

2001

## Brief Notice

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

(2001) "Brief Notice," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 32: Iss. 1.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol32/iss1/21>

This Brief Notice is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

## Brief Notices

Monica Sturlese. "Tesi di Laurea. La Scissione dell'Io: *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* di James Hogg." University of Pisa. 1994. 136 pp.

*The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* can be considered one of the greatest works of imaginative prose written in Scotland in the nineteenth century. It was first published in 1824 and not reprinted in Hogg's lifetime. Its present-day fame was due, in large measure, to André Gide who in 1946 wrote an enthusiastic introduction to the book.

The novel is divided into three parts: the first gives the "editor's" reconstruction of the Colwan family history, the second tells the same events from the point of view of the sinner Robert, while the third explains how the book was found by the "editor."

The plot is based on the doubleness of Robert's life and on his difficult relationship with his brother George. The identification of Robert with George and then with the unknown Gil Martin could be seen as symptoms of a possible psychosis: paraphrenia. In *The Confessions* we have a portrait of a self-centered young man suffering from the opposition between his mother's religious teaching and his feeling of insecurity, the conviction of his own illegitimacy. The weight of the anxiety over the manner of his salvation added to the feeling of hatred for both fathers (the Laird and the Reverend) are more than he can bear, and in an effort to free himself from these vile thoughts, he projects them into his double. The creation of an alter ego, then, is done in self-de-

fense. He tries to be another person and he rejects his own name—"No: Cowan is my surname."

Robert's renunciation of his name weakens his hold on his identity and leaves the way clear for his second self to take over. At last he tries to escape not only from justice but from Gil Martin who is the inescapable personification of his conscience. His desire is for total oblivion, which can only be found in suicide.

Together with the psychological reading there can be a supernatural interpretation of the novel. In this hypothesis the phases of internal change in Robert become markers in the stages of real demonic possession. He says of Gil Martin, "I could not well avoid him; and more than that, I felt a sort of invisible power that drew me towards him, something like the force of enchantment, which I could not resist."

The first part of the work examines Robert's boyhood sins, explaining why the Devil chose him. Robert may be an insignificant fellow in terms of his religious behavior during his lifetime, but because of his habit of lying he is a supreme challenge to the Father of Lies. Becoming trapped in the weaver's web is surely a metaphor for Robert's spiritual state, caught completely in Gil Martin's snares, identified by the weaver as Satan himself, and cut off from communication with the ordinary world. In this hypothesis suicide can be seen as a possible liberation from the Devil: Robert tries to free himself from Gil Martin/Satan because he cannot bear a life of possession.

We can say that the novel creates two different but probable solutions that reflect the theme of the double in the plot. Satan and the other supernatural apparitions could be seen as real or they could be interpreted as the result of a sick mind. The reader, then, has the possibility of choosing between a religious interpretation and a psychoanalytic one, for either could be admissible. Hogg does not give any final solution, thus increasing for the reader the mystery and the interest in the book. Hogg does not reveal whether he prefers the demonic interpretation or the other one; after all, the author was an "outcast" as was Robert, but he was also a journalist, a person who looks for reality. So we can say that the *Confessions* reflects the internal division of an author who cannot choose between reality and the imagination.

MONICA STURLESE

[*This short summary of her doctoral dissertation was prepared by the author.*]

John Smith. *Christmas Customs and Superstitions in Scotland*. Waukesha, WI: John Smith. 2000. 27 pp.

The title of this pamphlet may mislead the reader into the belief that the "customs and superstitions" enumerated are peculiar to Scotland. In the Foreword by James Dunbar McPherson, too, we are told of Smith's "interest in Scottish customs." It will come as something of a surprise, then, to find Smith's account opening with a page about the Roman feast of Saturnalia, with a quotation from the Emperor Lucian's edict "for the proper observance of this feast." From here the book goes on to a reference to Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. We then move to the origins of Christmas and the celebration of the New Year. With a nod to Sir Walter Scott in the form of a quotation from *Marmion*, we proceed to London, Paris, Munich, with a disquisition on carols. Smith has interesting things to say about the singing of carols, and at times the prohibition against singing them, but this has always been a more English than Scottish rite.

The author wanders through Christmas customs and beliefs in a number of places, but these are rarely located in Scotland. We hear about the Druids, Henry III, Queen Victoria, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Nicholas, and find quotations from John Clare and *Hamlet*. All this is interesting reading, but the reader remains mystified about the title of the pamphlet.

One custom which is mentioned as having been common throughout England was that of the "first foot" at Christmas, known as "letting in Christmas." Whereas the practice has largely died out there, it was changed to the New Year in Scotland where "first footing" is still very common.

There are numerous studies of Scottish beliefs and superstitions, and it is unfortunate that John Smith did not avail himself of some of them. The reader is not able to follow through from this booklet because there are no references cited. *Christmas Customs* is, however, interesting to read.

ANNIE MCEWAN