

Folklore, Loss, and Social Change in Nineteenth Century Cornwall

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Introduction: the historical context

The nineteenth century was a period of unprecedented social and economic change, at least in France and England. From France emerged the possibility of political transformation, which was to have profound historical consequences, and from England the no less momentous possibility of industrial transformation, forces which combined to create a triumphant liberal capitalism, which consolidated and extended its power in the latter half of the century.¹

Britain, where much of this process began, was of course a scene of unprecedented social and industrial change at this time. Between 1831 and 1901 the population increased by ten percent in each decade, and cities grew disproportionately: when Victoria came to the throne only five towns in England and Wales had a population of more than 100,000; by the end of the reign, there were twenty three.² Cornwall too was transformed: the population increased from 192,000 to 322,000, though it fell during the last three decades of the century due to recession and emigration, as we shall see.³

Cornish people played a big part in the transformation of Britain, and the wider world, and it would be hard to imagine the Industrial Revolution without Humphry Davy, Richard Trevithick, and the countless Cornish engineers and miners who made the wheels turn, everywhere from Mexico to South Australia.⁴ The landscape itself was changed forever. At the beginning of the century Cornwall was the world's biggest copper producer, and technological innovation caused both copper and tin production to soar; old mines were re-opened and between 1800 and 1837 the number of workings rose from seventy five to over 200. The towns boomed, and the new railways connected Cornwall to the rest of Britain, providing new markets for her raw materials. But in the "Hungry Forties" crops failed, food prices rocketed, and the population began to fall back, though it remained much higher than it had been at the turn of the century. Although production (and profits) surged ahead, conditions in the mines were frightful, and the men half-starved. In spite of this, production costs rose while foreign competition grew. Many miners left for Australia, South America, or Michigan, where their descendents still argue about the proper way to make a pasty.⁵ As the recession began to bite, outside interests came to control the Cornish mining industry, old, co-operative ways of working, based on a communal sense of the common good, were lost, and industrial relations deteriorated.⁶ The psychological effects of all this must have been profound, and Hamilton Jenkin writes of "the bitter leave takings there must have been in those black years when the Cornish people, who still love their home after a lifetime of separation, were first called upon to leave their natural inheritance."⁷

The Victorian age was shaped by the tension between continuity and change, and the transformations were ideological as well as scientific and industrial: indeed these domains were organically linked in the social nexus. The French Revolution challenged both the ancient aristocracies of Europe and the ideologies which maintained them, and made it possible for the new middle classes to take power. In Britain too, this was an ideological shift, since the bourgeoisie were mostly nonconformist, as opposed to the Anglican aristocracy. Since the

church controlled access to the universities and Parliament, this had serious practical implications, and effectively disenfranchised millions of citizens, including Roman Catholics and Jews. These disadvantages were gradually removed as the century wore on.

The link between social and scientific development could generate conflict: the dispute between the Darwinians and the bishops was a fight over status and funding, among other things.⁸ But it did unsettle the faithful, of course, and contribute to the growing, threatening sense that the British landscape, in both the literal and the intellectual sense, was changing forever.

Many Victorians recognised the historic nature of this transformation and rejoiced in it. In a 1948 broadcast, the historian Humphrey House said of them: “At one moment they are busy congratulating themselves on their brilliant achievements, at the next they are moaning about their sterility, their lack of spontaneity. In either mood they are all agog at being modern, more modern than anybody has ever been before, and in this they were right. They took the brunt of an utterly unique development of human history. The industrialisation and mechanization of life meant a greater change in human capabilities in the practical sphere than ever before had been possible.”⁹

Of course, liberal capitalism had its critics. Some of it took the form of political opposition based on the revolutionary French tradition. 1848 was the year of revolutions and in 1849 Marx settled in London, where he wrote *Das Kapital*. During the second half of the century the working class began to develop its own independent organisations, and the ruling classes either liberalised (as in Britain) or came under increasing pressure. Criticism often took the form of comparing an ugly or unjust present with an idealised rural past. Carlyle, deeply influenced by German romanticism, attacked contemporary Utilitarianism, and Ruskin’s great book, *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3) began a rehabilitation of Gothic style whose monuments may still be seen all over Britain, and indeed the world.¹⁰ Gothic architecture was championed by the Cambridge Ecclesiologists,¹¹ and by the extraordinary A. W. Pugin.¹² It is hard to see Pugin’s “Perfect Chedale” for instance (St Giles’ remarkable Catholic church in that Staffordshire town), as anything other than a rejection of Victorian Utilitarianism, in both the aesthetic and ideological senses. Pugin’s response to a modernity he detested was an attempt to recreate an idealised medieval past, much as William Morris opposed his enthusiasm for “medieval” craftsmanship against the industrial mass production of the Victorian age.¹³

