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Abode of Satan: the appeal of the magical and superstitious North in eighteenth-century Britain

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THIS essay considers the association made between the North and non-Christian beliefs in Britain in the eighteenth century. The North is of course a relative concept which is never static or objective, just as the English writer Pope pointed out in *An Essay on Man* (1734).¹ There is always a further north, or in the words of Peter Davidson, 'Everyone carries their own idea of north within them.'² The two northern areas that this essay will discuss are northern Scotland and Sápmi in Scandinavia. I will refer to Sápmi in this paper as Lapland since this was the term used by eighteenth-century writers. The focus of the paper will be a book called *History of the Life and Adventures of Sir Duncan Campbell*, published in 1720, which highlights this association between northern Scandinavia, Scotland and the supernatural.³ The essay will illustrate the variety of purposes for which non-Christian beliefs were evoked in the eighteenth century. Non-Christian beliefs and traditions were sometimes used as cultural weapons of resistance against colonisation and modernisation. Alternatively they were also regarded as symbols of backwardness and evil in the eyes of metropolitan governments. They were further sometimes evoked in terms of an exotic colonial fantasy that fascinated metropolitan writers, readers and tourists.

The North has for centuries been perceived, paradoxically, as a place of both purity and evil. Whereas there was a classical legend of the remote

1 A. Pope, *An Essay on Man* (London: 1734), Epistle II. Pope wrote: 'Ask where's the North? at York, 'tis on the Tweed; In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there, At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where.'

2 P. Davidson, *The Idea of North* (London: 2005), 8-9.

3 W. Bond, *History of the Life and Adventures of Mr. Duncan Campbell* (London: 1720).

North, a place beyond the northern wind, which was a utopia of peace and prosperity, there was also an association between the North and the Devil which goes back to Biblical, classical and medieval sources. The prophet Isaiah (14:12-13), for instance, wrote that Lucifer started his rebellion against God by setting up a throne in the North:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the Morning!
How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

For thou hast said in thy heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the North.⁴

The Prophet Jeremiah (1:14), likewise, made references to evil originating from the north: 'Evil is brought from the north over all the inhabitants of the Earth'; and Ezekiel warned of the armies of Gog coming out of the north in the latter days of the world.⁵ Although these biblical references did not refer to northern Europe, being instead references to places north of Israel, a general association between the North and evil was established. Classical discourses on climate and civilisation, which were centred on the superiority of Mediterranean civilisation, furthermore depicted the remote North as a savage and cruel place.

However, there was also an internal depiction within the northern countries of centre and periphery. In Scotland and Sweden it was the northern regions of these countries that were portrayed as wild, pagan and unruly. The image of the North, which represented a land of barbarity in opposition to southern civilisation, existed therefore within the northern hemisphere as well. The Sámi people of northern Scandinavia, and the Highlanders and Islanders of Scotland, were throughout this period depicted as representing the antithesis of European civilisation not only within their own countries but also abroad.

It became commonplace to draw parallels between the two areas and to perceive them as being located together in one northern pagan rabble, beyond the pale of civilisation. The Scottish king James VI, for example, stressed the link between the Devil and wild and northern places in his work *Daemonologie* (1597) and he emphasised the frequency of witchcraft in 'Lapland' and the Scottish Northern Isles:

4 P. Davidson, 33-34.

5 *Ibid*, 27; A. Williamson, 'Scots, Indians and Empire: The Scottish Politics of Civilisation 1519-1609', *Past and Present* 150 (1996), 47.

this kind of abuse is thought to be most common in such wild places of the worlde as Lap-land & Finland, or in our North Isles of Orkney and Schetland...because where the deuill findes greatest ignorance and barbaritie, there assayles he grossliest.⁶

