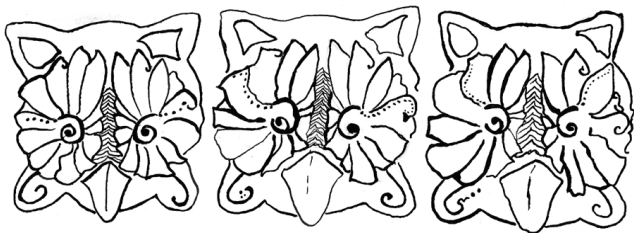


# SECRET DOORWAYS, STRANGE WORLDS

## *A Storywalk through Huntly*

*Devised by Bob Pegg,  
and inspired by the fantasy novels and stories of George MacDonald*



*Illustrated by Deborah Beeson*

George MacDonald was born in Huntly in 1824. When he was two, his family moved to a farm on the outskirts of the town, and he lived there until 1840, when he left to study in Aberdeen. By the time of his death in 1905, after a widely travelled life, he had written verse and much fiction for both children and adults. While he produced a number of novels which celebrated life in the north-east, and its unique Doric speech, George MacDonald is best remembered today for his fantasy writing. Stories like *The Light Princess* and *The Golden Key*, and longer

works such as *The Princess and the Goblin*, *At the Back of the North Wind*, and *Lilith* are still loved, and still readily available.

George MacDonald lived at a time when there was great interest in old tales and legends, songs and customs, and his stories contain many of the elements that can be found in European folklore: doorways to other worlds, talking animals, Fairy folk, and the deep, dark woods. In choosing the traditional stories for this walk, some of which McDonald might have heard when he was a boy, I have tried to reflect these themes.

This little book can be used in a number of different ways. Individual storywalkers can read the whole thing before going out onto the street, then use the book as a guide while retelling the stories in their heads. Group leaders, both of adults and children, can take their parties to the stopping places mentioned in the text, or somewhere nearby, and read out the appropriate story. Much better, though, to learn the gist of the story, and tell it in your own words, or even think about substituting your own favourite stories for those in the book.

The four main stories on the walk give plenty of opportunity for participation if you are leading a party of children, or family groups. Everyone can learn the Hobyah chant, for example, and the growing list of the wee Bannock's pursuers can make a lively litany. There are riddles, too, to keep minds busy from one story to the next (and again, do substitute your own favourites).

Now it's time to take to the streets.

*The George MacDonald storywalk begins in Huntly Square. A good place to stand is in front of the Brander Library, though be careful to allow space here and at other stopping places for people to pass by. Not*

so long ago, this place inspired a great love song called Bogie's Bonnie Belle (listen out for the sounds of pots and pans and paraffin lamps). Looking across the Square you'll see the statue of the Duke, and, behind him, the Pictish Stannin Stanes, seeming like the ancient gateway to another world. Beyond the Duke is the drinking fountain, though it's now dry. There's a legend that a secret tunnel runs between the fountain and Huntly Castle. If you go over to the fountain - and be very careful of the traffic - you might find three of what was once a family of eight owls. Remember the owls, we'll meet them again later. Now it's time for the first story, the terrible tale of **The Hobyabs**.



A long time ago there was a great forest. In the middle of the forest, just where Huntly Square is today, was a clearing, and in the clearing there was a house made entirely out of turnips.

In the turnip house lived an old man, an old woman, a little girl, and a dog. The dog was called "Little Dog Turpie." Little Dog Turpie was a terrier, with a loud bark – a good watchdog.

Now this was in the days before Walkmans and Gameboys, before Nintendos and Xboxes, before CDs and DVDs, before television and radio, even before books, magazines and newspapers. So the people who lived in the turnip house used to take it in turns to entertain each other.

On the first night, it was the old woman's turn. She climbed up onto the table and did a dance.

When she had finished dancing, everyone was tired, so they all went to bed. As soon as they were sound asleep, the Hobyahs came out of the woods. They surrounded the turnip house chanting:

*Hobyah, Hobyah, Hobyah*  
*Tear down the turnip house*  
*Chase off the old man*  
*Chase off the old woman*  
*Put the little girl in the Hobyah Bag!*



But Little Dog Turpie barked so loud that the Hobyahs ran off back into the woods in terror.

The old man woke up. He didn't know the Hobyahs had come out of the woods. He said:

*Little Dog Turpie barks so loud, I can neither sleep nor slumber.*  
*Tomorrow night, I'm going to tie him up in the Turnip Box!*

The next night, it was the old man's turn to entertain everybody. He played a tune on the squeezebox.

When he'd finished squeezing, everyone was tired, so they all went to bed. But before they went to bed, the old man tied up Little Dog Turpie in the Turnip Box.

