

## Putting the Owl to Roost: A traditional Newfoundland prank and some European analogues

J. B. SMITH

The expression *put the owl to roost* is explained in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* as a “game or trick in which a barrel of water is poured from above on [a] victim”. There follow the informant’s words: “And we’d get a feller among us now that never put the owl to roost; he don’t know nothing about putting the owl to roost.” (Story et al., p. 397)

The aim of this note is to cast light on the expression and the “game” it refers to, starting from what Katharine Briggs under the heading “Catching an Owl” in her *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales* clearly regards as a jocular tale. In it “a somewhat superior Cockney” visiting Southover Farm in Sussex has a practical joke played on him by three local “bumpkins” he has tended to despise. Invited to an evening “owl-catching” expedition in a barn, he is told to stand still with a sieve on his head as a receptacle for the owls when they fall. Meanwhile, his companions climb up, allegedly in search of owls, but in fact to tip over their victim two pails of water that have been surreptitiously placed on a beam above him (Briggs, A2, pp. 34-35; cf. Egerton, p. 35; Wright, 4, p. 394).

Is this a folktale, or is it a description of a custom? For Briggs it is clearly an example of the former, to be classified under Motif J.1500, “Clever practical retort”. This hardly resolves the question, but a very similar account, to be found in Walter Raymond’s opus, suggests a custom, or, more specifically, a widespread traditional practical joke. Raymond tells how, in a Somerset village he calls Hazelgrove-Plucknut, which is his pseudonym for Withypool on Exmoor, an over-inquisitive visiting townee would be invited to catch an owl in a sieve. “You see, in a manner o’ speaken, the owl wur but a bucket o’ water, a-put ready han’-pat [‘to hand’] up in tallet [‘loft’]. We did tell the owl-catcher to stand jus’ at the foot o’ the ladder under trap-door, an’ he did have to hold up a sieve wi’ both han’-s above the head o’ un so high as he could. Then he that did go up to rout out the owl, an’ make un fly down, did turn over the water into sieve, an’ the poor feller wur wet through.” (Raymond, pp. 144-145)

The search for comparable reports takes us farther afield. From the west Midlands comes the following: “The victim would be told that there was an owl in the stable loft and asked to help catch it. He would be placed immediately under the entrance, with a sieve upon his head, while his companion entered the loft, taking a pail of water to frighten out the owl. Of course the water descended on the victim’s head.” (Wright, 4, p. 394)

An account from Cheshire has it that a novice is persuaded to hold a riddle at the owlet hole in the gable end of a building. “He is told to hold it very fast, as an owl is a very strong bird; and whilst all his efforts are directed to catching the owl, as he supposes, somebody pours a bucket of water (often filthy water) over him.” (Wright, 1, p. 540) A *riddle* is a large coarse sieve, and an *owlet-hole* or *howlet-hole* is a hole left in the gable of a building to admit owls.

Though arguably close to what has gone before, our next example stands somewhat apart, since it was narrated in Bas-Vannetais, a variety of the south-eastern Breton dialect of the Vannes area as spoken on the Ile de Groix, which lies a few kilometres off the southern coast of Brittany opposite Lorient. The narrator was Madame Marie Tonnerre, described as an outstanding if illiterate informant, who was born on March 15th, 1892. She was interviewed by the dialectologist and Breton scholar Elmar Ternes in 1966-67. Here is a summary of the French translation of her Breton text headed “Pièce humoristique”. We note that the role played by “owls” in our above-reviewed English-language texts is taken here by “mice”, the underlying sense of which seems in the first place to be “sexual favours”.

Tonnerre’s grandmother used to tell how she had a friend who was not quite with it. One day he invited her to go hunting mice with him, though he had other things in mind. Saying there were plenty of mice in her loft, she agreed to accompany him that very afternoon after vespers. Armed with a stick, presumably to hunt the mice with, she goes into the loft, making her dupe wait below with a sieve on his head. As he is waiting for the mice to jump into the sieve, she empties a bucket of water over him. Understandably upset, his beautifully ironed white shirt wet through, he has it explained to him that all this is a punishment for his inappropriate behaviour (Ternes, pp. 382-383; Smith, 2012, 73).