European portrayals of the Scottish Highlanders and the Sámi as northern barbarians also converged in Catholic propaganda during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). The war brought stereotypes about pagan and wild Northerners to the fore and the Sámi and the Scots were held up as principal examples of northern barbarity. Whereas the Highland mercenaries, wearing their distinctive Highland garb, made a strong impression as wild, rough and fierce soldiers, the Sámi were instead accused of using sorcery to defeat their enemies. A cartoon called 'barbaric northerners', which was a Catholic caricature of Gustavus Adolphus's Protestant armies, depicted the soldiers of the Swedish monarch as consisting of a 'Lapp', a Livonian and a Scot.⁷ All three men have grim and threatening expressions. Their savage nature is also depicted by the recurrent motif of leafy branches that are found in the Livonian's hat, the Scot's backpack and, most savagely of all, being eaten by the 'Lapp'. They represented, as Williamson has pointed out, the 'presocial wildmen of traditional Europe, the embodiment of the uncivilised.'⁸

In the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries pagan traditions and belief in the supernatural were still common in Britain. Chambers's *Cyclopaedia, Or Universal Dictionary Of Arts And Sciences*, published in London in 1728, did not rule out, for instance, the existence of witchcraft.⁹ There was a great upsurge of cultural and academic interest in non-Christian traditions in remote areas. Within Britain the attention was focused primarily on the beliefs and customs of western and northern Scotland, where pagan beliefs were still common. Particular attention was paid to the phenomenon of second sight: the belief in the uncanny ability of certain individuals to foresee future events. People recording supposed incidences and examples

6 A. Williamson, 48.

7 The Livonian represented soldiers from Livonia which was a dominion of Sweden between the 1620s and 1721. Livonia constituted the southern part of Estonia and northern parts of Latvia.

8 A. Williamson, 52. Although Williamson is right in his analysis of the leafy branch, it is worth noting that a green token – often a leafy branch – was also used by the soldiers of Adolphus, who usually wore a yellow-edged blue band around their hats, when joining forces with the Saxons at the battle of Breitenfeld in 1631. For information on this battle see G. Parker, *The Thirty Years War* (London: 1984), 192.

9 *Chambers' Cyclopaedia, Or Universal Dictionary Of Arts And Sciences* (London: 1728).

of second sight were scholars such as Martin Martin, John Frazer and Robert Kirk.¹⁰

The interest in Lapland as an abode of witches and the supernatural also continued. The image of the Lapland witch, stirring her cauldron and astride her broom, seemed particularly to excite people. There were a number of accounts which referred to Lapland witches. These included Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* of 1594, which mentions 'Lapland Sorcerers'; Marlowe's 'Lapland Giants' in *Faustus*, which was published in 1604; Milton's 'Lapland Witches' in *Paradise Lost* in 1667; and David Mallet's *The Excursion* (1728), the latter being rich in detail in its grisly description of the North and the Lapland Sabbath.¹¹ Daniel Defoe was one of these British writers who had a deep interest in the supernatural. In his book *A System of Magick* (1727) he added to the discourse earlier expressed by, for example, James VI which associated the North with the Devil, by claiming that the Devil had great use of Lapland, Siberia, Norway (wind merchants) and second-sighted men in Scotland:

the *Devil* has some little Out-lyers and sculking Operators in the World, and which he makes great use of, which may not be said to come under any of those Denominations; as particularly our Second-sight Men in *Scotland*, the Wind Merchants in *Norway*, who sell fair and foul Weather, storms and calms, as the *Devil* and you can agree upon a Price, and as your Occasion require: Also in *Lapland*, *Muscovy*, *Siberia* and other Northern Parts of the World, he is said to act by differing Methods, and governed his Dominions by a more open and arbitrary Method, not prescribed and limited to Art and Craft as he does here.¹²

However, alongside this cultural fascination was governmental and church persecution of non-Christian beliefs. In Scotland, the *Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge* was founded by a Royal Charter in 1709 to promote the Christian faith, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, where superstitious beliefs were believed to be particularly strong. This was

10 R. Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (1691) (Not published until 1815 in Edinburgh); M. Martin, *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (London: 1703) and J. Frazer, *Deuteroskopia, Or a Brief Discourse Concerning the Second Sight, Commonly So Called* (Edinburgh: 1707).