As soon as they were sound asleep, the Hobyahs came out of the woods. They surrounded the turnip house chanting:

*Hobyah, Hobyah, Hobyah  
Tear down the turnip house  
Chase off the old man  
Chase off the old woman  
Put the little girl in the Hobyah Bag!*

The old man woke, not knowing the Hobyahs had been there, and said:

*Little Dog Turpie barks so loud, I can neither sleep nor slumber.  
Tomorrow night, I'm going to tie him up in the Turnip Box,  
And I'll tie him up so tight, that he won't be able to get out!*

The next night, it was the little girl's turn to entertain everybody. She played a tune on the penny whistle.

When the little girl had finished playing, everyone was tired. But before they went to bed, the old man tied Little Dog Turpie up in the Turnip Box. And he tied it up tightly with rope.

As soon as they were all sound asleep, the Hobyahs came out of the woods. They surrounded the Turnip house, chanting:

*Hobyah, Hobyah, Hobyah  
Tear down the turnip house  
Chase off the old man  
Chase off the old woman  
Put the little girl in the Hobyah Bag!*

Little Dog Turpie tried to get out of the turnip box, but it was tied too tight. So the Hobyahs tore down the turnip house. They chased off the old man. They chased off the old woman. And they put the little girl in the Hobyah Bag.

Then one of them slung the bag over his shoulder, and they started off along the path through the woods, that led to the Hobyah burrow. When they reached the burrow they went down into the depths of the earth. They hung the bag from a hook in the ceiling. Then the sun came up, and the Hobyahs went to sleep. Because Hobyahs sleep during the day.

It took the old man and the old woman a long time and a lot of courage to come back to the clearing in the forest. When they did return, all they saw was a great scattering of turnips and, in the middle of the clearing, the Turnip Box, still tied up tight. The old man undid the rope and out of the box jumped Little Dog Turpie. He started to run along the path through the woods, towards the Hobyah burrow. The old man and the old woman puffed along behind him, and soon all three of them were crouched down, with their ears to the entrance of the burrow. From below came the most horrible sound imaginable. It was a kind of slurping, slobbering sound. It was... the Hobyahs snoring!

Little Dog Turpie looked at the old man and the old woman. Then he plunged down into the burrow. There was a terrible commotion, a mixture of yelping, screeching, growling, and crunching. Then – silence. The old man and the old woman gingerly entered the mouth of the burrow and made their way down into the Hobyahs' dwelling. When their eyes got used to the dim light, they saw Little Dog Turpie sitting licking his lips among what was left of the Hobyahs. There

wasn't a single one of them still alive; which is why there are no Hobyahs in Huntly any more.

Hanging from a hook in the ceiling was the Hobyah Bag. The old man lifted it down, and out jumped the little girl. They decided they would go back to the clearing and rebuild their turnip house. And that's what they did. By evening they were sitting round a smouldering peat fire. The old man played the squeezebox, the little girl played the penny whistle, and the old woman danced on the table, while Little Dog Turpie lay in front of the fire on the mat, chewing on a Hobyah bone.

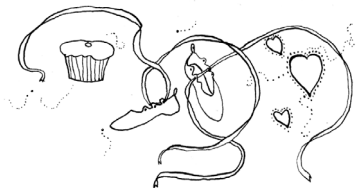
And, of course, they all lived happily together; until, one night, when they were fast asleep... But that's another story.

*Before you set off, here's a first riddle. It's an easy one, to get you going, and there's a big clue if you look ahead and up:*

***I have a face, but no nose – hands but no arms. What am I?***

*Now, go along the left hand side of the Square, and turn left down Duke Street. Keep your eye out for a flying thistle and a couple of lions – one of the lions has only one ear. And listen out for the sound of a thousand ghostly bicycle wheels. When you get to the Royal Oak on the left, find a space there or nearby.*

*Did you have time to solve the riddle (another clue)? If not, the answer's on the last page of the book. Now to the second story. It's called **The Three Gifts**.*



Where the Royal Oak is today, there was once an oak tree. And in the shadow of the oak tree was a cottage. In the cottage lived a young woman called Margaret, together with her husband Donald, and their little baby Angus. And if you asked Margaret which of the two - Donald or Angus - she loved the most, she would find it very hard to say.

Margaret had been born with three gifts: a light hand for the baking; a light foot for the dancing; and a light heart that could see her through the day.

Donald was a drover, sometimes away for weeks. One beautiful day in the late Summer, during one of these absences, Margaret decided to go for a picnic. She took a bottle of milk and some sandwiches, and set off up the road with the baby. In the early afternoon they stopped by a grassy knoll to rest. Margaret had unpacked the sandwiches and taken out the milk, when she noticed a cloud of dust coming up the road towards her. As the cloud got closer she saw inside it a little old man with a long white beard. He looked worn and weary, and the dust of the road was on him.

