

STEPHEN MILLER

HUNT THE WREN

THE EARLY DESCRIPTIONS  
(1731–1845)

*CHRISTMAS* is ushered in with a Form much less meaning, and infinitely more fatiguing. On the 24th of *December*, towards Evening, all the Servants in general have a Holiday, they go not to Bed all Night, but ramble about till the Bells ring in all the Churches, which is at twelve a-Clock; Prayers being over, they go to hunt the Wren, and after having found one of these poor Birds, they kill her, and lay her on a Bier with the utmost Solemnity, bringing her to the Parish-Church, and burying her with a whimsical kind of Solemnity, singing Dirges over her in the *Manks* Language, which they call her Knell; after which *Christmas* begins. There is not a Barn unoccupied the

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# HUNT THE WREN

## THE EARLY DESCRIPTIONS

(1731–1845)



“Hunt the Wren” is one of the earliest documented calendar customs in the Isle of Man with George Waldron, resident with his family in the Island in the 1720s, providing a description of it in his “A Description of the Isle of Man,” published after his death in *The Compleat Works, in Verse and Prose, of George Waldron* (1731). Waldron also documented the Battle of the Queen of Winter and the Queen of May on May Day. Of the two calendar customs, Hunt the Wren continues at the present day, whilst the May Day Battle of the Queens was discontinued, according to Dr John Clague, seemingly in the early nineteenth century (if not earlier).

Waldron recounts in brief that on the 25 December when prayers were over at church, servants went out to hunt for a wren and when one was found and killed, it was laid on a bier and taken to the parish church yard, where it was given a mock-funeral, “singing Dirges over her in the *Manks* Language, which they call her Knell; after which *Christmas* begins.” The next account come from Richard Townley’s *A Journal kept in the Isle of Man*, which appeared in 1791. Here, wren hunting now takes place on St Stephen’s Day, 26 December, and not on the 25th as in Waldon. He identifies it as taking place, as he writes, “in every fishing town in the isle” and if the wren was caught before sunrise it was a good omen for the coming herring fishery in the Island. Affixed to the top of a pole and with a red handkerchief hanging from it, it was then paraded around with money or alcohol being begged for, a detail missing from Waldron.

From Hannah Ann Bullock and her *History of the Isle of Man* (1816) comes a back story. Once there was a fairy enchantress who by her beauty enchanted the men of the Island to follow her, she leading them into the sea to their deaths. Soon there would be no men left, “when a knight-errant sprung up” who devised a trap for the enchantress, she escaping at the last moment by taking for the form of a wren. A spell was cast on her that she was to return once each year to suffer the fate that “she must ultimately perish by a human hand.” And so the scene was set for wren hunting, when birds were “pursued, pelted, fired at, and destroyed, without mercy, and their feathers preserved with religious care.” Having a feather with one at sea was a safeguard from “shipwreck for one year” (as with Townley, again an association with fisherfolk). Bullock refers to “this *well authenticated* legend” (emphasis in the original) but it stems more from her own pen than any oral tradition and is based on elaborating the similar story of *Tehi-Tegi!* found in Waldron.

With Joseph Train in his *An Historical and Statistical Account of the Isle of Man* (1845), the folklore material that appears was drawn from a manuscript account written by Peter Curphey in 1843. Train did once visit the Island in 1838, but the references are to the summer months and it seems unlikely that he stayed that long to have been personally able to have witnessed wren hunting that year. What this means then is that he did not author the footnote that appears mentioning that “[i]n 1842, no less than four sets were observed in the town of Douglas, each party blowing a horn.” Train notes the shift in dates between Waldron (which he takes as being 24 December) and the present day, dating the change to being a century ago (without giving any evidence), and then goes on to reproduce entire Bullock’s “*well authenticated legend.*”

Then comes the material drawn from Curphey. The wren being caught was attached to the top of a pole, “with its wings extended,” and carried from door to door, when a rhyme was sung of which just four lines are given in English, the first mention of there being any singing taking place. The wren ended up being buried in the parish church yard though the text is close to that from Waldon, but with the added detail that after the mock-funeral there was dancing by those present. Train now states that there is no fixed date for hunting the wren itself, St Stephen’s Day being only the day on which the wren is processed and involved are just adolescent boys. The wren pole is more elaborate from the first description given by Train. Instead of being a simple pole, it made from two hoops crossing at right-angles (affixed to the top of a pole), and decorated with evergreens and ribbons. It was processed from house to house, the boys “singing lines called ‘*Hunt the Wren.*’” If one gave the singers money then a feather was received in turn. Internment at the end of the day still took place but no longer in a churchyard, the sea shore or waste ground now being used. [This repeating by Train of the details of Hunt the Wren (as well as the footnote) suggests Train had been given an update to the manuscript.]

