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Scott McLean

**As They Lived It:  
Peasant Life as Portrayed in the Bethunes'  
*Tales of the Scottish Peasantry***



Often when involved in the process of historical inquiry it is necessary to go beyond the scope of usual sources. Nowhere is this more evident than when exploring the world of the peasantry. Sources are often rare, incomplete and at best allow for a limited knowledge of their day-to-day experiences. Exploring the literature of the period can at times prove to be a fruitful way in which to fill the gaps in the historical record. An examination of the Bethunes' *Tales of the Scottish Peasantry* illustrates such a point, as it represents a rich source for understanding the lifestyle of the typical Lowland Scots peasant. Although the stories bear some resemblance to the later Kailyard tradition, they stand apart from this body of literature on a number of important points and should therefore not be readily dismissed as another fanciful journey into a sentimentalized past. Within these colorful tales lies a high degree of historical reality taken from the life experiences of the authors. They provide a window into the everyday life, the hardships, social attitudes, the culture, of the early nineteenth-century Scottish peasantry which could not be understood through conventional sources of historical inquiry.

To critically evaluate the historical significance of the Bethunes' *Tales*, it is important to have a firm grasp of the authors' backgrounds. Alexander (1804-1843) and his brother John (1811-1839) were born and raised in Fife by parents all too familiar with the hardships of poverty. A difficult financial situation forced both brothers to begin work at a young age.

Alexander began laboring when he was fourteen, while his brother John began herding cows at age eight. During their lifetimes each worked at breaking rocks on the roads and as laborers in quarries. A joint venture in a small weaving business gained them some initial success but this was short lived due to an economic depression. It was during such jobs that the Bethunes gained their hard-won experience; each day they faced the same long hours, low pay, poor conditions and extremely high levels of physical exertion shared by all members of the peasantry.

Like others in their position they endured extremely poor living conditions. There was always a shortage of food, most of their wages being spent on providing for two sickly parents. Decrepit living quarters guaranteed them damp clothes which contributed to their susceptibility to colds and other ailments—practically from birth John was unhealthy and often had to be confined to his bed. Alexander, while somewhat healthier than John, was twice injured in blasting accidents which almost claimed his life.<sup>1</sup>

Despite long hours and poor living conditions the brothers endeavored to teach themselves to read and write sufficiently in the hope that they might one day make a living at it. In the story *Things and Thoughts*, Alexander recalls how he and John had saved enough money to purchase several books at a local auction. Throughout this short tale one can sense the childlike excitement they felt upon acquiring their first books. They bought "Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*, in four volumes; Goldsmith's *Citizen Of the World*, two volumes; *Byron's Works*, four volumes; a copy of *Burns' Works*, and some other trifles of comparatively little importance" (p. 275). Their interest in the great literary works, both classical and those closer to home, explains much of their writing style. The impression one gets is that the authors were well read and considerably educated even though they had no formal training. Within the tales there is something which separates them from the fictional, overly-romanticized representations of the Kailyard School.

The Kailyard novels of the late nineteenth century are recognized as having little or no historical basis since they contain a highly sentimentalized view of the past. Recent studies have led to a more positive re-assessment of the Kailyard, yet it is still necessary to differentiate between

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<sup>1</sup>This information has been taken from the Biography by John Ingram, which is prefixed to Alexander and John Bethune's *Tales of the Scottish Peasantry* (London, 1884), pp. 9-30. Alexander edited *Poems by the Late John Bethune* (London, 1841) to which he prefixed a 106-page Life. William M'Combie edited *Memoirs of Alexander Bethune, Embracing Selections from his Correspondence and Literary Remains* (Aberdeen, 1845). Further references to the Bethunes' *Tales* will appear in the text.

this body of literature and the works of the Bethunes. There are many differences between these works, both subtle and otherwise, the most obvious being the time frame. The Kailyard novels were a product of later Victorian morality, often viewed as "an escapist literature, retreating to a good past when the unpleasant realities of the future had not intruded."<sup>2</sup> Despite some similarities with earlier works such as John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* or Elizabeth Hamilton's *The Cottagers of Glenburnie*,<sup>3</sup> works contemporary with the Bethunes, the Kailyard literature must remain separate from this earlier body of literature. The Bethunes' *Tales of the Scottish Peasantry* does not fit comfortably within either style of literature. It has its own uniqueness which makes it historically significant. Unlike the Kailyard literature, the Bethunes' tales are written about the present as the authors experienced it, not about a past which was idealized.

