

No Advantages

This parish possesses no advantages. Upon the hills the soil is in many places mossy and fit for nothing. The air in general is moist. This is occasioned by the height of the hills which continually attract the clouds and the vapour that is continually exhaled from the mossy ground . . . The nearest market town is fifteen miles away and the roads so deep as to be almost impassable. The snow also at times is a great inconvenience, often for many months we can have no intercourse with mankind. And a great disadvantage is the want of bridges so that the traveller is obstructed when the waters are swelled . . . Barley oats and potatoes are the only crops raised. Wheat rye turnips and cabbage are never attempted . . .

There are ten proprietors of land in this parish: none of them resides in it.

Contribution by the Minister of Ettrick Parish,
in the county of Selkirk, to the Statistical Account
of Scotland, 1799

The Ettrick Valley lies about fifty miles due south of Edinburgh, and thirty or so miles north of the English border, which runs close to the wall Hadrian built to keep out the wild people from the north. During the reign of Antoninus the Romans pushed farther, and built a line of fortification between the Firth of Clyde and the Firth of Forth, but that was

not so lasting. The land between the two walls has been occupied for a long time by a mix of people—Celtic people, some of whom came from Ireland and were called Scots, also Anglo-Saxons from the south, Norse from across the North Sea, and possibly some leftover Picts as well.

The high stony farm where my family lived for some time in the Ettrick Valley was called Far-Hope. The word *hope*, as used in the local geography, is an old word, a Norse word—Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and Gaelic words being all mixed up together in that part of the country, as you would expect, with some old Brythonic thrown in to indicate an early Welsh presence. *Hope* means a bay, not a bay filled with water but with land, partly enclosed by hills, which in this case are the high bare hills, the near mountains of the Southern Uplands. The Black Knowe, Bodesbeck Law, Ettrick Pen—there you have the three big hills, with the word *hill* in three languages. Some of these hills are now being reforested, with plantations of Sitka spruce, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they would have been bare, or mostly bare—the great Forest of Ettrick, the hunting grounds of the Kings of Scotland, having been cut down and turned into pasture or waste heath a century or two before.

The height of land above Far-Hope, which stands right at the end of the valley, is the spine of Scotland, marking the division of the waters that flow to the west into the Solway Firth and the Atlantic Ocean, from those that flow east into the North Sea. Within ten miles to the north is the country's most famous waterfall, the Grey Mare's Tail. Five miles from Moffat, which would be the market town to those living at the valley head, is the Devil's Beef Tub, a great cleft in the hills believed to be the hiding place for stolen cattle—English cattle, that is,

taken by the reivers in the lawless sixteenth century. In the lower Ettrick Valley was Aikwood, the home of Michael Scott, the philosopher and wizard of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who appears in Dante's *Inferno*. And if that were not enough, William Wallace, the guerrilla hero of the Scots, is said to have hidden out here from the English, and there is a story of Merlin—*Merlin*—being hunted down and murdered, in the old forest, by Ettrick shepherds.

(As far as I know, my ancestors, generation after generation, were Ettrick shepherds. It may sound odd to have shepherds employed in a forest, but it seems that hunting forests were in many places open glades.)

Nevertheless the valley disappointed me the first time I saw it. Places are apt to do that when you've set them up in your imagination. The time of year was very early spring, and the hills were brown, or a kind of lilac brown, reminding me of the hills around Calgary. Ettrick Water was running fast and clear, but it was hardly as wide as the Maitland River, which flows past the farm where I grew up, in Ontario. The circles of stones which I had at first taken to be interesting remnants of Celtic worship were too numerous and well kept up to be anything but handy sheep pens.

I was travelling by myself, and I had come from Selkirk on the twice-a-week Shoppers' Bus, which took me no farther than Ettrick Bridge. There I wandered around, waiting for the postman. I'd been told that he would take me up the valley. The chief thing to be seen in Ettrick Bridge was a sign on a closed shop, advertising Silk Cut. I couldn't figure out what that might be. It turned out to be a well-known brand of cigarette.

