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JAMES HOGG

The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

The Private Memoirs and CONFESSIONS OF A JUSTIFIED SINNER

James Hogg

Written by himself

WITH A DETAIL OF CURIOUS TRADITIONARY FACTS, AND OTHER EVIDENCE, BY THE EDITOR

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

THE PRIVATE MEMOIRS AND CONFESSIONS OF A JUSTIFIED SINNER

This edition published 1997
by Wordsworth Editions Limited
Cumberland House, Crib Street, Ware,
Hertfordshire SG12 9ET

ISBN 1 85326 188 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent.
Typeset in the UK by R&B Creative Services Limited.

INTRODUCTION

THE POETIC TALENT of James Hogg was first recognised by Sir Walter Scott and admiring contemporaries came to refer to him as 'The Ettrick Shepherd' for his occupation in the forest of that name on the Scottish Borders. Hogg had virtually no formal education and his work reflects oral traditions, both his verse and prose consisting of stories based on adapted ballads, legends and folklore. His most ambitious prose work, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* was published in 1824, and is now widely acclaimed as his masterpiece.

The celebrated French author, André Gide, was lent a copy of the book in 1924 and was stunned by it. He wrote an enthusiastic introduction to The Cresset Library edition of the work that same year, extolling its psychological accuracy, likening it in this respect to Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, in its subject matter to Browning's poem, *Johannes Agricola in Meditation*, and in aspects of its form to Browning's *The Ring and The Book*. Gide quotes his own translator, Dorothy Bussy, who stressed the essentially Scottish nature of the book and of the fanatical Puritanism depicted. The novel shares the atmosphere and curious horror of Burns' *Holy Willie's Prayer*, and looks forward to Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* which seems to have been influenced by it.

Many have noted that Hogg, in the treatment of his material, was well in advance of his time. His story concerns a young man, Robert Wringhim, son of a strife-torn marriage, brought up in extreme Calvinist bigotry. He is instilled with the fatal belief that he is one of 'the community of the just upon earth', who cannot sin, his salvation being pre-ordained. Robert's every natural inclination is thus sanctified and encouraged. This doctrine apparently derives from the controversial teachings of Johannes Agricola who founded a sect in the sixteenth century called the 'Antinomians'.

The novel is constructed of two parts with the first section couched as an editor's objective narrative. Here a finely wrought atmosphere of mystery and suspense creates mounting tension as unsolved crimes are described and suspicions aroused. The second part of the book which purports to be Wringhim's own memoir, found in his grave some hundred years after his death, shows his very gradual movement from the self-righteous conviction that all he does is God's work to the belief that he is under the influence of a malign stranger whom he ultimately

recognises as the devil. Supernatural force is one explanation, but though Hogg's dramatic ending may pander to the Gothic tastes of his time, the essence of his story is also plausible on another level. Hogg's presentation of the evil spirit that possesses his hero is subtle and open to many interpretations. It is easy to perceive this devil as an alter-ego, playing only on the sinner's own darkest unconscious desires, and the instability of his character. The carefully laid background to this carries conviction with psychological realism that is worthy of any twentieth-century novel of the genre.

The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner is written with power, economy and a grim humour that makes compelling reading. As Gide claims, the book is 'an extraordinary achievement'. It is both significant and impressive as a precursor of the psychological thriller which reflects the author's profound understanding of the nature of fanaticism and the limitless extent of human perversity.

