones—probably most went into unmarked graves. Literally none of their houses have survived, and we know more about Roman tenements, or even about the dwellings of many stone-age people. There is, however, another window into the past—the peasant proverbs that were recorded in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—though no one seems to have looked into this with much attention. Although there has been, from time to time, quite a lot of interest in the proverbs, what might seem the most obvious question has not been asked: what do they reveal about life in this vanished society?

Most of the surviving Scots proverbs appear in only three manuscripts—two compiled by ministers, and one anonymous. One of the ministers is David Fergusson, who died in 1598 as an old man. He had originally been a glover in Dundee, and was one of the disputatious people who helped to bring about the Scottish Reformation. He became minister of Dunfermline and remained there from 1560 till his death. Here he collected the sayings of the people, in manuscript—perhaps with the awareness that this oral wisdom was liable to disappear in the literate society that he was helping to create. He became well-known for this, and ultimately a book of 911 of his proverbs appeared, though not until 1641. The title is *Scottish Proverbs: Gathered together by David Fergusson sometime Minister at Dunfermline*, and the printer’s introduction implies that Fergusson was still quite well remembered. After this, various reprints and variations of Fergusson’s proverbs were published, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
The edition of 1641 was published again in 1924, and with it was published a manuscript dating from the earlier seventeenth century, which lists most of Fergusson's proverbs—and about 500 others. The compiler seems to have used Fergusson's list as a base and recorded additions and variations—sometimes more obscene variations which Fergusson, as minister, may have chosen not to record. A third major source was discovered as late as 1924, a manuscript in Edinburgh University Library. 843 of the proverbs listed there do not appear either in Fergusson or the first manuscript, and 648 of them are otherwise unknown. The handwriting on this, third, source has been identified as that of James Carmichael, minister of Haddington, who died—old—in 1628. This collection of proverbs was published in 1957. Taken together, the three collections (published in two fairly accessible books) provide about 2250 proverbs (duplicates excluded). These figures still include some fairly obviously non-Scottish material—borrowed from English proverbs or from English or classical literature. Subtraction of known borrowings reduces the figure to about two thousand. There are other proverbs extant, almost certainly sixteenth century or earlier, in collections published later than Fergusson's, such as Allan Ramsay's. But, taken altogether, these provide only a few hundred extra proverbs. What we have in the three early collections seems enough to be going on with, and offers a cohesive group in that these proverbs were all recorded in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth-century; and in the same general area, the eastern Lowlands. (In the references for proverbs quoted here, F is Fergusson, M the anonymous manuscript, and C Carmichael.)

It is surprising that—apart from a few brief comments—no one has considered this large number of proverbs as a source of social and intellectual history. Admittedly, opinions as to the nature and value of the proverbs differ. The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs includes Scottish ones, but for the second edition, the editor made revisions on the grounds of quality. "A certain number of proverbs (mostly Scottish) which appeared in the original edition ... have been omitted from the present work because of their somewhat trivial character...." Beveridge, the editor of Fergusson's proverbs and the anonymous manuscript, enjoys the proverbs but does not see them as particularly Scottish. "It might even be allowable to feel some disappointment..."
that so very few among them bear the slightest impress of either local or national character” (p.xvii). But this impression seems to derive from considering each proverb more or less in isolation—and then noting, that few declare themselves as Scottish by referring to a place, person, or event (though some do). Yet this is what one should expect, as proverbs are general statements—“A bird in the hand is worth two flying”; “Praise the fair day at evening”—and do not usually deal in specifics. However, considering the proverbs as a group may give a different impression of their Scottishness. One Scot and one Spaniard may not be distinguishable: a group of twenty Scots set apart from twenty Spaniards almost certainly will be. These two thousand proverbs, taken together, may show something of Scottish peasant life four hundred and more years ago. Even if nothing completely new emerges, the proverbs may corroborate other evidence, or suggest changes of emphasis, in answering such questions as: how did the people farm, what did they eat, what were their attitudes to politics and religion; and, in general, what kind of world did they live in?

