

Perdurable Story Elements from Celtic Folklore and Mythology: These as More Recent Tastes as Observed and Reflected on In Regional ‘New England’, in Northern New South Wales

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ABSTRACT: It is remarkable how enjoyable Celtic/neo-Celtic tales prove to be to literary study groups. This is especially so in ‘Celtic Country’, when reading groups acquire a taste for such texts—doubtless because of the enduring motifs, the engagement with nature, and because they are put in touch with the considerable Celtic strand in Australian (rural) society. Further, these texts inspire a measure of ‘neo-Celtic’ writing.

Perhaps the most significant thing about the Irish myths... is that they were written when the literatures of modern Europe had not yet been born. (‘Introduction’, p. 22, to *The First Book of Irish Myths and Legends*, 1965 [8th ed.] 1982, by Eoin Neeson).

Great were the marvellous stories told of Ossian’s heroes... giants, and witches and young men bold. (Attributed to Sheriff Nicolson)

Literary folk and fairy tales are metaphor in a broad sense. The story itself is an extended image, a dream crafted by the wide-awake dreamer. They are folk tales in the sense that they use and re-use traditional materials: oral cadences, stock characters, status-conferring imagery, formulaic settings or plot. They are not, in the scholarly sense, folk—that is, out of the oral tradition. (Jane Yolen, in *The Horn Book Magazine*, 51.5, October 1975, pp. 496-497.)

Myth is simply the cement that binds society together. (David Greene, p. 2, of *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*, ed. by Joseph Ransley, 1977.)

This paper is one elaborated on from a similar one originally published in a defunct literary and cultural periodical, the quarterly *Orana: Journal of School and Children’s Librarianship*, where a version of this text had appeared in Volume 21, Number 3, August 1985. Permission for the present use—and the necessary adaption of various matters of record from earlier—were, alike, given by the long time editor, Mrs Val Watson, formerly of the Bankstown Municipal Library.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s,¹ there were held at the University of New England in northern New South Wales a series of weekend seminars concerned with /exploring the perhaps somewhat latent public taste there for fantasy and folklore. And there followed, largely for the same groups, close studies of stories both Aboriginal and Celtic—an experimental visiting combination much assisted by the consultant, the Irish-born Australian poet and collector of Aboriginal legends, the late Roland Robinson,² who had stressed throughout the many parallels of motif, mood and marvelling, as between Celtic and Aboriginal folklore, and, in particular, their indestructible nature and continuing appeal to later generations in much less natural settings. Their ready availability, and the continually increasing use by creative writers in the modern settings in the British Isles of these same ancient cultures was both commented on by him, and proved since in like manifestations of these tastes in our more general New England readers.

In the similar case of specific Celtic lore, the same point had already been made several times to the present writer by Michael Wooliscroft, long the Deputy Librarian, City of Dunedin, in southern New Zealand. Indeed, his *The Influence of Celtic Folklore and Mythology in Children's Literature*³ had been followed in some quite close detail, in the New England 1982 seminar. Thus, separate sessions were devoted then to several of 'his' authors, Alan Garner, Lloyd Alexander, Joan Aiken, Penelope Lively, Mollie Hunter, Patricia Lynch, Susan Cooper, Judy Allen, and Susan Price.⁴ Initially, at the subsequent seminar, the writers were treated separately, and thus the following texts were treated in the degree of detail as variously solicited by class questioning and obvious familiarity with the texts and clear fascinated interest in their content and styles:⁵

Alan Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, *The Owl Service*, and *The Weird Stone of Brisingamen*.

Lloyd Alexander, *The Book of Three: The Black Cauldron; The Castle of Ilyr; Taran Wanderer*; and *The High King*.

¹ For a survey of the series / the several weekend events, for both writers and potential writers, see *Australian Fantasy and Folklore*, by J.S. Ryan, a book version of materials being derived from the situations discussed in *Orana*, Volume 17 (1981), in numbers 2, 3, and 4, as issued in that same year.

² His *The Man Who Sold His Dreaming* (1965) was a reference text for this school, and several other like groupings in those years.

³ This is /was a 34 page pamphlet as issued by his library.

⁴ All of these writers, except Patricia Lynch, are mentioned by Wooliscroft.

