



**SAINTS AND SINNERS
ON HORSEBACK**
VOLUME I

EDITED BY MIRIAM A. BIBBY

ENVOI

BY MIRIAM A. BIBBY

RACE WITH THE DEVIL: TAM O'SHANTER AND THE DISSIDENT DEMONS OF SPEED

MIRIAM A. BIBBY*

I. Introduction: speed and sin, a cautionary tale

Oh you'd better run,
You'd better run,
You'd better run from the Devil's gun.
The race is on, said the race is on,
You'd better run from the Devil's gun¹

It is a rare equestrian who has no experience of pride going before a fall, particularly at speed. An early instance is provided by the Venerable Bede, who describes how a young monk called Heribald in the entourage of Bishop John of Hexham, later sanctified, was tempted to race his horse against some other young men despite the Bishop's warning not to do so. Heribald fell from his horse and was injured, thus bringing him down to earth in practice as well as spiritually.²

Bede's pithy parable of the correlation between speed and youthful misdemeanour, if not sin (the episode is treated tolerantly by all involved) could stand as prototype for a thousand subsequent descriptions of roguish race days, from Damon Runyan to Dick Francis. This chapter will explore connections between horses, speed, sin, and the devil, with particular reference to the famous poem by Robert Burns which takes centre stage at many a Burns Night Supper or Halloween gathering across the globe: *Tam o'Shanter*. Firstly though, it is helpful to briefly

* Affiliate, School of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Glasgow; co-editor, Cheiron Journal; Vice President, Equine History Collective.

¹ From "Race with the Devil," rock song by Adrian Gurvitz.

² Bede, *History of English Church and People* trs Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1974), 277; for Latin and English versions of the tale see Bede: *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in Latin + English (SPQR Study Guides Book 20), ed. Paul Hudson, Kindle Edition.