First then, although there are few references to places, there are enough to confirm from internal evidence that these proverbs were recorded in the eastern Lowlands—and especially in Fife. There are thirteen Scottish placenames in the anonymous manuscript, four in Fife and six nearby. Taking salt to Dysart is the equivalent of carrying coals to Newcastle; cutting Falkland wood with a penknife of finding a needle in a haystack (A596). Carmichael has twelve references, five in Fife, and four more in the eastern Lowlands, including an ambiguous one to his hometown of Haddington (Hey how Hadintoun aill made me never ful or never sall (C775). There are two general references to Galloway, of the sort that would be made by people who didn’t live there (“Greidie guts of Gallowa” (C571). This is Lowland society, then, and not Highland or Southern; and there is perhaps a split between east and west Lowland.

Nearly all the reference points are to farming—to landscape, or animals, or implements. “It is a bair moore that he goes over and gets not a cow” (A529). “A yeeld [barren] sow was never good to gryses [sucking pigs]” (A78). “He that lipens to bon plowes, his land will ly ley” (A302). (He that depends on
borrowed ploughs, his land will lie fallow.) One would expect proverbs about sea fishing, as this is an area with a very long coastline, around the estuaries of Forth and Tay, and fish would presumably be a basic source of food. There are references to fish—cod, herring, haddock, and also to whelks and oysters—but all from the consumer’s point of view. “Ther is a heat in our kitching the cook is wiried [choking] on a wilk” (M1847). “Ye ar sib [kin] to Cramond oysters & puiter vessel ye ar ay clattering” (M1562).

There are also a few references to ships, but half are general; suggesting the point of view of people who know what ships were, but did not actually work on them. “Als [as] broken a ship hes commend [come] to land” (C30). If any occupation is suggested here, it is the merchant’s, and we do also have: “A deir schip stands lang in the heaven [port]” (C48), which certainly sounds like a merchant’s proverb. The only ones which could arise from seamen are: “Auld shipis is aye lecking [leaking]” (M178), and “Spair sail and tak in a head” (M1219), both from the anonymous manuscript. There is virtually nothing on, for example, fish habits, sea-fishing tackle, or weather conditions at sea. There are one or two sayings about fishing but, where they are specific, they concern inland fishing. For instance, there is a reference to “damming and laving” (M363)—damming a stream and trapping fish above or below the dam. Again, “It is good fishing in drumling [troubled] waters” (A521)—but this also seems to refer to streams or perhaps lakes. It is strange that sea-fishermen contribute so little to these three collections. Either they made no proverbs, or they lived such an entirely separate life from farmers that their sayings do not appear in these collections. The second explanation is much more likely—for it would be very odd if farmers indulged in thousands of proverbs and fishermen almost none—but the apparent lack of communication between the two groups is surprising. There is a hint of it in one proverb about ships: “[The Devil] made sutars [cobbler’s] schipmen [who] could neither stier nor row” (C437). The idea seems to be that landsmen cannot acquire a seaman’s skills, and probably vice versa.

There are few references to towns, in the modern sense of concentrated settlements of, say, over 700 people. This is surpris-
ing, for we are dealing with the most urbanized area of Scotland. In an area forty miles square, there were Dundee and Perth in the north, with populations of between 5,000 and 10,000 by 1600; Edinburgh in the south, which was big even by European standards at perhaps 20,000; Haddington, Falkirk, and Dunfermline with close to 2,000, and several other towns in Fife and Lothian with around 1,000. That the word “town” is seldom used is not necessarily significant; but only a small proportion of the proverbs reflect town activities and occupations. There are a few about markets and merchants, and there are two proverbs on burgesses (“Sutars super tymes is burges bed tyme” (M1221). But of course some country people will come in to market, and in any case most of the more specialized occupations mentioned sound like country ones.

Millers and mills, naturally, come up often; there must have been a mill fairly handy for every farm. “Meikle [much] watter rinnis by quhen the millar sleips” (C1107). There are also cobblers—“The sownters wyfe gois ay warst schod” (C1444)—who could operate in country areas. We can follow the steps in making woollen clothing through various proverbs. Sheep are mentioned quite often, as in the ironic: “There is meikle wit in a flock of yowis” (C1516). After shearing the wool was combed—”Kemsters are creishie” [greasy] (1008)—and then spun and woven. “Sorrows gars [makes] websters spin” (A748), perhaps when they cannot get anyone else to do the spinning. There is mention of waulking, or fulling, beating the cloth to clean and thicken it; but not of dyeing, though this must also have been done. There are many sayings on the tailor’s work, such as “Calk is na schiers” (C387). (Chalk marking is not cutting.) With spinning the references are to the implement and not the person, which suggests that this was an activity anyone might engage in. Weavers and tailors, on the other hand, are treated as members of distinct groups, as if they had specialized occupations. Brewers are also mentioned as a recognisable group. “A brousters s[o]w a cotters k[o]w will never be fw [full]” (C193). Presumably the sow would be fed on draff, what was left of grain after the brewing; that was not very nutritious, as is evident from other proverbs that mention pigs and draff. “The worst worl that ever wes the malthman will gait his seck again” (M1382)—things will never be so bad that no beer is available. And it is surprising
to find this phrase extant at least as early as the early seventeenth century: "Tak an hair of the dog quhilk bait [that bit] yow yisternight" (M1358).

