

Sawney Bean

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This is a retelling in my own style of a Scottish Folk tale. It is loosely based on a real story. There is nothing deserves a PG warning but the narrative, although humourous, does get really greusome at times Sawney Bean is a tongue in cheek retelling of an Edinburgh folk take and this version is greatly fictionalised up until the time of their arrest. From there I have described the trial by ordeal very accurately although some details of the tortures had to be toned down a tad as the tortures used for the clan were ingenious in the extreme. Nobody knows what happened to the remains, most likely they were buried in lime in unconsecrated ground.



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The modern city of Edinburgh sprawls out in spacious suburbs along the southern shore of the Firth of Forth but social conditions did not always permit inhabitants the luxury of ample living space. The Auld Toon, or Auld Reekie as it is called, perches on Castle Hill, in bygone times the only easily defensible piece of real estate with access to the natural harbour of the Forth estuary.

Medieval Scotland was a wild place and the rule of law was often superseded by clan squabbles, religious conflict and wars with the English which were something of a national sport for both countries. Consequently people flocked to the security of the walled garrison towns and particularly to Edinburgh which was considered impregnable.

As the population grew the town, constrained as it was by the sheer cliffs of Castle Rock could only expand in two directions, up and down. The narrow streets became canyon like as tenements of five and six stories towered above them. Beneath the streets another city was growing. Under each street several wynds, subterranean passages, were carved from the bedrock.

Medieval societies depended for their structure on a strict class based hierarchy or in the case of Edinburgh a higherarchy. The richer and more important you were the higher you lived, the King in his castle atop the hill, the noblemen and gentry and their families in the penthouse apartments of each tenement built on the slopes. Below them were the wealthy merchants, lawyers and bankers, further down the craftsmen and tradesmen; goldsmiths, silversmiths and dealers in spices, wines, fine cloths and such. Eventually at street level the butchers and bakers, maybe the odd candlestick maker even, the farriers, weavers, tailors and other vendors had their premises. Below the street however was another hierarchy, or perhaps a lowerarchy, the servants, artisans, the hired help, below them the day labourers, chimney sweeps, stable hands and at the very lowest of the subterranean levels, the bare bottom of society if you will pardon the pun, the night soil men who cleaned up the human waste in the hours of darkness.

Niddrie Street was the main street through the poorest, most low lying part of town. Beneath it ran the Niddrie Wynd which at its lowest level was a refuge for Edinburgh's underclass (literally). The inhabitants often spent their whole life below ground, never knowing the feel of sunshine on their faces.

One of the people who dwelt in the lowest part of the Niddrie Wynd was a lad of about ten years called Sawney Bean. Despite his tender age he was alone in the world and made his living by running errands from household to household through the network of tunnels. Sometimes Sawney's errands took him to the surface and the pale, unhealthy boy grew to love the sunshine and the soft rain, the smell of the flowers and trees and everything about the outside. He talked to other servants and to labourers and carters and learned from them of a wondrous world beyond the city where there were no wynds but miles and miles of trees and fields, highways and country lanes where a young man could enjoy the freedom of the road and even become an outlaw and live off the land, squeezing warm creamy milk straight from the cow's udders into his mouth, snaring rabbits, hares and squirrels, catching fishes in the fast flowing streams and gathering nuts and berries. Sawney made up his mind that one day he would run away to the countryside to find an outlaw who needed an apprentice and would teach him the trade.

The boy Bean had one true friend, Aggie, a scullery girl of about his own age. She was quite the most beautiful creature Sawney had ever seen, her greasy hair was dishwater blonde, the same colour as her eyes one of which had a pronounced squint (s-q-u-i-n-t; pronounced squint) and she had a hare lip. But Sawney was no oil painting either and the pair fell in love and approaching their twelfth birthdays they decided to run away together and be outlaws. Wisely they waited until the spring then with great presence of mind Sawney

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stole flint and tinder to make fire, as many meat pies as he could fit into his pockets and a large knife, Aggie brought blankets from the laundry and other things that she thought a lady outlaw would need and they fled through the streets of the city and away into the forested hills to the south.

It was a few days before reality hit the fugitives. Reality one; far from posting job adverts on trees â Prosperous and successful outlaw requires apprentice to learn all aspects of the outlawing businessâ outlaws are actually hard to find. Reality two; pies do not last forever. Reality three; Rabbits, when they are not hanging on hooks in butchersâ shops are surprisingly nimble. The cows were more co-operative however and the pair managed to get a few mouthfuls of milk each day once they got the hang of squeezing the nipples properly. To add to Sawneyâ s troubles Aggie was turning into a wife. She was not going to put up with sleeping in the forest, she wanted a roof over her head, if Sawney could not find employment with a respectable outlaw she wanted him to get a job as a farmhand and at least bring in a regular wage. Aggie wanted curtains in her woodland bower.

