Nancy C. McEntire
nmcentire@indstate.edu

Associate professor emerita of English, Indiana State University, USA

First-Footing in the North of Scotland, Past and Present

Abstract. The early hours of the first day of the New Year are significant on a number of levels for residents of the Orkney Islands. This paper draws on field research in northern Scotland to document and review customs of crossing the thresholds of nearby homes, anticipating luck and goodwill, sharing food and drink, and bringing prosperity for the coming year.

Keywords: rituals, New Year's customs, liminality, superstitions, reciprocity

No one ever regarded the First of January with indifference.
Charles Lamb, 'New Year's Eve,' 1821

The beginning of a new year is a time for spirited celebration and renewed hope for the months to come. In Scotland, the activities surrounding Hogmanay, on New Year's Eve, spill over into a tradition of going from house to house in the early hours of 1 January. This activity is known as first-footing. Although it is related to guising or mumming through the act of visiting other people's homes, first-footing is more personal and generous in spirit. It is believed that a welcome visitor who crosses your threshold at the beginning of the New Year can bring prosperity to you and your entire household. Especially in rural areas, where residences are more isolated, neighbours hasten to be the first to set foot in each other's homes and then return to their own home in time to be first-footed themselves. The movement from house to house is a jovial affair, as visitors bring and receive drams of whisky and edible treats such as cheese, oatcakes, shortbread, and a variety of fruit cakes. In that brief period of calendrical uncertainty between the end of one twelve-month period and the start of another, first-footing has at its core a desire to express goodwill within the present moment as well as hope for future good fortune.

Some of the earliest written accounts of first-footing, published in the journal *Folk-Lore* in the late 1800s, describe merrymaking and sharing of food and drink on New Year's Day, yet they also allude to less-jovial superstitions associated with the custom. According to James Crombie, author of 'First-Footing in Aberdeenshire', the following persons and things were considered to be lucky as first-footers: 'Friends, neighbours, and all well-wishers; a kind man; a good man; a sweetheart; people who spread out their feet […] a man on horseback; a man with a horse and cart; the minister; a hen.'[1] The list of unlucky first-footers is much longer: 'Thieves; persons who walked with their toes turned in; persons who were deformed, or whose senses were impaired; a stingy man; an immoral man; a false pretender to religion; the hangman; the gravedigger; the midwife; women generally; all who were suspected of being addicted to witchcraft; those whose eyebrows met; and males who had red hair.' Among animals, the cat, the pig, and the hare were unlucky. Crombie wrote that his mother recalled a preliminary first-footing custom she had witnessed as a girl in Fort William, Scotland: 'It was a regular practice,' she said, 'to go by stealth the evening before, and nail up the door of the man who performed as district-hangman, and who was regarded as a most "ill-omened first-foot"' Similarly, Crombie added that he had 'heard of a boat being drawn up against the door of a churlish individual to prevent his getting out,' presumably with the intention of visiting someone's home at the New Year.[2] This example alludes also to superstitions surrounding the occupations of fishing and sailing, especially the supposed ill-luck that will result from meeting a woman on the way to one's boat or taking a woman on board.[3] Indeed, while first-footing had a generally hospitable intention and outcome, there were, as noted, precautions regarding unlucky or unwelcome first-footers. Those individuals who were associated with ill fortune were avoided; in more extreme cases they were physically prevented from engaging in the traditional New Year's activity of visiting other people's homes.

---

[1] Nancy C. McEntire, *Orkney: Land, Sea & Community*, Scottish Tradition 21 (Greentrax CDTRAX9021, 2004).

[2] James E. Crombie, 'First-Footing in Aberdeenshire', *Folk-Lore*, 5 (1893), 315–21 (p. 318).

[3] Crombie, 'First-Footing in Aberdeenshire', pp. 320–21.