In farming, the animals most often mentioned are hens, geese, pigs, sheep, cows, and there are three references to goats. Horses come up a great deal, but it is not clear that they were commonly used for ploughing; where the references are explicit, they are usually to riding. "As good hasd the stirrep, as he that loups on" (F135). The Scots form of putting the cart before the horse is putting the plough before the oxen (C1825). Around the house there were dogs, cats—and mice. The midden is often mentioned, as if it were beside the houses. The crops were oats, barley, peas, and kail (a sturdy kind of cabbage). Kail was grown in a separate, walled plot, presumably close to houses. "If thou steal not my kail, break not my dyke" (F490). Peas come up occasionally. Barley, or actually "bere", a more primitive form, seems to have been the most prized crop. "Make na bakes [balks] of gud beir land" (C1104). The balks must have been strips of unploughed land to divide different holdings.

As to implements, ploughs were used of course, and also harrows. Having many masters is compared to being a frog caught under a harrow and hit by all the teeth (C1123), which may suggest that the harrow was thinner than ours. Harvesting was done with sickles. There is one reference to a "shower bink" (M1354)—bink is usually a bench—which seems to mean a temporary shelter, for workers who were some way from the houses. Spades and rakes were in general use, and brooms around the yard. "Mony brings the raike but few the shovell" (F641)—because raking is easier work than shovelling. Creel-baskets carried on the back—are mentioned quite often as a means of carrying things around. Most historians say that carts were little used in Scotland even in the later seventeenth century because, except for a few main routes, there were no tracks good enough for a cart to operate on. However, there are enough proverbs about carts to suggest that they were a normal part of farm life. They were apparently liable to either tumble over or get stuck. "An unhappie mans cairt is eith [liable] to tumble" (F32). "If I can get his cairt at a walter [shaking], I shall lend it a put [shove]" (F492)—which is not intended charitably. "They
put at the cairt that is ay gangand” (F826) implies that other cards did need pushing. And there is a reference to a third wheel in the sense of our “fifth wheel.” “Ye mister [need] it als meikle as the cart dois the third quheill” (C1849). The carts must have been two-wheelers, which would make them easier to pull over uneven ground but also more unstable.

There is very little about domestic furniture, beyond beds, cradles, benches and tables. Presumably there was not much else, though a table-cloth is mentioned once (C1292). Kilns, or ovens, feature quite prominently, sometimes as sexual metaphors. Diet seems to have been limited: kail and beer come up more than anything else; also, of course, cereal and sometimes eggs. Given the number of animal references, there are surprisingly few to meat, and these are usually to hens or geese. The latter is of course bigger and more valuable—"ye are als like tok [take] the guse as give the hen" (C1732). One puzzling proverb is: "There is meikle hid meat in guse eye" (C1514). To be taken literally, or ironically, or suggesting that the eye may reveal the whole goose, or the place where the goose was killed? The fuels mentioned are coal and peat—not often, but in ways that suggest everyone would be familiar with them. "Let them that are cald blaw at thecole" (C1033) is fairly expressive, suggesting a small slow burning fire without much heat.

