Performing Kirk: A search for authenticity in the dramatisation of the life of the 'Fairy Minister', Reverend Robert Kirk

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Abbreviations

TSC: The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies

RRK: Rev. Robert Kirk

MSS: Manuscripts

Introduction

Is it possible to achieve authenticity in the fictionalisation of a historic figure? If the intentional fallacy warns us not assume knowledge of the authorial intention when it comes to their fictional worlds, the dangers of assuming more than superficial knowledge of an historical figure and their 'life-world' are manifold. Consider how much the interpretation of an event can change so rapidly – even as it is happening (as witnessed frequently since the advent of mobile phones) – so from the split-second moment it slips from the present into history the process of fictionalisation begins. Beyond these challenges, one could claim that *all* knowledge is unstable and therefore an argument could be made for an *epistemological* fallacy. What is knowledge; how do we know what we know; why is some knowledge validated more than other kinds … these questions drove my doctoral project, which by definition needed to be a 'significant original contribution to knowledge'. The slipperiness of an ontological framework made me adopt instead a phenomenological one (after Husserl[i], et al). I would come to know my subject through the noematic act. This, I argued in my research proposal, would bestow upon my performance of them an 'authenticity', which

otherwise may be lacking. The notion of authenticity has been problematised in recent years – Baker (2014); DeGroot (2015) – and I shall return to this. Partly to acknowledge the fallacy of *omniscience* of any doctoral project, but also to play upon the Appalachian dialect term for 'second sight', I entitled my research novel, *The Knowing – a Fantasy.* To research this novel, extensive experiential and archival research was undertaken. Having covered the experiential approach elsewhere (2020), here I focus primarily upon the *archival* (although that in itself has an 'affect', as Derrida has articulated).[ii] How the archival discoveries revealed secrets of Kirk's life[iii] (through painstaking textual analysis and transcription), and how the context of these discoveries (research libraries; a Scottish castle; a winter's writing retreat and long-distance summer walks) all fed into the portrayal of Kirk and his world, will be discussed. Firstly, a little bit of background to situate my own creative practice within this enquiry.

Playing Kirk

Adopting an embodied epistemic, I will summarise my long-term association with Kirk. As a professional storyteller I first performed a self-penned monologue in the voice of the Reverend Robert Kirk, in the Bath Literature Festival, 2002, alongside my fellow members of Fire Springs: the Bath-based storytelling troupe I belonged to, founded a couple of years previous. Kirk is best known for being the author of the monograph, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* – dictated on his sick-bed to his cousin Robert Campbell in 1691, but not published until 1815 (in a bowdlerised version by Sir Walter Scott). In the performance I dusted my hair to appear superannuated (Kirk was only 47 when he died in mysterious circumstances, but according to his legend, discussed below, he could still be 'alive' in Faerie, or Elfhame as it sometimes called in Scotland, and may one day re-appear, Rip Van Winkle-like). I recall suffering from a terrible cold, which made me feel light-headed in the performance – but, according to my peers, this resulted in an exceptional 'channelling' of the so-called Fairy Minister. I remember little of the actual performance itself other than I felt in a kind of fugue state. Something came through.

Thus began, in rather dramatic fashion, my long acquaintance with the Reverend. Little did I suspect then that a decade later I would be drafting my initial proposal for a PhD project at the University of Leicester: a novel dramatising the life of Kirk and his

(fictional) living descendant. But who was the real man? Was it possible the cut through the clutter of folklore, which accrues like the clooties, offerings, and memorials that have built up on Doon Hill, near his former parish in the Trossachs?

Robert Kirk – the folkloric folklorist

The Reverend Robert Kirk (1644-1692) is a fascinating, but problematic figure within folklore studies. He has probably been written *about* more than he has been *studied.* The legendarium that has accumulated around him has turned this scholar of the Bible, Gaelic, and Highland folklore, into a folkloric figure himself. The following has been gleaned and summarised from the usual sources of Scott (1815), Lang (1892), Rossi (1957), Sanderson (1976), Stewart (1990), Hunter (2001; 2012) and Warner (2006). According to local belief in his parish of Aberfoyle, where he served as minister for the last seven years of his life, he was prone to wandering Doon Hill, a well-known fairy knowe, in his night-shirt. There, he stepped into a fairy ring, where his body was to be discovered 14th May 1692. His (apparent) mortal remains where buried, leaving behind a second wife (Margaret), pregnant with his second son (Robert). At the christening of his son, Kirk appeared – in revenant form – and implored his cousin to release him by casting a dirk over his shoulder (fairies being purportedly allergic to iron). His cousin lost his nerve, and the opportunity passed, leaving Kirk a prisoner in Elfhame, where he was forced to become the chaplain of its Queen (an addendum whose provenance remains obscure).