James Hogg was born in 1770 at Ettrick Forest in Selkirkshire. He had little formal education and spent much of his life as a shepherd and a small farmer there. During his twenties he worked for a farmer in Yarrow where he had access to books. He began to write poetry, and his collection Scottish Pastorals, Poems, Songs, etc. *attracted the interest of Walter Scott. They became friends and Hogg and his mother supplied ballads for Scott's collection,* Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border. *Hogg's own first volume of original ballads,* The Mountain Bard, *was published in 1807. Soon after this he gave up farming and settled in Edinburgh, and in 1810 he published* The Forest Minstrel. *That same year he started a critical magazine called* The Spy *which folded a year later. In 1813 his collection of poems,* The Queen's Wake *established his literary reputation. He joined the editorial board of* Blackwood's Magazine *to which he contributed regularly, signing his editorial feature,* Noctes Ambrosianae, *as the 'Ettrick Shepherd'.*

Hogg was ambitious and versatile, producing many more works of poetry and prose. His best known prose work, The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner *of 1824, was long neglected but is now regarded as his masterpiece. He also edited works of Burns, and wrote a biography,* The Domestic Manners and Private Life of Sir Walter Scott, *which was published in 1834. Hogg spent his last years in the farm of Eltrive Lake at Yarrow which had been bequeathed to him by his patroness, the Countess of Dalkeith, and there combined farming with writing. After his death in 1835, Wordsworth wrote a poem, 'Upon the Death of James Hogg' expressing the affection and esteem in which he was held by his contemporaries.*

Further reading:

E. C. Batho, *The Ettrick Shepherd*, 1927
L. Simpson, *James Hogg: A Critical Study*, 1926

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THE EDITOR'S NARRATIVE

IT APPEARS FROM TRADITION, as well as some parish registers still extant, that the lands of Dalcastle (or Dalchastel, as it is often spelled) were possessed by a family of the name of Colwan, about one hundred and fifty years ago, and for at least a century previous to that period. That family was supposed to have been a branch of the ancient family of Colquhoun, and it is certain that from it spring the Cowans that spread towards the Border. I find that, in the year 1687, George Colwan succeeded his uncle of the same name, in the lands of Dalchastel and Balgrennan; and, this being all I can gather of the family from history, to tradition I must appeal for the remainder of the motley adventures of that house. But, of the matter furnished by the latter of these powerful monitors, I have no reason to complain: it has been handed down to the world in unlimited abundance; and I am certain that, in recording the hideous events which follow, I am only relating to the greater part of the inhabitants of at least four counties of Scotland matters of which they were before perfectly well informed.

This George was a rich man, or supposed to be so, and was married, when considerably advanced in life, to the sole heiress and reputed daughter of a Baillie Orde, of Glasgow. This proved a conjunction anything but agreeable to the parties contracting. It is well known that the Reformation principles had long before that time taken a powerful hold of the hearts and affections of the people of Scotland, although the feeling was by no means general, or in equal degrees; and it so happened that this married couple felt completely at variance on the subject. Granting it to have been so, one would have thought that the laird, owing to his retiring situation, would have been the one that inclined to the stern doctrines of the reformers; and that the young and gay dame from the city would have adhered to the free principles cherished by the court party, and indulged in rather to extremity, in opposition to their severe and carping contemporaries.

The contrary, however, happened to be the case. The laird was what his country neighbours called 'a droll, careless chap', with a

very limited proportion of the fear of God in his heart, and very nearly as little of the fear of man. The laird had not intentionally wronged or offended either of the parties, and perceived not the necessity of deprecating their vengeance. He had hitherto believed that he was living in most cordial terms with the greater part of the inhabitants of the earth, and with the powers above in particular: but woe be unto him if he was not soon convinced of the fallacy of such damning security! for his lady was the most severe and gloomy of all bigots to the principles of the Reformation. Hers were not the tenets of the great reformers, but theirs mightily overstrained and deformed. Theirs was an unguent hard to be swallowed; but hers was that unguent embittered and overheated until nature could not longer bear it. She had imbibed her ideas from the doctrines of one flaming predestinarian divine alone; and these were so rigid that they became a stumbling block to many of his brethren, and a mighty handle for the enemies of his party to turn the machine of the state against them.