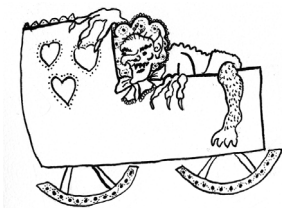
“Why don’t you stop and share our picnic,” said Margaret. The little old man sat down beside her. He ate half the sandwiches and drank half the milk. Then he stood up, and for the first time he spoke. “You’ve been kind to me, and I want to repay you.”

He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a rusty old horse-shoe nail.

“Take this,” he said, “and look after it well. It may come in useful sooner than you think.”

Margaret was far too polite to ask what on earth she should be doing with a rusty old horse-shoe nail. She thanked him, and slipped the nail into her apron pocket. The little old man set off back up the road, and soon he was gone from sight.

That evening it turned cold. She placed baby Angus in his cot next to the fire, and put a sprig of rowan on top of his eiderdown, to protect him from bad spirits. As she sat spinning, she heard a terrible commotion out in the yard. She thought a fox must have got in among the chickens. She took the lantern and went out into the night to see what was happening, but there was no sign of any fox, and the chickens were safe in their coop.



Margaret went back into the house. As she closed the door, she heard a sound. *Hehehehehe!* She looked around the room, but couldn't see where the sound was coming from. Then she noticed that the sprig of rowan was lying on the floor. Margaret went over to the cot, and looked in. Where baby Angus had lain there was a skinny, brown, mottled thing, with long, sharp finger nails, pointed ears, big, glowing eyes, a grin that stretched from ear to ear, and a mouth full of sharp teeth. It looked up at her and laughed. *Hehehehehe!* Straightaway she

knew what had happened. The Fairies had tricked her into leaving the house, and, when she was outside, they had stolen baby Angus, and put one of their own in his place. It was a Changeling.

It took Margaret the whole of the night to decide what to do, and most of the next day to pluck up the courage to do it. When evening came she took the Changeling and wrapped it up tightly in a blanket, so it couldn't scratch her face. Then she set off across the fields, to the grassy mound where everyone knew the Fairies lived. It was dark when Margaret got to the mound. She picked up a stone and struck three times. A door opened in the side of the mound, onto a room filled with light. Inside music played and people danced, tables were loaded with food and wine, and there, in the middle of the room, stood the Fairy Queen. She was a beautiful woman, but it was a cold beauty. By her side was a Fairy servant, with baby Angus in her arms.

Margaret stepped inside the Fairy mound. She threw the Changeling on the floor, and it scuttled away into a corner. "I don't want that thing," she said. "I want my baby back."

The Fairy Queen smiled a thin smile. "I wonder what your baby's worth to you. I hear you have a light hand for the baking. Would you give that in return for your baby?"

Margaret didn't have to think twice. She nodded. The Fairy Queen reached out and stroked her arm, and her hand became as heavy as lead. "Now," said Margaret, "give me back my baby."

"I didn't say I'd give him back," said the Fairy Queen. "I was just interested in what he was worth to you. Surely more than a light hand. I hear you have a light foot for the dancing. Would you give that in return for your baby?"

Again Margaret didn't have to think twice. She nodded. The Fairy Queen reached out and stroked her leg, and her foot became as heavy as lead. "Now," said Margaret, "give me back my baby."

"Did I say I'd give him back?" said the Fairy Queen. "I was just interested in what he was worth to you. I hear you have a light heart to see you through the day. Would you give that in return for your baby?"

This time Margaret did have to think. She knew that, without her light heart, she would always be gloomy, and it would be so hard to bring up a child in a house without joy. But she wanted Angus back so badly, that she nodded. The Fairy Queen reached out and stroked Margaret on the chest, and her heart went as heavy as lead. "Now," she said for a third time, "give me back my baby."

"Think," said the fairy Queen. "If he comes back with you into the world of mortals, he'll grow old. Eventually he'll die. If he stays here in our world he'll always be young. Surely you'd like to give him the gift of immortality?"

Margaret lunged forward and grabbed Angus from the arms of the Fairy servant. Then she turned and threw herself out of the mound into the darkness, and began to stumble across the field. She thought that if she could reach the stream and get to the other side she would be safe, because the Fairies can't cross running water. But she could feel them just behind her, playing with her hair, scratching her back with their long, sharp fingernails. She knew that they could pounce at any time.

Then Margaret tripped and fell. There was a chink as the rusty old horse shoe nail slipped out of her apron pocket and hit a stone. She

remembered that, if there's one thing the Fairies hate more than running water, it's forged metal. Margaret groped around until she found the nail. She turned to face the Fairies, held up the nail, and made the sign of the cross.