There are a number of similarities between the Kailyard literature and the Bethunes' tales. Like Kailyard material, the Bethunes sanitized their portrayal of peasant life to some degree. Relationships rarely take on sexual overtones and certainly leave a much different impression than that given in the bothy ballads which are full of the sexual exploits of men and women. In the story *Three Hansel Mondays* the Bethunes relate a girl's views on love:

..."the men maun aye fa' in love first, an' tell their love too, an' bide our scorn awhile to the bargain; for though the lasses, puir things, should fa' ower the lugs in love, they daurna speak a word o't' an' then they may a' dee o' broken hearts, an' ne'er ane ken—no even their nearest freends."

"What might hinder them to let their love be kenn'd as weel as the men do?"

"Maybe they wad mak an odd warld if they were aye able to tell o' their likings," was her reply; "but nature has ta'en care to keep that power for ither kind o' cattle. An' if ye only kenn'd the struggle a woman has afore she can tell the man she likes best some wee hints aboot her affections, after he has deaved her for years wi' his, ye wad never speer that question. A woman's heart is like a mouse-trap—love may get in, but it can never get out again, unless the minister len'a a hand to open it." (p. 115)

The impression one gets from this example is that falling in love was a lengthy and cautious procedure, where lasses never gave their heart (or anything else) to anyone, without careful consideration. Compare this to

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<sup>2</sup>Ian Campbell, "George Douglas Brown's Kailyard Novel," in *SSL*, XII (July, 1974), 62.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

the ballads which portray a decidedly different, uncomplicated attitude towards love:

But the plooman laddie's my delight,  
The plooman laddie loes me;  
When a' the lave gang tae their bed  
The plooman comes and sees me.<sup>4</sup>

Here we see love and sex expressed in a delightfully uncomplicated way which is decidedly different from the Bethunes' portrayals of young love. Their depiction is more typical of what was common amongst high society. In the story *Jonathan Moudiwort* there is a long description of upper-class courtship rituals which suggests a lengthy process of dinners with family, walks in the garden and at most the holding of hands (pp. 288-308). This representation accurately fits the historical evidence, as the morality of nineteenth-century elite society dictated a non-sexual relationship before marriage. It seems that for the wealthy, sex outside of marriage was gotten mostly from servants or the abundant numbers of prostitutes which filled the urban centers.<sup>5</sup>

Through their depictions of relationships, love and marriage, the Bethunes provide ample criticism of elite society. In fact, this would appear to form much of their commentary. Many of their tales have a moral to them which, in part, focuses upon the hardships faced by the peasantry and the social barriers which confronted them.

A characteristic common to both the Bethunes' works and the Kailyard literature is the use of Scots. The Bethunes make use of lowland Scots during conversations between characters who would have this as their native tongue. The use of Scots adds humor and sincerity to the narrative. In no instance do the Bethunes attempt to qualify their use of Scots in the way that S. R. Crockett does in his *Lilac Sunbonnet* (1894).<sup>6</sup> Like Galt, the Bethunes' characters are not attempting to use Scots as a foreign language but instead use it to better illustrate an important part of their culture.<sup>7</sup> For this reason the use of Scots adds to the importance of the tales, tales which represent the experiences, attitudes and way of life of

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<sup>4</sup>David Kerr Cameron, *The Ballad and the Plough* (London, 1978), p. 120.

<sup>5</sup>Rosalind Mitchison, *Life In Scotland* (London, 1978), p. 117.

<sup>6</sup>Emma Letley, *From Galt to Douglas Brown* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 246-7.

<sup>7</sup>Emma Letley, "Language and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction," in *The History of Scottish Literature*, ed. Douglas Gifford. Vol. 3 (Aberdeen, 1988), pp. 324-9.

peasants as peasants lived them, not how someone of a later age or higher station in life believed peasant life was or should be. There is no fairy tale element in their descriptions; instead, the stories contain an element of stark reality which lends credence to their historical validity.