The wedding festivities at Dalcastle partook of all the gaiety, not of that stern age, but of one previous to it. There was feasting, dancing, piping, and singing: the liquors were handed around in great fullness, the ale in large wooden bickers, and the brandy in capacious horns of oxen. The laird gave full scope to his homely glee. He danced – he snapped his fingers to the music – clapped his hands and shouted at the turn of the tune. He saluted every girl in the hall whose appearance was anything tolerable, and requested of their sweethearts to take the same freedom with his bride, by way of retaliation. But there she sat at the head of the hall in still and blooming beauty, absolutely refusing to tread a single measure with any gentleman there. The only enjoyment in which she appeared to partake was in now and then stealing a word of sweet conversation with her favourite pastor about divine things; for he had accompanied her home after marrying her to her husband, to see her fairly settled in her new dwelling. He addressed her several times by her new name, Mrs Colwan; but she turned away her head disgusted, and looked with pity and contempt towards the old inadvertent sinner, capering away in the height of his unregenerated mirth. The minister perceived the workings of her pious mind, and thence forward addressed her by the courteous title of Lady Dalcastle, which sounded somewhat better, as not coupling her name with one of the wicked: and there is too great reason to believe that, for all the solemn vows she had come under, and these were of no ordinary

binding, particularly on the laird's part, she at that time despised, if not abhorred him, in her heart.

The good parson again blessed her, and went away. She took leave of him with tears in her eyes, entreating him often to visit her in that heathen land of the Amorite, the Hittite, and the Girgashite: to which he assented, on many solemn and qualifying conditions – and then the comely bride retired to her chamber to pray.

It was customary, in those days, for the bride's-man and maiden, and a few select friends, to visit the new-married couple after they had retired to rest, and drink a cup to their healths, their happiness, and a numerous posterity. But the laird delighted not in this: he wished to have his jewel to himself; and, slipping away quietly from his jovial party, he retired to his chamber to his beloved, and bolted the door. He found her engaged with the writings of the Evangelists, and terribly demure. The laird went up to caress her; but she turned away her head, and spoke of the follies of aged men, and something of the broad way that leadeth to destruction. The laird did not thoroughly comprehend this allusion; but being considerably flustered by drinking, and disposed to take all in good part, he only remarked, as he took off his shoes and stockings, that, 'whether the way was broad or narrow, it was time that they were in their bed.'

'Sure, Mr Colwan, you won't go to bed tonight, at such an important period of your life, without first saying prayers for yourself and me.'

When she said this, the laird had his head down almost to the ground, loosing his shoe-buckle; but when he heard of *prayers*, on such a night, he raised his face suddenly up, which was all over as flushed and red as a rose, and answered: 'Prayers, mistress! Lord help your crazed head, is this a night for prayers?'

He had better have held his peace. There was such a torrent of profound divinity poured out upon him that the laird became ashamed, both of himself and his new-made spouse, and wist not what to say: but the brandy helped him out.

'It strikes me, my dear, that religious devotion would be somewhat out of place tonight,' said he. 'Allowing that it is ever so beautiful, and ever so beneficial, were we to ride on the rigging of it at all times, would we not be constantly making a farce of it: it would be like reading the Bible and the jest-book, verse about, and would render the life of man a medley of absurdity and confusion.'

But, against the cant of the bigot or the hypocrite, no reasoning can aught avail. If you would argue until the end of life, the infallible

creature must alone be right. So it proved with the laird. One Scripture text followed another, not in the least connected, and one sentence of the profound Mr Wringhim's sermons after another, proving the duty of family worship, till the laird lost patience, and, tossing himself into bed, said carelessly that he would leave that duty upon her shoulders for one night.

The meek mind of Lady Dalcastle was somewhat disarranged by this sudden evolution. She felt that she was left rather in an awkward situation. However, to show her unconscionable spouse that she was resolved to hold fast her integrity, she kneeled down and prayed in terms so potent that she deemed she was sure of making an impression on him. She did so; for in a short time the laird began to utter a response so fervent that she was utterly astounded, and fairly driven from the chain of her orisons. He began, in truth, to sound a nasal bugle of no ordinary calibre – the notes being little inferior to those of a military trumpet. The lady tried to proceed, but every returning note from the bed burst on her ear with a louder twang, and a longer peal, till the concord of sweet sounds became so truly pathetic that the meek spirit of the dame was quite overcome; and, after shedding a flood of tears, she arose from her knees, and retired to the chimney-corner with her Bible in her lap, there to spend the hours in holy meditation till such time as the inebriated trumpeter should awaken to a sense of propriety.