After a while the postman came along and I rode with him

to Ettrick Church. By that time it had begun to rain, hard. The church was locked. It disappointed me, too. Having been built in 1824, it did not compare, in historic appearance, or grim character, to the churches I had already seen in Scotland. I felt conspicuous, out of place, and cold. I huddled by the wall till the rain let up for a bit, and then I explored the churchyard, with the long wet grass soaking my legs.

There I found, first, the gravestone of William Laidlaw, my direct ancestor, born at the end of the seventeenth century, and known as Will O'Phaup. This was a man who took on, at least locally, something of the radiance of myth, and he managed that at the very last time in history—that is, in the history of the people of the British Isles—when a man could do so. The same stone bears the names of his daughter Margaret Laidlaw Hogg, who upbraided Sir Walter Scott, and of Robert Hogg, her husband, the tenant of Ettrickhall. Then right next to it I saw the stone of the writer James Hogg, who was their son and Will O'Phaup's grandson. He was known as The Ettrick Shepherd. And not far from that was the stone of the Reverend Thomas Boston, at one time famous throughout Scotland for his books and preaching, though fame never took him to any more important ministry.

Also, among various Laidlaws, a stone bearing the name of Robert Laidlaw, who died at Hopehouse January 29th 1800 aged seventy-two years. Son of Will, brother of Margaret, uncle of James, who probably never knew that he would be remembered by his link to these others, any more than he would know the date of his own death.

My great-great-great-great-grandfather.

As I was reading these inscriptions the rain came on again, lightly, and I thought I had better start to walk back to Tushielaw, where I was to catch the school bus for my return

ride to Selkirk. I couldn't loiter, because the bus might be early, and the rain might get heavier.

I was struck with a feeling familiar, I suppose, to many people whose long history goes back to a country far away from the place where they grew up. I was a naïve North American, in spite of my stored knowledge. Past and present lumped together here made a reality that was commonplace and yet disturbing beyond anything I had imagined.

MEN OF ETRICK

Will O'Phaup

Here lyeth William Laidlaw, the far-famed Will o' Phaup,
who for feats of frolic, agility and strength, had no equal
in his day . . .

Epitaph composed by his grandson, James Hogg, on
Will O'Phaup's tombstone in Ettrick Kirkyard.

His name was William Laidlaw, but his story-name was Will O'Phaup, Phaup being simply the local version of Far-Hope, the name of the farm he took over at the head of Ettrick Valley. It seems that Far-Hope had been abandoned for years when Will came to inhabit it. The house, that is, had been abandoned, because it was situated so high up at the end of the remote valley, and got the worst of the periodic winter storms and the renowned snowfall. The house of Potburn, the next one to it, lower down, was until recently said to be the highest inhabited house in all of Scotland. It now stands deserted, apart from the sparrows and finches busy around its outbuildings.

The land itself would not have belonged to Will, it would not even have been leased to him—he would have rented the house or got it as part of his shepherd's wages. It was never worldly prosperity that he was after.

Only Glory.

He was not native to the valley, though there were Laidlaws there, and had been since the first records were kept. The earliest man of that name I have come across is in the court records of the thirteenth century, and he was up on charges of murdering another Laidlaw. No prisons in those days. Just dungeons, mainly for the upper class, or people of some political importance who had fallen out with their rulers, and summary executions—but those happened mostly in times of large unrest, as during the border raids of the sixteenth century, when a marauder might be hanged at his own front door, or strung up in Selkirk Square, as were sixteen cattle thieves of the same name—Elliott—on a single day of punishment. My man got off with a fine.

Will was said to be “one of the old Laidlaws of Craik”—about whom I have not been able to discover anything at all, except that Craik is an almost disappeared village on a completely disappeared Roman road, in a nearby valley to the south of Ettrick. He must have walked over the hills, a lad in his teens, looking for work. He had been born in 1695, when Scotland was still a separate country, though it shared a monarch with England. He would have been twelve years old at the time of the controversial Union, a young man by the time of the bitter failed Jacobite Rebellion of 1715, a man deep into middle age by the time of Culloden. There is no telling what he thought of those events. I have a feeling that his life was lived

in a world still remote and self-contained, still harboring its own mythology and local wonders. And he was one of them.