“Stop!” said the Fairy Queen. “She has cold steel, she has cold steel!”

The fairies shrank back into the mound, and the door closed behind them. At that moment the cock crew, and the sun began to rise. Margaret picked up baby Angus, and started off back home. And she realised that, although her hand and her foot were still as heavy as lead, she had got back her light heart.

*Before we set off, here's another riddle, quite a bit harder this time:*

***The King of Cumberland gave the Queen of Westmorland a bottomless bowl in which to put flesh and blood. What was it?***

*Carry on straight down Duke Street, and look out for Church Street on the right. If you cross over the road (again, be careful of the traffic), and go a little up Church Street, on a good day you can clearly see Tap O'Noth with its famous prehistoric hill fort. You are also looking towards Kirkney Glen where in 1411, legend says, retreating survivors from the Battle of Harlaw planted willow wands in memory of their fallen comrades, and the trees that grew from those wands are still in the glen today. Now come back on to Duke Street and carry on down into Bogie Street, with the Strathbogie Kirk (site of George Macdonald's school) on your left. Keep an eye out for a plaque on a building on the right hand side of the street, where George MacDonald was born. Carry on down the street and just before you get to the bridge, on the left hand side, you'll see Jake Forbes Close, which is named after the fiddle player who used to live there. Cross over the bridge to the other side of the river and*

turn off left into the woodland, and find a place among the trees. Did you get the solution to the second riddle? It's not as gruesome as you might think. The answer's on the last page of the book. If you look back over the water you'll see a stone ruin on the opposite bank. This is where the third story begins. It's called **The Gypsies' Fiddle**.



Once, when there were many more trees than there are today, a girl lived in that house with her father, and her mother, and her four brothers. She was sixteen years old, she was pretty and she was smart – and she was bored with her family and life in the forest. What she really wanted was a young man to keep her warm at night.

One day, when she was out in the woods collecting kindling, she heard the sound of horse's hooves coming up the path towards her. She stood up and watched in delight as a handsome prince on a white horse approached. She smiled, and waved her arms, and jumped up and down, but he rode on by without giving her a glance. The next day the same thing happened - and again, on the third day.

That evening the girl refused supper, and went out for a walk in the woods. She came to a clearing she couldn't recall having visited

before. Something caught her eye, a glint of glass at the edge of the trees. It was a mirror. She stared into it, and thought she saw the dim figure of a man with a black cloak pulled around him, and a black hat pulled down over his eyes. Then a voice spoke from inside the mirror:

“What’s up with you, miserable and moping child?”

The girl told how bored she was with life in the forest. She told about the handsome prince on the white horse, who rode by without even looking at her.

“Never mind,” said the voice in the mirror, “I can fix that for you. Tomorrow evening, bring your father, and your mother, and your four brothers to the clearing.”

So the next evening, after supper, the girl said to her family, “I’ve found something wonderful and strange out in the woods. I’d really like you to come with me and take a look.” They went with her to the clearing, and she showed them the mirror, glinting.

Then the voice in the mirror spoke. “Push your father into the mirror.” She pushed her father into the mirror, and he was instantly turned into a stout wooden box.

“Push your four brothers into the mirror,” said the voice. One by one she pushed her four brothers into the mirror, and they were instantly turned into four strings.

“Now, push your mother into the mirror.” The girl pushed her mother into the mirror. The mother’s long, white hair was turned into the hair of a bow. Two pale, slender hands came out of the mirror, holding the very first fiddle.

“Take this,” said the voice from inside the mirror, “and the next time the prince rides by, play him a tune.”

Next day, the girl went out into the woods, and waited by the path. She heard the sound of horse’s hooves coming towards her. She lifted the fiddle up to her chin, and began to play. The prince reined in his horse, leapt out of the saddle, threw his arms around her and kissed her.

The girl and the prince went back to the stone house by the river, and lived there in bliss. Every evening she played him music on the fiddle, and every evening he fell in love with her afresh. Then, one Autumn morning, when the girl was still asleep, the prince got up, dressed, got on white horse, and rode away. As soon as she woke, the girl knew her lover had departed for good. She packed a few clothes and left the cottage. For the rest of her life she wandered the world, never dreaming of returning to Huntly. And the fiddle was left, silent, in a dark corner. A bad reputation grew up around the house. People who passed by late at night thought they could hear strange sounds. No-one wanted to live there. The doors rotted away, children broke the windows with flying stones, birds began to nest in the chimneys, and the roof collapsed.



