

## Notes and Queries

### Hares Portend Fire

The Folklore Report of *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* (henceforth *TDA*) 35 (1903) contains on p. 135 the following superstition, contributed by H. S., whom I have been unable to identify: “When a fox, being hunted, runs through a town, it is believed to be the precursor of a fire.” While counterparts featuring a fox are not to hand, similar superstitions featuring a hare rather than a fox are not uncommon. In fact the above-mentioned item with a fox is in *TDA* 35 (1903) immediately preceded by the following version with a hare, contributed by J. S[tevens] N[eck]: “It used to be believed by the good people of Moreton[hampstead], not many years ago, that if a hare ran through the streets it was a certain sign that a fire would break out.” The self-same superstition is again contributed by J.S.N. in *TDA* 39 (1907), 109, and an almost identical anonymous version can be found if we leaf back, through some twenty years, to *TDA* 18 (1886), 105.

On p. 240 of his *Superstitions of Britain and Ireland* (London, Penguin, 2003), Steve Roud lists about a dozen examples, including our Devonshire text from Moretonhampstead. The earliest example listed by Roud is dated 1851, and comes from Northamptonshire. To this small corpus of a dozen-odd we may add two items, dated 1866 and 1884, from Cambridge and Northampton respectively. These are to be found on p. 190 of Iona Opie, and Moira Tatem, eds, *A Dictionary of Superstitions* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989). Another is to be found in Kathleen Wiltshire’s *Wiltshire Folklore* (Salisbury, Compton Russell, 1973), p. 6. All we can say about the date of this example is that it is from 1870 or earlier. Wiltshire, who cites Ida Gandy of Upper Sixpenny, Aldbourne, as her source, writes:

“If a hare was seen in a village street, a fire was often said to have been caused. The village of Aldbourne has suffered badly from fires: in 1760, ‘laid in ashes’, ‘in 1777 another’, and a third in 1870. According to an old tale a hare was seen outside the first house to be destroyed.”

A further source of information is *The Leaping Hare* by George Ewart Evans, and David Thomson (London, Faber and Faber, 1972), where, on pp. 126-127, we find the transcript of an interview with the East Anglian naturalist Harold Jenner, which ends with the following:

“I’ve heard about the hare running and a fire coming afterwards. In fact, an old character out this way used to reckon that they were bad luck to have run through your garden because you’d probably have your house on fire before the end of the year. I’ve had them run through my garden since 1946 and so far I’m all right! But I’m not superstitious.”

Seeking an explanation for such beliefs, Roud remarks on reports that when there is a fire hares will tend to run through it rather than, like most other animals, away from it. Roud also remarks that our superstition seems to be neither very old nor very widespread. Indeed,

examples given so far hardly predate the mid nineteenth century, and all are from southern parts of England or the Midlands.

It will now, however, be appropriate for us to look a little farther afield, first of all to southern Scotland, where, in material collected in the early years of the nineteenth century, we find what might conceivably be seen as a prototype of our superstition. It is entitled “Hares Running through a Village”, and reads as follows:

“Hares running through a village betokeneth that that village will soon be pulled down, or that the villagers will be obliged to fly before the enemy, like that animal.”

Our source is p. 81 of “Old Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs of the Inhabitants of the Southern Counties of Scotland”, in *History of the Berwickshire Naturalists’ Club*, 23 (1919), pp. 50-146, material collected by Thomas Wilkie at the behest of Sir Walter Scott. We do note, it is fair to say, that there is no mention of fire here, and that there is an obvious analogy between the flight of the hare and the flight of victims before an advancing enemy army. The hypothesis that we have here a prototype for our superstition therefore deserves to be treated with some caution.

Our next task will be to assemble comparable material from the European mainland. The easternmost example I have come across is a Russian one in W. F. Ryan’s *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* (University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 201, where a hare running through a village is quoted as one of many signs of an impending fire. As Willibald von Schulenburg reports, among the Sorbs of Burg in the Spreewald, just to the north of Cottbus, about halfway between Berlin and Dresden, the belief was similar. See his *Wendisches Volkstum in Sage, Brauch und Sitte* (Leipzig, Harrassowitz, 1934, rpt. Bautzen, Domowina, 1988), p. 229. In the standard dictionary of German superstitions, the belief is stated to be “very widespread” (E. Hoffman-Krayer, and H. Bächtold-Stäubli, eds, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1927-42, 3, 1516). There appears to be little variation, except that in some reports the season is mentioned, with the hare passing through the village in summer (2, 1420-1421 and 3, 1516). Thus in Silesia, where, according to Paul Drechsler in his *Sitte, Brauch und Volksglaube in Schlesien* (Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1906, 2, p. 234), a hare running through a village in summer means that a fire will break out there. There follows the statement that if, before having drawn breath, one throws a stone at the hare, the misfortune will be averted. I am not able to track down all the authorities quoted, but my search so far suggests that the superstition was not known in the more westerly germanophone regions. The earliest reference cited in the *Handwörterbuch* is Ernst Urban Keller’s *Grab des Aberglaubens* (1777-86), 2, p. 205. This is one of the authorities I have not been able to consult.

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