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University of Aberdeen 1876



ABERDONIANA.

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*Footdee in the Last Century.*

BY

A LADY, A NATIVE OF ABERDEEN,

AND AUTHORESS OF "THE GOODWIFE AT HOME."

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ABERDEEN: A. BROWN & CO.

1872.

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PRINTED BY ARTHUR KING AND COMPANY, STEAM PRINTERS AND STEREOTYPERS,  
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# Footdee in the last Century.

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" Remote, but still distinct, the view appears,  
Through the long vista of departed years."

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THE FISHTOWN OF FOOTDEE, towards the conclusion of the American war, was certainly not one of those "green spots on which memory delights to dwell," and yet it has kept hold of mine, with all the tenacity of a first impression.

The *town* consisted of several rows of low thatched cottages, running from East to West, between the high road and the harbour, or as it was called, the "tide," which at high water came up even to the ends of the houses. Nothing could be more apparently comfortless, than the exterior of these dwellings, each fronting the back of the opposite neighbour, and the narrow space between forming a line of dunghills, crossed over with supported spars, from whence hung lines, bladders, and buoys, intermixed with dried skate and dogfish.

The prospect within was not more alluring to a stranger, and yet the inhabitants seemed quite contented. The earthen floor, dirty and uneven—the smoky roof, whose only ceiling was a few old oars and pieces of drift wood—with the bare rough walls, unconcious of any washing save what the sooty drops afforded, were objects far from pleasing.

The furniture was in every way corresponding. Two clumsy black bedsteads were placed under the two small windows, of which there was one on each side of the door; and a small table, two or three chairs, and some low seats or 'sunkies, with the

requisites of the fishing occupation, viz., lines, creels, sculls, murlans, &c., formed all the rest of the visible moveables. There was no press or keeping-place whatever, except a chest or locker in which the Sunday clothes and any stores were kept, and the saut bucket suspended in the chimney.

The fishermen were in general hardy and industrious, but ignorant in an incredible degree on all subjects unconnected with their own business. Few of them could read, and none of the grown up people could write. The elderly men wore broad bonnets, blue jackets, and canvas kilts or short trousers. The younger men were rather good-looking, smarter in their dress, and more good-humoured; but going to sea in the night, and taking their repose by day, was not favourable for the development of the social faculties, and there was scarcely an instance of intellectual talent or a tendency to any art or science among them. They were indeed fond of music, in as far as having a fiddle at their merry meetings, and a few of the lads could sing a little, but their collection of songs was not extensive, consisting almost entirely of "The Praise of Paul Jones," "the Woeful Ballad of Captain Glen," and the Christmas carol of "By Sonthend."

The females of this small community laboured under great disadvantages, both moral and physical; their incessant toils left no time for mental improvement, and their constant exposure to the weather without any sort of bonnet, together with their frequent immersion in salt water, gave a hardness to their features and a coarseness to the skin, with a far-from-pleasing expression of countenance. The figure also became early bent from the weight of the creel. The middle aged women wore a stuff gown with a large flowered calico wrapper or short gown over it, the young girls a stuff wrapper and petticoat, with the hair in a most unbecoming fashion, either thrown back with a large comb which reached from ear to ear, or put up in a very slovenly manner, with a "head lace" of red worsted tape. The boys under fifteen were the worst clothed; they ran about in a very tattered condition in old garments of their father's, "a



world too wide," and seemed to be kept waiting until their strength could enable them to gain a decent covering. The little children were more comfortable, those of both sexes being clad in a simple dress of white plaiding, called a "wallicoat," which, with their white curly heads and rosy countenances, made them look very pretty as they puddled with their mimic boats in the pools of water. Ah! what may have been their history since that period; and how different must any of the survivors be now, in 1843!