The first story told of Will is about his prowess as a runner. His earliest job in the Ettrick Valley was as shepherd to a Mr. Anderson, and this Mr. Anderson had noted how Will ran straight down on a sheep and not roundabout when he wanted to catch it. So he knew that Will was a fast runner, and when a champion English runner came into the valley Mr. Anderson wagered Will against him for a large sum of money. The English fellow scoffed, his backers scoffed, and Will won. Mr. Anderson collected a fine heap of coins and Will for his part got a gray cloth coat and a pair of hose.

Fair enough, he said, for the coat and hose meant as much to him as all that money to a man like Mr. Anderson.

Here is a classic story. I heard versions of it—with different names, different feats—when I was a child growing up in Huron County, in Ontario. A stranger arrives full of fame, bragging of his abilities, and is beaten by the local champion, a simple-hearted fellow who is not even interested in a reward.

These elements recur in another early story, in which Will goes over the hills to the town of Moffat on some errand, unaware that it is fair day, and is cajoled into taking part in a public race. He is not well dressed for the occasion and during the running his country breeches fall down. He lets them fall, kicks his way out of them, and continues running in nothing but a shirt, and he wins. There is a great fuss made of him and he gets invited to dinner in the public house with gentlemen and ladies. By this time he must have had his pants on, but he blushes anyway, and will not accept, claiming to be mortified in front of such *leddies*.

Maybe he was, but of course the leddies' appreciation of such a well-favored young athlete is the scandalous and enjoyable point of the story.

Will marries, at some point, he marries a woman named Bessie Scott, and they begin to raise their family. During this period the boy-hero turns into a mortal man, though there are still feats of strength. A certain spot in the Ettrick River becomes "Will's Leap" to commemorate a jump he made, to get help or medicine for someone who was sick. No feat, however, brought him any money, and the pressures of earning a living for his family, combined with a convivial nature, seem to have turned him into a casual bootlegger. His house is well situated to receive the liquor that is being smuggled over the hills from Moffat. Surprisingly this is not whiskey, but French brandy, no doubt entering the country illegally by way of the Solway Firth—as it will continue to do despite the efforts late in the century of Robert Burns, poet and exciseman. Phaup becomes well known for occasions of carousing or at least of high sociability. The hero's name still stands for honorable behavior, strength, and generosity, but no more for sobriety.

Bessie Scott dies fairly young, and it is probably after her death that the parties have begun. The children will have been banished, most likely, to some outbuilding or the sleeping loft of the house. There does not appear to have been any serious outlawry or loss of respectability. The French brandy may be worth noting, though, in the light of the adventures that come upon Will in his maturity.

He is out on the hills as the day turns to evening and he keeps hearing a sound like a chattering and a twittering. He knows all the sounds that birds can make and he understands that this

is no bird. It seems to come out of a deep hollow nearby. So he creeps and creeps very softly to the edge of the hollow and flattens himself down, just raises up his head enough that he can look over.

And what does he see down below but a whole company of creatures all about as high as a two-year-old child, but none of them are children. They are little women, all dainty looking and dressed in green. And busy as they can be. Some baking bread in a bit of an oven and some pouring drink out of little kegs into glass pitchers and some fixing up the other one's hair and all the time humming and chittering away and never looking up, never raising one of their heads but just keeping their eyes on their business. But the more he keeps listening to them the more he thinks he hears something familiar. And it comes clearer and clearer—the little chirp-chirp song they make. Finally it comes clear as a bell.

Will O'Phaup, Will O'Phaup, Will O'Phaup.

His own name is all the word in their mouths. The song that sounded sweet enough to him when he first heard it is not that anymore, it is full of laughing but it is not decent laughing. It makes the cold sweat run down Will's back. And he remembers at the same time that this is All Hallows' Eve, the time in the year when these creatures can work their way however they please with any human being. So he jumps up and runs, he runs all the way back to his house faster than any devil could chase him.