11 F. E. Farley, 'Three Lapland Songs', *PMLA* 21 (1906), 12.

12 D. Defoe, *A System of Magick* (London: 1727), 227.

to be achieved by building schools and sending missionaries.¹³ The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries also saw the most intense time of religious confrontation between the Sámi and the Christian Scandinavian states. Sacrificial sites and drums, which were used by Sámi shamans to answer questions about the future or events happening simultaneously elsewhere, were destroyed by missionaries or confiscated to eventually end up in curiosity cabinets for metropolitan people to observe. The drum represented for many Sámi their threatened culture and resistance against colonial encroachment, whereas missionaries perceived them as representations of wicked and sinful paganism and superstition.¹⁴

Very few British accounts discussed the brutality of enforced Christianity. Rather, Lapland was depicted as either a pagan utopia ruled by witches or as a place where heroic Scandinavian monarchs had tried to control a pagan population, but with little success. However, in 1720 a book was published in London which addressed the attacks on non-Christian beliefs and tried to bridge the binary cultural opposition between a pagan and barbaric hinterland and a Christian, civilised centre. The book was *The History of the Life and Adventures of Sir Duncan Campbell*, often attributed to Daniel Defoe but probably written by the journalist William Bond.¹⁵ It is a biography of the mute and deaf mystic and soothsayer Duncan Campbell, who was supposedly brought up among the Sámi by his ship-wrecked Scottish father, from Shetland, and a Sámi mother. After the death of his mother, Campbell was taken back to Britain by his father where he became famous for his power of second sight. The book was designed to introduce new customers to Campbell, who sold his second-sight skills to customers wanting to know their future.

While Campbell's adult career is a matter of historical record, the veracity of his exotic childhood in Lapland is questionable. Close study of the book suggests that it is unlikely Campbell ever really grew up in Lapland. Instead, the author of the book seems to have picked Lapland and

13 See for example: C.J. Withers, 'Education and Anglicisation: The Policy of the SSPCR Towards the Education of the Highlander' in *Language in Geographic Context*, ed. by H. Williams (Bristol: 1988), 136-166.

14 H. Rydving, 'Sami Responses to Christianity: Resistance and Change', *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, ed. by J.K. Oluona (New York: 2004), 99-108.

15 Rodney Baine argued convincingly in *Daniel Defoe and the Supernatural* (Georgia: 1968) that there was no evidence to support Defoe's authorship of the works on Duncan Campbell. However, authors such as H. Rydving, in 'Sami Responses to Christianity' and Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Chichester: 1997), still subscribe to the view that Defoe was the author.

Shetland as locations for the narrative since they were places commonly associated with superstition and second sight. Much of the material in the book seems to be directly lifted from popular contemporary sources such as Martin Martin's *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703), Johannes Scheffer's *Lapponia* (1674, 1704 English translation) and John Beaumont's *A Historical, Physiological and Theological Treatise of Spirits* (1705), all of which discussed non-Christian practices in Scotland and Scandinavia.¹⁶ It seems more likely that the author of *The Life and Adventures of Sir Duncan Campbell* provided Campbell with a Shetland father, a Sámi mother and a Lapland childhood in order to maximise Campbell's credentials as a soothsayer. With a Lapland and Shetland pedigree, two places so well known for their non-Christian traditions, Campbell is presented as a soothsayer *par excellence*. Even though the book may be to a large extent a tapestry of fabrications, it still sheds a lot of light on the image of northern Scotland and Scandinavia in the eighteenth century.

The story of how Campbell's father ended up in Lapland starts with the father – Archibald – going fowling (climbing cliffs for birds' eggs and feathers) at the dangerous Noss of Brassá, where he gets stuck. Luckily, a ship from Holland sees him and the sailors take him onboard. Although they offer to put him ashore, he tells them he would like to go with them to Holland, since he wants to learn the merchant trade. However, when the ship is in sight of Amsterdam, a terrible storm arises and they are driven first to Zealand in Denmark and then into Umeå in Swedish Lapland. They decide to go ashore there to repair the ship and take in provisions. While the Dutch repair the ship, Archibald meets a Sámi woman and falls in love. When the ship is ready to return, Archibald decides to stay in Lapland with his now-pregnant wife.¹⁷ The book contains letters supposedly written by Archibald to his family explaining his decision to stay. These not only draw parallels between Shetland and Lapland but also describe the non-Christian practices in Lapland. His wife's clairvoyance is, for example, illustrated in her knowledge that she is expecting a son, specifically, before she has given birth. Archibald believes in his wife's power but admits that others might find it superstitious.¹⁸

The book criticizes the harsh persecution of Sámi beliefs by the Swedish state. However, it is the punishment of second sight which is singled out for criticism. Note the comparison to second sight in Scotland:

16 Martin, *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*; J. Scheffer, *Lapponia* (London: 1704) and J. Beaumont, *A Historical, Physiological and Theological Treatise of Spirits* (London: 1705).