The folklore collectors: Hunt and Bottrell

Against this background, folklore began to attract attention as the embodiment of a traditional wisdom that was in danger of being swept aside by the rising tide of industrialism. This was a pan-European phenomenon. The Grimms, of course, started publishing their groundbreaking stories in 1812, and Crofton Croker’s Irish tales appeared in 1825.¹⁴ As far afield as Russia, Alexander Afanasyev published hundreds of tales from 1853 on, under extremely difficult conditions.¹⁵ In Britain similar developments led to the formation of the Folklore Society in 1878. Howells’ *Cambrian Superstitions* appeared in 1831, and Campbell of Islay (Iain Og Ile) began his great highland collection in 1859.¹⁶ But in England the first in the field was a Cornishman.

The most important early collectors of folktales in Cornwall were Robert Hunt and William Bottrell, both of whom collected in the 1830s, though they published at different dates; it seems too that Hunt drew on some of Bottrell's notes for at least some of his tales.¹⁷ Hunt deserves to be more widely known in both Cornwall and the wider world. In 1829 he embarked upon a ten-month walking tour of Cornwall to collect "every existing tale of the ancient people", though he was not to publish them for another thirty years. In the process, he encountered "droll-tellers", a kind of itinerant minstrel who specialised in long, rambling stories interspersed with songs, which were specifically designed to fit local circumstances.¹⁸ One would love to know more about the storytelling techniques of these men, their repertoire and socio-economic context, but it is clear that their main audience consisted of simple country people. Whether the droll-tellers and the itinerant balladeers were the same people is hard to say.¹⁹ Both Hunt and Bottrell collected stories from non-specialists, i.e. ordinary working men and women, but also from "gentlemen" and learned "correspondents".

The impetus that drove the collectors was a growing sense that social and technological change were destroying ancient ways of life, and that, while this transformation may have been inevitable and even desirable, it was also important to record the old ways before they were lost forever. The inevitability of the loss was widely accepted, and no real attempt was made to make the old beliefs relevant to the modern age, as Pugin, Morris and the leaders of the Oxford Movement had all attempted in their different ways.²⁰ Collectors were therefore ambivalent from the outset; in the main, they were educated men, trained in the dominant culture, who felt a need to distance themselves from the superstitious beliefs of the subject races to which they themselves often belonged, even as they recorded them. Some, like Howells in his *Cambrian Superstitions*, were frankly contemptuous:

"We rejoice that the beatific rays of wisdom have gleamed through the dark clouds of ignorance and superstition and the march of intellect has made its appearance even amongst the mountains and valleys of Wales. Almost every peasant can now read, and no longer dreads passing over his threshold in the dark, for fear of coming into contact with 'the shadowy shapes of the world unknown.'"²¹

This unpleasant combination of smugness and self-hatred reflected the ambivalence of the age, and it became less common as the century wore on. Collectors who identified closely with their material would sometimes adopt an apologetic tone. Patrick Kennedy, for instance, apologised for his "legendary fictions", which were "artless in structure, improbable in circumstance, and apparently devoid of purpose."²² But Kennedy was clear as to his own purpose. His collection was inspired by "the horrid thought that the memory of the tales heard in boyhood would be irrecoverably lost."²³ The Cornish collectors, who had less internalised self-hatred to manage than the Irishman, were less apologetic, but driven by similar motives. In his introduction to his *Popular Romances of the West of England*, Hunt describes his subject matter:

"Romances such as these have floated down to us as wreck upon the ocean. We gather a fragment here and a fragment there, and at length, it may be, we learn something of the name and character of the vessel when it was freighted with life, and obtain a shadowy image of the people who have perished ... Hoping to have

been successful in saving a few interesting fragments of the written records of a peculiar race, my labours are submitted to the world.”²⁴

Employing the same implied metaphor of gathering up the fragments of the tradition before they are swept away by the irresistible surge of economic and social change, Bottrell justified his own project:

“In a very few years these interesting traditions would have been lost, unless they had been preserved in some such form as the present volume is intended to supply; since modern customs, and the diffusion of the local news of the day, are superseding, in even the most remote districts, the semi-professional droll-tellers ...”²⁵

In a paradox that often characterised responses to the Victorian transformation, the modern science of folklore collection was used to preserve what remained of the old. Similarly, at Newlyn Stanhope Forbes used the new *plein-air technique*, developed in France, to record the passing lifestyle of the Cornish fishing communities.²⁶

Both Hunt and Bottrell make the important point that Cornwall, and particularly West Penwith, had until recently been protected from the forces of transformation by its geographical isolation, but that improved transport and communications now made its culture vulnerable to outside influences.