There was still another class, who, though few in number, formed rather an interesting part of the society. In several of the families there was, in addition to the husband, wife, and children, an old man or woman, known by the appellation of Lucky-daddy or Lucky-minnie—the grandfather or grandmother of the family. These, when unable to work for themselves, went to live in the houses of their sons or daughters, and seemed to be kindly treated by them. Some of the men were very old, born in a former century, and appeared to take little interest in what was passing, sitting in a chair in the sun outside the door, or led about by one of the children. The grandmother had her place by the fire, and assisted in many of the lighter domestic labours. Her dress was somewhat peculiar; she always wore a blue cloth hood or "trotcosie," and a man's coat over the rest of her attire, with a large pouch or pocket by her side. These old women were often skilled in the medical art, and their advice sought in preference to doctors; but some individuals of them were also dreaded as being an "nnlucky foot," and possessing other powers which made it dangerous to offend them. I often regret that I had neither the power nor opportunity of conversing with those ancient people. I was merely a silent spectator and unheeded listener to what was passing. Had I been able to ask questions, I might have obtained many traditional records of the olden time.

These slight sketches may give some idea of the general appearance of Footdee and the Fishers. Their manners and

habits were in many respects peculiar to themselves. Seldom or never intermarrying with those of other occupations, they became almost all, in some degree, related to each other, and several bearing the same name were distinguished by various "by-names," such as "Muckly," "Littley," "Habers," &c. They continued to count money by the old Scotch value, 1d. was twelve pennies, 2½d. thirty pennies, and so on. They were very particular as to the first-foot they met in the morning, or when going on any expedition, and when things did not prosper, it was often attributed to the influence of "an ill fit."

They were also very anxious on *old* new year's day morning to obtain the *cream* of the well, and used to assemble soon after the midnight hour round a large draw-well which stood in the middle of the road, where a scuffle generally ensued as to which of the numerous pans and buckets should be permitted to carry off the precious "first fraught."

Their marriages generally took place at an early period of life. When a young man was able to do for himself, he got a share of a boat, but required some one to sell the fish and bait the lines; he was therefore obliged to look out for a helpmate; and as soon as they were betrothed, it was the custom for the young woman to go to live with the bridegroom and his parents, where, under the superintendence of his mother, she *tip*\* and baited the lines, went for bait, and did all manner of household work, till a few days before the marriage, when she returned to her former home, where the ceremony took place, after which the young couple went to live in a house of their own, and the poor girl got the creel to carry for life.

Their marriages were celebrated with much festivity, great crowds attending, being generally what are called penny weddings; every one on payment of one shilling was admitted, and some who wished to be generous on the occasion gave more. The

\* To *tip* the line, which is usually a hempen rope, is to attach to it, at equal intervals, pieces of hair twist called tippets, to the ends of which the hooks are fastened. This operation, and the fixing of the bait on the hooks, were always the work of the women.

ceremony was performed in the Church or in the "Chamber," a small building with stone floor and iron-bound windows near it. The party walked in regular procession, a fiddler playing before them, and a man carrying a flag in which the bride was rolled on her way home.\* They then dined in a large tent erected for the purpose on a sort of loan or common, which divided the houses from the high road. There was always abundance of meat and broth served in broad pewter dishes for all within reach. After dinner they adjourned to the Links to dance the *shame dance*,† which being over, they returned and dispersed among the public houses, of which there were several at the ends of the lanes, where the music and dancing were prolonged till a late hour, and further expenses defrayed by the guests.

Another custom, somewhat peculiar to themselves, prevailed at that period. When any of their relations came from a distance to visit them, the stranger on his arrival usually sent one of the children of the family "up the town" for whatever was necessary to furnish the entertainment. Tea, sugar, white bread, spirits, &c., were all got on the occasion; and the children in telling of the visit of a friend, never failed to boast of the extent of his liberality—"Uncle Willie came from the Cove on Saturday, and was three shillings among us," or, "Uncle Sandy was four shillings the last time he was o'er the water," were common observations with them, and seemed to give great satisfaction.

Old Christmas or "Aul' Yule" was always a season of enjoyment and good cheer with the fishers for several days. At that time they did not go to sea. The men might be seen lounging at the gable end of the public houses, playing at pitch and toss, or keeping themselves warm by a particular sweeping motion of the arms. The women went about gossiping and preparing for the feasts.

\* This is still the custom in Newburgh after sundown (1871).

† I know not the etymology of the *shame dance*, which is the name given to the first dance after the marriage, and always includes the bride. I have heard of it in rural districts, and have heard it sometimes called *shamie* or *shamed dance* or reel.