While we have drawn a distinction between tale and custom, the evidence also suggests that what might seem exclusive to a particular region can turn out to belong to many. That being so, we shall not be totally surprised to find in parts of continental Europe a custom that appears to have much in common with owl-catching as described above. The basic structure is much the same, though names differ. A naïve person is encouraged to join in a hunt, usually at night, for a strange but much-sought-after animal, and is told to wait with a sack or other receptacle, into which his fellows will drive the creature from its lair. Far from capturing the promised prey, the victim of the prank has an unpleasant surprise: a bucket of dirty water is poured over his head, or the conspirators melt into the night, leaving him to find his way home from the lonely spot at which he has been stationed.

In parts of eastern Europe we have for instance a fictitious animal called the *rozemock*, which probably gets its name from a Slavonic language or dialect. Especially on New Year’s Eve, a favourite time for such pranks, an inexperienced young lad is persuaded to stand on the steps or beneath the ladder leading to a farmhouse loft. While thus stationed he is to hold open a large sack, into which the *rozemock*, which is lurking above, will be driven by the conspirators brandishing sticks. Much noise and shouting then herald the onset of the hunt, the outcome of which is a bucket of water tipped from above over the victim’s head (Frischbier, 2, p. 233, Papiór, p. 152, no. 593).

Also probably of Slavonic origin is the German name *Trappe* for the Great Bustard, *Otis tarda*. In Walther Mitzka’s *Schlesisches Wörterbuch* we find under that headword the Silesian expression *Trappen fangen*, literally “to catch bustards”, described as a *Neckspiel*, that is, a hoax or prank (Mitzka, 3, p. 1401). Thereby hangs a far-flung tale, of which the following is a variant. After the Second World War, when rations were short, many inhabitants of Vienna went to seek food and work in the surrounding countryside. Some of these city-dwellers despised the farm work on which they depended, and they also thought

themselves better than the peasants who provided it. One of these incomers, whom we shall call Hans, ended up in Haringsee, a township in the middle of a great plain known as the Marchfeld. This was frequented by bustards, and Hans dearly wished to capture one of these. He was told that he could only do this at night, and would need a large basket and a lantern. Appropriately equipped with these, Hans was accompanied by some of the local lads to a likely spot for the hunt. There they helped him to install himself, but then they mysteriously vanished into the night, leaving him to cope as best he could. Needless to say, he was unsuccessful, but from that day onward he was a reformed character, stripped of the arrogance that had made him so unpopular (Hofmann, p. 230.)

Now consider *elbetritsche*. In a number of germanophone regions, this strange word and its many variants, originally perhaps “one trampled by the nightmare”, more recently conveys senses such as “halfwit” or “village idiot”. It also stands for an imaginary bird or fur-bearing animal in the pursuit of which a stranger, a newcomer, or a naïve and inexperienced local lad is a willing participant (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli, 2, p. 761; Beitzl, p. 172). Usually in darkness and less than clement weather conditions, the victim is taken to some remote spot, where he is told to wait with a sack, which he is told to hold open so that his fellows can drive the *elbetritsche* into it. Instead of doing any such thing, they secretly make their way to some hostelry, where their victim eventually turns up, cold, wet, and empty-handed (Röhrich, 1, pp. 375-377).

Here is an account from Swabia, where up to, say, the middle of the nineteenth century girls and women would congregate on dark winter evenings in the *Spinnstuben* or spinning-rooms, not only to work at their spinning, but also to engage, with the young men who joined them, in all kinds of games and pranks. One of these involved sending an impressionable member of the party out into the wintry night. Stationed in a depression in the ground or a narrow thoroughfare, he was to hold open a sack into which his companions would drive the *elbetritsche*. At this point he would be abandoned, and only slowly would he come to the realisation that he had been taken in. As a result he became a laughing-stock, nicknamed the *elbetritsche*.

Not always was the *elbetritsche* the loser in all this. The story goes that a victim once stationed himself, with his sack dutifully held ready, in a disused fox earth that had been abandoned by the foxes and taken over by rabbits, and that one of these jumped into the sack. Overjoyed at this, the captor ran back into the house, shouting that he had caught the *elbetritsche*. He proved his point by releasing his prey in the midst of the company, causing uproar and dismay (Meier, pp. 88-89).

About the middle of the nineteenth century, an old woman from Derendingen claimed that such goings-on had been common in her youth, but were now hardly known any more (Meier, p. 90), thanks no doubt to the decline of the spinning-rooms and their traditions.