Over the course of the century, Folklore acquired academic respectability, and with it a more objective, confident tone. Of course, for all the Celtic collectors, language loss was the elephant in the room. Both Scottish and Manx Gaelic were in decline, though Sophie Morrison’s little Manx collection, first published in 1911, is a model of its kind.²⁷ Welsh was losing its ground, especially in the industrialising south, and Cornish was effectively extinct as a communal language by the time Hunt began collecting, though fragments no doubt survived in dialect terms, prayers and the like.²⁸ In Ireland, the famine had a disproportionate effect on Irish speaking communities, and Curtin lamented that “no language has been treated with such cruelty and insult by its enemies, and with such treasonable indifference by the majority of the people to whom it belongs as the Gaelic.”²⁹

Scholarly opinion has been divided about the precise effects of language loss on the storytelling tradition,³⁰ but there can be little doubt that, in all the Celtic lands, very much has been lost, in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Almost no folklore survives in the Cornish language, and in recording the fragments that do, Morton Nance comments that: “In leaving its own Celtic language and taking to English, Cornwall made a break with tradition that must inevitably have meant the loss of much of the older Cornish folklore.”³¹

In the Darwinian struggle to survive that was nineteenth century British capitalism, folkways must have seemed increasingly irrelevant, improbable and destitute of purpose. Urbanisation and emigration must also have been responsible for the loss of many stories. The collectors lament what has been lost even as they gather the surviving fragments, and Hunt regretted that the railways “have robbed the west of England of half its interest by dispelling the spectres of romance which were, in hoar antiquity, the ruling spirits of the place.”³² Though some

folk beliefs even survived the transatlantic crossing, and “knockers”, the Cornish mine spirits, were heard in Grass Valley, California, as late as the 1930s.³³ The sense of loss that permeated Victorian society was experienced in different senses in the Celtic regions of Britain, which were simultaneously aware of the rapid erosion of ancient cultural paradigms, particularly language and traditional narratives.

Pixies and the people

Apart from the famous giants, Cornwall’s most wellknown contribution to folklore is the Pисgie or Pixie, whose representation is still to be found in a thousand souvenir shops from the Tamar to Land’s End. The fairies of tourist art are usually benign, if mischievous looking figures, rather than, say, the disturbing visions of Victorian painters such as John Anster Fitzgerald and Richard Dadd.³⁴ But let us look at the stories themselves.

Though we will consider the nature of pixies later, for now we will accept Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud’s definition of the word *pixy*, *pisky* as the standard term in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset for a fairy, though many writers from the early nineteenth century onwards have insisted that the two races are quite distinct.³⁵ Pixies are nowadays associated almost exclusively with Cornwall, but it was on Dartmoor that they encountered their first chronicler, Mrs Anna Eliza Bray, whose letters to her friend the poet Robert Southey were published in 1844 under the title: *Legends, Superstitions and Sketches of Devonshire on the Borders of the Tamar and the Tavy*.³⁶ In fact, Mrs Bray did not have very much to say about pixies, though she does give an interesting version of “The midwife to the fairies” (motif F235.4.1, *Fairies made visible through use of ointment*). The belief that fairy mothers required human midwives was widespread, and Deane and Shaw give a Cornish variant (the stories which follow are in my paraphrase):

An old midwife was sitting by the fire when there came a knock at the door. She opened it, to see a tiny man sitting on a horse, who told her that his wife was in labour, and in need of help. The old lady mounted the horse behind him, and they rode away to the pисgie’s house, where the midwife delivered a child. As she was washing the baby she accidentally wiped some of the soap in her own eye, and found that she could see fairyland all around her. She said nothing, and was escorted home by the grateful father. Some time later, at the local fair she saw the pисgie and greeted him. ‘With which eye do you see me?’ he said. ‘With the right’, she said, pointing to the eye which had been splashed with soap. Instantly the pисgie struck her there, and she remained blind in that eye for as long as she lived.³⁷

John Rhys gives a Welsh version of this in the first volume of his *Celtic Folklore*, and Katharine Briggs found another, current at Greenhouse Hill in Yorkshire in the 1920s: interestingly, the Hill was said locally to have once been mined by Cornishmen.³⁸ Pисgies have a close, yet ambivalent relationship with human beings, as the midwife story demonstrates. The tale of Anne Jefferies is a good example of this.