“This is an old Manx custom, not yet extinct.” This appears in the *Mona’s Herald* for 8 January 1845. Even at this date, vernacular culture was now seen as something passing, although the obituary for Hunt the Wren has yet to be written.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018

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# HUNT THE WREN

## THE EARLY DESCRIPTIONS

(1731–1845)



### I. GEORGE WALDRON, A HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE ISLE OF MAN (1731)

[97] *CHRISTMAS* is ushered in with a Form much less meaning, and infinitely more fatiguing. On the 24th of *December*, toward Evening, all the Servants in general have a Holiday, they go not to Bed all Night, but ramble about till the Bells ring in all the Churches, which is at twelve-a-clock; Prayers being over, they go to hunt the Wren, and after having found one of these poor Birds, they kill her, and lay her on a Bier with the utmost Solemnity, bringing her to the Parish-Church, and burying her with a whimsical kind of Solemnity, singing Dirges over her in the *Manks* Language, which they call her Knell; after which *Christmas* begins.

George Waldron, “A Description of the Isle of Man,” *The Compleat Works, in Verse and Prose, of George Waldron*, ed. Theodosia Waldron (n.p. [London], 1731) 91–191.

#### NOTES TO WALDRON

(1) George Waldron (1687–1728), was a Commissioner for the British Crown residing with his family in the Island in the 1720s. (2) For an early biographical notice, see Thompson Cooper [as “TC”], “Waldron, George (1690–1730?),” *Dictionary of National Bibliography*, ed. Sidney Lee, vol. lix (London: Smith and Elder, 1899), 28. (3) Updated by Elizabeth Baignet, “Waldron, George (1689/90–1726x31),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004) [Online edition]. (4) Further, see Stephen Miller, “My Misfortunes press so hard upon me’: Letters from George and Theodosia Waldron to Sir Hans Sloane,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, xi.4 (2007 [for 2003–05]), 557–63. (This corrects a number of biographical errors in Baignet.)

### 2. RICHARD TOWNLEY, A JOURNAL KEPT IN THE ISLE OF MAN (1791)

[311] *ST STEPHEN’S-DAY* is distinguished here by a very strange custom: the hunting of the wren. Numbers assemble, by day break in the morning, with long sticks, with which they beat the hedges and bushes, till they start one of those smart, little birds from its evening retreat. They then pursue it, with great shoutings, from bush to bush, till the little creature is so tired as to be taken by the hand, or knocked down

by the stick, of one of its barbarous pursuers. It is then fixed upon the top of a long pole, to which is suspended a red handkerchief, by way of a banner; and in that manner it is carried round about the town, in triumph,—which serves as a pretext for begging money, or liquor, from the inhabitants.

If they can catch, or kill the poor wren, before sun-rising, they firmly believe that it ensures a good herring fishery the next season.

WHAT gave rise to such a strange, barbarous custom (which exists in every fishing town in the isle) I have not yet been able to learn: or why the tit-wren should be selected as the victim of that day; unless, from being the smallest bird upon the island, it is intended or meant as a proper sacrifice to the fairies, (the smallest [312] of *imaginary* beings) in order to appease their ill will against the poor fishermen, to whom they are such plagues in the herring season, and for the future render them propitious to them.

Richard Townley, *A Journal kept in the Isle of Man*, vol. i., 2 vols. (Whitehaven, 1791).

