

The Ghost That Haunted Itself

The Story of the Mackenzie
Poltergeist - The Infamous Ghoul of
Greyfriars Graveyard

Jan-Andrew Henderson



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Thanks to Claire and Sarah for all the invaluable work they did. Also Katherine, Kate, Cara, Andrew, Duncan, David, Derek, Joy and Gillian. Each helped in their own unique way.

There is a legend that some of the world's most famous fictional monsters and villains were born in Greyfriars churchyard, Edinburgh, Scotland.

In a visit to the cemetery in 1841, Charles Dickens misread the tombstone of a man called Scroggie and invented Ebenezer Scrooge. Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, used to sit in the peace and quiet of the graveyard to come up with inspiration for his stories. Polidori, writer of the first vampire story – which heavily influenced the novel *Dracula* – studied just beyond the cemetery wall and Bram Stoker also visited Greyfriars while writing this seminal novel. Mary Shelley was on honeymoon in Edinburgh at the height of the bodysnatching period, when ‘resurrection men’ dug up bodies from Greyfriars and sold them to scientists for their experiments. Shortly afterwards, she wrote *Frankenstein*.

The story of the Mackenzie Poltergeist, however, is true. When I was asked, or when I felt I should, I changed the names of participants to protect their anonymity. My thanks to all those who came forward and wrote down their accounts. In recreating actual incidents I have allowed myself what I hope is a suitably dramatic turn of phrase – but never at the expense of the facts.

In a country like this
Our ghosts outnumber us
DOUGLAS DUNN (1942-) 'AT FALKLAND PALACE'

If you ask, how do I know I have received God's grace?
The answer is: If you know with certainty that God exists,
then you have received it; if not, not.
CHARLES VAN DOREN, *A HISTORY OF KNOWLEDGE*<

If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a
large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank.
WOODY ALLEN (1935-)

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Prologue

What do people need to believe? Now, there's a question that can be taken more than one way. One might say that all we need to believe is the capacity for abstract thought – it often seems we need precious little else. People have believed in fairies, Valhalla and the necessity of the Berlin wall. Sometimes what once seemed obvious to us all turns out to be completely wrong. People believed the world was flat. It was a good guess. Seemed right. It wasn't until science built up enough evidence to the contrary that everyone came to accept the world was round. Yet there are still many who can't really understand why we don't fall off.

In the end, it doesn't matter. We accept the world is round. We don't fall off.

So. What do we *need* to believe?

Do we need to believe that we are not alone? No. There are lonely people. They live. They may not live happily, but they live.

Do we need to believe there is a point to life? Do we need to believe there is something for us after we die?

Again, no, though it is certainly depressing to hold such points of view.

But perhaps we *want* to believe. We want very much to believe that there is something greater than us. Something we don't understand. A point that nobody gets, not even the geniuses. Something that science can't pick apart and make us feel like children. For that we have faith, a belief so strong that it doesn't need evidence. Faith in astrology. Faith in reincarnation. Faith in God.

It is hard to have faith. Scientists tell us we *do* need evidence, that we are fooling ourselves and we have faith in science, so we are dispirited and torn. So we look for evidence of the existence of something, anything, that science and the rational mind are at a loss to explain.

We look for ghosts.

If you say you have been reincarnated you are treated like an idiot; nobody accepts you were really abducted by aliens and only psychopaths believe they have talked to God. But ghosts? So many people claim to have seen one. Can they all be deluded? Perhaps. There are precious few photographs of spectres that don't look as though someone inadvertently put their thumb in front of the camera. It could be that eighteenth-century highwayman you saw outside the window was on his way to a fancy-dress party. It's easy to doubt your own mind in the cold light of day.

A poltergeist is a different matter. Poltergeists move things. They are physical. There may be a scientific explanation for this phenomenon – but that discipline, for all its doggedness, has so far failed to come up with a satisfactory one. Maybe scientists aren't trying hard enough. Perhaps they don't believe enough to really explore the phenomenon. If so, shame on them, for there are few unexplained things left to explore. The defence of the rational mind is that historical poltergeists are the product of ignorance and modern cases are hoaxes. They cite the Amityville or Enfield poltergeists – two of the best-documented cases in history – as proof. Both turned out to be fakes. The witnesses were misrepresented, or had something to gain. 'Evidence' turned out to be manufactured. It's hard to argue with that.