Anne Jefferies and the fairies

In the seventeenth century there lived in St Teath a young woman called Anne. When Anne was nineteen years old, she went into service with Mr Moses Pitt and his family. She was an imaginative girl and would often go out after dark looking for the fairies. But they always ran away before she could see them. One day Anne was sitting at her knitting in the garden, when she heard a rustling in the bushes. When she looked up she spied six little men dressed handsomely in green. One of them jumped up onto her lap and began kissing her, then the others joined him. One of them ran his fingers over her eyes, and suddenly Anne was blinded, and felt that she was flying through the air, at great speed. When she opened her eyes again, at a word of command from the fairies, she found herself in a beautiful place, surrounded by palaces of gold and silver, trees full of fruit and flowers, and lakes teeming with gold and silver fish, where birds were singing sweetly. Crowds of finely dressed people were to be seen, strolling and dancing, and Anne was surprised to see that these people were of her own height, and that she herself was dressed in the most beautiful clothes.

Her six friends were still with her, but the finest of them was still her favourite, and the pair managed to separate themselves from the others, and take refuge in a beautiful secluded garden, where they passed the time “lovingly”, until their jealous friends arrived with an enraged crowd. Anne’s lover drew his sword to defend her, but was wounded. “The fairy who blinded her before placed his hand on her eyes once more, and again all was dark, and she felt she was flying through the air: when she opened her eyes, she was in the garden again, surrounded by the anxious faces of her friends.”³⁹

Hunt adds a letter concerning Anne which was written by Moses Pitt to the Bishop of Gloucester, who had interested himself in the matters; she seems to have become something of a local celebrity, was celebrated for her healing powers, and was said to be fed by the fairies. Unfortunately, her supposed supernatural dealings led to her being committed to Bodmin Gaol. This story is unusual (though by no means unique), in that it relates to a real person whose life is documented, though it clearly also incorporates traditional material, and it can clearly be read in a number of ways, not perhaps excluding the psychopathological. Like other stories, such as the tale of Cherry of Zennor, it clearly implies the possibility of erotic relations between pishies and human beings, in popular belief or fantasy. Uniquely, the fairies were said to have quoted scripture to the illiterate Anne: “Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God”, and this is clearly good advice. In a traditional culture tales such as Anne’s could have been used to conceal transgressive behaviour or sexual fantasy, especially among lonely servant girls: there are clearly elements of wish-fulfilment in Anne’s story, and it may also have raised her status as a practitioner of traditional healing, and so conferred some economic advantage.

Changelings

Encounters with the fairy folk could certainly be hazardous, if alluring, and indeed dangerous, especially for newborn babies; as Simpson and Roud explain: “In societies where the belief in fairies was strong, it was held that they could steal human babies and substitute one of their own race: the latter would never thrive.”⁴⁰

These stories are frequently found associated with the Cornish pixies, and Hartland gives other versions in his classic survey, mostly from Wales and Scotland.⁴¹ Simpson and Roud found only one English example, from Kington in Herefordshire, though Westwood and Simpson do rather better in *The Lore of the Land*, with examples from Staffordshire and Suffolk, as well as the Kington case.⁴² But there is no doubt that changelings are mostly found in the Celtic lands, where they seem to go back a long way, and were known variously as *Corpān Sidhe*, (Irish), *Siodhlbhradh* (Scotts Gaelic) and the Manx *Lhiannoo Shee*. In Welsh this is *plentyn an newidwyd amarall*, but no Cornish word for “changeling” seems to have survived.⁴³

One of the best Cornish changeling stories is Bottrell’s “The Changeling of Brea Veán” from his 1870 collection:

One day in harvest time a woman called Jenny Trayer, who lived at the foot of Carn Brea near Redruth, fed her baby and rocked it to sleep, and then went out to help with the reaping. When she returned, the cradle was overturned and the baby was missing. Then, searching around the cottage she found the child asleep in a corner. But the baby never seemed right to her after that – it was always unhappy and bad tempered, and the more it ate the leaner it became. Neighbours said Jenny had been tricked by the small people, and advised her to bathe the baby in the chapel well, “as May comes around”. She tried this twice, without success, then, as she went the third time, Jenny passed some large rocks by the open moor, and heard a shrill voice from above her head, crying:

“Tredrill! Tredrill!
Thy wife and children greet thee well!”