### 3. HANNAH ANN BULLOCK, HISTORY OF THE ISLE OF MAN (1816)

[370] But one of the most curious ceremonies, and which, I believe, is peculiar to the Isle of Man, is, that of *hunting the wren*, founded on a tradition, that in former times, a fairy of uncommon beauty exerted such undue influence over the male population, that she at various times seduced numbers to follow her footsteps, till, by degrees, she led them into the sea, where they perished. This barbarous exercise of power had continued for a great length of time, till it was apprehended the island would be exhausted of its defenders, when a knight-errant sprung up, who discovered some means of countervailing the [371] charms used by this syren, and even laid a plot for her destruction, which she only escaped at the moment of extreme hazard, by taking the form of a *wren*; but though she evaded instant annihilation, a spell was cast upon her, by which she was condemned on every succeeding New Year's Day, to reanimate the same form, with the definitive sentence, that she must ultimately perish by a human hand. In consequence of this *well authenticated* legend, on the specified anniversary, every man and boy in the island (except those who have thrown off the trammels of superstition), devote the hours between sun-rise and sun-set, to the hope of extirpating the fairy, and woe be to the individual birds of this species, who shew themselves on this fatal day to the active enemies of the race: they are pursued, pelted, fired at, and destroyed, without mercy, and their feathers preserved with religious care, it being an article of belief, that every one of the relics gathered in this laudable pursuit, is an effectual preservative from shipwreck for one year; and that fisherman would be considered as extremely foolhardy, who should enter upon his occupation without such a safeguard.

Hannah Ann Bullock, *History of the Isle of Man* (London, 1816), 370–71. From Chapter xix, “Some Characteristic Superstitions of the Manx,” 363–74.

## NOTES TO BULLOCK

(i) “I have trusted to the observations which a residence of ten years on the Island has enabled me to make, and my chief aim has been to give the result of those observations with impartiality and truth” (xiv). “Intoduction,” v–xv.

## 4. JOSEPH TRAIN, AN HISTORICAL AND STATISTICAL ACCOUNT OF THE ISLE OF MAN (1845)

[124] *Hunting the Wren* has been a pastime in the Isle of Man from time immemorial. In Waldron’s time it was observed on the 24th of December, which I have adopted, though for a century past it has been observed on Saint Stephen’s Day. This singular ceremony, says Mrs Bullock, which is, I believe, peculiar to the Isle of Man, [125] is founded on a tradition, that in former times a fairy of uncommon beauty, exerted such undue influence over the male population, that she, at various times, induced, by her sweet voice, numbers to follow her footsteps, till by degrees she led them into the sea, where they perished. This barbarous exercise of power had continued for a great length of time, till it was apprehended that the Island would be exhausted of its defenders, when a knight-errant sprung up, who discovered some means of countervailing the charms used by this siren, and even laid a plot for her destruction, which she only escaped at the moment of extreme hazard, by taking the form of a *wren*. But though she evaded instant annihilation, a spell was cast upon her by which she was condemned, on every succeeding New-year’s-day, to reanimate the same form with the definitive sentence, that she must ultimately perish by human hand. In consequence of this *well authenticated* legend, on the specified anniversary, every man and boy in the Island (except those who have thrown off the trammels of superstition), devote the hours between Sun-rise and sun-set, to the hope of extirpating the fairy, and woe be to the individual birds of this species, who show themselves on this fatal day to the active enemies of the race; they are pursued, pelted, fired at, and destroyed, without mercy, and their feathers preserved with religious care, it being an article of belief, that every one of the relics gathered in this laudable pursuit, is an effectual preservative from shipwreck for one year; and that fisher-man would be considered as extremely foolhardy, who should enter upon his occupation without such a safe-guard.” When the chase ceases, one of the little victims [126] is affixed to the top of a long pole with its wings extended, and carried in front of the hunters, who march in procession to every house, chanting the following rhyme:

“We hunted the wren for Robin the Bobbin,  
We hunted the wren for Jack of the Can,

We hunted the wren for Robin the Bobbin,  
 We hunted the wren for every one.”