⁵ This was influenced by both class preferences, and the degree of the Celtic in their backgrounds, as well as the degree of association that they could make with the higher altitude landscape of the elevated New England Plateau, an area popularly known in the earlier 19th century as 'New Caledonia'. [Certainly there had been a measure of Scottish settlement in the southern portions of these higher altitude Tablelands in the 19th century.]

Joan Aiken: *The Whispering Mountain*.

Penelope Lively: *The Whispering Knights*; *The Wild Hunt of Hagworthy*.

Mollie Hunter: *The Bodach*; *The Haunted Mountain*; *A Stranger Came Ashore*; *The Stronghold*.

Patricia Lynch: *King of the Tinkers*; *Knights of God*.⁶

Susan Cooper: *Over Sea, Under Stone*;⁷ *The Dark is Rising*; *Greenwich*; *The Grey King*; and *Silver on the Tree* (the five books in the order given make up a quintet).

Judy Allen: *The Spring on the Mountain*; and

Susan Price: *The Devil's Piper*.⁸



Progressively these—and other like groups of adult students, many of them teachers in primary schools—came to see that there was a surprisingly familiar pattern of Celtic motif which recurred in these and other similar stories, and that this easy modern application of stock folk elements much extended the life of the ancient symbols from an earlier time of story-telling. As from the two main seminars, in mid summer and in mid winter, various themes were identified with considerable satisfaction, and they may now be listed *seriatim*:⁹

- the cave in the mountain,¹⁰ the magic of the mountain; as in *The Whispering Mountain*; *The Haunted Mountain* [cp. Tolkien's *The Two Towers*]; or, *The Spring on the Mountain*;
- armies of deathless warriors: *The Black Cauldron*; as in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*; this last was easily linked with the neighbouring Glencoe;
- the final obtaining of rightful kingship: *The High King* cf. Tolkien's use of this motif as in his *The Return of the King*;

⁶ There was also some interest in the motif patternings in her 1980 volume of classic retellings, *Tales of Irish Enchantment*.

⁷ See Dudley Carlson's 'A Second Look', in the *Horn Book Magazine*, 52.5 (October 1976), pp. 522-533.

⁸ This tale, involving as it does, the matter of a leprechaun, has certain affinities with *Down the Bright Stream* (1948), by 'B.B.'. See p. 17 of *Orana* 19 (1983).

⁹ Authors are now given if they have not been mentioned above.

¹⁰ This theme is peculiarly associated with bushrangers in 19th century New England, as with the notorious Thunderbolt and his hideouts over a number of years.

- ancient 'landscape' ghosts; c.f. Tolkien's 'barrow-wight';¹¹
- dangerous and potent patterns of standing stones; Judy Allen, *The Stones of the Moon*; Dorothy Crowder, *The Ogham Stones* (1975); Mollie Hunter, *The Bodach*; P. Lively, *The Whispering Knights*; Mary Rayner, *The Witch-Finder*;
- the enigmatic gift of second sight (or, 'the Highland vision');
- the power of the ancient Celtic harp: *The Whispering Mountain*; Nancy Bond, *A String in the Harp* (1976); or of the pipes: Susan Price, *The Devil's Piper*;
- the symbol of the moon in Celtic religion, especially where there are 'standing stones'; cp. Rosemary Sutcliffe: *Sun Horse, Moon Horse* (1977); Joy Chant, *Red Moon and Black Mountain* (Puffin 1973); Susan Cooper, *The Grey King*, etc.;
- the legend of the elves /leprechauns leaving Britain and passing to the west: Jane Currey, *Beneath the Hill* (1968); Tolkien, *passim*; 'B.B.' *Down the Bright Stream*; cp. Mollie Hunter, *The Wicked One*;
- sleeping knights /magician waiting for the time to wake and fight evil: *The Weird Stone of Brisingamen*;¹² William Mayne, *Earthfasts*; Susan Cooper, *The Grey King*; cf. parts of C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*;
- the folklore of the water creature/ seal-become-human:¹³ Rosemary Harris, *The Seal-Singing* (1972); Ronald Lockley, *Seal Woman* (1974); Jane H. Yolen, *Greyling* ¹⁴ (1969);
- the kelpie or 'water-horse', Mollie Hunter, *The Kelpie's Pearls*; cp. Patricia Leitch, *The Horse from Black Loch* (1963);
- a riddle-contest¹⁵ within a quest, Patricia McKillip, *The Riddle-Master of Hed* (1977); cp. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937);
- the Celtic bowl /mirror /cauldron of magic: L. Alexander, *The Black Cauldron*; cp. Tolkien's 'mirror' (i.e. Galadriel's bowl), in his *The Fellowship of the Ring*;
- the rowan tree¹⁶ present to ward off threats/ magic;

¹¹ This particular ghost has a Scandinavian association as well.