As a source of popular culture, the Bethunes' portrayals are of the utmost importance. They provide information on a variety of topics associated with peasant life. There is surface information describing housing, sports, agricultural methods and festivals and fairs. Second, there are general comments on such problems as poverty, death, and injury at the workplace. Finally, there is an examination of social barriers and class, a level which demonstrates the acute awareness the Bethunes had of social attitudes and how these dominated social actions. Within all the tales there are comments, both specific and more elusive, which illustrate the divisions within society. They discuss the attitudes and perceptions the poor held towards the wealthy as well as the treatment the poor received from the rich and the problems created by such treatment. As well, the stories give evidence to many of the economic and social trends occurring within society, for example, the social changes which resulted from the agricultural improvements of the early nineteenth century.

Some of the information provided, while at times sketchy, can offer a significant contribution to our understanding of peasant life. While there are few complete descriptions of housing, the stories provide enough evidence to get a feel for what the average home was like. The furniture was simple, a table, chairs, beds, and a hutch, all of which would be within one or two rooms depending on the position of the worker. In Fife, where a large proportion of farm servants lived in houses attached to barns, the dwellings were small and consisted of nothing more than the bare necessities. Usually servants provided their own oven, shelves, fixtures, partitions and window frames.<sup>8</sup> A similar level of information is given for sport and recreation. There are few detailed descriptions of recreational activities in the tales other than mention of which were popular. The sport of curling appears to have been enjoyed by all classes. Other activities mentioned are quoits, cards, top spinning, and marbles. While these aspects of peasant life received little attention, they do contribute to our understanding of this part of society. However, not all of the Bethunes' accounts are as limited in scope. In other areas the level of information goes much deeper.

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<sup>8</sup>Alexander Fenton, "The Housing of Agricultural Workers in the Nineteenth Century," in *Farm Servants and Labour in Lowland Scotland*, ed. T. M. Devine (Edinburgh, 1984), p. 195.

Descriptions of agricultural methods are mentioned in many of the stories but particularly in the tale *Jonathan Moudiwort*. In this story the Bethunes expended considerable time explaining many of the new techniques in agricultural improvement. The story relates the rise of Jonathan from poverty to a position of considerable wealth and his eventual downfall. Once established on a considerable piece of property Jonathan endeavors to make the farm successful by implementing new techniques of farm management. Two types of drains are described, one a covered drain (box drain or rumbering syver),<sup>9</sup> and the other a large open ditch which ran between his farm and the neighbor's. The improvements mentioned by the Bethunes accurately correspond to the agricultural innovations being applied throughout Fife at the time. The *New Statistical Account of Scotland* (1836) gives reference to drainage practices, types of crops and other forms of improvement which were taking place at this time.<sup>10</sup> In this context the inclusion of such improvements in their tales represents no accident. The Bethunes were not only witnessing such changes but also felt the impact they had upon rural life.

Other improvements came in the form of new crops such as turnips. By the 1830s, turnips were common throughout the eastern Lowlands and played a major role in crop rotation.<sup>11</sup> The implementation of new crops and agricultural methods had dramatic effects on Scottish farm laborers. Farmers took on the role of supervisors instead of working alongside the servants as they had in the past.<sup>12</sup> As well, emphasis was put on a more mobile work force instead of the traditional system which was based on a sedentary, long-term farm population. The description of agricultural methods in the story of Jonathan Moudiwort goes beyond a simple narration of farming techniques: within the story is a biting criticism against changing trends in farm management.

The criticism comes in the character and actions of the main figure. Moudiwort is a peasant who, through cunning and deceit, climbs up the social ladder and gains acceptance into the upper circles. Criticism is ex-

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<sup>9</sup>Alexander Fenton, *Scottish Country Life* (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup>*The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, Vol. 9 (1836). For a more detailed discussion, see the section on Newburgh and surrounding area in the above-mentioned volume.

<sup>11</sup>Alistair Orr, "Farm Labour in the Forth Valley and South-East Lowlands," in *Farm Servants and Labour in Lowland Scotland*, ed. T. M. Devine (Edinburgh, 1984), p. 39.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

plicit in the actions Moudiwort takes towards his employees. He gains acceptance into high society through his manipulation of servants:

...the arrogance and presumption of one or more of these bumpkins became altogether unbearable, or it so happened that they were guilty of some misconduct which could not be pardoned; and, in both cases, it became a matter of conscience, and a duty owing to society at large, either to turn them off without their wages, or to reprehend them... (p. 291).