When his coffin was opened it was apparently full of rocks (likewise). A curious footnote to this: in 1943 the folklorist Katherine Briggs interviewed a woman keen to make it to Kirk's former manse, there to give birth to a child in his study – the act of which would emancipate Kirk from his misprision. Whether the woman succeeded in this Briggs does not mention – as a scrupulous folklorist in the field at the time, the occurrence of this event seems unlikely. We can only surmise that Kirk, if the legend is to be believed, remains in Elfhame to this day.

If the traditional time-dilation effects apply, then for Kirk what has been three mortal centuries on Earth may have been only three fae weeks. He may not have aged a day

beyond his 47 years and 5 months, when he 'passed over'. The belief persists in Aberfoyle that he was 'taken' for revealing the secrets of Elfhame. Kirk remains a hybrid figure, straddling the worlds of factuality and fictionality.

Thus ended, in curious circumstances, a short life[iv] that has cast a long shadow.

Kirk – the proto-anthropologist

In his project to compile evidence of a Fairy belief persistent in the Highlands, in his 'Essay to suppress the impudent and Growing Atheism of this Age' (1691) Kirk adopted proto-anthropological methods, mirroring those displayed in the early accounts of the New World (Columbus, 1493; Cabot, 1497; Corte Real, 1501; Vespucci, 1503[v]) .In the folkloric evidence of 'the secret commonwealth' he saw empirical data not antithetical to his Episcopalian paradigm, but in validation of it, of the celestial hierarchy of which 'fayries' were of the lower order, 'a middle nature betwixt man and Angel' (ibid). The project emerged from the discourse of the late 17th Century zeitgeist, the cusp of the Modern Age, when scientific and religious modes of enquiry sought for dominance, as epitomized by the Royal Society, in figures such as philosopher/chemist Robert Boyle (whose correspondence he quotes) and the antiquarian and biographer John Aubrey (whose fervour and methods he mirrors). Kirk's singular monograph offers a tantalising road less travelled, as the tides of rationalism swept the land. Although in some remote pockets, such beliefs persisted, so many glacial erratics left behind by the ostensibly rigid empiricism of Newton, Hume and Locke – a paradigm which was far more porous, as Hunter has pointed out (2012) – it became chiefly sublimated into Romanticism and the Fantastic, and thus made 'safe' as artistic and literary movements.

In the 20th Century Kirk's work has been embraced by the Counter Culture, in a similar way to Tolkien's – and no doubt at the great annoyance of both. That his monograph has become co-opted by neo-pagans as proof of the 'otherworld' is perhaps something that would make Kirk, the serious Biblical scholar, turn in his grave, if he does not yet dwell in Elfhame – a place where such differences may, if not fall away completely, at least be radically challenged.

Yet Kirk had his own radical credentials – not in his conviction of a spiritual dimension to reality and his rejection of a purely materialist universe (which at that time was pretty much consensual), but in his whole-hearted engagement with folk belief, which amongst the educated classes was anathema. As Maxwell-Stuart (2014) has observed, to dabble in such things did not risk extreme prejudice leading to torture and execution (a fate of half a century prior) but cultural opprobrium. To discuss the actuality of a parallel dimension inhabited by supernatural beings in the face of the bracing intellectual winds of the Enlightenment sweeping the land would be analogous to the claims of the Flat Earther. Only 20 years after Kirk's death, Joseph Addison advocates a Drydenian 'fairy way of writing' (1712) as a consciously affected literary mode, not as an articulation of belief. One was permitted to perform such superstition in the service of literature – with an ironic wink to the urbane reader – but to 'go native', as Kirk risked doing, could not be countenanced by respectable society. Of course, Kirk was not alone in his endeavours – figurehead of the anti-Sadducist movement, Joseph Glanvil, adopted the 'new science' method as mode of enquiry in his Royal Society treatise of 1666, 'A Philosophical Endeavour Towards the Defence of the Being of Witches and Apparitions'[vi] (Prior, 1932).

Developing Archive Fever

'Every age hath some secret left for its discoverie…' So Kirk observed in his notebook which the Royal Society was founded and flourished as the likes of Robert Boyle and John Aubrey (Hunter, 2000; Scurr, 2015) raced to catalogue and scrutinize the latest discoveries and near-lost antiquities. Yet this edict has a perennial quality too, one that resonated with me as, while undertaking research on my novel, I made a remarkable discovery.

During 15th November-12th December 2015 I spent a month at Hawthornden Castle, Midlothian, as a writer-in-residence. Although there to work full-time on the second draft of my novel — knowing that the historic surroundings (the original home of the poet, William Drummond) would be atmospheric and inspiring — I gave myself a day off each week to undertake research at the National Library of Scotland (NLS) and the University of Edinburgh Library (UEL). As I was attempting to fictionalize the life of

the Minister of Aberfoyle, the proximity to the Edinburgh research libraries seemed too good an opportunity to miss for they contained the extant Kirk archives.