After making the usual circuit, and collecting all the money they could obtain, they laid the wren on a bier and carried it, in procession, to the parish church-yard, where, with a whimsical kind of solemnity, they made a grave, buried it, and sung dirges over it in the Manks language, which they called her knell. After the obsequies were performed, the company, outside the church-yard wall, formed a circle and danced to music which they had provided for the occasion. At present, there is no particular day for pursuing the wren; it is captured by boys alone, who follow the old custom, principally for amusement. On St Stephen's day a group of boys\* go from door to door with a wren, suspended by the legs, in the centre of two hoops, crossing each other at right angles, decorated with evergreens and ribbons, singing lines called "Hunt the Wren." If, at the close of this rhyme, they be fortunate enough to obtain a small coin, they gave in return a feather of the wren; and before the close of the day, the little bird may sometimes be seen hanging almost featherless. The ceremony of the interment of this bird in the church-yard, at the close of St Stephen's day, has long since been abandoned; and the sea-shore or some waste ground was substituted in its place.

\* In 1842, no less than four sets were observed in the town of Douglas, each party blowing a horn.

Joseph Train, *An Historical and Statistical Account of the Isle of Man*, vol. ii, 2 vols (Douglas: Mary A. Quiggin, 1845), 124–26. From Chapter xvii, *Manners and Customs*, 102–39.

#### NOTES TO TRAIN

(1) It is unlikely that Train personally witnessed Hunt the Wren. He recounts a visit to the Island during 1836, but it appears to have taken place during the summer months only: Train mentions being in Peel on 18 July and later watching the harvest at the foot of South Barrule mountain (ii, 247 & 356) but there is nothing to establish a visit beyond the summer months. (2) The extract above is taken from a chapter which relies extensively on a written description of Manx folklore written especially for Train by a native of the Island. This account is described as a "MS. *Account of Manks Customs* collected for this work by a talented native of the Island, who understands the Manks language, and is thoroughly acquainted with all the ancient customs, superstitions, and legends of the peasantry," (ii, 115, fn. 6). (3) This manuscript is now lost although it was accessible (or known) at one time to William Harrison who lists it in his *Bibliotheca Monensis* of 1861: "MS. Account of Manx Customs, collected for Train's Historical Account of the Isle of Man. By a Native of the Island (Mr P. Curphey). 1843." William Harrison, *Bibliotheca Monensis*, Manx Society, vol. viii (Douglas: Manx Society, 1861), 197. Also, *Bibliotheca Monensis*,

Manx Society, New (revised, corrected, and enlarged) ed., vol. xxiv (Douglas: Manx Society, 1876), 274. (4) “I cannot omit an acknowledgment of the assistance kindly afforded me by Mr George Curphey in drawing up the brief notice of the manners and customs of his countrymen,” “Preface,” v–xi, in Rev. J.G. Cumming, *A Guide to the Isle of Man* (London: Edward Stanford, 1861), x. As seen, he is properly Peter Curphey. (5) A listing of the founder members of the Manx Society (established in 1858) has an entry for “Curphey, Peter, (the late) Douglas.” (7) The 1851 census enumerates Peter Curphey (born 1809) as a “Master Printer and Publisher employing 8 men” living in Douglas at 1 Heywood Lane, married and with a family of six children. He was the proprietor of the *Manx Sun* newspaper as well as being a jobbing printer. *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Douglas 1861, HO 107/2525, fol. 140, sch. 22. His wife Harriet later took over the business and “[s]he was the regular printer of the important works of the Manx Society [...]” William Cubbon, *A Bibliographical Account of the Isle of Man*, vol. ii, 2 vols (Oxford University Press [for the Manx Museum and Ancient Monument Trustees], 1939), 1155. (8) For biographical details of Joseph Train (1779–1852), see Charles Dickens, “Joseph Train,” *Household Words*, 16 July 1853, 475–76; Alexander Trotter, “Joseph Train, F.S.A., Poet, Historian, and Antiquary,” *East Galloway Sketches* (Castle-Douglas: Adam Rae, 1901), 140–46. Further, Angus Fraser, “Train, Joseph (1779–1852),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004) [Online edition].

#### 5. MONA’S HERALD (8 JANUARY 1845)

Thursday last, being St Stephen’s day, hosts of young urchins were wandering about the streets singing at the doors of the inhabitants, the dirge “Hunt the Wren.” This is an old Manx custom, not yet extinct. The song may be found entire in Train’s “History of the Isle of Man.”