The story goes further to suggest that this was a common occurrence which gained him considerable wealth and respect:

By prudent management, as has been already said, he always contrived to save the wages of one or more of his farm servants every year. More recently, but in the most honourable and upright manner, as always was the case with him, he had succeeded in nearly ruining several stupid individuals, who had "contracted" to reap his crops... on better increase; and, in the midst of all this prosperity, it was believed that a blessing rested upon the endeavors of so honourable and upright a man. (p. 302)

The portrayal of Jonathan Moudiwort is an obvious attack upon changes taking place in Scottish agriculture. Farmer-managers were always careful to keep a watchful eye on the hired help, and Jonathan is portrayed in this way. He does not work the land himself and tries anything possible to manipulate his way into higher circles, circles which view his methods as admirable. The irony underlying the story may reflect the attitudes farm servants had towards their employers and the social and agricultural changes which were taking place.

Several stories combine to provide important information about fairs and holidays. One focuses upon the holiday of Hansel Monday. On this day neighbors, friends and relatives would gather to celebrate the holiday in merriment; singing, dancing and telling tall tales would hold the attention of all while large quantities of food and drink were shared. Descriptions of local fairs give insight into the economic and social function which they fulfilled within the community. People would go to see or be seen, meet old sweethearts or to buy and sell goods. Wives would go, "to see that their husbands did not indulge in too much spiritous liquor, and to direct them in buying clothes for the children, or their own winter dresses" (*The Deformed*, p. 38). Some fairs had entertainment such as jugglers and wild beasts, but the main attraction was always the market place. Here one could gossip, trade, catch up on news or procure employment.

The most important events were the feeing markets, which were social as well as economic in nature. Drinking and carousing went hand in hand with bartering for work, but the emphasis was always on obtaining em-



ployment. The competition was fierce. Good laborers were known by the farmers and in high demand. As well, the laborers knew who were good employers and would vie for the opportunity of getting employment with such a person. A poor employer would be known to almost everyone, sometimes even getting his reputation immortalized in verse:

Come all ye jolly ploughboys  
I pray you, have a care,  
Beware o' going to Swaggers,  
For he'll be in Porter Fair.

He'll be aye lauch-lauchin'  
He'll aye be lauchin' there;  
And he'll hae on the Blithest face,  
In a Porter Fair.

Wi' his fine horse and harness,  
Sae well he'll gar ye true;  
But when ye come to Auchterless,  
Sae sair's he'll gar ye rue.

For he is the worst master  
That ever I did serve;  
And gin ye dinna me believe,  
Never mind ye this observe.<sup>13</sup>

Here is one employer who is well known and would no doubt have trouble getting hands to work his farm.

Laborers who were disadvantaged or known to be poor workers would have to find an employer unfamiliar with them or else chance taking a very low wage. This is what happens to the character Hugh M'Arthur who is slightly deformed in one leg and, as a result, is taken advantage of by a farmer seeking cheap labor (*The Deformed*, pp. 46-7). Once a contract was agreed upon, the servants were largely at the mercy of the farmer. The methods used by Jonathan Moudiwort in dealing with recalcitrant employees was not uncommon. A servant was bound by his contract and if he broke it in any way:

The employer may confiscate any part of the wages that may be due to him, and may sue for damages for breach of contract. If the farm-servant deserts his

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<sup>13</sup>Cameron, *The Ballad and the Plough*, pp. 89-90.

master and another farmer employs him before the date of expiry of his engagement, the master may sue the second for "harbouring a deserter".<sup>14</sup>

Once a contract was agreed upon, farm servants were strictly controlled by their employers. The feeing markets alleviated some of this problem, at least for those with good reputations as laborers. They had some say in whom they worked for and at what rate of pay.

The Bethune's stories, however, probe more deeply into the everyday life experiences of the Scottish peasantry. Here the reader is confronted by a barrage of information concerning the difficulties which faced the poor. Death, poverty, sickness and injury always seem to be lurking at a short distance. All these points are interrelated: one can cause the other or be caused by many.

The stories leave the impression that death was always near. Examples are given of deaths and funerary practices, but these are secondary to the hardships which they produced. Quite often the parents of young children would die at an early age, leaving the children to fend for themselves. This occurs in *The Deformed*, in which a young girl's parents die when she is but a child. If not for the care she received from her friend Hugh M'Arthur she might have died or been forced into prostitution. In *The Decline and Fall of a Ghost* we learn that it was not uncommon for lairds to evict a family from the land after the father had passed away and the contract ended. In this we find descriptions of practices such as the displaying of the body until the time for burial. As well interesting descriptions of superstitions surroundings ghosts and hauntings abound throughout the tale. From this tale we are told how peasants learned to cope with that common occurrence, premature death.

