

CHEVIOT CHANTER

Poems from the Scottish Border  
chiefly in the Roxburghshire dialect

by

JOHN GRAY

## Fastern's E'en

'First comes Candlemas then the new muin,  
The first Tuesday after that 's Fastern's E'en.'

Noo Candlemas is come and gane  
And the new muin cocks her horn,  
And the furr lies ready for the grain,  
And some inby lambs are born,  
And though the weather 's snell and keen  
The hardy hillfolk gether  
Frae Cheviot's watergates sae green  
To meet wi' ane anither.  
On Fastern's E'en.  
Frae Cocklawfit and Kelsaeclench  
And ower frae Coquet Water,  
Ower bank and brae and burn and sheuch  
They haud wi' blithesome clatter.  
Oor auld guidman 's an unco drouth  
Sin' Hogmanay tae slocken,  
And Jenny wi' her bonny mouth  
Maun ha'e some sweet love token  
On Fastern's E'en.

Noo beasts are lowsed and stabled bien,  
And doon the haugh they daun'er;  
The guidwife bides wi' gossip Jean  
Tae hear the latest slan'er;  
And in and oot amang the crood  
Like Wull o' Wusp's ain spunkies,  
Wreakin' their wrenk the callants jouk,  
Clean oot o' hand, the monkeys,  
On Fastern's E'en.

A skilly sramster tae his trade  
 As e'er dress' dudsbtæ order,  
 Jim tūned his pipes and briskly played  
 'Blue Bonnets ower the Border';  
 And 'Tullochgorm's' rantin' strains  
 Put 'a' in gallus fettle;  
 Lame Wull forgat his rheumy banes  
 And stepp't wi' martial mettle  
 On Fastern's E'en.

See noo they 've gane the putt the stane,  
 I trow that that 's the best ane.  
 A bonny shot,man ! What's the name ?  
 The blacksmith Wullie Gledston.  
 Dod Common seldom tak's a coup.  
 Whae won that race ? Guid save us !  
 The same as won the hop-step-loup,  
 The shepherd Anthony Cavers  
 Frae Southernknowe.

They 're aff tae speel the Venchen brae  
 And roond the auld Brae Hoðse;  
 I 'll wad or they 're a fair halfway'  
 They wunnae blaw sae cruise!  
 See noo,they 're skelpin' doon the hill,  
 And far ahead o' ony  
 I see the smith o' Primside Mill,  
 He 's aye the foremaist,Johnny,  
 On Fastern's E'en.

The aulder graith, as dour as death,  
 Haud steppin' competition;  
 Oor guidman swore he 'd won, Guid Faith !  
 But pipers tae perdition !  
 He 'd stepp't it fairly tae tae heel,  
 There 'd be a perch still wantin',  
 Whan Jim blew up a birlin' reel  
 And set the figues rantin'  
 Through 's heid that day.

Then up and doon by Kirk and Toon  
 They chase the leather ba';  
 There 's mony a groan and crackit croon,  
 But see, Tam wins awa.  
 He 's aff ! He 's clear ! In swift career  
 He flees the ba' tae hail,  
 But e'en as Tam o' Shanter's mear  
 He 's left his guid coat-tail  
 That Fastern's E'en.

Syne Jockie Bing his fiddle-string  
 Tunes up fu' brisk and cheery;  
 Tam gies his lass an unco swing,  
 They baith gang tapsulteery.  
 Their elders gang in social thrang  
 And muckle disputation  
 Taet' a dram and hear some sang  
 In blithe commemoration  
 O' Fastern's E'en.

There 's Wattie frae the Wundy Gyle  
 And Hen frae Woden Law,  
 Auld Yiddie Gray frae fair Kirkstile  
 And Fa'fu' frae Whiteha'.  
 In Yetholm Toon the dram gangs roond  
 I' routhie fu' abundance,  
 And heartily they drink it doon,  
 A pledge tae auld Acquaintance  
 On Fastern's E'en.

But lang or we reached hoose and hauld  
 On Cheviot's gousty muirlan'  
 John Barleycorn that hero bauld  
 Set a' oor heids a-dirflin'.  
 He gied us a richt royal convoy,  
 Weel slocken't wi' Scots whusky,  
 But och, the cratur likes his ploy,  
 Sae played us mony a pliskie  
 On Fastern's E'en.

Hark tae the gab o' fechtin' Rab:  
 'Set oot afore me noo  
 The man in his bare stockin' soles,  
 I'll fell him like a soo.  
 Or let us try a three-fauld haud  
 In a fair wrestlin' ring,  
 I 'll doon him, my haill pack I 'll wad  
 He 'll get an unco fling  
 This Fastern's E'en.

Quo' ane 'Man, Rab, ye cruishly craw,  
Ye gallus, wundy chiel !'  
Quo' Rab 'E'en noo we 'll try a fa';  
I 'll daur the very deil !'  
The deil, 'twas he, took lightsome leave  
I' semblance o' a maukin,  
And Robbie drave his sonsy neive  
Slap intil a larch stucken  
That Fastern's E'en.

But time and tide fleet by apace  
Like snaw-wreaths in a thaw, man,  
Sae back tae crowdie and auld claes !  
We 'll sune be on the lambin'.  
But wark and play, ilk fleetin' day  
Brings roond its ain diversion,  
And syne comes jovial Hogmanay  
And sets us a' rehearsin'  
For Fastern's E'en.