¹² Sub-titled 'A tale of Alderley'.

¹³ Much of this folklore, of the selkie, also has Germanic (Scandinavian) elements, as does the riddle context.

¹⁴ Sub-titled 'a picture story from the islands of Shetland'.

¹⁵ Many examples also occur in Germanic tales.

¹⁶ Compare the Scottish settler custom of planting a rowan before the door of a Scottish settler's home in his new land- Australia, Canada, or New Zealand.

- the presence of the ancient (or ominously dark) people from before the Celts; R. Sutcliff, *Sun Horse, Moon Horse*; Ann Turnbull, *The Wolf King* (1975);
- and cp. Rosemary Sutcliff's *Warrior Scarlet*;
- or the likely dire fate of a runaway slave, as in Tanith Lee, *East of Midnight* (1977).



All these motifs from the Dark Ages and the Celtic lands are usually related to a specific setting in what was once remembered—the ‘folk memory’ as being like such a Celtic land. Leaps of the imagination /recalled stories like these can and do cause these motifs, however blurred, to so easily spring to mind in the southern lands of Celtic exile.

As will be clear to any reader of *The Mabinogion*,¹⁷ the accepted composite title for eleven mediaeval Welsh prose tales, many motifs from this source are used by many British modern (folklorist) writers, notably by Alan Garner in his *The Owl Service* (1967, etc.), and by Joy Chant in her *Red Moon and Black Mountain* (1973). However, the Welsh strand is much less obvious in Australia and for Australian readers, than the fragments of Irish lore which are to be found in narrated tall /exaggerated tales that remind one, however indirectly, of those about the splendid hero, Finn McCool, as available in print in Bernard Evelin's *The Green Hero: Early Adventures of Finn Mccool* (1975). Indeed, several of the amazing tales of shearing achievements as are associated with Keith Garvey have their furthest antecedents in the lurid imaginings of Celtic stories from both the Dark Ages and the mediaeval phase in the original Celtic lands.

In the class situations for this Celtic-type study of popular folk-stories from both the Old World, and the New, the attitude-firming books of much appeal included:

- Mary McGarry (compiler), *Great Folktales of Old Ireland* (1972);
- David Guard, *Deidre: A Celtic Legend* (1977);
- S. McManus, *Hibernian Nights* (1963);
- Sean O'Sullivan, *The Folklore of Ireland* (1974);

¹⁷ A scholarly version of this is that in the Penguin Series, since 1976, in the translation by Jeffrey Ganz, in Penguin Classics.

W.B. Yeats (ed.), *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*;¹⁸

Jeremiah Curtin, *Myths and Folklore of Ireland* (1925; reprint, 1974);
and

F.U. Pilkington, *Shamrock and Spear: Tales and Legends from Ireland* (1966).

While there are many cheap editions of these and like works, and confused/conflated stories—especially in community book sales—particularly popular and common are those of: red etins /giants,¹⁹ distressed oxen and cattle mysteriously and terrifyingly bellowing, ghosts /pookas, dangerous events occurring near wells /waterholes /river crossings, spirits that startle the cattle, most of these, as feared as dingoes, white cats—in fact, all of these manifestations most to be associated with memories of the Irish countryside.

And for Things Scottish?

The following books were regularly owned by students several decades ago, are common in regional sales of used books, and are always held onto by those who are proud of their Celtic antecedents—J.F. Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*—as orally collected (1860-62); in the Puffin collections of translations of these, as in the collection styled *The Mouth of Night* (Penguin, 1977, ff.); that Scottish one from 1965, known as *Thistle and Thyme* (1965); Otta Swire's *The Highlands and their Legends* (1963, and following); R. Macdonald Robertson's *Selected Highland Folktales* (1961), or his *More Highland Folktales* (1964), etc., all of these 'originally orally gathered' by him. It is this rich stream of tales flowing forth from the labours of Campbell that can and does identify relatively easily for us the elements most often selected by modern writers and story tellers, both in Scotland and in Celtic-rich quiet rural areas of Australia and New Zealand, and very noticeably in the higher altitude 'Celtic' areas that we are focussing on. Thus we expect to find *spunkies* 'evil fairy spirits', the *urisk*; the unexpected and dangerous movements of the waters at river crossings, especially after floods; and, so sadly, the funeral obsequies that have long been associated with the last.