These took place on "Yule Day," and every boat's crew had one for themselves, their wives, and their children, and a few invited guests. Strange as it may appear in the present day, I was present at one of these entertainments when a child. Our fishwoman, who had a daughter a year younger than myself, named after me, having asked as a particular favour that I might be allowed to go along with the servants, who were, of course, invited every year. The entertainment consisted of large pieces of roasted beef and mutton, with broth handed up from a pot by the fire as it was wanted. There was no fish except a very savoury dish called *tyauven skate*\*, prepared in a particular manner from the fish in a dried state, and mixed with a variety of ingredients, so that it seemed to be accounted a great dainty. There was also in the middle of the table a very large loaf baked with plenty of raisins and currants, and to which the happy faces of the children were constantly directed.

The table equipage was not quite so ample as the eatables; plates were only given to a favoured few, and knives were only used for carving, or rather *hewing* down the meat. The young lads cut theirs on ship biscuits with folding knives which they took from their pockets, and somewhat old fashioned *five* pronged forks were chiefly employed by the rest of the company.

I cannot so well describe the quality of the drink used on the occasion, but a girded cogie and a pint stoup, with one glass, were frequently handed round, and all seemed quite merry and delighted. When they rose to go away, another scene commenced. The whole of the broken meat was divided among them, and the remainder of the sweetie loaf was cut into equal portions and distributed in the same manner. All the wives got their shares, which they bundled up in their aprons, and went home quite pleased and happy.

Their manner of living in general was far from comfortable, and nothing but habit could have enabled them to endure many

\* I cannot, by any combination of letters, convey the pronunciation of the *first* syllable to the English reader.

of the hardships to which they were exposed. Yet in the midst of apparent poverty and privation, they sometimes possessed articles not to be seen in places of higher pretensions; for instance, a bottle of French brandy or cordial waters was sometimes produced to a visitor, and offered in a small turned cap with four *lugs* or handles. I remember one, with a foreign gold coin inserted in the bottom, with which I was once gratified by a sight, when the guidwife insisted, in defiance of orders, "that the littlane should get a mou-fou'."

The small-pox often made fearful ravages among them; nothing could reconcile them to inoculation which brought the disease though in a milder form—vaccination being then unknown—and the children might be seen lying in the most miserable manner in the fish-sculls with a rich Barcelona silk handkerchief spread over them.

Having now given a hasty sketch of some of their customs and habits, I may say a word or two of their moral character. They were in general very honest, scarcely ever an instance of theft being found amongst them, and very seldom coming under church censure; but I regret to say they were most inveterate swearers, making use of the most horrid oaths on the most trivial occasions. These could not be said to be the ebullitions of anger nor the effects of immediate provocation, for at the hauling in of a ship to the pier, or pushing off a boat into the water, I have heard the most tremendous oaths and imprecations uttered, with seemingly as little evil intention as the "yo hee yo!" with which they were mingled.

The women were most violent in all their expressions of grief and lamentation. It often happened that the boats were in great danger in crossing the bar, and on these occasions the women used to assemble on the "bents," tearing their hair, clapping their hands, and collecting a crowd about them, while their piercing cries and frantic gestures might have afforded a study for the tragedian or the painter.

In giving way to anger, they were often equally outrageous, using the most opprobrious epithets, and I have seen a woman

in a passion take up a handful of burning coals and throw them down again without seeming to feel them; yet they were kind hearted, and were seldom known to do any personal injury.

Their religious knowledge was very limited. Mr. Fullerton the minister was a good quiet man, but he wanted energy for the radical improvement and reformation of such people. They had public worship on the Sundays, and "*examines*" occasionally in "the Chamber," but the effects were not very manifest, except on a few really well disposed and sincere persons. One circumstance was rather against them, viz., that the Sacrament was never dispensed in Footdee; there was preaching on the appointed days, and tokens were given as in other places, but on the Sunday forenoon there was no service, and the people were obliged to shift for themselves, by going to any of the Churches in Aberdeen, where they could find accommodation. The means of education were confined to those whose parents could afford to pay for them at the Parish School. It was kept, at that time, by a Mr. Robb, a man sufficiently "severe and stern to view," with a cocked hat, and long skirted coat. He taught reading by the usual routine of going through the Shorter Catechism, Proverbs, and Bible; he also gave instruction in writing and arithmetic, but his pupils seldom remained so long as to make any proficiency; nothing was explained to them, and I believe no one would have presumed to ask him a question. He was on the whole a diligent teacher, attending to his school, and coming to give me lessons two hours a day in the same dry and unvarying manner.