All the way he hears the song of *Will O'Phaup, Will O'Phaup* ringing just behind his ears and never growing any less or any fainter. He reaches his house and he gets inside and bars the door and gathers all his children round him and he begins to pray as loud as ever he can and as long as he prays he cannot hear. But let him just stop to get his breath and it comes down

the chimney, it comes through the cracks in the door, and it gets louder as the creatures fight against his prayer and he does not dare to rest till on the stroke of midnight he cries *Oh, Lord have mercy* and falls silent. And there is no more heard of the creatures, not a peep. It is a still night out as any night might be and the peace of Heaven over the whole valley.

Then another time, in the summer but around the darkening hour of the evening, he is making his way home from penning the sheep and he thinks that he sees some of his neighbors quite a distance away. It comes into his mind that they will be coming home from Moffat Fair, it being indeed the Moffat Fair Day. So he thinks he'll take the opportunity of going ahead and speaking to them, and find out what the news is, and how they got on.

As soon as he gets close enough to them he calls out.

But nobody takes any notice. And then again he calls out, but still not one of them turns around or looks towards him. He can see them plain from their backs, all country folks in their plaids and their bonnets, both men and women, and normal-sized, but he cannot get to look at their faces, they stay turned away from him. And they do not look to be hurrying, they are dawdling along and gossiping and chatting and he can hear the noise they make but not quite the words.

So he follows faster and faster and finally he takes to a run, to catch up to them, but no matter how fast he runs he cannot do that—though they are not hurrying at all, they are still just dawdling. And so busy he is, thinking about catching up to them, that it does not occur to him for some while that they are not going homeward at all.

They are not going down the valley but up a narrow kind of

little side valley with a trickle of a creek in it that flows down into the Ettrick. And with the light fading they seem to be getting dimmer but more numerous, a strange thing.

And down from the hills comes a cold draught of air though it is a warm summer evening.

And Will knows it then. These are no neighbor folk. And they are not leading him on to any place where he would want to go. And hard as he had run after them before, he turns now and runs the other way. This being an ordinary night and not All Hallows' Eve they have no powers to chase him. His fear is different from the fear he felt the other time, but just as cold, because of the notion he has that they are ghosts of humans bewitched into fairies.

It would be a mistake to think that everybody believed these stories. There was the brandy factor. But most people, believing or not, would hear them with more than a mild shiver. They might feel some curiosity, and some skepticism, but mostly a large portion of plain dread. Fairies and ghosts and religion were never mixed up together under some benign designation (*spiritual powers?*) as they often are today. Fairies were not blithe and captivating. They belonged to the olden times, not the old historical times of Flodden where every Selkirk man was killed except the one who brought the news, or of the lawless men raiding by night across the Debatable Lands, or of Queen Mary—or even of the times before that, of William Wallace or Archibald Bell-the-Cat or the Maid of Norway, but the truly dark times, before the Antonine Wall and before the first Christian missionaries came across the sea from Ireland. They belonged to times of bad powers and evil confusion, and their attentions were oftener than not malicious, or even deadly.

N O A D V A N T A G E S

Thomas Boston

As a Testament of Esteem for the
Reverend Thomas Boston Senior
whose private character was highly respectable,
whose public labours were blessed to many and
whose writings have contributed much to promote
the advancement of vital Christianity.
This monument erected by a religious
and grateful public.

Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto
you, will seek to enter in, and will not be able.

Luke xi 11, 24.

Will's sightings would certainly not stand well with the Kirk, and during the first part of the eighteenth century the Kirk was particularly powerful in the parish of Ettrick.

Its minister at that time was the preacher named Thomas Boston, who is remembered now—if he is remembered at all—as the author of a book called *Human Nature in its Four-fold State*, which was said to stand next to the Bible on the shelf of every pious home in Scotland. And every Presbyterian home in Scotland was meant to be a pious home. Constant investigation of private life and tortured reshapings of the faith went on to take care of that. There was no balm of ritual, no elegance of ceremony. Prayer was not only formal but personal, agonized. The readiness of the soul for eternal life was always in doubt and danger.

