

Sawney Bean and His Family

By John Nicholson

The following account, though as well attested as any historical fact can be, is almost incredible, for the monstrous and unparalleled barbarities that it relates; there being nothing that we ever heard of with the same degree of certainty, that may be compared with it, or that shews how far a brutal temper, untamed by education, and knowledge of the world, may carry a man in such glaring and horrible colours.

Sawney Bean was born in the county of East Lothian, about eight or nine miles eastward of the city of Edinburgh, in the reign of James I of Scotland. His father was a hedger and ditcher and brought up his son to the same laborious employment.

He got his daily bread in his youth by these means, but being very prone to idleness, and not caring to be confined to any honest employment, he left his father and mother, and ran away into the desert part of the country, taking with him a woman as viciously inclined as himself.

These two took up their habitation in a cave, by the sea-side on the shore of the county of Galloway; where they lived upwards of twenty-five years, without going into any city, town or village.

In this time they had a great number of children and grand-children, whom they brought up after their own manner, without any notions of humanity or civil society. They never kept any company, but among themselves, and supported themselves wholly by robbing: being, moreover, so very cruel, that they never robbed any one, whom they did not murder.

By this bloody method, and their being so retired from the world, they continued for a long time undiscovered; there being no person able to guess how the people were lost that went by the place where they lived. As soon as they had robbed any man, woman or child, they used to carry off the carcase to the den, where cutting it into quarters, they would pickle the mangled limbs, and afterward eat it; this being their own sustenance: and notwithstanding they were at last so numerous, they commonly had superfluity of this their abominable food, so that in the night-time they frequently threw legs and arms of the unhappy wretches they had murdered into the sea, at a great distance from their bloody habitation; the limbs were often cast up by the tide in several parts of the country, to the astonishment and terror of all beholders, and others who heard of it.

Persons who had gone about their lawful occasions fell so often into their hands, that it caused a general outcry in the country round about; no person knowing what was become of their friends or relations, if they were once seen by these merciless cannibals.

All the people in the adjacent parts were at last alarmed at such an uncommon loss of their neighbours and acquaintance, for there was no travelling in safety near the den of these wretches: this occasioned spies to be frequently sent into those parts, many of whom never returned again, and those who did, after the strictest search and inquiry, could not find how these melancholy matters happened.

Several honest travellers were taken up on suspicion and wrongfully hanged upon bare circumstances: several innocent innkeepers were executed, for no other reason than that persons, who had been thus lost, were known to have lain in their houses, which occasioned a suspicion of their being murdered by them, and their bodies privately buried in obscure places to prevent a discovery.

Thus an ill-placed justice was executed with the greatest severity imaginable, in order to prevent these frequent, atrocious deeds; so many innkeepers, who lived on the western road of Scotland, left off their business, for fear of being made examples of, and followed other employments.

This, on the other hand, occasioned many inconveniences to travellers, who were now in great distress for accommodation when they were disposed to refresh themselves and horses, or take up lodging for the night. In a word, the whole country was almost depopulated.

Still the king's subjects were as much missed as before, so that it became the admiration of the whole kingdom how such villainies could be carried on, and the perpetrators not discovered. A great many had been executed, not one of them all made any confession at the gallows, but maintained to the last, that they were perfectly innocent of the crime for which they suffered.

When the magistrates found all was in vain, they left off these rigorous proceedings, and trusted wholly to Providence, for the bringing to light the authors of these unparalleled barbarities when it should seem proper to the divine wisdom.

Sawney's family was at last grown very large, and every branch of it, as soon as able, assisted in perpetrating their wicked deeds, which they still followed with impunity. Sometimes they would attack four, five or six, footmen together, but never more than two, if they were on horseback; they were, moreover, so careful, that not one whom they had set upon should escape, that an ambuscade was set on every side to secure them, let them fly which way they would, provided it should ever so happen that one or more got away from the first assailants. How was it possible they should be detected, when not one that saw them ever saw any body else afterwards.