The laird did not awake in any reasonable time; for, he being overcome with fatigue and wassail, his sleep became sounder, and his Morphean measures more intense. These varied a little in their structure; but the general run of the bars sounded something in this way: 'Hic-hoc-wheew!' It was most profoundly ludicrous; and could not have missed exciting risibility in anyone save a pious, a disappointed, and humbled bride.

The good dame wept bitterly. She could not for her life go and awaken the monster, and request him to make room for her: but she retired somewhere, for the laird, on awaking next morning, found that he was still lying alone. His sleep had been of the deepest and most genuine sort; and, all the time that it lasted, he had never once thought of either wives, children, or sweethearts, save in the way of dreaming about them; but, as his spirit began again by slow degrees to verge towards the boundaries of reason, it became lighter and more buoyant from the effects of deep repose, and his dreams partook of that buoyancy, yea, to a degree hardly expressible. He dreamed of the reel, the jig, the strathspey, and the corant; and the elasticity of his frame was such that he was bounding over the heads

of maidens, and making his feet skimmer against the ceiling, enjoying, the while, the most ecstatic emotions. These grew too fervent for the shackles of the drowsy god to restrain. The nasal bugle ceased its prolonged sounds in one moment, and a sort of hectic laugh took its place. 'Keep it going – play up, you devils!' cried the laird, without changing his position on the pillow. But this exertion to hold the fiddlers at their work fairly awakened the delighted dreamer, and, though he could not refrain from continuing his laugh, he at length, by tracing out a regular chain of facts, came to be sensible of his real situation. 'Rabina, where are you? What's become of you, my dear?' cried the laird. But there was no voice nor anyone that answered or regarded. He flung open the curtains, thinking to find her still on her knees, as he had seen her, but she was not there, either sleeping or waking. 'Rabina! Mrs Colwan!' shouted he, as loud as he could call, and then added in the same breath, 'God save the king – I have lost my wife!'

He sprung up and opened the casement: the daylight was beginning to streak the east, for it was spring, and the nights were short, and the mornings very long. The laird half dressed himself in an instant, and strode through every room in the house, opening the windows as he went, and scrutinising every bed and every corner. He came into the hall where the wedding festival had been held; and as he opened the various window-boards, loving couples flew off like hares surprised too late in the morning among the early braird. 'Hoo-boo! Fie, be frightened!' cried the laird. 'Fie, rin like fools, as if ye were caught in an ill-turn!' His bride was not among them; so he was obliged to betake himself to further search. 'She will be praying in some corner, poor woman,' said he to himself. 'It is an unlucky thing this praying. But, for my part, I fear I have behaved very ill; and I must endeavour to make amends.'

The laird continued his search, and at length found his beloved in the same bed with her Glasgow cousin who had acted as bridesmaid. 'You sly and malevolent imp,' said the laird; 'you have played me such a trick when I was fast asleep! I have not known a frolic so clever, and, at the same time, so severe. Come along, you baggage you!'

'Sir, I will let you know that I detest your principles and your person alike,' said she. 'It shall never be said, sir, that my person was at the control of a heathenish man of Belial – a dangler among the daughters of women – a promiscuous dancer – and a player of unlawful games. Forgo your rudeness, Sir, I say, and depart away from my presence and that of my kinswoman.'

'Come along, I say, my charming Rab. If you were the pink of all puritans, and the saint of all saints, you are my wife, and must do as I command you.'

'Sir, I will sooner lay down my life than be subjected to your godless will; therefore I say, desist, and begone with you.'

But the laird regarded none of these testy sayings: he rolled her in a blanket, and bore her triumphantly away to his chamber, taking care to keep a fold or two of the blanket always rather near to her mouth, in case of any outrageous forthcoming of noise.