Previously I had viewed an 1815 edition of Kirk's monograph in the British Library's Rare Books Room (3.11.2015). This was printed in Edinburgh by James Ballantyne and Co. for Longman. The edition was prepared by Sir Walter Scott from a 'manuscript copy preserved in the Advocates' Library', of the Scottish capitol. Only 100 copies were printed and seeing it and handling it felt thrilling enough at the time ('looking at it for real, it is like looking back into the past, touching history', I wrote at the time, speculating what it would be like to handle the 1691 MS). This was the first time Kirk's radical treatise appeared in print.

Even here, in viewing this relatively late edition, I noted at the time: 'The archaic diction, Biblical references, obscurity of the text, death of the author … all add to the talismanic and Gothic nature of the book. Here, the paratextual becomes paranormal.'

The eccentric capitalisation and use of Gothic script for the Gaelic names of the Sidhe added to the occult quality of the text — which might have been intentional on the part of its editor, ironically framing the superstitious jottings of a 17th Century minister within the more 'civilised' margins of the Regency period.

Yet the Scott edition is an unreliable narrative, riddled with misspellings and inaccuracies which have been replicated (in some editions) for 200 years, for I viewed it in the year of its bicentenary (1815-2015).

I was introduced to the complex ethnography of TSC in an article by the punctilious Mario M. Rossi (1957). He listed all the extant Kirk MSS of the time:

- La.III.551 (UEL) – a very fragile early version (1692?).
- MS. 5022 (NLS) – a fair 18th Century copy.

As well as the notebooks:

- Dc.8.114 (1660/1-1672)
- Dc.9.5 (1663-1664)
- Dc.8.115 (1666)
- La.111.549 (1669)

- Dc.8.116 (1674-1675/6)
- MS.3932 (1679-80)
- La.III.529 (1681-83)
- La.III.545 (1689/90)

Rossi pointed out that all the printed versions of TSC at that time (Scott 1815, Lang 1893, Cunningham 1933) reprinted errors which are not apparent in the two known MSS (La.III.551; MS. 5022). Rossi hypothesized that Walter Scott based his version on another MS, now lost. His searches in the Advocates' Library and Signet Library lists (where a MS was once said to exist) did not bear fruit. Rossi lamented the lack of a 'new, textually sound edition with the proper historical, biographical and bibliographic apparatus'. Unable to find a Scottish publisher for one, his project remained buried within an Italian language edition of his research. This lack was somewhat corrected by Stewart Sanderson's scrupulous edition of the TSC for the Folklore Society in 1976. The text he painstakingly transcribed from the existing MSS became the basis for an exegetical work in 1990 that explored the esoteric material and associated legend surrounding Kirk, *Robert Kirk: walker between worlds*, RJ Stewart (1990, Shaftesbury: Element) from a neo-pagan perspective. And so things remained until Michael Hunter's *The Occult Laboratory: magic, science, and second sight (*2001, Woodbridge: Boydell Press) which published the most meticulous and reliable version of TSC to date, with contextual correspondence and thorough notes. A *New York Book Review* edition of the TSC came out in 2007 with an introduction by Marina Warner, largely based upon Hunter's version. Apart from poor quality reprints of the out-of-copyright 1815 edition (e.g. Glastonbury: The Lost Library) and creative interpretation's of Kirk's legacy (e.g. John Matthews' fictionalised journal, T*he Secret Lives of Elves and Fairies,* 2005: London: Harper) *The Secret Commonwealth* exists only in these versions.

Yet none of these make mention of or utilise another manuscript version of TSC which I discovered in my research at the NLS during that winter.

The Existing Manuscripts

By far the most legible version of TSC in existence is MS. 5022 — written in a fair hand in a style of English that suggests mid-18th Century. It was acquired in 1949 by the NLS

from an Edinburgh bookseller ‘who could remember no more about it its provenance than that it came from somewhere in Angus’ (Sanderson, 1976: 26). I transcribed half of this before I discovered the new MS, because I wanted the most accurate version available avoiding the repeated mistakes of the popular printed version; I also wanted, as a novelist, experience writing Kirk’s words to inhabit his paradigm and familiarise myself with his diction.

The other version (La.III.551) is considered an ‘icon’ in the University of Edinburgh special collections and is harder to access. It is most easily viewed on microfilm, using a digital viewer — the quality is razor-sharp and the pages easily searched through and printed from (with permission). This version seems to be a transcribed copy in the hand of Robert Campbell, Kirk’s cousin. It is probably not the actual copy made at the time of dictation but the nearest we get to the time of composition. It is incomplete, and MS. 5022 augments it usefully. Between these two MSS the most complete version of Kirk’s TSC was created, to date (Hunter, 2001).

