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Lucky white heather: a sesquicentennial review of a Scottish Victorian conceit

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The Scots' attachment of good luck to white heather contradicts a general tendency in the folk-lore of northern European flowering plants: to quote Vickery (1995), "many white flowers ... are considered to be inauspicious when taken indoors [and] some people extend this belief to include all white flowers." In Norway white heather is regarded as a sign of bad luck (Petterssen 1994), and in Langesund, southern Norway, heather plants with white flowers are believed to indicate the site of a crime (Høeg 1974; Alm 1999). Indeed, in a study of *unlucky* plants Vickery (1985) reported, under bell heather (*Erica cinerea*), this statement: "My grandfather (a Scottish Royalist) always said that white heather was unlucky because of its connections with the banishment of Bonny Prince Charlie."

The tradition also contradicts generally held superstitions about heather, especially *Calluna* (ling). In Sweden, for example, there is a belief that when ling is brought into the house it will bring bad luck, poverty, or even death, to someone in the family (Johansson 1985, 1994). Remarkably, again with reference to Scotland, Vickery (1985) recorded a Mrs B. Petre recalling that during childhood holidays in the Highlands "we were not permitted to bring either heather or heath into the house, but on the other hand white heather was considered lucky."

Our late President, David McClintock, an avid delver into the arcana of heathers, published an article about the origin of the tradition of lucky white heather in the issue of *Country life* dated 15 January 1970;



Figure 1. White-blossomed heather (ling), *Calluna vulgaris*, in County Kerry, September 2005.

this much-cited article has been reprinted several times – in *Heather news* (Fall 1994) and the *Bulletin of The Heather Society* (Spring 1996). He concluded that even the members of the Heather Society “cannot tell you when or why white heather was first considered lucky”, but he concluded that “perhaps it was an old Scottish belief which Queen Victoria fostered and made fashionable” (see also Vickery 1995; [Mackay 1995]). In fact, McClintock was not the first to chronicle the tradition of white heather – Alexander Wallace had done so in his book *The heather in lore, lyric and lay*, published in New York during 1903.

Queen Victoria and her family, and white heather

I was prompted to revisit David’s article after reading Christopher Hibbert’s *Queen Victoria. A personal history* (2000) in which there are several references, in different contexts, to white heather, and by the fact that the seminal event in the history of *lucky* white heather happened in 1855: 2005 was the sesquicentenary.

McClintock reported that he could find no references to the superstition that white heather was lucky before 1855¹, and that the earliest source was Queen Victoria’s book *Leaves from the journal of our life in the Highlands from 1848 to 1861*. Edited by Arthur Helps (Clerk of The Privy Council), the Queen’s book was originally issued in an edition for private circulation only, but was subsequently published by Smith, Elder & Co., and, so Hibbert (2000: 329–330) related, sold 100,000 copies within three months. The Queen herself was to write that “my book did me more good than anything else”, and while many were critical of its style and contents she dismissed such grumbles. The date of publication was 1868, so the earliest reference, in the public domain, to lucky white heather really should be so dated. In the sequel, *More leaves from the journal of a life in the Highlands from 1862 to 1882*, which was published in 1884, there was at least one more reference to lucky white heather, as noted by McClintock (1970).

McClintock reported that he had found “a mere 11 original references to the superstition before 1900” – it is not clear what he meant by this but he did add that “it is surely significant that the first three definite references and the first six out of the first ten are connected with Queen Victoria and all but one with Scotland.” These first ten references included a novel by William Black, *Macleod of Dare*, published in 1878. Sabine Baring-Gould’s novel of 1883, *John Herring*, contained the statement that “It is said in the West [of England] that the white heather brings good luck to the person that secures it”, while the title of Black’s 1885 three-volume work, *White*

heather. A novel, suggests that the tradition was well established in the public's mind by the mid-1880s. This latter work, described by Wallace (1903) as a tale of "pure fiction", contained an elaborate fable about a girl's search for a sprig of white heather to send to her lover.