Then the child on her shoulder seemed to reply:

“What care I for wife or child, when I ride on Dowdy’s back to chapel well and have got pap my full?”

The frightened woman ran home and a neighbour advised her to place the child on the ash-heap and beat it. The squire rode by, saw what they were doing and stopped them, but later Jenny left the child under a stile on the church-way path. When she returned home she found her own child asleep on some dry straw, spotlessly clean and wrapped in a piece of old-fashioned chintz, of the kind which fairies love to steal from furze bushes when it is left out to dry. The boy grew up simple, and subject to fits, though he made a good shepherd. He liked to wander by himself in wild places and people said that he spoke with the fairies.⁴⁴

Some of these stories could be seen as attempts to rationalise the incidence of infantile congenital illnesses, such as Down’s Syndrome, which were little understood at the time. Some could also represent ways of understanding puerperal depression and neglect. Certainly young children were very vulnerable in nineteenth century Cornwall, and the large-scale emigration of working fathers must have made it more difficult for hard-pressed mothers to cope. Most mining families lived in hovels of cob and thatch, which they often built for themselves. Sanitation and water supplies were poor, smallpox, measles, diphtheria and typhoid fever were rife, and the burial register of St Just in Penwith demonstrates the inevitable results. In the decade 1840-49,

600 males were buried in that town; their average age was twenty five years and eight months; 201 were infant boys of less than five years. Of the 477 females, 220 were under five years of age. These figures of course also demonstrate the shocking fatality rate among miners,⁴⁵ just as they provide evidence for an overwhelming grief which must have been as communal as it was individual.

That the fairy belief itself could be used to rationalise or even motivate child abuse, though it can never have been common, is evident from a small number of documented cases. In the *West Briton* of July 14th, 1843 there appeared the story of a Penzance man called Trevelyan, who was charged with starving and beating his infant son. At Christmas 1841 the child was left out in the cold for hours, because his parents believed him to be a changeling.⁴⁶ The case failed for lack of evidence, but the family were driven out of town. It is interesting that, while the parents presumably thought that the changeling hypothesis would excuse their barbarous behaviour, their neighbours did not agree, whether they believed in fairies or not. One imagines that these parents had a variety of problems, some of which were blamed on their unfortunate infant, and on the pixies.

One feels that pixies are also maligned in another story which appeared in the *Western Daily Mercury* on June 6th, 1890:

A few days previously some labourers were stripping bark in the woods near Torrington. One of the men went back to retrieve a tool. And as he stooped to pick it up he found himself unable to stand up straight again. He heard loud laughter all around, and realised that he had been trapped by the pixies. After remaining like this for five hours, he was eventually able to crawl away on his hands and knees, and eventually got home, when his wife berated him for not turning his pockets inside out (a deterrent against fairy magic).⁴⁷

Of course a man might have many reasons for being late from work, but the interesting thing about this story is that the man considered being “pixy-led” a reasonable explanation, and that his wife did in fact believe him.

But if pixies were sometimes maligned in this way, they were often given the credit for good deeds too. They seem to have been particularly fond of human children. Deane and Shaw tell the story of the lost child of St Allen:

A small boy was picking flowers one evening in summer when he heard music. He followed it into a wood, and to the side of a lake, where he met a beautiful lady who led him into an underground cave made of crystal. Many days later he was found by his distraught parents asleep in the ferns. He told them his story, which has been told since then in the district of North Trur.⁴⁸

Crossing tells two stories of farmers on Dartmoor whose threshing was done for them by friendly fairies, and also the tale of “The Ploughman’s Breakfast”:

One morning a man was ploughing on one of the moorland farms, and was starting to feel hungry. As he passed a large granite outcrop in the middle of the field he heard a voice crying “the oven’s hot!” “Bake me a cake, then!” replied the hungry

ploughman, continuing to plough his furrow. When he passed the same spot again he found a freshly baked cake awaiting him on the rock, steaming hot. The man knew that the pixies had taken pity on his hunger, and ate the cake gratefully.⁴⁹

In general this type of story reinforces values such as reciprocity and diligence, which are esteemed in a small rural community, and which affirm and sustain its existence. But it is also true that that people who have had close and lengthy encounters with the fairies seem often to be changed in some profound way, as was Jenny Trayer's son in Hunt's story above. Or poor Cherry of Zennor, who was employed by a fairy "gentleman" to look after his child, seems to have fallen in love with him, but was eventually rejected by him because of her insatiable curiosity.⁵⁰ This story, which has some interesting parallels with Apuleius's ancient story "Cupid and Psyche",⁵¹ ends sadly, for Cherry "was never afterward right in her head, and on moonlight nights, until she died, she would wander on to the Lady Downs to look for her master."