In the two years between 1999 and 2001 there have been over 70 recorded sightings of the entity named the 'Mackenzie Poltergeist'. Witnesses to its attacks ran into the hundreds. They were observers who just happened to be there and they had nothing to gain.

If there is an explanation for the Mackenzie Poltergeist,
'didn't really happen' isn't one of them.
This is its story.

Gill

Statement given by Gill Bruce on 12 April 2001. Gill is a 21-year-old student studying at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

I worked over Christmas 2001 in a gift shop and, on my way home after work, I stopped in to see a friend of mine called Ben Scott. His house looks over Greyfriars graveyard, which I have always found fascinating as well as a bit macabre.

Ben had told me about the poltergeist which is supposed to haunt Greyfriars and had commented that the house seemed to have a 'resident ghost'. He thought this was very funny, but I couldn't see how living in a haunted house, in a graveyard, could be a laughing matter.

We were sitting having coffee in his living-room when we heard the toilet flush in the bathroom, just outside the living-room door. 'It likes the bathroom,' Ben said. I know that doesn't sound exactly terrifying, but it sent a chill up my spine. There was nobody else in the house to flush the toilet and no mistaking what the noise was.

I might have brushed it off, but the next time I went to Ben's house there was another 'incident'. Ben was sitting in his living-room with his friend Duncan when I arrived. They told me they had heard what sounded like someone jumping around in the spare room, though there was nobody else in the house. Again, I didn't believe it and thought they were making fun of me – but suddenly there was a tremendous crash from the spare room. There was no mistaking where the sound came from and, of course, we went to see what it was.

The room was completely empty.

The City of the Dead

Cauld blaws the nippin' north wi' angry south
And showers his hailstones frae the Castle Cleugh
Owr the Greyfriars, whare at mirkest hour
Bogles and spectres wont to take their tour
FROM 'THE GHAISTS: A KIRKYARD EPILOGUE' BY ROBERT FERGUSON (1750-74)
(DIED AT 24 IN BEDLAM ASYLUM JUST OUTSIDE GREYFRIARS GATES)

Two weeks ago Lisa Allen from Boston visited the Graveyard on the tour. She said, 'There was no doubt this was real. I felt it and I never want to feel it again.'

'Is this graveyard the home of Edinburgh's scariest poltergeist?'
EDINBURGH *EVENING NEWS*, 3 JULY 1999

On the day after Christmas, Ben Scott came home from a party to find blood running down his apartment walls. This would have been traumatic enough under normal circumstances, but Ben Scott's circumstances were not exactly normal. His house was in Greyfriars cemetery - a graveyard that had long been regarded in Edinburgh lore as home to an impressive variety of ghosts and spectres. A cemetery that had, in recent years, become famous as the site of a supernatural entity known as the 'Mackenzie Poltergeist'. To make matters worse, Ben Scott's job involved taking nightly tours round the graveyard to show visitors 'The Covenanters' Prison' - a locked section of the cemetery. In that section was a tomb nicknamed 'The Black Mausoleum' and this, supposedly, was where the Mackenzie Poltergeist could be found.

If Ben Scott had been a believer in the paranormal he might have wondered if the Mackenzie Poltergeist hadn't just paid him a visit in return. But he didn't believe in that kind of thing.

He took off his coat and put it on a coat hook. Then he got a chair, pushed it against the wall, stood on it and looked carefully at the red stains. The substance had dried but it certainly looked like blood. Ben licked his finger, ran it down a discoloured patch of wall and was about to put it to his lips when he thought better of it. He really didn't want to know what this stuff tasted like.

He considered the possibilities. The whole thing could be a practical joke by his friends, though he couldn't begin to imagine them playing a prank this elaborate. Even so, he got off the stool and checked his windows. Outside in the graveyard, tombstones poked granite heads through pristine snow, each ancient marker topped with a frosty halo. Even the trees were crowned with thorns of ice. It was the first white Christmas Ben could remember for years. He looked down. The snow was unbroken below both windows and the windows themselves were still fastened shut.

Ben got a flashlight from his cupboard, fetched a short ladder from the hall and stood it under the small trapdoor in the ceiling. He laboriously hoisted himself through the dark square and toppled into the attic.