“[Local Intelligence] Thursday last ...” *Mona’s Herald* 8 January 1845:  
[3]c.

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# MANKS–ENGLISH DICTIONARY

REV. JOHN KELLY

(1750–1809)



## K1. REV. JOHN KELLY, MANKS–ENGLISH DICTIONARY (UNDATED)

BAAL

[...] On S[ain]t Stephen's Day the country people assemble to hunt the little Wren which they put to Death; & carry about the Country in triumph, with drums beating & colours flying & having distributed a feather to every body that can purchase it, as a charm against all disorders, for the coming ensuring year, they deposit its remains, in a very solemn manner in this Keeill ~~Alban~~, 'Ammon' & having first exercised themselves in all kinds of athletic exercises games they conclude the evening with ~~Mirth~~ Dancing Festivity & Revelling—Whether this be in Memory of the martyrdom of the Saint; or a Memorial of the bloody sacrifice paid to Baal I leave every body<sup>1</sup> to judge for themself [*orig.* themselves]. v. laa boaltinn.

Entry for headword “Baal” in partial fair copy of Rev. John Kelly's *Manks–English Dictionary*, undated, MNHL, MS 1045 A.

## K2. REV. JOHN KELLY, MANKS–ENGLISH DICTIONARY (UNDATED) [1804 OR AFTER]

BAALTINN

[...] On S[ain]t Stephen's day the inhabitants of this district assemble to hunt the ~~Wren~~ little Wren, which when caught & killed they fasten to the top of a long pole, & carry about in procession, with drums beaten and colours flying, & distribute for money the feathers of the bird, which are esteemed by the purchasers to be a charm against all evils for the ensuring year; so far is common with the practice of other parts of the Island; but in Baaltinn, the body of the naked wren is deposited with much solemnity in Kil Ammon, & the evening concluded with a variety of games on the open ground which adjoins. While some think this to be an emblem of the change from human sacrifice to those of beasts in the offerings of Baal, others think, with apparently more reason, that it is a superstitious memorial of the death of the saint.

Entry for headword “Baaltinn” in partial copy of Rev. John Kelly's *Manks–English Dictionary*, undated [1804 or after], MNHL, MS 2048 B.

**Notes:** (1) The date for [K2] comes from the watermark. (2) Material from the various Kelly mss. was edited by the Rev. William Gill to create *Fockleyr Manninagh as Baarlagh*, Manx Society, vol. xiii (Douglas: Manx Society, 1866).

### K3. FOCKLEYR MANNINAGH AS BAARLAGH (1866)

#### [K3.1] BAALTINN

[15a] [...] On St Stephen's day the inhabitants of this district assemble to hunt the little Wren, which, when caught and killed, they fasten to the top of a long pole and carry about in procession, with drums beating, and colours flying, and distribute for money the feathers of the bird, which are esteemed by the purchasers to be a charm against all evils for the ensuring year. So far is common with the practice of other parts of the Island; but in Baaltinn the body of the naked wren is deposited with much solemnity in Kil Ammon, and the evening concludes with a variety of games on the open ground which adjoins. While some think this to be an emblem of the change from human sacrifices to those of beasts in the offerings of Baal, others think, with apparently more reason, that it is a superstitious memorial of the death of the saint.

#### [K4.2] DREAIN

[67b] DREAIN, s. a wren. (*Ir. dreathann, W. dryw.*) This word is derived from *druai eean*, the druid's bird, and the inhabitants on the day after receiving the *uil* or mistletoe, which was on the 25th December, hunted the the wren, and when taken, its feathers were distributed among the people, as a preservative against witchcraft. As this happens on St Stephen's day, it may be in commemoration of the first martyr.

#### [K4.3] LAA'LL-STEAAOIN

[116b] Laa'll-Steaaoin, St Stephen's day, December 26th. It is the custom of the inhabitants of the several parishes to catch a wren, upon this day, and parade with flags flying and music, with the wren fixed upon the point of a long pole; and they oblige every person they meet to purchase a feather, and to wear it in their hats for the day; in the evening they inter the naked body, with great solemnity; and conclude the evening with wrestling and all manner of sports. This is supposed to be in memory of the first martyr.