This kind of behaviour is of course characteristic of grief. Murray Parkes, in his classic study of bereavement, contended that:

"The searching behaviour of the bereaved person is not 'aimless' at all. It has the specific aim of finding the person who is gone. But the bereaved person seldom admits to having so irrational an aim and his behaviour is therefore regarded by others and himself as 'aimless'. His search for 'something to do' is bound to fail, because the things he can do are not, in fact, what he wants to do at all. What he wants is to find the lost person."⁵²

Cherry, like Jenny in Hunt's story of "The Fairy Widowers" and perhaps Anne Jefferies, is mourning a lost love, and therefore searching, just as the mothers in the "Changeling" stories are searching for their lost children.

Pixie origins

We have considered the social and economic background to the great Cornish folklore collections of the nineteenth century, and looked at some of the stories about pixies which were gathered at that time. Scholarly debate has tended to focus on their taxonomy and origins: opinions on how pixies look and behave tend to be unanimous, if sometimes ambiguous.⁵³ They dress in green, and may be either diminutive in size, like Shakespeare's fairies, or of ordinary human height. They seem, at least sometimes, to occupy a distinct social world of their own, which parallels the human, but has some idealised, perhaps archaic qualities (Hunt has a fairy fair, and even the funeral of a pixy Queen)⁵⁴ and the stories themselves mostly deal with what happens when the two worlds meet, as in the tales of Anne Jefferies and Cherry of Zennor, above. They are mischievous, and may lead people astray on dark nights, or take babies, leaving their own misshapen offspring in exchange, though they may also be kind to children or to people they like or pity, as in Crossing's "Ploughman" story. Crossing also tells us that: "in many an ancient farm-house [we] shall be told how the butter has been made, and the corn in the barn has been threshed by these industrious little goblins."⁵⁵

Like human beings, pixies may be kind or cruel, creative or destructive. Also they are fickle, and their favour can be easily lost, as in the widespread story of "The Fairy Ointment", in

which an inquisitive human is punished for inquisitiveness, and in Bottrell's "The Fairy Master", for instance.⁵⁶ In fact, relationships between human beings and fairies seem to have been very ambivalent.

On the basis of his researches, Hunt identified five clearly distinguishable varieties of the Cornish fairy family, namely:⁵⁷

1. The Small People
2. The Spriggans
3. Piskey or Pisceys
4. Buccas, Bockles or Knockers
5. The Brownies

It seems that this classification has more to do with function than with essential difference: Spriggans, for instance, seem to function as bodyguards specifically, and knockers and buccas work in the mines.⁵⁸ In common usage too, these different terms may well have lacked precision. In her exhaustive categorisation, Katharine Briggs classified pixies with other tutelary spirits, such as brownies and Irish "pooka",⁵⁹ but Diana Purkiss, while admiring Briggs's "vast and entertaining taxonomies", consider them too fragmented: in her view there are only four fairy types, namely:⁶⁰

1. Brownies, Hobs
2. Fairy guides
3. Fairy Societies
4. Poltergeists and tricksters

Brownies are small, shaggy men, often dressed in rags, who perform household tasks and help around the farm: they flourish mainly in Scotland and all over the north and east of England. Some Cornish pixies do seem to perform this role, though it is not their dominant characteristic. They often do live in societies of a sophisticated kind, and they are certainly tricksters. Deane and Shaw identify only three types of Cornish fairy: knockers, piskey and spriggans,⁶¹ and opinions will no doubt continue to differ: pixies are liminal and protean, and will continue to defy our attempts to contain and classify them.