The place which they inhabited was quite solitary and lonesome, and, when the tide came up, the water went near two hundred yards into their subterraneous habitation, which reached almost a mile underground; so that when people who have been sent armed to search all the places about, have passed by the mouth of the cave, they have never taken any notice of it, never supposing any human being would reside in such a place of perpetual horror and darkness.

The number of people these savages destroyed was never exactly known; but it was generally computed that in the twenty-five years they continued their butcheries, they had washed their hands in the blood of at least a thousand men, women and children. The manner they were at last discovered was as follows:

A man and his wife behind him on the same horse, coming one evening home from a fair, and falling into the ambuscade of these merciless wretches, they fell upon them in a furious manner. The man, to save himself as well as he could, fought very bravely against them with sword and pistol, riding some of them down by main force of his horse.

In the conflict the poor woman fell from behind him, and was instantly butchered before her husband's face, for the female cannibals cut her throat, and fell to sucking her blood with as great a gust, as if it had been wine; this done, they ript up her belly, and pulled out all her entrails. Such a dreadful spectacle made the man make the more obstinate resistance, as he expected the same fate, if he fell into their hands.

It pleased Providence while he was engaged that twenty or thirty who had been at the same fair, came together in a body; upon which Sawney Bean and his blood-thirsty clan withdrew and made the best of their way through a thick wood to their den.

This man, who was the first who had ever fell in their way, and came off alive, told the whole company what had happened, and shewed them the horrid spectacle of his wife, whom the murderers had dragged to some distance, but had not time to carry her entirely off. They were all

struck with stupefaction and amazement at what he related; they took him with them to Glasgow, and told the affair to the magistrates of that city, who immediately sent to the king concerning it.

In about three or four days after, His Majesty in person, with a body of about four hundred men, set out for the place where this dismal tragedy was acted, in order to search all the rocks and thickets, that, if possible, they might apprehend this hellish crew, which had been so long pernicious to all the western parts of the kingdom.

The man who was attacked was the guide, and care was taken to have a large number of blood-hounds with them, that no human means might be wanting towards their putting an entire end to these cruelties.

No sign of any habitation was to be found for a long time; and even when they came to the wretches' cave, they took no notice of it, but were going to pursue their search along the seashore, the tide being then out; but some of the blood-hounds luckily entered the Cimmerian den, and instantly set up a most hideous barking, howling and yelping; so that the king, with his attendants, came back, and looked into it: they could not tell how to conceive that any thing human could be concealed in a place where they saw nothing but darkness; nevertheless, as the blood-hounds increased their noise they went farther in, and refused to come back again; they then began to imagine something or other must inhabit there. Torches were immediately sent for, and a great many men ventured in, through the most intricate turnings and windings, till at last they arrived at that private recess from all the world, which was the habitation of these monsters.

Now the whole body, or as many of them as could, went in, and were all so shocked at what they beheld, that they were almost ready to sink into the earth. Legs, arms, thighs, hands, and feet of men, women, and children, were hung up in rows, like dried beef; a great many limbs laid in pickle, and a great mass of money, both gold and silver, with watches, rings, swords, pistols and a large quantity of cloaths, both linen and woolen, and an infinite number of other things which they had taken from those they had murdered, were thrown together in heaps or hung up against the sides of the den.

Sawney's family, at this time, besides himself, consisted of his wife, eight sons, six daughters, eighteen grand-sons, and fourteen grand-daughters, who were all begotten in incest.

These were all seized and pinioned by His Majesty's order in the first place; then they took what human flesh they could find, and buried it in the sands; afterwards loading themselves with the spoils which they found, they returned to Edinburgh with their prisoners; all the country, as they passed along, flocked to see this cursed tribe. When they came to their journey's end, the wretches were committed to the Tolbooth, from whence they were the next day conducted, under a strong guard, to Leith, where they were executed without any process, it being thought needless to try creatures who were even professed enemies to mankind.

The men were dismembered, their hands and legs were severed from their bodies, by which amputation they bled to death in a few hours. The wife, daughters, and grand-children, having been made spectators of this just punishment inflicted on the men, were afterwards burnt to death in three several fires. They all in general died without the least signs of repentance, but continued cursing and vending the most dreadful imprecations to the very last gasp of life.