

Final protocol

The seeds of doubt.

John Gilbey

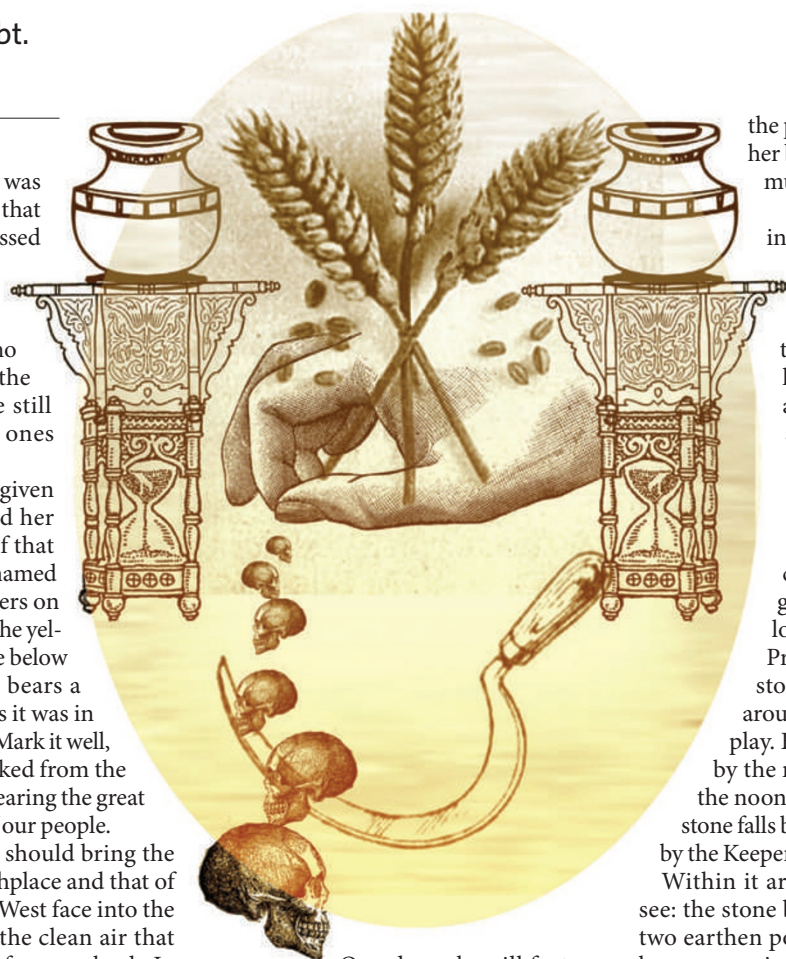
He who fell from grace was called the Professor — that is to say, one who professed grand skill and art. The term is now ironic, as his fall was great and its harm greater. She who sought to save us was the Doctor — the title we still give our healers, the ones who give us hope.

We are told that her given name was Heather and her eyes were the colour of that same plant — perhaps named for her — that yet flowers on our cliffs. Her hair was the yellow of the beach you see below us. This central stone bears a rendering of her face as it was in life so many years past. Mark it well, it shows where she walked from the sea, naked and alone, bearing the great Treasure — the hope of our people.

It was meet that she should bring the Treasure here, her birthplace and that of her parents. We of the West face into the wind from the sea — the clean air that helps to drive contagion from our lands. In her mind, the chronicler tells us, this cove and the fields between the mountains and the sea stood as a last redoubt.

The distant great hall where the Professor and Doctor dwelt had many rooms, all given to the study of plants. The Doctor took wayside flowers and grains, and teased from them new strains that gave more bounteously. How noble this study seems to us in our parlous state! But there were also dark ambitions, to which the Professor was privy, which sought blights with which to destroy the food of others. The Professor was also a smoker — a word whose meaning is distant to us. To continue living he had to perform certain rites periodically — outside, as the Law demanded. By breathing the smoke of various herbs he claimed to reach a state of nirvana, but this was achieved at a cruel cost to us all.

The Doctor, as mother of her craft, held the Book of Protocols: powerful writ that tasked her folk with many things — the way of how things must be done, and how they must not. Chief among these oaths was laid the Protocol of Security — which sought to contain both the good and evil within the hall, lest they escape to make untimely demands upon the world.



One day, when ill fortune attended his work, the Professor let vent great fury and stormed from the hall to smoke — still in his work attire. This defied the Protocol and caused the Doctor and her people great woe. She upbraided the Professor with strong words — which he scorned, forcing her to the presence of the Men of Power. Despite her earnest entreaties they spurned her call for action — merely admonishing the Professor as we would chide a child that strays.

Time passed and all seemed well, so the Men of Power smiled and nodded in their familiar way — until troubling news reached them. Soon, the air spoke of a blight sweeping the land — dark chancres covered every grain and those that ate them grew crazed. Men fought with fire — first the sickness and then each other — until the whole country was laid to ruin and starvation. We of this coast were lucky — few came near us, and those that did we dealt with. As our grass and grain withered we turned once again to the sea for fish and the weeds of the shoreline.

Through this terror, amid many horrors and privations, Heather fought her way home. Slipping from the fishing boat that carried her the last miles, she called on

the power of the sea to cleanse her burden of the sickness that must surely taint it.

As she lay, mortally ill, in the house of her mother, Heather called to her a friend of her youth — a yeoman who yet worked the land hereabouts. His love for Heather ran deep, and he cried to see her so abused. Yet, there was a last task that they must address — to write the final Protocol.

Now, gather and attend closely — for when you are grown, one of you will follow me as the Keeper of the Protocol. Beyond the central stone you can see the cairn, around which you are wont to play. Every tenth year, counted by the marks you see here, once the noonday shadow of the central stone falls below the cairn it is opened by the Keeper.

Within it are things you have yet to see: the stone bearing the Protocol and two earthen pots, their lids sealed with beeswax against the salt air. Within one pot, the hundred small packets of Treasure lie — formed of a bright metal thinner than our blacksmith can devise, and which can be torn between the fingers. Fifty of these packets are now empty — the grains they carried long dead in the field behind you.

One day, it is reasoned, seeds will be sown that will flourish — the blight being scoured from the land by sun and rain. Certainly, it is said that Heather chose the seeds from the finest she could devise. Perhaps it will be one of you whose hand sows them, as the Protocol dictates. When that day comes we will save and multiply the grain until we have enough to go beyond the mountains, into the grey wasteland beyond, so that man may once more have grain for his food.

What's that? The other pot? Well, on her death the body of Doctor Heather was burned with due ritual in the limekilns at the edge of the beach. That pot contains her ash — a pinch of which is spread to help nourish each crop. Mayhap her beauty and skill will pass into all those who one day eat of her grain!

John Gilbey is a gentleman and a scholar, currently Visionary in Residence at the University of Rural England.

JACEY