'This is a hell of a thing to be doing at Christmas,' he groaned to himself. 'Especially with a hangover.'

He began to crawl gingerly across the cold attic slats, the weak beam of light from his torch wobbling around in the darkness. He had never been up here before, and his eyes made out boxes of forgotten toys from someone else's childhood. The beam of light suddenly gleamed off a pair of beady eyes staring into his own.

'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!!! Oh, hello teddy.'

Ben shone the torch behind the tatty stuffed bear and, seeing something else glisten, shuffled closer and ran his fingers over a wooden roof beam. It was wet.

'Aha!' he said softly, a smug grin on his face.

Ben's parents came down from the north that afternoon, bearing gifts. His mother watched as he excitedly tore apart a huge, ribbon-infested parcel.

'It's a garden ornament,' Ben held up a silver-painted plaster cherub. 'That's lovely. No, really, it is.'

'I know you don't have a garden,' said his mother, 'but I thought it would go well with your surroundings.' She nodded furtively towards the graveyard outside, as if the present was designed to appeal to the dead residents as well.

Ben's father stood, hands in pockets, and looked around. 'What's that muck over a' the walls?' Ben had tried to clean off the red stains with a damp cloth, but had only succeeded in spreading them around in wide, rusty swabs. It looked like he had engaged in a ritual slaughter, then unsuccessfully tried to hide the evidence.

'The thermostat on my boiler broke.' Ben pointed to the cupboard where the boiler was kept. 'The water started boiling and forced steam up the overflow pipe and onto the roof. The steam melted the snow, the water ran back down the pipe, hit the top of the boiler, evaporated and spread out across the roof under the wallpaper.'

'Why does your roof hae wallpaper on it anyway?' Ben's father was never one to let a good explanation go uninterrupted.

'It was like that when I moved in. Anyway. Under the wallpaper, the water must have picked up rust or some kind of red dirt. When it reached the walls it started to run down, carrying the red stuff with it.'

'But there's nae join between the wallpaper on the roof and the wallpaper on the wall.' His father peered upwards. 'And how come there's nae red marks on the roof?'

'I don't know,' Ben sighed. 'I'll repaint the walls.'

'You should.' His mother was placing the angel experimentally in different parts of the room. 'It looks like somebody died in here.'

By Christmas 2000, Ben Scott had been taking tours in Greyfriars churchyard for a year and a half. In that time, he'd seen much to amuse him: he'd witnessed people collapse, apparently 'attacked' by the Mackenzie Poltergeist. He'd lost count of the cuts and bruises visitors claimed had been inflicted on them by something they couldn't see, and had watched with amusement as psychics bumbled among the granite tombs pointing out deceased residents at every turn. He'd smiled when hysterical women on the night walks he led insisted something was touching their hair in the dark.

Ben couldn't believe that people really fell for that kind of stuff. Yes, it was creepy as hell in the graveyard. Once or twice, when he had gone in alone to retrieve a forgotten flashlight, he'd almost had the screaming heebie-jeebies himself - who wouldn't? It wasn't that Ben believed he might see a ghost - he was more scared that some escaped convict might jump out at him from behind a gravestone. Or a serial killer. Or a giant, mutant crab woman from Pluto.

Greyfriars at night had a powerful influence on the imagination.

But the graveyard didn't scare Ben Scott, and neither did its so-called poltergeist. There were plenty of real monsters in the world to do that and just as many demons in the mind.

There was no doubt, of course, that visitors really did collapse in the cemetery; Ben's tours had an average of one a month. Ben could almost swear he himself had heard whispering and rattling noises in the tombs and he had certainly seen the mysterious cuts and bruises that visitors picked up on his walks. He even had photographs of them.

But Ben wasn't easily convinced. It was dark in the cemetery and the tour parties huddled together, as social niceties gave way to an atavistic fear of the unknown. Anybody who had a couple of terrified strangers hanging on

to them for dear life was bound to acquire a few bruises. It was the same when people fell over – all it took was an impressionable mind, a bit of abject terror and a touch of claustrophobia.

All right. So 27 collapses in a year and a half did seem a bit excessive – many of the victims hadn't seemed impressionable or frightened, and most of the cuts and bruises had appeared on people who were standing on their own. But if Ben couldn't come up with a logical explanation in every case, it certainly didn't mean that some invisible entity was slapping the paying customers around.