Death by unnatural causes was particularly common through accidents at the work place. *The Stranger* focuses on a blasting accident at a quarry, something with which the Bethunes were very familiar. The story suggests that these and other work-related accidents were not uncommon. Coupled with accidents is the stress they put on the work itself, leading to untimely death. In several stories mention is made of people unable to stop work while sick because of their financially unstable positions. In the end many died of "consumption" because they could not take proper care of themselves. One specific problem the Bethunes are careful to point out is that even when peasants were sick or injured it was often impossible for them to get medical treatment. A broken arm or leg could prove fatal, or at the least leave the victim deformed, which, in many cases, soon led to

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<sup>14</sup>Ian Carter, "Class and Culture Among Farm Servants in the North-East," in *Social Class in Scotland*, ed. A. A. Maclaren (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 110.

death. The majority of problems faced by the peasantry were always in some way connected to their tenuous financial situation.

The problems caused by poverty are dealt with at length in the Bethunes' tales. The need to earn a subsistence living forced the sick to work, others to work at a very young age or to take employment at low pay from merciless employers. Single mothers often faced extreme hardships in supporting their children if support from family was not available. The bothy ballads are full of stories about the ploughman's nocturnal visits to a receptive country lass, many such visits ending in pregnancy. A Dr. Strachan, writing in the nineteenth century, examined the problem of unwed mothers. He found working class courtship, or the lack of it, to be detestable and believed it to be the chief cause of illegitimacy in the rural areas.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, others have viewed the high rate of rural illegitimacy as being more likely a case of availability. Within the rural areas the exploitation of female servants by their male employers was very common. Since Victorian morality did not allow for pre-marital sex amongst members of the middle or upper classes, bourgeois males had to look to those socially beneath them for sexual relations, often to the detriment of the girl.<sup>16</sup> Such problems are described in the story *The Deformed* in which a girl named Liliias becomes pregnant by her young master. Marriage between them was socially unacceptable, so she is fired and removed from the premises. The problems faced by unwed mothers and their illegitimate children were difficult to overcome, but not all such trysts with masters ended negatively. One ballad tells of a country girl who had in mind a different fate for the young laird of the area:

On the south-east of Perth there lived a fair maid,  
She wandered late and ear' and she never was afraid  
She walked both late and ear' and she never was afraid  
For meeting wi' the young laird o' Kilty, O.

\* \* \*

She has fastened up her yellow locks a little above her e'e,  
And she's kilted up her petticoats a little below her knee,  
And so neatly as she walked by the harrows and the ploughs,  
And she's down through the bonnie parks o' Kilty, O.

She had not left her father's house I think by scarce a mile  
When she heard a voice behind her say, stay, my pretty child,

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<sup>15</sup>T. C. Smout, "Aspects of Sexual Behaviour in Nineteenth-Century Scotland," in *Social Class in Scotland*, ed. A. A. Maclaren (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 69.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 56-8.

When she heard a voice behind her say, stay my pretty child,  
 Don't you know your in the bonnie parks o' Kilty, O.

\* \* \*

He's ta'en her by the middle sma' and gently laid her down,  
 Where the apples and the cherries were a' hanging down,  
 The lilies and the green grass were growing all around,  
 Where they lay on the bonnie parks o' Kilty, O.

\* \* \*

Now, he loved this pretty girlie, as dearly as his life,  
 He loved this pretty girlie, and made her his wedded wife,  
 And she sits in his house and is happy as a queen  
 For she's lady o' the bonnie parks o' Kilty, O.<sup>17</sup>

This delightful ballad illustrates the point that although many servant girls were exploited, there were a few enterprising enough to make the best of such a predicament. A similar situation happens to young Lilius who, years later, marries the same laird who fathered her child.

The most important aspect of the Bethunes' tales is concerned with social barriers and the differences between the rich and poor. The Bethunes possessed an acute awareness of the problems of social rank and how this caused antagonism between the different levels of society. Their attitudes towards class differences are simply that they believed all people to be equal. They did not believe being poor was a crime as some at the time may have argued. They believed that the rich are as "guilty" as the poor since they frivolously spend their money on material goods when in fact it should be used to aid the less fortunate. Comments on these points are found throughout the stories and demonstrate the importance which the Bethunes placed upon the problems of class.