While the young people had this opportunity of acquiring a little learning, the old continued in a state of comparative ignorance; yet many of them displayed occasionally a great share of cunning and firmness of purpose, along with apparent simplicity. This was evident in their examination before the courts, to which their intercourse with the smugglers often subjected them. As an instance, it may be mentioned that some of them being witnesses on a trial for deforcement, at which they had been present, were pressed very hard on some parts of the

evidence, which they evaded with the greatest coolness. They were asked in particular by the counsel, "While the men were struggling in the water, did you not hear the prisoner call out, 'Drown the dogs, drown the dogs?'" "We saw nae dogs there, sir," was the demure and composed reply. "I do not ask what you saw, but did you not, on your oath, hear him call out, 'drown the dogs?'" "There wasna ony dogs there, sir," was, again the obstinate answer. In connection with the business of the port and shipping, the fishermen were frequently sworn at the Custom-house; but it was found at one period that they treated the manner of making oath too lightly, and went through the ceremony of kissing the book without being sufficiently impressed with the solemnity of the transaction, or aware of the great responsibility they came under. It was therefore found necessary to frame another form of oath suited to their capacity, and touching on their superstitious fears, which was found to be far more effectual. It was certainly a curious document, and concluded with the words,—“If I do not speak the truth, and nothing but the truth, may my boat be a bonnet to me.”

They had considerable personal courage, but great timidity toward everything which they supposed to be under supernatural influence, and stout men who would have faced any danger by day, would not have passed the churchyard alone at night. They believed firmly in Ghosts, Wraiths, Witches, Fairies, Mermaids, and Water Kelpies, and told many marvellous stories of all these mysterious beings, by which some had got frights, which they never “cowered.”

I perfectly recollect a stout man, Andrew Brand, who had dark hair, and a broad good humoured face, wearing his bonnet on the back of his head, and having more the appearance of a jolly sailor than a fisherman, being often employed as a pilot or extra boatman. This man was found one day lying insensible on the Hill of Torry, and on being roused, spoke so confusedly and incoherently, that they were obliged to carry him to the Ferry and bring him home, where he lay for some weeks in a

fever, sometimes delirious, and at other times low, and declining to give any account of the cause of his illness. However, with proper medical treatment he recovered, though reduced to a skeleton, and the neighbours, as well as his own family, were firm in the belief that he had seen "something."

Sometime afterwards he gave the following account in a very serious manner to those who questioned him on the subject:—

He said that one morning, being at the look-out, he was lying on his breast, looking over the rocks, and that he saw a creature like a woman, with a white sheet about her, sitting on a stone, sometimes combing out her long hair, and sometimes tossing up her arms in a *fearsome* way, and that she rushed into the sea and vanished. After this, he said he had no power to move, that his heart *lap*, that he grew blind, and had no recollection of anything, till he *wakened* with his bones all sore, and the men lifting him. It was concluded at the time that the poor man had the symptoms of fever before going out, and that falling asleep in that exposed situation, the confusion of his brain had done all the rest; but it has since often struck me, that he had actually seen the sight, and that it was nothing more or less than a lady bathing, a thing not common in those days; and the individual, whoever she was, must have remained ignorant of the mischief she unwittingly occasioned, by making such a direful impression on the unfortunate Damon.

But the time now came when my opportunities of making observations in Footdee ceased, for although my parents continued to reside there till the year 1788, I was able to walk to the schools in town, which occupied my future time and attention. There were at that time but four *slated* houses in Footdee, three (in one of which we lived) between Middlethird and the Kirktown, and another near the Pottery, possessed by a respectable shipowner, whose family then lived in a style of affluence and comfort not exceeded by the improvements of modern refinement.

Soon after this period, we came to reside in Aberdeen, and



had little intercourse with Footdee for several years, except from the visits of my name-daughter, who still continued to keep us in mind of the old neighbourhood ; but she was married to a young man in Finnan, and soon after Aberdeen ceased to be the place of my own residence.