Many, many years later, when the house was the ruin we’re looking at today, a band of Gypsies passed by. They went inside to see if there was anything worth having and, in a dark corner behind a tangle of brambles, one of them found the fiddle. He tucked it against his chest

and ran the bow across the strings. The music that came from it expressed all the joys and all the sorrows of the girl.

The Gypsies took that fiddle all over world and, everywhere they went, they played sweet music, one minute sobbing tragically, the next dancing in ecstasy. Somehow or other, by a long and winding road, the fiddle returned to Huntly and, until recently, you could hear its sound ringing out over the Bogie, as Jake Forbes played in the close that bears his name.

*Before you cross back over the river, here's another riddle. It's very easy to guess, but rather beautiful, and it was made by George MacDonald himself:*

***I have only one foot, but thousands of toes;  
My one foot stands, but never goes.  
I have many arms, and they're mighty all;  
And hundreds of fingers, large and small.  
From the ends of my fingers my beauty grows.  
I breathe with my hair, and I drink with my toes.  
I grow bigger and bigger about the waist,  
And yet I am always very tight laced.  
None e'er saw me eat – I've no mouth to bite;  
Yet I eat all day in the full sunlight.  
In the summer with song I shake and quiver,  
But in winter I fast and groan and shiver.***

*Go back across the bridge and up Bogie Street. You can either turn right quite soon, up Old Road, or carry on just past the Strathbogie Kirk and turn right up Stewart's Lane. Either way, you'll come to the old Strathbogie Bakery. It's no longer in use as a bakery, but you can still see the remains of the sign. This is also the site of the Congregational*

Church, where George MacDonald worshipped as a boy. How did you get on with the riddle? Just in case you need the answer, it's on the last page of the book. Now, find a place in front of the Bakery and prepare yourself for the final story – the tragic tale of **The Wee Bannock**.



In the days when the Strathbogie Bakery was still baking, one of its specialities was the oatmeal bannock, a round, thin, chewy, biscuity delicacy, somewhere between an oatcake and a scone, and about the size of a dinner plate.

One day the Baker had just baked a batch of bannocks. He surveyed them proudly, thinking that they were just about as beautiful as bannocks could be. One, in particular, caught his eye. “You,” he said, “are far too perfect to sell. I’m going to have you for my lunch.”

“That’s what *you* think,” replied the Bannock, and hopped off the girdle onto the floor. Before the Baker could catch hold of it, it was out of the bakery and running up towards Castle Street, with the Baker in pursuit. And the Bannock sang at the top of its voice:

*Over the hills - out to the sea  
I'm the wee Bannock, and you can't catch me*

A Police Lady was just about to climb into her squad car when she saw the wee Bannock heading towards the Square. She turned on her siren and set off after it. On went the Bannock, pursued by the Baker and

the Police Lady... *nee naw, nee naw*. The Bannock sang at the top of its voice:

*Over the hills - out to the sea  
I'm the wee Bannock, and you can't catch me*

Standing nobly on his statue in the Square, the Duke heard the commotion. He looked down to see the Bannock racing past the Brander Library and turning into Duke Street, followed by the Baker and the Police Lady. Always ready for action, he leapt down from his plinth and gave chase. "Come on," he shouted to the three Owls from the fountain. "Help us catch him."

"Who? Who? Who?" asked the owls.

"The wee Bannock, of course," replied the Duke.

And off went the Bannock down Duke Street, followed by the Baker, the Police Lady... *nee naw, nee naw*... the Duke, and the three Owls... *who? who? who?* And it sang, at the top of its voice:

*Over the hills - out to the sea  
I'm the wee Bannock and you can't catch me*

Not far down Duke Street, two Lions were sleeping high above the heads of the passers-by. One of them was quite deaf, as he only had one ear, but the other was woken by the racket caused by the wee Bannock and his pursuers. He sprang down with a ROAR! and padded along behind the wild train. And off went the wee Bannock towards Bogie Street, followed by the Baker, the Police Lady... *nee naw, nee naw*... the Duke, the three Owls... *who? who? who?*... and the Lion... ROAR! And the Bannock sang, at the top of its voice:

*Over the hills - out to the sea*  
*I'm the wee Bannock and you can't catch me*

On went the wee Bannock, past the Strathbogie Kirk and down Bogie Street towards the river. Two Haggises from the butchers' shops had now joined the pursuers, as well as the big, orange Fish from the fish and chip shop. Jake Forbes the fiddler was on his way home. When he saw the wild procession, he couldn't believe his eyes. There and then he took out his fiddle and began to compose a new tune. It was called "The Wee Bannock's Bid for Freedom."

