

SPIRITED AWAY

In 1757 a Scotsman called Peter Williamson published his life story. He'd had an interesting life – and he needed money. This is how his tale began:

Know, therefore, that I was born within ten Miles of the Town of Aberdeen if not of rich, yet of reputable Parents. I was sent to live with an Aunt at Aberdeen where, at eight Years of Age, playing on the quay with my Companions, being of a stout robust Constitution, I was taken Notice of by two Fellows belonging to a Vessel in the Harbour, employed by some of the worthy Merchants of the Town, in that villainous and execrable Practice called Kidnapping – stealing young Children from their Parents and selling them as Slaves in the Plantations abroad. I was easily cajoled on board the Ship by them. In about a Month's Time the Ship set sail for America.

This happened a lot back then. Children would vanish. So would adults. Those gone were said to have been *spirited away*, but the spirits that took them were not ghosts. They were paid traffickers. They might be rogues or idlers, they might be yeomen or doctors; even the mayor of Bristol was once suspected.

The most famous story of spiriting away was Robert Louis Stevenson's 1751 novel *Kidnapped*: 17 year old David Balfour, newly orphaned, seeks help from his uncle, an evil man who steals



the boy's fortune and has him kidnapped aboard a ship to be sold in the Carolinas.

In modern times we have such spirits too: the young men in Romania who talk sweet to girls then lure them away to brothels in Huddersfield, or the Bangladeshi gangmasters gathering slaves to build World Cup stadia in Qatar.

Today's Qatar was then the Carolinas. The new American colonies needed labour, however it could be procured. As early as 1645, Parliament banned 'diverse lewd persons who in a barbarous manner steal away little children'. But this had little effect. Nor did later laws, for trafficking was, and remains, a profitable business. As Peter Williamson continued:

When landed at Philadelphia, the Capital of Pennsylvania, the Captain had soon People enough who came to buy us. He making the most of his villainous Loading sold us at about 16 pounds per Head. What became of my unhappy Companions, I never knew; but it was my Lot to be sold for the Term of seven Years to one of my Countrymen, who had in his Youth undergone the same Fate as myself; having been kidnapped from St. Johnstone in Scotland.

Williamson was sold for seven years' indenture – a form of slavery. Like the majority of Europeans landing in colonial America, he had no rights: he was valued less than some livestock, and could be bought or sold as his master wished. This didn't match the evil of permanently enslaving a race, as with the African slave trade. Even so, half such European servants did not survive their term of indenture.

Some came voluntarily, accepting a lump sum for their servitude. But those spirited away received no bounty. Little wonder people in Britain were so scared of being kidnapped. In the poorer quarters of London, to accuse someone of being a spirit was a good way to raise a riot.