As for actually using white heather during the Victorian era, McClintock (1970) reported that sprigs were included in the bouquets of the brides or bridesmaids at the weddings of Princess Helena of Waldeck-Pyrmont to Prince Leopold, Duke of Albany (Queen Victoria's fourth son), on 27 April 1882. Wallace (1903: 163) added that "at the marriage of Prince Leopold ... the bridesmaids wore headdresses composed of clusters of violets, primroses and White Heather" which, given the season, cannot have been *Calluna*; unfortunately, he does not state his source for this description. White heather also featured in the bridal flowers at the weddings of Princess Mary ("May") of Teck, the future Queen Mary, on 6 July 1893 to the Duke of York (King George V to be), and of Queen Victoria's youngest daughter Princess Beatrice, on 23 July 1893, to Prince Henry of Battenburg. Queen Victoria herself recorded that Princess Mary of Teck wore "On her head ... a small wreath of orange flowers, myrtle, and white heather surmounted by the diamond necklace I gave her, which can also be worn as a diadem, and her mother's wedding veil" (Hibbert 1984: 325), while its inclusion in Princess Beatrice's bouquet seems to be confirmed by Queen Victoria's instructions about the burial of the Princess's husband, Prince Henry, who died of malaria in 1896: "... the crucifix to be put in his hand with a piece of ivy, white heather, and myrtle from the Princess's wedding bouquet ...", she commanded (Hibbert 2000: 496).

The language of flowers

Given that *Leaves from the journal of our life in the Highlands from 1848 to 1861* was a sensational best-seller (estimated to have earned £30,000 in royalties for Queen Victoria), there is little reason not to agree with David McClintock that the tradition attributing luck to white heather achieved popularity during her reign. The evidence from other publications seems to support this suggestion. I cannot be sure whether David searched through the numerous books dealing with the language of flowers – I suspect he didn't. In those that were published before about 1870, and which I have managed to examine, there are no entries for white heather, only for "heath" and its meaning is always "solitude" – the same meaning is attributed to lichen! However, in at least one post-1868 edition – Tyas's *Speaking flowers* (1875: 98–99) – there is an entry for white heather and its meaning is given as