Another version of TSC appeared in 1964 (MS. Gen.308.D) with the inscription ‘Doctor William Henderson, May 18th 1814’, a year before Scott’s version. Both of these (MS. 5022; MS. Gen.308.D) seem to be copies of an earlier MS, now lost.

Pepys mentions a copy in circulation in 1699, so we can assume fair copies were available in London during that period, although none have ever been found.

Whether other manuscripts existed and were used for the creation of the 1815 version, we can only speculate, as Sanderson emphasizes: ‘Unless and until other manuscripts turn up the matter must rest in doubt.’ (1976, 27)

Within what is known as the ‘London diary’ an embryonic form of TSC can be found. Passages were lifted from this verbatim for the monograph. The story of creation is fascinating, and is worth relating in full. It provided vital motivation for my fictionalised Kirk and created a whole new subplot within the novel. Time and time again such synchronicities made me feel I was, in some part, inside my own narrative. My novel had come alive and I had stepped into its pages.

The Notebooks - discoveries

Within the 8 surviving notebooks (7 in Edinburgh University Library; 1 in the National Library of Scotland) there was a wealth of material to discover. They are tiny – the size of matchboxes and very delicate. It is impossible to open the pages fully without risking damage of the spine. The handwriting is infinitesimal, faint in places, and full of Kirk's eccentric spelling and handwriting. Some sections are more legible than others. No full transcription of them has been undertaken (although Hunter mooted the idea). In my examination of them to date I have discovered:

- Marginalia – signature; inscriptions, dates.
- Drawings – several ink-drawings depicting occult symbolism.
- Juvenilia – schoolboy daydreams, doodles.
- Evidence of romance – poems to 'sweethearts', whimsical word-play.
- The Stillingfleet episode.
- An early version of *The Secret Commonwealth.*

I was particularly thrilled by this quote of Kirk's found in his London notebook (below). It leaped out at me as epigraph material. It is especially significant for being one of the earliest usages of the term 'Fayrie Tale' in the English language. For Kirk to have coined this seems very resonant, considering the nature of my project – one that explores the construction and transmission of folkloric narratives, and the juxtaposition of the historical with the fantastical. Kirk's rhetorical comparison between his account of the 'secret commonwealth' and the 'discovery' of the New World illustrates this superbly. Kirk suggests that in the same way the first accounts of the New World were received sceptically – their reports, the 'inventors of ridiculous Utopias' – critical readers may question the veracity of his account. Kirk, the man of God, was at pains to adopt a 'scientific' approach to his survey (mirroring the way Kirk's near contemporary, John Aubrey, the man of Science, seemed possessed with, at times, a kind of religious fervour in his search for and preservation of 'antiquities). And in this cross-fertilisation of methodologies and the fault-lines between a materialist and spiritual reading of the universe, we have the primary discourse of Kirk and Aubrey's age. Indeed, Kirk's whole endeavour seemed motivated by a desire to defend a spiritual interpretation of the universe against the burgeoning tide of the Age of Reason – a rearguard action doomed to failure in its day, as the wondrous became simply the curious; the sublime, ridiculous.

Perhaps Kirk saw in the plight of the Good Folk – relegated to the hollow hills and the simple folk beliefs of the Highlanders – a foreshadowing of the fate of his own belief system and culture in the devastating aftermath of Culloden?

A section of Kirk's 'London notebook', in which he drafts an early version of what would become his monograph, acknowledges this question of provenance and authenticity directly in a remarkable passage which draws upon the often fanciful travellers' tales being brought back from the New World. It is important for its use of the phrase 'fayrie tale':

> And if this be thought only a fancy and forgery because obscure and unknown to the most of mankind for so long a time, I answer the antipodes and inhabitants of America, the bone of our bone, yet their first discovery was lookt on as a Fayrie Tale, and the reporters hooted at as inventors of ridiculous Utopias.

Kirk's apologia asks the sceptical reader to accept his proto-anthropological gathering of beliefs as not merely a curiosity, but as evidence of an otherworldly reality, one that does not challenge a Christian cosmology, but reifies it – with his 'subterraneans' inhabiting their niche with the celestial ecosystem – and thus supports his deeper agenda, to refute the inherent 'atheism of the age'.