The fancied scurl of the pipes—particularly at dusk away over there behind the natural obelisks /'standing stones'; magical thunderstorms; moisture on tombstones—these weeping, surely, rather than just

¹⁸ This is usually a compilation based on volumes originally published in 1888 and 1892. Here, as elsewhere, there seem to have been many reprints in the U.S.A. throughout the period from the 1880s, to the present.

¹⁹ One may compare here the early story by Tom Keneally of 'Big Red of Dorrigo', an even larger fighter than the largest known fighter, as in his early novel, *The Fear*, and a daunting foe.

indicating condensation, in their lonely and long abandoned church reserves; poaching /cattle stealing—this long a Celtic activity on both sides of the Irish Sea; in short, so much of this legendary, as encountered in New England, in northern Victoria, and in Tasmania, for example, are close to the traditional Celtic ways of looking at the human life cycle, meteorological and water lore. Just reflect on your own intuitions of fairy-like presences ‘out there’ especially when the moon is new; the moon-lit phantoms; herbal lore; and the intriguing forthrightness, seemingly ‘untheological’, as associated with the minor sect of the Free Presbyterians, this found both on the North Coast of New South Wales, inland on the same Tablelands, and variously in pockets in southern New Zealand.

While Celtic-type story books/ fantasies have been a considerable success in English publishing since World War II, they have also enjoyed like sales amongst Australian children with no Celtic ancestry, and who yearn for the wondrous, or the miraculous, even the shape-changing, as cannot happen in the life of today. The same is certainly true of another writer whose work partakes of so many of these ingredients that one encounters in Australian Fantasy as well as in the migrant-transmitted folklore. The great Celtic motifs of sea-journey /the ‘voyage out’; battle; storm above, as over the battlefield; the sense of ancient rituals; the primal act of settlement in a new land; all of these have made up a corpus of fable [George Mackay Brown’s term] that far transcends the ‘attraction’ of his foe, ‘this age of television, uranium, and planet-flight’.²⁰

Of course, all these motifs are but vehicles for human stories of men and women and their life settings, and, as Sir Walter Scott discovered long ago, these Celtic tales and homilies were no mere romantic escapism from the present, nor mere recensions of the older tales of the Celtic regions. For they were, and are, zones behind the /our modern world ones where there had always tended to be sharper perceptions of the actual cultural heritage, it one not blurred by the drear industrialism that had so blighted the English spirit by the middle of the nineteenth century, nor by the later excesses of consumerism.

And so we may list some of the ‘Celtic qualities’ discerned by those reflective literary students, at high altitude, and of more than a generation ago –

- a really intimate and satisfying knowledge of the social milieu of such writings;
- a persisting loyalty to those former and holistic cultural ways;
- tales enshrining qualities that appeal intensely to urban and post-

²⁰ This said in his ‘An autobiographical essay’ as published in 1979.

- industrial /post-colonial man, even as they engender self-respect;
- a fascinated concern with the passionate language, thought and religion of earlier periods before our ‘civilization’;
- a rare determination to uphold national—or at least smaller scale regional—identity; and, finally,
- a satisfaction with the underlying psychology of good stories from the folk, ones which often did, and can still become explanations /myths, first of local and then of national significance and poignancy.

For it is quite clear that modern readers choose to inhabit in spirit these fiction fields /legendary tales of potency because of what is to be found there of human story, of the mindsets of our nearer forebears, and because of the sheer vitality of Celtic folk culture. As it has often been observed, the folklore of a ‘past, or antecedent people never ends’, least of all when we are dealing with races steeped in tradition and immensely proud of their heritage, one strong to have survived the tumultuous history of their harsh lands. In them has been bred tenacity and the courage to preserve both their dignity and their liberty. Like those of Celtic stock, the readers of these literatures are immensely proud of the strength and understanding which they have inherited, and savour with delight.

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