Thomas Boston kept this drama going without a break, for himself and for his parishioners. In his autobiography he speaks of his own recurring miseries, his dry spells, his sense of

unworthiness and dullness even in the act of preaching the Gospel, or while praying in his study. He pleads for grace. He bares his breast to Heaven—at least symbolically—in his desperation. He would surely lacerate himself with thorned whips if such behavior would not be Popish, would not in fact constitute a further sin.

Sometimes God hears him, sometimes not. His craving for God can never leave him, but he can never count on its being satisfied. He can rise up filled with the Spirit and enter marathons of preaching, he presides at solemn festivals of Communion in which he knows himself to be the Vessel of God and witnesses the transformation of many souls. But he is careful not to take the credit himself. He knows that he is all too capable of the Sin of Pride, and knows too how swiftly Grace may be withdrawn from him.

He strives, he falls. Darkness again.

Meanwhile the roof of the manse is leaking, the walls are damp, the chimney smokes, his wife and his children and he himself are often sick with fevers. They have septic throats and rheumatic aches. Some of his children die. The very first baby is born with what sounds to me like spina bifida and she dies soon after birth. His wife is distraught, and though he does his best to comfort her he feels bound also to reprimand her for complaining against God's Will. He has to reproach himself later for lifting up the coffin lid to get one last glimpse of the face of his own favorite, a little boy of three. How wicked of him, how weak, to love this sinful scrap of flesh and to question in any way his Lord's wisdom in taking him. There must be further wrestlings, self-castigation, and bouts of prayer.

Wrestlings not only with his dullness of spirit but with a

majority of his fellow ministers, for he becomes deeply interested in a treatise called *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. He is accused of being a marrow-man, in danger of going over to antinomianism. Antinomianism proceeds logically from the doctrine of predestination and asks a simple, direct question—why, if you are from the beginning one of the elect, should you not be able to get away with anything you like?

But wait. *Wait*. As to being one of the elect, who can ever be so sure?

And the problem for Boston must surely not be about getting away with anything, but about the compulsion, the honorable compulsion, to follow where certain lines of reasoning lead.

Just in time, however, he falls back from error. He retreats. He is safe.

His wife, in the midst of births and deaths and care of the remaining children and troubles with the roof and the continual cold rain, is overcome by some nervous disorder. She is unable to get out of her bed. Her faith is strong, but vitiated, as he says, on one essential point. He does not say what this point is. He prays with her. How he manages in the house we do not know. His wife, once the beautiful Catherine Brown, seems to stay in bed for years, except for the one touching respite when all the family is laid low by some passing infection. Then she rises from her bed and cares for them, tirelessly and tenderly, with the strength and optimism she showed in her youth, when Boston first fell in love with her. Everyone recovers, and when next heard from she is back in bed. She is well on in years but still alive when the minister himself is dying, and we can hope that she will get up then and go to live in a dry house with some agreeable relations in a civilized town. Keeping her

faith but holding it at arm's length, perhaps, to enjoy a bit of secular happiness.

Her husband preaches from his chamber window when he is too feeble and close to death to get to the church and up into the pulpit. He exhorts bravely and fervently as ever and crowds gather to hear him, though it is raining, as usual.

The bleakest, the most desperate life, from any outside point of view. Only from the inside of the faith is it possible to get any idea of the prize as well as the struggle, the addictive pursuit of pure righteousness, the intoxication of a flash of God's favor.

So it seems strange to me that Thomas Boston should have been the minister whom Will O'Phaup listened to every Sunday during his young manhood, probably the minister who married him to Bessie Scott. My ancestor, a near pagan, a merry man, a brandy drinker, one upon whom wagers are set, a man who believes in the fairies, is bound to have listened to, and believed in, the strictures and hard hopes of this punishing Calvinist faith. And in fact when Will was pursued on All Hallows' Eve did he not call for protection on the same God whom Boston called upon when he begged to have the weight—of indifference, doubt, sorrow—lifted off his soul? The past is full of contradictions and complications, perhaps equal to those of the present, though we do not usually think so.