If one were to sketch in a landscape, based on the information given in the proverbs, there would be dwellings, middens, and kail patches in the foreground; arable land surrounding these, divided up by strips of turf, and perhaps surrounded by a wall; further away, a grazing area, and then moorland, which might be pitted with large holes from peat cutting. There are references to fords over rivers—"Ruse [praise] the fuird as ye find it" (C1323)—but not to bridges. The fords must often have been hard to cross; indeed this is the basic assumption of most of the proverbs about them. Wildlife included the fly, midge, snail, worm, adder, fox, wren, crow, jackdaw, wild hawk and eagle. "Ane eagle taks na midges" (C59). Admittedly, one cannot always be sure that what appears in a proverb is based on observation rather than a literary source; the appearance of a lion reminds us of that. Also doubtful are swallows and wolves, because they appear in so many literary fables.
Some of the references to wild animals involve hunting, and there are quite a lot of references to hounds. The most frequent quarry seems to have been the hare: "A running hair is unreadie meate" (C163). It does not follow that most people hunted, and it seems rather unlikely that they would have had permission to do so, but they would not necessarily be left out. "An houndlesse man comes to the bast hunting (F132)"—perhaps by poaching. Some idea of social divisions comes through in the proverbs, from the point of view of peasant farmers, rather than lairds or beggars. "The lairds purse, the greifs horse and the taskers bull and cotters k[o]w wil never be ful" (C1629). This sounds almost like local society in microcosm. The grieve would be the laird’s superintendent, and presumably rode around his lands. The cottar had some land rights but was apparently likely to have difficulty pasturing his animals. A tasker sounds like a hired man paid on piecework, by the task; but in this case he seems to own the local bull. HIred men, who would not necessarily have had any land at all to work, are implied in one other proverb: "There should na unhyred men half [done] wark see" (C1529). But worst off would be beggars, and the many comments on these suggest that they were numerous. One proverb implies that Stewart was a common name among them, as it is now among tinkers. "Ye bre[e]d of the steuart that beggit the bread fra the bairnes" (C1728). There are also many references to thieves, and gallows.

Lairds-local landowners-come up frequently, and are dealt with in a rather familiar way. "Saine [keep] you weill fra the devill and the Lairds bairns" (F770) suggests that ordinary people might mix with the children. "Thair is lairds as ther is lyce pairt grit pairt small" (M1276). Apart from making a useful sociological point, this expresses a less than reverential attitude to social superiors; but many proverbs do that. The house of a laird is called a "hall", and "Hall binks ar slidderie" (C627)—great men’s favour is precarious. There is hardly any mention of the greater landowners, however, the lords and earls; ordinary people probably did not have enough access to aristocrats to consider them part of their world. The exception is the king, and occasionally his court, but he appears in slightly abstract form, representing a more distant authority, who should be avoided: "Neirest the king, neirest the widdic [gallows]" (C1194). And
one should be cautious about criticising him—"Kings hes long ears" (F562). The king’s court is something known about, in a general way, and disapproved of: “Court to the towne, and whoore to the window” (F212).

The Scots are often thought of as a religious people, after the Reformation of the mid sixteenth century if not before; and at least two of the three collectors of these proverbs were ministers, who might be expected to record whatever they could find that showed religious feeling. However, the church and religion generally show up far less than one would expect—possibly because the proverbs reflect a pre-Reformation, less pious world. The kirk as a physical building is mentioned much less often than the mill, though we have “Neirst the Kirk, farrest fra God” (F650)—one proverb that has survived. There is an indirect reference to the church distributing charity: “You are as likely to eat the kirk loaf as pay for it” (C1761), which implies that the church gave bread to the poor. Priests are mentioned two or three times—"Priest and dows make foul houses” (C1247)—and friars, especially grey friars, more often; they were perhaps a more conspicuous part of country life. They solicited money for the church and themselves, and this was not a popular activity. “Ye breed of the grey friars that always preach something to themselves” (C1712). Rome stands for somewhere a long way off, and the Pope is a distant, emblematic figure. “Ye may not sit in Rome and strive with the Pope” (F901). Harder to interpret is: “A man may speir the gate to Rome” (F88). Is this purely the city of Rome, or a reference to Catholicism? The Reformation came not long before these proverbs were recorded.