The Stillingfleet Theory

Most revealing in this hoard of untranscribed material is the account of the Stillingfleet episode, as related in Kirk's 'London notebook', MS. La.III.545. (EUL). In 1689 he journeyed to London to oversee the printing of 3000 copies of Bishop Bedell's Bible, written in Irish Gaelic, with the intention of distributing them amongst the Highlanders ('Tramontaines', as Kirk refers to them) for their conversion. While in the capitol Kirk visited many sermons of diverse faiths, summarising them in his 'London notebook' (La.III.545) and recording his observations. On 6th October of that year he attended the valedictory sermon of Edward Stillingfleet (1635-1699) at the Church of St Andrew, Holborn. Stillingfleet had just been made Bishop of Worcester and was soon to take up his post. The Bishop, a formidable and influential figure, sermonised against superstition. His sermons were so popular that Samuel Pepys records being forced to sit

in a nearby inn[vi]. Afterwards, Kirk talked with him and was invited to dinner. There he met the Bishop's wife, who having recently given birth to a seventh child was interested in the notion of such a child having to gift to 'touch against the King's Evil' (La.III.545). Extraordinarily, both Kirk and Stillingfleet were seventh sons — but while Kirk seemed to have embraced his folkloric inheritance in his research into the Fairy Faith, Stillingfleet appeared diametrically opposed to it. The conversation must have been a lively one – indeed, it perhaps dramatised a major fault-line of the 17th Century. The dialectic here was not Materialist/Idealist (possibly a false dichotomy when many of the members of the Royal Society had interests in both camps), but two very different ways of interpreting Christian doctrine. Kirk's plebeian interest in Fairy Belief would have been roundly mocked by Stillingfleet as smacking of the 'enthusiasm' of Catholics and sectarians. While as Kirk went on to exhort a counter-spiritual discourse in his monograph, Stillingfleet played a key role in the suppression of mysticism in mainstream English religious discourse (Temple, 2019). If this was a title fight, then Kirk was K-O-ed.

Bruising from the encounter, but fired up by the interest of Mrs Stillingfleet, afterwards Kirk began to make notes about the Fairy Faith of the Highlanders, recalling in considerable detail information collected in situ (thus suggesting an earlier fascination). Sanderson suggests his notes might have been fuelled by *hiraeth*:

> From distant London his thoughts possibly dwelt more than was usual on these themes of folklore and tradition in the Highlands… (Sanderson, 1976,17)

So, like John Cowper Powys who worked on his Wessex Quartet while lecturing in America, with 'the inkbood of home', Kirk seemed to be driven by his longing and possibly loneliness (the printing of the Bibles kept him away from his wife and children for several months). Yet another reason might have motivated. In every version of TSC the epigraph dedicates the work to 'some choice friends', cites Bishop Stillingfleet and 'The Lady', which by the context of the sentence suggests 'lady' Stillingfleet (an acknowledgement of her social status as a wife of a bishop, rather than a formal title). Rossi postulates that she was the secret catalyst for his work. Sanderson refutes this, but Warner is more sympathetic to the theory, and going by the evidence of the London

notebook it seems a reasonable conclusion. Kirk himself lamented in MS.Dc.8.116 that 'I groan for lack of devout and rousing society'. An intelligent scholarly man, it is unlikely he had many peers of equal wit and persuasion to share his radical (and in the witch persecuting atmosphere of the times) and dangerous ideas. And so, when he meets a Society 'lady' who shows a genuine fascination in his research, it is not unreasonable to assume he would leap at the opportunity to share them with her. It would appear 'lady' Stillingfleet became something of a muse figure. Although there is no evidence that they ever met again, Kirk certainly sent her a version of the monograph, which he completed in poor health. Another discovery in an earlier notebook (Dc.8.116, 1676: *'Ane eclogue of other writings & my own thoughts…'*) shows Kirk to be of a romantic persuasion. It was here, on p162 that I discovered: 'A modest panegyric on the uncomparable Lady L. Mary Napier, with the anagram of her name mary napier (an) army (doing) Rapine':

> Informe me, O you Muses, myne
> Send such a gale
> as may befit a Theme so fine
> Take off the baile… (transcribed by author)

These romantic musings were embedded within 'Essays of Moral and Political Persuasion'. Kirk was of flesh and blood. Other poems ('A Description of the Marriage of Athol', 1682) and a Gaelic poem in the same notebook (La.III.529) shows Kirk had a poetic side. Within this notebook ('Ane account of some occasional meditations, resolutions, and practices, etc, (which concern a public and private statione') Kirk articulates the challenges of embodying his convictions:

> Oh! Let me not Read & meditate and pray and teach, merely that I may habit a pleasure beyre and inchanting course (?), But let all the good I learn by study, be humbly & solidly emboded in my practice. (La.III.529, 5. transcribed by author)

Later in the same notebook Kirk writes the phrase: 'The shadow follows the body' (p169). Although this echoes his theory on 'co-walkers', it also could imply the earthly temptations that dog even a man of God's heels. It is tempting to think of Kirk having feet of clay. Certainly for a novelist, this is the kind of detail which is too good to pass up. With the artistic license of my medium (fiction, not non-fiction) I have used this as

plot device. Biographers usually cannot make such speculative leaps, although Ruth Scurr's innovative biography of *John Aubrey: my own life* (2015) which I first came across at the castle, could be a mirror project to my own, from the other side of the fiction/non-fiction 'divide'. Scurr has opted, in creating a diary for Aubrey, a fictionalised biography approach; mine veers towards biographical fiction (in Kirk's early years). There are several points (where biographical information meets imagination) at which the differences seem to dissolve.