One day, in desperation Sawney said â perhaps there isnae an ootlaws guild and nae official â prentices. Perhaps ye just set up as an ootlaw like I did as an errand boy.â

â Onest yeâ ve takken an idea in yer heid Sawney Bean thereâ s nay shiftinâ oâ it. Yeâ d better giâ et a try then if yeâ ve the first idea what ootlaws dae. But ahâ m tellin ye, if it doesnae start paying quick ye maun get yerselâ took on as a farmhand.â

â So ah dae ken what ootlaws dae as it happens, hien. Wez gan doon tae the road and wait for a traveller.â

â Aye, and then wha?â

â Ah jumps oot in front him an sez giâ us yer money Jimmy.â

â And yer man is gannaekak his pants at the sight oâ a skinny wee scrote like yersel' and giâ us his purse ye reckon.â

â Aye, thatâ s the way it works. Simples, nae wonder ootlaws dinnae need apprentices.â

When the first traveller approached their hiding place the flaw in Sawneyâ s business plan became obvious. The intended victim was a gentleman armed with a sword and mounted on a good horse.â

â We could awways wait the next one,â Sawney said.

â Awaâ wi ye, I need pots and pans and curtains andâ !..womenâ sâ things,â Aggie scolded.

â Ye get oot there on the road anâ rob yon mon.â

â Dinnae be impatient, ahâ ve tae think about ma strategy.â Sawney dithered.

â Strategy ma arse,â Aggie said, picking up a stout stick, â ye get doon there and whack yon roon the heid wi this.â

Sawney took the stick, gulped two or three times. â Ah could dae wiâ a wee swallae Aggie, ye got ony whisky left?â

â Yeâ re nay getting a swallae â til yeâ ve done the business,â Aggie commanded kicking her boyfriend on the shin.

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Sawney knew he had lost the argument and charged. Realising that the sight of an undersized, pasty faced twelve year old would not frighten an armed man Sawney tried to make himself terrifying. "Giâ us yer purse or git ready tae dee, wee scabby milksop that ye are," he shouted. The gentleman's horse took fright and bolted. The rider had drawn his sword and turned to face the would be assailant. A low branch that overhung the road caught him on the temple and he crashed to the ground.

"Is he deid Sawney?" Aggie asked nervously as they approached

Sawney, filled with confidence by his easy victory bent down and with the stolen knife slit the man's throat. "He is now, ye ken" he said.

"Then get his gold and let's be awa' to buy food and clothes afore onyone else comes by."

"Wait," Sawney said. "If we take the gold and go to the village the constable will be looking for murderers and tramps like us wi' gold tae spend will arouse suspicion. We need tae lie low. I'll kill the horse an' we can lie low and eat that."

"Kill the horse, wee blethrin moron that ye are. Hoo the hell we gonnae carry a horse. Ah! We've got a better idea."

And so between them they hoisted the body onto the horse and let it away to a cave they had planned to move into as soon as Aggie got her curtains and the trappings of domesticity.

By the time they had finished eating the traveller the hue and cry had died down. When they went into the nearest village a pedlar told them it was not uncommon for travellers to go missing in the forest and with such a huge area of trees and scrubland to get lost in, nobody bothered to look very far. Sawney and Aggie lived for a while on salted pork, salted beef, salted everything, gold bought a lot of salted meat, but they agreed the diet provided by their roadkill had been far more appetising. They took to the forest again and were rarely seen in town. Nobody thought much about the unfortunate travellers who regularly went missing on the forest roads and were never seen again.

Years passed. A young English nobleman who had travelled to Edinburgh to marry the daughter of a Scottish Theign decided to return by land with his bride as she was prone to seasickness. Dark tales were told of the forests to the south of Edinburgh and the fates that might befall unwary travellers but the young knight, with all the arrogance of the English upper class decided there was nothing Scotland could throw at him that he could not handle.

The two young lovers set off with their entourage but decided to dawdle and stray from the main road, telling the escorts they would catch up later. They were not only a few hundred yards off the track when they dismounted and tethered their horses intending to indulge in a bit of horseplay. The bride's bodice was no more than half unlaced when the couple were surrounded by ruffians

"Be off you wuffians, give us some pwivacy" the knight commanded.