So the wee Bannock headed for the river, followed by the Baker, the Police Lady... *nee naw, nee naw...* the Duke, the three Owls... *who? who? who?...* the Lion... *ROAR!*... the two Haggises, the big, orange Fish, and Jake Forbes the fiddler playing "The Wee Bannock's Bid for Freedom." And the Bannock sang, at the top of its voice:

*Over the hills - down to the sea*  
*I'm the wee Bannock and you can't catch me*

The Bannock was in sight of the bridge over the Bogie. It couldn't believe what it saw. A lorry had overturned, completely blocking the road. There was no way to get across. The Bannock skidded to a halt and looked back to see the Baker, the Police Lady, the Duke, the Owls, the Lion, the Haggises, the big, orange Fish, and Jake Forbes the fiddler, close on its heels. So it hopped over the side of the bridge and on to the riverbank, right next to the ruin where the Gypsies found the very first fiddle.

There was a rustle in the undergrowth. "Don't panic," said a silky smooth voice, "I can help." A big, red Fox came out of the grasses. "Hop onto my nose," it said. "I'll get you across the river."

So the wee Bannock hopped onto the Fox's nose, and the Fox jumped into the river. The current was strong but the Fox paddled on. "Hold tight," said the Fox to the wee Bannock, "We don't want to lose you now."

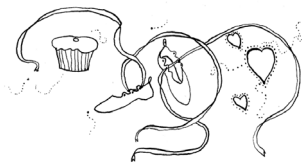
"No, indeed," said the Bannock.

And right there, in the middle of the River Bogie, the Fox flipped his nose, and the Bannock flew up into the air. Then down came the Bannock, into the Fox's open jaws, and, in two snaps, he was gone forever.

*And here's a final riddle, the answer quite appropriate to our walk:*

***Two brothers we are; great burdens we bear  
By which we are bitterly pressed.  
The truth is to say, we are full all the day  
And empty when we go to rest.***

*I hope you've enjoyed the walk. I asked **Phyllis Goodall** if she would translate one of the stories into Doric, the language of the north-east. She chose **The Three Gifts** as her favourite. I first heard it from **Alec Williamson**, the great Traveller storyteller from Ross-shire, who gave permission for it to appear here. I thought this might have been the first time it had appeared in print, but Phyllis tells me that she remembers it from a school book, back in the 1940s. Here's Phyllis's version:*



Faar the Royal Oak is noo-a-days, there wis eence an oak tree. An in the shadda o the oak tree wis a hoosie. In the hoosie there bade a young wife ca'ed Marget, wi her man Donal, an their wee baby Angus. An if ye speirt at Marget which o the twa - Donal or Angus - she loo'ed the maist, she wid hae been hard pitten til't ti say.

Marget hid been born wi three gifts: a licht han for the bakin; a licht fit for the dancin; and a licht hert ti mak the day ging by.

Donal wis a drover, sometimes awa for weeks at a time. Ae bonnie day in the late Simmer, durin ane o the times fin he wis awa, Marget took it intil her heid ti ging an see foo the peats war dryin on the peat moss on the hill. She took a bottle o milk an a piece, and an gid awa up the road wi the bairnie rowed in her plaid. In the early afternoon she stoppet by a grassy knowe for a rest. She took oot her piece an hid ta'en oot the bottle o the milk, fin she notice't a clood of dust comin up the road in her direction. As the clood got closer she saw inside it a little aal man with a lang fite beard. He looket trachlet an sair-come-at, and the dust o the lang fite road lay thick upon him.

“Come awa ower,” said Marget, “I’ve enough here for twa. Hae a bit o ma bread an some milk.” The little aal man sat doon aside her. He ate half the bread and drank half the milk. Syne he stood up, and for the first time he spak. “You’ve been kind ti me, and I wint ti repay you.”

He put his han in his pooch, and took out a rooshty aal horse shee nail. "Tak this," he said, "and look efter it weel. It may come in eesefu seener than ye think." (Some versions say: In the oor o yer greatest need, mine about it.)

Marget wis ower weel-menner't ti speir fit on earth she could be deeing wi a rooshty aal horse shee nail. She thanket him, and slippet the nail into her apron pooch. The little aal man set off back up the road, and he wis seen oot o sicht.

That fore-nicht it turn't caal. Marget laid the bairnie Angus in his cradle aside the fire, and put a sprig fae the rodden tree on the tap of his quiltie, ti protect him from evil speerits.



As she sat spinnin, she heard a terrible commotion o kecklin oot in the hen-coop. She thocht a fox maun hae gotten in among her bonnie fite hens. She took the lantern an gid oot into the nicht to see fit wis adee, but there wis nae sign o ony fox, an her bonnie fite hens war safe in their coop, ilka ane asleep wi her heid aneth her wing.

