

# William George Black “Neomagus,” and Folk-Medicine (1876)

Stephen Miller

“The term above, ‘folk-medicine,’ is one for which I confess myself responsible, having first (so far as I am aware) used it while writing some articles in a provincial newspaper.” (Black, 1878) So wrote William George Black in 1878, “the term above” referring to the simple one-word title of his article in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, namely “Folk-Medicine.” That “provincial newspaper” was found to be the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* and the year to be 1876. (Anon, 1876) It was located through only a single reference in the *Glasgow Herald*, digitised as part of the British Newspaper Archive (BNA), as there is a gap in the coverage of the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* in the BNA, the issues for 1870–78 missing at present. However, a microfilm copy is available at the British Library at St Pancras in London, and the mention in the *Glasgow Herald* gave a date to allowed the articles to be found. And as for “Neomagus,” that was the pseudonym chosen by Black to sign his pieces. He makes just one further appearance (in the BNA at least) as “Neomagus,” when in the following year he sent in a query about Holy Wells to the “Our Folk-Lore Column” in the *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, an Ayrshire title. (Black, 1877) Black mentions this column in one of his three

contributions to the thread in *Notes and Queries* started off by Eliza Gutch (as “St Swithin”) in 1876, over the founding of a Folk-Lore Society (the similar one in the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* is also referenced in another of his pieces there). The Folk-Lore Society of London was founded not that long after in 1878, and Black was later appointed in 1882, as the Local Secretary of the Society for what was termed “South Scotland,” with “North Scotland” being parcelled out to the Rev. Walter Gregor, the Church of Scotland minister for Pitsligo in Aberdeenshire. By that date, the Society had published Gregor’s *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland* in 1881, and Black’s own *Folk-Medicine: A Chapter in the History of Culture* was to soon follow in 1883. (Black 1883)

WILLIAM GEORGE BLACK (1857–1932)

As regards Black himself, he was born on 23 December 1857, in Milton, Glasgow, into a family of prominent Scottish lawyers; his father’s firm was Black, Honeyman, & Monteath, his father’s cousin that of James Black & Co., while his grand-uncle had founded the firm of Black & Wingate. Black was educated at the Glasgow Academy, the Albany Academy, and at Glasgow

University, “in all of which he took prizes.” He spent some time at the University of Göttingen in 1879, and in 1884, he became a partner in his father’s firm. He was a frequent summer visitor to Heligoland, “where a singularly cosmopolitan society was gathered during the summer months,” no doubt making good use of his German honed in Göttingen. A number of his contributions to *Notes and Queries* often refer to Heligoland, and his book *Heligoland and the Islands of the North Sea* appeared in 1889, translated later that same year into German. It was until 1890, a British possession, having been seized from Denmark in 1807, and subsequently annexed in 1814. Whilst his death in 1933, was announced in the pages of *Folk-Lore*, no obituary was to follow; unsurprising given that his original work was done so early. (Folk-Lore Society, 1933) His original folklore contributions had ended after the appearance of *Folk-Medicine* in 1883, and his later years were taken up with the authoring of legal articles and numerous standard texts on Scottish law and legal matters, besides a number of smaller pieces on local antiquarian topics. On an architectural note, Lion Chambers in Glasgow, an eight-storeyed building in the city centre, built between 1904–07 for Black, was an early example of the use of reinforced concrete in construction. (Cusack, 1985) Continuing the theme, his brother-in-law, the publisher Walter Blackie, had earlier in 1902, commissioned Charles Rennie Mackintosh to build The Hill House in Helensburgh, finished in 1904.

(For fuller biographical details and a list of publications, see (Miller, 2008). Missed obituaries

notices are (Anon, 1932b, Anon, 1932a). Note that the *Glasgow Herald* for 1932 has yet to be digitised by the BNA. See too, (Anon, 1933).)

“FOLK-MEDICINE,” GLASGOW WEEKLY HERALD (1876)

As regards Black “writing some articles in a provincial newspaper,” this was found to be a series of eight articles starting on 4 November 1876 in the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* and appearing weekly under the running title of “Folk-Medicine.” Black opens his first contribution with the following statement:

Before commencing a short series of papers on the subject of folk-medicine, it may be well to state that there is no intention to introduce any topics which more strictly belong to the scientific study of medicine, but simply to lay before our readers some account of the various remedies which have been, and are even yet, resorted to in the more ordinary ailments by the more or less ignorant or half-educated. Many of these will no doubt seem sufficiently absurd, but it would be wrong to suppose that they were in every case originally so. (Black, 1876b)