17 W. Bond, 1-24.

18 *Ibid.*, 19-26.

However, I must take notice in this Place, with all due deference to Christianity, that tho' I am obliged to applaud the Prudence and Piety of Charles the Ninth of Sweden, who Constituting Swedish Governors, over this Country, Abrogated their Practice of Superstitions, and Art of Magick upon pain of Death; Yet that King carried the point too far, and intermingled with these Arts, the pretensions to the gift of a second sight, which you know how frequent it is with us in Scotland, and which I assure you, my Wife (tho' she durst not Publicly own it, for fear of incurring the penalty of those Swedish Laws) does as it were inherit, for all her Ancestors before her, have had it from time Immemorial, to a greater degree than ever I knew any of our County Women or Country Men.¹⁹

The *Life and Adventures* was designed to advertise Duncan Campbell's second sight skills to a paying London audience. It was therefore important to differentiate it from other black arts and to reinforce its legitimacy. The book's appendix, moreover, discusses laws against fortune telling in England and why these should not apply to Duncan Campbell.²⁰ Archibald's nameless wife mediates in the narrative between her indigenous (pagan) world, a world that is outlawed but which she still inhabits, and the Christian world of her husband and the Swedish settlers and missionaries in the region. She also speaks French due to interaction with foreign merchants in Lapland.²¹ This capacity to accommodate different cultures is one that she shares with her son Duncan.

After the mother's death, Archibald returns to Scotland with Duncan. Before she dies she tells her husband that Duncan will have a bright future, but warns her husband that he will become involved in civil brawls in Scotland. This comes true in 1685 when the Duke of Monmouth and the Earl of Argyll take up arms against King James VII and II. Archibald took part in the failed rising due to clan allegiance to Argyll, and was forced into exile.²² This was not a national conflict of Scotland versus England, or a struggle between Christian and non-Christian beliefs, but a conflict about the rebel leaders' Protestantism versus the Catholicism of the monarch. However, the text was written only five years after the 1715 Jacobite rebellion against the Union between Scotland and England and the Hanoverian dynasty which

19 *Ibid*, 26-27.

20 *Ibid*, index.

21 *Ibid*, 19.

22 *Ibid*, 27 and 57-58.

had deprived the Scottish Stewart dynasty of the Crown.²³ In the book Archibald represents the dying Scottish clan system, and he is said to sigh himself to death and dies a broken man.

The future lies with his deaf and mute 'half Lapland and half Highland' son Duncan, who discovers his second sight just after his father's death. This he can express to the outside world, since a scholar at the University of Glasgow has taught him an early version of sign language – plus the skills to write and read.²⁴ Representing a new generation of Scots who would find fame and fortune in England, Campbell moves there to set up business as a soothsayer. Despite having left behind Scottish clan life and not being able to speak, Highland culture survives in London through his second-sight.

Unlike his mother and her relatives who had to hide their beliefs from metropolitan observers in Lapland, Campbell was able to carve out a career with his second sight in London. Although some people doubted his skills, and the books about his life were designed to justify his profession, he became a well-known and popular figure in London from about 1710 until his death in 1730. There are references to him in, for example, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. *The Daily Post* announced on Wednesday 4 May 1720 that he even kissed the king's hand and presented him with a copy of his book, which was 'by his Majesty most graciously receiv'd'.²⁵

Books such as *The History of the Life and Adventures of Sir Duncan Campbell* bolstered interest in northern areas and the supernatural. There was a large increase in the second half of the eighteenth century of, for example, books, songs, articles, and travel accounts about Scotland and Scandinavia. But, whereas the *Life and Adventures* had tried to some extent to criticise metropolitan persecution of indigenous beliefs, British books still failed to engage with cultural persecution of the Sámi and the Highlanders and Islanders. The debate had however moved away from a threatening and barbaric North to nostalgic depictions of the North as an innocent, desolate, melancholic place that still had remnants of non-Christian beliefs due to its pre-modern culture. This changing image of the North was to a large extent linked to the popularity of the discourse of the sublime and primitivism. The sublime, which celebrated vast, irregular and awe-inspiring beauty that mankind struggled or failed to control, popularised the landscapes of northern Scotland and Scandinavia.