Headwords "Baaltinn," 14–15, "Dreain," 67b, "Laa'll-Steaaoin," 116b, in Rev. William Gill, ed., *Fockleyr Manninagh as Baarlagh*, Manx Society, vol. xiii (Douglas: Manx Society, 1866).

#### NOTES ON THE REV. JOHN KELLY

(1) For a biographical notice of the Rev. John Kelly (1750–1809), see A.W. Moore, "John Kelly (b. 1750, d. 1809)," *Manx Worthies* (Douglas: S.K. Broadbent, 1901) 94–95. This used for the entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. (2) Updated by

N.J.A. Williams, “Kelly, John (1750-1809), Manx scholar,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004) [Online edition]. (3) For a linguistic assessment of Kelly’s work, see Robert L. Thomson “The Revd Dr John Kelly as Lexicographer,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Antiquarian and Natural History Society*, ix.4 (1989), 443–58.

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The Rev. John Kelly’s *Manks–English Dictionary* never appeared in his lifetime, whilst his *Triglot Dictionary* succumbed to the flames and ended that project. Material from the manuscripts was later edited by the Rev. William Gill and appeared in 1866 as *Fockleyr Manninagh as Baarlagh* under three headwords, Baaltinn (‘Beltaine’), Dreain (‘Wren’), and Laa’ll-Steaaoi (‘St Stephen’s Day’). Manuscript material appears for just the Baal/Baaltinn headword in partial copies of Kelly’s dictionary (MS 1045 A and MS 2048 B). Kelly’s description falls into line with the others from the same period here, though the feathers were a charm against witchcraft and worn that day in one’s hat. Drums are mentioned when the wren pole was being carried around together with “colours flying” but with no mention of any singing taking place. Kelly links wren hunting with a commemoration of the martyrdom of St Stephen, but adding a twist with the mention of a burial of the wren on May Day at Keeil Abban, a day that he associated with Baal, the so-called fire-god, adding, however, “I leave everyone to judge for themselves.”



## GEORGE WALDRON

### TEHI-TEGI!

BUT the reason for obliging the Females to this Hardship, is a very whimsical one, and such a one, as I believe, cannot but afford some Diversion to my curious Reader; I shall, therefore, insert it in the manner it was told me by an old Native, to whom it had been handed down from many Generations as an undoubted Verity.

HE told me that a famous Enchantress sojourning in this Island, but in what Year he was ignorant, had, by her diabolical Arts, made herself appear so lovely in the Eyes of Men, that she ensnared the Hearts of as many as beheld her. The Passion they had for her, so took up all their Hearts, that they entirely neglected their usual Occupations; they neither plowed nor sowed; neither built Houses, nor repaired them; their Gardens were all overgrown with Weeds, and their once fertile Fields were covered with Stones; their Cattle died for want of Pasture, their Turf lay in the Bowels of the Earth undug for; and every thing had the Appearance of an utter Desolation: even Propagation ceased, for no Man could have the least Inclination for any Woman but this universal Charmer, who smiled on them, permitted them to follow and admire her, and gave every one leave to hope himself would be at last the happy He.

WHEN she had thus allured the male Part of the Island, she pretended one day to go a Progress through the Provinces, and being attended by all her Adorers on [151] foot, while she rode on a milk-white Palfrey, in a kind of Triumph at the head of them: she led them into a deep River, which by her Art she made seem passable; and when they were all come a good way in it, she caused a sudden Wind to rise, which driving the Waters in such abundance to one Place, swallowed up the poor Lovers to the number of Six Hundred in their tumultuous Waves. After which, the Sorceress was seen by some Persons, who stood on the Shore, to convert herself into a Bat, and fly through the Air till she was out of sight; as did her Palfrey into a Sea-Hog or Porpoise, and instantly plunged itself to the Bottom of the Stream.

To prevent any such like Accident for the future, these wise People have ordained their Women to go on foot, and follow wheresoever their Lords the Men shall lead; and this Custom is so religiously observed, as indeed all their Traditions are, that if by chance a Woman is before, whoever sees her, cries out immediately, *Tehi-Tegi!* *Tehi-Tegi!* which, it seems, was the Name of that Enchantress [152] which occasioned this Law among them.