How could these people fail to take their religion seriously, with its threat of Hell inescapable, with Satan so cunning and relentless in his torments, and Heaven's population so sparse? And they did, they took it seriously. They were called up for their sins to sit on the cutty stool and bear their shame—usually for some sexual matter, solemnly referred to as Fornication—in front of the congregation. James Hogg was summoned there at

least twice, charged with paternity by local girls. One case he admitted readily and in the other he would only say that it was possible. (Eighty miles or so to the west, in Mauchline in Ayrshire, Robert Burns, eleven years older than Hogg, suffered precisely the same public humiliation.) The Elders went from house to house to see that no cooking was in progress on a Sunday and at all times their harsh hands were employed in severely squeezing the breasts of any woman suspected of having borne an illegitimate child, so that a drop of milk might betray her. But the very fact that such vigilance was thought necessary shows how these believers were waylaid by Nature in their lives, as people always are. An Elder in Burns's church records "Only 26 Fornicators since the last sacrament," as if this figure is indeed a step in the right direction.

And they were waylaid also in the very practice of the faith, even by the industry of their own minds, by the arguments and interpretations that were bound to arise.

This might have had something to do with their being the best-educated peasantry in Europe. John Knox had wanted them educated so that they could read the Bible. And they read it, with piety but also with hunger, to discover God's order, the architecture of His mind. They found a lot to puzzle about. Other ministers of Boston's time complain of how disputatious their parishioners are, *even the women*. (Boston does not mention that, being too busy blaming himself.) They do not quietly accept the hours-long sermons but grab hold of them as intellectual fodder, judging as if they were involved in lifelong and deadly serious debates. They are forever worrying at points of doctrine and passages of scripture that they would be better off leaving alone, say their ministers. Better to rely on those trained to deal with such things. But they will not do so, and the fact is

that the trained ministers as well are sometimes driven to conclusions that other ministers must condemn. The result being that the Church is riven by divisions, the men of God are frequently at one another's throats, as Boston's own troubles have shown. And it may have been the stain of being a marrow-man, of following his own unavoidable thought, that kept him so long in remote Ettrick, never up to his death being "translated" (as the word was then) to a moderately comfortable place.

James Hogg and James Laidlaw

He was always a singular and highly amusing character who cherished every antiquated and exploded idea in science, religion, and politics . . . Nothing excited his indignation more than the theory of the earth wheeling round on its axis, and journeying around the sun . . .

. . . for a number of years bygone he talked and read about America till he grew perfectly unhappy, and at last when approaching his sixtieth year actually set out to seek a temporary home and a grave in the new world.

James Hogg, writing about his cousin James Laidlaw.

Hogg poor man has spent most of his life in conning lies . . .

James Laidlaw, writing about his cousin James Hogg, poet and novelist of early-nineteenth-century Scotland.

He was a gey [very] sensible man, for a' the nonsense he wrat . . .

Tibbie Shiel, innkeeper, also buried in Ettrick Kirkyard, speaking about James Hogg.

James Hogg and James Laidlaw were first cousins. Both men were born and raised in the Ettrick Valley, a place which had not much use for their sort—that is, for the sort of men who do not take easily to anonymity and quiet lives.

If such a man becomes famous, of course, it is another story. Alive he is booted out, dead he is welcomed home. After a generation or two, it is another story.

Hogg escaped, into the uneasy role of the naïve comedian, the bumpkin genius, in Edinburgh, and then he escaped, as the author of *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, into lasting fame. Laidlaw, lacking his cousin's gifts, but not apparently his knack for self-dramatization and his need for another stage than Tibbie Shiel's tavern, made some mark by hauling up the more docile members of his family and carrying them off to America—actually to Canada—when he was old enough, as Hogg points out, to have one foot in the grave.