"There's something uncanny here," thocht Marget. 'O, my bairn, my bairn!' an she ran back ti the hoose. Bit wee Angus wis soon asleep, his thoomie in his moo, an the rodden twig on his quiltie.

Marget set tee at the spinnin again. Bit she hidna been lang at it fin she heard Daisy her bonnie broon coo, lowin in the byre. She took the lantern an gid oot ti the byre to see fit wis adee. Bit Daisy wis lying contented chawin the cud.

“There’s something gey uncanny here,” thocht Marget. “O, my bairn, my bairn!” an she ran back ti the hoose. Bit wee Angus wis soon asleep, his thoomie in his moo, an the rodden twig on his quiltie.

Marget set tee at the spinnin again. Bit she hidna been lang at it fin she heard Sheamus their bonnie grey horsie nicherin in the stable. She took the lantern an gid oot ti the stable to see fit wis adee. Bit Sheames wis stannin eatin his hay, an he turn’t his heid an gid her a kindly look oot o his big broon een.

Marget ran back ti the hoose, her hert thumpin. As she closed the door, she heard a soon. Hehehehehe! She looked roon the room, but she couldna see faar the sound wis comin fae. Syne she noticed that the sprig of rodden was lying on the floor. Marget gid ower ti the cradle, an looket in. Faar wee Angus had lain there wis a skinny, broon, mottle’t thing, with lang, sharp finger nails, pinted lugs, big, glowin een, a grin that rax’t from lug ti lug, an a moo full (pronounced to rhyme with ‘gull’) o sharp teeth. It looket up at her and leuch. Hehehehehe! Strachtaway she kent fit hid happen’t. The Fairies hid tricket her into leavin the hoose, and, fin she wis ootside, they hid stolen wee Angus, and putten ane of their ain in his place. It wis a Changelin.

It took Marget the hale night ti mak her myn fit ti dee, and maist of the next day ti pluck up the courage to dee’t. Fin evenin cam she took the Changelin and wrappet it up ticht in a blanket, so it couldna scrat her face. Syne she set aff up atween the parks o ripenin corn, to the grassy knowe faar abody kent the Fairies bade. It was dark fin Marget got ti the knowe. She picket up a stane and struck three times. A door open’t in the side of the knowe, ontill a room foo o licht. Inside music played and fowk danced, tables war loadet wi meat an drink, and there, in the middle of the room, stood the Fairy Queen. She wis a

bonnie woman, but it wis a caal beauty. By her side wis a Fairy servant, wi wee Angus in her airms.

Marget steppet inside the Fairy knowe. She threw the Changelin on the floor, and it scuttled awa intil a corner. "I dinna wint that thing," she said. "I wint ma baby back."

The Fairy Queen smile't a thin smile. "I winner fit your baby's worth to you. I hear you hae a licht han for the bakin. Wid you gie that in return for your baby?"

Marget didna hae to think twice. She noddet. The Fairy Queen rax't oot and stroket Marget's airm, and her han turn't as heavy as lead. "Noo," said Marget, "gie me back my baby."

"I didna say I wid gie him back," said the Fairy Queen. "I wis jist interestet in fit he was worth ti ye. Surely mair nor a licht hand. I hear you hae a licht fit for the dancin. Wid you gie that in return for your baby?"

Again Marget didna hae to think twice. She noddet. The Fairy Queen rax't oot and stroket Marget's leg, and her fit turn't as heavy as lead. "Noo," said Margaret, "gie me back my baby."

"Did I say I wid gie him back?" said the Fairy Queen. "I wis jist interestet in fit he was worth to you. I hear you hae a licht hert to see you through the day. Wid you gie that in return for your baby?"

This time Marget did hae to think. She kent that, without her licht hert, she wid aye be gloomy, an it wid be sae hard to bring up a bairn in a hoose without joy. But she wintet Angus back sae muckle, that she noddet. The Fairy Queen rax't oot and stroket Marget on the breist,

and her hert gid as heavy as lead. “Noo,” she said for the third time, “gie me back my baby.”

“Think,” said the fairy Queen. “If he gings back wi you into the warld of mortals, he’ll grow aal. Come time he’ll dee. If he bides here in oor warld he’ll aye be young. Surely you wid like to gie him the gift of immortality?”

Marget sprang forrit and grabbet Angus fae the airms of the Fairy servant. Syne she turn’t and threw hersel oot of the knowe into the darkness, and began to stummle doon the roadie aside the corn. She thocht that if she could win ti the burn and get to the ither side she wid be safe, because the Fairies canna cross runnin water. But she could feel them just ahin her, playin wi her hair, scrattin her back wi their lang, sharp fingernails. She kent that they could pounce at ony time.