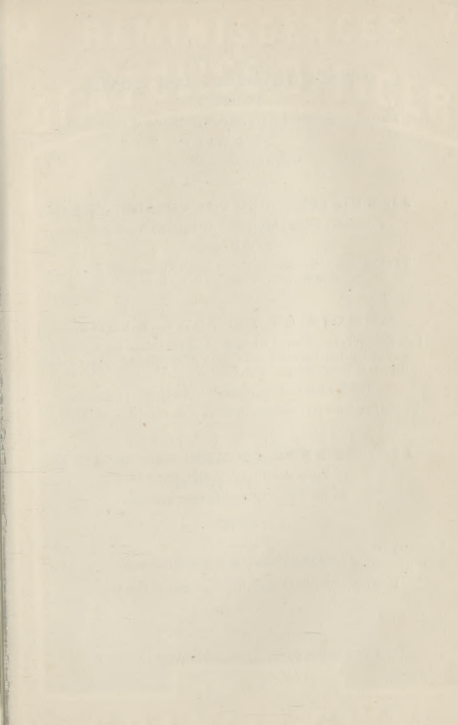
Time rolled on, and for many years, spent in a rural district, I had heard nothing of Footdee or its inhabitants, when it so happened in the course of events, that in the year 1824 I was again for a few days in Aberdeen. Great improvements had taken place there, the old Fish Town was no more, spacious streets and handsome buildings had extended the City in all directions, but I felt more interest in exploring the haunts of my childhood, and the old familiar places, through which I had so often passed on my way to school. Some of these places were certainly not the most pleasant, and I was one day kindly accompanied by a friend, ascending one of them, a steep narrow path, known by the rather unpromising designation of "The Hangman's Brae." It was the same as ever. We had just entered between walls and I was looking down recognizing the very causey stones (particularly some smooth-faced *blue ones*) as the acquaintances of my infancy, when a fish woman with her creel, came suddenly round the corner from Castle Street, and was descending the brae before us. It immediately struck me that I might know her, and as she approached nearer, I discovered, with agreeable surprise, something of the appearance of my name-daughter ; and when she came up close, a mark on her forehead put the matter beyond a doubt. She was going aside to make way for us, when I asked if her name was Ann Paterson ?\* She said "yes, ma'am," and stopt to see what was wanted. I then mentioned my own former name, and asked if she remembered such a person ? Her countenance brightened, and she answered, "Aye, I mind on her weel, and dream about her

\* She was commonly called *Dass*, from having been named after me, Ann Dundas ; and although, on changing my surname, I dropt my second Christian name, she was always distinguished by it, contracted into *Dass* ; and a younger daughter of the family was called Ann.

mony a time." I said, "do you think you would know her if you saw her?" "Oh! weel that," she replied, with a half smile, which seemed to say, that is an absurd question. It was now evident that time had stood still with the picture in poor Annie's mind, while it had made its usual progress with the one before her. I therefore told her who I was, and held out my hand; but never shall I forget the scene which followed. In a moment she disengaged herself from the creel, threw it on the ground, and burst into a flood of tears, exclaiming in the most affecting tones, "My frien, my frien, my dear, dear frien, and is it you? an is't just you yersell;" but no mere repetition of the words can convey an idea of the tender and pathetic manner in which they were uttered, or the tears, sobs, and impassioned gestures by which they were accompanied. The lady who was with me stood in much astonishment. I was quite overpowered, and certainly could not help feeling a little ashamed of my own cool composure, compared with the outpourings of the heart exhibited by this child of nature.

When she became a little more settled, we had much to ask and tell each other; her story was soon told, she had been more than twenty years married, but had no family, and her constant employment in all that time had been to cure, and bring to the Aberdeen Market, the celebrated Finnan Haddocks.

I was annoyed to think that after so long a separation we should have met thus, between two dead walls, where I had it not in my power to shew her any kindness, and I urged her to come where I could have given her a more hospitable reception. She seemed delighted with the idea, but the distance, and her never having been from home, were insurmountable obstacles. We have never met again, and I know not whether she is still in life, but my interview with her, which I have here described, is likely to be the last link in the long extended chain of my acquaintance with the Fishers of Footdee.



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