Self-dramatization got short shrift in our family. Though now that I come to think of it, it wasn't exactly that word they used. They spoke of *calling attention*. *Calling attention to yourself*. The opposite of which was not exactly modesty but a strenuous dignity and control, a sort of refusal. The refusal to feel any need to turn your life into a story, either for other people or for yourself. And when I study the people I know about in the family, it does seem that some of us have that need in large and irresistible measure—enough so as to make the others cringe with embarrassment and apprehension. That's why the judgment or warning had to be given out so frequently.

By the time his grandsons—James Hogg and James Laidlaw—were young men, the world of Will O'Phaup was almost gone.

There was a historical awareness of that recent past, even a treasuring or exploitation of it, which is only possible when people feel themselves most decidedly removed. James Hogg clearly felt that, though he was so much a man of Ettrick. It is mostly his writings I have to thank for what I know of Will O'Phaup. Hogg was both insider and outsider, industriously and—he hoped—profitably shaping and recording his people's stories. And he had a fine source in his mother—Will O'Phaup's eldest daughter, Margaret Laidlaw, who had grown up at Far-Hope. There would be some trimming and embroidering of material on Hogg's part. Some canny lying of the sort you can depend upon a writer to do.

Walter Scott was an outsider of sorts, an Edinburgh lawyer now appointed to a high post in his family's traditional territory. But he too understood, as outsiders sometimes do better, the importance of something that was vanishing. When he became the Sherriff of Selkirkshire—that is, the local judge—he began to go around the country collecting the old songs and ballads which had never been written down. He would publish them in *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Margaret Laidlaw Hogg was famous locally for the number of verses she carried in her head. And Hogg—with his eye on posterity as well as present advantage—made sure he took Scott to see his mother.

She recited plenty of verses, including the newfound “Ballad of Johnie Armstrong,” which she said she and her brother had got “from old Andrew Moore who had it from Bebe Mettlin [Maitland] who was housekeeper to the First Laird of Tushielaw.”

(It happens that this same Andrew Moore had been Boston's servant and that it was he who had reported Boston as having “laid the ghost” who appears in one of Hogg's poems. A new light on the minister.)

Margaret Hogg made a great fuss when she saw the book Scott produced in 1802 with her contributions in it.

“They were made for singin and no for prentin,” she is supposed to have said. “And noo they’ll never be sung mair.”

She complained further that they were “neither right settin down nor right spelt,” though this may seem an odd judgment to be made by someone who had been presented—by herself or by Hogg—as a simple old countrywoman with only a minimum of education.

She was probably both simple and sharp. She had known what she was doing but could not help regretting what she had done.

And noo they’ll never be sung mair.

She might also have enjoyed showing that it took more than a printed book, it took more than the Shirra of Selkirk, to make a favorable impression on her. Scots are like that, I think. My family was like that.

Fifty years after Will O’Phaup clasped his children and prayed for protection on All Hallows’ Eve, Hogg and a few of his male cousins—he does not give their names—are to meet in that same high house at Phaup. By this time the house is used as a lodging by whatever bachelor shepherd is in charge of the high-feeding sheep, and the others are present that evening not to get drunk and tell stories but to *read essays*. These essays Hogg describes as flaming and bombastical, and from those words, and from what was said afterwards, it would seem that these young men deep in the Ettrick had heard about the Age of Reason, though they probably didn’t call it that, and about the ideas of Voltaire and Locke and of David Hume, their fel-

low Scot and Lowlander. Hume had grown up at Ninewells near Chirnside, about fifty miles away, and it was to Ninewells that he retreated when he suffered a breakdown at the age of eighteen—perhaps overcome, temporarily, by the scope of the investigation he saw in front of him. He would still have been alive when these boys were born.

I could be guessing wrong, of course. What Hogg calls essays could have been stories. Tales of the Covenanters being hunted down at their outdoor services by red-coated dragoons, of witches, of the walking dead. These were lads who would try their hand at any composition, at prose or poetry. John Knox's schools had done their work, and a rash of literature, a fever of poetry, was breaking out in all classes. When Hogg had been at his lowest point, working as a shepherd on the lonely hills of Nithsdale, living in a rough shelter called a bothy, the Cunningham brothers—the stonemason's apprentice and poet Allan Cunningham, and his brother James—had come trudging over the countryside to meet him and tell him of their admiration. (Hogg was alarmed at first, thinking they came to charge him with some trouble about a woman.) The three of them left the dog Hector to guard the sheep and settled down to talk of poetry all day, then crawled into the bothy to drink whiskey and talk of poetry all night.

