

Bastardy gave the bothies a bad name. It was rife though in no way unusual; it was no more than the expected outcome of healthy rural courtship. It was only when the first official statistics about such things began to be published in Scotland in the mid-1800s that the true extent of the problem became known. Then indeed, were genteel eyebrows raised, for the figure for the ballad counties in particular, from the Mearns north to the lands of Moray, was about twice the national average. It was a staggering blow to the forces of morality and to the men of the Free Kirk, so closely associated with the farmtouns, in particular. Their wrath was terrible; Free Kirk ministers took to seeing abomination behind every haystack when all that was happening was the playful struggle of country lovers coming to the the right true end of love. ...

Though the registrar-general's revelations brought shame on .. they did no more than underline what the bothy ballads themselves so strongly hinted at: that the midnight sport of the farmtouns was as close to nature as anything about the farmyard itself; that the toil of the farmtoun day was as nothing sometimes against its activities of the night. ...

.. the Rev. Dr James Begg, the Free Kirk's great morals crusader, a man of sterner cloth and not about to let the ammunition supplied by the registrar-general go past him. Dr Begg was not a man to mince clerical words. It had long been known he claimed, the the bothies were "scenes of obscenity, drunkenness and Sabbath-breaking"; that the bothy districts were hot beds of profligacy". His phrases had the scorching fire of a Sunday tabloid journalist. Aberdeenshire in particular he singled out for comment; there - the very soul lands of the ballad - illegitimacy stood at nineteen per cent and nearly every fifth child was born a bastard - a hard word for what often a fine bairn and who frequently inherited the genius of bastardy.

Never though is it the slightest tinge of outrage that shines through, just the simple broad humour of folk who live close to nature and, for all the kirk's preaching, find in bastardy little cause for surprise. ...

"They have the courage of their practices, and never seem ashamed even when the results of their amours come to light individually, or afterward in mass form of sinister statistical statement and comment. We are not, however, dealing with the moral aspect of the question. We simply have to recognise sexual relations ... are about as nearly natural as the law will allow them to be, .... But it should in justice be added however free the relations of young men and women may be ... these persons once married exhibit as a rule a degree of conjugal fidelity that compares favourably with that found in the higher grades of society."