In the past, much energy has also gone into debating the origin of pixies. It was often said that they were the souls of Cornwall's prehistoric inhabitants, supposed to be getting smaller and smaller with the years, until they eventually vanish. Thus "the dwindling of the pixies would represent their loss of power, and account for their eagerness to get hold of human changelings to reinforce their weakening stock."⁶²

This would agree with similar beliefs in comparable cultures, such as the Irish, and Briggs adds that "The Christian theory that the fairies are fallen angels seems to be the next in popularity", a belief which is also found in Ireland. The knockers were said to be the spirits of deceased Jews who had been put to work in the mines as a punishment for their alleged role in the crucifixion of Christ. The idea that pixies are memories of actual survivors of some earlier, prehistoric race has proved surprisingly durable, but seems to be a romantic delusion, perhaps based on a semantic confusion between *peck*, a Scottish word for goblin, *Pict* referring to the

ancient inhabitants of the British Isles, and the Cornish *pisgie* or *pixie*. In fact *picti* means “painted ones” and was Roman army slang: no-one knows what the Picts called themselves. Yet even Henry Jenner, the great Cornish language scholar, concluded that

“The Cornish piskie is a mixed conception, founded partly on a folk-memory, or perhaps even more than a folk memory of a small, dark savage pre-Celtic race which certainly once existed and may have continued down to comparatively recent times. ... The pre-Celtic small people were for some reason or other called ‘picti’, though not necessarily as the Picts of Roman British and early English and Scottish history, and the Cornish-speaking Celts of the Dumnonian kingdom followed the usual rule of their language and make ‘pict’ in to ‘pix’, whence came ‘pixy’ and ‘pisky’ ”⁶³

though he offers no real evidence to support this hypothesis.

Katharine Briggs concluded that pixies represent the spirits of the dead:

“at first sight the commonly received idea of fairy land seems as far as possible from the shadowy and bloodless realms of the dead, and yet, in studying fairy lore and ghost lore alike we are haunted and teased by resemblances between them. ... Some classes of the dead were undoubtedly regarded by the old people as inhabitants of fairyland.”⁶⁴

And even the recently deceased might find themselves among the pixies, as in Bottrell’s interesting story “The Fairy Dwelling on Selena Moor”, in which a man called William Noy meets his dead sweetheart Grace Hutchens, in an assembly of moorland fairies: “Grace assured Mr Noy of her everlasting love, ... and also told him, that when he died, if he wished to join her, they would then be united and dwell in this fairy land of the moors.”⁶⁵

Of all these different theories, Briggs’s is the most convincing, but it is interesting that, despite their difference, all of these hypotheses explain pixies in terms of the past, in terms of some individual or communal loss. Fairyland is the abode of dead races, lost cultures, babies, and sweethearts.

Conclusion

In terms of both content and context therefore, these stories are permeated with a sense of loss. As far back as the seventeenth century John Aubrey could lament that:

“Now-a-days bookes are common, and most of the poor people understand letters; and the many good Bookes, and variety of Turnes of Affaires, have putt all the old Fables out of doors, and the divine art of Printing and Gunpowder, have frightened away Robin Goodfellow and the Fayries.”⁶⁶

It may be that the whole folklore project was always driven by this sense of loss, but there can be little doubt that this was sharpened in nineteenth century Britain by the Industrial Revolution and the many changes which came in its wake.

The cultural response to change was of course ambivalent. An age of bourgeois liberalism and (hesitant) democratic progress tended to see the past as barbarous, autocratic and

superstitious. This tendency was dramatised in gothic fiction, such as Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Mathew Lewis's *The Monk*.⁶⁷ The tension between progress and optimism on the one hand, and loss and pessimism on the other, tended to deepen as the century wore on and the true costs of industrialisation became apparent. This is why, although the first publishers of folktales were apologetic about their collections, the later ones were not. And thus, in his preface to the play *Gwreans an Bys* ("The Creation of the World, A Cornish Mystery") in 1826, Davies Gilbert could write: "No-one more sincerely rejoices, than does the Editor of this ancient mystery, that the Cornish ... language has ceased altogether from being used by the inhabitants of Cornwall."⁶⁸ Yet fifty years later Henry Jenner was to read his paper on "The Cornish Language" to the Philological Society, and the language revival began to take off around the turn of the century.⁶⁹ As we have seen, this sense that valuable things were being swept away, and needed to be preserved, also informed the folklore collectors, and perhaps generated a new audience for their work. Dorson captures this sense of loss in his description of Hunt's work:

"The one shining example of field exploration was set by Robert Hunt, who in 1829 embarked on a ten-month walking tour of Cornwall to gather up 'every existing tale of its ancient people'. Hunt unearthed a disappearing species in the droll-teller, an itinerant minstrel specializing in long, rambling, episodic narratives interspersed with song, which he often adapted to local situations. As secretary to the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society, Hunt further availed himself of the opportunity to elicit old stories while seated on a three-legged stool near the blazing hearthfire, or resting on a level after climbing from the depths of a mine. In 1862 he even employed a postmaster-poet to collect for him, but in the intervening years the droll-tellers had vanished."⁷⁰