Comments are found on varying levels of importance. In the *Three Hansel Mondays* a man named David argues with an old lady because she teasingly calls him sir. It bothers him because he will have no association with the upper class. In *The Deformed* the authors compare the fighting practices of the rich and poor to demonstrate the absurdity of upper-class honor. The rich and learned, we are told:

...do not appear to possess the slightest advantage over the poor and the ignorant in these matters; for very rich and very learned men have frequently been known to forge an excuse out of such an affair for shooting a fellow creature, or standing up themselves to be shot, when their poor and unlearned brethren, in all probability, would have only exchanged a few bad names, or, at worst, taken a bout of fisticuffs (p. 38).

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<sup>17</sup>Cameron, *The Ballad and the Plough*, pp. 132-3.

Many of these comments are direct attacks against upper class values. The story of Jonathan Moudiwort has already been shown to possess a number of attacks on the upper class. Jonathan's whole purpose in life is to gain entry into high society, and he eventually succeeds by cheating the less fortunate. These actions gain him honor amongst the wealthy and he is accepted. Soon his fortunes change and during financial troubles he is once again cast out and chastised by his false companions. Throughout this story the authors mock the traditions and values of the wealthy. The tradition of marriage is seen as something which is done only for the acquisition of wealth. There is no love involved in an upper-class marriage, whereas the poor are portrayed as falling hopelessly in love with each other.

How accurate is the picture of class which the Bethunes so articulately portray? Why are the social differences in society so prevalent in their writing? To understand these questions we must examine the changes which were occurring during the Bethunes' lifetimes. Two interrelated processes were underway during the early nineteenth century which saw changes in landholding and social attitudes.<sup>18</sup> The movement towards large farms with a single proprietor became predominant throughout lowland Scotland. Farmers who had previously worked the land themselves now took on the role of supervisor or manager. This put distance between the farmer and farm laborer and contributed to the growing rift between landowner and worker. Only in the Highlands did the farmer continue to work alongside the hired help in the traditional fashion.<sup>19</sup> Farmers, whether the owners or tenants, began to view themselves differently than their workers, developing a hierarchy of owners and laborers. Social behavior began to emphasize these divisions to the point where distinct barriers separated different farm groups.<sup>20</sup> The Bethunes grew up in an area which experienced the rapid decay of traditional values and ways of life. Each day they were confronted with the changes taking place and experienced the effects these had on people in their socio-economic position. It is no wonder, then, that these trends dominate many of their story lines. Perhaps they are justified in attacking these social trends with

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<sup>18</sup>Malcolm Gray, "The Social Impact of Agrarian Change in the Rural Lowlands," in *People and Society in Scotland*, eds. T. M. Devine and Rosalind Mitchison, (Edinburgh, 1988), I, 62-3.

<sup>19</sup>J. A. Symon, *Scottish Farming* (London, 1959), p. 186.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 62-3.

statements which denounce class differences. Many must have felt as they did when they argued:

"Poverty," he said, "unless it should proceed from idleness or evil habits is no disgrace. The poor man, who preserves his integrity, may be more honourable in the eyes of his Maker than the rich man who has no temptation to dishonesty; and why should he be less respected by his fellow creatures? Riches in this world, unless used for the purposes of benevolence and charity, form no passport to the next." (*The Covenanter's Grave*, p. 137).

Comments such as this provide us with social attitudes which would otherwise be lost to the historian. They provide a glimpse into the often unknown world of the attitudes of the common folk.

The Bethunes' *Tales of the Scottish Peasantry* represents an extremely important source for understanding the popular culture of early nineteenth-century Lowland Scotland. The stories contain such a large number of examples of virtually all aspects of peasant life that they cannot be ignored as an historical source. Everything from living conditions, folk traditions, beliefs and social attitudes are displayed for the reader. The stories bring a high level of intimacy to the descriptions of peasant life, something which is often lacking. Recent historical studies, while providing a large amount of information about the period, are often dry, economic renditions which cannot express the attitudes or feelings encountered by these people. Only the ballads come close to giving as personal a glimpse as do the brothers Bethune. When the Bethunes' tales are looked at in conjunction with other source materials, the overall portrait of peasant life in Lowland Scotland becomes clearer. The aspects of culture discussed in this paper form only the beginnings of what can be found within this rich source of peasant culture and attest to the value of literary works as sources of historical inquiry. For their historical worth to be fully appreciated, the tales must be read and enjoyed.

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