Syne Marget trippet and fell. There wis a chink as the rooshty aal horse shee nail slippet oot of her apron pouch and hit a stane. She myn’t that, if there’s ae thing the Fairies hate mair nor rennin water, it’s forged metal. Marget gropet about until she got haud o the nail. She turn’t to face the Fairies, held up the nail, and made the sign of the cross.

“Stop!” said the Fairy Queen. “She hauds caul iron, she hauds caul iron!”

The fairies cooer’t back inti the knowe, and the door closed ahin them. At that very meenit the cock crew, and the sun began to rise. Marget picket up wee Angus, and set aff for hame. An she realised as wee Angus cuddled inti her bosie and smile’t up at her that she hid gotten back her licht hert. An as she grippet the iron nail in her pooch the han that held it turn’t licht again an her feet waar gyan dancing doon the road aside the ripenin corn.

## MORE WALKS AND STORIES

*The Bahill, the Battle Hill,  
The Clashmach, the Bin –  
They a' circle roon about  
And Huntly lies within.*

The four tales in the George MacDonald Storywalk are traditional stories that can be found in many different places, chosen because they reflect particular themes in MacDonald's work. But this old rhyme, taking in some of the hills that surround Huntly, reminds us that the countryside around the town has plenty of legends of its own; for the Battlehill and the Clashmach were both sites of military engagements, while the Bahill whispers of a game of football played with a human head, and the Bin is home to many tales of superstition and the supernatural. Here is a walk that takes in some of those legends.

Leave the Square by Castle Street and cross straight over the road to the War Memorial. Carry on down through the Avenue of linden trees towards Huntly Castle and the Golf Course. Pass under the arch of the Gordon Schools, and keep going until you come to the Golf Club building on your right. Stand with your back to the Golf Club, look out over the playing fields and you will see the Bin Hill, until recently bare of trees. There's a cave on the Bin Hill called the Elf House which was once believed to be the haunt of the Fairies. A little girl who was herding cows allowed one of them to stray into the cave. The girl followed the cow and, as neither emerged, her father, who was a piper, went in to look for them. He, too, never came out of the cave, but people said that from time to time the cow could be heard lowing, the girl crying, and the piper piping, under the hill of Dunbennan on the opposite side of the Deveron.

Keep going down the Avenue to the Castle, which you must visit. Then follow the road as it bends to the right. When you see the entrance to the Castle Hotel in the distance, take a path to your left down to the banks of the River Deveron, by a tree where many lovers have carved their initials. Go on as far as you can, taking great care, and see if you can spot a big rock with two hollows in it. In one of these hollows the Devil would sit at midnight, smoking his pipe. The other hollow is where he kept his tobacco.



The Deveron used to be haunted by a water spirit, the Kelpie, which took the form of a beautiful black horse. It would wait placidly by the river bank, until some unwitting passer-by decided to mount it in order to cross over to the far side. In the middle of the stream, where the water was deepest, the Kelpie would vanish, leaving its passenger to sink or swim... but not before it had sung:

*Sit weel Janety, or ride weel Davie,  
For this time the morn, ye'll be in Potcravie.*

**In the Christmas term of 2006, Mrs Thomson's P7 class from the Gordon Primary School created their own fantasy Huntly. Using one of George MacDonald's favourite devices, the doorway to another world, they imagined a town full of magic portals. Their heroes were a boy called Terry and his dog Tess, and a girl called Mary-Anne. Mary-Anne was led on by a riddling voice – I'm black and light as a feather, I follow until the sun dies out (a Shadow) – into a fairy world. Terry and Tess had many adventures: they went through an ice hole in the river, where they met a giant and his leprechaun friend; they visited the Land of Cakes; they had an epic journey to Sparklecity, grappled with dragons and a Boar man, encountered giant muffins, and solved many riddles.**

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Above all, thanks to Phyllis Goodall for her hospitality, generosity and enthusiasm, and for putting in my way the legends from the Transactions of The Banffshire Field Club.

This is a book of folklore, legends, fantasy and fiction. People who want to discover more about the fascinating history of Huntly should seek out Patrick Scott's books: *The History of Strathbogie*, and *Huntly (Archive Photographs: Images of Scotland)*, as well as *The Place Names of the Parish of Huntly*.

William Raeper's *George MacDonald of Huntly* life story and town trail leaflet was extremely helpful to me, and the Brander Library, with its collection of books and manuscripts, is an essential browsing place for MacDonald enthusiasts.

Orb's Bookshop in Deveron Street has a fine collection of MacDonald's works, both new and secondhand, and is a home to good conversation as well as good reading.

**Answers to riddles:**

1. A clock.
2. A wedding ring.
3. A tree (of course).
4. A pair of shoes.

*How did you get on?*



Credits to come