Writing in the same volume of *Folk-Lore*, G. Hastie emphasised the function of courtship in first-footing rituals:

> *The first-foot, on crossing the threshold, at once announced, 'A gude New Year to ane [one] and a', and mony [many] may ye see. […] Then kissing the young woman, and shaking her by both hands, they passed into the household. If the visitor had not been seen for some time, the news of the families were gone into, and other matters of that sort; then the whisky-drinking, with health-giving toasts, eating shortbread, currant loaf, scones, oat-cakes, and cheese were all heartily consumed, then song-singing, sometimes a dance, then more drinking, and at last came the parting, in much hilarity and glee, the 'toosling' [hugging] and kissing of the young woman. […] Of course the first-footing only strengthened the courtship, the regular visiting continuing, and generally ending in marriage on a subsequent New Year's Day.*[4]

The importance of courtship is also mentioned in Chambers' famous compendium, *The Book of Days,* first published in 1879:

> *It [first-footing] was a time for some youthful friend of the family to steal to the door, in the hope of meeting there the young maiden of his fancy, and obtaining the privilege of a kiss, as her first-foot. Great was the disappointment on his part, and great joking among the family, if through accident or plan, some half-withered aunt or ancient grand-dame came to receive him instead of the blooming Jenny.*[5]

Whether or not a successful courtship began or flourished within the tradition of first-footing, the event itself conveyed a mood of well-wishing and reciprocity. Writing as early as 1851, William Grant Stewart made the following observations among the Highlanders in Scotland: On New Year's Day, families '[…] prepare themselves for […] receiving the visits of their neighbours: "My Candlemas bond upon you. You owe me a New-Year's gift." It is a point of great emulation who will salute the other first — the one who does so being considered entitled to a gift from the person so saluted.'[6] In the best of circumstances, then, the recipient

---

[4] G. Hastie, 'First-Footing in Scotland', *Folk-Lore*, 5 (1893), 309–14 (p. 310).

[5] Robert Chambers (ed.), *The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection with the Calendar*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1879), I, 29.

[6] William Grant Stewart, *The Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1851; repr. Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1974), p. 177.

of a welcome first-foot is honoured, and the person who bestowed the honour may also expect something in return.

The appearance of a first-footer at the threshold of one's home emphasises the precarious nature of the ritual, as the participants are having their initial encounter neither completely inside nor outside of the home. As a result, a threshold meeting is psychologically significant. The first-foot is seen as a harbinger of fortune, either good or bad, for the residents of the home being visited. Whereas positive or negative associations with occupations, criminal activities, physical oddities or deformities have decreased in emphasis when evaluating the presence of such a visitor, issues of gender, complexion, and hair-colour have retained strong associations. If the first-foot was dark-haired and male, this was a good omen; women, however, were generally regarded as unwelcome. Writing in the late 1800s, Sidney Addy gives the following instruction: 'The first person who comes into a house on New Year's morning must have black hair. Sometimes boys with dark hair are picked for the purpose of being the first to enter the house on New Year's morning. It is unlucky for a light-haired or red-haired man to be "let in".'[7] Decades later, I. F. Grant gave this account of first-footing in the Scottish Highlands in the early 1960s:

> *It is lucky if the first visitor in the New Year is a dark man; a red-haired one is unlucky and a woman, especially if she is fair-haired, is much worse, but fortunately for such omens, women never go first-footing alone. If they should go with men, the man is always pushed into the house in front.*[8]

Slightly over a decade after Grant's account, the Orkney writer and scholar Ernest Marwick confirmed the importance of hair colour for the early visitors: 'Strictly speaking, the "first-foot" was the first person to cross the threshold on New Year's morning, and it was considered essential to the luck of the household that he should be a dark-haired individual. Even today, in Shetland, a dark man who has proved to be a luck-bringer is expected to continue as a household's first-foot year after year.'[9] A few years later, Christian McKee confirmed the value of

---

[7] Sidney Oldall Addy, *Folk Tales and Superstitions* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), p. 106.

[8] Isabel F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 361.

[9] Marwick, Ernest W., *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland* (London: Batsford, 1975), p. 120.

a dark-haired male: 'If the first man to cross the threshold was dark and brought gifts, that house would have plenty in the New Year.'[10] In the early 1990s Isobel Williams described the ideal first-foot as '[…] a tall, dark, handsome man carrying gifts for the house. […] A good first-foot brings luck to the people in the house, but if something goes wrong and an unlucky person crosses the threshold first, then the occupants of the house will have bad luck for the following year. A woman, particularly if she is a red-head, is considered very unlucky.'[11] In 1997, Carol Shaw confirmed the negative association with female first-foots. 'The worst scenario,' she wrote, 'was a red-haired female first-foot. The only way to avoid the misfortune that would certainly follow this was to throw a pinch of salt into the fire immediately.'[12] A year later Sue Ellen Thompson published a similar assessment, including a reference to the practice of dark-haired men being paid to first-foot:

> *A family's fortunes in the coming year are believed to be influenced by the first guest who sets foot in the door after the New Year strikes. If it's a woman, a light-haired man, an undertaker, or anyone who walks with his toes pointing inward, it is considered a bad omen. A dark-haired man, on the other hand, brings good luck. In some villages, dark-haired men hire themselves out as professional first-footers whose job it is to go from house to house immediately after the New Year arrives. Female first-footers are considered to be such bad luck that male restaurant owners will sometimes make a point of opening the restaurant themselves before the waitresses arrive on New Year's Day.*[13]

Notwithstanding the recognition of taboos regarding first-footers, food and drink have remained essential components of a reciprocal exchange within the home that welcomes them. As McKee and Williams have mentioned, the visitor also was expected to bring gifts. Whisky was the drink of choice, and it was accompanied by popular treats such as oatcakes, shortbread, and a dense fruit cake called black bun. In the late 1800s, James Napier confirmed the necessity of food and

---

[10] Mckee, Christian M., *Scottish Folklore, Legend, and Superstition* (Baltimore, MD: Gateway Press, 1983), p. 32.

[11] Isobel E. Williams, *Scottish Folklore* (Edinburgh and London: W. & R. Chambers, 1991), pp. 50–51.

[12] Carol P. Shaw, *Scottish Myths and Customs* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 85.

[13] Sue Ellen Thompson, *Holiday Symbols* (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 1998), p. 321.

drink in his accounts of Hogmanay traditions in the west of Scotland: 'The first-foot was an important episode', he wrote. 'A hearty ranting merry fellow was considered the best sort of first-foot. […] To visit empty-handed on this day was tantamount to wishing a curse on the family.'[14] In some cases, symbolic gifts of coal or salt indicated the first-foot's wishes for prosperity and good health for the inhabitants of the house he was visiting. Napier offers an interesting account of a first-foot in his own home, in which an incident involving misfortune would have been considered an ill omen, yet because of the good fortune that occurred afterwards, was perceived in a positive light: 'I remember that one year our first-foot was a man who had fallen and broken his bottle, and cut and bleeding was assisted into our house. My mother made up her mind that this was a most unfortunate first-foot, and that something serious would occur in the family during that year. I believe had the whole family been cut off, she would not have been surprised. However, it was a prosperous year, and a bleeding first-foot was not afterwards considered bad. If anything extraordinary did occur throughout the year, it was remembered and referred to afterwards.'[15]

Most first-footers arrive with a variety of gifts for the home they are visiting. According to Williams, the first-foot's gifts might include 'coal — a symbol of light and warmth; something to drink; salt — for luck; and something to eat, often a tin of shortbread. Once in the house,' she writes, 'the first-foot puts his gifts on the table and receives a "nip" (a glass of whisky) and some black bun (fruit cake).'[16] Ernest Marwick writes that in the town of Kirkwall in the Orkney Islands of Scotland, 'the first-foot often brought with him a piece of coal and some bread, seeking thus to ensure a sufficiency of food and fire throughout the year'.[17] Roy Palmer confirms that the first-foot '[…] should carry a lump of coal (symbolizing warmth for the coming year), a mincepie (standing for food in general), and a coin (ensuring that money will not be lacking)'.[18] According to Carol Shaw, the ideal Scottish first-foot 'should

[14] James Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland* (East Ardsley: E. P. Publishing, 1976 [1879]), p. 160.

[15] Napier, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland*, pp. 160–61.

[16] Williams, *Scottish Folklore*, p. 51.

[17] Ernest W. Marwick, *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland* (London: Batsford, 1975), p. 120.