Of course, large swathes of rural Britain remained relatively untouched by industrialisation, though improved communications, agricultural depression, and a phenomenal rate of urban growth would affect most people's lives, but the transformation was particularly evident in Cornwall, where, as Philip Payton has noted, "the economy was one of the very first in the world to industrialise."⁷¹ Investment in tin and copper transformed the Cornish way of life and landscape, and by 1824 the parish of Gwennap alone was responsible for more than a third of global production of copper ore, while mining in Cornwall was technologically the most advanced in the world. Cornish engines and engineers were exported to the furthest corners of the globe.⁷² This resulted in what Alan Kent has called "an outstanding vision of industrial confidence and revived identity",⁷³ though it must have been challenging to live through. In any case, renewed confidence gave way to despair in "the hungry forties", when the rigidity and overspecialisation of the Cornish economy began to be exposed. The result was starvation, compounded by the failure of the potato crop, as in Scotland and Ireland, emigration on a huge scale, and violent riots, in Helston, Penzance and elsewhere.⁷⁴ Prices rose steeply, and mine work continued to be difficult and dangerous – it has been estimated that in 1847 one in every five miners in Gwennap died or were disabled in accidents.⁷⁵ Whole communities were decimated by emigration, as we have seen.

And the communities which were most disrupted by these catastrophic events were the same communities from which Hunt and Bottrell gathered their drolls. At the same time, the

cultural annexation of Cornwall proceeded apace, as the isolation which had protected the far west for so long was eroded by improved transport and communications. Though it was still possible for Wilkie Collins to “ramble beyond railways” in 1850, the Duchy was increasingly being incorporated into the British state.⁷⁶ Most of the people who survived (or did not survive) these events have left no record of their thoughts and feelings, and social change on this scale was quite unprecedented, and must have generated huge stresses, on both individual and communal levels. We thus have a profound experience of loss occurring simultaneously in a number of interconnected domains – the British, the Cornish, the communal, the familial and individual, and it was from this background that the pixie stories emerged and found their audience.

Of course, people have always told and listened to stories, for entertainment and to help them make sense of the world.

“Through the centuries (if not millennia) during which, in their retelling, fairy tales became ever more refined, they came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings – came to speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult.”⁷⁷

The stories collected in Cornwall seem more directed at adults, from Hunt’s account, though children must have heard them often. And what is the major theme of the stories but loss – lost children, lost lovers, lost races? And the accommodation of loss is an internal, as well as an external process, which narrative can address simultaneously. As Brian Wicker reminds us: “... narrative is not only a unique instrument for describing certain kinds of truth about the external world, it is also, for similar reasons, uniquely important in explaining what happens inside oneself.”⁷⁸

The Cornish working class community experienced all kinds of loss and change, emigration, and workplace fatalities, on top of the customary high mortality rates of the time, especially in relation to children and childbirth: it is striking how many pixie stories contain the “midwife” motif or deal with the loss of children, such as “the lost child of St Allen”. In addition, industrial, economic and cultural changes, such as language loss, must have impinged upon individual and communal identities, and to such losses communal answers must be found so that continuity and meaning can be recovered.⁷⁹ It may be that one such communal response to loss was to gather together to tell and listen to stories, or rather, that an ancient, dying tradition acquired temporary importance by providing an outlet for grief and an opportunity to share it. And in passing the stories on to Hunt and Bottrell, the people shared their loss and the healing power of their stories with a wider audience which was itself struggling to manage change.

Though we do not know as much about storytelling in nineteenth century Cornwall as we would like, it is evident (from the better documented Irish tradition, for instance) that the communal setting allowed emotional responses to be shared, in ways which would inhibit the development of pathological grief, Freud’s “Melancholia”, or what we would describe as depression.⁸⁰ The point (or at least one point) of the pixie stories was to help people cope with

loss and change, not least by affirming the continued viability of the community in coming together to share these stories, and so to share and heal their pain.

Notes

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- “Late last night and the night before,
Tommyknockers, Tommyknockers,
Knocking at the door.
I want to go out, don’t know if I can,
Because I’m so afraid
Of the Tommyknocker man.”
- The rhyme in turn inspired Stephen King’s *The Tommyknockers* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1988). This lively horror novel is set in New England and contains nothing which is authentically western, let alone Cornish, but it is an interesting example of how folk beliefs can travel and morph in unexpected ways.
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