There are only a few pious proverbs, such as “Gif God be with ws, quha can be against ws” (C567), and they seem almost out of place among the far greater number of very worldly sayings. The devil comes up more often than God—"He should have a long shafted spoon that sups kail with the devil” (F350)—but generally seems to be used metaphorically, as a personification of evil, rather than a being who is liable to appear in person. However, at least one proverb about him is also fairly concrete: “Seldom lies the devil dead by the dykeside” (C1374). It is not that orthodox Christianity is replaced by something else—the proverbs reveal little or no belief in the supernatural. Witches are
absent except for one rather doubtful reference: "God keep us from gyrscarlings & all lang nebbed things" (M459). A gyrscarling is a witch, or goblin, or something evil. Most of the proverbs must date from before the major witch burnings of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and perhaps the peasants' sentiments changed on this point, but a least there is no evidence here that they were rabid about putting down witches. The word "fairlie," a marvel, comes up sometimes, but does not imply supernatural beliefs: it means merely "impossible" or "unlikely." "A cook wncrabed a sholer wncabed ane tailyeor wnyce [not fastidious] these ar thrie fairlyes" (M156).

The catastrophes that one would expect to attend sixteenth-century country life—possibly war, probably plague, certainly famine—hardly appear in the proverbs. Arms are mentioned, but they seem to indicate conflict between individuals, rather than battles or devastation by a hostile army. "A sword holds ane uther in the scaberd" (M173). There is only one mention of plague (as "the pest"), and that looks like a late addition, in another hand, to the anonymous manuscript. The diseases that do come up are kidney stones, jaundice, gout, venereal disease, and "glanders." There are also many references to skin disease. War and disease may simply have been unsuitable material for proverbs, because there was nothing one could do about them. But it is also possible that they did not much affect sixteenth-century country life. (Plague was especially a town disease.) On the other hand, one could deduce the presence of famine from the proverbs, or at least of endemic poverty severe enough to kill. As already noted, beggars are often mentioned, and they must have depended on luck and charity to survive. The devil does not die by the dykeside, but the implication is that others do. Again, "It is evill geving a peice over a greiting bairnes heid" (C970). Presumably the child is crying with hunger, and the food has been reserved for someone else—probably the family's provider.

However, on the whole the proverbs' sentiments tend towards cautious optimism. Many suggest that things may be better than they look; there are several variations of "All is not tint [lost] that is in perrell" (F3). There is also a belief that few of us are entirely without options—"She is a sairie mouse that has but ane
hole” (F762)—and that energy can get you a long way—"A wight [bold] man wanted never a weapon” (F10). Nor should one necessarily be depressed by failure. “He that never did ane thing ill can never do it weill” (M616). There are admittedly various proverbs recommending caution. “Better had than draw” (C292)—draw a sword, that is. “He rises over soone quho is hanged or noone” (M501). But these are balanced by other proverbs that stress you can be too cautious. “He that raid never, fell never” (C762)—does not, I think, advise one never to go riding, or take an initiative, but rather the opposite. More explicitly, we have: “He that counts all costs, will never put pleuch in erd” (C736).

A very large number of proverbs make the point that words are cheap. “Manic words fillis not the firlot [grain container]” (C1132). It follows that insults and threats do not count for much. “A sair flyter [railler] was never a gud fechter” (C200), and “A schored [threatened] man leives lang” (C186)—another faintly optimistic proverb. There is something of a paradox here, because the proverbs themselves are verbal expressions and, for so many to be in currency, the people must have been fond of them. And some proverbs do grant power to words. “A man that is warned, is half armed” (F36) and, more subtly, “He that spares to speak, spares to speed” (F307)—one may be too secretive. The proverbs compromise on this issue by being as brief as possible.

Considered as a group, the three collections of proverbs do convey much of the world of these sixteenth-century farmers. They seem to have had little interaction with either fishermen or townspeople. They ploughed with oxen, harvested mainly bere, burned coal and peat, and carried their crop and fuel in creels and precarious carts; there were no bridges and rivers had to be forded. The concern with basic food and clothing implies a subsistence life style. By far the most important foods were bere and kail, the latter being grown in a walled patch near the house. There were many farm animals but, apparently, not much meat available for the farmers; presumably they sold it to the landowning classes or the townspeople. Beer was the only luxury in good supply. Famine was a danger even for the steeled farmers, and much more so for the many beggars; but there is no evidence
that the peasants suffered from war or plague. They seem to have been a rather independent class, not greatly in awe of anyone. They were familiar with the local laird, suspicious of the king, somewhat indifferent to the Church. They had no obvious supernatural beliefs, were sceptical of fine talk, and had a generally caustic attitude to life. Yet they were guardedly optimistic, and valued energy and decisiveness. "After long mint [pondering] never Dint [strike]" (M135)—a warning against hesitating too long. Despite their caution, these peasants preferred action to passivity.

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