"Be careful, his bride appealed, don't make them angry."

"Don't be silly dawing, these are nothing but low wanking peasants, they will obey the voice of authority."

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Now the idiosyncratic version of the Atkins diet favoured by the Beans, low in carbs, high in protein had kept them lean and mean and productive. Aggie's first daughter had been born when the mother was thirteen and till so the matriarchs had plenty of childbearing years left by the time Sawney had fathered his own grandchild. By the third generation the Beans were multiplying exponentially and all of them were somehow closely related to themselves. Understandably they were not drilled in the social niceties.

The bridegroom tried to summon up all his authority, but one cannot muster much dignity with chainmail breeches round one's ankles.

“Be away with you now wogues or I shall sound my hunting hawn and summon my men.”

“And arrrrre ye gaein tae fight us aâ wi yer todgerrr a dangling like a rrrratâ s tail, pustulatinâ wee sassernach that ye are?” the chief Bean enquired.

“I warn you I am fully twained, I went to Knight school and passed my dipwoma. I can handle anything you Scots wuffians can thwow at me.

“â s that rrright Jimmy,â said the chief Bean, “then catch this.â His head moved in a smooth arc towards the nobleman's noble nose.

“Aw nice one Jimmy, straight in wiâ the heid,â said another Bean appreciatively as the headbutt crunched on nosebone.

Faced with a challenge from a man who rrolled his rrrrs and the sight of his own blood the young man did what any brave knight would not do. He fainted.

The bride, being a Scots lassie was made of sterner stuff. Pushing her boobies back into her bodice she grabbed her husbandâ s sword and using it to keep the Beans at bay edged towards her horse. Slapping the beasts flank with the flat of the sword she leaped into the saddle and galloped away to find her escort.

When the brideâ s father heard of the outrage he went straight to King James and demanded that a troop of soldiers be sent to apprehend the villains and rescue his daughter's husband. The girl bravely offered to lead the search though she confided to a lady in waiting “I fear I shall never see Wogerâ s â er Rogerâ s â face again.”

Once the Lady had led the soldiers to where the attack had taken place she was taken away to safety. And the search began. It did not take the armed men long to find the cave of the Bean family. The Beans were inside playing their favourite pastime, Incest (the game for all the family.) and were taken by surprise. The outlaw clan were quickly put in chains and a search of the cave began. It was horrific. In a large store at the back there were smoked and salted limbs, and all sorts of organs, pickled in barrels of vinegar. There were potted brains, smoked tongues, soused eyeballs looking very like pickled eggs, livers (delicious with fava beans and a good Chanti Iâ m told) and hearts. Battle hardened soldiers felt faint at some of the sights they saw.

Had Morag accompanied them to the cave she would have seen her Rogerâ s face again for, with an apple in the mouth, his head turned slowly on a spit over a wood fire.

Once the Beans were back in Edinburgh the King wasted no time in organising trial by ordeal.

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One by one the clan members would be tortured to death and if they survived that they would be executed several times for lesser offences. Medieval torturers took great pride in their work, for Aggie they had the ordeal of the stones, piling great stones on the accused's body until every bone was broken but no vital organs damaged. When the torturers were satisfied they would release the prisoners and invite them to walk away if innocent, or else confess. Confession earned a quick death for Scotland was a civilised country and the King was a humane ruler. Those who maintained their innocence however were thrown into a ditch and left to their fate.

Aggie was the opening attraction, guaranteed to warm up the large crowd of paying customers. After that the children and grandchildren, all each others parents, siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins were dealt with. Finally they reached the star attraction, Sawney himself. He was stood under a high gibbet, his arms tied behind his back. A rope was thrown over the gibbet and hooked through the bond that held the man's wrists. Then he was hoisted aloft. The weight of his body dislocated both shoulders leaving him hanging in extreme agony. Then the torturers began to attach weights to his ankles, continuing to increase the load until the cannibal's arms were torn from his body.

With the last of the Beans dead all that remained was to bring on the musicians and start the dancing. The good people of Edinburgh all agreed they had never seen such a fine execution and the party went on until the first light of dawn.

The next day all the Beans' body parts were gathered up (except for a few hands and feet that could not be found, probably because spectators had taken them home for souvenirs) and were thrown onto a great fire. When this had burned down and the ashes had cooled they were gathered in sacks, rowed across the Norrloch and scattered on a site where now a famous fast food chain has it's main Edinburgh outlet.

So if you are ever dining royally in an Edinburgh fast food restaurant think twice before you order a spicy beanburger.

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