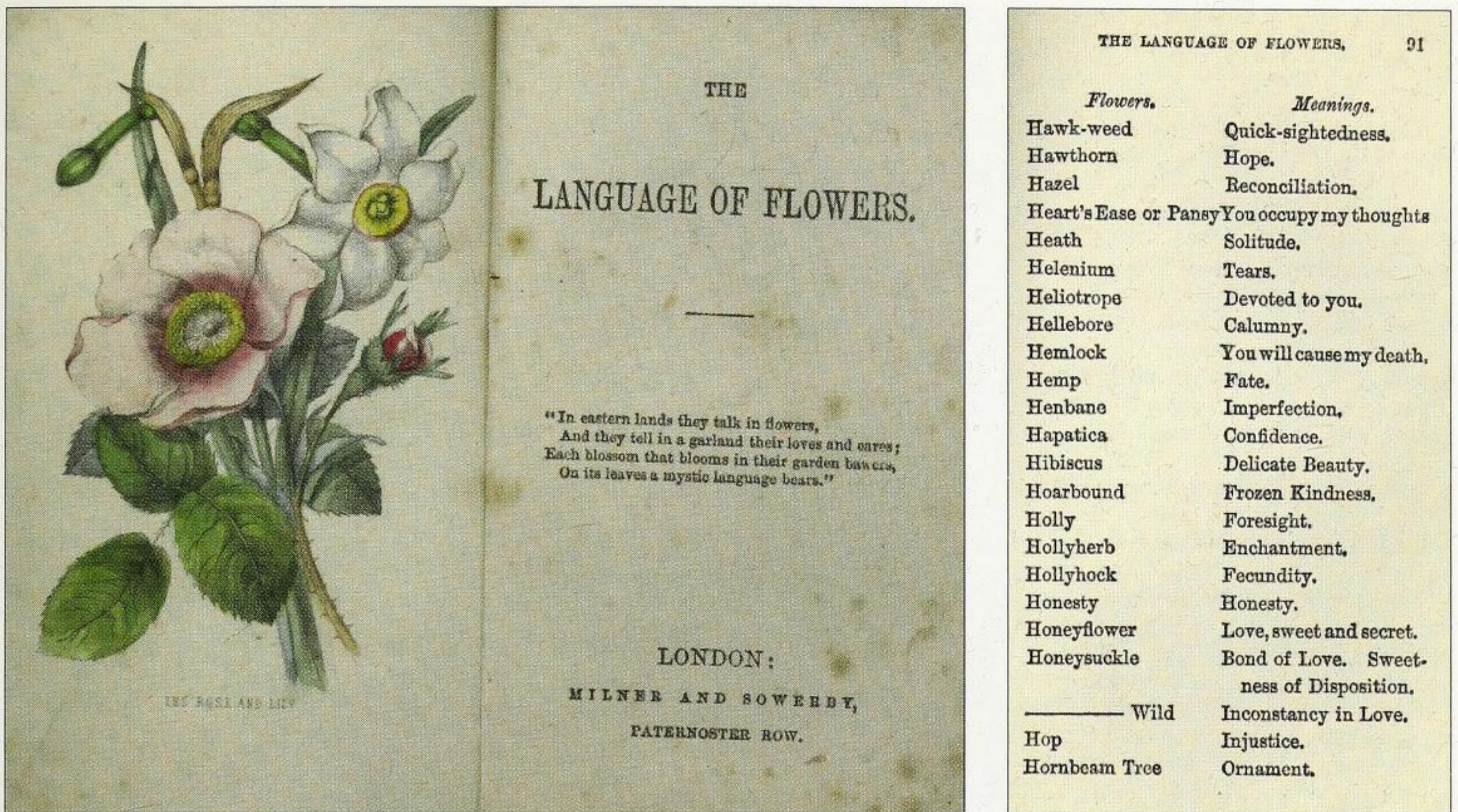


Figure 2. Frontispiece and title-page from an edition of *The language of flowers* published before 1871 (it is inscribed "W. A. Kirby, Scarbro' May 30th 1871"), and the page for the letter H.

"good luck": "it is so regarded in Scotland, as we read in our beloved Queen's "Journal in the Highlands" ...", Tyas explained! Under "Good luck", Tyas (1875: 145) noted that it was signified by "white Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*, β alba)".

The Scottish connection re-examined

Hibbert (2000: 294) noted that Queen Victoria "was much struck by coincidences and was superstitious about luck", traits she shared with Napoleon III, Emperor of France.² "White heather was used by the British royal family as a sort of charm, considered lucky for brides", according to *Curious chapbooks and hysterical histories* (chapter 10), but was it a peculiarly Scottish tradition, ancient and so untraceable, yet revealed and then popularized by Queen Victoria?

Let's examine the actual record, bearing in mind that *Leaves from the journal of our life in the Highlands from 1848 to 1861* is a heavily edited version of the Queen's personal journal of her life at Balmoral. The first reference to white heather and its lucky association is contained in the account of the day in the Autumn of 1855 when Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia (later to be, very briefly, Emperor of Germany) asked the then 14-year old Princess Royal, Princess Victoria, the eldest daughter of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, to be his bride. On 29 September 1855

Our dear Victoria was this day engaged to Prince Frederick William ... during our ride up Craig na Ban³ this afternoon he picked a piece of white heather (the emblem of Good Luck⁴) which he gave to her; this enabled him to make an allusion to his hopes and wishes, as they rode down Glen Girnoch ...

But the Queen did not herself witness this romantic – and undoubtedly romanticised – moment, according to Hibbert’s account (2000: 239), *contra* McClintock (1970) who implied that she was a witness.