The shepherds' meeting at Phaup, which Hogg claims that he himself did not manage to attend, in spite of having such an essay in his pocket, was held in winter. The weather had been strangely warm. That night, however, a storm arose which turned out to be the worst in half a century. Sheep were frozen in their pens and men and horses were trapped and frozen on the roads, while houses were buried in snow up to their roofs. For three or four days the storm continued, roaring and devas-

tating, and when it was over, and the young shepherds came down to the valley alive, their families were relieved but in no way pleased with them.

Hogg's mother told him plainly that it was a punishment brought on the whole countryside by the Devil's work being done in whatever reading and conversing was going on at Phaup that night. No doubt many other parents thought the same.

Some years later, Hogg wrote a fine description of this storm, and it was published in *Blackwoods Magazine*. *Blackwoods* was the favorite reading of the little Brontës, in the rectory at Haworth, and when they each chose a hero to impersonate in their games, Emily chose the Etrick Shepherd, James Hogg. (Charlotte chose the Duke of Wellington.) *Wuthering Heights*, Emily's great novel, begins with a description of a terrible storm. I have often wondered if there is a connection.

I don't believe that James Laidlaw was one of those present at Phaup that night. His letters don't show anything like a skeptical, or theorizing, or poetical sort of mind. Of course the letters that I have read were written when he was old. People change.

Certainly he is a joker when we meet him first, by Hogg's account, in Tibbie Shiel's inn (which is still there, more than an hour's walk through the hills from Phaup, just as Phaup is still there, now a bothy shelter on the Southern Uplands Way, a walking trail). He is putting on a show that could be seen to be blasphemous. Blasphemous, risky, and funny. Down on his knees, he is offering up prayers for several of those present. He asks forgiveness, and specifies the sins that are outstanding, prefacing each one with *an if it be true*—

An if it be true that the bairn born a fortnight past to ——
——'s wife has an almighty look about it of ——, then
wilt Thou Lord show mercy on all the participants . . .

An if it be true that —— —— cheated —— ——
out of twenty pieces of lamb siller [silver] at the last St. Bos-
well's sheep fair, then we pray Thee, O Lord, in spite of such
devil's doing . . .

Some of those named could not be held back, and his
friends had to drag James out before harm came to him.

By this time he was probably a widower, a fellow on the
loose, too poor for any likely woman to marry. His wife had
borne him a daughter and five sons, then died at the birth of
the last one. Mary, Robert, James, Andrew, William, Walter.

Writing to an emigration society around the time of Water-
loo, he presents himself as an excellent prospect, because of the
five strong sons who will accompany him to the New World.
Whether or not he was offered help to emigrate I do not know.
Probably not, because we next hear of him having trouble rais-
ing the fare. A depression has followed the end of the
Napoleonic Wars, and the price of sheep has fallen. And there
is no more boast of the five sons. Robert, the eldest, has taken
off for the Highlands. James—the younger James—has gone
to America, which includes Canada, all on his own, and it
seems he has not sent word to say where he is or what he is
doing. (He is in Nova Scotia, and he is teaching school in a
place called Economy, though he has no qualifications for this
except what he got in the Ettrick schoolhouse, and probably a
strong right arm.)

And as for William, the second youngest, a boy not yet out
of his teens who will be my great-great-grandfather—he is
gone as well. When we next hear of him he is settled in the
Highlands, a factor on one of the new sheep farms cleared of

N O A D V A N T A G E S

the crofters. And so scornful is he of the place where he was born, as to write—in a letter to the girl he later marries—that it would be unthinkable for him to live in the Ettrick Valley ever again.

The poverty and the ignorance distress him, apparently. The poverty which seems to him willful, and the ignorance which he judges to be ignorant even of its own existence. He is a modern man.