In Alsace, hemp-breaking provided a similar context for such activities, which will likewise have gone into decline with the advent of modern processing techniques. Before these took hold, one of the pranks played at the end of the working day involved providing an innocent young lad with a sack. Thus equipped, he was in due course to enter the *knitschloch*

or *dulfloch*. This was a pit about two metres in depth with a fire burning in the bottom. At the top was a horizontal grid on which the hemp was dried after being retted and before being broken. Once the grid was removed and the fire extinguished, the innocent was sent down to catch strange birds called *Dilbe<sup>n</sup>trutschle<sup>n</sup>* in his sack. Rather than these, his reward was a bucket of water poured over his head (Martin and Lienhart, 1, p. 550; 2, p. 680; 2, p. 769).

*Elbetritschen* have many counterparts in continental Europe. For present purposes we conclude with a creature known in some francophone areas as the *daru*, and best pursued in dusk or darkness. As a result of living on hillsides, the *daru* has legs that are shorter on the left than on the right. The innocent who is encouraged to join in the hunt is given a sack and told that his fellows will drive the animal towards him by noisily banging trees with their sticks. If only it can be made by him to move in the opposite direction, the irregularity in the length of its legs will make it lose its balance, so that it is easily imprisoned in the sack. Thus instructed, the victim patiently awaits his fellows, who, however, instead of noisily driving the promised prey towards him, disappear silently into the night, leaving him to find his lonely way home (Röhrich, 1, p. 376, Mineau and Racinoux, pp. 174-175).

For its legs that are shorter on one side than the other the *dahu* is no doubt indebted to popular descriptions of the badger, refuted as early as the seventeenth century by Sir Thomas Browne, who stated that they were not only believed in by theorists, but “even by those who had the opportunity to behold and hunt the animals daily” (Browne, book 3, chapter 5). The belief persisted into the twentieth century. Reminiscing about his childhood in north Carmarthenshire, D. Parry-Jones speaks of his terror of the deep woods and steep-sided *gellyydd* of his native county, stemming not least from his firmly held belief that, as well as giving the badger forelegs shorter than its hind legs, God had also “made his legs on one side shorter than the other, thus enabling him to keep an even keel on the slope.” (Parry-Jones, p. 188).

## References

- Beitl, Richard, *Wörterbuch der deutschen Volkskunde*, 3rd edn, Stuttgart, Kröner, 1996.
- Briggs, Katharine M., *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*, London, Routledge, 1991.
- Browne, Sir Thomas, *Pseudoxia epidemica*, 5th edn, 1672.
- Egerton, J. Coker, *Sussex Folk and Sussex Ways*, London, Trübner, 1884.
- Frischbier, H., *Preussisches Wörterbuch*, Berlin, Enslin, 1883.
- Hoffmann-Krayer, E., and H. Bächtold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1927-1942.
- Hofmann, Thomas, *Das Weinviertel in seinen Sagen*, Weitra, Bibliothek der Provinz, 2000.
- Martin, E., and H. Lienhart, *Wörterbuch der elsässischen Mundarten*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1974.
- Meier, Ernst, *Deutsche Sagen, Sitten und Gebräuche aus Schwaben*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1852.
- Mineau, Robert, and Lucien Racinoux, *Glossaire des vieux parlers poitevins*, Poitiers, Brissaud, 1981.
- Mitzka, Walther, *Schlesisches Wörterbuch*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1963-1965.

- Papiór, Jan, “*Aus fremden Rücken ist gut Riemen schneiden*”: *Das deutsche parömiologische Bild Polens: ein Versuch*, Poznan, Rys, 2010.
- Parry-Jones, D., *Welsh Children’s Games and Pastimes*, Denbigh, Gee, 1964.
- Raymond, Walter, *The Book of Simple Delights*, London, Dent, 1933.
- Röhrich, Lutz, *Das grosse Lexikon der sprichörtlichen Redensarten*, Freiburg, Herder, 1991-1992.
- Smith, J. B., “From Owl-Catching to Hands-in-Pockets: A Glance at Some Vanishing Somerset Customs”, *Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset*, part 367, vol. 367 (March, 2008), 202-205.
- Smith, J. B., “Three Breton Traditions Viewed from the West Country and Farther Afield”, *Folk Life*, 50, 1 (2012), 72-76.
- Story, G. M., W. J. Kirwin, and J. D. A. Widdowson, eds, *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983.
- Ternes, Elmar, *Grammaire structurale du breton de l’Ile de Groix*, Heidelberg, Winter, 1970, pp. 382-383.
- Wright, Joseph, ed., *The English Dialect Dictionary*, London, Oxford University Press, 1970 (EDD).

Independent Researcher, Chester  
 johnbersmith@gmail.com