The apparent differences between what is 'real' and what is 'made up' seemed to blur in the actuality of my primary source research, as I suddenly found myself 'part of the narrative', in terms of the critical discourse and scholarly endeavour surrounding Kirk stretching back two hundred years.

Stepping into the Gothic

It was towards the end of a long and tiring day (27th November 2015) examining the minute and often ineligible handwriting of Kirk's that I came across what appears to be an unrecorded Kirk MS of TSC. It was literally within the last twenty minutes of the day — and I was close to packing up. My eyes were tired and I couldn't really take any more in. I had inspected all but one of the artefacts retrieved for me in the Special Collections room of the NLS. The last one, a large ledger, 'Indexes and transcripts by Robert Mylne, the antiquary' (Adv.MS.34.6.9) looked the *least* promising, but I diligently trawled through it. Bundled together in 1931 was a collection of 17th/18th century ledgers recording Scottish names. Amongst them I was excited to discover correspondence by Sir William Drummond of Hawthornden and a history apparently written by him (at the time I was staying in Hawthornden Castle, so the discovery felt especially resonant).

> *Letters from Ye Drumonds yet warnd (?) from Scotland And Sent in ye Medera Islands about i4i8 to the Earle of Perth 1623*

And then, right at the back (folios 413 verso-433) just before I was about to call it a day (18:23 hrs), I discovered, to my astonishment, what looked like a manuscript of TSC, clearly dated 1691 and apparently signed by Robert Kirk! I was too tired to take it all in, but I made a note of it, and asked for it to be kept back until my next visit. A week

later (4th December 2015) I returned having carefully cross-referenced all mentions of the Kirk MSS. I could find no reference to Adv.MS.34.6.9 (NLS) in Sanderson, Hunter, or Warner. Promisingly this version included the Greek and Gaelic which less gifted transcribers are wont to leave out. It is clearly titled:

> *The Secret Common Wealth*
> *or,*
> *A Treatise Displayering the*
> *Chiefe Curiousities, As they are*
> *arise Among Diverse of the*
> *People of Scotland*
> *To this Day by Mr Robert*
> *Kirk, minister of Aberfoyle, 1691 - 1691*

In the other versions Robert Campbell clearly signs his name, but I could find no evidence of it here. With permission, I photographed the pages for future reference. I returned in September 2016 to transcribe the whole manuscript. To aid my transcription, I used Sanderson's and Hunter's versions to cross-reference spellings, as sometimes words were virtually illegible. In doing so I noticed very few divergences from these texts. I have yet to conduct a thorough comparative textual analysis with Sanderson and Hunter's versions, but *prima facie* it, it seems to be very close to them (but more complete than the two existing MSS they have used: La.III.551; MS. 5022. The National Library of Scotland accession data records: 'Presented, 1925, by the Faculty of Advocates to the nation on the foundation of the National Library of Scotland.' This would suggest it originated in the Library of Advocates, subsumed by the NLS, and supports the hypothesis that it is indeed the MS referred to by Scott et al. Further research into the provenance of Adv.MS.34.6.9 is required (as indeed the Kirk notebooks await full transcription — a project mooted by Hunter but not yet followed through). I discovered it in my initial search for Kirk-related material in the National Library online catalogue, so why it has not been noted before seems puzzling, yet my initial inspection suggests it is genuine and unrecorded in Kirk scholarship to date.

The Hauntological Authentic

A castle, a lost manuscript, occult lore, a wayward priest … It was not surprising that throughout this experience I felt I was entering the Gothic (the 'supernaturalization of everyday life', as Ann Radcliffe described it). It was a thrilling, visceral experience before it became an intellectual, cultural one. In a subconscious, instinctual way the discovery of the Kirk manuscript felt like an affirmation – that I was on the right track. A writer often proceeds by hunches, by flashes of intuition. We try to bring into the light what happens in the dark, in a liminal, twilight place.

My discovery may just seem like another layering of meta-narrative, a shameless plundering of the classic Gothic device – a bogus literary ruse. An early assessor of my PhD project certainly thought so (Taylor, 2016). Yet it is not one I deploy to evoke an aura of antique authenticity – a device long out-worn its sell-by date.

