

Review

McMahon, Brendan, *A Wreck Upon the Ocean: Cornish Folklore in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, Portlaoise, Everttype, 2015, xvii, 109pp., £9.95, paper.

The history and traditions of Cornwall are as remarkable as they are unique, and continue to attract the attention of scholars and writers today. Indeed, the recognition of Cornish nationality by the Council of Europe acknowledges and reinforces its individuality. In this context the publication of a new study of Cornish folklore is very timely, especially as its subject matter ranges widely over the traditional narratives of the region, but also engages with their political, social, and psychological ramifications.

Brendan McMahon already has an established reputation in celebrating and interpreting these aspects of Cornish heritage, and here he draws together both the principal materials of the subject and the essence of his own insights on their cultural significance. Following an introduction which surveys the collection of Cornish traditions and literature from medieval times up to the nineteenth century, the study is presented in four chapters, each devoted to specific narratives and beliefs, which frame the discussion and analysis.

The first chapter focuses on the archetypal pixies and the fairy world, the discussion being underpinned by quotations from Hunt, Bottrell, and a wide range of later writers. The narratives and beliefs are placed squarely in the context of the Industrial Revolution and its early impact on Cornwall, which was succeeded by a catastrophic decline and an accompanying sense of loss. In the second chapter we encounter equally archetypal stories of giants, which are seen against a background of major social change and the gradual development of interest in Cornish history, language and culture. The author also approaches the myths of giants in Freudian terms, before moving on to consider the nature and role of the gnome-like “knockers”, spirits who lived in the local tin and copper mines and warned miners of danger.

The third and fourth chapters, discussing and deconstructing tales of mermaids and saints and of Tregeagle and King Arthur respectively, follow a similar format, combining the essence of the narratives with insightful social and psychological commentary and analysis, and supported by copious annotation. A brief conclusion encapsulates the main thrust of the argument presented throughout the study: “For as long as they have existed folk tales have helped people to negotiate the psychological, sexual and spiritual quandaries which face them in every generation.” Quite apart from its reinterpretation of Cornish traditional narratives as significant in their own right, this book explores new ways of approaching and analysing such narratives wherever they may be found.

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