## JOHN GRAY

John Gray was one of Yetholm's most famous sons, much loved and held in great regard. Retired to Kelso after a life of scholarship, he was often seen wandering around his birthplace, "Dear Old Kirk Yetholm", meeting old friends and making new, whom he regaled with nostalgic stories of his boyhood and the characters of that time in Kirk Yetholm.

Very much the true Borderer, John was most proud of his origin.

He contrasted the peace and quiet in Yetholm of the present day, which he described "as that of an eventide home", with the "stir and excitement of the gypsy metropolis" of his youth in the 1920's. For much of his youth John lived at "The Cross Keys" in Kirk Yetholm which had been an Inn and is now a Guest House.

The work of the village in those days was mainly buying and selling, most families were merchants with horse and cart. They dealt in pots, rabbits, young pigs, broken wool, and "clerts" which John described as "sheep's wool clotted with dung which were cut from the sheep's buttocks, bought from the the shepherds for a small sum, washed and sold to the tweed mills in Jedburgh".

John had a great liking for the nicknames of the Yetholm characters of his day. Amongst these were "Potty Mary" so named after her merchandise, Bob Robson "The Bumper" who drove his Wife "Nellie" about hawking drapery, "Stovy Jock" who sold hardware, mainly pot lids, and Jockie Stenhouse "The Piner".

Many were the stories John would tell about these characters and others whom he could recall with great clarity.

We are indebted to "The Scots Magazine" for some of these details and to Colin MacDermott, Executive Editor of "The HERALD" and William Johnstone for the following obituary which best describes the varied and rich life of achievement of John Gray.

### **The Rev Professor John Gray MA, BD, PhD, DD**

Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages, University of Aberdeen

Born 9 June 1913 and died 1 April 2000

JOHN GRAY was born and brought up in Kirk Yetholm, high in the Cheviots, the older son of a master tailor. He had that particular quality of Scottish patriotism that only one reared so near the Border could possess.

From his childhood and youth in those rural surroundings he imbibed those virtues of a countryman's independence and self-sufficiency that marked him to the end of his days; the skilled fisherman that could tie his own flies and had that intuitive knowledge of weather and light and water conditions to go out of an evening and as he would put it, "fill a basket"; the beekeeper (on his retirement from Aberdeen he transported his hives in the removal van back to his native Kelso and received from the enraged bees 150 stings for his pains); the gardener, and really in his early days, smallholder and crofter, who, when in his isolated manse in Arran he was snowed up for six weeks, was perfectly able to support himself and his growing family; the piper and fiddler, devotee of Scott Skinner.



He often said that if he had not become a minister and then an academic he would have been a Border shepherd.

But he was quickly marked out as the proverbial Scottish "lad o' pairts". Proceeding to Edinburgh University, he took a First in Classics, followed by a BD with Distinction in Old Testament. En route, he took time to study Arabic with Richard Bell, the renowned interpreter of the *Koran*; as Blackie Scholar, he spent a year travelling in Greece and the Holy Land.

It was on that journey that in the famed Dominican Ecole he had, as he would say, the newly discovered Ras Shama texts put in his hands, which were to stand in the forefront of his research in a lifetime of academic endeavour. Ordained as a missionary in Haifa with the Church of Scotland in the fateful year of 1939, he returned to the Holy Land as Chaplain to the Palestine Police. This experience gave him opportunity to travel the length and breadth of the Land, to accumulate an unrivalled knowledge of its landscape and its topography and an intimate acquaintance with the life and manners of its inhabitants, especially the Arabs. He would, like the true countryman he was, "disappear for days into the desert with the Bedouin". Thus he acquired at first hand those anthropological observations that he would later effectively deploy in his writings, for that experience too he had prepared while still a Divinity student by study at Greifswald under the Palestinian anthropologist Gustav Dalman.

He returned to Scotland at the end of 1941 by Norwegian ship. Gifted linguist that he was, Gray did not let the opportunity slip of learning Norwegian, an unbelievable feat, even if the return route was by the Cape, but confirmed many years later he was to his profound satisfaction, invited to give two lectures founded in memory of his most admired mentor, Sigmund Mowinckel in Oslo. Gray determined to deliver his lectures in Norwegian. He had his manuscript checked by the Head of the Scandinavian Studies in the University of Aberdeen, who pronounced the Norwegian excellent, if somewhat marred by nautical slang.

Back in Scotland, he was inducted in 1942 to the Parish of Kilmory on the Island of Arran. In that remote setting, he set himself to prepare for a life in academe. The Ugaritic texts he had first met in Ecole Biblique, and which were still in the early days of interpretation, he subjected to fundamental study; in their elucidation he found in Arabic "the golden key" (during that period he also read through the whole of the *Koran* in Arabic).

An opening in Semitic Languages in Manchester under the redoubtable H H Rowley offered itself in 1947; there he once again found himself in the company not just of Old Testament scholars but of Arabists and anthropologists. Half-a-dozen years later a lectureship in Hebrew and Semitic languages became available in Aberdeen and to Aberdeen he came, where he was to spend the rest of his active academic life, first as Lecturer (1953-62), then as Professor (1962-80).

While Gray was willing to take his share of administrative duties (he served as Dean of the Faculty of Divinity for a three-year period), his first love was undoubtedly research. He wrote voluminously in several areas. On Ugaritic, he produced an edition of the *Keret Text* (1955), a comprehensive study of the then known corpus of texts in *The Legacy of Canaan* (1957), both published by the prestigious academic house Brill, and at a more popular level, *The Canaanites* (1964) and *Near Eastern Mythology* (1969).