The next day at breakfast the bride was long in making her appearance. Her maid asked to see her; but George did not choose that anybody should see her but himself: he paid her several visits, and always turned the key as he came out. At length breakfast was served; and during the time of refreshment the laird tried to break several jokes; but it was remarked that they wanted their accustomed brilliancy, and that his nose was particularly red at the top.

Matters, without all doubt, had been very bad between the newmarried couple; for in the course of the day the lady deserted her quarters, and returned to her father's house in Glasgow, after having been a night on the road; stage-coaches and steamboats having then no existence in that quarter.Though Baillie Orde had acquiesced in his wife's asseveration regarding the likeness of their only daughter to her father, he never loved or admired her greatly; therefore this behaviour nothing astounded him. He questioned her strictly as to the grievous offence committed against her, and could discover nothing that warranted a procedure so fraught with disagreeable consequences. So, after mature deliberation, the baillie addressed her as follows:

'Aye, aye, Raby! An' sae I find that Dalcastle has actually refused to say prayers with you when you ordered him; an' has guidit you in a rude indelicate manner, outstepping the respect due to my daughter – as my daughter. But, wi' regard to what is due to his own wife, of that he's a better judge nor me. However, since he has behaved in that manner to *my daughter*, I shall be revenged on him for aince; for I shall return the obligation to ane nearer to him: that is, I shall take pennyworths of his wife – an' let him lick at that.'

'What do you mean, Sir?' said the astonished damsel.

'I mean to be revenged on that villain Dalcastle,' said he,'for what he has done to my daughter. Come hither, Mrs Colwans you shall pay for this.'

So saying, the baillie began to inflict corporal punishment on the runaway wife. His strokes were not indeed very deadly, but he made

a mighty flourish in the infliction, pretending to be in a great rage only at the Laird of Dalcastle. 'Villain that he is!' exclaimed he, 'I shall teach him to behave in such a manner to a child of mine, be she as she may; since I cannot get at himself, I shall lounder her that is nearest to him in life. Take you that and that, Mrs Colwan, for your husband's impertinence!'

The poor afflicted woman wept and prayed, but the baillie would not abate aught of his severity. After fuming, and beating her with many stripes, far drawn, and lightly laid down, he took her up to her chamber, five stories high, locked her in, and there he fed her on bread and water, all to be revenged on the presumptuous Laird of Dalcastle; but ever and anon, as the baillie came down the stair from carrying his daughter's meal, he said to himself: 'I shall make the sight of the laird the blithest she ever saw in her life.'

Lady Dalcastle got plenty of time to read, and pray, and meditate; but she was at a great loss for one to dispute with about religious tenets; for she found that, without this advantage, about which there was a perfect rage at that time, the reading and learning of Scripture texts, and sentences of intricate doctrine, availed her naught; so she was often driven to sit at her casement and look out for the approach of the heathenish Laird of Dalcastle.

That hero, after a considerable lapse of time, at length made his appearance. Matters were not hard to adjust; for his lady found that there was no refuge for her in her father's house; and so, after some sighs and tears, she accompanied her husband home. For all that had passed, things went on no better. She *would* convert the laird in spite of his teeth: the laird would not be converted. She *would* have the laird to say family prayers, both morning and evening: the laird would neither pray morning nor evening. He would not even sing psalms, and kneel beside her while she performed the exercise; neither would he converse at all times, and in all places, about the sacred mysteries of religion, although his lady took occasion to contradict flatly every assertion that he made, in order that she might spiritualize him by drawing him into argument.

The laird kept his temper a long while, but at length his patience wore out; he cut her short in all her futile attempts at spiritualisation, and mocked at her wire-drawn degrees of faith, hope, and repentance. He also dared to doubt of the great standard doctrine of absolute predestination, which put the crown on the lady's Christian resentment. She declared her helpmate to be a limb of Antichrist, and one with whom no regenerated person could associate. She therefore bespoke a separate establishment, and, before the