Although such a hoary literary convention is, as Baker examines, one that is 'peculiarly prominent in Scottish writing' (2014, 54) – which aligns with my project's wish to situate itself on the Borders of that tradition, a cuckoo interloper in another's nest – the 'authentic fallacy' (De Groot, 2015) is no longer its chief aim. Nevertheless, 'questions of textual authenticity' remain (Baker 2014, 55):

> The trope of the found manuscript is often used to highlight the problematic relationship between text, language, and the past. (ibid)

The effect becomes one of textual indeterminacy, 'a play of textual surfaces' (ibid). Authenticity, if it exists, is triangulated through the writer-reader contract (ibid), and 'must be approached in terms of relation between text and reader.' (Baker 2014, 88). And also between text and text – intertextually, a 'found manuscript' narrative is a novel haunting itself. Danielewski takes this to its extreme (2000), presenting a palimpsest of texts where there is 'no point of fixity' (Baker, 2014, 88). Although I did not want to destabilise the diegetic universe to that extent (desiring instead the narrative traction of a genre novel, albeit one of literary merit) I *did* however wish to acknowledge Danielewski's intrepid polar trek with my 'box of leaves' (the container for Janey's family heirlooms).

Discovering the lost manuscript gave me permission to forge my own, dipping my toes into the current of Scottish tradition epitomized by Macpherson's *Ossian;* what Joseph Ritson describes, in his 1794 comment on Scotish [sic] poetry as 'a series of fraud, forgery, and imposture, practised with impunity and success' (cited by Baker, 2014, 54), which sells itself to me as a novelist making no claims to veracity beyond the 'fictive dream' of verisimilitude (Gardner, cited in Neale, 2009).

Even if the full transcript of *The Secret Commonwealth* does not appear in *The Knowing,* it still informs the novel, as Hemingway observed: 'Anything you can omit that you know you still have in the writing and its quality will show' (1965, 229).

My knowledge of it underpinned the narrative and enabled me to ventriloquize Kirk in a way I might have found intimidating prior to seeing his humanising notebooks. Kirk, the minister, the man, was indubitably flesh and blood, and his idiolect is not so alien from a modern one that it would be torturous to recreate, or onerous on the reader to read – and ultimately, there 'suspension of disbelief' is the only seal of approval I need, as Baker acknowledges: 'The question of authenticity lies not in manuscripts … but in human response. (2014, 57).

Whether I have discovered the lost Kirk MS remains for other scholars to decide. Whatever the verdict, it was a thrilling, visceral experience which seemed to uncannily reify my project in the actuality of its undertaking. The untranscribed notebooks await painstaking palaeography. Who knows what other discoveries await within their pages, and in other archives? With the release of the second part of Philip Pullman's 'The Book of Dust': *The Secret Commonwealth* (2019) – which imaginatively 'revisions' the Otherworld of the Highlanders in the light of quantum physics – it is clear that Kirk's legendarium can still serve as a potent portal for all bold travellers.

Performing Kirk: a Conclusion

In researching Kirk in this way, the affect of the archives, the visceral thrill of discovering a lost manuscript, and the telling details of the original handwriting and marginalia, all enriched my 'performance' of Kirk in the pages of my novel, *The Knowing: a Fantasy* (2020). Through the website I created as a platform for the transmedia version of the novel

(2018) the reader/viewer 'performs' their own version of the narrative with each exploration of the material and multi-linear narrative nodes. This begins with accessing the site through the 'splash' page of a fairy ring, which emulates the folk belief that Kirk stepped into a fairy ring on Doon Hill, near his Parish of Aberfoyle. The crossing of this virtual threshold enacts the transition into the world of 'the secret commonwealth', aka Faerie. Exploration is driven by how much each participant wishes to know, a motivator intrinsic to the epistemological enquiry of my doctoral research (2018b), and to the novel and its characters (the line of desire of the main protagonist, Janey McEttrick, is to discover the truth of her ancestry, and her own problematic gift of Second Sight, aka, the 'knowing'). The acknowledgement of the fallibility of omniscience is foregrounded in the novel's title: *The Knowing – a Fantasy* – and that in itself is an acknowledgement of that very issue for any doctoral researcher: it is impossible to have full omniscience about a subject, to have read everything, because new work is always coming to light. By the time the thesis has been submitted, read by the examiners, and defended, at least half a year may have passed. To deploy a down-to-earth analogy, it is like the proverbial painting of the Forth Bridge: as soon as you have reached the 'end' of the task, you need to go back to the beginning and re-evaluate everything in the light of new research and shifting discourses, which have a 'weathering' effect on the efficacy of one's arguments. Knowledge quickly goes out of date. One's special 'claim' to that hard-won knowledge only lasts until the research is made available via Open Access – and as with Kirk's divulgence of the Secret Commonwealth, one must be ready to face the critics, or even pay the price. And thus, in this way, I felt I was 'performing' Kirk, as the revealer of 'occult' knowledge (the sine qua non of PhD research). Formally, my doctoral studies last four years, although my journey with Kirk has lasted from 2002 until 2020 to date. Perhaps I too had stepped into the fairy ring, but the special world I found myself in was one of academe: a perilous zone, which operates by its own (often tacit) rules and alliances – a secret commonwealth of an altogether different order.