One difficulty is that Queen Victoria’s original diaries do not survive. Princess Beatrice was charged by her mother to burn the originals, which she did. However, Hibbert (1984: 98) provided a transcript of a “Memorandum by the Queen”, dated 29 September 1855, which records a slightly different version of the events on that day. It commences: “I must write down at once what has happened—what I feel and how grateful I am to God for one of the happiest days of my life!” The Queen continued:

When we got off our ponies this afternoon Fritz gave me a look which implied that his little proposal to Vicky, which he had begged us to let him make—had succeeded. ... He said in answer to my question whether anything had occurred, yes—that ... while riding with her, just at the very beginning—he began to speak of Germany, his hope that she w^d. come there & stay there; they were interrupted in fact 3 times, upon one occasion by the picking up of some white heather which he said was good luck—w^h. he wished her—& she him⁵

Surely she would not have written about asking the Crown Prince, known in the British Royal Family as “Fritz”, if he had succeeded had she been a witness to the event?

That provokes me to wonder whether this really was an old Scottish tradition? If the act of picking the sprig of white-flowered heather was a spontaneous one on the part of the Crown Prince, and if it was his affirmation that this was good luck, then we may consider it an imported, European superstition. To suppose that on this his first ever visit to Scotland he was prompted by, or even deliberately instructed by, the Queen or Prince Albert or a member of the royal household, to fulfil the requirements of an old Scottish belief (as suggested by McClintock), requiring him to find, collect and present the white heather as a means of contriving to declare his love, seems rather far-fetched. White-flowered bushes of *Calluna vulgaris* (ling), *Erica cinerea* (bell heather) and *E. tetralix* (cross-leaved heath) do occur in the Scottish Highlands, but are not that easily found: in fact, we don’t actually