Besides, attacks were great for business – people *wanted* a genuine brush with the supernatural. It was proof that humans were more than eventual worm fodder. So what if it was all in the visitors' minds?

Ben Scott loved the Mackenzie Poltergeist.

A few days later, Ben had a nightmare. He dreamed he climbed through the trapdoor in his ceiling – only this time he came out, not in the attic, but on top of one of the ancient mausoleums that were scattered throughout the cemetery. Greyfriars was spread out in front of him, teeming with worms of moonlight. Ben felt cold and resigned, as if he had sat here, night after night, for many years. The tomb was where his house ought to be, but he realised he could see all the way across the graveyard to the Covenanters' Prison – the church that should have been in the way was no longer there. He knew this was how it often was with dreams; they removed obstacles that couldn't be overcome in the real world.

As he watched, he saw a tall, thin figure with spindly limbs and the body of a concentration camp victim come skipping backwards through the cemetery gates. It was dancing a horrible clown jig, a puppet dance, all arms and legs and wobbling pirouettes. As part of the dance the figure kept leaping backwards into the air – impossibly huge springs –

30 feet, then 25, then 20, landing awkwardly, as if the effort of making each jump were becoming more and more taxing. Each time, it came down closer to Ben Scott's tomb. The figure's long leather coat was in tatters and it jerked around like a big black bird that had been shot in the air. With one last exhausted spring, it landed on the grass directly below Ben, staggering badly now, still facing away. Hopping and panting, it continued the frantic movements, breath whistling from a ragged throat, gathering its strength for another leap.

Though he was terrified of this tapping, whispering monstrosity, Ben couldn't stand the thought that the figure might continue past. More than anything, he did not want to be alone again, to have to climb back into that tomb. In desperation he started to dance as well, trying to move the way the figure was moving, to show he was a kindred spirit. He danced a dance of friendship, hopping up and down and waving his arms around his head. Then he saw the figure's back quiver and thought it was going to jump again and not notice him. So Ben Scott flapped his arms harder, stamping his feet madly on top of the tomb like a lunatic tap-dancer, until the figure whirled round, glaring up at him, its eyes bulging and spittle spraying from its mouth. 'Not danthing!' It screamed at Ben Scott through the lips of a withered corpse, 'Trying to thtay alive!'

And, hopping and skipping and fighting every inch of the way, it jerked and shuffled backwards until it vanished into the Covenanters' Prison.

Ben Scott woke up thrashing wildly. His partner was sitting up in bed, her back pressed against the wall. 'There's something in here,' she hissed in a tearful voice, clutching the duvet in front of her as if it were a shield. 'There's something in the room.' Ben looked wildly around, not even sure if he was awake. 'You were screaming,' she said quietly.

But there was nothing in the room, and next morning both laughed about how ridiculous they must have looked, terrified and holding each other in the dark.

In January, residents of three houses bordering the graveyard began to complain of poltergeist activity in their homes. Being intimately connected with the Mackenzie Poltergeist and living in an identical setting, Ben's thoughts, naturally, turned to this. He began to think about his own place and how strangely the human mind worked. It seemed to Ben that, in the month since Christmas, there had been something odd about his flat – he hadn't considered this until he heard about the other houses. There had been little incidents, nothing he couldn't explain, nothing paranormal, but put them all together and it was just a little . . . disconcerting. His alarm clock, for instance, never seemed to go off at the time he had set it. Annoyed, he asked his partner if she was playing a repetitive practical joke.

'No, Ben. I have a life.'

Ben couldn't recall ever having so many personal things go missing in such a short space of time and none of them ever turned up again. But then, everyone misplaces things – who hasn't found their house keys in the fridge once or twice? At night he would wake to the crash of framed pictures falling off the walls. So what? The plaster must be weak. Ben just wished they would fall off during the day, when the bang wouldn't scare the living daylights out of him. The hands of clocks seemed to loosen or stick; well, they must be cheap, poor quality. Light bulbs blew all the time; cheap wiring. A repulsive smell hung in the air by the living-room door for two weeks; spilled garbage that had finally rotted away.

It was just odd that none of this had ever happened before.

One morning in February, at four a.m., Ben heard screaming right below his bedroom window. He leaped out