23 Katie Trumpener has also pointed this out in, *Bardic Nationalism*, at 100.

24 W. Bond, 33-37.

25 R. Baine, 144.

Scotland and Scandinavia were now increasingly perceived as places where pre-modern traditions and customs had survived, but which were extinct or disappearing rapidly elsewhere. This celebration of primitivism was influenced by Enlightenment discourses in its adherence to historical stages of civilisation, yet it was a backlash against the modernisation processes that the Enlightenment had kicked off. The survival of non-Christian traditions and beliefs amongst the Sámi and the Highlanders was used as evidence of their pre-modernity. The cold and haunting northern landscape and its poetic genius were celebrated in, for instance, James Macpherson's Ossianic translations and Thomas Percy's *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763) and Lapland was evoked in poems by authors such as James Thomson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.²⁶ These literary descriptions of the North encouraged people to travel there and experience this Northern Arcadia for themselves. The travel account of the English traveller Matthew Consett, *A Tour through Sweden, Swedish-Lapland, Finland and Denmark* (1789), for example, cited James Thomson's poem *Winter* (1744), which celebrated an idyllic and innocent Sámi existence, in order to back up and illustrate his own observations in Lapland:

They ask no more than simple Nature gives,
They love their mountains, and enjoy their storms,
No false desires, no pride-created wants,
Disturb the peaceful current of their time;
And through the restless ever tortured maze
Of pleasure, or ambition, bid it rage.
Their reindeer form their riches. These their tents,
Their robes, their beds, and all their homely wealth
Supply, their wholesome fare and cheerful cups.
...
'Thrice happy race!' by poverty secured
From legal plunder and rapacious power:
In whom fell interest never yet has sown
The seeds of vice: whose spotless swains ne'er knew.²⁷

26 Poems of Ossian published in several volumes between 1760-1765; T. Percy, *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry Translated from the Icelandic Language* (London: 1763); J. Thomson, *The Seasons* (London: 1764) and S.T. Coleridge, *The Destiny of Nations* (1796).

27 Matthew Consett, *A Tour through Sweden, Swedish-Lapland, Finland and Denmark* (London: 1789), 84.

In Scotland, tourists such as Dorothy and William Wordsworth and their friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge went on a literary pilgrimage to places associated with Ossian in 1803.²⁸

Although the simple lifestyles and the landscape of the Sámi and Highlanders were celebrated, few writers wanted to see a wholesale return to pre-modern society or were prepared to give up their present lifestyles. Sámi and Highland societies were perceived to be ultimately doomed and the threat that had earlier existed in the representations of the barbaric and pagan North had disappeared. Non-Christian beliefs were now depicted as evidence of harmless ignorance. Few attempts were made by metropolitan writers and readers to preserve these societies. This applied to both the new rich travellers who recorded the last remnants of pre-modern society and the readers who mused over second-sighted Highlanders and Lapland witches in the comfort of their own homes. The sentimentalised portrayals of primitive happiness were therefore often an exaggerated metropolitan fantasy which once again failed to address current problems and issues.

In conclusion, non-Christian beliefs and traditions were evoked in medieval and early modern British literature as fascinating and threatening stories about the abode of the devil and the barbarity of the remote North. The book *The History of the Life and Adventures of Sir Duncan Campbell*, published just before the Enlightenment, had to some extent tried to bridge the binary cultural construction of a pagan and backward periphery and a Christian and civilised metropolitan culture. It defended non-Christian Highland and Lapland cultures while at the same time incorporating metropolitan culture. Although books in the second half of the eighteenth century idealised the remote North, due to the influence of discourses on the sublime and primitivism, they continued to engage with a cultural construct of the North. The North was now perceived as a non-threatening arcadia of pre-modern life into which the weary modern man or woman could escape – safe in the knowledge that it posed no threat.

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28 See for example, D. Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*

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