[18] Roy Palmer, *Britain's Living Folklore* (London: David and Charles, 1991), p. 97.

bring symbolic gifts of coal, shortbread or black bun and salt as tokens of prosperity and health for the year to come. Whisky or some other alcohol is usually brought too.'[19]

Some accounts of first-footing alluded to verses or songs being performed during the ritual. Most invoked a general wish for good fortune for the New Year, as with 'A gude New Year tae you and yours, and may yere meal-poke ne'er be empty'.[20] Writing about Hogmanay in Orkney, Ernest Marwick mentions the New Year's Song, which at the time of his research in the late 1960s, was still being performed. According to Marwick, the blessings on the house included 'a benediction of the wife, husband, children, cows, mares, sheep, geese, and hens'.[21]

The men of the island of North Ronaldsay sang a version that was 50 stanzas long, each one of them blessing each occupant — including all the animals — of a neighbour's home. Below are a few lines of the song, collected by Ernest Marwick on the island of Burray, Orkney, in 1969:

May a' your mares be weel [well] tae foal,
An' every een [one] a big fat foal —
May a' your coos be weel tae calf,
An' every een a big fat calf —
May a' your sheep be weel tae lamb,
An' every een a big fat lamb,
May a' your hens be weel tae lay,
An' every een a dizen [dozen] a day.[22]

When I was living in the Orkney Islands in the 1970s, I experienced first-footing in the farming community of Finstown on Orkney's largest island, Mainland. My landlady, Mary (of Smerquoy), her young nephew Neil, and I made a point of visiting nearby farms on the first of January, on foot, with oatcakes and sweets in hand. We were greeted with whisky and tea and tins of shortbread and similar treats wherever we went. There was no mention of women bringing bad luck, although we did hear jokes and stories about longstanding preferences

[19] Carol P. Shaw, *Scottish Myths and Customs* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 84–85.

[20] Hastie, 'First-Footing in Scotland', p. 313.

[21] Marwick, *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland*, p. 102.

[22] John D. M. Robertson (ed.), *An Orkney Anthology: The Selected Works of Ernest Walker Marwick*, I (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1991), pp. 129–30.

Fig. 1. Smerquoy, a farm near Finstown on the Mainland of Orkney, Scotland. Photo by Nancy McEntire

for dark, handsome men. Our party of two women and a light-haired boy, Neil, was welcomed wherever we went within walking distance of Mary's farm. Here, of course, everyone knew Mary and her family, so if there had been a pre-existing taboo regarding women or light-haired males, it was not evident here. Mary is no longer living, but I recently contacted a friend of hers, Lana Fotheringhame, to ask about past and current first-footing traditions in the far north of Scotland. I am including here some of Lana's recollections of Orkney practices. Note that while she does mention the importance of a man at the doorstep, it had more value as providing a possible spark for future courtship than it did as a requirement for the traditional first-footing custom. She also recalls the performances of the New Year's Song, the sense of camaraderie when people shared stories and music in people's homes, and she gives detailed descriptions of food that were offered at this time.

> *Yes, folk in Orkney still do first-footing on Hogmanay night and take in the New Year with family and friends. It used to be a custom in the islands to take a piece of coal with you so as it kept the fire burning in the early hours of the New Year, but that does not happen anymore since everyone has electricity now.*

Fig. 2. Lana Fotheringhame in her knitwear shop, Kirkwall, Orkney. Photo by Nancy McEntire

In Stronsay [Lana's family home, one of the northeast Orkney Islands] the night before the New Year there would be a dance in the community centre from 8 p.m. until 11 p.m. This gave the dancers time to go home and take in the New Year with their own family. When the clock struck midnight everyone had a glass of whisky and a piece of black currant bun and shook hands with everyone and wished them a happy New Year. Then you would go first-footing to your neighbours. Usually the older folks stayed home and kept an open door for their first-footers.

When I was a child it was usually the men that did the first-footing. I remember hearing that on the island of North Ronaldsay it was only the men that went and they had to sing the New Year's Song, which had fifty verses, before they got into the house. They usually went in groups.

There would be parties at the houses where folk had stayed up to take in the New Year. When I was young we had a gramophone and played records, but in some houses they would have a fiddler or a mouth organ. Sometimes folks played the spoons or you could hum a tune on a comb. And yes, women hoped that the first person they met after 12 o'clock on New Year's Eve would be tall, dark, and handsome!

First-footing is still done in Orkney, though not as much as before. Mostly now it's down to being invited to someone's house to take in the New Year, and if neighbours were still up after that you would first-foot them.