Ultimately, the Protean figure of Kirk remains to be 'performed' by whoever chooses to study or dramatise him or his life-world, from the visceral ritual theatre of the Beltane Fire Society[vii], recreated online during the lockdown of 2020 via multimodal digital performances[viii]; to the scholarly – Young and Houlbrook's recent wide-ranging survey,

Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies 500AD to the Present (2018) – to Contemporary Fantasy: Pullman's land-grab of the 'Secret Commonwealth', in which he dovetails Kirk's kingdom of fallen angels with quantum physics, creating an extended metaphor for creative vision, one that adopts a Blakean sensibility:

> Had reason ever created a poem, or a symphony, or a painting? If rationality can't see things like the secret commonwealth, it's because rationality's vision is limited. The secret commonwealth is there. We can't see it with rationality any more than we can weigh something with a microscope: it's the wrong sort of instrument. We need to imagine as well as measure ... (2019)

This echoes Addison's 'fairy way of writing'[ix] advice of three centuries earlier, and is perhaps the best (most sympathetic and efficacious) approach to Kirk's legendarium and legacy.

Notes

i. Husserl, E., 2001, *Logical Investigations*. Vols. One and Two, Trans. J. N. Findlay. Ed. with translation corrections and with a new Introduction by Dermot Moran. With a new Preface by Michael Dummett. London and New York: Routledge. A new and revised edition of the original English translation by J. N. Findlay. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970. From the Second Edition of the German. First edition, 1900–01; second edition, 1913, 1920.

ii. Derrida, J., *Archive Fever: A Freudian impression*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

iii. Robert Kirk was born 9th December, 1644. He was the seventh son of a respectable Clergy family, who were able to send him to Edinburgh, where he received his first degree, then onto St. Andrew's for his Masters. Thus validated, he was ready to follow in his father's footsteps as an Episcopalian Minister, first of Balquidder, then onto Aberfoyle in 1685, where he remained until his untimely death. While his time as a man of the cloth began on 9th November 1664, he became, on 23rd October 1667, Clerk of the Presbytery. With this new level of security, he perhaps felt ready for matrimony, and so in the following year, 1678, he married Isobel Campbell, daughter of Sir Colin Campbell of Rochester. They were blessed with one son, Colin. Tragically, Isobel died on Christmas Day 1680 (in unknown circumstances, although post-natal difficulties

seem likely), and Kirk carved her gravestone himself. He went on to marry a cousin of Isobel's, Margaret, and they had a son, also called Robert Kirk (who went onto to become minister of Dornoch, 1713-1758). In late 1690/early 1691 he oversaw the printing of Bedel's Bible (into Gaelic) in London. This was to be a formative experience, which we'll return to. Later that year, he dictated *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, on his sick-bed, to his cousin, Robert Campbell. The following year, 1692, he collapsed on Doon Hill on 14th May – a place he had taken to walking to in his nightshirt – and died of unknown causes, aged 47 years and 5 months. He was buried in Aberfoyle churchyard, within sight of the hill.

iv. Christopher Columbus, letter to Luis de Sant Angel, Treasurer of Aragon, 1493; John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto) letter from Lorenzo Pasqualigo to his brothers, August 1497; Raimondo di Soncino to the Duke of Milan, first and second despatches, 1497; Gaspar Corte Real, Pietro Pasqualigo, Letter to his brothers, 1501; Amerigo Vespucci, letter to Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de' Medici, 1503.

v. Later published as part of his *Saducismus Triumphatus: Or, full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions*, (published posthumously, 1681).

vi. 'Thence with him to Westminster, to the parish church, where the Parliament-men, and Stillingfleete in the pulpit. So full, no standing there; so he and I to eat herrings at the Dog Taverns. ' https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/10/10/ [accessed 12 September 2020]

vii. https://beltane.org/ [accessed 12 September 2020]

viii. https://youtu.be/RXewC64UDJk [accessed 12 September 2020]

ix. 'There is a kind of Writing, wherein the Poet quite loses sight of Nature, and entertains his Reader's Imagination with the Characters and Actions of such Persons as have many of them no Existence, but what he bestows on them. Such are Fairies, Witches, Magicians, Demons, and departed Spirits. This Mr. Dryden calls the Fairie may of Writing, which is, indeed, more difficult than any other that depends on the Poet's Fancy, because he has no Pattern to follow in it, and must work altogether out of his own Invention.' Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 419 (1 July 1712).

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- MS. 5022 (NLS)
- MS. Gen.308.D (UEL)
- Adv.MS.34.6.9 (NLS)

Kirk, R. (1660–90) notebooks:

- Dc.8.114 (UEL)
- Dc.9.5 (UEL)
- Dc.8.115 (UEL)
- La.111.549 (UEL)
- Dc.8.116 (UEL)
- MS.3932 (NLS)
- La.III.529 (UEL)
- La.III.545 (UEL)
- MS. 16499 (NLS)

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