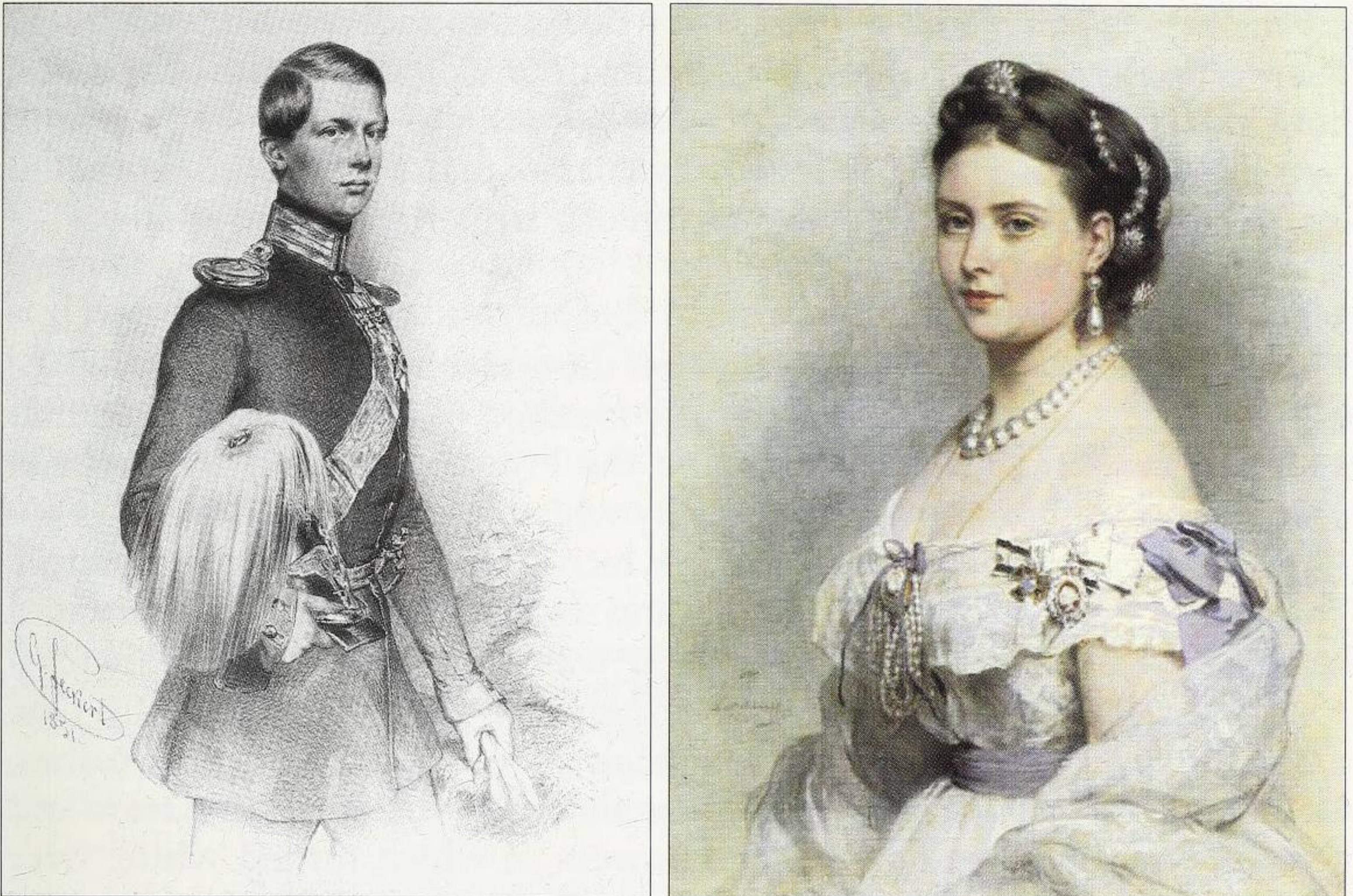


Figure 3. Prince Friedrich Wilhelm as a student, 1851 (left) (in later life he was H. I. M. Friedrich III of Germany), and (right) HRH Princess Victoria, The Princess Royal (a portrait by F. X. Winterhalter, 1867, when she was Crown Princess of Prussia and Germany).

know which heather it was that the Crown Prince plucked and presented to the Princess Royal because the accounts do not record its exact identity.

What is clear, however, is that the action of the Prussian Crown Prince lingered in the memory of the British Royal Family, and became a motif. Perhaps the most telling incident occurred seven years later, on 3 September 1862, when the recently widowed Queen was at Laeken to meet Prince and Princess Christian of Denmark and their daughter Alexandra, the fiancée of the Prince of Wales, "Bertie". "Her whole appearance", wrote Queen Victoria, "was one of the greatest charm, combined with simplicity and perfect dignity. I gave her a little piece of white heather, which Bertie gave me at Balmoral, and I told her I hoped it would bring her luck" (Hibbert 1984: 167). Thus the Princess Royal's younger brother employed the same token to convey a message to his future wife.

The modern "tradition"

In an interesting reversal of the royal tradition, nowadays at weddings in Scotland white heather is more often worn by the groom and his party⁶, than by the the bride. Yet there is a constant in these actions – white heather

is a token between couples, a love-token boding good fortune or good luck. There is no element of chance – of chancing upon a plant of white-blossomed heather in the wild – in the same way as a lucky four-leaved clover. In any case, the element of chance, if it ever was a part of the lore, has been extirpated by the ready availability at every season of a white-blossomed heather.

Malvina and Oscar

There is another twist to this tale, and it is the odder because neither Wallace (1903) nor McClintock (1970) made any mention of it. It is also a twist that may exonerate the Crown Prince and the Princess Royal as the original perpetrators of the contradictory “lucky white heather” tradition.

Searching the Internet reveals a tale which is repeated on numerous sites.⁷ This “Celtic” legend, “an old, old tale and a sad one”, is about Malvina and her lover Oscar. Needless to say, Oscar was a handsome, gallant hero, a warrior and, like all handsome warrior-heroes, was away doing battle. One day, a “ragged” messenger brought Malvina a bunch of purple heather, Oscar’s last token of love before he was slain. Malvina burst into tears and her tears fell on some heather, the flowers of which turned white. Ever afterwards, as she sorrowfully wandered the moors, crying for her dead lover, those of her tears that dripped on to heather instantly turned the flowers white. “Although this is a symbol of my sorrow”, she declared, “may the white heather bring good fortune to all who find it.”