A special treat is the black currant bun. It is like a Christmas cake mixture with treacle [syrup] in it. You line your cake tin with sweet short crust pastry, put in the very rich mixture, and put a circle of pastry to cover the top, sealing all the edges with beaten egg. Then you poke holes (about six in a pattern) on the top with a knitting needle and you bake it in the oven for 2 to 3 hours. This is done about three months before Christmas and you cover it with tin foil. Every week you add a little whisky or brandy through the holes on top. I made my one in October.[23]

As we have seen, first-footing is a longstanding tradition that maintains a strong emphasis on good wishes for the coming year and shared merriment with friends and neighbours. It comes at a time of transition from old to new. According to Robert Chambers, 'the day is a memorandum of the subtraction of another year from the little sum of life. Such sadness,' he writes, must be offset with merriment and a 'desire to express good wishes for the next twelvemonths' experience'.[24] Further, the drama of first-footing occurs at the threshold of the home, where the large, public outside world and the small, private interior world come together. It also is at this threshold that the appearance of the first-foot can indicate good or bad fortune for those who open the door to receive him, or her.

The fact that first-footers are received within a threshold emphasises the liminal state of their festivities. Poised as they all are in a transition from old to new, the participants, weary from the dark days of winter, are in need of good will and sustenance from welcome neighbours — yet some of the participants are shunned because of beliefs about misfortunes resulting from contact with them. These negative beliefs, which focus on persons to be avoided during the ritual of first-footing, emphasise the precarious nature of this transitional period.

Those who continue to enact the first-footing ritual, lingering at the thresholds of their neighbours' homes, are what Victor Turner has referred to as 'liminal entities'. They are, he writes, 'neither here

[23] Lana Fotheringhame, interview with Nancy C. McEntire, 11 December 2015.

[24] Chambers , *Book of Days*, I, 27.

nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial'.[25] Turner further emphasises the importance of a transitory period in a subsequent discussion of liminality:

> *This is the fact that when persons, groups, sets of ideas, etc. move from one level or style of organisation or regulation of the interdependence of their parts of elements to another level, there has to be an interfacial region or, to change the metaphor, an interval, however brief, of margin or limen, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance.*[26]

It is within this balance that ceremonial customs and beliefs thrive, even to the present day. As Turner's predecessor, Arnold Van Gennep, noted in his famous definition of the rites of passage, 'life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then begin acting again, but in a different way'.[27] As residents of the northern climates of Scotland celebrate the end of another year during the cold, dark days of winter, they anticipate life in a different way. They know that the New Year will bring change, not only in through the increased light and warmth of their physical surroundings, but also in their personal lives. The old year has ended. They are ready to take steps to ensure prosperity as the New Year begins.

References

Addy, Sidney Oldall, *Folk Tales and Superstitions* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973).

Chambers, Robert (ed.), *The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection with the Calendar*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1879).

Crombie, James E.. 'First-Footing in Aberdeenshire', *Folk-Lore*, 5 (1893), 315–21.

Fotheringhame, Lana, interview with Nancy C. McEntire, 11 December 2015.

Grant, Isabel F., *Highland Folk Ways* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).

[25] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969; repr. 1987), p. 95.

[26] Turner, *Ritual Process*, p. 41.

[27] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 180.

Hastie, G., 'First-Footing in Scotland', *Folk-Lore*, 5 (1893), 309–14.

McEntire, Nancy C., *Orkney: Land, Sea & Community*, Scottish Tradition 21 (Greentrax CDTRAX9021, 2004).

McKee, Christian M., *Scottish Folklore, Legend, and Superstition* (Baltimore, MD: Gateway Press, 1983).

Marwick, Ernest W., *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland* (London: Batsford, 1975).

Napier, James, *Folk Lore in the West of Scotland* (East Ardsley: E. P. Publishing, 1976 [1879]).

Palmer, Roy, *Britain's Living Folklore* (London: David and Charles, 1991).

Robertson, John D. M. (ed.), *An Orkney Anthology: The Selected Works of Ernest Walker Marwick*, I (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1991).

Shaw, Carol P., *Scottish Myths and Customs* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1997).

Stewart, William Grant, *The Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1851; repr. Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1974).

Thompson, Sue Ellen, *Holiday Symbols* (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 1998).

Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969; repr. 1987).

Van Gennep, Arnold, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

Williams, Isobel E., *Scottish Folklore* (Edinburgh and London: W. & R. Chambers, 1991).