Whilst not that much later in 1878, Black as seen points out his role in the coinage of the term “folk medicine,” here there is no sense whatsoever of its novelty, and that it is being used for the first time in English. He does not provide any clue as to how he came to the topic of folk-medicine, there is no note or statement of intellectual curiosity, and Black simply starts in on the matter in hand. Covered in the second article was (2) Hooping Cough, followed by (3) Toothache, and then (4) Ague, (5) Blood Staunching, (6) Rheumatism

and Cramp, (7) Fevers, and, to end the series, (8) Minor Ailments. (Black, 1876c, Black, 1876d, Black, 1876e, Black, 1876f, Black, 1876g, Black, 1876h, Black, 1876i) The first article was reprinted in the *East of Fife Record* in its issue of 17 November 1876, the BNA showing this to be a one-off occurrence and there was no wider reproduction of the series. (Black, 1876a)

As regards works drawn on, Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) is mentioned by Black, along with John Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain* (1849), Benjamin Thorpe, *Northern Mythology* (1851), and as periodicals, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, *Notes and Queries*, and the compilation, *Choice Notes from Notes and Queries* (1859). Scottish works drawn on were John Brand, *A New Description of Orkney, Zetland, Pightland-Firth and Caithness* (1703), and John Dalrymple, *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland, Illustrated from History and Practice* (1834). Robert Hunt's *Popular Romances of the West of England, or, the Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall* (1865) was also used, and wider afield, there was Rachel Busk, *The Folk-Lore of Rome* (1874), and William Baillie Grohman, *Tyrol & the Tyrolese* (1876). These are all familiar titles at the time, though missing is any mention of Thomas Joseph Pettigrew, *On Superstitions Connected with the History and Practice of Medicine and Surgery*, published in 1844. (Pettigrew, 1844) Whilst it is later referenced by Black in his *Folk-Medicine* from 1883, a number of its chapters lay down themes later developed there, "Talismans," "Amulets," and "Charms" being the most obvious ones.

Returning to the newspaper series itself, the final article appeared on 23 December 1876, which coincidentally was Black's own birthday—as he was born in 1857, this made him just nineteen at the time of publication, a remarkable achievement which showed you why he had earlier won prizes. His last piece in the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* ended with the statement that:

The present series on articles on Folk-Medicine close with this paper, not from any lack of materials for to exhaust the subject would be scarcely possible—but lest some may have grown weary of ever hearing only of disease and superstition. But the subject in the writer's opinion is not undeserving of more attention being drawn to its study, and he hopes at no very distant date, perhaps, to again have the pleasure of illustrating at somewhat greater length certain of the curious aspects of Folk-Medicine. (Black, 1876i)

He was true to his word, with *Folk-Medicine: A Chapter in the History of Culture* appearing in 1883, and it later appeared in Spanish translation with editions being published in 1889 and the following year of 1890, as well as a third one in 1901(?). (Black, 1889, Black, 1890, Black, n.d. [but 1901?]) For a recent reprint, (Black, 1982). It is the only title from The Folk-Lore Society's publications (in the Extra Volumes series) that appeared in translation in this period.

WILLIAM GEORGE BLACK: FOLK-MEDICINE, VOLKSMEDIZIN

Earlier in 2008, I advanced the thought that Black was simply translating the German language

term “Volksmedizin” into English. This assumed that he developed his interest in the topic whilst studying in Germany. Whilst as seen, Black was at the University of Göttingen in 1879, his article in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, where he talked of his coinage of the term folk-medicine, appeared the year before in 1878, which somewhat undercut the argument even at the time it must be said, and now his contributions to the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* date, as can be seen, from 1876, and with that year so the very term folk-medicine itself. The piece in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* was a paper delivered by Black before the BAA in the first week of January 1878, where incidentally G.L. Gomme was present and who made a pitch for The Folk-Lore Society that was to be first constituted at the end of that month. (Anon, 1878a) In November 1878, at the annual meeting of the Glasgow Archaeological Society, Black spoke on “Common sympathetic recipes for the cures of disease: a chapter of folk medicine.” (Anon, 1878b) The title of the paper is reported in (Anon, 1878c) Returning to the *Glasgow Weekly Herald* pieces from 1876, he was remarkably just nineteen at the time, and University in Germany was still to come, by which time he had in any case established folk-medicine as a term. It is difficult to see him coming into contact with German language titles in the field in Glasgow before he headed off to Saxony to study at Göttingen (from where, completely unrelated, Pettigrew had received his doctorate). Now close on one hundred and fifty years since Black’s coinage, and with no explicit mention at the time, and nothing since

for that matter, all we can say at the end of the day with assurance is that William John Thoms, an English antiquarian, was responsible for coining folk-lore in 1846, and William George Black, as a Scottish youth, folk-medicine in 1876.

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