That fable has clear links with the infamous forgeries of the Revd John Macpherson, Minister of Sleat on the Isle of Skye, and his namesake James Macpherson (they were not related). To quote Hugh Trevor-Roper (1982), “between them, by two distinct acts of bold forgery, [the Macphersons] created an indigenous literature for Celtic Scotland and, as a necessary support to it, a new history.” They stole both history and literature from the Irish! “The sheer effrontery of the Macphersons must excite admiration,” declared Trevor-Roper, but “it took a full century to clear Scottish history—if it has ever been cleared—of the distorting and interdependent fabrications of the two Macphersons.” The fabrications included the Ossian cycle of poems: there are several websites on which these texts are posted.

I must however make clear that there is no trace of the story about Malvina, Oscar and the tearful transformation of purple heather into white in James Macpherson’s original Ossian text – not even a hint of it. Where did the tale come from? A possibility, I suggest, may be a mid-nineteenth century edition of *Ossian*, embellished and enlarged by a disciple of the Macphersons. If such a work exists, it is quite possible that it was among the

reading matter of the young princes and princesses when they were on holiday at Balmoral, and maybe when “Fritz” and “Vicki” were out riding, the day of their betrothal, the sight of a white-flowered heather brought to mind the Ossianic tale and Malvina’s wish.

Yet, if that is the case and an embellished nineteenth-century version of *Ossian* exists, I am puzzled about the silence of Wallace and McClintock, and the more puzzled about the lack of any clear leads to this putative work from the websites I have searched. There may, of course, be a late-twentieth-century “Macpherson” at work, continuing to invent tradition and, worse, to add to this ludicrous “chain of error in Scottish history”. My attempts to trace the culprit (or author) have so far completely failed.

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Notes

¹ To exemplify the silence about white heather being a token of good luck, Ann Pratt’s *Flowering plants of Great Britain* volume 3 contains substantial material about heather, including the statement that *Calluna vulgaris* (ling) “... is an exceedingly beautiful plant ... occasionally bearing white flowers.” She quoted George Luxford who opined that it was “a very elegant plant. The red and the white-flowered varieties, with their smooth, deep green, closely imbricated leaves, are pretty and delicate...”. There is no mention of it being a lucky plant. Mrs Pratt also noted “old traditions, still extant in Ireland, ... that the Danes made beer of the Heath”, and that it was used in the Scottish highlands to make ropes, and in the Western Isles to dye yarn.

² She is also alleged to have named one of her cats, a black and white Persian, “White Heather” (see Victorian Cat Society of CLAW, <http://www.geocities.com/meowser18/Vic/> accessed 10 October 2005). However, Miss Pamela Clark (Registrar, The Royal Archives) informed me, in a letter dated 15 December 2005, that “we have been unable over the years ... to find any reference in our records to the cat “White Heather” ... or, indeed, to find any reference to any cat owned by the Queen.”

³ Creag nam Ban is the current spelling of this toponym according to the Ordnance Survey. It is a granite hill (527m, 1,735ft; GR NO290945), situated south-east of Abergeldie Castle, and 5km east of Balmoral. A 40-year lease on lands of Abergeldie was purchased by Prince Albert, the Prince Consort, in 1848. Glen Girnoch lies on the eastern side of Creag nam Ban and small tributaries of Girnoch Burn drain its eastern flank.

⁴ Given that in *The language of flowers* heath is stated to indicate solitude, one wonders indeed why he chose to pick heather. Perhaps he knew nothing about the coded system of sending messages. It is also noteworthy that he was not misunderstood!

⁵ Queen Victoria, Memorandum 29 September 1855; original ms, The Royal Archives, Windsor Castle: VIC / Add A 7 / 9: transcript by courtesy of Miss Pamela Clark, Registrar.

⁶ For example, <http://www.brideworld.com/plan/traditions.htm> (Accessed 10 October 2005).

⁷ For example <http://www.scottishwhiteheather.com/heatherstory.html>; <http://www.greatclanross.org/icons2.html>; www.clan-macpherson.ca (Accessed 10 October 2005).

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